

John Henry Newman on Wisdom, Nominalism and the Foundations of Social Justice

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Introduction

John Henry Newman is a giant in western theology. He was the dominant English-language voice for High Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism in the 19th century. Bringing many Anglicans to the Roman church, his Aristotelian approach to epistemology and ethics reinvigorated the argument for traditional canonical scholarship. Intellectuals in the Anglo-American world discovered that modernism and liberalism were not self evident, and shockingly enough at the time, were not the uniform default mode of thought among academics. Newman was able to force the reexamination of old debates from the Renaissance, Enlightenment and the industrial revolution. He put modernists on the defensive.

This essay begins with the important fact that Newman's epistemology is essential to understanding his approach to social justice. Reason is not logic, nor is it about practical results.¹ It is only about the fullness of Truth. Reason in Newman is not the "reason" in daily conversation. For him, that would be called "logic." Reason in this sense is moral, ontological and epistemological in that the pure mind alone can apprehend the truths of Reason. Wisdom, logos, the divine footprint manifest in Creation is the subject matter of Reason/Wisdom, a holistic way of life and thought dedicated to understanding the Cosmic order and its creator.

Any moral end must be autonomous. In other words, it can never be mixed with the base elements of self-interest or any other self-seeking goal. This egotism only distorts the mind and misdirects the will. Newman stresses this familiar Kantian idea, but of course, will not see it as merely a mundane matter. It is the work of the church, which can purify the will through the sacraments. Newman argues that the pure, regenerated soul alone can recognize and will what is truly ethical and thus, also truly real, beautiful and true.

The thesis of this present essay is that, for Newman, ethics, morality and civic life are functions of metaphysics. The nominalist world is literally meaningless in that it is inherently fragmented. Any meaning is inherently universal, so this modern theory can only, at best, argue that meanings are arbitrarily assigned to "things" that exist only for pragmatic and utilitarian purposes. Since the nominalist mind cannot see things as true, but only temporary and contingent, nothing is stable. Relativism in the broad sense is music to the ears of all oppressors, since even that term is highly controversial. Newman clarifies:

The concrete matter of propositions is a constant source of trouble to syllogistic reasoning, as marring the simplicity and perfection of its process. Words, which denote things, have innumerable implications; but in inferential exercises it is the very triumph of that clearness and hardness of head, which is the characteristic talent for the art, to have stripped them of all these connatural senses, to have

¹In the Greek tradition, this faculty is often termed nous, to differentiate it from the practical, rational brain.

drained them of that depth and breadth of associations which constitute their poetry, their rhetoric, and their historical life, to have starved each term down till it has become the ghost of itself. . .²

The nominalist and positivist must assume that words exhaust the content of what they signify. Only a Realist can see the radical limitation of words, since they are only symbols or abbreviations of the immense complexity of the “thing” denoted.³ In fact, the very existence of an “object,” which necessarily is unnaturally abstracted from everything else, is highly arbitrary.

The nominalist and even post-modern epistemology has an immediate and chilling effect on social justice. Higher order cognition cannot exist when there is no stable meaning, or when meaning is assigned by whichever faction presently has the power to assign meaning. Logic and its empirical methods can visualize only names and power and hence, is on the same level as the passions striving for domination. Objects desired by the passions of lust or greed are never ideal, but very real, physical things that do not spur a thought of its ideal nature in the whole, but rather possession and consumption. No pervert has ever risked his reputation over the conceptual idea of a nude woman. Only a very specific fantasy, a particular thing, is worth this. On the other hand, the aristocratic ethos is to transcend those desires and their social consequences. It serves to elucidate, not only the practical and necessary ends of life, but the spiritual, Cosmic Whole where all facets of life, thought and being find their place.

Reason and Wisdom as Higher Order Cognition: Liberal and Base Arts

Truth is absolute. It is not a “fact,” it is the reality that serves as the foundation for which terms like “fact” can have any real meaning. Since Newman's entire epistemology centers around the discovery of meaning as the part finds its purpose within the whole, coherence is a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for the true and real.

