

Raw Facts and Wilted Knowledge: An Essay in Practical Epistemology

by Theodore Plantinga

Just the facts ... When I was a high school student, my friends and I used to go around saying to people, "Just the facts, ma'am." We had taken this expression from a popular television program of the day called "Dragnet," in which a police investigator named Sgt. Joe Friday seemed determined to stick to business. You know how it is: people get emotional when a crime is committed, and they start talking about all sorts of things. Sgt. Friday would cut them off with a terse "Just the facts, ma'am." It seemed that women were, in particular, were liable to start babbling about irrelevancies.

In those days I did not know that I would one day become a philosopher and therefore would have further occasion to hear people say "Just the facts." Positivism, which today is more of an impulse than a consciously stated and defended philosophy, would approve of Sgt. Friday. The way for us as a human race to make progress is to *stick to the facts*. The positivists believe that whenever there is a dispute among us, we must appeal to *facts* -- and facts alone -- to settle it.

I'm not a Sgt. Friday philosopher, but in my teaching I do have occasion to press students to come forward with facts. I teach a course in philosophy of religion in which I try to give students some practical training and experience in religious argumentation. (For more detail on this matter, see my end-of-term report elsewhere in this issue.) In this course I acquaint students with the ontological argument for God's existence, and also some of the other classical "proofs." I let them know that such arguments are not easy to sell today; people are not as metaphysically minded as they once were.

I stress that much religious argumentation takes place on a more humble plain. Many objections to Christian belief stem from misconceptions. For example, a

person may declare that he could never be a Christian because John Calvin (1509-64), the favorite theologian of many Protestants, was a veritable "ayatollah" in his day and made Geneva a hateful place to live. The introduction of some facts into an argument about John Calvin and the extent of his power and influence in Geneva will greatly clear up such a picture and has the potential to take away some ill-conceived objections to Christian ideas. And so I tell students that the introduction of *facts* into an argument is an excellent way to gain ground in a friendly disputation. Appealing to facts does not call for a college course in advanced logic: anyone can do it.

What can be asserted ... At the opposite extreme from the Sgt. Friday approach to philosophy is the position taken by a group of philosophers who would have us believe that facts are forever beyond our reach. They seem to think that all efforts to convince someone of something must inevitably get bogged down in "perspectives" and "interpretations." Some may even appeal to Hegel's famous dictum "The true is the whole" [NOTE 1] and say that any limited statement about a particular state of affairs is shot through with inadequacy. The upshot seems to be that people believe what they *wish* to believe and that all argumentation is a waste of time. Hegel is sometimes quoted as having said, "Too bad for the facts," thereby exemplifying such an attitude.

And then there are some philosophers who wish to take up an intermediate position. They are sensitive to many of the historic objections to the concept of a fact, but they wish to retain some such notion for everyday life. Some, such as Richard Rorty, have suggested that we should think of a fact as a statement one can make without fear of being contradicted. This would not only include obvious examples like "Paris is the capital of France" but also summary statements of rather complex states of affairs such as "The earth revolves around the sun."

There was, of course, a time when the latter was not a fact: many thinkers disputed it, on grounds that have now largely been discarded. Some people today wish to proclaim it as a "fact" that man and the great apes share a common ancestor. The evolutionary origin of our race, they maintain, is now universally accepted among scientifically educated people. But they are wrong; there is still considerable dispute underway about these matters. Likewise, the Holocaust is not a *fact*, for there are Holocaust deniers around.

It is this understanding of fact that I tried to encourage in my philosophy of religion students. I wanted them to think of standard reference works as their allies in religious argumentation. I had explained to them that points about

Christian doctrine cannot be proven to non-Christians by appealing to the Bible. Neither do Christian theological works or even Christian reference books about church history function as useful sources, for the claims they contain would not all be accepted by opponents of Christian belief. But statements included in widely accepted works like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* can function as facts in the sense that they are generally accepted as reliable.

I wanted to encourage those students to prepare for religious argumentation through general education. I wanted them to get away from the notion that Christian commitment can only result from a "leap of faith" undertaken while muttering "I believe because it is absurd." I maintain that the body of thought called Christian doctrine includes quite a few points for which one can argue from human experience and general knowledge. If students would only expand that knowledge base, they would grow in effectiveness when it comes to religious argumentation.

