



Logophobia

I wish to introduce readers of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER to a wonderfully useful term to skeptics, *logophobia*. Its Greek roots are obvious: *logos* means *thought*, particularly rational thought, and *phobos* means *fear of*. Logophobia is defined as “a skeptical doctrine about rationality . . . [where] rationality cannot be an objective constraint on us but is just whatever we make it, and what we make it depends on what we value.” Moreover, the definition continues, “Opponents are held to disguise their self-interested construction of rationality behind a metaphysically inflated view of rationality in which Reason with a capital R is supposed to transcend the merely empirical selves of rational beings.” Do you know of any logophobics among your acquaintances?

The term was introduced—obviously

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in jest—by philosopher Nicholas Shackel in a delightful paper titled “The Vacuity of Postmodernist Methodology” (published in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 36, issue 3, April 2005, pp. 295–320). Shackel’s

publication, for instance creationist/IDers Kent Hovind, Ken Ham, Duane Gish, Bill Dembski, and Michael Behe, “gurus” like Deepak Chopra, paranormalists like Uri Geller, psychics like

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paper is actually a serious, and at times rather technical, critique of the *modus operandi* of postmodernist (and deconstructionist and anti-rationalist feminist) authors such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, David Bloor, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Fish, to mention a few of the major offenders. But the list might as well include names perhaps more relevant to readers of this

Sylvia Browne, or vaccination-deniers such as Jenny McCarthy (and her new unconscionable sponsor, Oprah Winfrey).

According to Shackel, logophobics have developed an arsenal of strategies to obfuscate clear thinking, which they deploy whenever pressed by a skeptic. For instance, consider Foucault’s classic thesis that there is no such thing as scientific truth because truth is a reflection

of local socioeconomic and political power: “The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth” (quoted in Shackel, p.

litter the pseudoscientific landscape, for instance in discussions of the ever more vacuous concept of “irreducible complexity,” a supposed intellectual cornerstone of the modern intelligent design movement, alleged proof that evolution cannot occur by natural processes. Michael Behe’s original definition went something like this: “A single system

recently existing biological systems to the property of a *historical pathway*, i.e., of a chain of events that has already occurred. This moves the target into rather unsailable territory because it turns irreducible complexity into an argument from ignorance (Behe’s in particular).

Logophobia, I maintain, is a broad condition that can strike adult human

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logophobia. A skeptical doctrine about rationality . . . [where] rationality cannot be an objective constraint on us but is just whatever we make it, and what we make it depends on what we value.

299). This is apparently strong stuff, but it becomes a much milder statement when Foucault later tells us what he means by *truth*: “‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements.” Really? And here I was thinking all along that *truth* means an accurate description of an observer-independent reality. Silly me.

Shackel calls this sort of move a “troll truism,” “a mildly ambiguous statement by which an exciting falsehood may trade on a trivial truth.” It is a particular form of Humpty-Dumptying, a term derived from the character in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* who—after Alice points out that he is arbitrarily switching word meanings in the middle of their discussion—famously tells her: “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

Examples of Humpty-Dumptying

composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function of the system, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning” (*Darwin’s Black Box*, p. 39). The problem with this, as philosopher Niall Shanks and biologist Karl Joplin immediately pointed out, is that a currently “irreducible” structure can easily result from a natural and gradual historical process, the alleged irreducibility appearing later on as a byproduct of said historical process.

Not to worry, Behe simply changed his definition to overcome the problem: “An irreducibly complex evolutionary pathway is one that contains one or more unselected steps (that is, one or more necessary-but-unselected mutations)” (“A Response to Critics of *Darwin’s Black Box*” by Michael Behe, *Progress in Complexity, Information and Design*, Volume 1.1, January–March, 2002). Notice that Behe switched from defining a property applicable to cur-

beings of all ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds, especially when they have never been seriously exposed to the basics of critical thinking or when they have grown up in the thrall of a powerful ideological system. The disease is preventable by early education, though this requires painful effort on the part of teachers and students alike. Once the subject is past middle school it becomes increasingly difficult, and in most cases essentially impossible, to provide a cure, and huge amounts of financial resources and time are wasted as a result. Occasionally, lives are lost as a direct outcome of logophobia, especially when the logophobic is a politician with the power to start a war or a celebrity pushing an anti-medical health agenda.

Needless to say, fighting the spread of logophobia is a primary responsibility of every critically thinking person despite the unfavorable odds, which is why thorough knowledge of the disease and of its symptoms is so crucial. Spread the word! □