

Escaping the Iron Cage of Hopelessness

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*“Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” -Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**

*“In this frightful round of unchecked means, nobody knows any longer where they are going, purposes are forgotten, and ends are overtaken. Human beings have set off at astronomically high speeds toward nowhere.” -Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World**

In a previous [article](#), I argued that those who think science can solve our major social problems - in particular, world destruction with nuclear weapons and the poisoning of the earth's ecology and atmosphere - were delusional and in the grip of the myth of science and technology. These problems were created by science when it became untethered from any sense of limits in its embrace of instrumental rationality. Once it became wedded to usefulness and the efficiency of technical means, it lost its original aim: the search for truth. (Obviously this doesn't include all scientists.) In embracing means as ends, it produced an endless loop of means justifying means that has resulted in what Weber called an “iron cage.” Concomitantly, the ideology of pure objectivity and impartial innocence was joined to elite state power and the capitalist profit motive where it was supported and instantaneously and completely applied to technical applications, including nuclear, biological, chemical and “conventional” weapons; bio-engineering; GMO foods and people; eugenics and cloning; and chemical/oil production, etc. It is indisputable that if our planet is incinerated or slowly destroyed through toxic pollution that modern science with its Faustian “prohibition to prohibit” will stand indicted, if anyone is left to make the case.



Albert Camus warned us long ago:

And even though we do it in diverse ways, we extol one thing and one alone: a

future world in which reason will reign supreme. In our madness, we push back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down upon us to destroy. Nemesis, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance, is watching. She chastises, ruthlessly, all those who go beyond the limit.

Ostensibly rational, the illogical logic of modern science has resulted in a mystifying double-bind that denies human freedom and leads to widespread despair and hopelessness. Many people feel trapped by this deterministic ethos, while others fail to see that the cause of our problems can't be their solutions.

In this essay, I will explore the possibility of a path out of the seeming impossibility of escaping the cul-de-sac of our spiritually disinherited and disenchanting condition.

✘ Max Weber argued that modern rational capitalism was informed by a religious impetus of inner-directed worldly asceticism derived from Protestant Christianity. In essence, modern capitalism was a religion. Likewise, modern mainstream science, despite the discoveries of quantum physics, rests upon a materialistic presupposition that is a self-contradictory act of faith that it denies to others. Committed to determinism, this materialistic scientific world view offers no basis for its truth claim since what is determined cannot be disputed when it wasn't freely chosen. To espouse a position that was predetermined is to choose nothing. In essence, such science is also a religion that, like capitalism, serves no end but its own regeneration.

Is it any wonder that so many people feel trapped on an endless merry-go-round that contradicts their felt experience and their hopes for a better world? They look around and see a mad world of war and lies and science run amok. The physical scientists tell them that everything started with a bang and will end with a bang or a whimper of one sort or another and that's how it goes since when did people so puny think they were anything but specks in a vast cosmos of meaningless gas that will devour them in a few billion years, give or take a year or so. The psych folks tell them they are the products of their brain chemicals and neurotransmitters and must submit "freely" to chemical treatment if they know what's good for them and want to be happy. The social scientists insist that all knowledge is socially conditioned and relative and therefore everything they think and feel is also relative and so they are lost souls forever wandering in a world of relativity where true wisdom is impossible and the difference between right and wrong is a relative choice that has no basis in any "reality." And of course the power elites and media play with their minds in endless games of mind control as they insist the only real truth comes through screens that they control. Mind and body warped, so many people stumble through their days like the living dead in search of some exit from their pain and confusion.

Or to say it differently. Science - both physical and social - has resulted in the systemization of doubt and the embrace of the relativity of thought and knowledge. The modern predicament is such that whereas in former times people felt that their knowledge was fact or truth and that it was grounded in a physically palpable reality, we have been exposed to systematic doubt and the suspicion has grown that all the various standpoints are limited and "relative." While not consciously espoused by the majority of people, this doubting worldview permeates social life as a vague insecurity and uncertainty. It may be left to intellectuals to circulate such relativizing ideas, but they have become part of the cultural air we breathe. For people today in a scientifically based society, faced with the relativizing of all knowledge and every eternal verity, the question of how to understand their deaths, and thus their lives, has become acutely problematic. Uncertainty has undermined people's

wills as they have forgotten they are free.

The question that modernity forces us to ask is this: once knowledge is seen to be relative; old cosmologies are transformed by science; symbol systems and religions are seen as the products of humans' own creativity; reality is understood to be socially constructed; once these developments take place consciously and unconsciously, how then can people understand their lives and deaths and find the confidence to live in peace and harmony with the earth and all living creatures?

