Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

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If nothing is known with certitude, a logical corollary is that everything is uncertain. The person who says it the first way may sound like a moderate. “I don’t deny that we know things; I’m just saying we’re never sure.” That’s the person you want on the jury when you’re being tried in a capital case. He or she finds nothing true beyond a reasonable doubt. Without quite realizing it, he or she is in a flirtation with absolute skepticism.

If nothing is certain, all the other skepticisms can come wrapped in this one. History is just someone’s opinion—or perhaps a tissue of fairy tales like stories about Santa Claus. The same can be said of science. The fact a lot of people proclaim themselves experts and say something in concert doesn’t make it true; think of all the times scientists have admitted they’ve been wrong. As for beauty, it’s something people pretend to discover. People praise Shakespeare and Mozart because they’ve been taught to. Or maybe it’s just a matter of neurological firings; some things “turn one on.” (And if that’s all “beauty” is, why not take a shortcut, and get the same from drugs?) As for morality, surely it’s a con. It’s a way by which some try to manipulate others; those who preach it most, observe it least. The same can be said for religion.

These attitudes often pass for wholesome cynicism—for necessary defenses against being taken in.

There may be cases in which that’s all they are. But absolute skepticism (in contrast to mere gestures of hesitation and doubt) endorses all that’s negative in such propositions, and works to cut off retreat back toward any unqualified affirmation. Where
a moderate agnostic may say: “I don’t know,” an absolute skeptic says: “Nobody knows.”

Once one arrives at such, one has no more lessons to learn or duties to fulfill. That’s as convenient as things get. A state of rest is achieved. The purchase price of such sublime disengagement is the despair of achieving any coherence. One takes this nettle in hand. One bites the bullet. There’s no northern star by which to steer one’s troubled bark through choppy waters.

For coherence in one’s thinking requires that there be somewhere or somehow an absolute in the system, and one other than absolute denial. Without such, there’s no fulcrum for Archimedes’ lever; everything’s left up in the air. For all that some deconstructionists may say to the contrary, if all things are regarded as subject to interpretation, there’s no “given” material for interpretation to address. Nor is there any standing principle for interpretation to utilize. Interpretation needs starting points. Anchored in those, or at least governed by them (or at least by one of them), it can move along. The alternative is a mental block of infinite proportions. If we cannot be sure of what the number “3” is, and of what its difference is from “4,” all counting has been compromised. Equations cannot be trusted. The attractions and utility of mathematics have been greatly diminished. (And school’s out early.)

Consider how, if everything is changing, there’s no fixed backdrop against which even change can be measured. Much less can there be a purpose in accord with which it might make sense to help along one change at the expense of another. To seek a “balance of nature” or speak of maintaining a “sustainable lifestyle” is sheer nonsense amid such randomness. One must reconcile oneself to Macbeth’s “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” (Interestingly, for all his acknowledgement of flux, Heraclitus was not so destitute—he had his “Logos” as a source of meaning; and Hegel for all his celebration of contradiction, had his “emergence of Absolute Spirit.”)

In his discussion of speculative reason, Kant asks what a “fact” is. To take Kant’s discussion off the page and bring it home, let me direct it toward an act of snapping my fingers. Suppose as I’m working at the keyboard, I stop and snap my fingers twice. (I just did.) Will that action (O’Neill just now has snapped fingers twice) constitute a “fact”? According to Kant such an act will.
He then asks what an assertion of that sort means. Suppose we posit an eventual loss of all memory of this deed (in the face of all my efforts to memorialize it) and suppose we posit the very collapse of the universe in which this act occurred. “Will that event remain a fact?” is Kant’s question. He answers that most of us intuitively feel it will. The universe may come and go, but a fact is not thereby undone.

This leads Kant to say he sees in our intuitive response that we humans spontaneously regard the world of our experience, and all the details of all the acts that occur in it, as taking place in full view of an absolute spectator, a divine witness. Here Kant seems to anticipate Hegel. In speaking—in The Critique of Pure Reason—of God as a “regulatory principle of speculative reason” Kant claims that in asserting the eternal endurance of facts, one regards a mere snapping of fingers (my example, not his) as taking place against a backdrop of Absolute Consciousness; we regard it as caught up and eternally conserved in a divine mind. Kant makes no effort to use this to prove the existence of God. He thinks all attempts to prove God’s existence involve an illegitimate maneuver—involve a begging of the question. He says however that it seems evident we cannot think at all without thinking God.

Kant is very modern in a way. He finds there are all kinds of things we humans must think, but finds too there’s no way to know these things are true. We cannot get outside the phenomenal order—something like Plato’s cave—in which we discover ourselves to dwell, and escape into what Kant calls the “noumenal”—the world of things-in-themselves. This is a world about which we can think (and that’s why Kant labels it “noumenal” or thinkable), but it remains inaccessible to us, at least in our present state. Kant thereby ends up closer to Hume than he may have intended. Along with Hume, Kant anticipates logical positivism by confining our experience to the phenomenal world—which for Kant means: the world as we constitute it (reliant on a priori categories with which consciousness comes fitted) in response to our sensations.

