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A Quest for Healthier Thought and Discourse

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This is the third of a three-part series of reflections, following 'The Danger of Apologetics' (https://adversariapodcast.com/2022/01/07/the-danger-of-apologetics/) and 'Unruly Media and Our Disordered Discourse' (https://adversariapodcast.com/2022/01/11/unruly-media-and-our-disordered-discourse/).

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You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2.

Transcript

Over a month ago, I started a series of podcasts on the issue of the danger of apologetics, as I called it. I didn't complete the series, I only produced two, so I thought I'd produce this final reflection to wrap things up. Within the first of the podcasts, I talked about the way in which apologetics tends to work in terms of a mediating foil for our thought.

That mediating foil can be provided by errors that we want to dismiss or attack, or on the other hand, by positions or persons that we want to be agreeable to. While apologetics is a very important activity for Christians to engage in, if our thinking primarily occurs in contexts where we are trying to position ourselves relative to such foils, whether for or against, it will greatly limit our ability to think about the truth of God on its own terms, or to approach matters in a more imaginative fashion, breaking out of the straitjacket of typical questions and approaching matters from a different angle. When the concern to find ammunition against opposing positions, or material with which to build up our positions as a defence against them, or alternatively, ways in which we might present Christian faith as being more congruent with or agreeable to certain widely held social

beliefs, becomes our preoccupation, we will increasingly approach the text of scripture and the truth of God listening for things that are useful to us, rather than actually listening to those things on their own terms.

One of the results of this, for instance, is very narrowed criteria of truth and greatly constrained realms of enquiry. Having read, for instance, vast quantities of material that evangelicals have written on the subject of sexual difference and the relationship between men and women, one of the things that has often jumped out at me is just how profoundly the gender wars have constrained and constricted people's attention. Coming at the text with the preoccupations of modern readers, people are mostly listening to the text for the things that will help them in their arguments, not actually to hear what the text says on its own terms.

The result is that our understandings of the relations between men and women tend to get focused upon issues of controversy, and large parts of scripture that do not answer to the needs of those controversies so readily are neglected in the course of our enquiries, parts of scripture like the Song of Songs, for instance. Likewise, when most of our thinking occurs in the context of ideological battles, we can lose sight of the more subtle ways in which scripture teaches us, ways that might not be suited to provide us with knockdown arguments against the other side, but which nonetheless give us clear insight into God's world and his word, and guidance for our lives within them. In the second of the two podcasts I got into the issue of our social media platforms and how they affect our modes and our objects of discourse.

On social media in particular, it's very difficult to detach the ideas that we're talking about from the way that we're trying to represent ourselves and act relative to each other. As a result, our thinking increasingly becomes driven by tribal dynamics, herd dynamics, and about our need to affiliate with or distance ourselves from other parties. People's skins, as it were, become thinner as what they say is increasingly associated with who they are.

Social media is a sort of shared spectacle in which we're constantly signalling to each other. Even the sort of people who will speak dismissively about virtue signalling are often signalling to people of their own tribe, trying to signal their affiliation by the way that they say things and who they argue against. In the context of social media, because of the live character of the discourse that's taking place, there is not the inertness that you'd usually have in the case of printed words.

Rather, words are things that people are doing things with. Tweets, for instance, can so often be understood primarily as sub-tweets rather than in terms of what they actually have as their content. This is because the tweet is an action, and the meaning of the action can be seen primarily, for many, in who is acting, towards whom, and in what context.

What is the person who made that tweet seeking to do with it? While the sort of interpretation that this yields can be deeply defined by suspicion, we should appreciate the degree to which this is merely responding to the character of the media that are being used. Nevertheless, one of the consequences of this is to make it very difficult to think about things in a principal manner. When you are thinking about things primarily in terms of who is acting towards whom, it is very difficult to stand back and judge statements in terms of some more objective criteria.

This doesn't mean that objective criteria are the only ones that matter. Many of the most significant differences and issues that we have today arise from inter-subjective factors, things to do with the way that we represent history, the way that we see ourselves represented by leaders and others, the ways in which we feel ourselves to belong or not belong, the way in which we imagine society. These things are not objective as such, but they are nonetheless real and very important for understanding how society works.

However, if we are going to be thinking about truth, it is profoundly difficult to do so if we are thinking primarily in terms of inter-subjective and subjective dynamics. In the grand spectacle of social media, where thought becomes so tribalised, so driven by these sorts of inter-subjective dynamics, it is very difficult to think about things carefully on their own terms. It is also very difficult to find the distance with which you can look at things from without.

