

Epistemology Matters: Reflections Prompted by a Death in Missouri
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At this writing, it has been four days since a highly anticipated and nationally televised November 24th, 2014 press conference conducted by St. Louis County, Missouri Prosecuting Attorney Robert McCulloch in which he announced that a grand jury had chosen not to indict Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson in the August 9th, 2014 death of an eighteen-year-old local resident, Michael Brown. The case had been headline news for over three months following Brown's death with a strongly racial story line: Was this unarmed black teenager murdered by racist white cop? Was this an example of white-imposed injustice for African Americans prevalent for so long in America? In the days following the press conference, protests by those outraged by the grand jury's decision not to indict Officer Wilson erupted in Ferguson and in a number of large cities across the U.S., both peaceful and violent.

Immediately after the press conference, the evidence and testimony the grand jury had reviewed in the process of coming to its decision was released to the public. Much of it put Brown in an unfavorable light: riveting testimony from Wilson describing his struggle with a 6'4", 280 pound assailant bent on killing him; pictures of Wilson's facial bruises from Brown's punches; forensic evidence supporting Wilson's version of the incident; evidence of marihuana in Brown's blood and urine, which could have caused impairment in his judgment; the incompatibility of the forensic evidence and eye witness accounts that had played time and again in media reports describing Brown being shot in the back by Wilson or with his hands up attempting to surrender; and, for the first time, a number of eye witness accounts that squared point-by-point with both the forensic evidence and Wilson's version of what had occurred. Plus there was, now, the simple and, it would seem, compelling fact that a grand jury of twelve local citizens had concluded that there was no probable cause to charge Wilson with a crime in this incident.

What particularly struck me in the hours and days that followed the release of this mountain of evidence, to borrow a phrase from the O.J. Simpson murder case twenty years ago, and the grand jury's finding exonerating Wilson is that, as far as I have been

able to tell, none of it had the slightest impact on the those who had decided that the answers to the two questions posed by the case were a resounding yes: yes, this was an instance of racially motivated police misconduct; and yes, this was part of the larger problem of racial injustice in America. These people didn't speak to this new information, they didn't refute it or explain it away, and they certainly didn't incorporate it into how they looked at the case. It was as if for them it didn't exist, or that the details of this new data somehow didn't just compute with them. In any case, they simply reiterated their position they had held before the grand jury report—Brown had been shot with his hands up trying to surrender (or in the back) and an awful thing is still going on with race relations in America. It could have been August 24th rather than November 24th. I had seen this general phenomenon before—what just happened didn't happen--including with reference to me, and it intrigued me no end, and I wanted to make sense of it. This writing is a report of the direction my thinking has gone in this regard over the past couple days.

I've decided that to make sense of went on it helps to take *epistemology* into account. Epistemology is a philosophical term having to do with how people go about knowing things. I'll describe three basic ways of doing that, the last one—reference to a story or narrative--being the one I will focus on in this writing.

One way of knowing people employ, one epistemology, is to draw conclusions based on concrete reality: what's right in front of them, what they can discern with their senses, and from detailed accounts of what others have discerned with their senses. It could be called the empirical, or scientific, method of coming to the truth about something. These particular facts establish or support that this is what is going on or isn't going on, or it isn't yet clear what's going on and the data needs more scrutiny. Bits of reality are the basis for the creation of concepts, ideas that characterize or describe phenomena. The concepts are used in the formation of generalizations and theories that propose to explain current realities and predict future ones. The generalizations and theories are tested against reality to discern whether they hold up, and they are improved upon as time goes along.

Another way to come to know, another epistemology, is to rigorously use one's mind: carefully consider various positions and

arguments and systematically, intensely, concertededly, employ reason and logic in coming to conclusions about what is true. Who is saying what about this, and not just on one side of the matter but on all sides? What makes the most sense here? What really explains this? What inferences can be drawn here? Are my deductions accurate? Are my ideas harmonious, in sync with one another, complete, or are they disparate, piecemeal, partial, replete with contradictions? Have I thought through this in detail, with precision, exactness, or is it more accurate to say I feel this in a gross, inarticulate, general way? Have I thought this matter through for myself, and carefully taken into account the ideas other thoughtful people from a variety of perspectives have offered regarding it, or am I just going my what I have been told or what others around me think, or what is just in the wind?

