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COMMENTARY

Puzzling Beliefs: Why Do Many Americans Mistrust Science?

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Abstract
Why is there such a pervasive mistrust of science and expertise in the United States these days? This essay argues that, alongside the contribution made by the internet in facilitating the spread of misinformation, information silos, validation of kooky views, and so forth, the most significant factor derives from our failure to inculcate in our citizenry the basics of critical scientific thought and of its myriad extraordinary accomplishments.

Keywords Expertise · Motivated irrationality · Science · Trump · Biden · Climate change · COVID · Epistemic vigilance · Rationality

Introduction

It is common to hear talk about a "crisis of trust in science and expertise." Many people nowadays, instead of listening to what the best expert opinion is telling us about climate change, COVID vaccines, or election results, hold beliefs that are incompatible with that opinion. 40% of the US population believes that there is either "no solid evidence for global warming" or that it is "mostly due to natural patterns in the environment" (rather than to human activity)[1]; 24% are inclined to believe that the COVID vaccines are unsafe for adults[2]; and perhaps most shockingly, one-third of the country believes that the 2020 American presidential election was rigged, that Biden won through "voter fraud" rather than "fair and square."[3]

In each and every one of these cases, the evidence that these claims are false is abundant and seemingly available—certainly that evidence is much discussed on the airwaves. So, how do so many people come to believe the opposite of what the evidence indicates? What or who is to blame?

Many theories have been proposed to explain how we ended up here. Some blame the internet for the way it enables the fast spread of misinformation, and encourages encapsulation in information silos or echo chambers, so that the views you start out with keep getting reinforced without being subjected to counter-evidence. Some blame self-serving and mendacious politicians, who endanger the public good for their own benefit. Others point the finger at science itself, and the way in which the occasional scientific scandal may have eroded the public trust. Or they blame science for not communicating effectively. Or they blame it for straying beyond its proper boundaries of expertise and making value recommendations. Still others look at the academy and especially at the "post-modernist" movement in the humanities and social sciences which, by raising doubts about the very possibility of objective knowledge or truth, has promoted a kind of skepticism about the privileged status we accord science.

I do not wish to deny that some of these factors may be playing a role in explaining our current predicament. But what I want to argue is that, at the most fundamental level, the problem is actually far simpler and that the blame for our current problems actually lies with all of us and with the kind of society we have built. We are to blame for the situation we are in. I will explain.

[1] Pasquini, G., Spencer, A., Tyson, A., & Funk, C. (2023). 'Why Some Americans Do Not See Urgency on Climate Change', Pew Research Center. Retrieved May 20, 2024, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/08/09/why-some-americans-do-not-see-urgency-on-climate-change/>.

[2] Maroni, E. (2023). 'Vaccine Confidence Falls as Belief in Health Misinformation Grows'. The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved May 20, 2024, from <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/vaccine-confidence-falls-as-belief-in-health-misinformation-grows/>.

[3] Murray, Patrick (2024). 'Voters Weigh in on Presidential Stamina'. Monmouth University Polling Institute. Retrieved May 20, 2024, from <https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_021524/>.

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Puzzling Beliefs

Why is it *puzzling* that people have come to hold these beliefs? It is puzzling because, *by and large*, people are *rational*: they *conform their beliefs to the evidence*. Yet, in these important cases, they seem to be deviating wildly from what the evidence supports. And this requires explanation.

In what sense are people by and large rational? First, a word about "rational." A *belief* that is "irrational" is not a belief that is merely *false*—indeed, it need not even be false at all, it might be true; rather, it is *a belief that is not supported by the evidence that you have for it*. If you buy a ticket for a lottery whose fairness you have no reason to suspect, and you form the firm belief that you will win the lottery, that belief will be *irrational*, even if it turns out to be true and you do win the lottery. It is irrational because even though it turns out to be true, you had zero evidence that it was true when you formed the belief. A belief is irrational if it is not supported by the evidence available to you. And a *person* is irrational if he or she has a tendency to form irrational beliefs.

