

# COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



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## New Beginnings and Welcome Backs

Spring declares itself the season of new beginnings, but at Gutenberg, the fall claims that distinction. After a busy and productive summer hosting both the Summer Institute and the Education Conference, Gutenberg opened its doors to the new freshmen class pictured below. We're excited to have them and look forward to sharing their four-year journey.

We're also welcoming back our returning students, three alumni in new roles, and a former tutor. Alumnus John Hemmerich (class of 2005)



now serves on our board of governors. (See his article on page 6.) Alumnus Brian Julian (class of 2003) joins the faculty. Alumna Trisha

Yeager (class of 2020) is our new administrative secretary. And Nancy Scott, a tutor from 2004 to 2009, returns to lead students in microexegesis. Student services administrator Naomi Rinehold also joins the faculty to teach first-year Greek. It should be a good year!

**2021 Freshmen.** Back (L to R): Gracie Greco, Samuel Tardibono, Selah Hamilton. Front (L to R): Bethany Petrick, Rachel Harper, Kaitlyn Couch



## The Obvious Problem with Knowledge

**Brian Julian**

I used to be a knowledge optimist. To know, one just needed a right understanding of how to go about it. The problem—with other people, naturally—was that they didn't have the correct framework for knowledge. They were skeptics, or they let themselves be caught up in misleading philosophies that skewed their perception. By contrast, once someone properly understood how to interpret the world, then truth would inevitably ensue.

But these days, in 2021, optimism is hard to maintain. Let me illustrate by asking three questions:

- Did Biden win the election?
- Should people get vaccinated?
- Is the United States racist?

Now, I could ask many similar questions, and I don't intend here to answer any of them. My point, instead, is to highlight an aspect of even *trying* to answer questions like these. It is a fact of which we are all acutely aware: Wherever you are on the spectrum of possible answers, you have most likely seen people to the right or the left of you and been deeply dismayed. Their positions seem crazy.

If I were content to see these people as “them,” in contrast to the rational “us,” this craziness might not raise a problem about knowledge. But here is where I must admit the lines are not so neat. Some of the people I disagree with are people I know, either personally or by reputation. They include people whom I respect and love. If I'm honest, I know I can't turn our disagreement into an issue of us and them, the good and the bad, the Bible believers and the world, the virtuous [insert political preference] and the evil [contrary political position]. It is really a case of persons and persons. One of those persons may even be you. In answering questions like those above, you and I may very well disagree. I may be your crazy person, and you may be mine.

There are various reasons for why someone who disagrees with me may appear crazy. The internet certainly doesn't help, given the way it ramps up emotional reactions and downplays empathetic understanding. But when it comes to thinking about the epistemological issues involved—how the nature of knowledge comes into play—we see others as crazy because the disagreements do not simply concern facts. If we could just cite evidence and come to an agreement, there would be no problem. Evidence does not go very far, however, because the deeper disagreements are over its sources and the frameworks used to interpret the evidence. In attempting to convince others, all sides throw around authorities as sources of evidence—the government, trusted friends, scientists, dissenting voices, first-hand experience, a favorite Bible teacher, this news outlet versus that one—but this does not get very far because we do not agree on which authorities to trust. This makes things hard because the reasons for trusting a source are deep and complicated, ultimately involving our whole framework for interpreting the world. Even if authorities are not being invoked, those frameworks still shape the way we see the evidence. A statistic about hospitalizations or about



wealth inequalities between racial groups does not mean the same thing to us, because we see it differently. And when people see the world differently from me, it is easy to think them crazy.

This situation leads to the problem on which I want to focus: In my more sympathetic moments, those times when I recognize “them” as persons, I must admit they are not crazy in an “Elvis speaks to me through my dog” sort of way. When I can hear them out, I can see that they have many reasons for their position, some of them quite decent. It is true that these reasons only support their conclusion because of a host of other pieces within their conceptual framework—ones that differ from mine—but they are still rational beings striving to make sense of the world.

Let me put this issue this way. You, I, the craziest “them” out there—we all see our own position as not just true but as *obvious*. It just *fits so well* with everything we know and experience. By contrast, some positions seem obvious to others but clash so badly with my experience and knowledge that they seem ridiculous to believe. So, how can knowledge be possible when rational, respectable people embrace obvious-to-them ideas that to me seem deeply, obviously false?

