

A few suggestions for living well in cynical times

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Let me start with a little story by Bertolt Brecht:

A man asked Mr. K. whether there is a God. Mr. K. said: "I advise you to consider whether, depending on the answer, your behavior would change. If it would not change, then we can drop the question. If it would change, then I can at least be of help to you to the extent that I can say, you have already decided: you need a God. (Brecht, 14)

The story is not really about the existence of God. It is about the way we talk with others—what we think we want to know about, and what we know we don't want to think about. It is also about the way certain kinds of questions solicit certain kinds of answers, and how, faced with empty questions that flatter us into thinking that what we might say would really matter, it is better not to answer at all.

Mr. K. seems to call the man's bluff—but the point of the story is that the man does not think he is asking a trick question. He is just as sincere as he can be. That is why this is a story about cynicism—or rather, about one of the faces of cynicism, the apparently-open, apparently-honest everyday kind of cynicism that prearranges every conversation, every encounter, according to what we think we already know, and so never really let ourselves think about at all.

"Everybody knows" that cynicism is a fundamental fact of life these days—and that it exactly the problem. It is hard to talk about what everybody knows. To respond to today's rampant cynicism, we have to learn to call its bluff, in all its many guises. And so I'd like to make four suggestions that might help to promote a non-cynical life.

Here's the first: Don't have opinions. It is a bad way of holding on to what you know, and an obstacle to learning anything new.

A conversation between two people who "have opinions" merely consists of discovering the ways in which each person won't change, no matter what the other person says. Sometimes, one or both of them might decide to change their opinions, but as the Brecht story suggests, that's beside the point. The problem has to do with the way people hold their opinions—how they hold themselves when they have an opinion—and with the idea that it's necessary to be opinionated in order to talk with others, in order to hold your own and settle your differences. To be opinionated is a fundamental attitude, no matter what the particular belief might be, or whether the belief changes from day to day. The opinionated person only knows how to approach other people in one way: by asking their opinion. Once the other person answers, the endless and pointless game begins. In our society, it is considered the height of courtesy to ask someone for their opinion. But it is really a dead end. Don't bother to ask, and don't trouble yourself to answer.

I can imagine a chorus of pundits—CNN, MSNBC, Fox, and so on—screaming in outrage at this suggestion. Opinions, of course, are their stock in trade; they would never dream of being caught without at least one, preferably several. Their shows exist solely for the purpose of training viewers to

have opinions, pro or con, subtle or bold, simple or complex. Talk shows are like dull foreign language courses, where you learn by repetition the stock phrases of imperturbable certainty. Only a few pundits will say that you should actually agree with them. It is far more important that you construct what you know about the world in the shape of an opinion, so that you can show it off whenever you get the chance.

The fact that opinion-mongering has turned into such a huge industry, one joined at the hip with the news media as a whole, means that the refusal to mold ourselves that way will have broader social and political significance. It means that we have to cast our skepticism more broadly, toward the whole system that purports both to tell us what we need to know and to protect us from what we don't.

The next suggestion, then, is: Don't be informed.

The antidote to punditry and infotainment is supposed to be open-minded pluralism: read several different newspapers, listen to several different points of view, and you will be able to come to your very own conclusions (which might just happen to coincide closely with the conclusions of one or more of your sources). It is increasingly obvious that this procedure—encouraged by the information industry itself—is little more than an alibi that allows each of them to continue to peddle their own name-brand forms of untruth. As long as "being informed" consists of accumulating and adjudicating between different products of the same industry, our conversations about the world will consist of more or less savvy consumer reports. The problem is not just that people select their information according to their prejudices: such circularity ought to be easy to correct. The deeper problem is that the ideal of "being informed" has evolved in

our society in a precisely inverse relation to the possibilities of acting on what we know. The price we pay for listening in on the conversations of the rich and powerful is an atrophy of the ability to wield knowledge as a weapon to challenge them. It is hard to know which would be worse: a situation where social power is shrouded in secrecy, or where power no longer cares about being exposed as mendacious or hypocritical. In any case, we live in the worst of both those worlds: we can be more or less well informed about everything we're permitted to know, on the condition that we do not try to use our knowledge to change the scope or the rules of the game. And as for what we don't know, that must be kept secret. It ought to be enough, we're told, just to know that the secrets are there, and that someone else is watching over them. Let me propose that the only way to operate in this situation is to cut the knot: to recognize the debilitating effects of information overconsumption while exercising a militant belief in learning.

