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Tibor R. Machan

# Why Is Everyone Else Wrong?

## Explorations in Truth and Reason

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ISBN 978-1-4419-7858-5 e-ISBN 978-1-4419-7859-2  
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4419-7859-2  
Springer New York Dordrecht Heidelberg London

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*To Victor Niederhoffer*



# Acknowledgments

Many friends and colleagues were instrumental in supporting my work on this project. The questions here are ones I have been mulling over for some time. Jim Chesher, as always, has done his best to keep me from getting too convoluted in my thinking. David M. Brown's editorial advice has been invaluable, as has been Christina Williams' tireless work on various drafts I have shown her. Others, too, have helped me focus on what are the main themes and I thank them all.

As always, I am grateful to Dave and Judy Threshie for their support of my work in recent years. Thank you all!





# Preface

Especially when there is a lot of political rhetoric in the air, those of us with strong political convictions are inclined to reflect on just why we hold certain views even as others who are basically like us hold very different ones. Social scientists and other thinkers struggle to explain it, but the puzzle remains—in part because they, too, disagree so much with one another.

I reflect on this puzzle when I visit a church and sit among a hundred or so people who believe what I take to be unbelievable; or during a political campaign, when men and women of all stripes voice ideas I find utterly mistaken; or when I join a conference table with other scholars to discuss topics in philosophy or political economy and observe that I am in very serious disagreement with most of those around the table, as are they with me; or when my students report that they or their relatives completely reject a view that I consider eminently sound.

Why are these folks so wrong? And how do they account for the fact that, as they see it, I am the one who is so wrong?<sup>1</sup>

As a result of such experiences, I have developed a nagging curiosity about how such sharp disparities of conviction can persist even though we all live in the same world, have many of the same hopes and dreams, and frequently act just like those with whom we disagree so vehemently. We go to work, shop at the mall, take hikes in the woods, play with our pets, pray, philosophize, exercise, complain, plan road trips—and fail to see eye to eye on fundamental issues of crucial importance.

It always amazes me that some principles that I consider to be obviously true, others with apparently equally firm conviction consider to be obviously false—for example, that people should be treated as having full authority over their own lives and works, and that however much we might like the support of others in our ventures, we ought always to obtain this support voluntarily. Some believe that people must be compelled to follow just one way of life; or that certain goals are so important that they override the rights to life, liberty, and property of those who favor different goals; or that certain people deserve to run our lives much more than we ourselves do either because their goals are so much more important than ours or simply because they are so much brighter than us. There are many other critical matters over which adamant disagreement has raged throughout history and around the globe. Often, those with whom we disagree are bright people, and may even be smarter and wiser than we are.

Here in the USA and in other advanced countries, we are always embroiled in various public controversies, with the various political parties, ideological factions, and special interest groups all asserting beliefs often opposed to the beliefs of others. Not only do those of us who care about political and social questions perennially attempt to show that we are right and those who disagree are wrong, we also sometimes assume that disagreement is evidence of bad moral character, lack of God's grace, mental impediment, poor upbringing, deficient schooling, and the like.

I myself am inclined to believe that when someone sweepingly dismisses individual rights—which I consider everyone to have in virtue of their very humanity—and endorses the use of governmental force to rampantly violate these rights, the defender of such coercion suffers from some moral or other failing that leads one to do this. Most of them are not just innocently mistaken, the way scientists arguing over the interpretation of ambiguous data can be. Their moral shortcomings might not be so serious as those of Nazis, communists, and slave owners; but they are shortcomings, nonetheless.

On the other hand, I have known quite a few bright people with whom I thoroughly disagree but who, once I got to know them personally, seemed to be fine persons, decent and conscientious in many aspects of their lives. I once met Ralph Nader at a conference in Michigan, and while nearly all of his political notions seemed to me insidious, I found him to be a nice enough man. The late B. F. Skinner, whose ideas I sharply criticized in my very first book, was very gracious in one of our rare encounters. The same is true of William F. Buckley, Jr., and of my colleague James P. Sterba, a philosopher at the University of Notre Dame with whom I have argued over basic issues for more than a decade now.

So why do we disagree so much? Why are certain kinds of important fundamental claims so clearly true in the eyes of some yet so clearly false in the eyes of others?

Surely we all puzzle over this question now and then, at least when we contemplate the fact that entire countries and epochs are guided by ideas and ideals that we find abhorrent. How could so many Germans have believed it right to kill Jews simply because they were Jews? How could so many early Americans have believed it right to shove Indians aside in their search for a promised land? How could they treat blacks as if they lacked a full measure of humanity? What is it about human beings that can lead us down such false roads? How can we be so implacably wrong so often?

I have my ideas about how all this is possible, but the phenomenon still somewhat flummoxes me. Could it be that we are all wrongheaded? Is it even possible to know the truth about the urgent ethical, political, and other questions that so animate us?<sup>2</sup>

What follows is my attempt to answer these vexing questions.

## Notes

1. Many attempt to invoke some kind of mental problem. As one of my own critics put it recently, “Why would ... someone defend [free will]? Could it be that his judgment is clouded by a particular system of ideas that one embraces?” Mental impediments are indeed often suggested as the source of someone’s mistaken thinking. And having one’s judgment clouded by a general philosophical or related framework calls to mind the oft invoked idea of being trapped in a box which one must get out of. (Which usually means, leaving one’s box and getting into the critic’s.)
2. I address whether we can be right in Sect. 3 of this book.



# Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
2	Is There a Right to Be Wrong? .....	4
3	Can One Be Innocently Wrong?.....	10
4	Is Everyone Always Wrong? .....	11
5	What to Do When Friends, Strangers, or Foes Are Wrong?.....	14
6	Does Science Rule Us All?.....	16
7	Do We Need Philosophy? .....	19
	7.1 Not Just Gabbing.....	20
	7.2 Specific Facts Versus General Facts .....	21
	7.3 Why We Need Philosophy .....	21
	7.4 Pervasive Impact .....	22
	7.5 Philosophical Nutrition .....	22
8	Did Socrates Know Nothing? .....	23
9	Epilogue .....	24
	Notes.....	24
	<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>27</b>
	<b>About the Author .....</b>	<b>29</b>



# Why Is Everyone Else Wrong?

*How come you're so wrong, my sweet neo-con...?*

Sweet Neo-Con, by Mick Jagger

**Abstract** The discussion begins with the issue of whether human beings have a right to be wrong in what they believe and in much of what they do (that doesn't inflict burdens on others). It moves on to a consideration of whether being wrong must always amount to something blameworthy or might it be innocent. Then the radical idea that everyone is mistaken, all of the time, as some extreme skeptics would have it, is examined. Next the matter of dealing with others who are wrong and what may and may not be done about them is considered. The oft-affirmed superiority of scientific thinking is then briefly discussed. What about philosophy—what if any role does the discipline have in these reflections? Finally the famous declaration of Socrates, that all he knows is that he knows nothing, is scrutinized.

All this aims to make sense of the idea that others are wrong while one is right about innumerable matters, an idea that is quite problematic.

## 1 Introduction

Most of us think we've got the best idea when it comes to such topics of urgently relevant concern to us as philosophy, religion, physics, mathematics, animal husbandry, or child raising. If so, then mustn't we also believe that all who disagree with us are wrong?

Even very open-minded, tolerant persons will disagree with those who believe that being open-minded and tolerant at least about certain matters is misguided.

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**Keywords** Certainty • doubt • ethics • ideology • liberty • logic • morality • opinion • politics • reason • rights • science • truth



(Say, about whether racism or sexism is bad.) It is not even possible to disagree about whether everyone believes that others are wrong without expressing a rather obvious disagreement. There might be a few persons who exist in a perpetual state of universal uncertainty and agnosticism, never venturing a firm opinion about anything that might clash with the views of others. But if so, I have yet to meet any members of this hyper-tentative minority.

We have no choice but to think that everyone with whom we seriously disagree is wrong. But why are they all wrong? How do we make sense of this disturbing fact? How did this come to pass? What, indeed, could it mean that we ourselves are right but the rest are wrong? And what of it?

