The Grueling Subject

In Defense of Politics

I wrote most of the following post in 2013 and cleaned up the draft to publish it now. If the post feels a bit dated, that's why.

Politics is seen as the [mindkiller](#). Alyssa Vance from http://rationalconspiracy.com argues:

> Politics is suspicious as the best means to ends for other reasons. [...] It's also zero-sum, and extremely competitive. So much human and social capital is going there already, yours probably won't make a dent.

Is that true? Is it impossible for the very smart person without much resources to make a dent?

Years ago I was talking with someone from an East European country about how they demonstrate to get rid of their government. When asked for a detailed background on the reasons of why the particular government should go they said that the reasons aren't well described by any English source.

I suggested that instead of spending their time being the 10,001 person attending a demonstration they should write up the reasons why the government is bad in a detailed manner and publish it in the Guardian's Comment is free section.

In that case, knowledge of the politics of the country and good writing skills would have been enough to make a dent.

When it comes to whether their government steps down, obviously it matters how other countries see the situation in the country. For someone who thinks that the government should step down, it should be obvious that it's important that the best reasons why the government should step down should be available in English.

If you look at how Mubarak lost political power in Egypt, people in the West who thought their media informed them didn't really understand the situation.

They were unaware of the relevant politics. They didn't know that according to [US embassy cables released by wikileaks](#):

> Academics and civilian analysts painted a portrait of an Egyptian military in intellectual and social decline, whose officers have largely fallen out of society's elite ranks. They describe a disgruntled mid-level officer corps harshly critical of a defense minister they perceive as incompetent and valuing loyalty above skill in his subordinate

The Egyptian military runs part of the Egytian economy. The IMF pushed for typical Washington Consensus policies and as a result a lot of private business came into Egypt and made money. What happened to the military?

Lee Sustar wrote in February 2011 [The roots of Egypt's uprising](#):

> The top military brass, however, hasn't cashed in on Egypt's economic growth to the same extent as private businesses. Indeed, military officials see the

privatization of state-owned enterprises as a threat to their economic standing and political clout.

If you look at that situations it much easier to understand why the Military didn't do something against the protesters that brought down Mubarak but now takes strong measures against the Muslim brotherhood. The West wanted to see the fall of Mubarak as a sign that democracy won instead of seeing it as a sign that the military got what they wanted.

Why does that matter to someone who wants to create political change? It shows that the general public is horribly informed about what goes on in the political sphere.

Before Bradley Manning submitted files to Wikileaks, Wikileaks dealt with information about corruption in Kenya. By leaking the [Kroll report](#) they [contributed](#) significantly to a different party winning the 2007 election.

Why do those examples from Egypt, Kenya and East Europe matter? You might say, of course people who spread information can change things in those countries but what about the USA?

If that sentiment resonates with you it should make you think about whether the USA is democratic in a meaningful way. Democracy is about citizens being able to affect the political process through free speech.

Why might you think such a thing? To be a politician in the US congress you need to gather a lot of money from donors. The Democratic party recommends that new US congressmen spend 4 hours of their day raising money. Fortunately, in practice the amount of time seems to be not that [extreme](#). After all, fundraising isn't fun.

The problem is that it's not easy to reach politicians directly. A lot of people try it and it's going to be hard to get sufficient attention from a US congressman to explain to him in detail why a certain policy is wrong.

What options do we actually have to create political change? Julian Assange had arguably a large political impact given that he's a single person who's not that rich.

What's his self professed goal? Justice. Defining justice itself isn't an easy task. We can however observe that sometimes there are groups that do something that isn't in the interest of the broad public.

If one member of a group of 100 people thinks that the group is engaging in injustice that is a valuable data point. Groups where every member thinks the group is doing good should be able to outcompete groups where some members think the group engages in injustice.

That's where Assange comes into play. He wants to empower that single individual that thinks the group is injust. Assange also made the observation that if a group spends a large amount of resources on keeping certain information secret that corresponds to the harm that the group will suffer should the information become public.

He makes the further observation that if it's possible for a single individual who thinks that a group is unjust to bring down the whole group, members of the group won't share all information with each other anymore. When it becomes harder to share information inside the group the group has to effectively pay a secrecy tax. That

means that the group is less effective in its battle against other groups in society that don't have to pay that tax because their members believe in their course.

