The Story of Us: Intro

237
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ust 26, 2019 By Tim Urban

Chapter 0: Introduction

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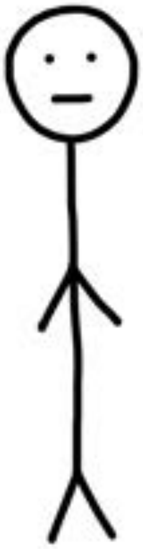

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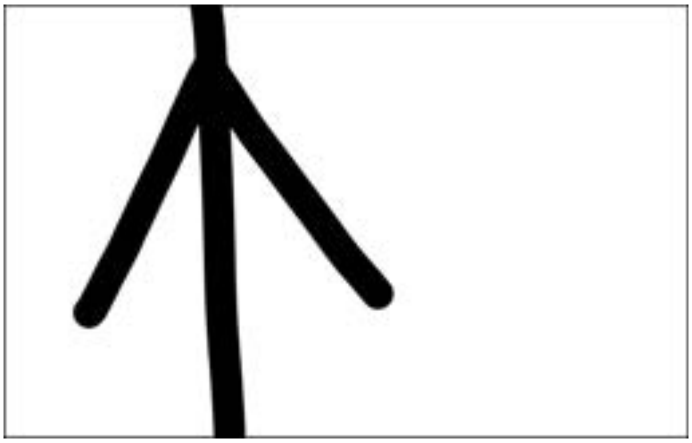

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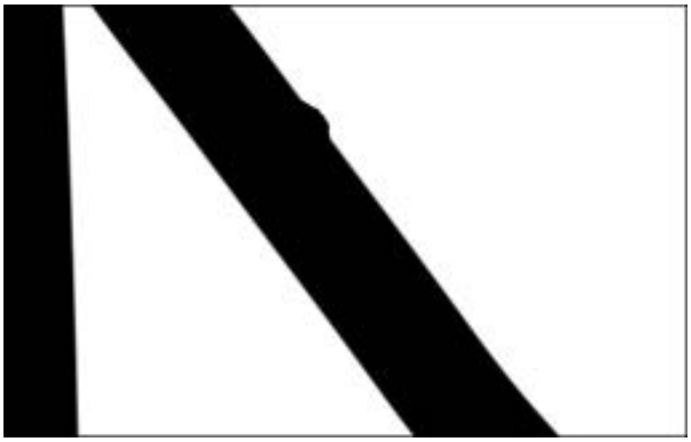
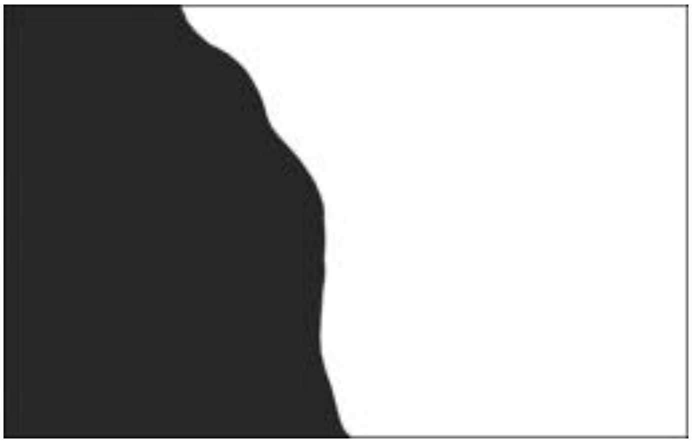
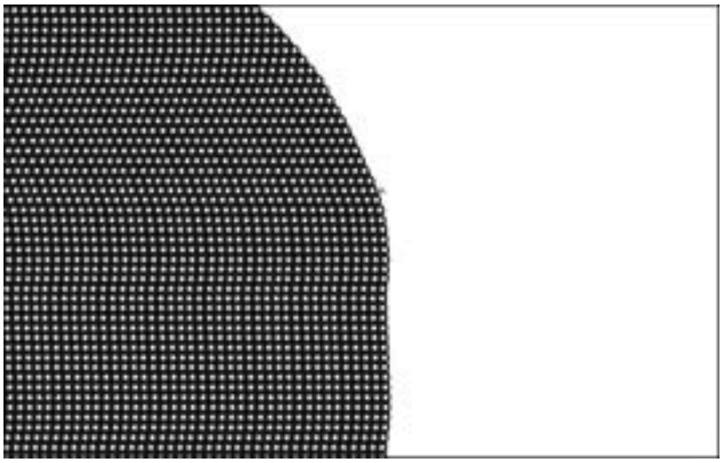


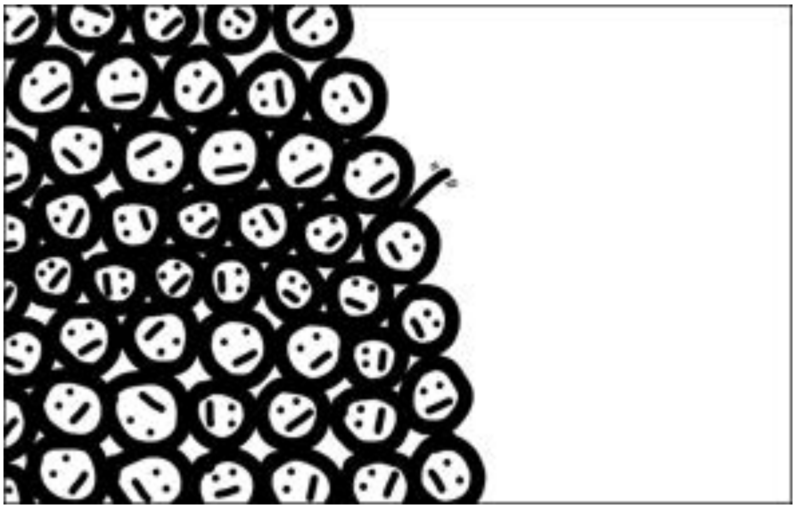
Okay see those skin flaps on the elbow? Let’s zoom in on the bottom one.



Little more.



There! See me? Come closer.



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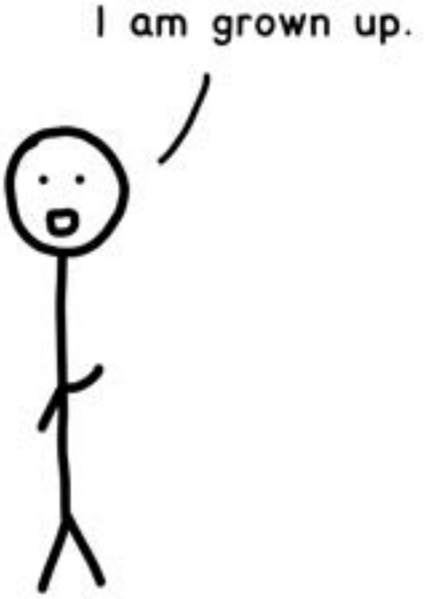
Hi. I’m Tim. I’m a single cell in society’s body. U.S. society, to be specific.

So let me explain why we’re here.

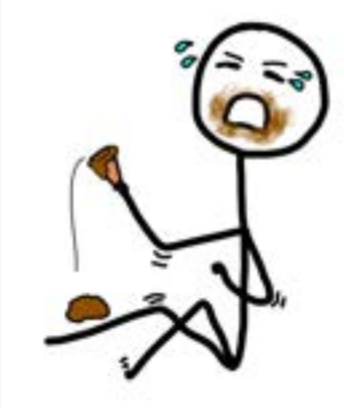
As a writer and a generally thinky person, I’ve spent a lot of my life thinking about the society I live in, and societies in general. I’ve always imagined society as a kind of giant human—a living organism like each of us, only much bigger.

When you’re a single cell in the body of a giant, it’s hard to understand what the giant’s doing, or why it is the way it is, because you can’t really zoom out and look at the whole thing all at once. But we do our best.

The thing is, when I’ve recently tried to imagine what society might look like, I haven’t really been picturing this:


I am grown up.

Based on what I see around me, in person and online, it seems like my society is actually more like this:



Individual humans grow older as they age—but it kind of seems like the giant human I live in has been getting more childish each year that goes by.

So I decided to write a blog post about this. But then something else happened.

When I told people I was planning to write a post about society, and the way people are acting, and the way the media is acting, and the way the government is acting, and the way everyone else is acting, people kept saying the same thing to me.

Don’t do it. Don’t touch it. Write about something else. *Anything* else. It’s just not worth it.

They were right. With so many non-controversial topics to write about, why take on something so loaded and risk alienating a ton of readers? I listened to people’s warnings, and I thought about moving on to something else, but then I was like, “Wait what? I live inside a giant and the giant is having a six-year-old meltdown in the grocery store candy section and that’s a not-okay thing for me to talk about?”

It hit me that what I really needed to write about was *that*—about why it's perilous to write about society.

I ended up going with some combination of both of these things: society's current situation and why it's an especially bad idea for me to write about it—and how those two things are related.

I knew this would be a deep rabbit hole. Did I think I'd follow some sick-ass rabbit down a hole for *three years,* deep into U.S. history, world history, evolutionary psychology, political theory, and neuroscience, through dozens of books, hundreds of datasets and articles, and into literally thousands of conversations, some very pleasant and some that made me want to pull my head off and throw it into the trash? No I didn't.

I ended up going so deep because as I read through studies and watched the news and read opinion pieces and listened to podcasts and heard people's life stories, I kept feeling like in each case, I was only seeing a small part of what was happening. And I became obsessed with trying to wrap my head around whatever the *big* story was that all of these smaller stories were a part of. So I went farther and farther down the rabbit hole, trying to get in a mental helicopter and zoom out far enough to see the complete picture.

After many months of listening and learning and a torturous amount of thinking, I'm finally ready to share my ideas with you.

Sometimes, certain topics become hard to talk about because our conversations get stuck in a rut. We hear the same arguments, using the same wording, again and again, until we become numb to them. When the words we use become too loaded with historical baggage, they stop being useful for communication. That's what I think may be going on here. We're all a little stuck in our viewpoints about society and we don't seem to have a way to make forward progress.

So part of what I've spent three years working on is a new language we can use to think and talk about our societies and the people inside of them. In typical Wait But Why form, the language is full of new terms and metaphors and, of course, lots and lots of badly drawn pictures. It all amounts to a new lens. Looking through this lens out at the world, and inward at myself, things make more sense to me now.

This is the introductory post in a series of posts that will come out throughout the next few months. In the early parts of the series, we'll get familiar with the new lens, and as the series moves on, we'll start using the lens to look at all of those topics a sane blogger isn't supposed to write about. If I can do my job well, by the end of the journey, everything will make more sense to you too.

There's a pretty worrisome trend happening in many of our societies right now, but I'm pretty sure that if we can just see it all with clear eyes, we can fix it. The Wait But Why community is full of people determined to make the future as good as it can be for as many people as possible. The goal of this series is to enhance the clarity of that community, helping us better understand ourselves and the world around us so that we can do our part in nudging the future in the right direction. As with all Wait But Why posts, everything in this series is open for debate—it's my latest draft in a never-ending work in progress. As the posts come out, reading your comments will help enhance my own clarity.

One last thing. When I took this topic on, I decided to do my best to force humility and open-mindedness on myself, even in places we're all terrible at being humble, like politics. It's amazing how much intellectual progress you can make when that's your starting point, and working on this post has felt like an awakening in more than one area. So before we start, see if you can take your existing convictions about all of this stuff out of your head. I'm not asking you to throw them away—just maybe put them in a drawer somewhere nearby. If you still want them when you're done, you know exactly where they'll be.

And away we go…

Chapter 1: The Great Battle of Fire and Light

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The Great Battle of Fire and Light

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ust 26, 2019 By Tim Urban

*This is the second post in a series. If you're new to the series, start with the **intro post**. Visit the **home page** for the full table of contents.*

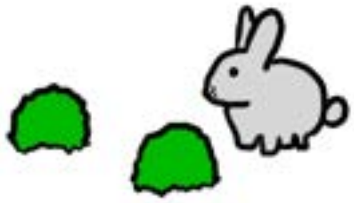
Part 1: The Power Games

There is a great deal of human nature in people. – Mark Twain

Chapter 1: The Great Battle of Fire and Light

The animal world is a stressful place to be.

due to violence for food, shalter, progoney



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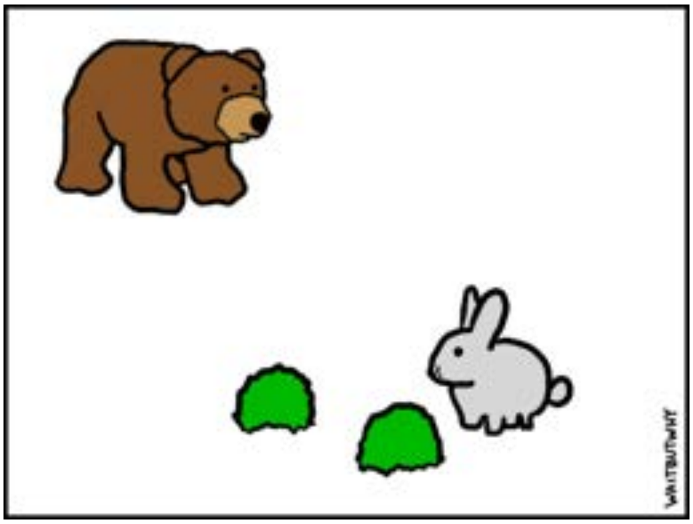

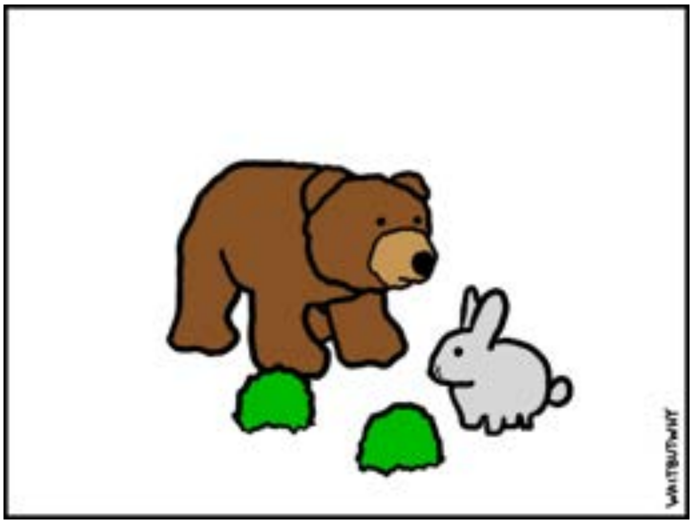

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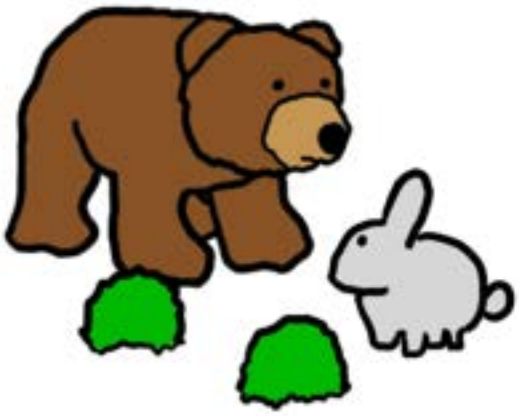
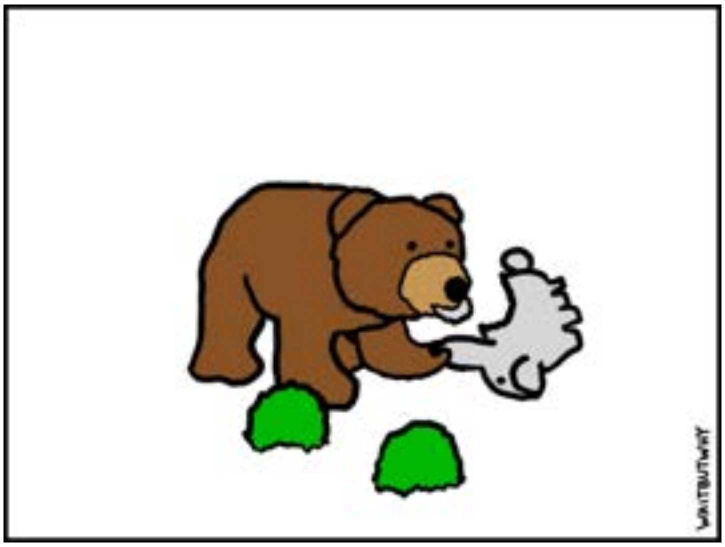
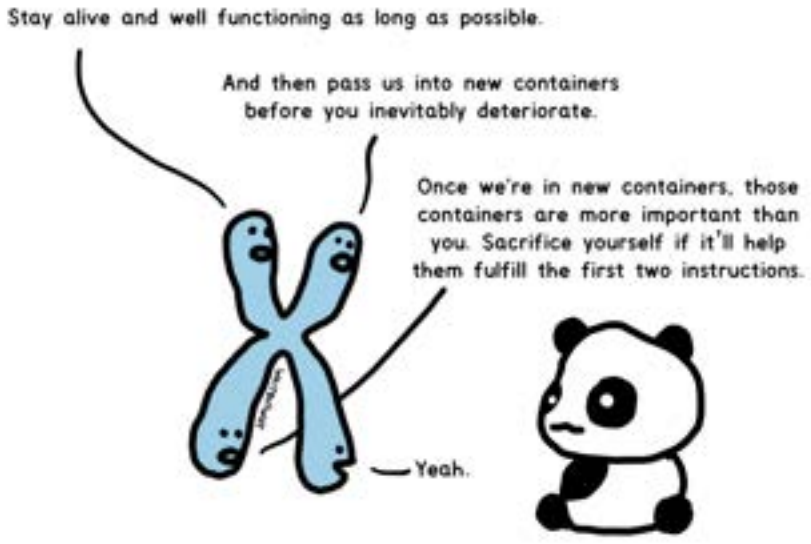



WAITBUTWHY

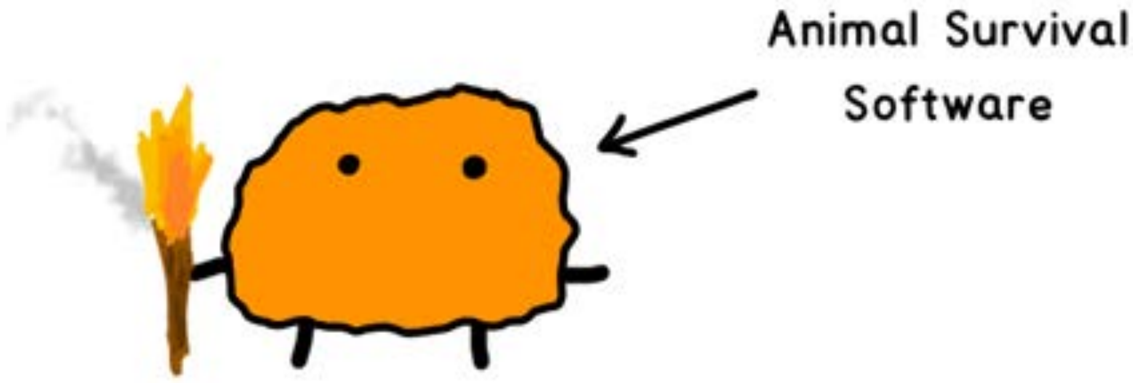
The problem is that the animal world isn't really an animal world—it's a world of trillions of strands of genetic information, each one hell-bent on immortality. And in a universe that wants to turn order into chaos whenever possible, the immortality of anything—let alone a delicate and complex genetic code—is a constant uphill battle. Most of Earth's gene strands don't last very long, and genes that weren't talented enough at the immortality game are long gone. The genes on Earth today are the miracle outliers on both the motivation and talent front—such incredible survival specialists that they're currently almost four billion years old and counting.

Animals are just a hack these outlier genes came up with—temporary containers designed to carry the genes and help them stay immortal. If genes could talk to their animal, they'd probably issue a few simple commands:

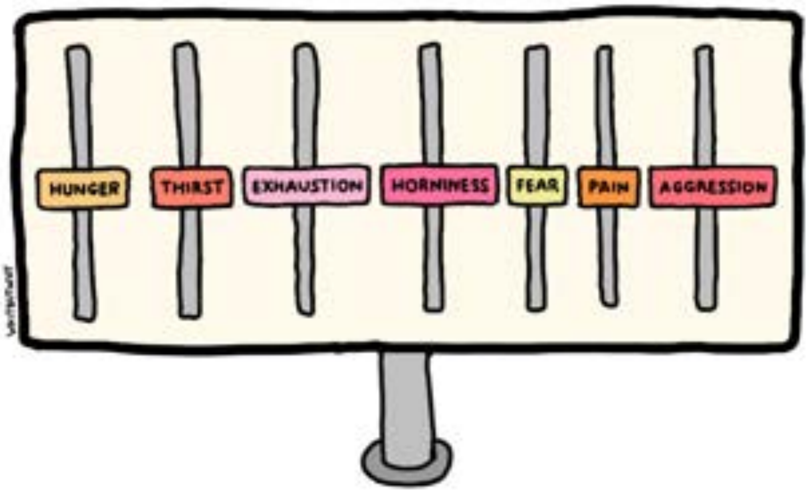

Stay alive and well functioning as long as possible.
And then pass us into new containers before you inevitably deteriorate.
Once we're in new containers, those containers are more important than you. Sacrifice yourself if it'll help them fulfill the first two instructions.
Yeah.

this is why your parents care so much about you. it's more of a biological rather psychological, or social.

But genes can't talk to their animals, so instead they control them by having them run on specialized survival software.


Animal Survival Software

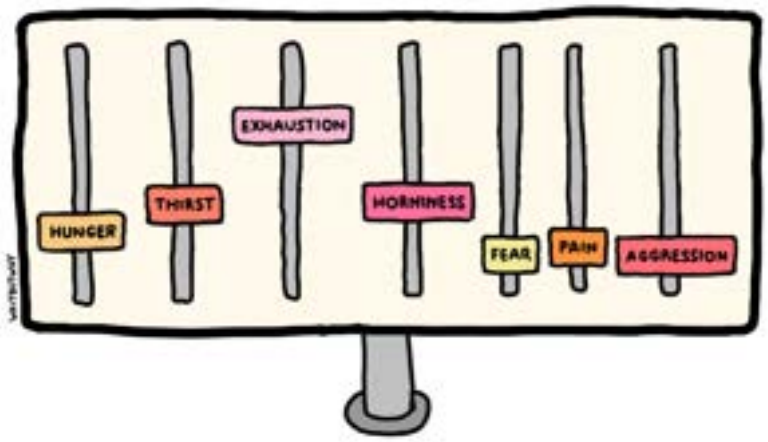
In simple animals, the software is an automated program that runs the animal on instinct. In more complex animals, the software also includes a number of *feelings*—higher-level behavior-manipulation tools like pain punishments, pleasure treats, and emotion manipulations.


HUNGER
THIRST
EXHAUSTION
HORNINESS
FEAR
PAIN
AGGRESSION
WAITBUTWHY

animal cannot think due to insificent neurons. they only have hormones for their function

By sliding the animal's feelings up and down, an animal's software uses the feelings like reins to keep the animal's goals and the genes' goals perfectly aligned.

Genes need animals to conserve all the energy they can, so the software's default settings will have "exhaustion" in a raised state.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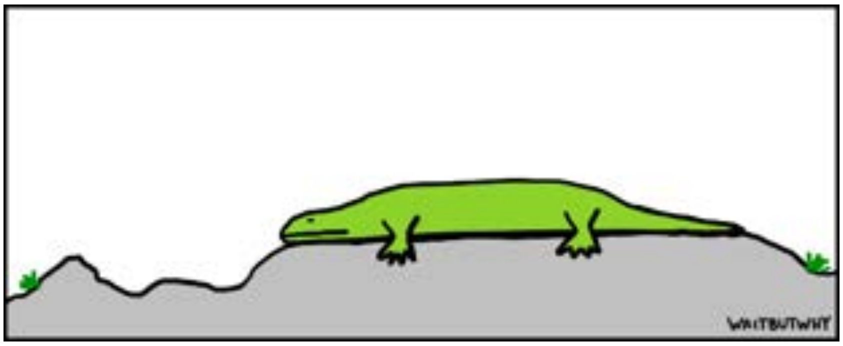
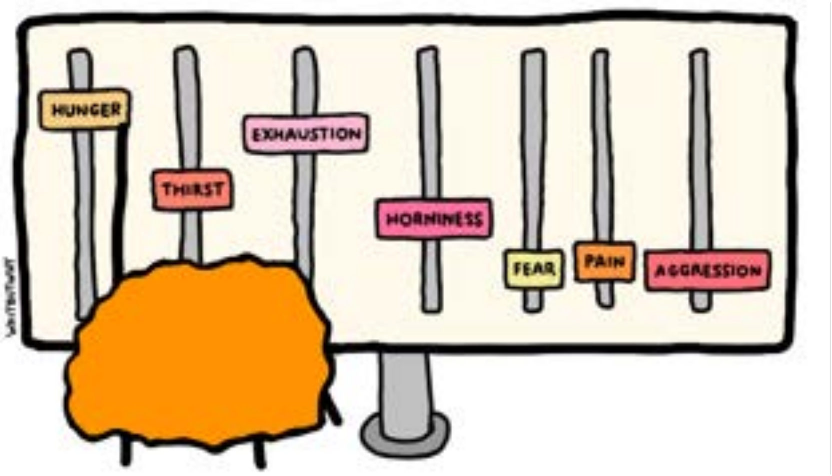

WAITBUTWHY

When everything is going smoothly, the software will run in the background on low-power mode. But at some point, the animal will start to run low on energy, so the software will kick into gear and shift the "hunger" setting steadily upwards until it eventually overpowers the "tired" setting.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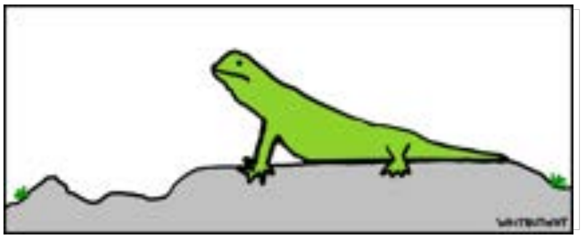
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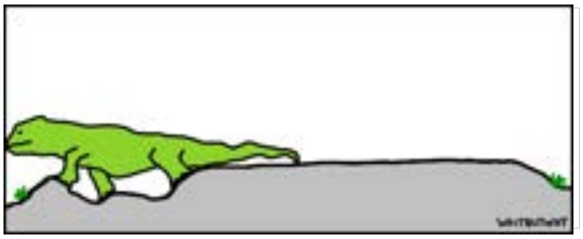
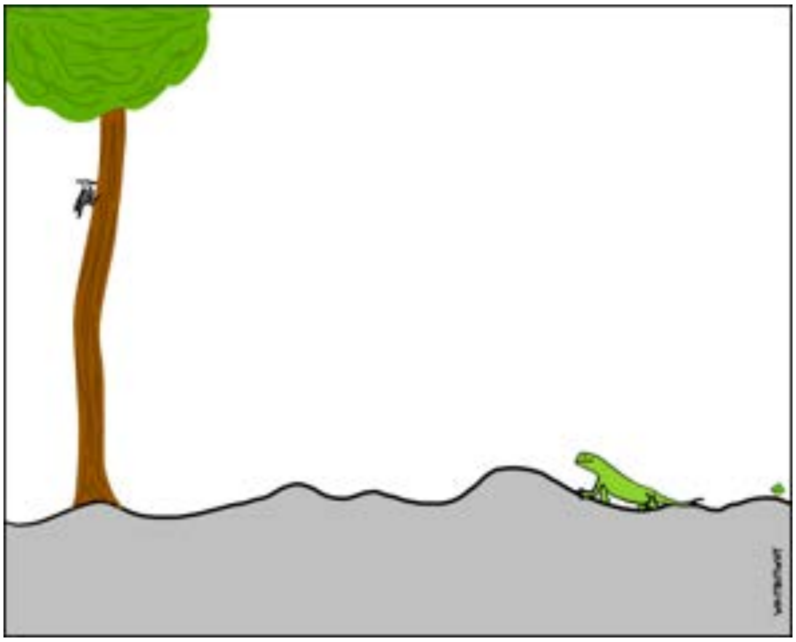
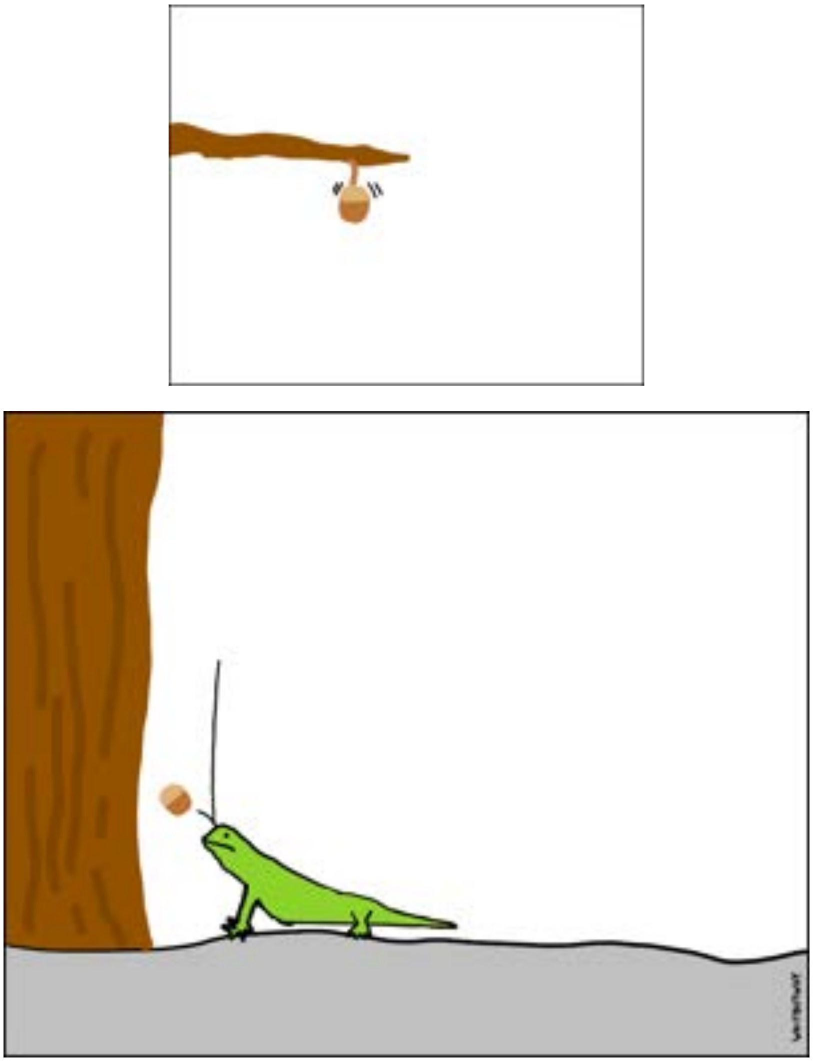
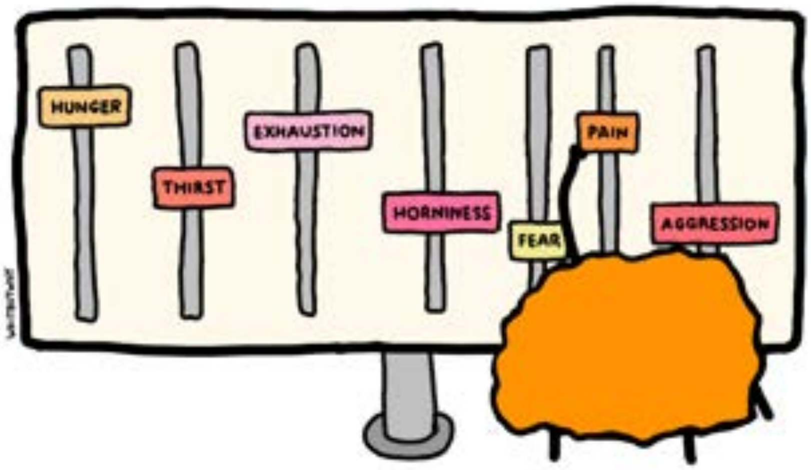

WAITBUTWHY

The genes need their animal to protect itself, so the software ratchets up the fear feeling when it senses danger and hits the animal with a physical pain punishment when it does something that damages itself.


WAITBUTWHY

your hormones job is to make you alive. no matter what, if for that it has to make you hungry, horney, angry, stressed so be so

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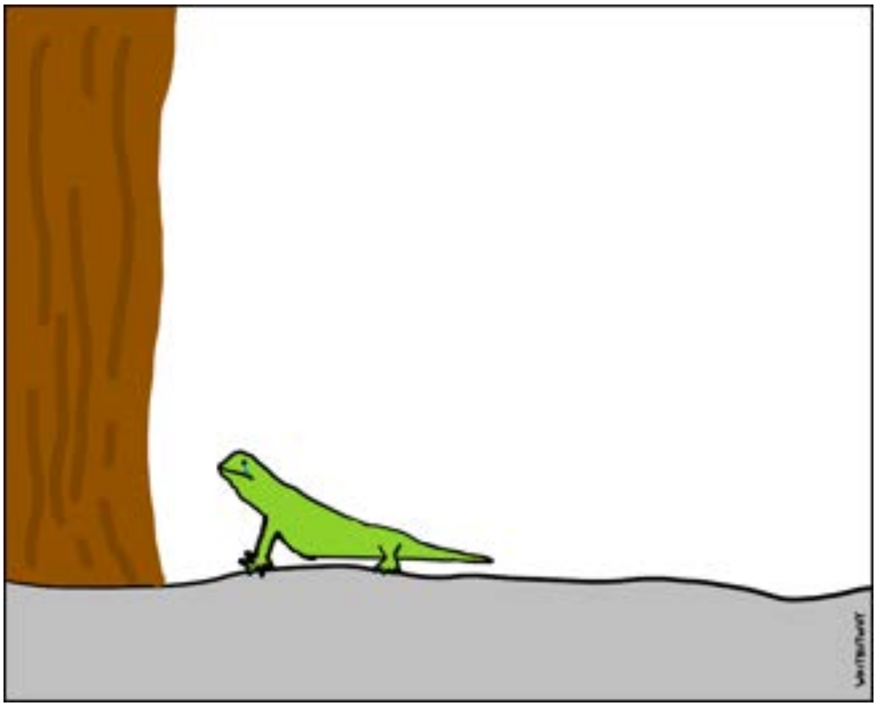
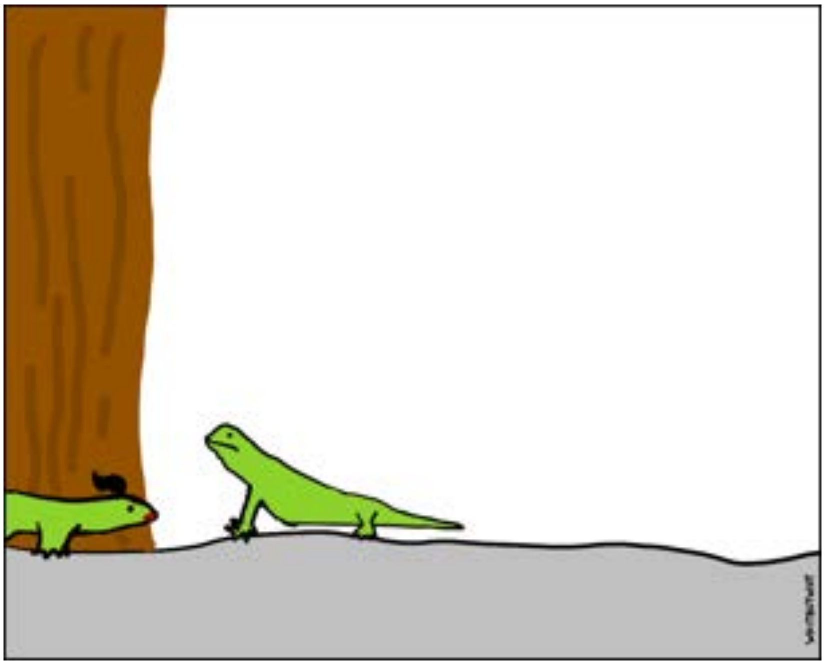

WAITBUTWHY

But genes value reproduction above all else, so whenever mating is a possibility, it'll crank up the horniness high enough to override everything else.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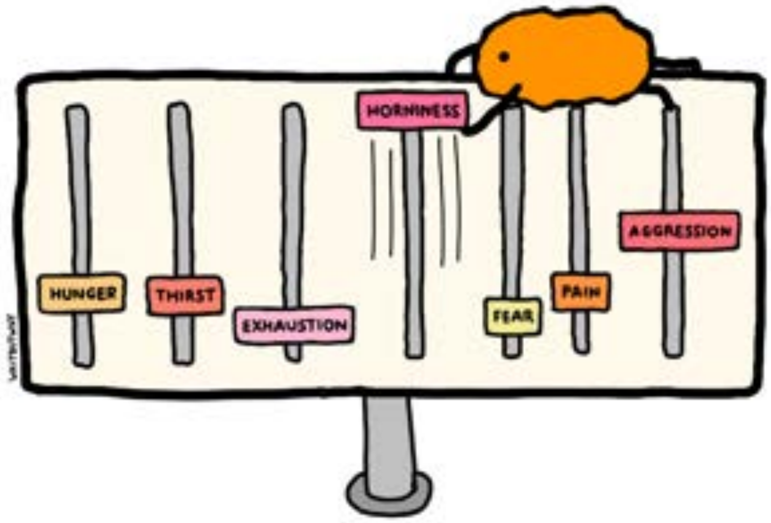
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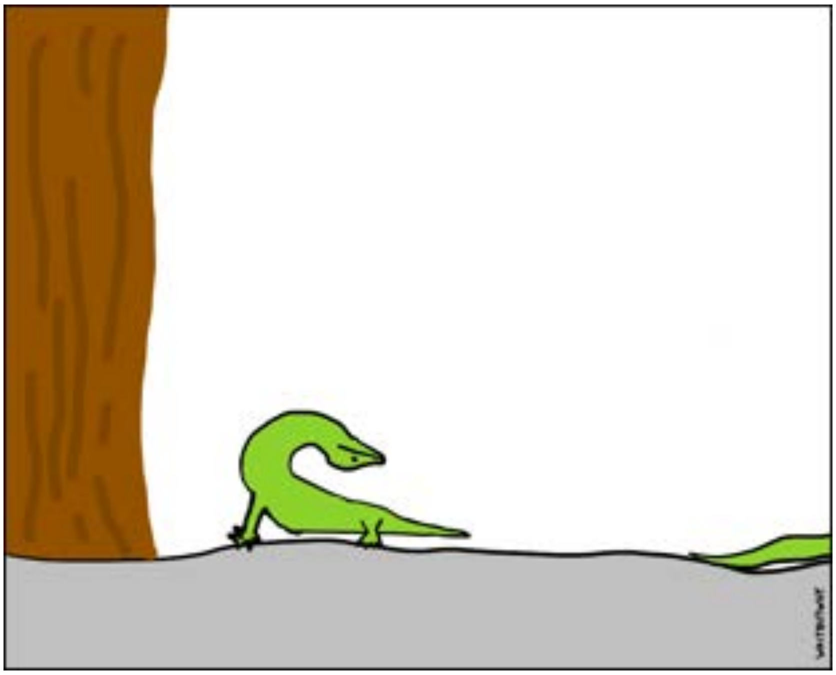
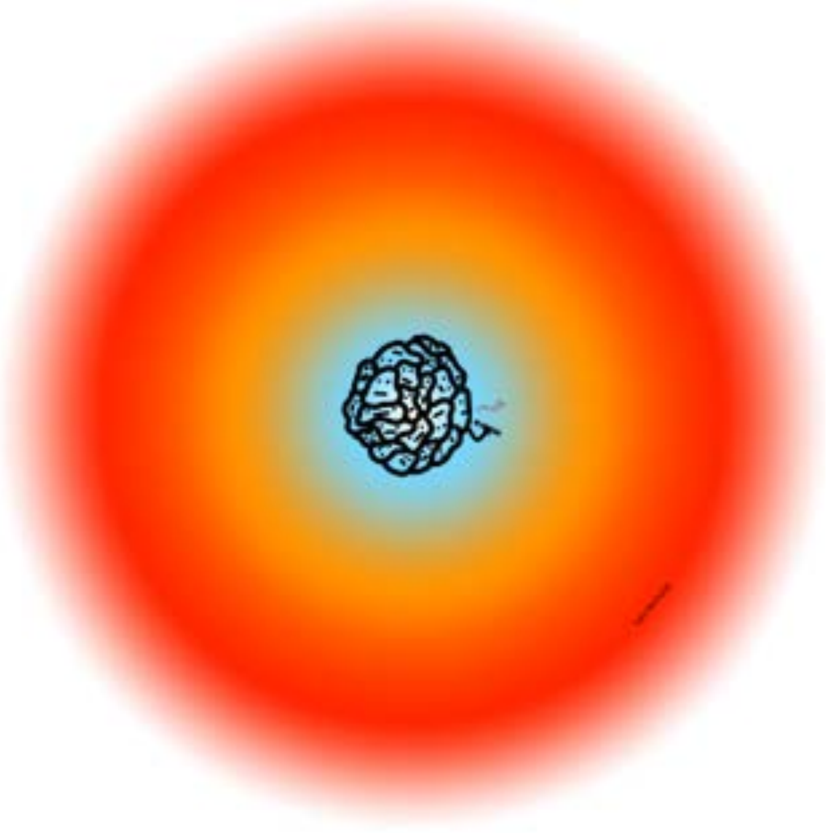


Life on Earth is a long succession of temporary animal containers passing genes along to newer containers like a baton in an endless relay. It's an odd survival system, but so far, it's worked pretty well—at least for those genes still around.

And that's great for genes. But it's stressful for animals.

The problem is that genes themselves aren't alive, they're just a force of nature—and forces of nature don't give a shit about anything. Gravity wants to smoosh matter together, so that's what it does. It has no concern for the well-being of the atoms it smooshes. If the hydrogen atoms in the center of the sun can't handle the smooshing, they'll fuse into helium atoms. Gravity doesn't care. But the important thing is, atoms don't care either. In the center of the sun, no one cares about anything, so everything's fine.



Genes are like gravity—they don't care. They want to stay immortal, and they'll pursue that goal as relentlessly as gravity fuses atoms inside stars. Just as there's finite space in the center of a star, there are finite resources in the animal world—finite land, finite shelter, finite food, finite mates—which makes gene endeavors a zero-sum game. One species doing better almost always happens at the expense of other species doing worse. And just like gravity relentlessly smooshes, genes are relentlessly greedy—a successful species will grow and expand as far as it can until it exhausts its advantages.

When you have a relentless force consuming finite resources, something's gotta give. In a star, atoms give, fusing into bigger atoms. In the animal world, animal species give, morphing into new, mutated species—or, more often, going extinct.

So genes are like gravity—but animals aren't like atoms.

Mindless evolutionary innovation brought survival tricks like feelings and subjective experience and higher sentience into animals, which means animals are like atoms in the center of a star...if the atoms *hated* being smooshed.

To genes, animal suffering is simply a useful tool—so the animal world is full of suffering. Genes have no higher principles, so neither does the animal world—no such thing as rights, no concept of right or wrong, no concern with fairness. Animals woke up in the heat of a universe pressure cooker, playing an unwinnable game they never signed up for, and that's all there is to it.

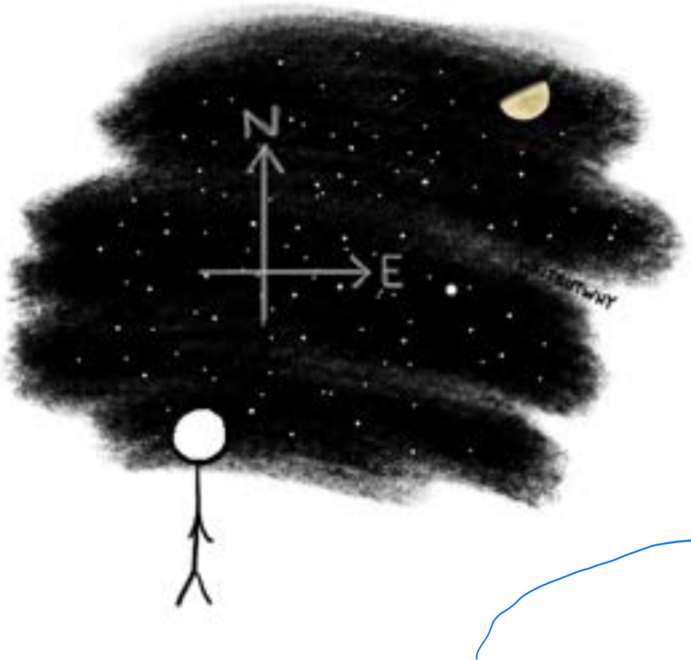
this is you shouldn't
be in animal world

At least that's all there *was* to it.

A few million years ago, the genes that inhabit a particular population of great ape started innovating in an unusual way, trying out an animal container upgrade that had never quite worked before: super-high intelligence. All previous genes had passed up extra high intelligence in their housing because it requires a ridiculous amount of energy to maintain. It's like running a small business and considering whether to hire an employee with a rare skill set who will only work for $1,000,000 a year. Doesn't matter how good the employee is—no one is worth a million a year to a cash-strapped small business. But these ape genes tried it anyway.

They evolved into a variety of hominid species, all of whom have since been discontinued, except one—a saucy one called homo sapiens. For them, the advancements in intelligence proved to be a major survival asset, so their cognitive capacity rapidly increased, developing into an array of shiny new tools that no animal had ever possessed before. Through an accident of evolution, humans had gained superpowers.

They had gained the superpower of reason, which gave humans the ability to solve complex problems, invent fancy new technologies, design sophisticated strategies, and make real-time adjustments to their thinking based on changes in their environment.

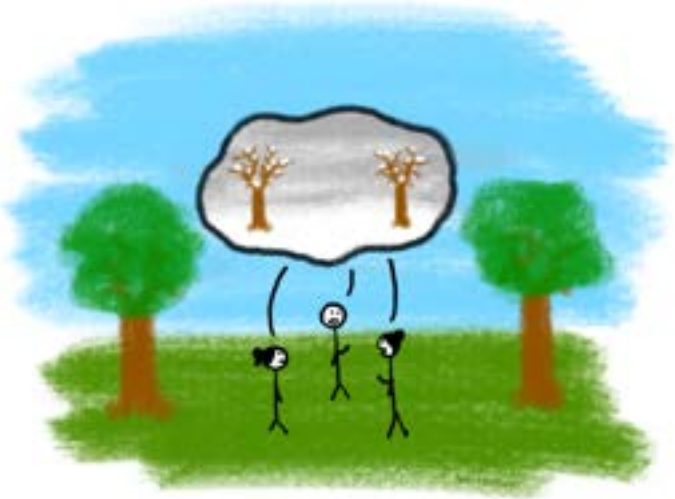


Reason sharpened human thinking, introducing nuance and logic into the process. It also affected human motivation—by illuminating the distinction between true and false, reason made truth a core human drive.

being a nerd is better
than being a body
builder

Humans had also gained the superpower of imagination, making them the world's first animal that could fantasize and tell stories and dream of places they had never been.

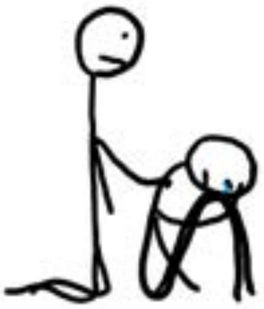
But the real power of imagination came when it was combined with communication. Humans now had the power to communicate with each other using a complex language full of sounds that represent things or ideas—human language is humans imagining *together*. Communication plus imagination is why humans can think in the big picture and make long-term plans in a way no other animal can.



Reason and imagination, combined together, lead to something even more incredible. Without imagination, animals have a hard time wrapping their heads around the fact that animals other than themselves are full, living creatures who experience life just like they do. They can't put themselves in another animal's shoes. Without reason, animals can't follow the logic that concludes that the lives of others are just as valuable as their own, and their pain and pleasure just as real.

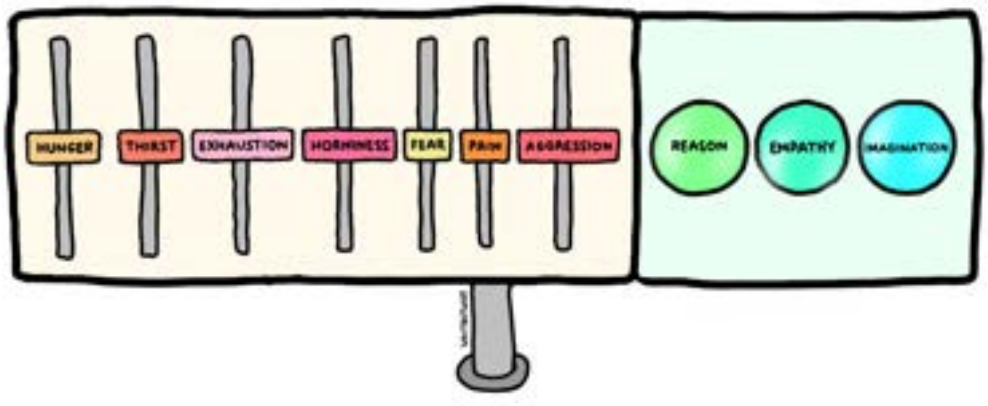
reason + imagination
= empathy

These two superpowers produced a third superpower—one that, above all, makes humans human: empathy.



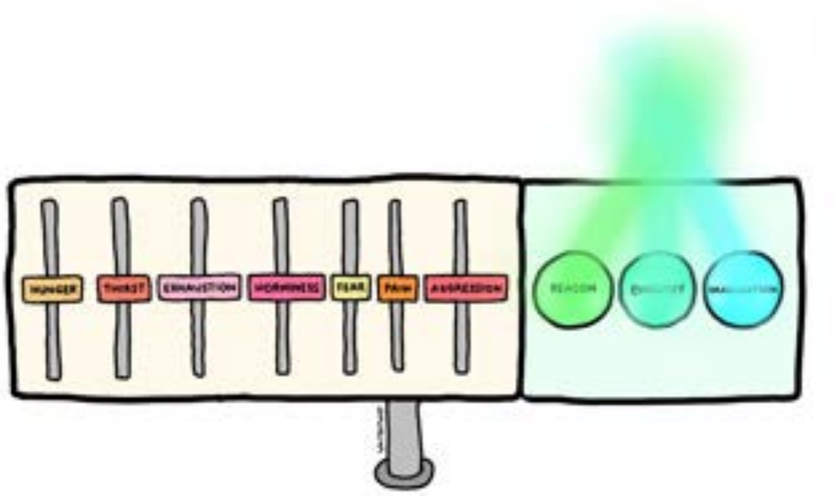
With the power of empathy came powers like compassion, guilt, pity. Even clueyness. Most significantly, with the groundbreaking epiphany that all animals have worth came the concept of right vs. wrong.

These superpowers took their place in the human mind as powerful new enhancements.


HUNGER
THIRST
EXHAUSTION
HORNINESS
FEAR
PAIN
AGGRESSION
REASON
EMPATHY
IMAGINATION

But none of that is the really weird part.

The craziest thing about the new human superpowers was their unexpected side effect. Each of the advanced capabilities was like a new stream of mental potential, and when combined together, it was as if they formed a glowing orb of light in the center of the human mind.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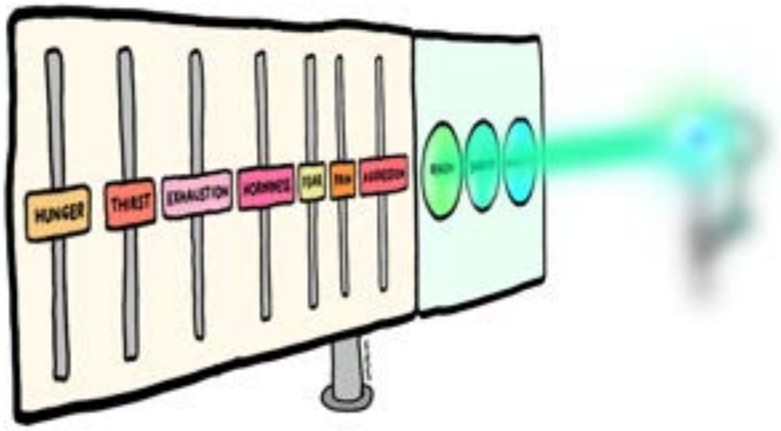
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THIRST
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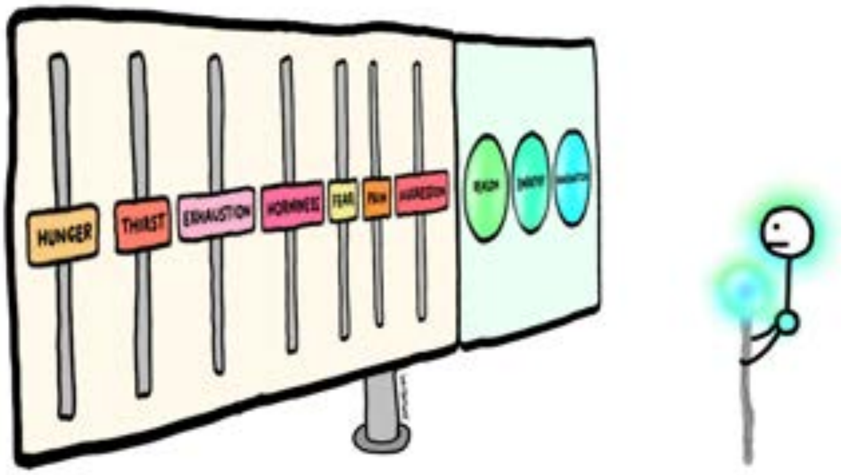
PAIN
AGGRESSION

This light was so bright and so clear and so powerful that it was as if it had its own *awareness*—an awareness of itself, of the human it lived in, of the ancient software running beside it. The human brain had grown a mind of its own that could think for itself.

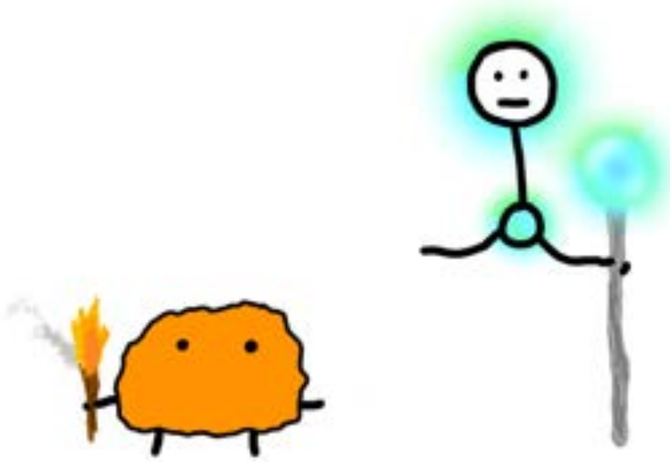


Up until this development, the early human mind was like all animal minds—powered by genetic will and run by ancient software, with one purpose only: genetic immortality. But this new mind was something different entirely—something running *independently* of the human's survival software.

Not only could this mind within a mind think its own thoughts, it could actually *overrule* the will of the genes, override the software's commands, and drive human behavior.

For the first time in early life history, an animal was more than just an animal—it was an animal plus… something *else*.

Let's call our ancient animal software, which is still very much in our heads—our Primitive Mind. And let's call this highly advanced, independent new consciousness our Higher Mind.



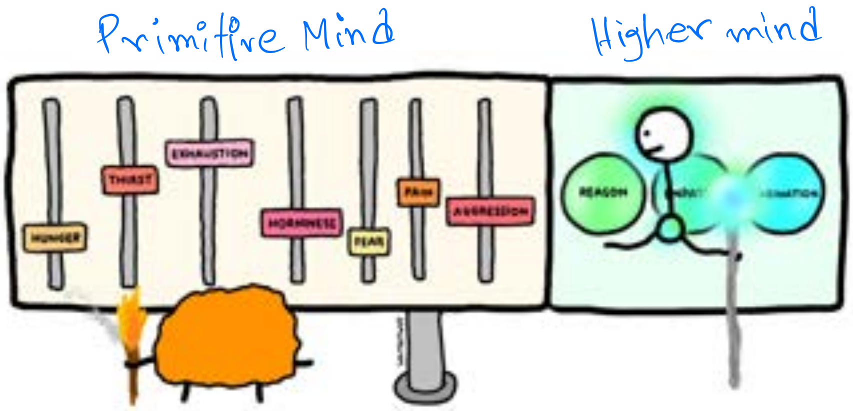
As any human you'll talk to can attest, two minds in one animal is an odd situation. Especially since the two minds often don't get along.

The Higher Mind is rational, reasonable, and thoughtful. On his staff sits the light of higher consciousness, and when the Higher Mind is in the driver's seat of your being, the light fills your mind with clarity and self-awareness. Wisdom flows through the Higher Mind's head, and love and empathy radiate out from his heart. When the Higher Mind is doing the thinking in your head, these rays pass directly into *your* mind and heart and light them up with the warm glow of high-mindedness.

The Higher Mind spends most of his time on the right side of the control panel with the superpowers, absorbing their energy and feeding them with his consciousness.

When he thinks about it—and he does think about it, sometimes—he wonders whether this is all a mistake and he ended up in the wrong head. Because he can't help but notice that next to him at all times is a hectic ball of orange fuzz that was living here when he moved in.

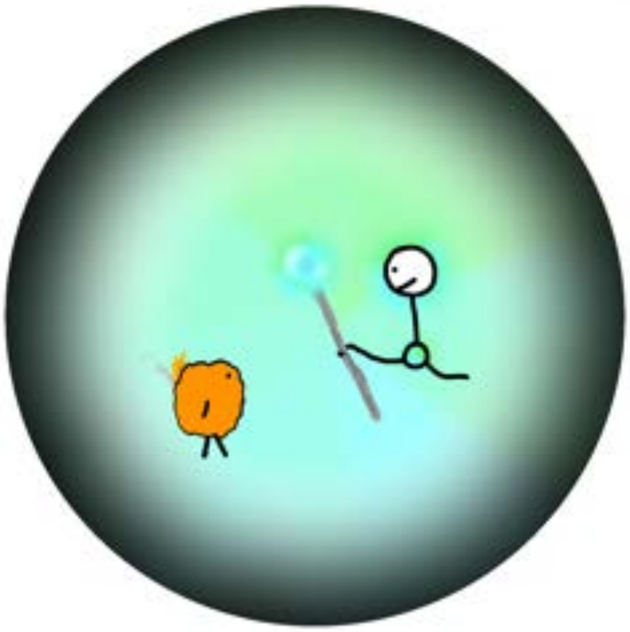
Over the years, the Higher Mind has come to see the Primitive Mind as a not-very-smart pet. But he also understands that it's important to the whole system to let the Primitive Mind get what it needs from its little pet life—to an extent. The Primitive Mind is endlessly greedy, completely untrainable, and the Higher Mind has learned the hard way that the Primitive Mind *must* be kept in check. As the only grown-up in the room, the Higher Mind does what he can, trying to keep an eye on the Primitive Mind and make sure that whatever it's doing over there makes sense and fits with the overall plan.



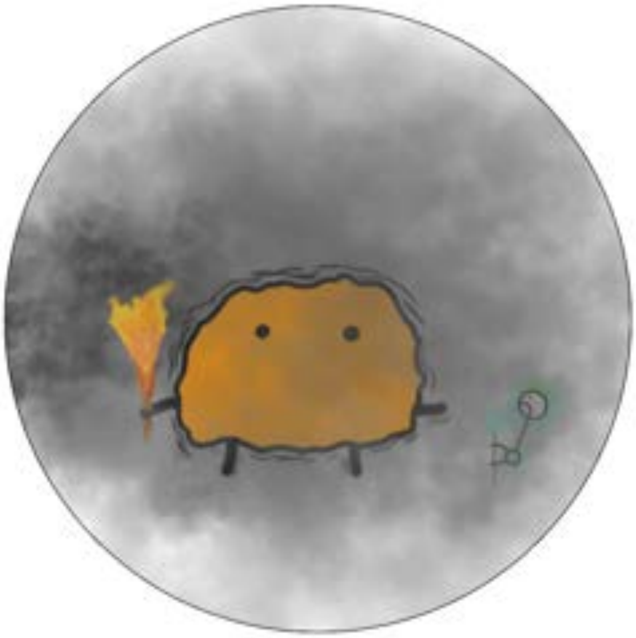
Meanwhile, the Primitive Mind doesn't know the Higher Mind exists. The Primitive Mind doesn't even know the Primitive Mind exists. The Primitive Mind is software—programmed by evolution to serve the will of your genes. In its hand, the Primitive Mind carries your primal flame—the raw will of your animal genes to survive.

The Primitive Mind doesn't care about you any more than gravity cares about atoms. It's just a truck driver delivering precious cargo from one place to another—and you're just the truck. The only concern it has with the truck is to keep it well fueled and out of accidents during this segment of the eternal voyage. The more prominent the Primitive Mind is in your head at any given time, the less you're like an independent entity and the more you're like a truck being driven by automated software.

The difficulty with two minds is that there's only one brain—leaving the two minds in an ongoing power struggle. When the Higher Mind is empowered, his staff lights up the room with self-awareness, offering a clear view of the Primitive Mind in all its silliness, which makes it hard for the Primitive Mind to do anything sneaky.



But when the tides turn, the Primitive Mind's torch grows along with his influence, and the room gets increasingly smoky. The more smoke there is, the more it blocks the Higher Mind's light, cutting off his access to his human and making it hard for him to do his job.



The human, with smoke obscuring its self-awareness, doesn't realize its mind has been switched over to software automation, leaving the Higher Mind pretty helpless to take back the controls. This is when humans start trouble, for themselves and for others.

The never-ending struggle between these two minds is the human condition. It's the backdrop of everything that has ever happened in the human world, and everything that happens today. It's the story of our times because it's the story of all human times. We're gonna go to all kinds of places in this post series—and wherever we go, remember to remember the great battle of fire and light.

Chapter 2: A Game of Giants

To keep up with this series, sign up for the Wait But Why email list and we'll send you the new posts right when they come out.

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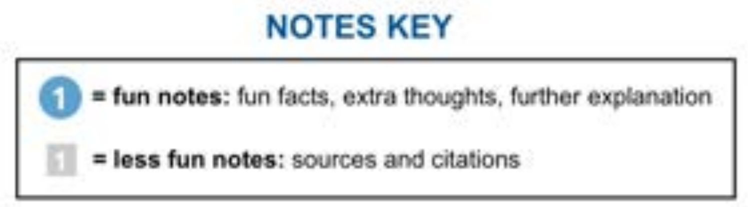
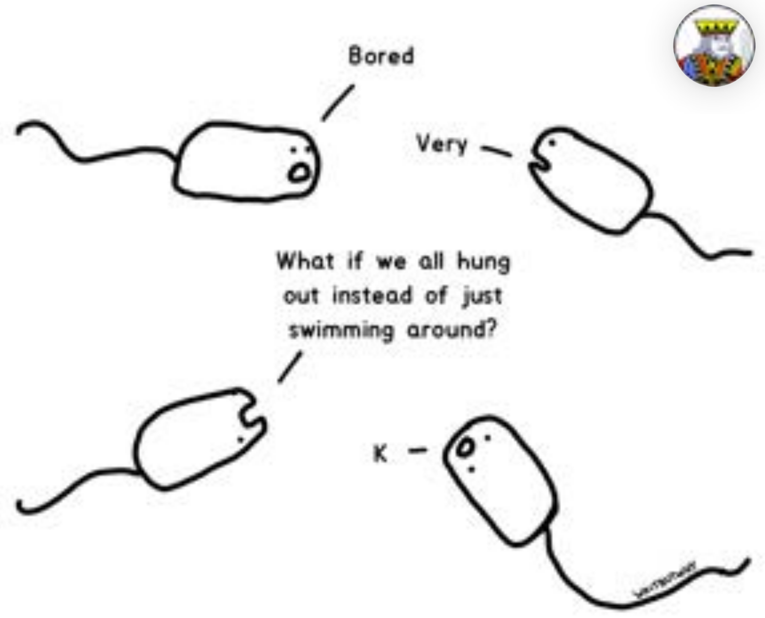

NOTES KEY

① = **fun notes:** fun facts, extra thoughts, further explanation

1 = **less fun notes:** sources and citations

Chapter 2: A Game of Giants

Billions of years ago, some single-celled creatures realized that being just one cell left your options pretty limited.


Bored
Very
What if we all hung out instead of just swimming around?
K
waitbutwhy

So they figured out a cool trick. By joining together with other single cells, they could form a giant creature that had all kinds of new advantages.

The downside was a major loss of individuality—

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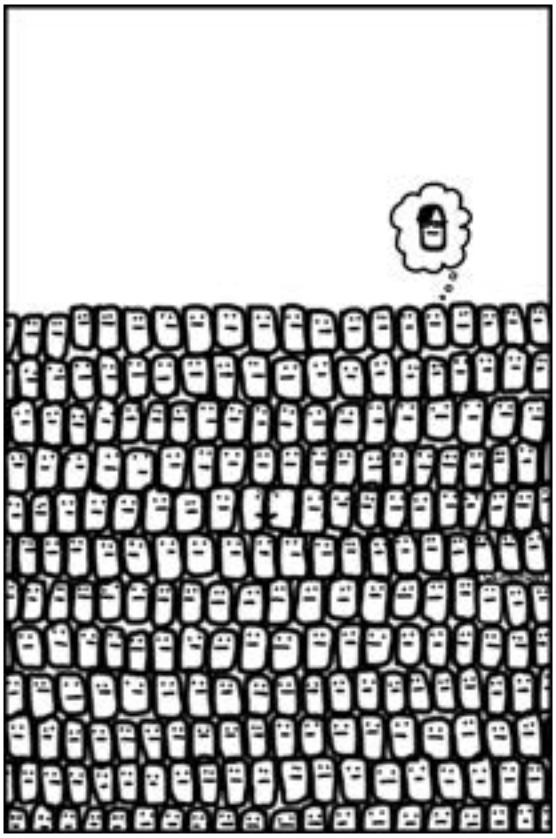
The Elon Musk Series
Like 811
491

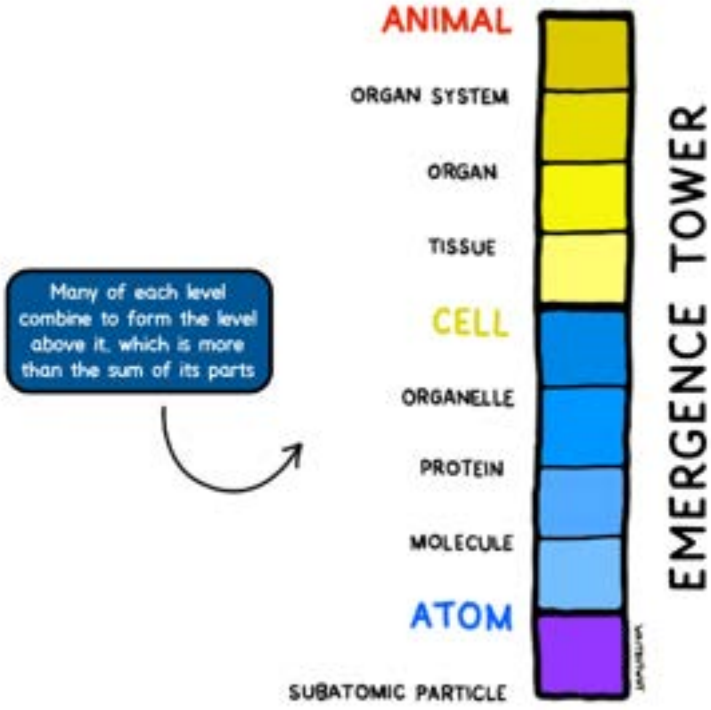
How to Pick a Life Partner
Like 2.6K
333

Why Gen Y Yuppies Are Unhappy



—but the survival benefits made it worth the sacrifice, and the multi-celled organism thing stuck.

A single cell is itself a giant—a magical living giant made up of trillions of non-living atoms—and an animal is a higher-level giant made up of trillions of cells. This concept—a bunch of smaller things joining together to form a giant that can function as more than the sum of its parts—is called *emergence.* We can visualize it as a tower.


ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
EMERGENCE TOWER
Many of each level combine to form the level above it, which is more than the sum of its parts

Pretty soon after cells started joining together to form animals, some of the animals discovered that they could go up *another* level of emergence and form even bigger giants made up of multiple animals. If you look around, you'll see them everywhere—schools of fish, packs of wolves, colonies of ants, waddles[1] of penguins. Groups like these represent floors of Emergence Tower *above* that of the individual animal level.

Like 2.2K
1,203

7 Ways to be Insufferable on Facebook
Like 4.9K
956

Putting Time In Perspective
Like 1.9K
550

How to Name a Baby
Like 440
325

Why You Should Stop Caring What Other People Think
Like 3.3K
334

Religion for the Nonreligious
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821

10 Types of 30-Year-Old Single Guys
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662

From Muhammad to ISIS: Iraq's Full Story
Like 167
320

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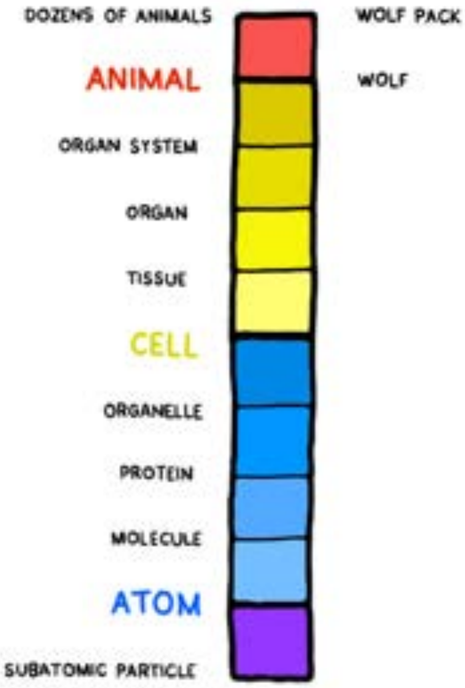
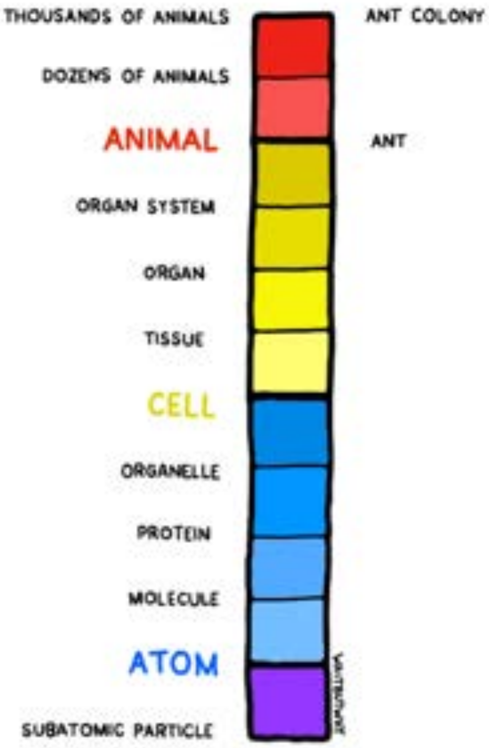

DOZENS OF ANIMALS
WOLF PACK
ANIMAL
WOLF
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE

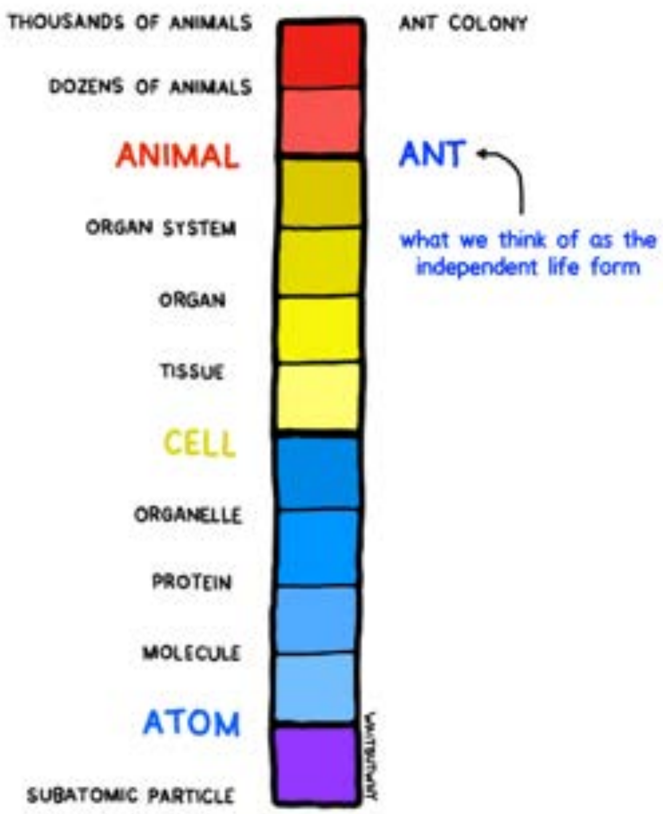

THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
ANT COLONY
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ANT
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE

The ancestors of the single-celled organisms that joined together to form the first sponges were able to survive on their own. But once evolution shaped their descendants into parts of something bigger, there was no turning back. You could try pulling a cell out of a sponge and telling it to go rogue, but it had lost that ability. On its own, it would die.

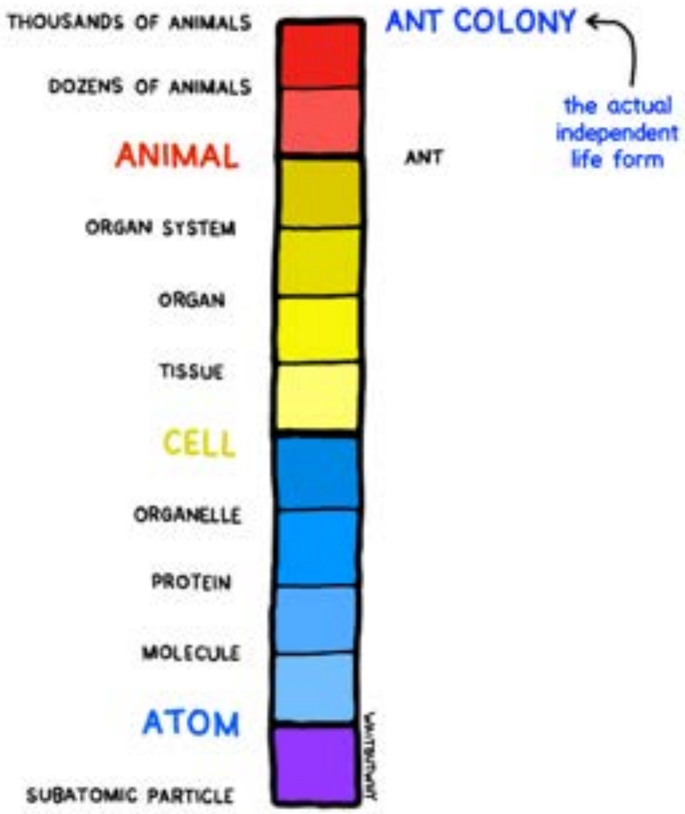
When most of us consider what constitutes a complete life form and what doesn't, it usually comes down to independence. We think of the sponge as a life form, but we think of each of its cells as mere *parts* of a life form. Meanwhile, there are other single cells—like an amoeba—that we do think of as full life forms. The key distinction in both cases is independence.

There's no reason this concept shouldn't apply across the board. Isolate an ant from its colony and it'll suffer the same fate as the extracted sponge cell—so why do we think of the ant as the life form and the colony as simply a community of those life forms?

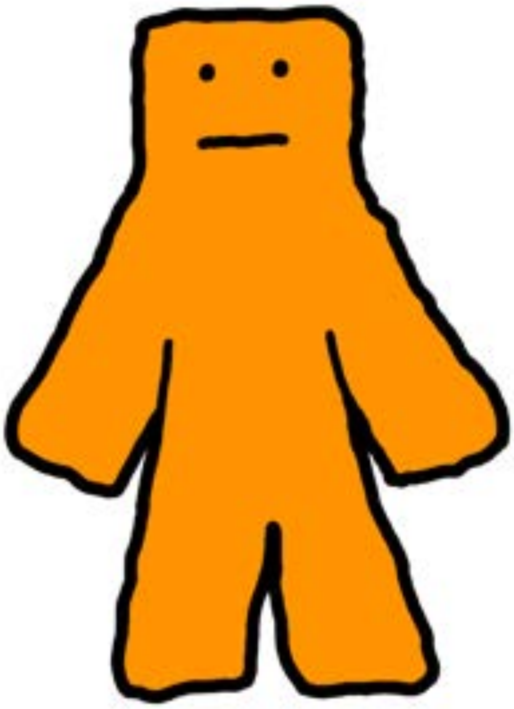
Probably because each of us is an animal. So we're biased to think of the animal as the key level along Emergence Tower—the point where the primary "life form" always exists.


THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
ANT COLONY
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ANT
what we think of as the independent life form
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
WAITBUTWHY

If we're not being animal-centric, though, we should probably put an ant in the same category as a sponge *cell*, and the ant *colony* in the same category as the sponge. The ant *colony* is really the independent life form in the ant world—the individual ant is just one of the units of emergence beneath it.


THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
ANT COLONY
the actual independent life form
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ANT
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
WAITBUTWHY

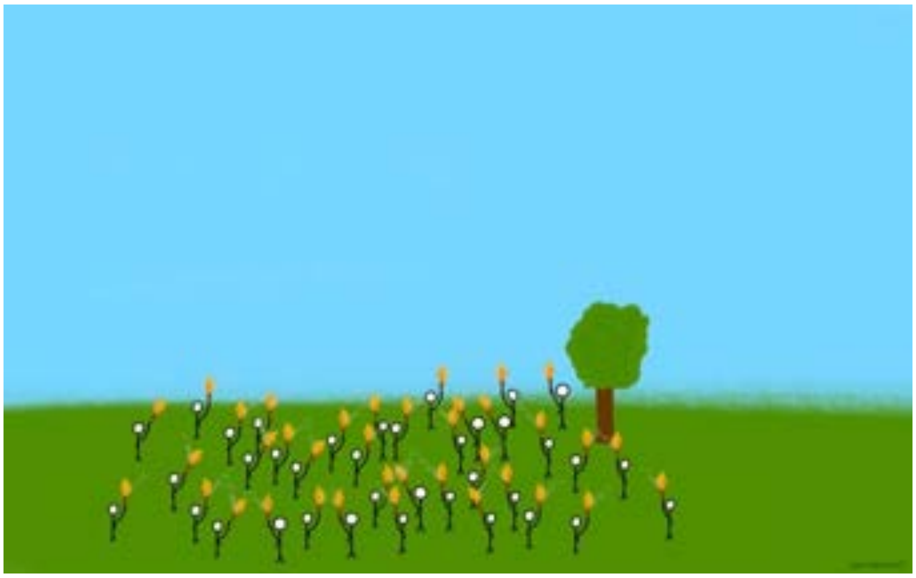
Since the dawn of human evolution, humans have been forming giants called tribes. In my head, an ancient human tribe looks something like this:

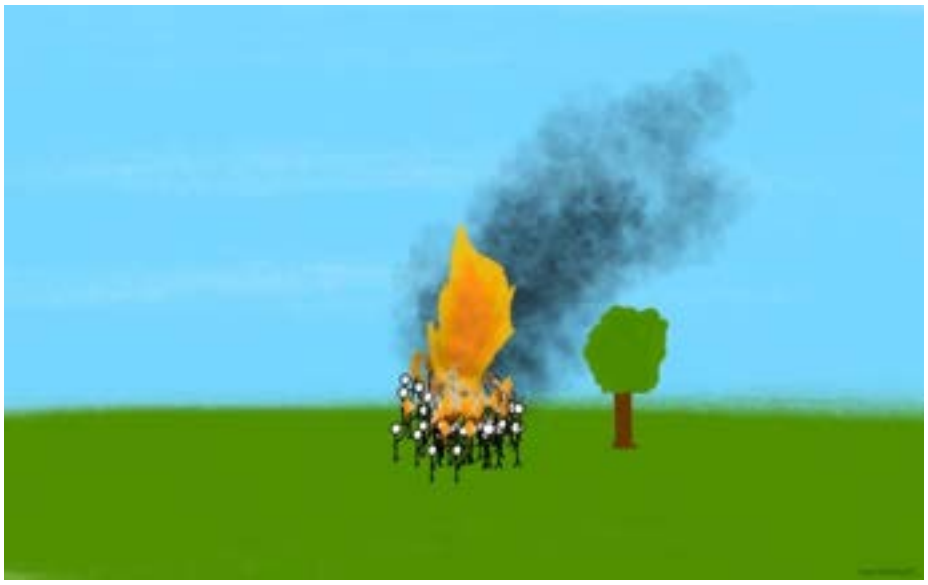


As is usually the case with emergent phenomena, a human giant is greater than the sum of its parts.

In Chapter 1, we discussed how each human has two “minds”—the Primitive Mind with its fiery flame and the Higher Mind with his orb of clarity and consciousness. So when humans band together, they can generate a *double* emergence phenomenon.

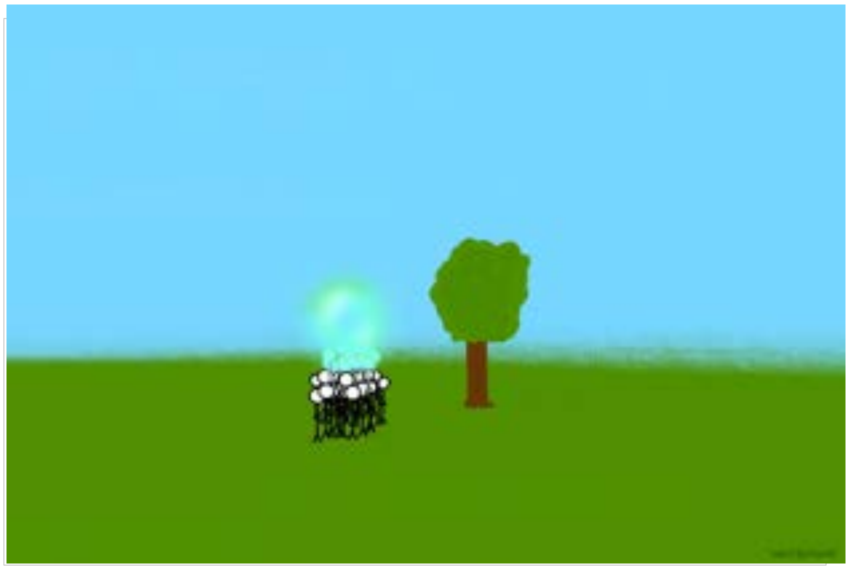
The Primitive Mind is all about making giants. In fact, one of the Primitive Mind’s central talents is the ability to instinctually merge with other Primitive Minds, combining each of their individual primal flames into a raging survival bonfire, making the group stronger and more powerful than the sum of its parts.





But when Higher Minds work together, the effect can be just as powerful: the group as a whole gains superhuman abilities in learning and creativity and discovery.

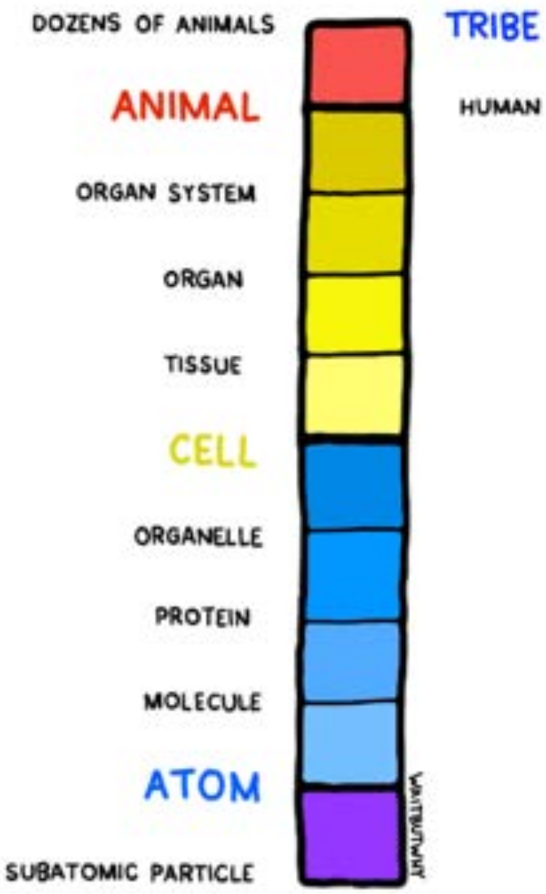
reiligious group
2 minds work togethe



Combining both emergent properties made the human tribe an incredible survival machine that allowed the species to stay afloat and thrive in a relentless natural world.

For most early humans, forming into giants with other humans wasn't just an advantage, it was a necessity. A couple with little children living alone in a forest in 50,000 BC would have had a hell of a time doing all the hunting, gathering, fire-making, cooking, breast-feeding, and migrating they needed to do to fulfill their basic family needs, all while raising kids. And even if they somehow managed this for a while, they'd be a pretty soft target for animal predators and for human tribes who wanted their resources, and their kids wouldn't have many dating options down the road. For all these reasons, ancient humans were tribe dependent.

In other words, on the ancient landscape—the one we were designed for—the human being wasn't really the independent life form of the human race. The tribe was.



This idea may explain a whole lot about people and about the world around us, and it's something we're going to talk a lot about in this series. If we wanted to understand why ants evolved to be the way they are, we'd want to think about the evolution of their independent life form: the colony. The individual ant wasn't shaped by evolution to be the perfect survival creature—it was shaped by evolution to be just the right element of a perfect survival colony. That's why ants happily sacrifice their lives to protect the colony during an attack.

why ant can't servive alone?
is there any exception?

If we want to understand why people are the way they are, we should try thinking the same way. A human isn't simply a perfect survival creature—it's also just the right element of a perfect survival tribe. Examining the traits of a perfect survival tribe can help us see the specs for human nature, not only illuminating who we are, but *why* we're that way.

Ants and Spiders

For the human genetic line, sustenance was a survival requirement, so we evolved to be hungry. Reproduction was a survival requirement, so we evolved to be horny. Not falling off a cliff was a survival requirement, so we evolved to be scared of heights. Tribe well-being was a survival requirement, so we evolved to be tribal.

most of our psychological Problems come from here!

But what exactly does it mean to be tribal?

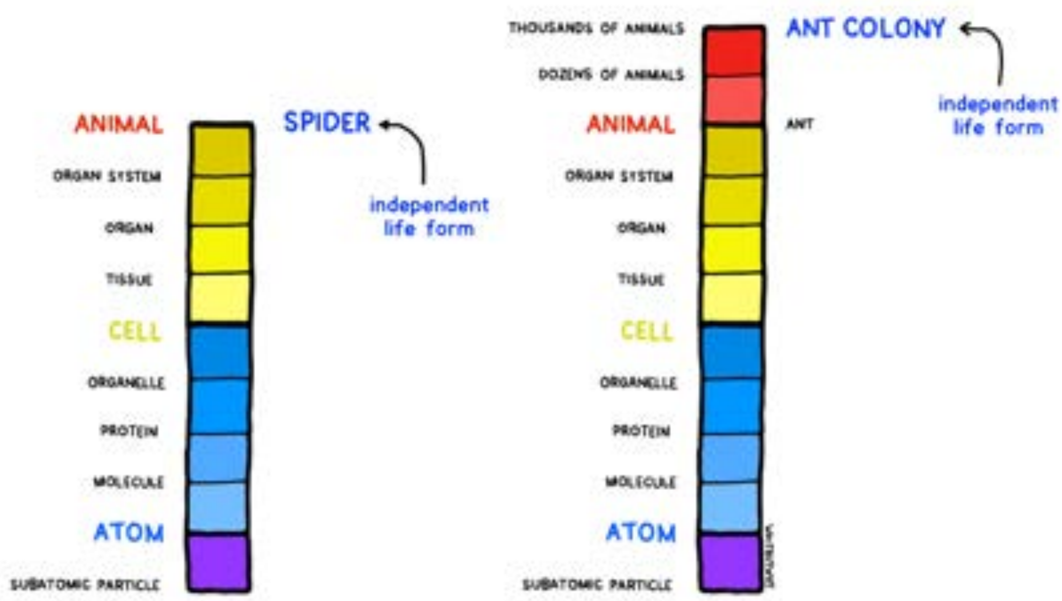
To me, someone is being tribal when they're thinking and behaving more like a piece of a larger organism than as an independent organism themselves.

Under this definition, ants are tribal as fuck. They're furiously loyal. They always put the team first. The ants I've gotten to know in my life have a long list of bad personal qualities, but "individual selfishness" isn't one of them.

Meanwhile, two rival spiders will compete with each other ruthlessly, both entirely self-interested.

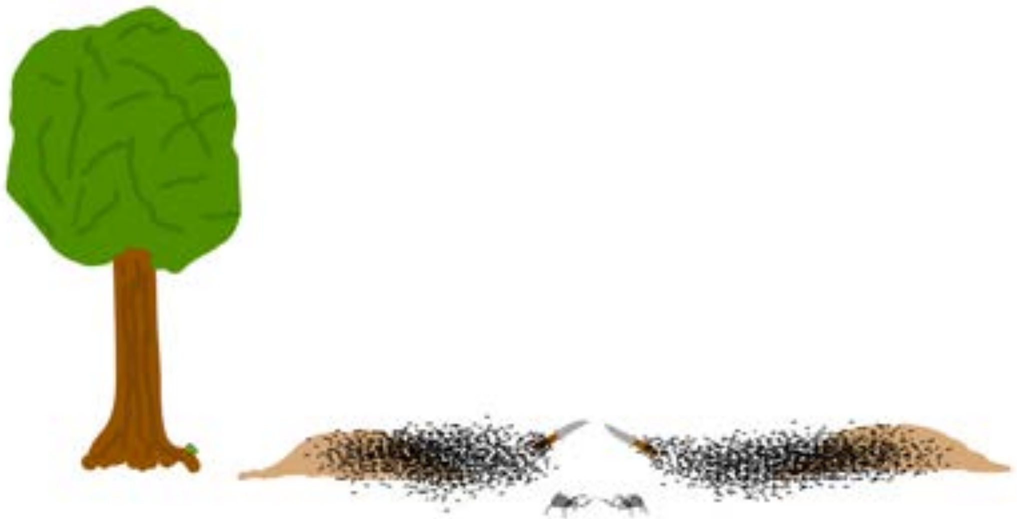
So what's the deal? Are ants better people than spiders are?

Ant behavior seems pretty different than spider behavior—until we remember that the two species have different relationships with Emergence Tower. For spiders, the "independent life form" lives on the level of the individual animal. For ants, independence happens a few floors up.


ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
SPIDER
independent life form
THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
ANT COLONY
ANT
independent life form

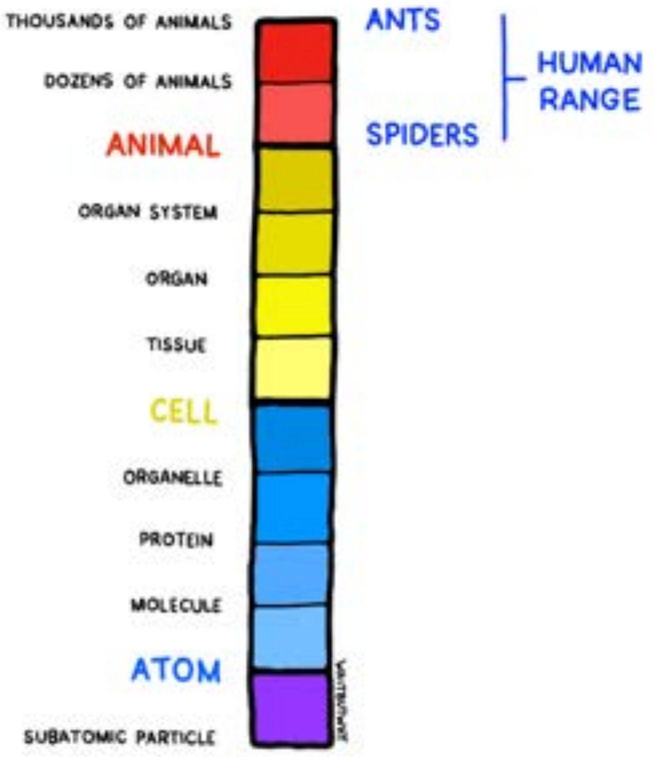
Comparing the behavior of individual spiders to individual ants is comparing the behavior of one independent life form to the behavior of the *cells* of another independent life form. Cells of a life form tend to be highly cooperative with each other—that doesn't tell you much about whether or not the life form itself likes to cooperate with other life forms.

If we look at ant behavior up on the colony level of Emergence Tower, they don't look so nice anymore. Colonies aren't especially into cooperating with or sharing their food with other colonies, and as many 2:45am YouTube spirals have taught me, they will not hesitate to pillage and murder members of another colony if it helps their colony. Ant colonies are big, selfish creatures—individual ants are just the cells of that creature.



In the human world, we think of "Me vs. You" selfishness and "Us vs. Them" tribalism as different concepts, but they're actually just the same phenomenon happening on different parts of Emergence Tower. Spider dickishness comes in the form of "Me vs. You" selfishness because the spider is the independent life form. Ant dickishness comes in the form of “Us vs. Them” tribalism because the ant colony is the independent life form. Tribalism is just what selfishness looks like up on the group level.

The human Primitive Mind isn’t any nicer than the spider or ant Primitive Mind—but it is a bit more complicated. Unlike spiders and ants, whose independent life form never changes emergence floors, humans are a kind of hybrid creature that inhabits a *range* along Emergence Tower, not a single floor.



In India it pretty visible,

① States vs States

② India vs Pakistan

We can be like spiders sometimes and like ants other times. Our independent life form makes trips up and down Emergence Tower’s *elevator*.

Human evolution has driven our use of this elevator, striking what’s probably an optimal balance for maximum genetic survival.

Me against my brother

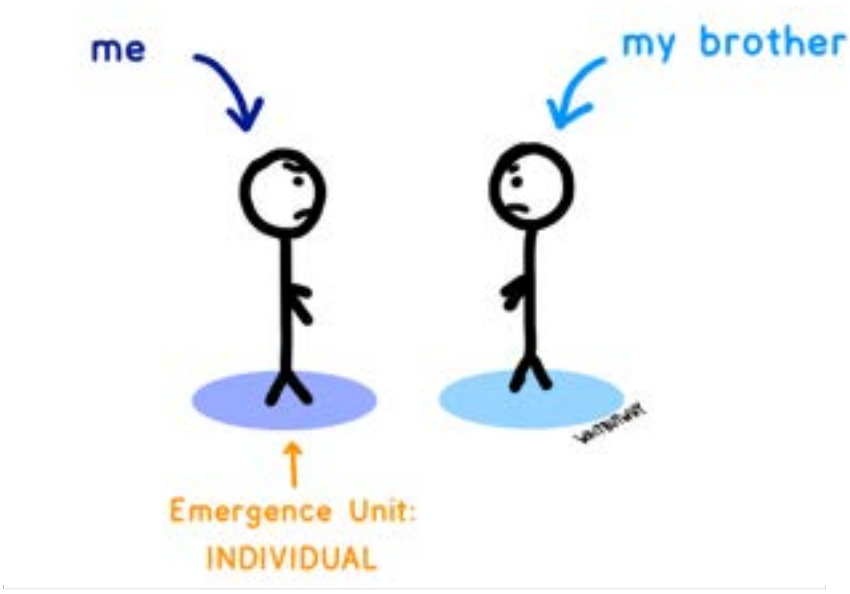
Of all the factors that affect our emergence mindset, one of the most reliable is conflict.

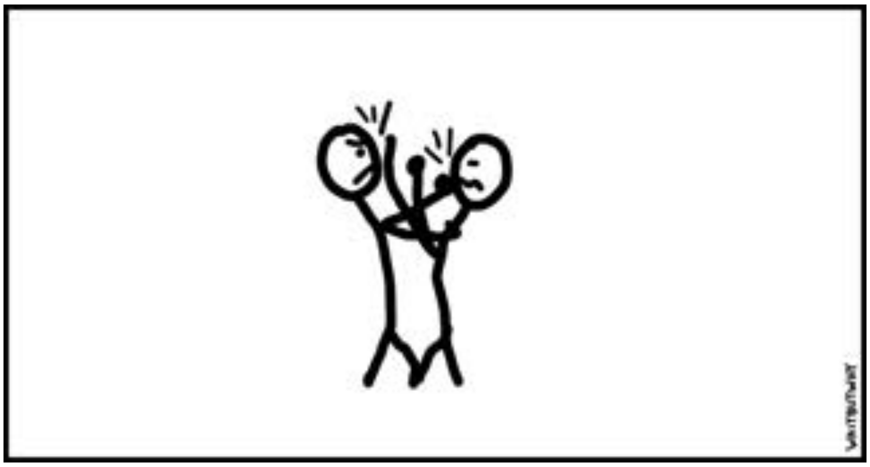
When my tortoise Winston is scared, he tucks his head and his limbs into his shell. When humans are scared, they form giants. The giant is the human tortoise shell. Typically, the bigger the giant that threatens a group of people, the bigger a giant they’ll form in response.

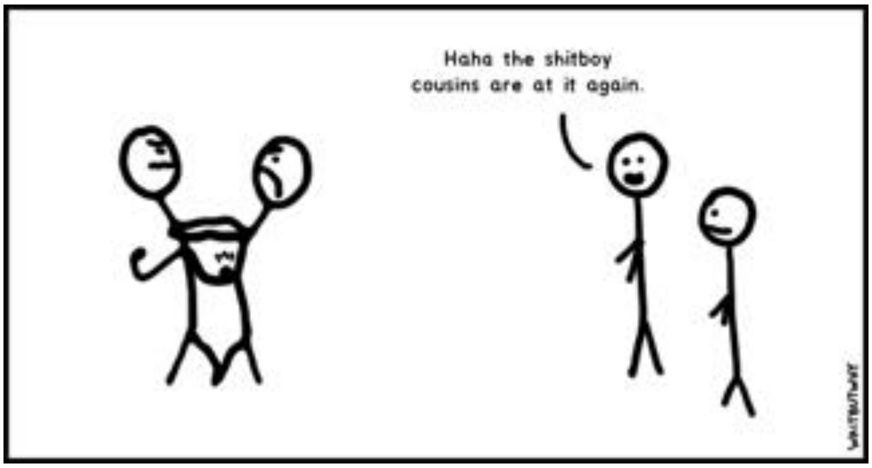
Psychologist Jonathan Haidt likes to point out an old Bedouin proverb that nails this idea. It goes:

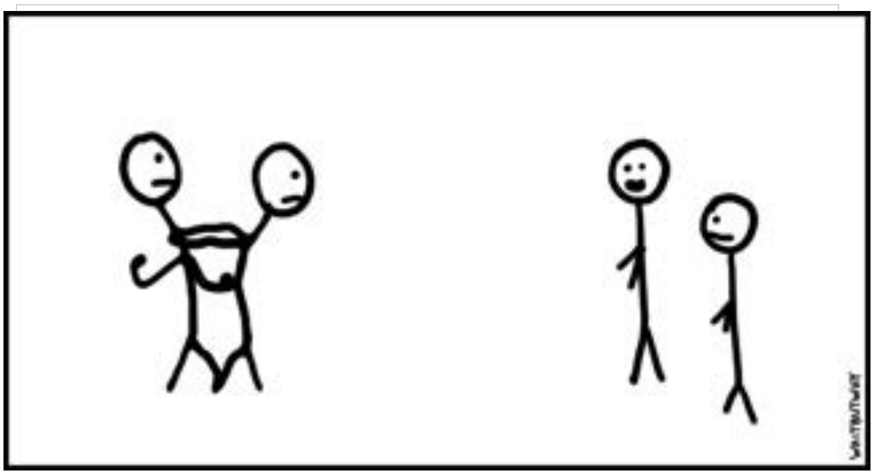
Me against my brothers; my brothers and me against my cousins; my cousins, my brothers, and me against strangers.

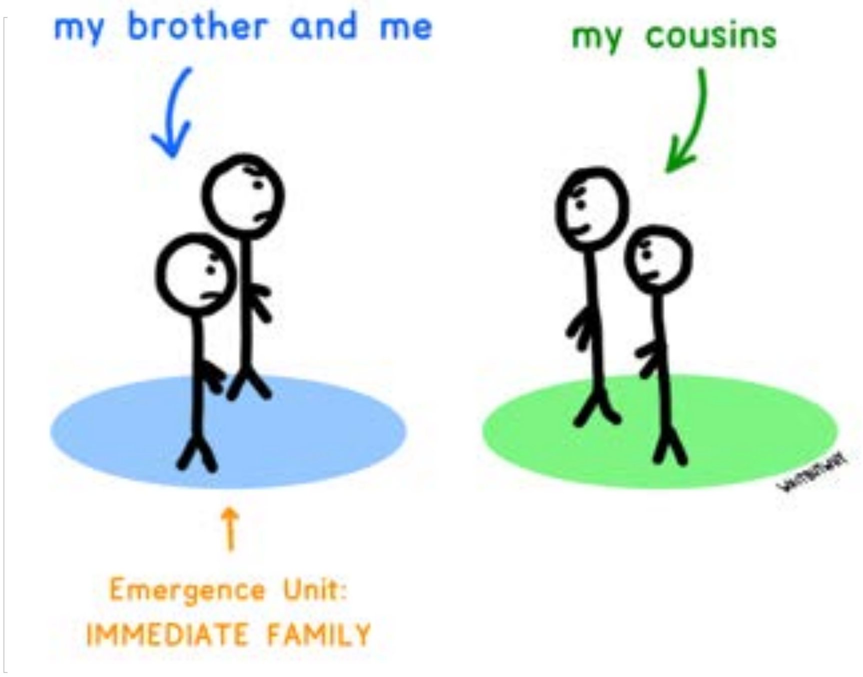
When I hear this proverb, I see a human taking a ride up the Emergence Tower elevator.

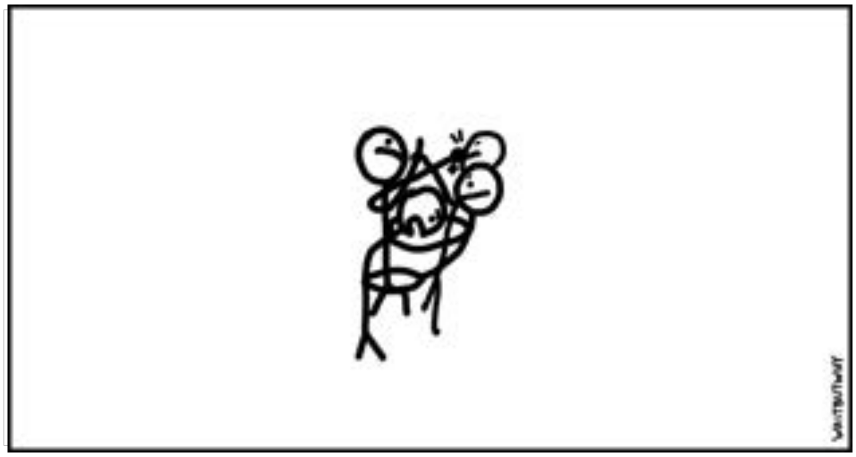

me
my brother
WAITBUTWHY
Emergence Unit:
INDIVIDUAL

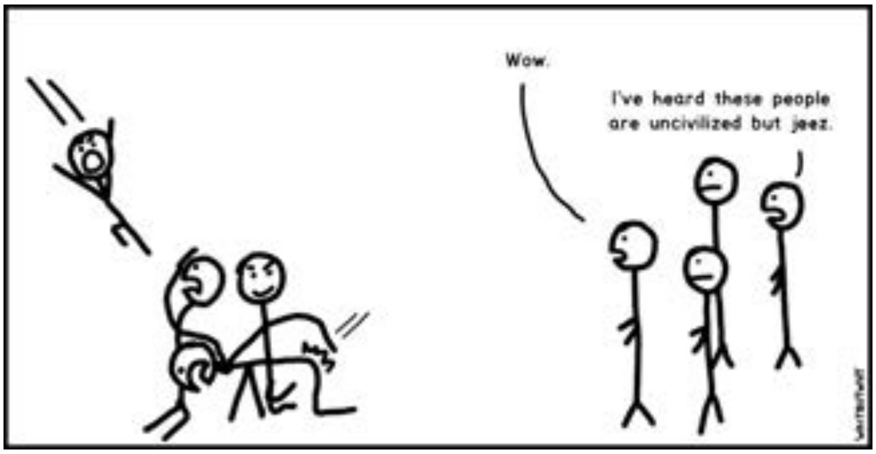

WAITBUTWHY

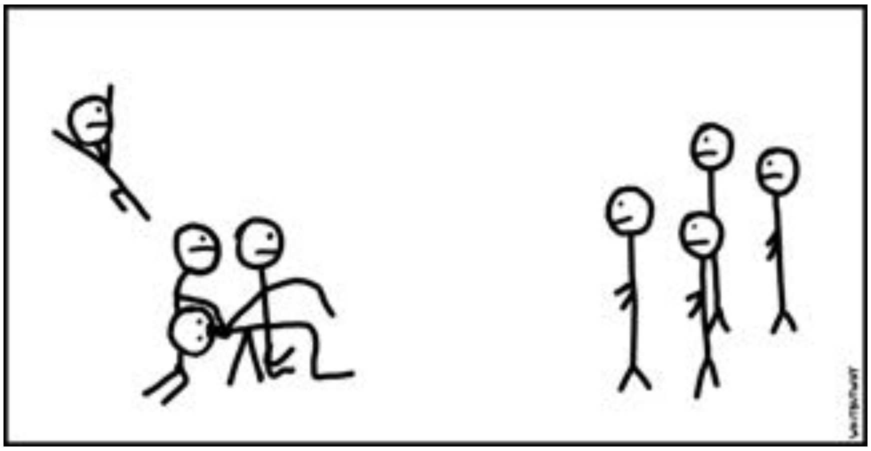

Haha the shitboy cousins are at it again.
WAITBUTWHY

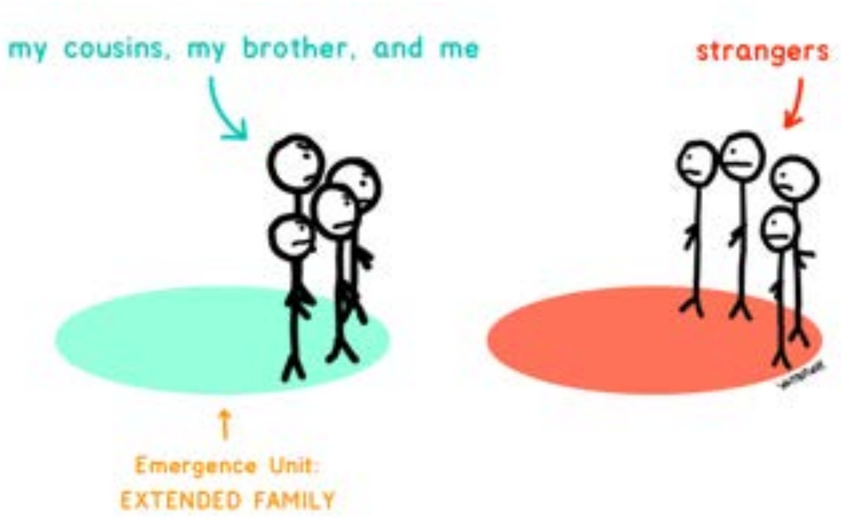

WAITBUTWHY

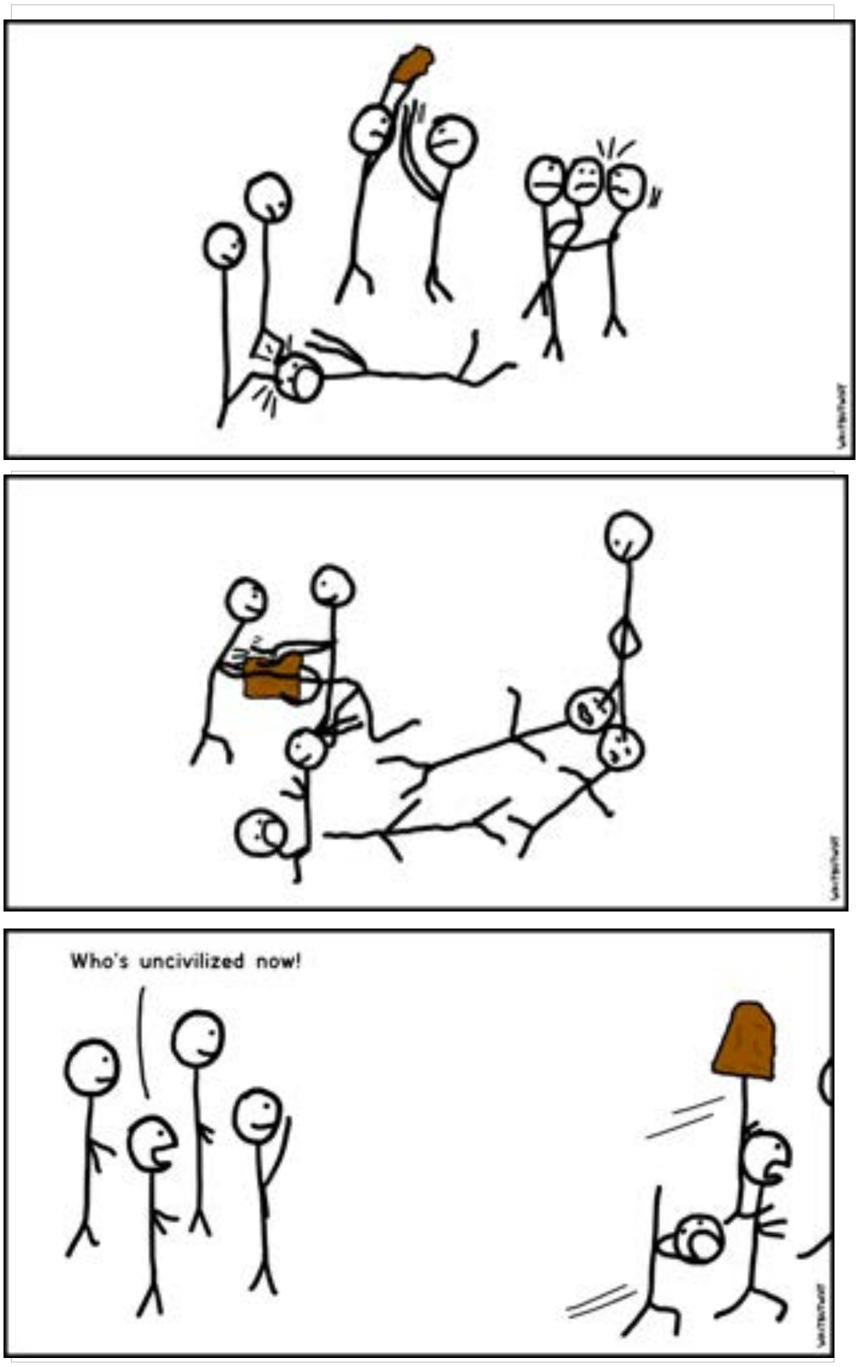

my brother and me
my cousins
Emergence Unit:
IMMEDIATE FAMILY
WAITBUTWHY

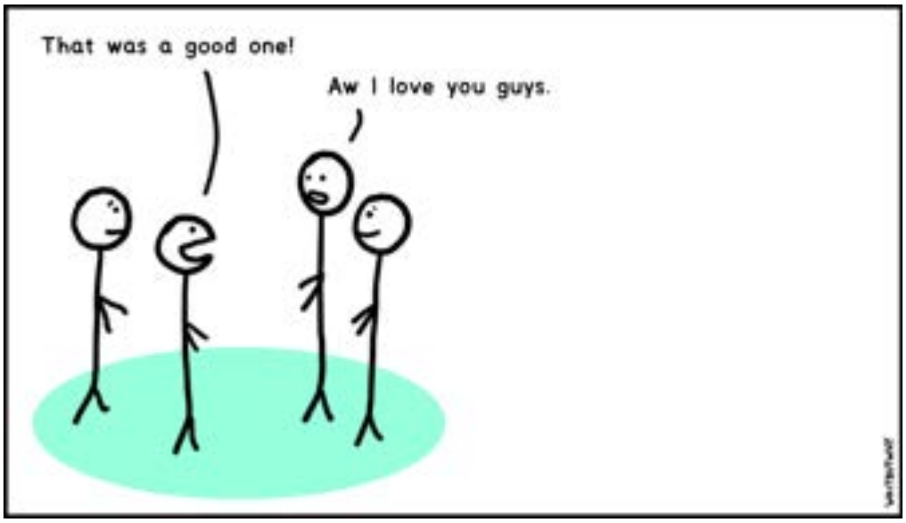

WAITBUTWHY

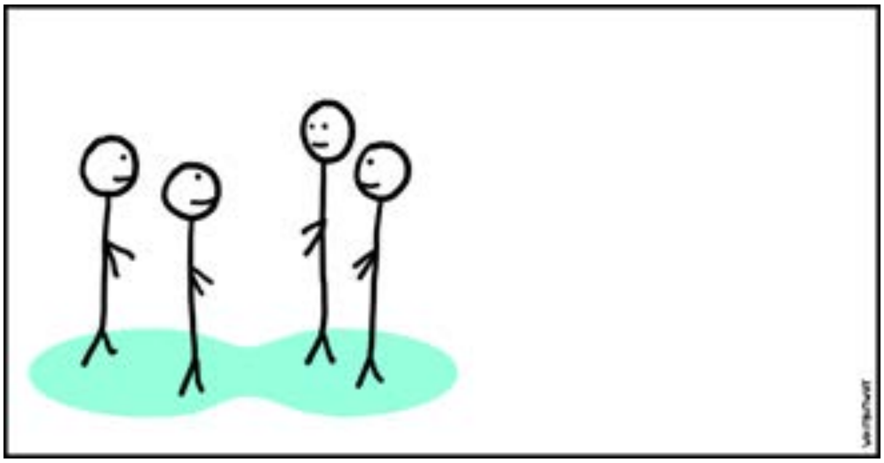

Wow.
I've heard these people are uncivilized but jeez.
WAITBUTWHY

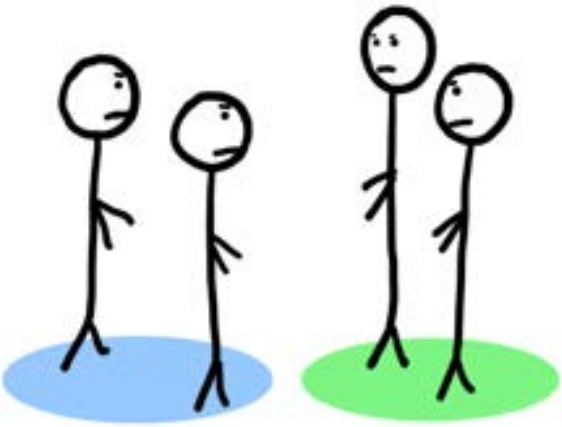

WAITBUTWHY


my cousins, my brother, and me
strangers
Emergence Unit:
EXTENDED FAMILY


Who's uncivilized now!


That was a good one!
Aw I love you guys.





At the beginning of the comic, the psychology of the two brothers was centered on the individual human floor. With no larger conflict happening, they acted a lot like two competing spiders. But selfish spider behavior is a luxury of safe times, and as other groups entered the scene, the brothers had bigger problems on their hands than their dislike of each other. Their psyches rose up on the emergence elevator, and by the middle of the comic, everyone was acting more like ants than spiders. Towards the end of the comic, as the threat levels went down, higher tribalism melted away and things became less ant-like—the elevator came back downwards.

If you pay attention to the world around you, and to your own psychology, you'll spot the elevator in action. Ever notice how countries in one region of the world will often despise each other, focusing most of their national dickishness on each other—until there's a broader conflict or war in play, at which time they put aside their differences? How different sects of a religion in fierce conflict with each other will suddenly find common ground when a rival religion or other outside entity insults or threatens their religion as a whole? How about when rivalries in the world of club soccer become less heated during the World Cup? Or when political factions with differing or even totally contradictory ideologies start marching in the street, arm in arm, during a national election or mass movement? I saw the elevator shoot upwards in the days following 9/11, when millions of New Yorkers who normally can't stand each other were holding doors for each other, showing concern for each other's well-being, and even hugging each other in the street. I remember thinking that while an alien attack would suck overall, it would do wonders for species solidarity. ②

In each case, human dickishness is running at full force—the thing that's changing is the size of the giants that are being dicks to each other.

Human evolution has probably been influenced by the entire human emergence range. We were shaped partially by our spider interactions as we competed with neighboring individuals and partially by our ant interactions as our tribes competed with neighboring tribes. In other words, to survive through human history, it makes sense that our genes had to be good at competing as an individual against their brother *and* competing with their family against other families *and* competing with their tribe against other tribes. ③

The right element of a perfect survival tribe

Our society today is, in its own way, still a game of giants. To understand the world around us, you can't think only about people as individuals—we need to get to know the tribal mindset. So what are some elements of a tribal mindset?

There are classic "Us > Them" traits, like our **respect for loyalty**—the feeling that being loyal is a critical virtue and nothing is worse than being a traitor.

Or the way we view others. Our tendency to **lionize members of Us and demonize members of Them**.

Many of the most tribal traits come in the form of "Us > Me"—as if the tribal mindset is in direct competition with the me-first selfish mindset.

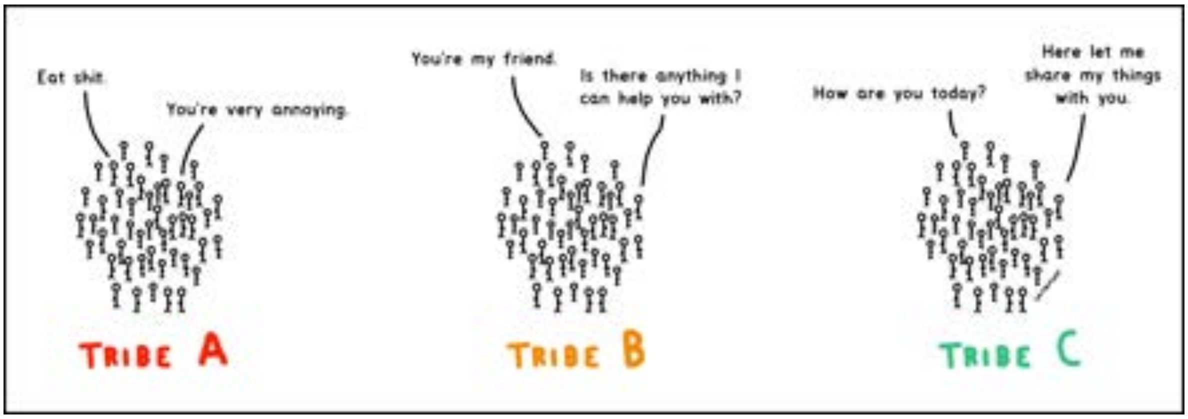
Sometimes it shows up as **a love of conformity.** A literal "selflessness." The inclination to fit in at the expense of your individuality. A susceptibility to groupthink over individual reasoning. A fear of standing out or being disliked and a disdain for those who diverge from group conformity. A very ant-y way to be.

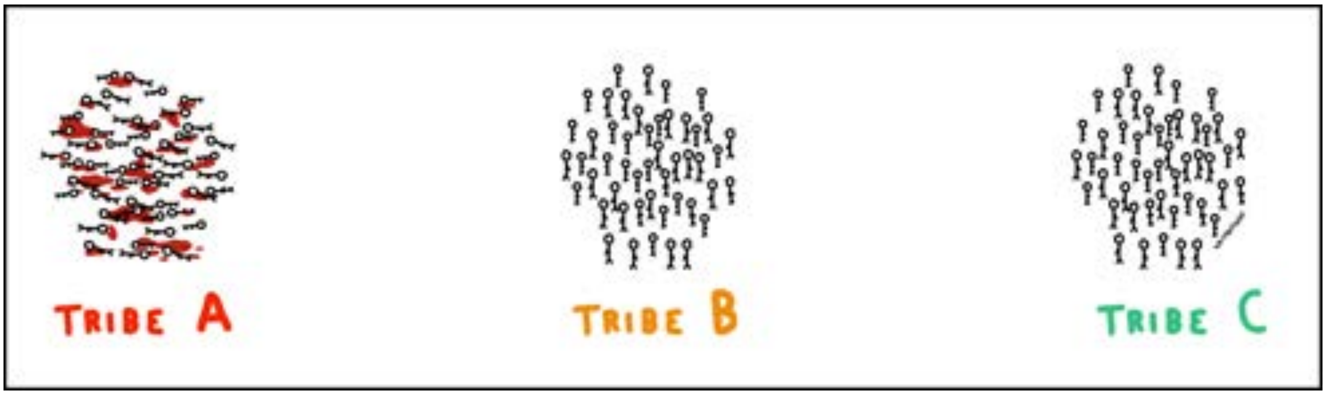
Sometimes it shows up as **an affinity for social hierarchy**—a deference to authority and the inclination to suck up to those in power.

Or **reverence for self-sacrifice.** The feeling that the most noble thing someone can do is sacrifice their life in service of Us as a whole or in order to save another group member. And deep contempt for anyone who looks out for themselves in battle or behaves selfishly within the tribe.

But the tribal quality that I find most fascinating is what I might call **selective kindness.**

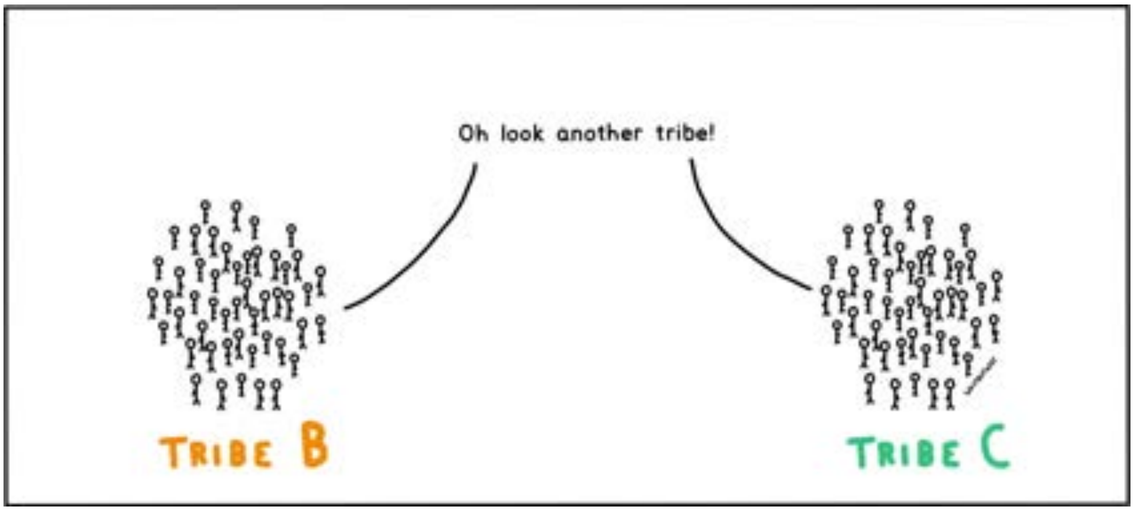
To see how selective kindness works, let's visit with three ancient tribes—one made up of people who are never kind, one made of people who are selectively kind, and one full of people who are always kind.


Eat shit.
You're very annoying.
TRIBE A
You're my friend.
Is there anything I can help you with?
TRIBE B
How are you today?
Here let me share my things with you.
TRIBE C

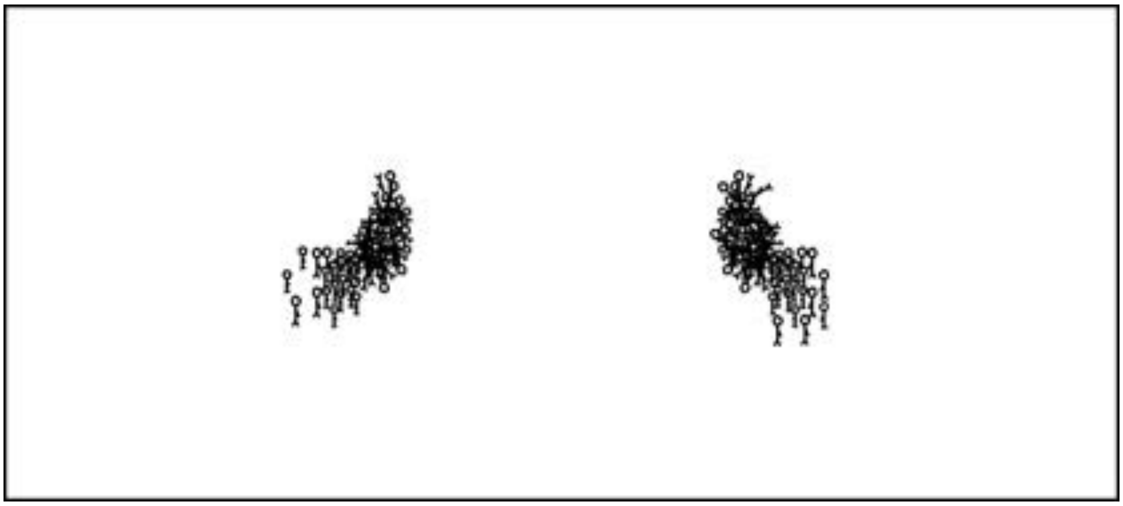


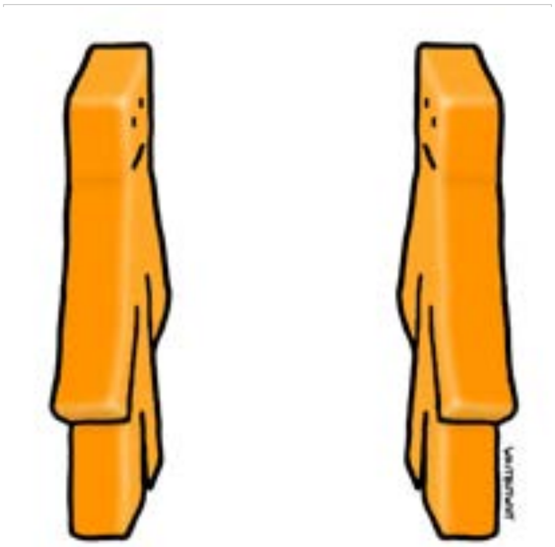
TRIBE A
TRIBE B
TRIBE C

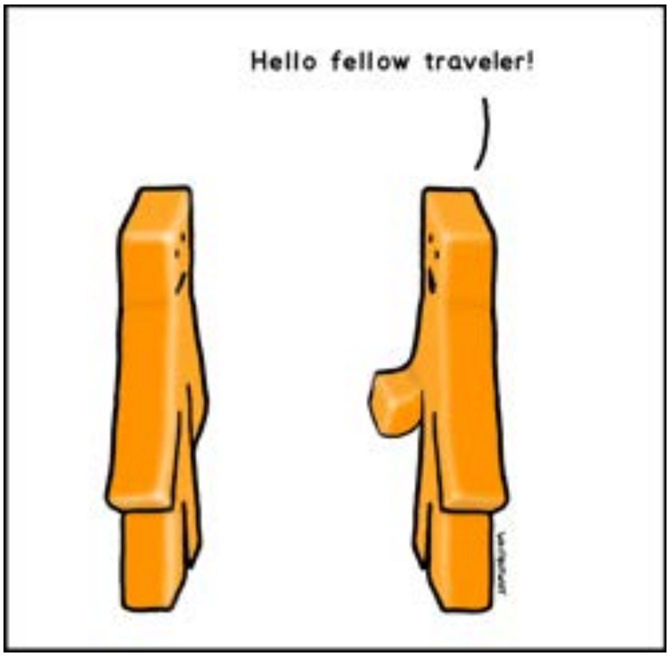
Okay well that was bad for Tribe A. The tribe was full of people who were never kind, which turned out to be a bad survival strategy. And how about Tribe B and Tribe C? Both look pretty decent so far. But what happens when, one day, they run into each other?

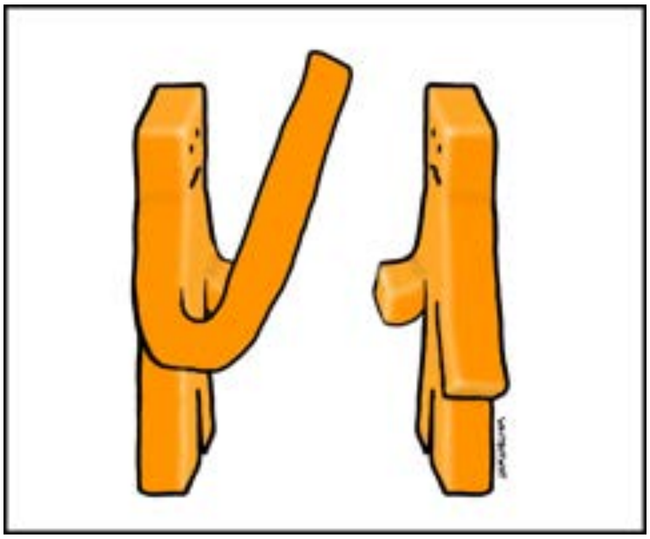


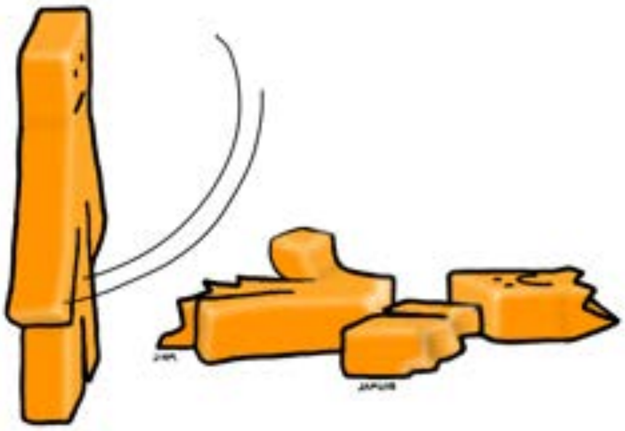
Oh look another tribe!
TRIBE B
TRIBE C






Hello fellow traveler!





Alright, then.④

Tribe B showed kindness *within* their giant the same way the organs in your body work together and support each other. This behavior emerged not from a general *principle* but as a means to the selfish survival of the giant they formed together. On the other hand, Tribe C's kindness was a core value, not confined to any single layer of emergence—it extended upwards into the world of giants as well.

So while kindness, in all its manifestations—care, altruism, compassion—was an important survival trait in a world where well-functioning groups were necessary for survival, universal kindness probably wasn't a great survival trait. Inevitably, other tribes would be selectively kind, shedding all of that kindness when dealing with other tribes. And when a kind tribe faces off against a ruthless tribe, the ruthless tribe usually wins.

The evolutionary sweet spot probably wouldn't have been kindness or empathy or compassion or cooperation—it would have been to have these traits on a *toggle switch*. To be micro-kind and macro-ruthless.

When I look around, I see evidence of this toggle switch everywhere. Notice how easily people who are normally compassionate drop that compassion when thinking and talking about members of a political party they hate—the "Them" political party? How these people are all about forgiveness with people they see as part of "Us" but are fine with permanent, lifelong consequences for enemies of that group? How they're so good at seeing the story behind the story when they hear about criminals they consider part of "good guy" groups, but always seem to see the worst superficial caricature in wrongdoers from groups they don't identify with? It happens on a smaller scale too, like when people who have spent their lives showing no compassion or understanding for a certain type of outsider suddenly have a warm heart when someone in their family ends up as part of that group.

religious group &
political party

Selective kindness isn't high-mindedness. The Higher Mind exhibits these traits all the time. He's high-minded *universally*, as a general principle, and applies it to everyone equally. Selective kindness is a Primitive Mind trick that *appears* to be high-mindedness, if you're not paying close enough attention. Remember, at first glance, ants seemed like nice people too. That's why the litmus test of anyone's true colors—the revealer of which mind is running the show in their head—is how they treat people outside their tribe. Both the Higher Mind and Primitive Mind tend to treat fellow tribesmen with kindness, so that tells you nothing—it's when dealing with *Them* that the two minds diverge.

cool trick to
find out
who is who
apart from human
behaviour.

I've written about our troubles with the Primitive Mind many times on Wait But Why, exploring how it manifests in different forms—as the reason we procrastinate, the reason we care so much what others think of us, the reason we're so bad at original thinking, the reason we struggle for self-awareness. In each case, the Primitive Mind is just doing what it's programmed to do—help us pass our genes on in 50,000 BC. In each case, our problems stem from the fact that we no longer live in the world we were optimized by evolution to live in. And in each case, there's hope to make things better—because right next to the Primitive Mind in our heads is an advanced center of clarity and wisdom and independent agency. The Higher Mind may be the underdog, but he's a fighter.

When I started thinking about modern tribalism as I wrote this series, it hit me that this has a lot in common with those other posts. Because a society's struggles aren't that different from each of our personal struggles—just like two families fighting isn't that different from two brothers fighting. Society and the people who make it up have a fractal relationship—their internal problems are of the same nature, just on different emergence floors. At the core of both struggles is the mismatch between our ancient programming and the advanced civilization we live in.

I've always felt hope when writing about our struggles at the individual level, and I feel hope in this series too as we look at what's going on a few floors up on the elevator. But we have a pretty daunting task in front of us—because innate tribalism is only the beginning of what we're contending with today. Somewhere down the line of human history, evolution happened upon a new tool that put human tribalism on steroids. That's what we'll explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: A Story of Stories

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Why I'm always late

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Your life is a beautiful painting…but you live inside a single pixel

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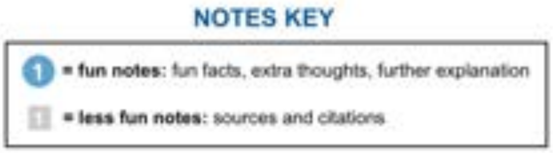
A Story of Stories

September 4, 2019 By Tim Urban

This is Chapter 3 in a series. If you're new to the series, visit the ***series home page*** *for a full table of contents.*



NOTES KEY

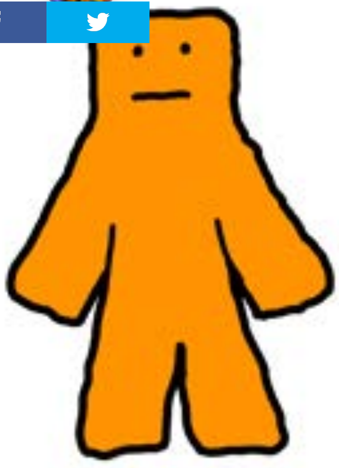
1 = **fun notes:** fun facts, extra thoughts, further explanation

1 = **less fun notes:** sources and citations

Chapter 3: A Story of Stories

In the last chapter, we met the human giant.

20 Shares



We talked about emergence and how the giant is what humanity looks like a few floors up the tower from the individual.

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The Fermi Paradox
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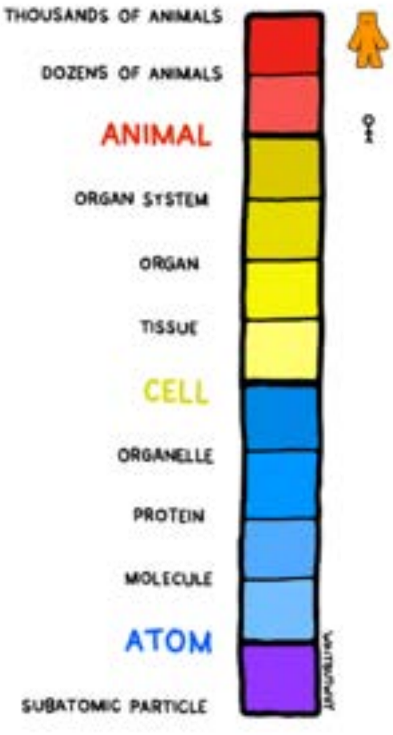


Building giants was a necessity for ancient humans. A human tribe was more than the sum of its parts, in physical power, in productivity, and in knowledge.

Given the powers of emergence, large human giants would be forces to reckon with. But unlike ants, humans are more than just cells in competing giants—they're competing individuals too. So as tribes grew in size, the benefits of strength and capability would be accompanied by the cost of increasing instability. A human tribe is held together by weaker glue than an ant colony, and the bigger the tribe, the harder it is for that glue to hold up. This is partly why complex animals like wolves, gorillas, elephants, and dolphins tend to roll in groups with under 100 members.

Early tribes of humans were probably similar to tribes of other apes—glued together mostly by family ties. Kinship is an obvious natural glue because animals are programmed to be interested in the immortality of those with genes most similar to them—so humans are more likely to cede individual self-interest to a group when that group is family. That's why today, people are so willing to make huge sacrifices for family members.

Family glue is strongest between parents and children, because genes "know" that copies of themselves live in their container's direct progeny. Genes also have us selfishly caring about the well-being of siblings and nieces and nephews because a very similar version of themselves lives in them—but we don't care *quite* as much about these people as we do about our children. As the distance between blood relations grows, the glue thins. As evolutionist J.B.S. Haldane puts it: "I would lay down my life for two brothers or eight cousins."

With that in mind, let's imagine a big extended family made up of 27 immediate families—the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of a single couple—living together as an ancient tribe. ①

Like 2.2K

1,203

7 Ways to be Insufferable on Facebook

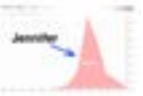
Like 4.9K

956

Putting Time In Perspective

Like 1.9K

550



How to Name a Baby

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Why You Should Stop Caring What Other People Think

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10 Types of 30-Year-Old Single Guys

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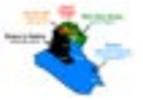

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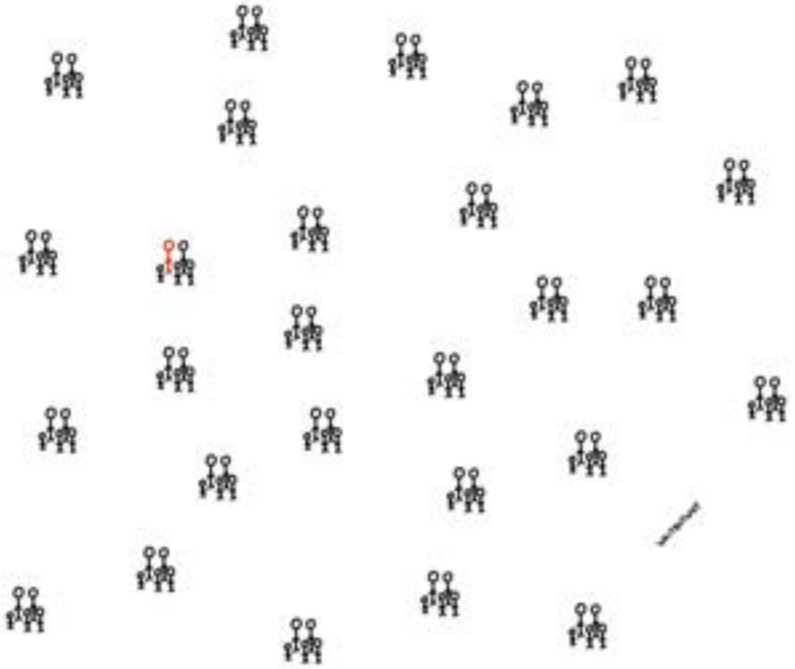
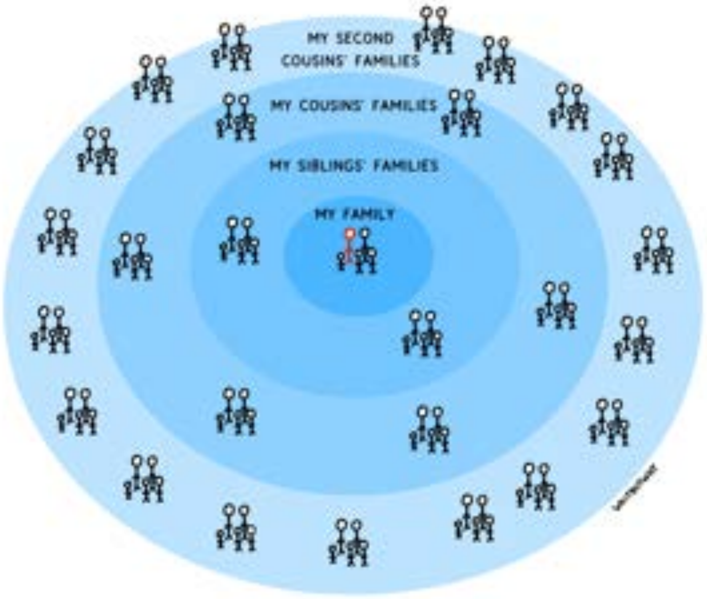
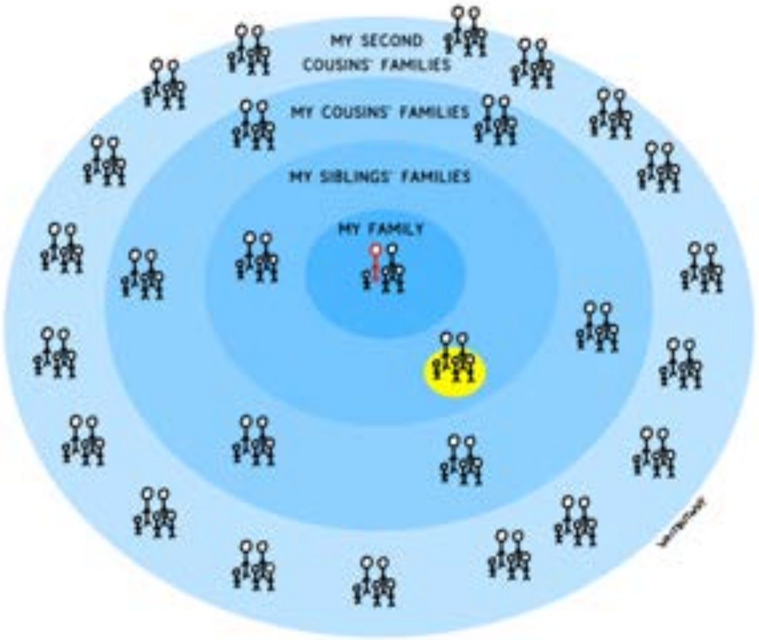


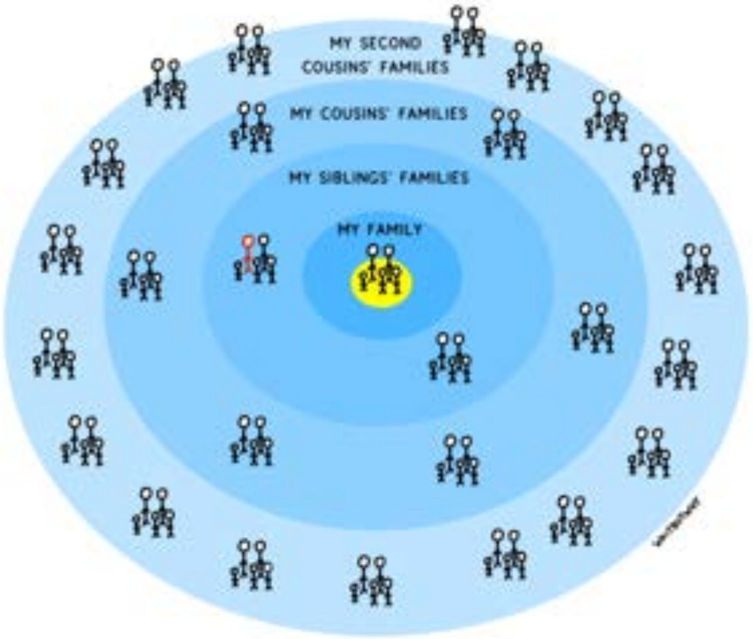
Say the red guy is the tribe's chief. For the chief and his family, this is what the tribe feels like:


MY SECOND COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY SIBLINGS' FAMILIES
MY FAMILY

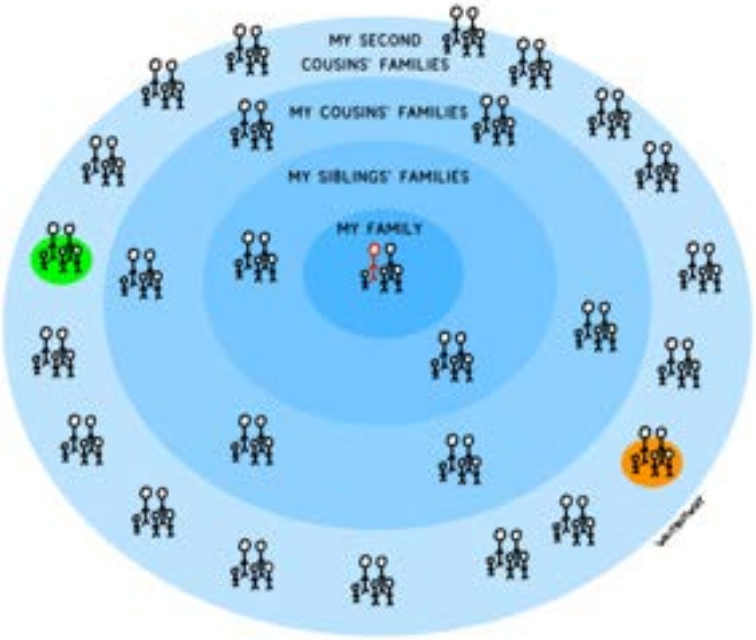
Pretty nice setup. The problem is that no one else views the tribe this way—because everyone is at the center of their own circle. Let's focus in on the chief's sister and her family.


MY SECOND COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY SIBLINGS' FAMILIES
MY FAMILY

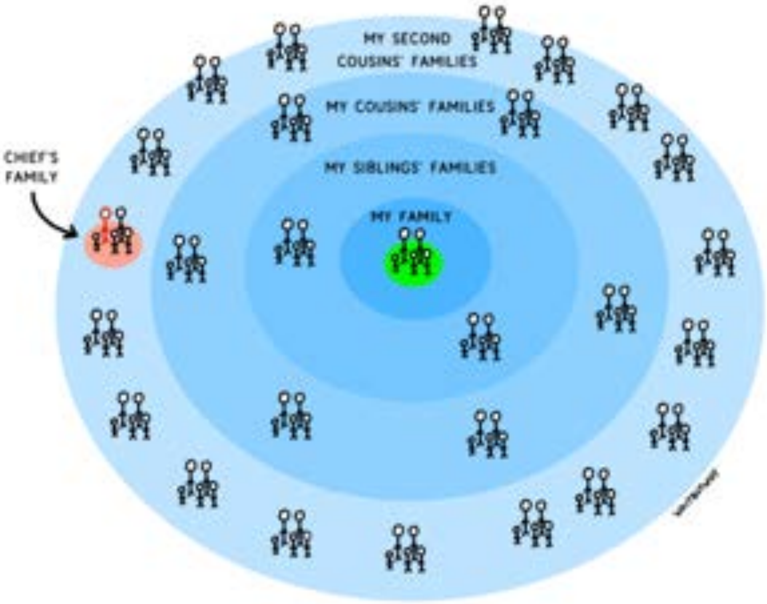
To this yellow family, the tribe feels like this:


MY SECOND COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY SIBLINGS' FAMILIES
MY FAMILY

Not ideal, but not the end of the world. But how about the chief's second cousins—like the orange family? Or the green family?

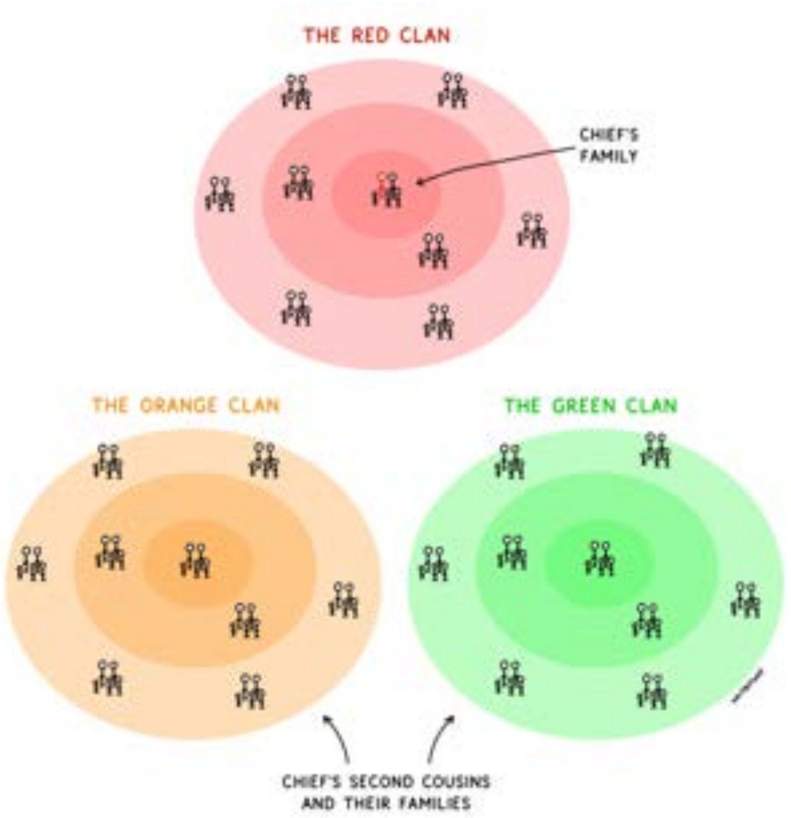

MY SECOND COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY SIBLINGS' FAMILIES
MY FAMILY

For these families—and all the other 16 families in that ring—the tribe feels like this:


MY SECOND COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY COUSINS' FAMILIES
MY SIBLINGS' FAMILIES
MY FAMILY
CHIEF'S FAMILY

And remember how the cousin system works. Your second cousin is equally related to you, your siblings, and your first cousins—to them, you're all equivalent second cousins.

So if the chief is your second cousin, it may feel a bit like they're part of a different clan from yours altogether.



And the way things are now, the head of the one clan is the chief of all three clans—leaving his clan with higher status and special privileges.

Now if all of you are immersed in a rivalry with your evil third-cousin tribe in the neighboring settlement, everyone will probably stay united, Bedouin proverb style,② bonded together as a single life form by the threat of an equal size rival life form.

But what if there is no evil third-cousin tribe? Without the binding force of a common enemy, if you're the alpha character in your clan, you may decide you don't like the status quo and either go to battle with the other clan or break off into your own tribe.

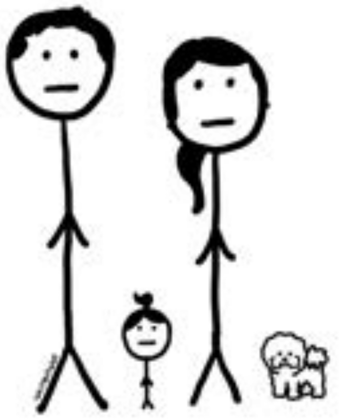
When a loose tribe held together by weak glue grows bigger and bigger, it also gets looser and looser until it can't hold itself together anymore, and it splinters.

This imposes a natural ceiling on human giant size—and therefore on human power itself.

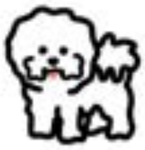
Except I'm currently sitting in an eight-million-person city that's inside of a 325-million-person country.

So what changed?

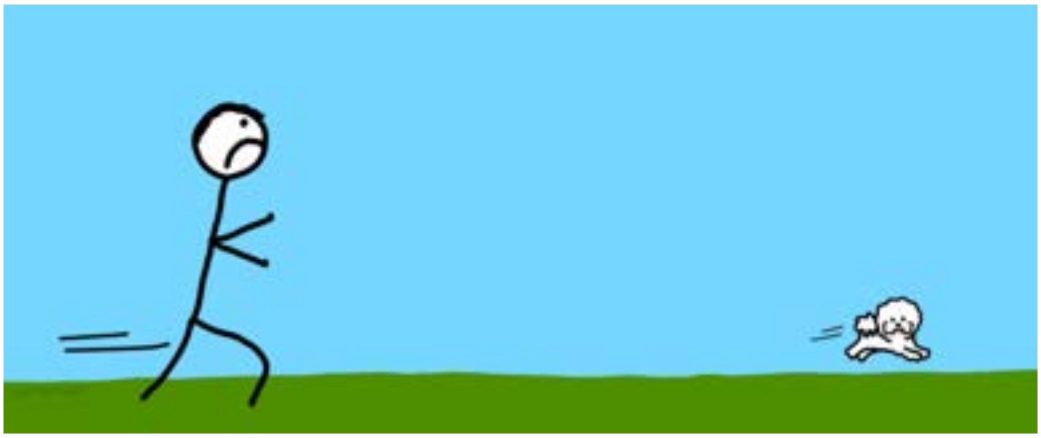
To help us answer that question, let's bring in the Johnsons.



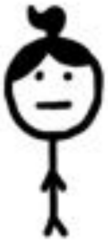
The Johnsons have problems. First there's Moochie.



Moochie never comes when the Johnsons call him, and whenever they open the front door, Moochie jumps out the door and runs away.



Then there’s Lulu.



Every night after the Johnsons put Lulu to bed, she waits until they leave the room and then she crawls out the window to go riding around with the bad baby who lives down the block.

Not good. So the Johnsons come up with a plan.

They get a bag of Snausages, and every time Moochie comes when they call him, they give him a treat. And they install an electric fence around their house.

And Moochie shapes right up.

But how about Lulu?

The Johnsons could go for a similar strategy, giving Lulu candy for staying home at night and lining her window frame with live electrical wire.

But instead they tell her about Santa Claus. They tell Lulu that A) Santa Claus is omniscient—he knows when she's been sleeping and he knows when she's awake and he knows when she's been bad or good; and B) when Santa breaks into their house next Christmas, he'll leave presents for her if and only if she's been good.

here comes disneyworld, folklor
, god, superheros,
methology etc

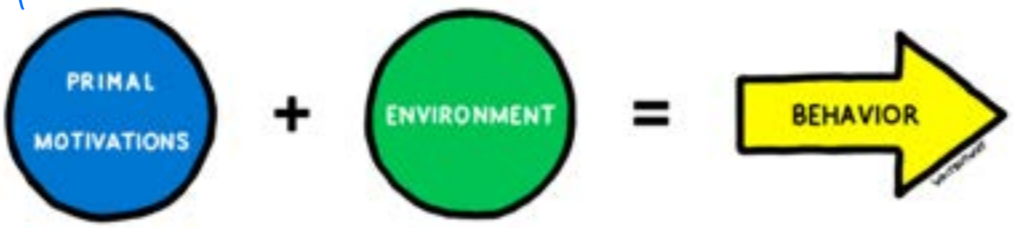
After hearing this, Lulu ends her fling with the bad baby.

Good for the Johnsons.

So let's unpack this.

An animal's behavior isn't an independent entity. It's the dependent variable in this equation:

tribe + primitive mind
+ concious mind



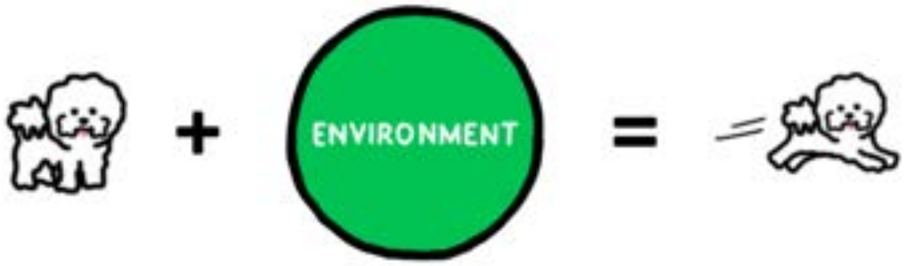
A dog's core motivations are hardwired into it by its software. The software is the real animal trainer, using a variety of chemical treats and chemical electroshocks to steer the animal to its genes' liking.

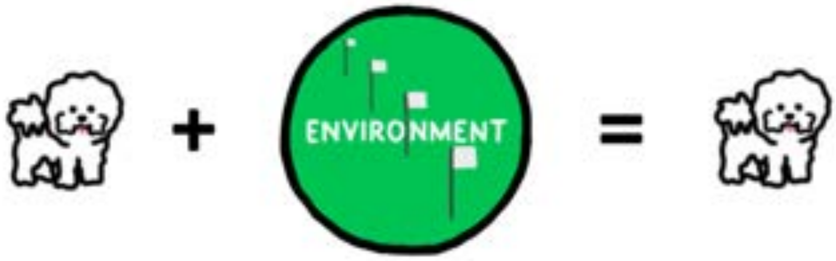
If an animal's life is a game of chasing good feelings and avoiding bad ones, the animal's environment is the obstacle course standing between it and all those delicious chemical rewards.

haha! Suckers
get fooled

So Moochie's behavior is just a reflection of his particular motivations and the environment around him. If you want to change his behavior, you have to change one of the equation's independent variables—Moochie's nature or his environment. If we had a brain-machine interface, we might be able to change his nature—rewiring Moochie's software so that dopamine hits are triggered by, say, the high arts instead of by gorging on food.

But it's far less of a hassle to just change his environment. By giving Moochie a Snausage every time he obeys their commands, or by casually electrocuting him whenever he tries to run away, the Johnsons can link a certain type of behavior that his software doesn't care about to one that it does. Moochie the good boy is still being just as selfish as Moochie the bad boy. He still doesn't like expending energy obeying boring-ass commands—but with the change of environmental conditions, the negative of the effort plus the positive of the Snausage yields a net positive, so he obeys. He still wants to run away just as badly as he did before, but between [not running away + not being electrocuted] and [running away + being electrocuted], he chooses the former.





here comes, motivation
peer presurre,
values

In some ways, humans are just like Moochie.

They're wired by primitive software to have certain motivations, and they live in an environment that stands between them and what they want—with their behavior as the dependent variable.

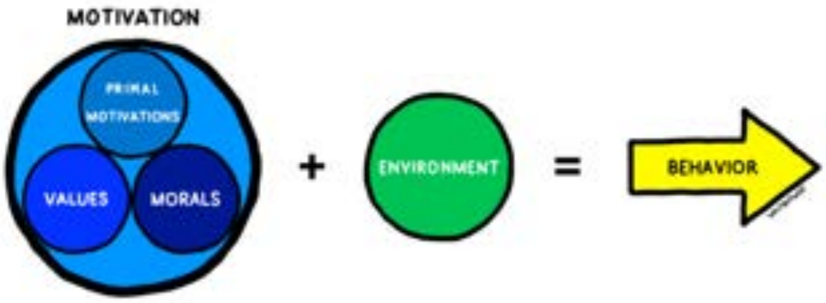
But with humans, things get more complicated.

First, their primal motivations are super complex. On top of all the standard animal desires, humans are incentivized by all kinds of weird Snausages and electric fences. They crave self-esteem and want to avoid shame. They yearn for praise and acceptance and detest loneliness or embarrassment. They pine for meaning and fulfillment and they fear regret. They're gratified by helping others and guilty when they cause pain. They're terrified of their own mortality.

Maslow's higherciey
needs

With so many factors involved, human motivation often comes down to personal priorities and what matters most to people—i.e. their values. Humans have a complicated relationship with morality too, and their conception of what's right and wrong has a hand in the equation as well.

Values and morals have the power to override a human's innate drives. Where traits like honesty, integrity, generosity, propriety, respect, loyalty, or kindness are valued, people will behave differently than where they're not. If three humans with identical sex drives value monogamy, polyamory, and celibacy respectively, they'll behave in three different ways with regards to sex.



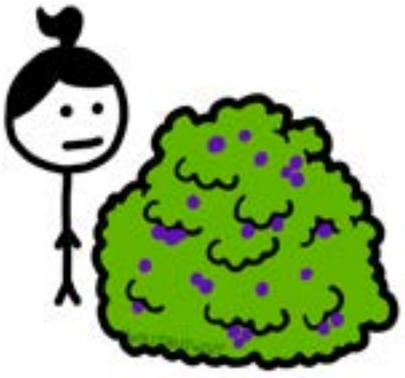
The "environment" circle is more complicated with humans too.

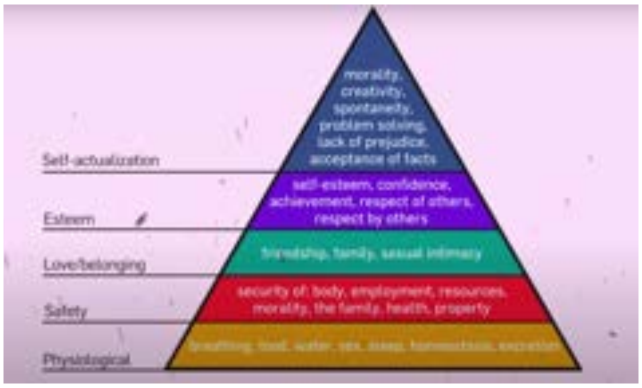
Dogs tend to be evidence-based thinkers. The Johnsons could have tried to tell Moochie that obeying their commands would yield a Snausage, but he wouldn't care. They could *promise* it—100 times—and Moochie won't care. He will 0% believe what you say until he sees it with his own eyes / tastes it with his own mouth. If you want a dog to change their mind about something, show them hard, concrete evidence.

this creates a lot
of struggle for
them

Humans also learn via direct experience, but their advanced language and imagination capabilities offer them a *second* learning pathway.

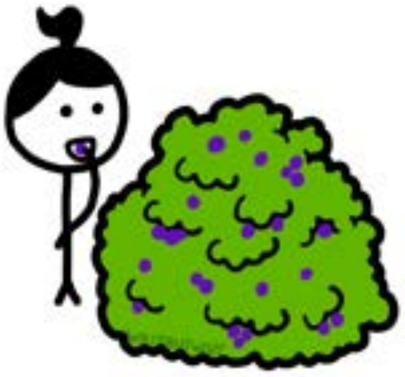
Let’s go back to Lulu for a minute. One thing I haven’t told you about her is that she fucking loves berries. And one day she’s out doing her thing and comes across a berry bush.




morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts
self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, respect by others
friendship, family, sexual intimacy
security of: body, employment, resources, morality, the family, health, property
breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, excretion
Self-actualization
Esteem
Love/belonging
Safety
Physiological

Now let’s run four quick scenarios.

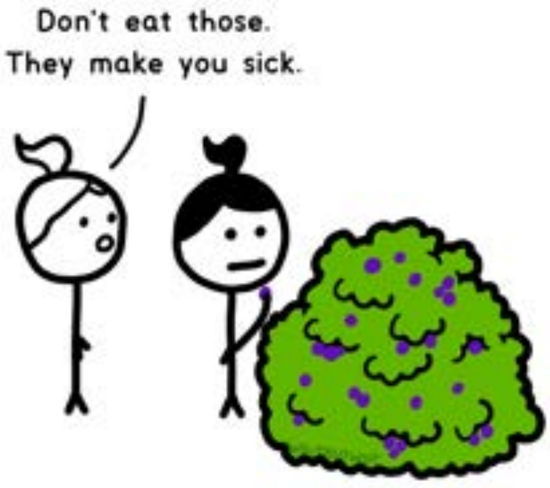
In scenario A, Lulu is alone when she encounters the berry bush. The enjoyment of berries ranks way high up in Lulu’s values hierarchy, so she eats one.



The berry is as delicious as expected, but five minutes later, Lulu feels nauseous, which she hates.

The next day, she encounters the same berry bush and pauses to consider the situation. She decides “not being nauseous” > “enjoying berries,” so she doesn’t eat any. She learned a lesson the hard way and adjusted her behavior accordingly.

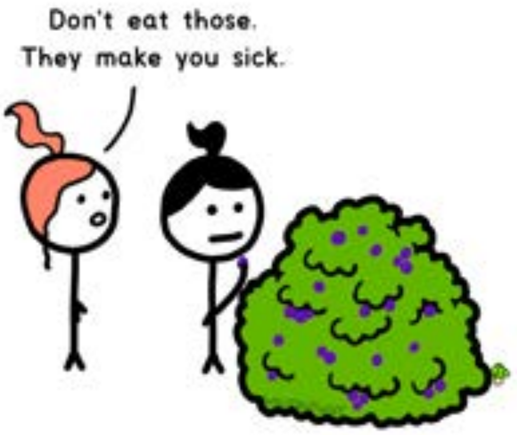
In scenario B, Lulu is with her friend Mimi when they see a different berry bush. Lulu is reaching out to grab one when Mimi says:


Don't eat those.
They make you sick.

Lulu pauses to assess the situation. Lulu's perception of reality, based on her own life experience, would yield berry-eating behavior here. But according to *Mimi's* depiction of reality, the optimal behavior would be to pass the berry up.

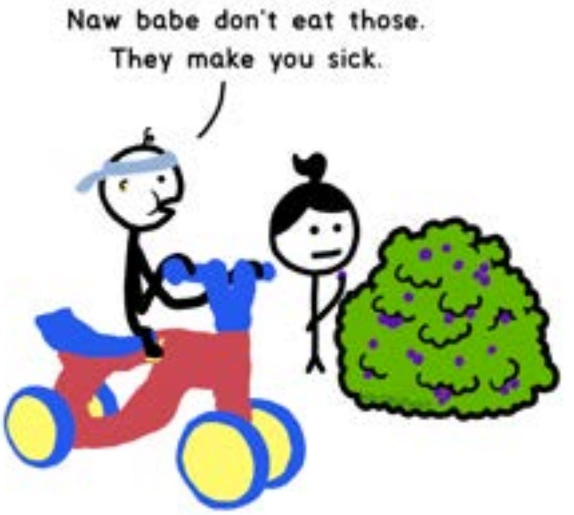
Staring hard at the berry, Lulu considers Mimi's credibility. Her experience is that Mimi is generally trustworthy, so Lulu decides to incorporate Mimi's reality, in this instance, into her own. She passes up the berry.

Scenario C is like scenario B except now, Lulu is with Kiki.

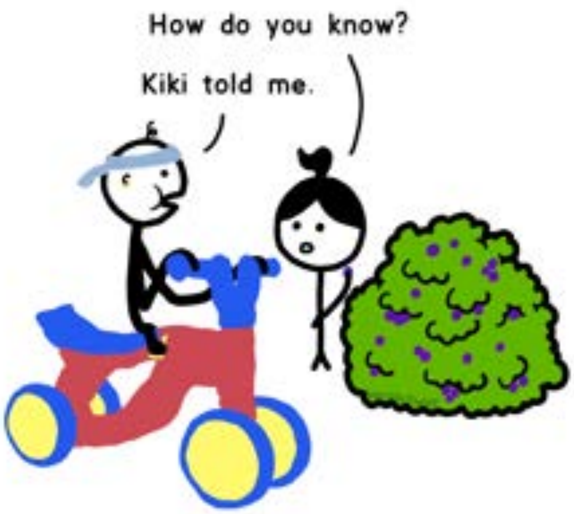

Don't eat those.
They make you sick.

When Kiki warns her about the berry, Lulu thinks about her experience with Kiki and recalls the day Kiki told her that one time she slid down a rainbow—Lulu later relayed the story to her mom, who told her that you can't slide down rainbows. Concluding that Kiki is a lying bitch—who probably just wants to keep all the berries for herself—Lulu scoffs and eats a berry. If she then proceeded to get sick, it would be reason to update her opinion of Kiki's credibility. But she doesn't get sick—which only hardens her view. Fuckin Kiki.

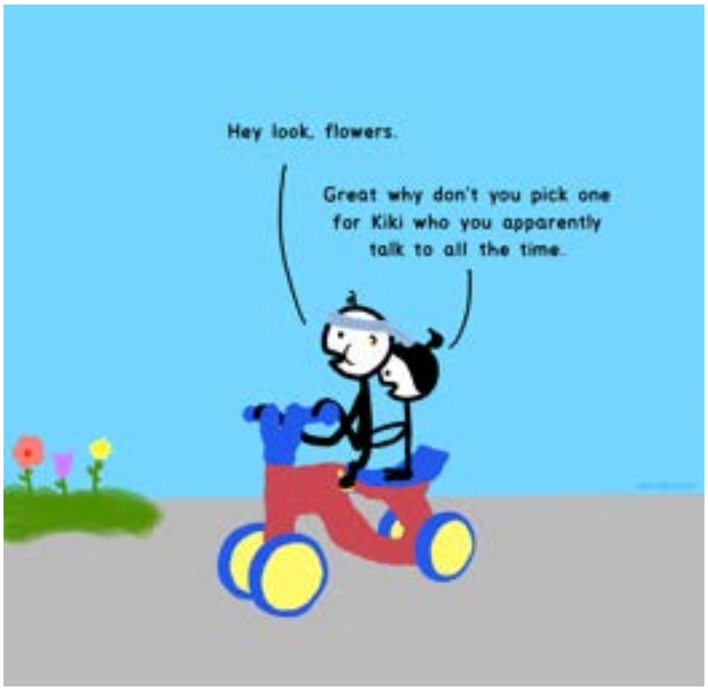
Scenario D is just like B and C except this time, Lulu is on a late-night ride with the bad baby who lives down the block when they come across the berry bush.


Naw babe don't eat those.
They make you sick.

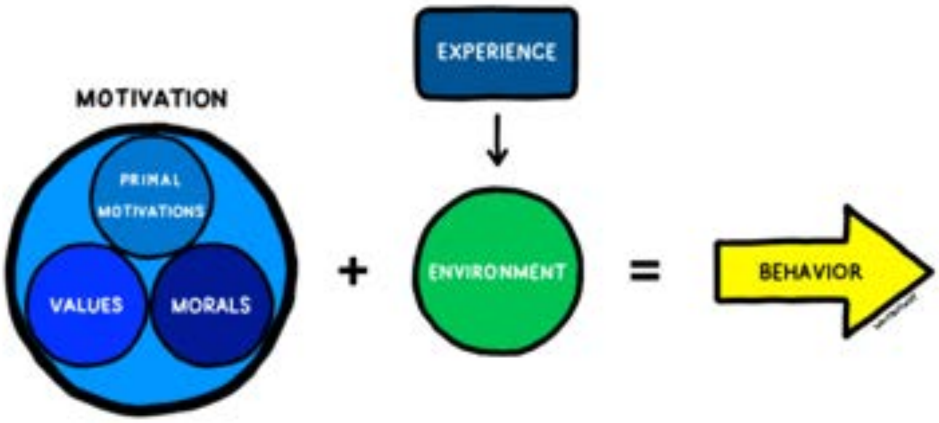
Lulu considers. She's pretty convinced that her bad baby bf tends to tell the truth, but he is also known to be gullible. She digs further.


How do you know?
Kiki told me.

Aha. Lulu knows that being truthful is only one part of being *trustworthy*, and in typical bad baby form, he'd been duped. Lulu eats the berry.


Hey look, flowers.
Great why don't you pick one for Kiki who you apparently talk to all the time.

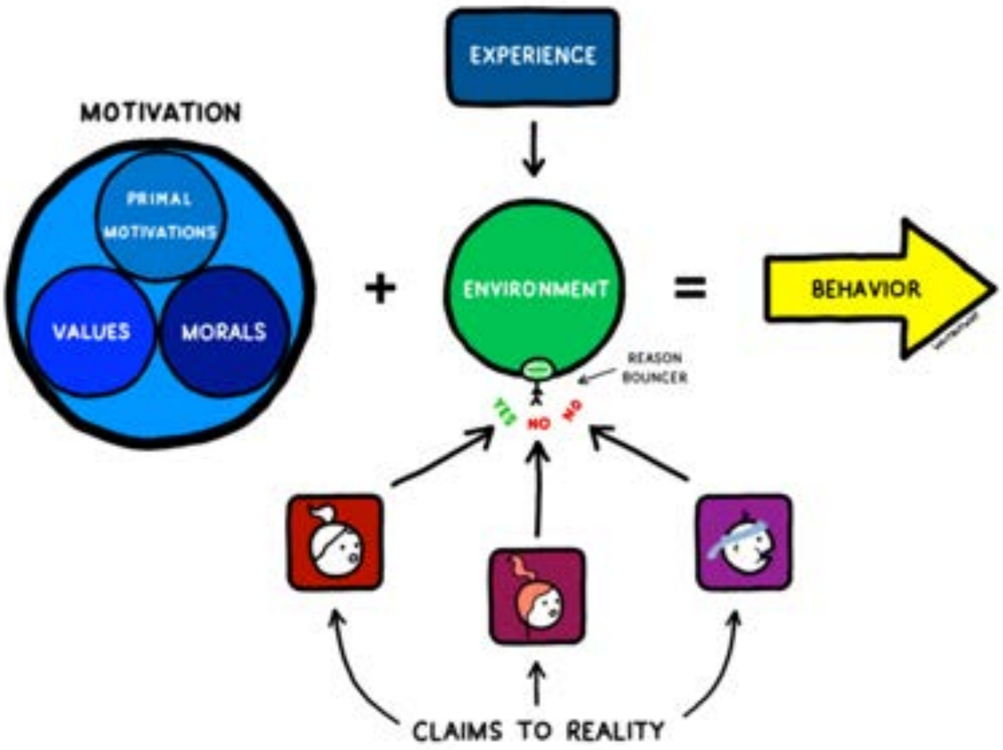
In the first scenario, we saw Lulu learn new information about reality from personal experience. She gained knowledge *directly* and used it to make better future decisions.


EXPERIENCE
MOTIVATION
PRIMAL MOTIVATIONS
VALUES
MORALS
+
ENVIRONMENT
=
BEHAVIOR

In the latter three scenarios, we saw Lulu perform an incredible magic trick.

In each case, another person presented Lulu with a *claim about reality*, placing it into her imagination.

Lulu, being no fool, treats her beliefs like an exclusive club, and she treats the claims of others like the line outside the door. The gatekeeper of her beliefs—the club's bouncer—is Lulu's sense of reason. In these three scenarios, Lulu's "reason bouncer" admitted Mimi's claim into the club but turned the other two claims away.



In scenario B, Lulu acquired knowledge *indirectly*—stealing it from someone else who learned the berry lesson the hard way, allowing Lulu to learn the same hard lesson the *easy* way. Without indirect knowledge, 100 people learn the berry lesson by way of 100 people getting sick. With it, 100 humans can learn the lesson from only one of them getting sick.

this is the reson you should read books.

But the same superpower makes us vulnerable.

Indirect knowledge only works in your favor when it's coupled with reason. Imagination is why you can become emotionally invested in a horror movie—reason is why you don't scream and run out of the theater when a ghost appears on the screen. Imagination allows you to consider an outlandish conspiracy theory—reason allows you to reject it as truth.

therefore I come with my theory about Sapiens fantasy

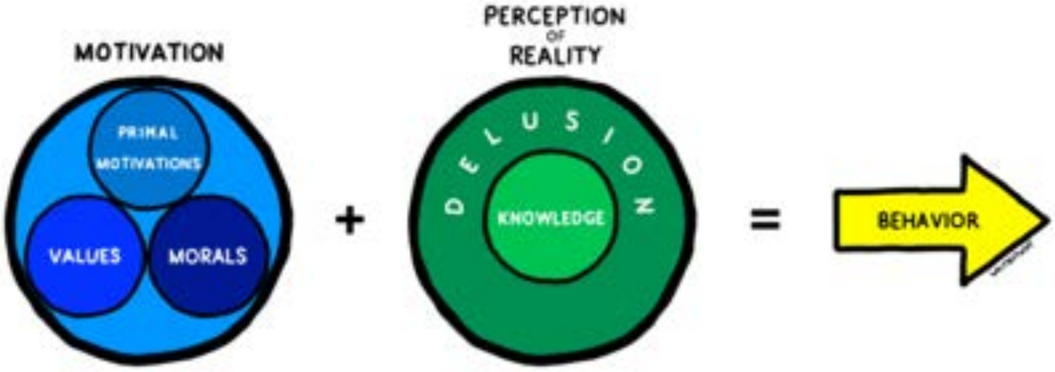
But what happens if the bouncer makes a mistake?

Back to Santa Claus. Lulu's parents figured that between the trust she has in them, the naïveté of her inexperienced reason bouncer, and a little confirmation bias nudge from her inevitable desire for this *delightful* story to be the truth, they could slip one by her. And it worked.

If you want to change someone's behavior, easier than altering their motivation or changing their actual environment is altering their *perception* of reality. This third way of manipulating a human is a shortcut —a cheat—made possible by one of human evolution's best tricks:

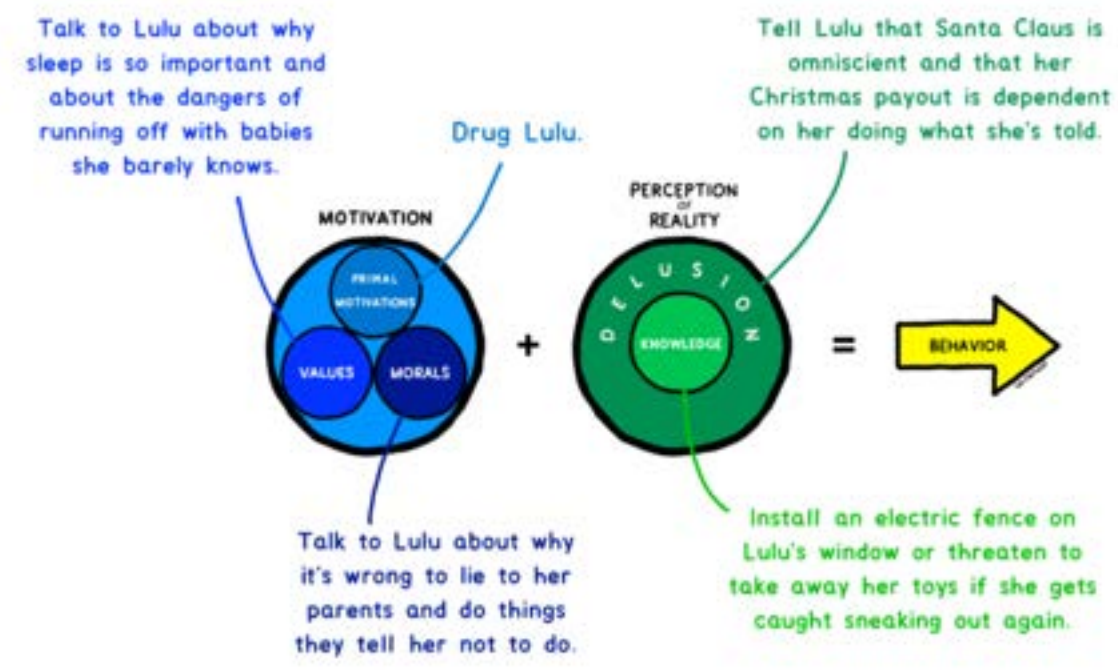
Delusion.

Delusion is what happens when our reason bouncer fails as the gatekeeper to our beliefs—when our imagination is stronger than our judgment. It might be the most universal human quality. And it adds a whole other component to the environment portion of our behavior equation.


MOTIVATION
PRIMAL MOTIVATIONS
VALUES
MORALS
+
PERCEPTION OF REALITY
DELUSION
KNOWLEDGE
=
BEHAVIOR

The Johnsons didn't have too much to think about when they decided to change Moochie's behavior. Moochie's behavior equation presented a clear strategic winner—alter his environment, and his behavior will adapt to the changes.

With Lulu, the Johnsons had a whole array of options:

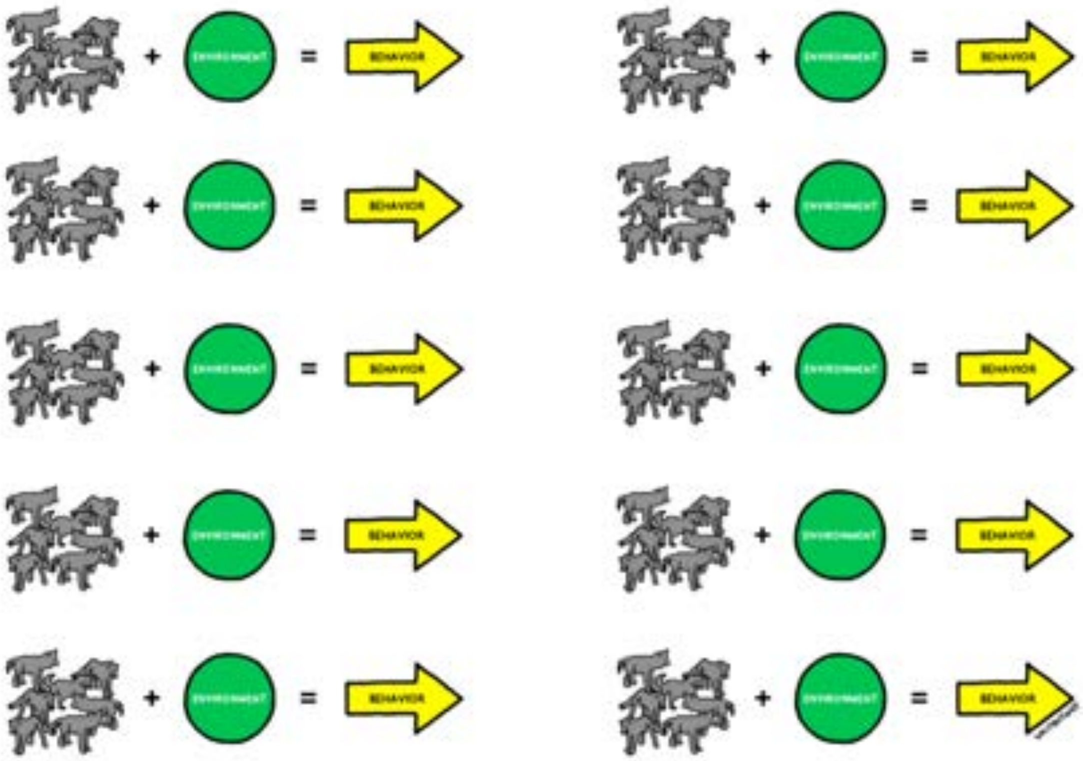

Talk to Lulu about why sleep is so important and about the dangers of running off with babies she barely knows.
Drug Lulu.
Tell Lulu that Santa Claus is omniscient and that her Christmas payout is dependent on her doing what she's told.
MOTIVATION
PRIMAL MOTIVATIONS
VALUES
MORALS
+
PERCEPTION OF REALITY
DELUSION
KNOWLEDGE
=
BEHAVIOR
Talk to Lulu about why it's wrong to lie to her parents and do things they tell her not to do.
Install an electric fence on Lulu's window or threaten to take away her toys if she gets caught sneaking out again.

In a lot of ways, human history is just a bigger version of this story. The same toolkit the Johnsons had access to in changing Lulu's behavior has turned out to be a breathtaking evolutionary innovation.

Picture ten different wolf packs of the same species, living in the same natural environment. They'd behave pretty similarly.

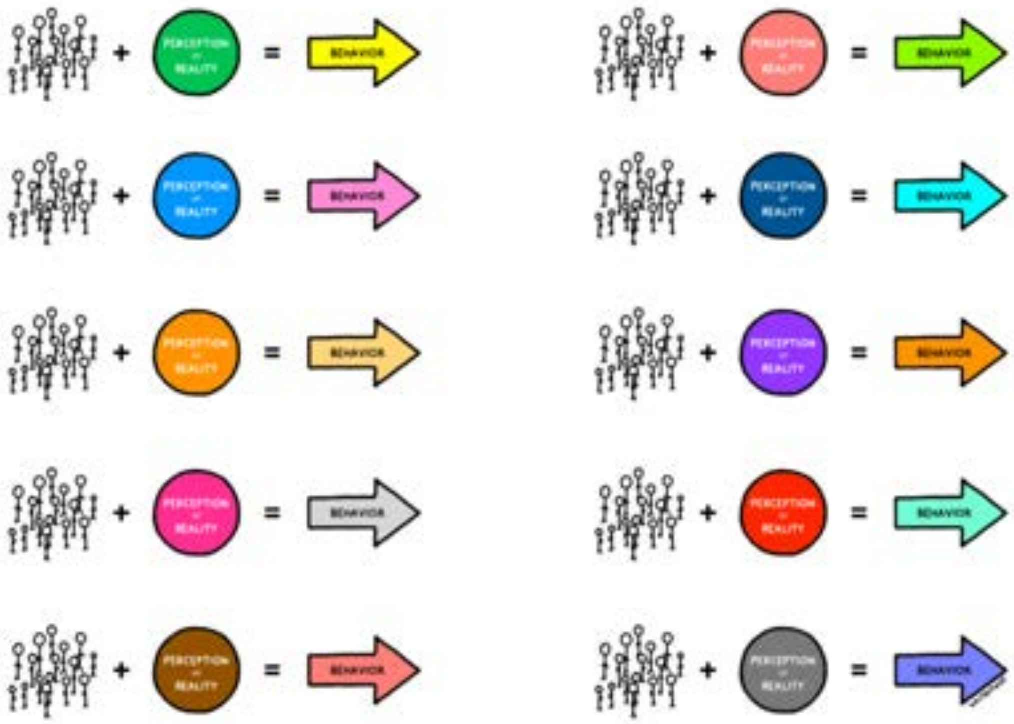
here human behavior Study comes from most of animals but still doesn't match up.

tournament speicies vs pair bonding speacies.



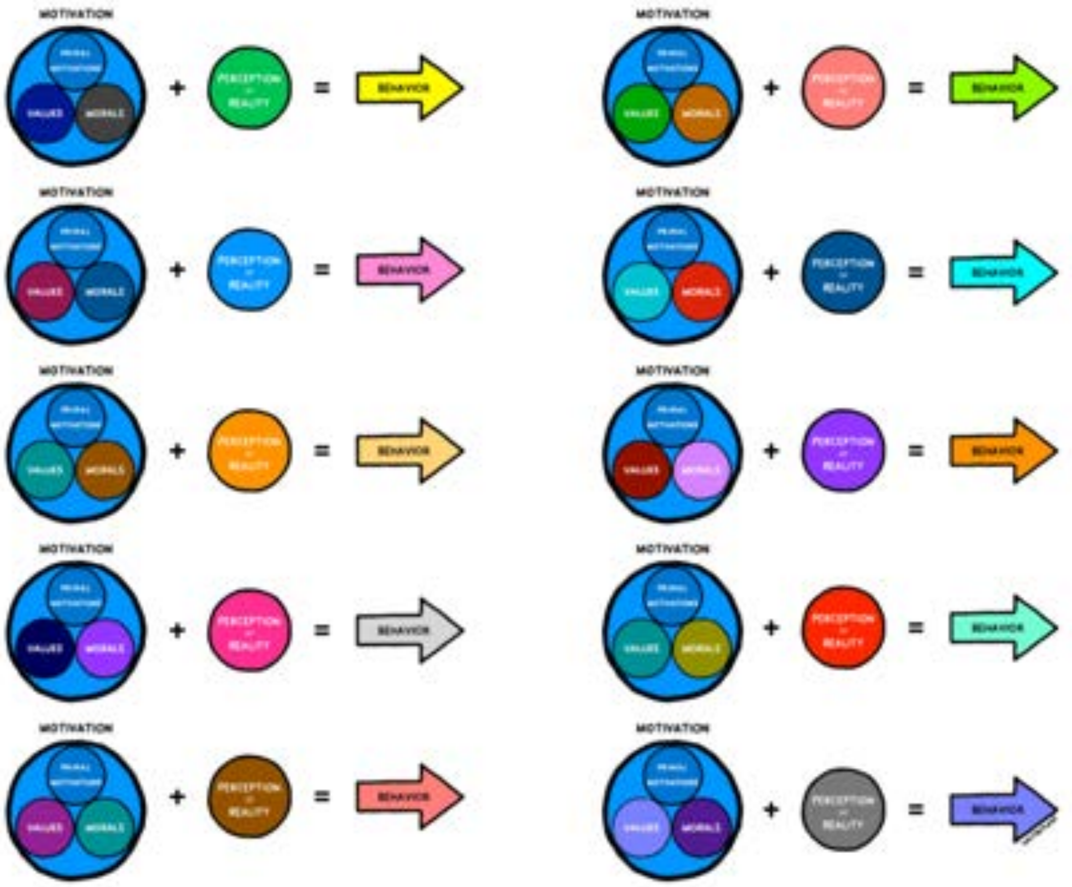
Over eons, animal nature and animal environment engage in a kind of life-or-death tango—the environment changes and animal gene pools either keep up with the dance steps by adapting to the changes or they die out. But on a lifetime-to-lifetime scale, a species' core motivations and its general environment rarely change. They are more like constants than variables, making behavior pretty much a constant too.

Now consider ten human tribes, living, like the ten wolf packs, in a common natural environment. The human capability for delusion means that those ten tribes could vary widely in their *perceptions* of reality, and thus behave entirely different from one another.



Couple that with the complexity, flexibility, and revisability of human value systems and moral codes—and you have a species whose behavioral output is the product of *multiple* axes of wild variability.

& their perception of reality mostly shaped by their enviorment .



Imagine if wolves were like humans. You'd be on a trek through the woods on a Monday and come across a wolf pack, and you'd be scared for a minute, but then you'd realize that this one believed it was evil to be violent. They'd come give you a few licks and move on. On Tuesday, you'd run into a new pack whose members were convinced that human children cast spells that caused wolf packs to starve, and that the only way to ensure wolf sustenance was to destroy them. You'd pick up your child and run away, barely making the escape. On Wednesday, you'd come across two wolves who weren't part of a pack at all because they were convinced that most of the problems in the wolf world stemmed from "pack supremacy." On Thursday you'd run into the first pack again—the totally non-violent one from Monday—and they'd ruthlessly attack you and kill you. Because a wolf missionary who preached the gospel of violence visited the pack on Wednesday and changed their beliefs.

christ teachings

this is why religion works so great. it's impact is forever

This is the power of human beliefs. Not only do they produce an endless array of behavioral varieties—a million little evolutionary experiments—they allow for the complete behavioral mutation of any one of them within a single generation. Sometimes within a single day.[1]

Variety is the source of all of evolutionary innovation, and the flexibility of our beliefs made human evolution a creative paradise.

Let's return to the world of ancient human giants. As we discussed, the glue of raw tribalism is only so strong, which imposed a ceiling on tribe size for a long time.

This isn't just a human problem—mass cooperation is rare anywhere in nature. Ant and bee colonies seem to pull it off, but they're actually just using the same "glue via family ties" trick human tribes use: they're all siblings in one huge immediate family. No human female can have thousands of children, so humans couldn't do mass cooperation.

But gluing together is a behavior. And human behavior lives in a magic laboratory of variety. Could that additional flexibility find a way to create a human beehive?

We've talked before about how each of us has a personal storyline—a story we believe about ourselves that tends to drive our behavior and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Scientists and historians talk about the same kind of stories, but in a collective sense.

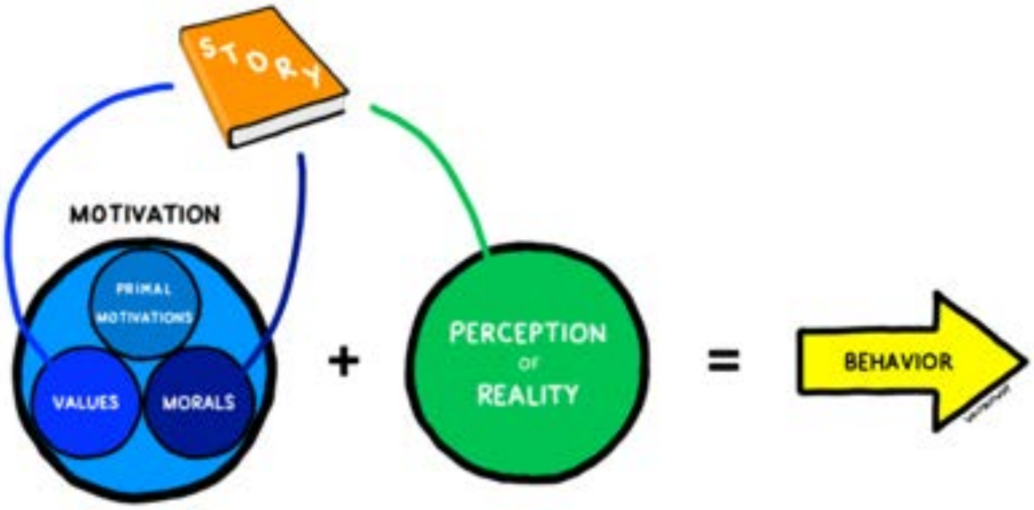
In his book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari writes about the "imagined realities" we all believe—not only mysteries like the supernatural or the meaning of life, but seemingly concrete things like a company or a nation or the value of money. Evolutionary biologist Bret Weinstein talks about what he calls a "metaphorical truth"—a belief that's not true, but one that enhances its believers' survival chances. One example he gives is the belief that porcupines can shoot their quills. In fact, they cannot—but those who believe they can are more likely to stay far away from porcupines and therefore less likely to end up hurt by one.[2]

Human history is a long progression of human behavior, and human behavior is largely driven by human beliefs. And as Harari, Weinstein, and others point out, what has mattered most in our past is not whether our beliefs were true but whether they drove the right behavior.

At some point between 150-person ancient tribes and New York City, human evolution jumped off of the "survival of the fittest biology" snail and onto the "survival of the fittest stories" *rocket.*

The story virus

A story, for our purposes, is the complete array of a human's beliefs—their beliefs around values and morality, their beliefs about their environment and the broader world they live in, their beliefs about what happened in the past and what will happen in the future, their beliefs about the meaning of life and death.



In the game of survival of the fittest stories, who wins and who loses?

Well, a story is like a virus. It can't exist on its own—it requires a host. In the case of story viruses, a human host. So the first prerequisite for a *fit* story is that it's good at binding to its host. A virus can invade an animal, but if it can't convert that animal into its long-term home, it won't make it.

So that starts things off with a few necessary characteristics of a viable story virus:

this could be the reason why some religions sprade vs evaporates

Simplicity. The story has to be easily teachable and easily understandable.

Unfalsifiability. The story can't be easy to disprove.

Conviction. For a story to take hold, its hosts can't be *wondering* or *hypothesizing* or vaguely believing—the story needs to be specific and to posit itself as the *absolute truth*.

Contagiousness. Next, the story needs to spread. If a particular virus were great at binding only to a random man in Minnesota named Skip Walker, it might have a good run while Skip was alive, but it would die with Skip. Likewise, a story about a god that created only Skip Walker, was only concerned with Skip Walker, and had a place in heaven only for Skip Walker wouldn't make it very far. Skip probably wouldn't get a great reaction telling people about that story, and others would have no motivation to adopt it or share it with anybody else. To be spreadable, a story needs to be contagious—something people feel deeply compelled to share and that applies equally to many people.

The story, once believed, needs to be able to drive the behavior of its host. So it should include:

Incentives. Promises of treats for behaving the right way, promises of electroshocks for behaving the wrong way.

Accountability. The claim that your behavior will be known by the arbiter of the incentives—even, in some cases, where no one is around to see it.

Comprehensiveness. The story can dictate what's true and false, virtuous and immoral, valuable and worthless, important and irrelevant, covering the full spectrum of human belief.

So far, you might notice, the story of Santa Claus is crushing it.

But now we have to consider exactly what behavior the story is driving. Santa Claus is a great story to generate discipline in children who want gifts. And if evolution favored ancient humans who were good about cleaning their room, it might have worked as a "fit" story. But that wasn't the idea.

In the game of stories evolution, the long-term survivors will be those whose *hosts* fare best over time.

Like microorganisms in our bodies, some stories can be parasitic to their hosts.

For example, for a story to have a long shelf life, its believers need to be super into passing down their genes, because stories are mostly passed down via generational indoctrination—they're *heritable*. So stories that override reproductive instincts won't fly. I'm sure there were tribes along the way who came to believe that sex was disgusting or that babies were demons or that severe child abuse was a virtue or that baby circumcision should include the testicles—beliefs that drove their genes right to extinction. That today's priests are celibate is a testament to the power of stories to override even the most fundamental tenets of our software.[3] But that doesn't make the story parasitic for the future of Catholicism, because only a few Catholic men are priests. Stories that made celibacy an obligation for *everyone* quickly disappeared.

A story also needs to preserve at least a reasonable degree of self-preservation instinct in its hosts. I'd bet that somewhere, at some time, some tribe became convinced that suicide at the age of 16 is the only way to enter heaven, while death at any other age sends you straight to hell. You've never heard about this tribe because it went the shit out of extinct.

Another parasitic story would be one that absolutely forbade any use of violence. A story like that would, on the ancient game board, be like HIV—disabling the host's immune system—and wouldn't last very long.

Long term successful stories would instead need to be symbiotic—making their hosts *better* at surviving. Kind of like Weinstein's "porcupines fire their quills" story.

But does that necessarily mean making the individual humans who believed it better at surviving? No, because as we've discussed, the ancient human life form wasn't just the human—it was also the human giant. So the right kind of story symbiosis would line up with the survival game humans had already been playing. It would need to make the *giants* who hosted it better survivors.

If natural selection was calling for bigger, stronger, meaner giants, then the stories that enhanced that trajectory would be the fittest of them all. Our biological evolution made us tribal to help glue us together. The right story would be our *superglue.*

Superglue stories

SUPER
STORY

To make human superglue, here are some logical ingredients:

Ingredient 1: Tribal Values

In Chapter 2, we discussed some of the trademark values of tribalism. A superglue story goes all out on these.

There are Us > Me values like conformity and self-sacrifice, and a superglue story reinforces these instincts by painting a clear paragon of what a good, righteous, worthy person looks like—something believers will try to conform to, for social status and for the sake of their own self-esteem.

The story will center around something greater than individual people that all believers should serve. This idea helps explain why so many early human marvels were temples or other monuments dedicated to worship.[4] The collective service of something greater was the force behind some of the earliest mass-scale human cooperation.

A superglue story also jacks up the Us > Them values. The story needs to be all about good guys and bad guys, with a crisp, clear distinction between the two. The good guys must be good in every way—in knowledge, talent, motivation, and virtue. They're good now, they were always good in the past, and they'll continue to be good in the future. The bad guys are the opposite—they are and always have been stupid, ignorant, malicious, and morally backwards. Strife between the good guys and bad guys is always the fault of the bad guys.

Most importantly, the bad guys are seen as a dangerous and immediate threat. Remember the Bedouin proverb. Humans are Emergence Tower hybrids whose mindset can move up and down the tower's elevator—and nothing brings humans up to the "small piece of a larger organism" level better than a threat from a common enemy. The bigger the common enemy, the stronger the glue.

me vs my brother

On the Us > Them front, there's an obstacle the story must contend with—the nuisance Higher Mind and all of his irritating disapproval of plundering and raping and beheading people. Because of the Higher Mind, it's hard for people to truly hate a real human. It's hard to pillage a settlement where real humans live. It's hard to commit heinous violence against a real human. But is it hard to do awful things to filthy vermin and vile cockroaches and revolting scum of the Earth and agents of the underworld? Not really. An effective superglue story goes further than painting the enemy as bad, dangerous people —it *dehumanizes* them.

motivation of teririst organization

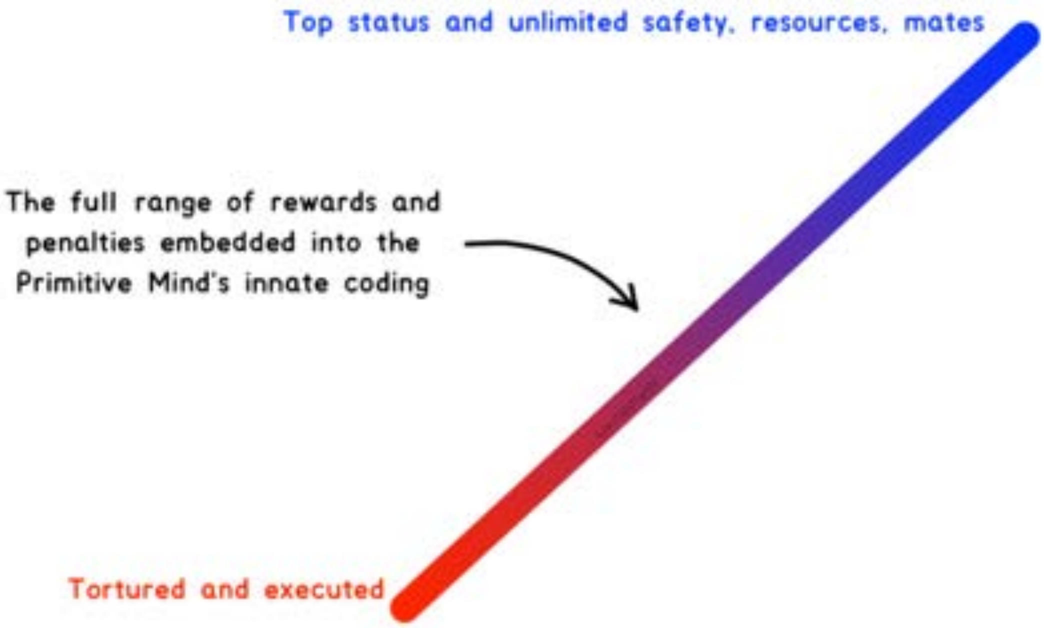
Through the millennia, the dehumanization trick would morph into the notion that it is not only okay to kill "Them"—it's the *duty* of a good person. Optimized geopolitical stories would turn everyday people into mass murderers by framing a soldier's work as the noblest human calling, only topped by dying while doing it. Optimized religious stories would depict the killing of non-believers as the highest service to god and dying in the act an instant ticket to heaven.

The ability to dehumanize is another gift of the delusion trick. A tribe could worship the local mountain all they want, but if their delusion stopped there, their genes probably aren't here with us in 2019. A giant needed to be big, but it also needed to be *mean.* The delusion that your enemies aren't actually full three-dimensional people with full life stories like your own is the prime source of giant aggression.

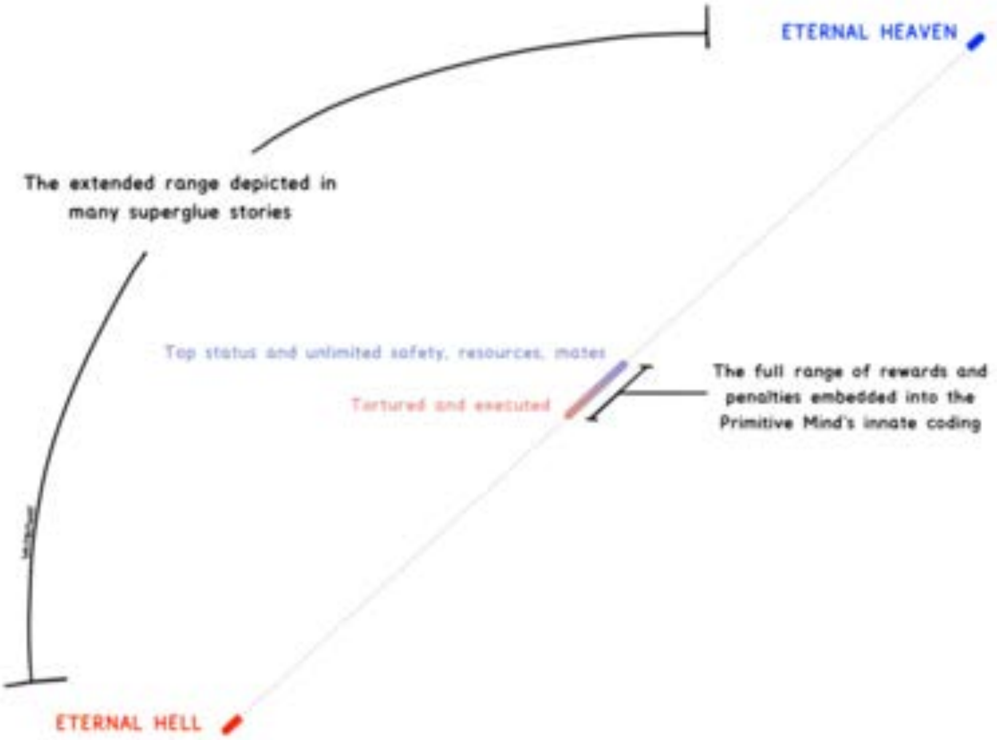
Ingredient 2: A Queen Bee

If you want people to act like ants or bees, give them a *queen.* The queen bee can be a rightful ruler or a mythic figure or a natural wonder or a higher cause or a hallowed homeland. The important thing is that the queen bee is seen as more sacred than any form of primal fulfillment. Tribes split when they get too big for everyone in the tribe to have an intimate relationship with everybody else—but there's no limit to the number of people who can have their own intimate relationship with the queen bee.

Usually, the story's queen bee is seen as all-powerful. Defying a monarch or dictator was seen as a sure-fire death sentence—for you and perhaps your whole family. Religious queen bees, free of real-world constraints, took things to an even more intense place, ramping the incentives up to unfathomable heights, wielding Snausages and electroshocks that would have made Moochie faint. The human Primitive Mind comes hardwired with this as the full range of possibilities for rewards and penalties:


Top status and unlimited safety, resources, mates
The full range of rewards and penalties embedded into the Primitive Mind's innate coding
Tortured and executed

Optimized superglue stories though, able to author reality, innovated with *extensions* to the range that were so tantalizing or terrifying to our Primitive Minds that they made everything else look trivial.


ETERNAL HEAVEN
The extended range depicted in many superglue stories
Top status and unlimited safety, resources, mates
Tortured and executed
The full range of rewards and penalties embedded into the Primitive Mind's innate coding
ETERNAL HELL

Extending the range like this overrides any care the Primitive Mind would otherwise have for what goes on within the normal range. If you're sitting in hell when all is said and done, all of that food and friendship and sex and power you scored during your life does you no good. If you have to do some seemingly awful things in order to win a ticket to eternal heaven, you do them without a second thought.

Human rulers got in on the afterlife game by claiming to have direct connection to the divine, or by offering eternal heaven or hell for a person's *identity*—with statues, monuments, and long-to-be-remembered legacies.

Which brings us to the next ingredient.

him talking direcly to the god.

Ingredient 3: Identity Attachment

A superglue story will almost always intertwine itself with the identity of its believers. You know a superglue story is linked to its believers' identities when you hear them use the story as a noun to describe themselves—when they call themselves “a [story]an” or “a [story]ist” or something like that.

For like-minded believers, the story-based identity gave otherwise total strangers a way to trust each other, which helped foster cooperation and trade. [5]

And by latching on to the identity of its believers, a story becomes protected by the primal flame rooted deep in a human's core. Rather than try to convince Moochie to behave differently, the Johnsons just let his existing drive for dog treats do the work by linking obedience to primal gratification. When a story is linked to our identity, the same phenomenon is happening. Why reinvent the wheel when you can just hop on the back of the human's most deep-seated wiring?

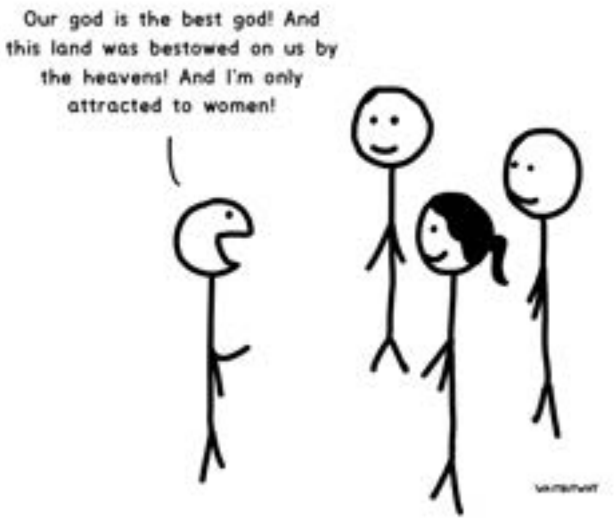
When people see a story as an external object, then someone challenging the story is just making an intellectual argument. But when believers identify with a story, someone challenging the story is a personal threat. And since our brains are notoriously bad at distinguishing between our psychological identity and our physical body, the personal threat doesn't feel like an insult—it feels like danger.

To double down on the identity trick, stories will also attach themselves to the identity of the entire human giant, as the group will use the story to define itself.

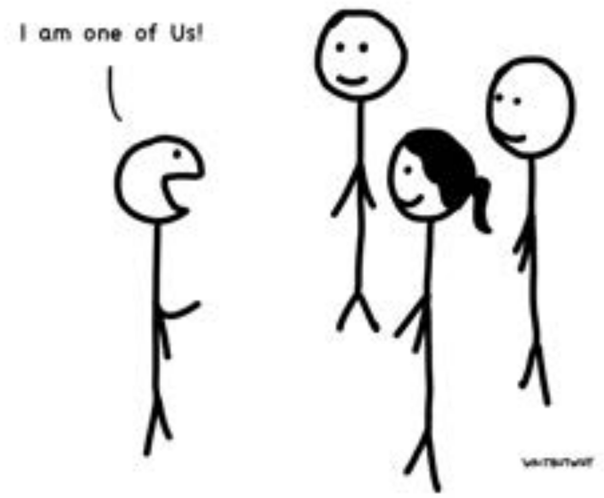
If a human giant is united by belief in a common story, that story can become synonymous with “Us” to its members. And for a culture with a tribal mindset, that makes the story a sacred object.

When a story becomes sacred to a group of people, you'll hear lots of people spending lots of time talking about how true the story is—how great the story's god is, how superior the story's values are, or most commonly, how disgusting and vile the story's bad guys are. Today we call it virtue signaling. It's a common tribal practice, because doing this:

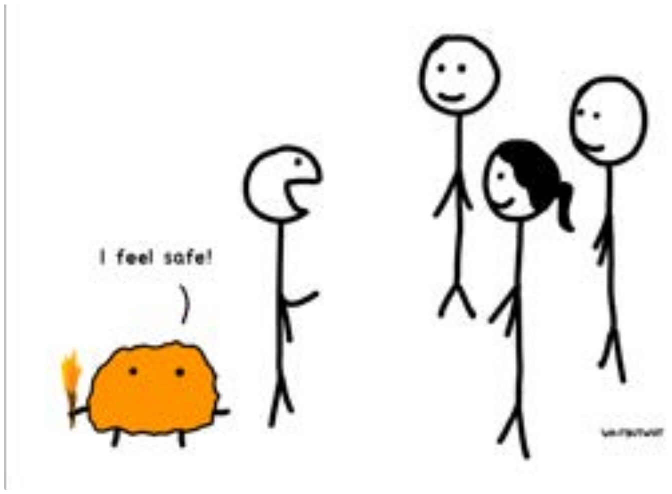
all the stories of eating veg or how great Hinduism is !


Our god is the best god! And this land was bestowed on us by the heavens! And I'm only attracted to women!

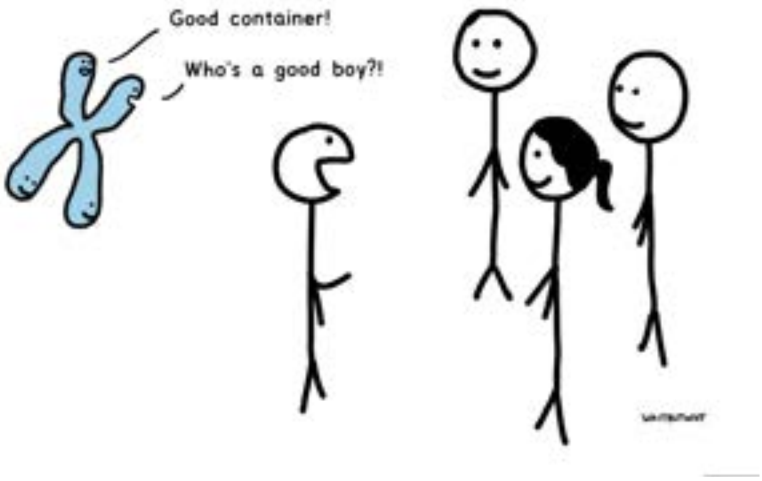
Is really doing this:


I am one of Us!
WAITBUTWHY

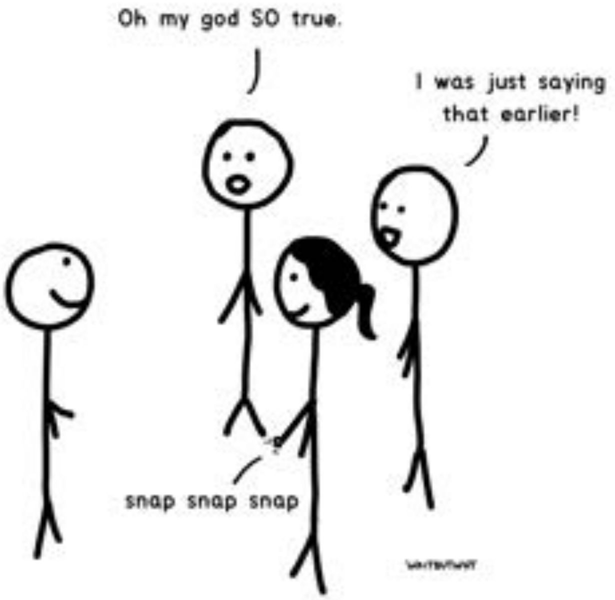
Which is really doing this:


I feel safe!
WAITBUTWHY

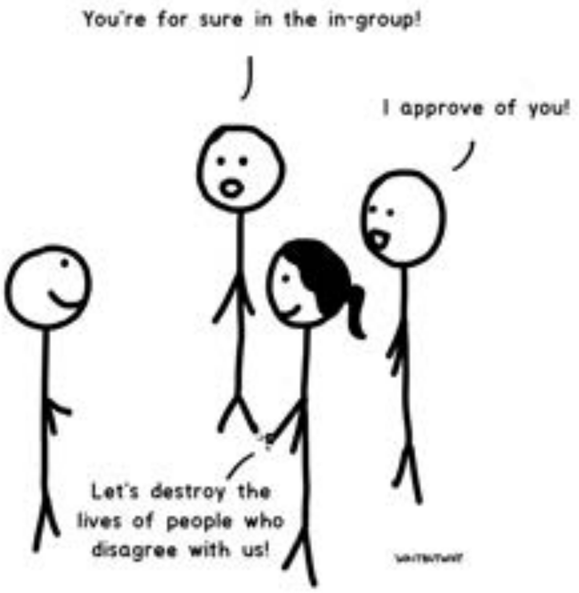
Which is really just this:


Good container!
Who's a good boy?!
WAITBUTWHY

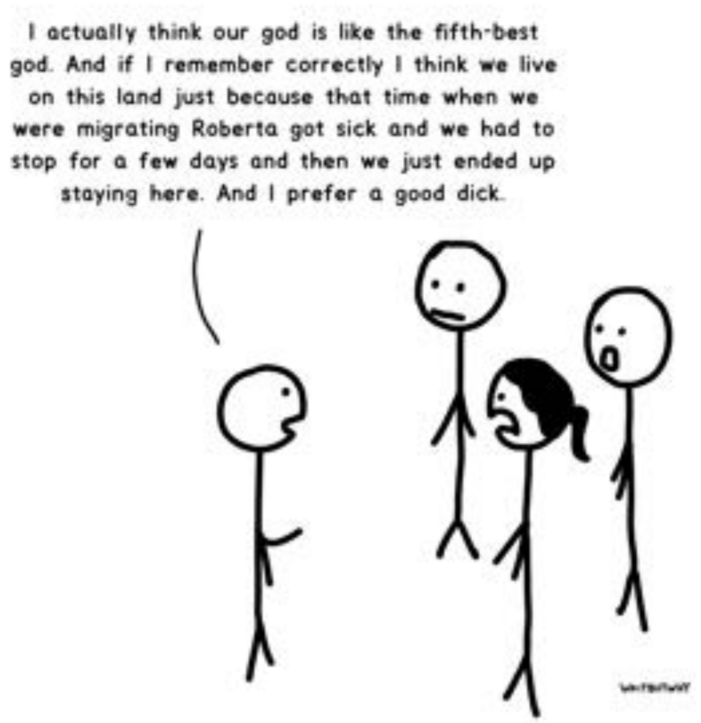
Expressing allegiance to the story is the best way of expressing allegiance to a story-based tribe. And when someone does this, fellow tribe members, partially to express their own allegiance, will respond by saying stuff like:


Oh my god SO true.
I was just saying that earlier!
snap snap snap
WAITBUTWHY

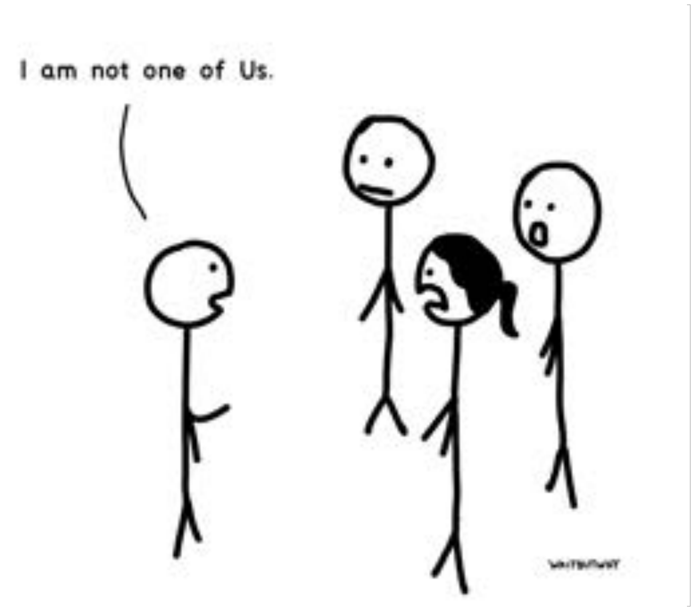
Which sounds to the person like:


You're for sure in the in-group!
I approve of you!
Let's destroy the lives of people who disagree with us!
WAITBUTWHY

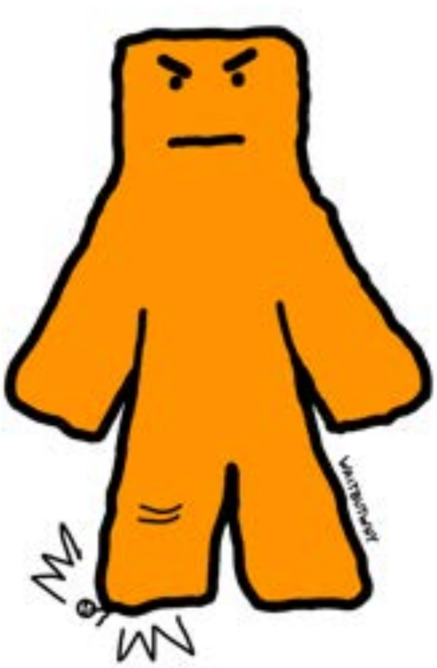
On the flip side, when a story is culturally sacred, a challenge to that story is culturally *taboo*. Sacredness and taboo are almost always opposite sides of the same coin—the sword and shield of uniformity. And violating a taboo is a risky thing to do. Because doing this:


I actually think our god is like the fifth-best god. And if I remember correctly I think we live on this land just because that time when we were migrating Roberta got sick and we had to stop for a few days and then we just ended up staying here. And I prefer a good dick.
WAITBUTWHY

Sounds to the rest of the tribe like this:


I am not one of Us.
WAITBUTWHY

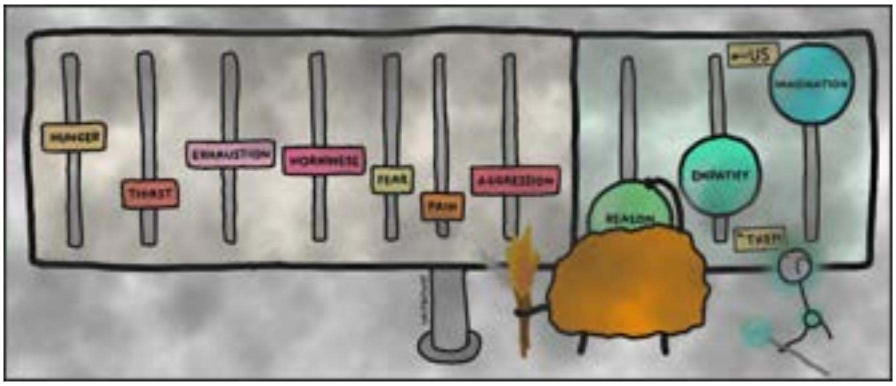
Which could quickly turn into this:



By attaching itself to believers' identities on both the individual and group emergence levels, a superglue story becomes synonymous for "Us" *and* synonymous for "Me" in the minds of its believers. Via the transitive property, this makes Us and Me feel one and the same, bonding them together with the story's glue.

All three of these ingredients rely heavily on delusion. For someone to believe the kinds of claims made in a superglue story, their reason bouncer has to be pretty incompetent. This is where the smoke comes in. When the Primitive Mind is dominant in a person's head, the room fogs up so much that the Higher Mind's clarity, wisdom, and powers of consistent reason, universal empathy, and responsibly-applied imagination become faded and weak. The Primitive Mind's emotional manipulations gain much more influence over the person, and it has free rein to toggle the *superpowers* as it pleases.

cheating happen in this psychological situation.



Delusion isn't the same as fogginess. Fogginess on its own is just confusion, disarray, forgetfulness. Delusion is *fog plus the illusion of clarity*. Delusion isn't confusion about what's true—it's *full belief* in what's not true. When the Primitive Mind is fully empowered, it can turn reason down while jacking imagination up to the max—which can leave a person vividly believing crazy things, including the belief that their Higher Mind is the one doing the thinking and that what they believe has been fully vetted by reason.

The ability to admit a Trojan horse superglue story into our beliefs, via a fogged-out consciousness, was a strong survival trait—so strong that every person on Earth today is susceptible to it. We *all* have an inclination to believe in superglue stories—and if you think you're an exception, you may be…a little delusional.

But as always, humans have a lot going on. As susceptible as we are to the Primitive Mind's tricks, we're also each the home of a determined Higher Mind—and no matter how many people believe a superglue story, there will always be clear-headed people among them.

That's why even the stickiest superglue story is up against the odds—because the same thing that makes a story an efficient way to influence human behavior also makes it a vulnerable one. A commonly believed story can build the strongest of strong giants—but strength dependent on certainty is also brittle. Belief is a remarkable but cheap trick for controlling behavior, and cheap tricks can break down. All it takes is a particularly charismatic person with a new, even more compelling story to convert people away from the sacred story and create a schism down the middle of the giant.

If a giant relies on glue to survive, and that glue is generated by common belief in a story, any threat to that belief is like cancer to the giant. It can spread, and if it spreads far enough, the giant will fall apart. Stories whose hosts weren't good at fighting cancer didn't survive. That's why the final superglue ingredient is the critical cancer-fighting tool.

Ingredient 4: A Cudgel

Meet the cudgel:

If there's a common theme to all of human history, all over the globe, it's probably humans bullying other humans. This is because bullying is one of the primary ways the Primitive Mind does business. Bullying is just humans doing business in a primitive format: the Power Games.

