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PETTY

ARE WE GETTING BETTER?

A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ABOUT US

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE SPHEX CLUB - - OCTOBER 10, 1996

INTRODUCTION

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one to present a paper to The Sphex Club, one may find oneself thrashing about wildly for a topic. Ideally, a topic about which one knows a great deal is preferable or, perhaps, a topic that other members of The Sphex Club may know very little about in the hope that the speaker might avoid the hard questions. The grim truth is that I could not produce a topic in either category.

Facing tonight's moment of truth, I rummaged through my files of clippings and notes and found a notation that The Sphex Club held its organizational meeting on October 5, 1910. And we have been meeting continuously since that time. I also found a notation that the word "SPHEX" was invented by Dr. F. W. Martin, who was an original member, and that the letter "P" in the Sphex Acronym represents "philosophy". I was also reminded that participation in this distinguished group challenges us, whether or not we are the speaker, to more fully examine, discuss, and reflect on matters outside our familiar and ordinary routine.

Tonight I ask that you visit with me some thoughts and reflections - - let's say, philosophical thoughts and reflections- - about us; on the human condition (particularly in Western culture); and the question whether the human condition is getting better. I must say at the outset, a quote from the 19th century English novelist, George Eliot (1819-1880) (quoted in Impressions of Theophras Such) comes to mind when he said "Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact." I hope I will heed that admonition.

#### BACKGROUND

Let me quickly dispel any claim that my comments tonight derive from original thought. Giving credit where credit is due, the source of information for this paper comes, in large part, from articles appearing in The Wall Street Journal in 1992 and 1994. In addition, several of our recent speakers raised philosophical questions that are related to tonight's topic but that were not fully debated and discussed by our members. For example, Pierre Guillerman, in his paper: "Looking at the Soul of Russia", stated the premise, which is perhaps as much theological as philosophical, that "Hope is essential to life!". He then posed the question "Does hope come from outside the scope

of daily experience?" and, again "Are children the only symbol of hope?". Then he asked, here more philosophically than theologically, "Do we all, including the Russians, justify our being only by the power we control?". Let me pose a related question here: "Do we live in a world where the pursuit of self-actualization is the highest value, a world where self-asserting violence is the norm?". (Quoted in part in the April 9, 1995, Charlotte Observer [Section C] from Richard B. Hays in the April 22, 1992, issue of The Christian Century. The full quote is: "Sacrificial love does more than create a defensive middle; it also presents a transformative witness to a world where the pursuit of self-actualization is the highest value, a world where self-asserting violence is the norm.")

In his paper on genetics presented earlier this year, Charles Warren raised the philosophical, and perhaps theological, question whether the rapid and mind-boggling advances in genetic engineering reflect a progressive movement toward ultimate good or, on the other hand, whether the law of unintended consequences, which he says applies to all technology, will outweigh this ultimate good.

Then John D'Entremont, in his paper on the film entitled "My Dinner with André", spoke of the necessity of facing life's

issues in an intelligent manner. John issued the challenge that, "to get the most from the talent assembled here (referring to SPHEX), we must engage ourselves on issues". He also posed what he says is the ultimate philosophical question: "Why are we here?". I submit that, in fact, we are here and let us ask ourselves tonight the philosophical question: "Are we getting better?".

#### THE CONFLICT BETWEEN ENLIGHTENMENT AND CHAOS

It is my hope that the questions raised by previous speakers, as well as this paper, will provoke meaningful discussion and, perhaps, suggest related topics for future speakers. In his comments to our members, John D'Entremont referred to the title of a painting by Gauguin. Paul Gauguin was a French painter who lived from 1848 to 1903. An 1897 work, painted while he was in Tahiti, is entitled: "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?". It would be difficult to conceive of a better source of inquiry for the letter "P" in SpheX.

In a few minutes, I will focus on tonight's basic theme: the erosion of a philosophical idea - - a secular faith or belief, really - - that has sustained and undergirded the American experiment from the beginning. This special gift of the

18th century Enlightenment - - a faith or belief in the idea of continual progress through reason - - germinated during the Renaissance, developed through the influential writings of John Locke, and others, during the 17th century, and reached full flower just in time to influence the thinking of America's Founding Fathers (Wall Street Journal, July 27, 1992, and December 14, 1994). One name given to this fundamental belief or faith is "secular humanism". Now, according to writers, the emerging field of chaos theory is ~~this~~ shaking secular humanism to its foundations - - and with it, a shaking of confidence that verged on "hubris", a word for a sort of arrogant self-assurance. History, and nature, once confidently viewed as something that rational man could bend to his liking, is increasingly viewed as an irrational force unto itself. And history, once viewed as progressing, almost in a linear fashion, to ever-higher stages, is increasingly viewed as not necessarily "progressing" toward anything! (WSJ December 14, 1994). We'll have more of John Locke and secular, rationalist humanism, and hubris, in a moment.

