

Science, Culture, and the Reconciliation of Knowledge and Understanding

Science, Culture, and the Reconciliation of Knowledge and Understanding:

Mind the Gap

By

Arthur Pontynen

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-0364-0693-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-0364-0693-6

Dedicated to my beloved wife Alison, whose patience made
possible the writing of this book

Certain brothers have frequently and earnestly entreated me to write out for them, in the form of a meditation, certain things which I had discussed in non-technical terms with them regarding meditating on the Divine Being [or Truth]...nothing at all in the meditation would be argued on Scriptural [or other types of] authority, but that in unembellished style and by unsophisticated arguments and with uncomplicated disputation rational necessity would tersely prove to be the case, and truth's clarity would openly manifest to be the case....

—St. Anselm of Canterbury, Preface: *Monologion* (1075-76)¹

¹ Anthony Hopkins, Herbert Richardson, *Anselm of Canterbury: Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (Jackson, MI: Ex Fontibus Co., 2016), 29.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The premise of this book is that the pursuit of an objective *understanding* of reality and life is now neglected. That neglect is due to a millennial shift from seeking Truth as the object of our understanding, to truth reduced to the production of *facts*, and *factual-experiential knowledges*. The distinction of understanding from knowledge is now obscured by the presumption that accurate facts are understanding (or truth), and that descriptions are explanations.

We live then in a world where meaning is reduced either to facts, or to fact-based knowledges. That reductionism also obscures how language and science refer to reality. For example, a current fact concerning the English language is that there are 26 letters in the alphabet. That fact is a description without meaning. When those letters are formed into words, the questions arise as to how that is done, how those words are associated with other words, and to what those words refer. However, since a fact is an accurate description of a material thing or occurrence, *what* replaces *why*. When there is no objective *why*, the primary intellectual and social question that remains is *what we want*. *What we want* comes then in hard and soft versions, as a matter of personal or group identity, or opinion.

This results in a brutal deconstruction of meaningful language. Instead, our understanding of reality and life is reduced to absolute assertions of power (via fundamentalist claims of scientific, religious, social and personal identity), and a trivialization of meaning as “*successful fictions*.” Since neither claims of identity or “*successful fictions*” have limits (or necessary boundaries), they are subject to an infinite regress of knowledges and contingencies (i.e., a never-ending succession of facts, theories, identities, etc.) devoid of any degree of genuine understanding (the result of which is a violent plurality centering on an intellectual and cultural absolutism contested by an intellectual and cultural relationalism). The common result is that actual (i.e., ontological) meaning is subjectified – and *what we want* self-destructs. Denied is the possibility of attaining better and therefore greater degrees of actual understanding. Consequently, peaceful attempts

to understand reality and life are replaced by a violent and banal consciousness vacillating between conflicting assertions and a beliefless tolerance.

The abandonment of the pursuit of Truth (or Understanding-as-such) is literally an existential threat not just towards Western Civilization and Enlightenment values, but also towards our ability to live intelligently and peacefully. It publically replaces persons committed to living wisely (as *Homo sapiens*) with those who trivialize understanding in the pursuit of pleasure (as *Homo ludens*), or are motivated by the pursuit of power (*Homo pugna*). When the free pursuit of Truth is denied, so too is the value of being peaceful (*Homo pacificus*), and science, culture, and justice are trivialized and or brutalized by the pleasures and powers that we varyingly demand.

If this analysis is accurate, then the question is whether abandoning the free pursuit of Truth is necessary and good, and if not, then how our current situation can be remedied. As later discussed in detail, these questions involve a consideration of how we understand science. Stephen Hawking (1942-2018) anecdotally addressed some of the problems involved:

“A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: “What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.” The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, “What is the tortoise standing on?” “You’re very clever, young man, very clever,” said the old lady. “But it’s tortoises all the way down!”²

Hawking observes that if we take tortoises as symbols of our accumulation of more and more knowledge claims, then a single tortoise is at the bottom, standing on nothing, or it is tortoises all the way down. However, as the following pages will indicate, that anecdote falsely limits us to an epistemological perspective. It presumes that meaning is limited to and by facts. Whether as a matter of identity (a tortoise), or relationally (as tortoises all the way down), meaning is subjectified; facts and feelings replace the peaceful pursuit of actual understanding. Physics thereby

² Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 1.

mandates an *immanentized metaphysics* that is inherently meaningless and arbitrary.

