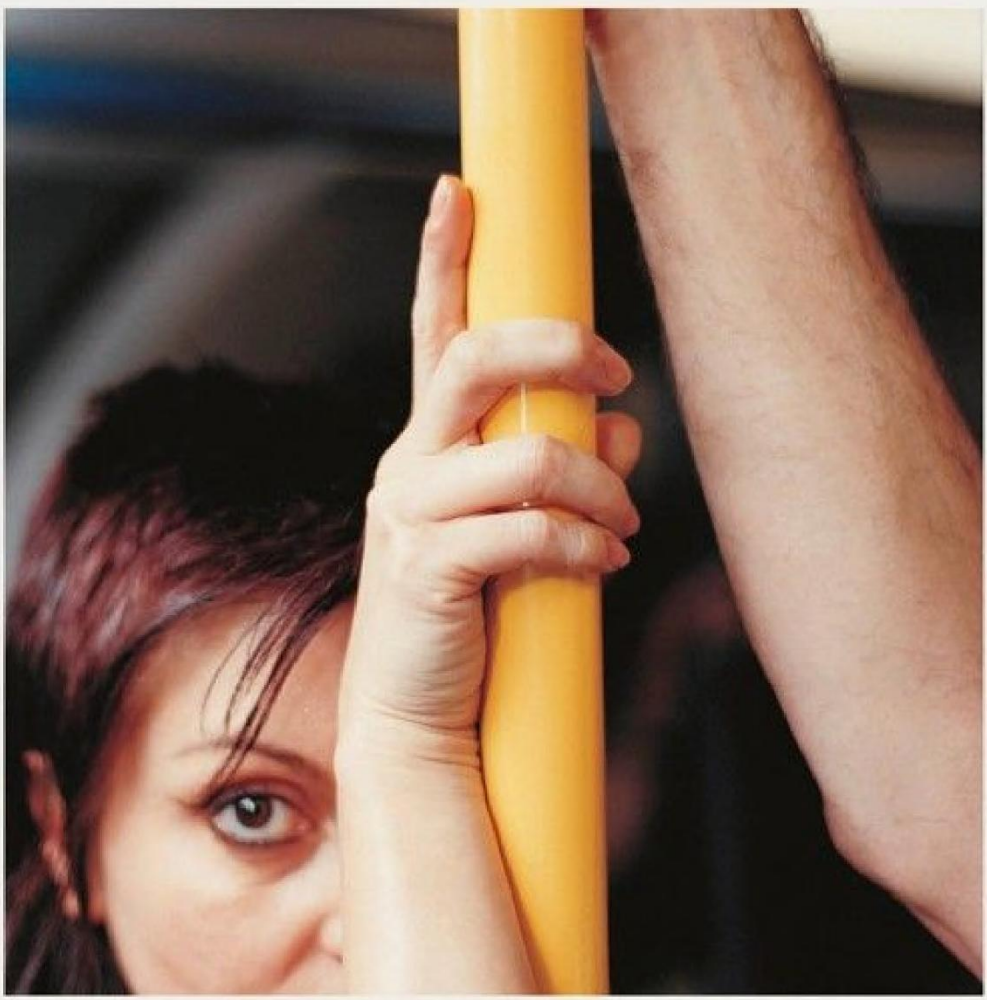
John D. Caputo

Truth

The Search for Wisdom in the Postmodern Age



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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John D. Caputo is a specialist in contemporary hermeneutics and deconstruction with a special interest in religion in the postmodern condition. The Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus at Syracuse University and the David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Villanova University, he has spearheaded an idea he calls 'weak theology'.

Introduction

Truth on the Go

Riding to work in the morning has become pretty pedestrian. Well, not exactly pedestrian, because pedestrians are walkers and we don't walk. But it has become commonplace. We ride everywhere. Doctors and public health officials plead with us to get out and walk, to get some exercise because of our increasingly sedentary lives. Sedentary, on the other hand, does not mean we stay in one place. On the contrary, sedentary means that even when we're not sitting in front of a computer, even when we're on the go we're still seated – in cars, trains, planes – and with our laptops in tow. People used to live within walking distance of the fields in which they worked, or they worked in shops attached to their homes. Now we ride to work, and nearly everywhere else, and we're always on the go. Which may seem an innocent enough point, and certainly not one on which we require instruction from the philosophers. But, truth be told, it has in fact precipitated a crisis in our understanding of truth.

In the past the philosophers, like everyone else, tended to stay close to home. In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant (one of the names on everybody's short list of great philosophers) was famous for having never left Königsberg. That made life simpler for him and gave him the idea that the way things were done in Königsberg was the way they were, or ought to be, done everywhere, and that where there were differences, the differences were variations on what male German philosophers thought was true. Kant read the travel

literature of the day, journals kept by ships' captains, but he never saw the inside of a ship. He was also a leader of the Enlightenment, which emphasized the Universal standards of Pure Reason. But the problem for Kant was that 'universal' had a way of collapsing into 'European', while 'pure' tended to mean never having met anyone else.

