

Forcing, Unforced Associations and Paradigms: A Commentary

Onel Brooks

I

The conversation between Martin Cohen and Richard House around the former's book, *Paradigm Shift* (Cohen, 2015; Cohen & House, 2021) is concerned with how we, overvaluing science and expertise, have little ability to think about and discuss them and the claims made in their names. My reflections on the issues they raise circle notions of forcing and unforced associations. These reflections begin with concerns about what we are doing to the planet, the other people around us and ourselves, in order to consume more, better exploit and make more money, and how Western science is implicated in putting us and keeping us on this is path to disaster. Something is said briefly about science and the dominant position that science has been in, in modern and 'analytical' philosophy. An alternative to forcing people and nature to do what we want, forcing them to comply, is also touched upon. Finally, there is an attempt to explicitly say something about how the sort of discussion Martin and Richard have entered into has important implications for psychotherapy.

So, first some comments about how we fail to see and think, because we are 'held captive', as Ludwig Wittgenstein tells us, by a picture of things in which science and expertise will save us, if we will only believe, follow and not question those who really know.

Graham Parkes lays out some related issues well when he writes:

When capitalism goes global it becomes incompatible with the basis on which it depends for its growth: a planet that is finite. When seen from a global perspective, which includes consideration for the other species

and natural phenomena with whom we share the biosphere, the capitalist enterprise has been disastrously destructive. The wisdom of the ancients that we have considered, and indeed many great thinkers from Plato to Marx and Nietzsche, would regard the whole system as inimical to human flourishing and based on a false understanding of what makes for a fulfilled human life. (Parkes, 2019, p. 57)

Of course it is possible for someone with a science degree or two to claim that we do not have 'enough evidence', or enough of 'the right sort of evidence' yet, to prove that global warming is a serious threat, or the degree to which it is a threat. We may need, they might argue, to wait until there is more 'scientific' 'data' or 'evidence'. There is room here for evaluation and interpretation and deciding, which are not the sorts of things that are highlighted in much talk about science, but are clearly part of science; and perhaps we should not assume that there will still be humans around to read and interpret 'the evidence' if we just wait for 'the evidence' to be conclusive and for all the relevant experts to agree.

This waiting for the experts to agree and pronounce is rightly highlighted and challenged by Martin and Richard, but how did we get here? How, for example, did we come to think that love, including the passionate madness that may be between a mother and child or two 'lovers', needs to be, and can be, reduced to and explained by neurobiology? Hence, Esch and Stefano (2005, online) write in 'The neurobiology of love', 'Love is a complex neurobiological phenomenon, relying on trust, belief, pleasure and reward activities within the brain, i.e., limbic processes'. They go on to tell us that 'love, pleasure, and lust have a stress-reducing and health-promoting potential, since they carry the ability to heal or facilitate

beneficial motivation and behavior’ (Esch & Stefano, abstract).

The question is not whether there is or should be something called the ‘biology of love’ or whether it can be informative. What is said here raises questions about what ‘love’ is in these sorts of studies. Do we see that love in tragedies, for example, is health-promoting and ‘stress-reducing’, or do we suspect that ‘love’ has been cleaned up and made logical, already taken over by people who like to make things ‘nice’ and ‘neat’, and that they want to leave out or look past some of the more unsettling versions of love? The argument is not that neurobiology does not have anything to do with love. The question is how did we get here? How have we come to look to scientists and experts to tell us about the neurobiology and chemistry of love, as if this makes love more real, solid, and somehow ‘proves it’? How did science become so dominant in our time and place, in our universities and in our minds?

I spent or – depending on how you look at it, your perspective or system of belief – misspent my time as a young man preoccupied with philosophy. I was told a number of times that I should abandon philosophy for something more lucrative, straightforward and less mysterious, such as business studies or computing (and the list is long, because most things seem to be more lucrative, straightforward and less mysterious than philosophy). I was also admonished that only ‘mad people’ studied philosophy and psychology, and that to take this path would put me in great danger of being driven mad (unless, of course, as the person addressing me tended to insinuate, it was too late and I had long parted company with whatever sanity I may have possessed). I was told, too, that philosophy was something that the upper or middle classes studied, not an interest for a working-class black boy, who if he were ‘sane’ and ‘rational’ would regard his time at university as an opportunity to train for something that would get him a job, because philosophy is clearly strange and useless, and everyone knows that it does not help you to get a job. It does not help you to fit into the

‘workforce’. Whilst studying philosophy, I was asked to come clean about having gone to boarding school, and not believed when I said that I went to the local comprehensive school. I was also quizzed about my father’s occupation. Surely he was a managing director somewhere and not a factory worker, as I claimed? It was hard not to have a sense that I was making a bit of a mess by being in philosophy: that, for some people at least, there is an order of things, a profile of who did philosophy that I did not quite fit and could not be forced into.

