

# Against The Herd: Socratic Questioning Meets Systems Thinking

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"What the herd hates most is the one who thinks differently; it is not so much the opinion itself, but the audacity of wanting to think for themselves, something that they do not know how to do."

-Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860)

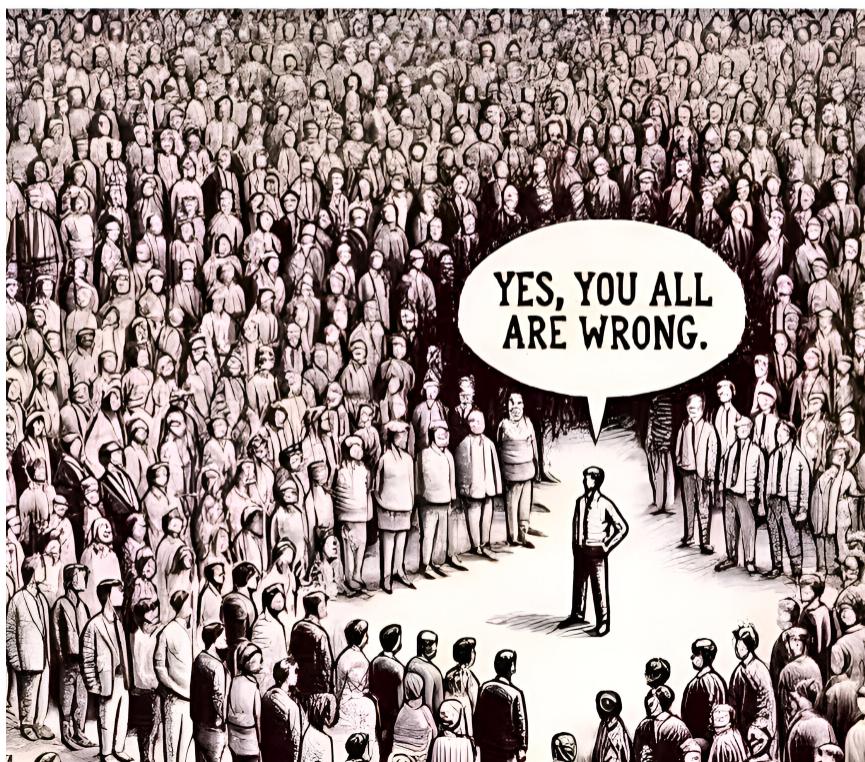


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# Chapter 1

## What is the herd?

Herds have a way of making us feel that we are alone. Most of us have felt this at some point in time or the other in our lives.

This book is about deconstructing a lot of things around herds.

So...time for the truth: The herd does not actually exist. Everyone thinks it exists, and everyone thinks everyone else is a part of it, but it does not exist.

The concept of the herd can best be explained using the idea of pluralistic ignorance, thank god this tweet thread is in the public domain (thanks to Tim Urban). Go through this tweet thread, and come back to the text, this latex editor isn't allowing me to format it the way I want to lmao.

And so, it turns out that what we call the herd isn't a fixed group of people — it's more like a floating, shapeless idea. I like to think of it as a control volume.

In thermodynamics and fluid mechanics — subjects dear to me — a control volume is a fixed space used to analyze what flows through it. Air or fuel particles can enter and exit freely. They may pass through or stay inside, but the space itself doesn't own them. In contrast, a control mass



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Psychologists use a term called "pluralistic ignorance" to describe the phenomenon of "no one believes, but everyone thinks that everyone believes." (h/t [@AdamMGrant](#))

Here's a way to visualize it:

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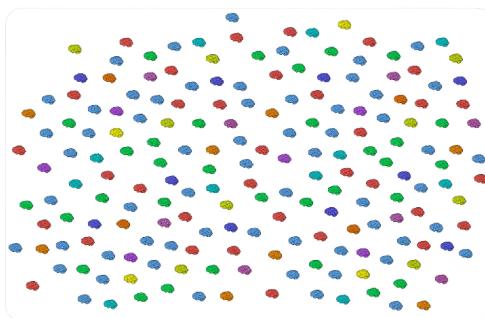


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Imagine a group of people who hold a wide variety of viewpoints on a certain topic. We can represent what each person thinks with a brain—the color of the brain represents their viewpoint. This is what a rich diversity of thinking looks like.



