

On the Tragic Side of Working for the Truth

In her streets the blood of the prophets was
spilled

Revelation 18:24

Take the acknowledgements any PhD thesis (including mine) or even of any modern book. You will often find out that the author is happy to share with the whole world how many encouragements he has had; you may also see how his work received the favors of so many great guys, usually starting with some (PhD) adviser and finishing with friends and family. This is essentially the main idea you get; only the artistic form may vary from author to author.

But what if we were all on the wrong track?

I could not have realized something is fishy here without the help of a greater thinker [1]:

“[One] should study the history of literature and read the biographies of great masters of every kind and in every art. He will then see that it has been so at all times and will understand that it will always remain so. Everyone recognizes it in the past, hardly anyone in the present. The illustrious pages of the history of literature are at the same time almost invariably the tragic.”

If this is true, any desire to show how your work received the applauses of many is in conflict with the spirit of honest truth seeking. The same may apply to all who search any kind of pleasure in the respect of their peers or in the favors of (more) senior members of the community. Maybe this is often not the good track towards writing “illustrious pages”.

And if this is so, why that? Why are so we doomed by fate? Why that?

The same greater thinker Schopenhauer gave me more keys to understand it [1].

“Here, of course, it is clear that, in order to pay absolute homage to truth and really to philosophize, so many conditions have to be fulfilled, but there is also one that is almost indispensable, namely that we stand on our own feet and recognize no master.”

So a honest worker for the truth should recognize no master and should care not of any exterior reward, ignoring the applauses of our peers or the recognition of anyone whatsoever (or the lack of these). If your motivation is fueled by any exterior recognition or moral reward, you may get stuck on the following: if you say some unpleasant truths, you may lose the applauses, which may paralyze your effort in working for the truth. This is why we need to decide and choose one of the following:

“We cannot at the same time serve two such different masters as the world and truth. Such an undertaking leads to hypocrisy, toadyism, and opportunism.”

I did not know the word “toadyism” until today, so I had to search it in a dictionary. It means flattering in the hope of gaining favors.

The only solution to stay true and faithful to the end is to accept that this is our condition: each of us is just yet-another spokesman of the truth. Again, if you take a different path, you end up captive in a spider web of human relations that may paralyse your mind. I use again [1]:

“Again, hardly anything is so obstructive to the actual attainment of a thorough or very deep insight and thus of true wisdom, as the constant obligation to appear wise, the showing off of so-called knowledge in the presence

of pupils eager to learn and the readiness to answer every conceivable question. Worst of all, however, is that a man in such a position is seized with anxiety when any idea occurs to him, whether such will fit in with the aims and intentions of his superiors. This paralyses his thinking to such an extent that such ideas themselves no longer dare occur.”

Let’s see how this phenomenon may project on various branches of mathematics, physics, computer science, art, literature, etc. We all have a form of need to check if our ideas are in line with the rest of the world. But, unfortunately, this natural behaviour can be easily diverted and it may bring some limitations. In too many cases, the modern man “is seized with anxiety when any idea occurs to him, whether such will fit in with the aims and intentions of his superiors. This paralyses his thinking.” Let me give an example. Consider a scientist that has a new research project in mind, but finds out that such idea is not appreciated by his peers, by the more senior members of the field, or more generally by the masses. The scientist is thus faced with two choices: (A) follow his inner voice and lose the favors of the community or (B) accept the view of the community and pursue something on a “good” track like a “good boy”. I think (too) many people choose (B) for simplicity or for lack of inner strength and determination. This is how (too) many of us get trapped in the matrix. The original personality of man and its driving force are replaced by an inert hierarchy or simply by the masses that are known to lack dynamism. Our productions become less and less brilliant, inspiration dries up and the whole world becomes less and less exciting.

I noticed even Nobel prize level people may end their careers by showing they do not find too much inner sense of worth in their work. A surprising number of them abandoned any interest in science towards the end of their career. For such people, science was like a wife loved very intensely for a (long) while, but finally divorced. We all understand that anyone can get upset or fed up with different people or even with a (large) part of the scientific community. But a real scientist can never and will *never* get upset or fed up with science itself. In the worst case, (older) scientists should simply do at least what retired footballers do: motivate younger people and work as coaches.¹ It is hard to evaluate the demoralization that such infidelities may induce on the whole body of scientists, from the least to the greatest. *It’s like when the pope no longer believes in God; imagine the demoralization of the average believer.* It is also quite notorious that many great scientists may pursue wrong politics in the dynamics of their field. Such problems have the same root: too many people divorce (art and) science as soon as they have no further applauses in sight.

Given these conditions, *(art and) science evolves like a child in an orphanage.* In such an institution, even the most brilliant technical service is not able to compensate the lack of real human care. Despite any high-level technical qualities we may have, the resulting modern world may no longer push people to find too much sense of worth inherent in their (scientific) work. How to find such inner worth when even scientists of Nobel prize level fail to do it? This drive for inner worth was widely and wildly replaced with the intensified struggle for superiority that generates only mutual demoralization. When people only try to get ahead of one another, we automatically construct a heartless and disenchanting (scientific) world. This is nothing new under the sun; Schopenhauer was right that we can not serve two such different masters as the (disenchanting modern) world and the truth.

Thus, the one who may stay forever true and endure to the end is the one who will know how to suffer.

Very few may escape this and still do accomplish something (noteworthy and useful to many). These ideas are not meant to discourage anyone. They are meant to recall how everything beautiful has a price. This is a law of nature. As in many other endeavours, there really ain’t no such thing as a free lunch when working for the truth. If it were, our world would be in much better (human) shape than it is now.

At any rate, the world can not obtain much instruction from one who searches only the favors of the public. This explains why Schopenhauer was again correct in the continuation of the citation I used as a starting point of this text:

¹Three examples came to my mind: A. Grothendieck, C. Villani, G. Perelman. They were all titans of mathematics, but they abandoned it one day. Grothendieck essentially said in his last letter “Shame on you for still using my work”. This no accident in light of the ideas discussed here. Even if he was very old then, what he said is normal for one who finds little inherent sense of worth in his work. We all agree that it may be more and more difficult to do high level science as one gets older. But it can be easy for older people to motivate younger ones; I repeat, they could do at least what footballers do: work as coaches when they are old. As a later addition (2022), I say that if a man decides one day to abandon a cause that he supported in the past, we have to thank him for what he did in the past, with only one difference: we no longer have enough grounds to consider him a first class hero.

“The illustrious pages of the history of literature are at the same time almost invariably the tragic. In all branches of knowledge they show us how, as a rule, merit has had to wait till the fools had stopped fooling, the merry-making has ended, and all had gone to bed. It then arose, like a ghost in the dead of night, to occupy the place of honour that was withheld from it, yet ultimately still as a shadow.”

Unfortunately, this is how appear the one(s) from whom the world can obtain instruction that can build us as a strong community: as a ghost in the dead of the night. As was said long ago, there was no special beauty and nothing majestic about him to make us notice him.

References

- [1] Arthur Schopenhauer, On the philosophy at the universities, in Parerga and Paralipomena, 1851, Vol. 1, <https://archive.org/details/23341891SchopenhauerParergaAndParalipomenaV2>
<https://files.catbox.moe/f1a8wb.pdf>

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