



ARE WE ENTITLED TO OUR BELIEFS?

A well-known saying has it that:

“Everyone has a right to their own opinions, but not to their own facts.”(1)

This appeals to our commitment to freedom of thought and expression, linked in the USA to the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of speech and of the press. The idea that no one is entitled to their own facts is also prized by Freethinkers since reality is a given and not subject to alteration by anyone’s needs, desires, sincerity or force of will. “It is what it is.”

We may try to resolve the tension between these ideas by supposing that facts are simple items of observation such as whether it is raining or whether a rock is a fossil. Opinions, on the other hand, may be seen as how facts are put together and made sense of: flooding may be expected or dinosaurs lived long ago. Such opinions are valid conclusions based on the factual evidence. It would be unwarranted to conclude that the rain dance worked or devils planted fake rocks to lead believers astray. To the extent that opinions are based on objective facts that everyone has access to, people ought to agree, even if they agree to disagree when the facts may fit more than one opinion. But there is no more “right” to opinions than to facts.

When people assert the contrary they are really saying that they are not interested in whether their opinions are reasonable, well-founded or true. They are saying that they are not interested in examining, justifying, defending or, especially, changing their opinions. Lots of people believe nonsensical things, often passionately. And they have a “right” to such beliefs inasmuch as no laws prohibit their having or expressing them. But such beliefs should not be, and do not deserve to be respected, especially when they have potential for motivating harmful behavior, such as the opinion that homosexuality is wrong and can be cured, that Muslims want to kill non-Muslims, and that contraceptives work by causing abortions.(2)

As said, opinions sometimes differ because available facts are insufficient to allow a rational choice between them. This happens in science all the time, which is why scientists devote their time and energy – their careers and lifetimes – to gathering additional evidence to try to settle such disagreements and uncertainties. But while they are doing so they recognize that the available opinions

– their own as well as others’ – are all subject to some degree of doubt. And they are aware of what it will likely take to overcome the various doubts.

A similar process plays out in courtrooms everywhere. There, judges and juries are charged with making sense of facts and deciding if they support a conclusion based on “the preponderance of the evidence” or “beyond a reasonable doubt.” There is clearly some flexibility here and miscarriages of justice happen. But just as obviously, people who serve as judges and on juries do not “have a right to their opinion” no matter what it is or is based on.

It gets more interesting when it comes to opinions that are largely subjective. Such opinions are also built upon facts. And even subjective facts are a given for one cannot choose how one may perceive things. One cannot experience a toothache as if it were a foot massage. But to the degree that perceptions are subjective, that they depend on those who are perceiving them, they are inaccessible to others. This is what makes them – literally and unavoidably – the subjects’ “own facts.” Consider the question of whether beetles, grasshoppers and worms are good to eat. Billions of people apparently think so. And from a nutrition standpoint, such people are right.(3) But most Americans would say no, insects and worms are not good to eat.

So we see that both parts of the aphorism are wrong, but in different ways and for different reasons. It may be said that this is all just a matter of semantics, of what are facts and what are opinions. But many disagreements come down to semantics and also, as shown, to people using the same words to refer to different things. Facts and opinions about the objective world are not the same as those concerning subjective experience.

Now what about the notion of people being “entitled” or “having a right” to their beliefs? Again, we should not want anyone to be persecuted for what is solely in their own mind and how they may choose to express it without harming others. But it is how we acquire our beliefs and what impact they have on us that matters when it comes to whether it is good that we have them and whether we are “entitled” to them in a moral sense. Because whether our beliefs are true or false should matter to us. And even if we suppose that absurd beliefs are harmless, still, “Ideas Have Consequences.”(4)

Beliefs about objective facts, about the real world that all people share, are not always easy to

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examine, but they can be considered openly and cooperatively with others. Beliefs about subjective experience can be formulated in the same way but, obviously, being private and personal, cannot be so considered. Still, we may do the best that we can, perhaps taking care to be extra-critical of and willing to examine closely beliefs that others cannot help us to re-assess and re-evaluate. We should strive to hold beliefs related to our subjective experience in the same way that we hold beliefs about the objective world: not because we need them or want them to be true, much less choose to believe them. Rather, our beliefs should be impressed upon us after due consideration and continual re-consideration. Thus, we are not so much "entitled" to our beliefs as we are led to them.

Besides being a mistake-making species, and a species capable of realizing that we are ignorant of many things, humans also excel at acquiring beliefs from each other. Like many abilities, though, this comes with dangers. Perhaps the most serious is the idea that beliefs can or should be capriciously chosen, that it is acceptable to believe things "on faith," not just in the absence of a personal grasp of the facts and reasoning that underlie valid beliefs, but despite facts and reason that stand in opposition to such beliefs. Choosing beliefs in this way is worse than ignorance. It deludes people into supposing that they know things they do not. And it raises obstacles to replacing beliefs with better ones.

Opinions should follow from facts,
and not the other way around

(1) Often attributed to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan [1927-2003]

(2) The US Supreme Court ruled that these false beliefs in the 2014 Burwell v Hobby Lobby Inc. et al case could not be called into question

(3) The Food and Agriculture Organization in 2013 recommended increased human consumption of edible insects

(4) This is the title of a 1948 book by Richard M. Weaver now widely considered a foundational text of the modern conservative movement

"All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure."

- Mark Twain

YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED, AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:

- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant "The Vineyard" - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: This is nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club August 20, 2016
THE BOOK: Undeniable by Bill Nye "The Science Guy."
Location (??): Farina's Winery, 420 S Main in Grapevine, TX. at 4:30 PM!

Communitas Dinner Group: To be Announced!
Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read past bulletins and service presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at twitter.com/ntcof !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"What Is America's National Religion?"**

**(We are a _____ nation!?)
> Sunday, July 3, 2016 <**

**COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western; starts at 10:30 but come at 10 for fellowship!)**

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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