Tolstoy put it this way:

“Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’ ”

In order to make our way out of this maze, we might contemplate the underlying presupposition that “everything is relative.” That, of course is an absurd position. Everything can't be relative when the statement “everything is relative” is an absolute statement. Joined to that, one can muse on the self-contradiction of materialistic determinism and perhaps glimpse an escape from the iron cage, the prison, the closed room, the garbage pail, or the no-exit -so many terms that our best writers have used to describe the modern condition.

Rudolf Steiner did that as follows in *The Philosophy of Freedom*:

Materialism can never offer a satisfactory explanation of the world. For every attempt at an explanation must begin with the formation of thoughts about the phenomena of the world. Materialism, thus, begins with the thought of Matter or material processes. But, in doing so, it is ipso facto confronted by two different sets of facts, viz., the material world and the thought about it. The materialist seeks to make these latter intelligible by regarding them as purely material processes. He believes that thinking takes place in the brain, much in the same way that digestion takes place in the animal organs. Just as he ascribes mechanical, chemical, and organic processes to Nature, so he credits her in certain circumstances with the capacity to think. He overlooks that, in doing so, he is merely shifting the problem from one place to another. Instead of to himself he ascribes the power of thought to Matter. And thus he is back again at his starting-point. How does Matter come to think of its own nature?

But these are intellectual exercises and are therefore probably not very helpful to the average person.

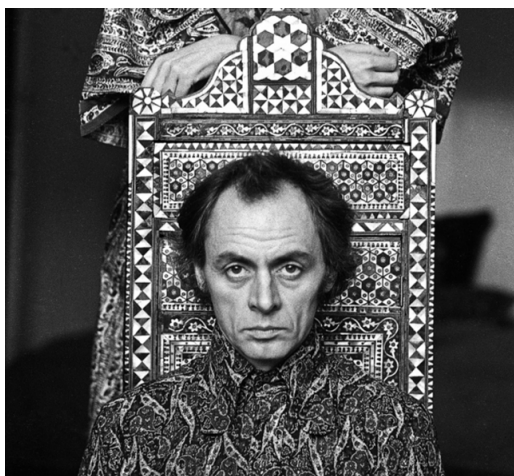
Tolstoy maintained that for the modern person death had no meaning because civilization was based on progress - an 'infinite' progress - which according to its own internal logic should never come to an end.

On this road of progressiveness everything is provisional and indefinite and so individual death seems like a failure and meaningless because it marks an end. But what then, asked Tolstoy, is the meaning to our lives? Are they meaningless means to meaningless ends?

Materialistic science can only answer in the affirmative. A negative affirmative. But for most people this doesn't satisfy. They sense the truth that we live by faith - scientists do,

religious believers do, atheists do, agnostics do, everyone does - faith is the water we swim in; it is our element. It is what impels us to get out of bed in the morning. But getting out of bed in the morning is a choice, a judgment. It is not inevitable. We do it in faith that the day will be meaningful and worth meeting. We encounter others in good faith and hope they do the same with us. This awareness of the faith dimension of life is a daily human experience that points beyond itself and is a source of hope, even when confusion reigns. While modern science and philosophy have largely attempted to treat all things, including people, as objects to be controlled by subjects, most people encounter others in daily life not as Its, as in Buber's I-It, but as Thous, as in I-Thou.

Where have I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? These are life's basic questions that science answers with nowhere, no reason, and nowhere in that order. Such answers are attestations of a faith in nothing, what is usually called nihilism.



The psychiatrist R.D. Laing maintained that the key to a sane world is for people to truly regain experiencing their experience and not to make-believe. He felt that most people had become estranged from the roots of their being. He put it thus:

The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man. Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal. Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years. Our behavior is a function of our experience. We act according to the way we see things. If our experience is destroyed, our behavior will be destructive. If our experience is destroyed, we have lost our own selves.... There is everything to suggest that man experienced God. Faith was never a matter of believing. He existed, but of trusting, in the presence that was experienced and known to exist as a self-validating datum. It seems likely that far more people in our time experience neither the presence of God, nor the presence of his absence, but the absence of his presence.... The fountain has not played itself out, the frame still shines, the river still flows, the spring still bubbles forth, the light has not faded. But between us and IT, there is a veil which is more like fifty feet of solid concrete. Deus absconditus. Or we have absconded.

So what can we do to break through this mystification of experience that has resulted in a double-bind that has trapped us?

I say nothing, at first. We are so busy doing and thinking our doing is the solution to our problems. We must stop the world we know by first not doing and by simply being in the

presence of Being. We must develop a contemplative discipline of allowing the awareness of our egocentric thinking to reveal to us the arrogance of our confused belief that we can coerce others and the natural world to do our bidding and that every problem has a solution. The grotesqueness of nuclear weapons is the physical manifestation of that willfulness. For the magician, the applied scientist, and the technologist all wish to conquer reality with techniques from the outside rather than being open to the truths that Reality (that we are in and is us and that goes by different names - Being, the Tao, Logos - all names for the unnameable) might reveal to us.

