

This article was downloaded by: [Gregory Brazeal]

On: 05 April 2012, At: 09:39

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number:
1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street,
London W1T 3JH, UK



Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society

Publication details, including instructions for
authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcr20>

WEBS OF FAITH AS A SOURCE OF REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT

Gregory Brazeal

Available online: 05 Apr 2012

To cite this article: Gregory Brazeal (2011): WEBS OF FAITH AS A SOURCE OF REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT, *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*, 23:4, 421-448

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2011.664850>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings,

demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

WEBS OF FAITH AS A SOURCE OF REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT

ABSTRACT: *An individual's beliefs can be seen as rationally related to one another in a kind of web. These beliefs, however, may not form a single, seamless web. There may exist smaller, largely self-contained webs with few or no rational relations to the larger web. Such "webs of faith" make it possible for reasonable deliberators to persist in a disagreement even under ideal deliberative conditions. The possibility of reasonable disagreement challenges the assumption that rationality should lead to consensus and presents an obstacle to the goals of liberal democracy.*

The Enlightenment is sometimes identified with the notion that the universal laws of reason, faithfully obeyed, will lead toward a rational consensus about the truth. The natural sciences provide a model of inquiry. Just as natural scientists make continual progress toward an ever more accurate and complete understanding of the natural universe, so might rational methods light the way toward an encyclopedic consensus in any other field of knowledge. Regardless of where we begin, the path of reason will lead us, eventually, at least under ideal conditions, to one and the same destination.

A countertradition has, from the start, denied the plausibility of the Enlightenment ideal. Some have argued that the notion of rationality leading toward consensus neglects the fallibility of mere human reason in the absence of divine illumination, propping up reason in a

Gregory Brazeal, gbrazeal@jd10.law.harvard.edu, is currently serving as a judicial clerk on the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York.

Critical Review 23(4): 421–448

© 2011 Critical Review Foundation

ISSN 0891-3811 print, 1933-8007 online

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2011.664850>

quasi-theological role that it cannot hope to fill. Others have faulted the notion for failing to recognize the relativity of reason to national culture, or economic-historical development, or gender or race, or power in general, or even the practical needs that shape our understanding from the ground up. Still others have argued that this view of rationality misunderstands the nature of scientific or mathematical inquiry, or the relationship between such inquiry and other types of investigation. Rather than coalescing around a single diagnosis of the Enlightenment's faults, these critiques themselves seem to embody the failure of consensus by proliferating along countless, conflicting paths.

In the last two decades, however, at least one small, largely unremarked convergence in the discussion of rationality and consensus has taken place. Operating largely independently, political theorists and philosophers of epistemology and religion have begun to pay increasing attention to the peculiar phenomenon of *reasonable disagreement* (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Waldron 1999; Feldman and Warfield 2010). For philosophers, the question has primarily been whether truly reasonable disagreement, rather than disagreement between generally but not perfectly reasonable individuals, is at all possible, and, if so, how. Political theorists, especially theorists of deliberative democracy, have instead tended to take the fact of disagreement among reasonable individuals as a starting point, and to ask what political consequences this disagreement has or should have.

In both cases, the questions seem to have been prompted by the remarkable but regularly neglected fact that even the most apparently reasonable people deliberating under the most promising conditions seem unable to reach agreement on an extraordinarily wide variety of topics. In other words, the discussions of reasonable disagreement in both philosophy and political theory continue to grapple with the basic Enlightenment assumption with which we began—the idea of a natural progress from rationality to consensus.

I will propose a different source of reasonable disagreement: “webs of faith.”¹ These webs can lead perfectly reasonable individuals of good will to fail to reach agreement, even in the long run. Webs of faith are relevant to the debates in political theory because they call into question some of the proposed responses to persistent moral and political disagreement in a democracy. If webs of faith exist and operate as this essay hypothesizes, there is an argument for exploring avenues of political

deliberation that rely relatively more on internal critique and relatively less on the search for common ground.

Webs of Belief

It might be argued that an individual's beliefs, as is sometimes said about the law, form a seamless web. That is, each of an individual's beliefs bears inferential connections to various other beliefs, and each of those beliefs in turn bear inferential connections to still other beliefs as well as to one another. No set of beliefs stands wholly logically alone; no set of beliefs is entirely logically self-contained. Because every set of beliefs bears some logical relationship to beliefs outside of that set, there is at least some possibility that any set of beliefs, no matter how internally consistent, might be challenged by pointing to the logical relationships between some belief in that set and other beliefs lying outside of the set, including new beliefs generated on the basis of empirical evidence (see Quine [1960] 2004, 86–87).

It also seems plausible that our ability to communicate with one another successfully depends on our sharing a vast background of generally uncontroversial beliefs (see, e.g., Wittgenstein [1953] 2001, 75, §§ 241–42; Davidson [1973] 2001, 168). If the web of an individual's beliefs is seamless, and successful communication implies an extensive shared background of uncontroversial beliefs, it might seem that we should be able to achieve a rationally motivated consensus on any subject—at least under ideal deliberative conditions, such as those proposed by Jürgen Habermas ([1983] 1990, 86–94)—by drawing inferences between our areas of common ground and any disputed claim, no matter how inferentially distant it might be from the common ground. We can imagine, for example, a group of people with differing beliefs regarding climate change. In order to reach a rationally grounded agreement, they might begin by determining what they agree on regarding the environment, scientific method, various sources of empirical data, and so on. They could then attempt to draw inferences from this common ground to conclusions about whether climate change is anthropogenic; how great of a threat it poses, if any; and how best to respond to it, if at all. Some members of the group could challenge the beliefs of other members by pointing to inconsistencies between the other members' beliefs about climate change and the shared beliefs from

which the group began, or by calling attention to some piece of uncontroversial, mutually available empirical evidence. In order to avoid these inconsistencies and conflicts, the challenged individuals could revise their beliefs. Then the new beliefs could be challenged, revised, and challenged again. Gradually, it might be thought, the beliefs of all the individuals in the group regarding climate change would begin to converge. Given access to the same evidence, and assuming that there is a single, best explanation of this evidence in light of the common ground from which the deliberators began, the process of eliminating inconsistencies within each individual's web of beliefs would inevitably lead to the elimination of inconsistencies between the individuals' webs of beliefs as well. At some ideal end point, a rationally compelled consensus would arrive.

There are of course many reasons to believe that the preceding story would not unfold as planned, at least in practice, and perhaps also in theory.² At least one element of the story, however, has apparently gone largely unquestioned: the notion that all of an individual's beliefs form a single web.

