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Live to Tell

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Winds of Change

After Modernity

Rodney Clapp has recently identified Winnie-the-Pooh as a premier philosopher in the West. He writes:

A noted Western philosopher, introduced to the world in 1926, was one day sitting on a log when he heard a buzzing sound. He was puzzled and fell to pondering. As his leading chronicler remembers the event, the philosopher reasoned along the following lines:

"If there's a buzzing-noise, somebody's making a buzzing noise, and the only reason for making a buzzing-noise that *I* know of is because you're a bee.'

Then he thought another long time and said: 'And the only reason for being a bee that I know of is making honey.'

And then he got up and said: 'And the only reason for making honey is so *I* can eat it.'"¹

Who can resist snickering at Pooh-bear's gleeful and unashamed preoccupation with his tummy? Yet, the reasoning process by which Pooh concludes that "bees are for *me*," epitomizes a widely accepted 300-year-old philosophical project. This project is the invisible backdrop to most of our contemporary preoccupations. Since the mid-seventeenth century, modern philosophy has advocated three doctrines.² First, the individual is always prior to and more significant than any larger group of which he or she is a part. According to this doctrine, sometimes called *generic individualism*, a believing community is incidental to, and really *nothing but*, the sum of the individual members. The real action takes place at the level of the individual who must choose his or her master, mate, and mission. Such decisions are taken to be the prerequisites for voluntary association with like-minded others.

A second modern doctrine holds that language is *nothing but* a picture of the world. Just as a Polaroid snapshot of my room does not rearrange the furniture, language is thought to be a neutral depiction of the way the world is. This reductive theory about language is called *representationalism*. According to representationalism, words and sentences are expendable bearers of more important things called meanings. In this view, truthfulness is measured in terms of a sentence's correspondence with the ways things really are.

It is claimed, third, that beliefs are *nothing but* assertions about the way things really are. This theory is sometimes called *propositionalism*. In this view, beliefs always can be, and ought to be, subject to rigorous testing. Those beliefs that pass the scrutiny of publicly accessible criteria qualify for the supreme status of "knowledge." However, strictly speaking, only in regard to logic and mathematics can the sentence "*I know*" be voiced truthfully—that is, with absolute certainty.

What could be more obvious?

Obvious for whom? Anything that strikes *Pooh* as obvious deserves a second look. Surprisingly, these three dogmas of modernity are themselves guilty of reductionism, the over simplification of complexities about selfhood, language, and faith.

These dogmas were not the achievement of millennia of searching after philosophical clarity. Rather, they were the emotional crutch of an age terrified by a world that was falling apart,³ and recent philosophers have begun to migrate away from the conceptual space defined by these three doctrines of modernity.

Rather than spend time trying to make clear the modern views of metaphysics, language, or epistemology, by telling some stories I will try to give you some inkling of the sorts of directions in which contemporary postcritical or postmodern philosophy may be moving.⁴ Once I clarify alternative ways for thinking about the world, I will make some suggestions as to what evangelism might look like in a post-Pooh age.

Challenging Individualism

According to the received account, conglomerates in the physical world are necessarily nothing more than the sums of their parts. For example, molecules are nothing more than the sum of their respective atoms; human persons are nothing more than the collection of their cells; communities are nothing more than the aggregation of their members, and so on.

On this old—and what we are calling here the modern—view, the *really real* and that which does all the causal work in any system are the smallest identifiable parts. Of course, this makes physics the premier scientific discipline because the direction of causation is assumed to move from parts to wholes, but not the other way around, and physics, after all, studies the smallest parts.

Yet if that were true, then we ought to be able predict the behavior of any group simply by looking at individuals. Unfortunately, this simply is not the case.⁵ In fact, groups frequently take on a life of their own and act corporately as if the group were its own sort of entity. For example, imagine a herd of wild boars fleeing single-file through dense vegetation with a predator at their heels. Just as the predator is close enough to nibble the haunches of the last boar in the line something amazing happens. The pack splits, some running left, others running right, and as if on cue the entire herd turns to face the now-surrounded

predator. How does each boar fleeing for its life manage to act in unison with the rest of the herd?