Nowadays we don't need to live within walking distance of where we work, and we can go almost anywhere we want if we have the money for the trip. We can fly like birds and visit other countries, cross oceans, not to mention the extraordinary amount of travelling we do through the media and the internet which bring other people and other places to us even when we stay home. We can be almost anywhere at any time, and the faster the trip, the better. The Instant Message has become the ideal: getting where you want to go in the blink of an eye and at the speed of thought itself. That's actually how the angels travel in heaven, or so we're told by those who claim to know such things. The angels, we read in the Bible, ran a kind of instant messaging service for God in the days before the Most High could have used email or a smartphone. Instant messaging, instant travel, instant meals – where will it end? And where are we going, anyway? Does anybody know the name of the last stop, or the one right before the last one so we can have some warning? Does anybody even know how to get off the train?

None of this may seem to have anything to do with truth, but in truth, this non-stop travel has created a crisis in our most treasured verities. Contemporary life, which is marked by modern transportation systems in which we can travel almost anywhere, and modern information systems, through which almost anything can travel to us, is much more pluralistic than life in the past. We are more exposed to others and others to us. We have a robust sense that life is not confined to Königsberg – or Kansas – and that the world is a

very diverse and pluriform place. This has resulted in ideas about open-ended rainbow cultures rather than monochromic pure ones. But it has also created trouble. On the one hand it has created social strife, arising from an influx of peoples into the wealthier nations in search of a better life, as well as the exploitation of the poorer countries by the wealthier ones on the global market. Kant, to his credit, saw some of this coming, and addressed it under the name of 'cosmopolitanism', treating visitors as citizens of the cosmos, of the world, which is an excellent point, especially coming from someone who didn't get around much. On the other hand, contemporary life has created problems for philosophers, as all this pluralism threatens a veritable vertigo when it comes to truth, and that vertigo is called *postmodernism*.

Postmodern culture is the globalized, multicultural, high-tech world in which we live. We can travel almost anywhere, see just about anything on television or a laptop, and see and talk to people on the other side of the world without leaving our seat – and if it started in the western industrialized countries, it is gradually spreading around the globe today. This induces a rather different frame of mind than if we had spent our entire life in Königsberg (or Kansas). Given the unremitting exposure of life in a high-tech world to the tremendous variety of cultures and lifestyles which contemporary travellers see and visit, or which visit them, they have developed a heightened sense of 'difference'. Difference is a buzz word for postmodernity just the way 'universal' was for *modernity*, a word that I will use throughout to signify the Enlightenment, the age of Reason that first emerged in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and which subsequently shaped the contemporary world of science, technology and civil liberties. Universal is a modern motif, difference is a postmodern one.

Modernists tended to think the whole was a system unified by a central power (God, if you still went to church, nature, if you didn't) where all the clocks and trains ran on time. Postmodernists tend to think things hang together laterally, linked up like a web, say, a world wide web, where it makes no sense to speak of who is in control or even of where it begins or ends. How do you get to the 'end' of the www? Modernists prefer the abstract lines of Google Map; postmodernists prefer the loosey-goosey terrains of Google Earth. Modernists think things are rule-bound and mathematical; postmodernists appreciate the irregular and 'chaosmic', to borrow a felicitous neologism from James Joyce, meaning a judicious mix of chaos and cosmos. The postmodern ideal would be 'chaosmopolitanism'. This postmodern effect even showed up in physics, when the paradoxes of Relativity and Quantum Theory replaced the regularities of Newtonianism, and in mathematics, when Kurt Gödel unnerved classical mathematicians with his undecidability theorems in 1931.

What then, in brief, is the postmodern, not as a culture, but as a mode of thought? To begin with, the 'post' does not mean anything anti-modern or reactionary against the advances made in modernity, nor some attempt (always futile and nostalgic) to take flight to the premodern. The best way to think of postmodern thought is *as a style*, rather than as a body of doctrines; it is an inflection or alteration that continues the 'project' of modernity, but by other means. Where modernity thinks there are pure rules and a rigorous method – in ethics as well as in science – postmodernity advises flexibility and adaptability. Where modernity thinks that things divide into rigorously separate categories, like reason and emotion, postmodernity thinks that these borders are porous, and that each side bleeds into the other. Where modernists look for the one big story that covers all

phenomena – like all of human history – postmodernists express what Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98) called 'incredulity toward meta-narratives', which became the most familiar definition of postmodernism.[1] This means a refusal to be taken in by big, overarching accounts, as if there was only one really big story to tell about human behaviour (sex, power, God, etc.). Where modernity favours the universal, postmodernists savour the singular and idiosyncratic. Modernists do not welcome exceptions to their rules; postmodernists think that the exception is the engine of creativity and the occasion on which the system can reinvent itself. Where modernists seek certitude, postmodernists see the salutary effects of a healthy scepticism. If we take the particular example of language, which is one of the places in which the postmodern critique of modernism broke out, the 'structuralists' (modernists) put their heart into designing a deep grammar of the universal laws governing any possible language while phenomena like metaphors and metonymies, which stretch and bend the rules in unexpected and non-programmable ways, stole the heart of the 'poststructuralists' (postmodernists).

