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RESTORING TRUTH TO THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE

A RESPONSE TO RUSTY RENO

WILLIAM EPPERSON

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Editor's note. ORU English professor William Epperson drafted the first version of this response after reading two essays by Reno that faculty were asked to read before Reno addressed them. Encouraged by the response of several peers and the request of *Spiritus*, he revised his response, which *Spiritus* is pleased to publish.

Rusty Reno, in his address “Restoring Love to the Intellectual Life,” delivered to the Oral Roberts University faculty on January 9, 2017, centered his remarks on the over-emphasis of critical thinking in modern academia—an emphasis that “in practice means disenchanting students by raising doubts and giving priority to questions rather than answers.” Reno finds the pedagogical aim has become training students and faculty “to avoid being duped by advertisers, ideologues, and other hucksters of snake oil wisdom, and this goal has become more important than affirming truth.”

But is not critical thinking more acutely needed now than ever? With the flood of information, much of it false or biased, passed on to society by public media—television and radio, but perhaps more so by irresponsible internet postings on social media such as Twitter and Facebook—teachers must not only equip students with knowledge of the old-fashioned logical fallacies, but also encourage fact-checking sources like Snopes.com to establish the validity and credibility of what

they hear and see on the informational outlets so available to them. Indeed, Reno affirms that “critical thinking purifies by exposing falsehoods *as false* . . . a necessary first step toward affirming truths *as true*.” Perhaps the legitimate need to teach critical thinking that we find so urgent now reveals a more pervasive weakness in our society’s intellectual health. We are experiencing the decay of belief in what have been called the “Transcendentals”—objective truth, yes, but also objective goodness and beauty—values that were the foundation of education from the Classical age to the Modern period. They were what our education aimed for; we shaped learning to lead students to see, acknowledge, and love the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. These values were our standards by which we structured our culture, measured our laws and customs, evaluated our arts, and organized our institutions. Even while we acknowledged that we had no perfect vision of these qualities, that we are always growing toward apprehending them more clearly, they remained our measuring rods that we used to make and revise laws to better reflect justice, to encourage our arts to better delight and instruct us, to guide our science and technologies toward humane applications.

Today we are living off the shrinking capital of these “Transcendentals.” Even our word “values” has eroded. “Values” are cut to tastes and feeling, individualized and not subject to judgment. The “values” of many today are described by the early Hemingway protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes, who defines immorality as “things that made you disgusted afterward.” Jake had reason for his disillusionment, having been wounded in a war he could not understand or justify. Young people today, finding no clear truth or goodness to guide them, repeat this individualized moral perspective under their *unum necessarium*, the one virtue they put over all others, tolerance. Of course, a degree of tolerance, we all agree, is a good thing, but it is absolutely demanded, in unqualified form, if we are all living according to our own standards, our own tastes, our own “goodness.” In such a subjective world, where no absolute goodness is acknowledged, no one has the right to correct anyone else, for there is no objective moral measuring rod.

The modern secular university, as Reno warns, does discourage belief in objective truth, goodness, or beauty. An example comes to mind: in

the 1980's a noble experiment at the University of Kansas was brought to an end. The Pearson College Integrated Humanities Program, formed by three highly honored graduate professors, John Senior, Dennis Quinn, and Franklyn Nelick, led undergraduate students through the classic works that formed Western civilization, from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus and Sophocles, through St. Augustine and St. Thomas, to modern philosophers and writers. Exposed to these thinkers who expressed the "Perennial Philosophy" of an objective truth, goodness, and beauty, students reacted as if they had found water for a deep thirst they had not even known they had. They fell in love with these old, old truths that had been cast aside by today's intellectual culture, some even converting to Catholic Christianity. The University reacted by taking away the previous policy of awarding General Education humanities credit for the twelve hours taught in the Integrated Humanities Program. The publicly stated reason? The three professors all believed in an objective Truth that should be an aim of study, rather than a relative truth that university faculty need to be presenting to students. According to University officials, students must be encouraged to question their previous ideas about truth so they can freely determine their own truth; professors must model the diversity of truth, and students must be taught to participate in their own construction of truth.

Reno's diagnosis of the major problem of American education is right on target, I believe, as it relates to public education, particularly higher education. It is less relevant to the work and orientation of Christian colleges that have a cadre of teachers who still believe in the traditional "Transcendentals" of goodness, truth, and beauty. The realities of our universe, we believe, reveal these qualities for they, the qualities and the creatures, originate in their source, the creator God; humans, as creatures who most clearly bear the image of God, find these qualities within themselves, attenuated by sin and the resulting weakness of the will, but still inherent in our souls. We work to help students see and love these in the world around them, in their fellow humans, and in the works of humans—in the arts and sciences and institutions in which they participate.

