Absolute Truth?

Gene A. Scapanski, S.T.D.

The question, "What is truth?", is ancient, perennial and... loaded. Socrates was given a hemlock cocktail for encouraging the youth of Athens to challenge the accepted truths of their tradition; Plato envisioned truth as the apprehension of pre-existing ideals; Aristotle perceived truth as the congruence of the mind's image with existent being. At his trial before the Roman procurator, Pilate mockingly asks Jesus the Sophist's question, "What is truth?"

Until the sixteenth century there were different modes of arriving at truth but general consensus that objective knowledge of reality was possible. In this "pre-modern" period, superstition and conflicting visions of existence were common, but each tribe or culture was enveloped in its own shared-visions of reality and either didn't encounter other views or, when faced with competing world-views, usually went to war to eliminate them. The religious-political wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are good examples and signaled the Renaissance in an exhausted Europe.

The Enlightenment project proposed to do away with superstition and faith-based knowledge and to establish a universal understanding of reality founded on rationalism and the scientific method. The Enlightenment initiated the "modern" period which dates from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The fundamental understanding of the rationalists was that reality could be known (only) empirically and that there was just one possible answer to any given question. With this "truth," they believed, came the power to control reality and to subdue it to the service of progress.

Post-modernism

The current age (roughly since the 1960s) is somewhat tentatively characterized as the "post-modern" period—a negative naming (until a better label comes along) of what no longer is. The change from "modern" to "post-modern" came about with the advent of globalization, a mid-twentieth century phenomenon made possible by air travel, communications technology, international commerce, tourism, and migration. In the mid-twentieth century, previously identifiable societies (especially in the West) almost overnight were intermixed and their members overexposed to the confusingly complex pluralism of diverse peoples and cultures. The effect was culture-shock and a sense of loss in contrast to the previous security of local worldviews and values.

Walter Truett Anderson defines “post-modernity” as “... a major transition in human history, a time of rebuilding all the foundations of civilization. ... Surrounded by so many truths, we can't help but revise our concept of truth itself: our beliefs about belief. More and more people become acquainted with the idea that... truth is made rather than found.” Anderson goes on to say that while truth is now seen as “socially constructed,” this does not mean there is “nothing out there.” There is an objective world that is not of our creation. Truth-claims, on the other hand, are always propositional. They are contained in...
sentences made up of human language which are freighted with human experiences, feelings, and perspectives. Truth-claims are, in fact, human creations.

As a theologian, I find myself on a mid-ground between the extreme post-modern relativists on the left and the far-right fundamentalists—defenders of “absolute truth.” Reality has objectivity and logic. Unfortunately, our truth-claims, both scientific and religious, have been overstated in the modern period. Jacqueline Grennan, former president of Webster College, summed it up best when she said that truth, by nature, is infinite. Our minds are finite. Therefore, the only truth we will ever possess will be finite truth. And if science has taught us anything, it has taught us that the only truth we ever possess is in answer to the questions that we ask. The challenge, therefore, is to ask ever more and more refined questions.2

I like the analogy of the four blind persons encountering an elephant for the first time. The first person comes up against the vast side of the elephant and thinks an elephant is a wall. The second has his arms around a leg and believes an elephant is a column. The third, at the trunk, perceives the elephant as a vacuum. And the last, with his hands around the tail, believes an elephant is a rope! Each comes at the objective reality with his or her own perspective and biases, and each, alone, can comprehend but partial truth. Like a centrifuge, the increasing diversity and the accelerating pace of change in this “post-modern” era threaten to blow apart the human community and spin it off into chaos. We witness this threat not only in the tensions between east and west, or north and south, between Muslims and Christians, or capitalists and socialists, but also within our growingly diverse local communities and churches, political parties, and institutions. In an age of seemingly endless diversity, the only way to keep the human community from flying apart is to deepen the center.

The “center” is found in our common humanity, in profound respect for the Other, and humility regarding our truth-claims. Even, and perhaps especially, for religious people is this virtue essential. Religion has always been susceptible to being used for political purposes. Believers claim to possess the font of truth, the Creator, and to have privileged insights into the meaning of life. Yet even doctrine is couched in human language. As such, it is human, limited language, inadequate to express the mystery of divine revelation. If the “center” is to hold it will be on the common belief in the inalienable dignity of all human beings and on their fundamental kinship and commonality. The “absolute truth” about objective reality, by nature infinite, at best can only be approached by a diversity of perspectives in a mutually critical but civil dialogue that reverences the fundamental dignity of our fellow travelers on this quest. All of us are smarter than any of us—and only together do we survive.