In this sense, then, ordinary people in their ordinary lives tend to be remarkably rational: in crossing the street, climbing the stairs, ordering food, driving their cars, etc., we are constantly being exposed to new evidence and are very good at rationally adjusting our beliefs to that evidence.

Of course, we are far from perfect in this regard. None of us is perfectly rational. We all experience occasional lapses, especially when strong emotion is involved. But it is the norm. And significant departures from rationality get called out and need explanation.

So, when we come across a *large-scale deviation* from the available evidence, as we seem to get in these cases, it is puzzling. And when they concern *matters that are as important as these*, we really need to know what is going on. After all, we are here talking about matters as important as the future of the planet, the potential deaths of millions, and the viability of democratic forms of government. The stakes could not be higher.

You might think that puzzling beliefs are nothing new. For example, even before the Trump era, nearly 50% of Americans believed in ghosts, 24% in reincarnation, etc.

One difference, though, between my examples and these ones is that these are all examples of beliefs for which there is *no adequate evidence*, rather than examples of beliefs that have been *refuted* by the available evidence. Beliefs that you hold on inadequate evidence are a certain kind of irrational belief; but beliefs for which you have ample disconfirming evidence are much worse and are much harder to explain. The puzzling cases I am talking about are all of the latter kind.

You might think that people believing propositions that have been decisively refuted is nothing new, either. For example, there are, and always have been, kooky conspiracy theorists out there: people who believe, for example, that there never was any moon landing, that the whole thing was faked.

That is true, but we are talking here about a very small number of people. It is easy to live with the claim that there is a small number of "kooks" among us; it is much harder to live with the claim that a third of the population is kooky. In any case, calling someone "kooky" is saying: I do not know why he believes the crazy things he believes, but I do not really care. But, of course, we do care why so many people believe things that threaten the very existence of democracy.

I defined "puzzling beliefs" as beliefs that *seem* irrational because they seem to run counter to the available evidence. The big question we face, then, is whether this appearance is true or illusory: when we figure out what is going on here, should we conclude that people only *seem* irrational or are they really being irrational in holding these beliefs?

This question is important both for science and for society. For science, it is important to figure out how belief, which is supposed to be responsive to the evidence, could deviate from it in such a large-scale way. For society, it is important to figure out what is going on because we might know how to fix the problem if we are dealing with basically rational people who have been misled in various ways; if, instead, we are dealing with an outbreak of mass irrationality, we may not know what to do, since we do not really have good ways of dealing with irrationality, let alone irrationality on a massive scale. So, the answer really matters.

Two Important Distinctions

Before we get to considering explanations, we need to make two basic distinctions. First, between two types of question:

> **A(ccess)-type questions:** questions that ordinary folks can settle for themselves. They can get access to the relevant evidence *and* are in a position to evaluate that evidence for themselves.
> versus
> **E(xpert)-type questions:** questions where ordinary folk either *lack access* to the relevant disconfirming evidence or are *not in a position to evaluate it* for themselves, and so must rely on the expertise of others.

In ordinary life, we come across many questions that we can settle for ourselves. However, much of ordinary life is pervaded by questions that are E-type—questions we cannot settle without expert help. My car is broken down—what is wrong with it? I have a pain in my stomach. What is causing

it? Or think of all the questions that you have to Google or check Wikipedia about.

The puzzling examples I cited above—the belief that climate change is unreal or that COVID vaccines are unsafe or even that a general election was rigged—are all basically E-type cases (although I think the one about the election is closest to being an A-type case). In such cases, you either do not have access to the relevant evidence for yourself or, even if you did, would be unable to appreciate the justification for yourself; to believe the right thing on these topics, you need to rely on expert opinion.

So, the situation is that the experts have the evidence and they make it available to you through journals, newspapers, government officials, and so on. Of course, if for whatever reason you do not *trust* the experts then you will end up ignoring this evidence and it won't have the appropriate effect on your beliefs. This lack of trust will explain why your beliefs are not conforming to the evidence.

The question of the rationality of these puzzling beliefs then becomes the question: Were you *rational* to withhold your trust from the experts?

A second, important distinction has to do with whether the question at issue is a purely *factual* one or a *practical* one.