Assange articulated that theory with using graph theory in a paper titled [Conspiracy as Governance](#) in 2006. From there he goes to accept every whistleblower that wants to contribute an internal document. He founded Wikileaks for that purpose. In some sense you could say that he took the idea that "everything that can be destroyed by truth, shall be" very [seriously](#).

What is the problem with that political theory of change? It's not that it is ineffectual. It's that it is powerful enough that you get into problems. Assange made some powerful people really angry and as a result he spent years in the Ecudaorian embassy and is now imprisoned under conditions with are called torture in the [Lancet](#).

I personally don't want to do that kind of politics. I don't want to attack other groups in a manner which endangers myself. That's my conscious choice. The founding fathers of the US payed the price of their victory in blood. But how do you do effective politics without harming yourself? To answer that question it's useful to look at the foundation of our current political orthodoxy.

Milton Friedman wrote in the 1982 preface of *Capitalism and Freedom*

> **Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.** That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.

Milton Friedman developed a lot of political policy ideas that had a big impact. He knew that you can't just go and demand the government to change. Usually the government changes when there some form of crisis. When in crisis mode politicians want to be seen as doing something about the crisis.

As I wrote above, politicians don't really want to engage in hard work. That means that someone else often needs to have done the intellectual legwork beforehand. Politicans seek experts and then take the policy ideas from those experts.

Friedman and a lot of think tanks specialised into developing detailed policy proposals. These days there are think tanks that provide ready made bills. A congressman can just take the bill and copy paste it without having to do any work.

Thinks tanks have the advantage that they can spend money on feasible developing model bills.

We however have seen that Wikipedia managed to outcompete the Encyclopedia Britanica. There in principle nothing that stops a smart programmer from building a platform that provides for model bills that change society for the better.

The hard part will be around getting contributors to focus on practical effects of policies and move beyond idealism.

Some demands just aren't realistic and have no chance of being implemented. On the other hand I think there a lot of room for smart policies that are simply superior to existing policies.

Once you talk about whether different policy tools work, you also have a discussion that's a lot less mind-killed.

In building such a tool you have to make certain choices. You can build it as a hosted website. You can also build it as a distributed platform that runs on home computers.

Given that you don't want outside interference from NSA, you want a distributed architecture.

Why do these thoughts matter, even if you don't want to invest a significant amount of time into politics? Many readers of LessWrong are software engineers or move in the startup space. As such they are in a position to make important architecture choices. When deciding whether or not a software that you design relies on a central US server that stores all user data you are making a political choice.

I don't want to say that cloud architecture is inherently politically wrong but if the only reason you decide for a cloud architecture is because it's a cool buzzword, you are doing political evil. If you then complain that congress doesn't implement your pet political idea, you should look at yourself and judge the extent to which you are part of the problem.

Whenever you make big architecture choices in software that affect society you should think in detail about how that will change the power balance in society. Commenting on random reddit posts about the evil of software patents isn't being politically active.

To the extent that LessWrong is full of intelligent 20-somethings I would predict that in 10 years people of this group will be in positions to make influential architecture choices. The only way to make those responsible is to understand the political effects.

But what about those things that aren't in your direct sphere of effect? Think about policies. Even if you don't have a ready-made bill that a congressman can copy and paste, ideas about policy are important.

[Zeitgeist Addendum](#) is for example a political movie that opposes the status quo. It has some popularity according to some people who hate the status quo. Even if you disagree that the status quo is bad the policy ideas that the movie pushes are dangerous.

One of them is that all economic decisions should be made by a "scientifically" designed central computer who knows what's best for everyone. What about the problem of people not wanting to do what the central computer tells them? People only would do that if they are selfish, and people who get the right education won't be selfish and thus work for the common good and recognize that it's the common good to do what the "scientifically" designed central computer tells them to do.

Here we know about the problems of FAIs, however many people on the internet don't. Because of lack of well argued alternatives to the status quo they might follow insane ideologies like the one articulated in Zeitgeist Addendum. Unfortunately I have seen smart people advocate Zeitgeist Addendum as a means of being contrarian.

Mencius Moldbug effective at changing political opinions despite not writing in a way that optimized for attracting a large audience. Moldbug is right when he argues that most people don't understand politics. Moldbug solution of rolling back all social

progress is still bad. You can meaningfully say that ending slavery was good. The case goes for legalising homosexuality.