Before attempting to untie this knot, however, I want to pull it tighter. We can’t simply dismiss this sort of obviousness as an obstacle to knowing, because it is also an essential part of it. Take, for example, your knowledge that two plus two equals four. How do you know this? As an adult who is experienced with numbers, when you think about adding two and two, you just *see* that it must be four. How could it be otherwise? It is obvious.

This sort of knowledge-by-obviousness is the crucial foundation of everything we know. All logical proofs rest upon premises that are obvious. All scientific experimentation relies on observations about things in the world that we find obvious. And much of what we know is neither proven nor the result of scientific enquiry: It is obvious to you that you are now in whatever location you are, reading these words. (And it should be.)

We need, then, to incorporate obviousness into our account of knowledge, but doing so is tricky. I want to consider here two different epistemological approaches to this problem.

The first is to say that there are two different kinds of obviousness—one good, one bad—and that we can tell the difference. This is the approach of René Descartes, a seventeenth-century philosopher who made it his mission to rid his mind of falsehood. To accomplish this goal, he differentiates two ways that something can seem obvious, or in his terminology, two ways that he might believe something by nature. They are (1) when he is “driven by a *spontaneous impulse* to believe” the thing and (2) when “some *light of nature* is showing [him] that it is true.”<sup>1</sup> In his view, only the latter is an infallible guide to the truth.

For whatever is shown to me by this light of nature... cannot in any way be doubtful. This is owing to the fact that there can be no other faculty that I can trust as much as this light.... But as far as natural impulses are concerned, in the past I have often judged myself to have been driven by them to make the poorer choice when it was a question of choosing a good; and I fail to see why I should place any greater faith in them [when it comes to] other matters.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, sometimes I automatically believe something—find it obvious—because something within me just leads me to believe it, whether or not I have actually seen its truth. Descartes has in mind beliefs that are hardwired into me; for example, when I feel the sensation of heat, I automatically believe that this sensation is generated by a hot object outside of myself. He could say the same things, however, about beliefs I pick up through habit or imbibe from my culture. If I encounter a new animal and automatically think of it as a creation of God or as a product of evolution, this is often because it is what I have always heard. Because the spontaneity of these beliefs is not

<sup>1</sup> René Descartes, Meditation Three in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, third ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 26, emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.



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## Community Classes 2021-2022 gutenberg.edu/cc

### Series: “It’s Complicated: The Histories Behind What We Think We Know”

We all know that the world is complicated and that people disagree about many things. It is easy to lose track, however, of just how complicated things are. Every day we make use of ideas, take sides in debates, and rely on historical narratives, but in doing so we can ignore the complex histories that shaped those ideas, sides, and narratives.

This series will examine an eclectic array of topics. In each “stand-alone” class, a Gutenberg tutor or community member will discuss a topic based on his or her particular passions and expertise, teasing out the historical complexities with the goal of illuminating various facets of our lives now.

Classes meet every other week on Wednesday evenings at 6:30 PM. In-person and Zoom options are available.

#### Remaining classes this fall:

- Nov. 3: The Battle Bow Will Be Broken: The Civil War, Lincoln, and the Tension at the Heart of America
- Nov. 17: Understanding Critical Theory
- Dec. 1: Sounds from the Past: How Did Music Become “Classical”?

## Young Philosophers gutenberg.edu/philosophers

“Life has never been normal,” wrote C. S. Lewis in an address to students at the outset of World War II. If we are waiting for a better time to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty, we may never get started. In the Young Philosophers series, Gutenberg College opens its (virtual) doors to high-school-age participants for thoughtful online discussion of important ideas. Join the conversation!

#### Remaining 2021-2022 topics:

- Dec. 2: Why Be Virtuous?
- Mar. 3: What Is Freedom?
- May 12: What Is Language?

## The Obvious Problem with Knowledge Continued from page 3

based in reason, Descartes argues that I don’t know whether they are true until I can give additional reasons beyond their obviousness. On the other hand, some beliefs are obvious to me because I see that they must be true and could not be otherwise (such as two plus two equaling four). The light of nature simply illumines my intellect. In this latter case, Descartes says, the obviousness of a belief is due to its truth, so I can’t be wrong about it.

