

*Academic appointments: Why ignore the
advantage of being right?*

I

Universities exist for the sake of the advancement of knowledge: its transmission by teaching, its expansion by research. Most of those who make academic decisions on behalf of universities will take the advancement of knowledge as their predominant, ultimate aim.

Of course, some people in universities have different aims in mind. They may think the advancement of knowledge is meaningless, or square, or worthless, or unattainable, or just outweighed by some more urgent aim – the cultivation of entertaining new ideas regardless of truth, perhaps, or the civilizing of the future rulers, or the recruiting of a mighty army to smash the state. But let us imagine an especially lucky university, where nearly everyone pursues the ultimate aim of advancing knowledge and where the few dissenters pursue aims so diverse as to cancel one another out.

As a philosopher, I shall tell a story about the philosophy department of this lucky university. But the story applies more broadly. Not perhaps to the department of frenchified literary theory, where skepticism runs rampant and the pursuit of truth is reckoned passé. Not perhaps to the mathematics department, where they are in

First published in *Ormond Papers* (Ormond College, University of Melbourne, 1989). Reprinted with kind permission from Temple University Press.

This paper is based on a lecture given at Ormond College, Melbourne, in July 1988. I thank the audience on that occasion and also Paul Benacerraf, Steven M. Cahn, Philip Kitcher, T. M. Scanlon, and others, for valuable comments.

confident agreement about what's true and how to tell, and they disagree only about what's fruitful and interesting. But in most departments, as in philosophy, (1) the advancement of knowledge is the agreed aim; but (2) there are prolonged disputes over what's true. Wherever both conditions are met, whether it's a matter of the extinction of dinosaurs or of superstrings or of legal realism, my story may be told.

One big academic decision is the decision whom to appoint to the faculty. In the lucky university we are imagining, this decision will be made by those who are already on the faculty in the discipline in question. When there is a vacancy in the department of philosophy, for instance, the members of that department will decide by vote who shall be offered the appointment. In making this decision, they will all be guided (or they will nearly all be predominantly guided) by the aim of advancing knowledge. They will make the offer to the candidate whose appointment would best serve that aim.

(Let me assume hard times: a buyers' market so bad that the disappointed candidates are unlikely to have an academic career elsewhere. Otherwise I might have to assume that the members of the appointing department aim not at the advancement of knowledge per se, but rather at the advancement of knowledge only insofar as it goes on at their own university.)

Note well that in discussing academic appointments, I am not discussing academic freedom. Nobody's academic freedom is violated if the job he wanted goes to someone else, provided he had no prior claim and provided the decision is made on proper grounds.

II

There are many disputed questions in philosophy – as in most disciplines – and each member of the appointing department will hold some opinions about which philosophical doctrines are true and which are false. The candidates for appointment likewise will hold, and will be known to hold, various opinions. Each member of the department can judge, by his own lights, to what extent any given candidate holds true doctrines, and to what extent he is in error.

Holding true doctrines, and not being in error, would seem *prima*

facie to be an important qualification for a job of contributing to the advancement of knowledge by teaching and research. *Knowledge* means, in part, being right. It is redundant to talk of knowing the truth, it is a contradiction in terms to talk of knowing what isn't so. (Such talk cries out for scare-quotes: he "knows" it, that is he *thinks* he knows it.) What is not true cannot be known. Advancement of error cannot be advancement of knowledge.

Unless a teacher conceals his opinions altogether, or presents them in an especially unconvincing fashion (both faults in their own right), his students will to some extent come to share his opinions. But to the extent that the teacher imparts false doctrines, what the students gain cannot be knowledge. To the extent that a researcher is guided by false doctrines, he is liable to arrive at new and different false doctrines, since he will choose them partly to cohere with the doctrines he held before. To that extent, the fruits of his research cannot be new knowledge. So error makes one worse at doing the job of advancing knowledge. Being right is a big advantage.