I don't have a good answer of what our political system should look like. But I do think that's an important question. Discussing it is worthwhile. If we find a design that nicely fits together there are a lot of people who hate the status quo and who gladly take your political philosophy if they don't have to do the leg work of thinking up the fundamentals themselves.

How do you read the news critically?

Epistemic status: My own theories that developed over years based on reading and giving mainstream media interviews about Quantified Self.

When the phrase 'fake news' became popular in 2016, many people called for critical news consumption. The American left used the term to talk about new venues that were very successful in producing stories that went viral on Facebook. Later Donald Trump co-opted the phrase to talk about the mainstream media.

The quality of the information of both kinds of sources is radically different. At the same time the mainstream media isn't a paragon of truth either. Given that there's little good writing about how to interpret news articles, I will try to describe a few key features of how reading the news media can mislead.

There's a common idea in the American discourse that you find informative articles by seeking for articles that are unbiased, have a neutral point of view and are objective. While the ideal has positive intent, following it leads to being less informed.

Why would you want to read an article from someone who doesn't have a neutral point of view? The average journalist has huge time pressure when he writes an article. An article that's based on the understanding of a topic that can be derived by researching the topic for a day isn't very deep because the author doesn't understand the topic very deeply. Traditionally, outlets such a Foreign Policy and The Economist, that take a point of view and are more informative than news media that pretends to be neutral. These articles are more thought through. The author has an informed opinion on a matter – a bias that has intelligent reasoning behind it.

While some forms of bias can be easily seen by reading an article, many can not. It's easier to correct for bias when the author is open about his stance on the issue.

When Robert Moses took over the building of the Triborough Bridge there was a flaw in the previous plan. The sensible location for the Bridge would have been 100th Street as 85% of its predicted traffic was going to move through it. The plan for the Triborough Bridge called for it to be built at 125th Street which added 2,5 miles of additional travel for most users of the bridge. Robert Caro writes in The Power Broker in 1974, that William Randolph Hearst, who owned at the time two newspapers, wanted the bridge to be built on 125th Street, because he would financially benefit from it being built at that place as he owned deteriorating real estate that the government would buy from him as a result.

Instead of picking a fight with Hearst, Moses allowed the bridge to be built where Hearst wanted it to be built. The project succeeded and the bridge opened in 1936. It would have been nearly impossible for a reader who tries to find out whether a related article in Hearst's newspapers is biased to find out about the conflict of interest, given that there wasn't any public information about it. This not only affects the reporting on the story of this particular newspaper but by doing what Hearst wanted in this instance, Moses could count on Hearst's support for his other projects as well.

In contrast to a newspaper an organization like Amnesty International is far from having a neutral point of view. They invest a lot of effort into doing the research to get their facts right. This kind of research takes resources and the people that engage with it do it because they actually care about it and they have a point of view that it's

important. Even when you don't necessarily follow their conclusions they are often good sources for information.

The alternative to thinking of articles as either fulfilling the ideal of the detached and having neutral point of view is to practice an expanded version of theory of mind. Theory of mind is about thinking about what goes on the mind of someone else. Why "expanded" theory of mind? It's about not only taking into account the mind of the author of the article. In most cases, the author of the article isn't the only person involved in writing the article.

In most newspapers both in print and online the headline isn't written by the person who wrote the article but by a headline writer. The headline is written by a person who didn't do any research on the topic and whose job it is to advertise the article in the newspaper to get people to read it. If there are claims made in the headline that the article doesn't make, those claims should generally be disregarded. Headlines are designed to entice the reader but may not accurately represent the content.

The first article that was written about in the context of Quantified Self was syndicated to multiple websites and some of those had new image captions that painted me in a negative light that the journalist who wrote the main article didn't write. When you read an article you should put special caution into what's written in image captions as there's a good chance they didn't get written by a person who researched the main article.

While some websites publish articles without an editor being involved, in many cases an editor influences articles before publication. If a journalist makes a claim that creates legal liability for the newspaper when it's wrong, the editor will require deep research from the journalist to prove that the claim is right. On the other hand, the editor won't care about whether the journalist gets the age of a person inside the article right and as a result it's a lot more likely that an article will misstate the age of an interviewed person.

Whenever you ask yourself whether a claim that's inside an article is well researched it's useful to think about how much the journalist and his newspaper has to lose when the claim will get shown to be wrong.

