

# SCIENCE, POLITICS AND TRUTH

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Science is the human activity which, more than any other, epitomises the search for objective truth about ourselves and about the universe in which we live. Truth is vitally important to human beings, since they must survive by means of rational thought, and they cannot take the decisions necessary for survival and for pursuing their own happiness and fulfilment without accurate knowledge about themselves and their environment. An excellent indication of the power of truth is given by the amount of effort which virtually every dictator in the world puts into tricking and deceiving his subjects through censorship and propaganda, in order to prevent them from discovering the truth. If a dictator, or a would-be dictator, can convince people that the whole concept of objective truth is nothing more than a myth and an illusion, then his task of persuading people to swallow his propaganda will become very much easier, because once people believe in a doctrine like that, they will believe anything — as anyone who has ever read George Orwell's *1984* should realise. Any such doctrine is, of course, absurd and self-contradictory: if there is really no such thing as truth, then the statement that there is no such things as truth cannot be true itself, so that no one can adhere consistently to the doctrine without cutting the ground right out from under their own feet. However, if it is presented carefully enough, with sophistry and clever rhetoric, it can be made to appear a perfectly plausible view. For example, according to Marxism, the most influential anti-libertarian ideology in the world today, there is no such thing as objective truth because the facts of reality vary according to the class interests of the observer. But whatever the ideology of those who wish to discredit truth, the most effective way of achieving this aim is by discrediting science.

Apart from the practical advantages of making people more susceptible to propaganda, there is another, more fundamental reason why totalitarian political movements are hostile to the concept of objective truth. The idea that the facts of reality exist in their own right, whether we like it or not, is profoundly subversive to the whole totalitarian mentality, which cannot tolerate the idea that there is anything that it has no power to control. It is for this reason that totalitarian governments, which aim to make themselves all-pervasive and omnipotent in every field of human life, in-

sist that even the findings of science must conform to the dictates of political ideology. The past consequences of this attitude have included the career of the notorious charlatan Trofim Lysenko in the U.S.S.R., and the appearance in Nazi Germany of a school of "race-scientists" who, in addition to their theories about the psychology of "superior" and "inferior" races, even claimed that Einstein's theory of relativity must be false because Einstein was a Jew. Even today in free countries, science is not completely immune to politically motivated interference. One particularly outrageous example of this form of obscurantism occurred in the U.S.A. in 1975, when a communist organisation calling itself "Science for the People" succeeded in preventing the medical school at Harvard University from conducting a research project into the psychological effects of the chromosome abnormality known as the XYY Syndrome, which was believed to cause aggression. It would be a mistake to assume that everyone who denies the existence of objective truth is a would-be commissar commissar or gauleiter, but writers who claim that "the objective consciousness of scientists is a myth" (Gillie 1976) or talk about "the myth that science itself is an objective enterprise" (Gould 1984) are, wittingly or unwittingly, playing straight into the hands of the enemies of freedom.

Two main tactics have been used by those who wish to discredit science and its claims to objectivity: firstly, citing examples of the mistakes made by scientists in the past; and secondly, arguing from value judgements to facts. In a recent book, the American palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould has given a very interesting account of past cases in which incorrect psychological theories gained credence because of the political implications which they were believed to have, and were never tested stringently enough for them to be refuted (Gould 1984). It is perfectly true that individual scientists are sometimes biased, and there are even a few cases on record of deliberate fraud, but this does not invalidate science itself, any more than a few forged banknotes make an entire currency worthless. In fact, Gould's own book, in which he examines the original data collected by the scientists whom he criticises, and identifies the exact points where they went wrong, is itself an excellent vindication of the ability of science to correct its own errors. Whenever bias exists among scientists, it can never be exposed by rejecting the methods of science and logic, but only by applying them more rigorously and consistently.