Philosophy may be a strange subject (depending on how you look at it and what you think you are looking at); it is an interesting and informative one (if you know how to look and listen). In the seventeenth century, Descartes’ announcement, promise or rallying cry (depending on how you hear it) to make ‘us’ (who? – Western European people or men, or learned men, or the superior upper and middle classes ...?) ‘masters and owners of nature’ (‘nature’ conceived as ‘female’, ‘primitive’, there to be used) heralds the unparalleled dominance of science as a means of helping us to improve ‘our’ ‘estate’ (Descartes, 1977, p. 46). Notions of ownership, property, wealth and exploitation are already clearly visible here. Science here is something that helps us to force nature and other people to do what we want. Science has much to do with rationality. To not accept what scientists say is to risk being regarded as ‘irrational’. For some, there might be no rationality outside the system of Western science (only what is ‘primitive’ or ‘backward’), and for some there might be nothing outside of global capitalism (only fantasies and anarchy).

When in the early part of the twentieth century, G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell inaugurated analytical philosophy, they were clearly champions of science – including mathematics – and common sense, and in opposition to the nonsense and mystification coming from other philosophers, especially those who, influenced by Hegel, seemed to be so caught up in the notion of the world being interrelated (Hacker, 1997). Some of us, ironically, are now quite

caught up with the notion that the world is interrelated.

Some of what kept me interested in philosophy was what I thought I learned from Ludwig Wittgenstein and the people concerned with his work. This includes the idea that ‘rationality’ is relative to a set of social practices, to what ‘one’ does, and, therefore, so is ‘irrationality’ or ‘madness’. Justification, then, comes to an end somewhere, and at some point we may fall silent, or say ‘This is what I do’. This emphasises the link between what we say and what we do, and undermines the pretension that we can continue to give justifications endlessly, rather than say something about how we tend to act.

And what could be ‘richer’, more important, less mysterious, more worth doing than to be engaged in discussions about belief systems, perspectives, paradigms, ideologies, justification, the line between sense and nonsense, the division between science and non-science? What could be more important than beginning to think about how systems (of belief, paradigms, ideologies) enable and keep us prisoner?

Inside of the universities it would be easy to think that whatever philosophy is, it is the property of Europe and North America. Certainly we were introduced to the Ancient Greeks and the notion of flourishing, but little was said about philosophy in India and China, for example. They had ‘religions’. Outside of the university, I pursued an interest in Chinese philosophy, which led me to Tai Chi, although I was told that Tai Chi was too arcane, a pursuit for ‘hippies’ and ‘old people’, not an activity for a ‘real man’, certainly not for young black men who are working class. In the late 1980s, a young black resident in a therapeutic community came into the kitchen whilst I was making a quiche to show me a book that stated that real men did not eat quiche or practise Tai Chi. I thought the book was tongue in cheek: I am not sure that he saw it that way. I think he wanted me to be a man who is quick to force, and meet force with force.

But how could I resist, after being told that Tai Chi was about becoming ‘free from ego and delusion’? I did not understand what was meant, but I was interested. After being meticulously taught the Tai Chi hand form, the exacting teacher tells me that the form ‘does not exist’. I began to understand that this means that there are many ‘forms’, and it is pointless to squabble over ‘the’ form; that insisting on following the form or system I had learnt, going from *a* to *b* to *c*, just as I had been taught, is to be a laughably bad student of Tai Chi; that the form opens doors, shows possibilities, and that the most important thing was to learn to follow what is unfolding around you. Tai Chi seemed to be related to what I had read in Nietzsche and phenomenology in that it emphasised openness, being in the experience, and the cultivation of the capacity to both attend to things and let them be. For, above all, I was encouraged to abandon the temptation to meet force with force, to force things, to insist that things must happen as I want them to happen; I was urged to be more attentive, instead, to what was happening. I take this as a good thing to urge or encourage, and not unrelated to the practice of psychotherapy.