We are so often deeply entangled with the objects of our enquiry, which greatly complicates our ability to think well about them. When we are emotionally and otherwise entangled in the issues that we are trying to understand, it is very difficult to think about them clearly. They are far too close to us.

At worst we can become like cornered animals, creatures of pure reaction that do not have the space within which to craft a true response. One of the people I've found very helpful in thinking through some of these issues is Edwin Friedman. In his work Failure of Nerve he talks about some of the dynamics that we see in places like the internet.

He discusses the ways in which people can become emotionally entangled with issues and persons in ways that greatly curtail their ability to respond thoughtfully to them. When you are emotionally entangled with something, it can be very difficult to avoid falling into polarised forms of thought and action. He describes, for instance, what he calls the danger of empathy.

Empathy here is the way in which people can become emotionally entangled with another party that greatly limits their ability to act relative to that party. His argument is not that we should be completely detached from other people and not care about them, but rather that it can be dangerous to be emotionally entangled with some other party in a way that leaves us without clear boundaries. Friedman keeps returning to the concept of self-differentiation, which would refer to the sort of boundaries that enable us to relate

to people without being entangled with them.

We might think about these boundaries or this self-differentiation as having a skin. A skin is a boundary or a barrier that allows us to get closer to things that might otherwise be threatening. If you did not have a skin, you might be in constant immune reaction against a non-sterile environment, or you might need to sterilise your environment, or you might need to quarantine yourself from your environment, or you might succumb to various infections from your environment.

When you have a skin, you can go into that environment without the same fear. Because your skin provides you with a boundary, it gives you self-differentiation. Since your body has strong boundaries, it can maintain its own health even in non-sterile environments.

One of the dangers of course of people who do not have good boundaries is that they will constantly be reacting against people around them, or they will try and manipulate them, or they will always stampede with the herd. They lack the ability to be in emotionally charged situations and not be emotionally charged themselves, to respond rather than to react. This is very evident on social media, where people can often see significance in the sharpness of disagreements, or in the viral force of a particular movement or idea.

Being emotionally entangled with other people on social media, either stampeding with them or reacting against them, their ability to respond carefully on their own terms without being in some sort of antagonism is profoundly limited. The fixation upon culture wars is a great example of this, where people have become so emotionally entangled and enmeshed within these various antagonisms that what might otherwise be thinking is increasingly mostly rationalised reaction to some other party. The rationalisations may be sophisticated, but the emotional dynamics underlying it are very simple and deeply unhealthy.

This gets at a key issue. A machine is often only as good as its weakest component, and in a similar manner our thinking will be dysfunctional if it's not operating upon healthy emotional dynamics. Those whose reasoning is driven by unhealthy emotional dynamics, whether reacting against some other party or idea, or emotionally entangled with their tribe, will lack the ability to think clearly about issues that fall within the gravitational field of their emotional entanglements.

In discussing the importance of media within my second podcast, I wanted to show the way in which certain forms of media can encourage dysfunctional dynamics. We can often focus upon our personal responsibility in these matters, and that's important, but often the dysfunction is found primarily in the environment, and in the case of our media, our social media in particular, I think that is the case. How do we form the sort of differentiation that will enable us to have healthy boundaries, that will give us the ability to respond rather than to react? Well there are a number of ways in which we can

provide these boundaries, the ways in which we can give ourselves the time to deliberate rather than just react, for instance.

We might think about the fact that time is such a form of differentiation. By giving ourselves time, we enable ourselves to get past that initial knee-jerk reaction, and to respond in a more considered and thoughtful way. Here you might think about the times in which you have slept upon a matter before responding to it, and as a result, in giving yourself that time, you've provided yourself with the distance from which you can think in a clearer manner.

Now our social media of course are driven in large measure by speed of response. The very speed of those interactions makes it very difficult to deliberate, to consider and to reflect before reacting to people. The result is often a conversation that is driven more by heated passions than by careful thought.

Another factor of our social media is the way that they collapse different boundaries. You might think about the character of wisdom as being able to speak a word in season, as our social media collapses spaces and contexts into each other. Its effect is undifferentiating, and as a result, makes wisdom very hard to voice.

On occasions it can feel like having to speak to every context and person simultaneously. Differentiation can also be provided by the way that certain discourses are held at a remove from our belonging and our sense of self. This is especially important for conversations that raise volatile emotional and relational issues.

