

The Future of Truth

The paradox of private faith and public reality

(The tenth Smith Lecture, September 2010)

‘It’s not true.
We only love what’s new
if it doesn’t threaten
too much change,
at least that’s my problem.’

Bruce L. Smith, *I’ll not Pretend* (1984), p. 62.

1. Can you trust history?

Are you afraid of success? You should be. So said the tragic culture of Greece and Rome. Bruce Smith reflected on this problem. He was not only a poet, but a philosopher, not only a theologian, but an ancient historian. He taught Classics.

At the destruction of Carthage in 146 BC the successful Roman general, Scipio, wept – and quoted Homer (extract 1 (a), *Iliad* 6.448, tr. A.J. Toynbee):

‘A day of doom shall dawn, and on that day shall Holy Ilion’s city pass away...’

This is recorded by Polybius, who was present and asked him what he meant. It was not for Carthage that he wept, but for Rome (Polybius 38.22.3).¹

Polybius claims to have compiled for his own day the first ‘synoptic’ or comprehensive history of the world (1.4.2). History, he says, offers the ‘most truthful’ education for public life (1.1.2). History requires ‘an exalted standard of truth’ (38.4.5). It aims at ‘the correction of the reader’s soul, to save him from stumbling at the same stumbling-block many times over’ (38.4.8, adapted from Toynbee’s translation).²

Our public still expects to learn lessons from history, but today’s historians try to leave that to the journalists, who only have to live for the day. We live under the discipline of the ninth commandment, no false witness against one’s neighbour.

The truth of landmarks of course is absolute. They are either true or false. There is indeed such a rational or natural mode of truth. One is then dealing with strict data, and with conclusions that necessarily follow, as in logic or mathematics.³

¹ A.E. Astin, ‘Scipio’s tears at Carthage’, Appendix IV in *Scipio Aemilianus* (Oxford, 1967), 282-287.

² K. Sacks, *Polybius and the Writing of History* (Berkeley, 1981); F.W. Walbank, *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World* (Cambridge, 2002).

³ E. Schrödinger, *Nature and the Greeks* (Cambridge, 1996); J. Habgood, *The Concept of Nature* (London, 2002); T. Peters et al. (eds.), *God’s Action in Nature’s World* (Aldershot, 2006).

But there is also a personal mode of truth. What is true for you may not be true for me. It is the truth that rests upon experience or understanding, persuasive truth. We will hold tenaciously to this whereas no one feels emotionally engaged with formal truth. That speaks for itself.⁴

History (*historia* in Greek) began as the art of discriminating enquiry. It was one of the nine performing arts, and its muse, Clio, led their chorus. Like its daughter, now called natural history or simply science, history must pursue both modes of truth. Was the person present at the time, as Polybius was with Scipio? Which thing was said first? Such data can be settled beyond dispute, and they may indeed be vital to the integrity of the ‘more exalted standard of truth’ that Polybius requires.⁵

The full meaning of history arises from the interconnection of things, and above all from the judgement as to which causes what. This is not obvious. There is an easy assumption that one thing coming after another implies a causal link. It haunts the law, politics and medical diagnosis alike. One must look for alternatives, and note distinctions before similarities. The scientific method works by the falsification of hypotheses, and of paradigms.⁶

The ‘synoptic’ history of Polybius rightly looks toward a coherent whole. Yet it is also imprisoned by his ‘exalted standard of truth’. The ‘stumbling blocks’ give it away. He assumes a rational structure, yet the stumbling blocks cannot be removed. They will recur ‘many times over’. All Polybius can do is to correct the soul to guard against stumbling.

Graeco-Roman culture fostered such a tragic view of life. Its problems were not open to solution. One’s very good intentions themselves became the trap. The more committed to them you were, the more inexorable your fate. They became fateful pretensions (*hybris*), exciting the envy (*phthonos*) of the gods. Zeal only created worse blindness (*ate*) and plunged you to your doom (*nemesis*).⁷

Polycrates of Samos, a patron of the sixth-century BC Ionian miracle, fell victim to it. He was warned that his success was dangerously excessive. He must decide what he valued most, and get rid of it before disaster struck. So he selected his most precious ring, sailed out to sea, threw it overboard, and gave himself up to the necessary grief. When a fisherman retrieved the ring from his catch and presented it to Polycrates, he then celebrated his escape. Not so Amasis, king of Egypt. He could not risk so foolhardy an

⁴ C. Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric and Proof* (Hanover, NH, 1999); C.G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Harlow, 2005); B. Southgate, *What is History for?* (London, 2005); A. Curthoys et al., *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney, 2007).

⁵ G.A. Press, *The Development of the Idea of History in Antiquity* (Kingston, 1982); C.W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley, 1983).

⁶ K.R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1959); B. Wilkins, *Has History any Meaning: A Critique of Popper’s Philosophy of History* (Ithaca, 1978).

⁷ H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley, 1971).

ally, and broke off diplomatic relations. Polycrates of course did not last long. Herodotus, the father of history, weaves such lessons into his narrative (3.42).⁸

History would warn you against the seduction of success. The only safe course was moderation. Accept your proper station in life and stay safely within its limits. This is the basic folk-wisdom of all the long-sustained cultures of mankind. They persist because they entrench convention against any passionate appeal for development. By a truly tragic irony, the invention of scientific philosophy itself locked Classical culture into this heritage.

