

The Velikovsky-Odent effect ...

or - why it's so hard to shift ideas or
take in apparently simple (but new) principles
©Andrew Cook, Norwich UK, April 2024

Summons

*Last night I dreamed
ten thousand grandmothers
from the twelve hundred corners of the earth
walked out into the gap
one breath deep
between the bullet and the flesh
between the bomb and the family.*

*They told me we cannot wait for governments.
There are no peacekeepers boarding planes.
There are no leaders who dare to say
every life is precious, so it will have to be us.*

*They said we will cup our hands around each heart.
We will sing the earth's song, the song of water,
a song so beautiful that vengeance will turn to weeping.
The mourners will embrace, and grief replace
every impulse toward harm.*

*Ten thousand is not enough, they said,
so, we have sent this dream, like a flock of doves
into the sleep of the world.*

*Wake up. Put on your shoes.
You who are reading this, I am bringing bandages
and a bag of scented guavas from my trees. I think
I remember the tune. Meet me at the corner.
Let's go.
-- Aurora Levins Morales*

Knowledge is intrinsically cumulative

There are very good reasons why this is so – one of which is that we change how we behave in, respond to and predict the possible immediate future of the world we live in through accumulated “knowledge” – and make those responses more efficient, more seamless and more instantaneous. Every creature with any semblance of a memory does this – the main aim being to predict the world so that we will move in the correct direction and use our energy efficiently, so that we will not go unknowingly or unprepared in directions that might be dangerous. So that we will find most easily whatever nourishes us and meets our needs.

We trust the knowledge we have used so far because it has got us this far, and so all that has to be done is add an extra piece to a gradually accumulating edifice.

The problem – perhaps the central and most troublesome problem our scientific culture faces – is that there are now several types of knowledge that never previously existed. And knowledge/information is distorted, falsified, pre-filtered and otherwise adulterated in ways that also never previously existed.

At a basic level there is (what is termed) “**instinctive**” or “intuitive” knowledge – we “know” something even though we don’t know how we know. This level of knowing is probably the main form of knowing employed by creatures who have no particularly sophisticated nervous system. Instinctive knowledge is essentially (for a human) somatic in its nature – there is a largely non-conscious urge and an inexplicable movement that happens to be the right thing to do. I experienced one particularly clear example of this when I was working as a mining engineer, watching an underground excavation in progress. “Something” made me feel uneasy enough to retreat back a couple of metres. Less than two seconds later a part of the tunnel collapsed, and a 4m long steel girder pivoted with a boulder weighing several tons on one end, whilst the other end, (driven by that weight) spun round and smashed into the very spot I had been standing.

Alongside this level of “gut” instinct is a set of Gestalts that enable the senses to make sense of both our (internal) body and the (external) world. These learned responses are shortcuts to understanding meaning – so for instance, once we enter the world at the time of being born, we are confronted by light and dark, and have to make sense of a whole mess of visual stimuli. Over a short time this begins to be ordered because we find certain consistent patterns... Light always comes from above, and throws shadows – so a fundamental visual gestalt is the learned assumption that this will always be the case. “Light comes from above, shadows lie where light does not fall” – is a basic piece of knowledge absorbed deep into the non-conscious, that is extremely simple but whose influence on our ability to navigate the visual world – is profound.

If we happened to be dumped into a world that was lit from below, then there would be several weeks of disorientation and painful re-learning – but after some time the Gestalt would be re-patterned and we would be able once more to glance at a lit object and know its shape. Similar Gestalts control balance, proprioception, and so on – because even the position of limbs and how they move is something that we learn rather than somehow being hard wired into the nervous system. Re-learning on a profound level like this is so painful and requires such a deep relinquishing of all the dearly held accumulated knowledge that requires this gestalt to exist – that many adults are incapable of this kind of re-learning. A nice example is the backwards bicycle¹ (learning to ride a bicycle with the handlebars reverse-gearred) and the reverse-learning process².

This kind of learning requires no need to unpick the means by which we know, because the learning is somatic/subconscious, and it is only necessary to “know” (i.e. to have direct access to the Gestalt meaning-interpreter) to react correctly. As soon as someone begins to doubt their access to this

1 Smarter every day <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFzDaBzBIL0>

2 Smarter every day <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqwfGUhYBEA>

level of Gestalt, this can interfere with the knowing. So (for example) people who are worried about tripping up eventually lose access to the instincts that keep their feet away from trip hazards (and so end up tripping all the time and insist the only way to prevent this is to keep looking at the ground). The way that loss of the balance/trip Gestalt produces severe incapacity to move is a good indication of how deep these experiential learnings go and how much we rely on them.

