

EXAMPLES OF SUPERIOR THINK PIECES

note: I have given you five examples. They come from several different classes.

EXAMPLE 1

What are the effects of memory on experience?

Memories are the flicker of a moment gone by. They are shadows of what has happened before, often bigger or smaller than the event itself and yet truly convincing of the reality of their deceptive forms. A memory can affect point-of-view, attitude, and a number of other psychologically significant variables but what encompasses all of these is the idea that memory has a direct effect on experience, whatever it may be. These effects are not only real but are also essential to the developing human person.

Experience is not just the perception of what is going on in this case but more notably what humans *feel* is going on. As Freud wrote it is no easy task to deal with matters of emotion in a scientific way (36, *Civilization and its Discontents*) and so the topic of experience, this mystical and poignant occurrence or occurrences in a person's life, must be dealt with in a completely subjective manner and interpreted thusly. The intensity that stems from experience is a direct result of the individual account of that experience whether outrightly religious or not. There are two times that experience occurs: the past and the present. The present is a time of consciousness. It is a time when the individual has an awareness of the moment-to-moment activities occurring in both the internal and external environment and is largely impacted by culture. The past is a time of memory (127, Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*). Often embellished and melodramatic or full of holes and lacking crucial information, memory affects the way humans reflect on life and on experiences. Memory also influences the ways humans experience the "now." The present is therefore fairly dependent on the past; consciousness is fairly dependent on memory.

his memories as if they were new events in his life. In this case his past and present coincide creating a crisis of experience in his mind. Through his trials he realizes that his memories are sacred and they are what he holds as truth in a world that is otherwise meaningless for him. Though his memories are ultimately erased some glimmer of them remains allowing him to experience Clementine in the same way he did with the memories fully in place. Both experiences, though not religious in nature, hold that “otherness” which makes religious and mystical experiences so awesome. It holds true that “in one sense at least the personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism” (33, James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*). His memories, these sacred pieces of his life, allow him a sort of extra awareness about the past, the present, and ultimately what the future holds for him based on what has already been.

Memory is the cornerstone of experience. It makes real that which has already passed and instills meaning into that which, under other circumstances, may have had none. Experience of the past and in the past is when meaning is given. Significance is almost never attributed in the moment of first experiencing because judgment must come after the fact and not before or during. If experience is to be thought of as a mystical occurrence then memory is the bridge between the intuitive and the sentiment. Memories are where the two are reconciled and where experience gets its power.

EXAMPLE 2

What are Humpty Dumpty's ultimate presuppositions? Does answering that question clarify how the term "religion" works in contemporary discourse?

Firstly, it should be clarified that Humpty Dumpty, in his discourse with Alice, ultimately has only ONE presupposition, for "directly and immediately, any given question involves *one presupposition and only one*, namely, that from which it directly and immediately 'arises'" (25, RG Collingwood *An Essay on Metaphysics*). A presupposition is an assumption that leads one to question a certain phenomenon. In this case, Humpty Dumpty's ultimate presupposition is that words mean only that which the author or speaker of the words intended them to mean, nothing more and nothing less. By raising this presupposition, Humpty Dumpty then leads us directly to the question "what does the word mean?" depending on what word we wish to be discussing at any given time. In this case, we will discuss the term "religion" and ask, "what does the word *religion* mean?" with respect to Humpty Dumpty's stated presupposition.

Humpty Dumpty's presupposition is not a novel one. In fact, many academics make it their life work to introduce new topics based upon a definition of a word that has never been considered before. From these "new" definitions, we are taught axioms, theorems, and postulates that can only arise with the acceptance of the specific definition of the word given to us. This practice of nominalization (the process of naming) was first introduced by the ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and others, especially Euclid. They devoted countless hours to establishing definitions of words that they found to be "true knowledge" and from which sprang many of the truths that we hold as infallible today (for instance: A triangle is a three-sided, three-angled closed shape. Henceforth, every triangle must have 180 degrees.) The difference between Aristotle and Humpty Dumpty is that Aristotle rejected the idea that one could define anything how he or she wished. Aristotle was only concerned with true knowledge, and would therefore reject Humpty Dumpty's assertion that words mean only that which the author intended them to mean and can henceforth have countless definitions.

