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Teen Age Lust and Far-from-Equilibrium Dynamics

July 31, 2017 | by Guy Immerman | Filed Under: Essays, Text&Context | 3 Comments

The History of Timelessness —

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The first time I heard about Jeffrey Epstein it had to do with reading glasses. There was this rich guy, I heard, who had built a huge house not far from Santa Fe, I was told, and the staff had been instructed to stock each of the thirty plus rooms with two pairs of reading glasses, one for Epstein and one for his domestic partner. Epstein chose the location for its proximity to Santa Fe Institute <<https://www.santafe.edu/>> (SFI), the influential think tank that had been founded in the 1980s by the physicist Murray Gell-Mann, a Nobel laureate. Epstein, you see, has a mad love for cutting-edge science, and, in fact, considers himself in many ways a contributor to the field. I heard about the house with the reading glasses years before Epstein got himself jailed in Florida for having sex with underage girls (this happened in 2005), and over a decade before his name would pop up in court documents also naming our current president for this same offence. But then I realized I probably experienced a much more direct and intimate connection with Epstein myself when I was a teenager. Well, I can't swear to it, but as the wretchedness of the current regime engulfs the entire nation the possibility haunts me more and more.

I love this notion that concepts are born, live for a while, and then pass away, like everything else, into the long night of what has past. The concept of timeless truths itself, for example—by which I mean the idea that truths exist in an eternal, immaterial or ideal realm above the world and are immune to change—arguably arrived some 5000 years ago, spread quickly like a virus of thought. Due to its outsized dynamism, this idea began to steadily transform a collection of locally situated agrarian cultures into the hyper-dynamic global monoculture of today...and to reduce, as a by-product, the collapse of living systems worldwide, along with a round of species extinction unlike anything the planet has ever seen. Today this problematic idea of timeless truths may well be heading for the ditch, dragging in tow, one can only hope, all the monsters it gave birth too.

The source of the possible connection between Epstein and I has to do with a girl—K, I will call her. K had a fierce presence, a full, round face and large green eyes, and, for reasons I do not understand, she could not resist the call of the erotic, and surrendered to it with complete abandon whenever it arose, as if salvation could be found there. I was alarmed at that time by how far K was willing to go without restraint or thought of consequence—without any thought at all, actually—but I was also ready to walk through walls to be with her that way. Entering her apartment building under the gaze of the impassive doormen my heart would thump so hard I was sure it was audible. Crossing that mausoleum-like lobby to the elevators I became fully transparent, deep in the trance of the instinctive. That we were young was a part of it—we were being called upon to actualize the instinctual capacities of the body all over again on behalf of the species. Cultural forces were at work too—this was the mid-1970s, a time still infused with the transgressive imperatives of the 1960s, despite the fact that the party had already moved on. It was not clear at the time, but in the back rooms of Max's Kansas City and at concert halls around downtown NYC we were chasing ghosts—the action was shifting back in the direction of wealth, privilege, the boredom of fixed, extractive hierarchies. Also unknown to me, or to anyone else at that time, is that a man teaching mathematics at K's expensive private school would soon shift to a career on Wall Street, and would then quickly blossom into the billionaire investor, science philanthropist and devotee of sex with underage girls known to many today as Jeffrey Epstein.

Various thinkers I've written about here have linked the idea of timeless truth to the birth of metal coinage (David Graeber is especially good about this). Coinage gave people a direct experience of transcendent value—how the value of a cow or a goat or a sharp axe could be quantified in an abstract realm above the fixed, localized world and its situated set of particular relations. The abstract aspect of monetary values pointed in the direction of timeless truths—truths that were not just true today, but true everywhere and always. Inspiring mathematicians and philosophers first, these ideas began to exert a broad popular allure. The source for this allure is quite obvious: if all things are time-bound that means we all must one day die, and we do not like the idea of dying one bit. And so, before long, this idea of a realm of timeless, transcendent value morphed in the popular imagination into an actual place we could access after dying, provided we have been good boys and girls—heaven, in other words, the seat of angels and of the good father with the long white beard. Such ideas also inspired the invention of material objects—machines and contraptions—designed to forever deliver identical results. We become affectively invested in the reliable certainty of the light switch on the wall doing its thing to the dark room, to the comforting cause-and-effect linearity of the phone number on speed dial connecting us with dad on father's day, and to the quadratic equations that generate reliable, consistent results—these small certainties whisper to us in the voice of immortality.

