

## Righteousness vs the Certainty of Doubt

*'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.'* Hamlet (Act 2, Scene 2).

*'No matter how many swans you observe that are white, you cannot prove that all swans are white.'* Karl Popper 1902 – 1994 (Austrian-British philosopher).

**Morality** is based on a sense of right and wrong.

**Probity** in public office means having a high standard of honesty and integrity – **knowing what is 'right' in an official context** ... both in terms of codified laws and regulations but also in an official's demonstrated trustworthiness.

Yet, Bertrand Russell 1872 – 1970 (British philosopher and 1950 Nobel Prize winner) states in 'The Triumph of Stupidity', 1933: *'The fundamental cause of the trouble is that, in the modern world, the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubts.'*

The oxymoron, '**Certainty of Doubt**', is often first attributed to French philosophers, Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650) and Voltaire (1694 – 1778), the latter wrote in a letter to Frederick II of Prussia in 1767 (translated), *'Doubt is not a pleasant condition but certainty is an absurd one.'*

The stark uncomfortable irony of that 'doubt paradox' has been used by many others (such as Bertrand Russell) to challenge any who can't see beyond their own surety of their 'rightness'.

### **So, what are we to make of those who have devout beliefs in their interpretation of 'right'?**

For some, their belief devolves from the notion of '*divine right*' as interpreted from the attributed writings and sayings of deities and prophets of many persuasions over many generations.

For others, it can stem from observed practices in being part of a 'successful' civilised society ... with those 'right' practices often entrenched in their mindset, along with rules and laws of civil life in **their** communities.

Some may extrapolate the kindness and nurturing of children in caring, protective families as being a very appropriate way to living a life.

**However, philosophers over centuries have used their studies of logic to challenge notions of righteous certainty.**

Their position is that **there should always be doubt**. Logical and scientific principles demand the testing of evidence and the quality of behavioural theories based on such evidence.

While acknowledging that many societies over millennia have deferred in subservience to social structures based on belief systems, philosophers and logicians have argued that such interpretations, of themselves, are **not necessarily** either '*morally right*' ... or correct (as in factually true).

Perhaps, some interpretations are more geared towards social power or maintaining a *status quo* – the way things have always been ... tradition ... resisting any hasty adaptation to changing circumstances. This is reinforced in the social narratives of their cultural history, schooling, status and institutions, entrenching each person's place into that particular framing of their world.

It is part of social conditioning to accept and belong (while '**other/different**' ways of living might well be feared or demonised). The implied consequence of not accepting is to be ostracised or banished from the '**normal**' way of existing.

**However, 'normal' is another human construct, like 'right' and 'wrong'.**

As cartoonist Charles Addams (1912 – 1988) stated: '*What is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly.*' Normality depends on perspective and one's life experiences. In human societies, 'normal' is about social roles and power dynamics.

Certainly, many successful societies have used such power systems for harmony and good ... over centuries.

But also, many of the accepted customs of past centuries can now appear to be antiquated, redundant or even bizarrely inappropriate for a planet of expanding populations, industrial/technological advances, stressed global ecosystems and governing ideologies that are struggling with their inability to adapt peacefully to change – or even **to entertain doubt about their traditional certainty**.

So, previously accepted social organisation structures (such as the feudal systems, the class structure, the caste system, the 'normality' of the many forms of slavery, human sacrifices, the automatic acquiring of wealth by armed conquest – ie the entitled *spoils of war*) are less accepted as normal concepts today, by the majority of nations, as compared to previous centuries. Indeed, since 1945, we have newer international legal notions enshrined in national constitutions and international courts of justice ... such concepts as '*fundamental human rights*', '*crimes against humanity*' and '*genocide*'.

Today, while vestiges of the older control structures still exist, their influence tends to be more disguised ... in global corporations, national alliances, the rhetoric of diplomatic language, national security and high-level control of public media narratives ... or even how cultural history is to be written.

In starker cases, the power games are played out in the unseen 'dealing' world, shielded behind the public façade of business normality and mainstream media. The general world population is largely oblivious to the machinations of those powerful global 'puppeteers', who deal in self-interest and control.

Likewise, as breaches of the accustomed sense of 'right' behaviour gets tested, the propaganda campaigns of the influencers work to 'gaslight', to disinform, to normalise formerly aberrant and abnormal practices. It is fertile ground for the charismatics in political systems and social media. **But, it is torture for those who expect to be able to trust people in authority ... to be hearing truth.**

This is part of an evolving global socialisation process. It is resisted to an extent by those who wish to maintain the comfortable established standards of the past. Nevertheless, the 'gaslighting' disinformation is still being regularly adopted by a disenchanted many, who feel so isolated by past deceit in the 'trusted' old social systems ... that they are willing to jump towards any change from promisers of a better life ahead.

Indeed, the frequent sham of those manipulators is often exposed when giving them '*enough rope*' to tangle themselves ... as they show that they are unable to deliver their grandiose promises. Then, the pendulum tends to swing back to the security of tried and testable systems of the past – albeit with a grudging acknowledgement of the need for some on-going adaptations to changing circumstances, along with a more careful monitoring of **probity in public life**.

**So, what is the place for either 'righteousness' or appreciating 'the certainty of doubt'?**

In the words of Professor Daniel Boorstin (1914 – 2004. Historian. 12<sup>th</sup> Librarian of Congress, USA) '*The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance, it is **the illusion of knowledge.***' ????????..... **convinced that you know better than everyone else ... without any challenging doubts.**

**That should be food for serious thought.** Knowledge needs to be fact-checkable – neither illusion nor delusion.