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# General Education Capstone Text: Ways of Finding Truth

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## Welcome to George Fox University's General Education Senior Capstone!

You are a senior, graduation is finally drawing near, and you find yourself back in a required general education course.

A number of questions may be clamoring for answers in your mind. Aren't I by now beyond introductory courses? Shouldn't I be concentrating on the advanced courses in my discipline that prepare me for the practical aspects of my career?

We agree, you are well beyond the need for another introductory course. We also agree that you should be concentrating on advanced courses that prepare you to succeed in the real world. But general education – that is, the liberal arts, the various ways that humans go about learning the truth about their world – is one of your fields. The George Fox University general education senior capstone is, in some ways, the most advanced course you will ever have, because it will require you to draw on every discipline you have studied, and to lean on others who have expertise in areas you do not, to work on solutions to the kinds of real world problems you will face for the rest of your life.

Sometimes universities help promote the idea that the serious work in life is all done by specialists. George Fox University does not believe it. We rely on specialists at key moments in our life, of course, to do all sorts of things (pastoring churches, teaching children, treating injuries, building houses and public facilities). But there are other occasions when the specialists can only advise us about small slices of the issues we face. Crucial decisions, and the work they call for, must be done by people with a broad, cross-disciplinary perspective.

Consider these situations:

A community must decide whether to spend money on its schools, or on improving the local economy.

A church must discern how it can best help the homeless in its community.

A university must choose between two new majors, one in pharmacy and the other in journalism.

All these decisions are beyond the capacity of any single expertise. Some decisions are structured to help overcome this problem – a city council, a board of elders, or a board of trustees will work together to decide what to do. Groups of people, hopefully bringing varied backgrounds and skills to the table, pool their strengths to reach a conclusion.

But what if all the members of the group are specialists only? How will they communicate? How will the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach to the problem be compared? How will any single member of the group know how to vote, or even what questions to ask of each other? And if the best solution to the problem is not located entirely within one discipline, how will the group ever find it? Hopefully some members of the group (or even better, all of them) are not just specialists. Hopefully they

are conversant enough with others' disciplines to allow them to recognize the best and reject the worst that might come out of others' approaches to truth.

In fact, if we do not have a steady supply of people with this ability, then democratic self-government will be impossible. Every major public issue, and most of the minor ones, requires the skills you will practice in this class.

A big part of the course is designed to help you develop as an advanced-level generalist. We want you to be able to listen to people from disciplines outside your specialty with enough familiarity about their methods and concepts to help them discern the best from the rest in what they have to offer. We want you to be able to connect ideas from a variety of sources, seemingly unrelated to each other, and from them fashion creative new solutions to problems. George Fox University, through this class, is trying to do its share to create the next generation of Mark Hatfields: Christians who can live up to the calling to be statesmen in public office, on organizational boards, and as members of congregations and other groups.

Also, this class will help prepare you to work in a multi-disciplinary decision-making setting, by giving you practice in pulling good ideas and insights from each member of a diverse group. You will spend part of the semester working with people from other majors to make a carefully-researched and reasoned recommendation for Christian action on a real-world public issue.

Perhaps you don't think you are likely to serve on a decision-making body like a board of elders or a city council. You don't see yourself as a Mark Hatfield type, not even on a local or organizational level. Actually, the odds of you finding yourself in a leadership role someday are probably higher than you think. Any Christian university has to take seriously the task of preparing community leaders, because university graduates pursuing any profession are likely to end up being such leaders whether or not they meant to.

But even if you spend the rest of your life in quiet reclusion, this course is important to you. Consider these problems we all must face:

Should I vote for candidate A or candidate B? Which of them has a set of policies that are likeliest to be good for my community, or for the world?

Should I send my kids to the public school, a private school, or home school?

Should I spank my child? Buy shoes made in China? Eat meat? Put weed-killer on my lawn?

All of these questions have larger implications than might first appear. Take what might be the smallest question mentioned so far. You can consult an environmental scientist, perhaps, to help you determine some of the ways weed-killers might be toxic to, say, species of fish in the nearest river. But his answer, no matter how clear it is, doesn't resolve the problem. What is the effect of weediness on property values? He won't know. Can I have a weedy lawn – or can I kill fish in the river – and still claim to love my neighbors? The environmental scientist brings no special information on these topics,

either. Can I afford the costs of weed spray year after year? The environmental scientist will just shrug.

Even for basic questions like these, you will have to know how to assemble information from a variety of disciplines and approaches to truth, interrogate your sources for clarification, assess the quality of the information they bring you, and make a decision that is morally right. Not everyone will be even a small-scale Mark Hatfield, but anyone might be a John Woolman, keen to do God's will in day-to-day decisions. Your general education program, and this capstone, is intended to equip you powerfully for that role, too. This class will help you take fullest advantage of your completed general education to make personal decisions, as well as to fill any roles God has in mind for you on public issues.

### **About the Text**

This Core Text (the Text) is an important component of the course. Section 2 gives a survey of some of the principal differences you will find among different approaches to truth, and offers an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each. Section 3 examines how a North American's approach to learning truth might differ from someone from another culture. Sections 4 and 5 look at Christians' roles in culture, including how they participate in public discussion of public issues.

You are required to read the Text because every educated Christian should take time to consider all these aspects of seeking truth. By the time you finish college, you should have begun to synthesize a sense of your role as a believer in public issues. You also should have begun to develop habits of careful decision-making for your private choices that have effects on others. The Text will help you sort out which approaches to truth make sense, and how you should interact with others who do not agree with you about what truth is or what its implications are for our actions.

While the Text is a crucial part of the course, it is only a part. An abstract study of how we know truth would be an incomplete capstone for a liberal arts education. Loving our neighbors is not a passive state; it requires practical action to meet needs and resolve problems. Thus, you will find that the course pulls you along two parallel currents. You will spend some time thinking about how we know the truth, and some time thinking about a particular public issue.

Your professors will manage these two currents in their own way. Whatever their approach, in the end it will be up to you to pull them together. You will need to reflect on the various paths to truth until you can articulate a coherent, multidisciplinary approach to practical wisdom. You will need to test your approach to truth on the topic for the semester. If all goes well, by the end of the semester you will know a lot more about the topic, about knowing the truth, and about what Christians might do to be God's ministers on the issues you have studied.

## Section II: Knowing the Truth

### A. Two Kinds of Truth:

Recall the questions we said an environmental scientist would have trouble answering as you considered whether to use weed killers on your lawn:

- What is the effect of weediness on property values?
- Can I have a weedy lawn and still claim to love my neighbors?
- Can I afford the costs of weed spray year after year?

Did you notice that there are two kinds of questions here? The first and third questions are requests for descriptive information about the world. They ask for what we are used to calling “facts.” An exceptionally sophisticated real estate appraiser could tell you what effect, on average, an untidy lawn has on the price you can get for your home. He may not be able to pin the effect down to the penny, but he can tell you with confidence that the effects will be in a certain range.

A financial adviser can also tell you whether there is room in your budget for the costs of periodically spraying your lawn. Again, this is a question of fact. The shape of your current budget can be known with some precision, and the costs of spraying your lawn can also be known. Someone with experience managing household budgets can give you a pretty solid reading of whether your budget can make room for the added costs.

But the middle question is of a different nature. It calls for something besides a tangible, measurable fact. There are such facts implicated in the question, to be sure: Will neighbors be offended if a person’s lawn is weedy? Will their property values suffer? How much visual impact will it have on how the neighborhood looks? But the question of whether one can love his neighbors and keep a weedy lawn goes beyond describing the observable impacts of one person’s choice. It asks for a value judgment, as well. Is it right to have a weedy lawn when doing so annoys one’s neighbors, or diminishes the value of their property, or messes up their view? What if the only feasible alternatives risk polluting neighboring streams?

These questions are not resolvable by simply measuring something. We have to make value judgments to answer them, weighing intangibles like human annoyance against the lives of fish or the robustness of our bank accounts. We can easily describe the size of our bank account, but it is a different matter to prescribe what to do with it.

All the important questions have both elements in them. First we need an accurate grasp of the **facts** of the situation. That is, we need to know the **descriptive truth** about what **is**. Then we have to do a good job of deciding what we **ought** to do about those facts. Thus, we also need a good handle on the **prescriptive truth** about the implication of the facts, their **moral nature**.

A lawyer would find this dichotomy very familiar. Every court case is about both descriptive truth and prescriptive truth. Litigants are apt to dispute on both dimensions. Disputes about what actually happened (e.g., whether a contract was breached) are called

questions of “fact” and are resolved by “triers of fact”, often juries. Disputes about what ought to happen next (e.g., whether the defendant owes damages to the plaintiff) are called questions of “law” and are generally resolved by judges.<sup>1</sup>

We will follow the lawyers on this point through the rest of this Text. Seeking truth is about both what is and what ought to be; about accurately describing the facts as they exist, and accurately discerning the right thing to do in light of those facts.

## **B. The Truth-Seekers Predicament**

Why is it important that we learn truth, descriptive and prescriptive? There are at least three aspects of our lives where truth matters: the practical, the moral, and the spiritual. We need to know truth as a practical matter to survive. If we make mistakes about the nature of the world around us, the normal result will be unnecessary injury to ourselves and those around us.

For example, the actual descriptive fact is that a cell-phone user (even one who uses a headset) multiplies the dangers inherent in driving. A person who drives while chatting on his cell phone may not be conscious of the safety risks, or may believe himself to be the exception to the rule, the one person who is so extra quick with reflexes or who has so much extra brain capacity that he can safely handle a task which has proven fatal to so many others. But these beliefs do not change the underlying facts – cell phone drivers who think they are safe are no safer than those who see the risks accurately. Our safety doesn't depend on what the driver thinks is true, but what is actually true. Thus, to maximize our survival, we have to replace inaccurate beliefs about the world with accurate information.

If our actions only affected ourselves, the moral value of truth would be relatively modest, confined to the moral duty not to harm oneself. But we do not live in isolation. All of our actions affect others, too. Thus, having accurate descriptive knowledge about the world around us is a moral duty first for practical reasons. Knowing not what we do does not undo the effects of what we do on others.

There may be ways that we affect others that are hard for us to evaluate. Is it better to buy a pair shoes and contribute to the stability of low-wage jobs in Asia, or not buy the shoes so as to avoid rewarding employers who don't pay their workers enough to provide a decent standard of living? Knowing the descriptive truth about our actions is necessary for us to do the right thing, of course. What we don't know can hurt us, but even more likely, it can hurt others.

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<sup>1</sup> Some people resist the notion that only descriptive truth can be described as “facts.” They argue that prescriptive truths are also factual, and would call them “moral facts.” We agree that discerning moral prescriptive truth is as important, and as possible, as accurately understanding the descriptive truth about our world. However, we will persist in calling descriptive truth “facts” and prescriptive truth “duties” or “oughts.”

But descriptive truth is not enough. We also have to have a clear grasp of prescriptive truth, of the moral facts of the situation. Does it violate a duty to our neighbors to, in effect, pay them starvation wages to work for us? What if they prefer to be paid starvation wages rather than no wages? Does their preference count the same if they have no real choice, that is, if they are effectively coerced into choosing between no wages and starvation wages? The decision to buy shoes comes laced with many more moral questions than just these.

And then we come to the spiritual questions. What happens to a person's soul if he acts in willing ignorance of the consequences of his actions? Or what if he knows the consequences, but fails to give them weight in his choices? Or what if he gives them weight, but gives even more weight to his self-interest? What kind of person is he making himself into? What kind of relationship will he have with God?

All of these issues are tied inextricably to our choices. And none of them is easily resolvable. Each day we face dozens of weighty choices. Assuming truth does exist, that there is a right way to understand the practical, moral, and spiritual implications of our actions, the truth-seeker's task is enormous. Calculating even the practical implications of even one of our actions may take all day, or (usually) more, were we to try to do so on our own. Add the moral and spiritual dimensions, and it should be evident that the truth-seeker's task cannot be done without help.