Attempts at arguing from value judgements to facts present a more complex problem. There have been many cases in the past in which the findings of science were used to support anti-libertarian political doctrines. When people see a scientific theory being used to prop up a political position which they find abhorrent, it is very tempting for them to jump to the conclusion that it must be the theory itself which is at fault rather than the arguments being used to derive political conclusions from it. It is not uncommon in politics for the members of one anti-libertarian faction to pose as champions of freedom by attacking a rival faction

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which is equally hostile to freedom, and situations like this provide them with a perfect opportunity to do so. It is easy for them to persuade people than any theory which has been used, or might conceivably be used, to justify political oppression must *ipso facto* be false, and from there it is only a short step to claiming that science itself is nothing but a weapon of the forces of oppression and that objective truth does not exist. To defend science against this type of attack, it is necessary to emphasise that the factual accuracy of a scientific theory, and the validity of the arguments by which it is made to support political conclusions, are two separate and distinct issues. A correct theory can be used to support an anti-libertarian ideology just as easily as an incorrect one, and anyone who wishes to defend freedom must be fully familiar with the various types of unsound argument which can be used to connect scientific facts with political values. My aim in the remainder of the present essay is to examine some of the main cases in which scientific theories have aroused controversy because of the way in which they have been used for political purposes, and to identify some of the commonest errors in this field. I believe that most of these errors involve two key concepts: the concept of nature, and the concept of equality.

## NATURE AND INSTINCT

The idea that people should live “according to nature”, and that whatever is “natural” is right, has a very long intellectual pedigree which can be traced back to the Stoic and Aristotelian schools of philosophy in ancient Greece. The problem is, however, that “nature” is a highly ambiguous word. As John Stuart Mill put it in his essay “Nature” (first published in 1874):

“We must recognise at least two principal meanings in the word Nature. In one sense, it means all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers. In another sense, it means, not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man. This distinction is far from exhausting the ambiguities of the word, but it is the key to most of those on which important consequences depend.”

In other words, the “nature” of a thing may mean the essential features and qualities which go towards making it what it is, and the word Nature with a capital N may be used to refer to everything that exists in the universe; or, alternatively, a distinction may be drawn between what is “natural” and what is “artificial”, and the word “natural” applied only to those phenomena which are the product of either inanimate forces or living organism motivated by instinct. In the first sense of the word, “human nature” encompasses both the conscious mind, with its ability to think rationally and make deliberate choices and decisions, and also the various instinctive drives and desires which we have inherited from our animal ancestors; in the second sense, only our instincts are truly “natural”.

The classical liberal philosophers who developed the doctrine of natural rights used the word “natural” in the first of these two senses, and derived human rights from mankind’s possession of the faculty of reason. There is, however, another very influential intellectual tradition, originating in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which re-

gards “naturalness” in the second sense as the criterion for correct behaviour, and believes in the superiority of instinct over rationality. At first glance, this view might appear to have little to commend it. To quote Mill’s essay again:

“If the artificial is not better than the natural, to what end are all the arts of life? To dig, to plough, to build, to wear clothes, are all direct infringements of the injunction to follow nature.”

“In sober truth, nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are Nature’s everyday performances.”

Nevertheless, the idea that instinct should always take priority over intellect has kept reappearing for many years, in one guise or another, in numerous political arguments.

One notable example of an attempt to settle a political controversy by appealing to nature involves the question of feminism. Many anti-feminists have defended the old doctrine that “a woman’s place is in the home”, and attempted to justify the inferior legal status of women and their exclusion from many jobs and careers, by invoking the existence of innate differences of personality and temperament between the sexes, such as women’s possession of a maternal instinct. Many present-day feminists have responded by denying vehemently that there is any such thing as a maternal instinct. Whoever is right about this question of feminine psychology, both sides may be equally wrong about its political consequences. Personally I doubt that the human race would have survived for very long if there was no such thing as a maternal instinct, but in any case there is no good reason for forcing any woman to follow her instincts if she would prefer not to. The same argument applies to the controversial theory put forward by the American anthropologist Steven Goldberg, that the majority of positions of authority and influence in any human society will inevitably be held by men because they are born with more dominant and assertive personalities than women (see Goldberg 1977). Goldberg may or may not be right, but even if the majority of women will always tend to choose traditional sex roles of their own accord, that fact cannot justify any attempt at obstructing the minority who might prefer a different lifestyle. If women wish to pursue careers outside the home in addition to motherhood or in place of it, no feature of the female personality can provide any valid reason why they should not do so.

