

The True, the Good and the Beautiful

Professor Phil Hanlon
University of Glasgow

Tuesday 8 February 2011

Glossary

The Burgess Shale Formation: located in the Canadian Rocky Mountains of British Columbia it is famous for the exceptional preservation of the soft parts of its fossils.

The Cree: one of the largest groups of Native Americans in North America with 200,000 members living in Canada.

The Eden Project: is an environmental project and visitor attraction near St Austell in Cornwall which highlights and explores the relations between humankind, plants and the natural world.

Higgs boson particle: a hypothetical particle which is postulated to exist as a way of resolving inconsistencies in particle physics. It is this particle which the Large Hadron Collider at CERN (the subject of the first lecture in GCPH Seminar Series 7) is established to find or refute the existence of.

Santiago de Compostela: the town at the end of a 1000 year old pilgrimage route to the shrine of St. James in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Over 100,000 pilgrims travel to the city each year from points all over Europe and other parts of the world.

Overview

The theme of Professor Hanlon's seminar was that the modern world has robbed us somewhat of the integration of three important elements of life first outlined by Plato – the true, the good and the beautiful. He illustrated this by drawing upon three journeys that he undertook to explore past, present and future consciousness and argued that a new consciousness needs to emerge which will enable us to successfully inhabit the future.

Summary

Professor Hanlon began by stating that Plato believed that humans naturally and instinctively integrated the elements of *truth*, *good* and *beauty* in their daily living. Professor Hanlon argued that the modern world view has caused our society to lose some of that integration. He illustrated this point by comparing the testimony of an enthusiastic astro-physicist engaged in searching for the Higgs boson particle, whose purpose in life and work is seamless with that of bureaucrats in large institutions engaged in the thankless task of saving money from the budget. The narrow sense of truth in the latter endeavour has eclipsed elements of good and beauty. He wished to explore this further in this seminar.

Rather than go to another university somewhere else in the world for his sabbatical and do something similar to that which he does in Glasgow, he decided to undertake three journeys to explore past, present and future consciousness. Each of these journeys involved cycling and or walking 'to slow things down' and to hopefully develop new insights about how to address key questions of humanity in a changing world. He suggested that travelling in this way made for better connections each day with the world around and that "*it felt different to be alive than after a frazzled day at the office*".

The journeys took him to the Burgess Shale Formation in Canada; on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain; and to the Eden Project in Cornwall.

Before speaking about the Burgess Shale in particular he made two important points about his experience in Canada. Firstly, in spending some time at Regent's College, he was surprised that colleagues there so readily agreed that modernity was under strain and in decline and that there is an urgent need to build something new – a new way of life more in tune with the emerging future. This was not his experience of such conversations in Scotland.

Secondly, he pointed out that in the last five years about a quarter of all the Pine trees around Lake Moraine (where the Burgess Shale is located) have died due to the increased presence of the pine beetle. The pine beetle (which is normally kept in check by the cold temperatures in that part of Canada – ten days of -30C temperatures) is multiplying and not dying back in the winter as the temperature is not low enough. Professor Hanlon therefore suggested that this was another and perhaps more direct way to understand global warming rather than simply through International Panel on Climate Change reports – contested among some circles.

Professor Hanlon then went on to describe in more detail his visit to the Burgess Shale itself.

The Burgess Shale is found above Lake Moraine at an elevation of about 9000 feet, in a quarry at the base of a cathedral buttress (slide 4).



These special fossils were discovered in 1909 by Charles Doolittle Walcott and his family on an expedition from the Smithsonian Institute and are the best example of their kind, in that the soft parts of the fossilised creatures are also present in the rock rather than just the harder parts as with typical fossilisation – and as suggested by Professor Hanlon, this phenomenon is only seen in two formations in the world, there and in China.

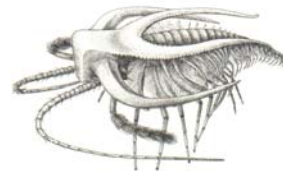
Professor Hanlon's guide at the Burgess Shale attempted to give the visitors an idea of timescales of formation and highlight where these events 'fit' in the big picture. To emphasise this point he used an often referred to metaphor of a calendar year (slide 6).



