

A Town Hall Meeting: Reason vs. Reality Convened at the Thomas Paine Society, Pasadena CA

by Maurice Bisheff



The historic Castle Green in Pasadena CA, home of the Thomas Paine Society

On September 9, 2018, TPF Board Members Maurice and Jenny Bisheff, of Santa Barbara, California traveled to the Thomas Paine Society of Pasadena, California who hosted a town hall meeting on “Reason vs. Reality: What Can Help Us Decide What is Real”. Approximately 50 or so citizens attended the evening event. Ian Ruskin (writer, director, actor) attended in the character of Thomas Paine along with Alaine Lowell (TPS executive director) as Mary Wollstonecraft and Dr. Linda Handelman, a professor of philosophy. Wide ranging themes, problems, and possibilities were earnestly explored by attendees alternating from what Paine’s view would be and today’s circumstances.

Some of the themes discussed:

- Modern life is more complex than in Paine’s time. It requires a more complex sorting out of issues and possibilities than in simpler times. That makes the citizens’ and politicians’ use of reason more important.
- The use of our faculty of reason, potentially in all human beings, can help us overcome our emotional responses.
- Paine’s view of reason was to draw on natural law, on the common good for each and all, and claim natural rights acting for basic human happiness which is not injurious to others.
- Reason is not mechanistic, but is a thinking process for sorting out facts, logical fallacies, and media distortions.
- Giving systematic reasons requires respect for others’ reasoning, however much we may disagree. If we take the posture that we are part of the human race and, like Paine, striving to become a principled, but broad-minded citizen of the world, we cultivate a more empathetic; inclusive, and encompassing “enlightened self-interest”. This mental posture does require a loosening of the grip of one’s own ego identification or personal identity with an issue so as to be able to “draw a larger circle” in the circumference of thought.
- With reason, people may come to different conclusions. Civility and tolerance can encourage that differences be expressed. Paine pointed out that time and reason do not

always cooperate at the beginning, but if one is sensitive to the context and has empathy then the truth-content of reasoning can have its own living power beyond the tyranny of the immediate.

It was added that we can distinguish between Emotions, Reasons, and Feelings.

- Emotions: are our ephemeral personality’s reaction to the external world and may energize us blindly; and thus are not proactive, but are reactive—induced from triggers outside of ourselves which want to control something external to us. This is a common reaction to untested beliefs.
- Reasons: we can use our minds to test an idea in a systematic manner such that we can produce a shareable logic with, in many cases, supportive facts. This enhances our knowledge.
- Feelings: are intrinsic to our deepest sense of the good and have a quality of being universal (inclusive of each and all); thus having a deep intuitional quality linked to reasoning from universal principles which provide understanding.

One of the themes in Paine’s writings is that of creating the possibility of a universal society. By creating a critical distance from society and going inward, one can connect a deep feeling or an aspect of one’s refined conscience to a universal principle seen in nature (or law). From a Deist view, the source of that inspiration, the burst of insight, located in the empyrean beyond our cognitive mind is illuminated from constant love of the Divine. Contemplating natural law and universal principles (i.e. universal brotherhood, liberty, equality, and fraternity) provide a fertile source of citizen creative inspiration and imagination so lacking in politics.

To regenerate, we can look to Paine. Reasoning from deep feelings on universal ideals and principles to particulars (as Paine often did in his writings) allows us to sift through complexity and sort out relevant facts—facts which naturally draw our natures toward a more humane society. Paine respected facts, but was not overly empirical to the neglect of principle based on natural law.

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Thus, our education system would be wise in encouraging us to go inward, get in touch with our deeper, inner feelings and “the better angels of our nature”, and connect them to universal principles (beyond a particular circumstance). This exercise can guide us in particular, practical situations to create public policy criteria which naturally draw out insight in our natures in selecting out and connecting relevant facts for a more humane public policy. This may be a first step in regenerating the faculties we have as human beings with a wiser understanding of public policy if we are humble enough to soften our emotional likes and dislikes.

This town hall allowed everyone to express many multi-dimensional views about reason and discernment of facts and was a very constructive exercise in citizen education.

The Thomas Paine Society was founded and endowed by the late George G. Holtz in 1993 to educate the public about the life and works of Thomas Paine.

Maurice Bisheff is a TPF Board member and a Past-President. A scholar in philosophy and religion, he has published on these subjects especially with attention to public policy. He maintains a website, www.religionpaine.org. Bisheff is also active with the Institute of World Culture.