Perhaps the problem is most glaringly evident when it comes to hot-button topics like religion and politics, which we are so often counseled to avoid at social gatherings. Roman Catholics must think Baptists, Muslims, and Anglicans are wrong on many fronts. Republicans, Democrats, Tories, Socialists, and Libertarians each must think that their own ideas are substantially correct (even if subject to amendment or refinement), thus clearly implying that all the others are wrong.<sup>1</sup>

But the phenomenon is rampant even in the so-called hard sciences. A few years ago, for example, a dispute erupted about the merits of string theory—an idea that surfaced about 40 years ago “asserting that infinitesimal strings of energy make up the most fundamental constituents of the universe.” Two prominent critics have offered not only criticisms of the idea but also explanations of why what they consider to be a wrong idea has been so popular among their colleagues. As *Science News* reports, one of the scientists, Lee Smolin, claims, “we are dealing with...a sociological phenomenon.” Both Smolin and Peter Woit “attribute string theory’s popularity and longevity to social and financial pressures—an excess of theoretical-physics graduates and stagnant research funding, for example—and a culture of arrogance, closed mindedness, and self-promotion among entrenched string theorists.”<sup>2</sup> Evidently, the need to make sense of why these other scientists are (allegedly) wrong about string theory induced the two critics to go beyond analysis of the theory itself to inquiry into why those who accept it do so even though it is, in their view, a dead end.<sup>3</sup>

In matters of public policy, domestic or international, it is often thought that when people are wrong it is because they fail to be well-informed or because they make errors of logic. Voting for this or that bill, electing this or that candidate, supporting this or that party, policy, or system of political economy has mostly to do, some believe, with failing to explore matters deeply enough. They lack pertinent information that they should take the trouble to obtain. Yet many people who are undoubtedly well-educated and well-informed disagree with one another and think others are wrong. So this account of what’s going on may be incomplete at best.

We are very often guided by our ideas in doing what we do, so conflict is hardly avoidable when we disagree. The question of how we should make sense of this rather disturbing situation is not a matter of idle curiosity.

Various answers have been suggested. Some think others are wrong because they were not favored with the truth by God—they lack God’s grace; or because they have been misled by the devil; or because they are too stupid or feeble-minded

to grasp the truth. This last is suggested by philosopher Daniel Dennett, who calls unbelievers “brights,”<sup>4</sup> as well as by scientist Richard Dawkins, who contends that belief in God is a kind of mental illness—a meme gone haywire, as it were.<sup>5</sup>

Some take those with whom they disagree to be victims of various obsessions, such as a desperate need to be different or rebellious. A dean at one of the universities at which I have taught once instructed me that the reason I express unorthodox views is that I like being a nonconformist. Why would he prefer this explanation over the more plausible one (to me) that I am simply articulating what I honestly believe? One possibility is that he feels the need to provide a cause other than honest inquiry for my being wrong (as he must think I am, since he disagrees with my unorthodox views). This would fall under the category of psychologizing as an explanation of why others are wrong.

Innumerable explanations of poor political and moral understanding point to class membership, mental disease, age, economic condition, and other impediments. In the Woody Allen movie *Everyone Says I Love You*, a teen falls, hits his head, and is henceforth a *National Review*-subscribing conservative Republican. The boy’s supposedly misguided beliefs are caused by brain damage.

In his book *The Outline of Bunk*,<sup>6</sup> Emanuel Haldeman-Julius advances many reasons why people have religious beliefs, which he, of course, takes to be false. One is the believer’s desire for “comforting illusions. And without making any intellectual difficulties for himself, without really thinking much about the question, he leans upon a simple, vague, but pleasant faith in religion.”

Clearly, something more than the above-proffered explanations must play a role in religious and political disagreements. When it is a matter of believing that stealing is okay, or invading a weak country or exploiting the poor or using torture or suicide bombing or the like, all those who do not see these matters as you do would seem to have failed in some way. But what kind of failure is involved? What is it that makes the criminal, who earnestly believes in killing, raping, robbing, or embezzling, and who acts on this belief, turn out as he does? Why are these folks so terribly, culpably wrong? Or if they are not wrong, why are all those wrong who believe that they are?

I want to suggest a general account of how others come to be wrong (including those who fail to see that I am right about why others are wrong). This issue can arise at any moment with burning relevance, as anyone who has lost a friend in consequence of a bitter disagreement can attest.

I will not approach the topic as certain social scientists might. That would involve explaining why people are wrong by reference to various impersonal causes that have (allegedly) impelled them to be wrong. I will not look for life events that “produced” their mistaken beliefs, for I regard such an approach as deeply suspect. It is in fact an explanatory dead end. For if our beliefs are caused by various events in our background—the size of our brains, our cultural history, and the like—our beliefs about why others are wrong would also necessarily be determined by such antecedent factors, rather than credited to the initiative we take to logically assess the relevant evidence. No seemingly independent stance whatever could escape having been shaped by these antecedent factors, thus rendering the analysis itself simply the result of various deterministic causal inputs. So such deterministic

understanding will not be deployed here. (Is that avoidance itself something I am wrong about? But if so, why?)

I propose a straightforward though not simple answer to the puzzle: others are wrong most often because they do not focus on or think enough about the issues, which includes not exploring enough of the relevant facts and not figuring out their meaning. In most cases, then, when we are wrong about knowable and relevant matters, it is our own fault. We go astray on our own. At other times, to be sure, we are honestly misled or misguided, and moral responsibility obtains only when we have the means to know that we have been misled.

## 2 Is There a Right to Be Wrong?

Before approaching the heart of my topic I wish to show why we have the right to be wrong. I am not about to argue for banning wrongheadedness. Indeed, in my view it would be very wrongheaded to do so.

Under certain versions of Christianity, the only meaningful way to be a good human being is by choosing to be so. Non-Christians often think so as well. However, if one can choose to be good or to do good deeds, one can also choose the opposite. Moreover, if one is prohibited from choosing to be bad—if one is punishable by law for choosing to do what's bad or for abstaining from doing what's good—then one is also prohibited from choosing to be good, at least the good of abstaining from evil. This observation also holds for beliefs. To “believe” what is right because one is being forced to believe it (assuming this were possible) is not a matter for either credit or blame. The process of reaching an honest conviction will have been taken out of one's hands.

If you are threatened with punishment for being bad or for doing bad deeds, then how are you going to be or do good? Not, apparently, because you are motivated by goodness; you will be good because you shy away from the adverse consequences of being bad that you are likely to suffer at the hands of law enforcers. Operating under such compulsion is not conducive to developing the moral traits that make one a good human being. If the only reason for skipping pornography or conserving wildlife is fear of punishment, this may reduce demand for pornography or enhance the environment, but it doesn't warrant any special personal pride for being pure or nurturing nature. When a witness in a criminal investigation cooperates only after the police threaten to sic the INS or the health department on his or her business, there is no justification for considering the person to be filled with civic duty. Moral goodness in any sphere must be achieved without coercion; moral values are chosen values.

This is not to say that good behavior can never be produced by way of laws that require it; nor, again, that one might not have chosen such good behavior had one been free of legal compulsion to engage in it. Yet in such cases, one will often be unclear about one's own motivation—why one is behaving well—as will others.

It is especially interesting to investigate this problem in the context of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which recognizes our rights both to free

expression and to freedom of worship. In both of these areas prior restraint is largely legally banned. Americans are protected in the right to be wrong, not the “right” to speak or worship only in ways approved and dictated by government arbiters. Given the variety of religious (and antireligious) beliefs prevalent in this country, one’s choice of religion is conceivably a bad one. In journalism, we can find many instances of journalistic irresponsibility: sensationalism, outright distortion of the facts, quoting out of context, and so forth, all of which are wrong from the point of view of how journalists ought to act. Yet no recourse is taken against them in law. This is a matter of self-regulation on the part of individual journalists and of the journalist profession as a whole. Journalists are counted on to be their own supervisors, their own regulators—unlike businessmen, farmers, psychologists, and the practitioners of many other professions in which heavy regulations interfere with the practitioners’ conduct.

So, we have at least two easily understood examples of the legal right to be wrong—legal at least in certain countries—grounded in a basic moral-political right to be wrong. You can be completely wrong and for the most part no one can take any legal recourse against you. No sanctions may be applied and no police may be enlisted to arrest you for being wrong.

The same principle does not govern when, for example, one hires persons in business corporations; one has no legally protected right to be wrong to engage in racial or sexual discrimination in hiring or promotion. One may be punished for being racist, sexist, or otherwise choosing wrongly. Governments heavily regulate such matters. So, in many professions one often enjoys no legal right to be wrong other than those covered by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. But what if we nonetheless on moral grounds have the basic right to be wrong? Wouldn’t these state imposed regulations then be unjustified?

