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Theory Matters

We live in a world where theory has a bad name. In business, the mainstream rhetoric emphasizes decisive action: “Lead, follow, or get out of the way.” A one- page summary is the preferred method of communication. A lengthier analysis, offering context or complex causation, is commonly greeted with impatience and, frequently, suspicion about the author’s clarity and decisiveness.

Theory also has a bad name in many personal growth and spiritual circles. People who claim to be in touch with a unifying spiritual force, when asked to explain what they mean, frequently say, “I just know.” And when the conversation in support and therapy groups turn to theory, it is likely to be cut off with the critical directive to “talk about your feelings.”

This theory-less approach to living comes at a high price. According to Irvin Yalom, a thought in therapy, unattached to an emotional experience, has little lasting impact. But, as Yalom makes clear, the converse is also true. An emotional experience that isn’t anchored in a coherent theoretical frame is equally short lived. Both are required if we hope to heal and grow.

In addition, our widespread disdain for theory is still another way in which the values of the predominant culture are reinforced and perpetuated. That is the point Vikki Reynolds makes when she speaks of her more conventional office mate’s request that she remove her peace sign, gay rights poster and other “political” material from their shared office. When her response – I will, if you do the same – was greeted with incomprehension, she pointed to his wedding ring, the photo of his wife and kids in front of their suburban home, and his framed diplomas.

To the same effect is Meryl Streep/Miranda Priestley’s withering speech to her young assistant in *The Devil Wears Prada*:

Oh, I see, you think this has nothing to do with you; that you selected that lumpy blue sweater because you’re too serious to care about fashion. But what you don’t know is that the sweater isn’t blue, it’s cerulean. You’re also blithely unaware of the fact that Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns in 2002, that Yves Ste. Laurent then showed cerulean military jackets, and that it quickly showed up in 8 different designer collections. Thereafter, it filtered through the department stores into some tragic casual corner where you no doubt fished it out of a clearance bin. It’s comical. You think you’re exempt from the fashion industry when in fact you’re wearing a sweater that was selected for you.

As Vikki and Miranda point out, an apolitical, non-ideological position – about fashion, social justice or, indeed, any issue of significance – is an illusion. Like or not, our choices have consequences in the world. What we think of as neutral or apolitical is really a stance of passivity; a failure to formulate an outlook and informing theory of our own.

The results are unfortunate. Failing to cultivate our own perspective, we, like Vikki's office mate and Miranda's assistant, easily confuse the culture's "default settings" – that is, its prevailing attitudes – with issue neutrality. At this point, these mainstream perspectives – and the theoretical underpinnings out of which they arise – become invisible; part of the air we breathe. Being invisible, they are able to operate in, through and around us with impunity.

So how do we cultivate a new, more engaged relationship with theory? Here are a few thoughts.

First, we need to accept the fact that all theory distorts. The world provides virtually endless data to our senses and theory attempts to make this data more understandable, by identifying patterns in it. Doing so, some facts and factual patterns are emphasized while others are minimized or ignored. Distortion, hopefully helpful distortion, is the essence of theory.

With this in mind, we should not be asking whether a theory is "true." No theory can be. But that does not mean that careful attention to facts isn't important. To the contrary, we live in a world where a debased version of relativism – "every thought is as good as any other" – is rampant. In this context especially, we need theories that strive to be congruent with the facts, as they are currently known. Equally, we need theories that can evolve and change as the discovery process adds new facts and, at times, unravels what once appeared to be inarguable truths.

This threshold factual question is key because theories – particularly those that persist over time – can so easily become dogma. At that point, facts are made to fit theory rather than vice versa. As this process accelerates, the theory's continuing value becomes increasingly suspect even as its potential to harm increases.

Examples of this phenomenon abound. Some are blatant – a refusal to recognize evolution. But others are less obvious and, for that reason, more pernicious.

Take mental health, for example. Current evidence leaves little doubt that healing occurs through the emotional brain (psychodynamic theory), thinking brain (cognitive/behavioral theory), brain chemistry (psycho-pharmacology), and body work (acupuncture, yoga, etc.). Equally important are our intimate relationships, support communities, and engagements with the larger culture (a particular concern of Radical Decency).

Unfortunately, our theories endemically privilege one set of facts over others. Mainstream cognitive/behavioral theories are dismissive of empirically unverifiable psychodynamic theories. And, direct body work and creative engagements with the larger culture are, in the great majority of cases, ignored by both.

What mental health exemplifies is endemic in our culture. Manipulation of facts to fit theory – dogma – infects our economic, political, religious, and philosophical theories as well. If we hope to use theory effectively, we need to be vigilant in recognizing this process and equally attentive to finding theories that resist it.

This does not mean, however, that old theories should be discarded because far more facts are available today. To the contrary, people who lived 2,500 years ago were every bit as smart as we are. The insights of Jesus, the Buddha, and the Greek philosophers need to be cherished. Moreover, enduring ideas in their teaching – because they are affiliated with institutions and historical traditions – can, if used well, have enormous impact. But if we chose that path, we cannot temporize with the very real dangers of dogma and, with it, co-optation by status quo interests.

Once this crucial threshold issue of credibility has been dealt with, the questions we need to ask about theory are practical. What does seek to explain and how compelling are its explanations? What are its limits, intended or unintended? Do its explanations fit with what I know of the world and how it operates? Does it expand or further invigorate those understandings? Does it clarify my choices and improve my decision-making?

Most of us have a “home base,” a theory or theories that are our base-line point of departure. For me, it’s Radical Decency. For others it is may be Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, or a more personal spiritual or ethical code. And this, I think, makes sense.

But the world is far too complex, and the challenges in living well too great, to stop there. Theory matters – and it matters a lot. Jared Diamond and others have expanded my historical perspective to include 300,000 years of homo sapiens history, 7 million years of distinct primate history, and 3 billion years of life. Daniel Siegel, Henri Nouwen and others have helped me understand our biologically wired affiliative nature and its implications for living well. Paulo Frieire and Philip Lichtenberg have explained the psychological mechanisms that play such an important role in perpetuating injustice and exploitation, in the world and in our intimate relationships.

All theories distort -- including the ones we use to define who we are. Remembering that, we need to seek out, embrace, and incorporate into our larger world-view the creative insights of others, regardless of source. If our goal is to create better lives and a better world, it is an indispensable part of the process.