

SPECULATION VS. FACTUALITY

An Analysis of Modern Unbelief and a Suggested Corrective

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John Warwick Montgomery[♦]

“Any mental activity is easy if it need not take reality into account.”
--Marcel Proust (*The Faber Book of Aphorisms*, ed. W. H. Auden)

We begin—and we shall end—with Sherlock Holmes: “Facts, facts, facts” insisted the Great Detective. “It is a capital mistake to theorize in advance of the facts.”¹ “I can discover facts, but I cannot change them.”² The theme of the present essay is remarkably simple, even though the arguments and illustrations supporting it are occasionally complex and difficult. It is this: modern unbelief departs from factual reality in favour of unassailable speculation, leaving its advocates in a never-never land without hope either in this world or in the next.

Our examination of this theme will be restricted to the modern secular era—since the rise of modern secularism in the so-called 18th-century “Enlightenment.” But speculation substituted for factuality did not begin there. An example: in the greatest debate among Protestant leaders during the Reformation period, the Marburg colloquy between Luther and Zwingli, the Swiss reformer argued that the whole Christ could not be present in the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper. Why? because (argued Zwingli) bodies can have only one location, and Christ had ascended into heaven, so that his body was located at the right hand of God. To this metaphysical speculation as to what Christ’s body could or could not do, Luther responded simply by writing again and again in chalk on the table, “*Hoc est corpus meum*”—Christ’s declaration as to the bread at the Last Supper, “This is my body.”³ In his writings, Luther was prone to assert that “metaphor is the Devil’s tool.”⁴

It is our contention (whether or not one agrees with Luther’s Eucharistic position) that speculation has indeed been one of the Enemy’s chief instruments in modern times. We shall survey the major areas of modern thought illustrating this fact—the fields of philosophy, science, theology, literature, the arts, legal culture and society—and then endeavour to determine why speculation rules and what can be done to counteract it.

AREAS OF MODERN MISERY

□ Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy and Christian Thought, Patrick Henry College. Professor emeritus, University of Bedfordshire, England. Ph.D. (Chicago), D.Théol. (Strasbourg, France), LL.D. (Cardiff, Wales, U.K.). Member of the California, D.C., Virginia, Washington State and U.S. Supreme Court bars; Barrister-at-Law, England and Wales; Avocat à la Cour, Paris. Websites: www.jwm.christendom.co.uk; www.apologeticsacademy.eu; www.ciltpp.com.

¹ From: *The Second Stain*. Cf. also Holmes’s remarks in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Copper Beaches*, and *Shoscombe Old Place*. In general, see John Warwick Montgomery, *The Transcendent Holmes* (Ashcroft, B.C., Canada: Calabash Press, 2000), p. 126.

² *The Problem of Thor Bridge*.

³ See the scholarly reconstruction of the Marburg Colloquy by Herman Sasse: *This Is My Body* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959).

⁴ Cf. Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology* (rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1973), I, 66-70.

Philosophy

Our first area for analysis is, naturally, that of philosophical thought—since it purports to be the most general and all-embracing field of scholarship.⁵

At the centre of what Thomas Paine termed the “Age of Reason” was the Deistic conviction that God, having created a perfect world, would never intervene to perform miracles, much less undergo an incarnation. David Hume asserted that it is always more probable that one reporting a miracle is a deceiver or mistaken than that the miracle actually occur—so it is a waste of time to investigate any miracle claim. What trumps miracle evidence is “uniform experience against the miraculous.” Wrote Hume: “It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden. . . . But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country.”⁶ The problem with this speculative argument, to be sure, is the brute fact that at least one dead man returned to life has indeed been observed—in Palestine, during the days of the Roman Empire.⁷ It will be noted that in the Humean argument speculative Reason is permitted—indeed, encouraged—to replace factual investigation.

The history of 19th-century German idealistic philosophy is the story of metaphysical speculation gone wild. Hegel is the most egregious example. He held that the *Weltgeist*—the immanent World Spirit of Reason—is moving humanity to higher and higher levels and would eventually produce a state of perfect freedom.⁸ Kierkegaard rightly observed that such confidence in knowing the “essence” of the universe constitutes mere *hubris*, for no human being has the perspective to see the cosmic process in its totality. There is no way factually to justify such a viewpoint.

F. H. Bradley, the English Hegelian idealist, spoke along the same lines. Proclaimed Bradley: “The Absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of, evolution and progress.”⁹ How, precisely, could such a claim be justified? One is reminded of Woody Allen’s comment in his hilarious essay, “My Philosophy”: “Can we actually ‘know’ the universe? My God, it’s hard enough finding your way around in Chinatown.”¹⁰

Twentieth-century atheistic existentialism is often regarded as a corrective to German idealism. Epistemologically, however, it commits the same overarching fallacy of speculating without concern for evidential support. Heidegger: “What is to be investigated is being only and—*nothing* else. . . . *Does the Nothing exist only because the Not, i.e., the Negation, exists? Or is it the other way around? . . . What about this Nothing? – The Nothing itself nothings.*”¹¹

We are told that we are entering a time of “metaphysical recovery” as a result of linguistic philosophy. If this

⁵ But what about library science? It also operates with maximal generality and is not subject to the criticisms which follow! See my essay, “Luther and Libraries,” in my *In Defense of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1970).

⁶ Hume, *Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), sec. X (“Of Miracles”), pt. 1, p. 115. Cf. J. Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁷ Not to mention the raising of Lazarus and a few remarkable dead coming back to life as mentioned in passing in the Book of Acts.

⁸ See my *Where Is History Going? Essays in Support of the Historical Truth of Christian Revelation* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969), pp. 18-19; and my *The Shape of the Past: A Christian Response to Secular Philosophies of History* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975), pp. 70-72.

⁹ See my *Crisis in Lutheran Theology* (*op. cit.*), I, 26-27.

¹⁰ *The New Yorker*, December 27, 1969, pp. 25-26. See also Allen’s recent and parallel masterpiece, “Thus Ate Zarathustra,” *The New Yorker*, July 3, 2006.

