

OVERCOMING VERIPHOBIA – LEARNING TO LOVE TRUTH AGAIN

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ABSTRACT: Truth has had a hard time in much recent educational and social scientific writing. Veriphobia, the fear of truth, can be witnessed in the work of postmodernists, radical social constructivists, pragmatists, and others. Although it manifests itself in numerous ways, there remain certain frequently appearing symptoms, and these are examined in this paper. It is suggested that the veriphobic stance is inherently self-contradictory. It is also fatal for serious and meaningful research and inquiry. Once veriphobia has been treated, researchers can stop worrying and start loving truth again.

Keywords: veriphobia, truth, inquiry, research, knowledge

1. VERIPHOBIA

Goodbye, Plato and Hegel,
The shop is closing (W.H. Auden)

Once upon a time the legitimacy of objectivity and the pursuit of truth as goals of inquiry and research were undisputed. Scholars of different disciplines were united by these shared goals, and relied upon indicators of truth and falsity in orientating their production of knowledge. Now, however, invocations of truth are viewed as either naïve or even sinister, and the truth-seeking character of inquiry is seen as the expression of a misguided approach inevitably destined for failure.

Postmodernists, social constructivists, pragmatists, and a host of others have set about undermining the foundations upon which traditional inquiry was based. They have launched a many-pronged attack upon the goals of objectivity and truth-seeking. Their scepticism has spread to all areas of the academy, and threatens to fundamentally change the character of intellectual activity.

Underpinning much of this work is a general assumption of the breakdown of established forms of knowledge and inquiry, especially

those associated with the Enlightenment's self-confident pursuit of truth. Earlier critics of the Enlightenment project condemned it for failing to provide an adequate representation of the world and its underlying truth. Thinkers such as Adorno and Marcuse went to great lengths to claim that its notion of objectivity was superficial. Modern sceptics have taken the criticism a stage further, and claim that the pursuit of such objectivity will always be doomed to failure as the pursuit presupposes that such objectivity exists. The world does not exist as a thing-in-itself, independent of human interpretation, but as a product of social practices of particular local communities of interpreters (Gellner, 1992). So, statements about the world must inevitably be conditioned by the particular context in which they are made. According to their argument, objectivity is not merely elusive, but unattainable. There is no Archimedean point from which it is possible to judge the veracity of statements about the world. Truth is not universal, but rather 'multiple, historical, contextual, contingent, political and bound up in power relations' (St Pierre, 2000, p. 23).

This has proved to be an attractive position to many scholars, and the last few decades have witnessed a sustained attack upon traditional conceptions of scholarship and inquiry, and their concomitant reliance upon notions of truth. As Appleby, Hunt and Jacob (1994, p. 243) observe, 'A fluid skepticism now covers the intellectual landscape, encroaching upon one body of thought after another'. This scepticism had spread to all areas of the academy, received with varying degrees of hospitality. The social sciences and the humanities, in particular, have welcomed the new scepticism, and its influence is readily identifiable in much recent educational theorising. For example, David Bridges (1999, p. 598) has observed a number of educational conferences in which there are,

an increased number of (often interesting) papers in which the notion of 'truth' (or 'Truth') is referred to in inverted commas (designed it appears, to distance the author from the direct association with the notion); or claims to the truth of beliefs are denied in favour of, for example, some kind of theory of political dominance or multiple subjectivity; or the very notion of truth of beliefs is assumed under some apparent orthodoxy to be ruled out of court.

The advocates of these views come from a variety of theoretical backgrounds, and align themselves to different philosophical stances. However, they are unified by a profound scepticism or even repudiation of truth as a viable criterion for inquiry into epistemic

activities. Indeed, the very notion of truth, in the sense of a truth existing independent of any political or cultural affiliation, is often viewed with bewilderment. Consider, as a particularly well-known example, *Fourth Generation Evaluation* by Guba and Lincoln (1989). At a number of points, the authors make it quite clear that they are not offering or attempting to offer any universal truths; 'indeed there is no universal truth to which our construction is a more or less good approximation' (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 16). Instead, they assert an approach in which the subject of evaluation or research does not exist objectively, but is constructed or created by individuals attempting to make sense of their situations:

Evaluation outcomes are not descriptions of the 'way things really are' or 'really work', or some 'true' state of affairs, but instead represent meaningful constructions that individual actors or groups of actors form to 'make sense' of the situations in which they find themselves . . . (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 8)

Those who continue with invocations of truth are dismissed as 'lovably old-fashioned prigs' (Rorty, 1982, p. xvii) or more harshly as 'conceited, ignorant, superficial, incomplete and dishonest' (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 25).