So when the appointing department assesses the qualifications of the candidates, to choose the one who can contribute best to the advancement of knowledge, it would seem that they ought to give a great deal of weight to the doctrines the candidates hold true and hold false. They ought, *ceteris paribus*, to prefer the candidates who hold true rather than false doctrines. Of course this will be a difficult thing to do collectively, if the members of the department disagree with one another. But, as always, each should do the best he can by his own lights, voting in the way that best serves the advancement of knowledge according to his own opinions.

So, by and large and *ceteris paribus*, we would expect the materialists in the philosophy department to vote for the materialist candidate, the dualists to vote for the dualist, and so forth. Likewise elsewhere: we would expect the transformational grammarians to vote for the transformationalist, the Marxist historians to vote for the Marxist, the biologists who think that all evolution is adaptive to vote for the adaptationist. . . . I say this not out of cynicism. Rather, this seems to be how they *ought* to vote, and unabashedly, if they are sincere in their opinions and serious about doing the best they can, each by his own lights, to serve the advancement of knowledge. We can well

understand how countervailing considerations might sometimes be judged to outweigh the advantage of being right, but it would be very strange if the advantage of being right were left out of the balance altogether.

Yet what do we see? I put it to you that an appointing department will typically behave as if the truth or falsehood of the candidate's doctrines are weightless, not a legitimate consideration at all. No speaker will ever argue that a candidate should rank high because he has the advantage of being right on many important questions, or low because he is sunk in all manner of error. No speaker will argue thus, not even if he thinks the great majority of his colleagues will agree with him about what is true and false on the matter in question. Most likely, there will be no mention of whether the candidate's doctrines are true or false. If there is mention, the speaker will make clear by hook or crook that what he says is a mere comment, not an argument for or against the candidate. (The signal might be a joking tone: don't say "false," say "goofy." Or it might be a reminder that one's opinion is only one's own, or it might be the placing of the comment within a speech to the opposite effect: "I hate his views myself, but still. . .") There will be arguments galore that a candidate has academic virtues that conduce to getting things right or vices that conduce to error: "his work is undisciplined," "what he said was shallow and inane," but it will never be said that the virtues or vices have actually led to truth or error. (I wonder why traits conducive to truth and error should be relevant considerations if truth and error themselves are not?) Maybe someone will be accused of being influenced by the fact that he agrees or disagrees with the candidate's views, and all present will presuppose that this ought not to happen. It will seem for all the world, in short, as if the department were convinced that being right or wrong is an illegitimate consideration; but a consideration that tempts them and that they must guard against. It would be less shocking, I think, to hear a case made that some candidate should be preferred on grounds of race or sex, than to hear a case made that the department should appoint the candidate who holds the true philosophy.

(My evidence? Participation in the deliberations of two philosophy departments, in each case over a period long enough to permit a good

deal of turnover of colleagues. But also, hundreds of letters written on behalf of candidates by referees hoping to be persuasive, and presumably guided by their expectations about which considerations a department will deem relevant and proper. To be sure, my experience does not come out of the lucky situation in which all concerned are wholeheartedly devoted to the advancement of knowledge. But it comes from something close enough that I think I may be permitted the extrapolation. Accordingly, I shall no longer bother to distinguish actual universities from the hypothetical lucky one.)

Suppose the question whether being right is an advantage came up in a different connection. Suppose we were considering the history of the advancement of knowledge about a certain subject. Then we would find it perfectly in order to explain the success of some researcher by noting that he had been on the right track, that he was right about a lot of things to begin with and therefore found it easy to get more and more things right afterward. And we would also find it easy to explain his head start, in turn, by the fact that he was the student of a teacher who also was right about a lot of things. In this connection, at least, we would have no trouble believing in the advantage of being right.