¹¹ Cf. Rudolf Carnap’s decimation of this argument in his “The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language,” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), pp. 69-73; the original German text was published in Vol. II of *Erkenntnis* (1932).

means that cosmic speculation has been rehabilitated, that claim is very doubtful. The central issue remains: Does *ontology* (one's worldview) determine *epistemology* (the search for truth), or is it the reverse? In one sense, ontology is fundamental, since when one commits to a method of investigating the universe, one starts with the unprovable assumptions that the world exists, that I exist as an investigator, and that the inferential functions of the human mind (deduction, induction, abduction) are valid. But those who start with substantive metaphysical views as to the nature of the universe (Deistic "Reason," the Hegelian "World Spirit," existential "Angst," etc., etc.) are setting forth mutually incompatible and unprovable pictures of the universe.

Only if we start on a level playing field with others in an effort to discover what the universe is all about can we hope to arrive at truth. Facts need to determine the legitimacy or non-legitimacy of worldviews, not the reverse. The story is told of Hegel that when a student objected, "But the facts disagree with your view," Hegel replied, "Then the facts be hanged!" The story is doubtless apocryphal (it is also told of Kant), but it well describes the staggering consequences of allowing metaphysics to swallow up an epistemological determination of the factual nature of things.¹²

Science

Close to philosophy lies the domain of cosmology. When at University College Dublin I debated atheistic cosmologist Sean Carroll, and Carroll was confronted by the implication of the Second Law of Thermodynamics that the universe must be finite (and must thus have been created), he responded that he was working on a repeal of the Second Law!¹³ This reminded me of T. S. Eliot's *Macavity the Mystery Cat*: "Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity, He's broken every human law, he breaks the law of gravity." The fact of entropy did not compel Carroll, as it certainly should have done, to find a more satisfactory route than the eternal existence of the universe; he preferred utterly unsupported speculation.

Non-Christian cosmologists have also appealed to the notion of "multiverses"—arguing that our universe may be only one of many and that other universes may obey totally different laws (and thus, presumably, not be subject to the Second Law or the equivalent, and so not need a creator). However, multiverses are pure speculation. Even if such universes existed (for which there is not a shred of evidence), their "laws" would either be the same as ours, or, if not, we would be incapable of comprehending them anyway. And there would need to be a "multiverse generator" to account for all of them—which, again, would need to be governed by our physical laws or, if not, be entirely incomprehensible to us and therefore a nonsensical subject of discussion.¹⁴ Atheist-turned-deist Anthony Flew put it this way: the multiverse speculations are little more than "'escape routes . . . to preserve the nontheist status quo."¹⁵ One is reminded of what physicist Wolfgang Pauli wrote in the margin of a colleague's paper: "This isn't right; it isn't even wrong."

And then we come to secular endeavours to deep-six intelligent design—in spite of the impressive scientific evidence marshaled in its behalf. Orthodox evolutionism admits that there is no such thing a single missing link

¹² But can language represent the real nature of things? Willard van Orman Quine apparently did not think so (*Word & Object* [Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1960], pp. 29 ff.): if a translator hears a native cry "*Gavagai!*" as a rabbit appears, this could mean the physical rabbit—but it could also mean "a rabbit is here momentarily"—or even just "the quality of rabbitness." So, allegedly, there is no inherent correlation between things and signification or between language and reality (cf. *Philosophie Magazine*, November, 2009, p. 75). But it should be obvious that such an argument does not eliminate factuality or objectivity: (1) what appears is a rabbit and not a hippopotamus; (2) the range of meaning of "*Gavagai!*" does not extend beyond rabbithood; (3) no one is questioning the factual existence of the rabbit, the native, or the translator.

¹³ See my write-up of the debate: "God at University College Dublin," *Modern Reformation*, XVIII/1 (January-February 2009), 32-34, 43; reprinted in my forthcoming book, *Christ As Centre and Circumference* (Bonn, Germany: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft).

¹⁴ Cf. Jeff Zweerink, *Who's Afraid of the Multiverse?* (Glendora, CA: Reasons to Believe, 2009), *passim*.

¹⁵ Antony Flew and R. A. Varghese, *There Is a God* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), p. 137.

and that there is no way ever to provide such. And full-blown evolutionary theory depends on unlimited time periods for the required developments and transitions to occur--yet time is not a causal concept: mere passage of time cannot bring about event x rather than events y or z . Given infinite time, anything can theoretically occur—including proof of the falsity of Dawkins' *Blind Watchmaker* scenario! "Huxley's notion that monkeys typing at random long enough will eventually produce literature ('the works of Shakespeare') has been tested at Plymouth University, England: over time, the monkeys (1) attacked the computer, (2) urinated on it, and (3) failed to produce a single word (AP dispatch, 9 May 2003)."¹⁶

Another stimulating example of the pervasiveness of speculation versus factuality lies in recent attempts to understand computers as "minds." John Searle, in his celebrated Chinese Room Argument, argues against what he calls "strong Artificial Intelligence"—the claim that an appropriately programmed computer has cognitive states such as understanding and is therefore necessarily a mind. The strong AI advocate counters that even if at the present computers do not appear to have arrived at the point of mind, all that is needed is to add something to them to achieve this: "one needs only find out what necessary additional properties come with what sorts of programs, and then on the basis of that knowledge design the Right Program that could not be run without producing mental states." Searle quite rightly replies to this idea of brain simulation that "our current knowledge of the brain does not give us any clue as to what to simulate, and the hypothetical future knowledge might turn out to exclude the possibility of computational simulation." This response is right-on-the-money, since the entire strong AI position is based on nothing but pure speculation. Searle's own position of biological naturalism seems in tension with his eminently sound assertion that "anything else that caused minds would have to have causal powers at least equivalent to those of the brain."¹⁷ Following this factual route, one would appear to arrive at a rational Source of human rationality, i.e., an Intelligent Designer.

