

Topical Seminar
Tuesday, January 16, 2018

To prepare for this session, please read the articles “The Dangers of Certainty: A Lesson from Auschwitz” by Simon Critchley, pp 386 – 391, and “When Hope Tramples Truth” by Roger Scruton, pp. 612 – 614. Both of these are in The Stone Reader.

As you read, please consider the following:

1. Critchley is making the point that *pursuing knowledge means accepting uncertainty* (page 388).
2. Further, he indicates that certainty can, in fact, be dangerous: *The play of tolerance opposes the principle of monstrous certainty that is endemic to facism and, sadly, not just facism but all the various faces of fundamentalism* (p. 390).
3. Scruton is making the point that *in any emergency it is optimism that triumphs and the prophets of doom who are pushed aside* (p. 612).
4. Scruton asserts *people interested in truth seek out those who disagree with them* (p. 613).
5. Scruton, finally, asserts *when truth threatens hope, it is truth we usually sacrifice, often along with those who search for it* (p. 614).
6. Both authors imply that scientific thinking may be alien to collective thinking such as religion or the “conventional wisdom” of a society. One could even imply that the pessimists are the scientists seeking to undermine the optimists.

These two articles, read together, imply that seeking truth means walking a fine line between the calls of opposing enthusiasts of ideas who would have us subscribe to their various views of the truth and of how we should react to it. There is a very real issue currently before the United States Supreme Court that tests our response to Critchley’s and Scruton’s essays,

<http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/05/politics/supreme-court-masterpiece-cakeshop/index.html>

<https://www.npr.org/2017/12/05/568653522/supreme-court-sharply-divided-over-same-sex-wedding-cake-case>

Are you able to listen to dissenting voices when you are seeking the truth? Do you give equal weight to all sides when doing so? In the SCOTUS case, does our hope for a more inclusive society blind us to the realities of, as Scruton puts it, *discussions of gay marriage have been conducted as though it were entirely a matter of extending rights and not of fundamentally altering the institution* (p. 613)? Can we make a case, in opposition to Critchley and Scruton, that sometimes we should not listen to opposing viewpoints?