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The Ebbing of Truth

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St. John Paul II famously warned against the tendency to reduce “conscience” to the level of feelings passionately held. Conscience, rightly understood, took its guide from a body of objective moral truths. Detached from that understanding, he warned, “the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and ‘being at peace with oneself’, so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment.”

Long before Benedict XVI spoke of the “dictatorship of relativism,” we were already aware of “dogmatic relativism.” Students who blithely say that “there is no truth” had not the slightest doubt of the truth of their own epiphany. But the incoherence never cast up any barriers to the swift surge of these convictions, and we find it, in our current crises, taking now an even more dramatic form. The people who insist that their sexual definition, as males or females, depends most decisively on their own feelings about themselves, have nevertheless turned with raging contempt against those who would not accept the truth of their claim.

Ms. J.K. Rowling made herself beloved in the world with her authorship of the Harry Potter stories, but suddenly she found herself the target of an orchestrated outrage because she dared to express reservations about transgenderism. She had commented archly on a document that referred to “people who menstruate.” She remarked that we used to have a familiar term for them (whisper: women). She had also written in support of a woman, Maya Forstater, who had lost her job because of what were called “transphobic tweets.”

But the tribunal hearing her case refused to agree that she had been fired wrongly for what Rowlings described as “a philosophical belief that sex is determined by biology.” First, of course, Ms. Forstater’s moral objection was reduced to a mental illness, a “phobia.” But then she herself, or the tribunal, reduced her claim to a mere “belief.” The dispute was detached even further from that anchoring, objective truth that should have supplied the ground of the judgment.

Ryan Anderson, drawing on the full range of texts in biology, has condensed the truth of the matter in this way:

Sex, in terms of male or female, is identified by the organization of the organism for sexually reproductive acts. . . . The fundamental conceptual distinction between a male and a female is the organism’s organization for sexual reproduction.

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Those obvious anatomical differences mark the *telos*, the purpose, of why there are men and women: to beget more of our kind. The hard news, then, to some people is that the males who become females will still not be part of those “people who menstruate.” The news even harder to bear is that the conservative judges dealing with these cases seem quite reluctant to move beyond the mechanics of procedure and make that appeal to the objective truth of the matter. But a jurisprudence that cannot touch that ground will be condemned to be a morally incoherent jurisprudence.

Juliana Pilon reminds us in *The Utopian Conceit* ^[1], that totalitarian regimes rested upon lies, and every day they needed to enjoin their populace to affirm those lies anew. And now, even without a prodding coming from our own government, we are being scolded by the surging crowds – and by some of our leading corporations – to join the affirmation of the lies in Black Lives Matter.

The former governor of Maryland, Martin O’Malley, had the temerity to respond that “all lives matter,” and he was quickly brought to heel. He was made to abase himself in apologizing, along now with the professional athletes who have expressed their own reservations.

“Black Lives Matter” is inescapably right as a principle, but what is inescapably clear is that the principle is so deeply disrespected by the people who have reduced this principle to a slogan. As we have come to know by now, the number of unarmed black people killed by the police in shootings – nine in 2019 – was but one-tenth of a percent of the African Americans killed in homicides in 2019, mostly at the hands of young black males.

And those deaths at the hands of black people, are dwarfed by the numbers of black abortions exceeding live births at times in New York and Chicago. In New York, between 2012 and 2016 black mothers “terminated” 136,426 pregnancies and gave birth to 118,127 babies. But these are not the Black Lives that count in the moral reckoning of Black Lives Matter.

That is the incoherence, the lie, that some of our most prestigious colleges and churches are willing to broadcast to the world as their own as they hoist the banner of Black Lives Matters over their buildings and websites. Amazon now affirms BLM, and Starbucks is willing to put the slogan on tee shirts worn by their employees. They are willing to stamp now these phrases as one of their own new orthodoxies, their own reigning half-truths.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like this in our country in my own lifetime, approaching fourscore years. It is tempting to say that we are witnessing a “war on truth,” but the metaphor is overdone. It would be more accurate to say that, for a scarily large portion of our people, there has been a simple ebbing of that ancient conviction that truth matters.

***Image:** *Ashes* ^[2] by Edvard Munch, 1884 [National Museum, Oslo, Norway]

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[1] *The Utopian Conceit*: **<https://amzn.to/3e3Knm9>**

[2] Ashes: **<https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/collection/object/NG.M.00809>**

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