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The Curious Case of Recurring Philosophies

by Curt Hillstrom

Except for a couple of brief intervals, the Minnesota Independent Scholars Forum has hosted a Philosophy Study Group for all of its nearly twenty-five years. As its coordinator for the last dozen years or so, I have marveled at the variety of opinions people express at our meetings. (Perhaps this should not be surprising. After all, the history of philosophy is cluttered with widely divergent ideas.) I recently had extended conversations with two of our members. These two have worldviews which were arrived at through considerable reasoning, although the conclusions they have come to are quite diverse.

Even though Phil majored in physics in college, he was never quite satisfied with the scientific explanations of the universe. Yes, scientists can tell you that magnets attract, and they can even use sophisticated mathematics to predict exactly how it will happen. But they cannot ultimately explain how magnetism works. Even after fancy theories of electromagnetic waves and quantum particles, there seems to always be another level that science needs to go to to provide a more adequate explanation. After college Phil worked at a variety of jobs, including ones dealing with computers. Impressed with the power and flexibility of these machines, he concluded that the universe works much the same way. What we regard as the natural world is actually a virtual world. The laws of the universe work the way they do because that is the way that God programmed the cosmos. Human beings are like characters in a video game, manipulated not by some evil or indifferent entity, but essentially by themselves. That is, by their souls, who exist in a different world—the real world—with God. Goals, drives, hopes, and ambitions lie with the soul, but the soul is constrained in this operation by the virtual character it controls. Mental illness, physical limitation, or an unfavorable environment is something over which the soul does not have control.

Rich, by contrast, has no trouble accepting the world we experience as an independent, objective reality. But to determine exactly what this world is, and to come to some kind of general agreement about it, require careful reasoning and precise procedures. The best of these procedures is the scientific method. This involves carefully collected data and well-tested hypotheses to come to conclusions which, unfortunately but inevitably, are always heuristic. Nonetheless this procedure has acquitted itself well over the last five centuries. Critical listening and Socratic reasoning can also give us confidence in the probability of something being true. The emphasis here is on probability, not certainty. And when it comes to gods and supernatural powers, these can be pretty well eliminated by Occam’s Razor, which awards the less complicated system the honor of being most likely true, as well as the lack of any objective way to verify such powers.

**Similarity to Enlightenment philosophy**

At about the same time I was talking with these gentlemen about their beliefs, I was also reading about Enlightenment philosophy. One thing that struck me about these two diverse ways of looking at the world was how much they paralleled the dominant philosophies of the Enlightenment: rationalism and empiricism. Phil’s philosophy would be the rationalist one. Dissatisfied with scientific explanations, he, like the rationalists, used his mind, imagination, and experiences to posit a whole new system that he felt more comfortable with. His worldview is unorthodox; some would probably call it bizarre. But is it really so different in this respect from that of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the influential Enlightenment philosopher who came up with the idea of monads? According to Leibniz, a monad is a point in space (though he denies that there is anything like space as we presume to know it), an indivisible entity with, essentially, just a long list of experiences. A human being is one sort of monad. Monads do not physically interact with each other, though we seem to since our experiences are coordinated with the experiences of other monads through the pre-established harmony created by God.¹

Rich’s philosophy would, of course, represent empiricism, since he is, simply enough, an empiricist. He feels that what we know comes basically from what we experience in the world around us: the sights, sounds, and other phenomena that reach our senses, along with the data that we obtain from our scientific instruments. The mind is important in utilizing this data and turning it into theories and useful predictions, but the mind cannot reliably go beyond what this data tells us. Reason by itself does not contain any magic kernels that, simply through contemplation, can be expanded into philosophical insights of profound importance. Unlike Phil, Rich feels that science has done a marvelous job of explicating the universe. According to Rich, the scientific method is far superior to what even a brilliant mind can come up with on its own.