So far does modern thinking move from the realm of factuality that attempts have even been made to argue that scientific activity is really not the product of factual investigation of the nature of things but the result of the metaphysical presuppositions, commitments, and *Weltanschauung* of the scientist. The most prominent example of this is the celebrated "Kuhn thesis": Thomas Kuhn's argument¹⁸ that one major scientific paradigm replaces another because of a shift in metaphysical orientation—not because increased factual knowledge leads to a better understanding of things. Now, one grants that changes in the ideological climate may contribute to movements in scientific theory, and questionable scientific notions can arise or succeed due to the *Zeitgeist* (evolutionary theory was readily accepted because of the 19th century myth of inevitable Progress). But good science moves from one paradigm to another as a result of "crucial experiments"—as Einstein's special theory of relativity, which reduced Newtonian physics to a special case within relativity theory, was ultimately accepted when the Michelson-Morley experiment put paid to the belief in an "ether" as a universal medium for the transmission of electromagnetic waves.

Where the subject-object distinction is discarded or weakened, meaningful scientific investigation disappears. "Bohr has emphasized the fact that the observer and his instruments must be presupposed in any investigation, so that the instruments are not part of the phenomenon described but are used."¹⁹ One thinks of humorist Robert Benchley's story of his (anything but scientific) experience in his college biology course: he spent the term carefully drawing the image of his own eyelash as it fell across the microscopic field. And one recalls the suspicion that Italian astronomer Schiaparelli's Martian "*canali*" were in part the result of incipient cataract in his own eye.

Pace some philosophers of science, the Heisenberg Indeterminacy Principle does not break the subject-object distinction, since any possibility of the validity of that Principle requires presupposing the subject-object distinction. Were Heisenberg himself interlocked with his data, his formulation of the Principle would not necessarily reflect physical reality but rather Heisenberg's personal perspective on the world.

Polanyi's position in this regard is not entirely clear, but his notion of "personal knowledge" does not, as some

¹⁶ Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* (4th ed.; Bonn, Germany: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2009), para. 3.86111.

¹⁷ See the valuable discussion in Josef Moural, "The Chinese Room Argument": *John Searle*, ed. Barry Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 214-60.

¹⁸ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (3d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). The literature on the Kuhn thesis and its difficulties is considerable.

¹⁹ Victor F. Lenzen, *Procedures of Empirical Science* ("International Encyclopedia of Unified Science," I/5; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), p. 28.

have suggested, “overcome the subjective-objective divide.”²⁰ True, as Polanyi, says, the scientist is “passionately interested in the outcome of the procedure,” but Polanyi is equally correct when he observes that the scientist functions “as detective, policeman, judge, and jury all rolled into one. He apprehends certain clues as suspect, formulates the charge and examines the evidence both for and against it, admitting or rejecting such parts of it as he thinks fit, and finally pronounces judgment.”²¹

Theology

Liberal theology since the onset of modern secularism has offered a series of truly wild speculations on which ecclesiastical edifices can supposedly be built.

Starting from 18th-century suggestions (Jean Astruc) that the early books of the Bible might be later, editorial compilations, German 19th-century “higher criticism” (Graf, Kuenen, Wellhausen) speculated that the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—attributed to Moses by Jesus himself, were actually a 10th-century B.C. pasted-up of four sources: J (using “Jehovah/Yahweh” as the word for God), E (using “Elohim” as the word for God), P (the priestly, or sacrificial, material), and D (the legal material). No such subdocuments have ever been found. The theory is based entirely on the assumption that literary variations in style and vocabulary prove multiple authorship. By the time I was a theological seminary student (mid-20th-century), the number of alleged sources had multiplied: Morgenstern of Hebrew Union College was dividing the hypothetical K source into K proper and K₁. A “Polycrome Bible,” projected to display these sources by diverse coloured typefaces, was never published—the reason being that the critics could not agree on the sources or where one started and another left off.

By the 20th century, the higher (or redaction or *Formgeschichtliche Methode*) critics had moved on to employ this same approach to the New Testament. The four Gospels were said not to have been written as unified documents by their traditional authors, but were held to be compilations of earlier source material. The early Christian communities were supposed to have done the editing—in a manner to convey their diverse “faith experiences” through the pictures of Jesus they created. Again: no subdocuments have ever been found to confirm such a thesis, and the earliest post-biblical Christian writers say just the opposite: they maintain that their teachings represent a fixed apostolic tradition deriving from the actual words and deeds of the historical Jesus.

Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most influential of all the higher critics of the New Testament, asserted that the historical details of Jesus’ life were of no consequence anyway, since our personal, existential experience of Jesus is all that counts theologically. What is needed biblically is just the *Dass*—the “thatness” of Jesus—that someone of the name existed. The contemporary Jesus Seminar now votes regularly on the historical value of the Gospel materials, using coloured balls to represent the varied materials, ranging from what the early church superadded (virtually everything) to what can in fact be attributed to Jesus (very, very little).²²

These conclusions are entirely the product of stylistic judgment and the identification of supposed inconsistencies in the Gospel accounts. None of the dismemberments or dehistoricisings by the liberal biblical critics depends upon actual manuscript sources preceding the New Testament documents. Indeed, as already noted, the very existence of such materials is entirely speculative.

²⁰ Mark T. Mitchell, *Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing* (“Library of Modern Thinkers”; Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), pp. 90 ff. Cf. Priyan Dias, “Is Science Very Different from Religion? A Polanyian Perspective,” 22/1 *Science and Christian Belief* (April, 2010), 43-55.

²¹ Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (new ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 38. Cf. Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* (*op. cit.*), para. 2.72-2.722.

²² The Jesus Seminar, noting that the non-publication of the “Polycrome Bible” was due to a hopeless lack of scholarly unanimity on the critics’ part, has managed, by employing the Seminar’s voting system, to publish a colour-coded edition of the Gospels (including the Gnostic “Gospel of Thomas”): Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). Their conclusions as to the historical accuracy (better, inaccuracy) of Jesus’ sayings and deeds are based, not on any existing documents preceding the canonical Gospels, but solely on their personal speculations concerning the literary aspects—style, etc.—of the canonical material.

