

**The Truth Myth**  
**What's Wrong with Being Right**  
**By**  
**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**  
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In case you missed it, three weeks ago a California man launched a homemade steam rocket in the Mohave Desert in his continuing quest to launch himself into outer space. Mike Hughes, a 61-year-old limo driver, former stuntman, and Guinness World Record holder for a 2002 limousine jump, who also hopes to run for Governor and claims he has a legal right to Charles Manson's guitar, wants to go to space to prove Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were just actors filmed on a set that looked like the moon, and that the Earth is really flat. I'm sure most would agree, Mr. Hughes doesn't need to build a rocket to go to outer space.

But even if he does eventually go high enough to see the round rim of the Earth for himself, he will use what he sees to confirm what he already believes is true. Many of today's flat-earthers succumb to this same confirmation bias to explain already existing images of the Earth from space. Instead of claiming it's a rectangle with flat edges, they now say our planet is shaped like a frisbee. This not only allows them to explain its circular shape while maintaining that it's flat like a coin, but also explains why its edges are curved, giving the illusion it's a sphere, even though it doesn't really have an underside. I don't know how they explain the apparent rotation of different continents across its flat surface, but I already know enough about it to know I don't care to know any more about it.

The point we should not miss, however, is that Mike Hughes is an intelligent person, intelligent enough to construct a launchpad out of his mobile home, build a rocket, and launch himself more than 1800 feet into the air. Although he's told the Associated Press he believes, "There's no difference between science and science fiction," he also admits, "I know about aerodynamics and fluid dynamics and how things move through the air, about the certain size of rocket nozzles, and thrust, but that's not science, that's just a formula."<sup>1</sup> Whether it considers it science or not, and, no matter how unfounded and ignorant some his beliefs are, Hughes is obviously and intelligent man.

This is a whimsical example of a common phenomenon in our society, the confirmation bias—interpreting the facts in ways that unreasonably affirm our preexisting beliefs—that often has far more serious consequences. Some engage in pseudo-science to counter the claims of actual science. Pseudo-science, to be clear, is the use of scientific sounding language to explain certain ideas that haven't really undergone the scientific method. Regarding Global Warming, for example, many who wish to maintain the status quo of exploiting and destroying the environment, initially claimed there is widespread scientific disagreement about whether it's even happening. When it became no longer possible to deny it without sounding utterly ignorant, they used the same argument to suggest there is widespread

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2018/03/27/flat-earth-rocket-man-finally-blasts-off-in-homemade-rocket-to-prove-earth-is-flat/#16666c1a9b6f>

disagreement among scientists about its causes. These false assertions pit science against science without ever addressing the scientific facts.

Others have more creatively taken certain facts, like acknowledging the Earth periodically undergoes abrupt climate changes, to argue what we're experience today is natural, and, by implication, isn't caused by human activity, and, by further implication, there's nothing we can do about it, and, thus no need to change our ways. The problem is, simply stating a scientifically accepted fact, then using it to prove one's bias, isn't the same as science. Those claiming today's Global Warming is cyclic haven't engaged the scientific method to prove their hypothesis. The claim Global Warming is based upon human activity, on the other hand, has a great deal of convincing scientific evidence behind it.

Still others, like Hughes' belief the moon-landing never happened, dismiss what they don't wish to believe as a hoax, or, in today's term, as "fake news." This has been a disturbing trend in response to some of the most horrific mass shootings in our country. Rather than admitting we need to make it illegal for citizens to own machine guns, some conclude mass shootings, like the one responsible for the deaths of twenty 1<sup>st</sup> graders at Sandy Hook Elementary school, are a hoax perpetrated by the liberal news media. Almost immediately following the mass shooting at a concert in Las Vegas last year, leaving 50 dead and 500 wounded, the "crisis actor" meme was invented, discrediting actual victims and survivors as paid actors, like Armstrong and Aldrin, participating in a hoax. Some of them were inundated with so many crude, heartless comments accusing them of fraud, they were forced to delete their social media accounts. The same cruel and insane accusations were also immediately hurled at student survivors of the recent shooting spree at the High School in Parkland Florida.

