

DOUBT, PRESUMPTION AND THE OPEN MIND

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IT IS always in order to defend "philosophic doubt," or the right to criticize and re-examine accepted views and theories. We too often assume that settled questions stay settled; that, for example, the battle, or campaign, in behalf of toleration and free inquiry was won long ago and need never be renewed, and that, therefore, bigotry and obscurantism, though rife at times, constitute no serious menace to liberalism and civilization. Alas, the situation is not nearly so satisfactory. The Klu-Klux-Klan, the not wholly unsuccessful assaults of the self-styled fundamentalists and Bryanites on the doctrine of evolution (which they misconceive, by the way) and like symptoms bid us beware of an excessive optimism. No; science and philosophic doubt are not as safe as they are supposed to be; eternal vigilance is the price of intellectual as of civil liberty. Any reasoned plea, therefore, for philosophic doubt is still useful, relevant and educational.

But it is the fashion nowadays to preach and boast of the right of doubt in another than the philosophical sense. A new periodical has recently been started to uphold the general right to doubt and question everything. It is explained that the editors of this review are not "radicals" in politics or economics; they are, however, great, unterrified doubters. They are free from superstition; they take nothing for granted; they stand for the open mind; they have no respect for mere authority. They demand proof, facts, demonstrations in support of any and all theories and doctrines, whether new or old.

Curiously enough, there are hosts of shallow persons who applaud this supposedly bold, courageous, independent position. Is it not, we are asked, eminently rational, scientific, noble? Does not every real *savant* carefully verify his theories and conscientiously

examine all new facts presented to him? Why, then, should politics, ethics, sociology and economics frown on the gospel of doubt?

Those who ask such questions as these have little comprehension of the methods and procedure of science or philosophy.

Let us take some illustrations. We have today a new theory regarding the structure and composition of the atom. This theory may or may not withstand criticism and further research. We accept it, of course, provisionally. No one challenges our right to question the theory, to offer objections thereto, if we have any. But the handling of material things is not affected by our freedom to doubt. We don't say, "Stop all activity because we are not certain our theory as to the atom is true." We should regard that person as feeble-minded who should argue that we cannot cross bridges, live in houses, ride in trains or motor cars, because, forsooth, the atom is not a solid bit of matter, but a "center of force," a miniature solar system!

Again, Professor Einstein's relativity theory, which is so revolutionary in an intellectual sense, may or may not be finally established by adequate observations and tests. Meantime, Doctor Einstein himself assures the practical man that to him the ultimate fate of relativity will "make no difference." Practice, in short, is not affected by scientific doubts concerning relativity. If it were, Doctor Einstein would be the first to demand adherence to accepted ideas pending production of conclusive proof.

Finally, there is the old biological controversy regarding the transmissibility of "acquired characters." The majority of contemporary biologists affirm that "heredity is everything" and the influence of environment is comparatively slight. There is no substantial evidence, we are told, in favor of the view that acquired characters, physical or mental, are inherited. Are we, therefore, asked to abandon all efforts to *improve* the environment? Are we exhorted to pin our faith to eugenics alone, and proceed to develop a finer and better race? By no means. No level-headed biologist or sociologist lightly dismisses the factors of environment, education, social discipline, tradition.

In the absence of certainty, conclusive proof, what does the wise man do? He acts upon probability, upon presumption, upon empirical knowledge and common sense. He knows that dogma is dogma; theory, theory, and probability just probability. But life cannot be arrested and activity suspended while we await the establishment of truth in any given sphere.

Now, the superficial defenders of the right to doubt and challenge everything accepted and recognized tacitly assume, if they not definitely assert, that *to entertain a doubt is to acquire the privilege of rejecting any law, rule, arrangement concerning which the doubt is raised by them.* The freedom of inquiry, discussion, criticism is identified with the freedom of action in ways that civilized society with virtual unanimity regards as immoral and injurious.

For example, let us consider the apologies for Bolshevik tyranny and Bolshevik persecution of all opponents which many of our Liberals and Radicals have been solemnly making. Democracy, we are told, is breaking down and parliamentary government is a snare and a mockery. The world is turning to dictatorships—look at Italy under Mussolini, at Spain under the military regime of Primo-Rivera, at France under Poincaré. The party system is giving way to the group and bloc system; thoughtful persons are advocating the abolition of political parties and the substitution for them of temporary, limited, loose "leagues" for the promotion of definite objects. In these circumstances why make a fuss when the Russian communists destroy the "bourgeois" fabric of civil liberty, due process of law, representative institutions, universal suffrage, and free speech? The soviet regime, with its despotic features, *may* prove to be superior to the obsolescent systems cherished by the "doctrinaire" individualists or moderate Laborites and Socialists of the type now in control of the British empire. Why not give the Russian experiment a fair trial? Why not observe it with an open mind? Why not be objective, tolerant and lenient toward the Bolshevik departures from tradition and habit?

Of course, this line of argument is childishly fallacious, yet it is adopted in all seriousness by self-styled exponents of the gospel of political doubt and skepticism!

Political and social science is still in its infancy, and, of course, experiments in government are not only legitimate but necessary. Let the soviet system be tried fairly; let even communism receive fair play; but fair play does not require any honest, sincere, intelligent liberal or radical to condone or justify Bolshevik savagery, terror, and ruthless suppression of every vestige of liberty and democracy! When the communist dictators, with their bloodthirsty checka, were guilty of excesses worse than those of absolute autocracy; when they imprisoned, exiled and executed men and women who had fought czarism and other evils for years, it became the duty and right of every true, consistent lover of justice and liberty to

denounce them as usurpers and traitors. No amount of "open-mindedness" of the right sort can possibly lead any one to apologize for flagrant and monstrous injustice or to overlook glaring, riotous repudiation of first principles. Open-mindedness is not empty-mindedness, or total want of consistency and good faith.