Should one accept these fashionable modern restrictions on knowledge? Can we only think things, but never know them? Is a conscientious organizing of our thinking, as we respond to a phenomenal world we generate in consciousness, the most we can
achieve in our intellectual life? Or is this an extravagant contraction? Is there a subset in the circle of things we think? Among the things we think, is there a subset containing things we know?

Surely this latter is the case. There are things of which we are certain. We know things. (And among the things we know is that memory is something more than shuffling through a bunch of images that may or may not put us in touch with the past. By memory we inhabit the past. This may seem miraculous, but—contrary to what Bertrand Russell says—we know it is the case.)

The suspicion we don’t know things does not, I suspect, come to us directly from Hume, or Kant, or any other philosopher. (In his Treatise on Human Nature Hume diligently employs reason to persuade us reason doesn’t work. Somehow most of us find this unpersuasive.) Rather our suspicions about knowing come generally from two common, and ongoing, experiences. One is the familiar experience, mentioned already, of finding that very intelligent people disagree. The other is finding that we ourselves are often mistaken—mistaken even regarding issues about which we care deeply and to which we’ve given full attention.

There’s no getting around these kinds of things; one can however put them into a perspective where they function as invitations to a richer intellectual life rather than as excuses from having one.

With regard to the first—the disagreements among brilliant and people—let me offer, as a case for study (among the literally millions of case studies one could conduct), the fractious relations that developed between Freud and his two most famous disciples.¹ Both Carl Jung and Alfred Adler eventually had trouble with Freud’s pan-sexualism. Where Freud saw libido or sex drive as the fundamental motive force of the human being, Adler said rather that it was the will to power. Jung too seemed to find that rooting everything in libido was too confining, and he proposed that the realm that roots our affectivity and motivation might more usefully be labeled the “collective unconsciousness.”

¹ My account here can no doubt be improved; specialists in the history of psychoanalysis may shiver, but my hunch is that even as they refine my very simple presentation, the point of my argument will stand.
Three brilliant men disagree. But is there in this kind of thing any serious excuse for doubting that truth can be known? All three men collaborate in trying to unveil the mysteries of consciousness and motivation. Jung, with his profound awareness of a “shadow side” of the human psyche, can easily be read as an elaboration of Freud rather than a rejection. There is within us, Jung says, a largely unexplored ground of human concerns—things, contents we do not choose, but which “choose us”—out of which we act but about which, by preference perhaps, we remain largely ignorant. Particularly when we sense a negative or shameful character in these contents, instead of “owning” them, we may in cases project these vaguely felt but unacknowledged contents—the very stuff of sin no less than of life—onto others. Then we are apt to fight these others, righteously and complacently, and commit time and again sins of violence whose source in us we deny; for we do not acknowledge that the true target of our hatred is inside ourselves. (This isn’t all Jung says, of course; but I’m impressed that this is there.) This, says Jung, can become our program; we can deny what consciousness we have in common with our ancestors; we own to no share in their guilt; and so we are free, in perfect “innocence,” to recapitulate their crimes.

Doesn’t this sound a lot like Freud? (See Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism.*) Only it is less “one note” than Freud was. It elaborates on Freud, much as Freud himself (no rigid Freudian) felt free eventually to elaborate by introducing the “death wish” to supplement the “pleasure principle.” Even in Freud, libido doesn’t get the last word.

As for Adler, he does not exclude Freud’s pleasure principle. It seems though he “complicates” Freud’s doctrine of sublimation. Whereas Freud would say of a man who spends his life climbing mountains or becoming boss of a huge enterprise that such a man is no doubt “sublimating” his sex drive, Adler is free to suggest that having sex might be a poor second best for a man who really wants to climb mountains or be a corporation executive.² Echoing in a way Plato in the *Symposium,* Adler sees Eros as having

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² This reconfiguration of Freud is fairly caught by the message on a shirt I saw on a pedal-pushing, hill-climbing San Franciscan cyclist: “This is what I fantasize about when I’m having sex.”
from the start a self-affirming horizon-expanding agenda that can, if one will, instantiate itself in sex, but which has never been confined to it.

Shared questions, and shared conviction as to the importance of those shared questions, continue to unite Freud and his disciples long after they part company. Their very rivalry is a bond. One should take no scandal here. These men are jointly caught up in a broadening encounter with reality. One hears in their disagreements their emphatic testimony to the reality and importance of their common subject matter in those very moments when one hears them conscientiously at odds with each other regarding which hypotheses and interpretations and metaphors do most to clarify it. What greater invitation to an intellectual life could one request?

As for the second cause for scandal, namely errors in which one finds oneself engaged, we know that each discovery of error is, genuinely, a discovery, an uncovering—a learning experience which opens the door to further learning. We can recognize mistakes in our thinking because we have a known context in which to identify truth. Successful golfers and pitchers, for instance, can make great use of their errors because they have a context—the rules and goal of the game, and knowledge of the discrete physical arena in which they play—in which to recognize them. In general, good athletes (the most successful of them) tend to be distinguished by calmness. They regard their performance with the Zen-like attentive detachment of the scientific observer. As the ball veers disappointingly from the hole, the kind of golfer I’m talking about doesn’t curse and ask, “How could I have been so stupid as to swing like that?” She or he’s too busy adding new knowledge to old: “So the turf just here has a near-invisible rise. Tomorrow, I’ll allow for it.” So too the reflective pitcher says, as he hears the batter connect sweetly for a base hit: “So that’s the pitch he can’t resist. I’ll use that against him his next time up.”

