

SONG-WORLDS & SENSE-MAKING:

A POST-EVERYTHING EPISTEMOLOGY

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From ghoulies & ghosties & things that go bump in the night,
Dear Lord, deliver us. I'm about to pop corn for the children
who may tonight knock on our door & present themselves, hilariously, as supernaturally
malicious. I love it! And I'm grateful that children nowadays (within my experience)
are less naturally malicious, on All Hallows' Eve, than I was at their age....This
Thinksheet is a reflection on the vestigiality of the hallows, ghosts, ghostly world,
in our flatlandish culture that experiences this aspect of the West's spiritual heri-
tage, if at all, in the form of fun only. But don't knock them: vestiges are victuals
--and also open doors through which a too-forgotten past may come again upon the stage
of a society's attention. And I'm reflecting, too, on the vitality of what I'm call-
ing here, for the first time ever (as far as I know!), song-worlds, communities coher-
ing, if not constituted, by song, a social repertoire of songs narrating & celebrating
the community's heart-soul-story-hope....The Thinksheet's THESIS is (1) that human
beings make sense primarily within song-worlds rather than as "individuals" and (2)
that this epistemological hunch of mine is an effort to get beyond, make an advance
on, at least my former ways--if not the culture's & the world's!--of contexting sense-
making, rationality, "knowledge."

1. As I was writing the above intro, the phone rang & I heard a voice I'd
never heard before. Its possessor, whose name is appropriately "Sim-
chah" (Hebrew, "Joy"), was full of joy (OK, from having read something
I'd written--but that's irrelevant). Phoning from Manhattan, she wanted
me to hear her story. (Please be patient! It will soon occur to you
that I'm not departing from the point of this Thinksheet.) A South Af-
rican Jew, at age 15 she was sent by her parents to Israel "to learn He-
brew." On the streets of Jerusalem she was lonely to tears till one day
an old woman stopped her & said, "Stop a little! I want to look a little
into your beautiful blue eyes." That did it: never since has she yield-
ed to the temptation to self-pity or self-depreciation. "When you love
yourself, you love the world; those who hate others first hate themselves."
She said "Yes!" when I said "Everyone is something special to God."
Then we spoke of the intimate connection, through Moses & Jesus, of
peace & joy (shalom & simchah); and in Hebrew she said what translates
into English as "If not now, when?" (Still 15, she met an American,
who till his recent death was for 60 years her husband.) While she's
added song-worlds as she's walked through the world, always her original
song-world, that of the Hebrew Psalmists, has been with her--in S.Africa,
Israel, & America. (Call it her Ur-Song-World, if you like.)

2. I'll get my testimony in here before I do any more theorizing on this
Thinksheet's thesis. For me, Sunday morning worship is never, cannot be,
a failure: if nothing else lifts me, the hymns at least will be a magic
carpet to the Transcendent, the More than I am that yearns through the
liturgy for me to become more than I have been, the Beyond that is more
than within me. (A moment for the magic-carpet metaphor, a contribution
from Islam: In the 1927 film "The Thief of Baghdad," Doug. Fairbanks Sr.
is given to great, almost levitational leaps--which, however, aren't to
be compared with the actual salvific rug-ride that climaxes this still-
gripping story.) My Greek-priest friend, Spiros Morikos, from age 7 in
Greece has levitated his soul through singing bits & pieces & the whole
of the Byzantine liturgical song-trove; and fragments of the Roman Cath-
olic song-trove sing their way through the Protestant liturgies. Of
all this I am a joyful, grateful heir, as well as of American gospel
music & (its chief source) British evangelical (pietist) song. For me,
never a day but my soul echoes bits, pieces, fragments of this Chris-
tian singing through the ages & around the world; it, not doctrine, is
my primary continuing mode of spiritual formation (as Augustine & Luth-

over

er witness was true of them).

3. While we birth-inherit a song-world (call it Urgesangwelt) along with a "native" language (Muttersprache, Ursprache), God gives us the power to choose, as social clothing, the song-world we want to live in. The latter, in my case, was, throughout adolescence, American evangelicalism of the neo-sort, ie an evangelicalism in conscious differentiation from "mainline" Protestantism, with which it (esp. at the higher cultural levels) had a lover's quarrel. The former, in my case, was a confluence of two song-worlds, (1) mainline Protestant & (2) the American ballad (neo-Victorian romantic; patriotic; B'way pop; dance-hall--my parents always playing & singing the latest sheetmusic before supper). (Recently I read a listing of America's favorite new songs 1925-35, & --without seeing the music--I could hear my parents singing them all. Their heavenly joy from their mainline Protestant heritage had somewhat abated, but their worldly joy was robust. No babysitters, so they took us children to the dance-halls; so when I hear the music of those songs, music now being revived even by Musak, I can hear the words!)

3. And so back to theory: A song-world being a social world rather than an exclusively inner, "individual" world (such as, in extremis, the world of the schizophrenic), sense-making is an activity not of the individual but of the person-in-community: the context of sense, of plausibility, of rationality is social: rationality is "dialogical." (Here I'm indebted to a crystalline article by Thos. A. Byrnes, "Dialogical Rationality: A New Context for Religious Studies and Liberal Education," CRI-TERION, Spring/87, pp.11-14. Too, I'm indebted, as he is, to a long list of social epistemologists, sociologists of knowledge, including these he does not mention: Durkheim, Mead, Berger, Luckmann, Frankl, Perls, Berne. And many previous Thinksheets have developed my "person-in-community" concept.)

4. All "individuals" are atheists, since theism is a community-born & community-nourished way of sense-making. Nontheistic communities, such as the American public school, promote nontheistic ways of sense-making & are thus, functionally, atheist (existential theism being the theocentric way of sense-making). Further, nontheistic communities either submerge the person by repressing individuality or deify the individual by locating "values" distributively in body-selves. In contrast, the biblical way, which I describe as person-in-community, honors "under God" both generative society & contributive individuality.

5. In contrast to the biblical & dialogical epistemology of being-&-knowing-in-community, the Cartesian split proposed being-in-knowing ("Cogito, ergo sum."): the individual's mind is a mirror of nature, & rationality is the logical-critical use of the mirror, which receives-organizes-reflects the "exterior" world (ie "nature"), "knowledge" being the product of this process. This process, & its disastrous effects on the world, esp. on the West, are detailed in Rich. Rorty's PHILOSOPHY AND THE MIRROR OF NATURE (Princeton UP/79); and, moving from that analysis-diagnosis to prescription, Rich. Bernstein in his BEYOND OBJECTIVISM AND RELATIVISM: SCIENCE, HERMENEUTICS AND PRAXIS (U.Penn./83) sees sense-making, rationality, knowledge as arising within and sustained by "dialogical communities."....In Descartes' deism, God was needed only (TAB) "to guarantee the correspondence between the mental and material worlds": God did not appear in the mirror, religion was a cipher or worse in the search for & use of reason, the individual was autonomous, & the study of religion was unnecessary to a good (Enlightenment) education. Since philosophy is now postCartesian, how long will it take to deliver America's public-school establishment from what Rorty terms the "Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition" which has been losing out to Einstein, Godel, Heisenberg, Thos. Kuhn, et al?