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Left and Right: A Non-Euclidean Perspective

Robert Anton Wilson

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Our esteemed editor, Bob Banner, has invited me to contribute an article on whether my politics are “left” or “right,” evidently because some flatlanders insist on classifying me as Leftist and others, equally Euclidean, argue that I am obviously some variety of Rightist.

Naturally, this debate intrigues me. The Poet prayed that some power “would the giftie gie us to see ourselves as others see us”; but every published writer has that dubious privilege. I have been called a “sexist” (by Arlene Meyers) and a “male feminist ... a simpering pussy-whipped wimp” (by L.A. Rollins), “one of the major thinkers of the modern age” (by Barbara Marx Hubbard) and “stupid” (by Andrea Chaflin Antonoff), a “genius” (by SOUNDS, London) and “mentally deranged” (by Charles Platt), a “mystic” and “charlatan” (by the Bay Area Skeptics) and a “materialist” (by an anonymous gent in Seattle who also hit me with a pie); one of my books has even been called “the most scientific of all science-fiction novels” (by *New Scientist* physics editor John Gribbon) and “ranting and raving” (by Neal Wilgus). I am also frequently called a “Sa-

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tanist” in some amusing, illiterate and usually anonymous crank letters from Protestant Fundamentalists.

I can only conclude that I am indeed like a visitor from non-Euclidean dimensions whose outlines are perplexing to the Euclidean inhabitants of various dogmatic Flatlands. Or else, Lichtenstein was right when he said a book “is a mirror. When a monkey looks in, no philosopher looks out.” Of course, we are living in curved space (as noted by Einstein); that should warn us that Euclidean metaphors are always misleading. Science has also discovered that the Universe can count above two, which should make us leery of either/or choices. There are eight – count ‘em, eight – theories or models in quantum mechanics, all of which use the same equations but have radically different philosophical meanings; physicists have accepted the multi-model approach (or “model agnosticism”) for over 60 years now. In modern mathematics and logic, in addition to the two-valued (yes/no) logic of Aristotle and Boole, there are several three-valued logics (e.g. the yes, no and maybe Quantum Logic of von Neumann; the yes, no and po of psychologist Edward de Bono; etc.), at least one four-valued logic (the true, false, indeterminate and meaningless of Rapoport), and an infinite-valued logic (Korzybski). I myself have presented a multi-valued logic in my neuroscience seminars; the bare bones of this system will be found in my book, *The New Inquisition*. Two-valued Euclidean choices – left or right of an imaginary line – do not seem very “real” to me, in comparison to the versatility of modern science and mathematics.

Actually, it was once easy to classify me in simple Euclidean topology. To paraphrase a recent article by the brilliant Michael Hoy [*Critique* #19/ 20], I had a Correct Answer Machine installed in my brain when I was quite young. It was a right-wing Correct Answer Machine in general and Roman Catholic in particular. It was installed by nuns who were very good at creating such machines and implanting them in helpless children. By the time I got out of grammar school, in 1945, I had the Correct Answer for ev-

everything, and it was the Correct Answer that you will nowadays still hear from, say, William Buckley, Jr.

When I moved on to Brooklyn Technical High School, I encountered many bright, likable kids who were not Catholics and not at all right-wing in any respect. They naturally angered me at first. (That is the function of Correct Answer Machines: to make you have an adrenaline rush, instead of a new thought, when confronted with different opinions.) But these bright, non-Catholic kids — Protestants, Jews, agnostics, even atheists — fascinated me in some ways. The result was that I started reading all the authors the nuns had warned me against — especially Darwin, Tom Paine, Ingersoll, Mencken and Nietzsche.

I found myself floating in a void of incertitude, a sensation that was unfamiliar and therefore uncomfortable. I retreated back to robotism by electing to install a new Correct Answer Machine in my brain. This happened to be a Trotskyist Correct Answer Machine, provided by the International Socialist Youth Party. I picked this Machine, I think, because the alternative Correct Answer Machines then available were less “Papist” (authoritarian) and therefore less comfortable to my adolescent mind, still bent out of shape by the good nuns.

