

Truth at Tempe Preparatory Academy

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I. Complexity of the term “truth”

II. Simplicity of its function

III. Two examples of truth in the Western Tradition

A. Truth is objective; and two objections.

B. Human individuals have unique value.

IV. The challenge of truth (Key quotations from this section are reproduced below. Some of these quotations, and the argument of this paragraph, are from C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*.)

V. So what? Truth at Tempe Prep

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Some quotations:

Socratic discussion ( from Michael Strong, *The Habit of Thought*)

When I ask a question, I don't want any particular answer. I want [students] to think the issue through and to present to the group whatever is the honest result of their thought. It is much more important that the answer be truly theirs than that it correspond with a particular answer given by others. . . .

While I am not the arbiter of truth in the group, whatever answer the students give is submitted to the critical judgment of their peers . . . Many teachers and students alike . . . believe that, merely because the leader is not telling the students what is right and wrong, there are no right or wrong answers. I do not offer my opinions as to right or wrong answers, not because such answers don't exist in seminars, but because I want the students to determine if a right or wrong answer exists. *In seminar, as in life, each individual must determine who or what to believe, including whether or not there is a truth, for himself*' (emphasis added).

Truth and education:

“The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments.” (C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*)

Plato: “I term, then, the goodness that first comes to children ‘education.’ When pleasure and love, and pain and hatred, spring up rightly in the souls of those who are unable as yet to grasp a rational account; and when, after grasping the rational account, they consent thereunto that they have been rightly trained in fitting practices:—this consent, viewed as a whole, is goodness, while the part of it that is rightly trained in respect of pleasures and pains, so as to hate what ought to be hated, right from the beginning up to the

very end, and to love what ought to be loved, if you were to mark this part off in your definition and call it 'education,' you would be giving it, in my opinion, its right name."

Aristotle: "We need to have had the appropriate upbringing—right from early youth, as Plato says—to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education."

St. Augustine: "What is really loved, in men who deserve to be loved, is love itself. For, we do not call a man good because he knows what is good, but because he loves it."

John Henry Newman (from *The Idea of a University*): "Our nature does not at once reach its perfection, but depends, in order to it, on a number of external aids and appliances. Knowledge, as one of the principal of these, is valuable for what its very presence in us does for us after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end."

Some interesting articles:

McBrayer, Justin P. "Why our children don't think there are moral facts." *New York Times*, 3/2/2015.

Morson, Gary Saul. "Why college kids are avoiding the study of literature." *Commentary*, July/August 2015.

Pullmann, Joy. "In the common core era, families flock to its opposite." *thefederalist.com*, 9/8/2015.

Robb, Robert. "Without a strong foundation, Ariz. education will not improve." *Arizona Republic*.

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"Goodness, Truth, Beauty." "What is truth?" "We hold these truths to be self evident." "You can't handle the truth!": From deep philosophy and profound theology to popular culture and the most informal conversations, the word for and the idea of truth occupy an essential position. Our problem at the outset of examining this phenomenon is that, besides being ubiquitous, truth in human experience is, or is regarded as being, diverse, complicated, apparently contradictory, and even ultimately unknowable. We could interestingly examine the phenomenon of our experience of truth by merely inspecting various purported examples of it as they have played their part in human cultures. Some such examinations will appear later in our discussion tonight. To embark on them now, though, would be to bypass the interesting preliminary question: given the apparent diversity and complexity of truth, why have human beings given it a single, unitary name? What is the simple function that is implied by that name? How can understanding it help us, and how can misunderstanding it mislead us? Another way of asking this same question with respect to present company is, why does the word "truth" appear in Tempe Prep's motto, and what are the consequences of that appearance for our students?

Before we begin to discuss the topic of truth, it will be helpful to note the double reference of the term. In some places in our discussion it will seem that I am using "truth" to mean a property of a certain sort of language. Other times, I will seem to be speaking about the object to which that language points. In fact, the word "truth" can be used to mean both the mode and the object of knowledge, that is, what is affirmed and the language by which it is affirmed. Thus, if I say, "It is true that 'all men are created equal,'" I mean both that the words 'all men are created equal' have the property of "truth" by virtue of their relation to reality, and also that the state of affairs in the world is such that "all men are created equal" describes it. We do in fact use the word "truth" to refer both to a property of certain language and to the state of affairs that language describes.

