

THE IDEAL OF INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY, IN LIFE AND LITERATURE*

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Certainly there be that delight in giddiness, and count it a bondage to fix a belief; affecting free- will in thinking, as well as in acting... But it is not only the difficulty and labour which men take in finding out of truth, nor again that when it is found it imposeth upon men's thoughts, that doth bring lies in favour; but a natural though corrupt love of the lie itself... Doth any man doubt, that if there were taken out of men's minds vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations as one would, and the like, but it would leave the minds of a number of men poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves?

...But howsoever these things are thus in men's depraved judgements and affections, yet... the inquiry of truth, which is the love-making or wooing of it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature.

Francis Bacon¹

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¹ Francis Bacon, "Of Truth" (1625), in *Francis Bacon's Essays*, ed. Oliphant Smeaton (London: Dutton, 1906), 1, 2.

In just a few short lines, Bacon presents the ideal of intellectual integrity with almost poetic precision and compactness; sketches some of the characteristic intellectual vices to which human beings are susceptible; suggests how these vices arise from the interference of the will with the intellect; and describes the “vain opinions, flattering hopes, and false valuations” to which they in turn give rise. The remarkable brief essay “Of Truth” from which these lines are taken, is a rhetorical, a psychological, and a philosophical tour de force, illuminating questions about the traits of character that make some people strong, honest, thorough inquirers, and others weak, dishonest, or perfunctory: questions profoundly consequential for our understanding, and our conduct, of the Life of the mind.

Of course, many others have also shed Light on these questions; scientists and social thinkers, as well as philosophers –I think of John Locke, Charles Sanders Peirce, Friedrich Nietzsche, W. K. Clifford, Thorstein Veblen, Percy Bridgman– have wrestled hard and helpfully with them; and many novelists, too –I think of George Eliot, Samuel Butler, Sinclair Lewis, William Cooper²– have explored the tangled roots and described the bitter fruits of ignorance, self-deception, hypocrisy, carelessness, and of those vain opinions, flattering hopes, and all their horrid kin, in the magnificently messy detail that imaginative literature makes possible, but from which dry philosophical analysis must abstract.

Inevitably, I too will abstract, as philosophers do. But in the spirit of Stanislav Lec’s shrewd advice –“think before you think!”³– I will first remind myself, and you, of the vast variety and rich diversity of our vocabulary for describing and appraising a person’s character or temperament qua believer, qua inquirer, or qua thinker. Here is an off-the-top-of-my-head list: sloppy, meticulous, thorough, patient, hasty, slapdash, credulous, skeptical, flighty, obstinate, willful, dogmatic, conventional, unconventional, iconoclastic, sober, light-minded, playful, serious, imaginative, fanciful, stodgy, original,

² I have in mind George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), on the power of ignorance; Sinclair Lewis’s *Arrowsmith* (1925) and William Cooper’s *The Struggles of Albert Woods* (1952), on the role of personality in science; and Samuel Butlers *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), on intellectual integrity –the novel on which I shall focus in this paper.

³ My source is *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, ed. J. Gross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 262.

derivative, reliable, unreliable, responsible, irresponsible, casual, prejudiced, partisan, honest, dishonest, slippery, simple-minded, crude, subtle, flexible, rigid, self-deceiving, independent, formulaic, crass, emotional, logical, illogical, confused, clear, ambivalent, penetrating, superficial, trenchant, sharp, dull, deep, shallow, critical, uncritical, quick, slow, thoughtful, curious, diligent, circumspect, cursory, accurate, picky, negligent, slack, loose, constipated, vague, foggy, vacillating, parochial, gullible, intuitive, dilettantish, hackneyed, sophisticated, blundering, perspicacious, judicious, inept, doctrinaire, timid, bold, conscientious, interested, disinterested, uninterested, engaged, perfunctory, pedestrian, plodding, persistent, painstaking..

A detailed categorization of these terms, as in a thesaurus, might classify them according as they relate to honesty, to thoroughness and care, to effort, to intellectual styles and strengths, and so forth. I shall focus here on honesty, carefulness, and diligence, and of course also on dishonesty, carelessness, and sloth; questions about intellectual styles, gifts, knacks, and kinks will have to wait for another occasion.