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Recurring philosophies continued from previous page

While the coincidence of talking to Phil and Rich at the same time as I was reading about Enlightenment philosophy led me to see these parallels, it soon became apparent that this dichotomy between rationalists and the empiricists has always existed, though they have not always used those names. It is more like a division between, roughly (very roughly), believers and skeptics. The former are people who look at the world and say, “This can't be all there is!” and promptly begin looking for, and finding, the meaning of things beyond the obvious. Reality is not appearance. Skeptics, on the other hand, are people who look at the world and say, “Ok, this is what we have, and any claims about something beyond this can be reasonably justified.” Their philosophies try to deal with the world as it directly appears to us. This doesn't mean that skeptics have no beliefs or theories, just that their beliefs cannot transcend what can be confirmed from experience.

Perhaps the clearest example of this split is between Plato, with his eternal Forms which epitomize everything from circles to goodness, and Aristotle, who rejected the Forms and, by fourth-century BCE standards, did some pretty good science. But the split starts even before that time, as philosophical questions first began to be raised in ancient Greece. Pythagoras and Heraclitus argued for, respectively, a mathematical mysticism and the universally controlling principle of logos, while Democritus and Empedocles presented physical elements (atoms for Democritus; earth, air, fire, and water for Empedocles) that defined the world for them. Later, during the Roman Empire, Saint Augustine became the first great Christian philosopher (in the process adapting Heraclitus’s logos), while the Epicureans and Stoics resolved problems on how to live on an earth that holds the only life we have.

After the Enlightenment a particularly interesting example of the split showed up in the nineteenth century. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel believed that mankind’s pursuit of this reality-beyond-mere-appearance (for Hegel another logos) is the driving force that, along with a law of historical process, will ultimately reveal this Absolute. Karl Marx then “turned Hegel on his head” and proposed a historical process in which labor and the laws of economics will eventually create an earthly workers’ paradise. But one has to be careful with these broad generalizations. There are philosophers who are hard to categorize. Still, as Bertrand Russell commented regarding one’s attitude toward God, either you believe or you don’t.

**History and philosophy**

Significantly, there have been times in history when either the believers or the skeptics have gained political control. In medieval Europe Christian philosophy so dominated that anyone who advocated a philosophy that was significantly at odds with the Scholastic ideas of the time risked losing their freedom to present their opinions, their position, or even their life. Copernicus waited until he was on his deathbed to publish his theory of heliocentric astronomy; Galileo was forced to apologize and placed under house arrest for agreeing with Copernicus; and Giordano Bruno met the ultimate fate at the burning stake for his outspoken ideas of a universe, ideas contrary to those held by the church. In this environment, while the church provided succor for the souls of citizens, the overwhelming majority lived in appalling poverty. So little scientific or philosophical investigation was allowed that this period has come to be known as the Dark Ages.

More recently, communist revolutions, inspired by Marx to hurry along the workers’ paradise, occurred in many countries. Once in control, the communists employed their interpretation of the scientific method (including Marx’s economic theories), to determine how things should be done. The church was suppressed; capitalism and many related freedoms were constrained. The citizens, while guaranteed the material necessities for a reasonably comfortable life, were left with a kind of spiritual void.

The leaders of both medieval Europe and twentieth century communism genuinely had the best interests of the populace at heart. But the believers did not want the skeptics to undermine the real truth, and the skeptics did not want the believers to infect the public with preposterous ideas. To thrive, a society needs both. When the believers are allowed to present their case without fear of suppression; when the skeptics are allowed to critique the believers; when the religious and the artistic are allowed to ensnare the people; when the scientific and the technical are allowed to propose and test their ideas—only then will a society exist which can shelter and feed its citizens as well as care for their souls. Such an ideal society may be historically inevitable or it may not. Regardless, it is one worth pursuing.

“The idea of the universe as a computer or an information processing system has been around since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Phil says the most recent proponent is Seth Lloyd, whose book, Programming the Universe: a Quantum Computer Scientist Takes on the Cosmos (Knopf, 2006), makes the same argument, though without any God.

Curt Hillstrom is the convener of the MISF Philosophy discussion group, which meets monthly. For more information about this group, to which all are welcome, contact Curt at <curthillstrom@hotmail.com>.
The Search for Authoritative Information in the Information Age

By Thomas Eland

Many of my college and university colleagues bemoan the explosion of the un-authoritative, un-edited information that is now available on the internet in the form of blogs and wikis. They assume they have a sympathetic ear when talking to me since, as a librarian, they consider me a guardian of “quality” information and knowledge. They are often surprised to learn that I do not share their concerns and that I am a supporter of blogs and wikis and other open forums of community-generated information. They are also surprised to learn that I do not consider any information to be objective or unbiased, even information from the so-called “hard sciences.” It is not that I consider all information equal or of the same quality. It is just that I don’t accept the myth of objective truth and knowledge proposed by Enlightenment rationalists or by certain religious authorities. Scientific naturalism is shaped by an underlying worldview, as are the various forms of theism and religious naturalism. The questions that scientists ask or don’t ask about the natural world are shaped by their worldview; therefore scientific results are biased by the questions asked and not asked as well as by the instruments used (see Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions).

