

# Our society's ignorance of certainty

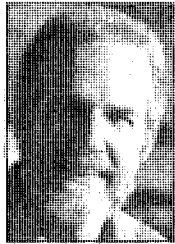
Sept. 4, 2009

By PHIL HANSTEN

## POINT OF VIEW

**AN UNFORTUNATE QUALITY** of human thinking is that the more ignorant one is about a topic, the easier it is to feel certain about it.

I just published a book on this topic, entitled *Premature Factulation. The Ignorance of Certainty and the Ghost of Montaigne*.



Hansten

The brilliant 16th century French essayist Montaigne explored the origins and manifestations of ignorant certainty, and his wisdom appears regularly in the book.

Here is my definition of Premature Factulation:

**Premature Factulation** (*n.*) The process of coming to conclusions without adequate study or contemplation; usually applied to complex concepts or situations. Syn. Ignorant Certainty

The book is based loosely on a

course I teach at the University of Washington, "The Nature of Scientific Truth."

Scientists are certainly guilty of Premature Factulation, and that is the primary focus of the class.

But good scientists try to avoid it, and because science is ultimately self-correcting, habitual premature factulators are discredited sooner or later.

In most other fields, however, Premature Factulation is the rule.

Pundits and pontificators—unencumbered by adequate study or serious reflection—provide us the "simple truth."

Beware when someone says they have come to their position using "common sense;" that usually means they haven't bothered to study and reflect, and they are just giving you their gut reaction.

It is when we deal with complex issues that Premature Factulation occurs, not "values" issues where complex analysis is not necessary.

Being for or against gay mar-

riage, for example, probably has a lot more to do with your values than with complex factual considerations.

Many thorny issues facing us today, however, are extraordinarily complex: climate change, economics, education, poverty, and, yes . . . health care.

Yet the loudest voices we hear on these topics are often from the uninformed premature factulators, rather than true experts who, on average, have a better chance of getting it right.

What causes this large gap between what we know and what we think we know?

The causes are many and overlapping, but self-deception is often involved — we allow wishful thinking to define our reality; we rationalize our conclusions; we oversimplify so we can imagine we understand what we do not; we compartmentalize our thinking so we can believe one thing here, and a completely contradictory thing there.

Our human nature also leads us down the path to Premature Factulation.

Our passions, prejudices and ideology saturate our views; we allow self-interest to wield its subtle sway; sometimes hubris and arrogance prevent reasoned thought.

Reasoning errors also play a role.

We assume that when one event follows another, the first event caused the second (like the rooster taking credit for the dawn).

We take our own limited personal experience as the truth, even when that experience is wildly at odds with the actual data.

We engage in all or none thinking, and fail to understand the nuances present in virtually all complex issues.

The picture may appear dismal, but there are remedies at hand.

First and most importantly, we need to show a little more intellectual humility.

We need to appreciate the complexity and mutability of the world, and tolerate the inevitable ambiguities that arise.

Secondly, we must make objectivity a central tenet of our thought.

We always fall short of complete objectivity, of course, but unless we continually strive for objectivity, all is lost.

Finally, we need to bring a philosophical perspective to our opinions and decisions.

Much nonsense swirls around us, and without the appropriate mind-set, we can be sucked into this murky vortex.

Montaigne understood this, and we would do well to heed his advice.

*Phil Hansten lives in Port Ludlow. His book is available in North Olympic Peninsula bookstores and through Amazon.com.*

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