What may be published ... The notion that a fact is a statement one would dare to make without fear of contradiction is closely related to the notion that a fact is a statement one would dare publish in a newspaper, for example. Now, if newspapers stuck to such a conception of facts and then proceeded to publish *only* facts, many trees would be spared. It is a common complaint about newspapers (and also broadcast media) that they contain a great many unproven and contested statements. Therefore newspapers are sometimes sued for slander.

Now, there is a way to print questionable statements without running much risk of a lawsuit: one labels the statement an allegation. In recent months we have heard many remarkable and distressing things over the airways about the president of the United States, who is surely a powerful man and presumably someone to be feared. Why can reporters speak so freely about him over the airwaves and also write such shocking things about him in newspapers and magazines? The answer is simple: the journalists are safe as long as they label the statements they make "allegations."

Once the allegation label is in place, one's own statement can pass muster as a fact. A reporter can then declare that person A alleged that person B engaged in shocking behavior C. But to make this system work, people or agencies are needed to make the original allegations. And that's where the most despised organizations in the media world come into the picture. Once a lowlife outfit has made a claim or has reported some private citizen's accusation against a public person, the claim or shocking statement has the status of an allegation

and can be incorporated as such into respectable news broadcasts and printed news reports.

There have been many analyses of these processes in the media world: I do not propose to add to what has already been written. Rather, what interests me philosophically about this situation is that a *modal shift*, as I would like to call it, takes place in public discussion. Instead of saying "Person A committed shocking act B" (a fact) one says "*It has been alleged* that person A committed shocking act B." One longs for Sgt. Friday to act as a censor by saying, "Just the facts, ma'am."

Keeping records ... The permanence of print is one of the reasons for our unease about these matters. Once apparent facts get printed (even with the modal qualifier "It has been alleged ..."), they seem to enter the public record and may give rise to doubt and confusion for a long, long time. And so many high-minded people are uneasy about the recording and reproducing of facts, even when they have the "allegation" qualifier before them. And some have it in their heads that they have the right to control "information" about themselves.

When I hear the latter claim from my students, I feel it is my duty to disabuse them on this score. I inform them that computers collect and exchange personal information about them on a regular basis. Much of this information has to do with the products one purchases, the stores one shops in, and so forth. Because such information is thought to be commercially useful, it is collected zealously and gets used to construct lists of people who might be interested in purchasing this or that product. Credit history is also a category of information which computers collect and exchange; a bad credit history can become the basis for the refusal of a loan application.

Another emerging area of automated information collection is net-surfing. Many netbrowsers, such as the popular Netscape, keep some sort of log of the websites which a computer-user has accessed in a given session. Nowadays the fact of the log's existence is made known to college students who may be thinking of using the college's computers to visit pornographic sites. A few decades ago a young man might have snuck a peek at *Playboy* magazine while he standing unobserved at the magazine rack in a drugstore, but there was no record made. Today the cyberspace equivalent of such an activity does create a trail.

I collect facts about my students, and I even share some facts with faculty and staff colleagues in the college in which I teach. (The information is stored in

my computer.) I let students know about my practices on this score. Some are apprehensive, and a few even raise politely-worded objections: they want to know what makes me think I have the right to record information about them.

Naturally, when they take my courses I am obliged to collect and report information about their *academic* progress. They accept this need, but do I have the right to collect and retain *personal* information as well, for example, their home town, or the fact that their older brother was once a student in the same college and took a course with me? (One of my standard questions to students when I first meet them and discover that they have a familiar last name is whether they are related to So-and-so.)

One of the forms of information I collect is class attendance (in upper-level classes only). When I explain that I am taking attendance, I inform the students that they also have the right to take each other's attendance -- and mine. (They will discover that I come to all the class sessions.) Some keep information on me that I do not possess, e.g. which tie I was wearing on a given day. Occasionally I am told that the tie I am wearing was also worn by me on such-and-such a prior occasion. One student of mine made a drawing of each tie right next to her class notes for the lecture of the day. I have also heard of students counting the number of times a professor uses his favorite phrase in one lecture. In short, we all engage in observable behaviors that our neighbors may record, if they care to do so. I did not say that they have the legal or moral right to *publish* all such notes and records. But they may certainly keep them for private use.