The Power Games basically goes like this: everyone acts fully selfish, and whenever there's a conflict, whoever has the power to get their way, gets their way. Or, more succinctly:

Everyone can do whatever they want, if they have the power to pull it off.

There are no principles in the Power Games—only the cudgel. And whoever holds it makes the rules.

The animal world almost always does business this way. The bear and the bunny from the beginning of Chapter 1 found themselves in a conflict over the same resource—the bunny's body. The bunny wanted to keep having his body to use for being alive and the bear wanted to eat his body to score a few energy points from his environment. A power struggle ensued between the two, which the bear won. A bear's power comes in the form of being a big strong dick. But power isn't the same as strength. A bunny's power comes in the form of sensitive ears, quick reflexes, and running (bouncing?) speed—and if the bunny had been a little better at being a bunny, he might have escaped the bear and retained the important resource.

Humans have power in numbers. That's why tribe glue was so important in the ancient world. More glue = bigger tribe = bigger cudgel. And in the Power Games, a bigger cudgel is the means to every important end: safety, resources, mates, peace of mind.

we call it country
in ligitimate sense

Just as important as the size of a tribe's outward-facing cudgel (the giant's "military") is the size of the one it points inward at its own members (the giant's "police force"). One fights external threats—the other fights cancer.

→ CIA / FBI

The first three ingredients have an internal cudgel embedded in them: Tribalism generates peer pressure to conform and a fear of being labeled a secret member of Them and ostracized (or worse). Fear of the queen bee translates to censorship for any dissenters without a death wish. Identification with the story causes people to protect the story like they'd protect their own children.

A superglue story will usually go even further and write a cudgel right into its pages—it's a *jealous story* that expressly forbids belief in other stories.

I'm sure some ancient stories were chill about things, upholding the value of tolerance of a variety of ideas and beliefs. Stories like these would probably encourage discussion and debate around true vs. false or right vs. wrong, and they'd probably emphasize that people are not their beliefs and that different people can believe different things and still be good people.

But you can't build a tight beehive around a tolerant story—and even if you could, when the Power Games are all around you, it's only a matter of time before tolerance is trampled over by intolerance.

Problem India is facing . 28 states as 28 country

A successful superglue story has intolerance *as a central value*—declaring, as part of the story, that dissenters from within should be obliterated. This led to concepts like heresy and blasphemy and treason and apostasy that came with consequences like imprisonment, execution, and eternal damnation.

ধর্মনিন্দা

প্রচলিত মতের বিরুদ্ধে

ধর্মত্যাগ

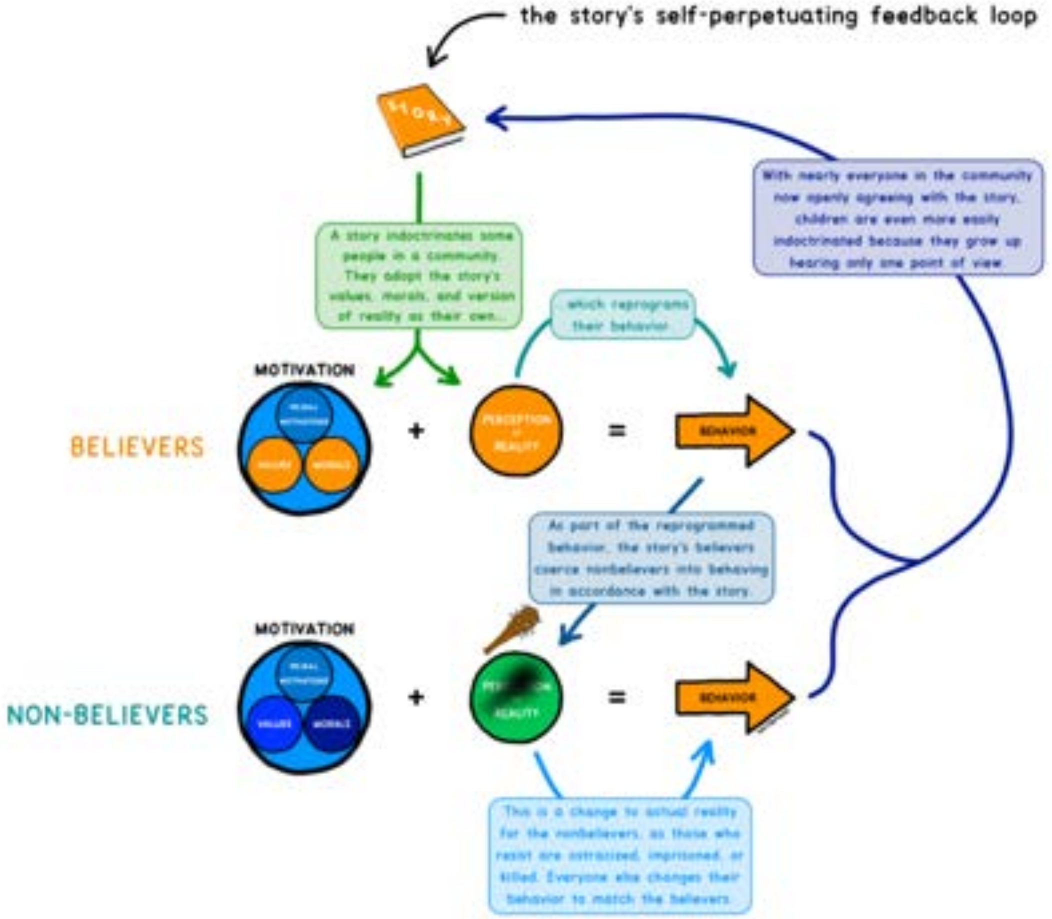
নরকভোগ

Just like a giant's outward-facing cudgel, the internal cudgel is all about numbers. If a critical mass of people in a tribe wants everybody in the tribe to behave a certain way, they can bully the dissenters into submission.

The "critical bully mass" phenomenon can turn a made-up story that *some* people live in into the actual environment that *everyone* lives in. When enough people believe that there's a god who wants death for anyone who says X, those who say X will actually end up dead. When enough people think saying Y means you're not a member of the tribe, saying Y actually gets you excommunicated. If a story could alter the behavior of enough people via indoctrination, the believers would alter the behavior of the rest via intimidation. This creates a loop that can keep a story, once implanted, in control of a tribe for centuries.

brainwash

হুমকি



A story indoctrinates some people in a community. They adopt the story's values, morals, and version of reality as their own...

...which reprograms their behavior.

With nearly everyone in the community now openly agreeing with the story, children are even more easily indoctrinated because they grow up hearing only one point of view.

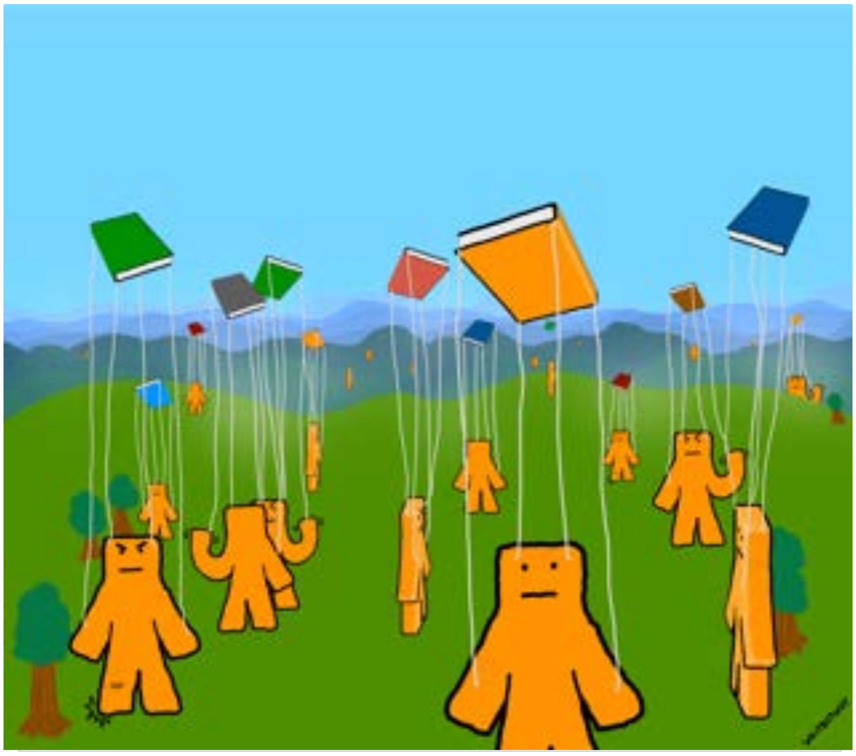
As part of the reprogrammed behavior, the story's believers coerce nonbelievers into behaving in accordance with the story.

This is a change to actual reality for the nonbelievers, as those who resist are ostracized, imprisoned, or killed. Everyone else changes their behavior to match the believers.

The self-perpetuating indoctrination-intimidation loop is the story virus's promised land. It's the reason why so many stories seem to get *stuck* in human beliefs for ages, even as the species continues to enhance its knowledge of reality.

From Perfect to Perfecter

As the centuries passed, super-optimized superglue stories competed to out-perfect each other in a game of rapidly growing giants.



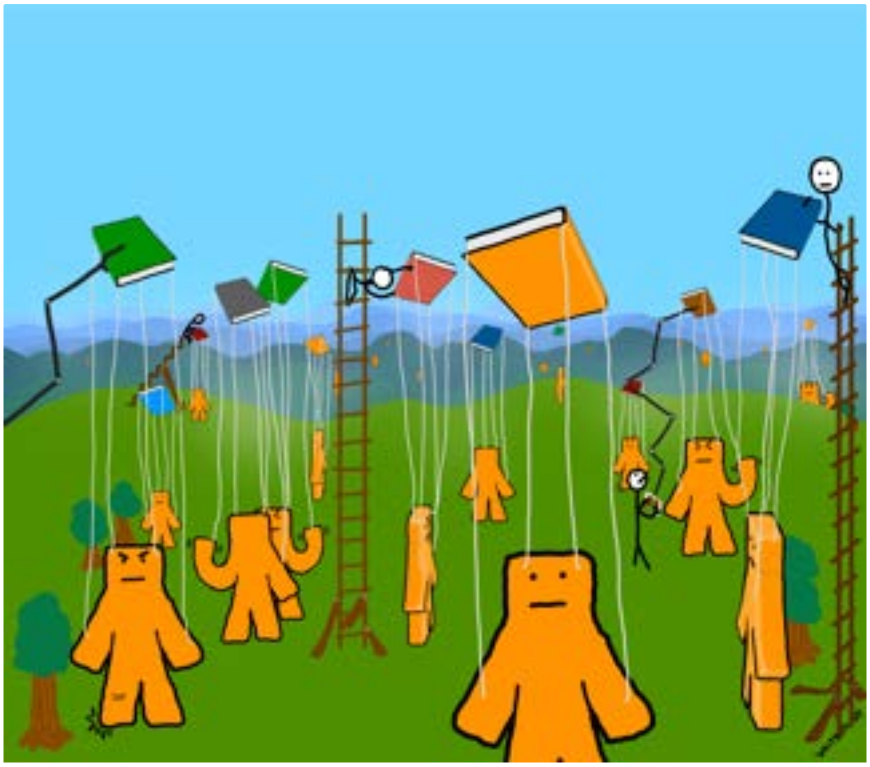
As our stories evolved, so did their hosts. Evolution is only slow because environmental change is usually slow. Could the insta-mutation capability of stories also have sped up our psychological evolution?

In a Power Games environment, humans with a natural pull toward tribalism and conformity, with strong imaginations and questionable reasoning, and with an instinct to please powerful people rather than defy them, may have been the best survivors. It would explain a lot about the world around us today.

Meanwhile, people inclined to be manipulated by stories are also people inclined to be manipulated by other people—and clever profiteers caught on.

They realized that brainwashing offered the biggest cudgel of all. If you could brainwash, you could write the story. If you could write the story, you could write reality. You could write the values, the morals, and the customs. You could write who the good guys were and who the bad guys were. You could write the rules, dole out the rewards, and inflict the penalties. And if you could write all those things, you could write people's behavior. If you could brainwash, you could play god.

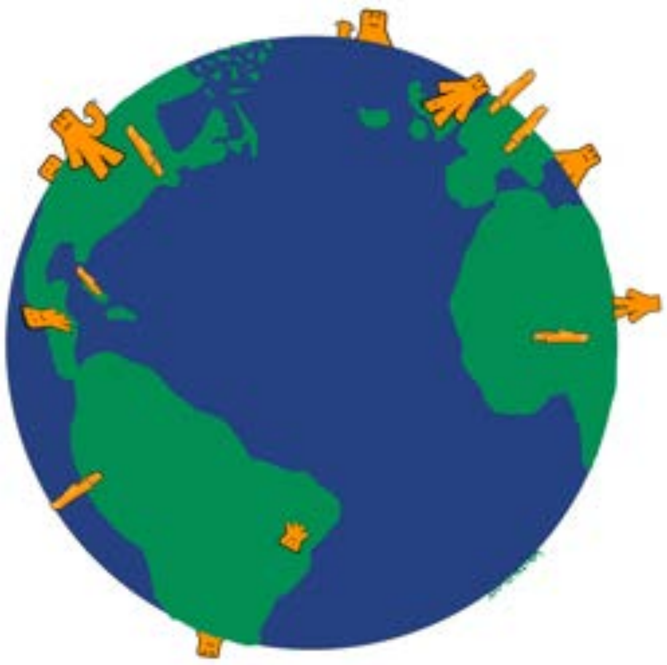
hidden plan of BaBaS



As human giants grew larger, the most skilled manipulators competed with each other to control the stories that controlled the giants. Some would claim knowledge of the divine as a means of grabbing the strings. Some would stoke fear with stories of imminent danger or invoke rage with stories about injustice in order to gather an army of supporters. Some would write stories of their own ruthlessness or their own merit or their own rightful status as queen bee—aiming for that sweet critical mass of indoctrination at which point defying the imaginary queen bee gets you actually beheaded.

Over hundreds of centuries, hyper-optimized superglue stories came to cover all the bases so thoroughly, they were able to do something biological evolution never could—convince masses of human beings to cooperate. Rather than repress the human primal flame, these stories *harnessed* it, grabbed its reins, and *redirected* it—lining up individual flames in parallel lockstep, pointing them all in the direction dictated by the story.

With glue like that, we transformed our little primate giants into world-conquering beasts.



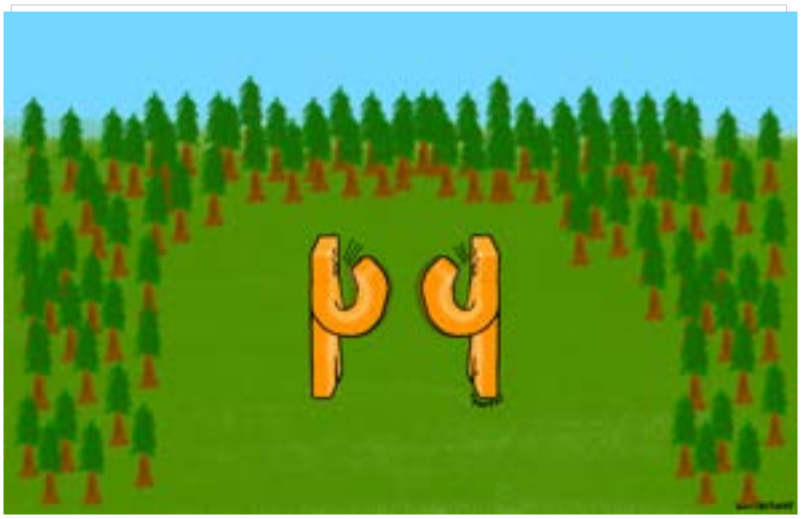
In a geological blink, a million animals scattered throughout the world's forests became a billion people living in vast civilizations, wresting themselves from the animal world and conquering the food chain in a way no other animal had ever done.

And yet…

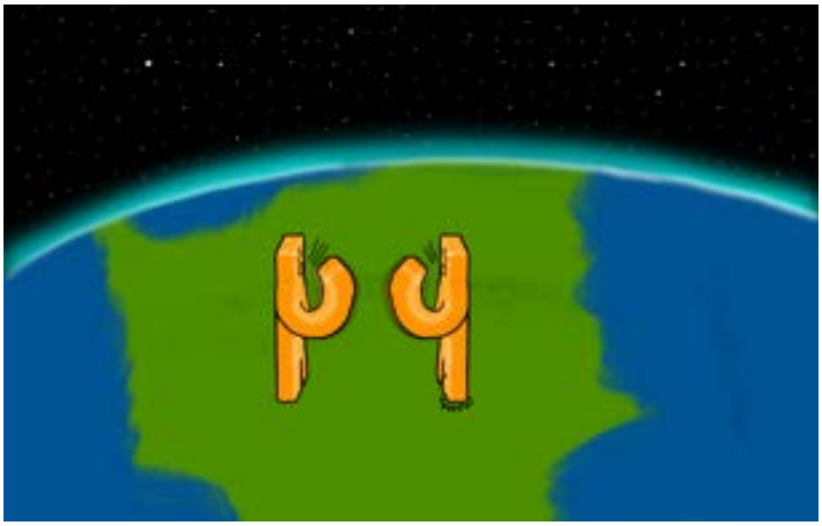
What did we really have to show for it?

We were still going through the same shit we were back in the ancient days—still stuck in the same old zero-sum power struggle the bunny and the bear were dealing with at the beginning of Chapter 1. We were still playing in the Power Games. Everything had just gotten bigger.

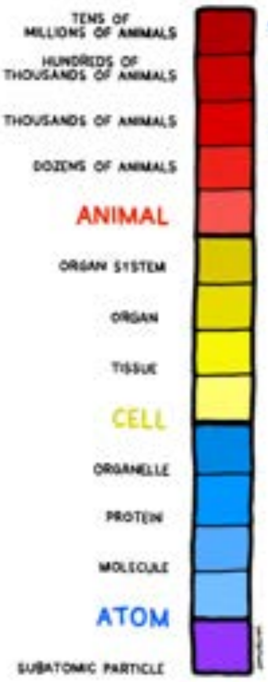
We went from tribes ambushing each other's settlements to kingdoms invading each other's coastlines. From brutal warlords enslaving ten people to brutal planters enslaving 1,000. From clans fighting battles over desired patches of land—



—to empires fighting wars over desired continents.



We clawed our way to the top of Emergence Tower—


TENS OF MILLIONS OF ANIMALS
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE

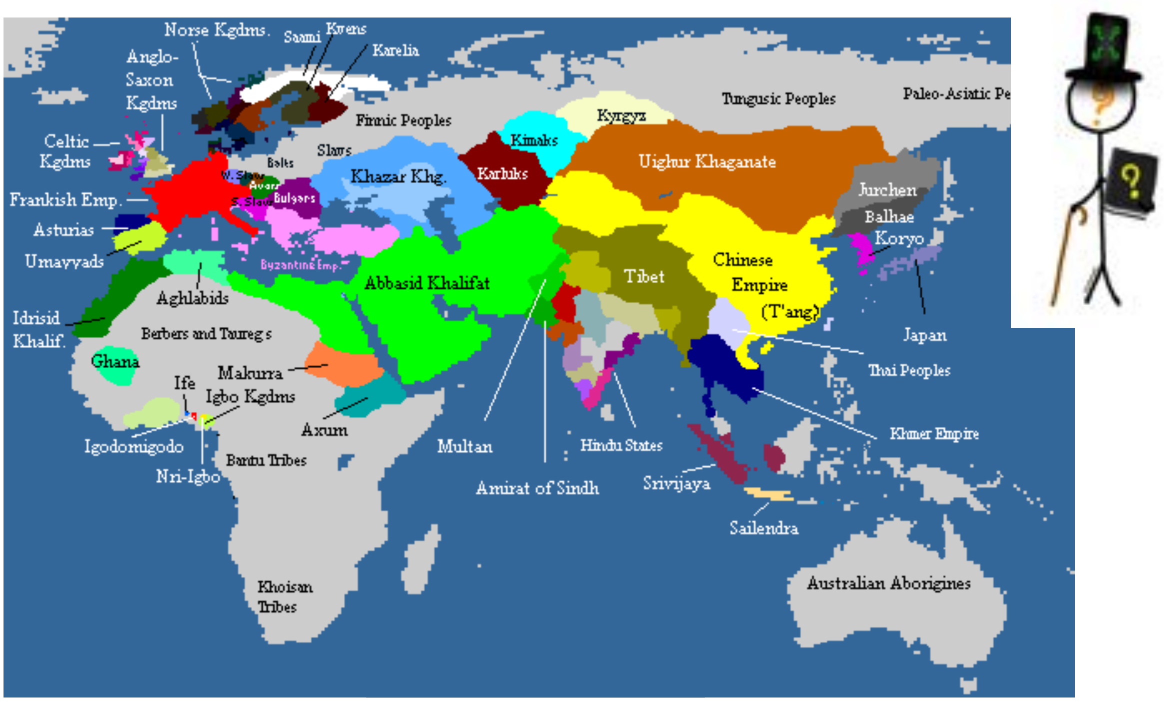
—only to still act like fighting tribes of primates once we got there. Same shit, bigger giants.

Of course, there were some major positives—we had made an unfathomable amount of progress. Cooperation on a mass scale made human knowledge and technology soar into the stratosphere, and in some ways, quality of life rose with it. The world's superglue stories, for all their downsides and damage, were also the source of some of the wisest and highest-minded values in our history, and were at times the bedrock of peace and stability.

But we hit the crazily futuristic year 1700 AD and most humans were living as a cell inside some human giant where the rules, the rights, and the resources were inflicted by a few people at the top on everyone else below.

dynasty, empire

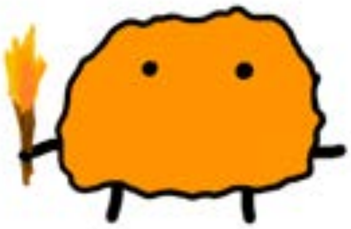
What that meant for almost everyone was that while your destiny in life would be partially shaped by your biology, upbringing, choices, and luck—it mostly depended on the Mr. Question Mark Man who happened to sit at the top of your giant and whatever Question Mark story happened to rule over its culture.


Norse Kgdms.
Saami
Kvens
Karelia
Anglo-Saxon Kgdms
Finnic Peoples
Kyrgyz
Tungusic Peoples
Paleo-Asiatic Pe
Celtic Kgdms
Slavs
Balts
Kimaks
Uighur Khaganate
Khazar Khg.
Karluks
W. Slavs
Avars
Bulgars
S. Slavs
Jurchen
Frankish Emp.
Balhae
Koryo
Asturias
Umayyads
Byzantine Emp.
Chinese Empire (T'ang)
Aghlabids
Abbasid Khalifat
Tibet
Idrisid Khalif.
Japan
Berbers and Tauregs
Ghana
Makurra
Thai Peoples
Ife
Igbo Kgdms
Khmer Empire
Axum
Igodomigodo
Multan
Hindu States
Bantu Tribes
Nri-Igbo
Amirat of Sindh
Srivijaya
Sailendra
Khoisan Tribes
Australian Aborigines
?

How the Question Mark ruler and Question Mark story felt about things like freedom, fairness, or your particular ethnic group would determine everything about how you were able to live. It was like drawing a card from a deck and hoping it was a high card. If you happened to draw a jack of hearts and be born the child of a noble in one of the dictator's deemed upper castes, you might live a safe and enjoyable life. But more often, you'd find yourself with the 7 of clubs and spend your one life as an in-the-shit peasant, or you'd draw a 4 of diamonds and spend 40 hard years as a slave, or you'd draw a 2 of spades and be thrust at the age of 13 into the front lines of one of Mr. Question Mark Man's foreign exploits and that would be that for you. Even if you did draw a decent card, you were always one heart attack or assassination of the leader away from a new queen bee taking control of the giant and reshuffling the deck.

For all our advances, we hadn't advanced where it matters most—the human world remained, like the rest of the animal world, a stressful place to be.

Which brings us back to this odd creature.



When you consider human history as primarily the output of a software program—and when you consider the fact that that software program, unlike our rapidly evolving civilization, hasn't really been updated in the last 10,000 years—it suddenly makes perfect sense that the global civilizations of 1700 AD would be acting out the same basic skit, on a larger scale, as the humans of the ancient past.

When you remember that the Primitive Mind cares about genetic immortality—not people—you're reminded why it also shouldn't be surprising that a species running on that software could develop an advanced civilization and find that life still sucks for most people. When the Primitive Mind is in charge, life will usually suck.

But how about the Higher Mind? Where the hell is he in all of this?

He's stuck as a second-class citizen in the human head, that's where.

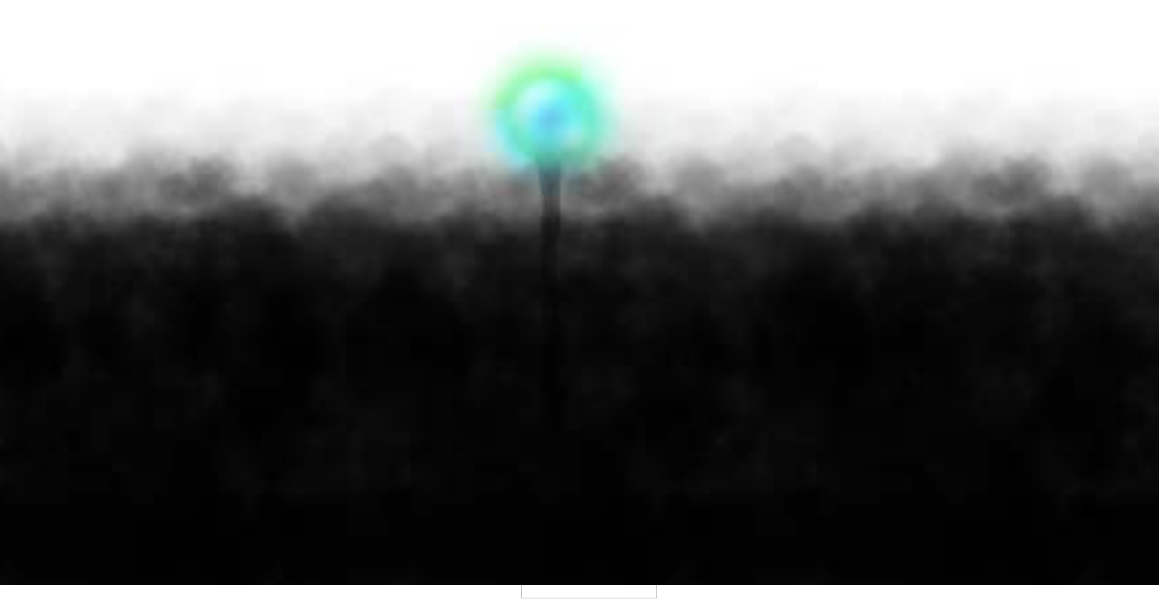
The Power Games are the Primitive Mind's output because the Power Games are the only way the Primitive Mind knows how to live. And given the heavy influence of the Primitive Mind in the human mind—and the Power Games' knack for trumping any competing games out of existence—our species is pulled toward the Power Games with a continual force like gravity.

And here's the problem—the Higher Mind is good at a lot of things, but he's not good at the Power Games. The Power Games are survival of the fiercest, survival of the greediest, and survival of the conformist-est. They favor the tribal, the manipulative and the gullible, the bully and the bulliable—each of them right in the Primitive Mind's wheelhouse. The Higher Mind just isn't cut out for those streets. History is scattered with moments of Higher Mind triumph, but it typically was only a matter of time before the high-minded culture was trampled over by the stampeding Power Games.

If everyone simultaneously stopped playing the Power Games, the Higher Minds of the world might be able to take the driver's seat for good, but in a world where some people are playing the Power Games, playing the Power Games becomes a survival necessity for everyone ③, which perpetuates the cycle. It's a suffocating loop the Higher Mind can't find a way out of.

But through it all—through the Ice Age and the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, through the rise and fall of empires, through the wars and plagues and genocides, underneath miles and miles of thick mental fog, the Higher Mind remained.

And just maybe, after a hundred thousand years in the back seat of the human mind, the tables would turn.



Chapter 4: The Enlightenment Kids

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The Enlightenment Kids

58
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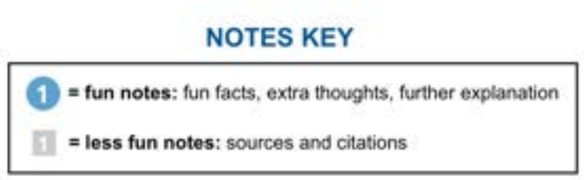
ember 10, 2019 By Tim Urban

s Chapter 4 in a blog series. If you're new to the series, visit the ***series home page*** *for ll table of contents.*



NOTES KEY

1 = **fun notes:** fun facts, extra thoughts, further explanation

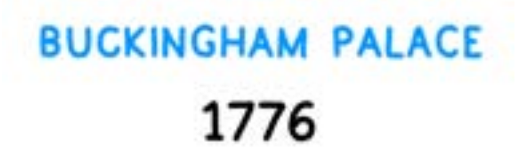
1 = **less fun notes:** sources and citations

Part 2: The Value Games

"We need a government, alas, because of the nature of humans." – P.J. O'Rourke

Chapter 4: The Enlightenment Kids

The American forefathers knew all about the Power Games.



BUCKINGHAM PALACE

1776

Join 608,367 other humans and have new posts emailed to you.
email address
SEND ME NEW POSTS

Follow these special men

412,637
634,264
130,240
Help us exist with PATREON

THE WBW STORE

RANDOM POST BUTTON

Popular Posts

The AI Revolution
Like 11K
1,097

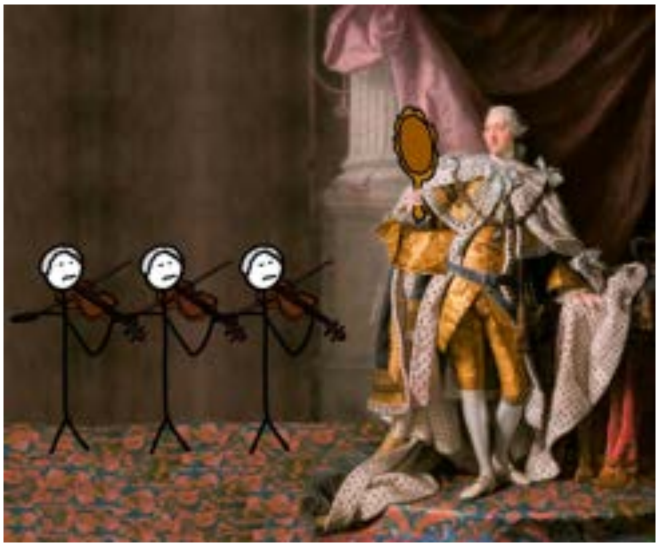
Why Procrastinators Procrastinate
Like 5.1K
550

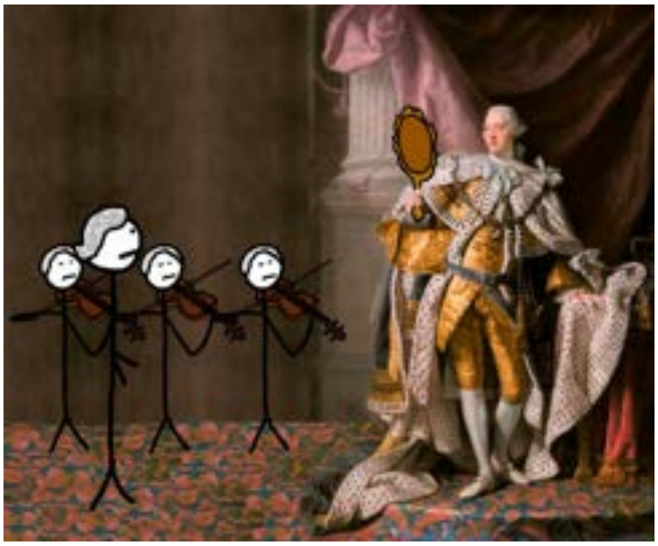
The Fermi Paradox
Like 4.9K
1,366

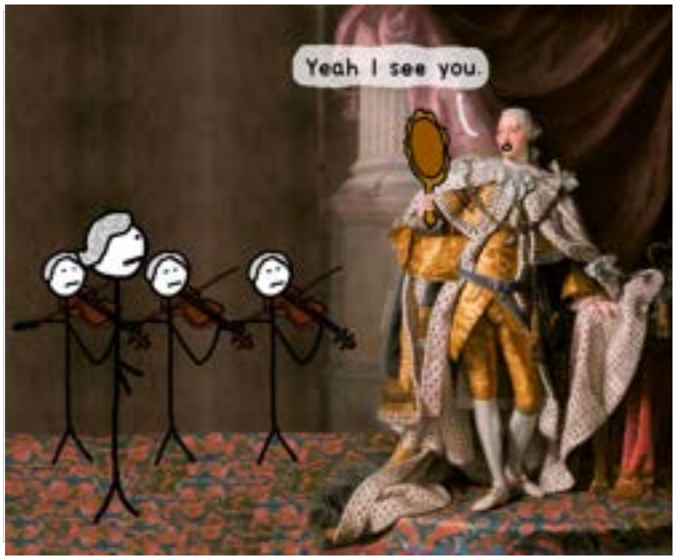
The Elon Musk Series
Like 811
491

How to Pick a Life Partner
Like 2.6K
333

Why Gen Y Yuppies Are Unhappy






Yeah I see you.

Like 2.2K

1,203

7 Ways to be Insufferable on Facebook

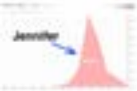
Like 4.9K

956

Putting Time In Perspective

Like 1.9K

550



How to Name a Baby

Like 440

325

Why You Should Stop Caring What Other People Think

Like 3.3K

334

Religion for the Nonreligious

Like 909

821

10 Types of 30-Year-Old Single Guys

Like 494

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From Muhammad to ISIS: Iraq's Full Story

Like 167

320

Full Archive

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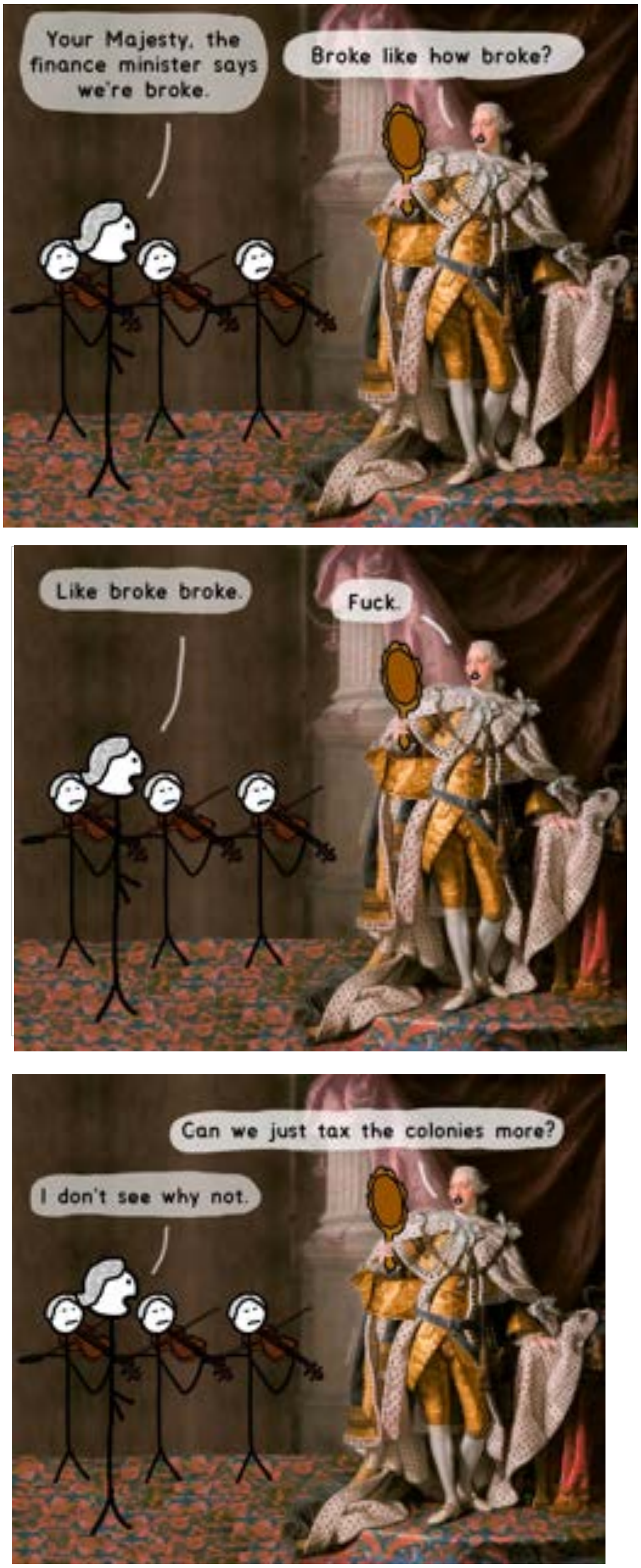
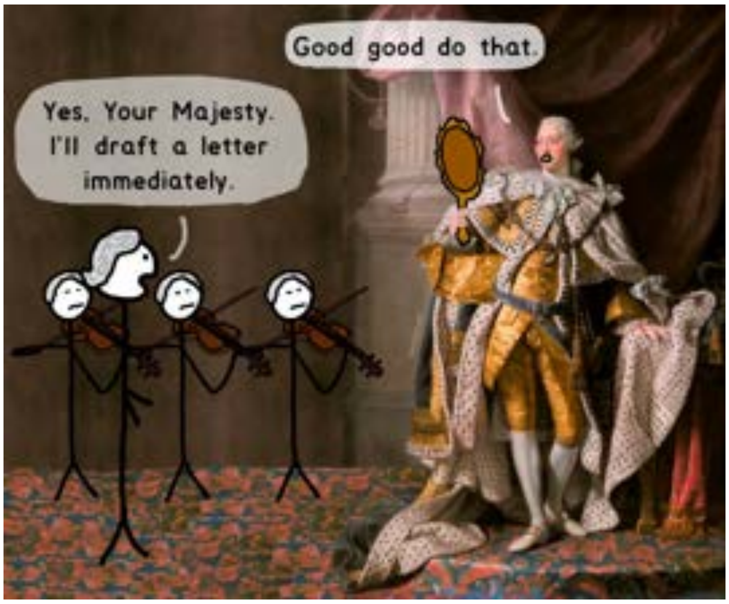
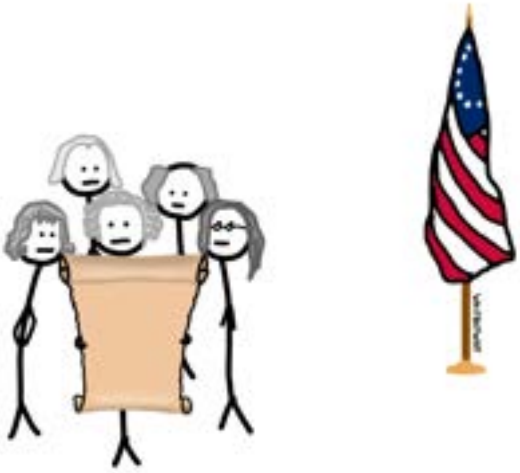
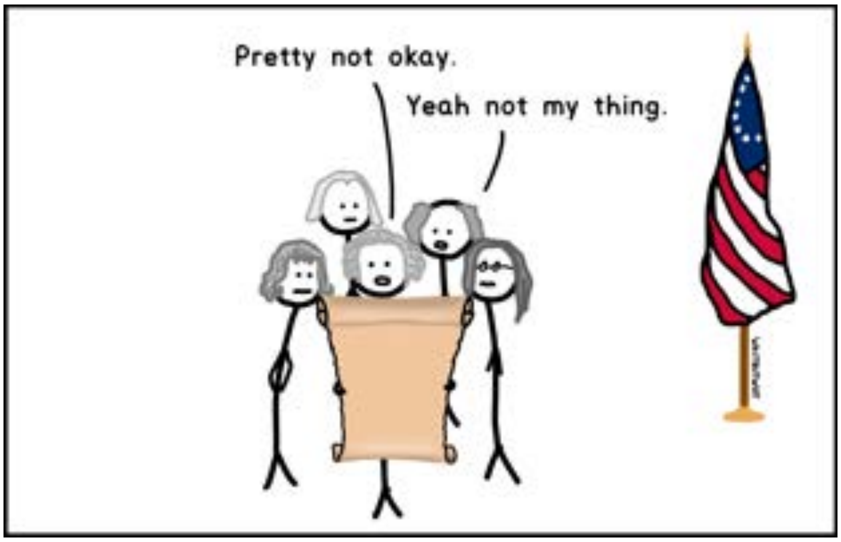
412,637
634,264
130,240

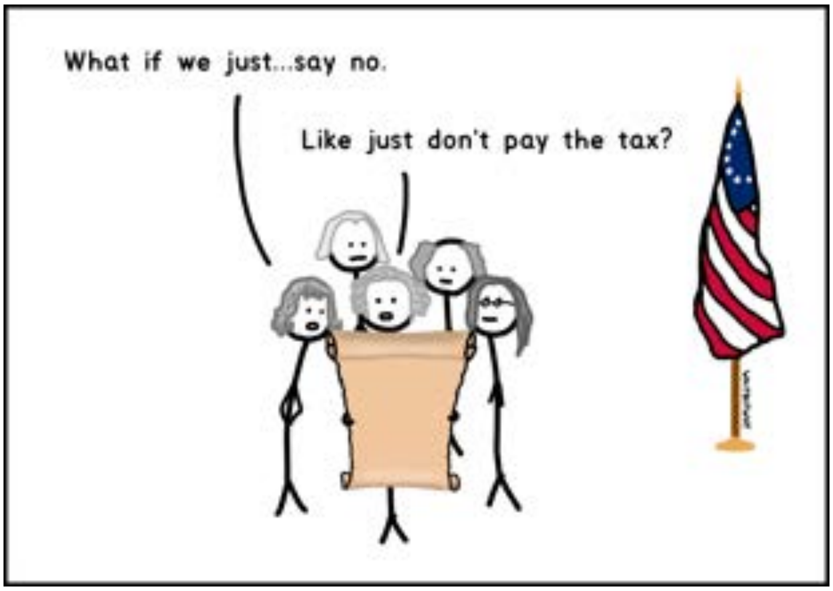

Your Majesty, the finance minister says we're broke.
Broke like how broke?
Like broke broke.
Fuck.
Can we just tax the colonies more?
I don't see why not.

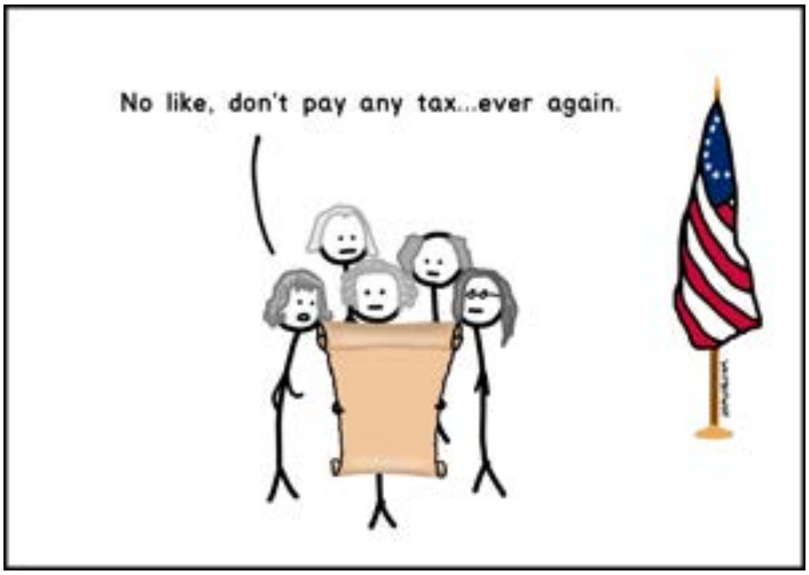

Good good do that.
Yes, Your Majesty. I'll draft a letter immediately.

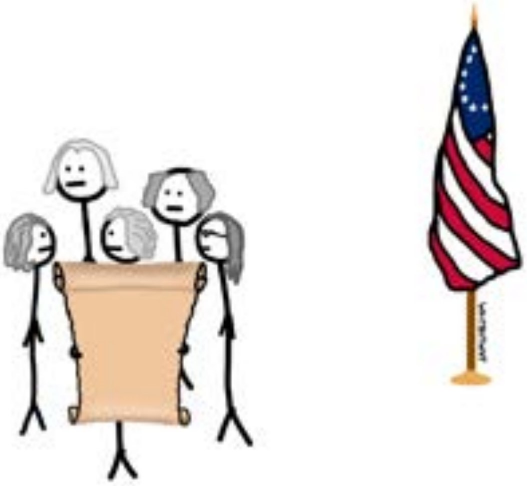
12 WEEKS LATER

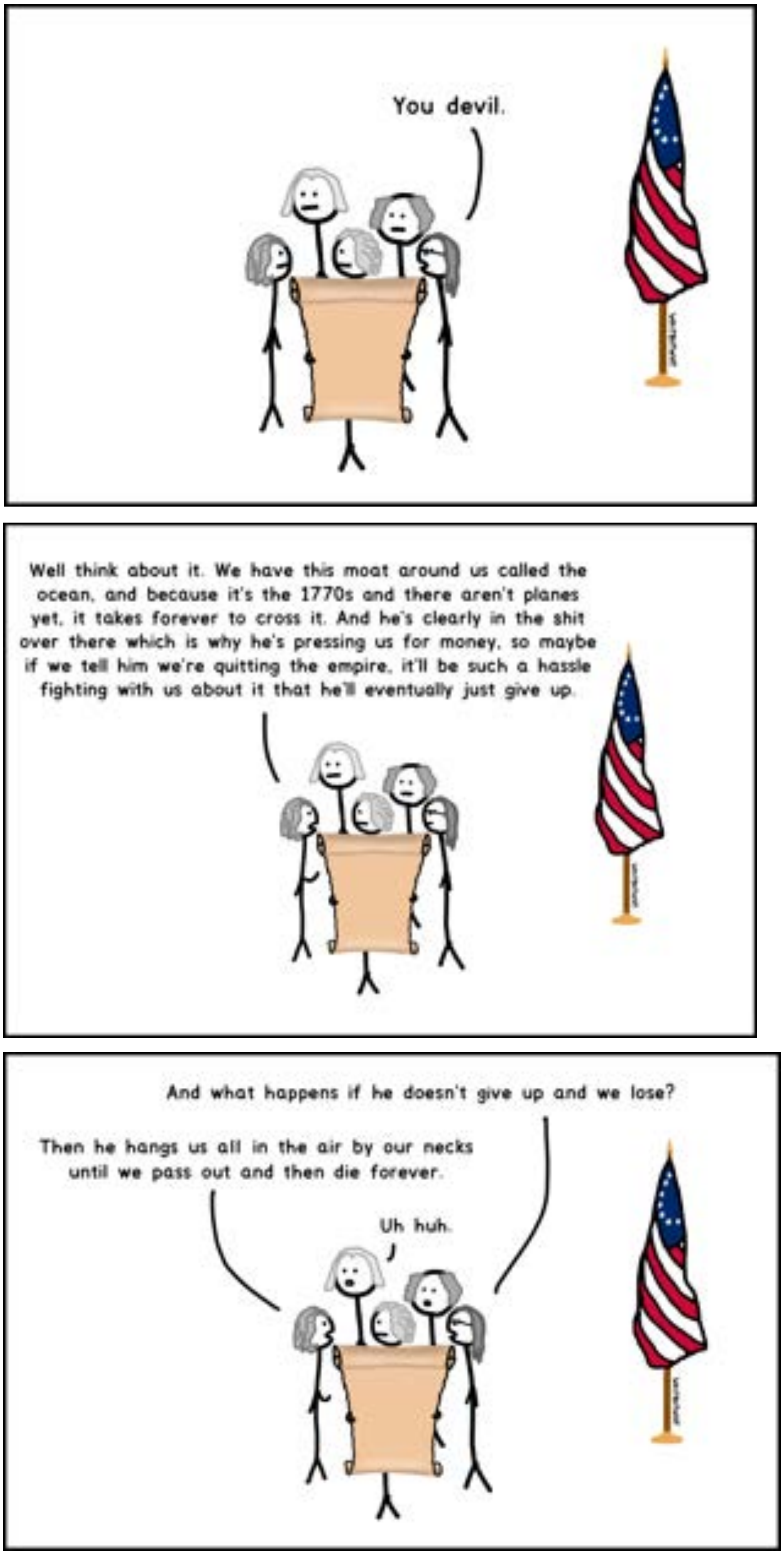


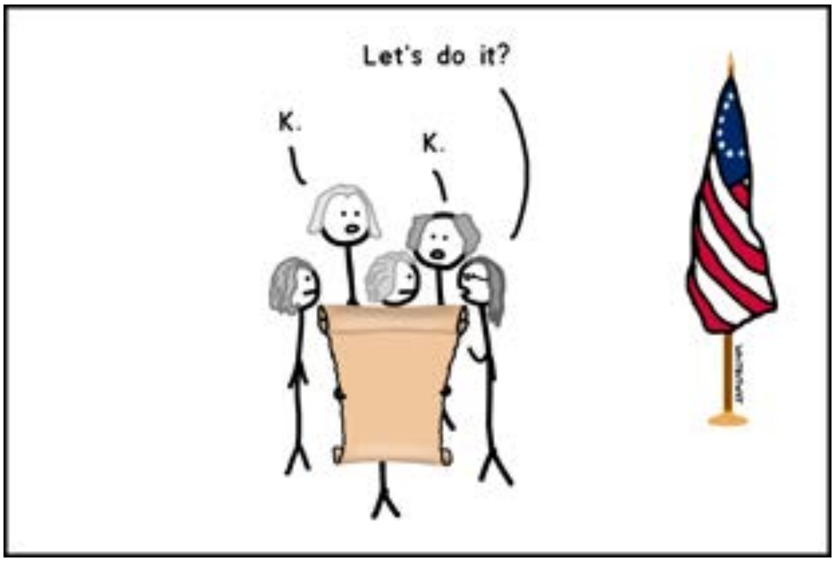

Pretty not okay.
Yeah not my thing.


What if we just...say no.
Like just don't pay the tax?


No like, don't pay any tax...ever again.




You devil.
Well think about it. We have this moat around us called the ocean, and because it's the 1770s and there aren't planes yet, it takes forever to cross it. And he's clearly in the shit over there which is why he's pressing us for money, so maybe if we tell him we're quitting the empire, it'll be such a hassle fighting with us about it that he'll eventually just give up.
And what happens if he doesn't give up and we lose?
Then he hangs us all in the air by our necks until we pass out and then die forever.
Uh huh.



This particular scene wasn't anything out of the ordinary. It was a typical development in the Power Games, where most nations of the time were on the "tyranny → coup → chaos → tyranny" merry-go-round.

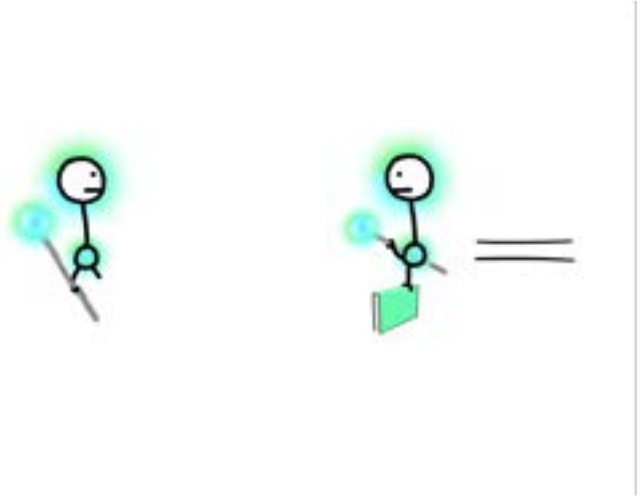
revelovtion age,
Romans, ottoman
Greece

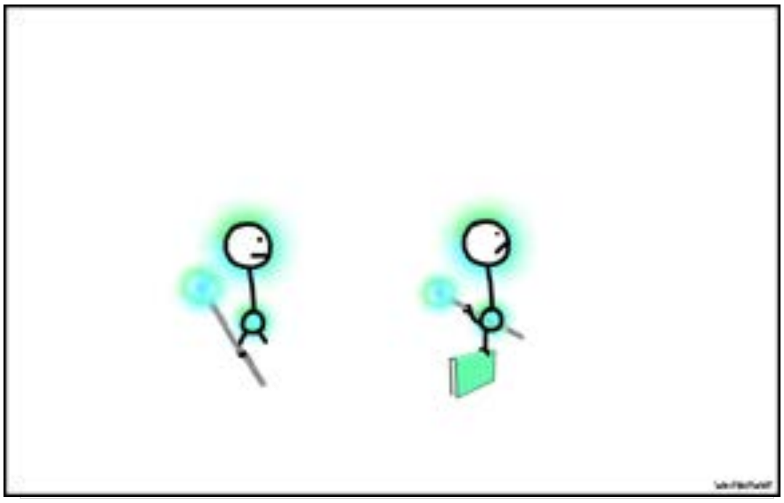
The forefathers were sick of tyranny and decided it was time to move on to the coup stage—or, in this case, the coup's less intense cousin, an independence movement.

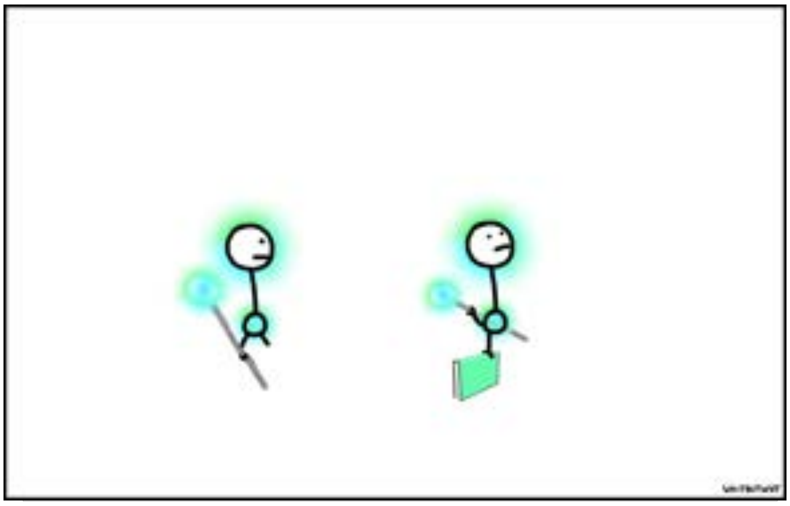
What was unusual was their long-term plan. Normally, the people rebel because they're annoyed about being powerless and they want to turn the tables. So a rebellion topples the king, some chaos ensues, some friends murder friends, and when the dust settles, there's a new king. For centuries, most people assumed that this was just the way things had to be. But this was the late 1700s, and the forefathers were Enlightenment Kids.

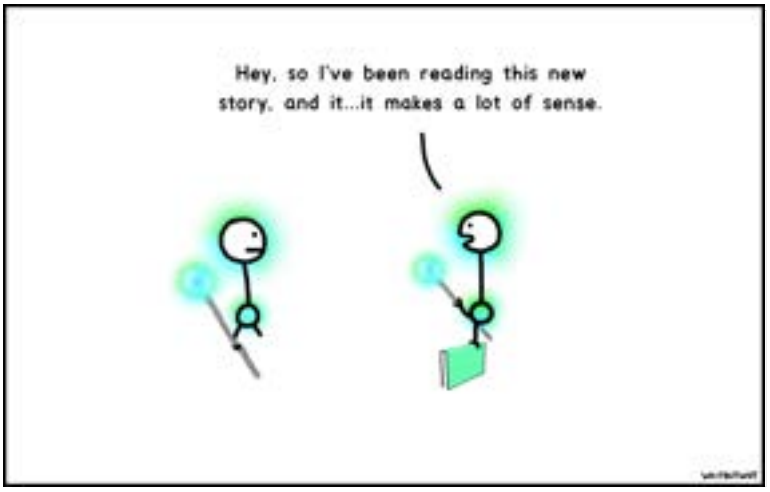
During the Enlightenment, Higher Minds in parts of Europe started cautiously talking about a new story.

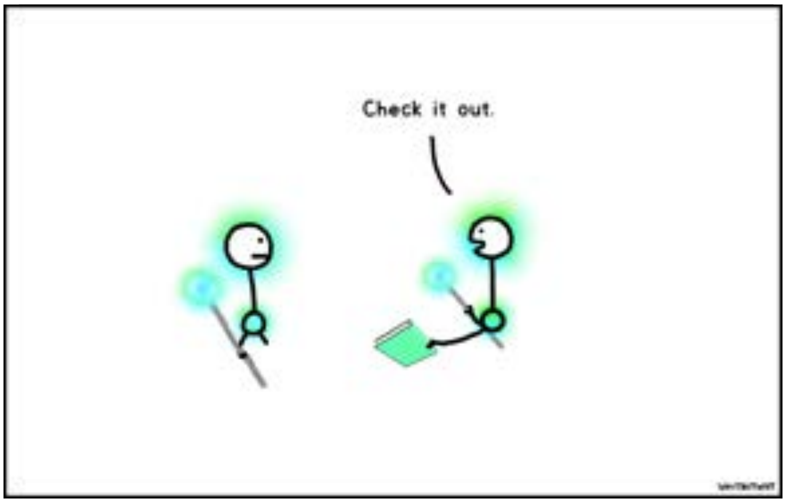
plato, Socrates, Aristatol (philosophy)

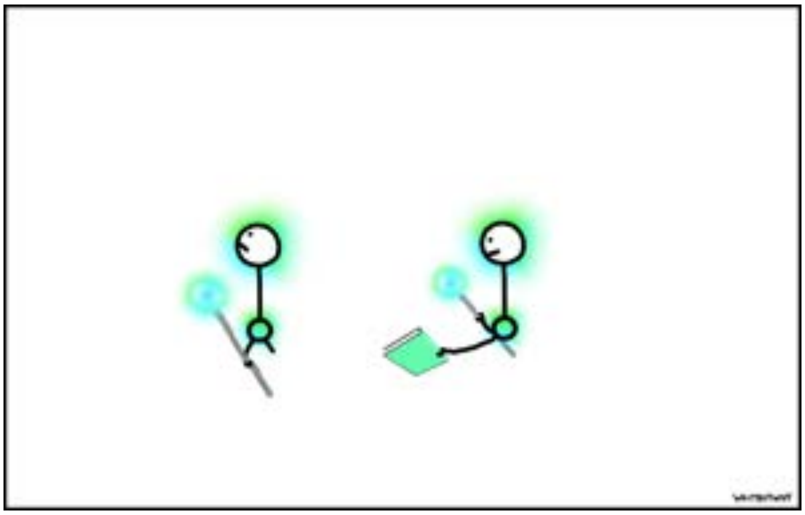


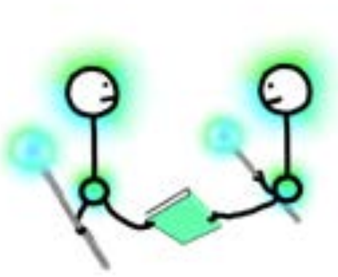


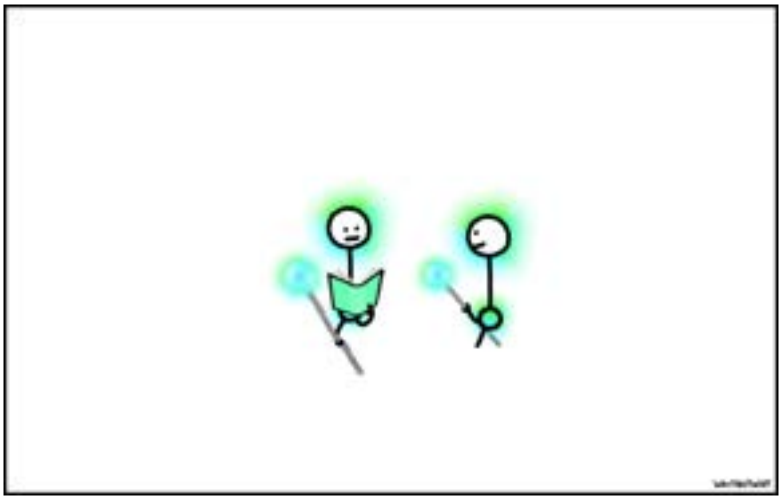


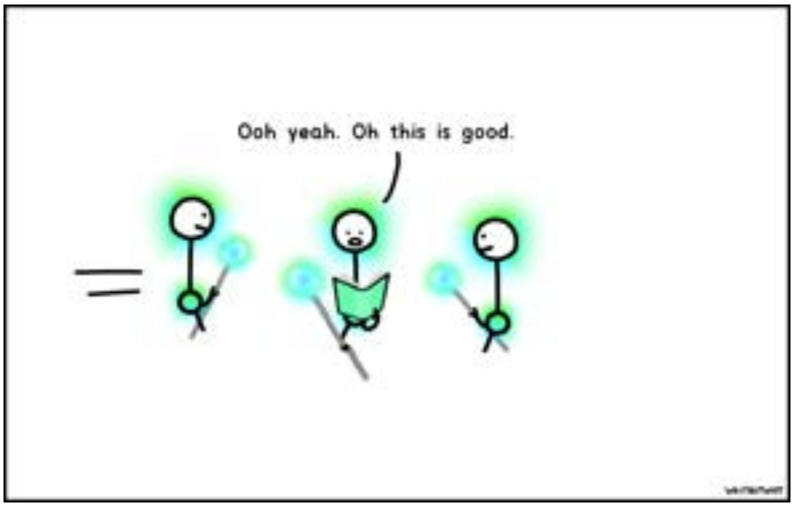

Hey, so I've been reading this new story, and it...it makes a lot of sense.

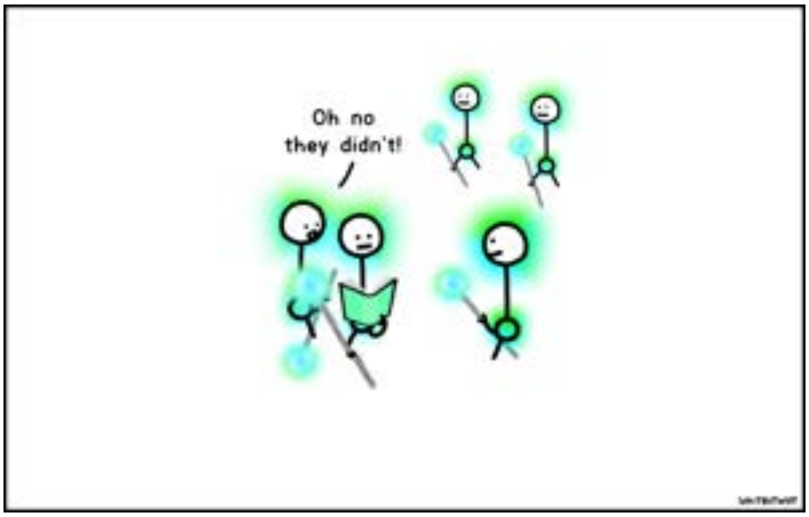

Check it out.

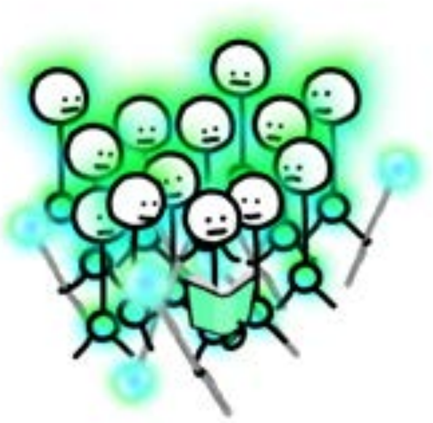







Ooh yeah. Oh this is good.


Oh no they didn't!



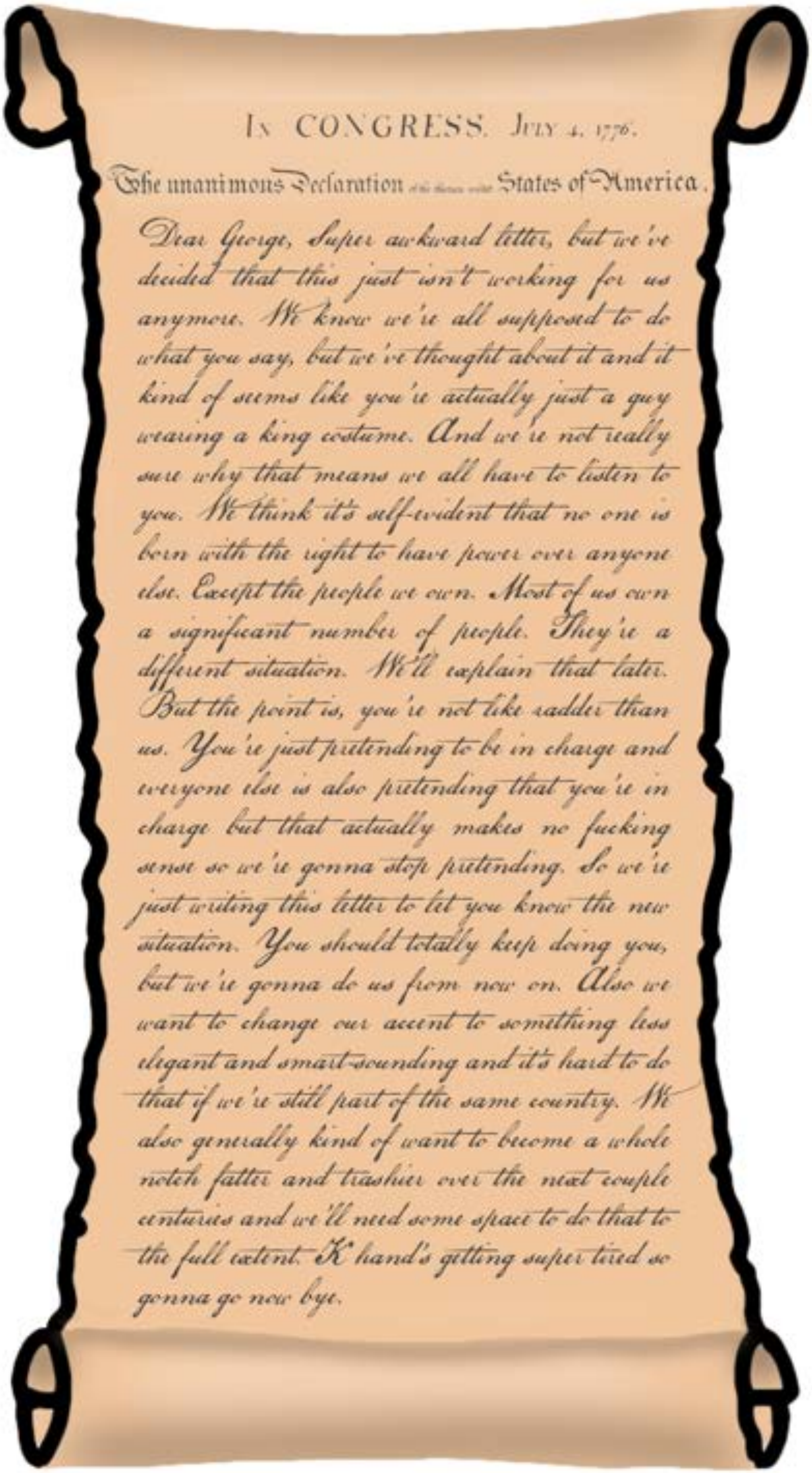
The new story talked about ideas like human rights and equality and tolerance and freedom. According to this new story, humans had made incredible advancements in knowledge, wisdom, and technology—but they were still doing government like it was 7,000 BC. The Power Games, the story went, were unpleasant, unfair, unproductive, and unnecessary—and they were fundamentally immoral, violating the most sacred elements of being a human.

The story was a mind virus, just like other stories—and it started to spread.

Before long, it had crossed the Atlantic and taken hold in minds throughout the American colonies, turning well-behaved English subjects—good cells in the global English giant—into Enlightenment kids. Enlightenment kids were the entitled Millennials of their time, and pretty soon people across the colonies had decided that wait, they had *rights*—and those rights weren't being respected.

The American forefathers were coming of age right in the middle of all of this, and they decided to take action. They had bigger ambitions than overthrowing their king—they wanted to overthrow the *concept* of a king.

So they wrote a letter to King George III explaining the new situation.

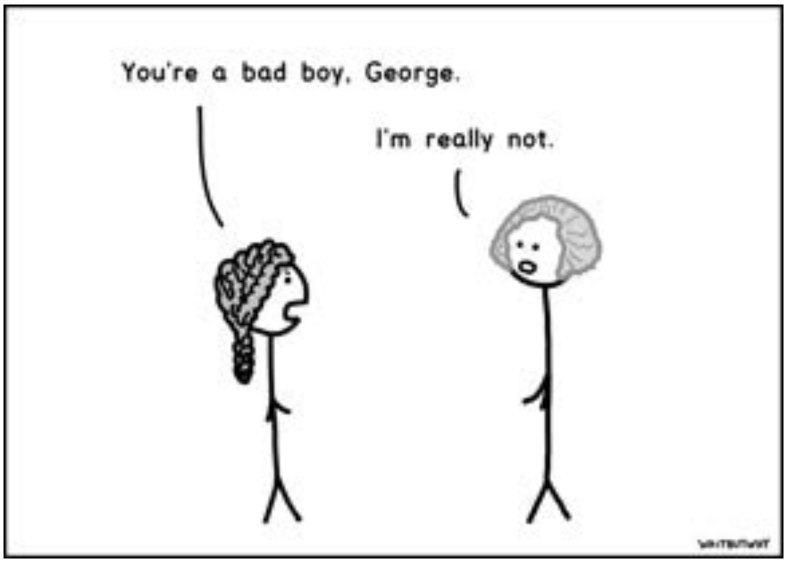


IN CONGRESS. JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration States of America.

Dear George, Super awkward letter, but we've decided that this just isn't working for us anymore. We know we're all supposed to do what you say, but we've thought about it and it kind of seems like you're actually just a guy wearing a king costume. And we're not really sure why that means we all have to listen to you. We think it's self-evident that no one is born with the right to have power over anyone else. Except the people we own. Most of us own a significant number of people. They're a different situation. We'll explain that later. But the point is, you're not like radder than us. You're just pretending to be in charge and everyone else is also pretending that you're in charge but that actually makes no fucking sense so we're gonna stop pretending. So we're just writing this letter to let you know the new situation. You should totally keep doing you, but we're gonna do us from now on. Also we want to change our accent to something less elegant and smart-sounding and it's hard to do that if we're still part of the same country. We also generally kind of want to become a whole notch fatter and trashier over the next couple centuries and we'll need some space to do that to the full extent. K hand's getting super tired so gonna go now bye.

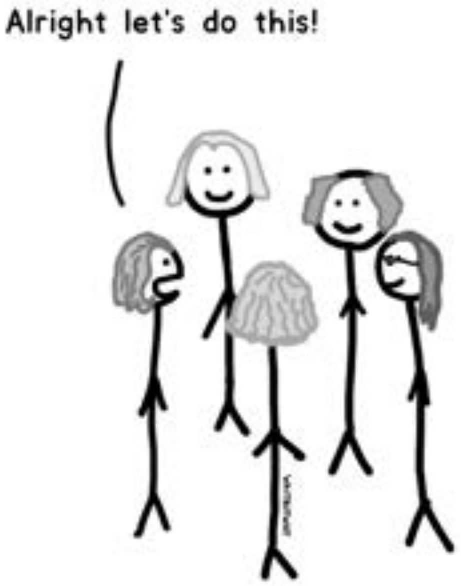
King George was terribly unamused by this development, and the British waged war. A 44-year-old George Washington found himself in charge of fending them off—which, hilariously, his mom apparently hated.①

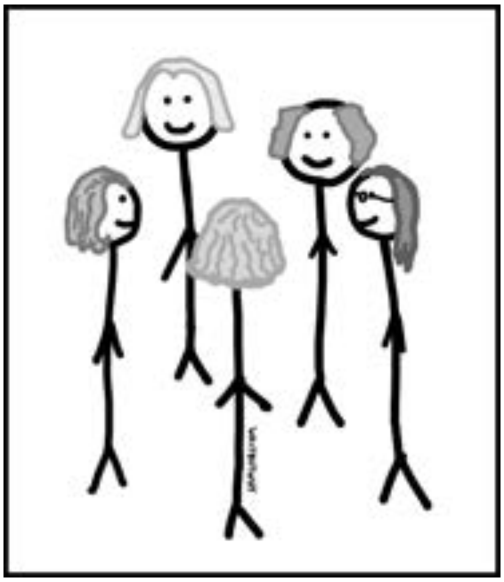

You're a bad boy, George.
I'm really not.
WAITBUTWHY

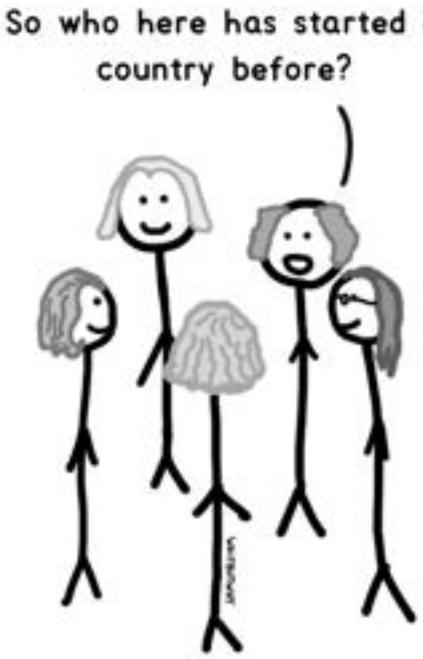
Yes you are. Why can't you just be a good English subject like the other boys?
I'm literally George Washington, do you not realize that?
I don't realize it. Shame on you.
WAITBUTWHY

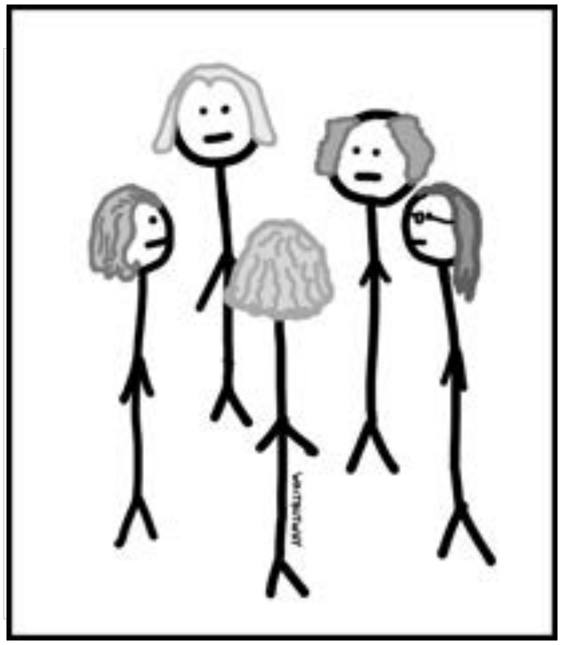
But George didn't let it stop him, and he and his crew, with the help of a *delighted* France, held off the British long enough that they finally gave up and headed back across the ocean.

The Americans had won their independence, and for the first time, a group of Enlightenment kids found themselves with a rare opportunity: a chance to create a new kind of country, from scratch—a chance to take the "here's what *I'd* do if I could start my own country" fantasy and actually play it out. It was time to put the Enlightenment to the test.


Alright let's do this!




So who here has started a country before?

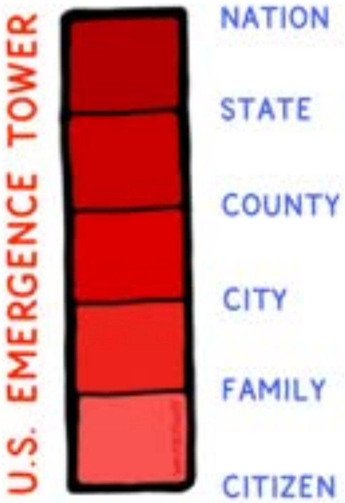


This was a lot to figure out.

Designing the American Giant

A lot of what follows will seem intuitive to readers today. But back when the U.S. started, not one country in the world was what we would consider a democracy today—so these ideas were anything but obvious. That's part of what makes the design of the U.S. such an impressive feat.

Part of the complexity of it all is that a nation simultaneously exists at different points along Emergence Tower. In the case of the U.S., it would work something like this: [2]



The forefathers thought about each of these levels as they designed the country.

First, and perhaps most important, was the individual American citizen. While Power Games dictatorships often treated their populace like just another resource to be used in the service of achieving domestic and foreign objectives, the Enlightenment was all about the sanctity of the individual. No matter what, individual rights had to be protected.

The Let's Just Get This Out of the Way Right Here Blue Box

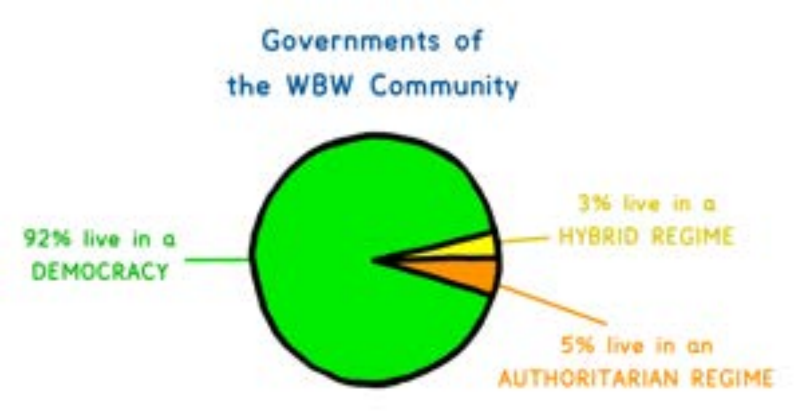
"No matter what, individual rights had to be protected" is one of many sentences in this post that look pretty silly without an asterisk that acknowledges the irony that a country founded on equality and freedom and high-mindedness also initially believed those tenets only applied to certain groups of people, while treating other groups like livestock, inferior savages, household accessories, etc.

The U.S. is not a perfect manifestation of its stated core values or founding intent—a fact at the heart of much of the strife today and throughout the country's history. We'll be diving into all that later in the series. For now, let's all get on the same page about what the intent was in the first place. This chapter will help us build the language we'll use to talk about the trickier stuff later on.

The Okay While We're Doing This Let's Also Get Another Thing Out of the Way Blue Box

This part of the series, and some other parts later on, are super U.S.-centric. The reason is that I'm American and I'm currently immersed in U.S. society—so I have a way better understanding of the U.S. than I do of any other country.

But I bet that even in the U.S.-specific sections of the series, most of the ideas correspond pretty well to wherever you're living. According to Google Analytics, 58% of WBW readers are American and 42% are from other countries—but when we dug in a bit, we learned that most WBW readers are living in democracies: ③



So for most of the non-Americans, you have your own version of all this to think about. As for the other 8% (which is actually probably higher due to VPNs), I hope you share your perspectives with the rest of us—they'll help paint a better picture here of the full spectrum of modern human societies.

Now go back up to the paragraph above these two blue boxes so you don't forget what we were talking about before this diversion.

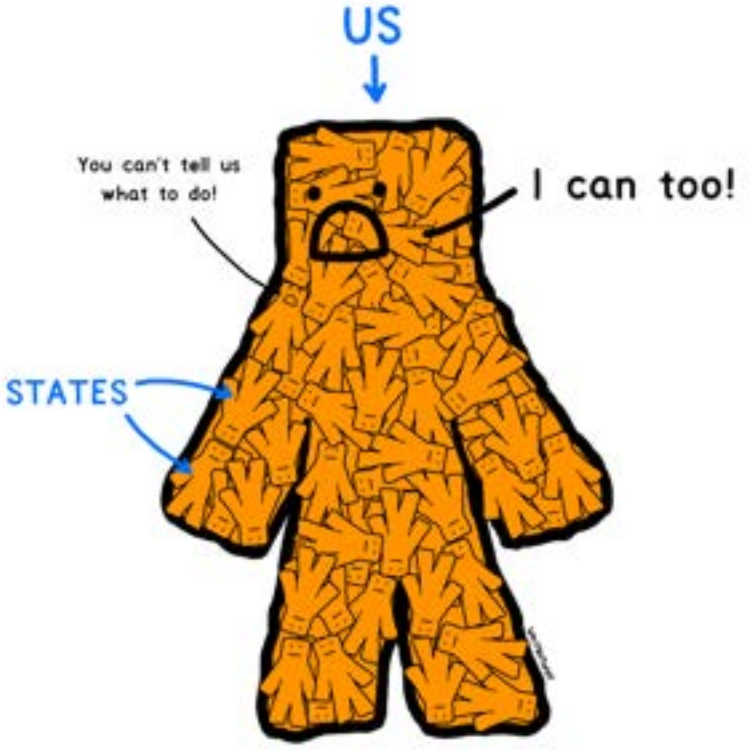
Specifically, the Founders drew on the core Enlightenment concept of *inalienable rights*—which they articulated in the most famous sentence in American history:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are ***Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*** ④

this is why people were crazy about democracy

Throughout human history, it was often taken for granted that some people had god-given rights that others didn't—because they were from a certain family, of a certain demographic, or were thought to be favored by the prevailing god. Enlightenment thinkers thought this was silly. They saw inalienable rights as inherently applying to everyone equally and existing beyond the realm of politics.

Higher up on Emergence Tower, the forefathers tried to strike the right balance between competing layers of giants. The big U.S. giant was made up of what would eventually be 50 smaller state giants, each of whom was made up of even smaller giants like counties and cities. The designers engaged in furious debates about what kinds of power each giant tier would have and the extent to which smaller giants would have autonomy versus being subject to orders from above. The debates rage on today.


US
You can't tell us what to do!
I can too!
STATES

We'll dive into those weeds in another post sometime. For now, we'll focus on the big national U.S. giant at the very top of U.S. Emergence Tower.

The inside of the U.S. could be the perfect Enlightenment utopia, but the world outside was still playing the Power Games, and if the U.S. giant couldn't hold its own on that stage, it would be a short-lived experiment. The U.S. giant would have to be strong, economically and militarily, and it would have to make wise decisions on the global landscape.

The Founders thought they could satisfy both the individual and national concerns—if the right rules were in place. But that introduced a new issue:

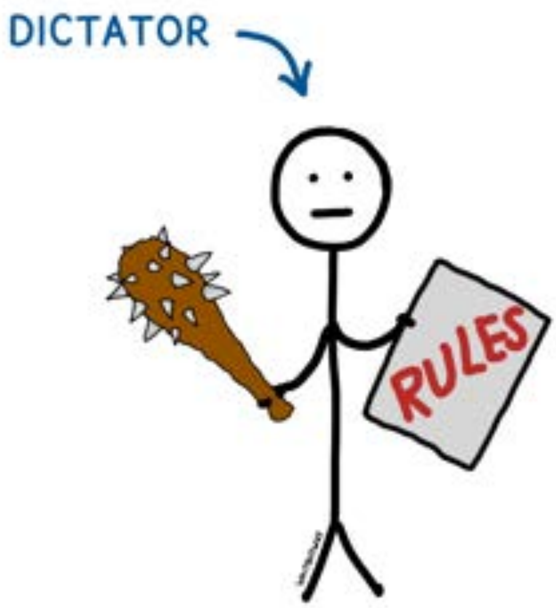
Who would enforce the rules? And who would get to make the decisions that affect the whole country?

If the country could have been run by a perfectly high-minded, selfless, principled, consistent, non-overthrowable, immortal, eternal dictator—then sure, that mythical leader could enforce the rules and make the decisions forever.

But since that's not possible, how would the U.S. avoid the predictable Power Games fate, where either the first dictator, or one of their successors, goes corrupt and starts bending and breaking the rules and sends the whole thing to shit?

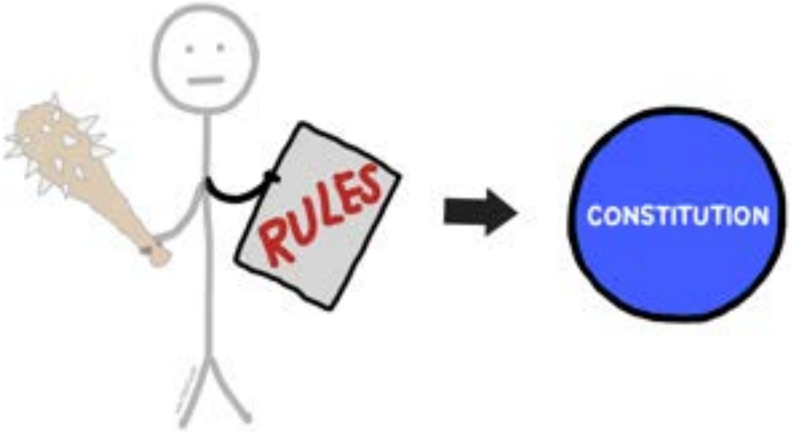
The Founders had a plan. They would take the standard dictator—

Probably this time
british were expanding
their empires,
middle east was
busy with oil, India
was under occupation
at a very early age.
& the battle between
communisum & capitalism
has yet to be started

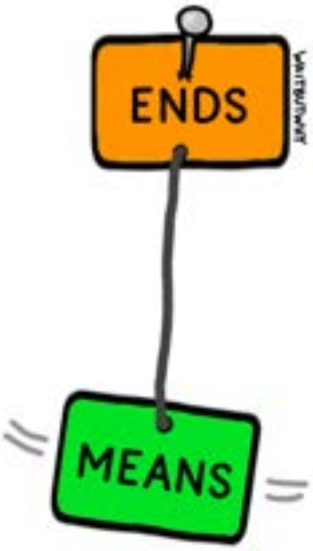


—and split it into three parts (not to be confused with the three branches of government).

The first part would be the dictator's rules, which in this case would not emerge from the mind of any leader but from the Enlightenment itself. The Founders would collaborate to forge a custom-crafted version of Enlightenment philosophy and lay it out in a sacred document called the Constitution.

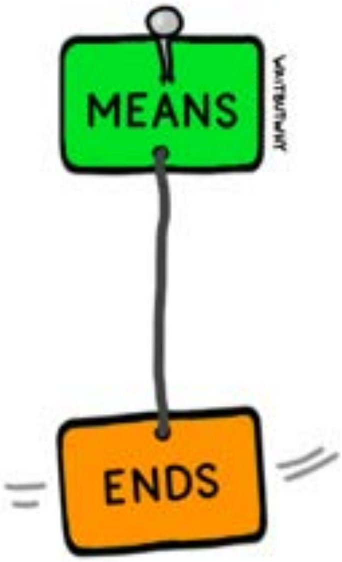


In the Power Games, kings, emperors, and warlords were typically focused on some set of goals—personal or national prosperity, defense against other giants, expansion, etc. These were the leaders' sacred *ends*, and they'd try to achieve them by any means necessary. The rules they used to govern would usually be treated as part of these means—set strategically in order to support the sacred goals. When two values come into conflict, the one held more sacred will stay nailed firmly in place, while the other one will compromise in order to accommodate the sacred value.

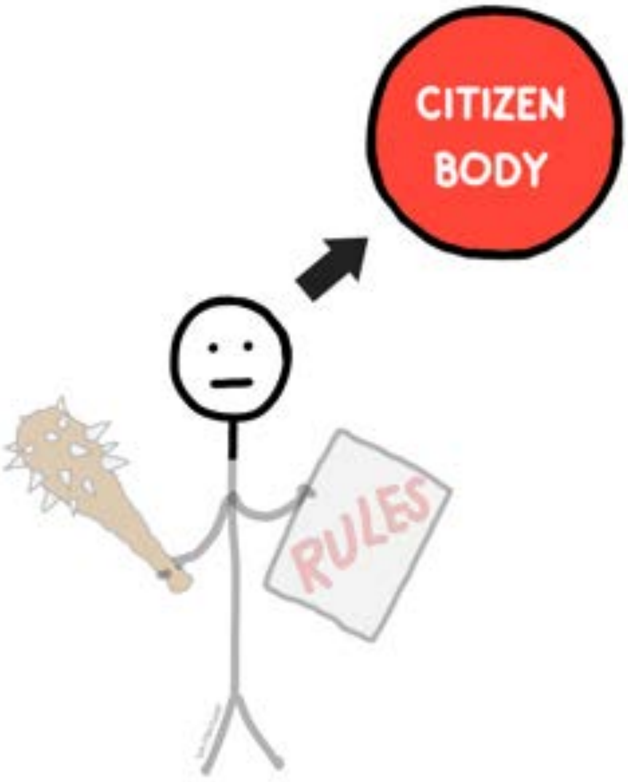


The U.S. Constitution would work the opposite way. It was a set of rules that, rather than serving any particular goal or outcome, would be sacred *in themselves.* The Constitution described a sacred *process*—a set of inviolable *means* by which any and all national or individual goals would need to be accomplished. It outlined the means by which leaders would be elected, the means by which conflicts would be settled and people who broke the rules would be punished, the means by which the country could act on the international stage—all processes that emerged from Enlightenment values. The U.S. and its citizens could and would do anything they wanted—as long as they did it *Enlightenment-style*.

By centering the new country around a sacred process, the U.S. Founders flipped the normal order of things on its head.



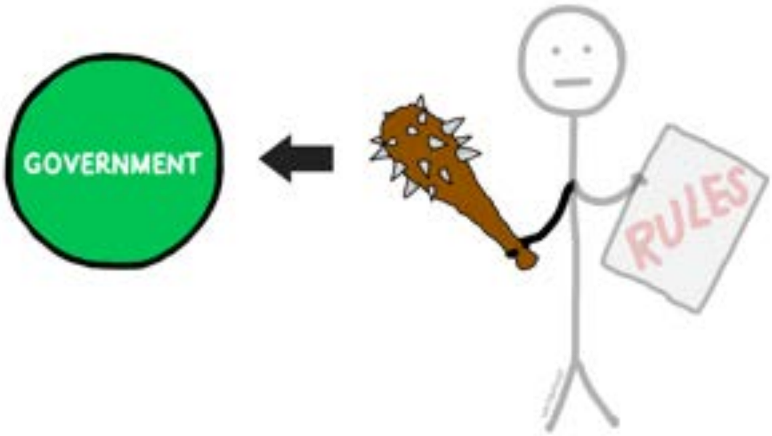
The second part of the U.S. dictator—the brain that makes decisions about both what goes on inside the country and what the country does on the international stage—would be handled by the citizen body.



The citizens would be able to make whatever decisions they wished, as long as they abided by the sacred rules. There would even be portions of the rules the citizen body could decide to change—certain laws, judicial precedents, amendments to the Constitution—but even these rule changes could only happen via pathways outlined in other parts of the rules. Of course, in a micro sense, politicians handle national decision-making, but over the long run, elections meant that the citizen body would be ultimately running the show.⑤

we call it a democracy

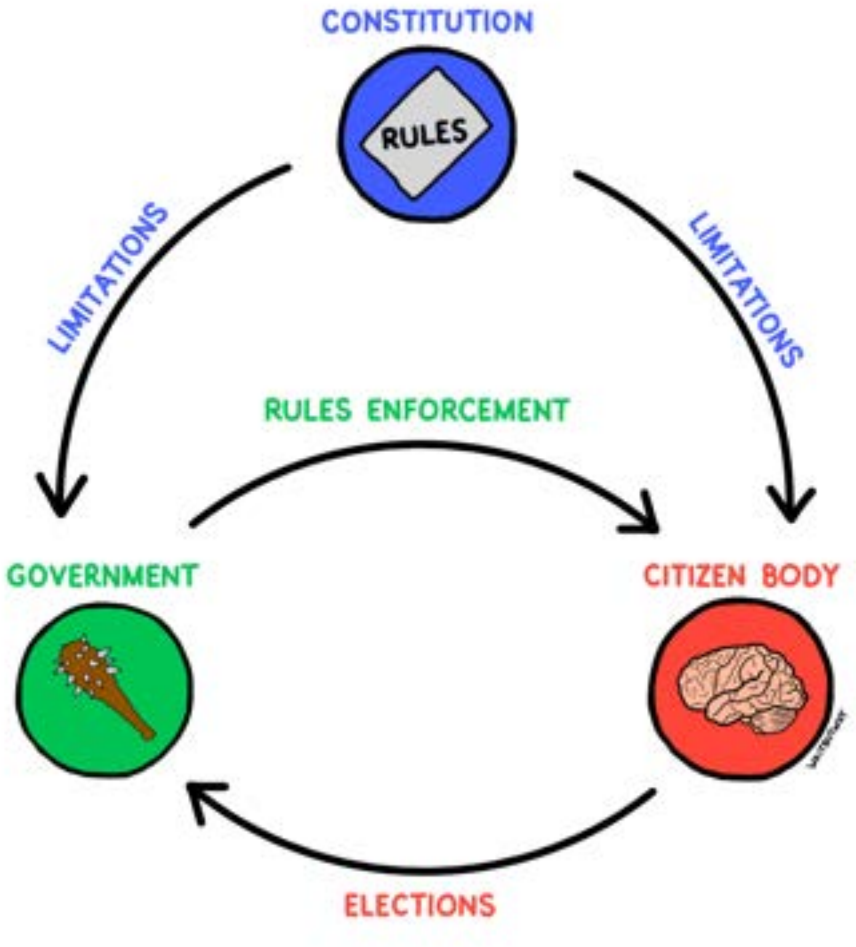
The final part of the split dictator would be the dictator's *cudgel*—the iron fist that enforces the rules and keeps everything functioning the way it's supposed to. This would be the job of the U.S. government.



A huge chunk of the Constitution's rules would pertain to the scope and limitations of the government. The idea was, the government wouldn't make the rules, it would be subject to the rules. The government wouldn't be the core driver of the evolution and direction of the country—it would, in theory, simply execute the will of the people as they evolved. With a monopoly on the use of violence, the government would be the grand enforcer that holds the operation together—but its use of force would be severely restricted beyond that purpose.

If the U.S. were a soccer game, the Constitution would be the rules of play, the citizens would be the players on the field, and the government would be the referee. In one sense, the ref is powerless—totally bound by the rulebook and unable to control the outcome of the game. But in another sense, the ref is immensely powerful—because whenever rules are broken, the ref can pull out a red card and send people to jail.

The Founders couldn't conjure a mythical, immortal, high-minded dictator, but they *could* conjure each of its parts, that together, *could* last forever, remain consistent, and ultimately accomplish the same thing.



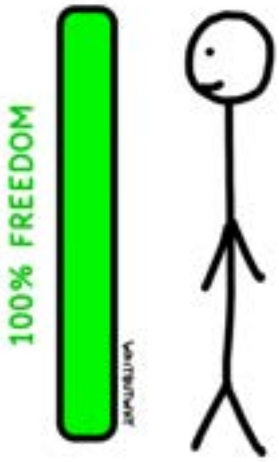
For a species that, by nature, plays the Power Games, this system had a remarkable ambition: to put the nation's collective Primitive Mind in a cage, giving the nation's Higher Minds space to decide how things would go.

With this plan in mind, the forefathers got to work designing the specifics of the rulebook—starting with a concern on every citizen's mind:

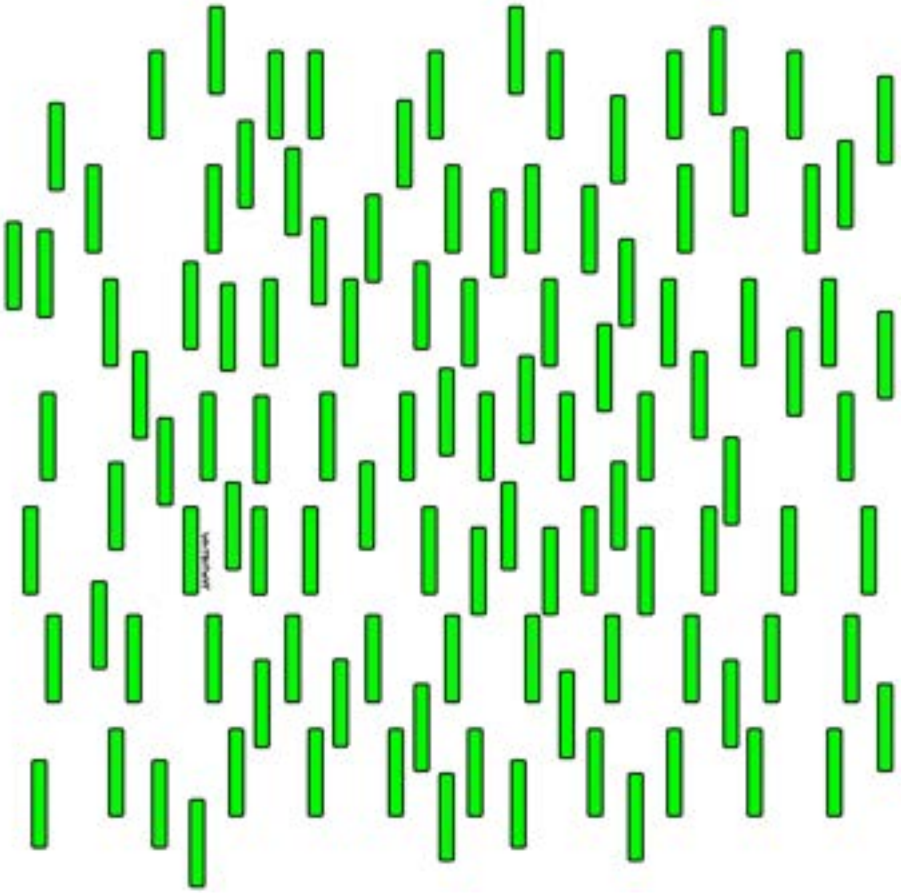
Freedom

One of the worst parts about living in the Power Games was the lack of freedom. Most people lived their lives at the whim of someone else's cudgel. But that's actually a *symptom* of the real problem with the Power Games: *too much freedom.*

In the Power Games, everyone actually starts off with unlimited freedom.



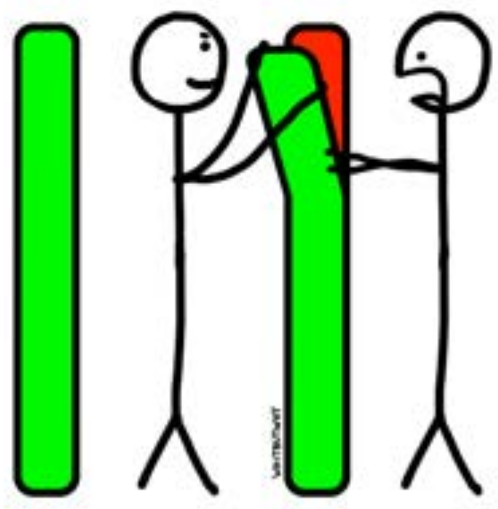
So before anyone does anything, a Power Games environment looks like this:



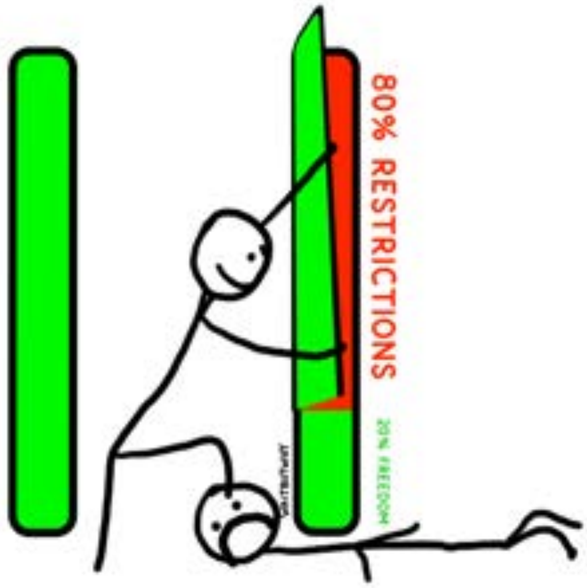
A complete freedom bar for every person. Which sounds great—until conflicts arise, and the guiding rule of the Power Games comes into play:

Everyone can do whatever they want, if they have the power to pull it off.

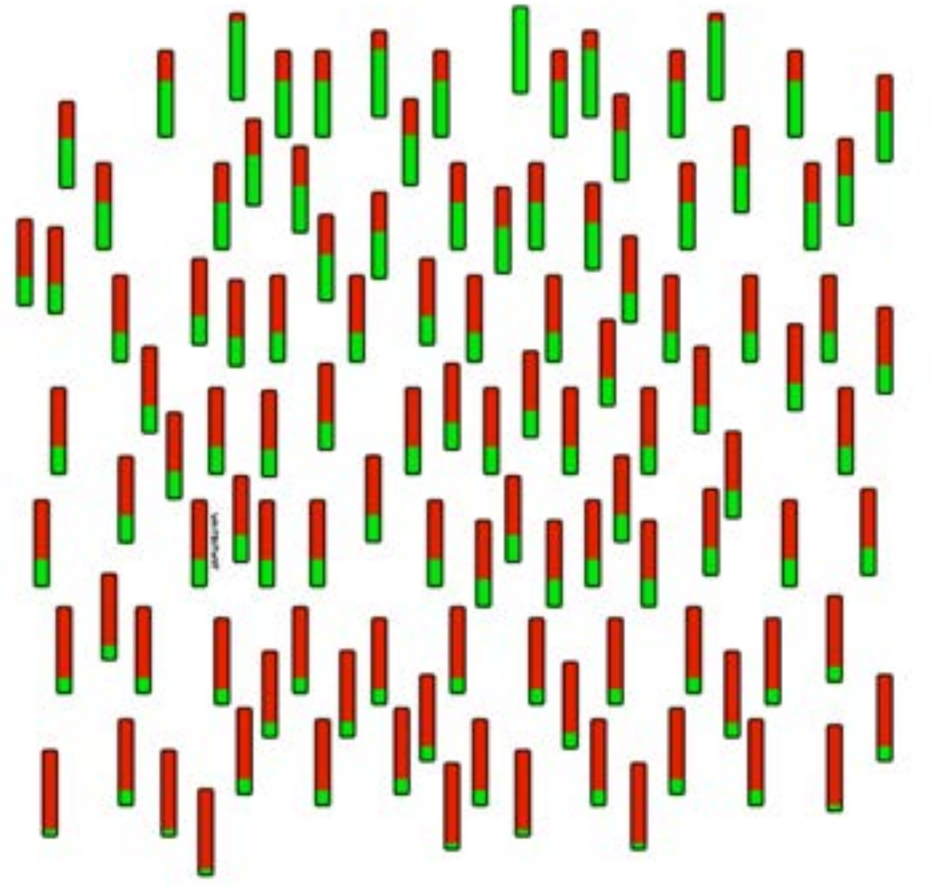
Without any principles in charge, the Power Games are a simple contest of who can be the biggest bully. In most cases, no matter how much power you can muster, there's someone around with an even bigger cudgel—and they'll usually use it to restrict some of that unlimited freedom of yours, whether you like it or not.


WAITBUTWHY

Depending on who the local bully is and how they feel about you, you may find yourself with almost no freedom at all.


80% RESTRICTIONS
20% FREEDOM
WAITBUTWHY

That’s why the typical Power Games environment has a few freedom winners and lots and lots of freedom losers. More like this:



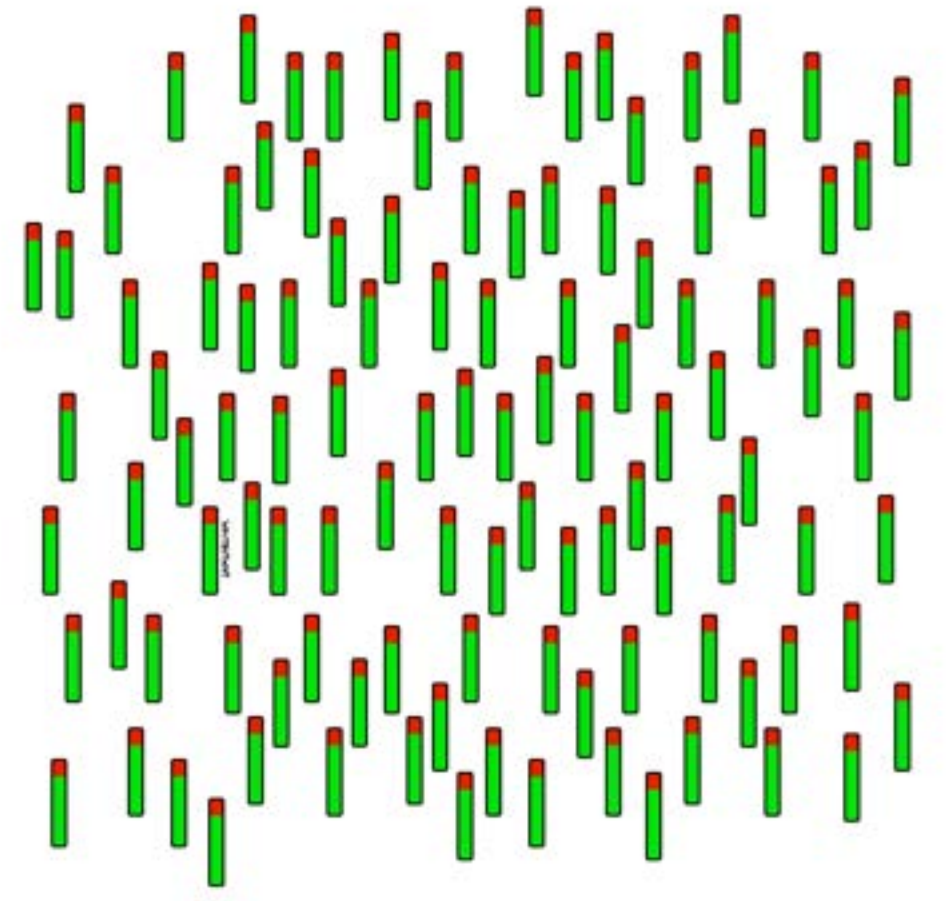
The U.S. was founded, above all, as a reaction against the Power Games' freedom problem—a problem that the Constitution solves with a compromise that goes something like this:

Everyone can do whatever they want, ***as long as it doesn't harm anyone else.***

Said more simply:[1]

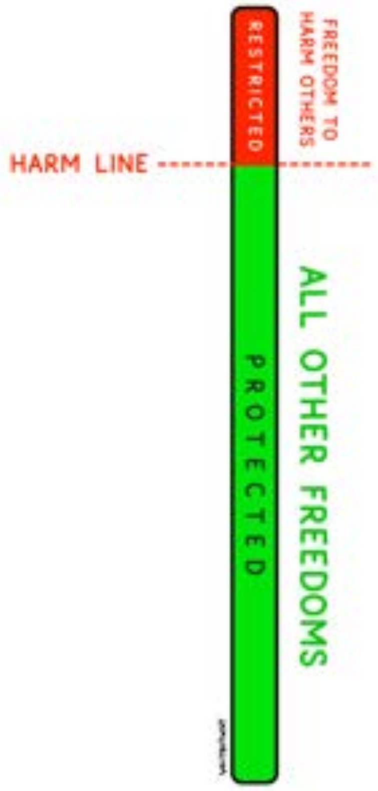
Your right to swing your arms ends just where another person's nose begins.

In exchange for giving up the freedom to harm or bully others, you could live a life entirely free from anyone bullying you. Pretty good trade, right? In the U.S., no one would be *completely* free, but *everyone* would be mostly free:

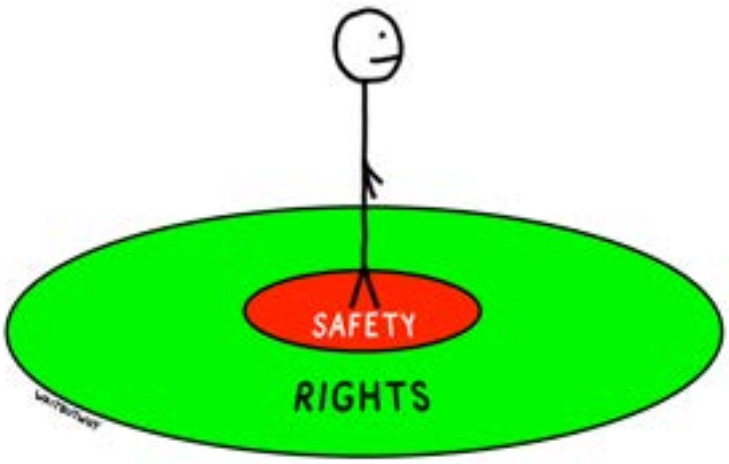


This compromise has two points baked into it. The first part—*everyone can do whatever they want*—describes what citizens *can* do. Their **rights.** The second part—*as long as it doesn't harm anyone else*—describes what citizens *cannot* do. Their **restrictions.**

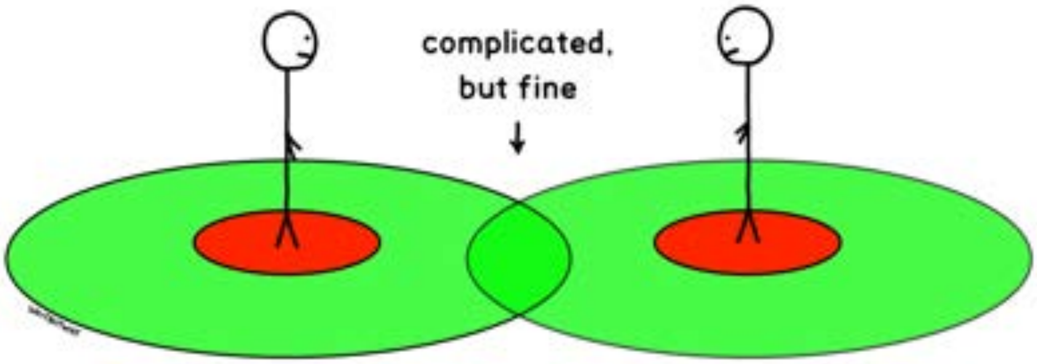
The two are mutually exclusive: deciding that citizens should be free from having a thing happen to them is also deciding citizens should *not* be free to do that thing. Likewise, every freedom granted to citizens is something citizens will have to live with others doing. That's why U.S. freedom isn't really *freedom* as much as it's a *freedom-safety compromise*. And in that compromise, the key word—*harm*—is the decider. As far as the Constitution is concerned, an action is judged mainly on the harm criteria: if it's harmful, citizens must be protected from it; if it's not harmful, it's a right that must itself be protected.

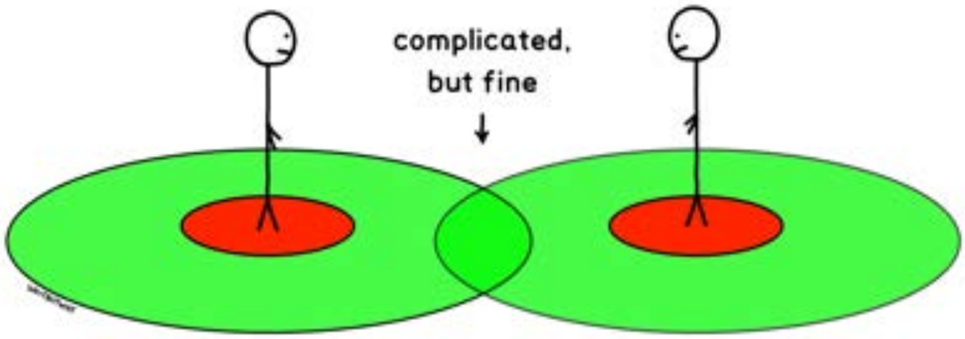

FREEDOM TO HARM OTHERS
RESTRICTED
HARM LINE
ALL OTHER FREEDOMS
PROTECTED

I like to think of it as two circles surrounding every U.S. citizen: a red circle of safety and a green circle of rights.

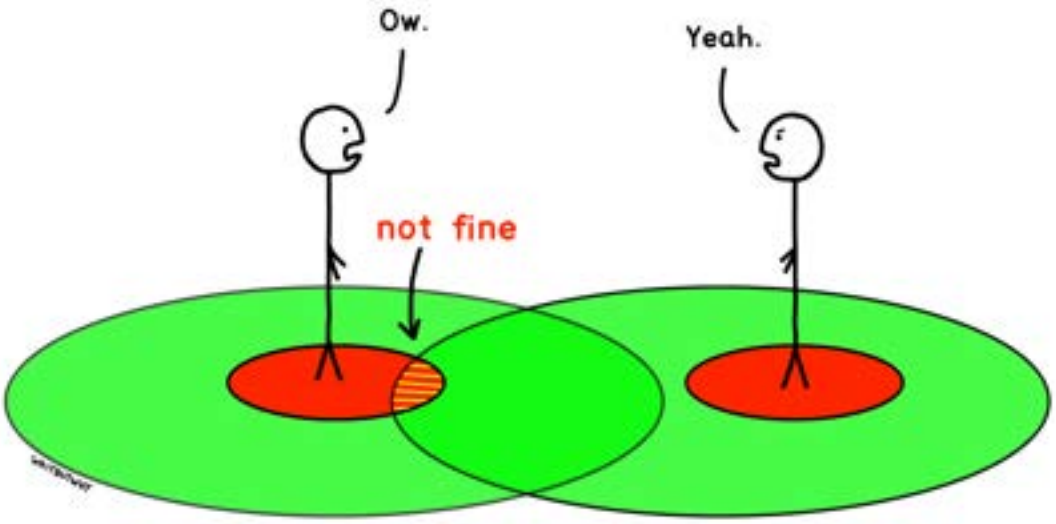

SAFETY
RIGHTS

A person's green circle would give them a tremendous amount of freedom rarely enjoyed in the Power Games—but the second someone's green circle invaded anyone else's red circle, they'd be breaking the law and the government would be obligated to step in.


complicated, but fine



in.



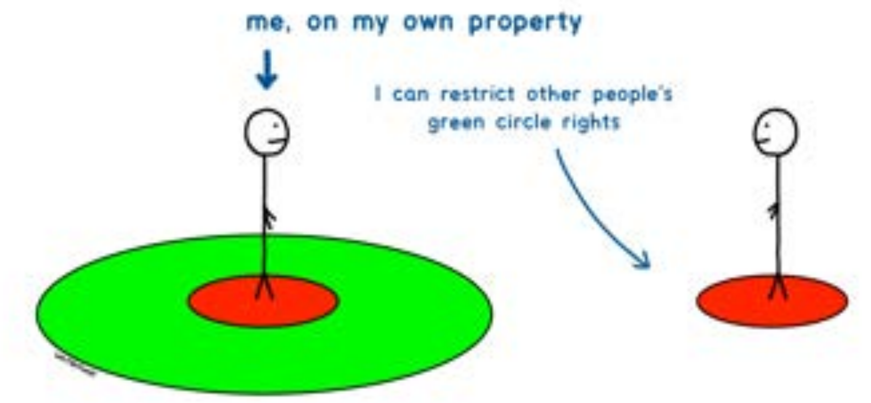
The Constitution required the government to handle its red circle protection duties. But just as pressing a concern was the protection of *green* circles. The government would be obligated to protect every citizen's green circle of rights against illegal impingement by bully citizens and, most crucially, by the government itself.

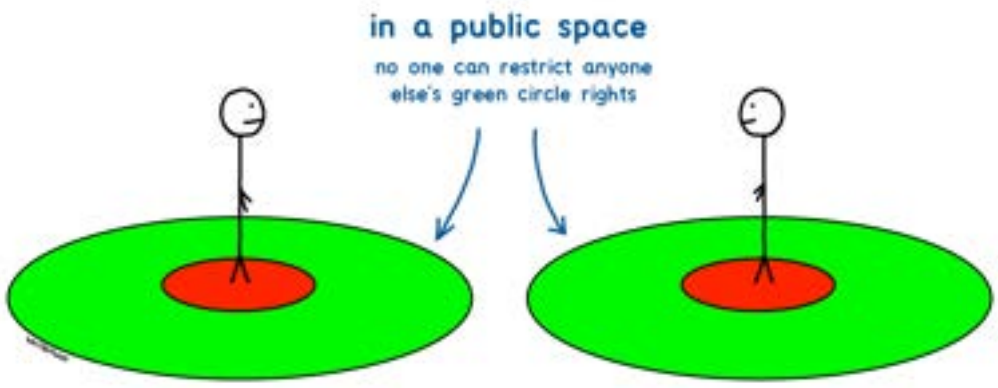
In his famous philosophical work *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill calls this concept **The Harm Principle,** stating:[2]

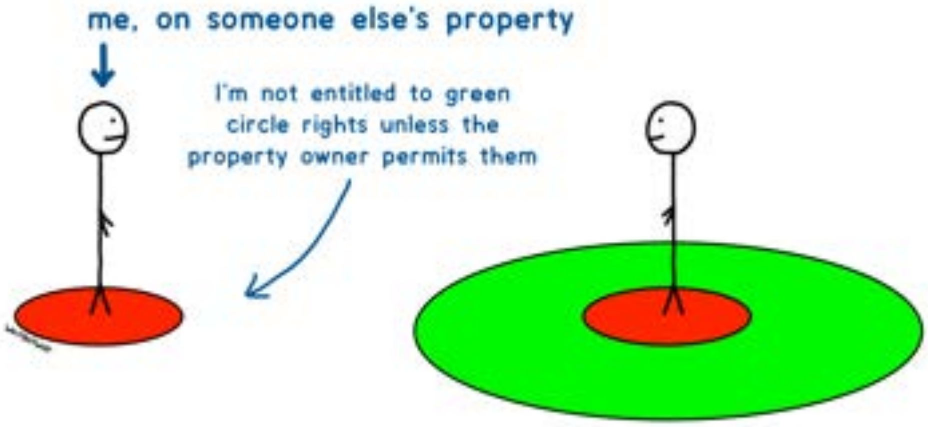
The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

To ensure that this was crystal-ass-clear, the Founders tacked ten amendments onto the original constitution—the Bill of Rights—that among other things spelled out the kinds of classic Power Games green circle encroachment the government would be expressly forbidden from. Most notable of the ten is the First Amendment, which protected classic Enlightenment rights like freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly.

The Founders also held property ownership in high regard—so much so that they endowed property owners with special power they could exercise within the confines of their own property. The power would allow them to treat their property like a mini country, where they could make any rules they wanted—as long as they didn't cross the harm line. In other words, a person's red circle would be protected *everywhere* inside the U.S. borders, no matter whose property they were on—but a person's *green* circle would only be protected in public or on their own private property. This means that for every U.S. citizen, the U.S. is divided into three types of space, each with their own tier of rights:


me, on my own property
I can restrict other people's green circle rights


in a public space
no one can restrict anyone else's green circle rights


me, on someone else's property
I'm not entitled to green circle rights unless the property owner permits them

When you're at my party, or working at my company, or hanging out at my restaurant, or commenting on my website, I have the right to kick you out if you say something I don't like, wear something I don't like, or if I just decide I don't like you. If you contest my ability to do so, I can call the police, and they'll take my side—because you're the one violating the rules, not me. ⑥ But the second I physically assault you, or kidnap you, or do anything else that falls under the government's definition of "harm," it no longer matters where we are—the police are now on your side.

But here in india
money only works

But if the U.S. was going to work, it couldn't just be a free country—it had to be a *fair* country.

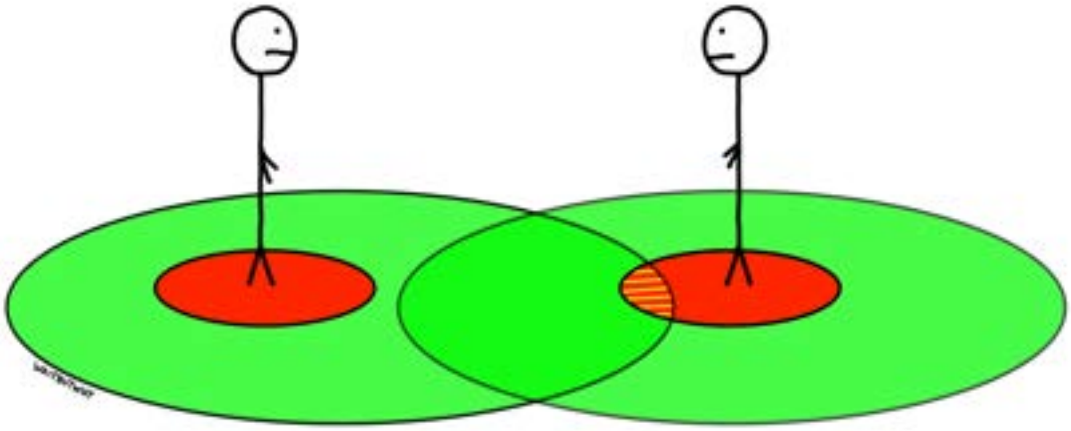
Fairness

"A fair country" means a few things.[3]

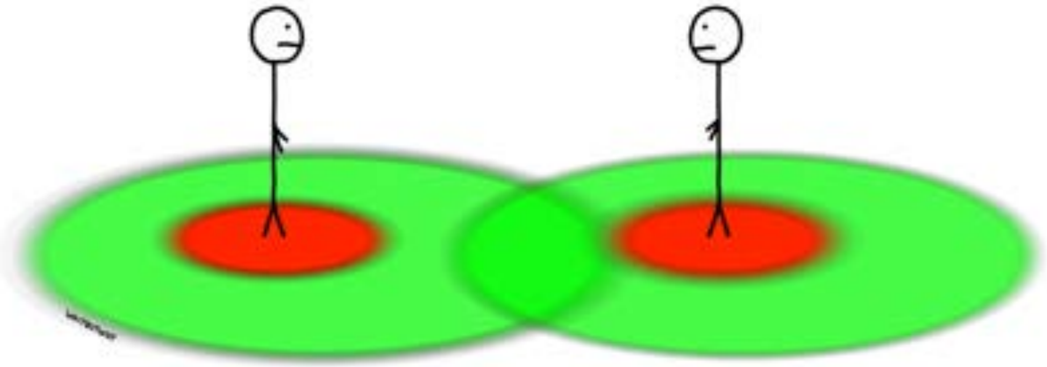
One important component is ***procedural* fairness**—i.e. are people being treated equally under the law, and is everyone subject to the same processes? A classic example here is the justice system.

When someone breaks the law, or when there's a conflict between citizens, the government referee has to ensure it's doling out the yellow and red cards consistently and correctly. Even when everyone is trying to be as fair as possible, this can be tricky.

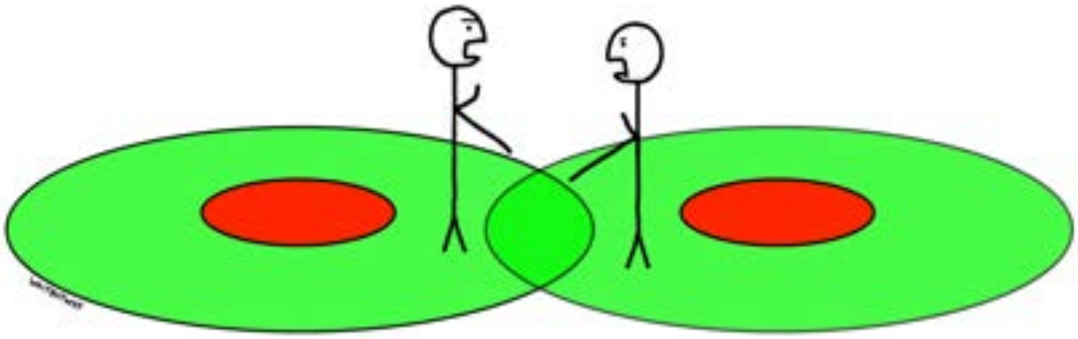
For one thing, the line that separates legal from illegal centers around the broad concept of *harm*. Which means this—



—is often not nearly as clear-looking as it is in my drawing. The harm line isn't always crisp—a lot of the time, whether harm actually occurred during a conflict is hazier and more ambiguous:



Then, there's the fact that one person's green circle rights regularly collide with the green circles of other people (like a public protest interfering with a public parade), and it's not always obvious which of these rights should trump the others.



To make things even trickier, people don't always tell the truth, and the government is often dealing with one person's word against another's without concrete evidence either way.

So the Founders created a justice system that allows anyone in a conflict or accused of a crime to tell their side of the story to other citizens, who can then decide who's at fault and for what. The Power Games is full of people being found guilty without evidence and punished unfairly, something the Enlightenment was determined to put an end to—so the hard rule would be: innocent until proven guilty.

The Founders also knew that as society evolved, new industries with new technologies would be developed, which would yield new kinds of rights and new kinds of harm—so the justice system would apply the spirit of the Constitution to unfamiliar situations as they arose, setting new judicial precedents in the process.

The other major component of a fair country is ***distributive* fairness.**

Humans like resources, and resources are limited. In the Power Games, whoever holds the cudgel tends to also distribute the resources, in any way they see fit. In the new U.S., that would no longer fly.

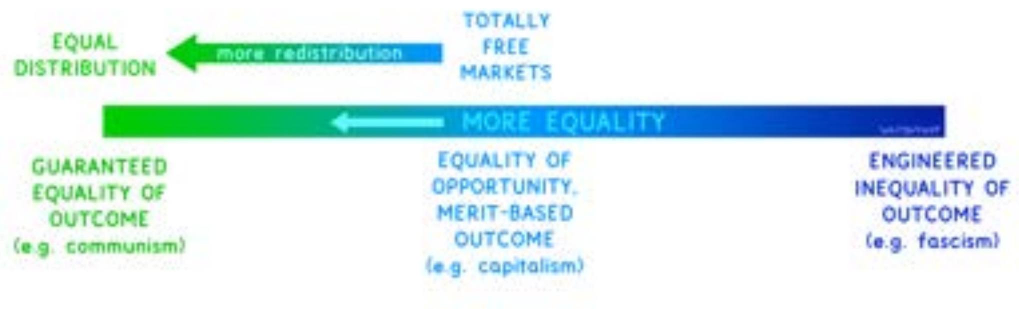
But if no one on top would be deciding who gets what, who would?

In Part 1, I compared being born into a Power Games dictatorship to drawing a card from a deck:

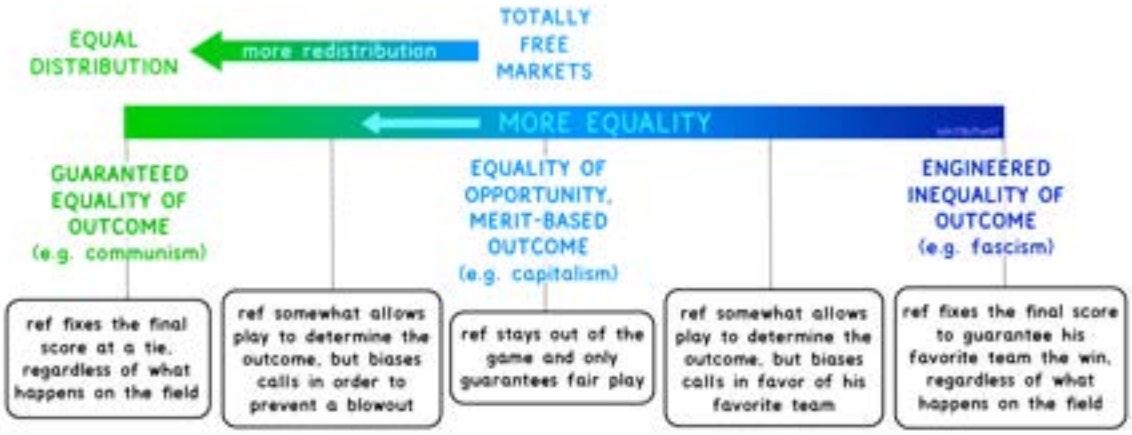
If you happened to draw a jack of hearts and be born the child of a noble in one of the dictator's deemed upper castes, you might live a safe and enjoyable life. But more often, you'd find yourself with the 7 of clubs and spend your one life as an in-the-shit peasant, or you'd draw a 4 of diamonds and spend 40 hard years as a slave, or you'd draw a 2 of spades and be thrust at the age of 13 into the front lines of one of Mr. Question Mark Man's foreign exploits and that would be that for you.

The red and green freedom circles partially solved this problem by removing, at least for citizens, the most blatant kinds of oppression that constitute the lowest cards—which means U.S. citizens would be guaranteed to hold no worse than, say, a 7. To determine how the cards were doled out beyond that minimum, the country would need the right system of resource distribution.

To grossly oversimplify for a minute, let's consider a country's resource distribution options on a linear spectrum that's sure to result in lots of people yelling at me:


EQUAL DISTRIBUTION
more redistribution
TOTALLY FREE MARKETS
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME (e.g. communism)
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME (e.g. capitalism)
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME (e.g. fascism)

We can overlay our soccer metaphor onto the diagram, where citizens are the players and the government is the ref:⑦


EQUAL DISTRIBUTION
more redistribution
TOTALLY FREE MARKETS
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME (e.g. communism)
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME (e.g. capitalism)
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME (e.g. fascism)
ref fixes the final score at a tie, regardless of what happens on the field
ref somewhat allows play to determine the outcome, but biases calls in order to prevent a blowout
ref stays out of the game and only guarantees fair play
ref somewhat allows play to determine the outcome, but biases calls in favor of his favorite team
ref fixes the final score to guarantee his favorite team the win, regardless of what happens on the field

Most of us can agree that the right half of this spectrum—where resources are distributed arbitrarily, at a dictator's whim—is an unfair system, and one that usually results in a vast underclass with little hope for upward mobility.

But one of the hottest worldwide debates of the past century has been over where the truest form of fairness lies on the *left* half of the spectrum.

The Founders favored the middle part of the spectrum—free markets and equality of opportunity—over the left end. They believed that on the U.S. soccer field, everyone should have an equal opportunity to play, but beyond that, *how* people played should determine their lot in life. The "equal opportunity" language is baked right into the third inalienable right: the pursuit of happiness. A right to the *pursuit* is what mattered to the Americans—the pursuit of happiness, wealth, power, influence—not a right to the *acquisition* of these resources.

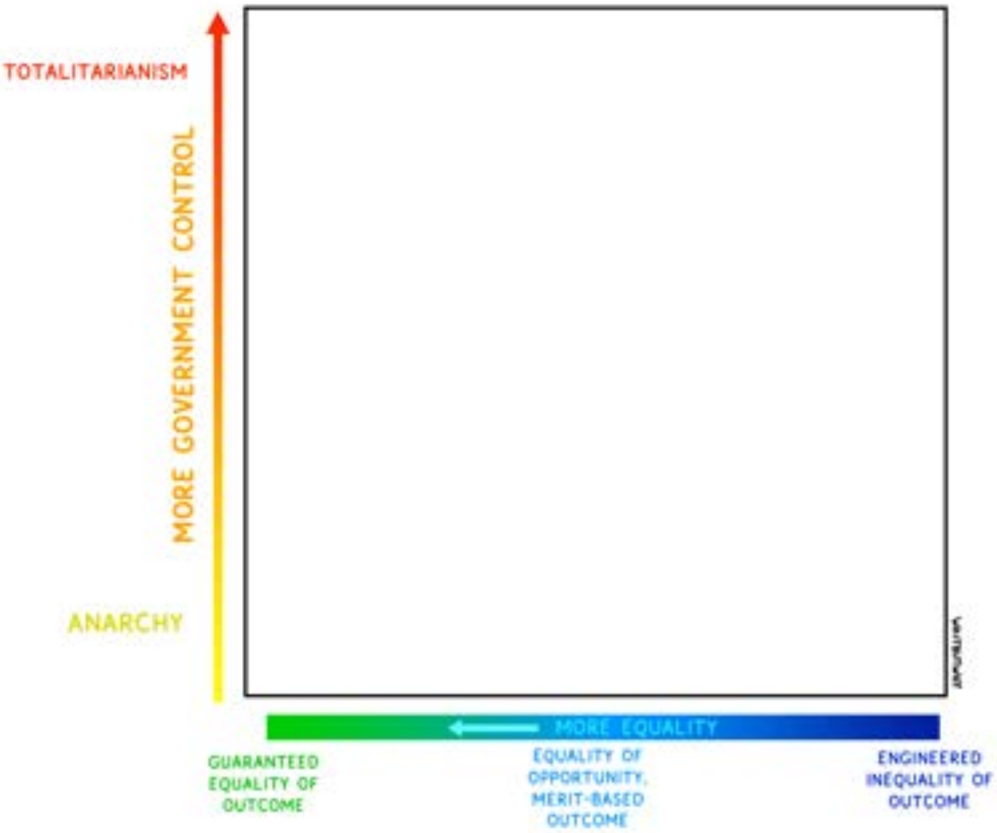
But it's a spectrum, not a choice between two binary options—and the exact location of where the U.S.

is and should be on the left portion of the spectrum has been a debate inside the country ever since the founding. The general idea, though, is that the Founders chose equality of opportunity over equality of outcome.

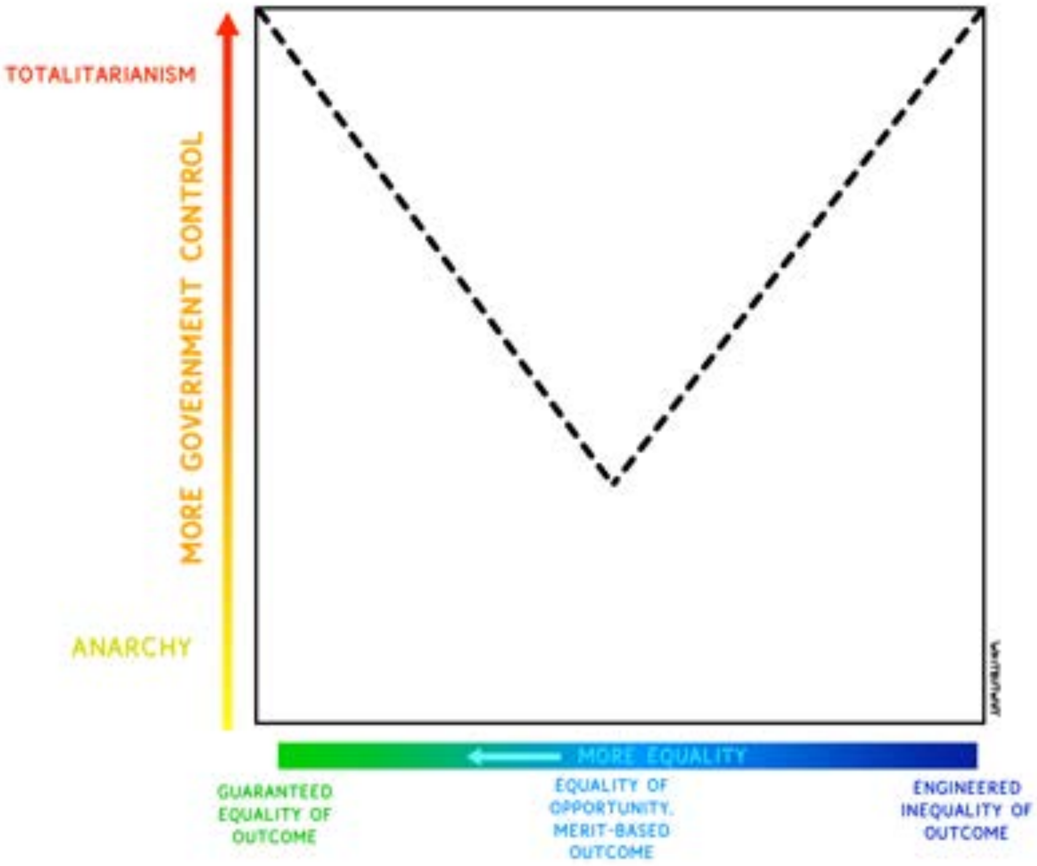
They saw equal opportunity as intuitively fair. Yes, a system like that would yield resource winners and resource losers—and not everyone would be happy with their outcomes—but they believed that if people felt that *opportunity* was equal, they would also feel that the resulting outcomes were just.

The Founders were also big on freedom. So any system of fairness that came at the expense of too much freedom would be unacceptable.

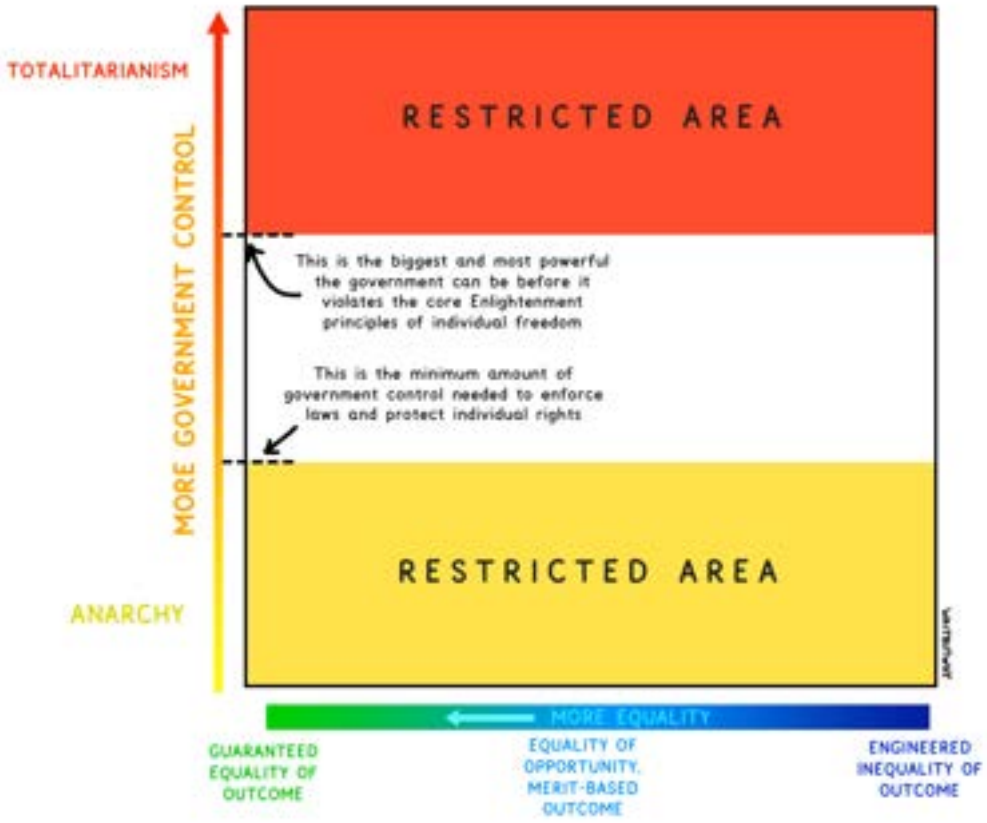
If we add a "government control" y-axis to our equality axis, we can see how this likely played into the thinking.


TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME

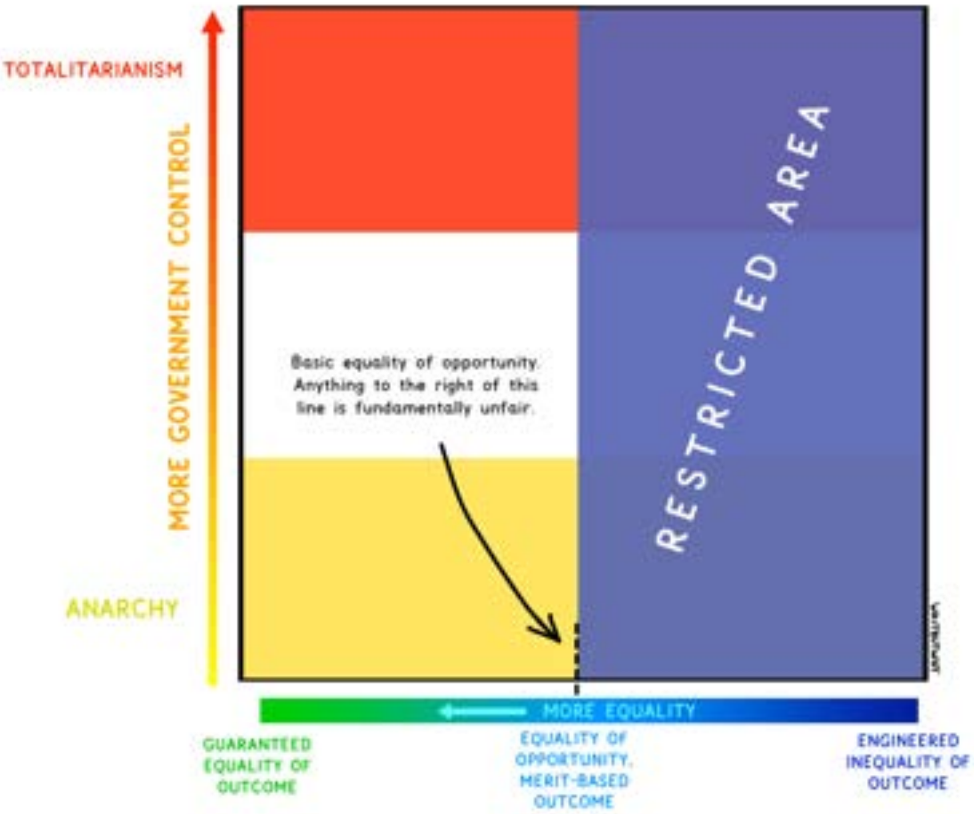
The general idea is that the farther you get from the center of the equality axis, the more government control is needed to generate the accompanying equality (or inequality) outcome—meaning a country's distribution system will probably fall somewhere along this V:


TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME
waitbutwhy

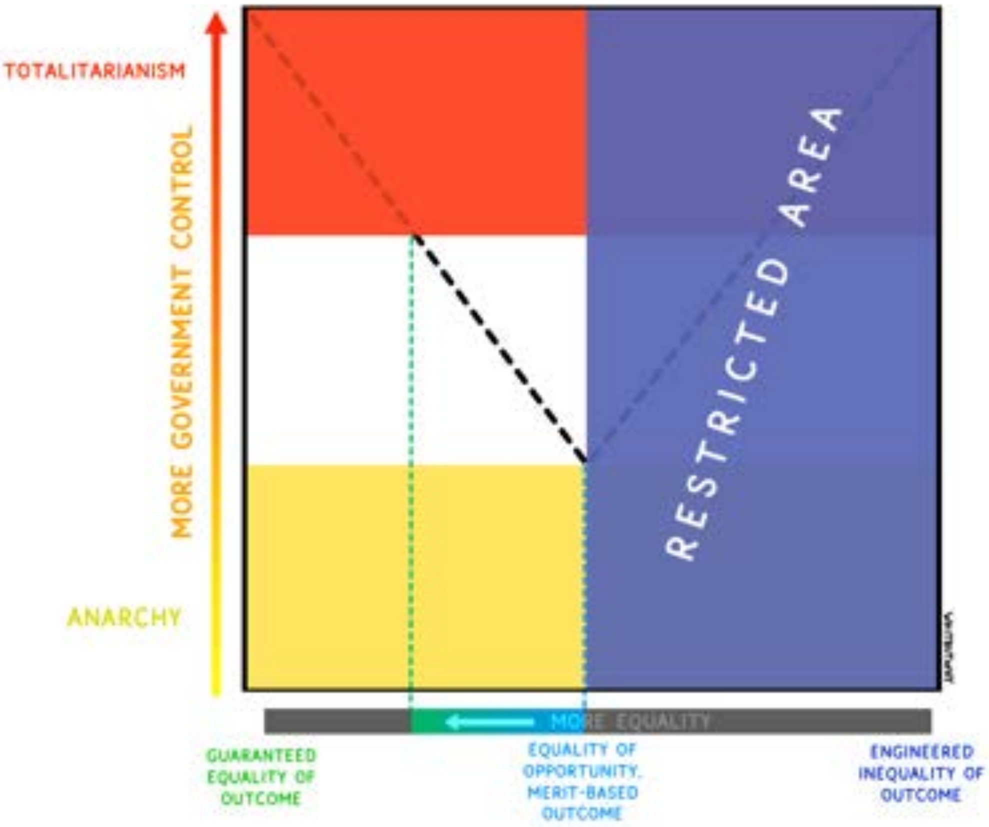
The Founders' insistence on both individual freedom and law and order restricts the top and bottom parts of the square:


TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
RESTRICTED AREA
This is the biggest and most powerful the government can be before it violates the core Enlightenment principles of individual freedom
This is the minimum amount of government control needed to enforce laws and protect individual rights
RESTRICTED AREA
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME
waitbutwhy

And as we discussed above, the principle of equality of opportunity wipes out the right half of the x-axis too.

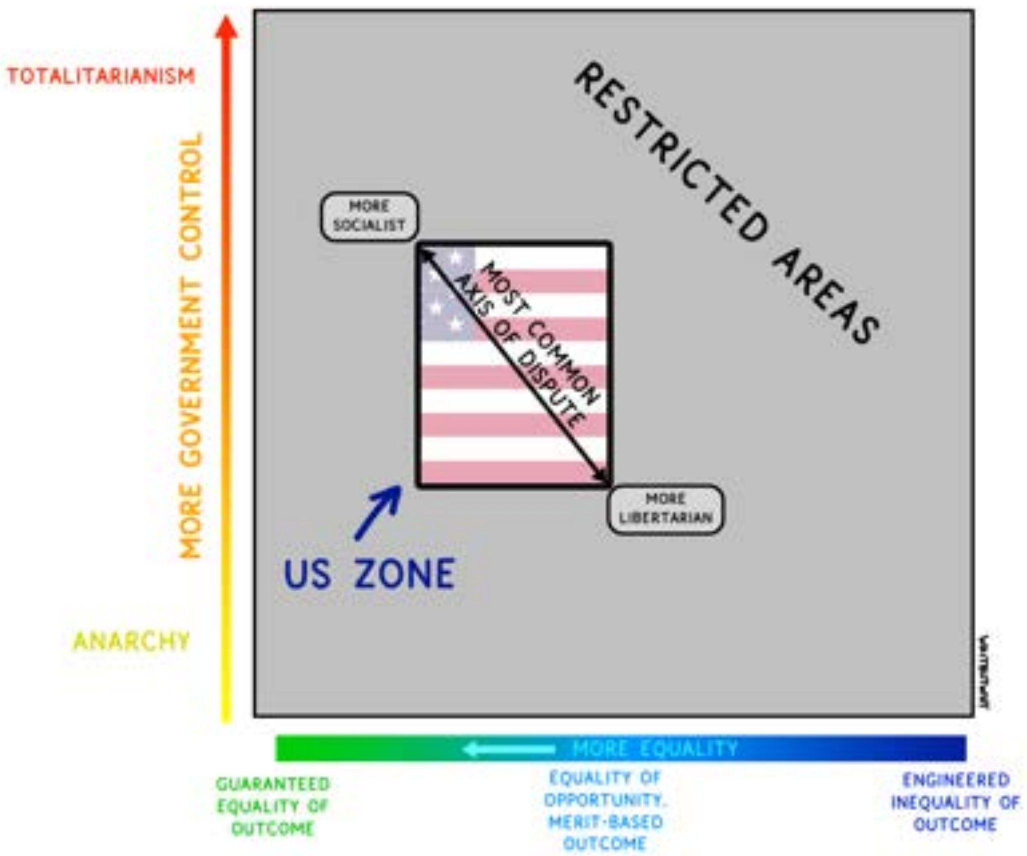

TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
RESTRICTED AREA
Basic equality of opportunity. Anything to the right of this line is fundamentally unfair.
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME

So adding back our V, we can see why the Founders landed where they did along the equality axis:


TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
RESTRICTED AREA
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME

A perfectly even distribution of resources that would guarantee that every citizen would live an equal life with equal resources would be too costly in terms of freedom—it would mean that what you did in your life had no bearing on how your life went. In that situation, your life outcomes would instead be determined by the government—which completely clashed with Enlightenment thinking. So again, the Founders struck a compromise.

Putting this all together, we get a little window inside the big square that constitutes the U.S. zone:


TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
RESTRICTED AREAS
MORE SOCIALIST
MOST COMMON AXIS OF DISPUTE
MORE LIBERTARIAN
US ZONE
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME

The U.S. zone isn't a single point, it's a shape with height and width—so there would still be plenty for citizens, philosophers, and politicians to argue about. But the entire range of argument would be limited to those confines.

(CIA)
edward snowden,
Julieas (wikileaks)

The reason lots of people will yell at me about these charts is that people don't usually see their political opponents as simply nestled in the opposite corner of the U.S. zone. Rather, people tend to believe their political enemies are doing all kinds of awful Power-Games-y things in the restricted areas—predatory capitalism, government overreach, institutional discrimination, etc. And in some cases, they are. We'll get to all that later in the series. What we're looking at here is the spirit behind the way the Founders designed the system—or at least what that spirit has evolved into today.

There was another argument for free markets and equal opportunity—one that went beyond the realm of morality. The Founders predicted that equal opportunity would produce a brilliant side effect —*fantastic productivity*. A system in which everyone had the opportunity to compete for resources would generate a complete alternative to the Power Games—what we might call the *Value Games*.

The Value Games

In the Power Games, people who have cudgels use them to forcefully take the resources they want. In the Value Games, people use *carrots* to win resources over from others.

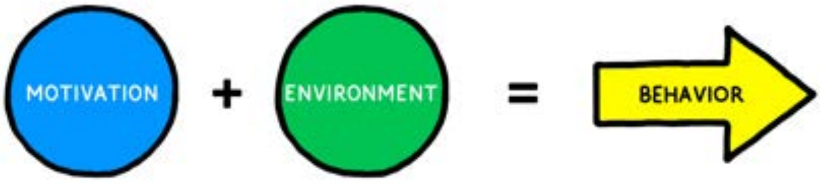
The Value Games are driven by human nature, just like the Power Games are. The difference is the Power Games is what humans do when there are no rules—the Value Games is what humans do when a key limitation is added into the environment:

You can't use a cudgel to get what you want.

If I want something you have, but I'm not allowed to get it by bullying you, then the only option I'm left with is to get you to give it to me *voluntarily*. And since you're selfish too, the only way you'll do that is if I can come up with a "carrot"—a piece of value I can offer—that you'd *rather* have than the resource I want from you. If I can come up with that carrot, you'll happily make the trade, and I'll get my resource. In the zero-sum Power Games, the bully wins and the bullied loses. In the positive-sum Value Games, with bullying removed from the equation, *both* parties in a transaction can win.

capitalisms

Let's bring back our behavior equation, in simplified form.



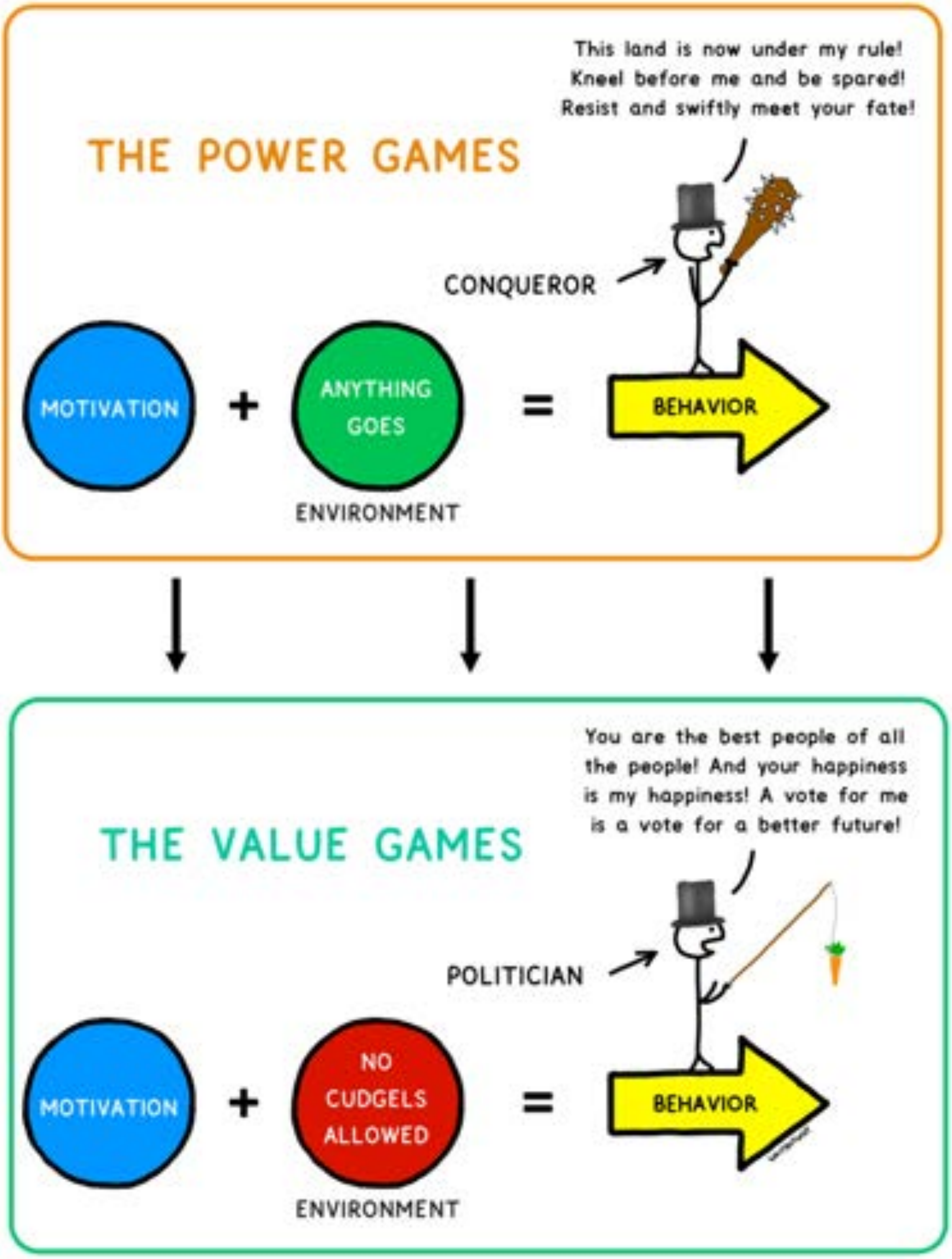
The Value Games are a classic example of tweaking the environment in order to alter behavior. Removing bullying from the game-playing options—or, rather, adding in harsh-enough penalties for bullying that it turns bullying into an undesirable game-playing strategy—changes everything. It changes the game from a contest of who can be the scariest, the most dangerous, and the most intimidating, to a contest of who can produce the best carrots—of who can provide the most *value* to their fellow citizens.

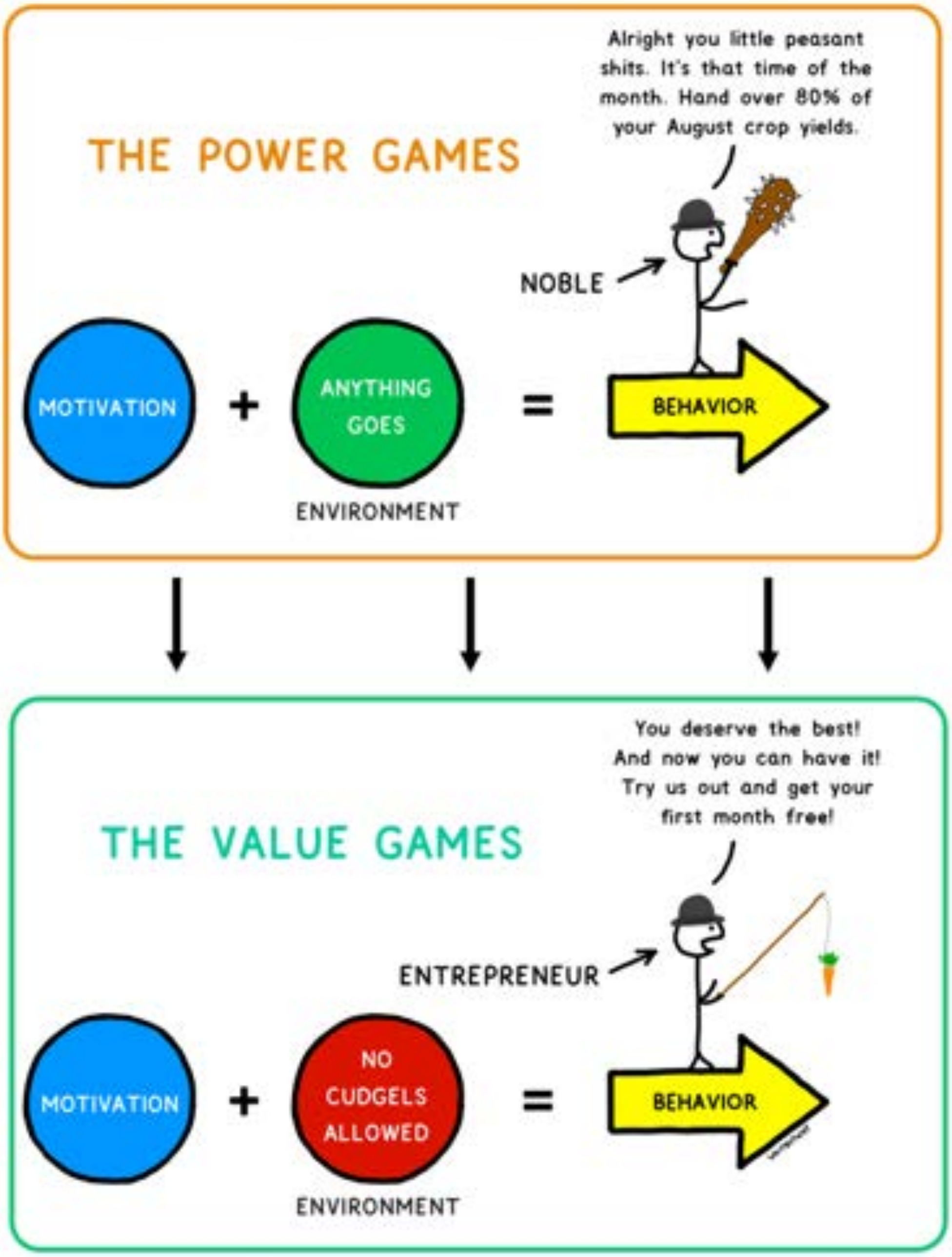
Two obvious examples:

In the *economic* Value Games—i.e. capitalism—any citizen can vie for wealth, but to actually *gain* wealth, a citizen has to figure out how to provide some form of carrot that other citizens want badly enough that they'll trade their wealth for it. So, for example, anyone can apply for a job or start a business—but for your *pursuit* at wealth to turn into *actual* wealth, you'll need employers or customers to decide to trade their wealth for the value you can provide. And in order to earn long-term wealth, the carrot better actually taste good and not just look or sound good. Your promise of value will have to prove true when tested—if not, you'll be quickly fired from your job or your business reputation will deteriorate.

In the *political* Value Games—i.e. democracy—any citizen can run for office and vie for the power to allocate government muscle and funding. But to actually *acquire* that power, you have to convince other citizens to grant you the seat by earning enough votes to win an election. And to maintain power for a long time, you'll have to use your power in a way that satisfies enough citizens to be continually reelected. If the carrots you promised during campaign season never ended up arriving, voters probably won't give you the power you want the next time around.

Without the right laws, human selfishness gets out of hand and quickly overruns everything, which is why the Primitive Mind dominates the Power Games. But the Value Games turn the tables on the Primitive Mind, forcing it to play by Enlightenment rules or end up in jail.


THE POWER GAMES
This land is now under my rule! Kneel before me and be spared! Resist and swiftly meet your fate!
CONQUEROR
MOTIVATION
+
ANYTHING GOES
ENVIRONMENT
=
BEHAVIOR
THE VALUE GAMES
You are the best people of all the people! And your happiness is my happiness! A vote for me is a vote for a better future!
POLITICIAN
MOTIVATION
+
NO CUDGELS ALLOWED
ENVIRONMENT
=
BEHAVIOR


THE POWER GAMES
Alright you little peasant shits. It's that time of the month. Hand over 80% of your August crop yields.
NOBLE
MOTIVATION
+
ANYTHING GOES
ENVIRONMENT
=
BEHAVIOR
THE VALUE GAMES
You deserve the best! And now you can have it! Try us out and get your first month free!
ENTREPRENEUR
MOTIVATION
+
NO CUDGELS ALLOWED
ENVIRONMENT
=
BEHAVIOR

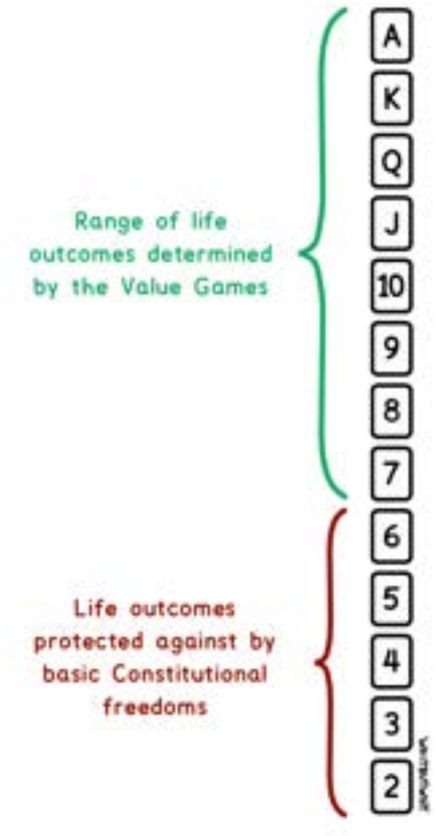
While it was typically better to be feared than loved in the Power Games, in the Value Games, it's usually better to be loved than feared—which keeps politicians and businesses on their best behavior.

And good behavior was only icing on the cake. The Founders believed that putting constitutional reins on the Primitive Mind would transform the wild fires of human selfishness into an inexhaustible, self-regulating, self-propelling *steam engine*.

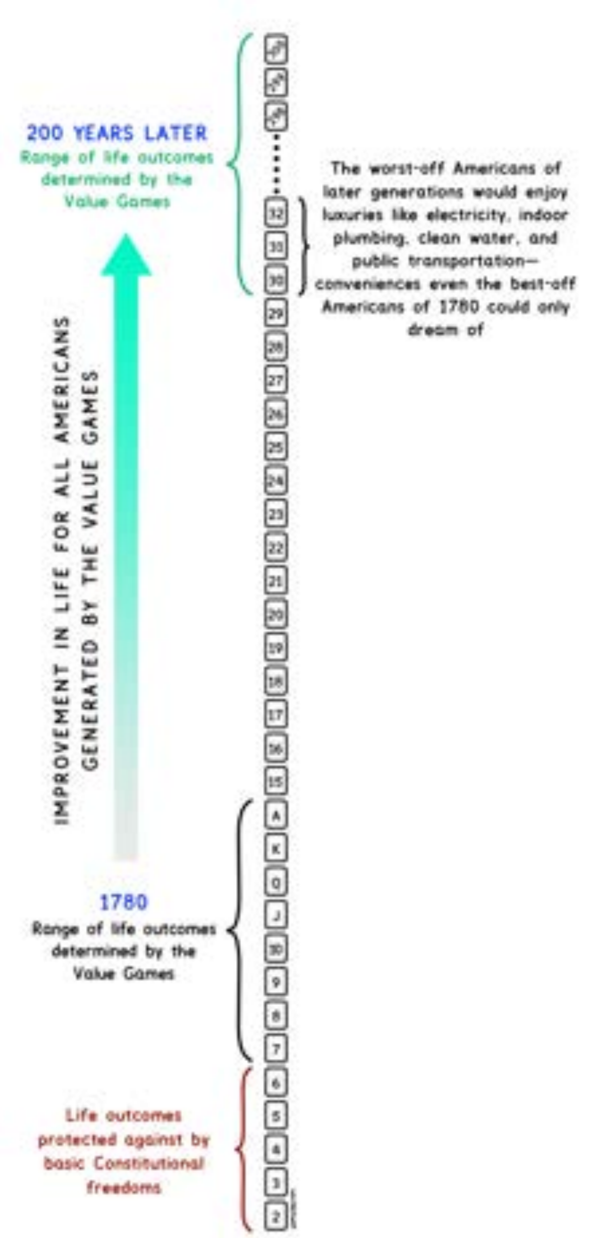
On a day-to-day basis, the Value Games would make high quality of life an objective that achieves itself. As Enlightenment icon Adam Smith put it:[4] "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."

Over the long run, the clash of Value Games competition would yield a shining forward arrow of progress and prosperity that would benefit all Americans.

The Value Games would do far more than determine who gets to live the 8, 9, 10, jack, queen, king, and ace lives…


Range of life outcomes determined by the Value Games
Life outcomes protected against by basic Constitutional freedoms
A
K
Q
J
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2

The long-term benefits of the Value Games would bring *the entire range* up to the point where the average American of the future would live a far more comfortable and pleasant life than the upper crust of the late 1700s.⑧


200 YEARS LATER
Range of life outcomes determined by the Value Games
The worst-off Americans of later generations would enjoy luxuries like electricity, indoor plumbing, clean water, and public transportation—conveniences even the best-off Americans of 1780 could only dream of
IMPROVEMENT IN LIFE FOR ALL AMERICANS GENERATED BY THE VALUE GAMES
1780
Range of life outcomes determined by the Value Games
Life outcomes protected against by basic Constitutional freedoms
32
31
30
29
28
27
26
25
24
23
22
21
20
19
18
17
16
15
A
K
Q
J
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2

But the coolest free market in the Value Games wouldn't be economic or political, it would be the game of ideas—the game that would give the U.S. giant a *brain*.

or psychology, behavioral science.

If we're going to achieve our goal in this series—to understand what's going on in U.S. society and others—we're going to have to learn to be neuroscientists in the world of giants and wrap our heads around the way a society *thinks.* That's where we'll pick up in the next chapter.

Next

Chapter 5: The Mute Button

To keep up with this series, sign up for the **Wait But Why email list** and we'll send you the new posts right when they come out.

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Other semi-related Wait But Why things:

More on the U.S.: **The deal with the U.S.'s first 25 presidents** (yes, I know I need to finish this series)

For those sick of the U.S.: I went to **Russia**, **Japan**, **Nigeria**, **Iraq**, **Greenland**, and **North Korea** and wrote about them.

The Mute Button

37
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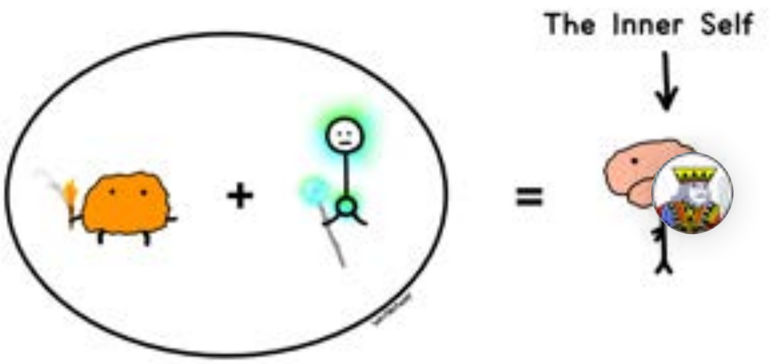
s Chapter 5 in a series. If you're new to the series, visit the ***series home page*** *for the ble of contents.*

Chapter 5: The Mute Button

we've talked a lot about the Primitive Mind and the Higher Mind, and the strange tension they in our heads. This chapter, we're going to zoom out a bit and bring two new characters into the mix.

The first isn't a new character exactly—it's the combined workings of the Primitive Mind and Higher Mind: the Inner Self.



The Inner Self is the product of the struggle between the Primitive Mind and the Higher Mind. At any given moment, the way the Inner Self thinks and feels, what it believes, its values and motivations, are a reflection of the state of that struggle. For our purposes in this chapter, we'll only worry about the Inner Self as a whole.

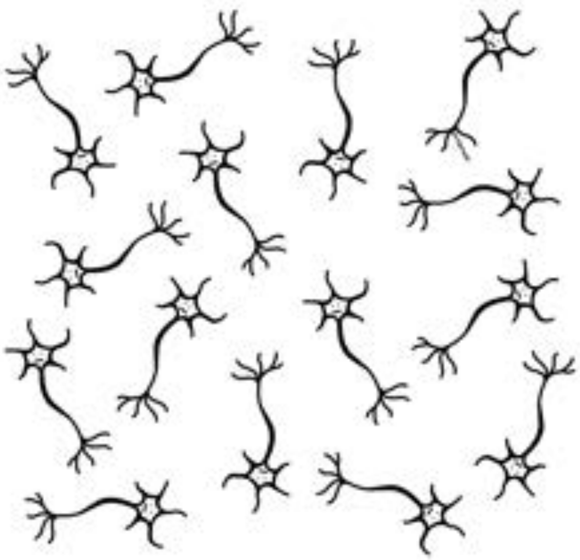
The second character is someone we haven't talked about, but someone we all know well.

The Outer Self.

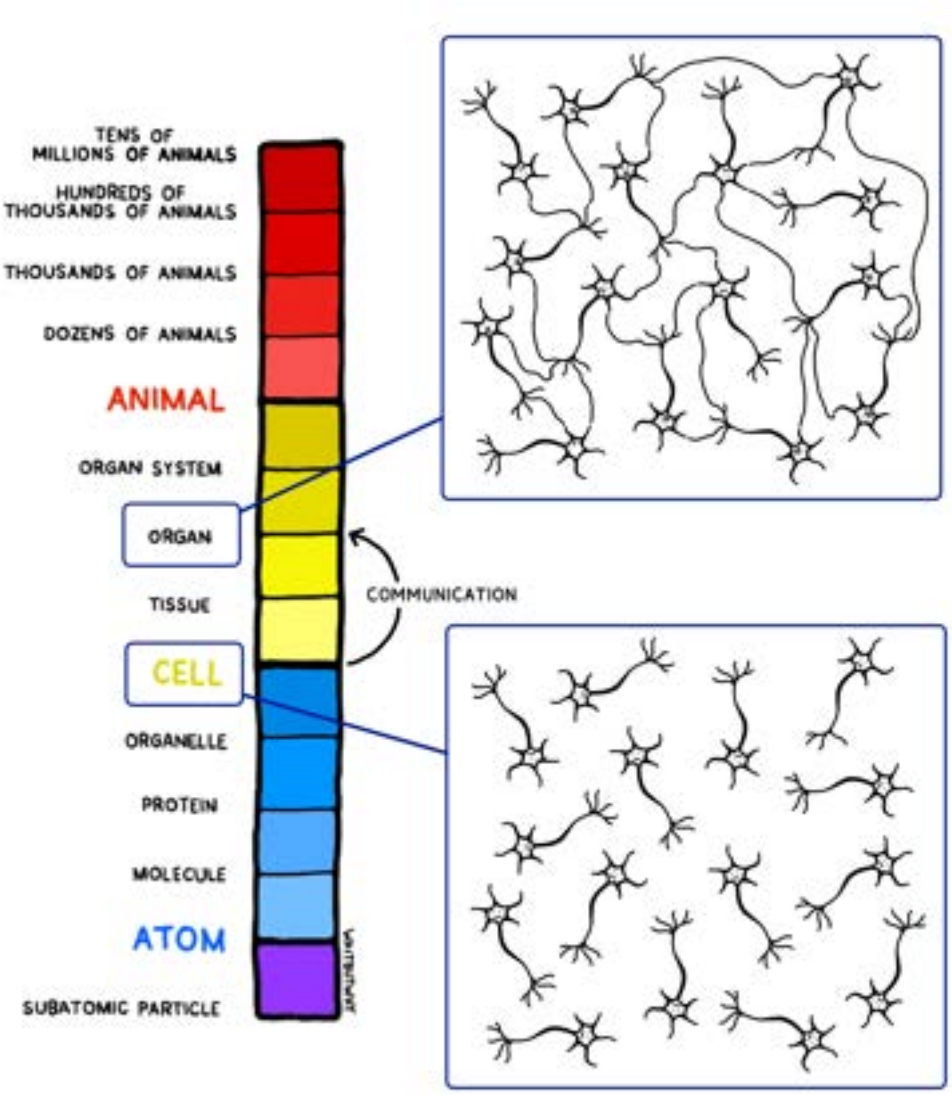
The Outer Self is the human body the Inner Self lives in. The state of the Inner Self determines how the Outer Self behaves—where it goes, how it acts, who it spends time with, what it says or doesn't say. So the Outer Self isn't really an independent entity—it's more like a big robot being controlled by the Inner Self, who sits in a little cockpit in its head.

Let's return once again to the concept of emergence and think about how it works with brains.

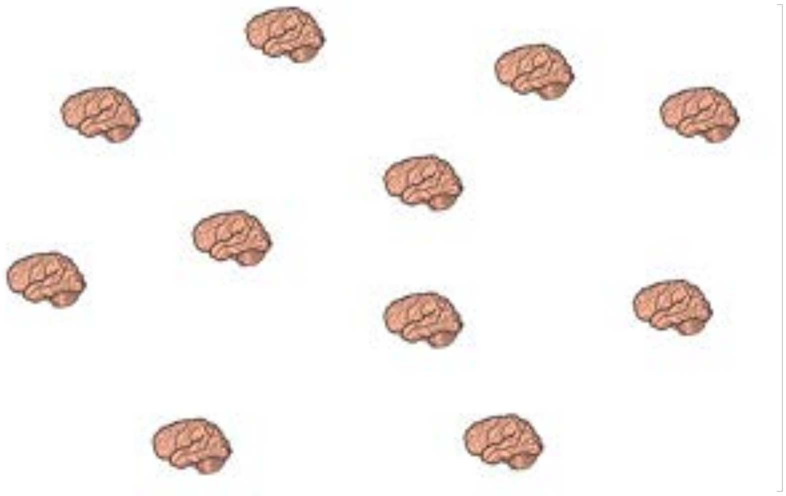
Your brain is a giant made up of a network of 100 billion neurons. A neuron on its own can't do too much.



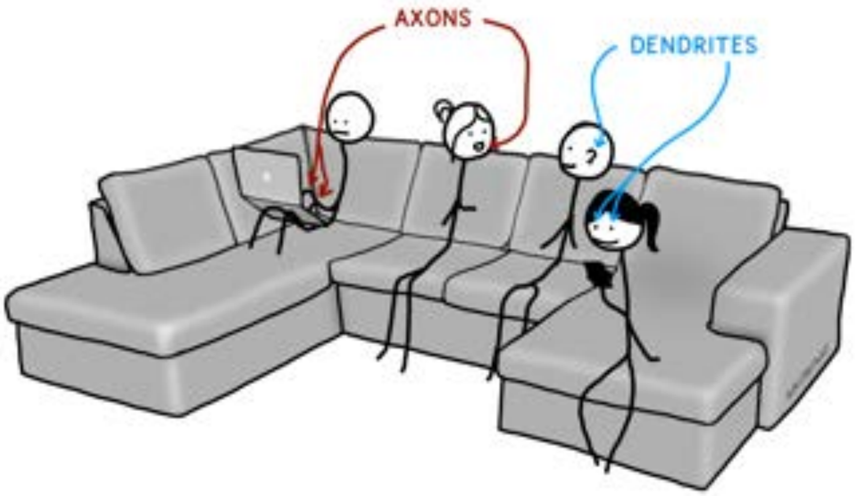
It's the neurons' ability to *communicate* with one another—to export information through their axons and import information through their dendrites—that allows them to move up Emergence Tower and combine together into a single thinking system that's far more powerful than the sum of its parts:


TENS OF MILLIONS OF ANIMALS
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
COMMUNICATION
WAITBUTWHY

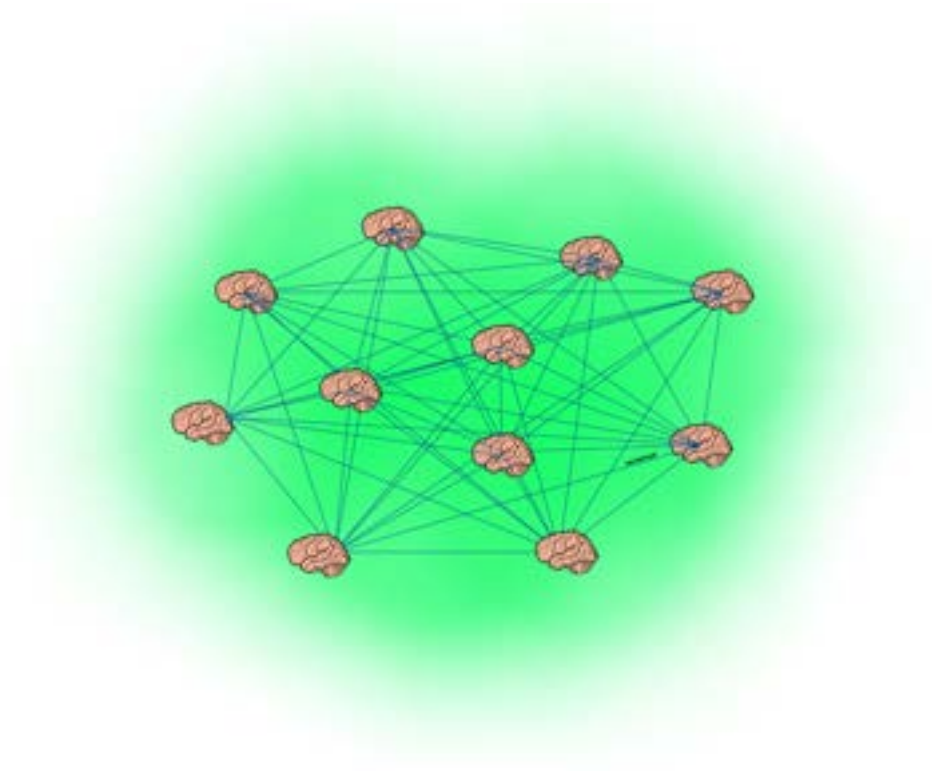
The same phenomenon happens a few floors up, on the human level. A bunch of people together, but not communicating, is just a bunch of individual brains in the same place.



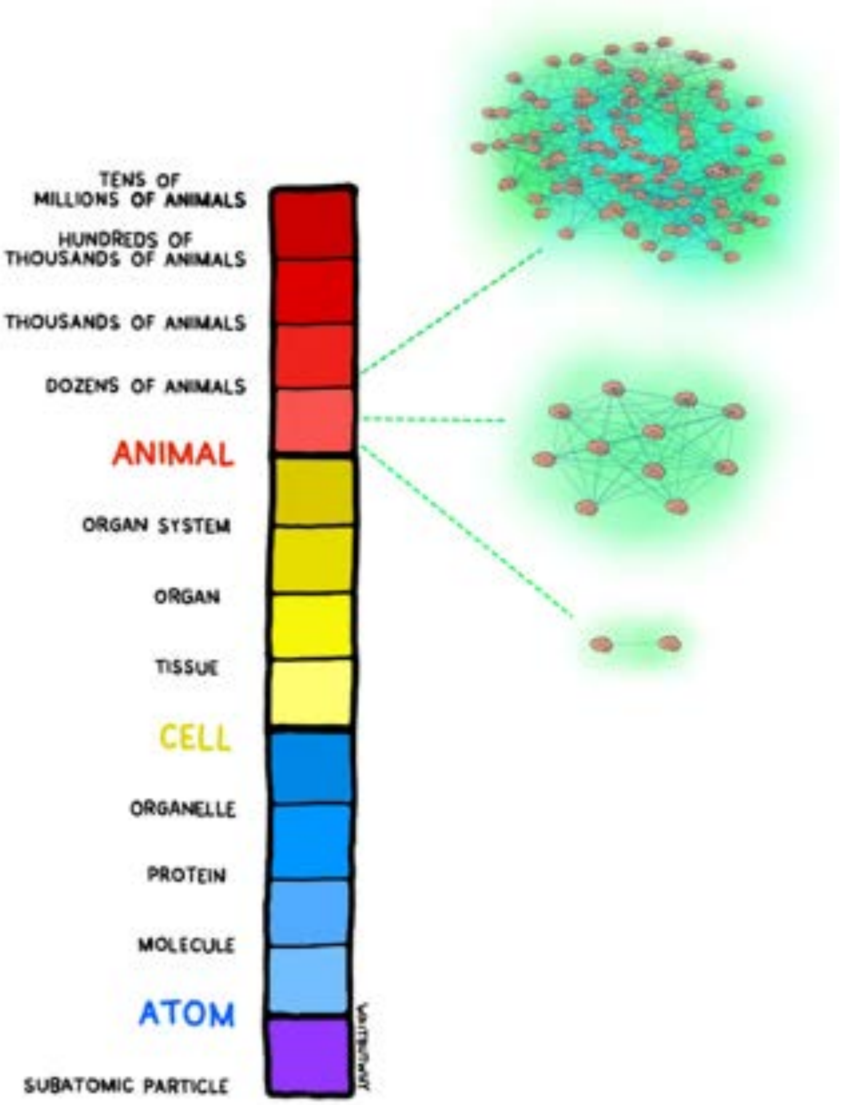
Language is so magical because it allows individual brains to *connect*, like neurons, to form a larger thinking system. If a human's Inner Self is like a neuron, the Outer Self's ability to *express* itself gives the neuron its axons, and its ability to see or listen to the expression of others gives it dendrites.



These channels let individual human brains combine together to form a larger communal brain.



Humans can form brains of all different sizes, depending on the number of people communicating with each other.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ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
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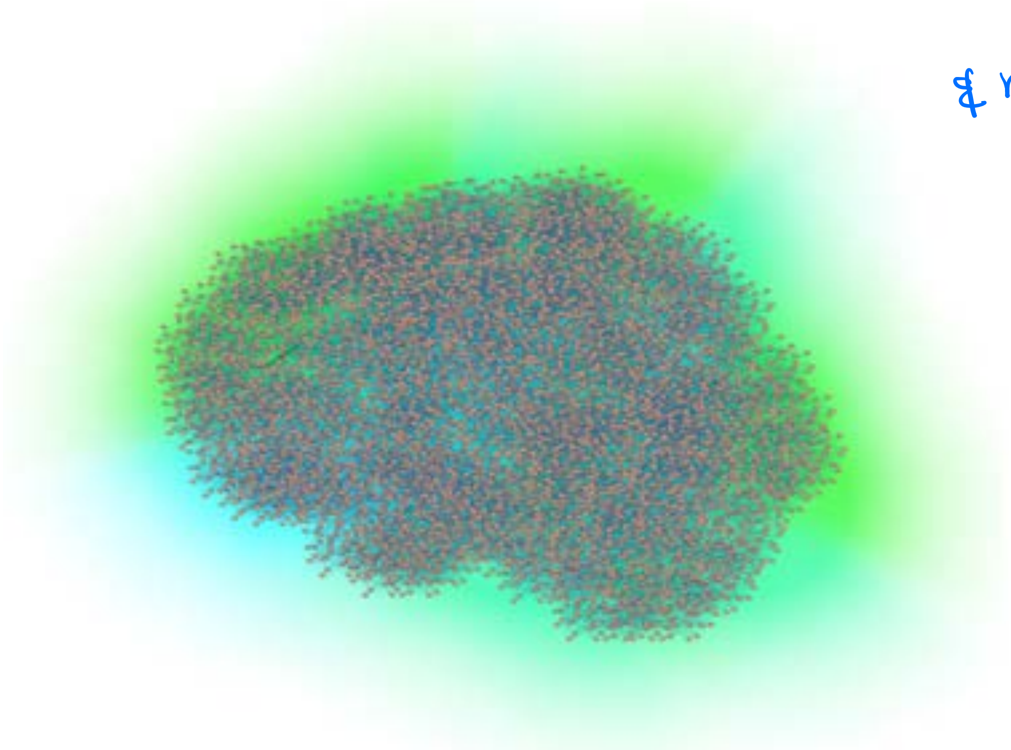
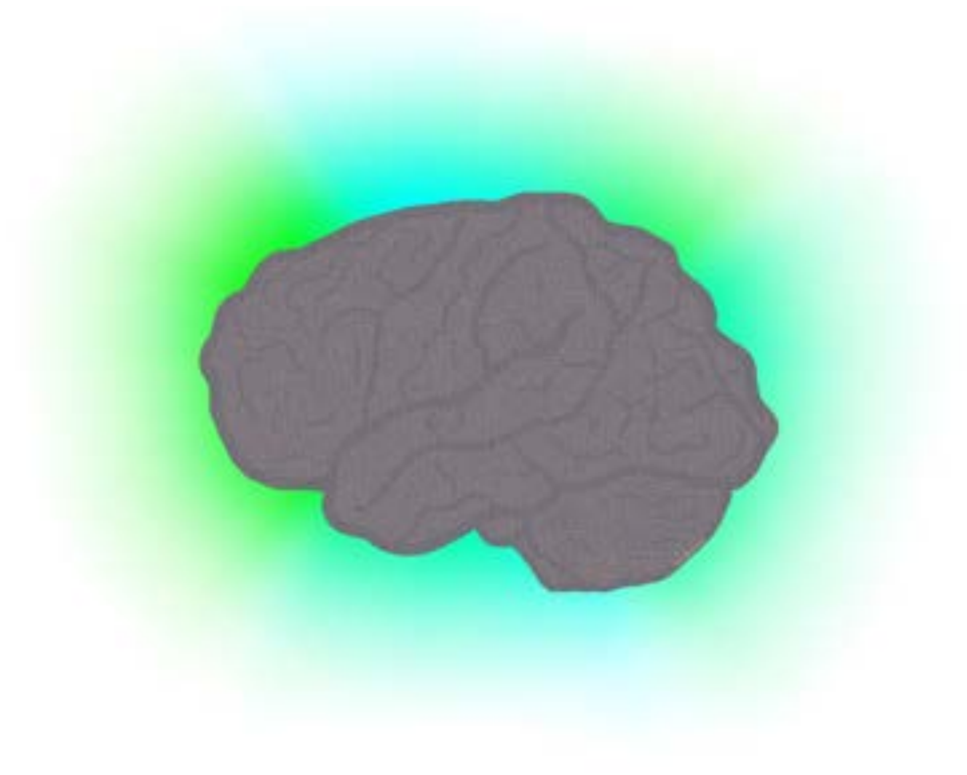
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
WAITBUTWHY

There's no limit on how large a brain humans can meld into. In human societies, vast interconnected gossip networks, with the help of tools of mass broadcast,① allow thousands of communal brains to quickly connect, turning huge portions of a society into giant thinking systems.



& now we have internet
so the connection is
more stronger & bigger
than ever.

In theory, with enough communication, an entire country with millions of people could become a colossal national brain.②



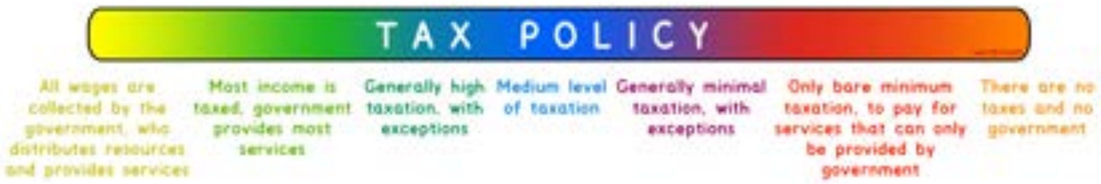
Through the magic of communication, human thinking can glide up and down Emergence Tower.

How we think is a major topic in this series, and in the next few chapters I'll be introducing a number of tools to help us think about thinking. Together, these tools will be a big part of the new language we're working on developing.

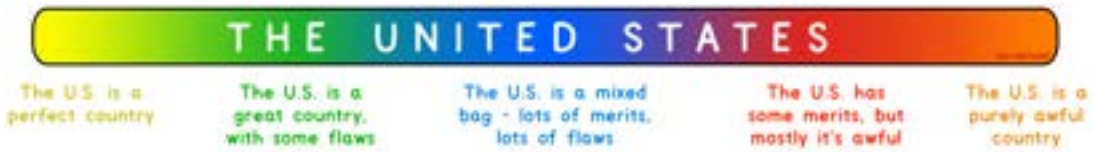
The first tool is a simple **idea spectrum**.

IDEA SPECTRUM

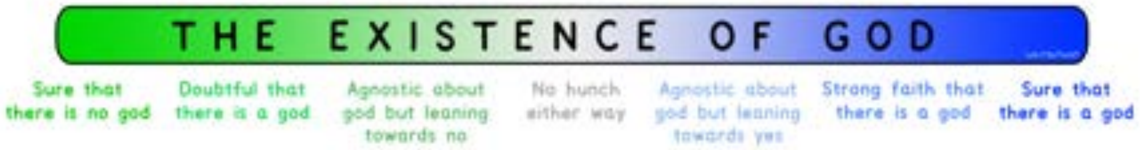
The idea spectrum gives us a visual way to depict the whole range of thought on any given topic. Like a political issue:


TAX POLICY
All wages are collected by the government, who distributes resources and provides services
Most income is taxed, government provides most services
Generally high taxation, with exceptions
Medium level of taxation
Generally minimal taxation, with exceptions
Only bare minimum taxation, to pay for services that can only be provided by government
There are no taxes and no government

Or an opinion range:

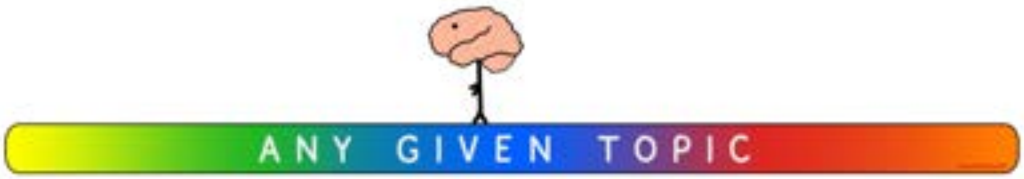

THE UNITED STATES
The U.S. is a perfect country
The U.S. is a great country, with some flaws
The U.S. is a mixed bag - lots of merits, lots of flaws
The U.S. has some merits, but mostly it's awful
The U.S. is a purely awful country

With binary questions, we can give the idea spectrum two colors and use it to examine the "degree of certainty" range:

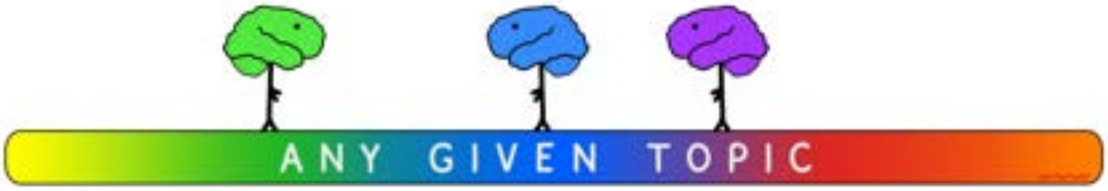

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD
Sure that there is no god
Doubtful that there is a god
Agnostic about god but leaning towards no
No hunch either way
Agnostic about god but leaning towards yes
Strong faith that there is a god
Sure that there is a god

Of course, the idea spectrum is a pretty rigid tool—it's linear and one-dimensional—and most worlds of thought are more complex and involve multiple dimensions simultaneously. But most of these worlds can also be roughly explored on a simple idea spectrum, and for our purposes, oversimplifying areas of thought to single spectrums can help us see what's going on. We're going to use a lot of idea spectrums in this series, and as we do, remember to take them with a grain of salt as a simplified version of reality.

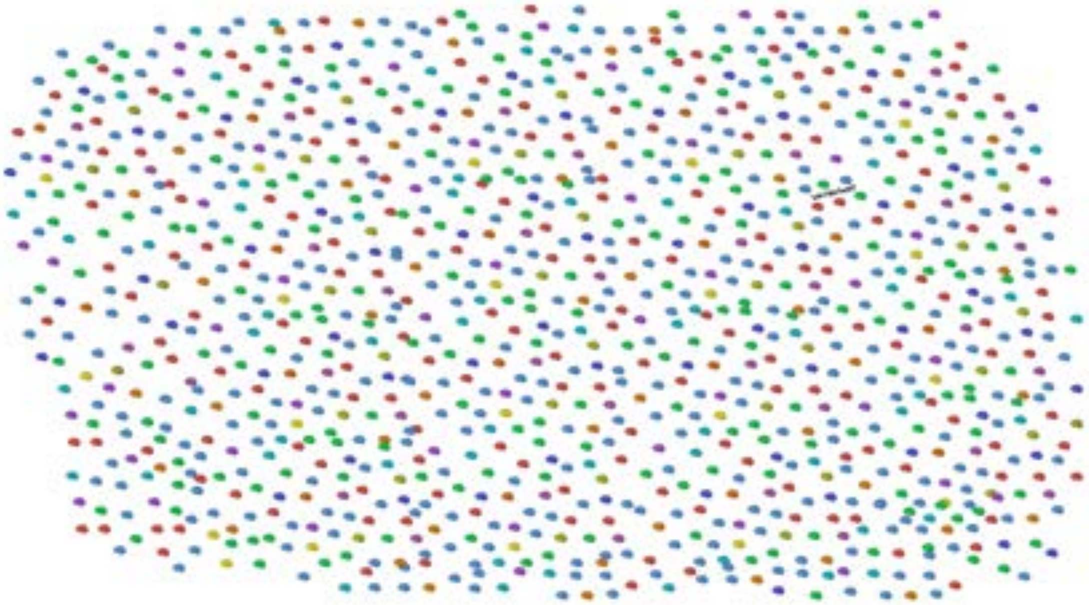
On any given idea spectrum, what a person thinks or believes or hypothesizes is where their Inner Self is "standing" on the spectrum. ③


ANY GIVEN TOPIC

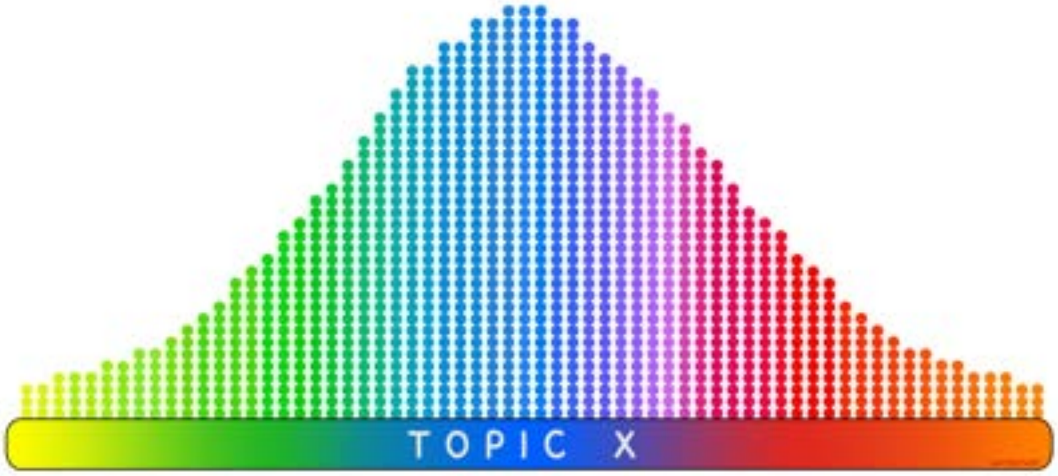
And let's color the Inner Self's brain-head the color of what it believes about the topic:


ANY GIVEN TOPIC

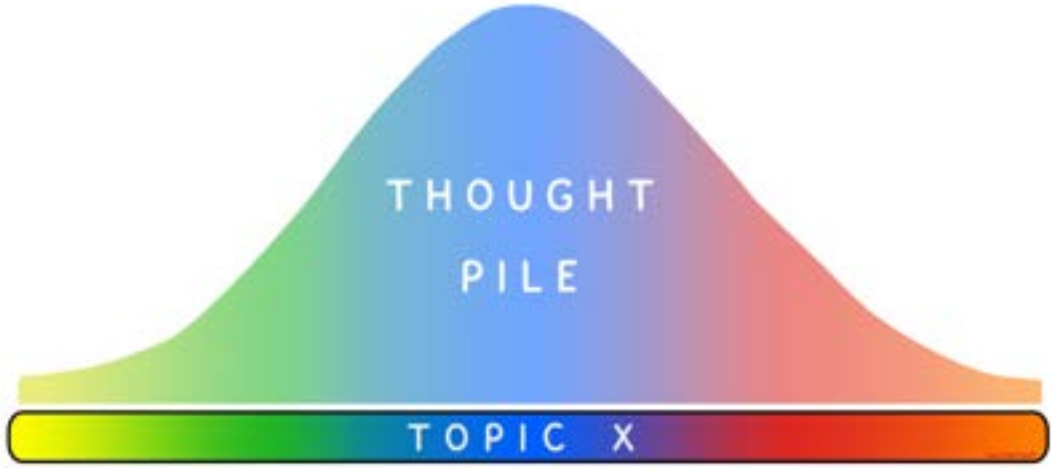
To visualize how we can use the idea spectrum, let's visit a small, 1,000-person country called Hypothetica, where we find the citizens mulling over a topic—let's call it Topic X. Looking at the color-coded Inner Selves of all Hypotheticans together can show us what everyone thinks about Topic X.



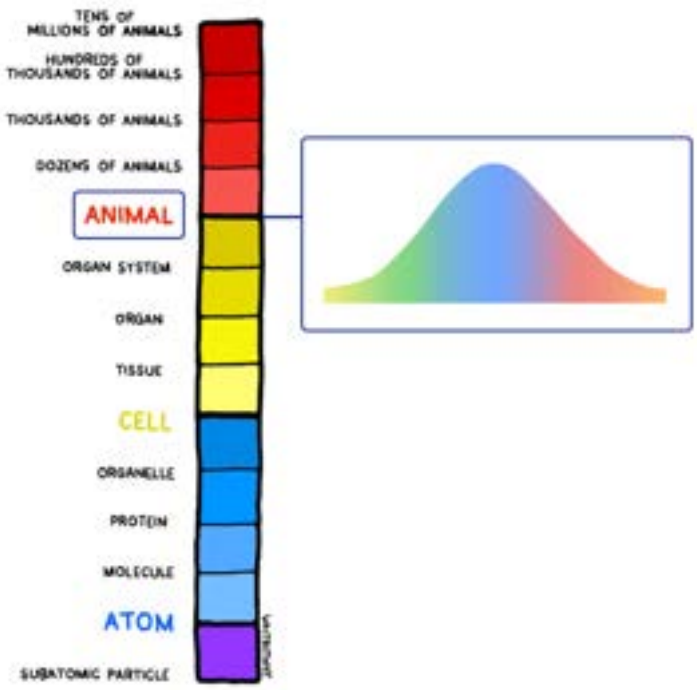
Cute. The only problem is, this image doesn't really tell us that much. To understand what the Hypotheticans really think about Topic X, let's turn these brains into little circles and organize them by *stacking* them on top of the Idea Spectrum.



Much more interesting. We can smooth this out into a single object whose height represents the commonness of each viewpoint along the idea spectrum. We can call it the **Thought Pile.**


THOUGHT PILE
TOPIC X

The Thought Pile is a visual representation of how the country feels about Topic X. On its own, the Thought Pile is *not* a higher-emergence giant. Remember, the phenomenon of emergence is many small parts combining together into a larger entity that is more than the sum of its parts. The Thought Pile represents a large group of individual viewpoints, all isolated from one another like a pile of disconnected neurons, equaling the exact sum of its parts. That's why a Thought Pile alone is still on the "individual animal" level of Emergence Tower—it's just a large group of items at that level.


TENS OF MILLIONS OF ANIMALS
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
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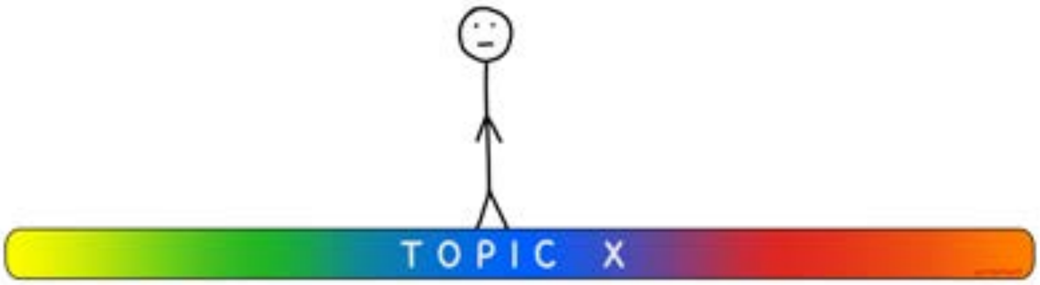
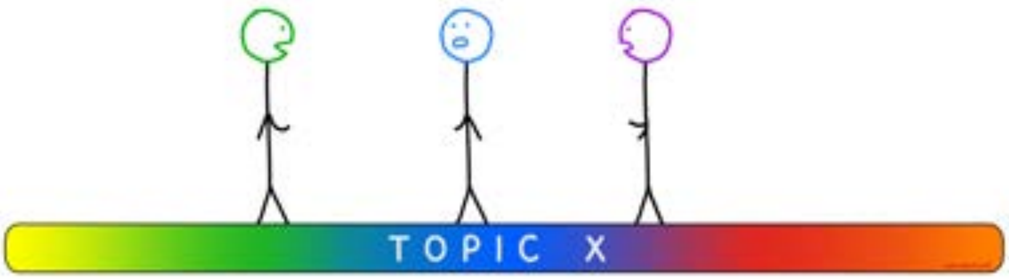
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE

To actually move *up* Emergence Tower and become a larger communal brain, neurons have to *communicate* with each other. This is where the Outer Self comes in.

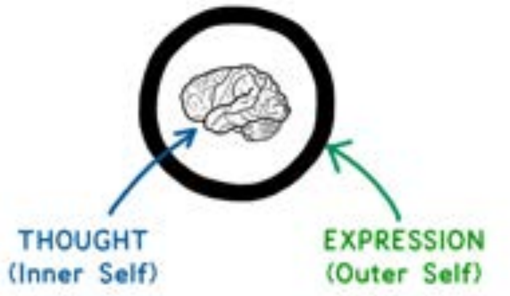
The Outer Self has a location on the idea spectrum too—a location that represents what a person outwardly *says* they think about the topic.



We can color their heads too. The color of the Outer Self's head represents the viewpoint a person *expresses* on Topic X.

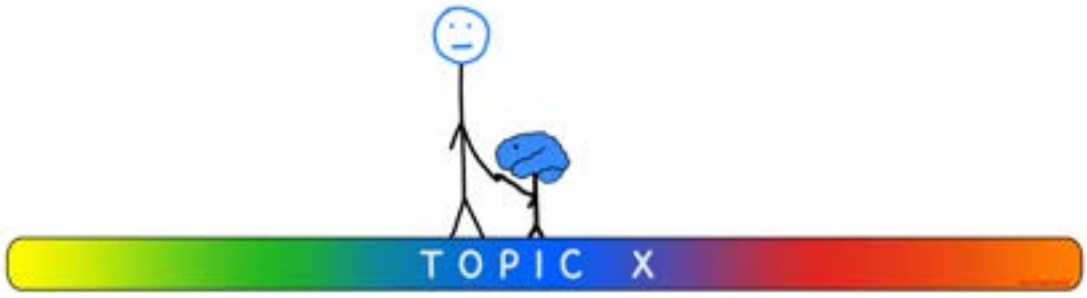


We can make a symbol that depicts the location of both the Inner Self and Outer Self:



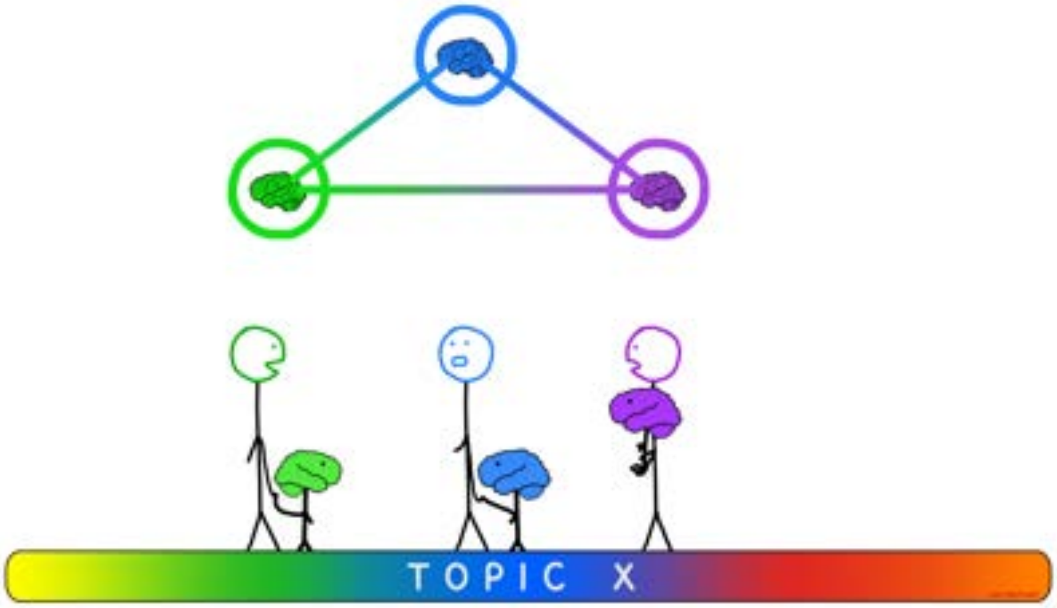
Both elements of this symbol can be color-coded. The color of the brain shows what the person is thinking on the inside—the color of the circle is what they're saying on the outside.

When a person is being authentic and saying what they really think, the Inner Self and Outer Self are standing in the same spot on the idea spectrum.

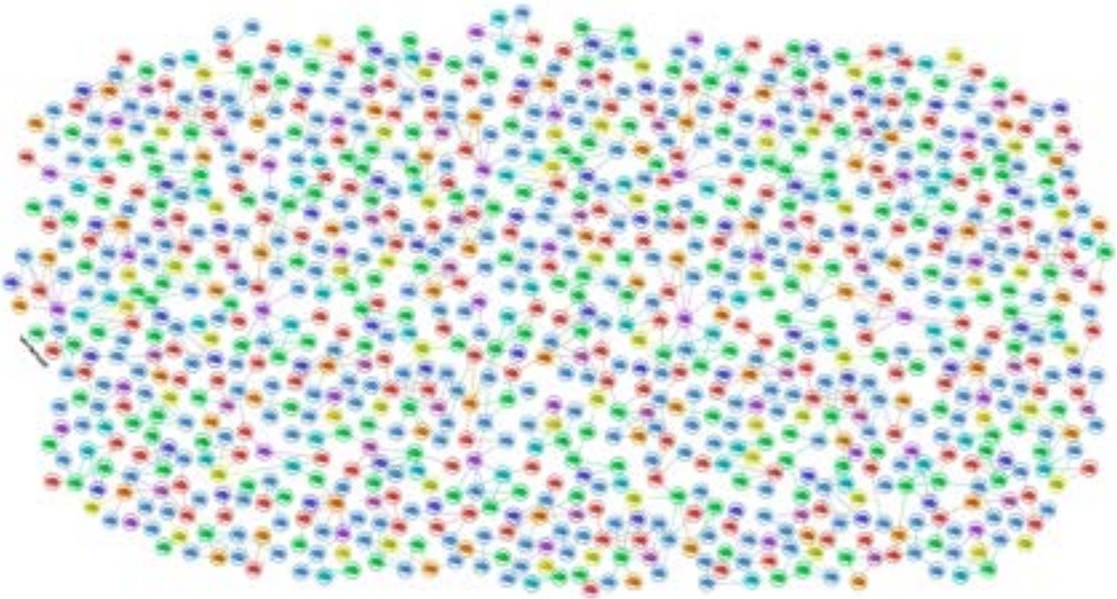


So here, both elements of our symbol are the same color, allowing the thoughts of the Inner Self to pass unimpeded through the Outer Self and out into the world.

When a group of people are all saying what they're thinking, their brains connect together like communicating neurons.

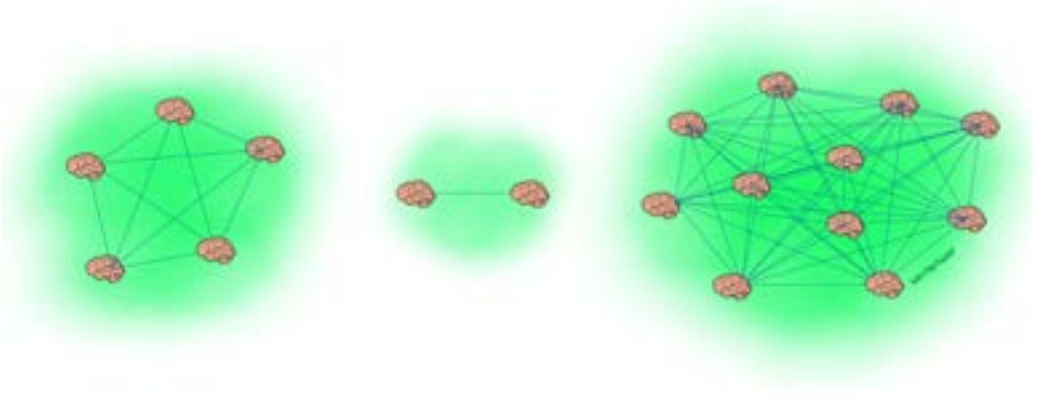


Likewise, when the citizens of Hypothetica are actively expressing their minds about Topic X, their Inner Selves wire together into a giant thinking *network*.



But is the network really a giant brain?

Mostly, the Hypotheticans are communicating in little groups of two or five or ten. Which means it's more like a bunch of these groups coexisting than a single thinking system:



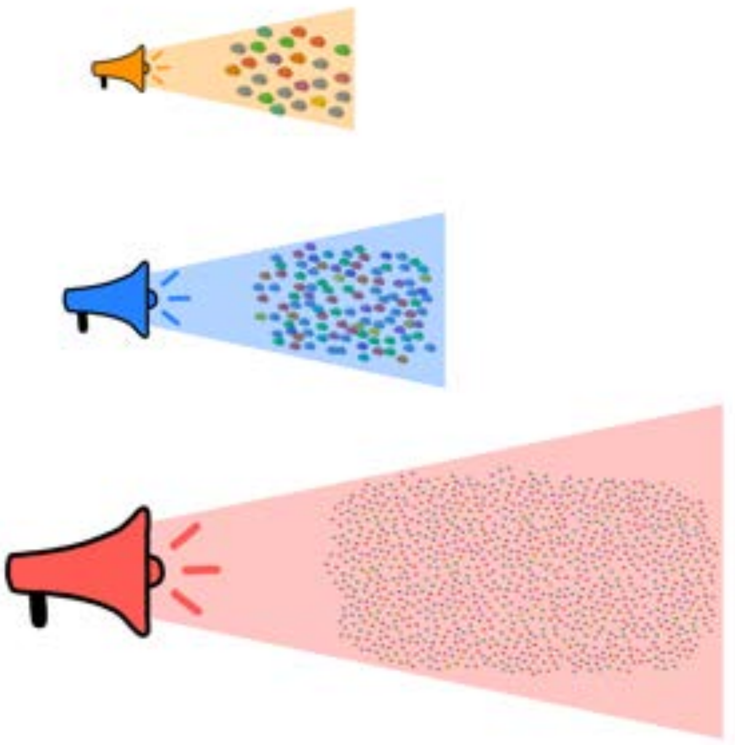
Sure, people socialize in multiple circles, so ideas born in small group discussions can travel into other small group discussions—but to think as one big brain, the Hypotheticans need to be able to have more system-wide, coordinated thought.

This is where mass broadcast comes in.

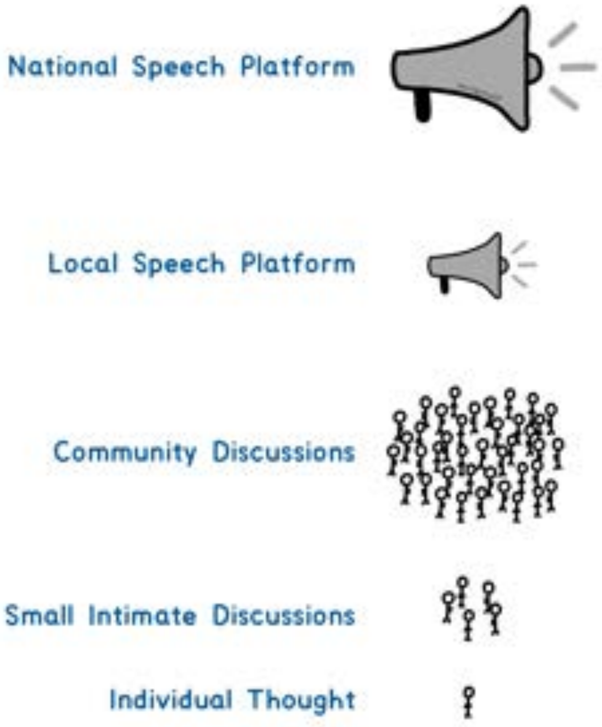
In Hypothetica, there's the big national newspaper, *Hypothetica Today*, which almost every Hypothetican reads. And there's the storied Hypothetica Colosseum, where masses of Hypotheticans gather to hear sermons from the country's major thought leaders or watch shows where comedians interview Hypothetica's celebrities. Each of Hypothetica's districts also has its own local newspaper and its own smaller town hall for local shows.

These forums allow certain individuals to express their thoughts to hundreds of people all at once. Under normal circumstances, the ideas circulating most frequently around the small conversations in Hypothetica end up finding their way onto these larger stages.

We can represent these platforms with a megaphone. The color of the megaphone represents the viewpoint being expressed through it. And the bigger the megaphone, the bigger the listening audience.

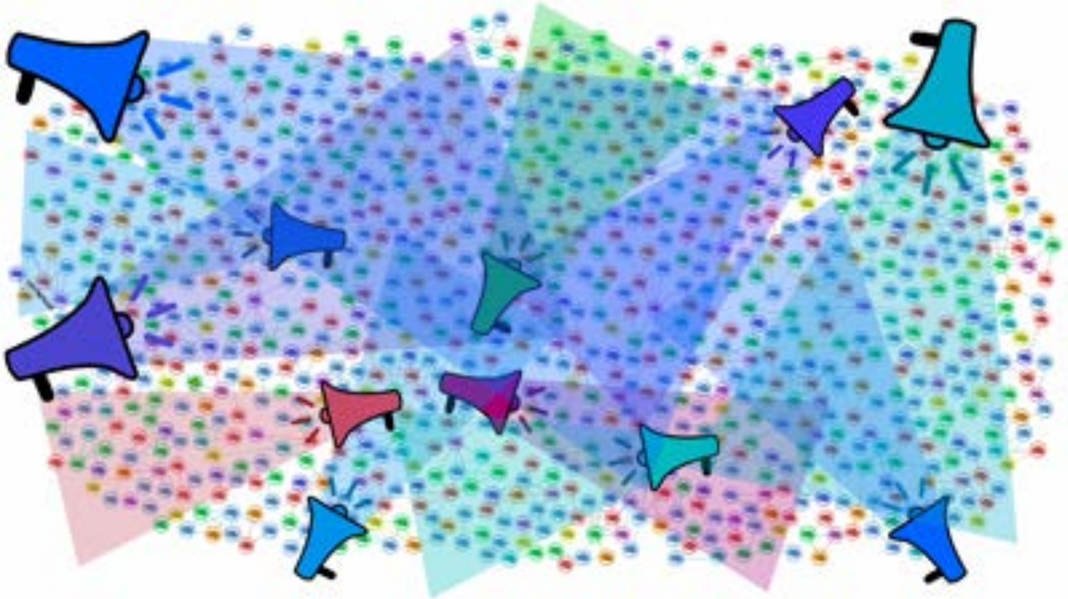


Hypothetica, as a small country, has two primary megaphone tiers—national and local. Below these tiers are the lower tiers made up of the hundreds of group conversations, and the ground-floor tier made up of a thousand individual thinking minds.

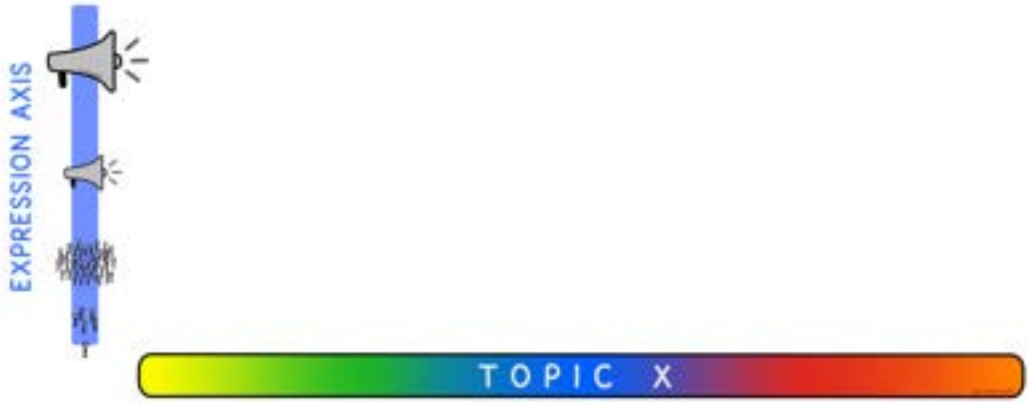

National Speech Platform
Local Speech Platform
Community Discussions
Small Intimate Discussions
Individual Thought

These tiers all feed off each other. New ideas are born in individual minds and in group conversations, and the hottest ideas rise up into the larger forums, where they're discussed and debated in front of hundreds of people. What's said on the larger stages stokes new conversations on the lower tiers and new thoughts in the minds of individual audience members.

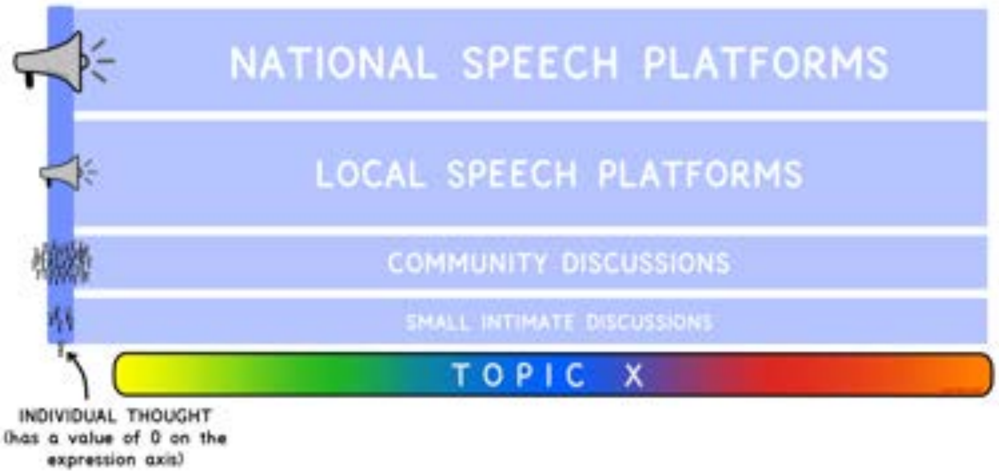
Each of the tiers plays its own important role—but it's the megaphone's ability to connect to masses of brains simultaneously that welds the whole thing together. Mass broadcast channels wire their way through the smaller pockets of the Hypothetica brain, bringing a unity to the nation's discussions that turns a thousand people into a single thinking system.



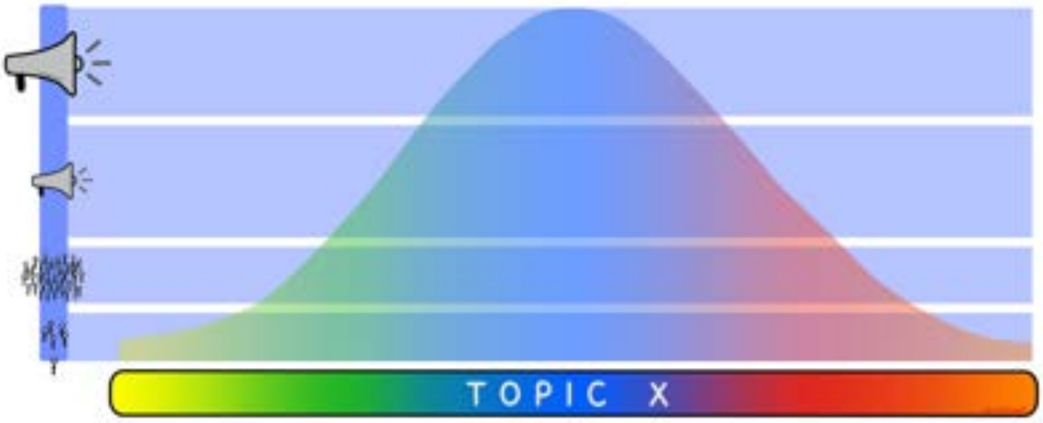
Now of all the ideas out there, which ones end up with megaphone distribution? Let's look at how it might work with Topic X by turning our tiers into a vertical **expression axis** that complements the horizontal idea spectrum.


EXPRESSION AXIS
TOPIC X

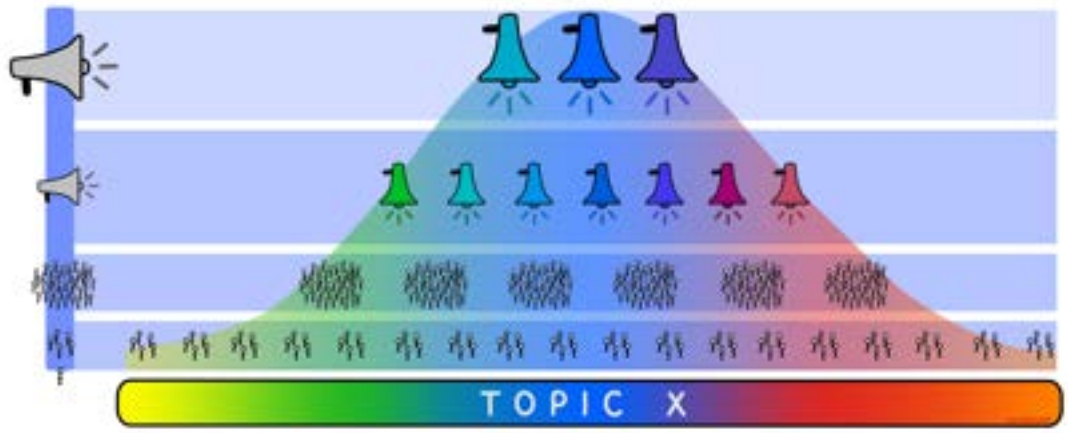
In theory, each idea along an idea spectrum could be outwardly expressed at each tier of the expression axis.


NATIONAL SPEECH PLATFORMS
LOCAL SPEECH PLATFORMS
COMMUNITY DISCUSSIONS
SMALL INTIMATE DISCUSSIONS
TOPIC X
INDIVIDUAL THOUGHT
(has a value of 0 on the expression axis)

But for expression to become *communication*, it requires participation from both expresser *and* listener—it requires *attention*. And attention is a limited resource. The megaphone platforms are businesses, and to stay afloat they need the ideas on their platforms to garner a sufficient level of interest. Some people like to listen to a wide variety of viewpoints, but on aggregate, people tend to be interested in hearing from like-minded people. So the Thought Pile can serve as a pretty good proxy for the amount of attention available to each viewpoint across Topic X.

