

Bad faith and better knowledge.

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There are those who want to know everything better than all the others. For instance: Everybody knew, for as long as one cares to remember, that the things in the world are composed of four elements: earth, water, air and fire. And that, if everything were as it ought to be, those elements would form four perfect spheres, earth occupying the center, being covered by water, being covered by air, which in turn would be covered by fire. How did one know that? An impertinent question: it suffices to look at the world to see that it is so. And, in addition, Aristotle has constructed a beautiful system which explains logically and consistently how those four elements relate to each other. It says in essence that if a thing should disturb the order of elements, it must of necessity return to the place it belongs to. If a stone is thrown into the air, it must fall back to earth where it belongs to, if some water should penetrate the earth, it must rise back to the watery sphere as a fountain, if it should penetrate air, it must rain back, and flames always rise, in order to return to the just place of fire, which is heaven. This system is not only true to observation, consistent, logical, and it has a great explanatory power, it also agrees with religious experience, (be it pre-Christian or Christian). It says that the things move about, either for criminal motives, (to disturb the order), or in search of justice, (to re-establish that order). In comes Galilei, and he says, (or implies), that he knows all of this better.

How can he dare to challenge obvious evidence, logical consistency, millenary philosophical and religious tradition, and indeed the social system which rests on all this? We know the answer, of course: he says that he knows better than Aristotle and everybody else how stones fall: not, in order to return to their just place, but because earth attracts them. But how can he have the cheek to question the harmony and beauty, the justice and perfection of the universe for such a trifle? And is it not, after all, more or less the same thing if one says that stones are attracted by the earth or that they seek it? We know that there is a vast difference between those two statements. The Galilean one may be formulated mathematically, those formulae may be used to build machines, and the machines may change the world and man, whereas nothing of the kind can be done with the Aristotelian statement. But as for Galilei himself, he could not have known this in his life time. So, for Heaven's sake, how are we to understand his cheek, his courage, his heroism?

This way: Galilei was shocked by the fact that Aristotle, (and everybody else), seems to know about the motives of motion, (crime and punishment, injustice and justice). How can they know that? They only believe to know it, because they take it for granted that there is some conflict of intentions, (be they human or not), behind the world which makes the things move. If one looks at the things without any such prejudice, one does not see any motives, but only motions. Those motions, (inertia), must therefore be accepted as given, and nothing can be known about motives. Galilei know better than everybody else, because he knows that he knows nothing about motives. He knows better, because he knows less.

We might say, at first sight, that Galilei was wiser than Aristotle. Did not Socrates say that he knows to know nothing, and is not that a sign of wisdom? But if we reconsider this, we see that this is not so. Science is the opposite of wisdom: it wants to know everything better and better. What Galilei means is this: Aristotle believed that he knew about the motives of motion, and this prevented him from knowing what there is really to know about motion. He asked the wrong question, namely "what for?", and therefore he gave all the wrong answers. I, Galilei, by admitting that I can never know "what for?", can now ask the good questions, namely "why?", and can therefore get the right answers. I know better, because I can distinguish better between the wrong and the right questions.

It is ridiculous, after Galilei, to ask "what does it rain for?", although it was not ridiculous, but very sensible, to ask this before Galilei. But now, we begin to know even better. In the near future, it will become ridiculous to ask "why does it rain?", and our children's children will have to restrict themselves to the "how does it rain?" type of questions. Because it is just as prejudiced to suppose that there is some causality behind the world as it is to suppose intentions. As knowledge grows better, all "teleological", (what for?), and "causal", (why?), questions are eliminated from the scientific discourse. Which implies that the systems built on Galilei, (like the Newtonian one), will have to be abandoned.

But come to think of it: if we cannot know about motives and causes, (which is after all what we are interested in), what is better knowledge good for? The answer of course is this: If you keep asking "what does it rain for?", you will never be able to make artificial rain, unless you have recourse to magic. You have to ask instead "how does it rain?", and is not that the purpose of knowledge: to make artificial rain, to change the world? Better knowledge is one which permits better than previous knowledge to change the world. But this is not a very satisfactory answer. It says two opposite things, namely: better knowledge is less prejudiced than previous knowledge, and it serves better the prejudice that knowledge can change the world. Obviously, some even better knowledge is required to give a better answer.

Let us therefore go back to Galilei, in the hope to find that answer. Galilei knew better than Aristotle, because he knew that he knew less than Aristotle. But this is not the whole truth. There were things which Galilei knew, (for instance that there are mountains on the Moon), which Aristotle did not know. Thus Galilei knew better than Aristotle, because he knew more, and therefore he knew better how much he did not know. To know better means to know more, in order to know what one does not now. Compare our own edifice of knowledge to the one our grandfathers had at their disposal. Ours is much larger. It contains more known data, (indeed so many that they no longer fit in our brains), but this is not, why ours is so much larger. The reason is that there are so many blank spaces in our edifice which were not there when our grandfathers used it. Thus, as knowledge increases, the relation between the known and the unknown shifts in favor of the unknown. And it is this shift toward ever increasing ignorance which is called "better knowledge".