A recent issue in all this record-keeping has to do with the buying or renting of books and videos. In some prominent investigations in the USA, libraries, video stores and bookstores have been pressed to reveal the cultural preferences of certain persons under investigation. I share the sentiments of those who find such demands dangerous; I, too, wish such information could be kept private as a matter of policy. Once we come to regard such demands for information about cultural preferences as routine, we have taken a step down the road to becoming a super-snoop society.

When students become apprehensive about the information I collect on them, I try to reassure them by stating that I have their interests in mind in using the information. And because my colleagues at the college are also trying to act in the students' interest, I sometimes consult my computer files to answer a question I am asked about a student. But my files are not for public perusal.

Wilted knowledge ... There is one area of concern in connection with recorded knowledge that one does not so easily deal with. My purpose in this essay is to make a practical proposal with regard to this area. The problem I have in mind is that some facts which we may record go out of date, so to speak. Borrowing an analogy from the world of plants, I would say that some of our knowledge is wilted, that it may need to be thrown out as no longer usable, and that if it is retained, it may need some other name. I already dealt with this issue in relation to education some years ago in *Public Knowledge and Christian Education* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1988). Here I propose to introduce some terminology for everyday use. The terms I propose will serve to keep us conscious of the problem.

Much information is dated and becomes untrue. I like to keep track of former students, and when I get a reliable indication of what job one of them holds, I enter the information into my files. I often add a date to indicate when I received the information. And so I may write that former student A is now (i.e. April 1998) teaching at the Christian elementary school in town B. That's a fact; no one would dispute it. A couple of years later I may be looking at my record concerning student A; perhaps someone has asked about her. There's a fairly high likelihood that she is still teaching at that school, but it's by no means a fact. May I still *assert* that she is teaching there? Or am I morally obliged to become an agnostic (one who says he doesn't know) concerning her?

My proposal here is that once the original fact has wilted a bit, one should be allowed to make a weaker, non-factual claim. And for that weaker claim I hereby propose a new term. I suggest that the claim should be regarded not as a fact but as a "lict." This term comes from "licit" (the opposite of the more popular term "illicit"). The term lict is also intended to echo the word "likelihood."

If it is likely that X is the case, and if X does not reflect badly on someone, I may assert it as a lict. But the need to maintain and protect a person's reputation or good name is also a factor to bear in mind when it comes to licts. For example, it may have been a fact a few years ago that an acquaintance of mine operated a business which ran afoul of Canadian customs regulations, with the result that his name got into the papers, a conviction on some charge was registered, a fine was paid, and so forth. Thus it was then a fact that he was convicted for offense D. But I should not forever after continue to assert as fact that he has some sort of a criminal record. Business brushes with the law are sometimes hard to assess in moral terms; therefore one is under an obligation to be very guarded about such matters. If anything is said, it should be classified as a lict.

Another example in which the wrongdoing is more clear-cut may clarify the issue here. Let's suppose that woman E bears a child out of wedlock during her teens and does not -- or perhaps cannot -- name a father. May we assert, as a fact, years later, that she bore an illegitimate child, with no father ever being named? I would be most reluctant to answer with a yes. If something must be said, let it be as a lict.

In my own record-keeping, I separate such sensitive personal information about former students from the more mundane facts (some of which eventually turn into licts). I use separate, password-protected files for the more sensitive information. And I am most reluctant to release or share information that has to do with past misdeeds.

Sometimes the sensitive information has to do with misdeeds committed during a student's time at the college. Letters of reference can be complicated by such questions. My general rule and recommendation is that in many such cases we should insist on keeping our silence. We should not utter lies to gloss over a painful past, but I do believe it is legitimate to decline to talk about this or that.

