

ASSIGNMENT 1

Philosophy 167

due October 7, 2014

In recent years several scientists have testified in court that Darwinian evolution is an established scientific fact.¹ One can easily imagine an appeals court justice asking his or her clerk to prepare a brief reviewing the considerations, pro and con, bearing on this claim. The point of such a brief would be to put the justice in a position to reach a conclusion about the merits of the claim. In particular, the clerk should not try to arrive at a conclusion unless the matter is beyond legitimate dispute, for the issue is ultimately one for the justice to decide, and a clerk should never usurp the prerogatives of a justice.

It would be anachronistic to suggest that Galileo could have defended himself by claiming that the Copernican system, as expostulated by Kepler, was an established scientific fact by 1633. The distinction invoked by the word 'scientific' here is surely post-Newtonian, if not far more recent. Nevertheless, the Church happened to reconsider the charges against Galileo just a few years ago. One can easily imagine someone in this context defending Galileo by contending that the Church was mistaken in trying him because, as of 1633, the combination of the simplicity of the Copernican-Keplerian system, on the one hand, and the extraordinary accuracy with which it predicted the locations of the planets, on the other, was enough to establish it as a scientific fact. And one can easily imagine someone charged with judging Galileo requesting a brief reviewing the considerations for and against this claim.

Your task is to prepare such a brief, 5 to 7 pages long, on the basis of the reading assigned in this course. In doing so, you best give some attention to what an established scientific fact is, as well as to what evidential requirements have to be satisfied for something to become an established scientific fact, for a good brief has to make the point at issue clear in order to bring the pros and cons bearing on it into focus.

1 Cf. La Follette, M. C. (ed.), Creationism, Science, and the Law: The Arkansas Case, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983); or Kitcher, Philip, Abusing Science, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982).