The internet and medical humanities: a reflection

The 18th century was the age of reason, and the 19th century the cradle of science. The 20th century was dubbed the Century of War and Peace. The 21st century could be the Century of Reflection. But what place the internet?

One of the most exciting scientific developments in recent years has been the emergence of the internet as a means of communication and as a medium for the revelation of imaginative creativity by people previously unknown to science, literature, or the humanities. Lots of junk and some nuggets are jumbled up in cyberspace and most of us will not find time to surf between the flotsam and jetsam in search of the gold. Instead we rely on focused searches in our field of concern. Chain mail passed on by someone you know is, however, always a distraction.

The following piece of prose is an example. It originated in the USA and it was posted around the world for “Happy Friendship Week” early in 2002. The originator is named as Andy Rooney. It was then passed from desk to desk in an accelerating international cybercascade with the request that it be read reflectively and then passed on to friends. It is reproduced here at some length, before comment.

Enlightened Perspectives

I’ve learned . . . That the best classroom in the world is at the feet of an elderly person.

I’ve learned . . . That when you are in love it shows.

That just one person saying to me, “You’ve made my day!” makes my day.

That the less time you have to work with, the more things I get done.

That it is best to give advice in only two words.

That I can’t choose how I feel, but I can choose what I do about it.

That when your newly born grandchild holds your little finger in his little fist, you are hooked for life.

That everyone you meet deserves to be greeted with a smile.

That love, not time, heals wounds.

That life is like a roll of toilet paper. The closer you get to the end, the faster it goes.

I’ve learned . . . That being kind is more important than being right.

That sometimes all a person needs is a hand to hold and a heart to understand.

That you should never say no to a gift from a child.

That when feeling alone.

That when chain mail arrives on screen. What made me want to pass this one on to others?

Downie provides a clue when he quotes both Coleridge and Wordsworth saying, “the function of the poet is that of removing the film of familiarity which coats everyday objects and situations, and thus making us more vividly aware of them.” This is important because most people don’t spend their days in wonder and excitement about the ordinary events and objects around them. Familiarity numbs the imagination, and crude jokes or banter about anything are a more common currency. Every-day experience then becomes a vehicle for day level, and so they cope by poking fun at anything and everything. Indeed humour is often a heroic means of coping with danger or a drab existence. Men tend to be more inhibited than women in expressing their deeper needs, and they are often less technophobic. The internet provides them with a safe arm’s length solution to their need for expression when feeling alone.

If such a hypothesis has some face validity then it needs to be tested because the internet may provide creative therapy for those with no other way to clarify their deeper needs. Story telling and poetry have much in common and one man’s egocentric poem can be another man’s liberation from feeling misunderstood. But what will this do for the development of the humanities? Will the rough hevn verses of untutored people rise in the halls of fame? Or will the professionals cry “Foul” and relegate those nuggets to the bottom of the league?

References


2 Evans MH, Greaves DA. A renaissance for the ‘sense of wonder’? Journal of Medical Ethics: Medical Humanities 2001; 27.


BOOK REVIEW

Science and Poetry


This is a book about personal identity, about who and what we are. It is about the unity of our lives.

In other words, the book is about a project many of us have entertained, in academic philosophy and elsewhere. We know, however, that there are serious obstacles to the successful realisation of the project. Far too often we raise dust by the methods of our thinking, and then complain that we cannot see. Then we

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are guided by visions that are inappropriate to the study we are engaged in. One important vision or imaginative habit is atomism. It works well in natural sciences—for example, in physics and molecular genetics. Physical atomism is not a theory of physics; it is more like a presupposition concerning the ways in which theories of physics should be formed in order to make sense. Social atomism is transferred to the social sciences, individualism results. In cultural studies atomism appears as the presupposition of “memes”—that is, a cultural object or belief that can be replicated, passed on, and evolve, and which seems to have a life of its own. Transfers of this kind are often thought of as attempts to prove that the studies concerned are genuinely scientific—that is, of the same stock as the natural sciences. So if social sciences are to be scientific, social atomism has to be presupposed; cultural studies deserve the name of science only if cultural atomism is presupposed; and so on. Dualism, materialism, and reductionism are other visions or ways of imagining the world. Many more can be found in our thoughts and actions, and, of course, not only in academic life. They are unavoidable. There is no science without presuppositions of various kinds—for example, ontological, categorical, and methodological. Every scientific inquiry is relative to the point of view of one of its presuppositions and, when successful, it gives a true picture of a reality only in some aspect or other. The claim that one has covered it all of its true aspects is rash, and so is the claim that all relations between the aspects have been mapped.

This aspect directed character of thought and action is therefore connected with a problem of fragmentation. In this I also include the question of how the whole(s), of which the aspects are parts, should be determined. To acquire understanding of a complex reality the problem of fragmenting must be solved or overcome. Failure to do so quickly hinders or blocks the way; it becomes an encumbrance, like heavy baggage. This seems to have happened in the social sciences with regard to individualism.

The challenge Mary Midgley has accepted for her book is to find a whole within which our ideas of science and poetry can be brought together. How, in particular, should we talk about the relation between ourselves as subjects and as objects—between the first—and third person aspects of ourselves? What sort of beings do we—as a whole—now turn out to be?

According to Midgley, the key to understanding the unity of our lives is to understand ourselves as whole persons. Mind and body are two aspects of that whole, the former the aspect of the whole as a subject, the latter the aspect of it as an object. The whole person belongs within a wider context of interlocking larger wholes, and ultimately of that living system we call the earth, with Gaia the earth goddess as its most expressive symbol. Many consequences follow from this radical holism. The weaknesses of individualism in social science are exposed effectively; new light is thrown on responsibilities, rights, and duties; freedom and determinism are re-articulated; the bridge between thought and feeling becomes visible; and the similarities and differences between science and poetry emerge—the similarities turn on the presence in both of visions or ways of imagining the world, the differences on a distinction between the manners of expressing those visions. The richness of the consequences lends strong support to the form of holism that generates them.

I conclude by observing that who, and what, somebody is or was may be considered to be different questions. The former, it is sometimes said—for example, by Arendt,1 pertains to narrative identity, and we know the answer to it when we know the story of which the individual person concerned is the hero. Thus “emplotment”—that is, the property of being located in a narrative, is the key to individuality.

The question of what somebody is or was is answered in terms of attributes which the person concerned may share with other individuals. Midgley does not discuss narrative identity, but as far as I can see the notion is consistent with her treatment of personal identity.

Mary Midgley has written a thought provoking book. Her polemics and engagement in current debates, and her lucid and beautiful prose, make the book a source of absorbing intellectual interest and enjoyment.

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