Forms and systems enable and can keep us imprisoned. Western philosophy and that living Daoist philosophy, as I have been interested in them, both seem to lead to questions about systems, patterns, habits, how not to get stuck in them, how our intelligence, curiosity and creativity may be casualties of our loyalty to the system (of belief, paradigm, ideology). And as a psychotherapist, who is particularly interested in psychoanalysis and philosophy, and dares to be teacher and supervisor for other practitioners in the field of ‘mental health’, the enabling power of systems of beliefs, ways of seeing, ideas, theories and models and how they threaten to imprison and rob us of our intelligence, curiosity and creativity, seems to be ever present. What lies outside of these systems or paradigms? Do we ask this enough? Is ‘outside’ in this case something like being in space, where there is no atmosphere, and no human can breath unaided?

II

As well as the notion of a paradigm – a typical example or pattern or model or set of concepts, or way of thinking that sets the standard for what is to be regarded as legitimate, justified, and acceptable – and the notion of paradigm shift – the idea of a shift in the way that we see or think that amounts or leads to a significant shift in how we understand, make sense and what we do – much is said in the discussion between Martin and Richard about the conservatism of science when this is ‘normal science’. ‘Normal science’ is science that is in the dominant paradigm, loyal to it, deriving its legitimacy from it. For those inside it, this is what ‘normal’ is, this is what ‘science’ is. ‘Abnormal’ or ‘revolutionary’ ‘science’, then, is work outside of the dominant paradigm, that does not take for granted, and so challenges what is current and dominant.

If ‘abnormal’ or ‘revolutionary’ science questions, challenges, looks at alternatives, does not stay within the paradigm that is currently dominant, such scientists, and the people who are interested in what such scientists have to say, are always in danger of being thought of as ‘a bit mad’, ‘quacks’, ‘loonies’. Over time, however, some of these people who say ‘strange’ things, when they are listened to with ears and ways of thinking formed by the dominant paradigm, come to be acknowledged as ahead of their time, rather than ‘dunces’ who should at best be humiliated at the back of the class, if not thrown out altogether. ‘Normal science’, then, tends to be a very conservative affair, coming from being schooled in how things happen to be now, supporting keeping us thinking as we are, against novelty. Martin and Richard give us a picture of this sort of science as easily falling into the hands of the elite, and becoming a ‘tool’ of those who would continue to oppress us, using rhetoric and propaganda that appeals to ‘science’ and ‘the evidence’ to support views and approaches that are far from straightforward, or the only contenders. On this view, some sort of research is not carried out, ‘findings’ that do not lead to the desired

outcome are promptly lost or held back, dismissed, regarded as obviously flawed.

Surely if you are a scientist or researcher, or for that matter anyone engaged in any kind of enquiry or practice, and you stay within the bounds of what is established, what you have been taught, having little interest in how what is established came to be so, you wittingly or unwittingly help to keep things the way they are? And if being a scientist or any other expert means that you are rewarded with status and money, there is less reason to rock this comfortable boat. In the 1960s, for example, we were still being told that smoking was good for us, helped us to take in more oxygen, made us slim and attractive, and this was supposedly backed by ‘doctors’ and ‘scientists’. Whether they were all real doctors and scientists is not the point, so much as the claim that where there is money and other sorts of gains involved, such as power and status, you are probably able to find someone who can be called a ‘scientist’ or ‘doctor’ who will support what you have to say. That ‘scientists’ say that something is supported by the science is not necessarily a claim that trumps all other comments.

III

Of course one of the themes in this conversation between Martin and Richard is the current coronavirus pandemic, the baleful injunctions to ‘follow the science’ and not be ‘stupid’, the obvious panic of those who ‘know’ that we are to embrace ‘the science’ and often sound as if they would like to (and sometimes admit to wanting to) force vaccines into the arms of people who are suspicious, protesting, concerned that governments never fail to take advantages of being able to declare a ‘state of emergency’, and force through much of what they would be unable to get away with at other times.

Martin and Richard claim that there is something worrying and at least uncomfortable about how the media dealt with this debate, or rather that the lack of debate is very much what

is disturbing. They often state or indicate that in what presents itself as a democracy, the official media has done much to make sure that the messages heard are in line with and support the Government's position, designating those who dissent as 'anti-vaxxers', dismissing them as at best misguided and naive, and at worst dangerous lunatics. This has been, and still is, a case of people talking at cross purposes and shouting louder when they feel that *their* message has not been received, which encourages the people who have been shouted at to shout even louder. Who can say 'conversation' or 'discussion' here? There are people who insist on everyone 'following the science', and even being made to do so. There are people who have much to say about vaccinations, the risk involved with them and the very idea of forcing people to take them. There are people who say that some knowledge of science and its history seems to be lacking in this discussion, and comments that state or imply that it is a mystery why many black and other 'minority ethnic' people might be slow or hesitant to take the vaccines offered just indicates how ignorant and lacking in sensitivity the persons making such comments are. To say that someone is 'misinformed' is often an indication that they do not share your paradigm or belief system, and this word is being used as a term of abuse. Trust, and the inability to listen, seem to be where the difficulties lie.