The power of Humpty Dumpty's claim, however, has been far reaching, regardless of its truth. Paul Bovens. In his article on "Discourse" describes the effects of a group of New Critics collectively defining the term "discourse" in terms of their own views concerning genre, poetry, and the like. Their definition was "functional," meaning it served a specific advantageous purpose for those who arrived at the definition. Specifically, according to Bovens, this new definition "helped transform their real historical experiences of concrete political and cultural deprivation into a conservative expression of their mythic desire to recover a lost origin, a supposed premodern state of innocence best named by TS Eliot as "an undissociated sensibility" (45, Paul Bovens

"Discourse"). In accordance with Humpty Dumpty's presupposition, the New Critics showed the literary world that "key terms are finally more important for their function, for their place within intellectual practices, than they are for what they may be said to "mean" in the abstract" (45, Paul Bovin, "Discourse").

With Humpty Dumpty's presupposition and the New Critics functional definitions in mind, let us now turn to the term "religion" and clarify how this term is used in contemporary discourse. What does the word "religion" mean? Most religion classes do not seek to define the term. Most religionists cannot define the term. Why is it that those who work closest to religion cannot seem to pinpoint or agree upon a definition of this term? This word religion has fallen victim to academics who use Humpty Dumpty's presupposition and the New Critics methods of argument. The term religion has been for centuries defined by those who study it, practice it, talk about it, and write books on it as that which will help them to organize a field of knowledge, "discipline the judgement, and thereby the response of students and teachers" (45 Paul Bovin, "Discourse"). By defining the term "religion" in a functional way to suit their needs, those academics have tapped a source of power that have effects upon the actions of others. When Billy Graham defines religion as the Almighty God tugging at your soul, pulling you toward himself to love Him and serve Him, those who listen to Billy Graham and heed his definition will mold their lives according to this definition, will "feel" the force of religion in their hearts and will claim that this is the "true" definition of religion. But Billy Graham defined the term "religion" in that particular way to serve a purpose. Some critics of religious practices define "religion" as the attempt of some mortals to find a connection with the supernatural, to find significance and order in this world full of chaos. Each person who defines religion is not necessarily trying to get at what the *essence* or *aretē* of religion, rather they are capitalizing on the presupposition that has become very popular in modern discourse that words mean only that which the author intended them to mean. This presupposition serves as a factor to limit the scope of discussion concerning a topic like religion. Humpty Dumpty's presupposition begs the question "what does the word mean?" and in terms of the word "religion" this presupposition has led to infinite discussions and arguments and persuasive speeches and sermons and critiques. Our job is to wade through the myriad documents purporting to define religion and determine which of those seek to define the abstract concept of religion or simply wish to create their own personal definition of the term for a functional purpose.

EXAMPLE 3

I would want to live my life according to the precepts of Proverbs in as much as I would want to live my live my life according to the precepts of my longtime friend Dr. Laura Schl^essinger. While at first glance/listen both appear to laudably endorse (for the most part) agreed upon socially sanctioned truths for (at least) the good and (at best) the Godly life, upon spending further time with both they in fact reveal little more than an obnoxiously pious and authoritarian attitude, in the long run serving no ones best interest but their own. “Hear *my* instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the man *who listens to me* . . . For he who find me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; *but he who misses me injures himself; all who hate me love death.*” This quote from Proverbs 8.33-36 pretty much sums up why I dislike this text. I’ve taken the liberty of italicizing the particularly offensive parts and I will explain why.

For one, this entire quote reinforces a locative world vision grounded in unrealistic dualities. You are either righteous or wicked. Wise or foolish. Rewarded or punished. And, secondly, as the world is so unnaturally cut up, of course, it requires authoritative knowledge to be correctly navigated. I’m not trying to imply that we all don’t need a little help in figuring life out, but is it really very productive or healthy to use threats of death, destruction, and casting out of the community to get one to pay attention and listen? Further, the firm insistence on listening to this specific message, even to the point of ignoring the prescribed counsel (“A prudent man conceals his knowledge, but fools proclaim their folly.” 12.23), makes me suspicious of what “*me*”’s

position is and what “*me*” has to gain in all of this. For example, by only listening to Dr. Laura, we know that not only her ego inflates but so does the cost of her advertisements, the sales of her books, and her bank account. And lastly, in only listening to “*me*”, we are only provided one set of tools. I much prefer the Little Prince’s technique of asking a lot of questions to a lot of different people, developing a fullness in his own wisdom.

Which is also why I prefer the message of Ecclesiastes. For Dr. Laura is to Proverbs as my classmate Shannon is to Ecclesiastes. Unlike Dr. Laura and the “*me*” of Proverbs for who life is dualistically and cosmically meaningful, Shannon and the author of this text express a much more nihilistic position (“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” 1.2b) which allows for wisdom to be found in the grays of reality, in the lived in experiences of one who has “tested” “all the things that men say” (7.23 and 7.21).

