

Counsel of despair

Brian Pippard

Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man. By Bryan Appleyard. Picador: 1992. Pp. 283. £14.99. To be published in the United States by Doubleday early next year.

BRYAN Appleyard is unhappy. Living, as I suppose he does, in reasonable comfort and having not just the opportunity but the professional duty as a journalist in the world of ideas to think about higher things, he recognizes both the material well-being of Western society and its lack of moral conviction. Because both, in his view, are engendered by science, he wishes there were a way of remedying the one without impairing the other.

In this well-written book, published tomorrow, he wastes little effort on the positive achievements of technology, but settles down with a will to his indictment of pure science. It is hard science that takes the knocks, especially physics as typified by the public figures who recount with breathtaking assurance the whole history of the cosmos from birth to death, and promise the end of Real Science when a Theory of Everything is brought forth.

If everything meant only the material world it would not be so bad, but it also includes the human mind, and sometimes even poor old God who appears to have had little choice in the sort of universe He would create. I wish one could say that Appleyard has simply been listening to the wrong pundits, yet this sort of triumphalism is unfortunately widespread. All too rarely do I find colleagues who will assent to the proposition (which I find irresistible) that the very ground-rules of science, its concern only for public knowledge, preclude its finding an explanation for my consciousness, the one phenomenon of which I am absolutely certain. Mostly they admit indeed that it will be a tough job, but like to believe that in due course the relationship of consciousness to brain activity will be made clear, and the ghost in the machine exorcised.

Such excess of confidence is a fairly recent development, although the exaltation of science as the key to heaven on Earth is an old story and has been attacked on many occasions. C. S. Lewis's *Silent Planet* trilogy offers the nightmare of a virtually irresistible science-based conspiracy, and the honest scientist's vulnerability to evil temptation, if presented as an intellectual challenge; but few readers who sympathize with the message will be consoled to find the happy ending (for all but the wicked) engineered by supernatural powers.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in its bleak pessimism is a better blueprint for Appleyard's fears, the surrender of the soul in the midst of plenty. In Appleyard's own words, "Science made us, science broke us" — it has taken away our ancient faith and given nothing in return. He tries hard to find merit in

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alternative scientific creeds but cannot in the end accept them. Environmentalism, anthropic principles, the hybridization of Eastern mysticism with physics, morphogenetic fields and 'implicate wholeness' are all found wanting as means of spiritual rebirth, because one cannot arbitrarily choose to build a religion out of an idea; it must spring from a deeper source — the thirst for understanding not just how, but why. If one has been persuaded that science, the only purveyor of truth, can at best tell one how, and with the aid of philosophy has denied the validity of 'why' questions, one will find no satisfaction in a contrived surrogate.

But, whatever individual scientists may say, it is not true that science has cut away the roots of revealed religion. That is beyond its power, though its legitimate critiques have starved the roots of material nourishment and thus weakened or destroyed the faith of the merely credulous. I cannot accept that it is a fault in scientists that they have worked hard to eliminate demonstrable errors, although it is perhaps a fair charge that they have frequently tackled the job with uncharitable gusto. There are those, however, who have gone further and assumed authority, in the name of science, to brand all belief as superstition. They have abandoned healthy scepticism in favour of bigotry, and (if Appleyard's reading is accepted) the whole of science is reaping the reward. The cynical materialism they helped to foster begins to take for granted that science shares its own venality; and the rare but sensationally publicized cases of scientific fraud are taken as evidence of

endemic corruption. But this can give no satisfaction to the enemies of science, if the role of spiritual guide is to be taken over by a proliferation of mindless pseudoreligions.

It would be wrong, however, to leave the impression that Appleyard sees the source of the trouble to lie solely in the antireligious excesses of a few enthusiasts. It is rather the whole scientific enterprise, from Descartes and Galileo on, that has done the damage, with philosophical demagogues such as Bertrand Russell, the archenemy of metaphysics, leading the demolition gang.

Appleyard seems to me to have allowed himself to be argued into the sort of despair that can thrive only in a leisure society, and which is entirely irrelevant to the generality of decent people who love their kind, and work for them, and only rarely wonder if life is worth living. The scientists among them, and there are plenty, need feel no shame at being part of a historical development that cannot be undone. They have a perfect right to be proud of the process and to enjoy it for its intellectual beauty.

This beauty is not the same as the awe that popularizers try to inspire with their grandiose stories of the cosmos, but is to be found all around us in simple things whose appreciation demands little in the way of advanced theory. Such understanding is no enemy of faith, and we should surely be trying to help a new generation of children grow up sharing our pleasures, or at least sympathizing with them. Exploratories are an excellent start, although the solemn, not to say pedantic, emphasis on introducing formal structures into the curricula at too early an age can easily undo the good work. Producing only experts is not a sound primary aim — we need a scientifically literate (or semiliterate) population from which the experts select themselves without being regarded as priests or pariahs. Ideally, everyone should be encouraged to feel involved, even if marginally, in a venture that combines enjoyment with mental discipline and a rigorous ethic. These features may not add up to a religious sense of purpose, but they can serve as a pretty good substitute for those who have been denied the gift of faith.

"I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher", said Oliver Edwards to Dr Johnson, "but cheerfulness was always breaking in." We might do worse than take Mr Edwards as the patron saint of natural philosophy. His is a better gospel than despair; and what fun we should have spreading it. □

Sir Brian Pippard, emeritus professor of physics in the University of Cambridge, is at the Cavendish Laboratory, Madingley Road, Cambridge CB3 0HE, UK.