While journalists do provide supporting evidence for their claims to the reader, they frequently can't share all the evidence they have. During interviews there are three basic modes:

#1: Information can be attributed to the person who's interviewed

#2: Information can be cited by anonymizing the person "A trusted source within the administration said..."

#3: Information is given on deep background and can't be used unless the journalist finds another source for the information.

A good investigative journalist usually has a lot of information that comes under #3 because people are more willing to share information with him under #3.

John Carreyrou brought through his investigative reporting light on the problems at Theranos. One of the lead scientists at Theranos committed suicide and Carreyrou spoke to his wife. Given that the wife was under a non-disclosure-agreement she shared her knowledge with him under #3. Carreyrou had a lot more information about

what Theranos did wrong than he could publicly disclose and the wife likely wasn't the only source of information that comes under #3.

Politicians who spent a lot of time with journalists often like it when they have someone to listen to talk about their troubles and when they don't want the information to appear in print it's often easy to simply declare the information to be shared under #3. There also cultural expectations that certain information should be automatically regarded as being shared under #3 in the mainstream media. When Michael Hastings wrote [his article](#) in the Rolling Stones that lead to the [sacking](#) of US general's Stanley McChrystal there was the sense that he violated the norms of the mainstream media who would have seen the information that got him fired has having been under #3 because of their cultural norms.

Roughly, a decade ago Buzzfeed was founded as a new model of publishing. It's founder Jonah Peretti had the insight that readers not only come to a news website because they want to get the daily news but that the new social media technologies allowed readers to share articles with each other. Buzzfeed provided his writers metrics to tell them about how viral their stories were and started to incentivise writers by the number of clicks their articles received and how often their articles get shared. People share articles when they get angry or feel happy about an article. They don't share an article when it makes them sad. As a result the most photo series about the [ruins of Detroit](#) don't have people in them while the [real Detroit](#) is full of homeless people. If the reality is sad, a journalist will try to write a story that will make you angry rather than sad.

Buzzfeed produced a model that allowed them to get a large audience but they missed respect. Buzzfeed decided that they want to be taken seriously and hired Michael Hastings and other investigative reporters. Even when the investigative reporters produce less clicks per hour of work, the stories they write are worth it because they give the website more [prestige](#). That prestige in turn makes it easier for Buzzfeed to convince advertisers to pay for sponsored stories on Buzzfeed. It's fortunate that prestige often goes hand in hand with providing true information but in cases where it doesn't, the reader should be very careful about claims that are made.

Investigative reporting can sometimes get dangerous. Michael Hastings died at the age of 33 when he was according to his widow writing a profile of CIA Director John O. Brennan in questionable circumstances. It's not clear whether his death was an accident but whether or not it actually was an accident the incident likely makes journalists who go for similar stories nervous.

Trump's ties to the mafia are an interesting story that doesn't get much reporting. While there was enough evidence of such ties, [Australian authorities blocked Trump](#) from building a casino and the US media is generally very interested in writing negative stories about Trump, you find few stories about Trump's mafia connections. The problem with writing those stories is that it's not only an attack on Trump but also an attack on the members of the mafia who don't like to be attacked. Wikileaks hosts some [interesting articles](#) for anyone who wants to better understand how the related mechanism allegedly works. For obvious reasons, I won't recount specific facts in my article and thinking through my likely reasons is left as an exercise for the reader.

The problem of missing information that a reporter can't access means that Forbes lists of the richest people is unlikely to actually list all the richest people, many of whom have a lot of their wealth in tax havens in complex structures where the ownership can't be assessed by a journalist.

Even when the information is available, the real world is very complex. A journalist, who wants to reach a broad audience for his writing, has to keep his story as simple as possible. It's the mark of a great journalist to be able to take a complex issue and explain it in a way that's simple. Journalism doesn't work by the academic standards where claims get qualified to avoid saying anything that isn't strictly true.

During my Quantified Self time, I gave a TV interview together with a friend who used the EmWave2 to meditate by doing heart rate variance biofeedback. We had the problem that most of the audience likely didn't know what heart rate variance was and there was no time to explain it because it wasn't central to the story of Quantified Self. After back and forth with the journalist to get the story to be more simple he ended up saying that he measures his heart rate. For the average member of the audience that was likely as informative as the more accurate claim that the EmWave2 measures heart rate variance but more sophisticated members of the audience would have had a problem if they would have interpreted the claim as face value.