The association of science with an immanentized metaphysics raises the question of whether a non-immanentized science is a realistic possibility. If so, then at issue is which approach (if either) facilitates the Enlightenment's quest to live intelligently and peacefully. That quest relies upon human nature being a condition of conscious awareness, and involves our paying attention to the choices we make. Those choices are grounded in what we believe to be realistic, reflecting our understanding of *ontology*, of that which exists. At issue is whether that which exists is limited to matters of fact and experience, or extends to the realization of greater degrees of understanding. The premise of this book is that the former produce knowledge claims that are descriptive and result in a violent consciousness, whereas the latter affirms the peaceful pursuit of Truth, or Understanding-as-such, the realization of which is inherently good.

The reconciliation of factual knowledge with intellectual understanding marks a state of being enlightened. Enlightenment is historically associated with seeking to understand what is genuinely true and good; our task is to be right with an intelligible and therefore meaningful reality; to be enlightened is to be wise. In the West, the quest to be wise is central to Classical and Christian civilizations, and is significantly present in the *Doctrine of Illumination* espoused by St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430). In this context, it is normative to attempt to live peacefully and intelligently by seeking a state of rectitude within a *Qualitative-ontology*, an ontology that is substantively true and good. It is realistic to be peacefully optimistic.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the association of enlightenment with an intellectual illumination was newly contextualized, and a new type of enlightenment – and ontology – resulted. The Enlightenment of the Modern West introduces a *Quantitative-ontology* by its limitation to a *world of facts and ideas*. Within that world, the very notion of what constitutes understanding – or truth – is transformed. As explained in detail below, when understanding is limited to a world of facts, when it is *immanentized*, science in the pursuit of degrees of intellectual understanding is replaced by *Scientism* as the acquisition of facts (or data). That data is subject to being rationally categorized (via a *Scientistic-relationalism*). Science in the pursuit of understanding is replaced by science as the willful selection and construction of knowledges. As

explained in detail later, the pursuit of knowledge-as-power replaces the pursuit of understanding,³ and a violent consciousness results. It is realistic to be transgressively pessimistic.

This presents a foundational challenge to the cosmopolitan quest to live peacefully and intelligently. As such, it stands in opposition to the once common (and globally diverse) pursuit of inherently good degrees of Understanding-as-such – that is, of Truth. Moreover, it produces a provincial consciousness that tacitly denies all attempts to go beyond material and descriptive facts to degrees of genuine understanding. In his preface to *Buddhist Thought in India* (1967 edition), Edward Conze (1904-1979) presents an exemplary summary of the situation:

“The prestige of the scientific approach among our modern philosophers seems to be entirely due to its applications. If a philosopher assures us that all the ‘real’ knowledge we possess is due to science, that science alone gives us ‘news about the universe’—what can have led him to such a belief? He must surely have been dazzled by the practical results, by the enormous increase in power which has sprung from the particular kind of knowledge scientists have evolved...

As professed ‘humanists’ they might be expected to have a greater faith in the depth and breadth of the human spirit and its modalities. As ‘empiricists’ they might have a more catholic notion of ‘experience’, and as ‘positivists’ a clearer conception of what is, and what is not, a ‘verifiable’ fact. And even as ‘scientists’ they ought to have some doubts as to whether the world of sense-bound consciousness is really the whole of reality. But alas, a staggering hypertrophy of the critical faculties has choked all the other virtues...

To judge all human techniques by the amount of bare ‘control’ or ‘power’ they produce is patently unfair. Other goals may be equally worth striving for, and men wiser than we may deliberately have turned away from the pursuit of measureless power, not as unattainable, but as inherently undesirable. A graceful submission to the inevitable is not without its attractions, either. A great deal might be said, perhaps, for not wanting more power than can be used wisely, and it is much to be feared that the ‘captors of an unwilling universe’ may end as many lion tamers have ended before them...

³ The rise of a money economy (with its social and political consequences) is concomitant with that of Scientism. See: Nial Fergusson, *The Ascent of Money* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

To establish contact with worthwhile reality has always been the concern of ... most reputable philosophers of both Europe and Asia up to about ad 1450.

About this time there began in Europe that estrangement from reality which is the starting-point of most modern European philosophy. Epistemology took the place of ontology. Where ontology was concerned with the difference between reality and appearance, epistemology concentrated on that between valid and invalid knowledge... The Occamists who set the tone for all later phases of modern philosophy asserted that things by themselves have no relations to one another, and that a mind external and unrelated to them establishes all relations between them. Ontology as a rational discipline then lost its object and all questions concerning being qua being seemed to be merely verbal. Science should not concern itself with the things themselves, but with their signs and symbols, and its task is to give an account of appearances (*salvare apparentias*)...In consequence, thinkers seek for 'successful fictions' and 'reality' has become a mere word."⁴

Conze analyzes the reduction of understanding to fact-based assertions of knowledge. However, those assertions come in hard and soft versions. The hard version centers on absolutist claims of identity, while a soft version advocates tolerance amongst a variety of "successful fictions." In either case, when understanding is replaced by the production of factual and experiential knowledge claims, reason (as the attempt to understand) is subjectified.

