



# Authority and Skepticism

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**W**hen I was a child, the conversations around the dinner table in our house were especially vigorous and impassioned (as I soon learned when I discovered that I had to adjust my manner when I was a guest in other homes). When points of factual disagreement arose, this triggered the only grounds for being excused from the table in the middle of dinner: to look up the answer in the *World Book Encyclopedia*.

I remember vividly many occasions of triumphantly returning to the table, bulky blue volume in hand, to quote my vindication, and just as vividly the other occasions when I conceded defeat. I was wrong, and it says so right here in the *World Book*. The question of whether the *World Book* itself might be wrong seldom arose but was a recognized possibility.

Where would grownups turn today to settle similar disagreements? One of the unwelcome side effects of the mostly wonderful democratization of knowledge that has been ushered in by the age of the Internet is that we are losing consensus on what to consult when settling a bet. Sources of information that are *mutually recognized* as reliable—not perfect but reliable—are very useful assets for a society. If in the past we have often been overly submissive in the face of the epistemic authorities, today we risk swinging too far in the other direction and becoming knee-jerk, all-purpose skeptics. Skepticism across the board often sours into cynicism, and while a scattering of tolerated cynics in a society is probably a sign of health, when cynicism explodes into a pandemic, it can sap the enthusiasm of a people and threaten the security and coordi-

nation that permits a free society to operate. What people tend to forget is that all-purpose skepticism is too easy, a shtick that disables trust and makes resolute action on shared information more difficult.

We skeptics have a very important role to play of policing the epistemic environment, rooting out falsehoods and myths, and exposing charlatans and propagandists, but we cannot effectively do that job without endorsing and illustrating the *contrast* between these inferior and toxic products and methods and the (I use the word advisedly) *authority* of investigations done right. Does that mean that a good skeptic has to be some kind of *authoritarian*? Some kind of *elitist*? Yes. The good kind. Meritocracy has its place, and best practices are (usually) rightly called best practices. We must not be cowed by the chorus of oh-so modern (and postmodern) believers in epistemological democracy who decry the category of *expert*, replacing the distinction between amateur and professional with a *lazy* relativism that refuses to take sides.

How should we defend our acceptance of authorities when faced with the disapproving murmurs—sometimes rising to a roar—of *vox populi*? Carefully.

We need to walk the tightrope between *appropriate* impatience with self-congratulatory ignorance on the one hand and on the other open-mindedness so tolerant that nonsense is granted “respect” that is mere lip service in any case. Like grade inflation, politically correct respect for all points of view threatens the quality control in thinking that modern society depends on, to put it bluntly. Not all points of view are equally “valid.” One effective tactic is pointing out that these hyper-egalitarians know better than to trust their surgeries to amateurs or even novice professionals and wax indignant when they discover that somebody has *made a mistake* designing their car or advising them on how to *make* out their income tax returns. They settle for nothing less than expertise when it comes to the arrangements that affect their health, security, and comfort. They should have the consistency to honor expertise in other arenas as well. Moreover, when they point to the lapses and foibles in science, they invariably cite the policing campaigns of science itself, the most systematically self-critical institution the world has ever known. That should be enough (though of course it seldom is). ■

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