

Chapter 6

The “We” Approach to Truth

In this chapter I will examine further what constitutes truth in the “We” approach to Truth? “Truth” can mean: (1) the Unknown Unknown that humans face, and (2) a knowledge that humans possess in their minds. The phrase “The ‘We’ approach to Truth” implies both meanings. A capitalized “Truth” can indicate the still Unknown Objectivity, distinguishing this meaning of “Truth” from the “truth” of a specific group consensus. As spelled out in the last chapter, a group “consensus” is not some sort of absolute certainty. It does not even mean an articulation with which everyone in the group agrees. Consensus means an articulation with which a group is willing to operate for the time being. A consensus can be said to be “true” to the extent that it “works” as a pattern of operation that carries out the values of the group.

Let us examine more closely the test for truth that I am calling “workability.” Some social designs just do not work in relation to promoting the sanity, survivability, and other values and purposes of the members of the consensating group. Some social designs are without the minimum beauty for nurturing the human spirit. Some social designs are without the minimum justice for holding the group together as a cooperating body. Some social designs destroy the environment on which this or other groups depend. Some social designs just do not work well for a complex of reasons. In social affairs the pragmatic value of workability is important: it is the very essence of the social or “We” approach to Truth. As the above illustrations imply, there is a degree of arbitrariness in our workability tests for truth. Any given society has numerous roads to workability. Nevertheless, this is the aim of a reality-affirming consensus process: to design guidelines for operation that are workable for this group’s members and for the impact of this group upon the whole human species and upon the planet on which all groups and societies must live.

I have already noted the communal aspect of scientific research and the communal aspect of contemplative inquiry. The “We” approach to truth is something more than the communal components of these other two approaches to truth. It has to do with pulling together into an overarching social consensus the scientific findings and the contemplative discoveries currently operating within that particular society. All systematic philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, many others, including you and me – do this kind of pulling together in dialogue with others. Such systematic thinking is a “We” approach to truth. This book is a “We” approach to truth in the sense that I, in dialogue with others, am seeking to make a contribution to the overall social consensus about what is workable for human life on Earth at this time.

The We-approach to truth is also present in the mundane aspects of our lives. Here is a simple illustration: Let us say that we have learned by empirical testing that throwing a wingless body off a high place results in a rapid descent to the ground below. That is scientific knowledge. Science cannot determine whether or not I love my cat. This requires contemplative inquiry. I have to look inside my own life and see what I mean by “my cat” and by “love” and then discern whether I really do love this particular cat. Perhaps I only tolerate this cat. Something is true, but this truth is not attainable through the path of scientific knowledge. Let us suppose that I discover that I do love my cat. Then, the We-approach to truth might be illustrated as a pull together of these two bits of awareness. A useful overview of truth would be: “If I love my cat, I would not be wise to throw him out of a tenth-story window.”

Human culture is made out of millions of such bits of pull-together of what we have found to be scientifically true, contemplatively true, and workable. Human culture is a

We-construction. No one person creates it. We create culture through our capacities to share with each other our awareness about what is so and what patterns of wisdom and association enable the most lively life together.

This process of culture creation is very old. It reaches back hundreds of thousands of years. It probably preceded the evolution of our species. It is probably true that our enlarged brain evolved in order to do the ever more complex culture building that our sequence of species in the hominid line were doing. Some primitive experiments in culture failed; they made too many miscalculations about how their society had to work to enable the sanity and practical procedures necessary for survival. Other societies succeeded in maintaining adequate sanity and survival skills to pass their communal wisdom on to the following generations and societies. This process continues today. The inherited traditions of past cultures are valuable to the extent that they have indeed maintained sanity, survivability, and other critical values. I am not implying here that survival implies that a society is good. Perhaps a surviving society is seemly the meanest among some set of societies. But I am implying that social workability includes surviving. It also includes remaining sane enough to operate humanly and humanely. And it includes more.

Fresh challenges to sanity, survivability and other workability values arise with each change of circumstances. Fresh scientific knowledge enters the discussion. Fresh contemplative wisdom enters the discussion. Fresh pull-togethers are assembled, taught, and used with the hope of fostering further sanity, continued survival, and quality living. This is the "We" approach to truth – the consensus-building approach to pulling together ever fresh articulations of truth that promise to be socially workable.