A work of literature can convey, in prose that engages and delights us, some of the very truths that a work of philosophy, sometimes very ponderously and laboriously, states and elaborates; moreover, the way the narrative structure of a novel tracks its protagonists' thoughts and actions over time is especially well suited to explorations of character, epistemic character included. So, not to lose sight of how subtle and complex epistemic character can be, I am going to begin, not with philosophers' analyses, but with a novelist's exploration of willfulness and self-deception in belief and inquiry.

V. S. Pritchett wrote of *The Way of All Flesh*, published the year after Samuel Butler's death, that it is "one of the time-bombs of literature... One thinks of it lying in [his] desk for thirty years, waiting to blow up the Victorian family and with it the whole great pillared and balustrade edifice of the Victorian novel." William Maxwell observed in the *New Yorker* that while the novel is often read by "the young, bent on making out a case against their elders", Butler was fifty when he finished working on it, and "no reader much under that age is likely to appreciate the full beauty of its horrors."⁴ True, all true; but from our perspective the important thing is that this is

⁴ My source for these quotations is the anonymous introduction to Butler, *The Way of All*

also one of the finest epistemological novels ever written: a semi-autobiographical *bildungsroman* that traces not only the moral but also the intellectual growth of its central character, Ernest Pontifex, as he fumbles his way from a fog of self-deceptive pseudo-belief and sham inquiry to an appreciation of what it means really to believe something, and what is involved in really trying to find something out.

Brought up in an “atmosphere of lying and self-laudatory hallucination” (291) by his cruel, domineering clergyman father, Theobald, and his socially self-aggrandizing and spiritually self-deluded mother, Christina, Further trained in humbug by Dr. Skinner at Roughborough School and then as a student in Cambridge, Ernest is none-too-subtly maneuvered by his parents (as, a generation before, the reluctant Theobald had been by his) into becoming a minister. As his ordination approaches, he briefly gets religion inwell, in earnest; at which—as Mr. Overton, Ernest’s godfather and Butler’s drily deadpan narrator⁵, observes— [e]ven Christina refrained from ecstasy over her son’s having discovered the power of Christ’s word, while Theobald was frightened out of his wits” (241).

Ernest’s ambivalence soon returns, in spades. Still, as a troubled young curate he chooses to live among his poorest parishioners; and, feeling he ought to try to convert someone, resolves to begin with the other tenants in the seedy rooming-house in Ashpit Place where he takes up residence. Too timid to tackle the loud, wife-beating tailor in the room above, he approaches the Methodist couple on the top floor, only to discover that he doesn’t actually know what it is he’s trying to convert them *from*. He ends up in the front kitchen, trying to convert the free-thinking tinker, Mr. Shaw; but faced with the tinker’s challenge to give the story of the Resurrection of Christ as told in St. John’s Gospel, he is embarrassed to find himself running the four Gospel accounts hopelessly together. If Ernest will go away and get

Flesh (1903; New York: Random House, 1998), v-vii. Subsequent page references to *The Way of All Flesh* in the text are to this edition.

⁵ Commentators tell us that Overton represents the mature Butler, reflecting on the life of the young Butler, as represented by Ernest. As Overton observes, “[e]very man’s work... is always a portrait of himself... I may very likely be condemning myself, all the time that I am writing this book, for I know that whether I like it or no I am portraying myself more surely than I am portraying any of the characters” (*The Way of All Flesh*, 67).

the different accounts straight, Mr. Shaw tells him, he may pay him another visit, “for I shall know you have made a good beginning and mean business” (277). And Ernest does as he is asked: he really tries “to find out, not that [the four Gospels] were all accurate, but whether they were accurate or no. He did not care which result he should arrive at, but he was resolved that he would reach one or the other” (280). He gets his first glimpse of the difference between really trying to figure something out, and merely trying to make a case for a predetermined conclusion.

But then, disaster: Ernest’s unhealthily overexcited effort to convert another neighbor, a young woman of easy virtue, is interrupted by one of her gentleman callers, Mr. Towneley –an affluent, affable, and self-assured fellow, “big and very handsome” (229), whom Ernest knows slightly from Cambridge. Ernest is crushed; and blushing scarlet with humiliation at the contrast between himself and the worldly Towneley, slinks away. “He knew well enough what he wanted now” (282); kicking his Bible into a corner, he blunders into making a crass, clumsy pass at another young woman in the house –rashly assuming that she and Miss Snow are birds of a feather. Scared, agitated, and insulted, the naive and innocent Miss Maitland hurries from the house; and returns with the police, who cart our hero off to the magistrates’ court, where he is sentenced to six months’ hard labor.