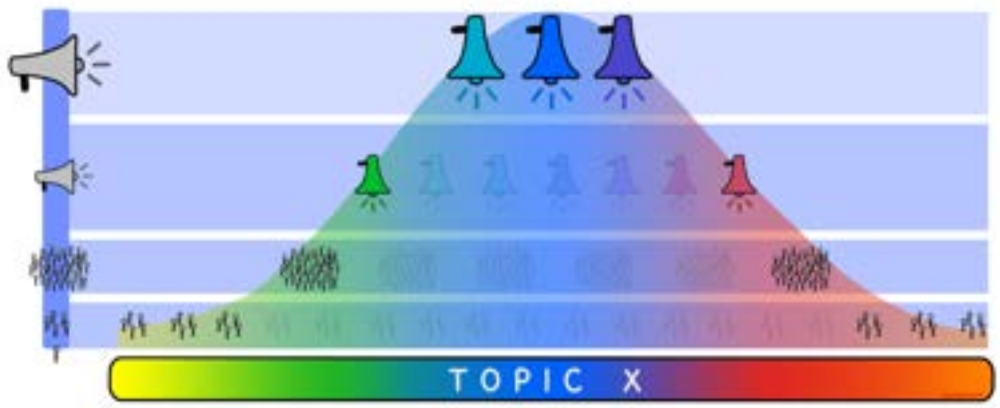


The higher the tier, the more the distributors need to appeal to a large audience, so the more they'll seek out ideas with widespread interest:

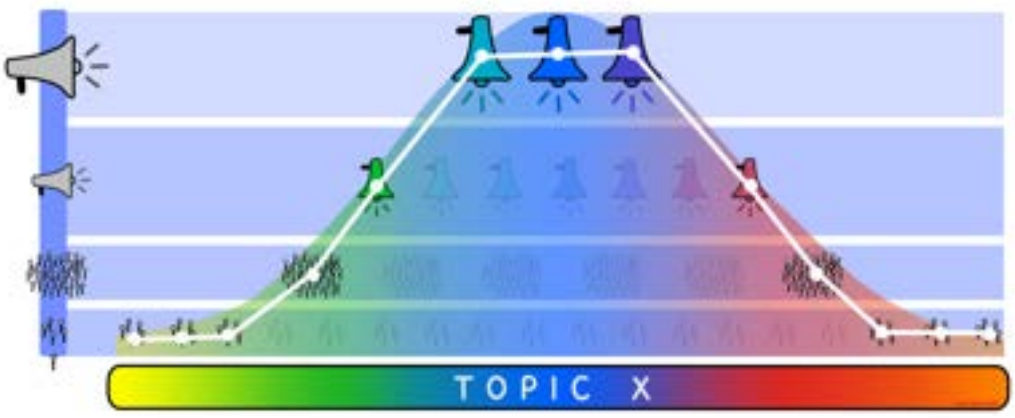


In the case of Topic X, only the most commonly held viewpoints in the blue-to-purple range are able to get much airtime in the national newspaper and the national colosseum. Less common ideas in the green or red areas don't draw national attention, but they have a sizable enough audience to get some play in the local newspapers and town halls. The even more out-there ideas are discussed within smaller communities, and the most fringe yellow and orange ideas will rarely get attention outside of the dinner tables of those who believe them.

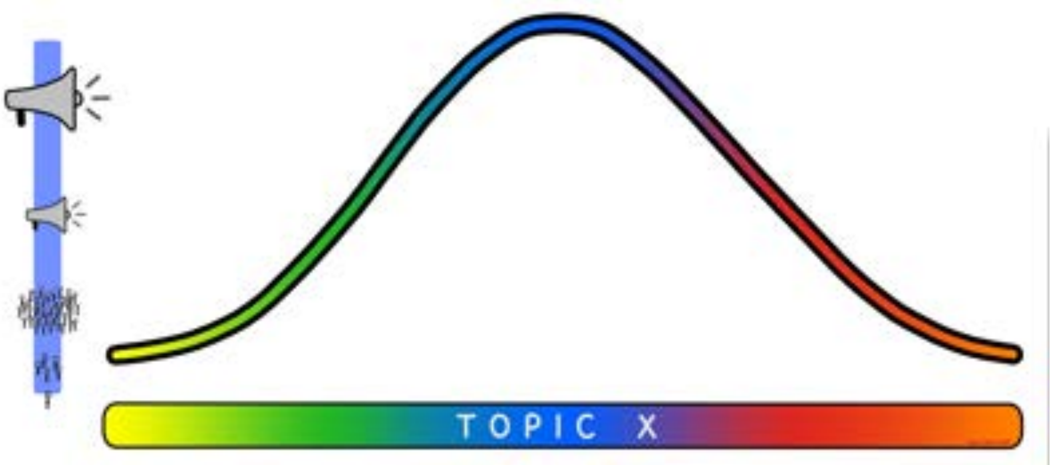
This phenomenon means that all ideas along the spectrum have an expression *ceiling*—the largest stage that can support it, given the interest it generates. The expression ceilings for the ideas within Topic X are highlighted below.



Connecting the dots with these ceilings gives us a line that matches up pretty well with the top of the Thought Pile.



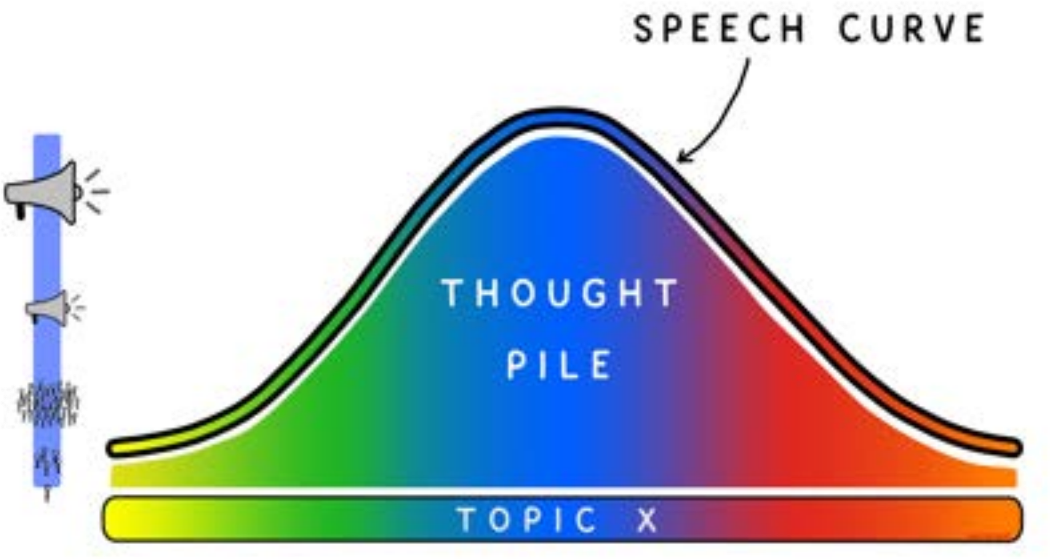
This is an important line that we'll call the **Speech Curve.** We're going to be looking at a lot of Speech Curves in this series, so let's make it pretty.



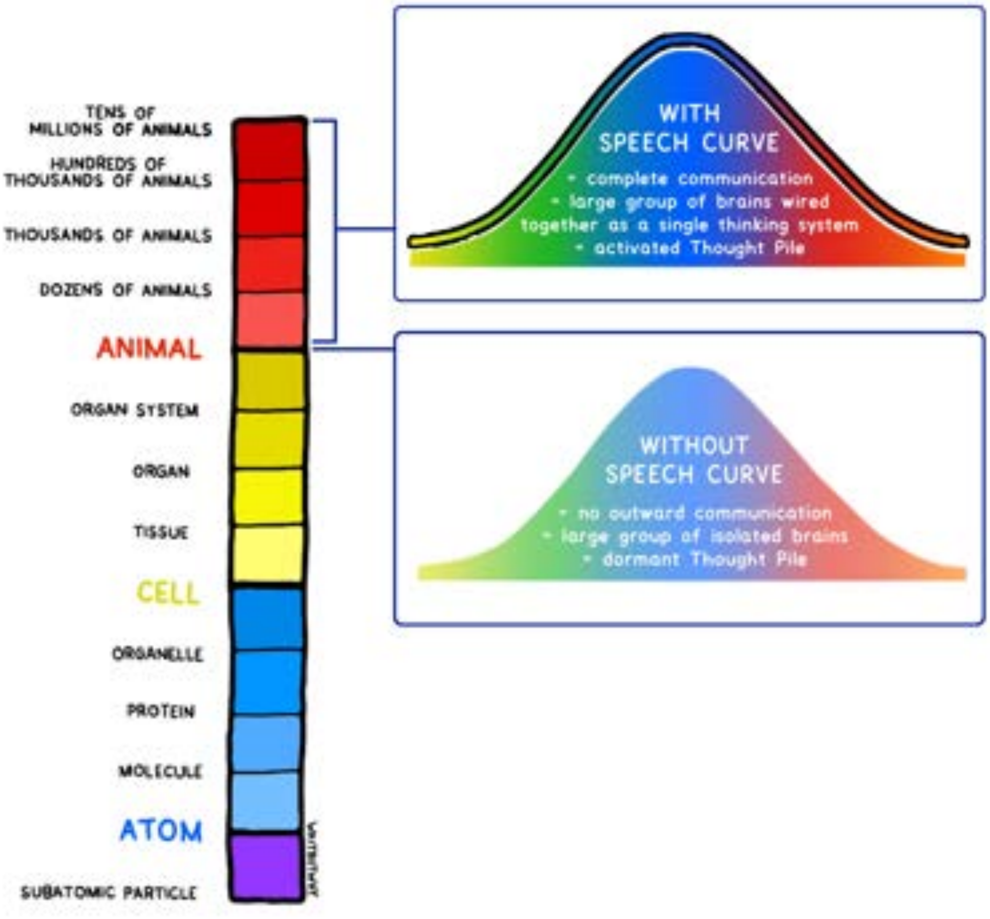
The Speech Curve is called the Speech Curve because it shows us the upper limit on how “loudly” each viewpoint is being expressed along a given idea spectrum—with loudness in this case referring to the size of the biggest stage on which the idea is being consistently expressed. While the Thought Pile lets us visualize what a population’s collective Inner Selves are thinking about a topic, the Speech Curve shows us what their Outer Selves are *saying* about the topic.

(Quick confusion-avoiding note: The y-dimension of the Thought Pile and Speech Curve are similar, but not exactly the same. The Thought Pile’s y-axis metric is the *number of people* thinking each viewpoint, while the Speech Curve’s y-axis is the size of the stage on which each viewpoint is being expressed—how *publicly* each viewpoint is being expressed—which will often but not always correlate with the number of people expressing that viewpoint. An exception would be a viewpoint that everyone is talking about in private but, because it’s a sensitive topic, keeping quiet about in big public forums. A situation like that would yield a low Speech Curve value even though the *number* of people talking about the idea is high.)

With a topic on which everyone is freely saying what they think, the shape of the Speech Curve for that topic sits neatly on top of the Thought Pile. The things people are thinking the most will also end up being said on the biggest platforms, and the fringe viewpoints will be relegated to fringe platforms.



On its own, the Thought Pile is just the *potential* for a giant brain. Only when it rests underneath the Speech Curve does a Thought Pile light up with color, activating into higher-emergence thought.



TENS OF MILLIONS OF ANIMALS
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
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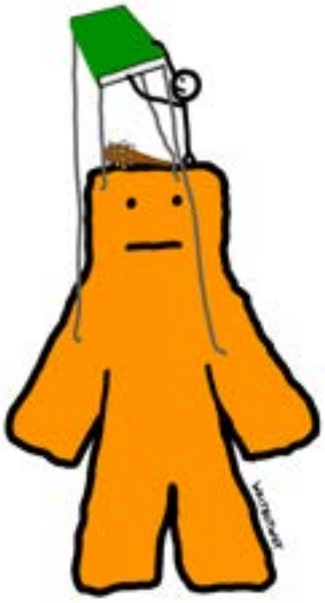
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
WITH SPEECH CURVE
• complete communication
• large group of brains wired together as a single thinking system
• activated Thought Pile
WITHOUT SPEECH CURVE
• no outward communication
• large group of isolated brains
• dormant Thought Pile

Remember the big orange giant from Part 1? The one controlled by strings? Well when the individual brains in a human giant can freely communicate with one another, the giant itself *wakes up*, developing the ability to think for itself.

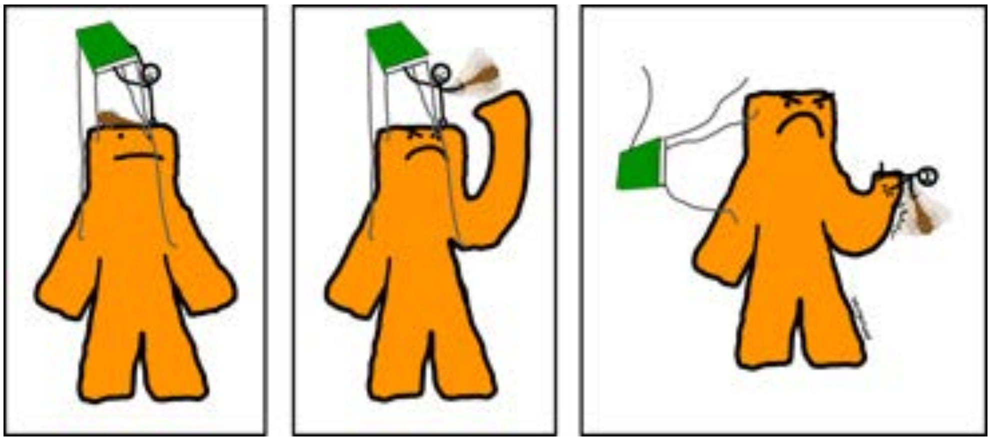
While the Thought Pile shows us what the individuals are thinking, the Speech Curve shows us what the *giant* is thinking. And when the two are aligned, the giant is thinking perfectly clearly.

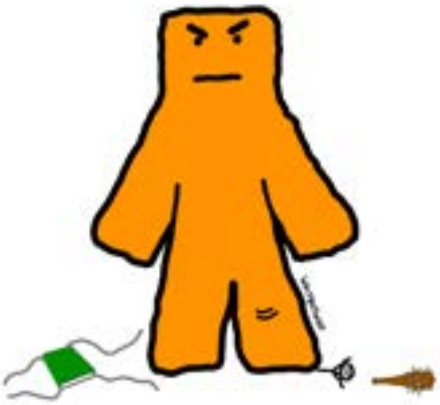
Which is great. Unless you're a dictator.

When the Enlightenment got rolling, the standard country looked like this:



In order to pull off the dictator gig, you had to control the story your giant believed. Which means you really didn't want your giant thinking for itself. Because a giant that can think for itself might pretty quickly do this:





This is why a dictator’s favorite word is:

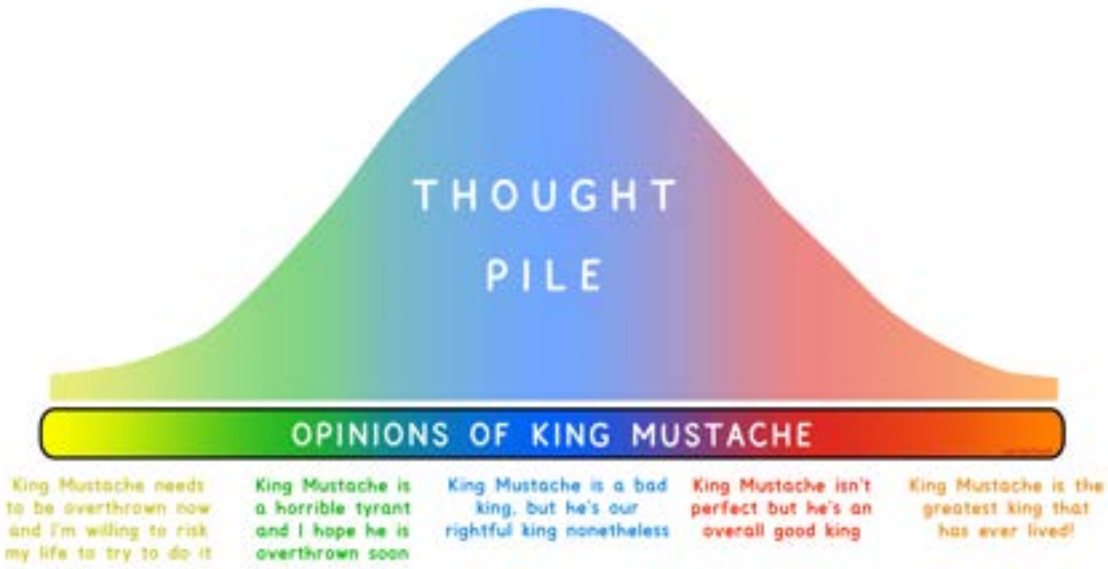
CENSORSHIP

Looking at it from the perspective of an individual, censorship is control over what people can say. And as individuals ourselves, this is what we usually think censorship is. But from a perspective higher up on Emergence Tower, censorship is control over what a giant can *think*. To a giant, censorship is *mind* control.

One thing I haven’t mentioned is that Hypothetica is a totalitarian dictatorship, led by the highly tyrannical King Mustache.

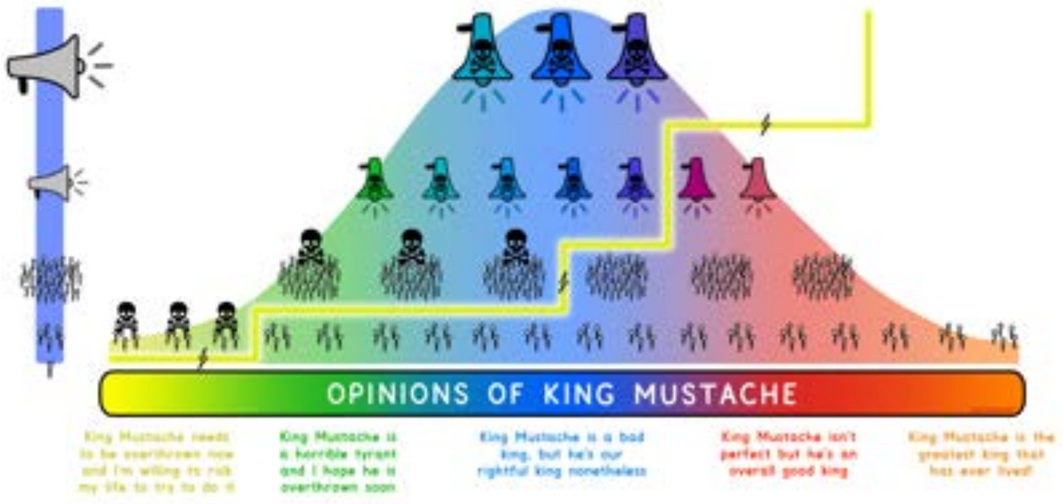
It’s not that King Mustache wants to exert *universal* mind control over his Hypothetica giant. In most cases, King Mustache could care less what people are talking about. But with sensitive topics—like, say, the rights of the lower caste, or the depiction of a rival country, or the perception of historical events—it’s a different story. It’s not that dictators want to prevent the giant from thinking about those topics, it’s that they want to control exactly *what* the giant is thinking.

And in this case, it turns out that Topic X is actually “Opinions of King Mustache”—which is about as sensitive a topic as King Mustache can imagine.

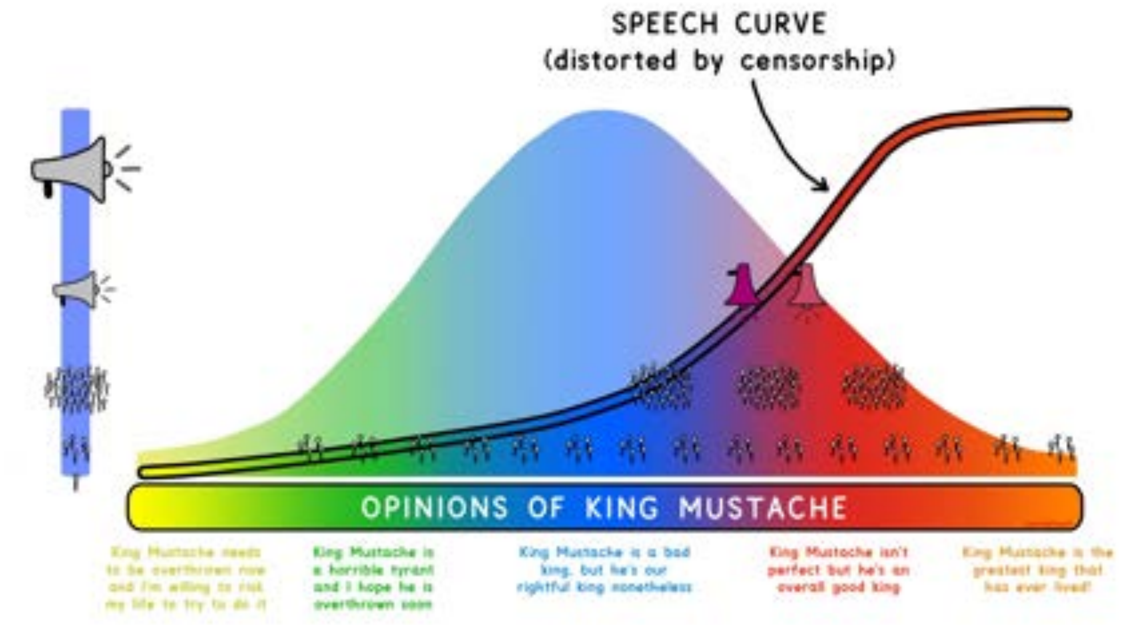

THOUGHT PILE
OPINIONS OF KING MUSTACHE
King Mustache needs to be overthrown now and I'm willing to risk my life to try to do it
King Mustache is a horrible tyrant and I hope he is overthrown soon
King Mustache is a bad king, but he's our rightful king nonetheless
King Mustache isn't perfect but he's an overall good king
King Mustache is the greatest king that has ever lived!

When King Mustache looks at that spectrum, he sees a number of *highly inconvenient* viewpoints. There's not much he can do about the Thought Pile, since he can't control what people think—but he *can* do something about the Speech Curve.

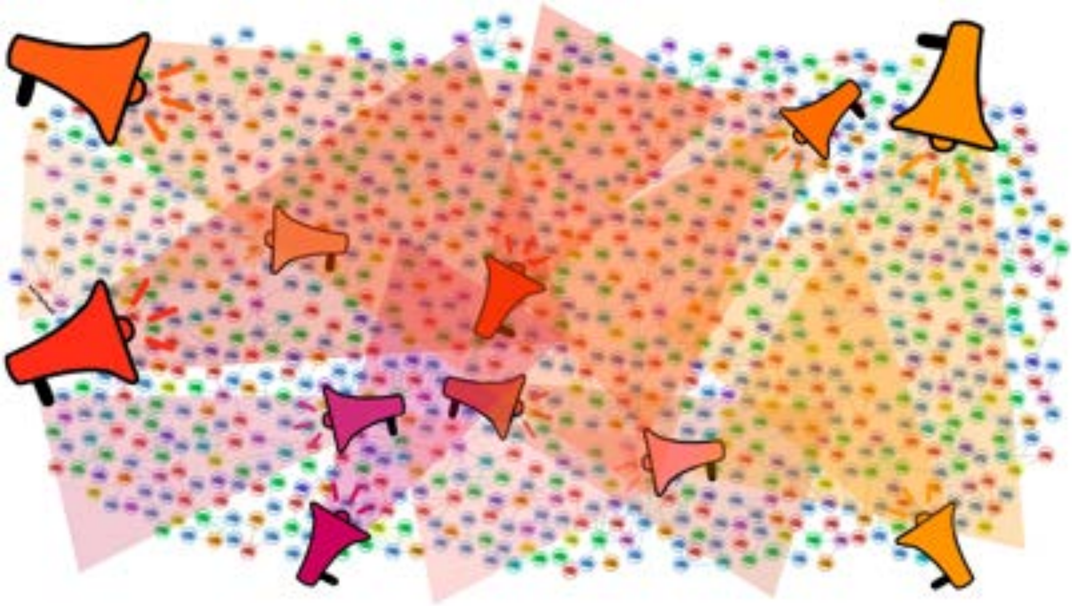
So he does exactly what the Johnsons did when they wanted to control Moochie—he puts up an electric fence. He makes an ironclad set of laws to ensure that certain viewpoints, if expressed publicly enough, will result in immediate imprisonment or execution.


OPINIONS OF KING MUSTACHE
King Mustache needs to be overthrown now and I'm willing to risk my life to try to do it
King Mustache is a horrible tyrant and I hope he is overthrown soon
King Mustache is a bad king, but he's our rightful king nonetheless
King Mustache isn't perfect but he's an overall good king
King Mustache is the greatest king that has ever lived!

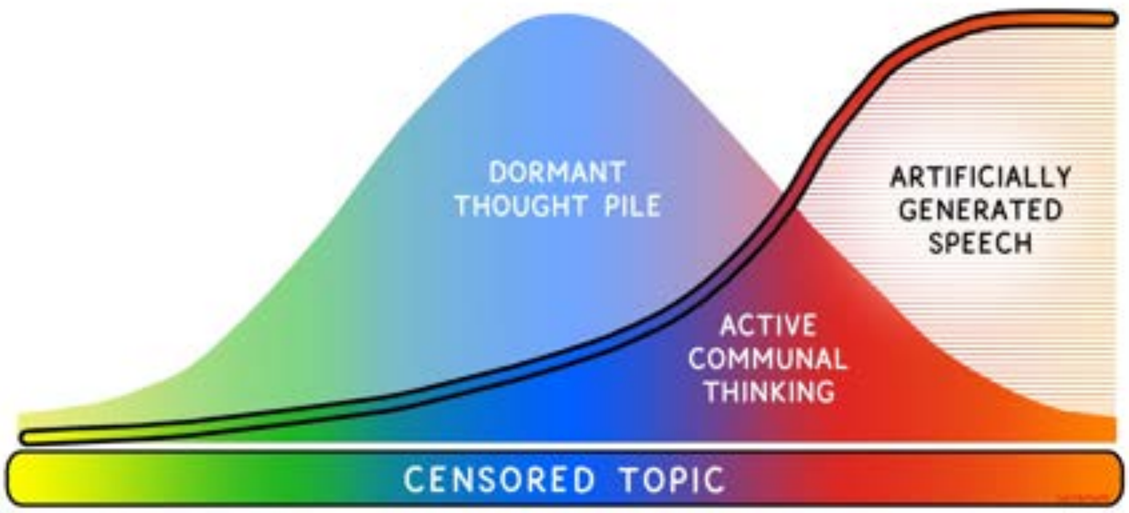
Under the king's policy, anyone who utters a frowned-upon viewpoint on a public stage—a celebrity, a journalist, a politician—is promptly zapped out of existence by the censorship fence. For the *extra* inconvenient viewpoints on the far left side of the spectrum, the electric fence threatens even those who express them in more private settings, as the government hires secret moles within communities to snitch on blasphemers. A few good public zappings of speech transgressors is usually all it takes to generate a wide-ranging silence, as the censorship fence quickly *becomes* the new Speech Curve for that topic. Silenced areas of the Thought Pile fall dormant, unraveling down Emergence Tower where they're no longer able to function as a higher-emergence entity.


SPEECH CURVE
(distorted by censorship)
OPINIONS OF KING MUSTACHE
King Mustache needs to be overthrown now and I'm willing to risk my life to try to do it
King Mustache is a horrible tyrant and I hope he is overthrown soon
King Mustache is a bad king, but he's our rightful king nonetheless
King Mustache isn't perfect but he's an overall good king
King Mustache is the greatest king that has ever lived!

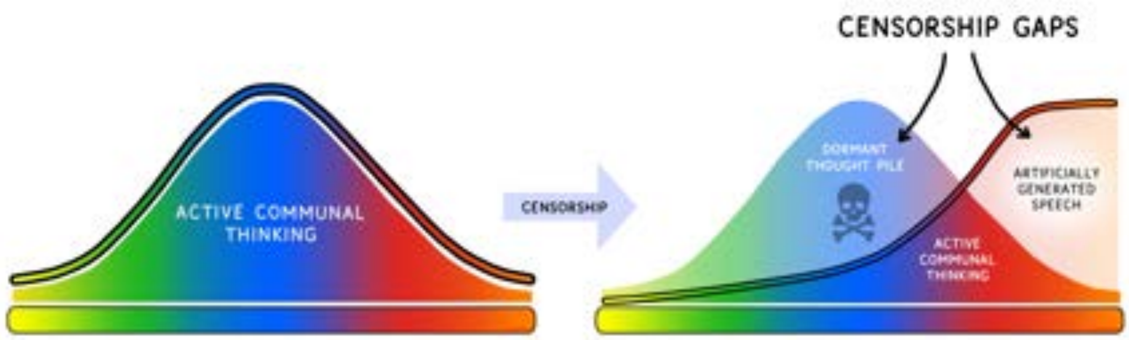
With the megaphones not allowed to reflect the true ideas of the Thought Pile back at the masses, Hypothetica loses its ability to function as a giant brain—at least on this topic. The censored ideas, though still widespread, can't develop or evolve or gain any traction. Which is exactly what King Mustache wants.



Meanwhile, beyond prohibiting that which cannot be said, the electric fence also emphasizes what *should* be said. Especially on the large platforms, the king's preferred viewpoints are now repeated ad nauseam—receiving a far brighter spotlight than the Thought Pile would normally warrant.

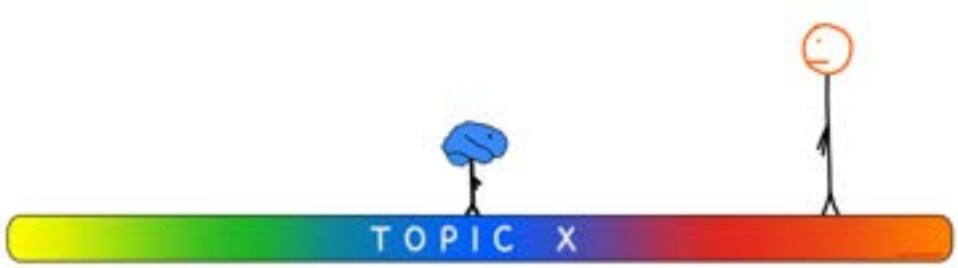

DORMANT THOUGHT PILE
ARTIFICIALLY GENERATED SPEECH
ACTIVE COMMUNAL THINKING
CENSORED TOPIC

Censorship takes a single region formed by an aligned Thought Pile and Speech Curve and turns it into three regions by generating two “censorship gaps.”

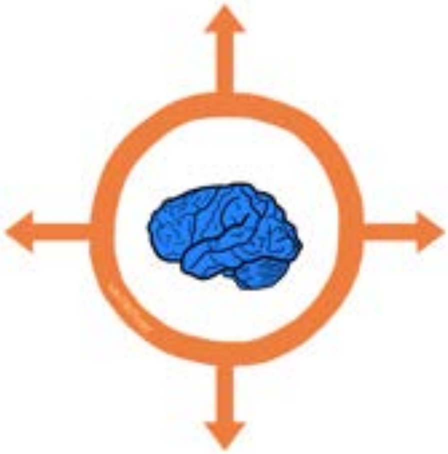

CENSORSHIP GAPS
ACTIVE COMMUNAL THINKING
CENSORSHIP
DORMANT THOUGHT PILE
ARTIFICIALLY GENERATED SPEECH
ACTIVE COMMUNAL THINKING

Censorship policies need to be put in by force at first, but once they’re in place, they tend to stay in place. Because when a population of people can’t communicate with each other, they become less communally *lucid*. When people aren’t saying what they’re thinking, the real shape of the Thought Pile becomes guesswork. False assumptions about citizen sentiment have no way of being corrected, and everyone starts to go a little crazy.

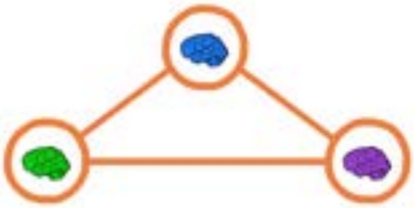
Let’s take a closer look at why. When, for one reason or another, what someone is saying is different than what they really think, their Inner Self and Outer Self are in separate places on the idea spectrum.

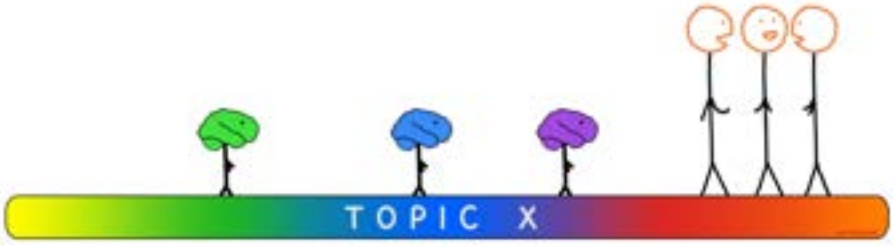


With their Outer Self broadcasting different beliefs than the Inner Self holds, the ideas of the Inner Self become hidden in a person’s head, isolated from the outside world.

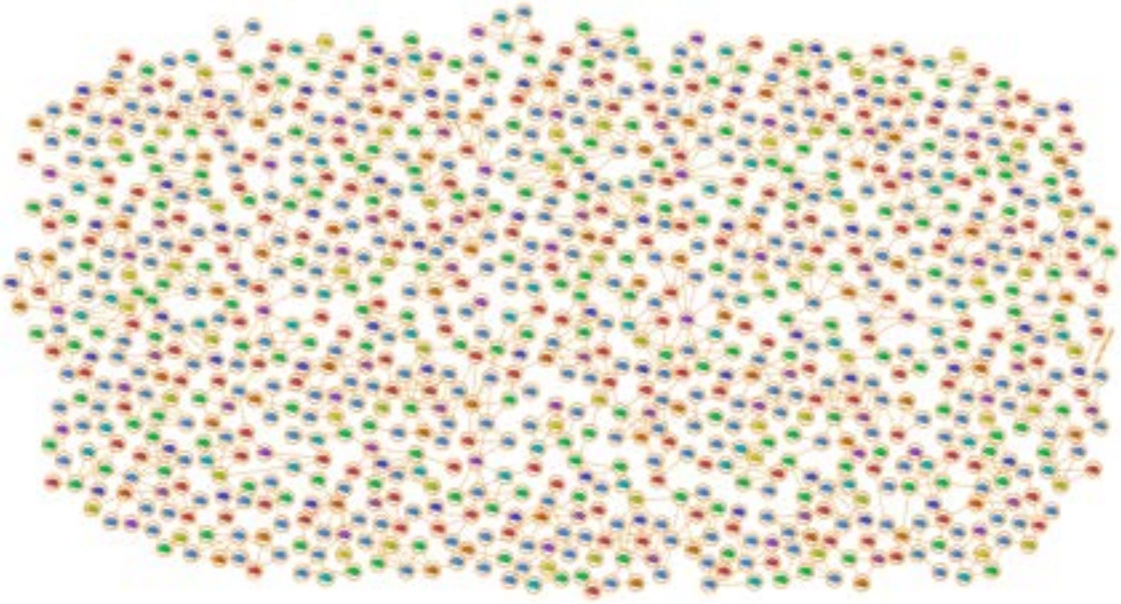


From the communal brain perspective, where each individual human mind is a single neuron, it's as if the axons of the neurons have been hijacked, which ceases any real neural communication.

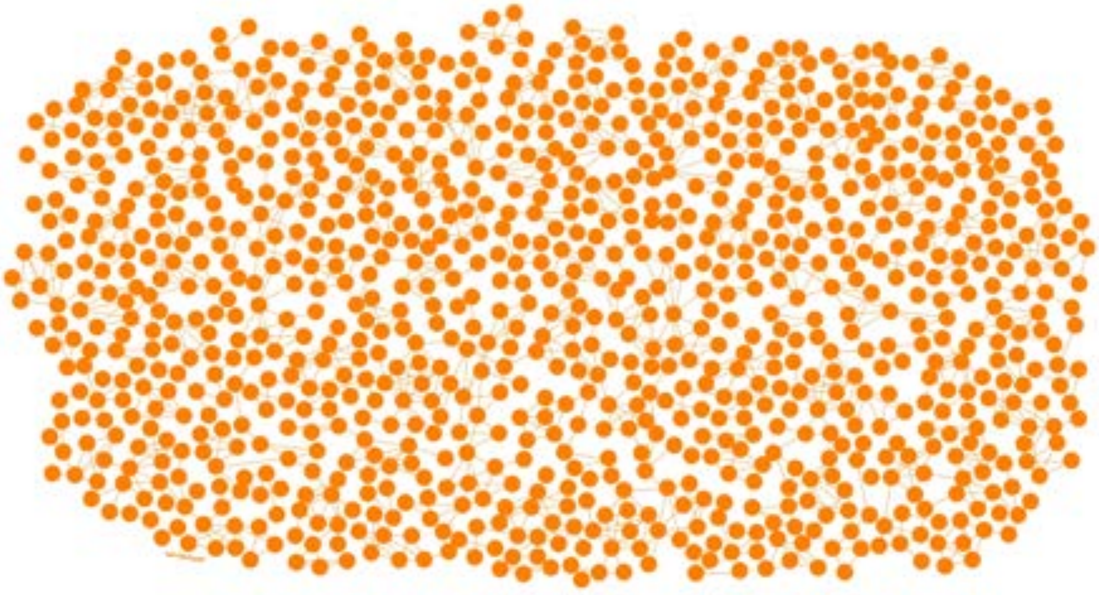




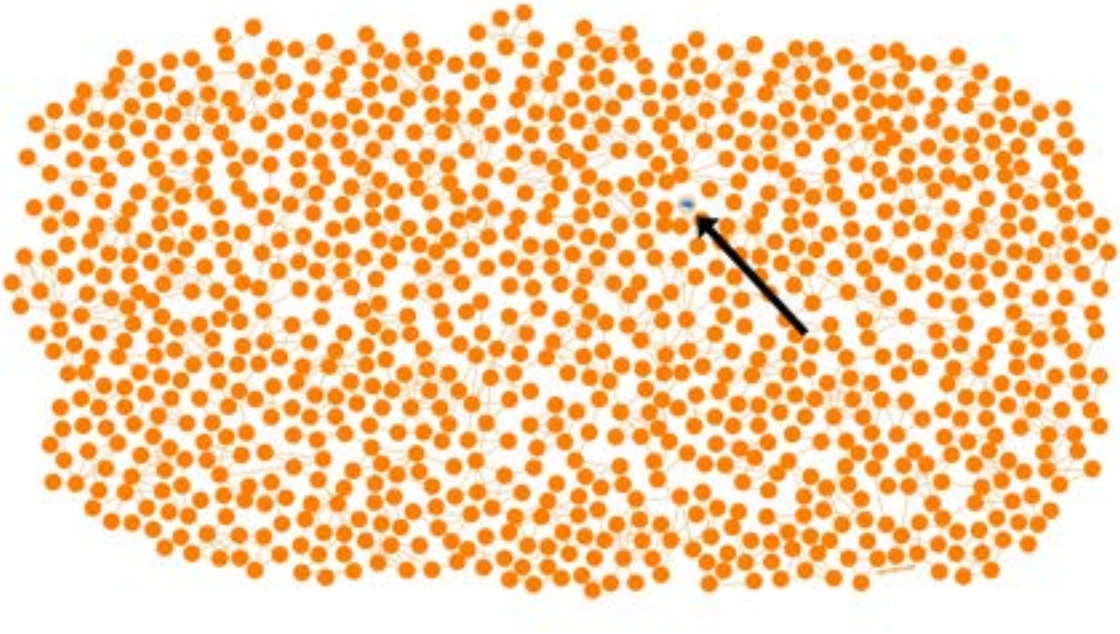
The macro effect of this is incredibly powerful. Under King Mustache's iron fist, almost no one dares to say the wrong thing—it's just not worth it. Looking at our network diagram, we can see all Outer Self circles now turned the king's preferred color, quarantining other colors safely within the skulls of each human neuron and preventing them from entering the wider network.



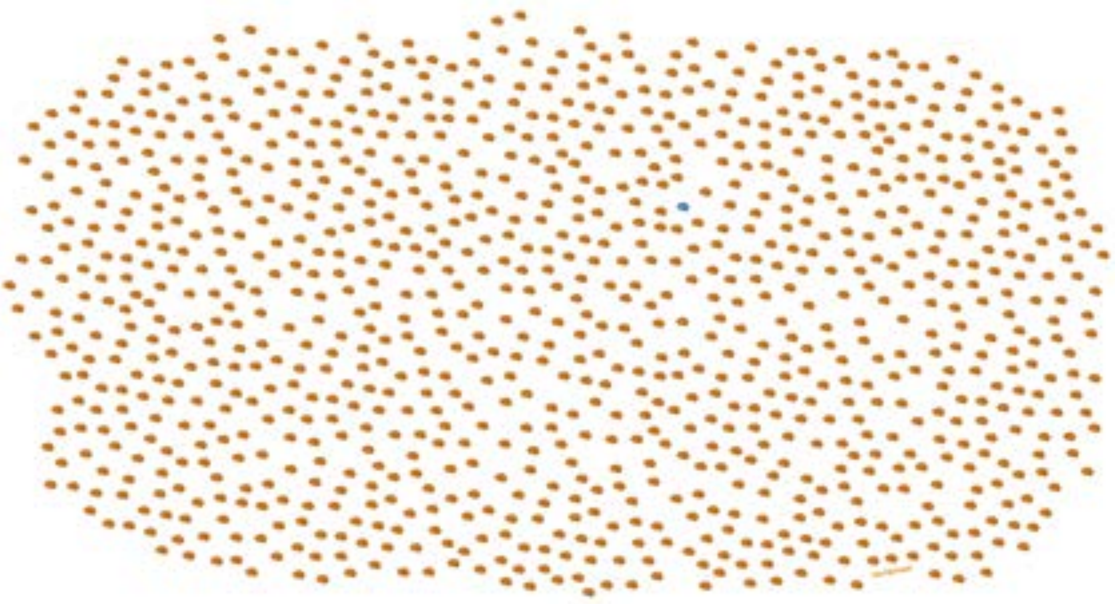
And the thing is, no Hypotheticans can actually see what we're seeing here. We're looking at a cross-section of everyone's head that shows *us* both what they're thinking and what they're saying. But in the real world, what people are thinking is hidden from sight—the only information we have about other people’s viewpoints is what they say out loud or do outwardly. So to any given Hypothetican, their society *seems* like this:



So if you’re this person—

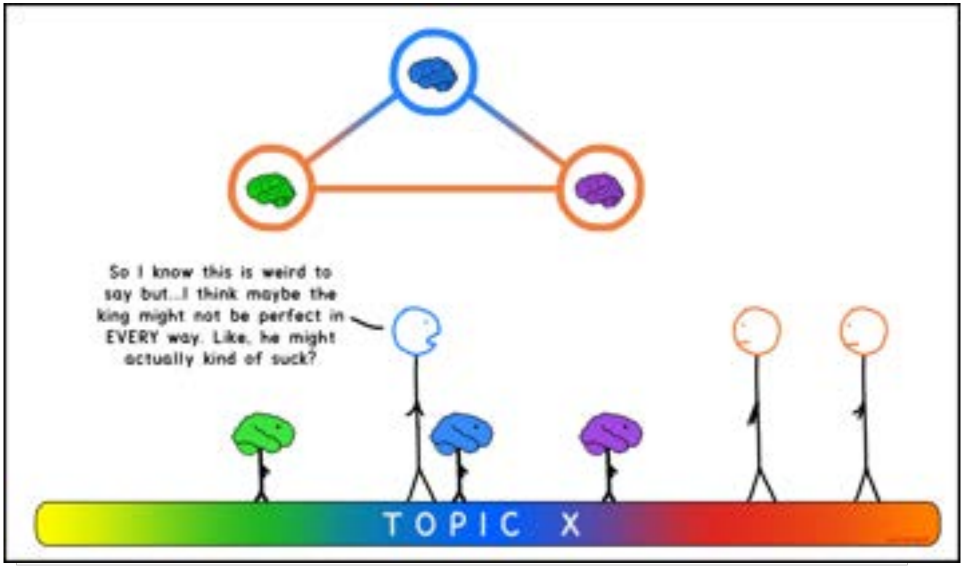


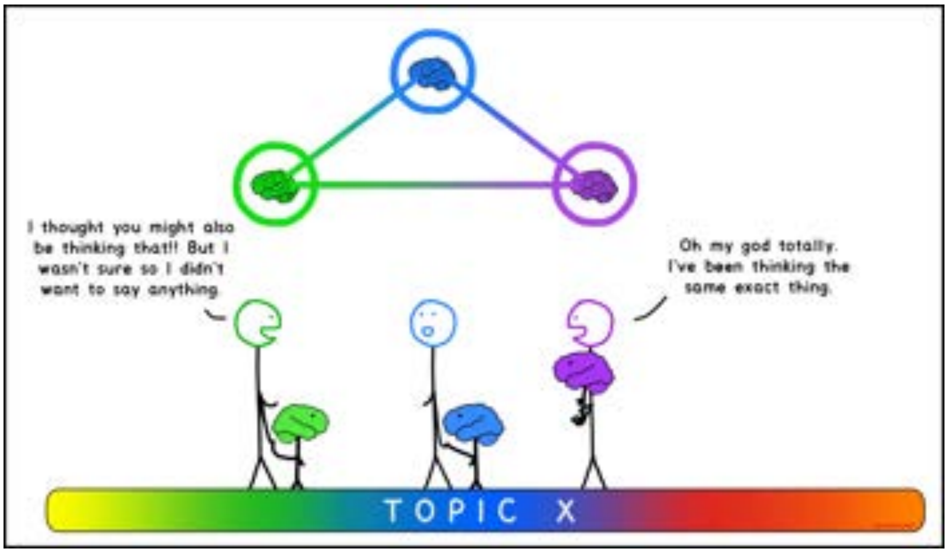
—despite actually being surrounded by tremendous thought diversity, you might very well assume that you’re the only person thinking what you’re thinking, and that the nation’s brains look like this:



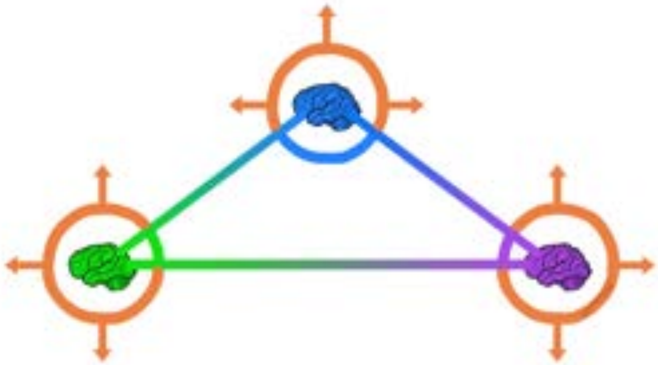
In the absence of anonymous surveys (which King Mustache banned a long time ago), the Thought Pile is *invisible* to citizens. All a citizen can see is the shape of the *Speech Curve*—which they often mistakenly assume to be the shape of the Thought Pile.

Of course, even the scariest censorship policies will fail to be airtight.


So I know this is weird to say but...I think maybe the king might not be perfect in EVERY way. Like, he might actually kind of suck?
TOPIC X


I thought you might also be thinking that!! But I wasn't sure so I didn't want to say anything.
Oh my god totally. I've been thinking the same exact thing.
TOPIC X

But a censorship policy doesn't have to be airtight to accomplish its goal. If you can block ideas from reaching the higher-tier expression platforms, you *quarantine* the ideas within small, isolated pockets. Because if people will be honest with each other in private but still abide by the censorship rules in public, they appear to everyone else to hold the king's preferred views.

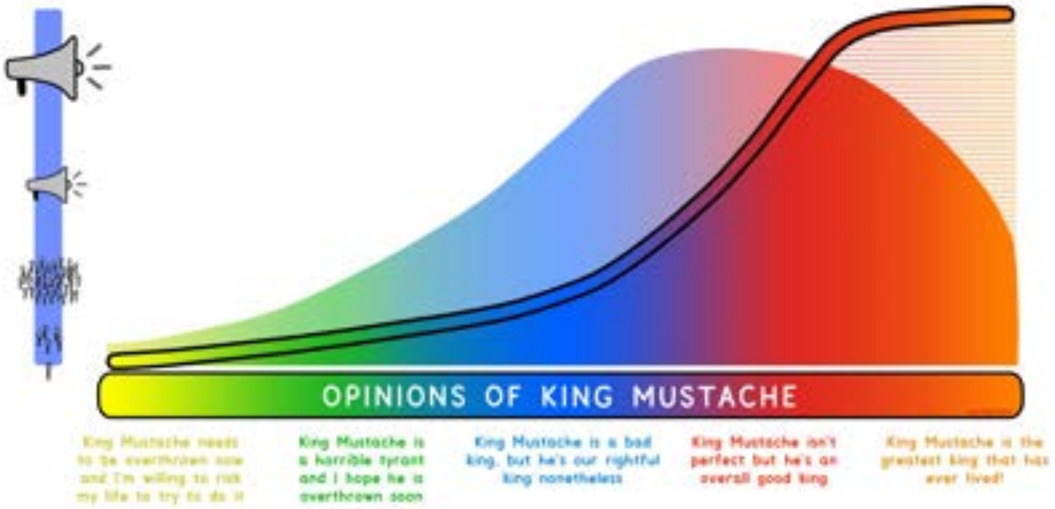


Containing the expression of banned viewpoints to small groups prevents the viewpoints from *traveling* anywhere and gaining any momentum in the national giant's big brain.

Over the long run, censorship policies generate the kind of self-perpetuating loop we talked about in Part 1. The absence of banned ideas in outward conversation makes it easy to indoctrinate children and impressionable adults into actually believing the dictator's preferred viewpoints.

In her TED Talk, Yeonmi Park, who grew up in North Korea and escaped, explained: "Growing up in North Korea, we truly believed that our Dear Leader is an almighty god who can even read my thoughts. I was even afraid to think in North Korea."④

When the Speech Curve is forced into place for long enough, the Thought Pile itself begins to morph closer to its shape.



For all these reasons, of all a dictator's possessions, the most precious one is his mute button.

By silencing certain ideas, the mute button prevents the giant from having the wrong thoughts. And when you can control a giant's thoughts, you can control the giant's actions.

In the Power Games, someone is usually holding a mute button over your head, lining your discourse with electric fences. And in most cases, the only way for a population to reclaim the power of collective free thought is to try to out-cudgel the dictator. Those are the two options of the Power Games: silence or violence.

The Enlightenment was aggressively anti-mute-button. And the newly liberated Americans were intent on making their young country a mute-button-free zone, something expressly stated in the Bill of Rights' 45-word First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Pulled out from the larger group of First Amendment liberties, we see that the American notion of free speech comes down to ten words:

Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech

Congress shall erect no electric fences. Congress shall exercise no mind control over the giant. Congress shall make no mute button.

These critical ten words mean that speech of any kind is always legal and protected. Well, not speech of *any* kind—remember the Harm Principle:

Everyone can do whatever they want, as long as it doesn't harm anyone else.

Freedom of speech is part of our green circle of rights—the "everyone can do whatever they want" part of the statement. But once speech *harms* someone else—once you've crossed over into someone's red circle and violated their inalienable rights—it becomes *restricted speech* and is no longer legal.

So when it comes to our freedom to "swing our arms" in what we *say*, what exactly constitutes hitting someone else's nose? The government uses specific terms to define what constitutes harmful and therefore restricted speech. Like:[1]

- **Incitement** — e.g. yelling "fire" in a crowded theater to trigger a stampede
- **Fighting words** — not violence itself, but speech that is aimed at inciting violence in others
- **Defamation** — publicly saying intentionally false things about someone which may damage the person's reputation in a harmful way—called **"libel"** when in writing and **"slander"** when it's spoken
- **Perjury** — knowingly lying under oath
- **Extortion** — using blackmail of some kind to force someone to comply with your wishes
- **False advertising** — e.g. lying about the specs of a computer you're selling
- **Plagiarism of copyrighted material** — publishing someone else's words or art as your own
- **Obscenity** — e.g. public masturbation
- **Child pornography —** k we got it

Further, as a green circle right, free speech on private property is still subject to the property owner's rules. The liberty to make one's own rules on one's own property supersedes freedom of speech, so you may be silenced or even kicked out of a private space if your ideas aren't popular. In public spaces, on the other hand, your freedom of speech trumps someone else's freedom to wish you would shut the fuck up.

But aside from these specific cases, speech is almost never illegal. It's pretty hard in the U.S. to get yourself sent to prison for something you say.

When the First Amendment was ratified in 1791, such a broad right to freedom of speech was highly unusual around the world. Even in relatively liberal places at the time, speech was far more restricted—it was illegal in England at the time, for example, to publicly criticize the government.

The First Amendment was a revolution for the Outer Self. Whether in speech or any other form of legal expression, you could no longer be punished by the government for being on the outside who you were on the inside. With the country's human neurons able to freely connect, the U.S. organism would be a lot more like a giant human being with a mind of its own than a big dumb orange monster giant that's controlled by strings.

But how do millions of citizens, holding a wide range of views, often in furious conflict with each other, actually function as a single brain *in practice*? How does the brain form opinions? How does it learn new things? How does it make concrete decisions, and how does it change its mind?

We'll explore all that in the final chapter of Part 2.

Chapter 6: The American Brain

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Name

Steve Cut
2 years ago

Tim, one small proofing correction:
"In most cases, King Mustache **could** care less what people are talking about." should be "... **couldn't** care less..."

4 ^ | ˅ 1 Reply

da4th ➦ Steve Cut
9 months ago

View — uploads.disquscdn.com

3 ^ | ˅ 1 Reply

William Brennan ➦ da4th
6 months ago

I hate this comic. There is a very practical reason to correct this. Because the saying, parsed literally, doesn't

The American Brain

27
Shares ember 18, 2019 By Tim Urban

s Chapter 6 in a series. If you're new to the series, visit the ***series home page*** *for the*
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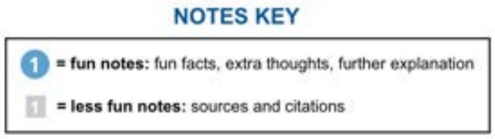
NOTES KEY

① = **fun notes:** fun facts, extra thoughts, further explanation

1 = **less fun notes:** sources and citations

Chapter 6: The American Brain

In Chapter 5 we became acquainted with some new toys: the Idea Spectrum, the Thought Pile, and the Speech Curve. Now it's time to play with them.

We finished the chapter with a paragraph full of questions:

How do millions of citizens, holding a wide range of views, often in furious conflict with each other, actually function as a single brain in practice? How does the brain form opinions? How does it learn new things? How does it make concrete decisions, and how does it change its mind?

The big U.S. brain thinks using the same system it employs to distribute resources and elect leaders: the Value Games. The First Amendment, in addition to providing a key liberty, opens up a whole new competitive playing field:

The Marketplace of Ideas

It's well known that the economic marketplace is all about supply and demand—a supply of products and services satisfies the demand for all kinds of things, like homes, cars, food, and healthcare. The two components react to and influence one another. Demand drives supply as supply scrambles to match it, and suppliers try to manipulate demand to drive it towards whatever they're supplying.

We don't always think of it like this, but the marketplace of ideas (MPI) works the same way. The demand for everything from knowledge to wisdom to leadership to entertainment to emotional catharsis is met by an endless supply of human expression. But there isn't really an established way to analyze the MPI the way there is with economics, so we'll come up with our own way of doing it, using the new language we're developing.

In its most basic form, the MPI is an *attention* market, where attention is the key currency instead of money.

Economic demand is generated by consumer preferences; demand in the MPI is a function of *listener* preferences. The listener is the consumer of expressed ideas—and in the same way economic consumers have limited money to spend, idea consumers have limited *time* to spend listening.

Economic supply is made up of products and services, and economic suppliers are sellers; supply in the

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634,264
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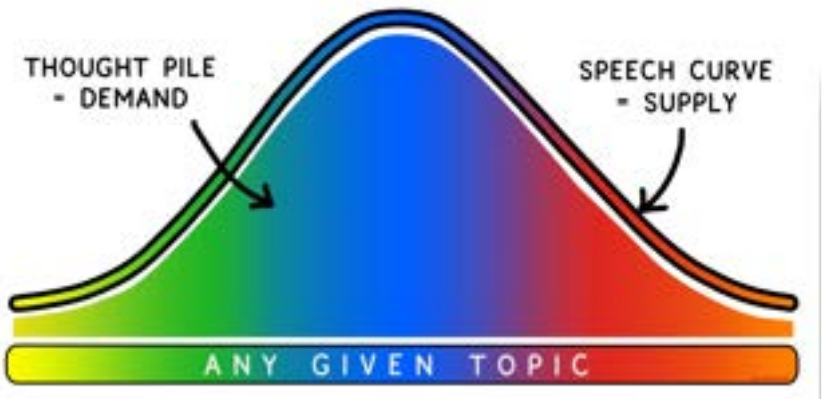
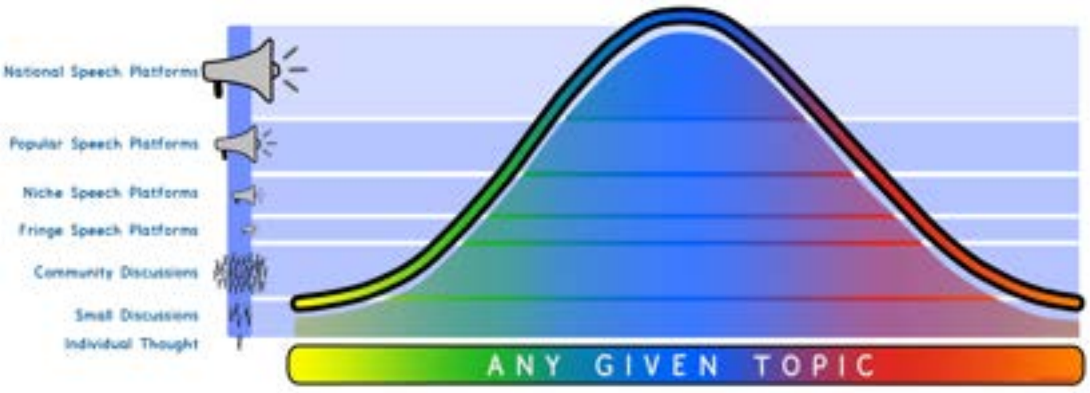
1,097
Why Procrastinators Procrastinate
Like 5.1K
550
The Fermi Paradox
Like 4.9K
1,366
The Elon Musk Series
Like 811
491
How to Pick a Life Partner
Like 2.6K
333
Why Gen Y Yuppies Are Unhappy

MPI is ideas, supplied by speakers ("speakers," in this case, means anyone exerting any form of expression—speech, writing, art, etc.).

The MPI is Outer Self suppliers selling ideas, via expression, to listening Inner Self consumers. So the Speech Curve is the MPI's supply curve. And because people tend to be interested in listening to like-minded people, the top of the Thought Pile can serve as a decent proxy for an MPI demand curve.


THOUGHT PILE
- DEMAND
SPEECH CURVE
- SUPPLY
ANY GIVEN TOPIC

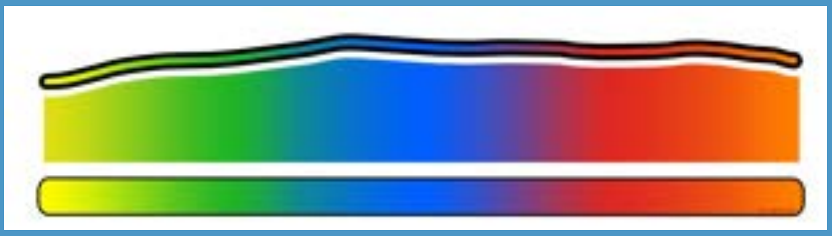
With the First Amendment barring restrictions on expression, attention seekers can take advantage of all parts of the Thought Pile. The most popular viewpoints on each topic reach the largest stages—national media, national politics, pop art—while the supply of less common viewpoints finds some space with the smaller megaphones, like local radio or, today, popular websites or YouTube channels. Even the fringe viewpoints shared by only a small minority of the listener base is satisfied on fringe internet forums or niche podcasts. When the MPI is at equilibrium on a topic with supply and demand matched up, the Speech Curve flops down right on top of the Thought Pile:


National Speech Platforms
Popular Speech Platforms
Niche Speech Platforms
Fringe Speech Platforms
Community Discussions
Small Discussions
Individual Thought
ANY GIVEN TOPIC

The But Wait I Can Think of Examples Where It Doesn't Look Like That Blue Box

You're right. In reality, the MPI is far from a perfect market, leaving many topics looking very different than a smooth bell.

Some topics have a more even distribution of believers across the idea spectrum.



With others, almost everyone is in agreement.

Like 2.2K
1,203

7 Ways to be Insufferable on Facebook
Like 4.9K
956

Putting Time In Perspective
Like 1.9K
550

How to Name a Baby
Like 440
325

Why You Should Stop Caring What Other People Think
Like 3.3K
334

Religion for the Nonreligious
Like 909
821

10 Types of 30-Year-Old Single Guys
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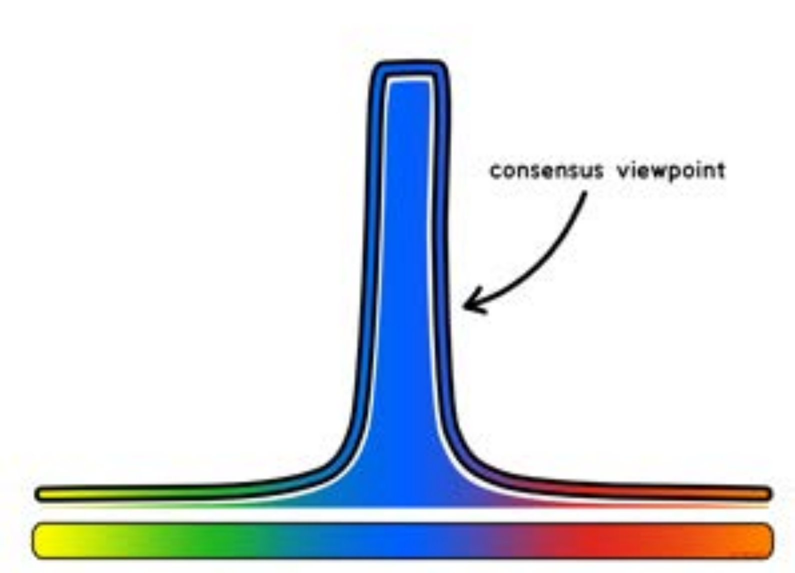
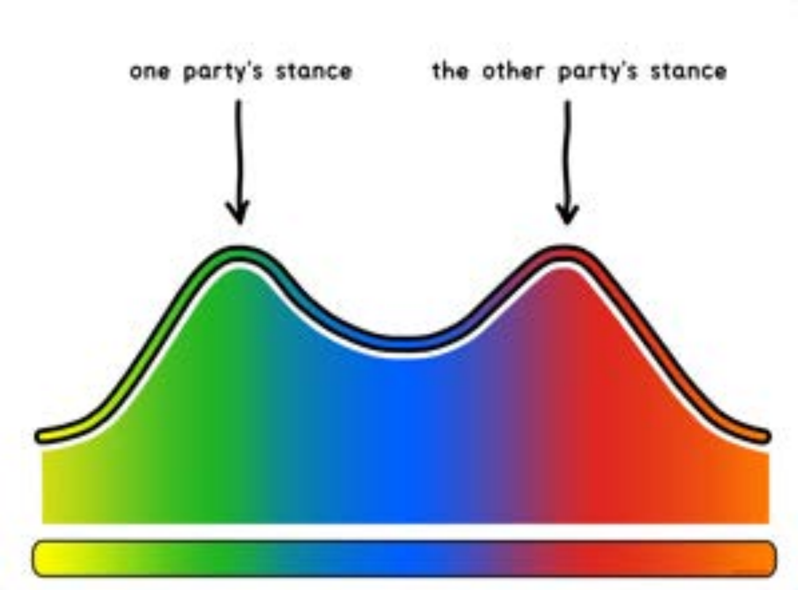
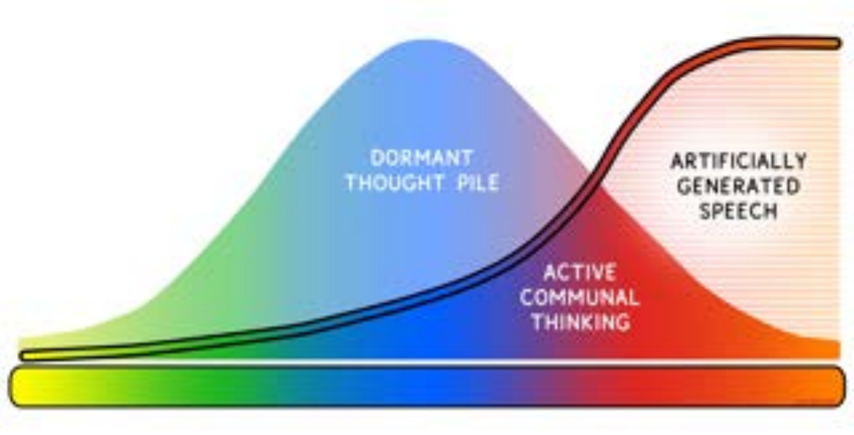

consensus viewpoint

When a topic has become mixed up with a tribal divide, there will be lots of people clumped together into *camps*.


one party's stance
the other party's stance

And sometimes, in spite of the First Amendment, a lot of people are *not* saying what they think about a certain topic—creating Power-Games-style gaps between the Thought Pile and the Speech Curve like we saw in Hypothetica.

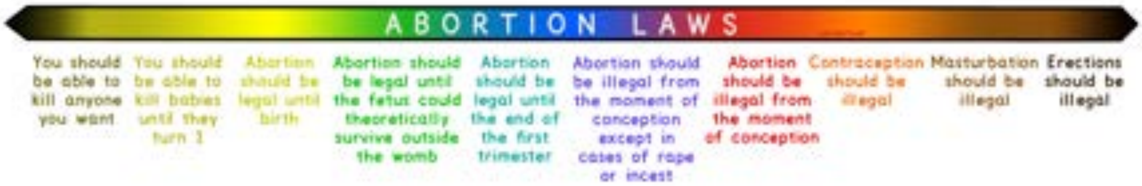

DORMANT THOUGHT PILE
ARTIFICIALLY GENERATED SPEECH
ACTIVE COMMUNAL THINKING

The latter two examples happen when the market is being affected by some external force—usually something going on in the culture. These kinds of marketplace externalities will be a central topic later on in this series. But before we can get into that, we need a strong foundational understanding of how the MPI works *when it's working well*. So for now, we'll

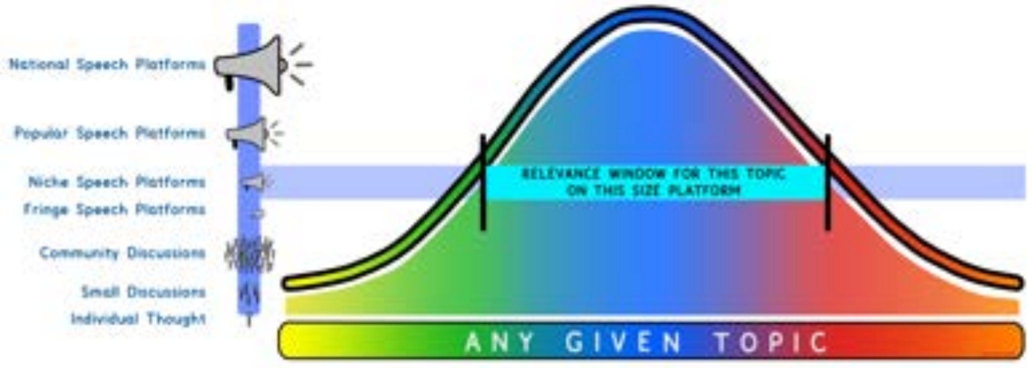
> be dealing in clean, simplified, perfectly aligned bell curves, so we can understand the basic concepts they represent.

Relevance Windows

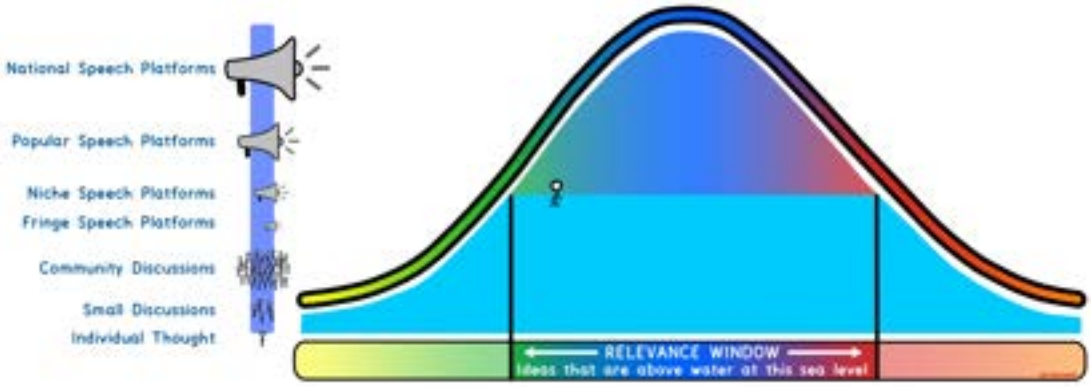
Technically, many thought spectrums can go on endlessly in both directions.


ABORTION LAWS
You should be able to kill anyone you want
You should be able to kill babies until they turn 1
Abortion should be legal until birth
Abortion should be legal until the fetus could theoretically survive outside the womb
Abortion should be legal until the end of the first trimester
Abortion should be illegal from the moment of conception except in cases of rape or incest
Abortion should be illegal from the moment of conception
Contraception should be illegal
Masturbation should be illegal
Erections should be illegal

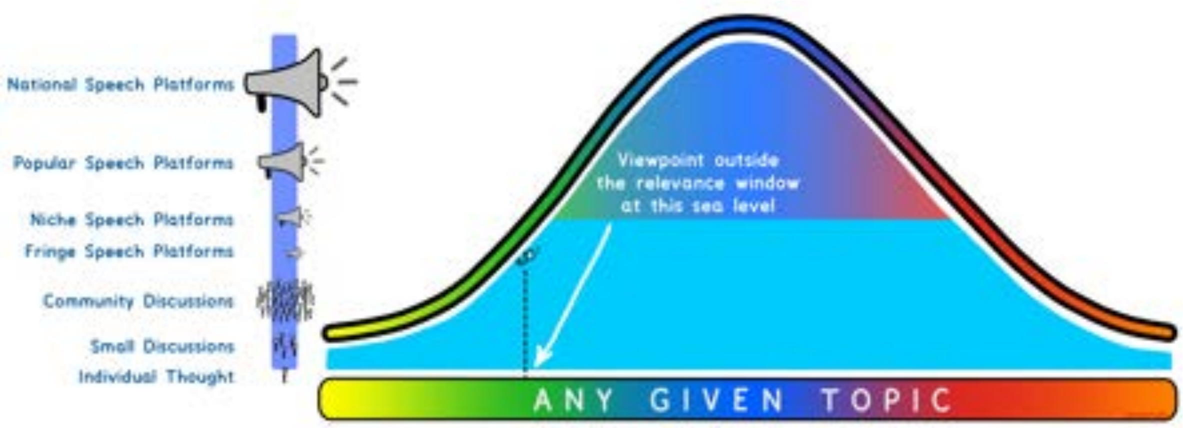
But the MPI has a natural filter to keep discussions within a range it considers reasonable—what we can call a **relevance window**. The relevance window is a concept we discussed in Hypothetica—the portion of the idea spectrum where listener demand is high enough to support attention on that size stage.


National Speech Platforms
Popular Speech Platforms
Niche Speech Platforms
Fringe Speech Platforms
Community Discussions
Small Discussions
Individual Thought
RELEVANCE WINDOW FOR THIS TOPIC ON THIS SIZE PLATFORM
ANY GIVEN TOPIC

For a speaker who wants to gain or maintain sustained attention on a given size stage, it's as if the Thought Pile is filled with *water* up to that level.


National Speech Platforms
Popular Speech Platforms
Niche Speech Platforms
Fringe Speech Platforms
Community Discussions
Small Discussions
Individual Thought
RELEVANCE WINDOW
Ideas that are above water at this sea level

If the speaker expresses too many viewpoints outside of the relevance window, the interest level wanes, "drowning" them out of relevance at that level.

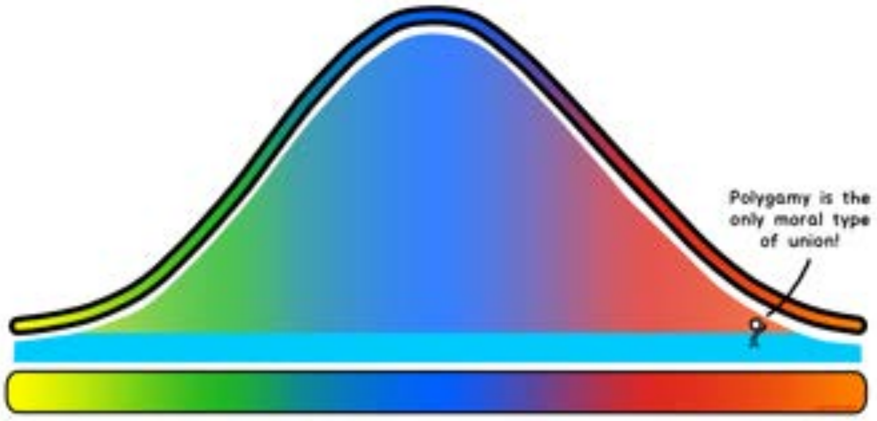

National Speech Platforms
Popular Speech Platforms
Niche Speech Platforms
Fringe Speech Platforms
Community Discussions
Small Discussions
Individual Thought
Viewpoint outside the relevance window at this sea level
ANY GIVEN TOPIC

Businesses in the economic marketplace think about this kind of “sea level” all the time. If someone wants to build a billion-dollar business, they usually need to be offering a product or service that millions of people want—like, say, jeans.

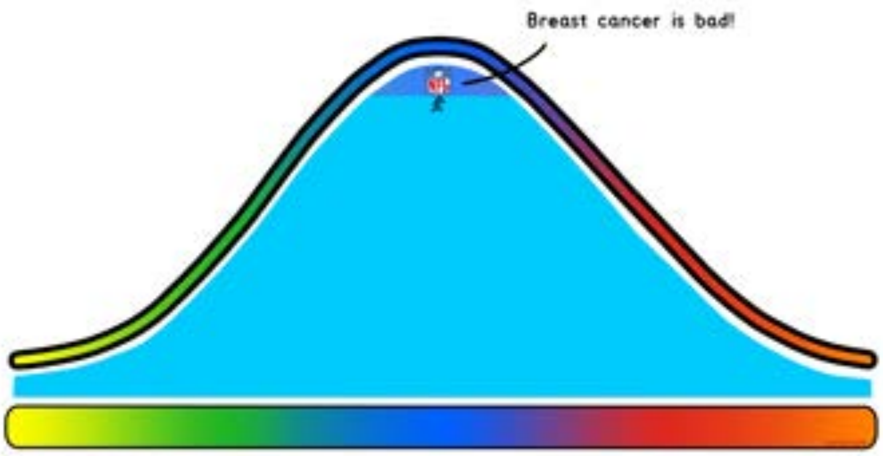
But if that jeans company decides to stop making jeans and start selling Irish kilts instead, they’ll no longer have enough demand to remain at the billion-dollar-company level, and they’ll drown. To survive with their new niche, they’d need to downsize and embrace being a much smaller company, doing business on a lower tier.

Likewise, a speaker on a large stage with a huge mainstream audience can start focusing on more extreme or obscure ideas, but they’ll probably be downgraded by the market to a stage with a lower sea level.

Down on a lower level, the viable relevance window is wide—which is why you can find small podcasts and YouTube channels and blogs and subreddits focusing on almost any topic or promoting almost any viewpoint you can imagine.

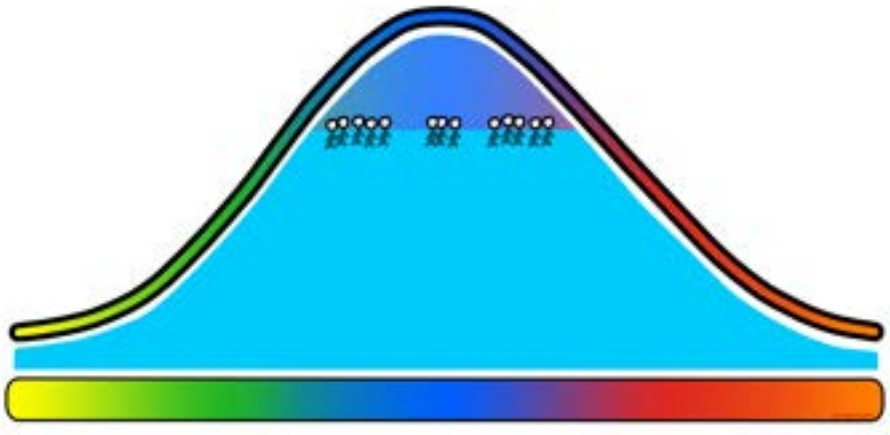

Polygamy is the only moral type of union!

But the MPI imposes a low attention *ceiling* on them. That’s why someone that requires a gigantic stage and widespread approval to stay afloat, like a massive corporation, will usually keep to the most non-controversial possible expression.

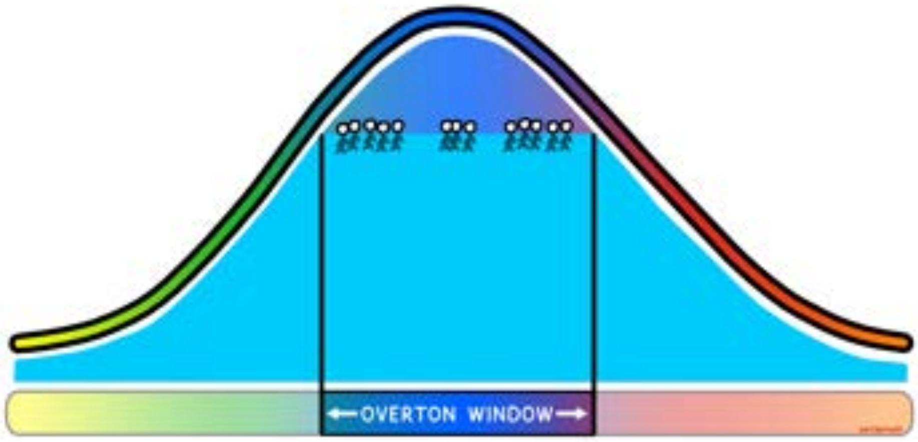

Breast cancer is bad!
NFL

The typical bell curve shape means that as a speaker, you can express far-out viewpoints *or* you can shoot for a super-high attention platform—but you typically cannot do both. ①

This concept applies to politics too. To win national elections, politicians need to appeal to a significant portion of the entire national Thought Pile, leaving them swimming around at a pretty high sea level. ②

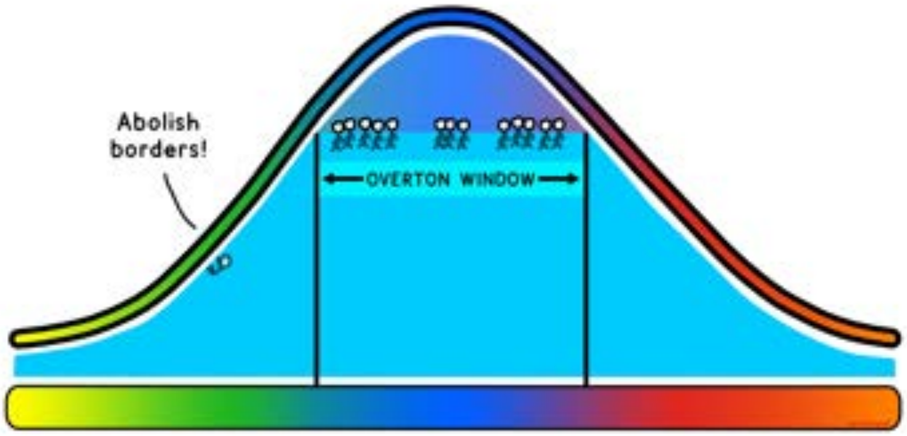


Political sea level sets the boundaries of the national politics relevance window, which actually has its own name in political science: the Overton window.

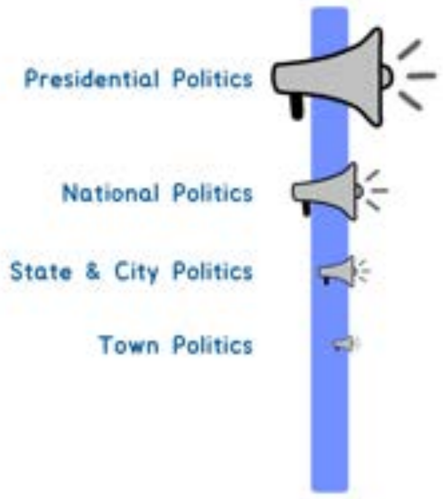


The Overton window is a newish term—named last decade after late political scientist Joseph Overton—but it's a concept as old as democracy itself: that for any political issue at any given time, there's a range of ideas the public will accept as politically reasonable. Positions outside of that range will be considered by most voters to be too radical or too backward or too controversial to be held by a serious political candidate, and holding those positions will render a candidate unelectable.

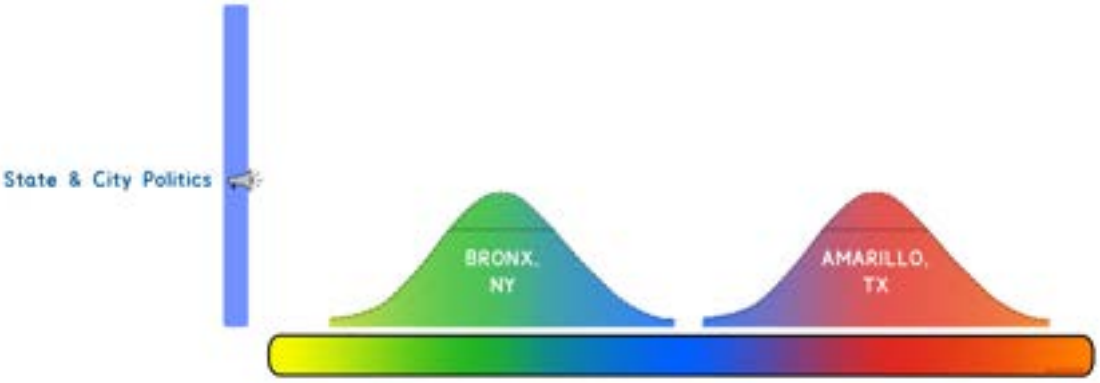
In the U.S., politicians with presidential ambitions who venture outside of this window won't appeal to enough voters to contend in a general election—they'll drown.



But similar to the attention market, the political market spans the vertical tiers.


Presidential Politics
National Politics
State & City Politics
Town Politics

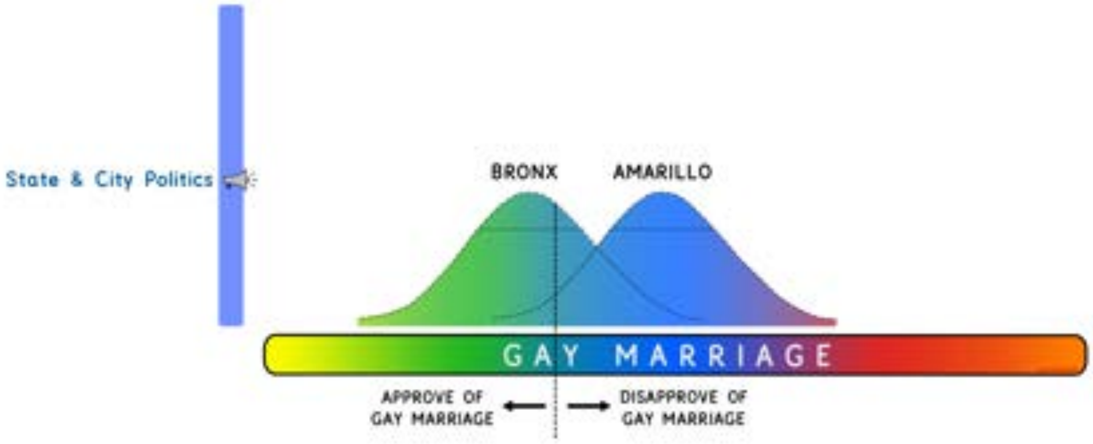
If you're running for a U.S. congress seat in The Bronx or in Amarillo, Texas, your constituency forms a much smaller Thought Pile that's located off the center of the idea spectrum.


State & City Politics
BRONX, NY
AMARILLO, TX

You still need to win a large percentage of that constituency—so you're still dealing with a critical relevance window towards the top of your Thought Pile—but that window allows for, and sometimes requires, less nationally mainstream views.

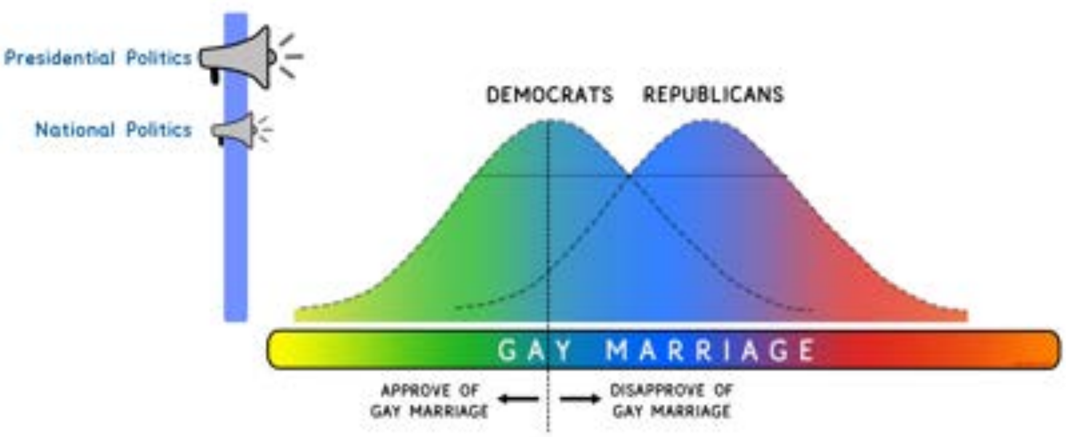
In a totalitarian dictatorship, power flows from the top down. Leaders aren't beholden to any kind of relevance window—so they go wherever they want along the idea spectrum. But a democracy works the opposite direction—bottom-up—as the leaders are forced to be wherever the Thought Pile wants them to be.

A nice example is gay marriage policy in 2008. According to 2008 opinion polls on the topic in Texas and New York, the Bronx and Amarillo Thought Piles looked something like this:


State & City Politics
BRONX
AMARILLO
GAY MARRIAGE
APPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE
DISAPPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE

So it's not surprising that Mac Thornberry, who was running for congress in Texas's 13th district, was anti, while Charles Rangel, who was running for congress in New York 15th district, was pro.

The same year, polls showed that the two national parties' Thought Piles looked something like this:

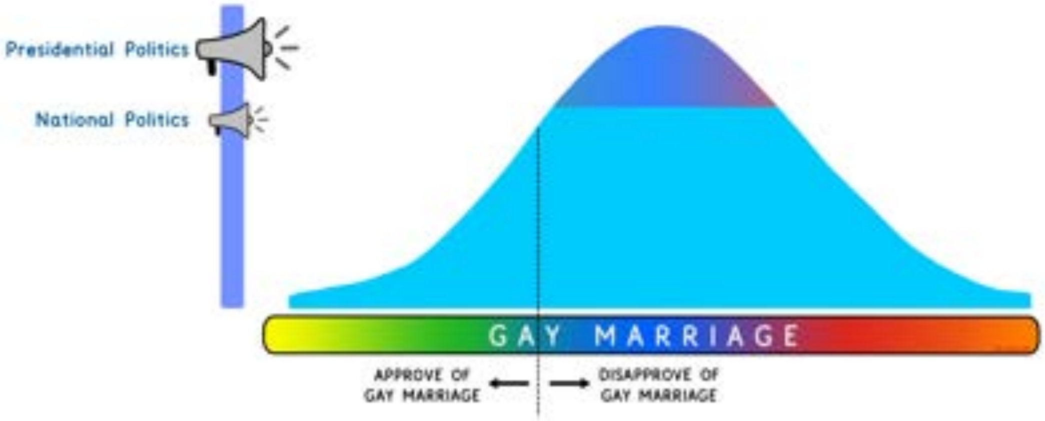

Presidential Politics
National Politics
DEMOCRATS
REPUBLICANS
GAY MARRIAGE
APPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE
DISAPPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE

So it's equally unsurprising that every candidate running in the 2008 Republican presidential primary—McCain, Romney, Huckabee, etc.—held an anti-gay-marriage stance.

But how about the two frontrunners in the Democratic primary: Obama and Clinton?

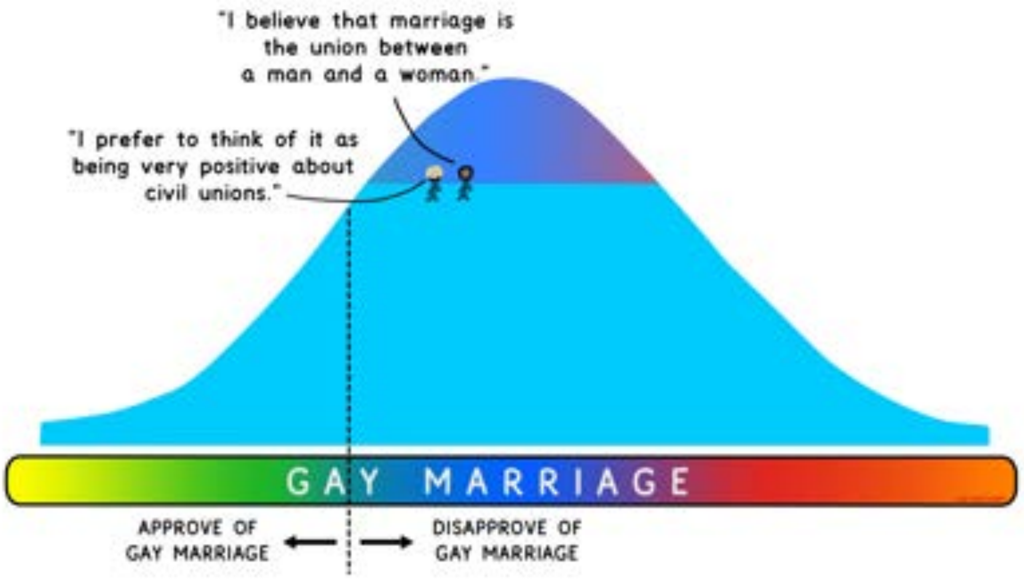
The Democratic Thought Pile suggests that they had the liberty to choose their position on gay marriage. But primary candidates are thinking about *two* Thought Piles—their party's and the entire nation's—since after the primary, they'll also need to win the general election.

And the *national* Thought Pile in 2008 looked more like this:


Presidential Politics
National Politics
GAY MARRIAGE
APPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE
DISAPPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE

The need to win both the primary and general election means politicians are actually bound to an even smaller window—the *intersection* between their party's relevance window and the national Overton window. Go too far towards the center and drown in the primary election; go too far away from the center and drown in the general election.

In the 2008 snapshot of the MPI, the pro-gay-marriage stance wasn't yet inside the Overton window—which is why you heard Obama and Clinton say this:[1]


"I believe that marriage is the union between a man and a woman."
"I prefer to think of it as being very positive about civil unions."
GAY MARRIAGE
APPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE
DISAPPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE

With all of this in mind, let's back up for a second.

What we've discussed so far is a basic *snapshot* of the marketplace of ideas—a picture of what the marketplace looks like at a single moment in time. In reality, there's a lot of other stuff going on in the MPI—stuff like tribalism and virtue signaling and media manipulation and the cudgel of cultural taboo and other fun things in the pit of hell we'll be descending into together later in the series. But we're keeping things simple for now, and the basic concepts of the Thought Pile and Speech Curve—and the relevance windows and attention ceilings yielded by their shapes—is a good starting point.

To most of us, the marketplace snapshot is an intuitive roadmap. Without realizing we're following any specific roadmap, we're all subconsciously aware of the marketplace's supply and demand, its areas of relevance, and its uncrossable lines—and we use this intuition to navigate our way through society. Each subculture, each company culture, each marriage or group of friends is its own little MPI with all of these components in place, and most people abide closely by the various lines and curves—because a culture's marketplace curves are a roadmap to popularity, and diverting off that map is often a roadmap to ostracism. Wannabe comedians and writers and podcasters and artists and entrepreneurs have the shape of their target audience's marketplace curves on the forefront of their minds—because it's a roadmap to acquire the precious attention and respect necessary for success. Politicians have entire teams working day and night to suss out the dimensions of the idea marketplaces of their party and of the country, because for them, it's a career survival instruction manual.

And if that's what you want—popularity, attention, survival—then it makes sense to use the current marketplace curves as guidelines.

But what if you want more?

Abiding by the existing shape of the MPI is an exercise in mimicking the status quo. It's taking what society's brain is already thinking and jumping into the flow to try to get a piece of the action. It's being a cook.

Trying your best to meet existing demand for ideas is trying your best to preach to the choir—to have your voice ascend in the marketplace on a vertical column of attention by preaching a little better than the other preachers—by offering a little crunchier version of the same expression carrot they're already eating.

There's nothing wrong with doing any of that. But it's not leadership.

Leadership is, by definition, leading people *away* from where they already are. If you're preaching to the choir, you're not leading anybody anywhere.

When you're zoomed in on a snapshot, markets are distribution mechanisms that allot coveted, limited resources like wealth or attention. But then we remember the cool thing about markets: when a market is working well, the cumulative effect of all the activity is a giant forward arrow.

When you back up and look at the bigger picture, the economic market is a *progress machine*. When you apply the axis of time to the economy, you see that each market snapshot is a thin slice of a forward progress arrow of technology, of innovation, of efficiency, of prosperity.

Over time, the MPI generates its own giant progress arrow: the growth of both knowledge and wisdom. When a country can think for itself, it gets both smarter and more mature as it ages.

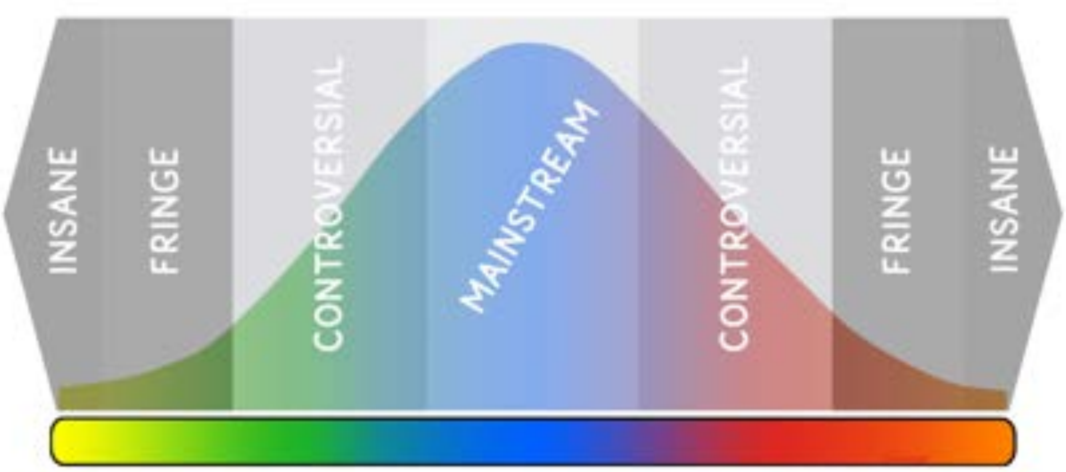
Every individual competing in the economic marketplace is, to some extent, contributing to the big progress arrow. But the chefs—those pushing the mainstream out of their comfort zone—are the primary drivers of change. The entrepreneurs who, instead of building a better hotel, build Airbnb. The tech moguls who, instead of building a better flip phone, build the iPhone. The employees who challenge the company's conventional wisdom instead of kowtowing before it.

Likewise, if you want to do more than preach to the choir in the MPI—if you want to help drive knowledge or wisdom *forward*—you'll need to make the jump from the benign attention market to the brutal *influence* market. You have to roll up your sleeves and go looking for the far less pleasant and far less willing kind of audience—the audience who *doesn't* agree with you—and tell them things they don't like hearing.

You've got to do something a thousand times harder than confirming people's beliefs and validating their identities—you have to *change people's minds.*

Mind-Changing Movements

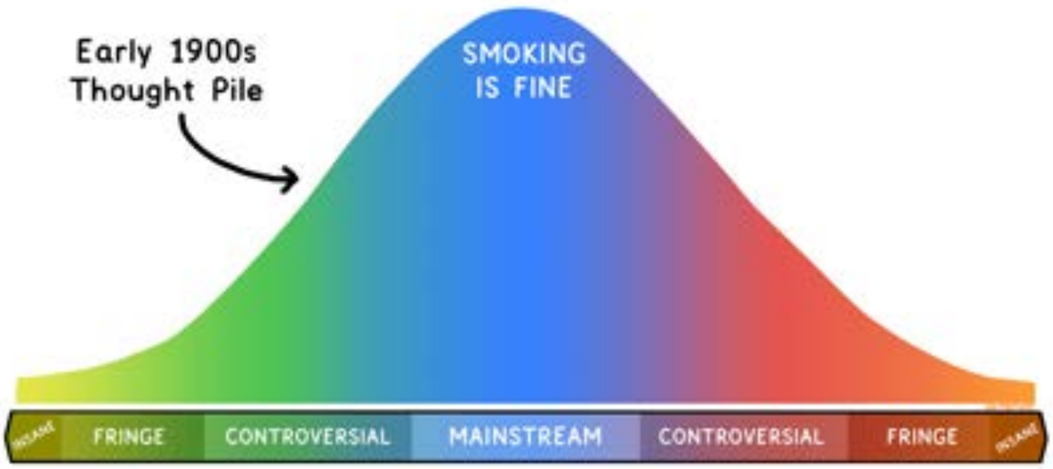
At any given point in time, there will be a wide range of what the people in an MPI believe to be true or good. But the ideas that carry the most power will be those held by the most people—the mainstream ideas.



Typically, the mainstream ideas are what will be taught in schools, what will appear most often in art, what will dictate broad cultural norms, and what will limit the stances held by national politicians. Even though plenty of individual citizens will disagree with them, the ideas at the top of the Thought Pile are what the big *communal* brain "thinks" at any given point in time.

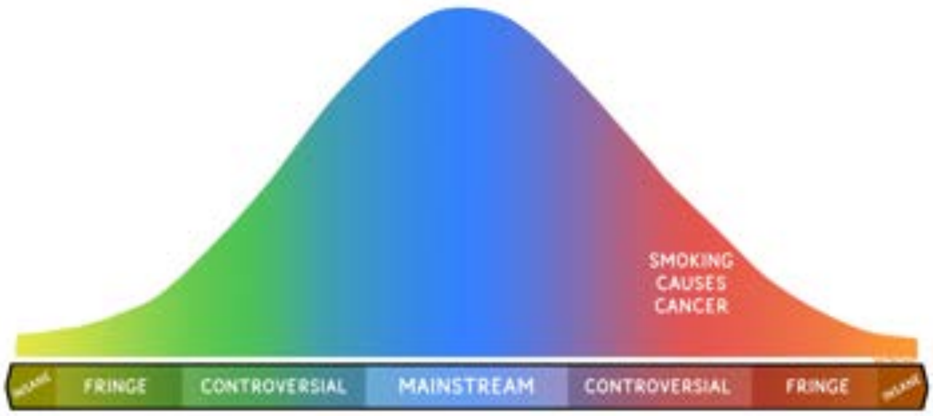
To make real, meaningful change in a country, you have to change the big brain's mind.

The modern cigarette was invented in the 1880s and exploded in popularity in the U.S. in the first half of the 20th century. Americans went from smoking an average of 50 cigarettes per adult per year in 1880 to over 2,000 by the mid-1940s.[2] Throughout these decades, it was a mainstream view among Americans that smoking was a relatively harmless habit.


Early 1900s
Thought Pile
SMOKING
IS FINE
INSANE
FRINGE
CONTROVERSIAL
MAINSTREAM
CONTROVERSIAL
FRINGE
INSANE

The communal U.S. brain believed that smoking was harmless, and everything else fell in line behind that belief. Ads portraying cigarettes in a positive, beneficial light were everywhere. Cigarettes were culturally cool and commonly associated with movie stars and other icons. You could light up in airplanes, restaurants, offices, hospitals, and most other places. Where the big brain goes, everything else follows.

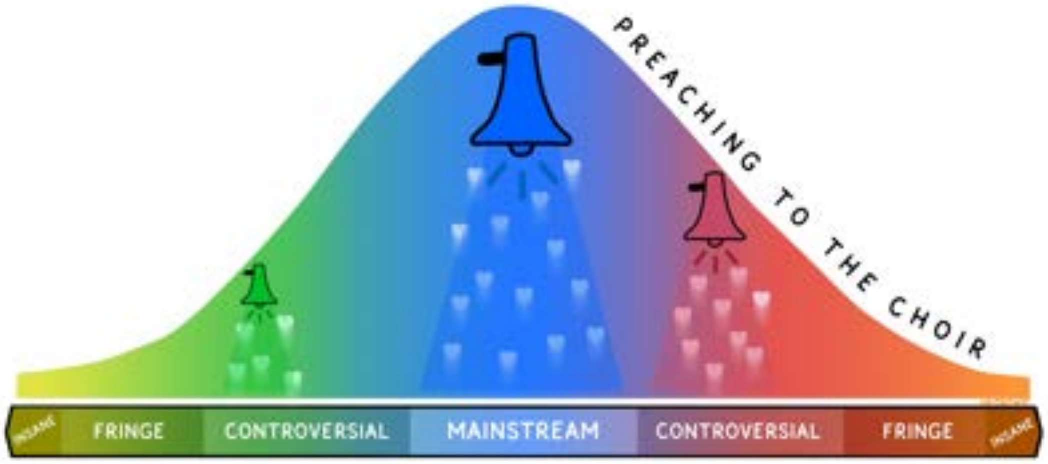
But then there was this other idea out in more controversial territory:


SMOKING
CAUSES
CANCER
INSANE
FRINGE
CONTROVERSIAL
MAINSTREAM
CONTROVERSIAL
FRINGE
INSANE

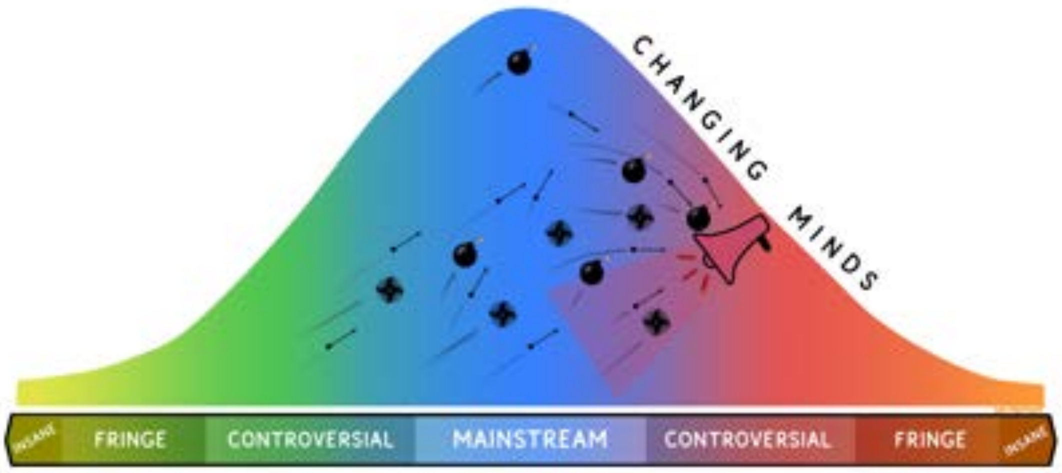
This viewpoint was born in the early part of the century, when research started to appear linking smoking to all kinds of health problems.

People who had come to believe that smoking is dangerous started talking about it.

Preaching to the choir is generally received well, met with a reaction of love or approval. When your mission is to make people feel great about what they already believe, the MPI is usually a pleasant, friendly place.


PREACHING TO THE CHOIR
INSANE
FRINGE
CONTROVERSIAL
MAINSTREAM
CONTROVERSIAL
FRINGE
INSANE

But when you tilt the angle of that megaphone towards people who don't agree with you, the MPI becomes a *gauntlet.*



The MPI gauntlet is especially treacherous for ideas outside the mainstream. People don't like having their beliefs challenged or their favorite habits disparaged. Companies profiting off the status quo *really* don't like dissenting viewpoints. So the new, anti-smoking ideas were attacked from all sides.

Most claims to truth that aim to debunk the mainstream perception of reality turn out to be wrong—and the MPI gauntlet is great at exposing their wrongness. Sometimes a false idea can make a run at it for a while, but the further it gets in widespread adoption, the more viciously the MPI attacks it. When false claims to truth go up against a marketplace free to criticize them, the marketplace almost always wins. Eventually, the falsehoods are shown to be wrong so clearly by the marketplace that all but the most stubborn zealots stop believing them.

But the gauntlet provides a second service. Scattered throughout the haystack of bogus claims are needles of actual truth. The gauntlet, acting selfishly, attacks *all* claims to truth—hay and needle. When it attacks hay, it exposes the claim as hay. But when it attacks a *needle*, the needle stands strong. The more the needle of truth withstands the gauntlet's attacks, the more people begin to adopt the viewpoint as their own. After enough attacks from the gauntlet, a needle still standing is exposed to be *true*. By no intentional goodwill, the same gauntlet that exposes falsehoods *also* exposes truth. The two services make the nastiest side of the MPI—the relentless gauntlet—an efficient *truth-finder* that sifts through hay and identifies the needles.

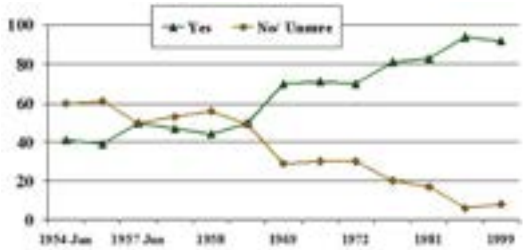
So the gauntlet went full force on "smoking causes cancer," hammering it from every possible angle, trying to expose it as (or at least frame it as) a fear-mongering strand of BS hay.

And for a while, the attacks were effective. Forty years after the early evidence surfaced linking smoking to cancer, a 1954 Gallup survey found that 60% of Americans answered "No" or "Unsure" to the question "Does smoking cause lung cancer?" And in 1953, 47% of Americans smoked cigarettes—including half of all doctors.[3]

But the gauntlet can only hold off a truth needle for so long, and the anti-smoking claims didn't fade away—they only got louder.

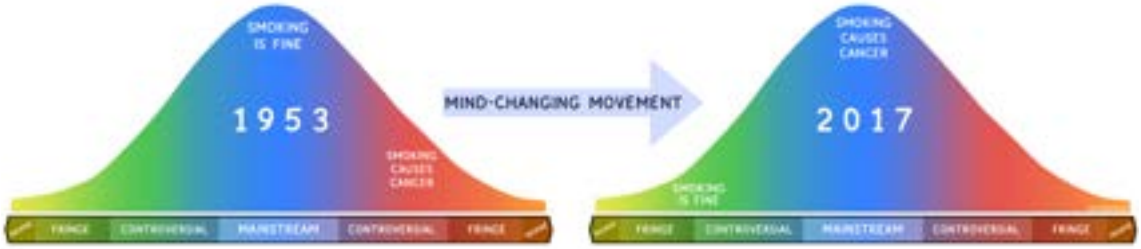
In 1964, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a public report on smoking for the first time, outlining the negative effects. As more and more evidence began to pile up about the dangers of second-hand smoke, more people in the marketplace began to protest cigarette smoking being legal in indoor spaces. Parents whose minds had changed about cigarettes became more likely to prohibit their children from smoking. The culture started to turn against smoking, lowering the prevalence of the cigarette in TV shows. Politicians, noticing the shifting tide of public opinion, began to outlaw cigarette ads, require cigarette companies to display warnings on their labels, and ban smoking in enclosed spaces like restaurants and airplanes, making a smoking habit increasingly inconvenient.

As the big U.S. brain's answer to "Does smoking cause lung cancer?" changed from "No" to "Yes"[4]—

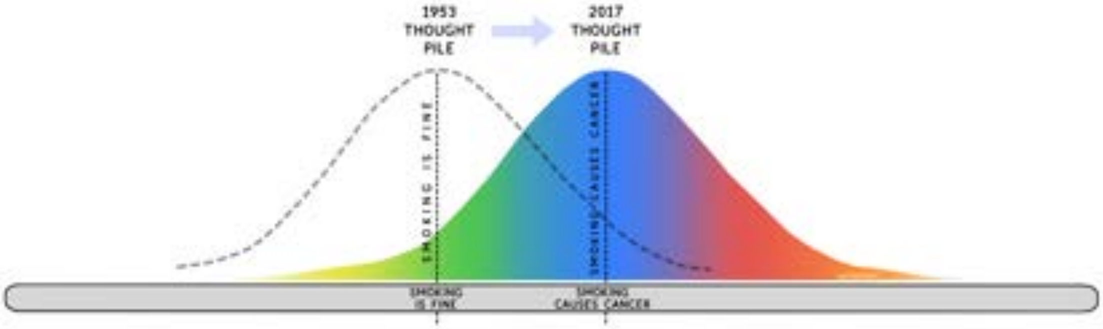


—the percentage of Americans who smoked dropped from 47% in 1953 to 14% in 2017.[5]

The cigarette story is a story of the MPI doing its job. It's a story of a needle of truth rising up from a haystack on the fringes of the big brain's consciousness and piercing its way through a century-long barrage of gauntlet attacks until it had conquered the Thought Pile mountain and *become* the mainstream, status quo viewpoint.


SMOKING IS FINE
1953
SMOKING CAUSES CANCER
MIND-CHANGING MOVEMENT
SMOKING CAUSES CANCER
2017
SMOKING IS FINE
FRINGE
CONTROVERSIAL
MAINSTREAM
CONTROVERSIAL
FRINGE
FRINGE
CONTROVERSIAL
MAINSTREAM
CONTROVERSIAL
FRINGE

The "smoking causes cancer" viewpoint didn't conquer the Thought Pile by climbing it, but rather by *pulling* the Thought Pile to where the viewpoint had always been, along an Idea Spectrum that itself never changed—and in the process, pulling the Thought Pile *away* from the "smoking is fine" viewpoint.


1953 THOUGHT PILE
2017 THOUGHT PILE
SMOKING IS FINE
SMOKING CAUSES CANCER
SMOKING IS FINE
SMOKING CAUSES CANCER

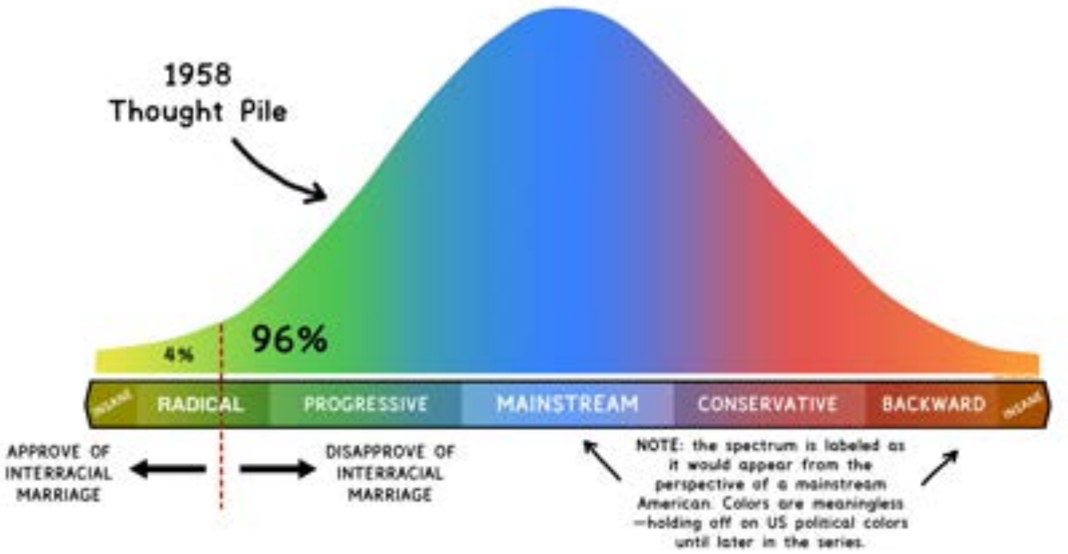
And as the "smoking causes cancer" needle coaxed the Thought Pile to slide itself along the Idea Spectrum towards it, the Thought Pile dragged everything else with it—culture, politics, laws, and behavior. All of this happened against the tremendous force of a large industry's fight for survival—because the little needle had truth on its side, and in a free MPI, truth prevails.

For reasons we discussed in Part 1, we're a species that isn't great at truth. We're built to believe convenient delusions, not to be accurate. Given this fact about us, the MPI isn't just a way for a large group of people to work together to find truth, *it's the only way* for them to do it. As author Jonathan Rauch points out, when someone like Einstein declares his theory of general relativity, there literally is no way to tell if he's a genius or a madman until the "global network of checkers," as Rauch puts it, attacks the theory from all angles, looking for holes, and continually fails.

Little Lulu from Part 1 did the best she could, using her own life experience and her own sense of reason, to turn her mind into a truth filter at that berry bush. The MPI carries out Lulu's process on an industrial scale, in which all the conflicting misconceptions and motivations come together in a great clash, and in the rubble, truth is left standing.

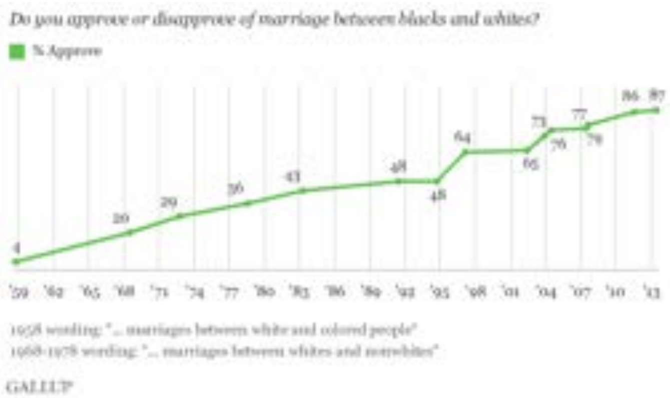
The same marketplace that makes its communal brain more knowledgeable also makes it *wiser*.

In 1958, 96% of Americans disapproved of interracial marriage.[6] The 4% who approved were on the far fringe:


1958
Thought Pile
4%
96%
INSANE
RADICAL
PROGRESSIVE
MAINSTREAM
CONSERVATIVE
BACKWARD
INSANE
APPROVE OF INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE
DISAPPROVE OF INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE
NOTE: the spectrum is labeled as it would appear from the perspective of a mainstream American. Colors are meaningless —holding off on US political colors until later in the series.

Right next to the U.S. brain's perception of what's right and wrong *factually* is its perception of what's right and wrong *morally*. Both knowledge and wisdom are ever-evolving works in progress, and in both cases, the nasty MPI gauntlet is the mechanism that drives that change.

In the case of the U.S. brain's views on interracial marriage, things have changed very quickly, at least by sociological standards. By 2013, only 55 years after 96% of Americans disapproved of interracial marriage, that percentage had dropped to 13%. A complete 180.

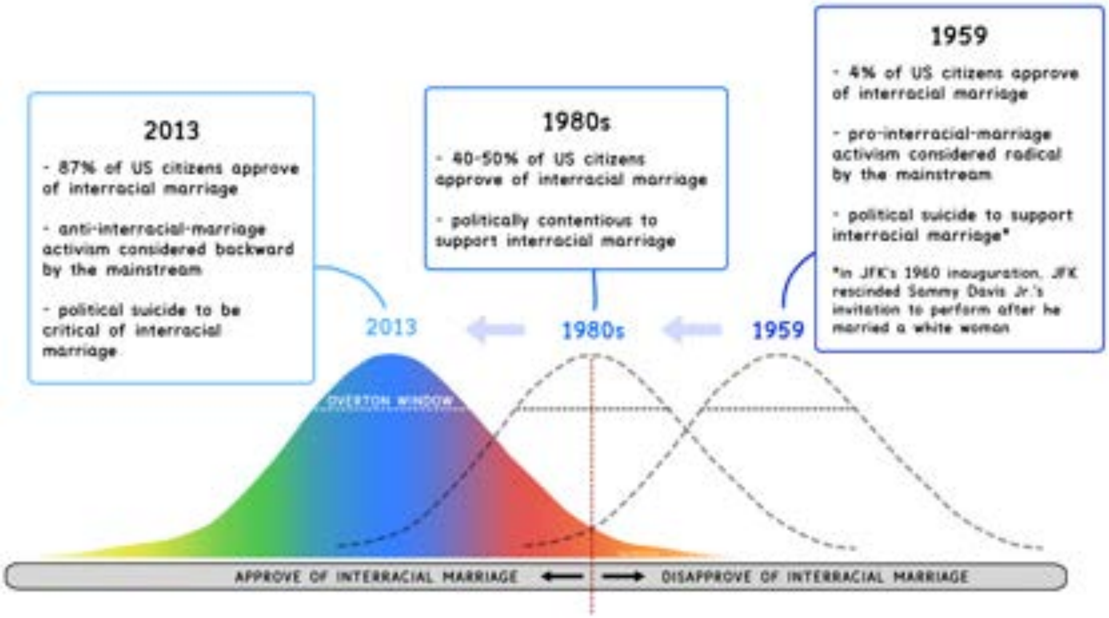


If fringe truth claims are a pile of nonsense hay with a few truth needles inside, fringe claims about *morality* are a pile of dogshit dotted with a few diamonds of wisdom. Most of what the fringe has to say will always be wrong, because the fringe is cluttered with the least knowledgeable and least wise among us. But scattered within that crowd are often the very *wisest* people too.

In 1958, almost every reasonable person in the U.S. thought interracial marriage was an immoral thing. Today, we see this as a failure of wisdom. The 4% who disagreed with them were the wisest people of all when it came to this topic. Their ideas were the diamonds in the dogshit.

The MPI is not kind to factual hay, and it's even less kind to moral dogshit. While those who believe fringe, foolish moral claims are usually positive that those claims are diamonds, the MPI has a bright flashlight, and a sensitive nose, and dogshit doesn't last long in the gauntlet. But when the rare diamond does enter the marketplace from the fringe, the more light that shines on it, the *brighter* it gets. In a half century, the small group of activists wise enough to see that interracial marriage bans were wrong, ridiculous, and unconstitutional, shouted their unpopular ideas into the MPI, igniting a mind-changing movement that spread until the change of mind had reached the center of the U.S. brain's consciousness.

We can look at this story on our idea spectrum.

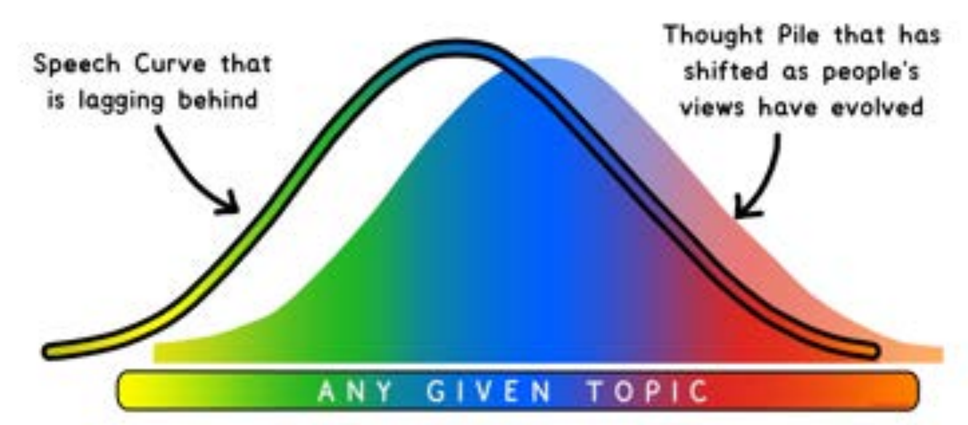

2013
- 87% of US citizens approve of interracial marriage
- anti-interracial-marriage activism considered backward by the mainstream
- political suicide to be critical of interracial marriage
1980s
- 40-50% of US citizens approve of interracial marriage
- politically contentious to support interracial marriage
1959
- 4% of US citizens approve of interracial marriage
- pro-interracial-marriage activism considered radical by the mainstream
- political suicide to support interracial marriage*
*in JFK's 1960 inauguration, JFK rescinded Sammy Davis Jr.'s invitation to perform after he married a white woman
2013
1980s
1959
OVERTON WINDOW
APPROVE OF INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE
DISAPPROVE OF INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE

Starting a mind-changing movement is like starting a fire with flint—it's laborious and sometimes not even possible. But when it gets rolling, it can spread like a forest fire. The history of interracial marriage in the U.S. is another story about the power of a free marketplace of ideas. It's the same power that changed the U.S. brain's mind about duels, about slavery, about child labor, about women's suffrage, about business monopolies, about segregation, and the same power that's currently working out what it thinks about animal rights, and bioethics, and online privacy, and ten other things, many of which seem right now like fringe dogshit to 96% of us.

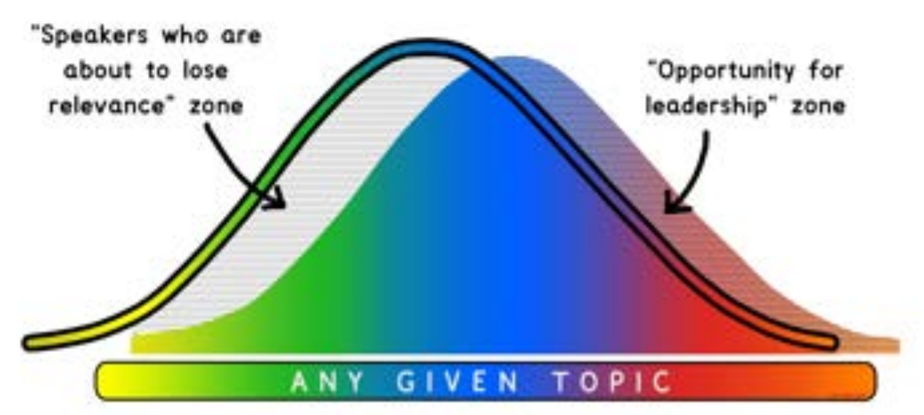
The people who argued for cigarettes and against interracial marriage weren't, on average, worse people or stupider people than today's Americans—just like the medieval scientists who believed the solar system was geocentric weren't less intelligent than today's scientists. Like any individual, a society grows up over time by reflecting on its experience, reconsidering what it believes, and working to evolve for the better. And like an individual, this evolution takes place within society's mind. A society's mind is its marketplace of ideas, and the freer, more open, and more active that marketplace is, the sharper and clearer the giant mind is and the faster the pace of societal growth.

The Extra Thoughts on Leadership Blue Box

All leadership is hard, but some is harder than others. In the above examples, I left out the Speech Curve and just focused on the Thought Pile for simplicity. But in reality, the Speech Curve and Thought Pile move together, each at times being the leader that pulls the other one behind it. In instances when the Thought Pile is the leader, it means that the big brain has quietly changed its mind about something, through lots of small conversations—but no one quite realizes yet just how sweeping a shift has taken place, so people are still timid to say out loud what everyone is thinking. It looks something like this:


Speech Curve that is lagging behind
Thought Pile that has shifted as people's views have evolved
ANY GIVEN TOPIC

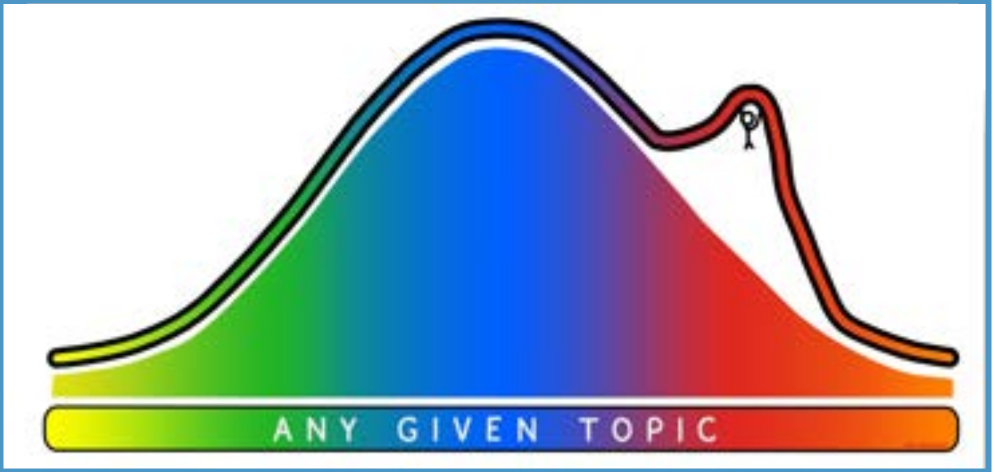
In a case like this, the Speech Curve is outdated for a period of time until people perceptive enough to see the Thought Pile's real location and courageous enough to trust their instincts start speaking up—venturing into this zone on the right:


"Speakers who are about to lose relevance" zone
"Opportunity for leadership" zone
ANY GIVEN TOPIC

If these bold speakers are wrong about where the Thought Pile is, they often end up in trouble, penalized by the market. But when they're right, they're handsomely rewarded. They become iconic stand-up comedians, best-selling authors, and election-sweeping politicians. One example that pops to mind is Obama being like, "Yeah duh I smoked pot. Smoking pot is fun." The widespread assumption at the time was that saying something like that would sink a politician (which is why a few election cycles earlier, Clinton pretended he never inhaled)—but Obama was savvy enough to see that the Thought Pile had shifted and the Speech Curve was lagging behind. And it turned out to be a boost for his popularity.

Saying what everyone is thinking but not saying is a form of leadership. It formalizes a Thought Pile shift that has already happened, clearing the way for everyone else to start saying those things too. A few bold speakers with big platforms are usually all it takes for the whole Speech Curve to shift and realign with the Thought Pile.

Then there are the times when the Speech Curve leads the Thought Pile. This is when someone has the nerve to go here:



This is even riskier than saying something that you suspect is already within the Thought Pile. It will for sure be met with resistance, and there's a strong chance the speaker will be zapped out of relevance by an angry Thought Pile. But if the speaker is good enough—and if they have truth or wisdom on their side—they may be able to change people's minds and pull the Thought Pile over toward their viewpoint. Changing minds is the harder kind of leadership. It requires even more courage than the "say what everyone's thinking" kind, and if it succeeds, it's even more impactful.

Both kinds of leadership are incredibly important. They're both the work of people who have the guts to reason from first principles and act on that reasoning. And most movements are probably the result of a bit of both forms of leadership. In this way, the Thought Pile and Speech Curve are a tag team, each taking the reins at times when the other is lagging behind, working together to drive the country's evolution.

The MPI is an attention market, a knowledge market, and a wisdom market—all rooted, like the economic and political markets, in the fundamental American freedom-fairness compromise: *everyone has an equal opportunity to compete, but no one has a right to succeed.* Anyone is free to run for office, start a business, express their opinions, or become an activist—but to actually acquire power, wealth, attention, and influence, you have to earn it from your fellow citizens on the playing field.

But Value Games markets are fragile, and they rely on clear rules. The status quo has a fierce survival instinct, which is why leaders in any market will be met with resistance—and what matters most is the *type* of resistance. In the Power Games, with the looming threat of imprisonment or execution for saying something unpopular with the wrong people, the opponents of cigarettes and the proponents of interracial marriage may have never spoken up in the first place. But the Constitution alters the rules of the game, taking the exact same selfish resistance and transforming it from a gauntlet of harmful cudgels into a gauntlet of harmless *criticism,* limiting it to attacking the dissent itself, not the dissenter. This kind of resistance, rather than repressing fringe viewpoints, *tests* them—forming a filter that pushes falsehoods and foolishness down and lifts truth and virtue *up*. In the same way that a free economic market harnesses human selfishness and points it toward progress and innovation, a free marketplace of ideas transforms selfishness into a compass that points the country in the direction of knowledge and wisdom.

Which brings me back to Obama and Clinton and 2008.

Jonathan Rauch, the author I mentioned earlier, is also a gay activist. He describes what it was like to be gay in the U.S. in 1960:[7]

> *Gay Americans were forbidden to work for the government; forbidden to obtain security clearances; forbidden to serve in the military. They were arrested for making love, even in their own homes; beaten and killed on the streets; entrapped and arrested by the police for sport; fired from their jobs. They were joked about, demeaned, and bullied as a matter of course; forced to live by a code of secrecy and lies, on pain of opprobrium and unemployment; witch-hunted by anti-Communists, Christians, and any politician or preacher who needed a scapegoat; condemned as evil by moralists and as sick by scientists; portrayed as sinister and simpering by Hollywood; perhaps worst of all, rejected and condemned, at the most vulnerable time of life, by their own parents. America was a society permeated by hate: usually, it's true, hateful ideas and assumptions, not hateful people, but hate all the same. So ubiquitous was the hostility to homosexuality that few gay people ever even dared hold hands in public with the person they loved.*

In a Power Games country, a topic like gay rights, considered deeply offensive to most people in 1960, almost certainly would have been censored. By censoring anything it considers dogshit, the society also censors that critical wise 4% that drives most of the growth.

But in a U.S. hell-bent on free speech, Rauch tells the story of how things changed:

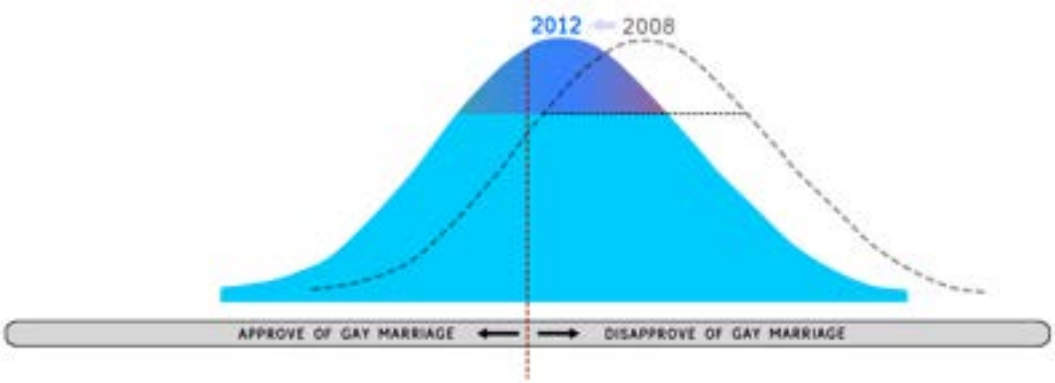
> *In ones and twos at first, then in streams and eventually cascades, gays talked. They argued. They explained. They showed. They confronted. … As gay people stepped forward, liberal science engaged. The old anti-gay dogmas came under critical scrutiny as never before. "Homosexuals molest and recruit children"; "homosexuals cannot be happy"; "homosexuals are really heterosexuals"; "homosexuality is unknown in nature": The canards collapsed with astonishing speed.*
>
> *What took place was not just empirical learning but also moral learning. How can it be wicked to love? How can it be noble to lie? How can it be compassionate to reject your own children? How can it be kind to harass and taunt? How can it be fair to harp on one Biblical injunction when so many others are ignored? How can it be just to penalize what does no demonstrable harm? Gay people were asking straight people to test their values against logic, against compassion, against life. Gradually, then rapidly, the criticism had its effect. You cannot be gay in America today and doubt that moral learning is real and that the open society fosters it.*

It took a while to get there, but by 2008, the U.S. brain had given both the truth and wisdom regarding homosexuality a lot of reflection, and it had changed its mind considerably on the topic.

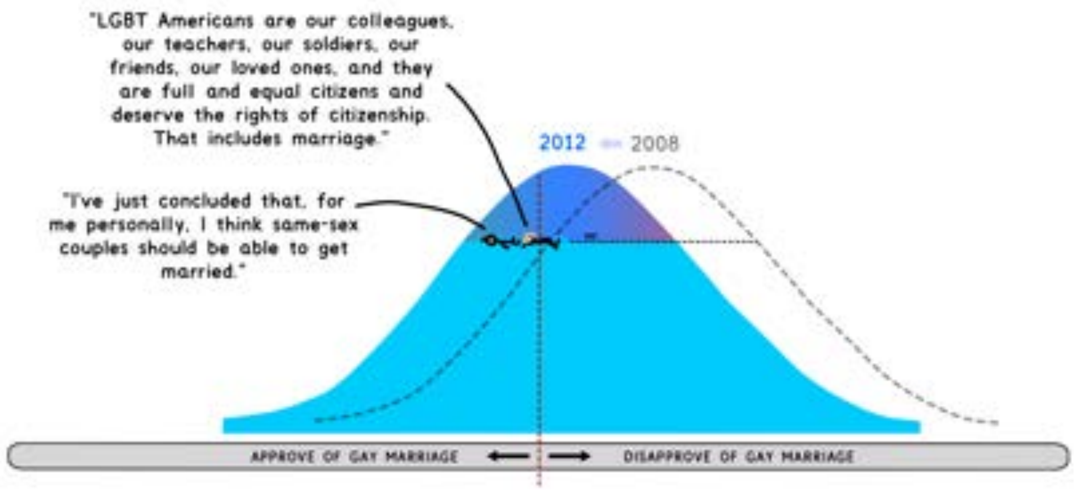
But as we were reminded above, it hadn't quite changed its mind on gay *marriage* yet.

Sensing that the pro-gay-marriage stance was still below political sea level, Obama and Clinton decided to pander to the status quo beliefs and play it safe.

But a mind-changing movement had caught fire and the national Thought Pile was on the move. Only four years later, things were here:


2012
2008
APPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE
DISAPPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE

And in a wild coincidence, Obama and Clinton's views on gay marriage had both *evolved:*[8]


"LGBT Americans are our colleagues, our teachers, our soldiers, our friends, our loved ones, and they are full and equal citizens and deserve the rights of citizenship. That includes marriage."
"I've just concluded that, for me personally, I think same-sex couples should be able to get married."
2012
2008
APPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE
DISAPPROVE OF GAY MARRIAGE

The Supreme Court had undergone the same sudden coincidental change of heart, and in 2015, they voted to legalize gay marriage across the country.

While most of us are busy arguing about whatever's being debated within the Overton window, big picture change is being driven by a second set of battles happening outside the window—battles about *exactly where the edges of the window lie*. Or as Overton's think tank puts it, "the ongoing contest among media and other political actors about what counts as legitimate disagreement." In this second set of battles, proponents of a policy outside the Overton window fight to simply get their policy into the window—that's the hard part. Then they can worry about winning the inevitable battle over that policy that will ensue *within* the window. Meanwhile, opponents of that policy will fight fiercely to keep the policy outside the window, where it's deemed unacceptable to even be debated. That's the best way to prevent it from happening. ③

If you live in a democracy, and you're not zoomed out far enough, you might look at the politicians running your government and mistake them for your leaders. In the short term, sure, they jostle with each other over the country's policies and steer the country on the international stage. But with a step back, the real long-term leader of a democracy is the giant communal brain of the citizen body. Politicians are all about principles…as long as those principles fit on the top of the country's Thought Pile, safely inside the Overton window. But when that Thought Pile moves, like it did on the topic of gay marriage between 2008 and 2012, politicians drop everything and start *swimming*.

This is no criticism of politicians—being a small-picture leader and a big-picture follower is the politician's survival requirement. It's simply a reminder that change in a country like the U.S. starts at the bottom and works its way up to the top. It starts with brave citizens willing to say unpopular things in public. With the right idea and a lot of courage, a single person can spark a mind-changing movement that gains so much momentum, it moves our beliefs and our cultural norms, which in turn moves the Overton window, which moves policy, which moves law.

Whenever a citizen of a democracy speaks up in a classroom or town hall, writes an op-ed, makes a movie, tweets a tweet, or yells something out on the street, they're sending an idea out into the great network—firing a little neural impulse into the workings of the larger system. Every citizen, whether they realize it or not, is a neuron in the mind of a giant organism, and what they do and say in their lifetime contributes to who that organism is, even if only a little bit.

But all of this only works because of free speech. All of those Thought Piles only ooze along the idea spectrum with a mind of their own because they're protected from above by the broad arc of a free and protected Speech Curve.

It's easy to see why free speech is often referred to as not just a right but as *the* fundamental right on which all other rights are based.

Free speech allows the precious resource of attention to be allotted the Value Games way instead of being doled out by the powerful and high-status at their whim.

Free speech gives citizens a way to resolve conflicts with words instead of violence. When ideas can go to battle against each other, people don't have to.

Free speech gives power to the powerless. It's never easy being in the minority in any country. The rich are protected and empowered by their money, the elite by their connections, the majority by their vote. A minority population is often helpless. But free speech gives the powerless a voice—an ability to launch a mind-changing movement that wins over the majority and makes the country better for themselves.

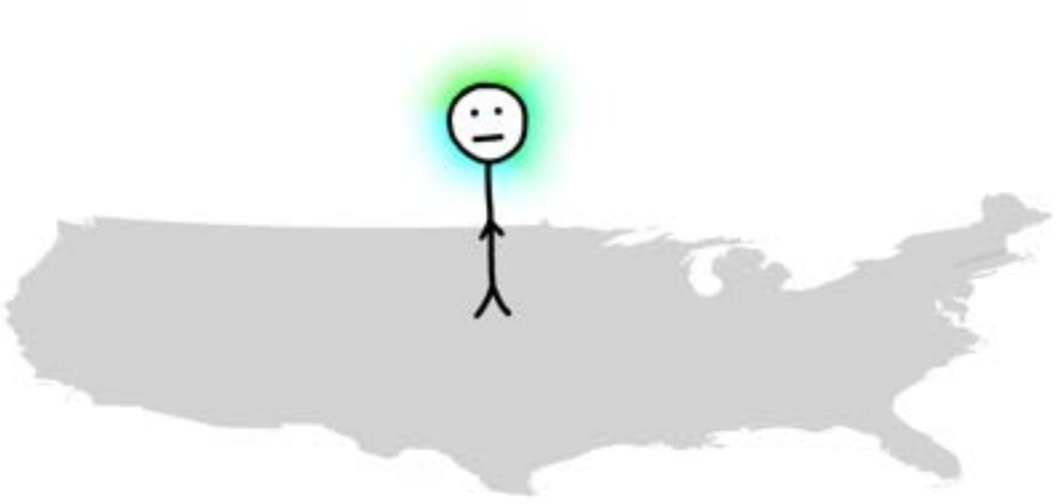
The free speech of individual citizens is the free *thought* of the communal citizen body, and the singular right that lets hundreds of millions of minds link together into a giant network that can learn, grow, and think as one. Society is driven by the stories we believe, and free speech hands authorship of those stories over to the people themselves.

And it's for all these same reasons that Power Games dictators clutch so tightly onto their mute buttons. Even today, over two centuries after the birth of the U.S., almost three billion human beings[9] are still deprived of freedom of speech or other core Enlightenment freedoms.

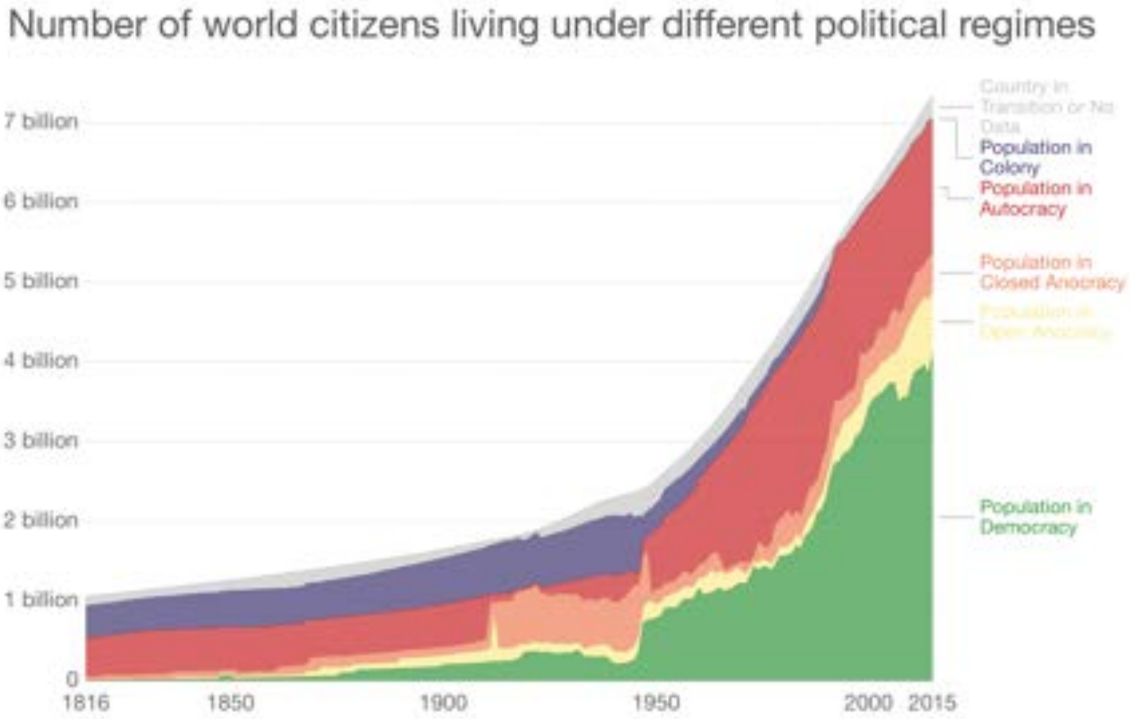
But dictators aren't the only ones who use mute buttons. Given all of the obvious benefits of free speech, when a culture or a movement or an individual citizen seems threatened by free speech, the first question you should ask is: "Why? What are they so scared of?" Free speech is a tool that helps us see what's true versus false and right versus wrong—so if you believe truth and virtue are on your side, a vibrant, open discourse is your best friend. And if someone is trying to repress free speech—that tells us something important.

Mute buttons in any form should raise an alarm in all of our heads, though they sometimes seem to go unnoticed. When all you've ever known is freedom, it can be easy to forget just how precious it is.

In a world of Power Games, the American forefathers built a different kind of giant—one that didn't need to be controlled with strings and cudgels because it could think for itself and make its own decisions. A giant human being.



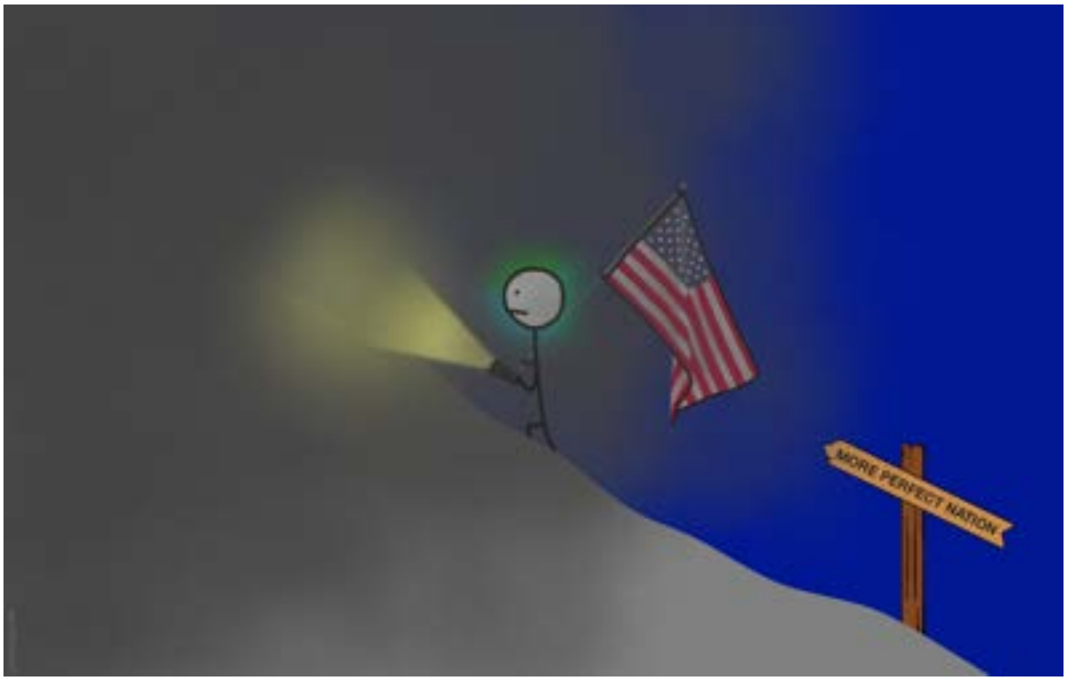
In the late 1700s when the U.S. was born, it was a bit of an oddball on the global scene. But the new country quickly began to thrive. This wasn't the first time a society replaced an iron cudgel with a constitution—but one had never been done so effectively, on so broad a scale, in modern times. Soon, countries run by constitutions, driven by minds of their own, began springing up all over the world.[10]



Data Source: World Population by Political Regime they live in (OWID (2016))
Image Source: Our World In Data (click the image for more graphs)

The founders knew that they didn't have all the answers. They knew that over time the world would change, the citizens would change, and unpredictable things would happen. They were wise enough to know that no matter how smart they were, their country was a first draft—United States 1.0. The U.S. was a promising child who would need to grow up into a more perfect nation.

So they built a nation that was founded on doubt, not certainty. With a mysterious, foggy future ahead, free speech would give the new nation a way to figure things out as it went: a flashlight to help see the truth, a compass that would help point it towards wisdom, and a mirror that would help an orphan child raise itself.



But when you're dealing with humans, nothing is easy.

Taking the human out of the Power Games is one thing—taking the Power Games out of the human is quite another. Enlightenment-born constitutions put the Primitive Mind in a cage, but just how strong are those bars?

While the Value Games may be the official way of doing business in the U.S., at the core of every U.S. citizen and government official runs a piece of primitive software that speaks a more ancient language

—and in U.S. society, the shadow of a cudgel sometimes seems to loom where it's not supposed to.

Is the U.S. the Enlightenment come to life? Or is it the Power Games, wearing an Enlightenment disguise?

Probably a little of both.

The U.S. is a story of a nation's struggle for security, for power, for progress, for wealth. But mostly, it's a story of a nation's struggle against itself.

Sounds a little like each of us, doesn't it?

That's the thing about building a giant human being. You get the whole package—on a giant scale.

In this post, we got to know how the U.S. works on the surface. But to accomplish our goal in this series—to understand modern societies well enough that we can figure out how to make things better—we'll need to go deeper. To really understand society, we'll need to take a closer look at a miniature version of it.

You.

Chapter 7: The Thinking Ladder

To keep up with this series, sign up for the **Wait But Why email list** and we'll send you the new posts right when they come out.

Huge thanks to our Patreon supporters for making this series free for everyone. To support Wait But Why, **visit our Patreon page**.

Three other places we can hang out:

1) Your odd friendships: **10 types of odd friendships you're probably a part of**

2) All the wealth in the world: **What could you buy with $241 trillion?**

3) Creepy upsetting children in old ads: **Creepy kids in creepy vintage ads**

Sources and related reading:

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. The old classic.

I cited author and activist **Jonathan Rauch** a few times in this post. He's one of the best at articulating why free speech matters. The long quote I included in this post is part of **this excerpt** from Rauch's excellent book ***Kindly Inquisitors*.**

Economist **Max Roser's** incredibly useful site ***Our World in Data*.** Specifically, **the page on democracy**.

It's an ongoing debate just how much a country like the U.S. is led by the citizen body vs. by politicians vs. by other components like the media. One interesting take that contradicts the idea that the people lead and politicians follow can be found in **John Medearis's** book ***Joseph Schumpeter's Two Theories of Democracy*.** He argues that democracy is more a mechanism that fosters competition among leaders, merely held in check by the electoral process.

You can find the ongoing list of sources, influences, and related reading for this series here.

❮ Previous Post Next Post ❯

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The Thinking Ladder

163
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ember 27, 2019 By Tim Urban

s Chapter 7 in a blog series. If you're new to the series, visit the ***series home page*** *for ll table of contents.*

NOTES KEY

① = **fun notes:** fun facts, extra thoughts, further explanation

□ = **less fun notes:** sources and citations

Part 3: Thinking, in 3D

"The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves and wise people so full of doubts." – Bertrand Russell

Chapter 7: The Thinking Lad

Why do we believe what we believe?

We've talked about a lot of ideas in this series so far, but a common theme that runs through most of them is human belief. Our beliefs make up our perception of reality, they drive our behavior, and they shape our life stories. History happened the way it did because of what people believed in the past, and what we believe today will write the story of our future.

So it seems like an important question to ask: Why do we actually come to believe the things we end up believing?

To figure that out, we have to get good at seeing human thinking in 3D. By the time you finish Part 3, you'll understand what I mean by that.

For now, let's get used to seeing in 2D. That's our mission in this chapter.

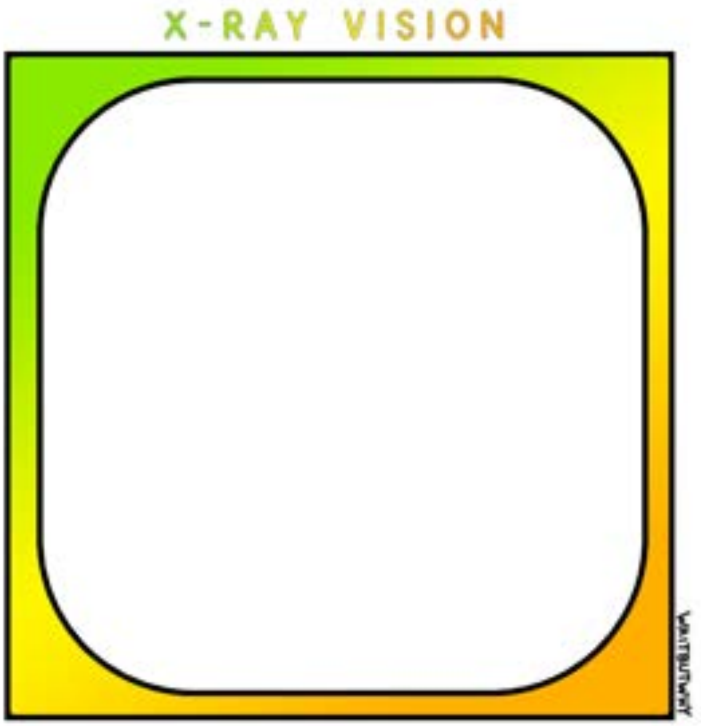
Seeing in 2D

The first dimension, as we're defining dimensions, is the *What* of life. It's what we see around us, what goes on in society, what people say and do, what they believe.

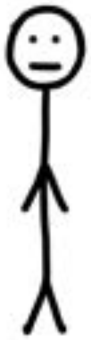
Looking at everything in one dimension just shows us what's on the surface of all these parts of reality. But when we lift the covers off the What of life and look at what lies beneath, we're reminded that there's a second dimension to everything as well.

To see in 2D, we're going to need x-ray goggles:

Join 608,367 other humans and have new posts emailed to you.
email address
SEND ME NEW POSTS
Follow these special men
412,637
634,264
130,240
RANDOM POST BUTTON
Popular Posts
The AI Revolution
Like 11K
1,097
Why Procrastinators Procrastinate
Like 5.1K
550
The Fermi Paradox
Like 4.9K
1,366
The Elon Musk Series
Like 811
491
How to Pick a Life Partner
Like 2.6K
333
Why Gen Y Yuppies Are Unhappy

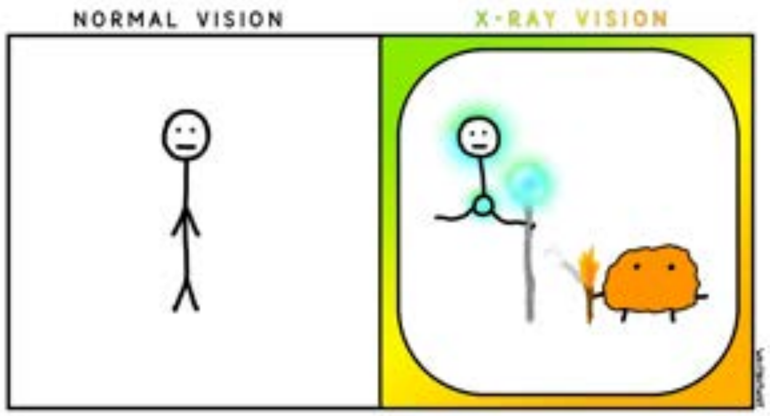


Without these goggles, we'd look at a human and just see this:



That's what a human looks like in one dimension. That's the *What* of a human, and it includes all of the aspects of their behavior, their beliefs, and their personality.

But when we put on our goggles, we look at the same human and see this:



Many of the human world's mysteries become a lot less mysterious when we put on our x-ray goggles. With x-ray vision, we can see the inner psychology that lies behind the scenes of every human What.

Like 2.2K
1,203

7 Ways to be Insufferable on Facebook
Like 4.9K
956

Putting Time In Perspective
Like 1.9K
550

How to Name a Baby
Like 440
325

Why You Should Stop Caring What Other People Think
Like 3.3K
334

Religion for the Nonreligious
Like 909
821

10 Types of 30-Year-Old Single Guys
Like 494
662

The Tail End
Like 25K
293

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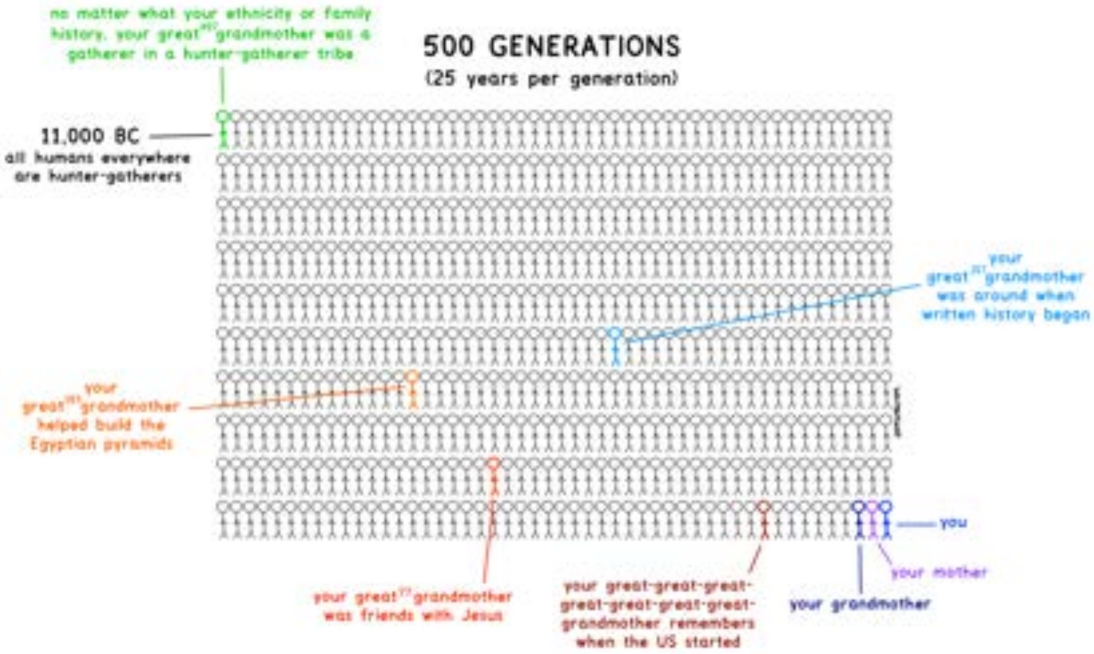
412,637
634,264
130,240

Quick review:

As we discussed in Chapter 1, the animal world is really a world of strands of genetic code, each in a never-ending quest for immortality. Animals are just the biological containers that genes use as temporary homes during this quest. And to control their containers, genes have their animals running on primitive automated software that I'm pretty sure looks a lot like this:

The Primitive Mind in every animal—humans included—has been optimized to near perfection at getting animals to survive long enough to pass their precious genes along to new containers.

Scientists aren't positive about the timeline, but many believe that all humans in all parts of the world lived in hunter-gatherer tribes as recently as 11,000 BC. So 13,000 years ago—or, if we call a generation 25 years, about 500 generations ago.


no matter what your ethnicity or family history, your great^{497}grandmother was a gatherer in a hunter-gatherer tribe
500 GENERATIONS
(25 years per generation)
11,000 BC
all humans everywhere are hunter-gatherers
your great^{201}grandmother was around when written history began
your great^{181}grandmother helped build the Egyptian pyramids
you
your mother
your grandmother
your great^{77}grandmother was friends with Jesus
your great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother remembers when the US started

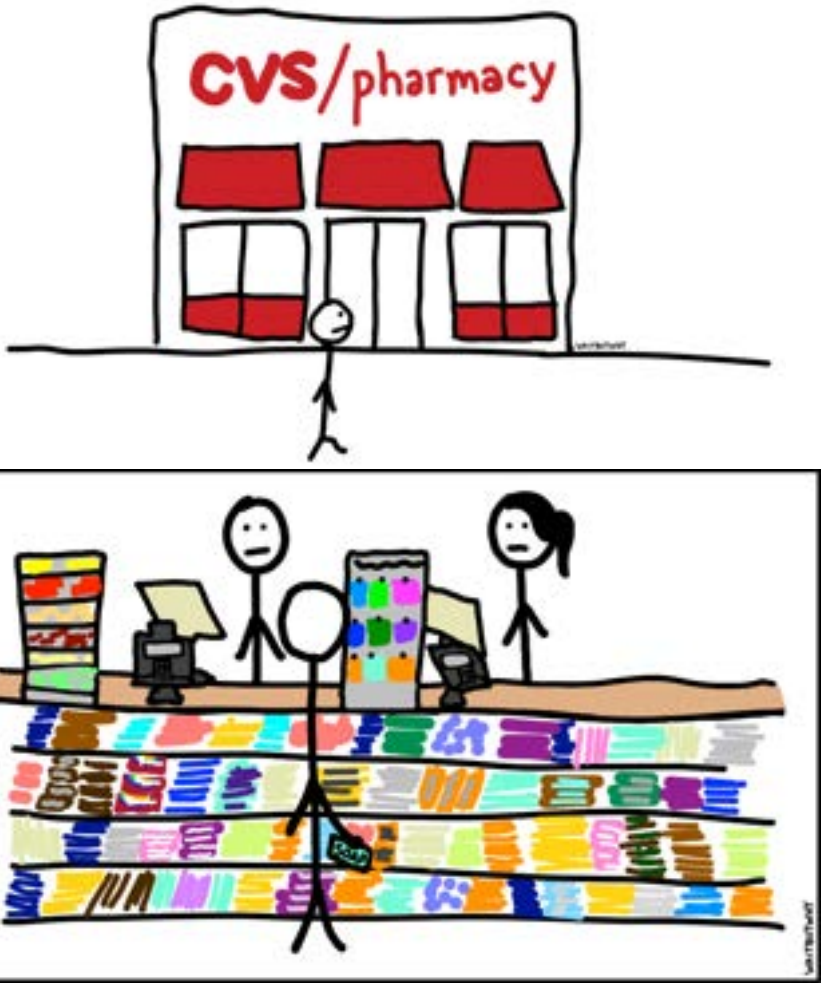
500 generations isn't enough time for evolution to take a shit. So the Primitive Mind—a hardwired part of us—is still stuck in the world of 11,000 BC. Which means we're all like computers running on the highly unimpressive *Windows 11000 BC* operating system, and there's no way to do a software update.

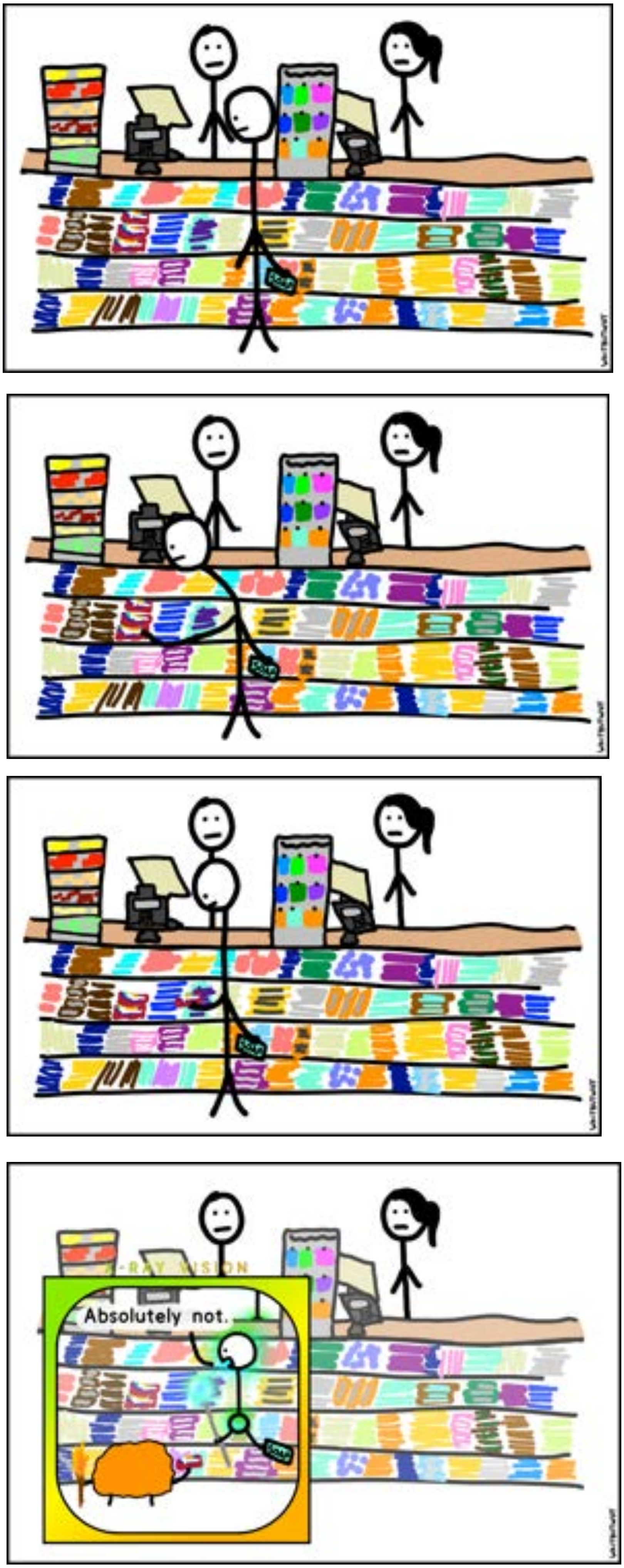
But humans have something else going on as well—cognitive superpowers that combine together into an enhanced center of consciousness we're calling the Higher Mind.

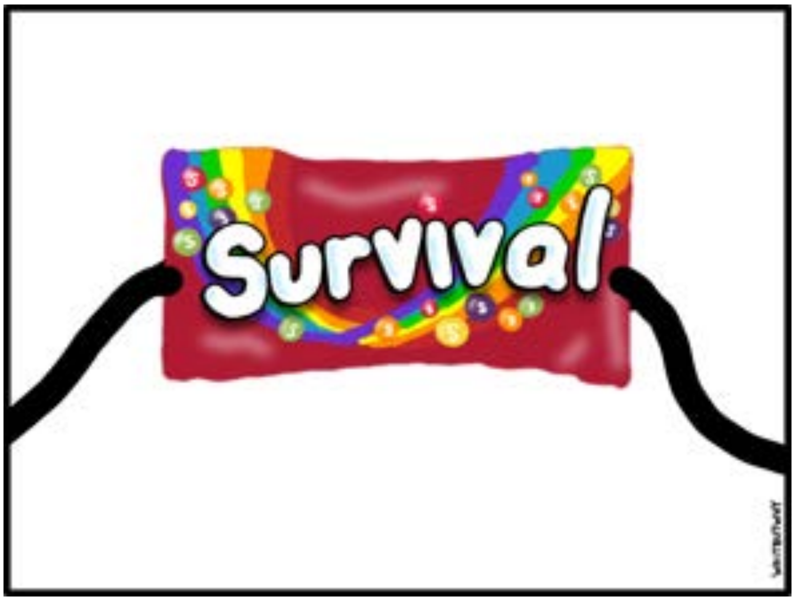
The Higher Mind and his magical thinking abilities helped the human species transform their typical animal hunter-gatherer world into undoubtedly the strangest of all animal habitats: an advanced civilization. The Higher Mind’s heightened awareness allows him to see the world with clear eyes, behave rationally in any environment, and adjust to changes in real time.

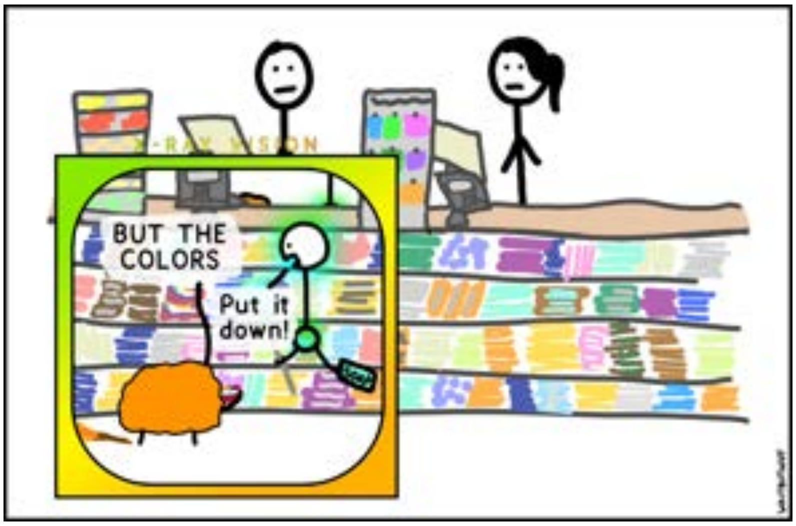
So while our Primitive Minds are still somewhere in 11,000 BC, our Higher Minds are living right here with us in 2019. Which is why, even though both minds are just trying to do their jobs, they’re in a fight most of the time.

Sometimes, the fights are about what’s best for us—a **practical conflict.**



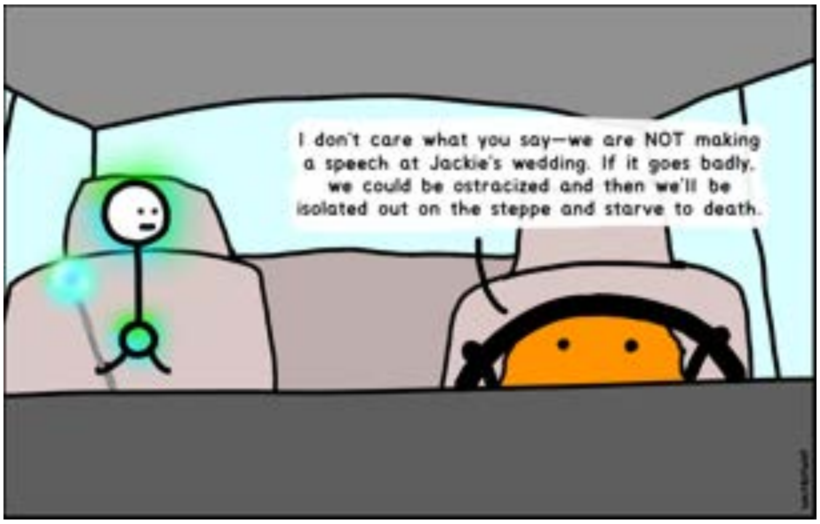

X-RAY VISION
Absolutely not.

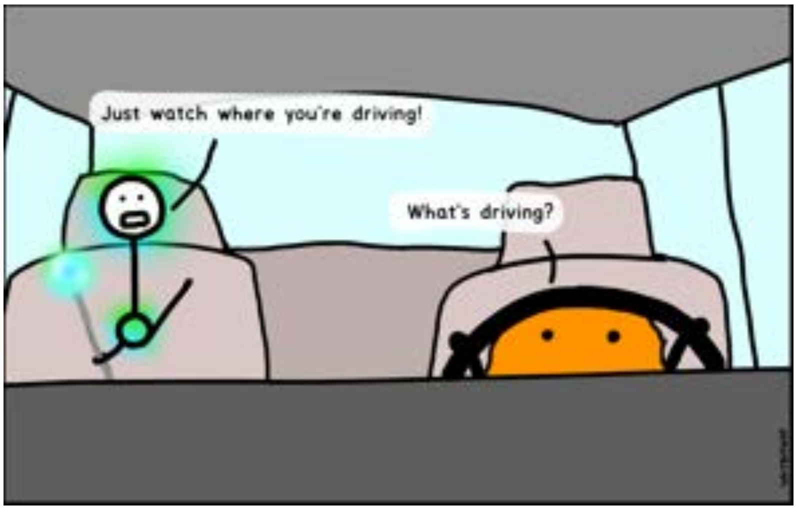




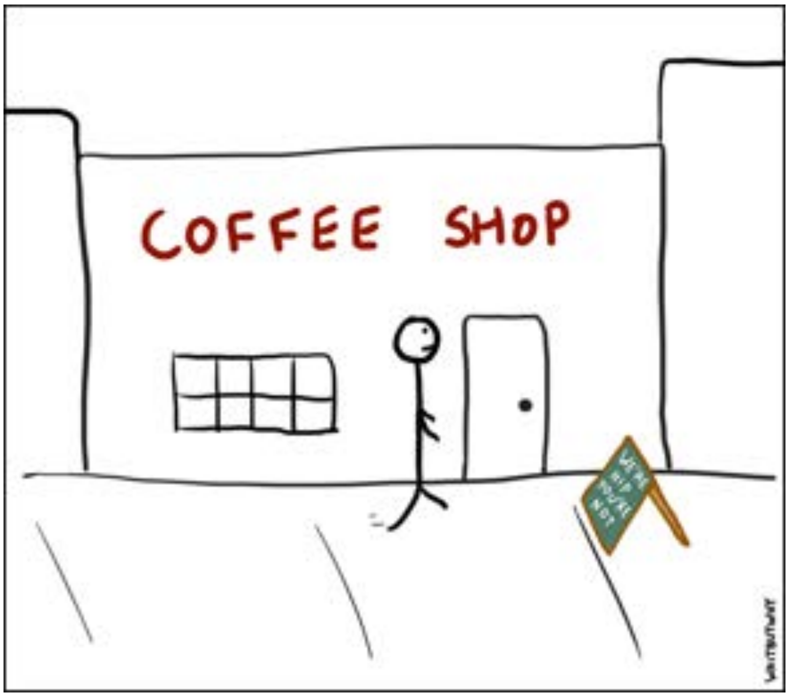
A fight like this happens when the two minds agree on what's important—i.e. they share a common value—but they disagree on the best way to get there. When you're torn about whether to go for it with a Skittles binge or not, your two minds are actually in total agreement that physical health is of the utmost importance. But in 11,000 BC, where your Primitive Mind lives, there was no such thing as processed food, calories were hard to come by, and anything with a texture and taste as delectable as a Skittle was sure to be high in calories. In other words, everything the Primitive Mind knows tells it that binging on Skittles is the healthiest possible decision. Your Higher Mind, living in 2019, is extremely aware that eating 145 Skittles in a sitting is not the right health decision. And thus, your inner conflict.

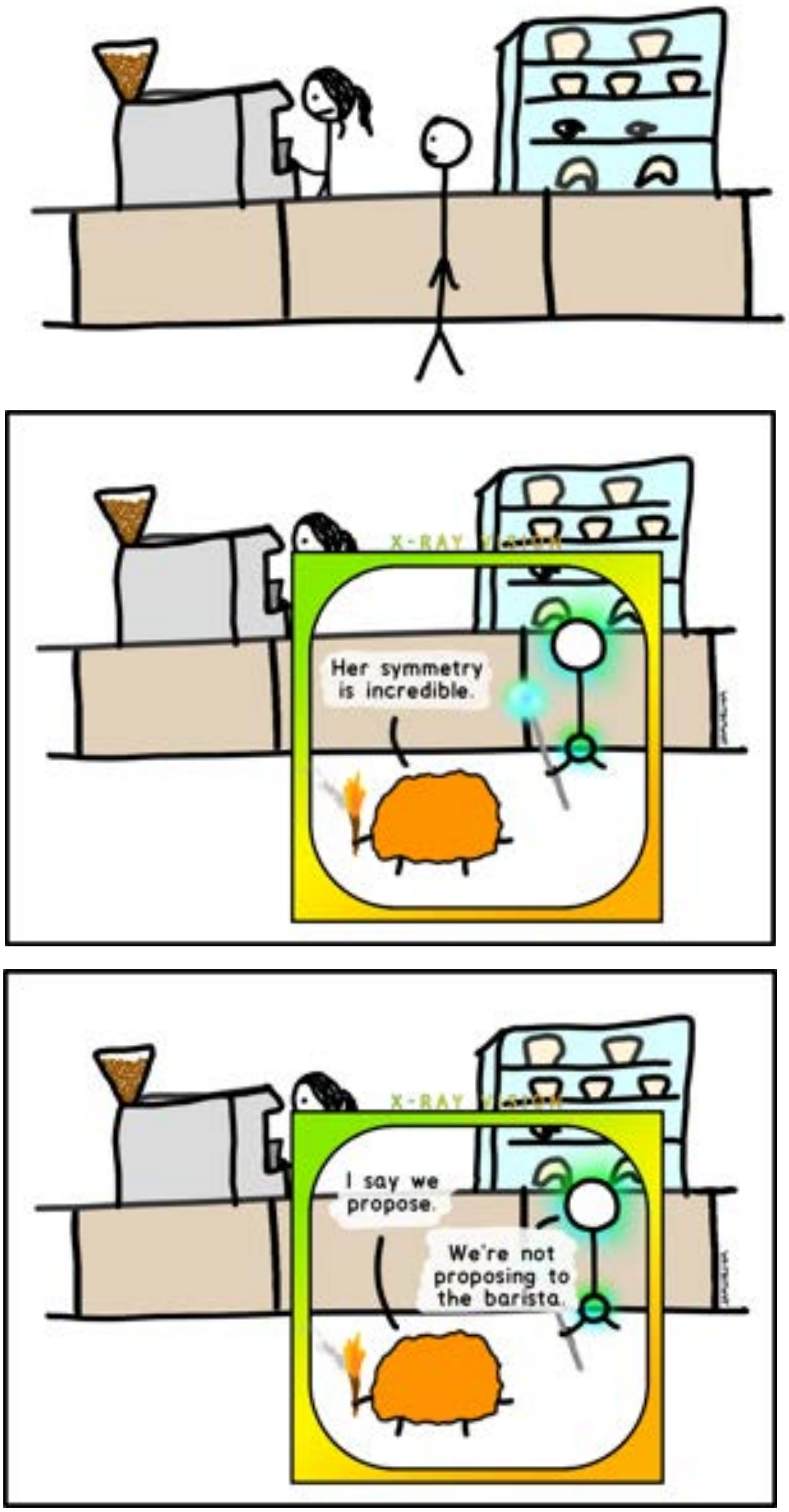
The same kind of practical conflict can also lead to a lot of fights about our fears.

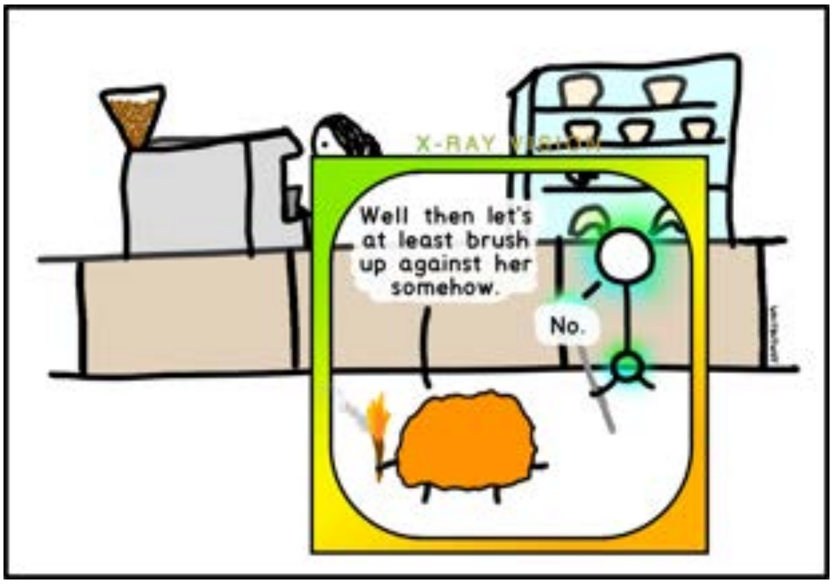

I don't care what you say—we are NOT making a speech at Jackie's wedding. If it goes badly, we could be ostracized and then we'll be isolated out on the steppe and starve to death.


Just watch where you're driving!
What's driving?

Sometimes, the disagreements are more fundamental.


COFFEE SHOP


X-RAY VISION
Her symmetry is incredible.
X-RAY VISION
I say we propose.
We're not proposing to the barista.


X-RAY VISION
Well then let's at least brush up against her somehow.
No.

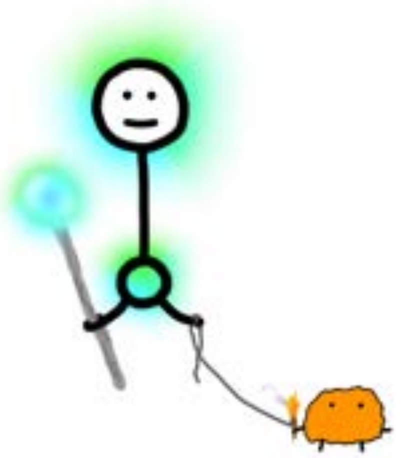
A disagreement like this happens when two minds disagree on what's important in the first place—a **values conflict**. A values conflict happens when the Higher Mind has a moral objection to something the Primitive Mind is programmed to want. Like, say, the way the Primitive Mind is programmed to try feverishly to deliver its precious genetic cargo to as large a variety of new containers as possible, at the expense of values like kindness, civility, professionalism, or marital fidelity. An inner values conflict is in progress anytime you're coping with a moral qualm or integrity struggle.

There's also the reverse kind of values conflict—when the Higher Mind values something that the Primitive Mind is specifically programmed to *resist*—like, say, pitching in with housework or donating to charity.

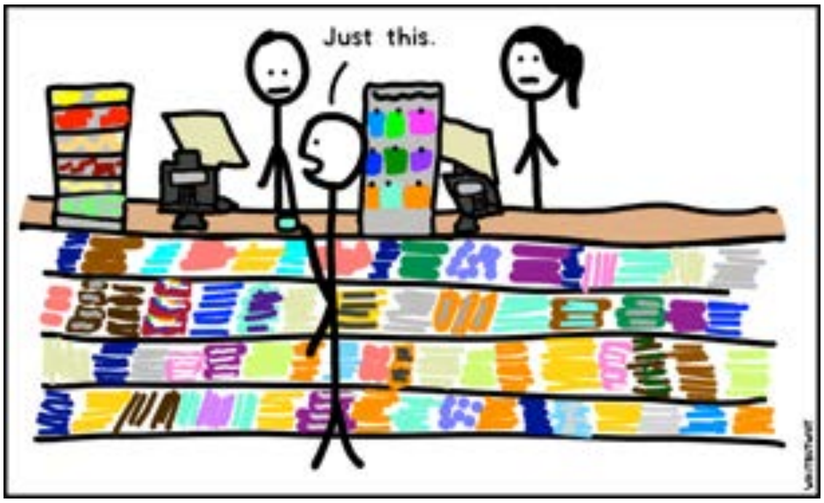
Humans are so complicated for a simple reason: we're each *the product of a struggle* between two fundamentally different, often contradictory forces.

This ongoing struggle of fire and light is like a constant tug-of-war in our heads—a tug-of-war over our thoughts, our emotions, our values, our morals, our judgments, and our overall consciousness.

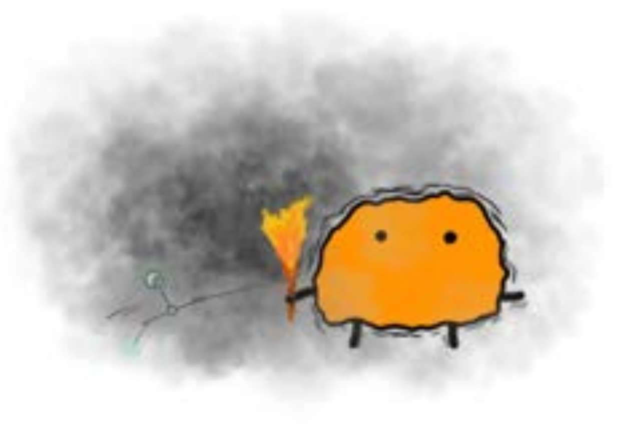
When we look through our x-ray glasses at someone whose Higher Mind is, at the moment, running the show, we see this:

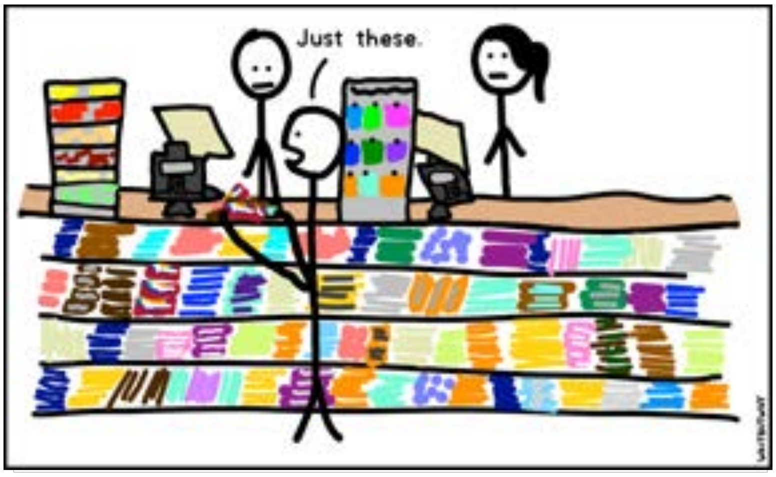


With a prominent Higher Mind in total control, the Primitive Mind still makes a fuss, but the Higher Mind just yanks it back like a dog owner walking his dog.

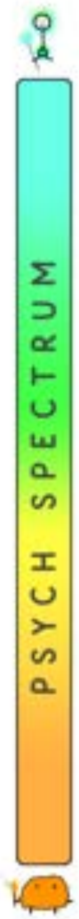


But when the balance of power swings to the other side, the Primitive Mind is like an escaped zoo animal.





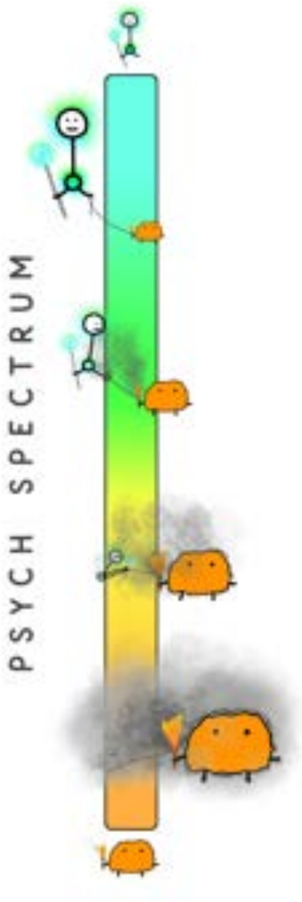
The tug-of-war isn't binary—it's a spectrum. Let's call it the **Psych Spectrum.**



We can think of the Psych Spectrum like this:

The Primitive Mind always lives at the very bottom of the Psych Spectrum, at the base human psychological level. The Higher Mind always lives at the top, at the pinnacle of human psychological evolved potential.

Where *you* are on this spectrum at any given point is determined by the status of the internal struggle between the two minds.



When you're high up on the Psych Spectrum, you get the best of all worlds. The Higher Mind understands that primitive pleasures like sex, food, and all-in-good-fun tribalism like sports fandom are awesome, and often necessary, parts of a human life. And like a good pet owner, the Higher Mind is more than happy to let the Primitive Mind have its fun. Primitive bliss is great, as long as it's being managed by the Higher Mind, who makes sure it's done in moderation, done for the right reasons, and no one gets hurt.

When we're low on the Psych Spectrum, we're short-sighted, we're small-minded, we think and act with our pettiest emotions and our ego, we lack self-awareness, we're short on compassion, high on hypocrisy—and because the Primitive Mind is an unconscious software program, we're usually too foggy to see our own shittiness for what it is.

Your Psych Spectrum position ebbs and flows throughout each day, each month, and each year of our lives, as we go through happy times and hard times, great days and terrible ones, good moods and crankiness. Even a single bad night's sleep has the potential to lower you down the spectrum the next day. But if we could quantify all of your various states, it would yield a general average. We can call that average your "psych equilibrium." Throughout our lives, as we grow and evolve psychologically, this equilibrium can change.

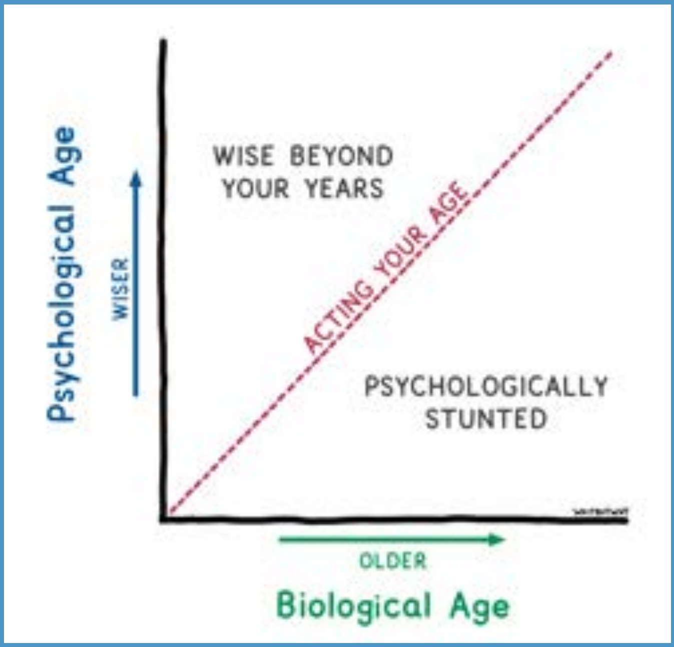
Adults and Grown-Ups Blue Box

Let's make an important language distinction: the difference between what it means to be an *adult* and what it means to be a *grown-up*. For our purposes, "adult" refers to our physical age, while "grown-up" refers to our *psychological* age. An adult is old. A grown-up is *wise*.

Each of us accumulates wisdom with life experience, but only when our Higher Mind is the one doing the thinking can we tap into that wisdom. When our willpower and our consciousness succumb to ancient software, we revert to the worst version of ourselves.

While the physical age pathway from child to adult is linear, steady, and the same for everyone, the pathway up this psychological spectrum is different for each of us. This is why we all know plenty of childish adults, as well as some surprisingly grown-up children.

Unlike our physical age, wisdom isn't evenly distributed inside of us—we all have parts of our lives where we’re good at being grown up, and others where we tend to struggle. Our wisdom gaps—the parts of our life where we tend to be less grown-up than we are adult—are the areas where we’re psychologically *stunted.*

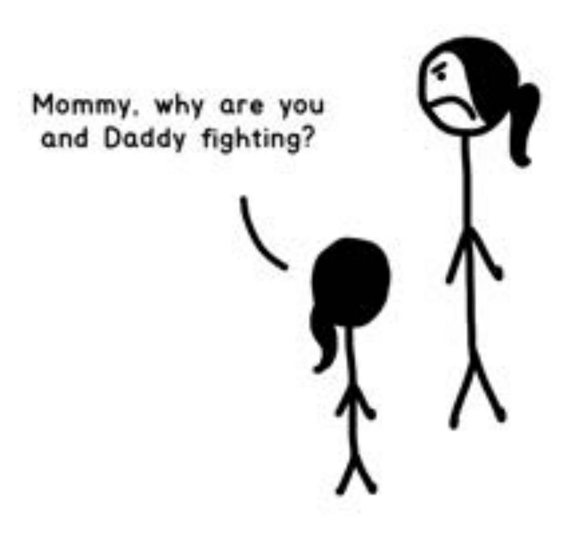


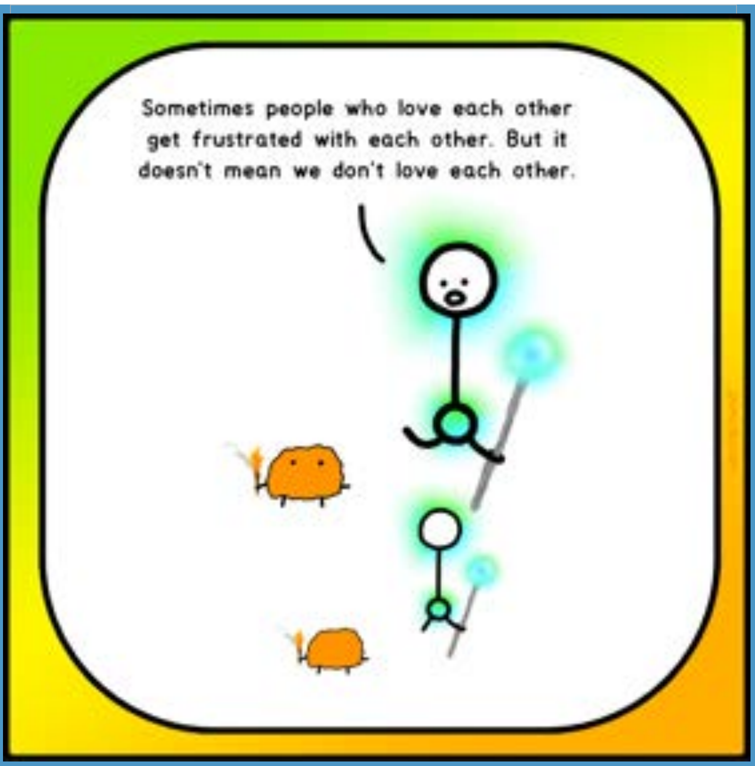
So the question isn’t *if* you’re psychologically stunted—the question is *where?*

Of course, like everything psychological, I’m sure nature plays a big role and we’re all born already prone to certain areas of psychological stunting, based on our genetic profile. But nurture is undoubtedly behind many of our Psych Spectrum struggles. I’m no psychologist, but thinking about my own mind and the minds of the people I know well, a few likely culprits come to mind:

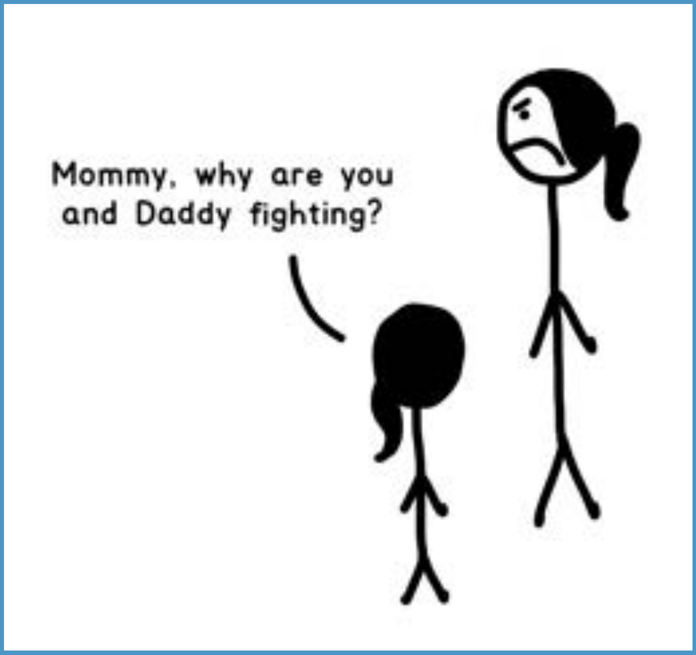
1) Areas of life where your parents are stunted. You know how sometimes you feel like your parents are super wise about life and you admire them for it, and other times you can’t believe how unwise they can be and you feel like you have to raise *them?* This is because wisdom is unevenly distributed in your parents too—they’re stunted just like everybody else, going through the same internal struggle. And the thing is, areas of stunting often run in the family—you’re likely stunted in many of the same areas where your parents drive you crazy. It’s just harder to see in yourself because it might manifest a little differently, and because it tends to be harder to see our own flaws than the flaws of others.

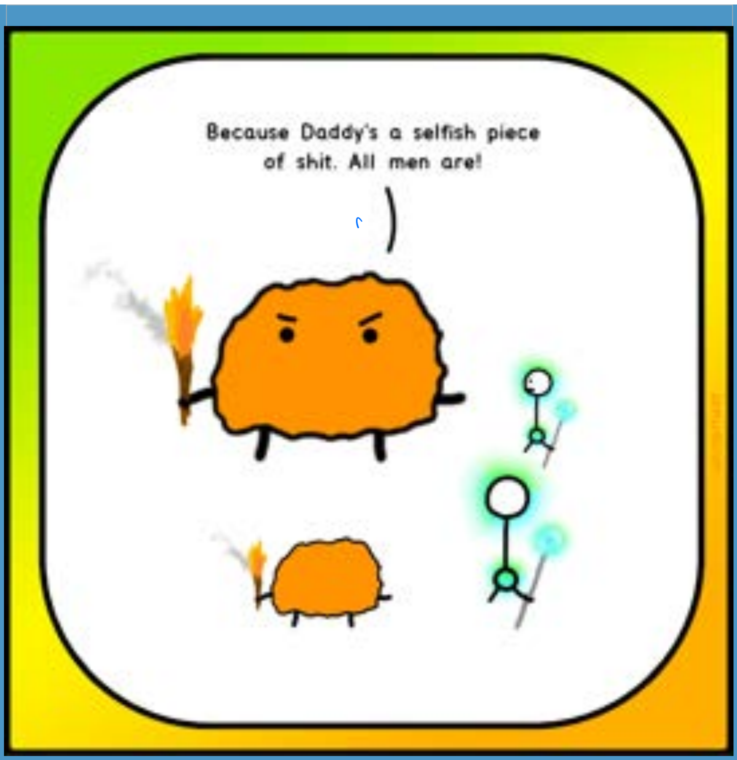
Part of the reason stunting runs in the family is that children aren’t raised by their parents—they’re raised by their parents’ Higher Minds *and* by their parents’ Primitive Minds. In the areas of life where your parents tend to be wise, you were probably being raised mostly by a Higher Mind. So you learned to approach this part of life with *your* Higher Mind doing the thinking, and the habit usually sticks.


Mommy, why are you and Daddy fighting?


Sometimes people who love each other get frustrated with each other. But it doesn't mean we don't love each other.

On the other hand, the parts of life where your parent is a baby, you were raised by...a baby. In these parts of life, your parent had yet to get ahold of their own Primitive Mind, so you were raised there by a Primitive Mind more than a Higher Mind.


Mommy, why are you and Daddy fighting?


Because Daddy's a selfish piece of shit. All men are!

If there's one thing a Primitive Mind knows how to do, it's use primitive emotions like fear or pride to kick other people's Primitive Minds into high gear. Thinking about an area of life through the lens of your Primitive Mind also becomes a habit—one that people can spend a lifetime trying to break, sometimes unsuccessfully. Wherever your parents were fearful, low integrity, petty, snobby, braggy, bratty, bigoted, jealous, cruel, entitled, uncompassionate, repressed, insecure, selfish, delusional, or any other form of foolish—those will be your psychological challenges in life. Those are the areas where you'll be starting off from a psychologically primitive, unevolved place and where you'll need to spend your energy and attention trying to grow.

2) Areas of life where your Primitive Mind has gone through trauma. If at any point in your past, you were bullied, neglected, shamed, ridiculed, betrayed, out-grouped, abandoned, heartbroken, discriminated against, or profoundly let down, your Primitive Mind has gone through hell. Experiences like those are burned into the Primitive Mind's memory, and if you never fully processed what happened, the trauma will remain an open wound in your psyche. Trauma to your Primitive Mind is a wound that only the Higher Mind can tend to, disinfect, bandage up, and begin to heal. And until that happens, the previous version of yourself—the age you were when the trauma occurred—will haunt you like a ghost. Like, say, if you were socially excluded in middle school and you never properly processed that nightmare. It'll be 20 years later and at just the *hint* of being out-grouped in any situation, you'll have a meltdown and find yourself acting like a child. The traumatized middle schooler will wake up and hijack your psyche, bringing your psychological age in that moment back down to middle school. The unprocessed pains of the past are vulnerable spots in your psyche where you may be prone to fall into the unconscious hands of the Primitive Mind.

3) Areas of life where your current environment is stoking the Primitive Mind. Your current environment is made up of all the places you spend time, all the people you engage with, and the river of information that enters your brain from the external world. Your environment is constantly impressing itself upon you, and vice versa: when you speak or express yourself in any way, your environment reacts. This constant friction between you and your environment can have all kinds of effects on you—ranging from very positive to neutral to very negative. And certain parts of this relationship will inevitably stoke your Primitive Mind—a gossipy workplace, a tribalism-fueling news website, an unhealthy friendship, and plenty of other elements of our environment can regularly pull us downward on the Psych Spectrum.

Upbringing, trauma, and environment don't perfectly cover all the bases, but my own life experience tells me that they map pretty well onto someone's psychological still-working-on-it list.

The challenge of human growth is outlined, for each of us, by our personal list of Psych Spectrum trouble areas. This list is why life will be hard. It's why we'll hurt others. It's why we have regrets. It's what stands in between us and the life we know we should be living. And it's a list we'll install right into our children (if we haven't already), unless we put in the continual self-reflection and hard work to "raise ourselves" in the areas where our parents couldn't.

Most of the problems with humans can be boiled down to unchecked Primitive Minds getting their way against the Higher Mind's better judgment. This is what's behind chronic procrastination, chronic overeating, temper outbursts, infidelity, sexual assault, and all the other terrible things humans do to themselves and others. Back in the hunter-gatherer days, the Primitive Mind was mostly on point—but in the modern world, it's our collective mental illness. And no one is immune.

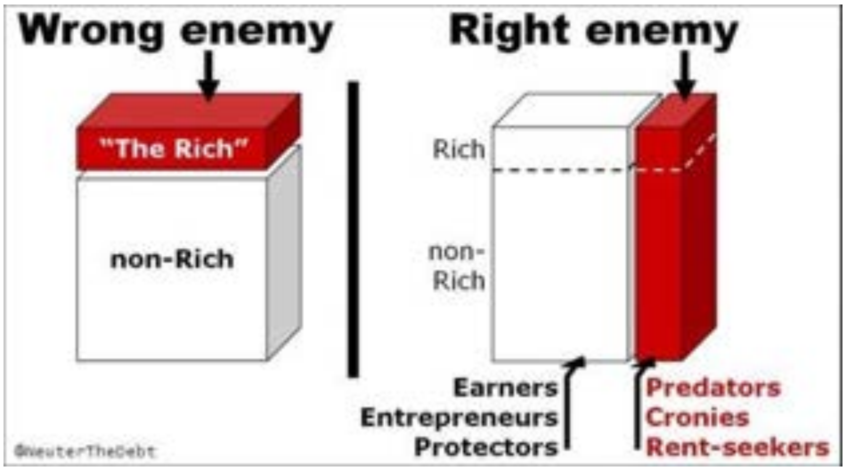
Back to our dimensions. So many of our problems today stem from the oversimplification of complicated phenomena in our discussions. Thinking about the real world in one dimension is usually a bad idea.

For example, wealth in one dimension looks like this.

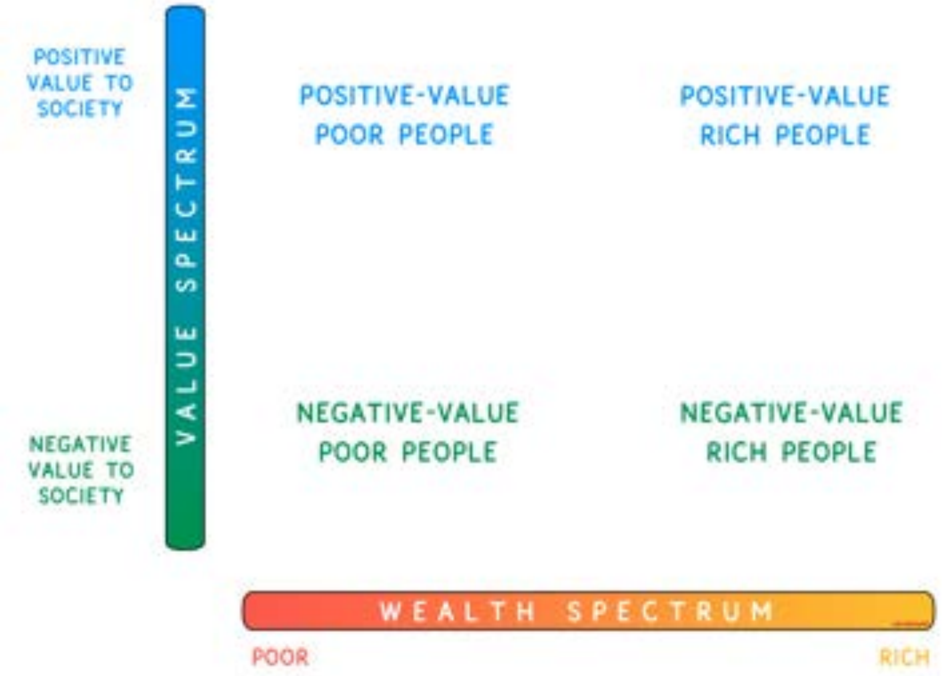
WEALTH SPECTRUM
POOR
RICH

If you want to place blame for society's ills, and you only have one dimension to work with, you're left with the unnuanced option of blaming the rich, blaming the poor, blaming both, or blaming neither.

But I came across this little visual recently:



This visual is imploring us to bring one-dimensional thinking into 2D. It's taking the wealth spectrum and expanding it (with the axes switched) into something like this:


POSITIVE VALUE TO SOCIETY
NEGATIVE VALUE TO SOCIETY
VALUE SPECTRUM
POSITIVE-VALUE POOR PEOPLE
POSITIVE-VALUE RICH PEOPLE
NEGATIVE-VALUE POOR PEOPLE
NEGATIVE-VALUE RICH PEOPLE
WEALTH SPECTRUM
POOR
RICH

Regardless of whether you agree with the specific viewpoint put forth in that other visual, adding a second dimension allows us to have a far more nuanced discussion about it.

For the rest of this series, we're going to apply one particular second dimension to everything we discuss: **the Psych Spectrum.**

The hard thing is, we've all been trained to think in only one dimension—in the *What* dimension. We look at people's behavior, their words, their tendencies, their habits, their demeanor, their disposition—and we stop there. The Psych Spectrum adds the critical second dimension to the equation that asks *why* people act the way they do. When a cashier is rude to you, you can look at the situation in one dimension, judge them to be an asshole, and stop there. Or you can put your x-ray goggles on, see that their Primitive Mind is clearly pulling the strings in their head, and wonder why. When you look at things in 2D, it doesn't make sense to hate people who say or do shitty things, because it doesn't make sense to hate the ancient pre-programmed survival software causing them to do so. In 2D, you see someone acting like an asshole as being "in the hands of the demon"—a demon that you know, looking at *yourself* in 2D, you fall into the hands of too, sometimes.

Once you get this second dimension into your thinking, you'll notice yourself applying it everywhere. We've given it a try a few times before on this blog. ① Now it's time to bring this second dimension into the world of human belief, to help us answer that key question: Why do we believe what we believe?

The Battle Over Our Beliefs

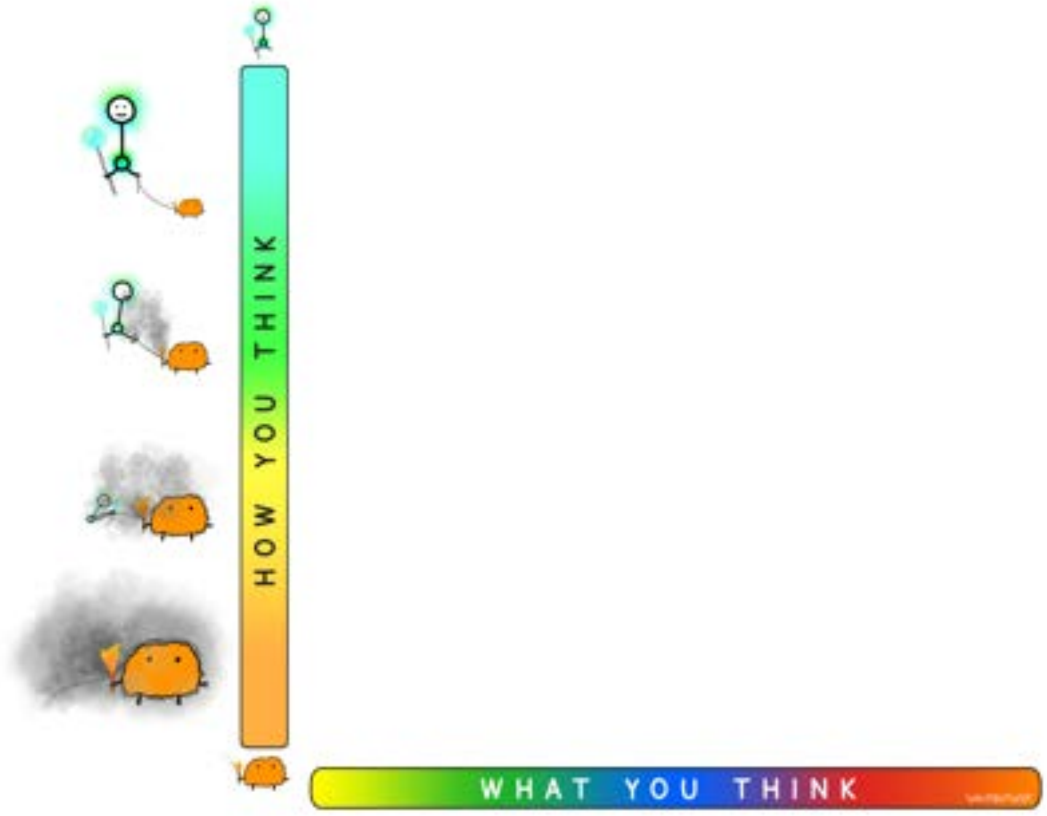
In one dimension, our beliefs landscape looks like this:

IDEA SPECTRUM

The Idea Spectrum—the same one we spent so much time with in the last two chapters—is useful when you simply want to explore what people think. This was sufficient in Part 2, when we talked broadly about the marketplace of ideas and the way a whole nation of Americans can collectively come to a conclusion, and how that conclusion can evolve over time. But as we'll see in this post, it's hardly a complete picture.

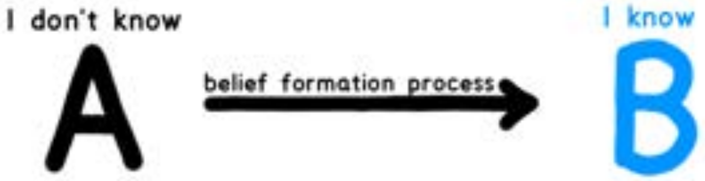
The Idea Spectrum is the What You Think axis. And that's important information, but the value of *what* one thinks is entirely dependent upon *how* they came to that belief in the first place.

That's where the second dimension comes in. When it comes to the way we think and the way we form our beliefs, the Psych Spectrum is our *How You Think axis*.



The addition of the Psych Spectrum turns our thinking spectrum into a thinking *square*—and now our discussion can get interesting.

The basic process we're examining is belief formation, which we can notate like this:



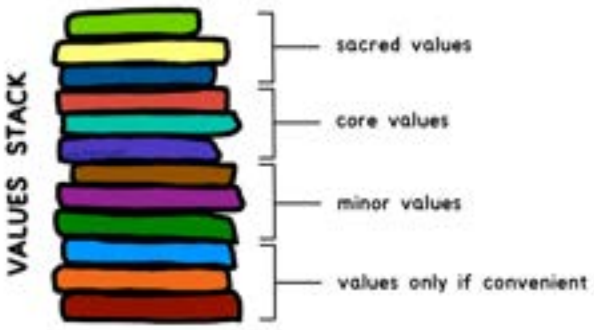
In our thinking square, a person's x-axis position shows us where they landed at Point B—the output of their thinking process. Their y-axis position tells us about the kind of arrow that led them there—about the process and the rationale underlying what they believe.

Where we are on this y-axis is a result of the state of our internal tug-of-war, so the first question we need to ask is: how do the two minds think?

How the Two Minds Think

In the same way our intellectual viewpoints are a function of our intellectual process, our intellectual process is a function of our intellectual *motivation.* We think the way we think in the first place mostly because it serves our purposes.

Our intellectual motivation will normally reflect our values—or, more accurately, the way we *prioritize* our values. Most of us value both health and culinary pleasure—but whether or not we binge on Skittles is determined by which of those values carries the most weight in our heads in that moment. It's as if our values are arranged in our head as a Values Stack.



At the very top of the stack are the values we hold sacred, and as we move down the stack, we place less and less importance on each value. Whenever two values conflict with one another, the lower one will be the one to compromise, while the higher one will stand firm.

Of course, the Higher Mind and Primitive Mind totally disagree about what your Values Stack should look like.

When it comes to your intellectual life, **the Higher Mind values truth above all else.** The Higher Mind's intellectual mission is to steer your beliefs—your *perception of reality*—as close to *actual* reality as he can.

PERCEPTION
of
REALITY
REALITY

This is his mission because the strength of the Higher Mind's entire being is fed only by truth. It's a direct correlation: the more access the Higher Mind has to truth, the brighter his light, and the wiser you are.

Given that mission, and the understanding that the mission is incredibly hard and never complete—it's only rational for the Higher Mind to be entirely humble about his perception of reality at any given moment and totally unattached to the ideas that make up that perception. He sees beliefs as nothing more than the most recent draft of an eternal work in progress, and as he lives more and learns more, nothing makes the Higher Mind happier than a chance to revise that inevitably flawed draft. Because when beliefs are being revised, it's a signal of progress—of becoming less ignorant, less foolish, less delusional. A change of mind about something is a good sign that his light is getting brighter—and that's all that matters to the Higher Mind.

And how about the Primitive Mind?

It's intuitive why the Primitive Mind would object to marital fidelity—but what's its problem with the Higher Mind's approach to beliefs? Isn't truth helpful to its genetic survival mission?

Actually no, it's not. Truth is mostly irrelevant to the Primitive Mind.

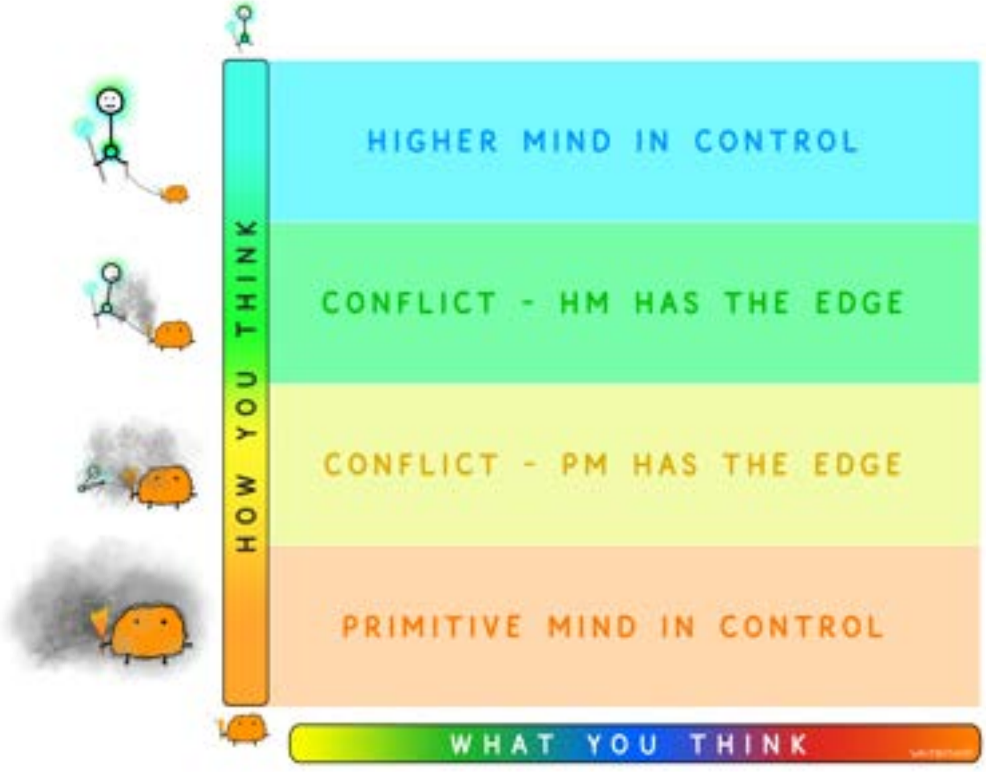
The Primitive Mind's beliefs are typically installed into its system early on in life, kind of like the way our immune system's settings are initially configured by our environment. The "intellectual environment" that configures our Primitive Mind's core beliefs is typically made up of the prevailing beliefs of our family and the broader community we grow up around. On the individual level, the Primitive Mind views those beliefs as a fundamental part of its person's identity—and therefore about as sacred as the person's arms or lungs or heart. On the group level, beliefs are the key node that wires its person into a larger giant, which—in the Primitive Mind's ancient world—means being safe on the lifeboat. For reasons like these, the Primitive Mind puts beliefs into the same ultra-critical category as core biological needs.

Given all of this, the last thing the Primitive Mind wants is for you to feel *humble* about your beliefs or interested in *revising* them. It wants you to treat your beliefs as sacred objects—as precious organs in your body or precious seats on a lifeboat. The Primitive Mind treats beliefs like it treats everything else—as nothing more than a means to the singular goal of genetic survival. To the Primitive Mind, the right beliefs are whatever will leave you with the strongest sense of identity and best fuse you with a large, powerful giant. An ever-evolving quest for truth is directly antithetical to these causes.

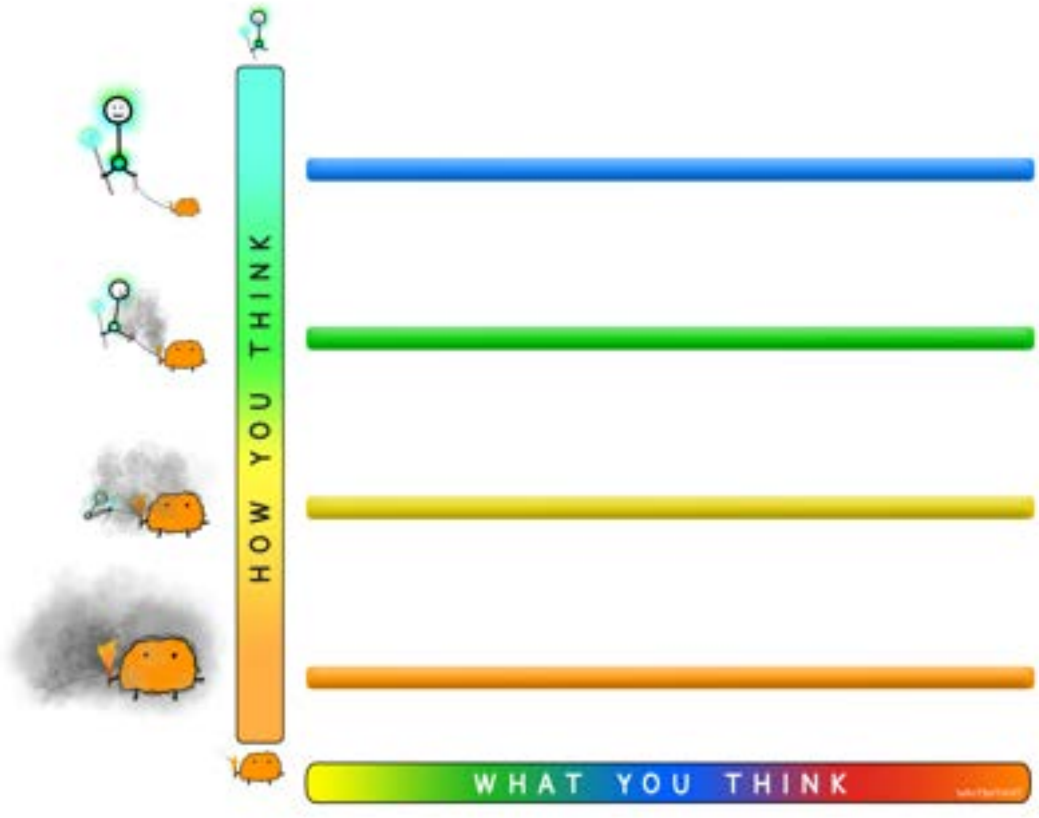
So when it comes to beliefs, **the Primitive Mind doesn't want truth, it wants *confirmation*—of your existing beliefs.**

So where does this inner conflict leave all of us? As fucking crazy people.

To structure our little examination of our collective craziness, let's divide the Psych Spectrum into four parts:


HIGHER MIND IN CONTROL
CONFLICT - HM HAS THE EDGE
CONFLICT - PM HAS THE EDGE
PRIMITIVE MIND IN CONTROL
HOW YOU THINK
WHAT YOU THINK

We can approximate each of these Psych Spectrum quartiles with a line—making our square into a Thinking Ladder with four rungs.

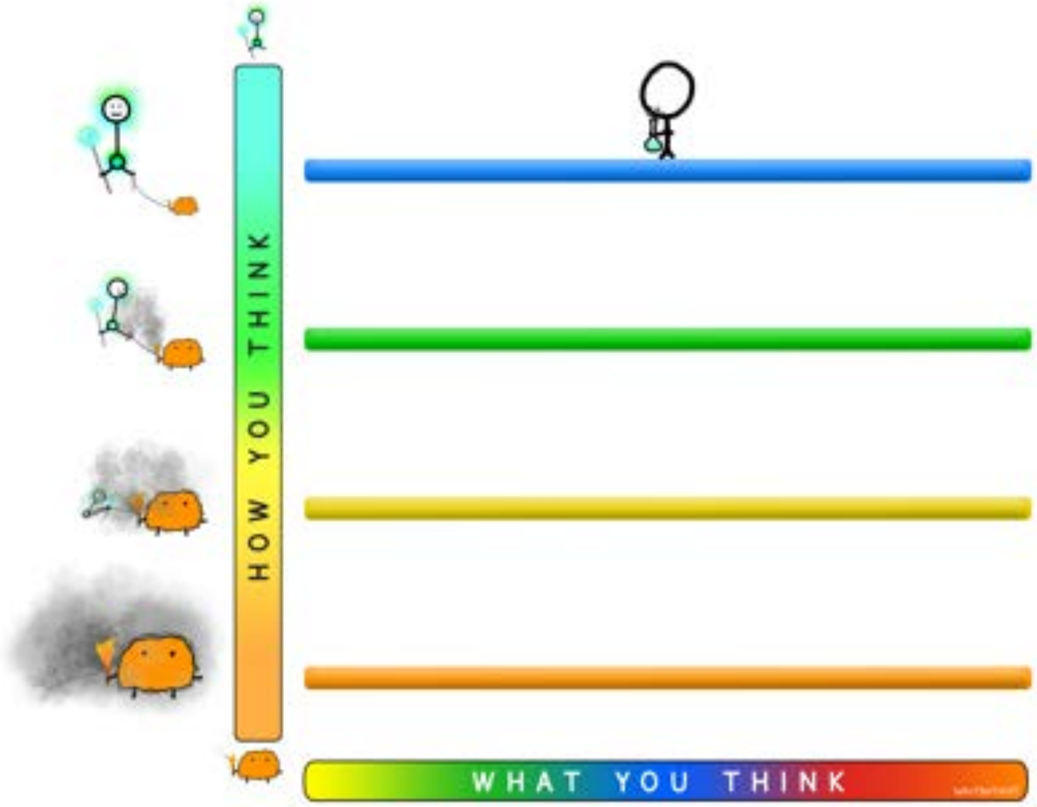


The Thinking Ladder is my favorite lens to use to think about thinking. For any given idea spectrum, you'll find people on each of the four rungs. People on the same rung may disagree wildly with each other about *what* they think—i.e. they'll be at different points *along* the rung—but what they'll all have in common is a *way* of thinking, driven by a common intellectual motivation, at least when it comes to the topic at hand. Most of us are in the habit of dividing people up by what they think—by *where they stand* on a topic. Our goal here is to shine a spotlight on *how* people think and learn to categorize people that way instead.

So let's explore each of these rungs, starting by looking at how thinking works at the top of the Psych Spectrum—where the Higher Mind is in full control—and then working our way down the rungs, until we finish up at the intellectual slums at the bottom.

Rung 1: Thinking Like a Scientist

Meet the Scientist:

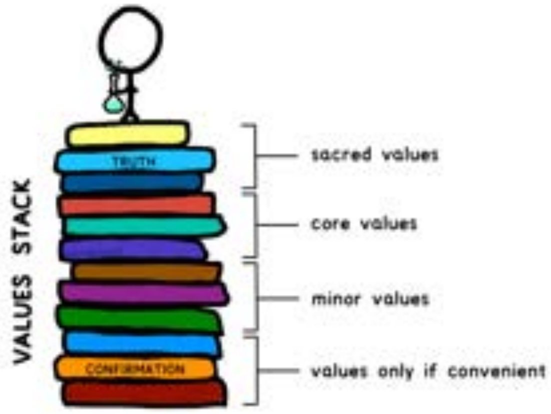

HOW YOU THINK
WHAT YOU THINK

This is who you are in moments when your Higher Mind is in charge of your thinking. Thinking like a Scientist has nothing to do with your line of work. It has to do with your thinking process.

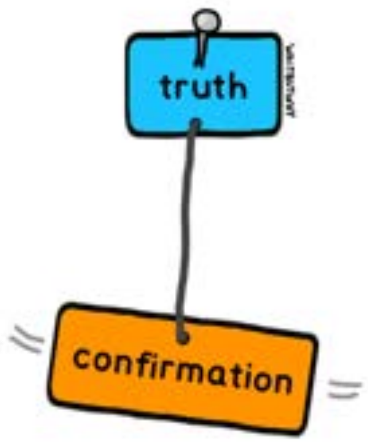
We often think of science as the study of the natural world, but in the words of Carl Sagan, “Science is a way of thinking much more than it is a body of knowledge.”

Science is a way of thinking. A means of thinking. A thinking *process,* designed to do one thing: find truth.

