

**“Half-Pregnant, Half-Dead: How Mistakes,
Misleading, Misinformation, Misquotes,
Misunderstanding, Misinterpretations, and
Mispronunciations Have Shaped the Half-Truth
World of Today”**

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"Yet ah! Why should they know their fate?
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more; where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise."

Mr. President. Mr. Secretary/Treasurer. Fellow presenter. Members of The Athenaeum Society.
(Guests.)

I present to you:

"Half-Pregnant, Half-Dead: How Mistakes, Misleading, Misinformation, Misquotes,
Misunderstanding, Misinterpretations, and Mispronunciations Have Shaped the Half-Truth
World of Today"

Thomas Gray, the English scholar and Cambridge University professor, quipped in his 18th-century poem, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, of the inherent ignorance found within and among mankind. Whether because of naiveté, lack of concern, or simply societal norms, we, as humans, more often than not, accept what is told to us as fact.

Our teachers instruct us from an early age on the basics of "The Three R's." Our parents and grandparents fill us with tidbits of wisdom and historical perspective. Our friends even share with us sayings and adages that have been passed along to them. And we, in turn, perpetuate the process with our kids, grandkids, and companions.

There is one colossal pitfall with this approach to learning, however, and one needn't look any further than the aforementioned instructional pillars: Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic – two of which don't even begin with the letter "R." Furthermore, a good percentage of what we hear, are taught, and disseminate elsewhere is also wrong. Half-right at best. And the problem with a half-truth is, you don't know what half you're getting.

Take these examples:

What is the tallest mountain in the world? What is the one manmade artifact that can be seen from the moon? Where did French toast originate? How many legs do centipedes have?

Well, if you're like the majority of people, you probably answered:

Mount Everest, the Great Wall of China, France, and 100. After all, the answers to these questions are elementary. There also all wrong... or at least misleading.

John Lloyd and John Mitchinson explain in their national bestseller, *The Book of General Ignorance: Everything You Think You Know Is Wrong*, “As far as mountains are concerned, the current convention is that ‘highest’ means measured from sea level to summit; ‘tallest’ means measured from the bottom of the mountain to the top” (pg. 1). Thus, Everest, Measuring 29,029 feet, is some three-quarters of a mile shorter than Mauna Kea, an inactive volcano in Hawaii, which rises a modest 13,799 above sea level, but spans 33,465 feet from seabed to summit.

As for the Great Wall of China, neither it, nor any other manmade artifact can be seen from the moon. But the stone wall can be seen from space, which begins approximately 60 miles above the earth’s surface. Some roadways, railways, and cities are also visible from this point. From the moon’s altitude of over 250,000 miles, though, even the continents are hard to see.

Common inference would conclude that French toast must have originated from France. No conjecture necessary, right? Wrong again. The Roman cook Apicius recorded a recipe for the dish in the 1st-century. The French later referred to this version as “pain a la Romaine” (Roman bread), and during the Medieval times, the dish was called “tostees dorees” (golden toast), and later “pain perdu” (lost bread). So French toast is actually Italian toast.

Good ol’ math, though! A subject of absolutes. You either come to the correct answer, or you’re wrong. So it only makes sense that a centipede, which is Latin for “a hundred feet,” will have, well, a hundred feet. Despite this rationale, not one centipede has ever been discovered to have 100 feet. In fact, the closest a centipede has ever come to the 100 foot mark is 96; and that was an aberration in itself, as this was the only centipede ever recorded with an even numbered pair of legs.

So why is it that so many accepted facts are actually fictitious? Why has society, historians, even educators allowed this propagation of errors to proliferate?

Well, as I hope my title alluded, most of these fallacies – delusions, if you will – are unintentional in their origin. Even more-so, most are perpetuated because, once accepted as fact, very few, if any, strive to prove said knowledge to the contrary. Chance and calamity are two of the few catalysts of change. As Mark Twain said, “The greatest of all inventors is accident.” Or as Alexander Fleming put it, “One sometimes finds what one is not looking for.” However, even if/when new findings point to the converse of conventional wisdom, because previously-accepted beliefs and theorems are so engrained, there is often tremendous resistance to the new-fangled information.

