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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Sidney Awards, Part 1

By DAVID BROOKS

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The highly prestigious Sidney Awards go out to some of the best magazine essays of the year. This year, many of these essays probed the intersection between science and the humanities. Links to all can be found on the online edition of this column.



Josh Haner/The New York Times

David Brooks

For example, over the summer and fall, two intellectual heavyweights, Steven Pinker and Leon Wieseltier, went toe-to-toe in *The New Republic* over the proper role of science in modern thought. [Pinker took the expansive view](#), arguing that, despite what some blinkered humanities professors argue, science gives us insight into nearly everything. For example, Pinker argues that science has demonstrated that “the belief systems of all the world’s traditional religions and cultures — their theories of the origins of life, humans and societies — are factually mistaken.”

Instead, science has given us a different value system: “The facts of science, by exposing the absence of purpose in the laws governing the universe, force us to take responsibility for the welfare of ourselves, our species and our planet. For the same reason, they undercut any moral or political system based on mystical forces.”

[Wieseltier counters](#) that few believers take Scripture literally. They interpret. Meanwhile, science simply can’t explain many of the most important things. Imagine a scientific explanation of a beautiful painting, based, say, on a chemical analysis of

the paint. “Such an analysis will explain everything except what most needs explaining: the quality of beauty that is the reason for our contemplation of the painting.” The scientists deny the differences between the realms of human existence and simplify reality by imposing their methods even where they can’t apply.

Caitrin Nicol had [an absorbing essay in The New Atlantis](#) called “Do Elephants Have Souls?” Nicol quotes testimony from those who study elephant behavior. Here’s one elephant greeting a 51-year-old newcomer to her sanctuary:

“Everyone watched in joy and amazement as Tarra and Shirley intertwined trunks and made ‘purring’ noises at each other. Shirley very deliberately showed Tarra each injury she had sustained at the circus, and Tarra then gently moved her trunk over each injured part.”

Nicol not only asks whether this behavior suggests that elephants do have souls, she also illuminates what a soul is. The word is hard to define for many these days, but, Nicol notes, “when we talk about it, we all mean more or less the same thing: what it means for someone to bare it, for music to have it, for eyes to be the window to it, for it to be uplifted or depraved.”

Larissa MacFarquhar [had a brilliant profile](#) in The New Yorker of Aaron Swartz, the 26-year-old computer programmer and Internet activist who hanged himself early this year.

Swartz lived much of his life outside the normal structures. He was too brilliant for his high school, so his parents let him drop out and take college courses or study on his own. He thought the students at Stanford were shallow, so he didn’t go back after his freshman year.

He began writing big books or starting great projects, but he usually didn’t finish them. He had dreams of saving the world, but fuzzier notions of the specific avenues by which he might do it.

On the one hand, he seems to have been the victim of the formless freedom of the Internet life. On the other, he did have intellectual daring and a fierce independence. MacFarquhar tells the story as befits the subject, with email and text-message-type comments from Swartz and his friends propelling the piece along. “Even among my closest friends, I still feel like something of an imposition,” Swartz wrote, “and ... the slightest hint that I’m correct sends me scurrying back into my hole.”

Don Peck looked at how companies assess potential hires [in an essay](#) in The Atlantic called “They’re Watching You at Work.”

Peck demonstrates something that most of us already sense: that job interviews are a lousy way to evaluate potential hires. Interviewers at big banks, law firms and consultancies tend to prefer people with the same leisure interests — golf, squash, whatever. In one study at Xerox, previous work experience had no bearing on future productivity.

Now researchers are using data to try again to make a science out of hiring. They watch how potential hires play computer games to see who is good at task-switching, who possesses the magical combination: a strict work ethic but a loose capacity for “mind wandering.” Peck concludes that this greater reliance on cognitive patterns and game playing may have an egalitarian effect. It won’t matter if you went to Harvard or Yale. The new analytics sometimes lead to employees who didn’t even go to college. The question is do these analytics reliably predict behavior? Is the study of human behavior essentially like the study of nonhuman natural behavior — or is there a ghost in the machine?

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Sidney Awards, Part 2

By DAVID BROOKS

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I tell college students that by the time they sit down at the keyboard to write their essays, they should be at least 80 percent done. That’s because “writing” is mostly gathering and structuring ideas.