Or suppose a squad of detectives have investigated a murder, working independently, and different ones began by suspecting different suspects. If, after the fact, we know that Plum dunnit, then once we know that it was Poirot who suspected Plum from the start, we understand very well why Poirot's investigation progressed by leaps and bounds, while his rivals bogged down and got nowhere. Or if some bystander knows from the start who dunnit (as Plum does, for one) then once he finds out that it is Poirot who has the advantage of being right, he will expect Poirot to forge ahead. In fact, anyone who learns that Poirot alone is right about some aspect of the case (even if he does not know just what Poirot is right about) should expect Poirot to gain an advantage thereby in contributing to the advancement of knowledge.

If, instead of a criminal investigation, it were the history of some branch of science or of philosophy, the same should be true. (Unless it is history done from the standpoint of utter skepticism about the subject, in which case it could not claim to be history of the

advancement of knowledge.) We know very well, outside the department meeting at any rate, that being right is one important factor that makes for success in advancing knowledge.

III

There are other factors, of course. We can list the costs of blindly going for the candidate who has the advantage of being right, and the possible benefits of preferring the candidate who is in error but has compensating virtues of ingenuity, rigor, originality, open-mindedness, clarity, curiosity, thoroughness, or just difference from the present members of the department. Up to a point, we can make the list *neutral*: equally acceptable to those on both sides of any of the disputed philosophical questions. First comes –

Risk of Error. We might try for the candidate who has the advantage of being right, but we might be wrong ourselves and therefore choose the candidate who has the disadvantage of being wrong.

Yes, we run a risk. But as Mill writes, “If we were never to act on our opinions, because those opinions may be wrong, we should leave all our interests uncared for, and all our duties unperformed. . . . There is no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance sufficient for the purposes of human life. We may, and must, assume our opinion to be true for the guidance of our own conduct.”¹

But is it so, perhaps, that our philosophical opinions are not real opinions? Do we pay them lip service, but always give them credence so close to fifty-fifty that they can play no role in guiding decision? If that were so, and were expected to remain so indefinitely, then it is hard to see how philosophers could be aiming at the advancement of knowledge. For what isn’t even believed cannot be known.

But I do think we might be guided by our philosophical opinions, even to the point of betting our lives. Consider our opinions about teletransportation, an imaginary process that works as follows: the

1 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), pp. 23–24. These words are in the mouth of a hypothetical critic, but Mill does not dispute them.

scanner here will take apart one's brain and body, while recording the exact state of all one's cells. It will then transmit this information by radio. Traveling at the speed of light, the message will reach the replicator. This will then build, out of new matter, a brain and body exactly like the one that was scanned.² Some philosophical positions on personal identity imply that one survives teletransportation (unless it malfunctions). Others imply that teletransportation is certain death. Now imagine that a philosopher is caught on the seventeenth story of a burning building. He has some hope, but no certainty, of the ordinary sort of rescue. Then he is offered escape by teletransportation, provided he accepts the invitation right away.³ At that point, I think his philosophical opinion may very well guide his decision. If he thinks what I do, he will accept teletransportation even if he reckons his chance of ordinary rescue to be quite high. If he thinks what many of my colleagues do, he will decline the offer even if he reckons his chance of ordinary rescue to be quite low. Either way, he stakes his very life on the truth of his philosophy. And yet if this philosopher does survive, only to find himself in a department meeting the next day, he will probably decline to stake the fortunes of the advancement of knowledge on the very same opinion.

However it may be with philosophy, consider the social scientists. A professor of economics, put in charge of the university budget in desperate times, may dare to stake the university's very survival – and *a fortiori* its contribution to the advancement of knowledge – on the truth of his disputed opinions about the causes of inflation. A professor of government who has been appointed to advise on national security may dare to stake the lives or liberty of millions on the truth of his disputed opinions about foreign affairs. If these same professors

2 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 199.

I have amended his description so as not to say that the scanned body is destroyed; for just as it may be held that the person survives teletransportation, so too it may be held that the brain and body survive. The same process, except with the scanning done remotely from the receiving end, is better known as "beaming up."