For example, the questions whether climate change is real, whether the COVID vaccines are safe and effective, or whether Biden won the 2020 US election fair and square are factual questions: they concern whether something is (empirically) true.

However, the question whether it is rational for you to *take* the COVID vaccines is not just a factual matter—it is a question about whether you have a reason to *do* something, not only a question about whether to believe something. And you could very well believe that the vaccines are largely effective and safe, while thinking that, on balance, it does not make sense for *you* to *take* them (you are young, fit, or what have you).

E-Type Cases

Let us turn to looking at E-type cases, cases where you have to rely on expert opinion on a given topic. Here we need to ask:

What is an expert?
What is it to trust an expert?
How do you identify who the experts are?
When is it rational for you to trust them?

For present purposes, the notion of an expert on a given *factual* topic can be taken to be fairly unproblematic: it is someone who knows a lot more about the topic than ordinary folk do and who can pronounce on it with considerable authority and reliability.

What about an expert on a *practical* question, e.g., whether it is good for you to take a given vaccine?

Here it is *not* enough that someone knows a lot more about the relevant factual issues; the person must also know what is in *your* best interests; and that, in most cases, will be a *much* higher bar to meet.

What is trust? And what is it to trust someone or more specifically to trust them as an expert on a given topic?

Ronald Reagan, when asked whether he trusted the Russians to abide by the terms of a nuclear arms control treaty, said: "Trust but verify!" This is cute, but slightly nonsensical. To trust someone involves relying on them without having to double-check that what they are telling you is true. That is the whole point of trust. In effect, Reagan was saying that he did not trust the Russians.

But there is a version of Reagan's thought that is correct; it has been well brought out by Dan Sperber, Gloria Origgi, and their colleagues.[4] As they have pointed out, there is a distinction between trust and "blind trust." While we have no choice but to trust experts, that does not mean that we do not, or should not, exercise a certain kind of *epistemic vigilance* about what we are being told—we check on whether what we are being told is internally coherent, or coherent with what we already think we know. We check on whether the source in question still qualifies as an expert or whether she has somehow fallen out of touch with the most recent developments. Or whether the source is straying from what they are truly expert on. And so on. So, being trusting is consistent with being vigilant in these ways. A good knower would trust but remain vigilant. So, Reagan should have said not "Trust but verify!" but rather: "Trust but be vigilant!".

Let us turn to the next question, how do we rationally identify who the relevant experts are on a given topic?

I was once in a debate with the late Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Laureate in Economics, who recounted the following story: He was invited to lunch by people he did not know who said they wanted to talk about climate change. It turns out they were climate change deniers. Kahneman said that he then thought to himself (I paraphrase from memory) "Well, I treat the folks in the National Academy of Sciences as experts on this and the consensus among them is that climate change is real; but these guys treat these other folks (not clear exactly who) as experts and they deny it. Who am I to say which of us is right in who to trust?".

At the time, I found myself surprised—even outraged—at this remark by the Nobel Laureate: don't we have much more reason to treat the members of the National Academy of Science (NAS) as experts than arbitrary internet

[4] Sperber, D., Clément, F., Heintz, C., Mascaro, O., Mercier, H., Origgi, G., & Wilson, D. (2010). 'Epistemic Vigilance', *Mind & Language,* 25/4: 359–93.

"experts"? The people in the NAS have a string of extraordinary scientific accomplishments behind them—they put people on the moon, virtually eradicated polio, came up with the science underlying computers and the internet, etc. What string of accomplishments do these arbitrary internet experts have to their names?

Well, maybe that is a bit unfair as a description. Climate change deniers can always count on there being at least a few well-credentialed scientists who have rebelled against the consensus. And these days, with the internet, it is much easier for the deniers to find out that such prominent rebels exist. The fact that such scientists exist, along with certain other factors, like distrust in government, can offer some rational support for the denialist view. But it does not make the appearance of gross irrationality go away, because to side with a few fringe figures over the overwhelming consensus of the most distinguished climate and other scientists still seems very irrational. This is not to deny that it can sometimes be rational for a small group of *scientists* to go against the scientific consensus, or even that such fringe scientists can sometimes eventually be proven *right*. But the topic at hand is not the rationality of *scientific experts* in the course of doing science but rather the rationality of *laypeople* in determining which experts to trust. The reason why the appearance of gross irrationality does not go away is that even though it may occasionally be rational for a small group of practicing scientists to dissent from the scientist consensus, it is much harder to imagine how it can be rational *for a lay person*, who by stipulation has no expertise about the topic, to choose to trust a fringe minority over the combined consensus of the world's most distinguished scientists.

