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## Concern for Truth: What it Means, Why it Matters<sup>1</sup>

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- 1 A century or so ago, C. S. Peirce wrote, “in order to reason well . . . , it is absolutely necessary to possess . . . such virtues as intellectual honesty and sincerity and a real love of truth,”<sup>2</sup> and that genuine reasoning consists “in actually drawing the bow upon truth with intentness in the eye, with energy in the arm.”<sup>3</sup> Forty years or so ago, C. I. Lewis observed that “we presume, on the part of those who follow any scientific vocation, . . . a sort of tacit oath never to subordinate the motive of objective truth-seeking to any subjective preference or inclination or any expediency or opportunistic consideration.”<sup>4</sup> These philosophers had some insight into what the life of the mind demands.
- 2 Now, however, it is fashionable to suggest that such insights are really illusions. Stephen Stich professes a sophisticated disillusionment, writing that “once we have a clear view of the matter, most of us will not find any value in having true beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty refers to those of us who are willing to describe ourselves as seeking the truth as “lovably old-fashioned prigs”<sup>6</sup> boasting that he “does not have much use for notions like ‘objective truth’”<sup>7</sup> since, after all, to call a statement true “is just to give it a rhetorical pat on the back.”<sup>8</sup> Jane Heal concludes with evident satisfaction that “there is no goddess, Truth, of whom academics and researchers can regard themselves as priests or devotees.”<sup>9</sup> These philosophers reveal a startling failure, or perhaps a refusal, to grasp what intellectual integrity is, or why it is important.
- 3 Still, as the saying goes, those who know only their own side of a case know very little of that; so perhaps it is healthy to be obliged to articulate, as I shall try to do, what concern for truth means, why it matters, and what has gone wrong in the thinking of those who denigrate it. [page 58] The first step is to point out that the concept of truth is internally

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2. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2.82.

3. *Ibid.*, 1.235.

4. C. I. Lewis, *The Ground and Nature of the Right*, p. 34.

5. Stephen P. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason*, p. 101.

6. Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 86.

7. Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” p. 141.

8. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xvii.

9. Jane Heal, “The Disinterested Search for Truth,” p. 108.

related to the concepts of belief, evidence, and inquiry. To believe that  $p$  is to accept  $p$  as true. Evidence that  $p$  is evidence that  $p$  is true, an indication of the truth of  $p$ . And to inquire into whether  $p$  is to inquire into whether  $p$  is true; if you aren't trying to get the truth, you aren't really inquiring.

- 4 Of course, both pseudobelief and pseudoinquiry are commonplace. Pseudobelief includes those familiar psychological states of obstinate loyalty to a proposition that one half suspects is false, and of sentimental attachment to a proposition to which one has given no thought at all. Samuel Butler puts it better that I could when, after describing Ernest Pontifex's sudden realization that "few care two straws about the truth, or have any confidence that it is righter or better to believe what is true than what is untrue," he muses, "yet it is only these few who can be said to believe anything at all; the rest are simply unbelievers in disguise."<sup>10</sup>
- 5 And pseudoinquiry is so far from unusual that, when the government or our university institutes an Official Inquiry into this or that, some of us reach for our scare quotes. Peirce identifies one kind of pseudoinquiry when he writes of "sham reasoning": attempts, not to get to the truth of some question, but to make a case for the truth of some proposition one's commitment to which is already evidence- and argument-proof. He has in mind theologians who devise elaborate metaphysical underpinnings for theological propositions that no evidence or argument would induce them to give up; but his concept applies equally to the advocacy "research" and the politically motivated "scholarship" of our times. And then there is what I have come to think of as fake reasoning: attempts not to get to the truth of some question, but to make a case for the truth of some proposition to which one's only commitment is a conviction that advocating it will advance oneself — also a familiar phenomenon when, as in some areas of contemporary academic life, a clever defense of a startlingly false or impressively obscure idea is a good route to reputation and money.
- 6 But we need to go beyond the tautology that sham inquirers and fake inquirers aren't really inquiring to see what, substantively, is wrong with sham and fake reasoning. Sham and fake inquiries aim, not to find the truth, but to make a case for some proposition identified in advance of inquiry. So they are motivated to avoid careful examination of any evidence that might impugn the proposition for which they are seeking to make a case, to play down or obfuscate the importance or relevance of such evidence, to contort themselves explaining it away. The genuine inquirer, by contrast, wants to get to the truth of the matter that concerns him, whether or not that truth comports with what he believed at the outset of the investigation, and whether or not his acknowledgment of that truth is likely to get him tenure, or make him rich, famous, or popular. He is motivated, therefore, to seek out and assess the worth of evidence and arguments thoroughly and impartially; to acknowledge, to himself as well as others, where his evidence and arguments seem shakiest and his articulation of problem or solution vaguest; to go with the evidence even to unpopular conclusions or conclusions that undermine his formerly deeply held convictions; and to welcome someone else's having found the truth he was seeking.
- 7 This is not to deny that sham and fake reasoners may hit upon the truth, and, when they do, may come up with good evidence and arguments; nor that genuine inquirers may come to false conclusions or be led astray by misleading evidence. Commitment to a cause and desire for reputation can prompt energetic intellectual effort. But the intelligence that will help a genuine inquirer figure things out will help a sham or fake reasoner suppress unfavorable evidence more effectively, or devise more impressively obscure formulations. A genuine inquirer, by contrast, will not suppress unfavorable evidence, nor disguise his failure with affected obscurity; so, even when he fails, he will not impede others' efforts.
- 8 The genuine inquirer's love of truth, as this reveals, is not like the love of a collector for the antique furniture or exotic stamps he collects, nor is it like a religious person's love of God. He is not a collector of true propositions, nor is he a worshipper of an intellectual ideal. He is a person of intellectual integrity. He is not, like the fake reasoner, indifferent