As such, the world as we know it is permeated with mistaken origins, misleading details, misinformed sources, misquoted figures, misunderstood vernaculars, misinterpreted meanings, and mispronounced words. What’s more, many of these terms are found and used in our everyday vocabulary.

In her book, *I Didn't Know That (or Why We Say the Things We Say)*, former Nashville radio and television personality Karlen Evins examines the origin of many words and sayings, and found that many terms have simply been lost in translation.

Catgut, for instance, is actually sheepgut, and is primarily used to string racquets and musical instruments. Because the strings were originally used on a “kit,” the three-stringed predecessor to the guitar, over time the “kit gut strings” became known as catgut.

Similarly, the saying, “dressed to the nines,” is actually an older English saying, “dressed to thy’n eyes.” Just leave it to us Americans – Southerners especially! We can butcher any language. Lafayette / La-Fey-Yette. Caribbean / Care-A-Bein. And speaking of the South, did you know that a “polecat” is not a skunk? Polecats are cousins of the skunk, but are only found in Europe, and obtained their name from the animals upon which they prey: poule (which is French for “chicken” and the root word of “poultry”).

Other axioms, such as “kick the bucket,” actually refers to a pig kicking as a last-gasp effort, after being slashed in a slaughterhouse and stretched across a wooden block – known as the “bucket.” Likewise, the aphorism, “pipe dream” has its roots with the early 1900’s American writer, Wallace Irwin, whose humorous, yet satirical, prose earned him the title of “the equal opportunity bigot.” While many believe the saying refers to a far-fetched goal, plan, or ambition, the truth of the matter is the term actually refers to the dreams Irwin – as well as many other literary geniuses of the time – experienced while smoking opium through a pipe.

There are even some words we use today, that are actually abbreviations or melding of other words. Snob, for example, is a blending of the phrase “sine nobilitate” (without nobility), and the contraction, “S. nob,” is the term wealthy students used to refer to commoners, after they were allowed to enroll in Cambridge University. Perhaps most ironic, though, is the term “utopia,” which was first coined by 16th-century humanist, and posthumously proclaimed Patron Saint, Thomas More. In 1516, More developed the word as a title for his book, by combining the Greek words “ou” (not) and “topas” (a place). In essence, any utopian ideal we can imagine and strive for, is found no place on earth.

So, what – if anything – can be done to help overcome some of this ignorance? Must we, as the apostle Paul told his understudy, Timothy, “Study to show thyself approved” (*KJV Bible*, II Timothy 2:15), or is it our innocence, our gullibility, our blind acceptance of the truth that makes us not ignorant, but ingenious? In the same sense as governments reportedly covering-up UFO sightings and finding, perhaps it is the search for knowledge, this quest for the unknown, the thrill of discovery, that keeps us fresh and hungry for more. Or as Christa Poppelmann quotes in her book, *1,000 Common Delusions: And the real facts behind them*, “According to the laws of aerodynamics, bumblebees cannot fly. It is just as well bumblebees don’t know this” (pg. 108).

In my opinion, the primary answer rests with not only those writing the history books, but especially with those reading of the accounts. By applying even some semblance of common

sense to quizzical stories, narratives, and reports, we would be able to mitigate much of history's fallacies. Of course, I also realize this "cum grano salis" lifestyle is a bit, utopian. Heck, it's probably more of a pipe dream. But a lot of half-truths are prolonged simply because we don't know and/or don't care to know both halves. As Gray described, "'Tis folly to be wise."

In many instances, by simply knowing – not just hearing or being taught – one half of the story, one can deduce the legitimacy of the other half. Take the ancient Roman empire, as an illustration. By knowing that the fiddle wasn't invented until several hundred years after Nero's death, one could dispel the notion that the purportedly insane Emperor joyfully played the instrument as Rome burned in 64 AD.

Or if one understands measurements – specifically their conversions – few would really consider Napoleon short for his time. At 5' 2" using French calculations (pieds de roi), the imperial leader was actually 5' 6½", over half a foot taller than the minimum height requirement for French soldiers.