If the Big Bang (which started the universe) happened on 1st of January one year and the whole history of the universe is a calendar year, then the dinosaurs arrived in time for Christmas, apes appeared at 10.15am on Hogmanay, and one second before midnight on that same day, Christopher Columbus sailed for America. Professor Hanlon felt this to be an awe inspiring insight. He suggested that this was a more generative response than that which suggests that the impact on human consciousness of such events and timescales make us feel insignificant.

He went on to illustrate the work of Whittinghame, a Cambridge based scientist, who spent years working on crushed fossils to understand how they were constructed and what they would have looked like when alive (Slide 9).

He used this work to illustrate the new appreciation which it gave him of the importance of painstaking reductionist science alongside holistic perspectives. He suggested that the search for the true rendition of these creatures represented something really beautiful as Whittinghame's drawing shows.



This work, along with that of others, resulted in the understanding that rather than there being a single tree of life, there were in fact five separate trees, four of which have died out, with over ninety percent of creatures which have ever lived now being dead. This highlights that it is possibly foolhardy to assume that the current species mix on the planet will continue unabated.

Following his time in Canada, he visited the caves in Lascaux in the Dordogne in France which are famous for their mysterious and beautiful wall paintings of animals. The people who painted these animals lived some 20,000 years ago on the edge of the ice receding from the last ice age (well into December on the 'calendar' mentioned earlier). This reminds that all of what we know as life has emerged during the favourable climactic conditions of the current inter glacial period.

Our species is slowly becoming aware that we are living at a time of change, exacerbated by our own activity. Speaking of Bruce Alexander's work on addiction Professor Hanlon suggested that levels of addiction (described by Alexander as *overwhelming involvement*) increase at times of crisis. Alexander also suggests that such behaviour is adapted – better than the next best alternative for those involved. When shown the data for drug addiction in Glasgow, Alexander suggested that this pattern of addiction was the same as that of the Cree after the meaning, purpose and their way of life changed and they were confined to reservations. *Overwhelming involvement* need not only be confined to drugs and drug addiction. Many patterns of human activity now have the look of overwhelming involvement about them too.

Professor Hanlon suggested that on his journey he came to think of the caves at Lascaux as being the beginning of recording. He also saw other examples at the spas in Bath where early Romans, having made a pilgrimage to the spa, entreated the goddess Minerva to help with their problems by throwing small lead tablets with requests into the water.

The pilgrim routes to Santiago de Compostela are about a thousand years old and centre around the bones of St James reputed to rest in its church there. As far as Professor Hanlon could ascertain, medieval pilgrims really believed that the saints bones were there having been transported after his death by angels dragging a stone boat. In trying to

understand the medieval mindset better Professor Hanlon was attracted by the beautiful stone bridge at Puente la Reina (slide 13) which had been built over three generations by the co-operative labour of the community during a time when the predominate worldview was that the Earth was flat with a literal heaven *above* and a hell *below* (with assignment to



one or the other being determined by one's actions whilst alive). This is now of course known not to be accurate as the earth is round and not flat but Professor Hanlon suggested that it was arrogant to suppose that *human consciousness* was unlikely to change again. While human nature was probably largely similar between then and now, consciousness was quite different and it is likely then that consciousness will change again. Thus the idea of an emergent and peaceful consciousness based on co-operation rather than competition with empathy rather than enmity informing relationships was possible, not impossible.

The Eden Project he had hoped would speak of the future. While it did in many respects, he found it difficult to see beyond the consumer experience that it provided. Not only did you have to get there by car (and park in the enormous purpose built car parking area), Eden Project merchandise was to be found at every turn. It struck him *largely* as a consumer experience. He suggested that many actions, programmes, policies and activities which purport to herald the new are in fact trapped in the existing mindset. Referencing the International Futures Forum, he suggested that a transformational mindset was needed in order to outgrow the challenges of today.

In concluding he suggested that the key challenge for Public Health was not to tackle this problem or that problem, but rather to join with others in asking how we might inhabit the future in a way which recombines truth, good and beauty. This is likely to take a transformation in consciousness as great as that from medieval to modern.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.