If Descartes is right, this could solve the problem I raised. We just need to determine which beliefs are obvious in the sense of being necessary, handed to us by the light of nature. Unfortunately, even if it is helpful to distinguish in theory between two kinds of obviousness—an arbitrary kind and a truth-guaranteeing kind—the distinction does not help us practically. Descartes’s own practice illustrates this, for even when he appeals to the light of nature in his arguments, he still finds some things obvious that other people find questionable.

For example, he builds one of his proofs for the existence of God on the belief that “the idea of a being more perfect than me necessarily proceeds from a being that really is more perfect.”<sup>3</sup> A lot could be said about such a premise, but suffice it to say that many people have questioned whether this is true, let alone necessarily true and as obvious as math. (I count myself as one of them.) A good argument can even be made that Descartes believes this premise due to the medieval metaphysics he was immersed in—that is, that its obviousness is a result not of the light of reason but of his culture. For another, more concrete example, Descartes also declares it to be certain that outer space must be filled with fluid and not be a vacuum, a conclusion “deduced in an unbroken chain from the first and simplest principles of human knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> That is, Descartes starts with what he sees as obvious, builds on it via steps that are obvious, and he arrives at a conclusion that is false.

Given Descartes’s failure, we could instead consider a second epistemological answer to the problem of obviousness and competing frameworks: relativism. This could even be seen as the opposite of Descartes’s view, since rather than seeking a specific criterion to find the narrow truth, relativism says that all frameworks are equal. It acknowledges that I see things differently from another person but denies that either viewpoint is better. Any judgment between the two is impossible, for it would just be making use of *its* own framework to make the ruling. One can say that under relativism, there is no “God’s-eye” viewpoint, no perspective-free place from which to evaluate frameworks. When it comes, then, to what I find obvious within my conceptual framework, relativism accepts all obviousness as true.

Due to the way that our frameworks shape what we see and influence what we find obvious, it can seem like relativism is inescapable. However, while it is right to note this influence, relativism goes further than it needs to, and there is good reason not to go along with it. Importantly, there is a difference between there *being* no correct perspective and *us not being able to discern* what the correct perspective is.

Suppose that there were a sealed box and inside it was a slip of paper with a number written by Jane Austen. Everyone would like to know what the number is, but there are two problems. First, for some mysterious reason the seal and the box are impossible to break. Second, Austen is dead and she never told anyone the number. Also suppose that many scholars had dedicated their careers to determining what the number is, either by studying the box itself or by examining Austen’s life. In this case, we have a situation where there are many perspectives, and it is impossible to discern which is the correct one. But we also recognize that some of those perspectives are wrong, because there is an answer as to which number is in the box, even if we don’t know what it is. We accept

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>4</sup> René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Part Four, section 206, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.290.

that there is an answer because of two facts: The piece of paper has something written on it (that is, reality is a certain way), and Jane Austen saw it (there is a perspective that correctly perceived that reality).

This is an arbitrary, contrived situation, and one could object that in real life we don't have the guarantee of a correct perspective, as we do here with Austen. Except, if God exists, we do. If there is a God, there is also a God's-eye view. As the author of the reality we are trying to know, God's perspective is better than ours. In fact, this divine perspective is even more important to consider than Austen's in the thought experiment. In the end, nothing much changes if we know what number she wrote. It matters greatly, however, if we are living our lives in accordance with reality. And there is great benefit to us in living this way rather than suffering the consequences of misjudging reality and scraping our knees on it—such great benefit that the existence of a God's-eye view matters even if we cannot ascertain for certain what God sees. It is a goal worth striving for in any case.

Someone might even suggest that we *can* see as God does, since He has provided us with the Bible. This person would be right to bring the Bible into the discussion. We should be seeking to conform the framework through which we see reality to what the Bible says. However, this appeal to the Bible does not solve the problem of obviousness but merely shifts it. Because, unfortunately, just as I interpret the world through a certain framework, I also use that framework to interpret the Bible. It is true that when interpreting the Bible, there is a smaller amount of data to deal with than when looking at the whole world; I am limited by the text that is there. At the same time, however, I still read that text through my conceptual framework. Sometimes the text's meaning is obvious to me, and nevertheless I might be wrong about what it means. Just as rational, respectable people come to different views of reality, rational, respectable people can arrive at different interpretations of the Bible.