(Why was I immune to Stalinism — an equally Papist secular religion? I think the answer was my youth. The only Stalinists left in the U.S. by the late '40s were all middle-aged and “crystallized” as Gurdjieff would say. Those of us who were younger could clearly see that Stalinism was not much different from Hitlerism. The Trotskyist alternative allowed me to feel “radical” and modern, without becoming an idiot by denying the totalitarianism of the USSR, and it let me have a martyred redeemer again as I had in my Catholic childhood.)

After about a year, the Trotskyist Correct Answer Machine began to seem a nuisance. I started to suspect that the Trotskyists were some secular clone of the Vatican, whether they knew it or not, and that the dogma of Papal infallibility was no whit more ab-

surd than the Trotskyist submission to the Central Committee. I decided that I had left one dogmatic Church and joined another. I even suspected that if Trotsky had managed to hold on to power, he might have been as dictatorial as Stalin.

Actually, what irritated me most about the Trots (and now seems most amusing) is that I already had some tendency toward individualism, or crankiness, or Heresy; I sometimes disputed the Party Line. This always resulted in my being denounced for “bourgeoisie tendencies.” That was irritating then and amusing now because I was actually the only member of that Trot cell who did not come from a middle-class background. I came from a working class family and was the only genuine “proletarian” in the whole Marxist *kaffeklatch*.

At the age of 18, then, I returned to the void of incertitude. It began to seem almost comfortable there, and I began to rejoice in my agnosticism. It made me feel superior to the dogmatists of all types, and adolescents love to feel superior to everybody (especially their parents — or have you noticed that?). Around the same time as my Trotskyist period, I began to read the first Revisionist historians, whom I had been warned about by my high school social science teachers, in grave and awful tones, as if these men had killed a cat in the sacristy. My teachers were too Liberal to tell me I would go to Hell for reading such books (as the nuns had told me about Darwin, for instance), but they made it clear that the Revisionists were Evil, Awful, Unspeakable and probably some form of Pawns of the Devil.

I recognized the technique of thought control again, so I read all the Revisionists I could find. They convinced me that the New Deal Liberals had deliberately lied and manipulated the U.S. into World War II and were still lying about what they did after the war was over. (In fact, they are still lying about it today.)

The Revisionist who impressed me most was Harry Elmer Barnes, a classic Liberal who was a bit of a Marxist (in methodology) — i.e., in his way of looking for economic factors behind

tion where that was the only defense of the specific lives of specific individuals I love, although I would never kill a person or employ even minor violence, or physical coercion, on behalf of capitalized Abstractions or Governments (who are all damned liars.) All these are matters of Existential Choice on my part, and not dogmas revealed to me by some god or some philosopher-priest of Natural Law.

I prefer the various Utopian systems I have mentioned to the Conservative position that humanity is incorrigible and I also think that if none of these Utopian scenarios are workable, some system will eventually arrive better than any we have ever known. I share the Jeffersonian (“Liberal”?) vision that the human mind can exceed all previous limits in a society where freedom of thought is the norm rather than a rare exception.

Does all of this make me a Leftist or a Rightist? I leave that for the Euclideans to decide. If I had to summarize my social credo in the briefest possible space, I would quote Alexander Pope’s *Essay On Man*:

For forms of Government let fools contest;
Whate’er is best administered is best:
For modes of Faith let graceless zealots fight;
He can’t be wrong whose life is in the right.

science is neuroscience, and I am endlessly fascinated by every new tool or technique that breaks down robot circuits in our brains (Correct Answer Machines) and spurs creativity, higher intelligence, expanded consciousness, and, above all, broader compassion.

I see no reason to believe that only an elite is capable of this evolutionary leap forward, especially as the new tools and training techniques are becoming more simple. In neuroscience as in all technology, we seem to follow Bucky Fuller's rule that each breakthrough allows us to do more work with less effort and to create more wealth out of less raw matter.

Once I broke loose from the employee role and became self-supporting as a writer, the "horrors of capitalism" seemed less ghoulish to me, since I no longer had to face them every day. I became philosophical, like all persons free of acute suffering. I prefer to live in Europe rather than pay taxes to build more of Mr. Reagan's goddam nuclear missiles, but I enjoy visiting the U.S. regularly for intellectual stimulation...