So if you ask postmodernists, 'What is truth?' they are likely to squint and say, 'It depends.' Postmodernists tend to be a bit incredulous that there is just one thing called truth which is always and everywhere the same, and are more inclined to think there are a lot of different truths, depending on who and where you are; they are inclined to play it loose. Herein lies the problem. Playing it *too* loose with truth is called *relativism* – a point that we will want to keep in mind throughout. Relativism means there is no Truth, just a lot of competing truths, depending on your language, culture, gender, religion, needs, tastes, etc., and one is as good as another. Who can say what is true? Who has the authority to pronounce on that? So the critics of postmodernism fear the

worst: relativism, scepticism, nihilism, flat out anarchy. And, truth to tell, a lot of postmodern philosophers have created this impression because they have spent their time trying to take the air out of Truth. In the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche (one of postmodernism's patron saints) said Truth was an ensemble of fictions and metaphors that we had forgotten are fictions and metaphors. More recently, the highly influential philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007) said truth was merely a compliment we pay ourselves when things are going well with our beliefs. He was an American, and a pragmatist. But maybe you already guessed that. Classical philosophers, especially Germans, love to capitalize Truth (of course the Germans capitalize all their nouns), while postmodernists generally avoid the upper case.

All this because we ride to work! Thus our transportation technologies are not merely transient phenomena; they are the vehicle for an important metaphor about postmodernism. In fact, these vehicles are not merely metaphors for postmodernism; they are important parts of life in a postmodern world. In other words, contemporary transportation systems do not merely cause traffic jams, they also jam our idea of truth. The fact that we can go anywhere tempts us to think that anything goes. 'Anything goes', which is a way to condense the threat that postmodernist thinking poses, is a temptation brought on by postmodern transportation and information systems. The postmodern situation is to be de-situated, uprooted, on the go. Every time we take a ride on a train, or an aeroplane, or make a virtual visit to some far-off place on a computer, we set off a crisis in truth. Truths, as Jane Austen wisely pointed out, are supposed to be 'universally acknowledged'. But today, the only universality we recognize is diversity. The only thing we seem to have in common is that we're all different. If someone invokes the power of Reason nowadays, postmodernists

wrinkle their brows and ask, 'Whose reason? Which rationality?' If someone says 'we think', postmodernists ask 'we who?' Well, it depends on who you are and where you're going. So the problem we have on our hands – and it's a good one to read about on a long journey – is what 'universal' means in a postmodern world, and what 'truth' means where our first thought is that everyone's truth is entitled to its own fifteen minutes in the sun.[2]

Relativism is the main threat to truth that is posed by the postmodernists, just as absolutism is the main threat posed by modernism. In what follows I hope to dodge both these bullets, each of which I regard as dead ends. I will argue that absolutism is a kind of intellectual blackmail, while relativism, which is widely mistaken to be the postmodern theory of truth, is in fact a failure to come up with a theory. Relativism renders us unable to say that anything is wrong, but absolutism confuses us with God. Unbridled relativism means that anything at all could be taken to be true, and then we're left standing at the station, holding the bag of 'anything goes'. This isn't chaosmic, it's just chaos. If anything goes, how will you ever be able to say anything is false? Why not just say things are different? How about '2 + 2 = 5'? How would you be able to object to lying and cheating? How about people who swindle the elderly out of their life savings? The list goes on. So, fond as we are of travelling hither and yon, Anything Goes is one of those places we don't want to go.

I am very fond of travel, but at the same time I want to see to it that we do not simply run off the tracks. I will defend the plurivocity, ambiguity and non-programmability of truth while also defending the right to say that some things are not just different, they're wrong, and this without embracing the no less mistaken idea of absolutism. So let me go on record right at the start of the trip. I pledge my troth to the breakthrough made by the Enlightenment. It liberated us

from the Church, superstition and royal lines of authority and replaced them with civil liberties, scientific research and technological advancements. I have no interest in simply opposing Enlightenment. But I do think the old Enlightenment has done all the good it is going to do and we now need a new one, not an anti-Enlightenment but a new Enlightenment. We have to board the train for the next station, to continue the Enlightenment by other means – to be enlightened about Enlightenment – to appreciate how much more non-programmable and inexact things really are. The idea is not to put out the light of the Enlightenment but to put out a new, revised edition by complicating its Pure Light with shadows, shades, greys, black holes and other unexpected nuances and complications. This even entails renouncing the title of my book, *Truth*, and breaking the bad news to readers that there is no such thing. Instead there are truths – many of them, in the plural and lower case. There is no such thing as Reason (as it was understood by the Enlightenment at least), but there are good reasons and bad ones. I want to defend all of this – and this is the challenge – while not ending us all up in the Relativist ditch of 'anything goes'.