With K there was no issue of fidelity, nor any pretense of a table arrangement. I never knew at all where I stood. How could one know? There was little talk, just a semi-mute signaling through the flames. When the right conditions presented themselves, our engagement would unfold, and this went on for several years before ending without definite closure. What haunts me most of all is the notion that they must have connected, these two beings, Epstein and K, despite the age difference (or, indeed, because of it), which nobody paid much attention to back then. I have no proof at all but it seems unlikely to me that a man so interested in sex with girls could not have noticed K; and it seems unlikely too that K would have been anything but intrigued by such interest.

Among those who study science and technology it is generally accepted that science is never about truth so much as it is about who has the resources to enforce certain perspectives. Since Isaac Newton first served as the exchequer of England modern physics has been closely allied with money, and the reason for this has to do with a desire for control that hinges on issues of causality and the temporal. Newton's remarkable discovery of laws governing the interactions of matter and energy were time reversible, for example—they could operate just as well describing events moving backwards in time. In the "clockwork universe" Newton described one could aspire to a kind of deterministic control over the future, and that, of course, was perceived to be very good news. If the radical developments shared in by Einstein and Heisenberg in the twentieth century challenged this dream of control on one level—with our limited perspectives there is only so much we were capable of understanding about the very large and the very small—relativity and quantum mechanics also re-affirmed the primacy of mathematical laws as a perfect mirror of nature. And so it remained possible to image the initial conditions of all matter and energy could be known to some being not as limited as we are, if not God perhaps a super computer. But off in the corner of the palace of contemporary science lurks the equally radical development of thermodynamics, a bastard stepchild who shadows the contemporary scientific mind

with the horrific notion of entropy, and the unsettling implication that time is not reversible at all but, like an arrow, moves only in one direction.

A few years ago I would find out on Facebook that K had died. She was still quite young. Details were not forthcoming but my sense is that substance abuse was involved, and a long, difficult decline. With the shift to Wall Street and his philanthropic engagement with cutting-edge scientific research Epstein, of course, travelled an opposite trajectory...at least until he didn't. The images of Epstein facing the cameras after his conviction are deeply moving, at least to me, due to the horror in his eyes. I do not think any of the glittering personalities who had attended his lavish and audaciously transgressive soirees in Manhattan in the 1990s, or the annual Billionaire's Dinner hosted by the Epstein-supported Edge publication—Jeff Bezos of Amazon and Sergei Brin of Google, not to mention Rupert Murdoch and scores of leading scientists in all the disciplines—made the trek to the Florida penitentiary to pay him a visit during the thirteen-months of his incarceration. I very much doubt his old friend our current president would have been taking his fall. But before we let this fact move us to tears, let us not forget the lasting impact Epstein's actions had on scores of vulnerable young women.

The close relationships Epstein cultivated with leading physicists and theorists only underscores how deeply entangled contemporary research is with finance capitalism in its neoliberal mode. Viewed in this context, the issue of time links the domains of politics and physics to the technological dynamism that now rages like fire. The situated, embodied fact of death, and its slow, inexorable approach, is legitimately terrifying, but, of course, pushing it away or repressing it only makes things worse. If you are a scientist and you come to understand this issue as a highly political one, you might want ally yourself with a good political philosopher. This is the step physicist Lee Smolin <<http://leesmolin.com/>> took in 2006 when he began to work with the political philosopher Roberto Unger <<http://www.robertounger.com/en/>> on the politics of time. Together these two thinkers have been exploring the idea of a "singular universe" based in a non-emergent temporality, and opposed to the "many worlds" theories currently in vogue. In many worlds theory the paradoxes of quantum wave function collapse are resolved by embracing the idea that all possible alternative histories and futures are equally real. Unger and Smolin emphasize instead that, whatever else may be true on the quantum level, we nevertheless live in a time-bound universe that is steadily and irreversibly evolving from one state to another. To Unger and Smolin even physical laws evolve in time, shifting from what they are today toward some new set of intricate alignments, and mathematics does not provide us with a perfect mirror of nature. The death-fearing mind recoils from such ideas—even if mathematical certainties shift on a cosmological time scale of millions of years, the domain of the timeless has been undercut, and this cannot be tolerated. Our affective bonds with idea of a-temporal truth run deep, and the effort to locate the One True Story and a unified natural law is written in blood and backed up by money.

