

Bioethics Book Club



Galileo's Middle Finger by Alice Dreger *Penguin Press, 2015*

Summary¹

A powerful defense of intellectual freedom told through the ordeals of contemporary scientists attacked for exploring controversial ideas, by a noted science historian and medical activist.

For two decades, historian Alice Dreger has led a life of extraordinary engagement, combining activist service to victims of unethical medical research with defense of scientists whose work has outraged identity politics activists. Realization of the shocking surgical and ethical abuses conducted in the name of “normalizing” intersex children’s gender identities moved Dreger to become an internationally recognized patients’ rights activist. But even as the intersex rights movement succeeded, Dreger began to realize that some fellow progressive activists were employing lies and personal attacks to silence scientists whose data revealed uncomfortable truths.

Troubled, she decided to try to understand more—to travel the country to ferret out the truth behind various controversies, to obtain a global view of the nature and costs of these battles. *Galileo’s Middle Finger* describes Dreger’s long and harrowing journeys between the two camps for which she felt equal empathy: social justice activists determined to win and researchers determined to put hard truths before comfort. Ultimately what emerges is a lesson about the intertwining of justice and of truth—and a lesson of the importance of responsible scholars and journalists to our fragile democracy.

Ethics Issues

- Bias in science
- Research ethics
- Conflicts of interest
- Transgender
- Identity
- Activism
- Intersex
- Social justice

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss whether the ends of increasing social justice or redressing historical wrongs ever justify means such as attempting to silence other individuals or misrepresenting them publicly.
2. What is the relationship between activism and the search for truth? What are the key values associated with each of these activities?
3. What does Dreger learn about the relationship between activism and truth over the course of her engagements with activism?
4. Dreger identifies both the drastic cutbacks to traditional media and significant corporatization in academia as reasons that the truth is sometimes obscured by activism – what might be able to counteract these effects?
5. Dreger argues that “the Internet has made it cheaper and easier than ever to organize and agitate, it also produces distraction and false senses of success. People tweet, blog, post messages on walls, and sign online petitions, thinking somehow that noise is change.” Do you agree?
6. Dreger identifies evidence and data as means of improving advocacy, and expresses optimism about the prospect of evidence based advocacy. Do you share her sentiments?

¹ Adapted from the publisher’s summary

7. Do you think that there could ever be findings so controversial, contrary to social convention, or potentially harmful to vulnerable or oppressed groups that they should be suppressed? Are there questions that researchers shouldn't ask?
8. These stories are told from Dreger's perspective – are you curious as to how others involved might tell them?
9. Discuss the following passages in the book:
 - “So long as we believe that bad acts are committed only by evil people and that good people do only good, we will fail to see, believe, or prevent these kinds of travesties. Nowadays I feel as though 90 percent of my time talking to academics and activists is spent trying to convince them of this: The people who are against you are not necessarily evil, and your own acts are not necessarily good. That's why we still need both scholars and activists. It's not easy to see what's what in the heat of the moment, and we need people pushing for truth *and* for justice if we're going to get both right.” (p. 275)
 - “There is much reasonable disagreement among transgender activists as to the right role for medicine in transgender politics. Clinicians who work with transgender people know that they are much more diverse in experiences, senses of self, and needs than the general public realizes. Clinicians with whom I speak sometimes express frustration that they have to toe particular party lines...or risk being painted as anti-trans, even when they are struggling to put the needs and desires of a patient before politics. (p. 267)
 - “Freedom of thought and freedom of person must be erected together....Truth and justice cannot exist one without the other....When one is threatened, the other is harmed.... Justice and thus morality *require* the empirical pursuit.” (p. 261)
 - “Human reasoning is imperfect. Human bias keeps us from perfect vision of what is happening around us. But the quest for truth – the quest to understand the world around us – must ultimately be how you enact the good.” (p. 256)
 - “If you think you're working for the greater good, you take the knocks and keep working, doing good research to figure out reality. You stop worrying about yourself. And so – staying firmly focused on the work that matters – you survive.” (p. 234).
 - “Sometimes people put you under house arrest because they honestly believe it is for the greater good....It can be very hard in a moment of heated debate to tell who is right – it can take a hundred years and a thousand people to sort it out. As one person trying to get it right, sometimes the best you can do – the *most* you can do – is point to the sky, turn to the guy next to you, and ask, “Are you seeing what I'm seeing?” (p. 18)