



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Two-Sidedness of Life

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All things are relative. They are known to us only in comparison to and/or in relation to something else.

Black - White
High - Low
Cold - Hot
Near - Far

To an ant, a four-inch brick is very high.

To a three-year-old, an adult is very tall.

On the flat prairie, the grain storage tower (maybe sixty feet high) is much taller than anything else around.

On a quiet millpond, a ten-foot rowboat is very large. On the trackless ocean it is but a tiny chip.

When I first came to Atlanta twenty or so years ago, the Hyatt Regency Hotel was the tallest building downtown. Its top was a blue-domed restaurant that rotated. From there, on a clear day, I could see all of Atlanta stretched out beneath me. Today, the Regency with its blue dome is still there, but I can't see all of Atlanta from its vantage point anymore.

What I can see are many other buildings surrounding the hotel – all of them much taller. The blue-domed restaurant is now down in a well of tall buildings.

Life is two-sided. What I see and what it means to me depends upon my vantage point. There is always another side – another point of view. Insofar as I can tell, there is no one position that can be declared to be the “right” one.

Sometimes I wish it were possible to discover “the right point of view” – no shading – no uncertainty – no possibility of another position that might be correct, or that might need to be taken into account. It would seem to be so much less confusing, so uncomplicated.

Come to think of it, two-sided doesn't provide enough sides. Maybe the title of this paper should be, “The Multi-Sidedness of Life.”

Black and white aren't the only possibilities. There are all the shades of gray in between. In fact, all black is not the same color, nor is all white.

I drive a white car. Whether or not it is white isn't at issue. It happens that a lot of other people in this area drive white cars. Therefore, when I park my car at the mall, I am likely to park alongside or near other cars that are white. Even though all the cars are

white, they aren't all the same color of white. While it is very difficult to describe the difference, upon observation, they clearly are different colors.

So I say, "My car is the white one."

You say, "No, my car is the white one."

And you say, "No, my car is the white one."

In truth, all the cars are white. And yet we three can stand and look at them and know which belongs to whom by the difference in color, even though all of them are white.

In a way, this is a parable of relationships. The three of us can differ mildly, get into a heated argument, come to blows, or break our relationship over the issue of which car is truly the white one. Or, the three of us can accept that there is only one word to describe the color of our cars, and, at the same time, recognize that each of them is different from the others. Indeed, it would be possible to strengthen our relationship as we accept the reality that the cars are the same color, yet of a different color.

Your point of view doesn't have to be the same as mine. In fact, I don't think it can be – not exactly.

We both believe that God is love. We also accept that we do not believe exactly the same thing. We cannot. Of necessity, the vantage point from which we each experience God is not the same. Therefore, our statement, in the same words, that God is love, carries a different meaning for each of us, and may well convey a different meaning to any who hear our statement.

I believe this is true of all the aspects of life. I am different from every other human being. I see from a different set of circumstances and experiences. I draw conclusions that are my own unique conclusions. I decide what I believe on the basis of those conclusions. So do you.

Although it is sometimes confusing, it is remarkably helpful to understand about the multi-sidedness of life. Then I am both more accepting of you and of me. I am able to be more patient and tolerant. I can broaden my view by undertaking to "see through your eyes." I can differ with you without having to determine, in some kind of absolute sense, who is right and who is wrong.

Interestingly enough, I am likely to be more comfortable and secure in my own point of view when I am willing to accept that you have a different one.

Having read this far, you may say to me, "You've made your case. People have a huge variety of points of view. Now what do you want me to do with this information? Are you, perhaps, suggesting that we can't get at the truth, but only at points of view?"

In a way, I am suggesting that it is impossible to get at the truth – truth in some kind of absolute and objective sense. And then I am thinking about the implication of that bit of reality in my life and in yours. To discuss this further, I want to use religious belief – or truth, if you prefer – as the illustrating subject. Insofar as I can tell, what I express applies to any and all sets of beliefs and points of view – religious or otherwise.

And, of course, I am expressing my own point of view. You will respond from your own point of view.

You remember the scripture account. Jesus had been arrested, and, in addition to being before the High Priest and others, he was brought before Pilate. It seems that Pilate, whatever his belief system, was having some difficulty dealing with Jesus and the charges of the Jewish leaders.

At one point, (see John 18:37-38) Pilate, trying to establish some kind of fact that would enable him to accede to the demands of the Jewish leaders, said to Jesus, “So you are a king?”

Jesus answered him, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

And Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”

To testify to the truth. Jesus didn’t answer Pilate’s question, and it may be that there isn’t a final, definitive answer. It may be that we human beings are called upon to “study the evidence” and decide for ourselves – each one of us – what is truth for us. Maybe it is my task to contemplate all that I observe and that goes on around me, and then to decide for myself what I believe to be the truth.

Since it seems impossible to establish one point of view as “the correct one,” I find it highly desirable to work out my own point of view and the reasons for it, and then to be willing to approach my life from that point of view – and I remind myself that my point of view is always in comparison with and/or in relation to another.

