

Have a rant: On news and information

Introduction

In the summer of 2004, I wrote what would later become JAW20 . At the time, I thought it was a provocative and eloquent statement of my position. Looking back on it now, it reads like utter crap. This email I sent today to one of my fellowship advisors will make a nice substitute for now.

Like a lot of things I write, this is long (sorry!), but also broken up into small sections. I think it is pretty easy reading, but then again I'm biased.

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My position

My point is that it is our reliance on information that makes us vulnerable to disinformation. I have tried to avoid information as much as I can, and found to my surprise that I barely needed any at all in order to have exactly the life I wanted to live. I can't remember the last time I read a newspaper; I can't remember the last time I relied on a "fact" .

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Arrogance?

This is not a point of arrogance, as some have implied, but just a matter of disciplined thought. I find that it is usually the "fact-aware" who are the arrogant ones, for even though their information is coming to them filtered through governments and news sources, and even though different reputable sources say different things, they think they (and they alone) have the ability to discern between the "true" information and the "false" information.

Indeed, whenever I would watch people debate back in high school and college, their arguments always hinged on something they called "fact" , when it was clear they had probably just heard it somewhere, seen it somewhere online, or read it in Newsweek. (I would call these the Time/Newsweek debates.) For instance, a meat-eater would fight with a vegetarian. "Don't you *know* that the human body *needs* meat to survive?" "You're so ignorant: Scientists have proved that we can get all the nutrients we need from vegetables and tofu." (Never mind that there seem to be happy healthy meat-eaters and vegetarians: perhaps the body is just more robust than we give it credit for.)

I have made my debaters rather petulant in this example, but in the real world things are little different. I am sickened (or amused, in turn) by the arrogance in politics, for

instance by the arrogance of liberals, who cannot simply disagree with conservative political positions, but mock and ridicule them, as if they are *prima facie* idiotic. And if you ask such a liberal to explain to you this feeling, their argument will undoubtedly rely on facts, for instance facts about the state of public schools, public health care, public services in other countries (*viz* the glorification of Canada), etc. But of course, when you talk to the conservatives (who also speak as if no reasonable person could ever be a liberal), you will get the same sorts of stories, just with different endings, more favorable to their cause.

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Subjectivity and symmetry

And so on. Few people have ever stopped to realize that if intelligent people can differ so widely in their thinking, then this more than anything proves the utter subjectivity of it all. (And the utter hopelessness of trying to form a foundation for a position out of facts.) Yet the Time/Newsweek debaters don't see things this way, they don't see the symmetry of the situation. Brains, in general, break symmetry in favor of their owners: The things I believe are not just tastes, but are true, correct, and right; the things the others believe are not just differing tastes, but are false, incorrect, and wrong.

We use words and language and much else to break that symmetry further. Some Americans will say that we should bomb other countries because they are backwards terrorists. If you point out to them that the structure of that argument is: "Here is someone doing something bad, let's hurt them so they'll stop." , and then point out that the backwards terrorists are saying the exact same thing about us, do you think they'll change their tune? Of course not. They'll just say: "Yes, but by stopping them, we're moral and justified, while their violence is unjustified." . Then you can point out that the backwards terrorists say the exact same thing: that by their reckoning, they are justified, and we are not. Will that change their minds? Of course not. They'll just say: "But our reasoning is governed by logic, while their reasoning is fallacious." . And so on.

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Brains and truth

I cannot really blame anyone for thinking and speaking this way, because I think our brains tend us towards it. Our brains seem hardwired to recognize constancy. From a very young age, a child will treat a table as a table, not as a random configuration of light. He will expect that table to stay exactly where it is, and not melt or mold into something else, or break apart. If he sees a bird flying in air, he expects it to continue to move in a smooth, continuous fashion. Of course, we have to have such expectations, or we wouldn't be the humans we are. We couldn't use a table if we thought it might suddenly break apart for no reason, and in fact we probably wouldn't even give it a name at all. It would be too random and too chaotic.