“I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness which is madness.” (7.25) So where Proverbs advocates gaining wisdom by listening to those at the top of a hierarchical system of belief (“do not rely on your own insight” 3.5b), in Ecclesiastes the author sets the example of one who trusts the process of his own mind, allowing himself, like the Little Prince, to actively seek out wisdom: “walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes” (11.9b). Further, where wisdom is one sided in Proverbs, here it is a summation of experience, allowing for learning through discernment, instead of through dogmas: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (3.1). For after all, “there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (7.20).

This being the case, Shannon and I will “go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart” (9.7a) while Dr. Laura, in “the babbling of a fool, brings ruin near” (Proverbs 10.14).

EXAMPLE 4

My father was--or rather still is-- a Christian Scientist. I went to church with him from an early age, and I still go with him from time to time, because it makes him happy. But I've always had severe frustrations with the religion--frustrations which I was reminded of when reading Nagarjuna.

Christian science, without going too far into it, distinguishes between the spiritual world-- which is, for them, the important one, and the material world, described as "mortal error." The Christian scientist sees the world in front of us as merely representative, as a creation of the mortal human mind. All the negatives associated with it--sickness, pain, death--and all the explanations of it, including science, are seen as a finite, mortal way to explain the illusory world that surrounds us. When you hear that Christian Scientists don't go to doctors, what it really means (to them, at least) is that a medical way of solving a problem is, in strict Christian Science, just fixing the bodies that exist in the world we mistake for reality. Understanding of the body, of science, or anything else that relates only to the "material" world is ultimately futile, because the world it explains isn't an important one, isn't the real one--it is the erroneous, material representation of reality, not reality itself.

As I read Nagarjuna, I couldn't help but be reminded of my old frustrations with Christian Science, which I felt had *part* of the understanding--the duality between the ultimate and the conventional (I am using these terms loosely, but let me have my fun), but completely missed the relationship between the two, a relationship that is explained very elegantly in Nagarjuna's philosophy. For him, the conventional and the ultimate are part of the same thing: a table is dependently arisen and thus conventionally existent, yet empty, because it is

independently arisen and has no essence. An object can be existent, yet essenceless, and therefore empty. So the existence of the “material” world is not denied, but our understanding of it is framed by our understanding of its capacity to change, because Nagarjuna’s philosophy really only seeks to place things in a perspective that suits our intuitive understanding of it. (Which is obviously that things can change: suffering can begin and end, etc.) But in comparing the two, it’s hard for me to see how Christian Science has other than a nihilistic position, at least in these terms. It certainly doesn’t make an essentialist argument, because the only thing that a Christian Scientist could be counted on to say has essence is a person, and I think that Nagarjuna, too, ^{OF COURSE HE WOULD! AGREE!} would not argue that people are empty. Christian Science argues for the error of the material world and for human understanding to transcend its terms. Is this not some form of nihilism? For when one admits that the material world is erroneous, how can one allocate any importance to it? Nagarjuna’s philosophy gets around this problem by seeing the material (or phenomenological) world as empty, not erroneous, and therefore still allocates a conventional importance to it. EXAMPLE 5

But both philosophies make arguments dependent on a rather cumbersome premise. Nagarjuna’s arguments end at the wall of Buddhism: he proves that one cannot logically be a nihilist or an essentialist while still remaining a Buddhist. Christian Science, too, has a similar crutch: the belief in God. All logical refutations to the philosophy of Christian Science can (and will, in my experience) end in a disagreement about the existence of God. It is the belief in an almighty that allows Christian Science to see the material world as erroneous, allocate almost no importance to it, and firmly believe in a “spiritual world” that one may someday understand. But here, still, Nagarjuna’s philosophy is more versatile, because the four noble truths his arguments are dependent upon don’t require the kind of leap that belief in God does. Suffering exists, suffering can end, desire is the cause of suffering: at least it’s intuitive, which for me, belief in God (and (you guessed it) Christian Science) are not.

EXAMPLE 5

Does Phil Connors' Ritual Experience Render Him the Unhappiest Man?