For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to label proponents of such deeply sceptical positions *veriphobes*, and the stance adopted by them, *veriphobia*¹. Whilst they may differ from each other in the details of their methodology, veriphobes share a denial of the merit, or even possibility, of truth. If they use the word truth at all, it is within inverted commas (appropriately called 'scare quotes' by Americans), or it becomes '*truths*', or it is accompanied by what might be called 'veriphobic qualifiers', such as '*for me*' and '*for us*'. Overall, the intention is to undermine any supposition that there is such a thing as truth in anything but the most relative and transitory sense.

My aim of this paper, briefly stated, is to suggest that veriphobia, of whatever form, is inescapably self-contradictory and antithetical to genuine inquiry, and consequently, should be abandoned by researchers. Rephrased positively, I support the seemingly obvious position that there is such a thing as truth, and that, aside from academic chic, there is little value in asserting otherwise.

2. THINKING FROM THE OUTSIDE

It is usually a good strategy to ask whether a general claim about truth or meaning applies to itself. (Nagel, 1997, p. 15)

As a number of commentators have noted, the rise in scepticism and relativism can be seen, in part, as a reaction to the over-confident certainties of an earlier age (Bailey, 1999). An 'heroic model' of inquiry, particularly in the sciences, had prevailed since the eighteenth century, according to which the scholar was engaged in a disinterested, value-free pursuit of truth, conquering ignorance and superstition, and always in the service of human progress (Appleby, *et al*, 1994, pp. 15–51). By the second half of the twentieth century, this model ceased to be credible, and critics began to highlight science's use and abuse as a tool of domination and control. This view was only reinforced by the events taking place around them, such as Nazi experimentation and the escalating arms race between the Soviet Block and the West. As a result, any conception of inquiry that failed to account for the importance of its wider social context had to be inadequate and misleading.

Of course, the central issue revolves around just how much the social context of inquiry explains. The relativistic claim that there is a large subjective element in inquiry is undeniable. All human enterprise takes place within a particular context, and is carried out by individuals and groups with interests and prejudices. A researcher's background, education, political allegiances, and a host of other factors constrain and direct his activity. Observations are conditioned by systems of classification and expectation that must be (provisionally) assumed, and so research insists upon a degree of conformity and control. Moreover, sociologists and historians of science have long recognised that politics and other human affairs impinge upon the content and character of inquiry. Researchers, like all people, are prone to pride, jealousy, dishonesty and greed. Anthropological studies of 'laboratory behaviour' provide fascinating insights into the idiosyncrasies and petty politics that can interfere with research (cf. Latour and Woolgar, 1979).

That inquiry is a social process, taking place within a social context is self-evident. What distinguishes the veriphobic stance from almost all other epistemological positions is the veriphobe's conclusion that findings are directly accountable in terms of the social and historical forces acting upon the process. This leap of logic towards subjectivity condemns veriphobes to self-contradiction.

Nagel (1997) refers to this predicament as the 'impossibility of thinking from the outside'. Sociological insights into our practice or beliefs serve a valuable role in raising self-awareness, and may lead us to change our ways if it becomes apparent that they are not reasonable or based upon evidence, but are instead based, for example,

upon some idiosyncrasy of our upbringing. These insights offer us an external view of ourselves that may lead to the abandonment of quite fundamental assumptions, particularly if we discover that judgements we had assumed to be of universal validity turn out not to be so. However, this process of self-analysis breaks down if it is stretched too far. If we decide to abandon the conception of objective truth entirely, in favour of contingent and local explanations, we are led to ask: 'Upon what are we relying to form this view?' On the one hand, we seem to be making a statement about how things really are. On the other hand, our position explicitly denies that we are capable of such statements (Nagel, 1997, pp. 13–4). To phrase it slightly differently, statements expressing contingent points of view are inherently objective in intent, since they suggest a picture of the true sources of those statements. But, if everything is subjective as the veriphobic stance seems to assume, then a distinction cannot be made between what is the case, and what is not².

