

TO TELL THE TRUTH?

DANIEL C. DENNETT

Is mathematics a religion at all? Is science? One often hears these days that science is "just" another religion. There are some interesting similarities. Established science, like established religion, has its bureaucracies and hierarchies of officials, its lavish and arcane installations of no utility apparent to outsiders, its initiation ceremonies. Like a religion bent on enlarging its congregation, it has a huge phalanx of proselytizers — who call themselves not missionaries but educators.

An amusing fantasy: an ill-informed observer witnesses the intricate, formal teamwork that goes into preparing a person for the arcane paraphernalia of positron emission tomography — a PET scan — and decides it must be a religious ceremony, a ritual sacrifice, perhaps, or the investiture of a new archbishop. But these are superficial appearances. What of the deeper similarities that have been proposed? Science, like religion, has its orthodoxies and heresies, doesn't it? Isn't the belief in the power of the scientific method a creed, on all fours with religious creeds in the sense that it is ultimately a matter of faith, no more capable of independent confirmation or rational support than any other religious creed?

Notice that the question threatens to undermine itself: by contrasting faith with independent confirmation and rational support, and denying that science as a whole can use its own methods to secure its own triumph, it pays homage to those very methods. There seems to be a curious asymmetry: scientists do not appeal to the authority of any religious leaders when their results are challenged, but many religions today would love to be able to secure the endorsement of science. A few have names that proclaim that desire: Christian Scientists, and Scientologists, for instance. We also have a word for science worship: *scientism*. Those are accused of scientism whose enthusiastic attitude toward the proclamations of science is all too similar to

the attitudes of the devout: not cautious and objective, but adoring, uncritical, or even fanatical. If the scientists' *summum bonum* or highest good is truth, if scientists make truth their God, as some have claimed, is this not just as parochial an attitude as the worship of Jahweh, or Muhammad, or the Angel Moroni? No, our faith in the truth is, truly, our faith in the truth — a faith that is shared by all members of our species, even if there is great divergence in approved methods for obtaining it. The asymmetry noted above is real: faith in the truth has a priority claim that sets it apart from all other faiths.

THE PRIORITY OF TRUTH

Truth-telling is, and must be, the background of all genuine communication, including lying. After all, deception only works when the would-be deceiver has a reputation for telling the truth. Flattery would truly get you nowhere without the default presumption of truth-telling: cooing like a dove or grunting like a pig would be as apt to curry favour.

We alone among the animals appreciate truth "for its own sake." And — thanks to the science we have created in the pursuit of truth — we alone can also see why it is that truth, without being appreciated or even conceived of, is an ideal that constrains the perceptual and communicative activities of all animals.

We human beings use our communicative skills not just for truth-telling, but also for promise making, threatening, bargaining, story-telling, entertaining, mystifying, inducing hypnotic trances, and just plain kidding around, but prince of these activities is truth-telling, and for this activity we have invented ever better tools. Alongside our tools for agriculture, building, warfare, and transportation, we have created a technology of truth: science. Scientists have faith in the truth, but it is not blind faith. It is not like the faith that parents may have in the

honesty of their children, or that sports fans may have in the capacity of their heroes to make the winning plays. It is rather like the faith anybody can have in a result that has been independently arrived at by ten different teams.

EPISTEMOLOGY: TRYING TO TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUTH

The ultimate reflexive investigation of investigation occurs in that branch of philosophy known as epistemology, the theory of knowledge. Agreeing that truth is a very important concept, epistemologists have tried to say just what truth is — without going overboard. Just figuring out what is true about truth turns out to be a difficult task, however, a *technically* difficult task, in which definitions and theories that seem at first to be innocent lead to complications that soon entangle the theorist in dubious doctrines. Our esteemed and familiar friend, truth, tends to turn into Truth — with a capital T — an inflated concept of truth that cannot really be defended.

Here is just one of the paths that leads to difficulty: suppose knowledge consists of nothing but true propositions believed with justification. And then suppose that true propositions, unlike false propositions, express facts. What are facts? How many facts are there? (Tom, Dick, and Harry are sitting in a room. There's one fact. In addition to Tom, Dick, and Harry, the room they are sitting in, and whatever they are sitting on, we seem to have a plethora of other facts: Dick is not standing, there is no horse on which Tom is riding, and so forth, *ad infinitum*. Do we really need to countenance an infinity of further facts alongside the rather minimal furnishings of this little world?) Were there facts before there were fact-finders, or are they rather like true sentences (of English, French, Latin, etc.), whose existence had to await the creation of human languages? Are facts independent of the minds of those who

believe the propositions that express them? Do truths *correspond* to facts? What do the truths of mathematics correspond to, if anything? The categories begin to multiply, and no unified, obvious, agreed upon story about truth emerges. Sceptics, seeing apparent pitfalls in any absolute or transcendental version of truth, argue for milder versions, and their opponents argue back, showing the flaws in the rival attempts at theory. Unremitting controversy reigns.

