

September 15 (vol. 3, no. 2) 1987

Dear Colleague:

I wonder whether one of the most important changes in the intellectual climate of the last twenty years is the increasing popularity of the concept of discontinuity. Continuity is perhaps still regnant. As thinkers, we are still disposed to look for connections and linkages, to see how one thing influences another down an unbroken chain of cause-and-effect, to understand change as somehow gradual and cumulative. Ecology, as an ideology or religion, stresses continuity: all life forms are somehow linked, we are all part of a vast web. The political theory of exploitation stresses continuity: the dastardly deeds of Europe affect the once colonized peoples of Africa through one generation after another without foreseeable end. But, against these ideas is its opposite: the idea of radical discontinuity, glamorized in mathematics as Catastrophe theory and in paleontology as the rapid extinction of the dinosaurs consequent upon some dramatic extraterrestrial event, or the sudden transformation of our ancestors from Homo erectus to Homo sapiens. Rather than the dull show of Uniformitarianism, we are suddenly invited to see reality as melodrama. Perhaps the sociopolitical turbulences of the sixties favored discontinuity: rather than wait for slow improvement, let us have a revolution. On the other hand, the same turbulences led to the idealization of ecology and "no man is an island"--that is, the idea that we are all part of the main with no real boundaries anywhere.

Jerome Kagan's book The Nature of the Child (1984) shows the influence of the idea of discontinuity in child psychology. "One reason psychologists prefer continua is that the statistical techniques available to them assume an underlying continuum of causation, with both extreme and less extreme values produced by the same forces. I shall argue that the temperamental characteristics of infants and the basic classes of emotions are better conceptualized as discrete qualities rather than as continua." To Freud, an early experience is never really lost--it continues to function as a cause. To Piaget, a child grows by necessary stages: the achievements of one stage provide the foundations for the next; and the foundations, however deeply buried, are always there. To Kagan, however, growth is considerably less continuous. The mega-vitamins of mother love administered to a three-year old do not guarantee a healthy adult, nor do physical punishments and a certain coolness necessarily produce a sick one. Something is lost, which implies that something really new is possible, if the current conditions are right. Temporal discontinuity may well be the philosophy of an optimist. How would you characterize someone who is inclined to see spatial discontinuities or boundaries? Is he a reactionary--a bit paranoid perhaps?

Best wishes,

*J. K.*