

Why It's OK to Speak Your Mind

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*“Let us speak of this, you who are wisest, even if it be bad.
Silence is worse; all truths that are kept silent become poisonous.”*
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Prologue

Speaking your mind can have consequences. We constantly face pressures to conform to the opinions – or at least *perceived* opinions – of our peers, friends, and employers. Dissenting from these views can have real costs. Often, the best way to advance in one’s career, for example, will involve not “rocking the boat” too much. Saying what you really believe might come at the cost of lost job opportunities, promotions – and in more extreme, but nowadays not uncommon, cases, getting fired.

What’s more, these sorts of pressures exist in their strongest form precisely within those professions and institutions which are primarily responsible for producing new ideas, maintaining the stock of knowledge, and shaping culture. Dissent from the zeitgeist of the cultural elite is less likely to be the cause of lost employment for truckers, plumbers, or mining engineers. It’s much more of an issue for writers, journalists, academics, and artists. But if such pressures exist most strongly within these professions, and if such pressures can cause groupthink and blind spots, then it seems particularly important to address them because of the power such professions have in determining public opinion.

Now, of course, legal sanctions for the expression of ideas are rare within modern democracies. The United States has protections built in to the Constitution itself, in the form of the First Amendment. You cannot go to jail for merely voicing an opinion – no matter how heterodox or repulsive. But this protection is nowhere near enough to safeguard our collective ability to evade the perils of conformity. John Stuart Mill, perhaps the most preeminent historical defender of free expression, was acutely aware of this issue. He wrote:

In respect to all persons but those whose pecuniary circumstances make them independent of the goodwill of other people, opinion, on this subject, is as efficacious as law; men might as well be imprisoned, as excluded from the means of earning their bread.¹

Bertrand Russell, one of the premier analytic philosophers of the 20th century and a defender of liberalism, echoed this idea decades later:

Legal penalties are, however, in the modern world, the least of the obstacles to freedom of thoughts. The two great obstacles are economic penalties and distortion of evidence. It is clear that thought is not free if the profession of certain opinions makes it impossible to earn a living. It is clear also that thought is not free if all the arguments on one side of a controversy are perpetually presented as attractively as possible, while the arguments on the other side can only be discovered by diligent search.²

Unless you are independently wealthy, the costs of self-expression can be very real despite the legal protections. Even if you are wealthy, there are substantial risks associated with saying what you think about contentious topics. For one, there can be reputational costs – from friends, neighbors, or colleagues. And bad reputations, even if unfounded, have tendencies to stick. In addition, if you stray too far from sanctioned opinion, you may eventually lose access to the very means of

¹ Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, 37.

² Russell, “Free Thought and Official Propaganda,” 13.

expressing your opinions to the broader public: op-eds or TV appearances, for example. That said, the democratization of information dissemination via the internet has in some ways reduced the power of gatekeeper institutions in this regard – though not entirely, because the internet has gatekeeper institutions of its own.

Given that speaking your mind has costs, what should *you* do?

This question is increasingly relevant for the many who feel that they often can't say what they really think. This is the question I want to explore. What this book is *not* trying to do is to defend, in the first instance, the ideal of free speech – that is, the notion that society and its institutions should be open to dissenting opinion. If you want a defense of *that* idea, you can do no better than to read John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, particularly Chapter 2.

Rather, what I want to do here is to defend the idea that we often have a duty to speak our minds, even in the face of the sorts of costs mentioned above. And furthermore, a good life involves the cultivation of intellectual independence, which we cannot achieve without the outward expression of our ideas. A life of intellectual conformity and status seeking, I will argue, leaves something important to be desired.

Below is a quick birds-eye view of the main arguments of this book.

Synopsis

Speaking our minds, against social pressure not to do so, can often help improve the condition of what I will call the “epistemic commons” – that is, the stock of evidence, ideas, and perspectives that are alive for a given community. This is because our knowledge is essentially *distributed*, due to the division of cognitive labor. We are deeply reliant on others for what we take ourselves to know. Few of us actually know how a zipper works, for example, but we often take ourselves to know this because we can easily access the relevant facts. In this way, we do not and cannot think alone.

This is in many ways an indispensable blessing: imagine having to figure out everything by yourself! Yet it is also a curse. As the ocean is vulnerable to overfishing and the atmosphere is vulnerable to pollution, the epistemic commons is vulnerable to *social pressure*. Social pressure can distort our picture of the world, often dangerously. And if we have a distorted view of what the world is like, then the actions we take can be counterproductive – even if our intentions are good.

The handling of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the former Soviet Union is a prime example of evidence distortion leading to catastrophe. Much of the disaster could have been averted had the authorities and the general public a better idea of what was going on. But because evidence was suppressed at crucial junctures, the response to the disaster allowed for many more deaths than it had to.

While the Chernobyl disaster occurred under an authoritarian government, democracies are not immune to the underlying phenomenon. Social pressure can cause evidence to pile up on one side of a debate or issue, while evidence on the other side is systematically screened out. A person who looks at the evidence as it is presented, then, will form a warped view of the matter, even if she

rationally evaluates the evidence at hand. I will suggest that whenever there exists social pressure to conceal evidence on one side of a topic, we should suspect that a (possibly dangerous) blind spot is lurking somewhere, due to this mechanism. The catch, and it is a big catch, is that the blind spot will not be recognizable by people who simply look at the evidence as it is presented. They will be unaware that their view of the world is distorted.

We should be especially mindful of social pressure in those institutions most closely associated with knowledge production and dissemination: particularly universities, but also thinktanks, newspapers and so on. In contexts where there is social pressure within a community not to give evidence for certain conclusions, the output of that community cannot be taken seriously – or at least it must be taken with a generous serving of salt. Nonetheless, the danger is for outsiders to take this output at face value: through no fault of their own, they might be unaware of the social pressures within the community. *This* is our modern epistemic predicament, though it has received little recent philosophical attention.

Given these dynamics, I will suggest there is a duty to reveal our evidence against the social pressure, so long as the costs are not too high. In this sense, you have a duty to speak your mind against social pressure, at least some of the time. The duty is imperfect in the sense that we can pick our battles. We don't have to speak our minds in every single context; that would be too onerous and generally unwise. Nonetheless, there is a duty to speak up against social pressure because this constitutes doing your part to protect a common resource – namely, the epistemic commons. Someone who never does this is a free rider. He benefits from the work of others but never does his part to contribute – much like the roommate who never does dishes or the dog walker who never picks up after the dog.