Thinking about complexity is important when thinking about public relations. When we discussed which questions to have in the LW census we thought about adding questions about illegal drugs but decided against it. Even a number that 14% of the LessWrong population used illegal drugs would constitute an interesting factoid for a journalist who writes a story about LessWrong even when the number equals the number of the general population. On the other hand, the fact that I argue against adding a question about measuring illegal drug use via our census is on it's own no factoid that's interesting to write about in a newspaper article.

Savvy authors who write for a specialized audience about an important subject matter that's unlikely to be well received by a mainstream audience are well advised to raise the complexity of their writing in a way that they can't easily be quoted without the journalist explaining their position in more detail. While this doesn't make it impossible to write a story, it makes it harder.

Seymour Hersh who won the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting exposing the My Lai Massacre and its cover-up during the Vietnam War and who broke the story about [Abu Ghraib](#) wrote [The Killing of Osama bin Laden](#). Hersh describes how the official story of how the US killed Osama bin-Laden is a huge fabrication. At the time when the US military in the official story killed bin-Laden, he was a prisoner of the Pakastani's. The Pakastani's killed him before the American helicopters arrived and flew his dead body away. Despite his track record as an investigative journalist Hersh couldn't get the article published in a normal mainstream venue and had to go to the London Review of Books to get it out.

When we get back to stories for a mainstream audience, a story for a mainstream audience has to talk about narratives towards which the audience can relate. The question of how we deal with technology is culturally interesting and as a result journalists were very interested in writing articles about Quantified Self. It deals with our human relationship to the technology in our lives.

When Egypt had its revolution our news media liked to talk about Twitter and Facebook because the idea that Twitter and Facebook change our lives is a narrative that Western readers can relate to. Western readers are less interested in the fact that the military who runs parts of Egypts economy had an interested in the revolution succeeding.

[They didn't like that Hosni Mubarak and his son Gamal Mubarak where opening up Egypt for international business](). While Hosni Mubarak served in the military, his son whom he groomed to be the next president had his first job at bank of America. Under him the military was going to lose power over the Egyptian economy to foreigners.

While the military could have decided to stop the revolution they didn't need to because their power was never threatened. I wasn't surprised when the military later reinstated the dictatorship because they never gave up any power. From the narratives of Western media that event was unforeseeable. This narrative where the people have the power to overthrow a government regardless of what the military wants to happen in turn leads to bad public policy.

According to [Michael Cieply]() who worked at the New York Times, in its editorial process journalists are occasionally asked by editors to map a narrative a year in advance and then find the facts to write the articles according to the pre-maped narrative.

[Hans Rosling]() asked the US public, the US media, EU public and EU media questions about how well global development is going. When he asked "What percentage of the world's one-year old Children are vaccinated against measles? 20%, 50% or 80%?" only 6% of EU media members answered the correct answer of 80% with 8% of the EU public getting it right. They did much worse than a chimpanzee who picks the answer randomly. He got similar results for other questions about global development. While the newspaper stories are mostly fact-based, the narrative that they tell about the global world makes people who read them less informed about what goes on in the world.

When you read the news, don't see the article you are reading in isolation. Try to see it in the context that produced it to draw understanding of our world from it.

Beware of identifying with schools of thought

As a child I decided to do a philosophy course as an extracurricular activity. In it the teacher explained to us the notion of schools of philosophical thought. According to him classifying philosophers as adhering either to school A or school B, is typical for Anglo thought.

It deeply annoys me when Americans talk about Democrat and Republican political thought and suggest that you are either a Democrat or a Republican. The notion that allegiance to one political camp is supposed to dictate your political beliefs feels deeply wrong.

A lot of Anglo high schools do policy debating. The British do it a bit differently than the American but in both cases it boils down to students having to defend a certain side. Traditionally there's nearly no debating at German high schools.

When writing political essays in German school there's a section where it's important to present your own view. Your own view isn't supposed to be one that you simply copy from another person. Good thinking is supposed to provide a sophisticated perspective on the topic that is the synthesis of arguments from different sources instead of following a single source.

That's part of the German intellectual thought has the ideal of 'Bildung'. In Anna Wierzbicka tells me that 'Bildung' is a particularly German construct and the word isn't easily translatable into other languages. The nearest English word is 'education'. 'Bildung' can also be translated as 'creation'. It's about creating a sophisticated person, that's more developed than the average person on the street who doesn't have 'Bildung'. Having 'Bildung' signals having a high status.