Coming closer to modern humans, animals with some intelligence have two kinds of knowledge. In addition to instincts and Gestalts (instincts being integrated sensory Gestalts) there is (2) learned/remembered **experiential** knowledge. We experience and remember in a way that can be recalled to consciousness – as opposed to the memory remaining on a subconscious Gestalt level. This progresses to learning through observing other people and learning second-hand through their successes and mistakes. Many animals deliberately copy their peers and communal adults – a process which is also semi-unconscious in animals possessing a motor cortex - via activation of mirror neurons, whereby the learning is “by osmosis”. Children learn from adults in this way, and it is the main way in which skills are passed on through traditional apprenticeship to an experienced craftsman, sailor, tailor, etc etc. Here we hit the first problem with accumulated knowledge, because some mirror neuron-acquired “knowledge” (skill) is through copying of unskilful movements. In this case, children sometimes copy their parents quirky mannerisms and clumsiness as well as more skilful abilities.

This is again closely followed by (3) learned knowledge based on learning through other people’s experience – we are shown or told by reliable elders. Here we rely on the transferred knowledge being accurate. I am of a generation where many of us had to re-learn all kinds of crazy fearful messages from adults – such as all mushrooms not found in a shop are deadly. Elephants and many other animals (such as mountain goats, migratory birds, etc) pass on information in this way. The information is usually geographic – where food or safety is to be found – but may also be about (e.g.) plants used for medicine (animals make substantial direct use of medicinal herbs in a way that shows they know exactly what they are doing³). This kind of knowledge is very direct – the person we learn from has directly experienced it, or having learned it from someone else has directly applied it many times. The everyday usage and direct experience give a certain stamp of reliability and authenticity.

As humans living in complex technological societies, we have take knowledge several steps further away from this point. We have learned to believe other people in all kinds of ways that would seem strange to an elephant. So, for instance, we believe that we can see a 2-D representation (on a computer, of a shop that doesn’t actually exist, and that is run by people who we have never met) of an object that projects 2-D images on a screen⁴; and that someone who has no idea of the details of how the object works can then instruct us how to use it – also with no real idea as to the

3 <https://www.cindyengel.com/animal-self-medication>

4 Or... how to buy a TV with a remote control from an online shop...

technological details that are being applied. This “Magical” knowledge is commonplace, and most information/knowledge is no longer about real things, but is about concepts that may be many steps removed from the real things they relate to and from real tangible experience.

For this abstracted 2nd/3rd or more-hand system to work, it is necessary to :

1. trust that the information is correct-enough,
2. have constructed an edifice of cross-linked pieces of information that allow us to navigate this largely virtual world
3. be able to filter out false information (usually by comparing it for consistency with our existing edifice of knowledge)
4. have a way of identifying trustworthy (and untrustworthy) sources of new information
5. be able to cross-reference abstracted knowledge to experiential knowledge so we can still integrate it into our physical reality
6. choose to apply filters – because there is just too much information out there

This filtering inevitably includes looking towards sources of information that agree with our current beliefs about the world. The loop is so self-reinforcing and there is so much limitation on social contact that everyone lives in their own little information bubble such that there are many personal worlds that have very few points of intersection.

The “Magical” (conceptual, abstract, non-experiential) nature of the knowledge we handle all the time means that this knowledge is essentially a belief system. Or even if it isn’t initially, it gravitates towards being a belief system. Thus, as technology has advanced rapidly, as knowledge has become manipulated for various purposes (making the filtering process more troublesome), and useful knowledge has become less and less about direct experience and more and more Magical and second-hand – the edifice has grown to be very shaky. It has more and more tended to be irrevocably cumulative rather than subject to substantial revisions and prunings. It has become somewhat arbitrary, because there is so much possible knowledge available about so many topics that it has also become necessary to restrict information. In this way we have also become increasingly dependent on specialists (academics) who look at a small field of knowledge and assess its worth and relevance, what is acceptable, and what has to be pruned – on our behalf.

Clearly this is a very long way from the direct experiential (or at most, directly second-hand from a known family member) system of knowledge that our nervous system evolved to handle. In a survey carried out recently in the UK⁵, it was found that the average adult watches over 5 hours of streamed video per day. I wonder if this retreat to virtual realities is one sign that the linkage between abstracted knowledge and the experiential world has become too stretched and places too

5 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-58086629>

much strain on the nervous system. The people who I see doing best psychologically are mainly ones who choose to ignore much of what goes on in the general world, and who largely constrain themselves to simple stuff they already know, such as family and friends.

What also affects this system of knowledge is the degraded general capacity to see the “new” unknown instead of just re-packaging the old known in new ways. Iain McGilchrist⁶ has written and talked about this issue extensively. When under threat brain activity tends to be more Left-sided as we look to identify what we already know. So as general personal and societal stress increases there is a gradually diminishing likelihood that new information will be accumulated, and the edifice then starts to be too strongly self-referential, one bit of “knowledge” supporting another in a veritable pile of Jack Straws.