The pioneering philosophers of this era brought logic to bear on physics. *Logos* is the rational calculation of truth. Physics is the nature of reality. So for the first time in known history, the intellectual powers of abstraction and classification were brought to bear systematically on the definition of truth. The method was dialectical, that is by a public disputation between rival definitions. It was conducted at first in tantalisingly condensed poetry.⁹

By the end of the fifth century BC it was all rhetorically staged in the dialogues of Plato, and in the fourth laid out on the grand scale in the scientific curriculum of Aristotle. Our disciplines have kept his names: Physics, Politics, and Ethics, three great categories formed from the top down by the totally integrating principle of reason (*logos*) so as to establish the functions respectively of the universe, the human community and the individual. Neither history nor philosophy however was a curriculum subject. Philosophy was the name of the speculative quest itself, while history ('enquiry' by a qualified judge) was its intellectual method.

Presumably because the mind itself is a rationalising instrument, delivering classification and explanation of things, it was taken for granted that reason (*logos*) was the controlling force of all existence. The question then became how to identify the primary substance or principle (*arche*) of nature itself. It must of course have a material character, however refined. And it could be one of the four elements (*stoicheia*), earth, air, fire and water.¹⁰

Pythagoras of Samos seems to have established the axiom that reality was constituted according to the sum of the first four numbers (i.e. the *tetraktys*, or numeral ten), and the number four was also the key to the musical intervals which ensured the harmony of the universe. So in various fields sets of four provided the structure of Greek thought at the axiomatic level. Not only four elements, but four material conditions (hot and cold, wet and dry), four seasons, four bodily humours (blood, which makes us

⁸ G. Shipley, *A History of Samos, 800-188 BC* (Oxford, 1987); E. Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford, 2007); C. Dewald et al. (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁹ G.S. Kirk et al. (eds) =KRS, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 2 1983); D. Sedley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2003).

¹⁰ A. Ehrhardt, *The Beginning: A Study in the Greek Philosophical Approach to the Concept of Creation* (Manchester, 1968); D. Furley, *Cosmic Problems: Essays on Greek and Roman Philosophy of Nature* (Cambridge, 1989).

sanguine, phlegm phlegmatic, yellow bile choleric, and black bile melancholy), four cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, in Greek *phronesis*, *sophrosyne*, *andreia*, *dikaiosyne*). Greek science is held sometimes to have failed through lack of measurement. The culture was engrossed instead with a mystical fixation on the properties of number.¹¹

A more fundamental trap was the axiom that the universe, because rational, must be perfect, complete, unlimited, unchanging and eternal. Parmenides denied any possibility of change, which was only an illusion. Across the millennium (500 BC to AD 500) of philosophical debate over the meaning of this, the original assumption was never dislodged: universal fixity (KRS 288).

Karl Popper famously promoted the ideals of an open universe and open society against the totalitarian idealism of Plato. Yet even Popper celebrated Parmenides for being our heroic pioneer. His ideas ‘determined the aims and methods of science as the search for invariants’.¹² Popper of course also claimed to detect in Parmenides the seeds of that critical rationalism which allows only the falsification of hypotheses, and not their fortification, as the proper method of science.

Empedocles, the successor of Parmenides, accepted the appearance of change, but only as a cyclical rhythm, ‘always changeless in the cycle’ (KRS 348). Things clearly rotated, but nothing changed.¹³

The implications of this were spelled out in the third century BC by Chrysippus (extract 1 (b), from Nemesius, *On the nature of man* 309.5/311.2, tr. C.K. Barrett):

‘Socrates and Plato and each individual man will live again... They will go through the same experience and the same activities... And this restoration of the universe takes place, not once, but over and over again – indeed for all eternity **without end** (*apeiron*)... For there **will never be any new thing** (*xenon*) other than that which has been before, but everything is repeated down to the minutest detail.’

‘Socrates and Plato and each individual man’ may seem to be unique. But there can be no such thing as personal truth. By definition truth cannot change, and therefore it must persist ‘**without end**’. The term *apeiron* (‘infinite’ or ‘unlimited’) had been the earliest attempt to formulate in abstract terms the basic condition of reality. The logical consequences of it undergirded the whole long debate.

¹¹ G.E.R. Lloyd, *The Revolutions of Wisdom: Studies in the Claims and Practice of Ancient Greek Science* (Berkeley, 1987), 215-284. Galen, ‘On the humours,’ in M. Grant, *Galen on Food and Diet* (London, 2000), 14-17.

¹² K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, 1945, 5th edn 1966); id., *The World of Parmenides: Essays on the Presocratic Enlightenment* (London, 1958), 146.

¹³ D. O’Brien, *Empedocles’ Cosmic Cycle* (Cambridge, 1969).