So where do we find truth – both in its descriptive, factual form and in its prescriptive, ethical form? In the balance of this section, we will examine several possible sources of help for finding truth. None of these helps should be totally alien to a student completing a fine liberal arts education. You should have encountered them somewhere in your studies, at least obliquely. But perhaps you didn't recognize them at the time as tools to help you live a truthful life, to do what God would have you do in daily decisions. So we are going to tour the truth-seeker's emporium, looking at the various approaches to truth embodied in a liberal arts education, so you can assemble a tool box for wise practical decision-making for use in the rest of your life.

A final note before we move on: at various points in the next several sections, we cite the Capstone Reader. The Reader is the predecessor to this Core Text, and includes selections from a variety of authors, some living, some dead, and some truly ancient. Copies of the Reader are available on reserve in the Murdock Learning Resource Center. If you want the premier experience, you might check out a copy of the Reader and consult the pieces we cite.

### C. Tradition

Think back on a time when you found yourself part of a new group, one in which you hoped to find a place and be accepted. How did it feel?

If the group was already in existence when you arrived, you probably caught on fairly quickly to the existence of a set of expectations about how people would act. Some of those expectations might be different depending on who you were, how long you had been in the group, how old you were, or other factors. Sociologists would tell you that you had stumbled upon the group's norms and roles.

Groups that endure for any length of time also accumulate explanatory accounts for their existence, and for their norms and roles. These explanatory narratives, or "myths", usually include some attempt to describe the conditions that gave rise to the group, that continue to sustain it, and that explain why the norms and roles are configured as they are. The myths may also buttress the sense of duty members have for complying with the group's obligations. For example, a university may explain its prohibition of drinking alcohol with a myth that describes its supporting community as committed to abstinence, and with another myth that ties a variety of personal and academic ills to drinking. Beware: these explanatory myths may be true! They are called myths not because they are false, but because of their role in a group's understanding of itself. They are taken by the group as descriptive truths which support the prescriptive "truths" embodied in the norms and roles.

Every human group of any duration forms norms (expectations for behavior), roles (specialized norms for people performing different functions in the group), and myths (accounts that explain the group's existence and nature). This happens whether or not anyone deliberately engineers it. Groups that do not form viable norms or myths, or fail to develop some key specialized roles, do not survive well. They are left with less capacity to coordinate behavior, and must spend time and energy renegotiating routine transactions from scratch. Meanwhile other, more developed groups have already worked out their relationships, making their transactions automatic and efficient, and are free to spend more energy being productive (or enjoying life).

This is the genius in the ancient advice that if we find ourselves in Rome we should, as a general rule, do what the Romans do. The Romans have worked out a way to live. Needlessly disrupting people's settled expectations for how to do things is disruptive, and forces them to spend energy either defending the status quo, or reconstructing their group's norms to accommodate your dissent. Either way, disruption is expensive, and in the short run impoverishes the group at least a little – and in extreme cases may threaten the group's survival.

We have hardly begun our exploration of ways of knowing truth, and have already stumbled onto a way of knowing prescriptive truth about what we ought to do: ***if possible, we ought to avoid disrupting a group's settled norms because disruption is expensive to the group and distracts it from tending to its members' welfare.*** That is, we can make a rough first approximate estimate of what we ought to do by consulting the norms, roles and myths of the group we find ourselves in.



We can call this rule of thumb a “**prima facie**” rule. We start our reflections with the presumption that a prima facie rule should be followed. However, prima facie presumptions can be rebutted. Under some circumstances, we may arrive at the conclusion that the prima facie rule of thumb needs to be ignored.

The rule “when in Rome do as the Romans” is a prima facie rule, which will cover a vast array of situations just on the strength of the recognition that people’s settled expectations about how to live deserve deference. But it is not a particularly strong rule, especially as applied to relatively transient groups. When a group has not been together long, or is not associated with meeting essential needs, it is unlikely that the existing norms and roles have been subjected to much testing. If there has not yet been significant conflict in the group on a particular aspect of its norms, the group is vulnerable to errors, either in its factual, descriptive understanding of the world, or in its moral calculations of what ought to be done. An outsider coming in with new perspectives is relatively likely to bring with her better information about the world, or better ideas about moral duties.

However, when a group has a lot history – when it has been around for a long time, has lots of diverse members, has been through extensive conflict among its members and has met serious challenges from the outside – then the norms, roles, and myths you find when you arrive in the group are probably worthy of deeper respect because they have helped the group survive sterner challenges. There has been more of a winnowing process, in which maladaptive elements are likely to be abandoned in favor of more effective ones.

And when the group has survived for generations, with each generation adopting a preceding generation’s culture as its own largely intact, then the group has a body of moral and factual guidance that can be truly impressive: it has **tradition**.

For most human societies, the basic source of guidance about what a person should do in any given situation is embodied in its tradition. Tradition is a powerful guide to truth for good reasons. For starters, traditions that have supported a group’s survival for generations certainly appear to have passed one test of truth – they have worked! They must be connected at least somewhat to reality. Given the infinite ways there are to die, traditions in a living community come with a certain stamp of approval. They have prevented the group from wandering into one of the myriad paths to extinction, but instead have helped the group carry on through whatever challenges it has faced to that point.

Tradition in literate societies has an even better claim on our respect. While all traditions undergo refinements based on the experiences of the group, literate societies have the potential to speed the group learning process and accelerate improvements. Writers can conduct thought experiments exploring what the world would be like under hypothetical conditions. Records of success and failure can be more extensive and detailed than in strictly oral cultures. Greater access to ideas from outside the culture can help people in the culture to find and adopt imported improvements. Writing extends the group’s capacity for dialog beyond what is possible face-to-face – and even frees it from any need for synchronicity, since dead people’s voices can still be heard as long as their writing stays in print.

We modern Westerners tend to sneer at tradition-bound cultures. But our smugness is misplaced. For one thing, we are also dominated by our own traditions. Did your morning deliberations today include whether to wear your loincloth, or mismatched socks or shoes? Are you considering a vote for the Monarchist party in the next election? Have you thought through the dramatic effects on our gene pool that result from orthodontia (and the resultant dental fraud we commit against potential spouses)? Have you given your parents the go-ahead to find you a spouse? Are they planning to have you and your spouse move in with them permanently after you marry?

We, too, are members of a traditional society. Much has been decided for us by our cultural traditions, and for the most part we don't notice the constraints this puts on our choices.

Furthermore, our Western traditions go well beyond the cultural assumptions we make about daily behavior. Because we have had the most voluminous literary industry ever, persisting for hundreds of years, to speak of tradition as a Westerner also invokes a vast body of inquiry and criticism. The Western culture was, arguably, born as a result of the quickening exchange of ideas resulting from the invention of the printing press and the simultaneous flowering of the Renaissance. It has roots going much further back, through the scholastics of the middle ages to the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and the heritage we draw from Judaism and Christianity.

Levels of conflict have varied, from relatively little contention in the medieval period to periods of high conflict in ancient and modern times. This constant dialog about our understanding of the world we live in, and about what we should do about it, has hastened the process of cultural adaptation to unprecedented speeds. Indeed, there are those who believe we have now entered a period of such strong disagreement about basic elements of our culture that we are threatened with cultural breakdown. In any case, elements of our culture are under constant review, and those parts that cannot be justified are likely to be jettisoned. The parts that remain are, in a real sense, the ones that have best survived hundreds of years of human experience, spread out over hundreds of millions of people, and shaped by intense scrutiny by tens of thousands of writers in scores of countries.

Shouldn't any aspects of culture that can survive such a stern test have a very strong prima facie claim on our adherence? Shouldn't we be exceptionally hesitant to claim that our own individually-developed notions of truth are somehow more reliable than those of our culture that have survived hundreds of years of vigorous testing?

Allan Bloom is one of those who thinks so. In *The Closing of the American Mind*,<sup>2</sup> he argues that there is a public American tradition of political and economic liberty and equality, distilled by the Founding Fathers. This tradition has roots even pre-dating the American Revolution, when it first flowered, but it grew strong in the early days of the republic, reinforced by everything from public pageantry on July 4 and lessons in school to the ways people framed political discourse. Bloom also describes a parallel private

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<sup>2</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), especially pp. 55-61, which you can find in the *Senior Capstone Reader* (hereinafter "the *Reader*"), pp. 5-8.

tradition of religion, nurtured primarily in the home, which he believes gave American families character and richness.

Bloom describes these traditions as tools for discriminating between good and evil, and for investing our daily activities with meaning. Traditions give their adherents' lives direction, and help them sort out what is important from what is optional or even harmful. Those steeped in tradition have a means for connecting their own lives to a larger story. This is where tradition adds texture to life.

Bloom contrasts life connected to a tradition with the rootless life of an individual, with impacts that start at the home. Homes steeped in traditions give family members a context. The family is about something, and the children are growing up into something. Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, sabbaths, and even family mealtime prayers mark stages in members' lives. Parents, Bloom believes, once assumed responsibility not just for raising kids, but for educating them. The home was a place of deliberate instruction in the family's heritage and the larger culture's tradition.

Bloom is convinced that parents and schools are failing at these tasks now. The result, he says, is that people are now both narrower and flatter. By "narrower" he means "confined as a group to a narrow range of views", which give them no basis for understanding or critiquing competing claims about the truth. By "flatter" he means "no deeper than mirrors", helpless to do anything but reflect the culture around them. Flat people cannot offer any corrective, let alone resistance, to whatever errors creep into the culture.

Tradition, then, can be seen as a sort of "experiential precedent." It distills the results of a culture's experiments with living, keeping beliefs, values and behaviors which seem to work and discarding others which don't. This happens in any culture, but in the West (and some other cultures) the natural accumulation of experience is enriched by a vast literature embodying commentary and debate about those experiences. If we are too quick to dismiss tradition, we toss aside this painfully-accumulate body of experience and knowledge, these experiential precedents, and are left to our own devices in seeking truth.

#### **D. Authority**

Tradition, for all its strengths as a guide to truth, has some limitations, including its impersonality. Tradition does not lodge in any one place. It permeates its group, a body of information to which each member has been socialized, and which belongs to no one person, nor even to any manageable group of them.

This means an individual cannot really converse with tradition. If its guidance is unclear on a particular point, there is no way to interact directly with tradition to seek clarification. Or if the individual believes that tradition is a poor guide in a specific situation, he is doomed to suffer, either from tradition's misfit with reality, or from the rejection of the community which will likely choose to uphold tradition rather than experiment with an untested new idea.

Some of tradition's impersonality is relieved by the presence in the community of those who are wisest in tradition's ways. Often these are elder members of the group, some of whom are recognized with titles and special roles. When someone faces a difficult choice, where tradition's guidance is unclear or possibly ruinous, he can go to an elder for counsel. In the simplest cases, the elder's value is in her knowledge of tradition, and her ability to explain its implications and offer reassurance that the traditional ways will work for the best. In some cases, the elder may help fashion a new way of doing things that is consistent with the broad principles of tradition, giving it some of the flexibility it needs to adapt to changing conditions.

However, the elder's position as interpreter of tradition adds a new element to a community's truth-seeking repertoire. The elder is not transparent. She cannot be a mere mouthpiece for an impersonal body of lore. She will add her own personality to the mix, her own perceptions of descriptive facts and her own judgments about moral oughts, which will be at least a little different than any other elder's. When new questions come up, she is likely to add some of her own ideas to the accumulated experiential precedents embodied in her tradition. If she has earned the trust of her community, her creative additions will be accepted as sharing validity with the pre-existing tradition. She will have earned the status of an "authority."

An authority is someone (or some group) that has earned the right to be heeded and obeyed. When an authority speaks, his words change our understanding of the world around us, and/or our sense of what our moral duties are. Something that we didn't see as true before now appears true. Whereas before the authority spoke we were under no obligation to do something, afterwards we are.

Joseph Vining makes a helpful distinction between such an authority and the merely authoritarian.<sup>3</sup> Whereas an authority has earned our respect, and his pronouncements thereby change our moral obligations, an authoritarian has only won our compliance. Authority is based on legitimacy and acceptance. The authority has the right to speak, and to expect compliance. Disobeying an authority is a moral transgression, a rebellion against wisdom, good order, and truth.

