

Truth and Consequences

by Steven Goldberg

Dead white males did not invent the rules of science; they discovered them. These rules enable science, and science alone, to make successful prediction.

And prediction is only evidence acknowledged by science to demonstrate that one is on the trail of the truth. One may, of course, invoke anything one wishes in attempting to come up with a successful scientific claim. If a dose of intuitional astrological foot fetishism helps, fine. But this claim gains no scientific *validity* until it can successfully make a prediction that does not require allegiance to intuitional astrological foot fetishism.

Prediction is the determinant of scientific truth—and, many believe, the determinant of *anything* (other than logical and mathematical truth) that can be termed “truth.” Prediction plays this role because science holds that “truth” can meaningfully be defined only as the concordance of a claim (a description, hypothesis, theory, or explanation) with nature (“reality”). And only a claim’s ability to predict can give us reason to believe that we are nearing truth—as opposed to merely experiencing a powerful, but quite possibly deceptive, *feeling* that we are nearing truth.

To be sure, there are those who apply the word “truth” to beliefs and moral values, concepts that are not, even in principle, capable of giving us reason to believe that they are more than an arbitrary preference, a subjective feeling. Such people tend to gravitate to empirical areas relevant to social issues: male-female differences, homosexuality, the death penalty, abortion, and the like. This, in addition to the fact that the less-controversial questions addressed by the physical scientists tend to attract smarter people, accounts for the fact that so many who write on empirical social questions are willing to subordinate logic to ideology.

Science can, of course, address such empirical issues as “which social factors increase the likelihood that religious beliefs will be entwined with moral beliefs.” It can consider such empirical claims about morality as, say, “societies in a stage of strong economic birth tend to see premarital sex as wrong” and, if such claims are true, it can explain the realities.

But science cannot make coherent the question of whether there is a God, and it cannot tell us whether it is better to favor sexual freedom or economic growth. In other words, science cannot conceive of any system of thought that can validate issues for which there is no possibility of text even in principle. Science does not know good from bad or right from wrong. The closest it gets to an objective moral claim is a belief that survival is good. And that is not very close in a universe that we have no reason to believe is concerned with our survival.

Science does not care whether a claim is made by a man or a woman; by a black, yellow, or white; or by a Nobel laureate, a plumber, or a clerk in a patent office. While the nonscientist part of any person worthy of being called “human” cares about the uses to which new knowledge will be put, such issues are irrelevant to the part that is a scientist. The only goal of science is the diminution of the distance between present knowledge and truth. The only subjective assumption of science is that nature will give you a lift only if you are going her way. To the scientist, the willingness to validate an empirical claim on the basis of bias, prejudice, or emotional and political need—or to reject a claim on the basis of the motivations of the claimant or the putative consequences of accepting the claim—represent an infantile narcissism; to the intelligent believer, these represent a lack of faith and a blasphemous conviction that one knows better than God.

In truth, the scientist cares more about hunting down the prey than tasting it. The fun is in the search. Indeed, the third best thing about a truth is that it raises questions about undiscovered truths that the scientist would not have thought of. (The second best thing about truth is that it is inherently subversive, and the best thing is that it is true. Many will, of course, rank these virtues differently. It does not matter; it is just a question of taste.)

The pull of undiscovered truths is so

great that there is the ever-present threat that the cracks in a “truth” on which one already stands will be overlooked. That is why science systematically attempts to eliminate all illegitimate reasons for holding to a truth. This process comes with only a partial warranty, so there is always the possibility of error. Some of these errors have, when exposed, launched the highest flights of intelligence and imagination. But even at its worst, science protects itself far better than does any other sort of investigation.

There will always be many who believe that science defines its own victory and that there are alternative routes to truth. But the claimed alternative routes to truth give us no prediction, no reason to believe that they exhibit anything more than a feeling and an insupportable claim of truth, a claim whose validity is as dubious as its ability to soothe is obvious.

Scientists are only people, of course, and every scientist will occasionally hope that some specific claim turns out to be true and others false. But science is structured to defend itself against such desires, and the ability to ignore them is, in science, what separates the grown-ups from the children.

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To An Artist Who Has Made It

by Richard Moore

Your paintings got a grant.
Newspapers ballyhoo them.
Thus warned, I shan't
trouble to view them.