Newman's *Grammar of Assent* is his central logical and hence ontological work. The essential doctrine presented is the “Illative Sense.” Newman argues that the existence of any fact says much about the world. First, it implies that there are truths that cannot be denied, facts that are obvious and indubitable. There would not be the slightest movement or idea if the basic assumption of the regularity of nature were not always present. The “assumption” that makes all action or thought possible is the Illative Sense.⁴

Any inference, however simple or complex, must assume many things for anyone to make a judgment about it. One must assume that the world is real and that they are real. It must assume that the senses report what is really out there and that, in reporting this, that we are awake, not brains in a jar being fed sensations. These assumptions cannot be “proven,” they are axioms. The lack of “proof” is not an epistemological problem since proof itself implies a ground. To put it crudely, since logic makes no sense without these assumptions, it is a contradiction to deny it.

Newman is speaking about all the intuitions that are required for anything to make any sense, anywhere. Any action or word implies an infinite ocean of ideas, connections and

2 Newman, John Henry. *Grammar of Assent*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1987, 267

3 See Tallmon, James M., *Newman's Contribution to Conceptualizing Rhetorical Reason*. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 25 (1995), 197-213 for a detailed analysis of how rhetoric and poetry can “fill out” the often formalized and sterile meanings of words. This sort of coercive fixing of intellectual meaning leads to a purely formal sense of words and phrases that, at one time, reflected the unity of the cosmos so dear to Newman.

4 Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 192-195

presumptions without which no word is meaningful.⁵ The positivists err in ignoring or wishing the Illative Sense away. It makes thinking possible. Newman describes this critical idea:

This saying [that probability is the guide of life], when properly explained, is true; however, we must not suffer ourselves to carry a true maxim to an extreme; it is far from true, if we so hold it as to forget that without first principles there can be no conclusions at all, and that thus probability does make some sense presuppose and require the existence of truths which are certain. Especially is the maxim untrue, in respect to the other great department of knowledge, the spiritual, if taken to support the doctrine, that the first principles and elements of religion, which are universally received, are mere matter of opinion. . . the initial truths of divine knowledge ought to be viewed as parallel to the initial truths of secular: as the latter are certain, so too are the former.⁶

Science and its methods presuppose another set of realities often taken for granted. That there is something rather than nothing is one of these. Rules of evidence, logical rigor and objectivity depend on facts far more fundamental.⁷ The standards of proof and what can be taken as authoritative in this regard, following Hegel, are social products. If they are social, then they are civic and historical. These are the pragmatic means that human beings have sought to extract from the world what they need to live.

Reason and the moral life in Newman is exceptionally broad in that this was the core project of his philosophical activity. “Reason as Wisdom” can serve as the summary of Newman's approach to thought. The virtuous citizen was a controlled, integral, well mannered gentleman in the best sense. The intellectual virtues of honesty and logical consistency – as opposed to the heteronomous ground of self-interest – is essential to everything Newman wrote.

Like all Christians and those seeking guidance from the ancients, curbing the passions was the essential trait for any real objective study. Precision and rigor in logical cognition, guided by Reason, is required to repress the egocentric drive that seeks to force itself upon others. The dispassion of mind is essential to avoid mere self-regarding behavior functioning under the guise of free action or “science.” From here, the concept of education in Newman makes its appearance.

In his famous work on education and the university's mission, Newman draws attention primarily to the principles and objectives of education in the broadest sense. He distinguishes the liberal from the merely utilitarian forms of knowledge. The empirical cognition of Locke is the merely useful; the practical arts needed by any society. The philosophy of science in modernity becomes oriented to achieve practically useful results dictated by either the market or the ruling class. Education seeks truth, not the immediately useful and certainly not anything that the market can itself generate. Education, that is, the influence of an entire cultural and civilizational inheritance, is what places the secondary and pragmatic arts into their proper balance and proportion with their ground.⁸

5 Newman, Grammar of Assent, 344

6 Newman, Grammar of Assent, 192-193

7 Newman, Grammar of Assent, 348

8 “Education” here cannot be reduced to “book learning.” it is a holistic upbringing into a civilizational nexus of ideas. It is not just the classroom, but the entire social and civic activity of a people.