Before explaining how this might not be so, it will be useful to alter the terms of the discussion slightly. Up to now, we have been considering the relationship between beliefs as a web-like structure of *inferential* or *logical* connections. It might be possible to conduct the following discussion in these terms, but in practice such a discussion is likely to be unnecessarily sidetracked by potentially interminable philosophical disputes over the precise nature of logic, concepts, meanings, and propositions, and how each of these relates to the use of words in a natural language. In order to avoid such disputes, the following discussion will instead be framed in less philosophically weighted terms. The aim will be "to avoid, so far as possible, disputed philosophical theses and to give an account . . . that rests on plain facts open to all" (in the words of Rawls 1993, 57). Instead of conceiving of a web of belief as a map of the logical or inferential relationships between an individual's beliefs, a web of belief will be understood as a map of the *reasons* that an individual might give for each of his beliefs, if the individual were asked to do so and gave an exhaustive, sincere response.

Constructing an actual, complete map of the reason-giving relations among an individual's beliefs would be wildly unfeasible. Not only would the interview process likely take longer than any subject's lifetime

but, in the course of the interview, the individual's beliefs would change, defeating the ideal of completeness. One would also have to settle on a consistent and sensible response to various problems of interview design and analysis, such as what to do about subjects' uncertainty regarding their own beliefs, how to minimize the influence of the order of questions asked over the reasons produced,³ whether to offer potential reasons or merely solicit them, how strictly to define the identity between two beliefs, and so on.

Such an investigation would therefore resemble other wildly unfeasible research problems, from individually counting every grain of sand in the world to creating a catalogue of every word that has ever been spoken. The investigations, however unfeasible, are nonetheless of an empirical nature. The same may not be true of an investigation of the logical relations among an individual's beliefs. By turning from propositions and logic to the hypothetical empirical behavior of questioning and answering, we ascend, at the very least, from a relatively controversial type of thought experiment (involving such questions as, "What are the logical relations, if any, between belief x and belief y ?") to a relatively less controversial one (involving such questions as, "Would this individual, if he answered sincerely, offer belief x as a reason for his belief y ?").

Webs of Faith

At least some of a person's beliefs can be envisioned as connected in a web of hypothetical reason-giving. There would be any number of ways to challenge one of the beliefs in such a web. We could argue that the reasons offered in support of the belief do not actually support it. We could argue that the belief itself is somehow inconsistent with one or more of the person's other beliefs—or, in reason-giving terms, that there are reasons elsewhere in the web for not believing the belief in question. If the belief is about, or relies upon, some belief about an empirical phenomenon, we could attempt to use empirical evidence to show that the belief is false. Even if one rejects the myth of the given and embraces the indeterminacy of theory choice, there will still be some beliefs that can be more or less straightforwardly refuted by what we would tend to call empirical evidence. If a person believes there are two

pencils in a box, for example, when in fact there are three, opening the box should usually be sufficient to settle the matter in practice.

In at least some significant cases, the rational relationships between an individual's beliefs may not form a single, seamless web. Rather, some of our most significant beliefs may be connected to one another in a dense web of reason-giving, but at the same time may have few or even no rational connections to the vast majority of our other beliefs. Consider an individual who would offer beliefs $a_1, a_2 \dots a_x$ in rational support of one another in various ways, and who sees beliefs $b_1, b_2 \dots b_x$ as rationally supported by one another in various ways as well, but would never offer a belief from set a in support of a belief from set b or vice versa. I will assume that the vast majority of an individual's beliefs, including the unquestioned background of everyday beliefs that we assume to be largely shared, do in fact form a single web. But apart from this extremely large web of beliefs, there may be smaller webs with few or no rational relations to the larger web. These smaller webs will be called "webs of faith."

In the ideal case, the beliefs in a web of faith would be rationally related to one another, in the sense that any given belief in the web would either be supported by, or provide support for, another belief in the web, but would have no rational connection to any belief outside the web. To the extent that none of the beliefs in such a web involved an empirical claim about some observable phenomenon, the web would be rationally impermeable. It would be like an extremely elaborate circular argument, one whose elaboration was so great that its circularity would be virtually impossible to perceive.

Webs of faith could thus provide a source of reasonable disagreement even under ideal deliberative conditions. Assume that two perfectly reasoning individuals enter a deliberation of unlimited duration. One subscribes to a self-contained, internally perfectly supported web of faith featuring no beliefs about mutually accessible empirical phenomena. The other does not subscribe to any of the beliefs in the web of faith. The two may share an extraordinarily rich and perhaps even identical web of beliefs regarding other matters. But no amount of reasoned deliberation will bring them to agreement regarding the truth of the beliefs in the web of faith. The non-believer can ask the believer for his reasons in believing anything in the web of faith. Each of these reasons will seem unfounded to the non-believer. But when the non-believer demands the reasons for the reasons, she will only find more reasons that strike her as

equally unfounded. As she continues to question the believer, she will begin to find some of the same reasons reappearing.

Given the likely unfeasibility of gaining a comprehensive view of the beliefs even in a relatively small web of faith, it is unlikely in practice that the non-believer will ever be able to show that the believer's contested beliefs do, in fact, form a perfectly self-contained web. But even if it were possible to do so in an ideal deliberation, it is unclear why the burden should necessarily fall on the believer in the web of faith to justify his contested beliefs, given that they are perfectly consistent and refuted by no empirical fact, rather than the burden falling on the non-believer to show why the contested beliefs are not true.

Someone might object that it could never be reasonable to believe in the validity of a web of faith, and thus that different webs of faith could not serve as a source of reasonable disagreement. Perhaps the argument would be that just as it would never be reasonable to adopt a belief without having at least some reason to do so, it must not be reasonable to subscribe to a set of beliefs whose only support is internal. Several considerations might be offered in response.

First, if we conceive of reason simply in terms of adherence to the basic laws of logic, the preceding is not an accurate description of what reason demands. Stephen Toulmin (2001), among others, has criticized the modern tendency to collapse what is "rational" into what is "logical," and thus to reduce rationality to a kind of algorithmic calculation, and most conceptions of rationality go beyond mere adherence to logical laws (see MacIntyre 1988, 2–4). But if it is true that we are unable to agree upon any more robust conception of rationality (*ibid.*, 4), it is at least worth noting that one who holds to a web of faith may be perfectly reasonable on a minimalist, purely logical conception of reason. His beliefs are consistent. There the story ends.

Second, it has been postulated from the outset that reason provides a series of laws for arriving at the truth. The opponent of adherence to webs of faith has offered no argument demonstrating that the beliefs in any web of faith must be false. To the contrary, it is very easy to imagine a world in which the beliefs making up a web of faith simply, straightforwardly correspond to the way things are. If one resists correspondence theories of truth, then the same claim can be made by saying that it is easy to imagine a world in which the beliefs making up a web of faith are simply true, whatever one's conception of truth.

So let us assume for the sake of argument that at least one web of faith does happen to be true. The opponent of belief in webs of faith would then appear to be arguing that it is unreasonable for anyone to believe in this truth, and that all reasonable people must instead agree on a falsity, or at least agree to suspend judgment rather than believing in the truth. Although this approach might be defended in terms of some robust conceptions of reason, it sounds odd on its face.