This is not to say that I reject objective truth completely. I am open to the idea that there may be objective truth, but I am an atheist when it comes to the claim that any mortal, or group of humans, can know that truth. I certainly reject the idea that those holding privileged positions in societies (i.e., academics, professionals, government officials, corporate and religious leaders, journalists, etc.) have special access to truth or that their ideas are automatically more credible than those of “average people” simply because they are recognized “experts.” Often the information and research produced by expert elites merely reproduce a world that benefits the interests of those elites.

New York Times is elitist

The New York Times is a case in point. It is often held up by the professional elite classes as an example of high quality objective journalism. Many librarians and academics certainly look to it as the definitive source for news. They may admit that the paper has been somewhat tarnished in the past few years but usually consider this a momentary lapse.

I take a different view, siding with Upton Sinclair (The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism) and Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (Manufacturing Consent: A Propaganda Model of the Media). Sinclair, Herman, Chomsky, and I view the New York Times as a newspaper of elite opinion. That is, the Times chooses and frames stories within the consensus of elite opinion. Sinclair, Herman and Chomsky convincingly document that the Times’ claim to publish “all the news that is fit to print,” should be altered to read: “all the news that elite opinion makers consider fit to print.” The very tagline used by the Times demonstrates the propaganda function of the paper. The Times staff is well aware that the paper sets much of the news agenda for the rest of the nation’s newspapers and news outlets. If one only reads the New York Times, or if one reads it with the assumption that it presents a neutral or objective perspective, then one will internalize the perspective held by U.S. elites. While that perspective is a valid part of our knowing what is happening, it is limited and biased, providing only a partial view of the world.

The belief in objective information sources goes beyond journalism. Most of us look to encyclopedias and scholarly research journals as objective sources. The argument goes that because these experts write the material subject to editorial and peer review, the information is trustworthy and accurate. While this statement is often true, it does not guarantee that the information is always accurate, true, or objective. Extensive research has exposed the inaccuracy, bias, and outright falsification of scholarly research published in peer-reviewed journals and “quality” reference resources. Add to this mix the free-for-all of the Internet, and one needs to grapple with the question: What information can be trusted in a world where everyone is an author, and the old trusted institutions are no longer considered reliable?

Alternative press, alternative answers

My answer to this question is that nothing has really changed. The old trusted resources are as biased and lacking in objectivity as they always were. It is just that more people have come to realize their biases and are less willing to grant them the same authority as in the past. I consider this a good thing for a democratic society. The explosion of self-published information on the Internet, for example, is simply a modern version of a vibrant alternative press that has always played an essential part

Continued on the following page
in American history. Roger Stiemmace does a wonderful job of documenting the role and power of the alternative press in his book, Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America. Dissident and alternative publications have always presented a very different picture of American politics, economics, and cultural and religious life from that found in the dominant and authoritative press. These dissident sources of information, while often small in circulation, had a very influential role in shaping American opinion on issues such as the abolition of slavery, women's equality, war and peace, religion and spirituality, sex and love, education, science, and economics. These publications were opinionated, often strident, and mostly upfront about their biases and positions on the issues. They were very much the predecessors of today's web logs, or blogs.

**What is a blog?**

**What exactly is a blog?** Wikipedia ("a multilingual, Web-based, free-content encyclopedia project, ...written collaboratively by volunteers, allowing most of its articles to be edited by almost anyone with access to the Web site") defines a blog as:

"...a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order.

Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. Most blogs are primarily textual although some focus on photographs (photoblog), sketchblog, videos (vlog), or audio (podcasting), and are part of a wider network of social media.

The term "blog" is derived from "Web log." "Blog" can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.

As of November 2006, blog search engine Technorati (http://www.technorati.com/) was tracking nearly 60 million blogs.

