

## **What Is Truth?: On the Need for an Old Paradigm**

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### **I. Introduction: What Is Truth?**

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to Pontius Pilate: “I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

Pilate famously responds, “What is truth?”

This question has reverberated through the ages, not least because different religions and different cultures – as Pilate’s question suggests – have presented us with very different versions of what they have called “the truth.” Muslims, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and others have fought violent battles to promulgate and defend their particular version of “the truth.”

These bloody ‘truth’ battles played a significant role in motivating the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was the hope of the early scientists and their champions to find a reliable and verifiable method of distinguishing true from false, a method based on generally available evidence that would yield truths of universal validity – truths that all informed, intelligent, and rational people would be able to agree upon.

The sciences have been hugely successful in their endeavor. Our ability to predict and control events in our physical environment has advanced immeasurably due to the employment of modern scientific methodologies. There can be no question about this.

What might be questioned, however, is whether the sort of truths the modern sciences provide are the truths we fundamentally seek. Aristotle writes, in his *Metaphysics*: “The science which knows to what end each thing must be done is the most authoritative of the sciences, and more authoritative than any ancillary science; and this end is the good of that thing, and in general the supreme good in the whole of nature.” When Jesus speaks to Pilate of “the truth” he is not, of

course, speaking of what we would think of as “scientific” truth, he is speaking of the truth concerning “the supreme good.” Indeed, it might be argued that the very success of the physical sciences has led to an obscured understanding of just what we seek when we seek “the truth.”

My contention in this essay is that we need a paradigm shift in our conception of ‘truth’ – one that will return us to the philosophical insight that the highest truths are those concerning “the good.” Let us call this “philosophical truth.” The pursuit of philosophical truth employs different methods and procedures than are offered by the sciences, methods and procedures that must be, by the very nature of what they pursue, less rigorous and reliable than those of the hard sciences. Still, to recognize the importance of pursuing these higher-order truths is, I believe, an imperative of our time. We have increasingly become a culture that – as the saying goes – knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. We know, as never before in human history, how to do what we want. Our problem is that we don’t know what to want.

How do we begin to think meaningfully about truths pertaining to “the good”? First we must endeavor to locate the domain of value within our own experience. Let us, then, turn to a consideration of this.

## **II. The Axiological Dimension of Being**

Let us imagine the following scenario: A man and woman sit across a restaurant table from one another. They have been married for many years and are now contemplating divorce. They are engaged in a tense conversation. We have been assigned the task of observing their exchange and expressing, as far as we are able, the ‘truth’ of what is taking place between them.

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that we have been asked to restrict our account, and our understanding, to what may be observed empirically; that is, to an account of their physical

interactions. We might describe what is taking place thus: The woman's right arm moves so many inches upward from the table and her fingers spread apart. The man's eyebrows tilt downward toward his nose and his head pivots on his neck from left to right. Her left hand, resting flat upon the table, begins to quiver, etc.

As for their conversation, we might give this account: His diaphragm contracts causing air to be expelled from his lungs, pass through his larynx, and escape from his mouth. This produces waves of air which spread from his mouth outward. Some of these waves strike the woman's eardrums causing them to vibrate. This vibration, in turn, causes neurological impulses to be conducted through her brain. Such impulses pass into her spinal cord and cause the muscles of her right arm to contract, which causes it to move toward her chest. Other impulses lead to a contraction of her own diaphragm and a release of air from her lungs, causing new air waves to arise and vibrate the eardrums of the man. And so forth.

Can such a strictly physical account ever reveal the 'truth' about what is taking place between this man and this woman? I think it is fairly clear that it cannot. No matter how elaborate and detailed a physical account we give, we will never be able to reveal the meaning of their exchange. What is missing?

This example makes it clear that there is another dimension of reality besides the physical, one that must be accessed in order to reveal the meaning of what is occurring. Indeed, it is only because we automatically infer from the physical account what is taking place in this other dimension that the physical account strikes us as having any meaning whatsoever.

What is this other dimension, and how are we to discover its 'truths'? Unfortunately, even though we are constantly immersed in it, we have no good name for it. Or perhaps it is *because* we are so constantly immersed in it that we have no good name for it. We take it so for granted

that we only tend to notice it when, as in the above example, we quite deliberately exclude it from our purview. Then we realize something is missing.

But we can get some idea of what is missing from the above physical account. What such an account fails to provide is any understanding of the way in which what is taking place between the man and woman *matters* to them; that is, the way in which they *care* about it. The discussion between them has meaning to them as something that they *care* about. The words they speak refer to these matters of care. This is what makes them meaningful. This caring is not, as such, a physical reality – that is, it is not anything available to the five senses. We cannot see, taste, smell, touch, or hear *caring*. Still, we will never understand what is going on between the man and the woman until we gain insight into the nature of this *caring*.