Third, it is true that we often dismiss arguments or claims as “circular.” But it is not unconditionally true that reasonable people, or even philosophers, reject such arguments (e.g., Davidson [1986] 2005, 106). Nor is it clear why the charge of circularity should provide grounds for *rejecting* an argument. It seems more precisely accurate to say that demonstrating the circularity of an argument shows that no one has a reason to accept it, not that anyone has a reason to reject it. Indeed, even if webs of faith do not exist, and all of our beliefs do form a single intertwining structure of reason-giving, is it so clear that this structure would not be, despite its points of empirical contact, circular in some meaningful sense?

Those who conceive of reason on the model of formal logical deductions have apparently never arrived at the establishment of presuppositionless presuppositions. Nor has anyone apparently demonstrated that we are logically compelled to speak in precisely the terms we do. Just as there may be no non-circular defense of our first principles, or of the terms in which we phrase our ultimate commitments, so might *any* web of beliefs in some sense be forced to hold itself up by its own bootstraps.

Fourth, it might be argued that there is something questionable in defining non-belief in the validity of webs of faith as the baseline, so that reasons for belief in them need to be offered. Such a baseline may be an element of the non-believer’s robust conception of reason, and, to the extent that the non-believer posits it as a premise, it would be inappropriate to demand a justification. But the process of becoming a reasonable person, like the process of acquiring a language, inevitably involves the uncritical absorption of innumerable beliefs. So it seems strange to define reasonableness in a way that rejects every belief that lacks some kind of non-circular foundation.

Certainly, one could define reasonableness in this way, perhaps suggesting, in an Enlightenment spirit, that to become an intellectual adult above all entails the critical examination of the inherited beliefs of

one's youth. But an epistemological conservative might suggest that a more efficient, sensible, and realistic approach would be to conserve one's current beliefs until confronted with some reason to abandon them. In fact, a number of philosophers, from James to Kuhn to Quine, have argued that this is what we—including the most reasonable and enlightened among us—already tend to do, as a matter of fact (see Little 1996, 397).

Moving beyond the bare philosophical possibility of reasonable disagreement,⁴ webs of faith might also serve as a significant source of persistent, reasonable disagreement in contemporary political life. I will now briefly consider several examples of webs of faith drawn from religious belief, philosophical belief, ideological belief, and conspiracy theories. Much more could be said on all of these subjects. The aim here is only to suggest how the phenomenon of a web of faith might manifest itself in practice.

Religious Webs of Faith

The most familiar illustration of the power of webs of faith to thwart the achievement of rational consensus in practice would probably be to imagine an argument between an atheist and a fundamentalist religious believer—although, as we will see, the believer's fundamentalism itself makes the example imperfect.

Suppose that a fundamentalist Christian tries to persuade an atheist that the earth was created a few thousand years ago. If the atheist asks on what basis the fundamentalist believes this, the fundamentalist might respond that it is stated in the Bible. If the atheist challenges the literal truth of the Bible, the fundamentalist might invoke the words of his pastor in defense of the literal truth of the Bible. If the atheist challenges the authority of the pastor, the fundamentalist might note that he has seen the pastor speaking in tongues, and thus knows that the Lord's spirit speaks through him. If the atheist challenges whether the pastor was truly seized by any spirit, the fundamentalist could speak of a miracle he saw the pastor perform. If the atheist argues that miracles are not possible, the fundamentalist might point again to the Bible. . . .

While the sketch is vastly oversimplified, it begins to suggest the kind of rational structure that might unite a set of more or less self-supporting beliefs. The fundamentalist can support each of his religious beliefs with

other religious beliefs that are, in turn, supported by still other religious beliefs, all of them weaving together into a rationally self-contained fabric. From the atheist's perspective, the fundamentalist's reasoning will seem suspiciously circular. But from the fundamentalist's perspective, the atheist will be unable to offer any definitive evidence that the fundamentalist's beliefs are not true. Indeed, if the fundamentalist were to interrogate the basis of the atheist's belief that there is no God, the atheist might end up relying on a chain of reasoning that would appear just as circular to the fundamentalist. Even if both sides adhered to the requirements of an ideal deliberation, the dispute between them could go on indefinitely without being resolved.

Religious fundamentalism, however, is imperfect as an illustration of a smaller web of beliefs standing in perfect isolation from a larger web within a single individual. One of the defining features of what is called "fundamentalism" is its willingness to assert rational connections between paradigmatically "religious" ideas, on the one hand, and, on the other, ideas regarding empirical phenomena, such as geology and evolution, that have complex connections to our shared backgrounds of belief. Fundamentalist religious belief, in other words, does not exist as a perfectly self-contained web of faith. The fundamentalist's religious beliefs may primarily be rationally supported by one another, but at certain points they connect up with the larger web. The fundamentalist believes in the Biblical story of creation and, as reasons for this belief, offers various other beliefs that we would generally identify as religious. But the Biblical story of creation is also a belief about history. It will have rational connections to other beliefs about history, and thus to the individual's larger web of beliefs.

A logically consistent creationist will have to be able to offer reasons for her creationist beliefs that reconcile them with both her identifiably religious beliefs and beliefs about history, technology, what goes on in universities, the aspects of natural science with which she does not disagree, and so on. The most heated debates occur at these points of friction between imperfect fundamentalist webs of religious faith and a fundamentalist's larger web of beliefs, many of which are shared with non-fundamentalists. Despite the rational connections between the fundamentalist's religious beliefs and her web of non-religious beliefs, however, it is far from clear that reasonable deliberation, at least in the minimal sense of adherence to the rules of logic, and perhaps in some more robust senses as well, could compel the fundamentalist to abandon

her beliefs. It is possible that reasonable disagreement under ideal conditions could persist indefinitely even on the basis of an imperfectly self-contained web of faith.

Henry Mather, for example, argues against the idea that any method for bringing coherency to one's moral beliefs would necessarily result in agreement on moral truths between two people faithfully employing the method. As Mather (1993, 323) notes, various sources of "leeway" can prevent coherency from entailing consensus. First, since "it is likely that no two thinkers will begin with the same set of considered particular judgments . . . they are likely to come up with somewhat different sets of moral principles when they arrive at equilibrium." Mather's next observation suggests how it might be possible for both a Biblical literalist and a believer in scientifically valid theories of physics, geology, and evolution to render their incompatible beliefs internally coherent:

The second kind of leeway becomes apparent when a thinker holds two beliefs that conflict, and must decide which to abandon or revise in order to achieve a coherent equilibrium. A coherence method does not give any type of belief priority over other types, and the thinker is free to exercise discretion. She may decide to abandon her particular moral judgment, or she may decide to abandon a conflicting moral principle. (Mather 1993, 323–24; cf. Converse 1964, 208)

The example of the fundamentalist deliberating with the atheist deals with empirical rather than moral claims. Still, as in Mather's account, the deliberators are driven toward coherency in their beliefs. The atheist can be expected, under ideal conditions, to expose any inconsistencies in the fundamentalist's beliefs, and vice versa. Imagine that the atheist confronts the fundamentalist for the first time with an inconsistency between her beliefs about Biblical creation and the apparent significance of, say, the fossil record. Assuming that it is not unreasonable to respond to an inconsistency in one's beliefs by revising those beliefs as little as needed to resolve the inconsistency—and many philosophers suggest that this is what we all, in fact, do—the fundamentalist may be rationally justified in revising her beliefs about evolution rather than touching any of the complexly interconnected religious beliefs at the core of her religious web.