If the universe is both total and rational it can have no limits, and therefore no end, and (by implication) no beginning either.¹⁴ The universe repeats itself, says Chrysippus, ‘for all eternity’. ‘**There will never be any new thing** (*xenon*).’ We must do it all over again, ‘down to the minutest detail’, and again, and again, for ever. We are taught to tolerate our fate with studied apathy (impassivity), acknowledging that fate is a function of the divinity that lies within the universe, embodying its rationality.¹⁵

The Epicureans, by contrast, minimised any divine component. They applied a physical model radically different. Far from being changeless, the universe was in continuous flux, Heraclitus had said. They took up the atomism of Democritus. Not fate but chance determines everything. One should simply accept one’s random fortune, not worry (*ataraxia*), and be happy. Strangely enough this policy seems to have produced a more serious and rather exclusive school. Like the Christians they were denounced as atheists.¹⁶

Galen in the second century AD is the earliest Classical philosopher to consider the intellectual problem posed by ‘the School of Moses and Christ’ (extract 1 (c), from *On the differences between the pulses* 2.4, tr. M. Stern):

‘I learned from Aristotle...to add...a cogent **demonstration** (*apodeixis*)...thus one would not, at the very start, as if one had come into the school (*diatribe*) of Moses and Christ, hear about laws that have not been demonstrated...[His “purist” opponent] did not consider it necessary to guide us by any **logical** method, but adopted an **empirical** fashion of teaching...’

In calling them a *diatribe* Galen accepts them as a dialectical contestant, and elsewhere praises some of them as true philosophers, for their contempt in the face of death and even for refraining lifelong from sexual intercourse (Abulfeda, *Historia anteislamica*, ed. Fleischer, p. 109).

As an Aristotelian, Galen requires a **demonstration** (*apodeixis*), a cogent proof according to ‘**logical** method’. His medical rivals, the ‘purists’, have been practising the **empirical** method, which Galen himself had tried. This no doubt aimed to explain disease by experiment, instead of applying the logical principle of analogy. Fever, for example, being hot, must logically have been caused by heat. It was to be sixteen hundred years, before the empirical method found its way to microbiology. So powerful was the spell of Galen.¹⁷

¹⁴ A. Drozdek, *In the Beginning was the apeiron: Infinity in Greek Philosophy* (Stuttgart, 2008).

¹⁵ S. Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998).

¹⁶ J. Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia* (Cambridge, 2002); R. Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1983).

¹⁷ R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford, 1949); R.J. Hankinson, *Galen on Antecedent Causes* (Cambridge, 1998); id., *The Cambridge Companion to Galen* (Cambridge, 2008); C.Gill et al. (eds), *Galen and the World of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 2009).

Celsus, his contemporary, produced a four-volume critique of the methodological errors of empiricism (extract 1 (d), from Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.27; 4.23, tr. H. Chadwick):

‘Among them are some moderate, reasonable and intelligent people who readily interpret **allegorically**.’

‘The race (*genos*) of Jews and Christians are like frogs holding their Sanhedrin round a swamp, or worms holding their *ekklesia* in a dung-hill, arguing about which of them are the worse sinners... “There is God first, and we are **next after him** in rank since he has made us entirely like God and all things have been put under us, earth, water, air and stars...”’

Like his contemporary Galen, Celsus allowed that some Jews and Christians were ‘moderate, reasonable and intelligent people’. They would ‘readily interpret **allegorically**.’¹⁸

Philo in the first century AD and Origen in the third show us what this means. Any poetic or other text that made its points not by abstraction but by depicting a particular case (sc. mythopoeically) must not be taken at face value. Its truth was conveyed not literally but symbolically. Genesis 1:27 says ‘God created man in his own image...male and female created he them’. This does not of course mean God is the head of a matrimonial household, but neither does it refer to men and women, since Eve had not yet been created, nor indeed had Adam’s earthy body. Interpreted allegorically it symbolises their unseen form, the (hot and dry) ‘male’ standing for spirit, the (cool and moist) ‘female’ for the soul.¹⁹

Celsus however objected strongly to the non-allegorical reading of the Fall in Genesis by Jews (mere frogs in a swamp) and Christians (mere worms in the dunghill). They have become a ‘race’ (*genos*) apart from the rest of mankind, degenerate. As with Galen, it is the focus of their philosophical debate in Sanhedrin and *ekklesia* that horrifies him. It is a competition in proving their own corruption, ‘which of them are the worse sinners’.

At the other extreme they dare to promote themselves to being ‘entirely like God’, ‘**next after him** in rank’, lording it even over the four divinised elements of the cosmos itself, ‘earth, water, air and stars (sc. fire)’. The outraged Celsus has glimpsed the misery and glory of the twenty-first century. That slimy infestation, writhing in its own moral squalor, will overrun and befoul the ordered beauty of all nature.

¹⁸ R.J. Hoffmann, *Celsus On the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians* (Oxford, 1987).

¹⁹ L. Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology* (Chicago, 2004); G.R. Boys-Stones (ed.), *Metaphor, Allegory and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 2003); P.C. Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids, 2008); See further K.E. Power, ‘Philosophy, medicine and sexual gender in Ambrose of Milan’, in T.W. Hillard et al. (eds.), *Ancient History in a Modern University 2* (Grand Rapids, 1998), 379-390.

Paul himself had also hinted at the intellectual revolution. He has a word (*logos*) that upstages philosophy. It carries its own proof, the ‘**demonstration** (*apodeixis*)’ delivered not by rationality but by spiritual experience of God’s influence (extract 1 (e), from the *First Letter to the Corinthians* 2:3-4):

‘My *logos* and my announcement were not in the plausible discourse of philosophy but in **demonstration** (*apodeixis*) of the Spirit and of power so that your trust might not be in human philosophy but in the power of God.’

