

INTEGRAL LIFE⁺



TRUMP AND A POST-TRUTH WORLD

An Evolutionary Self-Correction

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Excerpted from *Trump and a Post-Truth World*, [available here](#).

SELF-CORRECTION AT THE LEADING-EDGE

On balance, the response to the recent election of Donald Trump as the next president of the United States has been extreme, visceral, and loudly vocal, on all sides. The supporters of Trump have often been nasty and mean in their triumphal attitude, voicing “I told you so!” and “This finally serves you right!” as they gloat over their unexpected but, they feel, totally righteous and justified win. The anti-Trump side has been, if possible, even more vocal, with people tearfully telling of how they threw up, screamed, spent endlessly sleepless nights, and all but gave up on democracy and any sort of idealism at all (many had promised to leave the country should Trump win), finding his election to be a victory of hatred, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and all-round bad taste—and then, usually, vowing to continue “the fight” and urging their fellow Americans to fight with them, to never give up.

Both sides, in my opinion, are caught in too narrow a view. There is a bigger picture operating here, and I’d like to outline what that might possibly be. I’ve never heard this particular view I’m about to describe be expressed by anybody, but I believe it represents a larger, more integral view, and as such can be quite illuminating—and liberating. The pain and suffering that both sides feel is, I believe, the result of identifying with a much too narrow view, and a more expansive stance offers genuine release, while still allowing one to work on whatever side one wishes.

Every now and then, evolution itself has to adjust course in light of new information on how its path is unfolding, and it starts (apparently spontaneously but actually with this deeper morphic field operating) by making various moves that are, in effect, self-correcting evolutionary realignments. The leading-edge of cultural evolution is today—and has been for four or five decades—the green wave. (“Green” refers to the basic stage of human growth and development known to various developmental

models as “pluralistic,” “postmodern,” “relativistic,” “individualistic,” “self-actualization,” “diversity,” “inclusion,” “human-bond,” “multicultural,” and so on, and generically referred to as “postmodern.” This is an area that I will clearly and simply outline in the next chapter. . Right now, merely note that the large number of different names that I just listed for this item is an indication of how widespread the expert consensus is concerning it. For the moment, you can just remember it as “postmodern”; it joins “modern” and “traditional” as the three most populous value systems in this country. The confrontational and quite heated battles between them is known widely as “the culture wars,” as we will continue to see.)

The primary purpose of the leading-edge of evolution—in today’s case, the green, postmodern wave—is to be just that: a LEADING edge of evolutionary unfolding, what Maslow called a “growing tip,” which seeks out the most appropriate, most complex, most inclusive, and most conscious forms that are possible at that particular time and point of evolution, pointing to new, novel, creative, and adaptive areas for the future to unfold into.

Beginning in the 1960s, green first began to emerge as a major cultural force, and it soon bypassed orange (which was the previous leading-edge stage, known in various models as “rational,” “reason,” “formal operational,” “achievement,” “conscientious,” “accomplishment,” “merit,” “profit”, “self-esteem,” “self-authoring,” “excellence,” and “progress”—in short, “modern” in contrast to green’s “postmodern”) as the dominant leading-edge. Green started with a series of by-and-large healthy and very appropriate (and evolutionarily positive) forms: the massive civil rights movement, the worldwide environmental movement and drives for sustainability in business, the rise of personal and professional feminism, anti-hate-crime legislation, a heightened sensitivity to any and all forms of social oppression of virtually any minority, and—centrally— both the understanding of the crucial role of “context” in any knowledge claims and the desire to be as “inclusive” as possible. The entire revolution of the sixties was driven primarily by this stage of development—in 1959, 3

percent of the population was at green; in 1979, close to 20 percent of the population was—and these events truly and irrevocably changed the world. The Beatles (otherwise sacrosanct in my view) summarized the whole move (and movement) with one of their songs: “All You Need Is Love.” (Total inclusion rules!)

But as the decades unfolded, green increasingly began veering into extreme, maladroit, dysfunctional, even clearly unhealthy forms. Its broad-minded pluralism slipped into a rampant and runaway relativism (collapsing into nihilism), as the notion that all truth is contextualized (or gains meaning from its cultural context) slid into the notion that there is no real universal truth at all, only shifting cultural interpretations (which eventually slid into a widespread narcissism). Central notions (which began as important “true but partial” concepts, but collapsed into extreme and deeply self-contradictory views) included the ideas that all knowledge is, in part, a social construction; all knowledge is context-bound; there are no privileged perspectives; what passes for “truth” is a cultural fashion, and is almost always advanced by one oppressive force or another (racism, sexism, Eurocentrism, patriarchy, capitalism, consumerism, greed, environmental exploitation); each and every human being, often including animals, is utterly, absolutely unique, and absolutely of equal value (egalitarianism). If there were one line that summarizes the message of virtually all of the truly prominent postmodern writers (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Lacan, Paul de Man, Stanley Fish, etc.), it is that “there is no truth.” Truth, rather, was a social construction, and what anybody actually called “truth” was simply what some culture somewhere had managed to convince its members was truth; but there was no actually existing, given, real thing called “truth” that is simply sitting around awaiting discovery, any more than there is a single universally correct hem length that it is clothes designers’ job to discover.