In contrast, Wisdom-seeking traditions in the West (and around the world) historically center on the free pursuit of Truth as *the object of our understanding*. That pursuit centers not on the construction of fact-based knowledges, but on *modality* (i.e., what understandings are possible or impossible, contingent or necessary). That pursuit is characteristic of the Classical, Jewish and Christian traditions, and the initial hope of the European Enlightenment beginning in the 17th century. Globally, it is also a primary characteristic of civilizations dedicated to living intelligently and peacefully, that is, to being cultured.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) sought a means of reconciling empirical knowledge claims with human understanding. In his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784), he explains that the particular natural capacities of all creatures are destined to evolve

⁴ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India: Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967), 19ff.

completely; with humans, the highest natural capacity is the use of reason. Realizing those capacities is the cause of lawful universal order, and the history of humanity is the realization of Nature's *secret plan* to bring forth a numinous state of perfection. Therefore, idealism (or understanding) is the natural product of the human mind, whereas civilization and science are mental constructs (i.e., "successful fictions"). Different civilizations are to coexist peacefully via a principled tolerance that is rational and universal.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Karl Marx (1880-1883) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) soon contested this Kantian (i.e., *Modernist*) paradigm. The Hegelian-Marxist view is that the cycles of civilizations occur within a violently progressive dialecticism. In his *Introduction to Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1837), Hegel distinguishes between original, reflective, and philosophical history. Original history strives to accurately present facts about particular periods; reflective history focuses on the production of generalist narratives of interpretation; philosophical history presents history as the revealing of nature as the embodiment of reason. History as the embodiment of an immanentized idealism is itself the embodiment of Spirit (or the actions of an ontological History) manifested as a *Volkgeist*, a *Weltgeist*, and ultimately as a *Zeitgeist*. It is the necessary realization of the *Zeitgeist* (i.e., an *immanentized metaphysics*) by which a gap between idealism and realism is presumably bridged. In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1806), he dangerously holds that the end of history is the realization of freedom via obedience to the nation-state. Marx follows the same logic within a materialist and globalist context.

Neglected by these antagonists is that we can escape an intellectually vacuous tolerance, and a socially destructive absolutism and anarchism, by freely seeking to obtain - without closure - a better understanding of reality and life. The American Platonist Paul Elmer More (1864-1937) defines a free society as one dedicated to a timely pursuit of genuine understanding. He quotes Plato (428/423-348/347 BC) affirming that a free society is one where *becoming* seeks *Being*, with neither denied.⁵ The world is fact, process, and purpose, but that purpose is not immanentized, subjective or willful. It is to some degree objectively intelligible. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4-1109) similarly hold that time constitutes particular time-spans, but as a whole, those

⁵ Paul Elmer More, *Platonism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1917), Introduction.

particular time-spans constitute *a peaceful universal present, a peaceful sempiternity*.⁶ Our material passage through life occurs in time, but the ever-present goal is to realize genuine Truth. In the cultural realization of degrees of genuine understanding or Truth, our hope of human flourishing and peace is realistically progressive and peaceful.

The reduction of understanding to successful fictions and absolute-relational knowledges produces a gap between quantitative knowledge claims and the qualitative pursuit of degrees of actual Understanding. Hawkings' anecdote begs the question of whether any knowledge claims exist within an intelligible and meaningful context, and therefore tacitly asserts an unintelligible and meaningless one. Denied is that we can go beyond the false choice between there being a single fundamentalist knowledge claim (or giant tortoise standing on nothing), or an infinite regress of contingent facts (or tortoises all the way down).

Hawking notes that we have failed to reconcile those claims via a *Theory of Everything*.⁷ The intellectual, social and political consequence of that failure is an incoherent trajectory in which contemporary epigones of Kantian "successful fictions," and the absolutist-anarchistic claims of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche contend. Correspondingly, a long list of books declare that we have reached an absolutist end of science, history, and art,⁸ while another set of books contend that all civilizations face an inevitable cycle of dominance, decline and dissolution.⁹

This book rejects these propositions; genuine progress occurs, but is neither seamless nor smooth. This position is not just academic because

⁶ See; Anthony Hopkins, Herbert Richardson, *Anselm of Canterbury. Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (Ex Fontibus Co., 2016), 29ff; Seamus O'Neill, "Augustine and Boethius, Memory and Eternity," *Analecta Hermeneutica*, vol. 6 (2014), 2.

⁷ Stephen Hawking, Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).

