

## Beginning of Infinity, by David Deutsch (2011)

**T**he book is about everything: art, science, philosophy, history, politics, evil, death, the future, and yes, even the potential of, need I say, *endless* infinity. There were chapters that eluded me, for instance his focus on “the metaverse”, or quantum mechanics. While Deutsch is an expert of this subject, I scanned it at best. He tried, but my fuzzy brain didn’t comprehend. But as one who has always loved the sweep of human history, Deutsch’s interest in the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries seemed most pertinent to me - and was to Deutsch the pivotal event not merely of the history of the West, or of human beings, or of the earth, but (literally, physically) of the universe as a whole.

He points to the necessity of having “an *open and dynamic society* in order for progress to occur”. Deutsch highlights the importance of critical thinking, open-mindedness, and rationality in overcoming our past cognitive biases. In a *static society*, “authority” rules and defines for people what to think, the limits of that thinking, and where not to cross those boundaries. (Those who did would reap the wrath of those in power. Deutsch also uses the classic example of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athenians vs. Spartans.)

In an open society, ideas, conjectures, the promotion of new theories to be tested, criticized, and shaped anew can lead to “good explanations” that supplant previous thinking. And there is a beautiful and almost mystical irony in all this: that it was precisely the means of *the Scientific Revolution*, **it was precisely by means of accepting that we were not the center of the universe, that we became the center of the universe.**

And it was precisely such a threshold that was crossed with the invention of the scientific method. There were plenty of things we humans could do, of course, prior to the invention of that method: agriculture, or the domestication of animals, or the design of sundials, or the construction of pyramids. But all of a sudden, with the introduction of that particular habit of concocting and evaluating new hypotheses, there was a sense in which *we could do anything*. The capacities of a community that has mastered that method to survive, and to learn, and to remake the world according to its inclinations, are (in the long run) literally, infinite.

Deutsch argues compellingly that it is the ceaseless criticism and improvement of our explanations of reality that explains the progress that has been achieved since the Enlightenment, not just in science but in society too. There will always be problems, but the good news is if we face those “problems” openly and with optimism, they too can be resolved.

The beat goes on, as we do, possibly into...infinity.

Comments by D. Wilson (with help from others who have read and reviewed the book) for Chaos