

III-10. Living with Doubt

At their starting point the existence of things had not yet begun. The next assumption was that though things existed, they had not yet begun to be separated. The next, that though things were separated in a sense, affirmation and negation had not yet begun. When affirmation and negation came into being, Tao faded. After Tao faded, then came one-sided attachments.

- Chuang Tsu (ca 300 BCE)

If the realm of faith is about the past, doubt rules the future. Often we are sure about our doubts, and doubtful about the certitudes. Here information is not knowledge. Also not all knowledge, and for that matter not all information, is created equal. Doubt penetrates the victories of the past as well as the optimism for the future.

What matters is the moment-to-moment perception that sets the compass. Except to evaluate the trajectory of the change that has already occurred, prior knowledge is not very useful for decisions about future - that too only if the variables and relations can be extracted with a reasonable degree of certainty. Even then a knowledgeable gambler can not make living. Living with reality of doubt calls for rational alternatives. No matter how much we try, real-time decisions are made without complete knowledge. We are guided mostly by the perception of *what is out there* – armed with our reptilian instincts.

An ancient Hebrew saying. Jacob and Yehuda went a Rabbi to settle their dispute. Jacob claimed "this land has been in my family for generations." Rabbi solemnly responded "Yes, yes, you

are right." Then Yehuda pleaded "My family has used this land for generations. Without us taking care of it would have become worthless." Rabbi concurred "Yes, yes, you are right." After hearing this, a by-stander commented, "O Wise one, you have agreed to both. This all seems very complicated." Rabbi nodded "Yes, yes, you are right."

One can only affirm on the basis of evidence. Beyond identifying some contradictions and inconsistencies we rarely have sufficient knowledge to make rational decisions about the future. In the absence of incomplete knowledge, pragmatism requires that we do not take irreversible steps that invariably have undesirable consequences including close the future options.

We deal with degrees of doubt and certainties to balance the outcome in a compassionate and secular fashion. Most behavioral studies suggest that as a general strategy to deal with the unknown: *Be nice to others at least first time, and then tit-for-tat.* It is an appeal for restraint to build a feedback loop while avoiding actions that can result in loss of future options, if not the opportunities.

I have done, but not ended. There is no end to what one can hope to discover and think about any subject of interest. Every serious subject is infinite. To me life consists of the fluctuation between two poles of the hither and thither between the two foundation pillars of the world. What we have not and will not achieve is permanence and the finality. As our understanding progresses, some of the questions become irrelevant: nature of life, 'chicken or egg'. They are transformed to fit the emerging framework.

Much remains to be done. It is another way to invoke the condition of ignorance or incomplete knowledge. Others are: What would you consider as direct (observed) or indirect (circumstantial, implicit, analogy) evidence? Do perceptions play a part in such characterizations? We are born with little knowledge? Even such states we begin to understand, predict, or control what goes on around us. To make up for such deficiencies we have the unique ability to process inputs and experience into the various levels of awareness and perception separated by layers of uncertainties. Of course, always there is a need for more knowledge, yet we are designed to deal with the unknown, until unless we decide to give up.

Perpetual human concerns: Consider the everlasting appeal of the titles of some chapters in : *The Next Fifty Years* (Ed. John Brokman, Vintage Books, 2002): *Nature of the Universe; Are We Alone, and Where? Toward a Theory of Moral Development; The Future of Happiness; Will We Still Be Sad? What is Life? What is to Come and How to Predict It? Are we going to Get Smarter? Mind, Brain, and Self; What Makes Us the Way We Are? Mastering Disease.*

Against Gods and Humbug

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