

## Book Review: Being Wrong, by Kathryn Schulz

Review by John K. Chidester, originally composed for the Mount Vernon News on July 27, 2010

“It infuriates me to be wrong when I know I’m right.” That pithy epigram from Moliere heads the first chapter of Kathryn Schulz’s new book, “Being Wrong,” and it hits the nail on the head just as squarely as Schulz does in the remainder of the book, an amazingly comprehensive exploration of the entire landscape of human error—personal, societal, global—from the trivial to the monumental, in every facet you can imagine and then a few more. If you think such a treatment must be depressing and discomfiting, think again. Even-handed journalist that she is, Schulz gives ample play to the upside of wrongness, suggesting that it has value far beyond what most of us realize.

Schulz is a former reporter and editor for the Santiago Times, of Chile, and her work has appeared in the New York Times Magazine, Rolling Stone, the Nation, Foreign Policy and the Huffington Post, among others. In 2004 she received a Pew Fellowship in International Journalism. She’s done reporting from Central and South America, Japan and the Middle East. In “Being Wrong,” her journalistic chops show up in the dazzling array of sources she consulted, ancient and modern, ranging from philosophers the likes of Plato and Wittgenstein to scientists, researchers, medical authorities, religious leaders and politicians (who know a thing or two about wrongness, though they are often loath to fess up). Also included are intriguing stories of people who have been stunningly, spectacularly wrong about really important things, some of whom have bravely owned up to their mistakes, and others, well....

The first thing to consider about wrongness, Schulz says, is our own rather odd relationship to it. For the great majority of us, being wrong is characteristic of other people, not ourselves. Exhaustive surveys have demonstrated that nearly all of us consider ourselves mostly right about all of our beliefs, opinions and attitudes nearly all

the time (a little like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, "where all the men are handsome and all the women are strong and all the children are above average"). Though it's a statistical impossibility for all of us to be above average (much less, right about everything all the time), there's a simple reason we feel this way: It's impossible to know that you're wrong about something. Being wrong feels exactly like being right. Once it becomes inescapably obvious that you're wrong, you change your mind (and become right, once again).

So, how do we deal with the fact that lots of people disagree with us? For one, we tend as much as possible to hang around with others who think like us (or we may think like them because we hang around with them). Beyond that, we typically make one or more of three assumptions, which Schulz calls the Ignorance Assumption (those who disagree with me just don't know the facts), the Idiot Assumption (they know the facts but don't have the brains to interpret them correctly) and the Evil Assumption (they know the facts and how to interpret them but are just plain wicked).

The largest portion of Schulz's book is taken up with a detailed examination of the origins and experience of wrongness, as played out in dozens of stories both well-known and obscure: the Great Disappointment of 1844, when the Millerites convinced hundreds of thousands of believers that they'd figured out the date of the Rapture; the certainty of WMD in Iraq when there were none; a woman who was certain of the identity of her rapist, but was wrong, with doubly catastrophic results; the Dutch pilot who attempted a takeoff from Tenerife without tower clearance, causing the greatest airline disaster in history. There are many others.

Running throughout these stories is the tension between two alternate attitudes toward wrongness, which Schulz characterizes as the pessimistic and the optimistic. The pessimistic sees wrongness as an aberration, an abnormal human failing that has plagued us intolerably all through history and reeks of moral depravity. The optimistic (which is Schulz's position) sees wrongness as a necessary and even valuable part of

human nature. It's part and parcel of our mental development and thought processes (we infer things rapidly from sketchy evidence, making us quick but error-prone studies). The history of science is littered with discredited theories, which were necessary for us to arrive at more correct theories (which will almost certainly be replaced by still better ones as we keep exploring and learning). In the arts, we accept that great truths can come from things we make up (fiction, drama, poetry).

Schulz ends by inviting us to embrace human fallibility as a way of paying homage to "the permanent possibility of someone having a better idea." She says we get things wrong because we have confidence in our minds and can face our wrongness with the faith that we'll get it right next time (or the time after) It's a hopeful way of regarding the human prospect. Let's hope it's not wrong.