This modest but intermittently brilliant investigation of the very meaning of the word *truth* has had some mischievous consequences. Some have thought that the philosophical arguments showing the hopelessness of the inflated doctrines of truth actually showed that truth itself was nothing estimable or achievable after all. Give it up, they seem to be saying. Truth is an unachievable and misguided ideal. Then

Joanne Omigie



those who have gone on searching for an acceptable, defensible doctrine of truth appear to be clinging to a creed outworn, avowing a religion that they cannot secure by the methods of science itself. Epistemology begins to look like a mug's game — but only because the observers are forgetting all the points about truth that both sides agree upon. The effects of this distorted vision can be unsettling.

Everybody wants the truth. If you wonder whether your neighbour has cheated you, or if there are any fish in this part of the lake, or which way to walk to get home, you are

interested in truth. Why, though, if truth is so wonderful, and so obtainable, is there so much antagonism toward science? Everybody appreciates truth; not everybody appreciates the truth-finding tools of science. Some, it seems, would prefer other, more traditional methods of getting at the truth: astrology; divining, soothsayers and gurus and shamans, trance-channeling, and consulting a variety of holy texts. Here the verdict of science is so familiar that I hardly need repeat it: as entertainments or stretching exercises for the mind, these various activities have their merits, but as truth-seeking methods, none can compete with science, a fact regularly conceded, tacitly, by those who defend their favorite alternative practice by citing what they claim to be *scientific support* — what else? — of its claims to power. One never encounters a believer in trance-channeling enlisting the support of an association of astrologers, or a College of Cardinals, but every shred of putative statistical evidence, every stray physicist or mathematician who can be found to offer friendly testimony, is eagerly brandished.

Why, then, if science is regularly appealed to even by those who seek to spread the word about alternatives, is there also so much dread? The answer is well known: the truth can hurt. Indeed it can. That is no illusion, but it is sometimes denied or ignored by scientists and others who pretend to believe that *truth above all* is the highest good. Surely it is not. I can easily describe circumstances in which I myself would lie or suppress the truth in order to prevent some human suffering. An old woman at the end of her days, living her life vicariously through tales of the heroic achievements of her son — are you going to tell her when he is arrested, convicted of some terrible crime, and humiliated? Isn't it better for her to leave this world in ignorant bliss? Of course it is, say I. But note that, even here, we have to understand these cases as exceptions to the rule. We couldn't give this woman the comfort of our lies if lies were the general rule; she has to believe us when we talk to her.

It is a fact that people often don't want to know the truth. It is a more unsettling fact that people often don't want *other* people to know the truth. It darkens counsel to attempt to transform these facts into support for the fatuous idea that faith in the truth is

itself a culture-bound, parochial, or in any way optional human attitude. The father of the accused who sits listening in court to the testimony, the woman who wonders if her husband is cheating on her — they may well not want to know the truth, and they may be right not to want to know the truth, but they believe in the truth. Very clearly they do; they know that the truth is there to be shunned or embraced, and that it matters. That's *why* they may well not want to know the truth. Because the truth can hurt. They may manage to deceive themselves into thinking that their attitude toward the truth on this occasion reflects ill on truth, and truth-finding and truth-seeking itself, but, if so, this really is self-deception. The most they can hope to cling to is that there may be good reasons, the best of reasons — in the court of truth, note — for sometimes suppressing or ignoring the truth.

Should we not, then, consider suppressing the truth on a large scale, protecting various threatened groups from its corrosive effects? Consider what inevitably happens when our scientific culture, and its technology, is introduced to populations that have hitherto been spared its innovations. What effects will cellular telephones and Music Television and high-tech weaponry (and the high-tech medicine to deal with the effects of the high-tech weaponry) have on the underdeveloped peoples of the third world? Many destructive and painful effects, no doubt. But we don't have to look at electronic wizardry to see the damage that can be done. Tjjs Goldschmidt, in his fascinating book *Darwin's Dreampond* (1996), tells of the devastating effects of introducing the Nile perch into Lake Victoria: the amazing species, a flock of cichlid fish, was nearly extinguished in a few years, a catastrophic loss for biologists, but not necessarily for the people who lived on its shores and who now could supplement their subsistence diet with the bounties of a new fishery. Goldschmidt also tells, however, of a similar cultural effect: the extinction of traditional Sukuma baskets.