As with the relativism discussion above, this does not deny there is a meaning in the Bible I should be seeking. The Bible is crucial to our understanding, and pictures of the world that ignore it will have flaws. Also, I can have a high degree of clarity about some core truths in the Bible: God exists; we are sinners; God is good and saves sinners. But still, I may have a lot wrong in my interpretation, not to mention my application, and these falsehoods may appear to me obviously true.

There is much more that could be said about interpretation, knowledge, and the nature of mental frameworks. This discussion of obviousness is, obviously, incomplete. My goals have been to understand a bit more about why the very idea of knowledge seems problematic in this era of heightened disagreements and to point out that, unfortunately, there is no clear solution to the problem. But before ending, let me mention two things I can do when I acknowledge how hard it is to see my own framework.

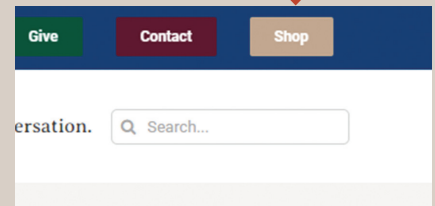
First, I can cultivate friendships that provide a diversity of perspectives. By seeking the views of other people who see things differently, I create more opportunities to encounter resistance to my own framework, with the hope that this will reveal its holes. Seeking diversity is different from relativism because I'm not saying that everyone is right. I'm just acknowledging that the other people are rational, even if I end up deciding they are wrong. This works best when the people with opposing views are friends, people with whom I interact in real life. It is easy to dismiss a piece of text on the internet as obviously irrational. It is harder to do this to my friend.

Finally, I should pray for wisdom. God sees reality, even when I can't, and I need God to protect me from my own blindness. I also need wisdom to know how to navigate this crazy world, a world where, when it comes to so many important things, so many people see their own positions as obvious, yet these positions are diametrically opposed. My needs—our needs—are obvious, and fortunately we can know that God cares for those who turn to Him in their needs.



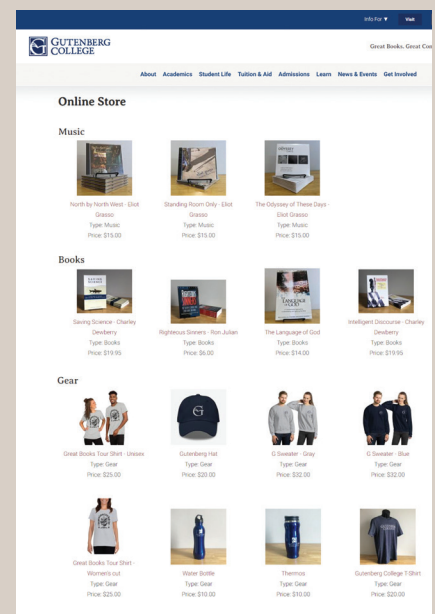
**Brian Julian** is a tutor at Gutenberg College, as well as an alumnus. He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston University. He writes (and cartoons) at [thinkinginthelight.com](http://thinkinginthelight.com), where he aims to make philosophical ideas accessible to a general audience.

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Thanks to Will Dowdy (Class of 2023) and Clayton Glasser (Class of 2011) for design and implementation.





# The Law of Suffering: Looking into the Face of God

John Hemmerich

Gutenberg College welcomed John Hemmerich to its board of governors in September. He graduated from Gutenberg in 2005 and received his juris doctor degree from Liberty University School of Law in 2009. He practices law at Myatt Bell, P.C., in Portland, Oregon, and is a member of the Oregon State Bar.

Not to think about suffering during this last year and a half was difficult. We have discovered new social liturgies that present us with death's mask even when the result goes unseen. The questions of injustice and suffering we face are especially present in my law practice, which sometimes makes itself known most poignantly in my clients, disappointed with the justice to be had in this life. In the Bible, this is felt most keenly in the book of Job. But even though this book is known for addressing the problem of suffering, yet, as a friend of mine once observed, for all its poetic beauty and Socratic dialectic, Job doesn't seem to answer the question at all. One might even come away with the view that God is powerful, we are ignorant, so just apologize to him for asking, "Why suffering?" But this, I think, would be to dismiss the jury too early. And Job is by no means willing to let the judge off so quickly. His three friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (fantastic names for any child today; somebody should give them a chance!), make the common arguments as to why Job is suffering: the moral evil of sin and its solution in repentance. In Adam's case, they would not have been wrong; but in Job's case, they were surprisingly quite wrong. But if you are like me, Job's friends' position is often our default. So how should we see Job's suffering?