On social media, you are largely the image and the words that you project. You are a representation of yourself in your online persona. The fact that your words are bearing so much weight for representing yourself, far more than they do in regular conversation and contexts, makes it much more difficult to decouple, to disconnect challenges to ideas from attacks upon persons.

Our shared world is another form of differentiation. As we share contexts of social interaction, as we share contexts and concerns of a common life, it is far easier to contain our differences. Social media, however, lacks the sort of aeration of ordinary interactions that we have within a social world.

As we are engaging in the flesh with other people, we have a sense of difference merely in our differences of bodies. We are also connected to each other without being entangled with each other as we share a variety of contexts and communities. Social media, however, lacks such aeration.

People are too close together. People can be overly intimate with each other online. The flip side of this excessive intimacy is great reaction against people.

We get emotionally entangled with people very easily online as we don't have the sort of

space that we have in offline interactions. You're always bumping into that person who's wrong on the internet, and as a result, reacting against them. You might waste your time hate-reading them, rather than just giving them their space.

Because of the vast number of people that are brought together on social media, there's also an encouragement to engage in the vaguest of terms, terms into which people can project all their own preoccupations and obsessions. People talking for or against things like socialism or critical race theory or the patriarchy seldom are using those words in a very clear way. They are the vaguest of symbols into which people are projecting their impressions, reacting with some attraction or aversion.

One very seldom sees these terms unpacked and considered in a balanced manner. Few people who use these terms habitually could give a careful definition of them. Their content is far more impressionistic and emotional than disrational or propositional.

Along with people working with such terms into which they project their emotions and their impressions, social media is also a place where we're constantly presented with things that supposedly represent this greater reality. An isolated incident in some location can be shared all over the internet, treated as a symbol that encapsulates some great ideological reality, Christian nationalism or something like that. All of this militates against differentiation.

It all encourages the collapsing of contexts, the collapsing of time, the collapsing of distance and the collapsing of persons into each other, and the result is a context where it is very difficult to think clearly or to have healthy discourse. This doesn't mean that we can't do anything to improve our manner of discourse on the internet. As Edwin Friedman points out, there are things to do with the environment, but not everything belongs to the environment.

There's also the organism within the environment. And it's important for us to recognise where changes to the organism would help it to deal with a hostile environment, even when we may recognise that the primary problem is the toxicity of the environment itself. Thinking then in terms of the categories that Friedman provides, the importance of self-differentiation, the need for boundaries or a skin, we would do well to consider the ways in which we can provide such a skin or such boundaries for ourselves, even in situations that discourage such boundaries.

Since what we need to do here is manage our emotions as much as anything else, it's important to consider the ways in which we can be people that are mindful of our own emotional states and the ways that those infect our discourse. Things like fear, anger, bitterness, panic, empathy and other emotional impulses like that can greatly limit our ability to think clearly about things. Not all of these emotional impulses of course are bad things in and of themselves.

Nevertheless, they are the sort of things that can make it difficult for us to develop the distance with which we can respond rather than react. Of course, some of these things are wrong in themselves. If we want to be people who have the healthy emotional relationships that enable us to think clearly, we need to be people who avoid bitterness, for instance.

The watchword that scripture gives us on this subject is in Leviticus chapter 19 verses 17 and 18. A lot of online discourse is driven by bitterness and antagonism, and yet as Christians we need to deal with this in our heart. At times this might require actually establishing some sort of distance from that person, because if we're around them we may not be able to maintain healthy boundaries and not get bitter and angry towards them.

There are other things that we can do along these lines too. If we're in an argument with someone it can be healthy not to think about them primarily as the person to whom we're speaking. We can think about the third party who's listening in and not actually having any sort of antagonistic relationship to us.

They're sitting on the fence and we're trying to win them over as we're speaking to the other party. Another practice that I found helpful is to pray for people as you're arguing with them. Even though you might be outwardly conflicting with them and trying to beat them in an argument, it's important that that's not driven by anger or bitterness in your own heart.

It may be important to beat them publicly in order that other people see that their positions are flawed, but yet if you're driven primarily by an antagonism towards them it's very difficult to relate properly to the issues about which you're discussing. In such a situation it can be healthy to pray for that person, to seek their best. If you're not driven by reactivity you might also find that you have a lot more latitude in the arguments that you will make.

You don't always need to own the other side or to prove how completely wrong they are. You can acknowledge the things that are true within their position. You can make a weaker and yet more effective argument which acknowledges and takes on board some of the things that they are seeing and some of the healthy moral impulses that are driving them to their positions and yet shows that there are other ways to hold those things, ways that are congruent with your own position.

