



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2008

Seeking an expanded framework: some fundamental reflections

Steineck, Raji C

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-6284>

Book Section

Originally published at:

Steineck, Raji C (2008). Seeking an expanded framework: some fundamental reflections. In: Johnson, D H. The Meaning of Life in the 21st Century: Tensions among Science, Religion, and Experience. New York: iUniverse, 109-112.

Seeking an Expanded Framework: Some fundamental reflections

Dr. Christian Steineck, Bonn University, Center for Studies on Modern Japan

Modern societies can be characterized by their incorporation of innovation into the core of their ways to produce, to distribute and to reproduce. This has set an accelerated pace of progress for science and technology, which have become the Dioscurs, the shining, ever-youthful, heroic twins of the modern age. Their progress has led to previously unthinkable levels of human manipulation of the material world. What used to be fate has to a growing extent come within the sphere of possible human decisions.

Since Francis Bacon, this spectre of increased human discretion, empowered by rational investigation, has produced a new mythical tradition which I would like to call 'visionary modernism'. Visionary modernism creates and reinvents myths of brave new worlds, reigned by scientific reason, in which fate and its beasts of burden, poverty, illness, old age, famine and war have been finally tamed and brought under human control. To visionary modernism, all laws that govern the world can be learned and put to use in alleviating suffering. Knowledge is power, misery arises from a lack of power; increasing knowledge will increase human power and, in the long run, eliminate all misery.

On the other hand, there are counter-visions, which not only negate visionary modernism, but modernity itself. Modern society, with its incorporation of innovation and change, has always produced alienation, even anticipatory alienation: An alienation from a future shaped by progress. A second type of modern myth, which I would like to call 'modern revisionism', is concerned with remedying just that. Modern revisionism wants to "overcome modernity" and re-establish humanity's link to some essential source of stability. Typically, modern revisionists point to a glorious past, where that link supposedly was firmly entrenched within the human mind. Revisionists envision that, by once again linking itself to that essence, humanity can safeguard some core values from the cold wind of change. Once the link is established firmly, society may

even use modern tools, like science and technology, or rational investigation in general — as long as they remain subservient to the eternal truths that guide enlightened vision.

Not surprisingly, modern revisionism shares more with its antithesis, visionary modernism, than both sides would like to admit. Both believe in some sort of final solution to the human predicament. Both have the same propensity to sacrifice the present for a better future. Neither side is much given to open debate and critical investigation. Arguing against the evils of "rationalism" is of course part and parcel of revisionist myths. More surprisingly, visionary modernism seems equally poised to devalue rational investigation, if only by closely confining it to the employment of one single method which is exempt from critical evaluation. Its self-styled "rationalism" is, more often than not, but a caricature of systematically elaborated rationality, and its "reason" is one that conquers rather than patiently persuades. Where both sides unify is in their defamation of an open debate in which various norms and predilections contend.

In seeking for an expanded framework to evaluate and possibly resolve the conflicts we perceive today between science and religion, I suggest that we keep the dangers of both mythologies in mind. We should do what both of them want us to avoid: to rationally examine *all* aspects of human existence and of the strategies human beings have developed to deal with the problems this existence entails. The aim of such a critical examination, as exemplified in Kant's *Critiques* or Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, is to establish the relative value of a given method or strategy while destroying the mystifications and exaggerations that stem from its totalization. Its starting point and core conviction is that human existence is finite, and that human capacities are limited — but that accepting finitude in knowing and testing the limits can be a source of self-conscious strength. And precisely this kind of reflective reassurance is appropriate for an age in which humanity increasingly assumes responsibility for its own fate. Concerning our theme of "seeking an expanded framework", I'd like to offer some basic perspectives derived from this conviction, and its elaboration in critical philosophy.

Firstly, seeking an expanded framework does not mean to look for a super-science (a spiritual science, or a science that supplants or integrates

religion) or a super-religion (a new, scientific religion or spirituality), or any other new form of positive knowledge that will overcome the conflict between the various ways of grasping the world.

Secondly, in contrast to such endeavors, the general framework, in which mere oppositions of science vs. religion etc. operate, needs to be expanded in the "third dimension". This 'third dimension' is one that reveals the relative function and value of those opposing forces through reflection on the ways they operate. In such a framework, we may understand that religion and science are cultural forms apt to address *different kinds of questions, or problems*. Their solutions have a different status of validity, which conforms to the kind of questions they are suited to address. None can solve each other's problems, and no type of question will simply go away — as long as human beings co-exist as finite individuals. And critical reflection of the *conditions of possibility* for scientific truth as well as aesthetic, ethical or religious values does not leave much hope that any other form that might be envisioned to replace it will, on due consideration, appear desirable.

Thirdly, critical reflection of human finitude teaches that there will be no final solution to human problems. Humanity as a whole will always have to 'muddle through', and individual human beings will always have to live with the conflicts and tragedies that human existence entails. There will never be a single, universal truth to guide humanity into a brave new world, because a brave world would have no place for conscious, finite individuals. To reiterate, this means to accept that no single form of grasping reality can validate a claim to totality. (That includes the "formless forms" of the mystics). Scientists have to accept that there are rational questions that cannot be solved by scientific methods, and that a "scientific world view" is a myth — plus, because of the reductions incorporated in scientific methodology, and therefore, knowledge, a "scientific world view" is not necessarily the best or most valid of all the myths around. Religionists have to accept that religious insight, insofar as it entails positive statements about the world, does not stand above scientific scrutiny and critical investigation. Religious truth can be exemplary at best, it can only prove itself by showing how it benefits human individuals and communities. Religions therefore will have to accept competition by other religions, and by non-religious world-views. All of us, whether we be scientists, religionists, philosophers, technicians or politicians better avoid adopting exaggerated

visions of "brave new worlds", as they can only generate frustration and hatred.

Finally, while the various ways to grasp reality and the strategies to deal with existential problems have their limits, each of the fundamental symbolic forms has its function, and each fundamental attitude towards human existence has some revelative power. While this insight demands humility from each individual, each discipline, and each cultural community regarding their own claims for validity, it may also foster an enlightened form of self-respect and courage. If anything, I think this combination of humility, self-respect, and courage stemming from critical reflection may help us to address future problems with responsibility – and responsibility is what we really need as we manipulate the fundamental material structure of human life and its earthly environment.

I would like to add one final statement to this. So far, I have been speaking in fairly general terms. However, it seems to me that if we critically reflect on the various cultural forms we employ, and their interaction, we will notice that the progress of science and technology has altered the possible shape of religion as well as ethics in the present age. My focus in this closing remark is on the changes necessary in ethics. Technoscience has not only enlarged the scope of human action, and therefore, responsibility. It has also made the collective action of technosystems the new standard form of human behaviour. However, if it is mostly systems that act, and not individuals (whose actions are subjected to systematic corrections), what we need is a "systems ethic", one that reflects the modes of decision making a techno-system demands and supports, and that creatively cooperates in constructing techno-systems that match our ethical demands. What we need is a systematic exploration of the conditions evolving techno-systems set for human behaviour, and a collective will to adopt only those systems that have an in-built capacity to act responsibly.