So let us take a look at why we might have a right to be wrong. Unless we find a sound basis for this right, it may turn out that the First Amendment itself is wrong and that journalists and clergy too, just like the members of other professions, ought to be regulated to do the “right” thing by the government, as in many countries they are. Even England, with slander and libel laws much fiercer than those of the USA, does not stringently protect the freedom to speak out. In the 2005 controversy over the Danish cartoons satirizing Islam, we could see that in some societies, expressing ideas and criticisms that the leaders find offensive is forbidden; the right to speak one’s mind is not officially protected. In America, by contrast, if you attack a politician and besmirch his or her character, even falsely, you may not be fined or arrested (except if you do so in the course of violating the growing welter of campaign finance regulations). Your rights to freedom of speech and freedom of press are usually protected, even in the face of what is widely recognized as gross abuse.

Should a policy of protecting the right to be wrong be extended to all of society, including business, medicine, farming, insurance, and other professions, instead of being confined merely to journalism and religion? If so, the only kind of wrongful conduct that may be rightly prohibited is the kind that involves the invasion of other people’s sphere of authority, such as assault, rape, robbery, or murder. Merely inconveniencing others by one’s own bad behavior, whether this takes the form of

gambling, unfair discrimination, prostitution, or self-destructive drug use, would then be acknowledged to be the kinds of wrongful conduct that one has the right to engage in and that must not be banned.

This is in fact one prominent meaning of “freedom” in a political context. The idea is that every adult is sovereign, that is, a self-ruler, about matters of right or wrong. In a society that embraces the idea that the first public purpose of government is to “secure our rights,” it is understood that citizens are responsible for their own conduct, and that legal officials may not interfere or punish except in cases entailing violation of the same rights of others: murder, assault, burglary, and so forth. Banning these activities protects everyone from invasions of his or her sovereignty. The principle is that everyone has the right to freely govern his or her own life and estate, but not that of another person. To attempt the latter amounts to violating another person’s rights; so in such attempts one may be stopped.

Many Christians have recognized that a great deal of what one does in life must be under one’s own control. The risk of moral mismanagement (sinning) must be accepted, because otherwise right or proper conduct is not really a person’s own achievement—not really something worthy that one has done but merely behavior that has been coerced. If I put a gun to your head and make you write a poem under the threat of losing your life, and it turns out to be a pretty good poem, it would be odd to compliment you (or me) for it given the fact that you did not choose to write the poem but were forced to do so. It is a bit like being forced to dance because others shoot guns off at your feet. It might be a wonderful dance, very entertaining; but it’s not an accomplishment. It is something imposed by others.

That some weird cases can be imagined in which credit—or blame—might still be due is irrelevant here. Harry Frankfurt, for example, has argued that coercion need not remove responsibility. But his cases are very contrived and work only if one insists that the contrary claim must be true not only in normal circumstances but in any context whatsoever.<sup>7</sup>

Under a view of human nature that recognizes the moral dimension of human life, that recognizes the centrality of our own choosing to attainment of moral and other values, it is critical that our right to freedom—our right to a sphere of personal jurisdiction in which we are in charge of our own lives (what the late Robert Nozick called “moral space”)—be recognized and protected as well.<sup>8</sup> Of course, accepting our moral nature also means accepting the risk that people will make bad judgments and engage in bad conduct. If not, they are not being recognized as fully human—as fully intact and responsible agents, even if sometimes unwilling to do their best. Their human dignity is then denied. When people grow quite old and others begin treating them in paternalistic ways although they are still capable, the question is often asked whether their basic dignity is not being violated thereby. That means that the paternalists do not recognize that these elderly persons ought still be free to manage their own lives.

However, in other cases, for example when an employer engages in massive discriminatory hiring, many would say that people do not have the right in such a case to manage their own affairs. They would say that such conduct is wrongful and must be prohibited for that reason alone. For example, when the state of California

voted to enact Proposition 14 in 1964, which the US Supreme Court characterized as “authorizing private discrimination,” the Supreme Court struck down the law because, in the words of Justice Byron R. White, “The right to discrimination, including the right to discriminate on racial grounds, was now embodied in the state’s basic charter, immune from legislative, executive, or judicial regulation at any level of the state government.” And that is exactly what having a basic right to discriminate with legal protection entails.

“Those practicing racial discrimination need no longer rely on their personal choice,” wrote Justice White. “They could now invoke express constitutional authority, free from censure or interference of any kind from official sources.” But legally protecting the right to discriminate does not mean that racial or other forms of unjust discrimination have now been accorded constitutional authority, any more than legally protecting the right to freedom of religion or the press means that everything done with the protection of that right, such as becoming a Satanist or practicing yellow journalism, has gained constitutional authority. Having a right to do X does not imply that X is the right thing to do. Americans usually understand this in the case of the First Amendment, which affirms our right to freedom of speech but by no stretch of the imagination implies that everything everyone says is true or is being sanctioned by government officials or anyone but the speaker.

In any case, Justice White suggested that while it might not be okay to interfere with someone who engages in irresponsible journalism, it is okay to interfere with someone who engages in irresponsibly discriminatory trade.

But this is a very one-sided—dare we say, discriminatory?—kind of government intervention. For this doctrine is never applied consistently in the marketplace. Producers tend to be prohibited from practicing racism, sexism, and bigotry in hiring, subcontracting, and other aspects of trade. But consumers are not thus regulated. Any consumer is perfectly free to abstain from patronizing a store solely because he dislikes the owner’s religion, politics, race, or gender. One can go to the mall, glance inside a shop, and decide, “There are two people working there who look to have Arabian ethnic origin, and I don’t want anything to do with them, so I’m going to shop at another store.” Yet this is a form of discrimination generally deemed to be unjustified, since the two persons with apparently Arabic origins are unknown to shoppers; they have no idea whether they are decent human beings or not. They are being judged entirely on the basis of superficial traits, ones they cannot help possessing; yet no law prohibits such discrimination. And if someone were to gain certain knowledge of the shopper’s reasoning, this person could not legally compel the shopper to shop otherwise than as he or she wishes. As consumers, we are mostly free to be wrong and to do wrong.

It goes further than the protection of racial or ethnic discrimination. If when chatting with your barber you learn that he adheres to politics you dislike, you can decide never to return even if the barber’s politics is right and yours is wrong. No law requires us to shop at places that we have irrationally and unjustifiably decided to bypass. The law, indeed, protects the right to be wrong in such a case should someone attempt to rectify the situation by forcing unreasonable abstainers to patronize shops they do not wish to patronize.

So, there are some severe inconsistencies in denying people the right to be wrong. Some people are given just the sort of protection to be wrong that Justice White lamented; others are prohibited from being wrong. Why so? Perhaps, simply, because it's very difficult to regiment people at the mall or grocery store. To be sure, there is some effort to regulate consumer behavior—as when producers are prohibited from selling products and services that consumers want, including certain drugs, sex, and, in some locations, gambling. In such cases both the producer and the consumer tend to be regulated. But in many others, even apart from the implications of the First Amendment, the right of consumers to be wrong is fully protected.

We have seen that the law is contradictory, that it both does and does not protect one's right to be wrong. Let me now argue that the contradiction should be resolved by fully recognizing (not fully denying!) the right to be wrong. Such a defense begins with the recognition of human beings as moral agents.

Moral agents have the responsibility to choose to act ethically—to be decent, honest, prudent, courageous, generous, and to do all sorts of right things in all sorts of diverse circumstances. Fulfilling these moral responsibilities is a central feature of their lives: not a mere side issue, but one upon which success or failure in life at the most basic level depends.

A great many thinkers consider morality to be bogus. When Enron and WorldCom executives started to be noticed for their malpractice, very few moral philosophers in the academy commented. This is because many of them, given their moral skepticism, would have had to say: "Look, we shouldn't hold these people responsible for having done anything wrong. After all, who can know what's right and what's wrong?"

Many philosophers regard morality as a primitive set of superstitions, not anything a sophisticated contemporary intellectual would take seriously. They believe that people simply can't help themselves, that they are not free to choose their conduct but impelled to do whatever they do by their genes, upbringing, or other factors. Or such thinkers simply doubt that any moral claims can be shown to be true or false. Ever since David Hume was interpreted to have argued, in the eighteenth century, that one cannot derive any claim about what we ought to do from any claim about what is the case (an "ought" from an "is"), many in the field of philosophy and the social sciences have embraced moral skepticism. (What Hume actually argued is that one cannot *deduce* moral conclusions from nonmoral knowledge, but that there are derivations that aren't deductions; so Hume was no moral skeptic.)