Interestingly, these critical methods have been found wanting in classical scholarship (Homeric criticism), in parallel Near Eastern studies (Ugaritic literature), and even in the study of the English ballad tradition. C. S. Lewis pointed out that when reviewers tried to use the same kind of subjective, stylistic analysis to uncover the true sources of his Narnian stories, they never succeeded—and they were operating in Lewis’s own time, in his own language. How then, asked Lewis, do the biblical critics think that they can succeed on a similar basis with biblical materials preceding them by two thousand years and deriving from cultures and languages alien to their own?²³

Once the biblical documents have been dismissed as unhistorical, theological doctrine inevitably becomes a matter of speculation as well. Karl Barth, desperately wanting to hold to the gospel of Christ’s death for our sins and resurrection for our justification, but also accepting the so-called “assured results of modern biblical criticism,” hit upon Martin Kähler’s distinction between “ordinary history” (*Historie*) and “supra-history” or “salvation history” (*Geschichte*): the miraculous events recorded of Jesus, such as the resurrection, happened not in ordinary, verifiable history, but in the realm of supra-history, accessible only to faith.²⁴ To this, Bultmann countered—and with good reason--“Then why regard such events as historical at all?” Thus were the saving events of Christ’s life walled off from historical criticism—but at the expense of no longer being part of normal history. A Pyrrhic victory, indeed.

Paul Tillich stated early in his career that he was attempting to find a basis for Christian theology that could stand even if the very existence of the historical Jesus became improbable.²⁵ Tillich’s solution was to try to lay a foundation for theology in “Being Itself”—in Schelling’s philosophical ontology. But did this mean that God is coterminous with the world (i.e. a pantheistic Deity) or just that God is the “Ground of All Being” (in which case his existence would still need factual support)? Tillich never tells us. Christ becomes the source of the “New Being”—but without any necessary biblical or historical foundation. The “Protestant Principle” is set forth: every theological idea must be subject to criticism, else it become idolatrous. But would this not mean that Tillich’s own ontological theology can be subjected to the same critical negation? The death-of-God theologians of the 1960s (especially Thomas Altizer) thought so, and thus within the framework of mainline liberal theology God himself died.²⁶

Literature and the Arts

Post-modern literary interpretation, as exemplified by Jacques Derrida, maintains that the meaning of a literary work resides in the interpreter. Works of literature, therefore, are not to be understood as having an objective, factual meaning residing within them, capable of being discovered by careful exegesis. Rather, they are open to creative deconstruction by the sensitive critic.

Literary scholar Frederick C. Crews, in his marvelous little book, *The Pooh Perplex*, “analyzed” A. A. Milne’s perennial children’s classic, *Winnie the Pooh*, through assuming the guise of “several academicians of varying critical persuasions.”²⁷ Here we have a series of hilarious examples of what invariably happens when interpreters allow themselves total personal latitude in the handling of their texts. “Harvey C. Window,” author of a dehistoricising casebook titled, *What Happened at Bethlehem*, writes on the “paradoxical” in Pooh; for him “all great literature is more complex than the naive reader can suspect,” the literal meaning is to give way to “multivalent symbolism,” and when the events of the book do not fit his paradoxical categories, they are reinterpreted until they do so.

“P. R. Honeycomb,” a poetical contributor to the “little magazines” who engages in “intensely personal criticism,” brings his existential stance to bear on the text: “In wondering what I shall set down next in these notations, I am reminded of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle. The only thing that is certain is that I am uncertain what to set down next, and in this I typify the whole modern age and the collision of

²³ C. S. Lewis, “Biblical Criticism,” in his *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

²⁴ See Montgomery, “Karl Barth and Contemporary Philosophy of History,” in his *Where Is History Going?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969), pp. 100-117.

²⁵ See Montgomery, “Tillich’s Philosophy of History,” *ibid.*, pp. 118-40.

²⁶ Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1970), pp. 76-173. Also, his *La Mort de Dieu* (2d ed.; Bonn, Germany: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2009).

²⁷ Frederick C. Crews, *The Pooh Perplex* (New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1965).

elementary particles in particular, a fact I find peculiarly comforting." "Myron Masterson," a distinguished "angry young man" for the past 20 years, writes on "Poisoned Paradise: The Underside of Pooh," employing as his guides Karl Marx, St. John of the Cross, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sacco and Vanzetti, Sigmund Freud, and C. G. Jung; he rejects those finicky "experts" who have said that "there exist differences of opinion among these thinkers," for, after all, "each of them has helped to shape my literary and moral consciousness."

"Woodbine Meadowlark," a perpetual graduate student romantically overwhelmed by the Angst of existence, paints a poohological picture in exact conformity with his worldview:

The most perfect emblem of ignorance is contained in the "Woozle" scene, which gives us Pooh and Piglet (ethereal, pure-hearted Piglet, the real hero of the book) wandering helplessly in circles, following their own darling little tracks and misconceiving their goal ever more thoroughly as they proceed. Is this not the very essence of modern man, aching with existential nausée and losing himself more deeply in despair as his longing for certainty waxes?

"Simon Lacerous," editor of the feared quarterly, *Thumbscrew*, describes Pooh as "Another Book to Cross Off Your List" and terminates his acid analysis by completely losing the subject-object distinction between the book and himself: "The more I think about it, the more convinced I become that Christopher Robin not only hates everything I stand for, he hates me personally." Finally, "Smedley Force," a spokesman for "responsible criticism," completely submerges the text by his interest in literary antecedents, conjectural emendations, and the "discovery" of errors and inconsistencies in the book. Such endeavours, he is convinced, place us "on the threshold of the Golden Age of POOH!"²⁸

The point of Crews's volume is simply that, if interpreters are allowed this kind of existential, Post-modern latitude, all meaningful interpretation collapses and no one will understand the meaning of any text under analysis.

Fortunately, the desire to avoid just such a "golden age of Pooh" has led more and more responsible literary critics to reject the so-called "Hermeneutical Circle"—the claim that the interpreter and the object of interpretation are inextricably locked together so that not only does the object influence the interpreter but also the interpreter colours what he or she interprets, thus making objective interpretation impossible in principle. The path out of the "Pooh perplex" is exemplified by Elder Olson's "Hamlet and the Hermeneutics of Drama,"²⁹ where Olson defines a perfect interpretation as "one which is absolutely commensurate in its basic, inferential, and evaluative propositions with the data, the implications, and the values contained within the work." But to follow that route would, of course, mean a return to a world where literary works had a factual meaning of their own, apart from the speculations of their critics.