God’s intervention in his Son breaks our dependency on the ‘elements (*stoicheia*) of the *kosmos*’, and emancipates us as adults in the household of God. It alters the course of human history, ‘once the time had been fulfilled’ (extract 1 (e), from the *Letter to the Galatians* 4:3-4):

‘When we were children we were in servitude to the elements (*stoicheia*) of the *kosmos*, but once the time had been fulfilled, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.’

Roman law set a minimum age for the emancipation of home-born slaves. One selected for adoption may even have been fathered by the head of the house.

At Athens, Paul had upset the Stoics and Epicureans with his new landmark for all history, the resurrection of Christ (Acts 17:31). He had personally suffered its impact. It trumped rational analysis, appealing to a personal test, the experimental method if you like.

At Alexandria in Paul’s own day the Jewish philosopher Philo had published *On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses*, now accessible in the rich commentary of David Runia, master of Queen’s college, Melbourne.²⁰ Seneca, the Stoic, admired the Jews because they ‘are aware of the origin and meaning of their rites’ (cited in Augustine, *City of God* 6.11). The Romans and others lacked access to any purposeful history of their folk practices. Moses could be shown to have lived before Plato, who must have learned from him, it was argued.

The book of Genesis depicted the creation of the world by God. It invited comparison with Plato’s theory in the *Timaeus*.²¹ The speech of Paul before the Areopagus is opened and developed with a philosophically congenial treatment of God’s management of the world (Acts 17:22-28). Its theology came to be elaborated in response to the intellectual standards of Greek higher education.

²⁰ D.T. Runia, *Philo’s On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses* (Atlanta, 2001).

²¹ D.T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden, 1986); Jaroslav Pelikan, *What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Genesis and Timaeus in Counterpoint* (Ann Arbor, 1997); T.K. Johansen, *Plato, Natural Philosophy: A Study of the Timaeus-Critias* (Cambridge 2004); an Australian Research Council project has produced a several-volume treatment of the Neoplatonist commentary on the *Timaeus* by Proclus, head of the Academy at Athens in the fifth century AD: D.T. Runia, *Proclus: Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus II* (Cambridge, 2008); M. Martijn, *Proclus on Nature and its Methods* (Leiden, 2010).

But for all the allegory the huge Patristic enterprise and the ongoing schools of philosophy sharpened some key contrasts between the two cultures. Moses and Paul were implying an alternative principle of scientific truth. Truth stemmed not from the divinised rationality of nature itself, but from the independent action of the creator, understood in personal terms. God must have made the universe out of nothing, a point not explicit in Genesis. By contrast, the implication that the universe itself must have always been there became entrenched in the philosophical tradition.

In AD 529 the teaching of the Neoplatonist school in Athens was stopped by the intervention of Justinian. The Alexandrian Simplicius retreated to Mesopotamia, compiling extensive commentaries on Aristotle which supply much of our knowledge of a thousand years of Greek philosophy. In the same year his Christian opponent in Alexandria published a refutation of the Neoplatonist Proclus on the eternity of the world.²²

‘Philoponus is important both for his proofs of the Creation and for his progressive replacement of Aristotelian science with rival theories, which were taken up at first by the Arabs and came fully into their own in the West only in the sixteenth century.’²³

In the West knowledge of Aristotle was for centuries confined to his works on logic, which had been translated into Latin by Boethius, a contemporary of Philoponus. It has been persuasively argued by Peter Harrison that what led to the breakthrough of the modern standard for scientific research in the seventeenth century was the liberation of the book of Genesis from the Classical method of reasoning.²⁴

In particular the symbolic meaning of the text was abandoned, and the creation taken literally. The priority of logic was given over to the experimental method. The universe, seen as a literal artefact of God, could be probed technically to see how it worked. Taking the Bible at face value brought it also back into the critical workshop. The new methods of historical research were applied to text and artefact alike, bringing a new literal test for truth in both fields. The truth is found by personal testing, not by natural logic.

Can you then trust history?

²² John Philoponus, *Against Proclus's On the Eternity of the World*, tr. Michael Share, chapters 1-5 (Ithaca, 2004), 6-8 (Ithaca, 2005); tr. J. Wiberding, chapters 12-18 (London, 2006); C. Scholten, in Johannes Philoponos, *De aeternitate mundi*, 2 vols (Turnhout, 2009).

²³ R. Sorabji, in Philoponus, *Against Aristotle, on the Eternity of the World* (London, 1987), p. 11. The fragments have been collected from the commentaries of Simplicius for the first time here by C. Wildberg, in translation. R. Sorabji, *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (London, 1987); id., *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1983).

²⁴ Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, 1988). The book was written from Bond University, in discussion with colleagues in the University of Queensland. The author went on to be Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford. See now also his *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge, 2007).

(i) It may be that in a work of literature or the creative arts there is no meaning, as the postmodernists hold, except what someone sees in it. But in history, the mother of science, our judgement accumulates with testing. There has been a massive shift from the old belief in the fixity of the whole to our current conviction that we are dominated by change. Nor is anyone still in doubt that knowledge of reality has exploded. It has indeed culminated in our own lifetime.

By 1927 (my conceptual year!) Wegener was convincing us that the tectonic plates of earth itself were on the move. The crisis over Max Planck's quantum physics and the relativities of Einstein was resolved in 1927 by the uncertainty principle of Heisenberg and Schrödinger's wave mechanics. In 1931 Popper showed that science proves nothing, but only destroys false hypotheses.

