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The Local Yarn

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Contents

1	Imagination and Self-Doubt	1
2	Death, Decay and the Haunted Afterlife	5

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Imagination and Self-Doubt

In a 2005 episode of *This American Life*, titled “A Little Bit of Knowledge”, we hear the story of an electrician¹, who, despite being fairly smart, nonetheless deludes himself into thinking he has disproved Einstein’s theory of relativity. The fact that he’s reasonably intelligent makes it all the harder for him to see his own error, even when confronted by actual experts.

Bob Berenz: All right, in this point I have to be completely honest. I did write a paper early on, and I submitted it to a physics site. And it was summarily rejected out of hand. But I did learn an important lesson, that physicists and what’s being done by them is very complicated, very mathematically intensive. What I’ve got is none of that, so it completely, almost in reverse, goes over their heads.”

Whenever his theory is challenged, Bob’s response is to reject the messenger as being narrow-minded or unintelligent. In fact, of course, *Bob* is the one whose mind is not quite up to the task he has set for himself. But he can’t allow himself even to

1. <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/293/a-little-bit-of-knowledge?act=3#play>

suspect this. In this episode's narrative, Bob goes from brushing off simple, obvious clues to his own crackpottedness (the rejection of his paper) to dismissing direct personal demonstrations of his ideas' incorrectnesses. Even after a PhD in nuclear physics takes time to meet with him and explain what's wrong with his theories, Bob comes away totally unfazed.

Bob Berenz: Well, this is not really fair, but I'm going to say it anyway. It's like he [Dr. Brant Watson] was talking the party line. He didn't strike me as being all that bright. I know he has a couple of patents, and he's this big professor, and it's probably not fair for me to say that, but I'm not claiming to be this incredible genius in this one area. It's very simple what I ran into. And I need some help to get it put into a forum where people can understand it. But it really isn't that difficult.

I listened to all this with great interest, because I fear that I myself might be just like Bob. In fact, I waver between thinking I am *in danger of becoming like* Bob, and thinking I *have been like Bob for years* and am *just now realizing it*. I have big, long-nursed theories of my own about subjects I have no formal training in, and I even write & tweet on those subjects, with few to no disclaimers.²

When an idea captivates your imagination, you can't really do anything *but* ponder it, discuss it, write about it, and live it out – at least, not until another idea captivates it even more strongly. And there, I hope, is where Bob and I part company: because while he will not even admit the possibility of a new idea displacing his old ones, that possibility is deeply appealing to me.

2. Consider this article my life-long disclaimer.

In fact I genuinely enjoy being proven wrong³ much more than the feeling of being proven apparently correct. In that moment there is a kind of clarity that is real and rare. I may put up a fight and kick a lot of tires before I get there, but really this is because I want that clarity: to *know* I'm wrong, and not to have to go on just *suspecting* I'm wrong.

I regret that I don't have (or don't know that I have) the direct knowledge or tools to construct with certainty my ideas on theology, metaphysics or economics; I fear I will never have them. But being, thankfully, aware of this shortcoming, I can do no other than to explore these ideas with humility and the hope of further discovery; and I invite my readers to humour me, and join with me in the same spirit.

3. <http://howellcreekradio.com/episodes/the-field-and-the-fortress>

October 26, 2014

Death, Decay and the Haunted Afterlife

The common Western idea of death is that once you die you are transported immediately to a place of ultimate comfort (or torment), with no intervals. Your consciousness continues seamlessly into the next life, just no longer tied to your physical body.

And then ‘compiled’ to PDF:

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$ pandoc -s -o out.tex simplepost.pdf  
$ xelatex out.tex out.pdf
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The result is a very basic PDF set in Computer Modern, suitable for printing on loose sheets of 8.5×11 paper:

Suppose, though, that while consciousness does continue in some way after death, it remains thoroughly joined to your physical remains. As your body decays, so does your personality, your capacity to reason. Your emotions, having been all along largely the product of your fluids and nerves, transmute ever more into the mute horror which your remains increasingly depict.

This consciousness-in-death was a running theme of Edgar Allen Poe. His genius, in my view, was to paint this horror only

at the edges – premature burials, loss of breath¹, the unwillingness of the “deceased” to actually die – so intimately that we often mistake the edge for the abyss at the center. But in a kind of artistic truth, the madness of Poe’s narrators increases in proportions as that abyss (the experience of actually being dead) is really approached – whenever we see a lady of Usher, for example, or hear the beating of a murdered man’s heart – it is nearly always seen through senses that are themselves being damaged.

C.S. Lewis’s view

C.S. Lewis, on the other hand, gets right inside this idea, describing it in lucid detail in *Perelandra*, when his villain Weston temporarily recovers his senses and tries to articulate his experience of death²:

“...All the good things are now – a **thin little rind of what we call life**, put on for show, and then – the real universe for ever and ever. To thicken the rind by one centimetre – to live one week, one day, one half hour longer – that’s the only thing that matters. ... [Humanity] knows – Homer knew – that **all the dead have sunk down into the inner darkness: under the rind**. All witless, all twittering, gibbering, decaying... Then there’s Spiritualism...I used to think it all nonsense. But it isn’t. It’s all true. You’ve noticed that all pleasant accounts of the dead are traditional or philosophical? What actual experiment discovers is quite different. Ectoplasm – slimy films coming out of a medium’s belly

1. <http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/lssbthb.htm>

2. <http://www.bestlibraryspot.net/fantasticfiction/Perelandra/14838.html>

and making great, chaotic, tumbledown faces. Automatic writing producing reams of rubbish.”

I wonder whether this idea of death is common in other cultures, or times of history. It seems to me something very Other – definitely not Christian, but not exactly Pagan either.

The song ‘Bottom of the River’ by Tom Fun Orchestra seems an appropriate example as well. Interpreted by some³ as concerned mainly with environmental vandalism, it seems to me more straightforward to read it as the experience of those “beneath the rind”: dead yet conscious, still chained to their remains, enduring a never-ending passage of time where light is distant and the idle time-marking movements of the living all too close.

3. <http://www.animationblog.org/2009/10/alasdair-brotherston-jock-mooney-bottom.html>