

# Philosophy and Sophistry Revisited

"Truth is great and will prevail if left to herself. She has nothing to fear from the conflict of free argument and debate."

.....Thomas Jefferson, 1786.

"The great masses of the people will more easily fall victim to a great lie than to a small one."

..... Adolph Hitler.

The above quote from Jefferson is typical of an attitude to the question of truth that was prevalent in the 'Enlightenment' era in which much of Unitarian thought and attitudes are grounded. Today this is considered simplistic. Some would say that there is no 'Truth' but a plurality of personal truths possessed by each individual. Now, the question of fundamentals (plural) arises here. The basic assumptions upon which a society or sub-culture or individual bases its/his life mould what comes to be regarded as true.

Let us start with the simple assumption that the real world has an objective existence. It exists prior to our existence and we arise from it formed by objectively existing laws of nature. That there is an element of social construction to reality is not in question here but these elements of reality arise at a later stage of the reality continuum to the objectively existing world 'out there'. There is an element of social construction in what constitutes an objective 'fact' but to claim that we each invent our own realities without reference to an objective world quickly reduces to the proposition that social reality is created purely by lies and violence. Here a proposition is regarded as 'true' purely for reasons of expediency and if it were actually factually correct this would only be a coincidence. And if it were only the whim of the human ego that divides fact from fiction, truth from falsehood, then an ethos of confrontation and conflict would be prevalent in interpersonal relationships. Each personal 'truth' would be a position adopted by each individual for reasons of expediency, conceivably for reasons of altruistic expediency, and interpersonal relationships would reduce to political, and amoral, competition.

John Searle speaks of the social construction of reality: "A counts as B in the context of C". Wine is holy in the context of a religious ceremony; it is an intoxicant elsewhere. Sexual acts in the context of wholesome close couple relationships are holy but may well be acts of violence elsewhere, and this not necessarily so only in the case of rape. The sexual act, or the bottle of wine, exist objectively, and while the context may be a socially created construct this social context is not the creation of the individual. The delusion that this can be the case is the driving force behind those who desire only wealth and for whom wealth is truth. Even among Unitarians this

relativism can occur involving a phoney tolerance of unexamined and bogus 'truths'. All genuine truths have an objective element existing in shared reality.

Some time ago I attended a seminar on comparative religion hosted by a Bible believing Christian. While there was no question as to where he stood on the question of what constituted religious truth the lecturer was in no way contemptuous of other faiths. I remarked that as a child it had seemed to me, and others, that the world of a believer and that of an atheist was one and the same, 'this' world, but the believer held that another world, 'the world to come' perhaps, also existed but was separate from 'this' world and was invisible. The lecturer held that this was the case and the nature of the 'world to come' was discovered only through the study of the Bible. I argued that the findings of modern science would point to the 'world to come' as having a real, tangible, existence and was, in fact, an aspect of 'this world'. The atheist of my youth made the mistake of confusing the surface appearance of 'this world' with its totality. The believer might well be using primitive or archaic terminology but these terms really do refer to actually existing aspects of reality.

I spoke of the evidence for a mind or soul that was distinct from the brain using the examples of my pet slugs, my two pet cats, each with distinct differing personalities, and my wife of twenty years, this to suggest an hierarchy of mind whether of evolutionary or divine design, or both. As well as the observed differences of behaviour in these three categories of being, through which observations their 'minds' are directly perceived, biological, and neurobiological study in particular, would provide knowledge which would correlate with such observations. Of course scientific facts are often used as part of atheistic propaganda but science can also be used for the opposite interpretation and without the dishonesty.

The 'fundamentalist' Christian lecturer believed in a material world, that was of a simple nature, and the Bible, he firmly believed, answered all complex questions referring to the eternal. He admitted that the basis of that belief was inner certainty. He further insisted that every statement in the Bible should be considered as literally true. As evidence he again appealed to inner certainty. I then admitted to a terrible 'lie'. While I did have a wife and two cats my pet slugs were of a fictitious nature. He admitted that this in no way surprised him as he had assumed this to be the case when I was advocating my naturalistic explanation of mind/soul. I put it to him that any complex and lengthy literary work which sought to express a truth, such as is the case with the Bible, would usually contain metaphors and allegories and while these would not be literally true this would in no way compromise the truth of the total work. The 'Parable of the Slugs', I argued, pointed to non-literalist interpretations of the Bible as being likely to be more in accordance with its Truth and this in common with most cases of language usage. However I doubt if my objective demonstration of the normal way language works in any way disturbed his inner certainty. Or perhaps I may be wrong.