In any case, despite all the academic or philosophical skepticism about morality that is bandied about, there is also widespread acceptance of the idea that human beings are indeed moral agents. Nearly everything said about how people should treat their environment, other animals, members of minorities and other cultures, the poor, those in dire medical need, and so forth implies that we are indeed moral agents, that we do indeed have the responsibility and capacity to do the right thing. We are reminded, quite often, that we have not done so to a sufficiently consistent degree.

Even those who do propound skepticism about our freedom to choose and capacity to know right from wrong tend in their own practical affairs to credit the conviction that we are moral agents. They usually punish their children, complain

about personal betrayals, and criticize fellow academics for any unbecoming conduct. They certainly criticize those who fail to accept their own point of view, considering them seriously wrongheaded and suggesting that they ought to change their minds. It is very difficult to act and think consistently as a moral skeptic, for human life is inherently bound up with morality.

Despite all the “official” moral skepticism in academia and other quarters, then, it is clear enough for all practical purposes that human beings are moral agents in that they constantly face alternatives, some good and some bad, and are held responsible for how they choose.

A social precondition for treating human beings as moral agents is the basic right to be wrong, which is implicit in the right to freedom as such. Without the right to be wrong, people cannot freely make their own moral judgments. They often act, rather, from fear of legal sanctions, a circumstance that obscures the moral significance of what they do. They might have done the right thing anyway, but this is difficult to tell if they must do it, that is, regardless of their own actual judgment. (This is why Ayn Rand suggested that an “attempt to achieve the good by force is like an attempt to provide a man a picture gallery at the price of cutting out his eyes.”<sup>9</sup>) Decisions about what a person ought to do and ought not to do have been usurped by others. This means that in many spheres of life, their own quality of moral judgment can never surface. (And what a person must do may not actually be the right thing or morally best decision in the individual’s own context in any case.)

The temptation is very great to subvert the principle that adults, being moral agents, must be free to be wrong. Abstaining from interference with the conduct of others when they act wrongly or seem on the verge of doing so can be difficult. Parents know this all too well. As children grow up and begin taking responsibility for themselves, it is nearly impossible for their parents and intimates to adhere to the doctrine that it’s their life and therefore they should be allowed to run it, whether badly or well. Nevertheless, just because something is difficult to do does not mean that it is the wrong thing to do.

Recognizing the rights of people as free agents and implementing this recognition in public policy is not easy. But most good things are not easy. Whether you want to be a proficient pianist, newspaper editor, or philosopher, it means withstanding many temptations to take short cuts.

Now, if one wants to be right about basic political philosophy and law, one has to resist the temptation to coercively interfere with the bad judgment of others, no matter how eager one is to counter it. It’s not up to another person to do that for an adult. One can, of course, advise, recommend, implore, plead, or ostracize and boycott. But it is morally and politically wrong to force oneself on other adults to prevent them from being wrong.

A genuinely free society is one in which everyone has the right to be wrong so long as they respect the same and allied rights of others. That this may displease some who would be better off if those who choose wrongly had instead chosen rightly is irrelevant. No one is entitled to another person’s doing the right thing apart from what is required to respect one’s own rights and liberty.

But exactly why people exercise this right to be wrong so often is another matter.



### 3 Can One Be Innocently Wrong?

Now that we have a good idea about how to view the right to be wrong, we can consider the central issue in this book, namely, why people are wrong so much and so widely.

An initial answer is that they were somehow innocently misled, as opposed to “acting from bad faith or self-deception.”<sup>10</sup> Innocent disagreements are easy to imagine. No one has time to consider every reasonable option with respect to the various topics that concern us. Take child raising. As children, we are exposed to certain ways parents raise their children, and we had only a few alternatives to consider. Even these few we could explore only briefly as we visited the homes of friends or occasionally stayed over with them. So when we grew up to have children of our own, even if we did so prudently, the challenge of properly raising a child had to be met with limited information at our fingertips.

We do what we know to do, and what we know is limited by the scarcity of experience and of time to explore. So in this and many other cases we can grow up believing wrong things quite innocently, not through negligence or oversight. The same can be true of many other approaches we take to the problems of living. We drive, perhaps, the way our parents showed us; we follow eating habits we learned without the chance to investigate them. Limited information also helps determine which exercise programs we practice. We embrace religious faiths that come from our parents and other relatives without ever having had the chance to make sure we aren’t being misled.

Even with respect to the ordinary conclusions we draw on the basis of immediate perceptions, we can innocently go wrong. Our vision may be obstructed without our having the chance to become aware of this, as in the cases of mirages or optical illusions. We can be honestly mistaken about seeing a particular person, when in fact that person is out of town and we are encountering a look-alike.

From the most mundane to the most complex set of beliefs, it is possible, even easy, to end up with wrong ideas yet treat them confidently in light of the facts that they haven’t been proven wrong and that when relying on them we have not been misguided drastically. We can embrace prejudices about people of race, color, ethnic origins, nationalities, gender, and such that are indeed wrong as a general rule but that have been dependable enough, or at least innocuous, in limited circumstances. A visitor to Germany may find that the remote relatives she just met do indeed match the stereotype of Germans, namely, that they are very methodical, precise, punctual, or the like, and come away convinced that this really is “the” German personality. Without some preparation in basic reasoning, which most people do not receive unless they take a college course or receive some decent advice, the conclusions they infer from such experiences will often be wrong (in this case, a consequence of the fallacy of hasty generalization) yet also quite innocent.

Those who specialize in figuring out how to think properly might themselves make the mistake of overgeneralizing from their opportunities to those of others who lack them and thus lack the preparation for attentive and careful abstract

thought. They may even be intolerant toward those who are less careful in their thinking and who therefore reach mistaken conclusions, as if everyone could think things through equally well and thoroughly about any issue, whether the death penalty, abortion rights, welfare, radical Islam, terrorism, capitalism, socialism, or any other rather complex and abstract matter.

So one good explanation of why so many others are wrong is that they just haven't had the chance to get it right. No matter how carefully they formed their beliefs, as a result of their limited time and other opportunity constraints, they went wrong. Even if they had reached valid conclusions, perhaps it would have been largely by accident.

Wait a minute though. Such persons may still be faulted for one kind of lapse fully of their own choosing—insofar as they are willing to firmly endorse positions without having taken the time to address the issues fully enough. Rushing to judgment is, then, not such an innocent reason for being wrong. It is not merely “a mistake in judgment” made “in good faith,” to quote Dan Rather, the famous former anchor of *CBS Evening News* who admitted that he should not have used documents that later turned out to be forgeries<sup>11</sup>—and the suspect quality of which he had been warned about before using them on the air.

It is clear enough that while many persons can be wrong innocently, a good many believe that when people are wrong, they are guilty of something. The flack about the Danish cartoons of Muhammad back in late 2005 is a case in point. Many Muslims thought that the cartoonists and the editors who ran their work were not only wrong but severely wrong, guilty of major transgressions that they ought not to have committed. Indeed, the famous saying that “Ignorance of the law is no excuse” is often applied to ethics as well. It is not enough to say, “Gee, I didn't know I was being insulting.” Many think one is responsible for being more aware of how to act. In such cases, being wrong can be quite blameworthy. Yet this assessment leaves open the question of what accounts for being wrong in such important cases. (It doesn't matter for now that those who react to such blameworthy wrongfulness may well themselves be wrong in what they believe they should do about it all. I have already touched on that matter in Sect. 1.)

Although acting on the basis of wrong conclusions can be blameworthy, it clearly need not always be. In some circumstances—say, during a natural disaster—beliefs about what to do must be formed on the basis of inadequate evidence, with too little time to figure it all out. When this occurs, some will admit to being ignorant but realize that they must take the risk to act nonetheless. When all available choices are bad but a choice must be made, it is moral to choose the least-bad one.

## 4 Is Everyone Always Wrong?

Some would address the question of this book by asserting that everyone is always wrong because knowledge itself is impossible. They advocate general skepticism or agnosticism about every claim to know something. Skeptics hold that since no one can ever know anything, whenever anyone does claim to know something, he or she

must be wrong. In this view, the reason so many people get it wrong in their conviction is that everyone is wrong in every conviction.

One prominent reason offered for this position is that the human mind is itself fraught with prejudice, equipped with rose-colored glasses. We have, it is held, a mind that is inherently an obstacle to understanding the world; our sensory organs are no better. These obstacles are inbuilt: we must see things in certain ways whether they are actually as we see them or something else, so that even if we were by chance to see them right, this would be impossible to know. In this view, ironically, even if we could be right, we could never know that we are.