Even science itself was held to be no more true than poetry (Seriously). There simply was no difference between fact and fiction, news and novels, data and fantasies. In short, there was “no truth” anywhere.

So it ended up that, to the general postmodernist perspective, all knowledge is culturally bound; there is no universally valid perspective, therefore all knowledge is based on a mere interpretation announced from a privileged (therefore oppressive) perspective; knowledge is not given but is constructed (created, built, fabricated); there is nothing but history, and therefore what any culture might take as “true” today will dramatically shift tomorrow (Whatever happened to the “seven deadly sins”? Half of them are clear virtues today.); there is no universal moral framework—what’s true for you is true for you, and what’s true for me is true for me—and neither of those claims can be challenged on any grounds that do not amount to oppression; the same is true for value—no value is superior to another (another version of egalitarianism)—and if any truth or value is claimed to be universal, or claimed to be true and valuable for all, the claim is actually nothing but disguised power, because it is simply an attempt to force all people everywhere to adopt the same truth and values of the promoter (with the ultimate aim of enslavement and oppression). It is therefore the job of every individual to fight all of the authoritarian truths handed to them from yesterday and to be totally, radically autonomous (as well as not to entertain any truths that could or should be forced on anybody else, to allow everybody their own radical autonomy as well—in short, not to entertain anything called “truth” at all, which now was seen as always being a power-grab).

Put bluntly, since everything handed to us by yesterday is not a real and enduring truth, just a fabricated fashion of history, it is our job to accept none of it, and instead only strive for a total, self-created, self-initiated autonomy (which very soon became indistinguishable from “Nobody interferes with my narcissism!”). You simply deconstruct every single truth and value you find (an approach that indeed rapidly slid into nihilism and, again, its tag-team member from postmodern hell, narcissism). In short,

the aperspectival madness of “there is no truth” left nothing but nihilism and narcissism for motivating forces.

The catch-22 here was that postmodernism itself did not actually believe a single one of those ideas. That is, the postmodernists themselves violated their own tenets constantly in their own writings, and they did so consistently and often. Critics (from Jürgen Habermas to Karl Otto-Apel to Charles Taylor) would soon jump all over them for committing the so-called “performative contradiction,” which is a major self-contradiction because you yourself are doing what you say either cannot or should not be done. For postmodernists, all knowledge is non-universal, contextual, constructivist, interpretive—found only in a given culture, at a given historical time, in a particular geopolitical location. Unfortunately, the postmodernists aggressively maintained that every one of its summary statements given in the previous paragraph were true for all people, in all places, at all times—no exceptions. Their entire theory itself is a very Big Picture about why all Big Pictures are wrong, a very extensive metanarrative about why all metanarratives are oppressive. They most definitely and strongly believed that it is universally true that there is no universal truth. They believed all knowledge is context bound except for that knowledge, which is always and everywhere transcontextually true. They believed all knowledge is interpretive, except for theirs, which is solidly given and accurately describes conditions everywhere. They believed their view itself is utterly superior in a world where they also believed absolutely nothing is superior. Oops.

Over two decades ago, in the book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, I summarized this postmodern disaster with the term “aperspectival madness,” because the belief that there is no truth—that no perspective has universal validity (the “aperspectival” part)—when pushed to extremes, as postmodernism was about to do, results in massive self-contradictions and ultimate incoherency (the “madness” part). And when aperspectival madness (“no truth”) infects the leading-edge of evolution, evolution’s capacity for self-direction and self-organization is bound to collapse.

It's widely acknowledged that postmodernism as a philosophy is now dead, and books written about "What comes next?" are starting to appear everywhere (with no clear winner yet, but the trend is toward more evolutionary and more systemic—more integral—views). (But in academia and the universities, it is a long, slow death, and most teachers in the humanities still teach some version of postmodernism and its aperspectival madness even if they have many deep doubts themselves.) It's telling that virtually every major developmental model in existence contains, beyond the stage generally known as "pluralistic" or "postmodern," at least a stage or two variously called "integrated," "systemic," "integral," or some such, all of which overcome the limitations of a collapsed pluralism through a higher-level wholeness and unity, and thus return to a genuine "order out of chaos." Right now, only about 5 percent of the population is at any of these integral stages of development, but the evidence is that this is clearly where tomorrow's evolution eventually will go—if it can survive the present transition.)