⁸ For example, Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); John Horgan *The End of Science* (New York: Little Brown & Co, 1999); Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁹ Prominent amongst them are Edward Gibbons' *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789); Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918); Paul Kennedy's: *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987); and Jacques Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

the lives and happiness of many are at stake. Today we live with the consequences of the inevitable failure to reconcile relationalism with absolutism; we also face the danger of conflating them. The free and peaceful pursuit of a better understanding of reality and life is a search for enlightenment. However, a search for enlightenment limited to physics (or an immanentized metaphysics) self-destructs. Within a Post-enlightenment (or Postmodern) milieu, science, culture, and justice are no longer associated with the realization of degrees of Truth-as-such. The legitimacy of all Truth-seeking cultures around the world is thereby denied. There is no ontological Truth to seek, and we live in a world of particular facts and experiences, of knowledges experienced, arranged by our minds and wills. Whether those knowledges unfold in the world by necessity, or contingently, normalized is a banal violence. Denied is the importance of people seeking genuinely good judgments in daily life, and of seeking a sophisticated generalist understanding in the pursuit of Wisdom. The following pages will present a critical analysis of this millennial shift. To question its core assumptions and alleged merits is to challenge current dominant modes of thought and interpretation. Nonetheless, it is necessary to do so if we are to understand and escape the violently incoherent authoritarian- anarchism commonplace today.

CHAPTER 2

MINDING THE GAP

In London's underground rail system, there are ubiquitous warnings to *mind the gap*. Those warnings counsel caution when entering a stopped train from the train station platform. It is good counsel since a misstep could result in genuine harm. It is also good counsel in daily life. In that case, the gap to be minded is not just a physical hazard or a matter of practicality. It refers to the challenge of reconciling factual knowledge with our intellectual understanding, the understandings of others, and with actual understanding, or Understanding-as-such.

Understanding-as-such, or Truth, is distinct from the pursuit of accurate facts, the construction-deconstruction of fact based narratives, or factual experiences. Since antiquity the problem of bridging the gaps between knowledge, understanding, and Understanding-as-such has been addressed as the attempt to reconcile the *particular*, the *general*, and the *Universal*. That attempt historically centers on the nature and relationship of *Realism* and *Idealism*.

In his fresco, the *School of Athens* (1508) Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, 1483-1520) depicts the realist Aristotle (384-322) and the idealist Plato (428/23-348/347) walking in harmony. Categorical factual knowledge and intellectual understanding are depicted as reconciled via *Scientia*, that is, natural science and intellectual understanding are united in the pursuit of Truth. In contrast, Honoré-Victorin Daumier's (1808-1879) lithograph, *Battle of Schools – Idealism against Realism* (1855) holds that the vital effort to bridge the gap between them has failed. Idealism and Realism no longer operate within the context of Truth. Instead, they are immanentized, as are our lives. We live within a banal and often violent world of conflicting ideas, facts and factual narratives. Those conflicting ideas, facts and factual narratives are represented by two artistic schools of his time: an idealistic Neo-classicism and an identity based Realism.



Illustration 1-1: Raphael, *The School of Athens*. 1510-11, Fresco, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Rome. Photo: Public Domain

In Daumier's lithograph, Realism is depicted as a scruffy looking figure holding a crude palette and a brush that would accommodate house painting. He is in combat with a bespectacled classical nude who personifies Neo-classicism (i.e., an immanentized Classicism), using a palette as a shield, and a maulstick (a device used in steadying the hand while painting) as a spear. Their combat is beyond mere aesthetic preferences.

To note factually that Daumier's print depicts a 19th Century battle between idealism and realism leaves unanswered why that battle occurred, and how it matters today. It is by better understanding why that conflict occurred, that we might thereby remedy its consequences or avoid repeating them. However, the conundrum is that it is futile to attempt to understand this conflict by using the epistemological methodology that produced it. Critical analysis of Scientism and Scientific-relationalism cannot be done via an epistemological analysis, because they are its necessary products.

Within the context of an immanentized science (i.e., the replacement of *Scientia* as the pursuit of Truth and Goodness by *Scientism* (or later, *Positivism*), as the production of facts), there is a failure to peacefully bridge the gap between factual narratives and ideas. Their battle is limited to *epistemology* (from the Greek, *episteme*, or knowledge from nature, and *logos*, or reason). When epistemology is separated from the pursuit of Truth, the problem of reconciling the particular with the general (or factual knowledge with an understanding in our mind) is subjectified and sophistry or demagoguery result.