By calling a certain statement a lict, I am claiming that I utter it in good faith, believe it to be true, but recognize that something may have changed. I am saying, in effect, "As far as I know, former student A is teaching at the Christian elementary school in town B." If I turn out to be wrong, no one will accuse me of slander or libel or deliberate deception.

I also propose an adverb form of this new term. If you ask me about an old friend from my Winnipeg boyhood, I may say that it is probable that he still lives in Winnipeg. Or I may say, "Probably he's still in Winnipeg." Of student A I used to say "It's a fact that she teaches at the Christian elementary school in town B." Now that a couple of years have passed, I should say, "It's a lict that she teaches" The adjective corresponding to lict is "lix," and an adjective which I hereby coin to correspond to fact is "fax." Thus I could now say "Lix she teaches ..." instead of my earlier "Fax she teaches" "Lix" and "fax" are modal qualifiers. The substance or content of a statement may remain the same when the modal qualifier changes.

Licts may also have to do with names and marital status. Since Christian women who get married generally use their husband's last name, I make an effort to gather the married names of my former female students; otherwise I would lose track of them. And so I may record that Miss G married Mr. H in July of 1995. Fax she is now Mrs. H -- or at least the wife of Mr. H. But a marriage may break up without my hearing about it, perhaps through divorce,

perhaps through death. And so if someone asks me about Miss G a few years later, I need to say, "Lix she is now Mrs. H."

Quality of information ... Those who object to the free flow of consumer information about people may be able to use the distinction between facts and licts to get a better handle on what their objection amounts to. When person M orders product N and pays by credit card, thereby generating some computerized information that can be passed around, the information should be considered a lict at best ("Lix M likes N"). We cannot be sure that person M bought the product in question for his own use; it may well have been a gift for someone else. Or perhaps he was trying it out and decided he didn't like it. But because a certain lict is now in circulation, generated by the credit-card transaction, he could well become the target of sales appeals that presuppose that he *does* like product N.

Is there an injustice here? Perhaps, but it would be hard to write laws that would eliminate all such injustices from our lives. The issue is one of *quality* of information. Low-grade licts are all too common in the commercial world today. A person whose credit history includes untruths that are now having an adverse effect on his ability to borrow money has good reason to become upset and even to seek legal remedies. There are laws governing so-called "credit information." But in the case of licts that contribute to your "consumer profile," it may be best to let economic "laws" (money spent on ill-targeted solicitations is wasted) take care of the problem. A very vigorous effort to stamp out such licts may pose a danger to our civil liberties.

ASCII reductionism ... Another reason why many people are uneasy about recorded information (whether called facts or licts) is that much of it involves the use of categories and classifications that may not do justice to a particular case or set of circumstances. When we fill out forms we sometimes find ourselves needing to check the "none-of-the-above" box (if there is one). There may be space to write a note of explanation, and then again there may not. Sometimes we are forced to select the least inaccurate of a set of categories to describe our unique situation.

Nowadays people make such complaints in connection with racial and ethnic categorizations on forms. They may even claim that the form is racist because it favors or recognizes certain racial and ethnic groups while implicitly denigrating others by not recognizing them. Those who claim victim status may also utter such complaints: the unique form of mistreatment which they underwent may not be on the list. Or one may complain that there are not

enough letters in the computer field that is made available to spell out (literally) what needs to be said in answer to a certain question.

Today we also face the issue of ASCII reductionism. (ASCII stands for American Standard Code for Information Interchange.) The ASCII character set is roughly the set of characters available on a standard computer keyboard, including a few that were not part of the traditional English alphabet or typewriter keyboard. These characters represent the most universally recognized elements in computer communication. They do not include the accents used in French and German, which are languages that share an alphabet with English, generally speaking, but have a few symbols of their own on the side.

The limitations in terms of accents did not pose much of a problem in the early days of personal computer use, because the major word processors developed auxiliary character sets which one could draw on to include accents and symbols that could appear in one's printed text and also on the screen (after Microsoft's Windows, which made graphics mode available, became the platform for the new generation of word processors). Thus it appeared that there did not need to be a problem of ASCII reductionism.

