

EDITORIAL

TRUTH — AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

Molière, the famous French author, wrote an incisive comedy entitled “The Forced Marriage.”¹ The play, which had been written at the request of King Louis XIV, was an immediate success, and occasionally France’s most opulent king even participated in its presentation. This comedy addresses some of the foibles of humanity in a humorous, but instructive and not so subtle, context. In the story, a rich, mature gentleman wonders whether he should marry a young maiden who is primarily interested in his wealth. He seeks the advice of several individuals, including two philosophers. The first philosopher is Aristotelian and is so concerned about his own opinions, his philosophy, and the definitions of terms that the poor gentleman cannot communicate to him the reality of his practical problem. He departs disappointed and seeks advice from a skeptic philosopher. In introducing himself he informs this philosopher that he has come for advice; whereupon the philosopher replies: “Pray change this mode of speaking. Our philosophy enjoins us not to enunciate a positive proposition, but to speak of everything dubiously, and always to suspend our judgment. For this reason, you should not say, I am come, but it seems that I am come.” An extended discussion follows as to whether the gentleman has really come or if it only appears that he has come. Further factual statements from the gentleman are met with deprecating comments such as “it may be so,” or “it is not impossible,” and “that may be.” The philosopher refuses to address the gentleman’s real question. Tension arises, and compelling reality suddenly appears when the exasperated “gentleman” attacks the philosopher who responds with yells and vexed comments. Informing the gentleman that it is an insolence and outrage to beat a philosopher like him, he threatens to appeal to the magistrate. The gentleman appropriately answers: “Pray, correct this manner of speaking. We are to doubt everything; and you ought not to say that I have beaten you, but it seems I have beaten you.” Subsequent argumentation provides the gentleman with further opportunity to reply to the philosopher with the same uncertain statements he has just heard. The philosopher, who is positive that he has been beaten, rehearses comments such as “it may be so” and “it is not impossible.” The gentleman is proudly instructing the philosopher about the foibles of skepticism.

Our present intellectual milieu does not appear to be all that different from some of the foibles of Molière’s time. Relativism, agnosticism, and skepticism are respected, while certainty and truth appear to be endangered.

It is fashionable to question almost anything. Doubts appear to be encouraged for their own sake, even when they have little else to contribute except further doubts.

This attitude, without doubt, in part encouraged Mark Twain to quip, “Researchers have already cast much darkness on the subject, and if they continue their investigations, we shall soon know nothing at all about it.”

Absolute truth, i.e., that which is — in other words, actuality or reality—, is degraded by the presently accepted philosophy of relativism which holds that no absolutes exist. Agnosticism — the idea that the answer to ultimate questions is “I don’t know” — scarcely fares better. This philosophy runs the risk of missing any ultimate reality, because of refusal to come to any conclusion. It may seem wise to keep an open mind on ultimate issues, but “many an open mind has revealed a vacant lot.” More significant is the avoidance of disagreeable or painful decisions by resorting to agnosticism. This is sometimes referred to as the convenience of agnosticism. Skepticism, which encourages an attitude of doubt towards much, can also paralyze the truth-searching-and-finding process. When we come to a point of decision between two views, we can do one of three things. We can opt for one view or for the other, or we can decide not to decide. Skepticism encourages the latter, and when no decision is made, progress can be hampered.

A recent article in the journal *Nature* entitled “Where Science Has Gone Wrong”² bemoans the loss of certainty in science. An attitude has developed that science is not an objective search for truth but more of a transient sojourn through ever-changing ideas. The authors attribute the loss of financial support for science in England and the rise of the creation movement in the United States to this lack of certainty. As soon as a new idea is proposed, it is usually challenged. If science is not finding truth, what is its ultimate value? My personal opinion is that science does discover truth, albeit a number of false pathways may be taken along the way, but current agnosticism, relativism and skepticism would tend to deny this, and scientific truth is endangered.

In academic pursuits, how often we are satisfied with just presenting several views and not bringing our study to a conclusion. Too often our research ends up with a plurality, of possibilities. This is doubtless part of the basis for the traditional satirical “maybe” as the final conclusion of the typical doctoral dissertation.

There is no question that a firm case can be made for not accepting many ideas and that in the presence of a plethora of concepts, investigation and caution are virtues. Also, there is room for legitimate suspension of judgment because of lack of information. In working out truth, we should

be reasonable and balance our acceptance of ideas with careful inquiry. There is room for questioning, but everything does not have to be questioned forever, and the all-important task of sorting out truth from error should not fall a victim to fruitless skepticism. Sound scholarship can afford to make room for truth. We do not need to relegate ourselves needlessly to that realm of the “maybe” where everything seems, but nothing is.

Sometimes our doubting game comes face to face with the reality of plain cold facts, such as the collision between an iceberg and the Titanic. If our car is stolen, its existence and concepts of ownership become real; if we are late and miss a plane, time also becomes very real. Our fashionable questioning can also be jarred by the reality of having someone physically attack a skeptic philosopher! (Incidentally, in Molière’s comedy, the relatives of the young lady forced the rich man to marry her!) A divorce or the pardoning of the criminal can remind us that moral values, integrity and forgiveness are also a part of reality. Sometimes in the midst of all our doubts reality confronts us and commands our respect, and if there is reality, there is truth.

Truth exists, and we will not arrive at it by doubting everything. The one who doubts everything certainly does not have as much to offer as the one seeking for truth.

Relativism, agnosticism, and skepticism reduce truth to uncertainty while assuming exceptions for themselves. These ideas cannot claim any degree of assurance of being correct, while their own tenets would enjoin that we be uncertain about almost everything significant, which would include these propositions themselves. If you do not believe in anything, can you be consistent and believe that you do not believe in anything?

Reality is there, truth exists, and a satisfying degree of certitude is possible. While we must be cautious in not accepting as true that which will not bear careful scrutiny, truth should not fall a victim to prevalent concepts of uncertainty. Truth is so important that we should actively protect its right to exist.

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ENDNOTES

1. Molière JBP. n.d. The forced marriage. In: van Laun H, translator. *The Dramatic Works of Molière*. Vol. 1. NY: R. Worthington, Publisher, p 469-499.
2. Theocharis T, Psimopoulos M. 1987. Where science has gone wrong. *Nature* 329:595-598.