

Worried about the year 2000? Nature doesn't care

Stephen Jay Gould believes that millennial meditations make us come to terms with a universe that is neither entirely orderly, regular or comprehensible.

Review by
MICHAEL R. LeGAULT

IN recent years, books such as Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* and John Horgan's *The End of Science* have created the suspicion that ours is an age with nothing new to experience, learn or create. At the near-end of the millennium, this cynical ennui, nourished by society's preoccupation with engineering the equality of all conditions and results, has sprouted what is arguably one of mankind's more nervy and onerous conceits: "been there, done that."

With this compact book, *Questioning the Millennium*, Stephen Jay Gould, who really has been there and done that, proves that a widening insight can be gained from a preciously narrow foothold. The only conceit favoured by the Harvard professor of zoology and geology, and author of 15 books, is his scientist's belief in skepticism as the best method for finding truth and meaning in a world supposedly lacking either. His triumph, as it were, is to shoot down both cynicism and disillusionment as the only appropriate intellectual reactions to the end of the millennium. Along the way, Gould's elegance speaks for the value of a science-based education in the debate over how best to remedy the declining abilities and performance of students.

Gould eschews both of the big-ticket staples of fin-de-siècle writing, predictions about the future and reflections about the origins of apocalyptic anxiety, instead starting his millennial meditation with a simple observation: Nature gives no preference for the number 1,000, either in her earthly or celestial cycles of time. The two central questions then become why, as in why all the hullabaloo, and what, as in what does the millennium mean, signify, represent? Playing off an eccentric combina-

QUESTIONING THE MILLENNIUM
A Rationalist's Guide
to a Precisely Arbitrary Countdown

By Stephen Jay Gould

Harmony Books, 190 pages, \$24.95

tion of subject matter — history and religion, astronomy and astrology, numerology and poetry — Gould proposes that the ultimate significance of the approaching millennial event is to be gleaned from the dichotomy between what millennium used to mean and what it means today. Its biblical origin as an apocalyptic term associated with the second coming of Christ, has given way to its current matter-of-fact designation for the end of a 1,000-year period centred on a year ending with three zeros. Gould proves this is not a mere etymological exercise. The deeper historical connections he ferrets out to link the two usages generate sufficient wattage to throw new light on human appetites for both reasoning and myth-making.

What happened to cause this transition in meaning? In Gould's words: "The basic reason for 'millennium' switching from a description of the future to a counting in the present stems from the failure of this expected future to materialize." There ensues a selective accounting of mankind's freelance debacles at predicting the end of earthly time, based on these biblical interpretations and projections, and the beginning of Christ's 1,000-year reign of peace. The fallout from Christ's no-show has been humanity's engrossment with secular divisions of time, calendrics, numerology and cyclicity.

Gould believes that such millennial meditations are useful precisely because they make us come to terms with a universe that is not entirely orderly, regular or comprehensible.

Humankind is acting in its highest capacity when it recognizes and accepts this contingency and seeks to resolve mystery and restore order. It is both our efforts and the way we choose to define, classify and categorize that ultimately create truth and meaning.

This ain't Derrida (the deconstructionist Jacques), but it is postmodern in spirit and counter to the conventional scientific outlook. At its most rigid, this old-school stance holds that any discernible social or moral meaning lies outside the concerns of science, which seeks to deduce truth strictly from the record of data. Using our evolving millennial fixation as an example, Gould, the politically left-of-centre academician, suggests that subjectivity, in the form of linguistic, social or other valuations, is never entirely out of the loop in scientific truth-seeking.

Gould chooses not to elaborate on this point, using the last pages of the book to ruminate over day-date calculations. In doing so he misses a chance to draw out the full implications of his mainly epistemological theme. The millennial message would appear to be that knowledge based on experience has won out over knowledge based on doctrine. How immensely practical it would be for Gould, the scientist and gifted communicator, to affirm to a society inclined to take much for granted that this knowledge is a record of both our intellectual and moral progress. And that only in rational pursuit and use of this knowledge is our physical, emotional and spiritual well-being ensured.

Michael R. LeGault is the editor of a business and technical trade journal, and a frequent reviewer of science books.