Authoritarianism is based on coercion. The authoritarian wins our compliance by eliminating our freedom to choose otherwise. Only the most heroic among us will defy an effective authoritarian, because to retain his position, the authoritarian has to punish noncompliance and stifle dissent.

So, at least at first glance, authority is distinct from authoritarianism. The authority has earned his role in our lives, so his pronouncements have **legitimacy** and alter our moral duties. The authoritarian, on the other hand, tries (unsuccessfully) to usurp power over us. The effective authoritarian may succeed in winning our compliance, but he never acquires the legitimacy that will make us feel obligated to comply. As a result, the authoritarian must continually expend time and energy enforcing compliance because he knows we will stop complying as soon as we think we can get away with it.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Vining, *The Authoritative and the Authoritarian* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986).

How can someone acquire legitimate authority in our lives? This would be a good question for each of us to reflect upon. As we have already seen, someone with deeper experiences in and knowledge of an area of human activity would be a good candidate as an authority. Parents earn their authority over their children in part from their advantage in experience. Similar advantages in depth and quality of information can come from something other than veteran status, however. Someone who has studied a topic more deeply may have earned the right to give direction to the rest of us. Or someone who occupies a key node where information flows in higher quantities might deserve to be treated as an authority. Thus, the department secretary is the authority on a wide variety of things. If she says we have a faculty meeting at a certain time in a particular place, for example, the rest of us have learned a long time ago to believe her without question. She knows, because she actually reads the faculty calendar and the e-mails announcing changes to it.

This kind of information advantage, acquired by something other than just longevity, explains a vast array of cases where you might have identified someone as having authority. Students generally believe the descriptive facts they hear from professors – what kind of lives would they lead if every single thing their professors say had to be questioned anew? The same goes for textbook publishers and (for some students, apparently) the fellow student who actually takes comprehensible notes. Members in some congregations might be inclined to believe their pastor’s take on some of the moral facts they need to know, based on the congregation’s general acceptance of the pastor’s having been called and uniquely gifted in spiritual discernment and sensitivity to the voice of God.

In fact, Harry Blamires argues that one of the unique marks of Christian life is, or at least should be, our receptivity to spiritual authority.<sup>4</sup> For a believer it starts, of course, with the authority of God. When faced with the all-powerful, all-knowing, infinitely loving Creator, there are, as Blamires says, only two options: the back either bows to acknowledge the King’s right to command and be obeyed in all things, or the back turns in rebellion and rejection.<sup>5</sup> There is no third option.

Once a Christian has accepted God’s authority, a whole host of other authorities spring to life. Some of these – Scripture and revelation, notably – we will discuss in another section. But direct human authorities are also part of the equation for most Christians. For example, the early Church, struggling to resolve tough questions about how the new faith should interact with its Jewish roots, turned to the Council of Jerusalem (as described in Acts 15) for guidance in resolving the matter. The believers understood that there was spiritual authority in the decisions of a group called and equipped by God to deal with the tensions between the Law and grace.

Christian comfort with the idea of authority extended to individuals. The label “apostle” came to be applied to certain people who demonstrated special giftedness from God. The offices of “elder,” “deacon,” and “bishop” developed early. Christians recognized that life thrust at them a wide variety of moral choices, too many for any individual to

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<sup>4</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1963), especially chapter 4, excerpts from which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 15-26.

<sup>5</sup> Blamires, from p. 36 of the *Reader*.

resolve reliably on his own. It didn't take long to realize that, for the spiritual health of individuals, and for harmony in the body of believers, deference should be given to the opinions of some of these individuals who had proven their spiritual insight. And special deference was owed in those cases where spiritual leaders assembled in councils to reflect together on the toughest questions.

We will have to postpone for a while longer a fuller examination of how spiritual authority works. For now, we need only note that a Christian recognizes authority for more than just a byproduct of experience and information, but also as a result of vocation. Some believers are gifted and called into roles which invest them with at least mild authority over others. Even the most whole-heartedly democratic denomination, possibly, of them all – the Friends – some of whom reject the idea of a professional class of ministers, still recognize the special role of “weighty Friends” as spiritually influential.

This Christian view of authority goes beyond a mere competitive advantage to the person with better information. It includes a sense of “office”, of the needs of the group to have someone playing the roles of deacon, elder, bishop, apostle, etc. Someone needs to be empowered to decide open questions of church policy, and God has provided someone to do so – the elders, or the synod, or the church council. Someone needs to counsel individuals when they are in spiritual crisis, or in general need of discipleship. There are pastors, both formal and informal, in place to meet every such need.

The idea that authority is inherent in an office, so familiar to Christians down through the centuries, is also familiar in secular life. In fact, Thomas Hobbes makes it a central tenet in his philosophy of political authority, described in *Leviathan*.<sup>6</sup> Writing against the backdrop of the sufferings of England during the dynastic (and Cromwellian) upheavals of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Hobbes argues that we have a moral duty to obey whoever succeeds in installing himself as head of government.

This sounds a lot like “might makes right”, or perhaps even the collapse of Vining's distinction between the authoritative and the authoritarian. Hobbes abhors anarchy. The state of nature, wherein there is no law and no state to enforce it, is a state of abject misery. People are defenseless in an anarchy against all those who would prey on them: the thief and murderer, of course, but also the fraud, the local strongman with his gang of thugs, and more. To survive, every person would have to provide effective means for his own defense, and use them with appalling frequency. No time would be left for education, leisure, or even economic specialization. We would live sordid, day-to-day lives, unable to even protect crops until they ripened. In short, we would be subjected to a “war of all against all” wherein “the life of man is solitary, nasty, brutish and short.”

Since this is the alternative, Hobbes places extremely high value on political stability and the capacity for imposing law and order. So the mark of legitimacy in a political regime is its ability to achieve and maintain this kind of domestic tranquility. Anyone who can do it deserves our obedience. To withhold obedience from an effective head of state is to invite revolution. There may be a limit beyond which a despot could go and be worse than anarchy, but that limit is much more remote to Hobbes than to most of his

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: 1651), especially chapters 13 and 17, excerpts from which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 9-13.

contemporaries, who (according to Hobbes) have not really thought through the implications of anarchy.

So, in Hobbes' view, anyone who succeeds in making himself king deserves our obedience, not because of superior knowledge, but because society depends on there being a king. The office itself is the source of the office-holder's authority, of his legitimate claim on our obedience. Hobbes is willing, it seems, to graft onto this basic explanation some trappings to make it more palatable, so he is not hostile to talk of the divine right of kings to rule. But he would differ with those who tie the divine right to rule strictly to family inheritance through primogeniture. Orderly succession is a good thing, but if it breaks down and a usurper takes the throne, then there is nothing magical about bloodlines. No one owes an ousted, incompetent first son of the late king any obedience if he has let himself be deposed by a crafty shirt-tail relative, or even a commoner. Success in wresting control of the state brings with it the right to claim allegiance from the citizens, so that public order can be restored as quickly as possible.

This notion of legitimate authority being tied to a particular role in the community applies to other situations, too. A police officer deserves our obedience because we all benefit from empowering someone to enforce order against our will, even if the police officer has a lower IQ and didn't finish as much college as we did. A college board of trustees deserves obedience because no institution can survive if no one is empowered – or if everyone is equally empowered, which is about the same thing – to look after its welfare. An umpire gets to call us out on strikes even in doubtful cases because the game cannot proceed if everyone feels free to make their own calls. A professor gets to write the syllabus because it's so difficult for students (who haven't studied the material yet) to know what to include, and because the class needs someone to tend to its order and effectiveness.

Hobbes, Blamires, and Vining all recognize (at least implicitly) that authority is not unlimited in any of the four forms in which it can be earned: by experience, knowledge, giftedness, or holding a necessary office. The right to be obeyed can be forfeited, they would all agree, even if they might disagree on exactly when that forfeiture occurs. So the duty to obey authority, or to believe its descriptions of the world, is a *prima facie* duty, similar in dynamic to the duty to obey tradition. The presumption that we should obey any particular authority is rebuttable, with varying degrees of difficulty depending on the case. But until the presumption is rebutted, we will encounter many occasions each day in which we are morally bound to obey someone just because of who they are.

## E. Rhetoric

Tradition and authority are sources of truth based on something someone else tells us. They are thus "heteronomous", meaning "coming from another." Although they are both the product of processes, the process is not the key to their claim to our deference. We owe a *prima facie* obligation to obey tradition and authority because of their ties to the welfare of the community.

This can seem a bit arbitrary. Note that the legitimacy of tradition or authority is not conditioned directly on either of them actually being true! While each has an ultimate

connection to truth – for example, in the winnowing out of inaccuracies necessary to survival of the community – we all know of cases where both have been wildly wrong. Furthermore, tradition and authority both have a markedly conservative cast, in the sense that they tend to preserve the status quo. And there is plenty of historical evidence that defenders of authority and tradition are willing to defend them even in the face of nearly overwhelming evidence of their error.

So it is not entirely surprising that some have tried to overthrow tradition and authority in favor of more direct, immediate approaches to truth. To a modern person steeped in individualism, the ideal is “**autonomy**” wherein each of us is responsible for finding and following truth. This view renders heteronomous sources of truth distinctly unsatisfying. They represent a lazy irresponsibility (letting others do the hard thinking for us) impoverishing both the individual (who never completely matures until he forms his own estimations of the truth) and the community (which stagnates under the weight of the dead hand of history entrenched in tradition and authority).

Although objections to the power of authority and tradition are especially strong in modern times, they are not new. The prevailing balance between heteronomy and autonomy shifts through history. Even in ancient times, autonomous objections to tradition and authority are prominent. But this leaves the autonomists with another problem: how can the individual search out truth? Given the limits of time, energy, and capacity each individual faces, what tools can we use to make our search feasible?

There are too many possible answers to include in this essay. Some are easy to ignore, due to their pervasive unreliability – astrology, for example, or tarot cards. Others have somewhat better claims to our respect, but still lead adherents into tragedy often enough to undermine their justification. (One example might be “if it feels good, do it!”, so superficially reasonable to an unsophisticated evolutionist, or an ethical egoist, but so disastrous in practice.) But this still leaves us with a sizable list: Rhetoric; Stories and Art; Empiricism; various Ethical Engines such as the market, democracy, and law; and spiritual resources such as Scripture, revelation and group discernment.

The ancient Greeks systematically studied rhetoric as something between a craft and a branch of philosophy. By the time Aristotle wrote his *Rhetoric*<sup>7</sup>, there was already an extensive literature on the topic, to which he referred and with which he sometimes took issue. Aristotle saw rhetoric as the science of persuasion, in which the practitioners aim was to change a listener’s understanding of the truth.

Aristotle operates like a philosopher when he establishes several key starting points for his discussion of persuasion. He creates a classification of three major modes of persuasion: appeals to *ethos* (the speaker’s own character as a trustworthy person); to *pathos* (the listener’s emotions); or to *logos* (evidence supporting his position). He analyzes the kinds of settings in which one might want to persuade – in court during litigation, in the assembly as it debates legislation, and in public in displays of oratorical skill.

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, excerpts from which you can find in the Reader along with comments and reflections questions by Phil Smith, pp. 27-44.



Even though he weaves several other bits of rhetorical theory into his discussion, Aristotle didn't make sharp fundamental value judgments about the alternatives facing an orator. For example, he thought ethos, pathos and logos might work differently in different situations, and made suggestions about how a person might think through the strategic benefits of each. But, with the stated goal being persuasion, the only factor that he treated as relevant was the likelihood of one approach to be more effective with the audience than another.

If Aristotle was willing to put appeals to pathos on roughly the same level as logos, and thus encourage his students to cut corners with the truth if it could win them the argument, how can we offer rhetoric as a tool for truth seekers?