In addition to the alleged impediments posed by our minds and sensory organs—how their very nature is allegedly such that the very use of them interferes with attaining a sound understanding of the world—there are also the distorting effects our upbringing, cultural background, psychological disposition, and other conditions, all of which are thought to make it impossible to see and understand the world as it really is.

Some, like the late philosopher Karl Popper, have tried to avoid the predicament by proposing that we at least have probable knowledge. Although we may never be certain of what's what, if we are diligent enough we may achieve a high probability about it all. But the skeptic cannot be placated this way, for probabilities must always be comparable to some cases of certainty and according to skepticism there can never be any such cases. It is akin to claiming that we are near some goal we are trying to reach without anyone being able to locate the goal; without knowing its location, how could we tell when we are near it?

Some have attempted to refute the skeptic by arguing that if no one can be right, neither can the skeptics—not, certainly, about whether anyone can be right.<sup>12</sup> But this objection doesn't show that anyone knows or can know anything, only that we may all be at sea. Skeptics have often been willing to bite the bullet. "Sure, neither can I tell what's right," they'll admit. "No one can, and I don't even know that much."

Yet the skeptic does have problems. After all if there is nothing skeptics can teach us, why should we attend to what they tell us? More fundamentally, the skeptic's argument cannot be taken seriously at all given the fact that arguments must involve premises that are true in order to yield sound conclusions. Say we propose that all human beings are mortal, and Socrates is a human being, so Socrates is mortal. If, however, it is impossible to tell whether "All human beings are mortal" is true, then the conclusion cannot be treated as true either. The argument may be valid, but not sound.

In the skeptical viewpoint, it is questionable whether arguments could ever be valid, including the argument of the skeptic, since "validity" is a concept that is defined by reference to the concept of "truth." A valid argument is one in which the conclusion must be true if the premises are true. But if truth is impossible—if no one can ever know what's true—then the concept "truth" is never applicable and can never be successfully formed by us.

So, skepticism is ultimately an empty theory. It cannot be taken seriously, once we think it through, although we have the capacity to imagine that it could be true

by a sort of Walt Disney–type thought experiment. Imagine that we go to Mars and find people who suffer from total mental and sensory deficiency, moving about aimlessly, who are thoroughly and irremediably lost. This scenario can only be imagined, for we cannot reasonably say that it is possible. Such beings would not last long on Mars or anywhere else. They would not know how to live. (The lower animals, which lack conceptual ability, obviously cannot even attempt to attain the sort of knowledge that human beings articulate. But they do have senses and other mechanisms for detecting and responding to information about the world, and luckily for them are not hobbled by all-consuming doubt about what their perceptions tell them of the world. If the lion leaps, the antelopes run, instead of pondering whether there really are such things as carnivores.)

But what of the plain fact, then, that so many people are heavily influenced by their culture, religion, upbringing, and the like regarding what they believe exists in the world? One possibility is that although they often are thus heavily influenced, they do not have to be; and that if they work hard, following certain procedures in learning about the world, they can overcome any of these inherited prejudices worth overcoming. Certainly that is what we hope for and expect of those who were raised in households with racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, or other views formed without sufficient evidence or good reasons.

What we may well have to concede to the skeptic is the fact that many, many people are ignorant and prejudiced, knowing only so much about the world while going about misinformed, often because of corrupted minds. But this is not the sort of skepticism that is a threat to the possibility of human knowledge.

One reason skepticism seems plausible is that many influential thinkers have badly misunderstood the nature of objective knowledge. Even in ordinary discussions, people sometimes suggest that to know *per se* is to have unchangeable or perfect information. This is what is often meant by saying, “But you don’t know for absolutely certain!” While a few matters can be known with absolute certainty, most knowledge isn’t of that kind, not in any reasonable understanding of the idea. If I know my name or my birthplace, I do know it, as it were, beyond a reasonable doubt, but not beyond a shadow of doubt. In other words, I can imagine being wrong, easily enough. But do I have any reason to think so? If not, but I do have good reasons to believe what I do, it is most reasonable to call this knowledge. I also know where my car is parked and that outside my window there are trees and other homes nearby; even though, yes, I can imagine that I might be sleeping.<sup>13</sup>

If this misunderstanding of knowledge as requiring invulnerable certainty is widespread, so is the belief that since such invulnerably certain knowledge is impossible, knowledge *per se* is impossible. Only God might have knowledge of the type that could not possibly be mistaken, the type that never needs updating or modification. We humans are not in a position to have such knowledge.

But is human knowledge best understood this way? We can know a few truths in such a way that the matter can be permanently closed once we know it—certain laws of metaphysics or logic or even mathematics. But that is because these are so basic that even to deny them assumes they are so—like the fact that everything is what it is. (Try denying the law of identity and see if the denial itself does not then

fall apart, if it isn't what it is. Or try denying that something cannot be both one thing and not that thing, also, at the same time, in the same respect; then the denial, too, would have to be regarded as both a denial and not a denial.)

Most items of knowledge, however, do not resemble such fundamental, sweeping certitudes as the law of identity. Most items of knowledge are scientific and ordinary facts that we never know exhaustively, with nothing more to be learned about them. The world isn't at its end such that we are ever cognitively entitled to close the door on its content, write it all down, and have it done with for good. Such an idea of knowing the world is absurd and plays into the hands of skeptics and cynics, at least up to the point at which skepticism founders in its own contradictions.

Yet simply because the skeptical alternative is untenable, neither is it prudent to be complacent about trying to know things. Many do not know but a few things. Many merely have reasonable beliefs, even good hunches, but not knowledge, not what they can prove beyond a reasonable doubt.

Thus understood, knowledge is probably still quite rare, at least on many fronts where we would like to get some. So here we can return to our main question, "Why is everyone else wrong?" Say you do know a thing or two. You will soon find that thousands, even millions of others dispute what you know. Why would this be the case?

## **5 What to Do When Friends, Strangers, or Foes Are Wrong?**

Friends, especially close and lasting friends, are our soul mates. So when we consider them wrong about something important—in, say, ethical matters, politics, child raising, or financial management—we naturally want an explanation that does not undermine the friendship. Such motives as malice, recklessness, and stupidity do not easily come to mind as candidates for why our friends are wrong about something. Instead we tend to consider oversight, ignorance, preoccupation, and similar factors as likely candidates, since these possibilities do not impugn a friend's moral character. We give the benefit of the doubt.

However, these more benign reasons for being wrong may be biased in favor of friends due to our awareness that if harsher explanations are true, they reflect badly on ourselves. How could my friend be stupid, reckless, or even malicious? A friendship is sustained voluntarily, albeit often eagerly. So a friend's faults may reflect badly on us insofar as such faults suggest that we are indifferent to them, maybe even embrace them ourselves. If knowledge of the character flaw is new, learning of it may strain or even break the friendship. This is a denouement to be feared when a friend has been a cherished one.

So when friends (whom Aristotle called other selves) are wrong, we often tend to regard the most decisive motives as belonging to the benign, no-fault category. If the friendship is one of honor and genuine virtue, this approach is very likely right—although friends can change during the course of a friendship, including for the worse. If Aristotle is right that evil persons cannot really have ongoing friendships

of virtue, when friends in *bona fide* friendships are wrong, the reason is probably an innocent one, such as a mistake or oversight.

It is more difficult to establish why total strangers are wrong, for we know little of their character. When a stranger prefers a political party, candidate, or program that we know to be vile, we are tempted to reason by shortcut. Given how wrong they are and our ignorance of their character, we guess that it is quite likely that they are wrong because they suffer from character flaws. This estimate assumes that good persons would not freely reach important conclusions that are wrong. But is this true? Is it integral to good character to take care to believe only what is true or very likely true? Is the pursuit of truth an imperative of morality or ethics?

This is a highly charged issue. After all, millions of human beings are simply too busy to reach the right conclusions about many very important matters. They may even be innocently superstitious, having embraced conclusions they deemed plausible but whose veracity they simply could not spend time researching. Or they trusted family or community members to teach them the correct way to see something (albeit based on folklore passed down from elders who themselves relied on sources that could not be checked out). If my parents are Republicans or Democrats or socialists—and I am busy training day and night for the Olympic speed skating competitions—I am very likely to embrace their position, even vote as they do. If I am wrong, it may be due to sheer obliviousness, and I am at most responsible for failing to admit my ignorance. (Here is one reason that insisting that all eligible voters go out and vote is misguided.)