The war forced the pace. In 1945 Howard Florey (an Australian) won the Nobel prize for penicillin, the great antibiotic. Popper had written (in New Zealand) *The Open Society and its Enemies*, blaming Plato for both Marx and Freud. I was in his logic and ethics class that year; it delivered also the atomic bomb. At Canterbury College, prayer meetings were held in the basement where Ernest Rutherford, the nuclear pioneer, had begun.

By 1953 I was in Cambridge where Crick and Watson broke the genetic code, revealing the most personal singularity of all. Not only is every soul on earth descended from a single mother, but every one of us possesses an individual component derived neither from mother nor father, but unique in all of time. Also there were G.E.R. Lloyd, who has gone on to explain in detail the methodological failures in Greek science and medicine,²⁵ and John Polkinghorne, the mathematical physicist, who produces a book a year on the subtle fellowship between the open-ended worlds of sub-molecular particles and of philosophical theology.²⁶

It is only at the end of the twentieth century, I am told, that cosmologists in general finally settled for the big bang rather than a steady state.²⁷ Now we wait for them to say where it is all leading, just as we wait to see whether opinion will gravitate towards a non-Darwinian explanation of the first cell.²⁸ We may surely trust history when it says the world is neither fixed nor eternal, but changing.

(ii) It is also surely undeniable that this fundamental discovery has been delivered to us by the experimental method. Following Popper, ongoing tests will continue to correct what we believe we know. History gave up repetitive drama long ago. We demand

²⁵ n. 11 above.

²⁶ J. Polkinghorne, *Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion* (New Haven, 2005); *Quantum Physics and Theology: An unexpected Kinship* (New Haven, 2007); *Theology in the Context of Science* (New Haven, 2009).

²⁷ K.R. Popper, *The Open Universe: An Argument for Indeterminism* (London, 1982); P. Coles et al., *Is the Universe Open or Closed?* (Cambridge, 1997).

²⁸ Freeman Dyson, *The Origin of Life* (Cambridge, 1999), 91.

footnotes documenting verbatim sources. The great historiographer Momigliano, the son of Israel, showed that this arose from church dogmatism.²⁹

(iii) What is yet to be seen is whether Peter Harrison's explanation, that the experimental revolution in science came out of Genesis, 'literally' as he might have put it, will win the day.³⁰

(iv) Which brings us to the burning question of world history. David Christian from Macquarie has taken his innovative curriculum in world history around the world. Most impressively he cannot explain what no one is now game to call 'the triumph of the West'. As a good Popperian he points out the flaws in all the usual explanations. But he has construed world history in terms of technological changes. I think we can see the scientific revolution has itself been the product of a battle over ideas. It is not over yet. The dynamism of the West perhaps arises from the irreconcilable tension in the minds of us all between Athens and Jerusalem?³¹

Conclusions

- (i) You can trust our conversation with the past: it says the West has opened up the old fixed universe of Greek philosophy, into a world with rapidly changing new horizons and hazards.
- (ii) You can hardly doubt that the old axiomatic logic was falsified by experimental truth, such as baffled Galen in the school of Moses and Christ.
- (iii) You may note that in AD 529 after 1100 years the Academy at Athens was closed, and Aristotle's eternal universe was refuted by Philoponus; but it took another 1100 years before empirical testing for truth in science fully upstaged logic, once they replaced the symbolic reading of biblical Genesis with a literal one.
- (iv) You might question whether the restlessness of the Western mind is not driven by the misfit between Classical reason and biblical experience, Athens and Jerusalem, an uneasy tension in our inherited culture.

²⁹ A.D. Momigliano, 'Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century AD', in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), 79-99; *Historicism Revisited* (Amsterdam, 1974); *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley, 1990). See also G.G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution in Early Christianity* (Tübingen, 1999); *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformation in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2009). E.A. Judge, 'Biblical Sources of Historical Method', in *Jerusalem and Athens: Cultural Transformation in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2010), 276-281.

³⁰ Such a perspective seems missing in L. Russo, *The Forgotten Revolution: How Science was Born in 300 BC and Why it had to be Reborn* (Berlin, 2004, ex Milan, 1996), and J.M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge, 2004).

³¹ David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, 2004). Also disregarding the intellectual sources of the scientific revolution is C.S. Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (New York, 2007).

2. Must faith now be private?

There are various anthropological categories which are assumed to apply universally, for example language, culture, society, ethics, economics, and marriage. All such categories are publicly discussed and politically regulated. This does not however apply to religion or morality, both of which we now try to ban from public life. They are not in their current sense found in every culture. Both are Latin-based words, yet their current sense is not applicable in the Roman world. It arises uniquely from the later christianisation of Rome. For the older Roman culture we would do better to talk of worship and virtue.

By religion we now mean a comprehensive world-view which has moral consequences in how we live. Both these components, belief (including theology) and behaviour, were part of philosophy in the Classical world. They were not required for cultic worship. The culturally unique phenomenon of Christianity arose when its doctrinal and moral commitments, in principle philosophical, were enshrined in cultic practice (sc. worship and ethics).³²

This distinction comes out even when you observe media practice in Australia. Faith is held to be a strictly private matter, excluded from public life, so we are free to enjoy looking at other people's quaint rituals and buildings, without the slightest hint that they might be open to criticism or even dangerous.