But first, let me speak in general of philosophy. I have never taken a course in philosophy and I doubt that most of you have either. On the other hand, I suspect that most of us have some sense of the philosophical search for ultimate answers to

questions such as those posed by Gauguin. The encyclopedia tells us that philosophy is ". . . the endeavor to discover by systematic reflection the ultimate nature of things." [Collier's Encyclopedia]. The term is derived from two Greek words meaning the love of wisdom or knowledge. Philosophy can be defined as rational critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind, about the conduct of life, the general nature of our world, and the justification of belief. [Encyclopedia Americana].

I quickly discovered that philosophy, the "P" in SPHEX, is an ancient and broad subject and difficult to define. It is sometimes used to denote a system of speculative beliefs, as when we speak of the Kantian philosophy or, on the other hand, a set of convictions on important issues, such as a system of principles for guidance in our practical affairs, as when we speak of a certain man's "philosophy of life". (Collier's Encyclopedia, Philosophy, p. 701).

In [this] latter sense, perhaps everyone has a philosophy, formulated or not. Philosophy does not consist primarily in a set of doctrines, however, since philosophers have to confess that there are no conclusions upon which all competent philosophers agree, as physicists or chemists [might] agree.

Furthermore, philosophy does not, like the sciences, have a province of nature that is peculiarly its own; it has no distinctive subject matter. In short, it is not a body of specialized knowledge, but a kind of activity, "a peculiarly stubborn effort to think clearly," as William James once put it, a sustained process of reflection directed toward ultimate understanding. It may start anywhere. The attempts by reason to discover the nature of a pebble, of an idea, or of the Deity are equally philosophy provided they are pressed through to what present themselves as fundamental conclusions. [id. at page 701]

This "reflection directed toward ultimate understanding" inter-relates, and has something in common with, other major activities of the human mind, such as poetry, religion and science. It differs from poetry in being an activity of reason only. For the theologians, it differs from religion in that religion appeals also to mystic experience, revelation, and faith. The emphasis on reason in philosophical thought makes philosophy the close relative of science.

Philosophy is related to science in two ways: it logically precedes science; it also completes it. In preceding science,

the philosopher undertakes to examine concepts that the scientist in his daily work is compelled to use and which the scientist cannot take the time to examine - - for example, the concepts of time, space, proof, and truth. In completing science, the philosopher questions assumptions and conclusions of science.

At this point you might ask, with some justification I might add, why this rambling on in an attempt to define something that is incapable of definition? Well, my short answer is that, whether we are conscious of it or not, our Western culture is permeated by a philosophy - - the philosophy of John Locke and others - - and their fundamental conclusions are now being viewed by thoughtful observers as breaking down. These observers, such as Dr. Donald Worster, an environmental historian at the University of Kansas, are seeing that, in science, in ecology, in history, and psychological outlook, change is the norm. Disturbance is the norm, the world is nothing but flux and flow, change without end, change that doesn't necessarily "progress" toward anything. (WSJ July 11, 1994).

Let us now spend a few moments on John Locke and secular humanism and then on to chaos theory and the erosion of a secular faith in progress.

Locke an Englishman, lived from 1632 to 1704. His writings have greatly influenced political science as well as philosophy.

His "Two Treatises of Government" (1689) strongly influenced Thomas Jefferson in writing the Declaration of Independence. Until his death, he wrote widely on such subjects as educational reform, freedom of the press, and religious tolerance. He studied medicine and science and obtained a medical license though he didn't actually earn a medical degree. His friendships with prominent government officers and scholars (Sir Isaac Newton, for example) made him one of the most influential men of the 17th century. In his major work, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1690), Locke argued against a doctrine of innate ideas and expounded the empirical theory that all knowledge is based on sense experience and is further refined through reflection. Locke's view of knowledge anticipated further developments by later philosophers and led to the idea that, through reason, man would discover the "laws of nature" and, if man could just know enough and apply that knowledge, things would be better and better.

Locke's considerable importance in political thought is perhaps better known. In his "Two Treatises of Government", written in 1689, Locke set forth the view that the state exists to preserve the natural rights of its citizens. When governments fail in that task, citizens have the right - - and sometimes the

duty - - to withdraw their support and even to rebel. Locke opposed the view of Thomas Hobbes that the original state of nature was "nasty, brutish, and short", and also the view of Hobbes that individuals through a social contract surrendered - - for the sake of self-preservation - - their rights to a supreme sovereign who was the source of all morality and law. Locke maintained that the state of nature was a happy and tolerant one, that the social contract preserved the preexistent natural rights of the individual to life, liberty, and property, and that the enjoyment of private rights - - the pursuit of happiness - - led, in civil society, to the common good. Locke's notion of government was a limited one: the checks and balances among branches of government (later reflected in our Constitution) and true representation in the legislature would maintain limited government and individual liberties. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

I began this paper with words taken from the preamble to our Declaration of Independence. In the next paragraph of that document appear the words: ". . . [W]e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of

Happiness. . . . ". This language was inspired by the Enlightenment and philosophers such as Locke, which promoted in our Western culture a new vision of human beings as set apart from, and above, the rest of nature by their capacity for reason.