Compared to the richness and rational interrelations of the fundamentalist's religious beliefs, the number of points at which those beliefs make contact with not-inherently-religious beliefs in problematic ways

may be extremely small. The epistemologically conservative religious fundamentalist may thus be fully justified in altering her beliefs about various subjects in natural science—which, not only for the fundamentalist, but for most of us, may be relatively sparse and thinly supported by reasons—wherever they conflict with her richly developed religious beliefs, which are thickly supported by reasons (the threads connecting the beliefs in the web). Such a response is especially rationally defensible if our conception of reason allows us to give any rational weight to the depth of significance that a belief holds in a believer's life. If significance carries rational weight, then the rejection of the fundamentalist's few scientific beliefs that conflict with her religious beliefs may indeed be her most rational course, all other things equal.⁵

Perhaps only if we assume a more robust, culturally contingent form of rationality, such as one that demands skepticism toward claims by authorities that are not backed by consensually verifiable empirical evidence, might rationality itself require the fundamentalist to resolve the contradiction between scientific geological beliefs and her religious beliefs by revising the latter rather than the former. But once we adopt this more robust conception of rationality, the religious believer might object, with justice, that the deck has already been stacked against religious faith. Does *reason itself* truly demand a prejudice against the types of claims characteristically made by religion? Is a religious believer who does not harbor such prejudice being *irrational*? Or perhaps there is some middle ground, a conception of rationality that would not seem biased against religious belief but would nevertheless necessitate the abandonment of fundamentalist Biblical literalism.

In any case, if we return from the realm of ideal deliberation to the realm of the practical, even an imperfectly self-contained web of beliefs will make it extremely difficult to achieve rational consensus between believers and non-believers. It will simply be too easy for the non-believer to dismiss the imperfect web as a whole on the basis of the few contradictions between it and beliefs outside the web; and it will be too easy for the believer to revise the beliefs outside the web in a way that resolves the contradictions, as when the fundamentalist adopts a special theory of "creation science." An individual is far more likely, as Kierkegaard recognized, to "leap" into or out of a web of religious faith as a whole (see Ferreira 1998) than to arrive at the beliefs in the web in a piecemeal fashion. In general, the greater the degree of some set of beliefs' logical self-containment, the more it seems likely that adoption of

those beliefs will take place in a holistic manner, and the more it will seem appropriate to apply the metaphor of “conversion,” even in non-religious contexts, such as being “converted” to a competing school of scientific thought.⁶

It should be emphasized, before turning to the next category of example, that the preceding and following examples of webs of faith remain grounded in nothing more than a wholly disputable empirical hypothesis regarding the interrelated structures of belief that could be derived from a hypothetical inquiry into the reasons for a person’s beliefs. It is possible that the hypothesis above regarding the substantially but imperfectly self-contained rational structure of some fundamentalists’ religious beliefs, for example, would turn out to be simply inaccurate, if it were possible to conduct an actual investigation. (In fact, I stumbled across at least one piece of anecdotal support for something like the hypothesis.)⁷ It is also possible that other belief-structures worthy of study have been overlooked. I have only attempted to draw attention to one of the more obvious possible structures. What patterns might be observed in the relationships between religious beliefs regarding morality or ethics and non-religious beliefs on the same matters? In the relationships between moral beliefs and political ones?

Philosophical Webs of Faith

Perhaps the purest example of logically self-supporting sets of beliefs can be found in philosophical theorizing.

Diagnosing the precise (and, no doubt, varied) sources of the interminability that seems to characterize philosophical dispute would require more detailed investigation than is possible here. But even when we view philosophy from the outside, at a distance, we can glimpse what might be the traces of webs of faith. Consider that most philosophers abide by the model rules of discourse laid out by Habermas ([1983] 1990) to an exemplary degree, yet disagreements persist more stubbornly and inflexibly in the field of philosophy than in perhaps any other field. Just as puzzling, many philosophers hold to their core philosophical beliefs as steadfastly and with as much apparent certainty as non-philosophers would hold only to obvious and apparently unquestionable facts about the world—such as the fact that I have arms. If I were to meet a person who sincerely believed that I did not have arms, and who could not be

persuaded otherwise even under Habermas's ideal communicative conditions, I would probably begin to doubt whether the person was sane. Yet philosophers regularly encounter colleagues who do not share their unwaveringly held philosophical beliefs and these philosophers do not, most of the time, conclude that their colleagues are mentally troubled.

How to explain the baffling disparity between philosophers' unyielding philosophical convictions and their willingness to accept profound disagreement with those convictions as entirely sane? Webs of faith provide a possible explanation. If a person who assumed that he had two arms were to conclude that in fact he had had no arms at all, it would be necessary for him to revise an extraordinarily large number of beliefs on a wide range of issues. The revision would be so extensive, in fact, that it is difficult to imagine what it might entail. Were his arms in fact hallucinations? How did they lift objects then? Were they hovering robotic instruments controlled elsewhere? By whom? How did this arrangement come about, and what other beliefs must be revised in light of it?

By contrast, if an eliminative materialist philosopher were to conclude that she had been wrong, and that Cartesian dualism is in fact the truth, she might have to revise a large number of her philosophical views, but it is unclear that she would be rationally compelled to revise any non-philosophical beliefs. In that case, the beliefs that made up her eliminative materialism would seem to have had no rational relationship to her non-philosophical beliefs. The former seem to be bound only to one another—in a rationally self-contained web. The philosopher may be justified in feeling certain about the truth of her philosophical beliefs: nothing refutes them, so long as they are internally consistent.⁸ At the same time, the philosopher may be justified in viewing disagreement with those beliefs as reasonable: Such disagreement does not lead to a chain reaction of unreasonable non-philosophical inferences in the larger web of beliefs, such as would be entailed by stubborn disbelief in my having arms.

