

“A Good Chance to Shut Up”  
A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
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## Introduction

Well, Rome, Rome, Rome. The dominos continue to fall in the Western World, more and more governments shifting toward to Right.

Last weekend, the center-left Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi resigned after a resounding defeat at the polls. The victors were populist parties such as the Five Star Movement, led by former comedian Beppe Grillo whose catchphrase is, “Vote with your heart, not your head.”

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Both Great Britain and the United States have recently experienced a spate of this mindless, heartfelt voting. Spain’s government is too fragmented to govern effectively and shifting right with each election, and France is beginning a presidential race that will most likely drive the country far to the right.

Populism across the Western World nowadays means right wing and nationalist. One of the few countries that has rejected a turn to the right recently has been Austria, home country of Adolf Hitler.

Too often we fall victim to American exceptionalism and forget that our politics—far from being unique—mirrors the Western European powers that colonized this hemisphere. Our politicians copy European models and visa versa, for good and ill.

Last week I tried to think through an alternative to our current culture of “if I feel it, it’s real.” One solution I think is the skepticism practiced by some in the ancient world. As I mentioned last week, the Chinese philosopher Mengzi, twenty-three-hundred years ago, said that no god or law is going to stop people from acting according to human nature. And he suggested three “natural” human reactions to a stressful situation: rushing in; freaking out; or stopping and strategizing.

I suggest that right-wing populism is about the second option: freaking out.

I also mentioned what probably stands as the ultimate skepticism, the idea attributed to a mythological figure in the Middle Ages who said, “nothing is true, everything is permitted.” My argument is that, far from being a statement of ultimate “I can do whatever I want,” those words are actually a statement of ultimate responsibility: after

each of us realizes we can perpetrate—and get away with—the most heinous of crimes, we each realize that we must decide how we will act in the world, and then take responsibility for our actions. As Bob Dylan once put it, “To live outside the law, you must be honest.”

It is in that considered moment—that moment between stimulus and response—that we have the power of choice.

Yes, we realize, we *can* vote with our hearts; we *can* choose our news stories with our hearts; we can choose our religion and politics with our hearts . . . but the cumulative outcome of everyone acting in such ways is predictable, and it ain’t pretty.

My suggestion last week that silence is a place of power is based in the idea that thought should and can precede action—fools rush in where Unitarians should . . . think before treading.

Most of the us here at First Unitarian Society have taken the time to think about reality. To think about truth. We come here because we include our heads in our choices, whether that be in religion, politics, personal morality, or buying a toaster. We believe in evidence and in thinking about things. We find it problematic to “vote with your heart, not your head.”

One

Reason is on the ropes these days. We know now—it has been experimentally proven—that human beings often aren’t reasoning when we think we are. But the Chinese philosopher I mentioned last week, Mengzi, already knew that. Last week, I mentioned the anecdote he used:

Imagine you’re walking down a road and you see a child standing on some rotten boards covering an abandoned well. What do you do? Mengzi postulated three natural responses:

You run and sweep in and save the kid.  
You freak out and go the pieces.  
Or you stop and calculate what is best to do.

Mengzi thought that these natural responses show us the basis for human ethics and how we build from emotion to reason.

Now, here’s another story about helping someone:

Perhaps it’s because I’m often called cynical, but I have a soft spot for the Cynic philosophers of Ancient Greece. (Capital C Cynic.) An early philosopher in this tradition

was named Pyrrho. (No, he didn't set fires.) Pyrrho. The Cynics taught that the cause of human unhappiness is that we place value on the wrong things.

The story goes that Pyrrho was walking down the road one day and lo and behold there was his old Cynic philosophy teacher Anaxarchus thrashing in a lake, clearly about to drown. "Pyrrho! Help me!" Anaxarchus cried.

Pyrrho glanced his teacher's way . . . and went on walking.

Some days later Pyrrho was out walking again and who should he meet coming the other way but his old teacher Anaxarchus. "Oh, didn't drown," said Pyrrho.

"No," Anaxarchus responded, "and you are clearly my greatest student. You live the highest standards of Cynicism!"

Whether or not that's a true story, the Cynics taught that the value we put on things determines our happiness or our discontent in life.

If you want to be happy for the rest of your life, the Cynics said, you've got to think through what they called the *pragmata*—life's little things that add up: what do you value and what does it mean that you value that and not this other thing?

The Cynics were good Religious Naturalists. Like the Daoists, they said, *Look closely at nature: what does nature value?*

Well, said the Cynics, it appears that nature values everything that exists . . . equally. So, it is the value that we human beings falsely give to things and events that makes us unhappy. (Sounds like Buddhism, doesn't it?)

The Cynics recommended that we be *a-doxastous*. "Doxy" means "belief" in Greek. "Orthodox" means you believe the right way. A-doxy means you don't choose. You don't put value anywhere more than anywhere else.

Had he jumped in to save the life of his beloved old teacher, Pyrrho would have been interfering in the natural course of events, and he would have been valuing saving his teacher over getting to where he was going, and he would have been ignoring the sequence of events that led to his teacher falling into danger.

We know that living this way is absurd, but that's one of the differences between Eastern and Western thinking. Eastern thinking sticks with what's pragmatic, Western thinking gets abstract and absurd in order to make a point.

The Cynics are there with their extreme example to point out that life is about choices —we choose *this* instead of *that*. And with each choice we make, we are assigning value to things: You came here this morning instead of going to champaign brunch.