Out of Order

by Terence Gallagher

When Aeneas lands, after seven years of wandering, shipwrecked on the shores of Africa, his great concern is to discover the nature of the country into which fate has cast him, and the temper of the people who live there. His fears are put to rest when he stands in the rising city of Carthage and sees on the walls of a temple the depiction of his own story, of the siege and downfall of Troy. He knows then that he has arrived at a place where “there are proper rewards for the praiseworthy, where there are tears for the world’s affairs and mortal deeds touch the heart.” In other words, he knows he will be treated justly because he is in a country where people recognize things for what they are and react accordingly to them. If something is honorable, they honor it; if something is tragic, they weep for it. One might call this the capacity for proportionate reaction to moral reality. “Cast away fear,” says Aeneas to his companions, “your fame here will bring you safety.” Aeneas is confident that when the people of Carthage recognize who the Trojans are, they will treat their visitors with honor.

Conversely, a wanderer wrecked on the shores of a country where no proportion is shown in moral reactions would be well-advised to retain a good deal of healthy fear. An Aeneas looking about him in contemporary America might have felt less sanguine about his prospects of honor and safety, for public life has become a forum for ever more inappropriate responses to ever more bizarre forms of behavior. The wince of recognition has become familiar, so familiar that example seems superfluous: the lawyer for the Menendez boys has jurors over for milk and cookies after the declaration of a hung jury; Amy Fisher’s mother gains a sympathetic ear for her laments that her daughter will be unable to enjoy Thanksgiving at home; Susan Smith kills her children and becomes the “victim” of the pressures oppressing women today.

There was the *New York Times*’ picture

of O.J. Simpson’s lawyer Robert Shapiro with an arm fondly draped around Dennis Fung’s shoulder at the conclusion of Mr. Fung’s testimony: the photo’s caption informed us that Mr. Simpson himself cordially shook hands with Mr. Fung. Now, put this in perspective: Mr. Simpson’s lawyers had just spent a great deal of time attempting to demonstrate that Fung had participated in a scheme to frame O.J. for murder, so what possible purpose could the concluding love-in, conducted in full view of the jury, be intended to achieve? Well, because Mr. Shapiro had been guilty of making a joke about Mr. Fung that appeared to be in poor taste, it then became important for Mr. Shapiro to convince both the jurors and the public at large that he was not a bigot; in the face of this need, the question of who may or may not have hacked two people to death, and of who may or may not be framing an innocent man for a capital crime, faded into comparative insignificance.

Such behavior reflects not only the loss of a capacity for morally proportionate reactions but also the primacy of *political* behavior. When society loses the belief that there is intrinsic meaning residing in things themselves and hence a proper, and an improper, way to view reality, the resulting confusion is a perfect field for the assertion of political power. People simply do not know how to act, even when they have been personally injured, and it is left to those with the loudest and most persistent voices to tell them. This accounts for the extreme, almost hysterical touchiness, exhibited in our society when confronted by the mildest example of “racism,” or “sexism,” or “homophobia.” The reactions are not proportionate to whatever offense is committed, but rather proportionate to the public profile of the offended group. Thus, the Menendez boys claimed the mantle of child-abuse victims; Amy Fisher and Susan Smith are female and therefore, according to the tenets of feminism, more sinned against than sinning.

In the absence of a sense of ordered reality, the power of politics (which in our democracy means the power of organized special-interest groups) is unlimited, even to the extent of blurring the distinction between man and the lower animals. When a California woman was killed by a mountain lion last year, and the lion subsequently destroyed, the woman’s children and the lion’s cubs

were both left motherless; donations for the support of the cubs far exceeded donations for the support of the children. In an earlier incident, when a five-year-old girl was severely mauled by another mountain lion, to the point of suffering brain damage, there was widespread resistance to killing the lion; the caller to the California Fish and Game Department who said that humans are always replaceable, whereas mountain lions are not, gave expression to what is rapidly becoming common educated opinion. These are the reactions of people whose consciences have been completely formed by politics; they simply do not know that people are intrinsically worth more than animals. Animal rights advocates, environmentalists, conservationists all speak for animals; there is no group that speaks for people-who-have-been-mauled-by-animals. Lacking a public profile, such people are simply invisible. Among the truly civilized it is considered grossly offensive to imply that there is any primacy to be accorded to humans—such bias is labeled “speciesism” and filed with all the other abhorred biases.



When people lose all belief in a morally ordered reality, there can be no *lacrimae rerum* because there are no longer any real things, any *res* of independent meaning and value, to inspire tears. To many, the abandonment of the conviction that some intrinsic meaning resides in the world’s affairs and *commands* human feelings rather than being subject to them, no doubt seems like a liberating thing. On the contrary, when the human understanding of reality is cut loose from its moorings to truth, people become completely subject to the shifting demands of politics. The personal judgment of human beings, grounded in each person’s understanding (however dim) of a real moral order, gives way to pressures brought to bear by whoever happen to be the current rulers of society, who assign value by sheer force of will. As a result, human moral reactions and beliefs must submit to a master that is tyrannical, completely capricious, and inevitably unreasonable.

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