If you work in one of the institutions of knowledge production mentioned earlier, one way you can significantly benefit humanity's epistemic position is by pursuing heterodox projects. The marginal value of this type of work is very high. The first article defending X or developing a new way of seeing things is vastly more valuable than the 1000th article defending not-X or making a small move in some arcane debate. Those with the protection of tenure are in an especially good position to do this and to help others who are pursuing such work.

Now, the structure of the free riding problem identified here creates a worry many readers will have. Given the many actors involved in the maintenance of the epistemic commons (think of all the people who drive science or a particular culture), we might wonder if our individual actions make a real difference. Climate change seems to be a case like this. What difference will it make if *you* stop eating hamburgers? Probably not much, given the scope of the problem. But isn't speaking your mind like this? What difference can one person make?

Quite a lot, it turns out. Even *one* dissenter can have a huge psychological impact on others. This is borne out in several psychological studies, most notably the famous Solomon Asch experiments. One person calling it like they see it can relieve the fear of isolation that other potential dissenters might be experiencing. That person can be you. This is also a lesson we can draw from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes" – when the child points out that the emperor has no clothes, everyone suddenly musters the courage to say it themselves. In this way, a lone voice can burst the bubble of what social scientists call "pluralistic ignorance," which is a situation wherein most people think something but are unaware that they are in the majority.

Speaking your mind for the sake of the *common good* is the subject matter of Chapters 1-3. Chapters 4 and 5 contend that you should speak your mind *for your own sake*. Speaking your mind is an essential component of the good life. Or so I will argue.

The question of what makes for a good life has been a core preoccupation of philosophers for as long as there has been philosophy. When we look at a life as a whole, under what conditions might we say: “this here was a life well-lived”? Two natural answers present themselves immediately: pleasure and social status. According to the first option, a life goes well for the person who lives it to the extent that it contains lots of pleasure (which encompasses not only things like gustatory and sexual pleasure, but also feelings of contentment, satisfaction, and the like) and little pain (physical pain, but also frustration, depression, etc.) The second option is that a good life contains lots of social status: thus, kings, presidents, deans, Nobel Prize winners, musical celebrities, etc., are living the best lives.

The great ancient Greek philosophers considered these two answers and found them wanting. For Aristotle, what makes something – anything – good is whether it fulfills its characteristic work (*ergon*) well. Therefore, if we want to know what a good human life is we need to think about what is the characteristic work of humans. In other words, what is distinctive about humans *qua* humans? Aristotle thought it is our capacity to *reason*. Hence, he thought the good human life is one that exhibits the proper development and exercise of reason.

Recent work in philosophy and psychology suggests we simply cannot reason well in isolation. In order to reason well, we must find interlocutors with whom we can go back and forth. Reasoning is an *essentially social* activity. But if that’s right then reasoning well involves speaking your mind, rather than keeping all your distinctive thoughts and ideas to yourself. Aristotle’s teacher’s teacher, Socrates, was a living embodiment of this ideal. He roamed Athens challenging the cherished assumptions of his fellow Athenians. For this, he was put to death by a jury. But even then, he had no regrets. From his perspective, the unexamined life was not worth living anyway. Now, this may well be a bit much, but if these ideas have something to them, then at the very least we should not sacrifice our integrity as thinkers willy-nilly for accolades and prestige and approval.

A somewhat different strand of thinking about the good life emphasizes *independence*. Great human lives do something unique, create something new, and refuse to follow the cultural zeitgeist everywhere it goes. This is a major theme for the 19th century philosophers John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Nietzsche. Their ideas are of deep relevance to thinking about the pressures to conform that we experience today, and might help to put these pressures into broader ethical perspective. Many of the trends they identified in their own time seem to exist in an even stronger and more potent form in the 21st century. Hence, revisiting their works, not merely as historical curiosities, but as offering perspectives worth engaging with and drawing from, can greatly benefit us with respect to our current predicaments.

Importantly, for our purposes, the independence they extol cannot be cultivated if we never speak our minds: because we are fundamentally *social* creatures, we must express and exchange our ideas and values outwardly in order to be genuinely independent.

The book ends with an exploration of how the future of humanity is a condition of many things mattering to us here and now. Philosopher Samuel Scheffler has recently presented novel arguments for this idea. According to him, much of what we value here and now assumes a future for

humanity; without such an assurance, we would be gripped by nihilism and despair. This is just part of the picture, however; I argue that we don't just want humanity to continue but also to *flourish*. But if social pressures can create dangerous blind spots, then given the speed at which modern life is evolving, it seems all the more important to speak our minds so as to combat these blind spots. There is far too much at stake, given what we care about.

Chapter 1: The Epistemic Commons

“Madness is rare in individuals – but in groups, political parties, nations, and eras it is the rule.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

“Every age has its peculiar folly; some scheme, project, or phantasy into which it plunges, spurred on either by the love of gain, the necessity of excitement, or the mere force of imitation. Failing in these, it has some madness, to which it is goaded by political or religious causes, or both combined.”

- Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions*

The Division of Cognitive Labor

Modern society is only possible because of the division of labor. Without division of labor, the most we could achieve is a very meager standard of living. Imagine you had to make everything you use, by yourself, from scratch – without tools created by others, without water and food provided by others, without medicines invented by others. Most of us would not survive for a month, if that. Division of labor makes modern standards of living possible because with individuals specializing in one area, society as a whole is able to be much more productive.

Adam Smith illustrated and developed this idea in his *Wealth of Nations* by using the example of a pin factory. Imagine ten people tasked with making pins. If each person had to make a whole pin, perhaps each might make ten pins a day. Making a whole pin involves several distinct processes. Let's suppose it involves ten different tasks. Well, if one person had to do all these tasks we can expect that there would be time lost as that person transitioned from one task to another. Furthermore, it would be hard to become skilled at all these different tasks – that would require lots of training and effort. But what if each person in the factory focused on just one of the ten tasks instead? Time would be saved in a myriad of ways, and the factory would be able to produce a lot more pins – though, no person by himself would be making a whole pin. As a result, the factory might produce 10,000 pins total per day, whereas it would have produced only 100 without specialization. Modern society is like this pin factory writ large.¹

But division of labor in modern life is not limited to the production of physical goods. The other face of specialization is the division of *cognitive* labor. Our institutions of knowledge production (universities, thinktanks, private research labs) reflect this feature: researchers inevitably specialize in one tiny sub-subfield or two in order to make new discoveries. Yet, the division of cognitive labor has deep implications. What we are able to know is inextricably tied to what I will call the *epistemic commons* – the stock of facts, ideas, and perspectives that are alive in society's discourse.

