SECTION TWO

Facilitators of Incoherence:
Convenient Skepticisms

Perhaps this book should have ended with the last questions on
the previous page. Much of the material up to now may seem to
some to be trite and self-evident. Such in fact much of it seems
to me. I wonder then how it is that this material escapes the con-
sciousness of so many Americans today. Here, in this section, I
try to examine the epistemology (or lack thereof) that makes this
possible.

In the opening chapter I compared education to mother’s milk.
A mother doesn’t wait till her child has earned a right to be fed;
she draws her child close and nurses her or him. Education is
something like that. To treat it as a privilege or a reward is to
suspend our wholesome instinct in the matter. We override intui-
tive wisdom with a convenient rationalization. Convenient that
is to the powers that be. Among other functions, education—
resembling mother’s milk—stimulates the immune system of
the mind. As a part of my unease about contemporary culture,
I fear one reason education has become as problematic as it has
is because the powers that be don’t want a general public well
immunized against nonsense. When prophetic voices among us
disclose the mythic character of our economics and our foreign
policy, efforts are made to marginalize and silence them. Gov-
ernment treatment of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, and
Edward Snowdon is instructive here. Think of the outrage of
the Nixon Administration when Ellsberg, Zinn, and Chomsky
brought The Pentagon Papers into the media mainstream. In many
cases, our government prefers that we work within a foggy blur.

“What you don’t know can’t hurt you.” We’ve all heard this;
no one can really think it’s true. The bus hurtling toward you
as you jaywalk across a busy street engrossed in your cell phone can certainly hurt you. Flip the stupid phrase, and you arrive at something close to the most basic premise of common sense: What you do know may be of help to you. Confirmations are more numerous than there are grains of sand.

What’s insidious about skepticism is that it smothers the quest for knowledge before it can get fairly started. Skepticism is our soup du jour. It’s become the artfully contrived mother’s milk of our times. It expresses itself as irony and cynicism. It raises an eyebrow. It keeps reality at bay.

Skepticism shouldn’t be confused with critical thinking. Skepticism and critical thinking are like identical twins in a comical farce—two characters whom others continually mistake for each other, but who have altogether opposing agendas. Critical thinking leads to science and wisdom; skepticism leads to word games and sophistry, ending in disengagement. Both skepticism and critical thinking may express themselves with the question: “How do you know?” Yet the intentions in asking are quite different. Skepticism intends to shut down the quest for understanding; critical thinking embarks upon it.

The reason I speak of the skepticisms that follow as “convenient” is because they provide an easy way out. They’re not convenient in the sense that they allow us to arrive at what we want; their convenience is limited to permitting us to stop asking what we want.

Why is skepticism attractive? Well, the actual task of our time is uniquely daunting. People my age are glad they’re old. The kind of challenge facing us once the ecological dimension is factored in—is without parallel. For a whole society to reconfigure its internal sense of who it is and where it’s going is a monumentally greater task than for a cruiser to swerve from an iceberg toward which it’s headed. It’s a much more demanding task than to send a man to the moon. To relinquish the specific sense of mission that began with the Puritans and that manifests itself lately as still alive and well—in our wrathful behavior toward Iraq after 9/11, for instance, and in our supine response to financial extortion in 2009—would impose a burden of reconstruction on the American people that almost everyone in America would rather avoid—politicians, media pundits, clergy, teachers, and, to tell the truth flat out, typical Americans everywhere. To examine our life and recognize the extent to which our coping
strategies have only made matters worse—really, there's nothing more painful. It's “a long day's journey into night.” Instead of doing that, we choose to be gamblers doubling down. If we'd just be more forceful in our foreign policy, we tell ourselves—if we can just arm enough drones and kill enough terrorists to convince our enemies that violence never works, we tell ourselves—then all will be well. As for our finances, in the wake of the bankster meltdown, we say let's unfetter the apostles of greed once and for all, and then surely they will serve us devotedly. That's only logical, isn't it? I mean, who knows more about the ills of our financial system than our financiers?

Ominous thinking. How, though, does all this connect to skepticism? If the indictment I've made has truth, it seems our problem is one of rampaging, uncritical complacency and trust. Skepticism would seem in order. Is it not the remedy?

The opportunity for skepticism and its lure today among the eyebrow raising intelligent is the manifest credulity of the herd of true believers we've mentioned at such length by now—the great numbers who never question their familiar opinions but simply forge ahead. Such true believers are in the grip of obsession, and the intelligent, including the thoughtful young, can see this. Worse yet, the obsessed people in charge of our society are clearly in the ranks of the credulous true believers. A very common response of intellectuals then to the manifest absurdity of current foreign policy and current financial policy is a shrug in the physical order and a shift into skepticism in the mental order. “Look where convictions lead people! The last thing this world needs is another true believer!”

Have I described the situation accurately? The response of the sophisticated is to look at the triumph of folly, and rather than be motivated by it to look for answers to say instead: “Do you see what a mess people make of things when they think they have answers?” (This question was in fact a favorite maneuver of David Hume.)

That response—a retreat into civilized and urbane despair—is too easy.

To elaborate: among many it's fashionable today to greet almost any statement of conviction with an ironic smile. To do so has become a mark of political correctness among many of our young at universities today, and the behavior is modeled and reinforced
by many of their professors. The consequence of this tendency is paradoxically conservative. If we’ve found that all ideology leads to egotism and bloodshed, then it becomes fashionable to have none. Students these days study ideologies as taxonomists study butterflies. The butterflies are all dead. Such detachment in turn leaves those who blindly possess (are “possessed” by) an uncriticized ideology firmly in control of all things outside the classroom. The thoughtful people have surrendered to those among us who are least sane. The Milton Friedmans and the Pol Pots rule.

The compensation for such an inglorious surrender is that it absolves one from Herculean/Augean labor of sorting well-grounded convictions from ill-grounded ones (or, as the Greeks’ metaphor would bluntly suggest, from getting the bullshit out of the stable). Meanwhile, it allows a docile society to soldier on without let or acknowledged misgiving in our mission. Ours not to reason why, into the valley of death ride the three or four hundred million Americans; and the world at large twists in the after-draft.

In this section we will investigate skepticism about history, skepticism about beauty, skepticism about morality, and skepticism about anything being known absolutely. All are common today; and all contribute toward conservation and perpetuation of the interlocking cycles of disintegration described in earlier chapters. One of the problems the reader is likely to face is a nagging misgiving that none of this is really relevant. That misgiving, I claim, makes it more relevant than ever. We Americans have not much inclination to ponder how epistemological stagnation and paralysis block our path to meaningful action. Bear with me then.