

Information, Disinformation, and the Authority of Knowledge in the Age of Babel

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This paper explores some of the perils to American democracy in the age of the Internet, social media, and the filtered bubbles that its citizens inhabit. I open my analysis by revisiting the myth of the Tower of Babel in order to reflect on the insights that can be gleaned for the present state of disinformation. Then I turn to an examination of the notions of polarization and structural stupidity, while tying them to the distinction that C. Thi Nguyen makes between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. I then argue that the insights of the myth of the Tower of Babel can take us only so far and that an adequate understanding of the current state of affairs in the United States needs to consider the crisis in the authority of knowledge. I base my argument on some insights of philosophers Walter Lippmann and José Ortega y Gasset, who were both concerned about the role of private citizens and the public in the life of a democracy. I conclude this paper by discussing various positions that philosophers of education can take in the age of Babel, while advocating for the need to adopt a probing stance.

Introduction

Chapter 11 in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible recounts the myth of the Tower of Babel – the story of the people who tried to build a tower that would reach the heavens, only to be punished by God, who dispersed them around the world while “jumbling” their languages so that they would lack a way to communicate with each other. According to the ancient Biblical text (Jewish Publication Society, 2003), the descendants of Noah migrated from the east and settled in a valley in the land of Shinar. Once settled, they said to each other:

“Come let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.” The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the Lord said, “If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another’s speech.” Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:4–9)

The myth of the Tower Babel is a harrowing, yet prophetic, account of the risks of misguided hubris and unbridled power. More specifically, Babel is a story about the dangers posed to society when its citizens can no longer understand and communicate with each other. Inspired by the myth of the Tower of Babel, this paper explores some of the perils to American democracy in the age of the Internet, social media, and the filtered bubbles that its citizens inhabit. I begin my analysis by examining how the current state of information has led to what Jonathan Haidt (2022) has called “the triumph of polarization,

outrage, and stupidity.” Then I turn to an examination of the notions of polarization and structural stupidity while tying them to the distinction *C. Thi* Nguyen makes between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. In the next part, I argue that the insights of the myth of the Tower of Babel can take us only so far and that an adequate understanding of the current state of affairs in the United States needs to consider the crisis in the authority of knowledge. I base my argument on some insights of philosophers Walter Lippmann and José Ortega y Gasset, who were both concerned about the role of private citizens and the public in the life of a democracy. In the last part of this paper, I reflect on various positions that philosophers of education can take in the age of Babel, while advocating for the need to adopt a probing stance.

Information in the Age of Babel

Following Haidt’s lead, I submit that there are some valuable lessons that can be gleaned from the ancient story of the Tower of Babel for the fragmented and polarized society that currently exists in America:

The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past. (2022)

Haidt (2022) goes on to note that the story of the Tower of Babel can be viewed as a metaphor for what is happening not only between conservatives and liberals, but “within the left and within the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional associations, museums, and even families.” It is a metaphor for how social media and the virtual realities in which many people spend a significant portion of their time have impacted the nature of relationships between individuals and groups, as well as what it means to be an active, educated citizen in a democratic society.

To be sure, the impact of the Internet, social media, and virtual realities has not been entirely destructive. As Haidt points out, in the early 2000s, when various social media sites were first launched, their impact was quite positive:

Myspace, Friendster, and Facebook made it easy to connect with friends and strangers, to talk about common interests, for free, and at a scale never before imaginable. . . . In the first decade of the new century, social media was widely believed to be a boon to democracy. What dictator could impose his will on an interconnected citizenry? What regime could build a wall to keep out the internet? (2022)

Hence one of the beneficial aspects of smartphones, social media, and other modern technologies was that they made it possible to organize citizens across the globe into political movements – that is, into publics that were devoted to the struggle to bring about democratic reforms (e.g., the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street).

However, Haidt insists that many social media platforms began to change for the worse after 2010. These platforms, which were originally designed to enable us to connect with friends and organize affinity groups, gradually evolved into something much more sinister and anti-democratic. Around the second decade of the 21st century, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter changed their algorithms to promote dishonesty, outrage, and a mob mentality. Haidt (2022) writes that “if you were skillful or lucky, you might create a post that would ‘go viral’ and make you ‘internet famous’ for a few days. If you blundered, you could find yourself buried in hateful comments. Your posts rode to fame or ignominy based on the clicks of thousands of strangers, and you in turn contributed thousands of clicks to the game.” In this way, the tweaked social media platforms were designed to bring out our most moralistic, nasty, and least reflective selves.

Ironically, as Haidt points out, the Founding Fathers of the American Republic were aware of and tried to protect us from the dangers posed to democracy from a public that is impulsive, unreflective, and relies on outrage rather than reason. As Haidt notes:

The Framers of the Constitution were excellent social psychologists. They knew that democracy had an Achilles' heel because it depended on the collective judgment of the people, and democratic communities are subject to "the turbulence and weakness of unruly passions." The key to designing a sustainable republic, therefore, was to build in mechanisms to slow things down, cool passions, require compromise, and give leaders some insulation from the mania of the moment while still holding them accountable to the people periodically, on Election Day. (2022)

In contrast to the visions of our Founders, social media has magnified the frivolous comment, elevated the nasty video posting, and emboldened instantaneous outrage as a legitimate response in public debates.