3 Do not grumble about a farfetched example. The decision problem requires only that the philosopher *thinks* he is offered escape by teletransportation. It is farfetched that teletransportation should be available. It is not farfetched that a philosopher should be bamboozled.

are not too busy to vote in their own departments, and if they must decide which candidates have the advantage of being right and which appointments best serve the advancement of knowledge, shall they then find their opinions too uncertain to play any role in guiding decisions?

When we bear in mind the risk of error, and so are less than certain of our own opinions, we might have reason to promote –

Division of Labor. The researcher who is not running with the crowd may do more to advance knowledge, if he does turn out to be right, just because he is not duplicating others' efforts. Even if we think it probable that he will fail because he lacks the advantage of being right, we can expect a more important success from him in case he does succeed. It may be worth backing the long shot in hopes of winning big.⁴

Consider again that squad of detectives, and suppose you've just taken charge of the investigation. There are several suspects, and at the present stage of the investigation, there's good reason to suspect some more than others. What to do: assign your entire squad to concentrate on the leading suspect? That means giving each detective the maximum chance to benefit from the advantage of being right. But also it probably means diminishing marginal returns: some bits of investigating are apt to get done several times over. Divide your squad equally between the suspects, then, so as to minimize redundant effort? That makes sure that most of their work will go to waste. Compromise, say with five detectives assigned to the leading suspect, two to the runner-up, and one to all the rest? No solution is right a priori. It depends: on whether you're shorthanded, on how far the leading suspect leads the rest, on how good your detectives are at cooperating. . . . There may well be considerations that weigh heavily against the advantage of being right – but not necessarily.

Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, if you are an only-moderately-convinced materialist choosing between two finalist job candidates. One would be the department's seventh materialist: probably right,

⁴ See Philip Kitcher, "The Division of Cognitive Labor," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), 5–22.

you think, but also redundant. The other would be only its second dualist: probably wrong, you think, but possibly right and not redundant. All things considered, the dualist may well be the better bet. But not necessarily – again, it depends.

Continuing our neutral list, we come to –

Change. He who is wrong today may be right tomorrow. If he is open to argument and not too proud to change his mind, his present errors may not persist. And he who is right today may afterward go wrong.

That may happen, sure enough. There are philosophers whose position is in a state of permanent revolution. But it's rare. We would expect to find a strong correlation between positions held now and positions held twenty years later, therefore between having or lacking the advantage of being right now and having or lacking it then.

Different Questions. Someone who has been wrong about the questions he has so far addressed may yet, if he has the virtues conducive to being right, have the advantage of being right about different questions that he will take up later.

There are two cases. One is that he may take up entirely unrelated questions and arrive at true views about them. The other is that he may be right about a host of subsidiary questions in the vicinity of the big question he is wrong about. An antirealist may be right about the flaw in the argument that was meant as the grand bombshell against realism; a champion of epiphenomenal qualia may be right about why one materialist theory of mind works better than another.⁵ In general, a philosopher may be importantly right about what the menu of positions looks like, he may know all the advantages and drawbacks and moves and countermoves very well, even though he makes the wrong choice from that menu. Likewise an honest physicist might, on balance, favor the wrong explanation of superconductivity; and yet he might be the very one who best points out which

5 G. H. Merrill, "The Model-Theoretic Argument against Realism," *Philosophy of Science*, 47 (1980), 69–81; and Frank Jackson, "A Note on Physicalism and Heat," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 58 (1980), 26–34.

problems his preferred hypothesis does not solve. And whenever the evidence is misleading, as sometimes it is, whoever is right about the balance of the evidence will be wrong about the truth of the matter, and vice versa.

Dead Dogma. The advocate of error will challenge those on the side of truth. He will keep them on their toes, compelling them to think of questions hitherto ignored, and causing them to improve their positions even more in order to answer his arguments.