In the name of Scientism, there is no gap between factual knowledge and intellectual understanding because all understandings are limited to factual and experiential knowledge claims. Alternatively, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) earlier advocated a Scientific-relationalism in which we place factual knowledge into particular and often-personal narratives that are "successful fictions." Kant refers to them as *Hypothetical Imperatives*; in common usage they are *fact based opinions about which we feel strongly*. In the spirit of a rational good will, differences between those fact-based narratives are to be resolved via a deontological principle (or *Categorical Imperative*); we have a duty to treat others, as we would like to be treated. However, in the absence of Truth (or Understanding-as-such) we are limited to a subjectivity of ideas, facts and feelings that is inherently relationalist (or *intersectional*) and violent.

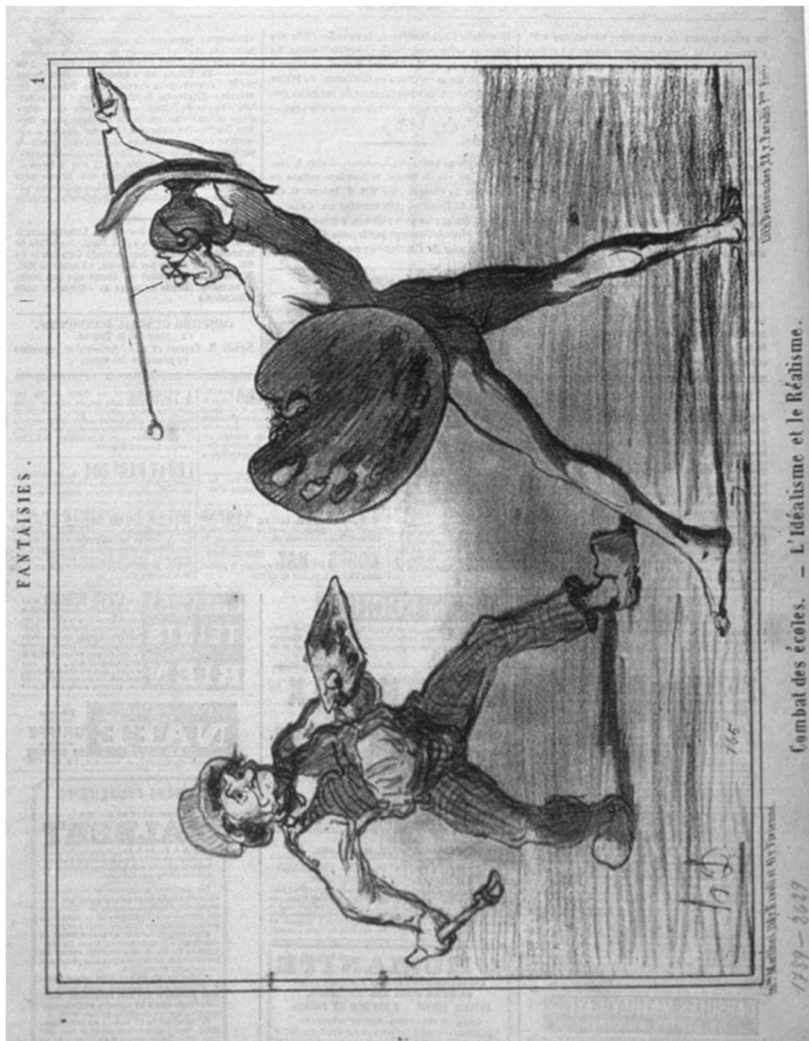


Illustration 1-2: Honoré Daumier, 'Battle of the Schools — Idealism and Realism', in *Fantasies* (Paris: Charivari, 1855). Public Domain.

There is then an irony in attempting to understand this lithograph from an intellectual and historical perspective. When Daumier's *Battle of Schools — Idealism against Realism* (1855) was printed, Daumier's contemporary, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was advocating a new *science of altruism*.

Both Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Auguste Comte reconciled idealism with realism via a sociological perspective. Kant provides Comte with the metaphysical foundation for a new empirical science that is allegedly altruistic. Just as Kant proclaimed that a good will is the only thing unequivocally good, Comte contended that the gap between facts and reason is bridged via altruism. By sociologizing *Scientism*, a new scientific, altruistic, and moral *Positivism* allegedly results. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) differently concludes that Positivism failed to bridge the gap between the physical and the moral. He instead argues in his book *On Liberty* (1855) that there is the liberty of thought and opinion, the liberty of tastes and pursuits, and the liberty of planning our own lives. He holds that as a practical matter, differences between beliefs are to be tolerated as long as no harm results.