Or consider another puzzling story. The Hollywood hit *Jurassic Park* made famous the biological phenomenon that some species of African frogs have the ability to spontaneously change their gender in order to equilibrate a population in which one gender has disappeared. Let's say all the females have been removed. How is each male frog to know the difference between being continuously unlucky at getting a date for Saturday and the more serious condition (serious enough for him to change gender!) of there being no females at all in the community?

Consider a third example. We are all familiar with the ability of a school of fish to move in unified reaction to our tapping on the side of the aquarium. It might be hypothesized that unified movement is not a group behavior, but simply an accident: each individual fish is similar enough to the others to respond identically to the same external stimuli. If we managed to put tiny blindfolds on the fish and witnessed the same group behavior after tapping the glass, I suspect that we would be undaunted, for it is conceivable that the fish, each nearly identical to its neighbor, might be capable of responding to the sound or even to the vibration of our tapping. Of course this explanation only works if each fish possesses the faculty necessary for responding to sight, sound, or whatever. The real surprise would be if the school still swam in unison after, in addition to blindfolding them, we stopped their ears and scooped out their brains. And yet this is analogous to the Bénard phenomenon.⁶ If a cylinder of liquid is heated from below, the blind, deaf, and witless molecules of the liquid spontaneously form hexagonal "cells" of convection as if an invisible honeycomb had been slipped into the container. Within each cell molecules move in a uniform way while molecules in a neighboring cell move in a different pattern that is uniform for that cell. How does any given molecule "know" to which cell it belongs?

What are we to make of these mysteries? Should we conclude that there *must* be a way to explain these group phenomena entirely in terms of the individuals because, after all, groups are *nothing but* the sum of their individual members? Some contemporary thinkers beg to differ; group behavior cannot be described in terms of individuals precisely because the group is

more than the aggregation of its members. Something real emerges at the level of the group that has downward causal influence on the members. How else can we account for the behavior of the amoeba known as *Dictyostelium*?

Normally, this single-celled organism goes about its quiet business of hunting down, engulfing and digesting bacteria that live in soil. After gorging itself sufficiently, *Dictyostelium* divides in two, and the new pair go their separate, bacteria-devouring ways. But if the thousands of *Dictyostelium* in a stamp-sized plot of soil should eat their surroundings clean, they do something exceptional. . . .

Rather than crawling around randomly, the amoebas start streaming toward one another in inwardly pulsing ripples. As many as 100,000 converge in a swirling mound. And then, remarkably, the mound itself begins to act as if it were the organism. It stretches out into a bullet-shaped slug the size of a sand grain and begins to move. It slithers up toward the surface of the soil, probes specks of dirt, and turns around when it hits a dead end. Its movements are slow—it would need a day to travel an inch—but . . . the deliberateness of the movements eerily evoke an *it* rather than a *they*.⁷

Apparently, each *Dictyostelium* is able to take orders from the system of amoebas as a whole. To put it differently, the organisms form a group that attains something akin to group consciousness. Whatever the mechanism, the group appears able to influence its members by the transfer of information without which a given amoeba is unable to tell the difference between a localized food shortage and a regional famine. Notice that the direction of influence in this case is from the group to its members, or from the top down. This downward causation has an important correlate for human behavior.⁸

Imagine that you are the dean of students at a small Midwestern religious university and are leading an investigation into the suicide of a twenty-one-year-old white female student, Jane Doe. Relatives and acquaintances of all sorts have been interviewed for clues that might shed light on Jane Doe's choice to end her young life. The jigsaw puzzle of her life begins to take shape: the normally hard-working Jane had recently lost her job because she was unable to stay on task; her academic perform-

ance had suffered, with grades falling steadily over a six-month period; and a long-standing romantic relationship had soured, leaving Jane listless and depressed. And, oh yes, an autopsy showed that Jane had an unusually low ionic lithium concentration in her bloodstream—a condition typically associated with one form of manic depression.