These watertight baskets were woven by women and used at celebrations as vessels for consuming vast quantities of *pombe*, a millet beer . . . Blades of grass dyed with manganese were woven into the baskets in geometric patterns with a symbolic significance. It wasn't always possible to

find out what the patterns meant because the arrival of the *mazabethi* — the aluminum dishes named after Queen Elizabeth that had been introduced on a large scale under British rule — had signified the end of the masonzo culture. I spoke to an old woman in a little village who, after more than thirty years, was still incensed about the *mazabethi* “Sisi wanawake, we women, we used to weave baskets while sitting around and chatting with each other. I don’t see anything wrong with that. Each woman did her best to make the most beautiful basket possible. The *mazabethi* put an end to all that.” (p.39)

Even more sad, I think, is the effect reported of the introduction of steel axes to the Panare Indians of Venezuela. “In the past, when stone axes were used, various individuals came together and worked communally to fell trees for a new garden. With the introduction of the steel axe, however, one man can clear a garden by himself . . . collaboration is no longer mandatory *nor particularly frequent*” (emphasis added, Katharine Milton, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” *Natural History*, March, 1992, pp. 37-42).

These people lose their traditional “web of cooperative interdependence,” and they also lose a great deal of the knowledge they have amassed over centuries, of the fauna and flora of their own world. Often their very languages are extinguished, in a generation or two. These are great losses, without any doubt. But what policies should we adopt regarding them?

First, we should take note of the obvious: when traditional cultures encounter Western culture, the traditionalists enthusiastically adopt almost all the new practices, the new tools, the new ways. Why? Because they know what they have always desired, valued, wished for, and they find that these novelties are better means to their own ends than their old ways. Steel axes replace stone axes, outboard motors replace sails, modern medicine replaces witch doctoring, transistor radios and cellular phones are eagerly sought. These people turn out to be no better than we are at foreseeing the longterm effects of their choices, but, on the basis of the information they consider, they choose rationally.

Yes, there are times, to be sure, when their innocence is taken advantage of by meretricious “advertising” cunningly aimed at their sheltered appreciation of the possibilities life has in store. But notice that this deplorable tactic is not the special province of those who would exploit them. Those who would protect them from

modern technology are apparently prepared to grit their teeth and lie to them on a large scale: “Conceal your high-tech wonders from them! If you must give them something, palm off some shiny beads, or other tidbits that they can readily incorporate into their traditional culture.”

Is this any way to treat adult members of our species? Do we not *all* have, among our human rights, the right to know the truth? It is shockingly paternalistic to say that we should shield these people from the fruits of civilization. What, are they like elephants, to be put in a preserve? I recommend that we treat them as we treat our own citizens: we offer them all the truthseeking tools in our kit, so that they can make an informed choice — if they so choose. To be sure, that course of action is a one-way street. Once they have been so informed, we have already violated their pristine purity. There’s no going back.

You can’t have it both ways. If these are human adults, then they have a right to know, do they not? Would you really advocate taking steps to prevent them from educating themselves? Educating themselves will turn them into something radically different. They will lose many of their old ways. Some of this will be good riddance, and some, no doubt, will be tragic. But what standard would you use to anchor the “right” ways for them? The ways of the last hundred years, or of the last ten years, or of the last ten millennia? And more pressing, what would give us the right in the first place to treat them differently from the way we treat our own citizens?

Who cries out for this self-imposed restraint, by the way? Who beseeches us to button our “imperialist” lips and keep our so-called scientific truths to ourselves? Not, typically, the people, but rather, their self-declared spiritual leaders. It is they, not their flocks, who demand that their flocks be shielded from the corrosive and irreversible

influences of our scientific culture of truth. Those people who work in “cultural studies,” and others who fly the banner of multiculturalism, should linger thoughtfully over the following suggestion: their well-meaning policy of tolerance for traditional policies that deny free access to the truth-seeking tools of science is often — more often than not, I would judge — a policy in the service of tyrants.

In our culture, the idea of informed consent is one of the cornerstones of liberty. In other cultures, the very idea of informing the people so that they might consent or not is viewed with hostility. The next century will, I hope, sweep away this hostility. Indeed, I think it will become more and more impractical for political leaders to preserve the uninformedness of their people. All we need do is just keep putting out the word, clearly and with scrupulous concern for telling the truth. There is really nothing new in this suggestion. Institutions such as the BBC World Service have been doing just that, with tremendous success, for decades. And year after year, the elite in every nation in the world send their children to our universities for their educations. They know, perhaps better than we ourselves appreciate, that the science and technology of truth-seeking is our most valuable export.

Daniel C. Dennett is director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, USA. Among his many books is Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life.

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