

A Vaccine Against Arrogance

William M. Briggs · Willie Soon · David Legates ·
Robert M. Carter

Received: 11 April 2011 / Accepted: 15 June 2011 / Published online: 1 July 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

As a distinguished author once said, “Most people reading [journal] papers are interested in science and content and not supposedly catchy or funny titles” (Trevors 2009). So we must beg forgiveness for the crude title we adopted and assure our readers that our intent is serious and concerns the propriety of political argumentation in science journals.

There is a difference between science and politics. Science can tell us how much of a pollutant is present in a precisely defined area. It can tell us

with reasonable certainty the sources of this pollution. It can even tell us effects of this pollution. But science cannot tell us the importance of these effects.

Scientists acting in the name of science must remain mute on morality. They must remain agnostic, and should not preach. It is, thus, obvious that professional journals have no business publishing poorly written and naively argued political tracts which are only loosely associated with their stated purpose. Further, the forums available for scientists who feel utopian urges and the need to agitate politically are as multitudinous as they are for any citizen.

A journal devoted to water, air, and soil pollution cannot be one of these forums. Yet for some time, this journal has been routinely misused as soap box.

For example, we read in Trevors and Saier (2011b) that the “USA is an example of a failed capitalistic state” (an absurd and empirically false claim), that we need to develop “a deep feeling of compassion and responsibility towards all”, and that, “inferior ideas and thoughts in ignorant human minds” should be “eliminated”. History has shown that civilizations made to cry out “*Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz!*” (“The Common Interest before Self-interest!”), a favorite chant of the National Socialist German Workers Party) have not ended well. Pollution is mentioned in passing but only as one among many ills besetting mankind.

W. M. Briggs (✉)
300 E. 71st Apt. 3R,
New York, NY 10021, USA
e-mail: matt@wmbriggs.com

W. Soon
Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics,
60 Garden Street, MS #63,
Cambridge, MA 02138, UK
e-mail: wsoon@cfa.harvard.edu

D. Legates
College of Earth, Ocean, and Environment,
University of Delaware, 212A Pearson Hall,
Newark, Delaware 19716, USA
e-mail: legates@udel.edu

R. M. Carter
Marine Geophysical Laboratory at James Cook
University, Queensland, Townsville Qld. 4811,
Australia
e-mail: bob.carter@jcu.edu.au

Then there is Trevors and Saier (2011a), whose authors tell us (with a sigh) that some religions are “gentle”, and that “human societies” would be more “pleasant and tolerant” if these religions replaced (for example) Christianity. The authors then venture into areas in which they evidently have no more than a cursory acquaintance. This includes a naive Old Testament exegesis and an embarrassingly simplistic theory of epistemology. No mention of pollution is made.

And what of the shocking discovery of Trevors and Saier (2009) that “Most past and present dictators, elected political officials, military officials and terrorists have been or are males... Rarely have females been responsible for comparable degrees of destruction.” At least the authors intimate that a certain chemical associated with the male sex is a political pollutant.

Finally, from the same author (Trevors 2010), we have the argument that if the “art and science of critical thinking” were applied to “problems, challenges, and crises resulting from global pollution” then “Humans will then be able to improve the quality and content of their thinking.” It has always been difficult to disprove a tautology. But there is no tangible content in telling us that we should be “visualizing the total situation, seeking better and correct alternatives, changing ideas where necessary, and seeking superior solutions.”

These examples are a small, a very small, sample from what appears to be an undamnable source. Pollution indeed! A hubristic, intellectual noise pollution. The arrogance arises from these authors assuming their ideology is the readers’, and if it is not, it ought to be. About pollution, the authors never venture beyond the trivial “discovery” that humans make pollutions, and that more humans means more pollution.

This is not science and it has to stop.

Acknowledgement Thanks to Jack Trevors who suggested this editorial to encourage debate.

References

- Trevors, J. T. (2009). The title of manuscripts. *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*, 203, 1–4.
- Trevors, J. T. (2010). Critical thinking: Apply it to global pollution! *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*. doi:10.1007/s11270-010-0688-2:1–2.
- Trevors, J. T., & Saier, M. H. (2009). Testosterone: The cause of our world’s problems? *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*, 200, 1–2.
- Trevors, J. T., & Saier, M. H. (2011a). Science and religion: Two products of human imagination. *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*, 205(Suppl 1), S23–S25.
- Trevors, J. T., & Saier, M. H. (2011b). A vaccine against ignorance? *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*. doi:10.1007/s11270-011-0773-1:1–3.