This suggestion—Don't be informed—is not at all a recommendation to be ignorant. It asks instead that we constantly examine the relationship between knowing and doing, what we can and cannot know, how we can and cannot take action, in order to think about our situation and our prospects in a more mindful and practical way than the nightly news allows.

Speaking of the nightly news, I have a third suggestion: Don't be afraid.

This proposal might seem more familiar than the others, even if it is not any easier to follow. When speaking of everyday life and its colonization by cynicism, it is important to recognize exactly what kind of fear we need to reject. What characterizes so much media discourse these days is the way an attitude of threatening uncertainty is embedded in simple statements, as if fear is the

ground-tone or carrier wave of every message. It is not simply that we are constantly being told to be afraid of someone or something—rather, fear infects our public conversations, in the precarious balance between what we might say, could say, and are allowed to say.

The 17th century philosopher Spinoza defined fear as "inconstant pain arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in some doubt." On this account, fear is a child of the imagination, nourished whenever we let pain rule over what we can know. The prevailing language of fear proposes that tangible pain is better than genuine uncertainty, that panic makes us more aware than active skepticism, that distress trumps composure. So when people make statements that need to seem certain, they blame uncertainty itself as the proximate source of fear. In this light, it is easy to see that the discourse on terrorism must itself be terrorist—that is, it aims to produce, in the name of protecting it, a collectivity bound by fear. The "other" terrorists aim to do the same thing, to produce a collectivity bound by fear, in order to attack it. "You're either with us or you're with the terrorists" is the most perfectly terrorist statement imaginable, because it aims to create collectivities of fear on both sides. It projects an unending struggle between people in pain, without any prospect of relief.

Against such a scenario, Spinoza would make a simple point: if a collectivity can be held together only through fear and pain, no matter how willingly self-inflicted, it is not capable of acting well on its own behalf, and thus it is not really a collectivity at all. There is no cure for fear except the exercise of reason and the practice of knowledge: fear never offers a more true insight into the state of things.

But before we can begin stamping out fear wherever we find it, I want to make a final suggestion: Don't be hopeful.

Perhaps this is a disappointing place to end. But we have to recognize, still following Spinoza, that the cure for fear will also cure us of a certain kind of hope. In his definition, hope is an "inconstant pleasure" arising from a thing whose outcome is in doubt. As much as we might prefer pleasure to pain—and when speaking of current political life in the US, that's debatable—hope is just like fear, in that it leaves us stranded in passive uncertainty. And insofar as we look for hope—for example, the hope for a better life, for a more just and less belligerent society—in some fabulous yonder that we can't ever really know about, we'll miss what we might actually be able to accomplish in the present. (That's where the real Utopian impulse always takes hold.) So I am very far from saying that we should simply accept things as they are. Quite the contrary: everything we might hope for ought to be sought right now, where every minute might show us a potential otherwise obscured by the rigid certainties of the already-known and the habitual uncertainties of our ever-changing moods.

I can guess that some of you will find these suggestions too abstract, too exaggerated, too contradictory, above all, too impractical. I might have presented another argument today that might go something like this: I would recite some general observations about our current historical situation, starting with the war in Iraq, touching on the behavior of the Administration, and outlining the place of the US in the global economy. I would talk about Empire abroad and mechanisms of control at home. Even the briefest description would combine facts and opinions, hopes and fears. If I arranged the presentation properly, I could let facts triumph over opinions, hopes triumph over fears—or, perhaps the

other way around, or maybe some different combination entirely. We could then discuss, in a more or less rational, more or less emotional way, what it means to find ourselves and each other in such a situation. We would have a lot to say, and it would be worth our while.

But I did not choose to do that, for one simple reason: I want to see how far we can depart from the scripts that we already know how to play. I want to see how far we can set aside that satisfaction of having an opinion, and that edge of authority that comes being better informed, and that all-too-persuasive pessimism of fear, and even that necessary but insufficient reflex consolation of hope—to see if, somehow, without all of that, we can see our situation anew. It is precisely because I think things are so bad, so bewildering, so full of despair and so full of possibility that we cannot do anything else.

Citations:

Bertolt Brecht, Stories of Mr. Keuner, translated by Martin Chalmers (San Francisco, 2001).

Baruch Spinoza, Ethics and Selected Letters, translated by Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, 1982).

This lecture was given at a public forum on cynicism held at the Barrett Honors College, Arizona State University (West Campus) in June 2005. My thanks to Ramsey Eric Ramsey and Stephen Pluhacek for their hospitality.