

[Benjamin B. Olshin: pre-colloquium contributions to the dialogue]

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Answers that Assure Me: A Reply to Some of Jan Visser's "Questions that Trouble Me"

Question: Does 'Building the Scientific Mind' mean the same to other people (particularly my BtSM friends) as it does to me? In other words: Is there shared understanding of BtSM?

I would conjecture that as with all things in life, the answer is yes and no. Is there a shared concrete understanding? No. But obviously, the fact that participants such as myself are drawn again and again into being a part of BtSM, and the fact that many of us derive great pleasure in debating, asking questions, and discussing the issues brought up by BtSM means that in essence we do indeed share an understanding. That understanding is more of BtSM as a process, and certainly as a mode of — as Jan notes — a "lifelong process of human development to acquire a way of being in and of the world, inspired by the heritage of the millennia-long history of the human pursuit of knowledge (scientia) for the advancement of understanding and wisdom..." Indeed, the BtSM meetings themselves are part of this "pursuit".

Moreover, I like Jan's list of key elements of this "lifelong process":

- habits of thinking and dispositions in approaching the world, as well as
- values, ethical concerns, aesthetic considerations, and attitudes, alongside
- mastery of a complex array of skills and mental capabilities in select domains, with such 'select domains' depending on an individual's interests and prospective needs and desires, which are different for a carpenter, a theoretical physicist, or a musician.

Of course, I would argue that the "interests and prospective needs and desires" for "a carpenter, a theoretical physicist, or a musician" might be quite the same.

Jan adds that he feels that he "can describe this even better", but it seems quite clear to me — for those of you who prefer technical terms, it's all about ontology. For those who prefer plain language, with a bit of Buddhism and Daoism, it's about "making one's way in the world", and how we do that as individuals, but also as humankind as a whole.

Jan also notes something about looking at "underlying human tempers such as passion and resoluteness and postures such as resilience, and stressing the importance of

embodiment.” I am guessing that he’s interested in that because science or even just scientia seems a bit too rational and thus too narrow in focus. However, I’d add that it’s important to see the connection between passion, etc., and things like scientia. Human beings seem to have both a rational and emotional side (to be a bit simplistic), and it is indeed relevant for BtSM to look at that.

Question: Can we imagine planet earth, its biosphere, and humanity in the year 42015? What can we learn from such a prospective view against the backdrop of what we may learn by looking back at the heritage of our forebears who lived, as long as forty thousand years ago, in the area where we meet?

Not only is it hard to human beings to imagine this far into the future, it seems difficult for them to think about the future at all. But I want some positive answers here to Jan’s questions, and I would say the following: Instead of thinking about somehow leaving a “time capsule” for 42015, hoping that they will remember and understand us, we should think about building continuity from now until that distant future age. The memory of our current civilizations and its struggles and errors and hopes should be a living memory. We need to set up the apparatus for that lineage now. I see that as part of the mission of the BtSM

Question: What inroads can we make into imagining the learning landscape of the future, based on our appreciation of what it means to be human in the 21st century and beyond?

Jan very nicely in the background he gives to this question resonates with what I’ve said above. Jan notes that the for the “learning landscape” to change, society “requires a community to foment the desired change.” He adds that such a “community is growing, but slowly.” It is that community that must grow and create a new form of learning, and build, then, the living legacy of preserving the past and shaping the future — one long line of more and more enlightened human learning and existence.

Question: What technological, pedagogical and content knowledge and know-how will determine the effectiveness of future learning environments? What else is needed?

I am not — despite being a professor — an expert in education. Therefore, I cannot answer this question of Jan’s directly. I would add this, however, drawn from my own twenty years of teaching: First of all, what I see most often in education is a lack of content, period. Students spend an inordinate amount of time in a classroom (and this is especially true in secondary schools, undergraduate programs in universities, and even graduate programs) but the actual amount of learning is incommensurate with that time. In technical fields, this is less so, but I would feel safe in making this generalization across all subject areas and almost all institutions of learning. More profound a problem, however, is that almost all education, both in technical areas and the humanities, lacks a strong component of philosophical and ethical content. We create in both Western and Eastern cultures students with some technical proficiency but virtually no context. The Chinese have a wonderful term for this: 書呆子 (shu dai zi), which means, literally, “book stupid” — all the knowledge from reading lots of books, but no actual ability or socialization to use that knowledge in a formative way.

