Part I: Right? Wrong? Who Cares? I Do Want to Be Right!

BY ROBERT A. CREO

Fallor, ergo sum (I err, so I am).

—Augustine, (354–430), Bishop of Hippo Regius (Annaba, Algeria)

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Augustine preceded the pronouncement of Rene Descartes, *Cogito, ergo sum*, by more than 1,200 years. Both expressions are integral to the human condition. We think!

Sometimes the conclusions we draw vary with external objective reality. Some conclusions—including knowledge—are based upon belief, faith, or values, which are either subjective or otherwise not provable in a consistent and objective manner. Usually, when we discard a belief, especially a subjective or internal one, we substitute replacement beliefs to overwrite it. We now know something different than before and there are no gaps in our internal truths or values.

We make our decisions and conduct our affairs according to these beliefs within the parameters defined by physics, environment, health, economics, law, identity, culture, norms or other constraints.

Erring is an evolutionary process that is essential to creation, innovation, and individual and society progress. This month, the *Master Mediator* column looks at the human tendency—and lawyers’ drive—to validating beliefs, and dealing with errors, including how error fits into mediation efforts. Next month, specific practice techniques to get past mediation party beliefs that may or may not be based on mistakes are explored.

RIGHT OR WRONG?

We may believe that the sun rotates around the earth. This internal knowledge is not a subjective value but reflects our knowledge of external reality. It is also objectively wrong. We may believe that hot dogs should not be eaten with mustard as only ketchup, preferably Heinz, is right. No one can contend this is objectively wrong.

Both subjective and objective beliefs are malleable to new information or experiences. Being wrong is being inaccurate about objective reality, or holding a belief or engaging in conduct, which later is thought to be mistaken or otherwise disavowed. Epistemology, the study of knowledge, deems being wrong as believing what is true is false, or what is false is true.

No matter what the dictionary definition, we hate to be wrong.

We crave being right. This dawned on me when I was at a baseball game and during the seventh-inning stretch four characters dressed in costumes prepared to race around the empty field. On the larger-than-life video screen, each participant insisted that the current recollection of the outcome was the right one. We all know losers are inferior in all ways.

Similarly, we all regale in knowing the answer when playing trivia games or watching Jeopardy. Being wrong is equated with being a loser, and we all know losers are inferior in all ways.

RIGHTFUL MEMORIES

This inability to admit error extends deep into our psyche and is reflected in our memories of significant events. Wikipedia notes that the term “flashbulb memory” has evolved in the science and literature for autobiographical memory involving “elements of personal importance, consequentiality, emotion and surprise.”

Common flashbulb memories involve the assassination of John F. Kennedy (1963), the Challenger Space Shuttle (1986), the O.J. Simpson murder trial verdict (1995), and Sept. 11, 2001. I suspect research also will include the moment individuals learned that Osama bin Laden was dead.

Scientists often refer to these as episodic memories. There are differences between these and a memory of a traumatic event stemming from the personal nature of the fear and injury of the trauma. Usually, in situations involving traumatic injury, the memory dampens peripheral information and minor detail which are often characteristic of flashbulb memories.

Prof. Ulric Neisser (1928-1912), a founder of the field of cognitive psychology, performed experiments on flashbulb memory. They included people writing details of what they recall when they learned of the Challenger disaster.

Three years later, he asked the same people to recount the memory without reviewing the earlier recorded narratives. Not only was there false memories and inaccuracies, some of the participants insisted that the current recollection

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We crave being right. Being wrong is equated with being a loser, and we all know losers are inferior in all ways. To avoid being losers, we refuse to admit an error, or pass it onto a phantom self-identity by speaking in the third person or otherwise deflecting it away.