Points germane to these matters are made well in Martin's book, and discussed in the conversation between Martin and Richard. Neither of them seems to be 'against science' generally – which is just the thing that is said in order to disregard whatever someone is saying. They are against overvaluing science and being unable to listen to any comments that do not seem to take it that science must be obeyed and we must present ourselves as if we behave like 'scientists'.

They are in good company here. They mention Paul Feyerabend and Thomas Kuhn. It is difficult not to begin to create a list of philosophers who are concerned with our overvaluing science, our failures to think about

the obvious disaster of taking a technological view of the world, our seeing it and ourselves as 'standing resources' for us to use. These philosophers seem to shout and rant, present themselves as prophets who will not be listened to because it is as if they speak in a 'foreign tongue' when those around them are all too happily schooled in the delusion that science and technology are our saviours. They try to warn us that on this path, we are sleepwalking to our doom. (We might smugly claim that of course they do not offer any 'scientific proof' for these sorts of assertions, and think that we are being clever.)

I think that Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard all belong in this group. For some of us, they are among some of the most important thinkers of the last two centuries. Although I will not try to provide support for this here, I find it hard to think that Wittgenstein, with his notion of 'seeing as' and 'language games', was not a major influence on Thomas Kuhn's thinking, and that Nietzsche's remarks about perspectives (often referred to as his perspectivism) and celebration of polytheism (as in *Gay Science*, section 143) and the abundance of possibilities for a life, did not have some influence on Paul Feyerabend. It is clear that Feyerabend and Kuhn were both familiar with Wittgenstein's work.

Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Wittgenstein are philosophers who warn us about how our over-confidence in science, technology, and the thinking and attitude that goes along with this, lead us to disaster because this leads us away from 'wonder', 'mystery', our sense that the world and our lives are 'sacred' gifts. (However, for some of us, they mean little or nothing, and the only thing worth repeating is that people really must 'follow the science', and that if you do not want to take the vaccine, you are rejecting science so you should never use electricity, since this is also something given to us by science.)

IV

Sometimes I am asked how we can make someone who refuses to listen to any arguments or comments about racism or sexism, and what they do to people, listen and take them seriously: how can we stop this person just pretending to listen but going away from the conversation with the same views he or she came to it with? I am sometimes asked how we can get people who refuse to take the vaccine to take it. Similarly, I am asked how it is possible to get the people who are caught up in the ‘brainwashing’ and ‘delusions’ supported by the Government to see that they are being duped.

The sort of response I like to give – if anyone stays awake long enough for me to get to the end of it – involves the opening scene of Plato’s *Republic*. Socrates and his friend Glaucon are at a festival and are intending to return to Athens when a group of their friends stop them and tell them that they cannot go home, pointing out that they, the group of friends, outnumber the two of them. Socrates and Glaucon are told that they must either prove that they are stronger than the group or they will have to stay: that is, do what they have been told to do. Socrates says, ‘Isn’t there another alternative – namely, that we persuade you to let us go?’. What comes back is ‘But could you persuade us, if we won’t listen?’ (Plato, 1997: 973 ((327 c))).

How do you persuade someone, or get them to look in another way, if they refuse to listen or are too frightened to do so? Do you try to force, insist, violate, dominate, make them do what you know is ‘for their own good’, or do you try to engage in a conversation that is very unlikely to lead to consensus and a clear plan? If philosophy and psychotherapy are not about force and getting people to do what you want them to, what are they about? Force or ‘brute force’ is what they teach you to abandon in the Chinese philosophy that is alive in Tai Chi. You are urged to listen to the ‘force’ coming from others. Might we listen to what others seem to believe so completely, so forcefully? If so, might we begin to hear anxieties, assumptions,

convictions, aspirations and senses of being disappointed, dispossessed, distressed?

