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The Integrity of a Truth Seeker

by Toby Johnston

There is no such thing as a postmodernist. If you were to walk around Stanford University or Berkeley, you would probably not find a single student or professor (except, perhaps, the occasional art undergrad) who would know what you were talking about. “Postmodernist” is a misnomer, a slur, like “fundamentalist Christian” or “bleeding heart liberal.” It is a label invented by an opposition sub-group so that they might easily identify and dismiss the viewpoints and ideas of another sub-group. It is a moniker Christians have invented to classify a particularly stubborn and well-read group of secular intellectuals who do not take capital “T” Truth as a given in their axioms.

This group of thinkers is a diverse population of scientists, linguists, physicists, philosophers, and artists who speculate outside the boundaries of universals. For one reason or another, they have identified with the uncertainty of existence rather than the certainty. They classify and make distinctions. They place as the sun and moon of their intellectual sphere empirical evidence and cultural relativism, and they disdain any concepts that are not verifiable, repeatable, and factual.

And yet, a logistical paradox (or perhaps just simple irony) presents itself: the human mind cannot be certain of uncertainty. No one will ever know perfectly that there is no God. Nor can one claim that there is no Truth. Perhaps this paradox is more the limitation of linguistics than reality, but despite the present intellectual and cultural bias against universals, ideals, and especially imperatives, Truth is the foundation of human knowledge and plays a necessary part in transferring information. I write words to an audience I believe exists. I write words I believe represent things that can be represented. I communicate assuming I will be heard and with the goal of being understood. Knowing, teaching, and dialogue assume a common Truth, require a shared objective point of reference, without which knowledge is highly suspect—if not completely untenable.

Despite the skepticism toward Truth, adaptation exists. No one claims that human beings are incapable of mistaken assumptions, error, and erroneous belief. Yet, everyone acknowledges that human beings learn, adapt, and grow in knowledge. The acquiring of knowledge through correct and incorrect beliefs testifies to Truth. Take, for example, a man who keeps bumping into a piece of furniture in a dark room. He does not doubt the existence of the offending sofa or loveseat, even if he is unable to identify it as one or the other. He cannot doubt the presence of something else in the room. In our error, Truth bumps back, teaches us of itself. And yet like men who leave a mirror and forget their reflection, skeptics are quick to denounce Truth, God, and objective

reality despite consistently and habitually acting in accordance with just such assumptions. From the cultural relativists who believe in the evil of human cruelty to the scientists who believe the universe is real, knowable, and worth understanding—skeptics cannot get away from Truth. The universe's truthfulness exists in conformity to its realness, and we exist in conformity to Truth.

We must be careful to keep in mind that skepticism does not birth from barren minds. We live in a society, we participate in a culture, we are heirs of a tradition whose meaningful attempts to understand the world have created this failed position. The question for us who believe in Truth, God, and objective reality is this: How do we understand this climate of intellectual uncertainty and convey to the skeptic *the conviction of a real world*? How do we convince others that the unexamined life is not worth living? How do we compel others to take up the mantle of Truth, to become Truth seekers and identify themselves accordingly?

Almost immediately, the seeker of *personal* truth objects, "I am a truth seeker sojourning toward my truth. Your journey and your truth are different." This objection reveals a complete misunderstanding of the word "Truth." Truth is an understanding of the real universe, and it is anything but subjective or personal. The Real, the True—by its existence and by its being perceived—convinces, instructs, and edifies the perceiver. Truth is not at the whim of the individual, but rather the individual is at the whim of Truth. By denying anything more substantive than his opinion, that personal-truth seeker exists within a broken narrative, a false relationship to Truth. If Truth is merely preference, then that personal-truth seeker is incapable of change or adaptation because he already exists in a state of harmonious agreement to "his" truth. Because he already has what is true/good for himself, a personal-truth "seeker" no longer seeks and no longer learns.

Of course, this intellectual stagnation can never exist except in a mind determined to be deranged. Every thinking, rational, sane individual notices discrepancies in the cartography of his paradigm, his "map" of reality; and while he might not identify every incongruity correctly, the curriculum of existing is not wasted on him. To borrow from philosopher Michael Polanyi, we are continually adapting the map of our understanding as we find errors in it; we are continually refining and redrawing the borders and roads of our own understanding. Even as the vigilant relativist might be passionately declaring dubious the existence of capital "T" Truth, he no doubt continues to learn every day—even at the moment of his fallacious declaration. What is the wellspring of this learning if not an unavoidable dialogue with the objective reality of the world? Truth, our greatest teacher, finds us in our darkness and bumps back.