The problem is that, when it comes to truth, all this movement has produced a kind of motion sickness. The more mobile life is, the more likely we are to suspect what we previously considered true was provincial, what they think back where we grew up, part of the local colour of our original location, which gets 'relativized' the more we are on the move. You might say that over the course of time we have begun to appreciate the course of time, to appreciate that things are constantly in motion, and by 'things' I mean *everything*. Aristotle assumed everything was at rest unless something moved it. Newton assumed everything was in motion unless something stopped it. We have gradually come

to realize that everything is going somewhere. Everything is on a trip – all of the time.

In the past, when everyone lived within walking distance of where they worked, people led very settled lives, staying relatively put, and thinking of the earth as *terra firma*, planted firmly at the centre of the universe. To be sure, there were trade routes and communication between distant places, but they were slow and immensely difficult. Nowadays we realize the earth is in motion, so that even when we stand very still, or lie flat on our backs, we are still riding on Spaceship Earth as it circulates around the sun and rotates on its axis. We have managed to travel to the moon, to land a rover called Curiosity on Mars, and to staff satellites that circle the planet, even as our science fiction writers routinely imagine travel to galaxies far, far away. And that's just the beginning. The horizon keeps expanding in increasing orders of magnitude, not only in our imaginations but in our mathematical calculations. According to contemporary physics, as we sail through space on Spaceship Earth (which is but a tiny speck of cosmic dust), everything in the universe is speeding away from us at an ever-increasing velocity, which will eventually result in an infinitely expanded, utterly expended, cold, dark and dead universe. That's the last stop.

In the end, we are all living in the midst of an explosion of unimaginable proportions. According to the physicists, the really big trip, the journey of all journeys, started fourteen billion years back at the Big Bang, when an unimaginably concentrated point of energy burst and began to expand explosively until, at some point in the future, the universe will reach the last station in entropic dissipation. That relativizes everything! It makes Kansas, Königsberg, our entire civilization, Spaceship Earth, our solar system purely local and transient phenomena. 'Provincial' on a cosmic scale. What good will fine words like Truth do us then? What we call

Truth will be like a day lily; here today and gone tomorrow. We will all have spoken dead languages and all our lives will have turned out to be dead ends.

In the long run, the really long one, what difference will it make where you're trying to get to this morning? This is a thoroughly paralysing thought if you let it get the better of you. If you dwell on it long enough, you'll find it hard to get out of bed in the morning to go anywhere. So it's clear I'm going to need all the help I can get if I want to stay on the move. To this end I will call upon Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), one of the great figures in the Enlightenment, who didn't know anything about our postmodern condition, but who said something enlightening for our times, something that will steer us around the choppy waters of absolutism and relativism. Lessing offers us some sage advice in terms of reducing our expectations and trimming our sails to the winds of space and time. He said that if God held out the truth in his right hand and the search for truth in his left hand and asked him to choose, he would select the left hand, on the grounds that the absolute truth itself was for God alone, while his own business was the search for truth.[3] On the face of it this looks like a huge missed opportunity. After all, how many times do we get an offer like that? It sounds like asking someone, would you rather ride a train for ever, never reaching your destination, or would you prefer to get where you are going? It makes no sense. The sum of Lessing's wisdom seems to be: spend your time running around and don't worry about getting anywhere. The man was obviously not worried about getting to work in the morning.

But let's get off the train and switch the analogy. Let's suppose it's the weekend and we have decided to follow our doctor's advice and go out to do some jogging, when some friends in a passing car offer us a ride to wherever we are going. It is a very kind offer, to be sure, but accepting it would

rather miss our purpose. We are not actually going anywhere. Or at least, it's the going that matters, not the destination. Now we see a little better what's on Lessing's mind. Truth, our philosopher is saying, is more like jogging, maybe not for God, but for the rest of us, who have to negotiate the challenges posed by getting around in space and time.