For instance, I believe God to be unconditionally loving. I raise the question with myself, “Over against what?”

“Against what?” could be the belief that God is conditionally loving, or that God is not loving at all. Without some concept with which to compare my belief, I have no boundaries – no benchmarks to confirm what I believe.

I need, then, to recognize, accept, and keep in mind that I approach life from the thesis that life is two-sided – not alone multi-sided, but two-sided in a rather specific sort

of way. There is always a point of view over against my own, and its very existence gives my own credibility.

The people with whom I am friends in West Virginia have a particular way to tell me how far it is from one place to another. They always tell me in terms of how long it takes to make the trip – never in terms of miles to be traveled. On the other hand, I am accustomed to thinking and speaking in terms of the distances to be traversed.

I ask, “How far is it from Charleston to Wheeling?”

And I get the reply, “It is about three hours.”

Since I am accustomed to thinking in terms of miles per hour on interstate highways, I quickly estimate that the distance is approximately 180 miles. It turns out that the estimate is correct if I travel interstate highways between Charleston and Wheeling, but it isn’t correct if I travel by way of two-lane highways. Even so, the distance, measured by time, remains correct.

If I ask, “How far is it from Beckley to Parsons?” I get the reply, “It is between 2 and 2 ½ hours.” There are no interstate highway-type roads between Beckley and Parsons. If I use the measure, my mileage estimate is way too high.

Quite legitimately, my friend might say, in answer to my question, “Measured by what?”

“Measured by what?” Everything I know and believe is expressed in terms of something else, whether I use words or not.

The concept opens vistas for me.

When I was a child, I pretty much accepted what I was taught – or what I thought I was taught – as being the absolute truth. I didn’t doubt. I didn’t ask questions except to seek clarification. The ones who taught me – parents, school teachers, Sunday School teachers, and ministers in particular – were supposed to know the truth. It wasn’t fitting for me to question the truth of what they taught me. I don’t know where I got that particular belief, and I didn’t realize that I was interpreting and giving a particular meaning to what I was taught. It didn’t occur to me to check as to whether or not what I interpreted was what they meant.

Nor did I realize that there could be another side to what I was taught – not until I began to sense some contradictions in the teachings.

One of the biggest such contradictions had to do with the nature and behavior of God.

On the one hand, I was taught that “God is Love” – with a capital “L.” On the other hand, I was taught that I must obey God at all cost. If I did not, I was assured, God would punish me with hell fire and damnation. These teachings weren’t supposed to be contradictory.

As it turned out, I experienced love from my parents and family. I didn’t know if that love was the same as God’s Love (I supposed that it was not). Even so, I knew that my parents loved me. I also knew that they expected me to obey them.

However, I didn’t always obey my parents. When I did not, they called me to account and punished me with a punishment that “fit the crime.” I rarely believed that they were unfair. I was punished, but I was never condemned, nor did I live in dread of being cast out of the family. They loved me – unconditionally or not – and they would never cast me out. I could count on their love.

When the teaching, as I understood it, was both that God loved me, and that God would cast me into outer darkness (hell) if I did not obey him, I saw two points of view. I couldn’t accept them both.

I believed that my parents loved me and would continue to love me whether I obeyed them or not. I could measure that love by how they consistently expressed it, and by how they treated me.

I saw people behave toward other people in ways that seemed quite unloving. They did hurtful and destructive things to each other. They were demanding. They were condemning and rejecting of each other. They broke relationship and cast each other out of their lives. I couldn’t believe that people who treated each other these ways loved each other. It was more as if they hated each other.

It seemed reasonable to me to measure whether or not God loved me by what I understood of God’s treatment of me. If God is Love, it seemed reasonable to me to expect God to express it much as I experienced my parents express it. If God is Love, I did not expect God to treat me in unloving ways.

I decided that God did love me, and that God would not condemn me, nor cast me into hell even if I did not always obey him. I expected to be punished in some way, but not by being cast out.

I could have decided that God would condemn me and cast me into hell for being disobedient. But, if he was that kind of God, he did not love me. I could not believe that he could be both ways. And yet, I knew then, and know now, that other people believe differently than I.

No matter where I turn, and no matter what I do, I encounter the reality of two-sidedness. As I indicated earlier in this paper, what I see of life and what it means to me depends upon my vantage point. Further, as I indicated, it is remarkably helpful to

believe this. There aren't absolutes of which I can be aware. I have measures. I have criteria. I reach my conclusions over against other conclusions.

I conclude that life is two-sided. As I go about my life, I decide where I stand – what I believe – and why. I accept that there is not an absolute that I can know. Further, I accept responsibility for my decisions, and for where I stand.

And I accept that life is two-sided for everyone. I have found answers. I am still searching for answers. Our answers may be similar, and they may differ.

No matter. After the manner of God, we can continue to love each other.