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Social Movements and the Sacrifice of Epistemic Rationality

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There are two common ways to engage with ideas. The first is to treat them as models for the world, ideally providing us with greater accuracy or understanding and thus agency in our choices. The second is to view ideas exclusively in terms of their effects upon people and their relationships with one another.

In practice we all do both.

It's almost impossible to consider a statement without considering the impact it might have upon likely audiences and we can rarely segregate our desire for truth entirely from our other desires or aspirations. Nevertheless there are still clearly different degrees to which we can weigh the first mode of thinking versus the second.

It's tempting to try and parse the difference between these approaches in terms like 'prosocial' versus 'antisocial.' Altruistic science versus malicious manipulation. Internal clarity versus public positioning. But the dynamics are usually more

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complicated. We may, for example, lie to ourselves, focusing on the psychological effect a certain narrative or frame would have for us. Even honest communication with the goal of providing others with more agency necessarily involves modeling them, considering what frames or presentations will be most likely to “manipulate” them into an accurate understanding.

Of course one can make a utilitarian case for certain modes of discourse — the construction or presentation of ideas and statements — that intentionally deviate from improving accuracy. Obviously no one would object to lying to the gestapo at your front door about the border-crossing refugees you’ve hidden inside. But most of our interactions are rarely so extreme.

Today we frequently read a news article or an editorial piece and think first and foremost about it as a *development* in a strategic arena. Who benefits and loses from a certain statement or claim, and in what ways. What friendships are brought closer or severed. What demographics align. What social forces gain momentum. Those raised on the internet know this intuitively. Every development in The Discourse is a military act, every argument is a soldier.

The political movements of this primordial moment in the information age — as diverse as “social justice” and the “alt-right” — operate almost entirely in such a frame. Truth always has a bias and nuance is betrayal, or at least any nuance that smells of The Enemy. We can afford to tell some facts, but never all of them. Framing and narrative are half of everything, and the other half is who your utterances place you in alliance with.

I’ve long argued that the better part of this vicious polarization is not the natural tendency of information technologies to create bubbles but the limited capacity or hamfisted means of our present technologies to give us *agency* in our social networks.

Closed conversations with limited audiences are plainly useful, even necessary. Specialized knowledge bases and discourses are critical to the development and advancement

of ideas. Physicists need to be able to have conversations with other physicists without fear of derailment by cranks. Women sometimes need the company of other women to be able to discuss common experiences without constantly having to explain or prove them to the disbelieving. This loose clustering is hardly pernicious unto itself. What has fueled runaway ideological and demographic nationalism in our era is our inability to associate and disassociate in ways that we can completely control. Our communication technologies provide little nuance in our selection of audience. The choices are basically very select private chats or broadcasting to everyone.

When literally any stranger can show up in your mentions or in the comments, people necessarily turn harsh as a means of policing online “spaces” by overwhelming cruelty or other social psychological pressures. There are then sneering appeals to “coolness” that are necessarily statements about your social alliances. Since our tools are still too blunt to fine-tune audience and association, we resort to tribal discourses and fractal nationalisms.

The chaos and tribalism of our era is not an indictment of globalism or universalism but an indictment of how our heretofore existing hegemonies were built. The norms and beliefs of the pre-internet era were incredibly suboptimal; they had escaped any real evolutionary pressures, backed by institutions and histories of centralized violence. Now those universal assumptions and patterns, grown bloated and domesticated, are being eaten alive by their sudden contact with an archipelago of ideological and subcultural ecosystems.

Centralization and institutionalization has weakened the epistemic muscles of civil society. Developing efficient grassroots social organisms and instincts for parsing truth takes time, and while they slowly and fitfully evolve from the primordial market, even the stupidest of ideas can win for a while with a few shallow tricks. Every inanity from nazis to flat-earthers are gorging themselves in this environment.

We exist in a period of grave upheaval, when white nationalists have begun to stalk the streets confidently again, murdering on a whim.

Obviously we must mobilize, we must convey the graveness of this situation, and we must get serious about responding with strength of our own. This is a time for movement building. For stepping forward to boldly face the challenges and horrors arising.

But it is precisely in such situations when it becomes easier and easier to think *entirely* in terms of friends and enemies, to dismiss ideas as phantasmal distractions without pull or torsion. It is precisely when the social stakes are so high that we risk accidentally trapping ourselves in a world of nothing but social positioning.

Things *matter*, and we cannot pretend that they don't for the sake of some illusion of detached rationality, but we should nevertheless always bend towards it. Accuracy in our picture of reality is incredibly important, without accuracy our agency slips away, and the first thing small deviations from rationality do is hide the scope of their consequences. True rationality is not emotional detachment, nor is it willful blindness to the complexities of discourse and political struggle in favor of some simplistic code.

But social positioning is the language and paradigm of power, it encourages us to think *entirely* in its terms. The psychosis of power is a creeping denial of anything else besides the game. Eventually the entire premise of accuracy is lost to the most distant recesses of our minds, everything becomes positioning, and those not swallowed up *entirely* by the game are rendered enemies. Sincerity becomes viewed as betrayal, a weakness in the ranks, an unwillingness to fully embrace the most vicious tools. Or at least the most effective *in the immediate*. In a war of social positioning the honest person is criminally untrustworthy. Truth is lost and only teams remain.

This is how power wins. Small little cycles of feedback, building up to a storm of obtuse tribalism, authoritarianism, and sociopathy.