And literature is not by any means the only cultural area in the modern secular world where factual reality is ignored. One thinks immediately of Magritte's celebrated painting, which declares both that reality has no objective meaning and that language and reality are entirely disconnected:

²⁸ With considerable difficulty, I have restrained myself from giving a sampling of Marxist and psychoanalytic interpretations of Pooh from Crews's book.

²⁹ Elder Olson, "Hamlet and the Hermeneutics of Drama," *Modern Philology*, LXI (February, 1964), 225-37.



The fields of music and photography are likewise not exempt from the secular effort to make imaginative creation the only reality.

No longer bound by the traditional rules, composers were forced to create their own. Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg explored serialism, Cage threw out the bathwater (and some would say the baby), continuing with the chaos of his own imagination. . .

So too with photography: through the discipline's history, artistic photographers have been limited by images in the physical world—even with burgeoning manipulations, they have depended on existing images as starting points. No longer. Today, photographers are almost completely free of the rules imposed by the real world.³⁰

Conservative Roman Catholic essayist and novelist Georges Bernanos, whilst properly condemning the evils of 20th-century materialism and technocracy, went much too far when he declared: "*On ne comprend absolument rien à la civilisation moderne si l'on n'admet pas d'abord qu'elle est une conspiration universelle contre toute espèce de vie intérieure.*"³¹ In point of fact, one understands absolutely nothing about modern civilization unless one starts by admitting that it is a global conspiracy against every sort of *extrinsic, objective factuality*—and an idolization of the subjective, inner life.

Law and Society

It would seem fairly obvious that the legal treatment of constitutions, statutes, judicial decisions, contracts, wills, and the like should follow standard interpretive canons. And this has indeed been the case through the history of the Anglo-American and the European civil law traditions. Such rules of "construction" as the so-called "literal rule" have been sacrosanct: words are to be given "their ordinary and literal meaning."³² Lord Bacon put it aphoristically: "*Non est interpretatio, sed divinatio, quae recedit a litera*" ("Interpretation that departs from the letter of the text is not interpretation but divination").³³ One only employs other canons of interpretation, such as

³⁰ Garth Sundem, *The Geeks' Guide to World Domination* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), p. 151. The consistently high quality of our scholarly citations will be particularly evidenced by this reference.

³¹ Georges Bernanos, *La France contre les robots* (Bordeaux: Castor Astral, 2009). Bernanos (1888-1948) is of course best known for his *Journal d'un curé de campagne* ("The Diary of a Country Priest").

³² Cf. Lord Esher MR, in *R v Judge of the City of London Court* (1892), 1 QB 273.

³³ See Montgomery, *Law and Gospel: A Study in Jurisprudence* (2d ed.; Calgary, Alberta: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology and Public Policy, 1995), pp. 24 ff.; also, Montgomery, "Legal Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Scripture," in Michael Bauman and David Hall (eds.), *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1995), pp. 15-29.

the “mischief rule” (finding the purpose of the enactment, decision, or text) when literal construction would lead to absurdity.

But in contemporary American jurisprudence, another, very different approach has come on the scene: the so-called Critical Legal Studies movement.³⁴ CLS, as it is popularly known, appeared on the American law-school scene in the 1970s; it has since become an important influence in British legal education as well. The two most noteworthy advocates of the position are Roberto Unger and Duncan Kennedy, whose emphases and concerns, while differing in certain respects, are fundamentally the same.³⁵ These thinkers build upon the pragmatic, social orientation of American legal realism, and carry to a far greater extreme Llewellyn’s view that formal legal judgments are little more than rationalisations of social practice. For CLS, the law is to be viewed from the standpoint of radical skepticism: all legal judgment is a matter of choosing one set of values over another. That being so, the purpose of legal activity is not a search for principles of justice embedded in and developed by the legal tradition, but the conscious advancement of a political vision. The law is inherently indeterminate; its literature has no single and objective meaning, being capable of virtually any interpretation; legal principles are contradictory; indeed, the law, in the final analysis, is but a tool generally serving the interests of the powerful and the maintenance of the status quo.

It will be observed that this approach subordinates the meaning of legal texts to the interests (political, social) of the interpreter, and thus has strong affinities with the deconstructionist literary schools treated earlier. Even though American judges would not generally want to be identified as adherents of CLS, they quite regularly handle their cases in a pragmatic, sociological fashion. The most egregious—and tragic—example is surely the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court abortion decision in *Roe v. Wade*, where the Court refused to be influenced by the objective fact that the entire genetic-chromosomal pattern of the human person is created at the moment of conception, and instead let pragmatic, instrumentalist issues determine the legal outcome.³⁶ Here untrammelled speculation and legal theorizing in the face of scientific fact have led to the loss of millions of human lives.³⁷

And, on the social scene, one encounters a remarkably similar phenomenon: the substitution of a personally constructed reality for the world as it actually is. A perceptive recent analysis—albeit touched by some outmoded leftist ideas—is Barbara Ehrenreich’s aptly titled book, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Pursuit of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*.³⁸ Speaking of the current economic turndown and the sub-prime catastrophe, she says: “American corporate culture had long since abandoned the dreary rationality of professional management for the emotional thrills of mysticism, charisma, and sudden intuitions.”³⁹ The root problem? One reviewer describes her argument in the following terms:

She begins with a look at where positive thinking originated, from its founding parents in the New Thought Movement (inventors of the law of attraction, recently made famous in books such as “The Secret”) through mid-20th century practitioners like Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie, to current disciples ranging from Oprah Winfrey to the preachers of the prosperity gospel. We’re not talking here about garden-variety hopefulness or genuine happiness, but rather the philosophy that individuals create—rather than encounter—their own circumstances. . . . Positive thinking, in Ehrenreich’s view, has

³⁴ This movement, mercifully, has had practically no influence on European philosophy of law.