Our students need to learn to be more critical thinkers, to promote their clear thinking and to avoid logical fallacies—but not to

the point of a skeptical distrust of everything their attention falls on. Unfortunately, the contemporary social and cultural environment does, in fact, encourage such radical skepticism. For many creative people, the center no longer holds; there is no ordering principle giving coherence and meaning to reality. Beauty is no longer the central aim of the arts, nor is goodness or truth. These qualities that guided traditional arts have little or no power today; they have been rendered impotent by a pervading atmosphere of subjectivity and relativity. Sensation and shock are the effects desired by some well-known artists—musicians, painters, even writers—whose material (words) would seem to tie them inseparably to meaning. Rock musicians have shocked audiences since Peter Townshend of *The Who* shattered his guitar on stage in 1968. Guitar shattering has marked concert climaxes since—with Eddy van Halen, *Nirvana's* Kurt Cobain, *The Clash's* Paul Simonson, and even Jimi Hendrix destroying their instruments on stage, and to what end? Asked about this in a *Rolling Stone* interview in 1968, Peter Townshend said, “it’s an act, it’s an instant, and it really is meaningless.” Yes, it is meaningless, but it is not without sensation, without shock. The musicians that followed Townshend’s “act,” his “instant,” simply tried to replicate his shock—with diminishing effect as the years passed; yesterday’s shock is, as they say, so “yesterday.”

Contemporary painters and other artists also substitute shock for Truth or Beauty. British artist Chris Ofili attempts “to jolt viewers into an expanded frame of reference” by daubing his portrait titled “The Holy Virgin Mary” with elephant dung. Andres Serrano imposes shock on his viewers with a photograph of a crucifix immersed in a jar of urine (his own, he informs us). And experimental writers, mainly writing in the 1970’s, produce incomprehensible poems and “stories.” But since shock is an effect impossible to sustain, the lasting power of such displays of sensationalism is quite evanescent; one can only be appalled at the destruction of guitars a couple of times, after that the shock becomes a cliché. Performance art—fortunately, brief and impermanent, but drawing crowds of voyeuristic viewers—may be the perfect art for many in today’s audiences, who value sensation and originality, but are incapable of attention, reflection, or meditation—and skeptical of any hint of meaning.

I know these are extreme examples, but what kind of society permits—indeed, encourages—even a modicum of interest in such things? Students can hardly be blamed for doubting the significance of the arts, just as they doubt the credibility of politics, the value and dependability of a free press, and the integrity of corporations. Ultimately, they doubt the validity of their own ethics. They learn from contemporary philosophy and literary theory that truth, goodness, and beauty are all relative—merely cultural constructs that they, as “educated” elite, must relinquish. What impels them to forsake their trust in the old values? Perhaps they have a belief in human progress that is shaped on the evident progress in scientific knowledge and technological advancement. Perhaps they are seeking a more esoteric spiritual enlightenment. Perhaps they are enamored of some principle or idea that they trust will save the world. Or perhaps they simply are bored with the old verities, finding revolutionary notions and actions to be more interesting.

C. S. Lewis asserted “two propositions” in “The Poison of Subjectivism,” an essay initially published in *Religion and Life* in 1943 and often republished:

1. The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of planting a new sun in the sky or a new primary colour in the spectrum.
2. Every attempt to do so consists in arbitrarily selecting some maxim of traditional morality, isolating it from the rest, and erecting it into an *unum necessarium*.

Beyond today’s students being taught the subjectivity of all values, they are learning that gender and race are also merely cultural constructs, having no basis for a claim of objectivity. Even their sense of themselves as a “self” is not immune to these deconstructive tendencies. Traditional man knew and trusted “reality,” knowing without question that what “is” cannot simultaneously be “not is.” They trusted that an idea cannot be both true and false, light cannot be the absence of light, goodness cannot be evil. Traditional man knew “I am, therefore I think,” before Descartes, anticipating the new philosophy of subjectivism, threw us into the modern world by his maxim, “I think, therefore I am.” Of course, students don’t receive these ideas directly; few of

them read the philosophers, probably fewer read the literary theorists—the feminists, the gender critics, the racial critics, the Marxist critics, or the whole slew of other voices—but they pick these notions up as they filter down into commonplace daily life and assumptions. They too often accept the attitude of “if it works for you, that’s great.” Their religion is what feels good to them; their worship is what pleases their senses; their morality is too often of the “early Hemingway” type—avoiding what makes you feel “disgusted afterward.”