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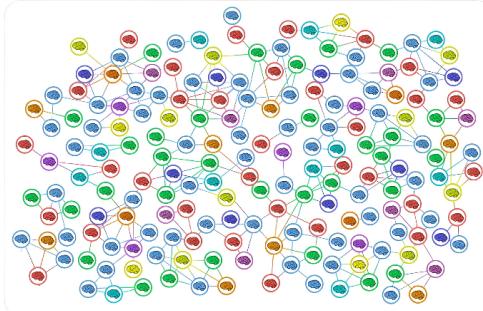


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Now let's put a circle around each brain. The color of the circle represents what each person is SAYING about the topic. When everyone is saying what they're really thinking, the circle matches the brain, allowing the brains talk to each other. The group forms a superbrain.



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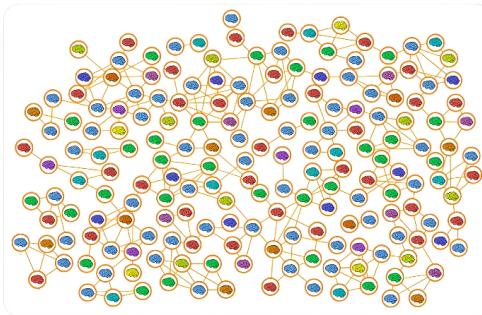


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But now imagine that the people who believe the orange viewpoint start saying that anyone who disagrees with orange is a bad person. No one wants to seem like a bad person, so everyone starts pretending they agree with the orange opinion, even though they don't.



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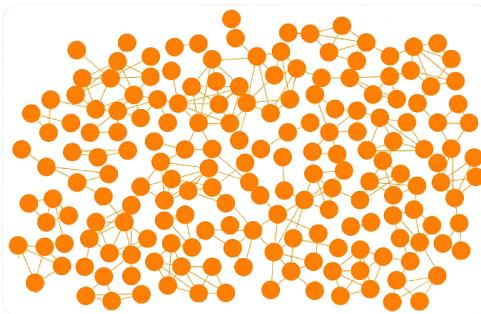


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The thing is, people can't actually see the color of anyone's brain. The only way people know what's going on in the heads of others is through discourse, and now that everyone is saying they agree with orange, this is all anyone sees when they look around.



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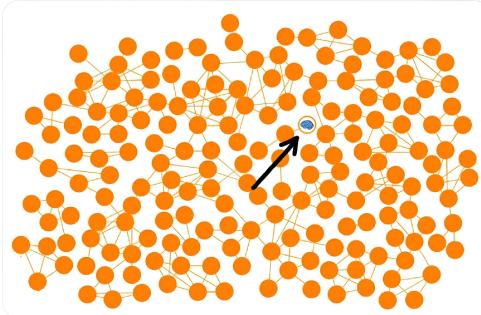


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So if you're this person, who secretly disagrees with orange—



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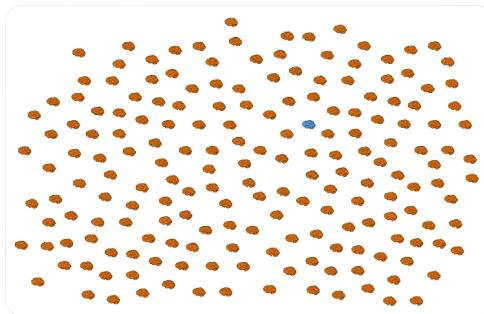


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—despite the fact that MOST people secretly disagree with orange, you just assume that everyone else must agree with orange. You imagine the inside of everyone's heads looking like this:



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And that's what everyone else thinks too, so no one wants to admit how they really feel about orange. When people are scared to say what they really think, brains are cut off from each other and stuck pondering the topic alone in their heads. Group intelligence vanishes.

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Some people continue to believe orange is wrong, but they keep quiet or open up only with close friends.

But others start to assume, because everyone is saying orange is right, that it must be so. They start to believe everyone who disagrees with orange must be a bad person.

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Eventually this takes on a life of its own and starts reinforcing itself, as lots of people will now attack anyone who disagrees with orange. This can keep things going for a long time.

But the emperor has no clothes, and orange's stranglehold is more tenuous than it seems.

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If only one brave person starts to say "I think orange is wrong," they will probably be squashed by the orange zealots. But other people heard them, and it chips away at the idea that "everyone but me thinks orange."

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It helps more people start being courageous and saying what they really think, and soon a tipping point is crossed and the entire charade falls like a house of cards. Punishing non-orange people quickly goes out of fashion, and people again feel safe being themselves, publicly.

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When you feel alone in what you think, remind yourself how common pluralistic ignorance is. If you find the courage to be yourself, you might find that you're not alone at all.

/end

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tracks a specific collection of particles over time, no matter where they go — expanding, compressing, moving — but still remaining the same set.

If the herd were real in the way people imagine, it would be more like a control mass — a cohesive, identifiable group that sticks together even as it changes shape. But that's not what we observe.