Learning and adaptation are the hallmarks of every rational being. Something else, though, distinguishes the Truth seeker from the personal-truth seeker. The person claiming to be a Truth seeker also seeks *to conform himself* to that which is real and true. The Truth seeker does not just ask questions; he does not just expect answers from the real. The Truth seeker, unlike the personal-truth seeker, is willing to be held accountable by those answers. The Truth seeker takes Socrates' project upon himself: he endeavors to develop a closer and closer approximation of what is real, of what Truth is; he devotes himself to knowing what is true. Those who have failed in their responsibility as Truth seekers cease striving toward a more complete understanding of themselves, their narrative, and their world. Like those grotesque cinematic Zombies known as the living dead, those indifferent to Truth become the rational insane. Their willingness to accept

lies in the place of truth has deformed their reason. They have come to value self-deception above intellectual integrity.

This blasphemy against the spirit of Truth is not a curse only on the lips of the personal-truth seeker. Since Christ ascended, we Christians have sought to invent shortcuts to Truth, sought to circumvent the hard work and responsibility intellectual integrity requires. All too often we find approaching truth with direct inquiry just too hard, too scary, too unnerving—and too risky. What if God is different from what we imagine? What if God causes suffering, kills people with floods and earthquakes? What if God asks us to speak in the tongues of angels and perform the laying-on of hands? What if God asks us to reject material comfort or become missionaries? What if He asks us to be vulnerable? What if God is not there? Or worse still, what if God speaks Arabic, or has an elephant's head, or wields a trident?

In order to alleviate the suffering and insecurity of being Truth seekers, we Christians have too often sought salves. We have created canon and institutions that are ready and willing to relieve the believer of the burden of having to seek Truth for himself. We too often look to tradition as a trustworthy surrogate for our own thoughtfulness. We publish books and broadcast radio programs whose whole purpose is to tell us what we already believe. We have created a consensus of conscience. We agree with “we” that God has guaranteed our forgiveness.

Where the relativist avoids the Truth seeker's responsibility by doubting the inherent value of Truth, we Christians too often avoid altogether the effort required to be Truth seekers. Oftentimes we seek authorities to whom we may surrender our responsibility to discover Truth. Instead of entering the darkness of personal speculation and finding out if that bump was a sofa or loveseat, we simply believe someone else's account of the room and its contents. It matters very little whether that someone has even ventured into the room himself.

Not only are we unwilling to question the foundation of our own beliefs, but we also assume that our process of knowing truth is equally unquestionable. Even how we use the Bible too often demonstrates not a desire for Truth but rather a desire to be safe in the certainty of “right” answers without the hard work of studying difficult texts and being willing to question our own assumptions. Too often, we treat the Bible as if it were more “real” than reason or science or common sense, as if it had some mystical power to convince—a power that absolves us of our responsibility as Truth seekers and trumps our need for intellectual honesty and integrity. But surely God did not intend the Bible to trump the effort required in the careful consideration of the Truth seeker. Rather, the Bible contributes to the dialectic of our understanding. It asks us to measure, to ponder, to compare our own paradigm to its Truth. The Bible (and the God it describes) does not ask for blind allegiance but rather careful investigation. The Bible does not ask us to believe despite contrary evidence or to be irrational, but instead the Bible asks us to reason with it, to enter into conversation with its Truth.

The Bible is full of individuals whose Truth seeking was rewarded. Thomas was not rebuked for his skepticism but given evidence. Job was not denied his answer, even though it was not the comfort he hoped for. From patriarch to minor prophet, when people asked for empirically verifiable evidence, God answered. Their “doubt” and “skepticism”—unlike that of the skeptic

who doubts the existence of Truth—was healthy, not sinful. They were simply being good cartographers.

But the Bible does not just provide us with answers; it asks us to live in the Truth we discover. This submission to the Truth is not a suspension of intellectual integrity or an abrogation of the Truth seeker's responsibility; rather it is the trust that comes from the edifying relationship an individual can have with the Bible. As the Bible speaks to us through our careful interpretation, as it shows itself to be more and more truthful, our relationship with the Bible changes. We give it authority, and it becomes our instructor, our compass, and the legend to our map.

But we remain Truth seekers. The responsibility does not pass from us. The effort required does not diminish. We must remain ever vigilant, continually using Truth to measure our rationality, our experiences, our tradition, our paradigm, our reasons to believe. If in our investigation we discover error in our favorite philosopher or theologian, pastor or talk-show host, Truth obliges us to abandon that error, to make sense, to take account of our new view. As Truth seekers, we should welcome mistakes as part of the refining process and adjust our paradigms accordingly, for we know that this vigilance, this responsibility, edifies us. We know our reward is wisdom, and this wisdom, in turn, draws us closer to Truth.

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