It would make sense, then, to set aside the question of why strangers are wrong, if indeed they are. Without investigation, we do not necessarily know what leads them to be wrong. This doesn't imply that we need to abstain from criticizing strangers who are wrong, only to abstain from imputing questionable motives. Perhaps George W. Bush did do wrong by going to war with Iraq; but unless one knows him well enough, why he chose wrongly cannot be established. Yes, it may require discipline to abstain from imputations of bad motives. Nonetheless, that is probably warranted, unless the wrong involved is so egregious and unambiguous that whoever is wrong clearly ought to have known better.

Arguably, even the motives of an Osama bin Laden—widely believed to have ordered the September 11, 2001 attacks on the USA that killed nearly 3,000 people—are difficult to judge. Of course, bin Laden has issued statements about why he directed those attacks, an analysis of which could well reveal malice aforethought as opposed to something more benign, such as an innocent but gross misunderstanding of geopolitical history. Even though most citizens around the globe were made shockingly aware of those attacks, and this awareness seemed to call for firm opinions from them about men like bin Laden, it is possible that most opinions formed have been ill thought out, more a matter of emotional urgency than rational justification.

What of people like Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin, whose responsibility for ordering mass murder has been thoroughly documented, a fact of history known beyond any reasonable doubt? Even here, a distinction may be drawn between the monstrosity of their conduct and what best explains it.

Enemies wish us ill not simply because they happen to dislike us but because what we stand for clashes with what they stand for. If the basis of what we stand for is sound, if we have reached our conclusions carefully and rationally, then our enemies are probably wrong. But why?

Suppose we are innocent Jews targeted by anti-Semites who want to wipe us off the face of the globe or at least destroy the land we most reasonably consider our own. Such anti-Semites are our enemies, and they are wrong to want to hurt us. They may proclaim many reasons for their enmity that they hope will induce others to collaborate with them against us. We, however, know they are wrong to do this. Why would they be so wrong about us?

It is difficult to give such people the benefit of the doubt, to consider that they may wish us ill from some mistaken but innocent motive. They are, after all, actively our enemies; and, being innocent, we do not deserve the fate they want for us. Certainly they are wrong from malice. Their wishing us ill is part of why they hold false beliefs about us; they are blinded by hatred. Their strong negative emotions interfere with their willingness to think objectively about us. They cannot see straight when it comes to who and what we are.

Those who wish us ill despite our innocence negligently fail to acknowledge or respect the fact that we do not deserve what they want for us. They have a guilty mind, in other words. This guilt stems from failure to consider fully everything that is relevant to how they ought to regard us, or any human being. In this case, then, being wrong is largely attributable to their failure to think through what they are doing.

## 6 Does Science Rule Us All?

I will now touch on a topic that relates to how much we can get confused about what it is we need in order to get things right. This is a discussion about science and about how it has led (and can always offer the temptation to lead) to a certain kind of complacency masquerading as simplification.

In all eras—ancient, modern, and contemporary—there has been what might be called a reductionist, *scientistic* temptation. In ancient times, Democritus yielded to it with his early version of atomism. In modern times, Hobbes introduces it *via* his reductive materialism. And in our contemporary era, perhaps the most outstanding representative was the late B. F. Skinner with many others jumping on the bandwagon. These include most social scientists who embrace engineering and many economic imperialists, such as the late George Stigler, who take an approach to understanding human behavior in terms of the universal drive to maximize utilities.

What is the temptation exactly? It is to analyze all human affairs into the behavior of constitutive material bits and then to take the laws that govern these and insist that those laws also apply to the gross entity with which the analysis began.

In the case of Hobbes, especially, the application of classical mechanics—which he learned from famous physicist Galileo Galilei when he visited him in Italy—to all human, especially social and politic, life produces the idea that when human beings

act it is all determined by the laws of physics. The instinct for self-preservation is just a special application of the laws of motion. To get ahead, then, we are driven by laws of behavior that are the laws of motion applied to human beings as they strive to live—to gain advantage, riches, or power. In the last analysis this is nothing different from the behavior of subatomic or atomic particles moving ahead and aiming to remain in motion.

So what we've got is a fairly complicated—although also rather straightforward—explanation of social life as starting with the efforts of all these human beings to stay alive, to prosper, to live in peace, and to flourish. Which later on, in classical economics turns out to be best facilitated by a very limited government, one that does not pose any friction to the movements of individuals forward. This begins with Adam Smith who is, in a way, a Hobbesian cleansed of the illusion that the absolute monarch can actually achieve the goal of peace and prosperity. Maybe we can call Smith's position Hobbes plus public choice theory.

Contemporary versions of reductionism and scientism have been found more explicitly in the thinking of those on the political left. The reason is that the right has tended to retain some loyalty to supernaturalism through which room for freedom and choice is made available, albeit only via some measure of mysticism.

Most positivist social scientists, however, are materialists and once again fall prey to the "Hobbesian illusion," namely, that there can be a technology of behavior, one that will best be put to use by leading engineers and other technocrats. (Skinner probably never read about public choice theory.)

Now why is this inclination a temptation? When I call it that, obviously I think of it as something of a vice rather than a virtue. The "vice" stems from what I consider a misunderstanding of human nature. This is that nothing fundamental sets human beings apart from the rest of nature. Indeed, it holds that within nature only one kind of being exists, which is the smallest into which the rest may be analyzed. This is, then, a basic reductionism, one that a lot of people are very proud of and embrace with glee. (Curiously, some avid moralists share it, namely animal rights or liberation advocates!)

It is, however, a mistake to think that human beings are just an aggregate of material bits and pieces that exhibit the deterministic laws of classical mechanics. Why? Partly because experience shows it to be false. And, also, because there are serious contradictions the idea generates.

Unlike in many other cases, there are too many ups and downs in the human sphere of existence, too many pluses and minuses, too much creation and destruction, all of it present in the natural world around us, often part of an ongoing conflict, even—or should I say especially—in the realm of ideas. There is in the human sphere, in other words, a creativeness that is optional and it stands in the way of understanding human affairs along lines of the regularity noticed in the rest of nature.

Human beings appear to be able to initiate their conduct or, or again, fail to do so—in other words, we have free will. We are causes ourselves, of our own actions, at least at a certain level—for example, we cause our own thinking. This is exactly what Hobbes and what Skinner denied, exactly what Marx and Freud denied and what determinists today also deny.



The fact that human beings are capable of initiating some of their own behavior comes out clearly in the intellectual process in which those writing on these topics are involved, namely, in mutual and relentless criticism. Suppose a determinist considers my theory of free will wrong, so he or she is now criticizing it. The criticism presupposes the notion that I might have thought differently, more successfully, better, or correctly or soundly—in short, in the way the determinist thinks—but I allegedly failed to do so. The allegation of this kind of failure, however, implies freedom since it involves the proposition that I might have done better if I had the capacity to think correctly rather than mistakenly.

And so even in the determinist's criticism of free will there is an implicit affirmation of human freedom. The critics addressing the intellectual adversary are alleging that this adversary might have thought differently what they claim that's what he or she ought to have done.

Furthermore, the very idea of scientific judgment, independent of prejudice and other distortions, presupposes the freedom of the human mind. Without it any thought would be merely the product of various forces, possessing no more truth and validity than any other.

All of this amounts to a clear clue that there is something wrong with the notion that a reductionist, scientific, and determinist approach to understanding human behavior will suffice. But does this also indict our confidence in technology?

No. Clearly, technology is mostly a plus in the sense that we can put it all to good use, but like anything else, we can also fail to do so—we can also misapply it, we can go wrong with it. If indeed human nature is such that there's a possibility of good and bad conduct, then the tools with which human beings work can also be applied badly or well.

This elementary fact is evident enough in our own era. For example, computers, nuclear power generation, the Internet, e-commerce, and all other manifestations of high tech lend themselves to both creative and destructive uses. This would suggest the sort of caution that I am urging about science in general, in relying on it with too much anticipation of panacea.

A while back I went to hear a speech by a very enthusiastic supporter of encryption. He said encryption is going to do away with all government power over individuals because we are able to secretly communicate with one another and the FBI, CIA, the Feds will not be able to lay a hand on us and that will set us free and hurray for technology as the liberator of humankind. Being the naïve person that I was I raised the question of "well, doesn't the Internet work on electricity—and doesn't the government have the power to shut down electricity?" Then I went back to California and was rather concerned when the black outs and brown outs began to occur. Even here, with such a promising instrument as encrypted messaging on the Internet, things can go wrong; processes can be pretty much sabotaged by criminals and by a tyrannically inclined government.

