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Security Myth



How secure are you? What does this question even mean? We think about security in relation to our finances, our work, our family, our abode, our country and our health – basically in relation to our entire lives.

Can you ever be secure about anything? Security implies avoiding risk, but how do you manage that? In fact, what we mostly regard as security is risk management. As Hellen Keller wrote: “Security is mostly superstition ... Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outside exposure.”

‘Security’ is only possible in a world in which everything operates according to rules we can understand. If there are rules, they are so numerous and so complex that we cannot possibly comprehend them, much less codify them. We are like players in a complex team game in which there *are* rules but no-one knows or understands them all.

To misquote Arthur C. Clarke, any complex enough system is indistinguishable from chaos. Life on Erath is one of those complex systems. We live in chaos and put a large amount of effort into trying to make sense of it, largely in an attempt to survive as long as possible. Part of that survival strategy is pattern recognition and, if we cannot discern a pattern, we fabricate one.

This pattern fabrication is the basis of our science – its methods, its dogma and its ideology. Science is a highly organised system for curious people to find the patterns that explain how the world works. A scientist will form a theory of how or why something behaves in a certain way (the fabrication of a pattern) and will then exhaustively test that theory to either disprove it or find evidence that supports it.

Science, and the technologies that have come from it, has allowed *Homo sapiens* to ‘progress’ and to support ever larger populations. This growth has put increasing pressure on the other life forms, to the extent that many of those life forms have become extinct and many more are facing extinction. We have created a situation on this planet about which we can have no certainty – we cannot feel secure about the effects this uncontrolled expansion will have on us, on other life forms or, indeed, on the entire planet.

Science relies on experimentation, but we are participants in the experiment of our impact on the planet. We can, therefore, not step back and view the events and changes dispassionately. We have no way of conducting any control experiments, in which we would do things differently to test if there will be different, and possibly what, outcomes. In the present experiment, we only know the interim states as they occur and cannot be certain of the eventual outcome.

All the systems we are subject to – the weather, ocean currents, the ecosystems we live in – are more complex than any models we can devise to represent them. Chaos is part of all of these and certainty is not achievable.

And then there is our own collective response to what we can see and measure. We know that average temperatures are rising and that weather patterns are changing, yet we act as if we can continue to put off acting sensibly. The inaction is based predominantly on fear. Changes are happening *to* us, but we are afraid of making mistakes if we initiate changes that could ameliorate the effects of what is already happening, because there will be known and unknown consequences of any such actions – but so are there consequences of inaction.

There is nothing new about this fear. Advances in technology have always brought disruption to individuals and enterprises that have relied on the older technology. There were the people who spun and wove in their cottages until the mechanical equivalents made them redundant; there were people who fed and stabled horses before there were cars; there were people who delivered telegrams on bicycles. Now there are people who rely on fossil fuels for a living and people who drive taxis and people who publish physical newspapers – their livelihoods are or will be threatened.

There are other sources of insecurity. It is unlikely that we will change the fact that there are people who will, for whatever reason, randomly take things from others or randomly hurt or kill others. And, although most ‘accidents’ can be sheeted home to a failure on the part of some person or group of people, we are unlikely to find a way of eliminating all such failures.

We live in a world, in a universe, that is to all intents and purposes chaotic. We can therefore not be certain of anything. We can thus not have absolute security about anything. Maybe the only real security is in accepting this and being prepared to respond usefully to whatever comes our way out of the chaos.