So, how could Kahneman say what he said? How could he think that his lunch companions were *epistemically blameless* in picking the fringe "experts" rather than going with his choice, the consensus view of the members of the prestigious NAS?

Kahneman did not explain. But I now see that we can offer the following argument on his behalf. To put the matter succinctly: *for many people, the question which experts to trust is itself an E-type question.* In other words, for many people, the question which experts to trust on a given topic is itself a question that you cannot answer for yourself but need expert help to do so.

There are at least two dimensions to the question about how to identify experts:

(a) What criteria should people use to figure out who counts as an expert on a given topic?
(b) And how do ordinary folk rationally tell who satisfies those criteria?

As examples of (a), we could mention: Why should we prefer experts who have degrees from top institutions, and membership in national academies to those who are not credentialed in this way? Why should we prefer people with a track record of impressive accomplishments, to those who do not have such a record? Why should we prefer the views of the consensus of the members of a national academy to fringe outliers?

As examples of (b), we could mention: How do I tell what the "top" institutions are? How do I tell who's got an impressive track record and who does not?

To some of us, the answers to these questions will seem obvious, questions that we can more or less answer for ourselves: they are for us A-type questions. To others, the answers will seem far less obvious and may well not be answerable without expert help—for them, they will be E-type questions.

To whom will the answers to these questions appear obvious? As you might expect, they will appear most obvious to those among us who have received a good education, one that includes an appropriately deep study into what it is to inquire into the truth about the world in a rational way. Such an education taught me not only about the *institutions* and *content* of science; it also taught me *how to think critically and scientifically*.

If you have received a decent education, you learn about the phenomena science tries to understand; you learn how complex those phenomena are, how difficult it is to make predictions about those phenomena that are accurate, and how remarkably accurate many scientific theories have been. You would learn just how impressive it is to have been able to softly land a probe on an asteroid coming in from the furthest reaches of the solar system traveling at 25 km per second! Or what an achievement it was to discover the structure of DNA and now to be able to edit it. The list is endless and mind-boggling.

You also learn about the peer review process, about how tough it can be to get something accepted by a top journal; how incentivized scientists are to criticize the views of other scientists, to check them; and so forth.

A proper appreciation of the magnitude of scientific achievement, of the genius that underlay those achievements, would naturally lead you to have a great respect for science as a knowledge-producing institution. While learning all of this, though, and inevitably, you would also learn how to think scientifically and critically yourself. It is not possible to teach someone a decent amount about the content of science without also teaching them how to think critically and rationally.

So, at the end of a decent education, you not only end up with a trust in, indeed reverence for, the institutions of science; you end up with a trust that you can see to be rational by the very critical faculties that you acquired when you learned what it is to think critically and scientifically. So, for you, the question about why it is rational to trust science

was, as it were, satisfactorily answered a long time ago and answered through the use of your own critical faculties.

In effect, what I am saying is that, with a proper schooling, the question which experts to trust is an A-type question, one that you can settle for yourself. You can see for yourself how extraordinarily impressive the scientific method has been in understanding the world around you. The kind of critical faculty that is thereby cultivated is also what enables you to exert the "epistemic vigilance" that Sperber et al. talk about and which allows your trust in expertise to be not blind.

Now, you might object that the question of which experts to trust can occasionally arise in a meaningful way even for a highly educated person. This is absolutely true; but for reasons I will now explain, this "objection" only serves to underscore the relevance of education to the question of whom to trust.

Take, for example, the question whether cryptocurrencies are the future of money, or whether they are just a Ponzi scheme with which to defraud unsuspecting folks. Because a currency like Bitcoin is such a new concept, resting on previously unheard-of technologies like the blockchain, most of us will need to rely on experts to figure out what to think. But who should we listen to? Who counts as an expert?