Whether they call what they don't want to hear a hoax, crisis acting, or fake news, or else turn on Faux News to hear what they do want to hear, having their biases falsely confirmed, many in our society, many intelligent people, treat the truth as something they get to make up as they go along, often on a whim, with no duty to be objective or thorough in its pursuit, and no duty to have integrity and be honest, at least, with themselves.

All of this leads to one of the questions I want to explore today, why do smart people believe ridiculous things?

Firstly, I would say it's because the truth hurts. The truth is a lot harder to believe than our myths. The truth may set us free, but true freedom often comes with a difficult price, the feeling of being alone, excluded, even persecuted for expressing our own authentic beliefs. Many of us prefer almost anything to being isolated from the comforts and benefits of society, from the feeling of belonging, even if it means conformity and hiding who we really are, even from ourselves. Erich Fromm said our, "deepest need... is the need to overcome [our] separateness, to leave the prison of [our] aloneness."<sup>2</sup> We naturally want to be accepted by others, he said, but the modern person, "wants to be accepted by everybody and therefore is

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<sup>2</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1956, 1953, p. 8.

afraid to deviate, in thinking, feeling, and acting, from the cultural pattern.”<sup>3</sup> Or, as Bertrand Russell once wrote, “People’s opinions are mainly designed to make them feel comfortable; truth, for most people is a secondary consideration.”<sup>4</sup>

When this happens, we develop an authoritarian conscience, meaning we are willing to let external authoritarians do our thinking for us, no matter how absurd they might sound. We internalize the mind of the authoritarian as our own, mistaking its thoughts as our own. “Very often this interaction of internalization and projection,” Fromm says, “results in the ideal character of the authority, a conviction which is immune to all contradictory empirical evidence.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the facts not only don’t matter to us, we become immune to them, and are, thus, free to believe whatever the hell we want! This explains why a person who says things as absurd as Donald Trump can appeal to so many in our country—claiming things like President Obama was born in Kenya, that Mexico will pay for his border wall, that he prefers war heroes who don’t get captured, that he’d rush in unarmed to face a school shooter, and that he could stand in the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> avenue and shoot somebody and still get elected. The more absurd he sounds, the more powerful he seems.

“*Credo quia absurdum est*,” Fromm calls it, “I believe *because* it is absurd.”<sup>6</sup> For those trapped in the authoritarian mindset, those who have given their ability to think for themselves to outside authorities who tell them what to think in exchange for the feeling of belonging and safety, rational ideas become unimpressive. “If, however, [one] dares make a statement which *is* rationally absurd,” he says, “[the authority] shows by this very fact that [one] has transcended the faculty of common sense and thus has a magic power which puts [one] above the average person.”<sup>7</sup> In short, to some, the more absurd, the more extreme and irrational, an authority sounds, the more godlike they become. In light of what’s going on in our country today, this helps explain a lot.

Another reason smart people believe ridiculous things, is because human society seeks to control the ideas of its populous, and always has. This explains historical ideological events like the Crusades, the Inquisitions, fascism, McCarthyism, and the Cold War. Just as biology seems to care more about the information in our genes surviving than for the individual host organisms of such information, the powers-that-be care little for individuals or their ideas, yet are obsessed with making sure certain ideas remain dominant forever, passed on from one generation to the next, which explains why so many people today still adhere to ancient religious beliefs. So, we can’t blame the authoritarians who may be acting instinctively on behalf of the parasitic ideologies that have hijacked the minds of their hosts, preventing them from thinking on their own.