In Eliade's terms, ritual uses bodily action within the profane realm to create sacred time and space. This action "recenters" participants in a cyclical conception of time, where time "waxes and wanes," and "can grow and decay, and must be regenerated" through repeated ritual (Zeusse 0113). This repeated return to sacred time is essential to meaningful life for the religious human. Phil Connors' experience certainly fits this understanding of ritual: his perpetual experience of Groundhog Day marks a time which is separate (though perhaps he does not always consider it sacred) from normal linear time. But his experience also fits another paradigm, that of Kierkegaard's "unhappiest man" (0135). This presents a contradiction: if ritual is essential to a meaningful life, why does Phil's ritual experience result in unhappiness? To reconcile this conflict, I argue that ritual only leads to unhappiness when it becomes a lone entity, when ritual actions lose their connection with the purpose they serve. Kierkegaard describes the unhappiest person in somewhat paradoxical terms. The unhappiest person hopes constantly for something which is already in memory, and remembers constantly that for which they¹ hope. "He does not live in the future, for the future has already been experienced; he does not live in the past, for the past has not yet come" (Kierkegaard 0140). Kierkegaard's unhappiest person is without a meaningful sense of time, and is frustrated by any attempt to create such a sense: "he cannot die, for he has not really lived; in another sense he cannot live, for he is already dead" (0140). The unhappiest person has no choice but to live in an inherently unsettled situation, where they are so conflicted that even the relief of death is denied them.

Phil's initial experience of time is similar because his ritual has no relation to any broader purpose. Unlike James' explanation of ritual, Phil's repetition of Groundhog Day does not address any perceived "accidents... felt to be... overwhelmingly present and powerful" (0130). When leopards unexpectedly enter the temple, James sees the resulting ritual as "a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things" (James 0130). From Phil's perspective, however, the repeated events of Groundhog Day serve no immediate purpose; he has no ideal conception of how things "ought to be" and cannot pinpoint his frustration with "the way things are" (James 0130). With no sense of purpose outside of his ritual context, Phil can think of nothing more fulfilling to do than to steal money and seduce women. Without a meaningful link between his daily cycle and a broader goal, Phil is separated from his memories of the past and meaningful hopes for the future. Facing this emptiness, he eventually develops an unattainable death wish, directly living out Kierkegaard's hypothetical state of ultimate unhappiness: "he cannot die, for he has not really lived" (0140). Until he gains an understanding of the end (deserving Rita's love) to which his ritual experience is a means, Phil is lost in the confusing and paradoxical state of the unhappiest person.

Fortunately for proponents of ritual, Phil's experience does not remain an

¹ I know using "they" and "their" as gender-neutral terms is traditionally not considered proper grammar, but I see no reason why those words shouldn't replace our inconvenient "s/he" and "his/her". Grammar rules constantly evolve, and in my opinion this particular mutation makes sense.

unhappy one. As he transitions from the self-centered early stage to the benevolent, communitarian stage (the turning point perhaps being the death of the homeless man), he discovers a meaning for his ritual action. In determining that he "ought to be" able to deserve Rita's love, he gains a link between his ritual experience of time and a purpose which that experience may serve (James 0130). In Kierkegaard's framework, he gains something real to hope for which exists outside the realm of the ritual itself. This hope extends beyond the ritual actions of a single day, but allows him to work within the context of a single repeated day to achieve it. His ritual accomplishment of good deeds is similar to the bear ritual which James describes. Like the hunters who use a festival in which "all of the variables have been controlled" to simulate "a perfect hunt," Phil takes advantage of his controlled environment to rack up a list of good deeds he could never had accomplished experiencing Groundhog Day for the first time (James 0131). With a hope that can be achieved through ritual action, the Phil Connors that falls asleep on the night before Feb. 3 can no longer be considered the unhappiest man.

It is not the very nature of ritual, then, that renders Phil Connors the "unhappiest man," but rather the imposition of ritual without an understanding of the ritual's purpose. When put this way, the claim can be illustrated in our current context. Though Valentine's Day was created as a ritual to celebrate and express mutual love (its corporate roots notwithstanding), the holiday's traditions take on a significance independent of their original purpose when loved ones expect flowers or chocolates for the sake of the gifts alone. In taking the ritual of Valentine's Day as an end in itself instead of a means for expressing love, people lose sight of what matters and see it as a burden instead of a blessing. As couples can escape the stresses of mandatory affection by regaining a sense of Valentine's Day's purpose, so too is Phil able to escape the perpetual Groundhog Day by tapping into the ritual's underlying meaning.