Ideological Webs of Belief

If philosophical views often represent one of the purest examples of a web of faith hermetically sealed off from the richly interwoven

majority of an individual's beliefs, an even more impure example than fundamentalist religion would be ideological views. An argument between, say, an Islamist and a Straussian, or an economic libertarian and a socialist, may display many structural similarities to the argument between the fundamentalist Christian and the atheist. In general, each side will find ample support for each of its beliefs in other nodes in its web of beliefs, while the opposing side will seem to offer only counterarguments that do not make any real contact with the first side's position, much less compel a revision of it. But ideological views, even more than the fundamentalist's religious beliefs, bear rational relationships to a wide variety of beliefs outside the ideological set, such as infant-mortality rates, the performance of stock markets, and the relative price of a loaf of bread. As a result, even if a core web of ideological dogma bears some resemblance to the logical structure of a philosophical web of faith, the former will also be inferentially bound up with the shared background of belief in a way that the latter is not. In fact, ideological views are so bound up with the larger web of beliefs that it is notoriously difficult to draw the line between "ideological" and "non-ideological" beliefs, if the latter are even considered possible.⁹

The ideological transformations of individuals reflect the mixed status of ideological belief, its position somewhere between the pure webs of faith one finds in philosophy and a set of beliefs that simply forms a region of the individual's more general web. Even after the horrendously failed experiments and inaccurate predictions of many Marx-inspired revolutionary intellectuals in the twentieth century, for example, it remains possible to be both rational and a Marxist. Provided that one is sufficiently committed to preserving various core Marxist tenets, one can explain away any apparent conflict between them and the events of the twentieth century. To the non-Marxist, the explanation may seem implausibly sophisticated, like the complex epicycles of the late Ptolemaics. But as in the case of the fundamentalist religious believer shaping his view of evolution in order to make it consistent with his religious beliefs, the Marxist might succeed in violating no logical rules or truly neutral standards of rationality. If we compare ideological understandings of the social and political world to narratives, then it might be said that these narratives, like most others, can accommodate a great many anomalous threads before beginning to warp into implausibility.

Nevertheless, because the rational self-containment of most ideologies is imperfect, it is possible for the believer in an ideology to be, in Irving

Kristol's phrase, "mugged by reality" in a way that the believer in a philosophical theory, or perhaps even in a sufficiently sophisticated fundamentalist creed, probably cannot be. Kristol's conversion from the ideology of New Deal liberalism to neoconservatism, in light of the failure of liberal social-welfare policies to deliver on the grand expectations of the era, would be one example of such a mugging. More recently, some—though, predictably for an ideology, not many—one-time believers in the ideology of self-correcting, unregulated classical free markets, such as Alan Greenspan (2008) and Richard Posner (2009), were mugged by the reality of the financial crisis. Recent experimental studies in psychology support the notion that even beliefs and attitudes that are strongly resistant to negative evidence can sometimes be dislodged when the forces of disconfirmation reach a tipping point in the believer's mind (see Redlawsk et al. 2010). If the predictive failures of an ideology are vast enough, even the relative rational insulation of its core tenets—their inferential distance from any consensually verifiable facts—may not be sufficient to protect the ideology from doubt.

Conspiracy Theories

A final example of a category of belief whose structure resembles to some degree a web of faith can be found in conspiracy theories. Unlike philosophical webs of faith, conspiracy theories are overwhelmingly about empirical phenomena. Either an airplane crashed into the Pentagon on September 11, or it did not, and if the conspiracy theorist had been present outside the Pentagon on that day, she could have seen for herself. Conspiracy theories might thus appear to be woven into the common, general fabric of belief. Whether a plane flew into the Pentagon is logically related to countless other empirical matters, such as whether the plane in question was not elsewhere at the same time.

But this view of the logical structure of conspiracy theories would conflate potential access to empirical evidence with actual access. The difference between the two is what makes conspiracy theories possible. Although such theories are entirely about matters that could be settled by reference to dispositive, empirical evidence, their proponents lack anything approaching direct access to such evidence, and they distrust many of the less direct sources to which they do have access. As a result,

the beliefs of conspiracy theorists end up resembling webs of faith in which all the pieces of evidence to which a non-believer could point are accounted for, but the trustworthiness and significance of these pieces of evidence has been radically altered. Discrepancies that the non-believer casually overlooks as random flukes or noise in the data are highly revealing to the conspiracy theorist: not only evidence that the accepted story is false, but sometimes evidence of a cover-up or a key to what really happened. Conversely, pieces of evidence that the non-believer takes as indicative of the obvious falsity of the theory are either explained away as deliberately planted misinformation, or are otherwise elaborately incorporated into the theorist's version of events. Conspiracy theories, the poor man's metaphysics, offer the potential for endless refinement in response to any challenge.

As in the case of the religious fundamentalist, it does not seem quite right to say that the conspiracy theorist's beliefs are "illogical." There may be no definitive, uncorrectable logical inconsistency anywhere in the theorist's theory. If anything, conspiracy theories are not irrational but *hyperrational*, obsessively committed to offering an explanation for every minute piece of the puzzle. As Rebecca Goldstein (2005, 48) writes of the mathematician Kurt Gödel's belief, later in life, in a centuries-long conspiracy to "make men stupid" by suppressing the truth of the full power of a priori reasoning, paranoia is not irrationality but a form of "rationality run amok." Even earlier, Gödel claimed to have discovered an internal contradiction in the U.S. Constitution "that would allow its democracy to deteriorate into tyranny," as well as a "strange axiom" that "disposed him to believe that everything that happens has a thoroughly logical explanation" (ibid., 232, 236). Is the problem with such beliefs that they are illogical? There is something questionable about blithely concluding that one of the greatest formal logicians who ever lived failed to spot a *logical* inconsistency in his ideas.

Or consider the case of James Angleton, the influential chief of counterintelligence at the CIA through many of the pivotal years of the Cold War. Angleton believed in the existence of a wide-ranging "master plot" orchestrated by Moscow (Weiner 2008, 267–71, 317). All of the Communist powers were united in executing the plot, and any evidence of rifts between them, or power struggles or economic disasters within them, were part of a deliberately manufactured disinformation campaign, a "wilderness of mirrors" designed to splinter Western solidarity (ibid., 317). Moreover, the Soviets had penetrated every Western intelligence

service, including the CIA, so the CIA's own analyses running counter to Angleton's theory could not be trusted—indeed, they were only further evidence of the insidious success of the Soviet plot (*ibid.*).

Was Angleton's belief in his conspiracy theory irrational? Not in the sense that it was internally logically inconsistent or disproved by any empirical evidence available to him. Once again, the internal logical consistency of the beliefs bound together in a conspiracy theorist's web, and the theorist's lack of direct access to potentially dispositive empirical phenomena, may prevent rationally compelled consensus with regard to the subject matter of the theory.