A liberal education, in the classical mind, is that which befits the truly free man.⁹ Accordingly, a liberal education should be dedicated to the exercise of the mind, that is, it should feature a strongly logical and clear focus of mental and intellectual abilities as a manifestation of Wisdom. The opposite of the liberal arts is the specialized professional or commercial life. Newman does not reject the fact that employment in commerce or certain professions such as medicine or law involve considerable mental faculties, but he does argue that they are inferior to the liberal arts relative to their generality and proximity to the ultimate ground of being.¹⁰

Newman argues that the most universal element of the liberal sort of thought is that it is self-sufficient and complete. This is to say that it has a goal inherent to itself and does not need external results or immediate “usefulness” to justify it. Here, Newman follows Aristotle completely. On the other hand, the most sublime occupation using all forms of mental rigor will lose its liberal quality if it is cultivated not for its own sake.¹¹ In his *Idea of a University* (1907), Newman writes

Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward. And if this is true of all knowledge, it is true also of that special Philosophy, which I have made to consist in a comprehensive view of truth in all its branches, of the relations of science to science, of their mutual bearings, and their respective values.¹²

Knowledge is primary the knowledge of the whole, the broad context within which all action, thought and vocation have a place. Reason as Wisdom provides the more practical arts with their purpose within the whole. Reason is greater than logic or scientific methods, though it might use its conclusions. Education, as a truly noble rather than base (or ordinary) pursuit, is an introduction to the truths of Reason as a mode of cognition, life and action that is universally true as it mirrors the hierarchical arrangement of the cosmos itself. It is applicable anywhere, from family life to civic association to professional development.¹³

Both forms of thought are appropriate, but unequal. The intellectual and philosophical methods alone deserve the name of “liberal” as it gives the human mind a means to connect with the cosmic order itself. Without such connection, entities such as the civic association have only the will to power of its elite members to guide it. Philosophy is “useless” in that it produces no tangible good. Rather, it creates some answer to why these more tangible goods are needed, in what proportion and to what further end they might be put.

Reason, Social Epistemology and Revelation

The Illative Sense depicts the cosmic order as the consequence of a powerful God with the ability to express Himself in this colossal way. Objects studied by man differ. There are material, cognitive, spiritual or imaginary objects, just to name four. The free will, for example,

9 “Liberal” in this sense is precisely that: the free man. This, in the classical idea, was opposed to the man who needed to constantly work at menial or otherwise secondary jobs. The free man had the time and independence to come to his own conclusions about profound objects. The laborer did not have the time or interest.

10 Newman, John Henry. *Discussions and Arguments*. (Longmans, Green, and Co.): Discourse VII, 1907

11 Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*. (Longmans, Green, and Co.), 1907a, 100-107

12 Newman, *Discussions and Arguments*, 103-104

13 Newman, *Discussions and Arguments*, Discourse VII

shows that the spiritual world is real because matter is unfree. Our freedom implies a non-material world that must exist to serve as the ground for free will. This will is hence a spiritual object, and not a physical one. This hints at a spiritual world largely closed to most, if not all, and thus, revelation is used to supplement the conclusions of fallen human reason. Revelation is a form of condescension.

Revelation depicts the nature of the Cosmos as fallen; damaged and imperfect. This includes man and his reason. The “positivist” mentality seeks to exclude theology from public life in the name of science. The problem is that this very desire distorts what science can grasp. Unlike natural objects, spiritual ones are not constrained by laws of physics. The problem is when the logical and empirical methods of science arbitrarily claim that all that is not “logical” using its methods must not exist.¹⁴

God is present in creation through natural and universal law. These laws are distinct from the material world and cannot be said to be imminent in it. Matter is one thing, the laws which seem to govern its relations universally cannot be deduced as a result. The scientific law is itself immaterial, but it governs a material world not susceptible to that sort of government except from outside. Natural science deals with laws as facts, theology deals with their origin and purpose.

The methods of natural science are inductive and experimental, while that of theology is deductive and traditional (that is, from Wisdom rather than quantitative measures). Natural science is based on the confrontation of the flux of manifold sense data and the need to grasp their arrangement and orderly functioning. This might hint at the existence of natural law, but without being a law of nature in that a conclusion from observation has no logical necessity. Theology, by contrast, relies on certain truths given in divine revelation but also speaking to the immaterial in man: the freedom of action and the development of thought in the mind, one clearly obeying no natural law seen in the external world.¹⁵

Newman, speaking of the inductive and experimental method of natural science in relation to theology, stresses that each approach is quite correct, but only to the limit that their objects imply. Contradictions begin only when the natural scientist begins requiring all other disciplines follow the methods used by the chemistry or biology and even going so far as to pontificate on what is real and what is imaginary.¹⁶ An example would be the chemist who rejects free will because it cannot be measured and dissected.