An Age in Chaos

I called this essay “the Velikovsky-Odent effect” because these are two classic examples from the past of new information not being accepted.

Immanuel Velikovsky was a highly respected scientist, polymath, and integrated thinker in the 1950’s – until he published several books that severely contradicted the scientific status quo. Some of the material was highly challenging. He stated that Gravity is actually a secondary effect of electrical charge, and that planets are vast electrically charged globes that occasionally change position in their orbit around the Sun, that this had occurred in human memory and is the basis for some aspects of ancient mythology. Instead of the usual scientific to-and fro of argument based on measurable data, the statement was too far from an accepted norm spanning too many disciplines in a time before cross-disciplinary research was invented. He was consequently ostracised and his books banned from scientific libraries (and remain so to this day). He also pointed out that - whereas the Geological science of his time was based on long gradual change, there were clear signs of vast cataclysmic upheavals to be found all round the Earth. This argument was also thrown out, a baby in the bathwater – but was then re-hashed and accepted in various forms over the next 30 or so years. So Geological science now accept tsunamis, super storms, glacial floods, asteroid impacts that have changed and been recorded in human history, rapid upwelling of quartz-veining and gold deposits in hours (not millennia), etc. But Velikovsky is still consigned to the dustbin, and the mention of his name still raises bile and vitriol amongst people who align themselves with the institution of mainstream science.

Michel Odent did not suffer such an ignominious fate – but was instead largely ignored for decades. A French Obstetrician and Gynecologist, he pointed out that over-medicalised modern birthing practices were a direct cause of mental health problems in adults as they grew up, and

⁶ <https://channelmcgilchrist.com/>

presented scientific evidence (some of which predated his book⁷ by yet more decades) to back up his position. He also pointed out that many attempts had been made to put “natural” birthing practices (i.e. aligned with our recent evolved past) into place all round the world - but up to his book publication (1999) all of them had been strenuously opposed or been shut down after an all-too-brief period of promise. Some of these required public education that is still, 25 years later, not even on the horizon or has even gone backwards – such as the relationship between painkillers and difficulty bonding (which is a major factor in post-natal depression). Of course the whole topic is complex and interleaved with the even more complex, controversial and politicised issue of women having control over their own bodies (and what that means in practice). But the point is the degree to which natural birthing was so unpalatable to both senior consultants and health authorities. Some of his practices were introduced in my local hospital, and then substantially diluted about 15 years later as budget cuts and political/insurance jobsworths drove the whole hospital into a more medicalised and interventionist mentality (which in the long long term will have cost it even more money and lives than it might possibly have saved).

So what do I actually mean by “the Velikovsky-Odent effect”?

Paradigm shifts were never easy for societies to assimilate. The relatively small shift of Luther from the central dogma and doctrine of the Church of Rome caused (amongst other things) 1/3 of the population in what is now Germany to die as a result of a prolonged religious war. However much we now think of ourselves as being an open-minded scientific society, the fact is that the edifice of accumulated knowledge has some rather flimsy parts to its foundation material. And it is then defended tooth and nail, to the bitter end.

The human viewpoint being restricted to a lifetime finds changes disturbing, and constantly seeks a “normal”. If the edifice of knowledge-as-it-stands cannot continue to be constructed and improved by incremental (largely additive) changes, then the whole shebang starts to topple and threaten to collapse due to its inherent inconsistencies with reality. The fact that in the past 120 years we have gone from largely horse-drawn transport to cars to space, from telegraph to copper-wired telephone to wireless communication, from news print and books to digital information – to name just a few of the changes – is itself highly disturbing. In the face of this still-accelerating technological shift there is little spare capacity left to assimilate assaults on our beliefs as to the nature of reality. The fact is, we have not even fully adjusted all the implications of the technological reality of the automobile⁸.

7 Michel Odent (1999) Scientification of Love. Publ. Free Association Books. Hardcover, 130pp, ISBN-13: 978-1853434761

8 Cars are not unlike the Roman Empire – their use having expanded to fill the world. The limit (how much road surface can we build and maintain? How much pollution can we withstand? What are the implications for population distribution, given the law of decreasing returns applied to distance and time and cost of travel?) is balanced against huge infrastructure shifts. Whole settlements used to be abandoned as work and employment drifted elsewhere, and now we drive. One gallon of petrol in a car equates to about 480 man-hours of labour, so owning a car is economically like owning a hundred slaves to carry us around. Like the Roman Empire, car-oriented transport appears to be here for ever just as it is also hitting boundaries that foretell its eventual demise.