But when the internet and the World Wide Web came along, those character sets receded in importance. Soon we were constructing HTML documents for display on the web. Those documents had to be composed of ASCII characters alone. The netbrowsers that interpreted the HTML documents and displayed them on the screen could take a string of ASCII characters and interpret them as a single non-ASCII character, e.g. an accent over a vowel in French), but all the original data had to be in ASCII form.

The phenomenon of ASCII text has taught many a computer user what philosophers are talking about when they speak of reductionism. A technology or an intellectual system often imposes certain limits, such that something gets lost because of the constraints built into the system. One is forced to simplify in order to make the system work. A Windows word processor could give Descartes an accent over the second letter "e" in his first name, but under the pressure of ASCII reductionism the accent is often omitted: René becomes Rene. Likewise, Jürgen Habermas, facing the same pressure, becomes Juergen. Since many of our word processing files are destined for web display via a netbrowser, we tend to stick to the ASCII character set.

I believe this need to simplify is one of the costs of using computers in this age of the internet. We do acknowledge it in principle, but in our enthusiasm for the new technologies we often do not reckon sufficiently with the price we pay.

Practically speaking ... A reductionism of sorts is also to be found in certain other statements that might appear factual and might seem to qualify as information but actually are flawed in some way. One such category has to do with anachronism, which is a disregard for -- or violation of -- temporal sequence. One common type of anachronism has to do with names. One may say that President Kennedy was born in 1917. Isn't that a fact? It is true, but not in the strictest sense of the term. When a certain Mrs. Kennedy gave birth to a son back in 1917, which son was subsequently named John, no one (not even in the Kennedy family!) called him President Kennedy. He did not take on that title until 1961. If someone says that President Clinton met Mrs. Clinton while they were both students at the Yale Law School, we have two such anachronistic violations. The second is that the lady whom Bill Clinton met at Yale was not then Mrs. Clinton: she was Miss Rodham.

To deal with such cases, I propose a third modal qualifier, which I will call a "pract." Practically speaking, it is true that President Kennedy was born in 1917; to be more particular, the human being who became President of the USA in 1961 was born in 1917. And although a child might be confused about titles, all adults are aware that John Kennedy did not emerge from the womb as president, and so there is no harm done in declaring that the president was born in 1917. Likewise, it is true, practically speaking, that President Clinton met Mrs. Clinton at Yale. I sometimes say that I met my wife at Calvin College when we were both students there, but people realize that the young lady in question was not my wife when I met her.

Is it a fact that President Kennedy was born in 1917? No, it's a pract. Notice that it's not a fact, for this is not a case in which a statement that once counted as a fact has become a bit dubious because of the passage of time.

The adverb form corresponding to "pract" would be "prax." Thus one could say "Prax President Kennedy was born in 1917."

The fine points of academic life sometimes call for the use of a pract as a modal qualifier for a sentence. Take the case of higher degrees. Many people have it in their heads that there are two kinds of doctoral degrees: the medical ones, which are held by so-called medical doctors, and the other ones (called Ph.D.), which are held by professors. All professors nowadays are supposed to have a Ph.D. Many students cannot be bothered to keep track of who does and who

doesn't (many profs have not yet finished their final degree when they begin teaching full-time); such students freely address all instructors as Doctor So-and-so. But professors do care about these fine points.

Consider the business of the degree which is held by a music professor. A person might ask whether Mr. S (a music professor) has his Ph.D. The intent of the question is to find out whether he should be addressed as "doctor." The discriminating answer may be that he does not, for he is in the performance side of his field. The performance folks take a different doctoral program, with a different name. Is there then no such thing as a Ph.D. in music? Indeed there is: it is awarded for doctoral work in "musicology," which is roughly the theoretical side of music. Many music profs do hold a Ph.D. But a prof on the performance side would attain a performance doctorate, which is a different degree, with different sorts of requirements.

Now, these fine points may be lost on people outside the academic world. To such I would be willing to say, "Prax Mr. S has his Ph.D.," even though I know that, strictly speaking, this is not correct. But for many practical purposes (how shall I address him?), it will do.