Important in this context, whether you're letting the facts speak for themselves, as it were, or contemplating reality from your easy chair, you don't stray far from reality. If reality doesn't support your theory, or it blows holes in your speculations, you have a problem, because the facts of the matter are the measure of your attempt to increase your understanding, to come to know, to arrive at truth, or better, to a closer approximation of it—as a practical matter, we can never be absolutely sure we know anything, and we need to always keep that in mind.

And then there is a third epistemology, the one I want to spend time with here. It is coming to know, arriving at an understanding or conclusion, on the basis of how something fits into a narrative, or story, you have accepted as a valid one. In the case of an event such as the one in Ferguson, you are part of the story, you are in the story. By story I mean like a movie or television show, except that it is real, not fiction: in the beginning this happened, and then this, and then this, and now here we are, here you are, and this is going on; and the story isn't over, the ending hasn't been written, and you are involved in writing it, or you could be. This story has heroes and villains, and you are one of the heroes—or at least you are one of the good guys, and you could be a hero, or at least be more heroic, if you'd come closer to center stage and get into the drama. But whatever you do, you avoid panning the show or retarding the performance

A key aspect of this epistemology is you have a rooting interest in the story. You like this story, this narrative, or at least the good guys in it (I use the labels story and narrative interchangeably). You feel good about it/them. You're part of it/them. This drama, another word for it, has a *moral* loading to you: it involves good and bad, and you are on the side of good. You care how this story turns out, an emotional investment in that. A big part of the two other epistemologies discussed above—empiricism and reflection, call them that--is a commitment to assuming a posture of detached impartiality; you don't take sides or get personally involved. You take on that stance so you can be objective and let the facts and reason take you where they will. Not so when you buy into a narrative line: you want this story to turn out a particular way. The problem with that, however, is that personal involvement, investment, could lead you, without realizing it, to see things that aren't there, or misread or ignore things that are there. Subjectivity, rather than objectivity, can rule the day for you, because if you come up against something that doesn't fit your story you could ruin both the story and your part in it and have to deal with not just being factually or logically off-base but personally, morally, off-base, and that doesn't feel good.

So you have a story, a narrative, a script, to guide your knowing, one you are part of and have a stake in, to serve as your epistemology. Very likely, you aren't the author of this narrative, someone else is, and one way or another they submitted it, as it were, to you for your consideration, or taught or conditioned you to accept it, or it was just part of your world—you picked it up from your friends, or the schools, or the mass media (movies, TV, CDs, the Internet), or from social media. However it happened, you latched on to this story, and now you call it your own.

To illustrate, let's say your narrative, wherever you picked it up, goes something like this: From the earliest days of America, black people have been oppressed by white people. A big part of that problem is the discriminatory and abusive conduct of racist white police officers in urban black communities, especially toward young black males. The overall situation is perhaps better now than it was before, including with the police, but in any case it's still a huge problem in this country and something has to be done about it. Though as bad as it was and still is, there can be a happy ending to this story up the road: racial justice for African American people.

The way this narrative-based epistemology works, something comes up, let's say a cop killing in Missouri. What does it mean, you ask yourself? Where does it fit in the scheme of things? What went on down there in Missouri? What should be done about it? Your story answers all that. This Ferguson case fits into the drama of your story. It's part of that action: racial injustice in America, police brutality. That racist white cop executed that black teenager; that fits into your story of America struggling to clean up its racial act. You got it. Nothing else to know. If something comes up that fits the story—like a witness report that Wilson shot Brown in the back while he was lying in the street—put it into your story; compelling scene, heightened drama. If it doesn't—like Brown's blood being on Wilson gun and in Wilson's car, and there were no entry wounds in the back—ignore it, it just confuses or clutters up the story line. Wilson insists it had nothing to do with race and everything to do with fighting for his life against a "Hulk Hogan" aggressor (a metaphor Wilson employed to describe Brown)? No way: it was about race, that's what this movie is about, case closed.