This may happen or it may not. It depends. Sometimes there is bedrock disagreement, and both sides go their separate ways. Sometimes our only answer to an argument – a fair answer, if unsatisfying – is that since it leads to a false conclusion, it must have some flaw we can't find.

The Specimen. The advocate of error may play a role somewhat like the native informant in the linguistics department, or the snake in formaldehyde in the biology department. Error can be better understood, and better rejected, when it is seen close up. Know your enemy.

Not a respectful attitude toward a prospective colleague! – Still, there's truth to it.

IV

I am not satisfied. Yes, these considerations are cogent. Yes, they carry weight. But they do not, not even all together, carry *enough* weight to do the job. They might sometimes, or even often, outweigh the advantage of being right. But it is not credible that they always and overwhelmingly outweigh the advantage of being right; and that is what they would have to do before they could explain why we treat the advantage of being right as though it were weightless. It remains a mystery why, if someone aims to support the candidate who can contribute most to advancing knowledge, he should not even weigh the holding of true doctrine as one important

qualification among others, but rather should dismiss it as an irrelevant or improper consideration.

Indeed, if it's specimens of diverse errors that someone wants, or challengers to dead dogma, or insurance against the risk of his own error, then he should not dismiss being right as irrelevant. Rather he should treat it as, to some extent, a *disadvantage*! This attitude to appointments is not altogether unknown, and not quite as disreputable as trying to pack a department with right-thinking colleagues would be. We hear of "zoo departments" that try to procure one specimen of each main school of thought. (Too bad for the candidate who's so original as to defy classification! And you might think it's a scruffy specimen who'd consent to live in a zoo.) Still, I think the more usual attitude is that the truth of a candidate's position is not a proper consideration one way or the other. Is that because we think the advantage of being right and the advantage of being wrong always cancel exactly? – No; they can't always cancel, because the listed advantages of being wrong will vary greatly depending on the initial composition of the department.

V

Why ignore the advantage of being right? The considerations just listed do not go far enough. But I think there is a better explanation. We ignore the advantage of being right because we comply with a tacit treaty to do so. It is reasonable for all of us to think that this treaty, and therefore our present compliance that sustains it, serves the advancement of knowledge. However we should not all think this for the same neutral reasons.⁶

6 Here I parallel the suggestion I offered in "Mill and Millquetoast," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1989), 152–71 (reprinted in this volume as Chapter 14), concerning a utilitarian defense of toleration. Put society in place of the university; utility in place of advancement of knowledge; toleration of dangerous opinions in place of ignoring the advantage of being right. A Millian neutral list of the benefits of toleration does carry weight. But too little weight, sometimes, for those who most fear the grave disutility of dangerous opinions. If a utilitarian inquisitor thinks that exposure to heresy conduces to eternal damnation, he will find a Millian defense of toleration lightweight to the point of frivolity. But even he might think

First, take a simple two-sided case: the materialists versus the dualists. (Assume, what may be none too realistic, that all concerned think the errors of their opponents matter more than the errors of their misguided allies.) In my own opinion as a materialist, the best thing for the advancement of knowledge would be the universal acceptance of the true philosophy: materialism. Or near-universal, anyway; I can see some good in preserving a small dualist minority as insurance against the risk that we're wrong, or as challengers, or as specimens. Worst would be the universal, or near-universal, acceptance of dualist error. Second best would be a mixture, as at present. A treaty requiring us all to ignore the advantage of being right when we make appointments will raise the probability of that second-best outcome and lower the probability both of the best and of the worst. If the dualists are willing, we can have the treaty if we like. We cannot have what we might like better, which is a rule that only dualists shall ignore the advantage of being right (that is, of being what dualists take to be right). If the treaty is on offer, we can take it or leave it.

