

Epistemic Risk: Memetics in a Post-Truth Society

Not once in 300,000 years has a man walked the same soil as another; not once since fire bloomed and the caves were laid bare have we, as human beings, shared this Earth. From Assyrians to Americans, from Carthage to Kiev, we have changed much as a species. Yet the one constant has always been our animosity for the Other, our insistence that the world be better salted than quartered. When I first grasped *The Precipice* – when I held it in my hands and gripped it by its spine – 13 days possessed me. Faced with a book on the extinction of humanity—on the death of our legacy and potential—I could not stop thinking about the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was the first event which came to mind: the prime example of a world-ending catastrophe. For nearly two weeks, civilization teetered toward Armageddon. Communists, capitalists, and hundreds-of-millions in between were poised to drown in nuclear fire, all to ensure that the opposition would be unable to pick up the pieces. It stands, to me, as the perfect encapsulation of the madness of ideology. So, reading Ord's analysis of the situation (23-27), I was surprised to see it did not at all account for the sociological factors at play. Rather than dwell on the ideas that drove us to the brink, or how they rose to such prominence, he merely studied their consequences. And this is the fatal flaw running throughout his otherwise seminal masterpiece.

The Precipice urges us to take charge of our shared future. It is a powerful plea to the whole of humanity, demanding we awaken to the existential risks that have thrown our planet

into peril. More than this, it does an excellent job at materially outlining these risks, measuring them with an unprecedented degree of diligence and precision. The problem with its approach, however, is that people do not live in the material world. Rather, they live in their conception of the world: a conception deeply shaped by culture, belief, creed, and political interest. As put by professor of psychology David Myers:

We view our social worlds through the spectacles of our beliefs, attitudes, and values. That is one reason our beliefs are so important; they shape our interpretation of everything else. (Myers and Twenge 78)

Philosophers have expressed similar sentiments throughout the ages, particularly in the school of German idealism. Whether with objects or with the broader material world, “we are acquainted with nothing except our way of perceiving” (Kant 185). This is the great danger of our times. We are charged with protecting what we cannot see, with assessing objective risk through intrinsically subjective interpretation. I do not think this is impossible: I believe that through logic and careful consideration, we can glimpse past our biases into the external. But this is a difficult task, especially in these turbulent times.

Now more than ever, we are faced with an epistemological crisis, where personal truths and ‘alternative facts’ trump any interest in objective reality. Fueling this is the rise of digital communication. With the advent of the internet, society has become more connected than ever before. We are but a click away from speaking to people halfway across the world, and have access to an ever-expanding galaxy of information unrivaled by any other collection of human knowledge. But this same innovation has paradoxically led to widespread alienation, in addition

to dangerous levels of misinformation. Both have sown the seeds of solipsism in our society, leading those ensnared in the web down ideological rabbit holes; they are encouraged to adopt increasingly radical positions, and to break ties with any who would challenge their narrowing worldview.

A link between internet addiction and depression has been observed as early as 2010 (Morrison and Gore), with research also demonstrating that depression correlates with extremist sympathies (Bhui et. al). The pandemic has further exacerbated this trend, leading to a surge in radical thought and action (Morris). Isolated, angry young men have begun to lash out at the world en masse, turning toward misanthropic, exclusionary ideologies that are fundamentally incompatible with effective altruism. In the best case scenario, these men become withdrawn and hopeless; they sink deeper and deeper into nihilism, convinced that the world is grotesque and beyond salvation. Their poisonous mindset kills any chance of mobilizing them and their talents to combat existential risk. In the worst case, however, they become active threats to humanity's future. They might seize control of the levers of power, lock in their values, and bring about an enforced dystopia (Ord 154); or alternatively, we might see them follow in the footsteps of the Aum Shinrikyo cult, using chemical warfare as a means to bring about their final solution. *The Precipice* itself raises this possibility (134).

Misinformation is one way people are led to destructive ideologies (“The Role of Fake News in Fueling Hate Speech and Extremism Online”). However, that is not the only way it does harm. It is an engine of epistemological ruin that can distort even the most reasonable and innocuous of positions into delusional self-parody. Climate change is a prime example. Ord estimates that there is a 1/1000th chance of it causing civilizational collapse within the next

century (167). He suggests that its risk lies more in its role as a geopolitical stress factor, noting that “[it] could easily cause major catastrophes that leave us more vulnerable to other existential risks” (179). Activists and politicians, however, paint a far more hyperbolic picture, claiming that it will cause billions of deaths within the next 20 years or end the world in 12 (Shellenberger). If this were true, it would necessitate extreme and immediate action—namely geoengineering, which poses its own risks to environmental safety (Ord 113). Fortunately, it is not, but truth matters little if it goes unspoken.

On the other side of the spectrum, denialism poses an equal (if not greater) risk. While alarmism might lead to overcorrection, ‘climate skepticism’ will guarantee inaction and subsequent disaster. And disconcertingly, it holds a shocking amount of staying power. Only half of Americans believe climate change is caused by human activity (Zoledziowski and Grzincic); 45% of the electorate is unaware of—or refuses to acknowledge—its root causes.

So what is our recourse? We are prisoners of our minds and prey to ideology. The internet divides those it has brought together, and the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’ grows ever wider, with differing perspectives becoming disparate worlds. How can we unite to combat existential risk, then, when we cannot even manage to agree on reality?

The solution, I would argue, lies in memetics. Rooted in Richard Dawkins’ concept of a meme – a unit of cultural transmission analogous to a gene (193) – memetics studies the genealogy of ideas. Applied individually, we can recognize our implicit biases and limit their influence over our interpretation of data. Applied societally, we can trace the origins of ideas, discovering their source and appeal, and enabling us to limit the spread of extremist ideology. And finally, applied existentially, we can achieve the clarity and impartiality necessary to survive

the coming centuries, separating partisan hackery and tribal one-upmanship from unifying, objective truths. Only then—through understanding ideas—can we understand each other; only then will we be capable of attaining our shared future.

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