This vision has driven Western culture. We have celebrated the power of reason and the promise of progress. This is what we refer to when we speak of secular, rationalist humanism. In its broad sense, secularism might be thought of as any movement in society directed from the spiritual world to life on earth. The movement toward secularism has been in progress during the entire course of modern history and secular humanism can be described as really any set of beliefs that promotes human values without specific allusion to religious doctrine. In the European Middle Ages there was a strong tendency for religious persons to despise human affairs and to meditate on God and the afterlife. In a reaction to this tendency, secularism at the time of the Renaissance became evident in the development of humanism, when man began to show more interest in human cultural achievements and the possibilities of his fulfillment in this world. As might be expected, secular humanism has not been warmly embraced by theologians.

But in our Western culture secular humanism, this faith in the idea of continual progress through knowledge and reason, has

been pervasive. Arguably, it helped to foster what has been termed our "manifest destiny" in the development of the Western United States. This belief that it was the destiny of the United States to expand and enhance its political, social and economic influences is a reflection of our arrogant self-confidence, our hubris, if you will, in the assumption that nature and human history is something that rational man could bend to his liking.

But now doubts are eroding this secular faith. Nature, once viewed as inherently orderly, is coming to be viewed by many (although certainly not all) scientists as inherently disorderly. And human history, once viewed as something that rational man could bend to his liking, is increasingly viewed as a force unto itself.

In our daily life now, we are troubled by racial tensions, ethnic conflicts, and even genocide, economic disparities evidenced by recent articles in the press about the widening gulf between rich and poor in the United States and the erosion of the middle class, and then seemingly more frequent, isolated and random acts of violence such as the 16 five year olds and their teacher being killed by a gunman earlier this year in Dunblane, Scotland, who then killed himself. I am not here to spread pessimism. I believe I am an optimist at heart.

But what we observe is also being observed and written about by others. One of the things undermining the faith that we are not necessarily "progressing" toward anything is the scholarly emergence of chaos theory, which holds that many complex phenomena are inherently unpredictable. In his book "Chaos - Making a New Science" (Viking Press 1987), James Gleick says:

Where chaos begins, classical science stops. For as long as the world has had physicists inquiring into the laws of nature, it has suffered a special ignorance about disorder in the atmosphere, in the turbulent sea, in the fluctuations of wildlife populations, in the oscillations of the heart and the brain. The irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side - - these have been puzzles to science, or worse, monstrosities.

Much has been written, and is being written, about chaos theory and I am sure there are those in this room who know the subject much better than I and can discuss it in greater detail. (One recent book on the subject that I was unable to read is Frontiers of Complexity: The Search for Order in a Chaotic World by Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield, Fawcett Columbine 1995).

## Chaos

But for the moment suffice it to say that this theory holds that the long-term behavior of a system (the weather, for example, or voting patterns, or financial markets or the universe itself) cannot be predicted with certainty unless the initial conditions of that system are known to an infinite degree of accuracy - - which is impossible. This theory follows an earlier unsettling principle formulated by the German scientist Werner Hiesenberg, in the 1920's, known as the "uncertainly principle". In layman's terms, this principle holds that it is impossible to get an absolutely precise measurement of even a relatively simple thing - - his example was the position and velocity of a particle - - because the very act of measuring subtly disturbs the thing being measured. And without an absolutely precise measurement, it is impossible to predict with certainty how that thing will behave in the future. For a scientist or a philosopher this can be humbling - - and even terrifying. Albert Einstein recoiled against the ultimate implication of the uncertainty principle: a universe governed by chance. "God does not play dice," he protested. Perhaps the emergence of the chaos theory might arguably cause Einstein to reexamine that statement although he would probably join in the challenge of the modern study of chaos to discover patterns of order behind the chaos.

My comments about the uncertainty principle and chaos theory are intended to demonstrate that faith in secular humanism has evidence of erosion among physical scientists, that is, uncertainty and doubt rather than the supreme confidence - - or hubris - - that characterized earlier eras of science. Dr. Worster, the University of Kansas historian and ecologist, has examined this erosion during the 20th century by using the science of ecology as a prism. Ecology, as defined by ecologists themselves, has changed radically in recent decades. As Dr. Worster has written with some dismay, it has metamorphosed [changed] from "a study of equilibrium, harmony and order" into "a study of disturbance, disharmony and chaos." (WSJ July 11, 1994).

