What to Seek When Creating an Evaluative (Dialectic) History

Video: Klavan and Wittle on "Truth"

January 17, 2018 Cosmopolis session, Whiteboard Notes & Commentary

Broad Considerations

–Truth: a value not a "reality"

Truth is not in itself a human good; it represents a decision of what is or is not valuable when it comes to choosing among different policy and/or planning options. Seeking the truth may be a terminal value for an individual or a society, or it may be subordinate to something of greater value such as Power. In the latter case, truth becomes whatever the power seeking individual or institution says that it is. In both cases, there are institutional mechanisms that are set up to process what is or is not real. Such mechanisms belong to the "good of order" level of the human good.

– Conversion: Critical Realism

Proportionate Being

Only the Divine Mystery knows all that there is to know, encapsulated in a universal viewpoint. For human beings, our knowledge is proportionate to being human that bounds our horizon, i.e., our body of knowledge depends on what we can experience both at the sensate and abstract level, on the questions that are of interest to us, to the insights that arise from the tension of inquiry, on to the critical tools used to make a judgement: is the insight true—yes or no?

Differentiation of Mind

The truly universal tool common to all men and women is a structure of cognitive operations such that the lower conditions the higher while the higher sublates the lower. Each operational level has its own corresponding intentionality or injunctions, so experiences implies the need to be open to experience, understanding implies the need to be intelligent, judging demands reasonableness, and deciding requires responsibility. Differentiation of mind occurs when this common structure is used to create specialized realms of meaning, So common sense specializes in getting on with the work of the work, empirical sciences seek ways to uncover the underlying laws and principles of the universe, scholars seek knowledge of a particular time and place, artists seek to express an aesthetic quality, philosophers devise means of reflecting on reality, and theology—according to Lonergan—"mediates between a cultural matrix ad the significance and role of a religion in that matrix" (Method, p. xi).

Judging: Being Reasonable

Judging is the last step in a long and complex process of understanding that is so habitual in human beings that we run the full gamut so quickly that we are not aware of what has actually taken place. This is ok if things are working, but if they are not we need to slow down the process and observe what actually take place. This involves setting the criteria for what to select, select the actual evidence to be considered, reflect on the significance of that evidence, and finally to make a virtually unconditioned judgment. Since we are not God, our judgement is always conditional on unanswered yet significant questions, on further evidence, etc. But eventually all avenues are explored, all options faced, and a nearly invulnerable judgment can be made.

What to Look For

– Does the institution (or individual) value truth? Or is truth subordinate to some other more powerful and attractive terminal value?

Human beings construct a hierarchy of values, in which some things are simply valued more than others. In such a hierarchy, there is one think of supreme value, of terminal value. It is around this terminal value that institutional structures are created and that the "spirit of an age" (the good of order) is defined. It is within this ranking that deception occurs, where individuals or an institution profess a certain commitment to a value while in fact valuing something quite different. Political institutions are prone to such deception, almost by definition, for they need to appeal to a broad audience in order to build a power base.

– Institutional mechanisms for determining "truth"

Self-critical

When truth is taken up as something of real value, there emerge various mechanisms for implementing a search for what can be affirmed as true. Essential to this process is a self-critical attitude that includes the individual and/or institution itself. Without this commitment to self-evaluation and self-criticism the search for truth devolves to blaming other institutions, other persons, for the simple reason that the person or group in power cannot be criticized, cannot be allowed or permitted to be seen as less than perfect and all powerful.

Legal and/or administrative procedures and practices

The level of the good that deals with the supply of a regular stream of goods—the level of the good of order—consists of a collection of individual roles and tasks that are incorporated in a recurring scheme of operations known as an institution. The presence or absence of schemes specific to coming to grips with reality is a matter of some investigative skill, for like many operations it is the method being employed rather than the actual results that is important.

Corrective mechanisms

The pursuit of truth is never complete: mistakes are made, insights need correction, experiences once forbidden are now accepted, and people are—gasp—known to be unintelligent, unreasonable, and irresponsible. So the search begins for those mechanisms that can detect error and convey the mistakes been made to the responsible people within an institution that are in a position to do something about the situation. Such mechanisms may or may not exist. If they don't, decline is bound to occur as those involved increasing live in an imaginary or fictitious world mediated by meaning with little or no connection with what can be reasonably affirmed as being real or true.

– Providing communal resources for:

Actualizing human potential

Each of the three levels of the invariant structure of the human good involves the actualization of human potential to meet the needs of that level. So at the level of the particular group the capacity and need for cooperating with others requires the development of operational skills appropriate to the immediate one-off task at hand. At the level of the good of order, individuals possess an innate plasticity and perfectibility to meet the demands of different institutional roles and tasks required to provide a steady stream of goods that requires the development of specific skills. At the level of terminal value, the individual's potential for living a free and liberated life is actualized through intellectual, moral, and religious conversion that constitutes a fundamental radical shift in the individual's orientation to the world. Accordingly, what institutional resources are available to encourage individuals to fully actualize their potential at all levels of the human good? Or are there constraints the institutional structure if not the general state of the good of order (spirit of an age) imposes on human development?