This double humiliation is the making of him. In prison, slowly recovering from the illness bought on by shock and shame, too weak for the treadmill but allowed to have a Bible, Ernest returns to Mr. Shaw’s challenge. Reading his New Testament “as one who wished neither to believe nor disbelieve, but cared only about finding out whether he ought to believe or no” (297), one day he experiences a kind of revelation: that “very few care two straws about truth, or have any confidence that it is righter and better to believe what is true than what is untrue, even though belief in the untruth may seem at first sight most expedient. Yet it is only these few who can be said to believe anything at all; the rest are simply unbelievers in disguise” (299). He has begun to appreciate the ideal of intellectual integrity.

And so, Ernest finds his way-though hardly all at once or directly, for “like a snipe” he ziggs and zaggs before settling to a steady flight (213). He cuts off communication with his ghastly parents; he makes his living as a second-hand clothes dealer during a sad “marriage” to the pretty, good-natured –but hopelessly alcoholic,

and, it turns out, bigamous—Ellen. (Dry as ever, Overton muses: “Is it not Tennyson who has said: ‘T’is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all?’” [361])⁶ But eventually Ernest comes to see his time in Ashpit Place and in prison as far more valuable than his misspent years at Roughborough and Cambridge; he is even able to appreciate the irony of Theobald’s pleonastic plea at family prayers, that Christina and himself, their children, and their servants be made “*truly* honest and conscientious” (107, 230, 400).

Gradually realizing the potential that his godfather and his independent-minded, affectionate aunt Alethea (yes!) had seen in him, by the end of the book Ernest is, like Butler himself, a modestly successful if not very popular writer. When Overton wishes he would write more like other people, he replies that he “must write as he does or not at all” (429); when his publisher points out that his reputation is suffering because of his reluctance to form alliances in the literary world, he replies in one word: “Wait” (430).

“Those who know [Ernest] intimately,” the book concludes, “do not know that they wish him greatly different from what he actually is” (431). I for one certainly wouldn’t wish Ernest greatly different; and not least because his story has so much to teach us about intellectual character. For one thing, it is a vivid illustration of Nietzsche’s shrewd observation that “[i]n his heart every man knows very well that being unique, he will be in the world only once and that no imaginable chance will for a second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated an assortment as he is.”⁷ Intellectual character, almost inextricably intertwined in each person’s ever-evolving personality, is as various, as individual, as—well, as character is, and as people are.⁸

⁶ Of course, what Alfred Lord Tennyson had written, in *In Memoriam* XXVII, was: “T’is better to have loved and lost / than never to have loved at all.”

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator” (1874), in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 125-94, 127.

⁸ Now may be the time to say explicitly that, while this paper is a study of certain traits of intellectual character, it is emphatically not an exercise in the genre now known as “virtue epistemology.” When Sosa, Greco, et al. write of “epistemic virtues,” they are referring to such human cognitive powers as perception, introspection, and reasoning—“virtues” in a generic sense, as in Quine and Ullian’s talk of “virtues of hypotheses.” Ernest Sosa, “The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge”, in *Midwest Studie in Philosophy* 5

For another thing, and most to the present purpose, Ernest's story brings home to us that to understand what intellectual integrity involves means thinking about the role of the will and the mechanisms of self-deception; about the nature of belief and pseudo-belief; and about the differences between inquiry and advocacy, and what happens when the two are blurred. Arid it nudges us to ask why intellectual integrity is not only an achievement, but a rare and difficult one—and why there are so many who, rather than recognizing it as an ideal, scorn or denigrate it as a kind of superstition.

The phrase “intellectual integrity,” with its etymological connotation of wholeness or unity, suggests that what is involved is a kind of harmony. The harmony involved is not, however, simply consistency or coherence at the intellectual level; rather, as expressions like “wilful ignorance” and “wishful thinking” suggest, it is a kind of concordance of the will with the intellect. The phrase “intellectual honesty” —which Merriam-Webster's dictionary, as well as my linguistic intuition, tells me is a synonym for “intellectual integrity”— suggests that self-deception is the special kind of wilfulness that intellectual integrity requires us to avoid. As Peirce writes, a man “must be single-minded and sincere with himself. Otherwise, his love of truth will melt away, at once.”⁹ Articulating what is involved, however, calls for caution if we are to avoid suggesting *either* that belief is voluntary, that one can simply decide what