You don't have to actually believe in God to get Lessing's point. You can simply treat God as an ideal limit point, whether or not you think there really is a Divinity up there overseeing all this traffic down below. Although the local theologian will consider this an odd way to put it, it will serve the present purpose if we say that by God we mean the one being who does not need to worry about transportation. That is because God – at least this is what we are told – is everywhere. That means that God knows things full blast, everything, everywhere, and all at once. We sublunary beings down below, on the other hand, have to take our truths one at a time, depending on the where and the when (the language, culture, gender, body, etc.) in which we find ourselves. We are always 'situated', and that situation imposes a limit on us; but that limit also gives us an angle of entry, an approach, a perspective, an interpretation. God doesn't need an angle, but we do. Having an angle is the way truths open up for us mortals. The opposite of having an angle on things is a dumb look, just staring at things uncomprehendingly, like the look I've seen on the faces of students who cannot come up with an angle for their research papers. So Lessing is really saying that when it comes to truth, our job is to cultivate the art of interpretation, which is what philosophers nowadays call *hermeneutics*.

Originally, the word hermeneutics was a theological one, having to do with the interpretation of the Scriptures. But what we today mean by hermeneutics is a more general

theory, that every truth is a function of interpretation, and the need for interpretation is a function of being situated in a particular time and place, and therefore of having certain inherited presuppositions. This is something of which we have been made acutely aware by modern transportation and information systems, by virtue of which we are constantly being barraged by a multiplicity of perspectives. Whatever truth means for us – in our postmodern situation – is a function of hermeneutics, of learning to adjudicate; of dealing with difference judiciously.

This brings out something else about what Lessing was saying. Hermeneutics is based on the idea that there are truths big and small, some crucially important, others not so much, truths of different kinds, levels and purposes, all depending on our hermeneutic situation. Lessing was, as is the wont of philosophers, talking about a kind of long-term truth. He was not thinking about getting to his office in time for an appointment. His point was that in the long run, when it comes to truth, it's the seeking that matters, the earnestness of the search, the effort we put into it, the way we go about it, rather more than the conclusion. The journey is more important than the destination.

After all, as we have just seen, in the long run we're all dead. Sometimes we do need to get where we're going, and sometimes we'd rather not. Sometimes we need to get to our terminal and sometimes, as when the doctor pronounces this a terminal condition, we'd rather not. But then again, that was Lessing's point. We are finite creatures and we have to try to see how these multiple and competing truths can peacefully cohabit without throwing us into chaos. That means we have to try not to act like God, which is good advice in other situations as well (and which for some of us is surprisingly difficult). That means we should not lay claim to

One Big Truth and allow it to intimidate all the others. God might be able to pull that off, but we can't.

Hermeneutics is the art of negotiating multiple finite, lower-case truths, coping with the shifting tides and circumstances of truth while not allowing any eight-hundred-pound gorillas into the room. In the past, before the Enlightenment, the overweight primate was theology. In the Middle Ages (and not just then), if someone said, 'The Church teaches ...' that tended to reduce everyone in the room to silence. But if ever there were a candidate for a Big Truth nowadays, it is science. Science is our gorilla. Whenever anyone says, 'Science says ...' we tend to think the conversation is over. So we postmodern hermeneuts must be as bold as brass and be willing to stand up both to bishops and to physicists, or, to be more precise, to the way that some religious people misuse God, and Enlightenment types misuse physics. Even what the physicists call the 'Theory of Everything', the famous TOE, is but one theory. It is 'of' everything, of course, but it itself is not everything, since there is more to life than physics, and we need all kinds of theories.

Nonetheless, the big TOE raises a big problem which pits it against religion as a pretender to the throne previously occupied by religion. It also reveals an interesting comparison between religion and science. They both hold that over and beyond the everyday world we live in, the buzzing, blooming, noisy multicoloured world we experience, there lies the 'true' world, and consequently they are inclined to take each other on about which true world is *really* true. For the one, the true world is delivered by mathematics; for the other, it is delivered by Revelation. The contribution hermeneutics makes to this debate is that, when it comes to truth, there are many ways to be, and we have to keep an eye out for One Hegemonic Discourse (a bully) in the crowd who

claims to know it all and to be able to identify the True World. Whether confronted with theology or science, the trick is to remember Lessing's advice about not confusing ourselves with God. Physicists could very well come up with something to say about everything, and theologians might even get something right about God, but that doesn't make anyone God. It just gives them an angle, a slant, an interpretation, and we need all the angles we can take, as many ways to approach truth as possible, as many truths as possible without falling for the lure of something called Truth, capitalized and in the singular, or suffering the illusion that it is we who get to tell truth what to do.