You might think the answer is easy. Who are the experts on money—surely, the chairman of JP Morgan Chase, Jamie Dimon, the largest bank in the US, will do; and he says cryptocurrency is all nonsense. But is Jamie Dimon really the right person to listen to? We know from history that sometimes an idea can be so new and transformative that even the best of the old guard cannot recognize its value: history provides many examples of such blindness. So, maybe instead we should listen to the inventors of the various cryptocurrencies? However, those folks are interested parties with a heavy investment in persuading you that crypto is the future of money; so, their views, while worth hearing out, cannot be taken as reliable either. So, we do not know who to turn to.

As we can see, then, a choice of expert can be a real conundrum, even for a highly educated person. But it is a conundrum precisely about questions about which *there isn't an existing scientific consensus*. Because questions about cryptocurrencies contain so many new features, critical scientific reflection has not yet been able to fully process what it would be correct to believe about them. Far from showing, then, that education makes no difference to the question of who to trust, it only reinforces the privileged place that critical scientific thought has for us.

What I have been arguing then is that if you have received a proper education, one that includes not only learning about the great achievements of scientific thought but which includes inculcating a certain amount of the capacity for such thought in you, the question of who to trust on most well-defined topics becomes relatively easy.[5] And indeed, that is how it seems, doesn't it? Here we are, a bunch of highly educated academics, scratching our heads about how people could allow themselves to be misled by fraudulent "experts." Of course, the matter seems easy to us; but how does it look from the vantage point of someone who has not received our kind of education?

Suppose all you have to go on is a very basic education, from a generally bad public school system, such as those that are all too common in the United States. Here you are in early adulthood having to make up your mind about whether to take a new vaccine, or whether to believe in something as elusive as global climate change, or even whether to believe that the election was not rigged.

In such a case, it is easy to see how you might not know the answers to our questions about how to identify the right experts. Why should you prefer the views of the consensus of the members of a national academy to fringe outliers? And what is a national academy anyway? And how do they arrive at consensus? Is that forced on them perhaps by outside forces, like the government or money? And who has the most impressive track record? And what does that mean anyway? For someone with little knowledge of the achievements of science and with too little capacity for critical thought, these can all seem like very difficult questions to answer in a rational way.

If, through no fault of your own, you grow up not knowing the answers to such questions, you can easily find yourself in a quandary with respect to them from which you cannot extricate yourself through purely rational means. To rationally resolve an E-type question, you need to know which folks to count as experts. However, which folks to count as experts is itself an E-type question for you, and so itself requires reliance on experts. This threatens what philosophers like to call a regress of justification.

If you are in this predicament, it may very well be a rationally irresoluble matter for you which experts to trust. Once such a rationally unbridgeable gap opens up, it can only be filled with rationally arbitrary factors, such as charismatic persuasion, propaganda, political solidarity, disinformation, information silos, and the like.

In the educational system as we currently have it (at least in the US), there will be many folks who will suffer from a *rationally blameless uncertainty* about how to go about identifying the relevant experts, and when to trust them; and for these folks, it is totally understandable that their opinions will be manipulable by factors and actors in a way for

[5] Might not whole disciplines go off the rails, as in social psychology, which suffers from a "replicability crisis?" Of course, but the perfectly rational decision to suspend belief in its "results," and to suspend trust in its mainstream experts, is itself just an exercise of the epistemic vigilance mandated by critical scientific thought.

which they cannot be wholly blamed. In the case of advice about practical matters, such as whether you should *take* the COVID vaccine (rather than just believe something about it), the difficulty is only compounded, since, as we saw, the bar is even higher for rationally identifying the relevant expert.

What is the solution? As I say, once you have arrived at the point where the question who to trust as an expert is an E-type question for you, you have no rational way out. At that point, you are at the mercy of various irrational factors and actors.

So, the only solution for a democratic society that does not want this to happen is not to allow so many of its citizens to arrive at such a stage. And the only way for a society to prevent that is to ensure that its citizens are educated in the only real respect that counts: a full appreciation of the nature, powers, and achievements of critical scientific thought.