Deliberative Democracy and Internal Critique

It might be objected that, to the extent that webs of faith are defined by their logical self-containment, their subject matter will presumably be of little public consequence. How can the resistance of the ideas in webs of faith to rational contestation make a difference if their truth or falsity has few or no inferential relations to any of the countless everyday facts of the world that make up our shared background of true beliefs? Philosophers, for example, might be criticized for failing to achieve rational consensus, but no one outside of philosophy departments seems to be very troubled by this, and, as we saw, even those within philosophy departments do not seem overwhelmingly concerned.

One response would be that the logical structures described above have had, as a matter of historical fact, political consequences. The stubbornly self-contained logical structure of conspiracy theories has played a politically significant role on a number of occasions, as the case of Angleton suggests. From Federalist allegations of a Jacobin conspiracy involving Jefferson's Republican party, through Senator Joseph McCarthy's allegation of a Communist conspiracy in the State Department, to the more recent Iraq-Al Qaeda conspiracy theory concocted by Douglas Feith and others in the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, the resistance of conspiracy theories to rational refutation has repeatedly helped insulate the paranoid style in American politics from critique.¹⁰

Likewise, it is probable that the relative or complete logical self-containment of some religious views has had an effect on those American political movements that have defined themselves partly in terms of religious belief, such as abolitionism, turn-of-the-century progressivism,

the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, and the rise of the religious right over the last thirty years.

Other examples could be offered. The practical question is how best to respond in a democracy when webs of faith lead to a deliberative standoff.

The reweaving or even wholesale exchange or abandonment of a web of faith is possible through the method of internal critique. Rather than attempting to reach agreement by building upon a common ground of shared beliefs, the practitioner of internal critique, or dialectical argument, begins with another's views and deliberates with the other about whether those beliefs should be revised according to the other's own standards, on the other's own terms. Applying this model to webs of faith, it becomes at least theoretically possible for two participants in a dialogue who are divided in their adherence to a web of faith to work toward agreement even on subjects bound up with the web of faith. Even a hermetically sealed web of faith remains subject to criticism on its own terms.

Many participants in the debates over deliberative democracy have, to some degree, resisted dialectical forms of public deliberation. In the words of Iris Marion Young (1995, 120), "Deliberative theorists . . . tend inappropriately to assume that processes of discussion that aim to reach understanding must either begin with shared understandings or take a common good as their goal." Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996, 12, 55, and 348), Thomas Nagel (1987, 216–17, 231), John Rawls (1993, 462), Joshua Cohen (1993, 54–55), and Ronald Dworkin (2006, 4–5) all assume that public deliberation should begin from common ground and build upon this foundation toward agreement on specific issues about which disagreement currently exists. In other words, they call upon political deliberators in a liberal democracy, at least on some range of very important public subjects, to reason *from* the vast web of generally shared beliefs (or at least from a web of faith that happens to be shared by all or nearly all of the participants in the democracy) *to* agreement on divisive subjects (or at least to a kind of mutually understanding truce). However, for some of the most deeply entrenched and apparently unyielding disagreements in our society—such as disagreements regarding abortion, religion in schools, gay marriage, climate change, and the size of government—reason may not be adequate to arrive at agreement. There may be no rational path connecting the common ground to the field under dispute, or only such a tenuous path that it would be implausible to

expect many to navigate it—and even more implausible to expect that a non-question-begging conception of reason could require all to navigate the path in the same way.

It has become a common political refrain that the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us. Indeed, such unity may, at some times, largely define the outlines of political discourse—for example, when a polity bands together in the face of an external threat. But on some issues, in some contexts, the beliefs that unite us may not provide a sufficient foundation for overcoming our divisions through rational deliberation. A deliberative process that leaves room in the public square for internal critiques of webs of faith, and that remains open to beginning from one's opponents' foundational beliefs—even if they do not appear to be the kind of belief that every reasonable person could be persuaded to accept—may provide a more effective path to consensus.

Of course, as a practical matter, ignoring or ridiculing an opponent's beliefs may sometimes be a more effective political or rhetorical strategy. It may also be the case that in many circumstances, the most effective response to a political disagreement may not be deliberative engagement, but rather addressing some underlying problem that plays a role in the dissemination and adoption of one's opponents beliefs.¹¹ A continually growing body of psychological research suggests that, in numerous ways, rational deliberation may not be as central to human cognition as deliberative theorists may assume.¹² Furthermore, even if an individual is fully committed to rational deliberation, internal consistency in her views, and subjecting those views to scrutiny, a dialectical discussion of an internally conflicting set of beliefs could fail if one participant is committed enough to preserving the beliefs under attack, as we saw above: Contradictions can be evaded through special distinctions, and peripheral beliefs can be abandoned in order to preserve the web's integrity.

It would also be unwise to overstate the potential for any deliberative process to achieve the peaceful resolution of the most deeply entrenched political conflicts. Just as those hard cases that get to the U.S. Supreme Court are often precisely those for which a straightforwardly legal resolution is most inadequate, because the accepted legal moves lead to no determinate, consistent outcome; and just as the conceptual problems that end up interesting contemporary puzzle-solving philosophers are almost always precisely those for which the rules of the puzzle-solving game, with its appeals to intuition and demands for consistency, do not

lead to any clear answer; so the unceasingly divisive contemporary political questions at the center of deliberative theory may be precisely those for which no deliberative tools can hope to provide a calmly rational, mutually beneficial or even mutually acceptable resolution. In the most divisive political issues, it is probably unavoidable that someone is going to feel that he lost, and that the loss was unfair and wrong.

But none of the preceding considerations undermines the basic point that there could be meaningful advantages to adopting internal critique as a strategy of political deliberation in a variety of contexts. In some cases, for example, the mere act of having charitably considered an opponent's point of view might make the opponent more willing to reconsider his views, or perhaps even to engage in a reciprocally charitable consideration of his own opponents' positions. Also, the use of internal critique might help one to see the partiality of one's own perspective, its limits and weaknesses. This was one of the primary bases for John Stuart Mill's advocacy of free speech in *On Liberty* ([1859] 1947, 52–53), and contemporary political theorists who advocate a more open debate than could be achieved by starting from common ground have continued to promote it (see, e.g., Young 1995, 128). Above all, it remains the case that beliefs sometimes change; that this change sometimes results at least in part from rational deliberation, whether by the believer or by someone who has influenced her; and that, if webs of faith exist, then they provide a reason to hypothesize that in some situations, internal critique will provide a less futile form of deliberation than the search for common ground that has so often been prized by deliberative theorists.

The effective use of internal critique in public deliberative processes need not entail giving undue deference to morally objectionable beliefs. At its heart, it simply means the recognition that in a liberal democracy, everyone's voice deserves to be heard. Whether exceptional circumstances might justify the exclusion of some arguments in some contexts is a subject for another occasion. But the general exclusion from the public sphere of reasoning derived from webs of faith is neither theoretically justified nor practically wise. What the Czech novelist Milan Kundera (1986, 164) said of the novel should be true also of liberal democracy generally: It should be a "realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood."