And thus postmodernism as a widespread leading-edge viewpoint slid into its extreme forms (e.g., not just that all knowledge is context-bound, but that all knowledge is nothing but shifting contexts; or not just that all knowledge is co-created with the knower and various intrinsic, subsisting features of the known, but that all knowledge is nothing but a fabricated social construction driven only by power). When it becomes not just that all individuals have the right to choose their own values (as long as they don't harm others), but that hence there is nothing universal in (or held-in-common by) any values at all, this leads straight to axiological nihilism: there are no believable, real values anywhere. And when all truth is a cultural fiction, then there simply is no truth at all—epistemic and ontic nihilism. And when there are no binding moral norms anywhere, there's only normative nihilism. Nihilism upon nihilism upon nihilism—"there was no depth anywhere, only surface, surface, surface." And finally, when there are no binding guidelines for individual behavior, the individual has only his or her own self-promoting wants and desires to answer to—in

short, narcissism. And that is why the most influential postmodern elites ended up embracing, explicitly or implicitly, that tag team from postmodern hell: nihilism and narcissism—in short, aperspectival madness. The culture of post-truth.

There were many responses to this aperspectival madness—as a blanket, background, morphogenetic, leading-edge field, there were few areas in society that were not directly affected by it—and we will explore many of them in this overview. But the major driver behind all of them, the ultimate causative agent, was that the leading-edge of evolution itself had begun failing—badly, obviously, and often. When the leading-edge has no idea where it's going, then naturally it doesn't know where to go. When no direction is true (because there is no truth), then no direction can be favored, and thus no direction is taken; the process just comes to a screeching halt—it jams, it collapses.

Nihilism and narcissism are not traits that any leading-edge can actually operate with. And thus, if it's infected with them, it indeed simply ceases to functionally operate. Seeped in aperspectival madness, it stalls, and then begins a series of regressive moves, shifting back to a time and configuration when it was essentially operating adequately as a true leading-edge. This regression is one of the primary factors we see now operating worldwide, and the primary and central cause of all of this is a failure of the green leading-edge to be able to lead at all. Nihilism and narcissism bring evolution to a traffic-jam halt. This is a self-regulating and necessary move, as the evolutionary current itself steps back to reassess and reconfigure, a move that often includes various degrees of temporary regression, or the retracing of its footsteps, to find the point of beginning collapse and then reconfigure from there.

Evolutionary biologists in general tend to deny any sort of directedness or telic drives to evolution, seeing all of it as a random series of events and a blind natural selection. But this view is just a holdover from the reductionist scientific materialism of the nineteenth century. It overlooks

more current scientific concepts, starting with Ilya Prigogine's Nobel Prize-winning discoveries, that even insentient material systems have an inherent drive to self-organization. When physical systems get pushed "far from equilibrium," they escape this chaos by leaping into a higher-level state of organized order—as when water that is chaotically rushing down the drain suddenly leaps into a perfect downward-swirling whirlpool—referred to simply as "order out of chaos." If nonliving matter inherently possesses this drive to self-organization and order out of chaos, living systems certainly do—and that definitely includes evolution, a drive that philosophers often call "Eros," an inherent dynamic toward greater and greater wholeness, unity, complexity, and consciousness.

But this "order out of chaos" is exactly what the green leading-edge began failing to do. If anything, it was producing "more chaos out of chaos." It had no idea of what true order was to begin with all such "metanarratives" were completely and aggressively deconstructed. Because nothing was true at all, there could be no true order, either, and hence no preferable direction forward. And so, as the leading-edge of evolution collapsed in a performative contradiction—lost in aperspectival madness—evolution itself temporarily slammed shut, and began various moves, including a regressive stepping back and searching for a sturdier point where a true self-organizing process could be set in motion once again.

ABOUT TRUMP AND A POST-TRUTH WORLD

The world is in turmoil. As populist waves roil the Brexit-bound UK, along with Europe, Turkey, Russia, Asia—and most visibly, the US with the election of Donald Trump—nationalist and extremist political forces threaten the progress made over many decades. How did we get here? And how, with so much antagonism, cynicism, and discord, can we mend the ruptures in our societies?

In this provocative work, philosopher Ken Wilber explains why there is cause for hope. He lays much of the blame on a failure at the progressive, leading edge of society. This leading edge is characterized by the desire to be as just and inclusive as possible, and to it we owe the thrust toward women's rights, the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and more. This is all evolutionarily healthy; what is unhealthy is a creeping postmodernism that is elitist, "politically correct," and that looks down on "deplorables." Combine this with the techno-economic demise of many traditional ways of making a living, and you get an explosive mixture. As Wilber says, for some Trump voters: "Everywhere you are told that you are fully equal and deserve immediate and complete empowerment, yet everywhere are denied the means to actually achieve it. You suffocate, you suffer, and you get very, very mad."

It is only when members of society's leading edge can heal themselves that a new, Integral evolutionary force can emerge to move us beyond the social and political turmoil of our current time to offer genuine leadership toward greater wholeness.

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