³⁵ On CLS, see the citations in Montgomery, “Modern Theology and Contemporary Legal Theory,” in his *Christ Our Advocate* (Bonn, Germany: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2002), pp. 32-33.

³⁶ See Montgomery, *Slaughter of the Innocents* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1981).

³⁷ In diametric contrast to CLS, Matthew H. Kramer, Professor of Legal and Political Philosophy at Cambridge University, argues *in extenso* that “objectivity . . . is integral to every system of legal governance” (*Objectivity and the Rule of Law* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], p. 232).

³⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided* (New York: Henry Holt/Metropolitan Books, 2009). And see Hanna Rosin’s parallel treatment of the prosperity gospel in her trenchant article, “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?,” *The Atlantic*, December, 2009, pp. 38-48. (This is, to be sure, the Hanna Rosin whose book, *God’s Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America*, put Patrick Henry College on the national and international map—for better, not for worse, in this writer’s opinion.)

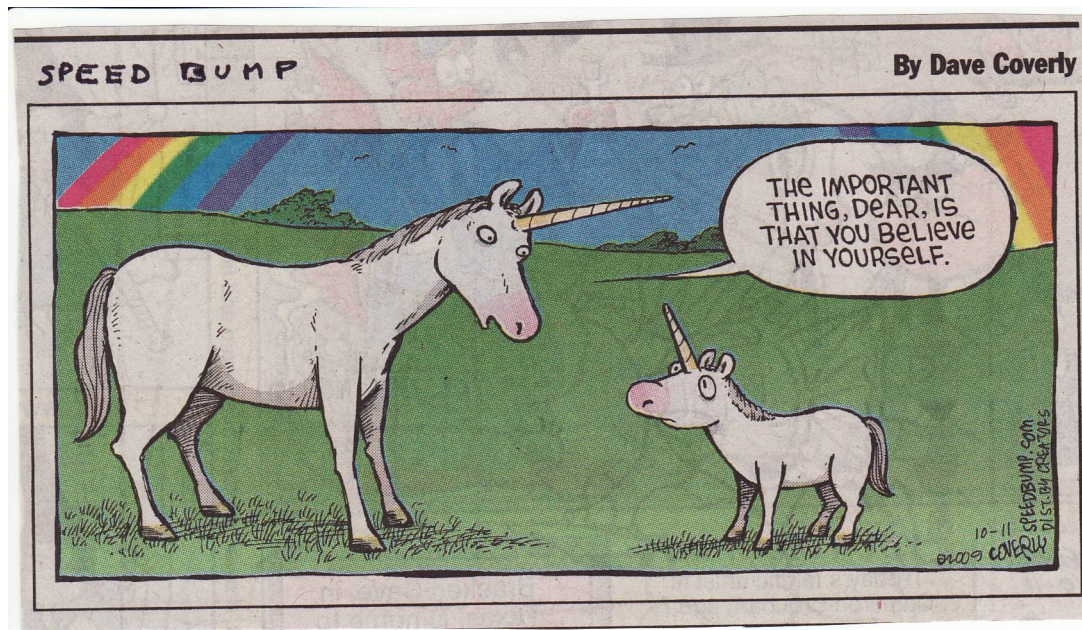
³⁹ Ehrenreich, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

become a kind of national religion.⁴⁰

Here, reality disappears: through “positive psychology,” the individual and the nation can make of the status quo an illusory ideal—or newly construct it in any fashion whatsoever, since all is plastic and open to re-creation.

A SUGGESTED CORRECTIVE

The manifold problems just discussed have a common denominator: disregard of fact and the substitution of speculation for reality. We shall conclude by suggesting a way out of this morass—offering as well a very short analysis of why our culture entered this quagmire in the first place.



The Proposal

The formal error in secularist speculation is epistemological: it relates to how one arrives at truth. If one believes that truth depends in the final analysis on one’s own stance, the problems we have described here will follow as the night the day. Philosophically, one needs to distinguish the real world from one’s encounter with it. The subject-object distinction is the beginning of epistemological wisdom. As Sigmund Freud—of all people—put it: “If there were no such things as knowledge distinguished from our opinions by corresponding to reality, we might build bridges just as well out of cardboard as out of stone.”⁴¹

No one seriously questions that interpreters are capable of regarding the object of interpretation in an almost infinite number of ways, depending on the interpreter’s background, prejudices, and interests. The question is: *Ought one to do so?* Are there objective limits to interpretation, created by the factual nature of what one is interpreting, that should restrain the interpreter?

This question has long been raised in the field of constitutional interpretation. Does the American Federal Constitution, for example, have an inherent meaning which should bind future generations of legal interpreters and judges, or is it a document capable of infinite re-understandings by each subsequent

⁴⁰ Kate Tuttle, “The Downside of Cheering Up,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 2009.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 212-13.

generation, according to present interests and needs? If the latter, does not the Constitution lose all normative force? That is the judgment of those thinkers who argue (as did Chief Justice John Marshall) that texts must be understood in their original sense, not twisted to fit the interpreter's agenda. Robert Bork admits to the difficulty of psychoanalysing the Founding Fathers to discover what they really "intended" in framing the American Constitution (the dilemma thrown up by liberal constitutionalists such as Laurence Tribe), and so prefers the expression "original understanding" to the more common phrase "original intent": "What we're really talking about [is] not what the authors of the Bill of Rights had in the backs of their minds, but what people who voted for this thing understood themselves to be voting for."⁴²

If, however, trying to determine the "original intent" of the author over and above his text poses extreme problems (Sibelius, for example, was hopeless in explaining the true intent and significance of his *Finlandia!*), the same dilemma attaches to the original audience of the text: they, too, may have misunderstood it—for any number of personal, societal or cultural reasons.