However, it is naïve to assume that no genuine harm will result from a combat of artistic schools. It is also naïve to presume that differences between beliefs can be resolved when those beliefs differ on what constitutes altruism, practicality, or harm, and what limits if any apply to advancing or remedying them. Beliefs have consequences, and it can be rational to tolerate some differences of belief, but some beliefs result in (or are used to) condone violence. Harm results when good will and reason, or altruism and science, are pursued in the absence of a peaceful understanding of reality and life. When Truth is sociologized violence results, and the pursuit of enlightenment is revealed as being in conflict with itself. In his essay, “What is Enlightenment,” (1784) Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) observes that a publically required tolerance constitutes the oppression of critical thinking. Therein lies the rub:¹⁰ an incoherent commitment to tolerance *and* critical thinking (in pursuit of “successful fictions”) condemns us to confusion and violence that destroys good will and altruism. Traditional Socratic skepticism in hope of obtaining a better understanding, a glimpse of Truth, is thwarted by a skepticism denying the existence of any understanding to be found. In the name of good will and altruism, reason and science are subjectified, politicized, and thus denied as sources of enlightenment. When understanding is subjectified, there are no public, peaceful, freedom-granting spaces to resolve differences. Despite the claims of an altruistic Scientism (later, Positivism), and Scientistic-relationalism (i.e., Kantianism), neither provides the means by which a personal and public quest for genuine good judgment can realistically (i.e., ontologically) be affirmed. Since they do not value the

¹⁰ The term “there’s the rub” is first attested in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene 1).

intellectual pursuit of actual Understanding-as-such, the free and conscientious pursuit of Truth is replaced by absolutism, anarchism, or a specious pragmatism.

In this context the millennial values of Western Civilization, and of Wisdom-seeking cultures around the world, are deemed not just obsolete, but obstacles to progress. Nevertheless, the practical and scholarly pursuit of actual understanding and good judgment are not obstacles to meeting the challenges, and pursuing the pleasures, of everyday life. What we believe to be worthwhile (and just) is grounded in our understanding, and that understanding affirms a distinct type of consciousness to be realized via a particular cultural and political mode. At issue is how that mode defines, and whether it actually advances, human flourishing.

The normalization of either peace - or violence - hinges on the problem of bridging (or resolving) not just the gaps between facts and their placement in fact-based narratives, and between tolerance and critical thinking. It hinges on whether any knowledge claims can peacefully rise to genuine understanding. An obstacle to that resolution is a quantitative and nominalistic understanding of science that was early introduced by figures such as Peter Abelard (c. 1079-1142), blossomed during the 17th Century under the auspices of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), and refined in the 19th Century by Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Science subsequently constitutes an *Empirical Scholasticism* that centers on the mass accumulation of factual and subjective descriptions.¹¹ Neglected is the pursuit of better degrees of understanding.

The problem of reconciling facts with understanding was addressed by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who observed:

¹¹ This term *Empirical Scholasticism* was introduced in Arthur Pontynen, "A Winter Landscape: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of Art History," *Art Bulletin*, vol. LXVIII, no.3 (September, 1986), 467: "The common distinction in contemporary thought of fact from value, truth from good, has resulted in what might be termed empirical scholasticism: the mass accumulation of factual and subjective descriptions. Here is it argued that art objectifies and law codifies socially accepted values, that empirical scholasticism entails both a cultural and judicial positivism, and that this constitutes a grave cultural loss. It further is proposed that continued acceptance of Empirical-scholasticism as a cultural paradigm would be detrimental socially and for the practice of art history. Traditional liberalism is offered as a desirable alternative."

“... intuition and concepts ... constitute the elements of all our cognition, so that neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition. Thoughts without [intensional] content (*Inhalt*) are empty (*leer*), intuitions without concepts are blind (*blind*).

...it is, therefore, just as necessary to make the mind’s concepts sensible—that is, to add an object to them in intuition—as to make our intuitions understandable—that is, to bring them under concepts. These two powers, or capacities, cannot exchange their functions. The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only from their unification can cognition arise.”¹²

In the 20th century, physics affirms yet recontextualizes Kant’s view. As discussed below, Relativity and Quantum Physics establish that it is no longer tenable to reduce understanding to “successful fictions,” positivist identity claims, or a combination of the two. Albert Einstein (1879-1955) and Niels Bohr (1885-1962) recognize the problems inherent to an epistemological- science.¹³ As Einstein explains:

“The reciprocal relationship of epistemology and science is of noteworthy kind. They are dependent upon each other. Epistemology without contact with science becomes an empty scheme...

However, no sooner has the epistemologist, who is seeking a clear system, fought his way through to such a system, than he is inclined to interpret the thought-content of science in the sense of his system and to reject whatever does not fit into his system. The scientist, however, cannot afford to carry his striving for epistemological systematic that far...