Blogs give people voice on a variety of topics. In a world controlled by large hierarchical organizations, including a consolidated corporate media, blogs are a vehicle for people to communicate their thoughts and ideas to others without censorship. They provide a platform for creativity and spontaneity, and like any truly democratic forum of communication, they can be raucous, offensive, and inaccurate. But they can also be insightful, unique, and inspiring.

**What is a wiki?**

The same holds for wikis, which are web sites that allow visitors to add and edit content themselves. Wikipedia is a wonderful example. It embodies the belief that together people have a wealth of knowledge and information that can be shared without the need for "expert" gatekeepers to validate that knowledge. Because Wikipedia has been so successful in providing relatively accurate information on a tremendously wide variety of topics, it has come under fire by many "experts" who see it as a threat to their gatekeeping role. An excellent example of this negative response is found in the October 27, 2006, issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education. An article, titled "Can Wikipedia Ever Make the Grade?", reports that many academics find Wikipedia upsetting because it does not accord them a privileged place. Academics are free to write and edit articles on Wikipedia, but they are treated just like everyone else—Wikipedia does not distinguish or privilege their knowledge. Academics who don't outright reject Wikipedia argue that it is up to them to "rescue" Wikipedia and transform it into a "quality" source of information. Such an argument exemplifies the arrogance of elites and their belief that it is their right and duty to direct the thoughts of the less educated and less enlightened.

So what do I advocate as far as information sources are concerned? All information and knowledge do not have equal weight or credibility. Nor is there knowledge or information bearing a divine imprint. All information and knowledge are biased, limited, and fallible. As citizens we must develop a sense of our own place in the world. We must develop a moral, political, economic, and religious/spiritual sense. We must contemplate the type of world in which we wish to live and live in harmony with those views. In order to develop a reflective life, we must read broadly and listen attentively. We must think for ourselves and resist the temptation to rely on established experts for our thoughts and opinions. While the Internet can be a source of spurious information, it can also provide access to unique information that was difficult to find in the past. The Internet will not make us wise or intelligent creatures, but it does offer us the opportunity to seek out and reflect upon the wisdom and folly of the world without leaving our homes. It also allows us to read, reflect, and contribute to the never ending human discussion without the need to go through expert gatekeepers.
Who Controls Information?

by Mary Treacy

One positive thing to be said about our national deciders is that they have a healthy regard for the power of information. In the old days we library types naively waved banners touting “Information Power!” The idea of capitalizing on information as a powerful, if abstract, force for positive change was refreshing—smart people, good information, wise decisions. There was an implicit theme about “Power to the People.” Something along the lines of Jefferson and Madison.

In the early 1980s Harlan Cleveland, best known in these parts for his tenure at the helm of the Humphrey Institute, laid out a framework for thinking about information as a resource with unique properties that don’t fit the grid. Cleveland’s piece, “Information as a Resource,” first appeared in 1982 in *The Futurist.* In it, Cleveland first tackles basic definitions, including the definition of information. He starts by quoting T. S. Eliot’s hierarchy, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” He invokes his University of Minnesota colleague, Yi-Fu Tuan, who observes that “the difference is one of order of complexity. Information is horizontal, knowledge is structured and hierarchical, wisdom is organismic and flexible.”

Focusing on the information as a resource, Cleveland argues that a society based on information will look very different from one based on raw materials and heavy manufacturing. The uniqueness of information as a resource lies in that fact that it is

- transportable at least at the speed of light;
- substitutable for capital, labor, or physical materials;
- shared among people;
- not a drain on our resources;
- diffusive and hard to contain;
- and finally, information shared is

information expanded (like a kiss, he tells us).

Twenty five years later, we laud the clarity and optimism of Cleveland’s thesis. At the same time, we struggle as individuals and as a society with the dark side of information—permutations; misinformation; information stifled, skewed, bought, warped, subverted, choked, and turned against the voting public. Though information as a resource is unique, it is not benign; rather we live in world in which information is created, shaped, spread, collected, and twisted to serve the interests of a power structure that is only too well “armed for action.” Although we are witnessing an explosion in the amount of and access to both data and information, real knowledge eludes us.

Information relates to truth

Citizens of virtually every democratic nation operate on the assumption that information relates in some substantive way to truth. In reality, it’s a treacherous route from information to knowledge to wisdom. Bombarded as we are by information presented in every possible format, replete with color, sound, texture, action, and now olfactory attributes, we remain vulnerable, as much victim as master of information. We lack the time, the experience, and

Continued on the following page
Information control  concluded from previous page
perhaps the will, to probe those basic characteristics of
information profiled by Cleveland.