First, remember the settings Aristotle had in mind for the rhetorician's craft: the courts, the legislative assembly, and public entertainments. In the latter, the point would be putting on a good show as much as shedding light on the truth. Skillful use of tactics we might dismiss as fallacious in other settings could win admiration in these less formal conditions.

But in the court, and in the assembly, speakers had to anticipate serious, even desperate, opposition. On any important issue, someone was likely to be looking for the weak points in one's presentation, and then to expound upon them in excruciating detail once you finished. This forced a bit of accountability into the process. Furthermore, as a truth-seeking exercise, the orator was not the focus of a court trial or an assembly debate's truth-seeking function. The judge or jury in court, and the voters in the assembly, were charged with making a decision. They had to sort through the points made by each side, discerning where the truth lies.

Rhetoric then becomes a tool in a truth-seeking process, even though each speaker might (according to Aristotle) fairly decide to appeal to emotions or their own character rather than just to the objective facts. Perhaps some appeals to ethos and pathos are connected to truth – after all, a trustworthy counselor is more likely to steer you right than a nefarious one. But the main corrective is the rhetorical setting: adversaries lined up ready to puncture any weak points.

Put a speaker in a competitive setting and you immediately get improvements in the search for truth. Presenters have every reason to be thorough, leaving no potentially advantageous point unexamined – they will know their topic thoroughly before they are done. They have to be organized, with each part of their arguments rationally linked to the others in a way that helps the listener keep up with where the speaker is going. Presenters also have to be clear, to think through and refine their ideas until the listener is unlikely to misunderstand. All these factors tend to purify a speaker's message in ways that will mostly serve truth (although not without exceptions).

The most powerful truth-seeking aspect of adversarial argumentation is in how it equips the listener. With two or more speakers highly motivated to bring every possible fact and argument to bear that might help their cause, the listener can expect to be treated to a thorough exposition of the situation. If one side succumbs to the temptation to leave out a telling but inconvenient detail, the other side has every incentive to bring it back in. Competitive rhetoric then has the function, for the listener, of providing a powerful

summary of the situation, both in terms of factual descriptions of the reality of a problem, and moral prescriptions about what should be done about it.

This ancient insight is still in operation today. Debate competitions are still based on the premise that skilled adversaries trying to be persuasive will generate powerful light on the truth. Our adversarial process in courts is another, very advanced, application of the same insight. The old Catholic practice of appointing a devil's advocate to ferret out weaknesses in claims of sainthood was also premised on the power of adversarial rhetoric. And, of course, our political system is steeped in it, from debates during campaigns (direct and in person, or indirect through media and campaign brochures), to speeches on the floor of the legislature or in the public arena as various decisions loom.

This dynamic of harnessing contradictory ideas to push us toward truth underlies the concept of the **dialectic**. According to one common description, a dialectic process comes into being when one proposition about truth (the *thesis*) is opposed by another proposition (the *antithesis*) which contradicts it. The intellectual tension created by the two propositions creates an opportunity for *synthesis* – for the discovery of a new proposition which is truer (works better, is more accurate, etc) than either the thesis or the antithesis.

Mohandas Gandhi built his theory of active nonviolence on this idea.<sup>8</sup> According to Gandhi, conflicts offer exceptionally valuable opportunities for finding the truth. Each side's position can be treated as propositions about the truth. The truth-seeker's strategy, then, is to help create a third proposition that combines the strengths of the two contesting views. This third proposition should represent a step toward what is actually True in the deepest, most transcendent sense. (Gandhi advocated nonviolence in large part to avoid succumbing to the temptation to destroy one's opponents and thus remove the creative tension so crucial to the dialectic process.)

Perhaps you will smack your forehead at this point and wonder why you haven't taken advantage of adversarial rhetoric in your personal decisions. Still wondering whether you should put weed-killer on your lawn? Why not invite your environmentalist friend and your sister-in-law who works for Ortho over for dinner? You could always have that lawn-obsessed neighbor join the party for dessert, along with the guy from church who is always trying to fish in the Willamette, if matters are still unclear by then.

## F. Stories, Art, and Empathy

At one point in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle is trying to illustrate what he means by natural law.

For there really is, as every one to some extent divines, a natural justice and injustice that is binding on all men... It is this that Sophocles' *Antigone* clearly means when she says that the burial of Polyneices was a just act in spite of the prohibition: she means that it was just by nature.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Gandhi's Way* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), especially chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* from page 38 of the *Reader*.

Note what Aristotle is doing here. He is offering as evidence for his attempt to describe reality something that happens in the play *Antigone*, a work of fiction. He thinks someone seeking the truth can gather useful evidence from a made-up story.

Of all the potential sources of truth we will examine here, this may be the most problematic: the arts – including literature, music, and the visual arts. The problem with consulting the arts is in the nature of the medium. Works of art are human creations. Artists do not have to pay attention to the real workings of the real world to create their works. And even if they do try for some level of verisimilitude, there is no guarantee that they get it right.

Consider some of the following examples where consulting a human creative product has been disastrous for the truth seeker:

- \* Hitler listening to the music of Wagner and hearing in it confirmation of the superiority of the Arian race.
- \* A young man taking pornographic literature as his inspiration for going on a raping spree.
- \* Caricatures of ethnic minorities or military enemies, encouraging treatment of these people as sub-humans.
- \* Joe Camel enticing children to look forward to smoking, or beer ads promising promiscuous delights galore to their customers.

There does not seem to be any limit to the unreliability of the artistic genres as truth-teachers. Defenders of some crafts – pottery, for example – may be able to avoid the charge that they or their colleagues have spread lies, but this is related to the low textual content of some lines of art. If an art has text, if it says something to someone, it has been used to lie.

Can we dismiss Aristotle's invocation of *Antigone* as an attempt at pathetic rhetoric – that is, as an appeal to our emotions through an attractive fictional character? Or can we rescue the arts and literature as sources of truth?

Henri Nouwen tells in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*<sup>10</sup> about his encounter with a work of art, in this case a painting. Nouwen first saw the painting in the form of a poster in an office in Trosly, France. He was captivated by its depiction of an embrace between an old man and a boy, especially by how the man's hands touched the boy's shoulders which, he said, "reached me in a place where I had never been reached before." His host told him it was a reproduction of Rembrandt's painting depicting the moment when the prodigal son returns to his father.

Nouwen's interaction with Rembrandt's painting was not a one-time affair. Over the next several years, he saw it many times. As time passed, he noticed new aspects of the work. At first his observation of the younger son seemed to cut him open to learn something he had never been able to see before. In this case, it was to recognize that he felt "homeless and very tired" just as the younger son did before he turned his footsteps

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<sup>10</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Image Books, 1994), especially the Prologue and - Introduction, excerpts from which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 50-56.

toward home. For Nouwen, this was a joyous insight, because he realized that his sense of exile was self-imposed, and that he had a Home and a Father who were always ready and eager to receive him.

Years later, Nouwen found himself more attentive to the figure of the elder son in the painting, lurking off to the side and disapproving of what was happening between his father and his prodigal younger brother. One day Nouwen realized he shared much in common with this elder son, so resentful of the relatively easy paths others seemed to have in their spiritual lives.

Finally, Nouwen's attention was directed by another friend to the image of the father. The friend told Nouwen that he was called by God to be like the father, to be someone to whom others could come home and find forgiveness and acceptance free of conditions. Nouwen resisted this suggestion at first, but the painting would not let him forget it, and over time he began to see how God was asking him to grow into the father's role.

Nouwen reports his own experience, then, in which a painting was a key element in making him aware, at least three times over several years, of an array of important facts about himself. It taught him factual truth! And he also insists it helped him see better how he should live – it taught him moral truth.

You are probably already comfortable with the idea that truth lurks in images. Modern Americans are bombarded with images every day, and your generation is more immersed in them than any in history. Anyone who awoke on September 11, 2001 to images from New York City, and who watched on live television as the World Trade Center towers fell, has a direct and visceral memory of the power of images to teach factual truth.

But Rembrandt's painting wasn't a news photo. Rembrandt was not an eyewitness to the return of the prodigal son. There were no eyewitnesses, because the event never happened. Jesus made up the story. Not only is the picture a fiction, it is a fiction based upon a fiction. There is no factual truth in either Jesus parable or Rembrandt's painting. So is there any sense in which the story of the prodigal son, or a painting about the story, can be said to be "true"?

It is likely that Jesus told many stories that didn't make it into the Gospels. The parable of the prodigal son is recorded, and is one of the best known all over the world, and has been one of the most popular stories in the world for 2000 years. Perhaps it will be fruitful to ponder the reasons for the staggering impact of the story and, in Nouwen's case at least, of the painting it inspired.

Sometimes our reaction to a work of art or literature is direct and immediate **recognition**. The event depicted is just like some thing that may have happened to us. Maybe this was the case for Henri Nouwen – maybe he had at one time been welcomed back like a prodigal. Very likely many who heard Jesus tell the story immediately recognized it because they themselves had been prodigals who returned, or were parents who recognized in the father's love for his sons their own love for their children.

Nouwen knew already that God's love was infinite and personal. Perhaps Jesus' listeners did, too. But knowing something in the abstract isn't the same as knowing it directly, first hand. Jesus' account of the prodigal's return Jesus' story might have helped them connect viscerally to the reality of God's love. The language they might use to answer an exam question wouldn't necessarily change – it would still be “God loves me” – but the knowledge would be different. The story helped listeners make a connection between one thing they knew (God's love) and another thing they knew (their own love for their children) to reach a life-changing new insight.

If a story or a piece of art teaches through recognition, it's not so much a matter of the work providing new information. The work teaches mostly by helping us connect something we already know with something else we already know. This might mean we just see something new by seeing it from a new perspective, or it might mean we learn by synthesizing two previously unrelated ideas or experiences. Either way, this is an important source of knowledge about the factual description of the universe, and the moral implication of our actions.

Sometimes the story, artwork, or piece of music does not relate to our own personal experience. We have nothing in our own history out of which to make the work mean something new and valid. However, something we see in the work may help us experience **empathy** with another person's viewpoint. We get a glimpse of what it's like to live in someone else's subjective universe. This is, of course, valuable in knowing how to deal with that person, or others like him. But it is also valuable as a way of seeing aspects of the objective universe we might otherwise never see, by seeing them through another person's eyes.

We really ought to find opportunities for empathy abounding in the normal course of daily life, since we encounter others at every turn. But somehow we still need help to escape the confines of our subjective universes. Arts and stories can be powerful tools to this end.

Consider Flannery O'Connor's short story “Revelation.”<sup>11</sup> The main character, Mrs. Turpin, is not an easy target for anyone's empathy. She's arrogant, bigoted, self-righteous and loud. But when a sudden (but objectively trivial) crisis erupts in her life, we begin to see her vulnerabilities more clearly, and her major vices as her way of defending herself from her fears. We don't have to like her, but when we allow ourselves to see her life from her point of view, we catch a glimpse of where bigotry and arrogance and the rest might come from. This is valuable information, since none of these vices are disappearing from the world and we have to know how to deal with them.

But “Revelation” has more to teach us than the beginning of a handbook for dealing with bigotry. In the end, Mrs. Turpin sees that her fate is to have her virtues burned away – the very ones upon which she has built her sense of wellbeing and personal pride. We can't help but wonder if the same fate is in store for all of us. O'Connor brings us part of the way into a fictional character's subjective universe, with the result that we come to re-examine our own subjective universe, to look at our own views of ourselves and our

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<sup>11</sup> Flannery O'Connor, “Revelation”, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1971), pp. 488-509, which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 71-81.

connection to the world. Whether or not our prized virtues are doomed to be smelted out of us, a story that rattles our complacency and prompts self-criticism is a powerful tool of truth.

Recognition and empathy are straightforward aids in the search for truth since they connect us to truth about what exists which we may otherwise overlook. But Doug Campbell says there is something else going on in the creation of a piece of art, which also has a bearing on its value as an aid to finding truth.<sup>12</sup> According to Campbell, some art is not just an attempt to represent the world around us, or to tell a story. Sometimes it is primarily an offering. Like the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, such an artist is pouring out everything he has as an act of worship.