He therefore must appear to the systematic epistemologist as a type of unscrupulous opportunist: he appears as *realist* insofar as he seeks to describe a world independent of the acts of perception; as *idealist* insofar as he looks upon the concepts and theories as free inventions of the human spirit (not logically derivable from what is empirically given); as *positivist* insofar as he considers his concepts and theories justified *only* to the extent to which they furnish a logical representation of relations among sensory experiences...”¹⁴

¹² *Critique of Pure Reason* A50–51/B74–76)

¹³ Jan Faye, Rasmus Jakslund, “What Bohr wanted Carnap to learn from quantum mechanics,” *Science*, vol 88 (August 2021), 110-119.

¹⁴ Paul Arthur Schilpp, Editor, *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*. Evanston: The Library of Living Philosophers, 1949), 683-84.

Therefore, the idea of an objective science is challenged by three distinct understandings: as a *realist* attempting to describe the world, an *idealist* who begins with concepts imagined, and a *positivist* seeking to reconcile the two by placing factual descriptions into empirically confirmable orders (not, an actual confirmable order). Despite resistance from the advocates of scientific objectivity, all three of these approaches sociologize and politicize science.¹⁵ The problem is that within the realm of physics, truth-claims are limited to knowledge-claims that are epistemological, tautological, and meaningless. The solution to an unsatisfactory yet long-ensconced *Empirical Scholasticism* thereby remains elusive. However, instead of science *seeking accurately to describe the world*, we might better return to the problem of *understanding the world*. When science is the attempt to understand the world, it escapes being limited to the production of facts, the ability to make and escape particular conceptual modes, or relationally rearranging them.

It is by the pursuit of Truth that we can escape a banal and or violent epistemology. We can escape being confined to the pursuit of facts subject to expert manipulation. In science and life, we can distinguish the foolish amateur from the expert, and escape being confined to systematic or authoritarian claims of individual or bureaucratic expertise. The amateur produces chaos, the expert has particular modes for knowing, doing or making, but the wise are not limited to any particular mode - while avoiding chaos. The wise transcend epistemology via metaphysics in search of a better understanding of reality and life.

The splitting of facts and reason from Truth has a long pedigree. One significant contributor to that effort was René Descartes (1596-1650). He tragically advanced the trajectory leading to the establishment of Empirical Scholasticism by attempting to bridge the gap between facts and reason while reaffirming the existence of Truth. He observes that we can only be certain that since we think, we exist (*Cogito, ergo sum*), and it is our ability to think that establishes the existence of God (or Understanding-as-such personified). Alternatively, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) later posits that *Sentio, ergo sum* (we feel, therefore we exist).¹⁶ The question of whether we can be certain we exist because

¹⁵ See: Lawrence Krauss, "Alan Sokal's Joke Is on Us as Postmodernism Comes to Science," Wall Street Journal, Saturday/Sunday, January 6-7, 2024, a13.

¹⁶ Takashi Sugiyama, "Herder on 'Sentio, Ergo Sum': Seen from His Remarks on the Color Harpsichord," *Computational Aesthetics*, (2019), 43-51.

we think, or feel, is later conflated by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). He claims that the only truth is that we exist in a condition referred to as *facticity*. In that condition there is no gap to be bridged between mind and body (or idea and facts or feelings) because the mind is limited to facts (as a matter of identity). In reference to Vincent Van Gogh's (1853-1890) *Peasant Shoes* (1886), Heidegger argues that there is no gap between matter and idea to bridge, because *ontology*, the study of that which actually exists (i.e., that which is in a state of *being* as opposed to *non-being*) refers to the factual; fact is truth, and truth is fact:

"...Van Gogh's painting [of peasant shoes] is the disclosure of what...the pair of peasant shoes, in truth *is*. This being [in Greek, *ὄντα* or *όντα*] steps forward into the unconcealment of its being. The unconcealment of beings is what the Greeks called *ἀλήθεια* [*alétheia*: truth]. We say "truth" and think little enough in using the word. In the work, when there is a disclosure of the being as what and how it is, there is a happening of truth at work.

In the work of art, the truth of the being has set itself to work... In the work, a being, a pair of peasant shoes, comes to stand in the light of its being. The being of the being comes into the constancy of its shining.

The essential nature of art [or science] would then be this: the setting- itself -to -work of the truth of beings. Yet until now art has had to do with the beautiful and with beauty – not with truth...

In the fine arts, the art is not itself beautiful, but is, rather, called so because it brings forth the beautiful. Truth, by contrast, belongs to logic. But beauty is the preserve of aesthetics.

Correspondence to beings as long been taken to be the essence of truth. Do we then mean that this painting by van Gogh depicts shoes that are actually present and count, therefore, as a work because it does so successfully?... By no means.

