

# **THE HUMAN QUEST: PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LIFELONG LEARNING**

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## **INTRODUCTION - WHAT MAKES US HUMAN?**

The human genome project seeks to put our humanity into numbers: the human genetic code contains about six billion letters grouped around 25,000 genes. We share more than 95% of our genes with chimpanzees and around 30% with bananas - but nematode worms which grow to about 1mm long have a similar number of genes to us. What a fascinating set of facts about the human being, albeit a very small set – but, even if we could print out all six billion letters around our 25000 genes what would it tell us about of human being? Actually, with the proper training it would tell us a lot about our physical bodies and our evolution, but it tells us nothing about our humanity or what it means to be human. Here then is a major difference – between knowledge, information and meaning – but meaning is a word with many meanings (Bruner, 1990; Jarvis, 1992). The point is facts, in themselves, have no meaning and so this picture of the genetic code needs meaning given to it by the knowledgeable mind if it to be at all meaningful to anybody – but the knowledge that we have from the picture does not tell us about the meaning of our humanity although it can reveal something about how humanity reached this stage in its evolution. We can reach similar types of conclusion when we look at the cosmos through the technological marvels of telescopes – we can understand a little of its content and something of how the cosmos reached this stage in its creation but it tells us nothing about the reason for the cosmos.

But we are faced with this problem that facts have no meaning and yet both the cosmos and human existence are facts – but they have no meaning. Does this mean that our existence is meaningless? Is it just absurd? And is the cosmos meaningless – some form of cosmological accident? Of course there is no intrinsic meaning in the fact of our existence – in this sense it is meaningless – or absurd and it matters not how much we know, we still know that we will never understand the reason for the cosmos or for humanity, if there is one – in this sense it all appears just absurd. But this is contrary to our common sense view of the world. We want to believe that it is not absurd and we keep on asking, ‘What’s it all about?’ Many religious and philosophical texts are based on thoughts that scholars and sages have had in response to this question. But we might go one step further and ask whether the quest itself to discover meaning is absurd because we know that we will never discover that meaning. But this is also contrary to our inclination which is to believe that this is not all absurd, meaningless or accidental. It seems contrary to our humanity – which seems to be on a perpetual quest – to discover and answer the question, ‘What’s it all about?’

## **THE HUMAN BEING**

It is clear, however, from the earliest stages of human evolution that human beings have always known that they do not know – that they are ignorant. One of the most fundamental aspects of our humanity is that we know we do not know and that this has driven us to be meaning seekers and meaning makers: we are meaning seekers if we believe that there is a discoverable meaning in creation or in existence or meaning makers if we believe that whether or not there is meaning in humanity and the cosmos, we still have to invest our own knowledge and give meaning to it. But even more significant is that we are conscious that we do not know – this conscious awareness lies at the root of our humanity but even consciousness is meaningless (Donald, 2001, p.34). We consciously function in the three dimensions of our existence and seek to understand them – the cosmological (natural), the ontological (practical) and the social, and we ask the questions – Who? How? What? Why? When? - in each of these dimensions of our existence. But we only do this when we do not know! If we know, or think that we know, we presume

upon the world and take it for granted – as it were. We are ‘at home in our world’ and this is the state in which we like to be, but there is a danger in it – familiarity breeds contempt! In a sense this is what taken-for-grantedness is and we will return to this later in this paper. Indeed, many of society’s structures are premised on the assumption that we will merely repeat the same actions each time we are in similar situations and that society does not change: in this sense the concept of society is premised upon non-learning and stasis. But while we seek to be at home in this world, the fascinating thing about a great deal of our existence is that we can only feel at home if we learn to live with our ignorance! In this technological world, we do tend to do this a great deal even though humankind has more knowledge now than it has ever had before, but even now we are frequently confronted with the reality of our existence and recognise that we do not know! It is this knowledge of our ignorance that makes us profoundly human. It is also what Sartre refers to as a lack – a lack that needs removing or fulfilling.