3. Tiger Woods in his salad days, Buster Posey anytime, Joe Montana and Jerry Rice in the legendary closing minutes of a game, Michael Jordan in the legendary closing minutes of a game, Madison Bumgarner most anytime, Steph Curry anytime, Russell Wilson most anytime, Serena Williams year in and year out, are examples that come to mind.
Rather than support skepticism, acts of ours which go wide of the mark, if analyzed, point to new tactics and abandonment of false assumptions. That we can recognize acts that are wide of the mark suggests that beyond the things we think (and can be wrong about) are things we know (and are not wrong about). Our moments of frustration resolve into moments of insight. Horizons of knowledge open. Amid temporary setback, the attentive human finds an invitation.

If this sounds a bit too like the breezy “by-your-bootstraps psychology” that floods our media, let me hasten to concede that when it comes to understanding contemporary affairs, there are so many interlocking unknowns and hidden agendas that the effort to understand them is indeed daunting, and tends to overpower one. If we’ve wondered whether official governmental reports involve cover-ups and lies, surely the Pentagon Papers, the Nixon tapes, the refusal of Obama to disclose videos of CIA torture, the information and documents made available by WikiLeaks and Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, etc., should put the matter to rest.

Complicating things further, as one’s eyes open to the duplicity and manipulations of our government and begin looking into the myriad things that remain unknowns in our government’s public reports, one is likely, as noted, to be labeled “a conspiracy theorist”—which carries the implication one is not quite sane or at least not quite adult. This has been effective in dampening down the curiosity of us Americans. (Even when governmental cover-ups have been uncovered, we seem at times less displeased with the agents of the cover-ups—the government conspirators—than we are with those who have disillusioned us by uncovering their conspiracies. We are uncomfortable, and turn away, when James Douglass uncovers our government’s involvement in the Kennedy assassination, when Robert Parry delves into the sordid details of the Iran-Contra scandal, when Gary Webb discovers the collusion of the CIA in the affairs of gangsters who were poisoning our ghettoes by importing drugs into them, when Edward Snowden discloses the officially-denied spying of the National Security Agency on the American people, etc. In turn, our tendency to reject the messenger is endorsed by presidents and mainstream media when they label the messenger a traitor.)
The retreat of so many of us from the world about us (the only planet those currently alive are likely ever to inhabit), while we take up residence in a personally designed neighborhood in cyberspace, tends to leave under-exercised our capacity for truth-finding regarding this more primary and immediate four-dimensional world—the one where trucks can run over us as we tweet. While there is much to hope for from social media, our escape from immediate physical habitat into psychic habitat can have as its flip side the abandonment of our physical habitat to the care of those who can least be trusted with it. By reason of the many lingering tokens of American prosperity, and the palpable comfort and longevity many of us continue to enjoy, such an escape strikes many as affordable. For this reason, withdrawal into a personalized alternative reality has probably played out more freely among us here in the United States than, say, in India or China. As our electronic embublement continues, our feeling of responsibility to make sense of the world which feeds and sustains us often tends to shrink. Our desire to understand gets undermined. From a daunting world, we can seek refuge in electronics; but if we retreat there and take up residence, the world surrounding us will—count on it—become more daunting still.

What I’ve argued in this section on skepticism is that the things many of the most sensitive among us are relegating to the margins are the things that offer coherence. In putting away history, we reduce our sense of identity and forego our opportunity to discern and elude the traps and flaws that others set for us. In trivializing beauty, we consign our affectivity to a process of numbing. When we do the same with morality, we all but lose the ability to live purposefully. When we hitch up our pants, stand straight and stoical, and loudly proclaim: “There are no absolutes!” we despair in general of our understanding and effectively close down effective response to current challenges.

I agree with Kant that we cannot think without thinking God. But I depart from Kant when he says this is the best we can do, the closest we can get to anything absolute. We don’t just think an absolute but are in touch with one. Somewhere, somehow, in our exertions within the common reality we all share, we interact with the structure and laws of being; we have ontological insights and certitudes. We know that what is, is actual. We know that events which have taken place will without extinction remain
“what has been”—so that the past is eternal. And we know, as Descartes says, that even if we are making a mistake, we must be—else we could not be making it. So we know that we exist, that memory is a source of contact with reality, and that the complex and confusing world in which we live, move, and learn—this world into which Heidegger says we have been “thrown”—is not a world we’ve cooked up on a personal whim, nor is it a world simply devoid of pattern, intelligibility, value, opportunity, and purpose. We know further, that when we retreat from interaction with this world, we culpably chip away at our confidence about everything. We know that if we indulge ourselves in games of skepticism, we leave what’s precious and fragile in our world to the un-tender care of the Second Law of Thermodynamics—and things fall apart.