In their book, *The Knowledge Illusion*, cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach write: “Language, memory, attention – indeed, all mental functions – can be thought of as operating in a way that is distributed across a community according to a division of cognitive labor.”² The authors argue that we know very little, but take ourselves to know a lot because the relevant facts are easily accessible to us. If Sloman and Fernbach are right, then our epistemic health as individuals – i.e. the

¹ Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.

² Sloman and Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion*, 121.

extent to which our beliefs accurately represent the world – is inextricably tied to the health of the epistemic commons.

Consider the following. Do you understand how a zipper works? How about a flush toilet? These objects seem basic enough. Knowing how they work isn't exactly rocket science. But people drastically overestimate their understanding of how these simple items function. In one study, Leon Rozenblit and Frank Keil asked people to rate from one to seven how well they understood the workings of such objects. They then asked participants to actually explain in detail how the objects worked. Many were simply unable to do so. And so when asked to revisit the question of how well they understood, subjects drastically lowered their ratings. Psychologist Rebecca Lawson performed a similar experiment where students were asked to explain, by sketching out the mechanism, how a bicycle works. The results were striking – most people were unable to complete the task, even though a bicycle is such a familiar object in our daily lives. This phenomenon, of people thinking they know much more than they actually do, has come to be known as the illusion of explanatory depth.³

Why might we fall prey to this illusion? Well for one, the relevant information is easily accessible. If you want to know how a zipper really works, a simple internet search will give you all the details you need. Though you may not actually as of this moment know the workings of a zipper, the knowledge is “at your fingertips,” as it were. What this suggests is our representation of the world is like a low-resolution map such that “zooming in” only gives a clear picture insofar as we are able to rely upon the knowledge others have. With respect to most areas of the map, we are unable to zoom in by ourselves – and if we do, we'll just see large pixels that don't look like anything. The division of cognitive labor, then, renders our epistemic lives intricately tied with the efforts and contributions of others.

Furthermore, the very coarse-grained picture we have of the world will itself depend on which perspectives are “alive” in the discourse within our milieu. Consider for example a teenager within a deeply religious sect living in a small village. Suppose that this sect does not believe in Darwinian evolution. The arguments for evolution are not discussed, and when the topic is broached, people quickly dismiss it as an unsubstantiated theory. Some might raise what they take to be decisive counterarguments like: “How come we don't see monkeys turning into humans now?” or “Where are the missing links?” and so on. Now the teenager might be able, in principle, to discover the powerful arguments in favor of evolution by natural selection. There is a copy of the *Origin of Species* at the local library, and she could also spend time delving into encyclopedias and biology textbooks. But for all intents and purposes, her map of the world has a large hole in it. What's more, given that there are ample other constraints on her time, she might simply not find it worthwhile inquiring further.

In this way, there are lots of questions that we might lack the time or imagination to inquire about if the people we're surrounded by consider the issue settled. Division of cognitive labor means we simply cannot independently verify all the claims we take for granted. But that in turn means that if the view our community settles on is mistaken or impoverished, the distortion easily transfers to us. Our epistemic health thus depends on the epistemic health of our milieu.

³ Rozenblit and Keil, “The Misunderstood Limits of Folk Science: An Illusion of Explanatory Depth”; Lawson, “The Science of Cyclopedia: Failures to Understand How Everyday Objects Work.”

The 19th century mathematician and philosopher W.K. Clifford underscored this social, interconnected nature of our ability to understand and describe the world in his landmark essay on the ethics of belief:

Our lives are guided by that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes. Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handed on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork. Into this, for good or ill, is woven every belief of every man who has speech of his fellows. An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live.⁴

For Clifford, this meant that each of us has an important ethical responsibility: namely, to believe only on the basis of proper evidence. As I will be arguing in the next chapter, if our epistemic situation is a common resource in this way, then we all have a duty to do what we can to preserve the integrity of this resource. However, believing on the basis of proper evidence, though important in its own right, is *not enough* – we also have a duty to speak our minds.

Blind Spots and Social Pressure

To set the stage for that argument, it is necessary to examine the way in which the epistemic commons is vulnerable. Tragedies of the commons arise because common resources are often susceptible to damage and degradation.⁵ For example, industrial pollution can destroy river ecosystems. Analogously, I will argue below, *social pressure* can degrade the epistemic commons.

Consider again the village described above. Why might reasons to accept evolution be systematically repressed here? Presumably because publicly defending such reasons will come at some cost to one's social status, the maintenance of which is a strong motivation for most people.⁶ Somebody discussing evidence in favor of Darwinian evolution might be seen as deviant, and perhaps not a true believer of the religion. Furthermore, accusations of heresy or disbelief can invite severe repercussions in many deeply religious societies – even if such accusations end up being untrue. Thus, even if somebody were to encounter or think of a reason to believe in evolution, they might keep that thought to themselves, especially if they're unsure of the soundness of the reason. Why risk your reputation and social standing (or worse, in many places and times) just to voice some reason you're unsure of?

In this way, social pressure can systematically filter out reasons to believe a particular claim. The reasons that don't get filtered out will make it look like that claim ought to be rejected – *even if* had there been no such filtering, then people would be justified in believing the claim. In other words, filtering processes created by social pressure allow reasons to pile up on one side of an argument while those on the other side get discarded. Yet, the overall balance of reasons, had open discourse

⁴ Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," 292.

⁵ This idea was first introduced in Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons."

⁶ Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland, "Is the Desire for Status a Fundamental Human Motive? A Review of the Empirical Literature."

prevailed, might well have supported the other side. Any time we observe social pressure to avoid giving some kinds of reasons, then, we should suspect that a worrisome blind spot exists in some form or another.

Importantly, we can't dismiss the existence of such distortions simply by surveying the first-order evidence (i.e. evidence directly relevant to the issue at hand) presented to us. The problem is created precisely because evidence is filtered in such a way as to support one conclusion. It's then no good to simply look at the evidence that is presented and say: "but the conclusion is obviously right!" The conclusion *looks* obviously right because countervailing evidence is not allowed to surface and accumulate, due to the presence of social pressure. A collective blind spot can exist in this way even if the members of a community *respond rationally* to the first-order evidence they have.

A Detailed Example: Three Engineers and a Dam

Consider the following example. Imagine a situation where three engineers are responsible for the construction and upkeep of a particular dam. Suppose that constructing the dam has been a project that has required enormous funding and mobilization of resources. Imagine also that the dam has an enormous positive impact on the livelihoods of the surrounding community – it provides essential power and irrigation. So, naturally, the community as a whole has a strong interest in the success of the project. Besides, the dam construction is a big feather in the cap for many local officials and politicians. People want to believe it will succeed, and opponents of the project as well as doubters are not looked upon favorably.