When we encounter such a work, we may find its value is not confined to whatever it may represent to us for our recognition or empathy. Rather, the heart of the work may be a window into the soul of the artist, into what she values most deeply.

J.R.R. Tolkien said something along similar lines about fairy stories, of which his masterworks *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are examples.<sup>13</sup> To Tolkien, at the root of every good fairy story is a yearning for something that doesn't exist in this world. Tolkien reports that his own interest in fairy stories as a child was tied up in large part with his desire for a world in which dragons really exist. This will not surprise anyone who has read *The Hobbit*, which derives much of its magic from the dragon lurking at the end of Bilbo's journey. Tolkien's yearnings grew in scope and depth as he matured, for yearning for something much vaster and more momentous than dragons fuels *The Lord of the Rings*.

The idea of arts as expressing deepest desires and visions cannot be attributed just to Tolkien or to fairy stories. All the arts function this way for at least some of their artists. For example, instrumental music may be hard to use to communicate descriptive facts about the world around us. But as a window into yearnings, or as an offering to God, music is as powerful a medium as any.

Do works of art that are offerings of worship or expressions of deepest yearnings do us any good in seeking after truth? Certainly they give us windows onto the soul of the artist and his private subjective universe. But do they tell us anything true about the objective universe? Tolkien thought so. He was convinced that longings of the type evoked by the best fairy stories were glimpses of Joy from "beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" – that is, glimpses of the reality of Heaven.<sup>14</sup> If Tolkien is right, then the longings that find expression in art are signposts pointing us toward both a cardinal descriptive truth (the existence and nature of God) and a body of prescriptive truth about how we should live our lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Campbell, "The Role of Art", *Voices* (March/April 1988, pp. 10-12), which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 46-48.

<sup>13</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories" in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1968), pp. 3 – 84 of the "Tree and Leaf" section.

<sup>14</sup> Tolkien, p. 68.

## F. Empiricism

These are ambitious claims to make about the most inarticulable aspects of the arts, and might be hard to confirm by other tests of truth. Many people get nervous around this kind of talk. If yearnings and offerings can point to truth, how does one go about figuring out which way they are pointing? And if different works seem to point in different directions (as they seem to do), how does one sort out which ones are pointing closer to truth? Are we left with no choice but to take the word of the artists themselves as to the degree and type of truthfulness to be found in their works?

We are all used to making decisions based on our own perceptions of our own experience. The idea that our perceptions are connected to truth can be called the “interocular inference” – that what I see with my own two eyes has to be true, and that my experiences can be safely generalized to other cases.

But there is a fundamental weakness in relying on individuals’ interocular inferences about truth: they are exceptionally vulnerable to error. People make too many errors in perception to rely on their perceptions too heavily. And people interpret what they perceive with so many distortions that, were we to rely on their testimony, we would be doomed to fall into serious error sooner or later.

Examples abound of the dangers of over-reliance on the interocular inference. After the 2004 election, news accounts reported the incredulity of voters in heavily Democratic areas (some of the famous “blue states”) who couldn’t figure out how Bush could win when they didn’t know anyone who voted for him. Sixteen-year-old drivers are notoriously unsafe because they don’t really believe that something that hasn’t happened to them can happen to them. You can no doubt think of many more, some of them embarrassing episodes of your own over-reliance on interocular inferences.

An antidote to the interocular inference is **empiricism**. Empiricism starts with observation of the objective universe, but insists on three levels of protection against erroneous inferences. First, it imposes a discipline of **careful and systematic** observation. Second, it looks with extreme doubt on any observation that cannot be reproduced by a different observer – that is, the observations need to be **intersubjective**, so that we aren’t relying on only one (possibly mistaken) observer. To this end, the empiricist values careful descriptions of methods used to obtain observations, and of measurements taken of the observations. Finally, the intersubjective observations collected by the truth-seeker need to be explained, harmonized by a **theory** that accounts for all the verified observations relating to the matter being studied. This is because the empiricist believes in cause and effect – that things in the natural order never happen without some natural cause, and never happen without having some effect on things around them. The theory explains the causes that brought about what was observed, and the effects that flow from what was observed.

The ancients valued observation, but perhaps not with the rigor of a modern empiricist. We can see that rigor emerging with the Renaissance and the dawn of modern science. One particularly telling proponent is Francis Bacon, writing in his *Novum Organum* in

1620<sup>15</sup>. He describes several ways people delude themselves by not making careful observations of the world, including the invention of overly orderly explanations that do not correspond with reality (such as limiting the number of elements to four, or assuming that heavenly bodies had to move in perfect circles) and the selective perception of events to correspond with previously adopted opinion. His solution is empiricism.

Bacon argued for empiricism to be adopted as the methodology of science. Eventually his point of view prevailed, so that by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century scientists had embodied empiricism in the modern **experimental scientific method**. For an excellent example of how Bacon's advice had been operationalized, consider Lavoisier's treatise on *Chemistry*.<sup>16</sup> Beginning with some theories derived from previous observations about the nature of the atmosphere and the behavior of various substances, Lavoisier proceeds to report on systematic experiments with air which resulted in his discovery of oxygen – including his discovery that air is composed of more than one gas, and that only about 23% of it (at most) is breathable.

At one point in his report, Lavoisier wants to ascertain how much phosphoric acid is produced in a combustion chamber. He could do this by calculating how much oxygen and phosphorus he put into the chamber and just adding those figures up. He avoids this temptation, in the best spirit of the empiricist, and explains in an exceptionally revealing passage:

...but as, in physics and chemistry, it is not allowable to suppose what is capable of being ascertained by direct experiment, I thought it necessary to repeat this experiment... on a larger scale and by means of a different apparatus.<sup>17</sup>

So he devises a new way of doing the combustion so the phosphoric acid can be directly weighed.

Here is the key empiricist instinct: if it can be measured, figure out how to measure it. You never know what might happen to surprise you. As it turned out in this case, Lavoisier wasn't surprised, so he could proceed confidently on the assumption that he was right about what was happening in his combustion chamber. But in many other cases, in chemistry and any other field, it is possible to make startling discoveries when you take the trouble to actually observe and measure something carefully even when you are confident you know what is going on.

Empiricism's power to improve our grasp of reality is not confined to the sciences. There may not be any field of human activity beyond the reach of empirical study. Even major league baseball is undergoing an empirical revolution in the last twenty years. Long dominated by grizzled managers and scouts liberally making interocular inferences, baseball finally found its own Francis Bacon figure in Bill James, whose *Baseball Abstracts* published in the 1980's prodded team managers to more systematically study the

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<sup>15</sup> Sir Francis Bacon, *Novum Organon* (1620), the full text of which can be found at <http://www.constitution.org/bacon/textnote.htm>, and key excerpts of which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 84-88.

<sup>16</sup> M. Lavoisier, *Traite Elementaire de Chimie* (1789) chapters 2-5, which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 95-109.

<sup>17</sup> Lavoisier, p. 105 in the *Reader*.



elements that go into producing a winning team. At one point, James offered this description of what he was doing in writing the *Abstracts*:

“I pick up something that somebody in baseball has said, and I ask ‘If this were true, what specific consequences would flow from that truth? If this were true, what else would be also be true.’...”

The *Baseball Abstract*, in this way, has become the focal point of the discussion of a certain range of questions about baseball. We have imitators, but they essentially fail to understand this – they think what we’re writing about is *statistics*, rather than *questions* – and thus the book continues to occupy a unique position in the baseball marketplace.”<sup>18</sup>

It took a few years for James’ ideas to infect the decision-making process of major league teams, but the transformation is now well underway. The Oakland Athletics have been under empirical management the longest, and have fashioned a remarkable record of competitive success even while constrained by tight budgets, an awful stadium, and embarrassingly low attendance. The Boston Red Sox converted to empiricism after 2001, hired Bill James as a consultant and one of his disciples as general manager, and in 2004 won their first World Series since the team sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1919.

A good empiricist would wince at the previous sentence, since it implies cause and effect where the evidence is inconclusive. Do we really know that the Red Sox’ success is due to the new empirical attitude among the team’s top executives? A good empiricist is constantly aware of the complexity of cause and effect, and the difficulty of attributing any event to just one cause. The Red Sox have been a good team for most of the last 30 years. Sooner or later a team that good would, by random chance, win the World Series. Much more care needs to be taken before one can identify with confidence the factors that caused the end of the so called “curse of the Bambino.”

This kind of caution in drawing conclusions – what we might call “**intellectual modesty**”, or taking care not to go beyond what is warranted in drawing conclusions – is a key feature of empirical approaches to truth. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, the prevailing wisdom among those who studied the distribution of power in American cities was that these communities were run by a very small group of elites, who were not only the most politically powerful, but the wealthiest and the socially most influential. These conclusions were not drawn out of thin air, nor even from seat-of-the pants reasoning by people familiar with the cities. They were the conclusions of sociologists who had done systematic studies of several cities in different parts of the United States.

But in the years after World War II, this picture of American community power was challenged by new studies, mostly done by political scientists. These studies tended to show that there were no unified elites in American cities. Those at the very top of the economic pyramid were not the same people as those at the top of the pyramid of social influence, nor were they the same as the most politically influential people. Sometimes the wealthy got what they wanted out of local governments, but other times they didn’t. And in even more cases, it was impossible to tell because the wealthiest citizens did not agree on what should be done.

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<sup>18</sup> Bill James, *The Baseball Abstract* (Ballantine Books, 1986), pp. 3-6, which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 91-94.

Political scientist Nelson Polsby tried to account for the differences in these two lines of social scientific research in *Community Power and Political Theory*.<sup>19</sup> He argued that it is not enough for those who study community power to be committed empiricists. They also have to be *careful* empiricists. He concluded that the sociological studies done before World War II suffered from a key flaw in how they were set up. Generally, these studies tried to identify individuals who were the most powerful in a community by asking people in that community to name the two or three people who ran things in the city. Polsby noted that this question assumes that there are two or three people who run things. Anyone doing the study with this assumption would be unable to recognize a city where things were not run by a small group of people. Whether or not a small group really ran things, respondents would come up with names of prominent people because the question asked for names. Because the researcher had some names, he would naturally think that he had found the elites who held the strings of power.

According to Polsby, the political scientists' studies avoided this problem. Rather than starting with the assumption that elites ran things, the political scientists tried to design studies that could as easily find there was no small elite in charge, if that were true. So they set about to actually observe who participated, who prevailed, and who benefited from a series of decisions made by local governments. If a small group of elites ran things, then there would be a small number of people who consistently participated in, won, and benefited from the main decisions made. However, according to the observations of most of these studies, no single group dominated local politics. Alliances made over one issue would break up and realign on the next one. Elites were about as likely as anyone else to disagree among themselves about what should be done. Even where they did agree, the wealthy and the socially influential could still face political defeat if the issue grabbed attention outside elite circles.

Our interest in Polsby has very little to do with whether local power structures are elitist or pluralist. We are more interested in his account of the pitfalls that await the empiricist who is trying to ferret out the descriptive truth about something. It is so easy to deceive ourselves with poorly-designed observations, sloppy methods, careless measurements, or hasty conclusions that aren't supported by the data. The empiricist has to pay constant attention to these details. Empiricism is a powerful tool, and the empiricist has to be as careful with it as any user of power tools would be.

There is another crucial form of intellectual modesty and care that an empiricist has to exercise: the ability to admit error. Not only would this apply to experiments or observations that had been improperly done or interpreted. It can even apply to studies that came off well, but which end up being superseded by groundbreaking new information of the sort that force seekers of truth to entirely rethink the mental models with which they have been working.