In this court room of heavenly and earthly perspective, Job puts God in the dock, and we are introduced to another kind of suffering—not of the wicked but of the righteous. While Job is not let in on the secret, we readers are given a better horizon. We know that God approves of Job, and we hear the divine wager with

Satan. The purpose of Job's suffering is to prove the deceiver wrong, to prove that Job serves God out of a love for God and not for what God gives him.

Suffering is an undisclosed test of life's biggest question for a human being: Do we love God primarily for God himself, or do we love him primarily as a means to our pleasure and power? In the words of Satan, "If you let me touch his body, then he will curse you" (2:5). Job's response to suffering was a matter not just of morals, but of existential loyalty to the good creator despite the real temptation to curse him. The tree in the Garden of Eden raised the same question: Will human beings offer up to God the place of moral and epistemic ultimacy because we love him and it is his rightful place as the good creator, or is God a mere means to our ends?

Initially, Job responded well and does not speak against God, for naked he came into the world, and all is a gift, so naked he will return without complaint (1:21). But eventually Job's insistence upon his innocence (proper as it was initially) and his physical suffering result in him questioning God's justice. Interestingly, Job finds the answer not so much in God's power, which puts Job's ignorance to shame, but in God's very presence. Job declares (42:5-6, ESV):

*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,  
but now my eye sees you;  
therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes.*

After much impassioned thinking, Job finds his answer: His friends were wrong to accuse him, but he was wrong to doubt God. But what is it that changes him? He finds what he needs to know in

the presence of God himself and nothing else. The answer to the question of why Job suffered is not direct—he is never told of the heavenly wager—but rather indirect: Knowing God himself is worth everything this life throws at us.

But the story of Job's suffering raises a lingering objection for us readers: Isn't God just playing with Job? And isn't it morally problematic for the good God to ask humans to suffer as tokens to prove that he is our maker and should be loved without ulterior motive? In Job's answer to his trial of suffering—that we should love God for himself—we stumble over the problem of love and the concern of being used. Does God use us—his creatures—unjustly simply to prove himself great? And this leads us to the deeper problem of the suffering of the innocent creature—sacrificial animals and even young children. Does God use this suffering as the coin to pay off the cost of the good he is to bring about in the world? As Dostoevsky's Ivan asks, is the ticket into this world paid for by the suffering of the innocent creature?<sup>1</sup>

This problem is not overlooked in the Old Testament. David is told that the sacrifices of innocent animals do not set things right with God, for what can be given back to God which did not come from him (Ps. 40:6; 50:12-13)? The writer of Hebrews (10:4) also raises the problem of the insufficiency of animal sacrifice.

Rather, God's personal sacrifice is the central focus of the promise made to Abraham: God will be the surety for his promises (Gen. 15:12-17). In this fascinating passage, God shows Abraham that he will bear the suffering and death necessary to accomplish his promised blessing for man. It is a foretaste of the idea that God knows that the sacrifice of creatures is not enough, the moral problem of forgiveness rests between man and God, and it is God, as the offended party, upon whom it hangs.

The idea of a substitutionary sacrifice is surprisingly central to this teaching. Some think negatively of this idea of penal substitution because they interpret it as an example of the very problem—namely, God is asking man to suffer for what God wants to accomplish.<sup>2</sup> From this cynical angle, God is willing to ask his son, a third party, to be a sacrificial substitute for another part of creation.



Here, we have the cruel vision of the god who asks for humans to pass their children through the fire to show how much they serve him, how far they are willing to go. But the sacrificial substitution found in the Old Testament and the cross of the New Testament are the exact repudiation of this notion of creaturely sacrifice, even while maintaining the truth that each person owes God a sacrificial love. The central question, however, is not whether love requires sacrifice, but rather who is willing to sacrifice first. In Genesis 15, God does not ask Abraham to pass between the sacrificed animals as a pledge, nor is it Israel who bears the penalty of her own misdeeds in Isaiah 53, but in fact, it is God who promises to have his mysterious servant act in Israel's place (Is. 52:13-14).