So any change in understanding the structure of the world that goes too far outside our sense of normal is inevitably rejected, because – it can't possibly be right – right? Velikovsky operated by the rules of science – *collecting observed data, forming a hypothesis, repeating until the inconsistencies between data and theory are reasonably accounted for, then publish* – but his hypothesis was too far from the norm. Odent's work was not so radical as to be excommunicated in this way, so he was given the more usual treatment of – being ignored for as long as possible. However, he also stirred up (and identified the work of) a second and in some ways more insidious and difficult demon. Odent indirectly pointed out that the male-dominated medical institutions had historically imposed a form of best practice with its own inescapable logic – *control, make safe according to known scientific parameters* – and that standard way of thinking in its ignore-ance of the basic wisdom and flow of Life was damaging the health of our entire society. Doctors are supposed to promote health, not damage it. So whether conscious or not (probably in most cases, not), the information stirred up a festering guilt, and fear such that the very idea of it caused a gut recoil and an overwhelmed dissociation and denial. The implications of this way of thinking go out much further than the natal ward, and affect every area of medicine. And having an institution geared to the current paradigm that tries to impose control over Life processes, that sits inside a society, a legislative framework and all kinds of other cultural norms also geared in that direction – makes it easy to just say “we can't do that” – “things don't work that way”.

This issue is not totally irrelevant to changes in the global climate as a result of human activity, in that

- (a) Historic birthing practices (and the belief systems that devised them and maintain them) are one factor that has contributed to the human capacity to trash the one planet we have to live on. They are both a result of that way of thinking, and one of the mainly accidental means by which it is perpetuated and entrenched⁹.
- (b) The same response (largely unconscious guilt, overwhelm, dissociation – followed by denial and turning to look the other way) is seen generally with regard to the accelerating climate crisis.

Both the climate crisis and the more specific case of birthing practices and technological medicine are a direct result of the fact that we have distanced ourselves from the Earth and all its messiness. As equal, integrated, symbiotically dependent members of an extended ecosystem we are also mortal and have to accept death as being a proper and normal part of Life. We would recognise that Life has certain rules. Individual animals might go crazy now and again – like bears do when faced with a seemingly infinite supply of salmon – but the bear species lives with and within everything else and is not permanently insane. Which is one reason why evolution has not reversed into a “green goo”, as some super-organism evolves to dominance. Instead, evolution thrives on death, and Life consequently becomes more complex and beautiful. There is no absolute good or bad in

9 <https://evolvednest.org/>

this ecosystemic world, outside of humans thinking it so. Viruses accelerate evolution by transferring large snippets of DNA between species, and are responsible for almost 10% of our DNA, along with much of our brain function and the capacity to reproduce in the way that we do. Bacteria, bacteriophages and viruses (and even some parasites) are active parts of the human immune system - despite the general cultural attitude that we are at war with them.

Being at war with Nature to defend and enrich human existence is the default position we have adopted. To do this, in withdrawing from Nature to our constructed sterile environment we have had to also construct our own human ecosystem, in which humans (rather imperfectly, or sometimes rather too well) take up the roles that different species take up in a normal ecosystem. We have made ourselves predator, prey, parasite. The greatest threat to humanity is – humans.

Recognising the awfulness of this even in the smallest of ways goes deep. Grief, anger, despair and then dissociation and denial, and projection of these emotions onto – the humans around us. Change is not easy because of the huge festering pit that has to be assimilated, navigated, waded through – before we step onto dry land the other side. There is no option but to recognise it – we can't get Scotty to beam us up. Instead many people are subliminally aware of it, but are surviving by streaming Netflix over 5 hours a day.

The Far Pastures

PIPPIN: I didn't think it would end this way.

GANDALF: End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it.

PIPPIN: What? Gandalf? See what?

GANDALF: White shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.

PIPPIN: Well, that isn't so bad.

GANDALF: No. No, it isn't."

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

If there were only recognition and nothing else, then we would truly have constructed a Hell-on-Earth straight out of Dante's Inferno or Swedenborg's journey to Heaven and Hell. There are few options available when most of humanity is in denial, and many of the ones that are not are dissociating are unable to grasp the nettle. That inability to engage with the reality is also creating a backlash of attempts to keep the edifice of belief (as to how the world is) shored up, gaff-taped and pop-riveted together.

To see the reality requires resilience. To see the alternative – surprisingly – requires even more resilience, because in seeing what could be, the grief and pain of how we have become and what we have done (and our ancestors pain) also rises up because of the awareness of how it could have been. As Swedenborg said, in Heaven the Angels weep because in looking towards the light, they can see the faces of all those who are looking blindly the other way. There have to be people who stare without pause or wavering at the light – at what could be. The rest will somehow arrive there despite themselves, not because they are pushed, pulled, prodded, or even attacked – but because there is a growing critical mass of souls who focus on what might be.