Those blank spaces of ignorance within the edifice of knowledge are not just there, however, but they tend to disrupt the whole structure of previous knowledge. Take two of those spaces, namely "origin of life" and "mental processes", as an example. They were not there for our grandfathers, because one believed to know about them. Life originated due to a unique act of creation, and mental processes went on in the spirit. We know better: we know that we know nothing about creation and spirit. Now those blank spaces which now gape in our edifice of knowledge traverse it from top to bottom. The edifice our grandfathers inhabited consisted of fairly neatly separated storeys. The physicists lived on the ground floor the biologists on the first one, the psychologists on the second one, and the sociologists on the third floor, (to give a "positivistic" description). Each floor had windows proper to it, to look at the world outside and to know it. This was not structurally very different from the Aristotelian system, only more "open". This is no longer so, because the gaping holes have destroyed the structure. Inhabitants of all the floors tumble into those holes, and while doing so, they collide with each other. This is called "interdisciplinarity", and it poses a problem for ever better knowledge.

Let us use a metaphor to illustrate this problem. Suppose that, in the year of 1492, three simultaneous expeditions were sent out to investigate the blank space which is filled with "America" at present, one coming in from Spain, one from Polynesia, and one from China. (Which is not an unreasonable supposition.) In that case the Spanish Columbus would have announced to the Catholic kings that the hole was inhabited by Chinese, (something which he had supposed all the time), and the Chinese Columbus would have announced to the Great Khan that it was inhabited by Spaniards, (which, from the Chinese point of view, was to be expected). Of course: both Columbuses would have come up against Polynesians and Aztecs, (a thing none of them had expected). But would not those people look like curious Chinese to the Spanish Columbus, and like curious Spaniards to the Chinese Columbus? So that in that case "America" would never have been discovered, but only a gray zone common to both Spain and China. No "new" knowledge would have been gained, but previous knowledge would have been extended.

Consider the expeditions which are sent out, (or which tumble into), the gaping hole "origin of life", coming in from Genetics and from Molecular physics. The Catholic kings of genetics are being informed that there are curious molecules out there, and the Great Khan of molecular physics is told of curious primitive genes out there. And both expeditions come back with a few captured Aztecs, (artificial bacteria), to prove it. Consider now the expeditions which are sent out, (or which tumble into), the gaping hole "mental processes", coming in from Neurophysiology and from Electronics. The Catholic kings of neurophysiology are told of curious quantic jumps out there, and the Great Khan of electronics of curious chemical processes, and both expeditions came back with a few captured Aztecs, (artificial intelligences), to prove it. Which is, after all, what was to be expected from previous knowledge. The problem is this: have we gained new knowledge concerning the blank spaces, or have we covered them up with gray zones of overlapping knowledge?

This problem can be put this way: Is it possible that the newly gaping holes within the edifice of knowledge have disrupted its structure so profoundly, that we can no longer know whether we gain new knowledge? Is "interdisciplinarity" a method to fill ignorance with overlapping old knowledge? If this were the case, we would have to conclude that the will to know ever better finally leads to a point where it is no longer reasonable to want to know better. To put this differently: the more one knows, the better one knows how much one does not know, until a point is reached where one no longer knows whether one knows more.

~~XXXXXXXX~~ Which suggests the following description of the history of knowledge, (of science and philosophy of science): first, one knew; then, one knew how much one does not know; then, one began not to know, whether one knows anything at all; and finally, one even does not know whether one really does not know this. And this is called "progress toward ever better knowledge". What strikes us, if we read that description, (and if one tries not to become dizzy while reading it), is that it mirrors the history of faith: first, one believes; then, one believes that there are incredible things; then, one begins to believe that one does not believe anything at all; and finally, one does not even believe that one really does not believe anything. The history of knowledge mirrors the history of faith, because such is the dynamics of knowledge. To know ever better is to eliminate progressively belief from knowledge, (for instance the belief in motives and the belief in causes). The result is that belief becomes exhausted, and that ever greater holes gape within knowledge. There is a culmination point in this process: one believes that one can know without believing anything. At then one knows it better: one believes that one can know nothing without believing in something. Which is of course an intolerable situation both for faith and for knowledge.

This explains why so many people try nowadays to get away from this situation. (Without necessarily having followed the argument which leads to the situation). Those people try to run away into India, into Tibet, into sects, into drugs, into the greenery of ecological movements, in the hope to find true faith and true knowledge. But of course: they do so out of bad faith and against better knowledge, because they are, themselves, the result of that intolerable situation. This cannot be a good method to overcome what is called "our crisis". Something else must be tried, and this is our challenge.