

Submitted manuscript

Personal Epistemology

Robert A. Benfer, Jr.

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I write as one whose myth for why we are here is a very simple one, that we are here because we have parents who were able to find each other, reproduce, and, in most cases, care for us. They also, in most cases, cared for each other and, living as social animals, found support from other members of their society. For me, it is from these necessities that flow all systems of ethics, that part of our understanding that can be made conscious in stories, depictions in other artistic media, and ceremonies.

I write as an anthropologist, as a member of a tragically conflicted group that celebrates the variety of human experiences possible with the many different systems that assign meaning to lives. Yet we also know that never did a culture long survive while respecting competing belief systems of political and economical competitors.

I write as a sometime forensic anthropologist who is asked by law enforcement carriers of human remains, to assign the “race” of the person who in life would have benefited or suffered from a classification only sometimes and slightly registered in her bones.

I write as a man, a male whose potential reproductive period is long and whose investment in any particular offspring might be slight, possessing a nearly inexhaustible supply of sex cells. With these characteristics come all of the flaws in men so visible to women with precisely the opposite reproductive characteristics.

I write as a “white,” in a society where skin color makes a difference. White is a term that covers many ancestries; my first cousin parental grandparents, making the writer also an inbred, spoke German and my maternal grandparents contributed genes brought from the British Isles and then mixed with those of the original explorers of the New World.

I write as a moderately published scientist and barely published poet. Science as an epistemology shares for me one unusual distinction with the successful world religions in that it is intended to be universally applicable.

I write as a materialist, so for me, although the image of my wife is quite real even though she might not be near, there are no images of the wonderful and horrible and always interesting supernatural beings that most people keep in their head. I feel awe in an old-growth forest but do not really sense the supernatural forces that exist in an animated landscape.

I write to help me develop a private theory of my desires and behavior and feelings in order to understand the successes and failures of my life. I know them as successes or as failures because of rules internalized when I was a child unable to evaluate their reasonableness.

I write as a scientist, one for whom the primary language is mathematics and science, metaphors uninteresting to those who are so much more skilled in everyday language that they believe their knowledge is greater for their lack of facility with the rhetoric of science.

I write poetry that is only successful shorthand for emotions that I do not fully understand. I read poetry and novels and evidence reports for the pleasure they afford me, a pleasure that much be at its

base, a search for novelty in some landscape persistent enough that in my life I scarcely notice its change.

But now I notice the seasonal change enough to write as one for whom, if remaining days are not countable, they are estimatable. I write for those for whom the future still appears expansive not to narrow your view, not to suggest that you should love less and more wisely, or want less, approach goals that are more reasonable. For I do not think that my vision of more years is better than yours of less.

Because I write as one who sees the sun set, not balls revolving in space, who believes that there is a place and an event, because its quantum twin is invisible, invisible as are so many important things, like my wife when she is not near, or my daughter who is far away.

I write as one who has seen the battle rage back and forth in directions not predicted by Snow's Two Cultures. I saw the loss of prestige of humanists with the increase of scientists with their grants and graduate students made almost crazy by the loss of believable political alternatives, these days. The unlimited good of science and capitalism threatened postmodernists and creationists alike, because they benefited so little from either.

I write as one who cannot imagine unlimited capitalism producing new wealth forever, but I am less able to see the end of the new knowledge that science might produce.

The return to medieval beliefs, where writing in holy books or by elite humanists, becomes the only acceptable guide to behavior is impeded at present by a President influenced by the former, not the latter.

I write for you, gentle reader, to help me and others see another way than revitalization cults in the Middle East as well as among threatened poor people everywhere who retain some sense of ethnic identity, their final defense against capitalism and science, against being losers in the battle for the benefits of both.

I write wondering whether scientists and humanists might find common ground to oppose the excesses of free-market capitalism while defending free-market science.

I write from Mexico where genetically altered cultigens, like all cultigens, but more recently and quickly modified, is feared as unhealthy when its use would reduce the need for fertilizer significantly, fertilizer that has known rather than imagined bad effects on the environment.

I write as someone who has visited China enough to see how sterile is a world with few species, but how lively are the people. Still, I write as one who believes that the rate of change in the environment, especially the climate, could quickly get out of hand. I write knowing many thoughtful persons who believe that the situation is even worse with respect to a culture, into which they are so embedded that they cannot see another better.

I write as an archaeologist fascinated that the worldwide deterioration in climate 5,000 years ago was translated into the building of the first cities at widely scattered locations around the world, was translated into the beginning of stratification by class, was translated into an agriculture so intensive that today, a few thousand farmers can support parasitic persons such as myself to spend time not on subsistence, but on learning.

I write as someone who knows very well how to accumulate knowledge, who has experienced the heady discoveries of how old are archaeological sites, how old is our species, how old is the line of upright walking anthropoids whose hands became freed for writing.

I write from Mexico where the differences in the quality of life, if not the understanding of it, vary so enormously that one doesn't

know where to begin, except perhaps in revolution, which as a young man, I considered as a solution to the segregated world in which I grew up in Texas.

Unfortunately, I do not write as someone who knows how to translate the accumulation of knowledge into dignified living for so very many people. I wish it could happen by pronouncing the goal that from each by her ability, to each, according to her need.

However, in the same way that tolerant cultures can never survive competition with intolerant ones, how can we social primates focus on cooperation when we are in competition with those that focus on efficiency? At the level of the family, our parents in most cases, cared for each other and, living as social animals, found support from other members of their society. Somehow, the benefits to one's family of cooperation rather than competition might come to be greater than the benefits of social Darwinism, Darwinism crueler when ethnic groups are identifiable by external phenotypic characters, and the resulting castes are always ranked.

I do not know any answer, but I am pretty sure that the answer lies not in writing, but in doing. I wish all the luck possible to those of you young enough to have energy enough for the challenge. Even

should the two cultures be reunited as one scholarly community, the forces of demography and economics may prevail. Perhaps, with age, you, like me, will have to accept that which we are unable to change.