The point must be made here that a huge proportion of Bible centred Christians share this distorted, and easily discredited, methodology of approaching the Bible and hold this to be central to their way of life. However the more general purpose relativism of the earlier part of this essay stems from the same perverse attitude to the nature of truth. Fundamentalism is surely a misnomer as what is in question in both cases is the unsound nature of the first principles from which knowledge is derived and,

accordingly, the unsound first principles on which fundamentalists of all kinds base their way of living. Christian fundamentalism and liberal autonomous moral relativism both, in essence, share the same sort of defect in their foundational assumptions, namely knowledge claims that are based on fantasy. And in each case the error in question is reinforced by social intercourse with those of similar mindsets. Rigorous psychology experiments show that people tend to regard social pressure as valid information more readily than the evidence of their own senses.

So it is widespread, to say the least, that people live in a state of substantial delusion just at a personal level. However that society is also fed delusion intentionally by the media is an established fact. I will give two examples from my sociology studies at Dublin City University. The reasons for the creation of a 'moral panic' are not always clear. It may be the ruling elite diverting the attention of the populace away from real issues. Interest groups may be engaging in a power play. Or it may be mischievousness and malevolence on the part of the media.

In 1976 and early 1977 the Irish media created hysteria by alleging that Dublin was being terrorised by gangs of juvenile criminals dubbed the "Bugsy Malones" after the movie where child actors played the parts of gangsters. At the height of the hysteria four leading Irish daily newspapers claimed that a planeload of these juvenile Mafioso were flying to Spain on a holiday to spend their 'loot'. The 1% of truth here was that some inner city children were treated to a holiday, funded by parents and charities, and they were, of course, chaperoned at all times. Statistics show that the rate of underage crime at this period was unusually low but the minister for justice, bowing to media created public pressure, sanctioned the building of Lochane House, a prison for juvenile offenders.

The DCU sociology department explanation for the mysterious illegality of cannabis is as follows. As late as 1931 the US Treasury Department denounced reports of the supposed dangers of marijuana as spurious and alarmist. However the Bureau of Narcotics, in an unholy allegiance with Hearst newspapers, created a moral panic centred around nonsensical tales of how tiny amounts of the herb changed usually well-adjusted people into axe murderers. Enough mud was thrown to make enough stick and the result was the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937. In my youth it was almost seditious to question the nonsense that cannabis always created a craving for heroin. However the 1% truth here lay in the fact that most people would have no idea as to how to procure heroin while a cannabis user 'just might'. The very recent notion that cannabis causes schizophrenia has a similar 1% of truth. Just as prohibition of alcohol created many illicit distilleries producing extremely strong moonshine whiskey and few illegal breweries, growers of cannabis have been producing, not just *stronger* cannabis, but cannabis with a higher proportion of hallucinogenic chemicals and less of those that produce a 'mellow' effect. Panic attacks are to be expected, especially in the inexperienced. Here we have the 'moral panic' either compounding or actually creating the social damage involved.

Jefferson's naïve idea that the truth will *always* come out arose in a simpler era but was naïve even then. Free argument and debate was, of course, central to the libertarian democracy that Jefferson helped to create and this was quite distinct from the tyranny he helped overthrow. At best the *possibility* that the truth *might* become known is a check against corruption but the above analysis shows the simplicity of

Jefferson's attitude. Service to the truth requires constant vigilance and most people prefer comfortable falsehoods to truths. And the social control exerted by a free but corrupt media further distorts our reality.

Hunter Thompson described the candidature of Senator George McGovern as a rare opportunity for the American people to elect an honest man as president. Tricky Dickey Nixon won by a landslide. Nixon's corrupt administration was ousted by a free press, perhaps, but it was Nixon's bugging of the opposition that caused his removal from office. That he ordered the illegal carpet bombing of Cambodia somehow did not become part of the discourse.

To insist that the truth will *automatically* be recognised is little better than the assertion that might is right. And in the same manner as the winners write history the question arises as to how we will be sure we will recognise the truth *as* the truth when it is so easily confused with falsehood.

Brendan Burke MA(Phil).  
16 April 2008.