

Crises in Conversation

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1 The questions

It is one thing to have knowledge from learning about the world. It is one thing to want to understand the world, to try to understand the world, to come to some sort of synthesis of what on earth is going on on earth. It is another to try to spread that understanding. These are two separate questions; two very different questions, but the relation between them is critically important to consider.

The questions are very different. The efforts and intellectual satisfactions of resolving the story of the world into orderable, knowable, semi-predictable, motivatable pieces of knowledge are deeply empowering; but radiating that knowledge outward is a much more hazardous project, with its own tactics, its own considerations, its own pitfalls, its own gamut of folly. The approaches to the second question may vary, wildly; minds may differ; there may be no best answer; there may be multiple best answers; the best answer may not be so good after all. Even given the same understanding, answers to the question will vary with judgment, with personality, with psychology, with temperament, with circumstances — and often, according to the qualities of the recipient/adversary, whether friend, foe or otherwise.

Yet the linkage between the two questions is crucial. For, why do we go there in the first place? As a scientist on the eternal quest for truth and understanding, or simply as a human being coming to terms with life, why do we seek some understanding of the world? — here we mean, not at the level of physics or chemistry or biology or geology, but at the level of the human project, at the level of the evolution of human society. We are drawn to this problem — at least I am — not because it is elegant, not because it has easy solutions, not because it carries the beauty of physical or mathematical theory. In fact it is a mess; it is complicated; the data is dispersed, contingent, aggregate, quite aside from questions of bias or selection; often it is contradictory; to the intellectual aesthetics of a mathematician or a scientist, it is as beautiful as vomit. The data, the history, is simply poring over the vomit; the best one can do is note

its overall trajectory, the general characteristics of the spray of vomit that is human history. We know very little about physics for instance, we have no idea what makes up most of the matter in the universe; our Standard Model is a complete mess. But we know even less about chemistry, which is far more complicated; less again about biology; much less yet again, about psychology; but by the time we reach the level of society and politics and human nature, the quality of our knowledge is truly abysmal — and probably always will be. It is some sort of loose aggregate of the totality of individual human actions, each, as they are, ignorant, prejudiced, irrational, uninformed, impassioned, goaded, repressed, manipulated — or courageous, principled, or transcendent — as the case may be for every person in every circumstance at every instant of history. Sum the uncertainties in all of that, factor in judgments of the range of potential action for each individual, and behold the dubiousness of social science as anything like 'science'. Never speak of certainty, never speak of full or partial knowledge, never speak of societies as if they were laboratory instruments. Knowledge is partial, to be sure, but in the same sense that a grain of sand is a partial beach. It is usually zero and at most miniscule; the expert claims their status by climbing a rickety ladder from zero up to the infinitesimal.

But yet we embark on this hopeless project, with our credibility at zero and our scientific principles relaxed and deeply compromised. We expect no firm conclusions, no theorems, no laws, no predictable consequences. The best we can hope for is to extract some guidance for the future, to extract some understanding of the way our society operates, some sense of how social institutions evolve. Above the bookkeeping, there is no knowledge but the gist. Why would we bother?

I suppose I can speak for myself. Until fairly late in my adolescence I was interested in these questions, but almost totally disinterested in politics, which I thought was something completely different. I still am interested, of course, but of course I was wrong: in fact they former subsumes the latter; the point is that politics is presented in everyday discussion and the mainstream media in such decontextualised, irrelevant, cynical, mis-evolved fashion that starting from the root of the question, one cannot recognise the deformed, debased outgrowth.

Why, indeed, might one ask such questions, against all external stimuli and doctrinal conditioning?

I say it is human nature to do so. I do not think I am alone in this regard; I see it scattered about in the vomit. I say it is human nature to try to understand human nature. I say it is human nature to try to understand human nature because human nature has a deeply vested interest in the survival and evolution of humanity — by which I mean, not the human race, but the qualities of knowledge, tenderness, understanding, empathy, creativity, respect, dignity, solidarity, responsibility, freedom and love which we refer to as 'humanity' — we carry the banner of humanity, in the philosophical and transcendent rather than the biological or racial sense. We do this, almost by definition — it is almost circular to ask why; it goes without saying. Almost. It is depressing that many today have seemingly resigned themselves to doom — an existentially horrendous position, well beyond mere apathy — but that seems to be an

aberration. At least I hope so. We are at a low point in history.

