

Introducing the 10th Issue of *AntiMatters*

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“If there is to be a scientific Prometheus for our day,” **Steve Talbott** writes in the first article of this issue, “he must bring the fire of meaning into our various theoretical languages — languages that, in their current, desiccated state, are like dry tinder eager for the blaze. And it is almost as if geneticists, with their ceaseless invocation of word and text, have been unconsciously calling down the tongues of flame.”

What has come to light in the half century since Francis Crick articulated the Central Dogma of Molecular Biology — DNA makes RNA, RNA makes protein, and proteins make us — is that the *context* of the organism informs the genetic text *at least* as much as the genes inform the organism. In the words of Lily Kay (quoted by Talbott): “once the genetic, cellular, organismic, and environmental complexities of DNA’s context-dependence are taken into account,” we might find that genetic messages “read less like an instruction manual and more like poetry, in all their exquisite polysemy [multiplicity of meaning], ambiguity, and biological nuances.”

That the essence of science lies in the mathematization of reality is an opinion vastly more common than its necessary counterpart, the characterization of the reality the mathematics refers to. In his second article, **Talbott** takes aim at those who believe that experimenting with digital organisms can yield biologically significant results:

Transfixed by the intrinsic force of their own logic, they have lost their investigative anchor in the world’s sense-perceptible phenomena. The world has become in their imagination a mere crystallization of their own logic, a process greatly helped by the false conviction that the world can be understood the way we understand the humanly imposed logic of a machine. It’s as if the only task of all material substance were to put the logic on display — which is much like saying that the only task of speech is to pronounce whatever logic or grammar we can extract from the speech. But just as speech always has a content setting the terms for any further play of its logic, so, too, the world has a content giving direction to the play of the laws we discover at work in it. Investigating “organisms” without bodies isn’t a productive way to explore this content.

In the same article, the author offers valuable insight into the farcical nature of the debate about “intelligent design.” Both ID advocates and their materialistic opponents view the universe as a grand machine. While the former argue that the machine requires a Designer, the latter insist that the universe is *merely* a machine.

The only way out of the ill-tempered and lightless debate between the two sides is to recognize that the intelligence we see in the world is not imposed from the outside upon pre-existing material, in the way we impose our design upon a machine. The intelligence in nature works always from within. In the world’s phenomena we see intelligence embodying itself in that visible, significant, aesthetically compelling speech we can’t help recognizing everywhere around us (Talbott 2007 ♣). The one thing we can be certain of

is that whatever — or whoever — speaks through these phenomena is not doing so in the way we speak through the design of our machines. It is the height of hubris to think that we have become creators in that fundamental sense. Our design of machines does not bring material reality itself into existence as the embodiment of our own expressive powers. It is not both the lawfulness and the substance of things.

In his third piece, **Talbott** reveals the madness of that sacred cow, economics.

It's a strange and pernicious notion that has been foisted upon Western society by economists: you and I, they tell us, by giving free rein to greed, selfishness, competitive malice, and megalomania, perform a valuable public service. We can spend our days pitting ourselves against the welfare and livelihood of others, and then trust "the market" to transform our venality into a public good.... Somehow, through a kind of magic, the social value will automatically condense out of the numbers and percolate through society as a healing balm.... How could this grotesque notion — the notion that private vice equals public good — gain such widespread acceptance?

The decisive fact, according to Talbott, is that we are *on a path*. Along that path our task is not the maximization of some numerical value — a "value" that does not distinguish between profit from sales of cocaine and profit from sales of penicillin — but rather the *discovery* of true values, the struggle to become worthy of them, and the exercise of creative imagination and disciplined work in socially incarnating them.

Ernst von Glasersfeld next explains how "society" can be considered an individual construct rather than an ontological given.

Simplified — and therefore seen somewhat naively — all that is written and proclaimed in scientific sociology is the sum of what an attentive observer with the help of more or less accepted methods gleans from experiences, experiments, and statistical investigations, and formulates in a way that his or her colleagues can interpret in a satisfactory fashion. Irrespective of how large the number of agreeing colleagues might be, the conceptual structure that they consider to be common property does not describe an "objective" state of affairs but a collection of individual interpretations that, in the course of discussions and mutual critique, have acquired a certain viability for all the participants.

A couple of decades ago, "postmodern" seemed to von Glasersfeld an acceptable epithet for radical constructivism "because it advocated breaching with the traditional notion that reason is a means of access to objective knowledge of reality." He now rejects this epithet because he doesn't see the epistemology he founded as an "emancipation *from* reason." Radical constructivism is a theory of rational knowing, and this not least *because* it rejects the notion that knowledge aims at representing "things in themselves."

Andreas Quale then examines the quest for a complete unification of physical theory from the perspective of radical constructivism. In this relativist epistemology, any true/false dichotomy of theories is without meaning. The truth value of any scientific proposition can only be defined relative to some given set of criteria, which the knower may then choose to accept or reject. The ontological status of the hierarchical structuring inherent in the sought-after "Theory Of Everything" will thus depend on the individual knower's epistemic position concerning the notion of truth in science. Quale

is neither the first nor the last in this issue of *AntiMatters* to censure the idea that complex entities can be meaningfully reduced into their simpler parts.