Narrative-reference epistemologies have great appeal. For one thing, they are neat and clean, easy to understand—and the simpler the storyline the better. Mucking around in reality and working things through in your mind can get complicated and confusing, and be full of qualifications and contingencies, and that can lead to uncertainties—it feels way better to be sure of things. In the old Alfred Hitchcock-directed films, he made sure the audience always knew where they were in the plot and who the good guys and bad guys were; that made the audience feel good about themselves, it knew what was going on, and that good feeling got transferred to Hitchcock and his film. Part of their attraction, there is no heavy lifting with story epistemologies. Narratives are easy to employ—just fit whatever it is into the story, which can be done in a flash, and you know all you need to know, move on. You don't have to pore over, well, grand jury records, or stay up late reading a lot of books or get a headache thinking things through from this angle and that other one.

And a big upside to stories, having a good, socially acceptable one (in your particular social niche) helps life go better for you personally. You are in the know, and you are one of the good guys, and that makes you feel positively about yourself. And the people around you, who have bought into the same story you have for the

same reasons you have, whatever they are, like and approve and respect you and want you around, you aren't some kind of oddball or even traitor, and if they are in a position to do so, they give you rewards for adhering to this story and going public about it (you want to make sure to let people know you are on the "story team," and certainly don't debunk the story): good grades and recommendations and awards and jobs and promotions, and if they are romantic interests, they'll invite you up for a drink at the end of the evening. And a big thing, they won't give you trouble; staying out of trouble is a distinct payoff for conforming, going along with the story currently playing in your local movie theater.

Narratives can, and often do, have a big downside, however, and indeed it's major: they can keep you from knowing the real truth about something, and since actions grow out of what you deem to be so, you could end up going in the wrong directions with regard to whatever it is. Simply, narratives aren't to be trusted as epistemologies. They can oversimplify, and be misleading, and outright false. If you want to get good things accomplished, better to ground your efforts in the precise truth about things. You could be using lighter fluid to set a store on fire somewhere, and if you'd been in better touch with what is actually going on you might have found something better to do with your time. If you buy into the idea, as I do, that the truth will set you free, narratives too often keep you in the herd. Without realizing it, rather than forging your own path in life you are trudging—or trotting, or racing—along under the direction of whatever storyteller has gotten your ear.

Note that at the beginning of this last paragraph I wrote that narratives “can, and often do” keep you from knowing the real truth, which is not saying that narratives are completely without value. Indeed, narratives can be helpful epistemologically. I'm currently reading a fine new biography of the playwright Tennessee Williams (*Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, by John Lahr, W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), and Williams' plays most certainly inform the human condition. As did Ernest Hemingway's novels. As does the story of America as an experiment in human freedom and equality before the law. As does—and here's where it gets complicated—the story of African Americans' quest for justice in America. The point here is but to offer that we need to be very careful to ground ourselves in the details and complexities of any matter and not leave our rational faculties over in the corner to

gather dust, not to lock in on a story but rather study reality hard and think hard and change the story, or discard it, as new insights and perspectives warrant. We need to be more than a true believer in some narrative, which is what I seeing going on in a lot of areas in American life, and what I saw going on in Ferguson.

President Obama's remarks following the grand jury's decision fit the Ferguson case into a larger racial-injustice-in-America narrative, which included self-references. The point here is that it can, yes, be helpful to put this incident in a larger context, and into the frame of what has worked for President Obama personally, I'm not totally discounting the usefulness of that—I'm not making a cut-and-dried, either-or argument here--but it can also keep us referenced in abstractions and easy generalizations and thus miss the truth of both the larger reality of race relations in our time and in Ferguson.

We need to recognize that this isn't just an issue for Ferguson—it is an issue for America. We have made enormous progress in race relations over the course of the past several decades. I have witnessed it in my own life, and to deny that progress is to deny America's capacity for change.

But what is also true is that there are still problems and communities of color aren't just making these problems up. Separating that from this particular decision, these issues are issues in which the law feels as if it is being applied in a discriminatory fashion. . . . [T]hese are real issues. And we have to lift them up and not deny them or try to tamp them down. What we need to do is to understand them and figure out how to make more progress. And that can be done.

But with all due respect to President Obama, weren't the protestors in Ferguson, the issue at hand, making problems up? I think they were. One of the ways to make more progress in anything is to avoid getting mired in narratives that detract from our being referenced in specific realities and the outcomes of concerted and disciplined thought. Did President Obama think of the possibility of including in his remarks the importance of understanding things from police officers' as well as protesters perspectives and of condemning resisting arrest?

If what I have written so far has validity, what follows for us, you and me? Here are six things that come to mind:

1. We can work on recognizing stories, narratives, when they are present in our world. Writing this article has made it clear to me that I have taken on some stories in this site. Three examples:

There's the World War II story: Hitler was on a rampage conquering all of Europe, and perhaps the world. The heroic British were barely hanging on in the face of relentless Nazi bombing raids. Out of the blue, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, bringing us into the war in both the Pacific and in Europe. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, necessary to prevent an invasion of Japan that would have resulted in untold further destruction and casualties, ended the war. The Greatest Generation of Americans saved this country and democracy and we should be forever grateful. World War II: the inevitable war, the Good War.

See my 2007 writing "Ken Burns' Show Business."

And there is the what's-going-on-in-the-schools narrative, which goes something like: There is major problem with American education and it's because schools and teachers aren't doing their jobs nearly well enough. How do we know that? Because the numbers are bad. SAT scores are down. National Assessment of Educational Progress numbers aren't what they should be (NAEP is a nationally representative assessment of what America's students know in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. history). American students come off mediocre at best in tests of math and science compared to students in other countries. Girls aren't enrolling in math and science courses in the same numbers as boys. Performance on standardized tests is lower among low-income students. Black and Hispanic academic performance lags far behind that of white students. As a nation, we need to get on the ball educationally.

See my 2010 article "A Needed Paradigm Shift in Education."

And there is the story of white people that pervades universities, where I work: Historically, whites, particularly white males, have been authoritarian, racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, homophobic, politically and economically oppressive of other people, and destructive to the natural environment. White students must be taught about the social construction of whiteness and their white privilege, and be encouraged in every way possible to devote

their energies to remediating the injustices and harm their race and European heritage have inflicted upon the world.

See my 2013 article “Critical Thinking in the University: A Critical Issue.”

What are some stories in your context?

2. We need to become aware of our own stories. We are not immune to getting caught up with stories and simply plugging what happens into them rather than putting it to the empirical and logical test. One of the stories I’m working with these days is the story of my own life I’ve come up with. Mother and Dad did such and so, and then this happened in school and on the sport teams and in the army, and there was my marriage and divorce, and this has gone on in the university job, and so and so and so on, and all of that has pushed me in such and such a direction and that’s why I am the way I am and why things happen to me in the way they do, and thus this is what I need to be doing now and in the coming years.

That might be a good story, quite well thought out and all, but I have to understand that it also could be, and undoubtedly is, incomplete and, to a greater or lesser extent, untrue and keeping me stuck in a fantasy world and shaping and limiting what I experience and accomplish now, as well as what’s going to happen to me up the line in my life.

3. We need to be aware of how stories can, yes, serve us. The accomplishment of great things can be helped along if they are embodied in a great story. And even things that aren't so great can also be helped along by a good story. Indeed, embedding what we want to accomplish, whatever it happens to be, in a compelling story is a good tactic. We don’t pitch what we want as coming out of simple self-interest, getting a bigger piece of the pie or getting attention or sympathy or power or exacting revenge, anything untoward like that. Rather, we tell a story that makes what we do and want at the moment seem justified because of how it fits into a captivating drama with an appealing moral dimension to it. We are careful to attach a moral aspect to our story so that if anybody questions its merits they are nothing less than bad people for doing that, and thus we are justified, if we are of a mind to, in subordinating them, shutting them up, demonizing them, taking things from them, hurting them, casting them into the wilderness,

and even killing them--murders and wars are driven by compelling story lines. Narratives are good ways to accomplish just about anything, including perking up your love life and getting good tickets to the big game. This strategy involves a creative challenge: figure out what you want, and embed it in a narrative that makes it seem like, no doubt about it, a good idea and a morally right thing to do, both.

4. We need to recognize when other people are using a narrative epistemology to figure out what is so. One way you can tell is that no matter what you say, or what realities present themselves, they ignore all that and simply reiterate the story. Another way to tell is they never ask you a question or ask you to expand upon anything. They sincerely don't care what you think. If you say anything, they either interrupt you, or they simply wait you out until they can get back to reciting the story.

5. We need to figure out how best to manage our responses to "narrative epistemologers." Four ways I can think of:

First, don't be taken in by their stories, which can be really good ones. Develop a good crap detector (euphemism), all the while understanding that a lot of the time, people spreading manure around don't realize that it's manure; to them it looks and smells like roses.

Second, when they shut us down or shut us out, don't take it personally. What they are doing has to do with them, not us.

Third, do everything we can to keep from being victimized by stories, other people's and our own. Absolutely don't do anything that brings ourselves down because of where we fit into some narrative or another. "Sure I'm pounding your face, but it's because my mother didn't love me." That doesn't play.

Fourth, quit feeling we have to chase after story-directed people. We don't have to keep trying to make them get it, we don't have to fawn over them, or placate them, or try to ingratiate them; really, we don't have to give them any energy at all beyond perhaps shoot them a look of disapproval or, if it warrants it, assume a posture (we don't have to say anything) of contempt for them. We aren't absolutely obligated to straighten out or rescue storytellers or the story-determined; we don't have to have anything at all to do with them, zero.

6. We need to keep in mind that our existence on this earth is finite and it's short, and we serve ourselves and others by devoting the precious time available to us in this life to knowing the real truth about ourselves and the world so we can express that truth and live our lives guided by it. We have a wonderful tool for doing that: our rational minds. And another great tool, great gift, we have the power of volition, the ability to conduct our lives guided by what's true, and what's right (what's true is a good guide to what's right, and what's right invariably involves looking out for other people and not just ourselves--I've noticed that if you scrutinize stories they often turn out to be covers for people looking out for themselves and theirs at the expense of other people). We also have the capability to live with integrity and courage, with character, in the face of aversive consequences. If the emperor is naked, and there will be hell to pay for pointing that out, we can nevertheless point that out. Although, employing our rational faculties--this all goes together--we can look for a way to do it such that we protect our behinds in the process, and we might even bide our time some with our announcement or hold off doing it altogether, we aren't obligated to be martyrs. But then again, if whatever it is is important enough, we can choose to go public with our truth, in word and deed, even if the world comes down on us; as human beings we can make that call.

The part of the Ferguson case, which I followed closely in the news, I personally remember most was a moment in an interview Charlie Rose conducted with the mother of Michael Brown, the young man who died that August day. Tears streamed down her face, and the reality of a mother forever losing the son she had brought into the world and raised hit home with me. I thought about my own ten-year-old daughter, about losing her, about what that would be like, how incomprehensible, how unbearable, but you must comprehend it, must bear it, for the rest of your days and weeks and months and years, the pain never leaves you. Rose asked her what hurt her most about the loss of her son and she replied softly, through her tears, "The way he wasn't respected."

I don't know that respect had much of anything to do with the actual shooting, but I believe what she said about respect is very true in a general sense. I wrote a book some years ago now in which

white people who had issues with black people said what it was about blacks that put them off. (*One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious White Americans Talk About Race*, 1stBooks Library, 2004.) As they spoke, they didn't reveal the irrational animus we associate with the racism that is at the heart of the generally accepted race-relations narrative. Rather, it was, expressed one way or another, "I don't respect how they conduct themselves as a group."

Perhaps if we break from the conventional racial narrative and the concepts that provide its scaffolding, racism being one them, and come to grips with the reality I believe this mother tapped into in her time of great anguish, we may be able to help prevent other such tragic deaths. If, now a decade and a half into the 21st century, it is disrespect more than unthinking hatred or the desire to hurt or suppress black people that, at least in good part, is the real problem, what are the rules, so to speak, of gaining others' respect, and respect for ourselves? Perhaps if we explore the very serious racial issues we face as Americans from that angle, and particularly if black people examine the disrespect they receive from white people and how they may internalize that disrespect and how that may affect the way they conduct their lives and produce even more disrespect, some other African American mother won't have to go through the indescribable grief and experience the irreplaceable loss that this mother did. All I can say for sure is I won't soon forget the reality of her tears.