Isaac Asimov — Part II

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MOYERS: You wrote, a few years ago, that the decline in America’s world power is, in part, brought about by our diminishing status as a world science leader. Do you still think that’s so?

ASIMOV: Yes, I do. We’re still probably well up there technologically, you know, but what margins we do have are slimmer, narrower, and we’re being overtaken.

MOYERS: Why? Why have we neglected science?

ASIMOV: Well, partly because of oversuccess. I mean, if you’re so convinced that—I suppose the most damaging statement that the United States has ever been subjected to is the phrase, “Yankee know-how.” You get the feeling, somehow, that Americans, just by the fact that they’re Americans, are somehow smarter and more ingenious than other people, which really is not so. It causes you to rest on your laurels. And actually it was first used in connection with the atomic bomb that I know of. The atomic bomb was invented and brought to fruition by bunch of European refugees. You can go down the list of names; that’s the “Yankee know-how.” But also there’s this feeling that somehow, because we have a, what we consider, a decent economic system, freedom, free enterprise, all that — which I’m all in favor of — that that alone will do it for us. And, I admit, that helps out in some ways, but not if we’re lazy about it. It’s not going to do it for us if we don’t do anything, you see.

MOYERS: And yet there’s always been a bias in this society against science.

ASIMOV: Well, it’s against intellectuality. I mean, when nominee Bush can castigate Dukakis for going to Harvard, whereas he went to a proletarian school like Yale, you know there’s something wrong. I mean, there you’re actually trying to run a person down for belonging to what people see as an elite school, that there’s something vicious about going to an elite school.

MOYERS: What did you mean when you said once that we have to stop living by the code of the past?

ASIMOV: Only because times change. In the old days, we didn’t worry about the future, and now we must. We have to worry about the future all the time. Things are changing so fast.

MOYERS: You and I may not be around when it arrives.

ASIMOV: Well, I imagine our children will be, our grandchildren. And besides, the human race will be. And — well, let me try to make it — I don’t want it to sound like a foolish idealist. I don’t want to make it sound as though I just love humanity, but look — my books are going to survive me. I want to have people alive to read them.

MOYERS: Right. Is it possible that you suffer from an excessive trust in rationality?

ASIMOV: Well, I can’t answer that very easily. Perhaps I do, you know. But I can’t think of anything else to trust in. You say to yourself, “If you can’t go by reason, what can you go by?”

Now, one answer is faith. But faith in what? I notice there’s no general agreement in the world of these matters of faith, they are not compelling. I have my faith. You have your faith. And there’s no way in which I can translate my faith to you or vice versa. At least as far as reason’s concerned, there’s a system of transfer, a system of rational argument following the laws of logic, et cetera, that a great many people agree on. So that in reason there are, what we call, compelling arguments. That is, if I locate certain kinds of evidence, and even people who disagree with me to begin with, once they study the evidence, find themselves compelled to agree by the evidence. But wherever we go beyond reason into faith, there’s no such thing as compelling evidence. Even if you have a revelation, how can you transfer that revelation to others? By what system?

MOYERS: So, it’s in the mind you find your hope.

ASIMOV: Yes, and I have to say I can’t wait until everyone in the world is rational, just until enough are rational to make a difference.

MOYERS: [voice-over] From the Great Hall of Cooper Union in New York City, this has been a conversation with Isaac Asimov. I’m Bill Moyers.