(1980): 3-52; John Greco, “Virtue in Epistemology”, in *The Canon and Its Critics* ed. Todd M. Furman and Mitchell Avila (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 226-42; W. V. Quine and Joseph Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1978). Moreover, Sosa's and Greco's account is reliabilist; but in *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), chap. 7, I gave a detailed critique of reliabilism. When Zagzebski writes of “intellectual virtue” it is in the more specific sense, and so does concern intellectual character. However, like Sosa et al., Zagzebski adopts a kind of reliabilism; and her suggestion that knowledge can be defined by appeal to “acts of intellectual virtue” reveals that she too expects the concept of virtue to do epistemological work for which, in my opinion, it is quite unsuited—work that can only be done by the concept of evidence. Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁹ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 1.19. References to this source hereafter cited in text by volume and paragraph number.

to believe, *or* (at the opposite and equally faulty extreme) that a person's hopes, desires, and fears can have no legitimate bearing on his intellectual life.

To believe that *p* is to hold *p* true; to inquire into whether *p* is to try to find out whether *p* is true; and evidence that *p* is an indication that *p* is true. As this suggests, intellectual integrity is, at its heart, a matter of conducting your intellectual life from the motive of truth-seeking. Peirce is eloquent on the subject: the year after William James's *The Will to Believe* was published, dedicated to "my old friend, Charles Sanders Peirce," we find him referring to the "Will to Learn" (5.583). Elsewhere he writes: "[t]he *spirit*... is the most essential thing—the *motive*" (1.34); for genuine inquiry requires "actually drawing the bow upon truth with intentness in the eye, with energy in the arm" (1.235), looking into things "without any sort of axe to grind" (1.44), seeking the truth "regardless of what the color of that truth may be" (7.605). I might put it, more prosaically, like this: really inquiring into a question requires that you want to find the true answer. But when what you want is not the truth, but a palatable conclusion, or a theologically or politically correct conclusion, or the conclusion you have already committed yourself to in print, or..., your desires are pulling against your intellect.

However, since belief isn't simply voluntary, much as you might want to reach that theologically or politically correct conclusion, you can't just make yourself believe it, can't just *decide* to believe that things are as you would like. You have to go about things less directly: to deceive yourself about where the evidence really points. As this reveals, "intellectually honest," like many of our terms for appraising intellectual character ("thorough," "meticulous," "responsible," "diligent," "negligent," and so on), has to do with a person's relation to evidence; for intellectual integrity requires a willingness to seek out evidence, and assess it, honestly.

Some philosophers have found the phenomenon of self-deception puzzling, since the idea of a person's lying to himself seems far more problematic than the idea of his lying to someone else. The better analogy is not with the flat-out lie, but with selective presentation, misdirection, being "economical with the truth." You *can't* simply tell yourself that not-*p*, and believe it, while being well aware that *p*.¹⁰ You

¹⁰ Compare Peirce's observation that "A man cannot startle himself by jumping up with an exclamation of *Boo!*" (5.58).

can, however, willfully pay attention selectively, concentrating your attention on this, favorable evidence, and not dwelling on that other, less favorable information; for this is, up to a point, a voluntary matter: hence our talk of “willful” ignorance, and “wishful” (and “fearful”) thinking. Those who “delight in giddiness, affecting free-will in thinking, as well as in acting,” as Bacon so charmingly puts it, want to believe that things are as they would like them to be: a goal best achieved by not looking into things too closely, and actively ignoring or strenuously trying to explain away any inconvenient evidence you can’t avoid altogether. And not only the irresponsibly light-minded, who want to change their opinions whenever they feel like it, but also the obstinately dogmatic, who don’t want to change their opinions at all, do this in one way or another. But, as Ernest gradually comes to understand, when the will habitually pulls against the intellect, the price is steep; inevitably, you are drawn into pseudo-belief and pseudo-inquiry.

Someone who really believes that *p* will have a disposition, when circumstances demand it, to agree, or to aver, that *p*; and, when circumstances demand it, to act as if *p*.¹¹ Since it is true that *p* just in case *p*,¹² this is as much as to say that he holds *p* true. (Depending on the degree of intensity of his belief, the strength of his conviction that *p*, these dispositions may be strong or weak; depending on the degree of entrenchment of his belief, they may be more or less easily budged as new evidence comes in.)

Someone who really believes that not-*p*, but is pretending to believe that *p*—to avoid flak from his boss, say, or to escape the perils of the Inquisition— will say that *p*, when he must, and act as if *p*, when he can’t avoid it; but his dispositions to assert and to behave as if not-*p* will remain untouched.

