

## EDITORIAL

There's been a lot of chatter lately on Internet discussion groups to which I subscribe about the virtues (but mostly about the vices) of journal peer review. In substance, the commentary adds little to the ever-growing number of published or online discussions of that subject. And not surprisingly, it resembles the correspondence I receive from authors whose papers have been rejected by the *JSE*. Typically, the negative comments are predictable and familiar complaints about how editors and reviewers tyrannically impose their prejudices on authors who express dissenting or minority opinions, or—even worse—who argue for novel (if not radical) points of view. In this way, we're told, journals reinforce the status quo and keep worthwhile scientific or conceptual innovation at bay.

Of course, censorship of this kind undoubtedly occurs, and some of the incidents recounted in listserves and published articles are horrific and infuriating. But these practices are also nothing new, and I wonder whether it wouldn't help to step back a bit, strive for some perspective, and in particular see if we can find some helpful analogies to the situation regarding peer review. It seems to me that peer review doesn't deserve the battering it often receives.

Ever since Plato's *Republic*, a standard criticism of democracy has been that at best it's inefficient, and at worst it puts important decisions in the hands of people who lack the competence to make those judgments. However, an equally standard rejoinder is, first, that there's no such thing as absolute competence to rule; even equally intelligent and informed people can reasonably disagree. Moreover, the alternatives to democracy are worse in crucial respects. G. B. Shaw once remarked, "Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few." What many want to say about democracy is that non-democratic systems are inherently brittle, in the sense that a challenge to the ruling authority is (in effect) a challenge to the political system itself, and thus it can undermine the whole political structure. By contrast, democracies are inherently (if inefficiently) self-correcting. Leaders and their policies can be challenged and replaced without having to question or overturn the very system in which they have a place.

Perhaps an analogous series of arguments and counter-arguments can be made about peer review. Is it fallible and vulnerable to abuse? Of course. Can editors and reviewers behave badly or merely exercise poor judgment? Of course. In fact, nothing can be used exclusively for the good, and humans seem to have an inexhaustible supply of disappointing behaviors. But, as in

a democracy, peer review allows for checks and balances, and avenues for appeal. The review process is flexible and potentially self-correcting, and so hasty judgment or instances of outright abuse don't undermine the process itself. Naturally—in fact, clearly—some journals are more editorially myopic, unscrupulous, or cowardly than others. But I can assure our readers that *JSE* editors and reviewers take their responsibility and their commitment to open-mindedness very seriously. That's never a guarantee that our biases don't sometimes cloud our judgment, and in fact it's impossible to assess a submitted paper from no point of view whatever. But I can tell you that at the *JSE*, we're particularly alert to this, and in fact rejected papers *are* sometimes reappraised (usually by different readers) and then accepted. Indeed, we recognize that this sort of flexibility is essential in a journal devoted to controversial topics outside the mainstream.

But let's not stop with examples from political theory. In my noble quest for analogies, the following episode from the history of philosophy also occurred to me.

In his *Principles of Nature and Grace*, Leibniz famously (though some say, insincerely) claimed that this is the best of all possible worlds. Now as students of modern philosophy know, that claim isn't as optimistic as it sounds. It's rather like saying: If you think this world is bad, you should consider the alternatives. For the case at hand, it's like saying, if you think a world with Steve Braude as *JSE* Editor-in-Chief is bad, imagine it instead with [and then fill in the blank with your favorite tyrant—unless, of course, that would be me].

In fact, Leibniz seemed to think that in the best possible world, some evil is actually inevitable. For Leibniz, the best possible world was one that contained the greatest *surplus* of good over evil. Perhaps a world with no evil is not even a possible world. But even if it is possible, Leibniz wouldn't have considered it as good as the actual world, because it wouldn't contain the greatest *surplus* of good over evil. And that's because, according to Leibniz, some of the greatest goods, such as free will, can't even exist in the absence of certain evils; those goods and evils are necessarily connected. (The necessity here would be stronger than mere empirical necessity: It would be metaphysical or logical necessity.)

For a somewhat down-to-earth example of the sort of relationship Leibniz had in mind, consider the good of satisfying one's hunger. Clearly, the hungrier one is, the greater the good of satisfying that hunger. So the great good of feeding the starving can't occur without the evil of their having suffered great privation. Of course, in the case of free will, the issue is that the great good of human freedom must allow both for the freedom to do good as well as evil, or to act reasonably as well as rashly.

Although this might be stretching it, perhaps there's an analogy here with the journal peer review process. Perhaps the best possible journal would *not* be one in which editorial prejudice never exists or in which editorial misjudgments never occur. In fact, so long as fallible humans have anything to do with the editorial process, it's plausible that an error- or prejudice-free editorial board and journal are *not* possible (at least not empirically possible). So perhaps the best possible journal, editorially speaking, will be one containing the greatest surplus of fair and reasonable editorial decisions. And perhaps the existence of prejudice and poor judgment is a necessary correlate of having humans do the work. If so, complaining about peer review because the process can be unreasonable or unfair would be analogous to complaining about the existence of free will because it allows for evil.

Interestingly (and more or less as an aside), Leibniz seemed to think (or at least he claimed) that his position solved the notorious *problem of evil*: the alleged incompatibility of evil with God's existence. (Roughly, the idea behind the problem is that if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, He would anticipate and prevent evil from occurring. Hence, since evil exists, it follows that there is not an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God.) However, according to the Leibnizian view sketched above, the existence of evil did not count against the existence of God. Quite the contrary; from Leibniz's standpoint it was an indication of God's greatness. Evil would simply be an unavoidable side-effect of God's actualizing the best of all possible worlds.

However, as Bertrand Russell once observed, Leibniz's reasoning here is less than compelling. One could just as well claim that this is the worst of all possible worlds, created by an evil demon, and that good things exist only to heighten the evils. So one could argue that the evil demon created us with free will in order to ensure the existence of an excess of sin, and that the demon created good people so that there could be the great evil of their suffering.

Now this might really be stretching it, but I suppose that one could argue that some particular journal is the worst of all possible journals (not the *JSE*, of course), in the sense that it maximizes the amount of editorial abuses over editorial good. *JSE* readers will probably be ready with some likely candidates for that honor. And perhaps the existence of such a journal could even be cited as evidence for the existence of an evil publisher or managing editor who created or uses the journal precisely to suppress or deny certain points of view. One obvious nominee comes immediately to *my* mind (and I'll wager to those of many readers).

Ironically, however, when it comes to the journal I have in mind, defenders of its editorial policies and practices actually follow Leibniz's lead and claim that what others consider editorial error or abuse is actually a manifestation of

editorial greatness. That is, they would say that it's exactly what journal editors heroically must do in order to protect and promote what they consider (or "know" to be) the truth, and strive to shield unwary readers from the subversive and dangerous influence of irrational or stupid ideas.

So let me be clear; I don't endorse that cynical assessment of editorial rigidity and censorship. Granted, the *JSE* does have an agenda—namely, to give a proper airing to scientific data and theory which more mainstream publications ignore or treat shabbily. But the journal doesn't exist to advance or exclude any particular point of view or set of data. What matters to the *JSE* are *conclusion-independent criteria* of scholarly and scientific integrity. In fact, that's why we often publish papers with which my Associate Editors or I disagree. Still, the next time an irate or disappointed author complains to me about the negative judgment rendered over a submitted paper, perhaps I shouldn't be averse to giving the more cynical position a try.

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