In reality, the herd behaves more like a control volume: defined not by who people are, but by the ideas and behaviors they exhibit. Anyone can fall into it — or out of it — based on what they say or signal, regardless of what they actually believe — because as soon as something you say that's even a tad bit different from what the herd expects you to say (usually the majority of the control volume), you're out. It's fluid. You can be inside one moment and outside the next.

So what does that mean? Just because you don't feel part of the herd doesn't mean others are. The herd isn't a who — it's a what.



# **Chapter 2**

## **Group of People: Sociology**

### **2.1 Berger's idea of sociological consciousness**

you need to detach

### **2.2 Karpmann drama triangle? Transactional analysis**

### **2.3 Dynamics**

It's not really important what kind of a transaction is taking place, it does matter what pretext it's taking under.

Narcissists, People-pleasers, enablers, solipsists

## 2.4 Social Death and the Birth of Civilization

But then how did we go from just a group of people to a gang—and eventually a herd? Gossip. Not idle chatter, but credible gossip—the evolutionary glue that helped us survive the most dangerous predator we've ever faced: each other.

Evolutionary theory suggests that gossip emerged as a form of social grooming, replacing physical touch in larger groups. As our numbers grew beyond what our primate brains could manage—what's now known as Dunbar's number—we needed a scalable way to track reputations, enforce trust, and detect threats. Gossip became that tool.

"...the most important information that needed to be conveyed was about humans, not about lions and bison.

Our language evolved as a way of gossiping. According to this theory *Homo sapiens* is primarily a social animal. Social cooperation is our key for survival and reproduction.

It is not enough for individual men and women to know the whereabouts of lions and bison. It's much more important for them to know who in their band hates whom, who is sleeping with whom, who is honest, and who is a cheat...

Reliable information about who could be trusted meant that small bands could expand into larger bands, and Sapiens could develop tighter and more sophisticated types of cooperation."

Excerpt From *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* Yuval Noah Harari [2]

In small groups, gossip flagged who could be trusted. In gangs, it enforced loyalty. But in herds, gossip became the silent tyrant—shaping behavior not through force, but through the ever-present fear of social death.

Without it, our alliances would've splintered. Our creations—cities, cultures, civilizations—would've collapsed under mistrust. Gossip didn't just entertain us. It policed us. It preserved us.

# Chapter 3

## Hierarchies as a countermeasure against widespread gossip

We developed as social animals, who needed information about each other in order to preserve a functional societal structure.

The tussle to find credible gossip must have been alive since the beginning. And that's exactly it: credible gossip – we want gossip that we can trust. And this is what forms the infrastructural basis of hierarchies and organisations.

In modern society, this dynamic persists. The structures that have evolved from our need for reliable social information are the same ones that create our institutions, from corporations to governments, and even in our everyday interactions. The same instinct to trust those who have proven credibility is what keeps those systems running, despite their flaws. Whether it's a CEO, a politician, or even a friend, credibility is the currency that enables power and influence to be sustained.

"Power resides where men believe it resides. It's a trick, a shadow on the wall. And a very small man can cast a very large shadow." — Lord Varys

The question, then, is: Who decides who is credible? In many cases, it's not the person with the best ideas or the most knowledge, but the one with the right connections, history, or social standing. Those who challenge this credibility often find themselves dismissed as outsiders, their ideas ignored, even if those ideas could be revolutionary.

In this system, credibility isn't just about truth; it's about who has the authority to define what truth is. So if anyone comes in claiming anything to the contrary, the natural instinct is to shush them down, just because they do not hold the "credibility" that people usually trust in.

# Chapter 4

## Bureaucracies

“All bureaucracies do this, insofar as they set demands they insist are reasonable, and then, on discovering that they are not reasonable (since a significant number of people will always be unable to perform as expected), conclude that the problem is not with the demands themselves but with the individual inadequacy of each particular human being who fails to live up to them.”

— David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules* [1]

And this gives rise to the phrase “that’s just how it is”.



# Chapter 5

## That's Just How It Is

Ever heard these supposedly modest words come out of the mouths of those ambivalent to your troubles? It's often said: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Maybe that's because your enemies, at least, take a stance.

But ambivalence? Ambivalence is cowardice dressed in politeness. It's the mask of comfort, the refusal to engage with what's broken. And when you dare to ask real questions—

- Why is this the way it is?
- Who benefits?
- What's being ignored?

—ambivalence morphs into something worse: 'That's just how it is.' Or even worse: they isolate you, leaving you to question not just the system, but your own reality.

That phrase isn't insight. It's a system telling you to surrender by proxy of those who have been brainwashed to accept the unacceptable. And if you

ever needed proof that your question matters, it's in how quickly people try to shut it down.