So it is not a value-free project. And this is not such a bad thing. In fact, any entirely value-free project is probably morally abhorrent. A value-free project is the engineer designing better missiles because they were asked to; a value-free project does not ask questions; a value-free project is often respectable, but does not have any guidance outside of itself. Even mathematics — supposedly the most value-free of all disciplines — is motivated by truth, by aesthetics, by knowledge, by purity. In examining history and society, one does not do it in a value-free way — in a certain sense. We want guidance about what to do in the future. We want to extract hope from the horrors of the past. We want to find a path to utopia — however narrow, however difficult, however far away. We want to understand social evolution not only for its own sake, but because it may give some idea about social evolution in the future, about government in the future, about politics and economics in the future. We want examples that show up the previously established empirical limits of what is possible; we want to know if they can be improved upon. We want to take the assorted facts known and established, particles of vomit that they are, and do with them what we can, minuscule knowledge that it is. We must be honest about the contingency and uncertainty in our judgments; but we must make them, all the same.

So, the motivation is not value-free, and thankfully so. But when the motivation impels us to try to understand, and we think we understand something — necessarily minuscule but greater than the usual zero — this has severe ramifications for the second question. It revoutionises the approach that we must take. If we think we know something, some lessons to be extracted from the past, which can be applied to the present and the future — and which offer the opportunity of improving our prospects — then we do not become mere seekers of truth. We become missionaries, with all the baggage, all the pitfalls and all the arrogance that entails. One then presumes to know more than others; one presumes to have a greater infinitesimal of knowledge than others; one does not relent while within earshot of views that lead the wrong way, that lead to conclusions striving headlong towards disaster; one even presumes that that infinitesimal knowledge needs to be known by many others; one presumes to preach, to cast the finger at others, to inflate the certainty of one's own knowledge, even — and especially — in relation to those who claim conflicting knowledge.

But it is worse than that. Suppose, among one's findings and judgments about the evolution of human society, one finds — as I do — the following:

- that even under contemporary democratic conditions, information does not flow freely, but is severely filtered and restricted by doctrinal institutions such as media, government and sectors of academia — not as a conspiracy, not by any explicit agreement between groups or individuals, but as the part of the natural evolution of society, as the natural trajectory of social forces over time;
- that as a result, much of the population harbours views which are misinformed, or believes facts which are false (even though they may sometimes

doubt the quality of their own knowledge);

- that those sources of information which the majority of the population rely on, which are the social norm for sourcing information, present a very particular view of society (even though the facts they report themselves may usually be true, and even though many may know it is not the whole truth);
- that the doctrinal institutions of society present a spectrum of acceptable views, a framework of ideas which provide acceptable limits for discussion, which serves the interests of various powerful sectors of society, and which, through the inculcation of this very particular spectrum of views throughout the population, inhibit individuals from understanding the whole, and marginalise and atomise dissent, thereby setting society on a course for continued horror.

Suppose one finds all that. Then one comes into the dangerous situation of believing that they are the lone voice of truth, the lone renegade who has managed to jump outside the system; one runs the risk of alienation and ostracism in the intellectual, but also the social sense. The psychological effects are potentially dangerous; one is then prone to closing off and dismissing all others; one is prone to ignoring conflicting information which is probably filtered through doctrinal institutions and not to be believed. Having come to believe that there is more to the operation of society than meets the immediate eye, through understanding of social evolution and social institutions and examination of assorted facts of history, one is then prone to seeing more, whether dark conspiracies, paranoia or worse. Am I a crackpot? No I am not — I have reams of documentation and sources and reading and history behind me — but sometimes one cannot help but ask the question.