It is often the case that the exchanges between people in this pandemic seem to be about ‘brute force’ meeting ‘brute force’, people getting more entrenched in their systems and positions, rather than attempts to listen to why the other person is so forceful, so convinced, so knowing. Sometimes we seem to be without memory or imagination when speaking to others. For example, someone might set out what role ‘science’, including medicine, has played in racism and oppression. They might begin with the notion of ‘drapetomania’ in 1851: the idea that black slaves who ran away from slavery did this because they had some sort of illness inside them. They may cite this as an example of how ‘science’ and ‘medicine’ have a history of finding ‘illness’ in groups of people, and so helping to divert attention from the terrible conditions some people face. Science here supports what is dominant, and justifies practices that are widespread. In Tuskegee, the United States government ‘observed’ poor black men with syphilis, seeing what happens if this condition is left untreated. The men were promised ‘free medical care’ but were not even told that they were diagnosed with syphilis. Then there is ‘scientific’ or ‘biological’ racism; there is the fact that modern gynaecology is based on horrific experiments performed on enslaved black women in the nineteenth century; the fact that some ‘scientists’ were complicit with Nazi and apartheid regimes. Drug companies made illegal trial of their products in India and Africa, and in spite of their ‘ethical codes’ and ‘ethics boards’, psychologists complied with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), using their ‘scientific knowledge’ to devise torture in Guantanamo Bay. If in the face of this litany of reasons to be wary of governments, science and demands that sacrifices are made for ‘the greater good’, someone begins to talk about ‘following the science’, it would be hard to feel that they are listening at all.

However, this list of some of the sources of mistrust in science, medicine and governments

is not offered as some sort of conclusive argument that forces anyone to a particular conclusion. I have had my vaccinations, wear my mask and follow guidelines not because I am sure that all of this is right and the only way, but I accept that it is a way of responding when so many seem to be so fiercely confident about being in the right and knowing what others should do. And people I know and love have been incapacitated or killed by the virus; people I am close to have buried many in this pandemic. Arguments and justifications can go on for a long time. We do not always have the time. Taking the vaccine or not taking the vaccine is one kind of argument. Some people have already had their third vaccination, as I write; yet others who are more vulnerable and poorer have not even had one. It does look very much like the ‘richest’ rather than the ‘fittest’ will survive.

V

The theme of being too confident about our knowing comes up early in the discussion between Martin and Richard, towards the end of the first page and on the second page. We do not pause enough at the idea that with our human mind and brain, we have now through science come to understand our human mind and brain. Perhaps we do not need to dwell on the ‘arrogance’ or hubris of wanting to think of science and ourselves in this way.

This is the sort of confidence about where we are, what we know and what we can do that might come easily to those inside paradigms, belief systems or ideologies. I would like to attach as a footnote to this discussion the idea that being less certain about things and more attentive to paradigms and paradigm shifts might be crucial for psychotherapists, who, I think, might worry more about Kuhn than they do. For when we are so certain, we may be speaking from inside a paradigm, taking too much for granted. We may be too caught up in how our way of thinking enables us, but without interest in how it may imprison and limit us. Perhaps breaking out of or subverting or

challenging the ‘normal’ discourse and finding our way around in ‘abnormal’ discourse might be regarded as close to the heart of what some of us try to do when we practise as psychotherapists.

Richard Rorty (1980, p. 320), following Kuhn’s distinction between ‘normal’ and ‘revolutionary’ science, writes of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ discourse. ‘Normal’ science is the practice of solving problems against a consensus on what counts as a good explanation, and what it would mean for a problem to be solved. It is when we are agreed on what it is to be rational, how to evaluate what is said, how to decide what is relevant. ‘Revolutionary’ science is taking place when a new paradigm for explaining, thinking and treating the world is being introduced. ‘Abnormal’ discourse is what happens when someone joins the discussion but is ignorant of the conventions or orthodoxies, or who sets them aside or challenges or undermines them. (For example, the child or adolescent’s voice?) ‘Normal’ discourse has much to do with staying inside orthodoxy and comfortable sameness. ‘Abnormal’ or ‘revolutionary’ discourse has more to do with letting difference in, in not being clear what is what and who must be listened to, with encounters with foreignness.

Psychotherapy trainings may behave as if they are teaching and championing a ‘normal discourse’ around some model of the mind, development and behaviour, but when we are with clients and we have some idea of the variety of approaches that have adherents, we may quickly realise that the situation is ripe for ‘abnormal or revolutionary discourse’ and a ‘confusion of tongues’. If we are trained in a certain way, live and work in some paradigm or theoretical model and we do not make space for ‘abnormal’ or ‘revolutionary’ discourse, are we guilty of using ‘brute force’ to keep people in ‘normal’ discourse, according to the theories, paradigms and ideologies that we act as agents for? Evidence-based practice might make more sense when we have the agreement and orthodoxy of ‘normal’ discourse, but perhaps ‘abnormal’ discourse is crucial to what we do,

and are trying to make room for, outside of the paradigms that easily come to dominate us.

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SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“I want to defend society and its inhabitants from all ideologies, science included”

Paul K. Feyerabend (1924–1994)