Still the struggle with information may be a necessary, if
insufficient, first step. It may be folly to grapple with the
philosophical concept of “truth” absent some exploration
of its information component. One place to start is with
the mundane queries posed by a paranoid—or a prepared
—electorate.

—Who pays? Who monitors? Who reviews?
—Who sets the information agenda?
—What didn’t get out? What wasn’t asked?
—Who was excluded?
—What is the connection between the medium
and the message?
—Or between the message and the delivery system?
—Where are the filters?
—Who operates those filters—and who pays them?
—Where do informed citizens hone essential
information skills?
—If information is so important, who is paying
attention to information per se?

The next step
Just this month I had the opportunity to represent
the Minnesota Coalition on Government Information
(MnCOGI) at the national gathering of affiliates of the
National FOI Coalition. This was an amazing gathering
of journalists, state government agency staff, federal
advocacy groups, librarians, and others—all grappling
with an exhausting array of challenges—not so much with
the details but with our collective capacity to deal with
this resource of inestimable power. Clear to me is the fact
that the challenge to the “information society” is to craft
collaborative organizations, support research, and take
time to think about this elusive, but essential, human (not
just technological) challenge. It’s the dawn, not mid-day, of
the info age.

1. Harlan Cleveland, “Information as Resource,” The Futurist,
2. Ibid, p. 34.
3. Early in the 1980s when Joan Durrance wrote the primer
on the topic, Armed for Action, her innocent subtitle was
“Library response to citizen information needs.”

Mary Treacy is convener of two complementary and
long-standing coalitions, one focused on access to
government information and the other on information/
telecommunications policy, particularly at the state and
local levels. The two topics are inextricably related, both
requiring informed public policy so that public purposes,
rather than technology, determine the nature, the impact,
and the involvement of the public. These collaborative efforts
began under the auspices of Metronet, a library network, but
have expanded to include a broader constituency.

History and Hollywood: What One Group Read, Saw, and Discussed
by Robert Brusic

Many movies carry subtle messages of social and
political significance, and some offer rather
forceful perspectives on broad public issues... Hollywood’s interpretations of American history can make
a significant impact on the public’s thinking about the past.”
A small but voluble group met several times during the past
winter and spring to consider the implications of these views
written by Robert Brent Toplin in History by Hollywood: the
Use and Abuse of the American Past (p. 1).

The Mayflower
Three films were viewed and matched with three
works of historical writing for purposes of comparison
and contrast. The conversations, once ignited, proved
to be lively, entertaining, and critical. One matched pair
concerned the experience of our early American forebears.
The book was Nathaniel Philbrick’s The Mayflower; and the
film was the 1952 color epic Plymouth Adventure, starring
Spencer Tracy and Gene Tierney. During the film’s initial run one film critic noted that the “drama of the pilgrims’
crossing (is) a bit flowery and presumptuous but it remains
a sensible movie, excitingly sea-battered, well-acted, with
some interesting characterizations interlocked in reasonable
conflict, and it harms history not one iota.”

Critics in the discussion group, over a half-century later,
observed that the movie was indeed flowery and it took
some non-pilgrim romantic liberties. Philbrick’s book, on
the other hand, was a solid bit of historical writing, giving
insight into the dynamics of the early days of Plymouth Colony. It was a story we thought we knew but really did not. Especially instructive was the author’s telling of how
the first generation of English settlers and native Americans
reached a workable if not amicable arrangement for living
with each other in the land. But only a generation later that arrangement was tragically destroyed on both sides by ambition and misunderstanding, resulting in the bloody King Philip's War. The smoldering, unrequited romance between Spencer Tracy and Gene Tierney proved to be a bit of cinematic fluff. By contrast, the book's depiction of the bloodletting in the latter days of the Plymouth Colony was a sobering bit of reality, reminding readers of the violent thread that has long been a part of the American social fabric.

