

BOOK REVIEW: *Wild Knowledge: Science, Language, and Social Life in a Fragile Environment* by Will Wright (1992) University of Minnesota

I am thoroughly impressed with this book: It has achieved a foundational realignment in my thinking and knowing of the world. The author was early trained in mathematics and later researched a Ph.D. in Sociology, so he writes with the lucidity of a mathematician systematically developing a theorem, yet applied to issues of “social-natural sustainability.” As I was reviewing my notes, highlighting exceptionally trenchant and incisive quotes, I had to stop halfway as there were far too many to use as reference for this little review. I hope I am able still to glean the essence of the author’s purpose.

This is a book about epistemology; or, more precisely, about the need to develop a new epistemology if we are ever to achieve social-natural sustainability. Mr. Wright comes out swinging in the Preface: “In many ways [the ecological problem] seems to be a problem with our legitimating idea of rationality...Rational society seems to be disrupting itself systematically, and if so, then there is a fundamental problem with our legitimating idea of rationality, because this idea is legitimating ecological disaster in the name of reason” (p. ix). He then points unambiguously to the source of the problem: “scientific knowledge is both ecologically and conceptually incoherent” (p. x). When I first read this, I thought it to be a provocative statement – somehow ringing true, but how will he ever prove it? By the end of the book I was convinced: science – and especially physics – is definitely incoherent, and certainly not a valid basis for constructing a sustainable theory of knowledge.

Science is incoherent because it postulates an objective, external, “true” reality that is deemed to be more “true” than the reality we experience in our daily lives. This “truer” reality can only be incorrigibly accessed through the privileged, symbolic, “magical,” pseudo-language of mathematics. In order to access this “truer” reality, it is necessary for the inquirer – the seeker of knowledge – to adopt a detached, completely asocial perspective; indeed, that was the purpose of science in the first place: to remove any social considerations, any “traditional or moral constraints,” from a theory of knowledge. “[T]he [scientific] epistemological argument asserted that the rational human mind could have direct perceptual access to the external and objective laws of nature. Through these neutral and untainted observations the individual mind could achieve true knowledge of objective reality” (p. 26). This sounds all too familiar; yet, when you really think about it, what exactly is an “objective reality” – out there? “Scientific epistemology must fail, since we can never have direct and innocent knowledge of an independent and objective world” (p. 27).

Truly, we are of the world, in the world. Any rational theory of knowledge, any valid epistemology, must be “referred to the formal enabling conditions that make knowledge possible, the formal conditions that enable social-natural interactions based on knowledge” (p. 168). In other words, a valid epistemology must be referred to those conditions that enable *ecological sustainability*, so that this knowledge may have a chance to perpetuate itself. This is highly rational. The claim being made in this book is that it is highly *irrational* – indeed incoherent – to refer a legitimating theory of knowledge to some postulated, absolute, “true” reality that can only be accessed through mathematics – not experienced directly. This claim is easily verified when considering that the widespread use of this knowledge – as in local, technical solutions – has precipitated conditions of ecological crisis; yet the basis of this knowledge is still defended as absolutely “true,” fully conforming to objective reasoning. Is this not highly irrational? Imagine, science may ultimately destroy itself, and yet to its last breath it will staunchly claim to be describing an absolutely “true” reality, a reality “truer” than the reality we experience in our daily social-natural interactions. “Science is not rational because it is not ecological, and scientific rationality is not coherent because only a reflexive reference to sustainability can make the idea of rationality coherent” (p. 140).

After effectively deconstructing “science” as a valid epistemology, Mr. Wright proposes a sustainable replacement: a theory of knowledge referring to *language*. “Knowledge is the socially organized use of language, language directed toward generating effective actions on the world...Language is exactly the effort to conceptualize the world in order to act on it” (p. 175). “Assertions of knowledge must be able to legitimate social institutions in terms of how actions and the world can be effectively, reliably, and sustainable connected. And they must be able to criticize and de-legitimate institutions that...have become ecologically irrational, in terms of the formal criteria of sustainability” (p. 195). “[T]his formal reference to language, as the basis for valid knowledge, creates the legitimating reference to sustainability, as a basis for rational criticism” (p. 208). Will Wright makes it sound so easy.

Wright makes a lot of comparisons between religion and science – both attempt to legitimate social institutions based on the claim to have privileged access to an absolute “true” reality. Religion legitimated institutions with the goal of sustaining a social-natural order, but is inherently uncritical of itself; science legitimates institutions that are self-critical, but have no interest in sustaining a social-natural order. Wright weaves the synthesis: an epistemology referred to language as the basis of knowledge that is inherently self-critical while at the same time formally referenced to a goal of social-natural sustainability. He closes by saying, “it is only through a reference to language that the idea of knowledge can be made coherent and that knowledge can become fully “wild,” fully critical.” (p. 219). “Wild” knowledge is ecological knowledge, sustaining its own continued viability by effective reflexive criticism, remaining “wild” by refusing to be captured and tamed by particular cultural absolute “truths.”