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Conspiracies Segment

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*How To Talk to People about Conspiracies without “Debunking” Them*

For the most part, today’s media-proliferated brand of Conspiracy Theory are given little substantive credence but are spread widely for their entertainment value. Most have at least heard of ‘pizzagate,’ are well aware of the anti-vaccination movement and the resurgence of flat-earthers. Those of us old enough to remember probably still remember the beliefs behind the Y2K apocalypse, the Mayan Calendar, and various other end-of-world predictions made since. Many of these conspiracies lead to cultic activity, and in some cases, even extreme levels of personal or mass violence.

And while we find some of the more benign beliefs entertaining, there is some true harm not just to the belief in those conspiracies, but in the way we *treat* those who believe in them and what this says about our ability to help dissuade people from erroneous ideas. Many of us have come to realize that ‘fact’ and rational argumentation do little to alter people’s beliefs, especially in some of the more outlandish of these conspiracies. So before I begin to discuss *how* to talk to people about their conspiratorial notions, we have to understand why people hold them, and then even continue to hold to them when faced with what seem to *us* as clear and compelling evidence to the contrary. In recognizing the reasons *why* people hold fast to their irrational beliefs, we can then address how to begin the conversations necessary to help others overcome them.

*Conspiracy Theories: the Pitfalls of Knowledge, Commonly*

Conspiracy theories begin in ways that *most* knowledge begins—with an ardent desire to explain experience and impose order and structure on a world where humans have become quite adept at recognizing patterns. We reinforce this desire through formal education, where we test individuals for pattern recognition in cognitive functioning tests, games of memory, and methods for testing and measuring various localized phenomena. We do this, then, less formal constantly—we recognize shapes of things in the clouds above us, so much so that we can watch the Facebook posts that garner millions of likes for pictures that look like the Hand of God reaching through the clouds in the middle of a storm. However, humans also have a tendency to simplify, or more importantly *oversimplify* these patterns to find generalizations from which to operate. In doing so, we often fall victim to the fallacy of Correlation and Causation, in which the repeated observance of two independent phenomena in a controlled experience leads us to believe not just that they are correlated to the experience, but that one is the cause of the other. A particularly poignant example of this error of thinking can be seen in discussions of violent video games; originally, the prevailing belief was that playing violent video games *caused* people to be more violent in their real, physical lives. Further studies have recently tried to make progress to overturn such belief, showing at *most* correlation, but failing to derive concrete causal links between the two phenomena.

In a more harmless sense, we rely on this kind of thinking in our daily lives. I washed my car a month ago, and the next day it rained. At this point, I *know* that if I wash my car, it will just rain on it tomorrow, so no sense in wasting my money. The Angels have won four straight games because I have been watching every night. When I did not watch, they lost. So, reason stands that I *have* to watch their games in order for the win streak to continue. Causation, though, is harder

to actually account for in measurement. And yet, many of our prominent industries—even today’s data-driven philosophies of education—*require* ‘evidence-based’ decision-making. The problem is when we fail to account for nuance for the sake of faster answers. We may be able to correlate this with the faster processing of data afforded to us by computers, allowing is faster access to statistical data, analysis, with more and more information to correlate. The belief, then, could be that with more and more information, and more and more ability to sort and analyze that data, that answers can be more definite, and quickly. What lacks, though, is the human element, the observations of the experience itself.

Also problematic is the way false causation may be advanced by confirmation bias—a personal desire to advocate for a personal belief, which drives one to use *only* the evidence which confirms the previously-held belief. In a formal setting, *this* is what happens when starting with an idea or a belief, or an argumentative claim, and *then* researching information to support it. Activity of this nature lacks true intellectual integrity, because it ignores information that contradicts the originally-held belief, and leads to false equivalencies. However, the search for causation *continues* to be important and, in some cases, *necessary* enterprise—the sciences are built upon this premise; it is human to desire causation as a feature of our experience, but also more casually in the convenient ways to think about relationships between events in our normal day-to-day interactions.

Media may also (intentionally, or unintentionally) contribute to the continuance of these kinds of fallacious reasoning as well, though it may just be a natural pitfall of our reliance on language. This can be seen in news headings, or in character-limited online media posts, where language is simplified for the sake of catching attention (or to fit the limitations): commonly the

heading “Seat Belts Save Lives” portends accuracy. It may be the case that wearing a seat belt prevented serious injury or death in many individuals. However, this is not *always* the case—there have been many serious car accidents in which the wearing of a seat belt did *not* prevent serious injury or death to the individuals in the vehicle. Thus, simply wearing a seat belt is not causally determinate of a person’s fate in an accident, though it may increase the *likelihood* of survival. The language in the original statement implies causality in its simplicity. More accurately, the statement should read “Seat belt use is associated with lower mortality rates” in which there is correlation without implying a single cause for survival.