¹¹ Of course, this isn’t intended as a complete theory of belief, only as a first step. For a fuller account, see my *Defending Science Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 156-61.

¹² Of course, this isn’t intended as a complete theory of truth, either. For steps towards a fuller account, see my “Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig,” in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7-30, 21-23, and “One Truth, or Many Truths? Yes, and Yes” (presented at a conference on Pluralism at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, October 2003).

But someone who would very much like it to be the case that *p* (or very much fears that it is the case that *p*), and who willfully concentrates on evidence that *p* while willfully ignoring evidence that not-*p*, all the while telling himself that of course, *P.* is in a state of pseudo-belief. Like the person who really believes that not-*p* but is pretending to believe that *p*, he will aver that *p*, when this is expedient or is expected of him, and act as if *p*, when there will be no serious consequences; for example, he may, like Ernest, affirm the creed unquestioningly, and even hope to convert unbelievers from a supposed heterodoxy he doesn't understand to a supposed orthodoxy he doesn't understand either. But he doesn't really believe either way; he isn't even straightforwardly pretending to others that he believes; he is *pretending to himself* that he believes that *p*. So he must deceive himself about deceiving himself, studiously ignoring the evidence that he is studiously ignoring the evidence that not-*p*-and so on. No wonder he is in a mental fog!

Someone who is really inquiring into a question wants to discover the truth of that question, no matter what that truth may be. Whether he wants the true answer out of pure scientific curiosity, "an impulse to penetrate into the reason of things,"¹³ or he wants it for some ulterior reason, such as to find the cure for his child's illness, or to make money, or to become rich or famous, whether he is a deeply engaged inquirer who wants the true answer very badly, obsesses over the question, and works all the hours God sent to answer it, or a merely dutiful inquirer who goes home at five and gives his question no more thought until the next day, the truth of the matter is what he wants. (However, someone may want to know the truth with respect to some question, or want that truth to be known, without inquiring into it himself; think of a person who devotes himself to raising money so that others more competent than he can look into, say, a cure for macular degeneration.)

A person who knows full well that he isn't actually trying to work out the answer to the question he is supposedly investigating, but is goofing off –telling his boss or the dean that he is making progress, that he has written a draft of the eventual article, or whatever, when actually he has done nothing– is pretending to inquire; as, in a different way, is a person who knows full well that he has no idea, really,

¹³ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 1.44.

whether p or not- p , and doesn't really *care* whether p or not- p , but is busily seeking out evidence that p , and finding ways to hide or explain away any indication that not- p , because he wants the boss, the dean, the external evaluators, the voting public, or whomever, to believe that p .

But someone who is seeking out evidence that p , and finding ways to avoid, ignore, or explain away any indication that not- p , while telling himself that he is trying to find out whether p , is engaged in pseudo-inquiry. Perhaps he is already unbudgeably convinced that p , and couldn't be persuaded by any evidence to the contrary; or perhaps he doesn't give a damn about whether p , only about the fact that being known as a proponent of p will make his name in the profession or ensure his boss's approval. In any case, such a person isn't really inquiring; he isn't even straightforwardly pretending to others that he is inquiring; he is *pretending to himself that* he is inquiring. Like the pseudo-believer, the pseudo-inquirer is obliged to conduct his intellectual life in a self-induced mental fog: in this case, a fog in which inquiry becomes indistinguishable from advocacy—the art of the attorney, the lobbyist, the politician, and (as Butler doesn't fail to remind us) of the clergyman. Advocacy is all very well in its place;¹⁴ but pseudo-inquiry *has* no legitimate place in the life of the mind.

Allow me to add—recalling the wonderfully funny hypothesis that bullshit is so called “because it is very loose and copiously produced”¹⁵—that pseudo-belief and pseudo-inquiry stand to real belief and real inquiry rather as a bull session stands to a genuinely truth-directed discussion.

Our capacity to inquire is a remarkable human talent; but of course we don't always inquire successfully. Sometimes, even with the best will in the world, we just can't figure something out: our imaginations fail us, and we can't think of a plausible hypothesis; or we can't see, or reason, well enough. But sometimes we are very far

¹⁴ See my “Epistemology Legalized: Or, Truth, justice, and the American Way” (the Olin Lecture, Notre Dame School of Law, Notre Dame, IN, October 2004), in *The American Journal of jurisprudence* 49 (2004): 43-61.

