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Climategate: Scientists Are Mean Girls--So What's New?

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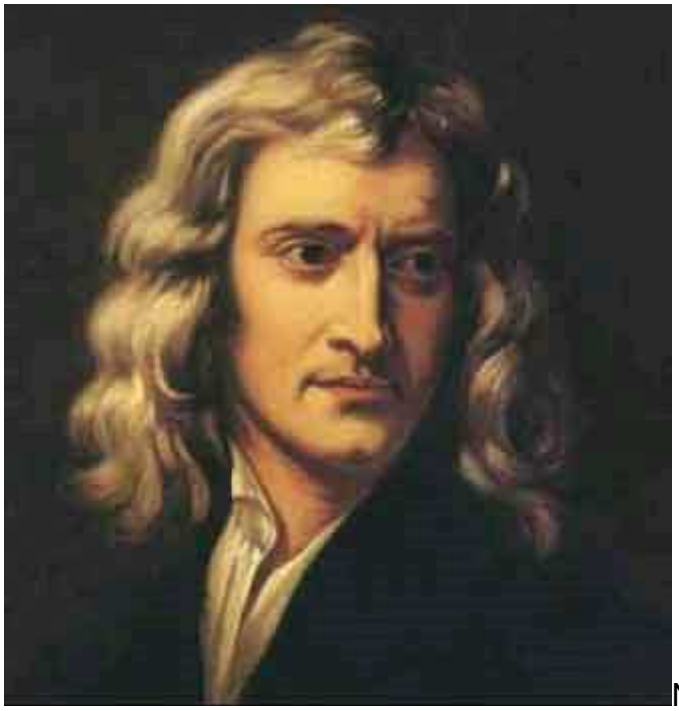
Anyone who has spent any time in the rarified world of peer-reviewed academia knows it's not much different from the adolescent cliques and backbiting of high school, but on steroids--only that it's the nerds that get to sit at the cool (or should I say global warming?) table in the lunch room.

Let's start with a little Aristotelian logic, a syllogism: "All humans are nasty. Scientists are human. Scientists are nasty."

That's all you basically need to know about the hacked emails from East Anglia and Climategate. We can stipulate that there are nasty remarks in the emails. Benjamin Santer from the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory threatened to "beat up" Pat Michaels, a climate contrarian from the Cato Institute.

A look at the history of science easily shows there is nothing new under the sun, except maybe a lot more CO2.



Newton famously said, "If I have seen farther it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." Kind of makes the man about whom Pope wrote, "God said, 'Let Newton be' and then there was light," sound humble. What's normally left out of this laudatory tale is that the "giants" statement was actually a dig at Newton's rival, the very short Robert Hooke. In their battle over the nature of light Hooke--whose first biographer called "despicable, melancholy, mistrustful, and jealous"--believed it was a wave. Newton--who as president of the Royal Society destroyed the only portrait of Hooke--believed it was particles. Paradoxically, they were both right, and both wrong. But their opinion of each other had little to do with that.

When Newton wasn't executing a Soviet style purge on the memory of Hooke, he was kicking off a centuries long dispute with Gottfried Leibniz about who invented calculus. Newton developed the calculus to describe the universe, but the notation that we all struggle with in our math classes today was devised when Leibniz hit upon the same idea. But did he? Although Leibniz published first, the Newton camp says he cribbed some of their master's work on a visit to London.

Science historians have continued to earn their PhDs and tenure off this dust-up well until our own time, when a similar provenance dispute over the discovery of the HIV virus. Robert Gallo, an American, was accused of pinching the virus from Luc Montagnier's Pasteur Institute lab in Paris. He was eventually exonerated of theft by the National Institutes of Health, fellow Americans, but, separately, the Inspector General of HHS found no evidence for Gallo's claim that he invented the AIDs test. Despite this, and despite the fact that Gallo developed the science that made the discovery of HIV possible and proved it caused AIDS, he did not share the Nobel awarded to Montagnier.

Earlier in the 20th century Arthur Eddington, Britain's most prominent researcher--famous for observations that confirmed a prediction of the Theory of Relativity with data as imprecise as tree rings are for temperature change--worked hard to suppress the publication of Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar's discovery of black holes. Eddington, an experimentalist, hounded Chandra (as his friends called him) out of the country where he took up residence at the University of Chicago, but gave up that line of research.

So it's not a surprise when Phil Jones, director of the East Anglia Climate Research Unit notoriously emailed a colleague about some contrarian papers looking for publication: "I I will keep them out somehow--even if we have to redefine what the peer-review literature is!"

So what's a poor layperson to believe? When Newton was discovering the secrets of the universe, it was still possible for an educated person to understand all of science, and to draw his or her own conclusions. These days, and as a psychologist I can attest to it, it's difficult even for a scientist to keep track of his own field of expertise.

Much of what we believe, we have to accept on authority. But, as any Philosophy 101 student should know, an argument from authority--argumentum ad verecundiam--is an elementary fallacy. Just because Einstein or the Bible said it, doesn't make it necessarily so.

Conversely, just because those East Anglia folks may have tarnished their authority, it doesn't mean there's no anthropogenic warming.

Unfortunately, even if it's a logical fallacy, we may in the end have to believe it when a trusted authority says it is so.

If the globe is getting warmer because of our human activity, it will continue to do so regardless of what we in our own lives choose to believe--just as blood continued to move despite whatever the Pope thought of the matter.

To dip my toe into a bit of public policy, there is a kind of Pascalian bet here. Pascal said we

should believe in God and a reward in Heaven, because if we don't and we are wrong we are damned. But if we do and we are wrong, we lose nothing. Similarly, if we don't believe in global warming and we are wrong our grandchildren will be water skiing where Los Angeles used to be, but if we believe in it, and are wrong, we get clean energy and lose our dependency on fossil fuels and people who aren't necessarily our friends.

One last puzzlement is the liberal-conservative divide on this issue. Perhaps it is a liberal attitude to be open to new ideas in science, but I don't understand why it's a conservative tendency to disbelieve global warming. Where are those old-time conservatives who could even be atheists as they believed in warming and the theory of evolution, while maintaining all their aristocratic notions of class entitlement? That, I don't get.

My book, Nasty, Brutish, and Long: Adventures in Old Age and the World of Eldercare (Avery/Penguin, 2009) provides a unique, insider's perspective on aging in America. It is an account of my work as a psychologist in nursing homes, the story of caregiving to my frail, elderly parents--all to th accompaniment of ruminations on my own mortality. Thomas Lynch, author of The Undertaking calls it "A book for policy makers, caregivers, the halt and lame, the upright and unemcumbered: anyone who ever intends to get old."