Now, a dam bursting, of course, can be really devastating. Suppose there are some good reasons to think that this particular dam will hold during this particular year. But there are also reasons to think the dam will break. The reasons to think the dam will hold are common knowledge among the engineers, since there's no social pressure not to voice these reasons. However, the reasons to think the dam will break are *distributed* among the engineers. They keep these reasons to themselves because they don't want to be seen as naysayers.

Suppose that the reasons to think the dam will break outweigh the reasons to think the dam will hold. Basically, given the total evidence, the dam is going to break. The resulting case has the following feature: it would be rational *given the evidence of the group as a whole* to believe the dam will break. Yet it is not true of *any particular individual* that she should believe the dam will break given the evidence she has.

To fix ideas, suppose the following are the relevant considerations ('R' for 'reason').

Pro:

R₁ = the dam is constructed with good materials.

R₂ = the structural engineering is sound overall.

Con:

R₃ = the upstream rainfall has been unusually high this year.

R₄ = the spillway design has some defects.

R₅ = the outlet pipe maintenance has been suboptimal.

None of the con considerations is by itself sufficient evidence to think the dam will break, given the pro reasons. However, the considerations taken as a whole – i.e. R₁ through R₅ – support the conclusion that the dam will break. But now suppose that each of the three engineers knows both R₁ and R₂ (since there's no social pressure to hide these) but only *one* of the remaining reasons.

So, suppose the first engineer knows R₁, R₂, and R₃, the second knows R₁, R₂, and R₄, and the third knows R₁, R₂, and R₅. Each engineer believes the dam will not break – and given the evidence each has, this is indeed the rational conclusion for each to draw. But the *group as a whole* is irrational in a sense. For the group as a whole is in possession of evidence such that it would be rational to believe the dam will break, and therefore to take steps to fix it if possible or to evacuate the surrounding population.⁷

Why might each engineer not reveal her counterevidence? Well she might think something like this: “I have some evidence to think the dam will be in trouble, but the overall case for the integrity of the dam is really strong. If I raise concerns about the dam, all that will happen is I will invite social opprobrium. Nothing good will come out of it, because given what I know, the dam is not going to break anyway.” So, in other words, there's a downside but there's no upside.

Notice that such silence need not be borne out of pure selfishness. It need not be the case that the engineers only care about themselves and not the people who would be affected were the dam to break. We can even suppose that if the dam breaks, all three of the engineers' houses will get destroyed. So, if any of these engineers *knew* the rest of the evidence, let's suppose they'd bring it to the attention of the others, despite the risk of social opprobrium. I'll risk some flak if it means saving thousands of lives, including my house, they might think. But the issue is that none of them is in a position to know that the dam will break *because* they act in a way that's rational given what they know. In this way social pressure can blind us to what the right course of action is, given what our group as a whole knows.

Lessons from the 20th Century

Evidential situations like these can lead to catastrophe. If information is not freely shared within a group due to social pressure, deliberation on very important issues can be distorted. In the above case, the dam will break and ruin many lives.

Moreover, this is not simply an exercise of the imagination. Many avoidable disasters have occurred because there was pressure not to share certain kinds of information. The Chernobyl disaster, in which a nuclear powerplant malfunctioned and exploded in what is modern-day Ukraine, is perhaps a paradigm example. Due to the authoritarian, top-down government in place at the time,

⁷ Empirical work suggests that in general, when deliberating, groups tend to focus on commonly known information as opposed to information possessed only by some individuals within the group. This can cause the group to make poor decisions. See: Stasser and Titus, “Pooling of Unshared Information in Group Decision Making: Biased Information Sampling During Discussion”; Hightower and Sayeed, “The Impact of Computer-Mediated Communication Systems on Biased Group Discussion”; Stasser, Abele, and Parsons, “Information Flow and Influence in Collective Choice”; Sunstein and Hastie, *Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink to Make Groups Smarter*. Part of the explanation here is that sharing unique information tends to carry social costs; see Stasser and Titus, “Hidden Profiles: A Brief History.” The problem becomes worse as the group size increases.

individuals had incentives not to raise alarms about radiation levels, the nature of the explosion, substandard materials, etc. The result was devastating for thousands of people, many of whom continue to feel the effects of radiation poisoning to this day. The HBO series *Chernobyl* offers a detailed look at the deliberations and actions of various individuals as they grappled with the situation in a way that brings out the incentives they had to distort or suppress information.⁸

Democracies typically do a better job of avoiding unnecessary disasters and missteps like this. The victory of the Allies in World War II can be partly attributed to the nature of information flow within democratic decision-making.⁹ In the democracies, members of the army were relatively more able and willing to offer information that would lead to course-correction by the upper chain of command. By contrast, within the German army and air force, people were much more hesitant about displeasing their superior officers with news or information or strategic perspectives that might be seen to dampen the war effort.

Democracies are also able to allow the spread of key information through a more open media. Journalists are less prone to intimidation by the government, and thus can quickly disseminate crucial news to civilians and government officials alike. Luther Gulick, who served as a high-level American official during World War II, explained that in contrast, decisions within authoritarian governments are “hatched in secret by a small group of partially informed men and then enforced through dictatorial authority.”¹⁰ Democracies are thus able to avoid some of the epistemic pitfalls that beset authoritarian regimes because the channels of information are much freer.

This is no cause for complacency, however. Democracies are not *immune* to such problems. For example, the infamous Bay of Pigs Fiasco, a failed U.S.-backed landing attempt on Cuba in 1961, resulted in part because those who had doubts about the plan suppressed their reservations.¹¹ Moreover, social pressure need not always come from government authorities. Think of college students who feel pressure to binge drink, the many of us who feel pressure to dress in particular ways, teenagers who (used to) feel pressure to smoke cigarettes – or, what’s more relevant here, people who feel pressure not to publicly express certain social or political opinions. Such forms of social pressure do not come top-down, from some governmental chain of command. Rather, they are much more spontaneous and organic. These pressures *emerge* from the incentives, interactions, and choices of millions of people who shape a particular culture. Democracy, then, does not solve all the informational problems systemic within authoritarian regimes.

The Importance of Reference Networks

Which pressures to conform we experience depends crucially on our *reference networks*. Philosopher Christina Bicchieri, known for her work on social norms, uses the concept to illustrate that the set of people who matter when it comes to influencing your norm-guided behavior is not always the set physically closest to you. Thus, a religious, married Mormon individual’s reference network might centrally involve her religious family and other Mormon friends rather than the atheist singles living

⁸ Parts of the presentation are fictionalized for dramatic purposes, but the core features of the events are preserved.