What shall we call this dimension of *caring*? I propose to call it the *axiological* dimension of being. The Greek word *axios* means worth. Things have worth to us in relation to the way we *care* about them. Something we do not care about at all will have no worth to us. So, to give it a name, let us call it the *axiological* dimension.

When Jesus says that he has come to testify to “the truth,” it is to truths pertaining to the axiological that he refers. When Aristotle writes that the most authoritative science is the one that seeks to understand “the supreme good,” it is, again, to the axiological that he points.

What is the ontological status of the axiological? What is its origin or source? This, we must admit, is a pure mystery. A physicalist might posit that it arises whenever matter configures itself into certain dynamic spatio-temporal patterns (which we call ‘life’), but we can form no conception of how or why it would do so. How could it happen that inert matter, through some rearrangement in its physical form, should suddenly begin to *care*? There seems to be nothing about matter, as we tend to understand it anyway, that could give rise to *caring*. This, indeed, is

why we must speak of caring as pertaining to another “dimension” of being. Although there can be innumerable arrangements and rearrangements of spatio-temporal forms, no such spatio-temporal arrangement, *as such*, amounts to *caring*. Caring cannot be reduced to one or another spatio-temporal form. It is something else.

Further, if we assume that something cannot emerge from something else that does not at least contain the seeds of the emergent something within it, then we must conclude that *caring*, or the axiological dimension from which *caring* springs, is somehow fundamental to being itself.

This axiological dimension has certain features that distinguish it sharply from the spatio-temporal dimensions accessible to empirical research. In particular, though we all participate in this axiological dimension (insofar as we all *care*), the quality of our participation (*how* we care), and indeed the very fact of our participation (*that* we care), is shielded from the view of others. We must infer, or intuit, the nature of others’ caring from the ways they behave, and frequently – more often than not – we understand others, not in terms of how *they* care, but in terms of how they affect *our* caring. To the extent that we do, of course, we misconstrue them.

Beyond this, whereas physical events seem to operate on mechanistic principles (i.e., each event occurs in response to conditioning prior events), *caring* seems to operate on teleological principles (i.e., we feel this way or that because of the way this or that thing affects some goal – or *telos* – we seek). Thus, if we ask why the woman cries we would not consider a mere physiological account of how moisture comes into her eyes a sufficient answer. We would need to know how events are causing her to feel the loss of something she *cares about*, something she *wants*.

Values – political, moral, spiritual, and otherwise – have their ontological basis in the axiological dimension of being. This is why the physical sciences – restricted to the investigation

of physical objects – can tell us nothing about them. The physical sciences can describe, in elaborate detail, what is occurring in the bodies of the man and the woman at the table, but they cannot tell us the *meaning* of their interactions. The axiological dimension of being is not accessible to empirical observation; it is accessible only to inner reflection. In our ‘scientific’ age, this has led some to simply dismiss it, as if it is not real. But such a dismissal is a great blunder.

Traditionally, it is through philosophy that the axiological has been rationally examined.

### **III. Philosophical Truth**

The word ‘philosophy’ is derived from two Greek words, *philia* and *sophia*. *Philia* means love, *sophia*, wisdom, hence philosophy might be defined as ‘love of wisdom.’ What do we mean by ‘wisdom’? The wise person is one who understands the *good* of life and how to achieve it. Or, to put this in the terms that we have been developing, the wise person is one who understands the axiological dimension of being and knows how best to apply its truths to our dealings with one another, and to our dealings with the physical world.

Aristotle, as Plato before him, long ago recognized the attainment of such wisdom to be the ultimate goal of the intellect. From this perspective it might be said that ‘philosophical truth,’ i.e., truth that yields wisdom, is truth in its fullness. The sort of truths provided by the natural sciences, then – i.e., truths pertaining to the operations of the physical world – would have their meaning as supplementary truths, truths that have their full significance only by reference to philosophical truth. Thus, the modern sciences are, and should be seen as (in Aristotle’s terms), “ancillary sciences”; our ability to wisely use the truths they provide will depend entirely upon our progress in attaining philosophical truth.

This is not in any way to denigrate the value of the physical sciences. It is, rather, to place their value in its proper (axiological) context. Our knowledge of the physical world has *meaning* and *value* for us only as it pertains to the axiological, i.e., only as it pertains to our *caring*. This is simply a tautology. To lose sight of this, quite simply, is to lose sight of what we are about.

Again, this is an old insight. We see a remnant of this insight in the fact that we still call those who have attained the highest level in any academic discipline, “doctors of philosophy.” The implication of this phrase is that the highest attainment in any discipline is not just the attainment of knowledge, but of wisdom, in that particular field. But, of course, this understanding of the meaning of “Ph.D.” has long been lost, just as philosophy itself has long been sidelined in academia.