Our authoritarian systems, which benefit only a few dominant ideas, designed to exclude a wide range of thinking and freethought, control the meme pool in a variety of ways. In the

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<sup>3</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man For Himself*, Henry Hold and Company, Inc., 1947, New York, NY, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Art of Philosophizing*, Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1968, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm., p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

past this has occurred by adopting official creeds and declaring those who express otherwise to be heretics. Holding illegal ideas was then considered a crime punishable by death. In more recent years, in the U.S., those holding ideas differing from those of the status quo, particularly those ideologies that rewarded their compliant hosts with power and wealth, were officially declared dangerous, a threat to national security, traitors, and unpatriotic, threatening them with imprisonment and unemployment.

Even more recently, those who have benefited most from parasitic authoritarian memes have used the power and wealth their symbiotic relationship has afforded them to take over the nation's flow of information, so their preferred ideologies can dominate the national discourse. Just this past week we discovered Sinclair News Media, which has been rapidly acquiring and consolidating control of our country's local TV stations, has been sending out corporate scripts read verbatim by its news anchors everywhere, ironically, about the danger of "fake news," another term, as we have seen, for dismissing inconvenient truths as hoaxes.

Another problem is that the truth, from our perspective, is always relative and incomplete. It's hard to know exactly what the truth is. 2500 years ago, some philosophers started taking advantage of this by accepting payment for using their rhetorical skills to argue anything their employers wanted. They were called, *sophists*, which means, "wise ones." The Sophists weren't all bad, but philosophers like Socrates and Plato criticized them because they weren't as devoted to discovering the truth as they were to getting rich inventing it. Today we don't call this practice *sophistry*, we call it spin. Our mainstream, corporate owned and controlled media, doesn't merely report the news, but often invents it by choosing what will and won't enter the national discourse, and by spinning the facts to mean whatever helps maintain the status quo.

The result is some things that should sound insane to all of us end up being accepted as perfectly plausible and normal. *Global Warming is a hoax. Barak Obama was born in Africa and is a Muslim. The kids from Parkland are being used by the Hollywood elites and the FBI to push their liberal agenda.* Statements like these are as absurd as they are obscene, yet many accept them without question. 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Baruch Spinoza once said, "*factually* greediness, [blind] ambition, and so forth are forms of insanity, although usually one does not think of them as 'illness.'"<sup>8</sup> This is so because certain thoughts and behaviors, once embraced by the mainstream, become normalized, and, thus, seem perfectly sane even though there is no reasonable basis for them. War, mass incarceration, racism, gender inequality, income inequality, destroying the environment, cops routinely killing unarmed black men, voter suppression, the worship of ancient gods, and so on, are forms of neurotic to psychotic thinking that have become normalized, and, thus, seem perfectly sane.

Those of us who don't accept these destructive ways as normal may feel animosity toward those who do. But we should keep in mind that all of us are driven by psychological and biological forces we aren't usually aware of. If, as biologist Richard Dawkins has argued, memes are like genes, vying for dominance so they can outlast their individual hosts and get

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

passed on in the meme pool, generation after generation, there can be little wonder our ideologies are such a powerful force in our lives and our societies. As I have mentioned before, some neurologists now say the sense of *knowing*, which feels like a rational state, is really an emotional state, the feeling of knowing that is accompanied by a flood of dopamine to our pleasure centers. In other words, knowing, the belief we are right, feels great! So, we are physically wired, chemically programmed, to argue in favor of our ideas, not only because it feels good to prove ourselves right (at least in our own minds), but also because it feels rotten to be wrong.

This line of explanation is a bit of evolutionary psychology, which seeks to explain human behavior in terms of our biology. So, hard as it is not to take an adversarial attitude toward those we disagree with, we should keep in mind this possibility that the same unconscious biochemical forces driving some to promote their ideologies at the expense of all others may be the same forces driving us to promote our own beliefs. As one who considers myself a “smart person,” by my own line of reasoning, I must admit the possibility that I too believe some ridiculous things, even though they feel perfectly reasonable to me.