So, I mentioned above that I would identify the unitary function of the word "truth." What is that function? Simply this: "Truth" is our collective name for the reference points by which we interpret our experience. Let us consider how fundamental and necessary a requirement such naming is. We enter in our first minute of independent life a world that most would not choose, a world of confusion, strangeness, and violence in which we begin our days by being slapped by a stranger wearing a mask. We soon begin to acquire data points, such as, when I cry, I am fed. Then we are learning willy-nilly from life's three great

teachers, experience, authority, and reason. But it does not take long to realize that some things we thought we knew prove unreliable and that other people claim to know things that we know are false: that Little League umpire's wrong call on our slide into third base still stings with the understanding it brought that life and the world are not necessarily what we think or want them to be. In the light of this uncertainty and unpredictability, compounded by our occasional reflections about what life's experiences mean, and what, if anything, they are worth, those acquired data points that hold their validity become all the more precious to us. As with us, so with our society, and the human race: whatever our disagreements, our awareness and hope that there are permanent things out there to be found lead us onward. The term "truth" allows us to name those things and anchor those data points in our individual and social discourse such that we can locate ourselves, compare our bearings with fellow sojourners, and move towards further progress. That is its purpose.

Truth is defined profoundly and essentially in that particular line of thought that we at Tempe Prep call the Western Tradition, and that definition helps give the education offered to students here the distinctive character that it retains. The very concept of a Western intellectual tradition, though, is questioned and criticized in both intellectual and popular culture, so some explanation of it is necessary. For us at Tempe Prep, the "Western Tradition"

is a shorthand designation for the line of thought and culture flowing from and symbolized by the three cities named on our school emblem, Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. Privileged in the Tempe Prep interpretation of this tradition are Greco-Roman philosophy and literature, Judeo-Christian moral philosophy and metaphysics, and European high culture. When we call this multiform intellectual and cultural spectrum a singular "tradition" rather than designate it with the arguably more accurate plural "traditions," we are not making a triumphalistic oversimplification or logical error, but are emphasizing the coherence and complexity within the tradition, attributes that are implicit within and essential to our curriculum, as a few examples will show.

Two truths that animate both the Western Tradition and the curriculum of Tempe Prep will serve to illustrate the essential position and productive consequences of truth in our cultural dialogue. My first example describes the nature of truth itself: truth is objective. My second example asserts human importance: individuals are uniquely valuable. If these propositions, that truth is objective and that human individuals have unique value, seem obvious and trivial to us now, a quick look at their function in our history will revise our understanding of their potency.

My first example of truths essential to the Western Tradition is that truth itself is objective, that is, it ultimately exists independent of human observation. Let us

first consult Socrates about what this might mean. Socrates teaches that in some pre-existent state, human beings possessed a full awareness of reality that is lost upon birth. Not only was an understanding of "absolute equality" previously held, he says, "but [also] of beauty, good, justice, holiness," and "all which we stamp with the name of essence . . . all this we may certainly affirm that we acquired before birth." Socrates, on his deathbed in this scene, goes on to say that he is looking forward to returning to this realm where he can once again know the real truth, unclouded by terrestrial uncertainties. There are three points to notice here: First, truth for Socrates existed in external, objective form, outside of himself; Second, it was difficult, if not impossible to learn on earth; finally, it was surpassingly valuable. Parallel to this lies the Christian story: as John the Evangelist describes it, "The Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." In the Christian narrative the truth not only exists in another realm, but its essence is born a man in order to enlighten a benighted world. As for Socrates, the truth of the Christian gospels is described as both ultimately valuable and ultimately unobtainable in the world as it is: it takes God himself effectively to deliver it. To the truth of Socrates and the truth of the gospels I will compare a third truth, that

expressed in the book that founded modern science, Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* of 1687. Here the basic physical principles of the universe, most of which are still axiomatic for physicists and which have been redundantly supported over the centuries since by countless observations and experiments, were laid down in a single book. Although Newton's scientific achievement stands magnificently alone, philosophically it moves along the current of the Western Tradition: as in Socratic myth and Christian story, Newton's truth is excruciatingly difficult to obtain, precious to have, and objective in its independent existence.

Two important and interesting objections to the objectivity of truth must be considered at this point. One of them pertains in a practical way to Tempe Prep. It is this: do we not encourage students to think independently, as in their participation in Socratic seminars, where they each decide for themselves what the truth is? Extending the logic of this question some ask: since all human beings ultimately have to decide on their own what truth is, is not truth ultimately what we each think it to be? How then can we call it objective?

To answer the first question, how Tempe Prep Socratic seminars relate to the idea of objective truth, I will call on a witness who explains it much better than I can: this is Michael Strong, a compelling advocate and practitioner of Socratic seminar education. Strong explains,



When I ask a question [of students in a seminar], I don't want any particular answer. I want them to think the issue through and to present to the group whatever is the honest result of their thought. It is much more important that the answer be truly theirs than that it correspond with a particular answer given by others.

So far, Strong sounds as if he is advocating intellectual free for all. That is the opposite of the case, though. He continues:

While I am not the arbiter of truth in the group, whatever answer the students give is submitted to the critical judgment of their peers . . . Many teachers and students alike . . . believe that, merely because the leader is not telling the students what is right and wrong, there are no right or wrong answers. I do not offer my opinions as to right or wrong answers, not because such answers don't exist in seminars, but because I want the students to determine if a right or wrong answer exists.