I agree passionately with Maurice Nicoll (a physician who mastered both Jungian and Gurdjieffian systems) who wrote that the major purpose of "work on consciousness" is to "decrease the amount of violence in the world." The main difference between our world and Swift's is that while we have stopped killing each other over religious differences (outside the Near East and Northern Ireland), we have developed an insane passion for killing each other over ideological differences. I regard Organized Ideology with the same horror that Voltaire had for Organized Religion.

Concretely, I am indeed a Male Feminist, as L.A. Rollins claimed (although seeing myself often on TV, I deny that I simmer; I don't even swish); like all libertarians, I oppose victimless crime laws, all drug control laws, and all forms of censorship (whether by outright reactionaries or Revolutionary Committees or Radical Feminists).

I passionately hate violence, but am not a Dogmatic Pacifist, since I don't have Joan Baez's Correct Answer Machine in my head. I know I would kill an armed aggressor, in a concrete crisis situa-

political actions. I was amused and disgusted by the attempt of the New Deal gang to smear Professor Barnes as a right-wing reactionary. Barnes, in fact, was an advocate of progressive ideas in education, economics, politics, criminology, sociology and anthropology all his life but the New Deal Party Line had smeared him so thoroughly that some people have heard of him only as some cranky critic of Roosevelt and assume he was a Taft Republican or even a pro-Nazi. In fact Barnes supported most of the New Deal's domestic policies, and dissented from Liberal Dogma only in opposing the spread of American adventurism and militarism all over the world.

Charles Beard, another great historian of classic Liberal principles, agreed that Roosevelt deliberately lied to us in World War II and was smeared in the same way as Professor Barnes. This did not encourage me to have Faith in any Party Line, even if it called itself the modern, liberal, enlightened Party Line.

(I have never been convinced by the Holocaust Revisionists, however, simply because I have met a great many Holocaust eyewitnesses, or alleged eyewitnesses, in the past 40 years. Most of these people I seemingly met by accident, in both Europe and America. A conspiracy that has that many liars planted in that many places — or has always paid such special attention to me that it placed these liars where I would meet them — is a conspiracy too omnipotent and omnipresent, and therefore too metaphysical, for me to take seriously. A conspiracy so Godlike in its powers could, in principle, deceive us about anything and everything, and I wonder why the Holocaust Revisionists still believe that World War II occurred, or that any of past history ever happened.)

I reached 20 and became an employee (i.e. a robot) in the McCarthy Era and the Eisenhower years; my agnosticism became more total and so did my suspicion that politics is a carnival or buncombe (as Mencken once said). It seemed obvious to me that, while Senator Joe was a liar of stellar magnitude, a lot of the Liberals were lying their heads off, too, in attempts to hide their previous

fondness for Stalinism. That was something I, as a former Trotskyist, knew about by experience. In *bon ton* East Coast intellectual circles, before McCarthy, Stalinism was much more “permissible” than Trotskyism; it was almost chic. If I still regard the McCarthy witch-hunt of the 1950s as abominable, I also remember that some of the victims had engaged in similar witch-hunts against the Trotskyists in the early 1940s.

It is probably impossible for a social mammal to be totally “apolitical.” Even if I was allergic to Correct Answer Machines, my mind kept searching for some general social ideas that I could take more or less seriously. For a while I dropped in and out of colleges and in and out of jobs and searched earnestly for some pragmatic mock-up of “truth” without a Correct Answer Machine attached. And yet both Left and Right continued to appear intellectually bankrupt to me.

* * *

Coming from a working class family, I could never have much sympathy for the kind of Conservatism you find in America in this century. (I do have a certain fondness for the classic Liberal Conservatives of the 18th Century, especially Edmund Burke and John Adams.) After I married and had children to support, the abominations of the Capitalist system and the wormlike ignominy of the employee role began to seem like prisons to me; I was a poor candidate for the Conservative cause. On the other hand, the FDR Liberals, I was convinced, had lied about World War II; they first smeared and then blacklisted the historians who told the truth; and they had jumped on the Cold War bandwagon with ghoulish glees.

I was anti-war by “temperament” (whatever that means — early imprints or conditioning? Genes? I don’t know the exact cause of such a deep-seated and life-long bias). Marxist dogma seemed as stupid to me as Catholic dogma and as murderous as Hitlerism. I now thought of myself as an agnostic on principle. I was not going

Fuller’s computers would work best of all, but I still lack the Faith to proclaim that as dogma.