It is worse again. Suppose one finds — as I think everyone does — the following:

- that it is deviant behaviour to raise serious social and political matters (i.e. beyond the doctrinally accepted discussion of electoral parties and politics and their policies, and even probably then);
- that much of the population is disinterested in social or political matters (for reasons that are an interesting matter of discussion);
- that raising serious political matters can easily disrupt otherwise pleasant social interaction;
- that knowledge of the various ills of society can lead one to become angry, rude or hopeless.

It is yet again worse, where one already does not have much in common with much of the rest of society — you already did not have much in common with the average person, perhaps, if you were inclined to undertake such investigation in the first place.

It worsens still, finally, if one finds — as, at least, I do — that the situations in which the topic arises most naturally in communication with others are situations of conflict: where one comes up against an ideologue of the doctrinally accepted view; where one comes up against an opponent who came to the position by less worthy means than the search for truth, and with less scientific commitment; who does not play by the same rules; whose concern is not the spread of what they have discovered as a partial, miniscule grain of truth, but the defeat of opposing voices, or the silencing of dissent, or the victory of the accepted status quo over a quiescent world, or the putting in their place of deviant upstarts.

Not a pleasant situation, indeed.

Nonetheless, if we are to retain our original commitment — and, as a result, refuse merely to return to tending our own garden, furthering our own knowledge, and balefully predicting the descent into barbarism as it all collapses in around us — then we must confront the question. We must evolve our own strategy, our own tactics, based upon our own situation, our own personality, upon our own knowledge and beliefs. It is not only a question of spreading knowledge, then, but also a question of self-preservation — by which I mean, not just keeping oneself physically alive, but keeping oneself emotionally and spiritually engaged, keeping one's own humanity intact. Conflict is draining; the state of the world is depressing; one's inability to communicate one's own thoughts and ideas is deeply humiliating and frustrating — especially when the thoughts and ideas are important ones. Yet they are all ineradicable obstacles, if one chooses the path of understanding, and finds oneself drawn to communicating it, in a world of ignorance and prejudice.

So, some responses.

2 Responses

2.1 Get your hand off it!

First — and perhaps most importantly — one needs to get their hand off it! This is no terrible cross to bear. If one starts considering oneself as some sort of saint on a righteous quest among a world of sinners, one is sure to be exposed as a hypocrite eventually. It is not such a big deal, having unpopular opinions. It doesn't compare, say, to having unpopular opinions in a totalitarian state. It doesn't compare to having a terminal illness. It doesn't compare to being a Jew in Nazi Germany; or a trade unionist in the 19th century; or being left-wing, poor, non-white or female for most of history; and so on. So one has a few arguments, sometimes — one gets used to it. One gets used to stating one's case and listening to others respectfully. One gets used to dealing with people not caring about things one cares about. One gets used to failing to convince people. One finds methods to present dissenting or even radical ideas in non-threatening fashion. One finds subtle or humorous ways to bring these things up. And it's a very satisfying experience if you feel like your argument pits

you alone against the rest of the world, but you find out that someone in the discussion unexpectedly comes out in your support. Or you find after speaking out that others agreed but didn't feel knowledgeable or courageous or strong enough to speak out. Or you find that your erstwhile adversaries are learning about things they didn't know, and which force them to re-evaluate.

But these are just obvious considerations. Of course, things do not always turn out well; indeed, rather depressingly, often things never arise in the first place because nobody raises, or is interested in, such matters. Still, one wants to have some idea how to deal with it when it arises, and in difficult situations. So let us consider tactics.