### *Debunking’ as a Problematic Approach*

Conspiracy theories arise out of the same tendencies of erroneous logic—causal fallacy, confirmation bias, and the limitations of language—but also fall prey to a *different* impact. Unlike the examples given above, in which belief generally get overturned by objective scientific or sociological studies, *belief* in conspiracy theories are not often *weakened* by further evidence (this might actually be the results of deeper, more entrenched confirmation-bias, but causality has failed to be established in this argument here). Conspiracy theories are not simply ideas in themselves like many of the other realms of knowledge discussed above; instead, they say far more about the *believer* and the way the believer has been *treated* in his or her beliefs by those who do not hold the same values, suggesting that unlike some forms of knowledge, beliefs in conspiracies tend to be far more personal and entrenched in the believer’s identity.

Often people project a desire to ‘stick-it’ to believers of wild conspiracies, finding personal pleasure in the need to ‘wake up’ their interlocutors from what they believe to be deeply troubling and often ‘stupid’ ideas—but, Ignorance *is* Strength, as they say. While ‘giving people

the facts' seems like the quickest and easiest method for overturning false beliefs, this is generally not an effective method. One only need visit the darker corners of the internet to see arguments that span thread over thread between individuals who continue to deny the truth of facts with phrases such as "fake news" and "that's what the government *wants* you to think" to realize that a disbelief in what one offers as factual evidence goes far beyond the evidence itself. As Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* asserts "don't give me a lecture about facts and aspects," people may want a *story* more than they want the Truth.

As a result of conversations driven by the desire to 'debunk' a conspiracy theory, what happens is what is called the *Backfire Effect*: the conspiracy, in the act of 'debunking' it, becomes far more memorable than the evidence used against it; by mentioning the conspiracy, we simply reinforce them. Presenting information to correct them then positions the believer to 'double-down' on their initial beliefs. Especially those they hold fast and hard. A reason for this may be that beliefs like these get tied up in a person's concept of self, their 'identity' at the core. While the person aiming to 'enlighten' may see facts as emotionally and morally neutral, this may *not* be the case for the believer of the conspiracy; thus presenting conflicting evidence may be viewed as an attack not only on the *ideas*, but on the *person* behind the *ideas*. This *Boomerang Effect*, then, can devolve conversations into arguments, into a host of ad hominem and straw-man attacks leaving both in the dialogue frustrated, emotional, and personally threatened.

We have likely all been involved in an argument that left one or both parties in this state—it may have severely impacted the relationship moving forward, forcing one or both parties to ignore the other. There *is* a problem to this though. A Conspiracy Theory believer has wrapped

up the belief in his or her personal identity. The arguer attacks the conspiracy with logic and evidence, which—while unintended—is perceived as attacking the *believer* as well. The believer doubles-down on the belief, frustrating the arguer. The arguer dismisses the argument *and* the believer by choosing to no longer engage the discussion, thereby dismissing not only the belief, but the believer. This *further* reinforces the believer’s tendencies to conflate belief with his or her identity, which furthers the vicious cycle. No one ‘wins’ in this situation. We must find a different way to engage so as to avoid this devolving and unproductive experience, which does nothing to deepen anyone’s understanding, but rather perpetuates people’s claims to their conspiracies in the long-run.

*The Alternative: A Humanistic Approach to ‘Argumentation’*

In the process of researching the epistemology of disagreement for a course in my graduate studies, I came across a study published in *Social Psychology* in 1981 entitled “Effects of Controversy on Epistemic Curiosity, Achievement and Attitudes” by two professors of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. The study was performed within a formal school setting, testing small groups of students in which control groups were created where no controversy (defined in the study as ‘substantial difference of opinion’) existed over the topic in discussion, while variable groups were given highly controversial discussions in which two or more students in the group held wildly different positions on the issue. The study found that in this kind of controlled environment, those groups which experienced controversy led students to become more epistemically curious in the material of discussion, often leading to deeper exploration and research of information surrounding the nuances of the complex issue. This lead to higher academic achievement and a more positive attitude toward the activity.