Equally troubling, according to Haidt, is that the rise of the Internet and our heavy reliance on social media have led the citizenry in the United States to become less reflective and open-minded. The educational problem identified by Haidt comes about because the digital platforms that people inhabit have exacerbated a host of cognitive biases, leading to what he calls "structural stupidity." Among these biases is epistemic closure, which is the "tendency to restrict one's sources of information, including other people, to those largely in agreement with one's views, thereby avoiding adverse discussion" (Jacobson, 2016, p. 3). Closely related to this understanding of epistemic closure, as a partisan psychological stance, is the well-known concept of confirmation bias – the inclination "to focus on evidence that supports what we already believe and to discount contrary evidence" (Jacobson, 2016, p. 3). Psychologists have shown that holding on to confirming beliefs and opinions makes people feel good. As Jessica Nordell (2021) puts it, clinging to such beliefs provides people "an illusion of certainty in uncertain situations; finding evidence that they are right is also affirming" (p. 42).

A corresponding yet lesser-known predisposition is what psychologists and other academics refer to as motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning is the "tendency to scrutinize evidence with greater skepticism if it does not fit one's existing beliefs or values" (Gibson & Jacobson, 2018, p. 187). Epistemic closure, confirmation bias, and motivated reasoning should all be regarded as various cognitive biases that are exacerbated by partisan politics and by the filtered, technological media bubble that many people inhabit. The problem, as Gibson and Jacobson (2018) assert, is that "the closing off of alternative perspectives, information sources, and voices from one's own personal information landscape results in an attenuated and impoverished capacity to reflect and learn" (p. 185).

To complicate matters further, Nordell (2021) points out that modern psychology and contemporary brain research have both taught us that our brains are wired to categorize and essentialize other beings:

When we see beings as belonging to a particular group, for instance, we start to believe there's something fundamental and biological that unites all the creatures in that group, that there's some invisible essence that makes a dog a dog or a cat a cat. We do the same thing with humans: if we are told that a category is important, we infer that people in that category share a fundamental essence. (p. 49)

Nordell's point is that whereas placing people into categories is necessary, there is empirical evidence that shows that it often leads people to essentialize and stereotype groups (e.g., immigrants, Jews, or Muslims). Thus, our tendency to categorize and essentialize others, as well as the general configuration of social media, which encourages users to interact only with those who they agree with, while encouraging an aversion to dissent, together work to intensify the structural stupidity that Haidt has identified. In the next part of this paper, I develop further the notion of structural stupidity, while connecting it to the distinction that Nguyen makes between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers.

Polarization and Structural Stupidity

A careful examination of the history of the United States reveals that neither the phenomenon of political polarization nor the notion of structural stupidity should be considered unique to 21st-century America. The former has surfaced throughout the history of the United States when periods of increased political polarization have been followed by a period of less fragmentation. For instance, the period leading up to and during the American Civil War was one of high political tensions and conflicts between those who supported maintaining slavery as an institution and those who opposed this practice and economic model. American historian Howard Zinn (1995) describes this period as follows: “Behind the secession of the South from the Union, after Lincoln was elected President in the fall of 1860 as candidate of the new Republican party, was a long series of policy clashes between South and North. (p. 184).” Similarly, the middle of the 20th century marked a period of elevated polarization, one in which leaders and citizens who struggled for equal rights for African Americans were met with strong resistance and even violence from those who wanted to maintain segregation and the various privileges and powers that White people enjoyed. Although the hyper-polarization that grew during the Civil War and the civil rights era diminished somewhat in the years that followed these two historical periods, it never disappeared from American society and politics.

Like the phenomenon of political polarization, the notion of structural stupidity ought not be regarded as new or unprecedented. Haidt summarizes his account of this notion by suggesting that “American politics is getting ever more ridiculous and dysfunctional not because Americans are getting less intelligent. The problem is structural. Thanks to enhanced-virality social media, dissent is punished within many of our institutions, which means that bad ideas get elevated into official policy (2022).” The notion of structural stupidity implies that the hyper-polarization and fragmentation we are witnessing today is not a function of individual intelligence. That is, it is not the case that human beings are becoming less smart than their predecessors. Rather, the problem is structural, meaning that the news outlets we consume, the universities that our students attend, and the social media platforms that we subscribe to generally discourage dissent, reward conformity, and expose us to viewpoints that are likely to make us comfortable.

How does media in general and social media in particular contribute to our becoming structurally stupid? Nguyen’s analysis of the difference between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers sheds some critical light on this question. He opens his discussion by arguing that the rise of social media in the 21st century has called into question the breadth and reliability of the information to which people have access. Nguyen (2020) writes that most of the conversations taking place about fake news and post-truth have

blurred two distinct, but interrelated, social epistemic phenomena, which I will call *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers*. Both are problematic social structures that lead their members astray. