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## A Perspective on *Perspectival Factualism*: Response to Paul Gould

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**Abstract:** Paul M. Gould defends what he calls ‘Perspectival Factualism’ as the best approach for a Christian scholar to adopt towards her academic discipline. I raise some questions for Prof. Gould’s proposal.

How does the Christian scholar, guided by the missional imperative, faithfully serve Christ within an academic discipline? That is the question Paul Gould sets out to answer in his wonderfully compact and insightful “Essay on Academic Disciplines, Faithfulness, and the Christian Scholar.” The essay is actually a chapter excerpt from his book *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor*,<sup>1</sup> which I consider to be *sine qua non* reading for every Christian academic—grad students, adjunct professors, right on up the chain. Indeed, after hearing Prof. Gould speak on this topic, the Academic Dean at my university purchased copies of the book for every faculty member in the school. Such was the impact and excitement generated by this idea of a *missional professor*.

Now I must confess up front that I found it very difficult to engage Prof. Gould’s essay in the way philosophers typically do—by way of destructive philosophical criticism. I am in such sympathy with his overall project. My aim in these briefs comments is more modest. First, I want to take a quick look at *Perspectival Factualism*—the view Prof. Gould recommends to us (on cognitive and missional grounds) as the proper way of thinking about an academic discipline. And then, secondly, I’ll highlight a few points on which, as a Christian academic, I have some questions or would like to hear a bit more.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gould, *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014). Also available here: [http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/file/Gould\\_Essay-on-academic-disciplines-faithfulness.pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/file/Gould_Essay-on-academic-disciplines-faithfulness.pdf)

What is perspectival factualism? As its name suggests, it is a species of factualism: the thesis that there is an objective, ready-made world of facts that we discover and don't create (say, by way of our linguistic or conceptual activities). According to Prof. Gould, *naive* factualism (hereafter, NF) is the view that the scholarly process for accessing the facts essentially involves "leaving behind" what Francis Bacon (1561-1626) calls "idols of the mind," namely, the "biases, prejudgments, and values"<sup>2</sup> that distort our rational apprehension of reality. In similar fashion, Isaac Watts' (1674-1748) classic text on logic details not only the "special rules to direct our conception of things," but also the "springs of false judgment" and "prejudices."<sup>3</sup> On this view, it is natural to think of an academic discipline as a "bounded collection of facts about a particular subject."<sup>4</sup> The scholar doesn't operate inside a discipline; rather, she seeks to add to and refine it from without.

Now of course to call this view "naive" is somewhat pejorative; it's probably not the way a proponent would describe it. No doubt Bacon would have called his view something like "sensible" factualism, reserving the term "naive" for those who thought you could rightly apprehend reality without discarding the "idols of the mind." The label "naive" is the critic's prefix. So what is it that the naive factualist is naive about? If I understand him correctly, Prof. Gould believes that NF ignores the fact that "the scholarly task is fundamentally social and perspectival"<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, his favored alternative *perspectival* factualism

incorporates these insights in what I believe is a more accurate understanding of how an academic discipline is identified and defined. Academic disciplines are indeed factual. But the scholarly enterprise is one approached from a variety of perspectives that each provides unique cognitive access to the phenomenon to be studied or the problem to be solved.<sup>6</sup>

An initial comment. I'm fairly confident that Bacon and Watts would not have denied the existence of "a variety of perspectives" within their respective scholarly communities. They were not so naive. Religious, political, and

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Isaac Watts, *Logic: The Right Use of Reason in the Inquiry After Truth* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Gould, *An Essay on Academic Disciplines*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

philosophical disagreement was rife during their age, so much so that the burden of much philosophy of the time was to bring unity to the scientific endeavor by trying to convince scholars to operate from the same set of epistemic foundations (think Descartes). If Bacon and Watts were naive, it certainly wasn't because they were blind to the presence of conflicting perspectives inside the academy.

So it's not the *plurality* of perspectives that's at issue. Rather, the problem, I take it, is that their *pervasive influence* and *purpose* (i.e., the role they serve "in accessing and interpreting facts") is ultimately "ignored".<sup>7</sup> What the proponent of NF naively overlooks is the following:

SHAPE: The activities and deliverances of a scholarly discipline are shaped by the perspective or "narrative identity" that forms the culture of that discipline.<sup>8</sup>

ACCESS: Each perspective or "narrative identity" provides unique cognitive access to and an interpretation of the facts.<sup>9</sup>

Now just to clarify: as Prof. Gould uses the term, a "perspective" (or "narrative identity") is roughly what Kuhn means by a *paradigm*.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, then, what SHAPE and ACCESS *seem* to imply is that all disciplinary knowledge claims are paradigm-dependent. As Prof. Gould notes, "neutrality is a myth".<sup>11</sup> Still further, our epistemic access is apparently to *interpreted* facts—not the facts as they stand apart from the "shaping" influences of our discipline's guiding paradigm.

At this juncture, I must say that I emphatically agree with Prof. Gould when he says that the "guiding principles" of a paradigm "need to be identified and critiqued as a necessary component of discovering the truth," and this "allows for the possibility of a foundation to learning in the academy that is both distinctly Christian and viewed as legitimate."<sup>12</sup> Yea and amen. What I'm not so clear about (as yet) is how these things are possible given SHAPE and ACCESS.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> See Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Perhaps we can see this as follows. From the various things he says in his essay, I am quite certain that Prof. Gould's own "guiding principles" or "control beliefs"<sup>13</sup> include:

GP1: Rival paradigms can be rationally assessed  
and

GP2: There are objective (factual) criteria for paradigm choice.

But given SHAPE and ACCESS, wouldn't these two principles simply be paradigm-dependent claims? I should think they would. And if so, there wouldn't be objective (i.e., paradigm-independent) criteria for paradigm choice and assessment. The criteria would be paradigm-relative, in which case those operating out of rival paradigms might well be in a position to reject them. And what then? Thus James K. A. Smith tells us,

The *criteria* that determine what constitutes 'evidence' or 'proof' must be *game-relative*: they will function as rules only for those who share the same paradigm or participate in the same language game...The incommensurability of language games [or paradigms] means that there is a plurality of logics that preclude any demonstrative appeal to a 'common reason'...the rules for distinct games are not proportional.<sup>14</sup>

Surely this sort of reasoning (i.e., Smith's) poses a serious obstacle to missional encounter. For example, on p. 13 of his essay, Prof. Gould suggests "four principles that can serve as guides for the Christian scholar," as she pursues truth within her discipline:

GP3: "All truth is connected and unified."

GP4: "There is a mind independent reality that we can discover."

GP5: "Scripture makes knowledge claims about the nature of God, the world and the self."

GP6: "Humanity's greatest need is the gospel."

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> "A Little Story About Metanarratives" in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), p. 132. For a critique of Smith's position, see Richard Brian Davis and W. Paul Franks, "Against a Postmodern Pentecostal Epistemology," *Philosophia Christi* 15 (2013): 383-399.

Now I assume that the goal of missional encounter (one of them anyway) is to encourage a paradigm shift—say, from Darwinian naturalism to Christian theism. But how, precisely, is that to take place? A Darwinian naturalist, of course, will gladly welcome GP3 and GP4 as “control beliefs.” But her paradigm can hardly be expected to include the likes of GP5 and GP6. That leaves us with a paradigm impasse: a fundamental disagreement about “guiding principles,” but no objective, paradigm-independent way of adjudicating between them. Here appealing to second-order criteria privileging GP5 and GP6 won’t help. For these, too, will be paradigm-dependent, in which case savvy naturalists can be expected to dispute these higher-order principles as well.

For my part, I find it hard to see how an academic discipline could “provide many points of contact for a missionary encounter”<sup>15</sup> unless the likes of GP1 and GP2 were true in a trans-perspectival, trans-disciplinary way. (And here I don’t mean to even slyly suggest that Prof. Gould would disagree.) But if so, then it does seem to me that SHAPE and ACCESS will need some surgical fine-tuning. Early on in his splendid essay, Prof. Gould happily confesses that there is “much about” naive factualism that “resonates” with him<sup>16</sup> —in particular, its commitment to GP4. I concur. If we just add the proviso that it’s also possible for Christian scholars to access this extra-mental world God has created apart from disciplinary perspectives or “narrative identities” (Christian or otherwise), we’ll make Bacon and Watts happy as well.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gould, *An Essay on Academic Disciplines*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Special thanks to my colleague Paul Franks for helpful comments on an earlier draft.