NOTES

1. One precedent for something like the notion of a web of faith can be found in Philip E. Converse's description of constrained belief systems in the opening pages of "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964). Converse suggests that beliefs are sometimes connected to one another in a system, "a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint," where "constraint" generally means "the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes" (ibid., 207). Converse identifies three primary forms of constraint: logical, psychological, and social (ibid., 209–13). The rational relationships that define a web of faith can be seen, in Converse's terms, as logical constraints between beliefs; and the political belief systems discussed by Converse, especially including the abstract, wide-ranging ideologies of elite political actors, but perhaps also the more concrete, fragmented, issue-focused belief systems of non-elites (ibid., 212–13, 246–47), could be described as imperfect webs of faith. This essay can be seen as complementing Converse's project by drawing out some implications for deliberative democracy of the basic model of belief that he assumes.

Converse also provides empirical evidence that there are (or at least were at the time his article was published) important differences between the structures of the political beliefs of sophisticated elite political actors and those of non-elites whose attitudes are influenced by elite opinion. If the political beliefs of elites are in fact more likely to be unified into something resembling a single, densely interwoven web—an imperfect ideological web of faith—while the political beliefs of non-elites are more likely to exist in multiple, relatively self-contained, issue-focused webs or knots within a web, this fact would have significant implications for practical political deliberation. To take only one example, Converse's model would predict that the political beliefs of opinion-makers would be more likely to resist negative evidence for an extended period of time, and then change (if at all) through episodes of wholesale ideological "conversion"; while the political beliefs of ordinary voters could be more susceptible to piecemeal change on an issue-by-issue basis. Just as an oil tanker with only a single tank will be more prone to capsizing than one containing a number of compartmentalized tanks, so the political belief systems of elites would be more prone to wholesale crisis than the more compartmentalized beliefs of the non-elites in Converse's model.

Another loose precedent for the notion of webs of faith (discovered after the writing of this article) appears in Robert Fogelin's "The Logic of Deep Disagreements" (1985). "When we inquire into the source of a deep disagreement," Fogelin writes, "we do not simply find isolated propositions ('The fetus is a person.),' but instead a whole system of mutually supporting propositions (and paradigms, models, styles of acting and thinking) that constitute, if I may use the phrase, a form of life" (ibid., 5–6). As a result,

- “there are disagreements, sometimes on important issues, which by their nature, are not subject to rational resolution” (ibid., 7).
2. The most influential account of the practical sources of reasonable disagreement by a political theorist appears in a brief section of John Rawls’s *Political Liberalism* (1993). In order to explain the phenomenon of reasonable disagreement, Rawls identifies several “burdens of judgment” (ibid., 54–58).
 3. As an example, consider the likely differences in outcome between the following two orders of question. If the interviewer asked the subject a question, recorded the answer, then asked why the subject believes the answer to be true, recorded the answer(s), then asked the subject why he believes each of those responses to be true, and so on, the structure of the answers would likely take on a hierarchical appearance, with the subject eventually reaching what appear to be first principles of some kind, probably very abstract statements for which no further justification seems possible. (This trend is captured by the comedian Louis C. K.’s description of how a conversation ends when a child asks “Why?” after every answer: “This goes on for hours and hours and it gets so weird and abstract at the end. It’s like: ‘Why?’ ‘Well, because some things are and some things are not.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Well, because things that are not can’t be.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because then nothing wouldn’t be! You can’t have . . . *nothing* isn’t! Everything is!’”) If, on the other hand, the interviewer recorded the answer to one question, then recorded the reasons for believing that answer, then turned to an unrelated question and repeated the process, and so on, it seems entirely possible that one would never arrive at a belief for which no reasons were offered, and the answers would appear like interconnected clouds (or webs) rather than quasi-deductive hierarchies.
 4. Of course, much more could be said on this point. A prior version of this essay attempted at great length to clarify the precise senses in which webs of faith, if they exist, could permit individuals to persist indefinitely yet reasonably in a disagreement even under ideal conditions of deliberation. In essence, the less controversially robust one’s definition of “reasonable,” and the more plausible one’s notion of “ideal conditions of deliberation,” the more likely it will be that webs of faith could serve as a source of reasonable disagreement under ideal conditions. By contrast, if one bakes into the definition of “reasonable” a correct answer to every possible question under dispute, then of course reasonable disagreement will be foreclosed even under very flawed conditions of deliberation; and if the ideal conditions of deliberation are so fanciful as to result in quasi-omniscient deliberators, then reasonable disagreement may be impossible even based on very loose conceptions of reasonableness.
 5. Mather’s third source of leeway in the achievement of coherency is that “there will be more than one set of moral principles that justify” any set of particular moral judgments, “just as any set of points on a graph can be connected by any number of different curved lines, each of which passes through every point” (Mather 1993, 324).
 6. Appropriately, Kuhn (1996, 204) describes revolutionary shifts in scientific paradigms in terms of “conversion.”

7. While trying to find precursors for the notion of a web of faith, I arrived at the following passage from a description, on a computer scientist's blog, of his religious debate with a divinity student on a flight from San Francisco to Philadelphia:

I was . . . interested in understanding my adversary's reasoning process—and ideally, in getting him to notice inconsistencies *within his own frame of reference*. Alas, in that I was to be mostly disappointed.

Here's an example. I got Kurt to admit that certain Bible passages—in particular, the ones about whipping your slaves—reflected a faulty, limited understanding of God's will, and could only be understood in the historical context in which they were written. I then asked him how he knew that *other* passages—for example, the ones condemning homosexuality—didn't *also* reflect a limited understanding of God's will. He replied that, in the case of homosexuality, he didn't *need* the Bible to tell him it was immoral: he knew it was immoral because it contradicted human beings' biological nature, gay couples being unable to procreate. I then asked whether he thought that infertile *straight* couples should similarly be banned from getting married. Of course not, he replied, since marriage is about more than procreation—it's also about love, bonding, and so on. I then pointed out that gay and lesbian couples *also* experience love and bonding. Kurt agreed that this was true, but then said the reason homosexuality was wrong went back to the Bible.