Freedom and liberty

Actualizing human potential is particularly important at the reflective level of terminal value for the simple reason that only free and liberated people can reach the point of human development that allows for reasonable and responsible behaviour without all the various distortions due to

human interests, concerns, and obsessions. Hence, the state of the good of order in any society ultimately depends on the authenticity of those whose positions within society allow for the implementation of institutional operations compatible with the best of what it means to be human. The primary shift at the reflective level involves a falling in love with the Divine Mystery, with God. Such a falling in love manifests a shift in power away from human interests concerned with managing scarcity, avoiding loss, and death to a transcendent reality in which all is well and simple being is sufficient. Regardless of the accuracy of the language, the point to keep in mind is that religion—or its lack—plays a fundamental role in any society. The human drive for transcendence will manifest itself even if it is denied by the powers that be.

Concern over terminal values
The state of the good of order is always up to being criticized, whether foolishly or wisely. In any case, the question of what society is for may be taken up by only a very few. But the question itself is an important one, for human's may work out a solution that best fits those holding positions of power or seeking to hold such positions—rationalizations and justifications—but ultimately for the converted it becomes a question of what the Divine Mystery has in mind. So there is always a tension between the two "powers." How do individuals, institutions, and entire cultures deal with this tension?

– Theopolitics[1]

Communal tools for individuals to face their own mortality
Very few individuals can accept the end of their existence without apprehension. For the greater majority, their own death can be accepted if the community of which they are a part promises to continue on down the stream of time. Yet, what if the civilization that defines you itself faces extension? When that happens, all human interests go out the window for what matters in being reasonable and responsible if you and your civilization will cease to exist in a few years? So it is very important to find out if a civilization is close to collapse, and the key indication is the fertility rate. When that drops below the replacement rate of 2.1, a society no longer considers itself viable, worth protecting and developing, for its members have given up on the future. Only oblivion waits, so why not live for the satisfactions of the now and leave intellectual, moral, and religious conversion aside.

Specific to a culture vs. universal
There are alternatives that have arisen that transcend this link to immortality through the collective. Judaism is the first of these, where the covenant between man and God applies to anyone who takes up this Jewish existential reality. Christian took up this challenge and sought to become a universal religion in which family and tribe allegiances gave way to a universal brotherhood in Christ. Unfortunately, pagan practices crept in leading to such nations as France and then Germany going to war in an attempt to affirm that they alone are the "chosen people." The only nation whose founding principles also negated individual allegiances to family, clan, and race is the United States.

– The actual dynamics existing in a society's "pivot point"

The existing set of existential issues
The challenges leading to intellectual, moral, and religious conversion arise from the contemporary existential issues existent in the good of order. Any society faces a number of unresolved issues that demands a personal judgment, as for example the issue of abortion in our own society. Even if one declines to make a decision, that very act is itself a decision to support one side or the other. What are these fundamental issues? How have the choices been formulated? Expressed? Conveyed to the public?

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[1] David P. Goldman, *How Civilizations Die (And Why Islam is Dying Too),* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2011).

The options (dialectic) provided for individuals to choose
First are the existential issues, the fundamental questions that need to be resolved within the good of order. Out of these arise a series of proposals and counter-proposals that eventually—unless the disagreement is artificial rather than real—coalesce into two primary stances: positions capable of being improved worked out by those engaged in intellectual, moral, and religious conversion, and counter-positions created by specialized interests, dogmatic groups, or others who are not concerned with what can be affirmed as true, place personal satisfactions over pursuing values, and have no place for God in their lives.

Collective choices "go along to get along"
For the most part, approximately 95 to 98 percent of the populace will go along with the existing state of affairs, preferring to go along to get along. (This was observed in the Second World War, where prison camps became manageable by removing officers from the general population; it was found that leaders who planned escapes and other disruptions represented only about 3 to 5 percent of the total number of prisoners.) The focus shifts from the general populace to this core group of "disturbers" or "innovators" whose beliefs and actions lead to progress, decline, or the possibility of reversal.

Challenges involving conversion: positions and counter-positions
Any evaluative history in the functional speciality of dialectic needs to take into account not only the kinds of issues that are considered existential within a society, but the manner in which positions and counter-positions are formed and propagated. Here is to be found evidence of various levels of conversion among the key "leaders" of the time and the actual mechanism within which these leaders emerge and perhaps even flourish. And as it has already been noted, individual conversion made manifest through institutional encapsulation brings about fundamental institutional change that affects all.

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