If we are to intelligently explore the axiological dimension of being – i.e., the values and meanings by which we live – we must recover our respect for the place and role of philosophy in our intellectual pursuits.

#### **IV. The Centrality of Philosophy**

As things stand now, philosophy has come to be thought of as something of a ‘boutique’ study for those with extra time on their hands who wish to amuse themselves by dallying in it. This is a dangerous misconception of the significance of philosophy – dangerous precisely because it is through philosophy that we rationally apprehend and critically examine the basic values by which we live.

Let us take a simple example. In the *Declaration of Independence*, Thomas Jefferson writes: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of

happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

The first thing to note is that this is a *philosophical* statement. The *truths* to which Jefferson refers are truths pertaining to the axiological dimension of being. The truth-status of this statement itself can only be assessed philosophically. There is no scientific test by which we can determine whether “inalienable rights” exist. To the extent that we restrict our understanding of ‘truth’ to the scientific, then, we must dismiss this statement as meaningless; it asserts nothing that can be examined in a scientific manner.

But, of course, this statement is far from meaningless; it is a primary declaration of the basic, axiological, truth-claims on which the United States is founded. Only a philosophical examination will permit us to understand and assess these claims. As our culture becomes more and more philosophically illiterate, we lose our ability to engage in such an examination. We thereby lose intellectual access to the very values by which we live.

Of course, the nature of philosophical inquiry is such that we cannot hope to achieve the kind of certainty with respect to philosophical claims that the hard sciences provide. *But that is not a good reason to abandon philosophical investigation.* On the contrary, the limitations of philosophical claims, and the implications of these limitations for how we should dispose ourselves toward them, are themselves important philosophical issues to address.

In a brief article such as this it is not possible to enter upon a detailed examination of how philosophical inquiry should proceed (which is yet another philosophical question). My aim here is simply to argue that it *should proceed*. We ignore philosophy at our great peril. Philosophy is not a “boutique” subject for those with extra time on their hands. Philosophical inquiry is



essential to our self-understanding, both as individuals and as a society. As such, it is essential to the health of civilization.

## V. A New (Old) Paradigm

What is required, then, is a return to a rather old understanding of what ‘truth’ is. In particular, we require a renewed appreciation for the axiological dimension of being. Such an appreciation entails the recognition that the axiological is *ontological*, i.e., that it is a feature of reality as such, and not just some odd peculiarity of ourselves.

As I write this I am struck by how strange it is that I should *have* to write it. That we have lost sight of the ontological status of the axiological testifies to the extent to which we have come to see ourselves as alien to the reality from which we spring. The universe – so the materialist conception suggests – is a great pile of insentient things, blowing about hither and thither. Sentience, in this view, is an accidental and superfluous byproduct of insentience. Where has *caring* come from? What is its ontological basis and status? Materialism doesn’t so much fail to answer this question as fail to *ask* it – as if the question itself simply does not occur to it.

The late Stephen Hawking, for instance, spent his brilliant career working on what he called “a theory of everything.” The “everything” of which Hawking spoke, however, did not include Hawking himself. In truth, there can be no comprehensive “theory of everything” that does not take into account the axiological dimension of being. Until we have understood this aspect of reality, we have, quite simply, *not understood*.

Can we explore the axiological dimension “scientifically”? Sam Harris and others have suggested that we can.<sup>1</sup> But much depends here on just what we are going to mean by the word “science.” Of course, there are the psychological, political, anthropological, and social

“sciences” that may be said to explore the axiological in various ways. This is true. But it must be noted that, given that our only immediate access to the axiological is through inner reflection, these sciences cannot be strictly “empirical” – if by “empirical” we refer to that which is observable through the senses. These “human” sciences span the border between the strictly empirical and the philosophical; we are able to understand their findings only by reference to a prior understanding of human caring.

This means that we can’t effectively explore the axiological ‘scientifically’ without radically revising what we mean by ‘science.’ Rather than do so, we would do better to return to an old paradigm that sees science itself as one branch of philosophy. Indeed, the original term for what we now call “science” was “natural philosophy.” This was in recognition of the fact that the physical sciences, in their ways, also reflect human caring – insofar as they arise out of our concern to understand, and to live well within, the physical world.

What is needed, then, is not to reduce the philosophical to the scientific (as Harris proposes), but to bring the scientific back within the philosophical fold, by recognizing science as one *mode* of philosophical inquiry. We need a restoration of the Aristotelian insight that the ultimate study is one that seeks “the good.” Every other study has its place and purpose as “ancillary” to this one.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Sam Harris’s book, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (Free Press, 2011).