As I will try to show in what follows, the task of a hermeneutic or postmodern theory of truth is to stay on track with the chaosmic play of multiple and competing interpretations of the world. 'Truth claims' come flying at us from all directions – science, ethics, politics, art and religion – and we need to be able to dodge speeding taxis and to deal with all the complexity and confusion of postmodern traffic. The art is to stay on the move with the moving, which is the peculiarly postmodern accent we put on what the ancients called wisdom (*sophia*), of which they professed to be lovers (*philia*) – and on this point we postmoderns also want to be as wise as the ancients, which (as I will show) demands an idea of truth that is nimble on its feet. If truth, as Nietzsche said, is a mobile army of metaphors, we hermeneuts march behind a flag that reads '*Mutatis Mutandis*' (we need a Latin motto), 'changing with the changed'. Hermeneutics is cut out to fit this high-tech world of instant messages flying and twittering all around the globe like little postmodern angels (*angelos*, messenger) and of postmodern travellers rushing hither and yon, in planes, trains and automobiles (eventually, perhaps, in space ships), with global positioning systems at the ready (eventually, perhaps, implanted in their brains). Whither we

Ship of Fools

Let's start with fools, which no one wants to be. I said before when discussing Lessing's thesis that there is no need to actually believe in God in order to get his point. Just think of God as a kind of limit-case, the sort of being that does not require a means of transportation. To get an idea of how much things have changed, consider that there was a time, not so long ago, when I would have not got away with talking about God so glibly. The fact that I can gives us an idea of how much our idea of truth has shifted. Life before modern times was nicely summed up by a line in the Scriptures, which runs, 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." ' (Psalm 14:1). They did not speak of atheists – that very word acquires currency only in modernity – but of 'foolishness'. To take God so lightly, or to cut yourself off from God altogether, not to seek after God, was to cut yourself off from truth and goodness and beauty, and that was unwise in the extreme. Notice that the psalmist says 'foolish', not 'irrational'. What's the difference? The opposite of foolishness is 'wisdom', whereas the opposite of irrational is 'rational', and the ancients were more concerned with being wise than rational. Make no mistake. There was a flourishing business called 'reason' in Greek (*logos*) and medieval (*ratio*) times, so much indeed that it got under the skin of Martin Luther in Germany, who wondered what had happened to faith, which is what precipitated the Reformation. In fact, the reason all our academic degrees come in Latin is the flowering of learning in the thirteenth century which invented the prototype of the modern university, which explains why everybody who gets a PhD (*philosophiae doctor*) dons the title 'philosopher'. Greek and medieval thinkers were not against reason by any means, but they had integrated reason into a wider and richer concept, wisdom. Later on, during the Enlightenment, so my argument goes, being rational acquired

pride of place, which forced being wise to take a back seat. In the version of postmodernism I am advancing – there are, predictably, many, as I will explain – this move was unwise.

But what is wisdom? Wisdom, the Greeks said, is the love of the highest things, all of them, the true, the good and the beautiful. It includes reason without stopping at reason; it includes truth but it does not reduce truth to that which is established by reason, and it does not exclude the good or the beautiful from the true. The true, the good and the beautiful hang together. Socrates made a mountain of trouble for himself by troubling his fellow citizens to give good reasons and arguments for the choices they made in life, and for the things they held dear – which pretty much kicked off the tradition we call 'philosophy' – and Aristotle came up with the classical definition of human beings as rational animals. His works, like those of Plato and the medieval theologians, were famously full of arguments and reasons. But the Greeks never lost sight of wisdom, of a fuller understanding that proceeded from a wider and richer sense of life as a unified whole. After all, we cannot prove everything, and even proofs have to start somewhere, with a premise that is taken to be simply known or evident. It is a mark of an educated person, Aristotle said, not to argue about everything – a bit of advice that came too late for Socrates, who was put to death by his fellow Athenians for all the trouble his nettlesome questions caused. Wisdom included insight and intuition as well as definitions and arguments (the true); it included action, living well, ethical and political wisdom (the good), not just professorial knowledge; and it included Plato's idea that a life surrounded by beautiful things promotes the beauty of the soul (the beautiful).

The person who managed to put all this together, who 'had it all' in classical times, who led the good life, who was a model for the rest of us, was said to be 'wise', as opposed to

'rational' (or rich and famous). It is very important to see that such a person did not pretend to know it all. On the contrary, being wise especially meant having a healthy respect for everything we do not know (a Greek wise man would never have been able to host a TV talk show). So in reality the ancients did not say such people were 'wise' so much as that they *sought* wisdom, or had a love (*philia*) of wisdom; in short, they were philosophers. A philosopher is one who searches for the highest things, of which the true and the good and the beautiful were deemed the very highest. Wisdom means the love of all of these highest things knit together in an integrated form of life, where each thing was cultivated in due proportion. Wisdom is the whole ball of philosophical wax.

You can see that in antiquity, philosophy, the search for the highest things, did not mean an academic specialty housed on the local university campus. It meant a form of life, the very model of living well, knowledge linked with action (ethics and politics) and passion (*philia*, *eros*) and a sensibility finely attuned to life's joys. Our special task in this book is to single out the place of truth in leading a wise life, the sense that truth must have if we are to be wise, today, in our postmodern condition. But remember that everything we say about the true could also be said about the good and the beautiful, because wisdom requires that the three hang together. The lovers of wisdom can adapt the wise saying of the American revolutionaries against their king in England: if we don't hang together, we will all hang separately. The wise know that truth and goodness and beauty are inseparably unified, and on this point we postmodernists think it wise to follow the ancients, who were far ahead of us all in this regard.