So, basically I'm wondering whether some of the confidence in having technology solve our problems for us is not just another one of those scientific temptations where one believes, once again, that we have reached a point where everything can

be solved by deploying some technique, some formula. Believing this has a serious negative side effect. It encourages, even generates, something insidious, namely, complacency about the need for vigilance. If we put too much confidence in the technical instruments that can be used to solve many of our problems, we are likely to discount the necessity for a kind of eternal vigilance that has always been associated with the fight for freedom. Such vigilance requires a constant renewal of personal determination and initiative.

The failure to reduce the human to something else more easily managed is not all that difficult to appreciate. To the best of our knowledge we, human beings, are indeed unique in nature although we are also very similar to many other animals, such as chimps and dolphins. But we, unlike they, theorize and think long range, plan elaborately, and in these we get things right and wrong, and we are often responsible however we proceed, gaining credit here and blame there. We have ideas that reach far beyond the experiences we have, into a future we can thus manipulate because we learned some rules of engineering based on the laws of nature we have managed to identify.

In consequence, we might consider that trying to figure ourselves out in terms of something else is going to be futile. Sure, it may work with those aspects of ourselves, such as how our stomach or heart works, how we digest food or process sensory information that we share with other living beings. But when it comes to understanding how we understand, how we manage to mean one thing and another *via* thought and language, how we reflect on our conduct and adjust it by reference to standards, what art and ethics and politics mean in our lives—as to these issues there just isn't something analogous to utilize when we try to understand them. We are, in short, *sui generis*, a kind that is un-replicated in nature. And so trying to use sociobiology, physics, the behavior of pigeons, or game theory, as well as all the other models from some nonhuman area of reality to make clear sense of ourselves is quite probably not going to work. And why should it? After all, we are the only being that seeks this kind of self-understanding, so how could the conduct of anything else shed sufficient light on how we work? No, we will just have to come up with a suitable way to understand ourselves that is going to be new, novel, a method that applies uniquely to us.

## 7 Do We Need Philosophy?

In what sense is philosophy relevant to everyone's life? The previous sections of this little work amounted to doing some philosophy. I try to get to the bottom of an issue of concern to us all, to the basics, which is what is done in philosophy, uncovering the basics.

Is philosophy of any use at all? Why bother with it? Why bother with these kinds of explorations? After all, this is one of the oldest if not the oldest field people have thought about, from way before when the ancient Greeks organized it.

Although most people have probably not considered how philosophy can or does touch their lives, some simple examples may show this connection. When, in anger perhaps, someone blames the world for his misfortunes, he implies a basic belief—even if he later might wish to modify or abandon it. When someone declares his love of life, in some joyous moment, he, too, is expressing a view of the world in general. Such explicit statements as “Everything is relative,” “Words mean whatever one wishes them to mean,” “None of us can help what we are,” “Human existence is without meaning or purpose,” and “Whatever the majority chooses is what should be done” all indicate very broad beliefs—ideas not just about one or two instances of a person’s life or of what he or she witnesses.

It is sometimes argued, however, that ideas are mere epiphenomena, or even simply follow actions—William James thought this, as do some contemporary neurophysiologists. It means that ideas are not anything at all, mere shadows following real stuff like brain processes. But this appearance can be explained by reference to the fact that ideas develop and are not some kind of static object, they are themselves a kind of action and when they occur in a logical sequence, their impact may actually be ahead of them, in a sense, since the logic of the idea is already giving guidance to action. In any case, ideas undoubtedly matter, because even the idea that they do not is an idea with potentially important consequences.

## ***7.1 Not Just Gabbing***

Philosophy is something quite specific: it is a human activity of a certain kind, not just any variety of gabbing, speculating, or debating. In spite of the many differences among various philosophies, the field itself is specifiable. Philosophy has as its purpose the identification and study of the most basic facts of reality and our relationship to them.

From this abstract statement of what philosophy is we can now move on to fill in some of the details. First of all it will help to give an example of what some philosophers have considered a basic fact, and to suggest how human beings might relate to such a fact in their lives. Basic facts are rarely thought of in our everyday, normal experiences, since they are very obvious—just as on earth we rarely think about gravity, since it affects us always.

To characterize such facts, let us contrast them with the more ordinary kind. We often make note of such facts as that the moon is difficult to see in the daytime because the sun is bright, or that it is raining very hard in the Midwest. Such facts are of limited scope. Although they are simple enough to make evident, many other facts are required before these sorts can be understood and appreciated. In the first case, for example, the facts of the moon’s, the sun’s, and the daytime’s existence are presupposed. Many such facts are encountered each moment, every day, and throughout a lifetime. But these are not basic facts, since they depend on too many other facts.

## 7.2 *Specific Facts Versus General Facts*

A basic or fundamental fact would be something different. It would have very broad scope and would be evident on a very wide scale. For example, let us assume that it is a fact that everything that exists must be composed of material substance, that it must have mass, dimension, and weight. If what we are now assuming were correct, then anything that could exist would be composed of matter. Such a fact, if it were a fact, would have the entire universe as its scope, and all other facts we might encounter would have to include it as a feature, as a “background” fact.

We, in turn, would relate to existence, to all of reality, in a way that would be directly influenced by this basic fact. Thus, when discussing whether something or other exists or could exist, the answer we would give would depend first of all on whether the proposed item is composed of matter. Suppose now that it is shown that what is proposed to exist is not composed of matter. Then if it were true that everything that exists is composed of matter, we could conclude that the proposed thing simply does not and could not exist. So the assumed basic fact that everything is material relates to human life as a sort of basic guide to what we should accept as possible. If materialism is true, then it is impossible for something to exist that is not composed of matter: therefore, we should not bother with any suggestions to the contrary (except as a curiosity, perhaps).

This is just one illustration of what basic facts might be, and of what sort of inquiries philosophers might conduct.

## 7.3 *Why We Need Philosophy*

Is there an important role for philosophy in human life?

One aspect of philosophy evident in the ordinary philosophical remarks cited earlier, as well as in all major philosophical systems and schools, indicates the answer to our question. We can already detect the indispensability of philosophy to human life. Recall that all of the statements listed at the beginning of this discussion are very broad in their scope. They cover or refer to many things, many individual events, relationships, actions, institutions, or elements of whatever subject matter they involve. When a person says, “Life is nothing but struggle,” the meaning of that statement includes all of life, from birth to death, without exception. “Words mean whatever one wishes them to mean” refers again to all words—even those used to make the statement. “You made your bed so you must lie in it” refers, metaphorically in this case, to all instances when a person chooses some course of action and is faced with the results.

If someone takes these thoughts seriously, and many do, it is very likely that such an individual’s life will reflect what is meant by them. A person will most likely have an attitude toward, an anticipation of, or a regard for life that conforms

to the belief expressed—or to the same belief held in silence. To see the impact of philosophical ideas we need to consider what will happen when a person takes such ideas seriously and lives by them.

#### ***7.4 Pervasive Impact***

It is most likely that those who take such ideas seriously will find their impact evident throughout their lives. This can be so whether the ideas are worked out in great detail or held as firm conclusions without close scrutiny. Even in what might be considered less reflective, less systematically intellectual cultures, there is clear evidence that ideas such as those we have cited have considerable impact—in the form of myths, sayings, religious writings, and the like.

It should also be stressed that virtually everyone has some such general ideas. Whether explicitly stated, self-consciously believed, or merely accepted by habit, such ideas influence one's life. They sometimes govern entire cultures, even epochs of human history, as was evident not long ago with Marxism throughout a considerable portion of the globe. In the last analysis, for philosophical purposes, the crucial issue is whether these ideas are correct. But their importance cannot be overstated.

We can go through life without ever becoming involved with horticulture, astronomy, or international relations, since these apply only within a limited range and only intermittently (though, of course, widely and often enough when compared with some other concerns). But philosophical ideas, by their nature, apply directly or indirectly to the basic features of existence and human life. For example, the philosophical idea that none of us can help what will happen in our lives pertains to all of everyone's life! That surely is not a restricted scope, and if the claim is true, it can have considerable bearing on how we should understand ourselves and others—whether, for instance, we can ever meaningfully hold others responsible for criminal activity, credit ourselves (or others) with achievements, and so forth.