Now, if asked to identify which of these was the *real* reason Jane committed suicide, the modern analyst would unhesitatingly point to the chemical deficiency as the root cause of Jane's behavior, on the assumption that Jane is *nothing but* the sum of her chemicals. But contemporary thinkers are unwilling to be so dismissive of what is a more complicated cluster of reasons each of which may have contributed to Jane's behavior. So, for example, one thinker might justifiably answer the question, "Why did Jane commit suicide?" by responding, "Because she was Protestant!"

How can this be? In 1897 Émile Durkheim, the father of sociology, published his finding that suicide rates vary according to victims' social groupings.⁹ Protestants had higher suicide rates than Roman Catholics; city dwellers had a higher suicide incidence than their rural counterparts; and civilians were more likely to commit suicide than military personnel. Durkheim reasoned that groups displayed properties that individuals could not possess on their own. This is not unreasonable: a single H_2O molecule cannot display the property of wetness because more than one molecule is required to establish the surface tension considered characteristic of that we experience as wetness. Similarly, a single individual living in isolation cannot display the property of social cohesiveness. Durkheim hypothesized that groups vary according to levels of social cohesiveness. Some groups have a high degree of cohesion because members have internalized a strong normative framework closely tied with the group's identity—family obligations among Italians, religious duty among Roman Catholics, nationalist ideals among Shiite Muslims. Such normative frameworks possessed by the group and ingested by members make members resistant to suicide.

Durkheim's study of suicide is but one example of the way we are beginning to understand that groups achieve a certain level of reality. Properties emerge at the level of the group that can be neither reduced to those operating at the level of the indi-

vidual nor completely explained only in terms of individuals. Moreover, the group as an ordered whole exerts a top-down influence on the individual members by virtue of these emergent group properties. Consequently, even the hardest of the sciences are, albeit reluctantly, beginning to admit that no one discipline has priority over the others; multiple levels of explanation are required because real causal influence emerges and operates at *all* levels of complexity.

Of course, it is relatively easy for us to admit that a chemical imbalance may cause aberrant behavior. But it takes much more to convince us that the reverse is also true: behavior alters brain chemistry.¹⁰ In recent philosophical parlance, this more complicated picture of things is called *metaphysical holism*: a group may be *more than* the sum of its individual parts. In such cases, the group itself is causally real, influencing members from the top down.

Ironically, the notion of metaphysical holism is not a new-fangled thing, but a very old concept that was lost sight of in the modern period. When the New Testament speaks of "the Body of Christ," the corporate filling of the Spirit, and the corporate "new man," or disapprovingly of "the Law"¹¹ and "principalities and powers,"¹² it is acknowledging powers that are inextricably bound up with community life and that hold sway over the individual.¹³ To anticipate a topic I will take up in more detail later, we can at least provisionally conclude that faithfulness in evangelism must simultaneously attend to both the group and the individual. But before we consider evangelism, we must consider two other ways modernity is becoming antiquated.

Language Constitutes the World

A second way in which contemporary thinking is leaving the conceptual space of modernity is by acknowledging the way that language constitutes the world.

The urgency modern thinkers feel for doing analysis misleads them: they try to understand the mechanism of language by misconstruing language as one thing and the world as another, and then investigating the relationship between the two. The nearly

unanimous conclusion of this approach has been that language simply pictures the world.

This strategy is flawed from the outset. What does it mean to treat language in isolation from the world and the world in isolation from language when we think *by means of* language? I cannot treat the world in isolation from language because it is by means of language that I treat anything at all.