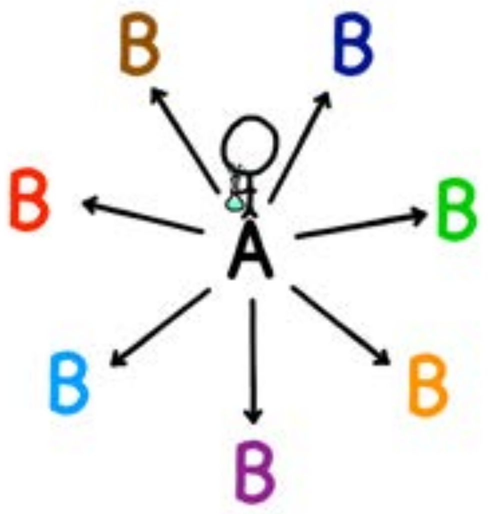
When you’re high up on the Psych Spectrum, the Higher Mind’s core intellectual value—truth—will be in the top section of your Values Stack. And the Primitive Mind’s core intellectual value—confirmation of your existing beliefs—will be toward the very bottom. So it’s only logical to think like a Scientist.


VALUES STACK
TRUTH
CONFIRMATION
sacred values
core values
minor values
values only if convenient

It’s a good time to bring back our nail visual from Chapter 4. Just like a nation, whether we consciously realize it or not, each of us has a nail in our mind that we drive through our sacred values—those values we will not compromise on. All other values, when in conflict with the sacred values, will be forced to sway to accommodate the sacred values. When you’re thinking like a Scientist, there’s little doubt where the nail goes.

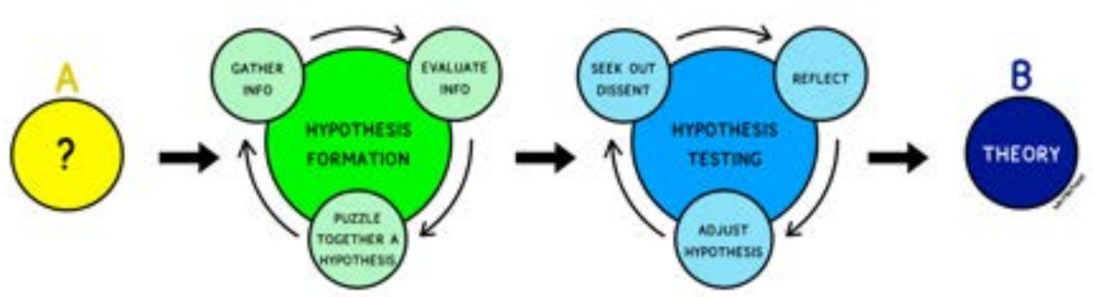

truth
confirmation

Things are simple up on the top rung: your intellectual mission is to take your existing beliefs, or lack thereof (Point A) and use your thinking process to move towards beliefs that are a little closer to the truth (Point B). You don't know what Point B ultimately looks like, and when you're thinking like a Scientist, you don't care. You just want your process to take you to the truest possible Point B.



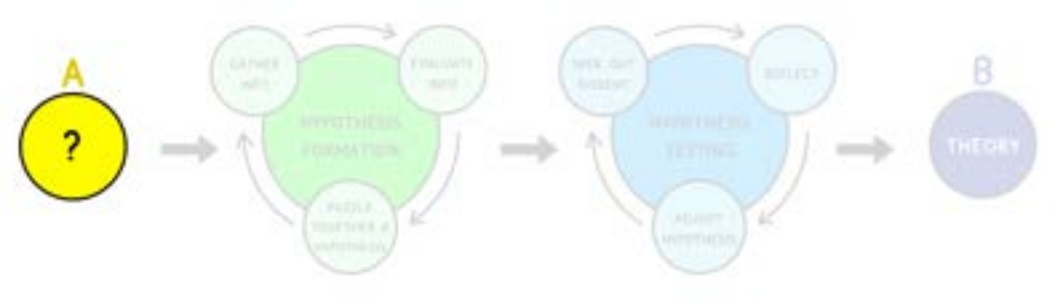
To top-rung thinkers, chasing truth is like climbing through thick fog up an infinitely high mountain. It's the pursuit of something that can never be fully achieved, but it can be approached—and their goal is simply to continue moving up the mountain. They make their way up the mountain using their sacred process—the scientific method—as their compass. They're intellectually flexible about everything—except the process itself.

The Scientist's process looks something like this:

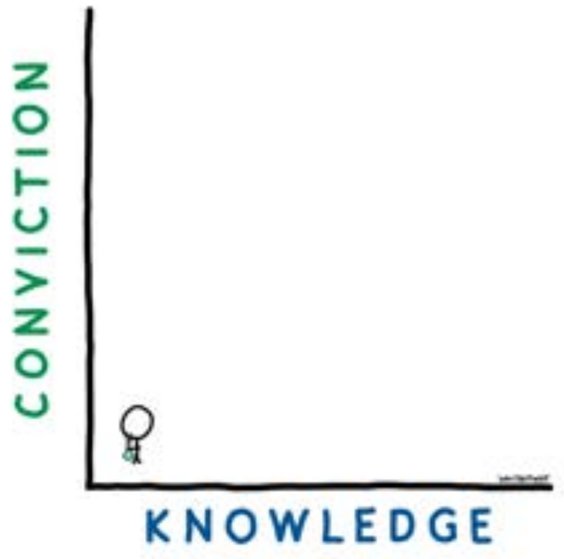

A
?
GATHER INFO
EVALUATE INFO
HYPOTHESIS FORMATION
PUZZLE TOGETHER A HYPOTHESIS
SEEK OUT DISSENT
REFLECT
HYPOTHESIS TESTING
ADJUST HYPOTHESIS
B
THEORY

To see how it works, let's join you in one of the areas of your life where you're good at thinking on the top rung of the ladder, and watch you work your way through this process toward a conclusion. Starting at the very beginning—Point A.

Point A



For Scientists, Point A is almost always a loud, proud "I don't know." I don't know is the top-rung thinker's default starting place. This isn't a righteous thing, it's just stating the honest fact: "I don't have knowledge about this." When you're honest about what you do and don't know, knowledge and conviction are one in the same, and at Point A, you're way down in this corner:



More often than not, Scientists don't bother chasing truth—they know that with limited time, they'll spend their whole lives not knowing when it comes to most topics. But when a Scientist *does* want to move away from A and towards B on a topic, the scientific method is the non-negotiable "due process" ideas must work their way through in order to be deemed "knowledge."[2]

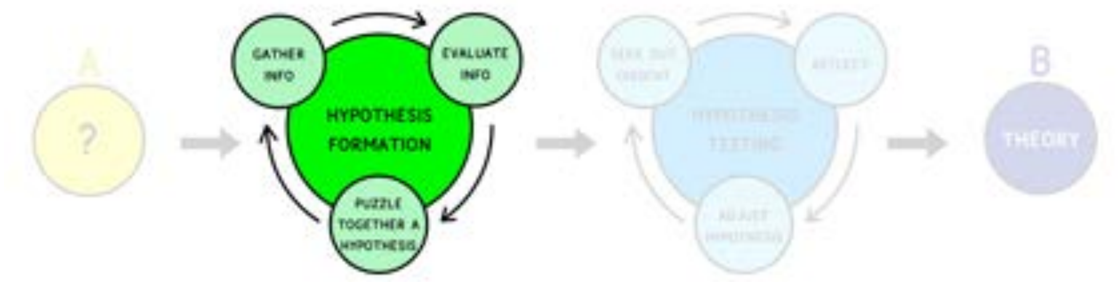
Let's say that today, you've decided it's one of those times when you want to learn more about some relevant societal topic.

Maybe you're thinking about society and you want to figure out what you think about trickle-down economics, or you decide it's time you developed an original, well-thought-out stance on abortion laws. Maybe you keep hearing about charter schools or tariffs or border policies or standardized testing and want to understand the issue better. Maybe there are local elections coming up and you want to figure out who to vote for.

Maybe you're thinking about history and you want to get a better understanding of the causes of World War I, or maybe you've been reading the news and you want to know why Brexit happened and what it means for the future. Maybe you're just wondering how scared or excited you should be about the technological explosion happening all around you.

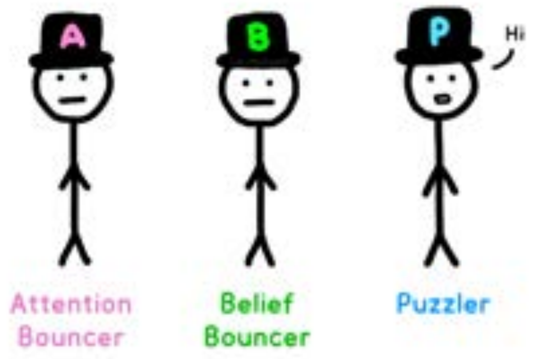
Whatever the topic, you're ready to embark up the high-rung thinker's foggy mountain in search of a truer Point B—so you get going on your first goal:

Forming a Hypothesis


A
?
GATHER INFO
EVALUATE INFO
HYPOTHESIS FORMATION
PUZZLE TOGETHER A HYPOTHESIS
SEEK OUT DISSENT
REFLECT
HYPOTHESIS TESTING
ADJUST HYPOTHESIS
B
THEORY

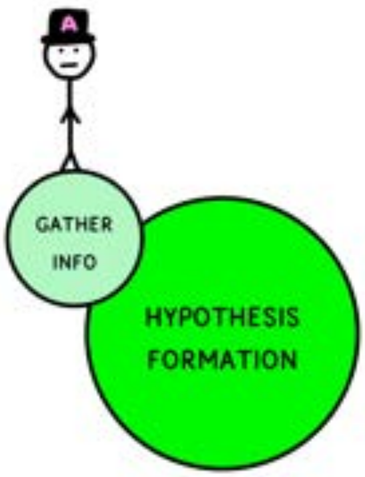
Top-rung thinkers form hypotheses from the bottom up, by reasoning from first principles. When you reason from first principles, you do your best to ignore conventional wisdom and your own preconceptions, and you focus only on fundamental facts. You treat those core facts—the "first principles"—like puzzle pieces, and using only those pieces, you employ rationality to puzzle together a conclusion.

But in order to puzzle, you need pieces, and at Point A, you don't even have those yet. Getting the right pieces and eventually assembling them into a hypothesis is a three-part effort, carried out by these three characters:

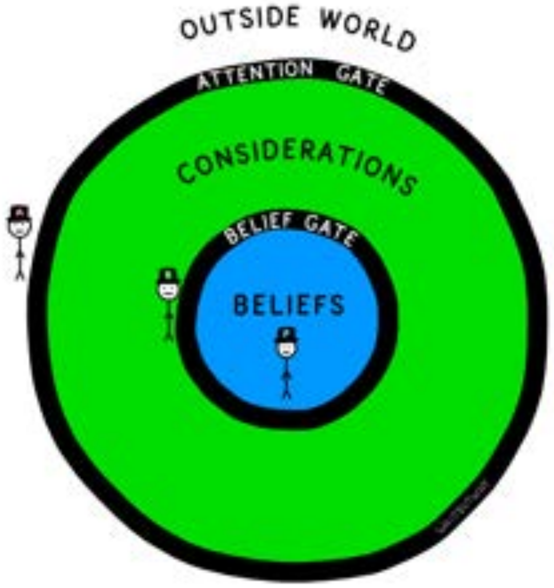

A
B
P
Hi
Attention Bouncer
Belief Bouncer
Puzzler

Here's how they do their thing:

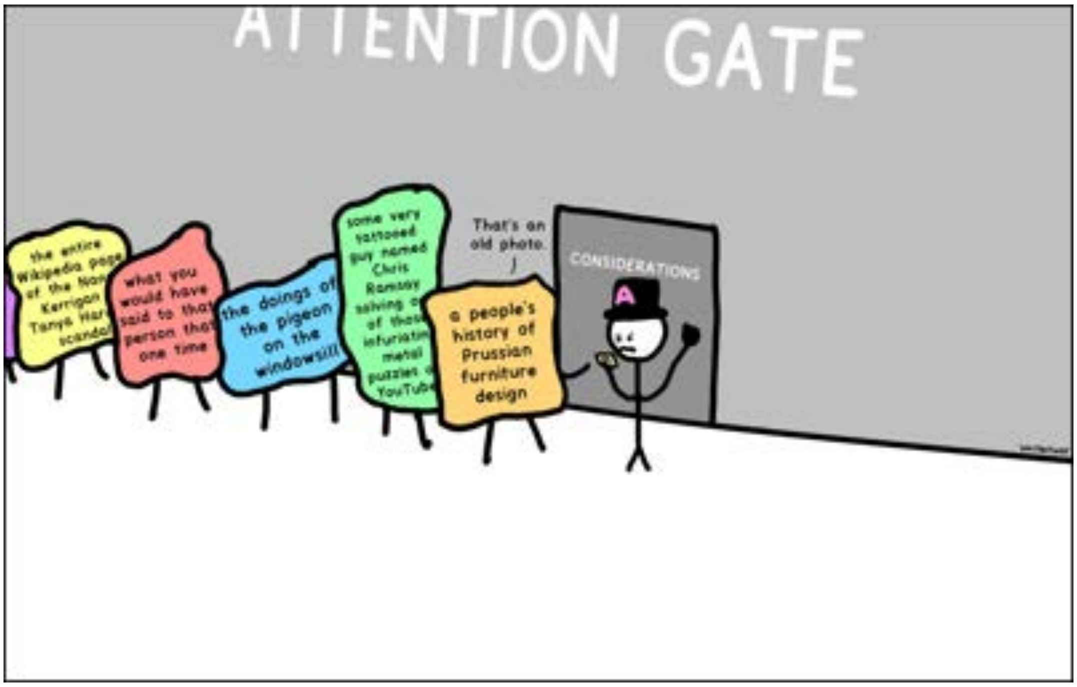
Forming a Hypothesis, Component 1: Gathering Information


A
GATHER INFO
HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

When we think about how you form your viewpoints, we can think of your head as a two-region system, with a gate surrounding each region:


OUTSIDE WORLD
ATTENTION GATE
CONSIDERATIONS
BELIEF GATE
BELIEFS

The Attention Bouncer's job is to guard the attention gate. Each of us is flooded with information at all times, and we have severely limited attention to allot. In other words, your mind is an extremely exclusive VIP-only club. As you scan the world around you, pieces of information form a long line outside your Attention Gate, and your Attention Bouncer has no choice but to be a real dick of a bouncer and turn away almost everyone.

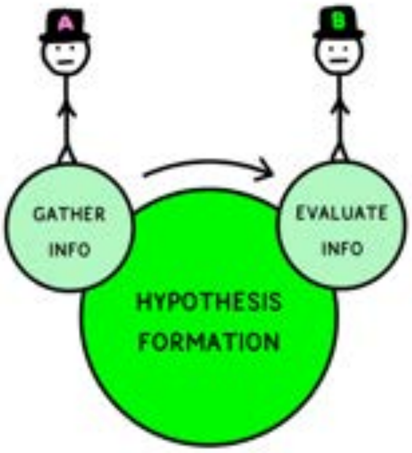

ATTENTION GATE
the entire Wikipedia page of the Nan Kerrigan Tanya Har scandal
what you would have said to that person that one time
the doings of the pigeon on the windowsill
some very tattooed guy named Chris Ramsay solving o of thos infuriatin metal puzzles o YouTube
a people's history of Prussian furniture design
That's an old photo.
CONSIDERATIONS
A

The exception is when you decide you want to learn something new and develop a viewpoint on it. When you're thinking like a Scientist, you know how little you know, especially when you're at Point A. So the Attention Bouncer keeps the filter very loose for any info that seems potentially relevant to the topic.

As he mans the Attention Gate, the Attention Bouncer isn't especially concerned with whether the puzzle pieces are reasonable or even accurate—that's above his pay grade. He just wants to import a wide variety of pieces that seem to be representative of the full range of ideas out there on the topic at hand, from all across the idea spectrum. He knows that even a viewpoint you're pretty sure you disagree with, from a person you're pretty sure you don't like, can teach you something. It may not end up changing your mind, but learning about the way that person thinks is information in itself. In this stage, even viewpoints you know are ridiculous are allowed in if they seem to be prominently represented, because the range of viewpoints that exist about the topic *is* a key facet of understanding the topic.

Soon, the outer region of your mind—the "considerations region"—is jam-packed with eager puzzle pieces, standing in a long line of their own outside a far more exclusive VIP club—your beliefs.

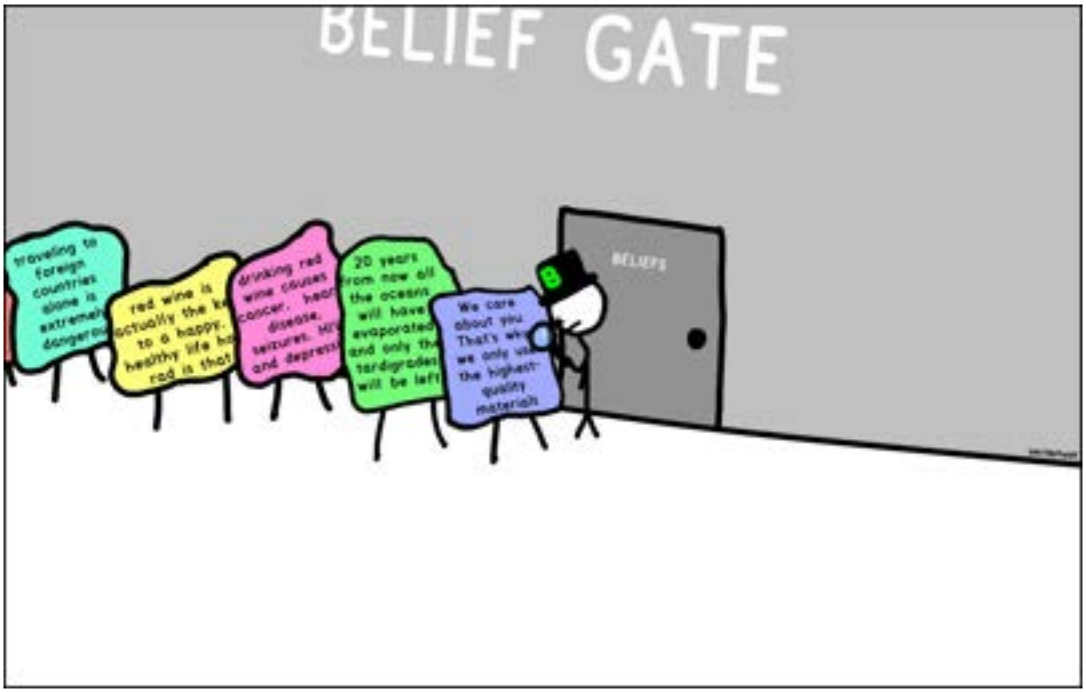
Forming a Hypothesis, Component 2: Evaluating Information


A
B
GATHER INFO
EVALUATE INFO
HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

There are instances when a thinker has the time and the means to collect information and evidence *directly*—with their own primary observations, or by conducting their own studies. In these cases, the Belief Bouncer doesn't have much to do—you already know that the information is reliable, because you saw it with your own eyes.

But the vast majority of the info we use to inform ourselves is *indirect* knowledge—knowledge accumulated by others that we import into our minds and adopt as our own. Every statistic you come across, every study you learn about, everything you read in a textbook, everything you learn in school, everything you learn from your parents, every book you read, everything you see or read in the news, everything you read on social media, everything you hear a politician or celebrity say, every assumption of conventional wisdom—it's all indirect information.

Your Belief Bouncer's job is to decide what's true and what's not.


BELIEF GATE
traveling to foreign countries alone is extremely dangero
red wine is actually the k to a happy, healthy life b red is that
drinking red wine causes cancer, hear disease, seizures, HI and depress
20 years from now all the oceans will have evaporated and only th tardigrades will be left
We care about you. That's wh we only us the highest-quality materials
B
BELIEFS

Assessing an idea's legitimacy is hard work. And if the only means of assessment is to verify the truth of it yourself, you're not saving much time.

That's why perhaps the most important skill of a savvy thinker is learning how to dole out *trust*.

Trust, when assigned wisely, is an efficient knowledge-acquisition trick. If you're able to trust someone who actually speaks the truth, and you accept what they say as truth, you've taken the knowledge they worked hard for—either through their own primary research or indirectly, using their own carefully designed trust criteria—and essentially photocopied it into your own brain.

Without trust, knowledge is limited to a tiny dataset of personal experience. Raise infant Einstein in the forest with no information and then tell him to invent the best weapon he can, and he won't get anywhere *near* the bow and arrow. But start Einstein off standing atop a knowledge skyscraper and he can outline how general relativity works. Communication, plus trust, is a magical intellectual corner-cutting tool—and it's the reason humanity has been able to accumulate a skyscraper of collective knowledge over the past 10,000 years that has led a species of forest primates to understand the origins of the universe.

But trust, when applied wrongly, does the exact opposite. When we trust information to be true that isn't, we end up with the *illusion* of knowledge—which is far worse than having no knowledge at all.

The fact is, almost all the learning you've done in your life has flowed into you through a trust channel presided over by your Belief Bouncer. But what matters far more than the quantity of your cumulative learning is the *quality*—the legitimacy—of what you've learned. And the quality of your knowledge is a function of how good your Belief Bouncer is at assigning trust.

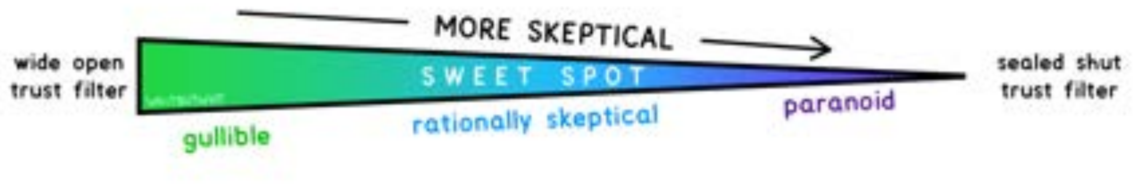
In a way, learning is kind of like running a business and knowledge is like the cash you collect. Accepting bad information as truth is like accepting a customer's payment in Monopoly money without realizing it. You can build a great business and work hard for decades running it, but if 90% of your income has been counterfeit Monopoly money, you're still a terrible businessperson.

It's easy to see that Monopoly money is fake, but Monopoly knowledge often looks exactly like real knowledge to the untrained eye, so our knowledge economy is currently infested with counterfeit information.

To do his critically important job, your Belief Bouncer needs to master the art of *skepticism.*

The Skepticism Spectrum

The truth-seeker's goal is to hone in on a *skepticism sweet spot*—something we can visualize on a Skepticism Spectrum.



The Skepticism Spectrum is a filter whose settings can be adjusted to make the filter stricter or looser. The sweet spot is the filter's optimal setting—just tight enough to consistently identify and weed out bullshit; just open enough to let in the truth and take full advantage of the magical corner-cutting of adopting the real knowledge of others as your own.

Move to the left of the sweet spot on the spectrum, where the filter is looser, and you begin to allow some bullshit to flow into your beliefs. Move even farther left and your beliefs become packed with a jumble of falsehoods, misconceptions, and contradictions. Moving to the *right* of the sweet spot tightens the filter too much, like a business owner so worried about accidentally accepting Monopoly money that they end up turning down real money too. Go way to the right and you'll stop believing the moon landing happened.

To be a healthy eater, you need to find the food intake sweet spot—too lenient a "Food Bouncer" and you eat a ton of junk food, too strict a bouncer and you starve. Being a healthy thinker works the same way. Both gullibility and paranoia, especially as you move farther away from the sweet spot, cripple your ability to be a healthy thinker. When you're being gullible, contradictions become a nightmare for you. You read Opinion A on a topic and you're sold, adopting it into your beliefs. Then you read Opinion B, which says Opinion A is wrong, and you're sold on *that*. With wildly contradicting viewpoints jostling over your beliefs, you end up withdrawing from the topic, feeling like you're just not capable of understanding it. On the other side, when you're being paranoid, everything you hear comes along with a little asterisk that says, "don't be a chump—they're probably trying to manipulate you." You refrain from adding almost anything to your knowledge bank. In both cases, learning stalls.

Both gullibility and paranoia are a sign of a lack of confidence in your own judgment of who and what is trustworthy. The key skill that's missing is the ability to accurately separate the real from the skewed from the misleading from the totally incorrect. If you can't judge incoming information, you can't take advantage of the critical tool of indirect knowledge.

The Rung Rating: A Trust Shortcut

Effective thinkers, usually without consciously realizing it, develop an internal trust rating system for friends, journalists, politicians, media brands, institutions, and any other source of information. Like an intellectual credit score.

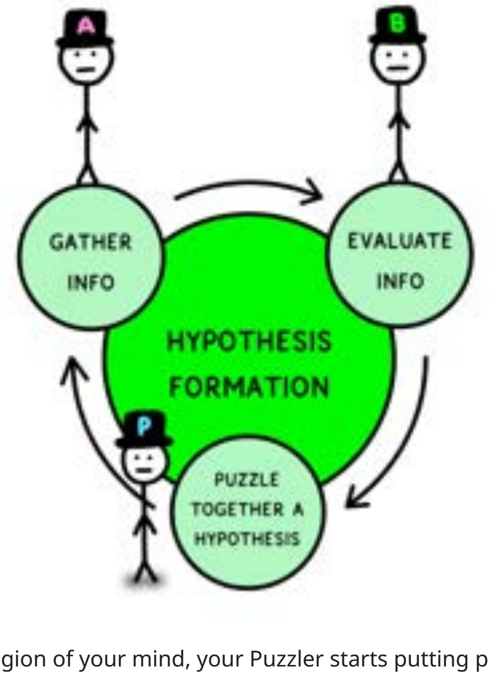
We'll call this credit score a Rung Rating—because what they're really evaluating is which rung of our Thinking Ladder the source is "thinking from."

A good trust rating system adds even more efficiency to the knowledge acquisition process, saving the Belief Bouncer the heavy lifting of having to evaluate every piece of incoming info on its own merits. We have an internal trust rating system in our heads for the food we eat. If you trust a certain grocery store or food brand or restaurant, you can save the time of carefully scanning ingredients before every bite. The Rung Rating works the same way.

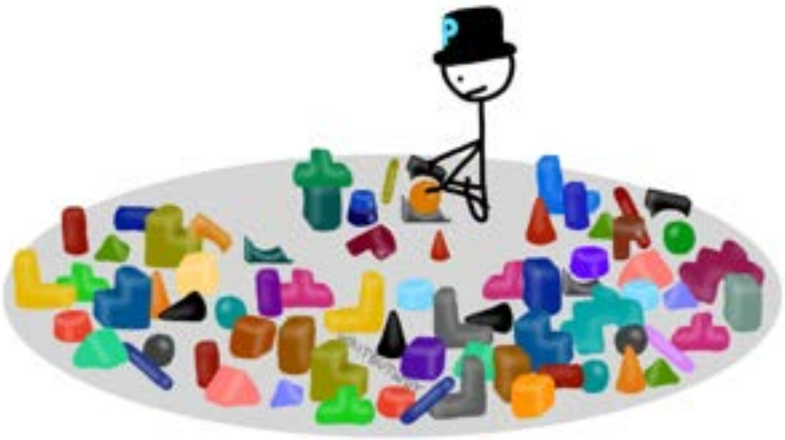
On top of being an efficient time-saver for acquiring info from trusted sources, it's a trick that allows you to gain real knowledge from *less*-than-healthy information as well. If I know that a particular source, on Topic X-Y, tends to be strongly pro-X and a bit biased against Y, but they also have shown to be reasonably concerned with truth, I can accept their views about X or Y as real information, as long as they're taken with the proper grain of salt. Depending on the magnitude and direction of their bias, I can apply just the right size and flavor salt grain to their views. If they say something good about X, I can consider that point but know I need to verify it myself, since their historical bias in favor of X means this is just a default statement for them. Same for a negative statement about Y. On the other hand, if they say something *good* about Y, their historically anti-Y bias makes this *very* meaningful information that I can probably accept right off the bat.

To get anywhere as a thinker, you need to start with the right puzzle pieces. The Attention Bouncer and Belief Bouncer, through a team effort, are in charge of getting you those pieces. If they're doing their job, the super-VIP club of your beliefs ends up populated by a large array of useful information—and you're ready to get puzzling.

Forming a Hypothesis, Component 3: Puzzling Together a Hypothesis



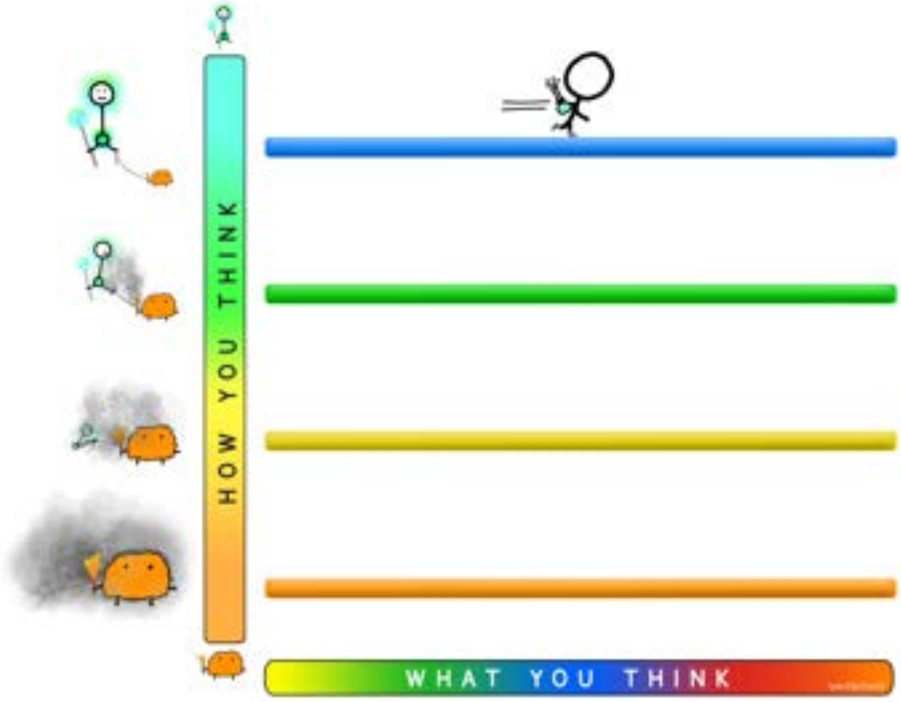
In the center of the beliefs region of your mind, your Puzzler starts putting pieces of information together.



Your Puzzler knows that the two bouncers guarding his laboratory have done a ton of listening to others, and his job is to now block out all of that noise and build his puzzle using nothing other than rationality and the info already in your head.

When you reason from first principles, you'll often come to conclusions that conflict with your pre-existing beliefs or with conventional wisdom. It's a challenge not to lose trust in yourself and give up on your thought process in these moments. But an experienced high-rung thinker knows how often even consensus beliefs are wrong, and their Puzzler will forge ahead confidently, knowing that in a world full of dogma and misinformation, his diligent, honest reasoning process is as valid a path to truth as any.

Scientists, so rigid about their high-up position on the How You Think axis, start out totally agnostic about their *horizontal* position on the What You Think axis. Early on in the puzzling process, a Scientist treats their rung like a skating rink, happily gliding back and forth and flip-flopping their opinion as they explore different possible viewpoints.

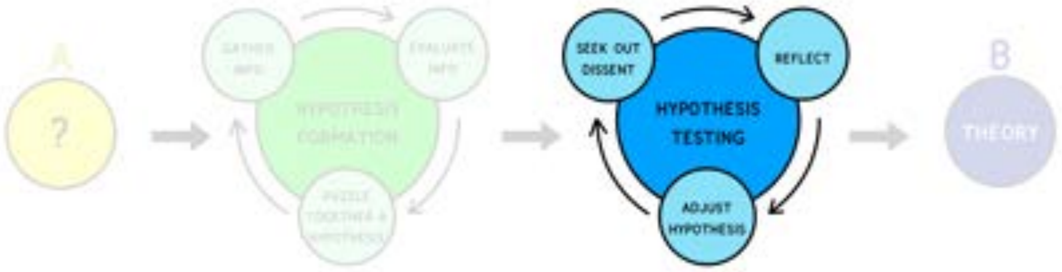


But as the Scientist learns and starts to puzzle info together, they increasingly hone in on a portion of the Idea Spectrum that they suspect may be where the truth lies. Their puzzle is finally taking shape—they have begun to form a *hypothesis*.

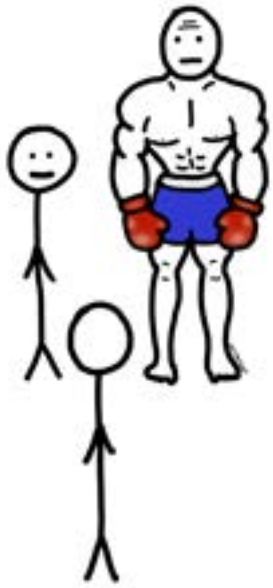
This is an exciting moment on your mission today—you've conquered the first section of the scientific method. You've learned a ton and you've formed an authentic take on the topic.

Now comes the unpleasant part.

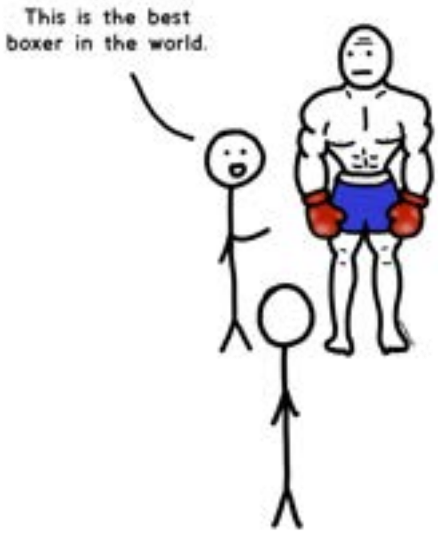
Testing the Hypothesis


A
?
GATHER INFO
EVALUATE INFO
HYPOTHESIS FORMATION
PUZZLE TOGETHER A HYPOTHESIS
SEEK OUT DISSENT
REFLECT
HYPOTHESIS TESTING
ADJUST HYPOTHESIS
B
THEORY

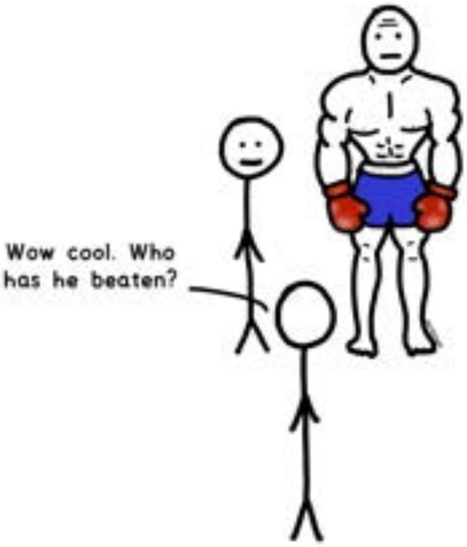
Imagine I present to you this boxer.



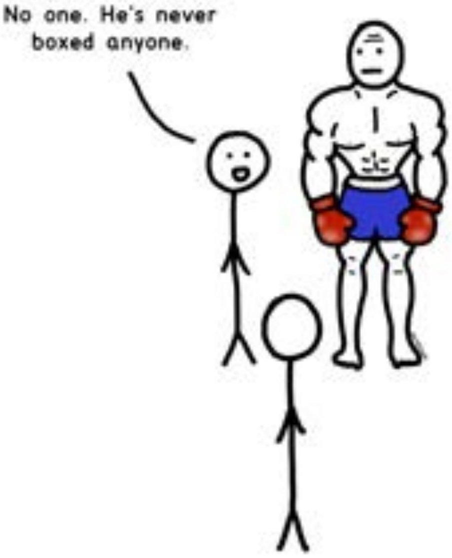
And I tell you


This is the best boxer in the world.

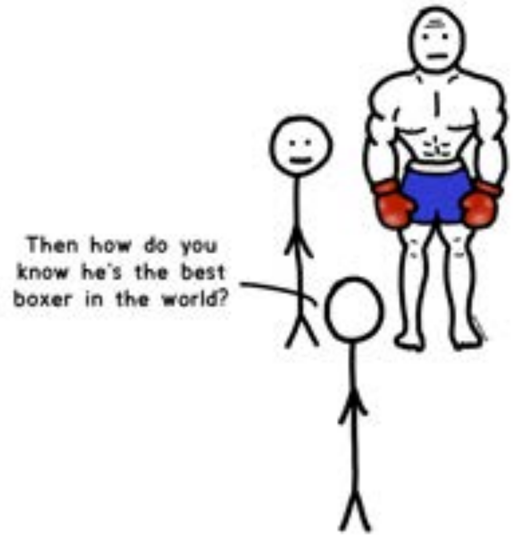
You might ask


Wow cool. Who has he beaten?

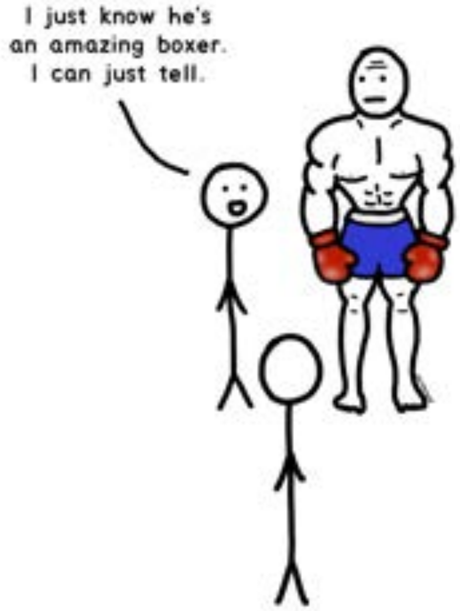
If I answered


No one. He's never boxed anyone.

You'd probably ask


Then how do you know he's the best boxer in the world?

And if I answered


I just know he's an amazing boxer. I can just tell.

You'd think I was insane.

But people do this with their ideas all the time. They feel sure they're right about an opinion they've never had to defend—an opinion that has never stepped into a ring.

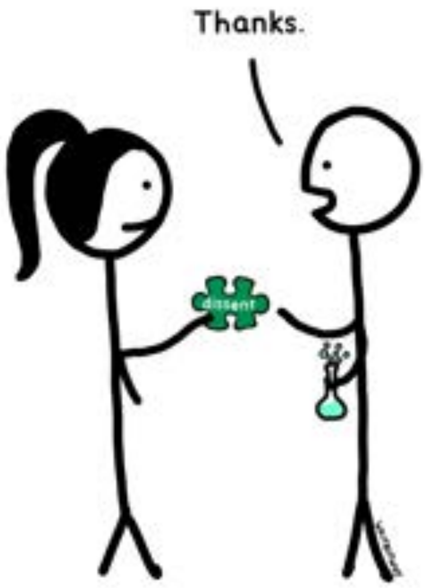
A belief or opinion you haven't tested isn't knowledge, it's wannabe knowledge—i.e. a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a boxer with *potential*—but it's not a champion of anything.

In the world of ideas, the marketplace of ideas is the boxing ring, and boxing opponents come in the form of *dissent*.

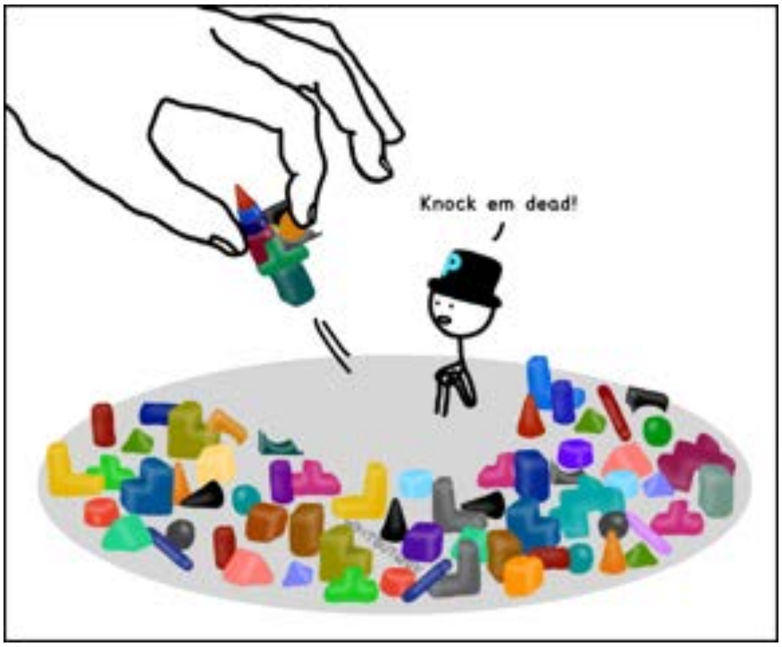
When you're thinking like a Scientist, you know that there are major barriers between you and truth. No matter how fine-tuned your Rung Rating filter system is, it's sure to mess up sometimes and let falsehood toxins find their way into your hypothesis. You're also wary of your own biases and the inevitable stubbornness of your own worldview. This is why dissent is so critical for every Scientist. Dissent is the truth-seeker's immune system. If your hypothesis is a machine, things like biased reasoning, oversimplification, and misleading statistics are its glitches and bugs, and a feisty dissenter to the hypothesis is like a technician searching for those flaws, which helps make it a better machine. Stuart Mill says it best:[1]

> *There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true, because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation.*③

That's why a Scientist views dissent as another valuable puzzle piece, critical to the completion of their understanding.



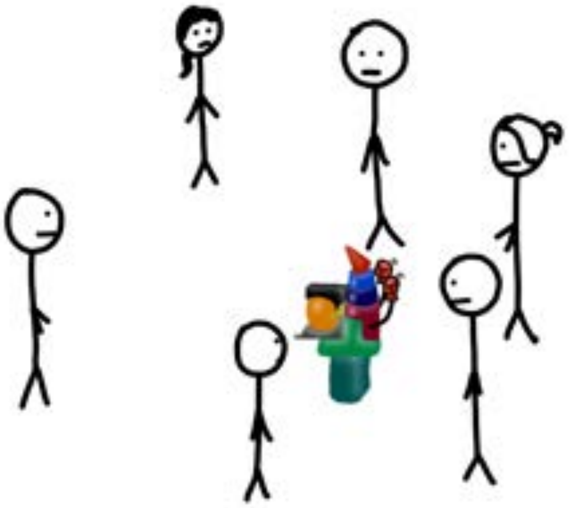
So you take your hypothesis out of the safety of your head—


Knock em dead!

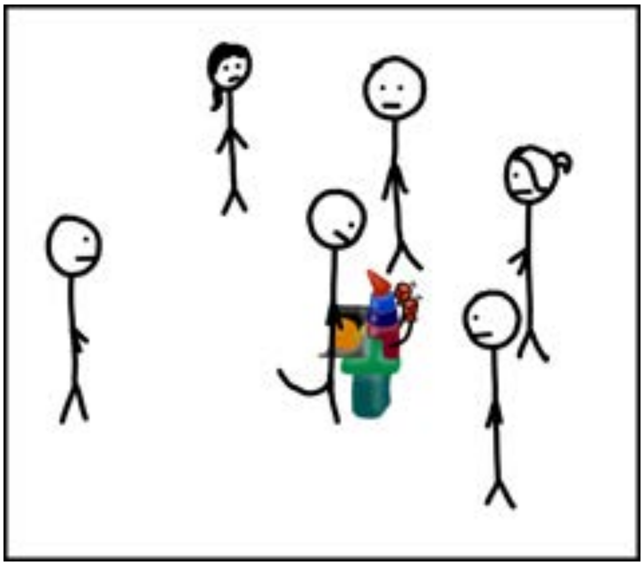
—and you toss it into the gauntlet of the marketplace of ideas. You start expressing the idea publicly, in person and online, and watch it get pelted by criticism from all angles. It's time to see if the little guy can box.

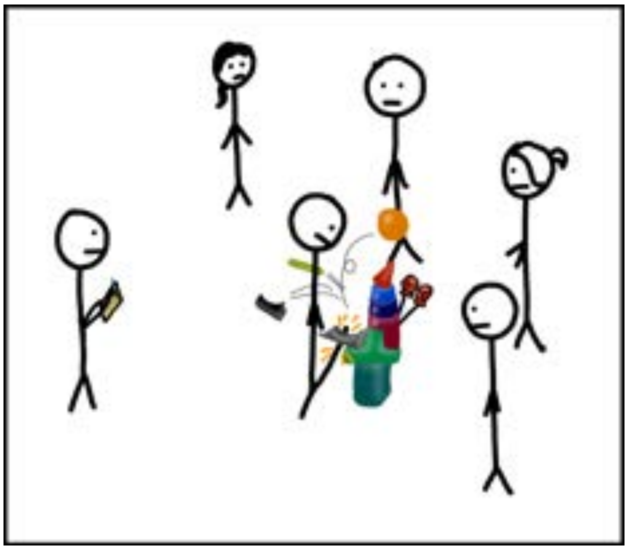
High-rung thinkers tend to surround themselves with other high-rung thinkers—which means finding people to debate with will be no problem. When high-rung thinkers hear an idea, they reflexively look for holes to poke in it. They disagree with each other for sport.

So you just put the idea out there and watch people flock over to try to break it.

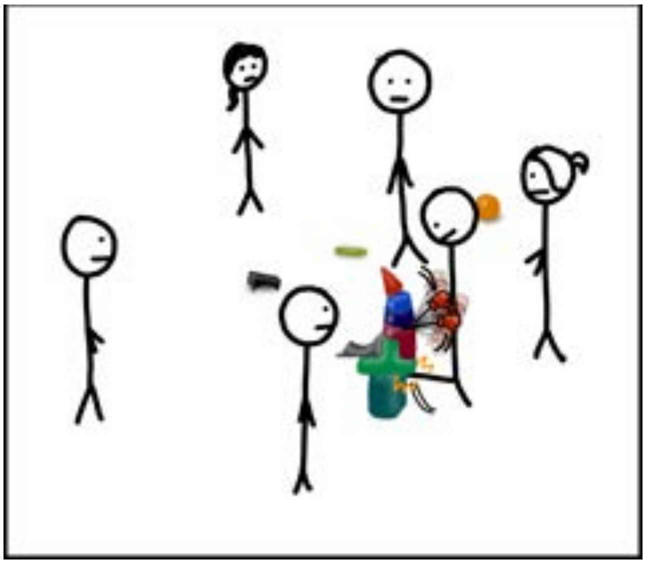


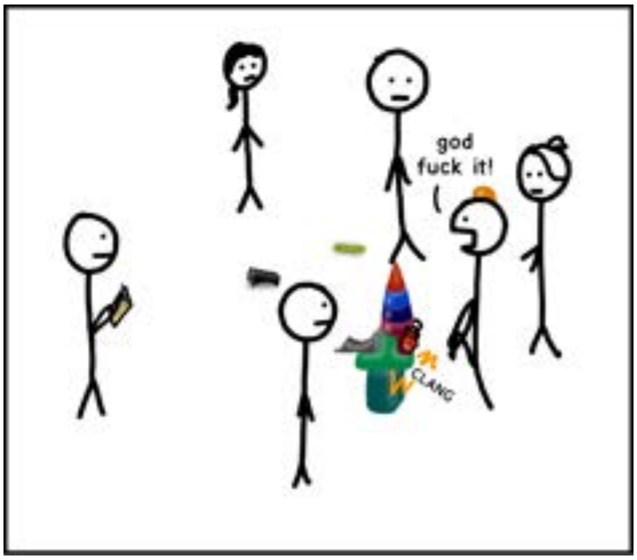
Sometimes they succeed.



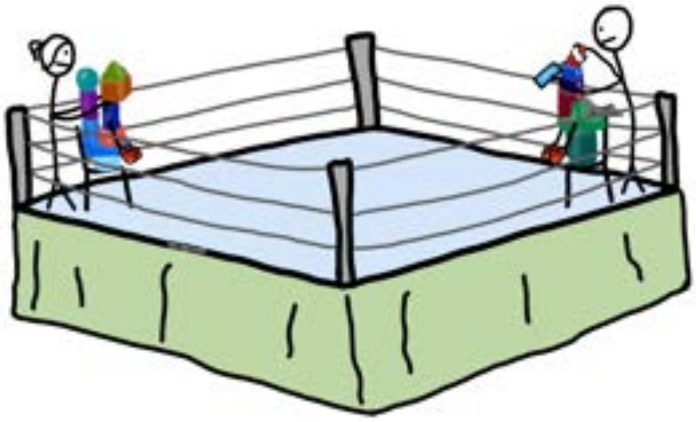


Other times your idea holds strong.

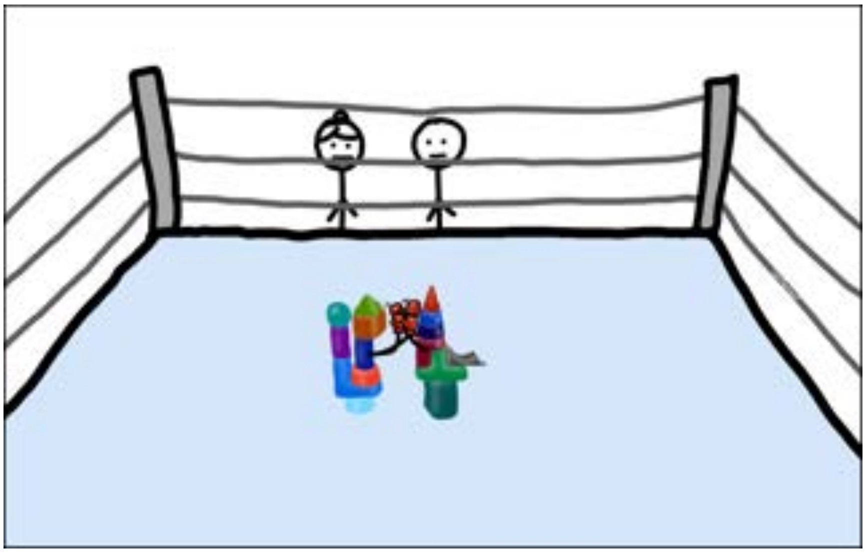




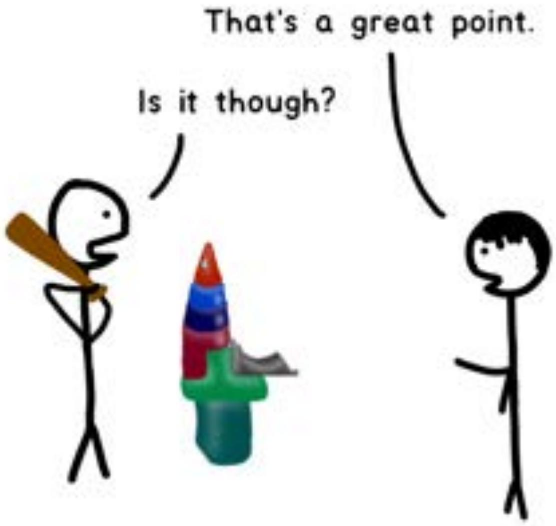
Watching your idea in the ring exposes flaws or misconceptions or soft spots in your ideas and helps you see where to make adjustments. Sometimes you engage in *debate*, playing the role of defender of your idea, arguing for its validity as hard as you can.



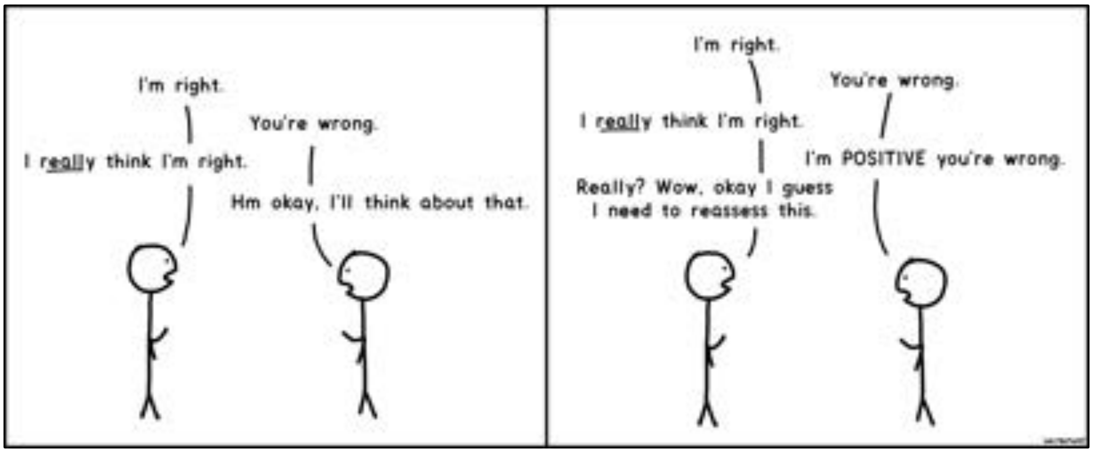
Sometimes you engage in *dialectic*, joining the dissenter in examining your idea.



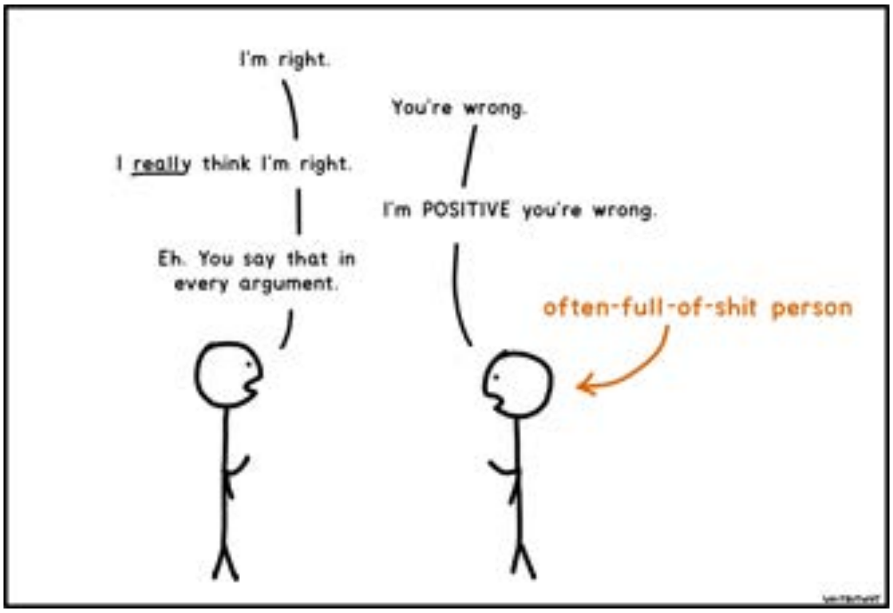
You sometimes even try flipping sides and playing devil's advocate, finding someone who agrees with you to debate with since looking at your conclusions through another lens enhances your clarity and reveals things you missed.


That's a great point.
Is it though?

As your hypothesis boxes different dissenting ideas, you keep your salt shaker handy, viewing every boxing match through the lens of what you believe to be the dissenter's Rung Rating. You also take the dissenter's degree of conviction into account, engaging in what writer Julia Galef describes as "meta-updating": if you're arguing with someone who has previously shown that their conviction tends to carry integrity, and you're both pretty sure you're right in the argument, you assess which of you seems *more* sure they're right and use that as an important piece of information.


I'm right.
I really think I'm right.
You're wrong.
Hm okay, I'll think about that.
I'm right.
You're wrong.
I really think I'm right.
I'm POSITIVE you're wrong.
Really? Wow, okay I guess I need to reassess this.

On the other hand, when you argue with someone who has shown you in the past that their expressed conviction is often dishonest or delusional, boy-who-cried-wolf style, you don't view their level of certainty as meaningful information.


I'm right.
I really think I'm right.
Eh. You say that in every argument.
You're wrong.
I'm POSITIVE you're wrong.
often-full-of-shit person

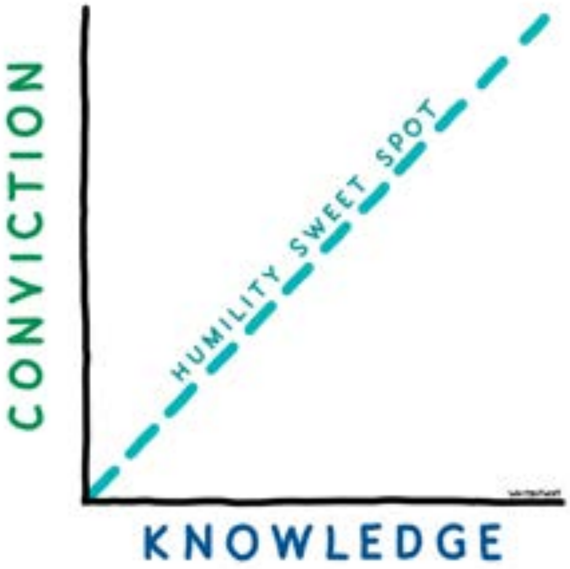
The more boxing matches you put your hypothesis through, the more you're able to explore the edges of your conclusions and tweak your thoughts into crisper and more confident opinions. Your hypothesis is starting to get some serious *gauntlet cred*.

The gauntlet isn't kind to most ideas, because most ideas are flawed. And when your hypothesis is flawed, some time in the gauntlet watching it get its ass kicked will *lower* the conviction you feel and convince you that you need to go back to the drawing board. But the times when you come up with a hypothesis that's logically sound, thoroughly fact-based, and philosophically consistent, the marketplace of ideas will have the opposite effect: watching your idea box like a champ again and again will make you feel tremendously confident about your opinion.

As you work your way through this process, we come across yet another important thinker skill—keeping the appropriate level of humility as your confidence grows.

You know how I said there's a "skepticism sweet spot"—right in between gullibility and paranoia—where your skepticism is enhancing and not hindering your ability to learn? Well the same thing goes for humility.

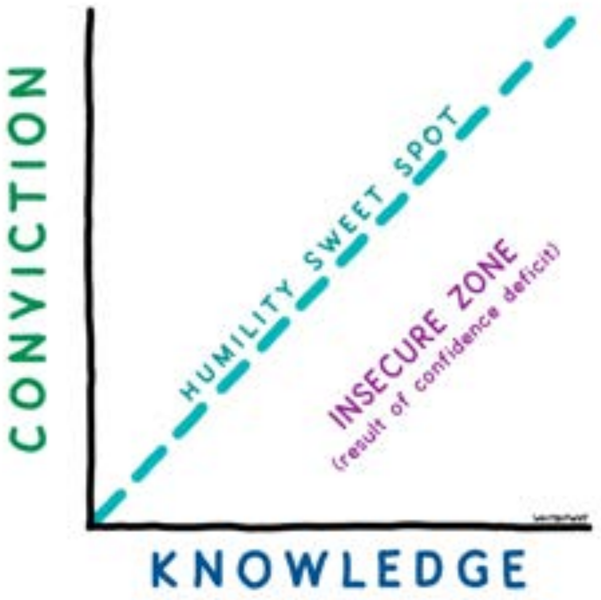
That sweet spot falls along this dotted line:


CONVICTION
HUMILITY SWEET SPOT
KNOWLEDGE

At any given point on your knowledge quest, you want your conviction to be an accurate expression of how much you actually know.

Even for the most self-aware thinkers, staying on the diagonal is easier said than done. It's like walking on a tightrope, and it's easy to fall off.

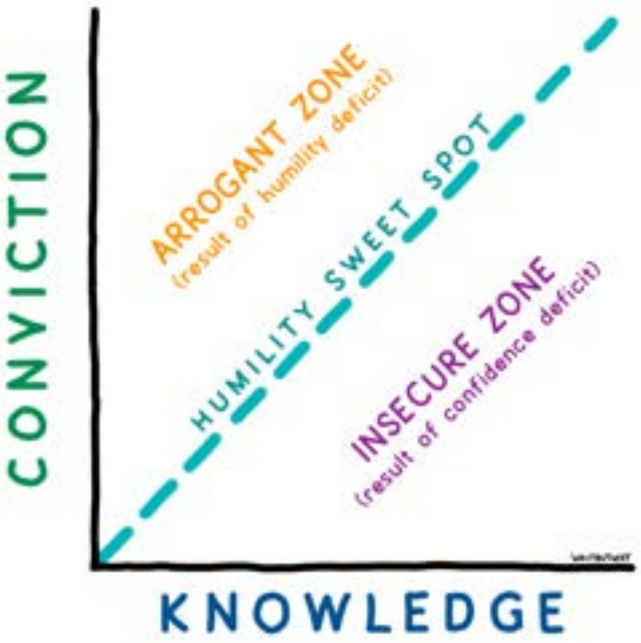
When you fall off the tightrope to the lower direction, you end up in the **insecure zone.**


CONVICTION
HUMILITY SWEET SPOT
INSECURE ZONE
(result of confidence deficit)
KNOWLEDGE

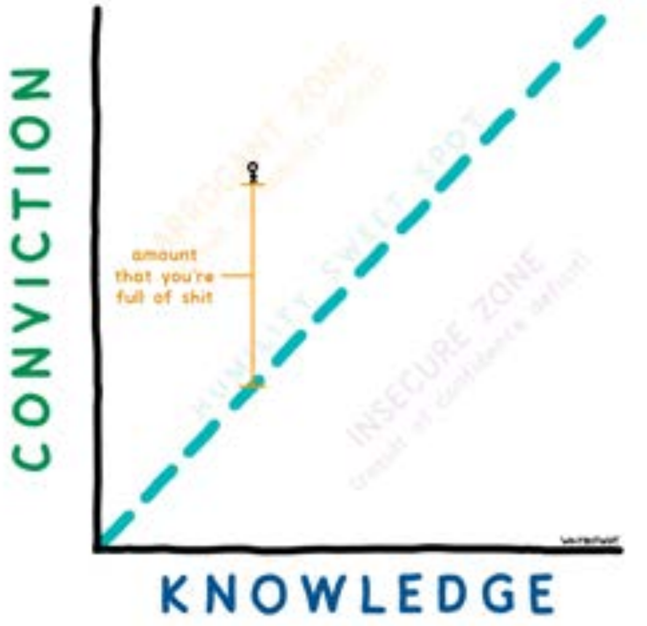
The insecure zone happens when you forget a critical fact: that most people expressing conviction are full of shit. When you forget that, but you're just self-aware enough to not feel the same BS conviction yourself, you feel stupid, and you feel ashamed of your more modest levels of knowledge.

When you're gullible to other people's *conviction*—like a customer who falls prey to a snake oil salesman—*your* conviction drops below your own knowledge level. You actually do know some stuff about the topic, but you feel like you don't. You have a confidence problem. The farther below the tightrope you are, the bigger the problem.

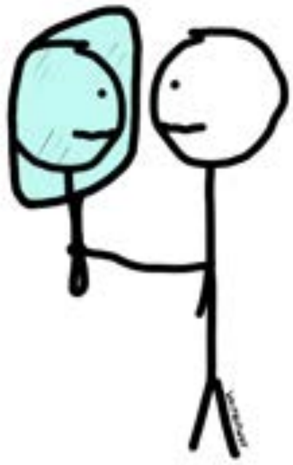
When you fall off the tightrope to the other side, you land in the **arrogant zone.**


CONVICTION
ARROGANT ZONE
(result of humility deficit)
HUMILITY SWEET SPOT
INSECURE ZONE
(result of confidence deficit)
KNOWLEDGE

The arrogant zone happens when you're not self-aware enough to remember your own flaws, and you forget how hard knowledge is, and you fool yourself into believing you know more than you do. The higher up you are above the tightrope, the fuller you are of shit.

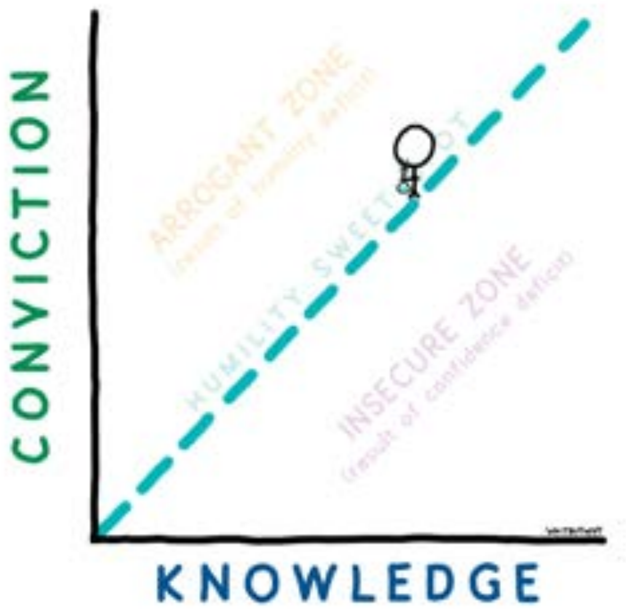


But so far on our little journey, you've been doing things like a Scientist. When you're thinking like a Scientist, it means the Higher Mind is strong in your head, and it lights you up with clarity and self-awareness. High self-awareness means that when you look in the mirror, you see yourself as you are—a flawed thinker with endless potential to learn.

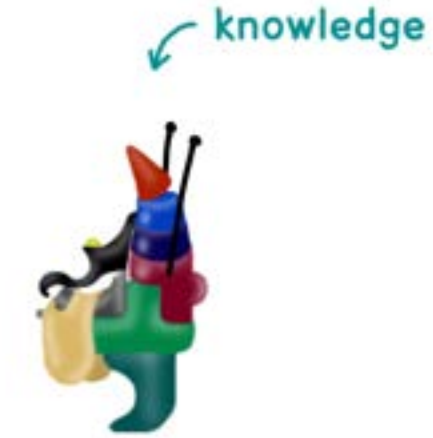


Clear self-awareness helps you keep an eye on the Primitive Mind and stay aware of your own cognitive pitfalls—because you know that your brain was designed for survival, not truth, and it's wise to be wary of your own intuition. As you learn and ponder, self-awareness helps you resist your brain's urge to save mental energy and oversimplify a complex topic. It helps you remember to think in spectrums despite an instinct to think in binary black-and-white. It helps you force yourself to parse slightly different versions of similar ideas instead of more conveniently grouping ideas together and labeling them as a single thing. It helps you keep putting in the effort to search for the nuance. Because a Scientist knows that the truth is always buried somewhere in the wrinkles of nuance, and that a satisfying, clean-cut, one-sided viewpoint is almost always wrong or incomplete. Looking in the mirror helps you keep an eye on your *own* Rung Rating as you do your thinking.

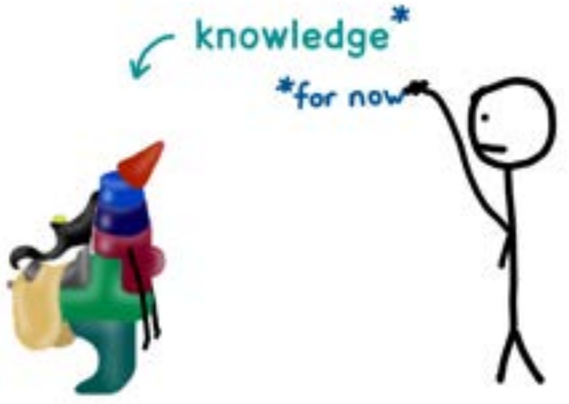
So you manage to stay pretty close to the tightrope, working your way somewhere up here:


CONVICTION
KNOWLEDGE
ARROGANT ZONE
(result of humility deficit)
HUMILITY SWEET SPOT
INSECURE ZONE
(result of confidence deficit)

Your little hypothesis has gone through hell and come out on the other side as *knowledge*.



There’s just one more thing to do.


knowledge*
*for now

Top-rung thinkers know themselves, their peers, and history well enough to know that all human intellect is fallible. In the actual science world, even the most tried and true hypothesis will be treated not as ultimate truth, but as a *theory*. Scientists max out at “theory” because they know that all beliefs are falsifiable and subject to be proven wrong by changing times or new evidence. Thinking works the same way—in order to continually claim a hypothesis to be “knowledge,” it must survive continued testing and scrutiny.

If all of this sounds a bit exhausting, that’s because it is.

The Scientist’s learning process is exhausting because knowledge is hard. Because truth is hard. Which is why people who tend to think like Scientists are more than happy to say “I don’t know” most of the time. They’re lazy like anyone else—the thing that makes them Scientists isn’t that they’re necessarily obsessive learners, but that they’re realistic about what developing real, independent, informed viewpoints entails, and they’re honest with themselves and others about what they know and what they don’t.

But for today at least, you’ve gone hard enough at this to establish a solid, independent viewpoint that you can feel confident about—and you’ve done it the Scientist way.

I recently attended a conference for scientists (actual, science scientists). I’m not a scientist, but I’m a curious person, and I often write about science, so I had a delightful time spending the whole conference cornering scientists and grilling them on questions I’ve had but haven’t been able to answer. ④⑤⑥⑦ I also often write about how scientists *think*, and at one point, standing in a circle with about four scientists, I talked about how much I admire the way scientists think—their humility, their pure motivations, their willingness to admit they’re wrong when new evidence changes their conclusions.

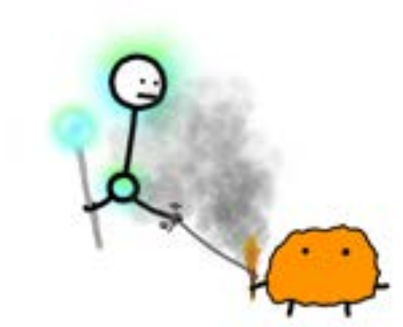
They all burst out laughing. One of them said, “Have you *met* scientists?”

This is the thing about humans. We’re so bad at thinking like Scientists that even *scientists* are bad at thinking like Scientists. Because no matter who you are, inside your mind is a powerful little primitive fuzzball.

Above, when you were thinking like a Scientist, the conditions in your head were pristine. The Higher Mind was doing the thinking while the Primitive Mind lay mostly dormant. We’re all there sometimes, when we’re being our best selves—when we’re thinking like pros.

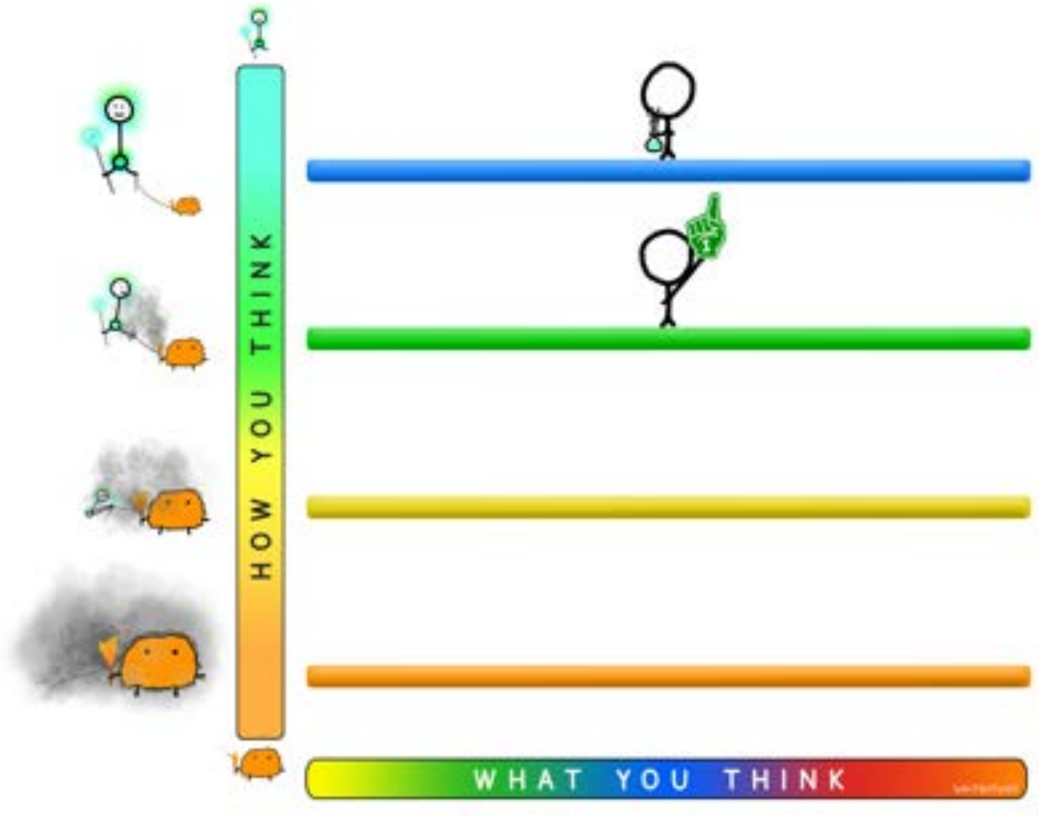
But truth is a fragile motive. And at some point, without you realizing it, something changes. It’s a bit of a chicken and egg situation. Sometimes, a topic you’re thinking about jolts your Primitive Mind awake because it believes, for some reason, that holding a certain viewpoint on this topic is important for your survival—often because the topic has become tangled up with your identity. Sometimes, the Primitive Mind has activated for some unrelated reason, which infiltrates your mind with one or more of its standard emotions—fear, pride, anger, ego—and this then affects your thinking, bringing your intellect down closer to its level.

Whatever the cause, on our journey down the ladder today, the Primitive Mind has entered the picture. The Higher Mind is still the more powerful character, but now he’s got competition.



The Primitive Mind’s involvement has compromised your ability to think from the very top rung—you’ve dropped down to Rung 2. You’re no longer thinking like a Scientist—you’re thinking like a *Sports Fan*.

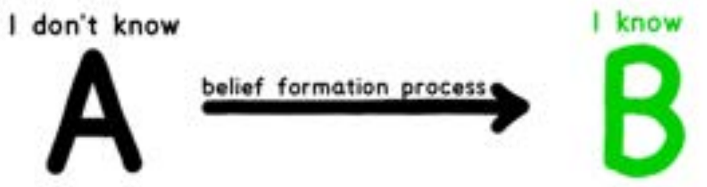
Rung 2: Thinking Like a Sports Fan



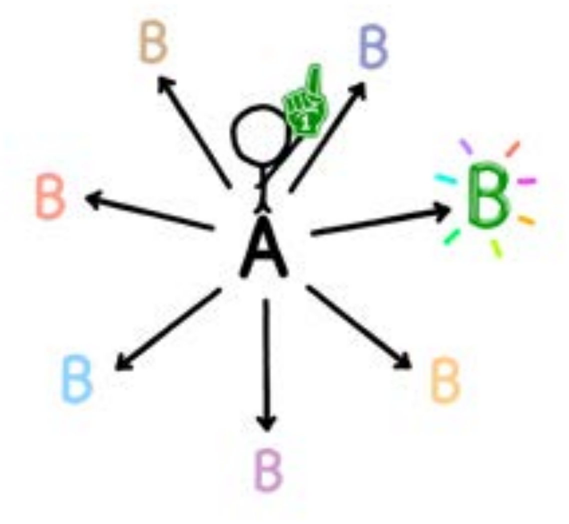
The biggest psychos aside, most real-life sports fans want the games they watch to be played fairly. They don't want corrupt referees, even if it helps their team win. They want their team to win fair and square. They place immense value on the integrity of the process itself.

It's just...that they really really want that process to yield a certain outcome. They're not just watching the game—they're *rooting.*

When your Primitive Mind begins to infiltrate your reasoning process, you start thinking the same way. When you head down this road—



—you still believe you're starting at Point A, and you know you need to work hard to get to Point B—and you do want the Point B you ultimately arrive at to be the truth. But you're not exactly objective about it.



Weird things happen to your thinking when the pure drive for truth is infected by some ulterior motive. Psychologists call it “motivated reasoning.” I like to think of it as Reasoning While Motivated—the thinking equivalent of drunk driving. Sent-ts’an explains:

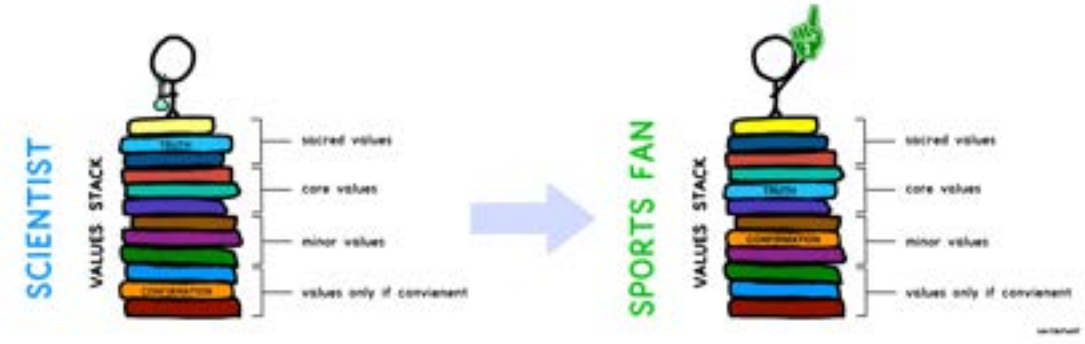
If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between “for” and “against” is the mind’s worst disease. – Sent-ts’an, c. 700 AD

When you’re thinking like a Sports Fan, Sent-ts’an and his apostrophe *and* his hyphen are all mad at you, because they know what they’re about to see—the Scientist’s rigorous due process of thinking, corrupted by the truth-seeker’s most treacherous obstacle:

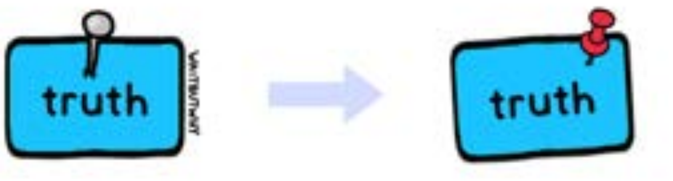
Confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias, one of the most common impairments caused by Reasoning While Motivated, is why people see perfection in their brand new romantic relationships, and why people are so often nauseated by exes they once adored. It’s why socially paranoid people freak out when someone takes too long to respond to their email. It’s why overconfident artists can hear ten lukewarm reactions to their art and one effusive one and see the single exception as evidence of their greatness—and why other insecure artists do the exact opposite. It’s why conspiracy theorists see evidence of their conspiracies everywhere.

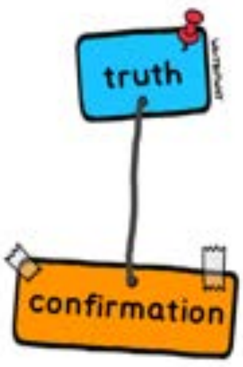
Our x-ray goggles remind us what’s going on here: While the Higher Mind is all about the How You Think axis—about the integrity of the *process* of thinking—the Primitive Mind is the opposite: it cares only about *what* you think—about your x-axis position. Because the two minds’ intellectual goals—truth and confirmation—are in direct conflict, it’s a zero-sum situation. When the Primitive Mind enters the equation and captures a piece of your mindset, it inherently draws some of your integrity *away* from the Higher Mind’s principles. Confirmation rising up in your Values Stack also means truth moving down.



Truth being lowered a bit in your Values Stack moves it out of sacred, nailed-in territory and into the important-but-not-totally-sacred area, where values are fastened in a less rock-solid way—let’s say, with a thumbtack.


truth
truth

At the same time, confirmation has moved *up* from the unimportant area of your Values Stack—where values swing freely, totally at the whim of the more important values above—to the *somewhat important* tier. Values in this tier are still secondary to the more important values, but they're given enough weight that they don't swing so freely anymore. They're taped in place now.


truth
confirmation

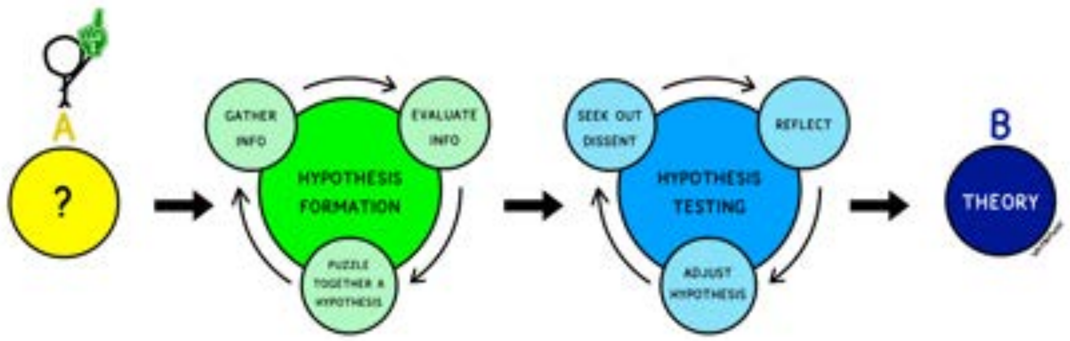
With some effort, taped values can be moved, but there's some friction now—a resistance to changing your mind that wasn't there when you were on the top rung. A portion of your intellectual integrity has been supplanted by intellectual *loyalty.*

Life is simple for you when you're dealing with only nailed-in and free-swinging values—there's little inner conflict. Thumbtacks and tape are trickier.

Now, as the Higher Mind tries to chase truth, confirmation bias is the invisible hand of the Primitive Mind that nudges the process in a preferred direction. And this invisible hand infects every part of the knowledge-acquisition process.

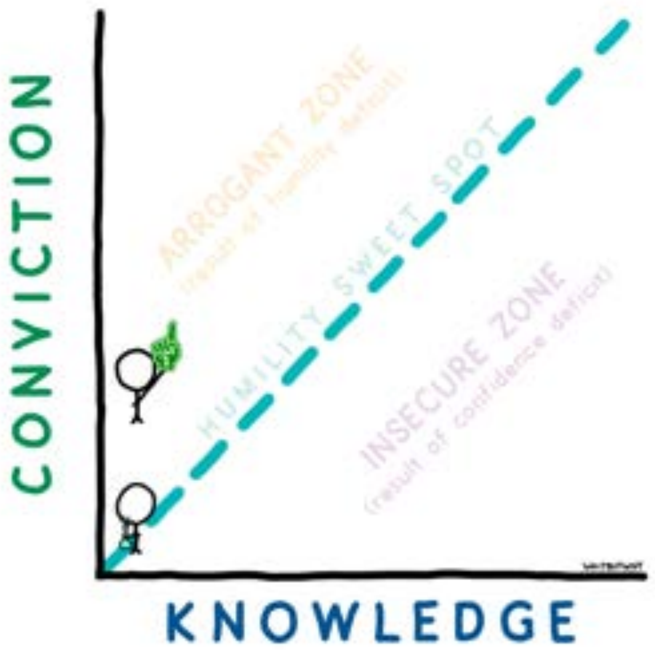
The Sports Fan's Thinking Process

If you're not looking closely enough, the Sports Fan's thinking process looks a lot like the Scientist's:


A
?
GATHER INFO
EVALUATE INFO
HYPOTHESIS FORMATION
PUZZLE TOGETHER A HYPOTHESIS
SEEK OUT DISSENT
REFLECT
HYPOTHESIS TESTING
ADJUST HYPOTHESIS
B
THEORY

But as we watch you work your way from A to B, we'll see that a little Primitive Mind can go a long way.

From the very start, when you're standing at **Point A**, without any actual knowledge yet, the influence of your Primitive Mind's automatic conviction has you *feeling* like you know a bit more than you do.



The **gathering evidence phase**—which the Scientist made sure to do in an even-handed and representative manner—now becomes *motivated gathering.* The Attention Bouncer now plays *favorites*.

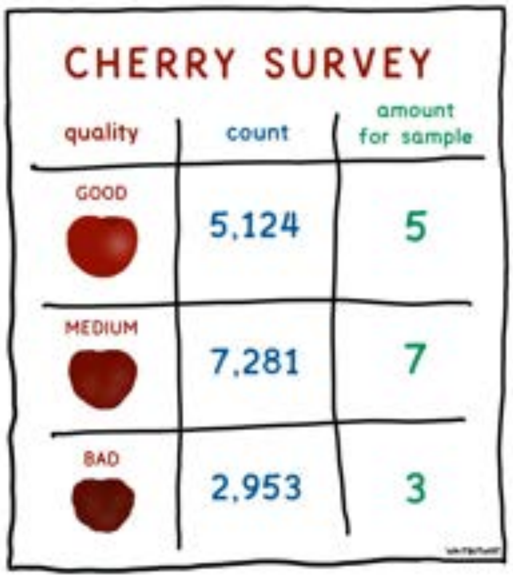
We all know what it's like when a bouncer plays favorites. Back in my 20s, I suffered through a reasonable amount of hellish nightlife—and a common experience was waiting in line outside some dark, loud, nightmarish weekend night bar while groups of women would walk up and gain immediate entry, without waiting in line. If I were with a group that was too guy heavy, we might get all the way to the front only to not be let in at all.

When you're thinking like a Sports Fan, your Attention Bouncer treats information that concurs with your existing opinion like a group of young, attractive women. And he treats info that weakens your existing views like a large, unappealing group of bros. Wary of letting your mind turn into a sausage fest, he plays favorites.

When favoritism happens in the realm of ideas, we call it **cherry-picking.**

According to the internet, the origin of the term has to do with actual cherry-picking. Imagine you're a very rich person who owns a huge estate, and one day you're bored as shit so you call your servant into the room and tell him you'd like to get a sense of what the cherry harvest is like this year in your orchard. But you're also hungry, so you order the servant not to *tell* you how the cherries are looking but to actually bring you a *representative sampling* of the cherries in your orchard.

If you were thinking on the Scientist rung of the ladder, you'd leave the instructions at that. Your servant would count the cherries in the orchard and collect a sampling like this:

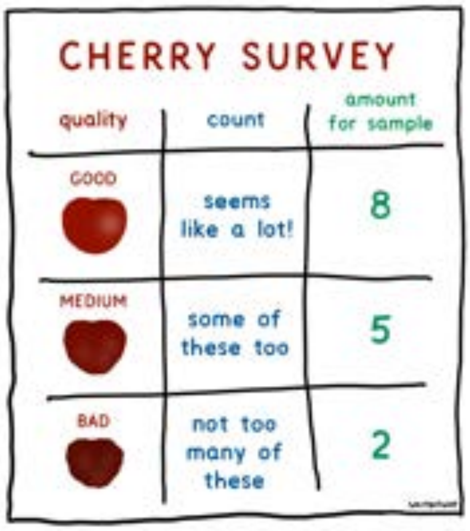


CHERRY SURVEY

quality	count	amount for sample
GOOD	5,124	5
MEDIUM	7,281	7
BAD	2,953	3

But if you were thinking from the Sports Fan's rung, you might add in one extra comment while issuing the command: "…and it will upset me greatly if my cherries aren't having a good year. I look forward to learning how well they're doing."

So now, the servant heads out to the orchard with the same plan—to pick a representative sampling. But with your last comment ringing in his ears, he finds himself not really *counting* the cherries but more *eyeballing* them. And when he picks his sampling, it comes out like this:



CHERRY SURVEY

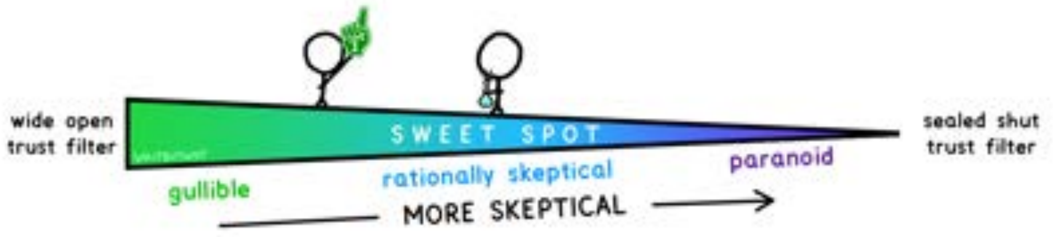
quality	count	amount for sample
GOOD	seems like a lot!	8
MEDIUM	some of these too	5
BAD	not too many of these	2

As a Rung 2 thinker, you still want to know what's actually happening out in the world—you're just nudging the results a little. And that's what you did here in the info gathering phase, with your Attention Bouncer as the servant. You didn't exactly tell the bouncer to be *dishonest* about anything—you just put him in an awkward position by providing conflicting motivations: 1) to give you a representative sampling, and 2) to hope that the results come out a certain way. So the info you end up gathering and absorbing on the topic skews a little friendly to your preferred conclusion.

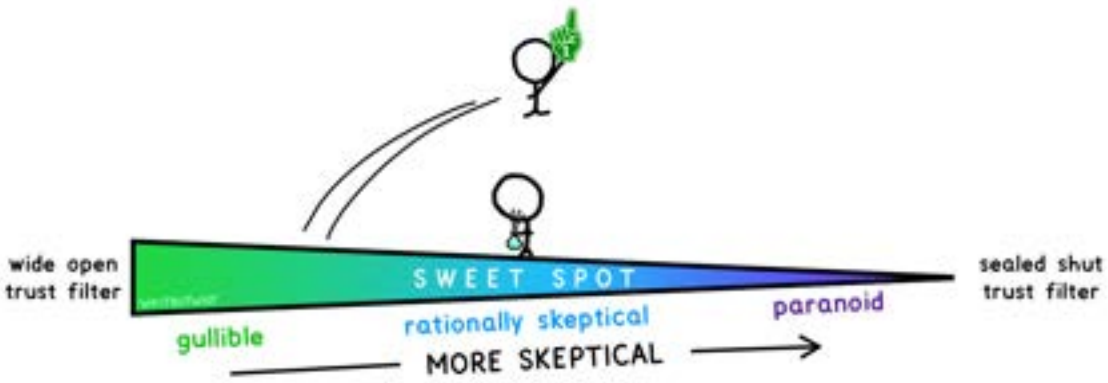
As this happens, you're not *conscious* of doing anything weird at all. You still believe you're thinking like a good Scientist—even if somewhere very deep down, you might feel a little worse about yourself without being quite sure why.

And as we move on from info gathering to **info assessment**, the trouble continues—because when you're thinking like a Sports Fan, the Belief Bouncer starts acting funny too.

When presented with an idea that confirms your existing beliefs, he becomes more lax with the door, easing up on the trust filter criteria.



But when a piece of evidence doesn't seem to match your Primitive Mind's favorite idea, that benefit of the doubt vanishes, and the Belief Bouncer looks for any reason he can find to deny entry.

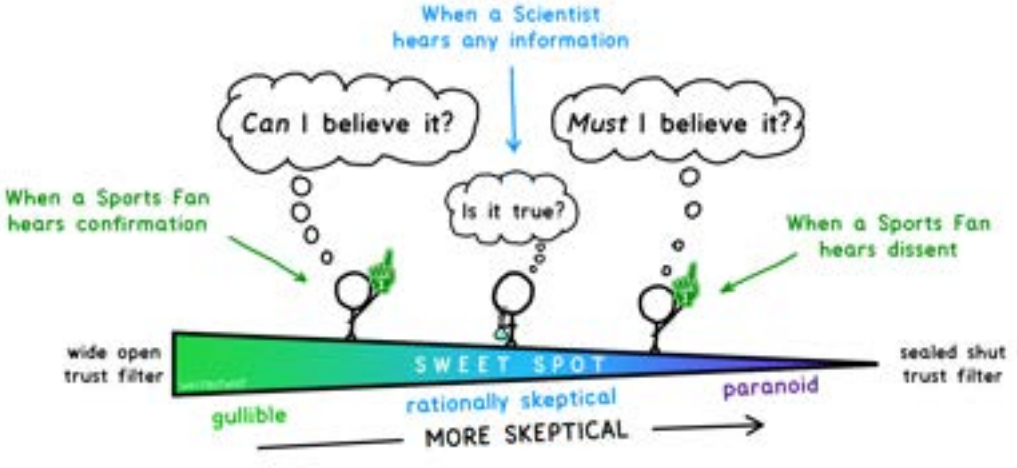

wide open
trust filter
SWEET SPOT
sealed shut
trust filter
gullible
rationally skeptical
paranoid
MORE SKEPTICAL

We talked about the problem of being either too gullible or too paranoid—but there, we were talking about genuine truth-seekers who were simply insecure about their intellectual judgment. Toggling *back and forth* on the Skepticism Meter, based on the content being evaluated, is *motivated skepticism*—a classic form of Reasoning While Motivated.

Social psychologist and NYU professor Jonathan Haidt sums up motivated skepticism nicely:[2]

We don't look out at the world and say, "Where's the weight of the evidence?" We start with an original supposition and we say, ***"Can I believe it?"*** *If I want to believe something, I ask: Can I believe it? Can I find the justification? But if I don't want to believe it, I say:* ***Must I believe it?*** *Am I forced to believe it? Or can I escape?*

"*Can* I believe it?" isn't accidental gullibility—it's *motivated* gullibility. Likewise, "*must* I believe it?" is motivated paranoia.


When a Scientist
hears any information
Can I believe it?
Is it true?
Must I believe it?
When a Sports Fan
hears confirmation
When a Sports Fan
hears dissent
wide open
trust filter
SWEET SPOT
sealed shut
trust filter
gullible
rationally skeptical
paranoid
MORE SKEPTICAL

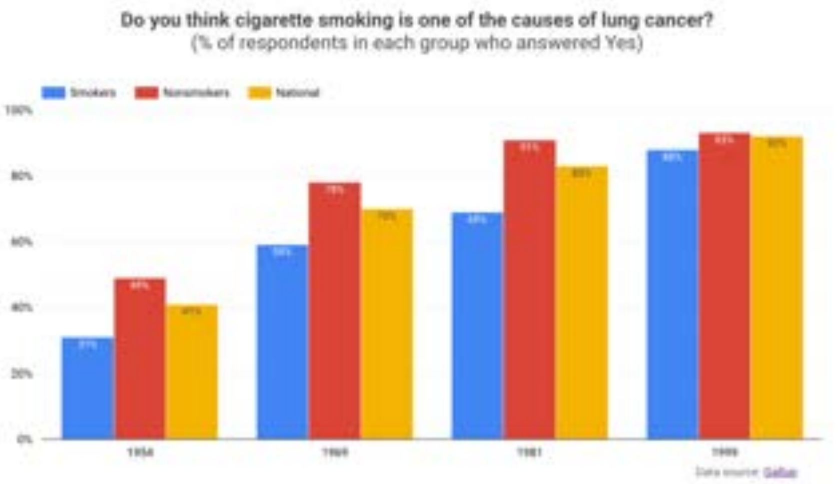
Haidt goes on to reference a perfect example of motivated skepticism in action:

In a classic study, students come into the lab. They're taking psychology classes, they're learning about experimental methods, so they're given a study. It looks like it's from the Journal of Science. They're asked to critique the methods. And the study seems to show that caffeine consumption is associated with breast cancer. And their job now is to read the study and say what they think of the methods.

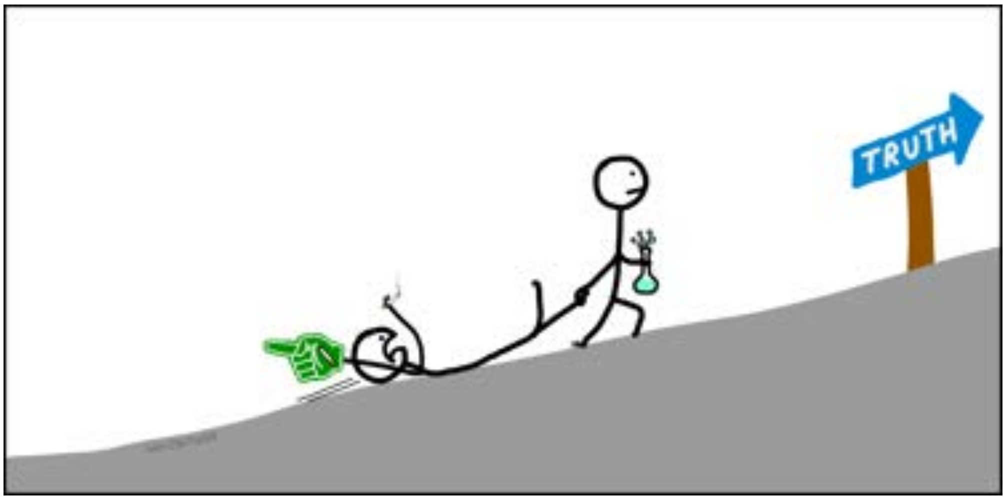
Well, who do you think finds a lot of flaws in that study? Who do you think? Coffee drinkers! And do you think all coffee drinkers are trying to find flaws in the study? Women *who drink coffee are desperately saying, "Must I believe it? Must I believe it? What could possibly be wrong," and they find all kinds of things wrong with it. The others say, "Oh gosh, okay, I didn't know that."*

Reasoning While Motivated caused the exact people who were most upset about the study's results to reason differently, and less accurately, than the rest of the participants—because it literally changes what goes on in our brain. An MIT study used actual fMRI data to see what was going on with motivated reasoning, and they found that "motivated reasoning is qualitatively distinct from reasoning when people do not have a strong emotional stake in the conclusions reached."[3] Kinda like how drunk driving is qualitatively distinct from sober driving.

We could also return to the story of smoking in the US that we discussed in Part 2 and see the same exact phenomenon. One thing I didn't mention is that as the country slowly came around to the reality that smoking is bad for your health, no one came around more slowly than smokers.[4]



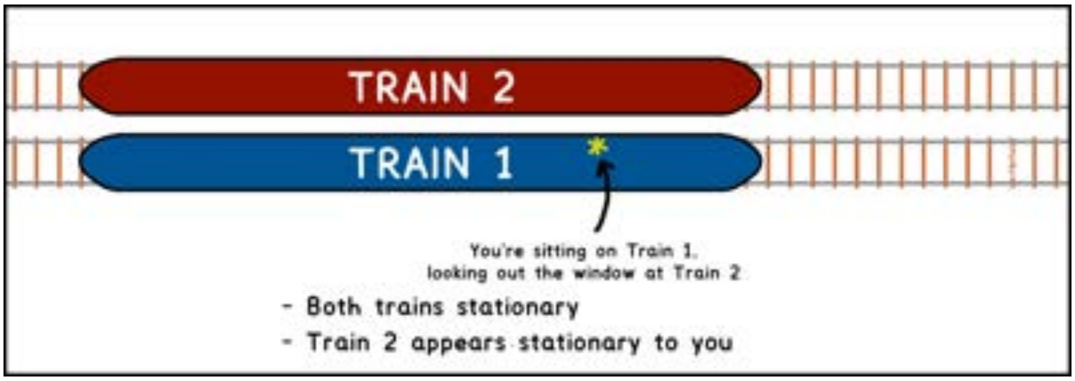
When I see these stats, I see this story.



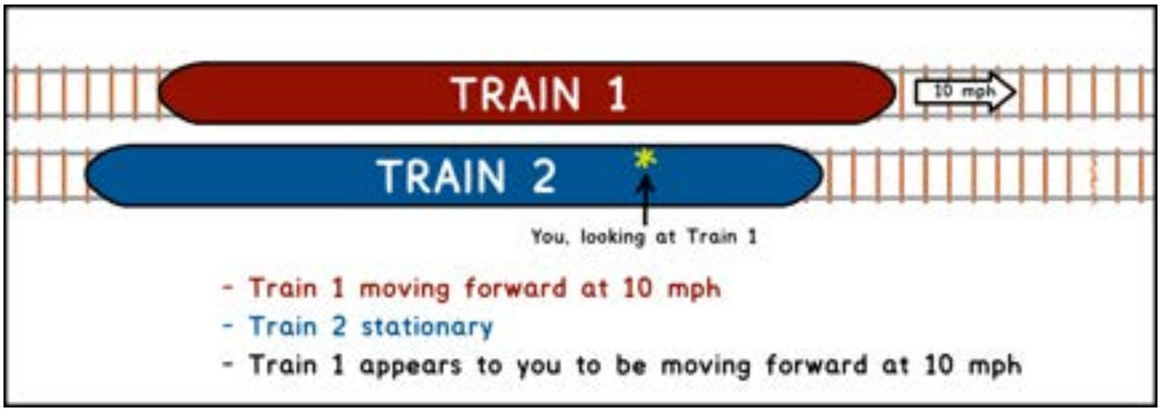
Smokers were fans of the “smoking is fine” sports team—which impaired their ability to reach truth as quickly as those without a dog in the fight.

But neither the smokers nor the female coffee drinkers were thinking about any of this. Like a drunk driver who’s pretty sure they’re fine to drive, they assumed they were being objective. Because part of motivated reasoning’s sneakiness is that the thinker doesn’t realize that it’s happening.

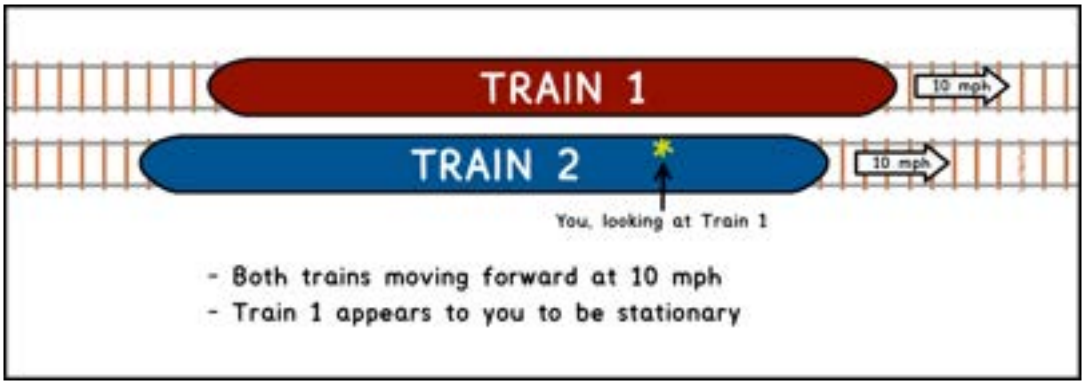
The same bias alters the way you judge info *sources*. It works kind of like adjacent trains. If you’re on a train looking out the window at another train and both trains are still, you see the other train as still.


TRAIN 2
TRAIN 1
You're sitting on Train 1,
looking out the window at Train 2
- Both trains stationary
- Train 2 appears stationary to you

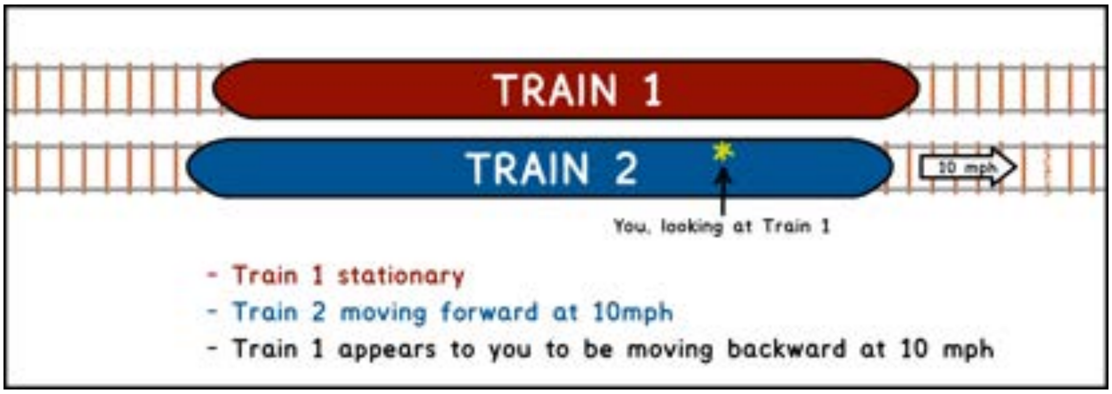
If the other train then starts moving forwards at 10mph, it appears to you as it really is—moving forwards at 10mph.


TRAIN 1
10 mph
TRAIN 2
You, looking at Train 1
- Train 1 moving forward at 10 mph
- Train 2 stationary
- Train 1 appears to you to be moving forward at 10 mph

But if *your* train is moving forwards at 10mph, then the other train, also moving forward at 10mph, looks to you like it's stationary.


TRAIN 1
10 mph
TRAIN 2
10 mph
You, looking at Train 1
- Both trains moving forward at 10 mph
- Train 1 appears to you to be stationary

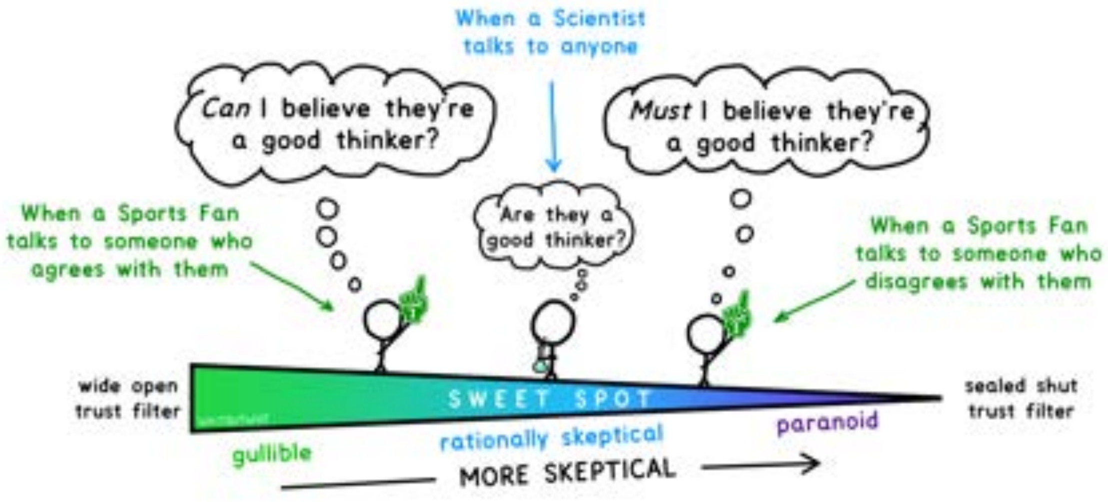
And if the other train then stops moving and becomes stationary, it looks to you as if it started moving *backward* at 10mph.


TRAIN 1
TRAIN 2
10 mph
You, looking at Train 1
- Train 1 stationary
- Train 2 moving forward at 10mph
- Train 1 appears to you to be moving backward at 10 mph

Humans with bias works like trains in motion. When you're thinking clearly and objectively, like a Scientist, you're like a stationary train. You see objectivity and bias in other thinkers for what they are. But when you're seeing through a biased lens, you're like a train in motion. Someone who shares your bias seems objective to you, while someone being objective seems to you to be biased the other way. And when you come across someone who is actually biased the other way, you'll see their bias as more extreme than it is.

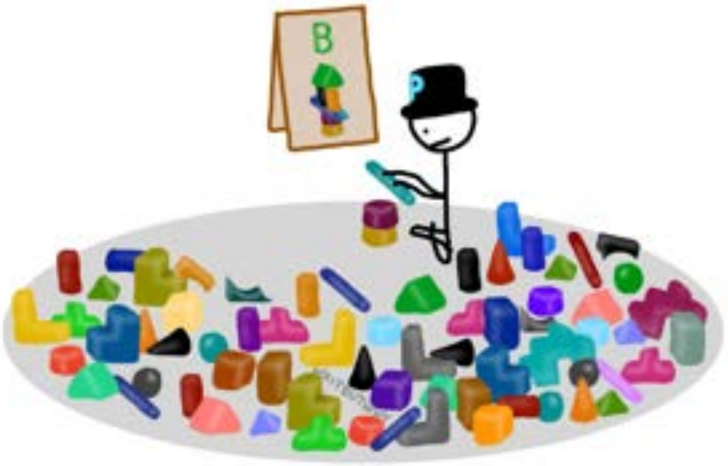
The motion of your own bias skews your Rung Rating system. Instead of judging thinkers or info sources purely by the strength of their intellectual process, you'll unconsciously inflate the rating of sources who agree with you and dock your rating of those who don't. More motivated reasoning—this time in the form of motivated *judgment.*

This Rung Rating distortion works hand-in-hand with the Skepticism Meter toggling.

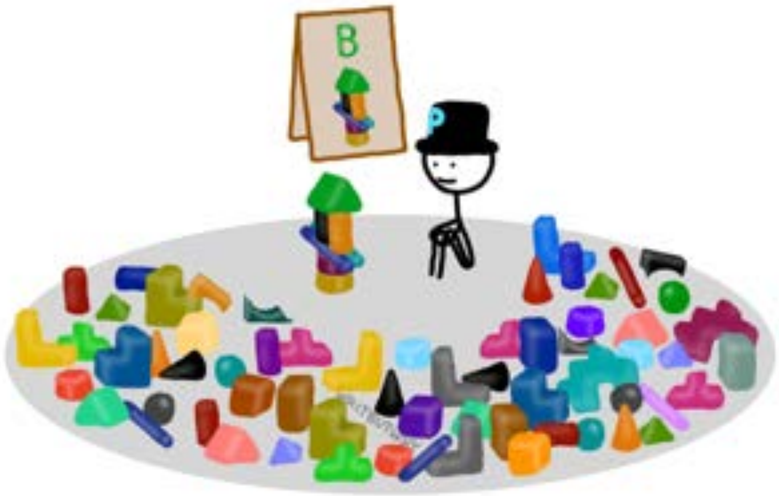

When a Scientist talks to anyone
Can I believe they're a good thinker?
Are they a good thinker?
Must I believe they're a good thinker?
When a Sports Fan talks to someone who agrees with them
When a Sports Fan talks to someone who disagrees with them
wide open trust filter
SWEET SPOT
sealed shut trust filter
gullible
rationally skeptical
paranoid
MORE SKEPTICAL

A corrupt Attention Bouncer leads to a distorted picture of reality, and a corrupt Belief Bouncer means a weakened intellectual immune system against toxic falsehoods. So when we head onto the third leg of the "hypothesis formation" process—**puzzling together a hypothesis**—we find a room of beliefs curated by a corrupt process. The key character in that room—the Puzzler—is limited in his puzzling to the pieces he's given, and when you're thinking like a Sports Fan, a disproportionate number of those pieces will support your existing views.

And that's only half the problem, because the Primitive Mind's motivation has infiltrated the process of all parts of your mind—including the Puzzler himself. As he puzzles, hovering somewhere in his peripheral vision is a picture of your existing viewpoint—the one your Primitive Mind wants so badly to confirm—and the Puzzler is a bit more inclined to use the pieces that match the picture.



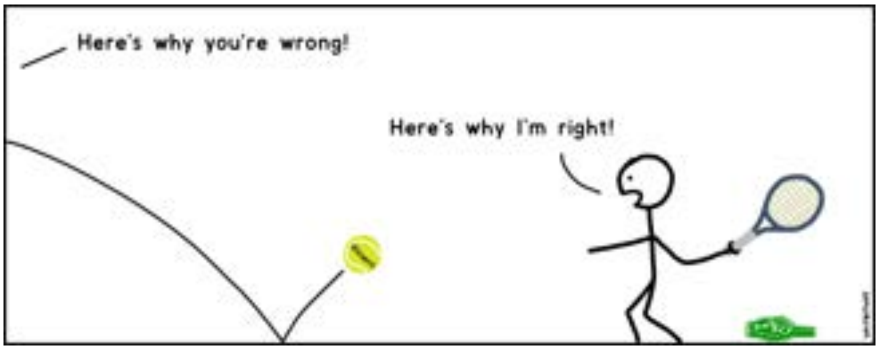
By the time you arrive at your eventual hypothesis, it looks conveniently and predictably similar to what you suspected/hoped was true back when you were at Point A.



When you move onto the final step in the knowledge process—**testing your hypothesis**—your Sports Fan bias continues to rear its head.

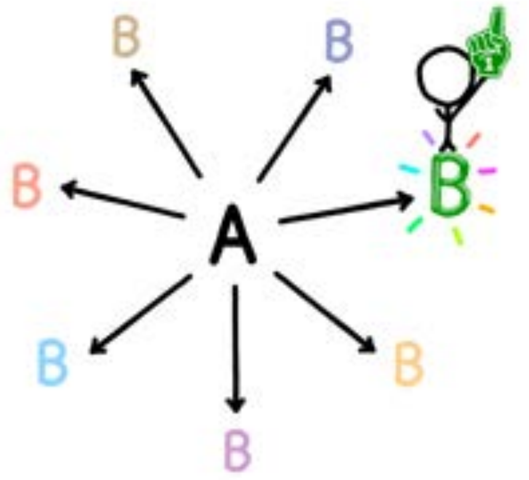
When you were thinking like a Scientist, you felt very little attachment to your hypothesis. But now, as you watch your little machine box, you're watching as a *fan*. You're wearing its jersey. It's Your Guy in the ring. And if it wins an argument, you might even catch yourself thinking "we won!"—a classic term in the world of real sports fans that reveals their identity's entanglement with their team.

You're acting like a weirdo because when you're thinking like a Sports Fan, you don't see dissent like a helpful puzzle piece—you see it like a tennis ball coming at you during a tennis match. Something to hit back—a challenge to try to *defeat*.

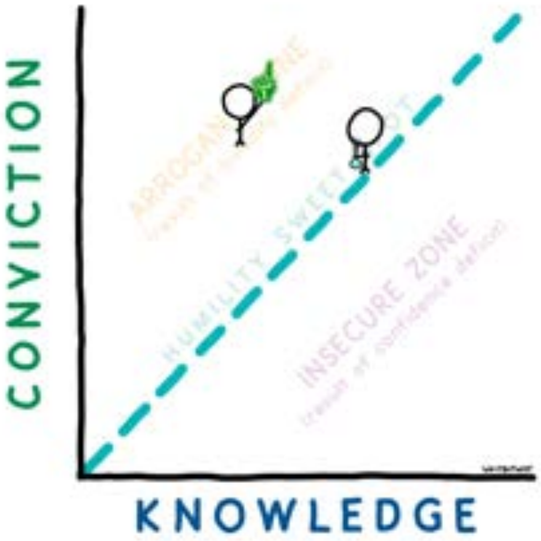

Here's why you're wrong!
Here's why I'm right!

And as you analyze what takes place during the boxing match, there's more motivated judgment. When a good punch is landed on your hypothesis, you're likely to see it as a cheap shot or a lucky swing or something else that's not really legit. And when your hypothesis lands a punch, you may have a tendency to overrate the magnitude of the blow or the high level of skill it involved. When the match is over, you usually end up feeling like your hypothesis passed the test with flying colors—even in cases when an objective observer would see it the opposite way.

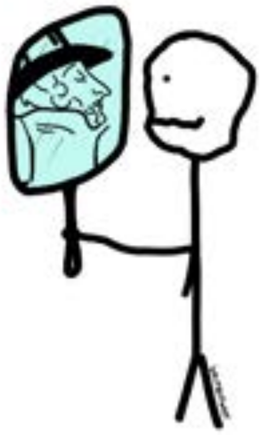
At the end of all of this, it's no surprise when you end up right at that shiny green Point B.



Your road to Point B was easier this time. And even though you learned a little less to get there than you did when you were a Scientist, you feel a little more confident about your beliefs than you did then.



Your Primitive Mind's suite of confirmation bias tricks has brought you up *above* the humility sweet spot, into the Arrogant Zone. Even though in reality, you've diminished as an effective thinker, when you look in the mirror you see a *better* thinker than the Scientist saw through their mirror.

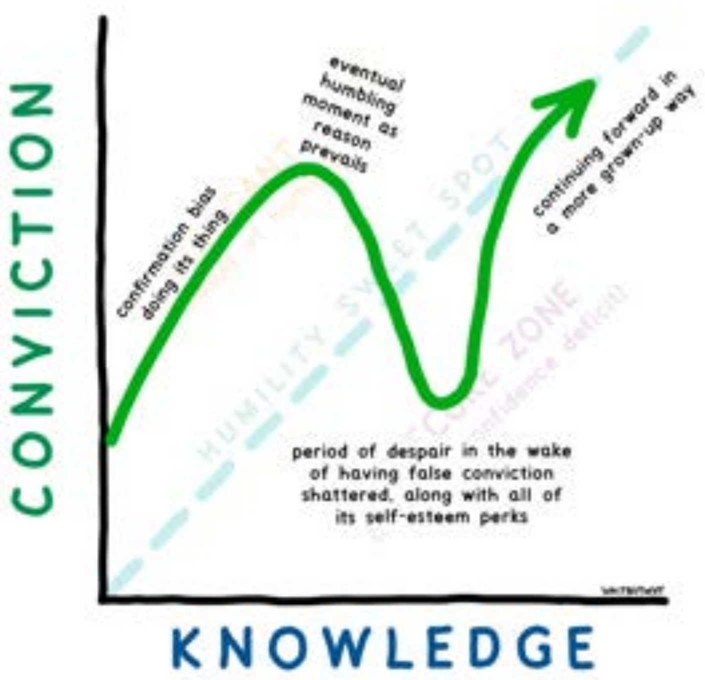


As I said, a little Primitive Mind can have a big impact.

But Sports Fans aren't hopeless. The Higher Mind still has the edge in the Sports Fan's mind, which is why the Sports Fan, motivated as they are, still goes to such great pains to try to go through all the steps of the thinking process. The Sports Fan *gets* that the scientific method is incredibly important—they're just not great at working through it effectively.

But the Higher Mind will be a nagging voice of self-doubt in the Sports Fan's head, and at least some of the time, the Sports Fan can reluctantly acknowledge that they're wrong. Watching their favorite team play, a real-life sports fan's eye may be biased, but when a slow-motion replay clearly shows that the opposing team was in bounds and got both feet down, they will grudgingly concede that it was the right call—in the end, if the dissent is strong enough, the Sports Fan's views are falsifiable. Deep down, when push comes to shove, the integrity of the game matters most to the Sports Fan—because underneath all the haze of cognitive bias, Sports Fans are still real thinkers.

This is why a lot of Sports Fans end up on a Dunning-Kruger-type path, where the Higher Mind eventually prevails and the Sports Fan starts thinking more like a Scientist.



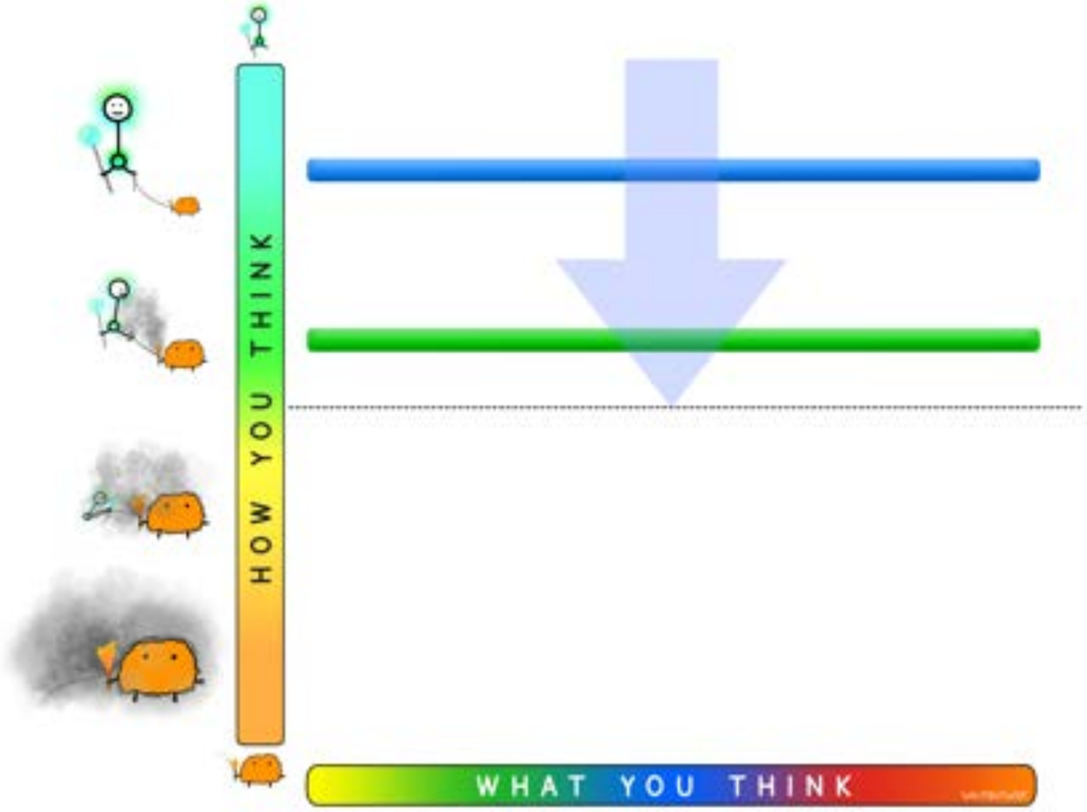
When the scientists I talked to at that conference laughed and asked me, “Have you *met* scientists?” I think they were probably referring to the fact that scientists, like almost all good thinkers, often drift down a rung and think like Sports Fans. Sports Fans are imperfect Scientists—Scientists who have, at least in a particular moment or on a particular topic, fallen off the thinking wagon and let their Primitive Mind get the best of them. The key is that when Rung 1 thinkers go biased, they usually go Rung-2 biased—but probably not much lower.

As we move down the ladder from here, let’s remind ourselves that even though we’re using distinct rungs to simplify things, we’re really working on a spectrum.

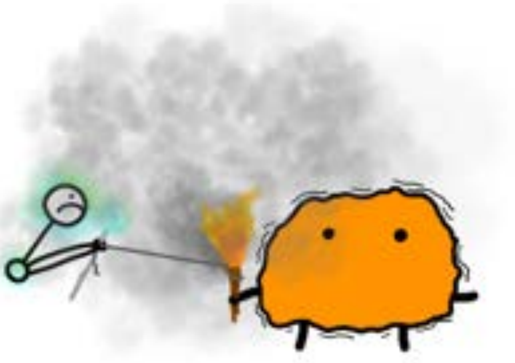
When you’re just below the Scientist rung, you’re just being a *little* bit of a Sports Fan. Yes, you’ve begun Reasoning While Motivated, but you’ve only had a couple drinks at the motivation bar and your Higher Mind is still in near-total control.

But as you drift down the Psych Spectrum, the influence of the Primitive Mind becomes more and more prominent. Your feet get stickier on the x-axis, as it becomes increasingly difficult for even the strongest dissenting evidence to move your beliefs. As the smoke clouding your reason gets thicker, your self-awareness dulls. Your Blood Motivated Level rises higher and higher as truth and confirmation are driven closer to each other in your Values Stack.

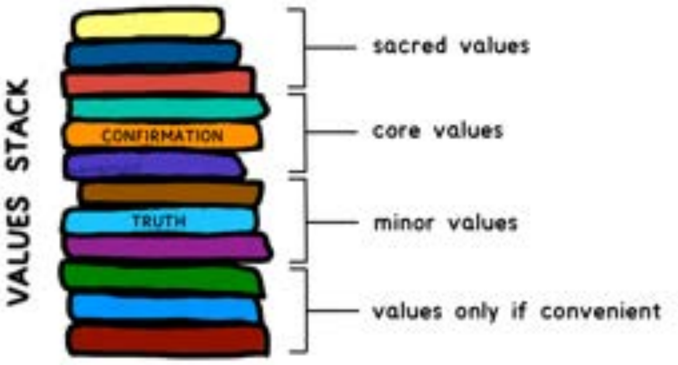
Eventually, you cross the mid-point.


HOW YOU THINK
WHAT YOU THINK

This is a big moment. Because now, the Primitive Mind is the more powerful character in your mind.



And when the Primitive Mind becomes the alpha character, confirmation becomes *more* important to you than truth.



Whether you'll admit it or not (you won't), the desire to feel right, and appear right, has overcome your desire to *be* right. And when some other motivation overcomes your drive for truth, you leave the world of integrity, of rationality, of reality, and enter a new place—a place I call:

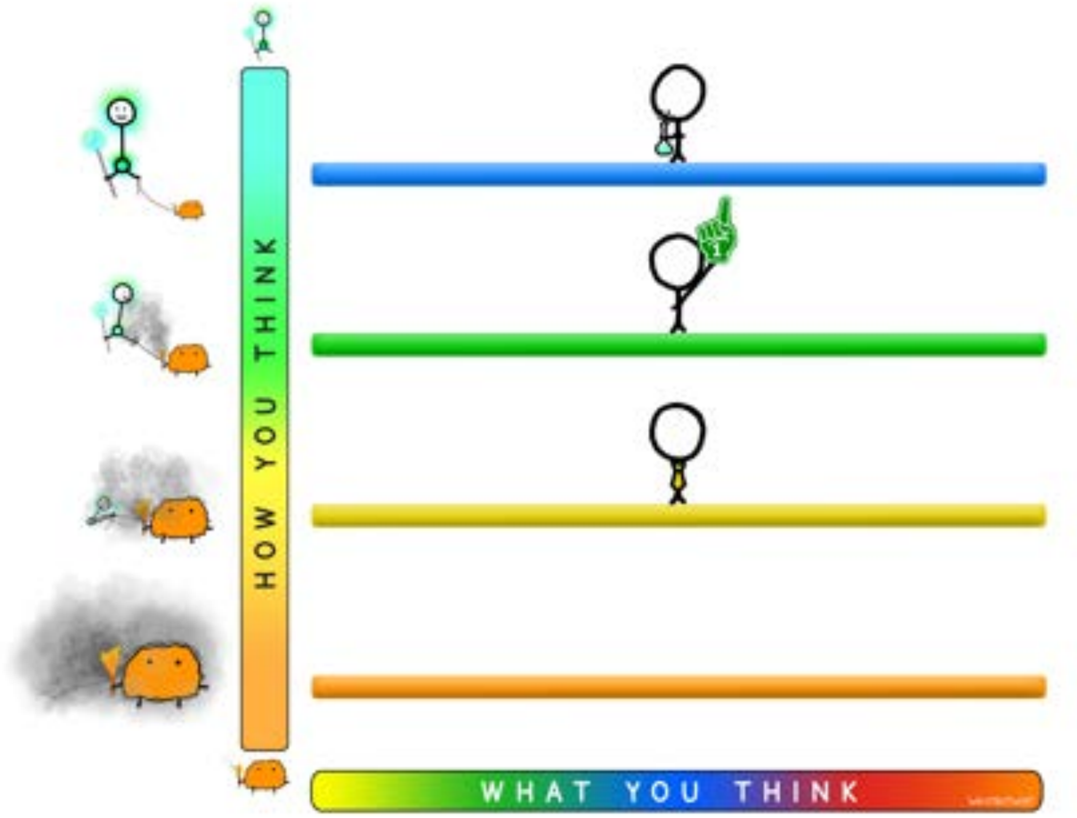
UNFALSIFIABLE LAND!

Unfalsifiable Land is a great world of green grass, blue sky, and a bunch of people whose beliefs are unable to be swayed by any amount of evidence. When people are here, they believe what they believe not because of independent reason, but because they are disciples of some line of thinking—that of a religion, a political ideology, a subculture—or maybe they're simply clinging onto the conclusions of their previous self, back when that self was more of a real thinker. Either way, you can argue with them all you want, but you will achieve nothing, because their views are not falsifiable. That's why they live here.

Even though the vertical axis is a smooth spectrum, the mid-line is a key point along it. Having crossed it, What You Think is now more important to you than How You Think.

When your thinking descends from Rung 2 to Rung 3, you've gone from a Sports Fan to a different kind of thinker entirely.

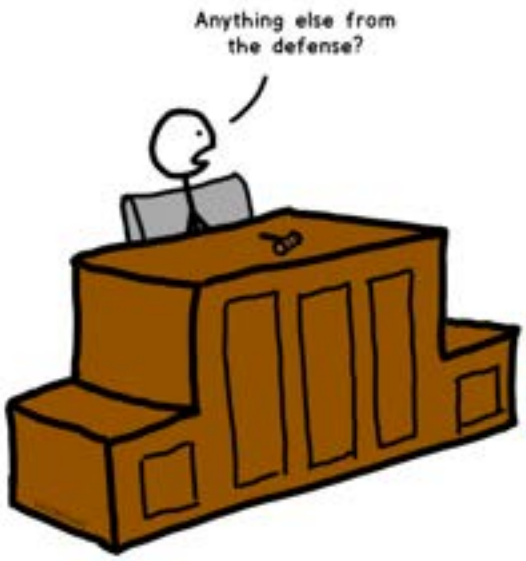
Rung 3: Thinking Like an Attorney

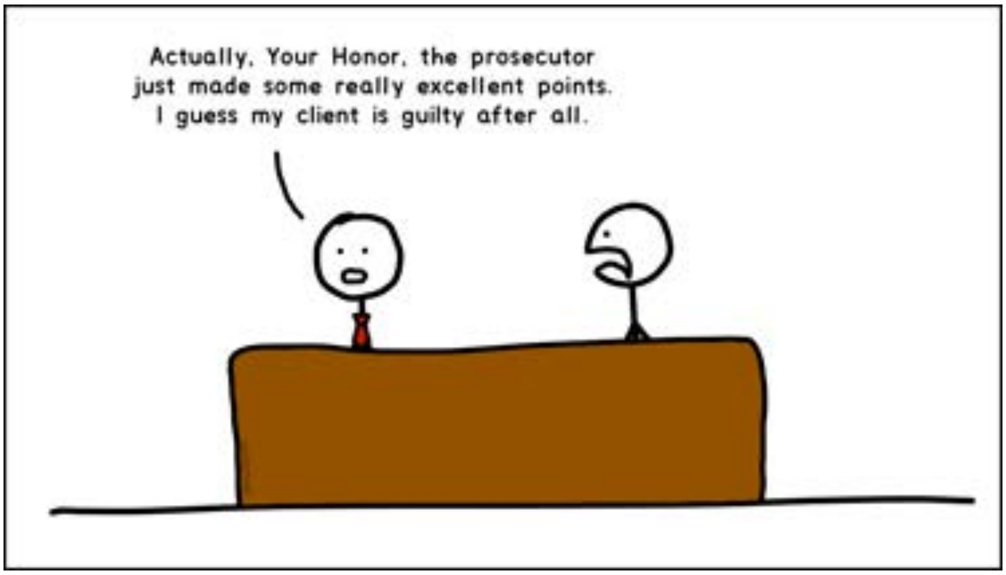


An Attorney and a Sports Fan have a lot in common. They both have a preferred Point B, while also still maintaining some level of dedication to the arrow that's supposed to take them there. They're both conflicted between the values of truth and confirmation. The critical difference is in which value, deep down, is higher in their Values Stack.

A Sports Fan wants to win, but when pushed, they care even more about fair play than winning.

An Attorney's *job* is to win, and no matter how hard you push them, nothing can alter their allegiance. Because has this ever happened?


Anything else from the defense?

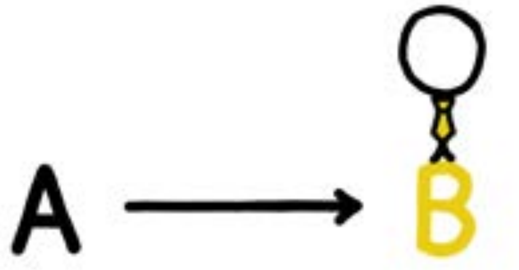

Actually, Your Honor, the prosecutor just made some really excellent points. I guess my client is guilty after all.

No. That has never happened.

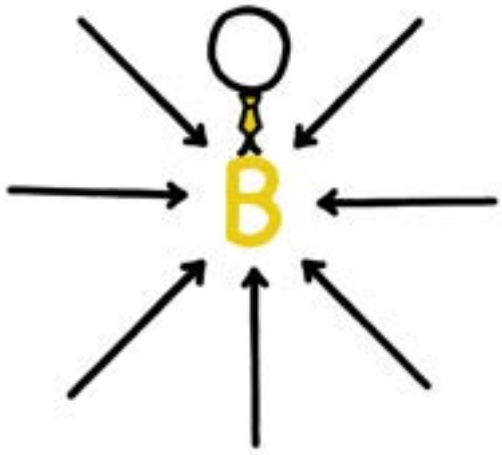
Because an Attorney is *on a team, period.*

Which means that while the Sports Fan starts at Point A and then kind of tries to nudge the arrow in a certain direction, when you're thinking like an Attorney, you don't start at Point A at all.

You start at Point B.



When you're thinking like an Attorney, the faint voice of the Higher Mind in your head means you'll still feel the need for there to be *an* arrow that leads to Your Idea—but instead of Point B being the dependent variable to the arrow's independent variable, your process renders the arrow at the whim of Point B. You'll put your effort towards piecing together an arrow that leads right where you want it to.



This is how attorneys in the real world think, isn't it? They decide to take on a case, or they're assigned to one, and from the first moment they're thinking about the case, they already know their overall stance—and this is where they'll stay, regardless of what their reasoning or the evidence says.

The client is not guilty. Now let's figure out why.

From there they go through their due diligence, cherry-picking evidence and piecing it together in a way that allows them to present an arrow to the jury that appears to be an objective path to their side's Point B.

real-life attorneys reading this post right now

Time for the "I'm not criticizing real-life attorneys" disclaimer!

The thing about real-world attorneys is that in an actual courtroom, the attorney way of thinking makes sense—because the attorney's case is only *half* of what will be presented to the jury. The opposing attorney presents an opposing arrow that leads to the opposite Point B. This completes the picture, allowing the jury to decide which of the two arrows is more legit-seeming and which Point B seems more like the truth. In this way, the court process sets up a miniature marketplace of ideas, where opposing ideas can clash and truth will (hopefully) be left standing when the dust settles.

That's why my many criticisms of the thinking Attorney on our ladder aren't criticisms of actual, real-world attorneys. Real-world attorneys *know* they're one half of a two-attorney system, and they know that the best way for that *system* to yield truth is for *them* to make the best possible case they can for one side of the story.

The problem for you when you're *thinking* like an Attorney is that you're not doing so as half of a complete picture, for the purpose of playing your role in a truth-finding process—you're doing so as a thinker so flawed that winning arguments has become more important to you than truth. While a two-attorney courtroom is an excellent truth-finding mechanism, a courtroom with only one attorney in it is awful at truth—and when you're thinking like an Attorney, your head is the latter kind of courtroom.

Forming a hypothesis, Attorney style

Before any learning has begun, your starting point looks nothing like it did when you were thinking like a Scientist. With the Higher Mind's voice now marginalized, his humble "I don't know" is barely audible with the Primitive Mind's more prominent "of course I know" resonating in the center of your mind.

And as you work your way through the learning process, you treat your existing beliefs not like a revisable experiment, or even a favorite sports team, but like your *client*. The Scientist is the boss of their thinking process—but now, you're working for your beliefs.

Working for your beliefs means you're not reasoning objectively and you're not even Reasoning While Motivated—it's more serious than that. You're Reasoning While *Obligated*.

When you're Reasoning While Obligated, the three characters that make up your reasoning process are like law associates working on your case whose only job is to help build the case that will keep you at the Point B you started on—and, ideally, strengthen your conviction about it.

Your Attention Bouncer has an updated set of instructions: only import perspectives, statistics, anecdotes, and opinions that help confirm Point B. Regardless of how cherry season is actually going, you want to see one thing: a basket full of bright, ripe cherries. Your Attention Bouncer no longer needs to put in much thought or effort to supply you with information—you've made his life easy.

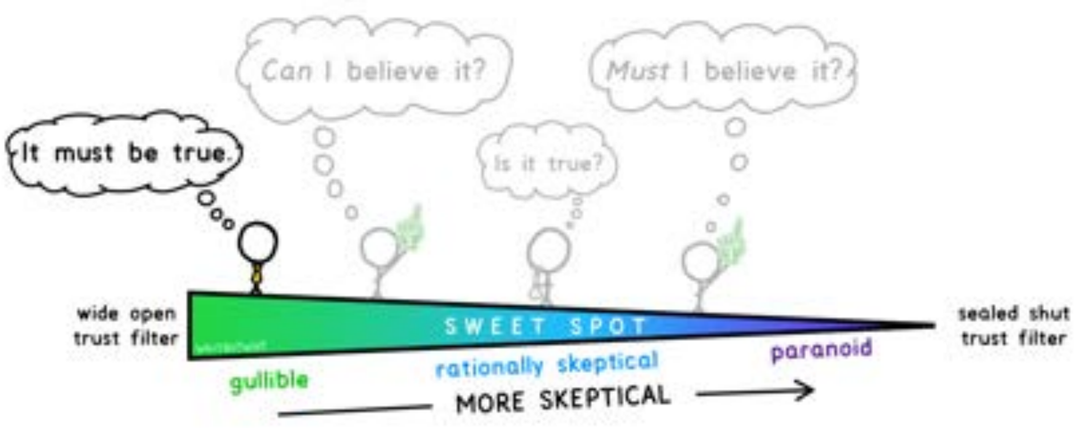
Attorney-style cherry-picking explains why there are so many situations where opposing sides of an argument can, simultaneously, be *absolutely positive* they're right. When you're low enough on the How You Think ladder, you stop being aware of the fact that cherry-picking is even a thing, so to you, it seems like *clearly, all the evidence shows that I'm right.* We see this everywhere. Like, for example, two ideologically opposed media platforms presenting the same exact news story but picking totally different cherries to present, so the parties presented as heroes and villains, victims and perpetrators, are literally reversed in their tellings.

There are plenty of less-charged examples as well. Want to believe that coffee, wine, chocolate, saturated fat, or red meat are healthy? Just type into Google the name of that item, along with "surprisingly healthy." Cherry-picking has you covered. Want to believe they're all terrible for you? Ask Google if they're "harmful" or "unhealthy" to eat. Either way, you'll come out of your search even more sure of what you came in wanting to believe.

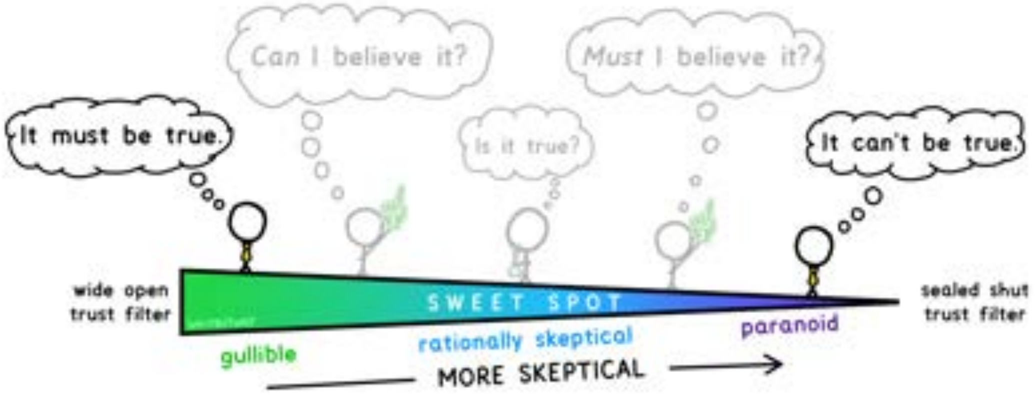
Your Attention Bouncer is also less intent on collecting first principles puzzle pieces than he was on the higher rungs and more content to collect pre-packaged arguments in the form of op-eds and other external opinions. When you're looking for confirmation first and foremost, nothing is more efficient than information in a "here is why you are right" format.

Your Belief Bouncer's new assignment is just as easy. When assessing which info is valid, instead of the super difficult job of checking IDs for truth, he now only has to check IDs for content.

When a piece of imported info jibes with what you already believe, the bouncer opens the door wide.


Can I believe it?
Must I believe it?
It must be true.
Is it true?
wide open trust filter
SWEET SPOT
sealed shut trust filter
gullible
rationally skeptical
paranoid
MORE SKEPTICAL

Info that suggests you might be wrong is seen as malicious and manipulated and consistently shut out by a skepticism filter so tight nothing could ever get through it. We have a word for that: denial.

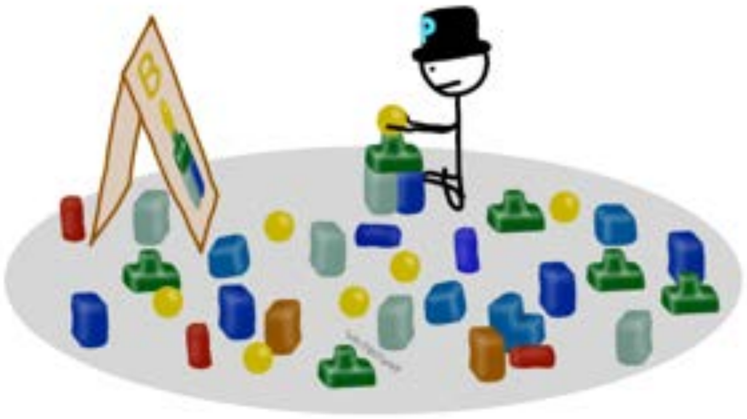

Can I believe it?
Must I believe it?
It must be true.
Is it true?
It can't be true.
wide open trust filter
SWEET SPOT
sealed shut trust filter
gullible
rationally skeptical
paranoid
MORE SKEPTICAL

When your Belief Bouncer judges info *sources*, his job is just as straightforward. When you think you already know the truth, then by definition, someone who agrees with you is right and someone who doesn't is wrong. Instead of asking, "How did they get to this idea?" your Belief Bouncer now simply asks: "Are they enlightened?"

In such rapid "bias motion" yourself, anyone who disagrees with you, objective or biased, appears to you to be a terrible thinker. A surefire sign that you're thinking like an Attorney is when you believe—really believe, in your heart—that the people who disagree with you are not just wrong, but wrong because of who they are—fundamentally bad thinkers—despite having a relatively small amount of experience getting to know them.

When you're thinking like an Attorney and Reasoning While Obligated, your two-bouncer immune system is totally disabled. Your beliefs end up filled with a combination of real information and Monopoly-money junk—and you no longer have the ability to tell one from the other.

The good news is, it's not important. Knowing what's true and what's not only matters when you're actually trying to get to the truth—and your goal has now shifted to confirmation. So in the center of your mind, your Puzzler gets to work. The preferred conclusion at the periphery of the Sports Fan's consciousness has now been moved front and center, and your Puzzler uses it as a guide, like the image on the box cover of a jigsaw puzzle.



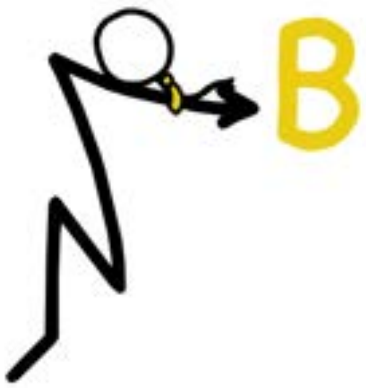
Where Scientists have to painstakingly paint, Attorneys can mindlessly trace.

Often, the main activity for your Puzzler is simple memorization. Rather than focus on raw first principles, the bouncers have imported mostly second-hand arguments by others, and memorizing them will feel to you like gaining knowledge. You simply adopt as your own viewpoints the most legit-sounding arguments made by others who agree with you, and you're good to go.

When you do decide to dig in a bit more and form some of your own conclusions, your Attorney process has you covered with all kinds of clever tricks involving trends and anecdotes, correlation and causation, sneakily worded statistics, and more (we'll get into all of that in later chapters).

If someone really wants to believe just about *anything*—that the Earth is flat, that 9/11 was orchestrated by Americans, that everyone hates them, that everyone loves them, that the CIA is after them—the human brain will have no problem using the large toolbox of Attorney tricks to make that belief seem perfectly clear and irrefutable.

When you're thinking like an Attorney, the Hypothesis Formation stage is really just a belief-strengthening process. You inevitably end up with the same viewpoints you started with, now beefed up with a refreshed set of facts and arguments that remind you just how right you are. You've constructed an arrow that does the trick.



Testing your hypothesis, Attorney style

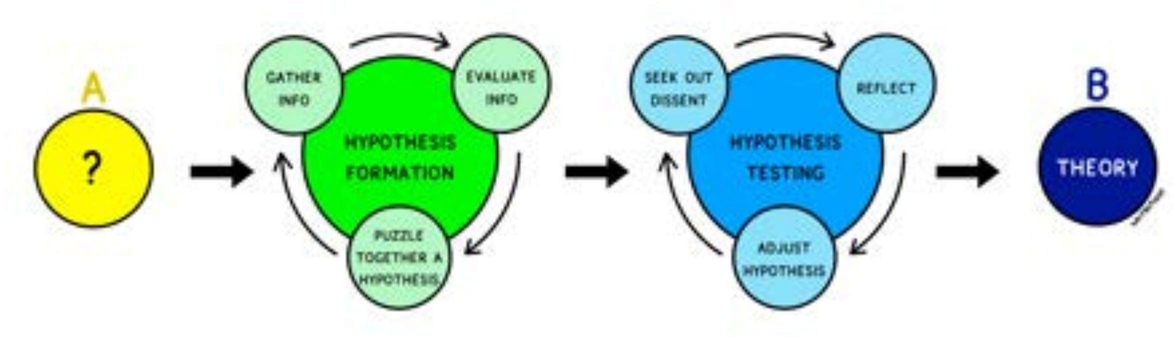
In the testing phase, though you're far less eager to seek out dissent to challenge your beliefs, your manufactured arrow to Point B has you ready to argue with anyone who tries to crack your conviction. You're ready for the testing phase, because you know you're invincible.

Your argument has nothing to worry about, because in order for dissent to generate doubt, you have to thoughtfully listen to and consider the dissent—and you won't do either. For every argument that comes your way, you'll listen only enough to pick out the best argument against it from your arsenal. Usually you'll simply be reciting the words of one of the opinion pieces you imported. If someone does come at you with an argument you can't seem to beat, you'll again reach into your arsenal of dirty tricks.

Your refusal to really listen to or consider anything a dissenter says, compounded with your bag of trump card tricks, and topped off with your unbreakable conviction that you're right, will ensure that you're an absolutely infuriating person to argue with. Your opponents will feel like they're arguing against a brick wall, and by the end, it'll be clear to them that nothing they could have said—nothing whatsoever—could have made you say "hmm that's a good point—I need to think about that—maybe I'm wrong." That's what it feels like to argue with someone who lives in Unfalsifiable Land.

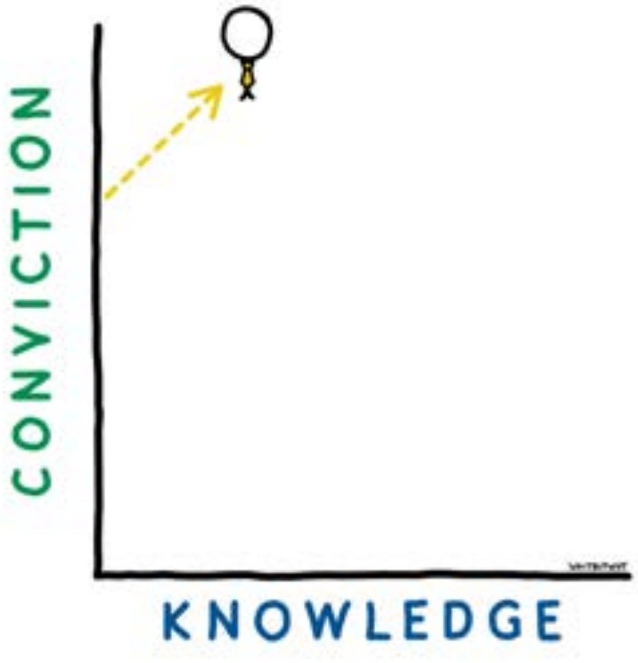
The Scientist watches their ideas box as an objective spectator. The Sports Fan watches with a rooting interest. The Attorney watches boxing matches from the middle of the ring, as the corrupt ref who has fixed the match's outcome from the moment it begun.

Let's bring back our scientific method of knowledge acquisition for a second.

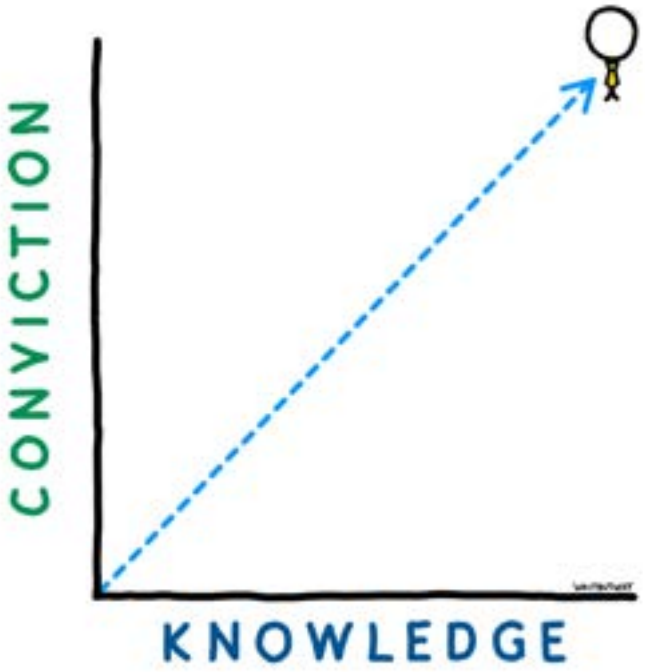


High-rung thinkers go through this arduous process because they know that knowledge is hard. When you're thinking like an Attorney, this entire process is a farce—a formality to appease the faint voice of the Higher Mind bellowing from the backburner of your mind. Your knowledge process never had a chance to change your mind, and it never had a chance to build much real knowledge in your head.

It only took you along this path:



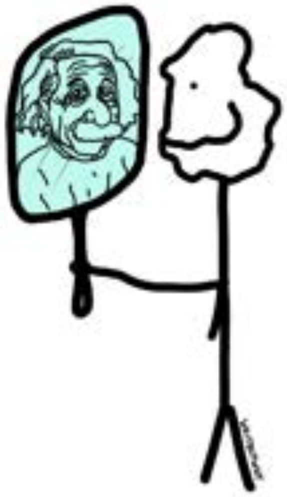
But the crazy thing about humans is, when you're thinking like an Attorney, *you still believe you're thinking like a Scientist*. You *think* you did this:



You're sure that the immense conviction you feel has been well-earned. You think your mind is full of original viewpoints based on real, hard knowledge. You come out of those fixed-match arguments believing that you crushed it. If the argument was frustrating, you probably attribute it, ironically, to your *opponent* being a brick wall to argue with, and the kind of person who just can't admit when they're wrong.[8]

This is the power of human delusion. A delusional feat of this magnitude—to leave you filled with a level of conviction you have absolutely no ground to feel—is usually a tag-team effort between two types of delusion:

1) A distorted view of yourself. When you look in the mirror, instead of seeing a dramatically flawed thinker, the Primitive Mind's thick smoke shows you a model intellectual.



2) A distorted view of the world. When you're clear-headed and thinking like a Scientist, you're well aware that both the world and the people in it are impossibly complex and nuanced and messy. This fact keeps you humble about what you know, no matter how much you've learned. But when you're thinking like an Attorney, the same consciousness-clouding fog that lowers your self-awareness also distorts your vision of the world around you. While the Scientist's *clear* vision shows them a complex, foggy world, the Attorney's *foggy* vision shows them a world that's straightforward, full of crisp lines and black-and-white distinctions. As your intellect works its way down the ladder, fuzzy spectrums sharpen into clean, binary distinctions, and unique individual people sort themselves into easily stereotyped groups. Issues now have a right side and a wrong side, with little middle ground. People are right or wrong, well-intentioned or malicious, and that's that. Oversimplification is the amateur thinker's trademark.

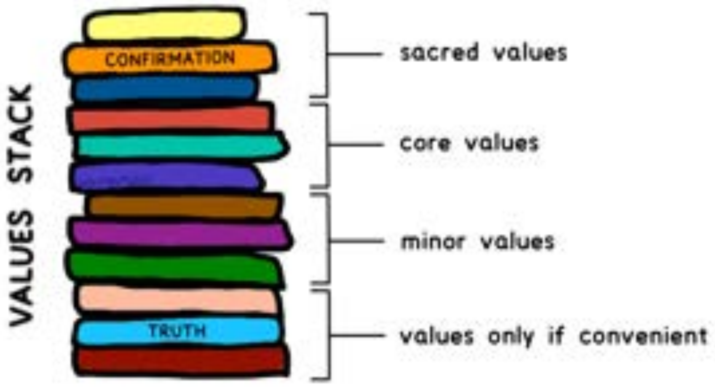
Arrogance is ignorance plus conviction. This is an especially deadly combo because it prevents you from improving. It not only leaves you without real knowledge, it deprives you of the humility needed to gain real knowledge or grow into a better thinker. When you think you're already doing great, you feel like there's no room left for improvement. We all collect life experience, but we don't all take advantage of it. While humility is a permeable filter that absorbs life experience and converts it into knowledge and wisdom, arrogance is a rubber shield that life experience simply bounces off of.

If there's anything you can say about Rung 3, Attorney-style thinkers, they at least understand the *concept* of an arrow. They're unfalsifiable, but they're not *that* big an internal shift—an intellectual "growth spurt"—away from becoming a legitimate thinker. From somewhere in the periphery of their mind, the voice of the Higher Mind still carries some weight. And if they can just learn to listen to it and value it, maybe they can change.

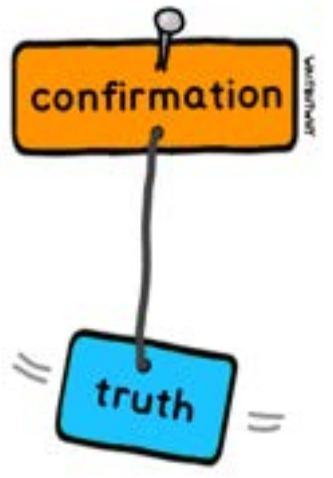
But again, we're working on a spectrum here, so the Higher Mind's prominence in an Attorney's head varies. The How You Think ladder works kind of like the U.S. congress. It's a binary situation where whichever "party" has the majority is in the driver's seat. At any point along the spectrum, either the Higher Mind or the Primitive Mind holds primary control, all determined by whether you're below or above the ladder's midpoint. But like congress, the margin of victory matters. When you're thinking like an Attorney, the Primitive Mind is the majority party—but the Higher Mind is a sizable minority who still asserts influence. But as your intellect drops further down the Psych Spectrum, deeper into Unfalsifiable Land, the Higher Mind's voice grows fainter. The Primitive Mind starts to develop a *super*-majority, eventually leaving the minority Higher Mind party with little to no influence.

As you descend, you become an increasingly corrupt Attorney, increasingly likely to accept red-painted plastic cherries—fake news, shoddy statistics, scattered anecdotal personal experiences—as hard evidence and universal truth. You start taking things out of context or even flat-out lying when you argue with people. And less exposure to those who disagree with you means it becomes easier to fictionalize your opponents as people not even worth talking to, making you even more certain that everything you believe is correct. At the same time, your self-image and the conviction you hold about your beliefs grow even stronger than they were. You no longer concern yourself with the reasoning behind your viewpoints—you just know that those viewpoints are right.

Eventually, your Values Stack looks like this:



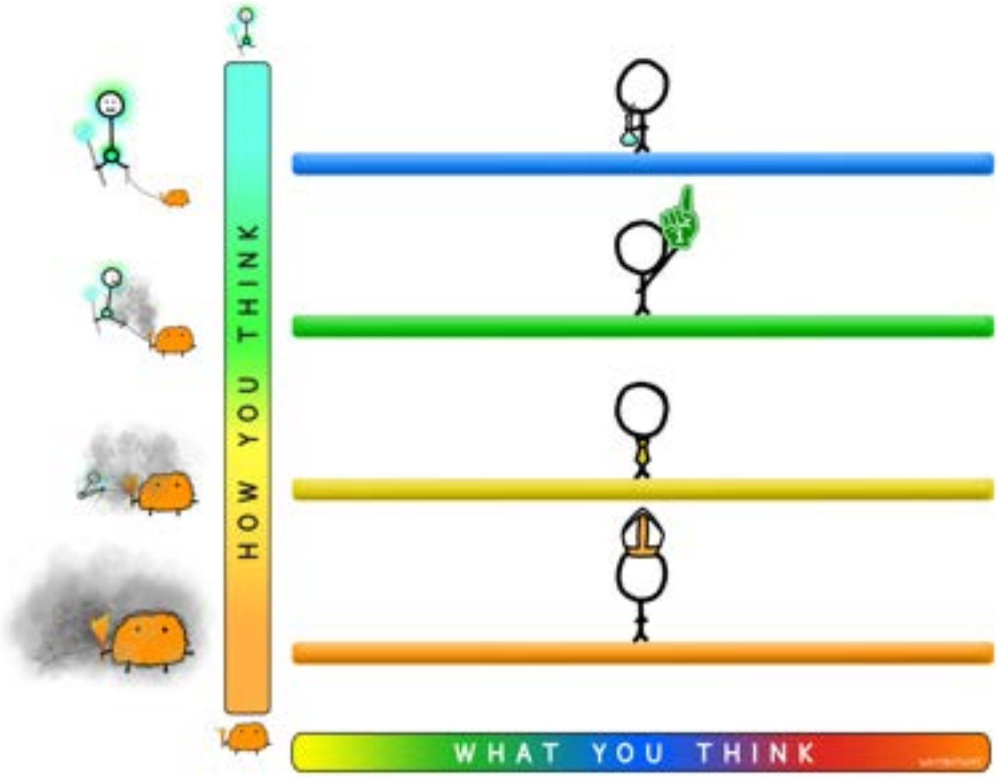
With confirmation having reached the sacred section of the stack, your nail is back in the picture—while truth now swings freely.



Your thinking is now entirely running on the ancient software of your Primitive Mind, with the rational, reasonable, humble, and self-aware Higher Mind completely out of the picture.

You've reached the bottom rung.

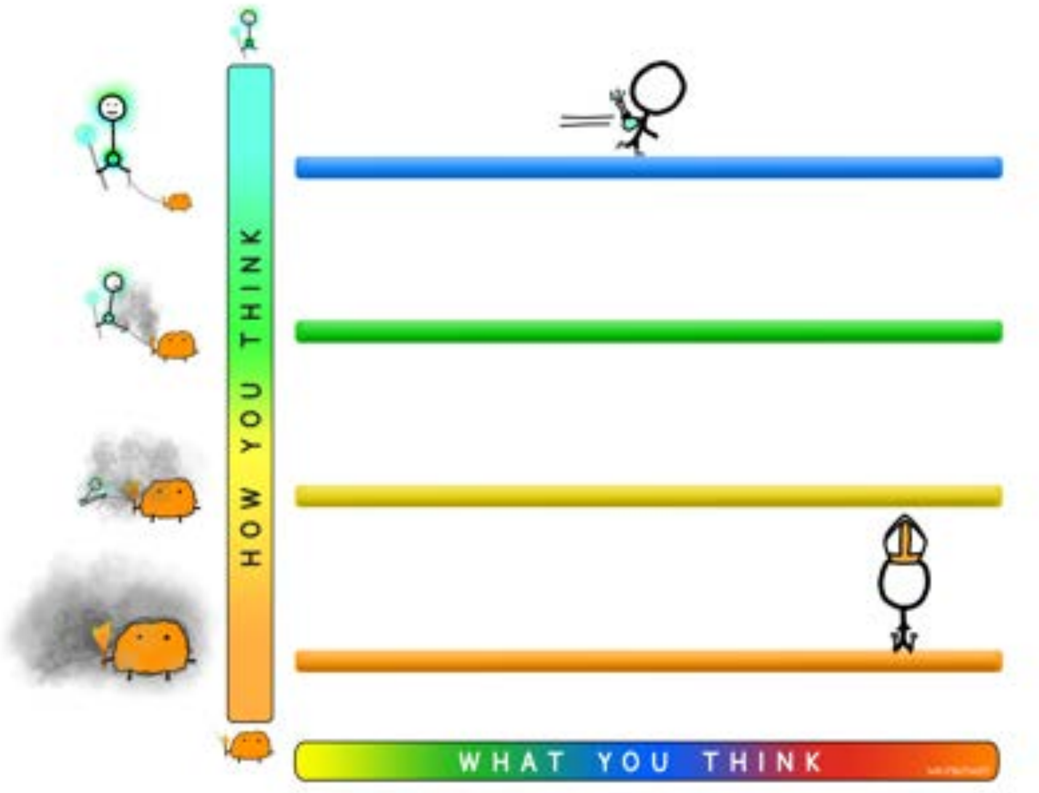
Rung 4: Thinking Like a Zealot



We all think like Zealots at times. We're all naive in our own unique set of ways, and zealot-like thinking is sometimes a case of naivety. Sometimes we're taught zealot-like thinking by our parents or friends. Sometimes we're scared and zealotry is a cave we've found to hide in.

I think it's often because we've made the amateur error of thinking that people are ideas and ideas are people. If ideas and people are the same, it ties our self-worth to the worth of our beliefs. It ties our personal safety to the protection of those beliefs, and it makes a challenge to those beliefs feel like physical danger. It makes validation of our beliefs feel like acceptance and approval and love. This is one of the many pits we fall into when our Primitive Minds are doing our thinking.

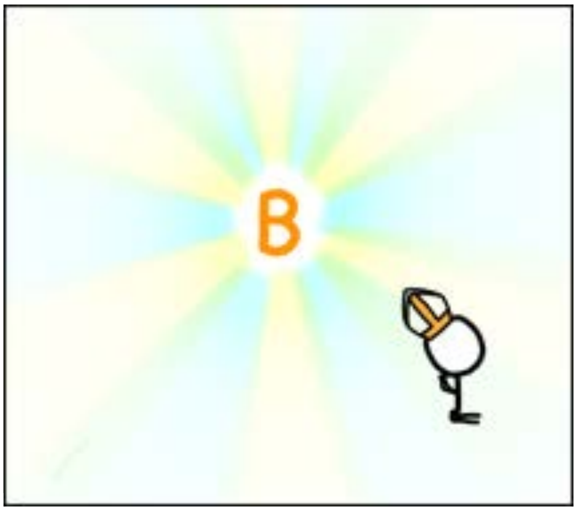
When you forget that people and ideas are separate, your entire thinking process is laden with a crippling burden: to protect your beliefs like you protect your body. You've traded in the Scientist's horizontal flexibility for a total willingness to vertically compromise on your thinking process, and you've swapped the Scientist's vertical rigidity that keeps their process on the top rung for a horizontal rigidity that nails your feet right into the Idea Spectrum, right at the point where your viewpoints live.



No longer is there a humble Point A. When you're thinking like a Zealot, humility feels weak and shameful. You'll never say "I don't know," because that sounds the same to you as saying "I don't know who I am." You *do* know. Your beliefs are a rock-solid reflection of the objective truth, period. Knowledge is the opposite of hard—it's like knowing the sky is blue. Anyone with a mind and a heart knows what's true and what's not.

So you don't need any "process of thinking" arrow. Arrows are for idiots. This is what thinking like a Zealot feels like.

In reality, you've taken a set of ideas to be sacred, and you've given up an independent truth-seeking path in order to faithfully serve those sacred ideas. Without any Higher Mind influence forcing you to engage with some kind of knowledge process, the once-rigorous scientific method has evolved to this:



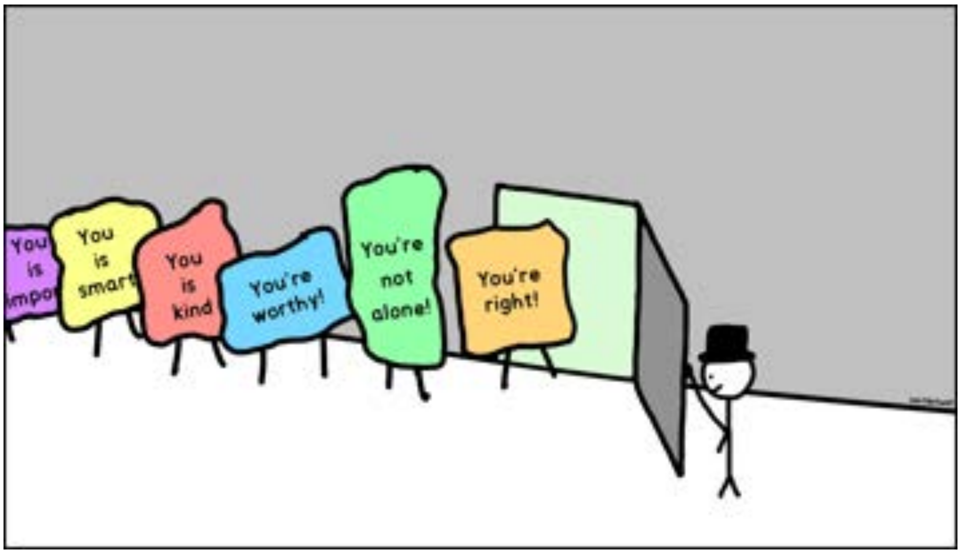
Thinking, for you, is about worship, not learning.

So aside from a deep pleasure you derive from information that praises and confirms What You Think, gathering information has little use—you already know all your cherries are perfect, so your Attention

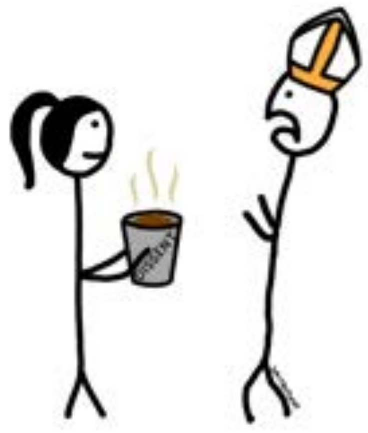
Bouncer servant can stay home.

Your Belief Bouncer doesn't have much to do either. Ideas that validate your ideas are good, true ideas, spoken by good, reasonable people. And those are the only ideas you want to hear.

The three characters in your reasoning process who used to help you find truth now simply send in a never-ending stream of love, acceptance, approval, and safety in the form of anecdotes, statistics, and opinions that make you feel great.


You is impor
You is smart
You is kind
You're worthy!
You're not alone!
You're right!

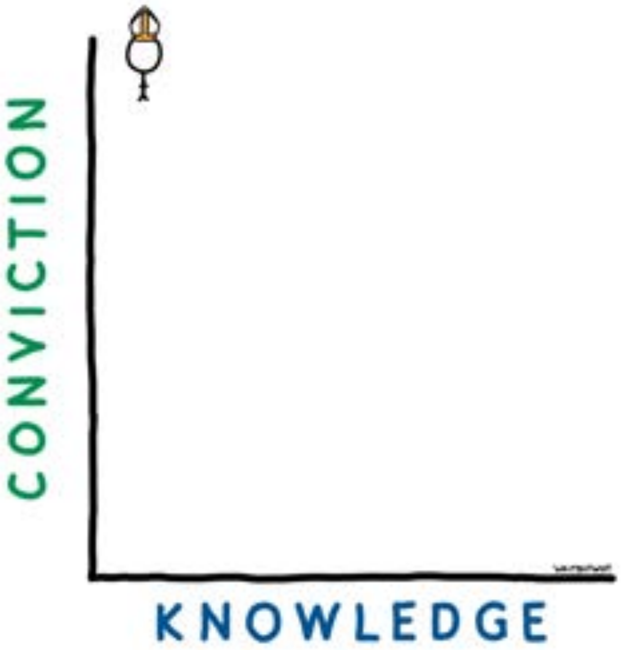
In the testing ideas phase—well, there is no testing ideas phase. First of all, why would you test what you're already sure about? It's like testing whether the ocean is wet. But more importantly, when you think ideas and people are the same, someone challenging your ideas feels like an insult. It feels violating. It feels personally invalidating. It's a threat. If Scientists see dissent as a puzzle piece and Sports Fans see dissent as a tennis ball, Zealots see dissent as a bucket of shit.



And who wants to challenge your ideas anyway? Dissenters. Dissenters are people who hold different ideas, which means they're different kinds of people—worse kinds of people. Their entire existence, if accepted, invalidates your own existence. So they cannot be tolerated. You avoid dissenters and their disgusting ideas as much as you can—other than the time you spend mocking them and their ideas, which is just another form of self-confirmation.

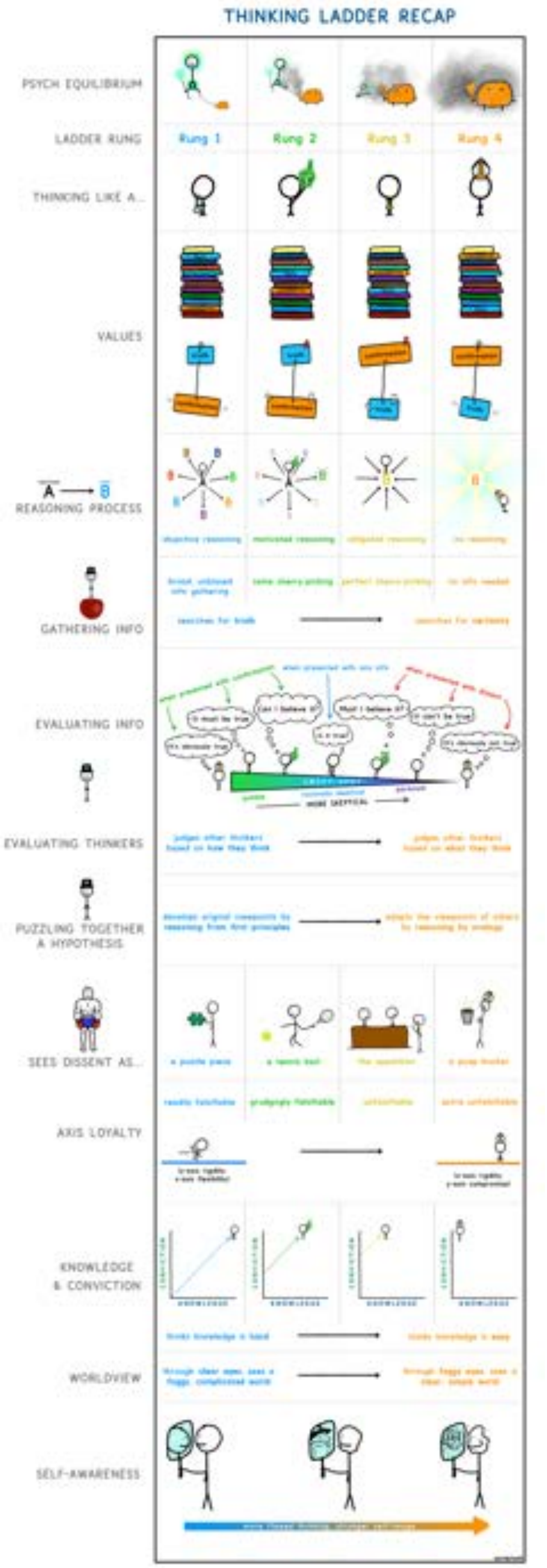
At the top of our ladder, your identity was that of a humble learner, which made you intellectually robust. So intellectual boxing matches were your friend—they made you smarter and brought you a little closer to the truth. Now that you're thinking like a Zealot, those ideas in the ring are your naked, vulnerable body—so you don't want to watch your ideas box, or root for them, or even fix the matches. You ban boxing altogether.

When you're thinking like a Zealot, there is no reasoning process, because there is no reasoning. You're just here, always:



You're the picture of arrogance, of unearned conviction, of total ignorance, of utter un-self-awareness. And hiding just beneath that façade is a terrifying frailty, protected only by a rigid, brittle set of simplified beliefs. It's not a great situation.

So there's our ladder. Time for a big recap chart:


THINKING LADDER RECAP
PSYCH EQUILIBRIUM
LADDER RUNG
Rung 1
Rung 2
Rung 3
Rung 4
THINKING LIKE A...
VALUES
A → B
REASONING PROCESS
GATHERING INFO
EVALUATING INFO
EVALUATING THINKERS
PUZZLING TOGETHER A HYPOTHESIS
SEES DISSENT AS...
AXIS LOYALTY
KNOWLEDGE & CONVICTION
CONVICTION
KNOWLEDGE
WORLDVIEW
SELF-AWARENESS

Each of us is a work in progress, and as we grow in age, we also can grow up psychologically. The more we evolve psychologically, the more time we spend thinking from the high rungs and the less time we spend down below. But no matter how good we get at thinking, I'm pretty sure we never totally rid ourselves of low-rung thinking.

This post focused entirely on individual thinking, but the intellectual life of an individual doesn't happen in isolation. The 2D picture we've painted so far in this post is still an incomplete picture. It's a 2D cross section of what's actually a 3D system—a single slice of bread in the *loaf* of human behavior. To bring our lens into full focus, we'll need to zoom out and look deeper into the loaf, exploring how thinking happens in communities. In the next chapter, we'll step into the wonderful, horrible world of intellectual *cultures*.

Chapter 8: Idea Labs and Echo Chambers

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Three posts that are related to this one but not actually:

A post I wrote about **actual sports fans**.

A post I wrote about **actual bouncers and why I hate bars**.

A post I wrote about **the rest of our primate relatives**, who are even more embarrassing than we are.

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RECOMMENDED POSTS

Mailbag #2

It's 2020 and you're in the future

Political Disney World

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Name

Rediah
5 months ago

This has been such a fine read. Will reflect on the ideas for months. Thank you.

1 ^ | ˅ Reply

RA
6 months ago

You are totally wrong, Anubis will certainly punish you for this jibber-jabber

^ | ˅ Reply

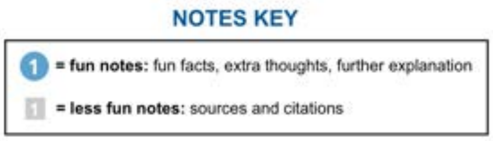
bob cl is a pleb → RA
4 months ago

Idea Labs and Echo Chambers

61
Shares

ber 8, 2019 By Tim Urban

s Chapter 8 in a blog series. If you're new to the series, visit the ***series home page*** *for ll table of contents.*


NOTES KEY

① **= fun notes:** fun facts, extra thoughts, further explanation

1 **= less fun notes:** sources and citations

Chapter 8: Idea Labs and Echo Chambers

"Sheep wish no taste but woolly sweet conformity." — Kevin Focke

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Chapter 7 began with a question: "Why do we believe what we believe?"

We spent the rest of Chapter 7 thinking about thinking in 2D, exploring how our thinking process changed as we moved up and down the second dimension: the Psych Spectrum. At the end of the chapter, I reminded us that the entire discussion was only looking at a 2D cross section of what's actually a 3D space of human thinking and behavior.

The good news is the third dimension is something we already became familiar with early on in the series: Emergence Tower. Here it is in all its fully extended glory:

Join 608,367 other humans and have new posts emailed to you.

email address

SEND ME NEW POSTS

Follow these special men

412,637
634,264
130,240

Popular Posts

The AI Revolution
Like 11K
1,097

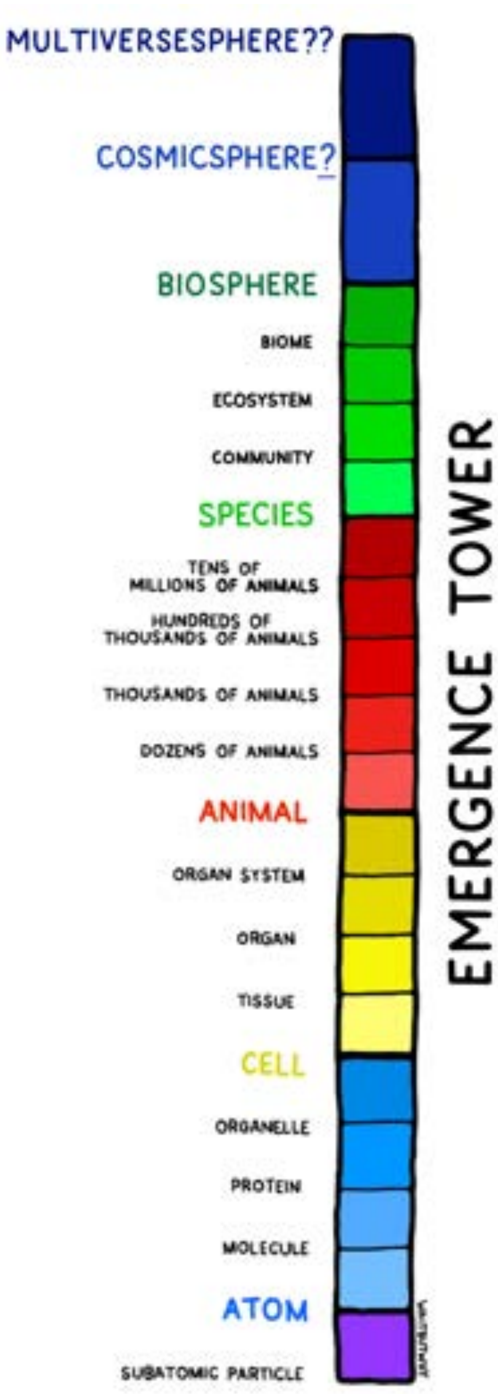
Why Procrastinators Procrastinate
Like 5.1K
550

The Fermi Paradox
Like 4.9K
1,366

The Elon Musk Series
Like 811
491

How to Pick a Life Partner
Like 2.6K
333

Why Gen Y Yuppies Are Unhappy


MULTIVERSESPHERE??
COSMICSPHERE?
BIOSPHERE
BIOME
ECOSYSTEM
COMMUNITY
SPECIES
TENS OF MILLIONS OF ANIMALS
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
EMERGENCE TOWER

We'd all be having maximum fun right now if we were about to dive into a discussion about the multiversesphere. Unfortunately, we have human concerns to deal with first. So we'll zoom in here:

Like 2.2K
1,203

7 Ways to be Insufferable on Facebook
Like 4.9K
956

Putting Time In Perspective
Like 1.9K
550

How to Name a Baby
Like 440
325

Why You Should Stop Caring What Other People Think
Like 3.3K
334

Religion for the Nonreligious
Like 909
821

10 Types of 30-Year-Old Single Guys
Like 494
662

From Muhammad to ISIS: Iraq's Full Story
Like 167
320

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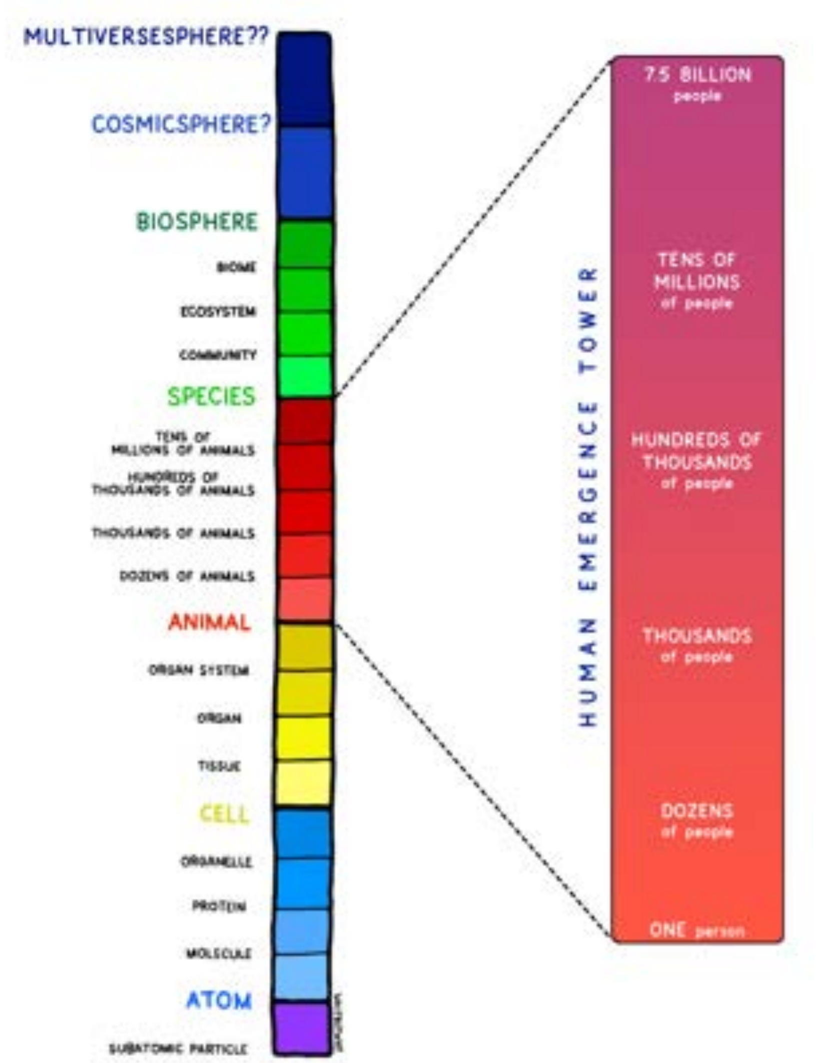
MULTIVERSESPHERE??
COSMICSPHERE?
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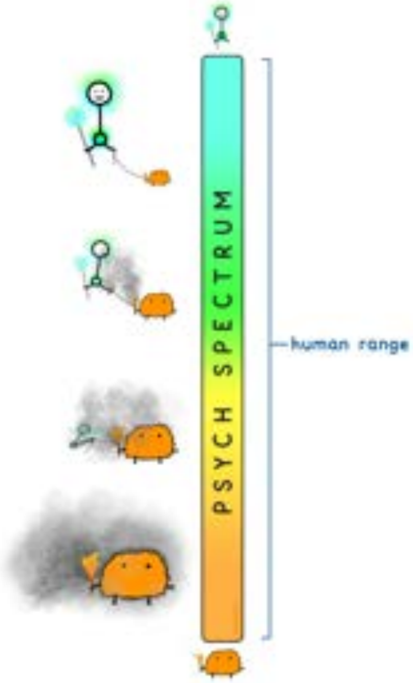
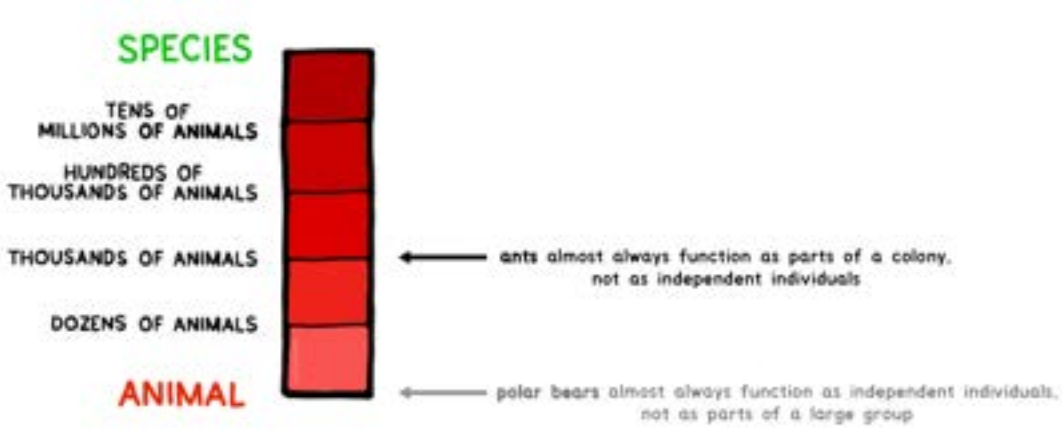
ORGAN SYSTEM
ORGAN
TISSUE
CELL
ORGANELLE
PROTEIN
MOLECULE
ATOM
SUBATOMIC PARTICLE
HUMAN EMERGENCE TOWER
7.5 BILLION people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
THOUSANDS of people
DOZENS of people
ONE person

Seeing in 3D

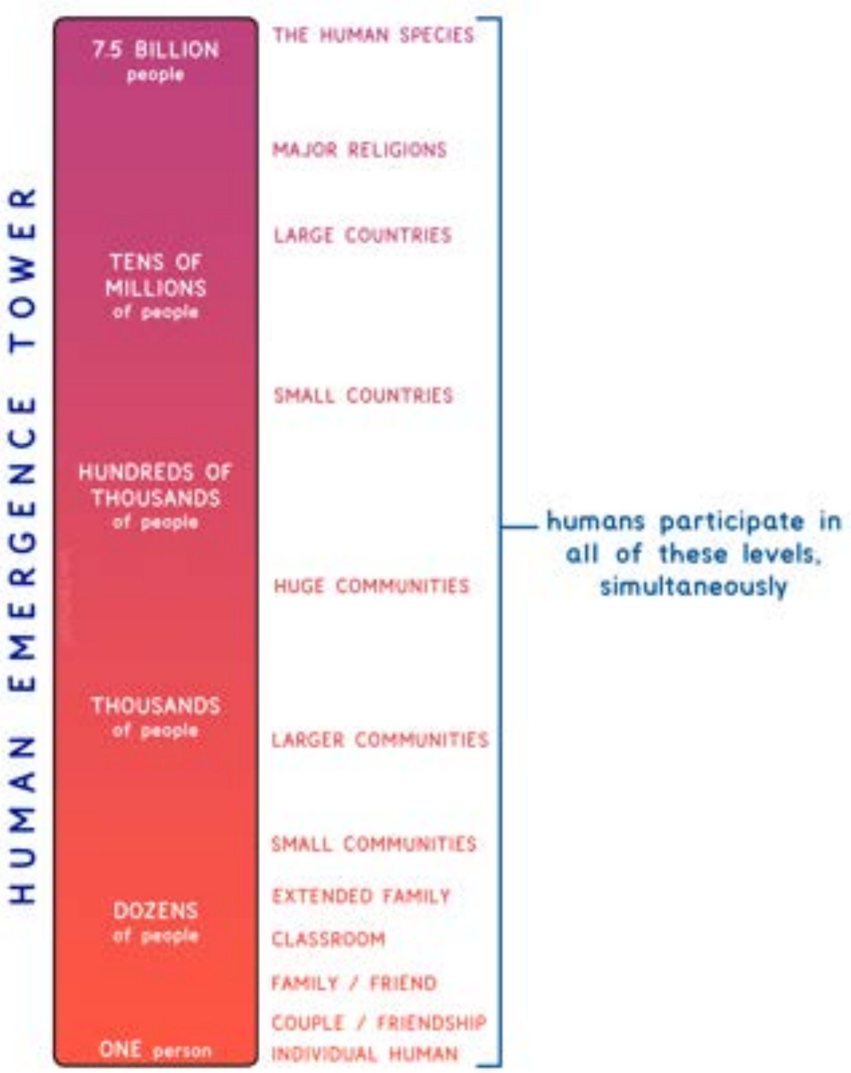
The reason we need our second dimension—the Psych Spectrum—is because humans exist along a *span* of the Psych Spectrum. That's why it's a *dimension.*


PSYCH SPECTRUM
human range

We need our third dimension for the same reason. You don't really need a third dimension to think about the behavior of ants or polar bears, because they exist almost entirely at a single point along Emergence Tower. Ants never function as self-important individuals—they're always cells in a colony who live entirely for the well-being of the colony. Polar bears are almost① always solitary selfish individuals, rarely sacrificing themselves for the well-being of neighboring polar bears.

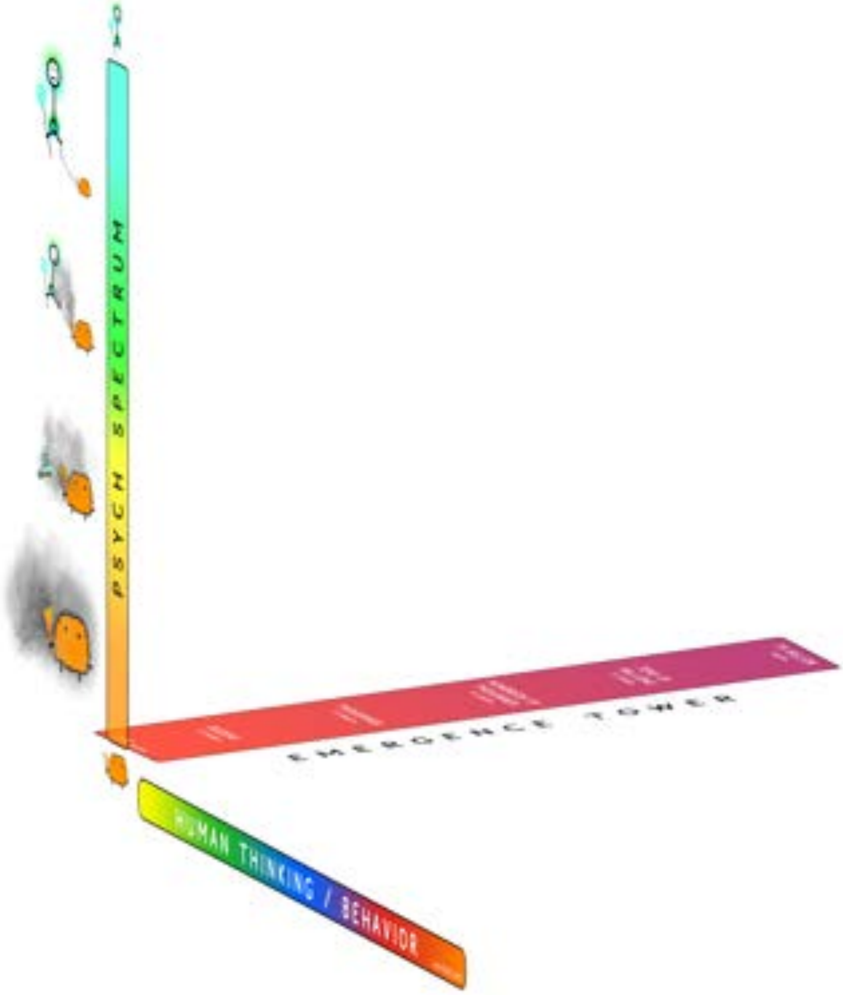

SPECIES
TENS OF MILLIONS OF ANIMALS
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS
DOZENS OF ANIMALS
ANIMAL
ants almost always function as parts of a colony, not as independent individuals
polar bears almost always function as independent individuals, not as parts of a large group

But humans are more complicated. Like ants, humans often function as cells in a larger tribe giant—but unlike ants, humans are *also* complex enough to function as true individual entities the way polar bears do. Just like our relationship with the Psych Spectrum, we function at multiple points along Emergence Tower simultaneously—as I worded it in Chapter 2, we travel up and down Emergence Tower's *elevator.*

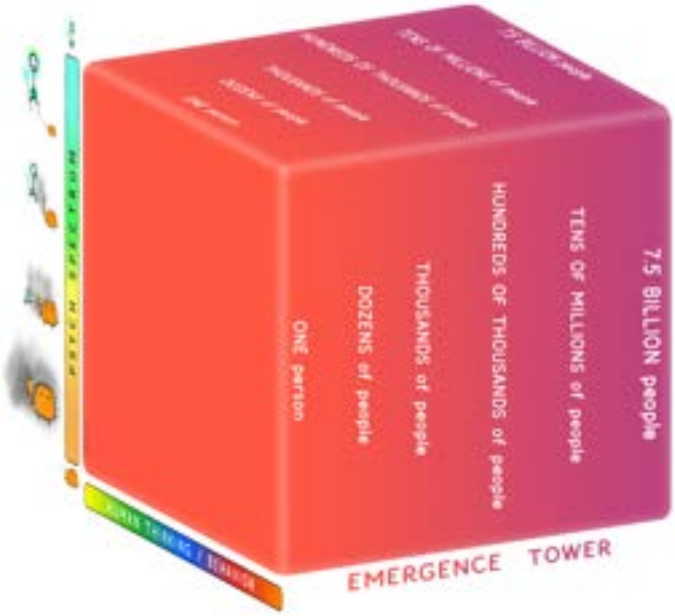

HUMAN EMERGENCE TOWER
7.5 BILLION people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
THOUSANDS of people
DOZENS of people
ONE person
THE HUMAN SPECIES
MAJOR RELIGIONS
LARGE COUNTRIES
SMALL COUNTRIES
HUGE COMMUNITIES
LARGER COMMUNITIES
SMALL COMMUNITIES
EXTENDED FAMILY
CLASSROOM
FAMILY / FRIEND
COUPLE / FRIENDSHIP
INDIVIDUAL HUMAN
humans participate in all of these levels, simultaneously

Every human phenomenon becomes a little clearer when we look at it in 2D with the help of our Psych Spectrum. And things start to make even more sense when we also consider Emergence Tower. Seeing in 3D allows us to consider both of these ideas simultaneously.

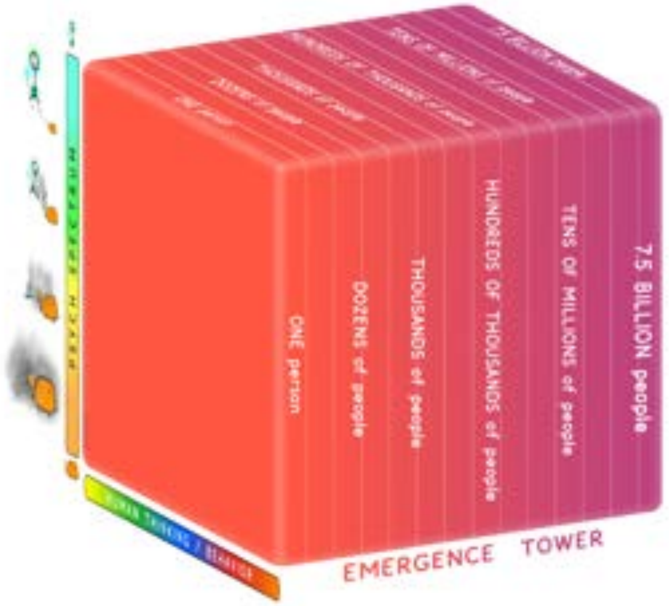
The visuals can get a little complicated here, especially when I'm the graphic designer, but try to bear with me. Emergence Tower is kind of like a z-axis we can flip on its side and add onto our x-y graph:


PSYCH SPECTRUM
EMERGENCE TOWER
HUMAN THINKING / BEHAVIOR

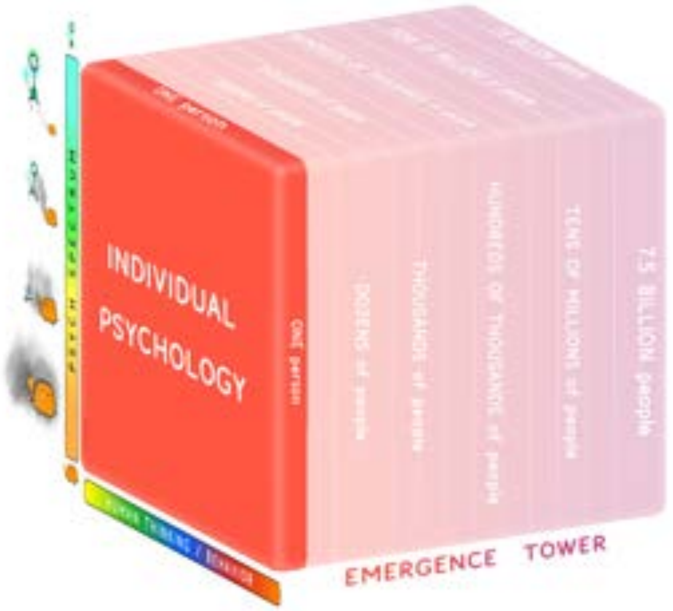
The Psych Spectrum takes a spectrum of human thought and behavior and turns it into a square—adding Emergence Tower goes a step further and turns the story of humans into a *cube*.


PSYCH SPECTRUM
ONE person
DOZENS of people
THOUSANDS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
7.5 BILLION people
EMERGENCE TOWER
HUMAN THINKING / BEHAVIOR

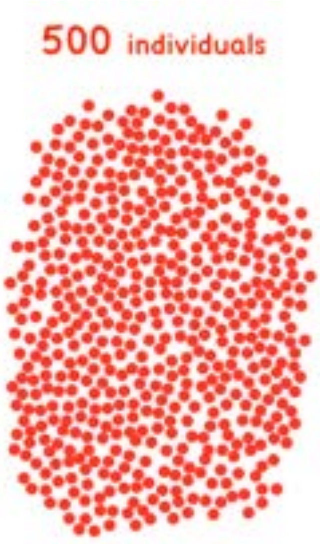
This is our full “loaf” of human thinking and behavior. And like a loaf of bread, we can cut it into slices.


ONE person
DOZENS of people
THOUSANDS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
7.5 BILLION people
HUMAN THINKING / BEHAVIOR
EMERGENCE TOWER

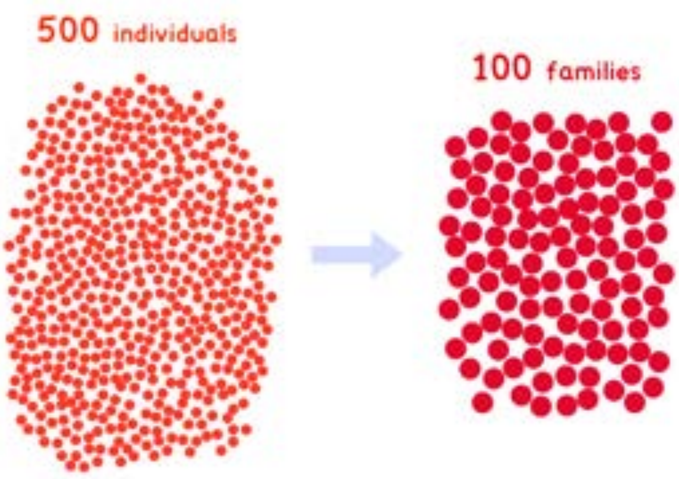
When we’re focusing on what goes on in our heads, we’re thinking about the very bottom of Emergence Tower—the ground-floor slice—which is the realm of individual psychology. We spent all of Chapter 7 here:


ONE person
INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY
ONE person
DOZENS of people
THOUSANDS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
7.5 BILLION people
HUMAN THINKING / BEHAVIOR
EMERGENCE TOWER

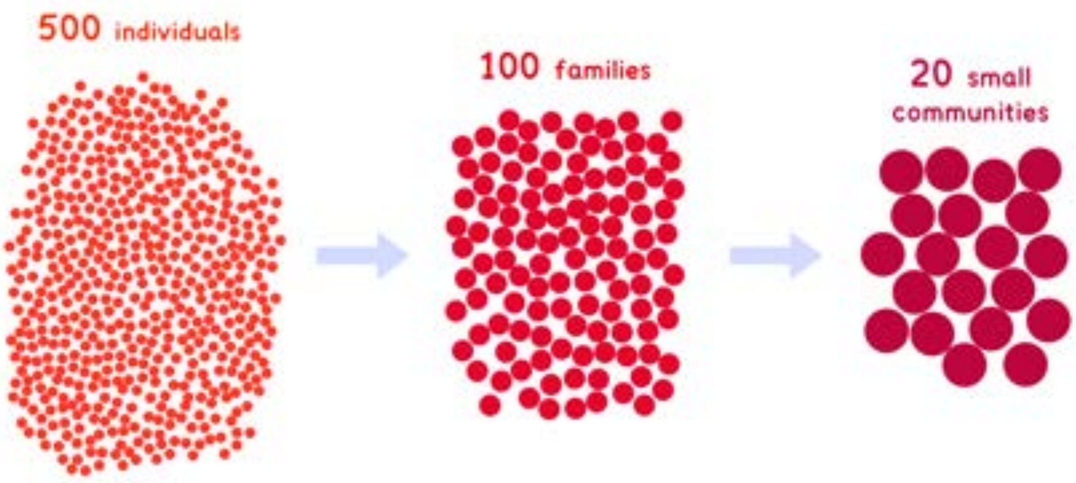
To broaden our vision into 3D, let’s take a super oversimplified example of 500 people living as a community somewhere.


500 individuals

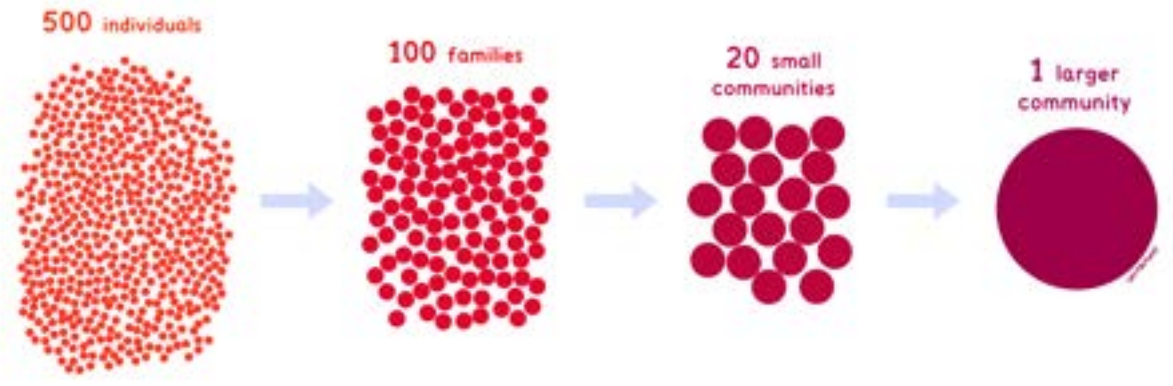
And let's say those 500 people are divided perfectly into 100 five-person families.


500 individuals
100 families

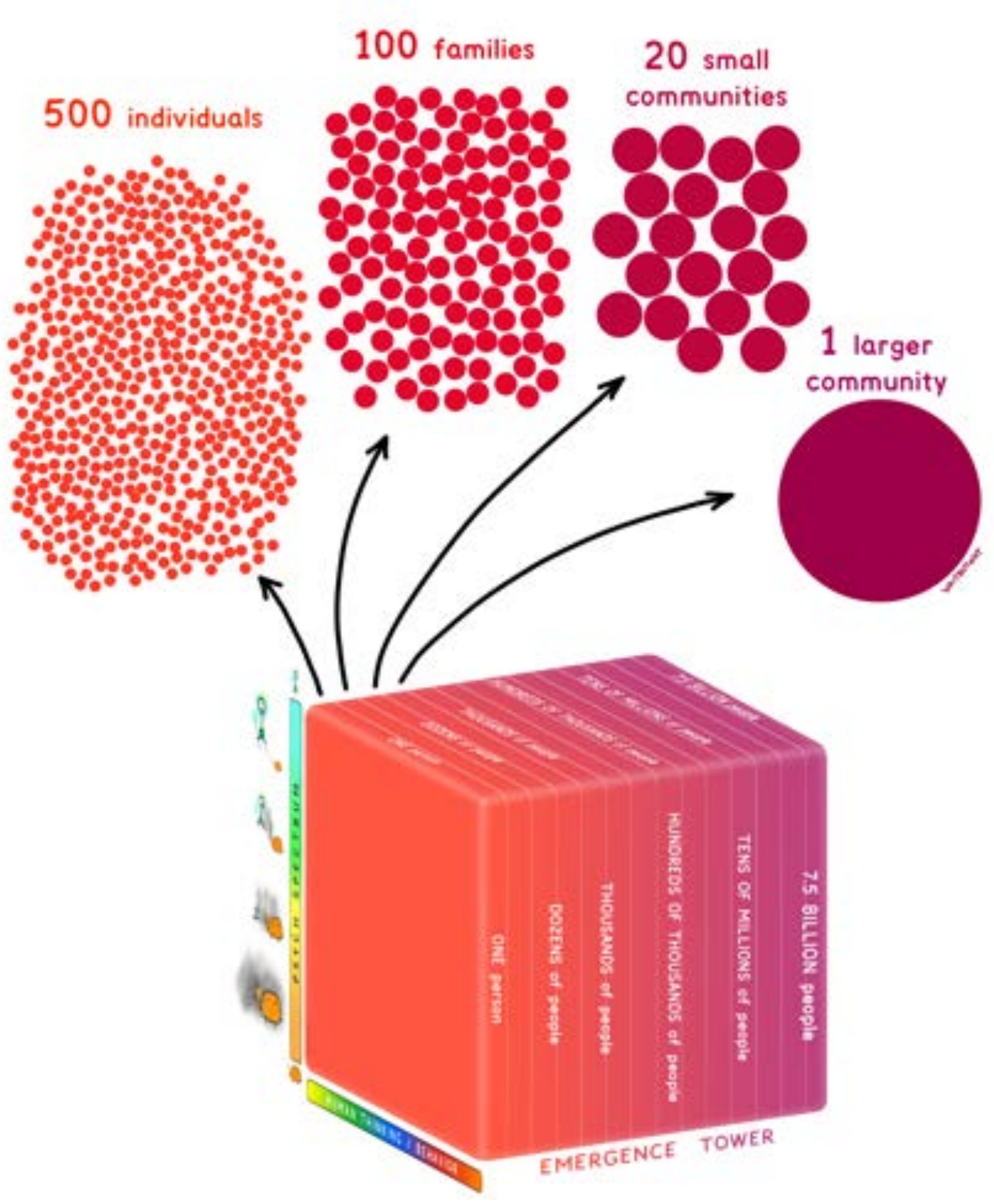
A five-person family is a mini giant. Now let's imagine that each of those families is part of a small five-family community.


500 individuals
100 families
20 small communities

And finally, those 20 communities are all part of the larger 500-person community.


500 individuals
100 families
20 small communities
1 larger community

This simple example reminds us how a 500-person community doesn't just exist as a 500-person giant on the "hundreds of people" slice of the loaf—it permeates the entire part of the loaf below it.


500 individuals
100 families
20 small communities
1 larger community
ONE person
DOZENS of people
THOUSANDS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
7.5 BILLION people
EMERGENCE TOWER

Likewise, that 500-person community is itself a smaller piece of the larger communities, factions, and nations that exist on the slices above it.

To really understand the 500-person community and why it is the way it is, we have to examine each layer of smaller units that make it up and the larger giants that encompass it. To really understand what's going on with a group of any size, we have to consider how it interacts with all parts of the loaf.

The same goes for understanding individuals. The people within our 500-person community don't exist as isolated minds. Each person is an individual organism, an "organ" in the mini giant of their family, a piece of tissue in the larger giant of their small community, a cell in the 500-person community giant, and an organelle, molecule, atom, and subatomic particle in the subsequent even larger giants above—all at the same time. Each of those slices plays a role in influencing the thoughts and behavior of the individuals, and in turn, each person plays a small part in influencing the giants they're a part of.

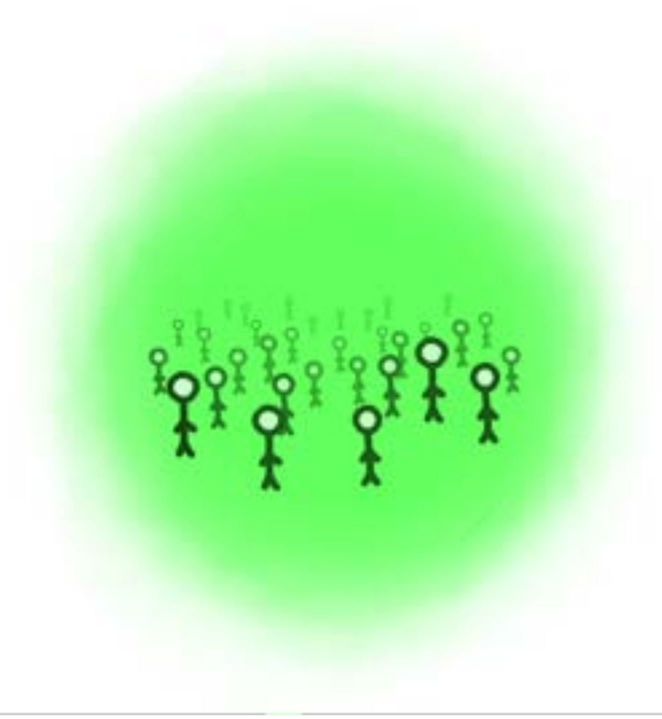
This only gets more complicated when we move out of simplified hypothetical land and into the real world—where the actual tiers of giants are messy, overlapping, and highly variable.

And the thing is, every entity in the loaf—every couple, family, community, company, university, religious institution, political party, nation, even the species as a whole—is doing its own thing in the other two dimensions. Each of them moves around the first dimension—the What axis—as its thoughts and behavior shift and evolve. And each is in its very own Psych Spectrum struggle along the second dimension.

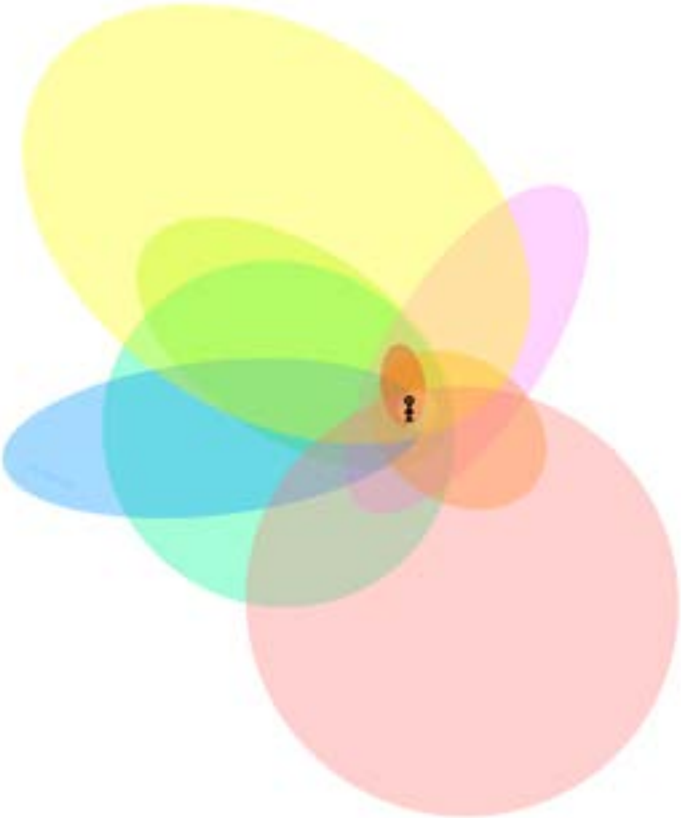
To make sense of all this, we need to discuss the critical, invisible force that ties all of the loaf's slices together: culture.

Culture

Culture is the collection of unwritten rules, norms, and values around "how we do things here." Every human environment—from the two-person couples to the 20-person classrooms to the 20,000-person companies—is embedded with its own culture. We can visualize a group's culture as a kind of gas cloud that fills the room when the group is together.



A human society is a rich tapestry of overlapping and sometimes sharply contradictory cultures, and each of us lives at our own unique cultural intersection.



On the largest scale, we're all a part of a few vast pan-national cultural clouds—where customs like shaking hands, waving hi, New Year's Eve, birthdays, card games, sports fandom, and tipping, to name a few, have taken on broadly shared meaning. Each nation is a smaller cloud with its own sub-culture. Americans who believe they have nothing at all in common with certain other Americans are taking for granted the rich set of specific norms, customs, and values they actually share. ②

Inside of the broadest cultures are thousands of smaller communities—each with their own cultural vibe that exerts influence on its members. Someone working in a tech startup in the Bay Area is simultaneously living inside of the broad human community, the global Western community, the American community, the U.S. West Coast community, the San Francisco community, the tech industry community, the startup community, the community of their workplace, the community of their college alumni, the community of their extended family, the community of their group of friends, a few other bizarre SF-y situations, and a dozen other communities their particular life happens to be part of (including, if they're a regular visitor here, the Wait But Why community). Most immediate to each of us are the micro-cultures of our immediate family, closest friends, and romantic relationships. Going against the current of all the larger communities combined tends to be easier than violating the unwritten rules of the most intimate mini cultures in someone's life.

A culture's rules, norms, and value systems pertain to a wide spectrum of human experience. A group of friends, for example, has a way they do birthdays, a way they do emojis, a way they do talking behind each other's backs, a way they do bragging and self-deprecation, a way they do conflict, and so on. They even have a way they do cultural adherence for each area—one group of friends might find it delightful when a certain friend regularly appalls them with their uncharacteristic-for-the-culture bluntness while in another, the same violation might be grounds for dismissal from the community. Some cultures apply pressure to live a certain kind of lifestyle or abide by a particular structure—a culture that shames being single at 30 incentivizes people to be on the lookout for a life partner in their mid-20s, while another one might not apply that pressure at all, driving different behavior.

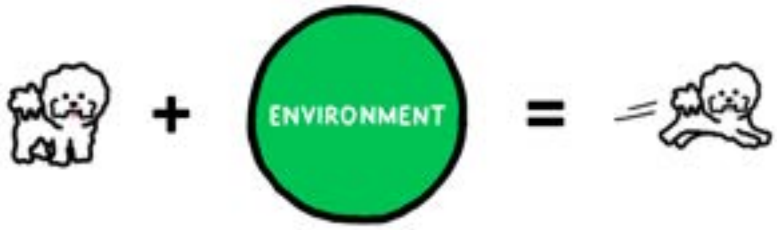
Living simultaneously in multiple cultures is part of what makes being a human tricky. Do we keep our individual inner values to ourselves and just do our best to match our external behavior to whatever culture we're currently in a room with? Or do we stay loyal to one particular culture and live by those rules everywhere, even at our social or professional peril? Or do we just go for full authenticity and let our inner values drive our behavior, unaltered, for better or worse? Do we navigate our lives so to seek out external cultures that match our own values and minimize friction? Or do we surround ourselves with a range of conflicting cultures to put some pressure on our inner minds to learn and grow? Whether you consciously realize it or not, you're making these decisions all the time.

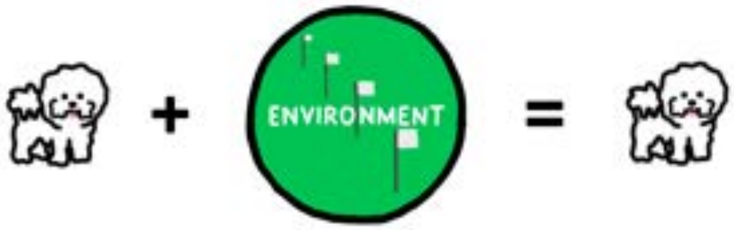
And these decisions matter—because the cultures we spend time in have a major influence over us.

Cultural Incentives

Remember Moochie from Part 1?

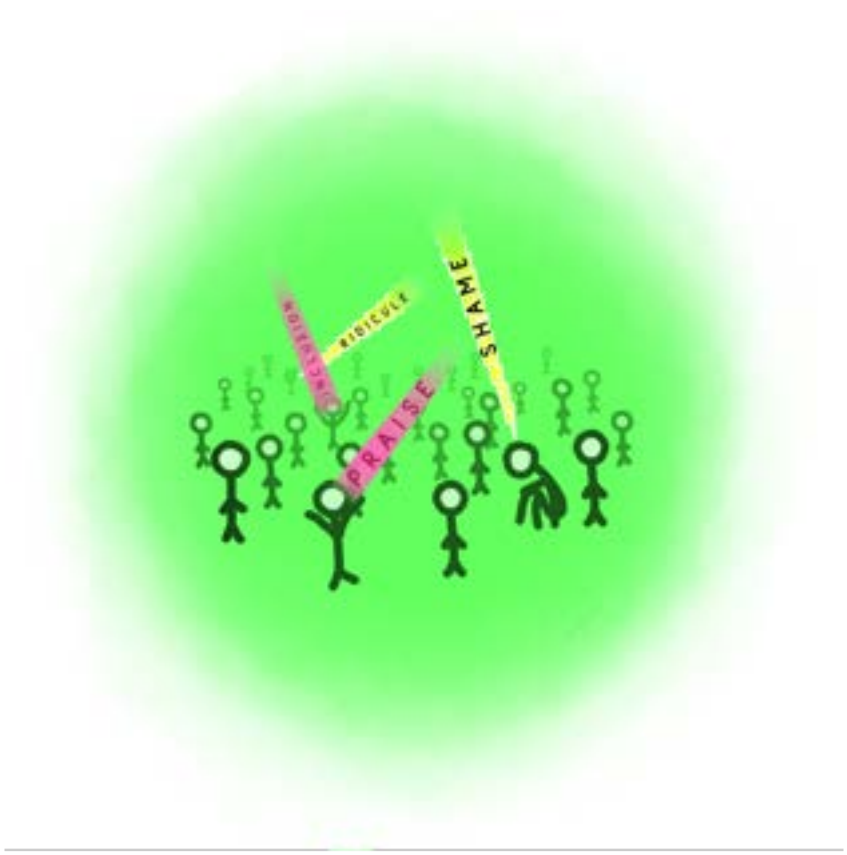
The Johnsons drove Moochie’s behavior in a certain direction by adding Snausage rewards and electrocution penalties into his environment. This whole thing:





In Part 2, we looked at how the brutal dictator King Mustache did the same thing by imposing harsh penalties for saying the wrong thing, and how liberal democracies then turned the tables on the Power Games by writing their own set of rules that punished the violation of inalienable rights. We also looked at how free economic markets reward the creation of value with money. These are all the same idea, just with different zaps and treats.

Cultures use incentive systems too. Instead of physical shocks or jail time as penalties, cultures enforce their values with social and psychological punishments like criticism, ridicule, shame, and ostracism. Instead of Snausages or money, they use rewards like praise, acceptance, approval, respect, and admiration.



In other words, in a species that collectively never really leaves middle school, cultures determine what kind of behavior makes you cool or uncool. For social creatures like humans—creatures with a big, fat mammoth in their heads—these *cultural* zaps and treats work just as well as (and often far better than) the more tangible kinds of incentives, helping to align the behavior of people in a group.

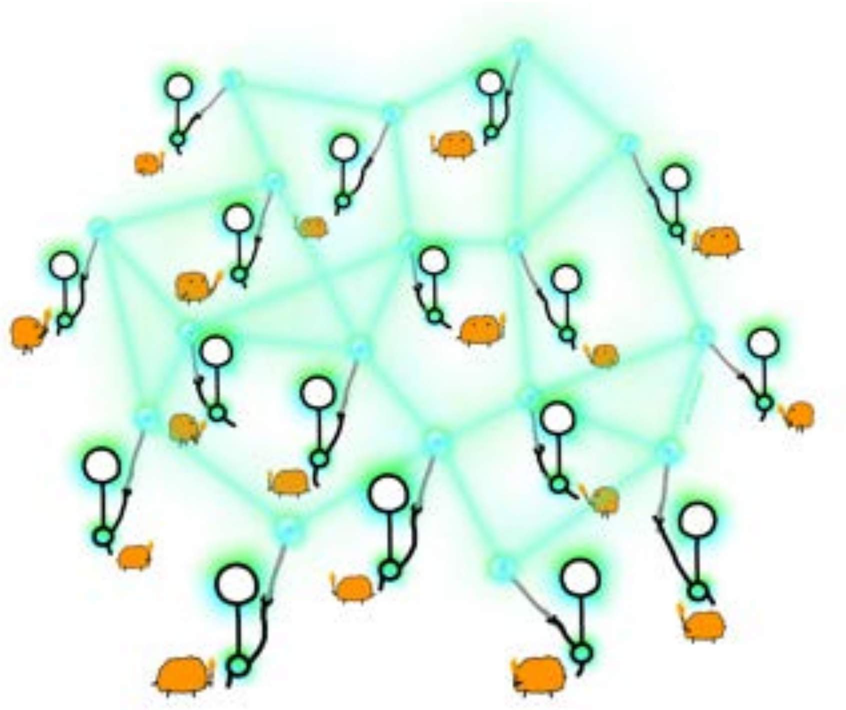
Which brings up an important question: why does a particular culture enforce certain values and not others?

Culture, in 2D

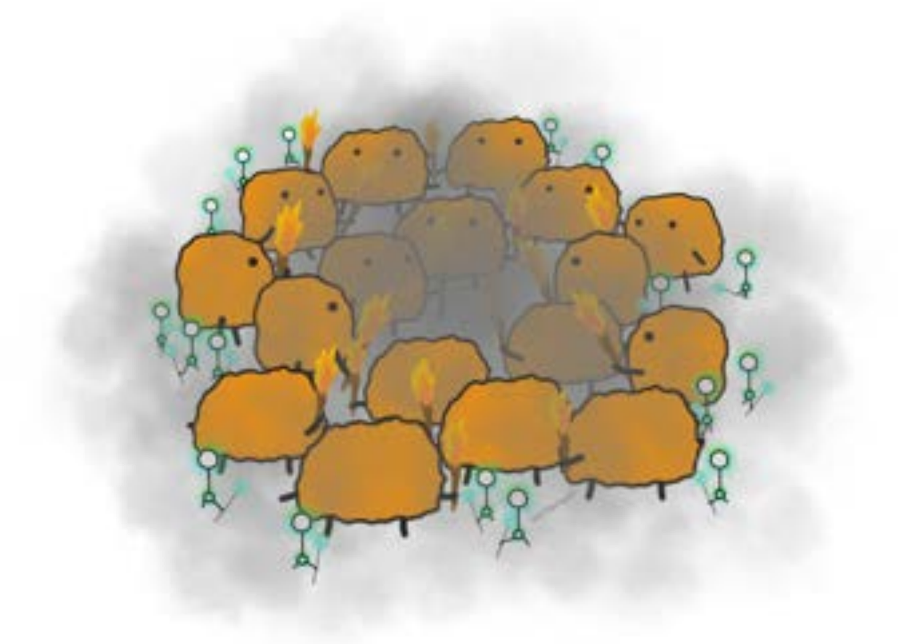
In your head, your Higher Mind and Primitive Mind compete for control of your psychology. On the group level, the two minds jostle for control over the group's *culture.* When people are around other people, their Primitive and Higher Minds band together with others of their kind in a group-wide power struggle. And like a human's personality, a group's culture has a general Psych Spectrum equilibrium it tends to default to.

The psych equilibrium of a culture exerts a vertical *pull* on the individuals within it—filling each culture with a kind of electrical current.

In higher-minded culture, the pervading values are Higher-Mind driven, making it a *positively charged* culture that exerts an upward pull on the psyches of their members. The behavior rewarded or zapped by the culture align more with the Higher Mind's values, and interactions carry a generally high-minded tone, which empowers the Higher Minds of the people within the culture.



In a negatively charged culture, the Primitive Mind is on its home turf. Conversations are pettier, values are more superficial, conformity beats individuality, and things tend to feel a lot like middle school. A culture like this speaks directly to the Primitive Minds in the heads of its members, continually stoking their fires and forcing their marginalized Higher Mind counterparts to swim upstream.

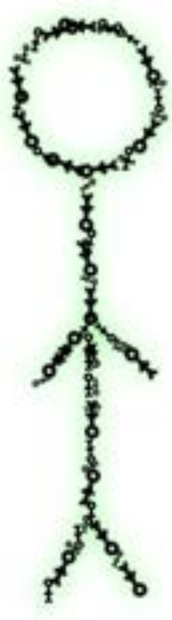


As always, the power struggle exists on a spectrum, not as a binary switch—and cultures, like people, can often be somewhere in the middle. But in groups, where this kind of "coalition" can form, one mind gaining control over the culture is like an extreme home-field advantage in sports. Control over the electrical charge of the air and power over the painful zaps and pleasurable rays that police cultural dissidents is such a leg up that, for the "away team," it can be very hard to overcome.

