

## It Depends on the Translation

Many years ago, I was having a conversation with the woman I was dating. I forget the details, but the discussion was on one of those controversial verses in the Christian scriptures and she was telling me what she believed it said. I went to my bookshelf, opened my edition of the Greek New Testament, and translated the verse for her. Her immediate response to my reading, which apparently didn't support her view: it depends on the translation.

My problem with her response was not that I am infallible and could not have erred in my reading. My problem was not that I had actually learned the original language of the Christian scriptures and she hadn't. My problem was not that I took these issues seriously and had spent years wrestling with them and she was simply repeating an argument that had been refuted hundreds of years before. My problem was the automatic response that had served her so well on the other times she had had this discussion: It depends on the translation. Any attempt to explain that she was groundlessly questioning my translation fell on deaf ears.

I run into this type of thinking quite frequently. Many people believe that whatever beliefs they hold (especially on religion and politics) are valid because they hold them, and are offended when you show how they might be mistaken. Even worse, there is an anti-intellectual under-current, such that people will say to me, "Well, I haven't studied it like you have, but here's what I think," and leave thinking the same as when they entered. People who would never presume their knowledge of plumbing equaled that of their plumber or of cars equaled that of their mechanic, have no trouble saying, "Well I've never studied biology, astronomy, languages, psychology, etc., but here's what I believe and what we should teach our children." I earned my doctorate researching a pseudo-phenomenon known as "flashbulb memory"; I can't tell you how many times I finish a discussion of this in class and people say to me, "Well, that's interesting that you found memories are less detailed and consistent than people believe, but I remember perfectly where I was when . . ."

We're not omniscient. We live in a complex inter-connected world, where most of us have no clue how the objects that we rely on work. I have no idea how my computer is storing this essay, how the internet works that allows me to distribute this, how my iPod works that allows me to listen to music while writing, or how my cell phone works to discuss this with friends. We live in a complex world where much of what we learned as children has been overturned by new discoveries that we do not always possess the prerequisites to properly evaluate. We live in a complex world where the evidence we need may be difficult to acquire and the logical argument assembling that evidence can be long and difficult to follow. We live in a complex world where solutions to large problems are not obvious and reasonable people can reasonably disagree. However, that we might not be able to come to a singular definitive answer doesn't mean that all answers are equally reasonable. Knowledge is more, not less, important in these situations.

There is no shame in saying that one does not know something, that one had been wrong, that one had made an error, that if one had known a particular fact they would have evaluated a situation differently. The only shames are in an unwillingness to learn and to change when one learns new facts. As for myself, I expose myself to correction and growth every day by taking both formal and informal classes, by offering credit to my students who find mistakes in my lectures, and to students who find the answers to questions that stump me in class. I don't do

these things because they are easy; I don't offer credit for finding mistakes because they are rare; I'm not happy when someone has shown that I erred; I do these things because they ultimately help me become a better person.

The pursuit of knowledge is a difficult and often lonely affair. I often feel that all I've done is explore a tiny island surrounded by an ocean of my ignorance. Every day, I try to reclaim a little more land from the sea, rebuild walls that were built on too flimsy a foundation, and hopefully build bridges to others' islands. I relish the guidance I have been given by those who have explored before me and the companionship of those who explore with me. We may now be knee deep in the messy muddle of the real world in exploring, but we gain nothing by slinging it at each other. Come walk with me where the motivating power of being willing to say "je ne sais pas" doesn't depend on the translation. Let's go explore.

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