Thomas Kuhn studied the history of these "paradigm shifts" to try to understand how they occur.<sup>20</sup> One of the episodes that drew much of his attention was the discovery of

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<sup>19</sup> Nelson Polsby, *Community Power and Political Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), especially pp. 98-121, which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 110-122.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Kuhn, "Historical Structure of Scientific Discovery", *Science* (Vol. 136, pp. 760-764, 1962) which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 123-126b.

oxygen by Lavoisier, James Priestley, and others in the period from March 1774 to early in 1777. Up until then, air was thought of as homogenous, not comprising several different elements or compounds. The discovery of oxygen required chemists to entirely rethink their assumptions about air. Once they had surmounted the mental hurdle of abandoning their view that air was homogenous, perhaps even an element in itself, chemists were unleashed to discover the other gaseous elements and to work out the chemical composition of the atmosphere. But this would have been impossible had chemists stubbornly clung to their old understanding of the “truth” about air.

Empiricists have to be modest enough to entertain the notion that things they had thought true for their entire lives might not actually be true, even though they may have had made many important scientific discoveries (and built many impressive scientific careers) based on the old assumptions. Empiricists cannot get too wedded to their own ideas, because their observations (and the theories they construct to explain them) are always subject to correction.

### G. Ethical engines<sup>21</sup>

Our search for autonomous sources of truth has brought us three vastly different approaches: rhetoric as a tool for sifting truth out of opposing points of view; the aesthetics (arts, literature, music) as a way of stepping into other people’s subjective universes and seeing things from new perspectives; and empiricism as a way of trying to measure the objective universe and pin down as precisely as possible what is going on in it. As guides for individual decision-making, these tools have a significant drawback – they ask from us a quantity of time and effort that is difficult for us to afford.

You might be able to put together an ad hoc rhetorical process for deciding whether to weed spray your yard, but you can’t do this for every decision you make. Other people have lives, too, and can’t build their personal schedules entirely around your need for help in decision-making. You might be able to find a work of art, music, or literature created by your neighbors (or people just like them) to illuminate how your yard (or the herbicides draining from it) appear in their worldview, but usually that’s going to be impossible. You might find (or even conduct) studies on the biochemistry of herbicides, the economics of property values, the allergenicity of weed pollens, etc. But even if these studies exist, they probably aren’t assembled for you in a convenient compendium, along with enough alternative studies to be sure you can draw safe conclusions.

In other words, thoroughgoing resort to rhetoric, aesthetics, or empiricism is hard work. We can only do it from scratch in the rarest, most important cases. And when we shift our perspective from your private, personal decision-making to large public issues and the infinitely complex effects they have on vast populations, we can see that careful empirical, aesthetic, and/or rhetorical study of these issues is a task mostly beyond our powers.

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<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed presentation of this argument, see Ron Mock, “Law and Market as Ethical Engines” in the *Reader*, pp. 148-174.

One of the advantages of a democratic system of government is that significant effort goes into all three of these truth-seeking methods in many of the public issues we face. Even local planning commissions for relatively small towns engage a professional planner to do empirical study of the issues connected to land development proposals. And they often take public testimony, of the rhetorical or even aesthetic kind, in public hearings. However, as helpful as these measures are, they are expensive, and always partial. Questions always seem to persist, even when the planning commission feels it has to move to a vote. The same applies to state legislatures and Congress, even though their capacity to study an issue and its impacts, and to attract public discussion, is usually quite a bit greater than a small-town planning commission.

Still, even when we acknowledge the limits on how thorough public decision-making processes can be, in a democratic system they are likely to be more robust, with richer participation from a wide variety of people, and able to draw on more empirical studies, etc., than almost any other human decision-making process. The products of public deliberation of public issues in a democratic society are likely to include more and better factual inputs, and even more thorough consideration of prescriptive inputs, than any of us can do on our own. Have you ever held a public hearing on a personal dilemma? Have the most accomplished experts on the topic in question come to your hearing? Did you get input from nearly all the kinds of people who might be affected by your decision? Did you spend many days in the collection of this information? If you can answer all these questions “yes”, you may have, for that one issue, begun to approach the quality of decision-making routinely achievable by public officials.

So, even though an autonomous truth-seeker believes the responsibility to decide is his own and can't be delegated, there is a compelling case for him to acknowledge the superior decision-making position of a public governmental body. It would be irresponsible and unrealistic of him to pretend he can do as well. If he is genuinely interested in finding truth, if that matters more to him than being able to say he came up with an answer on his own, then the autonomous truth-seeker is going to give prima facie deference to the legislative outcomes of a democratic system of government. That is, he will look to the laws and ordinances passed by agencies of his government as good guides to the prescriptive truth about what he should do, and to the descriptive truths that they assume.

How fast is it right for you to go on the highway? The legislature of your state, with input from Congress and various bureaucratic experts, as well as testimony from broad swaths of the public and the traffic safety-related professions, has already decided that question. It is unlikely in the extreme that you have conducted a study as thorough as theirs, or subjected yourself to as harrowing a rhetorical process, or considered the stories of as many victims of auto accidents (or looked at as many images). So if the sign says 55 but you go 65, what else can that be but foolish hubris on your part?

This is only a prima facie obligation. It is possible for you to conclude, rightly, that in some exceptional cases you can see better than they what is true. Perhaps you are traveling in an area where government is not democratic. Perhaps you are aware of such great amounts of corruption in the political system that its outputs are regularly skewed. Or maybe your travel needs are so extraordinary that you can be sure they were not taken into account – your passenger is bleeding to death, maybe – then you might be

justified in coming up with your own speed limit. However, be careful even here. Public decision-makers do take into account evidence they get from multiple sources about the uses of the highways for medical emergencies.

To sum up this point, **the truth seeker can get prescriptive guidance and, by inference at least, descriptive guidance from the legislation adopted in a democratic political system.** Legislation in other systems might also be offer some guidance, but without a process that forces the legislators to listen to their people or to consider competing claims of truth, the results are not going to have as big an advantage over an individual's own investigations. The more democratic the process, the stronger the prima facie presumption that the legislation is morally and factually truer than what an individual can learn on his own.

Sophisticated readers will remember, however, that ours is historically a common law legal system. That is, much of our law is not legislated by legislatures, but grows over time in the decisions of courts. Are these rules as useful as outright legislation in guiding us toward truth? Consider a bit of the history of our common law.

The origins of the modern common law go back almost 900 years. When William the Conqueror overran England in 1066, he found a hodgepodge of local laws. Each shire and village had its own judicial bodies that resolved disputes and, in the process, established the rules governing commerce and personal relationships. William's descendants, eager to establish firmer rule over this welter of localities, created a national court called the King's Bench. The judges in this court would ride circuits around England hearing cases. Their charge was to make their decisions come out the same everywhere so the law would be the same in each locality – would be a true common law for all of England.

To accomplish this, it became the practice for a King's Bench judge to make a written record of each case he decided. He would note, briefly, the facts of the case, and his decision. Thus, if he decided that a person was liable to pay for the injuries he caused when he ran over another person with his cart on a road, he made a record of this. The next time he, or any other King's Bench judge, encountered a case of a person being run down by a cart, he could refer back to the previous decision and make his next ruling consistent with the earlier one. While the reports of early cases are exceptionally brief – maybe one sentence to sum up facts and ruling – modern cases tend to have much more elaborate published opinions, complete with a story laying out what happened (as far as the judge can tell) and then an essay describing what the court ordered to happen next and why.

(You may have noticed we slipped a reference to the “story” of the case in here. This is more significant than it might first appear. Because the modern judge is never someone with first hand knowledge of the case, the account she gives of the “facts” of the case is not necessarily the same as what actually happened. This is unavoidable and not really an indictment of our legal system. In fact, the account of the facts given in a judge's opinion is treated in every respect as if it is what actually happened. Or to put it another way, the judge always rules based on the story she tells about the case, rather than on what happened. The story may or may not be partly fictional – whether it is depends on how good a job the attorneys have done in presenting their case. But it no longer

matters – the rule the judge announces is a rule covering cases like the one in the story she tells.)

This notion of looking for previous cases on a point and, where they can be found, adhering to them is called “stare decisis”, Latin for “let the decision stand.” Over the centuries, courts have gradually filled out a comprehensive system of laws just by performing their duty to decide cases. Obviously in modern times this case law has been heavily supplemented by legislation from various legislative bodies – at first the King, then Parliament, then (in the U.S.) the state legislatures, Congress, and the state and federal constitutions. Nevertheless, the common law carries down to this day, and even shapes to some extent how we understand what the rules are under modern legislation or the various constitutions.

Common law is not entirely static. Situations arise in which it is impossible to apply previous cases strictly and still come up with a coherent result. Sometimes a new case doesn't fit any of the precedents. The judge still has to decide the case, and can't do so without creating a new rule of law. Other times a case seems to invoke more than one prior case, and the judge has to decide either to pick one precedent and ignore the other, or to try to harmonize them with some new formulation of the rules. And very rarely courts will just decide that a previous case was wrong, wrong, wrong (or at least, if it was right once, it isn't any longer given what else has happened in the legal system), and the court will overrule a previous decision.

So the common law has a little sway in it. Over time, the common law changes gradually as judges try to decide cases in a changing society. The result is that the common law as we have it now is the result not only of each judges' original wisdom, but of the critical judgments of thousands of judges as they consider each other's work in a slow but powerful dialog going back nearly 900 years.

Remember also that each individual judge does not make her decision in a vacuum. She is informed by the strongest evidence and legal arguments that two (or more) parties can come up with for their own sides in the matters in dispute. That is, the judge has the benefit of the highest levels of rhetoric available in her time, brought to her by people who have studied the law and the adversarial process, have honed their crafts as professionals, and are bound to a code of honor to do their best to represent their clients as zealously as possible within the bounds of the court's rules.

So once again we have a body of work, mostly in the form of prescriptive “truths” about our duties to one another, which the honest autonomous truth-seeker will recognize he cannot match on his own. When was the last time you hired trained professionals to argue two sides of an issue with the zeal of an attorney, backed up by the subpoena powers of a court to compel the production of evidence, and devoting days or weeks to the process of compiling the evidence and listening to, and weighing, the arguments? Of course, no one can afford to do this kind of diligence voluntarily! It is why we dread being sued – the process is so expensive and disruptive we avoid it at almost any cost. Nevertheless, since this very process has been undertaken in hundreds of thousands or even millions of cases, what person could consider herself wise while giving its results no weight in her own search for truth?

So, again, **the truth seeker can get prescriptive guidance and, by inference at least, descriptive guidance from the Anglo-American common law.**

This may not sound like an exciting moment in the history of truth-seeking, but it is. We have identified two truth-engines. That is, we have at our fingertips two immensely powerful processes which draw at the very highest levels on rhetorical, empirical, and to some extent aesthetical truth-seeking fountains, and specifically generate both factual and moral conclusions. The rest of us don't have to do anything but read the readouts – the laws enacted by legislative bodies, and the decisions handed down by common law courts. They have done all the work, and we can reap the benefits.

The law, legislative and common, does not do a perfect job. It doesn't address many of the details in our decisions, the ones that don't get legislated or litigated about. It may not address our highest standards, since laws tend to gravitate toward descriptions of the minimum standards of duty we have toward one another. Nevertheless, a good place to start in deciding how weedy your lawn should be is your local nuisance abatement code, which probably has a section on lawn care. This section was legislated by the local legislature (eg, the city council) after a reasonably good truth-seeking process, one that you would be hard-put to reproduce. It gives you a pretty good idea of what the minimum standard looks like for loving your neighbor through lawn care.

Another good place to look is at nuisance case law in your state. There have probably been dozens of published opinions in your state on cases involving something like weedy lawns – maybe not precisely that question, but ones close enough for you to be able to apply the standards they articulate to your lawn. And your state cases probably refer to other state cases. If you took your research far enough, you will probably find decisions in your state that draw for their ultimate authority on cases from England that might be hundreds of years old. So your state cases that touch on lawn care and duties to neighbors are the distillation of hundreds of hours of argument and evidence which, again, you would be unable to duplicate. The case law of nuisance is another good place to look for an idea of what love for a neighbor looks like in our culture, at least at a basic level.