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10. Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 259. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 76; "[t]he great majority of people does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con, and without even troubling about such reasons afterward."

to the truth of the propositions for which he argues. He is not, like the sham reasoner, unbudgeably loyal to some proposition, committed however the evidence turns out. Whatever question he investigates, he tries to find the truth of that question, whatever the color of that truth may be.

- 9 The argument thus far has taken us beyond the tautology that genuine inquiry aims at the truth, to the substantive claim that lack of intellectual integrity is apt, in the long run and on the whole, to impede inquiry. But why, it will be asked, should we care about that? After all, in some circumstances one may be better off not inquiring, or better off having an unjustified belief than one well grounded by evidence, or better off having a false belief than a true one; and some truths are boring, trivial, unimportant, some questions not worth the effort of investigating.
- 10 Intellectual integrity is instrumentally valuable, because, in the long run and on the whole, it advances inquiry; and successful inquiry is instrumentally valuable. Compared with other animals, we are not especially fleet or strong; our forte is a capacity to figure things out, hence to anticipate and avoid danger. Granted, this is by no means an unmixed blessing; the capacity that, as Hobbes puts it, enables men, unlike brutes, to engage in ratiocination, also enables men, unlike brutes, “to multiply one untruth by another.”<sup>11</sup> But who could doubt that our capacity to reason is of instrumental value to us humans?
- 11 And intellectual integrity is morally valuable. This is suggested already by the way our vocabulary for the epistemic appraisal of character overlaps with our vocabulary for the moral appraisal of character: e.g., “responsible,” “negligent,” “reckless,” “courageous,” and, of course, “honest.” And “He is a good man but intellectually dishonest” has, to my ear, the authentic ring of oxymoron.
- 12 As courage is the soldier’s virtue par excellence, one might say, oversimplifying a little, so intellectual integrity is the academic’s. (The oversimplification is that intellectual integrity itself requires a kind of courage, the hardihood needed to give up long-standing convictions in the face of contrary evidence, or to resist fashionable shibboleths.) I would say, more bluntly than Lewis, that it is downright indecent for one who denigrates the importance or denies the possibility of honest inquiry to make his living as an academic.
- 13 This explains why intellectual integrity is morally required of those of us who have a special obligation to undertake inquiry; but the explanation of why it is morally important for all of us has to be more oblique. Over-belief (believing beyond what one’s evidence warrants) is not always consequential, nor is it always something for which the believer is responsible. But sometimes it is both; and then it is morally culpable. Think of W. K. Clifford’s striking case of the ship owner who knows his ship is elderly and decaying, but doesn’t check and, managing to deceive himself into believing that the vessel is seaworthy, allows it to depart; he is, as Clifford rightly says, “verily guilty” of the deaths of passengers and crew when the ship goes down.<sup>12</sup> The same argument applies, mutatis mutandis, for under-belief (not believing when one’s evidence warrants belief). Intellectual dishonesty, a habit of reckless or feckless self-deceptive belief formation, puts one at chronic risk or morally culpable over- and underbelief.
- 14 So, what has gone wrong in the thinking of those who denigrate concern for truth? Unfortunately, even with just the three writers I quoted at the beginning of this paper, not quite the same thing in each case.
- 15 Stich begins by ignoring the internal connection of the concepts of belief and truth, and misconstruing belief as nothing more than “a brain-state mapped by an interpretation-function into a proposition,” or, as he likes to say to make the idea vivid, a sentence inscribed in a box in one’s head marked “Beliefs.” This encourages him in the mistaken idea that truth would be a desirable property for a belief to have only if truth is either intrinsically or instrumentally valuable. He then compounds the confusion with two manifest non sequiturs: that since truth is only one of a whole range of semantic properties a sentence in one’s head could have, truth is not intrinsically valuable; and that since one may sometimes be better off with a false belief than a true one, truth is not instrumentally valuable either.

