

I Do Not Fear Flat Earthers

Someone Tweeted the other day that what scares them the most is the growth of anti-scientism among the public, as evidenced by things like the niche of people who believe the earth is flat.

My first reaction to any fearful claims about the state of the world today is skepticism about the superiority of the past. Flat earthers have always existed. I'm not sure if they have actually swelled in number, or just been given a temporary internet celebrity status as the meme of the moment.

But let's just accept that it's true. Let's say anti-scientism is growing. Why is this scary?

I heard someone say if you pursue any field of study deep enough you arrive at mystery. Yet the popular scientific outlook is the opposite of mysterious. It presents a cocksure, "Everything's settled but the details, and someone in a lab in Sweden is working those out as we speak". What kind of invitation to inquiry is that? Where's the adventure?

There's a sense in which popular scientism makes the world smaller, rather than more expansive. Specialization need not lead to reductionism, but the fashions in science feel that way.

The funny thing is, scientific thought has a checkered history if you judge it by its own standards of what's scientific. How many of the big conceptual breakthroughs come from alchemists, drug-trippers, and people who prayed to gods or sought mediums? You might be surprised. How many looming figures admit in private discourse their fundamental bafflement with reality, and belief that something like mind, or spirit, or consciousness must be at work in ways that don't fit the models?

There's a kind of arrogant front put forward by the PR arm of intelligentsia. If a public company presented its business condition in such a way it would be considered fraudulent. The nice, tight, all-but-the-details presentation is not only boring and wrong, it runs counter to the zeitgeist.

The current trend is for openness and transparency. So much so that satirical labels like "Struggle porn" have popped up. Today, people want an unfiltered, rambling, three-hour drinking session on the Joe Rogan podcast instead of a well-written statement at a press conference. People want Medium articles about what it's really like to run a startup, instead of post-IPO retrospectives. Some entrepreneurs have gotten famous by publishing their monthly income statements for all to see.

What about scientists? We're confidently assured that they know how the world works, and

if we wait patiently a few more years for some lab somewhere to tally some numbers no one's allowed to see, and submit it to some journals no one can access, and let some anonymous referees behind closed doors approve it, it will see the dark of day and get improperly summarized in a news story and used as a bludgeon against anyone openly exploring other ideas.

No wonder mushroom-taking conspiracy YouTubers are more interesting to people!

I see the openness to fringe theories as a good thing. I think the best way to understand the world is to question it. The more fundamental the question, the better. It's excellent mental exercise precisely because it's so hard. If an intelligent 10 year old asked you to prove to them the earth was round, could you do it without appeals to authority? It's shockingly difficult! And that is the kind of difficulty that should be embraced! That kind of question is the gateway to scientific understanding, and possibly breakthrough!

I say bring on the scientific skepticism. Hopefully it keeps curiosity in the driver's seat, rather than an obsessive illusion that we have everything neatly labelled and understood.