

## EDITORIAL

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote, “A curious analogy could be based on the fact that even the hugest telescope has to have an eye-piece no larger than the human eye” (Wittgenstein 1980:17e). It’s an intriguing comment, and (like many of Wittgenstein’s) its import isn’t altogether clear. For me, though, it calls to mind an insight apparently embodied (perhaps, unwittingly) in a short story, “Ask a Foolish Question,” by science-fiction writer Robert Sheckley.<sup>1</sup>

It’s clear from Sheckley’s body of fiction that he knew quite a bit of philosophy, and “Ask a Foolish Question” seems to dramatize certain venerable themes concerning conceptual relativity and the nature of truth. Although I think Sheckley draws the wrong conclusion at the end of his story and may in fact have missed the central point he so cleverly illustrates, the dilemma of his characters might interest and be of value to *JSE* readers who aspire to draw grand conclusions from their studies of scientific anomalies.

Sheckley imagined that a race of super beings had uncovered the ultimate nature of reality and had constructed a device, Answerer, to provide that knowledge to whomever sought it. (Sheckley doesn’t seem to realize that his story actually illustrates why this is impossible.) The story, then, concerns several dramatically different races of beings, including humans, heading toward Answerer, all of them eager to pose their ultimate questions.

The problem, however, is that because these organisms are such radically different forms of life, their distinctive and interrelated descriptive categories, overall conceptual schemes, and even the phenomena and regularities they can experience, differ radically as well. For example, the members of one race were so big that they could leap from one star to another. These beings were concerned with their lifelong and only partially grasped activity of collecting purple, which was present throughout the universe, which somehow governed their lives, and which they were slowly building into an enormous mound whose purpose was also not clear to them. They also spoke a variety of contextually appropriate languages, each presumably with its own idiosyncratic syntax and semantics—that is, ways of parsing and organizing the world as they experience it. For example, these creatures spoke the language of imminent decision, the tongue of light banter, the vernacular of decision-to-fact, and the tongue of arguments.

Another race was governed by the rule of eighteen, according to which when there are eighteen, a nineteenth will appear. These creatures knew that the stars were cold, but they did not know why, just as they didn’t know why the

rule of eighteen was a natural law. And for them there was no distance, although there were other places where they could appear.

And then there were humans, also heading toward Answerer. Moreover, all the travelers believed that Answerer had been built by a race not unlike their own.

In Sheckley's story, each group of beings has a frustrating encounter with Answerer. In every case, Answerer tells them their questions rest on organism-relative assumptions that it and its creators reject. Answerer couldn't say what purple was or why the race that collected it was building a mound of the substance. It couldn't explain why, when eighteen gather, a nineteenth is produced, or why the stars are cold, or why those creatures were fat there and thin here. Answerer couldn't even answer the human visitors' questions, "Is the universe expanding?" and "What is death?" For Answerer, the concepts/descriptive categories used in all these questions were profoundly inadequate for conveying genuine knowledge.

Unfortunately, Sheckley confusedly ends his story with the conclusion that, in order to ask the right question, one must already know most of the answer. But that's not quite right. What the story seems instead to illustrate is that there *cannot* be such a thing as an objectively privileged right answer—including those dispensed by Answerer. The moral should have been that no set of questions, including those to which Answerer was designed to respond, is perspective-free, and no perspective on the universe can be independent of some relevant lifeform's idiosyncratic organism, perceptual modalities, history, and current situation. But then no perspective on the universe can be all-encompassing, capturing every possible discernable phenomenon or meaningful natural regularity.

Answerer tells his visitors that their questions and concepts are mere "partialities" at best, as if Answerer's own perspective transcends the limitations of the organisms posing their questions. But those limitations result from at least two related states of affairs, which unavoidably affect Answerer and its creators as well as the galactic travelers. First, the visitors are all organically restricted in the range of phenomena they can experience. Second, the language they use for articulating and grasping what they call knowledge, and the descriptive categories they employ, are all abstractions focusing on certain aspects of their idiosyncratically experienced world to the exclusion of others. In fact, as the philosopher C. S. Peirce recognized, by the time you're old enough to conduct a scientific investigation or do epistemology, you're already "laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself if you would" (Peirce, 1963, paragraph 416). To use a familiar philosophical image, our combined organic constitution and conceptual framework is analogous to a pair of tinted glasses that we can't

remove. Everything we experience and try to analyze comes pre-tinted, pre-conceptualized, and there's not a thing we can do to escape it. It's why classic philosophical attempts at rational reconstructions of knowledge have been such spectacular failures—for example, empiricist efforts to build up knowledge from uninterpreted sense-data. As Peirce recognized, “there is but one state of mind from which you can ‘set out’ [to do philosophy or science], namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do ‘set out’,” and at that point “our very percepts are the results of cognitive elaboration” (Peirce, 1963). This is why many philosophers, including Kant and some of his less rationalist pragmatist successors, believed that it was the business of science to study the world as we experience it (i.e. inescapably tinted), and it was the job of philosophy to study the nature of the tinted glasses.

Now Sheckley apparently wants us to believe that the humans and other visitors to Answerer suffer from conceptual limitations traceable to their distinctive organic constitutions and perceptual modalities. But of course, *any* organism must be constrained in that way, including the members of the race that built Answerer. Visitors to Answerer didn't ask the *objectively* wrong question. The questions which Answerer was designed to accept would be no more privileged or inherently deep than those which Answerer rejected. A more plausible explanation for Answerer's inability to deal with visitors' questions would be that there's no way to translate neatly (or without residue) between Answerer's conceptual framework and those of its interlocutors. In fact, it's reasonable to suggest that the only difference between the race that built Answerer and those whose members visited it in search of ultimate knowledge is that Answerer's creators were satisfied—perhaps only at that time—that they understood nature as they experienced it. And of course, that's a position which scientists have taken, and later rejected, repeatedly over the centuries.

So is there a lesson here for the study of scientific anomalies? Many of those working in areas of frontier science are understandably tempted to speculate about the implications of their research for our understanding of nature. Some even aspire, foolishly I think (as Sheckley's story unwittingly illustrates), to formulate a theory of everything. Sheckley's story, and various additional philosophical considerations, seem to show that our grasp of reality is doomed to be partial at best, and that this grasp must inevitably be couched in terms idiosyncratic both to one's form of life and to one's cognitive history.

So perhaps Sheckley's story can serve as a cautionary tale, reminding us not to succumb to a kind of scientific or metaphysical hubris. Whatever key we might think we've found to unlock nature's secrets, we'll never wind up either with an all-encompassing description of nature or one incapable of revision or further refinement. Those goals seem simply to be naive and forever out of reach.

Nevertheless, I feel strongly tempted to put a positive spin on this, and it's not because I'm an exemplar of a sunny disposition (in fact, that would violate the professional philosopher's imperative to be curmudgeonly). I think Sheckley's story also reminds us that there will *always* be more to learn about the universe. Despite the aforementioned inevitable limitations on our understanding of nature, as we evolve both organically and conceptually, we will hopefully devise increasingly useful sets of conceptual grids for grasping and manipulating the world around us. And if (as I believe) there's no reason to think this evolutionary process can ever end, we can look forward to more anomalies, more mysteries, and the possibility of further and exciting refinement of our knowledge, restricted as it must be in any case.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> The story first appeared in *Science Fiction Stories No. 1* in 1953. It is available online at several sites and has since been anthologized often. See for example Sheckley, 1955, 1975.

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### References

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