It may well seem to us materialists, on balance, that taking it is what serves materialism best, and therefore serves knowledge best. For if we decline the treaty, who knows what may happen in the long run? We cannot predict the fortunes of voting. Majorities in our department, and in the profession of philosophy at large, may shift in unpredictable ways. Even if we are on top here and now, some of us may move away, or change their minds, or decide that the advantage of being right is somehow outweighed in some particular case. And besides, we cannot predict the swing votes of those colleagues who suspend judgment between materialism and dualism.

Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, according to the dualists' opinions. They too may fear the shifting fortunes of voting. So they may think it better for dualism, hence better for knowledge, to join us in making

that a treaty of toleration serves utility on balance, if he sees it as preventing not only the eradication of heresy but also the possible triumph of heresy. Rather than chance the doubtful fortunes of war, he might think it better, for the cause of salvation and hence for the cause of utility, to give away both the hope of victory and the risk of defeat.

and sustaining the treaty. What they count as the main benefit of a treaty to ignore the advantage of being right is what we count as its main cost: it tends to prevent the triumph of materialism. And what they count as the main cost is what we count as the main benefit. But however much we disagree about which is the cost and which is the benefit, we may yet agree that the benefit exceeds the cost. It is not inevitable that they and we should both think this. (They will not think it if they think the triumph of dualism is just around the corner.) But if both sides do think it, as they reasonably might, that should come as no surprise. And if both sides are found complying with a tacit treaty, that is evidence that (in some inexplicit way) both sides do consider the treaty worthwhile. I suggest that this is exactly what we do find.

In the complex real world, we have not just one disputed question but many, dividing philosophers in crisscrossing ways. Should we therefore expect a big network of crisscrossing little treaties, each one binding the parties to ignore the advantage of being right on a certain specific question? That would be too complicated to be workable. It would be too hard to keep track of which positions are under the protection of which treaty and which are unprotected. Mistakes would be made; and since the treaties are sustained by the expectation of reciprocation, mistakes would tend to unravel the whole network. It would work better to have one big, many-sided treaty to ignore the advantage of being right across the board. True, that would protect schools of thought so weak that others have no need to make a treaty with them.⁷ If that is the price we must pay for a workable,

7 Maybe the treaty is limited to “respectable” schools of thought, as opposed to ratbag notions. Is this because a school of thought gains respectability when it gains numbers enough to be a threat, so that bringing it into the treaty is worthwhile protection? I think not. If I am not mistaken, hard-line paraconsistency – the thesis that there are true contradictions – is just now gaining respectability. But not because it has the numbers; the overwhelming majority of philosophers still think it certainly and necessarily false. To gain respectability, all it takes seems to be a handful of coherent and otherwise respectable defenders. Or not quite that, even – rather, defenders who satisfy all standards of coherence save those that are part of the very question at issue (as consistency is at issue when paraconsistency is defended). Graham Priest, author of *In Contradiction* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987),

stable arrangement that prolongs stalemate, and protects true doctrine from the triumph of its opponents, we may find the price well worth paying. Alas, it stops us from doing all we can to keep error out of the university. But in return it helps stop error from keeping out truth.

I stipulated that at the lucky university, advancement of knowledge was the predominant aim. But if the treaty is sustained by a sense of fair play or by respect for customary propriety, are those not quite different aims? Yes, and maybe those different aims are there, but they are extra. The treaty does not require them. It can be sustained solely by its foreseen benefits for the advancement of knowledge. For we cannot gain its benefits once and for all, and then double-cross our partners. As we know all too well, the work of appointments is never done. There will always be a next time.

If we're serious about aiming for the advancement of knowledge, and if we sincerely believe that the advantage of being right matters to the advancement of knowledge, then why ignore it? Because if we, in the service of truth, decided to stop ignoring it, we know that others, in the service of error, also would stop ignoring it. We have exchanged our forbearance for theirs. If you think that a bad bargain, think well who might come out on top if we gave it up. Are you so sure that knowledge would be the winner?

probably could have made hard-line paraconsistency respectable even if he had been a minority of one.