Consider: it is tempting to assume that the mind operates like some sort of digital camera that stores a staggering number of freeze-frame snapshots as we proceed through a day. Such snapshots are thought to be, in principle at least, available for recall and review by the adequately trained brain. A verbal description of the image is thought to be a secondary, add-on step in the processing of sensory data. However, as Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, an astonishingly high percentage of our mental life cannot be accomplished merely by sequences of images. For example, try thinking *I expect it to stop raining soon* without using words. We can conjure images of it raining and then not raining. But what would an image of "expectation" or "soonness" look like? That an expectation can be about an imminent state of affairs that may or may not come to pass (it may rain for another week!) is central to the meaning of this sentence. As it turns out, words such as "expect" and "soon" are not incidental add-ons to fundamentally image-based mental processing. Rather, we cannot catch the principle drift of the sentence without using these very words because *language is the means by which we think*.¹⁴

We can also get an inkling that the modern approach may be deeply flawed by noting that if language were merely a picture, it could be learned by pointing and naming. However, Wittgenstein showed that a word can be defined by pointing to something only when the overall role of the word in the language is already clear.¹⁵

Suppose, however, someone were to object: "It is not true that you must already be master of a language in order to understand an ostensive definition: all you need—of course!—is to know or guess what the person giving the explanation is pointing to. That is, whether for example to the shape of the object, or to its color, or to its number, and so on."

Wittgenstein answers his imaginary interlocutor: "And what does 'pointing to the shape', 'pointing to the color' consist in? Point to a piece of paper.—And now point to its shape—now to its color—now to its number (that sounds queer).—How did you do it?"¹⁶ Because the same gesture in each instance is intended to pick out vastly different aspects (shape, color, number, and so on), pointing cannot be the basis by which a nonspeaker acquires fluency in language, especially his or her first language.

One of my earliest memories is of an event that occurred when I was too young to have mastered the names of the primary colors. I recall my friends teasing me for not knowing my colors. I must have insisted otherwise because one of them chirped, "Oh yeah, then what is this?" while pointing on a page in a coloring book. "That," she cried triumphantly, "is yellow!" I went home very confused because I knew she had pointed to a pear. I could not understand her gesture of pointing until I understood how to use the words *color* and, in particular, *yellow* in English sentences.

Children initially learn a language not by having objects pointed out to them—that game comes very much later—but by being trained into a form of life. All of us share primitive reactions—we squint at bright lights, we pucker when we suck lemons, and so on. Wittgenstein calls these behaviors primitive reactions in order to emphasize their givenness for the functioning of language. One way (and only one way) to think of the connection between primitive reactions and language use is to imagine language as going proxy for these other behaviors.

How do words *refer* to sensations? . . . Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behavior.

"So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?"—On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.¹⁷

Wittgenstein's point is that language doesn't *refer to*, or *picture*, or *correspond to*, or *depict* some nonlinguistic reality; there

is no way for us to imagine that to which language corresponds ("a state of affairs," "the world," "reality," etc.) except in terms of the very language that this "reality" is supposed to be considered in isolation from. Rather, learning a language is an irreducibly social enterprise that trains a child into a communal mode of living.¹⁸ Thus Wittgenstein likens language to a series of games that require partners for playing: "In a conversation: One person throws a ball; the other does not know: whether he is supposed to throw it back, or throw it to a third person, or leave it on the ground, or pick it up and put it in his pocket, etc."¹⁹ Language is not a picture that succumbs to distanced observation, it is a socially involved enterprise that by its very nature engages human subjects.

We now can see why another radical critic of modernity, John L. Austin, describes language as "performative."²⁰ Language is a form of action that gets work done. Think of the vast array of ways in which language performs work: we make promises, we ask questions, we give orders, we make confessions. When I spoke the words "I do!" to Jeanne L. Dahle, I didn't describe some state of affairs—I changed forever both her world and mine. With and through those words I became her husband. More ominously, now that we have children, we are painfully aware of the power of language to nurture or denature our three children, who inhabit a world of either praise or verbal abuse.

Thus, philosophy has challenged some long-standing assumptions about language. Before I show these recent views' significance for doing ministry, let me introduce one more way contemporary thinking is leaving modernity behind.