We might as well consider legislation in a democracy, and case law in a common law system, as **ethical engines**, since they spin out answers to questions for us without any effort on our part. They seem to do it automatically, as a byproduct of their main purposes. They work because of the way the systems are designed to incorporate massive efforts at evidence gathering, story telling, and argumentation. They do not cover every question we face, but they cover more than most people imagine. And where they do, the truth seeker has available to him powerfully-supported guidance toward what is true.

Having discovered two ethical engines, the immediate question is whether there are more. Already you may be drawn back to tradition as an ethical engine. Perhaps it is; surprising support for this proposition would come from many judges, who sometimes refer to traditions for guidance when they are trying to decide cases for which the available law doesn't provide a clear guide.<sup>22</sup> Whereas previous cases and legislation

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<sup>22</sup> See Benjamin Cardozo, *The Nature of the Judicial Process* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), pp. 58-64, for a description of how judges use tradition.

might be seen as “reasoned precedent” since they are created as a result of careful (or at least massive) reasoning processes, tradition might be described as “experiential precedent” since it arises out of the culture’s practical experiences with survival. However, as a truth-generating machine, tradition lacks a bit of the pedigree of the law, since the process by which experience gets embodied in tradition is not obviously systematic, and its self-correcting mechanisms are very slow and, apparently, somewhat hit-or-miss.

However, there is another ethical engine – perhaps the quintessential example – in constant operation around you: the **free market**.

Consider how the free market operates. People who need things shop. They only buy when they are willing to do so, that is, when someone offers them a deal they think will leave them better off than they were without the deal. Other people sell. They have stuff they hope people will want. They only sell when they are willing to do so, that is, when someone offers *them* a deal that leaves them better off than they would be without the deal. When a shopper and a seller meet and can agree on a price, a sale is made. If they can’t agree, no sale is made. All transactions are consensual: no transaction occurs unless both sides think they are better off.

Lets say you are a farmer in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. This is lucky for you, because with our diversified agriculture and ideal climate, you can choose from dozens of crops to grow. How can you know which crops to grow, in what quantities?

You might try to find this out for yourself, but none of the methods for finding truth we have discussed so far will give you very good information about how much of various crops people are willing to buy, nor whether they will buy them at prices that could earn you a profit. On the other hand, you could just consult the market. What are the latest prices people are getting for various crops? Which crops seem to command rising prices, and which are declining in price? How do those prices compare with the costs you will face to produce the crop?

Prices can tell you most of everything you need to know. High prices tell you that people want more of a crop than is currently readily available. Rising prices tell you that either supplies are declining, or people’s tastes are shifting toward that crop so that demand is increasing. Lower prices indicate the need for a particular crop is declining, at least compared to the supply.

You may be making your decision about which crop to plant for purely selfish, profit-motivated reasons. But the market helps you do the right thing anyway. It steers you toward producing a crop that people are looking to buy, more than they are looking to buy other crops. Since in a market they don’t **HAVE** to buy your crops, and they know better than anyone else what they need and how badly they need it, you know that if you sell your crops, it’s because people want or need them. By responding to market prices, then, and producing things that command relatively high prices, you can be reasonably confident that you are pouring your time and energies into something that people actually need relatively intensely, rather than foisting stuff on them they don’t really want.



If identifying what people actually need (descriptive truth) and meeting those needs (prescriptive truth) are good things, then the farmer who produces what the market demands is doing a good thing, and is serving truth.

There are quite a few objections to this line of reasoning. Markets do not function perfectly in the real world, so that some of the information they seem to generate isn't true – sometimes prices do not reflect relative demand and supply. People sometimes spend a lot of money on things that aren't really what they need, or even are actually bad for them (consider the market in Cheetos, for example, or pornography). Some people do not have the money to translate all their needs into demand – that is, to back up their needs with an offer of money – so that some needs do not get communicated to the market. And not all dollars are created equal. When Bill Gates bids a dollar, he is not bidding the same amount of value *to him* that a student nearing graduation from George Fox (ie, a destitute person) would be bidding if he offered his last dollar.

Nevertheless – the descriptive fact remains that no one person, nor (if recent history is to be believed) even any vast centralized bureaucracy, can do a better job of informing us of the general pattern of human need than the market does. As a first approximation, one faced with a decision can hardly do better than by consulting the market for information on human needs and how well they are currently being met. Selling oneself to the highest bidder is going to be a better method than seat-of-the-pants choices if your goal is to devote yourself to the greatest human need

This is only a first approximation, another case of a *prima facie* presumption. It can be rebutted. You can stumble into a situation where needs are not being translated into market demand, or where demand represents tastes for perversions rather than attempts to meet needs, etc. But the cases where you can be confident you know better than the market does are going to be rarer than most people assume. The market is another vast and powerful ethical engine, spitting out information and moral guidance automatically as a byproduct of its normal functions.

In fact, the market may be the greatest of the ethical engines. Some see in markets, and in similar processes that sometimes occur outside of the world of prices and economics, a connection to something fundamental in the universe. For example, Robert Wright has argued that the mutually beneficial consensual transaction, so typical of markets, underlies all human progress.<sup>23</sup> Civilizations which do more of this kind of thing have a huge advantage over those that order their lives based on centralized commands, tradition, or other less-flexible modes of life. Wright traces human history back toward its beginnings and concludes that at every stage, the cultures that did more consensual mutually beneficial exchange tended to outlast their neighbors, and tended to pass their ways of living onto later cultures. Wright, taking an evolutionist's point of view, even probes into pre-human history and finds evidence that plants and animals survive best when they engage in rudimentary mutually-beneficial exchange. This even accounts for the evolutionary success of multi-celled organisms, according to Wright, since all the cells in the organism benefit from exchanging with each other compared to being on their own.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Wright, *Non-Zero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), especially pages 3-11, which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 137-141.

Wright does not believe in God. But when he looks at the irresistible progress that goes with mutually beneficial exchange, he becomes spiritually uneasy. He sees in it unsettling evidence that the universe is intended to go someplace, that time really does “have an arrow”, which he finds hard to reconcile with an atheistic view of the cosmos.

For some who do believe in God, what Wright notices is stunning, but not, on reflection, surprising. Why wouldn't a God who wants us to love each other build into the fabric of Creation a principle that rewards us when we successfully meet our neighbors' needs? If this is the case, then the ethical engine functions of the market would Divinely designed, and it would not only be unwise, it would be rebellious, for us to ignore its guidance.

## **H. Revelation, Scripture, and Spiritual Discernment**

Perhaps you do not buy entirely into the argument that God built market mechanisms into creation both to teach us to love each other effectively, and to give us an ethical engine that can lead us toward truth. Not everyone does; those of us most excited about it acknowledge the need to subject it to further criticism and testing. But it does serve to introduce us to the last category of truth-seeking tools we will cover in this section: those that help us tap into the mind of God.

For once we come to believe in the existence of a loving, omnipotent, omniscient God, our human striving for truth suddenly seems perilously foolish and a waste of time. God knows already. God knows what is objectively true about the world around us. God would have no trouble describing it in perfectly accurate detail. God also knows what we ought to do about it. God's will embodies that prescriptive truth: we should do what God would want us to do.

In fact, all our striving to know the truth can easily be summed up as a search for the mind of God.

So, why not dispense with any resort to tradition, authority, rhetoric, aesthetics, empiricism, or ethical engines, and go straight for the mind of God? Let's get Truth right from its source.

There are two problems with this plan. First, God seems to have designed the world with the intent that we humans would have a morally meaningful role in it. Whereas God could easily have spelled out all truth, or just downloaded it into us at birth, we are each and all set the task of discovering it ourselves. We are born knowing very little, in some ways less than many other animals know at birth since a greater proportion of what they need to know is programmed into them as instinct. And as we grow older, very little of what we need to know comes to us in a flash of direct revelation from God. We have to experiment, study, experience, and observe to learn. Some lessons we don't seem to learn without suffering. All this seems to be created into the universe, on purpose and presumably for our own good.

Secondly, when we do receive something that might be revelation from God, we don't have a good record of recognizing it or agreeing upon what it means. Having God speak, and having all of us agree on what was said, are two different things.

Nevertheless, the Christian truth-seeker always recognizes that what he is trying to learn is already known, and that the Knower is on his side and desires that he know it, too. Thus, all the other vehicles toward truth are driven with an eye out for confirmation or correction from the Source of Truth.

Access to the mind of God might come directly, through direct **revelation**. Quaker doctrine starts here. According to George Fox, “there is one, even Christ Jesus, who can (and does) speak” to our condition.<sup>24</sup> Evangelical Quakers emphasize the New Testament teaching that the Holy Spirit was sent to be our present counselor and teacher, and is ready to teach each Christian now in the same way as it taught the heroes of the New Testament.

We have an example of how one Friend devoted his life to following the leadings of the Holy Spirit is the 18<sup>th</sup> Century American John Woolman as recorded in his *Journal*.<sup>25</sup> Woolman reports that early in his life he became aware of occasions when he felt led to speak in worship. Equally significant, he also learned that it was possible for him to overstep the Spirit’s leading and say “more than was required of me.” He learned to “distinguish the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart, and which taught me to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that pressure to rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet, through which the Lord speaks to His flock.”

Building on this experience of learning to listen to God’s promptings in worship meetings, Woolman began to bring his daily life under the same discipline. The *Journal* recounts how his efforts to stay centered in the will of God led him to change his line of work, to avoid certain kinds of transactions (including anything to do with the slave trade), to alter his lifestyle and reduce his income, and to embark on frequent missionary trips around the American colonies, including into the wilderness to visit Native Americans. The *Journal* ends with Woolman traveling in England pursuant to another call from God, where he died after catching smallpox while visiting Friends’ meetings.

Woolman’s *Journal* is still influential among Quakers and other Christians as an example of how a life might be lived by someone earnestly seeking to submit all parts of it to the searching light of the Holy Spirit. Woolman’s cheerful acceptance of inconveniences and disruptions to his family life, eccentricities of dress, awkward episodes with slave-owning hosts on his missionary journeys, exposure to disease and the dangers of the colonial-era roads: these are models and promises for others who long to be as completely submissive to the will of God.

However, early in the history of the Friends it became painfully apparent that reliance on individuals to accurately gauge God’s leadings was not always for the best. Several embarrassing mistakes, especially when one leading early Friend rode into London naked on a donkey, demonstrated the dangers of misunderstanding God’s will, or of mistaking

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<sup>24</sup> George Fox, *Journal* (London, 1694), Chapter 1.

<sup>25</sup> John Woolman, *Journal* (Philadelphia: 1774), excerpts from which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 200 - 214. Woolman is not the only Christian to break trail for us in seeking to live in the center of God’s will. See, for example, Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God*;

other urges for the will of God. Friends developed a method of group discernment to build on the strengths of individual sensitivity to God's leadings, and negate some of the dangers by subjecting those leadings to the leadings of others.<sup>26</sup>

One of the most common settings in which groups need to discover descriptive truth about the world around them, and follow the prescriptive truth about what they should do, is the business meeting. Friends have at least as many business meetings as any other group. Like most Christian groups, Friends understand these meetings to be an opportunity for the group to find God's will for their common life. Friends, however, developed an approach to conducting business which, in their experience, gave them a better chance of correctly understanding God's will.

First, Friends treat their business meetings as a species of meeting for worship. In classic Friends practice, meetings for worship are entirely unscripted. People sit in quiet prayer and listen to God. Unless God leads an individual to say something, silence prevails. Everything is avoided that might distract a person from hearing God's word for them, including songs, rituals, or pre-planned sermons. Whatever happens in the meeting is supposed to rise out of the fresh promptings of the Holy Spirit.

In business meetings, the same spirit continues. There is usually more structure, as an agenda demands attention. But the group ideally does not come into the meeting with outcomes already pre-determined. Campaigning for an outcome outside the meeting is considered a trespass on the Spirit's ability to lead directly in the meeting. Commitments made to others outside the meeting – say, to support a particular outcome on an issue – are treated as not binding in the meeting, so that all participants are as free as possible to follow the leading of the Spirit in the meeting.

