

Will "Alternative Truth" Prevail?

By Frank Schnell — April 16, 2017



Credit: John Tenniel

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.” - Alice in Wonderland

Science is, above all, a methodology designed for discovering objective “truths” about the natural world. All lawyers and politicians speak quite highly of Truth, and all routinely claim that it is on their side, rather than their opponents’, however, the real function of legal and political debate is not to discover truth, but to win. And, whenever “winning” is the prime directive,

Truth is always the first casualty in the battle. Thus, in a court of law, neither the prosecution nor the defense will freely volunteer any inconvenient fact that might seriously detract from the strength of their case. Winning is the immediate objective of both sides, whether or not guilt or innocence is accurately established in the process is secondary. Our operative assumption is that, in an adversarial system, “the truth will out.” However, if the truth actually does come out (in the words of Shakespeare, “a consummation devoutly to be wished”), it may be a fortuitous coincidence but it is certainly not the inevitable consequence of judicial design.

Historically, the legal system has had only limited success (by scientific standards) in dealing with even basic legal questions (e.g., slavery, prohibition, equality of the sexes, minority rights, Florida elections, etc.). Why, then, should anyone imagine that the courts might be capable of resolving questions of science?

Generally speaking, government bureaucracies are even less qualified to answer fundamentally scientific questions than the court system, no matter who is in the White House. Unless it matches their policy goals, neither party has any more respect for good science. Instead, each party publically embraces “good science” when, and only when, it considers that science in support of a

pre-existing political objective which may have nothing whatever to do with either Science or Truth.

There are differences in trends over time. When it comes to environmental issues, Republican administrations tend to support “good science” more often Democratic ones, but that is because good science frequently supports the regulatory rollbacks that are popular among businessmen and industrialists. By contrast, good science seldom supports the apocalyptic predictions that are so popular among environmentalists because those are instead intended to: (1) mobilize grassroots political movements; (2) increase donations, and; (3) precipitate stricter environmental legislation (with each result feeding the other two, synergistically).

Of course, many Democrats are quite sincere in their environmental concerns and are even relatively well read on the topics dear to their hearts. Unfortunately, their philosophical affinity for “Apocalypticism” often prevents them from reading the best and most relevant scientific treatments of the topic of interest, which hampers their ability to appraise hypothetical hazards in a realistic fashion. Even when such individuals are exposed to the best science on the topic, their common response is to reject as “industry propaganda” any information which conflicts with

their political preconceptions. This occurs in political elites as well, and they latch on to fanciful “risk” assessments, activist propaganda, and those unfounded health scares that appear and disappear with the regularity of bad weather.

So neither Republicans nor Democrats nor liberals nor conservatives can claim a monopoly on “good science.” Instead, it is an extension of “good politics.” As in a courtroom, where winning an argument is often incompatible with defending objective truth, political activists quote science in support of their arguments and with more than a little bit of spin.

That leaves us. Only scientists and the science literate public can be expected to earnestly defend the integrity of the scientific process. Contrary to popular self-deception, it makes little difference these days whether the employer is an academic, government or industry, science can still be exploited because Money, Power and Prestige are equally seductive to industry tycoons, government bureaucrats, and academics in search of celebrity. The battle between Human Reason and Human Nature will always be a lopsided one.

So, I am noting there is nothing new about this state of affairs, and conceding there has always been the relationship between Objective Truth and Ideology, which sounds bad enough. But it can get worse. Now we have “fake news” and “alternative facts” issuing forth from both media outlets and the Halls of Power like sour mother’s milk, putting not only good science, but all forms of objective truth in greater jeopardy now than at any other time since the Dark Ages.

As bad as that sounds, what depresses me most is that a very large segment of society actually seems excited by this dire and ugly prospect. They can exploit it more adroitly than the best lawyers ever dreamed of doing. As a retired scientist, this is not what I spent a lifetime working for; nor is it the world I had hoped to leave my children.

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