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The Dangers of Universal Answers

In an era where new information is constantly being discovered, adhering to universal answers can be extremely dangerous. Universal answers are explanations that deem to be absolutely true for all, irrespective of the person or circumstance. These all-encompassing answers alarmingly act as a resistance to newfound knowledge, preventing alternative perspectives and ideas. Francis Bacon, the author of “Four Idols”, is a well-known philosopher that talks about the dangers of having universal truths. Specifically, his section on the Idols of the Theater corroborates how our knowledge gets distorted as we take into account our belief systems, making it hard to apply universal answers. Bacon argues that common belief systems, such as cultural and religious values, prevent the expedition for true knowledge. Such belief systems significantly affect a person’s perspective and makes it exhausting to accept a cookie-cutter answer that applies to everyone. He is skeptical of such systematic worldviews as it resists newfound knowledge and prevents us from understanding our surroundings.  
 Universal answers are taught to be answers that are true all the time, no matter the situation at hand. This is quite dangerous as it leaves little room for critical thinking and questioning, as it forces us to believe in the answer rather than understand the reason behind it. Bacon introduces this phenomenon by stating, “For they are no wise disparaged — the question between them and me being only as to the way. For as the saying is, the lame man who keeps the right road outstrips the runner who takes a wrong one” (Bacon 61). Here, Bacon emphasizes that there is a critical difference between his way of thinking and simply accepting universal truths. He believes that the intent of both are the same; however, traditional methods of simply accepting a mainstream answer leads to less true understanding in the long run, compared to critically thinking about an answer. He illustrates this through his metaphor of a “runner” and a “lame man”, where the runner has a faster pace, but is on the wrong path. This implies that the slow lame man will make more meaningful progress as he is on the right track. This ties into reality, where Bacon describes that truly understanding something may take longer, but it is more fulfilling compared to blindly accepting a universal truth.   
 Bacon is skeptical of absolute worldviews because our knowledge gets distorted through our belief systems. Every human has different systems of thinking; some may have religious and cultural obligations that they take into account. Bacon describes this in detail when talking about the Idols of the Theater. He mentions, "But the Idols of the Theater are not innate, nor do they steal into the understanding secretly, but are plainly impressed and received into the mind from the playbooks of philosophical systems and the perverted rules of demonstration" (Bacon 61). The Idols of the Theater describes how our “playbooks of philosophical systems” are made-up narratives compared to reflections of our true world. Bacon also mentions how our “perverted rules of demonstration” demonstrates that our knowledge is pre-filtered through our belief systems, making our viewpoints unreliable when it comes to uncovering the truth. When a person inherits a worldview, they inherit ideologies and beliefs associated with that perspective. Having even somewhat strong cultural or religious values leads to uncertainty in forming absolute answers because everyone has unique views that are affected by their own belief systems.   
 As humans, we tend to believe that the human perspective is the true, correct perspective; this may not be absolutely, universally accurate. Bacon articulates the limitations of human understanding, where he mentions, "The human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it" (Bacon 41). Here, Bacon associates the human mind with a “false mirror”, depicting that human comprehension does not picture the world in an accurate light. Bacon has the idea that different organisms have different ways of interpreting and understanding the world. For example, cats have their own view of the world, and humans have a different set of functions they utilize to help them perceive issues. The only things humans can rely on are things we have invented and seen with our own eyes, as there’s no other perspective we have access to besides the human perspective. Thus, the way we view the world may not be consistent with true reality.   
 Day by day, people are discovering fresh information that can impact their views, opinions, and objective truths. Having universal truths stops the search for newfound knowledge and critical thinking to happen. Absolute truths also disregards alternative viewpoints and discourages humans to dig deeper at specific issues. The Idols of the Theater is critiquing how humans are constantly, and sometimes unconsciously, influenced by these big systems of thinking: cultural, philosophical, religious. Our belief systems do not help us understand the world in a clear manner. With these inherent biases, it becomes extremely difficult for humans to fully conceptualize and accept the true knowledge of the world. So many people have different beliefs such as religious and cultural values which comes in the way of constructing an answer that applies to every single person in every situation possible. Overall, Francis Bacon’s philosophies describe how difficult it is to build universal truths in a world of diversity and growing information.

Works Cited

Bacon, Francis. "The Four Idols." Course Handout.