According to this ideal you learn about different viewpoints and then you develop a sophisticated opinion. Not having a sophisticated opinion is low class. In liberal social circles in the US a person who agrees with what the Democratic party does at every point in time would have a respectable political opinion. In German intellectual life that person would be seen as a credulous low status idiot that failed to develop a sophisticated opinion. A low status person isn't supposed to be able to fake being high status by memorizing the teacher's password.

If you ask me the political question "Do you support A or B?", my response is: "Well, I neither want A or B. There are these reasons for A, there are those reasons for B. My opinion is that we should do C which solves those problems better and takes more concerns into account." A isn't the high status option so that I can signal status by saying that I'm in favour of A.

How does this relate to non-political opinions? In Anglo thought philosophic positions belong to different schools of thought. Members belonging to one school are supposed to fight for their school being right and being better than the other schools.

If we take the perspective of hardcore materialism, a statement like: "One of the functions of the heart is to pump blood" wouldn't be a statement that can be objectively true because it's teleology. The notion of function isn't made up of atoms.

From my perspective as a German there's little to be gained in subscribing to the hardcore materialist perspective. It makes a lot of practical sense to say that such as statement can be objectively true. I have gotten the more sophisticated view of the world, that I want to have. Not only statements that are about arrangements of atoms can be objectively true but also statements about the functions of organs. That move is high status in German intellectual discourse but it might be low status in Anglo-discourse because it can be seen as being a traitor to the school of materialism.

Of course that doesn't mean that no Anglo accepts that the above statement can be objectively true. On the margin German intellectual norms make it easier to accept the statement as being objectively true. After Hegel you might say that thesis and antithesis come together to a synthesis instead of thesis or antithesis winning the argument.

The German Wikipedia page for ["continental philosophy"](#) tells me that the term is commonly used in English philosophy. According to the German Wikipedia it's mostly used derogatorily. From the German perspective the battle between "analytic philosophy" and "continental philosophy" is not a focus of the debate. The goal isn't to decide which school is right but to develop sophisticated positions that describe the truth better than answers that you could get by memorizing the [teacher's password](#).

One classic example of an unsophisticated position that's common in analytic philosophy is the idea that all intellectual discourse is supposed to be based on logic. In [Is semiotics bullshit?](#) [PhilGoetz](#) stumbles about a professor of semiotics who claims: "People have an extra-computational ability to make correct judgements at better-than-random probability that have no logical basis."

That's seen as a strong violation of how reasoning based on logical positivism is supposed to work. It violates the memorized teachers password. But is it true? To answer that we have to ask what 'logical basis' means. David Chapman analysis the notion of logic in [Probability theory does not extend logic](#). In it he claims that in academic philosophical discourse the phrase logic means predicate logic.

Predicate logic can make claims such:

(a) All men are mortal.

(b) Socrates is a man.

Therefore:

(c) Socrates is mortal.

According to Chapman the key trick of predicate logic is logical quantification. That means every claim has to be able to be evaluated as true or false without looking at the context.

We want to know whether a chemical substance is safe for human use. Unfortunately our ethical review board doesn't let us test the substance on humans. Fortunately they allow us to test the substance on rats. Hurray, the rats survive.

(a) The substance is safe for rats.

(b) Rats are like humans

Therefore:

(c) The substance is safe for humans.

The problem with `Rats are like humans` is that it isn't a claim that's simply true or false.

The truth value of the claim depends on what conclusions you want to draw from it. Propositional calculus can only evaluate the statement as true or false and can't judge whether it's an appropriate analogy because that requires looking at the deeper meaning of the statement `Rats are like humans` to decide whether `Rats are like humans` in the context we care about.

Do humans sometimes make mistakes when they try to reason by analogy? Yes, they do. At the same time they also come to true conclusions by reasoning through analogy. Saying "People have an extra-computational ability to make correct judgements at better-than-random probability that have no logical basis." sounds fancy, but if we reasonably define the term logical basis as being about propositional calculus, it's true.

Does that mean that you should switch from the analytic school to the school of semiotics? No, that's not what I'm arguing. I argue that just as you shouldn't let tribalism influence yourself in politics and identify as Democrat or Republican you should keep in mind that philosophical debates, just as [policy debates](#), are seldom one-sided.