As opposed to a 'fool'. A fool is someone who chooses badly, whose life falls out of proportion. A fool puts pleasure before

honour, riches before virtue, just the way nowadays musicians and movie stars can squander a ton of talent on drink and drugs. Why let a passing pleasure undermine your honour, your gifts, your life? That would be folly. Alternatively, a fool seeks a good thing but excessively, to the neglect of the whole, in a disproportionate way, so that it runs wild over the rest of his life, like people who strive for success in their business – which can be a good thing – but in so single-minded a way that it destroys their health or family life, which is unwise. When Nietzsche dared to criticize Socrates, who is considered pretty much the patron saint and martyr of philosophy, he criticized him on just this point, that Socrates' love of definitions and arguments was disproportionate, that he let his love of reasoning overrun everything else and failed to take into account that there are certain things for which we do not need definitions and cannot give reasoned arguments. We 'know' them in other ways. Fools act unwisely, let themselves be blinded by particular things and lose sight of the integrity of the whole, of the good life, of living 'in the truth', where the true, the good and the beautiful commingle and serve as the encompassing elements in which human life flourishes, like the air we breathe and the ground on which we stand. Nietzsche's criticism is also prophetic, because it is pretty much the same complaint that postmodern philosophers make about the Enlightenment.

In the Middle Ages, it is said, the West went to church. The highest philosophical ideals inherited from the Greeks (truth, goodness and beauty) were taken to be united in and realized to perfection in the God of the Bible. This led to a flourishing of philosophy (the search for the highest things) in concert with theology (the search for God) in great centres of learning scattered across the ancient and medieval world, in all three religions of the Book – Jewish, Christian and Islamic.

The search for wisdom is the search for God, as the psalmist says. God is not simply good or true or beautiful, but is infinite beauty, goodness and truth itself all wrapped up in one. Everything else that is good or true or beautiful is so by virtue of having been created by God and of imitating God's being, like so many reflections in a mirror. Not to seek God, to turn away from God, was to turn away from the highest things, to cut off our being from its root and source, which is the height (or the depth) of foolishness. God is like the sun, the very element in which we live and move and breathe, towards which all living things turn in a kind of heliotropism of truth, and from which they turn away at the cost of their life.

St Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo, the most influential theologian in the history of Christianity and about whom you will hear more as we go along, provides an especially good example of this. Of all his memorable sayings, none is more memorable than the beginning of the *Confessions* in which he says, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts will not rest until they rest in You.'[4] Augustine characterizes human life in terms of a search, which he calls our 'restless heart' (*cor inquietum*), where the 'heart' means the seat of our love and desire, including our love or passion or desire for truth. Augustine conceived human life as a tremendous journey set in motion by an ever restless desire or love, which nothing here on earth could satisfy. To be human means to be *homo viator*, a wayfarer, on the way to God, which St Bonaventure (1218–74) described as the *itinerarium mentis ad deum*, the heart's journey towards God. Every finite (earthly) good is fragile, impermanent and imperfect, and so is worthy of only so much love. We never find anything (on earth) that can really fill the longing of our hearts, or be worthy of unconditional love. As anyone who has ever invested in the stock market can attest, no sooner

promoted the growth of a literate middle class in the countries that embraced Protestantism, which were primed for the subsequent growth of industry and commercial life, while Catholic countries put themselves at a disadvantage, always threatening to break down into a divide between a literate Latinate clergy and a predominantly illiterate laity (or else, as in France, to be torn with strife between a Catholic monarchy and the leading Enlightenment thinkers).

But all this freedom came at a cost – the cost of truth and wisdom. Reason broke loose from wisdom and, in classical terms, reason ultimately became foolish while truth lost its reach and range and allure. Reason acquired a life of its own, quite out of proportion with everything else, which was pretty much the criticism that Nietzsche made of Socrates. Nietzsche, who did not mince words, said Socratic reason was a 'monster'; that it suffered from an excessive and uncontrolled growth of one part at the expense of the whole. But what difference, we might ask, does it make if we sign off on things on the basis of rationality rather than of wisdom or truth?