Perhaps the most common cause for confusion, and, subsequently, acceptance of "false facts," though, is the attributing of quotes to the wrong individual. Take Abraham Lincoln, as a case in point. America's 16th president was attributed with coining the phrase, "government of the people, by the people, for the people" in his Gettysburg Address in 1863. Truth be told, however, similar phrases had already been used by English theologian, John Wycliffe, in 1382, by American statesman, Daniel Webster, in 1830, and by the Boston minister, Theodore Parker in 1850.

Charles Darwin is another example. Most credit the scientist with developing the "Theory of Evolution" and describing the process as "survival of the fittest." It was not Darwin, however, that coined this phrase. That honor belongs to engineer, philosopher, and psychologist Herbert Spencer. Darwin actually preferred the phrases, "decent with modifications" and "natural selection;" but would occasionally use Spencer's description, where, as he describes in his fifth edition of *The Origin of Species* in 1869, he felt the explanation was more accurate and/or convenient.

There have even been cases where the majority of a book had been misquoted... and not just inadvertently. One such occasion took place with Nietzsche, [Centre aside] and his 20-volume magnum opus, *Will to Power*. As Poppelmann explains, the work was published after Nietzsche's death by his anti-Semitic sister, Elisabeth Forster. "(Nietzsche) wrote parts of it, but his sister cut and pasted the manuscript and essentially rewrote it, using it to promote her own beliefs. Scholars researching it decades later found Nietzsche's original pages and it became clear that Forster had subverted her brother's words and intent to such an extent that he can no longer legitimately be named as the author of the book" (pg. 278).

From the most profound to the most mundane. From politicians to pop stars. From science to social studies and every subject in between. Falsehoods rear their ugly heads almost any

direction we turn. And as alluded to earlier, a lot of the lessons we teach, knowledge we share, and quotes we use are, quite simply, incorrect.

Answer these true or false questions:

James Bond's favorite drink was a vodka martini? The most populous city in the world is Mexico City? Humphrey Bogart said, "Play it again, Sam"? Chicago is nicknamed "The Windy City" because of the lake-effect weather it experiences?

Survey says... False to all of the above.

Of the 317 drinks consumed by .007 in his oeuvre of movies, his 19 vodka martinis are a distant fourth place to whiskey (101 drinks), sake (35), and champagne (30).

As for the most populous city, this distinction belongs to Mumbai (formerly Bombay) with 12,883,645 inhabitants, which equates to an astounding 75,294 people per square mile. Delhi is second, followed by Karachi, Moscow, Seoul, and the Mexico City, with New York City close behind. Only when agglomerations are considered – or one central city, which is continuously surrounded by built up areas; suburbs, if you will – does Mexico City move into the number two spot behind Tokyo. (Parenthetically, the largest city geographically is actually Honolulu, which by state, county, and city law, incorporates all of the main island of Oahu and the rest of the northwestern Hawaiian islands... stretching some 1,500 miles into the Pacific.)

Now, for all you movie buffs out there, you should be ashamed for misquoting this *Casablanca* classic all these years! It was Ingrid Bergmann that asked the pianist to, "Play it once, Sam. For old times' sake." And Bogart later exclaimed, "Play it." But the oft-quoted phrase was never a part of the movie. Similar inaccuracies are found in the sayings of *Sherlock Holmes*' "Elementary, my dear Watson," where "Elementary" and "my dear Watson" are used, but never together; and *Star Trek*'s "Beam me up, Scotty" is a erroneous version of "*Enterprise*, beam us up," "Beam us up, Mr. Scott," and "Scotty, beam me up."

And Chicago's nickname has less to do with the blustery gales blowing off of Lake Michigan as it does with the hot air being blown about the World Exposition hosted by the city in 1893. Tired of politician's incessant boasting and clamoring about the event, Charles Dana, editor at the time of the *New York Sun*, dubbed Chicago "The Windy City."

When all is said and done, though. When all the ignorant, all the uninformed, all the "snobs" are through butchering our languages, chronicles, and axioms, at least there will still be "The Athenaeum Society." This bastion of truth. This beacon of knowledge. This first-Thursday-of-the-month-for-nine-months-out-of-the-year defender of culture, learning, and edification.

After all, what would someone expect from the second-oldest, continuously held, men's literary society in the Commonwealth of Kentucky?

Bibliography

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