We use practs a good deal in our discussions with children. We assume that they will pick up the fine points later in life and will then make minor corrections to some of the things they have learned. When it comes to computers and how they work, I often feel like a child. Because I enjoy using computers, I often engage in discussions about computer matters with computer professionals. (I have two brothers who fall into this category.) From time to time I pose a question in which I am testing a supposition of mine as to how the computer or a program within it handles such-and-such a matter. In many cases my supposition turns out to be wrong: no, I am told, that's not actually what happens. My proposed description is not correct. But then sometime I am assured that from my user's angle it would be all right to act as though such-and-such (some simplification which I have hit upon) were actually the case. By thinking along such lines, I could get the result I was aiming at. My simplified statement is accepted as a pract. Because I have such practs concerning computers in my head, the college does not ask me to teach computer science.

Abbreviations. Because positivism has led us to revere facts and tells us to think only in terms of facts, we tend to keep too many of them around. Actually, I do not mean this statement to be taken literally. It might be better to say that many of the alleged facts in our collection could better be considered liets or practs. Part of the work of man, on a day-to-day basis, involves

inspecting his collection of facts and recognizing some of them to be licts or practs. But what should we do when we come to such realizations?

On the basis of what I have written in this essay, one reasonable thing to do would be to put the modal qualifiers "lix" and "prax" in front of any recorded statement which, perhaps because of the passage of time, does not qualify as a fact and longer. Recognizing the pressure behind ASCII reductionism, I will propose ASCII symbols that can serve to qualify our statements when they are placed before them, right next to the left-hand margin. Those symbols are respectively =f> for a fact, =l> for a lict, and =p> for a pract. Because these symbols are made up of ASCII characters, they can easily be used in e-mail messages and HTML documents.

A practical advantage of using these symbols is that we could easily develop macros to downgrade facts to licts or to practs. Since the character string "=f>" is not part of standard English or of any computer code (to the best of my knowledge), one could write a non-mischievous macro that would instantly transform the next "=f>" into "=l>" if the statement to which it applied were deemed to have turned into a lict, or into "=p>" if it were judged to be essentially a pract. Information stored in computers could be adjusted quite easily by means of these conventions. Perhaps we could even get politicians to adopt such conventions in their political rhetoric.

He has no opinions ... Sometimes what seems an innocuous comment can turn out to be a devastating verbal thrust. Some years ago I heard it said of someone, "He has no opinions." At first I was puzzled. But the initial surface meaning was not the one that counted here. In the head of the man without opinions there were only facts -- indeed, absolute truths beyond questioning. Everything was black and white -- there was no room for compromise in relation to anything he held as true. Some people even take such a mentality to be a Christian virtue.

When I was an undergraduate studying philosophy at Calvin College, I would occasionally hear one of the profs quote David Hume's statement: "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence." [NOTE 2] This quote stuck with me, but it did not fit in well with my philosophical proclivities of that time. In recent years it has come back to me; I have come to realize that we would do well to focus more on what we *believe* (and why) and less on what we claim to *know*. In other words, the notion of having opinions needs to be restored to honor.

I would not like to be branded a man with no opinions. I do have some facts in my head, which I verbalizes as true statements. I also have a number of beliefs which I should state as licts if I have occasion to express them at all. And then, as a teacher, I often need to serve up practs. In higher-level teaching I set the record straight concerning some of the practs I allowed to pass in the introductory course in philosophy.

I suspect that Nicholas Wolterstorff was one of the profs who uttered the Hume quote in my presence during my Calvin College days. His subsequent work in philosophy demonstrates his interest in the set of issues I have raised in this essay. I think especially of his recent book *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), in which he tries to relate some of the Thomas Reid way of thinking about knowledge and belief to the tradition of the British empiricists.

Now that I have introduced the term "belief" into the discussion, one might suppose that what remains to be done is to apply the categories developed here to religious assertions, perhaps beginning with the resurrection of Jesus. But I'm not sure this can be done in a fruitful manner, and so I will postpone consideration of the issue of religious practs and licts to a future occasion.

[END]

NOTES

NOTE 1

Hegel makes this claim in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

NOTE 2

Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Section 10 ("Of Miracles"), p. 122 (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, second edition, 1966).