You chose this instead of that. If you put some money in the offering plate, you chose to spend your money this way and not that way. And on and on. *Pragmata*, as the Cynics pointed out.

We must remember that the sort of reason recommended in the Ancient West was not what we nowadays think of as the scientific method. That didn't come along for another thousand years after the time when most Western philosophical ideas developed.

The "reason" that the Cynics were promoting is what we would nowadays consider meditation or mindfulness: getting into the moment; focusing—finding the silence beyond the chatter; gaining the power of reflection; then acting in a way that is both moral and useful.

Reason is a form of meditation or mindfulness, and I think we do well to consider reason a form of emotion and use it in that context.

In our decisions about religion, politics, relationships. Soap. Clothing. Toasters. All our choices are based in our values . . . or in our ignoring or confusing our values.

How are we assigning value? Are we valuing with our hearts or with our heads or with a considered measure of each?

Two

Back to that idea that the Cynics had about valuation. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "All of life is a dispute over taste and tasting." "All of life is a dispute over taste and tasting." That sounds pretty cynical, doesn't it? Life is a dispute—that's one claim. And at least fairly often most of us feel like life is all about dispute. But what's all the disputes of life about? Nietzsche answers: taste and the act of tasting.

I taste something. I like it. And I'm ready to go to the mat for it. I'm ready to argue with you till the cows come home, as the old saying goes. I'm ready to fight, kill, and die.

My taste says that being Norwegian is better than being Guatemalan. Let's go! I'm ready to fight! I think a free market economy is better than a controlled economy. Get ready—let's have it! I had a mystical experience, and I know there's a god. I'm ready to fight all-ya'll.

Taste.

Nietzsche is making the claim that liking cupcakes better than pie and believing that god will judge the living and the dead at the end of the world are on the same playing field—taste. It's just personal taste.

The Cynics said, all that *pragmata*, all that stuff in the world—you're assigning subjective and arbitrary value to it. The value . . . isn't there. Again, that doesn't mean that moral actions don't exist, and it doesn't mean that nothing is right or wrong, it merely means that when we're following our hearts alone, we can make serious errors of valuation.

For example, one of my values is having two legs and being able to use them. After my back surgery, being able to walk has become both more important and less important to me. My experience has taught me that using my legs is a wonderful thing, but not an ultimate good that I must have to survive. I've discussed this with people who have lost the use of their legs. And they RE-E-VALUE-ATED life and found other values. And continued living well and happily.

That's one example. But you get the idea. Ableism is pretty clearly a set of bogus values. Misperceiving.

So is sexism. And racism. And on. Valuations based on false choices.

"But, I FEEL DEEPLY that men are superior to women!" "I FEEL DEEPLY that there's a personal god!"

"I feel it; it must be true!"

False valuation. Why am I so convinced I'm right? We need to stop and think why we value this instead of that. Or as the political satirist Will Rogers put it succinctly: "Never miss a good chance to shut up."

Sometimes we need to take that chance to shut up and think about values. Maybe even listen . . .

Three

The Stoic philosopher Publilius Syrus (85 BCE-43 BCE)—a Roman slave from Syria—said, "Would you have a great empire? Rule over yourself!"

I think that the first rule of ruling yourself is—never miss a good chance to shut up. There is power in silence. And there is respect in listening to what others have to say about taste and values. That's how we make First Unitarian Society a safe place to share dangerous ideas.

Read the Billy Collins poem "Cosmology." The poem comically makes a very serious point: We human beings are capable of creating world views—value systems—out of thin air. And pretty soon instead of questioning whether or not the world rests on the

head of Keith Richards, we're wondering what would happen if Keith Richards shook his head. We live in stories and we stop questioning the stories.

Humanism is about stepping outside and beyond the story; the box; the head / heart dichotomy; it's about stepping outside both the science and the narratives. Then. Then is the silence that is the power to act in both integrity and compassion.

As a Humanist, I believe that the world is as the world is. There's simply no evidence that we have any invisible helpers out there. But there's lots of evidence that what we do to each other is what happens to us. So, instead of worrying about the invisible friends, Humanism calls us to do something about what we see and how we treat each other.

Our job of work is to look at what is; see it as it is; and do our best to to make this world a better place. Our job is to vote with our hearts AND our heads.

That seems simple and obvious to me, to tell you the truth. But it clearly isn't simple for many of our fellow citizens.

We can freak out about that. Or we can figure out what to do about it.

## Conclusion

When you stare seriously at reality, you discover that it is staring back.

Sometimes, reality has a friendly expression, and we say, "god loves me!" Sometimes reality has a snarl: "god hates me!" Actually, nature, reality, the void, don't give a good gosh-darn about you or me or any of us.

That's the beginning of being a Religious Naturalist: Nature simply doesn't have our values. Nature doesn't care about my loved ones any more or less than it cares about your loved ones. Nature doesn't value who gets cancer and who doesn't. Nature doesn't care if you or I walk or not . . . Nature doesn't care who is rich and who is poor. Our values and nature's values just don't mesh.

That's what the Cynics and the Daoists and the Buddhists and the Stoics, *et cetera*, are trying to teach us: Look into the void and you will find it looking back.

It isn't your friend. It isn't your enemy. It just is. And you and I just are . . . But we can talk, we can listen . . . we can find mutual meaning and value. We can support each other. That can save us.