What I’ve tried to do so far is expose the processes by which such thinking occurs with some extreme and, therefore, obvious examples of faulty, biased beliefs. What I really want us to grasp, however, is the process itself, which may underlie our own, seemingly less extreme, thinking. I have seen many people who share my beliefs rush to defend their ideas at all costs, sometimes by shutting down genuine conversation to avoid the risk of other ideas rising to the forefront. I’ve seen how quickly some mundane practical matter turns into moral arguments because of the feeling our ideas are not only right, but righteous. And I know that I am not above committing the confirmation bias myself, or selecting only the facts supporting my preexisting beliefs, or spinning them in favor of my ideas, or inflating my mundane beliefs into moral imperatives.

Yet, after all this, I don’t believe it has to be this way. I don’t believe we, as individuals, as a species, or as a society, are condemned to live out our lives this way, as unwitting pawns in a game of ideological dominance. Although my evidence is personal and anecdotal, I believe it’s possible for not knowing to feel as good as knowing does. It is possible to rewire our brains, so our dopamine reward comes from questioning our own beliefs as well as those embraced by the mainstream. This is what my background in philosophy has ultimately done for me, by forcing me to admit the Truth, if it exists, is unknowable, and the best I can do is expose the faults in my own thinking and the thinking of others.

This attitude has led to my appreciation of humanity’s mystical traditions, those traditions that prefer not knowing to knowing, to living, that is, in the mist, in the mystery. “Mystery within mystery is the gateway to all understanding,”<sup>9</sup> the *Tao te Ching* tells us, similar to other religions, like Hinduism that tells us, “one can only say, ‘not... not’ [neti... neti]. [Neti] is ungraspable, for [neti] cannot be grasped,”<sup>10</sup> or Christianity’s St. John of the Cross who

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<sup>10</sup> Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4.5.15.

said, “The soul travels to God not knowing, rather than knowing...,”<sup>11</sup> or Judaism that says, “Every definition of God is heresy. Definition is spiritual idolatry.” Or the poet John Keats who said we must develop *Negative Capability*, “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Or the science of Einstein who said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. [One] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”<sup>12</sup> Or the philosopher, James Carse, who says, “Knowing that we don’t know is not only a higher ignorance, it is the basis for all our hope.”<sup>13</sup>

Mysticism, as statements like these indicate, has persisted throughout time in a variety of disciplines and traditions, proving it is possible for us to live fulfilling, meaningful, inspired lives without clinging to our ideas, without the need to know, without the irritable reaching after fact and reason. This isn’t to say we need not pursue truth, or should not be committed to it, only that, paradoxically, the more we seek it out, the more we come to accept it is ungraspable, “neti, neti,” not this, not that. As philosopher Bertrand Russell put it, “Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves.”<sup>14</sup> Mysticism, like philosophy, isn’t about piling up the truth, but about chipping away at it, like a woodcarver or stonecutter, ridding ourselves of what we think we know in order to find the truth in the empty spaces we’d otherwise never consider.

I do not believe that “All truth is subjective,” as Kierkegaard said, but I do think it is always experience subjectively, filtered through our human limitations and personnel biases. So, what I’m suggesting here is another way of living, another way of being together, in which we all admit we don’t know the truth and begin behaving and relating to each other as if this were so. Imagine a world in which our leaders, our priests and politicians, instead of being authoritarian ideologues, admitted their uncertainties, didn’t claim superiority over others, and were open to discovering new ideas and new ways. The truth is a myth, at least the notion we possess the truth is. But, as I said, myths are easier to deal with than reality, so many of us would prefer to go on pretending we know the truth. I’d personally prefer to live without it.

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<sup>11</sup> deNicolas, Antonio T., *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989, p. 232.

<sup>12</sup> Einstein, Albert in *Living Philosophies* Simon and Schuster, New York 1931.

<sup>13</sup> Carse, James, P., *Breakfast at the Victory*, (Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1994) p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Problem of Philosophy*, (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1912, 1959) p. 161.