There is one principle (or prejudice) which makes anarchist and libertarian alternatives attractive to me where State Socialism is totally repugnant to my genes-or-imprints. I am committed to the maximization of the freedom of the individual and the minimization of coercion. I do not claim this goal is demanded by some ghostly or metaphysical “Natural Law,” but merely that it is the goal that I, personally, have *chosen* — in the Existentialist sense of choice. (In more occult language, such a goal is my True Will.) Everything I write, in one way or another, is intended to undermine the metaphysical and linguistic systems which seem to justify some Authorities in limiting the freedom of the human mind or in initiating coercion against the non-coercive.

...and then came what Charles Slack calls “the madness of the sixties.” I was an early, and enthusiastic, experimenter with LSD, peyote, magic mushrooms and any other compound that mutated consciousness. The result was that I became even more agnostic but less superior about it. What psychedelics taught me was that, just as theories and ideologies (maps and models) are human creations, not divine revelations, every perceptual grid or existential reality-tunnel is also a human creation — a work of art, consciously or unconsciously edited and organized by the individual brain.

I began serious study of other consciousness-altering systems, including techniques of yoga, Zen, Sufism and Cabala. I, alas, became a “mystic” of some sort, although still within the framework of existentialism-phenomenology-operationalism. But, then, Buddhism — the organized mystic movement I find least objectionable — is also existentialist, phenomenologist and operationalist...

Nietzsche’s concept of the Superhuman has at last become meaningful for me, although not in the elitist form in which he left it. I now think evolution is continuing and even accelerating: the human brain is evolving to a state that seems Superhuman compared to our previous history of domesticated primahood. My favorite

system, You won't have to pay "taxes" to support a Protection Racket that is actually oppressing rather than protecting you. You will only pay dues, where you think it prudent, to protection agencies that actually perform a service you want and need. In general, every commune or syndicate will make its own rules of the game, but the mutualist-individualist tradition holds that, by experience, most communes will choose the systems that maximize liberty and minimize coercion.

Being wary of Correct Answer Machines, I also studied and have given much serious consideration to other "Utopian" socio-economic theories. I am still fond of the system of Henry George (in which no rent is allowed, but free enterprise is otherwise preserved); but I also like the ideas of Silvio Gesell (who would also abolish rent and all taxes but one — a demurrage tax on currency, which should theoretically abolish interest by a different gimmick than the competing currencies of the mutualists.)

I also see possible merit in the economics of C.H. Douglas, who invented the National Dividend — lately re-emergent, somewhat mutated, as Theobald's Guaranteed Annual Wage and/or Friedman's Negative Income Tax. And I am intrigued by the proposal of Pope Leo XIII that workers should own the majority of stock in their companies.

Most interesting of recent Utopias to me is that of Buckminster Fuller in which money is abolished, and computers manage the economy, programmed with a prime directive to advantage all without disadvantaging any — the same goal sought by the mutualist system of basing society entirely on negotiated contract.

Since I don't have the Correct Answer, I don't know which of these systems would work best in practice. I would like to see them all tried in different places, just to see what would happen. (This multiple Utopia system was also suggested by Silvio Gesell, who was not convinced he had a Correct Answer Machine; that's another reason I like Gesell.) My own bias or hope or prejudice is that individualist-mutualist anarchism with some help from Bucky

to join any more "churches" or submit to anybody's damned Party Line.

My agnosticism was also intensified by such influences as further reading of Nietzsche; existentialism; phenomenology; General Semantics; and operational logic. There have remained major influences on me and I want to say a few words about each.

Nietzsche's philosophy of the Superman did not turn me on in youth; coming from the proletariat, I could not see myself as one of his aristocratic *Übermenschen*. On the other hand, his criticism of language, and of the metaphysical implications within languages, made a powerful impression on me; I still re-read one or two of his books every year, and get new semantic insights of them. He is, as he bragged, a hard nut to digest all at once.

Existentialism did not convert me back to Marxism (as it did to Sartre); it merely magnified my Nietzschean distrust of capitalized nouns and other abstractions, and strengthened my preferences for sensory-sensual ("existential") — modes of perception-conception. The phenomenologists — especially Husserl and the wild man of the bunch, Charles Fort — encouraged my tendency to suspect all general theories (religious, philosophical, even scientific) and to regard human sense experience as the primary datum.