All are said to be valid for those who pursue them, and in some mysterious way they are all thought to amount to the same thing. And indeed they may do. They are the inherited cultural traditions of those who hold to them. The same goes for fossilised elements in Christianity, like the Amish people in Pennsylvania or the more picturesque monastic orders. It is all virtuous because of its other-worldly atmosphere.

By contrast the doctrinal and moral positions (i.e. the current commitments) propagated by the churches are under habitual and contemptuous criticism in the media. This is also much as it should be, except only that one rarely sees a serious engagement where the target is not caricatured, and where a qualified advocate is allowed in. When did you last see the media providing seriously for the case against abortion or gay marriage, for example?

The key lies in the distinction between ethics and morality. These are not at all the same thing, which is why we do not speak of medical morality or environmental ethics, for example. Ethics is a contractual or customary system of behaviour, our agreed social duty. Morality however is a compelling personal obligation we are totally convinced of and need to press upon other people. Ethics relies upon convention (as does law). Morality depends upon the integrity of the cause or person we trust. There is currently a case being made for backing out of morality into 'virtue ethics'.³³

³² On the seventeenth-century appearance of the modern concept of religion see Peter Harrison, *Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1990).

³³ J. Oakley and D. Cocking, *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles* (Cambridge, 2001); M. Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire: Ethics, Politics and Society* (Aldershot, 2007); M.V. Lee, *Paul, the*

In Classical culture virtue begins as the quality of manliness, specifically ‘masculinity’ (Latin *virtus*, Greek *andreia*, *arete*). It is the valour of a man in action, from courage in the field to enterprise in politics. This won public honour and was immortalised in the family succession of the nobility. It might be asserted even if your own career was cut short, as with Scipio Hispanus, a relative of Aemilianus the victor over Carthage, soon after 146 BC (extract 2(a), *Inscriptiones Latinae Liberae Rei Publicae* 316):

‘The virtues of my race (*genus*) did I enhance by my standards; I begot progeny, and emulated my father’s deeds. I kept my ancestors’ renown so that my birth to them might make them glad; my honours ennobled my line.’

The four cardinal virtues (fortitude, prudence, temperance and justice) are qualities evinced by the strong individual. They are to be cultivated, and will be recognised by the public. This applies in particular to justice which we must not mistake for equity. In a fixed universe justice was by definition the propriety of the rational order of society.

Plutarch, the Platonic near-contemporary of Paul and Philo, complained of the stifling effects of the Stoic doctrine of Chrysippus (extract 2 (b), *On Stoic self-contradiction* 1038 (*SVF* 3.179, tr. A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley):

‘Why then again for heaven’s sake in every book on physics and ethics does he weary us to death in writing that we have an appropriate disposition relative to ourselves as soon as we are born and to our parts and our offspring?’

Elsewhere (*SVF* 2.724) Plutarch notes that this doctrine of accommodation to one’s natural self-interest is developed in the (lost) work of Chrysippus entitled (significantly for us) *On Justice*. Loving yourself first is the Stoic principle, rejected by the saying of Jesus, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (which does not mean first love yourself).

Plato was an egalitarian on women’s position (*Republic* 5.456a). The good-quality ones should strip and compete in the gymnasium like men, and serve in battle (457a). All men of the same class were to have access to them, while the offspring should not know their parents, and vice versa (457d). Only children of the best-quality unions would be reared (459e). Those born to mothers aged between twenty and forty belonged to the state (460e). After and before that women could range freely provided the offspring were aborted (461e).

Plato’s rationality thus made women equal with men, though within the class order, but Aristotle determined that women’s reason was inferior anyway (extract 2 (c), *Politics* 1.5.6, 1254b, tr. H. Rackham):

‘As between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and female subject.’

Stoics and the Body of Christ (Cambridge, 2006).

Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic philosopher who ruled the Roman Empire in the late second-century AD., recorded privately the results of his own self-contemplation (extract 2 (d), *To himself*, 7.55, 59, tr. G.H. Rendall):

‘Man’s reason includes circumspection and immunity from error. Let but the inner self hold fast to these and keep a straight course, and reason comes by its own.’

‘Dig within. Within is the fountain of good; ever dig, and it will ever well forth water.’

The secure coherence of a rationally defined private life explains why the Classical tradition had no place for autobiography. There was nothing of interest to be disclosed. Yet the sustained effort to avoid that is apparent in the phraseology of Marcus, ‘hold fast’ to ‘immunity from error’, ‘ever dig’ to find ‘the fountain of good’.

Paul’s experience was radically different. Having had his well-ordered life turned upside down by the voice on the Damascus road, he found the problems of the sub-conscious will far more baffling than Classical culture had allowed (extract 2(e), *Romans* 7:15; *1 Corinthians* 13:12-13):

‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.’

‘Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then **face to face**...then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So trust, expectancy and care are lasting; but the greatest of these is **care**.’

The modern preoccupation with one’s inner struggles, and with discovering oneself begins here. It inspires novel and film alike, and causes political debate to be obsessed with each other’s hypocrisy.

Paul’s quest for personal integrity is grounded in his encounter with others. It begins with the call he heard from Jesus on the road. It is driven by his need to explain the paradox of that, and by his expectation of seeing Christ ‘**face to face**’. He is not concerned with personal virtue, and only in a secondary way with social ethics.