Since knowledge of our ignorance is at the heart of our humanity, it is hardly surprising that Aristotle regarded human nature as potentiality and Kierkegaard recognised that existence is always becoming - it is always in becoming that we seek to realise our full potential. But we are never able to realise this since we can still keep on becoming for as long as we live and so Vardy (2003), among others, is concerned about what type of person we should become, and so he asks ethical questions. However, answers to this question also depend on how we understand our place in the world and we will return to this later.

In seeking to eradicate our ignorance, we keep asking questions about the world – this, then, is at the heart of our humanity and we ask them in each of the domains of our existence. And we know that from our earliest recorded history (such as that in Indian and Chinese writings) our ancestors have tried to reach answers in all three of these realms of questioning but often they arrived at belief statements only but meaning/belief is not knowledge! But with the development of science, some of these belief statements have been questioned by new scientific knowledge and the new answers are about knowledge while the meaning remains unanswered. This is the religious answer and sometimes religious thinkers have talked about revealed knowledge which presumes that there is a source of the revelation other than the human questioners, but this claim to divine legitimation has now created major problems for religions – especially in the West. Consequently, I prefer to think about beliefs as inspired knowledge.

In investigating these three domains scientifically, however - we know that both the cosmos and humanity exist – knowledge that - empiricism; we know something about how they have evolved into their present states – knowledge how - pragmatism; we know little or nothing about the knowledge why - meaning. Only in the social domain can we answer ‘why’ questions because they are about human motivation - now we are not dealing with the ultimates of time and space. We can know why things happen in the social because the social is bound in time and space – it is finite - in this domain human sciences come in and so we can explain why in social terms but only of social phenomena. But the sciences do not provide answers in the other domains – and we are still left in our ignorance. This quest to overcome our ignorance has given rise to the sciences and pseudo-sciences and to the humanities as we have sought to understand the cosmos and humanity – in forms of knowledge that and knowledge how – in this sense we are giving a ‘meaning’ to the world – we are meaning makers. But as meaning seekers we draw a blank.

Empiricism and pragmatism are two ways of ascertaining truth propositions – there is a third: the rational-logical. This is based upon posing a premise and arguing to a conclusion – provided that the stages of logic are correct and the premise is acceptable, then the conclusion must be valid. In our case our premise is that existence is not absurd – but this is a premise that we cannot prove - and so we can argue our case and reach many different religious conclusions. This is precisely what the different religions have done and they have provided us with meanings but not meaning - but none have provided us with a universally accepted answer to our question – and while we can draw some personal satisfaction from our answers we have to admit that we are ultimately left in our ignorance. But religious philosophies provide our only

'answer' and, significantly these permeate all counties and all cultures and these statements require faith since there is no scientific evidence available. And so the human quest continues.

As we grow older and learn more, we talk of wisdom: one of the features of wisdom is that the more that we know, the more that we know that we do not know – for knowledge of our ignorance still lies at the heart of our humanity. We still need to ask the questions and seek answers – even answers to the unanswerable – this then is our lifelong quest – and quest is the right word – for it is a lifelong questioning, and the really interesting thing is that as we age, the questions tend to remain the same but the answers – the meanings – that we give change. We are engaged in lifelong learning and the meanings change because: \*cultural knowledge changes; \*our perceptions change; \*our priorities and feelings alter; \*we have been learning throughout our lives.

## **LIFELONG LEARNING**

One of the crucial features of human learning is the distinction between presumption and disjuncture: presumption that I can act as if the world is unchanged and that I do not need to think about it and disjuncture when I realise that I do not know, cannot understand and have not the ability to do what I desire to do. But in my own early research (Jarvis, 1987) it became clear that to a very great extent society and its norms is based upon the assumption that a great deal of non-learning occurs in everyday living since we repeat our patterns of behaviour – in this sense we learn to conform and we are at home in the world. This is part of the social fact of humanity – we would probably not have survived as a species had it not been for the fact that we learned to live in social groups, or tribes. It is as a result of social interaction that human beings evolved a social brain. However, it is also the basis of much social study – we recognise norms of behaviour, and so on and also one of our first ideas about learning is that we learn to do as others do, we copy and imitate them and that learning is, in a sense, learning conformity.