Job found his answer in the presence of God. To ponder the mystery of suffering, we also need to look at the face of God in another place, the place of the cross. In Jesus, we find the fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament. Jesus is the one who will suffer on behalf of the people. When Jesus is asked, "Show us the Father," he replies, "Have I been with you so long and you do not recognize me?" (Jn. 14:8-21). Jesus' suffering was not the suffering of just a creature whom God asked to bear the costs of making a good world, but in fact, it is the maker—in the very form of the creature—who is sacrificed for the life of the world. Salvation is the act of one God, as heavenly Father and earthly Son in the power of the Spirit on behalf of Adam.

God decided he would make this sacrifice from the very beginning. From the "foundation of the world," God counted the cost of allowing sin and deemed it worthy of his sacrifice. He does not ask his creatures to suffer to prove that he is a good maker, but he decided first that he was willing to suffer for the inherent glory of demonstrating his righteousness in keeping covenant with Abraham, even to die for his people to bring about the blessing he promised (Rom. 3:26).

More specifically, suffering is shown to be good in the very act of forgiveness. God chose to be the hero who forgives his people and bears their reproach. Many people miss that forgiveness is not trivial but rather a deep suffering and that forgiveness is inherently an act

of divine penal substitution. We do not often think of it this way, but God was a victim of sin in the Garden and on the cross. God substitutes his forgiveness for our punishment. The one forgiving gives up his rights and suffers as a result of his free act. If God forgives, he must suffer in the act of putting away his displeasure and forbearing the judgment of the one who betrayed him (Col. 2:14). But he does this for his own glory and for our sakes, and then he asks us to be like him in our forgiveness of others (Matt. 6:14). So, he tells us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him (Matt. 16:24-26). God does not push the creature into suffering for the world but has set his own heart upon this heroic love and then calls us to join him, hand in hand. For the oppressor, this means to turn from our oppression; but for the victim of sin, it means to forgive.

In this way, the question that the story of Job raises—"Is creaturely suffering the coin God uses to pay for the life of the world?"—is answered with a resounding "no." The cost we pay, unless we refuse the washing of our feet on his dime, is only a sympathetic reflection of the real cost of his cross—a cost he paid on our behalf, a cost born by the good shepherd, the substitutionary lamb, from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). So, we should walk away from Job with a new appreciation for what Paul proclaims in wonder, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Although I see many injustices in the practice of law, rather than despair, I try to take heart and remind those around me that, in our pain, we utter what we do not understand, but we should stand with Job and know that:

Our Redeemer lives,  
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
And after our skin has been thus destroyed,  
yet in our flesh we shall see God,  
whom we shall see for ourselves,  
and our eyes shall behold, and not another.  
Our hearts faint within us!<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, (Penguin Books New York, 1880, reprint 2003), 308, 316.

<sup>2</sup> See discussion in: Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2004), 82.

<sup>3</sup> Job 19:25-27, ESV. The singular has been changed to plural.



## Week Two in Western Civilization

And a Review by Eliot Grasso

The "question of the week" was this: What scientific and technological solutions were developed in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries to address the problems raised during the Reformation? Two "sub-questions" included: (1) How did Western civilization's understanding of epistemology change from the medieval period through the rise of modern science? (2) What were the major stumbling blocks in the development of modern science? Students read selections from Francis Bacon, Blaise Pascal, and Robert Boyle to discuss answers. Tutor Eliot Grasso has this to say about Bacon's *Novum Organum*, or *The New Instrument*:

Known to many as the father of the scientific method, Bacon writes of the hurdles one must jump in order to make progress in the sciences. The barriers to progress involve four idols of the mind: that of the tribe (the misguided and wayward tendencies of human nature), that of the den (the particular quirks of an individual), that of the market (the way language shapes how we know things and how we talk about things), and that of the theater (the dominant philosophical assumptions and schools that decide what sorts of inquiries are allowed). Bacon suggests that these idols can be destroyed by using his new method that seeks to minimize the impact of these idols. In the end, readers may find themselves wondering if the method he proposes is capable of circumventing the complexities of human nature.

COLLOQUY FALL 2021



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Find meaning?  
Pursue truth?  
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