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“There is no greater barrier to understanding than the assumption that the standpoint which we happen to occupy is a universal one.”

-H. Richard Niebuhr

MODELING A BETTER AWAY OF THINKING

By John Rose

Duke University

Richard Niebuhr, a leading twentieth-century theologian, here warns against the constant temptation to believe that our own way of seeing the world is the only one worth considering. By regarding our own theories as “universal,” we are tempted—mistakenly—to see them as perfect and complete, standing at the culmination of history, and in no potential need of revision. Such an attitude lacks intellectual humility, and its costs are great: we get reality wrong and we also get ourselves wrong.

Niebuhr’s remarks were made in a 1937 book criticizing the Marxist interpretation of the American founding, but his general arguments about the problems associated with assuming a universal standpoint are widely applicable today, especially in educational settings. Marxism portrayed the birth of the country reductively in purely material, economic terms. Such an explanation, Niebuhr thought, was far too simplistic. By insisting that their ideology explained everything, Marxists ended up explaining little.

What they failed to see is that human beings are more than economic creatures. Human nature is more complicated. So, too, is human history, whose contours cannot be reduced to *any* flavor of monocausal determinism. To be sure, economics can help describe certain spheres of human life, something Niebuhr didn’t deny. Yes, we are producers and consumers. But that’s not all we are. We also have identities and relationships that are incapable of being defined in economic terms. We are husbands, daughters, members of religious communities, and lovers of art. When these ways of being human are seen through a purely economic lens, we have lost something essential about the meaning they give to our lives.

Totalizing theories demand that we reinterpret our identities and activities according to their own logic. Lacking intellectual humility, they prevent us from understanding our fellow human beings by “denying from the beginning the validity of [others’] interpretation of themselves and their world,” Niebuhr goes on to say. *Critical* thinking can’t occur because real

criticism—like healthy conversation between people who disagree—begins by first taking seriously the others’ perspective and reasons on their own terms. In the place of real dialogue in a classroom, dogmatists respond to those who question their views by adamantly reasserting that their way of seeing things is the only one. Tellingly, Marxists accused those who didn’t share their view of reality as suffering from “false consciousness.” They were in denial, and any appeals they made to reason were only more proof of this. Marxism was unfalsifiable.

Of course, Marxism is not the only the dogmatism the world has known. All of us are prone to assuming that our standpoint is universal. When we do it, let us have the humility to recognize it. When we see it in others, especially in academic settings, let us have the courage to name it. Above all, let us all—educators, parents, and students—model a better way of thinking.

John Rose is Associate Director of the Arete Initiative at Duke University’s Kenan Institute for Ethics. In addition to helping coordinate Arete’s programming, John teaches courses in Happiness and Human Flourishing, Christian Ethics, Conservatism, and Political Polarization. His research concerns the tradition of virtue ethics and Christian theology. Originally from Iowa, John holds a BA in religion from Wabash College, an MTS from Duke Divinity School, and a PhD in Theology from Princeton Theological Seminary.