But we also know that very frequently we are confronted with disjunctural situations where we recognise that all our previous learning has not equipped us to take this new situation for granted – and we ask: Why? How? What? Who? And so on. We all know how young children go through this stage and pester their parents or teachers for answers – and we have all seen the bad parent or the poor teacher who actively seeks to shut the child up. But recognition of our ignorance is fundamental to our humanity and the bad parent and the poor teachers deny that humanity – often without realising it – by inhibiting the questioning process. Disjuncture is the situation where our perception of a situation finds no immediate answer in what we already know and so there is a gap between our expectation (the situation of presumption) and our actual perception of it.

It is the point of disjuncture that our learning really begins - when we know that we do not know, cannot do, etc - it is knowledge of our ignorance that begins the learning process and we seek to understand or to give meaning to the meaningless. Confidence either leads to having the confidence to admit that we do not know – or the lack of confidence that will not confess that we do not know. And so what is learning? At its simplest, it is the process of human becoming but we perhaps need more of a description than this and so my own definition (Jarvis 2009, p.25) is:

The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

This definition points to the fact that learning is an individual process but one of the traps of individualism is to assume that when the individual has learned and changed the remainder of the world has stood still. This is the fallacy of individualism which emerged with the Western Enlightenment which

had given rise to very many errors in human living, especially since the Western philosophy has dominated the world. But the world has not stood still and it is not made up of individuals. It comprises networks of people learning and living together and each is affected by the others – it is much closer to the Asian understanding of the world! We live in inter-relationship. Postulate, for instance, two people in one of those networks – one learns and is changed in certain situations – but does this always assume that the other has not learned as well? Change leads to a new disjunctural situation and we still have to negotiate how we behave and learn. Hence, we are in very fluid situations where all the actors are learning and changing all the time – individual learning is a social phenomenon and lifelong.

Over the ages, individuals have evolved meaning systems about humanity and the cosmos, and knowledge about all three domains of our existence, so each society builds up its own culture – which is the sum total of all that is learned and shared by people who are members of the same social group. We have a British culture and a Western culture; there is a Hindu culture, a Buddhist culture and an Indian culture – and so on. Culture can take many forms – ideological, social, material and so on. At the heart of the ideological culture is a meaning system that has evolved by the social group within which an individual is a member and learning its system of meaning is part of the process of human belonging. At the same time, there are knowledge systems and these are based on pragmatism or scientific evidence. For each person there are dominant cultures in our life-world and as we grow up, so we learn those that affect us, or as sociologists say – we are socialised. We can depict this very simply:

In this simple diagram X is any person in interaction and the bottom arrow depicts the passing of time when these cultures, being fluid, are always changing: the arc (objectified culture) symbolises the culture (the sum of knowledge, practices and meanings) of our life-world at any moment in time, which is carried by people who are member X's life-world and the other arrows depict the processes of interaction between X and all the other people and technologies within the life-world. The interaction takes place within the cultural framework of the life-world so that in every interaction in everyday life there is a cultural transaction in which we either transmit our understanding of the culture of our life-world (presumption) and/or we learn and have reinforced the culture of our life-world. In other words, in every interaction throughout the whole of our lives we either can presume upon the situation or regard it as disjunctural or both. It is this distinction which is crucial to our understanding our humanity and our human quest – one which we can see in terms of learning and knowing (and not learning), and as we have already said – the beginning of wisdom is when we recognise that we do not know and are willing to learn from every situation in which we find ourselves.

However, as society evolved we created ways of passing on the answers (both knowledge and belief) that we have reached to succeeding generations through families and local communities, through religious institutions and in more formal ways such as schools, colleges and universities - institutions of learning and education. These latter institutions are rather strange places because they have been established mainly to prepare young people for adult life and work and yet they are more like part-time prisons which

shut children and young people out from the world while they learn about it! And we have teachers who know and whose job it is to transmit the culturally accepted knowledge (and sometimes meanings) to those who do not know. We are laboured under a conceptual confusion between learning and education now for many years and what we see in the world of work is adult learning and lifelong education but it is often called lifelong learning. Some teachers – but not all by any means (see Parker, 1998 *inter alia*) – tend to presume upon the situation in which they interact with their students rather than create a genuine two-way system of interaction – this is part of the nature of the formal system. However, education – especially higher education – has another function and that is research. It exists not just to transmit knowledge and meaning, it also exists to seek for new knowledge and deeper meaning – it is not just a teaching institution but a learning one as well. As an organisation it must be free and open so that its members can pursue the human quest, although in contemporary society we are beginning to see restrictions placed on universities by governments and other funding bodies – and in this sense this is a betrayal of our humanity.