⁹ For more on this, see Sunstein, *Conformity*.

¹⁰ Gulick, *Administrative Reflections from World War II*, 125.

¹¹ For further analysis of the fiasco, see Janis, *Groupthink*; Sunstein and Hastie, *Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink to Make Groups Smarter*.

in her city, who may be physically closer to her. An academic's reference network may largely consist of other academics even if he lives in a neighborhood comprised mostly of blue-collar families.

The cultures that have the greatest impact on us, then, are not necessarily those most physically close to us. And they may be cultures associated with a minority of the population, as in the Mormon example above. It's not always a matter of similar demographics either. For instance, according to Bicchieri, "A young woman in Philadelphia wearing very high heels will probably not care what other women do in India, or even New Orleans. Her reference network may be the 'fashionable' crowd in her town, those who she is likely to meet and give her a chance to 'show off,' or it may be a celebrity, magazine starlets, or TV series that girls in her reference network follow."¹²

Now the pattern I have been describing – where the evidence on one side is common knowledge but the evidence on the other side is distributed and isolated – has important epistemic and ethical implications which have received little philosophical attention. The pattern may explain some of the phenomena we observe in public discourse and public opinion – in particular, how political polarization on a range of separate issues can be maintained. Crucial to the analysis is a characterization of the social pressures and information channels within people's reference networks.

Consider a person, Alice, whose reference network consists mostly of supporters of one party. Now imagine that Alice agrees with her reference network, given her analysis of the information she has, on all but one issue. Let's say that on this particular issue, she has some pretty strong evidence. Suppose this issue has to do with the causes of, and effective methods of reducing, violent crime. Alice has done a deep dive into the available data on crime and policing, and is statistically savvy enough to draw reasonable conclusions. Now, Alice disagrees with her group on this issue, but the evidence she has is strong enough that many others in her group, if they deliberate rationally with this evidence in hand, will come to change their views on the topic.

Nonetheless, Alice may not share this evidence with her group. For one, she might be keenly aware of the flak she will receive if she disagrees with her reference network on an issue of contentious partisan disagreement. Even if she doesn't explicitly lose friends, people may look upon her with more suspicion. She might also lose out on future professional opportunities if she signals to others that she's not a good member of the ideological group. So that's the downside. What's the upside? Well by Alice's own lights, her group gets things mostly right anyway. Sharing the evidence that she has will only empower the other group relative to her group, which will be, on balance, bad by her lights. Thus, the rational thing to do is to keep that evidence to herself.

But now note that Alice may not be the only one facing such an issue. Imagine that Bob, another member of the group, disagrees on the issue of the minimum wage. He has good evidence that would suggest a position contrary to the group's accepted wisdom. But he agrees with the group on all the other issues, including crime and policing. Claire might disagree with the group's position on abortion, having thought a lot about the topic and delved into the arguments on both sides of the issue. However, she agrees with the group on all the other topics, including crime and policing as well as the minimum wage.

¹² Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*, 19.

The dissenters don't share their evidence. However, *were* the evidence to be shared, the group's overall position on a variety of partisan issues may well be dramatically undermined. This fact, however, will not be transparent to the members of the group. Given what first-order evidence they have, it makes sense for them to think their group is right on the whole.

This dynamic may be a good explanation of the pattern of polarization we observe in modern life. We find public opinion divided strongly along partisan lines, but on issues that seem to be rationally disconnected. For example, particular positions on gun control, criminal justice, immigration, climate change, abortion, minimum wages, and a host of other issues travel together. In other words, if you pick a person at random and all you know about them is their view on gun control and climate change, you can probably predict their opinion with good accuracy on abortion and immigration. But why should this be so? It would seem that these issues have nothing to do with each other – a particular position on gun control shouldn't commit you to any view on abortion or minimum wage. To put it another way: the set of considerations, statistics, arguments relevant to each of these issues is quite distinct. So, what explains this pattern? Partisans of either side, of course, will be tempted to say the other side is simply wrong about every issue at hand. And they'll point to the first-order evidence they have on a variety of issues, which supports the views of their side, and thus implies that the other side's views are wrong.

But what could possibly *explain why* the other side would get everything wrong and one's own side would get everything right? There are a variety of flat-footed responses partisans will be tempted to give: the other side is dumb, brainwashed, evil, selfish, and so on. These responses, however satisfying from the point of view of the partisan, are challenging to sustain.¹³ It is also worth exploring *non-cynical* hypotheses that could show how generally well-meaning individuals come to form their beliefs on contentious issues. What is needed here is a way of explaining how people seem to come to accept one of two packages of disconnected beliefs. The model formulated above, of social pressure acting as a screen on contrary evidence, is a plausible candidate. The model can explain how rational people, doing the best they can with the evidence they have, can nonetheless form a *group* that is irrational.

The Danger Today

In her groundbreaking work on the dynamics of public opinion, political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann argued that fear of isolation can create a "spiral of silence," where only one side of an issue is publicly defended. The core mechanism she identifies is this. People don't want to say things that they believe might risk eliciting the disapproval of others; they don't want to potentially lose friends and get pushed out of their social groups. There is a fear of *isolation*. So, instead of saying what they really think about a particular issue, such individuals keep mum. Once the process is set in motion, more and more people become silent about their true opinions.¹⁴

¹³ For more on why such strategies of vindicating the partisan face significant challenges, see Joshi, "What Are the Chances You're Right about Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship."

¹⁴ The worry is not merely theoretical. For instance, a recent poll shows that 62% of Americans say they have political opinions they are afraid to share, and 32% worry about potential lost job opportunities if their political views become known; see Jenkins, "Poll: 62% of Americans Say They Have Political Views They're Afraid to Share." Another study shows that the proportion of Americans who do not feel that they can speak their minds has *tripled* from the height of McCarthyism and the Red Scare of the 1950s: Gibson and Sutherland, "Keeping Your Mouth Shut: Spiraling Self-

Spirals like these typically occur with regards to contentious, emotionally laden moral and political issues. A spiral of silence can drive even the majority opinion underground if the minority is sufficiently vocal, and especially if mass media repeatedly and concordantly come down on one side of the issue. Eventually, the spiral of silence causes the majority opinion to effectively disappear, while the previously minority opinion becomes the dominant societal assumption.¹⁵

What does this mean for us, now? Well for one, we shouldn't assume, for all the reasons explored so far, that such spirals of silence induced by social pressure (real or perceived) are going to line up with the truth all the time (or even most of the time). Spirals of silence are sensitive to *social* forces, not to the *truth*. Thus, they can cause society to settle on opinions that are quite misguided.