The Shifting of Paradigms

Nicolaus Copernicus was a Polish astronomer whose posthumous publication with the snappy title *On the Revolution of the Celestial Orbs* (1543) turned the world on its head. Copernicus used geometry to argue that, contrary to common thinking, the Earth revolved around the sun in a regular orbit. By 1610 Galileo Galilei had begun publishing observations of the heavens that he had made by means of his telescope. These obser-

ventions corroborated Copernicus's heliocentric model. Despite violent opposition from the church, multitudes of thinking people were converted to the view that we inhabit a solar system, with the sun at its center, rather than a geocentric, or Earth-centered, universe.

We must understand that the stakes for such a conversion were high. Astronomy was not simply a hobby for those who had the money and leisure to gaze heavenward. Charting the stars was critical for navigating Earth's oceans, and knowledge of the heavenly seasons was integral to skillfully timing the planting and harvesting of crops. And for thousands of years, the Earth-centered model of the Egyptian astronomer Ptolemy had generated exceptionally accurate star charts and calendars. To give up this system surely could be done rationally only on the basis of improved charts and calendars. Right? Wrong! The real puzzle surrounding the mass conversion to the Copernican view was the fact that empirical data, such as those improved charts and calendars, lagged behind the Ptolemaic system by nearly two hundred years!²¹ We normally say that when we change our minds, we did so on the basis of solid evidence. How can we account for this mystery?

In 1951 W. V. O. Quine shocked the philosophical world with the suggestion that beliefs are as social as they are rational.

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. . . . But the total field is so undetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole.²²

Quine suggested that we understand human beliefs as the shared property of a human community.²³ Beliefs form an interlocking set; each belief has a stake in the reliability of neighboring beliefs. Experience impinges only on the set as a whole

by being the "boundary condition" of the web. Experience may indeed conflict with beliefs, but in such cases, the conflict is not between an isolated belief and a single datum of experience. Rather, experience as a whole may generate dissonance within the entire web. As tension mounts, the community rushes to reestablish equilibrium by a variety of strategies.

To put it differently, beliefs differ from each other only by virtue of their distance from the periphery of experience. Those beliefs that lie near the periphery are more public and more open to change. Those beliefs that are more deeply ingressed are more impervious to change. One can imagine that central beliefs are hedged in by a buffer of more peripheral beliefs. Tension may be resolved by one of three strategies, any of which may be reasonable.

First, the recalcitrant data may simply be ignored. Scientists regularly suspend final judgment on puzzling experiment results when these results seem to undermine reigning scientific views. For example, scattered reports of experiments in which nuclear fusion is achieved at room temperature will continue to be treated with suspicion precisely because the possibility of cold fusion runs against the grain of contemporary theoretical physics. Two facts make the current web of beliefs very resilient to change: first, too much has been invested (time, research dollars, textbook production, etc.) to scrap it all on the basis of one or two anomalies; second, the reigning web of beliefs has a vastly greater success rate at explaining hundreds of thousands of experimental data than any yet-to-be-formulated replacement created to account for the single puzzling anomaly. Thus, one reasonable response is to adopt a wait-and-see attitude in anticipation that some fertile minds may eventually concoct ways to understand present anomalies within the spectrum of currently available theories. And, as the history of science bears out, in most cases such a resolution presents itself.

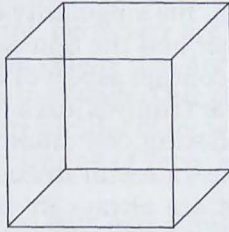
Second, sometimes tension may be resolved by inventing a belief that mollifies the tension by realigning the web. Consider a theological example. Early Christians clearly believed that (1) Jesus was to be worshiped as God, (2) God was one, and (3) Jesus and God were distinct. It didn't take long for detractors to object that these beliefs constituted a logical contradiction. Of course, the problem would dissolve if Christians were willing simply to

jettison one of these three beliefs, but too much was at stake. Denial of Christ's deity is the subordinationist heresy practiced by the Arians. Denial of the unity of God would be tantamount to polytheism (or literally, bi- or tritheism). Denial of the distinction between Jesus and the Father winds up in the heresy called modalism. In order to retain all three beliefs, Christians constructed the doctrine of the Trinity, which relieved the tension. The deity of Christ, the singularity of God, and the distinctiveness of the Father and the Son were each intelligible when viewed under the concept aspect of the Trinity.