For what it’s worth, I structure geographically. I organize my notes into different piles on the rug in my living room. Each pile represents a different paragraph in my column. The piles can stretch on for 10 feet to 16 feet, even for a mere 806-word newspaper piece. When “writing,” I just pick up a pile, synthesize the notes into a paragraph, set them aside and move on to the next pile. If the piece isn’t working, I don’t try to repair; I start from scratch with the same topic but an entirely new structure.

The longtime New Yorker writer John McPhee wonderfully described his process [in an essay](#) just called “Structure.” For one long article, McPhee organized his notecards

on a 32-square-foot piece of plywood. He also describes the common tension between chronology and theme (my advice: go with chronology). His structures are brilliant, but they far too complex for most of us. The key thing is he lets you see how a really fine writer thinks about the core problem of writing, which takes place before the actual writing.

Kevin Kelly set off a big debate with [a piece in Wired](#) called “Better Than Human: Why Robots Will — And Must — Take Our Jobs.” He asserted that robots will soon be performing 70 percent of existing human jobs. They will do the driving, evaluate CAT scans, even write newspaper articles. We will all have our personal bot to get coffee. There’s already an existing robot named Baxter, who is deliciously easy to train: “To train the bot you simply grab its arms and guide them in the correct motions and sequence. It’s a kind of ‘watch me do this’ routine. Baxter learns the procedure and then repeats it. Any worker is capable of this show-and-tell.”

Matt Labash took several sledgehammers to the Twitter culture [in a Weekly Standard piece](#) called “The Twidiocracy.” Labash acknowledges that some tweets can be witty. For example, @GSElevator writes: “If you can only be good at one thing, be good at lying. ... Because if you’re good at lying, you’re good at everything.”

And Labash will never persuade most of us to actually give up Twitter.

But he is rollicking in his assault. One of his sources describes Twitter this way: “It’s the constant mirror in front of your face. The only problem is that it’s not just you and the mirror. You’re waiting for the mirror to tell you what it thinks. The more you check for a response, the more habituated you become to craving one. It’s pathetic, because at the end of the day, a Twitter user is asking, ‘Am I really here, and do you love me?’ ”

Steven M. Teles had [a mind-altering essay in National Affairs](#) called “Kludgeocracy in America.” While we’ve been having a huge debate about the size of government, the real problem, he writes, is that the growing complexity of government has made it incoherent. The Social Security system was simple. But now we have a maze of saving mechanisms — 401(k)’s, I.R.A.’s, 529 plans and on and on. Health insurance is now so complicated that only 14 percent of beneficiaries could answer basic questions about deductibles and co-pays.

This complexity stymies rational thinking, imposes huge compliance costs, and aids special interests who are capable of manipulating the intricacies. One of the reasons we have such complex structures, Teles argues, is that Americans dislike government philosophically, but like government programs operationally. Rather than supporting straightforward government programs, they support programs in which public action is hidden behind a morass of tax preferences, obscure regulations and intricate litigation.

Scott Stossel is already getting a lot of attention for his book excerpt “Surviving Anxiety” [in The Atlantic](#), but it is hard not to give it a Sidney. Stossel suffers from a wide range of phobias, “to name a few: enclosed spaces (claustrophobia); heights (acrophobia); fainting (asthenophobia); being trapped far from home (a species of agoraphobia); germs (bacillophobia); cheese (turophobia); flying (aerophobia); vomiting (emetophobia); and, naturally, vomiting while flying (aeronausiphobia).”

But he is extremely high-functioning and now edits The Atlantic. How many people are genial and supercompetent on the surface while a cataclysmically intense world churns just inside their skulls?

Finally, and this is totally bending the rules, but I can’t resist honoring Douglas Coupland’s “Notes on 21st Century Relationships” [in FT Magazine](#). He cites survey data suggesting that the average person falls in love 2.5 times in a lifetime; and that some psychologists believe that human beings are only capable of five or six loves in a lifetime. One lesson is, don’t use them up too quickly.

Discuss.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/27/opinion/brooks-the-sidney-awards.html?ref=davidbrooks>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/31/opinion/brooks-the-sidney-awards-part-2.html?ref=davidbrooks>