Question: How come those who spend years and years in school still exit it with deficient abilities to use their intellectual faculties critically? Can this be repaired?

I've addressed this question in my answer to the preceding one. But again, since I wish to be positive in these comments, let me talk about the tag question here: "Can this be repaired?" Absolutely. In fact, in my years of teaching, I have seen that it is the students themselves who desire context, who crave it, and who feel lost with only technical knowledge. They want to know how to navigate through their lives, and they see clearly what's needed. We also have teachers all over the world who can teach things like philosophical context, ethics, and so on.

Question: What has gone wrong with religious sentiment? In the face of evolving secularization, what is it in the cultural heritage of humanity's religious past that should possibly be preserved and remain available for contemplation by future generations?

This is a wonderful point for discussion, and I hope Jan and others pursue it at the conference. I would add the following, as this recently came up in a different context in a discussion that I had with someone currently in seminary school. There is nothing wrong with religious sentiment per se; rather, the problem is that religion is poorly understood and, to use Jan's term from another question, religion is not "embodied" in a healthy and formative way by human beings. Moreover, secularization is not the "answer" that has been so readily embraced by so many in the recent times; secularization simply creates an even more terrifying scenario: one where human beings become the final arbiters of all things, and cease to see themselves as part of a much greater universe.

Question: What holds us from living in constructive symbiosis with the environment of which we are part?

This is a profound question. I look at this question briefly in my BtSM contribution, which I cite here: In terms of violence, human societies often see no connection between our approach to the environment and our approach to each other. While a number of distinguished environmentalists, naturalists, and other thinkers have argued against it, human beings most often continue to view the natural environment as resource to be exploited. This is an act of violence at the most fundamental level: the exhaustion of something finite — that is, killing it.

Again, historically, even early societies were capable of exhausting their environment, with Easter Island perhaps being the most famous example. But we cannot say now, in 2015, that we are ignorant of the dangers inherent in such actions. The intellectual knowledge of such facts must become part of our natural behavior, so that viewing the Earth and the environment as partners becomes the default state of existence.

Question: What has gone wrong in the development of democracy? Can it be repaired? How?

This is the last question I will address here, and I could not hope to do justice to it — there are many factors affecting democracy in the current era, and I look forward to hearing Jan's take on this problem. As a U.S. citizen, I will give my perspective, since this is a topic discussed in my country frequently these days. In the U.S., there has been a

conflation of politics and democracy. Politics is about social control and power; democracy is about representation and the exercise of rights. Many people in the U.S. believe that voting for a particular candidate will somehow secure the latter, when it is clear to members of a broad spectrum, from socialists to libertarians, that under all political parties, the representation of the average citizen, not to mention the underclass, has declined. The other problem with democracy in the U.S. is that many citizens have come to believe only in rights and not responsibilities. They believe that they are owed certain things, but they have lost an understanding of the fact that they also have obligations, e.g., to help those less fortunate, to build ties to the community and so on. In other countries, such as Egypt, where there was hope for the development of democracy and it collapsed, the causes are different. In such cases, the fundamental requirements for democracy do not exist, and so all moves in that direction are doomed to fail. Those requirements include equal opportunities for women, proper and meaningful employment for young people, and the realistic possibility for citizens to achieve a peaceful and fulfilling existence. Until such social and economic structures exist, democracy cannot take root. An example that I often cite is Taiwan: there, democracy took root and developed quite quickly in one sense: Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, and was succeeded by his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, who died in 1988. By 1996, Taiwan had its first election. Chiang Ching-kuo realized that Taiwan had to move towards a democratic system, and there were all the ingredients necessary to do so: a good work ethic, a strong sense of family and community, and a thriving economy and growing educational system. Democracy can not be imposed by foreign governments, nor even arise from the “masses”. It can only appear organically if the fundamental elements — the citizens themselves — are “healthy” in a social and economic sense.