Thus the most sophisticated academic analysis of legal interpretation—or of interpretation in general—is surely the Wittgenstein-Popper approach: the analogy of the shoe and the foot. Interpretation is like a shoe and the text like the foot. One endeavours to find the interpretation that best fits the text (allowing the text itself to determine this). Here, "intent" or "understanding" is decided by the text itself.⁴³

Such an approach is another way of stating the principle that "the text must be allowed to interpret itself"—in the sense that when different or contradictory interpretations of it are offered, each will be brought to the bar of the text to see which fits best. Interpretations therefore function like scientific theories that are arbitrated by the facts they endeavour to explain: the facts ultimately decide the value of our attempts to understand them.⁴⁴

In the Wittgenstein-Popper model, the interpreter of course brings his prejudices (aprioris, presuppositions, biases) to the text, but it is the text that judges them also. And the meaning of the text is not to be established by extrinsic considerations, such as the background, prejudices, or stance of the interpreter, for that would yield an infinite regress. If the given fact or text has no inherent meaning and one must appeal beyond it to the interpreter for its true signification, then that must also be true of the extrinsic facts to which one appeals: "Bigger bugs have littler bugs upon their backs to bite them/And littler bugs have littler bugs/And so—*ad infinitum*."

The Wittgenstein-Popper approach to texts has direct application to the investigation of the world in general. We are to seek the best explanations of what we encounter, whether in literature, science, religion, history, law, or everyday life—i.e., the explanations that best "fit the facts."

One may notice a certain affinity here with the so-called "Scottish common-sense philosophy" of the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Thomas Reid, *et al.*), often regarded as simplistic.⁴⁵ And yet the principle of Occam's razor is

⁴² Robert Bork, interview in "Bork v. Tribe on Natural Law, the Ninth Amendment, the Role of the Court," *Life* (Fall Special, 1991), pp. 96-99. For his position in detail, see Bork, "Neutral Principles and Some First Amendment Problems," *47/1 Indiana Law Journal* (Fall, 1971); Bork, *The Tempting of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1990); and cf. Ethan Bronner, *Battle for Justice: How the Bork Nomination Shook America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

⁴³ Though Karl Popper developed this analogy in dependence upon Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical insights, the two were very uncomfortable with each other. See the brilliant treatment by David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

⁴⁴ Cf. Montgomery, "The Theologian's Craft," in his *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (*op. cit.*), pp. 267-313.

⁴⁵ One should not forget that this epistemology was fundamental to the solid biblical theology and apologetics of Old Princeton (Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield); of their "Christian Baconianism" a careful scholar of the subject has declared: "The Princeton Theology . . . with its historical pillars resting squarely upon the Baconian Philosophy of facts, is an important bridge across which influences continue to stream from antebellum to present-day American religion" (Theodore

applicable also to epistemology: the simpler solution is, all things being equal, better than a complex solution. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, chances are that it is not a platypus.⁴⁶

If what we are here suggesting seems rather childish, perhaps we should recall Jesus' rebuke to his disciples who wanted to send children away from him: "Suffer the little children to come to me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." The acceptance of factual reality as it is should be a goal for adults seeking truth, not just a description of how children view the world.

But does not our approach militate against "faith"? Did not Augustine teach us, "*Credo ut intellegam*"—that we must first believe in order to understand? If Christians take this Augustinian axiom to mean that truth can only be found through our personal stance, then we fall into exactly the same pit as the secularists we have been examining—and whom, presumably, we are trying to bring to a better understanding and to the historical, factual Cross of Christ.

There are two ways of regarding Augustine's statement and they must be clearly distinguished. First, the phrase can mean "all truth begins with prior faith"—or, in modern parlance, every worldview commences with unprovable assumptions. This is true enough, but we regularly overlook the fact that although all unprovable assumptions are equal, some are more equal than others! That is to say, it is vital to start with (admittedly undemonstrable) methods of investigation—deduction stemming from the law of non-contradiction, induction, retroductive inference—rather than with full-blown worldviews, none of which can be confirmed or disconfirmed if there is no commonly accepted methodology for distinguishing fact from non-fact.

Secondly, Augustine's phrase can mean "belief is the foundation of true understanding"—and that also is quite correct. Until one enters into a personal belief relationship with the object of one's search for truth, one understands only from the outside. Interiorising fact is the only way to comprehend it fully. Understanding marriage theoretically is a far cry from comprehending it from the inside, when one actually marries. The classical theologians rightly insisted that faith entails not just *notitia* (factual knowledge), but also public commitment to it (*fides*), and, most important, *fiducia* (a personal, living relationship with the Author of gospel truth).

But it is still of absolute importance to *believe in what is indeed genuine factual knowledge!* In religion, the object of belief is paramount. "The magic of believing" can be dark magic. Belief *per se* saves no one. If one believes in a false god or false faith-system, one will indeed "understand" it in the deepest way—but that will entail damnation rather than eternal life. So, as the Scripture says, we must "test the spirits," not naively assume that any kind of belief is sufficient for the proper understanding of things. And non-Christians need to be helped factually to see that only Jesus is (as he himself proclaimed) "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," and therefore the only proper object of religious faith.

We must all therefore start by investigating the world so as to arrive at factual truth. In religion, this will mean investigating the case for the Word—both Christ the living Word and the Holy Scriptures the written Word—and follow the positive results of that search with a personal commitment to Christ as Lord. When Christ said, "I am the Truth," he was telling those who had seen him heal the sick and raise the dead that they needed not only to accept those evidences of his Deity but also to enter into a personal relationship with him for time and for eternity.⁴⁷

Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977], p. 173).

⁴⁶ And, *pace* Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reid's common sense epistemology in no sense requires the rejection of classical foundationalism or one's being left only with the issue of interpreting reality (hermeneutics).

⁴⁷ Cf., as but a single example, Jesus' response to the disciples of John the Baptist, who enquired of Jesus whether he was indeed the Messiah whom John had proclaimed: "Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me"

Why Do Secularists Prefer Speculation to Fact?

And now, at the end of our journey, we ask: Why have so many areas of modern life fallen under the sway of secular speculation rather than adjusting to the factual nature of things? Why would anyone prefer unfounded speculation to factual reality?