### **LEARNING AND THE DANGER OF KNOWING**

We are continually confronted with the situation – presumption, disjuncture or both – and as we have already pointed out society is premised on the assumption that we will always repeat our patterns of behaviour – so are all bureaucracies! Once we have learned the rules and procedures we will just follow them and presume upon the situation. Naturally, for any social group to live together this is a normal process and necessary for the group's survival: it is the paradox of social living. We all prefer that which we know – but knowledge of our ignorance is one of the features of our humanity. But, learning how to live together is necessary for our survival as well – and so in interaction we both acknowledge that we know and that we do not know! What is not a feature of our humanity is unrestrained knowing. But this is the confidence, in many ways, of the scientism of the contemporary Western world, or at least of many who live within it. When we are certain that we know – we become confident in our knowledge, even arrogant about it. This is dogmatic fundamentalism: of religious and political ideologies; of the espousal of scientific rules and regulations; of claims to know the truth – and so on. We see it in the arrogant person who does not learn from interaction, or from success or failure. This is the truth of the old maxim, 'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing'. The danger of knowing is in not recognising that we do not know – in not acknowledging our humanity. We might want to view the situation when we have learned and achieved the necessary knowledge as a superior position – when we have reached the apex of our quest to understand but it may be a denial of our humanity: in this sense, it is an inhuman condition – see Janicaud (2005). For the human condition is in recognising that we do not know and that we have to keep on learning. There can be no humanity without disjuncture!

As we go through our lives, the more that we recognise that we do not know, the more that every experience is a learning experience – but when we arrive at a more senior age – we still recognise that we have not arrived. We know that however much knowledge we have accumulated over the years, there is still much more to discover even in those areas in which we might be considered to be experts! But, however much knowledge we have accumulated during our lifetime, we still cannot answer the meaning question with which we started this paper – what's it all about? We have no answer to the ultimate 'Why?' even though we have gained more knowledge, adjusted our practice and ways of living and faced the questions of the global world. But as we age and gain a great deal of knowledge and experience, is it time to stop learning? We still face the unknown in the everyday. We still have to realise the truth that the recognition of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom and as the novelist Evelyn Waugh once commented: 'Only when one has lost all curiosity about the future has one reached the age to write an autobiography' (in Pasternak's 2007, p.13). In this sense, perhaps we should never consider writing one! But as more of us are living longer we are still human and our ignorance is still manifest and so we are faced with the human quest - lifelong learning does not cease since it is rooted in our ignorance.

### **CONCLUSION: PRACTICAL WISDOM**

Aristotle writing of practical wisdom wrote:

What has been said is confirmed by the fact that while young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The cause is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience, but a young man has no experience, for it is length of time that gives experience... (Aristotle 1925 VI.8 ,148)

While, in today's world, we would probably dispute Aristotle's rather clear-cut distinction between the old and the young and their forms of knowledge, we would probably want to maintain that the greater our experience – and while this may be correlated with age, it need not always be - the more likely we are to gain wisdom. The more we learn the more that we know that we do not know. The very old might want to disengage from this rapidly changing world and create small niches for themselves in a world that they no longer wish to understand – but many older people do not disengage – they travel, join educational organisations, such as Universities of the Third Age, and continue with their human quest – still seeking to answer the questions Why? How? What for? We are always seeking more knowledge but underlying it all is the question – what's it all about? It matters not how much knowledge we gain, the meaning question remains unanswered and as we pursue this human questioning, we grow and develop – for learning is like food. Learning is becoming but never arriving – and we keep on becoming, always learning to be (Faure, 1972), for as long as we live because existence is always becoming and at its heart is lifelong learning.

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