Another influential political belief which was justified in the name of “nature” was the doctrine of social Darwinism, which was adopted by a number of classical liberals in the late 19th Century, including Herbert Spencer in Britain and William Graham Sumner in the U.S.A.. In Sumner’s words (quoted in Sahlins 1977), this doctrine was based on the assumption that “the social order is fixed by laws of nature precisely analogous to those of the physical order”, and that the Darwinian struggle for survival “can no more be done away with than gravitation”. The paradox of social Darwinism is that, although its own advocates originally regarded it as an individualist doctrine, and it has always been condemned by collectivists as an example of individualism taken to its logical conclusion, in reality it is a form of collectivism. Animals in a state of nature, which were held up by the social Darwinists as a model for human emulation, behave in a way which we would have to describe as “collectivist” if it was the result of moral choice

rather than blind instinct. The main characteristics of their behaviour is the systematic sacrifice of the lives of weaker individuals in order to ensure the survival of the group — in this case, the species rather than the race, nation or class. The distinguishing feature of human beings, on the other hand — an essential part of their “nature” in the broadest sense of the term — is their ability to use their powers of rationality to recognise and admire the virtues of other humans, and to value them not merely as component parts of some group or organisation, but as individuals.

Many socialists have condemned capitalism on the grounds that it is based on “selfishness” — by which they mean that it allows people to act for their own benefit and does not force them to act for the benefit of others. The correct libertarian response to this type of criticism should be to challenge the spurious definition of “selfishness” implicit in the argument, and to draw a clear distinction between acting for your own benefit regardless of whether your actions harm other people, which may reasonably be called “selfish”, and acting for your own benefit, full stop. If the second definition of “selfishness” is accepted, then it follows that the only “unselfish” people in the world are slaves, since the essence of slavery is that a slave is denied any right to benefit from his own actions, and is obliged to work for the benefit of someone else while receiving nothing in exchange. Unfortunately, however, all too many would-be defenders of economic freedom have conceded the moral high ground to the socialists by accepting the charge of “selfishness” and arguing that, even if capitalism is inferior to socialism in ethical terms, it is the only feasible system in an imperfect world, and “human nature” prevents the creation of a better system. The idea that “selfishness is natural” has often been supported in recent years by citing the theories of the Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz, that mankind possesses an aggressive instinct so powerful that it is virtually impossible to control, which have been popularised by writers such as Desmond Morris and Robert Ardrey. Similar political conclusions have been drawn from the new zoological school of thought known as sociobiology. The theories of Lorenz and his followers have been used to support the view that war is an inevitable consequence of innate human aggression, and that lasting peace is impossible to achieve. Although these scientific theories are, strictly speaking, irrelevant to the political debate between capitalism and socialism, the alleged inevitability of war is an issue which merits closer attention.

Even if Lorenz and his followers are right in claiming that the human aggressive instinct is so strong that it is unique in the animal kingdom — which has been disputed by other biologists (see, for example, Montagu 1976) — their pessimistic conclusions about war do not necessarily follow. A fascinating alternative analysis has been put forward by the anthropologist Robert Bigelow in his book *The Dawn Warriors: Man's Evolution Towards Peace* (1969). Bigelow argues that aggression and co-operation, far from being opposites, are in fact complementary to each other and have evolved in parallel, since better co-operation with friends and allies means greater fighting efficiency against enemies. In his own words, “co-operation is the secret of success in war, and co-operation requires brains”. The ability to co-operate peacefully for mutual benefit, which is a function of human intelligence, has throughout history been gradually bringing together larger and larger groups of people, and if it can be directed towards purposes other

than waging war against rival groups, peace can be extended throughout the whole world. To quote Bigelow again:

“We are far better equipped for learning self-control than are any dogs or baboons. We can restrain aggressive drives through conscious, intelligent effort.”

## TYPES OF EQUALITY

Ever since the earliest days of classical liberalism and its ideal of human equality, endless confusion has been caused by the fact that the word “equal” can have either a descriptive or an evaluative meaning. A statement that two or more persons are “equal” may simply mean that they possess the same empirically measurable talents and abilities, whether physical or mental, or it may imply a value judgement about the kind of treatment, status or esteem which they should be granted. As a consequence of this confusion, there has been a long history of attempts to justify the denial of equal rights to all persons under the law, on the grounds that some groups of people — such as women, or members of non-white races — are inherently inferior to others in intelligence. Much energy has been expended over the years in debating the accuracy of various methods used for measuring human intelligence, as well as the extent to which environmental influences are capable of modifying innate mental ability, but one question which has frequently remained unasked is whether unequal intelligence, if it was demonstrated to exist, would in fact justify unequal rights. According to the classical liberal doctrine of natural rights, the source of all human rights is the faculty of reason. Anyone who is capable of surviving by engaging in a process of logical thought and taking conscious decisions has a right to do so. It follows, therefore, that anyone who has reached this mental threshold and possesses this basic ability — in other words, any adult who is not insane or mentally subnormal — is entitled to the same rights as every other human being. Above this minimum level, differences in intelligence have no political significance. As Thomas Jefferson put it in 1809, in a letter to the French writer Henri Gregoire on Negro civil rights:

“Whatever their degrees of talent, it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the property or person of others.”