The three lasting things of which ‘the greatest...is **care**’ are not virtues. They are not characteristics one can develop, or properties of the soul. Each is a response to the other person. ‘Faith’ is trust in someone else, ‘hope’ expects his promise to be fulfilled, and ‘charity’ is when you **care** for the need of another. Care cannot be generated by the studied apathy of a Stoic. No one wants cold-hearted charity. The open heart is when one shares in the suffering of the other, with sympathy. Stoicism spoke cosmologically of the sympathy of all things, the coherence of the whole. You broke that if you were upset by someone else’s problem.

In 1887 Friedrich Nietzsche, professor of Classical literature, denounced morality and urged the revival of ‘virtue ethics’ (extract 2 (f), *The Genealogy of Morals* 1.7, tr. W. Kaufmann):

‘It was the Jews who...dared to invert the **aristocratic value-equation**... saying ‘the wretched alone are the good...and you, the powerful and noble, are...the evil...one knows who inherited this Jewish revaluation.’

He correctly identified as the origin of morality, the servile Jews. They dared to think that the poor were good, and the noble evil, against all natural reason, inverting ‘the **aristocratic value-equation**’.³⁴

Nietzsche idealised the heroic, and coined the term ‘Superman’. As for those who inherited that ‘Jewish revaluation’ he disdains to name them. The human rights of the weak are the imprint of a christianised West, the distant echo of Paul’s vision of redemption through the paradox of a suffering Messiah.

Modern scepticism makes an apostle of humanism out of Nietzsche. But it was those frogs and worms who saw the importance of humanity and its problem, and were denounced by Celsus for exaggerating it.

The founder of scepticism in Aristotle’s day had been Pyrrho. He was momentarily upset when a dog took to him, and apologised to his students. He had not yet completely mastered the art of ‘stripping off the human’ (Diogenes Laertius 9.66). If only we could live in contentment, like pigs do, it was said.

An ABC panel searched for the national values of Australia. The presenter summed it up. All we agree on, she said, was a fair go. No, interjected one of them: ‘A fair go – with passion’. ‘I like everyone to be exuberant’, enthused an ABC presenter on another occasion. But the privatisation of the gospel of Christ’s passion is set to cut the nerve of the compassion we all need.³⁵

Conclusions.

Now that natural history has become personal must belief and choice become private?

- (i) Virtue is the public display of private merit, qualities of character that arise from the good within.
- (ii) Ethics is the collective cultivation of this good behaviour, endorsing convention to moderate any risky social activism.

³⁴ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887, tr. W. Kaufmann), 1.7, p. 34.

³⁵ E.A. Judge, ‘Who programs our values’, *CASE* 10 (2006), 23-26, 5.

- (iii) Morality inverts this order: not good but evil lurks within, insensitive to others, empowering the strong over the weak; but the obligation to others demands passionate intervention.
- (iv) Faith is exuberant commitment to a trustworthy other, expecting the fulfilment of what he promises, and responding with open-hearted care to the needs of the rest.
- (v) Religion in its obsolete sense (inherited rituals of life) is better privatised in a multi-cultural society, but in its modern sense (a comprehensive world-view with moral conviction) it must be openly tested for truth in the public square.

3. How can truth still be public?

The ethics of virtue cannot guarantee the free use of the public square. They may even threaten it.

In the fifth century BC it was proposed that the civil law was contrary to nature, a mere convenience, hindering the free expression of merit – the survival of the fittest we might say. A fragmentary text of Antiphon says it might be advantageous to observe the laws **when others were watching**, so that one could follow the interests of nature when alone (extract 3 (a), *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 11.1364.6/34):

‘For the interests of the **laws arise by accident** while those of nature come **from necessity**. And the interests of the laws are contractual, not natural, while those of nature are **natural**, not contractual.’

In the fourth century Aristotle resolved this contradiction with his famous dictum (extract 3 (b), *Politics* 1.1.8-9):

‘Every polis exists by nature...It is apparent that the polis is part of nature (*physis*) and man (*anthropos*) **by nature** a civic being (*politikon zōon*).’

But this could be worse. Can you count on the ‘political animals’ to tell the truth? The modern democratic myth is a fraud. We do not have government ‘by the people’. The last relic of popular rule as the Greeks devised it (sc. selection for office by lot) is our jury system, and that is challenged. Aristotle would have classed us as an aristocracy, since in elections we are supposed to choose the best to rule us. Polybius said the ideal was a mixed constitution, where you had a monarch as well to safeguard you against oligarchy.

In the second century AD, the era of Galen, Celsus and Marcus Aurelius, the earliest extant Roman jurist, Gaius, formulated the principle of international law (extract 3(c), *Institutes* 1.1):

‘What each people has determined to be right for itself, that is its property and is called civil law...but what **natural reason** has determined amongst all men, that is maintained equally among all peoples and is called the law of the nations.’

But where was **natural reason** to be embodied? Diotogenes said, in the ruler as ‘animate law’. Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, had once sought to moderate Nero, his pupil, by presenting him as the head of the body who would not of course cut off any limbs. Unlike Socrates, Seneca was permitted to choose his own method of suicide.

The Stoic ruler, Marcus Aurelius, surely lived the ideal. Before long the Roman citizenship had been made available to the free men in the many hundreds of minor republics of the Mediterranean world, while individual Romans had always been free to manumit their slaves into ultimate citizenship. The modern world has never matched such liberties. But the Christians posed another problem never faced before. Their refusal to perform the public sacrifices blocked their taking part in political life.