Here is another illustration: The institution of private property has evolved and is still evolving. The conception of private property is not—and never has been—a rigid one. Do these facts warrant theft or embezzlement on the part of "open-minded" persons? Does any rational thinker entertain a plea of doubt or open-mindedness in regard to private property when advanced by a willful thief? What the future will do with private property may be a matter of doubt; for the time being we expect—all of us, not excepting sane communists—respect for private property, as for public property, from all members of society. Even revolutionary governments sternly forbid and punish "private expropriation," that is, looting, which is attempted sometimes in the name of some professed doctrine or relief.

We may say the same thing about other social, economic and political institutions. We may believe that the family is bound to undergo important changes, but this would not justify any rational person in disregarding present obligations toward his wife, or children, and throwing his burdens upon the community or his neighbors and friends. We may believe that education is very inadequate, but this would not warrant total neglect or abandonment of existing educational and research agencies. We may believe that the wage system will be supplanted in the course of some centuries by a more satisfactory and more equalitarian and libertarian system; meantime, as reasonable beings, we expect employers, managers, superintendents, foremen, workers and workers' spokesmen to consult reason and common sense in disposing of the hundred and one issues that constantly arise within the sphere of industrial relations.

But, it may be asked, what of the right insisted upon by Thoreau and other earnest and high-minded radicals—the right of "civil disobedience?" Is not the superior individual, whose reason and conscience are offended or outraged by accepted laws and standards, entitled to break such laws, trample upon such standards? Have not heroic and self-sacrificing men and women always defied and violated law in obedience to a higher moral conception? What of the Hampdens, the John Browns, the religious martyrs, the political and social heretics we now honor and revere? And is not the

example of such pioneers, leaders, rebels inspiring and compelling—one of the important factors, indeed, of progress? How can we preach to the young men and women of today blind, unreasoning obedience to law and convention because of alleged presumptions and probabilities in favor of such law and convention when history tells them that revolt by individuals and small groups of advanced thought and exceptional moral independence has made for reform and evolution in the past?

These queries are pertinent and important, and one must answer them candidly. Certainly the law may lag behind the moral sentiment and enlightened opinion of a nation, or section of a nation—witness the American conflict over the extension of slavery and the rigid enforcement of anti-fugitive slave laws. Certainly taxation may be oppressive, confiscatory, unfair, and government may become corrupt, tyrannical and imbecile. In such circumstances there is a duty of civil disobedience and there is a right to revolt. Nay, in a free state there is no escaping the conclusion that when conscience and moral duty clash with formal law, the latter must yield to the former. The statute books are full, and always have been, of so-called dead-letter laws which are honored in the breach rather than in the observance—which public opinion has outgrown and forgotten, and which no rational government would attempt to revive and enforce for a day. Laws are often annulled or repealed by custom and general evasion and violation. The so-called general property tax laws of our American states may be cited as one current and striking illustration of this truth. Everywhere intangible personal property escapes taxation, and everywhere governors, legislatures, assessors and prosecutors bow to the inevitable and treat the law as a dead letter.

But one must be perfectly sure that a law is unjust, obsolete, unreasonable, unwise and unenforceable before one decides to ignore or break it. The appeal to reason and conscience in such a case must be sincere, real, frank. The trouble with many social insurgents is that they mistake personal prejudices for convictions, inconveniences selfishly resented for high moral sentiments outraged, and that self-indulgence is mistaken for devotion to principle. In the name of philosophic doubt unstable and unscrupulous men demand the privilege of disregarding restraints imposed by moral decency, by the consensus of reasonable opinion, by respect for human dignity and social solidarity.

The true man of science is never dogmatic. He may frame

working theories, but he does not mistake them for established truth. He will adhere to his theory only so long as the facts sustain it. If new facts or new interpretations of known facts, throw doubt upon his theory, he will thenceforth treat it as doubtful and seek further light. He will welcome, instead of resenting, additional evidence, whether it tends to support or to undermine his theory.

There is, of course, no reason why economic, political, social and ethical questions should be dealt with in any other than the humble, tentative, scientific way. But science is not at war with common sense. It does not require us to be gullible, patient with manifest absurdity, willing to abandon positions taken after profound study and reflection and lightly swallow cock-and-bull stories. Prof. T. H. Huxley, for example, refused to devote time to the psychical research of his day on the ground that "inherent probability" militated against the worth or value of familiar "proofs" of spirit communication with the living—table rappings, medium trances, and the like. His mind, he protested, was not closed to real evidence; but he did not propose to waste his energy and valuable time on futile investigations. To engage in such investigations on slight pretexts is not to exhibit open-mindedness and tolerance, but rather to write one's self down as weakly amiable and wanting in discrimination. There is a time for inquiry, a time for suspending judgment, a time for revising a view, and a time for holding fast to that which has been tested and demonstrated to be true.

If science and philosophy must beware of undue conservatism, of pride of opinion, of arrogance, it must also beware of flabbiness, of superficiality, of excessive generosity to quacks and fools.

The proper study of mankind is perhaps man; but the indispensable preliminary study or discipline is logic and the correct use of words to express real ideas instead of pseud-ideas. The besetting sin of our age is loose thinking and loose writing. Persons who revolt against everything accepted in ethics, economics and sociology should be reminded of their inconsistency in not doubting their doubts, in not cultivating an open mind in respect of the results of earnest labor and reflection in the past, and of the teachings of vital experience. In their sweeping rejections they forget such principles as probability, presumption, preponderance of evidence, legitimate inference, and the like. Nothing is more futile, and nothing more impossible, *au fond*, to the rational human mind than universal skepticism. No science was ever born of or advanced by such an attitude toward the world.