Does this mean that the Trinity is just a fiction because it was an invention of the believing community? This question is wrongheaded. Let me illustrate with an example from the world of engineering. Bridges are always in danger of collapsing because winds and traffic set them vibrating like guitar strings. If the vibrations resonate—a phenomenon in which the amplitude, or strength, of the vibration surges because it matches the natural wavelength of the span of the bridge—the bridge is in danger of collapsing. To avoid catastrophe, bridge designers must estimate this danger by solving what are called wave equations for the bridge. If the solution to the wave equation turns out to be a certain imaginary number (such as $\sqrt{-1}$), the bridge will not collapse from vibrational stresses. Yet imaginary numbers are so called because they cannot be located anywhere on the real number line. Does this make them simply fictitious? Of course not. Imaginary numbers are real in the sense that they are shorthand accounts of safe bridges. Similarly, the concept of the Trinity is a shorthand reminder of safe ways we need to travel when speaking about God. To speak about God in any other way will land us in heresy.

Third, tension in the web resulting from the web's inability to reconcile itself to recalcitrant experience may eventually tear the fabric of the web. When this sort of crisis occurs, a large set or subset of beliefs may be supplanted by another set altogether. This wholesale exchange of belief systems is called a *paradigm shift*. Because swapping takes place in blockhouse fashion, there is not usually a smooth transition from one paradigm to another. Rather, the transition is like a Gestalt switch. For example, most Westerners instinctively see the following figure in one of two ways: as a three dimensional box coming toward and down to

the left of the viewer or as one coming toward them but up to the right. Once a viewer fixates on one of these aspects, she can force herself to see it under the other aspect. However, when this change of aspect dawns, it happens all at once; the figure doesn't morph from one aspect to the other—it *leaps*.



Similarly, when a paradigm is in crisis, the shift to a new paradigm is very rapid and has naturally been described as “a conversion.”²⁴ However, unlike a Gestalt switch, a paradigm shift generally is not reversible; once the new paradigm is in place, the old way of viewing things is no longer convincing.

On the other hand, because data gain significance only by virtue of their appropriation and interpretation by a conceptual scheme (a paradigm is the means by which we interpret data *as data*),²⁵ the shifting of paradigms cannot be driven by data alone. Thomas Kuhn explains:

The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by problem-solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few. A decision of that kind can only be made on faith.²⁶

Thus, the swapping of paradigms is reasonable—we have epistemic permission to shop around once our old paradigm is in crisis—but it is never, strictly speaking, *compelled* by the data for which the new paradigm provides a radically different (incommensurable) interpretation.²⁷ We can now appreciate the

ambiguity facing early admirers of Copernicus. Copernicus's geometry seemed to make sense, but Ptolemy's model produced (at that time) more accurate calendars. So, what was one to do? In Kuhn's words, those who converted to the Copernican model did so on the basis of faith.

Summary

By and large, the differences between the received modernist account of reality and that offered by recent postmodern upstarts are so great that it is natural for postmodern (or postcritical) thinkers to speak of their own work as constituting a paradigm shift. I have discussed three aspects of this new paradigm in particular. First, *metaphysical holism* is the view that groups behave like real entities that both constitute each member's identity and have top-down causal influence on them. Hence, we are socially constituted critters. Second, language accounts for the lion's share of our social make-up (*linguistic holism*); language is the means by which we think and act in the world. Language cannot be pried off the world of experience and analyzed in isolation because the conceptual language we think and speak determines the shape of the world we inhabit. Third, the beliefs we hold about our world form an interlocking set that we share with the rest of our community (*epistemological holism*). This set of beliefs, or paradigm, is very resilient and typically resists change. But when change comes, it comes all at once.

Although these new habits of speaking cannot be easily explained (especially in terms of the modern paradigm), they have direct implications for understanding evangelism and religious conversion. Let's tackle conversion first.