As I conceded at the outset, a sexual encounter between K and Epstein may never have happened—devoid of anything resembling evidence I am guided solely by a sickening "6-degrees" intuition. Perhaps it's simply how haunted I remain by the last time I saw K, which was during the most challenging portion of my life. In my late twenties I was living in Ft. Green in Brooklyn and working for a financial software company writing technical manuals—the 1980s were unfolding along in a direction I could not find interesting. At the end of a long week, dressed in coat and tie, loaded down with documents I carried in a satchel on my shoulder, I caught a glimpse of her in the crowd on the platform as I stepped onto the D-Train, and when I glanced back a moment later she was looking at me with a little smile and I said nothing and the doors closed. Cowardice? Exhaustion? The bewilderment and closure of my own history of trauma? The moment reminds me that regret is all about time—specifically how the arrow of time means we can never take it back. Regret is humbling, and therefore healthy, today most of all. Regardless of our politics we are all implicated anyway. Our good intentions mean very little. We are participants in the trashing of the planet, and we cannot stop because we do not see clearly what is driving us. Herein lies the value of sorcery as a metaphor for our situation. We believe ourselves to be in control—but this is because we're in a spell. I'm including myself in this, and K too across the platform too, and also all the business visionaries attending the annual Billionaire's Dinner, and the very serious philosophers of computation, and the complex systems researchers attending too—all of us are stumbling blindly toward the cliff.

And what is the source of the spell that has us so firmly in its grip? An innocuous sorcery object we interact with all the time—money, the coin—that generates a mode of knowing within which its own influence becomes invisible...a self-cloaking sorcery object. In a time when coinage—the dynamic forces of money and the financial—fuel all of our various problems (in the domains of politics, the environment, social justice, etc.) is it too much to think the answers to our collective viability as a species involves this ideational aspect of money—its effects on thought and the secret promise it seems to make? The coin, we come to see, activates psychological and social dynamics that have drawn us

inexorably out of balance into a kind of hyper-dynamic planetary death spiral. And yet the ratchet-like mechanism itself is relatively simple, suggesting the beneficial changes that could immediately unfold were we to decide it is time to make money a servant rather than our demonic master.

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Comments

1.

Michael Elias says:
August 1, 2017 at 3:30 pm

This is a terrific article. Personal, challenging; it deserves study and contemplation. I think it makes a real contribution to contemporary thought. Congratulations, Mr. Zimmerman!

2.

Jeff LeBeau says:
August 1, 2017 at 11:09 pm

very thought provoking...atoms in a void...regret.. vision, mortality,cultural trajectory, and inertia from a counter culture in transition...trance like passion in service of fulfilling what?
and the politics of time... wow! very thought provoking, and echoing Michael's sentiments above-
personal and challenging..which in turn has challenged me.. Kudos to Zimmerman!

3.

Michael Ginn says:
August 7, 2017 at 9:52 pm

I found this to be a very moving and stimulating article. I have endured depressing dinner table conversations with those who promulgate the idea that "all possible alternative histories and futures are equally real." Such advocates are usually on the Right of the political spectrum. it is therefore heartening to read a defense of thermodynamics and the concept of entropy. Your view chimes with my own that, in the lonely hours of darkness, when the distractions of the day have subsided, our regrets are mostly about the things we did not do, and less often about the things we did do.

Speak Your mind

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