

My father's philosophy

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My father had a view of life informed by his love of problem-solving. When first faced with trouble, it is almost impossible to say what exactly is at issue. Where to begin is almost as much of a dilemma as is the problem itself, and usually the nature of your predicament is neither as grand or as obvious as one might hope or else the solution would be simple and the fix clear. Instead it ends up being one of many seemingly trivial details; a subtle complication prone to oversight. Identifying the source of the issue is a rare gift that few have been as blessed with as my father, and it is a talent that drove him to discover things we could only have dreamt of before.

And finally I think it was this fascination with perplexity, this draw to mystery more than anything else, that attracted him to mathematics as a means by which to unveil the enigmatic essence of existence and defined his spirit. Here, he approached his interests using a method he was very much convinced of (and not bad at) yet did not feel restricted to. You would be very surprised just how much he knew of subjects far outside his professional preview; things like history, culture, politics, music and philosophy. But since it is not convenient to study everything all at once within the span of one lifetime, better to pick one and do well where you excel. This particular pragmatism came from an attitude of his wanting to see the whole of but one aspect of reality first, if nothing else, because he believed in depth before breadth: once captured by a question posed- usually in science- he would focus in intensely on the specifics and it was only until he understood fully the minutia that he would proceed to perform his great work, and not a moment before. He would insist on reviewing the introductory material over and over again until crystal clean and pressed his peers to restate the general idea in simplest terms. He asked not so much for the answers themselves, but to be sure of what he already knows and to survey his colleagues for agreement, to see if they too have the same understanding. Afterall it's very confusing to communicate with others concerning the same text when everyone speaks and thinks of it differently. More importantly, By doing this, he was addressing the question "what are the basics?" the atomic facts, if you will, which while elementary are also essential, for whatever is basic is likewise fundamental, and whatever that may prove to be is necessarily the case, extending abstractly to any and all possible relations and their manifestations, meaning if you are right in one regard, it stands to reason the principle adopted will apply universally (one hopes) thereby enabling you to deduce the whole- therein lies the integral truth. Besides his area of expertise- fission- my father would often drift into tertiary topics of particular intrigue to him, namely numbers theory of relativity and specifically time dilation, magnetism

and string theory, just to name a few.

The pursuit of knowledge at the deepest level of understanding, getting at the bottom of the underlying veracity of reality, knew no end for him. Once transfixed by a new notion, there could be no peace of mind from then until the moment of insight arrived. If you could see him passing up and down the halls of our home, roaming the gardens restlessly, scouring the fragile pages of ailing texts for answers unknown, you would think him quite mad, and indeed he was able to drive himself very much insane if it would bring him closer to some transcendent truth. My father was always a skeptic. He would often say to me “doubt is the most important thing” yet you have to start somewhere in science, usually with a theory entirely your own, and that requires a modicum of faith and boundless imagination. He had no fear of making the strongest claim- If the implications of the thesis were of consequence, he would argue for it forcefully and incessantly.

It is not enough that one simply does something in science out of obligation, but because one truly believes in what they are doing. My father's hero, Marie Curie is maybe the model disciple, giving her life in an effort to bring to light something new and extraordinary and today, radiation, a radical idea for its time, is as common a notion as the recipe for apple pie. The revelation of radiation and ideas like it expand our collective consciousness, even when we are oblivious of its influence, well beyond our initial condition and elevates us all above mere mortal coil.

With all the progress we've made, all we've learned and accomplished, it's easy to feel confident and be proud, but what I ask does it mean? How ought we reflect on ideas that come of it? Having internalized all we've gained, in what state do we find ourselves in? That is the questions my father posed with his work and I hope all of you will demand with yours.

Merci