One explanation frequently heard in the history of ideas places the burden essentially on the social conservatism of traditional Christianity. Until the French Revolution, theology was comfortable absolutising the political and social *status quo*. The “Great Chain of Being,”⁴⁸ as classically formulated in early medieval times by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, related the “Ecclesiastical Hierarchies” (the structures of church organization on earth) to the “Heavenly Hierarchies” (the graduated tiers of angelic and demonic beings).⁴⁹ When combined with a notion of the Divine Right of Kings, human social organization appeared to be an unalterable fact to which everyone must bow.⁵⁰ Thus, once revolutionary thinking recognized quite rightly that given social structures were but human constructs, not divine orders,⁵¹ this placed a question mark over all accepted beliefs. Modern man then asked himself if perhaps the whole world was inherently pliable—open to speculation and manipulation in all respects.

There is certainly a point to the claim that professing Christians contributed, if inadvertently, to the secular move from fact to speculation. Indeed, whenever Christians have identified political and social conservatism with the will of God, great harm has been done: legitimate critics of the *status quo* have been led to believe that Christianity supports entrenched injustice.⁵² But the reason why today’s secularist prefers speculation to factuality goes much deeper than historical considerations.

The trouble with facts is that one has to subordinate oneself to them—to succumb to them. The world is no longer plastic, able to be adjusted to fit one’s personal desires and interests. The attractive thing about speculation is that it places the speculator at centre: the world can be readjusted as he or she wishes. Speculation and autonomous self-centredness go hand in hand.

Luther criticized Erasmus for treating the Bible as a “waxed nose” which he could twist in any direction he wished.⁵³ The secularist—the man without God—wants to create his own universe, untrammelled by anything. Someone has rightly said, “First God created us in his image, and ever since we have been returning the compliment.” The secularist wants to become his or her own god, creating a

(Matthew 11:2-6).

⁴⁸ Cf. Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁴⁹ See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, ed. Paul Rorem, *et al.* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

⁵⁰ Cf. John Neville Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings*, intro. G. R. Elton (reprint ed.; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965); and Roland Mousnier, *Les Institutions de France sous la monarchie absolue, 1598-1789* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), Pt. I, chap. 15.

⁵¹ Note that even though any given socio-political order is not revelationally derivable or divinely inspired, this does not say that political order *in general* is purely a human creation. The Reformers were quite right in holding to *Schöpfungsordnungen* —“Orders of Creation”—imbedded in a fallen world by God to keep sinners from destroying themselves. See Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, and Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*: discussed in Montgomery, *The Shape of the Past* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975), pp. 358-74.

⁵² Montgomery, “Evangelical Social Responsibility in Theological Perspective,” in Gary Collins (ed.), *Our Society in Turmoil* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1970); reprinted in *Christians in the Public Square* and *The Church: Blessing or Curse?* (both published by the Canadian Institute for Law, Theology and Public Policy, Calgary, Alberta: www.ciltpp.com).

⁵³ Cf. Montgomery, *In Defense of Martin Luther (op. cit)*, pp. 70-75.

world that will be maximally satisfying and personally undemanding.

This move seems particularly evident in the arts. Parallel with the speculative operations we have described earlier, the contemporary secular artist has eschewed attempts to represent the world or to plumb its depths, as did Michelangelo and Rembrandt, and has preferred, in post-impressionism, cubism and dada, to give vent to personal expressions which leave the meaning of artistic works to the vagaries of each individual observer. One thinks of Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" (which could as equally represent an elephant ascending a staircase).⁵⁴ Some years ago, a painting was carelessly hung upside down in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City; no one realized this until, months later, the artist complained bitterly of the mistake.

As Dostoyevsky recognized in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "If God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted." If there is no transcendent God who has revealed his will for us, then it follows inexorably that "anything goes"—and thus that any and all speculations are possible. From here it is a very short step to the most bizarre explanations, such as Francis Crick's naturalistic proposal for explaining the origins of life on earth that the basic genetic structure of bacterial DNA was seeded from outer space—a theory without a modicum of empirical support.⁵⁵

Facts are a serious impediment to unbelief. The factual case for intelligent design is far better than the case for a godless, irrational universe. The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and thus the soundness of his claim to Deity, is far better than the speculative truth-claims of other religions and the sects.⁵⁶

The speculator is like the builders of the Tower of Babel. Without a fragment of evidence, and against all reason, they attempted to erect a building that would reach to heaven. All they received for their Herculean efforts was a confusion of languages: the loss of meaningful discourse. And that is precisely the case with the modern world. Example: John Lennon of The Beatles, and his lyric, "Imagine":

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too . . .

Yes, speculation "isn't hard to do." But what we need is more, not less factuality. As Saint Paul says to the Stoic philosopher Seneca in a recent French dramatic production: "It's not a question of believing or not believing: it's enough to open one's eyes!"⁵⁷ We need to open our eyes to God's facts, as embedded in the creation. We need to open our eyes to the facts of Christ, as manifested, "by many infallible proofs,"⁵⁸ in his historical life, death, and resurrection. We need to open our eyes to the factual presence of the Holy Spirit, promised by Christ himself, as he convicts the world of sin,

⁵⁴ Reproduced, for the delectation of the reader, in Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (*op. cit.*), p. 24.

⁵⁵ Francis Crick, *Life Itself: Its Origin and Nature* (New York: Simon & Schuster Touchstone Books, 1982).

⁵⁶ See Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* (4th ed.; Bonn, Germany: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2009), *passim*.

⁵⁷ "Il n'est pas question de croire ou de ne pas croire, il suffit d'ouvrir les yeux!"--Xavier Jaillard, *Après l'incendie: Saint Paul et Sénèque; pièce en 8 tableaux* (Levallois-Perret: Editions ACTE, 2007), p. 11. First presented at the Petit-Hébertot theatre, Paris, on 8 October 2009. Paul and Seneca were contemporaries, though there is no historical record of their actually having met.

⁵⁸ Acts 1:3.

righteousness, and judgment.

We began with the Great Detective. We conclude with him: “We are suffering from a plethora of surmise, conjecture, and hypothesis. The difficulty is to detach the framework of fact—of absolute undeniable fact—from the embellishments of theorists.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ From: *Silver Blaze*. Cf. my essay, “How Many Holmeses? How Many Watsons?,” *The Baker Street Journal*, Summer, 2002, pp. 26-30.