Objections

I can imagine two objections to what I have been saying.

First, even many highly educated people, whom you might think would have no difficulty with our question about who counts as a scientific expert, are climate change deniers or vaccine resistant or believers in the Great Lie about the election (take some of the politicians in the Republican party, or Robert Kennedy Jr.). So, how can we say that a proper education is the solution?

Second, I have said that those of us who have been taught both about science and about how to think scientifically have no difficulty figuring out that it is rational to trust science. But how did *we* arrive at this happy state? Wasn't it just by having it drilled into us that scientific critical thought is the right way to fix beliefs. So, why isn't what we have here just a sophisticated form of *brainwashing*? If all that is going on is that I have been brainwashed one way (and we call that "rational"), how can I rationally insist that others come over to my way of thinking?

I will take these in turn.

What about all those educated Republicans, then? Well, I do not know how many of those people really believe what they say they believe. Much of it may be just expedient political posturing.

At least as far as both the Big Lie and vaccine hesitancy are concerned, the studies show that a lack of education is the best predictor for whether you will fall for these falsehoods. The situation with climate denial is a little more complicated, but then again that is the topic that is the most remote from everyday experience and concerns.

That said, I should emphasize that I do not for a moment think that a decent education would make *all* of our problems go away.

There will continue to be such a thing as *motivated irrationality*—where you allow your desires for something to be true to cause you to ignore or suppress the evidence against it. That does not necessarily go away with education. There will continue to be the influence of propaganda, which we know from history can be effective even with educated folks. (There are quite a few educated Turks who to this day deny the Armenian Genocide.)

You can even get a problem from being too intellectually sophisticated and falling for sexy but ultimately nonsensical views, as we have seen with the rise of "post-modernist" thought in the academy. According to such views, there is no such thing as objective truth or knowledge; rather all truth is "socially constructed" at a particular time and place and reflects the contingent values of those who create it.

My favorite example of the proponent of such a view is the very famous late French philosopher and sociologist of science, Bruno Latour. When French scientists working on the mummy of Ramses II concluded that Ramses had probably died of tuberculosis, Latour, sticking to his guns, wrote a famous paper in which he question their findings: How could an Ancient Egyptian pharaoh, he asked, die of a bacillus that was not discovered until 1892 in Berlin? That would be as anachronistic as saying he died of machine gun fire.[6]

So, as we can see, even smart people can end up saying very silly things.

One of the things that underlie such social constructionist, relativist ideas is precisely the thought that lies behind our second objection. What makes critical scientific thinking the best way to approach an inquiry into the truth? As the ancient philosophers realized, you can quickly run out of answers to such questions. Why is perception a good source of evidence about the world? It seems that we would need to use perception to try to answer this question. Why is logical thinking the right way to think? It seems that any answer will itself employ some logic.

However, if such *circular* justifications are allowed, then maybe other methods can have such circular justifications as well. Maybe if you read tea leaves, the tea leaves would tell you that reading tea leaves is the right way to figure out the world.

Philosophers are paid to think about such issues; but you would have to be mad to think that the outcome of those reflections may be that tea leaf reading *is* just as good a way of inquiring as science is. No sane person is in doubt about the probative value of the scientific method, even if it would take a lot of philosophy to explain why that is the right attitude.

[6] Latour, B. 'On the Partial Existence of Existing and Non-existing Objects'. Daston L. (ed.) *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, pp. 247–69. (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

The ordinary person who is in a quandary about which experts to trust is not doubting that there is a fact of the matter about what to believe; or that there are better or worse ways of doing so. That person has simply been let down by our educational system so that questions that to us are obvious seem to them to be hard, and to leave them vulnerable to manipulation by irrational factors and actors.

That is why I said at the beginning that it is *we* who are ultimately to blame for the current state of affairs, because it is we who allowed our governments to neglect the education of their citizens to the extent to which they have. As I emphasized above, though, I do not claim that remedying this will make all our problems go away; but it is hard to believe that it won't make a significant difference.

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