Even as thinkers and scholars observe that the secular faith of rational humanism erodes, I do not mean to say that it is still not pervasive in daily American life. It is! It is evident in the faith that education will lead to a better life, that technology will spawn a higher standard of living, and that new laws from Congress will curb violent crime, for example. But, these thinkers are asking the same basic, deeper and fundamental questions that Dr. Worster asks in an essay: "What is there to love or preserve in a universe of chaos? How are

people supposed to behave in such a universe? If that is the kind of place we inhabit, why not go ahead with all our private ambitions, free of any fear that we may be doing special damage?". id.

Irving Kristol, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, talks frankly of "a shaking of the foundations of the modern world." He is convinced that "we are at a unique moment in Western culture, the collapse of secular, rationalist humanism." (WSJ July 11, 1994). Secular humanism has often been viewed as being anti-Christian and anti-religious. Some traditional religious thinkers have probably even prayed for its collapse. But we are talking here about a basic philosophy and not theology. Another critic of this secular religion is David Ehrenfeld, a Rutgers University biologist and author of the book "The Arrogance of Humanism". In his book, he acknowledges that humanism has much to its credit, including its emphasis on human dignity, tolerance and human freedom. But all this must be weighed against another, darker characteristic: Its [excessive] hubris (there is that word again!) id.

David Ehrenfeld goes on to say that: "The idea of 'progress' is the disease of our time," . . . In truth, we are not inventing our future, we are just engineering changes whose

outcomes we cannot predict and which often turn out to be terrible." id.

This perceived disruption of humanistic notions of order and progress has special implications for the United States, arguably the purist expression of Enlightenment thinking of any nation on earth. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, drafted by men steeped in Enlightenment philosophy, celebrate the power of reason and the promise of progress.

This secular religion - - reflected in Jefferson's phrase "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" - - is the great linchpin of a remarkably diverse nation that some observers say is otherwise in danger of splintering along ethnic, class and value fault lines. If this core religion is now eroding, what will be left for Americans to hold in common? Irving Kristol [a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute] says, only half-jokingly, "At the moment, the glue is organized sports."

But what Kristol and other apparently see is a wide philosophical vacuum in American life. "There is a transition going on - - but to what, nobody knows," he says. This great transition is the common denominator of a number of social phenomena that might otherwise seem unrelated. Membership in evangelical religions is growing, even as New Age philosophies

proliferate. The environmental movement, the feminist movement, the rise of alternative medicine, the growth of street gangs - - each represents a hunger for something beyond scientific rationalism, beyond material progress. "People want more," Kristol says. "They want community and they want transcendence." id.

But David Ehrenfeld is concerned about the perils of this transition. The impulse to turn inward and toward community and family could possible degenerate into xenophobia. The impulse toward mysticism could lead to fanaticism; the hunger for stability to authoritarian government. Ehrenfeld ". . . [h]ope[s] the process takes decades because if it doesn't, it's chaos." id.

#### CONCLUSION

My purpose tonight is not to spread pessimism but to stimulate discussion. If the uncertainty principle in science, and chaos theory in science and other disciplines, question whether nature is governed by an ultimate order, then we must ask what is our place in the universe. Perhaps one could argue that this is a good opportunity for the theologians; that there may not be any rational explanation for our ultimate place in the universe.

On the other hand, there seems to be a common thread among the scientists and other scholars who write of the erosion of secular, rationalist humanism - - that is, the erosion, or decline, over time of that supreme, and almost arrogant, confidence - - that hubris - - that characterized earlier eras of science, and now other disciplines, and that has characterized American life with its promise of progress. Maybe we even sense a change in ourselves, this feeling that, in our Western culture, we may be less confident, less certain, that we might have lost some of that brashness, that hubris. But let us ask ourselves, philosophically, does the disruption of humanistic notions of order and progress really discredit Enlightenment philosophy. Let us ask ourselves if there is a permanent transition underway or whether is what we read, discuss, and feel nothing more than a temporary phenomenon in the grander scheme of things. Maybe, in the more rapid pace of change, we have simply lost our confidence in the future. Or optimistically, perhaps all life on this earth is biologically endowed with altruistic genes and we just haven't discovered that yet. Are we getting better? Let's talk about it.

David T. Petty, Jr.

# *Sphex Club Meeting*

*Date:*                    *October 10, 1996*

*Time:*                    *8:15 p.m.*

*Place:*                    *First Colony Life Insurance  
Company Board Room*

*Speaker:*                *David T. Petty, Jr.*

*Topic:*                    *"Are We Getting Better?"*

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*Next Meeting:*        *October 24 1996*  
*Speaker:*            *Rabbi Morris Shapiro*

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