Strong concludes, "In seminar, as in life, each individual must determine who or what to believe, including whether or not there is a truth, for himself." Following Strong, Temple Prep Socratic seminars teach students not that there is no common, objective truth, but how to seek it.

A second objection that I have mentioned to the objectivity of truth is the deduction that, since we all must ultimately decide for ourselves what is true, then truth must finally be what we each think it is. This perspective on truth is not so much wrong as it is incomplete: as individual, responsible human beings, we all are indeed in the position of deciding what is true. However, our individual beliefs about truth, though objectively real as mental states and profoundly important for our own self-definition, are not the whole story, and to

think they are is to confuse our limited knowledge of the truth with the whole truth. Galileo said, and got in a lot of trouble for saying, that the earth revolves around the sun. Many of course believed the opposite at that time. My point is that the earth was orbiting the sun before, during, and after this dispute was going on, irrespective of what anyone believed or said about it. This planetary example illustrates the relation of the totality of truth to each of us. The consensus of the Western Tradition is that the truth is bigger than we are, and that it is the privilege and responsibility of human beings to go out and find it. That is what we teach at Tempe Prep, and what we try to inspire our students to do.

My second example of a truth definitive of the Western Tradition is that the individual human being is uniquely valuable. As reflected by the Hebrew Psalmist's meditation that "[God] didst form my inward parts" and "weave me in my mother's womb," the value of the individual human life is affirmed by the Judeo-Christian tradition on the grounds of divine creation, and thus possesses individual value and consequent responsibility as a significant moral agent. Therefore, in the early modern period when a political system suitable to such valuable and accountable individuals was being conceived, it was appropriate if not inevitable that spokesmen for that tradition such as St. Thomas Aquinas would begin to advocate for democracy. Thomas says,

This is the best constitution, a happy mixture of kingdom, since one person rules; and of aristocracy, since many govern by reason of their virtue; and of democracy . . . since rulers can be chosen from the people, and since the choice of rulers belongs to the people.

Thomas's endorsement of democracy, in fact sounding strongly like a representative republic, points us on toward Philadelphia, 1776. The document written there founds what was to be the most spectacularly successful political revolution ever mounted on the premise that "all men are created equal," a statement whose implications combining human rights and moral accountability fired it with political incandescence. The truth of Thomas Jefferson's great assertion (and of its author's sincerity and intentions) has been tested, questioned, and criticized since he wrote it, but here I will only refer critics to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, who both endorse it at face value in their greatest speeches. What is unquestionable is that the presumption that every single human life is valuable as affirmed by Jefferson proceeds directly out of the beginnings of the Western Tradition, and that it lies at the heart of modern political democracy.

But the Western Tradition reveals not only rich deposits of truth. There is also a sharp challenge for educators and parents to be found among them, and I will conclude this talk by describing Tempe Prep's response to it. The challenge is put in statements like this. Aristotle describes the educator's task: "We need to have had an appropriate upbringing--right from early youth, as

Plato says--to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education." St. Augustine wrote, "What is really loved, in men who deserve to be loved, is love itself. For, we do not call a man good because he knows what is good, but because he loves it." C. S. Lewis sums it up: "The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments." What challenge does our tradition lay before us, parents and teachers of Tempe Preparatory Academy? It is this. Our task is not finally to teach our children and students the truth; it is to teach them to love it. At Tempe Prep we accept this challenge. How do we meet it?

Let me digress first on how we do not meet it. Our students do not memorize long lists of stuff for AP tests. Our classrooms do not revolve around the use of high technology. Nor do we force our curriculum onto the Procrustean bed that is the latest data driven reform model. None of those things won us the excellence and the recognition that we have earned in the past, or that we are still earning now.

What is the most important element of Tempe Prep by which we encourage students to know and love the truth? We teachers try to offer engaged and engaging teaching. Maybe sometimes we succeed. But our teaching is not our greatest strength. We lead students through the highest quality curriculum, an immersion in great books. But our curriculum

is not our strongest asset. We create the conditions for students to discover the truth for themselves in Socratic seminars, and to help others find it. But Socratic seminars are not our greatest strength. Tempe Prep's essence, what really makes it what it is, is our school culture: the belief and confidence of our faculty and administrators in the value of what we do and how we do it; the trust of our students, newly arrived or veteran, who buy into our program and work so diligently to reach the high goals we set them; and the support of parents like you who encourage your students not only to learn but to find their learning valuable. That belief and confidence that is at the heart of our school culture, belief and confidence shared by teachers, students, and parents, is what makes Tempe Prep the powerful educational force that it is, and that ultimately moves and empowers our students to understand the Western Traditional vision of truth, beauty, and goodness. May that vision be conserved and honored at Tempe Prep, now and in the years to come.