Part of Wisdom's benefit is that it forces the self to accept the limitations of human logic. Revelation is the means whereby God supersedes the inherent instability of logic and points directly to God and his purpose. Such things cannot be exhausted in words, but God's mercy permits some basic truths to be communicated in poetic or symbolic form, since human language, by its very origin, is not suited to non-mundane concerns.

In his *Oxford Sermons*, Newman defines the discipline of Wisdom or Reason as being identical with philosophy. He states that “philosophy. . . is Reason exercised upon Knowledge; or the Knowledge not merely of things in general, but of things in their relations to one another.”¹⁷

14 Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 121

15 Newman, *Discussions and Arguments*, 293ff

16 It should be clear by now that “science” is really any systematic body of method serving a unified end or purpose. Today, “science” is identical with “natural science.”

17 Newman, John Henry. *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford*. (Longmans, Green, and Co, 1909): Sermon XIV, 29

Knowledge refers to the experience of sense data and the practical methods of induction. This is the practical world that has no meaning or purpose unless Reason be applied to it.

He says that “[Reason] makes every thing lead to every thing else; it communicates the image of the whole body to every separate member, till the whole becomes in imagination like a spirit, every where pervading and penetrating its component parts, and giving them their one definite meaning.”¹⁸ Reason seeks the ground of logic and the purpose of its conclusions:

Many a man will live and die upon a dogma, no man will be a martyr for a conclusion. A conclusion is an opinion. It is not a thing which is, but which we are quite sure about. It has often been observed that we never say we are sure and certain without implying that we doubt. This logic makes but a sorry rhetoric for the multitude. To most men argument makes a point in hand only more doubtful and considerably less impressive. After all, man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal. Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for everything we shall never come to action. To act you must assume, and that assumption is faith.¹⁹

The essence of all of Newman's views of Reason is here boiled down to the fact that empirical data suggest nothing of themselves. It takes a certain “imagination” to bring this “opinion” out of a mass of data. The mind seeks patterns in even random facts as a matter of natural inclination, and therefore, conclusions, regardless of the researcher's search for objectivity, always have a certain artificiality. Reason, or Wisdom, is a communal and historical entity, not possessed by one person, but a “communion” of persons spread throughout space and time. It is the very nature of the church. It is the ground of community and its final end.

In theology, induction has three sources: first, the text of the Holy Scriptures and Fathers,²⁰ secondly, the events of church history and, finally, the phenomena of the visible world. While theology and metaphysics cannot subject its ideas to a laboratory experiment, it can use some of empiricism's conclusions as the grounds for the spiritual. He states in his *Grammar of Assent*:

Science gives us the grounds or premises from which religious truths are to be inferred; but it does not set about inferring them, much less does it reach the inference—that is not its province. It brings before us phenomena, and it leaves us, if we will, to call them works of design, wisdom, or benevolence; and further still, if we will, to proceed to confess an Intelligent Creator. We have to take its facts, and to give them a meaning, and to draw our own conclusions from them. First comes Knowledge, then a view, then reasoning, and then belief. This is why Science has so little of a religious tendency; deductions have no power of persuasion.²¹

18 Newman, Sermon XIV

19 Newman, Discussions and Arguments, 293

20 The term “scripture” does not refer to the 74 books of the Bible. Scriptures are the whole corpus of “divine writings” that include the lives of the saints, patristic writing, canon law and the books of the bible. It forms a single whole.