Once a topic is raised for discussion and decision, the group may fall silent. The Spirit is expected to lead, and each member is expected to be ready to be surprised as to where the Spirit leads. A distinction can be drawn in this setting between group discernment and debate. A debater might draw on any of the tools Aristotle describes in his *Rhetoric*, since her goal is to persuade, to change others' minds, and to win the point. A discerner has a different goal, since she operates under the assumption that the truth God has for us is probably not entirely contained in any one person's position. Thus, to move toward truth, she and all her colleagues need to look for where God would ask them to change their views. The presumption is that to reach God's position, each of us should expect to discover at least some modification to our own.

Thus a discerner would be mortified to learn that someone had changed his position because of her skills as a communicator. A decision reached through clever campaigning or parliamentary maneuver would be a tragedy.

Whereas other forms of decision-making draw on the skills of the rhetorician in speaking, and of the tactician in politicking, the Quaker Christian discernment process calls on skills of listening. A discerner listens at two levels: to the humans speaking to her, to learn

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<sup>26</sup> For more on Friends' decision-making, see Michael J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983), especially pp. 1-7 and 22-29, which you will find in the Reader, pp. 224-230.

about their lives and leadings; and to God, who will speak routinely through human beings, even one's opponents. Periods of silence can be especially useful in a tense Quaker business meeting since they give all the members more opportunity to listen for God's nudgings and corrections.

Friends do not proceed democratically. Majority rule is not the rule. Majority rule, to a discernor, clearly has some advantages in finding truth, but also unfortunately truncates and distorts it in cutting off discernment as soon as a majority can be found, and in the kind of campaigning it encourages.

A Quaker business meeting knows it has made a decision only when it has arrived at a **sense of the meeting**. Ideally, this occurs when all hearts are clear that a proposed action is consistent with the will of God. If one person is convinced that the action is against God's will, he may hold up the meeting's decision until a way can be found that all are clear about. This is because Friends expect the Spirit to lead them all in the same direction. If one, or a few, members are convinced the Spirit is leading in another direction, this is taken as evidence that the group has not yet found the right direction. New attempts to formulate the correct course of action may be made until all can feel clear.

Clearness does not mean strict unanimity. Some may be uneasy about an action, but may decide that their unease arises out of their own personal concerns, and is not rooted in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. These people may voice their unease, but also express their recognition that it does not contradict the general sense of clarity in the group. On other occasions, those with more serious reservations about the accuracy of the group's leading will stand aside and let a decision proceed, perhaps on the grounds that some decision or other has to be made, and perhaps with a commitment from the group to keep the question open for reconsideration at a future meeting.

This practice has been extended in Friends circles to help individuals make major decisions in life. One of the classic applications of clearness is for couples considering marriage to convene a "committee for clearness" to help them confirm whether their desire to marry is in line with the God's will. The clearness committee can be used to confirm calls to ministry, steps to be taken to reconcile a broken relationship, or any other major decision.

These classic Quaker practices all assume the individual, either alone or more likely in the context of a group, can be in direct communication with God. They all assume that God will at least sometimes tell us the Truth through **direct revelation**. This is certainly not an idea confined to Quakers. All Christian groups acknowledge the possibility of such revelation, and expect it to occur with more or less frequency, depending on the group. Charismatic Christians expect direct communication to be almost a routine experience, and build worship experiences around that expectation. Catholics recognize a long history of direct revelation, including through visions. The individual receiving the revelation might be shocked, not expecting something like this to happen in their own life, but in the long view of a 2000-year-old church, the regular return of episodes of revelation is not all that surprising.

Direct revelation might come in a variety of forms. Woolman's internal nudgings and Friends' sense of clearness in meetings are not the only possibilities. Other Christian traditions emphasize more vivid experiences, including dreams, visions, and even voices. One suspects that God might tailor the means of delivering revelations to the needs and expectations of the recipient. Mary saw the angel Gabriel probably in part because God knew that would be the medium in which she would recognize that God was trying to communicate with her. Brother Lawrence's advice to practice the presence of God is intended to expand the range of ways we can connect to God.

Even nature itself can be a medium of direct revelation. "The heavens are telling the glory of God," according to Psalms 19, suggesting that we can learn descriptive truth about the Creator by studying the creation. A modern example of someone who sought truth by examining nature is Annie Dillard, as reflected in her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.<sup>27</sup>

Dillard is struck by nature's profligate intricacy – why make an infinitely detailed and variegated forest of trees to accomplish photosynthesis, when a slab of green goo might have done as well? She marvels at the depth of nature's beauty, hiding in places and sizes we mostly never see. Who is the beauty for if almost all of it goes almost entirely unnoticed? She also struggles with ferocity in nature, where a frog can suddenly have its insides sucked out by a water beetle, or a male mantis locked in coitus can find his mate eating him at the very moment of climax. How can the same God be so lavish with beauty and so wanton with suffering?

There is too much in Dillard to summarize here – you need to read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* for yourself. But here is a sample of the kind of truth Dillard distills from her intense observation of nature:

There is not a guarantee in the world. Oh your needs are guaranteed, your needs are absolutely guaranteed by the most stringent of warranties, in the plainest, truest words: knock, seek, ask. But you must read the fine print: "not as the world giveth, give I unto you." That's the catch... Did you think, before you were caught, that you needed, say, life? Do you think you will keep your life, or anything else you love? But no. Your needs are all met. But not as the world giveth. You see the needs of your own spirit met whenever you have asked, and you have learned that the outrageous guarantee holds. You see the creatures die, and you know you will die. And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life. Obviously. And then you're gone. You have finally understood that you're dealing with a maniac.

I think that the dying pray at the last not "please," but "thank you," as a guest thanks his host at the door. Falling from airplanes the people are crying thank you, thank you, all down the air; and the cold carriages draw up for them on the rocks. Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk

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<sup>27</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), excerpts from which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 191-199).

on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part.<sup>28</sup>

Dillard cheats a little, of course. Even in these two paragraphs you no doubt spot references to the Bible and several other influences outside of nature itself. There is even an oblique reference to the Koran in this passage. Dillard will take truth from wherever she can find it. Nevertheless the heart of her book is her own observation of nature and her reading about others' observations, especially from the natural sciences.

Does Dillard get it right? Are we guests, who ought to be thankful for getting to come to the party, even if the host tells us the party is over before we are ready? Do we really not need life? Is God a maniac? Are we supposed to end up like the monk: nearly rootless, fearless, finding comfort in the fact of death, and clinging to it privately wherever we go? It seems to many Christians that she is right on target. If she is right, then she has tapped a source of revelation. But if she's not, then the passage quoted above is as likely to take you into error as into truth.

Problems with spurious claims of revelation, and with interpreting revelations reliably for group guidance, have led most Christians to discount, in practice, the role of direct revelation from God. While most of us recognize it as a possibility in theory, and will pray for guidance in various aspects of our lives, we mostly expect this guidance to be inarticulate, communicated in nudges and hints. For longer-winded guidance, richer in text, believers are likely to look to the **Scripture**.

Christians vary somewhat in how they view the Bible.<sup>29</sup> Some see it as literally accurate in every word (except where the text clearly announces a passage as being a parable) and thus as good a book to study about science or history as it is about what our Christian duties are. Others question some of its historical or scientific descriptive accuracy, while still regarding it as completely authoritative in its moral truth – that is, as an unerring source of prescriptive truth about how we should live. Others think the Bible is uneven in its descriptive, or even its prescriptive, truth, although those taking the latter position would not be thought of as orthodox in many Christian groups.

For people in the first group, the Bible is a good source to learn about anything it comments on. Creation for them happened in six days (perhaps of 24 hours each) about 6000 years ago. There was a flood that covered the entire earth at about the dawn of recorded history; a day in which the sun stood still; etc. And, of course, in addition to this descriptive truth about history and science, the Bible is a fairly detailed guide to how to live one's life. Doctrinal issues among literalist Christians divide them on how closely they need to hew to the Old Testament law, but certainly any commands in the New Testament can be seen to be literally binding today.

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<sup>28</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim*, see the Reader, p. 199.

<sup>29</sup> For an interesting perspective on the authority of Scripture, read Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), esp. pp. 96-116 (which you can find in the *Reader*, pp. 178-189).

Others believers take some of the descriptive accounts as symbolic or allegorical. Thus, for example, Creation may have taken billions of years, although the Genesis account does accurately teach that God was active in every phase, and specially created human beings. The point of the story is the focus for these believers – the prescriptive “ought” (eg., we ought to be thankful to the Creator for making a good and bountiful Creation) is crucial while the descriptive details are not. Thus believers in this group might defend the notion that the account of the Virgin Birth is factually true, because they see this fact as crucial to the sinless nature of Christ and its prescriptive consequences (the need to accept Christ’s gift of forgiveness and salvation, etc.). But they might not feel so strongly about the historical existence of Job. Whether the story of Job is history or parable, it is just as authoritative as a window onto our relationship to God, and to the prescriptive truths that flow from this relationship.

Quakers have a somewhat distinctive take on Scripture. Friends start with the assumption that the same Spirit that moved in the writing of the Bible still teaches us today. One conclusion that flows from this – that Scripture and present leadings should be consistent with one another – is fairly uncontroversial among Biblical Christians. But another conclusion is more problematic: that present leadings, especially those confirmed by the clearness of a group, are as authoritative as Scripture because they come from the same source.

Note how Scriptural authority helps moderate the risks in emphasizing the authority of current personal revelation. Even though both sources of insight into God’s will are equally authoritative, since they are expected to also be consistent with each other, the current leadings cannot stray from the Bible. But occasionally a current leading will be on a point not directly covered by Scripture, or (even more likely) upon which humans have not come to agreement about what Scripture means, or (more radically) upon which the current prevailing interpretation is in error. In these cases, Christian Quakers are prone to give more attention to the current leading than to prevailing interpretations of the Bible.

Slavery is a classic example. Quakers came to clearness on the evil of slavery in stages, starting in the northern American colonies (partly under John Woolman’s influence) but spreading to the south by the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Thus, many years before the Civil War, American Quakers had overwhelmingly abandoned support for, and participation in, the institution of slavery. In doing this, they came to a view opposed by the majority of their Christian brothers and sisters, especially at first. Other Christians pointed out the Bible’s seeming ambivalence about slavery, its lack of a clarion call against it, and the long Christian tradition of holding slaves. Friends for the most part acknowledged all these factors but gave equal weight to their own sense that slavery was a sin. The main authority they could appeal to was their group’s growing spiritual clearness on the evil of slavery, which they found at least as compelling as the Bible’s near-silence. Friends were saying, in effect, that Christians had misunderstood God for generations, and that God was calling all believers to a new understanding as important (and as binding on them) as any clear command in Scripture.

The omnipotent, omniscient, loving creator God no doubt is continually frustrated with human evil. If we were in God’s shoes, we might be tempted to end human entanglement in evil by removing the barriers that make it so hard for us to read God’s mind. Factual certainty about the world around us would sure help us avoid making a



lot of mistakes. Moral certainty about what we should do would make our paths clearer. Perhaps Adam and Eve had these things available to them in their unfallen state. Perhaps they always automatically knew the biochemistry of the fruits they ate so they could balance their nutrition. And perhaps they automatically knew what God wanted them to do in any situation. If so, then our inability to see the truth any better than through a glass darkly is entirely a result of the Fall, and God's decision to hold back on giving us automatic access to all truth might be explained as a form of punishment for our sins, or as a way of protecting us from becoming too "smart" for our own good.

But it may also be that we were designed from the start to know little and be capable of learning a lot. Our ignorance costs us, and all of Creation, dearly. It must be of astounding importance – not that we be ignorant, but that we be part of our own education. So it is that revelation, the means of knowing that could render all the others obsolete and pointless, is calibrated to avoid doing so.

In the spirit of Annie Dillard, we might profit greatly from reflecting on why, when there is an omniscient God so eager to help us, we know so little and at such great cost. And in the spirit of John Woolman, we might be wise to open our entire lives to being changed by whatever truth we find, including the truth about why God keeps such tight reins on revelation.