Next is a commentary by **Donnya Wheelwell** on papers by C.M.H. Nunn and Harald Atmanspacher, which appeared in *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 5 (3). “Nunn,” she summarizes, “relates Jung’s archetypes to (Dennett’s version of) Dawkins’ memes and suggests an epidemiological angle, Atmanspacher suggests a hierarchical arrangement of memes, and I suggest they are talking dangerous jabberwocky.”

Dennett’s definition of meme calls our attention to an important obsession of Western culture, namely the search for *atoms*. We seem to want to find the simplest constituents of everything, and then go on to explain how all of the more complex phenomena are built out of these simplest constituents.... This kind of divide-and-conquer method ... is particularly inappropriate for social phenomena, which is where questions of meaning belong. I would further say that reductionist, atomistic views are actually harmful, even morally repugnant, in this area, because they imply that meaning as actually experienced by human beings is dead, reduced to patterns of simple atoms, rather than being embodied, situated, holistic and alive.

In the article that follows, **Marcel Kvassay** contrasts the spiritual Illusionism exemplified by Buddhism and Shankara’s Mayavada with the views of Sri Aurobindo, drawing on his major philosophical work, *The Life Divine*.

Along with Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo is increasingly appropriated by the Hindu right, as a champion or founding figure of “Hindutva,” an ideology that promotes religious opposition to non-Hindu sects, forms and practices. In his insightful piece, **Debashish Banerji** attempts to set the record straight. This co-option by the Hindu right has sought its support in certain texts of Sri Aurobindo — usually early nationalistic texts taken out of context and interpreted according to prevalent discourses of nationalistic religion. When these very texts are viewed in their historical context, they are seen to form part of what is known today as the colonial-national interchange. Within this, Banerji distinguishes four distinct discourses, and it is the fourth to which Sri Aurobindo’s early speeches and writings essentially belong. This is constituted by the awareness that spirituality is part of the definition of the Human, which has been suppressed and neglected in the development of the progressive “logocentric” discourse of the Enlightenment, and that engagement in dialogue with this living potential of non-Western cultures can transform and enrich the world, and create a new future. Sri Aurobindo, then, was hardly a champion of any religious creed. He saw the life of religion in India as a plural field, as a culture of seeking, not a uniform religious body with fixed and rigid boundaries.

The Book Excerpts section kicks off with two chapters from *Pushing Ultimates: Fundamentals of Authentic Self-Knowledge* by **Lew Paz**. Paz does not mince his words:

Treacherous indeed is the ego’s craving for excessive self-esteem, cultivating ways and means for the personality to preen an image of awakening rather than seek the actual challenge of inner exploration. This entire capitalist Society, dependent upon the interplay of consumer and marketing industry, has produced the most profoundly manipulative advertising empire the world has ever known — and the main “game” is to create self-imagery dependent on external validation. Marketing experts, skilled at catering to

every vanity and whim of the ego-persona, inundate the media with commercials that ignite a worshipful attitude for external display, such as fashionable name-brand attire to enhance the image of success, coolness, or hip sophistication. The New Age movement has its own place in this marketing empire. Designer gurus and yoga teachers give their devotees in-crowd prestige on the New Age circuit. The expanding number of people who are skilled at cultivating external images of spiritual depth and intellectual substance is epidemic as the new millennium dawns...

A significant element here is the problem of psychological transference. This syndrome, known to all psychiatrists, occurs when a patient projects his/her longing for a godlike guide onto the analyst. In the New Age milieu, a person only needs to be qualified to teach a class in yoga to receive such projections, since so many people naively equate the teaching of yoga as somehow qualifying a person for the status of guru. Many yoga teachers encourage this for various egoic reasons. Far too many who have claimed to be and are seen as gurus thrive on projection.

David Loye, in a chapter from *Revolution and Counterrevolution*, recalls the work of some evolutionary outriders, e.g., Hazel Henderson, Jean Houston, and Barbara Marx Hubbard. During their meeting in 1978, Barbara uttered the pregnant words: "We have reached *critical mess*."

In "Psi and the Philosophy of Mind," a chapter from the revised edition of his *ESP and Psychokinesis: A Philosophical Examination*, **Stephen E. Braude**, finally, demonstrates that "any theory in which mental states get explained by reference to specific associated physiological structures or mechanisms that produce them is a theory that must rest on one or another false presupposition." If the published attacks on one such theory, the so-called trace theory of memory, "were to have the effect they deserve on the intellectual community, many neurophysiologists and neuropsychologists might find themselves unemployed." Trace theories are scientific theories only on the surface: "at bottom, they require that memory is magical." Braude's suggestion is "that we stop seeking explanations of abilities, dispositions, etc., in terms of underlying physiological structures or mechanisms."