A NEW CONVERSATION WITH THE SMN

Peter Harper

May 2015

Published in *Network Review* 119, Winter 2015-16

I have been a Network member for a long time, but for a variety of reasons have been out of contact for a number of years.

But here I am back again, and (as before) found much to reflect on in the latest print issue of the Network Review (Summer 2015, amazing cover!).

However, things have changed, both in myself and in the world, and evidently in the Network as well, so I’d like to pass some comments.

I have always liked these lines attributed to Basho:

*Do not seek to emulate the masters.*

*Seek what they sought*.

For reasons I have not been able to fully articulate, I sense that ‘what they sought’ was (following Iamblicus)

 *A certain arcane cause…more excellent than reason*

If such a ‘cause’ exists, it is immensely subtle, embracing the astonishing quirky mysteries of the universe large and small and in the middle, which of course we have only just begun to probe in a physical sense. The pursuit could keep us happily occupied for millennia, and I applaud it.

But.

It must be obvious to any reader of the *Review* that humanity is currently faced with a series of brutally physical discontinuities, and on a global scale. I am talking about climate change, biodiversity, ocean acidification, nitrogen and phosphorus accumulation, etc.: those human-generated global trends whose trajectories cannot be physically sustained without the most dismal consequences – which will affect the whole remainder of history, and not just that of humanity.

These questions pose an ethical and existential challenge to any thoughtful person: what is our responsibility? It appears to be an ‘all hands on deck’ moment when we need to act collectively, rapidly and resolutely to prevent irreversible changes in the essential physical fabric of the biosphere.

The *Review* never denied the importance of these matters, but they were usually confined to a few book reviews on the last few pages. I am struck by the higher profile they are given in the latest issue.

As it happens, global sustainability problems are the main focus of my own activities, both private and professional, so naturally I am pleased and interested. But they always sat awkwardly in the overall SMN perspective, and in some ways they still do. Does the Network have a distinctive ‘take’ on these issues? If we are confronted with important physical problems, is there any other appropriate mind-set than the application of brute physical knowledge?

Climate Change is particularly interesting because it has triggered, or revealed perhaps, huge veins of magical thinking running through society, and consequent failures in necessary dialogues. It has proved impossible to engage with many varieties of ‘climate scepticism’ because the sceptics appear to inhabit a differently-constructed universe. We have almost nothing in common. They usually won’t come out to debate, but if they do, the ensuing ‘dialogue of the deaf’ is deeply frustrating for all concerned.

What is the difference between ‘magical thinking’ as a form of intellectual irresponsibility, and the kinds of challenges to consensus science commonly explored within the Network?

My experiences with climate-change and allied debates has left me far more ‘physicalist’, because I ask myself, surely consensus on the nature of the problems (and perhaps solutions too) can only come from a painstaking catalogue of *what we can all agree on*. And is this not the essential definition of scientific knowledge: shared facts, evidence, that (at least in principle) all human beings can agree on?

As soon as we move away from the tribunal of empirical evidence, all hell breaks loose, and agents appear free to create narratives – and even ‘facts’ – free from any sense of responsibility to the shared world. Once this touchstone is lost, we cannot tackle these genuinely shared problems.

In the face of these difficulties, I have been forced ever closer to the raw quantitative data, always asking myself what are the minimum basic factors that need to be changed (or held constant, or regulated), which could in principle command an adequate consensus. These basic physical factors are set in a kind of logical structure of dependencies and timings that also need a shared understanding.

We are talking essentially of reason and empirical science. What do we do at this point of history? What is our responsibility? We are running out of time. and must use the best tools we have. Are reason, science, logic, measurement, not good enough?

In these circumstances, what has the Network got to offer that is truly ‘more excellent than reason’?