HOW TO DISCERN TRUTH IN THE MIDST OF
CULTURAL DISSONANCE & DELUSION
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One of my overriding rules of conduct, namely, maxims, in my life is to pursue moral and intellectual excellence in my daily life, believing that the "good life" is dynamically related to knowing and practicing that which is true.[1] Truth is to shape my character and conduct whereby both desires (inward conformity) and duty (outward obligation) are harmonized into a way of life that not only expresses virtue, but also enables one to both fully live life, free from the entanglements of poor choices, and to discover what others often fail to see. In fact, the ordinary details of life become extraordinary as one looks for truth. Thus, seekers of truth relish not in only in anticipation of a potential future, but also in the present experience as he or she examines, engages, and interacts with expressions, manifestations, and consequences of truth.

Naturally, one may ask how I am defining "truth." Simply put, my definition of truth is that which corresponds to reality, identifies things as they are actually are, can never fail, diminish, change, or be extinguished must be able to be expressed in logical propositions (logical), and is sourced in the God of the Bible who is the Author of all truth. I take it that the truth of a judgment consists in the identity of its content with a fact; it is a "true-truth." So, when I look at the Grand Canyon, I'm not seeing a copy or picture of the Grand Canyon in my mind, I'm actually seeing the Grand Canyon.

Notwithstanding, the pursuit of truth can be difficult given the amount of competing truth-claims being made in this information-saturated world by some of the most academically qualified, brilliant, mesmerizing, popular authorities and representatives, and intellectual, emotional, and spiritual movements that come and go. Moreover, these truth-claims, which are expressed in a wide variety of voices (e.g., loud, soft, striking, and subtle) in multifarious ways (e.g., entertainment; imagery, and media) are often dissonant, jarring, and inharmonious. The cacophony of these truth-claims can leave one terribly cynical in outlook, numb to all that which one holds dear, and tone-deaf to truth-claims that are important for aesthetic and existential aliveness and vitality, freedom, integrity, healthy interpersonal relationships, both personally, collectively, and culturally.

Competing claims of truth not only exist all around us, but can also be expressed from within. We can generate our own illusions and delusions because we do not want to acknowledge and embrace what is true. We violate what we already know to be true. Deception and duplicity is in our nature. All too easily we can become divided souls, inflamed by such vices (bad habits) as pride and self-righteousness. For example, an arrogant person not only dismisses the truths offered by others, but even suppresses what he or she knows to be true.

Interestingly, as we lie to ourselves with each layer of denial, rejection, or falsehood, we eventually become enveloped as a whole by deception, shaping us in ways we never thought

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[1] I appreciate the insights of Aristotle, Aquinas, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, and Louis Pojman in the area of virtue ethics and virtue theory. See my paper on Aretaic Graded Absolutism at www.prshockley for an understanding of my personal model of ethics.

possible. So altered can we become by our own lies, that we are last to recognize reality as it is… and unfortunately, for some, the recognition of what one has done comes too late. For example, one's spouse willfully ignores the fact that the marriage is in serious trouble… until the spouse leaves. Denial of the facts can be very costly. What was once so dear to us has been snatched away by our own vices. Therefore, the negative consequences of embracing illusions and delusions are too great to not know and embrace the truth-even though knowing the truth may be painful.

I have also come to the realization that my understanding of truth-claims are affected by my biases, namely, fixed presuppositions that do not change unless extreme duress is applied, preunderstandings, namely, moldable influences that come and go (fluid-like), and the existential struggles and longings of my soul. Coupled with the environment in which I am embedded, whereby I feed off my context and my context feeds on me, how I can decide or determine which truth-claim which is most honorable, reliable, and trustworthy?

Yet, I whole heartily confess that I have a deep and enduring longing for truth, an existential hunger that has never been satisfied by following gifted personalities, pursuing earthly pleasures, or delighting in experiences from a variety of contexts (e.g., foreign cultures). Blaise Pascal must have made a similar discovery when he wrote this thought down in his classic work, *Pensées:*

> We desire truth and find in ourselves nothing but uncertainty. We seek happiness and find only wretchedness and death. We are incapable of not desiring truth and happiness and incapable of either certainty or happiness (401/437).[2]

I have found from personal experience that the claims which I have discovered to be "truly" true, I have experienced qualitative enrichment, nourishment, and pleasure which transcends the temporal. It has not only benefited my own personhood, but also those who are in my sphere of influence, whether they are familiar or unknown, intimately related or strange, friend or foe. When these truths are inculcated or instilled into my character (assimilated), these truths not only spill out into my habitual way of seeing and doing, qualitatively enriching my community, but they also become tools or resources to engage my inquiries.

The seven-fold criteria I personally use to examine truth-claims (which have proven to be most enlightening, enriching, and meaningful to me given the contexts in which I move, act, and have my becoming) are extrapolated from the insights of philosophers like William H. Halverson and Winfried Corduan.[3]

First, truth-claim or worldview must be **logically coherent**, that is, the truth-claim or worldview must be free of internal logical inconsistencies. For example, if one is told that one is spiritually incomplete without God, it must harmonize with what I already know to be true about both spiritually incompleteness and completeness.

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[2] Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 48.
[3] William H. Halverson, *A Concise Introduction to Philosophy*, third edition (New York: Random House, 1967, 1972, 1976), 363; Winfried Corduan, *No Doubt About It: The Case for Christianity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 72-79.

Second, a truth-claim or worldview must be **empirically adequate**, that is, there must be no single fact or realm or realm of facts that cannot be accounted for within the context of the proposed view. A fact is something that actually exists; it has objective reality'; it is a provable concept. For example, the hunger for transcendence is empirically evident among the world's adherence to religious worship (e.g., the amount of and adherence to religion).