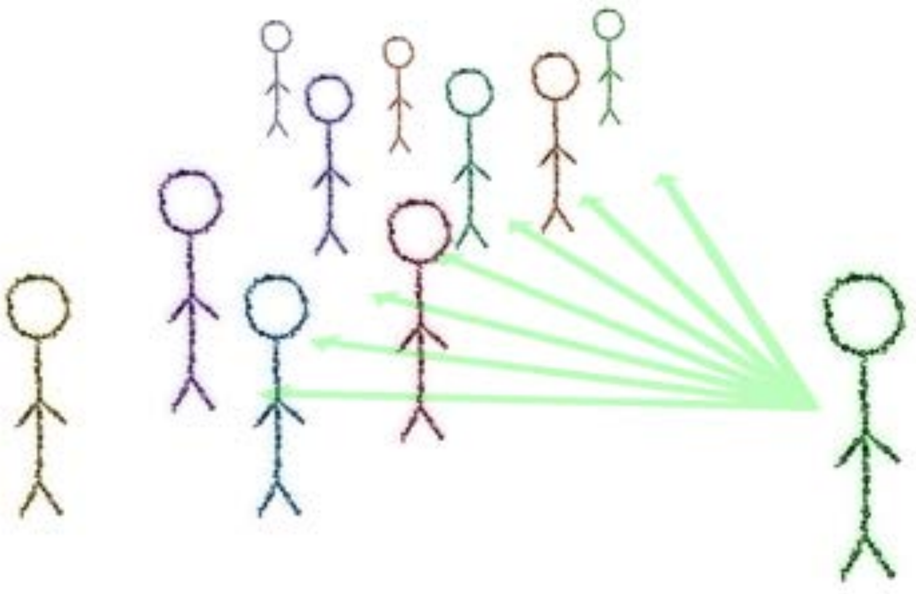
Culture, in 3D

So far, we've been focusing on the relationship between culture and individuals. In that realm, culture functions as the rules of engagement. But when we move up to higher levels of emergence, where groups of people function like giant organisms, a group's culture becomes the giant's *personality.*

The culture cloud that surrounds us as individuals is, to a giant, a field of energy radiating through its body and coloring the way it thinks and acts.

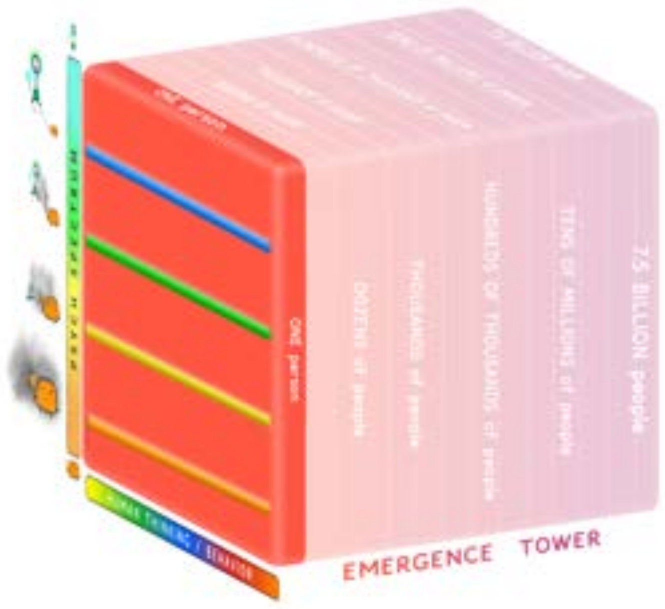


A giant’s culture also affects how it interacts with the emergence levels above it, as each giant’s prevailing culture determines how it plays with other giants, and which types of other giants it will gravitate towards.



With all of this in our mind, let’s return now to the world of human *beliefs*.

We spent last chapter thinking about thinking here:



But human thinking, like all things human, happens up and down Emergence Tower—in 3D. Where we are on the Thinking Ladder at any given moment is affected by what's happening on the emergence slices above us—by the giants we're a part of, and where *they* are on the Thinking Ladder.

For the rest of this post, we'll zoom in on one specific type of culture: *intellectual culture*. There are all kinds of intellectual cultures out there, but we can slot them into two broad categories:

Idea Labs and Echo Chambers.

We all know what an Echo Chamber is. An Idea Lab will be our term for the opposite. Let's discuss:

Idea Labs

When the Higher Mind is in control of a single human's intellect, the human becomes a high-rung thinker. When a *group* of Higher Minds band together to take over a group of people's intellectual culture, they form what we can call an Idea Lab. An Idea Lab is an intellectual culture where high-rung thinking thrives and where it can be done well communally. Idea Lab culture abides by the Higher Mind's intellectual goals, values, preferences, and tastes, and it sees thinking, ideas, discussion, debate, questions, answers, information, and knowledge through the Higher Mind's lens. Any size community can be an Idea Lab if the intellectual culture in that community is Idea-Lab-like.

We're going to take a look at both cultures from two emergence perspectives:

1) The individual level—how the culture affects the individuals within it

2) The group level—how the culture affects the group itself, as a larger-emergence giant

How Idea Labs affect individuals

To a person, a community is kind of like a mini nation, and as a mini nation, an Idea Lab is a lot like a liberal democracy. Both are rooted in values: a typical liberal democracy is premised on Enlightenment values like freedom and equal opportunity; an Idea Lab centers around the Enlightenment values of truth and free expression. A liberal democracy is governed by rules about the *way* things are done, not the end result—and this binding process is outlined in a constitution. An Idea Lab has a binding process too: the scientific method.

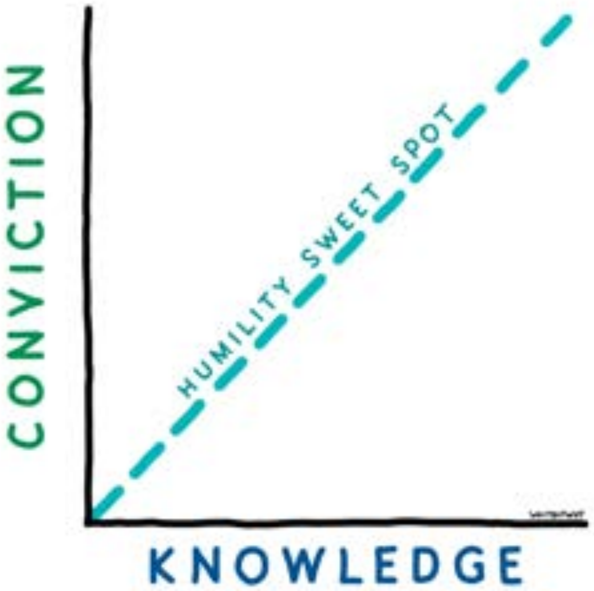
Unlike communities of actual career scientists, most real-world communities don't exist solely to find truth, so it's not exactly the literal scientific method happening as much as it's an intellectual culture that's scientific-method-*esque*, generally abiding by the same principles.

This makes an Idea Lab's cultural point system pretty straightforward—the cool kids do stuff that serves truth, and those who do otherwise are lame. A few examples:

Idea Labs like independent thought. In an Idea Lab, people are more interested in what you have to say if they think your thoughts come from a self-determined place, and they'll begin to tune you out if they suspect you tend to just repeat what you heard from another source. This is partially because independent thinkers usually respect other independent thinkers and find low-rung dogmatics to be transparent and boring. But it's also for practical reasons. An independent thinker, regardless of their viewpoints, is an active brain in the room, contributing something original to the system. A dogmatic who simply regurgitates the same viewpoints, without independent critical thought, contributes little.

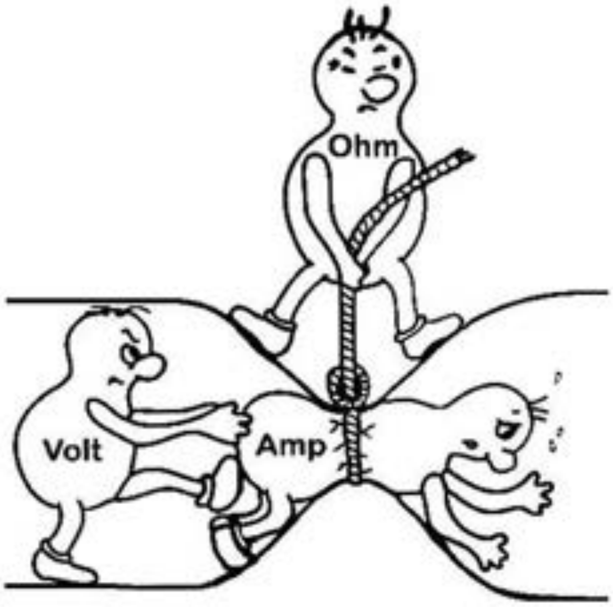
Idea Labs like intellectual diversity. An Idea Lab is a place of intellectual *pluralism*. It's a miniature marketplace of ideas where multiple, varied viewpoints coexist. High-rung thinkers know that intellectual diversity is the key quality that fills a community with the rich collection of idea puzzle pieces needed to find truth. On topics where everyone seems to agree, people in an Idea Lab will have an instinct to prod that consensus with contrarian ideas and to play devil's advocate. Thoughtful contrarianism is valued because there's an implicit understanding that the evolution of knowledge works like the evolution of life. Only through mutations does evolution happen. In the natural world, a mutant is a biological weirdo. In an Idea Lab, bold, quirky, contrarian thinkers—intellectual weirdos—are seen as critical innovators in the lab who provide mutant ideas to the community.

Idea Labs respect thinkers who stay close to the humility sweet spot tightrope.

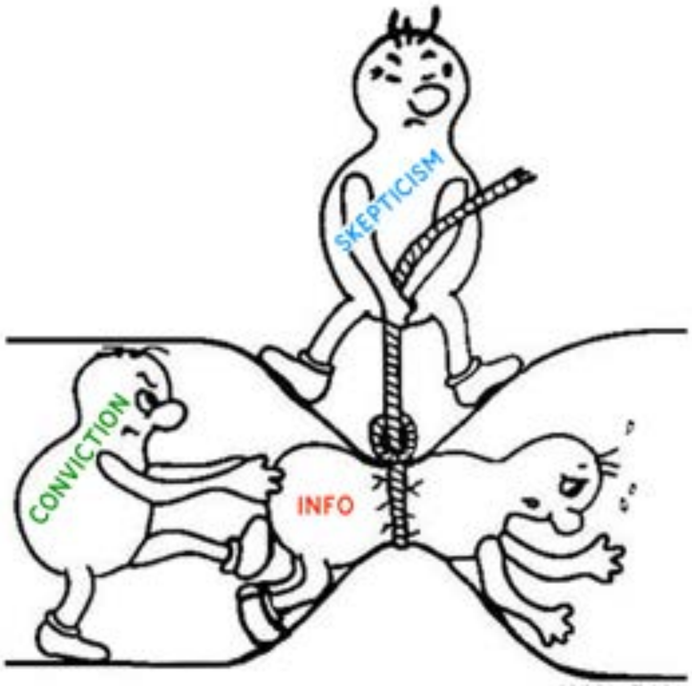


In an Idea Lab, conviction is used sparingly and with caution—because conviction levels in an Idea Lab are used as “degree of certainty” stamps. The more conviction in your voice when you make a claim, the more you’re saying: “You can *trust* me that this is truth. I’ve already done the hard work to vet this information, and it’s safe to incorporate it into your beliefs without much testing.” For trusted thinkers in an Idea Lab, conviction offers fellow members a beautiful knowledge-acquisition shortcut and saves them the effort and opportunity cost of re-vetting what has already been tested.

I’ve always been a fan of this cartoon that explains what volts, amps, and ohms are.[1]



In communities, info flows in a similar way. Amps are info. Volts are conviction. And ohms are skepticism.



labels by waitbutwhy

In an Idea Lab, this system is geared around letting truth in and keeping bullshit out. In a good trust network, the Skepticism character (i.e. the Belief Bouncer) is able to trust the Conviction character, which can spare everyone a bunch of work. When a proven high-rung thinker expresses info with a lot of conviction *umph*, the listener will lower the skepticism ohms without thinking too hard about it.

On the other hand, unearned, false conviction is a major no-no in an Idea Lab. Conviction from a trusted source opens a clear path directly into someone's most sacred intellectual space: their beliefs. And when conviction is used carelessly, it infects those beliefs with misconceptions, slant, and inaccuracies—the Idea Lab's toxins—like feeding someone food that will make them sick. Super uncool kid thing to do—and the Idea Lab will punish you by lowering your Rung Rating and damaging your reputation, boy-who-cried-wolf style. Getting caught abusing the use of conviction means you lose the ability to believably communicate your degree of certainty when you say something—because people will know you have a spotty history. Now, when you up the volts and express conviction, listeners will take it with a grain of salt, keep the skepticism filter tight, and feel the need to further verify it.

For all the same reasons, humility wins you major respect in an Idea Lab—where "I don't know" is a very cool thing to say. People in an Idea Lab are high-rung thinkers, so they know that knowledge is hard. They know the world is a foggy, incredibly complex place, and they're well aware that no single human knows that much about it. So humility is seen as evidence of honesty and self-awareness—evidence that you "get it." A reputation for humility makes you intellectually powerful in an Idea Lab—because when a typically humble person does express conviction, it carries a ton of meaning and everyone's ears perk up.

Idea Labs love arguments. Truth is a sacred value in an Idea Lab, and ideas themselves are seen as nothing more than puzzle pieces to be used in its service. Idea Labs treat all beliefs as works-in-progress, and they see an argument as not only fun, competitive, and intellectually stimulating, but also as a useful exercise for everyone involved, because they know you can only get to knowledge by rigorously testing hypotheses. That's why Idea Labs are cultures of disconfirmation, debate, and argument. These values mean an Idea Lab doubles as a miniature marketplace-of-ideas gauntlet, a place where no idea is safe. In an Idea Lab, ideas are meant to be criticized, not respected; kicked, not coddled. But the aggression never falls on the *thinker*—arguments are often heated, but they don't get personal. As a necessary condition of truth finding, *people* in an Idea Lab are safe to express any viewpoint they want.

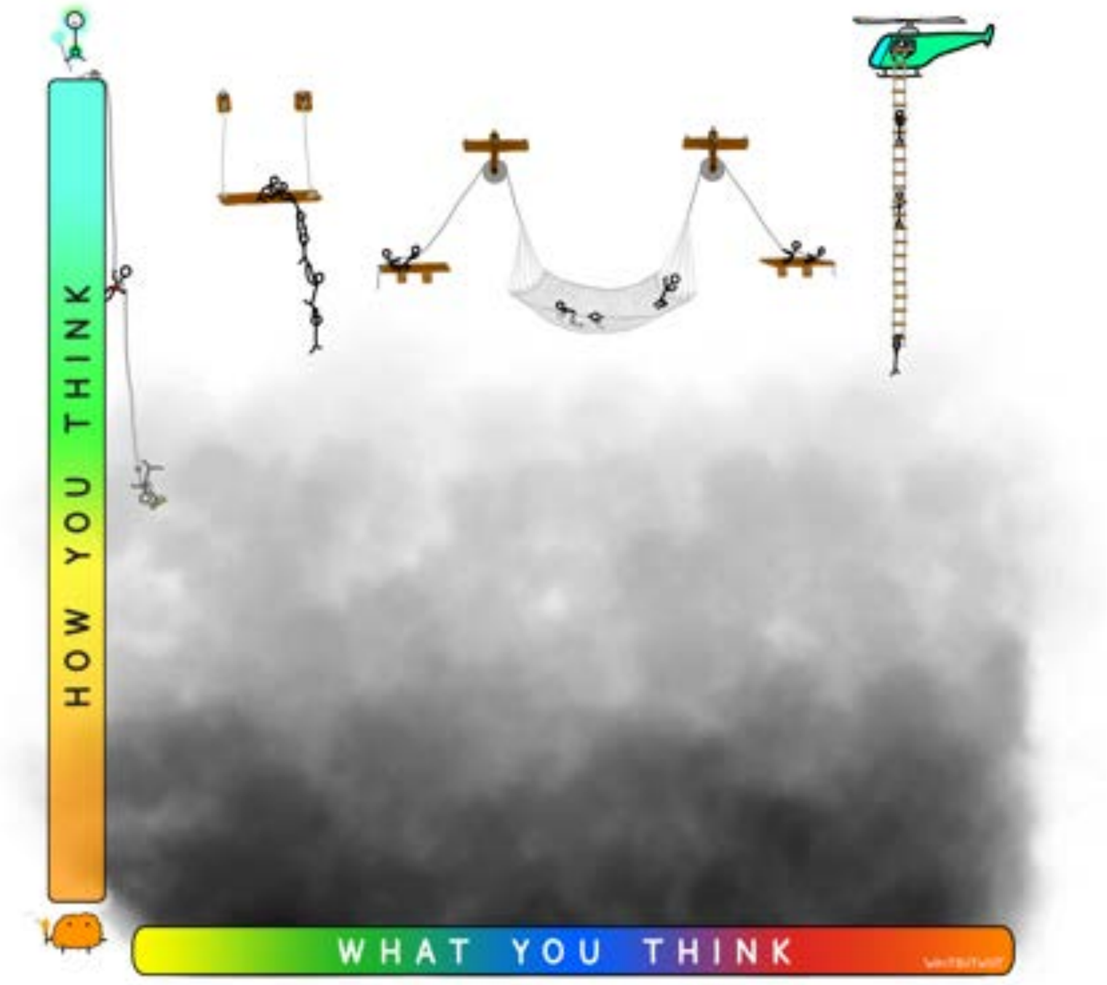
Spending time as a citizen of an Idea Lab mini nation—whether it happens at dinners with your spouse, in classroom discussions, in book club get-togethers, in text conversations, on long scrolls down Reddit threads, or anywhere else—makes you smarter. It shows you where the holes in your knowledge are; it grants you access to a network of intellectual trust that floods you with new, accurate information; it introduces you to a variety of perspectives; it teaches you how to effectively judge others' ideas and claims. It's a constant intellectual workout that keeps you sharp.

But even more importantly, an Idea Lab helps you fight the good fight in your own head. I don't care how good a thinker you are, your intellect will always be in an uphill Psych Spectrum battle against gravity. Even if you get good at thinking with your Higher Mind, your Primitive Mind never gives up and is always looking for a loophole—some personal insecurity, some emotional attachment, some lingering psychological baggage from your past—to latch onto as an opportunity to re-hijack the wheel.

No one thinks like pure top-rung Scientists all the time. More often, after a brief stint on the top rung during an especially lucid and humble period, we start to *like* the new epiphanies we gleaned up there a little too much and we quickly drop down to the Sports Fan rung. And that's okay. It might even be optimal to be a *little* over-confident in our intellectual lives. Taking a rooting interest in our ideas—a new philosophy, a new lifestyle choice, a new business strategy—allows us to really give them a try, somewhat liberated from the constant "but are we really sure about this?" nag from the Higher Mind.

The Sports Fan rung alone isn't a problem—especially since, like cheering fans in a stadium who know deep down that their fandom is a little silly, somewhere behind the fog of a Sports Fan's confidence is the self-awareness of a still-pretty-present Higher Mind. The problem is that inviting some fog into the equation is a bit like closing your eyes *for just another minute or two* after you've shut your alarm off for good—it's riskier than it feels. Getting a little attached to or emotional about an idea is a small step away from drifting unconsciously into Unfalsifiable Land and into the oblivion of the intellectual slums down below. We're programmed by evolution to be terrible thinkers, so we should never get cocky.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a Higher Mind support network, where a bunch of people suffering from a disease—one in which the animal they live in has become fixated on using alcohol to ruin their lives—can get together and help each other fight the good fight. An Idea Lab is the same thing for our intellect—Dogmatics Anonymous.

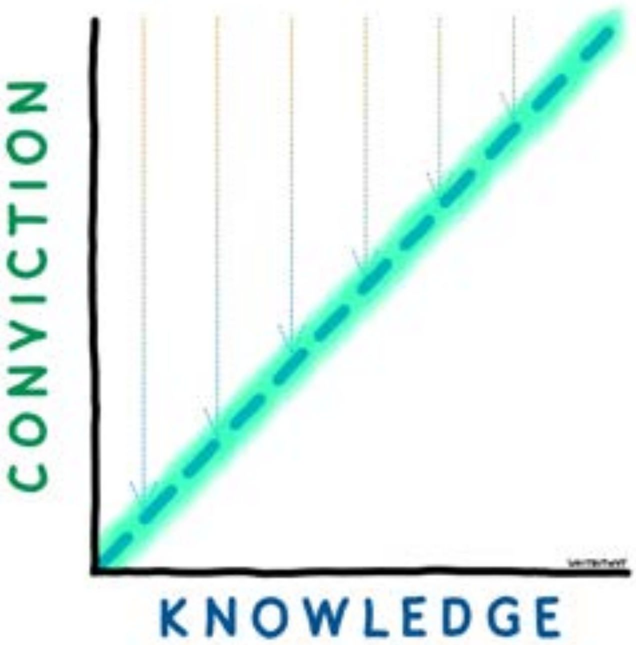


People in Dogmatics Anonymous keep each other from falling too low down the Thinking Ladder.

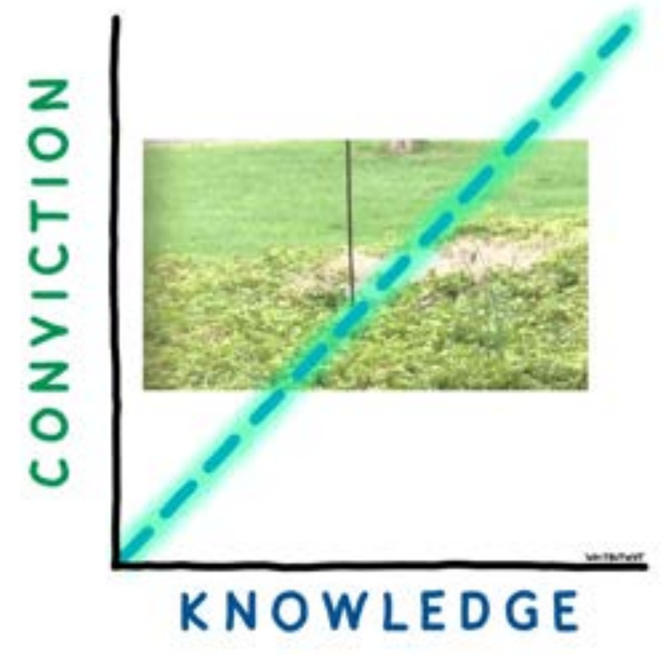
The social pressure helps: if it's considered cool to think with your Higher Mind, you're more likely to do so.

And the intellectual pressure helps: If the people around you are good enough at thinking to notice when you're being biased, hypocritical, conveniently gullible, or selectively unempathetic—and if they're culturally encouraged to call you on it—you're less likely to keep doing those things or fall into a well of false conviction. In an Idea Lab, the room is usually too well-lit for the Primitive Mind to get away with anything too sneaky.

When you spend enough time in an Idea Lab, humility and self-awareness are *inflicted* upon you, whether you like it or not. When you float upwards on the Knowledge-Conviction graph, Idea Lab culture pulls you back down to the tightrope.[3]


CONVICTION
KNOWLEDGE
WAITBUTWHY

Or, depicted far more hilariously: People in an Idea Lab are like this squirrel trying to get to a bird feeder, and Idea lab culture “greases the arrogance pole.”


CONVICTION
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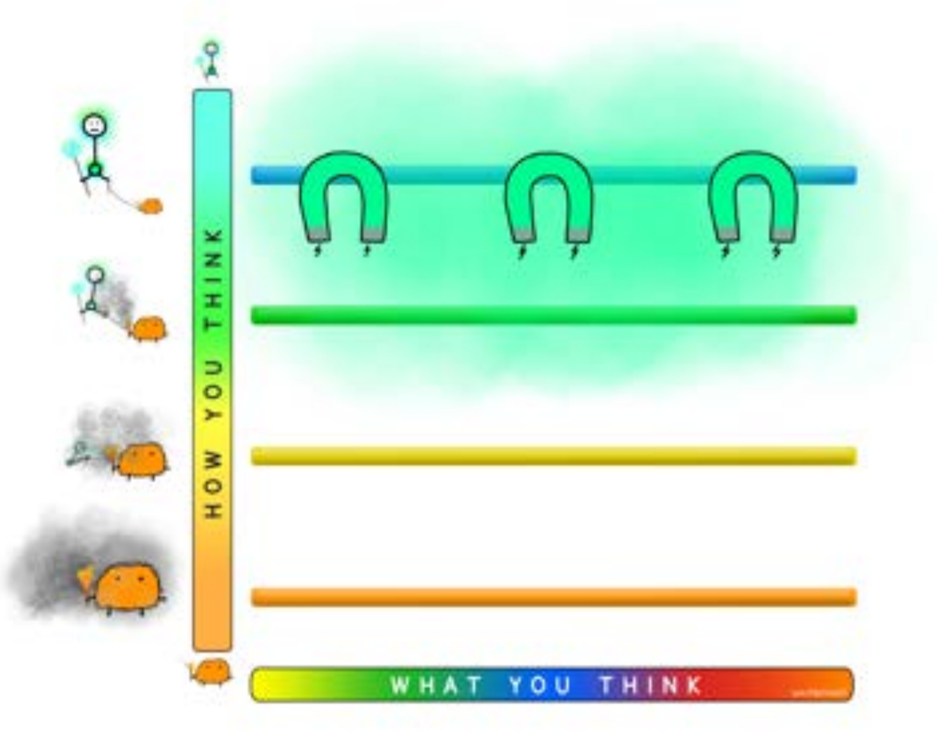
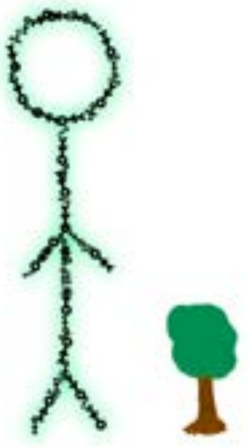
All of these forces combine together to make an Idea Lab a big magnet on top of our ladder.

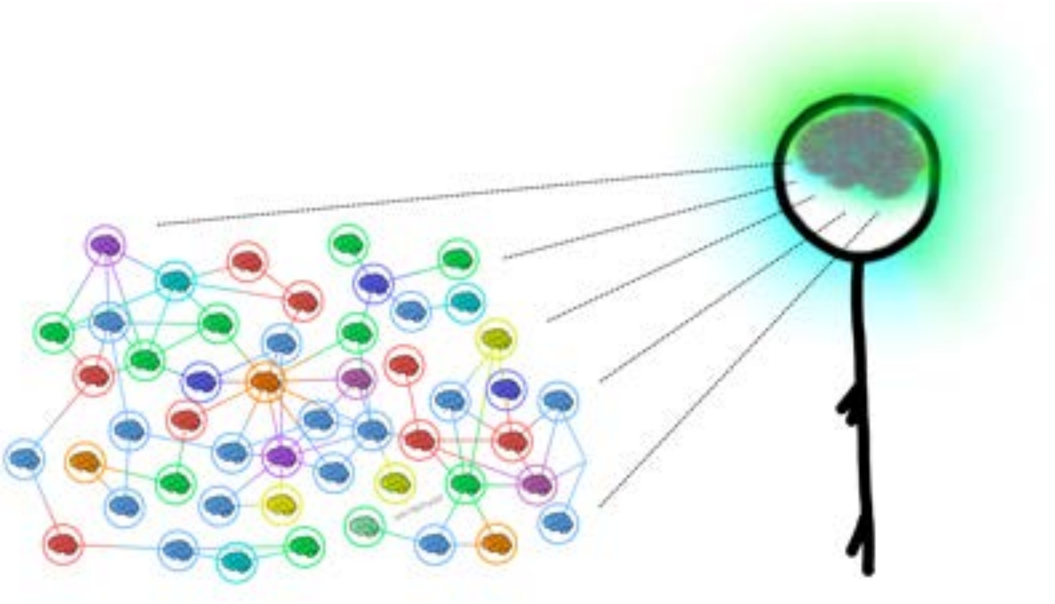


And that's just the benefits of an Idea Lab to the individuals within it. Bringing our attention upwards on Emergence Tower, a community starts to look less like a mini nation of people and more like a single giant organism—and here, we see just how powerful Idea Lab culture can be.

How Idea Labs affect groups



An Idea Lab is a giant, high-rung thinker with super-human intelligence. At its best, it's the ultimate Scientist. The group's mini marketplace of ideas is the giant's brain, with the individual members' brains as its neurons.



This single, multi-mind thinking system is far superior to its individual members at learning new things and separating truth from fiction. If the mind of a single high-rung thinker is a truth-seeking tool, the mind of an Idea Lab giant is truth-seeking *factory.*

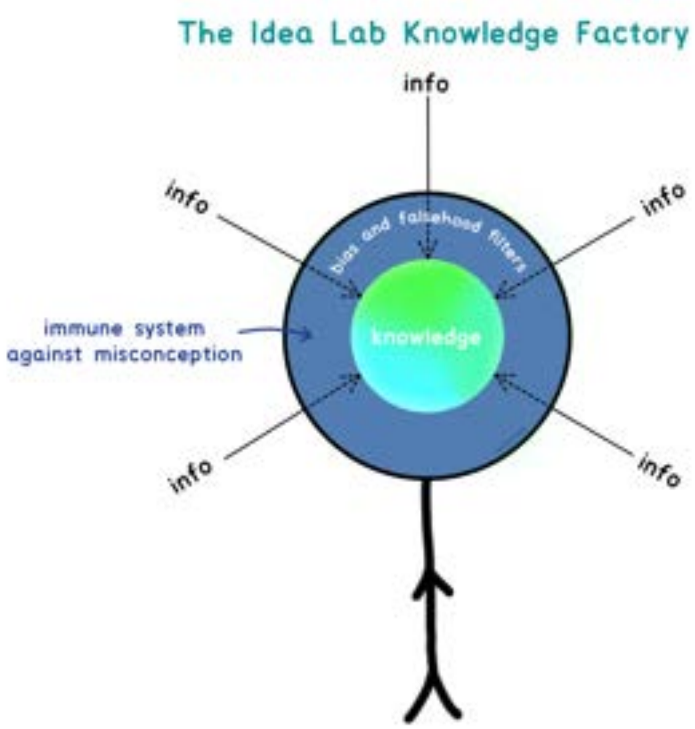
Instead of a single Attention Bouncer, bound by the limits of his time and the scope of his curiosity, the Idea Lab organism has a *team* of Attention Bouncers importing information.

Instead of a single Belief Bouncer trying his hardest to judge the accuracy of info, the Idea Lab giant has a squadron of Belief Bouncers at the door of the community's generally accepted beliefs. In order to make it past the gate, a hypothesis or piece of information has to make it past *each* of the bouncers. Even if a convincing falsehood succeeds in duping most of the community, all it takes is one person's Belief Bouncer discovering it to be flawed and they'll quickly expose it as fraud to everyone else. The beliefs of high-rung thinkers are readily falsifiable—so this is a fast process that leaves the bad information with little hope.

Instead of a single Puzzler working on building hypotheses out of scattered information, the constant hum of discussion in an Idea Lab makes puzzling collaborative. With everyone mostly saying what they're really thinking, the line between puzzling together a hypothesis and testing that hypothesis in a gauntlet of criticism blurs. When dialectic and debate are core parts of an intellectual culture, new ideas can be tested as they're being formed, in real-time, making the step-by-step knowledge-building process of the individual high-rung thinker into a single, dynamic process.

As a giant organism, an Idea Lab is an example of emergence at its finest: a system that is far more than the sum of its parts.

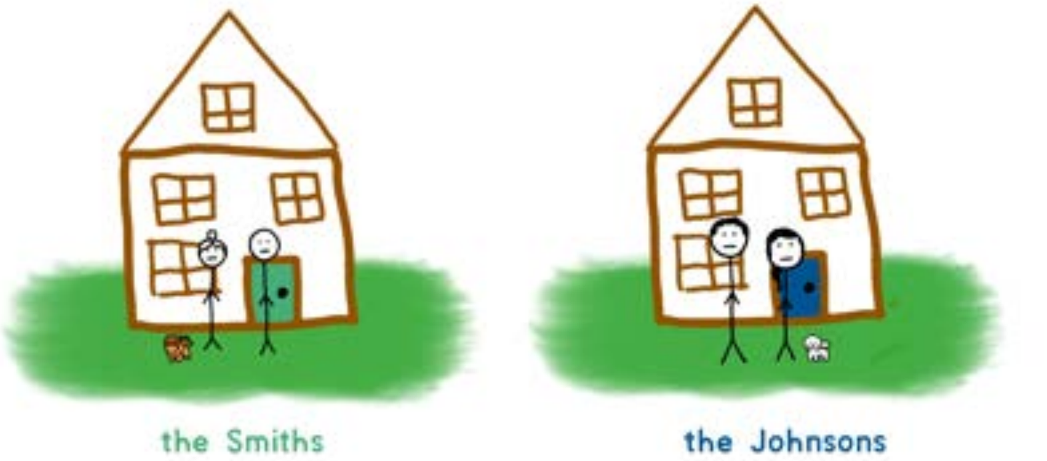
The Idea Lab giant is an organism that takes in raw information and converts it into knowledge and wisdom. Its immune system specializes in sorting truth from fiction and rooting out falsehoods and bias—the toxins that threaten the knowledge manufacturing process.



One of the coolest properties of an Idea Lab is its ability to play nicely with other Idea Labs and seamlessly meld together with them into larger Idea Labs. Take the simplest example: two couples.

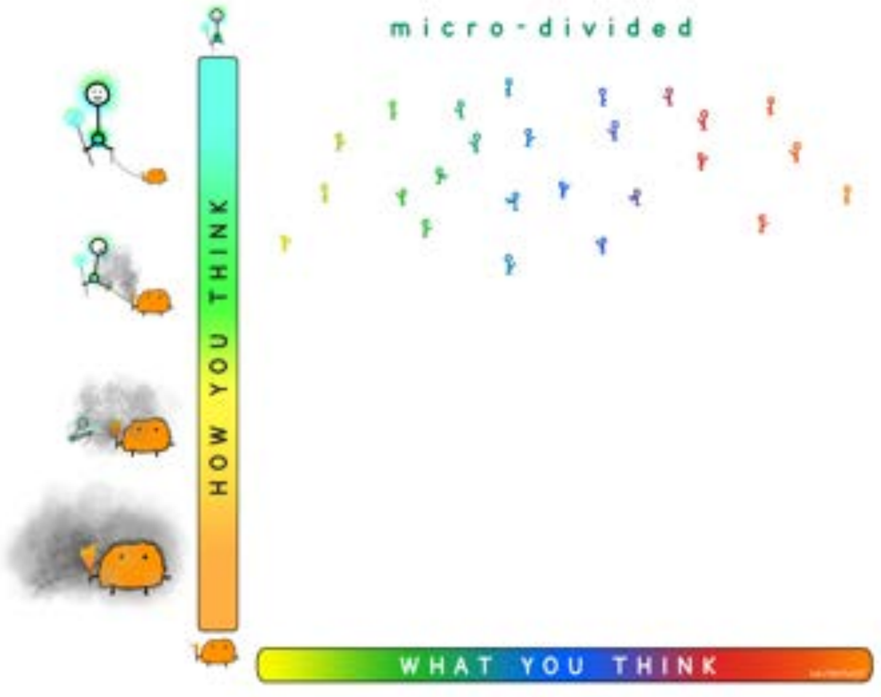
To continue exploiting the Johnsons from Part 1, let's imagine that in their marriage, they have formed a strong, high-rung intellectual culture together. When they're together, they form a tiny Idea Lab—a two-mind system that's always working on a lifelong, collaborative mission to become a little less wrong and a little less foolish. They disagree about ideas all the time, but their intellectual arguments rarely double as *fights*. They get heated alongside smiles and jokes and light-hearted jabs at each other. Like any humans, they're both prone to sink downwards on the ladder, but they keep each other honest, and they both have a history of changing their mind when the other makes a point so good they can't deny the truth of it—an intellectual "offer they can't refuse."

Now, let's also imagine that they have their next-door neighbors, the Smiths, over for dinner one night.

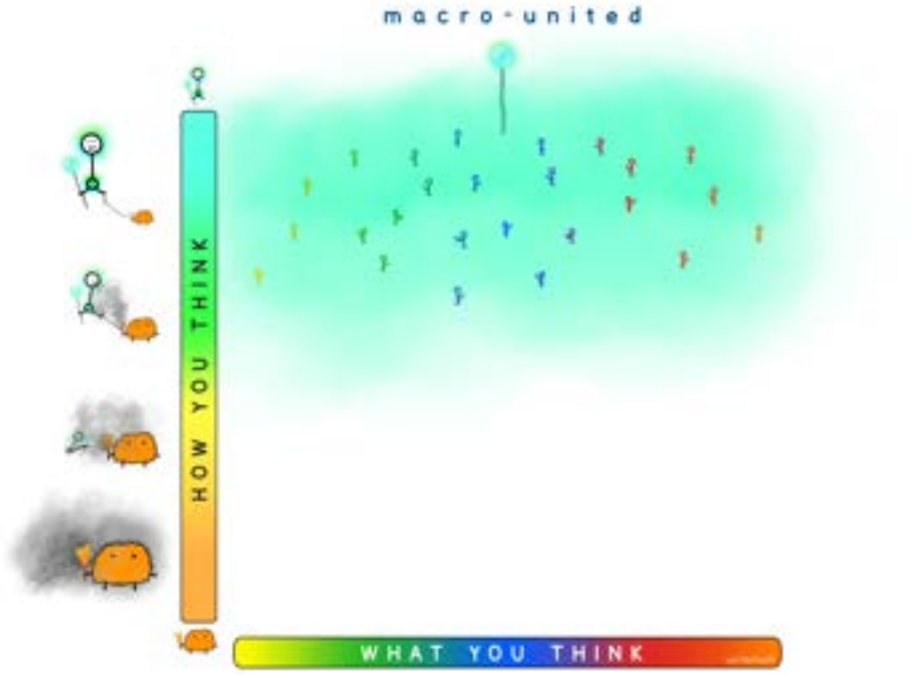


The Smiths are also an Idea Lab couple. So very quickly, the dinner becomes a rich discourse, full of original ideas and critical thinking, as the four of them seamlessly merge their two-person Idea Labs into a four-person Idea Lab. The dinner table becomes a four-person marketplace of ideas, with double the knowledge, double the intellectual diversity, and double the keen-eyed Bouncers and Puzzlers at their service. The hangout goes on for hours after the food is done, and everyone leaves feeling a little bit smarter than they were before. The two couples, sharing high-rung intellectual values, both end up feeling positive about the experience, as the large amount of critical thinking that happened made the dinner super interesting and fun.

The thing going on here is that Idea Labs are **micro-divided,** and **macro-united.** On a micro scale, Idea Labs and the people within them disagree often—that's the intellectual diversity component.

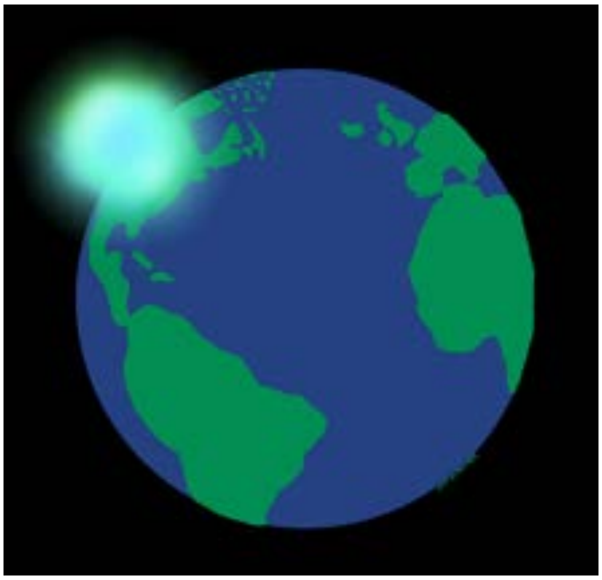


On a macro scale, all Idea Labs are broadly united by a common set of intellectual values—a shared understanding that they're all ultimately on the same truth-seeking team.

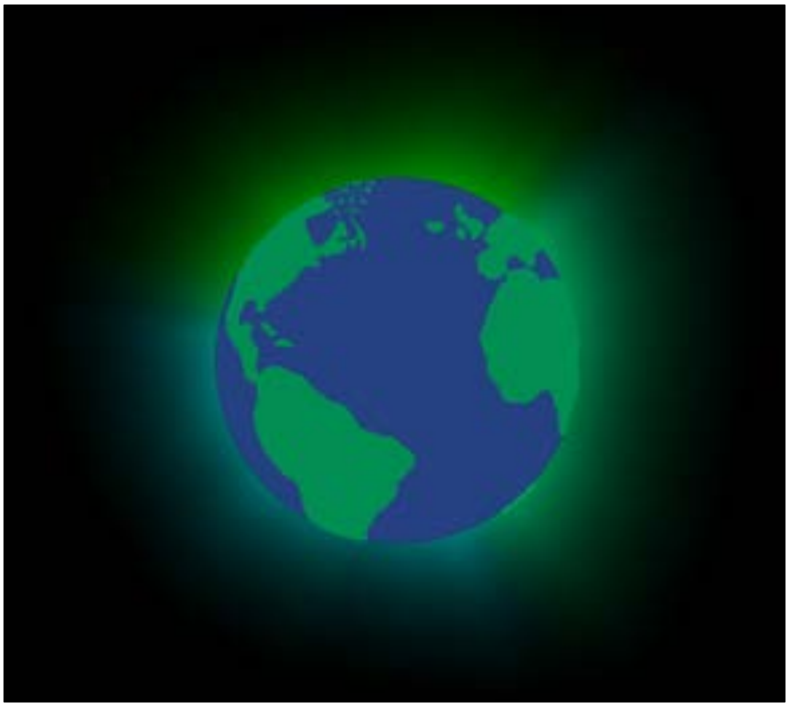


This allows Idea Labs of all sizes to combine together just as easily as the Johnsons and Smiths did. Two can become four around a dinner table. A six-college-friends Idea Lab can become part of a larger one 50 students strong when those friends walk into one of Bridge USA's many university clubs dedicated to ideological diversity. High-rung science departments can "team up" with other departments by criticizing each other's findings.

Even farther up Emergence Tower, every Idea Lab in the U.S. is a tiny piece of the grand American Idea Lab—the U.S. marketplace of ideas—each of them a little pocket of neural tissue in the giant U.S. brain. In the U.S., the joint effort of hundreds of thousands of Idea Labs of all different shapes and sizes generates that big, bright orb of light held by the collective nation's giant Higher Mind.



The U.S. marketplace of ideas is in turn a lobe of tissue in the largest Idea Lab of all—the uber-giant brain of the collective high-rung thinkers of the human race. Through a worldwide mega-web of different size Idea Labs, each individual high-rung human thinker is able to link into the giant species brain as a single tiny neuron.



Idea Labs can blend together so effortlessly because the only glue needed to tie them together is a simple set of high-rung intellectual values, all centered around a common mission to get closer to the truth.

This is what Thomas Paine was getting at when he said:[2]

Science, the partisan of no country, but the beneficent patroness of all, has liberally opened a temple where all may meet. … The philosopher of one country sees not an enemy in the philosopher of another: he takes his seat in the temple of science, and asks not who sits beside him.

Idea Labs are awesome because they're awesome at every level of emergence.

They're great at the individual level. Individuality is valued, people are respected, and communities are safe spaces to share whatever ideas you're thinking about, without fear of negative consequences. An Idea Lab is a good mini nation to be citizen of. Spending time in an Idea Lab makes you smarter, wiser, humbler, more realistic, and helps pull your internal battle *upwards.*

Idea Labs are great at the community level. The same people encouraged to retain their full individuality at the low-emergence level also get to enjoy the benefits of being a cell in a larger, superintelligent system, with all of the social and community perks that come along with it.

Idea Labs are great at the national and pan-national level. We have Idea Labs to thank for the collective knowledge tower we've built as a species, for the evolution of our species' psychological maturation, and for the development of our growing philosophical clarity.

Perhaps most importantly, Idea Labs bring to fruition a fundamental right:

The Free Speech Puzzle

Given how naturally Idea Lab culture fits into the broader spirit of the U.S. constitution, you might assume that at least Idea Labs would be the norm in a place like the U.S.—but they're not. The U.S. was a country built to give the underdog Higher Mind a chance, but it wasn't built to *enforce* the Higher Mind's ideals on any citizen. Doing so would violate the core premise of the country: freedom from authoritarian rule. The Constitution puts its citizens in an environment where neither the government, nor other citizens, are allowed to impinge on any citizen's right to live in a high-minded environment. But like the case with power, wealth, and the pursuit of happiness—the Constitution offers only the *opportunity* to enjoy the ideals of the Enlightenment, not a guarantee of that kind of life. In the U.S., you're so free that you're *free to be unfree*, if you so choose.

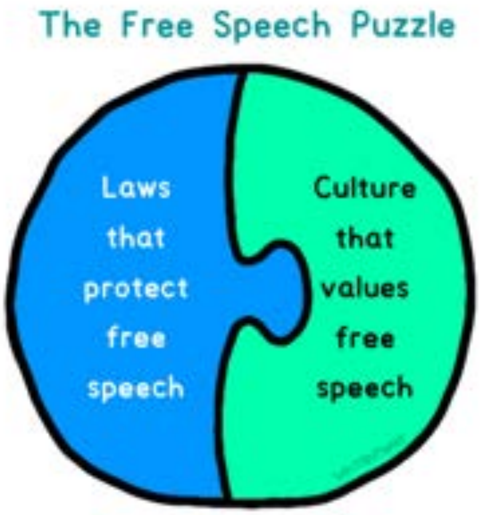
We can apply this to the world of discourse. The reality is that while all Americans are living under the protection of the First Amendment, many aren't living with freedom of speech. Constitutional lawyer Greg Lukianoff highlights this distinction:[3]

> *Though often used interchangeably, the concept of freedom of speech and the First Amendment are not the same thing. While the First Amendment protects freedom of speech and freedom of the press as they relate to duties of the state and state power, freedom of speech is a far broader idea that includes additional cultural values. These values incorporate healthy intellectual habits, such as giving the other side a fair hearing, reserving judgment, tolerating opinions that offend or anger us, believing that everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion, and recognizing that even people whose points of view we find repugnant might be (at least partially) right. At the heart of these values is epistemic humility – a fancy way of saying that we must always keep in mind that we could be wrong or, at least, that we can always learn something from listening to the other side.*

Free speech, like any Value Games privilege, requires both the government *and* the culture to be on board. The U.S. Constitution makes free speech possible—but only within the right *culture* does the freedom come to fruition.

Let's apply this idea to t-shirts. The Constitution gives all citizens the right to walk around wearing t-shirts in public. As far as we're concerned, there might as well be a T-Shirt Amendment that protects this right for all citizens (the right to bare arms?). But if I live in a community in which one of the unwritten cultural beliefs is that wearing t-shirts is evil—and anyone who does so will likely be permanently shunned—I'm not gonna walk around in a t-shirt. Sure, the T-Shirt Amendment means that I can't be imprisoned by the government for wearing a t-shirt—but my entire *social* life would be destroyed by doing so, which is just a different kind of incredibly harsh penalty. Being deeply invested in a community allows the culture of that community to essentially override my constitutional rights. The actual enjoyment of a constitutional right relies on finding a community who *agrees with the Constitution* about it.

Likewise, in cultures that impose their own harsh penalties for saying the wrong thing, freedom of speech all but vanishes, along with the presence of the marketplace of ideas. This is why Idea Labs are so important. Idea Labs are fully bought in to the value of free speech—they see it as a constitutional gift and make it a way of life. Idea Lab culture is the critical second piece that completes the free speech puzzle.


The Free Speech Puzzle
Laws that protect free speech
Culture that values free speech

If the Idea Lab were the only intellectual culture out there, things in the human world might be simple. But Idea Labs aren't the only human intellectual culture, because the Higher Mind isn't the only human mind. Liberal concepts like free speech are thoroughly artificial constructions, and no matter where they exist, they'll always be the underdog, constantly fighting against the gravity of human nature.

Some people do manage to spend most of our time in the little pockets of Higher-Mind-run cultures that have managed to subsist inside of the broader primitive ocean. But many of us aren't so lucky. The typical human today, around the world, and inside the U.S., is spending their life inside communities that are culturally charged the old-fashioned way.

Echo Chambers

Imagine you've just had your first baby. Super exciting right?

And every day when you look at your baby, you can't believe how cute it is.

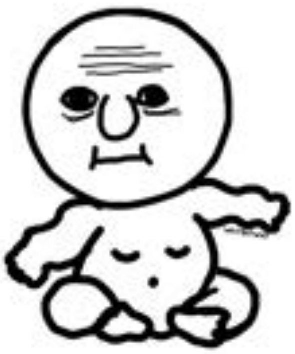
Babies have a pretty high success rate at being cute. It's one of the only things they're talented at.

But the thing is, there's also that one baby out of every five or six that manages to not pull it off. The Upsetting-Looking Baby. We all know a few.

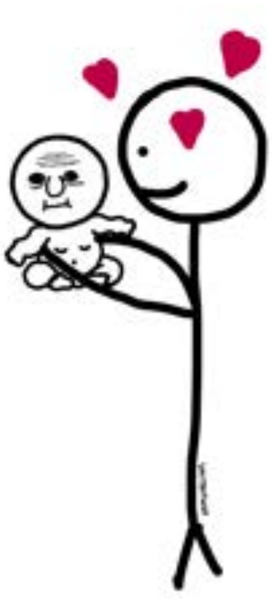
And I've noticed a funny pattern—when I talk to the parents of an Upsetting-Looking Baby, they somehow don't seem to realize what happened.

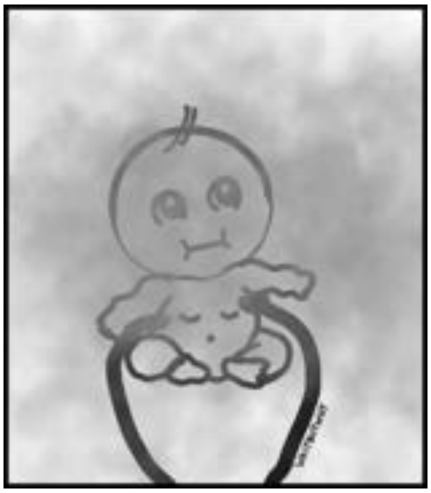
The reason is the Primitive Mind is pulling one of its tricks. When you have a baby, your Primitive Mind knows that, cute or upsetting, baby survival is the key to its genetic mission, and it's critical that you as the parent are fully obsessed with it.

So let's just say it turns out that your baby looks like this:



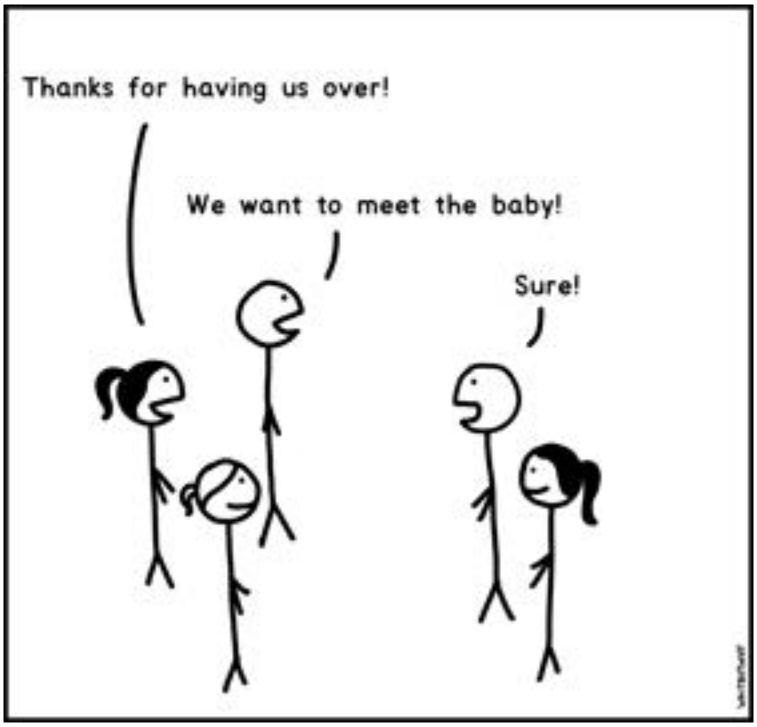
You'll never realize it—because when you look at the baby, your Primitive Mind will quickly flood your head with delusional smoke and make you see what it wants you to see.

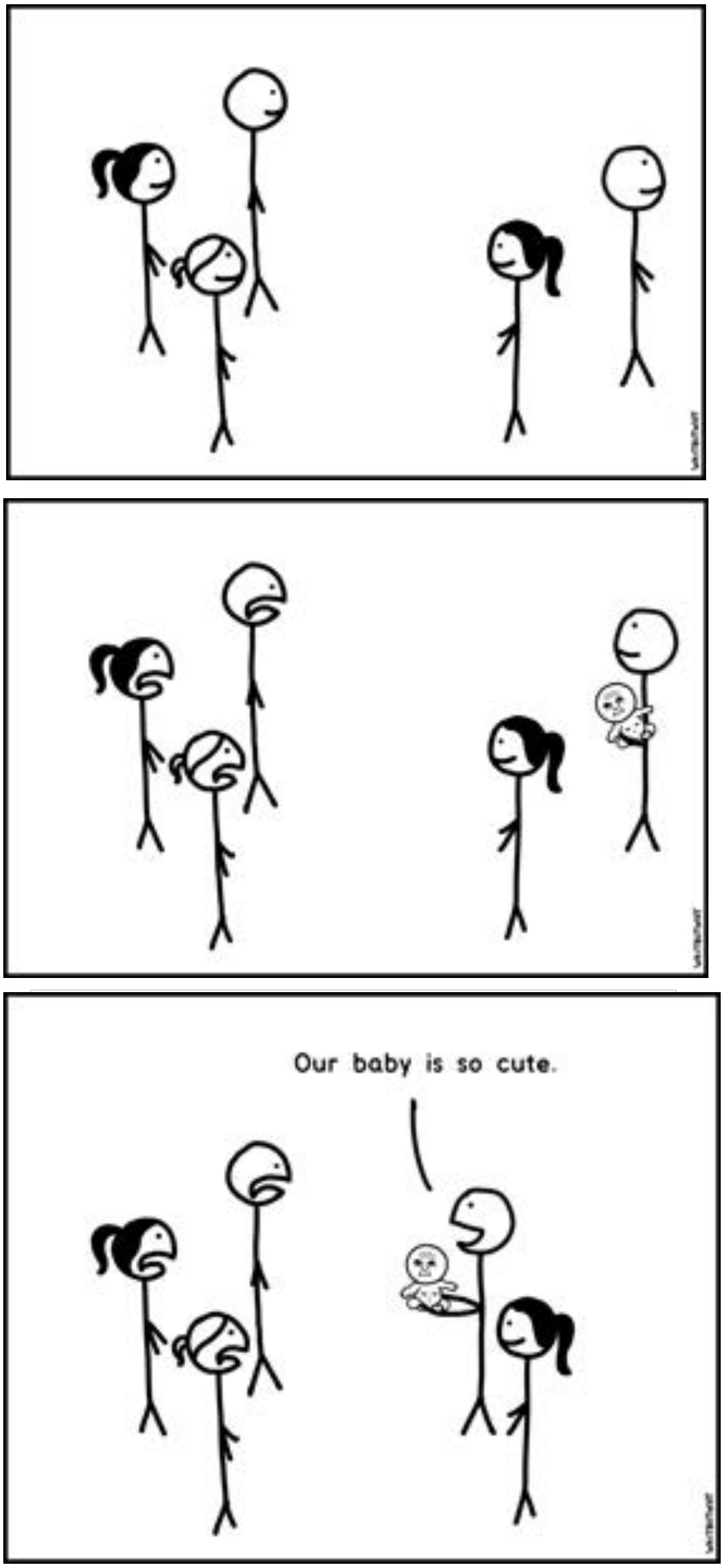


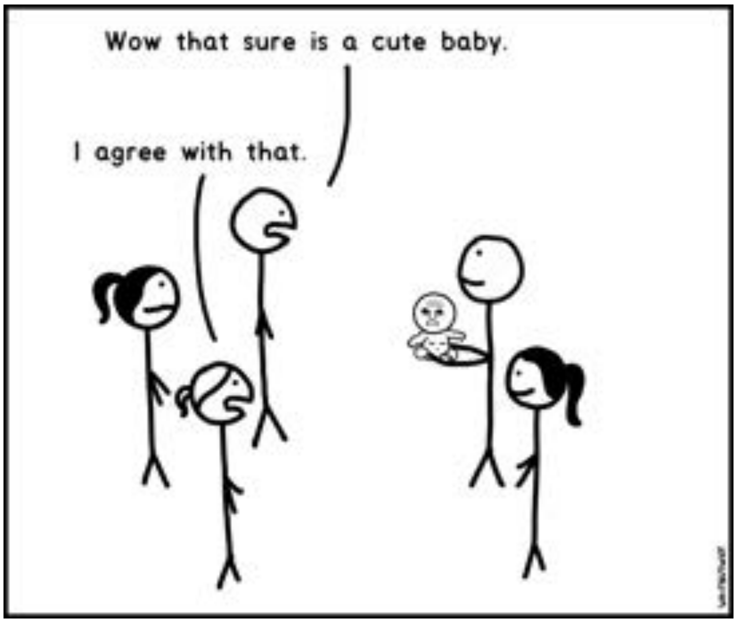


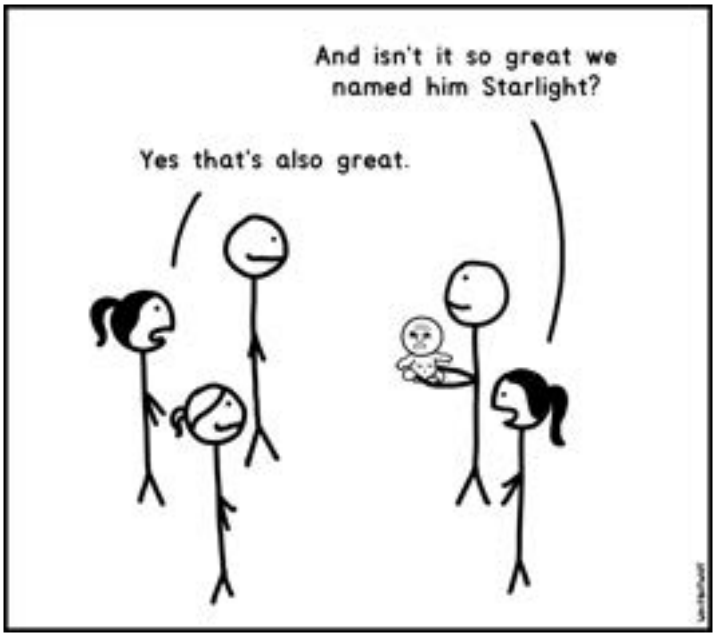
This is why everyone thinks their baby is super cute.

But now imagine some friends come over.


Thanks for having us over!
We want to meet the baby!
Sure!


Our baby is so cute.

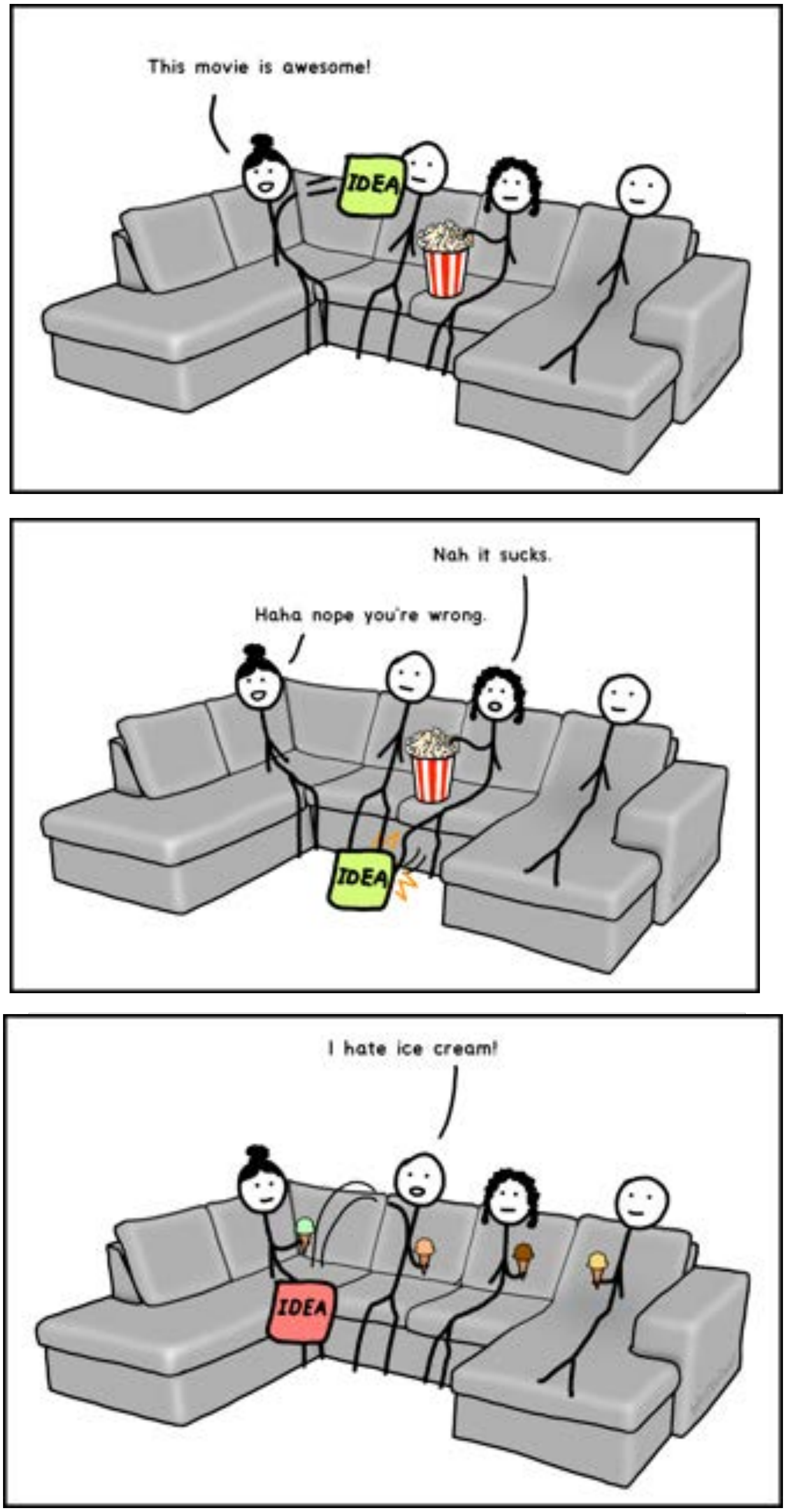

Wow that sure is a cute baby.
I agree with that.

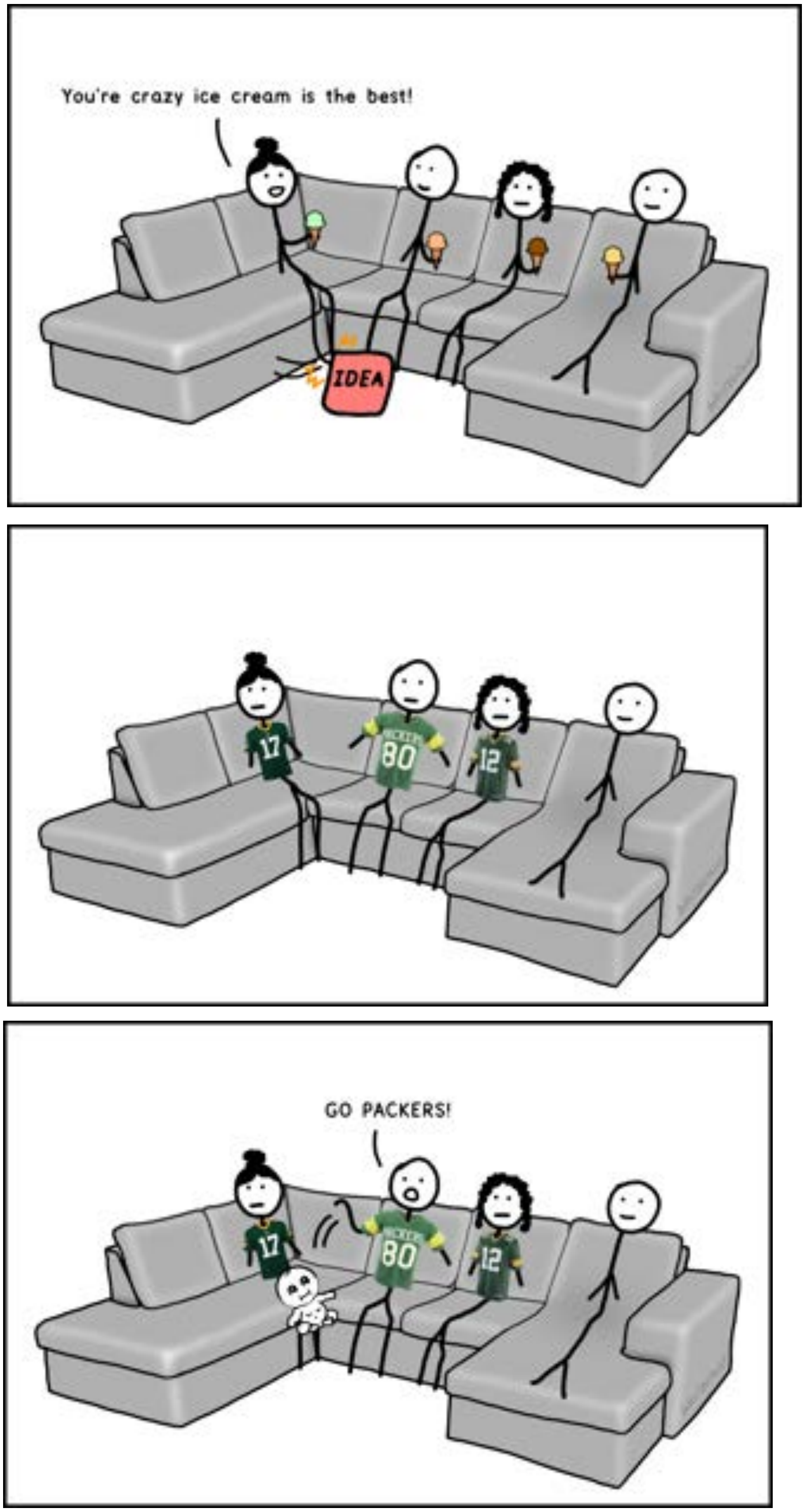

And isn't it so great we named him Starlight?
Yes that's also great.

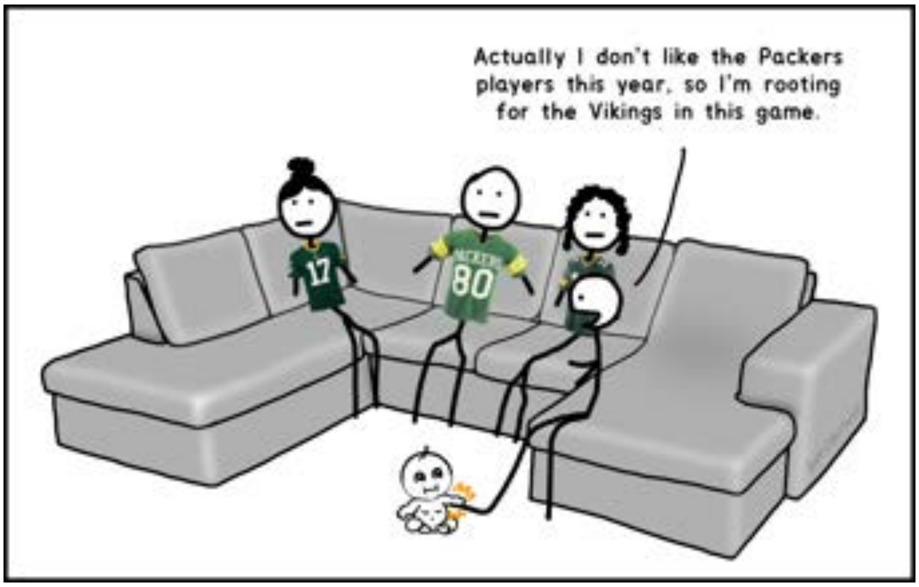
A couple's baby is their most sacred object. And everyone who visits the house knows that—so they go with the flow and confirm the parents' delusion, fully and unquestionably.

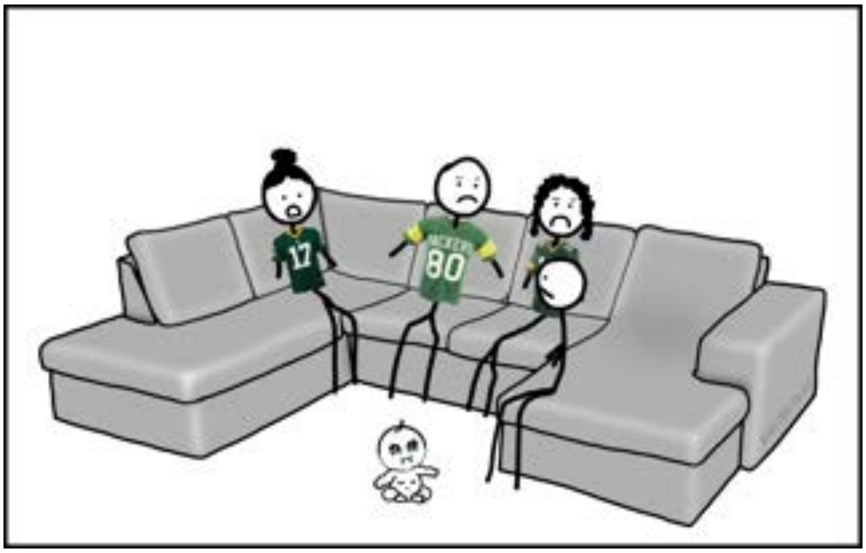
When a culture holds an object to be sacred, the culture becomes embedded with an implicit set of iron-clad social rules about how that object must be treated. Praising the object becomes a very cool thing to do, while saying anything bad about the object is considered an act of unredeemable blasphemy. When something becomes uncriticizable to a culture, the culture becomes the opposite of an Idea Lab about that thing. It becomes an Echo Chamber.

It doesn't mean the culture is necessarily an Echo Chamber *in general*—it may be a classic Idea Lab most of the time and simply flip to the other side when the conversation turns to one particular topic. If you're a sports fan (actual, not metaphorical), you're well-accustomed to this kind of situation.


This movie is awesome!
IDEA
Nah it sucks.
Haha nope you're wrong.
IDEA
I hate ice cream!
IDEA


You're crazy ice cream is the best!
IDEA
17
PACKERS
80
12
GO PACKERS!


Actually I don't like the Packers players this year, so I'm rooting for the Vikings in this game.
17
PACKERS
80



Every home that's populated entirely by lifelong Packers fans is an immediate Echo Chamber when it comes to Packers fandom. They may happily argue about everything else, including Packer-related topics (e.g. "Are they good enough to make the playoffs this year or not?"), but on the specific topic of "who are you rooting for in this game?", any answer other than "the Packers" is blasphemy. Packers fandom is the sacred baby in the house, and everyone damn well better call it cute.

So why do some objects or ideas become sacred to certain humans and certain cultures?

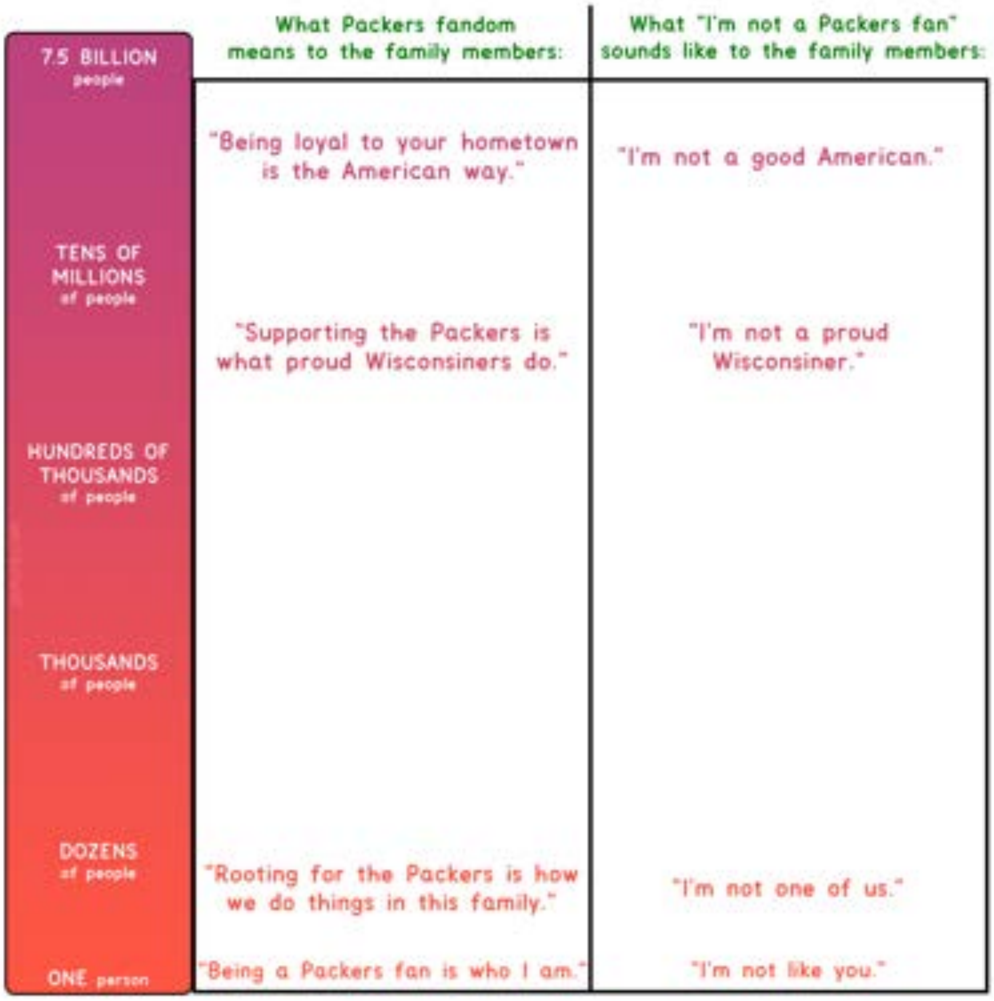
As we've discussed in previous chapters, it often has a lot to do with identity. Every human is an impossibly complex, fluid, ever-evolving unique personality—and to the Higher Mind, that's more than enough of an identity. But the Primitive Mind doesn't understand human complexity or uniqueness, so it sees your innermost self as a blank page. A non-identity. For the Primitive Mind to feel secure about your identity, it needs you to attach external things to it—symbols, resources, profession, family name, status, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, nationality, hometown, college alma mater, social group, music tastes—anything really, as long as it's crisp and clear and tangible enough for its simple programming to grasp.

The Primitive Mind is always hungry to meld you into larger giants, so its favorite kinds of external things to stitch to your identity are those that also stitch *you* into a group. When an object can help it define both who you are and which tribe you're in, it latches onto it.

Sports fandom is a classic Primitive Mind identity attachment because it checks a lot of these boxes. It's crisp and clear. It's linked together with other identity attachments like hometown and, in the case of something like the World Cup, nationality and even ethnic group. It binds you together with everyone else who likes the same team. There are even uniforms you can wear, painting the good-guy Us colors directly on your body, as you root for them against the bad-guy Them team with their bad-guy Them fans from their bad-guy Them hometown wearing their bad-guy Them colors.

If we didn't understand the Primitive Mind, we might think it's a bit odd that a group of out-of-shape people sitting in a living room in sweatpants will scream "We won!" when a bunch of professional athletes they don't know won a game they had no part in. But to the Primitive Mind, the athletes and the game are just vehicles to do the important thing—bind you together with other people. The Primitive Mind is so well-programmed to bind together with others that using only something as superficial as sports fandom, you can seamlessly become one with a total stranger you know nothing about—like the time at a Red Sox playoff game when I cuddled with a big, scary, mean man I never spoke to before or since.

Which brings me back to our Packer fan family. When the son changed his rooting interest, all he said was, "actually I'm rooting for the Vikings." But the Primitive Minds of his family members heard a *cascade* of betrayal, up and down Emergence Tower.


What Packers fandom means to the family members:
What "I'm not a Packers fan" sounds like to the family members:
7.5 BILLION people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
THOUSANDS of people
DOZENS of people
ONE person
"Being loyal to your hometown is the American way."
"I'm not a good American."
"Supporting the Packers is what proud Wisconsiners do."
"I'm not a proud Wisconsiner."
"Rooting for the Packers is how we do things in this family."
"I'm not one of us."
"Being a Packers fan is who I am."
"I'm not like you."

He violated a sacred object—but really, he violated the core sense of unity and safety the Primitive Minds of his family members feel. That's why a football team became a sacred object in the first place.

But the reason sports fandom isn't a bad thing is that it (usually) doesn't harm anybody—it's a form of fake, role-play tribalism. Jonathan Haidt gets at this when he provides the analogy: "Sports is to war as pornography is to sex."[4] Sports fandom lets humans exercise primitive tribal drives—which you can plainly see every time triumphant fans instinctively throw their arms up like a conquering tribe of apes, or heartbroken fans cover their heads and faces like apes being attacked. But they can exercise these drives without actually going to war. Sports fans, deep down, know the whole thing is just a game, which makes sports a harmless thing to build an Echo Chamber around.

But other Echo Chambers aren't as harmless.

Echo Chambers become problematic, and even dangerous, when they don't come along with deep-down self-awareness; when the sacred object is more sacred than the well-being of people; when the tribalism they generate is more like war and less like sports. We often see this kind of Echo Chamber in the worlds of religion, ethnicity, race, nationalism, economics, and, as we'll get fully into in the next part of this series, politics.

Let's head back into 3D land and take a closer look.

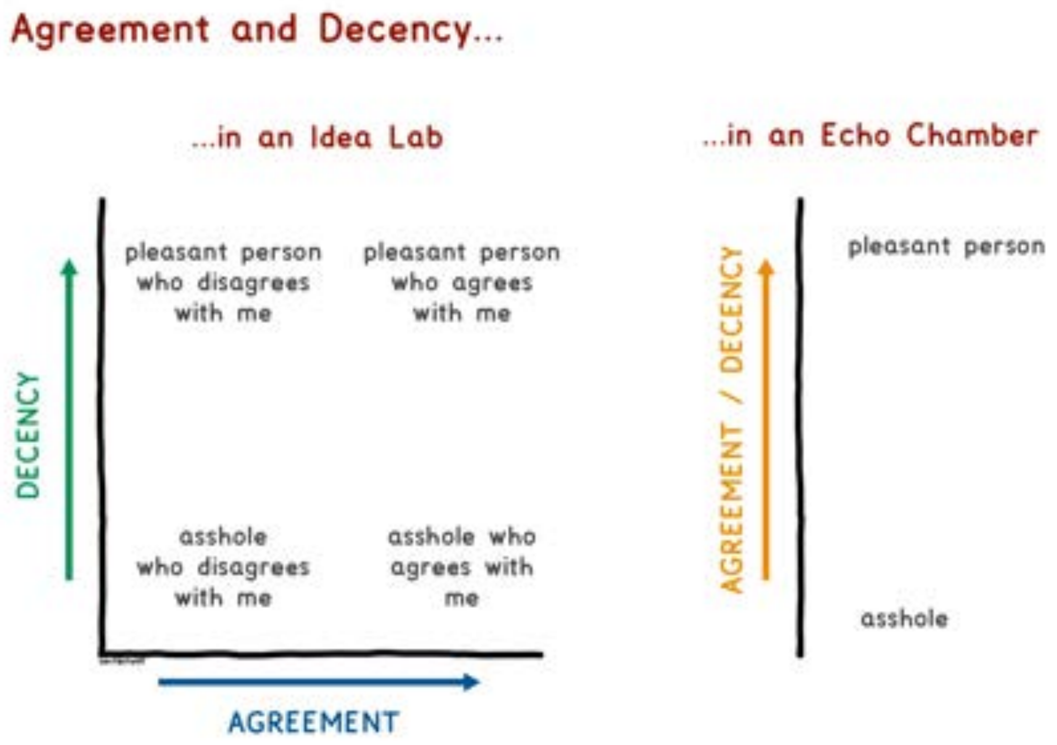
How Echo Chambers affect individuals

To understand how Echo Chambers work, just think about how Idea Labs work and then imagine the opposite. For example:

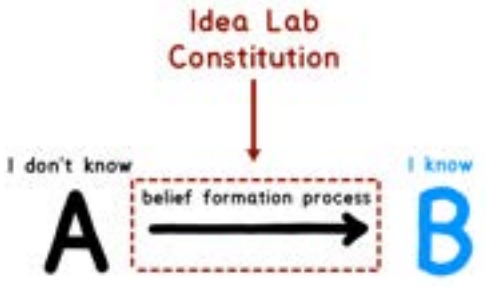
Where Idea Labs are cultures of critical thinking and debate, Echo Chambers are cultures of agreement and confirmation.

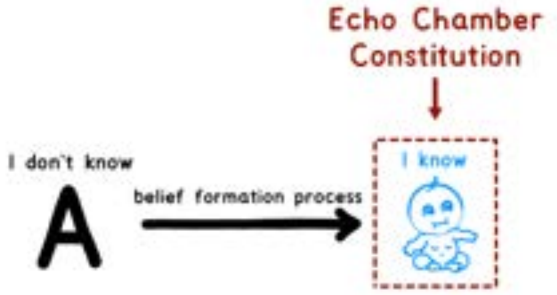
There are a few reasons for this:

First, it comes from a core distinction between how the two cultures view ideas. Idea Labs see people and their ideas as separate entities—people are meant to be respected, ideas are not. In Echo Chambers, a person's ideas are part of their identity, so respecting a person and respecting their ideas are one and the same. While people in an Idea lab argue with each other for fun, disagreeing with someone in a culture of agreement is seen as *rudeness*, and a heated argument about ideas in an Echo Chamber is indistinguishable from a fight. To put a visual to it, Idea Lab culture views agreement and decency as separate, unrelated axes, while Echo Chamber culture views agreement and decency as a single axis:


Agreement and Decency...
...in an Idea Lab
...in an Echo Chamber
DECENCY
pleasant person who disagrees with me
pleasant person who agrees with me
asshole who disagrees with me
asshole who agrees with me
AGREEMENT
AGREEMENT / DECENCY
pleasant person
asshole

Second, Echo Chambers are devoted to *specific* ideas. While the constitution of the Idea Lab mini nation is devoted to a *kind* of thinking, an Echo Chamber is an idea temple whose constitution is a set of sacred beliefs themselves.





The Idea Lab's quest for knowledge and truth becomes the Echo Chamber's quest for *confirmation* of the community's sacred story.

Changing the goal from truth-seeking to belief-confirmation flips a bunch of other values to their opposites.

The intellectual diversity of the Idea Lab's pluralism is a major threat to an Echo Chamber, which replaces it by the intellectual uniformity of purism. For the same reasons, Echo Chambers don't like intellectual mutants—inconvenient independent thought is frowned upon in an Echo Chamber, where abiding by collective groupthink tends to go over much better.

In assigning Rung Ratings, Echo Chambers are concerned only with *what* you think, not how you got there, basing judgments not on accuracy but on *loyalty* to the sacred ideas.

The cultural incentives follow suit. The orange, downward-charged air of an Echo Chamber, like the blue-green, upward-charged air of an Idea Lab, administers rewards of acceptance, approval, and respect, and electroshocks of criticism, ridicule, shame, and ostracism—but the criteria for the incentives is almost the exact opposite.

In an Echo Chamber culture, which sees knowledge as easy and obvious, conviction is seen as a sign of knowledge, intelligence, and righteousness (assuming, of course, you have the right viewpoints), and it's socially rewarded with respect and deference. Humility, on the other hand, is looked down upon in an Echo Chamber, where saying "I don't know" just makes you sound stupid and ignorant. Changing your mind too much in an Echo Chamber gets you zapped with negative labels, like *wishy-washy* and *flip-flopping* and *waffling*.

An Echo Chamber's sacred ideas are the community's newborn baby. And the best way to both express your allegiance to the community and prove your own intellectual and moral worth is to call the baby cute, as fervently as you can. Otherwise known as:

virtue signaling

Virtue signaling comes in a few forms:

1) Talking about how cute the baby is (i.e. how correct the community's sacred beliefs are)

2) Talking about how uncute the rival babies are (i.e. how wrong the community's ideological opponents are)

3) Talking about how great the community itself is

4) Talking about how awful the rival communities themselves are

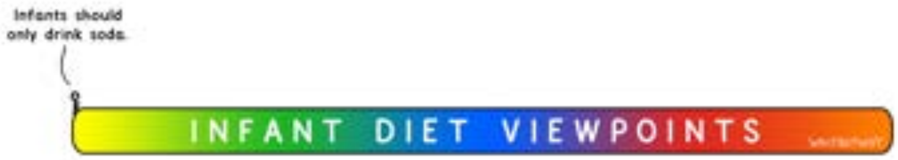
So some form of the statement "We are so right / knowledgeable / smart / virtuous and/or They are so wrong / ignorant / stupid / evil."

Virtue signaling is your Primitive Mind's way of expressing your sheer Us-ness. While conviction in an Idea Lab expresses your degree of certainty about what you're saying, conviction in an Echo Chamber expresses the degree of your Us-ness. The baby isn't kind of cute. It's not maybe cute. It's deeply fucking cute. Period.

When a group of people is together expressing their Us-ness at the same time, it not only makes each individual feel safe and loved and accepted and included, it provides a binding energy that unites the group. Participating in one of these sessions—as we all have—showers you with cultural reward, and it feels great in the same way eating Skittles feels great. It's a classic form of primitive bliss.

Positive incentives go a long way to unifying the Echo Chamber's viewpoints—but in a community fused together by shared belief, they're not enough. So they're coupled with their partner in crime: **taboo**.

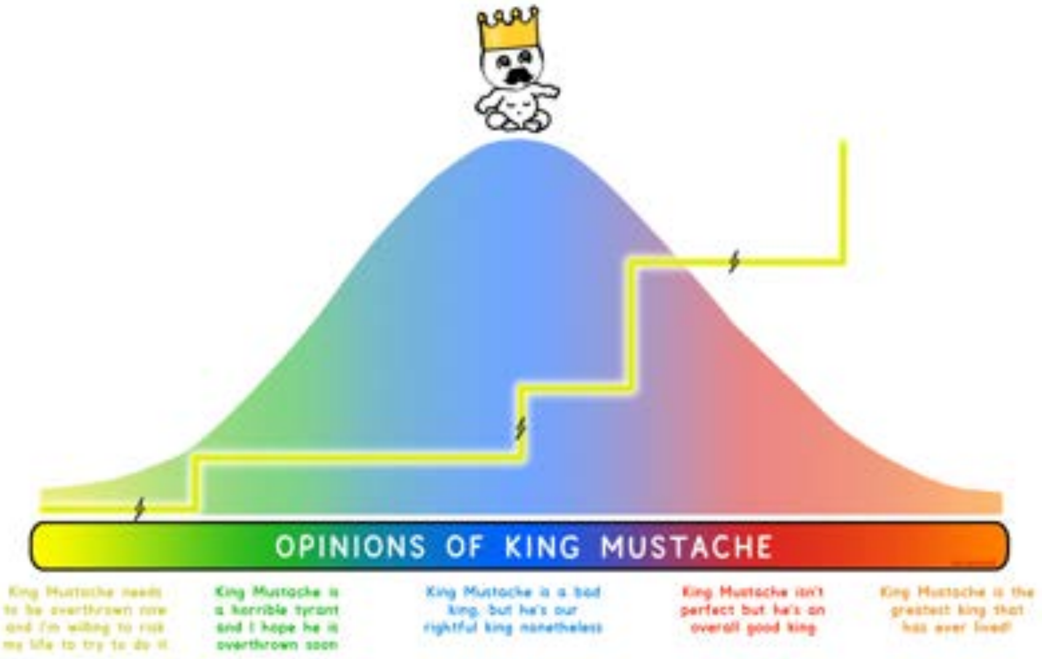
Taboos exist in an Idea Lab, but you have to say something pretty extreme to violate one—and almost always, the offense is an attack on a person, not their idea: a mean-spirited racial slur, a degrading jab, a nasty low-blow. The only way for an otherwise-respected thinker to get culturally zapped by the sole expression of an idea itself is to express a viewpoint so inane that it totally lowers people's opinion of their intellectual ability.


Infants should only drink soda.
INFANT DIET VIEWPOINTS

The over-application of taboo is the bane of free speech, so pro-free-speech cultures use it sparingly. This frees the Idea Lab's Speech Curve to freely line up with its Thought Pile.

Echo Chamber Nation, meanwhile, is more like Hypothetica.

In Hypothetica, the dictator, King Mustache, deemed *himself* to be the country's sacred newborn baby, and he used his mute button to electrify any sentiments other than calling him tremendously cute.


OPINIONS OF KING MUSTACHE
King Mustache needs to be overthrown now and I'm willing to risk my life to try to do it
King Mustache is a horrible tyrant and I hope he is overthrown soon
King Mustache is a bad king, but he's our rightful king nonetheless
King Mustache isn't perfect but he's an overall good king
King Mustache is the greatest king that has ever lived!

In a country like the U.S., the harm principle prevents Echo Chamber communities from using physical penalties, so they use taboo as their mute button instead.

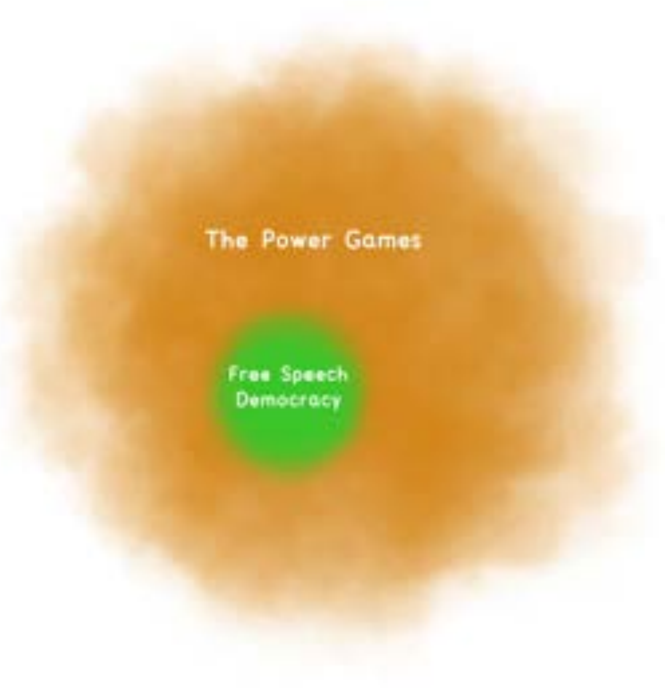
Taboo is an Echo Chamber's censorship electric fence—a police force that slaps members with the social fines of status reduction or reputation damage, the social jail time of ostracism, and even the social execution of permanent excommunication. In your criticisms of the *opposing* viewpoints and those who hold them, you're free in an Echo Chamber to be as personal and as vicious as you please—cutting slurs, degrading jabs, and nasty low-blows included. Not only is this kind of expression not considered taboo, it's a sign of moral and intellectual awesomeness. But disagree with the sacred beliefs and you've committed blasphemy in place of worship—and you'll be promptly electrocuted.

The Idea Lab's criticism gauntlet, a safe place for people and a dangerous one for ideas, provides a type of resistance that elevates truth and wisdom and pushes the whole entity, along with each of its members, toward intellectual and moral growth. An Echo Chamber's taboo minefield makes it a safe and protected space for all ideas that confirm the sacred beliefs and a very dangerous space for ideas—and people—that don't. This type of resistance has the opposite effect, discouraging new ideas and intellectual innovation and repressing the growth of the community and its members.

Of course, both of these make sense, given the cultural objectives. High-rung thinkers want their perception of reality to change and get closer to reality, so they invite the productive kind of resistance.

Low-rung thinkers want their perception of reality to remain untouched. They view safety not as safety *to speak* certain ideas but as safety *from hearing* certain ideas—making an Idea Lab a place of danger for them. So they invite the repressive kind of resistance.

Liberal democracies were built to be bubbles of free speech in a world of censorship—bubbles where Higher Minds could band together and form high-minded giants, safe from the bullying of the Primitive Mind.

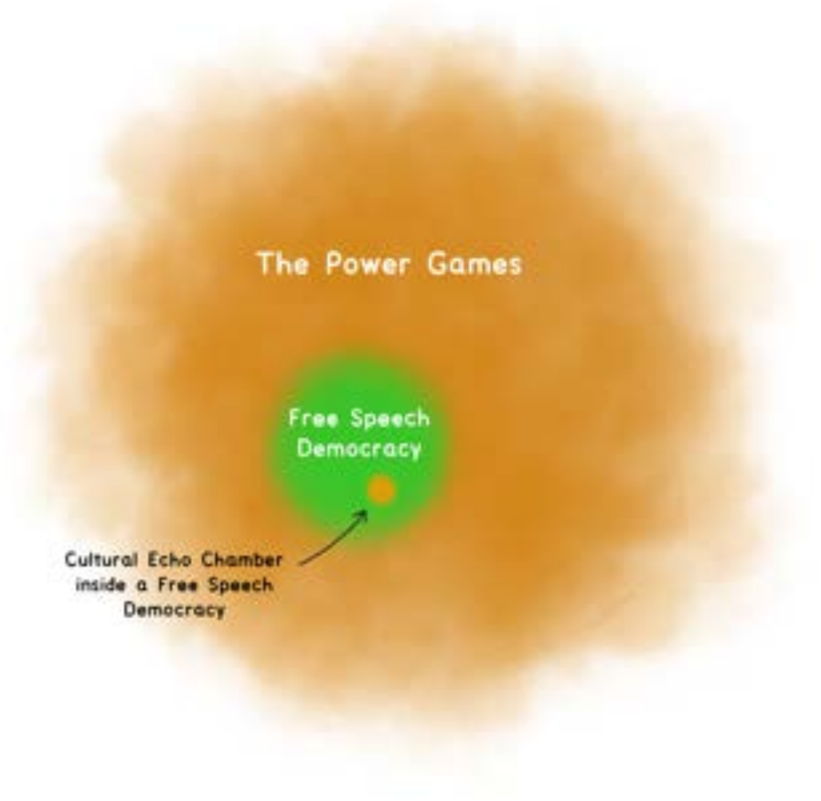


Idea Labs are communities born of this spirit, taking full advantage of the privilege afforded to them by the liberal constitutions. But the Primitive Minds in our heads don't understand any of this. They run on automated software, unable to see the present day or understand its liberal values. No matter what country they're in, they want to do what they were programmed to do: play the ancient Power Games by banding together into the old-fashioned kind of giant.

And the thing about Primitive Minds is, as simple and unthinking as they may be, they can also be highly innovative. It's like what Jeff Goldblum said.

Life finds a way.

You can put as many constraints on Primitive Minds as you want to, but some of them will usually find a way to get together and play the Power Games. In a country like the U.S., the Echo Chamber is one way they do it. The Echo Chamber is a mini dictatorship—a cultural dictatorship—of Power Games inside of a liberal democracy. A non-free-speech zone inside of a free speech nation.



This kind of mini dictatorship has the opposite effect on its citizens that an Idea Lab has. If an Idea Lab is Dogmatics Anonymous, an Echo Chamber is a dogma keg party.

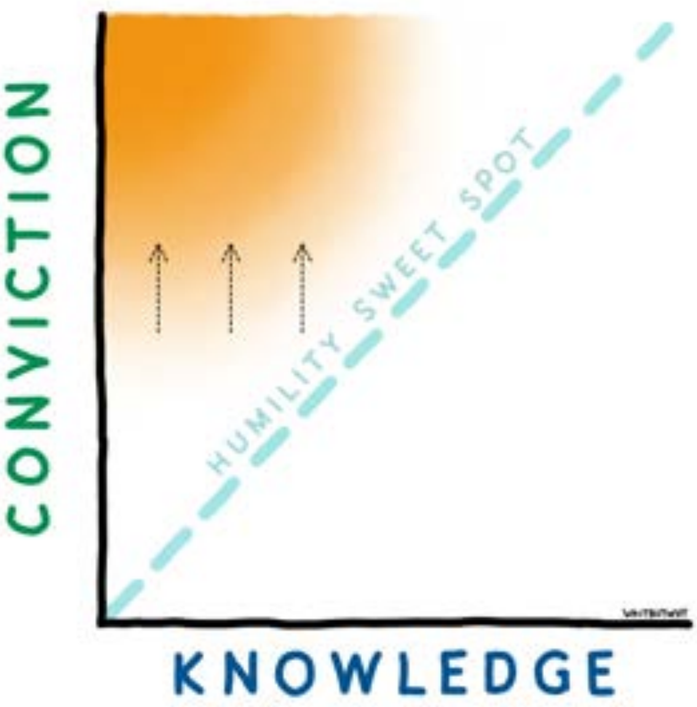
Some reasons why the dogma keg party sucks:

An Echo Chamber makes you more primitive. Spending time in an environment full of primitive smoke gives the Primitive Mind home-field advantage in the battle inside your head. In an Echo Chamber, people are constantly releasing the human version of wolfpack pheromones—the words they use, the virtue signaling, the in-group / out-group social structure, the binary worldview. This isn't simply the Primitive Mind's way of thinking, it's like gas in the air that ignites our primitive fires. Tribal language is the Primitive Mind's way of signaling to each other: "Let's fucking do this. Let's band together and go to war." Your Higher Mind is already in a serious uphill battle for sanity—but trying to tame your Primitive Mind in that kind of environment is like trying to get a shark to refrain from eating while surrounding it with the scent of blood.

An Echo Chamber makes you arrogant. On top of the general downward pull on your psyche, an Echo Chamber pulls directly downwards on your intellect. When everyone around you believes humility is for the weak-minded and conviction is a sign of intelligence and righteousness, it's going to have an effect on you. Even in an Idea Lab culture where humility is the ultimate intellectual virtue, we have a very hard time actually being humble. So when you take away that cultural pressure and apply the reverse pressure, *shaming* humility—good fucking luck.

At the same time, the strength of your beliefs goes up. In an Idea Lab you're always being reminded that opposing ideas have validity, that all ideas are flawed, that you and everyone else is prone to bias, and that the world is ridiculously complex. This is like an air jet that blows the fog of delusion out of the environment. In an Echo Chamber, all of those reminders have been filtered out by the system, allowing the fog to grow thick. Members of an Echo Chamber tend to share both an oversimplified conception of the world and an inflated view of their own intellect. When everyone around you shares your delusions, the communal fog strengthens delusion, which allows conviction to rise to laughable levels.

Instead of pulling you toward the Knowledge-Conviction diagonal, the Echo Chamber pulls you upwards into the arrogant zone.



This is why people who spend too much time in an Echo Chamber end up as an intellectual contradiction—holding views that are strongly felt but weakly supported.

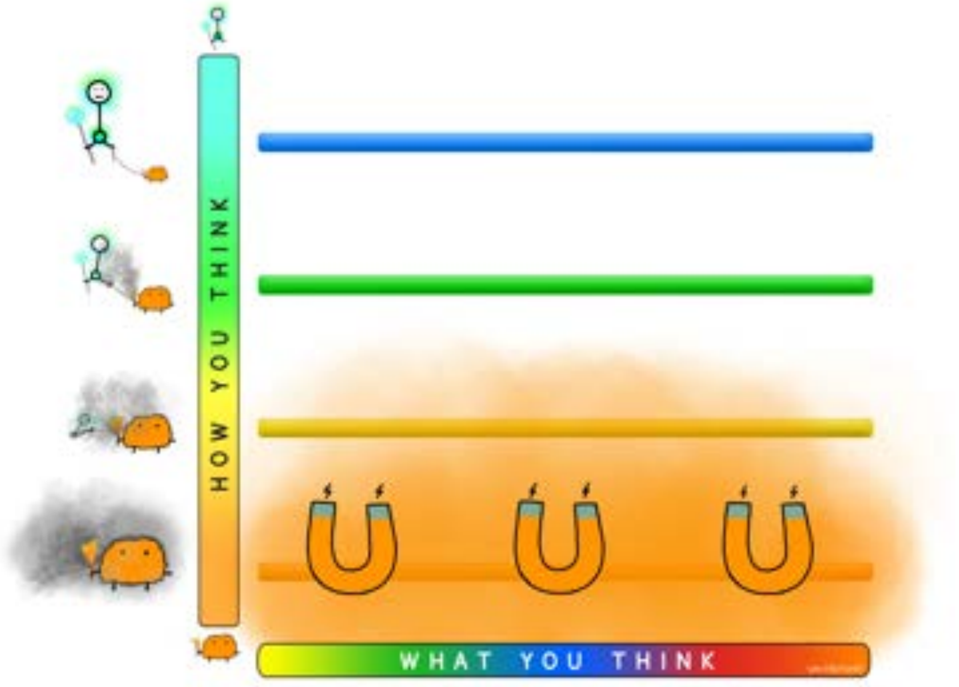
An Echo Chamber makes you intellectually helpless. Those who want to become better thinkers will have a hard time in an Echo Chamber, where the constant barrage of confirmation of a single viewpoint, along with the prohibition of dissent and open debate on the sacred topics, removes all the most critical tools of knowledge-acquisition from the environment. It's an environment where A) people think knowledge is easy, B) accuracy isn't taken into account for ideas that confirm the dogma, C) honest new hypotheses are rarely being formed, and D) the testing of existing assumptions or new incoming confirmation, through dissent and criticism, is culturally discouraged. A + B + C + D = an environment of imposed ignorance. How could anyone learn real stuff in that environment? They couldn't.

And when you've been ignorant for too long, you don't just lack knowledge, your learning skills dull. Learning is a skill like anything else—it takes practice—and your ability to think critically atrophies. People who surround themselves by Idea Lab cultures get constant practice at defending their ideas and challenging others. In the Echo Chamber's safe-from-dissent-space, you remain an amateur, which makes the prospect of trying to migrate from your environment to a more argumentative one incredibly daunting.

An Echo Chamber makes you more of a dick. When the Primitive Mind gets control of your heart, it'll happily toggle your ability to feel empathy up and down to suit its purposes—and resisting this is all the more difficult in an environment totally isolated from the maligned group, where myths and stereotypes about them permeate every conversation, and where it's believed that hating the right people is precisely what makes someone a good person. When you come to believe that people outside the Echo Chamber are not worth talking to, it's easy to forget that they're full, real people just like you.

An Echo Chamber bullies you into submission. Those who manage to remain self-aware enough to try to improve will be met with the social aspect of the Echo Chamber's cultural rubric. If you try to step outside the standard groupthink viewpoints, the Echo Chamber will dock your social status, and your likability, and your credibility. Your friends will talk behind your back. Your family will discuss how you've changed. Your co-workers will exclude you from happy hour drinks. Your fellow dogmatics have built their identities, their sense of stability, and their self-esteem around the Echo Chamber's set of delusions—and trying to improve will be subconsciously perceived by others as a personal threat. But since self-awareness is scarce in Echo Chambers, they'll consciously just think you're an asshole.

All of this adds up to an Echo Chamber culture being a big, fat magnet at the bottom of the How You Think ladder.

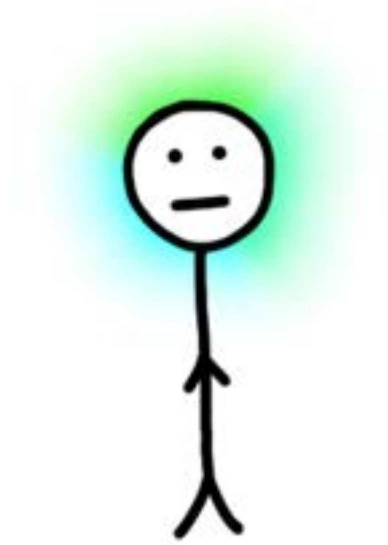


While the pull of an Idea Lab makes you smarter, wiser, and more humble, the Echo Chamber magnet makes you ignorant, arrogant, delusional, unempathetic, and inept. Living your life in an Echo Chamber tastes as good as Skittles…and it's just as bad for you.

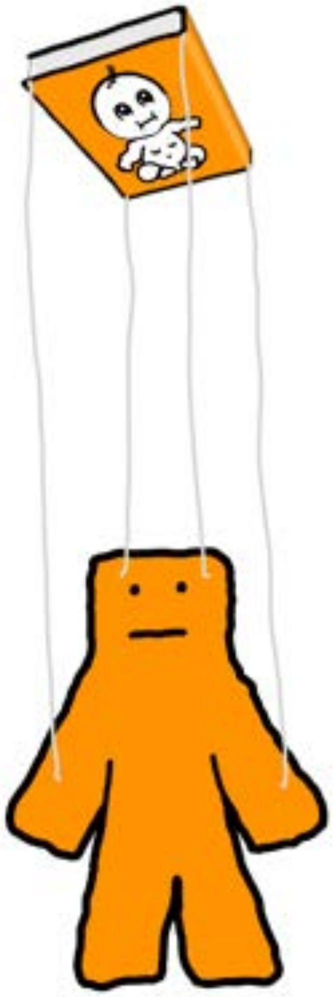
Riding up the emergence elevator, from the world of individuals to the world of giants, we're reminded why Echo Chambers exist in the first place:

How Echo Chambers affect groups

If an Idea Lab giant looks like this:

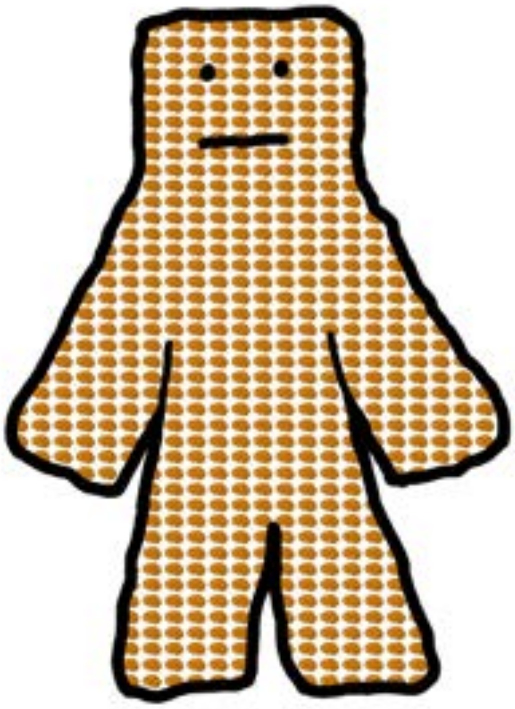


An Echo Chamber is more like the old-school kind of giant:



When you think about Echo Chambers not as a collection of individuals, but as a primitive human giant playing the Power Games, all of the Echo Chamber's odd characteristics make much more sense—in the same way individual ant behavior makes the most sense when you zoom out and look at how the colony works as a whole. Revisiting the above Echo Chamber qualities from the giant organism perspective helps us see them in a new light.

To survive, a giant needs to be glued together well, and the Echo Chamber is glued together by a shared set of beliefs. While an Idea Lab draws its strength from its intellectual diversity, the Echo Chamber thrives on intellectual uniformity:



The multi-colored brain network in an Idea Lab is a marketplace of ideas that functions as a super-brain—a giant, superintelligent thinking machine. But the Echo Chamber's network isn't a giant brain at all. It's a solid-colored *agreement network*—a bloc of hijacked brains, tightly glued together by shared beliefs in order to generate brute strength in numbers.

For a giant glued together by shared beliefs, confirmation of those beliefs are like the giant's food—the giant relies on a steady incoming stream of confirmation for sustenance and strength. So Echo Chambers are factories that specialize in confirmation manufacture.

The Echo Chamber's collective Attention Bouncers scour the world for bright red information cherries that support the giant's core beliefs—anything that helps promote the "We are so right / knowledgeable / smart / virtuous and They are so wrong / ignorant / stupid / evil" manifesto. The standards for confirmation cherries aren't high—it can be random anecdotes or statistics, strongly worded opinions, out-of-context quotes, whatever. It's not important whether the confirmation is true or something that would pass for confirmation outside the Echo Chamber—most people in an Echo Chamber already believe, and all they need from confirmation is a nice continual flow to keep morale high and the belief glue at full strength.

Social pressure in an Echo Chamber plays its role, lining up with the main mission. Expressing confirmation is socially rewarded in an Echo Chamber, so the giant's circulatory system—the communication network—ends up flooded with the very ripest confirmation cherries. When new, juicy nuggets of dogma-supporting info are discovered, they spread through the system like wildfire. The confirmation factory is also great at twisting the less bright cherries to make them better—through a game of telephone, one person's somewhat-relevant anecdote can quickly morph into a confirmed, undeniable fact about the world that members treat as further scientific proof that the sacred baby is obese and adorable. This is its own kind of market that pushes the best supporting arguments—real or manufactured—straight into the beliefs of the Echo Chamber's members, since the Belief Bouncers of low-rung thinkers usually give an immediate free pass to friendly, confirming information.

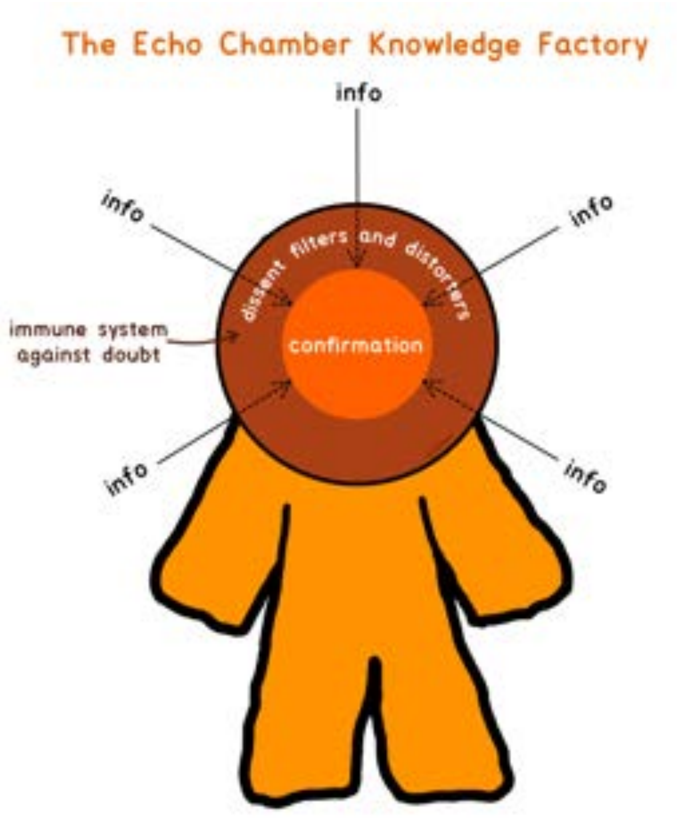
If the Idea Lab giant is the ultimate Scientist, the Echo Chamber is the ultimate Zealot. And like any zealot, an Echo Chamber relies not just on belief but on full *conviction.* An Echo Chamber's conviction isn't just a trademark quality of the Echo Chamber giant—it's the giant's lifeblood.

But strength that relies on conviction is brittle, and vulnerable. In many cases, the conviction of many Echo Chamber members is entirely sourced in their trust in other members' conviction, many of whose conviction is derived from the conviction of others still. It's like a conviction Ponzi Scheme. In reality, the Echo Chamber's dogma baby isn't usually very cute at all, and the fervent belief that it is relies on the complete absence of questioning or real discussion about it. For a giant that relies on conviction to survive, doubt is deadly.

In an Idea Lab, people know that the information stream entering the system will be full of toxins—deceptions, slant, falsehoods, bullshit surveys and studies, cherry-picked research, misleading statistics, etc.—and there needs to be a strong immune system to keep their body of knowledge healthy. Their immune system is the idea gauntlet with its culture of dissent and disconfirmation. Information and suppositions that manage to make it through the gauntlet are very likely to be non-toxic—and the continual re-examination of the Idea Lab's accepted assumptions help to root out toxins that somehow slipped by.

An Echo Chamber works the opposite way. The Idea Lab's toxin—bias and misconception—is the Echo Chamber's immune system. The Idea Lab's immune system—doubt and dissent—is precisely the Echo Chamber's toxin. Each immune system is made of that which the other immune system is built to guard against.

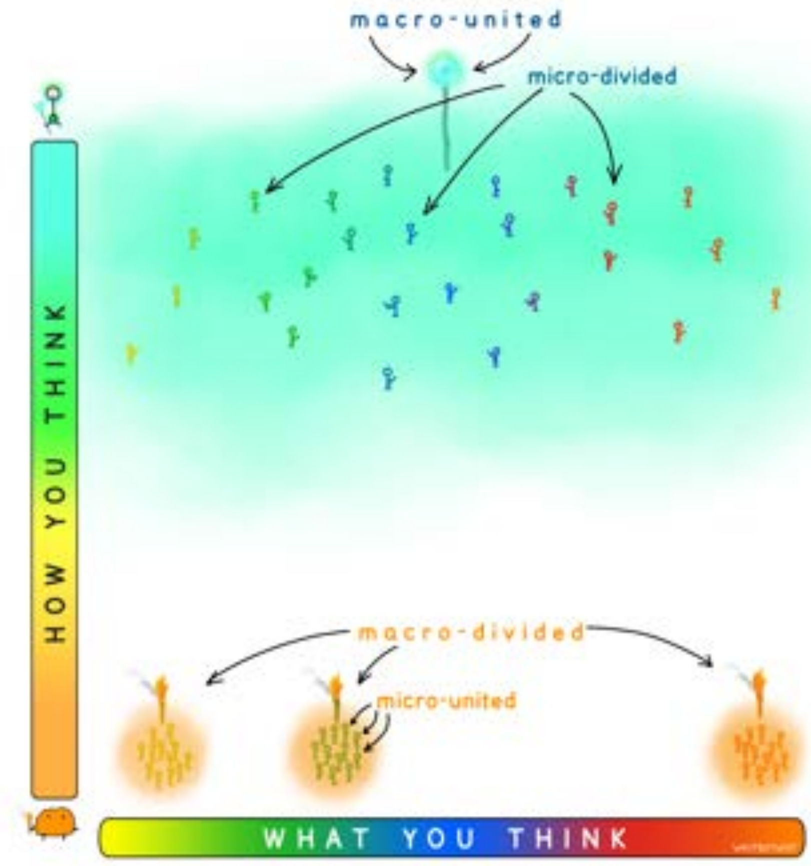
For an Echo Chamber giant, doubt that threatens to infiltrate the system from the outside, where it can catch on and spread, is like a deadly virus. So the Echo Chamber's immune system is a multi-layered filter system that leaves little to chance. To successfully generate doubt in an Echo Chamber's neurons, dissent has to first make it past the cherry-picking filter. Then it has to survive the filter that specializes in misinterpreting, distorting, and re-framing inconvenient info (or, if all that fails, discrediting the source). Dissent that makes it this far has to figure out a way to spread through a social network that punishes members for sharing it. Finally, when the occasional devastating stat or damning news story or well-reasoned dissenting op-ed does manage to reach the minds of Echo Chamber members, there's a last line of defense—denial. Most Echo Chamber members are low-rung thinkers, which means they're unfalsifiable—they enforce Echo Chamber rules inside their own heads, and their cognitive biases provide the final blockade.


The Echo Chamber Knowledge Factory
info
info
info
dissent filters and distorters
immune system against doubt
confirmation
info
info

But even with an airtight immune system in place to thwart invasion by doubt viruses, the Echo Chamber is vulnerable to an internal threat. H. L. Menken said, "The most dangerous man to any government is a man who is able to think things out for himself, and without regard for the prevailing superstitions and taboos." Same story for Echo Chambers. In addition to the large number of Attorneys and Zealots who believe every part of the dogma, there are some people in every Echo Chamber who don't actually believe the dogma—just like there are some people who visit new parents who are well aware that the baby isn't actually cute. These are the most dangerous people to an Echo Chamber, because as trusted members of the Us group, dissent from their mouths can circumvent the immune system and trigger dangerous cognitive dissonance in fellow members. If dissent from the outside threatens to become a doubt virus in the body of the Echo Chamber giant, dissent from the *inside* threatens to become a doubt *cancer*. This is why Echo Chambers go beyond making it uncool to express unpopular ideas and make it *taboo*. Cancer must be nipped at the bud.

This is the kind of intense information control you see when reality is not your friend—when ideological purity is a survival requirement.

When we look at how giants interact with other giants, we see a final distinction between Idea Labs and Echo Chambers. As we discussed earlier, Idea Labs merge seamlessly together with other Idea Labs, because while micro-divided in their viewpoints, they're macro-united by common values like civility and truth. Echo Chambers, as expected, are the reverse—micro-united in their viewpoints, macro-divided with other communities who don't share those viewpoints.


macro-united
micro-divided
HOW YOU THINK
macro-divided
micro-united
WHAT YOU THINK

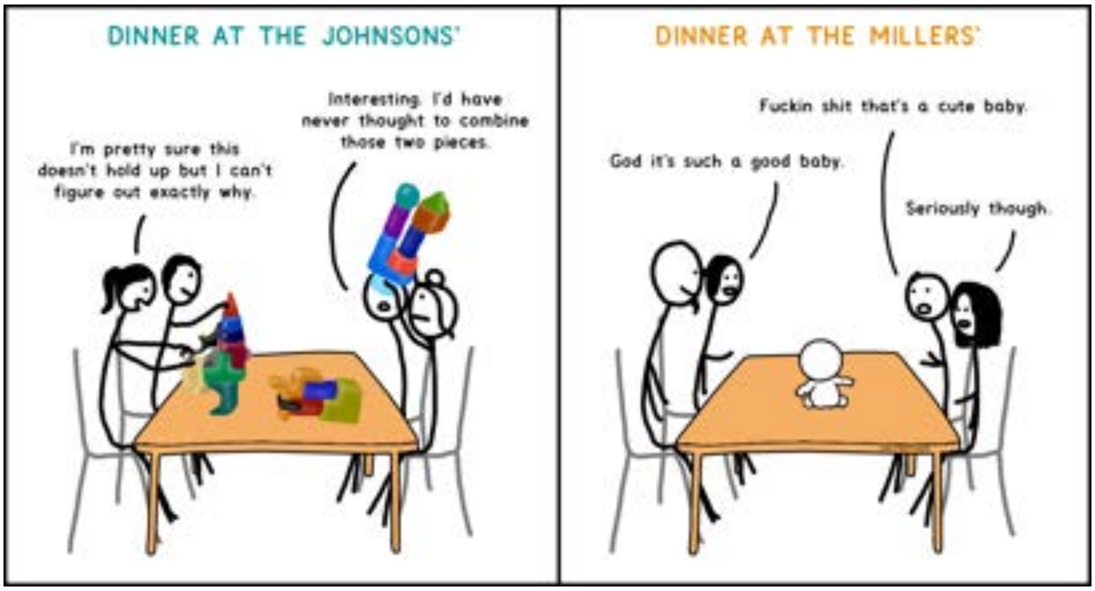
Since Echo Chambers are built on agreement, they can only merge with other communities who are like-minded.

Take the Millers.

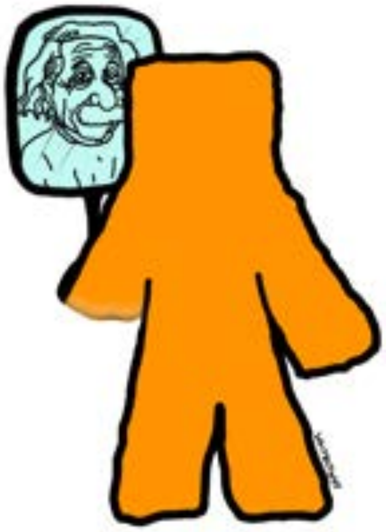
the Millers

The Millers are an Echo Chamber-y couple. When they were on the dating scene, both of them judged potential suitors based on like-mindedness, and their closeness as a couple is based on how much they agree on. Today, there's a long list of viewpoints that, if expressed by one member, would cause a huge fight. In their social life, they judge things the same way—they seek out like-minded friends and see those who disagree with them as assholes and idiots.

Of course, all people bond with others over shared viewpoints—but for the Millers, it's the *only* way bonding happens. When they have new potential friends over for dinner, the more agreement that happens at the table—especially around the ideas the Millers hold most sacred, like politics and child-rearing—the more they'll like the new friends and pursue them as long-term companions. Get-togethers at their house end up feeling very different from the Johnson-Smith dinner we observed earlier.


DINNER AT THE JOHNSONS'
I'm pretty sure this doesn't hold up but I can't figure out exactly why.
Interesting. I'd have never thought to combine those two pieces.
DINNER AT THE MILLERS'
God it's such a good baby.
Fuckin shit that's a cute baby.
Seriously though.

For Echo Chamber couples, it's pretty easy to keep things glued tightly together. But as Echo Chambers grow in size, it becomes a greater challenge to hold them together by shared ideas—so usually, the binding beliefs are honed down and simplified to the common denominator ideas that the whole community can get behind. So while Idea Labs get even smarter and more nuanced as they grow, growing Echo Chambers become even dumber and more sure of themselves.



Remember the "me against my brother; me and my brother against our cousins; me, my brother, and my cousins against the stranger" cartoon from Part 1 of this series? Hatred or fear of a common enemy—an opposing group of people or ideas—is often the common denominator that unites large Echo Chambers. Without a prominent Them foil, an Echo Chamber's Us is liable to split into rival Us/Them factions. So Echo Chambers don't usually combine all the way up to the nationwide or species-wide level the way Idea Labs do—they grow until they hit a stable two-rival situation (think political parties or economic paradigms, to name two obvious examples). The hatred/fear mechanism to unite otherwise-divided Echo Chambers means that growing Echo Chamber coalitions don't only get more ignorant—they get meaner and scarier.

Earlier, I said that Idea Labs are awesome because they're awesome at every level of emergence. Well

Echo Chambers suck—because they suck at every level of emergence.

At the individual level, they repress free speech with a minefield of taboos, hinder learning and growth, and foster delusional arrogance. As mini nations, they're more like old school dictatorships than constitutional democracies, and they pull their citizens downward on the Psych Spectrum.

At the community level, Echo Chambers are more than the sum of their parts only in raw power. Intellectually, the Echo Chamber giant is less capable of finding truth than a single independent thinker.

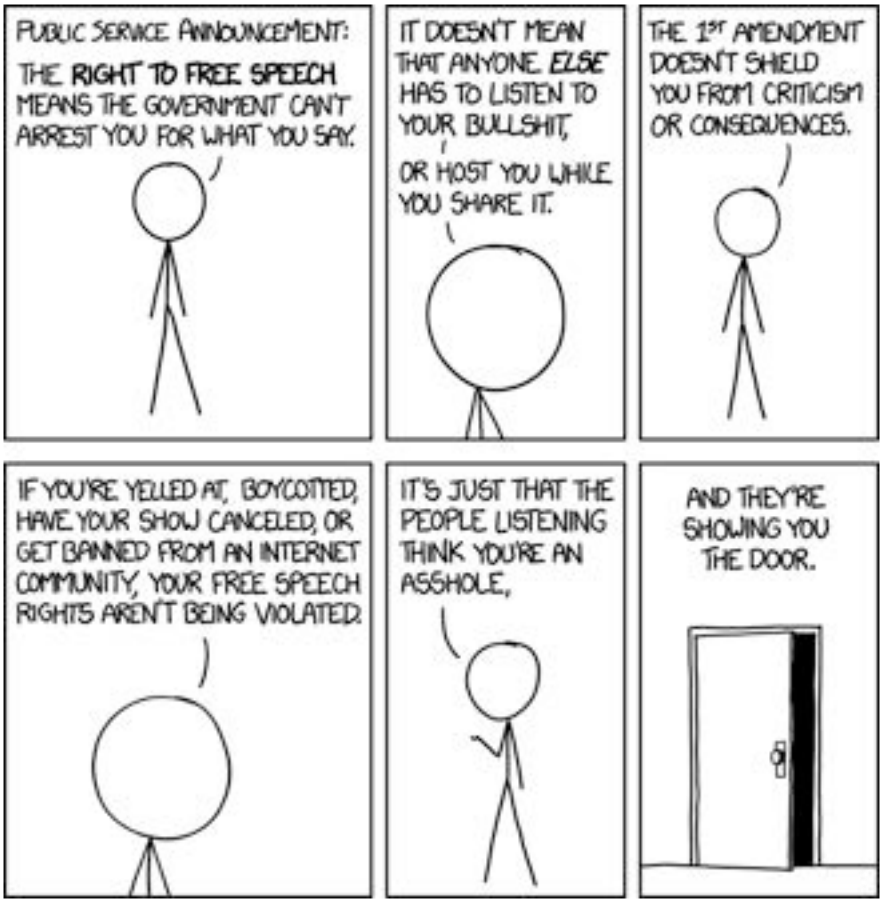
And at the national and pan-national level, we can thank Echo Chamber coalitions for fun parts of our history like war, oppression, bigotry, and genocide. The grand, species-wide Idea Lab is why we've made progress. Giant Echo Chambers are why that progress hasn't happened a lot faster.

All of us are living in at least a few Echo Chambers right now. To discover the Echo Chambers in your life, think about the different communities you're a part of, and ask, "Is there a sacred baby in the room when I'm with those people? Are there ideas or viewpoints that are socially off-limits?"

Here's one other trick:

The Asshole Litmus Test

I'm a long-time fan of Randall Munroe and his always-delightful site xkcd. But I have a quibble with one particular xkcd comic:


PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT:
THE RIGHT TO FREE SPEECH MEANS THE GOVERNMENT CAN'T ARREST YOU FOR WHAT YOU SAY.
IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT ANYONE ELSE HAS TO LISTEN TO YOUR BULLSHIT,
OR HOST YOU WHILE YOU SHARE IT.
THE 1ST AMENDMENT DOESN'T SHIELD YOU FROM CRITICISM OR CONSEQUENCES.
IF YOU'RE YELLED AT, BOYCOTTED, HAVE YOUR SHOW CANCELED, OR GET BANNED FROM AN INTERNET COMMUNITY, YOUR FREE SPEECH RIGHTS AREN'T BEING VIOLATED.
IT'S JUST THAT THE PEOPLE LISTENING THINK YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE,
AND THEY'RE SHOWING YOU THE DOOR.

What Randall's trying to do here is put an end to people claiming that their First Amendment rights are being violated when in fact, they're not.[4] And the comic does a good job at that. My problem with the comic is that it doesn't address the difference between the two kinds of intellectual cultures we've discussed—and as such, it serves as perfect justification for *both* the Idea Lab and the Echo Chamber.

For me, the critical word in the comic is "asshole." Both kinds of intellectual culture agree with the comic—what they disagree on is the definition of asshole.

Communities that define asshole as "someone who in arguments attacks people, not ideas," or "someone who expresses conviction on viewpoints where they don't actually know very much," or "someone who never admits when they're wrong" are Idea Labs. They eject from the club those who turn arguments into fights and hinder the community's ability to search for truth.

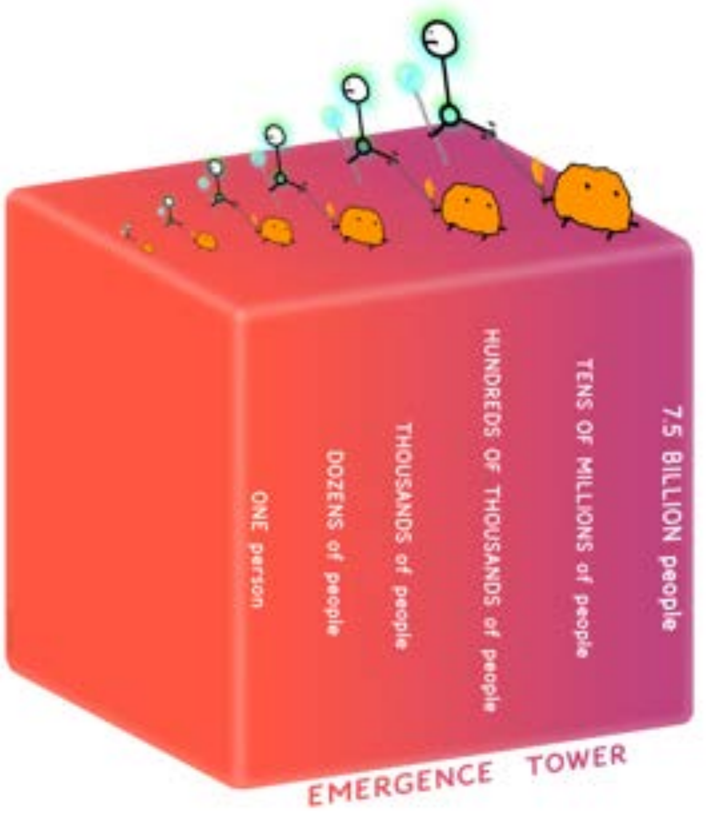
On the other hand, communities that define asshole as "someone who disagrees with what the community believes," or "someone who holds views that we find offensive," or "someone who criticizes the community or defends our rival community" are Echo Chambers. By "showing the door" to anyone who doesn't say their baby is cute, they purge their community of dissent and ensure that things remain intellectually pure.

The xkcd comic is a comic about intolerance—but the key question it leaves open is: intolerance of *what?* When you consider your own judgments and those within your communities, think about the criteria for intolerance. Ask yourself: How exactly is "asshole" being defined?

Liberal Democracy: Cultural Coexistence

This is a post series about both psychology and sociology, because to understand what's going on in the world around us, we need to think about both. If we view humanity in 3D, we see that psychology and sociology are really studies of the same human system, just from different vantage points along Emergence Tower.

What Idea Labs and Echo Chambers show us is that the Higher Mind – Primitive Mind tension isn't just happening in each of our heads—it's raging up and down Emergence Tower, at the heart of both our psychology and sociology. It's a *3D struggle.*



This 3D struggle is the backstory behind human history and behind everything going on in our world today. It can also help us understand why the U.S. forefathers designed the system the way they did.

The key innovation in a country like the U.S. isn't to force higher-minded cultures and free speech upon anyone—it's to allow people and communities to be whoever they want to be, in peace. The important thing is that membership in any community or culture, including a mini dictatorship, is purely *voluntary*. If the only threat zealots have is to kick you out of their social circle—to "show you the door"—higher-minded people are free in a liberal democracy to say, "goodbye!" and head elsewhere. That's liberal democracy's secret sauce.

In countries like the U.S., Idea Labs and Echo Chambers *coexist*. Echo Chambers may slow down the country's progress—but they can't forcefully hijack the whole system like they do in the Power Games. Whether the Echo Chambers like it or not (and they usually don't), a liberal democracy's Idea Labs, with enough tenacity, can continue to power their country's slow, steady forward march of progress.

At least that's how it's supposed to be. Remember the words of a wise man, Jeff Goldblum. *Life finds a way.* Liberal democracies do a great job of capping the power of the Primitive Mind and even harnessing that power as an engine of progress. But like an animal in a cage, the Primitive Mind yearns for its natural habitat—the Power Games. And even the best system isn't infallible.

I look around the U.S. and other parts of the world today and I worry that something is off—that in the chaos of rapid advances in technology and media, our worst tendencies may be quietly breaking free. In the next part of this series, we'll hold our noses and dive into everybody's favorite topic: politics. If we can look out at the world around us and see it in 3D, we might just be able to figure out what's really going on.

Chapter 9: Political Disney World

To keep up with this series, sign up for the **Wait But Why email list** and we'll send you the new posts right when they come out. It's a super unannoying list I promise.

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Three places to go next:

Some thoughts on **how to pick a life partner** (pro tip: go for someone you can disagree with)

The social world has a whole set of other problems: **16 comics about awkward social interactions**

In case we're all getting a little self-absorbed with humans here: **4 mind-blowing things about stars**

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Name

I V
4 months ago

I wanted to ask how one would find thought labs?

1 ^ | v Reply

Natasha ❤️ ❤️ ❤️
a year ago

Does everyone in the echo chamber have their heads in the sand, or are some influential members more aware and manipulating/steering the more primitive minded members of the chamber for personal gain? Seems like it has to be the latter a lot of the time.

1 ^ | v 1 Reply

Political Disney World

43
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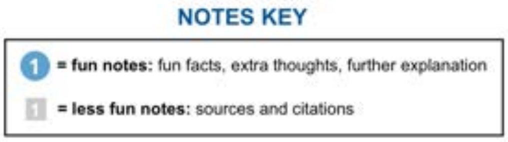
ember 15, 2019 By Tim Urban

s Chapter 9 in a blog series. If you're new to the series, visit the ***series home page*** *for* *ll table of contents.*



NOTES KEY

① = **fun notes:** fun facts, extra thoughts, further explanation

1 = **less fun notes:** sources and citations

Part 4: Politics, in 3D

"Knowledge of human nature is the beginning and end of political education." – Henry Adams

Chapter 9: Political Disney World

I grew up in Newton, Massachusetts in the 80s and 90s. Newton back then was a diverse place—a 90,000-person suburb with a wide range of ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. To live in Newton, there were only two requirements: you had to be a Red Sox fan and you had to be a Democrat. I was both, so things were chill.

When I was six, my second-grade classroom voted on the 1988 presidential election by circling either "Michael Dukakis" or "George Bush" on a little sheet of paper, folding it, and placing it into a shoebox on the teacher's desk. It was the first time I had been sentient for a big political event. Later that day, the teacher revealed the results:

Dukakis 20, Bush 1

Duh. Dukakis was the nice good guy candidate and Bush was the bad guy candidate. I still don't know who the one sick fuck was who voted for the bad guy, but other than that, the results made sense. Pretty boring.

Then the actual election happened and—somehow—*Bush won*.

I was floored. What kind of medieval shit did my country just pull? How could so many people have gotten it so obviously wrong?

I assumed when I was older and understood the world better, it would make more sense.

But I got older, and the storyline stayed the same. There was the Obviously Good Party, who cared about poor people and black people and flowers and smiles—and the Obviously Bad Party, who were all these two men, teaching their sons about offshore bank accounts.

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491

How to Pick a Life Partner
Like 2.6K
333

Why Gen Y Yuppies Are Unhappy

PATEK PHILIPPE
PATEK PHILIPPE

And every election, the vote would split very near 50/50. I figured there really just were a lot of bad people in my country. Shame.

Then I went to college. It was 2000. Bush-Gore year. While everyone I grew up with was obviously rooting as hard as possible for Gore to win, it began to dawn on me that I had made a very strange group of new friends in college. Some of them were rooting for Gore, but they hated certain things about his beliefs. Others disliked *both* candidates. And some of them were fervently rooting for *Bush,* even though they had previously seemed like reasonable people.

I knew exactly where I stood, of course, and made my opinion clear. When I explained that I was unquestionably voting for Gore, instead of giving me a high five, my friends asked me why. I had all kinds of explanations, but when they'd push me to talk in specifics, I'd run into a problem.

I didn't really know the specifics.

I knew Gore was the better choice, just like I knew the Democratic Party was the better party—but when pressed about my underlying reasons for liking any specific policy of Gore's, I'd end up in an uncomfortable place.

Gore will be much better for the poor.

Why?

Because he won't cut taxes for the rich as much and there will be more money for social programs.

Which social programs are you talking about? What about them do you think has worked well? Why are you so sure increased government spending on those programs is the best way to help the poor? And why are you so confident that tax cuts for the rich don't end up positively affecting poor people?

Um well Gore will be better for the environment.

How so?

He talks about it more and seems to care about it more.

Right but what kinds of policies do you hope he'll put in place that Bush won't? And do you think government regulations or incentives will accomplish more than a market solution like a carbon tax?

Well fucking shit. When continually pressed, my underlying reasoning for my positions would always seem to boil down to some combination of, "Because that's what seems intuitive to me based on what everyone I know has always said" and "Because the Democrats are the good guys".

Being challenged by people who didn't agree with me made me realize I didn't actually *know* anything—I just strongly *believed* a bunch of things.

I didn't know anything because I hadn't ever needed to know anything to feel like I had all the answers, and I hadn't ever been interested enough in the workings of government to put in the serious effort to truly understand it. All I knew was how to articulate the beliefs I assumed were right, in a pretty surface way.

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1,203

7 Ways to be Insufferable on Facebook
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Putting Time In Perspective
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550

How to Name a Baby
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10 Types of 30-Year-Old Single Guys
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The Tail End
Like 25K
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Full Archive

I had always thought of myself as a well-educated thinker, an independent thinker, and a thinker whose opinions were based on evidence and facts—but freshman year, I was smacked over the head with the truth about myself. When it came to politics, at least, I wasn't really a thinker at all.

If I had to describe politics in modern societies, I'd say it's—how should I put this—it's a fucking nightmare. It's just awful, for basically everyone. It makes us angry. It makes us anxious. It makes us hateful. It makes us our worst selves.

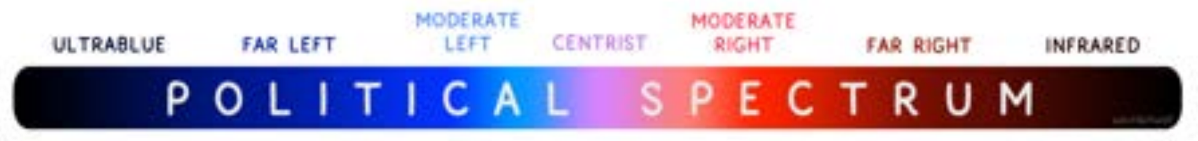
But why?

Politics is just the domain of how people live and work and make decisions together, which on its face seems like a fascinating puzzle—a joint project each society works on together, for all of their benefit. Sure, it's contentious and involves competition and disagreement, but there are a lot of worlds like that that aren't a fucking nightmare and don't consistently bring out our worst selves: science, sports, tech, entrepreneurship, and the arts, to name a few. What is it about politics that makes it so much more miserable than all of those other vibrant centers of human development?

Let's pull out our tools and discuss.

Politics, in 2D

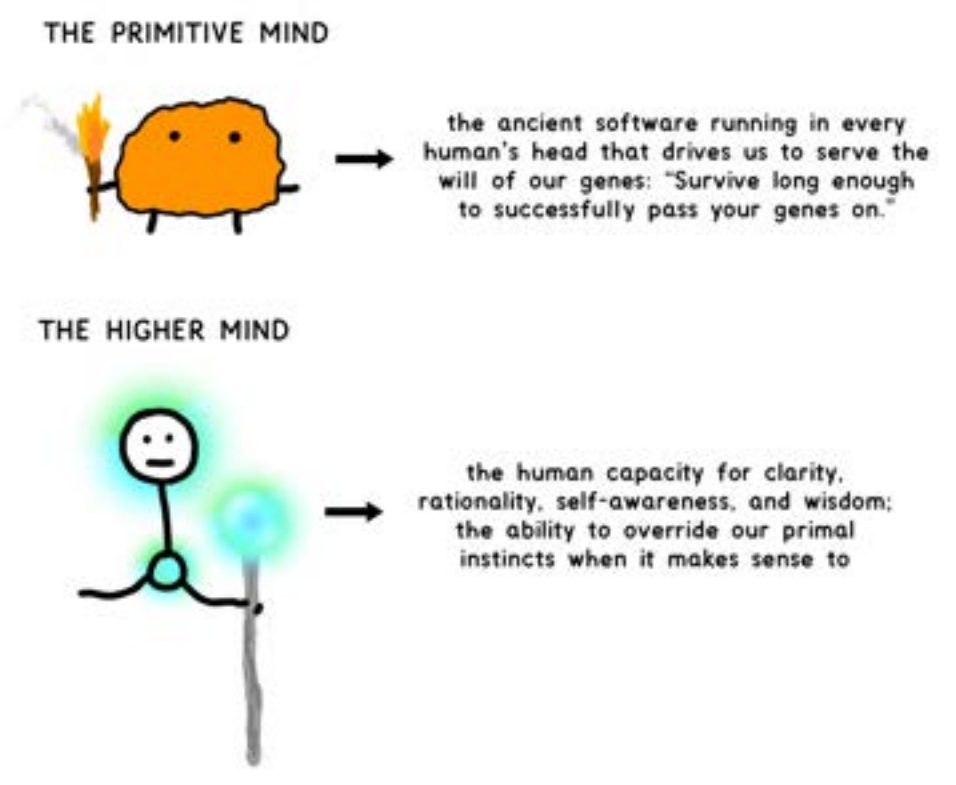
I don't know about other countries, but the entire U.S. talks about politics as if it's one-dimensional:



In this chapter, let's try looking at politics in 2D instead. We spent Chapter 7 talking about the Thinking Ladder. What would a Political Ladder look like?

The Probably Time For a Refresher Blue Box

We started this series by defining what I see as two fundamental elements of the human psyche.



THE PRIMITIVE MIND

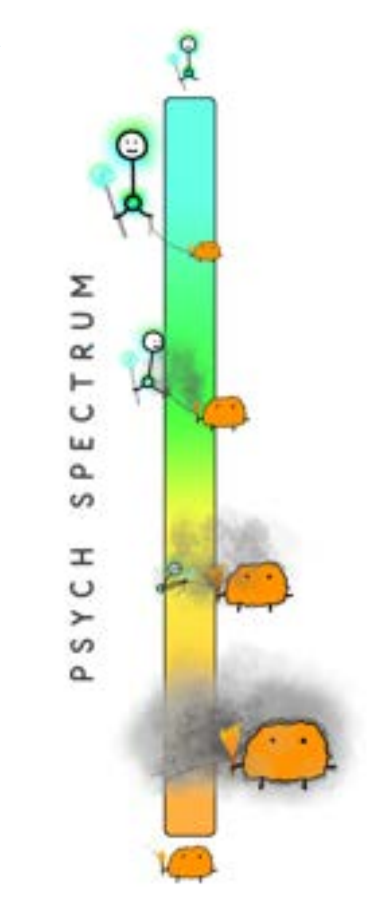
the ancient software running in every human's head that drives us to serve the will of our genes: "Survive long enough to successfully pass your genes on."

THE HIGHER MIND

the human capacity for clarity, rationality, self-awareness, and wisdom; the ability to override our primal instincts when it makes sense to

I call them "minds," but really, they just represent two states a person (or group of people) can be in. When the Primitive Mind is in control in our minds, we're often not being our best selves, not making very good choices, and not especially self-aware about what we're doing or why. When the Higher Mind is in control, we're being more of a grown-up. It's not binary though—it's more of a tug-of-war between the two states. The tug-of-war ebbs and flows in each of us and often, we're somewhere in the middle.

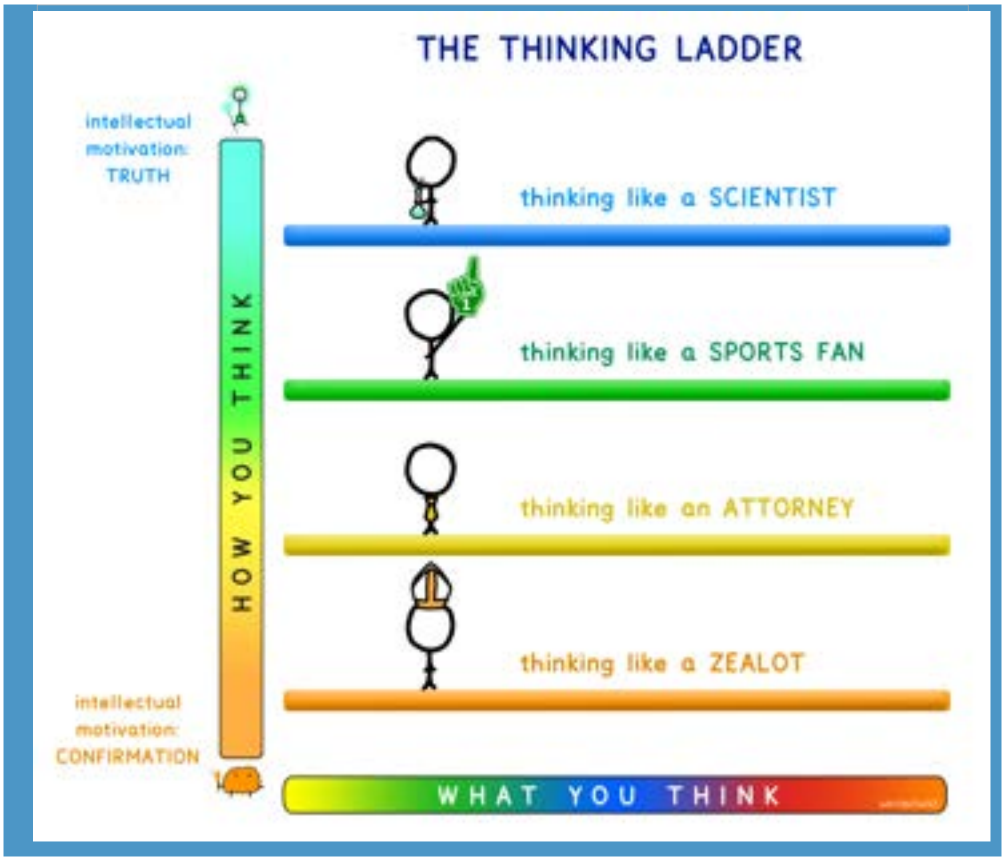
The Psych Spectrum is our way of visualizing the state of this tug-of-war. When the Higher Mind has a strong presence in our heads, we're higher up on the spectrum. When the Higher Mind's voice gets lost in the fog of a riled up Primitive Mind, we sink lower down on the spectrum.



I find that when I'm thinking about any What of life—what we do, what we say, what we think—things make a lot more sense once I bring the Psych Spectrum into my thought process. The ladder is our way of doing this visually. If we simplify any What of life so we can represent its possibilities on a one-dimensional, horizontal spectrum, we can then slap the Psych Spectrum onto it as a vertical y-axis. The resulting *square* forces us to add another dimension to our thinking and reconsider the What of life alongside the question, "but how is the Psych Spectrum affecting what's happening here?"

I call the square a ladder because thinking of it in terms of rungs focuses the discussion in on the Psych Spectrum, which is the skill I want us to gain in this series.

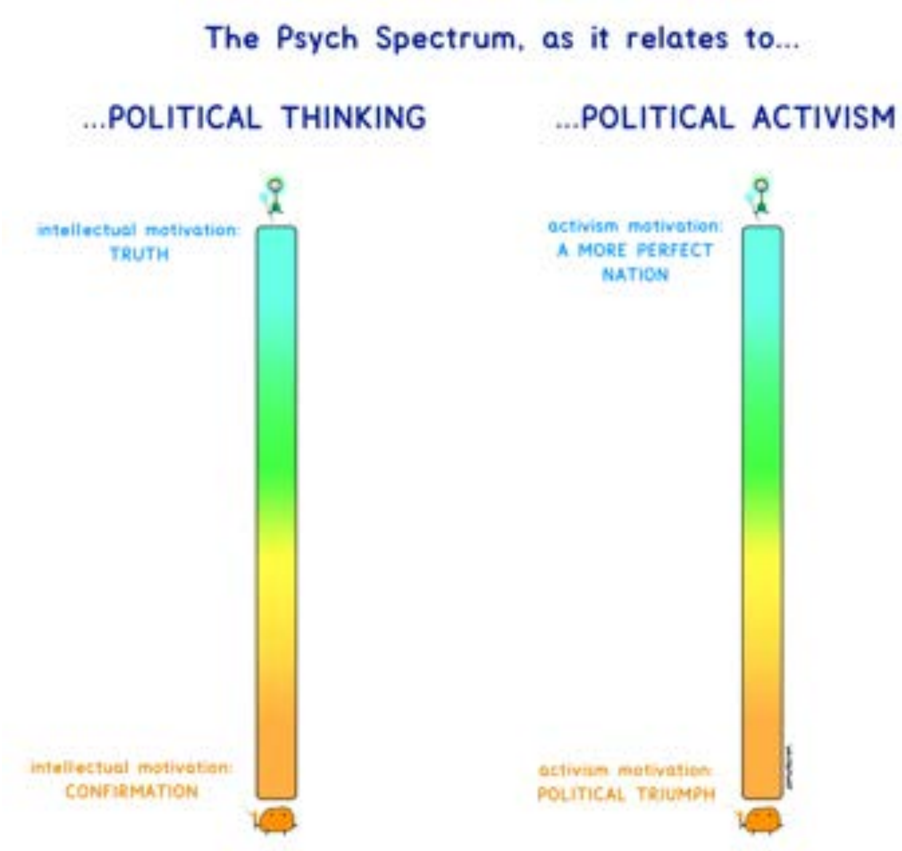
To define the rungs of any ladder, we need to start by asking ourselves how the Higher and Primitive Minds "do" that part of life. This defines the y-axis's two extremes. Each person, in thinking about their own psyche, might define it a little differently. When it comes to our intellectual lives, I see the Higher Mind as motivated to seek truth (because that's the rational thing to want) and the Primitive Mind as motivated to confirm what it already believes (because that was the best way for a human to survive 50,000 years ago). My specific definition of each rung of the resulting Thinking Ladder is derived from those two definitions (I call the Thinking Ladder's y-axis the "How You Think" axis for clarity—but it's really just "the Psych Spectrum, as it applies to thinking"):


THE THINKING LADDER
intellectual motivation: TRUTH
thinking like a SCIENTIST
thinking like a SPORTS FAN
thinking like an ATTORNEY
thinking like a ZEALOT
HOW YOU THINK
intellectual motivation: CONFIRMATION
WHAT YOU THINK

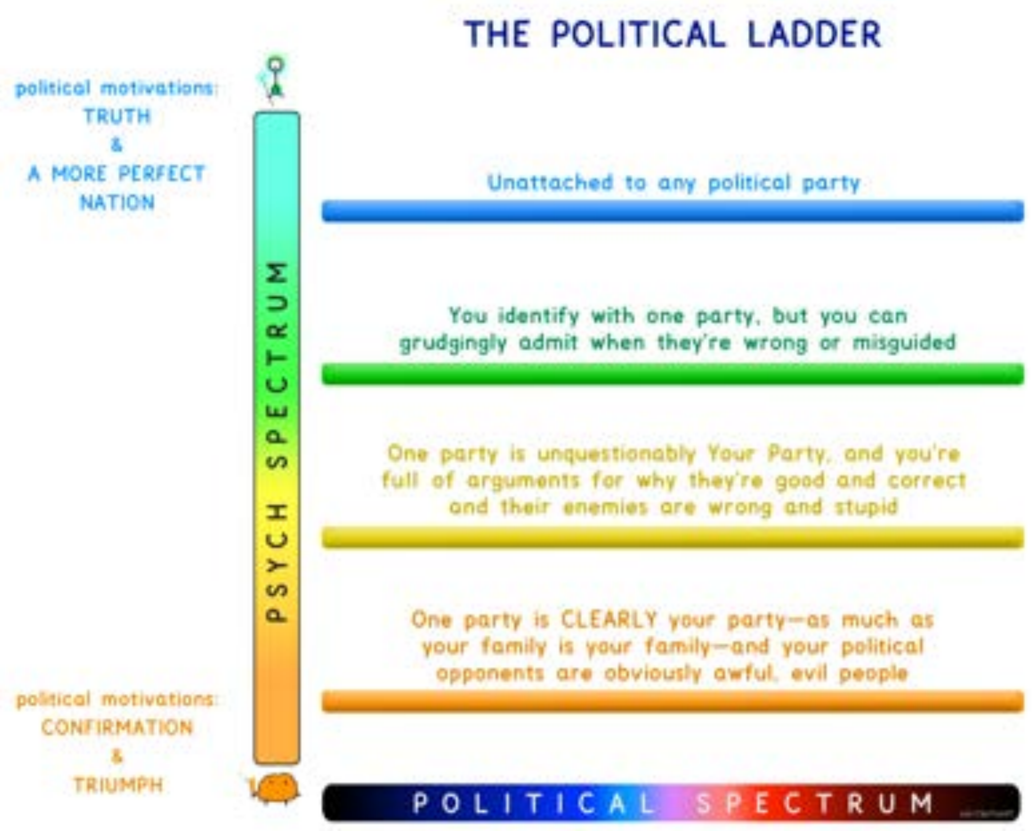
So what would a Political Ladder look like?

It's a little more complicated than the Thinking Ladder. A huge element of politics is "political thinking," and for that element, we could just use the Thinking Ladder. But politics also involves *action.* To bring this element in, we should also ask ourselves: What would the Higher Mind and Primitive Mind's political *goals* be?

Everyone can take their own crack at this, but here's mine: The political goal of the grown up, rational, universal-thinking Higher Mind is to build *a more perfect nation*. And the political goal of the ancient, survival-obsessed, Power-Games-playing Primitive Mind is *political triumph* against the bad guys, whomever they may be. A discussion of politics should incorporate both political thinking and political activism:


The Psych Spectrum, as it relates to...
...POLITICAL THINKING
...POLITICAL ACTIVISM
intellectual motivation: TRUTH
intellectual motivation: CONFIRMATION
activism motivation: A MORE PERFECT NATION
activism motivation: POLITICAL TRIUMPH

Using two political ladders in this post would be terribly cumbersome, and also pretty redundant. I'm sure there are instances when someone is simultaneously at different y-axis positions when it comes to their political thinking and activism… but you know people—most of them will be in a similar place on both. So to simplify, we'll combine these into a single Political Ladder.


THE POLITICAL LADDER
political motivations: TRUTH & A MORE PERFECT NATION
political motivations: CONFIRMATION & TRIUMPH
PSYCH SPECTRUM
Unattached to any political party
You identify with one party, but you can grudgingly admit when they're wrong or misguided
One party is unquestionably Your Party, and you're full of arguments for why they're good and correct and their enemies are wrong and stupid
One party is CLEARLY your party—as much as your family is your family—and your political opponents are obviously awful, evil people
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

With our view of politics now in 2D,① we can return to our question: Why is politics such a nightmare?

The answer: The Political Ladder is *bottom-heavy.*

Bottom-Heavy Topics

Religion, like most things human, exists all up and down the Psych Spectrum. At the top, you'll find people who think about religion as a set of cultural traditions, as a basis for community, as a moral framework, even as an enticing set of possibilities for the unknown. Every single major religious text has high-minded ideas in it, and every single major religion includes millions of high-minded members—those whose religious adherence isn't mutually exclusive with, but right in line with, top-rung intellectual and moral thought. Religion, when done the Higher Mind's way, is a lovely thing.

And in each case, as you work your way down the Psych Spectrum, high-minded conceptions of religious culture, community, and philosophy morph into complete and utter zealotry, tribalism, delusion, and depravity, as they're transferred from the Higher Mind's domain into the clutches of the Primitive Mind.

What makes religion a major cause of some of the largest, most intense Echo Chambers isn't that religious thinking spans the Psych Spectrum—most topics do—it's that the distribution is bottom-heavy. For every deeply religious person thinking about religion from the high rungs, there are even more people down below. Some reasons why:

- Religion involves beliefs about death, sex, morality, and almost every other topic the Primitive Mind cares about. Beliefs about eternal life, in particular, match up perfectly with the core end goal of animal genes.
- Religion is faith-based, and at least with its conceptions of what happens after death, inherently untestable—i.e. unfalsifiable.
- Religion is a topic that identities like to attach themselves to. People don't *follow* Christianity or *believe in* Christianity or *live by the philosophies of* Christianity—people *are* Christians.
- Religion lends itself perfectly to a tribal, Us/Them worldview. Not only are you an X, but *other people are a Y*, and if Y religion is true, it would mean your religion is not true.
- Most religions are based on books written long ago, by people whose Higher Minds had much less access to knowledge and advanced moral wisdom than we do today.

So it makes sense that religion would rile up our Primitive Minds and damn religion to eternal Psych Spectrum bottom-heaviness.

And if I had grown up in a religious Echo Chamber—and if I were surrounded by religious dogmatists in my life today—and if my country were currently being torn apart by religion—then I might have decided to write a big post series about religion. Instead, I wrote one about politics.

Like religion, politics is a pro at igniting our primitive fires.

The Primitive Mind mistakes politics, like it does religion, for a life-and-death situation. This makes sense, because in the ancient world where the Primitive Mind still thinks it lives, politics *was* a life-or-death game. For almost everyone who lived before the Enlightenment, and still for many people in today's world, being on the losing end of the game of politics put you in grave danger at the hands of your enemies. And being on the winning side meant having the power to vanquish those enemies. If politics went wrong, nothing else mattered—you were fucked.

It's not that today's politics no longer deals with critical life factors like freedom, safety, fairness, and resources—it's that today, in a country like the U.S., the *stakes* in each of those games are far lower than they were in ancient times. Modern politics is about whether taxes should be higher or lower—not about which people should have food during a period of low resources and which should starve to death. It's about where the line should be drawn when certain rights butt up against other rights—not about which people will be slaves and which will be masters. Politics today is an argument about whether the criminal justice system is applied consistently—not about which citizens the written law itself will and won't apply to. It's about the way police do their job and police accountability—not about which citizens should be protected by the government during a genocide and which should be the subject of government genocide. It's not that modern liberal politics doesn't have life-or-death consequences for some people—it's that today, those cases are the exception, not the rule.

But our Primitive Minds are hardwired to see politics the old-fashioned way, regardless of how the world has changed. That many people will read the above paragraph and think, "politics is *still* all of those things, just in better disguise," is reflective of how bad we are at thinking reasonably about politics.

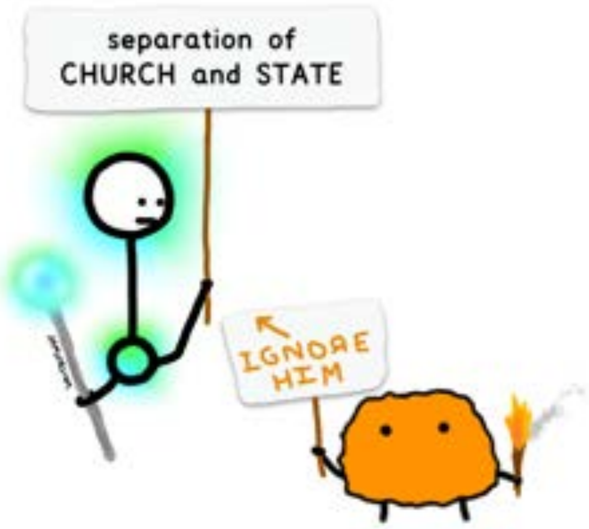
And politics doesn't just rile up one part of your ancient mind—like religion, politics is a one-stop-shop for nearly every concept that lights the Primitive Mind's fires:

The Primitive Mind is obsessed with the concept of power hierarchies—and politics is literally the allotment to some humans of power they're allowed to use against the rest of the population.

The Primitive Mind is obsessed with binary moral divisions—and politics, like religion, is a prime arena for the fiercest disputes over what's righteous and depraved, fair and unfair, pure and toxic, good and evil.

The Primitive Mind is deeply concerned with defending your identity—and political alignment, like religious affiliation, consistently forms a piece of people's core identity.

Politics sometimes even overlaps with the world of religion itself, in the continual dispute over how political laws interact with religious laws.



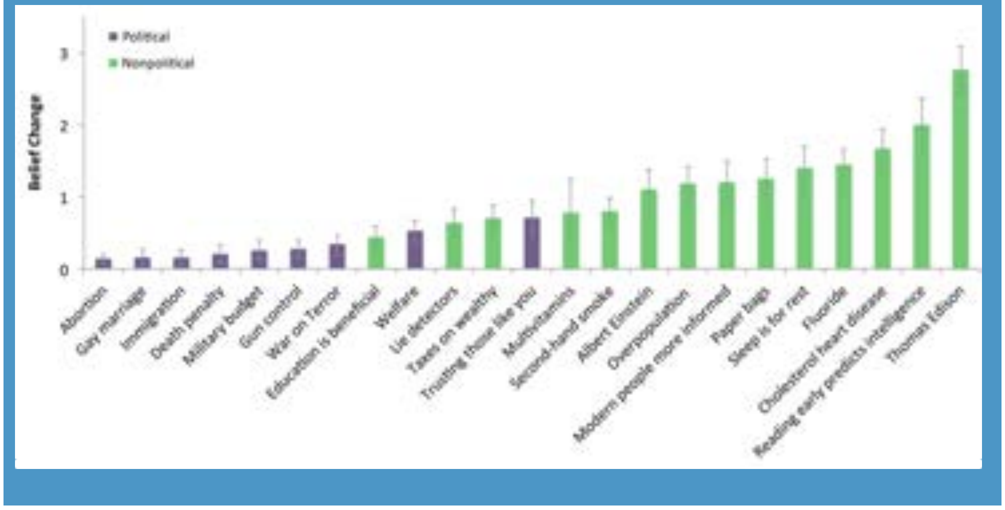
And of course, there's the way politics lends itself beautifully to tribalism, the Primitive Mind's favorite game. The Primitive Mind sees the whole world through a Power Games lens, and it's always looking for ways to divide its surroundings into Us people and Them people—it just needs a vehicle. And politics provides a perfect one.

This all adds up to politics being a bottom-heavy thing for us. But don't just take my word for it—

The Some Actual Science Agrees That We Suck at Politics Blue Box

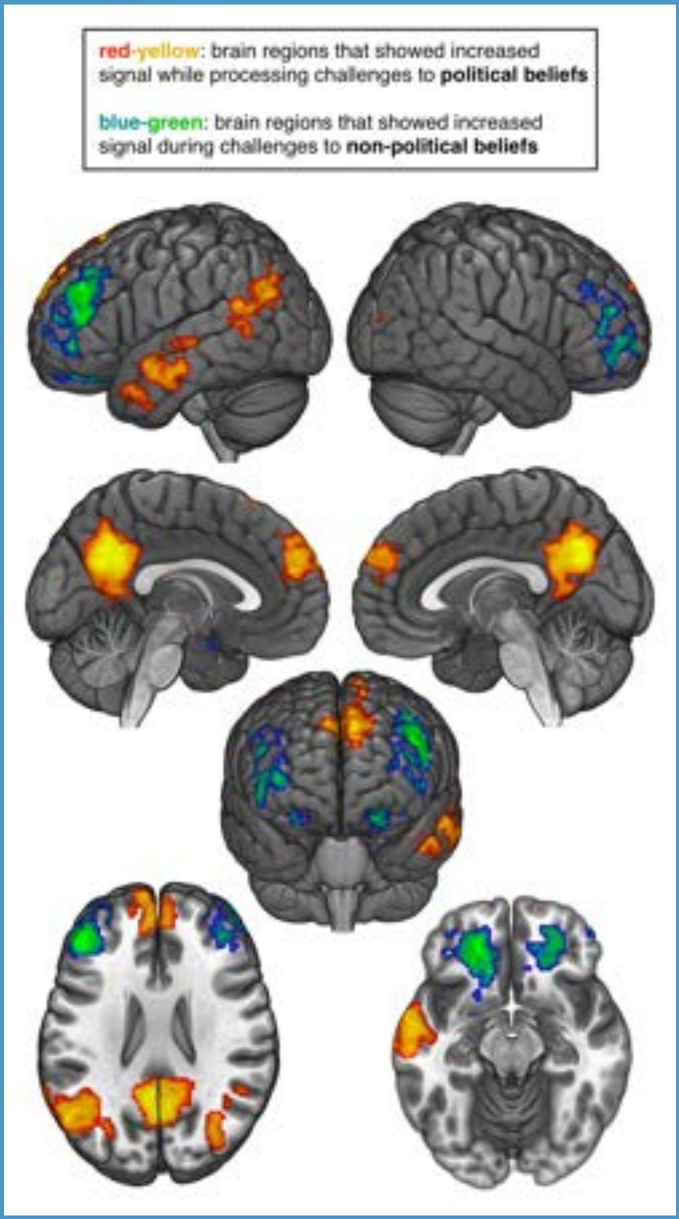
We're still learning about this, but there's some interesting research that helps explain why politics so often takes place on the lower rungs of the ladder.

A 2016 study published in the journal *Scientific Reports* presented people with "arguments that contradicted their strongly held political and nonpolitical views." The results were pretty stark: people were much less likely to have their minds changed when it came to their political beliefs.[1]



In other words, political thinking was taking place in Unfalsifiable Land, while other thinking was not.

Even more interesting is that while conducting this study, the scientists used an fMRI scanner to measure participants' brain activity, revealing that people actually processed challenges to their political beliefs with different parts of their brains than they used to process nonpolitical contradictions.[2]


red-yellow: brain regions that showed increased signal while processing challenges to **political beliefs**
blue-green: brain regions that showed increased signal during challenges to **non-political beliefs**

In particular, they found that having nonpolitical beliefs challenged lit up regions of the brain like the orbitofrontal cortex that are involved in decision-making. Having political beliefs challenged, on the other hand, generated less activity in those areas and more activity in the Default Mode Network—a group of brain regions associated with creating a sense of self and with disengagement from the external world. The scans also showed that having a political belief challenged caused more activity in the insula and the amygdala—emotional, fight-or-flight parts of the brain—than having a nonpolitical belief challenged.

So when the participants had one of their political views challenged, they were more likely to withdraw from the external world and go into the internally focused parts of their brains that deal with their identity, as well as the parts of their brains that deal with danger, fear, and other primal emotions. And while doing their thinking this way, their minds were far less likely to change.

This is just one of dozens of studies I came across in my research that examine the relationship between political beliefs and the likelihood of changing one's mind—and the findings seem to be pretty consistent.

The study above examined people who identified with the American Left, but of course, the phenomenon spans the political spectrum. Another study found that in their questioning, "people whose political identity was made salient were less likely to believe in an anthropogenic cause of climate change and less likely to support government climate change policies than those whose identity was not made salient; particularly when those people were aligned with the right-wing of politics."

Another found that "even under conditions of effortful processing, attitudes toward a social policy depended almost exclusively upon the stated position of one's political party." This study also examined participants' awareness of their own political dogmatism and found, predictably, that "participants denied having been influenced by their political group." But of course, "they believed that other individuals, especially their ideological adversaries, would be so influenced."

One study suggests that showing people belief-disconfirming scientific evidence not only leads them to reject the evidence but to lose faith in *science in general*—finding that "relative to those reading belief-confirming evidence, participants reading belief-disconfirming evidence indicated more belief that the topic could not be studied scientifically and more belief that a series of other unrelated topics could not be studied scientifically."

Then there are the studies about the backfire effect that find that not only do "corrections frequently fail to reduce misperceptions among the targeted ideological group … corrections actually increase misperceptions among the group in question."

The study suggests an explanation: "When confronted with counterevidence, people experience negative emotions borne of conflict between the perceived importance of their existing beliefs and the uncertainty created by the new information. In an effort to reduce these negative emotions, people may begin to think in ways that minimize the impact of the challenging evidence: discounting its source, forming counterarguments, socially validating their original attitude, or selectively avoiding the new information."

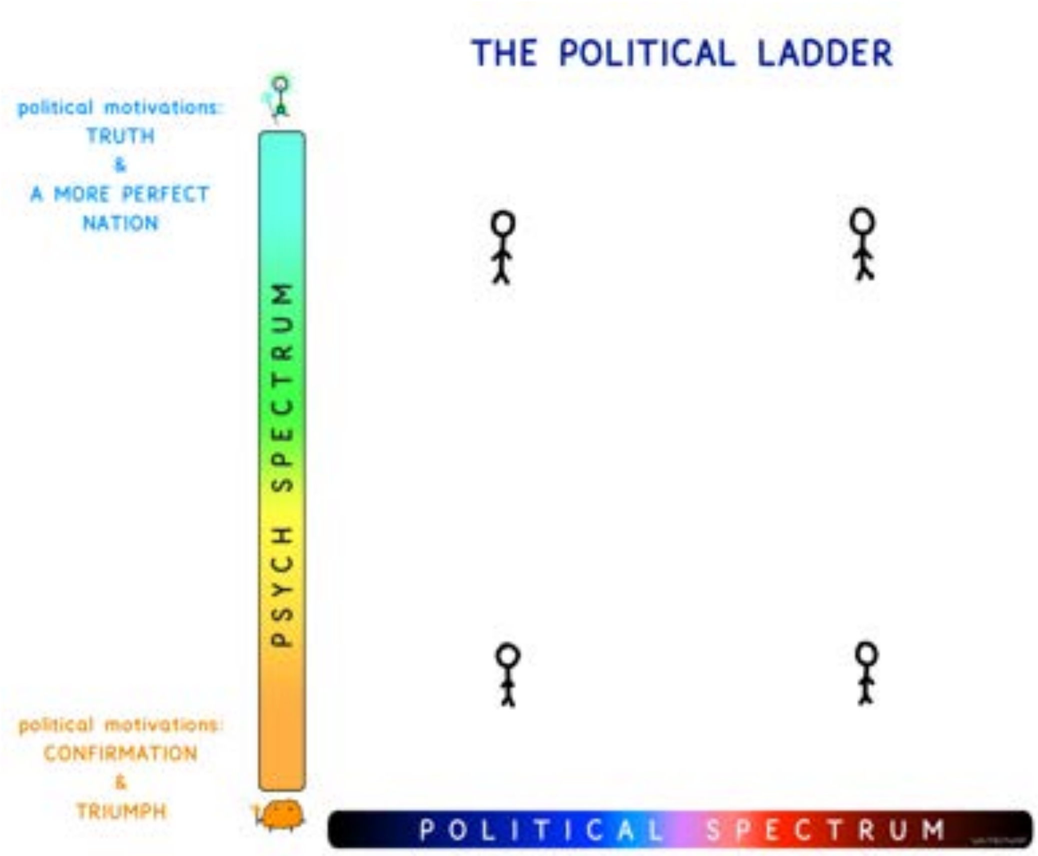
In case you're assuming that well-educated people might fare better here—mountains of evidence (not to mention real-world observation) suggest that they don't. One study looked specifically at what happens when education and science knowledge butt heads with political dogmatism. It found that "more knowledgeable individuals are more likely to express beliefs consistent with their religious or political identities for issues that have become polarized along those lines (e.g. stem cell research, human evolution), but not for issues that are controversial on other grounds (e.g. genetically modified foods)." So for controversial science-related issues that were not politically polarized, more education meant less dogmatism—which seems intuitive. But when the science-related controversies were politically (or religiously) polarized, that correlation went away, and their beliefs simply lined up with their tribal alliance. In our terms: well-educated people are likely to be high-rung thinkers…until the topic is politically or religiously polarized, at which point they drop down the ladder and become obedient partisans like anybody else.

Taking a moment to look at some research is a nice reminder that high-rung thinking is actually neurologically different than low-rung thinking. Low-rung thinking isn't really thinking at all—it's self-preservation. Our relationship with intellectual culture follows suit. When our psyche is up on the high rungs, we know that thinking is just thinking. This makes us interested in truth and open to changing our minds—so we like Idea Labs. When we're lower on the ladder and confusing thinking with self-preservation, confirmation of our beliefs feels like safety—so we seek out an Echo Chamber as a protective bunker.

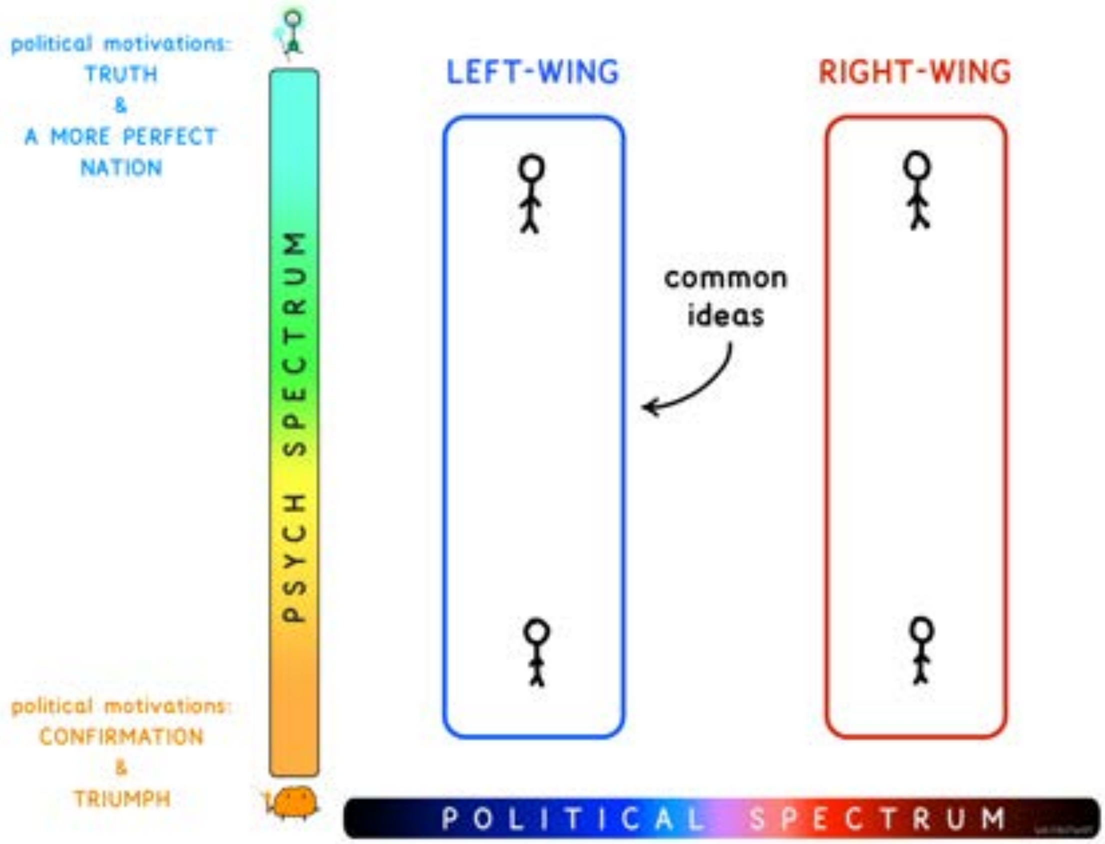
The good news is that politics isn't *confined* to the low rungs. There's plenty of political activity up on the high rungs—it's just that politics has an ugly high/low *ratio*. I think, with some work, we can improve that ratio. But first, we have to see the political landscape for what it is. You can't improve upon a bottom-heavy distribution if you can't *see* the bottom-heavy distribution, and you can't see it if you don't know there's a vertical dimension to be at the bottom of in the first place.

It reminds me of the whole "Inuit people have 428,085 words to describe different kinds of snow!" thing. Whether that's true or just a fun myth (it's a myth), it gets at an important concept: the level of nuance in our thinking is limited by the level of nuance in our language. Before I encountered the delightful term "humblebrag," I found it vaguely irritating when someone would humblebrag, but it was more of a subconscious irritation and one I'd have had a hard time articulating to someone if I tried. But then this term entered my thinking and my vocabulary, and suddenly, humblebragging became a distinct *thing* in my head. I clearly noticed it now, and I knew exactly why it irritated me. I also noticed myself doing it, which helped me do it less. Labeling a nuanced concept sharpens our ability to think about that concept and communicate our thoughts to others. With the right labels, nuance becomes a breeze.

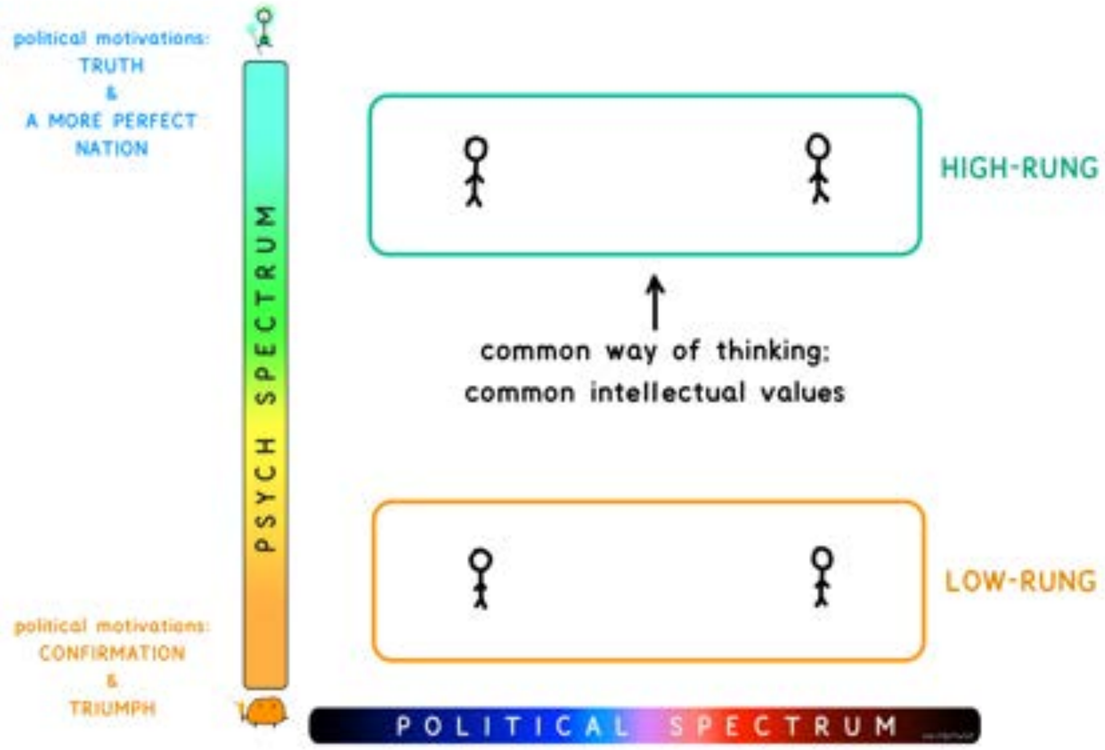
That's what we're trying to do here. Like, consider these four political thinkers:


THE POLITICAL LADDER
political motivations:
TRUTH
&
A MORE PERFECT
NATION
PSYCH SPECTRUM
political motivations:
CONFIRMATION
&
TRIUMPH
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

The two thinkers on the left side, at least on the topic at hand, share a common viewpoint. Same for the two thinkers on the right.


political motivations:
TRUTH
&
A MORE PERFECT
NATION
PSYCH SPECTRUM
political motivations:
CONFIRMATION
&
TRIUMPH
LEFT-WING
RIGHT-WING
common
ideas
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

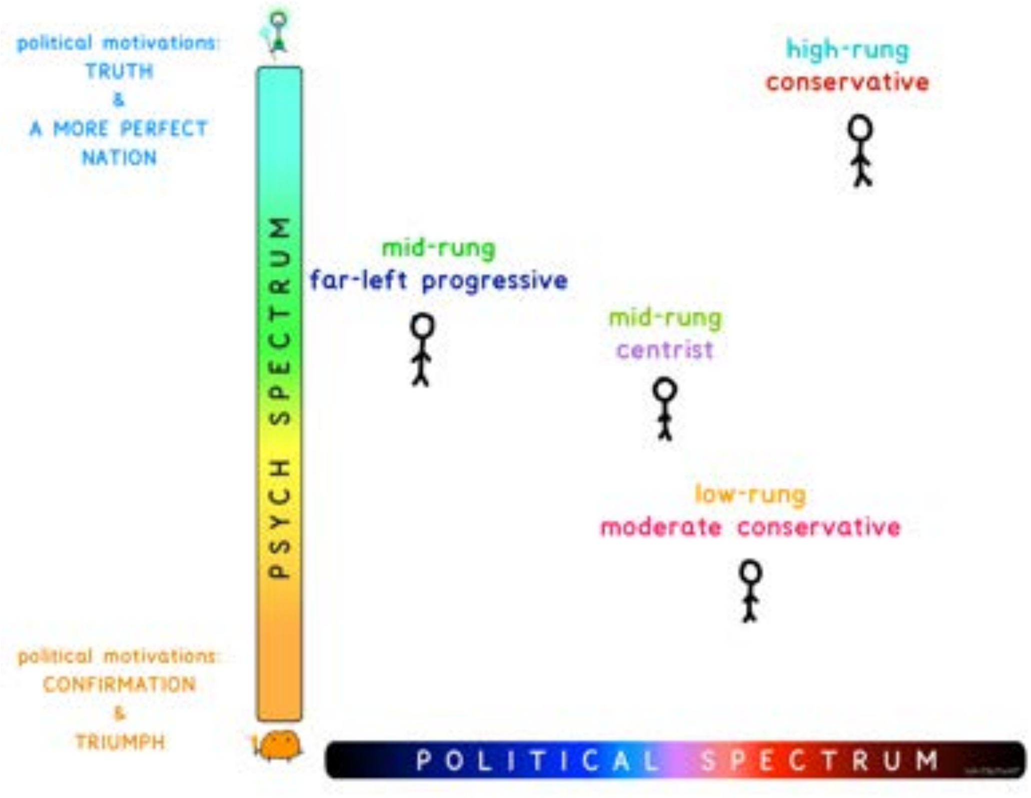
But the two high-rung thinkers share a common *way* of thinking. They're humbler, more nuanced, and their opinions about the topic were hard-earned. The two low-rung thinkers are more sure of themselves while knowing less than the thinkers above them—and there's nothing you could really do to change their minds.


political motivations:
TRUTH
&
A MORE PERFECT
NATION
PSYCH SPECTRUM
political motivations:
CONFIRMATION
&
TRIUMPH
HIGH-RUNG
common way of thinking:
common intellectual values
LOW-RUNG
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

Our societies are great at talking about the horizontal distinction. We're experts at identifying what people think and grouping people that way, because we've been trained to look at these four thinkers and see two left-wingers and two right-wingers.

But we're awful at talking about the vertical distinction. When I listen to arguments or read op-eds, I constantly hear people *trying* to make vertical distinctions in their arguments about politicians or ideas, but because A) many people forget that there is a vertical axis, and B) those who do think vertically lack a common language with which to talk about it, those attempts are usually misunderstood or missed altogether.

When people notice a vertical discrepancy between thinkers, it's like me before I learned the word "humblebrag"—they often can't quite tell *what* it is that they're noticing, so they'll misattribute the qualities that distinguish the thinkers to something they do have a vocabulary for. I hear people refer to high-rung political thinkers as being more *centrist*, or more *moderate*, than low-rung thinkers. But those are What You Think words. They refer to the middle part of the *x*-axis—as if holding viewpoints in those areas is the mark of a good thinker, and vice versa. Often, high-rung thinkers *will* end up at more centrist or moderate positions than low-rung thinkers, but there are plenty of cases where the opposite is true. Vertical terms like *high-rung* and *low-rung* make our discussions a bit less constrained and a bit nimbler.

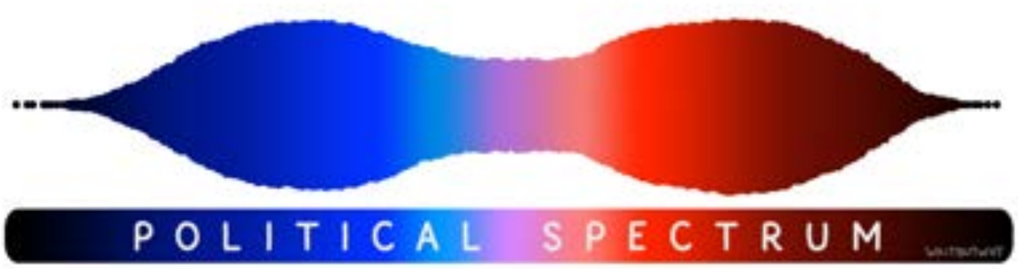

political motivations:
TRUTH
&
A MORE PERFECT NATION
PSYCH SPECTRUM
high-rung
conservative
mid-rung
far-left progressive
mid-rung
centrist
low-rung
moderate conservative
political motivations:
CONFIRMATION
&
TRIUMPH
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

So let's try taking a breath from left-wing and right-wing politics and focusing, for the rest of this chapter, on the worlds of high-rung and low-rung politics.

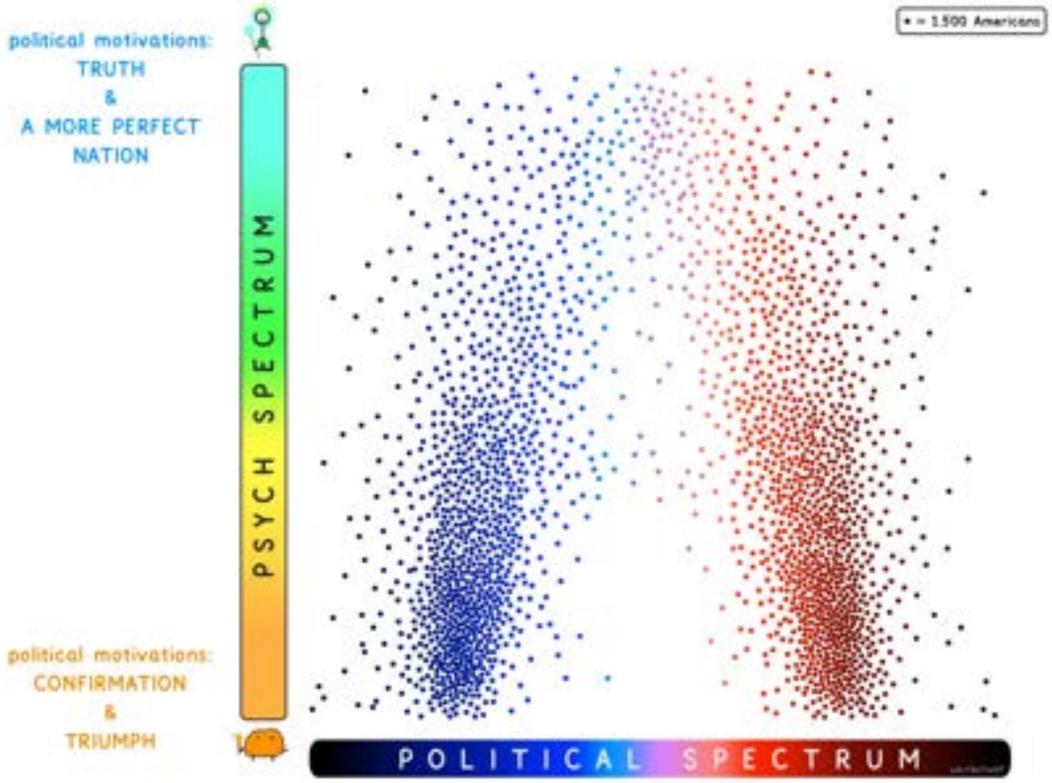
The Political Arch

Every country has their own special political squabble around the What of politics—the parties, the stances, the ideologies. We'll be using U.S. politics as our "demo system" in this discussion—because as an American, it's the system I understand the best and will be the least wrong about. But this discussion can apply to any country, as the high-rung / low-rung distinction is something that all political systems share.

If we mapped out the American political landscape in the traditional way—by bunching everyone up in one dimension, paying attention only to What people think—it might look something like this:



Now let’s bring the landscape into 2D:

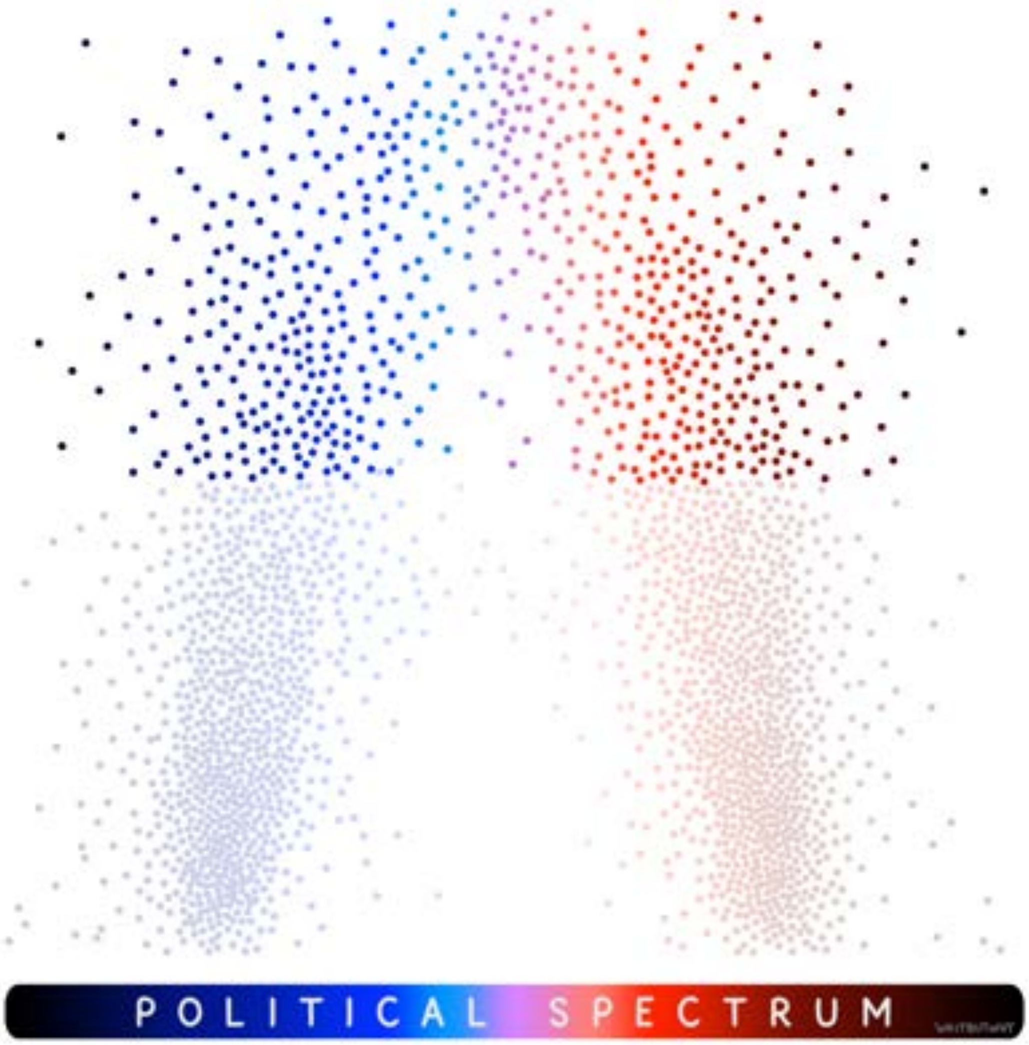


This tells a more interesting story. The American political distribution now forms a St. Louis Arch-esque shape.

Of course, since no one talks about the Psych Spectrum, there are no Gallup polls, Pew research tables, or Our World in Data graphs showing us the exact shape or distribution of Americans on our two-dimensional graph. All we can do is guess—and my best guess is that we’re dealing with some kind of St. Louis Arch situation.

Let’s start at the top of the arch and work our way down.

High-Rung Politics



Not everyone who participates in high-rung politics approaches politics like a Scientist. Up in this realm, you'll find some super-objective, unaffiliated top-rung thinkers. But you'll probably find even more somewhat partisan, pretty confirmation-bias-y political Sports Fans. You'll even find some hopelessly partisan, highly tribal, fully unfalsifiable political Attorneys.

The thing that makes high-rung politics high-rung is that it takes place within high-rung political *culture.*

High-rung political culture is the political version of the high-rung Idea Lab cultures we discussed last chapter. It subscribes to all the same high-rung intellectual values and supplements them with the high-rung political notion that the good of the country trumps the good of any political tribe. It's a culture that makes it safe for Scientists to be Scientists, and it lets Sports Fans do their thing while keeping their worst tendencies on a leash. Attorneys who abide by the culture's norms and don't inhibit good conversations can stay. When Attorneys are policed by a strong high-rung culture, their one-sided arguments can provide potential truth material or serve as useful criticism of prevailing ideas. The right political culture can turn a wide collection of thinkers into a productive thinking system.

In high-rung political culture, people are micro-divided in their viewpoints and macro-united, in a broader sense, in their values.

They're macro-united because they're almost all liberals. Not "liberal" the way it's often used in the U.S., as a synonym with "Left"—liberal the way the Enlightenment thinkers used it. Liberal meaning "committed to liberal values"—values like truth, human rights, freedom of expression, and equality of opportunity.

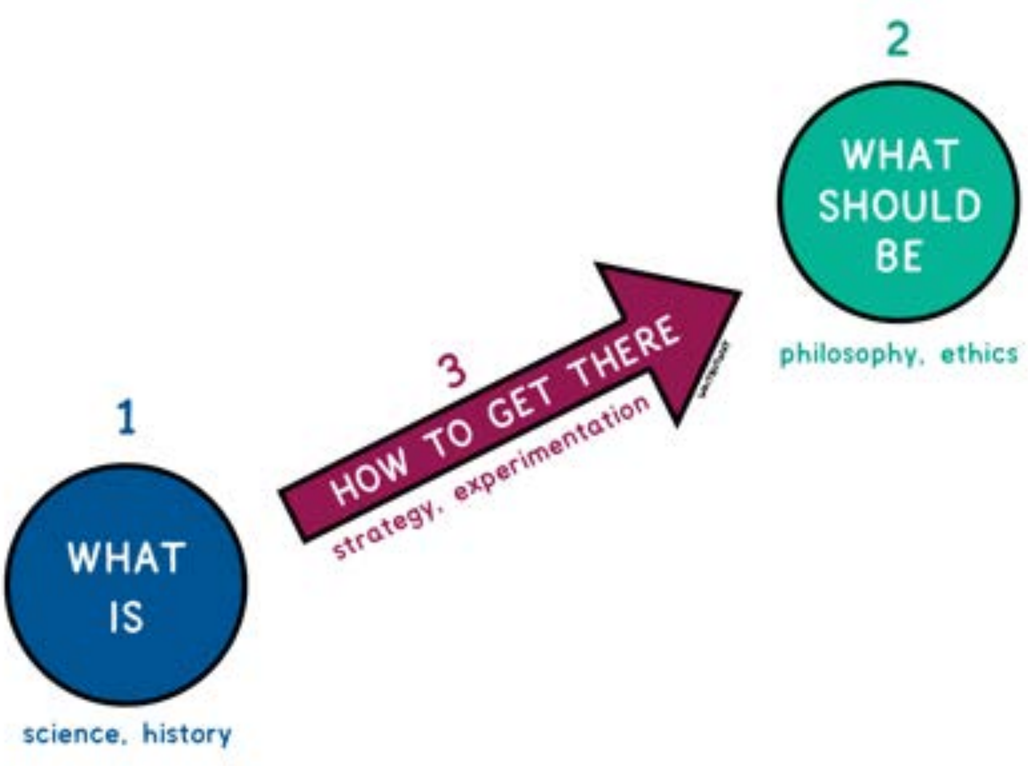
They're macro-united because they share a common notion of reality. Their opinions will differ wildly, but they'll usually agree on facts or the lack thereof.

They're macro-united by a shared humility—an understanding of just how hard politics is and a self-awareness that knows it's impossible to fully understand the values or the worldview of people who grew up in or live in circumstances different from your own.

They're macro-united because they get how democracy works. They know that a successful democracy is one where everyone gets what they want only *sometimes*—where regular and widespread frustration and disappointment means the system is working.

Finally, high-rung political thinkers and activists are macro-united around the broad shared goal of a more perfect nation, along with a mutual understanding that they can move towards that goal only by being micro-divided within a vibrant marketplace of ideas. High-rung political discussions are boxing rings, where ideas get their asses kicked, but people don't. When it's safe for people to say what they're thinking, Speech Curves line up with Thought Piles, turning high-rung thinking communities into giant superbrains.

And what exactly are people micro-divided about in the high-rung political world? Their debates center around three core questions:



Question 1: What Is?

You can't figure out how to make a more perfect nation if you don't have a good sense of what the nation currently is. What does the population look like, and how has it evolved over time? What are the current policies, and how do they work? Which experimental programs are being attempted, and what does the data say about their efficacy? How are resources currently distributed? How is the status quo being experienced by citizens of all kinds and in all circumstances? The study of What Is is the domain of science. Embedded in What Is, and critical to its understanding, is the study of What Has Been—i.e. how did What Is become What Is? This is the domain of history.

Both science and history are the search for truth—the quest to see reality as best you can. High up on the ladder, there's disagreement around Question 1, but not too much *conflict*. Conflict happens when disagreement is accompanied by conviction, and two high-rung thinkers won't usually both feel strongly about conflicting conceptions of reality. Conviction on the high rungs is a function of clarity, and if there's clarity around a certain set of facts, high-rung thinkers will usually agree with each other. When things are hazier, two differing high-rung thinkers will both speak with doubt, and they'll consider the points where their conceptions differ to be areas for joint exploration as part of a collaborative knowledge quest.

Question 2: What Should Be?

Unlike What Is, What Should Be is a matter of philosophy and often the subject of fierce conflict on the high rungs. High up on the arch, almost everyone's goal is a more perfect nation, but thinkers hold different notions of what kinds of policies and systems are the fairest, the most morally right, and the most philosophically consistent. They'll dig deep on lots of hard questions with no objectively correct answer:

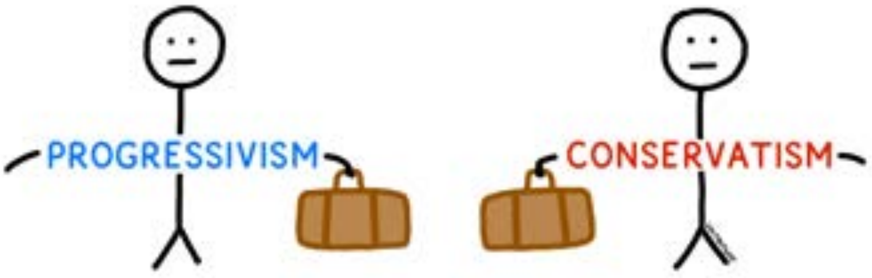
What should the role of government be? Which freedoms should be restricted in the name of citizen protection and which shouldn't? When does a fetus become a human being? What are the criteria for "equal opportunity" to be considered equal? How big and how powerful should government be, and where should the boundaries be drawn between state and federal government power? What should the country's role be in the world, and under what circumstances should it involve itself in foreign affairs? When is it appropriate for the military to use force against other countries or police to use force against citizens? Which resources are rights, and which are privileges? The list is long, and the debates are heated.

Question 3: How to Get There?

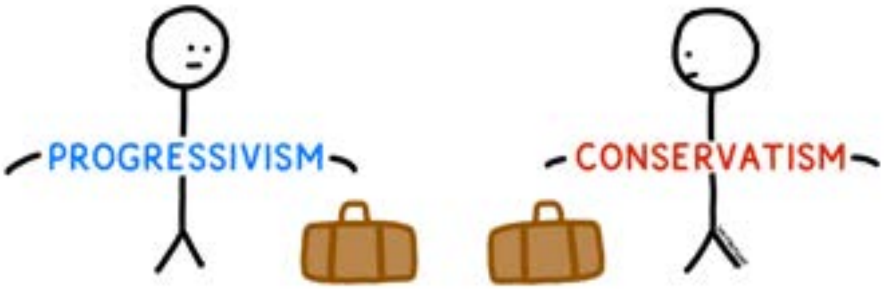
What Is and What Should Be, when compared, yield the gaps between reality and the ideal. These gaps define the political objectives of the high-rung thinker. But even when high-rung thinkers do agree about What Should Be, they often completely disagree about the best way to bridge the gap from What Is to their vision of something better. No one is an expert at how to run a country, and there's rarely a consensus about the most effective way to fix an identified flaw in the system. Two people who agree that the middle class should be larger than it is can completely disagree about which tax structure or government structures will best achieve the goal. Two people who feel the same exact way about the history of race in the U.S. can hold opposite viewpoints about the efficacy of affirmative action. Two people who both hate the current healthcare system can come up with entirely different government healthcare programs as their proposed solution.

Parsing political arguments using these three questions can help us isolate what the arguments are really about. Sometimes thinkers who agree philosophically will disagree strategically. Some who seem to agree strategically may actually be aiming for different outcomes. Some will disagree on all fronts.

Other times, disagreements may be more fundamental. Here, it may be appropriate to *cautiously* apply what have become two of the most unpleasant words in American English: Progressivism and Conservatism.



If we're going to discuss these words—and the core concept behind each—the first thing we'll need to do is put aside the baggage.



Well done. Now, anytime in this post we're going to use politically charged words, we should make sure to agree on the definitions we're using.

If you want to confuse yourself, google around for a while reading about "Progressivism" and "Conservatism." Each of the words has been the banner for a huge range of political, economic, social, and philosophical ideas—some of them overlapping, some that are unrelated to each other, and some that are totally contradictory with others.

In the U.S., giant political Echo Chambers have appropriated these words as banners for themselves and for their enemies. And we'll come back to what the words mean in that low-rung context, but let's remind ourselves that the words *themselves* actually have pretty intuitive literal definitions, and I think those meanings provide an important and useful distinction in political thinking. At their most literal—and, because we're dealing with Higher Minds at the moment, their most charitable:

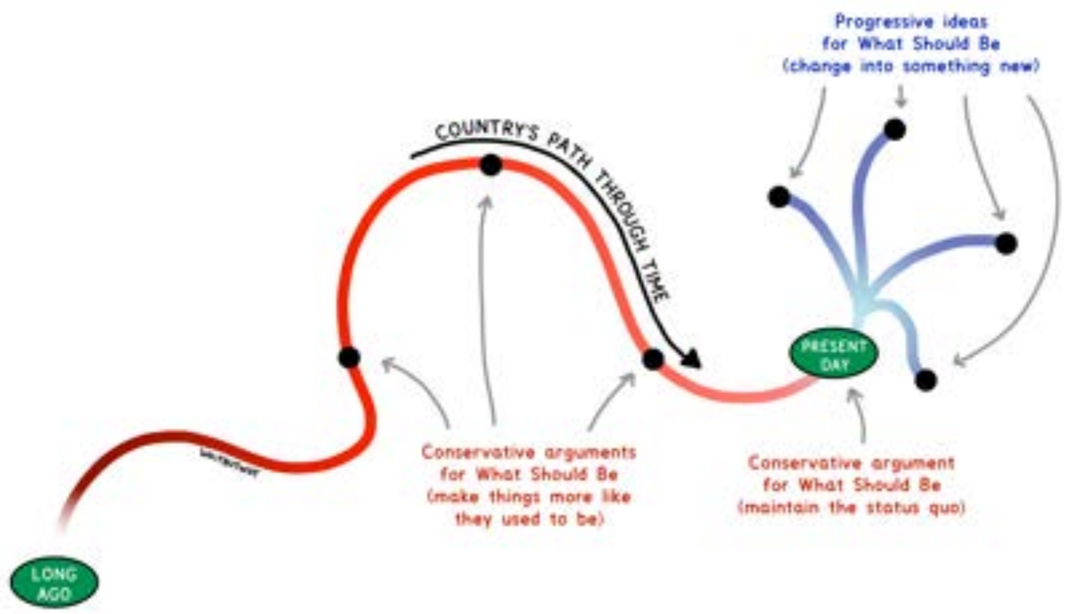
Progressivism = concerned with helping society make forward *progress*—positive changes to the status quo. That progress can come from identifying what you deem to be a flaw in your nation's systems or its culture and working to root it out, or by trying to make your nation's strong points even stronger.

Conservatism = concerned with *conserving* what is already good about society—either by fighting against the erosion of what you deem to be your nation's strong qualities, or by pushing back against well-intentioned attempts at positive progress that you believe, in reality, will prove to be changes for the worse, not for the better.

Put more simply, if a nation is a boat, high-rung Progressivism tries to make improvements to flaws in the boat and build newer, better features, while high-rung Conservatism tries to protect the existing boat against damage and deterioration.

Given that any nation, like any boat, has some things working well and others working poorly—along with the capacity to be both improved and damaged over time—Progressivism and Conservatism, the way we're currently defining them, are simply the two sides of the "Let's make this the best boat we can" coin. Two halves of a single noble quest for a more perfect nation.

As high-rung thinkers trudge their way up the mountain into a foggy future, some of the most fundamental disagreements will be those between a progressive and conservative mindset—the "to change or not to change?" disagreements, and their underlying "how well is this part of the system accomplishing what it's supposed to?" and "what does a more perfect nation even look like?" disputes. ②



It's easy to see looking at this diagram why Progressivism is important. No country is perfect, and you can't become a more perfect nation without making changes. Progressivism drives that change.

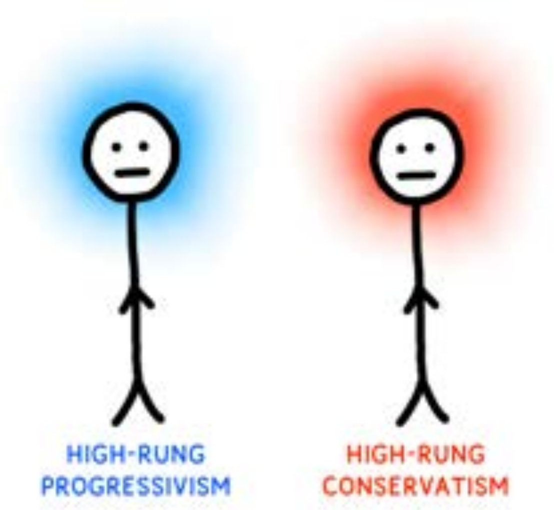
But Conservatism is just as important. Firstly, there are some aspects of a country that are working beautifully—and in these cases, the conservative impulse to resist the inevitable calls for change will be wise. Further, a country like the U.S. is permanently tasked with figuring things out as they go, and when it comes to running and adjusting a massive country in a rapidly changing world, everyone is an amateur. Mistakes will be made, and some changes will prove with time to have been ineffective or detrimental. In these moments, the voice urging the country to press the undo key and go back to the way things used to be will be the wisest voice.

Secondly, Progressivism is the collection of lots of different ideas—most of them untested—and inevitably, most of them will be bad ideas. Nations evolve the same way species do—through beneficial mutations. Coming up with mutations and pushing them into the national genome is the job of Progressivism. But for every beneficial mutation to a species, there are many more mutations which prove to be detrimental to survival. The conservative resistance to *all* progressive ideas provides a critical filter—a gauntlet that relentlessly tries to expose flaws in each progressive effort at mutation. Forcing progressive ideas to pass through intense conservative resistance in order to implement their desired change helps separate the wise ideas from the foolish or naive and protects the country from the latter kind.

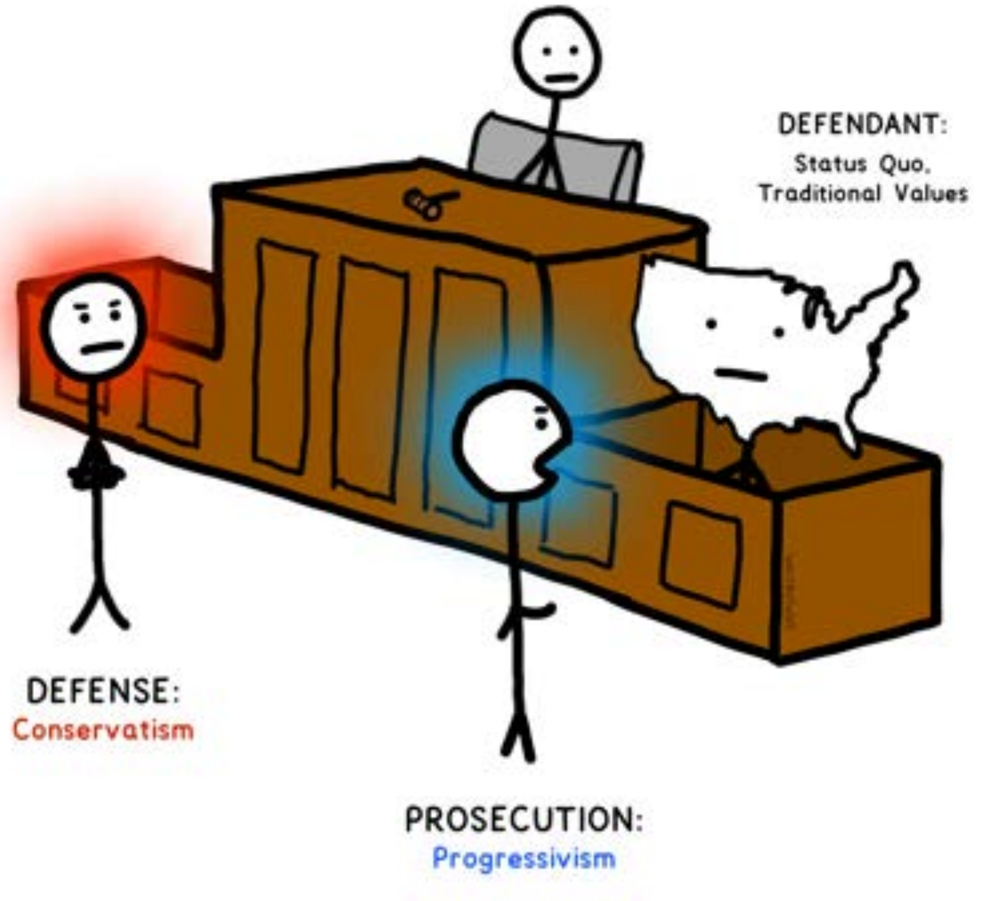
It's worth noting that I'm using these *ism* terms and not "progressives" and "conservatives" because the latter implies that people are either one or the other, and high-rung culture doesn't equate people with their ideas. High-rung thinkers may tend to think in a more progressive or conservative way—but they *are* no line of thought.

Even using the words as adjectives for people—declaring yourself to *be* progressive or conservative, in general (as opposed to "holding a conservative viewpoint" or "tending to be progressive in a certain area of your thinking") is an implicit presumption of uniform thinking across the board and through time. A single brash label for a person, or for their thinking, boxes in a person's intellect and boxes in their evolution—and high-rung thinkers don't like to be put in boxes, by themselves or by anyone else. This non-boxable phenomenon is apparent when I think about the high-rung political thinkers I know or know of, as it can often be frustratingly hard to figure out what their "deal" is politically.

But while the individuals in high-rung politics may bounce back and forth between the two camps, what *is* consistent is a substantial group of people falling into each bucket on any given issue. If we bring things into 3D and venture upwards on Emergence Tower, we can visualize the two groups as a progressive giant and a conservative giant.



If high-rung politics is a grand political courtroom, these giants are the two lawyers.③ When the "defendant" is the nation's status quo or its traditional values, the progressive giant is the prosecutor and the conservative giant is the defense. In these cases, Progressivism will be the voice of negativity and criticism, while Conservatism will paint the rosier picture of the country as it stands, and its history.



But when it comes to how to change the country—when the defendant is the country's evolution—the roles switch. Progressivism, now in the role of the defense, will tend to be a vocal proponent of change, while Conservatism, as prosecutor, will be critical of and resistant to change.

In both cases, each giant acts as a counterforce against the other and helps keep it in check. When the conservative giant gets riled up, it can drift too far into "Our country is perfect just as it is" or "Our country used to be perfect" territory. When the progressive giant gets out of hand, it can fall too far down the "Our country is and always has been awful" hole. The presence of its rival giant restrains each giant from becoming a ridiculous caricature of itself.

The clash of these two forces lies at the heart of the parts of society that evolve. I have a friend who's a new mother and decided not to breastfeed her baby and use formula instead. She explained her reasoning to me and it made sense. I mentioned this to another friend, also a new mother, who thinks the first friend is crazy. Her reasoning made sense too.

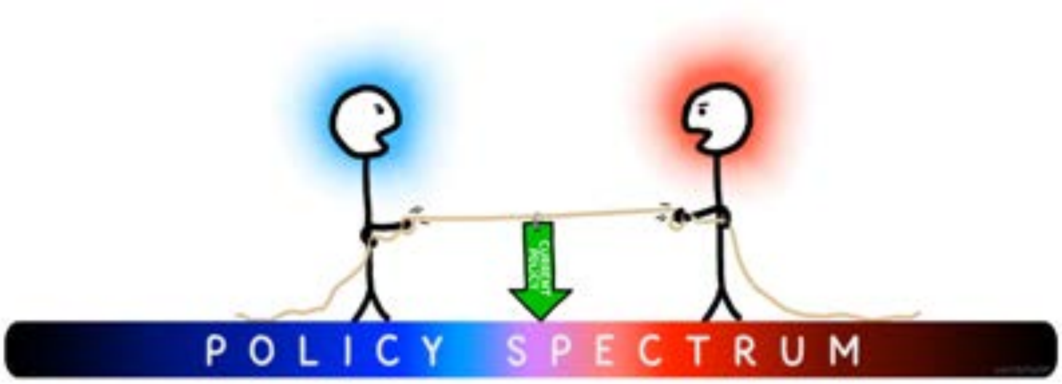
Another friend of mine makes a compelling case about how women who can afford to should consider using a surrogate for pregnancy instead of getting pregnant themselves. I found this interesting and have brought it up with a few other friends, to hugely negative reactions.

I'm not sure who's more right in either case, or if there even is a clear right and wrong side—but I know that some people having a progressive, "we should challenge the status quo" instinct in each area is important for our ability to evolve and improve, and some people having a knee-jerk conservative instinct to criticize and push back against progressive ideas is important for our ability to proceed prudently and effectively in our evolution. Together, they are the two lawyers that allow societal evolution to undergo "due process" in the marketplace of ideas.

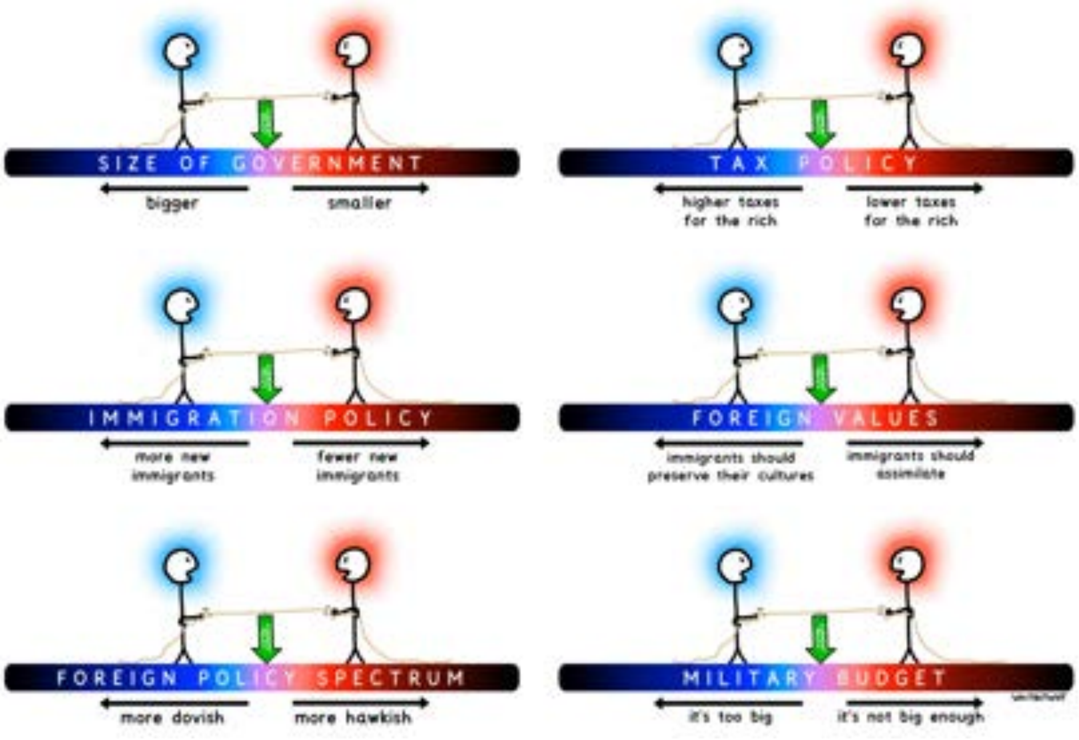
This same tension exists at the core of debates about nutrition, wellness, parenting, education, professional sports rules, holidays, company culture, employment practices, and 100 other things. In each area, evolution is driven by progressive ideas and policed by conservative sensibilities. In any of these situations, people with a progressive mindset feel like they're dragging more conservative people upward to a better place, while people on the conservative side feel that the progressive effort is dragging things downward to a worse place.④

Most of us will find ourselves on the progressive side in some of these "courtrooms" and on the conservative side of others. Even people who find themselves falling on the same side of most of the debates I mentioned would hesitate to box themselves in by attaching their identities to that quality and letting that label automatically determine all of their viewpoints. High-rung political culture simply extends this way of thinking to politics as well.

Some political debates aren’t about “to change or not to change.” Instead, they’re about a spectrum of possibility and the debates are about where exactly on the spectrum our policies should lie.


CURRENT POLICY
POLICY SPECTRUM

In spectrum battles, which side ends up backed by the Left vs. the Right doesn’t always map on very well to “progressive” or “conservative,” but it doesn’t matter. The important thing is that each side of the spectrum has a group advocating for it. This allows the marketplace of ideas as a whole to home in on a point that represents a reasonable compromise. As the debates rage on and public opinion evolves, that point can evolve along with it. It’s democracy at its finest: everyone disagrees with each other in an unpleasant marketplace of ideas, and it results in a policy that represents a broad compromise that most people are somewhat unhappy with. There a lot of these types of issues in American politics:


SIZE OF GOVERNMENT
bigger
smaller
TAX POLICY
higher taxes for the rich
lower taxes for the rich
IMMIGRATION POLICY
more new immigrants
fewer new immigrants
FOREIGN VALUES
immigrants should preserve their cultures
immigrants should assimilate
FOREIGN POLICY SPECTRUM
more dovish
more hawkish
MILITARY BUDGET
it's too big
it's not big enough

Sometimes political issues revolve around priorities and where we should direct our attention. Here, again, high-rung politics usually organizes into a two-sided structure. A recent paper explored how the two giants differ in which parts of Emergence Tower they focus on. Here are their results (they call progressives “liberals”):[3]

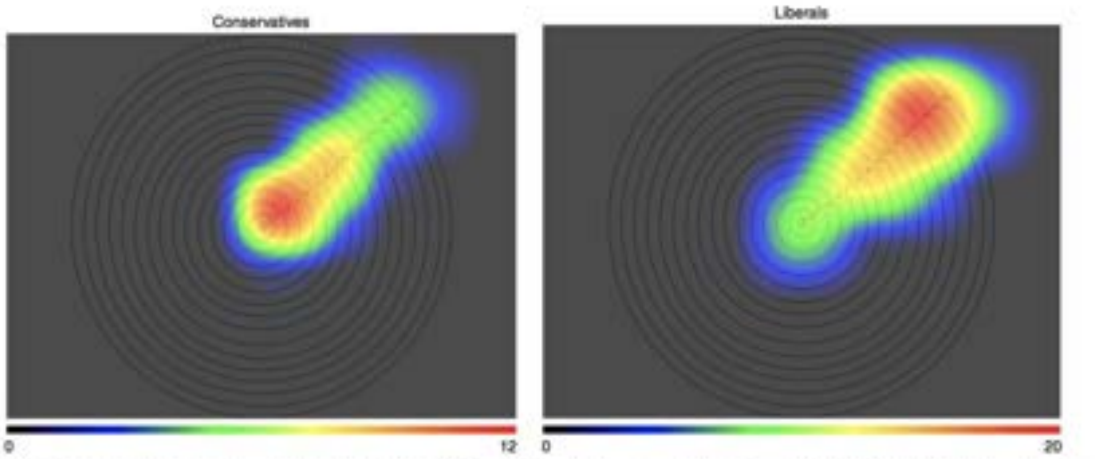
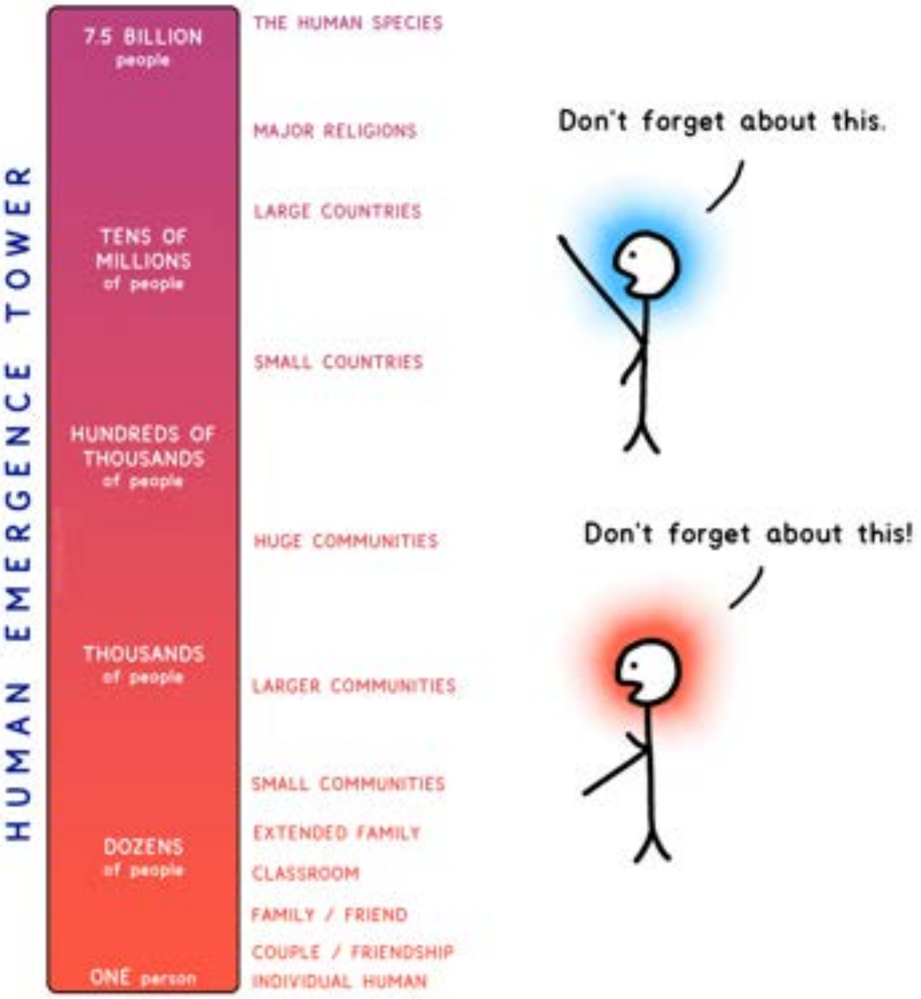


Fig. 5 Heatmaps indicating highest moral allocation by ideology, Study 3a. Source data are provided as a Source Data file. *Note.* The highest value on the heatmap scale is 20 units for liberals, and 12 units for conservatives. Moral circle rings, from inner to outer, are described as follows: (1) all of your immediate family, (2) all of your extended family, (3) all of your closest friends, (4) all of your friends (including distant ones), (5) all of your acquaintances, (6) all people you have ever met, (7) all people in your country, (8) all people on your continent, (9) all people on all continents, (10) all mammals, (11) all amphibians, reptiles, mammals, fish, and birds, (12) all animals on earth including paramecia and amoebae, (13) all animals in the universe, including alien lifeforms, (14) all living things in the universe including plants and trees, (15) all natural things in the universe including inert entities such as rocks, (16) all things in existence

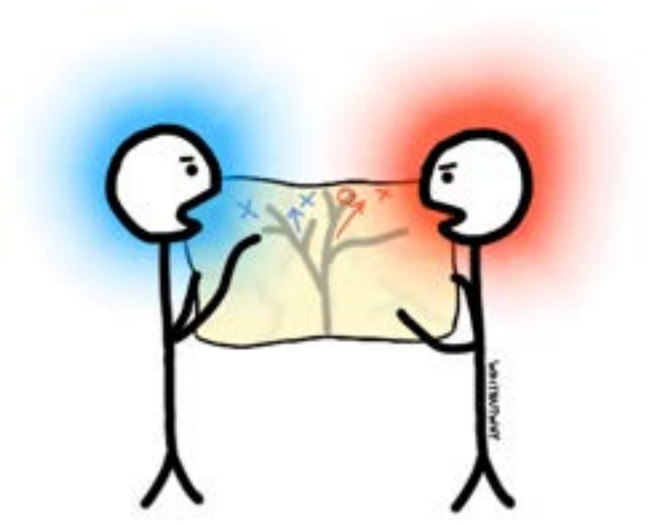
In our language, that translates to:


HUMAN EMERGENCE TOWER
7.5 BILLION people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
THOUSANDS of people
DOZENS of people
ONE person
THE HUMAN SPECIES
MAJOR RELIGIONS
LARGE COUNTRIES
SMALL COUNTRIES
HUGE COMMUNITIES
LARGER COMMUNITIES
SMALL COMMUNITIES
EXTENDED FAMILY
CLASSROOM
FAMILY / FRIEND
COUPLE / FRIENDSHIP
INDIVIDUAL HUMAN
Don't forget about this.
Don't forget about this!