There are some broad implications that could be extrapolated from such a study. In education, it could be argued that students need exposure to broader questions where controversy can arise. Students then, would be led through coping with controversy, and given creative license and choice in the pursuit of intellectual complexities and nuance. This would also, tangentially, give students practical experience in intellectual failure, where finding answers to a complex issue may yield little results to their inquiry. This discomfort is important for intellectual pursuit—students could then develop means for being ‘comfortable in the uncomfortable’ a lasting skill of *grit* often now associated with success.

However, more importantly, this could say something about our experiences in conversations with others who hold different opinions to our own—as noted in the extreme cases here regarding believers of conspiracy theories. In education, students are grouped in close quarters for multiple hours a day for multiple days a year. In much of the rest of our experience, though, we have a lot more choice in what and *who* we engage—in social media we see this microcosm, where people can selectively ‘listen-in’ on messages that confirm their already-held opinions. We return back to comfort, no longer needing to cope with discomfort as we have more control over our experiences. We no longer *need* to listen to a variety of opinions, and we can surround ourselves, both in daily life (for the most part) *and* in digital life, with reinforcement for our own views. We embrace the ‘echo chamber,’ read selectively, watch selectively, and in some warped sense, may even *enjoy* the condescension with which we bitterly watch or listen to *other* opinions, engaging in arguments for our own pleasure—but only up to a point. As for the rest, we can disengage and devalue.

But, we cannot ignore or ‘tune out’ the other views, for reasons previously discussed—this only furthers to reinforce the deepening belief in erroneous views. There *are* things we can do in both the short term and more long term—though the long-term solutions would require substantial changes to social outlook that often results from overhauls to our youngest “influencees”—children in schools. In the short term though, what we need to begin to employ is a far more humanistic, empathetic historical understanding to others and to dialogue. While common ground may seem difficult to find, it *can* be found, and *should* be sought. And, more importantly, what we need to do is mitigate the *Backfire Effect*, and to do so means we need to ignore the myths, but do so *without* ignoring the believer *of* the myth. Instead of ‘debunking’ where side-by-sides are shown of the ‘facts’ of the myth versus the *real* facts, we need to simply be able to talk about what is True. To do so requires restraint, and limitation. We cannot challenge entire world views, but we *should* offer explanations that work in line with the underlying assumptions and presuppositions of those who operate with conspiracies. And, possibly the *best* method for a humanistic approach is to engage in dialogues that are narrative in nature; to return to Willy Loman as above, we *want* the linear, and in some ways the entertaining, story. This is why conspiracies are often so compelling to begin with, they entertain. To present facts as neutral and dry—however True—does not necessarily impact the emotionally-driven, and will not dissuade beliefs held on such a ground; to do so is to use apples against oranges. Presentation of information with more pathos, through anecdotes, hypotheticals, and descriptive dialogue *can* help a *discussion* keep from becoming a *debate*.



What is important to note in all of this is that *no one* is truly safeguarded from false belief of the kind that leads to entrenched and wide-spread conspiracy-theory proliferation. We have to be aware of our *own* cognitive processes, our own personal biases, and also recognize that holding *any* belief in so steadfast a way provides us little room to grow and truly learn. It is this static lack of malleability that makes us vulnerable to conspiracy theories, especially those that prey on or provide reason for our inherent fears and insecurities. We have to be able to hold tenuously to our beliefs, to operate on our philosophical assumptions while recognizing their ability to be challenged at any time. By being aware of the flows in our own thinking, and in argumentation in general (this returns to the discussion of the limitations of language, which would be addressed in the more long-term solution of evolving educational philosophies to account for formalized education in something like logic and critical thinking), we can hold a healthy optimistic skepticism and be willing to reform beliefs when presented with new, compelling evidence, thus being a model for good, adaptive thinking. By showing that we *can* divorce ideas and beliefs from our sense of *self*, we show that identity is less the substance of the belief, but rather our *attitude* toward it.

The good news, is that—for practical purposes—we do much more reduction of others to a single, perceived ‘world view’ than may *actually* be the case for most people. Few, if any, persons actually act on a single system of belief, but may contradictorily or not operate on a more pragmatic level. As a result of our limited cognitive resources, our belief-forming mechanisms serve us better as fragmented rather than unified systems. If this is a case, it should only be a matter of empathetic treatment of the *person* of the belief and a desire to understand not the view itself but the *why* behind the person’s holding fast to it, that we find a way to break

the vicious cycle of identity-threat thinking. If we serve as models for malleability, we may eventually get to a place where—like the students of the experiment—we actually *all* become better, more intellectually curious, and more driven by truth than we currently are in this isolated spiral of partisan bickering.