21 Newman, Grammar of Assent, 293

The final two sentences above go a long way to summarize the contents of this paper and its relation to social justice. “Knowledge” is not true, profound reality, but the slow and unsteady collection of probable conclusions wrested from a mass of data. A “view” is an opinion, and is the basic consensus of a general run of conclusions on various related subjects. Reasoning then begins to penetrate the process of cognition itself, reflect on its origins and ground, and see its relation to all aspects of human and earthy life. It is the beginning of reflection and the realization that human thought is also part of the cosmic Order.²²

The Scriptures, including the works and thought of the saints, seek to establish theological truth only on the data that the bible or the saints can provide over and above observation. Historical theology seeks to build its data and conclusions only from the “objective” facts of history while Reason seeks to manifest its hidden center. The theology deriving from the cosmic Order differs from the scientific data of natural science in that it is trying perceive the wisdom and omnipotence of God in this immensely complex order of the universe. For example, a long haired cat is, for the sciences, a collection of atoms, energy and habituated reflex. For Reason, it is also an immensely complex manifestation of divine wisdom manifest in thought, myth, symbol and attitude.²³

Reason, the Holy Spirit and Social Justice

Logic and truth are, of themselves, meaningless. Unless the mind is capable of comprehending these facts and incorporation them into a holistic organization of life, their mere existence is empty verbiage. Facts presume that the person discovering or explaining them is able to separate himself from the fact under review. Self-interest or greed destroys the truth of any research. Its conclusions will reflect only the self-interest of those promoting it. The conclusion then, is that only when these passions and egotistical demands are suppressed or transfigured can any truth be manifest or understood. The alternative is a Hobbesian world: purposeless, thoughtless and vapid.

Yet, even in that matrix, the carnal, mundane and nominal life does not satisfy. Sensing his freedom, man is both rational and moral, capable of legislating for himself so long as autonomy (in the Kantian sense) is realized. Furthermore, legislation in a moral or civil sense cannot be randomly imposed by a powerful faction, but itself must come from the autonomous soul that has been purified and permitted to see the Wisdom in all things.

Finally, Newman speaks of the Hobbesian alternative in graphic terms:

Again, sin brings with it its own enlargement of mind, which Eve was tempted to covet, and of which she made proof. This, perhaps, in the instance of some sins, to which the young are especially tempted, is their great attraction and their great recompense. They excite the curiosity of the innocent, and they intoxicate the imagination of their miserable victims, whose eyes seem opened upon a new world, from which they look back upon their state of innocence with a sort of pity and contempt, as if it were below the dignity of men.²⁴

22 O'Connell, MR Newman: The Limits of Certitude. The Review of Politics, 35(1973), 149ff

23 O'Connell, Newman, 150-152

24 Newman, Sermon XIV, 15

The practical, mundane world revolves around basic human needs, political power and the rationalization of egocentrism. It is alienated in that it must deny the spiritual world and freedom in order to justify the ever shifting power coalitions ruling the state and the concomitant, endlessly shifting passions that rule the soul. The mundane – that is, the logical and practical – can easily overthrow the rule of the truly noble and wise: the rule of Reason. Aristocracy is replaced by oligarchy and money tries to wear the trappings of “civilization.” Society, education and thought are then inverted towards the earth, towards the fluid flux of human passion and desire for dominance. This can then usurp logic and use it to justify and rationalize this desire. Logic, and all empirical tools, can either look towards the higher order as servant, or be forced to slave for the ruling class.²⁵

Presently, science has been reduced to what is required for the functioning of post-modern capitalism and globalism, and are hence a part of the ruling class and can be used to focus attention on what this class finds significant. Reason is absent. The will to power of the new oligarchs is based on blind desire. Because of this, it must generate ideas, theories, buzzwords and movements that seek to sever the human will from the cosmic order and Reason. Reason does not get millions of shoppers into the malls on Black Friday. This is the realm of social science when desire rules without restraint. The individual is not free, nor has it been liberated, but has rather just been harnessed to a much less forgiving master than the Mind that crated mind.