If their thinking is confused by subjectivity, their hold on the real is similarly imperiled by an education biased toward abstraction; we teach them to prioritize the intellectual habits of analyzing—categorizing, dealing with principles and universals, demanding the higher skills of intellect before the foundation of *experience* has instructed their hearts to *love* the real. What if we, like the ancient Greeks, emphasized the body and the senses first? What if we taught the joy of music, with its order, harmonies, melodies, proportions—not as concepts, but as sense experiences, as something beautiful and joyful—prior to teaching math, where these same qualities exist as intellectual *aesthetic* experiences? What if we told stories as the Greeks did, for the sake of the stories, and thereby shaped children’s hearts to love the brave, the good, the hopeful, the true—by their identifying with the stories’ protagonists rather than by didactic moralizing? They might then have characters that were good soil for the growth of morals, ethics, right reason, and profound religious sensibilities.

One of the most profound treatments of the grace of forgiveness is Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in which Prospero forgives his enemies—including his traitorous brother—and frees the servant/spirit Ariel. As the epilogue of the play, Prospero seeks freedom for the players, invoking the applause of the audience. This is the clear theme of the play—a testament to the power of forgiveness and freedom. But today, students reading the play are told by post-colonial critics that the play is really about European exploitation of native peoples. Prospero is no longer a Christ figure extending forgiveness and freedom, but a villain—at best, a powerful man who is simply ignorant of his greedy exploitive motives. Caliban is no longer a brutish savage in need of redemption, but the victim of colonial power. Never mind that he too was not native to the island (his mother, the witch Sycorax, had

been banished to the uninhabited island because of her crimes); never mind that Caliban turns from his perversion of Prospero's teaching him language—which he uses to curse—and repents and resolves to “sue for grace” when Prospero acknowledges him at the play's ending. In this way, the contemporary theory replaces the earlier affirmation of the reality of sin (betrayal and idolatry) and the greater power of forgiveness. The abstract theory distorts the literal action and meaning of the play. Today's readers may plead, “But we do not believe in forgiveness as a spiritual power; it may have psychological benefits, of course.” The people of the late 16th century did believe in it, Shakespeare and his audience believed in it, and when we moderns read earlier literature it would be to our advantage if we first try to see the world as they saw it, rather than rushing to impose our attitudes on the texts. Read the play as closely as possible as it was read or viewed contemporaneously, then we can discuss the differences between modern values and earlier values.

Fundamentally, I believe we need to reintroduce students to what is *real*, the natural world presented to our senses. From this base, that which is good, true, and beautiful can be imagined and affirmed. In my childhood, I had the freedom to explore the woods and ponds and rivers around my small town. I was not afraid to explore, to spend a day walking alone in the country, staring at plants, and flowers, rocks, and beetles. These drew me out of myself into experiences of loving relationship with natural things of beauty. I felt wonder as I watched a shower of “falling stars.” I felt heavenly beauty as I saw a morning sunrise light up a golden river bluff and its green crowning hill. Such experiences led me to a hunger for the beauty of God, and for the echoes of that beauty reflected from earthly creatures, then from the beams of reflected beauty—and goodness and truth—of human arts.

I wonder about children today. They live according to their schedules, their soccer matches, their dance lessons. They have limited attention spans, their cell phones moving along from image to image quite briskly. A free 20 minutes is enough for ennui to set in; their most favored word is “boring.” I hope I am simply exaggerating. Grandfathers have been seeing their beloved grandchildren—and their friends—going to the dogs since Aristotle. But when my 18-year-old students cannot enjoy a poem or have any idea what it is saying or any

interest, I worry. They complain that the poem is too “abstract,” when actually it is too concrete, its images too specific, individual, sharp, invoking real senses. A good poem demands they imagine it with their senses alive, that they connect its images into coherent patterns; in short, that they transform its concreteness and lack of abstraction into a more abstract meaning. And that action they feel incapable of doing. Distracted beyond any previous generation, they are not friends with natural reality, not used to “making meaning.” Perhaps the first college class they should take as part of the “General Education” sequence should be “Backpacking”—with at least two strenuous trips into the backwoods and a couple of star-watching evenings required.

Two years ago, as I walked out of the Oral Roberts University Graduate Center building, making my way to my car, I happened to glance up into the sky to find, to my wonder, a skyscape unlike any I’d seen before. I stopped and simply stared—the whole sky was textured by parallel lines of cirrus clouds, arranged like squadrons of mounted troops across the heavens. I gazed in wonder at the beauty. Then students began to come out the GC doors, two or three girls immediately checking their phones, chatting, never looking up, never looking around, caught up in their own individual electronic worlds. Had they looked up at the amazing scene in the sky, they might have reflected briefly, they may have thought about this beauty, recovered it from their memories. They may have tried to write a poem.

We pay lip service to the Psalmist’s affirmation, “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork.” But do we care? Are we interested enough to look up?



William Epperson is a long-serving Professor of English at Oral Roberts University who is loved by many for his courage to speak candidly and his skill at speaking aptly.