And so our notion of “fact” and “truth” is born out of the necessary notion of “constancy” . When this constancy is broken, we are very surprised. If a wall were to suddenly vanish before our eyes, we would likely have a heart attack. If, as a baby, our parents disappear, we may cry. When friends or relatives die, we imagine them as if they were living, and cannot make sense of their sudden disappearance.

In any case, my point is that from a very early age we have some sense that there “is” something out there, and that it is real and constant. Our sense of truth is equivalent to the constancy of our perceptions. And when we find our perceptions to be faulty, we don’t question the notion of truth —that is not how the brain works— , but instead rationalize things by saying that our perceptions were simply *mistaken*, while the true facts are still there. Once we settle on a new decision or course of action, we feel we have brought ourselves more in alignment with those facts.

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Interfaces and models

I don’t think the notion of truth is a very fruitful way of looking at the world. It leads to stubbornness, inflexibility, hatred, and war. We feel that through our reason, we approach ever closer to this one undeniable entity called truth, and if others are doing something different, they must be brought into alignment with our correct way.

My way of looking at the world is the notion of “interfaces” , or ways of understanding. I don’t need facts, I just need my faculties of perception, and my faculty of reason. I take my perceptions, I organize them, I generalize them, I reason with them, and I form a model of the world. That model is expected to meet certain expectations or specifications, like for instance it should help me be healthy and happy. Such models are built from an analysis of one’s values, as well as the sort of problems one faces and hopes to tackle.

Different people have different values or specifications, and so need different methods to meet those specifications. From what I know of Zen Buddhism, it would not be a very useful way of living, because I get my kicks from having desires and fulfilling them ever more efficiently and effectively. Similarly, my ways would be anathema to a Buddhist. Neither of us are wrong or stupid. Different values, different ways of seeing the world.

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Do chairs exist?

Now, in one way of looking at the world, things like tables and chairs are effectively constant. That is a reliable way of looking at things, so I treat tables and chairs as if they are constant, and the reward is that I benefit from their utility. There’s nothing more to the story: just a way of understanding that helps me do certain things. Fact has become unnecessary.

And just because I don't have to believe that chairs are "real" , doesn't mean I have to believe they are "imaginary" . I just take no position; it's not a belief I need to live. I am not like those philosophers who would sit around and question whether chairs "really" exist, because that presupposes a belief in reality. Rather, I just don't care, because I don't need to care. Chairs are for sitting, and they work well for that purpose: and for this purpose, it is irrelevant whether they "really exist" , as irrelevant as whether or not they are made up of atoms. (The atomic model is a "way of understanding" the molecular makeup of an object. It has nothing to do with sitting on a chair, or love.)

When it comes to tables and chairs, my approach does not differ much from the belief-in-fact approach. But when it comes to hotly-debated topics, as we find very soon after moving up from tables and chairs, the flexibility of my approach is invaluable. And remember, just because I don't believe in fact, doesn't mean that I live in a world where everything goes. I have values and sensibilities, and the models I choose have to agree with those sensibilities, and meet my specifications to my satisfaction.

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The Holocaust

So here is something shocking: I take no position on whether or not there was a Holocaust.

"What?! Are you an idiot like those people who deny the Holocaust? They deny the hard cold facts!" . Please realize that it is the reliance on facts that makes one's position so vulnerable to the Holocaust-deniers, who just use different facts. And fundamentally, the vulnerability comes from the need to take a position on the Holocaust.

At some point I decided that, although it seemed overwhelmingly likely that there had been a Holocaust, it didn't matter to me either way. I wouldn't live my life any differently if there had been, or if there hadn't. The question of whether there was a Holocaust or not is completely irrelevant to my life, and indeed one of the joys of my life has been discovering that there are many things I don't have to take a position on.