EXAMPLE 6

Functioning as a (if not the) primary work in regards to the bodhisattva path, the Lotus Sutra provides anecdotes, guidelines, parables, and a plethora of proverbs to aid the bodhisattva on his or her path to enlightenment. Chapter XIV of the sutra is titled “Ease in Practice,” and provides a type of conduct code to be rigidly followed in order to ensure that the Dharma be spread in “ease.” However, it seems almost oxymoronic to describe strict guidelines as a path to “ease.” Hence, it is necessary to ask what is meant by “ease in practice” and how do the specific guidelines for such as described in Chapter XIV interact with the principles of the Dharma in relation to both the expounder and the hearer? The clear conveyance of the Dharma is crucial to its success as a didactic vehicle, and the transference of its information must be made easily, and clearly in order to have a profound effect. For a bodhisattva, both expounding and practicing the Dharma are ultimately the same concept as the bodhisattva cannot preach what he has yet to understand or practice. Therefore, “ease of practice” refers to three different experiences of the Dharma, (1) the ability of the hearer to understand the Dharma, (2) the didactic instruction of the Dharma, and (3) the personal Dharma practice of the bodhisattva. The combination of these three elements under the umbrella of “ease of practice” aides one in comprehending the dynamic nature of Buddhism as a religion based on interconnection.

Stipulating the definition of “ease” in this context as a clear understanding of the Dharma, both the hearer and expounder can only practice the Dharma in “ease,” because not doing so would suggest that neither expounder nor hearer understands that which he/she practices. Regarding the experience of the hearer, the bodhisattva must make certain to portray the Dharma in such a way that the understanding of the Dharma is the central focus of instruction. The concept of clearly articulating the Dharma is explained in Chapter XIV, “[A bodhisattva] should teach the Dharma equally to all sentient beings in accordance with the Dharma, explaining neither too much nor too little. Nor should he teach too much to even those who are deeply enthusiastic about hearing the Dharma,” (209). Here, it is evident that every bodhisattva should be aware of the ability of the hearer to comprehend the Dharma and aid the “ease” of his or her understanding through teaching methods tailored to each individual hearer. The sutra addresses the issue of those who are “enthusiastic about hearing the Dharma,” and makes a point of reiterating the importance moderation concerning the Dharma. Essentially, when it comes to the experience of the hearer, the bodhisattva must naturally exercise discretion while instructing the Dharma; this will create ease for both the hearer (who has enough information to make sense of the Dharma) and the expounder (who neither has to struggle with questions of confusing or overwhelmed students).

Key to ease of the hearer’s ability to understand the Dharma is the bodhisattva’s ease in instruction of the Dharma. Before the bodhisattva can know how to best explain the Dharma to a hearer, the bodhisattva himself must understand that what he is teaching and to whom it should be taught. The sutra explains that the instruction of the Dharma must convey the principle of limitlessness and honor ultimate truth, “The bodhisattva mahasattvas perceive the emptiness of all dharmas in their true aspect...They do not

have any name or mark, and in reality they have no substance. They are limitless, without obstacles or obstructions,” (204). Furthermore, the honest and true instruction of the Dharma must be taught to all sentient beings, “[The bodhisattva] should not practice/ The superior, mediocre or inferior teachings,/ The conditioned and the unconditioned,/ Or the teaching of the real and the unreal./ Nor should he discriminate/ Between men and women,” (204). Ergo, ease of instruction requires that a bodhisattva teach the Dharma to all who are able to hear it, without superficial discrimination, and does so in a manner that does not employ any other instruction than that of the true Dharma.

The discussion of ease of practice cannot be complete without the personal Dharma practice of the bodhisattva himself. Both the ease of instruction and the ease of the understanding of the hearer greatly depend on the motives and virtuosity of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva must not use the Dharma for any sort of personal gain, “The bodhisattva mahasattva should expound the teaching without any thought of desire for, or wish to see, a woman’s body;” (202) the bodhisattva cannot expound the Dharma if he himself does not act in accordance with it. The sutra goes on to state, “Those who practice wholeheartedly and at ease/ Will be honored by innumerable sentient beings,” (210) elucidating that the bodhisattva’s “wholehearted” practice of the Dharma is the only way to aid others on the path to enlightenment and hence the only way to truly be a bodhisattva. The instruction of the Dharma and the experience of the hearer both depend upon the overall ease of Buddhist principles: the Dharma and the bodhisattva are one, and the ease of one is the ease of the other.

Though the “ease of practice,” as described in the Lotus Sutra, may seem overwhelming and a bit strict at first glance, the principles of ease can be condensed to “be what you say”. So, after all, if a bodhisattva truly is a practitioner of the Dharma, all he has to do is take it easy, and be himself and the Dharma.