However, in order to know what policies to support or how to remedy various social problems, we need to have an accurate idea of what the social world is like. The very best of intentions can have terrible consequences if those intentions are not supplemented with an accurate picture of the world. (Indeed, under some description, more or less all of the worst actors and movements in history can be said to have "good intentions.") But social pressure can warp our collective picture of the world without individuals being in good positions to detect the distortion. So, the more we allow spirals of silence to occur, the more chance there is for the road to hell to be paved with good intentions.

The danger we face today is that many of us have quite confident views about lots of contentious issues, as well as lots of issues that have been "settled," not via a process of institutionalized disconfirmation, but rather through spirals of silence. But this means that the steps we might take to mitigate economic and social problems could backfire, making things worse. The risk becomes greater the more radical, as opposed to piecemeal, solutions we embrace. We might also be misdiagnosing what the problems are in the first place. And we might be missing various forests for the trees. Our Chernobyl, so to speak, might not involve a nuclear powerplant, but might instead manifest itself in the way we conceive of and try to solve social and economic problems.

One way to respond to this predicament is to encourage epistemic humility.¹⁶ Perhaps we should all just check ourselves. This however, is far easier said than done. Knowing our epistemic limitations in abstract terms may not actually induce humility in us (especially the loudest among us) when the rubber meets the road. The only way to properly mitigate our dangerous blind spots is for courageous individuals to speak their minds, and refuse to buckle to social pressure. This is not to say that epistemic humility and other tools for critical thinking are not important or worth cultivating. But if knowledge is a collective enterprise, individual epistemic humility can only go so far. This humility, for instance, cannot prevent a Chernobyl – only people sharing their evidence can.

Upshots for Conformity and Cooperation

Censorship in the United States." The study further finds that the tendency to self-censor increases with level of education.

¹⁵ Noelle-Neumann, "The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion."

¹⁶ For a thorough recent treatment of how individuals should regulate their epistemic lives in the potential presence of epistemic defeaters, see Ballantyne, *Knowing Our Limits*.

Whenever there is social pressure to support one particular conclusion and to refrain from giving reasons to doubt that conclusion, there will be a systematic filtering out of important information. If, in the end, the group's conclusion is correct, it will be an accident, a stroke of luck. Even then, the group's picture of the world will likely be warped in some way or another. Depending on the context, such distortions can have terrible practical consequences as well.

Two qualifications are in order. First, there is often stigma attached to obviously irrational "giving of evidence." Imagine a person who says "Hey, here's some evidence for thinking the sun goes around the Earth: horses have four legs." People would probably think there's something off with this person, or that he's joking in some way; the argument is a *non sequitur*. Though, people presumably won't get *mad* at him. They'll probably just try to make sure he's not having some kind of breakdown. Second, there are pressures to be relevant in conversation. Thus, giving evidence about the employment effects of minimum wages, say, is not relevant in the context of an ongoing conversation about how the dinosaurs went extinct, and would rightly be frowned upon.

But society often applies pressure on us to conceal evidence in a way that is independent of the quality of the evidence *qua* support for a particular conclusion, or considerations of relevance. Thus, imagine a person giving evidence about the effects of minimum wages, which conflicts with the convictions of her social group, in the context of political discussion. Even if her arguments are good, there will be an inclination for people to act as if to say, "Which side are you on?" or "You're not the good person I thought you were." Or imagine giving reasons to believe in evolution by natural selection within the context of a deeply religious sect of a particular sort. There, people might suspect that the person making such arguments is actually a closet disbeliever, to be shunned.

These forms of social pressure, which come apart from the perceived badness of the argument or evidence on offer, are ubiquitous with regards to ideas that social groups have an affective investment in. The pressures are often tied to issues regarding which taking a particular stand is important to people's *identity* in some way – be it social, political, religious, national, or professional. What's more, people will often publicly display *anger* towards those who share evidence supporting disfavored conclusions of this sort.

It is these kinds of pressures, especially when they apply to topics of great epistemic importance or generality – like the theory of evolution or the effects of minimum wage – that can lead to worrisome blind spots. Therefore, providing evidence that challenges prevalent opinion, at personal cost, can be a useful service to society.

Of course, it's important not to overstate the point. A pure contrarian, that is, someone who disagrees with people for the sake of disagreement, is probably not doing much of a service to society. First of all, most people and groups, most of the time, get most things right. If that's correct, then pure contrarians will be wrong most of the time. Secondly, a pure contrarian's opinions will not contain much "signal" – since he disagrees simply because he wants to disagree, people won't be in a good position to take him seriously.

Legal scholar Cass Sunstein, in explaining the perils of conformity thus warns that "We should not lament social influences or wish them away. Much of the time, people do better when they take close account of what others do."¹⁷ Many of the conventions and social norms that societies adopt

¹⁷ Sunstein, *Conformity*, 7.

serve useful functions. Furthermore, even if the contentious issues that generate disagreement or social pressure seem pervasive, they reflect the tip of an iceberg. In almost any society, there is a base of mutual agreement on facts and norms. Most members of most societies agree that theft is wrong, that plants need water to grow, that two and two make four, and that it makes sense to drive on the side of the road on which everybody else is driving. If there was constant disagreement about everything, society, with all the coordination and cooperation it requires, would be impossible.

The tendency to come to mutual agreement with others would have had enormous evolutionary import for our ancestors. Cooperating with others to hunt large game, for example, would have required a lot of agreement and coordination. The hunters would all have to agree about which kind of animal to hunt, what technique to use, what roles each individual must play, how to divide the bounty, and so on. Agreement, then, is indispensable for cooperation, which in turn is indispensable for human society.¹⁸

Yet, conformity also has a dark side. Individuals who speak their minds despite the pressure serve a crucial function. Sunstein goes on to say, “But social influences also diminish the total level of information within any group, and they threaten, much of the time, to lead individuals and institutions in the wrong directions. Dissent can be an important corrective; many groups and institutions have too little of it...conformists are free riders, whereas dissenters often confer benefits on others.”¹⁹

Institutions of Knowledge Production

Social pressure creates blind spots by making it costly to provide evidence on one side of an issue, while making it costless or even beneficial to provide evidence on the other side of the issue. Whenever such incentives exist, we should suspect that our resulting view of the world is warped in some way. These incentives are particularly important to address within the institutions responsible for knowledge production and dissemination: research groups of various sorts and fields and academic departments within the university system.

