

Introducing Particles, People and Purpose

Aim

This may be a little ambitious, but I would like to change the way people see the world. I regularly enjoy fascinating conversations with a wide range of people, and it seems clear that many people are trapped within a mental framework which limits their ability to thrive and shuts them off from helpful knowledge and life-giving connections with other people.

To take a familiar starting point, the divide described by C P Snow in his 1959 lecture, *The Two Cultures*, can still be seen: far too many people (in my view) inhabit either the world of the sciences, or that of the humanities, and have only (at best) a nodding acquaintance with the other one.

Actually, the situation seems to be worse than Snow described: there is a third world, quite distinct from the first two, inhabited by people who would often describe themselves as ‘spiritual’. Some people specialise in one distinct region of this world, but others range over a large part: it includes psychics, fortune tellers, mediums and faith healers; it embraces parapsychology, magic, mysticism, and many forms of paganism and wicca as well as the more traditional religions and superstitions.

When you put it all together, the activity of this third world is substantial. People flock to Psychic Fairs and similar events; in France there are more spiritualist healers than doctors, lawyers, and priests all put together. Wherever you live, you can easily find people who will tell you the colour of your aura, or introduce you to your ‘Spirit Guide’, or assure you that their group offers the only way to God, heaven and happiness.

I find that many people who inhabit this third world also have a solid base in one of the first two, either the sciences or the humanities, but the two worlds they inhabit tend to be isolated from each other. Knowledge and insights from one world do not get applied to the other, friends will inhabit one of their two worlds, but not both.

So we seem to have not two, but three cultures, three worlds, which exist and operate independently of and isolated from each other. What I would like to do is offer a framework which unites all three worlds: an activity which is almost certain to upset almost everybody, but finding a way to talk with and learn from each other is surely better than continued isolation.

Outline

In all three worlds, you can find people who are seeking the truth – and this can function as a common starting point. We all want to know what is true, or most of us do, anyway. More than that, once we distinguish truth from falsehood as best we can, we want to understand the truth better.

But people sometimes talk about ‘truth’ as a subjective thing: what you are saying may be *your* truth, but it isn’t *mine*. So, instead of talking about *truth*, it may be clearer if we consider what is *real*.

In all three worlds, you can find people who have an academic or intellectual interest: they enjoy understanding and exploring the world, purely for the joy and fun of the discovery, for the beauty and delight in what they have discovered – whether it is genuinely new, or just new for them.

But probably most people, whichever world they are inhabiting, are more interested in the practical uses: faster computers enable us to do more things with them, new medical treatments heal people who would otherwise suffer, new books and films entertain and bring people together, new spiritual insights bring peace or enable us to better survive adversity. Most of us want to know what is *real*, because we want to know what *works*. And, when we know that something works, we want to know how to make it work better.

The way we learn, the way we discover how to better inhabit and manipulate the world we find ourselves in, is primarily through stories. We tell stories about the physical world, we tell stories about other people, we tell stories about the way things should be. The stories we tell are important, which means there are two basic questions we need to continually be asking ourselves.

- *What is the story?* What are the details? Is it coherent? How does this story differ from the other stories people tell?
- *What is the evidence for this story?* Are there other stories the evidence could support? Is there other relevant evidence which should be considered?

In all three worlds, we engage primarily through stories: there are stories we know, stories we understand, and stories we believe – even when we know they don’t tell the whole truth. We teach children that an atom consists of electrons spinning round a nucleus, like planets orbiting the sun – it’s a story, simple enough to comprehend, true enough to be useful.

The people who want to learn and grow are always interested in these two questions, whether they are primarily interested in particles (the sciences), or people (the humanities), or purpose (religion and spirituality). What counts as evidence differs in each world, but the need for both stories and evidence is the same.

Using this approach, we can connect with people who differ greatly from us: by seeking to understand their stories and what they consider to be evidence for their truth, we can understand each other in a deeper way, and see more clearly how our shared humanity connects us.

You can read about it in the article, *Particles, People and Purpose* (also available for download from <http://hazelden.org.uk/sg>).