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11. Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, p. 23.

12. W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 70.

- 16 With Heal one encounters a different kind of misdirection. She points out, correctly, that not every true proposition is worth knowing; again correctly, that, like courage, intellectual integrity can be useful in the service of morally bad projects as well as good ones; correctly once more, that what an inquirer wants to know is the answer to the question into which he inquires. Even her conclusion — that there is no goddess, Truth, of whom academics can regard themselves as devotees — is true enough. What is wrong with it is not that it is false, but that it suggests that if one takes concern for truth to matter, one must deny it. The instrumental value of intellectual integrity does not require that all truth be worth knowing; its moral value does not require that it be a character trait capable only of serving good uses; and valuing intellectual integrity is not, as Heal's conclusion hints, a kind of superstition.
- 17 And as Rorty more than hints when he tells us that he sees the intellectual history of the West as an attempt “to substitute a love of truth for a love of God,”<sup>13</sup> Rorty is of the party that urges that there is no one truth, but many truths. If this means that different but compatible descriptions of the world may be both true, it is trivial; if it means that different and incompatible descriptions of the world may be both true, it is tautologically false. More likely, Rorty has confused it with the claim that there are many incompatible truth claims.
- 18 This reveals a connection with a ubiquitous fallacy. What passes for known truth is often no such thing, and incompatible truth claims are often pressed by competing interests. But it obviously doesn't follow, and it isn't true, that incompatible truth claims can be both true; or that to call a claim true is just to make a kind of rhetorical gesture or power grab on its behalf. This latter mistaken inference, like the inference from the true premise that what passes for objective evidence is often no such thing to the false conclusion that the idea of objective evidence is just ideological humbug, is an instance of what I have come to dub the “passes for” fallacy.<sup>14</sup> Rorty transmutes this fallacy into a shallow misconception that identifies “true” and “true’,” the true with what passes for true. “True” is a word that we apply to statements about which we agree, simply because, if we agree that p, we agree that p is true. But we may agree that p when p is not true. So “true” is not a word that truly applies to all or only statements about which we agree; and neither, of course, does calling a statement “true” mean that it is a statement we agree about.
- 19 Here is Peirce again, describing what happens if pseudoinquiry becomes commonplace: “man loses his conceptions of truth and of reason . . . and comes to look upon reasoning as mainly decorative. The result . . . is, of course, a rapid deterioration of intellectual vigor.”<sup>15</sup> This is the very debacle taking place before our eyes. Sham reasoning, in the form of “research” bought and paid for by bodies with an interest in its turning out this way rather than that, or motivated by political conviction, and fake reasoning, in the form of “scholarship” better characterized as a kind of self-promotion, are all too common. When people are aware of this, their confidence in what passes for true declines, and with it their willingness to use the words “truth,” “evidence,” “objectivity,” “inquiry,” without the precaution of scare quotes. And as those scare quotes become ubiquitous, people's confidence in the concepts of truth, evidence, inquiry, falters; and one begins to hear, from Rorty, Stich, Heal and company, that concern for truth is just a kind of superstition — which, I should add, in turn encourages the idea that there is, after all, nothing wrong with sham or fake reasoning. . . and so on.
- 20 One thinks of Primo Levi on the subject of Fascism and chemistry: “the chemistry and physics on which we fed, besides being nourishments vital in themselves, were the antidote to Fascism. . . , because they were clear and distinct and verifiable at every step, and not a tissue of lies and emptiness, like the radio and newspapers.”<sup>16</sup> I would put it more prosaically, but perhaps a little more precisely: the antidote to pseudoinquiry, and to the loss of confidence in the importance of intellectual integrity it engenders, is real inquiry and the respect for the demands of evidence and argu-

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13. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 22.

14. A term I introduced in “Knowledge and Propaganda: Reflections of an Old Feminist.”

15. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 1.57-59.

16. Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, p. 42. I owe this reference to Cora Diamond, “Truth: Defenders, Debunkers, Despisers,” to which I refer readers for illuminating discussion of Rorty and Heal.

ment it engenders. Real inquiry of any kind, I should say: scientific, historical, textual, forensic, . . . even philosophical. But there is a reason for putting “scientific” first on this list, the same reason that led Lewis to write “scientific vocation,” meaning “intellectual vocation,” and that led Peirce sometimes to describe the genuine inquirer’s concern for truth as “the scientific attitude”:<sup>17</sup> not that all or only scientists have the scientific attitude, but that this is the attitude that made science possible. It is not concern for truth, but the idea that such concern is superstition, that is superstitious.

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17. And another reason, too: that, in scientific inquiry the circumpressure of facts, of evidence, is relatively direct (though not, I think, as direct as the quotation from Levi suggests). It may be worth recalling in this context that Peirce, a working scientist as well as the greatest of American philosophers, was trained as a chemist.