Given modern division of labor, such institutions specialize in knowledge production; the rest of society thus relies upon them for providing an accurate picture of the world. Other individuals in society, however, do not have the time or resources to check all the work produced by such institutions, and so an element of trust is necessary. Analogously, you don’t have the time or wherewithal to check all the work done by your lawyer, doctor, or accountant – when it comes to your interaction with such specialists, then, an element of trust is involved.

However, social pressures within institutions responsible for knowledge production can undermine their mission and distort their product. Science works well only in a context of institutionalized disconfirmation: that is, a situation wherein researchers are free and even incentivized to disconfirm any and all hypotheses that are in contention.

Over time, science has disconfirmed hypotheses that would seem exceedingly natural to humans observing their world. Many things that seem intuitive to us turned out to be false. The Earth, it

¹⁸ Bowles and Gintis, *A Cooperative Species*.

¹⁹ Sunstein, *Conformity*, 7.

turned out, is roughly spherical, though it looks flat from our vantage point. And while the sun looks like it goes around the Earth, the reverse is true. In the 17th century, Galileo Galilei suffered persecution at the hands of the Catholic Church for defending this idea. Science naturally works best when such costs are absent – so that it doesn't take a Galilean personality to seek the truth.²⁰

Modern physics has upended our intuitive picture of the world even further. The things that look 'solid' to us – tables, rocks, books, etc. – are actually made mostly of empty space.²¹ And the fundamental units of physical reality have both particle-like and wavelike properties. Albert Einstein famously showed that time is not absolute. Whether or not two spatially distant events are simultaneous depends on the observer's frame of reference. He further showed that space and time are intertwined in such a way that it's best to think of them as spacetime. According to the best models we currently have to explain the behavior of large objects, gravity is the result of spacetime "bending" around massive objects.²² Trippy stuff!

How has science made these remarkable discoveries that are so far from our intuitive sense of the world? Science is a collaborative effort, and no one person can do it all by themselves, even within a sub-sub-field. Science involves enormous division of labor. But for us to be able to trust the products of science, the incentives have to be right. The incentives that individual scientists face must be aligned with finding the truth, wherever it may lie. Generally, this is the case, and that is why science has been on the whole very successful. In physics or chemistry, if you are able to find experimental data that disconfirms an important and commonly accepted hypothesis, you will receive many professional goods – you'll likely get published in prestigious journals like *Nature* or *Science*, you might get big grants in the future, an endowed chair, maybe even the Nobel Prize.

Given these incentives, physics and chemistry are *self-correcting*. If a hypothesis is easily disconfirmed, it won't last for long. Researchers, incentivized to disconfirm it, will quickly design experiments to show why the hypothesis doesn't hold. Sloman and Fernbach write: "Scientific claims can be checked. If scientists are not telling the truth about a result or if they make a mistake, eventually they are likely to be found out because, if the issue is important enough, someone will try and fail to replicate their result."²³ Many scientists have echoed the importance of this feature of science over the years. Any time the accepted wisdom strays from the truth then, a course-correction will quickly follow.

Understanding knowledge production as a collective endeavor, which relies heavily on a well-maintained epistemic commons, helps us appreciate why John Stuart Mill defended his somewhat radical sounding account of justification for our scientific beliefs in *On Liberty*. He wrote:

If even the Newtonian philosophy were not permitted to be questioned, mankind could not feel as complete assurance of its truth as they now do. The beliefs which we have most

²⁰ For an exploration of "Galilean personalities" in the context of modern science, see Dreger, *Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and One Scholar's Search for Justice*.

²¹ Straightforwardly so at least on one interpretation of quantum mechanics. The other interpretations, however, are even more counterintuitive. For more on the interpretive issues, see: Maudlin, *Philosophy of Physics: Quantum Theory*.

²² See Maudlin, *Philosophy of Physics: Space and Time*. One notorious persisting problem here is that quantum mechanics and general relativity do not cohere. So, the search for a unified theory continues.

²³ Sloman and Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion*, 224.

warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded.²⁴

Thus, imagine if critics of Newton's physics found themselves unemployable or prone to receiving censure, threats, etc., as soon as they challenged part of the view. Could a person living in Mill's time, circa the mid-19th century, be able to trust the science of physics? Could he have reasonably believed in Newton's laws if people faced a very uphill battle in trying to disconfirm them and he knew about this situation? Plausibly not. For, especially if this person is not a physicist, he lacks the wherewithal to check the researchers' work. For all he knows there may be good reasons to reject Newtonian physics that are just not allowed to surface.

Indeed, as it turns out, Newtonian physics was accurate only in approximation. For macroscopic objects traveling at relatively low speeds, i.e., well below the speed of light, Newton's laws allow us to make approximately true predictions. However, as Einstein later showed, some decades after Mill had passed away, Newtonian physics breaks down when it comes to objects moving close to the speed of light. Furthermore, while Newton assumed that space, time, and mass are absolute, Einstein showed that they are relative. Which events are simultaneous, how long an object is, how much mass it has, all depend on the observer's frame of reference. If you are traveling at, say, half the speed of light relative to where I stand, then the length of a particular table will be quite different for you as opposed to me. Hence, even Newtonian physics, which was by Mill's time well established and confirmed with countless experiments, turned out not to be sacrosanct.

The scientific *process*, then, must be structured in a certain way for it to merit our trust and reliance. If there were contrary evidence to be found, would it be discovered, published, and incorporated into the mainstream scientific consensus? The answer to this question must be yes.

In some sense, the scientific enterprise must be *objective*. What does such objectivity mean? Philosopher Helen Longino argues that it requires an openness to what she calls *transformative critique*. For Longino, science is fundamentally a social practice, and it is precisely due to this fact that its objectivity can be secured. Individual researchers are bound to have their idiosyncratic perspectives and biases. However, "science" is not simply the aggregation of the findings of individual scientists. Science is fundamentally practiced by social groups, not lone individuals. What gets counted as scientific knowledge results from social processes like peer review, attempts at replication, citation patterns, and clashes between defenders of alternative hypotheses and paradigms. This is a feature, not a bug. "Only if the products of inquiry are understood to be formed by the kind of critical discussion that is possible among a plurality of individuals about a commonly accessible phenomenon," says Longino, "can we see how they count as knowledge rather than opinion."²⁵ Consequently, the more diverse points of view there are within a scientific community, the more objective the process is likely to be.