**The Battle of New Orleans**

History and Hollywood bounced off one another in a ripping account of Andrew Jackson and the Battle of New Orleans. The book was Winston Groom's *Patriotic Fire*, and the movie was the 1958 swashbuckler, *The Buccaneer*. In the celluloid version of history Charlton Heston (as Jackson) nobly trod the bayous and the ramparts while Yul Brynner (as Jean Lafitte) piratically stomped hither and yon, arriving in the nick of time to save the city with the necessary materiel. Groom's even more breathtaking account traced the tenuous relationship between Jackson and Lafitte and limned the battle in cinematic detail. The discussion group noted how the Battle of New Orleans is one of the pivotal moments in American history. If the British had triumphed over Jackson's motley band of defenders, the peace treaty (signed a few weeks earlier) might not have held; and the Mississippi could, in some likelihood, have become the western boundary of the fledgling United States. This episode may be one of those instances in which a written historical account was more colorful and dramatic than the Hollywood version.

**Abraham Lincoln**

Raymond Massey ambled through the role of Abraham Lincoln in the final entry of the series, appearing in the 1940 saga, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. A period review claimed this was "a grand picture and a memorable biography of the greatest American of them all without a single touch of national complacency, of patronage or boastful pride." More cautiously, the discussion group regarded the movie as slow, even ploddy, by today's standards. Yet it had an appeal, especially as it was noted that the dramatic action in the movie prefaced the Civil War, while the 1940 movie was produced on the eve of—and in some ways seemed to anticipate—World War II.

As good as the movie may have been, it was trumped by Doris Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: the Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. This massive and masterful tome (over 750 pages) gave a detailed account of how Lincoln secured the presidential nomination of 1860 over his rivals and then had the tenacity to place those rivals in his Cabinet. In effect he harnessed their ambition (and his own) for the long and difficult haul of the Civil War. The lively discussion on this impressive book gave the participants a deep appreciation of the contribution and sacrifices Lincoln (and his team of rivals) made during the crucial war years. Some inevitable comparisons of leadership between then and now were made. All agreed that Lincoln (especially in his stovepipe hat as realized by Raymond Massey in the film and by Matthew Brady in the book) stood tall.

As an experiment in viewing, reading, and discussing, the History and Hollywood series seemed to be a qualified success. Conversation never flagged, though it would have benefitted from a few more voices. Group members agreed that the films tended to simplify and romanticize the historical story and that the books both amplified and enhanced our understanding of history. Few of us, for example, had known anything substantive about King Philip's War. The Battle of New Orleans had been just a footnote in a high school American history course. Moreover, the political savvy of the Lincoln administration had never been so impressively and convincingly drawn.

Linking historical accounts from the written page with offerings from the silver screen may seem to be a fanciful stretch. However, some in the group confessed that they had enjoyed the films; and all admitted that at least some of their understanding of American history had been shaped by the movies. Charlton Heston and Raymond Massey did look like Andrew Jackson and Abe Lincoln, though no one really knew or cared if Spencer Tracy looked like the skipper of the Mayflower. Comparing and contrasting the written and the visual media proved to be a singular way of regarding both.

In the end it proved difficult to refute the claim that movies have affected the way we visualize the past, though most of us agreed that we prefer books to films. Still, pairing the two expressions and then talking about them was eye- and mind-opening. One might be inclined to affirm the conclusion drawn by Mark Carnes in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. "Filmmakers have had their say about the past. They have spoken both eloquently and foolishly. Sometimes their fabrications have gone unnoticed, sometimes their truths unappreciated. But they have spoken, nearly always, in ways we find fascinating" (p. 10). If the movie was fascinating and the book was riveting, then the combination (at least in terms of group discussion) was decidedly salutary.

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**Afterwords . . .**

What do we know for sure?

In his excellent essay on the ecology of work (Orion Magazine, May/June 2007), Curtis White speaks with a frankness that so often goes wanting especially when it comes to a hot issue like the environment. He notes, for instance, that “environmentalists are, on the whole, educated and successful people, many of whom have prospered within corporate capitalism. They’re not against it. They simply seek to establish a balance between the needs of the economy (as they blandly put it) and the needs of the natural world.” The sharpness of White’s perspective—that pro-environment people are often complicit in the very problem they oppose—finds its anchor in his opening statement. “Environmentalists see the asphalting of the country as a sin against the world of nature, but we should also see in it a kind of damage that has been done to humans, for what precedes environmental degradation is the debasement of the human world.”