In practice, then, it is not possible to maintain a thoroughgoing relativism, in which every level of judgement is presumed to be subjective. In fact, challenging a particular view, method or judgement as an expression of some local or limited perspective of less than universal validity does not undermine the notion of objective truth, but actually presupposes it, because it presupposes a state of affairs existing beyond the subjective perspective of the challenger.

None of this discussion should be taken as equating truth-seeking with certainty. As fallibilists like Karl Popper have suggested, the pursuit of truth is destined to coexist with serious doubts about its results (cf. Bailey, 2000). Doubts and a recognition of our own limitations can encourage us to continue inquiring and learning about the world, and, perhaps more importantly, remain open to the possibility of our own errors. However, the scepticism underlying the veriphobic stance is of a different sort. It is inherently debilitating, since it casts doubt upon the ability to compare one position with another, to make judgements based upon anything other than whim or habit, or to decide with any sense of credibility how to proceed.

The argument in this section is not the only response to veriphobia, but I believe it highlights serious difficulties with the position. I now turn to two popular expressions of the veriphobic stance to show how the preceding argument applies. The two expressions are the view that notion of truth is merely as instrument of power and domination, and, first of all, the view that what we call truth is just consensus.

Truth as Consensus

We cannot find a skyhook which lifts us out of mere coherence – mere agreement – to something like ‘correspondence with reality as it is in itself’ . . . Pragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity – the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves – with the desire for solidarity with that community. (Rorty, 1991, pp. 38–39)

Richard Rorty’s equation of objectivity with solidarity is one form of the view that what we naïvely hold to be truth is simply an assertion of which we are subjectively persuaded. Accordingly, truth is not a property of beliefs by virtue of some relation they bear to ‘worldly’ facts that stand outside of discursive practice.

This is a radical proposal, since it seems destined to assume what Kuhn calls ‘incommensurability’ (1962). If what we take to be the truth of a matter is merely consensus within a community, there is ‘no need to view it as accuracy of representation’ (Rorty, 1979, p. 170), and thus it is inappropriate, in fact impossible, to compare one group’s view with another. The differing criteria of different times and communities are not merely social, but also entirely conventional. It makes no sense to seek to support one’s own groups’ view with reference to accuracy, since there is no objective truth, at least in the sense of truth grounded in anything external to those practices (Rorty, 1979, p. 178).

The problem with this stance is that not only does the truth of a statement not require complete agreement, it does not require anybody to believe it. The statement ‘the earth rotates around the sun’ would be true, even if (due to historical accident) nobody came to agree upon it. Of course, if we believe a proposition to be true, we agree when someone asserts it. But, our agreement is a consequence of a prior judgement that the proposition is true; it is not the cause of us believing it to be true. If truth were an expression of consensus, it would not be possible to challenge any established belief. No matter how well-established a belief may be, however deeply entrenched, however persistently accepted by a community, it is always possible to ask the question, ‘is it true?’ (Putnam, 1978).

To deflect criticisms of this sort, advocates of the truth-as-consensus version of veriphobia sometimes claim that what they are saying need not conflict with the content of theories or arguments. They are simply explaining how those theories or arguments actually operate. In their highly influential (influential, that is, among veriphobes³) study of the interactions and ‘laboratory life’ of a group of

neuroendocrinologists, the sociologists Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979, pp. 180–81) state:

Despite the fact that our scientists held the belief that the inscriptions could be representation or indicators of some entity with an independent existence 'out there', we have argued that such entities were constituted solely through the use of these inscriptions . . . we do not conceive of scientists . . . as pulling back the curtain on pre-given, but hitherto concealed truths. Rather, objects . . . are constituted through the artful creativity of scientists.