Around AD 200 in the province of Africa, Tertullian, lawyer, rhetorician, and apologist, declared (*Apologeticum* 38.3):

‘We have no need of a public meeting, and nothing is more foreign to us than the *res publica*. There is only one republic we recognise, the world-wide one.’

In the mid-third century, Origen of Alexandria, the polymath philosopher-theologian, refuting the *Argument from Truth* of the late second-century critic Celsus, began with a mighty challenge, never before recorded in history (extract 3 (d), *Against Celsus* 1.1., tr. H. Chadwick):

‘As he talks much of *the common law* saying that *the associations of Christians violate this*, I have to make this reply... So, **at the bar of truth**, the laws of the nations such as those about images and the godless polytheism are laws of the Scythians or, if possible, more impious than theirs. Therefore it is not wrong to form associations **against the laws for the sake of truth**...’

By *the common law* Celsus meant the codes of civil law in the various nations, determined by ‘natural reason’ (as Gaius had stated). Taking up the very ideal, truth, used against the Christians in the title of the critique by Celsus, Origen declares that the laws of the Roman world-empire ‘**at the bar of truth**’ are as bad as those of the barbarians of the steppes, the Scythians.

Origen specifically cites the example of image worship and ‘godless polytheism’. It is not wrong to form associations ‘**against the laws for the sake of truth**’. Since the creation of the International Court of Justice or its predecessors back to 1899 we have seen this principle increasingly enforced, especially against army generals who were obliged by their own governments to act against the Geneva conventions on warfare.

In Origen's case it is the international conventions themselves that are confronted by the truth. The precedent he has created opens the way not only to the condemnation of state crimes in war, but to the whole ideal of respect for an alternative society which has won axiomatic status amongst us.

After enduring two and a half centuries of totally passive resistance against the public sacrifices, the Roman government abandoned its attempt to impose on every citizen the sacrosanct rites vital to Roman success. In AD 311, Galerius provided conditional toleration, in spite of the scandalous betrayal of their ancestral duty by Christians (extract 3(e), Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 34.2):

‘...they were not following those customs of their elders which perhaps their own ancestors had instituted in the beginning, but on their own discretion and as it appealed to them, **they made up laws for themselves to keep**, and **on divergent principles formed alternative communities**...they will be obliged to **plead** with their god for our safety and that of the republic and their own.’

The unthinkable was explicitly stated, ‘**they made up laws for themselves to keep**’, and ‘**on divergent principles formed alternative communities**’. We can tell Galerius had been fully informed. They had always insisted on their loyalty to the Roman state, and prayed for its well-being. Galerius uses the distinctively Christian term for prayer (*orare*, ‘to plead’), making it the condition of their new toleration. It only lasted a year, before Constantine began to institute privileges for the churches. But it is the historic origin of Popper's ‘Open Society’: a proud national culture lets go its ideological unity.³⁶

How then can truth still be public? Only a fully open, personal engagement can hope to grasp the larger truth.

‘Is that your own idea, or have others put you up to it?’ – said Jesus to Pilate (John 18:34). ‘My kingdom does not belong to this world. If it did my supporters would be fighting.’ (18:36) ‘I have come to bear witness to the truth...all who are not deaf to truth listen to my voice.’ (18:37) ‘What is truth?’ said Pilate (18:38). He was ready to wash his hands of it.

Where then is the future of truth? An open universe; an open society; an open heart.

The final throwing open of these three frontiers in one lifetime promises even more rapid unfolding of the historical meaning and purpose of our world. But how shall we be judged for these monstrous risks, as Herodotus would have seen them?

That must wait until the last day.

³⁶ E.A. Judge, ‘Cultural Conformity and Innovation in Paul’, *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century* (Peabody, Mass., 2008), 157-174; ‘The Biblical shape of modern culture’, *The First Christians in the Roman World* (Tübingen, 2008), 717-732; ‘Synagogue and church in the Roman Empire: the insoluble problem of toleration’, *Jerusalem and Athens: Cultural Transformation in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2010), 44-57.

Conclusions.

An open heart in an open universe calls for a personal approach also to public truth.

- (i) The old ideal of society as the natural order tended to give opportunity to the strong, in a totalitarian state.
- (ii) The ‘partisans of Christ’ openly organised as a quasi-nation, for the first time challenging the civil order in the name of truth.
- (iii) The free choice of a divergent lifestyle on alternative principles was for the first time conceded by Galerius in AD 311, but toleration was conditional on one’s praying for the divine protection of the public life.
- (iv) An ‘open society’ can only thrive if questions of ultimate truth are put to the test publicly, and not side-stepped by the media.
- (v) Education must not entrench a final solution, but must explicitly provide critical access to rival truth-claims, open in the same way to their supporters and opponents alike. ‘I have come to witness to the truth’, said Jesus. ‘What is truth?’ Pilate replied, and washed his hands.

The Future of Truth?

The West inherits a dual culture of enquiry (*historia*):

Athens gave us the rational analysis (*logos*) of our inherent nature (*physis*), an objectively stable universe (*kosmos*) and the idealising life of ethical restraint, informed by philosophy.

Jerusalem gave us the revelatory word (*logos*) of our personal creator (*theos*), a subjectively unfolding world (*kosmos*) and the experimental life of moral passion, informed by science.