¹⁵ I thought I remembered this from Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11-33; but this turns out to have been a false memory, and I have not been able to discover the real source.

from having the best will in the world: we are ambivalent about inquiring, or about what we might discover if we look into things too carefully. Sometimes we don't want to know the truth badly enough to go to all the trouble of finding out; and sometimes we really want *not* to discover what we suspect will be unpalatable truths, and go to a lot of trouble *not* to find out. And so we not only often make mistakes and often fail to come up with answers; we not only often inquire reluctantly, half-heartedly, dragging our heels about it; we also often fudge, fake, and obfuscate so as to disguise, even from ourselves, that we aren't really inquiring at all. This is the sad fact that dawns on Ernest in his prison cell: pseudo-belief and pseudo-inquiry are ubiquitous.

“Real [intellectual] power,” Peirce observes, “is not *born* in a man; it has to be worked out.”¹⁶ And the same is true of intellectual integrity; it is an achievement, and a difficult one at that. For that tendency to self-serving mental fogginess is just as much part of human nature as the capacity to inquire. A whole sleazy crew of motives, desires, hopes, and fears conspires to impede the intellect: among them sloth (we don't care to do the work involved in looking into a question thoroughly), impatience (we cut corners because we want quick and easy answers), and timidity (we sense the dangers involved should we have the misfortune to discover that the conventional “wisdom” is no such thing). And then there's hubris: as Peirce observes, the desire to learn requires that you acknowledge that “you do not satisfactorily know already” (1.13); but it hurts our pride to admit that we don't know, or that we were mistaken.

“Your discovery of the contradiction [the paradox of the class of all classes that are not members of themselves]... has shaken the basis on which I intended to build arithmetic”, Gottlob Frege writes in response to Bertrand Russell's letter pointing out the inconsistency in his logic; and sets to work to try again in an appendix to be added to the second volume of his *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, then in press.¹⁷ When Rosalind Franklin points out that DNA contains ten times as much water as his model has room for, “Honest Jim” Watson candidly admits his embarrassing mistake

¹⁶ Quoted in *The New Elements of Mathematics*, ed. Carolyn Eisele (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 4:977.

¹⁷ Gottlob Frege's letter to Bertrand Russell, dated June 22, 1902, appears in *From Frege to Gödel: A Source Book in Mathematical Logic, 1879-1931*, ed. Jean van Heijenoort (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 127-28.

and goes back to the drawing board-as he will do again, many times, before the problem is finally solved.¹⁸ Such expressions of intellectual honesty are striking and inspiring precisely because we all know how hard it can be to admit that you screwed up, and to take up a difficult task again after failing once (or twice, or...). As my title indicates, intellectual integrity is an ideal –something to strive for, but something achieved only imperfectly at best.¹⁹

Writing in 1933 of “The Struggle for Intellectual Integrity,”²⁰ Percy Bridgman observes that “animals and morons are incapable of intellectual honesty.” Moreover, he continues, appreciation of this ideal requires not only a certain intellectual power, but also “example and practice” (364-65). It isn’t always easy to recognize when rationalizing has crept into your thinking; and the opportunity for the practice of intellectual integrity is possible only in a society far enough from bare subsistence that an appreciable fraction of people can engage in intellectual pursuits. Intellectual integrity can and should be an ideal for intellectual workers in every field, Bridgman adds; but “in scientific activity the necessity for continual checking against the inexorable facts of experience is so insistent, and the penalties for allowing the slightest element of rationalizing to creep in are so immediate” that even the dullest understand that “intellectual honesty is the price of even a mediocre degree of success” (365-66).

More than that: the ideal of intellectual integrity can come to make a strong emotional appeal; one “finds something fine in... rigorously carrying through a train of thought careless of the personal implications; he feels a traitor to something deep within him if he refuses to follow out logical implications because he sees they are going to be unpleasant.” Though only a small fraction of people have yet caught the vision, Bridgman believes, “enough have caught it... that a new leaven is working in

¹⁸ James D. Watson, *The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of DNA*, ed. Gunther Stent (1967; New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 59.

¹⁹ See also James Gouinlock, *Eras and the Good* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 272-74, on the growth of intellectual independence, and 274-89 on “the scientific ideal.”