The short answer is that once rationality takes over, a profound inversion takes place: truth ceases to be a claim made upon us, and becomes a claim we make on behalf of our assertions. That is, the much-vaunted 'autonomous individual' of modernity makes its first appearance, as the author of true assertions, while truth ceases to be the sun, an all-encompassing horizon in which we live, something that inspires love and desire. In modernity the faculty of reason began to function like a high court before which everything else had to appear in order to be judged rational or real as opposed to irrational or illusory or even mad. Reason judges whether claims are true or not, just like a judge would. In the place of the sun of truth in which all things bask, modernity

reason defined itself by the exclusion of faith. Once again, the distinction between faith and reason was already drawn in the Middle Ages, but in modernity it grew horns and teeth. It devolved into an opposition quite unlike anything previously known. In the high Middle Ages, religious people sought to understand their faith ('*fides quaerens intellectum*', 'faith seeking understanding'). They wanted to give a reason for the faith that was in them, and so they sought to integrate faith and reason into the unity of wisdom. But modernists don't like mixing things together like that. So the distinction between faith and reason became a dichotomy, which presented modernity with a special problem. Religion constituted (this is also part of my line) the single greatest and most symptomatic problem modernity had to deal with, which is why, later on, Karl Marx said that the critique of religion is the model of all critique and its first order of business.

I am not saying religious wars were not always a problem, long before modernity. But the peculiarly modern problem was brought on by the low tolerance that religion showed for the new sciences – the powers that be in the Church have always had a nose for what they call trouble and everybody else calls progress – and they made every effort to suppress scientific enquiry, which lay at the heart of the Enlightenment project. That meant another kind of religious war broke out, a war over truth, and these truth wars continue to flare up in a deadly way today. Having hitherto enjoyed pride of place in the Middle Ages (and while continuing to flourish in the lives of the faithful in modernity), religion now had to face the altered conditions of modern life even as modernity had to decide what to do with religion. Religion and scientific reason squared off. Again, I am not saying this is all bad, because it means a literate laity started reading and writing and talking back to a previously

another with analytic clarity. Instead of the unity of the true, the good and the beautiful we saw in antiquity, the categories run in separate orders without interfering one with the other. Neat, clear, tidy, well defined, orderly, methodical, certain, unambiguous – a place for everything and everything in its place, all the trains running on time; that's modernity's ideal, and that's exactly what postmodern thinking tries to disabuse us of by raising our tolerance for a certain optimal ambiguity.

On the back of modernity's separation of truth and religion, another crucial set of categories was created to make it all work: 'public' and 'private' were rushed into service to deal with the crisis of religion. Religion, modernity said, is a private matter. This was momentous, unprecedented, world-changing, the most radical breach in the history of truth the West has ever known (this may not be an exaggeration!). It is as if the moderns reached up and pulled God down out of the sky, as if they wiped away the horizon, dried up the ocean and stopped the sun in its tracks. Religion became a matter of individual preferences, of what we do with our personal time, while its role in public life was to be carefully monitored. This had never been the case before. Richard Rorty liked to say religion was for weekends but we have to keep it out of the work week, which is what Kierkegaard (one of our postmodern prophets) was complaining about under the name of 'everyday' Christianity, which he wrote off as a sham (more on this later). Such an idea of the divine would have dumbfounded the ancients. In fact when Socrates started to raise questions about the gods, it wasn't just that the people of Athens were tired of him bothering them in the streets which got him into trouble; they also feared he was bothering Athena, the divine Protectress of Athens. His dallying with reason was taken as dallying with treason, with betraying and endangering the *polis*. In the classical world, the gods were consolidated into social life and people were consolidated

off to some wider phenomenon occurring throughout the ecosystem. So, with all due respect to my religious friends, I think of religion as my frogs. Every time a serious question about truth arises, the clue to seeing what is going on is to look at what is being said about religion.

One big reason an expression like 'loving the truth' today sounds like empty rhetoric is tied up in the fact that we have evacuated truth from religion. If we can get a fix on both the advantages and drawbacks of the way the moderns treat and mistreat religion, we will have an angle on the whole problem posed by modernity and the circumscribed and truncated fate of wisdom in the modern world. Interestingly, religion is a hybrid phenomenon, in which elements of knowledge (the true), ethics (the good) and art (the beautiful) converge, in which all three components of wisdom are fused in one composite, which explains why it provides a clue to what is going on in the broader culture. I am arguing that what we say about religion is repeated in other areas like art and ethics, in everything that goes to make up our wider conception of life. My hypothesis is that religion is a clue to the travels and travails of truth, not the truth of assertions,[6] but truth as a thing to love, to live and to die for, as Kierkegaard put it.

I am trying to stage a comeback for the old idea of truth and wisdom but now wearing a postmodern hat. The challenge is finding a postmodern counterpart to the role played by truth and wisdom in classical times that is not going to drag us under the waves of the divine right of kings and the old menace of theocracy. We cannot become premodern and we do not even want to be. Nobody wants to give up freedom of speech, of assembly, of religion, and I, for one, am not giving up air-conditioning. But the modern solution of tolerance to the problem of religious truth is phoney, contrived, an artifice, a tissue of abstractions and