



DISCUSSANT RESPONSE

by

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to Antony Flew's

GOOD FAITH: ACADEMIC AND POLITICAL

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ANTONY FLEW'S "GOOD FAITH: ACADEMIC AND POLITICAL";

A Response from Stephen G. Post

"I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice."

"Truth?" said Pilate, "what is that?"
--John 18:37

When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.

--Saint Augustine, "On Lying"

A great man--what is he?...He rather lies than tells the truth; it requires more spirit and will.

--Nietzsche, The Will to Power

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

--Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf

In the absence of veracity, we may as well rip out our tongues, for all coherent communication--even the game of bargaining, where to a point deception is necessary--becomes thoroughly impossible. So veracity is, simply stated, a principle of social success; it is a condition without which social experience is impossible. Cultural anthropologists agree that restraint on deception within any given community is a moral and practical universal, although what goes on between adversarial tribes and nations is another thing altogether this side of Kant's perpetual peace. The contractarian philosopher who believes that moral rules are things human beings invent simply notes that veracity is needed by rational self-interested beings unless they desire the fearful Hobbesian state of nature, the war of all against all.

Professor Flew begins with mention of scientific fraud. Fraud

obviously occurred when a cancer researcher painted black areas on transgenetic white mice. It most recently is likely to have occurred in the case of the Japanese Alzheimer mouse. The pressures to engage in fraud are immense--grants, fame, academic tenure, income. That blatant fraud is usually uncovered sooner than later, that promising careers are ruined, that the researcher's self-interest in the long run is anything but served--none of these concerns seem to deter the agent. In most cases, fraud in science is difficult to define. Is it fraud to have deleted from statistical consideration this one data point that just does not seem to fit? Is it fraud to slant data a bit to confirm a theory that one is so very sure of, perhaps to press a paradigm shift into the mainstream? If so, Einstein did as much. Where does acceptable but somewhat free interpretation of data end and fraud begin? But enough said beyond the scope of Flew's text. His point is a good one--in science the foundational commitment to the truth and nothing but the truth has weakened. There have been sufficient numbers of cases now that in the United States, the National Institutes of Health requires a course in ethics for all those graduate and professional students planning careers in the basic sciences. This is a condition for the award of grant support.

Flew mentions the case of Michael Levin. The issue of Levin's thesis aside, Flew is mainly disturbed by the methodological failure of the faculty of City College of New York to consider the possible veracity of the thesis. While Levin's strong associations

between race and learning potential are questionable, the point is that they must be questioned objectively rather than smothered by acrimony. Even the most controversial truth claims must be assessed in veracity.

I concur with Flew that utopian social engineers inevitably tend toward deception and the unwillingness to seriously consider evidence contrary to their purposes. This is particularly true when the engineer is driven by some a priori worldview from which utopia is deduced. Troublesome little things, like solidly verified empirical facts, are quietly cast aside as obstacles in the path of goodness. Of course the engineer will insist that he or she alone has the facts straight. Flew astutely cites case after case where social engineers either deny truth, suppress it, or disallow its pursuit.

The fragility of truth in the social and political spheres is perennial. Its moments of full triumph have been few and far between; for whole centuries it has been entirely eclipsed, like human freedom. Truth is a thin veneer over a cauldron of self-interest and the will-to-power. Truth is therefore something we must guard fervently. Flew, from his early discussion in philosophy on the verification-falsification debates to his engagements in political argument, has demonstrated a will-to-truth. A great many philosophers have not. There is much to be said for the demonstrated certainty of a single small fact. Such a fact is like a flower in Candide's garden, cherished now in the wake of youthful certainty about vast theodicies and theories of

the universe. A little fact is a great thing, the antithesis to huge deception. We can only rightly lie with great compunction and for the sake of obvious nonmaleficence.