Works of art, philosophy, sociology, history, etc. pull together our fragments of truth. Each of these disciplines of thought can illustrate the "We" approach to truth. Socrates was a breakthrough thinker, a contemplative innovator. Plato and Aristotle were his systematizers, writing for the "We" of their culture and the future of their culture. Archimedes, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein were breakthrough innovators in scientific research. They were followed by their cultural systematizers. The Buddha was a contemplative innovator followed by his systematizers. Jesus was a contemplative innovator. Paul and the Gospel writers were the initial systematizers of this breakthrough in contemplative awareness. Augustine was the grand champion of a long series of systematizers of Greek and Biblical heritage. Whatever obsolescences, omissions, and flaws we find today in Augustine's overview, we can still honor him for the power of his work, a work that laid cultural foundations that lasted eight hundred years before meeting major overhaul. Thomas Aquinas was another systematizer, discerning the gaps in the then existing overviews and constructing a new overview that both incorporated the more objective, scientific, Aristotelian heritage being recovered at that time and preserving the juice he found in his inherited Christendom. Recent science and contemplative thought have moved us well beyond the Thomistic synthesis. For example, Thomas' physics has been revolutionized by Newton and then again by Einstein and others. Biology and psychology have also undergone far reaching transformations. Contemplative thought today is taking place in whole array of new ways. We cannot go back to the Thomistic synthesis; nevertheless, we can honor Thomas as a hero of his era and take inspiration from him for facing our challenges to serve the sanity, survivability, and other crucial values that enter the consensus building of our existing and future human cultures. Indeed, we face enormous challenges to pull together the many partial truths of our era into workable guidelines for sanity, survival, beauty, equity, democracy, and other values of general well-being for this generation and its deeply altered planet. This is the "We" approach to truth. This is the consensus-building approach to the truth of workability.

While the “We” approach is dependent upon the breakthroughs of scientific research (“It” approach) and contemplative inquiry (“I” approach), it is a third approach to truth (“We” approach). It adds something to the human truth quest not handled by the other two. Perhaps the following chart can help hold this awareness in our minds:

Approach to Truth		Focus	Test for Truth
It	Scientific Research	impersonal objectivity	correspondence with factual formulations of sensory inputs
I	Contemplative Inquiry	personal subjectivity	resonance with descriptions of directly known experiences of consciousness
We	Societal Consensus	cultural integration	workability for the sanity, survival, & other values within a specific culture

A workable consensus will include: (1) the truth of scientific research and (2) the truth of contemplative inquiry. Workability is not a substitute for factuality or contemplative wisdom; workability is an additional test for truth (realism). If a societal consensus is not factual, neither is it workable. The factual truth will at some point reveal that the consensus is unworkable. A similar statement can be made with regard to contemplative wisdom. A societal consensus will at some point prove unworkable if the truth about human consciousness is ignored. But a societal consensus can be honoring of both factuality and contemplative wisdom and still be unworkable. The truth of workability is a test for truth that applies to a specific pull together for a specific group of the first two modes of truth as they apply to this group’s circumstances in historical time. This amounts to an third test for truth – that is, does this pull together of insight and guidelines apply to these circumstances for this group at this time? Any social consensus that does not honor all three approaches to truth is less wise than one that does.

Having three approaches to truth rather than one may evoke distress in some persons – persons who wish to achieve the type of rational consilience described in Chapter 1. But such hope in the rational potential of the human mind is illusory, a “modern superstition” as Wendell Berry calls it. Why is it illusory? The human mind is a finite biological process confronting the Infinite scope of Reality. I am continuing to use capitalization to symbolize this disjunction between the Fullness of Reality and the processes and possessions of finite knowledge of which the human mind is capable.

We need to hold on to the awareness that the human mind is capable of assembling relative truth for effective living. The amazing capabilities of the human mind evolved because these abilities aided the human species to survive and thrive. Human consciousness is in need of realism in order to orchestrate survival and well being. Nevertheless, the truth available to the minds of human beings is always approximate, partial, becoming obsolete or inapplicable to new circumstances and new experiences of Reality. Truth, for the human being, has a finite quality: known truth never becomes Final Truth. In ultimate terms, the human species will always remain ignorant. No matter how much we come to understand, there is always more. We are on a journey, a cultural journey, a “We” journey into an ever more preposterous Mystery.

Nevertheless, our knowledge is progressive in this way: once we have become relatively aware of some fresh aspect of Reality, we cannot go back to our previous stage of ignorance, even though many try to do so. What happens is that we inflict upon ourselves the psychological pain of knowing that we are denying what we know. But even when we are fully open to a new level of wisdom, we still remain ignorant.

Further, we may even focus on some new wisdom to the degree that we, as humanity, forget things that we once knew. For example, most of us know little about flint chipping, even though most stone age persons were good at it. More importantly, many of us have so focused on the wisdom of living in urban settings that we have forgotten much that humanity once knew about living in the natural world.

Our many forms of ignorance need not lead us to hopelessness or despair. This ignorance is simply our human condition, and this condition can be received as glorious and appropriate rather than as an offense to our unrealistic hope for some absolute certainty and security. Our best case scenario is to humbly admit this ignorance. Indeed, let us rename such authentic facing of ignorance as "openness to and curiosity about more Reality." Such openness might even be called "wisdom."