What fascinated me was that, with every single issue we discussed, we went around in a similar circle. . . . (Aaronson 2007)

8. This is, incidentally, not an especially difficult hurdle to pass, provided that one is willing to draw novel distinctions liberally and flout aspects of ordinary linguistic usage when necessary. It might also be added that the rational self-containment of philosophical beliefs could help explain how the English skeptic David Hume ([1739] 2001, 1.4.7, 175) famously managed to obtain relief from his philosophical torments by playing backgammon and being merry with his friends. If philosophical beliefs were less rationally self-contained, then such activities might lead the mind back to skeptical philosophical quandaries. The fact that this does not appear to be the case, or at least was not the case for Hume, strengthens the suspicion that philosophical beliefs bear no constraining rational relationships to beliefs about matters that would not routinely tend to be identified as philosophical, such as backgammon.
9. I will make no attempt here to summarize the vastly diverging historical and technical uses of the term "ideology," from Feuerbach to Niebuhr to Habermas, and to locate the usage here within that constellation. I use the term instead as it currently tends to be used in popular discourse—roughly, to refer to a rigid, fervently held system of interconnected, foundational beliefs regarding politics, culture and/or the economy, often identified at some point with a social or political movement, and often contrasted with pragmatism, compromise, or

- “common sense.” In this usage, there need be no implication of socially necessary self-deception, or lack of awareness on the believer’s part about adhering to the ideology. Paradigmatic examples of ideologies would include varieties of communism, liberalism, libertarianism, socialism, fascism, anarchism, and so on.
10. It might be noted that some of the most recent outbreaks of conspiracy theorizing in American political life, such as the so-called “birther movement” doubting whether President Obama was born in the United States, have tended to spread through interlinked web sites whose connections with one another and isolation from sites with other points of view in some ways resemble webs of faith. A study of the most popular partisan political blogs in the months leading up to the 2004 election found that more than 85 percent of the links on partisan blogs were to other blogs with a similar ideological orientation. “When the study’s authors charted the links in graphic form, they came up with a picture of non-interaction—a dense scribble on one side, a dense scribble on the other, and only the thinnest strands connecting the two” (Kolbert 2009; see generally Sunstein 2001).
 11. Some research suggests that superstitions flourish in conditions where security and group equality give way to uncertainty and inequality within groups. South Africa’s transition from authoritarianism to democracy, for example, brought a dramatic *upsurge* in the belief in witchcraft as the certainty of hardship and oppression gave way to greater uncertainty and more unequal losses and gains (Tilly 2007, 106–7). The forces of witchcraft may have provided many with a convenient and comforting explanation for a new, confusing, rapidly changing, and apparently unfair world. Widespread deficiencies in formal education may also have been an enabling factor. If the apparent upsurge of belief in anti-government conspiracy theories on the American right in recent years has anything to do with the uncertainty and inequality created by widespread unemployment, stagnant middle-class wages, and the concentration of wealth at the top of the income scale, then addressing the latter problems may be the most effective—perhaps the only effective—means of combating those theories. It is conceivable that argument might not be enough.
 12. Merely exposing a believer to potentially persuasive counterarguments may have little, no, or even negative persuasive effects if a believer’s reactions to the counterarguments are more shaped by gut reactions and flash judgments than what we ordinarily think of as deliberative processes (Haidt and Bjorklund 2008; Mutz 2008). Arguments may be especially ineffective if they appear to come from an “outsider” as opposed to someone who is perceived as sharing one’s worldview (Kahan et al. 2010). Those who are committed to a belief tend to display “confirmation bias,” embracing positive evidence and rejecting negative evidence (e.g., Nickerson 1998). We often become even more enthusiastic toward deeply held beliefs as a result of negative evidence—though this process of “motivated reasoning” may eventually reach a breaking point (see Redlawsk et al. 2010). The theory of “cognitive dissonance” suggests that argument, and even what seems to be empirical disproof, may in some cases further entrench the ideas that it challenges, especially if the believer has taken a high-stakes,

irreversible action in reliance on the truth of the belief. In the words of Leon Festinger ([1956] 1989, 259):

Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart. . . . Suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong; what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting people to his view.

Converse (1964, 209) makes the obvious but still significant point that while the ideologue “experiences” the constraints of her web of faith as logical, they are often anything but that.

REFERENCES

- Aaronson, Scott. 2007. “Religion’s Rules of Inference.” *Shtetl-Optimized*, 12 May. <http://scottaaronson.com/blog/?p=232>.
- Cohen, Joshua 1993. “Moral Pluralism and Political Consensus.” In *The Idea of Democracy*, ed. David Copp et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Converse, Philip E. 1964. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” In *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter. London: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Davidson, Donald. [1973] 2001. “Radical Interpretation.” In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson, Donald. [1986] 2005. “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.” In *idem, Truth, Language and History: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2006. *Is Democracy Possible Here? Principles for a New Political Debate*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Feldman, Richard, and Ted A. Warfield. 2010. *Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ferreira, M. Jamie. 1998. “Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Festinger, Leon, et al. [1956] 1989. “When Prophecy Fails.” In *Extending Psychological Frontiers: Selected Works of Leon Festinger*, ed. Stanley Schachter and Michael S. Gazzaniga. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Fogelin, Robert. 1985. “The Logic of Deep Disagreements.” *Informal Logic* 7: 1–8.
- Goldstein, Rebecca. 2005. *Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Greenspan, Alan. 2008. “The Financial Crisis and the Role of Federal Regulators.” Testimony before U.S. Congress. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. 110th Cong., 2nd sess., 23 October.

- Gutmann, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. 1996. *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. [1983] 1990. "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification." In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Haidt, Jonathan, and Fredrik Bjorklund. 2008. "Social Intuitionists Answer Six Questions about Morality." In *Moral Psychology*, ed. W. Sinnott-Armstrong. 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Hume, David. [1739] 2001. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kahan, Dan M., et al. 2010. "Who Fears the HPV Vaccine, Who Doesn't, and Why? An Experimental Study of the Mechanisms of Cultural Cognition." *Law and Human Behavior* 34: 501–16.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2009. "The Things People Say." *New Yorker*, 2 November.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kundera, Milan. 1988. *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher. New York: HarperCollins.
- Little, Laura E. 1996. "Characterization and Legal Discourse." *Journal of Legal Education* 46: 372–406.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mather, Henry. 1993. "Natural Law and Right Answers." *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 38: 297–334.
- Mill, John Stuart. [1859] 1947. *On Liberty*, ed. Alburey Castell. New York: Appleton-Century Crofts.
- Mutz, Diana C. 2008. "Is Deliberative Democracy a Falsifiable Theory?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 521–38.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1987. "Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 16: 215–40.
- Nickerson, Raymond S. 1998. "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises." *Review of General Psychology* 2: 175–220.
- Posner, Richard. 2009. "How I Became a Keynesian." *New Republic*, 23 September.
- Quine, W. V. [1960] 2004. "Carnap and Logical Truth." In *Quintessence: Basic Readings from the Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, ed. Roger F. Gibson. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Redlawsk, David P. et al. 2010. "The Affective Tipping Point: Do Motivated Reasoners Ever 'Get It'?" *Political Psychology* 31: 563–93.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2001. *Republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tilly, Charles. 2007. *Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toulmin, Stephen. 2001. *Return to Reason*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Waldron, Jeremy. 1999. *Law and Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Weiner, Tim. 2008. *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. [1953] 2001. *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1995. "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy." In *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib. Princeton: Princeton University Press.