²⁰ Percy W. Bridgman, “The Struggle for Intellectual Integrity,” *Harper’s Magazine*, December 1933; reprinted in Bridgman, *Reflections of a Physicist* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 361-79 (reprinted source hereafter cited in text).

society” (366-67). But the consequences for someone who does grasp the ideal are likely to be uncomfortable. His first reaction will be “a complete repudiation in his own mind of the bunk that he is asked to accept. So much he must do, though it slay him.” But, Bridgman continues, “he must also continue to live in society as he finds it” (368) –and this won’t be easy. Moreover, at least in the short term, the effects of this new leaven in society may be far from benign; alluding to the Germany of his day, Bridgman predicts that a period of disruption and instability is inevitable, for there is bound to be resistance to the ideal, and hostility to those who feel its power.

When Bridgman likens the discovery that we are capable of responding to the ideal of intellectual integrity to “that other great discovery of the human race about itself, that it responds emotionally to music” (366), I am reminded yet again of *The Way of All Flesh*. Noticing that the callow fourteen year-old Ernest can hum and whistle all kinds of classy stuff, Alethea sets him to building an organ: a project which, she hopes, will develop both his puny muscles and his puny character. “‘He likes the best music,’ she thought, ‘and he hates Dr. Skinner. This is a very fair beginning’” (148). And when she dies, Ernest proposes to his godfather that they inscribe on her tombstone a bar of music from the Last of Handel’s six grand fugues –music that “might have done for Leonardo da Vinci himself;” Overton comments, as he chuckles over the last line of Ernest’s letter: “if you do not like it for Aunt Alethea I shall keep it for myself” (166-67).

When Bridgman stresses the importance of intellectual integrity to “the scientific worker,” I am reminded of Peirce’s use of “the scientific attitude” as a synonym for “genuine, good-faith inquiry” (1.43-45). But neither Bridgman’s nor Peirce’s point is really about the sciences as such. For as Bridgman acknowledges, not only scientists but serious inquirers of every kind (and, I would add, in every age) have some grasp of the ideal of intellectual honesty. Moreover, the whole sad panoply of intellectual dishonesties from wishful thinking to outright fraud is to be found both in the history of science and in its current practice. In fact, of the vast array of helps to inquiry that scientists have gradually devised over the centuries –microscopes and telescopes, X-rays, CAT scans, MRI, questionnaires, and such, amplifying human powers of observation; techniques and devices from numerals to the calculus to the computer, amplifying human reasoning powers; and so forth and so on– it is precisely

the social mechanisms that, by and large and in the long run, have, thus far, kept most scientists, most of the time, reasonably honest, that are the most fragile. They are, moreover, ever more susceptible to failure as science gets bigger, more expensive, and more potentially profitable to its practitioners.²¹

Elsewhere, suggesting how the natural sciences have achieved their remarkable successes, I have addressed issues about scientific dishonesty and fraud in detail.²² Here, however, I want to develop some thoughts prompted by Bridgman's observation that there will inevitably be many who regard the ideal of intellectual integrity with indifference, and some who attack it as an illusion, a kind of superstition. Since Bridgman alludes to the rise of fascism, I will begin by reminding you of these words of Hitler's: "I don't want there to be any intellectual education... [W]e stand at the end of the Age of Reason.... A new era of the magical explanation of the world is rising, an explanation based on will rather than knowledge. There is no truth, in either the moral or the scientific sense. Science is a social phenomenon,... limited by the usefulness or harm it causes."²³

The rhetoric of "a new era of magical explanation" sounds dated; but the remarkable thing about "there is no truth," and "[s]cience is a social phenomenon,... limited by the usefulness or harm it causes," and so on, surely, is how *un*remarkable these ideas sound today. For in our times disillusion with the idea of truth and the ideal of honest inquiry has become almost an orthodoxy; and we face a veritable barrage of arguments purporting to show that the concept of truth is irredeemable and the supposed ideal of intellectual honesty just another sham. Elsewhere, spelling out why we should value intellectual integrity, I have tried to show that these arguments are, one and all, unsound.²⁴ Here, however –noting for the record that if the cynics

²¹ See Haack, *Defending Science*, chap. 1 and 4.

²² See my *Defending Science*, 196-201; and "Scientific Secrecy and 'Spin': The Sad, Sleazy Saga of the Trials of Remune" (presented at a conference on "Sequestered Science: The Consequences of Undisclosed Knowledge," organized by the Project on Scientific Knowledge and Public Policy, New York, October 2004), forthcoming in *Law and Contemporary Problems*.

²³ My source is Gerald Holton, *Einstein, History, and Other Passions: The Rebellion Against Science at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1995; New York: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 31.