Surprisingly, this need for transcendence is commonly expressed among naturalistic thinkers such as John Dewey, Victor Frankl, Eric Fromm, and Bertrand Russell. Consider this observation from Walter Kaufmann. He states, "Religion is rooted in man's aspiration to transcend himself.... Whether he worships idols or strives to perfect himself, man is the God-intoxicated ape."[4] Jean Paul Sartre readily confessed, 'I need God.... I reached out for religion, I longed for it, it was the remedy. Had it been denied me, I would have invented it myself."[5] In a letter to Lady Ottoline, Bertrand Russell wrote:

> Even when one feels nearest to other people, something in one seems obstinately to belong to God... -at least that is how I should express it if I thought there was a God. It is odd, isn't? I care passionately for this world and many things and people in it, and yet... what is it all? There must be something more important one feels, though I don't believe there is.[6]

I personally wonder if Friedrich Nietzsche's longing for comfort in view of his disbelief in God's existence, is because he knew within that God does exist. It seems empirically valid that for every innate desire, there is a real object that can fulfill it. A dog feels hunger, food can satisfy. Likewise, following a similar idea that C. S. Lewis advocated, namely, we have an innate desire for God. If we really need God, then God probably really exists. Therefore, God really exists.

Third, the truth-claim or worldview must be **existentially relevant**, that is, the truth-claim or worldview must be pertinent. In other words, this truth-claim or worldview must have an important, evident bearing on the matter at hand. For example, will placing my trust in God, fill the deep emptiness of my soul, allowing me to experience what I have existentially longed for all these years, namely, love (to truly be loved and to love in return), lasting fulfillment, ultimate meaning and purpose, and lasting relief, joy, and satisfaction-no matter how difficult life becomes. Corduan offers an interesting example regarding the relevant test for truth. He writes, "...if Buddhism and Christianity both raise the question of how to make this a better world, but then it turns out that Buddhism only directs us away from the world towards non-existence, Buddhism might not pass the test of relevance."[7]

Fourth, the truth-claim or worldview must be **workable**. If something works, then it is true. Though there are problems with this as the sole criterion, itself, e.g., a lie may be workable, the bottom line is that if something is true, then it works. To be sure, one does not have to embrace a consequential form of ethics or become a pragmatist in order to consider, discover, or observe what consequences a truth-claim or worldview may generate. In fact, one of the benefits of recorded history is that we have over 2,000 years of ideas and their consequences upon humanity and biological and sociological environment and the

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[4] Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, 355, 359.
[5] Jean Paul Sartre, *Words*, 102, 97.
[6] Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1968), 125-126.
[7] Corduan, *No Doubt About it*, 74.

trajectories they generate. We do not live in a vacuum. Thus, I believe it is helpful to consider what can be generated by truth-claims and worldviews.

Fifth, and related to the third criterion, relevance, and fourth criterion, workability, the truth-claim or worldview must be able to be lived out; it must be **viable**. If some idea or worldview cannot be lived out, then it is not worth while. Though this criterion of viability is a negative test, it is worth using. The question becomes, can one live this truth-claim or worldview out? If not, then it is suspect and perhaps valueless as we strive to live life in a physical world that oscillates between moments of stability and instability within the context of knowing that life itself is vaporous; it is here today and gone tomorrow (Ecclesiastes). Stated differently, living for what matters most becomes all too important knowing that life is vaporous like steam from a hot cup of coffee. In fact, the test of viability helps clarify our values, pursuits, and plans.

Sixth, does this truth-claim or worldview possess explanatory power in the area of comprehensiveness? Is this truth-claim weighty, substantive? Does this worldview pull all of life together?[8] Does this truth-claim shed light on other known inquiries, claims, insights or discoveries?

And seventh, does this truth-claim or worldview possess an **aesthetic and moral quality** that meaningfully improves or degrades that which good, honorable, and noble? Does it generate virtue or vice, contribute or degenerate one's well-being and the good of the community? Does it satisfy, conforming to, and enriching our conscience? Or is it counter-intuitive, extracting the best parts of our personhood.

In sum, when I apply this seven-fold criterion, namely, the criteria of (1) internal coherence, (2) empirical adequacy, (3) existential relevance, (4) workability, (5) viability, (6) comprehensiveness, and (7) aesthetic quality, to truth-claims and worldviews I encounter, I have come to the realization that I am better able to discover and discern that which is true and false among all the competing truth-claims and worldviews that exist in our world today.

Since I desire, especially in view of mistakes I have made and seen in others, to be ever so careful not to assimilate an opinion into my worldview that might affect, degenerate, and hinder my quest for experiencing the "good-life," distract me from my devotion to God, or deteriorate my responsibility to care for the best interests of others (not necessarily what they want but what the need), applying this seven-fold criterion to truth-claims and worldviews is very valuable.

When I consistently and diligently inculcate, that is, instill "true truths" into my very lifestyle whereby truth actually becomes second nature (habituated in what I desire, think, will, and act) and desires and duties are harmonized, everyone around me benefits; lives are dynamically enriched.

Finally, when I use these tools to evaluate truth-claims and assimilate "true-truths" into my lifestyle by means of diligent practice with the purpose that it will become part of my identity), God is glorified by my character and conduct. This theme of character and conduct becomes all too important not only because I am held accountable before God for the life

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[8] Ibid., 77.

that I live and the choices I make, but also because truth emanates from and finds its ultimate source in Him.