#### ***7.5 Philosophical Nutrition***

As the most general field of inquiry, philosophical concerns reflect on everything people think about and do.

Obviously one can live without explicit philosophical knowledge or convictions. One can also live without strict attention to one's health. Even without crucial nutrients a person can survive for quite some time. Many of the biological, chemical, psychological, and other requirements of life can be neglected without drastic immediate consequences. Therefore, if the issue is whether one can continue life without philosophy or some of its better contributions, then clearly the answer is yes. But this is not the issue, for one can live without many things that one should secure if they are even remotely possible.

Philosophy touches upon virtually every aspect of life—directly, when someone consciously, knowingly decides to invoke philosophical ideas, and indirectly, when a person absorbs such ideas on hearsay or must deal with others who have done so. Since philosophy focuses on the most basic principles of existence, and on our (proper) relationship to them, its results are of importance to anyone who wants to live successfully.

## 8 Did Socrates Know Nothing?<sup>14</sup>

A familiar teaching about the most famous philosopher in at least the Western world, namely Socrates, based mostly on Plato's representation of the Athenian philosopher, is that he professed not to know anything. The only thing he knew, he is reported to have said is that he knew nothing.

This matter comes up in one's life when one worries about whether one's firmly held beliefs qualify as knowledge, as fully substantiated true beliefs.

The idea about Socrates knowing nothing at all is fraught with paradox because while it professes knowledge of nothing, it is itself a claim to knowledge, self-knowledge, namely, the knowledge that one is ignorant of everything. Everything? But if so, then how could Socrates know of his own ignorance, given that his ignorance clearly is a candidate for something to be known?

Perhaps there is a solution to the paradox, a resolution to what appears to be a conflict in Socrates' position. Suppose that there is a kind of knowledge that Socrates, or anyone else lacks, namely, knowledge that is absolute, incorrigible, without the possibility of ever being modified, changed, or updated. Suppose this is a kind of knowledge that Socrates does indeed lack. In ordinary situations we run across mention of this kind of knowledge when someone challenges a claim we make to know something with the retort, "But are you absolutely sure of it? Are you completely certain?" Say I tell you where my car is parked. You ask me, "Do you know that it is parked there?" I tell you, "Yes, sure I do; I parked it there myself." But you come back with, "But are you certain, beyond any doubt, any possible doubt, that the car is there?" And here I must admit that I am not certain like that. I am only reasonably certain—I know it beyond a reasonable doubt—not absolutely certain—certain beyond a shadow of doubt.

Which is the kind of knowledge we should understand Socrates to have disowned? Is it that absolute variety? Or the more modest?

I suggest that when Socrates claims he knows only that he knows nothing, he first uses "know" in the modest sense, then in the more demanding one. And this seems to me a worthy thing to teach—few if any of us have that final, finished knowledge that some take the idea "know" to mean. It is more reasonable to understand by "know" the more modest notion that when one makes a claim to knowledge—say, to know where one's car is parked—one is only claiming to know beyond a reasonable doubt. This is what I believe we learn from the mid-twentieth century English ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin's famous paper, "Other Minds"

as well as from Ludwig Wittgenstein's posthumously published book, *On Certainty*. Austin shows that by saying one knows something one is not making a promise that at no time in the future will one need to modify this claim only that for the time being it holds true. Wittgenstein, in turn, makes clear that in being doubtful about something it isn't sufficient to fancy or fantasize a doubt—that is, “It might possibly be false”—but one needs to produce reasons. Only reasonable doubts need concern us! One may be certain so long as no such doubt exists; certainty beyond a shadow of a doubt is irrelevant.

Getting back to Socrates, it is good to keep in mind that the absolute type of knowledge probably doesn't exist, not for human beings at any rate, since none of us can tell at any given time that what we know will not in some future time require some modification, adjustment, or editing. Yet why should one be disturbed about this? Why contend, as Socrates appears to do, that this is inferior knowledge? It is indeed the knowledge that is produced in all the sciences, in philosophy, and in ordinary life. That other kind is at best an imaginary, Disneyland-type of knowledge, a myth, even, and no one need apologize for not having it. It is not the object of human inquiry but of human fantasy.

So what Socrates must have meant by claiming to know nothing is that he doesn't know anything in that fantastic fashion, for absolutely, timelessly, and incorrigibly certain. But he knew this, so he did in fact know something. But this he knew in the sensible way, the way human beings know a great many things. He knew that he had no final, perfect, timeless knowledge. And he was right—none of us does. There is no such thing, no such knowledge! And it is a valuable lesson Socrates taught when he told us this fact, a fact he knew and he must have assumed we all can know as well and perhaps even benefit from knowing.

## 9 Epilogue

So then why is everyone else wrong—what would be the best answer to this question all of us could easily ask when we realize just how many disagree with us about very important matters? Because, I propose, of insufficient thoughtful attention being paid to the topic about which they are wrong. It's here that human beings are free to choose, to initiate action; here they can be culpably wrong and they often are.

## Notes

1. In Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking Press, 2006), the author advances a neo-Darwinian explanation for the persistence of religion in human life. He does not share the position of believers, however, but tries to explain holding such beliefs. This is one effort to answer a question similar to the one I am addressing: “Why

- are all the faithful holding these wrong ideas?" During the debate about how to deal with the economic fiasco of 2008–2009, Representative Barney Frank advanced the idea that "conservatives must be nuts" for disagreeing with his and the Obama administration's approach to solving the country's problems! Dr. Michael Holick ("Dr. Sunshine") explained why doctors, with whom he disagrees, advise that no one should go out in the sun (as he defended his own book *The Vitamin D Solution*), "They are heavily invested, I think, with the cosmetics industry..." (Deborah Solomon, "Dr. Sunshine," *The New York Times Magazine* [March 21, 2010], p. 18).
2. Peter Weiss, "Fit to Be Tied: Impatience with String Theory Boils Over," *Science News*, Vol. 170 (October 21, 2006), p. 265.
  3. For more see, Lee Smolin, *The Trouble with Physics* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), and Peter Woit, *Not Even Wrong* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
  4. Daniel Dennett, "The Bright Stuff," Op-Ed, *The New York Times* (July 12, 2003).
  5. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).
  6. Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, *The Outline of Bunk* (Boston: The Stratford Company, 1929).
  7. See Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 66 (December 1969), pp. 828–839, reprinted in Derk Pereboom, ed. *Free Will* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 156–166. A good deal of bad philosophy is done because of this demand that insights true of a specifiable context be true regardless of context. A truth *per se* can be contextually true even if it does not obtain in exceptional or borderline cases. For a good discussion, see J. L. Austin, "Other Minds," *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).
  8. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 39. I called it "a sphere of authority" in my paper: Tibor R. Machan "Conditions for Rights: Sphere of Authority," *Journal of Human Relations*, 19 (1971), pp. 184–187.
  9. Ayn Rand, "What Is Capitalism?" *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1986), p. 23.
  10. Ronald Dworkin, "Integrity in Law," from his *Law's Empire*, reprinted in Keith C. Culver, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Law* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2008), p. 168.
  11. Jarett Murphy, "Dan Rather Statement on Memos," September 20, 2004, *CBS News*. Available at [cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/20/politics/main644546.shtml](http://cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/20/politics/main644546.shtml).
  12. For a thorough exploration of this line of reasoning, see Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
  13. John Searle offers an insightful discussion in *Freedom and Neurobiology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
  14. A version of this section has appeared in *Think*, No. 25 (Summer 2010).





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## About the Author

Tibor Richard Machan was smuggled out of communist Hungary in 1953, when he was 14. In time, he immigrated to the USA. He took a tour of duty in the US Air Force and then embarked on an academic career, earning B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in philosophy. He helped found *Reason Magazine* and edited, for 25 years, *Reason Papers: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Normative Studies*.

Machan has lectured around the world on political philosophy, business ethics, and other philosophical topics. He holds the R. C. Hoiles chair in business ethics and free enterprise in the Argyros School of Business and Economics at Chapman University, CA, where he also teaches frosh foundations seminar courses on introduction to philosophy, the history of political philosophy, and the philosophies of commercial life. He was visiting professor at the US Military Academy, West Point, and has also taught courses in the philosophy of law. He is Professor Emeritus at Auburn University, Alabama. He has written and coauthored more than 30 books and edited and coedited another 20. He has had books translated into Swedish, German, Hungarian, French, Lithuanian, Italian, and Georgian.

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