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First Understand, Then Evaluate

There is a quotation from Thomas Jefferson chiseled into the stone above a door I have entered many times at the University of Virginia. It reads, “Here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.” The expectation of this quote is that it is more effective to hear out a misunderstanding or false claim, and then deal with it, than it is to suppress the expression of ill-founded ideas, so that they continue without correction. I would much rather that my students state what may be mistaken, so that I can encourage them to consider how such a view needs challenging. When ideas are suppressed, they are not visible to be tested, and who gets to decide what ideas cannot be said or considered?

This journal has published carefully developed ideas that I do not find persuasive. The first word of the journal’s title is, after all, *Perspectives*, in the plural. What is asked of peer reviewers and editors, is not whether we agree with how an essay concludes, but rather, whether it is a new, clear, informed, and important argument. Then, standing on its own, it can be evaluated by our readers as to whether they think it has made its case. If they think not, they are encouraged to write a quick and focused letter to the editor that highlights the problem, or a better article to carry on the discussion in more detail. The point is not merely to repeat what has already been said, even if more emphatically. The point is to step by step build better understanding for all. *PSCF* gladly publishes contrasting pieces as close together as possible. That is not inconsistency. That is honest conversation.

Peer review plays an important role in this process, testing ideas to see if they are aware and clear enough for wide consideration, not to exclude and silence unpopular ones. For example, claiming that one’s own view is the only view of “Science” should be received with considerable skepticism. Some claims do properly carry that appellation, but far fewer than the number that make that claim. It is hard to imagine at this point how there could ever be a paradigm shift that, well actually, the sun does orbit the earth. Too much corroborating experi-

ence and evidence has built up for that description to reassert itself from the past. Not every contention needs to be aired yet again. Often a consensus develops among authors and readers that some ideas seem settled. We can build on what has become assured. Granted, someone may develop a new argument to disrupt that consensus, leading to a new consensus. That is an exciting development when it occurs, but simply being contrary does not justify a newly offered approach. Discerning which ideas call for further assessment, and which have risen to an assured level, is a goal the journal pursues, not one that it lightly assumes.

Now essential to this process of articulation and assessment is that we should make our much-needed critiques in a way that is respectful, out of love for our dialogue neighbor. The Holy Spirit will lead us to truth, and kindness is one of the aspects specifically used to describe the presence and fruit of the Holy Spirit. Some language choices obscure ideas rather than clarify them, or are so weighted with personal offense, felt or given, that it becomes difficult to hear what is actually being claimed. Thoughtful, measured, gracious language best meets our goals of seeking first to understand, and then second to evaluate. Evaluation without first listening until one understands why the writer is so persuaded, misses an opportunity to learn. Affirming a new idea without testing, leads to confusion and loss.

In conversation, then, language that challenges what one has thought, should not be equated with personal attack or violence, even if its persuasive power is uncomfortable for cherished convictions. It is a sign of maturity and strength to appreciate being shown a way out of a falsehood.

We seek at *PSCF* first to listen carefully, and then to evaluate just as thoroughly. Thank you authors, peer reviewers, editors, and readers, for bringing your best effort to hearing one another, and then working together toward better understanding and discernment. There is always more to learn. ☀

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