Now, what if god came down and told me: "Surprise, Jeremy, there are facts and truth after all." . Well, I probably wouldn't act any differently, just as I don't use chairs any differently when physicists tell me that they are "really" made up of atoms. But if I had choose, if I had to wager my life on whether or not there was a Holocaust, I'd probably bet that there was. But fortunately, my life isn't on the line, and I don't have to make a choice, and it's simpler to just leave the matter aside.

This isn't just raw ignorance, it's rational ignorance. If something happens that does pertain to my life, then it's certainly worth investigating. And indeed, one might want to investigate whether it "really happened" . I've just decided that the Holocaust is not one of these things. I wouldn't treat Germans any differently. Belief in the Holocaust leads governments to steal money from innocent people to give to descendants of the victims. This is something I am against, independently of the Holocaust.

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Science

There are similar points to make in the domain of science. (Which is not to say that they are widely respected in “modern scientific thinking” .)

For example, when proving a mathematical theorem, it is highly beneficial to start with the theorem itself (as opposed to your broad knowledge about the area), and to then analyze and generalize the theorem, until at the end of the day you have *derived* the sort of information/data you need to prove the theorem, whether or not you knew it beforehand. If you start from your knowledge, you have to first decide what knowledge is relevant to the problem. How can you do this rationally without analyzing the problem? Well, by “smearing knowledge” over the theorem until it “gets proved” . The result is confusing, entangled, and ungeneralizable.

I used the same principle as a linguist. Many linguists simply collect masses and masses of data, and then try to draw out rules from that mass of data. But this is just hopeless: For one, people disagree widely on the data; for two, they never have all the right data; and for three, by thinking they can spot the right generalizations in the data they are privileging their intuitions about language, when the whole point of modern linguistics is that we *cannot* just introspect into the workings of grammar. When I was studying linguistics, I felt that one had to find ways of using data judiciously. I would attack a problem completely theoretically, until I could find a way to use data unambiguously to make a theoretical decision. I built up my theory in such a way that I could answer a theoretical question, just by finding a certain kind of sentence. I found my sentence, and answered the question. My argument didn’t build up from the facts, but rather exploited them as effectively and as judiciously as possible.

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Dijkstra has the last word

One of Dijkstra’s adages came to mind for some reason: “Avoid duplicating volatile information.” .

His adage has to do with programming, and a simple way of reading it is this: If we are writing a program that uses 2 florps (whatever florps are), and we have a reason to believe that the number of florps may change in a later version of the program, we should not write ‘2’ everywhere we wish to refer to the number of florps! Because then once that number changes, we have to make that change in every instance where we wrote ‘2’ . We duplicated volatile information, and now we have to pay the price. Our changes will be labor-intensive and error-prone: For example, we may forget to change one of those 2s , resulting in an error. If we use a utility to find-and-replace all 2s , we may accidentally change a 2 that had nothing to do with the number of florps!

The adage seems applicable to me because facts do change, especially historical and scientific facts. They change because our models and ways of understanding change. This is why textbooks have to be replaced every so often: what a waste results from duplicating volatile information!

On the plane the other day, I saw an educational film saying that scientists have now discovered that man originated in Africa, contrary to what people have believed for decades. One scientist was filmed standing on a hill in Africa, saying how thrilling it was to stand where man really first stood. I couldn't help but be amused by his thrill: what makes him so sure that he won't be proved wrong 10 years from now, just as he proved his predecessors wrong?

Witness the arrogance of people who know all this trivia: "You mean you didn't *know* that the earth revolves around the sun? How uneducated!" . Of course, most of this "knowledge" will be outdated in 10 years' time. Einstein tells us that we may take any body as the center of the universe, so that it is perfectly acceptable to view the sun as revolving around the earth. In fact this is the model that is most useful for nautical navigation.

So the lesson of this, the final section of my essay, is that the less reliant your position is on information, the more reliable and versatile it is. My models have made me very knowledgeable, very happy, very secure, very reliable, very flexible, very powerful. Reading newspapers would be an utter waste of my time: the energy I would need to scrutinize and verify that information would far outweigh its utility.

END of rant.

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