Daring to slay another sacred cow, maybe we also shouldn't go around thinking of ourselves as Bayesian. If you are on the fence on that question, I encourage you to read David Chapman's splendid article I referenced above: [Probability theory does not extend logic](#)

A systematic error that lead to a bad policy response to COVID-19

Introduction

When it comes to dealing with adopting good COVID-19 policies, our civilization failed. This suggests low ability to respond well to another future crisis that might be an X-risk. While we made multiple classes of errors this post will look at one particular class of errors. The failure to come to synthesis through dialectic reasoning. In dialectics, the Fichtean "thesis–antithesis–synthesis" model, when there are two opposing positions A and B there's the idea that it's often possible to develop a new position S that builds on the ideas of both positions with S being superior to both A and B.

Examples

Requiring FFP-2 masks

Thesis:

FFP-2 masks should be required because it's what medical professionals use to protect themselves against infection.

Antithesis:

Medical professionals get regular fit-testing while only [25–75%](#) of people without fit-testing use them successfully and most of the benefit they provide over OP-masks comes from using them correctly.

Synthesis:

Require FFP-2-masks and make fit-testing easily available for non-medical personnel.

Create an additional FFP-X category, where the manufacturer only needs to do one study to get them to the market and that study consists of giving a representative group fit-tests with the mask. Require the seller of the masks to tell the customers about the fit-test success rate of the mask

Allow DIY antibody tests

Thesis:

DIY antibody tests allow people to reduce the chance to infect other people by staying home when the test is positive.

Antithesis:

The high false-negative rate of DIY antibody tests gives people false confidence and potentially induces them to reckless behavior.

Synthesis:

Easy: Allow DIY antibody tests but require publishing sensivity/specificity in the product name whenever the product is sold or otherwise marketed.

Hard: Create a central app that gathers as much information as possible and that allows interpreting the test for the user given his background variables and that calculates MICRO-COVID for infecting other people for user selected activities.

The Situation in Berlin

In both examples we had a policy debate where the authorities first argued the antithesis and after the thesis good enough support switched to and not the synthesis.

This is surprising because the synthesis would provide more benefits, coming up with the synthesis isn't very hard, politicians listen to credentialed experts and there are high benefits to getting it right both for their reelection chances and for the good of society due to less deaths, disability and economic damage.

The Fichtean "thesis–antithesis–synthesis" found little discussion on LessWrong because it seems too simple and trivial to be useful. The current situation falsifies the hypothesis that the process happens on its own without working to make it happen.

My hypothesis for why the error happens

Given that the question has very high personal utility for everyone and impacts everyone personally, people attach a lot of value to getting the question right. When everyone attaches a lot of value to getting a question right, the question becomes political.

In political domains individuals gain status if they advocate the same position as their allies. Advocating the thesis instead of advocating the synthesis is a better [tribal signal](#).

It's a bad move for a political actor to create a synthesis themselves when there's a lot of status in advocating either the thesis or antithesis because allies advocate it.

In contrast there's the strategy of being a leader. A leader can propose a synthesis and win status by convincing others but this move carries a lot more responsibility and thus risk of losing local status then going along with the position of allies.

Politicians proclaim that they listen to the scientists as a move to avoid responsibility and pass the ball. Unfortunately, the layer a step down is still very political and afraid of thinking for themselves and doing synthesis.

When people with the intellectual ability at Harvard think up a [Covid-Roadmap](#) the resulting document is devoid of synthesis. This suggests that the level at which the document is created is too political for synthesis.

The dynamics are similar to that of a [moral maze](#) which multiple layers of political management produce a dysfunctional organization.

What can we do as rationalists?

Writing posts about individual clashes

According to Cummings, our community managed to speed up the first lockdown in the United Kingdom by writing blog posts that were read by multiple people in Number 10. While this is partly due to Cummings being a fellow rationalist and thus more inclined to listen to us, well written posts can be easily passed around.

A political actor that advocades a thesis doesn't lose the tribal benefits of advocating the thesis when he passes around a link to another person advocating a synthesis. If a post gets passed around enough, it creates public knowledge of the synthesis having support and it becomes safe for political actors to advocate it.

Understanding the reasoning failure better

While I proposed a model, there might be better models. Part of the rationalist project is improving general decision making and we should produce models and propose general solutions.

Conclusion

Any large crisis is going to produce the same dynamics where actions regarding the crisis become highly political. Given our political structures with multiple layers of political actors at power positions, we will get bad policy responses to the next crisis as well unless we act and change our structures or create new structures.