It is interesting to note that, whilst they offer detailed descriptions of the social negotiations between the scientists, at no stage do Latour and Woolgar show how this negotiation influenced any aspect of the science. Nevertheless, they proceed to dismiss the claims by the scientists for the existence of a particular hormone as 'mythology' (Latour and Woolgar, 1979, p. 54). They do not turn to empirical falsification to support their claim, nor do they offer an alternative theory. Instead, they rely entirely upon their sociological analysis of laboratory discussions. But as a complete explanation, it is highly unsatisfactory. Perhaps the sociologists can account for some of the proximal causes of the scientists' beliefs (such as informal discussions and negotiations), but it is less clear how such analysis offers a satisfactory explanation of more distal or remote causes. In other words, consensus may go some way to explaining the process by which scientists progress from observations of traces on a recording device (via negotiations) to beliefs in the presence of a certain hormone. However, it cannot explain the cause of that observed recording trace (perhaps a biochemical reaction), and without a distal explanation of this sort, the account fails (Goldman, 1999).

In fact, we could argue that truth is not grounded in consensus, but on the contrary, where consensus is available, it arises from the convergence among different individuals in their pursuit of the truth. This may go some way to explain a difficulty facing Latour and Woolgar (1979, pp. 181–82):

We have found . . . it extremely difficult to formulate descriptions of scientific activity which do *not* yield to the misleading impression that science is about *discovery* (rather than creativity and construction).

Of course, the sociologists do not allow for the possibility that this impression is not misleading, and science really is about discovery.

In practice, it is difficult to imagine how anyone could make their way about the world without, at some level, abandoning the claim

that truth is merely consensus. Richard Dawkins (1994, p. 17) once asked a social scientist the following question:

Suppose there is a tribe which believes that the moon is an old calabash tossed just above the treetops. Are you saying that this tribe's belief is just as true as our scientific belief that the moon is a large Earth satellite about a quarter of a million miles away?

The social scientists replied that since truth was a social construct, the tribe's view of the moon is just as true as others. This made Dawkins wonder why sociologists and literary critics did not choose to entrust their travel plans to magic carpets instead of aeroplanes. Dawkins's verdict seems inescapable: 'Show me a cultural relativist at 30,000 feet and I will show you a hypocrite'! (Dawkins, 1994, p. 17).

Truth as Domination

Another form of veriphobia, and one which has a particular emotive appeal, is the claim that truth can only be understood in the context of power relations and domination. This position is expressed by Michel Foucault (1972, p. 131), as follows:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned: the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

Thus, notions of truth and objectivity amount to tools of domination. Foucault contends that human sciences arise from practices of social domination, and that interest in knowledge was driven by concerns of power and control (Foucault, 1979). Others have argued that the ideals of rationality and objectivity (and presumably, with them, the goal of truth) are of a masculine and Western origin and character, and have been used to sustain the inequality of power between male and female, and between the West and the rest of the world. Thus, in typically calm tones, Sandra Harding (1986, p. 250) asserts that science is, 'not only sexist but also racist, classist, and culturally coercive'.

Part of the appeal of this line of thinking is that it has an implicit moral subtext. Veriphobia has frequently been presented as a subversive response to oppression, and the adoption of the veriphobic stance is framed as an act of liberation and empowerment. A great deal of this writing proclaims a defence of under-represented

groups within society: minority ethnic groups, working class, homosexuals, and so on, and this aspect is sometimes seen as of greater importance than epistemological issues. Paul Feyerabend, the 'anarchist' philosopher of science, admitted as much in his introduction to *Against Method* (1988, p. 3): 'My main motive in writing this book was humanitarian, not intellectual. I wanted to support people, not to "advance knowledge" '.

One response to this sort of argument is essentially the same as used before: assertions that truth-claims merely represent regimes of power and domination are, themselves, truth claims. Foucault, for example, denies that he offers a 'theory', but rather an 'interpretation' of events (1979). Why are we to attend to accusations of inherent imbalance within our constructions of knowledge unless they are supposed to represent the way things really are, or were⁴?

