

## Logic and the Editor

*Jay A. Labinger*

Gabriel Stolzenberg's thoughtful and, on the whole, complimentary review of *The One Culture?* (Stolzenberg, 2004) (the latter adjective implies the former, of course!) leaves me little if anything to rebut, and not much more to say. But I would like to comment on one of his remarks:

It [the conversation] too contains misreadings and faulty logic, more than I thought the editors would tolerate. But most of it seems to be due to incompetence, or at least, carelessness, rather than to biasing habits of thought. Furthermore, many second-round misreadings of first-round statements are exposed in the third round, usually by the person misread. (Stolzenberg, 2004: 78)

The implication of the first sentence is that, as editors, we might (should?) have done more to clean up our contributors' acts. I find that suggestion more than a little surprising, considering how Stolzenberg focuses on the likelihood of misreading – even acknowledging the possibility that some of his own interpretations, in the review, result from misunderstandings. How then can he (or anyone) be sure that what he thinks is author X's misreading, or a misuse of logic, isn't in fact *his* misreading of X, or his own unconvincing logical argument?

For example, Stolzenberg devotes a significant amount of energy to pointing out the logical flaws in the claim that relativism is self-contradictory. That claim has also been attacked by others, perhaps most thoroughly by Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1997) in a recent book. I personally favour the Stolzenberg/Smith position, but obviously many – not only Bricmont and Sokal in Labinger and Collins (2001), but also the philosophers Stolzenberg mentions, Boghossian and Nagel – do not. Haven't they seen these counterarguments? Surely they have. How then can they persist in their 'faulty logic'? Incompetence? Carelessness? These would be *very* difficult accusations to sustain, it seems to me. And, of course, charges of faulty logic can be (and are) turned around and applied in the other direction, with much the same (lack of) impact. One reasoner's faulty logic is another's knockdown argument.

Hence, playing an editorial role in discussions of this sort, one ought to be *extremely* hesitant to request ‘corrections’ of misreading or faulty logic. In editing *The One Culture?* we did suggest changes or clarifications when we weren’t sure that *our* reading was correct – a notable (and productive) instance is discussed in the concluding section (Labinger & Collins, 2001: 298–99) – but not when we questioned the author’s interpretation. The proper way to deal with such disagreements, we felt, was allowing them to be worked out in the ‘conversation’ that was the central organizing principle of the book. Stolzenberg appears to agree, when he notes that many misreadings are ‘exposed’ in later rounds; but of course, some of the ‘exposures’ were (or surely would have been if there had been more rounds) challenged as misreading themselves. There can be no workable a priori process for winnowing out ‘errors’ when ‘demonstrations’ of error are clearly not universally accepted. No: the only thing an editor can do to promote productive discussion is to try to keep everyone engaged, talking *to*, rather than *past*, one another.

## References

- Herrnstein Smith, Barbara (1997) *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Labinger, Jay A. & Harry Collins (eds) (2001) *The One Culture? A Conversation About Science* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
- Stolzenberg, Gabriel (2004) ‘Kindler, Gentler Science Wars’, *Social Studies of Science* 34(1): 000–000.

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