When a person is mentally subnormal to such a degree that he is incapable of looking after himself unaided, that fact is readily apparent without giving him an I.Q. test or conducting a full-scale scientific investigation into his mental condition. If any race, or any other large group of human beings, were in fact functioning at such a low mental level, they would very rapidly become extinct. Scientific research into human intelligence may be valuable for many purposes, but it does not have the political implications which have often been attributed to it.

As Robert Nozick puts it in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), theories of what is commonly called “distributive justice” (i.e. who has the right to own wealth) can be divided into two main categories: patterned theories, which emphasise the amount of wealth owned, either in absolute terms or in relation to various other personal attributes; and entitlement theories, which emphasise the processes by which the wealth was obtained. The equalitarian position

on wealth, which has been put forward by many socialists, is an example of a patterned theory: according to this view, it does not matter how you got your wealth, just as long as you do not have more of it than anyone else. The libertarian position, on the other hand, is an example of an entitlement theory: according to this view, it does not matter how much wealth you have, just as long as you obtained it by non-coercive means, either by producing it yourself or by receiving it from someone else in voluntary exchange or as a gift. Socialists have often claimed that a consistent supporter of human equality must be in favour of both legal and financial equality, and have accused libertarians of inconsistency because the only type of equality that they believe in is “that equal right that every man hath, to his natural freedom”, as John Locke put it in 1690 in his *Two Treatises of Government*. In reality, however, financial equality is not a logical extension of legal equality, but is incompatible with it. If Smith earns £100 in a week and Jones earns £200, then, to maintain financial equality, Jones must give £50 to Smith. This means, however, that Smith and Jones no longer enjoy legal equality, since Jones only has the right to keep three-quarters of what he has earned by his own efforts, while Smith not only has a right to all of his own earnings, but to a quarter of Jones’s as well. In the light of Nozick’s analysis, the difference between patterned theories and entitlement theories may seem perfectly clear, but the failure of many people to appreciate this distinction in the past has greatly increased the confusion surrounding the whole concept of equality.

In 1919, the American psychologist H. H. Goddard gave a speech to a group of students at Princeton University. His words included the following comment (quoted in Gould 1984):

“Now the fact is that a workman may have a ten- year intelligence while you have a twenty. To demand for him such a home as you enjoy is as absurd as it would be to insist that every labourer should receive a graduate fellowship. How can there be such a thing as social equality with this wide range of mental capacity?”

Like many other opponents of socialism, before and since, Goddard was criticising the equalitarian theory of distributive justice, but what he was advocating in its place was not an entitlement theory, but a patterned theory of his own, in which the right to own wealth varied according to intelligence. From a libertarian perspective, however, differences in intelligence may play a significant role in explaining the present distribution of wealth, but in themselves they cannot justify it. A talented person may earn great wealth by virtue of his talents but he is not entitled to any wealth by virtue of his talents alone. If he obtains £1 million by planning a highly sophisticated bank robbery, then he has no right to the money, despite his intelligence. If, on the other hand, he obtains £1 million by inventing and manufacturing something that people want to buy, that is a different matter. In a free society, financial equality is something which may or may not occur, and it is not part of the government’s proper duties either to encourage it or to prevent it.

In September 1986, when the B.B.C. scriptwriter Alan Bleasdale was challenged about major distortions of history in his First World War drama series *The Monocled Mutineer*, his reply was “There is a difference between fact and truth” — which is not so very far removed from the Orwel-

lian motto “War is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength”. I would suggest that the words “ignorance is strength” are especially relevant in the present context. Whether in the field of history or in the field of science, the distortion or concealment of truth is one of the most dangerous weapons in the hands of the supporters of totalitarian collectivism, and no libertarian should ever forget that the defence of freedom is inseparable from the defence of truth.

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