## 5.1 Mechanism

### 5.2

1/ The phrase “that’s just how it is” functions as a cognitive defense mechanism within dysfunctional systems. It is not an observation of reality—it is a signal that reform has been socially, politically, or psychologically foreclosed.

2/ At its core, the phrase masks a learned powerlessness. It arises when stakeholders no longer believe change is possible, and instead reframe dysfunction as inevitability. This is not resilience. It’s resignation.

3/ Rather than diagnosing the source of breakdown - misaligned incentives, institutional decay, lack of accountability — “that’s just how it is” forecloses inquiry. It collapses analysis into fatalism.

4/ This sentiment creates what systems theorists call a stability trap: A system maintains equilibrium not because it is effective, but because the cost of challenging it is perceived to be higher than the cost of enduring it.

5/ Sociologically, it becomes a tool of normative control. It disciplines dissent by framing discontent as naïveté, and positions endurance as maturity. Thus, those who question dysfunction are seen as idealistic or disruptive.

6/ In practice, this sentiment protects incumbents. It sustains elite capture of systems by suppressing bottom-up agitation. After all, if “this is just how it is,” then no one is held responsible. No one is incentivized to change it.

7/ It is also structurally recursive:

The worse the system gets, The more exhausted the population becomes,  
The more normalized dysfunction appears. This leads to collective learned

helplessness.

8/ Crucially, “that’s just how it is” should not be mistaken for realism. It is a form of internalized propaganda—language that trains people to adapt to environments that systematically undermine their autonomy, dignity, or mobility.

9/ As long as this framing persists, no reform effort can succeed, because reform requires belief in alterability. You cannot improve a system that people have mentally written off as immutable.

10/ Therefore, deconstructing “that’s just how it is” is not rhetorical—it is strategic. It is the first step in reclaiming agency, accountability, and possibility within systems that have long abandoned them.

## 5.3 From Institutions (Bureaucracies) to Useless Gossip

## 5.4 The Experience Authority Card



# **Chapter 6**

## **Projection**

**6.1 Internalising the External**

**6.2 Externalising the Internal**

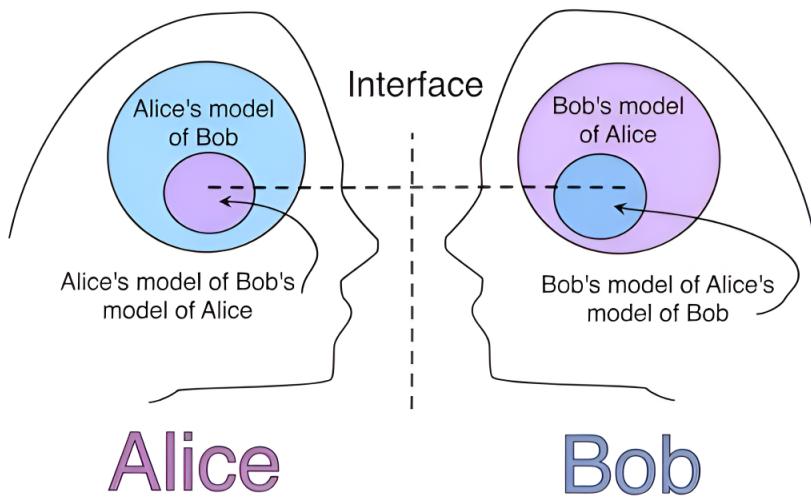


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# **Chapter 7**

## **Fundamental Attribution Er- ror**



# **Chapter 8**

## **Social Games**

### **8.1 Acceptable Social Games**

- Incorrectly attributing errors to the scapegoat
- Incorrectly attributing successes to the favoured one

### **8.2 Unacceptable Social Games**

- Correctly attributing errors to the actual wrong-doer, especially if its the favoured one
- Correctly attributing successes to the underdog who did it right, especially if he's the disliked one



# **Chapter 9**

## **Social Outcasts**

### **9.1 Tall Poppy Syndrome**

If you wear a suit to a party where others are not wearing a suit, places where tall poppy syndrome is not a thing, they'll just think "oh, okay, you're a bit overdressed", but places where tall poppy syndrome is a thing, they'll think "who does he think he is?!" in an almost "how dare he?" kind of tone.



# **Chapter 10**

## **Self-Determination Theory**

Autonomy, Belonging, and Competence



# Chapter 11

## Anthroposophic Philosophy

### 11.1 Doing, Feeling, Thinking, Repeat



# Bibliography

- [1] David Graeber. *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Melville House, United Kingdom, 2015.
- [2] Yuval Noah Harari. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Harper-Collins, United Kingdom, 2015.