2.2 Conflict resolution and avoidance

It is, in one sense, just conflict resolution. But there is a sense in which the conflict must be won — on moral principle. It is not enough that we shake hands respectfully at the end. If the argument is lost, it is not only a loss for us, and emotionally damaging — but also, to the extent that our view represents truth and humanity, and the opposing one does not, it is also a loss for truth and humanity. It may be enough if ignorance relents or gives up the fight. It may be enough if prejudice shuts its mouth for the time being, knowing that it will encounter resistance. It may be enough if one surprising fact is raised that the adversary had not considered, to which they respond with a curious "really?", and you with some grain of knowledge drive the truck home through the evidentiary wall. It may be enough if the ideologue finds that not all the obvious idiocies they impute to their adversaries apply in the particular case. (For instance, I have surprised and relieved plenty of capitalists by advocating against not only capitalism, but also Leninism and central planning.) It may be enough if the conservative admires your good heart, and finds one counterexample to their jaded view of human nature. An acceptable resolution certainly does not imply the feeling that one has vanquished the opponent. In fact, the humiliated opponent may just become so infuriated that their opinions harden. I think this depends on individual personality — the better the character, the more willing one is to re-evaluate one's opinions and beliefs, and to remain open to other views, and sensitive to other's feelings; but sadly, some of the hard-headed, hard-hearted and belligerent need to be fought. Sometimes there is no appeasement; and these types are liable to raise the stakes until the only outcome is one of victory or loss. These types, however, are often ignored and receive only a roll of the eye from those more prudent than I! It is a judgment call in each particular case. Out of consideration, where the discussion is among people who have not forfeited their due respect, one should avoid such escalation: I am reluctant to say that "I disagree", or "you are wrong", which unnecessarily raise ire; I usually find it better to present an alternative view to undermine an opposing story.

2.3 How to be a Citizen in a Democracy

In another sense, it is more than conflict resolution — it is the fundamental question of how to be a citizen in a democracy. The citizens of a democracy are supposed to be able to discuss their ideas, respectfully. A democracy is supposed to be continually self-organising at each point in time, according to the judgments of its citizens. A democracy is supposed to be a community of citizens who know when to discuss important matters, who know how to discuss them, who know how to evaluate and re-evaluate their ideas and beliefs based on those of others; and above all, who know to discuss such matters in the first place.

By such criteria, of course, probably every society on earth today fails on every possible count. No society, then, has been democratic since ancient Athens, and then only if you forget that there existed slaves, women, and poor people — and not really even then. It is a real skill to be a good citizen in a democracy, and very few live up to the challenge of citizenship. Not only are we trained not to be civically or politically minded, not only do we not know to discuss important matters, we *know not* to discuss important matters; and then, we are hopeless at the practice of it. It's not surprising that in a society which is so spiritually undemocratic — despite constitutions and triennial or quadrennial carefully stage-managed electoral extravaganzas to the contrary — it is so difficult to figure out how to do it. It is made worse, since fellow citizens are often either apathetic, uninterested, or totalitarian in their frame of mind.

The citizen of the democracy will make their point respectfully and expect others to listen; and do the same for them. The citizen of the democracy will know when they should stand and argue, and when they should back down, or relent. The citizen of the democracy will find the right place to let matters pass in silence, and find the right place to take a stand. The citizen of the democracy will know when to respect an opinion and when to rail against it and destroy it. The citizen of the democracy laughs easily, even when discussing important matters; but is just as prepared to turn deathly serious when the gravity of the matter requires. The citizen of the democracy knows that others will often disagree; but usually will agree that there are certain common standards of morality and humanity which can be assumed.

This is trite, it is adolescent. But those who take up the cudgels to do it, and do it seriously, have their work cut out for themselves: especially in present day circumstances, where most citizens are bad citizens and those we argue with are usually the worst; but even so in utopia.

I think, at least, that this is a useful way to think about it. It is demeaning even having to say it, but its implications are enormous. If a democracy means a self-organising society in the sense above, then something like the following is required: each individual requires a say in every decision that affects them, to the proportion they are affected. If we are to take that seriously, then that includes decisions in the economic realm — and this is a devastating consequence. It immediately negates private ownership of capital, it immediately negates the corporation, and indeed immediately negates renting oneself out for

employment. Democracy is a powerful idea! That is why, to maintain the existing social order, it has to be reduced to a parody of itself. Such considerations render "capitalist democracy" a contradiction in terms.