My polemics against Materialist Fundamentalism in *The New Inquisition* and the Aristotelian mystique of "natural law" (shared by Thomists and some Libertarians) in my *Natural Law; or, Don't Put a Rubber On Your Willy* are both based on this existentialist-phenomenologist choice that I will "believe" in human experience, with all its muddle and uncertainty, more than I will ever "believe" in capitalized Abstractions and "general principles."

General Semantics, as formulated by Korzybski, increased this anti-metaphysical bias in me. Korzybski also stressed that the best sensory data (as revealed by instruments that refine the senses) indicates that we live in a non-Aristotelian, non-Euclidean and non-Newtonian continuum. I have practiced for 30 years the exercises Korzybski recommends to break down Aristotelian-

Euclidean-Newtonian ideas buried in our daily speech and retrain myself to perceive in ways compatible with what our instruments indicate about actuality.

Due to Korzybski's neurolinguistic training devices, it is now "natural" for me to think beyond either/or logic, to perceive the unity of observer/observed, to regard "objects" as human inventions abstracted from a holistic continuum. Many physicists think I have studied more physics than I actually have; I merely neurologically internalized the physics that I do know.

Operational logic (as formulated by the American physicist Percy Bridgman and recreated by the Danish physicist Neils Bohr as the Copenhagen Interpretation of science) was the approach to modern science that appealed to me in the context of the above working principles. The Bridgman-Bohr approach rejects as "meaningless" any statements that do not refer to concrete experiences of human beings. (Bridgman was influenced by Pragmatism, Bohr by Existentialism.) Operationalism also regards all proposed "laws" only as maps or models that are useful for a certain time. Thus, Operationalism is the one "philosophy of science" that warns us, like Nietzsche and Husserl, only to use models where they're useful and never to elevate them into Idols or dogmas.

Although I dislike labels, if I had to label my attitude I would accordingly settle for existentialist-phenomenologist-operationalist, as long as no one of those three terms is given more prominence than the other two.

In the late '50s, I began to read widely in economic "science" (or speculation) again, a subject that had bored the bejesus out of me since I overthrew the Marxist Machine in my brain ten years earlier. I became fascinated with a number of alternatives — or "excluded middles" — that transcend the hackneyed debate between monopoly Capitalism and totalitarian Socialism. My favorite among these alternatives was, and to some extent still is, the individualist-mutualist anarchism of Proudhon, Josiah Warren, S.P. Andrews, Lysander Spooner and Benjamin Tucker. I do not have a

real Faith that this system would work out as well in practice as it sounds in theory, but as theory it still seems to me one of the best ideas I ever encountered.

This form of anarchism is called "individualist" because it regards the absolute liberty of the individual as a supreme goal to be attained; it is called "mutualist" because it believes such liberty can only be attained by a system of mutual consent, based on contracts that are to the advantage of all. In this Utopia, free competition and free cooperation are both encouraged; it is assumed persons and groups will decide to compete or to cooperate based on the concrete specifics of each case. (This appeals to my "existentialism" again, you see.)

Land monopolies are discouraged in individualist-mutualist anarchism by abolishing State laws granting ownership to those who neither occupy nor use the land; "ownership," it is predicted, will then only be contractually recognized where the "owner" actually occupies and used the land, but not where he charges "rent" to occupy or use it. The monopoly on currency, granted by the State, is also abolished, and any commune, group, syndicate, etc., can issue its own competing currency; it is claimed that this will drive interest down to approximately zero. With rent at zero and interest near zero, it is argued that the alleged goal of socialism (abolition of exploitation) will be achieved by free contract, without coercion or totalitarian Statism. That is, the individualist-mutualist model argues that the land and money monopolies are the "bugger factors" that prevent Free Enterprise from producing the marvelous results expected by Adam Smith. With land and money monopolies abolished, it is predicted that competition (where there is no existential motive for cooperation) and cooperation (where this is recognized as being to the advantage of all) will prevent other monopolies from arising.

Since monopolized police forces are notoriously graft-ridden and underlie the power of the state to bully and coerce, competing protection systems will be available in an individualist-mutualist