As I have argued elsewhere (Bailey, 1999), assertions that certain disciplines are *inescapably* sexist, classist and racist, if believed, create a barrier to participation and success among currently marginalised groups far greater than existed before. They are also deeply offensive to those groups. Though imperfect, truth-seeking approaches offer the most likely methods yet discovered for addressing such problems. By blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, and by dismissing evidence, argument and rigour as relics of an imperialist and repressive past, veriphobic rhetoric disempowers the very people it purports to save. Similarly, Alan Ryan (1992, p. 21) says:

It is . . . pretty suicidal for embattled minorities to embrace Michel Foucault, let alone Jacques Derrida. The minority view was always that power could be undermined by truth . . . Once you read Foucault as saying that truth is simply an effect of power, you've had it . . . But American departments of literature, history and sociology contain large numbers of self-described leftists who have confused radical doubts about objectivity with political radicalism, and are in a mess.

The fact that appeals to truth have been used as instruments of social control and repression does not inevitably lead to the conclusion that objective truth does not exist, nor that it deserves abandonment. Indeed, much of the harm caused by theories in the areas mentioned can be traced back to appeals that were false, inaccurate or even fraudulent (Goldman, 1999). As a case in point, consider responses to Hernstein and Murray's (1994) analysis of the relationship between intelligence, social class and race (see, for example, Dickens, *et al*, 1996). In such cases, vague appeals to inherent sexism or racism in the sciences are not likely to be nearly as effective as appeals to truth,

by highlighting error, prejudice and inaccuracy. And only the truth-seeking approach assumes that errors can be corrected and progress made.

3. TRUTH AND INQUIRY

Scoff at all knowledge and despise
Reason and Science, those flowers of mankind.
Let the father of all lies
With dazzling necromancy make you blind,
Then I'll have you unconditionally.
(*Faust*, Goethe)

The notion of truth is inherently related to the concepts of inquiry and research: to inquire into whether p is to inquiry whether p is true. It is difficult to see how inquiry could be otherwise, and still maintain any sense of purpose or value. Indications of truth, alone, can direct and discipline our work, and can warn us when genuine inquiry has been subordinated to a subjective preference or even opportunistic considerations. Without a sense of truth, and an explicit goal of truth-seeking in our work, inquiry becomes a fatuous exercise on self-promotion. The philosopher Mario Bunge (1996, p. 110) records how 'in former times higher learning was only a refined form of entertainment and a tool of social control'. Modern forms of veriphobia seem committed to returning to those Dark Ages.

Predictably, perhaps, the veriphobic stance has frequently been presented as the sole alternative to absolute certainty. Take, as a particularly high-profile example, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), in which he says his aim is to replace confrontation with conversation. In doing so, Rorty fabricates a confrontation between a philosophy centred on 'foundations' for knowledge and 'privileged representations' and a claim that there is nothing more to the justification of beliefs than local convention:

There are two senses apiece of 'true' and 'real' and 'correct representation of reality', and . . . most of the perplexities in epistemology come from vacillation between them . . . Consider the homely use of 'true' to mean 'what you can defend against all comers' . . . The skeptic . . . switches[es] to the specifically 'philosophical' sense of . . . 'true' which, like the Ideas of Pure Reasons, [is] designed precisely to stand for the Unconditioned. (Rorty, 1979, p. 308).

So, Rorty offers a choice between a conception of truth as what is defensible against conversational objections, and a concept which is not specified, but seems rather grand and beyond our reach. Of course, there is no such decision to be made⁶. Haack (1994, pp. 188–89), for example, offers six discrete conceptions of truth that stand between Rorty's 'what you can defend against all comers' and what could be called realism. After that, there would be at least as many version of realism to contend with.

As was argued before, there is no incompatibility between the pursuit of truth and a recognition of our inevitable fallibilism. In fact, I would go further, and suggest that it is a vital element of honest inquiry. Since no one can be certain in their position, it is necessary to remain open to new evidence, new ideas and the ever-present threat of finding one's beliefs or theories to be in error. Following Popper (1963) we might maintain that all human knowledge is provisional, and permanently so. Educational research, in this light, depends upon a conception of objectivity that is defined in terms of honest inquiry, openness to criticism and an unapologetic pursuit of the truth.

Without the regulation and sense of direction and purpose offered by truth, inquiry becomes impossible, or what C.S. Pierce called 'sham inquiry'. And what happens when sham inquiry becomes commonplace? According to Pierce (1931–58, 1, pp. 57–59), 'Man loses his conceptions of truth and reason . . . [and comes] to look about reasoning as mainly decorative. The result . . . is, of course, a rapid deterioration of intellectual vigour'⁷. It seems to me that sham inquiry is alarmingly commonplace in veriphobic writing⁸.