These lessons are not limited to science. Philosophy or literary criticism can be objective in this way too, according to Longino. However, the objectivity essentially depends on whether the social conditions within the field allow for robust critical discussion. A healthy field of inquiry, one whose product we have reason to take seriously, has to be one where people are incentivized to critique and disagree with ideas, such that no idea is sacred or beyond criticism.

²⁴ Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, 26.

²⁵ Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge*, 74.

To fix ideas, consider the philosophical field of metaethics. This subdiscipline asks foundational questions about the nature and epistemology of moral claims. These questions include, but are not limited to, the following. Are there any moral facts? If there are moral facts, are they subjective or objective? Would such facts be the sort of thing that can be discovered and investigated by the methods of natural science? How might we come to possess moral knowledge? When we say “murder is wrong,” are we expressing something more like a belief or something more like an emotion?²⁶

Now metaethics, given my own impression of it, is a good example of a field that is working reasonably well. People defending a wide range of positions – naturalism, non-naturalism, error theory, expressivism, constructivism, Humeanism – have climbed to the top of the profession, winning prestigious awards and endowed chairs, working at elite universities, and so on. A variety of perspectives and styles of argument can thus exist and flourish within the discipline. There’s no stigma, as far as I can tell, attached to working on either side of the various debates in metaethics. Consequently, younger members of the profession feel free to follow the argument where it leads. And so many different kinds of positions within the logical space have renowned and well-respected defenders.²⁷

When we look at the product of this discipline then, we can be fairly confident that few stones have been left unturned. If there was an easy argument to be made against some position it likely will have been made; the remaining fruits on the tree will probably be pretty high up. We don’t have to worry about reasons piling up on one side of the debate but being filtered out and discarded on the other side. Part of why metaethics works as well as it does might have to do with the fact that its subject matter – though fascinating and stimulating – does not “excite the passions.” People just aren’t going to get mad at you for defending non-naturalism or expressivism.

Due to the absence of such social pressure, we find each position having several defenders. This in turn reinforces the willingness of metaethicists to follow the argument where it leads. There’s a kind of strength in numbers. Contrast this with a hypothetical scenario where there are one hundred naturalists (i.e. those who believe that moral properties are natural properties, in principle investigable by natural science) for every non-naturalist (those who deny naturalism). In such a case, it is hard to imagine not feeling isolation or social pressure against defending non-naturalism. Such pressure, whether real or perceived, would especially impact early career researchers, such as graduate students, whose future careers are uncertain. A promising graduate student who is inclined to defend non-naturalism might think twice. The fact that naturalists are in the overwhelming majority may be taken by such a student – whether consciously or subconsciously, rightly or wrongly – to suggest that defending non-naturalism is a bad career move.

Suppose now we add a stigma to this. Imagine that defenders of non-naturalism were publicly censured and ascribed bad character traits. We can see how this would cause reasons to pile up on

²⁶ For a short but comprehensive overview of the field, see Finlay, “Four Faces of Moral Realism.”

²⁷ For example, the late Derek Parfit, a non-naturalist, was a renowned professor at All Souls College, Oxford. But Peter Railton and Michael Smith, both metaethical naturalists, hold professorships at the University of Michigan and Princeton University respectively, and are similarly well-regarded in the profession. Other prominent metaethicists include Sharon Street at NYU and Christine Korsgaard at Harvard who defend constructivism, Mark Schroeder at USC who defends Humeanism, and Allan Gibbard (emeritus) at Michigan who has defended expressivism. Though, my colleague Kevin Vallier thinks that divine command theory often gets short shrift in the teaching and research practices of the field.

one side of the debate. It would create perverse incentives that should undermine the trust we ought to have in the product of this community of research. Fortunately, as it stands, such pressures do not exist within metaethics. In fact, it would be considered grossly unprofessional to publicly ascribe bad character traits to one's intellectual opponents within the field. A person who engaged in ad hominem attacks would quickly lose standing in the profession.

I have been describing modern physics, chemistry, and metaethics as fields that model healthy atmospheres of research (though of course they may not be perfect). But is this true across the board with respect to our institutions of knowledge production? Along with others, economist Glenn Loury suggests there is reason to worry. In a provocative 1994 article called "Self-Censorship in Public Discourse," he writes:

Some areas of social science inquiry are so closely linked in the public mind to sensitive issues of policy that an objective, scholarly discussion of them is now impossible. Instead of open debate – where participants are prepared to be persuaded by arguments and evidence contrary to their initial presumptions, we have become accustomed to rhetorical contests – where competing camps fire volleys of data and tendentious analyses back and forth at each other.²⁸

In a later passage, Loury claims that perverse incentives within a community of research can reduce the degree to which we should take its output seriously:

The notion of objective research – on the employment effects of the minimum wage, say, or the influence of maternal employment on child development – can have no meaning if, when the results are reported, other 'scientists' are mainly concerned to pose the ad hominem query: 'Just what kind of economist, sociologist, and so on would say this?' Not only will investigators be induced to censor themselves, the very way in which research is evaluated and in which consensus about 'the facts' is formed will be altered. If when a study yields unpopular conclusions it is subjected to greater scrutiny, and more effort is expended toward its refutation, an obvious bias to 'find what the community is looking for' will have been introduced. Thus the very way in which knowledge of the world around us is constituted can be influenced by the phenomenon of strategic expression.²⁹

To the extent Loury is right, our epistemic condition with respect to the output of fields that are politicized in the way he describes above is shaky. Given the mountains and mountains of evidence relevant to all these policy-adjacent debates, though, none of us has the time, energy, or expertise required to dig through everything and properly make up our own minds. We inevitably have to rely on the journals, textbooks, and public lectures of the practitioners of these fields. But if the incentives within these fields are skewed in the way Loury describes, then such reliance will expose us to a lopsided selection and analysis of the facts out there. Depending on the case, this may well put us in a *worse* position epistemically than either ignorance or suspension of judgment with respect to certain topics. It would be like a jury being made to hear hours of arguments from the prosecution, and zero from the defense. Likely, the jury would have been better off before, when they had no opinion on the case!

²⁸ Loury, "Self-Censorship in Public Discourse," 452.

²⁹ Loury, 453.

All this puts us in a serious predicament, *especially* because, unlike metaethics (sorry metaethicists), the kinds of research Loury alludes to are extremely important to get right from a practical, policy-making perspective. The proper maintenance of the epistemic commons, when it comes to such fields of knowledge, then, is all the more important.

Conclusion

Social pressure to conceal evidence can create blind spots that can often be dangerous. Any time there is social pressure of this kind, we should suspect that our view of the world is distorted in important ways. What's the ethical upshot of this? If this is right, what should we, *as individuals*, do? That is the topic of the next chapter.

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