²⁴ See, for example, my "Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig," "One Truth or Many

really believed, as they profess to, that the concept of truth is irredeemable, there would be no point in their offering arguments at all— I will try to suggest why so many apparently find the cynics' arguments appealing, their (often manifest) unsoundness notwithstanding.

Ours, it is said, is the age of information; but of course it is also the age of misinformation, of boosterism, advocacy “research,” creative accounting, official cover-ups, propaganda, public relations, and so forth. *Pravda* (and *Veritas*) is full of propaganda, spin, and outright lies; the scientific breakthrough or miracle drug trumpeted in the press often turns out to be no such thing; in their zealous pursuit of clients' interests advocates commonly employ, in Judge Marvin Frankel's words, “time-honored tricks and stratagems to block or distort the truth”;²⁵ much of the boasted wealth of electronic “information” out there is dross; and so on and on.

You might think that universities would be the exception. Indeed, in principle a university should be in the business of inquiry; and from time to time real inquiry actually does take place. Only too often, however, it is crowded out—by preoccupations of quite other kinds, such as football or politics, but also by intellectual busywork, political axe-grinding, pseudo-inquiry of every variety imaginable, masquerading as the real thing. Worse, only too often a decline of good-faith inquiry is accompanied by an escalation of boosterism and hype, creating an ethos eerily reminiscent of the “atmosphere of lying and self-laudatory hallucination” in which young Ernest Pontifex grew up. (“Survival of the slickest” is the phrase that comes to mind.)²⁶

Here is Bridgman once more: “A dog is content to turn around three times before lying down; but a man would have to invent an explanation of it... There is not a single human social institution which has not originated in hit or miss fashion,

Truths?”, and “Fallibilism, Objectivity, and the New Cynicism,” *Episteme* 1, no. 1 (June 2004): 35-48.

²⁵ Marvin Frankel, “The Search for Truth: An Umpireal View,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 123, n° 5 (1975): 1038.

²⁶ On this topic, Thorsten Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* (1919; Stanford, CA: Academic Reprints, 1954) is classic; and Jacques Barzun, *The American University: How It Runs, Where It Is Going* (1968; 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), is also essential. James B. Twitchell, “Higher Ed., Inc.,” *Wilson Quarterly* 18, no. 7103 (Summer 2004): 45-59, is depressingly illuminating on the present situation. See also my “Preposterism and Its Consequences” (1996), reprinted in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, 188-208.

but, nevertheless, every one of these institutions is justified by some rationalizing argument as the best possible, and, what is worse, the community demands the acceptance of these arguments” (368).²⁷ Is it any wonder, then, if in today’s academy some set to work to cook up arguments purporting to show that the concept of truth is humbug, and the supposed ideal of intellectual integrity an illusion, or that others eagerly embrace the conclusion? After all, if that conclusion were –pardon the expression!– true, there would be no shame in failing to engage in what old-fashioned prigs like Peirce and I confusedly describe as “genuine inquiry”;²⁸ for there could be no such thing.

And this suggests the role of the cynics’ arguments in the psychic economy of those to whom they appeal: to generate a thick enough mental fog to enable the pseudo-inquirer, who must somehow disguise his dishonesty from himself, to ease the strain of studiously ignoring the fact that he is studiously ignoring unfavorable evidence.

Now I am reminded of Ernest’s comment –as, finally settling to a steady path, he realizes he must make his way by writing– that “there are a lot of things that want saying which no one dares to say, a lot of shams that want attacking, and yet no one attacks them.... [I]t is my fate to say them.” Overton warns that this is bound to make him unpopular; Ernest replies that that’s too bad: “hornets’ nests are exactly what I happen to like” (408-9).

Well: even though, like Ernest, I haven’t always heeded his advice, I would like to conclude by thanking Edward Overton –who unfortunately is unable to be with us today– for his invaluable help in thinking all this through.²⁹

²⁷ Compare Nietzsche’s observation in *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (1881), aphorism 1: “Reasonableness after the Fact”: “All things that live long are gradually so soaked through with reason that their origin in unreason comes to seem improbable” (this translation is Mark Migotti’s).

²⁸ “Old-fashioned prigs” is Richard Rorty’s phrase: “You can still find [philosophers] who will solemnly tell you that they are seeking the truth...lovably old-fashioned prigs.” *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86.

²⁹ And Mark Migotti, for very useful comments on a draft, as well as for his translation of the quotation from Nietzsche in note 27.