Since logic and empiricism cannot generate moral ends, the ends are independent of logical standards. Postmodern virtual-capitalism remains rooted in the very real world of the collective financial Will to Power, which is more than happy to provide these ends. “Science” then seems to suggest that if an object cannot be brought under a quantitative or experimental form, then it either does not exist or does not matter. Capitalism and socialism have this in common. Harnessing and enslaving the practical arts means that they are pressed into the service of this new order and must give the illusion that it has been “scientifically proved” that such an order is “freedom” or at least “inevitable.” This is the foundation of Newman's the *Idea of a University* where he says:

Of course if there is a science of wealth, it must give rules for gaining wealth and disposing of wealth, and can do nothing more; it cannot itself declare that it is a subordinate science, that its end is not the ultimate end of all things, and that its conclusions are only hypothetical, depending on its premises, and liable to be overruled by a higher teaching.²⁶

The passion of gaining wealth soon sees the world as one great arena for its acquisition. Wealth has a place, since some basic property is required for even the minimal existence. The science attached to it however, is highly regulated and limited, since wealth should be only one of many priorities. Wealth is inherently a means to an end, only in that to have some measure of financial stability is needed for further action in family, civic or cultural affairs. The problem is when economics is not regulated by philosophy, the higher science which puts wealth in its place,

25 Tillman, MK (1993) *Economics of Reason: Newman and the Phronesis Tradition in Magill, Gerard Discourse and Context : An Interdisciplinary Study of John Henry Newman.* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 46-50

26 Newman, *Discussions and Arguments*, 87

even the economist starts to see nature as a set of dollar signs.

Conclusion

For Newman, Reason is Wisdom. It is the highest of sciences (intrinsically theological) that places all other sciences and occupations in their specific place. Without this truth, then whichever of the sciences can maneuver itself into a position of power will then usurp the right to define truth or even reality itself. In our era it is certainly economics and technology, and quite possibly law.

The real upshot of this paper is that when these subordinate sciences are not properly regulated, the very nature of the cosmic order seems to be altered. When money making becomes the dominant science that trumps all others (as most would argue is the case today), human beings become mere quantitative elements, they become “market segments” rather than human beings. They are seen under a distorted lens.

Thus, Reason is not logic, and it deals not with superficial relations discovered by repeated observation. Instead, Reason is Wisdom, the practical science that has the ability to tightly bind the cosmic order and the hierarchy of being to one's daily action. This science of sciences, the world of Forms and the cosmic hierarchy is required to maintain proportion among the other, subordinate sciences. Needless to say at this point, without action informed by this intuitive and Rational science, the world of Forms will be forever separated from humanity.

Epistemology is the heart of science in that to know something is to apprehend its place in the cosmic order. It is not to apprehend something as it relates to prior and posterior causes. This latter is the realm of the subordinate sciences such as chemistry, law or administration. They deal with the nominal realm, that is, the realm of individuals seen in isolation. This is certain needed, as the computer tech is required for this writer to type this out. However, this same writer will not consult said technical as to its contents.

This cognitive idea is both hierarchical and, as with anything good, is difficult. The most crucial research ideas and discoveries will thus not be the domain of those in the specific sciences, but those who can then direct these sciences into new ends. These secondary disciplines are geared to the satisfaction of specific objective needs. They, in short, revolve around happiness. That, for Newman is a slippery concept, but rather, as Gordon points out (1963) is not something Newman wants to stress. Instead, the goal per se is the opening of the possibilities of human nature reaching their fullest possible development.²⁷ The discipline that is required for this holistic approach is fairly rigorous and long-term, and is not necessarily conducive to happiness in the same sense. Maybe a form of “satisfaction” would be more useful to describe that psychological feeling.

Newman did not create any new doctrines and did not lay out a single original argument. His faithfulness to an ancient tradition prosaically rejected due to its lack of practicality by the world was his strength. It was the prosaic and pedestrian mind that modernity had created, and by his day (and how much more so in ours) a human being that was simply incapable of thought beyond the most mundane and vulgar. Newman's significance is how easy it was to poke holes in the epistemology of the modern positivists.

This lack of strong intellectual foundations was made possible by the domination of

27 Gordon, B. Newman, and the Changing Scene in University Education. *International Review of Education*, 9 (1963), 9-10

economic interests and the connection of money and oligarchy with applied science. It was power, coercive abilities granted by the dead matter of currency, that kept the nominalist and empiricist artificially insulated from these “reactionary” questions. Ultimately, Newman was ignored. It was impossible to translate his noble sense of Wisdom to rapid economic benefit. The churches also collapse one by one to the modern juggernaut, struggling to adapt the now incomprehensible vocabulary of St. Basil or Athanasius to the mundane and jejune concerns of post-modernity.

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