ABOUT REVERSE EPISTEMOLOGY

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I have in front of me a pile of paper consisting of clippings, notes, essays, cartoons, and scraps on which sketches of ideas have been scribbled. I spread them out on the bed and see if I can come up with some way to organize them so that at least some degree of retrievability can be effected. How nice it would be to have a ready-made filing system so refined that a glance at the scrap would immediately inform me into which slot it goes. But these scraps defy filing! No system exists that can order them. They survive in a one category file labeled miscellaneous, whose present retrievability value is next to nil.

This is not an unusual problem. We seem to have to live with outgrown filing systems whose miscellaneous category continually expands. We can of course throw out items that don't fit in the file in order to keep the miscellaneous folder thin. In fact we have three choices: 1) Throw away what doesn't fit and thus have a perfect but incomplete file, 2) Keep everything and when an item doesn't fit stuff it in the miscellaneous file and thus have a complete but imperfect file, or 3) Create a filing system that will be both perfect and complete. The last option would be an ongoing and will-o-the-wisp task. It should be noted here that the Austrian mathematician Kurt Gödel proved that a file could never be both complete and perfect*. So the best we can hope for is continual updating, iterating our latest file.

Updating is one task, but starting from scratch with a totally unstructured pile is another task. This is where reverse epistemology comes in. Ordinarily an epistemology contains two aspects or layers. First, an epistemology has an organizing schema, a sort of matrix into which various experiences or items can be placed. Second, an epistemology has a process which identifies where in the matrix each experience or item is to be placed. If we have a set of experiences or items, but no organizing schema, then we must employ 'reverse epistemology'--create the schema and the process concurrently.

* Actually this is not what Gödel proved. He showed that in any postulatory system (at least as complex as arithmetic) that there exist true theorems that cannot be derived from the postulates. The application of this result to filing systems is valid because the file must include not only the analog of the derivable and non-derivable items but items coming from other completely different postulatory systems. If the Gödel case forbids both simultaneous perfection and completeness, then certainly the examples of files does.