In this connection, it is worth considering the famous 'Sokal Hoax'. In 1996, the leading cultural studies journal, *Social Text*, published a special issue on what it labelled the 'Science Wars'. It included an essay by an American theoretical physicist, Alan Sokal, entitled 'Transgressing the Boundaries: toward a transformative hermeneutics', which purported to be a scholarly piece on the 'post-modern' political and philosophical implications of modern physics. In fact, the article was a parody: merely a hotchpotch of absurdities, puns, strained analogies, New Age fantasy and non sequiturs, all strung together to superficially resemble an academic paper and flatter the ideological preconceptions of the journal's editorial board. To quote an excerpt:

Thus, general relativity forces upon us radically new and counter-intuitive notions of space, time and causality; so it is not surprising that it has had a profound impact not only on the natural

sciences but also on philosophy, literary criticism, and the human sciences. For example, in a celebrated symposium three decades ago on *Les Langues Critiques et les Sciences de l'Homme*, Jean Hyppolite raised an incisive question about Jacques Derrida's theory of structure and sign in scientific discourse . . . (Sokal, 1996, unpagged)

And so on. It seems that the editors of *Social Text* published the article in good faith. There are a number of possible explanations for this action, but the most tenable must be that the editors simply had no idea what Sokal was writing about, but decided to publish anyway; the sense or validity of the article were simply not criteria.

I remind you of this incident not to mock the academic pretensions and seeming scientific illiteracy of the leading cultural studies theorists. The 'Sokal Hoax' can act as a vivid warning of what can happen in a field that repudiates all received scholarship, in which 'text' is more important than 'fact' and the political consequences of a claim become its primary evaluative criterion. Without a strong and ever-present sense of truth-seeking, along with a recognition that truth is very hard to find, inquiry becomes impossible, and academia becomes little more than a forum for political whim and fancy.

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5. NOTES

1. The term 'veriphobia' originates, I believe, with the American epistemologist, Alvin Goldman (1999).
2. Some writers present their veriphobia as applying even to itself. But this gambit does not require a response, since it just reports what the speaker finds it agreeable to say. Since they offer no reasons to accept their position, there is no need to offer reasons for declining.
3. The sociologist of science, Stephen Cole (1996, p. 278), describes *Laboratory Life* as 'probably the most heavily cited and influential work done by constructivists'.
4. This is not to suppose that Foucault's 'histories' were entirely accurate, intentionally or otherwise (cf. Merquior, 1991).
5. I would go so far as to say that a strict division between extreme realism and extreme irrationalism is the norm in veriphobic writing. Appleby, *et al*, (1994) trace the way in which this division came to develop in academic history, and blame

the predicament upon a tacit adoption of old-fashioned positivism's similarly stark distinction:

We attribute this perverse reaction to the fact that despite this generation's well-broadcast scorn for positivism, positivism has left as its principal legacy an enduring dichotomy between absolute objectivity and totally arbitrary interpretations of the world of objects (p. 246)

Similarly, consider Richard Brown's (1994, p. 27) comfort to those who fear the consequences of non-judgemental relativism: 'Which is worse, the possibility that evil will be tolerated in the name of cultural relativism, or the promise that atrocities will be justified by some group's assurance that they are absolutely right?'

6. In some respects, this discussion reflects Richard Pring's recent warning against 'false dualisms': 'there is a danger in educational research, as indeed in everything, of drawing too sharp a contrast between different kinds of activity or different kinds of enquiry' (Pring, 2000, p. 43).
7. What are we to make of this startling admission by one of the leading advocates of the veriphobic stance about the seminal *La Condition Postmoderne*, Jean-François Lyotard?

I made up stories, I referred to a quantity of books I'd never read, apparently it impressed people, it's all a bit of a parody . . . It's simply the worst of my books, they're almost as bad, but that one's the worst. (cited in Anderson, 1998, p. 26)

8. Of course, sham reasoning is found not just in veriphobic writing. We should all start to worry when we see the word 'Inquiry' preceded by 'Official' or 'Government'!

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