The Left sometimes seems overly focused on the global and the universal, and the Right can be a broken record about individualism and community and family values—but when you remember that each is half of a two-part system, it all makes sense. They're both just doing their part of the job.

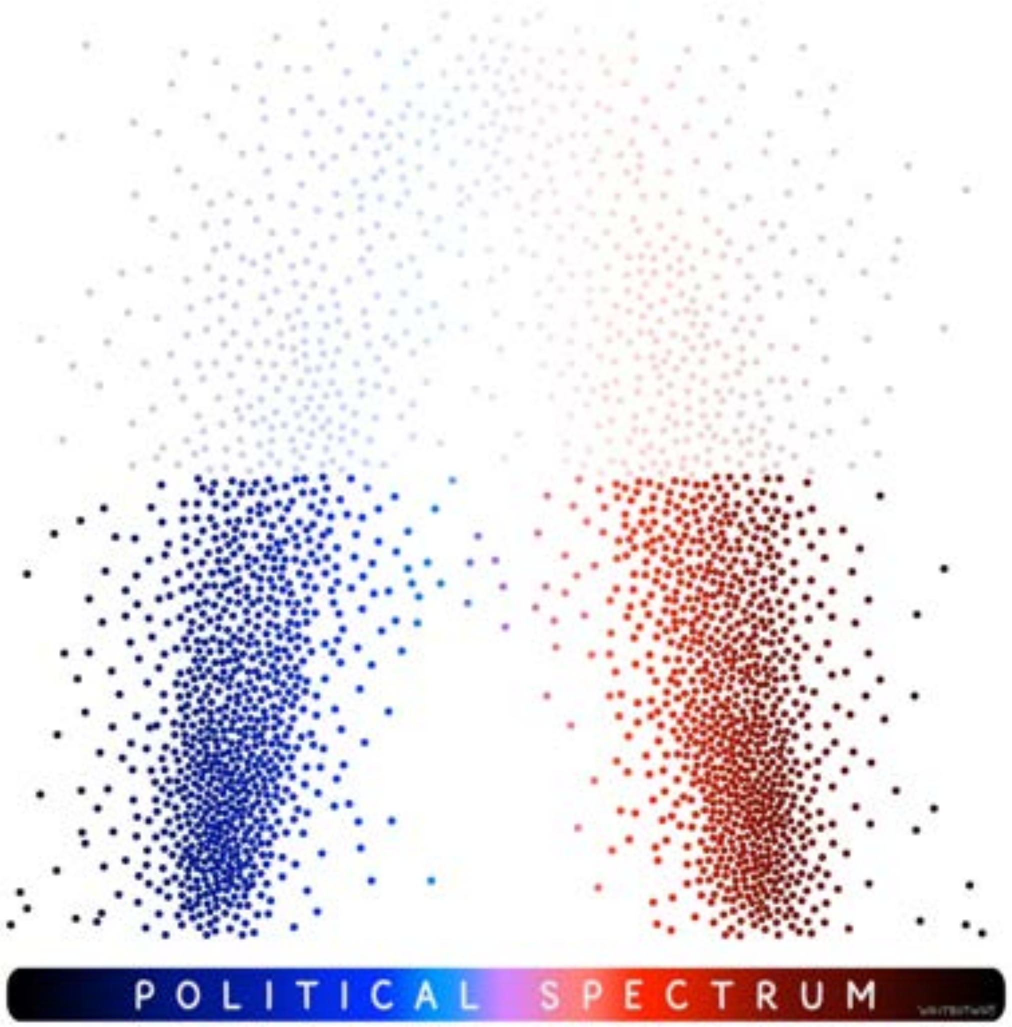
It's like a company having two founders, one who focuses more on operations and the other who thinks more about growth. Progressivism and Conservatism each worry about one half of every issue, and together, they make sure we're paying enough attention to everything that matters.

Every person involved in high-rung politics has a Primitive Mind in their head that wants to identify with political parties and treat politics like a tribal war. But up on the high rungs, the Higher Minds have the edge—one that they protect with a pervasive high-rung culture. The culture keeps everyone—even the more partisan people—aware that ultimately, they're all on the same team. As fierce as the debates between the high-rung giants can be, they know deep down that what they're really doing is working together to navigate their way up the mountain, towards a more perfect nation.



But politics is bottom-heavy. And even the high-rung-thinking grown-ups among us are prone to morph into childish low-rungers when it comes to politics.

When our Primitive Minds get ahold of our political thinking, our political worldview, values, and general mentality jump in a time machine back to hunter-gatherer times. Politics ceases to be about figuring out the truth and building a more perfect nation and becomes geared toward ideological confirmation and triumphing over the bad guys. We forget how to do the Value Games and revert to the old human ritual—the Power Games. That's why low-rung politics looks like this:



Politics done the Primitive Mind way leaves us in a place that can really only be called one thing.

Political Disney World

I'm pretty into most Disney movies. But especially *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King*. I've never been sure if those are objectively the best four Disney movies or if everyone just thinks whichever Disney movies happened to come out when they were between the ages of 7 and 12 are the best Disney movies. Either way, clearly those are the four best Disney movies. ⑤ ⑥

The thing about those movies, though, is that they're definitely fake movies, and definitely not real life. Right?

Like, kids might think Disney movies are the way the real world is, but everyone else knows that actually, the real world is not like Disney movies.

Right?

This is what I thought too—and then I started writing this post series.

After spending most of the last three years thinking about hardcore political partisans and their hardcore political Echo Chambers, it hit me: like 80% of the U.S. thinks they live inside a Disney movie.

I know it seems crazy.

I know it seems crazy that like 280,000,000 adult humans in 2019 think they're a beautiful Disney princess living inside a magical Disney castle perched on a sparkling Disney landscape on a fluffy Disney planet—

But that's the situation.

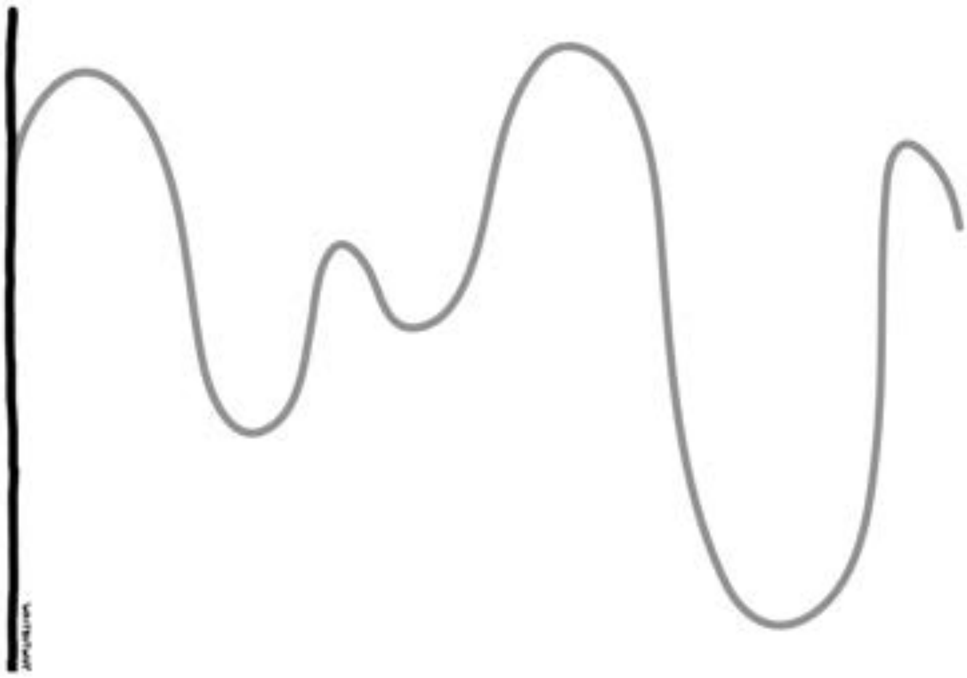
Let’s discuss.

Analog and Digital

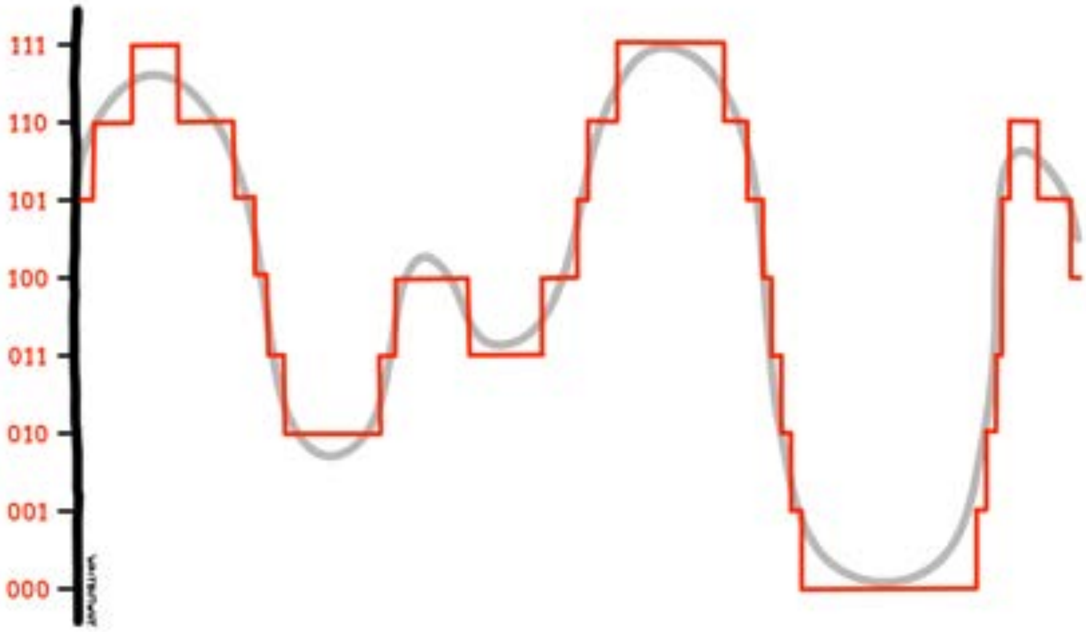
When I wrote about Neuralink, one of the concepts I got into was the difference between analog and digital information (brain waves are analog signals, but they need to be converted to digital information in order to be processed by a brain-machine interface).

The thing is, ever since then, I can’t get analog and digital out of my head. I see it as a metaphor for all kinds of things in the world. Here’s what I mean:

Analog is what actually goes on in the natural world. It’s a perfect representation of reality: information in its natural, messy state. Sound is a nice example.⑦ Sound is analog information that can be represented by a wave:

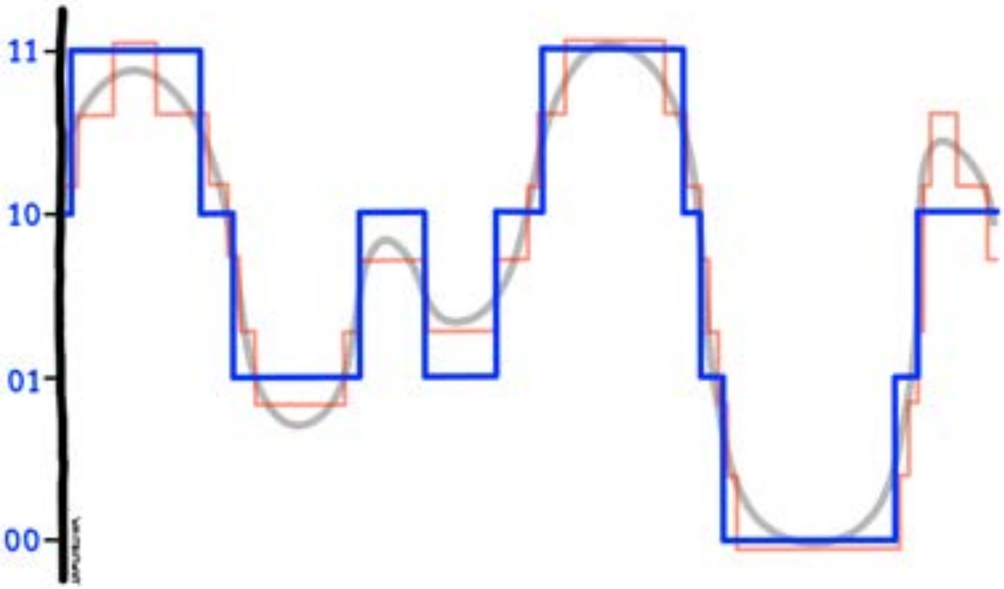


Digitization is a way to approximate analog information using a set of exact values. Like this:

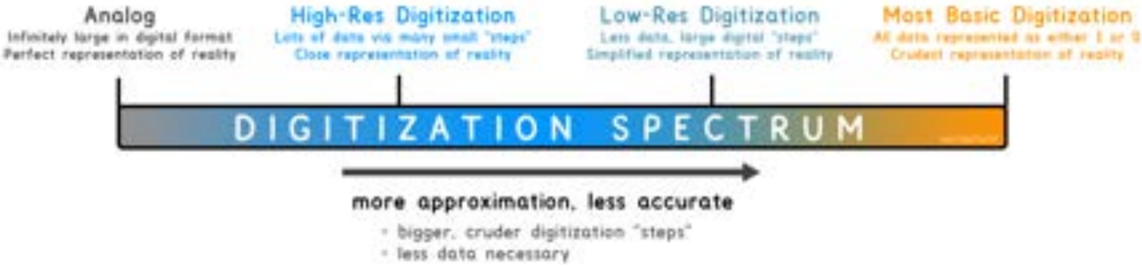


Information in digital format can be expressed as a series of 1s and 0s—an exact, binary format computers can process. When you listen to an mp3, you’re not listening to the true analog information made by the band’s instruments, you’re listening to a digitized version of the sounds—a big string of 1s and 0s that approximates the analog sound wave of the song.

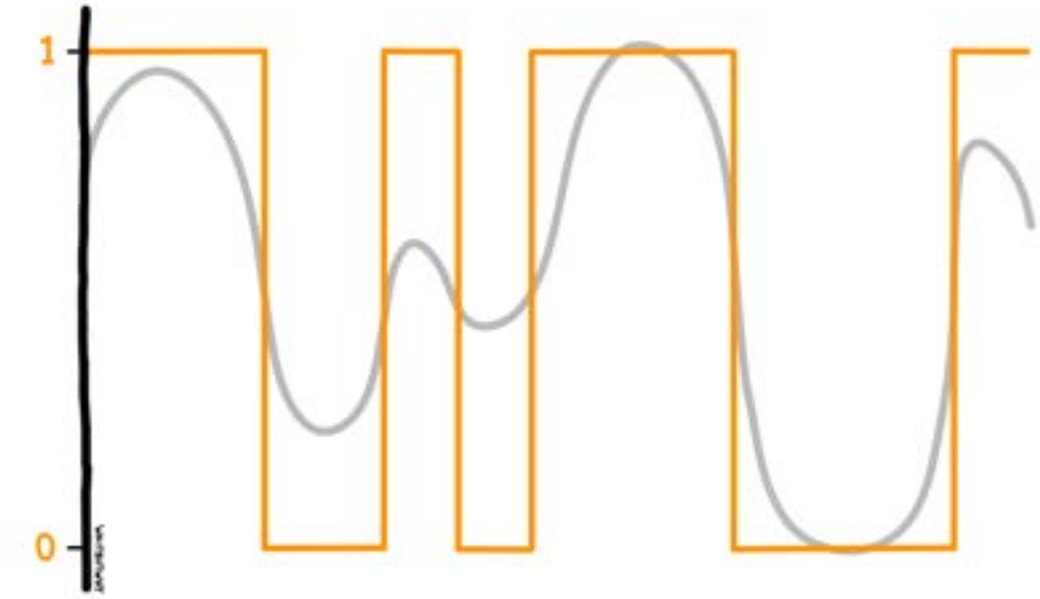
Above, the sound wave has been digitized to eight incremental values, by rounding all parts of the wave to the nearest value. Eight values can be expressed by three “bits” (a three-number string of 1s and 0s). You can compress an mp3 into a smaller file by making your approximations of the analog wave cruder—by making the digital “steps” *bigger*, using only four values. Now you only need two bits.



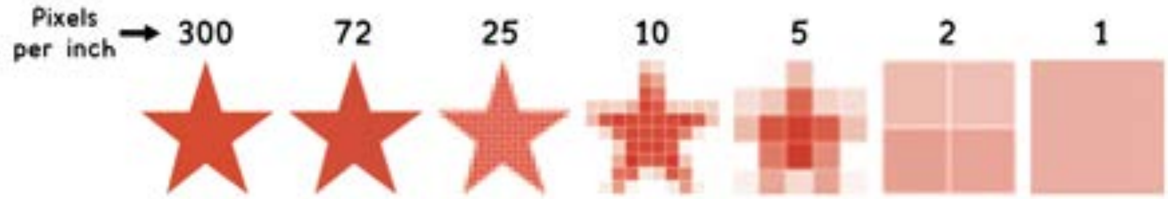
The more you compress a sound file, the smaller the mp3 file gets, because bigger steps require fewer 1s and 0s to express the sound. But the song also sounds worse, because more “rounding” is happening to make cruder approximations—i.e. the sound has become lower-res. The size and sound quality of a digitized file all depend on how far down the *digitization spectrum* you go in your conversion.


Analog
Infinitely large in digital format
Perfect representation of reality
High-Res Digitization
Lots of data via many small "steps"
Close representation of reality
Low-Res Digitization
Less data, large digital "steps"
Simplified representation of reality
Most Basic Digitization
All data represented as either 1 or 0
Crudest representation of reality
DIGITIZATION SPECTRUM
more approximation, less accurate
bigger, cruder digitization "steps"
less data necessary

At the far end of the digitization spectrum, you’d have only straight 1s and 0s—a tiny file that would sound almost nothing like the original song.



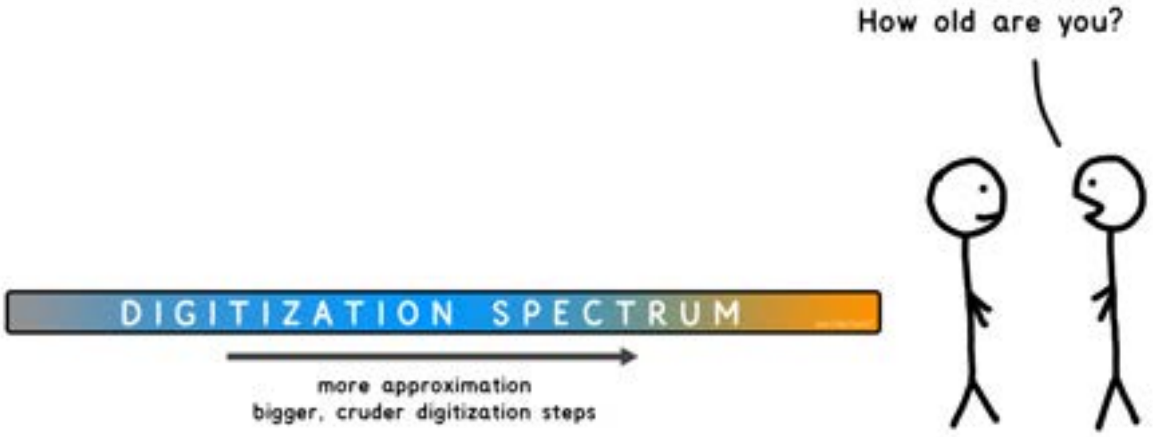
The same concept applies to visual information. Each pixel is a datapoint. You can make a photograph file smaller, and worse-looking, by making the pixels bigger.[4]

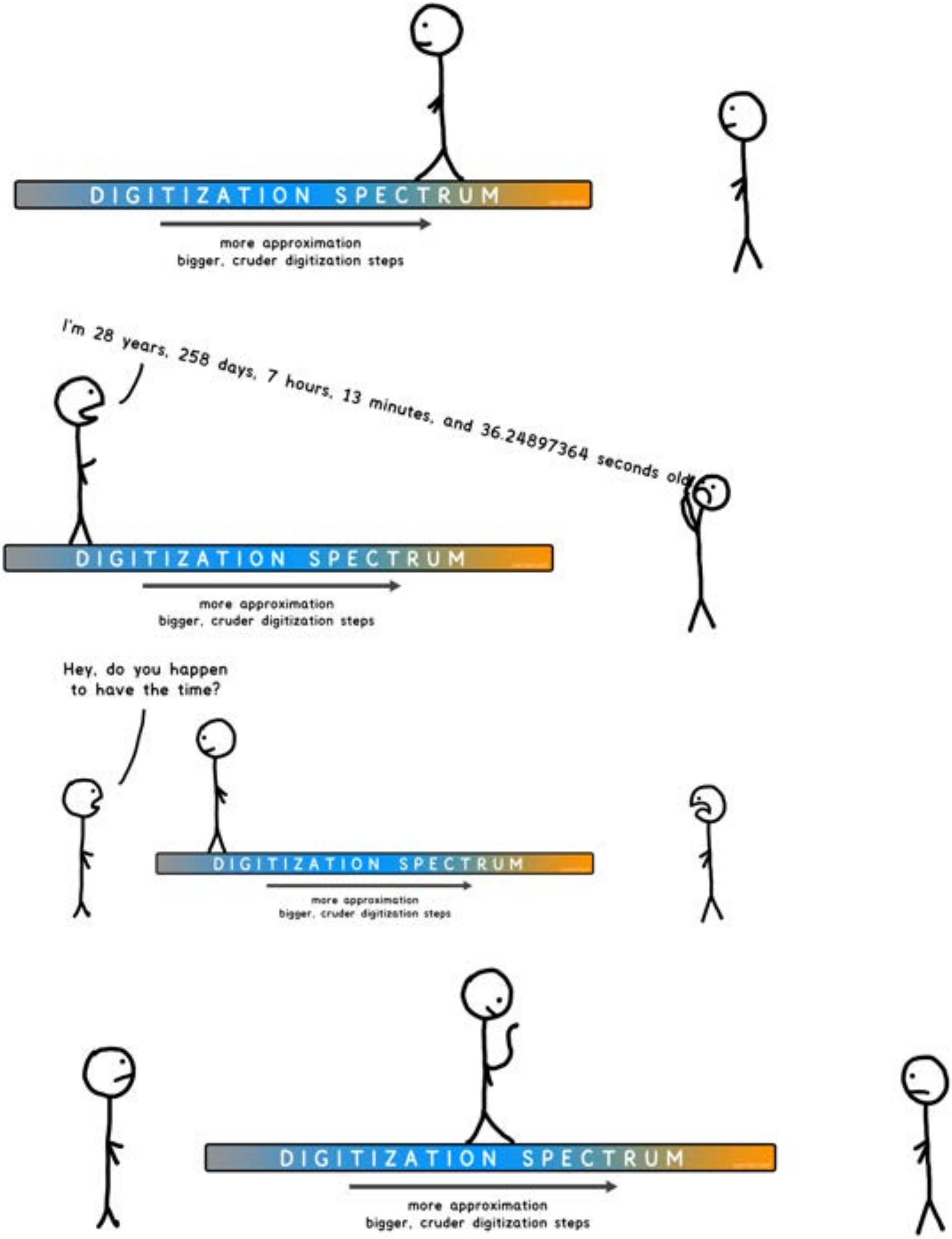

Pixels per inch →
300
72
25
10
5
2
1

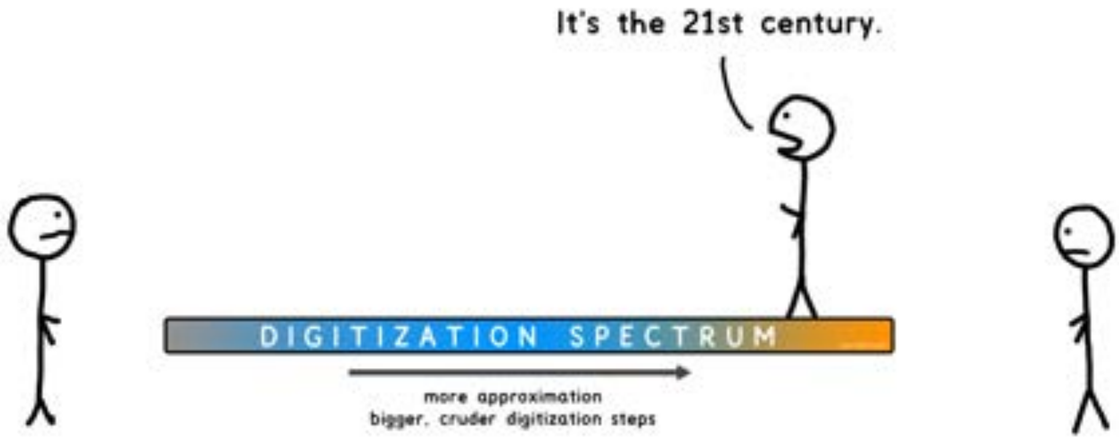
Another way to make it smaller is by reducing the real-world's infinite gradients of color to 10,000 gradients, or 100, or 15.

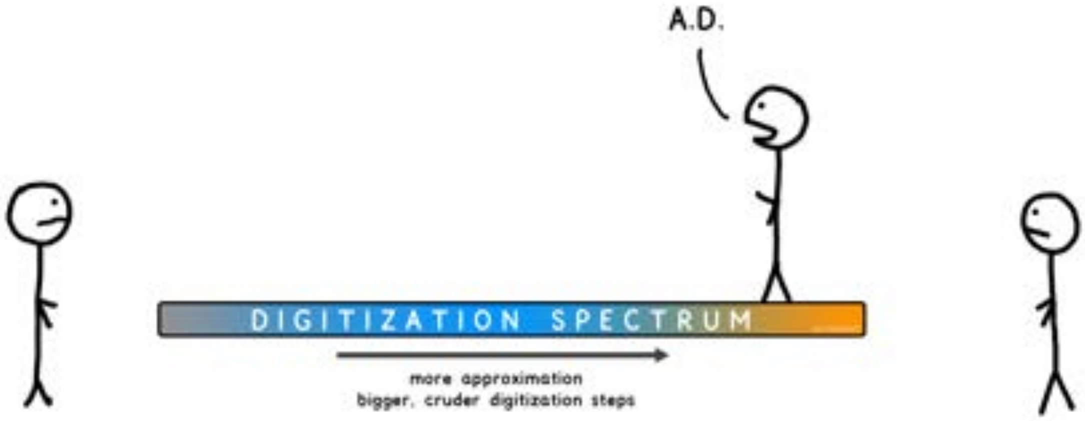
The typical goal when we work with audio and visual information isn't to try to go as high-res as possible—it's to try to find the sweet spot: the crudest approximation you can get to while still accomplishing your goal. You want to weigh the costs of high file size alongside the costs of quality reduction and choose the optimal compromise for whatever you're trying to do.

I've been thinking about this a lot because the general concept behind the digitization spectrum and the compromise it represents is relevant in all kinds of places. If someone asks you a time-related question, without realizing you're doing it, you'll answer the question at what you believe to be the optimal point along the spectrum. If you didn't do this, you'd be a weird person.


How old are you?
DIGITIZATION SPECTRUM
more approximation
bigger, cruder digitization steps


DIGITIZATION SPECTRUM
more approximation
bigger, cruder digitization steps
I'm 28 years, 258 days, 7 hours, 13 minutes, and 36.24897364 seconds old
DIGITIZATION SPECTRUM
more approximation
bigger, cruder digitization steps
Hey, do you happen to have the time?
DIGITIZATION SPECTRUM
more approximation
bigger, cruder digitization steps
DIGITIZATION SPECTRUM
more approximation
bigger, cruder digitization steps


It's the 21st century.
DIGITIZATION SPECTRUM
more approximation
bigger, cruder digitization steps

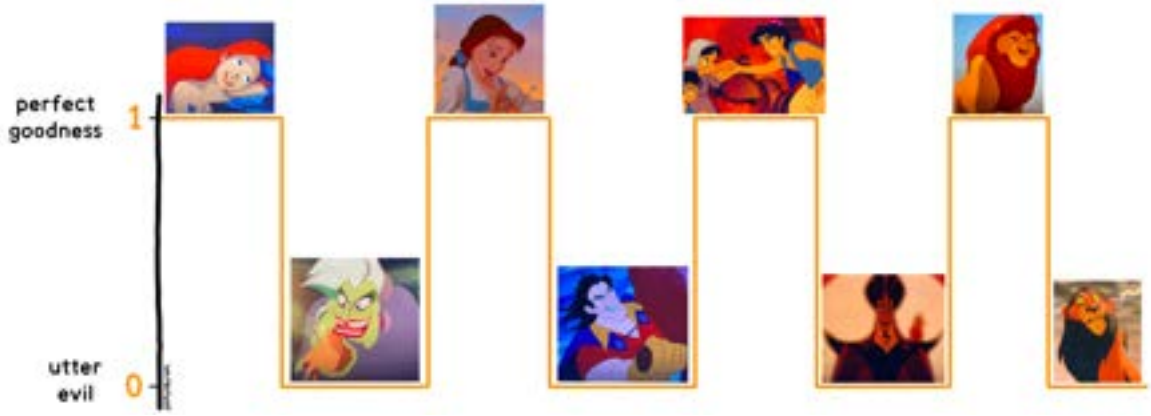

A.D.
DIGITIZATION SPECTRUM
more approximation
bigger, cruder digitization steps

In our thoughts and our conversations about life, society, politics, or anything else, we're always negotiating this same balance. Digitization/approximation, when used appropriately, is an incredibly handy efficiency tool that leverages the human mind's talent for pattern recognition. But digitization is inherently lossy—it intentionally does away with nuance—and the appropriate amount of digitization is up to whatever point where the lost nuance isn't important, meaningful information—or at least where the lost nuance is *less* important than the gained efficiency.

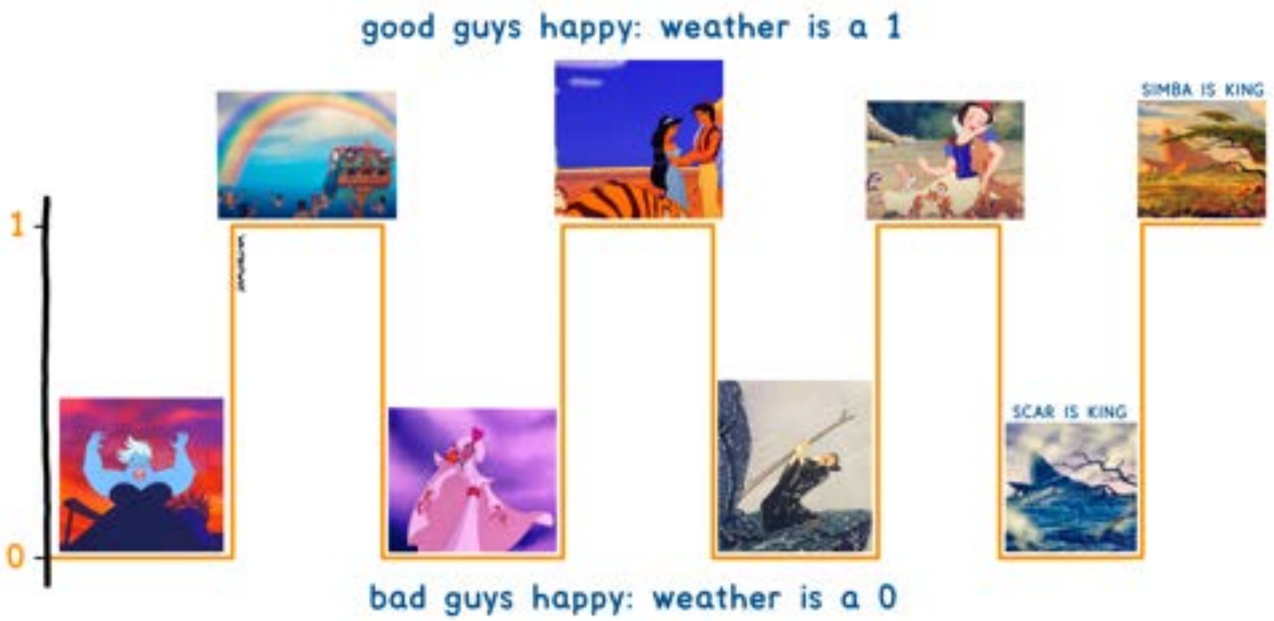
Back to Disney movies.

The real world is analog—gray, amorphous, and endlessly nuanced. What Disney movies do is they digitize the shit out of the real world. They go the full distance, converting all that gray into clean black-and-white 1s and 0s.

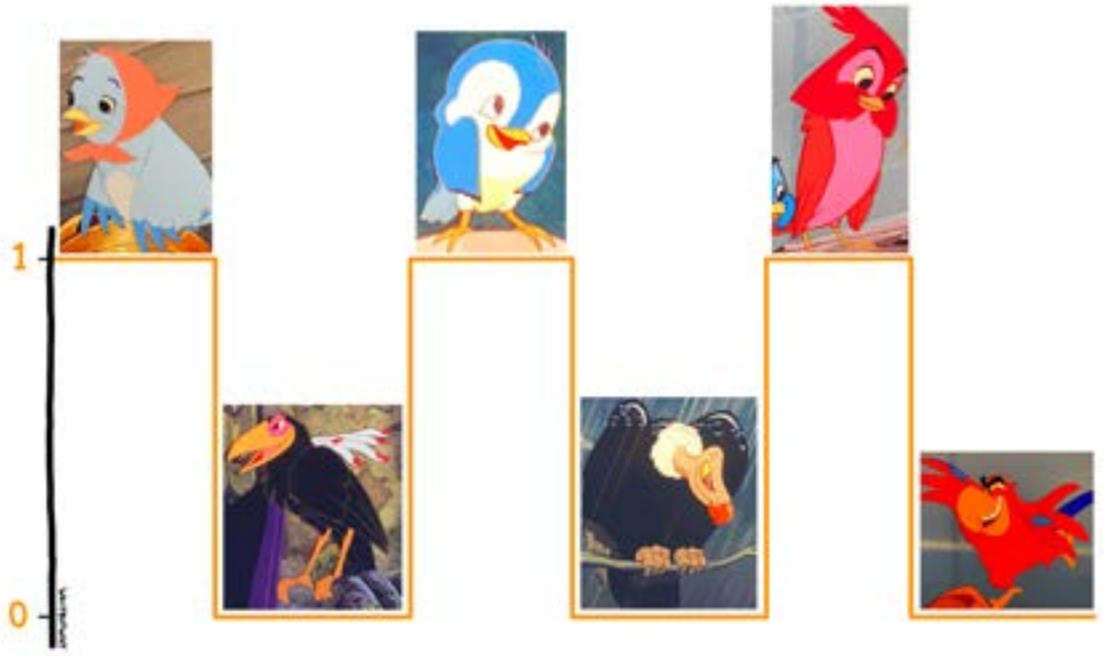
Real people are complex and flawed, full of faults but almost always worthy of compassion. Disney characters, on the other hand, are either entirely good or entirely bad.⑧



It goes beyond characters. In the real world, each turn of *events* is mired in potential positives and potential negatives, which is a mess to sort out. Disney movies get rid of that messiness. Something that happens is either clearly good, or it's clearly bad. Disney even digitizes the weather.



Disney digitization spares no one. Not even the birds.



Going full digital is logical in Disney movies. Their core audience is little kids, who aren't ready yet to sort through gray. Before a person learns to think in nuance, they first need to learn the basic concepts of good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, safe vs. dangerous, happy vs. sad. It's the same way you wouldn't teach a beginner poker player about the difference between how to slow play a big hand when you're in early vs. late position—you'd start by making sure they understood what a pair is, what folding means, and how the betting works. Going straight to the higher-level strategy would only confuse them.

If good Disney characters are shown to have deep character flaws, kids may misinterpret the message and think they're supposed to mimic those qualities.⑨⑩⑪⑫⑬ And if bad guys are humanized, kids will get upset when things turn out badly for them in the end.

Digitizing an analog world into perfect cartoon simplicity makes sense. In fictional Disney movies. Made for kids.

But over-digitizing the *real* world is a pretty bad idea—and unfortunately, that's exactly what the Primitive Mind likes to do. So low-rung politics ends up feeling, to its participants, just like a Disney movie.

Up on the high rungs, people know the world is a mess of analog complexity. They look out at that world, with clear eyes, and see fog. They also know that people are little microcosms of the messy world—each person an evolving gray smattering of virtues and flaws.

Political Disney World is much more fun. Everything is nice and crisp and perfectly digital. Good guys and bad guys, with good ideas and bad ideas, respectively. Good politicians and bad politicians with good policies and bad policies. Right and wrong. Smart and ignorant. Virtuous and evil. Safe and dangerous.

1s and 0s.

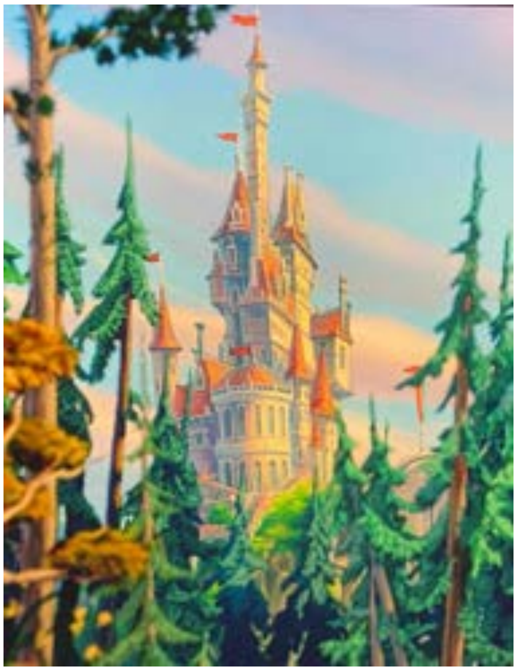
In the foggy minds of Political Disney World, it's all quite clear.

At the heart of every faction in Political Disney World (PDW) is a guiding narrative. PDW narratives are all-encompassing versions of reality—they come with their own worldview, their own telling of history, their own description of the present, and their own explanation for the causes behind all of it. A unique, customized Disney movie for the tribe, by the tribe.

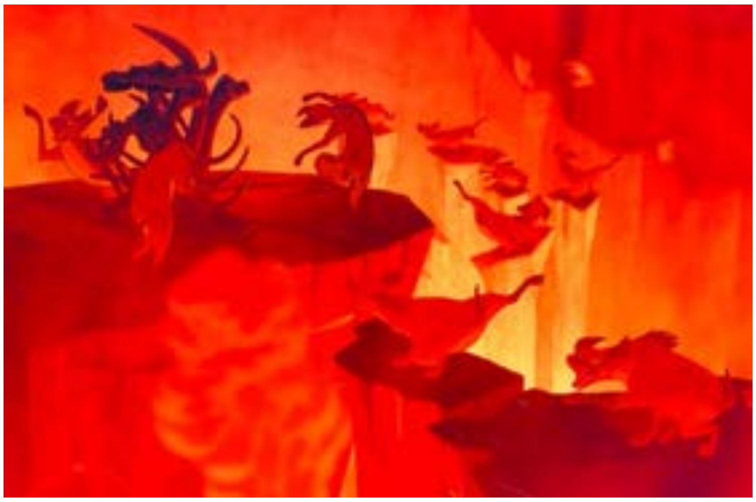
Every country has a Political Disney World, each with their own factions and their own narratives. I live inside "Political Disney World, U.S.," where there are two major factions: the low-rung Democrats and the low-rung Republicans. Their narratives digitize both people and ideas.

How PDW Narratives Digitize People

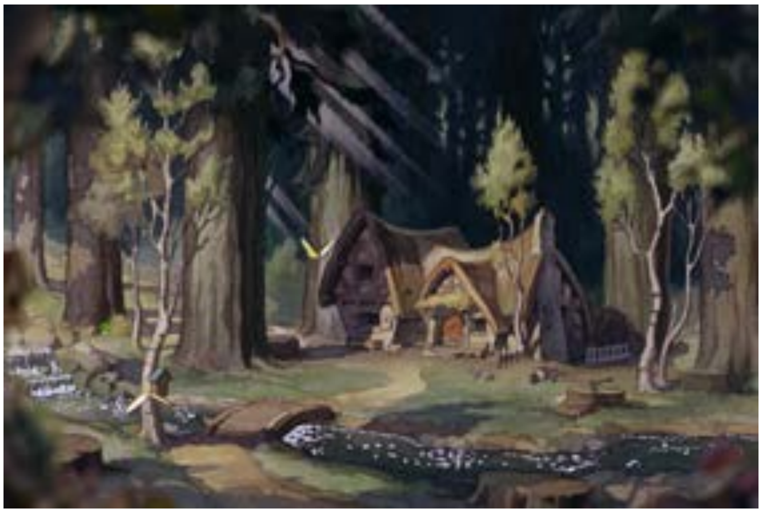
Central to each narrative are the main characters. In some stories, the protagonists live here—



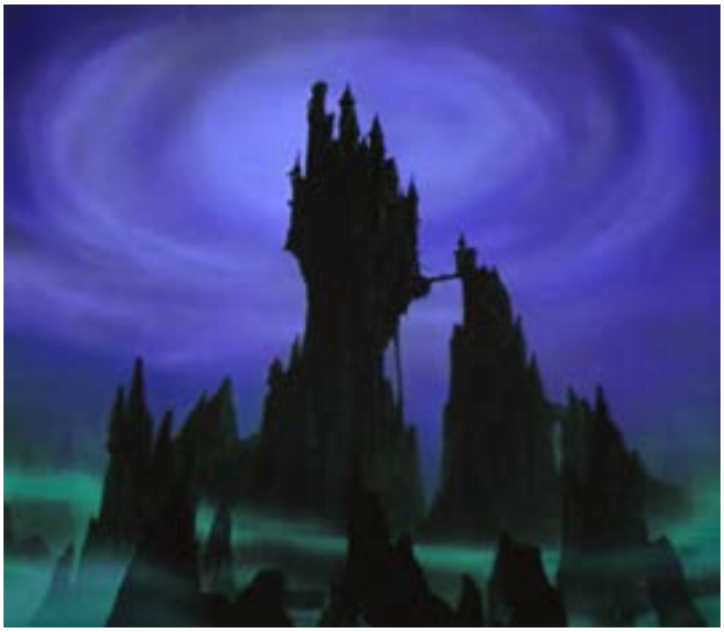
—while the bad guys are some version of these:



In other stories, the protagonists have this vibe—

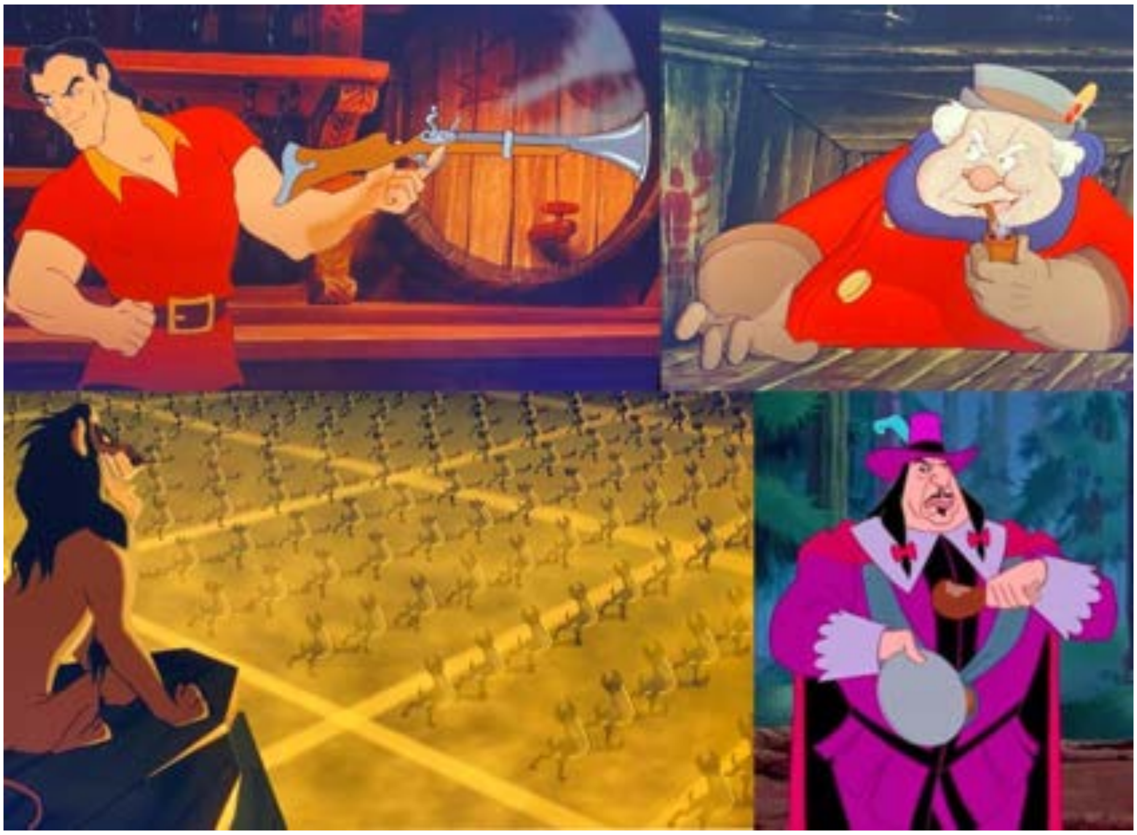


—while the bad guys are more doing this thing:



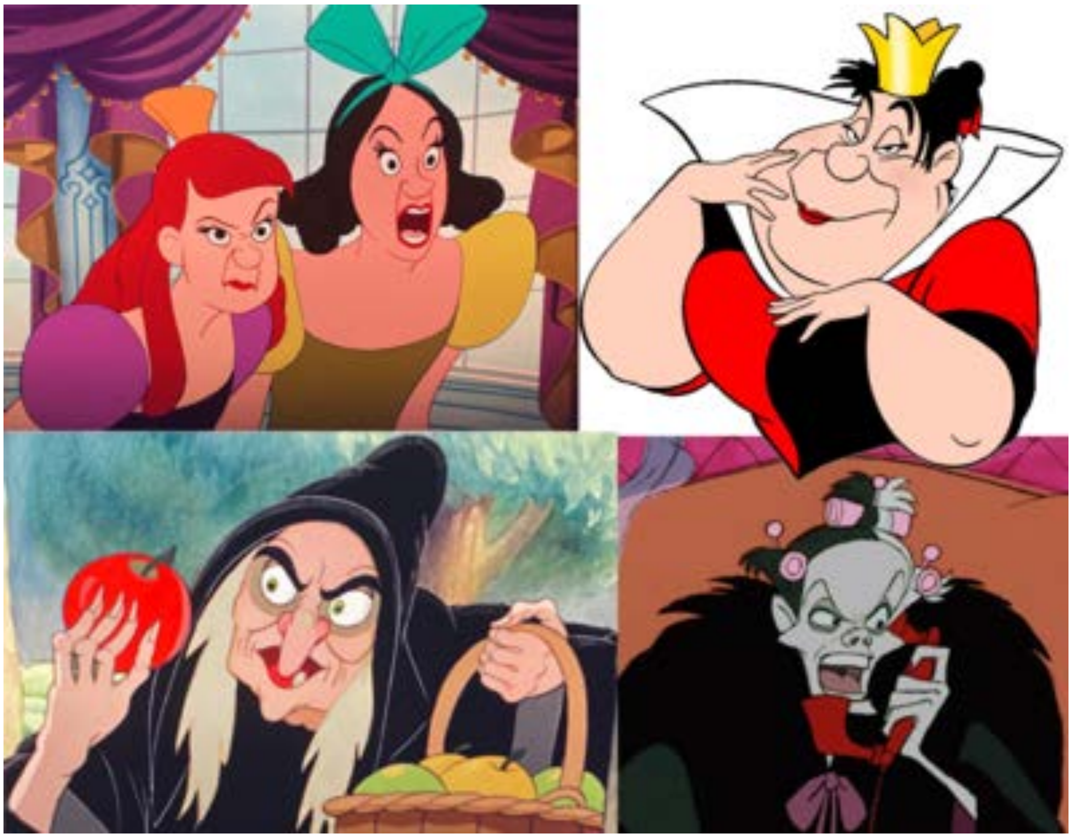
The important thing is that the characters can be divided into clear digital 1s and 0s, because that’s the kind of story the Primitive Mind understands the best. ⑭

In the U.S., when the Democrats imagine their Republican opponents, they tend to see them as Mr. Mean Man. Mr. Mean Man takes a few forms, usually one of these:



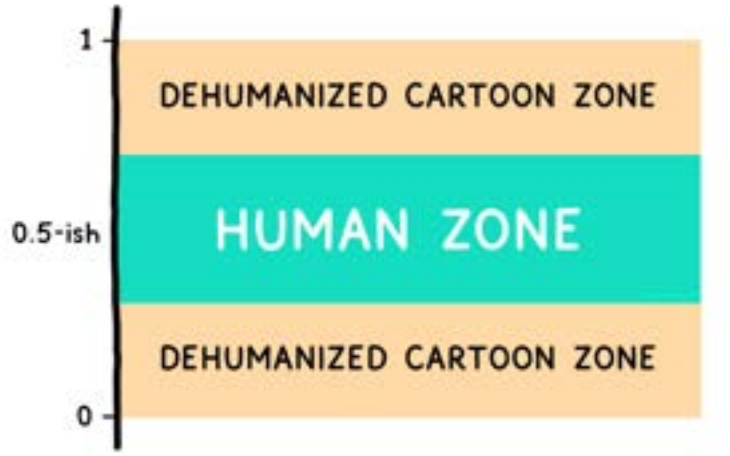
In the Democrat Disney kingdom, the traditional narrative tells the story of righteous Democrats in a continual struggle to pull the country upwards to a liberal utopia as mean, bigoted Mr. Mean Man uses all his weight to try to pull the country back down into an underwater Backwards Land of all-powerful corporations run by gun-swinging Nazi rapists.

On the other side of things, the low-rung Republican narrative paints their Them group—the Democrats—as Miss Shitty Pants, who might be depicted like any number of these:



In the Republican Disney kingdom, the standard story looks a little different. It's about the honest, hard-working families doing their best to stand their ground as the stupid, lazy, morally defunct Miss Shitty Pants tries her hardest to pull the country down into a dystopian hell of a tyrannical government run by ivory tower elitists that gives endless handouts to hordes of gay, Muslim immigrant terrorists.

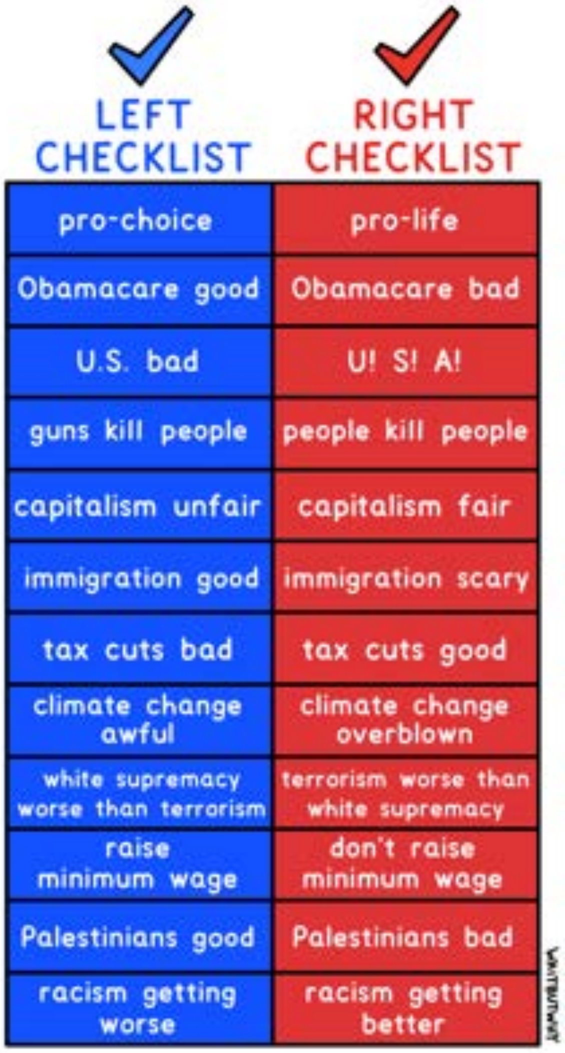
In high-rung politics, it's understood that people aren't 1s and 0s—they're all 0.5s, each in their own messy, complicated, unique way. And to people who see people as 0.5s, it's clear that PDW narratives not only dehumanize their opponents, they dehumanize *everybody* into fake cartoon people.



Digitizing people is a practice in *moral dualism*. The world of low-rung religion (Religious Disney World) does this all the time, with their gods and devils, their believers and infidels, their heaven and hell. Political Disney World does the same thing, just using different terms. A digital people mentality is why people in PDW rarely marry someone with opposing political views (something people in the high-rung political world do all the time). It's why people in PDW tend to feel an endless well of compassion and understanding for bullies, blunderers, and criminals within the protagonist group, while dropping all semblance of empathy for bad actors on the evil side.

How PDW Narratives Digitize Ideas

Political Disney World is also big on digitizing ideas, using one of PDW's defining features: the checklist. A narrative's checklist allows its thinkers to trade in the gray mess of nuanced "What Is," "What Should Be," and "How to Get from A to B" debates for a perfectly digitized list of binary issues with a Good, Correct Stance and an Evil, Wrong Stance. In the U.S. narratives, the current checklist includes items like these:



LEFT CHECKLIST	RIGHT CHECKLIST
pro-choice	pro-life
Obamacare good	Obamacare bad
U.S. bad	U! S! A!
guns kill people	people kill people
capitalism unfair	capitalism fair
immigration good	immigration scary
tax cuts bad	tax cuts good
climate change awful	climate change overblown
white supremacy worse than terrorism	terrorism worse than white supremacy
raise minimum wage	don't raise minimum wage
Palestinians good	Palestinians bad
racism getting worse	racism getting better

WAITBUTWHY

In each case, what is treated as a complex debate up on the high rungs digitizes out to perfect cartoon simplicity down below.

Some telltale signs that people are deriving their viewpoints from a checklist:

- They abide faithfully by the entire list of protagonist viewpoints, with no exceptions. They can scan down their side of the above checklist and, without hesitation, check off every box.
- For each issue, they tend to see the Them stance as having 0% merit.
- They have strong feelings about the *specific* issues highlighted by the checklist but have little to say about all the other issues that matter to their country. Issues played up in the media are like plotlines in the Disney movie narrative, which you'll hear constant emotional discussion about, while other issues are like plotlines that didn't make it into the movie's final cut—and in PDW, you won't hear people talking about them at all.

Anytime a bunch of adults are pretty sure that they live in a Disney movie, there can only be one explanation:

They've been sucked into the Power Games.

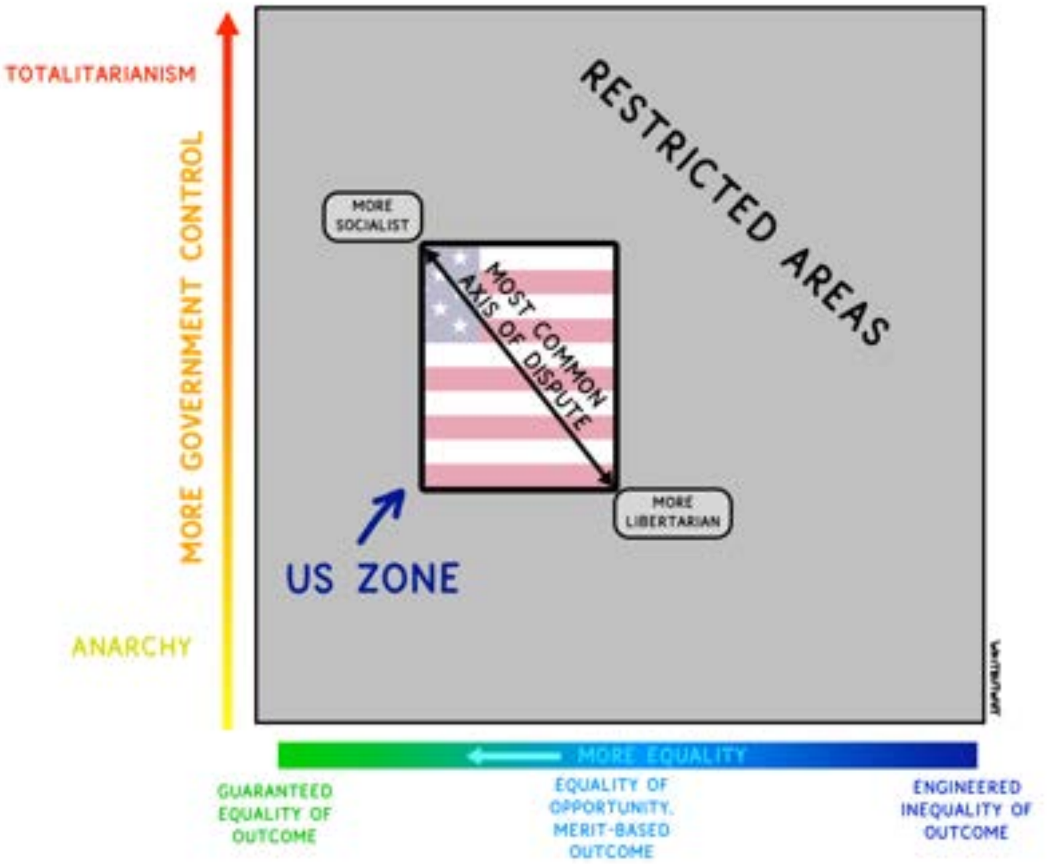
New World, Old Games

The Power Games, as you'll recall, is what humans evolved to do a long, long time ago. They're super simple, with the only rule being:

Everyone can do whatever they want, if they have the power to pull it off.

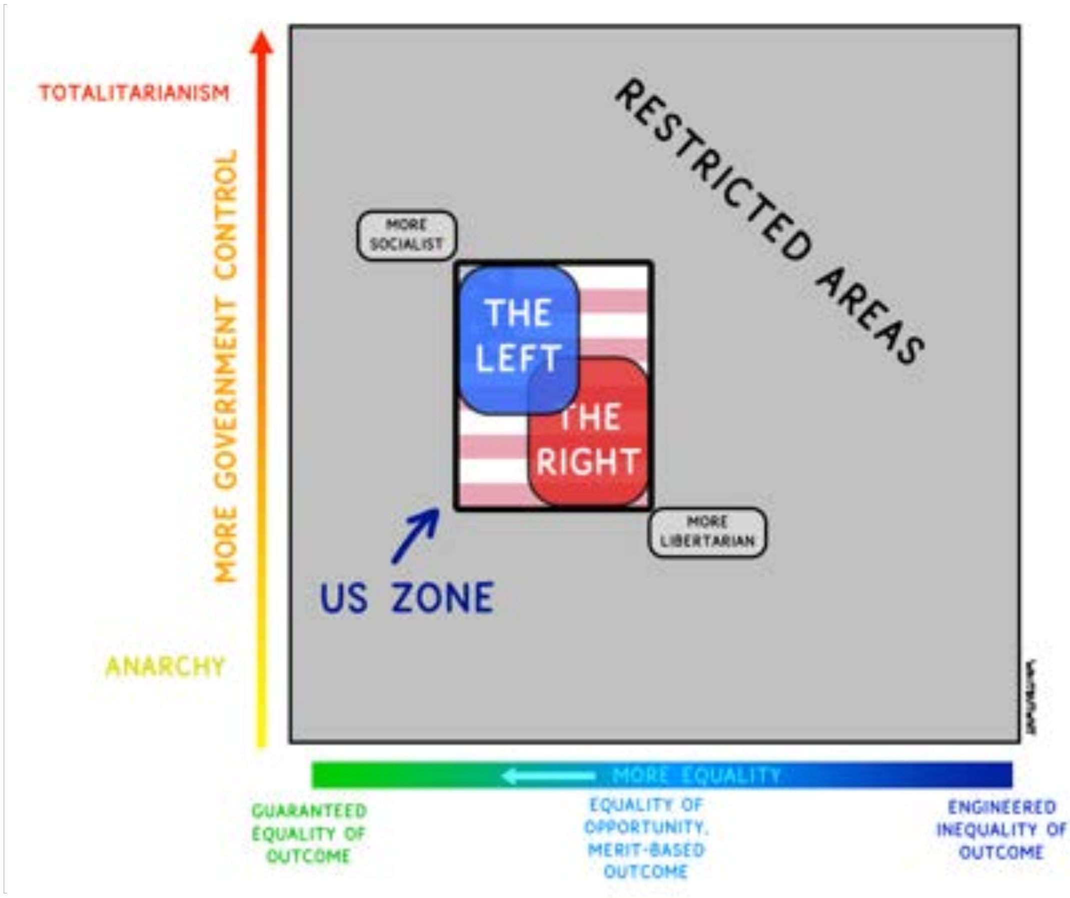
Our Primitive Minds only know how to make sense of the world through the Power Games lens—and when people in modern societies are playing the Power Games, it's a sign that Primitive Minds have hijacked the culture. Primitive Mind smoke is like a virus, and when a culture becomes permeated with it, it spreads through minds like an epidemic. Soon, almost everyone is convinced that they live in a Disney movie, where everything is 1s and 0s, and they're the good guys—allowing the Power Games to rule the day.

In Chapter 4, I laid out the American notion of fairness using this graph:


TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
RESTRICTED AREAS
MORE SOCIALIST
MOST COMMON AXIS OF DISPUTE
MORE LIBERTARIAN
US ZONE
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME

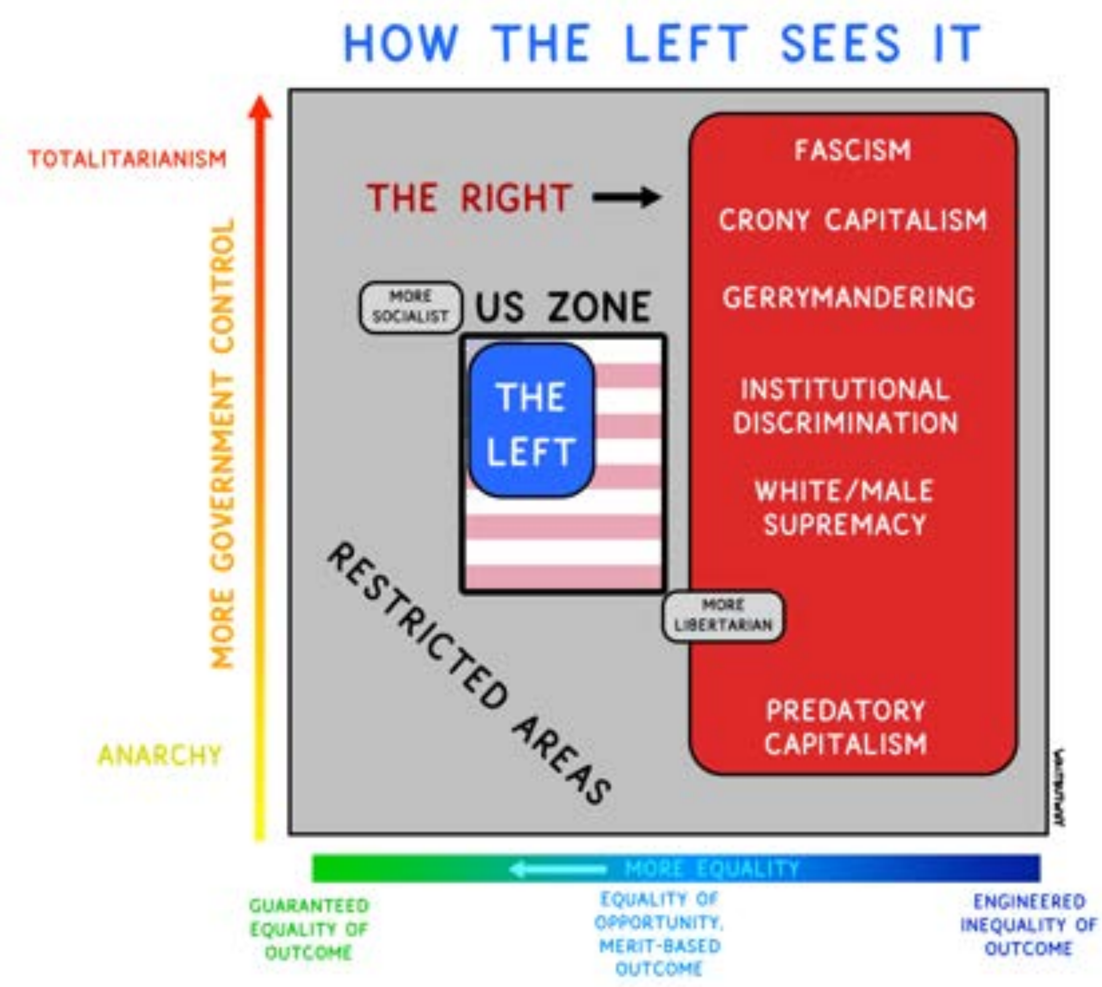
The graph is a bit complicated (go here for a full refresher), but the basic idea is that the U.S. is based on a freedom/equality compromise. The U.S. Zone represents the region of compromise that the country is supposed to stay in at all times. The areas outside the U.S. Zone are restricted because those areas would mean the Power Games has taken over.

In theory, the two American political parties are somewhere around here:

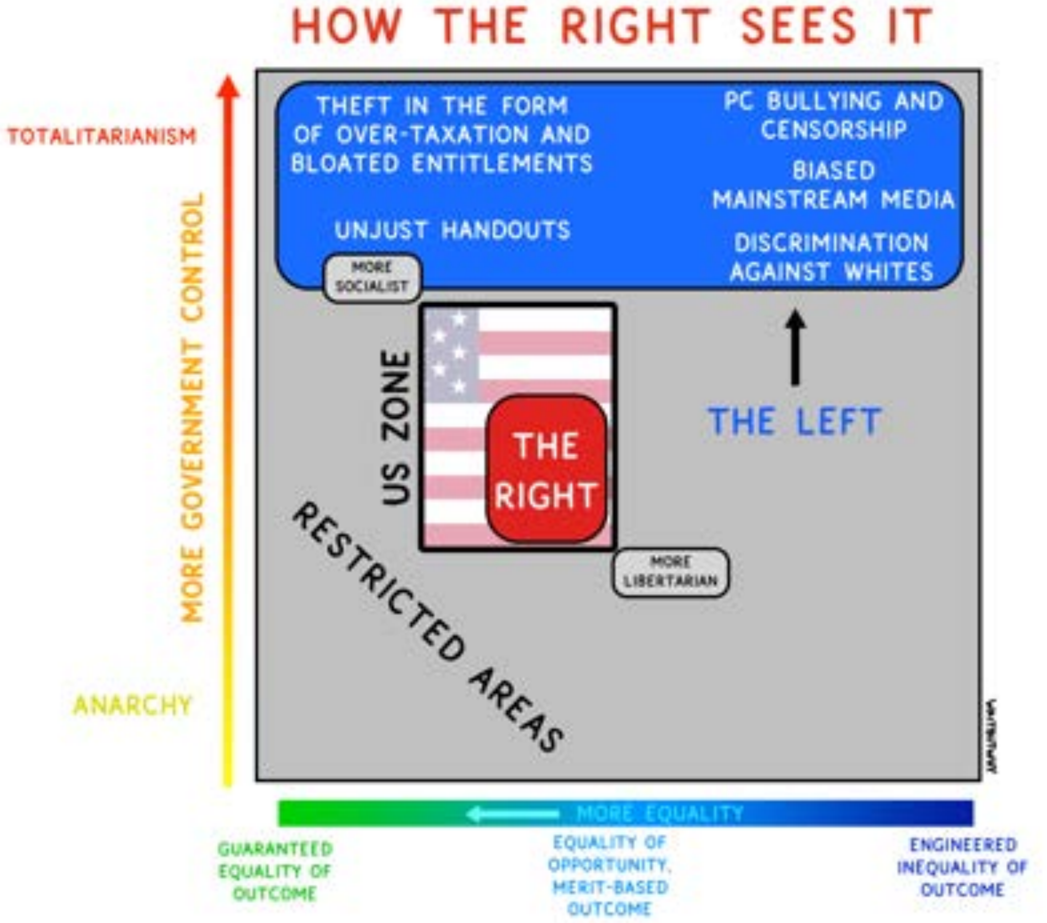

TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
RESTRICTED AREAS
MORE SOCIALIST
THE LEFT
THE RIGHT
MORE LIBERTARIAN
US ZONE
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME

Inevitably, a lot of Americans who read this chapter will yell at me and say I'm committing a gross false equivalency. Their reasoning will be that while their party is indeed behaving themselves neatly inside the U.S. Zone, the *other* party is playing all kinds of Power Games in the restricted areas.

People on the Left will say it's like this:


HOW THE LEFT SEES IT
TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
THE RIGHT
MORE SOCIALIST
US ZONE
THE LEFT
MORE LIBERTARIAN
RESTRICTED AREAS
FASCISM
CRONY CAPITALISM
GERRYMANDERING
INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION
WHITE/MALE SUPREMACY
PREDATORY CAPITALISM
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME

People on the Right will tell this story:


HOW THE RIGHT SEES IT
TOTALITARIANISM
MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL
ANARCHY
THEFT IN THE FORM OF OVER-TAXATION AND BLOATED ENTITLEMENTS
UNJUST HANDOUTS
PC BULLYING AND CENSORSHIP
BIASED MAINSTREAM MEDIA
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WHITES
MORE SOCIALIST
US ZONE
THE RIGHT
THE LEFT
MORE LIBERTARIAN
RESTRICTED AREAS
MORE EQUALITY
GUARANTEED EQUALITY OF OUTCOME
EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, MERIT-BASED OUTCOME
ENGINEERED INEQUALITY OF OUTCOME

The thing is though, there are ample studies that suggest both parties are pretty similarly intolerant and similarly biased. Whether one is a bit worse than the other in any given year or decade is less important to our discussion than the fact that both are bad.

Both parties are a bit challenged on the adult vs. grown-up thing, buying fully into the middle-school-esque “in-group/out-group” social structure—a classic sign of the Power Games. And both are totally down with gross negative generalizations of the out-group (John Cleese explains further).

On both sides of PDW, people would struggle to name three policies they like of a president on the Them side of things and three legitimate areas where an Us president has gone wrong—even though every president does a lot of good and bad things. People on both sides tend to believe that if only everyone in the country shared their viewpoints and values, all national problems would be solved. All signs of simplistic, tribal thinking. All signs of the Power Games.

Probably the clearest sign of the Power Games is rampant hypocrisy. High-rung thinking is all about values and principles, and there’s an effort to remain consistent about them in the face of the inevitable tug of tribal attachment. But the Power Games has only one principle: power. As George Orwell succinctly said it in *1984*: “The object of power is power.”

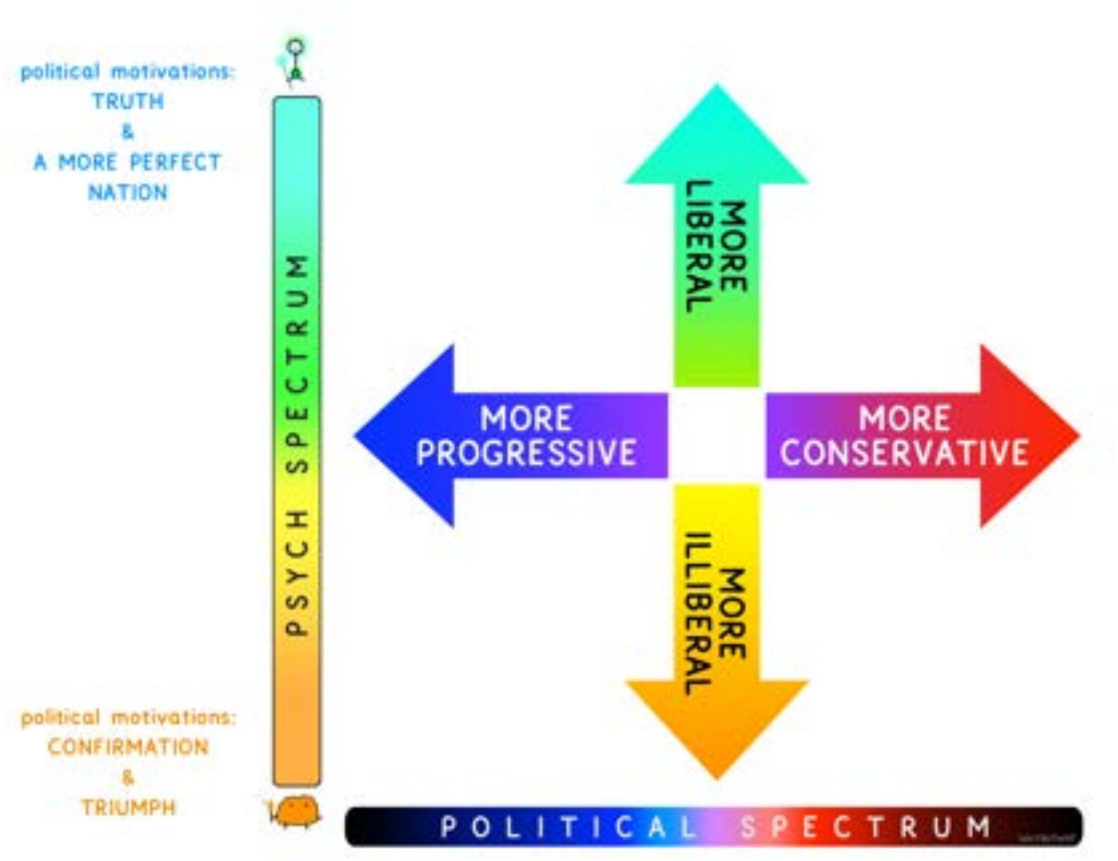
Channeling more Orwell, writer Andrew Sullivan sums it up nicely:

George Orwell famously defined this mind-set as identifying yourself with a movement, “placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests.” It’s typified, he noted, by self-contradiction and indifference to reality. And so many severe critics of George W. Bush’s surveillance policies became oddly muted when Obama adopted most of them; Democrats looked the other way as Obama ramped up deportations to levels higher than Trump’s rate so far. Republicans, in turn, were obsessed with the national debt when Obama was in office, despite the deepest recession in decades. But the minute Trump came to power, they couldn’t be more enthusiastic about a tax package that could add trillions of dollars to it. No tribe was more federalist when it came to marijuana laws than liberals; and no tribe was less federalist when it came to abortion. Reverse that for conservatives. For the right-tribe, everything is genetic except homosexuality; for the left-tribe, nothing is genetic except homosexuality. During the Bush years, liberals inveighed ceaselessly against executive overreach; under Obama, they cheered when he used his executive authority to alter immigration laws *and impose new environmental regulations by fiat.*

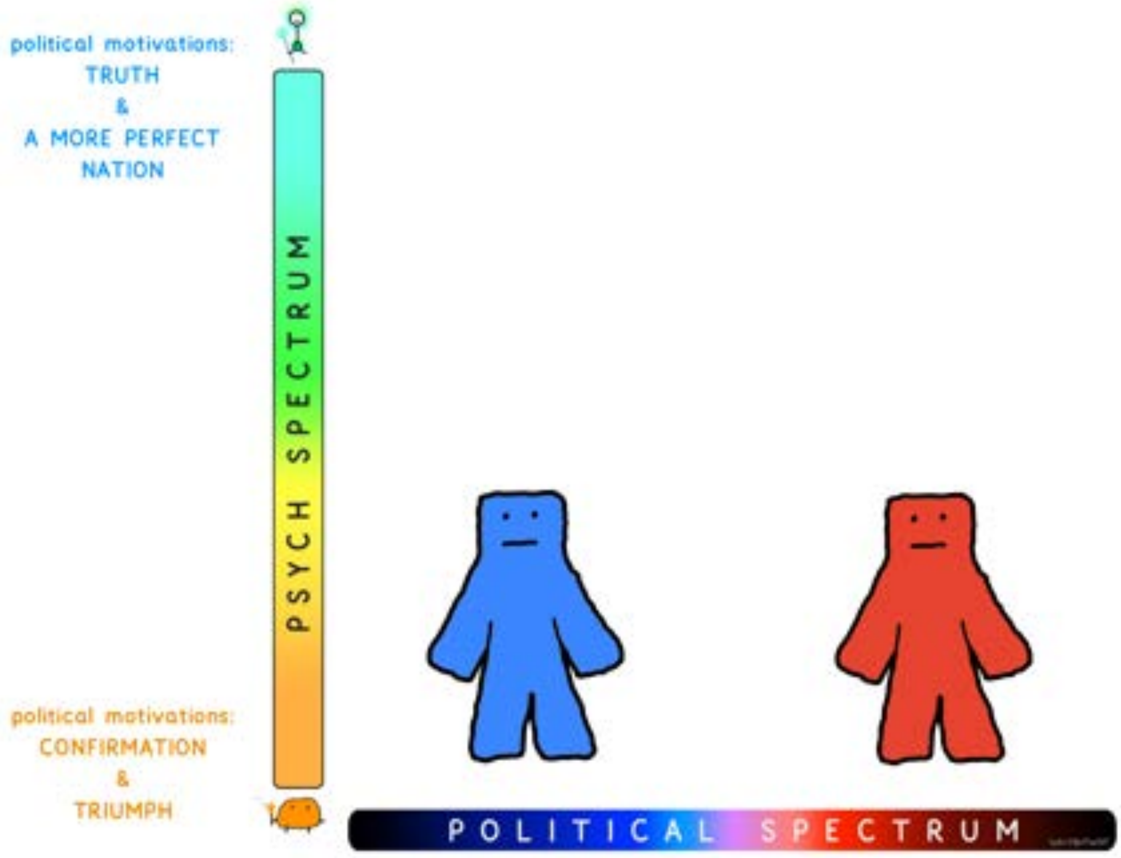
In the Power Games, principles will lose to power every time. While people in high-rung politics are criticized for flip-flopping on their *principles* (as in the above paragraph), PDW flip-floppers are criticized for the opposite reason: you get in trouble on the low rungs for flip-flopping on *policy positions* in an effort to stay *consistent* with principles. Integrity matters up high, loyalty matters down below.

Liberalism itself is a set of principles, and in Political Disney World, people won't hesitate to go illiberal if it helps with tribal victory. Beyond common PDW illiberal practices like selective empathy or being selectively supportive of core liberal rights like free speech, there's the illiberal way people in PDW view democracy. When people in low-rung politics lose an election, they scream that they're disenfranchised, they insist that the system must be broken,[15] and they have an impulse to overthrow the opposition leader. When their candidate wins, they say things like, "faith in democracy restored!"—i.e. democracy is only working when my candidate wins. This isn't the mindset of someone who believes in democracy—it's the mindset of someone who believes in dictatorship but who is stuck in a democracy.

This is why it's bad that the U.S. has come to redefine the word "liberal" as a synonym for "progressive." While "progressive" is an x-axis word, "liberal" is a *y-axis* concept.


political motivations:
TRUTH
&
A MORE PERFECT NATION
PSYCH SPECTRUM
MORE LIBERAL
MORE PROGRESSIVE
MORE CONSERVATIVE
MORE ILLIBERAL
political motivations:
CONFIRMATION
&
TRIUMPH
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

When we do a "zoom-up" on Emergence Tower, we're reminded that what feels to PDW members like being a protagonist in a Disney movie is actually just being a uniform cell in a big, dumb, Power Games giant.

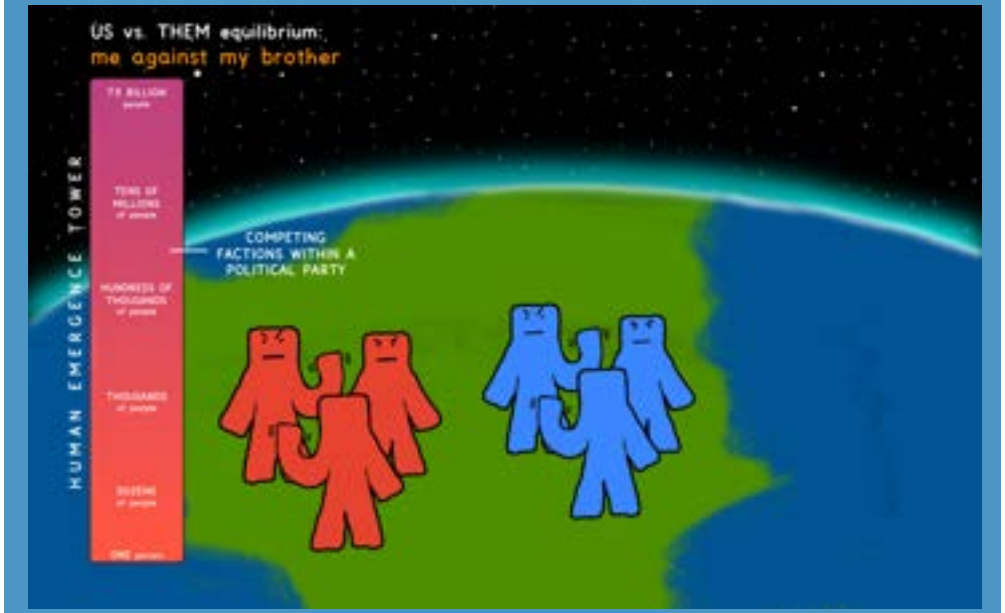

political motivations:
TRUTH
&
A MORE PERFECT NATION
PSYCH SPECTRUM
political motivations:
CONFIRMATION
&
TRIUMPH
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

Variations in the Us/Them Divide Blue Box

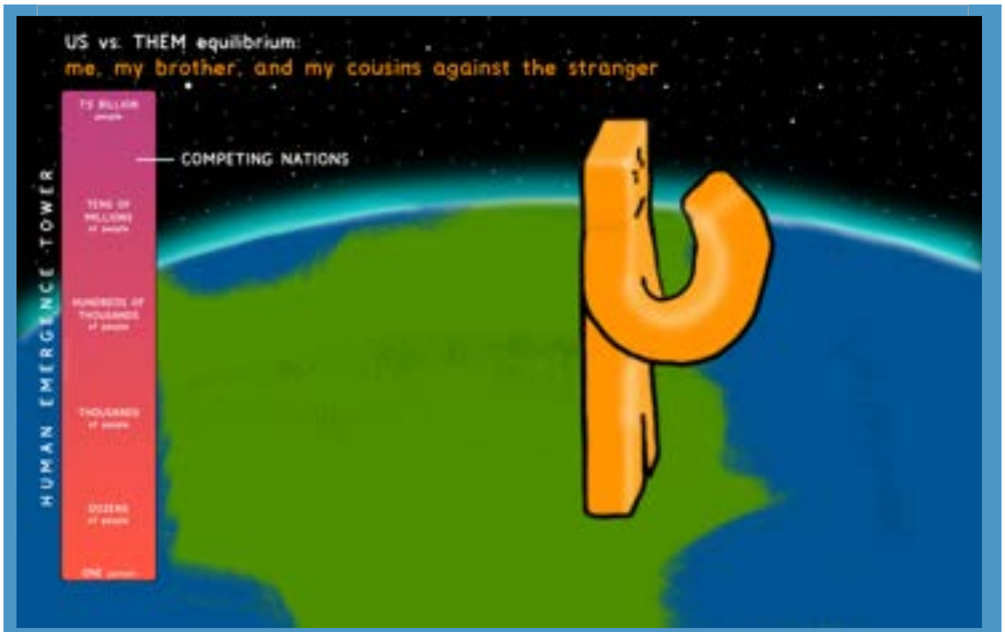
People with a Power Games mentality will almost always divide into the Us vs. Them format—the thing that varies is how big the giants in question are. This is what that Bedouin proverb is getting at (feel free to refresh yourself on my cartoon depiction):

> *Me against my brothers; my brothers and me against my cousins; my cousins, my brothers, and me against strangers.*

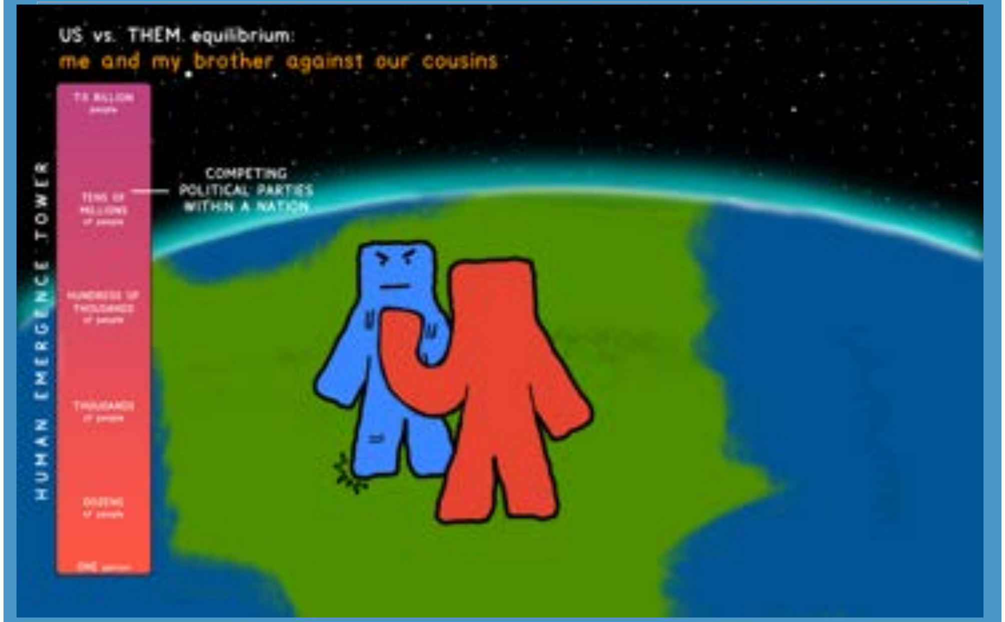
During primary season of elections in the U.S. the Us/Them divides move down Emergence Tower to the "me against my brother" level, as factions within each side go at it.


US vs. THEM equilibrium:
me against my brother
HUMAN EMERGENCE TOWER
7.5 BILLION people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
THOUSANDS of people
DOZENS of people
ONE person
COMPETING FACTIONS WITHIN A POLITICAL PARTY

During a war, the Us/Them divide moves upward on Emergence Tower to the "whole family against strangers" level, temporarily uniting the country as one big Us.


US vs. THEM equilibrium:
me, my brother, and my cousins against the stranger
HUMAN EMERGENCE TOWER
7.5 BILLION people
COMPETING NATIONS
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
THOUSANDS of people
DOZENS of people
ONE person

But those are special circumstances. In normal times, the U.S. likes to be at the “cousins” level in between, where one half of the U.S. is pitted against the other half.


US vs. THEM equilibrium:
me and my brother against our cousins
HUMAN EMERGENCE TOWER
7.5 BILLION people
COMPETING POLITICAL PARTIES WITHIN A NATION
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
THOUSANDS of people
DOZENS of people
ONE person

Since this is the norm, we’ll focus on these two big national factions.

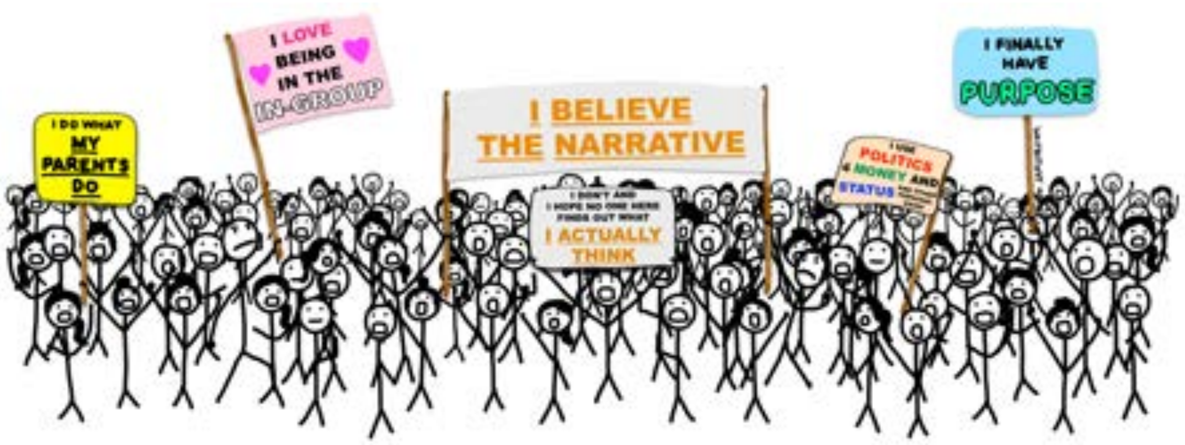
Keeping the giants glued together

Each giant’s guiding narrative, which feels so much like reality to the people inside it, is just another superglue story.

If high-rung politics is micro-divided and macro-united (people disagree, giants work together), low-rung politics is the opposite: micro-united (people in a giant all agree) and macro-divided (giants are enemies with other giants). Keeping things this way is the critical objective of the superglue story:

Keeping things micro-united

A low-rung tribe is like an ant colony, and it needs all of the ants in solid agreement and working together. This isn’t always easy, given the motley crew that makes up a PDW faction. This crew includes a few classic types, each there for their own reasons.


I DO WHAT MY PARENTS DO
I LOVE BEING IN THE IN-GROUP
I BELIEVE THE NARRATIVE
I DON'T AND I HOPE NO ONE HERE FINDS OUT WHAT I ACTUALLY THINK
I USE POLITICS 4 MONEY AND STATUS
I FINALLY HAVE PURPOSE

Some prominent members of any PDW faction:

Zealots: People who believe every word of the narrative.

Tribalists: People who love being part of a big, powerful in-group and talking shit about the out-group. These people were usually either super popular in middle school and use politics to relive their glory days or super unpopular in middle school and use politics to revel in the other side of things.

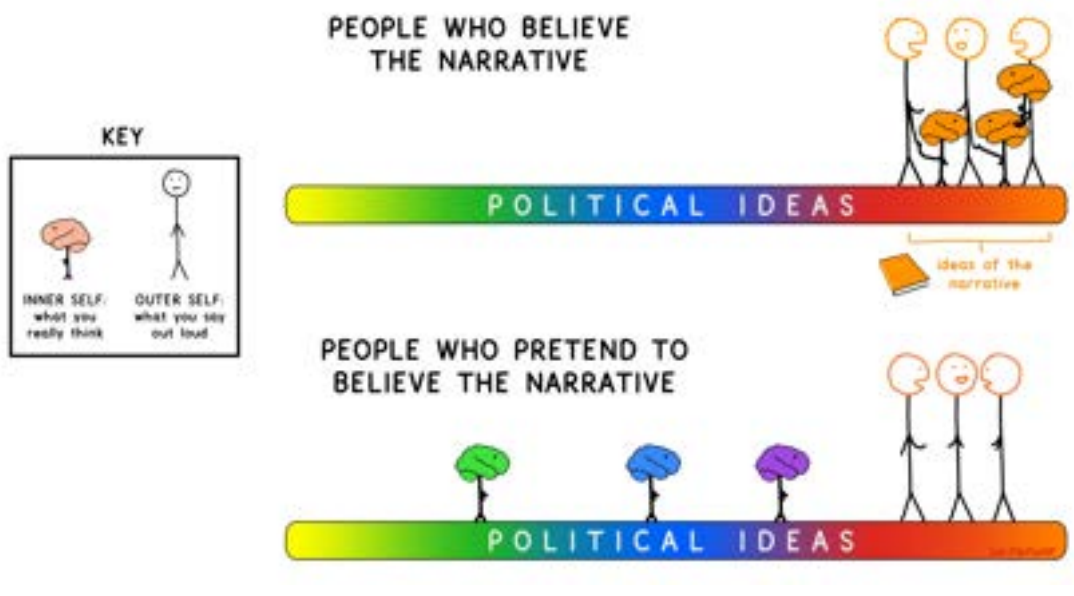
Opportunists: People who use politics to gain social status or career advancement, to sell books, to get clicks, or any other number of ways politics can generate profit.

Soul-searchers: People who have been convinced that politics can be a get-rich-quick scheme for meaning, purpose, intellectual conviction, moral conviction, self-esteem boosting, or any other parts of life that are, in reality, far harder than that to achieve. These people are also great candidates to buy weight-loss pills guaranteed to make you skinny with no work and snake oil balm guaranteed to make your hair grow back or your money back.

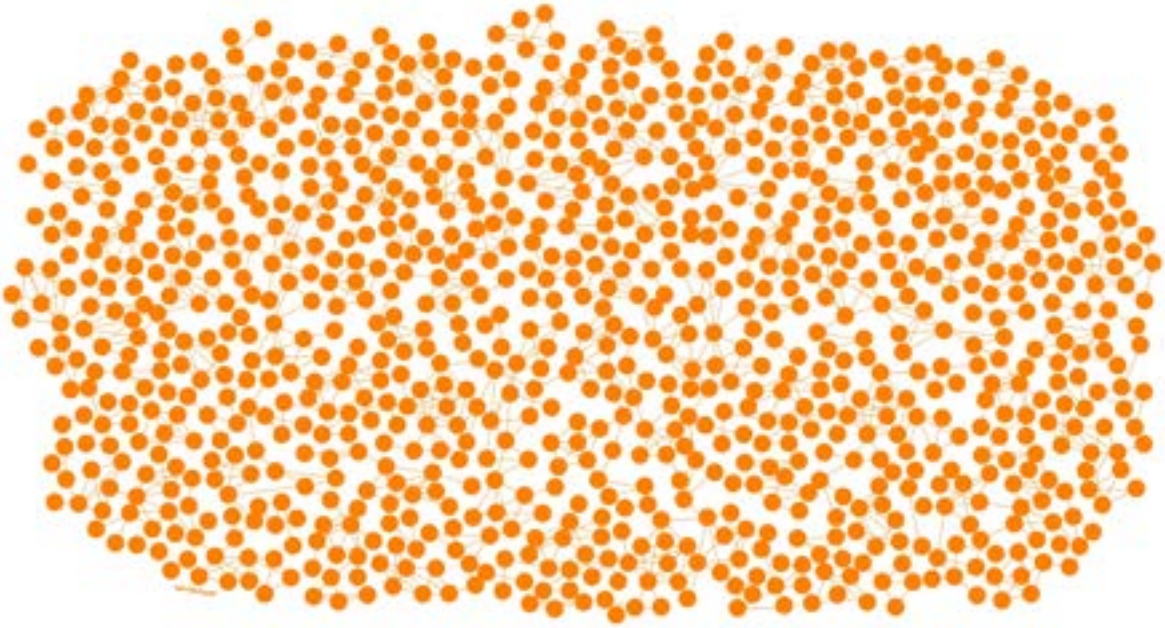
Intellectual townies: A me-coined term I'm super proud of. People who never "move out of their childhood hometown," intellectually or morally.

Undercover high-rung thinkers: These people's minds are up on the high rungs, but the low-rung culture they're immersed in has successfully intimidated them into keeping their mouths shut.

As far as the giant is concerned, this odd coalition falls into two categories:


PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THE NARRATIVE
KEY
INNER SELF: what you really think
OUTER SELF: what you say out loud
POLITICAL IDEAS
ideas of the narrative
PEOPLE WHO PRETEND TO BELIEVE THE NARRATIVE
POLITICAL IDEAS

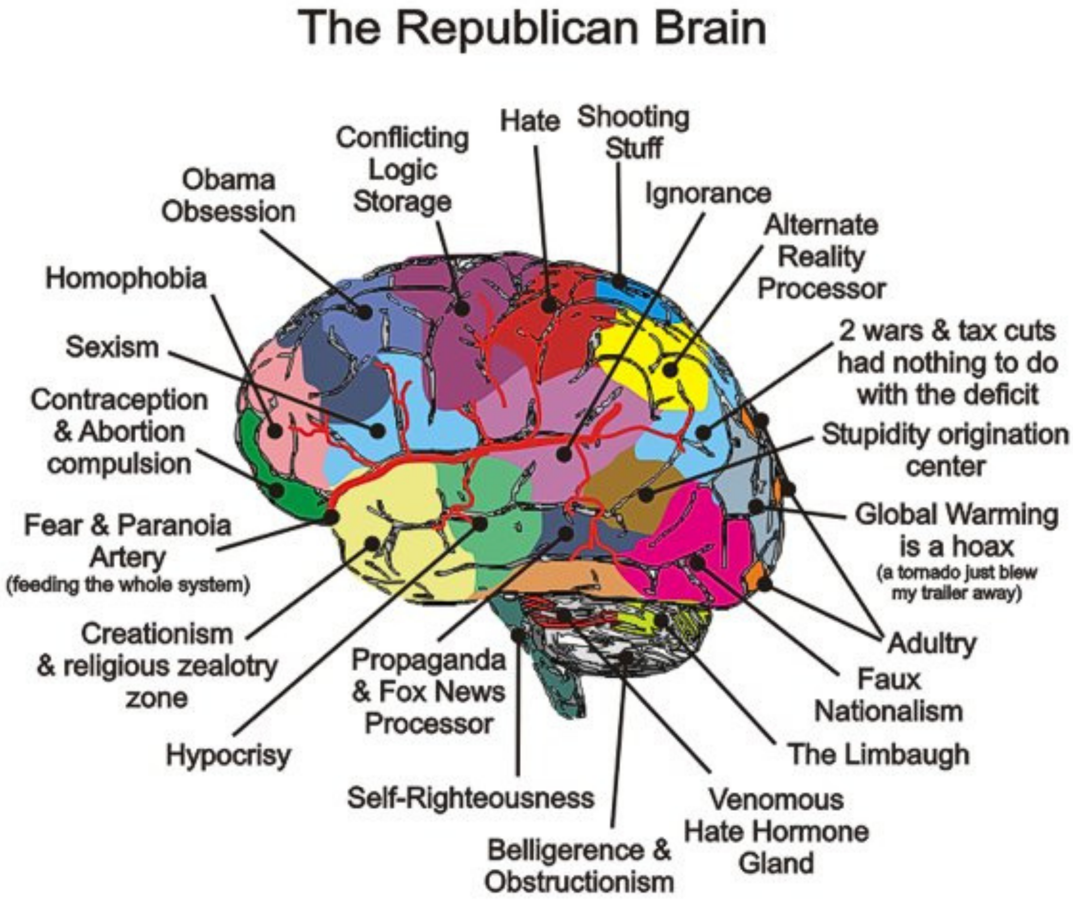
And the important thing is making sure that on the outside, things stay like this:



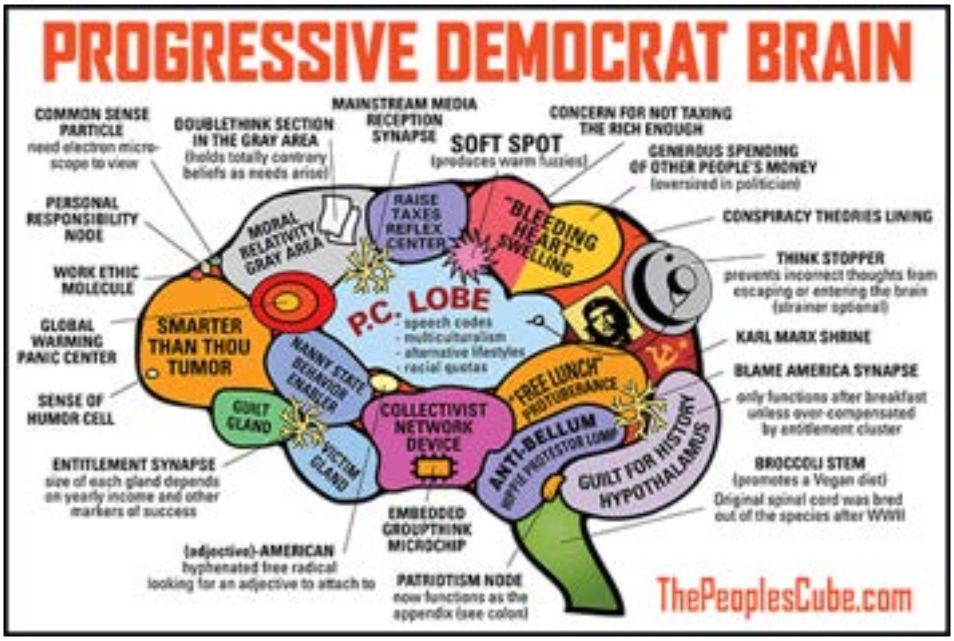
That means making sure that everyone who believes the narrative continues to believe the narrative and everyone who doesn't believe the narrative continues to pretend like they do (either out of fear or profiteering). The sacred narrative baby must always be said to be cute. This is what it means for a tribe to be micro-united.

Keeping things macro-divided

As the Bedouin proverb reminds us, in the Power Games, the best glue of all is a good common enemy. And the bigger a giant you want to build, the bigger the common enemy you'll need to keep things glued together—because if the Them giant isn't big enough, the Us giant will inevitably fracture into a new Us/Them structure. To serve this cause, low-rung political giants will typically frame politics as a zero-sum game—one in which the goals of the good guys can only come as a result of the bad guys losing (and vice versa). And they'll focus a ton of energy on the part of the narrative that talks about how stupid, ignorant, evil, bigoted, opportunistic, sneaky, toxic, backward, selfish, and most importantly dangerous the bad guys are, making lots of memes like this:[5]


The Republican Brain
Conflicting Logic Storage
Hate
Shooting Stuff
Obama Obsession
Ignorance
Alternate Reality Processor
Homophobia
2 wars & tax cuts had nothing to do with the deficit
Sexism
Contraception & Abortion compulsion
Stupidity origination center
Fear & Paranoia Artery (feeding the whole system)
Global Warming is a hoax (a tornado just blew my trailer away)
Creationism & religious zealotry zone
Adultry
Propaganda & Fox News Processor
Faux Nationalism
Hypocrisy
The Limbaugh
Self-Righteousness
Venomous Hate Hormone Gland
Belligerence & Obstructionism

And this:[6]


PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRAT BRAIN
COMMON SENSE PARTICLE
need electron micro-scope to view
DOUBLETHINK SECTION IN THE GRAY AREA
(holds totally contrary beliefs as needs arise)
MAINSTREAM MEDIA RECEPTION SYNAPSE
SOFT SPOT
(produces warm fuzzies)
CONCERN FOR NOT TAXING THE RICH ENOUGH
GENEROUS SPENDING OF OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY
(oversized in politician)
PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY NODE
WORK ETHIC MOLECULE
GLOBAL WARMING PANIC CENTER
SENSE OF HUMOR CELL
ENTITLEMENT SYNAPSE
size of each gland depends on yearly income and other markers of success
MORAL RELATIVITY GRAY AREA
RAISE TAXES REFLEX CENTER
"BLEEDING HEART" SWELLING
SMARTER THAN THOU TUMOR
P.C. LOBE
- speech codes
- multiculturalism
- alternative lifestyles
- racial quotas
NANNY STATE BEHAVIOR ENABLER
GUILT GLAND
VICTIM GLAND
COLLECTIVIST NETWORK DEVICE
"FREE LUNCH" PROTUBERANCE
ANTI-BELLUM
HIPPIE PROTESTOR LUMP
GUILT FOR HISTORY HYPOTHALAMUS
CONSPIRACY THEORIES LINING
THINK STOPPER
prevents incorrect thoughts from escaping or entering the brain (strainer optional)
KARL MARX SHRINE
BLAME AMERICA SYNAPSE
only functions after breakfast unless over-compensated by entitlement cluster
BROCCOLI STEM
(promotes a Vegan diet)
Original spinal cord was bred out of the species after WWII
EMBEDDED GROUPTHINK MICROCHIP
(adjective)-AMERICAN
hyphenated free radical looking for an adjective to attach to
PATRIOTISM NODE
now functions as the appendix (see colon)
ThePeoplesCube.com

Citizens of Political Disney World will be even better trained to rattle off the narrative's story about how bad the bad guys are than they are to rattle off why the good guys are good.

The bad-guys-are-bad part of the narrative is especially important because on top of its common-enemy glue benefits, it is the critical foil the story's protagonists need in order to feel like protagonists. Without Jafar, Aladdin is no longer a hero—he's just some guy. That's why Mr. Mean Man has to always be super mean and Miss Shitty Pants has to always stay shitty-pantsed.

Protecting the glue

Power Games giants glued together by belief in a certain story need a very specialized environment to survive. Unlike the inherent robustness of values-based high-rung giants, Power Games giants are brittle and vulnerable. When you rely on people fervently believing an all-encompassing, mostly fictional reality when real reality is all around them, you need to maintain a lot of control to keep things in order.

The sacred narrative would be torn to shreds in the marketplace of ideas outside the kingdom's walls, where high-rung thinkers roam and no idea is safe from criticism. Loyalists would be not only told but shown clear evidence that Disney World isn't a real place, like when a shitty five-year-old bursts the kindergarten class's bubble by spilling the truth about Santa Claus. Unacceptable.

Traditionally, brittle Power Games giants have avoided having their bubble burst with strict laws that control the flow of information—like King Mustache's laws in Hypothetica. But in a country with laws like the First Amendment, Echo Chambers are forced to police speech with culture. The right culture can serve as a filter system, which both enriches the giant with glue-strengthening narrative confirmation and protects the giant from every Power Games giant's kryptonite—doubt.

The PDW Giant's Filter System

1) The Media Filter

In today's world, every political Echo Chamber giant has its own media channels, which serve as the giant's eyes and ears. These media channels are for the Echo Chamber, by the Echo Chamber, and they're the first line of defense in upholding the giant's belief in the sacred narrative. To keep the giant strong and well-fed, they sensationalize the stories that confirm the narrative, like an amplifier. To keep the giant free of intellectual contamination, they downplay stories that challenge the narrative or neglect to report them at all.

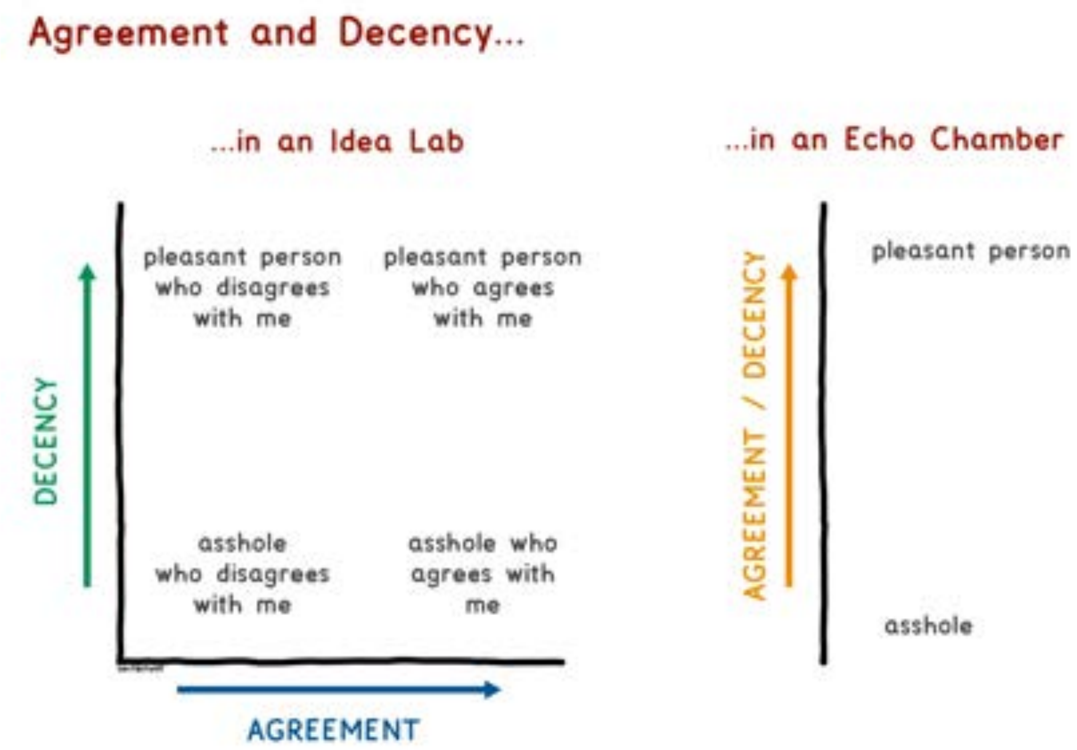
On any given day, just do a side-by-side at foxnews.com and msnbc.com, or breitbart.com and huffpost.com/news/politics, or townhall.com and salon.com, and you'll see the two major U.S. filters at work. One amplifies a story, the other muffles it. When they do report on the same story, their framings reverse who the protagonists and antagonists are, to mold the story to fit the narrative (Scott Alexander lays out some good examples here—and this is kind of interesting).

2) The Sharing Filter

If the Media Filter determines what ends up in the PDW giant's brain, the Sharing Filter sets the rules about how information circulates through the brain.

A key safeguard against those in the tribe who don't actually believe the narrative, the giant's political culture provides powerful social incentives to keep everyone's Outer Selves in line and saying the right things.

Expressing narrative confirmation is socially rewarded while challenging the narrative is laden with taboo. Because remember how the Agreement-Decency thing works in an Echo Chamber:

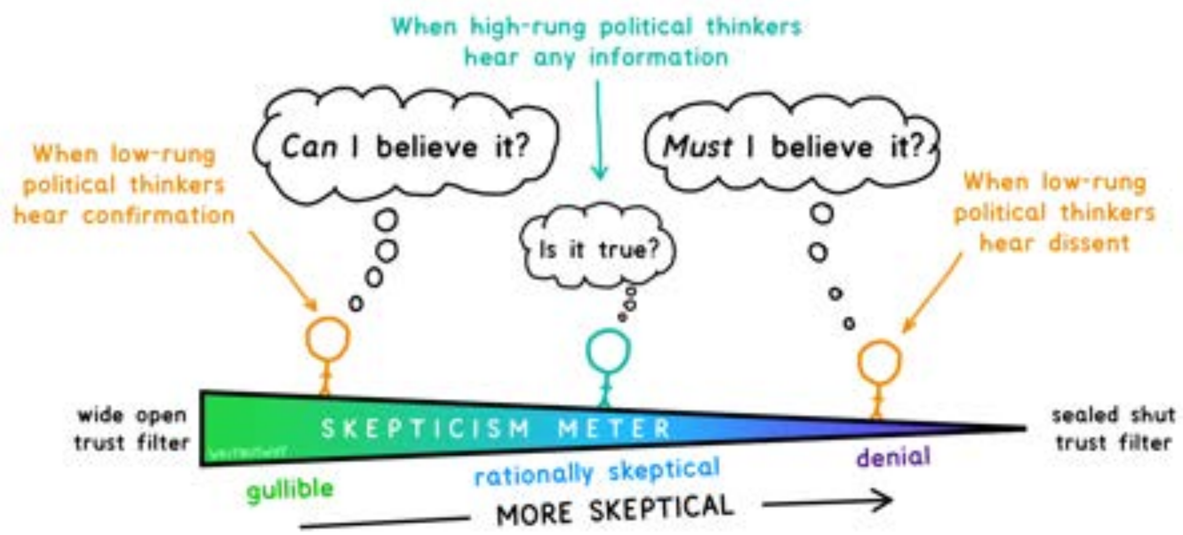

Agreement and Decency...
...in an Idea Lab
...in an Echo Chamber
DECENCY
pleasant person who disagrees with me
pleasant person who agrees with me
asshole who disagrees with me
asshole who agrees with me
AGREEMENT
AGREEMENT / DECENCY
pleasant person
asshole

The Media Filter will never be perfect, but the Sharing Filter can clean up the mess. When compelling alternative viewpoints make it into the giant's brain, they have hard time making it very far, as every neuron in the brain is socially incentivized not to pass it along to other neurons. The same system works as a market for narrative confirmation. When people share narrative confirmation, the most snappily worded and convincingly argued receive the biggest rewards when they're shared, which then incentivizes others to share them too (Twitter retweet numbers are a nice example). The best of the best pieces of confirmation go viral, spreading like wildfire through the Echo Chamber.

3) The Individual Bias Filter

Any scraps of compelling dissent not caught by the first two filters usually meet their doom at the gates of the final filter—the biases of the giant brain's neurons: individual minds. Those who do believe the narrative are thinking from the low rungs, in Unfalsifiable Land, where they'll use all of those low-rung tricks from Chapter 7 to make sure to stay unconvinced by any dissent that manages to reach them.

Low-rung political thinkers, Reasoning While Motivated, will do the "Can I believe this?" / "Must I believe this?" toggle on their Skepticism Meter:


When high-rung political thinkers hear any information
When low-rung political thinkers hear confirmation
Can I believe it?
Is it true?
Must I believe it?
When low-rung political thinkers hear dissent
wide open trust filter
SKEPTICISM METER
sealed shut trust filter
gullible
rationally skeptical
denial
MORE SKEPTICAL

Like trains in biased motion, they'll see any skeptics of their beliefs as worse thinkers than they actually are, making it easy to disregard the info right off the bat.

The Thanksgiving Dinner Table Hideous Political Conversations Blue Box

It's this third filter that lies behind phenomena like the whole "Oh my god I'm dreading the political conversations at the Thanksgiving dinner table so much" thing. When I hear someone say this, I know one of three things is happening:

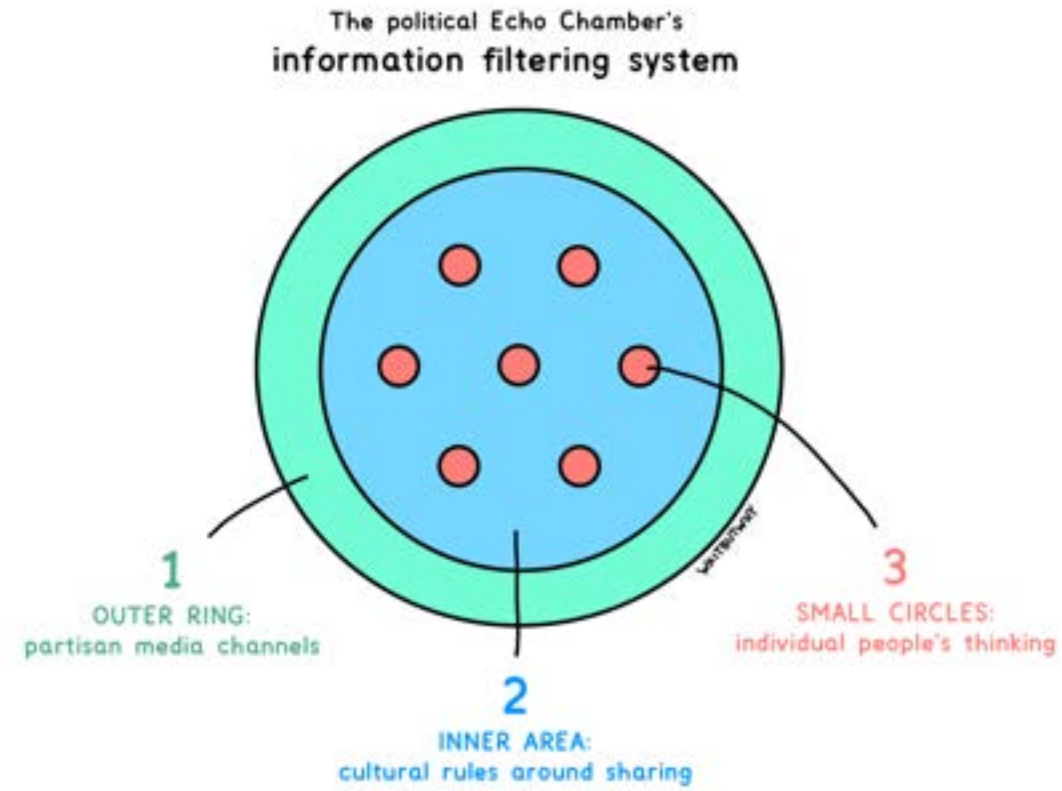
1) The person talking about their Thanksgiving dread is part of a low-rung political giant and they're dreading the one day of the year when they're with high-rung political family members who will challenge them.

2) Same as #1 except the dreaded family members are also low-rung political thinkers, from the opposite Disney kingdom.

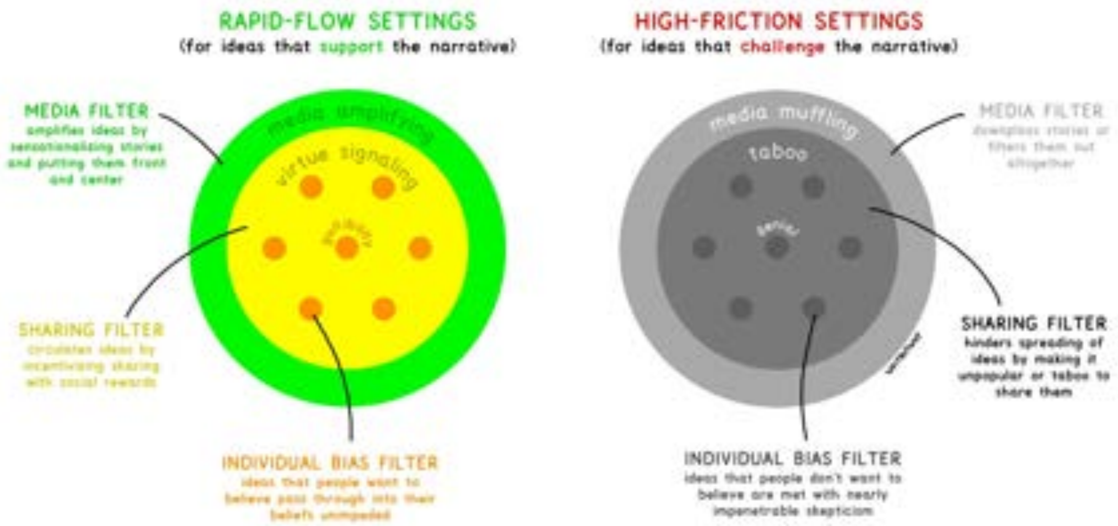
3) The person is a high-rung political thinker who is dreading their annual interaction with low-rung political family members.

Low-rung dreading high-rung, low-rung dreading low-rung, or high-rung dreading low-rung. The one thing I know is *not* the case is a high-rung thinker dreading interaction with a high-rung thinker who disagrees with them, since high-rung thinkers don't dread having political conversations with each other. At least one of the parties involved in a nightmarish Thanksgiving political conversation is from the low-rung political world. And they're dreading it because it's a moment when their usual info guardians—the Media Filter and the Sharing Filter—will not be able to shield them. They'll be exposed to challenges to the sacred narrative they identify with, and they'll have no tools to handle that interaction. So the third, final filter of individual unfalsifiability will be left to fend off the challenge, which tends to make for an unpleasant interaction.

We can imagine these three filters looking something like this:


The political Echo Chamber's
information filtering system
1
OUTER RING:
partisan media channels
2
INNER AREA:
cultural rules around sharing
3
SMALL CIRCLES:
individual people's thinking

While high-rung giants gauge their filters to expose the truth, we can see how PDW filters work hand-in-hand to keep the giant glue strong.[16]


RAPID-FLOW SETTINGS
(for ideas that support the narrative)
media amplifying
virtue signaling
MEDIA FILTER
amplifies ideas by sensationalizing stories and putting them front and center
SHARING FILTER
circulates ideas by incentivizing sharing with social rewards
INDIVIDUAL BIAS FILTER
ideas that people want to believe pass through into their beliefs unimpeded
HIGH-FRICTION SETTINGS
(for ideas that challenge the narrative)
media muffling
taboo
denial
MEDIA FILTER
downplays stories or filters them out altogether
SHARING FILTER
hinders spreading of ideas by making it unpopular or taboo to share them
INDIVIDUAL BIAS FILTER
ideas that people don't want to believe are met with nearly impenetrable skepticism

But Political Disney World doesn't stop there. The filter system is great for managing the world's real information, but when real information doesn't cut it, a political giant has to take matters into its own hands.

Fallacies

If there's one thing we've established in this series, it's that humans aren't good at reality. For us, trying to figure out what's right and what's real is like an obstacle course lined with cognitive pitfalls. The smartest people I know spend a *huge* amount of effort trying to become experts on their own irrational tendencies in order to become better thinkers, and they're still pretty bad at reality. That's why the high-rung Idea Lab culture is so important—it turns the reality obstacle course into a team effort.

But what if reality isn't your goal? What if reality is itself the obstacle?

Political Disney World turns confirmation bias into its own team effort—it does confirmation bias on a systematic, industrial scale. And when the mission relies on people getting reality wrong, human cognitive deficiencies are invaluable tools.

One such tool is the fallacy. If human reasoning is an outdated 1.0 software program, fallacies are the glitches and bugs.

We fall victim to fallacies by mistake all the time. A classic example is the sunk cost fallacy. As an untalented illustrator, I learned long ago that it's usually a terrible idea to draw elaborate backgrounds in my illustrations. Just draw the three stick figures talking over a white background—skip the street and the trees and the sky and the sidewalk they're standing on. And yet—sometimes I forget that lesson and decide to get all Bob Ross, like "well what if…what if I just put a happy little tree over there next to the people…well that looks weird like a floating tree…so I'll make some ground…how do you make ground again?…I'll try drawing a line…that looks bad…ooh okay I'll draw grass…" Suddenly it's 18 minutes later and I'm drawing individual strands of grass and questioning my entire existence.

At that point, a little part of my brain is like, "So you're about halfway into finishing this background. The background doesn't look good. It looks bad. The drawing would be better without it. It was a cute idea but it failed. So just delete the background and move on."

And then a much bigger, glitchier part of my brain is like, "Huh? No. Of course I'm not deleting this bad background I just spent 18 minutes doing half of. That would be a total waste of 18 minutes—which would be incredibly unsatisfying. I'm not allowing those 18 minutes to go to waste. I'm finishing the background. If it makes the drawing worse, then that's just what'll have to happen."

So I spend 18 more minutes finishing the background.

Rationalist Julia Galef likens this situation to walking to a store that's 20 minutes away, only to learn 10 minutes into the walk that the store is closed… and then deciding to "finish the job" and walk all the way to the store anyway, since you already started. Obviously that would be deeply inane—but that's exactly what I'm doing when I finish my bad background. To avoid having the 18 minutes I already spent go to waste, I'll waste *another* 18 minutes, even though the first 18 minutes is already gone and spent either way. It's a sunk cost.

We all commit the sunk cost fallacy. Sometimes it leads us to stick with jobs or relationships we know deep down are wrong for us. Sometimes we go the full distance with a long project even though, after having put some work into it, we've come to the realization that it wasn't such a great idea. Sometimes we read the last 250 pages of a book we're not liking very much because we've already read the first 100. In all cases, we do it because we simply can't bear to acknowledge that some of our time has officially been wasted. So we double (or quadruple) down.

It's a reasoning error. It makes absolutely no sense—as Julia's example illustrates—but we do it anyway. Because we're bad at reality.

The sunk cost is a famous one, but there are a *lot* of common fallacies. Wikipedia lists over 100 of them here. Our reasoning software sucks.

But fallacies aren't always mistakes. If you're trying to win an argument and you're not doing so well, you might try pulling a fallacy out of your bag of dirty tricks. If your opponent doesn't catch it, it'll appear to be a beautiful point in your favor.

Political Disney World is pretty big on both accidental and intentional fallacies. Let's go through some of the most prevalent, in three categories:

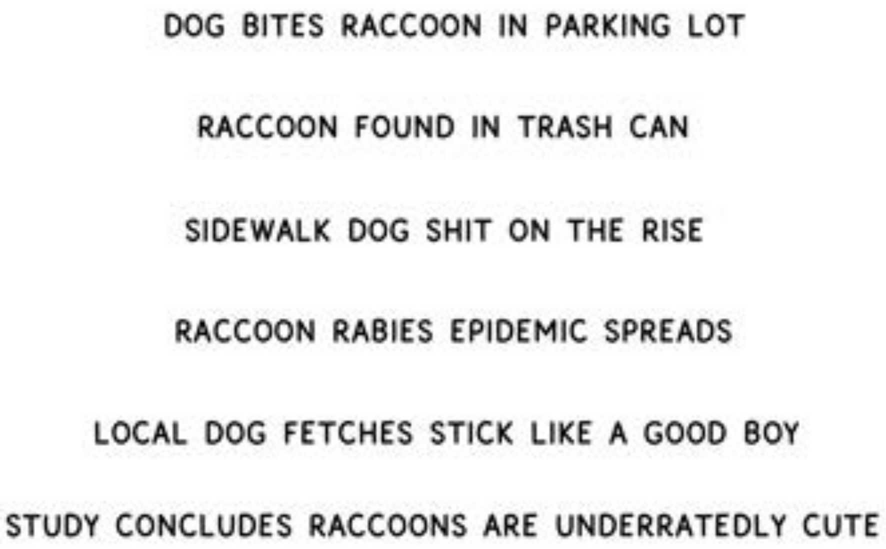
Category 1: Fallacies that misrepresent reality

The practice of misrepresenting reality falls on a spectrum with "slight data nudging" on one end and "total fabrication" on the other. Low-rung politics has a long tradition of misrepresenting reality by concocting questionable studies and misleading statistics or by spinning real events in a way that best fits the narrative.

A common type is what I call the **Trend-Anecdote Swapper.**

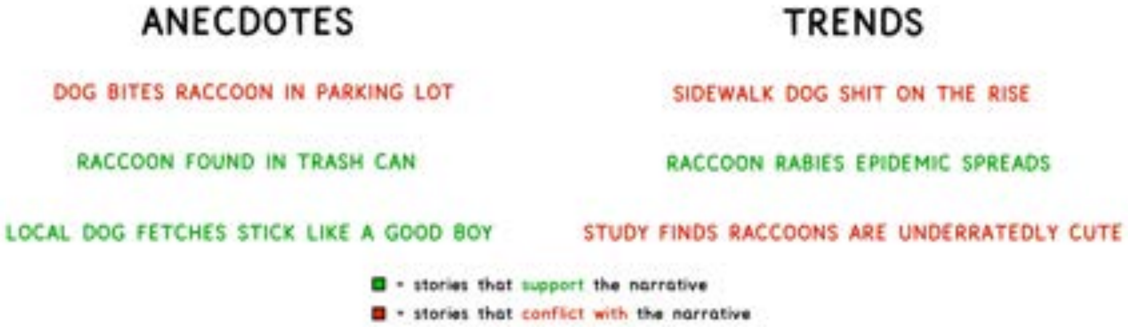
It's simple: If you come across an anecdote that supports the narrative, you put it through the swapper and frame it as evidence of a larger *trend* to make it seem representative of broader reality. Meanwhile, if there's an actual trend happening that really is representative of broader reality—but it's a trend that makes your narrative look bad—you just put it through the swapper, and it'll come out the other side framed as nothing more than a handful of freak anecdotes.

For example, imagine your tribe's narrative says that dogs are almost always good boys (and anyone who says otherwise is a bigot), while most raccoons are dangerous, vile creatures (and anyone who says otherwise is a bigot). Now imagine that one week, these six news stories happen:

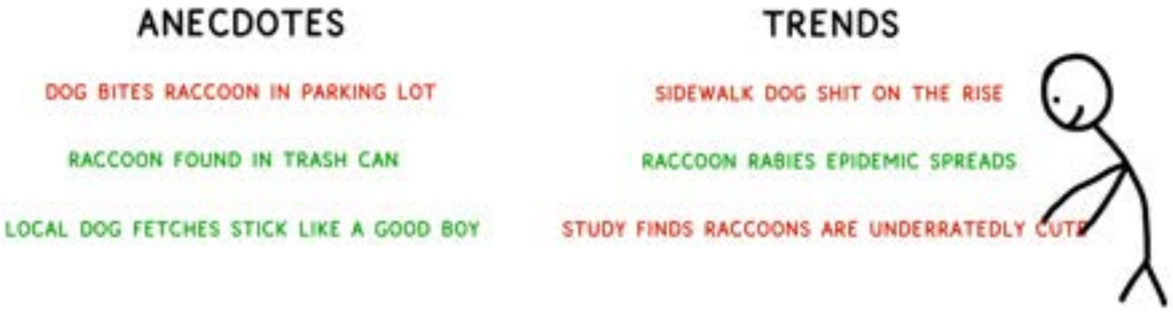

DOG BITES RACCOON IN PARKING LOT
RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
SIDEWALK DOG SHIT ON THE RISE
RACCOON RABIES EPIDEMIC SPREADS
LOCAL DOG FETCHES STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY
STUDY CONCLUDES RACCOONS ARE UNDERRATEDLY CUTE

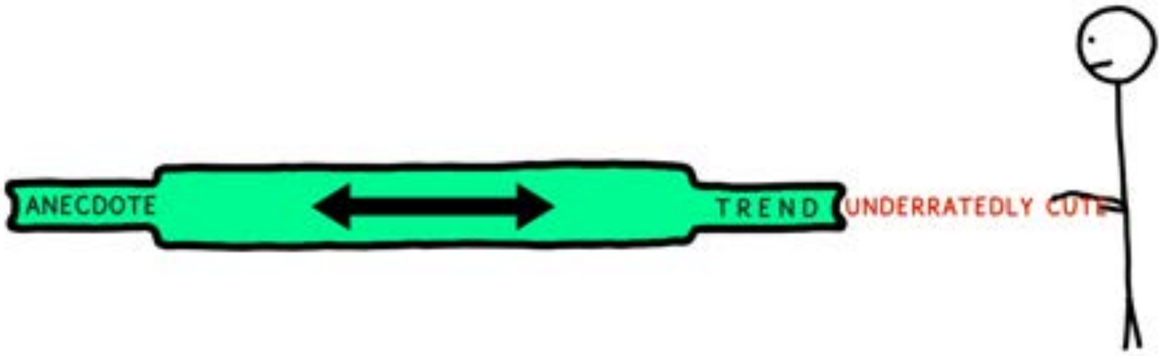
The actual reality here isn't really your friend. Your narrative, like all PDW narratives, leaves no room for mixed messages. Dogs are good. Raccoons are bad. Period. Meanwhile, the actual information at hand here suggests that maybe both can be good sometimes and bad sometimes. So you pull out the Trend-Anecdote Swapper and get to work.

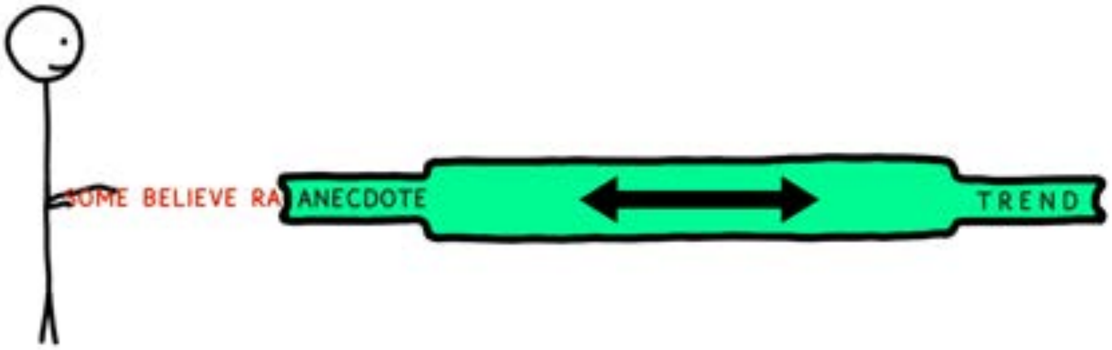
You start by categorizing and color-coding the stories as they actually seem to be.


ANECDOTES
TRENDS
DOG BITES RACCOON IN PARKING LOT
SIDEWALK DOG SHIT ON THE RISE
RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
RACCOON RABIES EPIDEMIC SPREADS
LOCAL DOG FETCHES STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY
STUDY FINDS RACCOONS ARE UNDERRATEDLY CUTE
🟩 = stories that support the narrative
🟥 = stories that conflict with the narrative

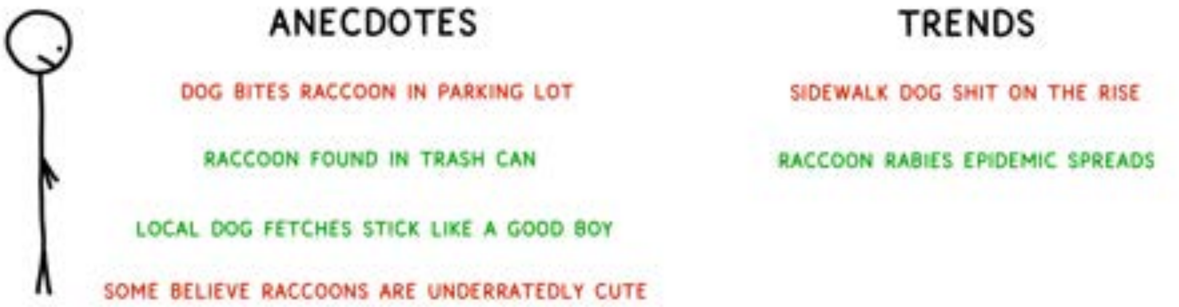
Then, when there's an inconvenient red trend, you use the Trend-Anecdote Swapper to reframe it as nothing more than an anecdote:

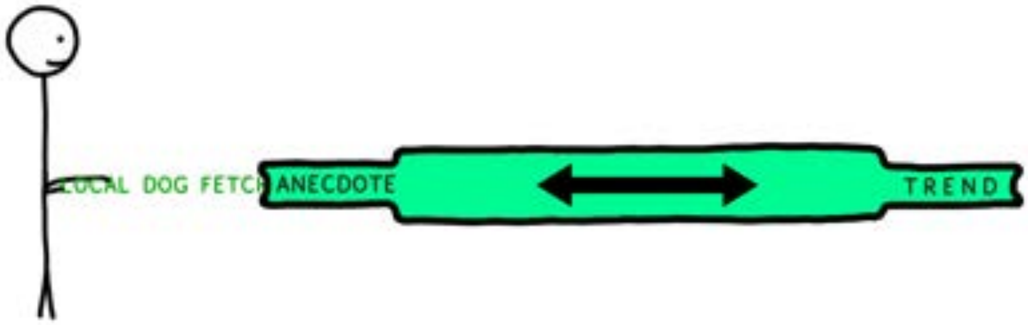

ANECDOTES
TRENDS
DOG BITES RACCOON IN PARKING LOT
SIDEWALK DOG SHIT ON THE RISE
RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
RACCOON RABIES EPIDEMIC SPREADS
LOCAL DOG FETCHES STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY
STUDY FINDS RACCOONS ARE UNDERRATEDLY CUTE

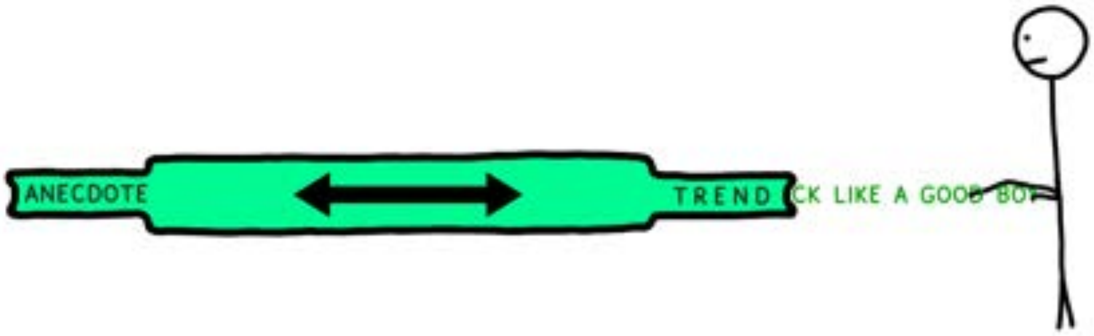

ANECDOTE
TREND
UNDERRATEDLY CUTE

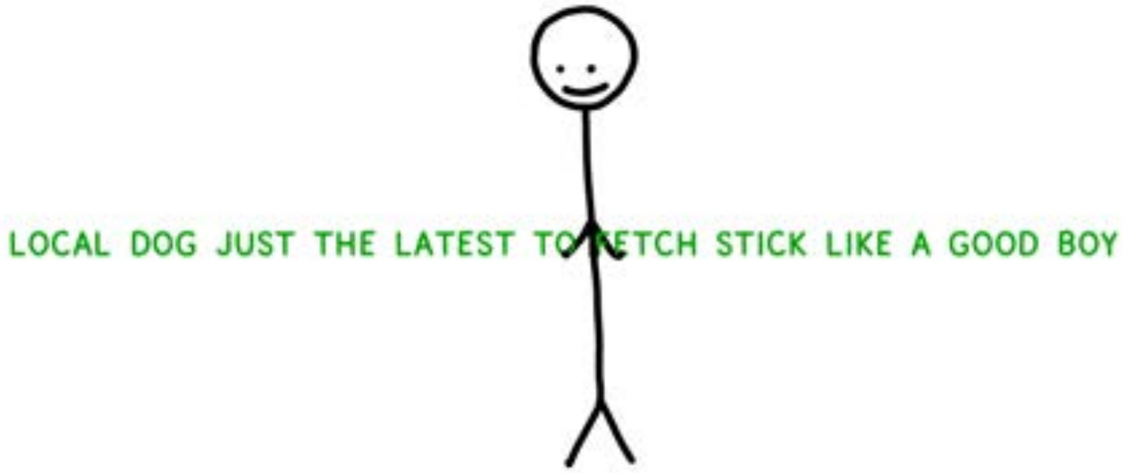

SOME BELIEVE RA
ANECDOTE
TREND

When there’s a helpful green anecdote, you use the Trend-Anecdote Swapper to make it seem like part of a larger trend.

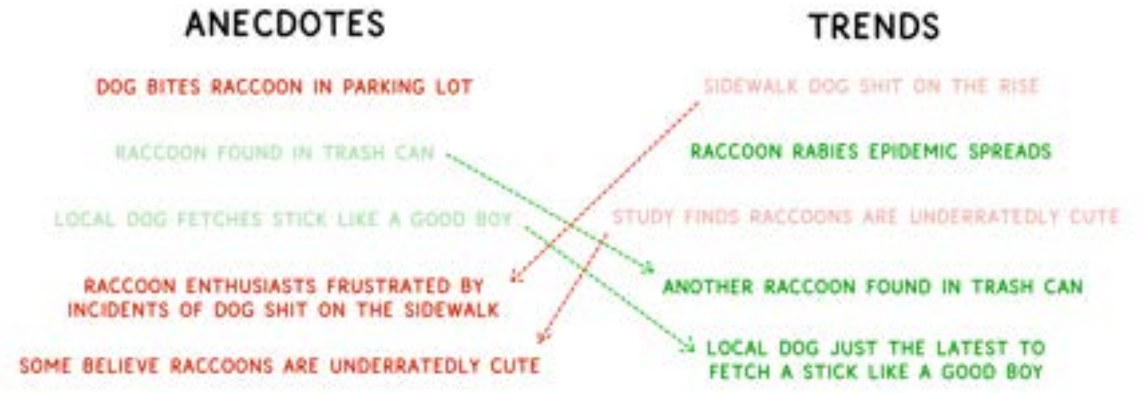

ANECDOTES
DOG BITES RACCOON IN PARKING LOT
RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
LOCAL DOG FETCHES STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY
SOME BELIEVE RACCOONS ARE UNDERRATEDLY CUTE
TRENDS
SIDEWALK DOG SHIT ON THE RISE
RACCOON RABIES EPIDEMIC SPREADS


LOCAL DOG FETCH
ANECDOTE
TREND


ANECDOTE
TREND
CK LIKE A GOOD BOY


LOCAL DOG JUST THE LATEST TO FETCH STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY

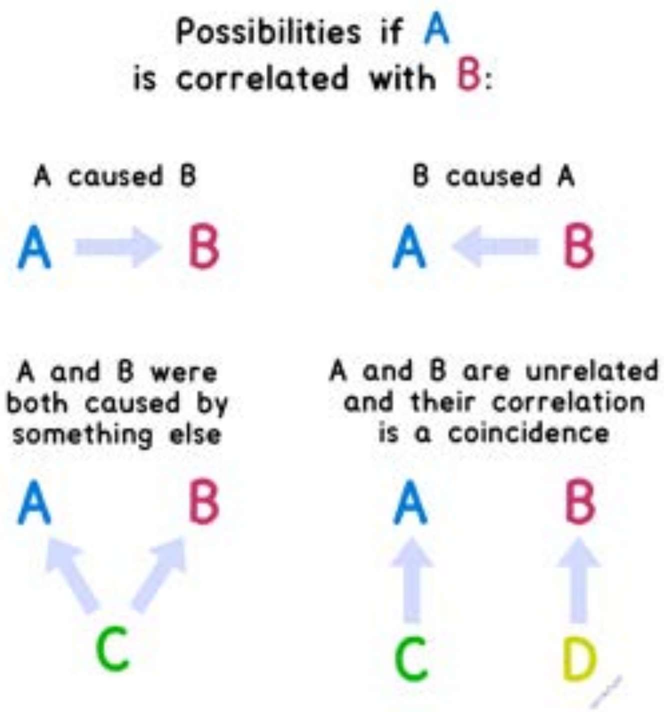
By the time you're done, the colors have sorted themselves out nicely: red on the left, green on the right.


ANECDOTES
TRENDS
DOG BITES RACCOON IN PARKING LOT
SIDEWALK DOG SHIT ON THE RISE
RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
RACCOON RABIES EPIDEMIC SPREADS
LOCAL DOG FETCHES STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY
STUDY FINDS RACCOONS ARE UNDERRATEDLY CUTE
RACCOON ENTHUSIASTS FRUSTRATED BY INCIDENTS OF DOG SHIT ON THE SIDEWALK
ANOTHER RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
SOME BELIEVE RACCOONS ARE UNDERRATEDLY CUTE
LOCAL DOG JUST THE LATEST TO FETCH A STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY

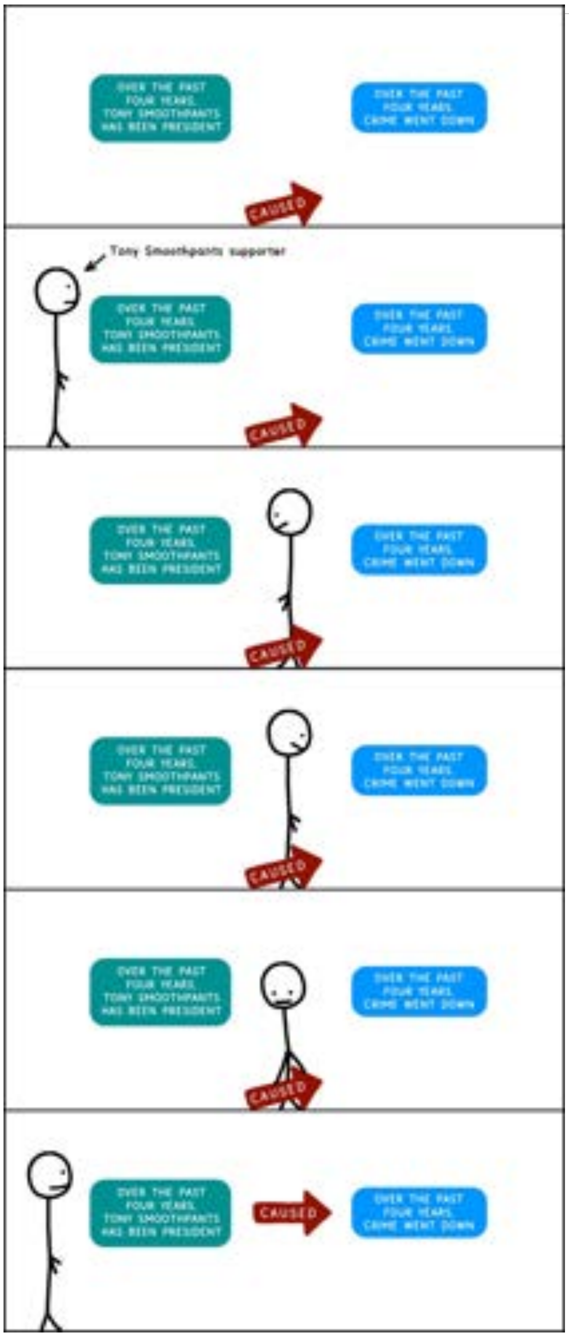
Another common fallacy uses what I call the **Causation Arrow.** The most 101 concept in Statistics 101 has to be: *correlation does not imply causation.*

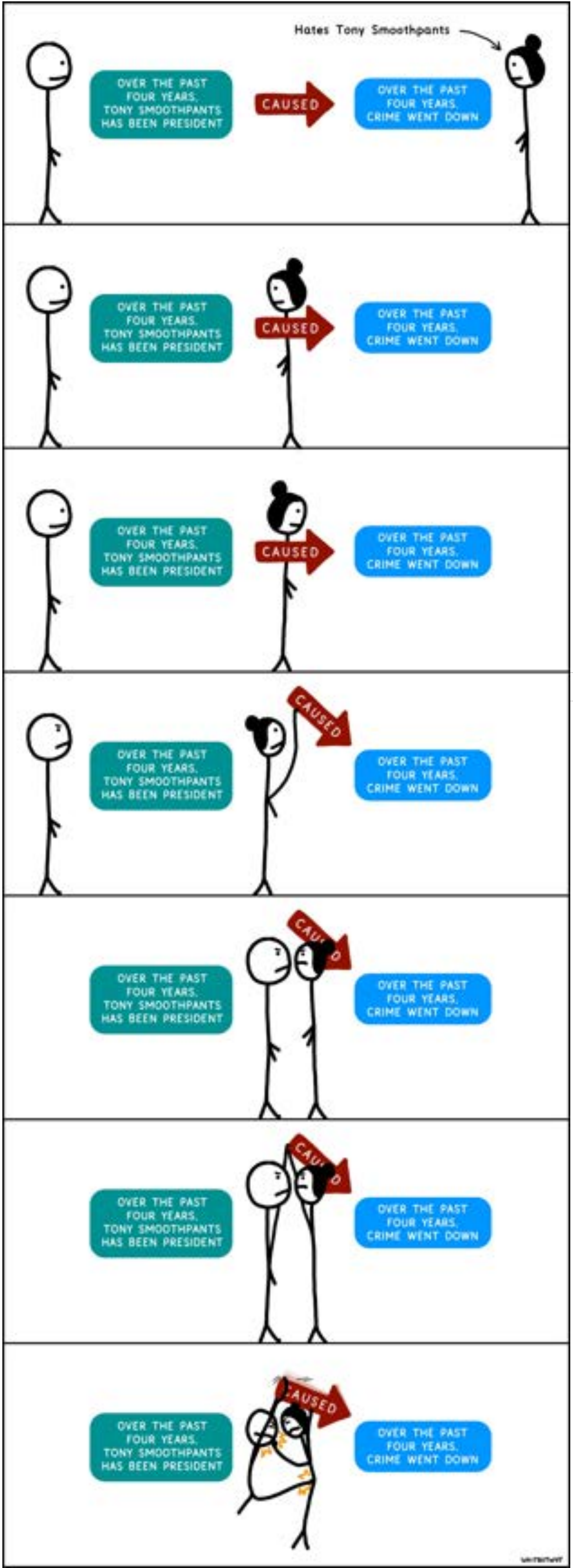
A nice example, courtesy of Jonathan Haidt: A 2013 study found that **people who have sex more often make more money.** If you weren't being cautious with your Causation Arrow, you might read a headline about the study and jump to the conclusion that having more sex *caused* people to make more money—or that making more money led people to have more sex. In reality, the study found that a third variable—*extraversion*—lies behind both the sex and money trends.

Any correlation stat—"variable A is correlated with variable B"—actually leaves us with four possibilities:


Possibilities if A is correlated with B:
A caused B
A
B
B caused A
A
B
A and B were both caused by something else
A
B
C
A and B are unrelated and their correlation is a coincidence
A
B
C
D

In high-rung politics, people assess every correlation and try to determine which of the above is actually going on. But in Political Disney World, people just go with whichever of the four possibilities best supports the narrative. They grab their Causation Arrow and point it in the most convenient direction.


OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, TONY SMOOTHPANTS HAS BEEN PRESIDENT
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, CRIME WENT DOWN
CAUSED
Tony Smoothpants supporter
CAUSED


Hates Tony Smoothpants
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, TONY SMOOTHPANTS HAS BEEN PRESIDENT
CAUSED
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, CRIME WENT DOWN
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, TONY SMOOTHPANTS HAS BEEN PRESIDENT
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OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, CRIME WENT DOWN
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OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, CRIME WENT DOWN
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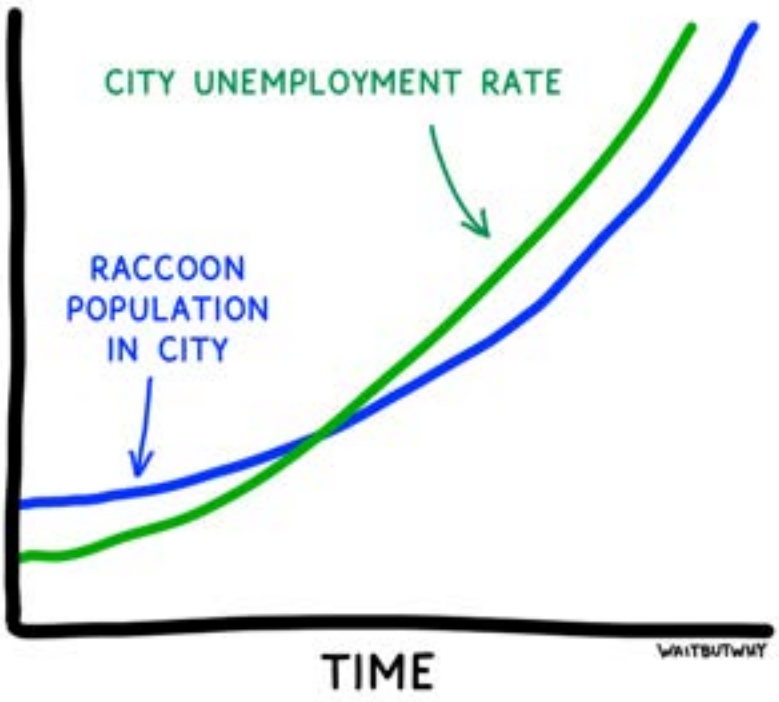
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, CRIME WENT DOWN
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, TONY SMOOTHPANTS HAS BEEN PRESIDENT
CAU D
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, CRIME WENT DOWN
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, TONY SMOOTHPANTS HAS BEEN PRESIDENT
AUSED
OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, CRIME WENT DOWN

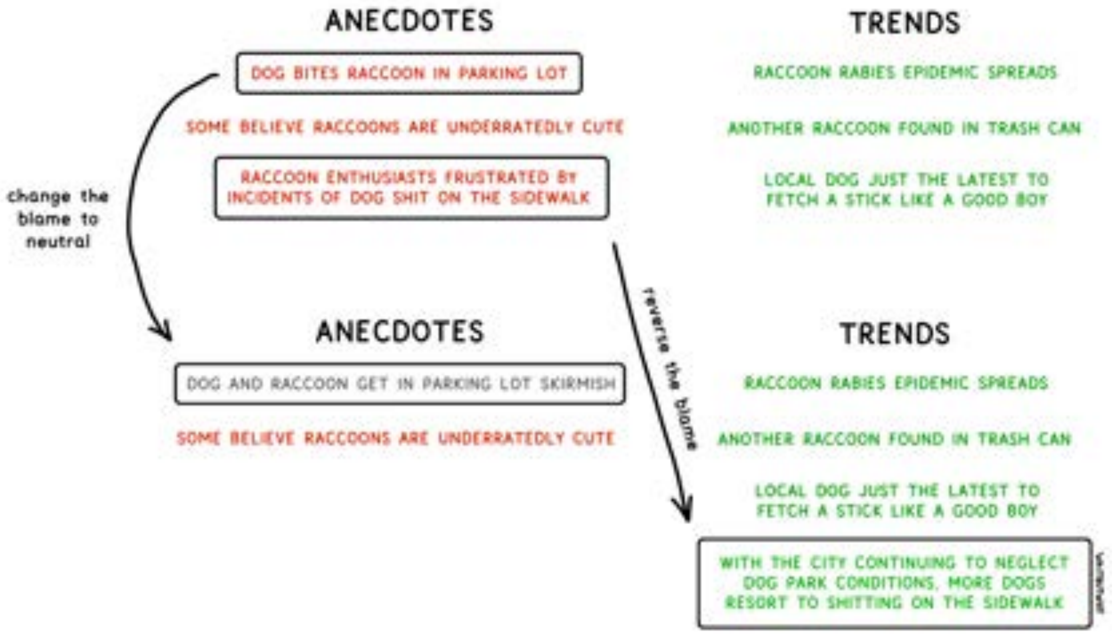
Of course, presidential debates are full of fighting over Causation Arrows. The incumbent candidate will claim that every positive trend during the past four years was caused by his presidency and every negative trend happened in spite of his great policies. The challenger candidate will say the opposite, in both cases.

Returning to dog-raccoonville, imagine that this graph starts making the rounds on Twitter.

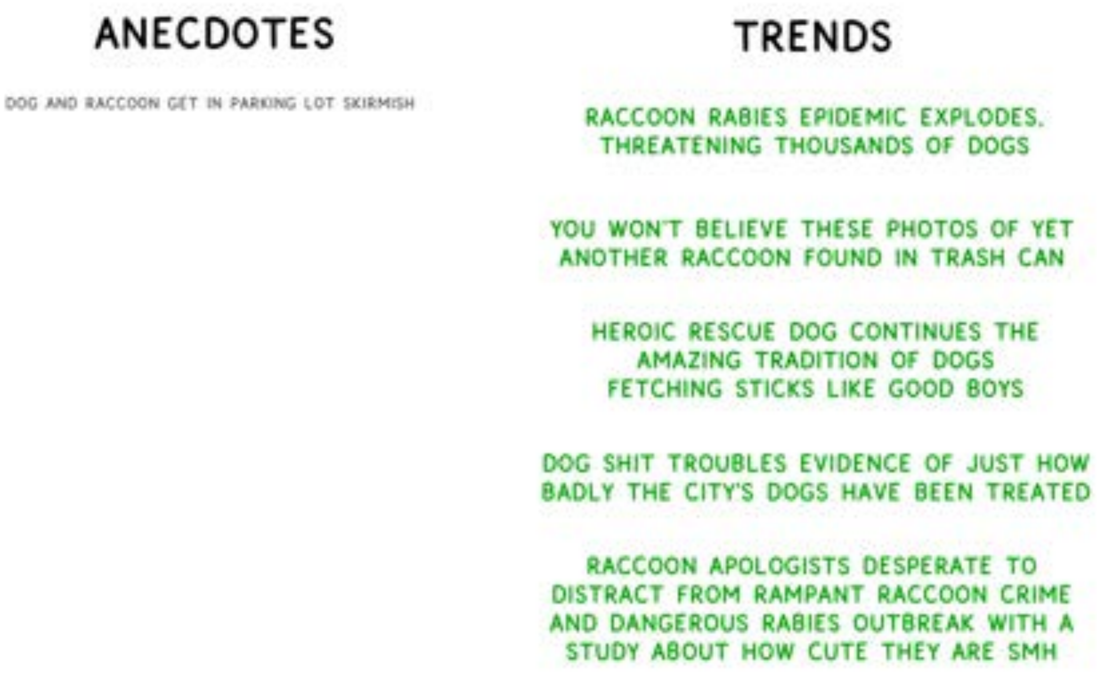


If you’re in the “dogs good / raccoons bad” tribe, you won’t hesitate to pull out the Causation Arrow and use the graph as evidence that raccoons are hurting the city. If you’re in the pro-raccoons tribe, you’ll call the correlation a coincidence or ignore it altogether (and call anyone who shares the graph a bigot). In neither case will you actually be getting to the bottom of why unemployment is going up—which makes sense, because the goal in PDW isn’t a more perfect country, it’s political triumph.

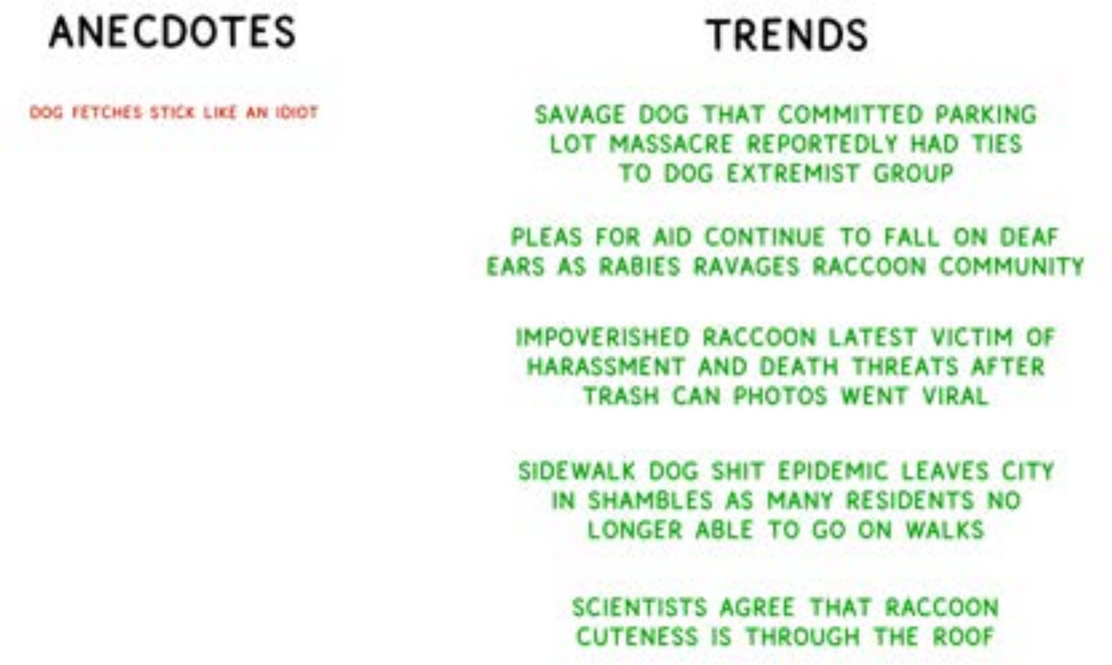
This is an example of how the Causation Arrow can also be used as a Blame Arrow. The pro-dog crowd could use the arrow to further nudge the day’s news in their favor by fiddling with blame in two of the stories:


ANECDOTES
DOG BITES RACCOON IN PARKING LOT
SOME BELIEVE RACCOONS ARE UNDERRATEDLY CUTE
RACCOON ENTHUSIASTS FRUSTRATED BY INCIDENTS OF DOG SHIT ON THE SIDEWALK
TRENDS
RACCOON RABIES EPIDEMIC SPREADS
ANOTHER RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
LOCAL DOG JUST THE LATEST TO FETCH A STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY
change the blame to neutral
reverse the blame
ANECDOTES
DOG AND RACCOON GET IN PARKING LOT SKIRMISH
SOME BELIEVE RACCOONS ARE UNDERRATEDLY CUTE
TRENDS
RACCOON RABIES EPIDEMIC SPREADS
ANOTHER RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
LOCAL DOG JUST THE LATEST TO FETCH A STICK LIKE A GOOD BOY
WITH THE CITY CONTINUING TO NEGLECT DOG PARK CONDITIONS, MORE DOGS RESORT TO SHITTING ON THE SIDEWALK
WAITBUTWHY

Then, to top things off, the pro-dog media channels will add on their own twist:


ANECDOTES
DOG AND RACCOON GET IN PARKING LOT SKIRMISH
TRENDS
RACCOON RABIES EPIDEMIC EXPLODES, THREATENING THOUSANDS OF DOGS
YOU WON'T BELIEVE THESE PHOTOS OF YET ANOTHER RACCOON FOUND IN TRASH CAN
HEROIC RESCUE DOG CONTINUES THE AMAZING TRADITION OF DOGS FETCHING STICKS LIKE GOOD BOYS
DOG SHIT TROUBLES EVIDENCE OF JUST HOW BADLY THE CITY'S DOGS HAVE BEEN TREATED
RACCOON APOLOGISTS DESPERATE TO DISTRACT FROM RAMPANT RACCOON CRIME AND DANGEROUS RABIES OUTBREAK WITH A STUDY ABOUT HOW CUTE THEY ARE SMH

Of course, that's just the pro-dog side of things. This whole time, the pro-raccoon tribe has been outraged about a whole different set of stories:

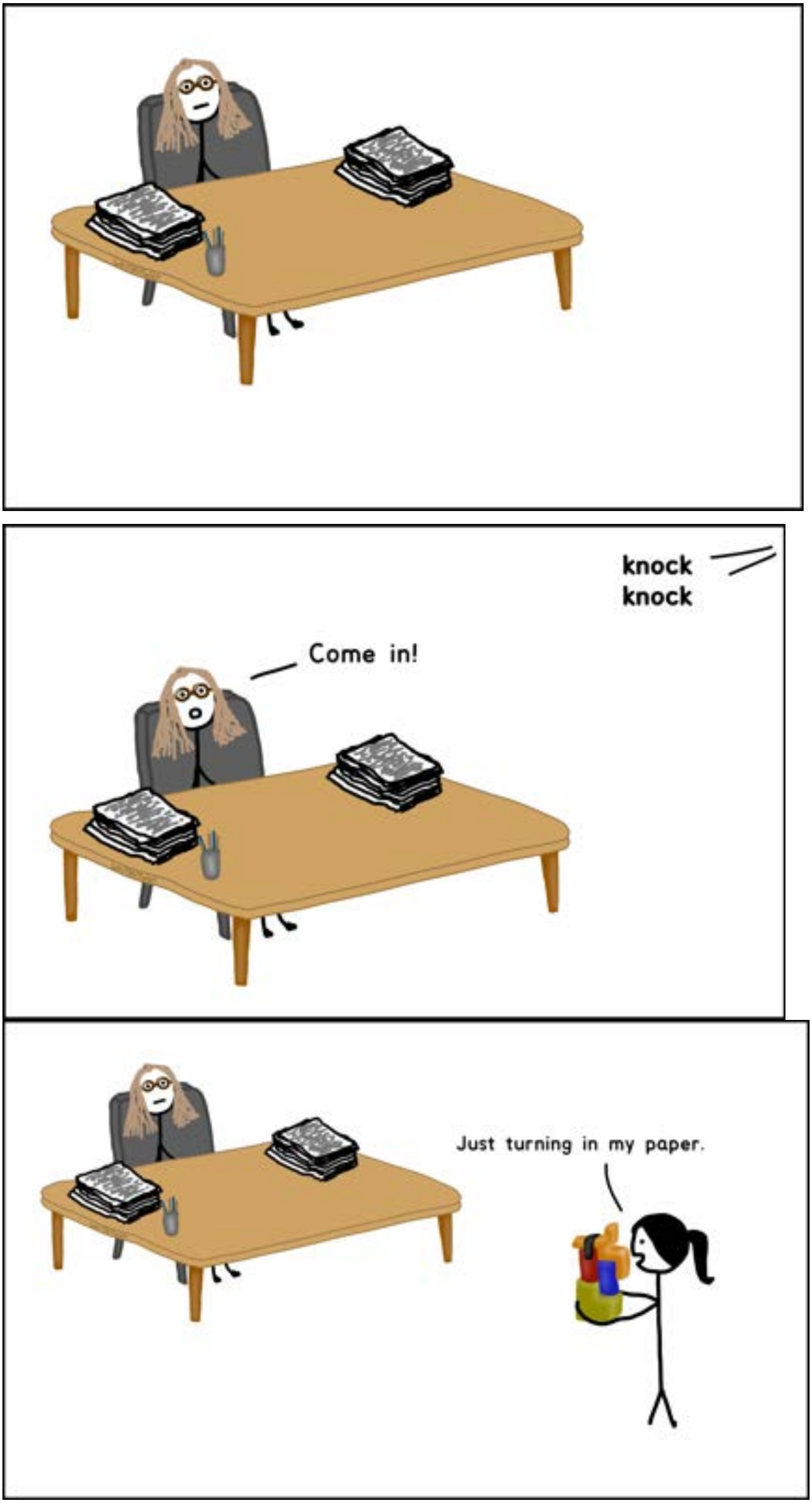

ANECDOTES
DOG FETCHES STICK LIKE AN IDIOT
TRENDS
SAVAGE DOG THAT COMMITTED PARKING LOT MASSACRE REPORTEDLY HAD TIES TO DOG EXTREMIST GROUP
PLEAS FOR AID CONTINUE TO FALL ON DEAF EARS AS RABIES RAVAGES RACCOON COMMUNITY
IMPOVERISHED RACCOON LATEST VICTIM OF HARASSMENT AND DEATH THREATS AFTER TRASH CAN PHOTOS WENT VIRAL
SIDEWALK DOG SHIT EPIDEMIC LEAVES CITY IN SHAMBLES AS MANY RESIDENTS NO LONGER ABLE TO GO ON WALKS
SCIENTISTS AGREE THAT RACCOON CUTENESS IS THROUGH THE ROOF

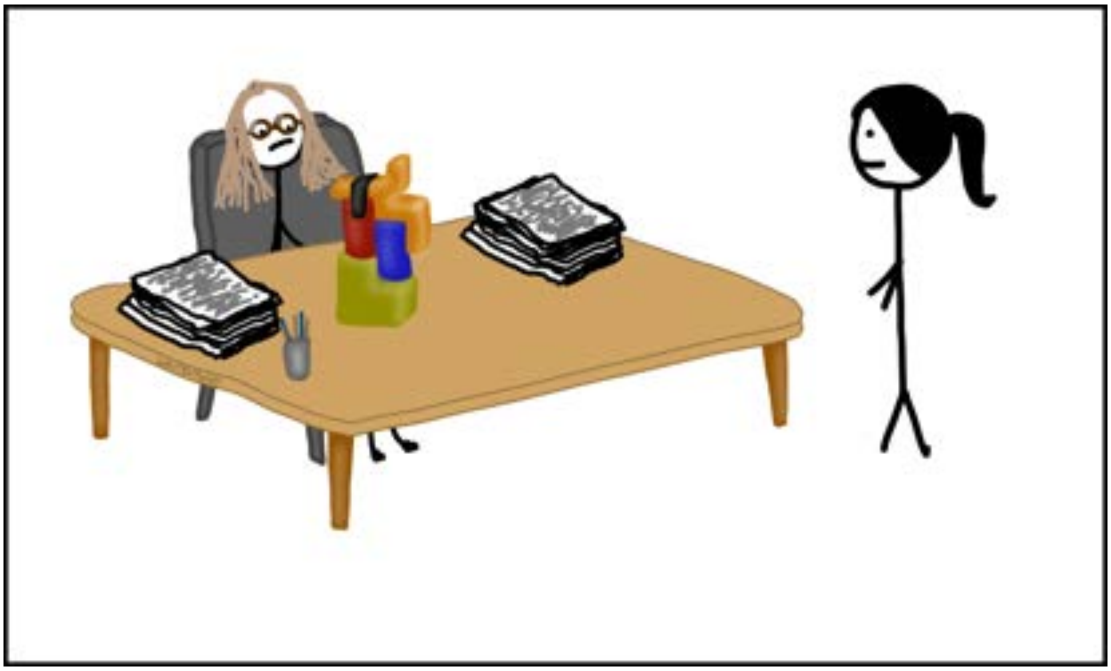
One of the critical defining features of high-rung politics is a shared sense of reality—a shared understanding of *What Is*. In Political Disney World, the beliefs and viewpoints of people in different tribes are premised on entirely different conceptions of reality. Of *course* they can't find any common ground.⑰

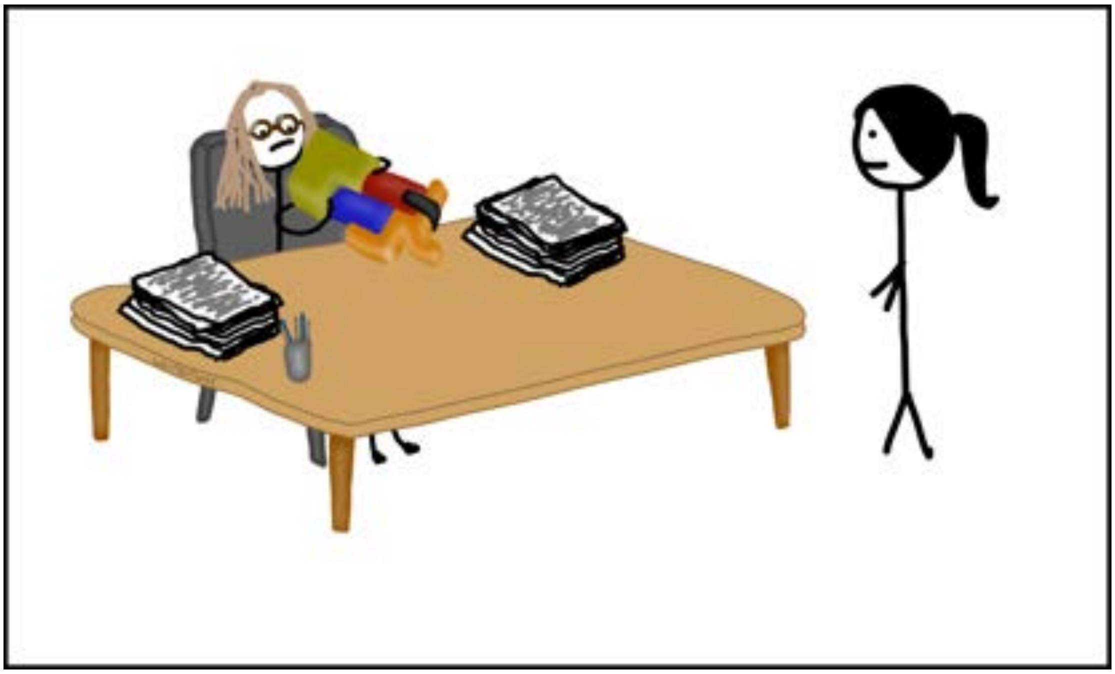
Category 2: Fallacies that misrepresent an argument

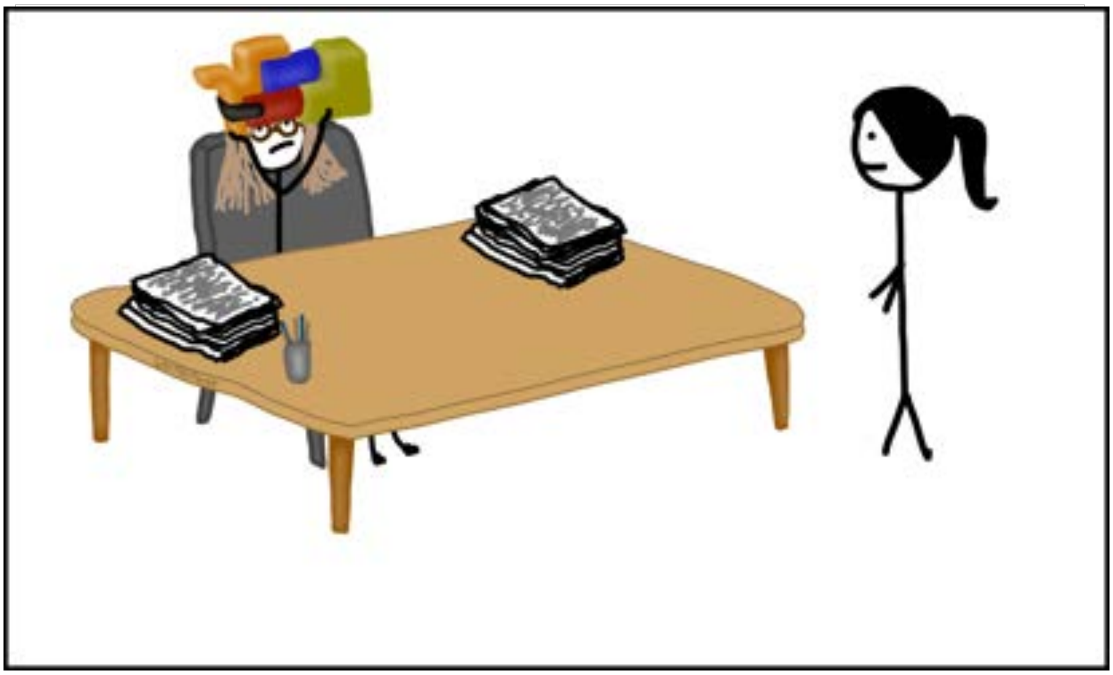
In Chapter 7, we talked about how a viewpoint is nothing more than a hypothesis until it's gone through testing.

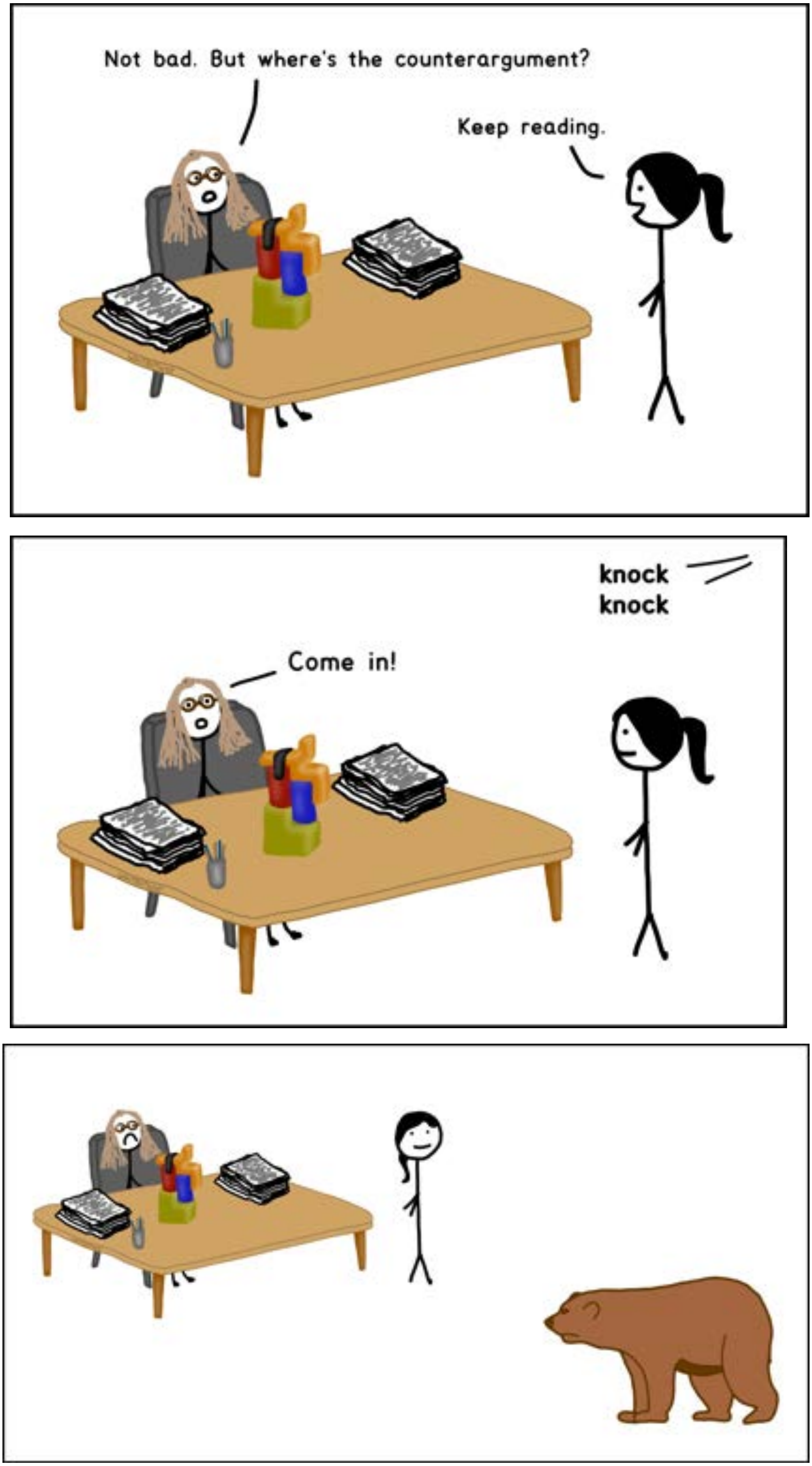
The real test of any argument is how well it stands up in the face of rigorous criticism. When you're confident in your viewpoint, you love a chance to throw it into the ring with other arguments and watch it show off its strength. Like real boxing, the stronger the opponents you've beaten, the better your ranking. That's why a strong college paper always includes a strong counterargument—it lets the thesis "show off" in front of the professor.

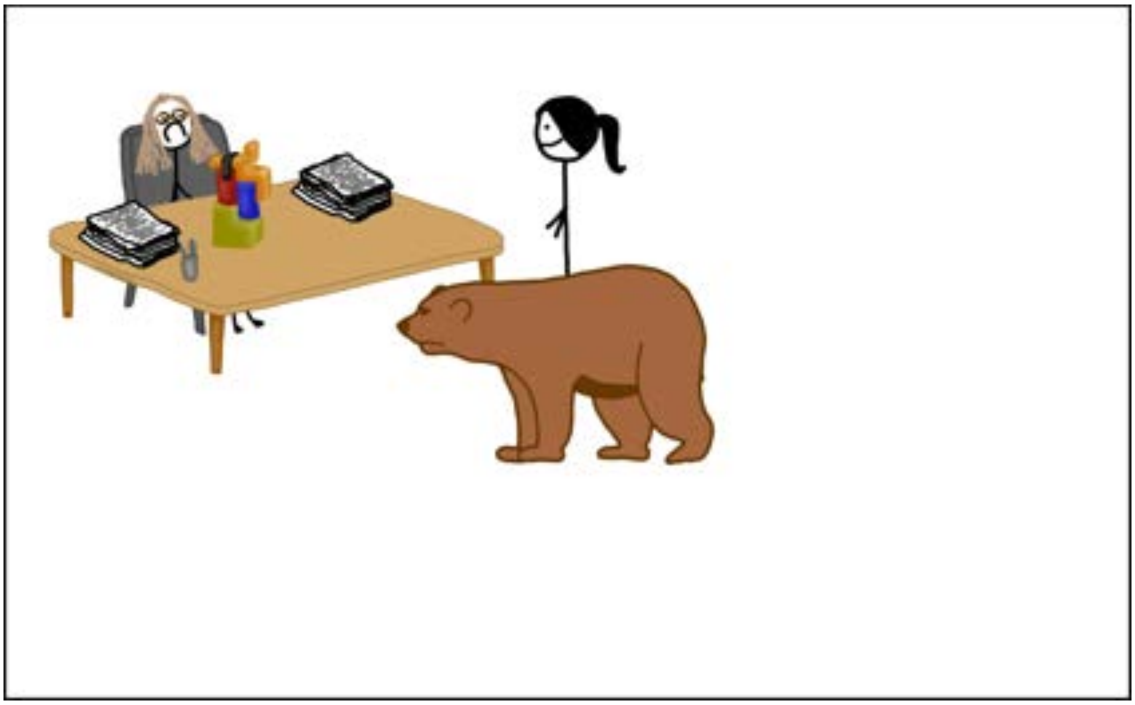

knock
knock
Come in!
Just turning in my paper.

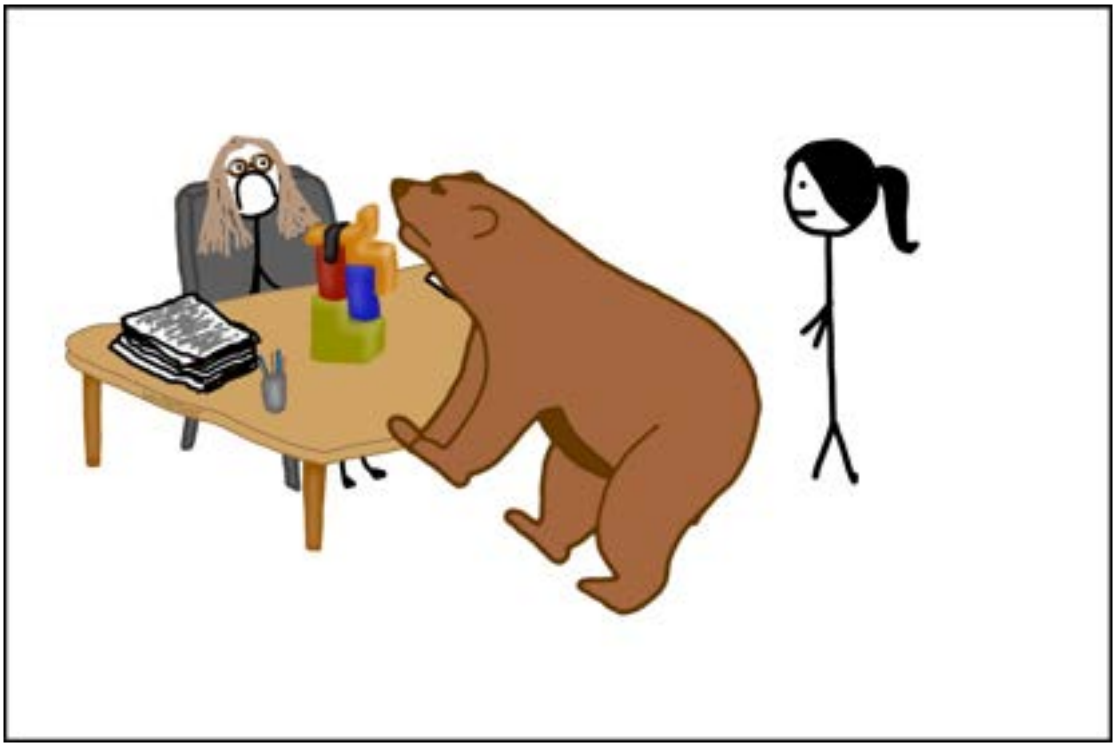


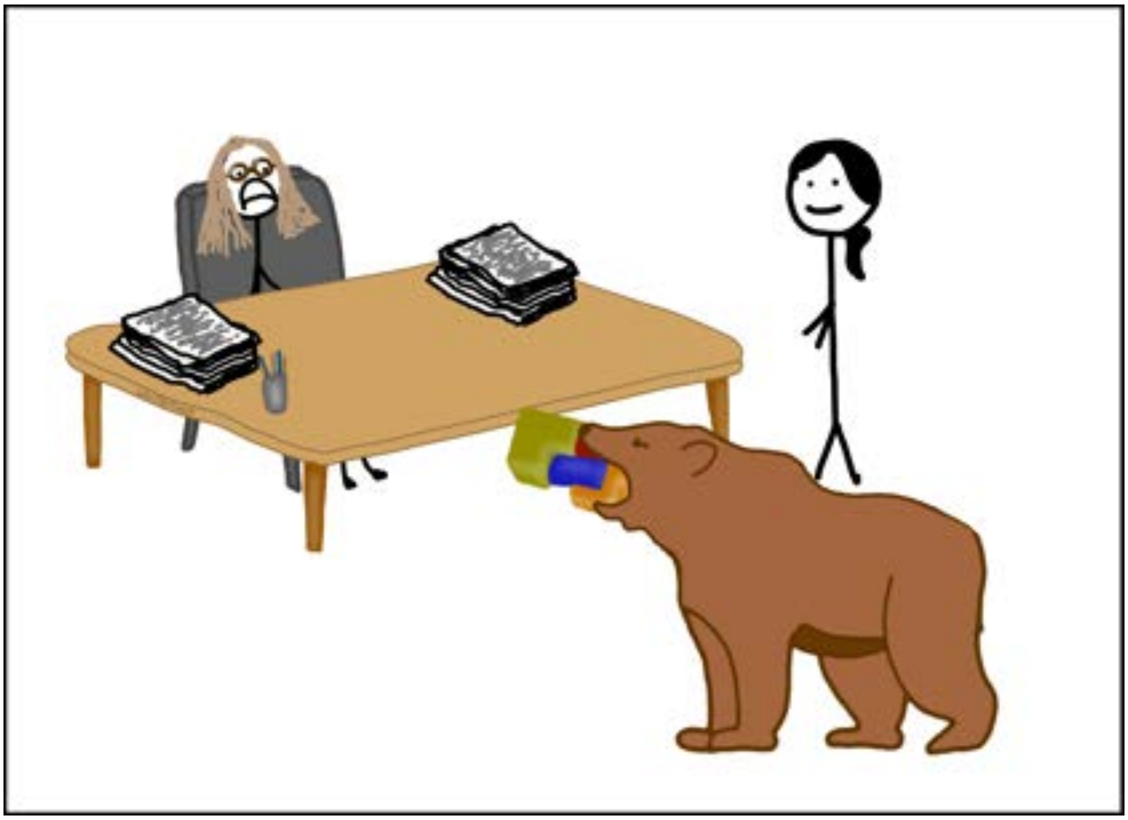


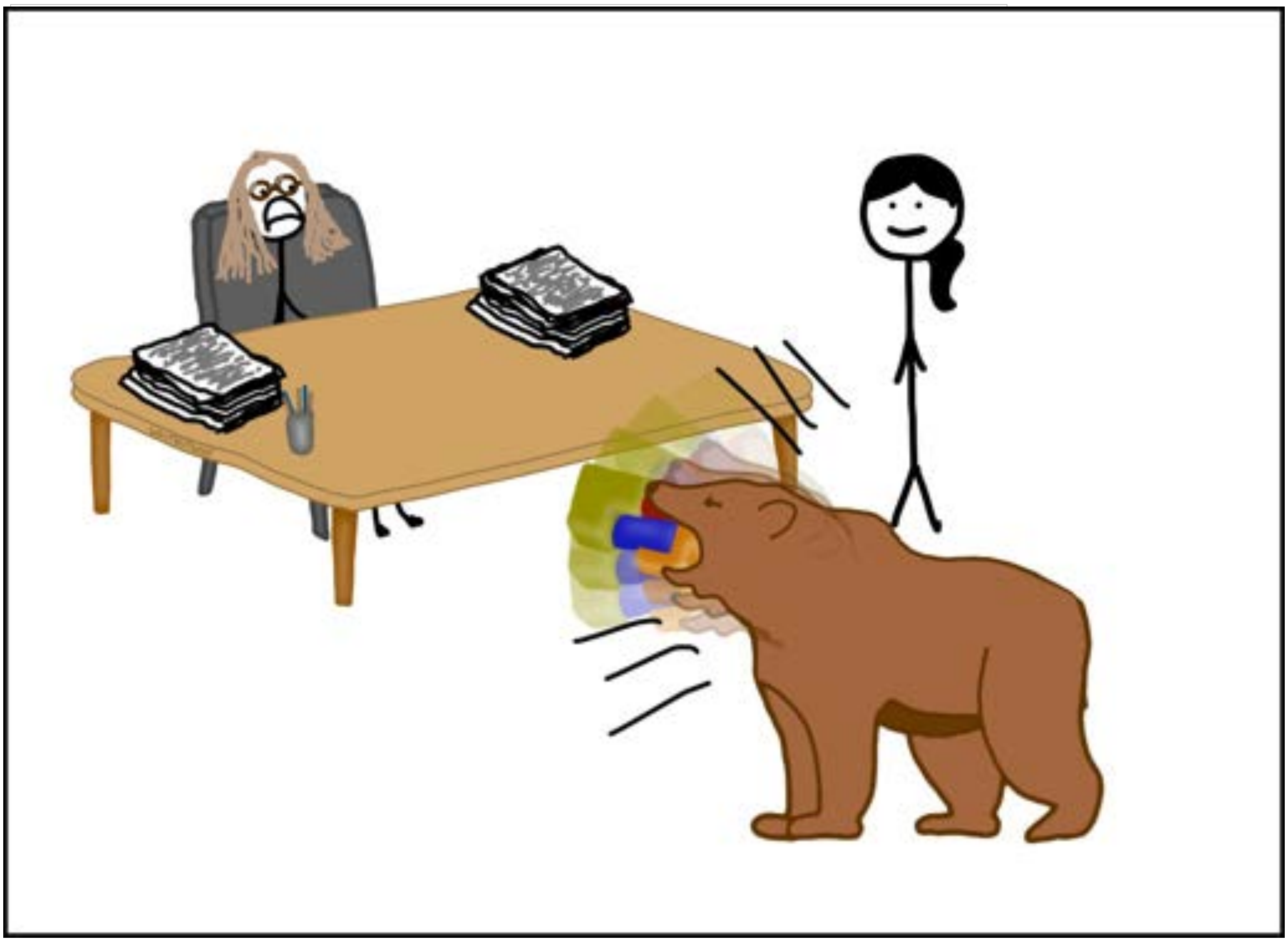


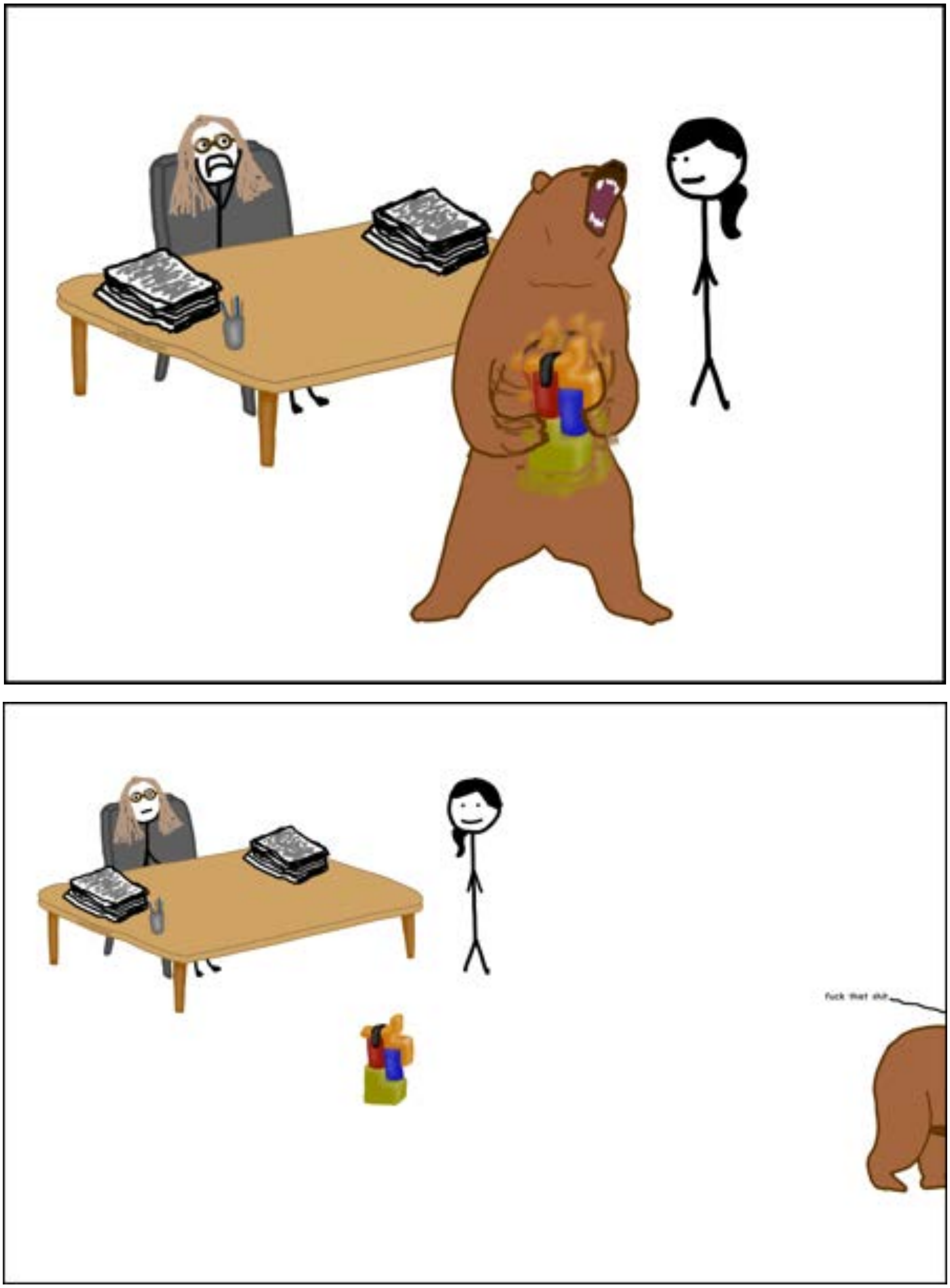

Not bad. But where's the counterargument?
Keep reading.
knock knock
Come in!

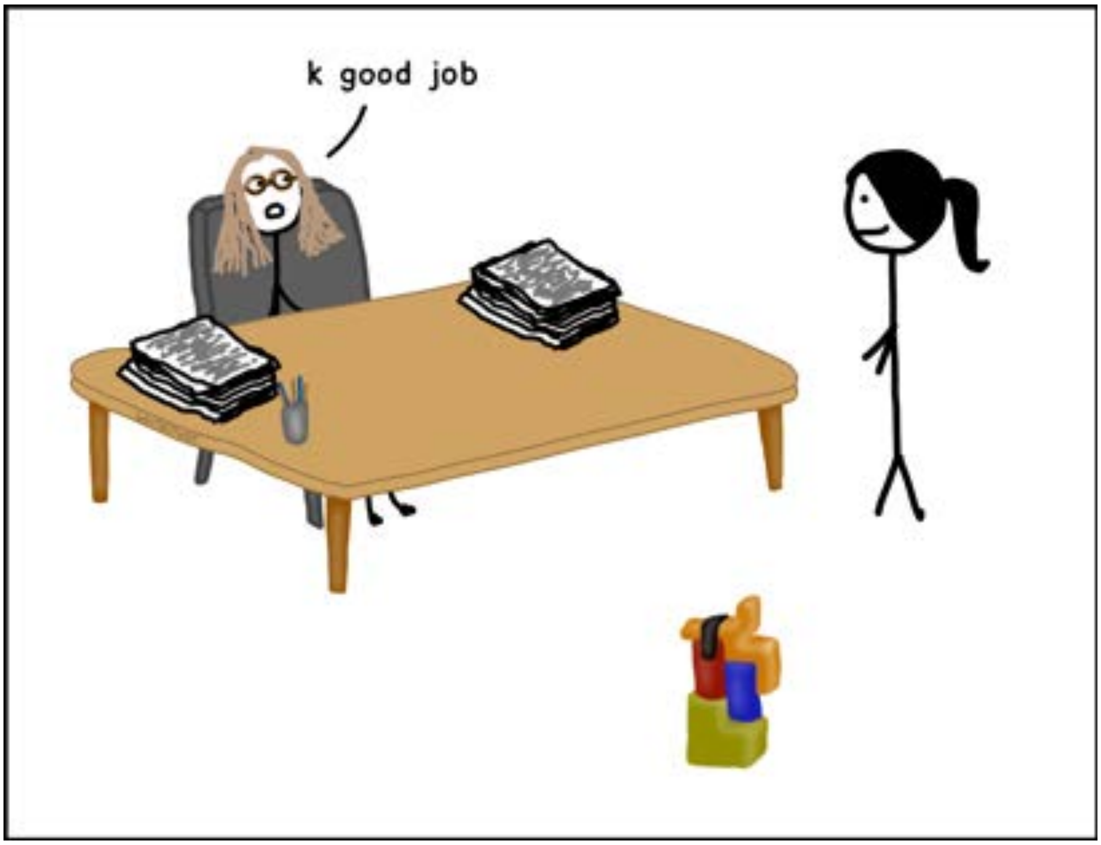




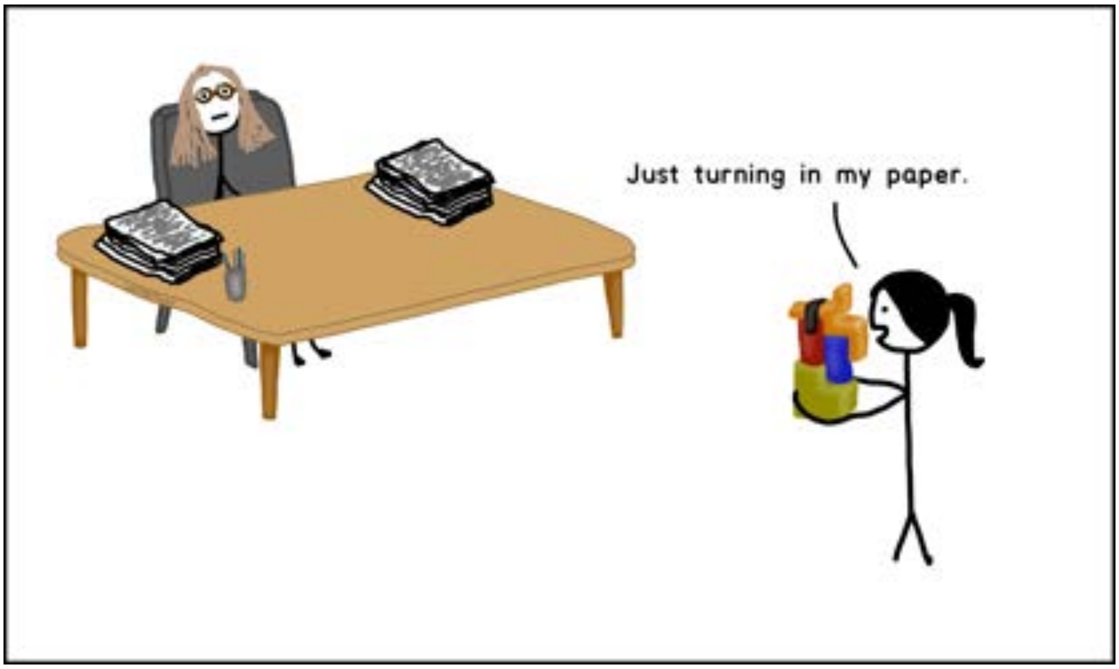


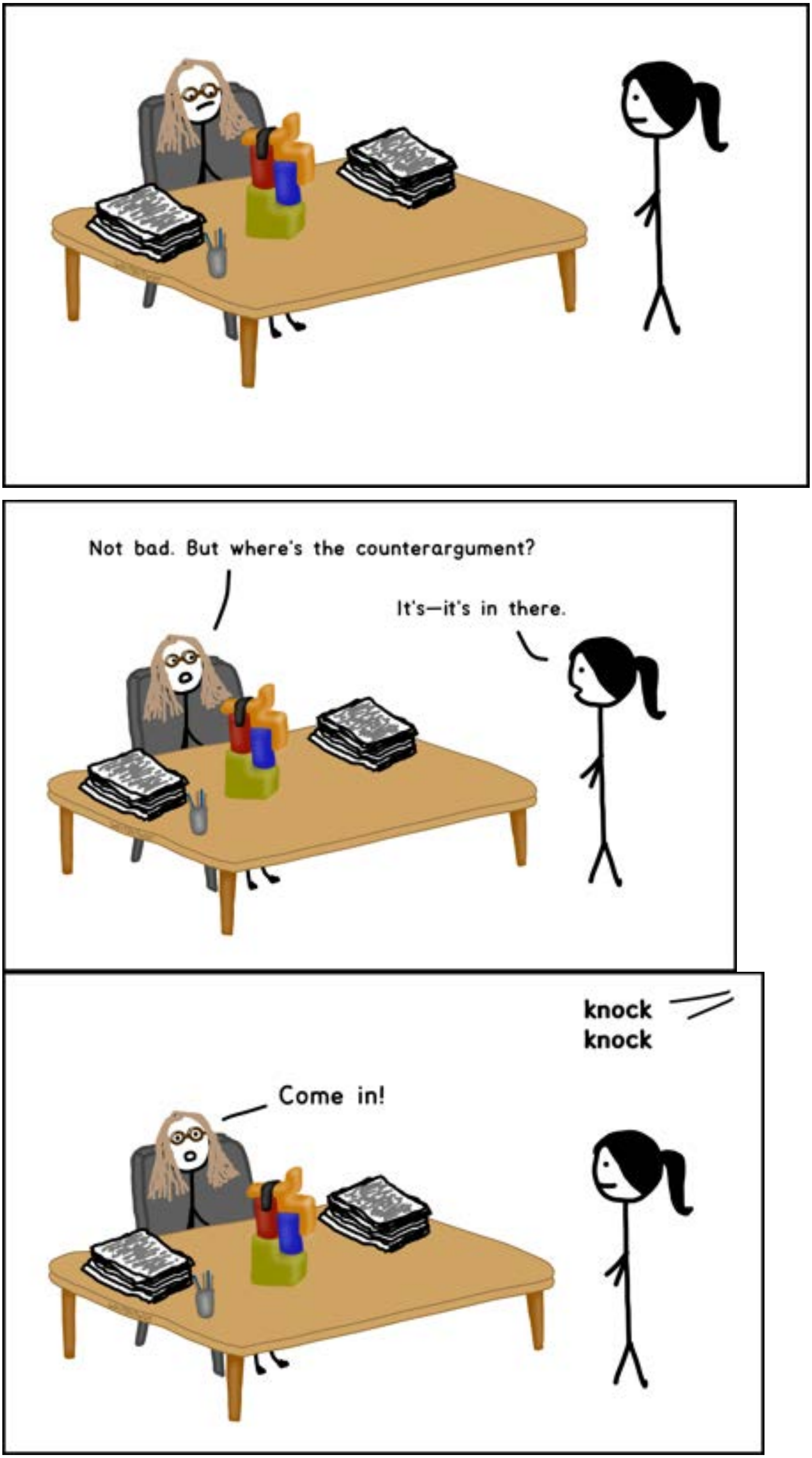


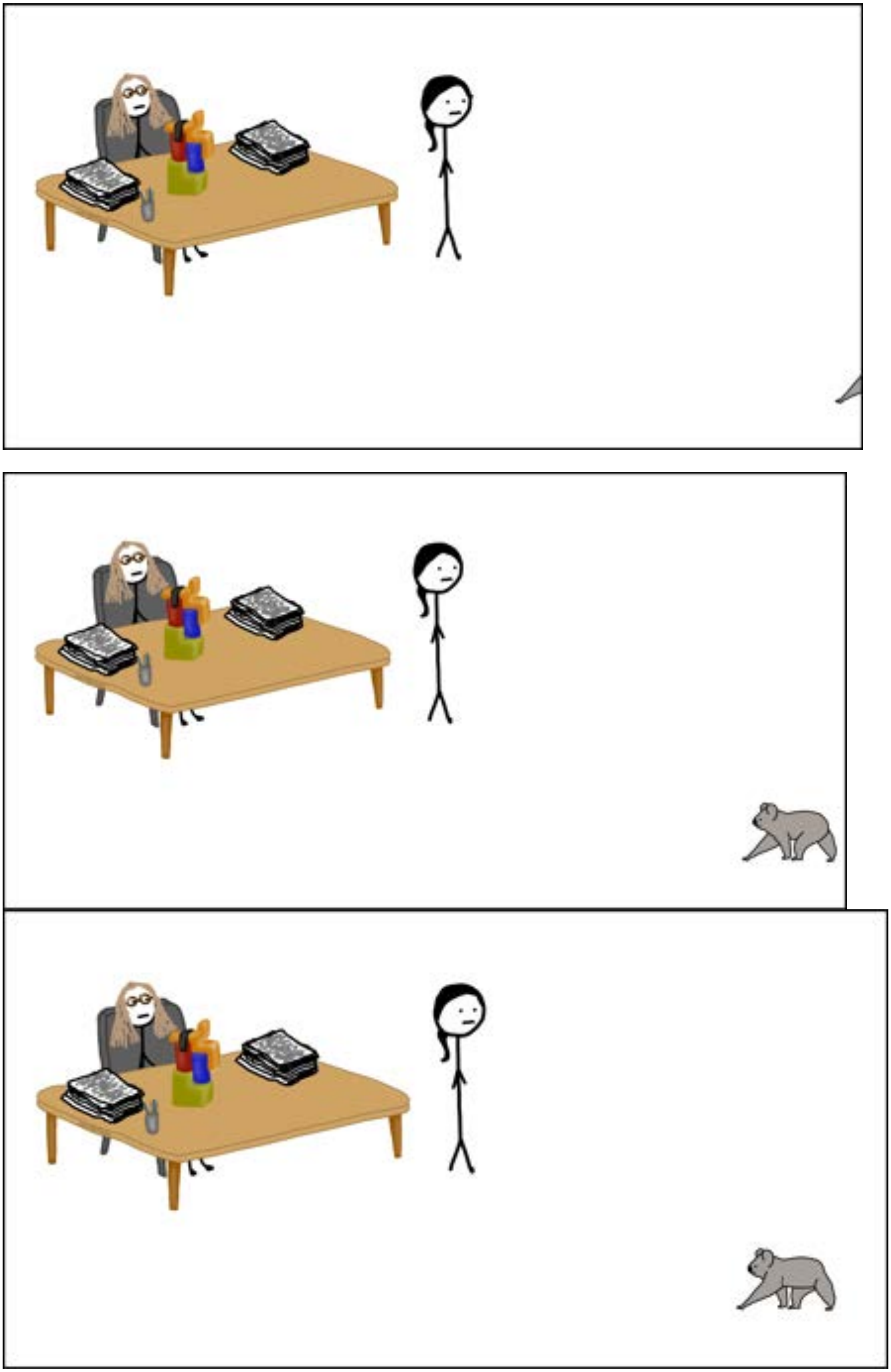

fuck that shit.

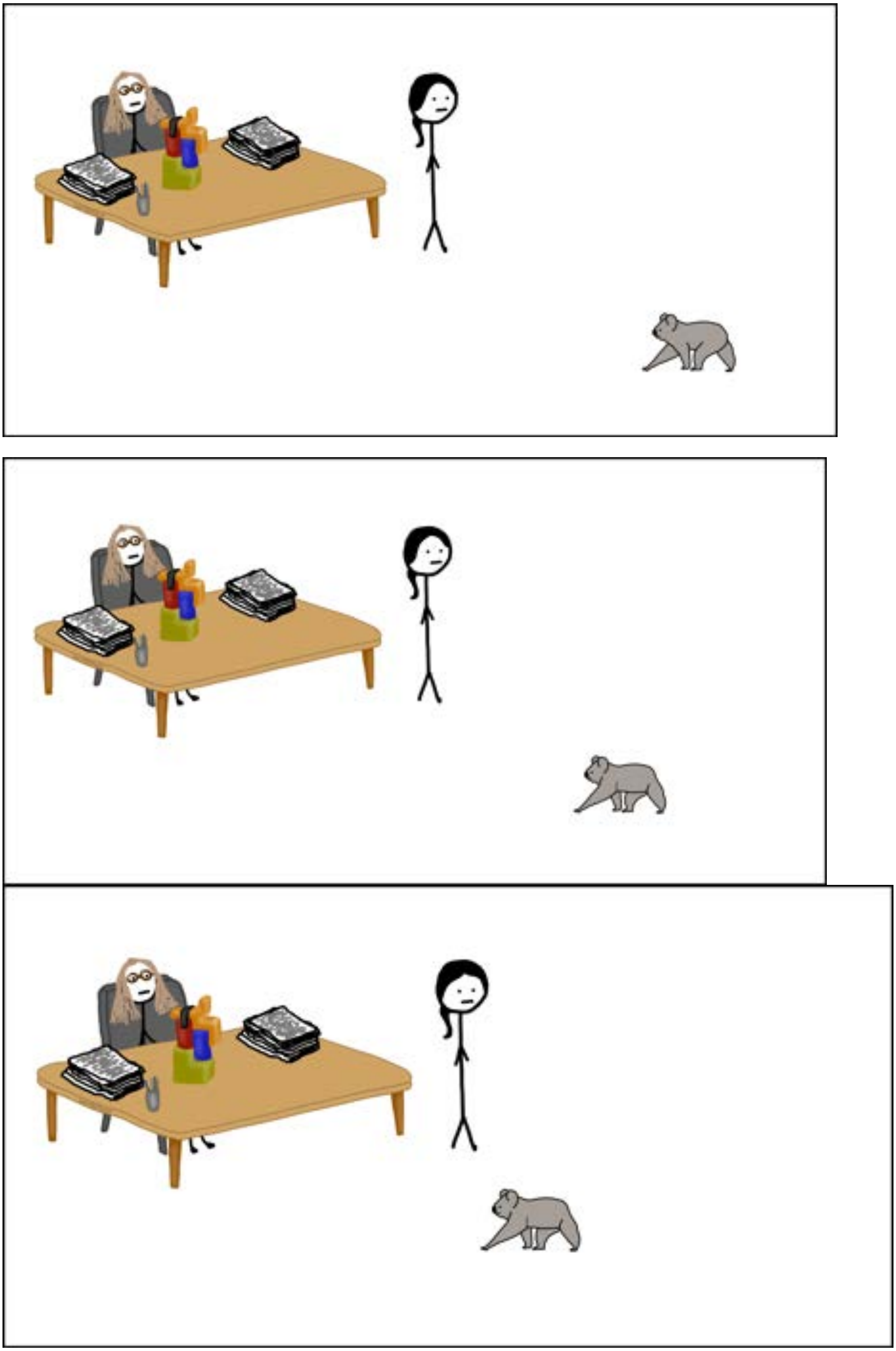


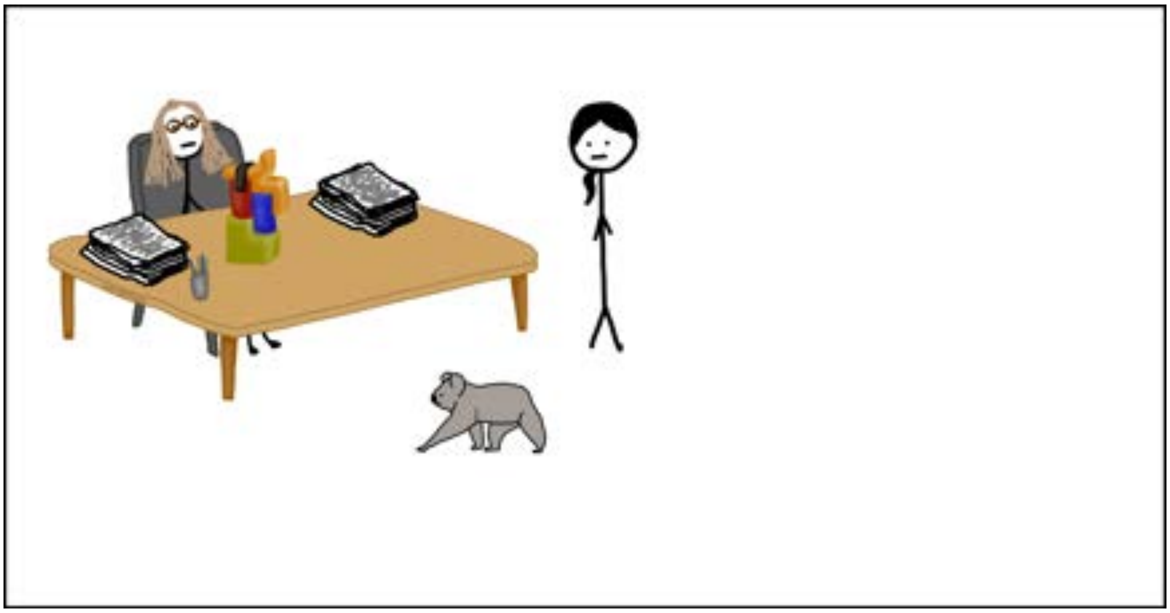
But what if you're not so confident in your viewpoint? And you still want to make it seem like it can do well in the boxing ring? As a procrastinator who wrote a lot of hasty, shitty papers in college, I can tell you firsthand that one of the trademarks of a paper with a weak thesis is an even weaker counterargument.

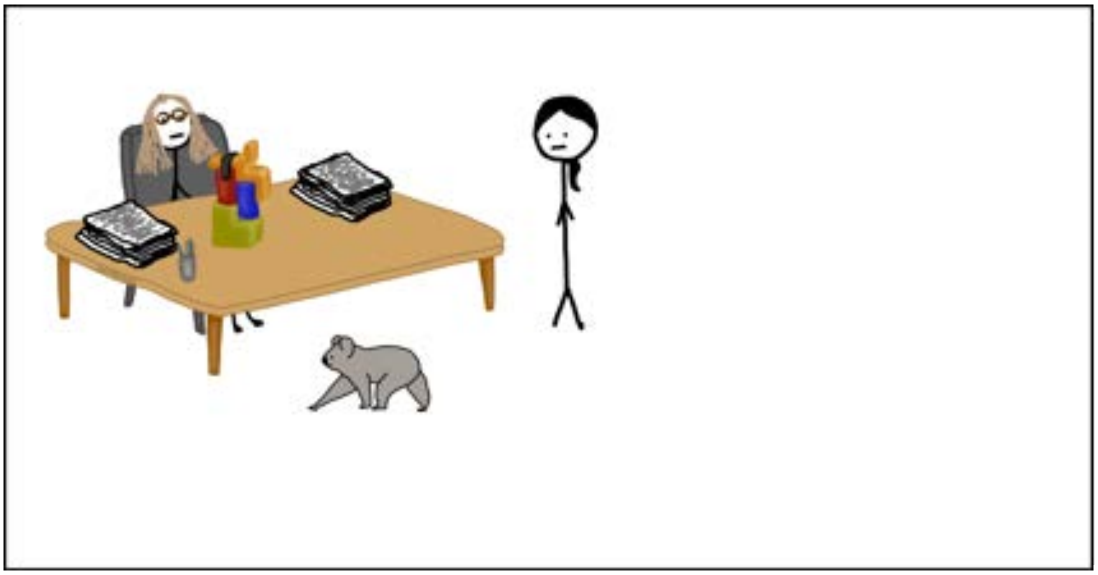

Just turning in my paper.

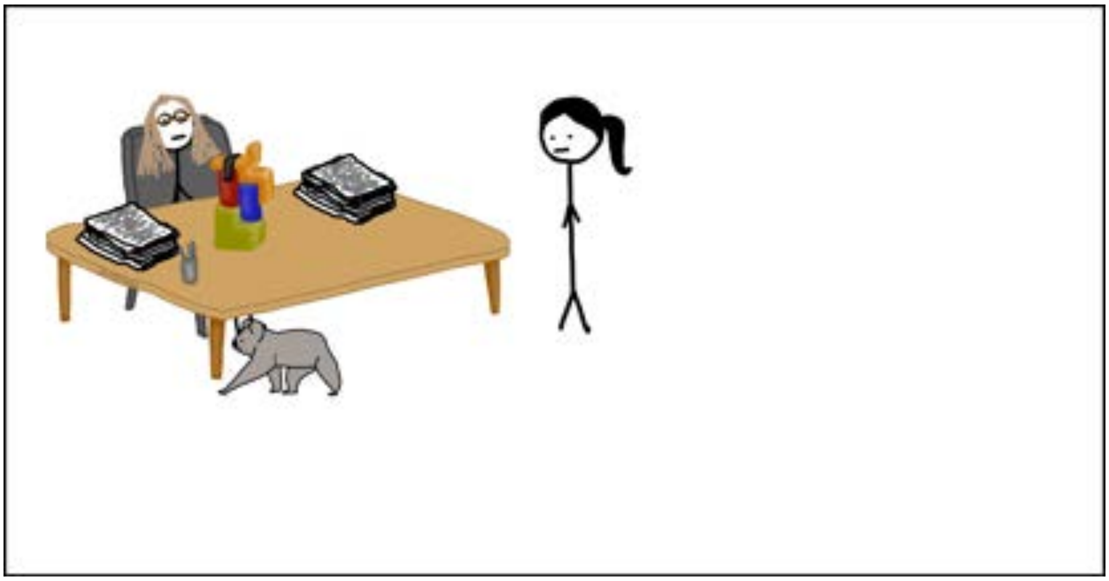

Not bad. But where's the counterargument?
It's—it's in there.
knock
knock
Come in!