“To ‘know’ reality,” writes Alan Watts, “you cannot stand outside it and define it; you must enter into it, be it, feel it.” So the first thing we must “do” is to do nothing so we may heal our divided minds; otherwise we are spinning in a vicious circle, “like everything else which the divided mind attempts.”

This seems self-evident to me and “doing” this should be our first “act” of dissent - our break-out (by breaking in) - from the reigning consensus that underlies the violent and sick condition of the world today. James Douglass, author of the ground-breaking book, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, says this perfectly in *Lightning East to West: Jesus, Gandhi, and the Nuclear Age*:

What we know ‘out there’ as the most resistant evil reality to be transformed, is in reality “in here” in its primary being. The precise nature of that correspondence, or identity, between inner and outer worlds is the mystery which Jung was attempting to describe with his theory of Synchronicity, whereby outer events can be increasingly recognized as unifying correlations of a profoundly traveled inner way. Once we begin to see this profound interpenetration of inner and outer worlds in a oneness of reality, the insoluble enigma of the world of evil gives way to the edge of the unifying mystery of Oneness, or of Love, a mystery that we cannot fully understand but which we can in fact move into with our lives and participate in to the extent of experiencing an ever-more-united world in Reality.

I think if we can see the big picture by “doing nothing,” we will have taken a major step toward a solution, or at the least an insight into how we can act to resist the evil that is occurring in the world.

“Seeing through” is to diagnose - *dia*, through + *gignoskein*, to know, perceive - which can allow us to see through to the roots of world problems. Without a deep comprehension of the causes of these problems, and how so many of our solutions have failed because they are based on false premises, we will get nowhere.

“The way one sees through the situation changes the situation,” writes Laing. Then, “as soon as we convey in any way...what we see or think we see, some change is occurring even in the most rigid situation.”

I think we can agree that we are in a “most rigid situation” as the nuclear weapons await discharge, countries and people are destroyed by U. S. war-making, the environment is poisoned, elite capitalist crooks line their pockets at the expense of everyone else, etc. Many of us convey this again and again, seemingly to no avail. Perhaps this is because we are missing the forest for the trees in our understandable haste to remedy it all. I suspect

this is so and scatter these thoughts like breadcrumbs in the hope they may suggest a way home. "Conveying" my thought experiments in the hope "some" change occurs in the process. First, in me.

The word spiritual has acquired a bad name with its embrace by New-Agers et al. with its association with magic and out of the world mumbo-jumbo. So I use it reservedly. But if we look to those so many hold in such high regard for their fight against violence and injustice - e.g. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, to name but two - it is apparent that their "truth-force" and "non-violent resistance" were rooted in a spiritual understanding of the human condition. We don't need to get caught up in words, for they have a way of missing the truth. Gandhi said God was truth and truth was God. King equated God with love. Truth, God, Love -do the words matter? Did not these men grasp the deepest dimensions of our problems? Didn't they understand the root causes of hate and violence? Didn't they see the Tao? Didn't they see that the way we conceive existence through our deterministic and instrumental sciences is a reflection of our violent world? Didn't they realize that we can't force change on anyone from the outside without doing violence and that the only way forward is to move the world through love and truthful resistance? Didn't they tell us that freedom is our birthright and is indivisible, and when you deny existential freedom you are lost in despair?

Despite the question marks, these are rhetorical questions. Don't our deepest experiences confirm their truth?

Let me end with James Douglass's words, for it seems to me they ring true, despite being far outside the reigning scientific paradigm and "common sense."

Is there a spiritual reality, inconceivable to us today, which corresponds in history to the physical reality which Einstein discovered and which led to the atomic bomb? Einstein discovered a law of physical change: the way to convert a single particle of matter into enormous physical energy. Might there not be, as Gandhi suggested, an equally incredible and undiscovered law of spiritual change, whereby a single person or small community of persons could be converted into an enormous spiritual energy capable of transforming a society and a world? I believe that there is, that there must be, a spiritual reality corresponding to $E=mc^2$ because, from the standpoint of creative harmony, the universe is incomplete without it, and because, from the standpoint of moral freedom, humankind is sentenced to extinction without it. I believe that the human imperative of our end-time is that we discover the spiritual equation corresponding to Einstein's physical equation, and that we then begin to experiment seriously in its world-transforming reality while there is time.

We must experiment in truth, for time is running out.

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