The work, then, is not concerned with the reproduction of a particular being that has at some time actually present. Rather, it is concerned to reproduce the general essence of things. But where, then, is this general essence and how should it be the artwork to correspond to, or agree with it?



Illustration 1-3: Vincent van Gogh, Peasant Shoes, 1886; Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. Public Domain

With what essence of what fame should the Greek temple agree? Could anyone maintain the impossible position that the Idea of Temple is represented in the temple?...

Truth establishes itself as strife in a being that is to be brought for only in such a way that the strife opens up in this being; the being itself, trying to get into a unity of sketch and fundamental design rupture and outline.”¹⁷

Heidegger’s use of the terms *beauty* and *truth* reveals an *immanentization of essentialism*. The traditional pursuit of Truth (and science) aims to rise above the accidental or trivial to reveal the actual or essential nature of things. When Truth is immanentized, it is not a refutation of essentialism¹⁸ that occurs, but its recontextualization. The association of Truth with rectitude of cognition is to be replaced by an understanding of truth as experienced fact. Heidegger centers beauty and truth on strife: “Truth is present only as the strife between clearing and concealing in the opposition between world and earth. As this strife of world and earth, truth wills its establishment in the work.”¹⁹

In Latin, *factum* refers not to something understood, but done. Traditionally, facts alone have no meaning, and understanding is found via the gift of genius. That gift is immanentized by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who contends that *genius is the unique capacity to produce meaning*. It is not what a work means, but that it exists (*factum est*,). This invalidates the peaceful pursuit of Truth as the realization of a better understanding of reality and life. In his essay on the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander (c. 610-546), Heidegger discusses the conundrum that in a state of facticity, when truth (as factual experience) reveals itself in beings, Being (as Understanding) withdraws. Seeking degrees of actual understanding (or Beauty as the splendor of Wisdom) is dismissed as futile, indeed oppressive. For Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), deconstruction is Truth; deconstruction is Justice.²⁰ In the quest for *finite knowledges*, we are

¹⁷ Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, eds. and trans. *Martin Heidegger: Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16ff.

¹⁸ Angelique Richardson, “Against Finality: Darwin, Mill and the end of essentialism”. *Critical Quarterly*, 53(4) (December 2011), 21-44.

¹⁹ Richardson, *Against Finality*, 37

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction is justice.” Gil Anidjar, ed. *Acts of religion* (New York and London: Routledge.2002), 243.

trapped within a violent infinite regress of subjectivist-absolutist facticities.²¹ The meaning of reality and life is that there is no meaning.

To the non-expert reader this may sound deeply obscure, but how we understand truth affects our understanding of justice. Claims of scientific and social knowledge warrant careful consideration since knowledge claims (or laws) can be flawed, ideological or incomplete. When limited to facticity, Truth cannot be understood, and therefore justice is grounded in authoritarianism (law as *lex* or command) and resisted by anarchism. It is not just a matter of obeying the laws of science, or the laws of society. At issue is whether we should submit to knowledge claims that equate truth and justice with fact, power, and deconstruction, or would it be better to pursue Truth, or Justice (the Latin *ius* or right, and *fas* or true). Since facticity holds that only different knowledges are possible, and that qualitative distinctions between them make no sense, demagoguery is empowered, be it vulgar or sophisticated. The scientist and judge personify specialist or elitist expertise, advance *special interests* (be they intellectual or political), and are accompanied by the desire of others to do the same. Denied are those aspiring to live intelligently and peacefully by seeking inherently *generalist* good judgment.

That denial is contrary to the social, political and intellectual values of Wisdom-seeking cultures around the world, and to the Enlightenment's peaceful pursuit of human flourishing. In the pursuit of that better understanding, persons of varying degrees of sophistication can be united in realizing what they hope to be true, good and just. They can aspire to being wise rather than foolish, ideological, and violent. Some might protest that this would be an unrealistic noble doctrine. Not all have the desire or ability to sort out difficult issues, and even if they did, they might not have the means of implementing that which they believe and desire. Out of neglect, practicality, or humility, we might better wish to delegate to others the task of doing so. As the following pages will indicate, it is essential that we not do so, because it empowers an incoherently violent authoritarian-anarchistic mindset that diminishes the dignity and threatens the quality of life of all human beings.

For more than a millennium, bridging the gap between Aristotelian Realism and Platonic Idealism by a shared pursuit of Truth was recognized

²¹ The Buddhist tradition treats the problem of infinite regress uniquely. See: Martin Kovan, "Buddhist karma as infinite regress: vicious or benign?" *Academia Letters* Article 2608 (2021).