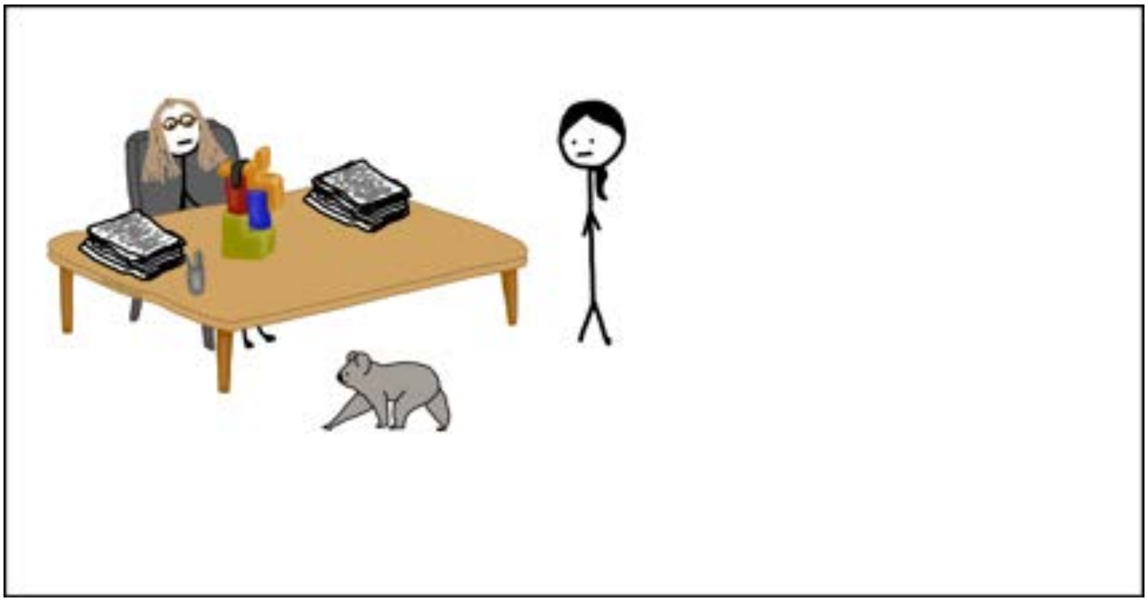


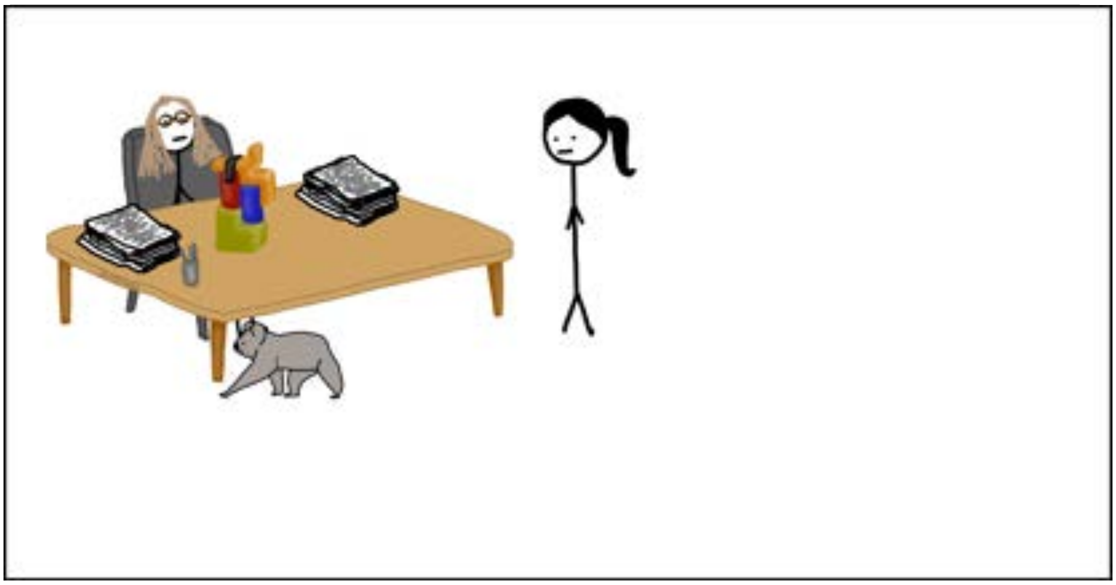


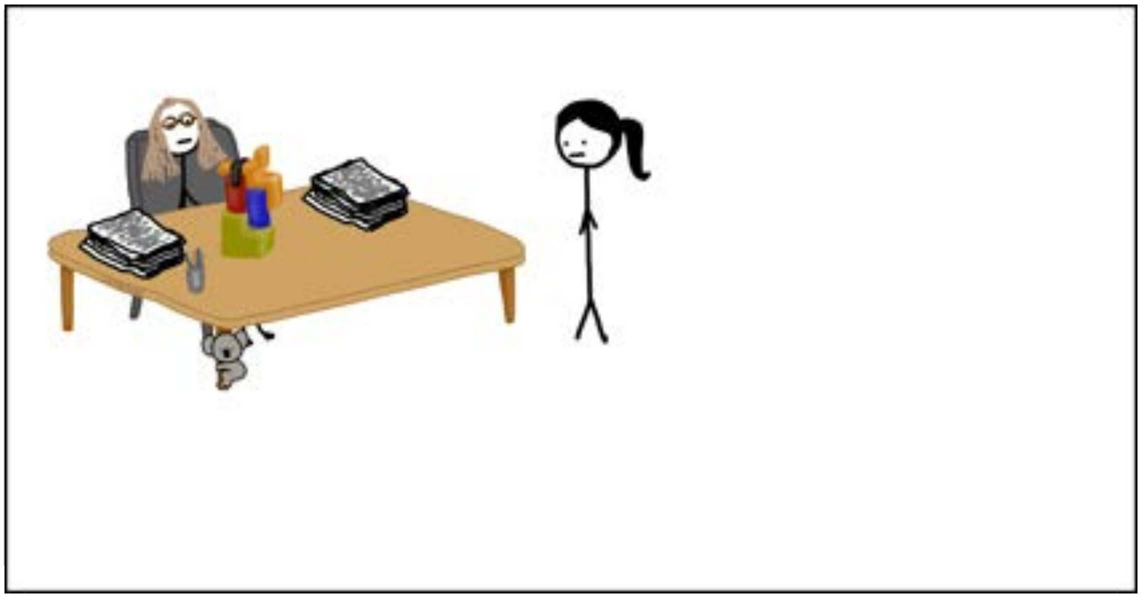


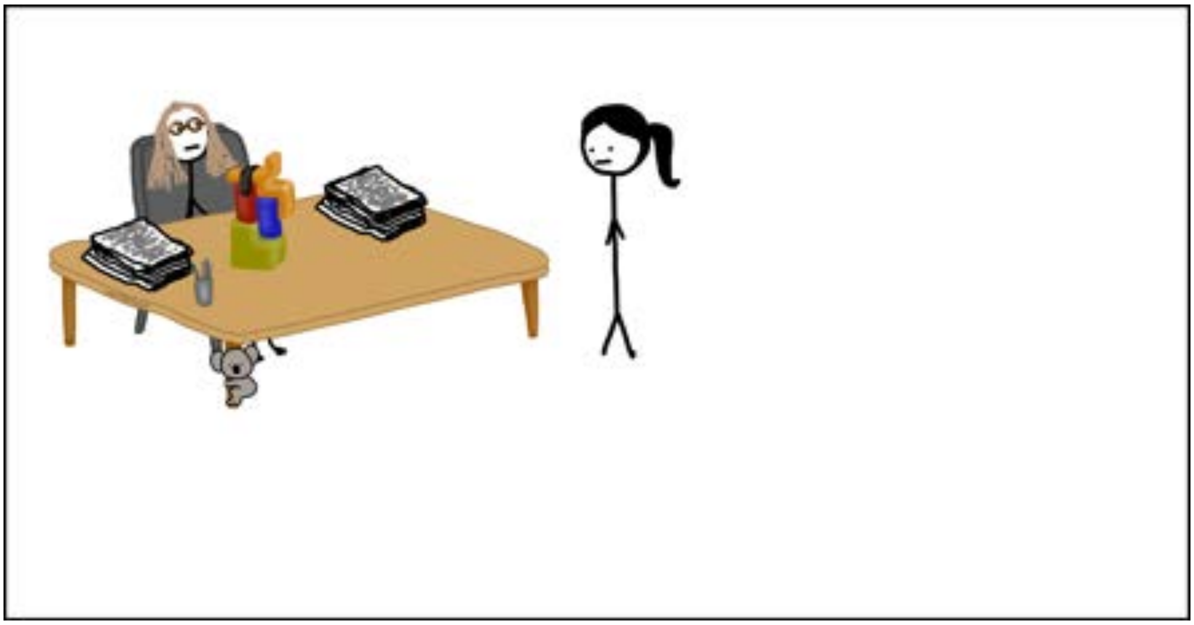


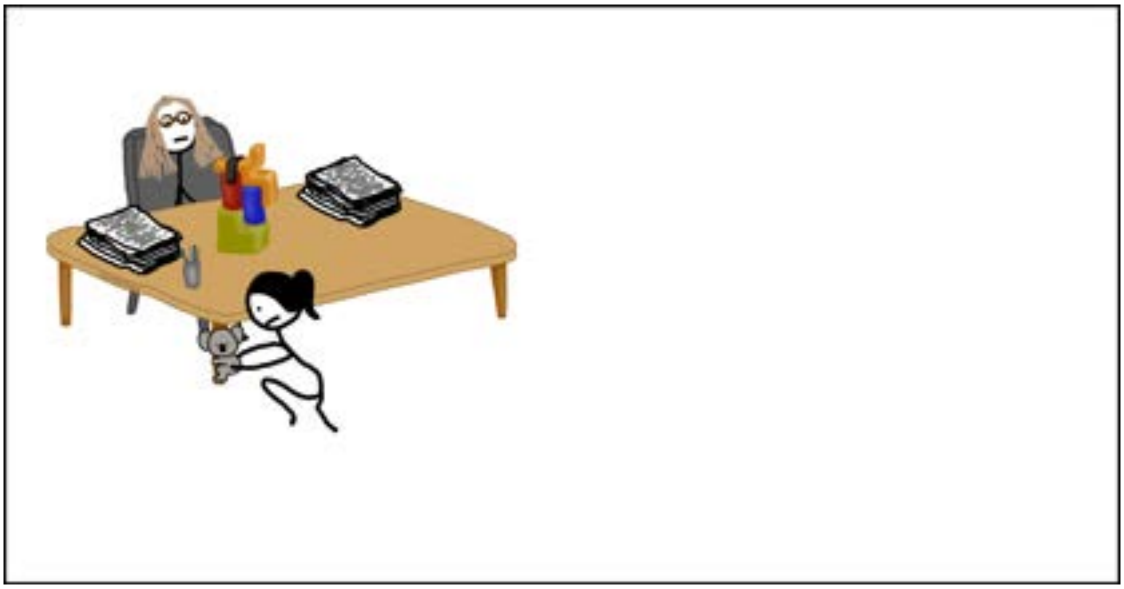


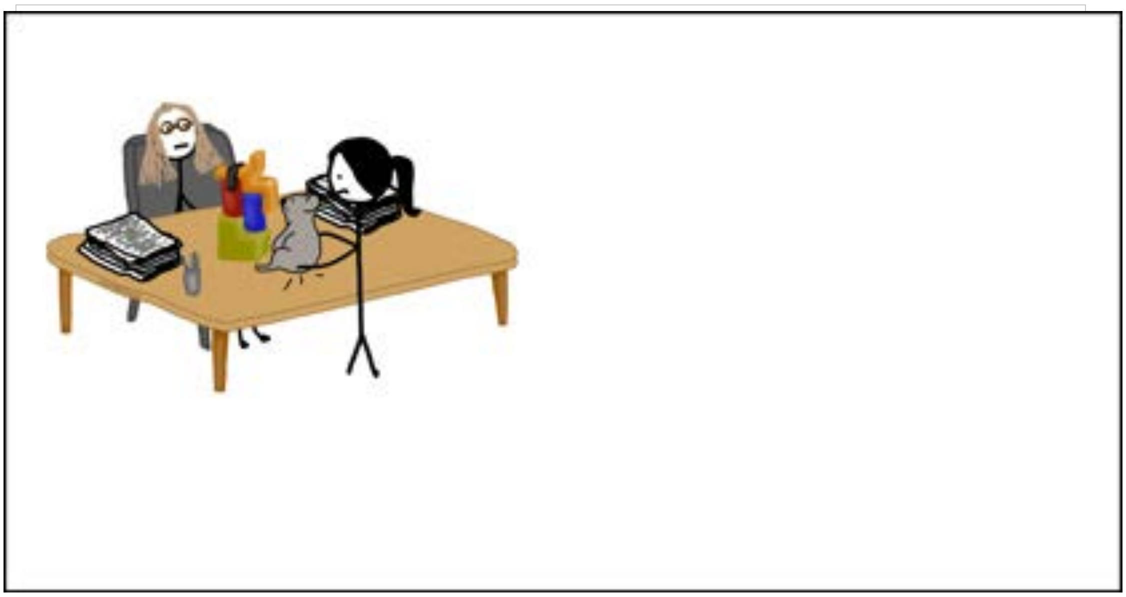


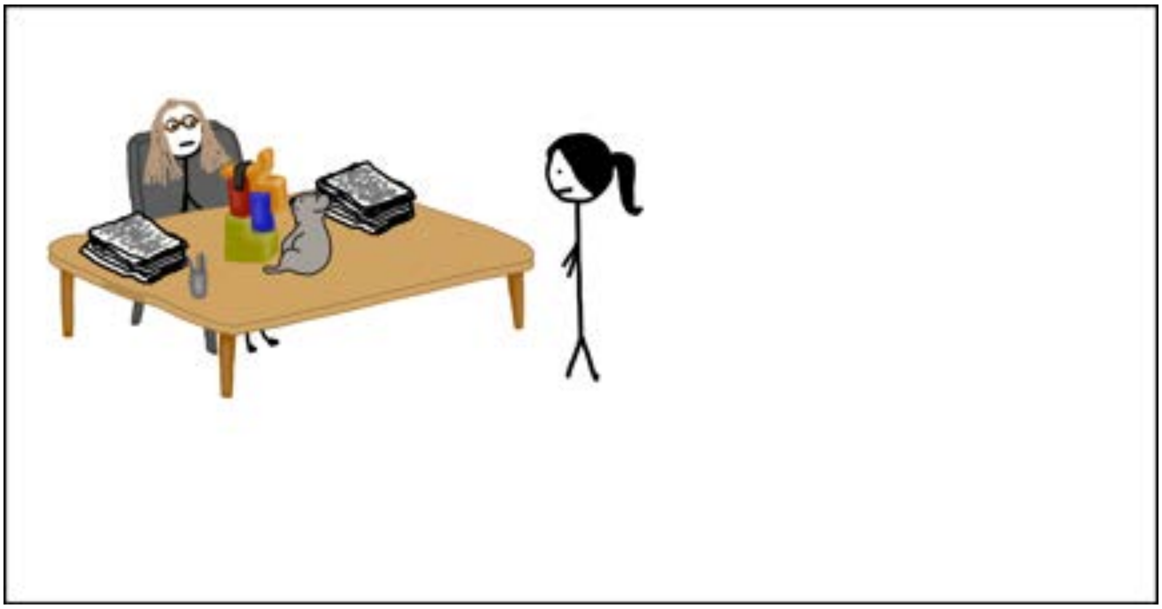


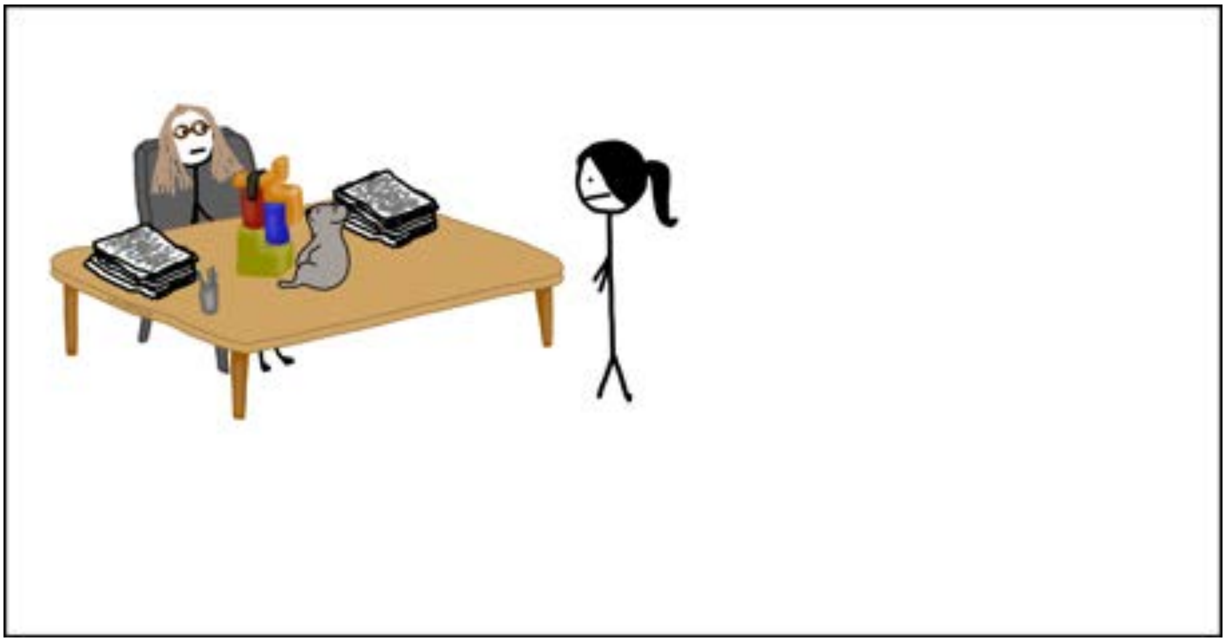


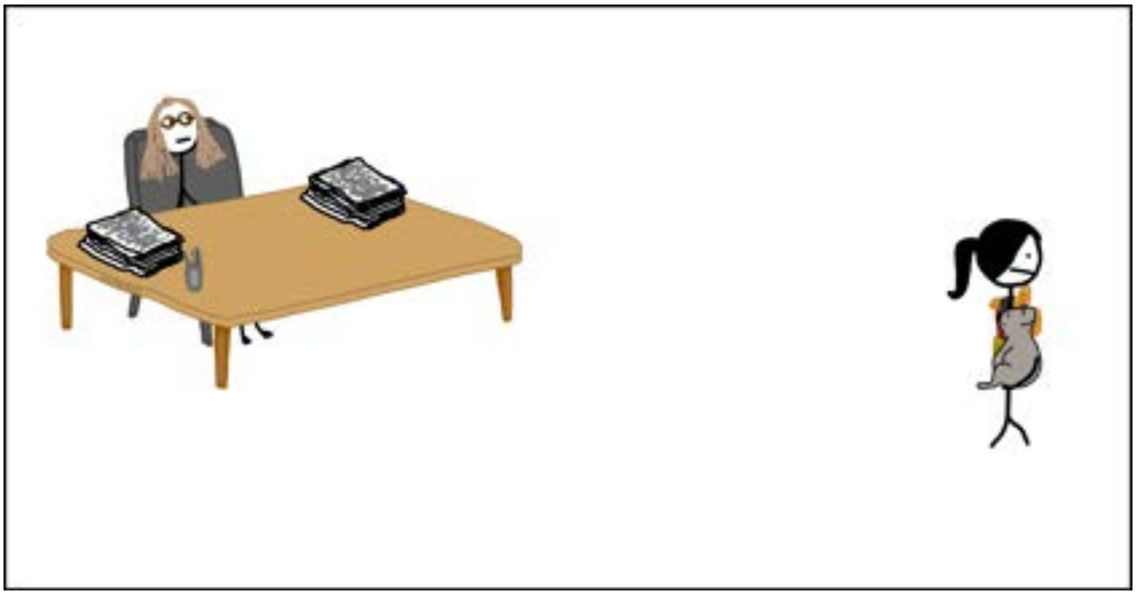








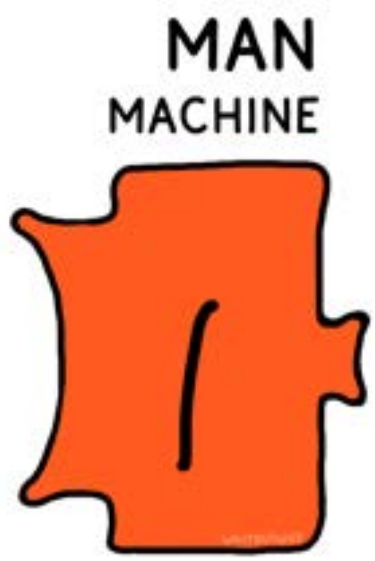




When exposed to real opponents not afraid to tear apart bad arguments, oversimplified PDW narratives end up TKO'd in round 1. That's why political Echo Chambers are so intent on making it taboo to criticize the narrative—it's their way of banning anyone from landing a good hit on their sacred baby.

But to generate the kind of intense conviction in its members that *of COURSE the narrative is correct*, political Echo Chambers need to make it *seem* like the narrative is a champion heavyweight boxer who demolishes anyone who tries to prove it wrong. So how can this happen when no actual living, breathing dissenters are allowed to fight the narrative?

Here's the trick: The Echo Chamber stages scripted fights that seem real to the Echo Chamber's members, but where the narrative always comes out on top. To pull this off, they use one of the most tried and true tools of the low-rung intellectual world:

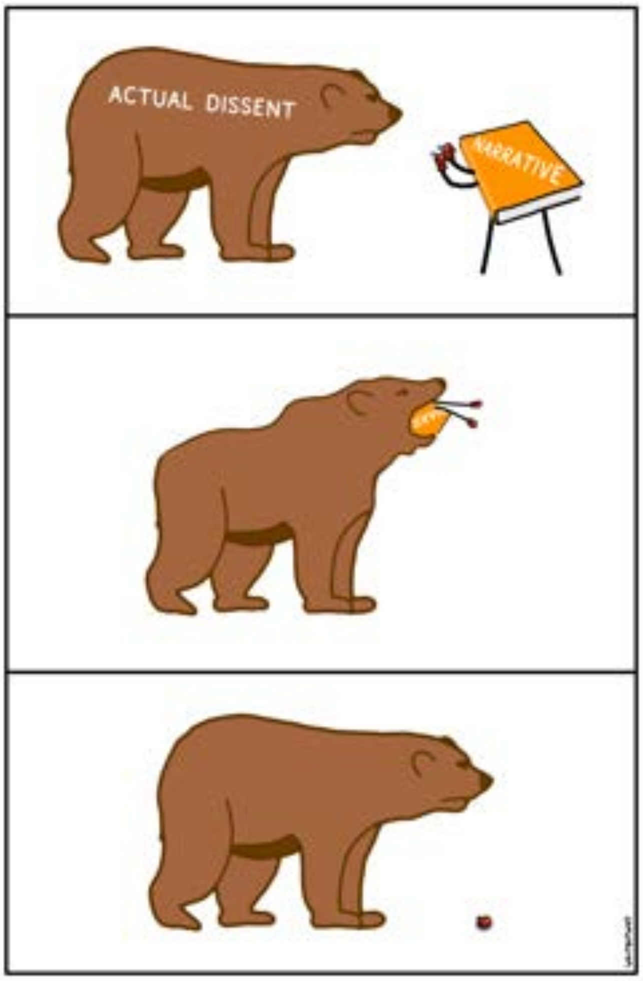


The man machine takes real criticism of the narrative and converts it into easy-to-beat opponents. Here are three of the most common:

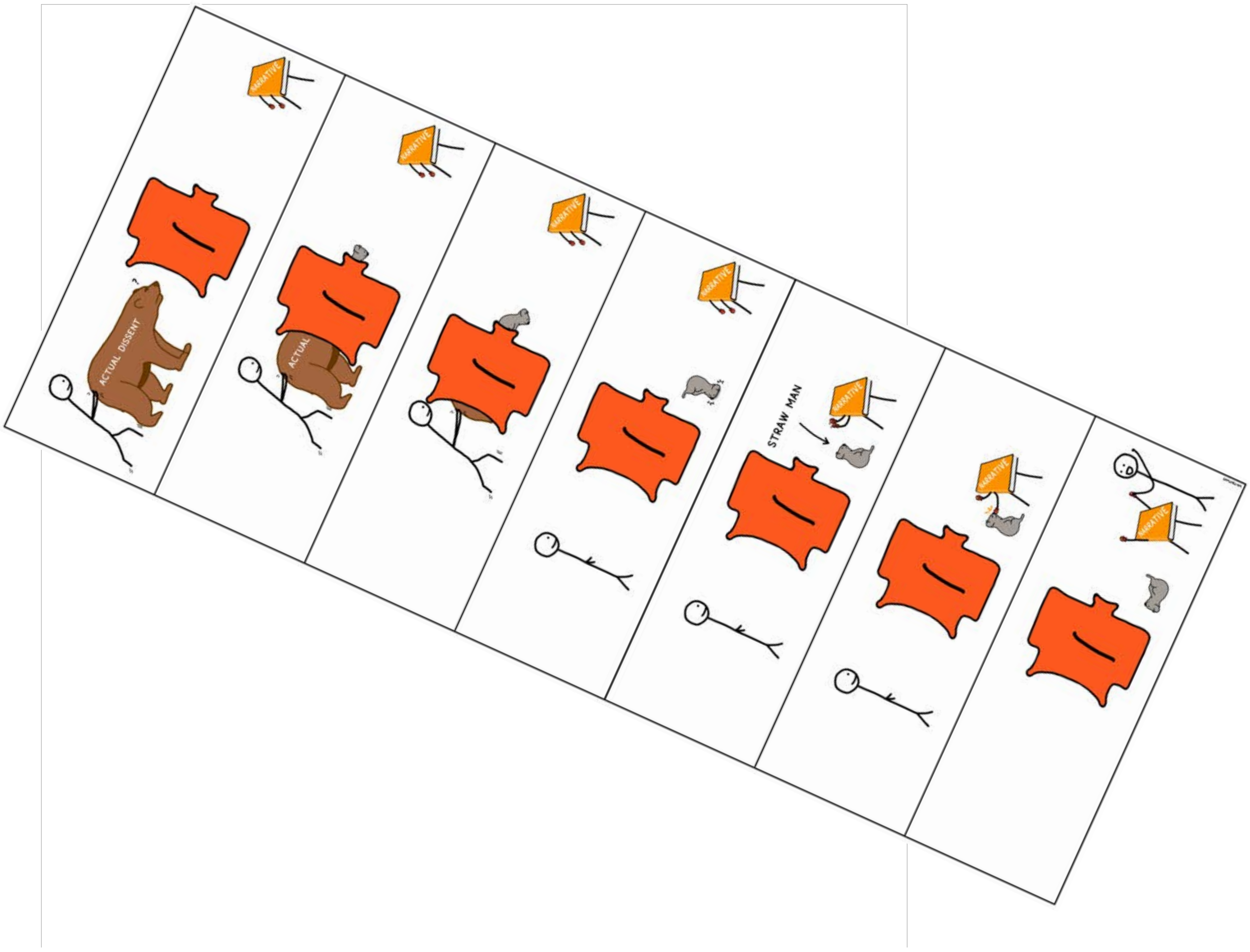
The Straw Man

To make a Straw Man, the man machine reframes the wording of a strong dissenting argument, transforming it into a much weaker argument.

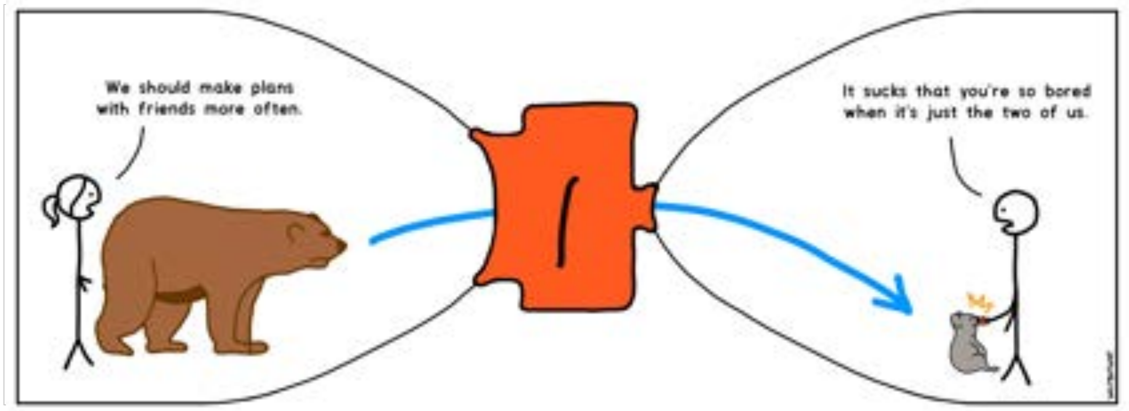
To see how it works, let's first watch a standard low-rung political narrative face off against real dissent from outside the Echo Chamber.


ACTUAL DISSENT
NARRATIVE

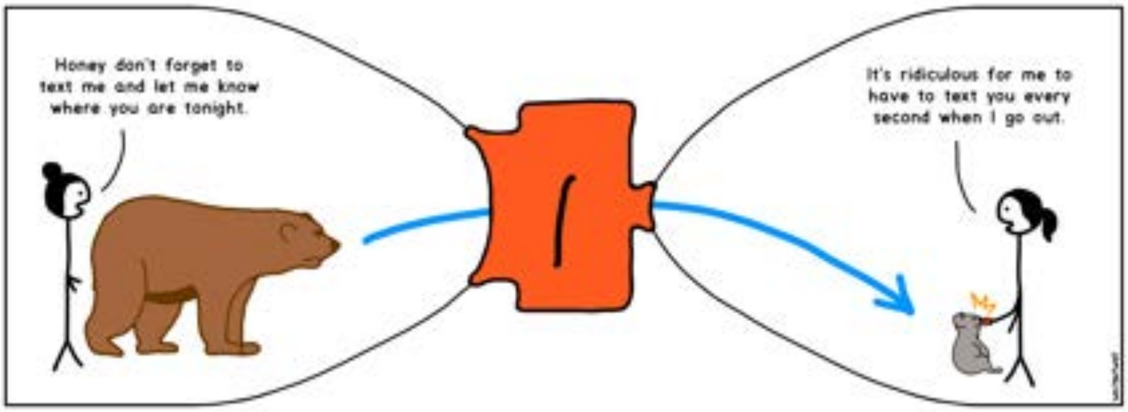
As expected, that didn’t go very well. But the man machine can save the day.

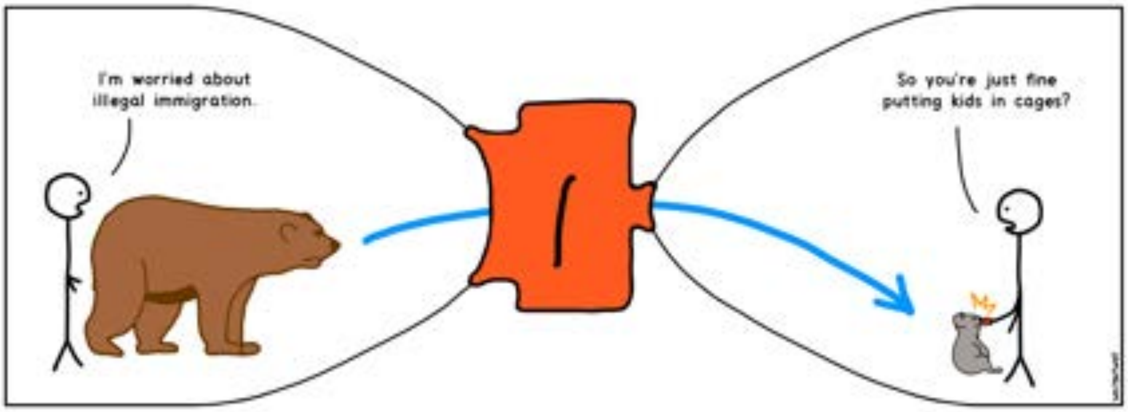

NARRATIVE
ACTUAL DISSENT
NARRATIVE
ACTUAL
NARRATIVE
NARRATIVE
STRAW MAN
NARRATIVE
NARRATIVE
NARRATIVE

We’ve all used this tactic.



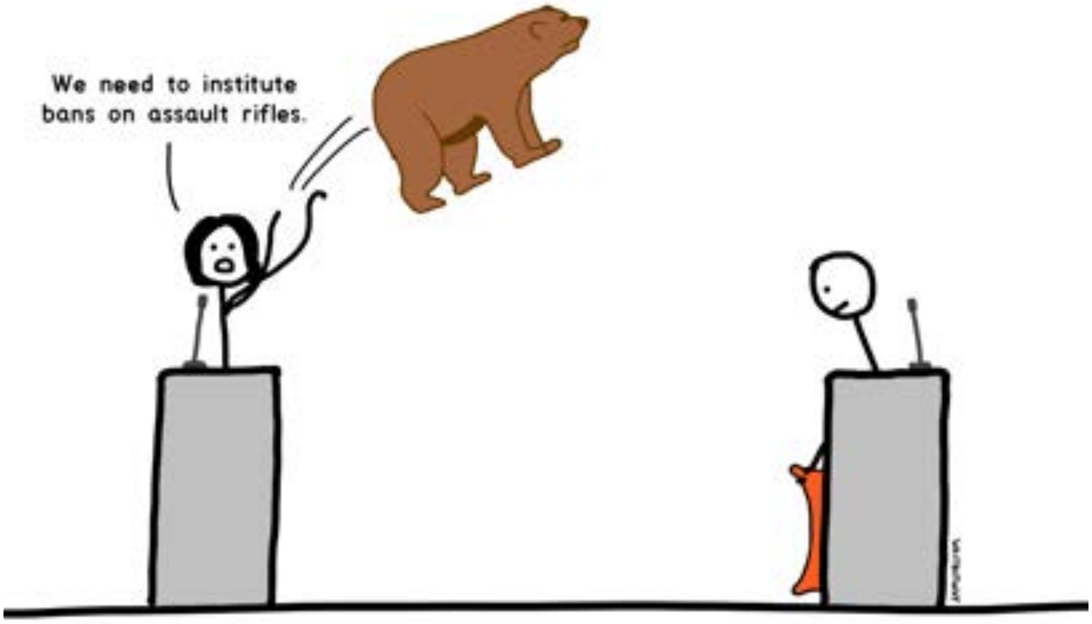
We should make plans with friends more often.
It sucks that you're so bored when it's just the two of us.

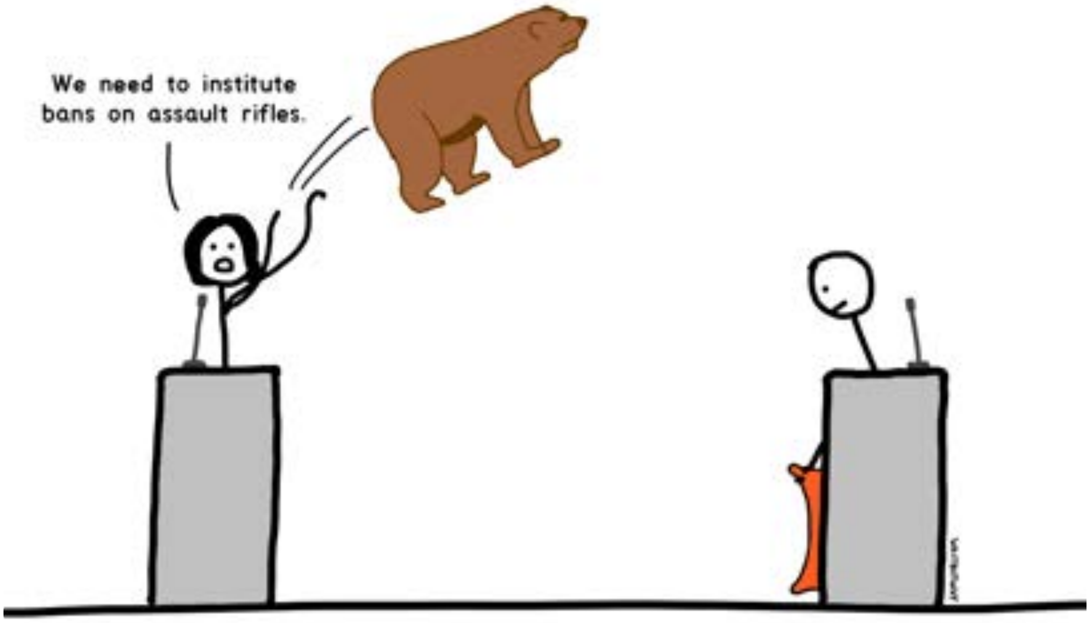

Honey don't forget to text me and let me know where you are tonight.
It's ridiculous for me to have to text you every second when I go out.

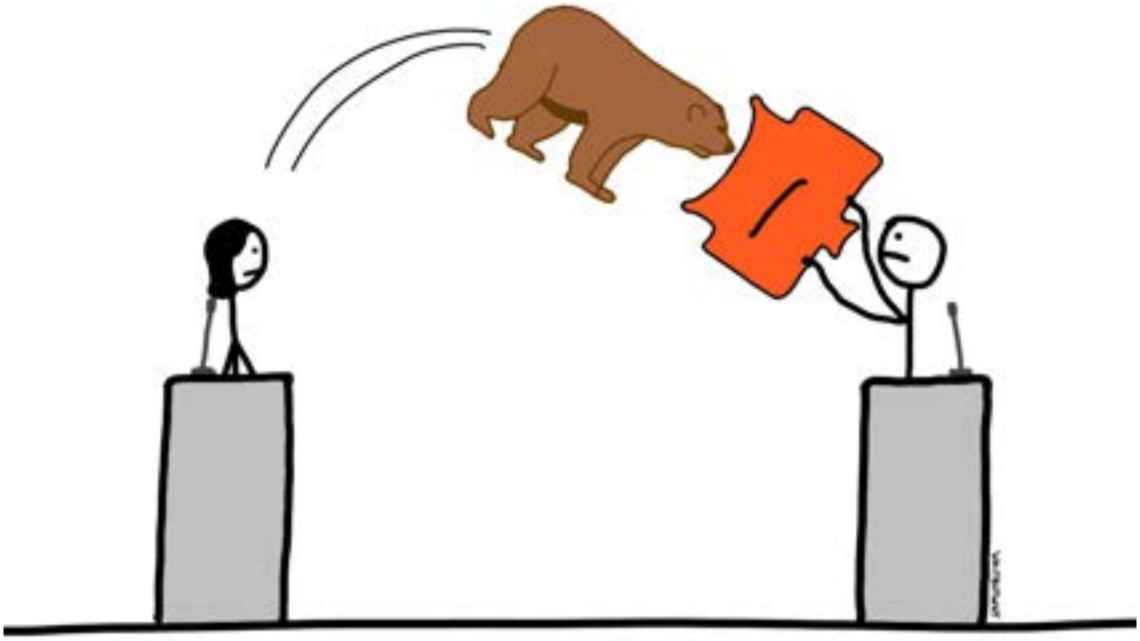

I'm worried about illegal immigration.
So you're just fine putting kids in cages?

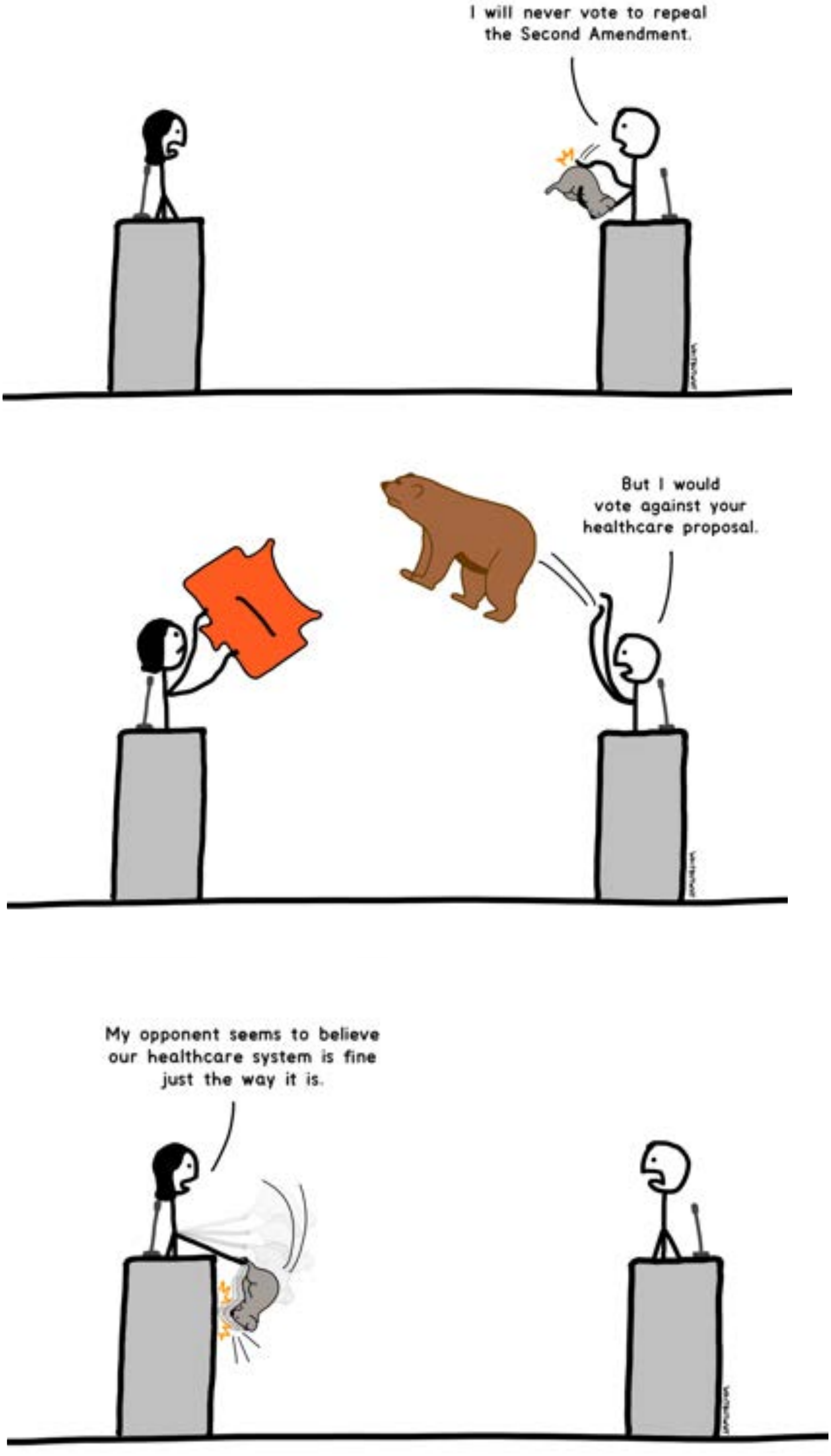
When we create Straw Men, we sometimes do it knowingly, sometimes cluelessly. Most of the time, we probably do it with our subconscious knowing what we're doing but our conscious mind in denial that we're pulling a cheap trick.

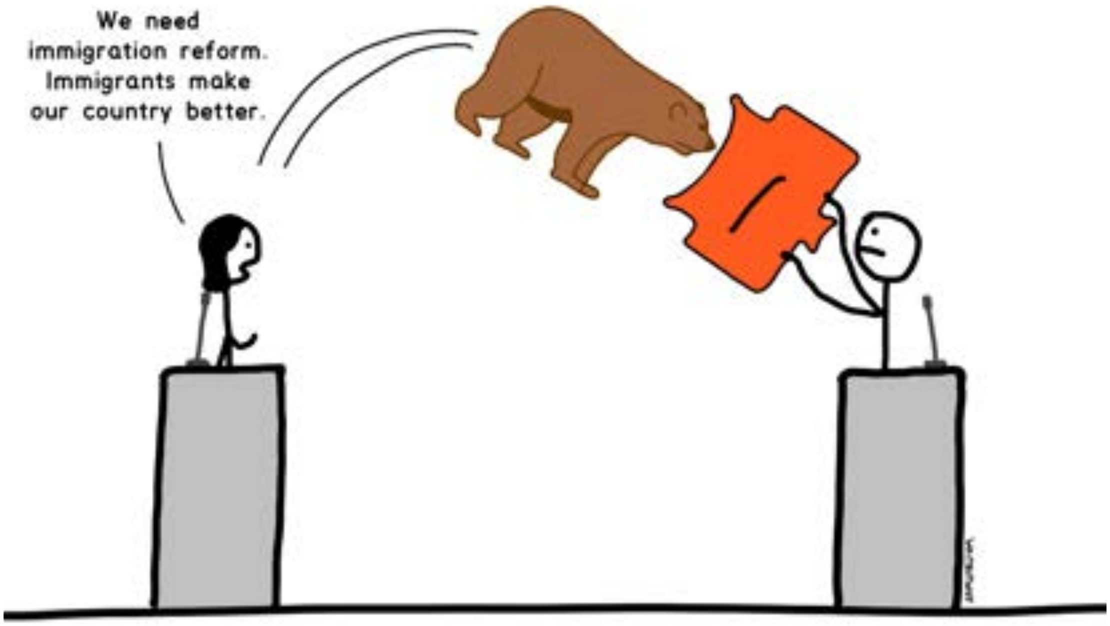
In *public* arguments, the goal of an arguer isn't to change the opponent's mind as much as it is to win over a viewing audience. Here, arguers will use Straw Men in hopes that the audience isn't smart enough to notice the sleight of hand.


We need to institute bans on assault rifles.


We need to institute bans on assault rifles.

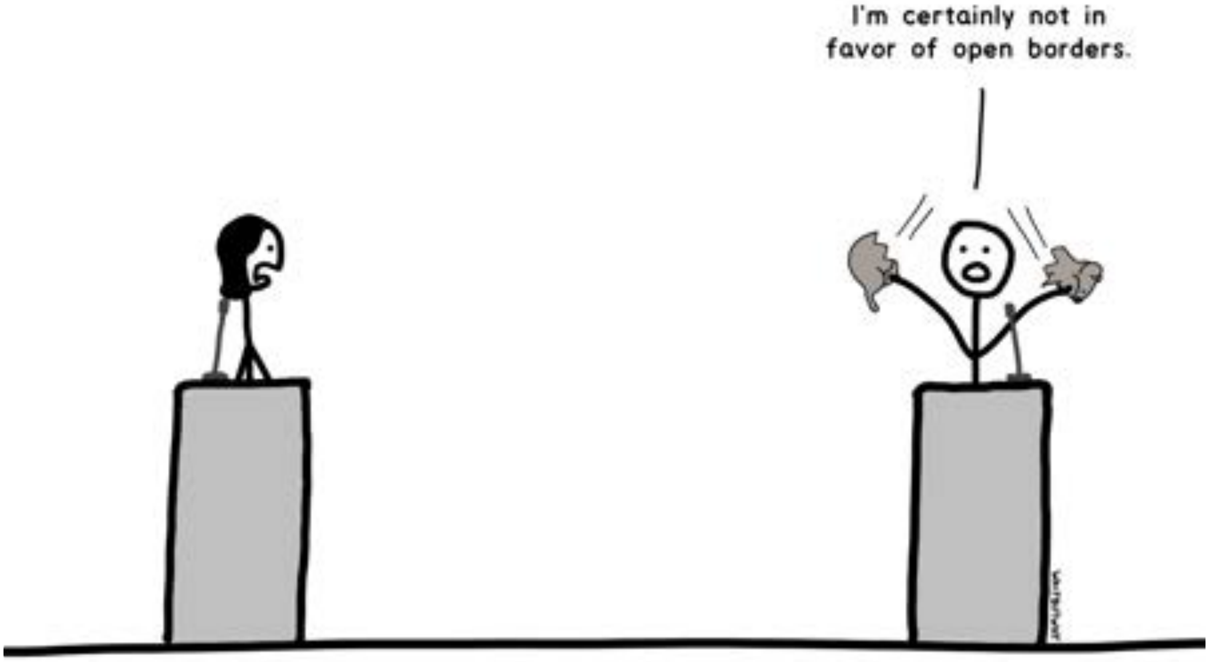


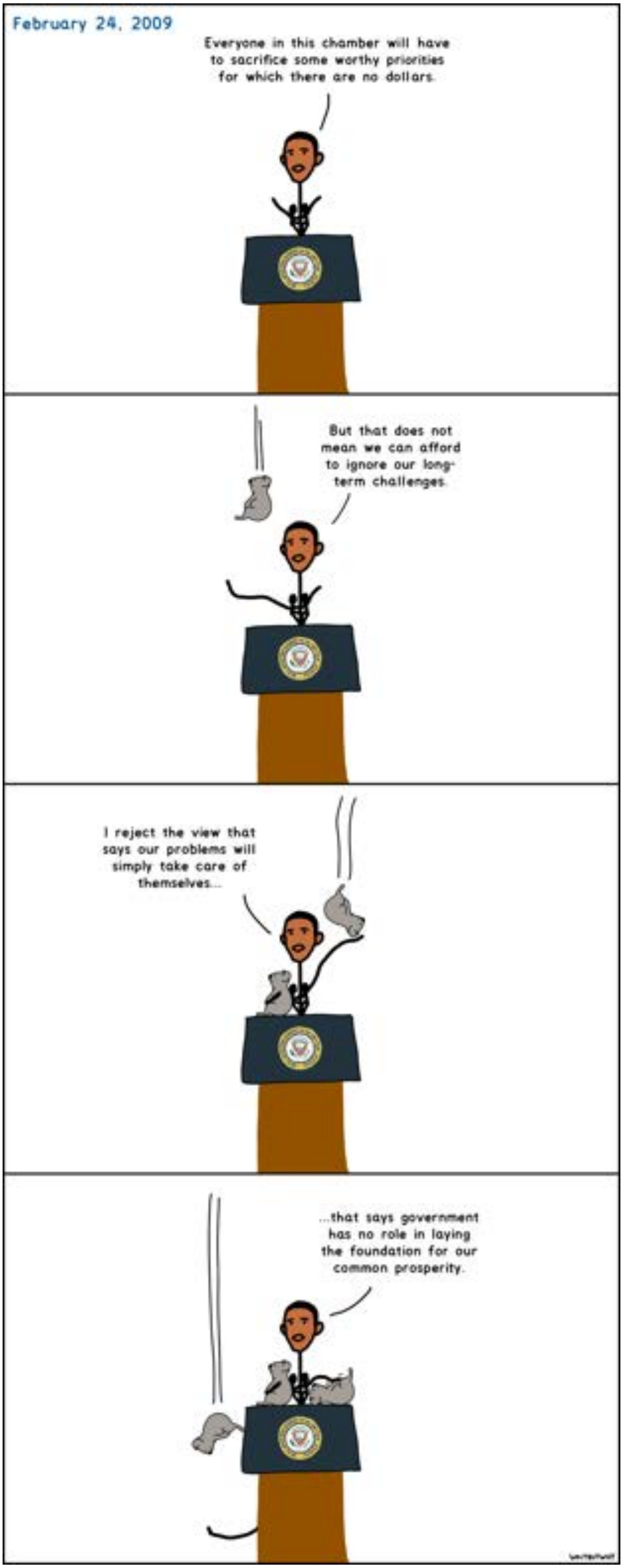

I will never vote to repeal the Second Amendment.
But I would vote against your healthcare proposal.
My opponent seems to believe our healthcare system is fine just the way it is.


We need immigration reform. Immigrants make our country better.

Using a Straw Man can make you appear victorious to unwitting viewers, like a boxer who takes a swing at the balls mid-match and hopes the ref won't see it. You wouldn't think it could work, but humans are bad at reality, so straw-manning often goes unnoticed.

In a courtroom or debate stage, the opposition at least has a chance to object to or refute a straw man attack. But usually, the opposition doesn't get a voice at all.[7]


I'm certainly not in favor of open borders.



February 24, 2009

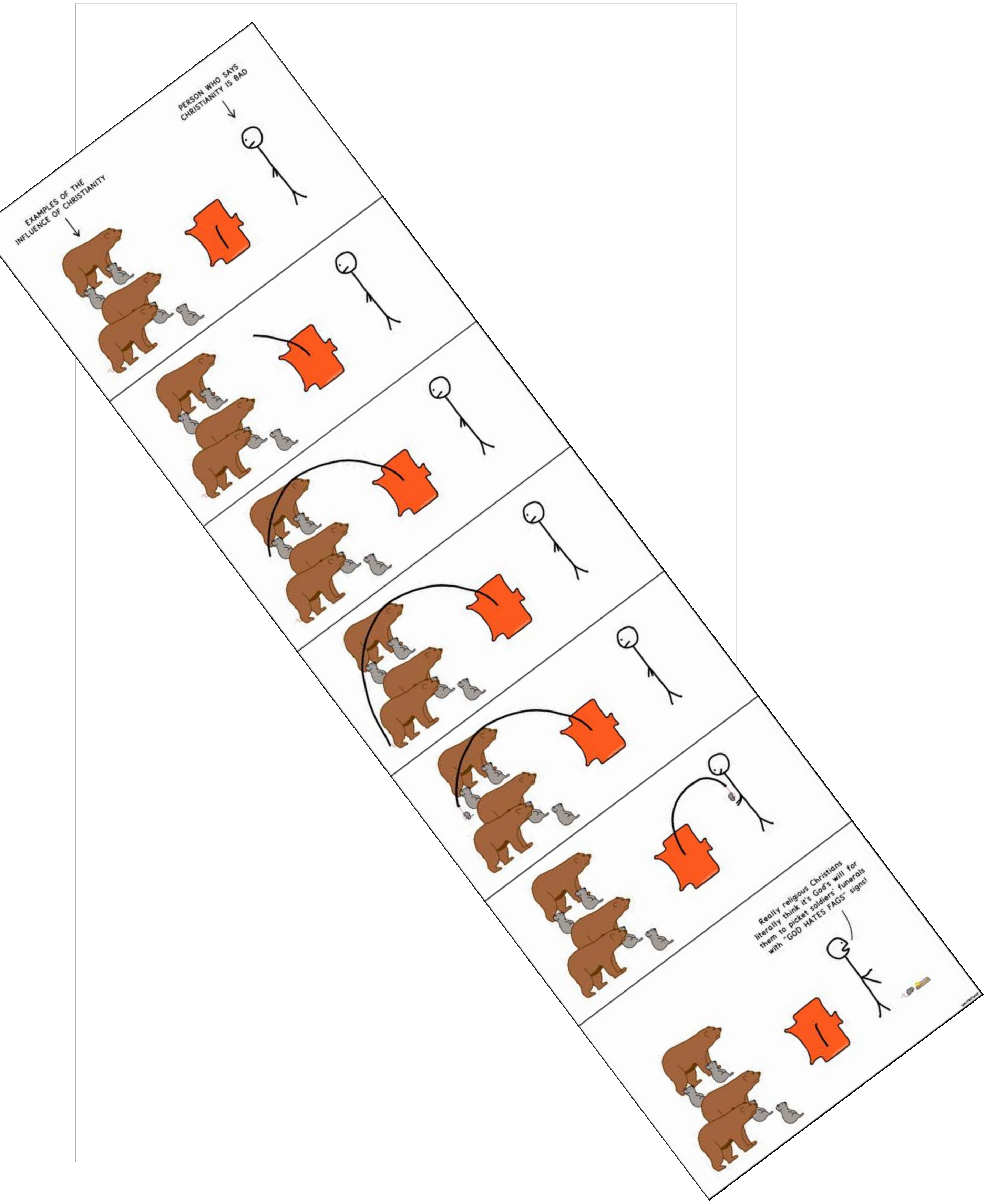
Everyone in this chamber will have to sacrifice some worthy priorities for which there are no dollars.
But that does not mean we can afford to ignore our long-term challenges.
I reject the view that says our problems will simply take care of themselves...
...that says government has no role in laying the foundation for our common prosperity.

In Political Disney World, when a cleverly worded Tweet or op-ed straw-mans the opposing side, it goes viral, and soon, the farce boxing match is played on loop throughout the Echo Chamber, ad nauseam.

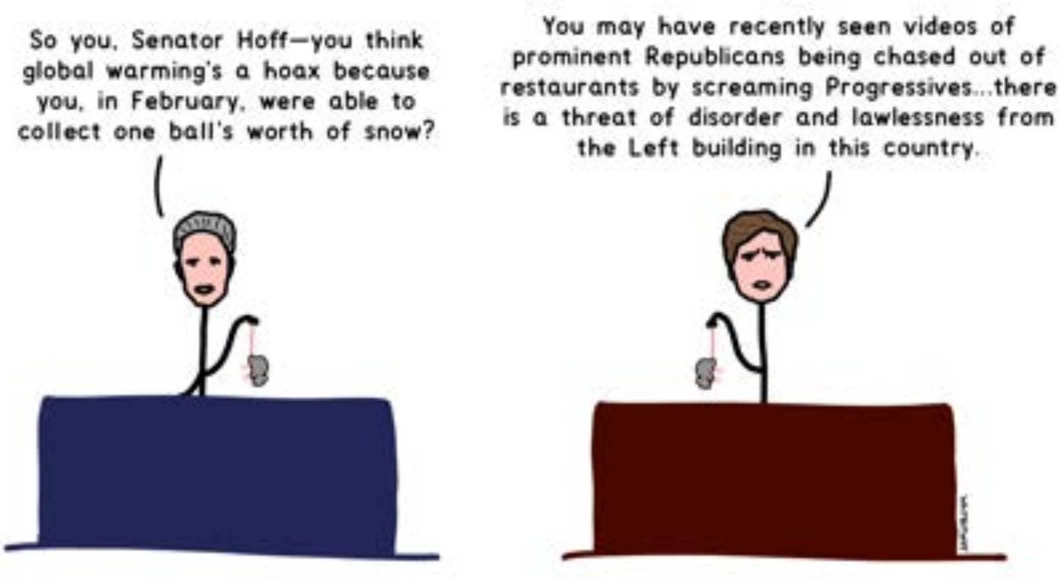
The Weak Man

The Straw Man is a well-known fallacy. But in the past decade, people have begun talking about what political theorist Robert Talisse calls the Weak Man fallacy.

Straw-manning takes a strong argument and distorts it into a weak one. Weak-manning takes a strong argument and hand-picks the weakest *part* of it, or the weakest *version* of it, and attacks that. When you handily defeat the weak argument, you then frame it as if you've defeated the argument, in general.


PERSON WHO SAYS CHRISTIANITY IS BAD
EXAMPLES OF THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY
Really religious Christians literally think it's God's will for them to picket soldiers' funerals with "GOD HATES FAGS" signs!

Partisan media are big fans of the Weak Man. People like Jon Stewart and Tucker Carlson have made entire careers out of weak-manning.[8]


So you, Senator Hoff—you think global warming's a hoax because you, in February, were able to collect one ball's worth of snow?
You may have recently seen videos of prominent Republicans being chased out of restaurants by screaming Progressives...there is a threat of disorder and lawlessness from the Left building in this country.

Weak-manning is why everyone in low-rung politics sees the other side as absolutely indefensible and unforgivable. They've been presented again and again with the worst of the other side's low-rung giant, and they've come to believe that it's representative of the other side as a whole.

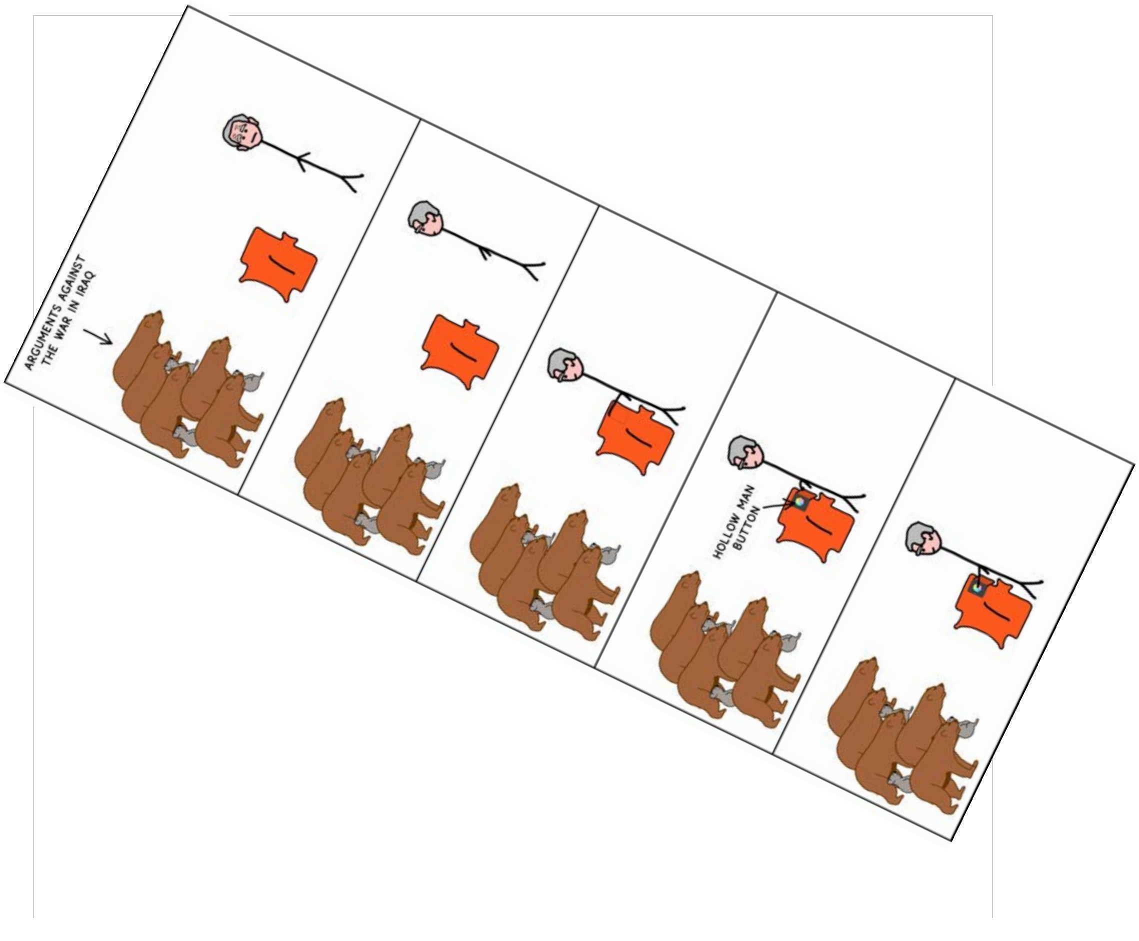
The Hollow Man

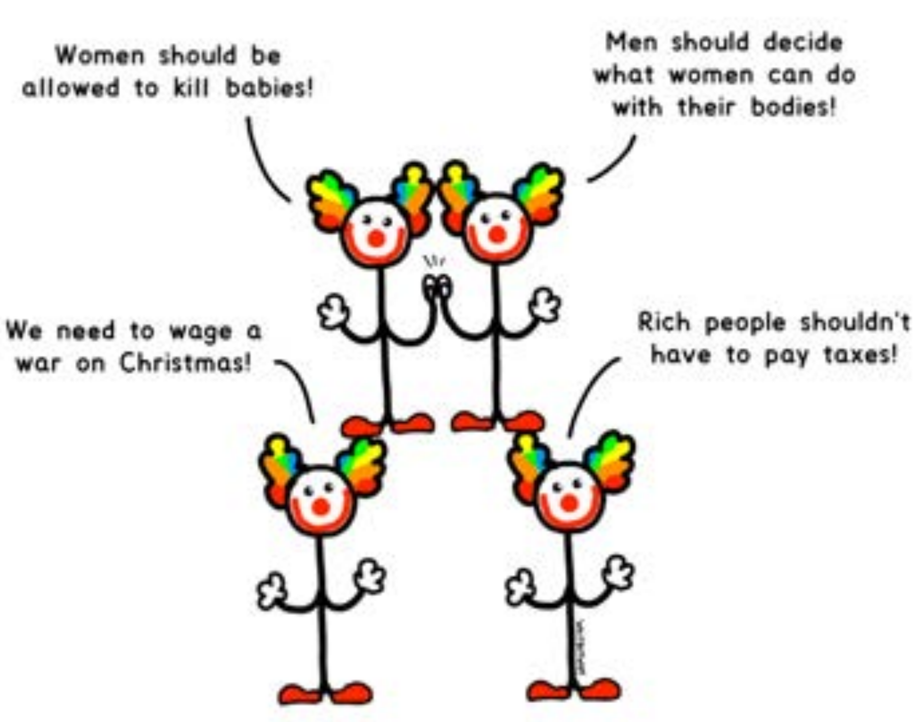
The Hollow Man does away with the work of distorting or cherry-picking the dissenting argument and just fabricates one from scratch. Often framed by "some people say" or something else vague, the Hollow Man is the ideal opponent for the narrative—the easiest match possible.

In 2004, in order to refute opponents of the Iraq War, George W. Bush said:

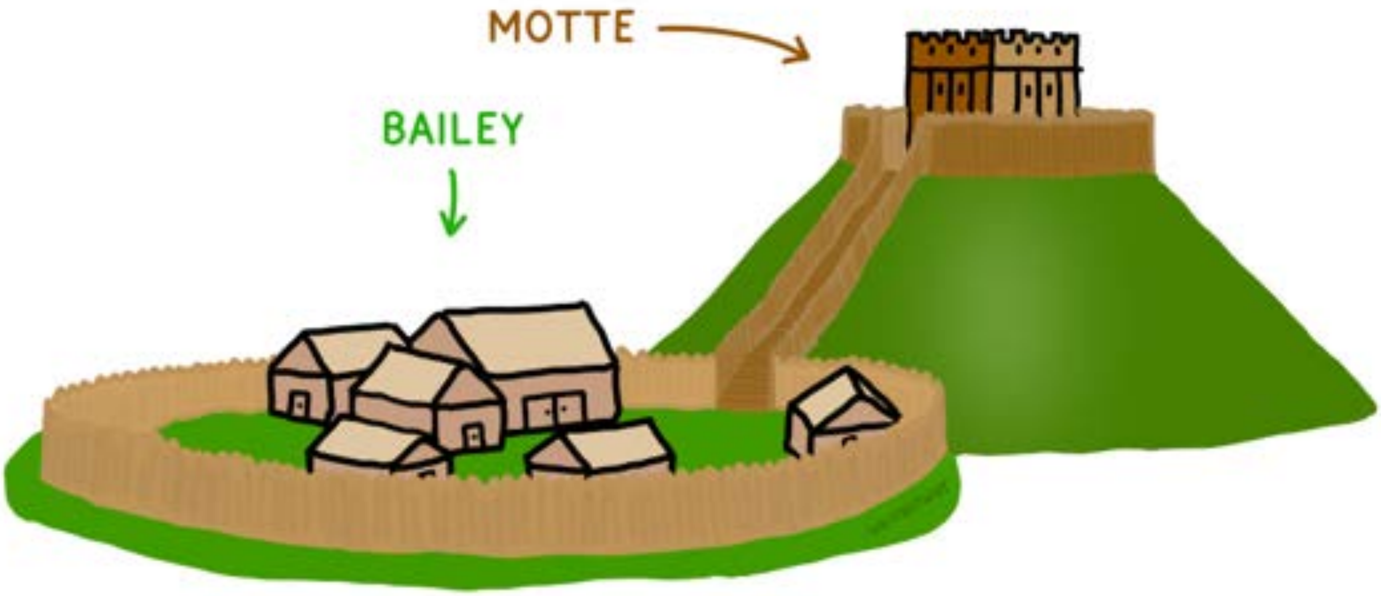
"There's a lot of people in the world who don't believe that people whose skin color may not be the same as ours can be free and self-govern…I reject that. I reject that strongly. I believe that people who practice the Muslim faith can self-govern. I believe that people whose skins aren't necessarily—are a different color than white can self-govern."

In other words:


ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE WAR IN IRAQ
HOLLOW MAN BUTTON


Women should be allowed to kill babies!
Men should decide what women can do with their bodies!
We need to wage a war on Christmas!
Rich people shouldn't have to pay taxes!

The Hollow Man argument is a viewpoint held by no one at all, created just to make the opposition look as bad as possible. It seems like a ridiculous tactic—until you remember that Political Disney World is a ridiculous place. Today, in the enchanted castles of PDW, Hollow Men are roaming around everywhere.



In PDW, the power of the man machine goes beyond winning individual arguments. In 1961, social psychologist William Maguire wrote about what he called the "inoculation effect." Vaccines work by exposing a person's immune system to a weak version of a dangerous virus. After the body defeats the weak version of the virus, it develops an immunity against all versions of the virus, including the strong ones. Maguire found that people's beliefs worked in a similar way. He wrote:

> *[B]eliefs can be "inoculated" against persuasion in subsequent situations involving forced exposure to strong counterarguments by pre-exposing the person to the counterarguments in a weakened form that stimulates—without overcoming—his defenses.*

If Straw Man, Weak Man, and Hollow Man arguments are repeated enough inside a political Echo Chamber, they become people's ubiquitous conception of what dissenters to the narrative think—eternal proof of how right the narrative is and how stupid anyone is who says otherwise. Soon, any version of dissenting arguments—even the strong ones—will be disregarded as nothing more than better-worded versions of the well-known absurd dissent. People will have become "immune" to changing their mind on the topic.

This also makes it even less likely that anyone inside the Echo Chamber will dare challenge the narrative—because the second they do, people will hear it as a defense of all of those terrible arguments and evidence of the challenger's own stupidity and awfulness. Social penalties will ensue.

But argument-misrepresenting fallacies can do more than attack opponents. They can also be used for *defense*.

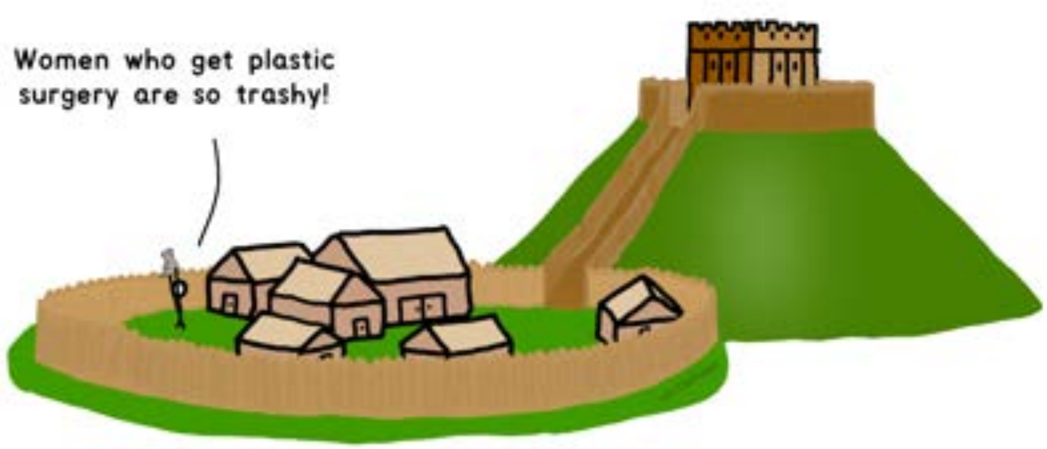
The Motte and Bailey

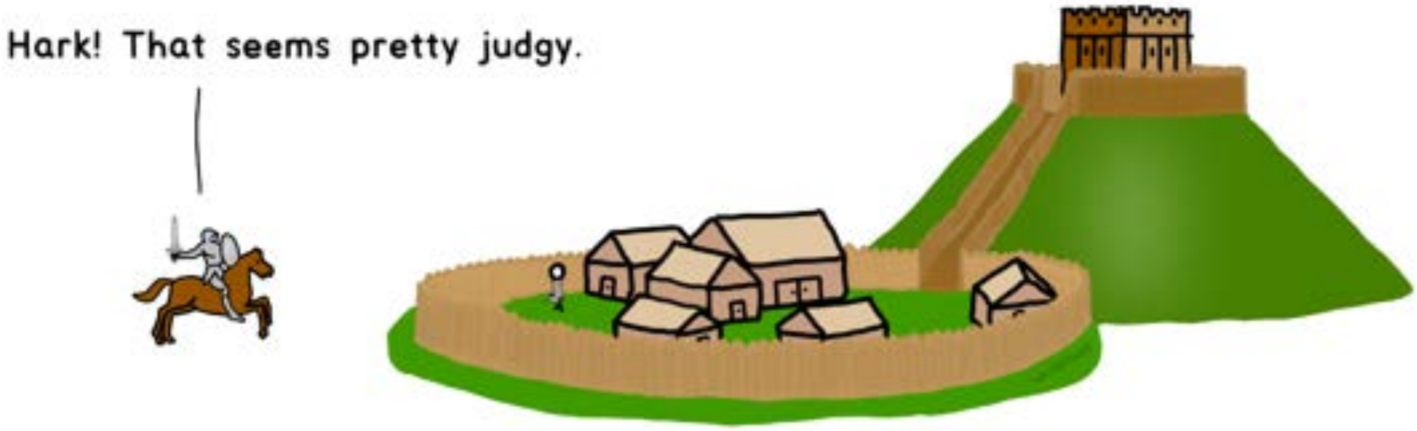
The "motte and bailey" fallacy is a recently named piece of age-old trickery (coined by Nicholas Shackel and further popularized by Scott Alexander).

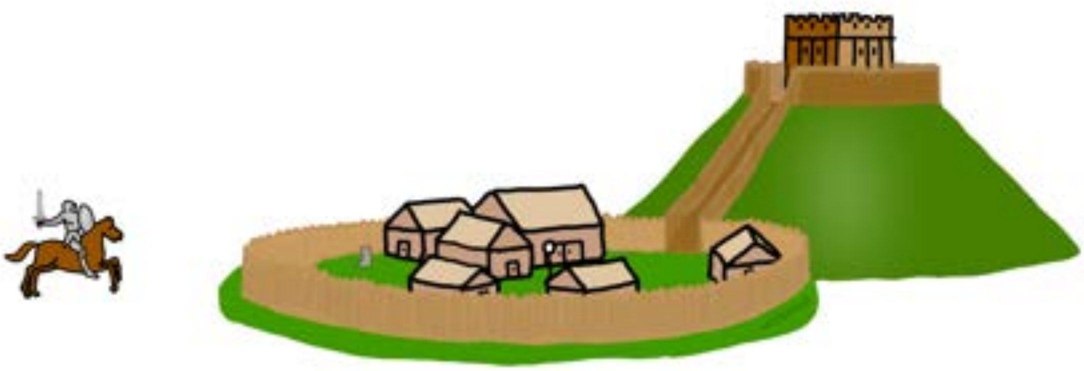
The name comes from a type of two-part medieval fortification common in Northern Europe between the 10th and 13th centuries. It looked something like this:

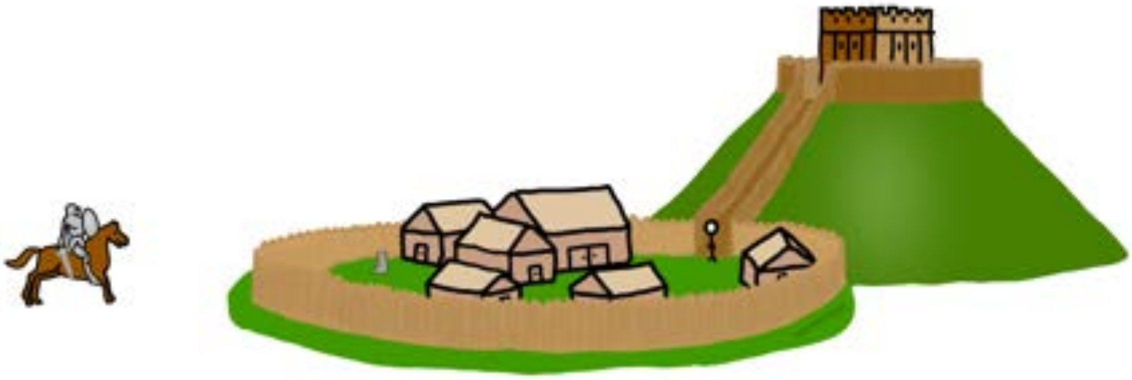
The bailey is an area of land that was desirable and economically productive to live on but hard to defend. It would always be vulnerable to attack. That's where the motte came in. A motte is a hill in or adjacent to the bailey with a wooden tower on top of it. When the bailey was threatened, inhabitants would run up the motte and into the tower. The motte, unlike the bailey, was easy to defend and nearly impossible to conquer—so invaders who captured the bailey would be unable to conquer the whole fortification. Eventually, with arrows raining down on them from the motte's tower, the attackers would give up and leave, at which point the inhabitants could resume life in their pleasant and profitable bailey.

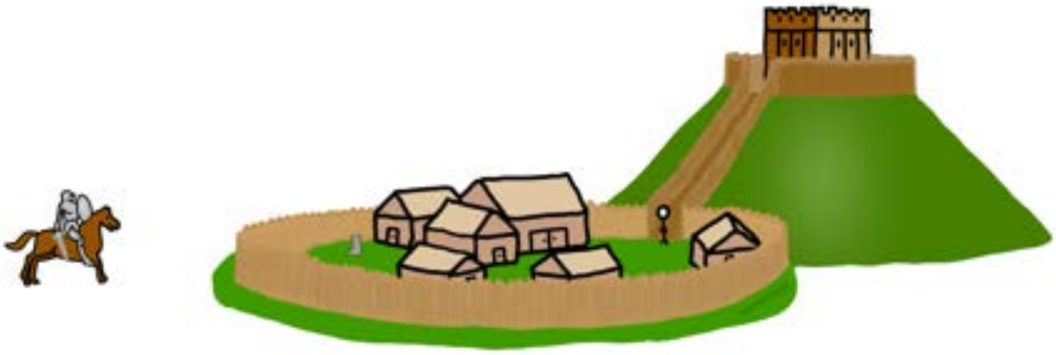
Shackel used the motte and bailey as a metaphor for a cheap argument tactic, whereby someone holding a convenient but not-very-defensible "bailey" viewpoint could, when facing dissent to that viewpoint, quickly run up the motte and swap out the viewpoint with a far stronger "motte" position.

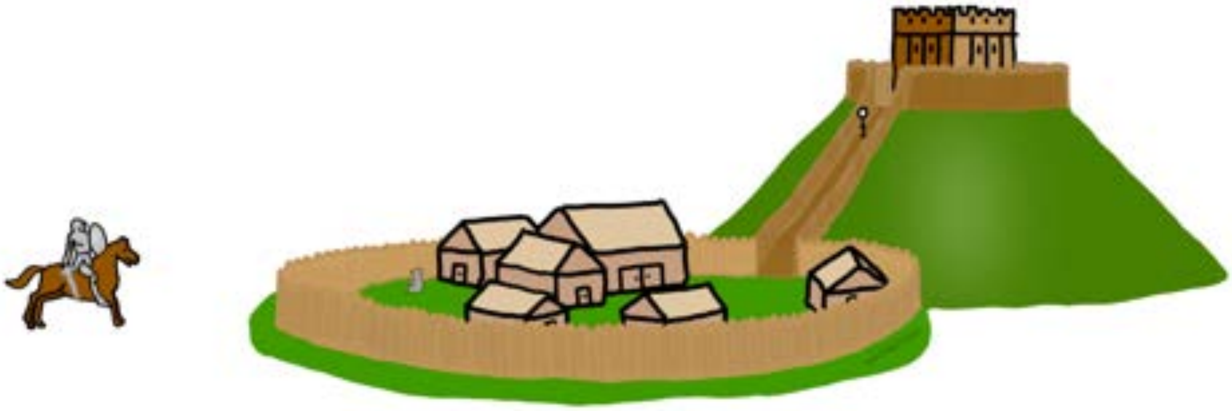

Women who get plastic surgery are so trashy!


Hark! That seems pretty judgy.



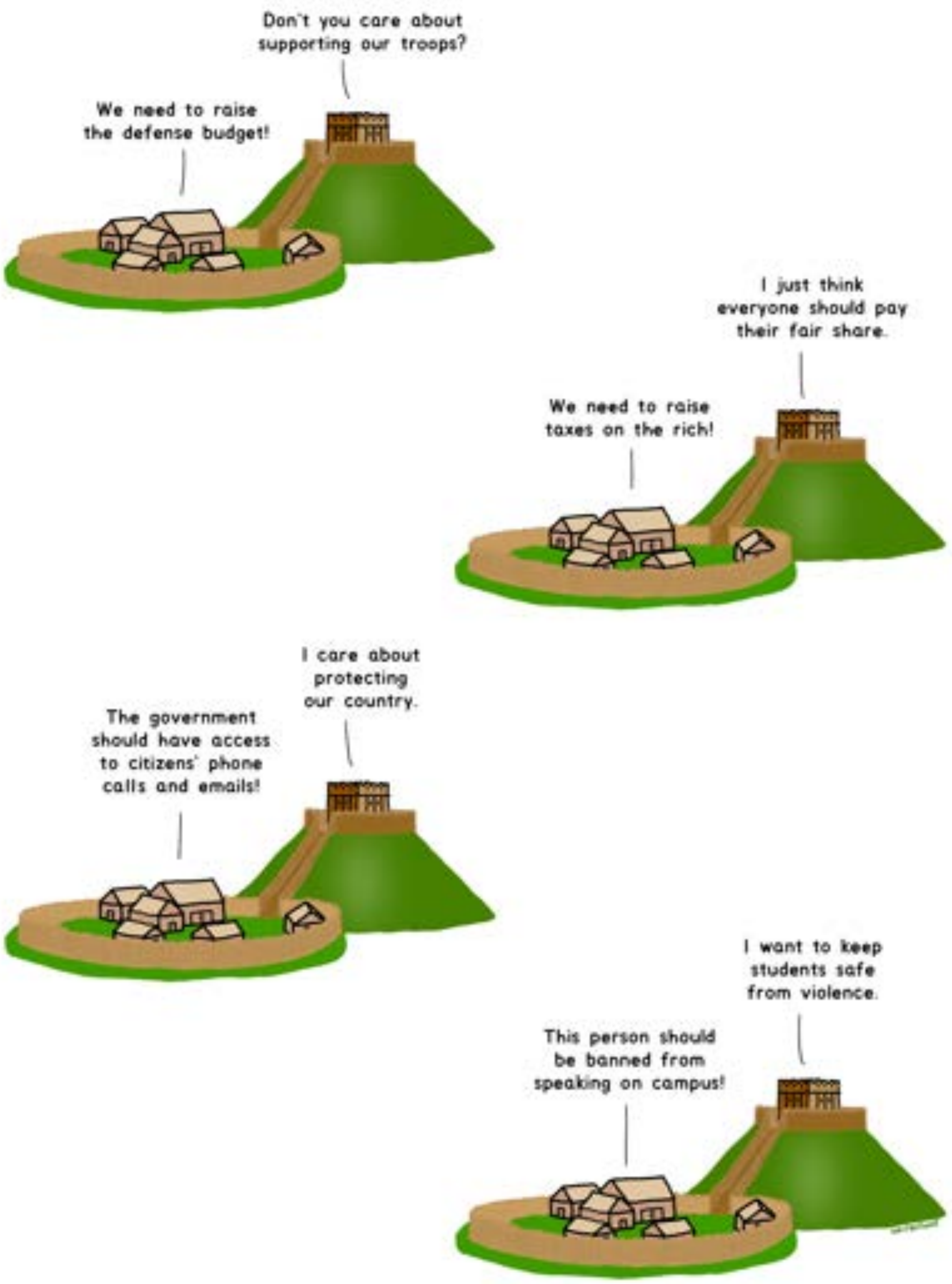






The motte and bailey is using the man machine reverse—instead of swapping an opponent's strong argument for a weaker one, it swaps out your own questionable argument for an irrefutable one. The goal is to make it seem like the two arguments are essentially the same, and that anyone who agrees with the motte statement must also agree with the bailey argument. It's an attempt to *stitch* one position to another and use it as armor.

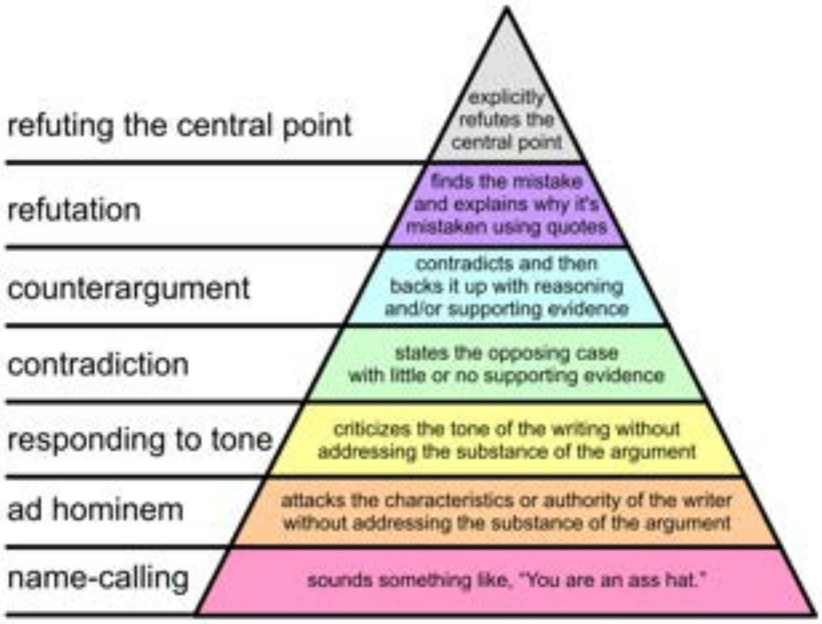
Political Disney World is a land of sprawling baileys, dotted with motte hills. And if you listen carefully, you'll notice people darting up to their trusty mottes, using them as trump cards whenever their views come under fire.


Don't you care about supporting our troops?
We need to raise the defense budget!
I just think everyone should pay their fair share.
We need to raise taxes on the rich!
I care about protecting our country.
The government should have access to citizens' phone calls and emails!
I want to keep students safe from violence.
This person should be banned from speaking on campus!

Fallacies that misrepresent arguments let people twist, mold, and fabricate arguments in order to engineer faux boxing matches. These tactics go a long way toward making the PDW giant nearly invincible to the outside world. But when all else fails, low-rung political thinkers can reach into their bag for the dirtiest trick of all:

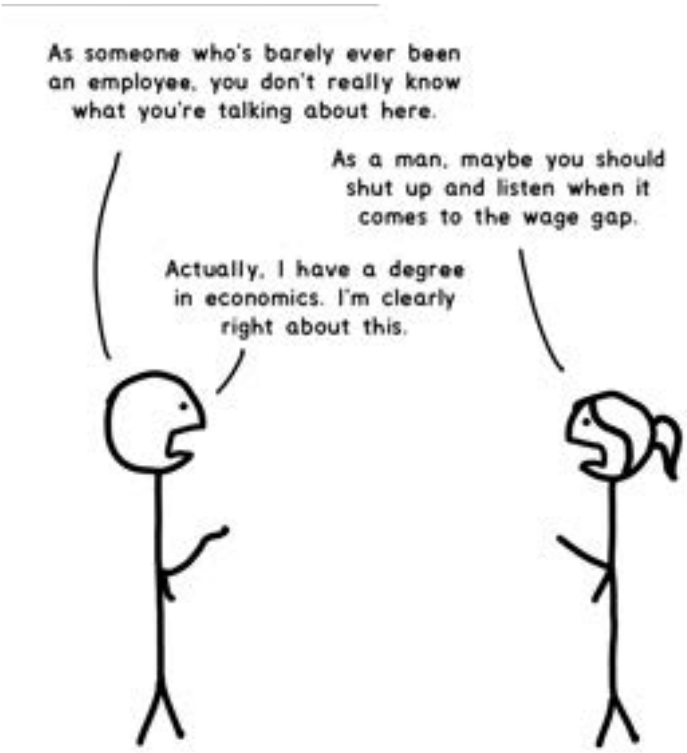
Category 3: Fallacies that misrepresent people

Paul Graham once laid out what he calls his hierarchy of disagreement, which can be summed up like this:[9]


refuting the central point
explicitly refutes the central point
refutation
finds the mistake and explains why it's mistaken using quotes
counterargument
contradicts and then backs it up with reasoning and/or supporting evidence
contradiction
states the opposing case with little or no supporting evidence
responding to tone
criticizes the tone of the writing without addressing the substance of the argument
ad hominem
attacks the characteristics or authority of the writer without addressing the substance of the argument
name-calling
sounds something like, "You are an ass hat."

According to Graham, the lowest forms of disagreement are attacks on the person arguing against you instead of the argument itself. On the very bottom level, name calling is the trashiest form of argumentation and the trademark of someone who knows they have little ability to win a real debate. Name-calling is also often a sign an argument's substance isn't really relevant because the disagreement is mostly a vehicle two people are using to vent anger onto each other. In any case, no one in human history has ever gotten to the bottom of anything while throwing insults. It can be fun though.

One level up, you have the slightly more civilized ad hominem fallacy. People often use "ad hominem" as an umbrella term that includes name-calling, but here, we're referring to the specific practice of discrediting dissent based on who the dissenter is instead of attacking the argument itself. Another form of ad hominem fallacy is bringing up your own authority on the matter as a way to add credibility to your argument.


As someone who's barely ever been an employee, you don't really know what you're talking about here.
As a man, maybe you should shut up and listen when it comes to the wage gap.
Actually, I have a degree in economics. I'm clearly right about this.

In Political Disney World, ad hominem arguments happen constantly, partially because people on the low rungs are childish arguers—but also because on the low rungs, ad hominem arguments are incredibly effective. The reason they're effective is that the less someone knows about the substance of an issue, the more they'll form their judgments based on how much they trust the messenger. In low-rung politics, people who seem trustworthy also tend to *seem* correct and well-intentioned, regardless of the quality of their arguments. And vice versa.

Standard tribalism takes care of most of the trust allotment. Earlier this year, professors Steven Sloman and Elke Weber compiled a wide range of articles exploring the science behind political polarization. Many of the findings confirmed the intuitive: that people are highly uncharitable in their assumptions about those in their political out-group. For example, if an opposing candidate has mostly mainstream views but holds a few extreme positions, people tend to make the assumption that the candidate's supporters voted for them *because of*, not *in spite of*, the candidate's extreme positions. But there's no evidence that this is true. Another study found that "constituents are likely to attribute the actions of in-group leaders as intended to benefit the country (national interests), and the actions of out-group leaders as intended to benefit the political leaders themselves (egoistic interests)"—even when the actions in question are identical.

So people in PDW are already predisposed to not trust those who challenge the narrative—and therefore, to not believe their arguments, regardless of the substance. But a strong tradition of ad hominem reasoning helps cement this key stability mechanism.

Enemies of a political Echo Chamber are regularly discredited based on their background, their religion, their race, their gender, their education, their profession, their friendships—none of which addresses whatever clearly-wrong, not-even-worth-listening-to argument they're actually making.

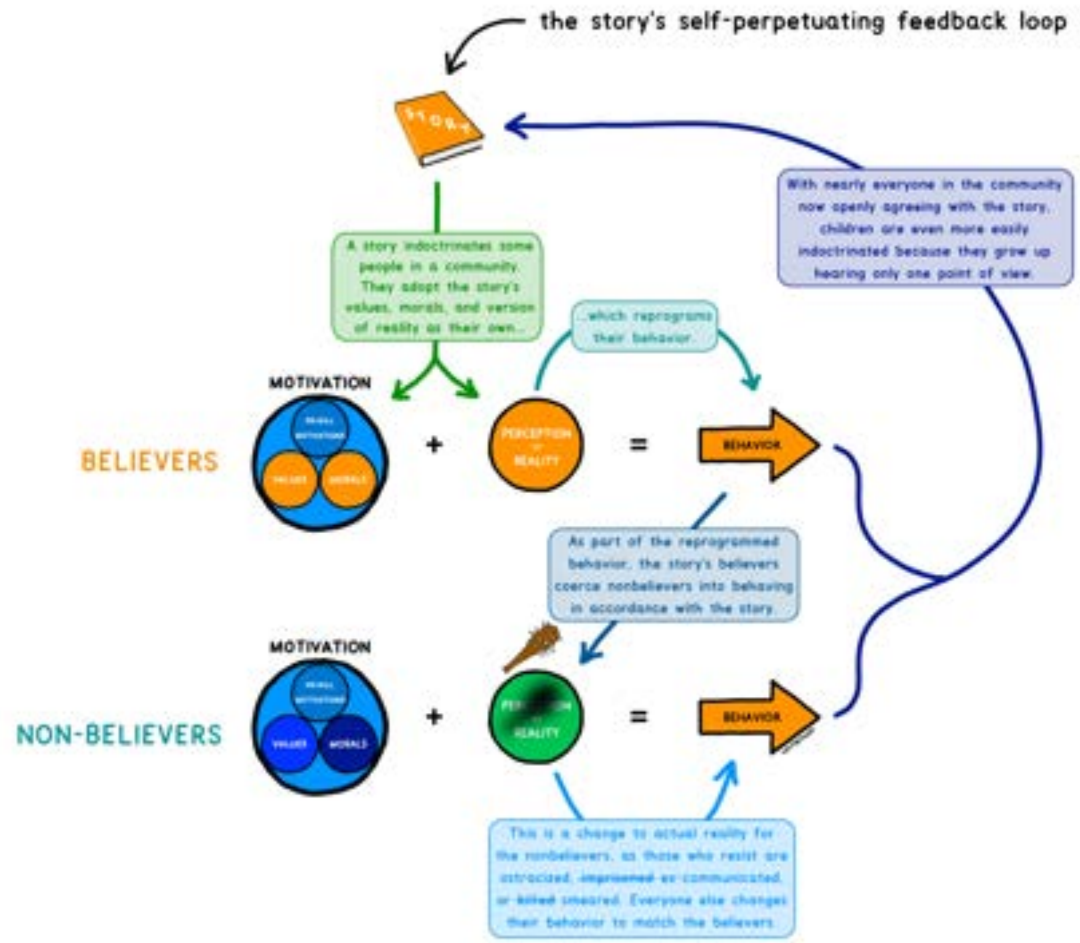
Dissenters are smeared by quotes pulled out of context, a tactic that can double up on misrepresenting the person *and* misrepresenting their argument. Often, a regrettable quote from a decade earlier is reason enough in PDW to rule out anything a dissenter ever says again—even if the dissenter swears they no longer believe that thing they said back then.

If those don't do the trick, there's always mind-reading—where disciples of a narrative will assume the worst about the dissenter's real, true, deep-down intentions (like people assuming that opposition candidates are motivated by selfishness while being more charitable with their preferred candidates). Political Disney World scales this up until everyone in the Echo Chamber is convinced that anyone who wants to curb immigration is racist, or everyone who opposes a war effort is unpatriotic, or everyone who supports tax cuts is greedy, or anything else that helps the Echo Chamber write off those who challenge the narrative.

In the most extreme Echo Chambers, the discrediting of arguments and people form an interlocking chain of dismissal. Once a given position is branded as terrible and wrong, anyone holding that position is automatically branded as wrong-headed, which in turn leads people to write off all of their other positions as well. In other cases, once a well-known person is deemed by an Echo Chamber to be bad, their viewpoints become tarnished with the same reputation, which then extends to anyone else who happens to hold those same positions. It's like a discredit disease that spreads.

With a further step back, we can see how all of these fallacies work in tandem with the Echo Chamber's information-filtering system. The filters let friendly info in, the fallacies twist it to make it even friendlier, then the filters further refine things by elevating the best-manipulated info into further prominence. This ongoing tag-team effort is so effective that not only will everyone in PDW have the same digitized viewpoint on every issue, they'll be saying *the same exact sentences about it*, word for word.

When everyone is saying the same thing, a feedback loop takes hold—the kind we talked about in Chapter 1 (when we were supposedly talking about our ancestors):

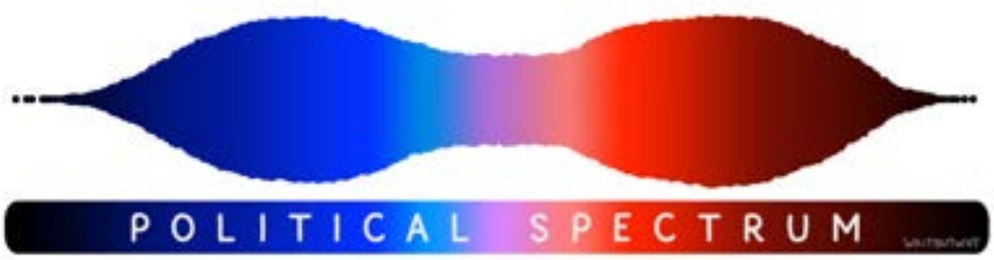


the story's self-perpetuating feedback loop
STORY
A story indoctrinates some people in a community. They adopt the story's values, morals, and version of reality as their own...
...which reprograms their behavior.
With nearly everyone in the community now openly agreeing with the story, children are even more easily indoctrinated because they grow up hearing only one point of view.
BELIEVERS
MOTIVATION
PRIMAL MOTIVATIONS
VALUES
MORALS
+
PERCEPTION of REALITY
=
BEHAVIOR
As part of the reprogrammed behavior, the story's believers coerce nonbelievers into behaving in accordance with the story.
NON-BELIEVERS
MOTIVATION
PRIMAL MOTIVATIONS
VALUES
MORALS
+
REALITY
=
BEHAVIOR
This is a change to actual reality for the nonbelievers, as those who resist are ostracized, ~~imprisoned~~ or excommunicated, or ~~killed~~ smeared. Everyone else changes their behavior to match the believers.

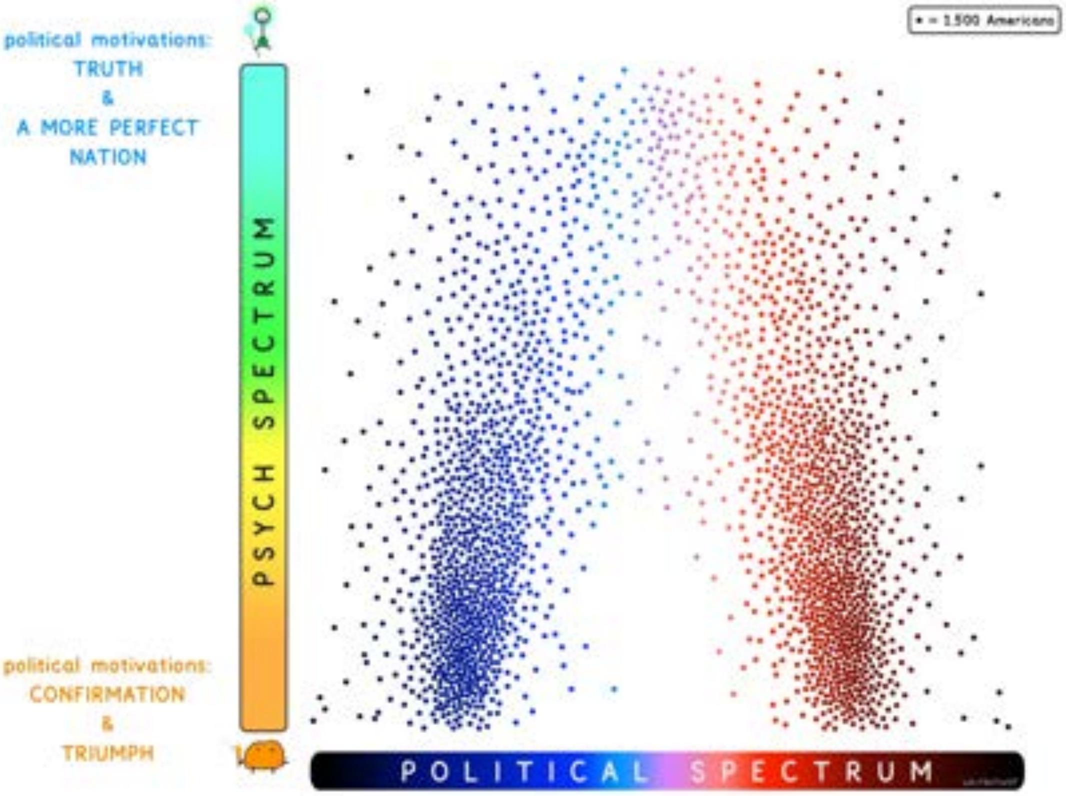
You can take humans out of the Power Games...

Politics in 3D

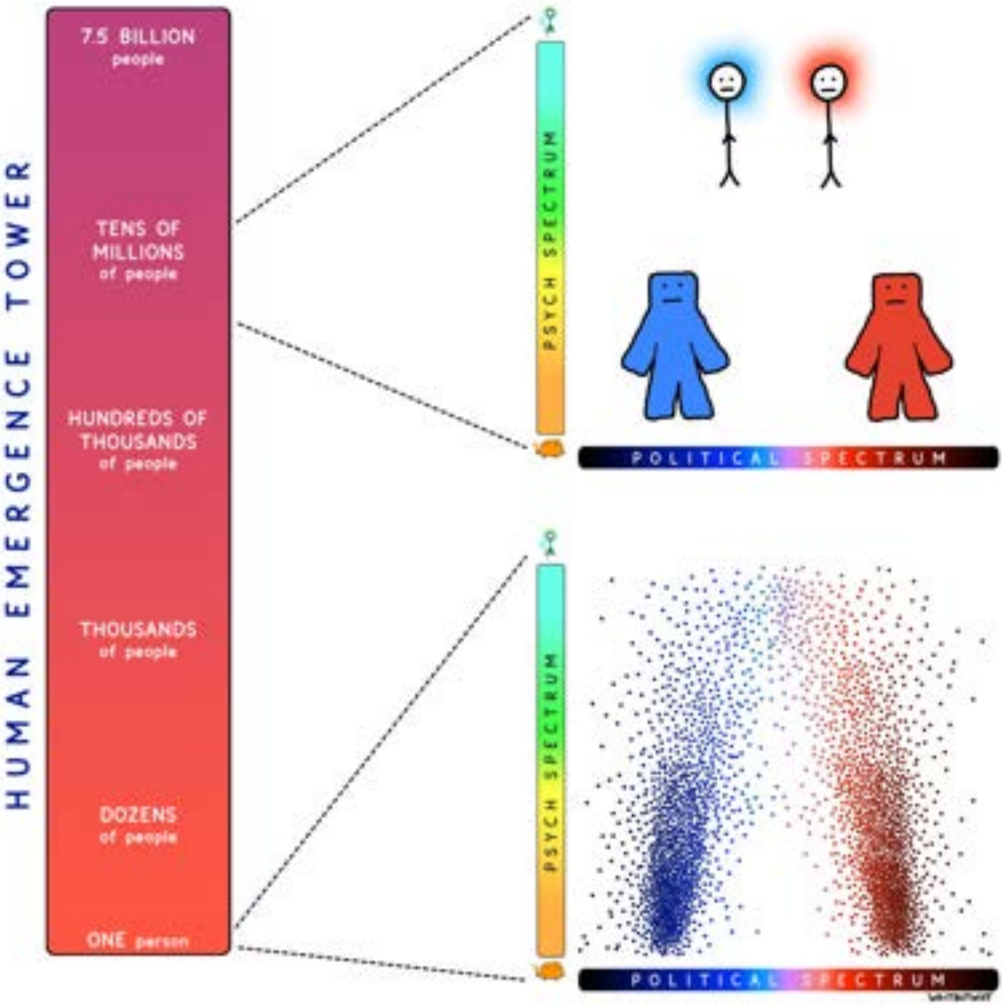
Our Psych Spectrum has helped us see the usual left-center-right—


POLITICAL SPECTRUM

—in 2D, where it looks more like an arch.

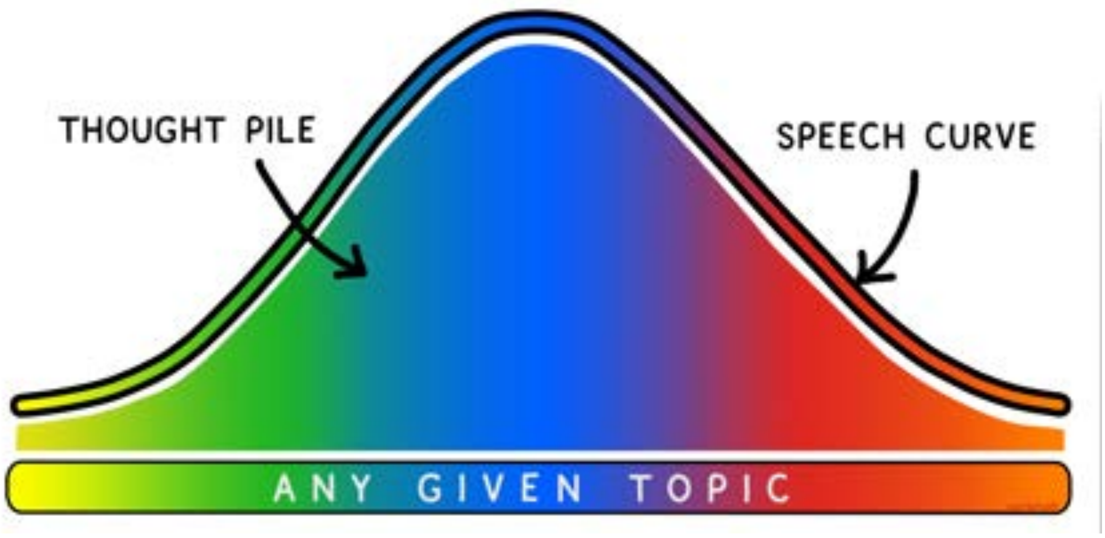


Our third dimension—Emergence Tower—lets us see an even bigger picture. What looks like an arch of 300 million individuals on the lowest floor of Emergence Tower looks like four giants from higher up on the tower:


HUMAN EMERGENCE TOWER
7.5 BILLION people
TENS OF MILLIONS of people
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people
THOUSANDS of people
DOZENS of people
ONE person
PSYCH SPECTRUM
POLITICAL SPECTRUM
PSYCH SPECTRUM
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

The people who make up the high-rung giants aren't that different from the people in the low-rung giants. But the giants themselves are nothing alike. Low-rung giants are the product of ancient human survival software—they're the kinds of giants that the software builds when it's able to run the show. In the high-rung giants, Higher Minds have managed to band together to define the culture and override the software's usual output.

In Part 2 of this series, we kept things simple and imagined how a country like the U.S. might work in an ideal scenario. Under the First Amendment's protection, the U.S. would become a grand marketplace of ideas where the minds of individual Americans would link up like neurons and form a giant superbrain. Individual thinking on most topics would yield a Thought Pile with a clean bell curve shape, and that shape would be lit up with activity by a Speech Curve that would sit right on top of it.

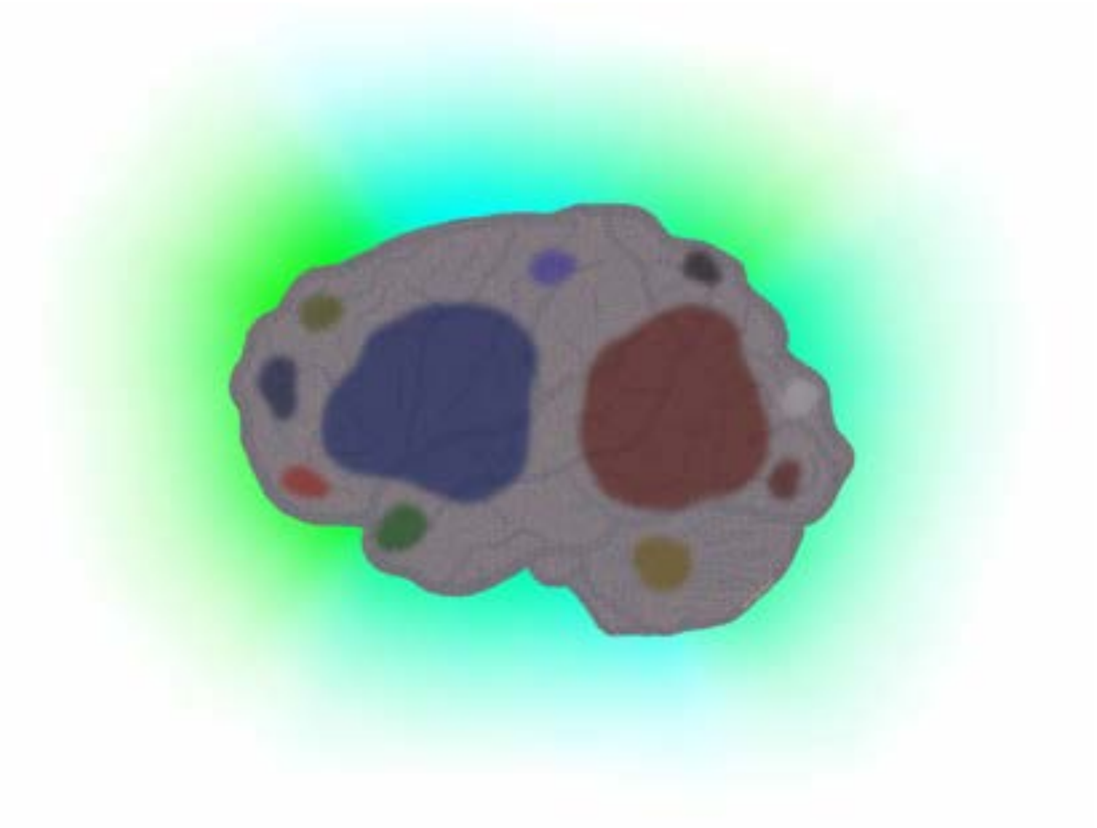


As people talked, the big brain would think, and over time, it would ooze its way along Thought

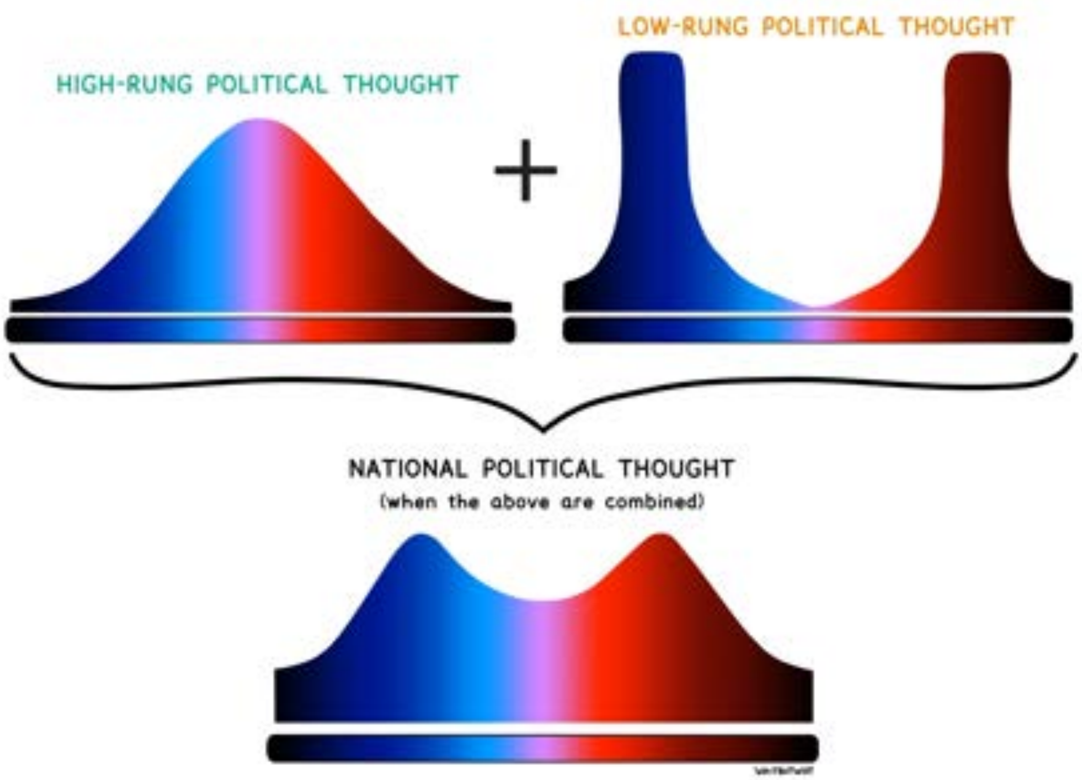
Spectrums to ever wiser places.

This is kind of what does happen in the U.S. today. Except there's a big asterisk.

What we didn't talk about in Part 2 were the inevitable Echo Chambers that would resist Enlightenment Values and function culturally like mini dictatorships. Echo Chambers are like frozen spots in a free nation's superbrain—dark regions of the brain where thinking can't happen.



If high-rung politics is a marketplace of ideas that yields bell curves along the Idea Spectrum, the frozen Echo Chambers of low-rung politics look more like tall vertical towers. Put together, they make most political topics look like a camel.


HIGH-RUNG POLITICAL THOUGHT
+
LOW-RUNG POLITICAL THOUGHT
NATIONAL POLITICAL THOUGHT
(when the above are combined)

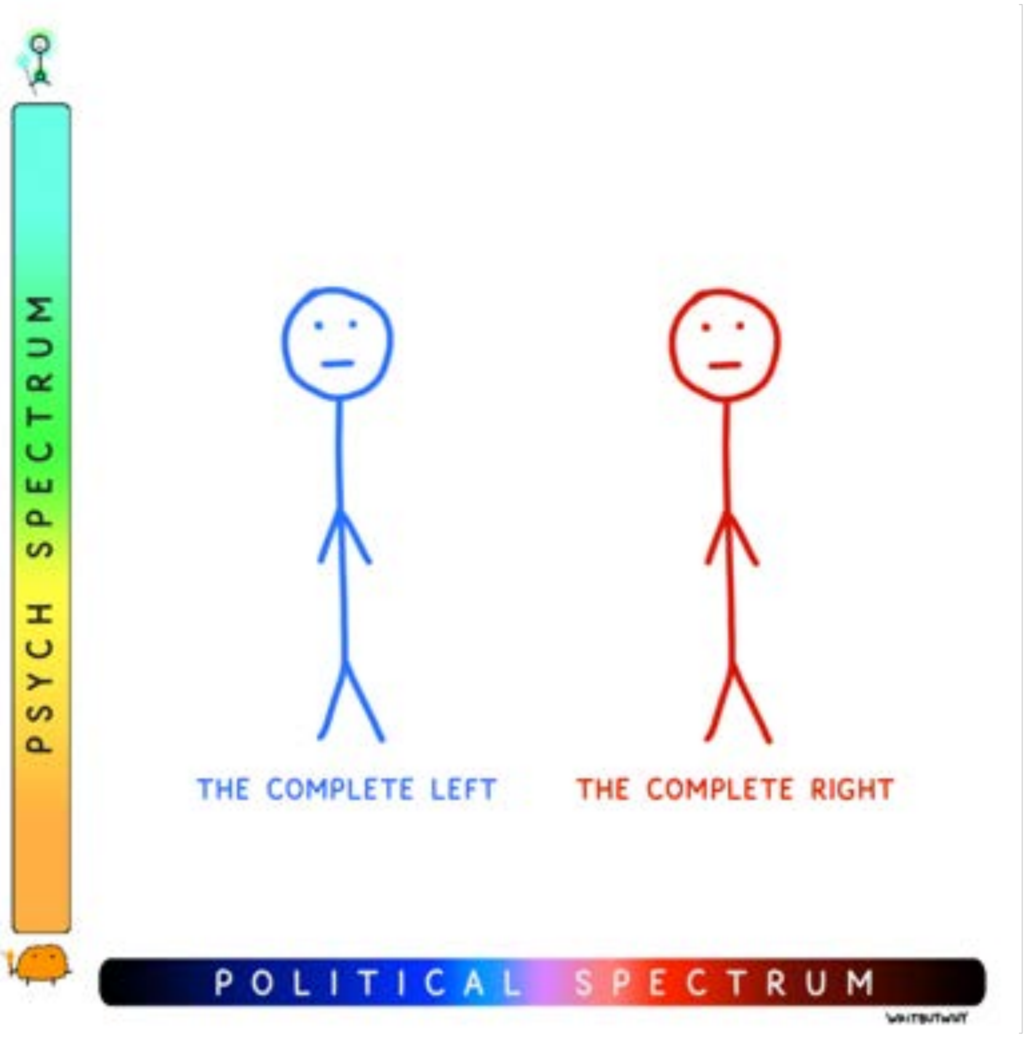
A camel curve moves slower towards progress than a bell curve. The science and business worlds can advance quickly because bad ideas fail quickly. In the world of ideas, Echo Chambers, with their sacred and taboo viewpoints, keep bad ideas alive way longer than they would in a normal marketplace. With so many voters locked up in the humps, politicians have to spend a lot of their energy catering to the low-rung ideas and speaking to the low-rung political mentality. The humps distort the shape of the Overton window, making the national brain less intelligent, less adaptable, less rational, and less wise.

None of this means the system isn't working. As we've discussed, the vision of the Enlightenment wasn't to completely repress the human Primitive Mind—it was to ensure that unlike most societies in the past, the Primitive Mind wouldn't be able to completely take over. It wasn't meant to generate perfect bell curves of national thinking—it was meant to thaw out static frozen towers enough to end up with stubborn but movable camel humps. With a species like ours, this may be the best we can hope for.

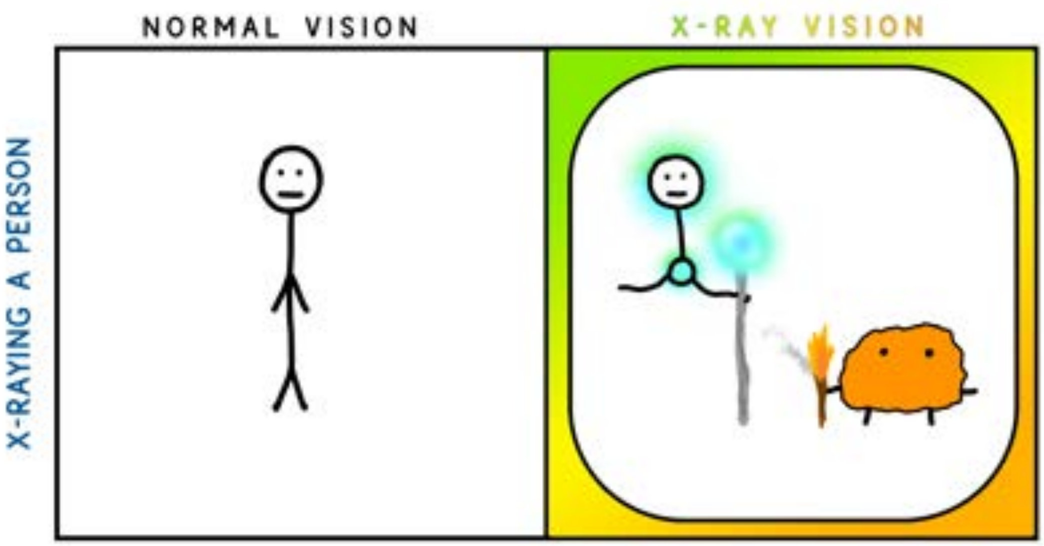
Let's zoom out further. If we move another floor up Emergence Tower, we can see a country like the U.S. as two huge political giants.

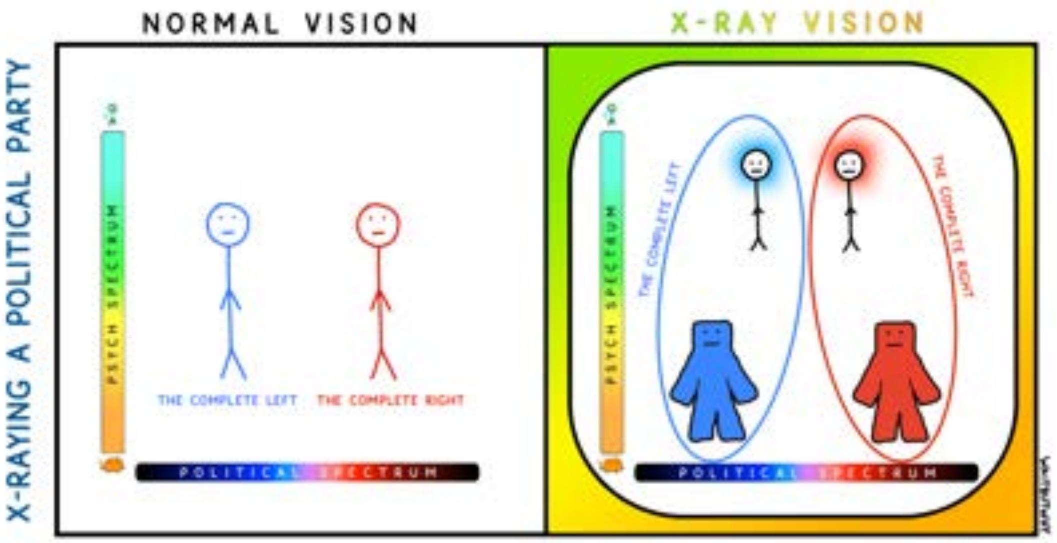
One way to do that is to slice our 2D political space down the middle vertically, leaving us with a Left giant and a Right giant.

The real Left—the *complete* Left—is the combination of the high-minded, high-rung progressive giant up top and the primitive-minded, Power-Games-playing blue giant down below. Same deal for the Right.



Each of these giants is like a large-scale human being—the product of an internal struggle between fire and light.


NORMAL VISION
X-RAY VISION
X-RAYING A PERSON


NORMAL VISION
X-RAY VISION
X-RAYING A POLITICAL PARTY
PSYCH SPECTRUM
POLITICAL SPECTRUM
THE COMPLETE LEFT
THE COMPLETE RIGHT
PSYCH SPECTRUM
THE COMPLETE LEFT
THE COMPLETE RIGHT
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

Each of us is on our own little mountain, ebbing and flowing in maturity and wisdom. We all have good days and bad days, good years and bad years. We're each a mix of admirable qualities and character flaws, and we spend our lives trying to become a little better. We're all human, and so is our society.

Like each of us, the political Left and Right are in a constant struggle to grow up. Sometimes they're childish. Sometimes they're wise. Like each of us, they can grow up with age—and like each of us, they also sometimes revert and go backwards.

Every person is working on two projects all the time: them against the world and them against themselves. High-rung political giants are in the same situation, fighting a two-front battle at all times: a horizontal battle against their high-rung counterpart, in the struggle to determine how the country changes and evolves; and a vertical battle against the low-rung giant that masquerades under the same political banner—a battle that, if lost, threatens to destroy their reputation, hijack its movements, and undermine its progress.

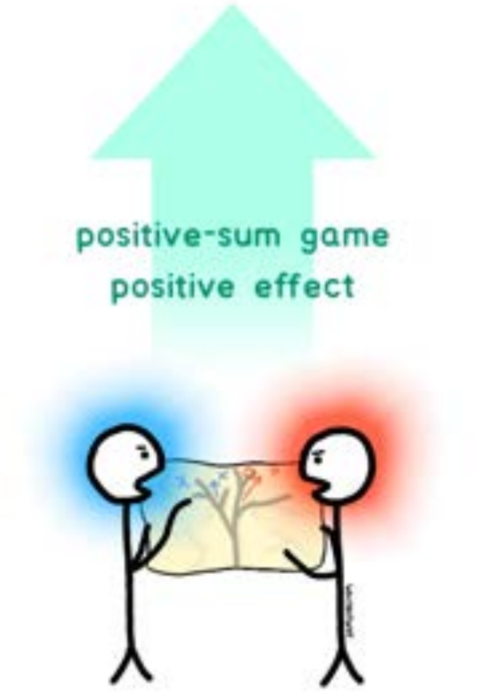
There's another way political parties are like people: in both cases, the individual struggle of one can influence the individual struggles of others nearby.

When a couple gets into a fight, it's often because their Primitive Minds have started going at it with each other. The Primitive Mind of one member of the couple doesn't want to fight with the Higher Mind of the other—it wants to fight with its primitive little friend. When it's worked up, it calls the other Primitive Mind out to play, and it usually gets a response. A vicious cycle takes hold as things quickly devolve into nastiness. When one of the Higher Minds in the couple manages to wrest control of their person for long enough to get a word in—something like, "I do see where you're coming from, I'd feel frustrated in this situation too"—the fight pretty quickly winds down. Once the Higher Minds start communicating with each other, they can regain the edge and take control of the interaction.

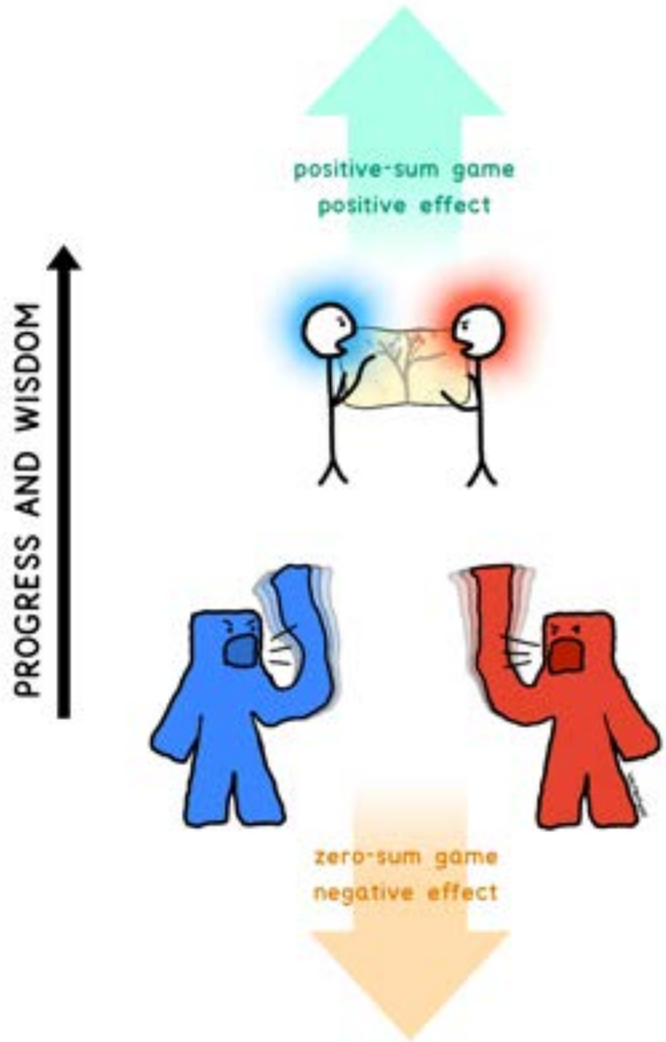
Between what I've observed about politics and what I've read about history, political giants seem to work the same way. If, instead of looking at the two-giant U.S. as Left versus Right, we slice our political region horizontally, we see two pairs that function as teams as much as they do as adversaries.

The high-rung giants argue with each other constantly, but they know they're ultimately on the same team with the same overarching goal. It's harder to see it on the bottom, but the low-rung giants are a team too. Remember, without Jafar, Aladdin is just some guy. The low-rung giants *need* their counterpart. It's the key villain in their narrative—the key uniting force that holds everything together. Nothing delights members of a low-rung giant more than the other low-rung giant behaving badly. It makes them furious, but in a super fun way. It lights their fires and injects meaning into their lives. And it justifies a wave of their own childish behavior, which in turn fires up their rival giant even more—like what happens to a couple as they descend into a nastier and nastier fight. When the low-rung giants really get each other riled up, the high-rung giants become increasingly helpless and muted.

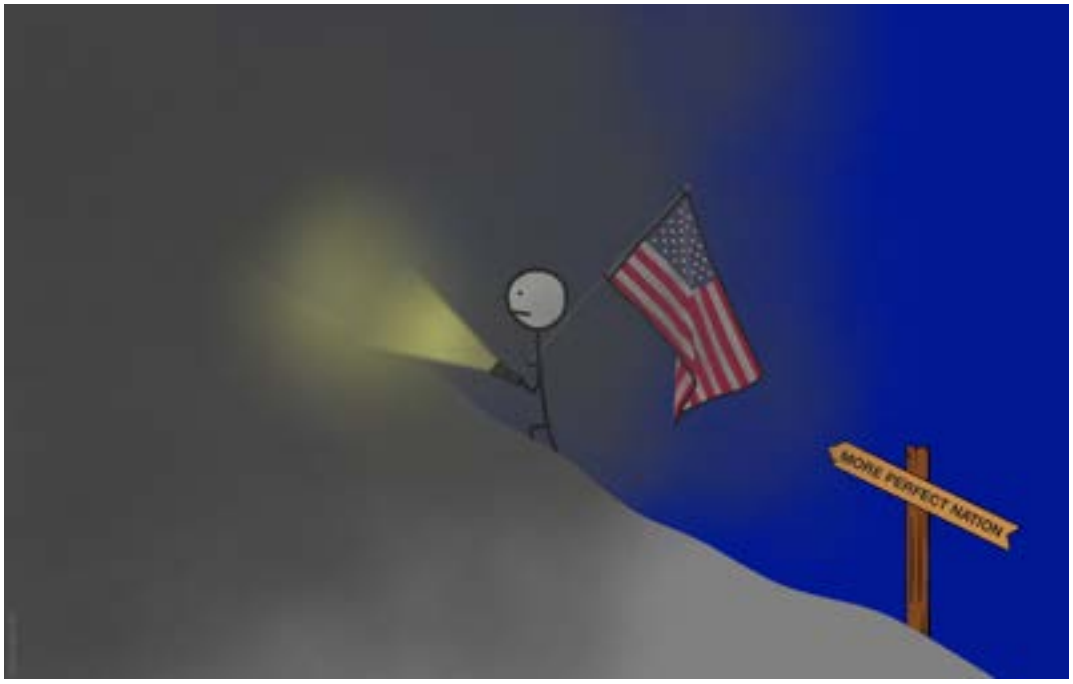
People in the high-rung political world think of politics as a positive-sum game, and the way they do politics, it is. The clash of the high-rung giants is a classic Value Games clash—it yields progress and wisdom.



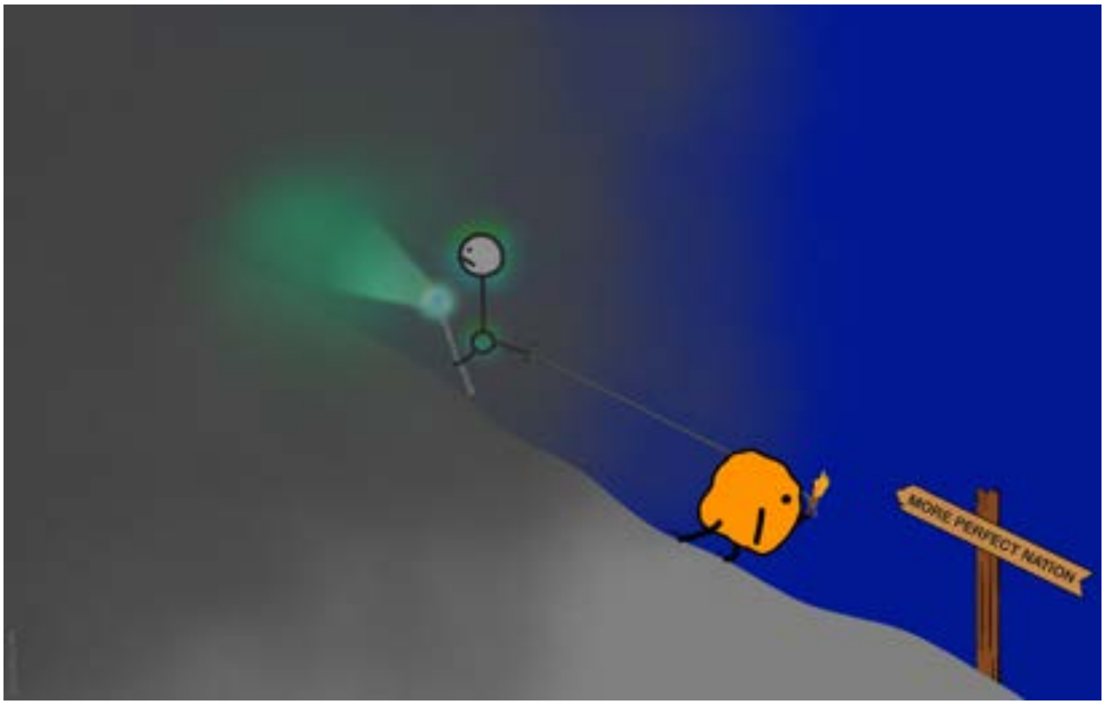
In the low-rung political world, politics is seen as a zero-sum game—when one side wins, the other loses, and that's that. But the actual game they're playing ends up being *negative*-sum. Their fighting pulls the country downward on the same mountain the high-rung giants are trying to climb.


positive-sum game
positive effect
PROGRESS AND WISDOM
zero-sum game
negative effect

I finished Part 2 with a depiction of the U.S., trudging up the mountain on its mission to become a more perfect nation:

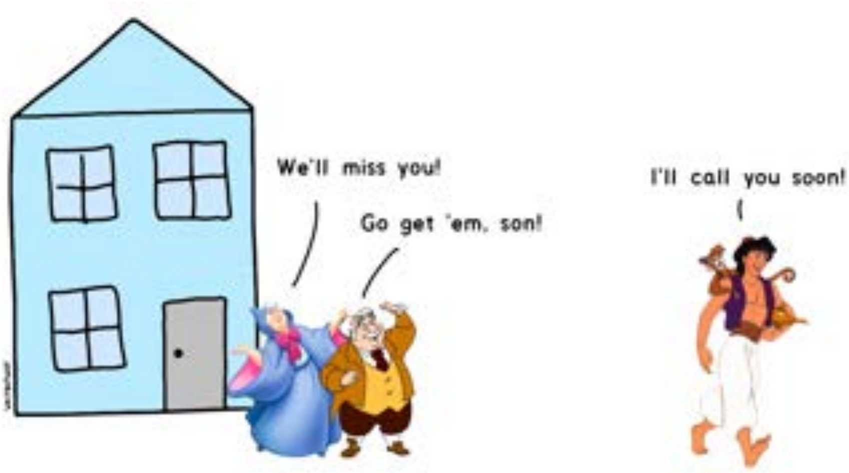

MORE PERFECT NATION

Back then, we could only see the nation as it looked on the surface. Now, with some more tools in our bag, we can look deeper into the image and see the situation for what I've come to believe it really is: an eternal tug-of-war between the nation's collective Higher Mind and the nation's collective Primitive Mind.

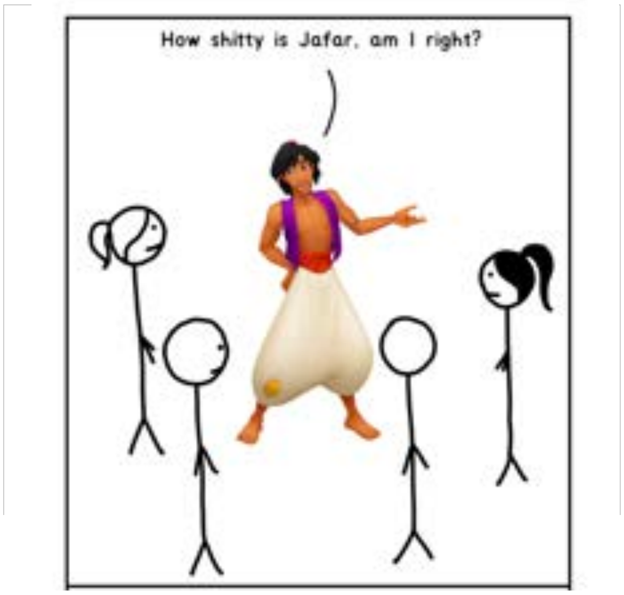

MORE PERFECT NATION

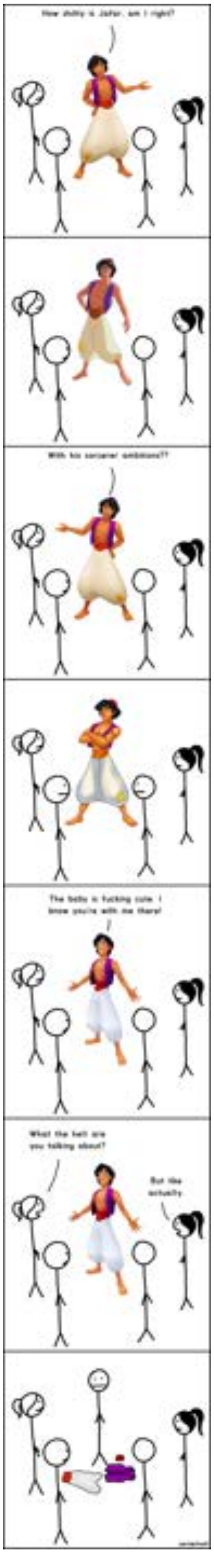
This is the real political picture in the U.S. It's not only Right vs. Left. It's High vs. Low. Forward vs. Backward. Wise vs. Foolish. Value Games vs. Power Games. It's not only wing politics—it's also *rung* politics. Many of our political struggles are, in fact, horizontal. But that's all in the shadow of the *big* political tug-of-war. Which is vertical.

This was me, heading off to college:

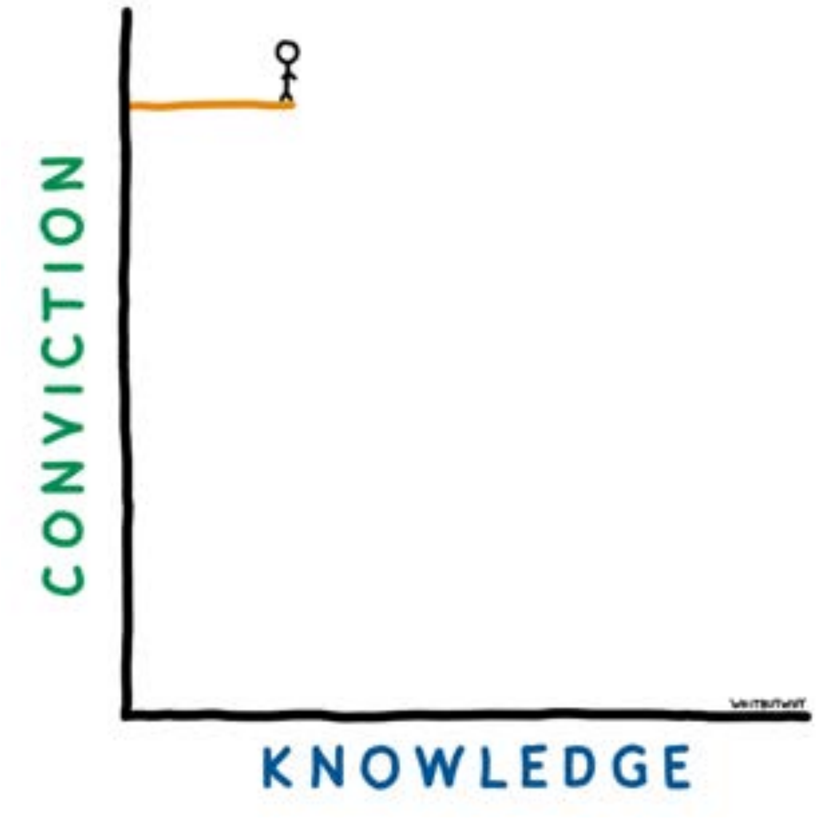

We'll miss you!
Go get 'em, son!
I'll call you soon!

The world was my oyster. It was exciting. But then the political conversations started.

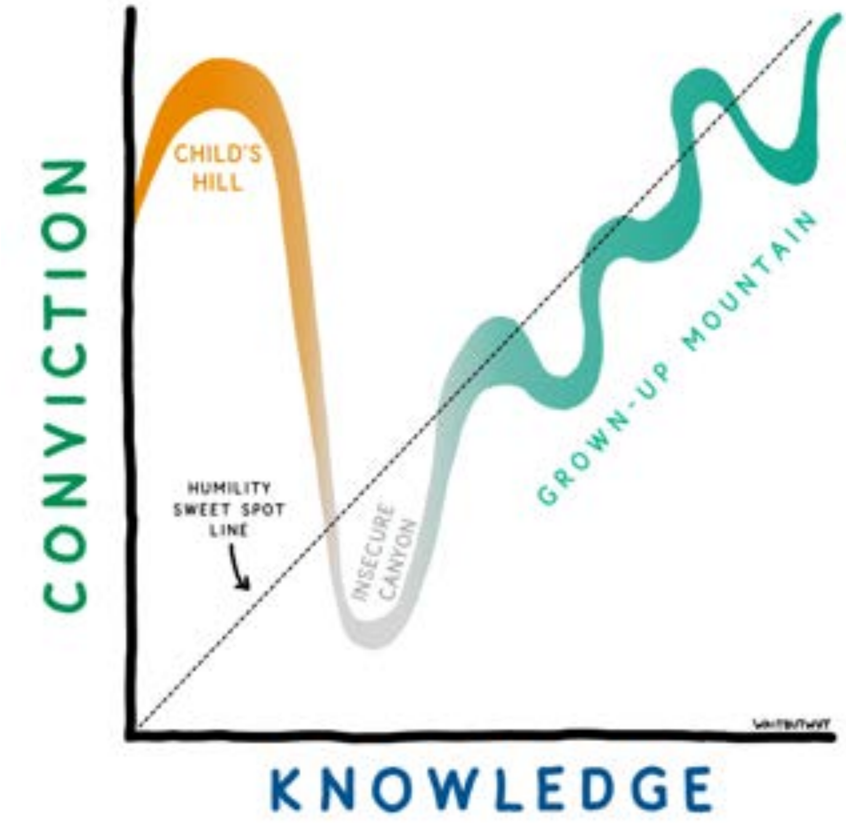

How shitty is Jafar, am I right?


How shitty is Jafar, am I right?
With his sorcerer ambitions??
The baby is fucking cute. I know you're with me there!
What the hell are you talking about?
But like actually

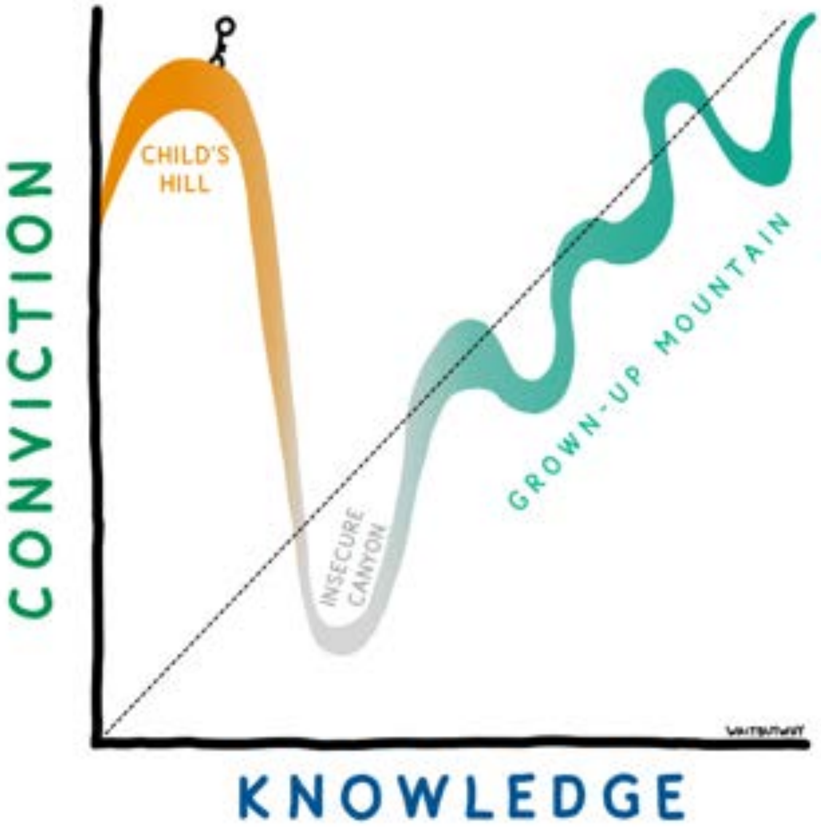
For the first time in my life, my political views were being challenged. It was like I was standing there living my life and these new friends were trying to shove me off a cliff:


CONVICTION
KNOWLEDGE
WAITBUTWHY

I didn’t know it at the time, but I was standing on a very common intellectual path, commonly referenced as the Dunning-Kruger effect.[18] Here’s how I think of it.


CONVICTION
CHILD'S HILL
HUMILITY SWEET SPOT LINE
INSECURE CANYON
GROWN-UP MOUNTAIN
WAITBUTWHY
KNOWLEDGE

It’s a lot like a roller coaster. At the time, I had spent my life doing the roller coaster’s big first creeping uphill part. Suddenly, I was at that terrifying moment where the car levels out and starts to tilt downward…

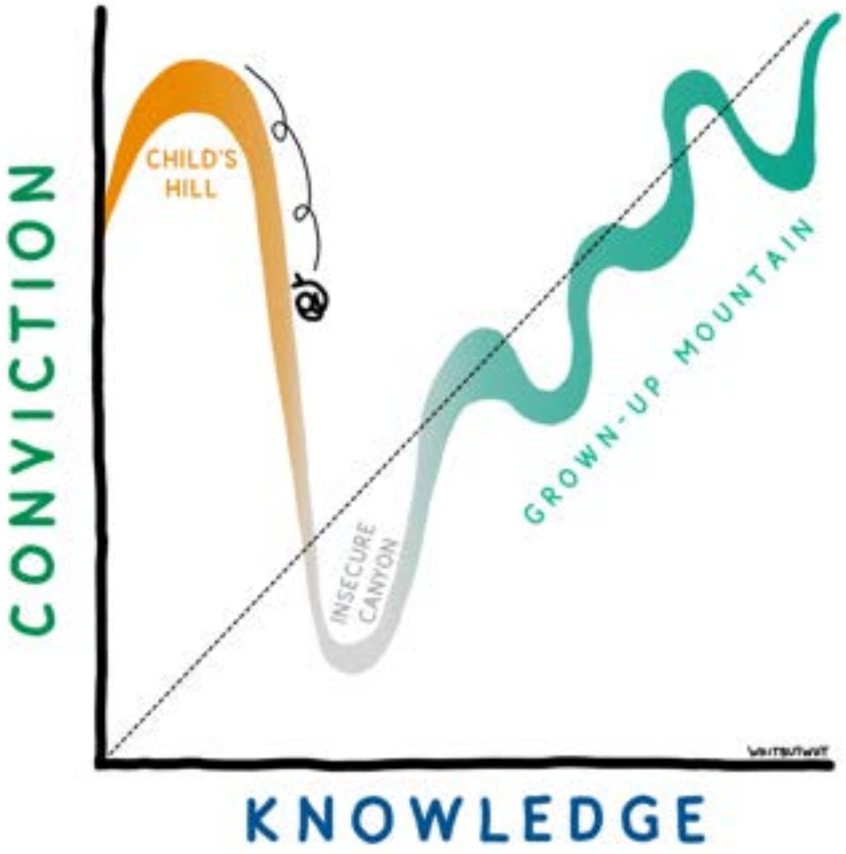

CONVICTION
CHILD'S HILL
INSECURE CANYON
GROWN-UP MOUNTAIN
WAITBUTWHY
KNOWLEDGE

I was left with two options:

Option 1: Stay up on Child's Hill. I could decide that I didn't actually like these friends after all, that they were arrogant ignorant assholes, and distance myself from them. I could seek out new friends more like the people I was used to talking to and try to forget about this whole bad early college experience. Re-isolate myself from dissent, reconfirm my established beliefs, and restore my confidence (which the backfire effect suggests wouldn't have taken long).

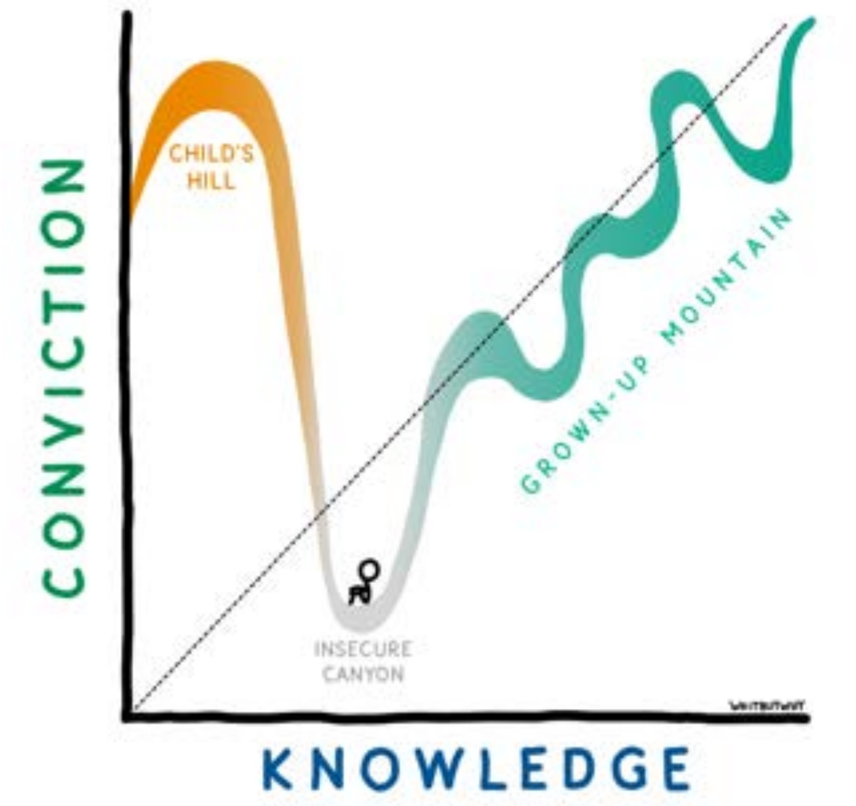
Option 2: Take the plunge. Let go of my comfortable conviction and embrace these new bad feelings of self-doubt and existential confusion.

I went tumbling.


CONVICTION
CHILD'S HILL
INSECURE CANYON
GROWN-UP MOUNTAIN
WAITBUTWHY
KNOWLEDGE

As I tumbled, it sunk in that to be as opinionated as I had been entering college, you either have to be an expert or full of shit—and I wasn't an expert. I was a Democrat mostly for the same reason that I was a Red Sox fan. They were my team, and that was that.

Pretty soon I had no idea what I thought or who I was or what was right or wrong. I didn't feel like a proud Democrat anymore. Tim the Democrat was a fraud and I was determined not to be a fraud ever again. But a Republican? *Me?* A *Republican?* No way. I had been indoctrinated too hard for too long to fully switch teams. I started to dread political conversation because I wasn't sure who I was supposed to *be* when these conversations happened. It was a bad situation. I was here:



Insecure Canyon is where you are when you're past the "Wait I actually don't know shit" epiphany, but not yet past the "Ohhhh no one *else* knows shit either" epiphany. The two-part epiphany, when still incomplete, leaves a thinker self-aware enough to know what they don't know but not yet wise enough to know that *not* knowing is a healthy, productive state. The unpleasant feeling of existential confusion and intellectual insecurity is the gateway drug to real intellectual growth—but when you haven't had the complete epiphany, it doesn't feel that way. It feels shameful and embarrassing. You feel stupid and wishy-washy, and you hope no one finds out how little you know. That's where I was.

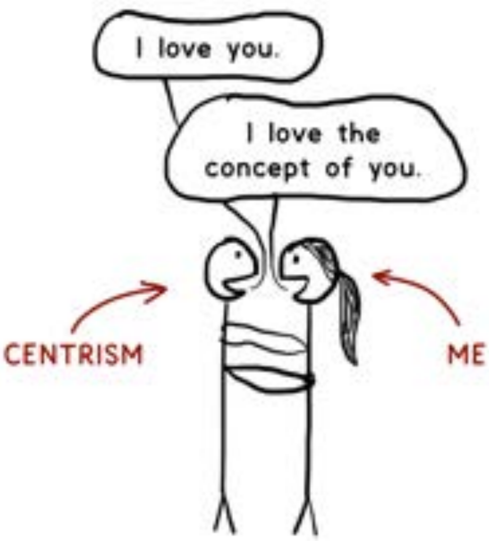
And then it happened. I was in my freshman dorm room and one of my roommate's friends was hanging out, and he said something like, "And really, all the reasonable people are centrist anyway."

It all clicked. I was a *Centrist*. It was the perfect new identity. Fuck all those political extremists. *I* was a thoughtful, nuanced, moderate thinker who acknowledged that both sides had some good points and some bad points.

We all look back on our previous selves and cringe about certain things. We've each got a list. Right near the top of mine is me coming home for Thanksgiving during my freshman year of college and declaring to anyone who would listen about how I was a Centrist. Wincey as fuck.

People in Insecure Canyon are super vulnerable. They're perfect targets for indoctrination into a new dogma, because they're still too hazy to understand how knowledge works, and they're dying to feel smart again. That's why many people in Insecure Canyon end up making the mistake Tim the Centrist Moderate Independent made—they jump onto another dogma boat. This feels like a step forward. But it's the opposite. It's a young chick flying for the first time, feeling the cold winds, and making a U-turn right back to the nest. This is what I did. I had tried to solve the bad feelings of Insecure Canyon by running back up to the top of Child's Hill, just with a new identity cloak on. I went from a Fraud Democrat to a Fraud Centrist.

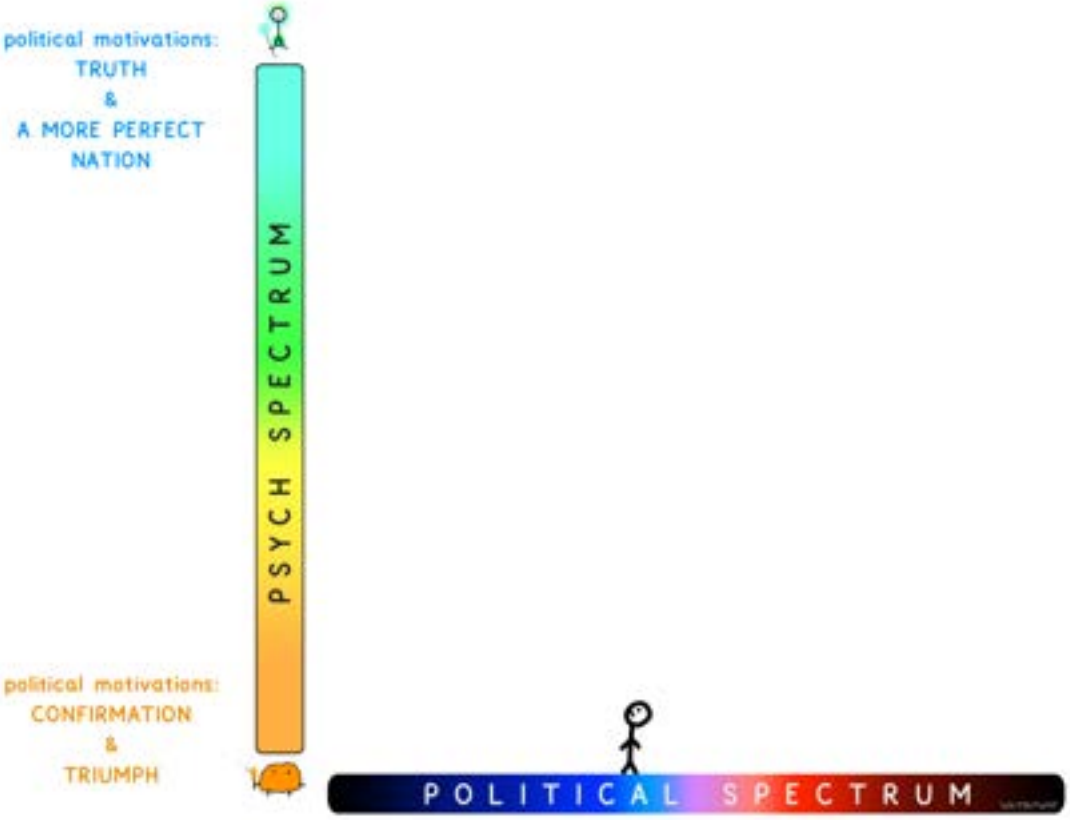
The whole thing reminds me of a drawing from another post.


I love you.
I love the concept of you.
CENTRISM
ME

Thankfully, some self-awareness eventually crept in. My brief foray into Centrism turned out to be like getting out of a long relationship with a crazy person only to immediately jump into a rebound fling with the next person I met. But the fling had taught me something. If I were ever going to really figure out who I was and get myself into a healthy future relationship, I'd have to be okay with being single for a while.

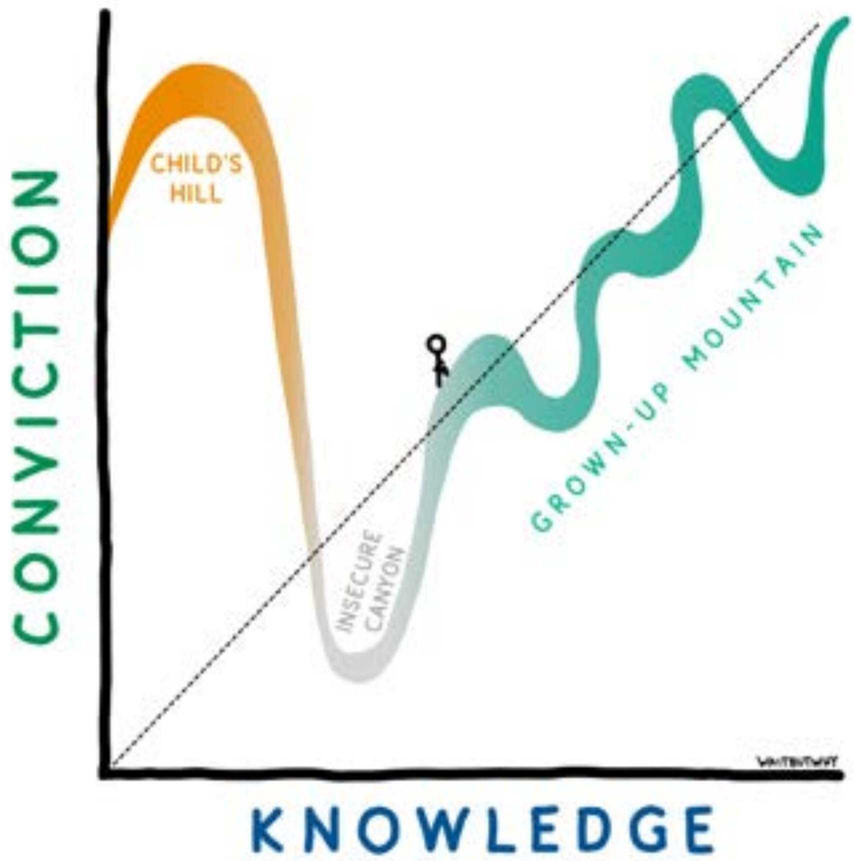
So my identity shifted again, this time to a guy who was Still Asking Questions. I became a SAQist.

Over the next few years, I started to look up for the first time and notice the y-axis of the political space. This whole time, I had been staring down at the ground, searching for the right spot along the What You Think axis—when the real answer was *above* me.


political motivations:
TRUTH
&
A MORE PERFECT NATION
PSYCH SPECTRUM
political motivations:
CONFIRMATION
&
TRIUMPH
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

Looking up at the vertical axis for the first time, I felt like these monkeys.

On the roller coaster, I was now standing here, a born-again SAQist, ready to start a life of climbing:



I'd like to tell you that it's been a straightforward trudge up Grown-Up Mountain since then.

But old habits die hard, and it turns out it's *really* hard to stay on Grown-Up Mountain. When I declared myself an unattached SAQist, I didn't realize just how attached my Primitive Mind was to the color blue.

I'd go through all the right motions—reading op-eds by the most convincing conservative writers and seeking out flaws in Democrat politicians or their platforms. I played the "Why?" Game with myself about my lingering instinct that the left's policies were more logical and more reasonable and search for evidence that those instincts were no more than a bad habit. I genuinely began to feel conflicted and confused about whether the Right or the Left made more sense when it came to fiscal and foreign policy and the optimal size of government.

But then election season would come around, and I'd feel like I was rooting for the Red Sox again. The Democrats still felt like "my people," no matter how hard I tried to shake the feeling off. Were the Democrats actually just more in line with my values, or was it just my Primitive Mind doing this? Or was it a little of both?

Whatever the cause of my attachment, the Republicans of the 2000s—with their Iraq War and their snowballs and their traditional marriage and their stem cell bans—weren't helping the situation. As I tried to rid myself of the notion that the Democrats were "my people," the Republicans—with their Sarah Palin and their Sean Hannity and their Perry ad and their just watch this for 30 seconds—would continually make it crystal clear that they were *certainly* not my people.

Well good news! Over the past decade, the Left finally did it. They regressed so far that they became as "not my people" as the Republicans. They actually went insane enough to free me from my tribal handcuffs. I spent a lot of years saying I was "an Independent" while not truly believing it. Today, I can say it with a straight face.

It's amazing how much clearer your vision gets when you really—*actually*—separate your identity from a tribe. I can see reality better now. The bad news is that I don't like what I see with my new eyes. It's… the situation is pretty scary.

We've got a problem and we need to fix it.

This whole series so far has been getting us ready to dive head first into that problem, with clearer eyes than normal. That's where we'll be headed in the final group of chapters.

Chapter 10: A Sick Giant

If you like Wait But Why, sign up for the **email list** and we'll send you new posts right when they come out. It's a super unannoying list I promise.

Huge thanks to our Patreon supporters for making this series free for everyone. To support Wait But Why, **visit our Patreon page**.

More vertical tugs-of-war:

The productivity tug-of-war

The social tug-of-war

The awareness tug-of-war

Sources and related reading

At the heart of an effort to grow in our political lives has to be a continual effort to get better at thinking and communicating. There are a lot of great writers on the internet dedicating themselves to helping people think and argue more rationally. I've learned a lot from them. Some of my favorites:

The mecca of rationalism, Less Wrong, run by Eliezer Yudkowsky and his ragtag gang of rationalists. Whenever there's a cutting-edge new idea making the rounds, Eliezer was writing about it 5-10 years ago. A deep dive on Less Wrong will make you smarter. This collection is a nice place to start.

A Less Wrong offspring, Scott Alexander's blog Slate Star Codex is a giant pile of clarity. If you liked this post, you'll really like SSC. Specific further reading on ideas in this post: Scott on motte-and-baileying, weak-manning, and the inoculation effect.

Another big pile of wisdom: Paul Graham's essays. You can read about his "hierarchy of disagreement" I referenced here.

Julia Galef, co-founder of the Center for Applied Rationality, is a great explainer of rational concepts. Go on a spiral through these sometime.

Adam Grant spends his life using research to embarrass conventional wisdom. Exceptional communicator but very bald.

Shane Snow dives deep on how we can think better, and he makes it fun. His awesome article on intellectual humility is especially relevant to this series.

Other resources:

A great collection of research that I referenced in the post: The Cognitive Science of Political Thought. And a summary of some of the findings.

The study I referenced about how we process challenges to our political and non-political beliefs with different parts of our brain. By Jonas T. Kaplan, Sarah I. Gimbel and Sam Harris. The article's citation list is full of interesting research. Other studies I referenced about how politics makes us bad at thinking: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Some nice examples of straw-manning and weak-manning in politics, by Yvonne Raley and Robert Talisse (who seems to have coined the term "weak man"). To go deeper, here's their paper on the topic.

Research on how progressives tend to be more concerned about the global and conservatives more about the local. By Adam Waytz, Liane Young, Ravi Iyer, and Jonathan Haidt.

Cool interactive exploring how Fox, CNN, and MSNBC differ in what stories they cover and how they present them.

Wikipedia has nice compilations of cognitive biases and fallacies.

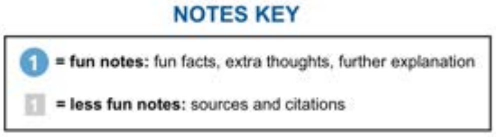
Rapoport's Rules for how to be a great arguer by doing the opposite of straw-manning (sometimes called steel-manning).

A Sick Giant

33
Shares

ary 8, 2020 By Tim Urban

s Chapter 10 in a blog series. If you're new to the series, visit the ***series home page*** *for ll table of contents.*


NOTES KEY

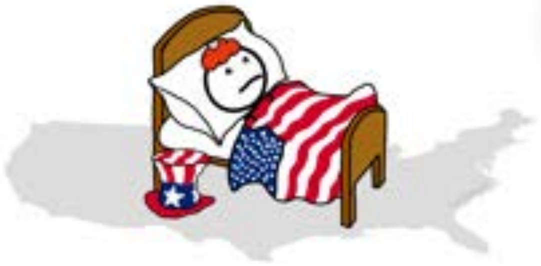
1 = **fun notes:** fun facts, extra thoughts, further explanation

1 = **less fun notes:** sources and citations

Part 5: A Dangerous Trend

"The gentle downward slope gets steeper and imperceptibly becomes an abyss." – Tomas Tranströmer

Chapter 10: A Sick Giant



In the introduction to this series, I said:

Part of what I've spent three years working on is a new language we can use to think and talk about our societies and the people inside of them…full of new terms and metaphors and, of course, lots and lots of badly drawn pictures. It all amounts to a new lens. Looking through this lens out at the world, and inward at myself, things make more sense to me now. … In the early parts of the series, we'll get familiar with the new lens, and as the series moves on, we'll start using the lens to look at all of those topics a sane blogger isn't supposed to write about. If I can do my job well, by the end of the journey, everything will make more sense to you too. There's a pretty worrisome trend happening in many of our societies right now, but I'm pretty sure that if we can just see it all with clear eyes, we can fix it.

Nine chapters later, here we are. There are a few new terms and visuals still to come, but for the most part, we now have our lens.

At the heart of the lens is the notion of "seeing in 3D," which involves two ideas:

1) Seeing in 2D. Getting to know what I see as the core human struggle: the tension between our genes' will to survive—a primal flame that burns brightly in everyone—and the human capacity to override that flame when it makes sense to do so, with rationality, self-awareness, and wisdom. I

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The Fermi Paradox
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The Elon Musk Series
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491

How to Pick a Life Partner
Like 2.6K
333

Why Gen Y Yuppies Are Unhappy

personify this tension with two characters—the Primitive Mind and the Higher Mind—whose struggle for control is a bit like a tug-of-war. Seeing in 2D means learning to consider this tug-of-war when thinking about anything human: ourselves and others, our interactions, our communities and societies and our politics, our personal and collective histories, and our prospects for the future.

2) Seeing in 3D. Remembering to remember not only the Psych Spectrum tug-of-war but also Emergence Tower. Ants are cells in a giant colony "organism." Polar bears are individual organisms in themselves. Humans are weird because we can be like ants sometimes and polar bears other times, making the human species kind of like a fractal. The individual human is an organism, but in many ways so is a human community, and even a whole society. The reason I see humanity like a fractal is that these different-order organisms are similar in a lot of ways. Namely, I see them as all enduring the same 2D struggle. I freely alternate between psychology and sociology in this series, because in 3D, it's all one big multi-tiered system. Psychology is just a microcosm of sociology. And sociology is higher-emergence psychology—it's the psychology of giants.

Putting the two ideas together, it's as if the tug-of-war is itself a fractal that scales up and down. There's a tug-of-war in every human's head, as we struggle for self-control and try our best to think and behave wisely. That same tug-of-war takes place on a macro scale in large and small groups of humans. When couples, communities, and societies let control of the rope slip towards the Primitive Mind, they end up playing out an ancient pre-programmed skit, falling into what I call the Power Games—the most primitive format of human interaction, where the only rule is: "Everyone can do whatever they want, if they have the power to pull it off." When their collective Higher Minds regain an edge, they're able to live within a wiser and more grown-up structure made up of consciously chosen principles. Tug-of-war shifts are also contagious. The state of each person's tug-of-war influences both the psychology of the people around them and the collective tug-of-war of groups the person is a part of. In turn, shifts in a society's collective mindset exert a pull on the communities and individuals within it.

Which brings us to the next part of what I said in the series intro: the worrisome trend.

I've alluded to the trend a few times in the series so far, but I didn't want to get fully into it until our lens had been sufficiently developed. My hope is that the lens can A) help me get my point across, and B) help us all see a baggage-laden story with fresh eyes and communicate about it with fresh words. Clarity is the name of the game—if we can see a bad trend for what it is and why it is, we can put our efforts toward reversing it. If we can't, we'll unwittingly perpetuate it.

Blogging about current events is a bad idea. It's less fun than blogging about rockets or cryonics or Panic Monsters and much more likely to make people mad at you. But this is too important, with stakes too high, not to talk about. The fact that there are such strong social incentives to avoid the topic is itself a huge part of the problem and why it's particularly important to talk about. For the rest of this series (this chapter and two more), we'll discuss the worrisome trend I think is happening, the consequences at play, and how I think we can work toward changing our trajectory.

Sliding Downward

The tug-of-war in our heads ebbs and flows on a day-to-day and hour-to-hour basis. You wake up feeling fine until you log onto Twitter—i.e. Primitive Mind land—where exposure to all the low-rung-ness jolts your Primitive Mind awake, dragging your psyche downward. You head to work, which let's say is a place with a generally high-minded, grown-up culture, and it elevates your psyche a bit. While at work, you pick up a call from your mom, who makes a subtle jab about the career path she wishes you weren't on, which infuriates you and leaves you finishing the call sounding like a 16-year-old, lower on the Psych Spectrum than you were a few minutes ago. A minute later, with your Primitive Mind now all riled up, you snap at your boyfriend in a text conversation, only to apologize a few hours later, when the tug-of-war in your head has come back up to its default position.

If there were Fitbits that could track Psych Spectrum levels, we'd each see that we have our own graph.

Like 2.2K
1,203

7 Ways to be Insufferable on Facebook
Like 4.9K
956

Putting Time In Perspective
Like 1.9K
550

How to Name a Baby
Like 440
325

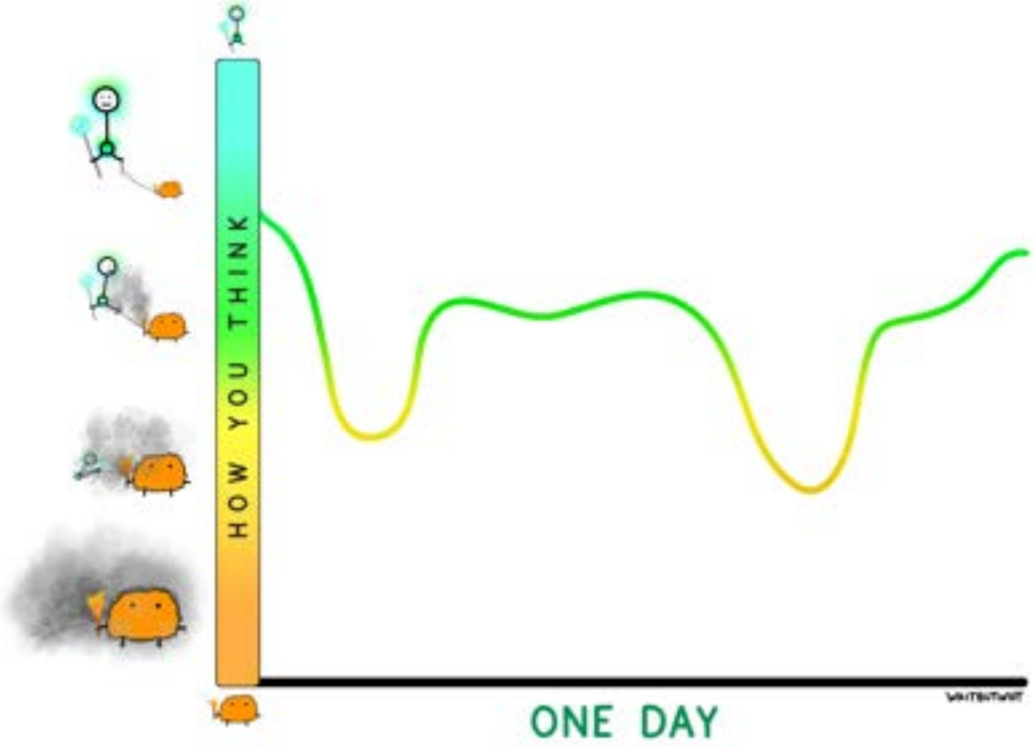
Why You Should Stop Caring What Other People Think
Like 3.3K
334

Religion for the Nonreligious
Like 909
821

10 Types of 30-Year-Old Single Guys
Like 494
662

The Tail End
Like 25K
293

Full Archive



The While We're Here, My Recent Airplane Story Blue Box

I recently engaged in a fun, joint Psych Spectrum roller coaster with a stranger on an airplane. We were on the runway, getting ready to take off, and I was doing my typical "I know the flight attendant said to turn all phones onto airplane mode but the whole policy is really quite inane so I'm just gonna keep texting until we take off and I lose service" thing, and a woman next to me decided I was an asshole and *loudly told on me* to the flight attendant, who was busy and didn't hear her. So I did the only reasonable thing—I stealthily turned my phone onto airplane mode, re-opened my texts, and very out in the open, started typing a long text. The woman—my new eternal arch-nemesis—took the bait. She saw me texting and *again* got the flight attendant's attention, saying, "Excuse me but he's *still* texting." When the flight attendant asked me to turn airplane mode on, I showed her my phone and calmly explained that airplane mode has been on this whole time and I just like to get some texting out of the way during flights—texts that don't send until I land and re-connect to the internet. The flight attendant said, "Oh then that's totally fine—my apologies." I replied, "that's okay," and did a little "it's amazing how awful people can be right?" sigh. Satan watched the whole thing and then just sat there silently, hopefully very embarrassed. It was an unbelievably satisfying, triumphant moment.

Here's how that interaction looks in 2D. I was hovering somewhere in the middle of the Psych Spectrum, around my default level. The woman next to me either has a particular pet peeve about people not following rules, or she was in a bad mood and low down on her Psych Spectrum and took her shit out on me. Had I remained in a Psych Spectrum middle-ground, my Higher Mind would have thought, "whoa that was aggressive...but I am kind of a cock about this kind of thing, so whatever it's fair. Plus she's a stranger and it would certainly be silly to take this personally." I'd have smiled, said a little "oops, sorry about that," and that would have been that.

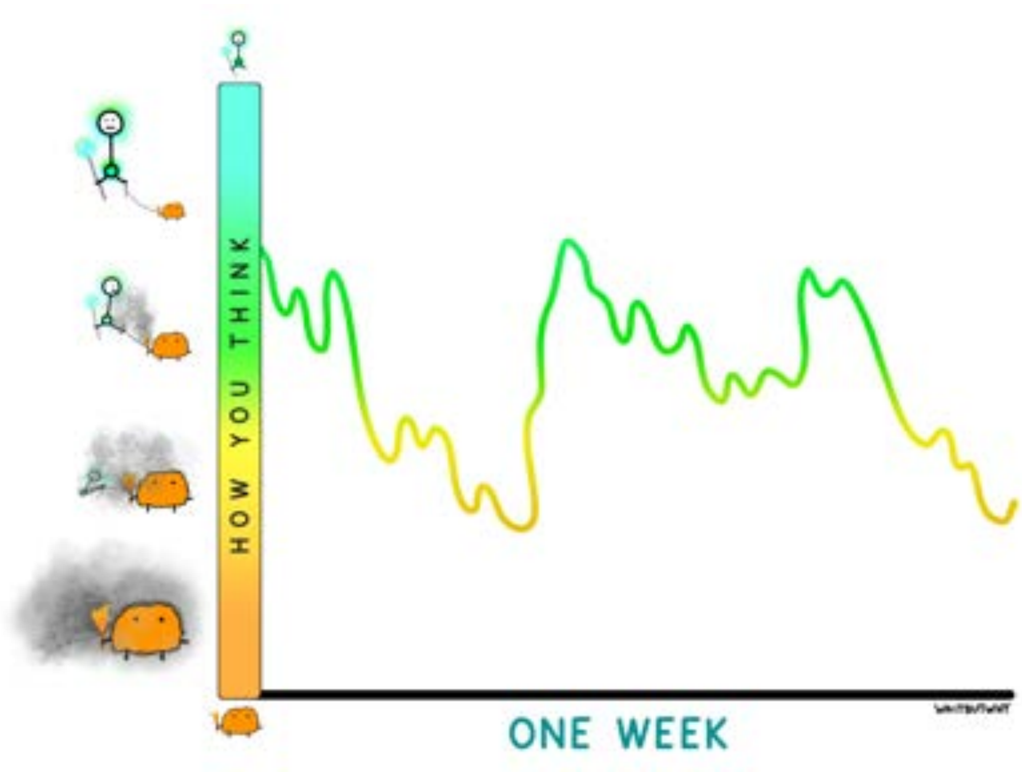
But that's not what happened, because her aggressive tattletale move immediately threw my Primitive Mind into a rage, plummeting me down the Psych Spectrum. This banished my Higher Mind to the closet of my subconscious, allowing my Primitive Mind to come up with a genius-yet-psychotic plan for revenge. Which worked, and made my Primitive Mind feel deeply satisfied in a very not-grown-up way.

Flash to two hours later. We're in the air somewhere. The woman and I obviously haven't spoken or made eye contact since the incident. Then she drops her glasses on the ground. I pick them up and hand them to her. She replies, "Thank you......hey by the way I'm sorry about before, that was totally wrong of me." I immediately reply back, "Oh don't worry about it, I totally understand!” For the rest of the flight, we’re best friends. She’s a lovely person and I just want her to be happy in life.

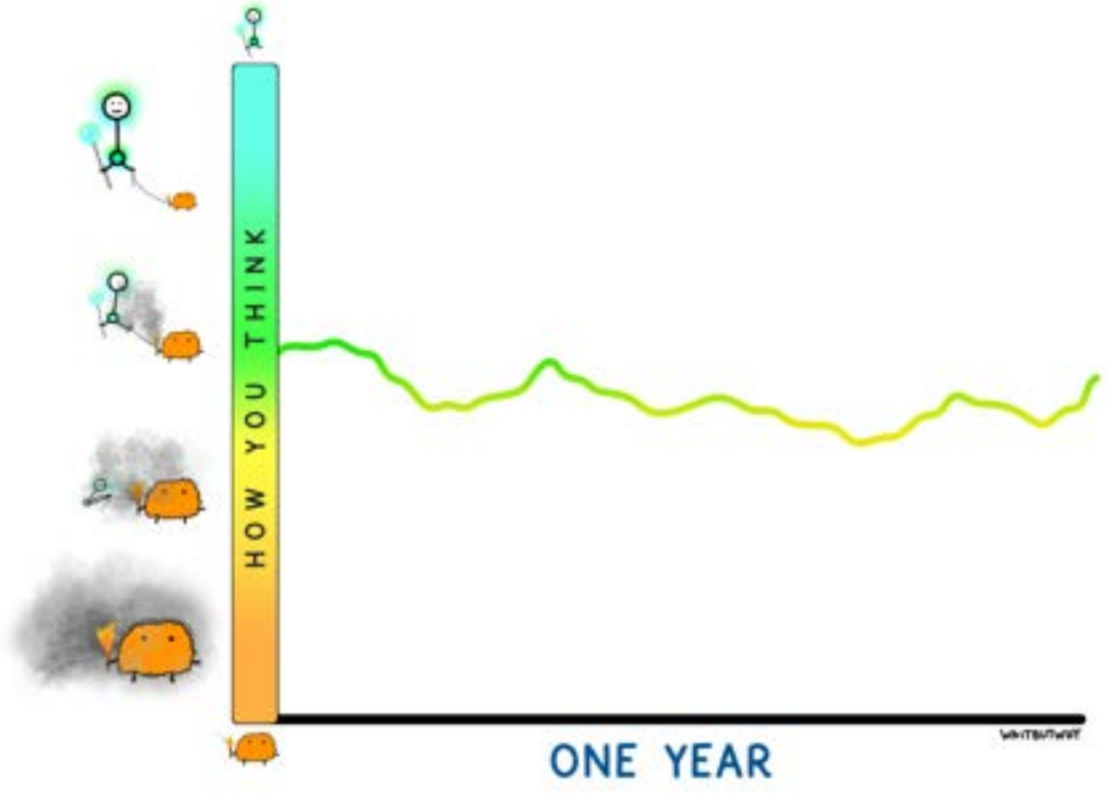
In 2D: Thinking (incorrectly) that she had falsely accused me of something, she feels bad, and uses the glasses interaction as a chance to make amends. My Primitive Mind, sitting smugly in the driver’s seat of my mind, had spent the flight assuming that this woman *hated* me and in turn, she remained my lifelong nemesis. Then she apologized. In that instant, my Primitive Mind deflated like a balloon and my Higher Mind burst out of the closet, suddenly fully empowered. My hatred of this random woman evaporated as I was reminded that she is a human, not Satan, and all of my satisfied anger transformed into regret for the sneaky trick I pulled on her.

Our little fight dragged both of our tugs-of-war downward, and then later, with a single positive interaction, we both snapped back upward. These kinds of Psych Spectrum roller coasters happen all the time.

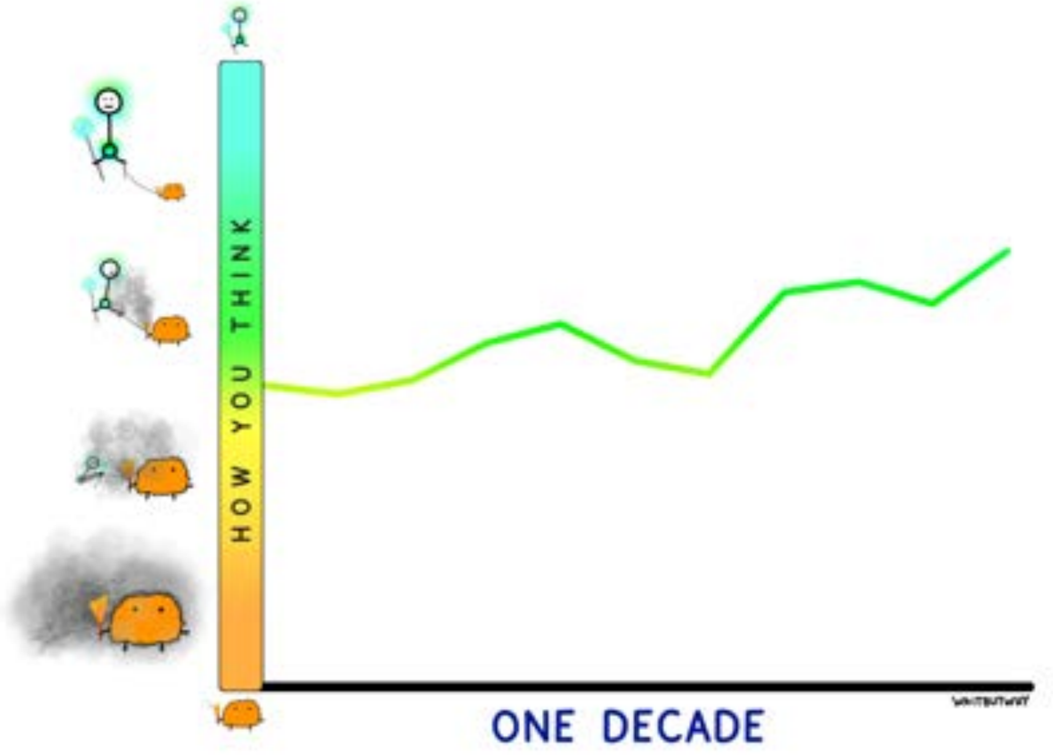
Over the span of a week, your Psych Spectrum Fitbit might show you a graph like this:



But that’s just the micro picture. To get a sense of how your life is really going, you’d want to view the graph over a longer span, like a year (by plotting each week’s average):



Or even over a full decade (by plotting each year’s average):

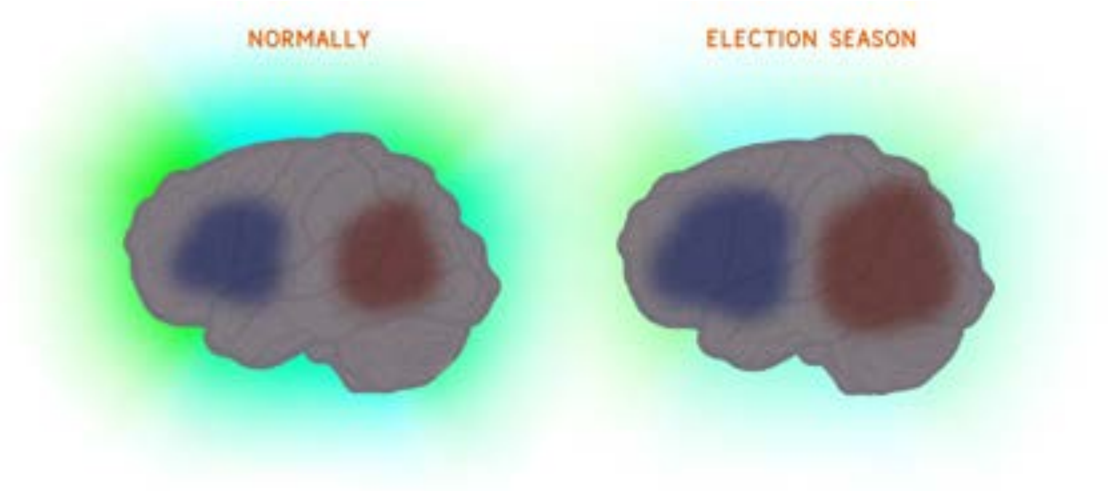


Over longer periods of time, the micro oscillations melt away, and we see the broader trajectories of *macro trends*. In most cases, I think we grow up over time, as we get a little wiser, a little more self-aware, a little kinder and less self-obsessed. This means that as the years pass, our general Psych Spectrum equilibrium rises, like a stock chart that goes up and down week to week but over the years goes up overall. But we also go through rough times in our lives where we seem to revert to old ways we thought we were done with. When a downward macro trend gets out of hand, our lives can fall apart for a while. It’s the human roller coaster that we’re all on, whether we like it or not.

Macro trends happen because Psych Spectrum movement in one part of our lives can spread to others and generate a feedback spiral, helping upward and downward trends to beget more of the same. Maybe you start to lose some confidence at work, which then bleeds into your dating life. You end up in a relationship that doesn’t make you feel so great about yourself—one you probably wouldn’t have gotten into when you felt better about everything a year ago. You find yourself eating badly and exercising less. The quality of your work goes down, which makes you lose more confidence. Your lower confidence worsens your relationship, and maybe your family notices that you haven't been calling as much as you used to. You start having a hard time being happy for friends when good things happen in their lives, which puts a distance between you and them. What started as a single negative development becomes a vicious cycle that infects all parts of your life. Years later, when things have turned around for you, you look back on those years and with hindsight, you can see them for what they were—a trough in the roller coaster of your life.

If the entire U.S. giant were wearing a Psych Spectrum Fitbit, I think we might see the same kind of graph.

In the U.S., election season is like a raging "Primitive Minds Gone Wild" keg party. In the months leading up to the election, the nation's air becomes more and more saturated with toxic, contagious Primitive Mind smoke. If the two U.S. political parties are like a married couple desperately in need of couples therapy, election season is when they're at their worst and most contemptuous. Not many of us can hold our tugs-of-war in place in that kind of environment, and on aggregate, election season causes the country to drift downward on the Psych Spectrum. The country's giant collective Primitive Mind gets stronger and louder, pulling the national tug-of-war downward a bit on the mountain. The frozen, non-thinking spots in the collective national brain—the country's political Echo Chambers—swell up and expand.



As we talked about in Chapter 9, politics is always a bit *bottom-heavy* on the Psych Spectrum—but during election season, politics is at its bottom-heaviest.

Then election season ends, a bunch of post-mortem op-eds are written, and eventually, everyone gets bored of politics and moves on, if only for a little while. Many Americans rise up a bit on the Political Ladder, leaving the low-rung giants behind and repopulating the high-rung giants. As people relax a little about politics, some communities become slightly less groupthinky, shrinking the national Echo Chambers down in size.

Putting it all together, the election cycle oscillation might look something like this. Please enjoy Wait But Why's attempt at animation:

The election cycle

We would expect this kind of short-term pattern in even the healthiest democracy. Like my example with an individual, to really get a sense of how a country is doing, we'd need to zoom out and try to see the longer-term macro trends.

Over a period of many decades, the hope is that countries have an upward trajectory. If almost everyone in your country would agree that they'd rather live there today than 100 years ago, it may be a sign that the big, national giant has managed to move higher up the mountain throughout the century, not lower. But even the most stable, healthy countries can go through painful periods of reversion as well.

The history of the U.S. has certainly been a roller coaster, with plenty of upward macro trends and some eras of negative progress too. I'm not enough of a U.S. historian to take a respectable crack at what the full graph of that roller coaster might look like (though I encourage commenters to give it a try), but when I look at recent times, here's what I see:

Over the past 30 years, the U.S. has been on a downward macro trend—a negative feedback spiral that has been accelerating in recent years. And the harder I think about what that macro trend means, about what's causing it, and about what its consequences could be, the more worried I get.

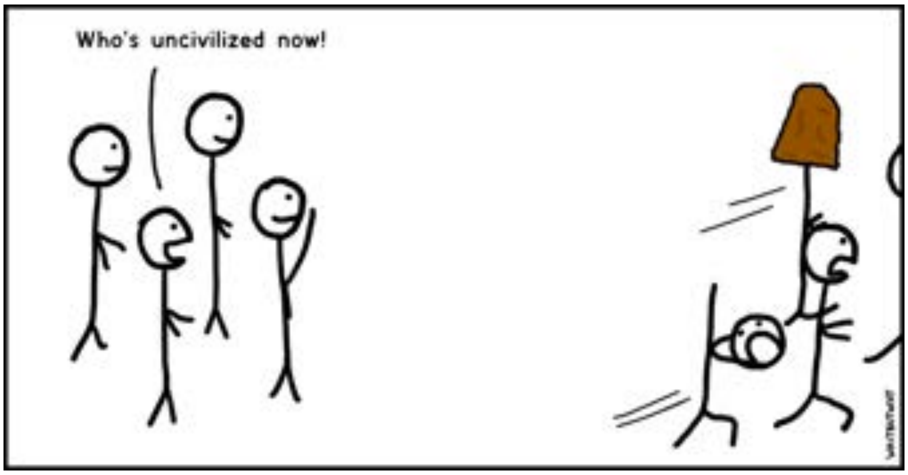
I suspect that this trend is bigger than the U.S., because it seems to be mirrored in many parts of Europe and other parts of the world. But having focused the majority of my thinking and research on the U.S., I'll limit my analysis to what's been going on here (though I'd love to hear from non-U.S. readers about what macro trends they see happening in their country).

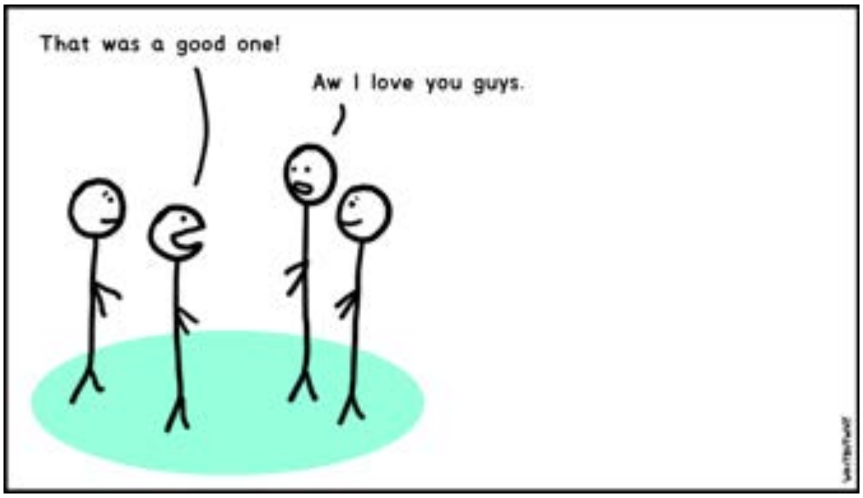
On its face, the downward trend I'm referring to looks like an increase in political polarization, both among voters and among politicians. Let's take a look at both areas:

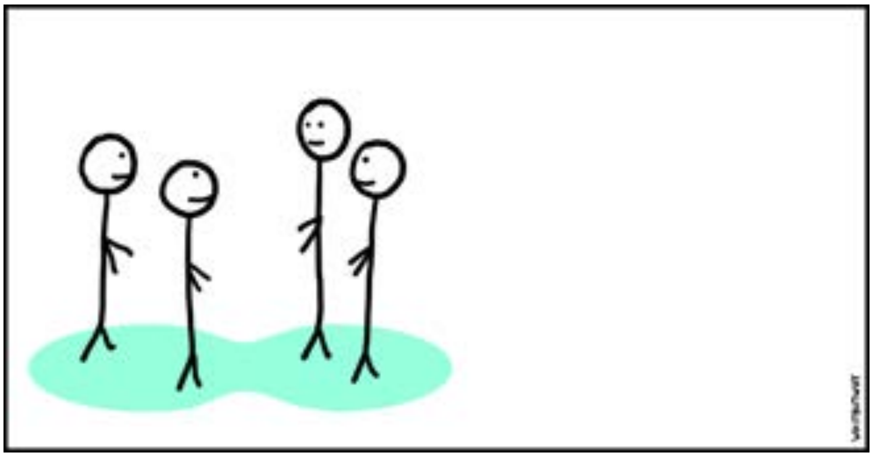
The Voter Polarization Story

Voter polarization is an old pastime in the U.S.—but over the past half century, things have devolved into a particularly nasty situation.

You could probably trace the roots of the trend all the way back to 1945, when Hitler died. As we've discussed, nothing unites a group of humans like a common enemy—and the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by giant world wars that helped Americans to feel united. The U.S. never stopped being immersed in foreign conflicts, but Hitler's demise marked the last time Americans were totally, uncontroversially united against a common enemy. And let's remember what happens when the common enemy goes away.


Who's uncivilized now!
WAITBUTWHY


That was a good one!
Aw I love you guys.
WAITBUTWHY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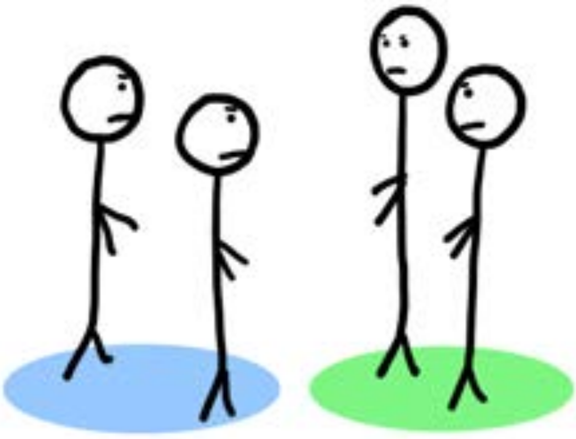


Another key moment happened in the 1960s, when a cultural schism divided the country and never really went away.

By the middle of the decade, it had been 20 years since the end of World War II, and the country was ready to start fighting with itself again.

The Soviet Union was kind of a common enemy, but the country wasn't totally united by it. A wave of pro-Communism sentiment from parts of the Left started to annoy the shit out of the Right, who felt that the Soviet Union and the spread of Communism should be viewed as pure evil, no differently than Hitler. Barry Goldwater, the 1964 Republican candidate for president, summed up this sentiment in his nomination acceptance speech, when he said:

I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.

This was a rallying call against Communism, but it was also a rallying call to the American Right to dig their heels in with their stances, whether the Democrats were on board or not.

Meanwhile, the Left was undergoing a shift in the other direction. In his 1997 book *Achieving Our Country*, philosopher Richard Rorty ① describes the mid-1960s as a period during which the Left began to transition from what he calls The Reformist Left—who were patriotic and devoted to making pragmatic progressive improvements to the traditional U.S. system—to what he calls The Cultural Left. The Cultural Left, led by students who were born after World War II ended, was less patriotic than the Left of previous decades, viewing the U.S. as somewhat of a failed experiment. This shift put them in direct conflict with the super patriotic Goldwater Right. The Cultural Left was also more politically militant and less interested in pragmatic reform than the old, Reformist Left had been, falling nicely into Goldwater's militant "extremism over moderation on matters of virtue" camp—only on the opposite side of every issue.

The renewed partisan divide was more clear-cut than it had been in decades past—and the major events of the late 1960s were viewed by both factions as binary political battlegrounds.

According to Rorty, the Cultural Left, who were often critical of Capitalism and sometimes sympathetic towards the Soviet Union, despised the Vietnam War, while most of the Right fervently supported it. Anti-war Republicans and pro-war Democrats increasingly became persona non grata in their own party and either faded away or defected to the other side.

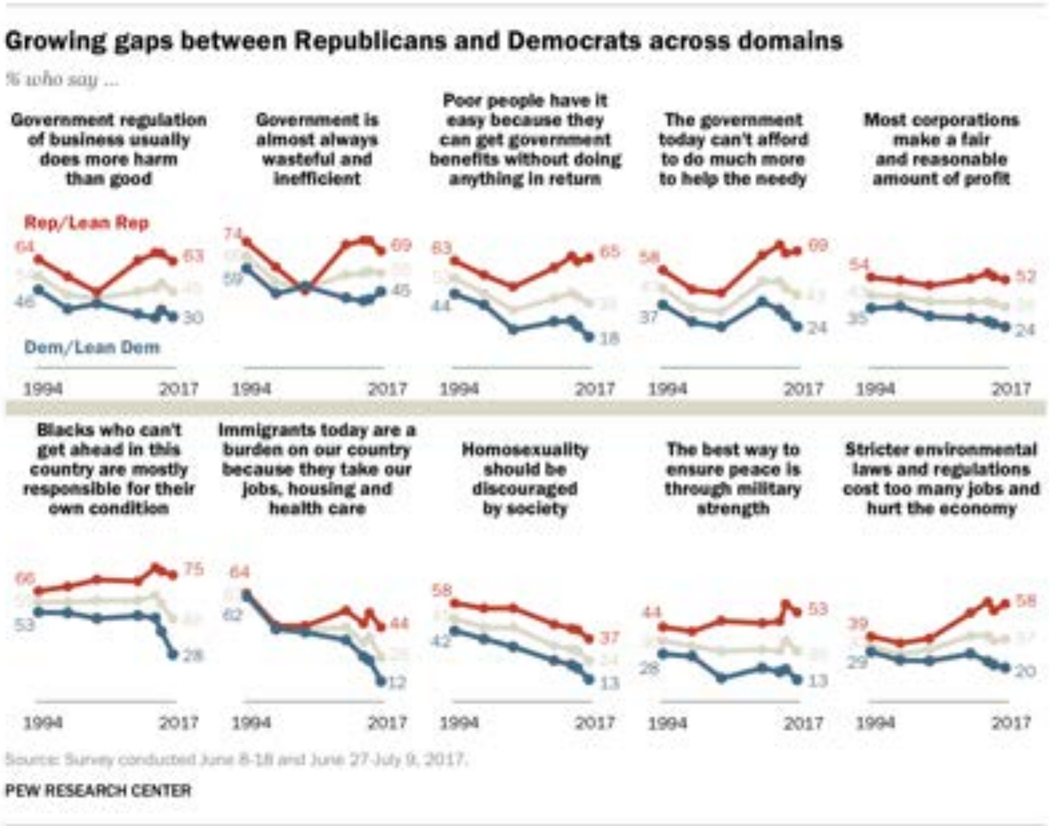
The Cultural Left saw the fight for civil rights as not only necessary but as a symbol of the country's moral bankruptcy. This really boiled the South's potato—and Republicans jumped on the opportunity. Democrats had dominated the South in presidential elections for a century, and by solidifying in resistance to the Democrats' 1965 Voting Rights Act (in what Nixon's strategists called "the Southern Strategy"), the Republicans snatched the South away, and they've (mostly) held it ever since. What had previously been a hazier divide on race issues like segregation, with some conservative Southern Democrats and some more progressive Northern Republicans previously in support of or opposed to segregation, respectively, now sorted itself out more cleanly.

The cultural gap between the parties also widened. The Cultural Left, with their drugs and their hair and their music and their rampant sex, became increasingly irritating to the more traditional Republicans. The Left had a similarly one-dimensional view of the Right, seeing them as a group of sweater-wearing, warmongering, financially predatory old white racists.

It all came to a head in the 1968 election, with Richard Nixon riding into the White House on a wave of populist appeal to everyone fed up with the Cultural Left—who, in turn, saw the election result as further reason to lose hope in the country.

The tumult of the 1960s sowed many of the roots for the modern Left/Right divides on foreign, fiscal, and social issues. According to a comprehensive study, people are at their most politically and ideologically impressionable between their mid-teens and mid-20s, and all of those Baby Boomers born in the 1940s and 50s—none of whom were sentient the last time the U.S. felt like a single, united front against a common enemy, and most of whom were deeply influenced by the events of the late 60s—are, by the 80s and 90s, running the country. The Greatest Generation (who fought in World War II) are by this point mostly retired, and it's the Baby Boomers who are the politicians, the university administrators, the CEOs, the home buyers, and the media moguls.

During the following decades, we see voter polarization steadily increasing. Pew data, collected over the past 25 years, shows us that the gap between the viewpoints of Democrats and Republicans has grown on issues across the board. [1]


Growing gaps between Republicans and Democrats across domains

% who say …

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

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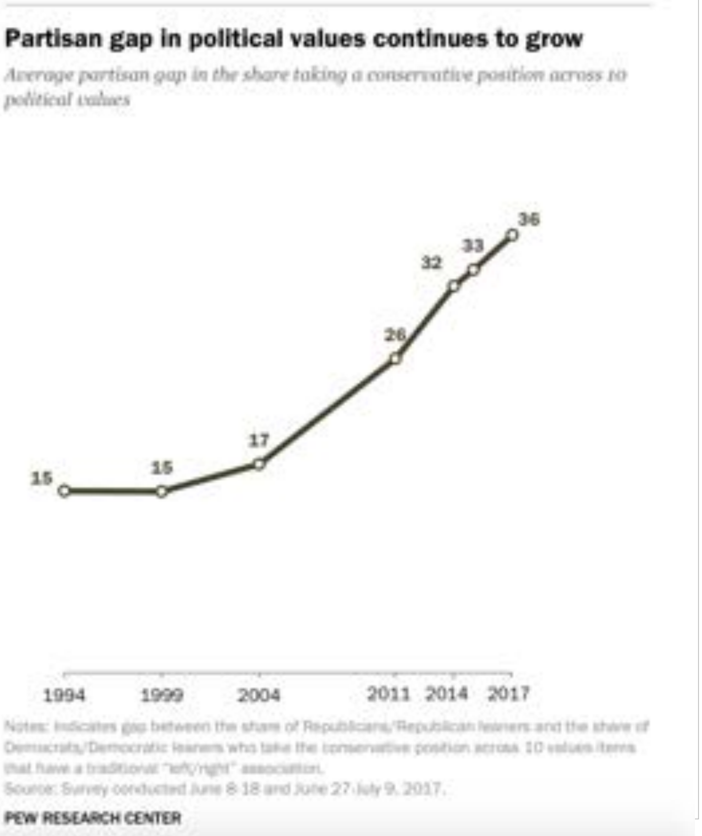
Averaging out the growth of the gap in those 10 graphs yields a smooth trend—[2]


Partisan gap in political values continues to grow

Average partisan gap in the share taking a conservative position across 10 political values

Notes: Indicates gap between the share of Republicans/Republican leaners and the share of Democrats/Democratic leaners who take the conservative position across 10 values items that have a traditional "left/right" association.

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

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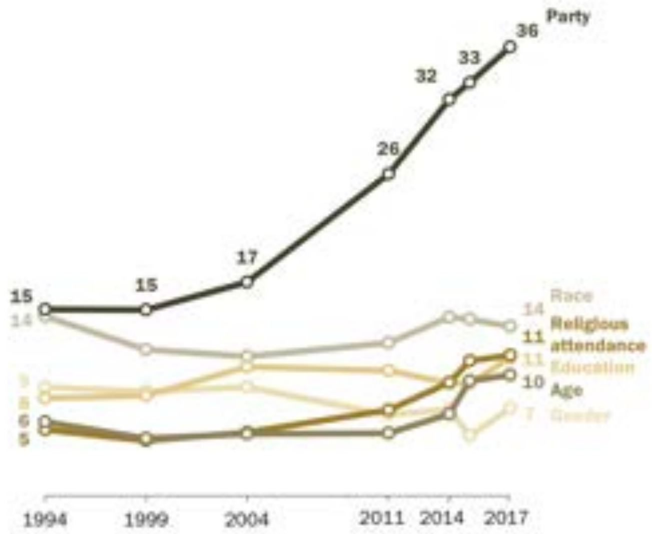
—even as gaps in viewpoints between the country's races, religions, and other types of groups have remained unchanged:[3]

As partisan divides over political values widen, other gaps remain more modest

Average gap in the share taking a conservative position across 10 political values, by key demographics



Notes: Indicates average gap between the share of two groups taking the conservative position across 10 values items. Party=difference between Rep/Lean Rep and Dem/Lean Dem. Race=white non-Hispanic/black non-Hispanic. Education=college grad/non-college grad. Age=18-49/50+. Religion=weekly+ religious service attenders/less often.
Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

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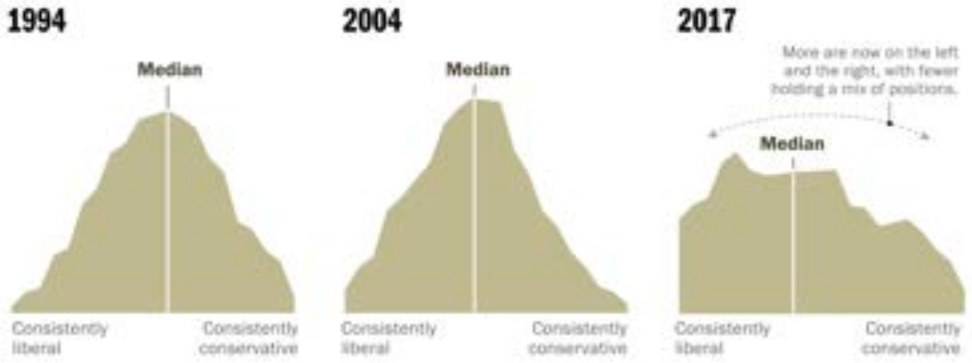
Pew helps us visualize this another way—by plotting Americans on a spectrum from consistently liberal on one end to consistently conservative on the other. So someone who holds liberal views on all 10 of the above issues is plotted on the far left, someone who answers all 10 questions conservatively is on the far right, and people who have mixed leanings are more in the middle (with those whose answers are split 5-5 in the dead center).

The U.S. Thought Pile has gone from a steep hill to a more of a flat mesa.[4]

A declining share of Americans holds a mix of liberal and conservative views

Distribution of the public on a 10-item scale of political values



Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see methodology).
Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017.

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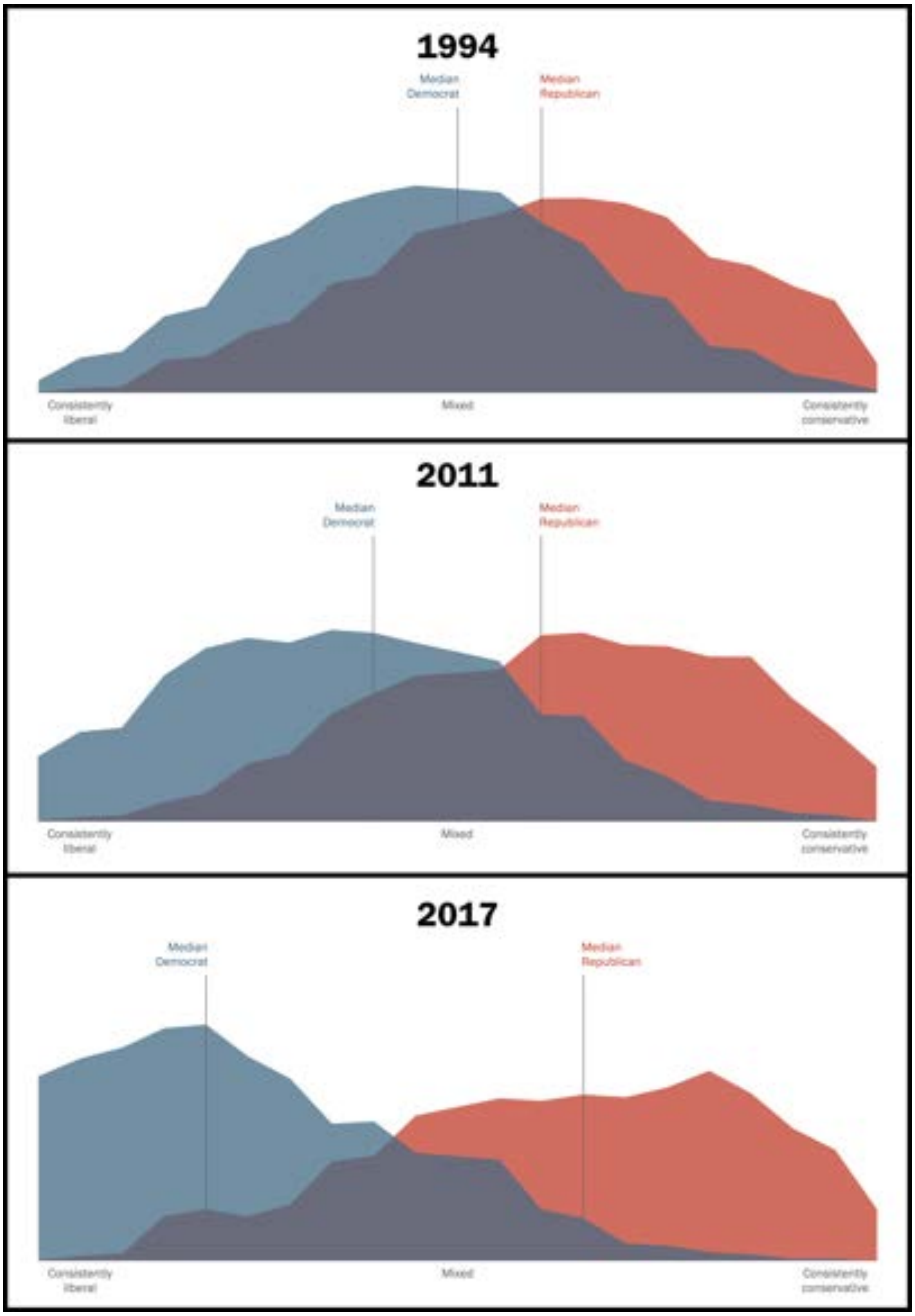
A steep hill means most people have a mix of liberal and conservative views—something you'd expect in a country with 325 million unique independent thinkers. A steep hill flattening into a mesa happens when fewer people are mixed and more people are ideologically pure.

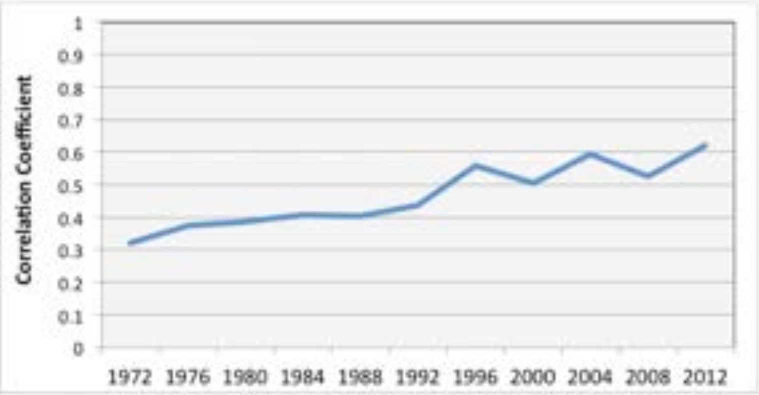
Up on the high rungs of our political ladder, my hunch is that you'd find people all along this spectrum—from consistently liberal to consistently conservative, to everything in between. But on the aggregate, the high rungs alone would probably form a steep hill. In the Echo Chambers, you'd be more likely to find people in lockstep, loyal to their party's ideological checklist from top to bottom. Going from a hill to a mesa is probably a sign that on the whole, America's Idea Labs have gotten smaller while its Echo Chambers have grown.

Separating this graph by party helps us see what's going on behind the scenes of this trend. Play around with this for a minute.

Here are three snapshots that sum up the story pretty well:[5]



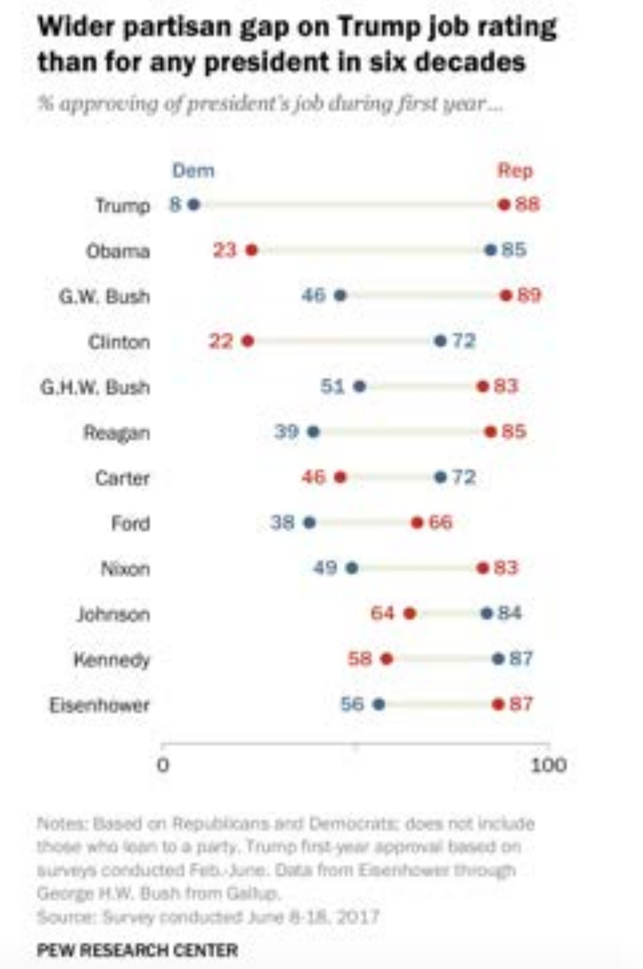
Jonathan Haidt and Sam Abrams look at the same story yet another way, using data from *American National Election Studies*, which suggests that the degree of ideological purity within the two parties has about doubled over the past four decades:



Correlation of left-right self-placement with party identification. Source: ANES

They explain: "Before the 1980s, if you knew which party an American voted for, you couldn't predict very well whether the person held liberal or conservative views. This chart shows the degree to which identification with a party correlates with a person's self-placement on the liberal-conservative spectrum. If there were no relationship, the "correlation coefficient" would be zero. If there were a perfect relationship, it would be 1. In 1972, it was 0.32, but it has nearly doubled since then, to 0.62 in 2012, which is considered strong."

2) The story shows up again when we look at presidential approval numbers. Young Americans who only know a country where half the citizens love the president and the other half hate him might be surprised to learn that it wasn't always like this:


Wider partisan gap on Trump job rating than for any president in six decades

% approving of president's job during first year…

Notes: Based on Republicans and Democrats; does not include those who lean to a party. Trump first-year approval based on surveys conducted Feb.-June. Data from Eisenhower through George H.W. Bush from Gallup.
Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017

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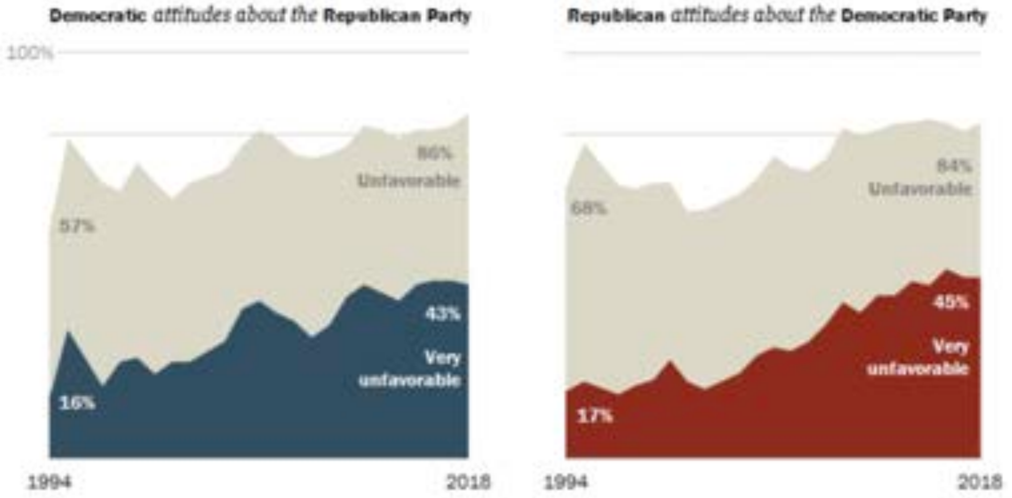
You can also see the story in how Americans' feelings toward opposing voters has evolved. In stats like this—[6]

In 1958, 33 percent of Democrats wanted their daughters to marry a Democrat, and 25 percent of Republicans wanted their daughters to marry a Republican. But by 2016, 60 percent of Democrats and 63 percent of Republicans felt that way.

—or in graphs like this:[7]



Large majorities of Democrats and Republicans view other party unfavorably; many take a very unfavorable view

Note: Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents; Republicans include Republican-leaning independents.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 7-14, 2018.

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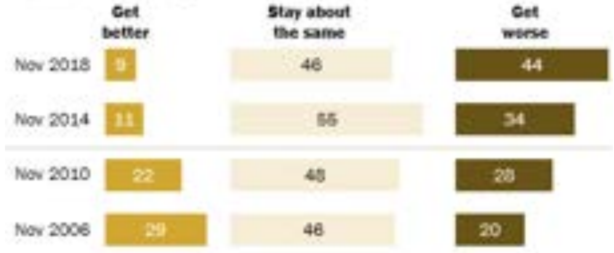
Looking at the trajectory we're on, it's no surprise that Americans are becoming less and less hopeful about things turning around:

More Americans expect partisan relations to get worse than did so after three prior midterms

% who say relations between Republicans and Democrats in Washington will ___ in the coming year



Notes: 2018 and 2014 surveys conducted online on the American Trends Panel; 2010 and 2006 polls conducted via telephone. No answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 7-13, 2018.

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As voters have polarized, a similar story has been playing out in Washington.

The Politician Polarization Story

It's a good idea to start with some context and remind ourselves that this isn't the first era the U.S. has descended into a polarization vortex.

In his farewell speech at the end of his presidency, George Washington warned about the dangers of political polarization:

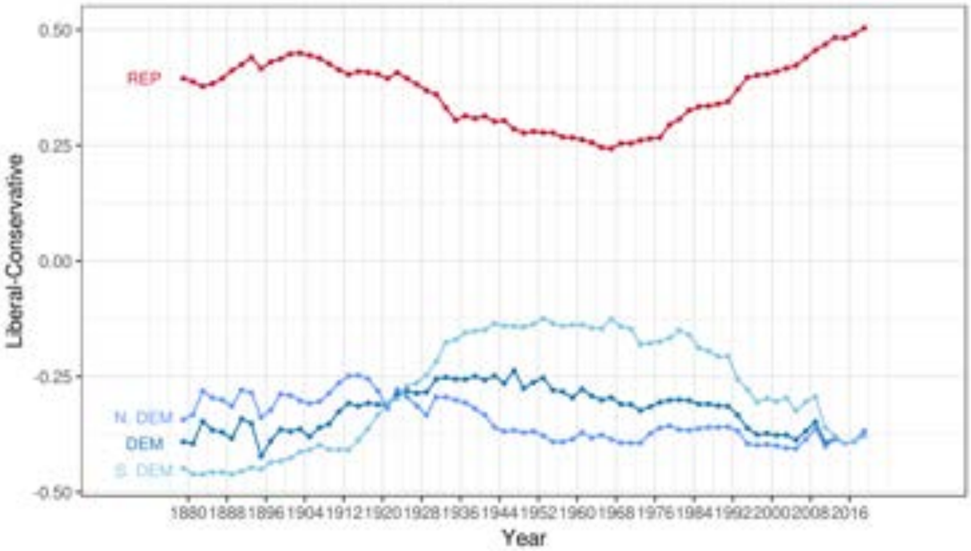
> *This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy. The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism…It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foments occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions…it is a spirit not to be encouraged.*

Everyone burst out laughing and the government has been polarized ever since.

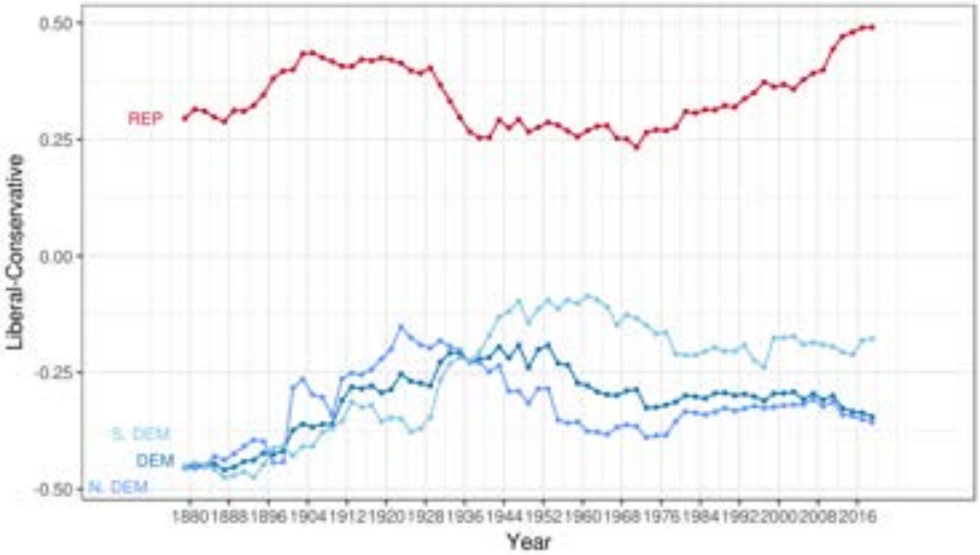
The John Adams–Thomas Jefferson election of 1800 was one of the dirtiest in history. Jefferson then spent his presidency at fierce odds with Hamilton and the Federalists. Half a century later, the country descended into Civil War. A few decades after that, the 1890s were a hyper-polarized time② that in many ways resembled today's divides.③ In the 1930s, the parties clashed again over the New Deal.

Looking at the history seems to support the idea that a country like the U.S. goes through macro oscillations in polarization. What seems like a trajectory into hell when you only look at WWII to today looks more like just another part of a roller coaster from a more zoomed-out angle.(Though for reasons we'll discuss later, the modern trend may be uniquely dangerous.)

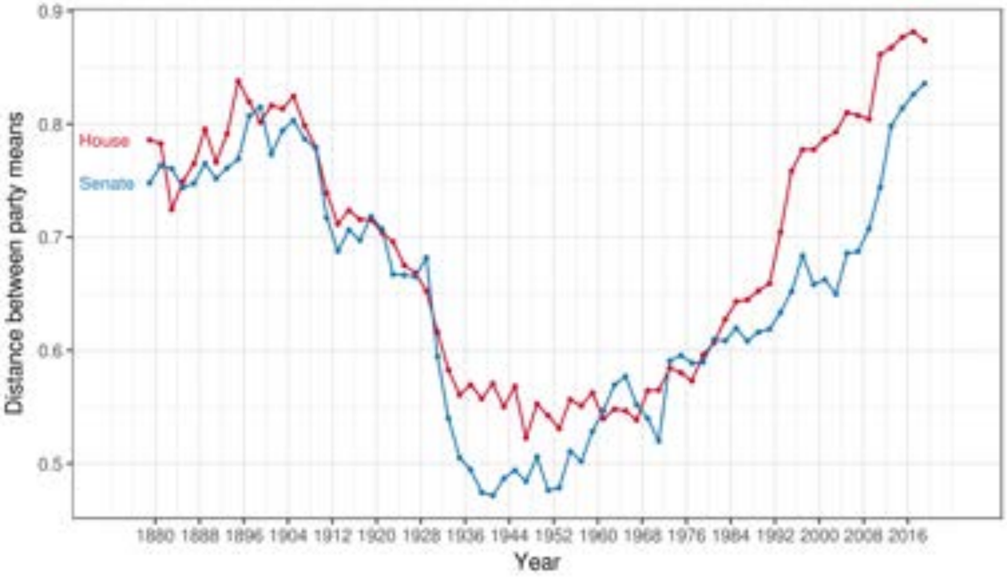
Probably the most commonly-cited metric to measure polarization levels in the U.S. House and Senate is something called the DW-NOMINATE,④ which places politicians on a liberal-to-conservative scale based on data like their roll-call vote behavior. The developers of the metric use it to make interesting charts on the site voteview.com. One such chart shows how DW-NOMINATE averages in the U.S. House of Representatives have changed since 1880:[8]



Their chart for the Senate tells a similar-looking story.

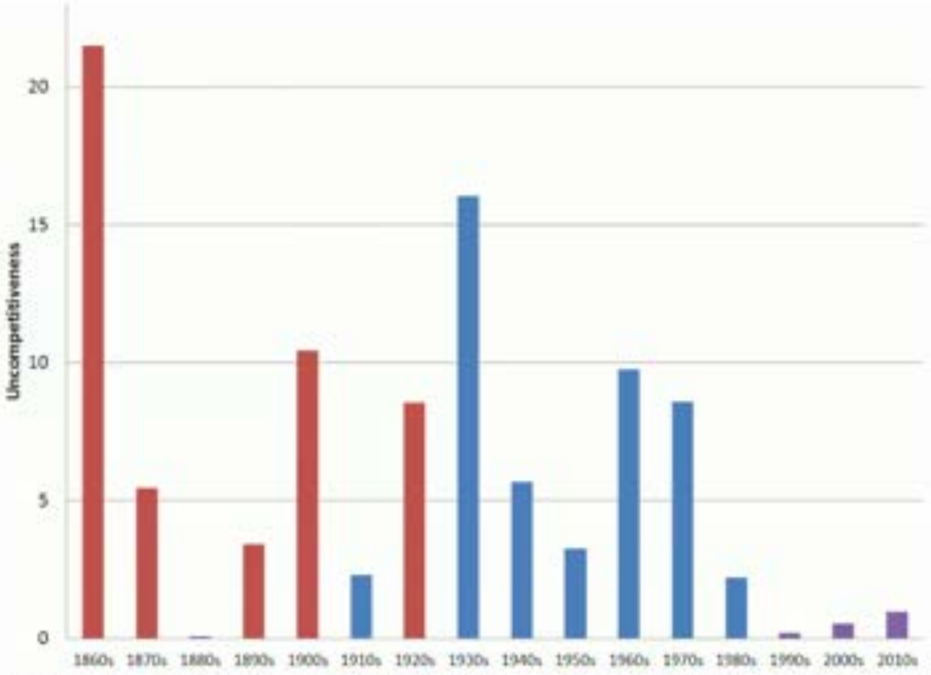


In each chamber, both parties have gone more extreme, with the Republicans going even farther. The full trend really comes through when you plot out the *gap* between the parties in the two chambers:



Political theorists suggest a few possibilities for the causes of the most recent polarization trend among politicians:

One theory points to the fact that both chambers have been highly competitive over recent decades.[9]



Index of Two-Party Competition, 1861-2013. Zero means evenly balanced competition. Distance from 0 means a tilt toward one party, with Republican eras in red, Democratic eras in blue. Purple indicates a difference of <1.

Political science professor Frances Lee explains: “Competition fuels party conflict by raising the political stakes of every policy dispute. When control of national institutions hangs in the balance, no party wants to grant political legitimacy to its opposition by voting for the measures it champions.”