2.4 Factual drowning

But to more specifics. How to deal with the worst belligerents? Sadly, I fear my main approach is one that is unfeasible for many. Against such opponents, my usual tactic — which is not always available! — is to drown them. Drown them! Drown them in rivers of fact which they probably don't know. Sometimes this is easier than others, and clearly it's impossible if one doesn't know very much. But if one has a big picture of how the world works, backed up by a solid base of facts (not necessarily particularly specific) — and especially those in conflict with propaganda lines — along with specific goals and visions to guide judgments, then I think it's quite possible, on quite a wide variety of topics. But of course, yes, there will always be infinitely more to know. I'm not sure it quite requires devoting one's entire career to it — but it is surely true that it requires some effort. But then again, being a good citizen in a democracy surely requires some effort.

2.5 Moral high ground?

Some suggest that it is better to seize the moral high ground and take it; or at least, to avoid losing it. Hard to win an argument otherwise!

I don't care for such considerations, usually, although I've never been accused of being a genocide denier or anything like that, so the issue has never really arisen. Taking the view that I am good and you are bad is unnecessarily polarising — I have found, at least in my own personal experience, that people who dislike left-wingers sometimes dislike their sense of self-righteousness rather than their beliefs per se. Of course this is totally illegitimate reasoning, but one can do well by avoiding conveying the impression of preaching. But of course, in a sense it's unavoidable; it's a difficult line to draw.

2.6 Working with necessary ignorance

Even partial ignorance may not be a grave obstacle. Everybody is partially ignorant, necessarily. Indeed, historical knowledge — of the sort that informs political arguments — is so vague and such a gist that it is almost meaningless — it is the coarsest divinations of the vomit of historical data. But of course some things, both particular facts and general statements derived from them, seem relatively well established. Depending on the adversary, one may present evidence in different ways. Against a nobler opponent, one can replace bald statements of fact with the more truthful "I believe that..." or "I think...". Against the less scrupulous, especially those who implicitly claim superiority by removing their qualifiers, it may be better to respond without qualifiers — but then one must guard against falsehood, perhaps by talking in greater

generality. Where there are onlookers especially, scruples will be appreciated — for the dissenter is an underdog, and an honest and virtuous underdog is loved by all.

It is also worth having replies to standard arguments well known. If one observes or finds oneself in such arguments sufficiently often then one finds how unoriginal most people are! Most of the points I argue most of the time are extremely standard. Of course, if one is sufficiently interested in such matters one will turn them over occasionally in one's head, perhaps read a little, and formulate their own responses to questions which may well be legitimate. Often the arguments that make us angry are the ones we have no response to — or, more precisely, those to which we know we should be able to respond but cannot, on the spot. The lesson is to go off and think more carefully for next time! If they are properly thought through, one can respond to the most frustrating and insulting questions with triumphant good humour. Perhaps!

In general, debating is a skill; sometimes a very nasty skill; but it can be done forcefully, without animosity — indeed, with pleasure and edification! — if one can overcome — or rather, sidestep — one's inclination to anger when it arises. One should not stoop, but neither set oneself up as vulnerable against an unworthy opponent. The anger is better directed at the system; the truth is what should be directed at the others. If we are not always correct, we will know for next time. If we lose out on a certain tactic, we will have a better rejoinder next time. And if, in the end, we do turn out to be wrong — which we must admit is always a possibility, though it is not a good tactic to admit this to enemies who are more likely to be wrong! — we must always be prepared to re-evaluate and re-form judgments. Considered judgments are powerful; but it is the consideration, not the judgment itself, that gives them their power.

It's an imperfect democracy; it's not really a democracy at all. But we do have an opening; and it's useful to take the opportunity when we can. Some time ago, the model democratic citizen would have been a street-fighter. Now it is the honest, virtuous — but not to a fault — forceful, smiling, friendly conversationalist who must emerge triumphant. But like all participants on this rough terrain, it sometimes helps to have a bit of spunk, a bit of verve, maybe even a bit of mongrel. It can be kind of fun. Just a bit. Sometimes.