Practical Thinking focuses this issue on information and the knowledge it seeks to produce. But finding “good” information is increasingly difficult as corporate interests exercise benign and not-so-benign control over what the public receives. “News” often needs to be balanced with market interests. White’s is not the only voice ready to speak to the truth even when it crosses ideological lines, but one needs to look actively for such sources and be open to views that might challenge our assumptions. Because Tom Eland influences how I think about news and the need to read widely, I try from time to time to read columnists who diverge from my interpretation of the world. The effort often ends up poorly. So many mainstream commentators fail to get to the point of an issue as they scramble to win the ideological advantage for which the issue is too frequently a symbol. Ideology is powerful and induces a lot of passion. Unfortunately, it does not always lead to the truth.

The search for truth is not a speculative issue subject to the twists and turns of political, social, or theological discourse. War and peace, care of the environment, justice and human rights, the distribution of wealth, the quality of educational and health systems, the integrity of science, and the nature of public service—all such issues require a devotion to the truth as best we can know it. Why? Because our lives depend on it. The complexity of seeking the truth finds good advice in Gene Scapanski’s observation in his essay: “All of us are smarter than any of us—and only together do we survive.” The brittle narrowness of black-and-white thinking and the narcoleptic effect of herd opinions are not just annoying. They ultimately are destructive for they leave us with too few options. The more we look at issues from various and diverse points of view and the more we expand the circles of conversation, the more we have a chance of understanding where true, effective action lies.

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Listening to other views

Recently two articles with intriguing headlines appeared in the daily newspapers. On May 24, the New York Times ran an article headlined “The Creation Museum: Adam and Eve in the Land of the Dinosaurs.” This article, by Edward Rothstein, reviewed the Creation Museum, which recently opened in Petersburg, Kentucky. Then, Monday, May 28, the Star Tribune reprinted, as an op-ed piece, an editorial from the Los Angeles Times commenting on the same museum under the headline “Creation Museum is an unfunny ‘Flintstones’.”

These two articles, with their different points of view, illustrate the points made by Gene Scapanski and Curt Hillstrom in their articles for this journal. Both men demonstrate and conclude that we must make room for opposing and competing points of view in our conversations with other people in our lives and our world.

Rothstein’s article, though it appears in the “elitist” (see Eland article) New York Times, seems to be remarkably even-handed. He describes the museum as a “temple...for those who believe that the earth is less than 6000 years old...” and concludes that he left “amazed at [the] strangeness and...peculiarities” of competing points of view at play in the world.

One point in particular that Rothstein makes is that “creationists and secularists view the same facts, but come up with differing interpretations.” He compares this phenomenon to Ptolemaic and Copernican astronomers in the sixteenth century, who viewed the same universe but came up with differing interpretations of its movement and organization. Curt Hillstrom illustrates (in his article in this issue of Practical Thinking) a similar phenomenon when he contrasts the world views of two members of the MISF Philosophy Study Group—same data, different conclusions.

By contrast, the Los Angeles Times editorial calls the Creation Museum displays “animatronic balderdash.” The unnamed author/s (probably the editorial staff) move quickly from the museum’s anti-evolutionary point of view to the three Republican candidates “who do not believe in evolution.” The editorial suggests that persons who do not believe in modern scientific theory are not fit to run “the last superpower on Earth.”

It so happens that, while I admire Rothstein’s attempt to treat the Creation Museum fairly, I resonate with the more vitriolic sentiments of the editorial staff of the LA Times. But the sentiments in Scapanski’s article and an email conversation with Curt Hillstrom bring me up short. Curt put it very well when he wrote:

The important thing is to have an open, tolerant society in which the two sides, and their many branches, can debate and listen. When this happens, the society thrives (Elizabethan England, most of the modern West, some of the Chinese dynasties, early Islamic communities, ancient Athens, Persia under Darius). And when it doesn’t, society stagnates (the Dark Ages, later Islamic communities, some of the Chinese dynasties, many examples of societies run by harsh absolute rulers).

My point is that I disagree strongly with the premise of the Creation Museum; I am not sure I could visit it with an open mind and a straight face. Nor do I find it comfortable to listen respectfully to creationists, when I know from experience that most of them will not listen respectfully to my point of view. However, when one looks at the long-term consequences of not listening to points of view with which one does not agree (plenty of current examples come to mind), one comes to the conclusion with which Gene Scapanski ends his article—that we must preserve civil dialogue in order to survive. Any other option leads to chaos and eventually the end of civilization.  

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