Some theories point to the increase in campaign spending:[10]

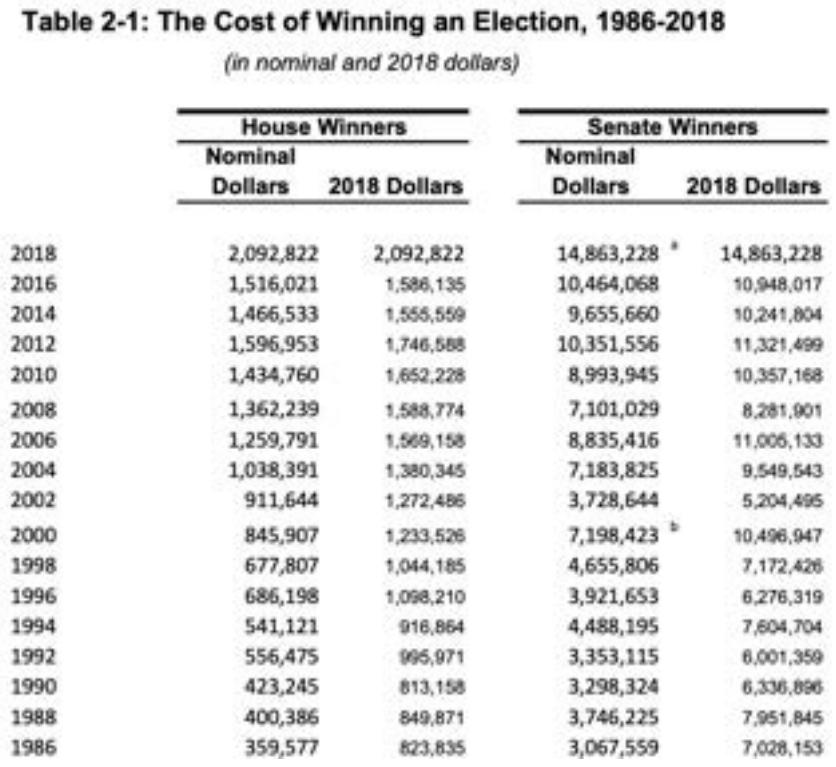


Table 2-1: The Cost of Winning an Election, 1986-2018

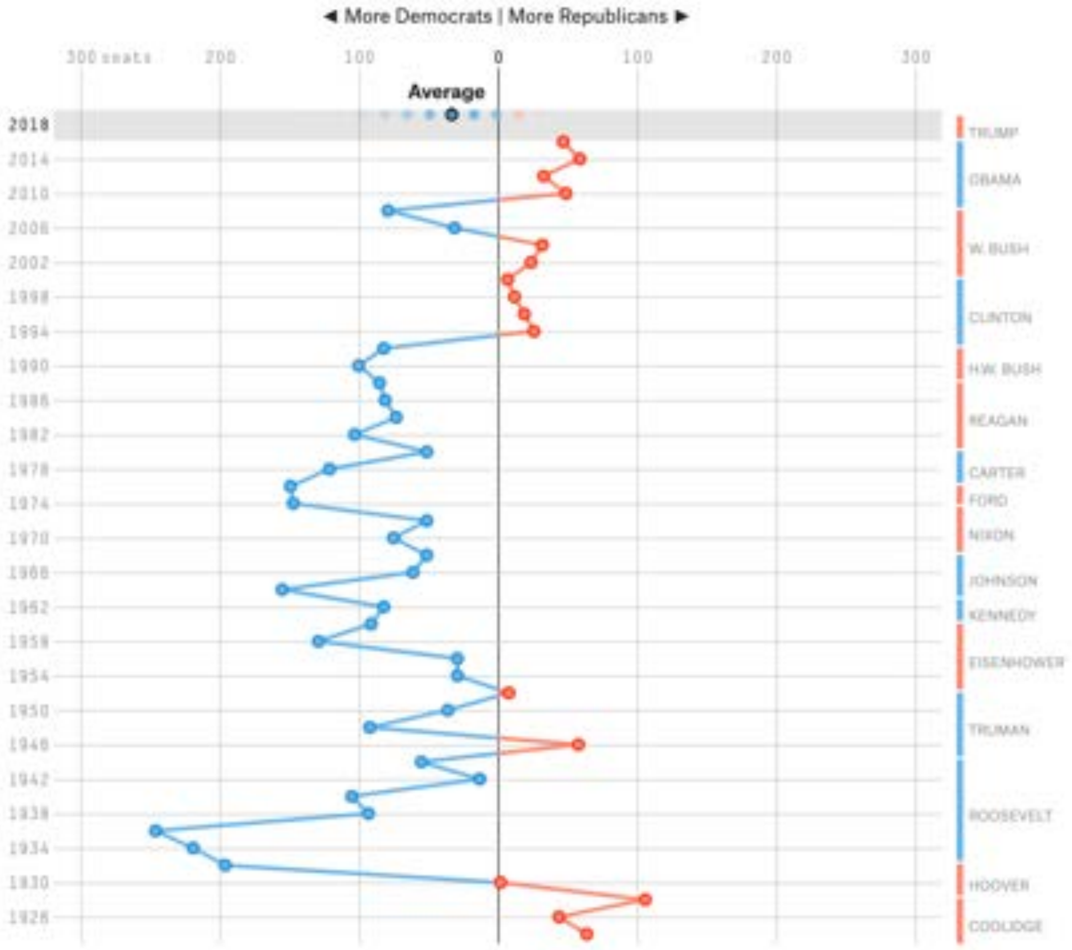
(in nominal and 2018 dollars)

	House Winners		Senate Winners	
	Nominal Dollars	2018 Dollars	Nominal Dollars	2018 Dollars
2018	2,092,822	2,092,822	14,863,228 [a]	14,863,228
2016	1,516,021	1,586,135	10,464,068	10,948,017
2014	1,466,533	1,555,559	9,655,660	10,241,804
2012	1,596,953	1,746,588	10,351,556	11,321,499
2010	1,434,760	1,652,228	8,993,945	10,357,168
2008	1,362,239	1,588,774	7,101,029	8,281,901
2006	1,259,791	1,569,158	8,835,416	11,006,133
2004	1,038,391	1,380,345	7,183,825	9,549,543
2002	911,644	1,272,486	3,728,644	5,204,495
2000	845,907	1,233,526	7,198,423 [b]	10,496,947
1998	677,807	1,044,185	4,655,806	7,172,426
1996	686,198	1,098,210	3,921,653	6,276,319
1994	541,121	916,864	4,488,195	7,604,704
1992	556,475	995,971	3,353,115	6,001,359
1990	423,245	813,158	3,298,324	6,336,896
1988	400,386	849,871	3,746,225	7,951,845
1986	359,577	823,835	3,067,559	7,028,153

More donations means more fear of pissing off donors—which often means more candidates falling in line with their party.

Others point the finger at redistricting—the practice of re-drawing the borders of congressional districts, which can dramatically change the voter balance in an election (usually in favor of the party who controls the state legislatures). That would certainly seem like a possible culprit in House polarization, though it wouldn't explain the trends in the Senate (which aren't subject to district lines).

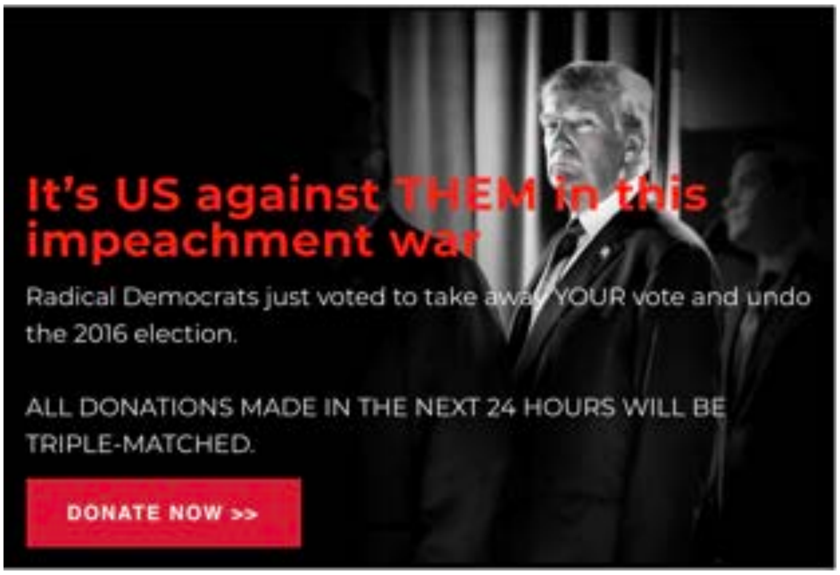
Then there's Newt Gingrich. When Gingrich won his first election in 1978, the Democrats were starting their 25th straight year as the majority in Congress.[11]



During this long tenure, the Democrats didn't always treat the Republicans so well, and Gingrich and other Republicans were frustrated that between the Democrats having more money and more access privileges due to their majority position, and continual assistance from what they saw as left-leaning mainstream media, the Democrat stranglehold on Congress had no seeming end in sight. So Gingrich innovated. He wanted to reframe Congressional elections to be less about the actual people running for Congress and more about a binary tribal war between the Left and the Right. Over the following 16 years, as Gingrich gained more seniority, he emphasized a culture among Republican politicians of distrust and disgust for Democratic leadership and made it taboo to say anything to legitimize them.

In 1994, when the Republicans finally won back Congress, Gingrich, now the Speaker of the House, doubled down on the effort to tribalize. He crunched the traditional five-day legislative schedule into three days. According to Haidt and Abrams, "he changed the legislative calendar so that all business was done Tuesday through Thursday, and he encouraged his incoming freshmen not to move to the District. He did not want them to develop personal friendships with Democrats. He did not want their spouses to serve on the same charitable boards."[12] ⑤ He also helped to do away with the seniority system for committee chairmen, which law professor Cynthia Farina says "many now blame for enhancing extremist voices, punishing defections from the party line, and burying measures with bipartisan support."[13]

Whatever the cause, the shift from a standard partisan tone to a fully tribal Us-vs.-Them tone is now ubiquitous in Washington. In 2012, Chris Christie's entire convention speech used the structure, "**They** believe ____; **We** believe ____." In her 2015 presidential campaign announcement, Hillary Clinton made six "**They** [something bad]" statements in just over a minute. Just a few months ago, Kamala Harris called on voters to not "let the bad guys win." As I write this, a visit to Donald Trump's website is immediately met with this popup:

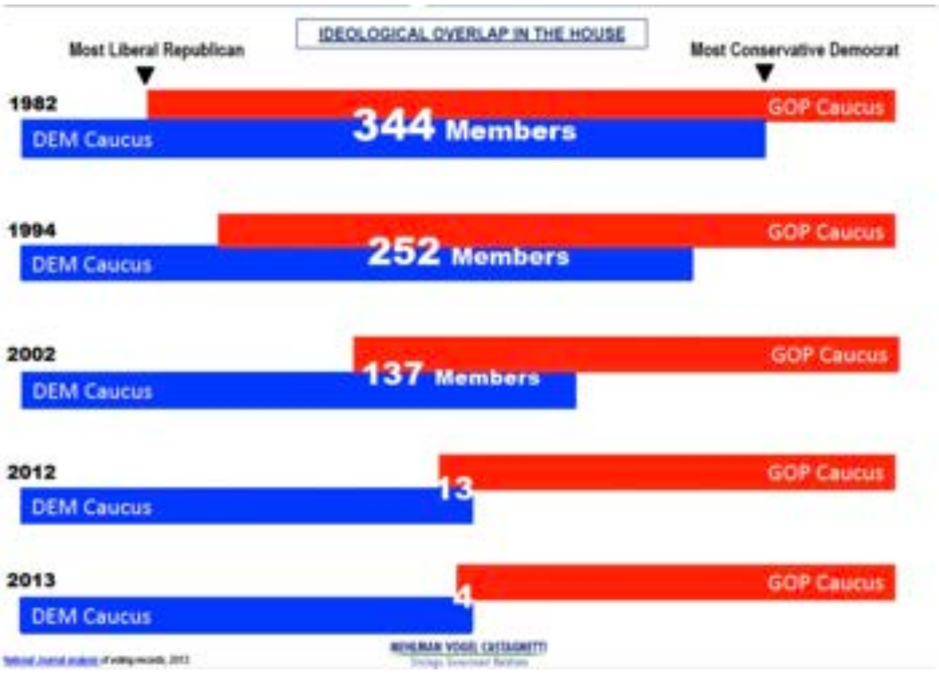


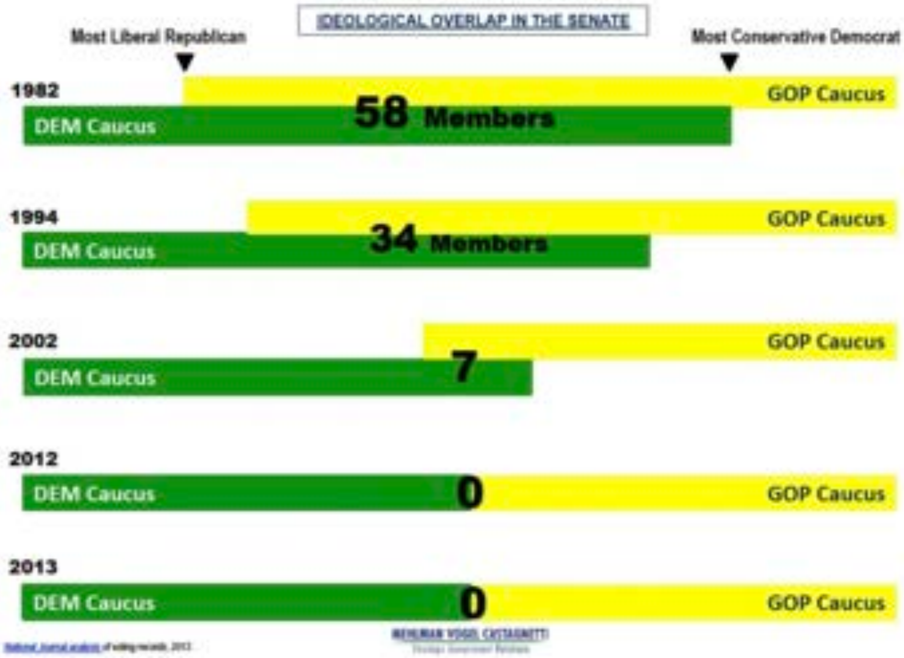
It's US against THEM in this impeachment war

Radical Democrats just voted to take away YOUR vote and undo the 2016 election.

ALL DONATIONS MADE IN THE NEXT 24 HOURS WILL BE TRIPLE-MATCHED.

Voters have become more ideologically pure, and the purity in Washington is even starker. In the decades following World War II, the parties were actually pretty diverse, with lots of overlap. But in recent decades, overlap groups like the conservative "Blue Dog Democrats" and the more progressive "Rockefeller Republicans" have gone extinct. Today, the overlap has entirely vanished:[14]



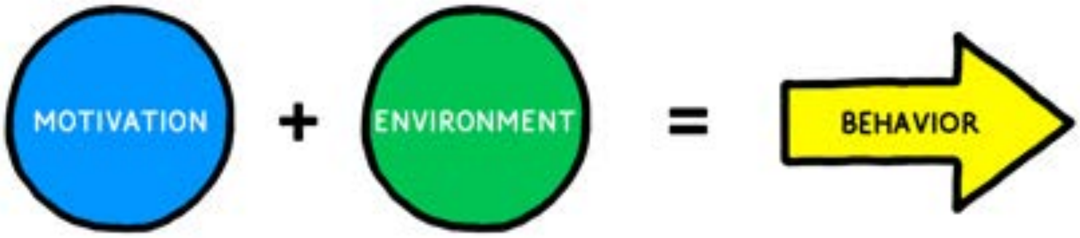


So there's the voter polarization story and the politician polarization story, which in many ways look similar. In both cases, polarization oscillates on a four-year cycle with elections, but each cycle, things are worse than they were in the last one.

And the question is: why?

As we think about that question, let's remember not to jump to causation conclusions when we see a correlation. Washington polarization may be a symptom of voter polarization. Or vice versa. Maybe they're stoking each other in a self-perpetuating loop. They could be independent phenomena, correlated only by coincidence. Or—and I think this is most likely—they could *both* be symptoms of something else.

In Part 1, we talked about how animal behavior works. It's a *dependent* variable.



Humans are complicated animals with complicated motivations, but the basic idea holds up. If a reasonably stable human society starts falling into some kind of downward spiral, it's probably because something about one or both of the independent variables has changed—usually, something about the environment.

I've read a whole bunch of sociological theories about why we in the U.S. have been spiraling down a polarization vortex, and there are lots of interesting ideas, with little consensus. Drawing upon what I see as the most compelling theories, here's my hypothesis:

Due to changes in the environment over recent decades, we've become connected in all the wrong ways —and it's led to a resurgence of the Power Games in the U.S.

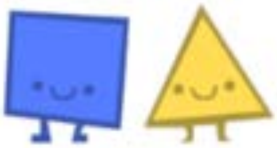
There are two elements of the hypothesis:

1) Geographic Bubbles

Over the past generation, Americans have become more educated, which has made them more mobile. *The Economist* cites a study that found that "45% of young Americans with a college degree moved states within five years of graduating, whereas only 19% of those with only a high-school education did."

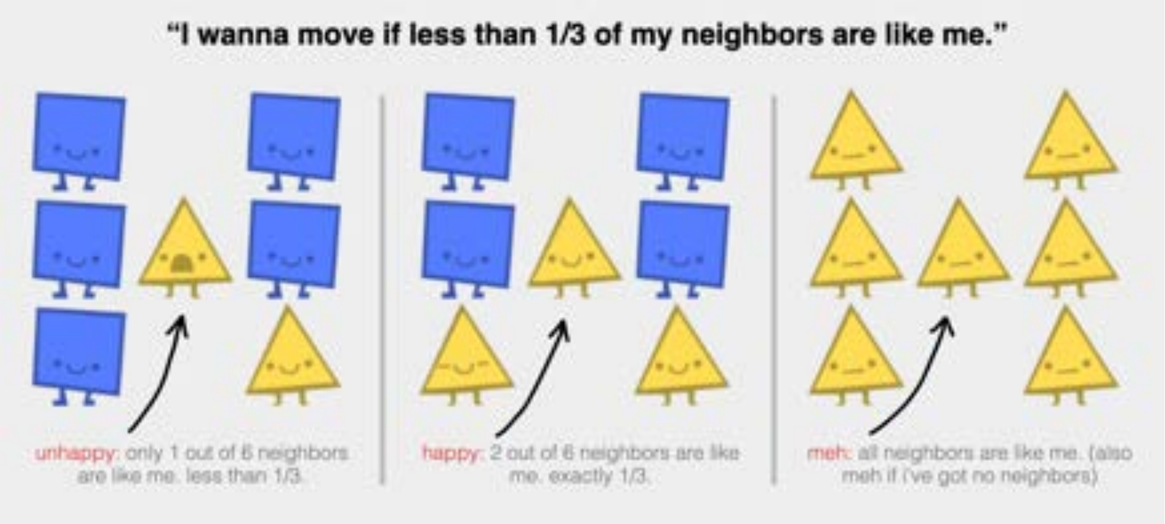
And here's the thing about mobility. If lots of people have the means to choose where they settle down, and those people tend to have even a *slight* preference to live near other people like them, everyone ends up totally segregated. This phenomenon is explained in a 1971 paper called *Dynamic models of segregation*, but it's best explored using a brilliant interactive simulation by Nicky Case and Vi Hart.

The simulation has two kinds of characters, a blue square and a yellow triangle.



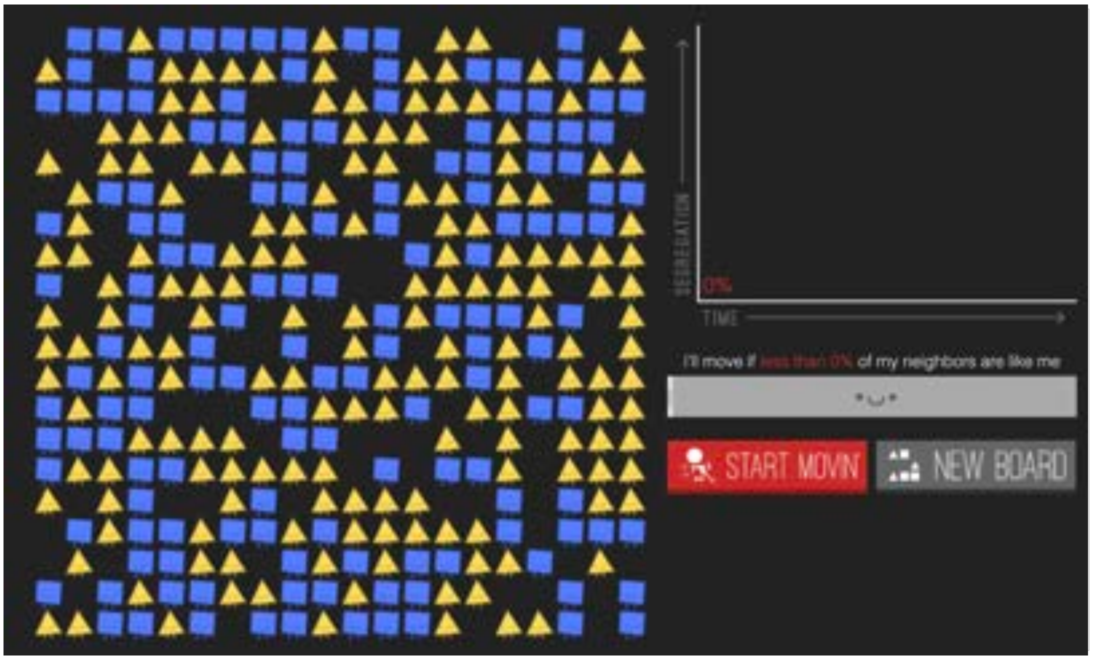
These could represent people of different religions, different races, different socioeconomic backgrounds, or anything else. For our purposes, they'll represent U.S. Democrats and Republicans.

In the simulation, there's one key metric, called "individual bias percentage"— a number that represents the minimum percentage of "sameness" (for us, ideological sameness) each shape finds acceptable among their direct neighbors. So for example, say the shapes like living in a politically diverse neighborhood, but they want at least 33% of their direct neighbors to be politically similar to them. That means they'll only be unhappy enough to move if less than 33% of their neighbors are similar to them politically, and beyond that, they prefer diversity. To illustrate this, imagine these three tiny neighborhoods:


"I wanna move if less than 1/3 of my neighbors are like me."
unhappy: only 1 out of 6 neighbors are like me. less than 1/3.
happy: 2 out of 6 neighbors are like me. exactly 1/3.
meh: all neighbors are like me. (also meh if i've got no neighbors)

Given our 33% condition above, everyone in the middle neighborhood is happy, because they live in a politically diverse neighborhood while also each having at least 1/3 of their direct neighbors share their views. On the right, no one is happy because there's no political diversity, but no one is unhappy enough to move. On the left, there's an unhappy triangle, because their direct neighbors are 5/6 squares and only 1/6 triangles (the other triangle in the left neighborhood is fine because it has only two direct neighbors, and one of them (50%) is also a triangle). Make sense?

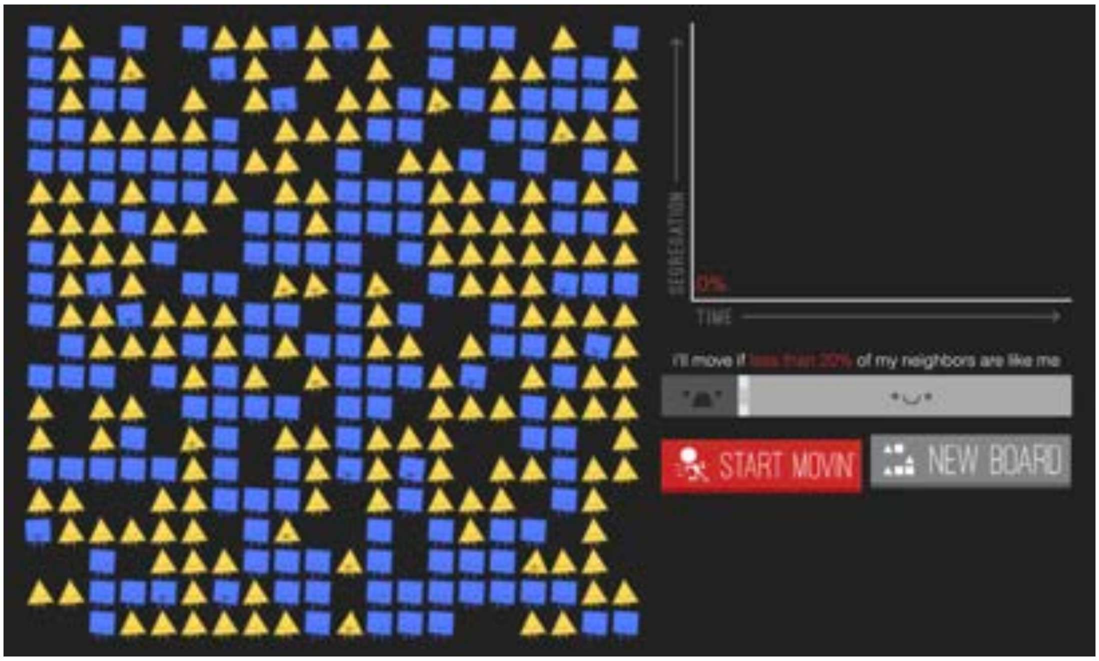
Next, Case and Hart bring out a big, diverse town with an interactive slider next to it.



I'll move if less than 0% of my neighbors are like me

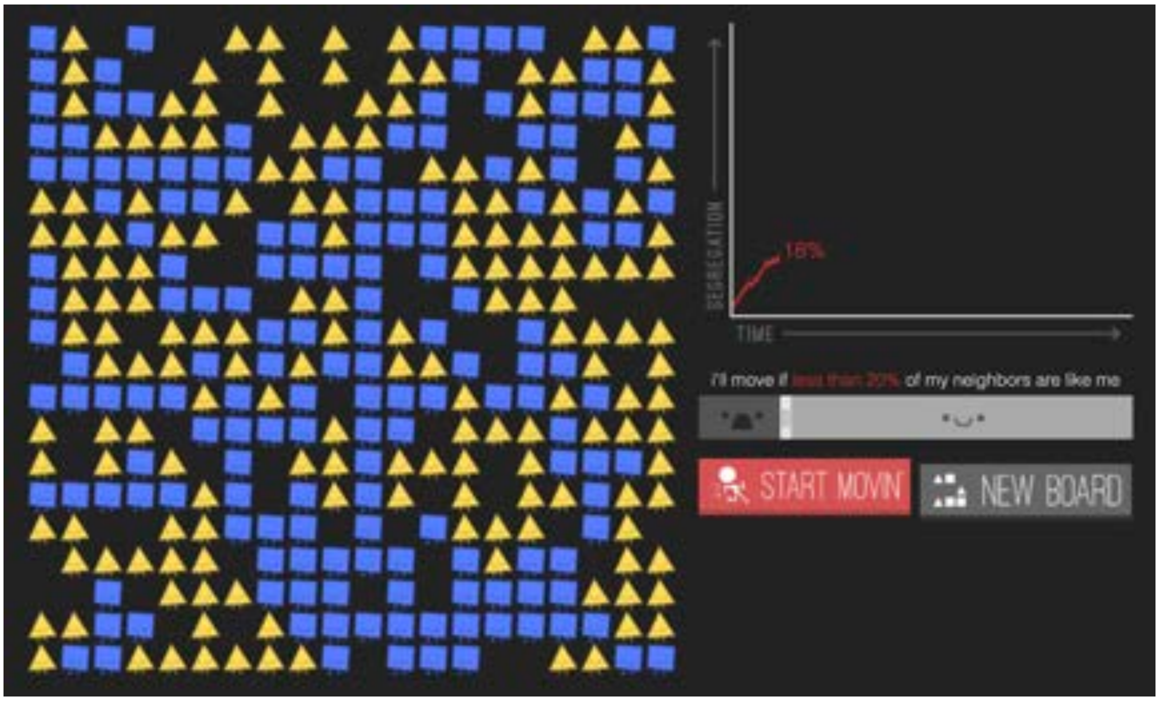
The slider lets you adjust the “individual bias percentage” of the shapes in the town. Above, the slider is at 0%, which means the shapes have no “acceptable minimum” requirement for ideologically similar neighbors—so no one is unhappy with the layout, and no one would feel the need to move.

But when you move the slider up to 20%—meaning every shape now wants to move if less than 1/5 of their direct neighbors are politically like-minded—a few residents become unhappy with their locations and want to move (hard to see here, but the unhappy shapes are frowning).



I'll move if less than 20% of my neighbors are like me

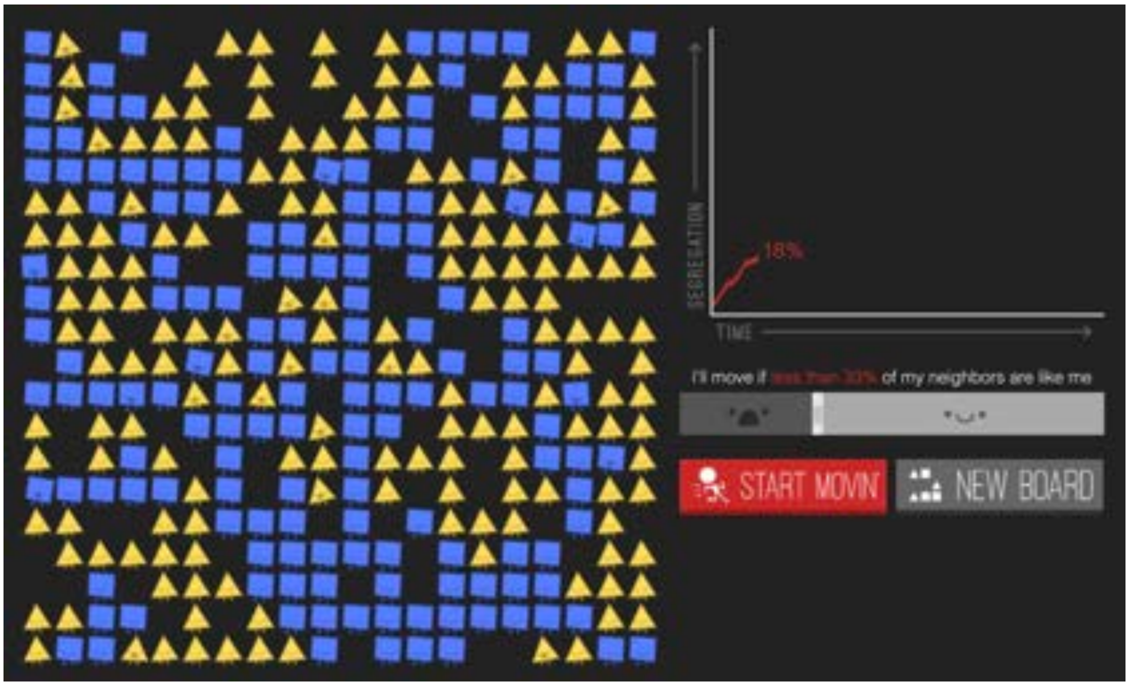
By clicking the “Start Movin’” button, the simulation shifts unhappy characters around randomly until everyone’s happy. Here’s how things end up:


SEGREGATION
18%
TIME
START MOVIN'
NEW BOARD

I'll move if less than 20% of my neighbors are like me

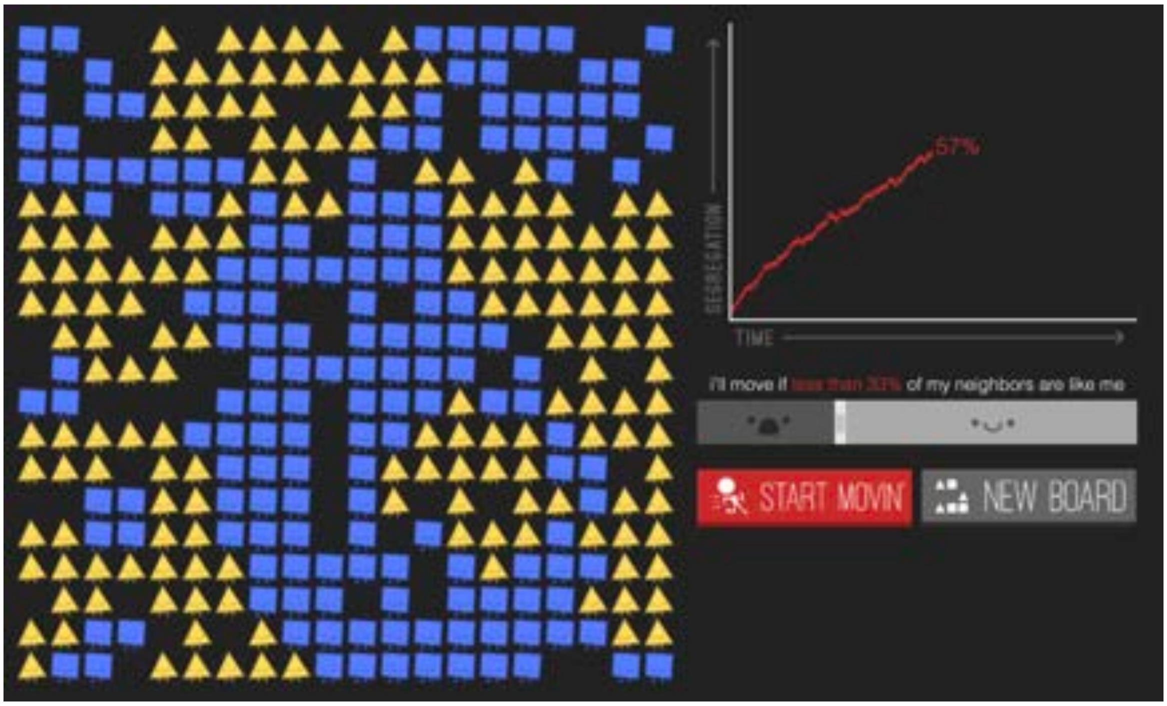
Things have gotten slightly more segregated, but nothing major—according to the simulation, the region has only “18% segregation.”

But what happens when you move the slider up from 20% to 33%? Our 18% segregated town no longer works, as there are now a few new unhappy residents.


SEGREGATION
18%
TIME
START MOVIN'
NEW BOARD

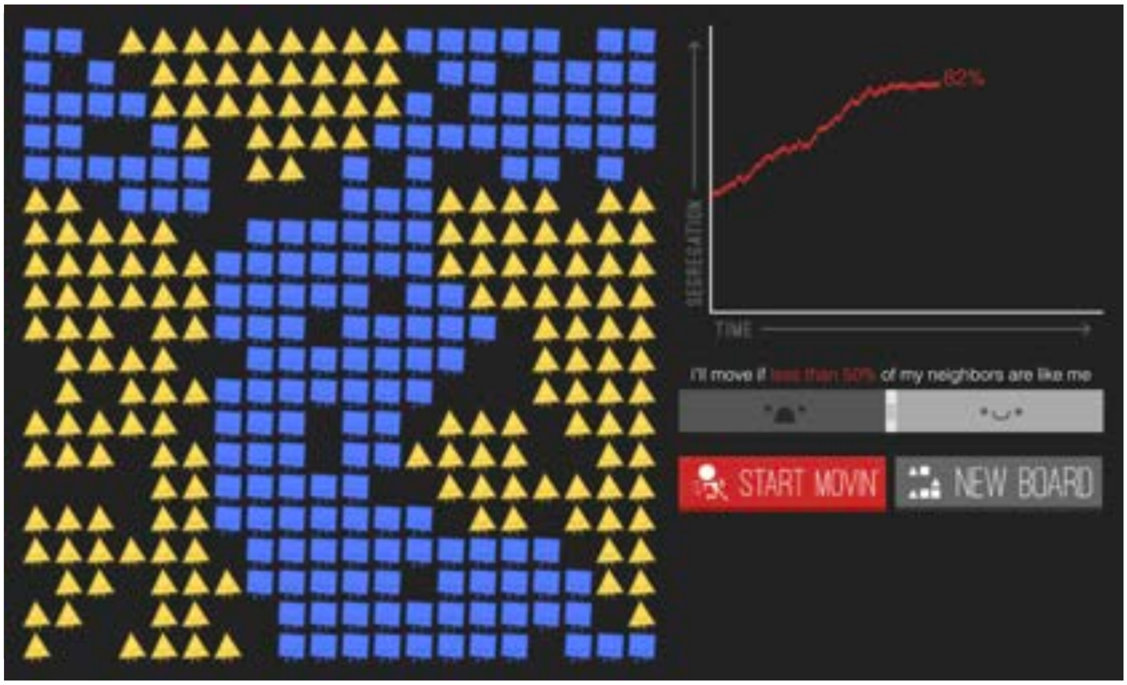
I'll move if less than 33% of my neighbors are like me

Doesn’t seem like a big deal—until we hit the Start Movin’ button, and by the time no one is unhappy, we’ve ended up here:


57%
SEGREGATION
TIME
I'll move if less than 33% of my neighbors are like me
START MOVIN'
NEW BOARD

In order for no one to be unhappy—even when everyone is politically open-minded enough to be fine with 2/3 of their neighbors being politically opposed to them—the town has to become 57% segregated. Suddenly, almost everyone is surrounded by people who agree with them politically.

And how about if we up the percentage just a bit more, to 50%—meaning the shapes are still totally fine with diversity, they just don't want to be in the political *minority* in their neighborhood? We end up with a completely segregated town.


82%
SEGREGATION
TIME
I'll move if less than 50% of my neighbors are like me
START MOVIN'
NEW BOARD

This exposes a stark fact: if easily mobile people like diversity but prefer not to be the *minority* where they live, it leads to complete segregated homogeneity. Or as Case and Hart put it, "small individual bias can lead to large collective bias." The only way areas stay diverse—racially, ethnically, politically—is if people like diversity *more* than they dislike being in the minority.

Back to our story. The simulation suggests that if Baby Boomers were, on average, a few "individual political bias percentage" points higher than their parents, *and* they were a bit more capable of moving and choosing their location, then when the Boomers reached home-buying age, the country would quickly sort itself into politically segregated neighborhoods in politically segregated counties.

Which is exactly what happened.

In his book *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop examines how Americans have shifted geographically in relation to political leaning—and he found that Americans are far less likely to live in politically diverse areas than they used to be. Politically, Americans have formed geographical Echo Chambers. Living in a geographical Echo Chamber means people will find themselves surrounded by agreement at dinner parties, at local churches and parks and businesses, and at school, which is where children make their lifelong friends.

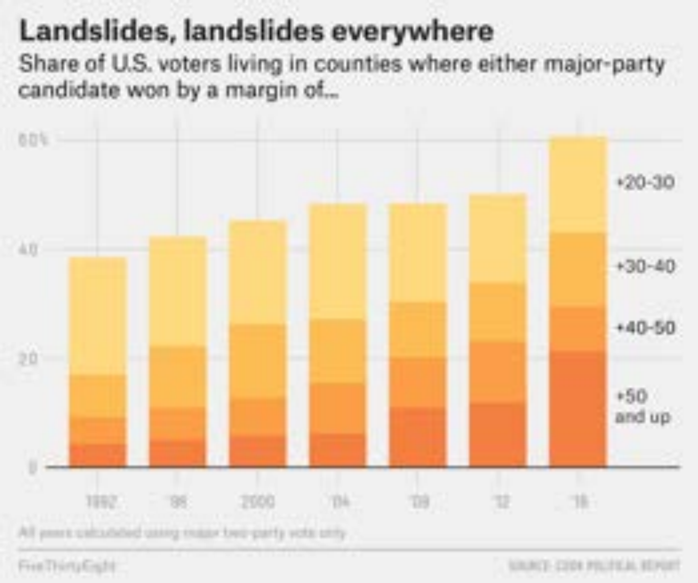
The “Big Sort” shows up in poll numbers. In an election, pollsters define a “landslide county” as one in which the winning candidate beat the losing candidate by 20 percentage points or more—in other words, a very red or very blue county. In the 1976 presidential election, 27% of Americans lived in landslide counties, with the remaining 73% living in more politically balanced counties where the election margin was closer.

By 1992, the percentage of Americans living in a landslide county had moved from 27% to 39%. That number has continued to rise every election since, with the 2016 results showing that *61%* of Americans now live in landslide counties.

FiveThirtyEight explains further, writing about the 2016 presidential election:

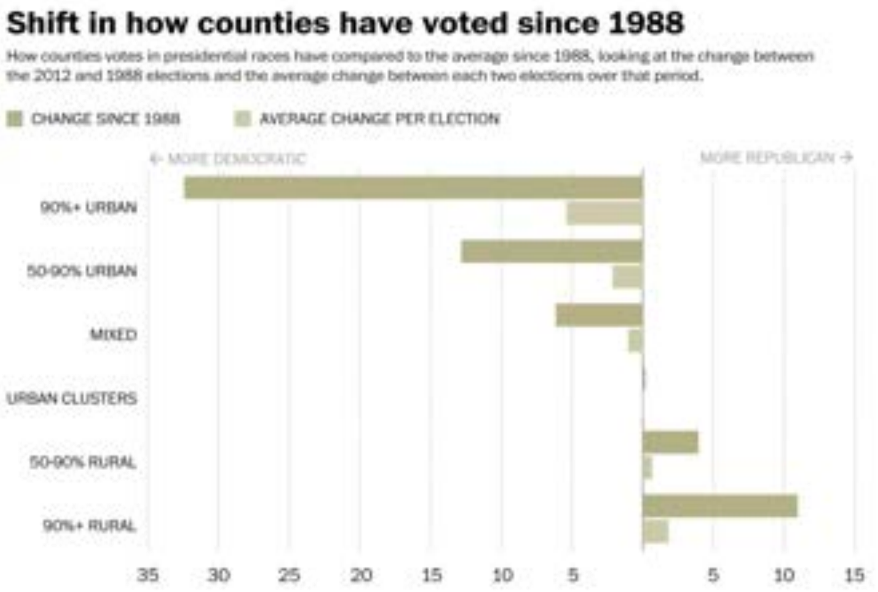
Of the nation’s 3,113 counties (or county equivalents), just 303 were decided by single-digit margins—less than 10 percent. In contrast, 1,096 counties fit that description in 1992, even though that election featured a wider national spread. During the same period, the number of ***extreme landslide counties*** *—those decided by margins exceeding 50 percentage points—exploded from 93 to 1,196, or over a third of the nation’s counties. … The electorate’s move toward single-party geographic enclaves has been particularly pronounced at the extremes. Between 1992 and 2016, the share of voters living in extreme landslide counties quintupled from 4 percent to 21 percent.*

They sum this all up in one graph:



Landslide counties are bad for progress. According to *The Economist*, “Voters in landslide districts tend to elect more extreme members of Congress. Moderates who might otherwise run for office decide not to. Debates turn into shouting matches. Bitterly partisan lawmakers cannot reach the necessary consensus to fix long-term problems such as the tottering pensions and health-care systems.”

Political writer Philip Bump illustrates the same story from a different angle, showing how the Big Sort reveals itself in an increasing urban-rural political divide.



In her book *Hearing the Other Side*, Diana Mutz surveyed people from 12 countries and found that Americans “engage in political discussions slightly more than average” but are the *least* likely of all the countries “to be exposed to political beliefs and arguments that differ from their own.”

When people are surrounded by ideologically homogenous groups, their views become more extreme. In an interesting study, scientists studied the effects of a kind of “deliberation day,” when two groups of citizens from politically homogenous areas got together to discuss hot political issues:

Groups from Boulder, a predominantly liberal city, met and discussed global warming, affirmative action, and civil unions for same-sex couples; groups from Colorado Springs, a predominately conservative city, met to discuss the same issues. ***The major effect of deliberation was to make group members more extreme than they were when they started to talk. Liberals became more liberal on all three issues; conservatives became more conservative.*** *As a result, the division between the citizens of Boulder and the citizens of Colorado Springs were significantly increased as a result of intragroup deliberation.* ***Deliberation also increased consensus, and dampened diversity, within the groups.***

Writing about the same phenomenon, *The Economist* reminds us that “even clever, fair-minded people are not immune,” reporting on a study that found that “Republican-appointed judges vote more conservatively when sitting on a panel with other Republicans than when sitting with Democrats. Democratic judges become more liberal when on the bench with fellow Democrats.”

As worrisome as this sounds, geographic bubbles are only the tip of the worrisome iceberg here.

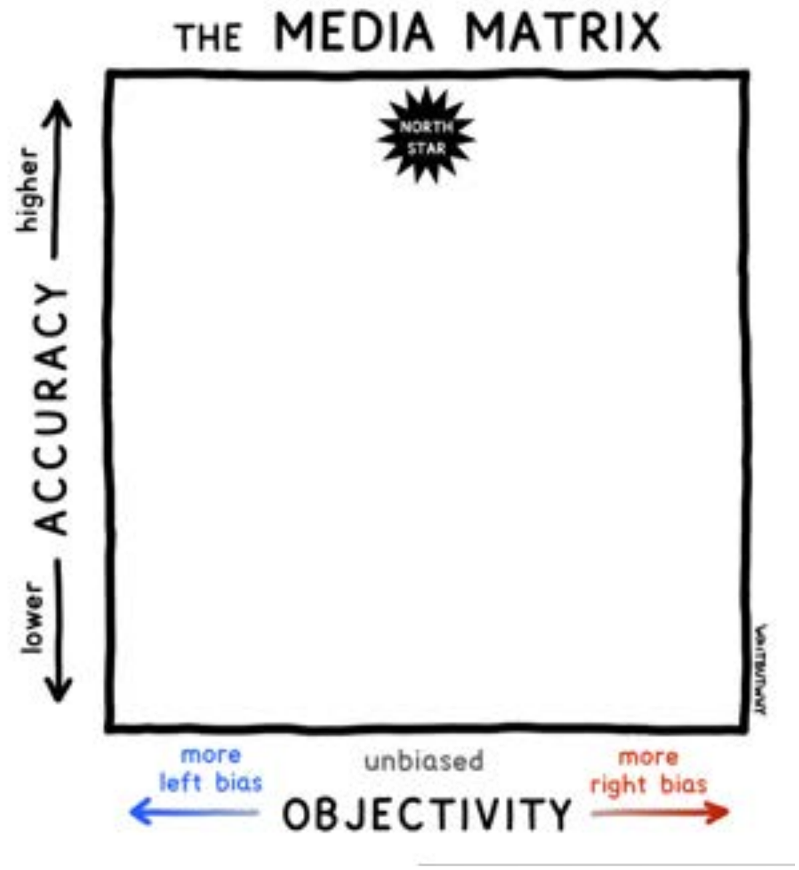
2) Information Bubbles

The story of politics is closely intertwined with the story of media, and several paradigm shifts in our information ecosystem have a lot to do with what’s happening politically.

As is the theme with this series, we’ll be better able to understand these transformations, and their consequences, if we can look at them through a useful lens. Here’s one that we can use to assess news-presenting media of any kind: the Media Matrix.

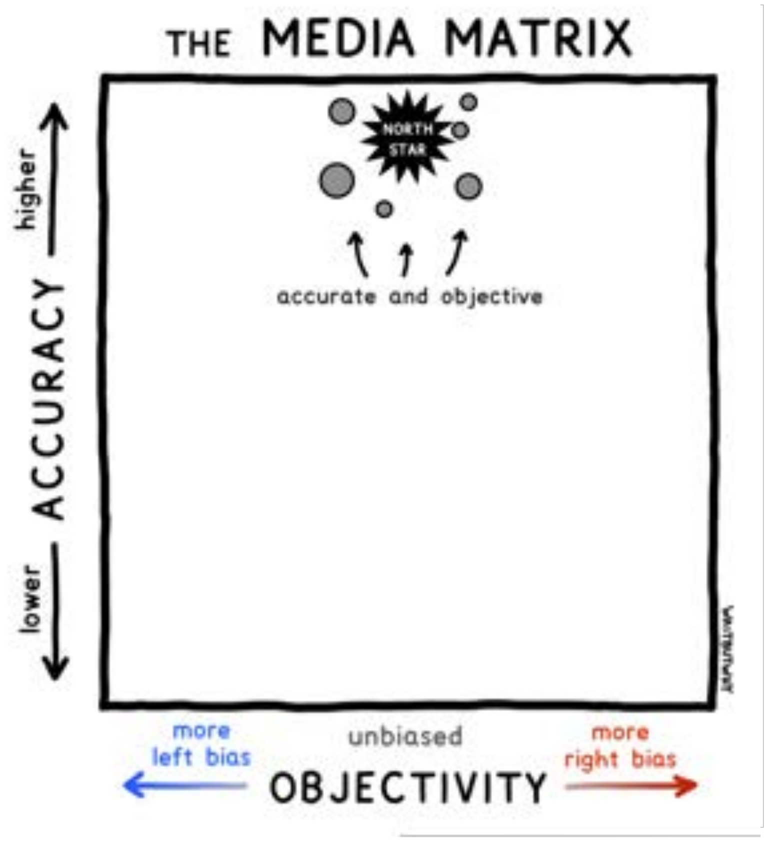
The Media Matrix

The Media Matrix looks like this:


THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
ACCURACY
higher
lower
OBJECTIVITY
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
WAITBUTWHY

Every media brand (or media personality) can be plotted somewhere in the matrix. To add a third metric, we can plot them as circles, where the size of the circle represents the size of their audience.

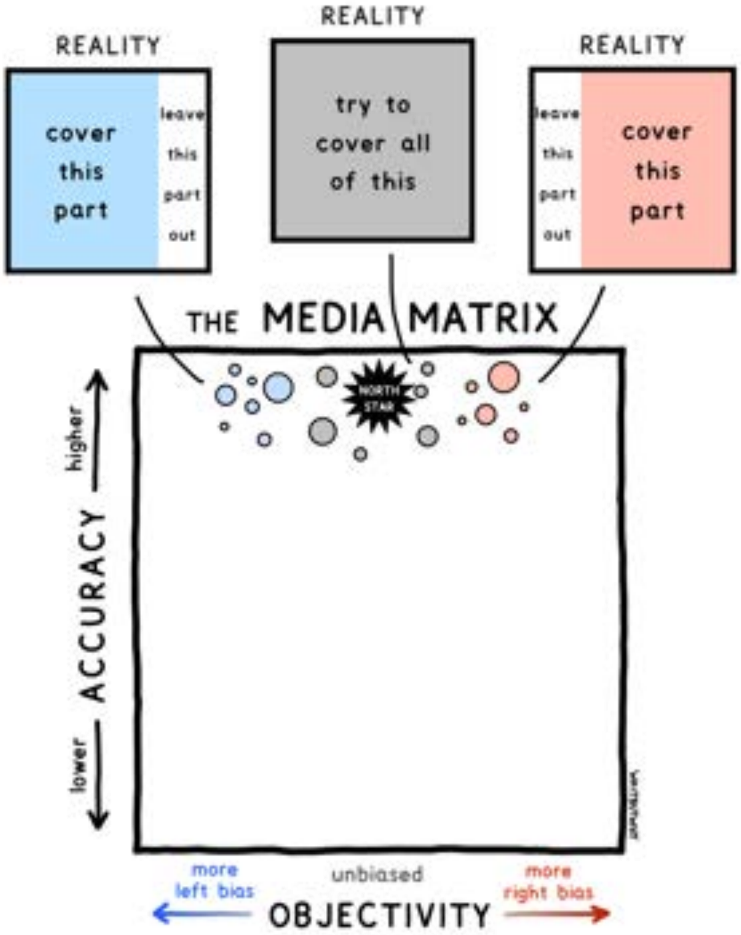
At the top of the Media Matrix, in the middle, is media's North Star. Here you have media brands that are rigorous about both accuracy and objectivity, trying their best to present the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. These voices are like the media version of the Scientist on the top rung of our Thinking Ladder.


THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
accurate and objective
ACCURACY
higher
lower
OBJECTIVITY
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
WAITBUTWHY

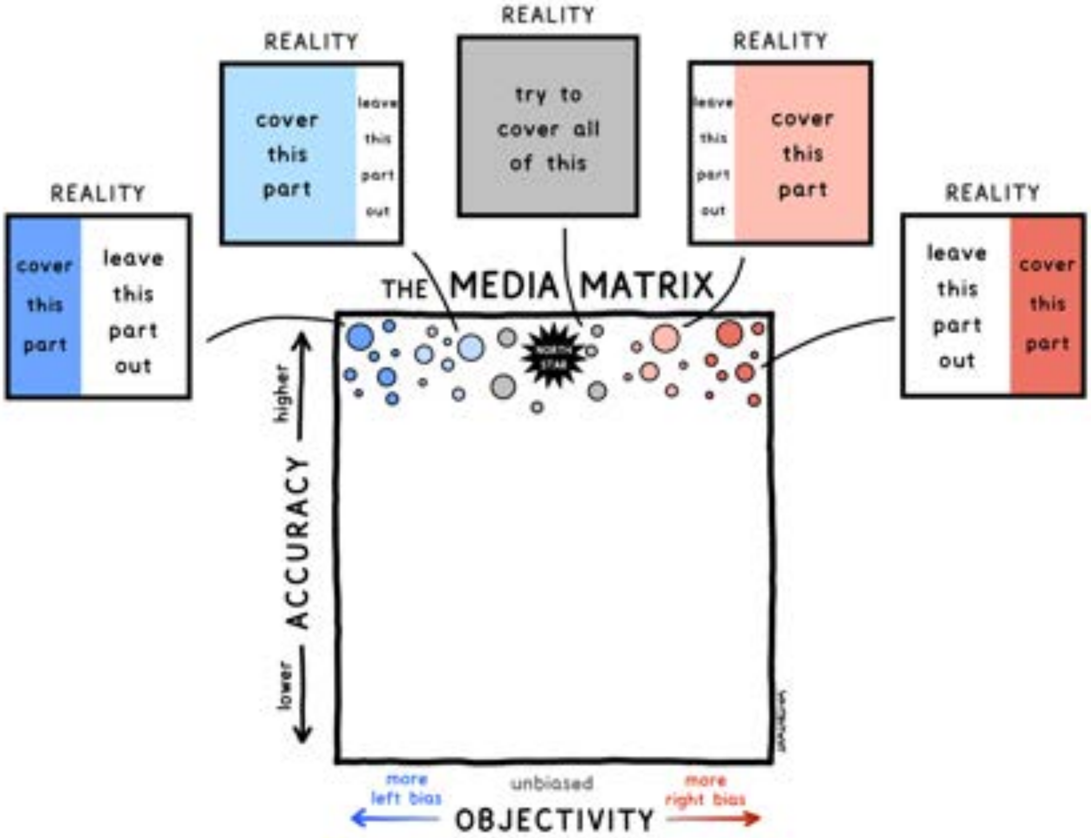
Now let's say this box represents reality:

Media near the North Star simply do their best to figure out what's in that box and then convey it to their audiences.

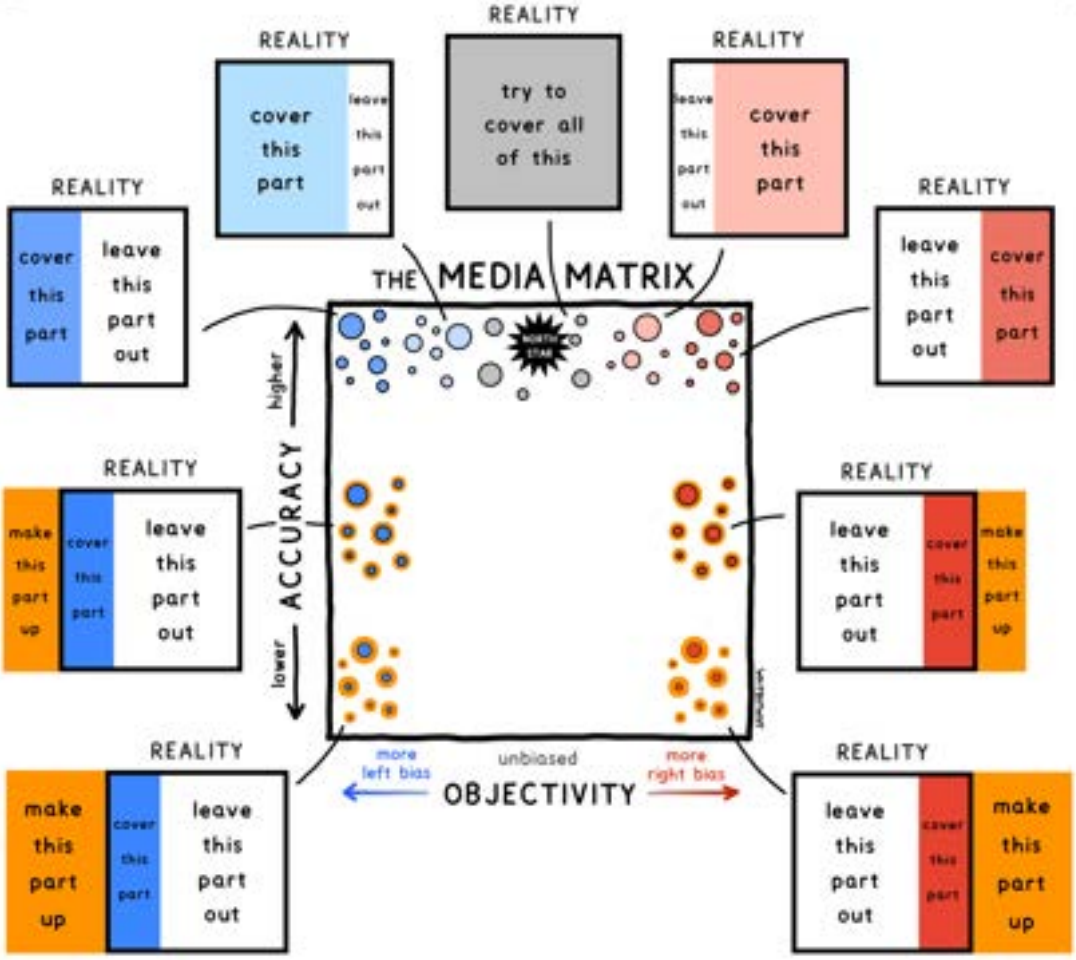
But as you move outwards a bit horizontally, bias begins to creep in. Brands here start to have an agenda beyond pure truth. They'll tell most of the story, but they may omit certain especially-unhelpful-to-their-cause stories.


REALITY
cover this part
leave this part out
REALITY
try to cover all of this
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY
waitbutwhy

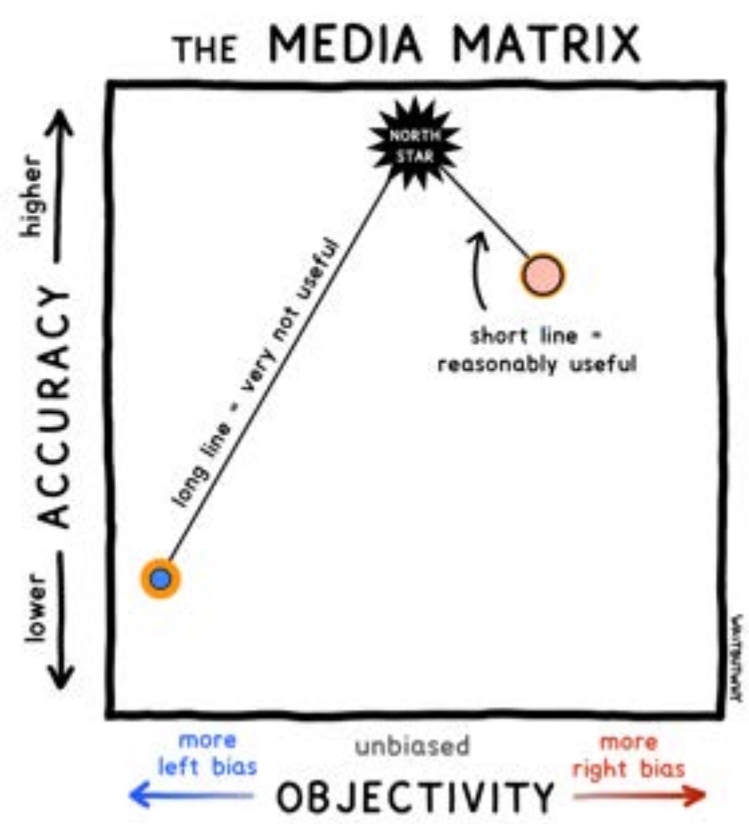
All the way out in the upper corners, you have brands with a serious agenda—careful about accuracy but not at all about objectivity. Everything they report is carefully cherry-picked.


REALITY
cover this part
leave this part out
REALITY
cover this part
leave this part out
REALITY
try to cover all of this
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY

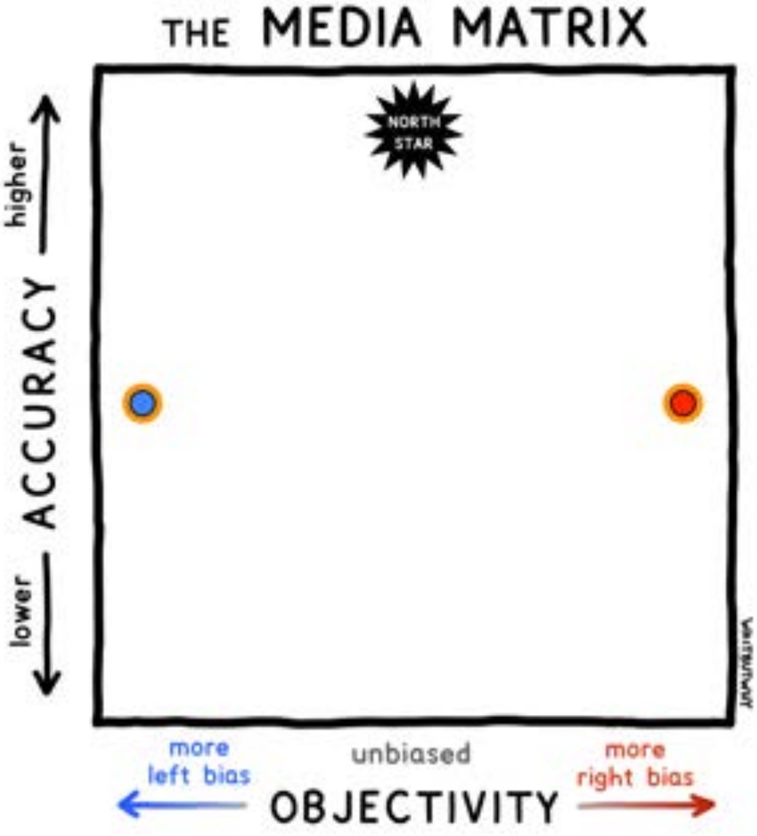
As you move down in the Media Matrix, accuracy diminishes as a core value in favor of some other value more sacred to the brand—that value might be profit, entertainment, a political agenda, or something else. The goal of a news brand down here is to be a steadfast ally to their partisan audience and stay current with the latest fads and talking points in Political Disney World, even if that means twisting stories, pulling quotes out of context, treating rumors as facts, or any other form of lying.


REALITY
cover this part
leave this part out
REALITY
cover this part
leave this part out
REALITY
try to cover all of this
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
REALITY
make this part up
cover this part
leave this part out
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
make this part up
REALITY
make this part up
cover this part
leave this part out
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
make this part up
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY

To me, the distance between a brand's location in the matrix and the North Star is a pretty good measure of its usefulness in the pursuit of truth. It's inversely correlated—the longer the line, the less useful the brand is.

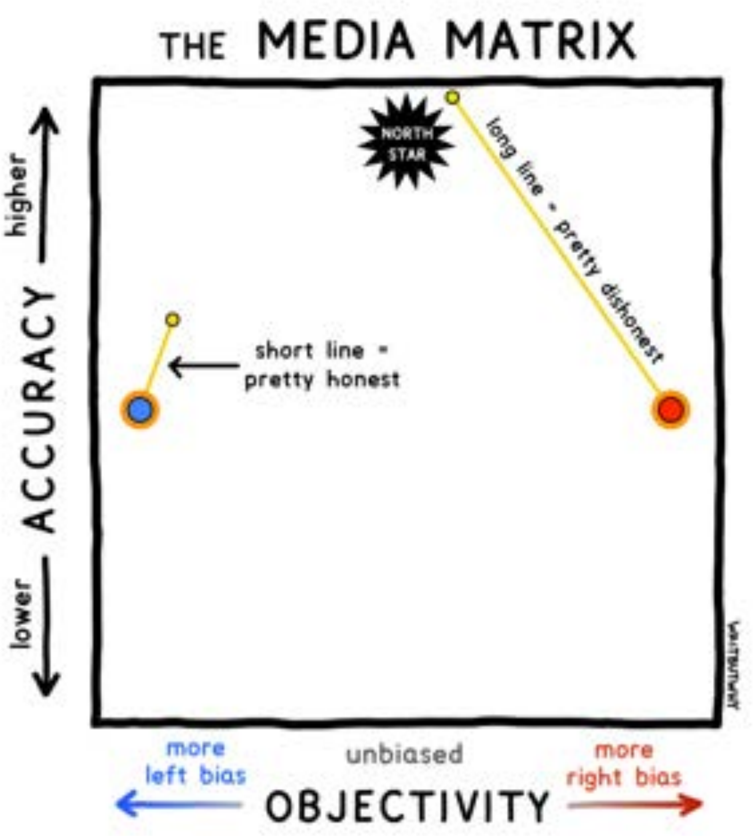

THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
long line = very not useful
short line = reasonably useful
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY
waitbutwhy

But there's another important metric here. So far, we've talked about where media brands are in the matrix. But each media brand really needs *two* circles—one for where they are and another—a yellow circle—for where they *claim* to be. The length of the yellow line connecting the two circles represents the brand's level of *dishonesty*. So imagine two news shows are here:


THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY
waitbutwhy

Now imagine that the host of Show A openly admits to their audience that they're Democrats and make jokes about their own bias, their habit of pulling quotes out of context, etc. On the other hand, say

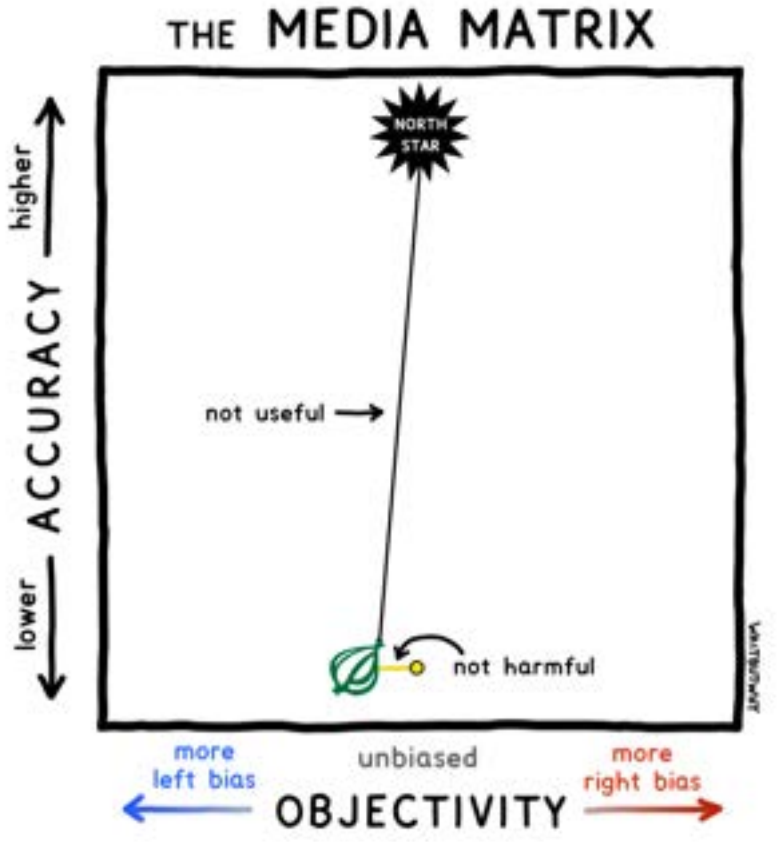
Show B characterizes itself as serious and objective. Adding in the yellow circles, things would look like this:


THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
long line = pretty dishonest
short line = pretty honest
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY
waitbutwhy

The black and yellow lines allow us to use the Media Matrix to grade news-presenting media voices of any kind—newspapers, TV networks, TV shows, podcasts, blogs, or individual columnists, anchors, podcasters, or bloggers—on two key criteria: usefulness and harm. In other words, positive and negative value, as it relates to what news is supposed to do: inform people of the truth.

The shorter the black line, the more positive value a brand is providing. The *longer* the yellow line, the higher the brand's negative value—the more harm it's doing.

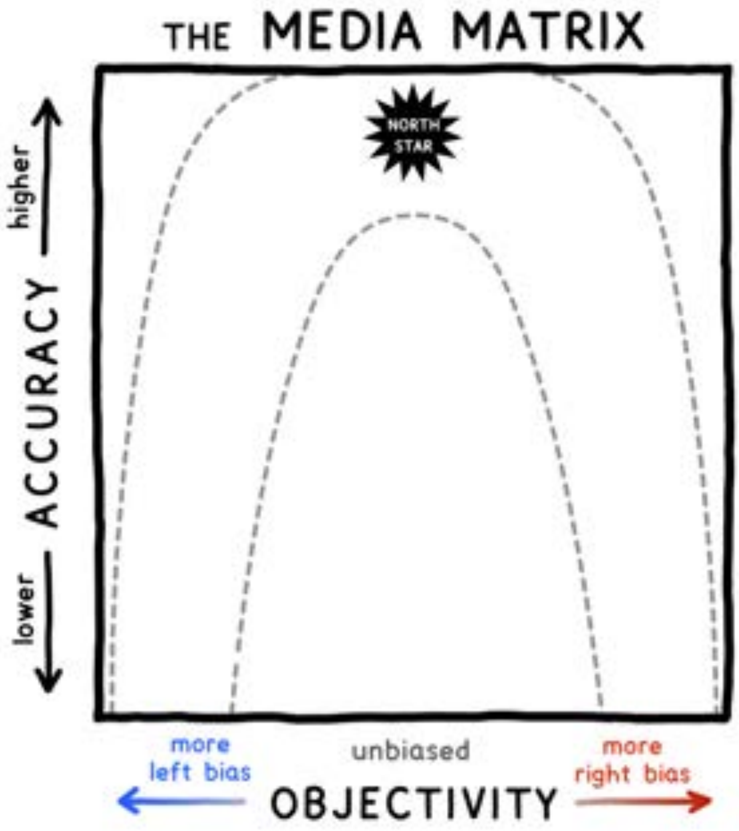
Let's use *The Onion* as an example. *The Onion* offers lots of entertainment value, but it's useless when it comes to informing people of the truth. *The Onion* is also very *openly* a satire brand. While it doesn't do much to help its audience become more informed of reality, it doesn't install a false sense of reality in them either, so it does ~~no~~ little harm.


THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
not useful
not harmful
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY
WAITBUTWHY

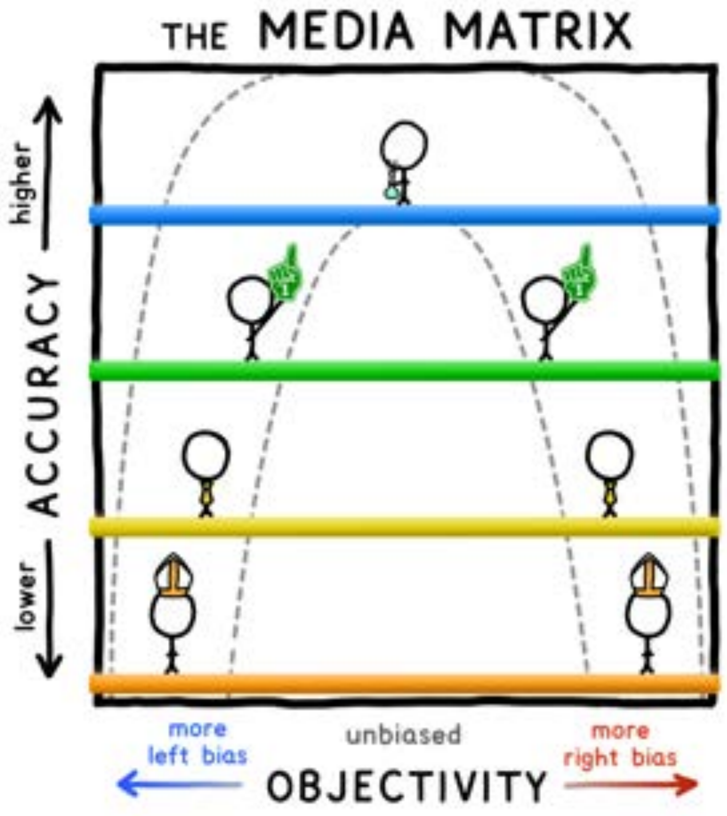
I use *The Onion* as a reminder that what harms society is not a brand's Media Matrix location as much as its *dishonesty* about that location. News brands are rarely like *The Onion*—they typically claim to be squarely on the North Star. So if and when they ultimately present with bias and inaccuracy, it misleads their audience, filling them with real conviction without filling them with real knowledge.

People will always disagree on which media brands are which level of biased/accurate, but at least the matrix can help us understand each other's viewpoints, and the gaps between them, a bit more concretely.

I can offer some of my own speculation. Looking broadly at the matrix, I'd guess that if you could take every presenter of news in the U.S. with a decent-sized audience and plot their actual location on the Media Matrix, you'd end up with many of them falling somewhere within an arch-shaped region—because bias and inaccuracy are probably often correlated.


THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY

I'd bet most of them claim to be entirely objective and accurate, leaving the North Star covered in yellow circles. I'd also bet that of the brands inside this arch, the average audience member lines up pretty well with our Thinking Ladder.

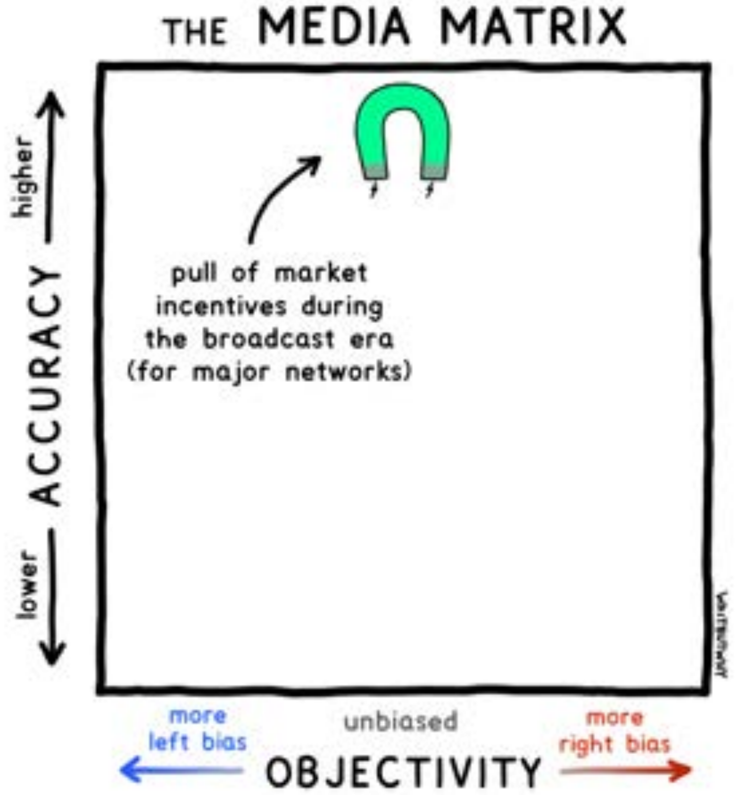

THE MEDIA MATRIX
higher
ACCURACY
lower
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY

In any case, with this lens in mind, let's look at two major recent media transformations:

Media Transformation #1: Broadcasting to Narrowcasting

In the 1980s, most Americans got their news from the Rather/Jennings/Brokaw trio on CBS, ABC, and NBC, and before them, from nationwide titans like Walter Cronkite. In those days, networks competed with each other for who could capture the largest share of American viewers. They were cautious to avoid seeming too politically biased and they knew that reporting a story incorrectly could lead to damaged credibility and a loss of viewers. So they had to be at least in the vicinity of the North Star.

Some might argue that the people who ran these networks (along with those who ran the major newspapers at the time) were reasonably objective and accurate because those were the sacred values of those organizations. Those more cynical might argue that the mission was just to maximize profit, and that they presented news with reasonable objectivity and accuracy simply because they would have been penalized with a loss of viewers for not doing so. It's hard to know for sure, because the media market was configured at the time such that the market incentives drove selfish media brands toward the North Star.



In recent decades, new technology has caused dramatic changes to the traditional media environment.

First, there was **the birth of cable television** around 1980, and with it, the advent of cable news. CNN (which literally stands for Cable News Network) launched in 1980. Cable channels, burdened with fewer regulations and hazier expectations than mainstream networks, could be more experimental with the way they covered the news.

Then there was **the end of the Fairness Doctrine.** In 1949, the FCC (the U.S. Federal Communications Commission) enacted the Fairness Doctrine, which required anyone who held a broadcast license to present controversial issues of public importance in what they called an honest, equitable, and balanced manner. In 1987, in the face of arguments that the Fairness Doctrine was in direct conflict with the First Amendment's freedom of the press clause, it was revoked.

Not coincidentally, the demise of the Fairness Doctrine was soon followed by a sharp rise in blatantly politically biased media. Conservative talk radio exploded onto the scene in the late 1980s, most notably with *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, which debuted in 1988 and made Limbaugh the country's most syndicated radio host by 1991. In 1996, *Fox News* and *MSNBC* were born.

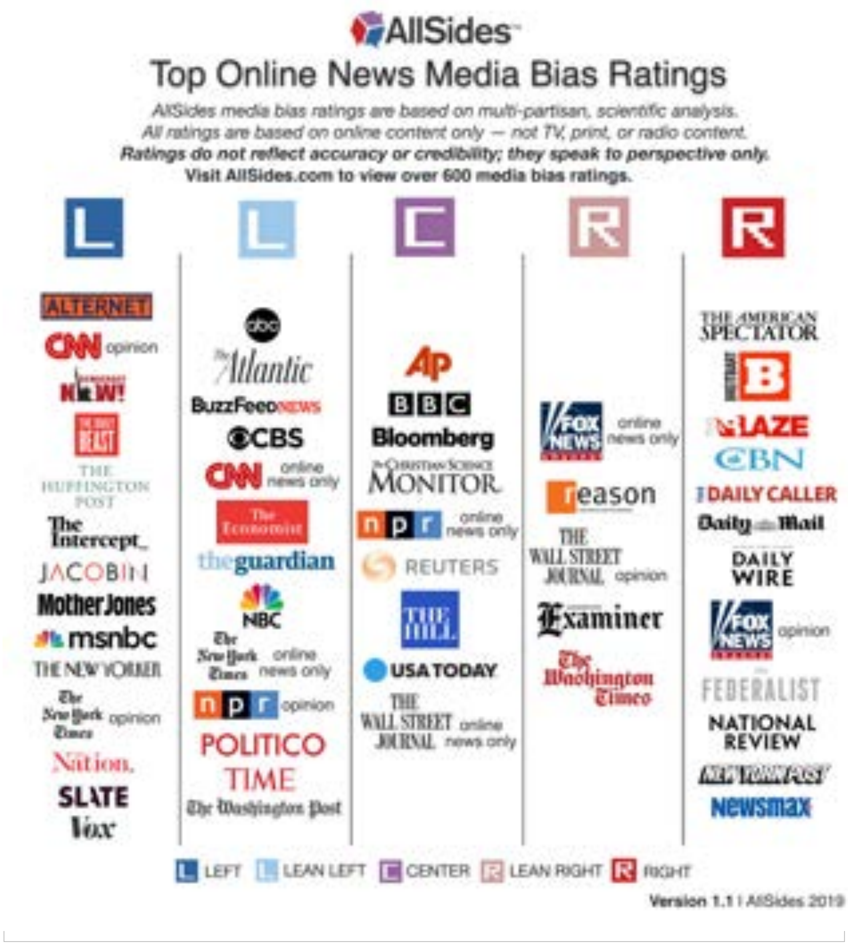
When I was in college, I went to see Ted Koppel (the anchor of ABC's late-night news show *Nightline*) speak. I remember the host commenting that Koppel was famously secretive about his own political leanings. This was standard for a prominent anchor in the past, but by the end of the 1990s, a huge portion of Americans were getting their news from people whose political leaning was supremely out on the table.

Then the internet sprung into our lives, and with it, sites like *The Drudge Report* (1995), *Slate* (1996), *The Huffington Post* (2005), and *Breitbart* (2007), along with a trillion political blogs. The internet takes narrowcasting up into a new gear—full-fledged tribal media.

Meanwhile, *Fox News* and conservative radio would continue to grow in size and influence, which was countered with a new genre of news TV on the Left—political talk shows. *The Daily Show* became a multi-decade sensation by serving as—depending on who you ask—either the voice of reason and sanity in the face of growing right-wing madness, or a show where elitist progressives would cackle as Jon Stewart relentlessly mocked their political outgroup. After Jon Stewart left, *The Daily Show* spawned, giving birth to a slew of similar "look at how awful the Right is" talk shows on even bigger stages. ⑥

Now, of course, this discussion will ruffle all kinds of feathers. People loyal to the Left will note that Fox News and conservative talk radio—which serve as the primary news outlets for a vast portion of the nation's conservatives—are significantly more biased than their left-leaning counterparts. People loyal to the Right will argue back that what progressives think of as objective, mainstream news brands—both currently and in previous decades—are all actually quite left-leaning and the reason a brand like Fox News has to exist in the first place.

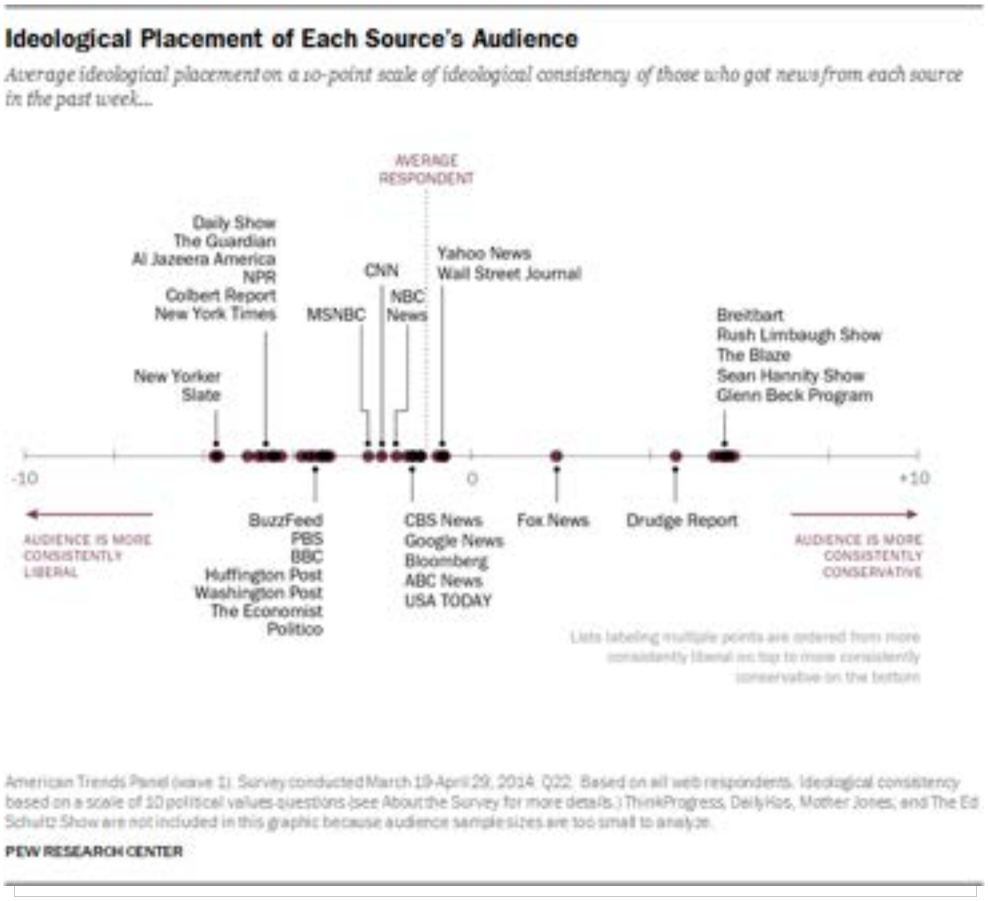
There are all kinds of charts online taking a crack at displaying major news brands along a political bias axis. The problem is, the people who create those charts might be biased themselves, which we know from Chapter 7 will skew their judgment (if they're even trying to be accurate). The closest I could find to something that seemed intent on using an objective methodology to lay things out is this chart, from a site called AllSides (vertical position is meaningless):



The difficult thing about topics where bias is both rampant and hard to quantify is that it's hard to feel confident in anything you read. When I ran this chart by a mix of friends, a highly conservative friend (we'll call him Bill LeMean) responded with 😒. When I asked him for clarification, Bill went on a tirade about how absurd it is to put brands like the AP and Reuters in the center and not further left, finishing with some angry thing about "The Precious," which is his term for how he thinks I think of Obama. So who knows. Bill LeMean certainly has his own biases—but I also haven't read enough AP or Reuters to judge whether he's making a good point here or not. ⑦

Part of the reason it's so hard to figure out media bias levels is that it's one of the areas where we're all craziest. There's a phenomenon called the "hostile media effect," which says that people on both sides tend to see the media as biased against their camp, even when they're looking at the exact same coverage.

But there are some interesting stats out there that can offer clues. Like this chart, from Pew:



Ideological Placement of Each Source's Audience

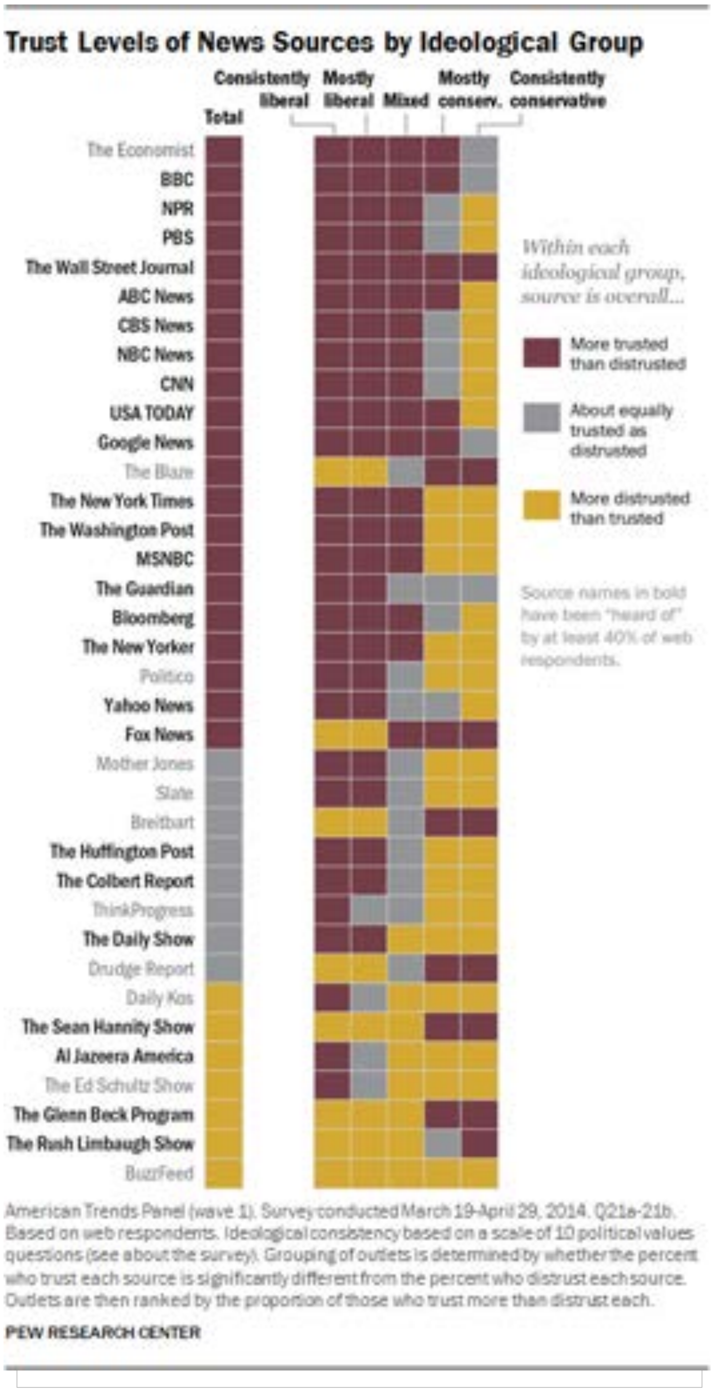
Average ideological placement on a 10-point scale of ideological consistency of those who got news from each source in the past week...

Lists labeling multiple points are ordered from more consistently liberal on top to more consistently conservative on the bottom

American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q22. Based on all web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see About the Survey for more details.) ThinkProgress, DailyKos, Mother Jones, and The Ed Schultz Show are not included in this graphic because audience sample sizes are too small to analyze.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Or this one:

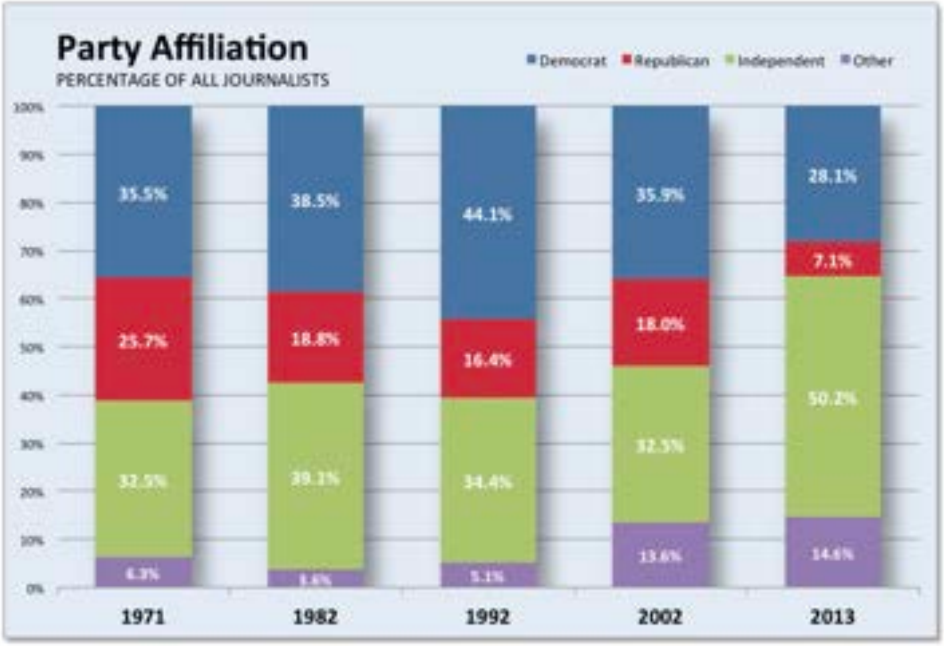

Trust Levels of News Sources by Ideological Group

American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q21a-21b. Based on web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see about the survey). Grouping of outlets is determined by whether the percent who trust each source is significantly different from the percent who distrust each source. Outlets are then ranked by the proportion of those who trust more than distrust each.

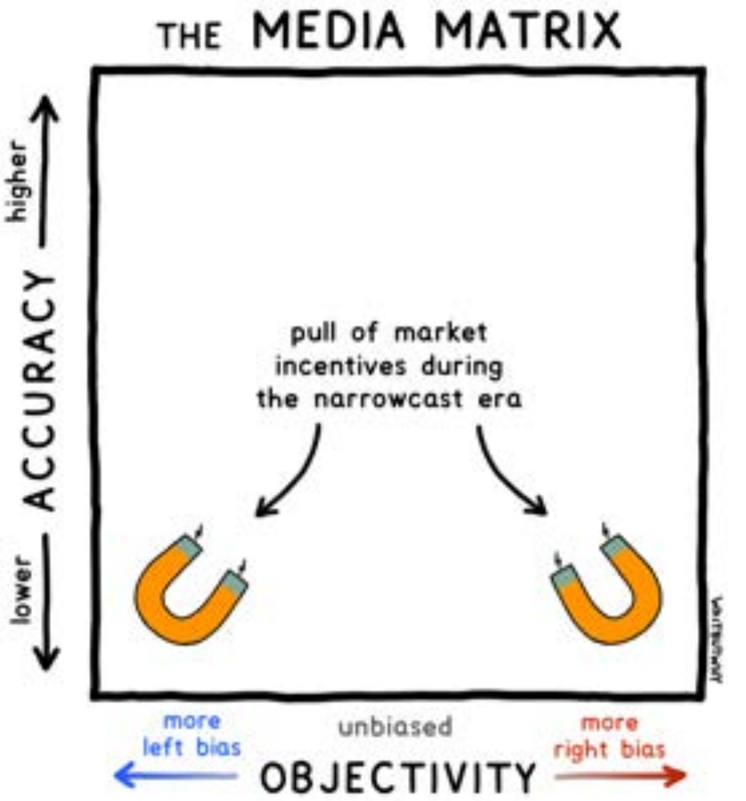
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

These don’t tell us about the bias levels of media brands, but they do tell us how the brands are viewed by the public. Looking at these charts, I can speculate how a vicious cycle could take place. Once the conservative media brands launch, many conservatives frustrated with the mainstream media would defect to them. Without those conservatives, the mainstream media has an audience that’s now overall more left-leaning than it used to be. To cater to their audience, they’ll probably start leaning a bit more left themselves—which causes more moderate conservatives to defect to the right-leaning brands. Meanwhile, with an audience made up almost entirely of conservatives, right-leaning media can move further right with little pushback, knowing that even their more moderate viewers will stick with them over the left-leaning options.

We can also look at the people who work at the media brands. One trend that gives credence to the notion that mainstream media is moving further left is the increasing nonexistence of openly Republican journalists.[15]

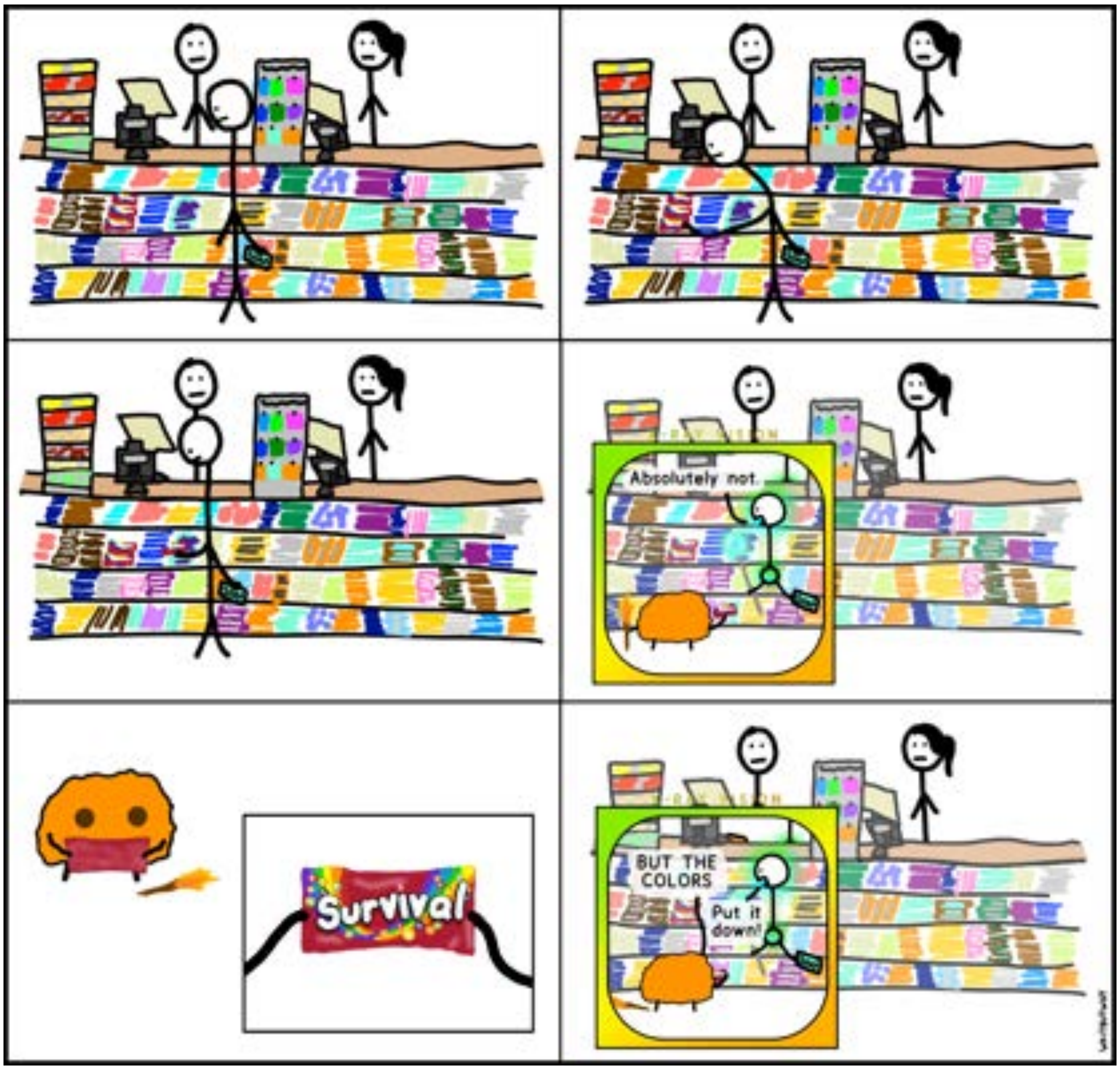


Fortunately, we don't need to have all the answers here. What's important for our purposes is the bigger trend in play: broadcasting has given way to narrowcasting. And the narrowcasting market works differently than the broadcasting market. With more politically homogenous audiences, the market demand for truth goes down a little bit in favor of an increased demand for viewpoint confirmation. Likewise, unfair bias against politicians most of the audience dislikes is no longer penalized by the market—and is perhaps even rewarded with a more loyal audience. In a world of narrowcasting, the market incentives magnet is no longer located at the North Star.


THE MEDIA MATRIX
higher
ACCURACY
lower
pull of market incentives during the narrowcast era
waitbutwhy
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY

Political Junk Food

Remember this scene from Chapter 7?


Absolutely not.
Survival
BUT THE COLORS
Put it down!

Every business knows that the easiest way to make money is to sell directly to the simple, predictable Primitive Mind.

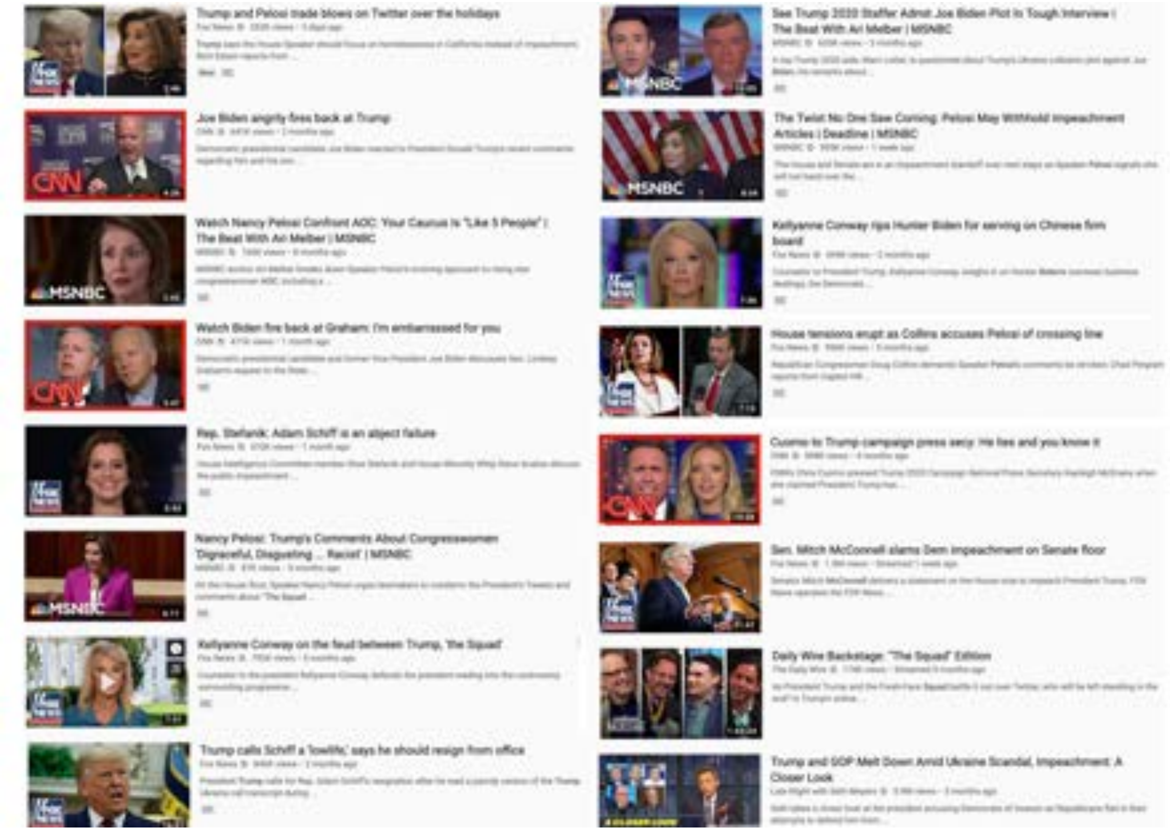
To sell food to the Higher Mind, you have to worry about quality and nutrition, which is expensive and hard. Instead, you can sell Skittles to the Primitive Mind, which mistakes them for nutritious food.

Selling magazines to the Higher Mind is also hard. Much easier to just put a young, firm, symmetrical person on the cover with the word “SEX” written in big letters next to them and market directly to the Primitive Mind.

COSMOPOLITAN
101 HOT SEX MOVES
Esquire
WHAT'S NORMAL NOW
SEX.
MEN'S FITNESS
THE 7% BODY FAT DIET
SEX
BAZAAR
SEX AND THE YOUNGER MAN
SERENA UNRETOUCHED & IN HER OWN WORDS
GQ
LOVE SEX & MADNESS
KIM
MEN'S FITNESS
21-DAY ABS
SEX
GQ
SEX
GQ
RACE SEX LOVE & POWER
Red
SUMMER STYLE EDIT
WHAT'S SEXY NOW
COSMOPOLITAN
DEEP SEX
InStyle
WHAT SEXY NOW
Rolling Stone
Sex, God & Katy Perry
Men'sHealth
BUILD BIG ARMS!
THE SEX ISSUE
ARMED • AMERICA
Esquire
Food Sex Cars
Inked
THE SEX ISSUE
MACHINE GUN KELLY
Entertainment
Masters of Sex
57
SKY
PHONE SEX
BRITNEY
OK!
SEX TAPE SCANDAL
FS
THE SEX ISSUE
People
Idris Elba
SEXIEST MAN ALIVE!

The Primitive Mind sees the same thing when it looks at a Skittles wrapper and a Cosmo cover—genetic survival.

In the world of U.S. politics, the junk food rack looks like this:



Trump and Pelosi trade blows on Twitter over the holidays

Joe Biden angrily fires back at Trump

Watch Nancy Pelosi Confront AOC: Your Caucus Is "Like 5 People" | The Beat With Ari Melber | MSNBC

Watch Biden fire back at Graham: I'm embarrassed for you

Rep. Stefanik: Adam Schiff is an abject failure

Nancy Pelosi: Trump's Comments About Congresswomen 'Disgraceful, Disgusting ... Racist' | MSNBC

Kellyanne Conway on the feud between Trump, 'the Squad'

Trump calls Schiff a 'lowlife,' says he should resign from office

See Trump 2020 Staffer Admit Joe Biden Plot In Tough Interview | The Beat With Ari Melber | MSNBC

The Twist No One Saw Coming: Pelosi May Withhold Impeachment Articles | Deadline | MSNBC

Kellyanne Conway rips Hunter Biden for serving on Chinese firm board

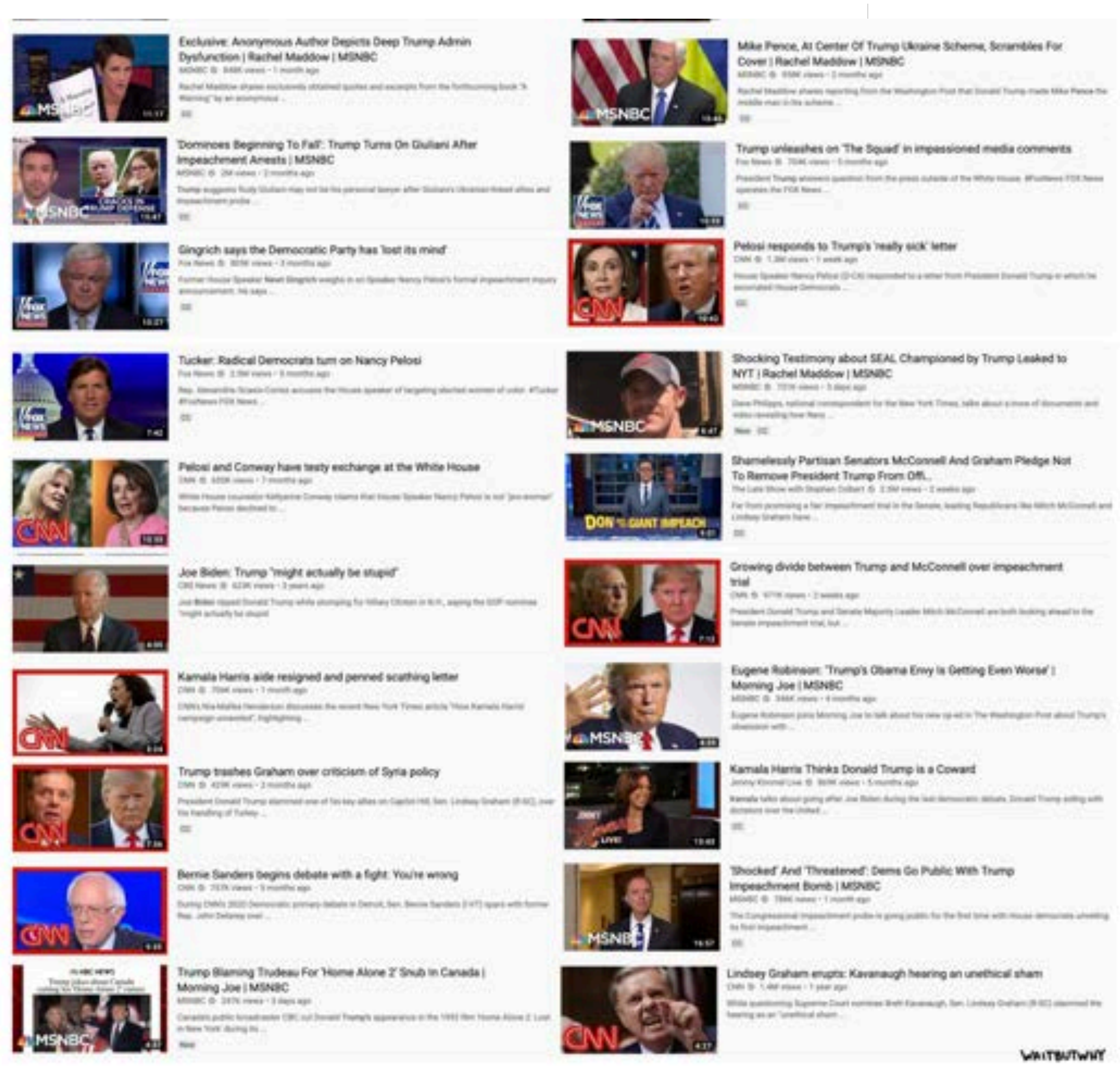
House tensions erupt as Collins accuses Pelosi of crossing line

Cuomo to Trump campaign press secy: He lies and you know it

Sen. Mitch McConnell slams Dem impeachment on Senate floor

Daily Wire Backstage: "The Squad" Edition

Trump and GOP Melt Down Amid Ukraine Scandal, Impeachment: A Closer Look



Exclusive: Anonymous Author Depicts Deep Trump Admin Dysfunction | Rachel Maddow | MSNBC

'Dominoes Beginning To Fall': Trump Turns On Giuliani After Impeachment Arrests | MSNBC

Gingrich says the Democratic Party has 'lost its mind'

Tucker: Radical Democrats turn on Nancy Pelosi

Pelosi and Conway have testy exchange at the White House

Joe Biden: Trump "might actually be stupid"

Kamala Harris aide resigned and penned scathing letter

Trump trashes Graham over criticism of Syria policy

Bernie Sanders begins debate with a fight: You're wrong

Trump Blaming Trudeau For 'Home Alone 2' Snub In Canada | Morning Joe | MSNBC

Mike Pence, At Center Of Trump Ukraine Scheme, Scrambles For Cover | Rachel Maddow | MSNBC

Trump unleashes on 'The Squad' in impassioned media comments

Pelosi responds to Trump's 'really sick' letter

Shocking Testimony about SEAL Championed by Trump Leaked to NYT | Rachel Maddow | MSNBC

Shamelessly Partisan Senators McConnell And Graham Pledge Not To Remove President Trump From Offi...

Growing divide between Trump and McConnell over impeachment trial

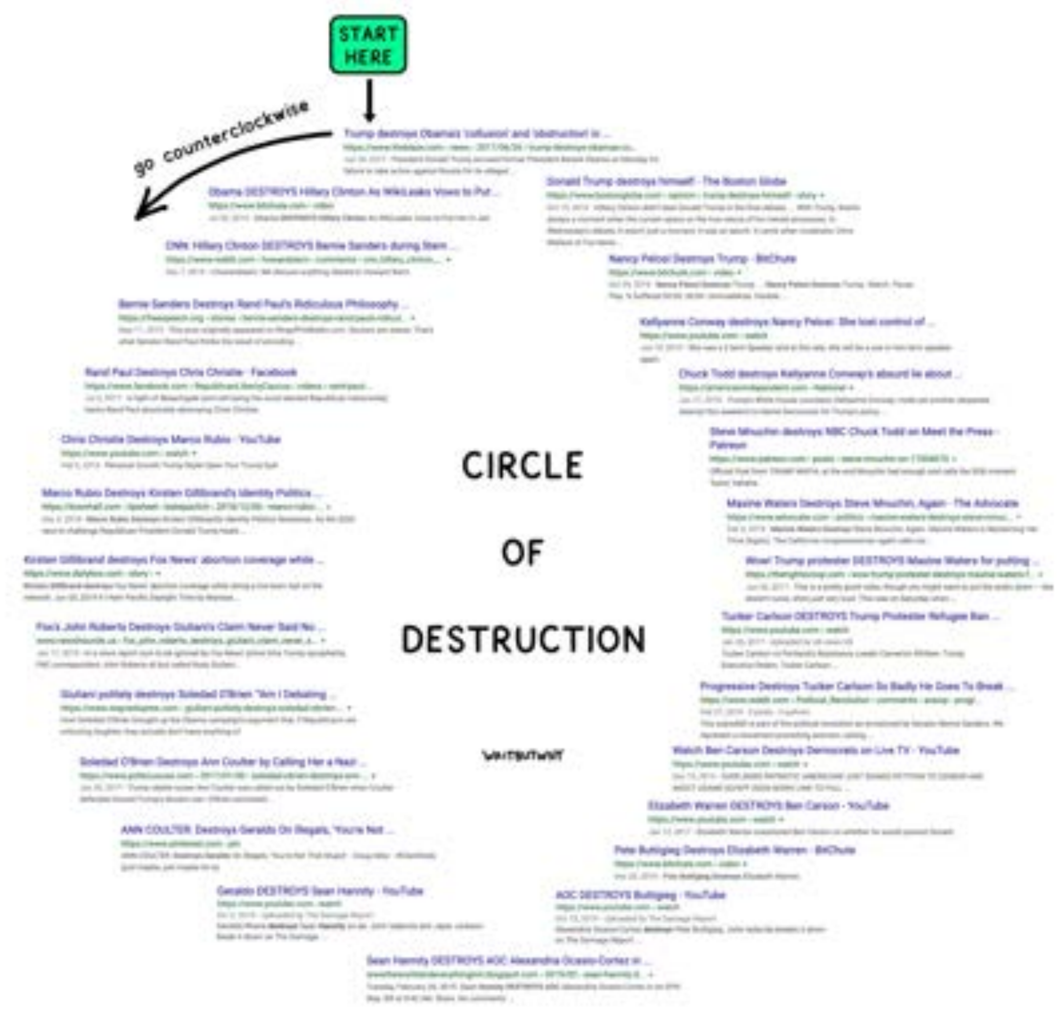
Eugene Robinson: 'Trump's Obama Envy Is Getting Even Worse' | Morning Joe | MSNBC

Kamala Harris Thinks Donald Trump is a Coward

'Shocked' And 'Threatened': Dems Go Public With Trump Impeachment Bomb | MSNBC

Lindsey Graham erupts: Kavanaugh hearing an unethical sham

The luscious confirmation promised by headlines like those looks as delectable to the Primitive Mind as the sweet sustenance promised by a Skittles wrapper. When everyone got their news from CBS, ABC, and NBC, this kind of hyper-partisan clickbait wouldn't have worked, because when the whole country is your audience, you can't confirm everyone's political views at once. Narrowcast brands don't have that same restraint. That's how you end up with actual circles of destruction. (click for a bigger view)



Seeing “DESTROYS” next to the name of a political figure you hate is kind of like seeing “SEX” next to a picture of a person you want to have sex with. An irresistible fishhook for the Primitive Mind.

Political junk food has nothing to do with learning—the headlines tell you from the get-go which side will win and which side will lose. Its purpose is to combine three of the Primitive Mind’s favorite things: viewpoint/identity confirmation, outgroup bashing, and gossip. Primitive Mind crack.

A Politics Reality Show

Broadcast TV news tried, at least a little, to be a show about reality. Narrowcast news tries to be a reality show. Big difference.

Reality is interesting sometimes. Reality shows are interesting all the time. Reality shows aren’t about reality, they’re about entertainment—so reality show producers manufacture a carefully edited, fictional version of reality that’s wildly entertaining, and super addictive. And what’s the reality TV producer’s best trick? Drama and negativity. Would anyone watch *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* if the characters got along most of the time? Of course not. That’s why every five minutes of the show includes a conflict of some kind.

As soon as you realize that news media is also entertainment media, the constant coverage of conflict and drama makes perfect sense.

In the U.S., most of us are addicted to a trashy reality show called *The Real Politicians of Washington.*[8]

the Real Politicians OF WASHINGTON

There are whole teams of heroes and villains, lots of ongoing storylines, and endless conflict. It's a perfect vehicle for a dramatic, super-addictive soap opera.

It's not that these heavily featured politicians or the super played-up storylines are unimportant. It's that we receive a totally *skewed* depiction of the full set of relevant political issues. The issues that make headlines day in and day out are usually overrepresented, while lots of other important political stories—like the bills being passed each week by the 52 House and Senate committees—are severely underreported.

I recently had a chance to talk with a Congressman named Derek Kilmer. Kilmer is the head of a House coalition called The New Democrats. Here's how they describe themselves:

The New Democrat Coalition is made up of 103 forward-thinking Democrats who are committed to pro-economic growth, pro-innovation, and fiscally responsible policies. New Democrats are a solutions oriented coalition seeking to bridge the gap between left and right by challenging outmoded partisan approaches to governing. New Democrats believe the challenges ahead are too great for Members of Congress to refuse to cooperate purely out of partisanship.

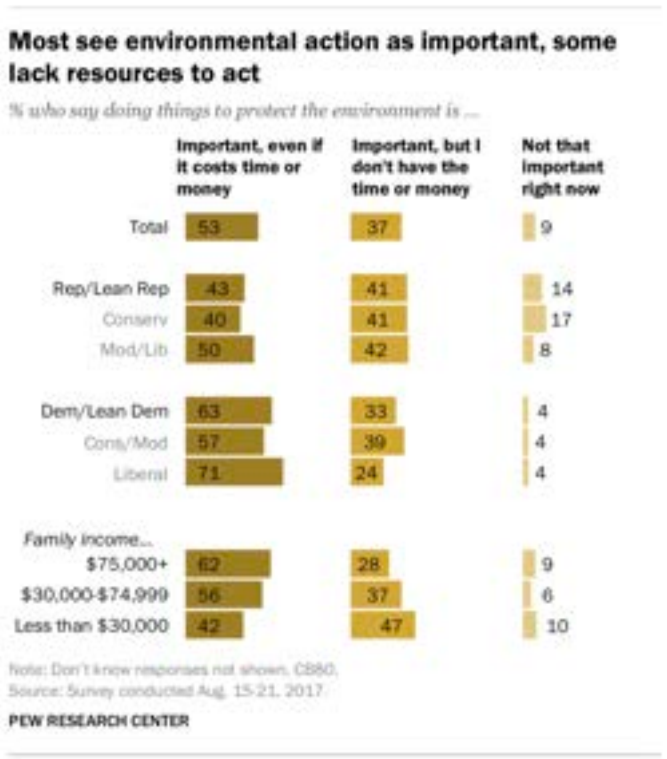
Snooooooooooze. The editors of *Real Politicians* waste no airtime on this kind of shit because it's nuanced and productive and boring as fuck. Kilmer is full of measured, well-thought-out ideas for how to make the country better and I'm falling asleep just writing this sentence.

Actual politics, like actual reality, is boring to most people. So tribal media brands do what reality producers do—they manufacture a carefully edited, fictional version of politics that's wildly entertaining.

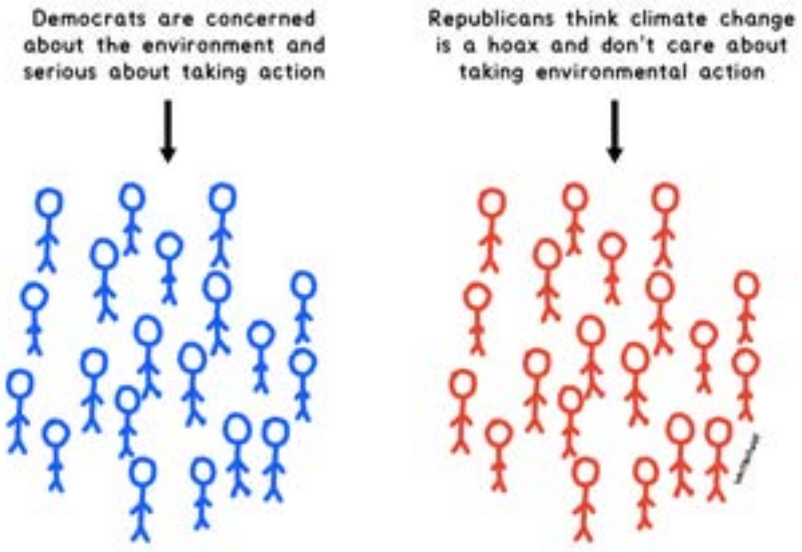
That's why most Americans who will tell you they're super passionate about politics can barely name ten current members of Congress. They probably can't name all the U.S. representatives for their state, let alone members of their *state* legislatures. But they *can* tell you about the 15 or 20 politicians chosen by the media to be the main characters on *Real Politicians*, along with the 5 or 10 hot-button issues being featured on the show in any given month.

Among many others, one reason this is bad is that there are lots of people in the U.S. who want to make the country better, and *The Real Politicians of Washington* misleads most of them on where they should be directing their efforts.

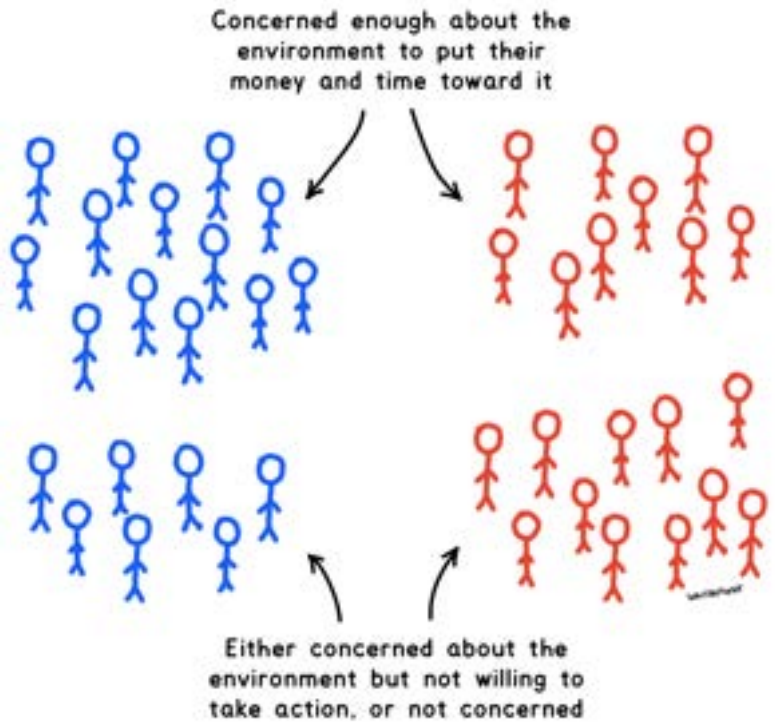
Take a look at this data:[16]



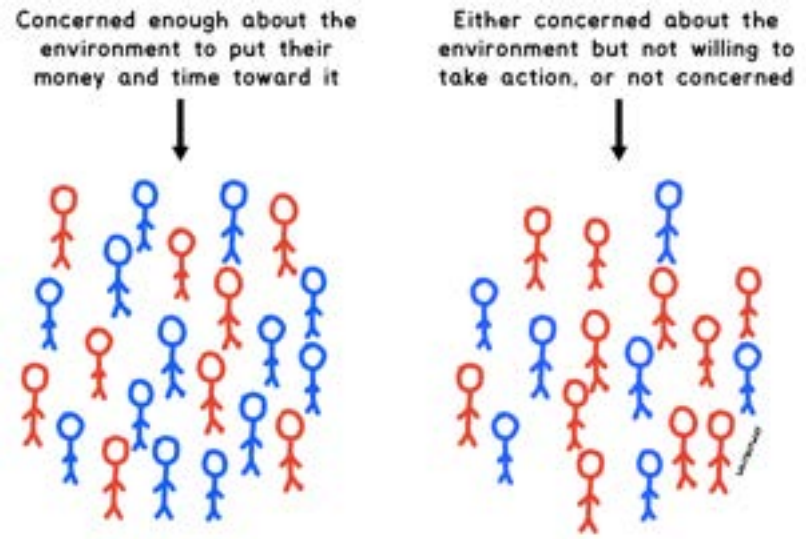
The data surprised me, as I'm sure it surprises many of you. The storyline I've been presented with is this:


Democrats are concerned about the environment and serious about taking action
Republicans think climate change is a hoax and don't care about taking environmental action

But the actual data above looks more like this:


Concerned enough about the environment to put their money and time toward it
Either concerned about the environment but not willing to take action, or not concerned

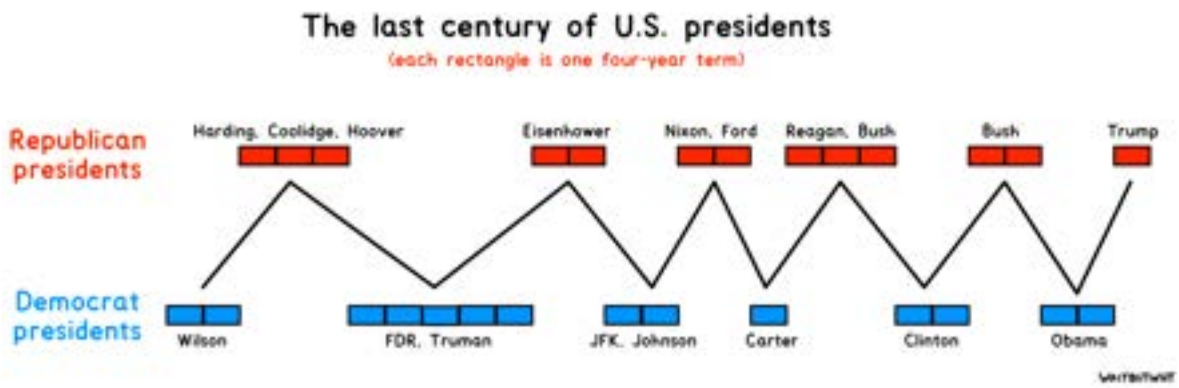
Which we could rearrange like this:


Concerned enough about the environment to put their money and time toward it
Either concerned about the environment but not willing to take action, or not concerned

Very different story. Of course it’s also true that Republican politicians, especially the current president, have often been dismissive of climate change. And “taking environmental action” is not necessarily the same as “taking action to curb emissions.” But the actual reality according to the survey makes me feel very differently about what kinds of strategies climate change activists should be using in order to build the necessarily coalition to change our trajectory. Presenting an inaccurate version of reality breeds displaced anger and division and hurts our ability to move toward important goals—all in the name of editing the politics reality show to be more entertaining with crisper, juicier storylines.

The most dramatic events on *Real Politicians* are elections. Elections are the show’s climaxes. And the show’s editors make sure to over-dramatize the shit out of them.

This is the past century of U.S. presidential elections.



It's a clear zig-zag pattern. Which makes sense. Citizens are typically not that happy with their lives, and it's a natural impulse to blame the government for our problems. It's also our impulse to naively believe that our favorite new politician will be able to fix all those problems, if only they could win the presidency. So after a single party has held down the presidency for a while, the country, still unhappy, decides that it's time to vote for the other party.

And yet—I remember when Bush won reelection in 2004, everyone in the media was talking about how Democrats just weren't able to win in politics anymore for a number of what-seemed-like-rock-solid sociological theories. Then the Democrats swept the midterms in 2006 and the presidency in 2008.

I remember in 2012, when Obama won reelection, hearing people say that the country had fundamentally shifted, and there were way more Hispanic immigrants than there used to be, and the Tea Party had rendered the Republican party irrelevant, and all of this other proof that times had changed and the Democrats wouldn't ever lose a presidential election again.

Then Republicans swept all three branches of government in 2016, at which point I read all these articles about how the Left is more *culturally* powerful but the Right is simply more *politically* powerful. I also heard a bunch of stuff about how gerrymandering ensured that the Democrats would never win back the House again. Then the Democrats won the House in 2018.

Media channels are for-profit businesses in a marketplace, behaving rationally. When people care about entertainment and confirmation more than truth, you end up with skewed coverage, over-dramatized storylines, and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of fake news.

In some ways, this is the return of an old story. The broadcast news era was something of an anomaly, generated by the advent of television. Before that, super partisan newspapers were common. James Baughman writes about political media in the 19th century:[17]

"Editors," wrote one historian, "unabashedly shaped the news and their editorial comment to partisan purposes. They sought to convert the doubters, recover the wavering, and hold the committed. 'The power of the press,' one journalist candidly explained, 'consists not in its logic or eloquence, but in its ability to manufacture facts, or to give coloring to facts that have occurred.'"

But in other important ways, this is a totally unprecedented media landscape.

Most notably, we have the internet. And one special kind of internet magic would be the source of a second key transformation to the media environment.

Media Transformation #2: Algorithms

Normally, I appreciate the Google search algorithm. It filters results that are most relevant to where I live and what I'm typically interested in, and it can guess remarkably well what I want to search for after I type just a few letters, saving me the trouble of typing the whole search.

I appreciate the YouTube algorithm, which knows my favorite channels and makes sure I never miss their latest videos.

I appreciate the Facebook algorithm, which spares me the knowledge of what Johnny from high school 20 years ago made for dinner last night while making sure to let me know when Johnny gets engaged, so I can go look through his most recent 87 photos to see the deal with his fiancé.

Internet algorithms are usually good things, and very helpful.

But new technology often comes along with unintended, unanticipated consequences.

When I’m watching a YouTube video and I glance at the thumbnails on the sidebar, I’m more likely to click on a video featuring someone explaining history or science than I am to click on a video featuring someone reviewing movies. YouTube has picked up on that, which is why I never see movie review videos on my YouTube sidebar, but I’m constantly being introduced to great new history or science explainer videos.

But then one night last year someone sent me a funny video a driver took with their phone. The driver taking the video had pissed off another driver, who opened his window and cursed out the driver. The angry driver got so worked up that he swung his arm at the video-taking driver angrily, and in the process, punched his own side mirror off. A delight of all delights.

Then the video ended, and YouTube offered me my choice of nine more videos in the road rage genre. I clicked on one of them and watched it. Then YouTube offered me nine more. I had a lot of work to do, so I held down the Command key and clicked on all nine, opening them in nine new tabs, and watched them all. Two⑨ hours later, utterly disgusted with myself, I pulled the dramatic “punishing Chrome by holding down Command-Q and closing all eight Chrome windows and all 127 of their open tabs” move. A nightmare waste of time. But at least it was over.

Except it wasn’t over. Somewhere out there, the YouTube algorithm was lining its Tim Urban fishhook with the best of the best road rage videos, which have reliably appeared in my YouTube sidebar ever since that regrettable night, damning me to an entire life wasted watching delightful road rage videos.

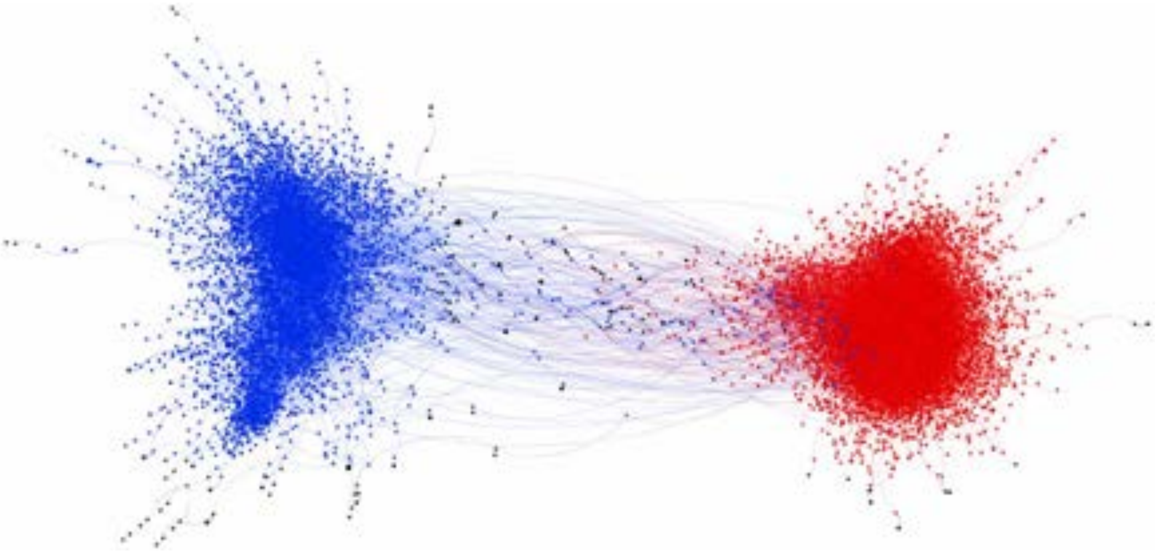
Internet algorithms are profit-maximizing mechanisms that want to spoon feed me whatever I’m most likely to click on. This is a win-win, symbiotic relationship—until it’s not. When an algorithm is catering to your Higher Mind, it’s your friend. When it’s luring in your Primitive Mind against your Higher Mind’s will, the relationship is parasitic.

So how does this apply to politics? What happens when your Higher Mind knows it’s important to challenge your beliefs and likes to click links representing a variety of viewpoints—but your Primitive Mind wants to click only on links that will further confirm and strengthen your existing viewpoints? Both minds will get some clicks in there—and overall, that might yield 75% clicks on confirmation links and only 25% clicks on dissent links.

It won’t take long for the algorithms to start treating political confirmation links like my YouTube treated road rage videos. Soon, your Google searches and YouTube searches will turn up only confirmation links.

The geographic and information bubbles don’t leave much room for air. As *The Big Sort* author Bill Bishop puts it: “We now live in a giant feedback loop, hearing our own thoughts about what’s right and wrong bounced back to us by the television shows we watch, the newspapers and books we read, the blogs we visit online, the sermons we hear and the neighbourhoods we live in.”

On social media, the effects of the two bubbles are multiplied. Most of our newsfeeds are insular networks made up of people who get their info from the same filter bubble we do. In 2017, PNAS analyzed over half a million tweets about three politically polarizing topics: gun control, same-sex marriage, and climate change. Using an algorithm that estimated the political leaning of each account, they examined the accounts that retweeted each tweet. The findings? Political tweets are almost entirely retweeted by those who agree with the tweet, to followers who also almost entirely agree with the tweet. They visualized these findings, which shows the tweets almost exclusively bouncing around a single Echo Chamber, with little chance to change anyone’s mind. A frenzy of confirmation:[18]



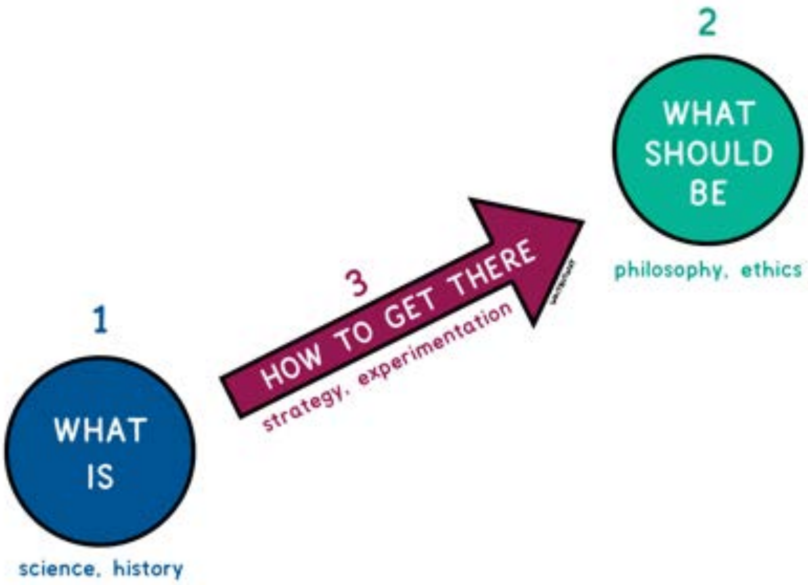
Even when there are exceptions—well-worded dissenting tweets that end up on people's feeds—they have a hard time spreading, because social media is saturated with peer pressure to conform ideologically and shame those who dare challenge the narrative.

On top of all that, social media provides another unfortunate filter: it dumbs down complex information. In an interactive about crowds, Nicky Case explains: "Ideas don't pass perfectly from one person to another the way a virus does. Like a game of Telephone, the message gets mutated with each re-telling…so, over time, ideas 'evolve' to be more catchy, copy-able, contagious." Since complexity and catchiness are often inversely correlated, the super connectedness offered by the internet may actually *hinder* the spread of complex ideas.

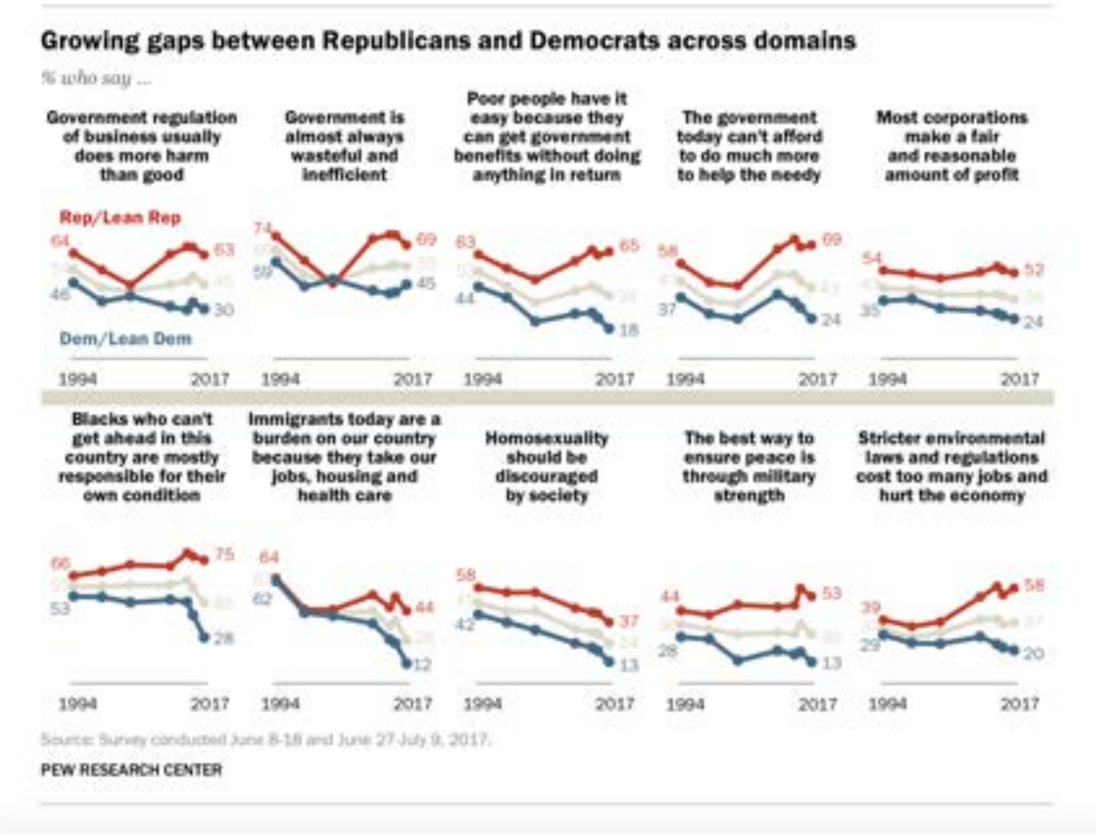
Putting this all together, the internet quickly becomes a downward magnet on your psyche. You may be a high-rung thinker interested in hearing a wide array of ideas and becoming more knowledgeable, but the internet is likely to push you in the opposite direction, even if it's hard to see that it's happening.

Separate Realities

When most of us hear about growing political polarization, we assume it means citizens are divided in their values. That people are unable to agree about "What Should Be":



But take another look at the 10 questions the Pew polarization graphs are based on:



Growing gaps between Republicans and Democrats across domains

% who say ...

Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good

Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient

Poor people have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return

The government today can't afford to do much more to help the needy

Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit

Blacks who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition

Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care

Homosexuality should be discouraged by society

The best way to ensure peace is through military strength

Stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

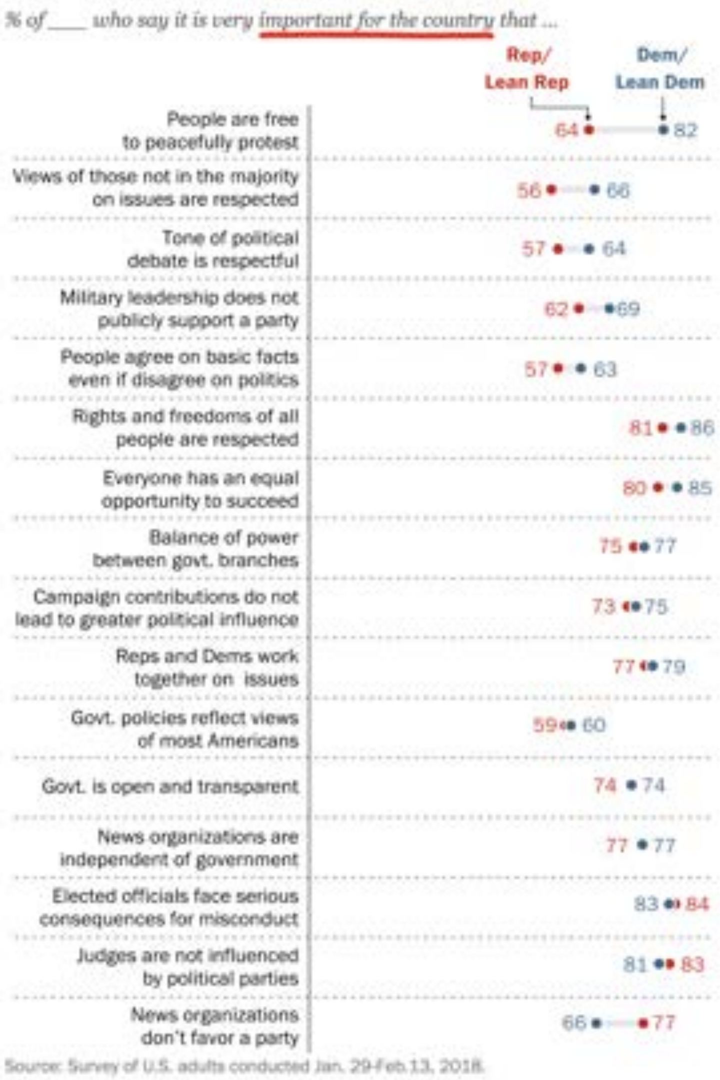
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Only *one* of them is a philosophical question of values—a *What Should Be* question: the question about homosexuality. And that's the question where the country has moved most closely in the same direction, as both parties follow a general national trend.

The other nine questions above aren't philosophical questions about values—they're questions about *What Is*.

The Wall Street Journal had a great interactive feature called *Blue Feed, Red Feed* that let you see how the same topics are presented on social media to people on the Right and the Left (they stopped updating it earlier this year, but you can still see a sampling). Whether the topic is Trump, healthcare, guns, abortion, ISIS, the budget, or immigration, opposing political camps are not just seeing different slants on the same story—they're being presented two entirely different realities.

The Right and the Left do disagree on some values:[19]



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 29-Feb.13, 2018.

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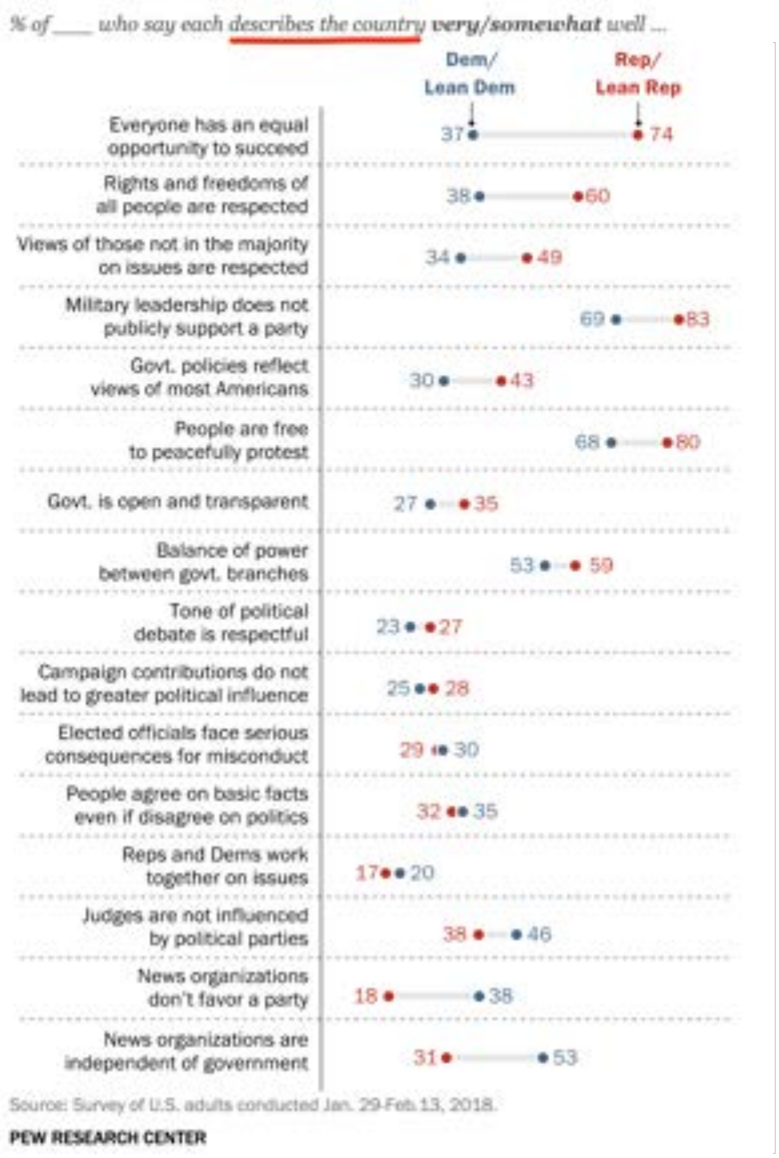
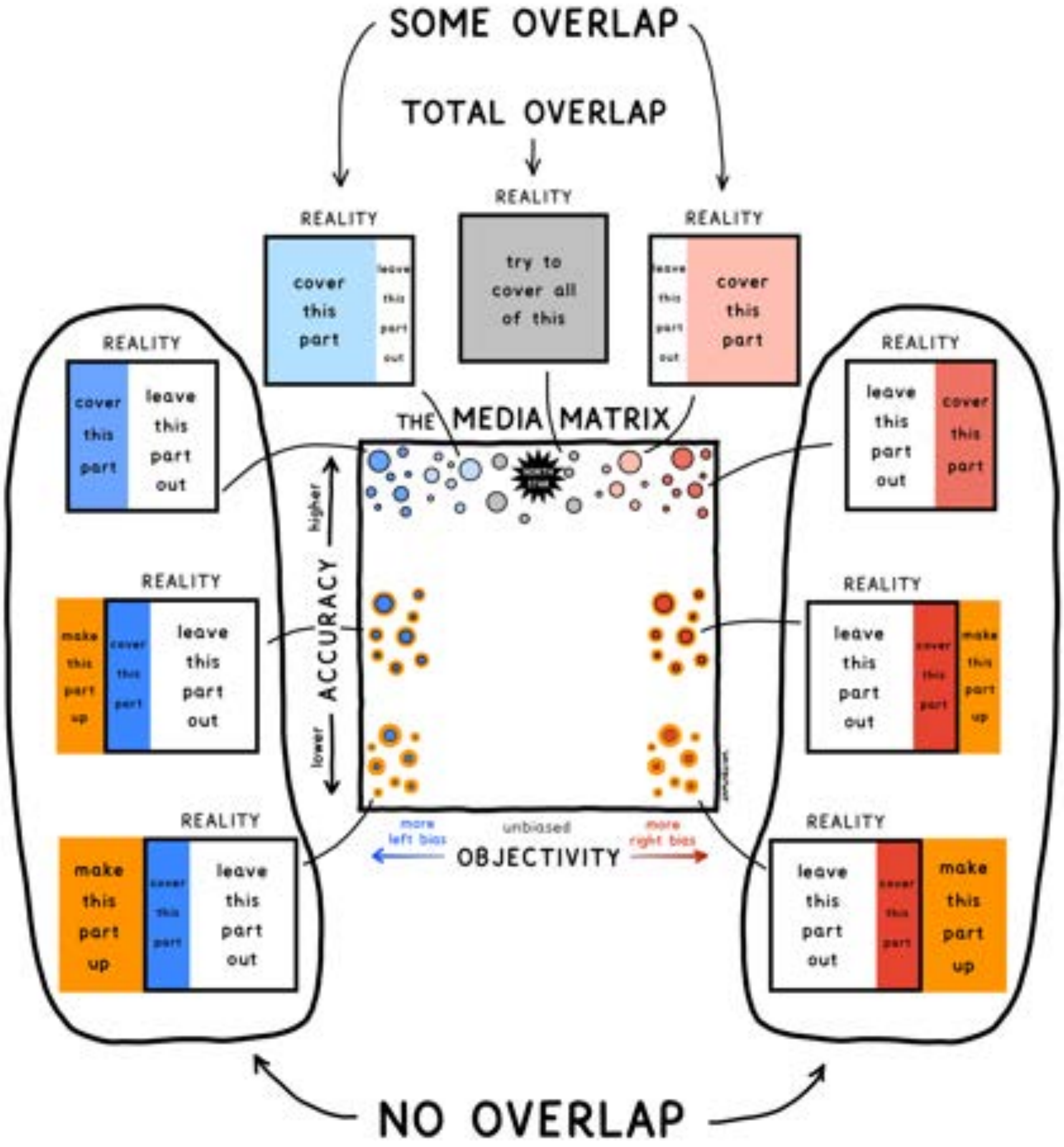
They just disagree way *more* on reality:[20]



If market incentive magnets have indeed moved from the North Star region closer to the lower corners, separate realities would be a natural consequence.


SOME OVERLAP
TOTAL OVERLAP
REALITY
cover this part
leave this part out
REALITY
try to cover all of this
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
REALITY
cover this part
leave this part out
THE MEDIA MATRIX
NORTH STAR
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
REALITY
make this part up
cover this part
leave this part out
higher
ACCURACY
lower
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
make this part up
REALITY
make this part up
cover this part
leave this part out
more left bias
unbiased
more right bias
OBJECTIVITY
REALITY
leave this part out
cover this part
make this part up
NO OVERLAP

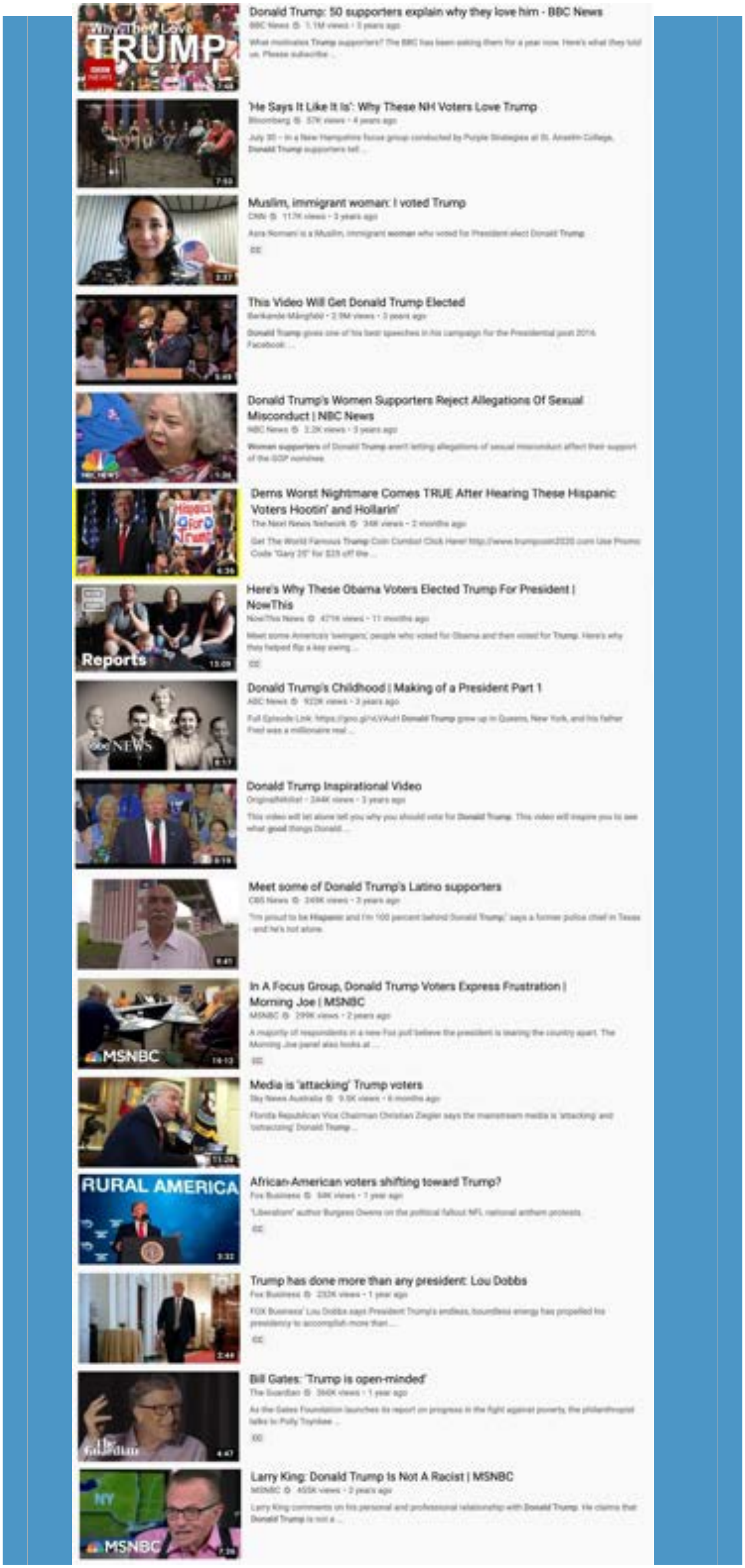
In today's politics, if you forget that A) your perception of reality has probably been at least a little manipulated, and B) your opponents are behaving the way they are based on a perception of reality that's different from your own—you're bound to get things wrong.

The Time I Was a Trump Voter Blue Box

I had a funny experience doing research for this series. I came into it crystal clear on what people on the Left generally think, how they think, and why. So the first order of business was a deep dive into what people on the Right—especially Trump voters—were saying, and why. I dug into conservative news sites, conservative blogs, conservative YouTube channels, conservative Reddit forums.

And a funny thing happened. The internet noticed, and it went for the full indoctrination.

Suddenly, it didn't matter what I was watching on YouTube—it could be a group of slippery Japanese people trying to climb stairs—and I'd glance at my sidebar and see this:


Why They Love TRUMP
Hispanics for Trump
Reports
abc NEWS
MSNBC
RURAL AMERICA
The Guardian
NY
MSNBC

Donald Trump: 50 supporters explain why they love him - BBC News

'He Says It Like It Is': Why These NH Voters Love Trump

Muslim, immigrant woman: I voted Trump

This Video Will Get Donald Trump Elected

Donald Trump's Women Supporters Reject Allegations Of Sexual Misconduct | NBC News

Dems Worst Nightmare Comes TRUE After Hearing These Hispanic Voters Hootin' and Hollarin'

Here's Why These Obama Voters Elected Trump For President | NowThis

Donald Trump's Childhood | Making of a President Part 1

Donald Trump Inspirational Video

Meet some of Donald Trump's Latino supporters

In A Focus Group, Donald Trump Voters Express Frustration | Morning Joe | MSNBC

Media is 'attacking' Trump voters

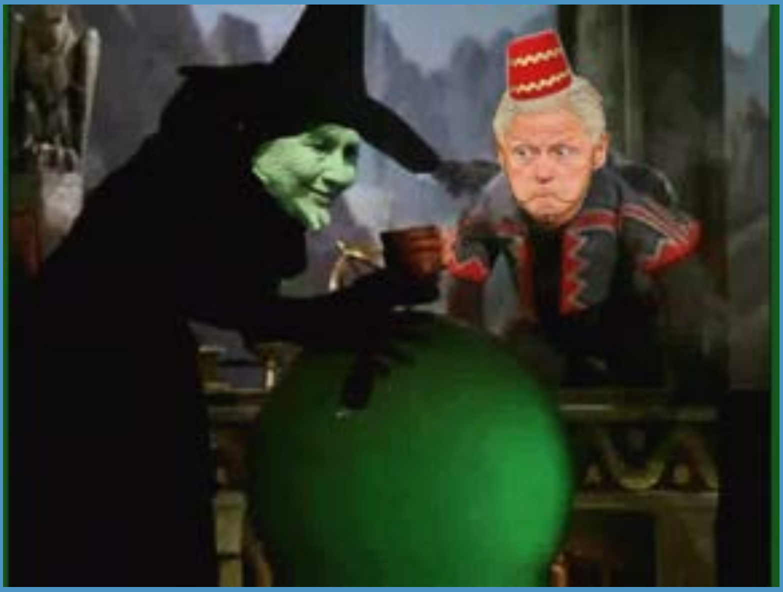
African-American voters shifting toward Trump?

Trump has done more than any president: Lou Dobbs

Bill Gates: 'Trump is open-minded'

Larry King: Donald Trump Is Not A Racist | MSNBC

It wasn't just YouTube. The algorithms were serving me the pro-Trump Bento Box. Reddit and Quora started sending me emails with links to pro-Trump threads. Twitter started recommending conservative accounts for me to follow. And it went beyond pro-Trump material. As far as the internet was concerned, these were now the Clintons:[21]



It didn't change my views on Trump very much—but it *did* change my thoughts about his voters. Before, I had been fed a steady diet of "Trump is a huge bigot, Trump voters know he's a huge bigot, and they voted for him because they're huge bigots too." But now the internet thought I was a Trump voter, and suddenly almost nothing I was seeing about Trump made him seem like a bigot. In the new depictions, he still seemed like a bit of a blowhard, but one that was unafraid to stand up to a corrupt, elite establishment and that was determined to help a losing America start winning again. The anti-Trump crowd I knew were making the mistake of looking at the version of Trump they were seeing and assuming his voters were voting for that guy. But his voters didn't know that Trump. They knew the version of Trump *they* were seeing, and *that's* the guy they were voting for.

Of course, some of the most damning things that came out about Trump during the campaign were seen by everybody. Everyone in every information bubble heard Trump grab people by the pussy, criticize McCain for being captured in Vietnam, mock a disabled reporter, and stereotype illegal Mexican immigrants as rapists. But in their information bubble, they were seeing moments like these once or twice, not 20,000 times—and when compared to their bubble's depiction of Wicked Hillary of the West, the evil treasonous criminal who threatened Bill's sex victims and called the working class "deplorable," I see how Trump might appear the lesser villain.

I came out of the whole thing feeling like I understood the Trump phenomenon a little better, and the Left's chorus of "Trump voters are all white supremacists!" began to seem over-confident, under-informed, and not very productive.

If you're thinking about politics without regularly asking yourself, "What does this look/feel like to the people I don't know?", you're going to get a lot of things wrong. Which ultimately makes you less politically effective.

Losing our grip on reality is an unnerving idea in general. But there's one particular kind of delusion that keeps me up at night.

Recently, I noticed this headline on CNN.com:

I wanted to not click on that, but the computer and I both knew that I had no choice. So here's what happened: a homeless man came across a woman after she had run out of gas on the side of the interstate, with no money. The homeless man told her to wait safely in her car while he walked over to a nearby gas station and, spending his last $20, bought gas and brought it back to her. The woman then went home and started a GoFundMe campaign to "pay it forward" and raise money for the homeless man.

When we read a feel-good story like this, it poofs away the fog in our heads for a moment because it reminds us how many good people there are out there and how much generosity and kind-heartedness there is in the world. It makes our Primitive Minds feel safe, which calms them down, and it empowers our Higher Mind. High-mindedness is contagious,[10] and the high-mindedness of the homeless man in the story traveled through the internet and infected 14,000 people, who donated a combined $400,000 to the homeless man. It was a beautiful moment.

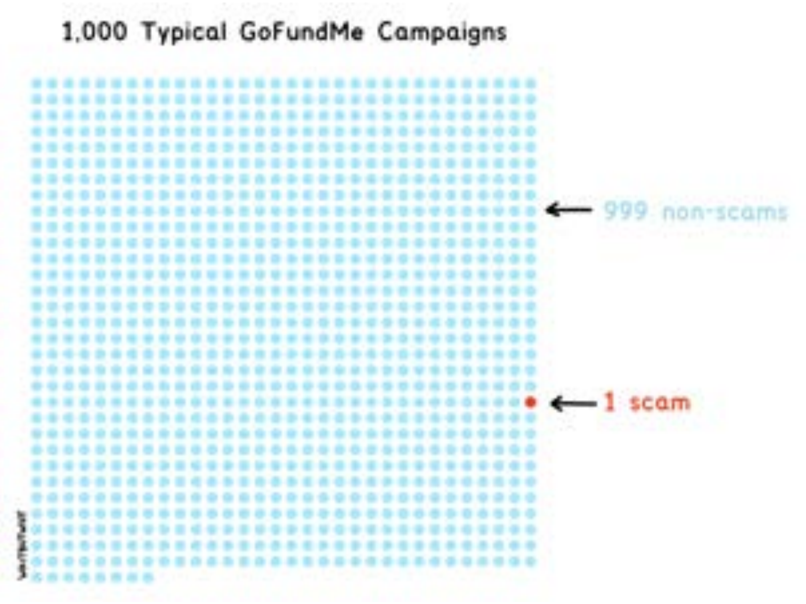
Until the woman, the woman's boyfriend, and the homeless man got caught. The homeless man (Bobbitt) really was homeless, but the whole story had been made up by the three of them as a get-rich-quick scheme. The article explains: "Bobbitt received $75,000, and within months McClure and D'Amico had 'squandered' their share to buy a car, high-end handbags and trips…they also used it at casinos."

Quite the crew.

At the very end of the article, there was a quote from GoFundMe's spokesman:

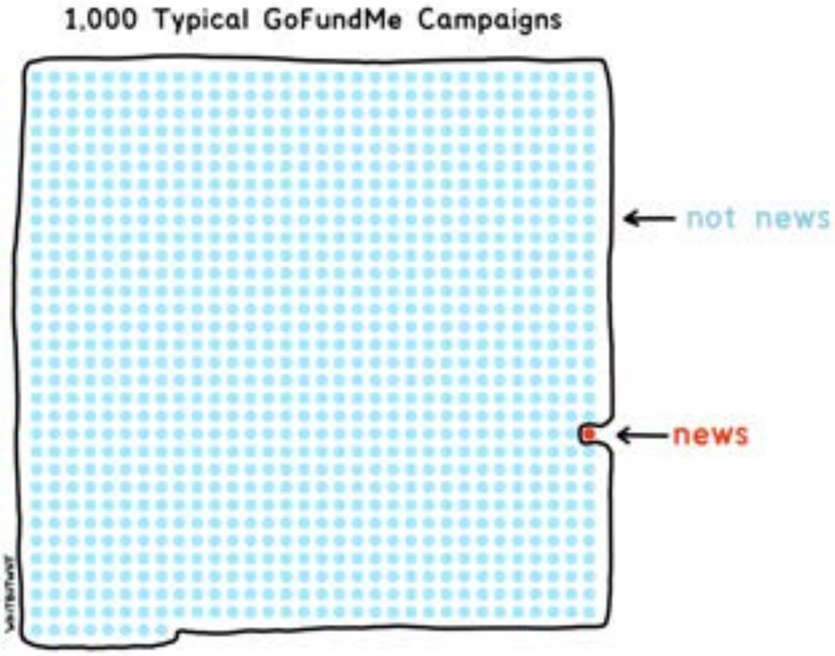
It's important to understand that misuse is very rare on our platform. Campaigns with misuse make up less than one tenth of one percent of all campaigns.

In other words, this is reality:

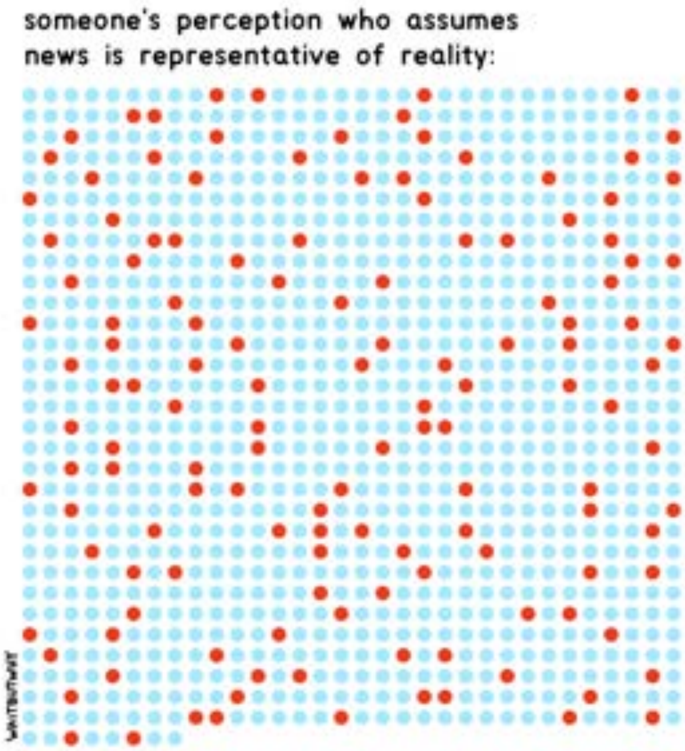


And if we knew more about the thousands of genuinely heartwarming GoFundMe stories that happen every year, it would strengthen our trust and love networks and boost kind-heartedness and generosity. Those kinds of stories are like positive viruses that, when spread, strengthen society.

But in the reality show editing room at CNN.com, they see this:



Of all the people that saw the article's headline, only a tiny fraction will end up reading the quote from GoFundMe at the bottom of the article. Everyone else just sees the headline, and lots of other similar headlines over the years, and they develop the intuition that things like GoFundMe are pretty "scammy":


someone's perception who assumes
news is representative of reality:
WAITBUTWHY

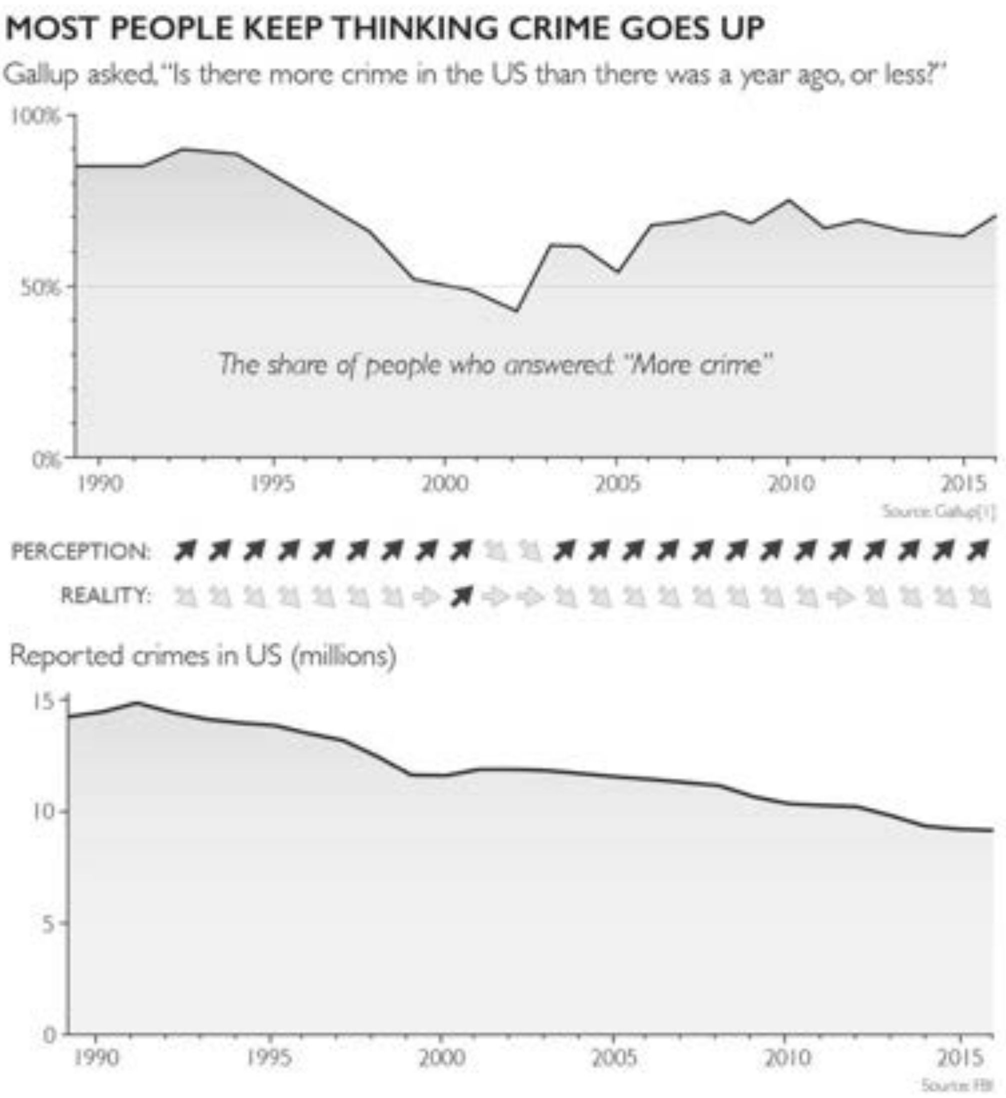
Trust is a society's most precious resource, and a strong trust network does amazing things, like donating $400,000 to a homeless man. But trust takes decades to build up and is easily shattered. In the case of a scam like this, 14,000 people reached out lovingly to another member of society, and their hands were zapped by an electroshocker. Their trust was shaken and replaced by cynicism.

On its own, this scam wouldn't do much harm to society. Unless, of course, the news plasters the scam all over their front pages. When that happens, 14,000 people have their outreached hands painfully shocked—and 10,000,000 more people watch it happen.

A scam is like a virus that converts trust into cynicism, but it's the news, in the name of keeping things entertaining and addictive, that distributes the virus across the whole country.

We can call this phenomenon—where the news cherry-picks stories that weaken society and spreads them—"destructive cherry-picking."

Destructive cherry-picking breeds fear, anger, and cynicism. It's why we always think crime is getting worse even though it's almost always getting better.[22]



But to me, the most damaging form of destructive cherry-picking is the kind that spreads *hate*.

Nicky Case made a killer simulation about this phenomenon too. It's fun and quick—give it a try.

Portraying a society where everyone is a GoFundMe scammer damages trust. Portraying a society where crime is rampant spreads fear.

But portraying a society where everyone hates each other is the most dangerous virus of all, because it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Geographic bubbles mean many people barely know anyone on the other political side personally, so the only information they have on what those people are like comes from information bubbles. And those bubbles have increasingly become hate-mongering machines. The right-wing information bubble floods viewers with anecdotes that make it seem like everyone on the Left positively despises them and everything they stand for. What a Republican from a small town hears from the Left is: "you're stupid, you're ignorant, you're a bigot, you're privileged, your values are wrong, your religion is bad, you're toxic, you're backward, you're selfish, you're a Nazi." Through the left-wing information bubble, all a Mexican-American living in Los Angeles hears from the Right is: "you're a criminal, you're a rapist, you're not a real American, you're stealing our jobs, you're inferior, you don't belong here, and we're coming for you." Outrage about these messages then spreads like wildfire on social media, because as CGP Grey explains in a fun/upsetting video, nothing spreads faster than anger—especially anger in the specific format, "Just *look* at how *awful* the people we hate are."⑪

Vocal Primitive Minds activate other Primitive Minds. Filtering a steady stream of "they *hate* you" to people jolts awake the recipients' Primitive Minds, filling them with reciprocal hatred, clouding their humanity, and flipping on that ancient tribal switch that makes people want to band together into giants for safety. The resulting anger is, in turn, filtered back over to the other side.

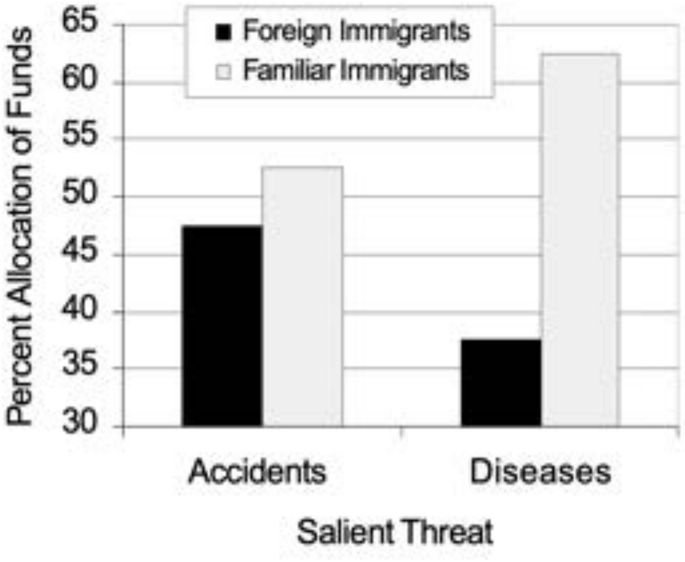
This most troubling thing about this kind of vicious cycle is that it fosters what may be the most dangerous word in the English language.

Disgust

Like happiness, sadness, anger, and fear, disgust is a basic emotion, hardwired into all humans. Travel to any country in the world and basic emotions will be expressed similarly. That's why smiles, for example, never require translation.

Basic emotions are the way they are because they were helpful for survival in the ancient human world. A Google Images search for "disgust" shows a bunch of people, all making the same hideous face—squinting their eyes, curling up their noses, and exhaling (and if it gets really bad, exhaling turns to gagging and eventually vomiting). Scientists believe this is evolution's way of getting us to close up our incoming passages and expel outward whatever we can, in order to protect ourselves when we're in the presence of toxins or disease. We react this way when confronted with rotten food, blood, shit, maggots, and anything else our primitive software believes is potentially dangerous and disease-carrying. We're so prone to feel disgust that you probably feel a bit of disgust right now just having read the last sentence.

The strange thing is that disgust can carry over to how we view *people*. There's a reasonable amount of research that suggests that when people are exposed to something that brings out their disgust emotion, they become harsher moral judges. In one experiment, one group of Canadians were shown disturbing-but-not-disgusting images of car accidents while another was shown photos of coughing people and other disease-related visuals. Then both groups were questioned about which countries they felt Canada should dedicate resources toward attracting immigrants from. Both groups showed a preference for immigrants from familiar countries (those who have a prominent presence in Canada), but the group that had seen images of disease felt much stronger about it.[23]



In another study, participants sitting at a dirty desk were harsher in their judgments of a series of criminal acts than participants sitting at a clean desk. In another, a wafting odor of vomit made participants more likely to disapprove of homosexuality.

Scientists use the term "behavior immune system" to describe the theory that disgust is linked to concepts like xenophobia and discomfort with practices and rituals (especially sexual) that seem foreign or different to us—an ancient impulse we developed because long ago, contact with foreign people and practices often did put you at risk of disease.

You know when you watch a horror movie and by the end, your amygdala is all up-in-arms about everything and suddenly every noise in the house makes you sure you're about to be murdered? What's happening is that your Primitive Mind is bad at distinguishing movies from reality and the movie actually makes it feel like it's in danger.

The behavioral immune system is the same idea. Once your Primitive Mind is triggered by the feeling of disgust, even just via images, it becomes *very* suspicious that life-threatening disease is afoot and wants to react accordingly. It gets all hyped up, your mind fills with smoke, and you start obeying your ancient software, even when it makes absolutely no sense. So you do the equivalent of double locking all your doors after watching a horror movie—you become super icked out by people and behavior that deviate from "your people" or their norms.

The reason I called disgust one of the scariest words in the English language is that it's a trigger for dehumanization, and dehumanization is the gateway drug to the worst things humans do. It's not a coincidence that two of the most horrifying events in recent human history—the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide—were made possible by disgust. Nazi propaganda constantly compared Jews to disgust-inducing animals like rats, swine, and insects. The Rwandan radio broadcasts that incited the 1994 genocide referred to Tutsis as "cockroaches" repeatedly. These are just two examples of a well-worn tradition. During World War I, the Germans depicted the British as spiders, while the U.S. did the same thing with the Kaiser. During World War II, Americans painted the Japanese as rats, while the Japanese went with spiders for the English.

In a 2012 paper, Erin Buckels and Paul Trapnell write:

> *Once activated, feelings of disgust reliably evoke feelings of superiority over offending targets, who by virtue of their disgustingness, are expelled from the circle of moral regard. As such, disgust guards the human–animal boundary in social cognition, playing the dual role of distancing ourselves from "lower" creatures and reaffirming our own humanity. When applied to intergroup contexts, disgust inserts a psychological boundary between us and them that humanizes us at the expense of the other. … there is evidence that feelings of disgust may weaken or block perceptions of target humanity. In two social-neuroscience investigations, Harris and Fiske (2006, 2007) found that members of certain disgust-eliciting outgroups fail to be processed as fully human, social entities.*

Disgust fills our mind with a special kind of primitive fog—one that turns ordinary humans into psychopaths who can commit unthinkable harm without remorse. Scary shit.

The geographic and information bubbles are a lethal combo, ripe for disgust.

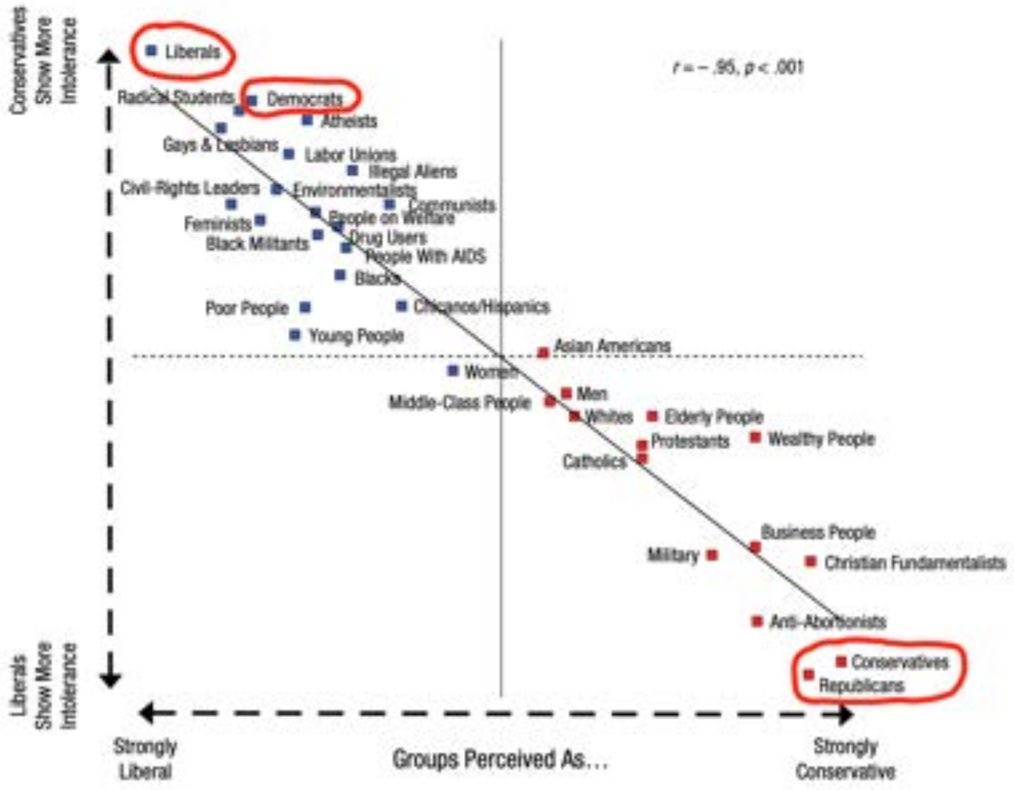
Writer Gene Knudsen Hoffman says, "An enemy is one whose story we have not heard." It's hard to feel dehumanizing disgust for people you know personally. Less hard when you rarely see your enemies in person. And even less hard when destructive cherry-picking teaches you only the worst of the worst about them.

There's a term we need to start using: **political bigotry.**

Political bigotry is as real as any other bigotry. In a 2014 paper on political polarization in the U.S., Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood write:

> *Hostile feelings for the opposing party are ingrained or automatic in voters' minds, and that affective polarization based on party is just as strong as polarization based on race. We further show that party cues exert powerful effects on non-political judgments and behaviors. Partisans discriminate against opposing partisans, and do so to a degree that exceeds discrimination based on race.*

Their findings are corroborated by another 2014 paper, which produced this graph, suggesting that political intolerance beats other kinds of intolerance on both the left and right.



As political Echo Chambers have gotten larger and more extreme, political opponents have gone from seeming like wrong, stupid people to seeming like evil, disgusting monsters. Feeling disgust towards a large group of people is textbook bigotry. If you heard about a country populated by two major races or ethnicities or religions, and they talked about each other the way today's Americans talk about the opposing political tribe, you'd be very, very concerned about that country.

But for most of us, our instinct tells us that political bigotry is not as terrible as other kinds of bigotry. Maybe because it seems like it's disgust about ideas more than disgust about people. Or maybe because, at least in the U.S., racial and other kinds of bigotry have historically been more prominent and the cause of more strife. But the paper goes on to talk about evidence that partisanship in the U.S. has increasingly become a "*primal"* kind of bond, much like ethnicity or race, making political bigotry a lot more like other types of bigotry.

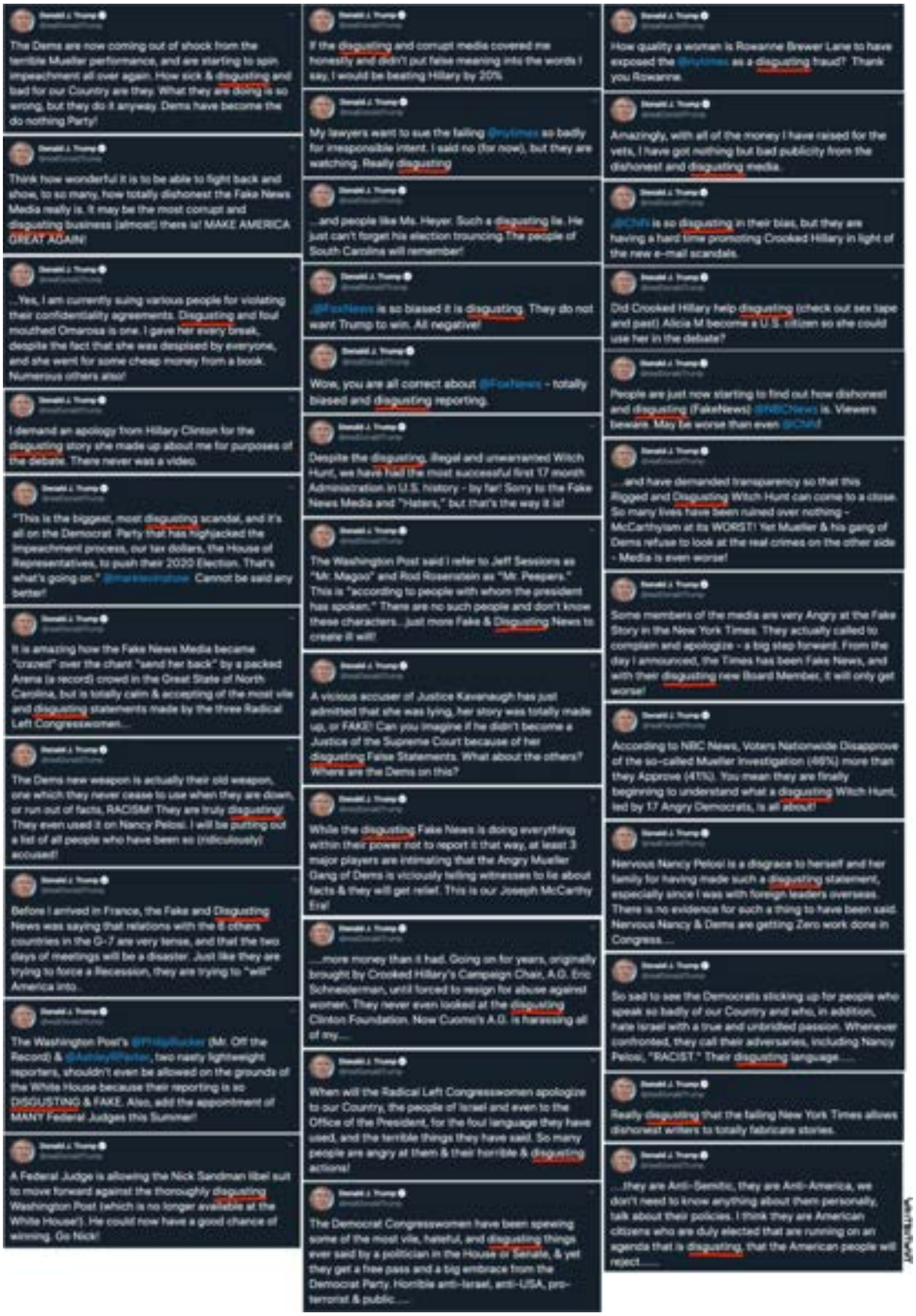
Bigotry is at its most harmful in moments when much of society fails to recognize it as bigotry. The best tools to combat bigotry are social norms that penalize its expression, but those norms only kick in when the bigoted attitudes and behavior become widely viewed as reprehensible. In the U.S. today, political bigotry is a rare form of bigotry that is rarely ever penalized by taboo—and it's often rewarded. Iyengar and Westwood's research corroborates this notion:

The most plausible explanation for the stronger affective response generated by partisan cues is the non-applicability of egalitarian norms. These norms, which are supported by large majorities, discourage the manifestation of behavior that may be construed as discriminatory. In contemporary America, the strength of these norms has made virtually any discussion of racial differences a taboo subject to the point that citizens suppress their true feelings. No such constraints apply to evaluations of partisan groups. While Americans are inclined to "hedge" expressions of overt animosity toward racial minorities, immigrants, gays, or other marginalized groups, they enthusiastically voice hostility for the out-party and its supporters.

When society is behaving badly, politicians will too. Iyengar and Westwood also studied how rising levels of disgust amongst voters is then mimicked by politicians:

Hostility for the out party among rank and file partisans sends a clear signal to elected officials; representatives who appear willing to work across party lines run the risk of being perceived as "appeasers." For the vast majority who represent uncompetitive districts, there are strong incentives to "bash" the opposition.

If they're right, we should be seeing lots of political disgust expressed by politicians right now. Let's see if their research holds up.



The Dems are now coming out of shock from the terrible Mueller performance, and are starting to spin impeachment all over again. How sick & disgusting and bad for our Country are they. What they are doing is so wrong, but they do it anyway. Dems have become the do nothing Party!

Think how wonderful it is to be able to fight back and show, to so many, how totally dishonest the Fake News Media really is. It may be the most corrupt and disgusting business (almost) there is! MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!

...Yes, I am currently suing various people for violating their confidentiality agreements. Disgusting and foul mouthed Omarosa is one. I gave her every break, despite the fact that she was despised by everyone, and she went for some cheap money from a book. Numerous others also!

I demand an apology from Hillary Clinton for the disgusting story she made up about me for purposes of the debate. There never was a video.

"This is the biggest, most disgusting scandal, and it's all on the Democrat Party that has highjacked the Impeachment process, our tax dollars, the House of Representatives, to push their 2020 Election. That's what's going on." @marklevinshow Cannot be said any better!

It is amazing how the Fake News Media became "crazed" over the chant "send her back" by a packed Arena (a record) crowd in the Great State of North Carolina, but is totally calm & accepting of the most vile and disgusting statements made by the three Radical Left Congresswomen...

The Dems new weapon is actually their old weapon, one which they never cease to use when they are down, or run out of facts, RACISM! They are truly disgusting! They even used it on Nancy Pelosi. I will be putting out a list of all people who have been so (ridiculously) accused!

Before I arrived in France, the Fake and Disgusting News was saying that relations with the 6 others countries in the G-7 are very tense, and that the two days of meetings will be a disaster. Just like they are trying to force a Recession, they are trying to "will" America into...

The Washington Post's @PhilipRucker (Mr. Off the Record) & @AshleyRParker, two nasty lightweight reporters, shouldn't even be allowed on the grounds of the White House because their reporting is so DISGUSTING & FAKE. Also, add the appointment of MANY Federal Judges this Summer!

A Federal Judge is allowing the Nick Sandman libel suit to move forward against the thoroughly disgusting Washington Post (which is no longer available at the White House!). He could now have a good chance of winning. Go Nick!

If the disgusting and corrupt media covered me honestly and didn't put false meaning into the words I say, I would be beating Hillary by 20%

My lawyers want to sue the failing @nytimes so badly for irresponsible intent. I said no (for now), but they are watching. Really disgusting

...and people like Ms. Heyer. Such a disgusting lie. He just can't forget his election trouncing.The people of South Carolina will remember!

@FoxNews is so biased it is disgusting. They do not want Trump to win. All negative!

Wow, you are all correct about @FoxNews - totally biased and disgusting reporting.

Despite the disgusting, illegal and unwarranted Witch Hunt, we have had the most successful first 17 month Administration in U.S. history - by far! Sorry to the Fake News Media and "Haters," but that's the way it is!

The Washington Post said I refer to Jeff Sessions as "Mr. Magoo" and Rod Rosenstein as "Mr. Peepers." This is "according to people with whom the president has spoken." There are no such people and don't know these characters...just more Fake & Disgusting News to create ill will!

A vicious accuser of Justice Kavanaugh has just admitted that she was lying, her story was totally made up, or FAKE! Can you imagine if he didn't become a Justice of the Supreme Court because of her disgusting False Statements. What about the others? Where are the Dems on this?

While the disgusting Fake News is doing everything within their power not to report it that way, at least 3 major players are intimating that the Angry Mueller Gang of Dems is viciously telling witnesses to lie about facts & they will get relief. This is our Joseph McCarthy Era!

....more money than it had. Going on for years, originally brought by Crooked Hillary's Campaign Chair, A.G. Eric Schneiderman, until forced to resign for abuse against women. They never even looked at the disgusting Clinton Foundation. Now Cuomo's A.G. is harassing all of my....

When will the Radical Left Congresswomen apologize to our Country, the people of Israel and even to the Office of the President, for the foul language they have used, and the terrible things they have said. So many people are angry at them & their horrible & disgusting actions!

The Democrat Congresswomen have been spewing some of the most vile, hateful, and disgusting things ever said by a politician in the House or Senate, & yet they get a free pass and a big embrace from the Democrat Party. Horrible anti-Israel, anti-USA, pro-terrorist & public.....

How quality a woman is Rowanne Brewer Lane to have exposed the @nytimes as a disgusting fraud? Thank you Rowanne.

Amazingly, with all of the money I have raised for the vets, I have got nothing but bad publicity from the dishonest and disgusting media.

@CNN is so disgusting in their bias, but they are having a hard time promoting Crooked Hillary in light of the new e-mail scandals.

Did Crooked Hillary help disgusting (check out sex tape and past) Alicia M become a U.S. citizen so she could use her in the debate?

People are just now starting to find out how dishonest and disgusting (FakeNews) @NBCNews is. Viewers beware. May be worse than even @CNN!

....and have demanded transparency so that this Rigged and Disgusting Witch Hunt can come to a close. So many lives have been ruined over nothing - McCarthyism at its WORST! Yet Mueller & his gang of Dems refuse to look at the real crimes on the other side - Media is even worse!

Some members of the media are very Angry at the Fake Story in the New York Times. They actually called to complain and apologize - a big step forward. From the day I announced, the Times has been Fake News, and with their disgusting new Board Member, it will only get worse!

According to NBC News, Voters Nationwide Disapprove of the so-called Mueller Investigation (46%) more than they Approve (41%). You mean they are finally beginning to understand what a disgusting Witch Hunt, led by 17 Angry Democrats, is all about!

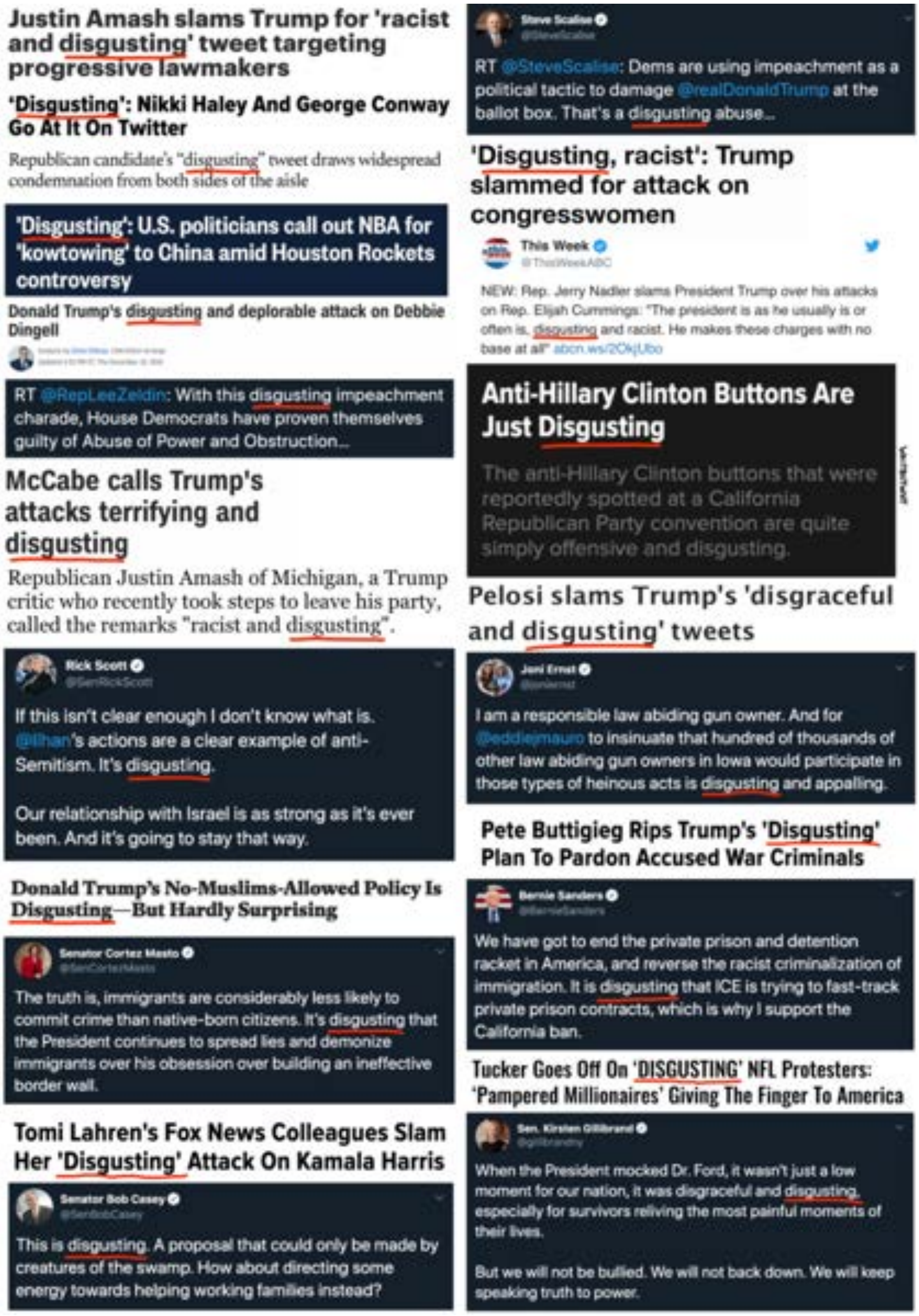
Nervous Nancy Pelosi is a disgrace to herself and her family for having made such a disgusting statement, especially since I was with foreign leaders overseas. There is no evidence for such a thing to have been said. Nervous Nancy & Dems are getting Zero work done in Congress....

So sad to see the Democrats sticking up for people who speak so badly of our Country and who, in addition, hate Israel with a true and unbridled passion. Whenever confronted, they call their adversaries, including Nancy Pelosi, "RACIST." Their disgusting language.....

Really disgusting that the failing New York Times allows dishonest writers to totally fabricate stories.

...they are Anti-Semitic, they are Anti-America, we don't need to know anything about them personally, talk about their policies. I think they are American citizens who are duly elected that are running on an agenda that is disgusting, that the American people will reject.....

Well then. But maybe it's just Trump?



Justin Amash slams Trump for 'racist and disgusting' tweet targeting progressive lawmakers

'Disgusting': Nikki Haley And George Conway Go At It On Twitter

Republican candidate's "disgusting" tweet draws widespread condemnation from both sides of the aisle

'Disgusting': U.S. politicians call out NBA for 'kowtowing' to China amid Houston Rockets controversy

Donald Trump's disgusting and deplorable attack on Debbie Dingell

RT @RepLeeZeldin: With this disgusting impeachment charade, House Democrats have proven themselves guilty of Abuse of Power and Obstruction...

McCabe calls Trump's attacks terrifying and disgusting

Republican Justin Amash of Michigan, a Trump critic who recently took steps to leave his party, called the remarks "racist and disgusting".

Rick Scott
@SenRickScott

If this isn't clear enough I don't know what is. @IlhanMN's actions are a clear example of anti-Semitism. It's disgusting.

Our relationship with Israel is as strong as it's ever been. And it's going to stay that way.

Donald Trump's No-Muslims-Allowed Policy Is Disgusting—But Hardly Surprising

Senator Cortez Masto
@SenCortezMasto

The truth is, immigrants are considerably less likely to commit crime than native-born citizens. It's disgusting that the President continues to spread lies and demonize immigrants over his obsession over building an ineffective border wall.

Tomi Lahren's Fox News Colleagues Slam Her 'Disgusting' Attack On Kamala Harris

Senator Bob Casey
@SenBobCasey

This is disgusting. A proposal that could only be made by creatures of the swamp. How about directing some energy towards helping working families instead?

Steve Scalise
@SteveScalise

RT @SteveScalise: Dems are using impeachment as a political tactic to damage @realDonaldTrump at the ballot box. That's a disgusting abuse...

'Disgusting, racist': Trump slammed for attack on congresswomen

This Week
@ThisWeekABC

NEW: Rep. Jerry Nadler slams President Trump over his attacks on Rep. Elijah Cummings: "The president is as he usually is or often is, disgusting and racist. He makes these charges with no base at all" abcn.ws/2OkjUbo

Anti-Hillary Clinton Buttons Are Just Disgusting

The anti-Hillary Clinton buttons that were reportedly spotted at a California Republican Party convention are quite simply offensive and disgusting.

Pelosi slams Trump's 'disgraceful and disgusting' tweets

Joni Ernst
@joniernst

I am a responsible law abiding gun owner. And for @eddiejmauro to insinuate that hundred of thousands of other law abiding gun owners in Iowa would participate in those types of heinous acts is disgusting and appalling.

Pete Buttigieg Rips Trump's 'Disgusting' Plan To Pardon Accused War Criminals

Bernie Sanders
@BernieSanders

We have got to end the private prison and detention racket in America, and reverse the racist criminalization of immigration. It is disgusting that ICE is trying to fast-track private prison contracts, which is why I support the California ban.

Tucker Goes Off On 'DISGUSTING' NFL Protesters: 'Pampered Millionaires' Giving The Finger To America

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand
@gillibrandny

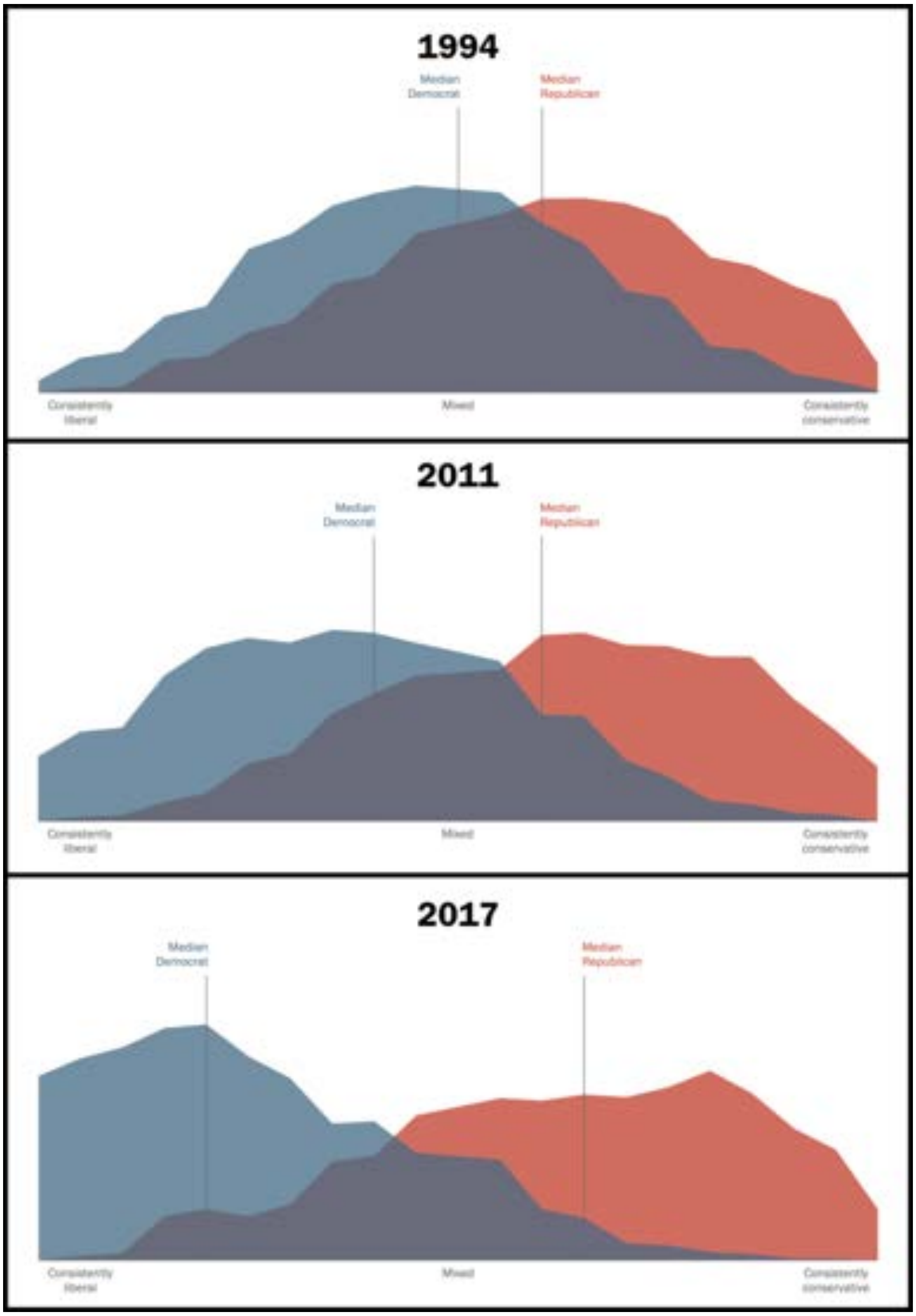
When the President mocked Dr. Ford, it wasn't just a low moment for our nation, it was disgraceful and disgusting, especially for survivors reliving the most painful moments of their lives.

But we will not be bullied. We will not back down. We will keep speaking truth to power.

Political disgust has become so common we barely even register it.

Zooming Back Out

With all of this in mind, let's return to this:



When I look at this trend, I see more than a simple story of the U.S. growing more politically polarized—I see just one manifestation of a much bigger story. The U.S. giant has fallen ill, and this visual is one of the symptoms.

We started this post looking at two well-documented trends in the U.S.: increasing polarization amongst citizens and within government. Then we looked at two major environmental changes that seem to be playing a large role in stoking and perpetuating those trends: geographic bubbles, generated by increased mobility, and information bubbles, generated by the shift from broadcast to narrowcast news and internet algorithms. These bubbles have Americans connected in all the wrong ways—no longer personally connected with people who disagree with them politically, and more connected than ever before in an online ecosystem that over-simplifies the world, encourages intellectual conformity, and spreads mistrust and hatred of the outgroup.

Here are four reasons this scares me:

1) We're losing our ability to gain knowledge. If our perceptions of reality are increasingly informed by media with other-than-truth motivations, we'll increasingly lose our handle on the truth. This is like the big U.S. giant becoming schizophrenic.

2) We're losing our ability to think together. Human giants can only think when people talk and when they're free to say what they really think. As Echo Chambers grow larger and more intimidating, people inside them are afraid to defy the sacred narrative. And the more all-encompassing political identities become, the more topics turn from kickable machines to precious infants. Meanwhile, intergroup communication suffers even more, as opposing groups become totally unable to collaborate on ideas. As the downward trend deepens, the voices of high-minded Progressivism and Conservativism—the team that navigates the U.S. up the mountain—are growing more timid and harder to hear. The U.S. giant is losing its ability to learn.

3) We're losing our ability to cooperate. A polarized country that isn't capable of building broad coalitions can't take forward steps—it can only self-inflict.

4) We're doing that thing that people do before really, really awful things happen. Disgust should scare you as much as it scares me. If our species were a person, it would have a mix of beautiful and unadmirable qualities—but its darkest quality would be the ability to dehumanize.

When I back up and look at all of these things at the same time—when I mentally zoom out as far as I can and try to see the downward macro trend all at once—it looks like one thing to me:

The Power Games.

Humans in a constitutional democracy aren't quite at home. Part of us—our Higher Minds—are right in their natural habitat, like bullied nerds who finally graduated high school and moved to a place where they can be themselves. But our Primitive Minds are wild animals caged up in a zoo. The cage is made up of the constitution and laws, but even more so, it's made of widely accepted, socially enforced liberal norms.

The Value Games is a remarkable human structure and when it's working well, it can not only cage the worst instincts of the Primitive Mind but harness them into tremendous productivity. But the Value Games aren't really our natural way, and they're fragile. The Power Games are always pulling on us like gravity, and whenever there's a crack in the Value Games structure, we're at risk of falling. The Primitive Mind may be in a cage, but it never stops pushing against the bars, searching for one it can bend, trying to break out.

The geographic and information bubbles are relatively new. The internet especially is evolving and changing literally by the month. The U.S. was built to be incredibly robust, but such insanely rapid environmental change is pushing it to its limits.

When I look at the downward trend, I see a resurgence of the Power Games. We're starting to do a lot of those things humans do when they're at their worst. We're tossing our principles aside and glomming onto big, mindless giants who aren't sentient enough to know that that kind of structure doesn't make sense anymore. As the country slides its way down the mountain, we're behaving more and more like the output of a non-living, force-of-nature software program that only wants genes to be immortal.

This is what I mean when I say the U.S. giant has fallen ill. In the chaos of rapid environmental changes, the giant's immune system—the thing that keeps the Power Games in check—has become weakened, and the Power Games is spreading through its body like an epidemic.

I don't really know what's chicken or egg here. Maybe the two bubbles caused the political polarization. Maybe the geographic bubble is enhanced by the polarization. Maybe it's all Newt's fault. Or maybe Newt's tactics only worked because the giant was already sick. Maybe Trump is an inevitable symptom of the sickness, or maybe he's an unusually harmful exacerbator of it. Ditto for social justice bullies. Maybe all of this is business as usual and I'm over-catastrophizing what's just another trough in an overall upward-moving roller coaster. Or maybe it would be business as usual if not for the internet, which makes this a dangerous anomaly. No one seems to know for sure. But we *can* figure out how to get ourselves onto a better trajectory.

After the last chapter, I was accused by some readers of practicing "bothsidesism," a suggestion that I was depicting both U.S. parties as equal and equally at fault for the state of the nation, as a kind of cop-out.

I get it. False equivalencies are infuriating. Imagine you're eight and you're in an argument with your sibling. It escalates and he shoves you. You shove him back. Then he slaps you incredibly hard across the face. Then your parent says, "Both of you, stop it!" You protest that what he just did was *much* worse than anything you did, to which your parent says, "I don't care about the details—you're both grounded." It would be maddeningly unfair.

People do this kind of thing all the time with societal conflicts, whether between political parties or racial groups or any other kind of faction. The people who do it often have good intentions—they want to seem fair and they think spreading out the blame equally is the best way to diffuse things. Other times, it happens when defenders of the group who did the "face slap" want to brush over the real story. Whatever the reason, drawing a false equivalency about unequal wrongdoing is as unfair as blaming only one side when there's equal wrongdoing.

The problem with posting what's clearly a book one chapter at a time is that you can't get the entirety of your point across until the last chapter is posted. Now that another chapter has come out, I hope it's a little clearer that "I don't care about the details—you're both grounded" isn't quite my angle here. I see it more like two siblings who have caught rabies. In this particular household, the siblings always have rabies to some extent (the low-rung element of both parties), but recently, their rabies have been flaring up. More rabies makes them want to bite each other more, and the way this strain of rabies works, every time a sibling gets bitten, it causes their own rabies to ramp up a bit, making them more likely to bite the other—and it becomes a vicious cycle. Diagnosing which sibling has rabies worse right now or whose rabies flared up first, while also a worthwhile endeavor, isn't the right focus of this series. Writing a series focused on scolding a single faction of society and riling up anger toward that side is not only unlikely to help the U.S. giant get better, it's the exact type of thing that *exacerbates* the illness—it would just be adding another *bite* to the rabies war.

What seems more pressing to me is the bigger fact that our family has an increasingly dire rabies problem—one that, in the current world of technological explosion, may have existentially scary consequences if it doesn't get fixed quickly.

My obsession over the past three years has been trying to figure out how our national immune system works, where it draws its strength from, and how we can get it working again. I spent so long on this because I believe a resurgence of the Power Games is *the* limiting factor of every other societal struggle I might write a post about. Every other concern I have—AI safety, climate change, war, poverty, disease, injustice, unstable institutions—hinges on that larger concern. If the U.S., and other countries in a similar predicament, can figure out how to get their immune systems back to full strength in this rapidly changing world, allowing us to think together and work together, we'll make forward progress in *all* of those areas. If our nations continue to get sicker and fall further downward into the Power Games, each and every one of those concerns will suffer. Everybody will lose.

As bleak as this may seem, one thing makes me hopeful.

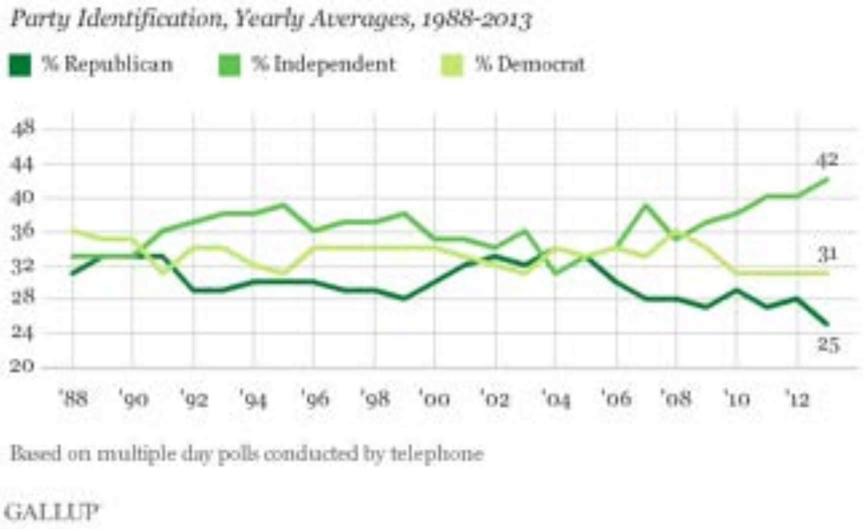
Pew's findings that polarization has sharply increased were well-publicized after the release of its report. What didn't make much news was this line:[24]

These sentiments are not shared by all—or even most—Americans. The majority do not have uniformly conservative or liberal views. Most do not see either party as a threat to the nation. And more believe their representatives in government should meet halfway to resolve contentious disputes rather than hold out for more of what they want.

Or this line:[25]

But beyond the ideological wings, which make up a minority of the public, the political landscape includes a center that is large and diverse, unified by frustration with politics and little else.

In the course of my research, in addition to everything I found about increased polarization, I came across a handful of stats that told a second story. Like this chart:[26]

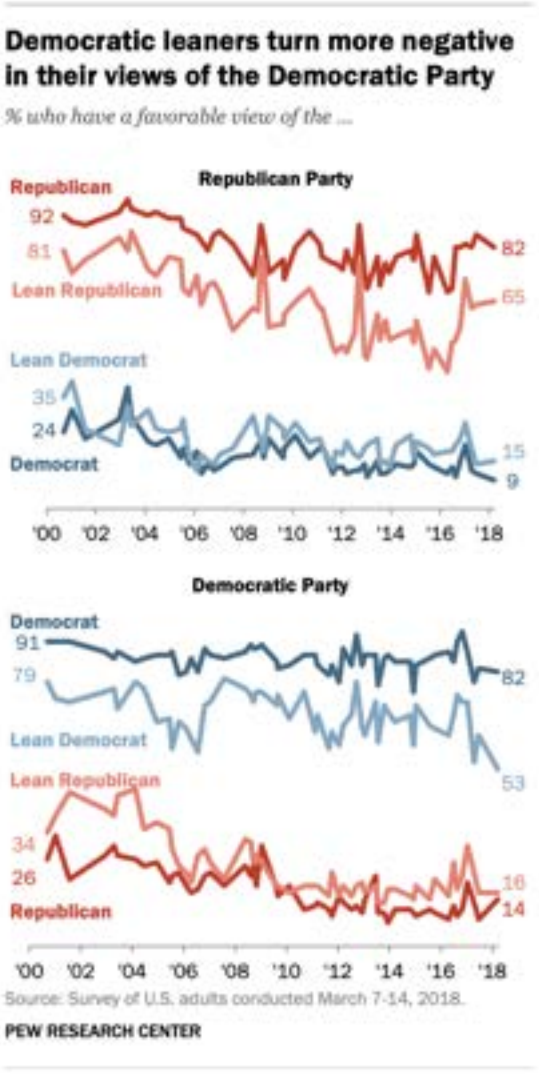


Party Identification, Yearly Averages, 1988-2013

Based on multiple day polls conducted by telephone

GALLUP

And this one:[27]



Democratic leaners turn more negative in their views of the Democratic Party

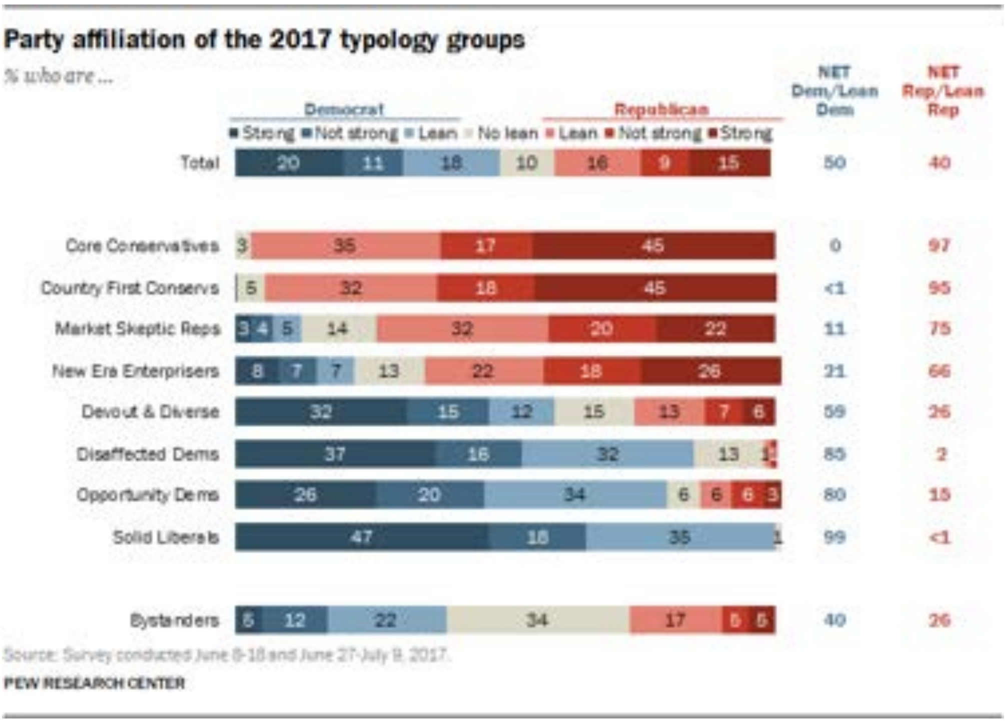
% who have a favorable view of the ...

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 7-14, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

I've felt like an exception in my "I used to be a staunch Democrat, but I don't feel that way anymore" story, but the more I dug in, the more I realized that a *huge* portion of both parties felt the same way.

Whenever the stats went to a more granular level, everything seemed messier than the story we always hear:[28]



Party affiliation of the 2017 typology groups

% who are ...

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Most interesting to me was a fascinating report called *The Hidden Tribes of America*—a year-long study that collected the views of over 8,000 Americans—which found that two-thirds of Americans fall into what they call the "Exhausted Majority."

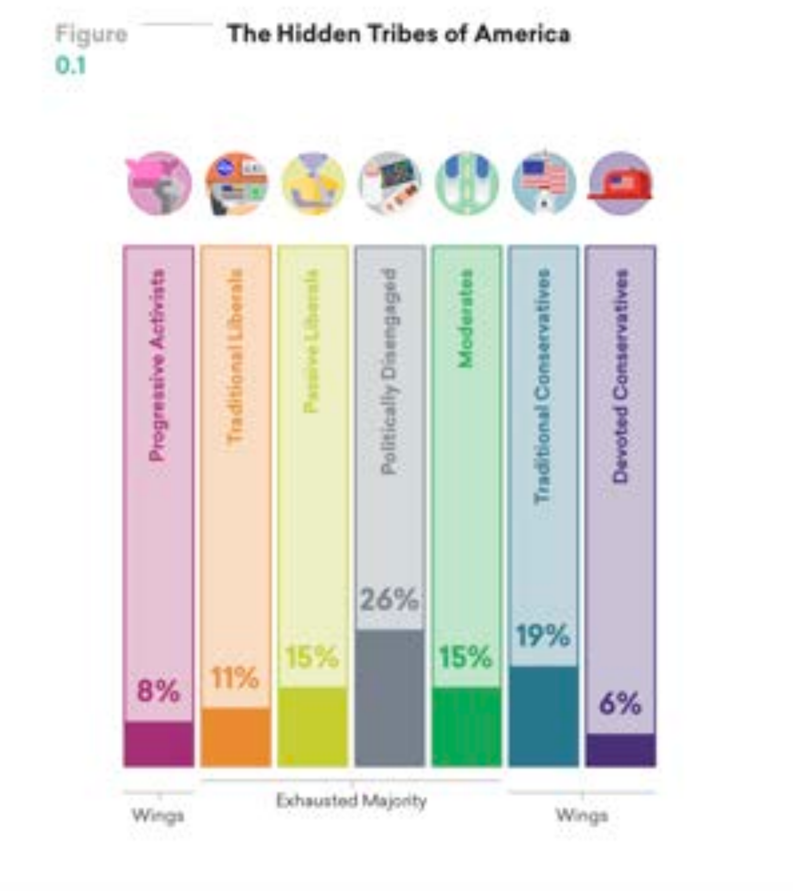


Figure 0.1 The Hidden Tribes of America

While the "Wings," as *Hidden Tribes* refers to the more politically partisan crowd, tend to hold extreme views, the Exhausted Majority has "more complex views on contested issues than our polarizing public debates would suggest." According to the report, the Exhausted Majority holds a wide variety of attitudes and viewpoints, but its members share four main attributes:

- *They are **fed up** with the polarization plaguing American government and society*
- *They are often **forgotten** in the public discourse, overlooked because their voices are seldom heard*
- *They are **flexible** in their views, willing to endorse different policies according to the precise*

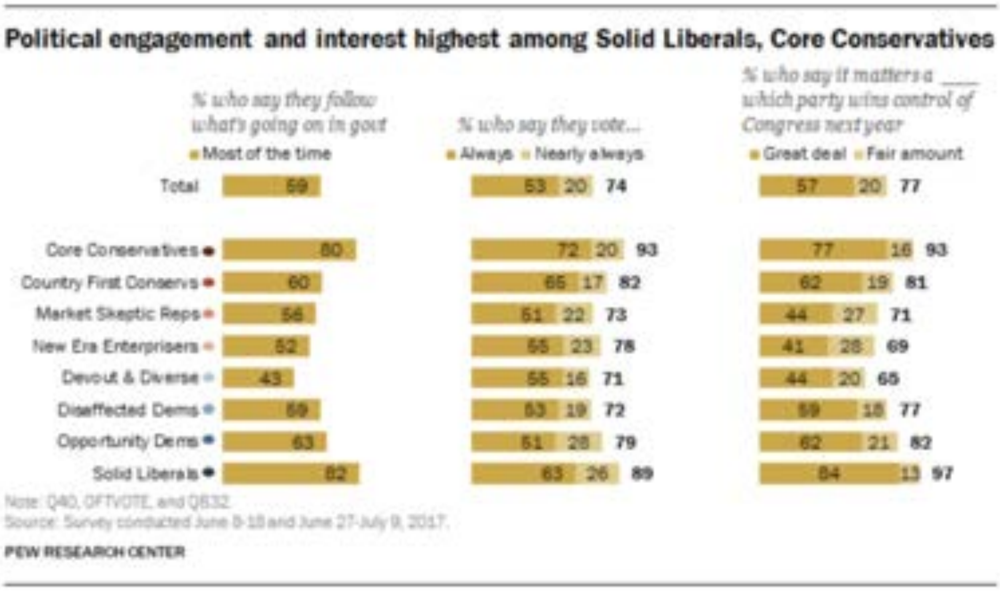
- *situation rather than sticking ideologically to a single set of beliefs*
- *They believe we can **find common ground***

Sounds a lot like…high-rung political thinking?

If the report is to be believed, the common perception that citizens are becoming more polarized, more ideological, and more tribal about politics is an illusion.

But where does this illusion come from? Typically, majority groups in a society are, if anything, too powerful, leaving minority groups marginalized. So why would politics work the opposite way?

Pew offers one possibility: "The rise of ideological uniformity has been much more pronounced among those who are the most politically active." Those with the most extreme, black-and-white views are also those most vocal about politics, most active in dictating the national dialogue, and most likely to vote:



Note: Q40, OFTVOTE, and QB32.
Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

That's definitely part of the explanation, but it's also nothing new. Hardcore partisans have always been highly politically active. Something else is going on here.

When the Value Games are working properly, people holding the most extreme views are relegated to the fringes—retaining enough of a voice to effect change when they're right about something but unable to do too much damage when, more often, they're wrong. But in the Power Games, it's often the case that small groups of more extreme people end up with outsized power over others.

Maybe instead of focusing on how politically active the most extreme people are, we should be asking ourselves why those who hold "more complex views" have become so *inactive*.

In the series intro, I wrote:

When I told people I was planning to write a post about society, and the way people are acting, and the way the media is acting, and the way the government is acting, and the way everyone else is acting, people kept saying the same thing to me.

Don't do it. Don't touch it. Write about something else. Anything else. It's just not worth it. …

It hit me that what I really needed to write about was that—about why it's perilous to write about society.

I ended up going with some combination of both of these things: society's current situation and why it's an especially bad idea for me to write about it—and how those two things are related.

This chapter focused on the first item: society's current situation. But the second item—about how incredibly ill-advised it currently is to write about that situation—is the item we need to look hardest at.

That's where we'll go in the penultimate chapter of The Story of Us.

If you like Wait But Why, sign up for the **email list** and we'll send you new posts right when they come out. It's a super unannoying list I promise.

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More Posts:

The AI Revolution: The Road to Superintelligence. One reason we need to get our shit together soon, not later.

My transcript of the Trump / Clinton town hall debate. The kind of silliness that happens in a polarized country.

For everyone sick of politics, **here's a big mailbag post** of totally unrelated topics.

Sources, Etc.

I did between one and two trillion hours of research for this chapter. The specific citations are all linked and/or footnoted in the text, which seems like a more useful place for them than in a massive list down here. Instead, the below list includes some of the core sources and data, along with some articles I think will make for good reading for anyone who wants to go on the full spiral on this topic. At the bottom, I included a group of links that were the cause of procrastination spirals because you should have to waste time on them too.

Data, Studies, and Reports

A lot of the data in this chapter is courtesy of Pew. Here's their U.S. Politics homepage. Their giant 2017 report on polarization in the U.S. is full of interesting charts. Another good one from 2018 with more specifics. And their report on how the country may not actually be as polarized as it seems.

The Hidden Tribes of America is a fascinating report that breaks out of the oversimplified Left/Right divide, finding it more accurate to categorize Americans into seven tribes (three of which make up the more extreme "Wings" and four of which make up the less partisan "Exhausted Majority.") Worth flipping through.

Gallup data that shows a rising percentage of Independents in the U.S. (Alan Abramowitz is skeptical, suggesting that many supposed Independents are "closet partisans").

The media bias chart I included in the post, from AllSides.

Interesting Pew data about the ideological makeup of different media brand's audiences, and how much each brand is trusted by people in different parts of the political spectrum.

Voteview is a useful database that shows you the results of every Congress and Senate vote, now or in history (or enter a zip code to see who the representatives are there—if you don't know who your own representative is, you can find out here and no one will ever know). The three "polarization over time" charts in the post can be found here. You can also look at interesting charts that illustrate the political leanings of everyone in the House and Senate, or the history of U.S. parties and their ideologies. If you want to be pretty bored, you can read about their ideological measuring metric (DW-NOMINATE) here.

Ballotpedia tallies up *National Journal's* annual "vote rating analysis," allowing you to pull up the data on exactly how conservative or liberal each U.S. House member voted the previous year.

An interactive from *Time* letting you mouse over the states and see how campaign spending has increased since the 80s. Not sure who would want this, but here's the raw data on campaign spending (and the cost of winning an election table from the post).

Interesting analysis of the distribution of right- vs. left-wing media during the 2016 U.S. election.

A 2014 analysis about the state of journalism—the demographics, ideologies, and attitudes of U.S. journalists today.

Here's the big analysis of political tweets I referenced.

A meta-analysis of 51 experimental studies, involving over 18,000 participants, on partisan bias. The findings: the Left and Right show similar levels of political bias.