Such differentiation also makes it much easier to have friendly disagreements, to break differences down to size, to argue about issues without an antagonism between persons. And that lack of antagonism between persons will open up your imagination to explore some of the strengths and perspectives of the other side because you're not reacting against it. This is all possible to some extent on social media.

However if we're going to be self-differentiated people we will need to ground ourselves in contexts outside of social media. If we're spending most of our time in thinking and reading online we'll find it very difficult to think clearly and to avoid some of these unhealthy emotional dynamics. Our primary contexts of reading and thought should be contexts of solitude or thick contexts of friendly discourse where people will push us and challenge us.

In the calm of such situations our imaginations will be released. One of the features of a context of emotional entanglement is that it tends to constrain people's imagination. It also dulls their sense of humour.

There is a playfulness of healthy thought that is difficult to find in contexts of emotional tension. If we want to be good thinkers we need to find healthy contexts in which to think. We need contexts of friendship with people with whom we differ.

We need contexts that give us a healthy pace of discourse that give us the time to think and to reflect rather than just forcing us to react. We need differentiated contexts where different conversations can be held in different places and times and with different persons. Besides this and most importantly of all, if we're going to be people who have healthy discourse and thought we need to maintain healthy relationships to God and to other people within our hearts.

We need to pursue the perfect peace of a mind that has stayed upon God. It will primarily be as our eyes are fixed upon God that we will be able to resist reactivity in our pursuit of truth. We won't fall into the trap of thinking that the most important things to consider are the things that people are having the greatest controversies about.

We won't be as emotionally preoccupied with our arguments. When we do argue it will be from a sense of peace and security within ourselves. With such peace and security we won't need to react against other people.

We can respond to them thoughtfully. We can take on board some of the things that they say but also argue against them without feeling at all threatened by them. While we can be engaged with the arguments of our day we won't be entangled in them.

We will be able to differ with people without being bitter about them. Where do we find this perfect peace? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks about the danger of performing our piety to be seen by men. When we are primarily performing our piety in the sight of men we can easily become preoccupied with the spectacle of how we appear to others, in how they are judging us, and forget that the judgement that really matters is the Lord's judgement of us.

Jesus teaches that the best response to this impulse, the fact that we will most naturally perform to the audience before whom we are placed, is to pray in the privacy of one's

own closet, in a context where withdrawn from the eyes of men you are not primarily performing to them. Something similar I believe could be said about our thought. If we want to be people who think deeply and carefully we need to be people who pursue truth primarily before the face of God.

Rather than primarily situating ourselves in the context of the bitterness and the rancour of our society's discourse. That doesn't mean that we won't speak into such discourse but we need to speak into it from hearts that are grounded outside of it. This, it seems to me, requires grounding ourselves outside of social media.

Such a grounding will also mean that we are not primarily thinking about Christian truth in order to persuade or to confute other parties, which is a danger inherent in an apologetic's mindset. When we think about Christian truth it should not be primarily because we are preoccupied with the need to tackle the errors of some other party or even by the need to win them over, but because God's truth is good in itself and worthy of pursuit. Pursuing the truth in this way, when we do come to the apologetic encounter, we can handle it rather differently.

From a position of confidence for instance, one that is not defensive or reactive or needing to please the other party. Likewise with the position of such self-differentiation we can really listen to people who come to us from different perspectives. We needn't be so guarded or on edge.

We can genuinely hear people out, affirm what is good and true in their positions and reject what is false or evil. Much of the point of this series has been to show that good and healthy thought is as much a result of carefully curating our environments, of carefully guarding our emotions and managing our relations, of recognising the dangers of our technologies and the subtle problems with over-dependence upon certain modes of thought. Pursuit of healthy thought will require management of our own hearts, our relationship with God and our neighbour, and also a mindfulness of the dangers and the tendencies of the different contexts into which we speak.

Thought is a relational activity and to be carried out well it needs to be carried out in the context of healthy relations. Thought is also something that is forged primarily in the context of discourse, of conversation. And functional conversations don't just happen.

They require curation, they require care, they require functional contexts in which to operate. They require habits and postures of mind that in many respects precede the intellectual task itself. If then we are to be faithful and good Christian thinkers, we need to give a lot of attention to these factors that craft our epistemological environments.

As we do so we will be better equipped to think and to speak and most importantly we'll have minds more receptive to, open to and fitted for the pursuit of God's truth.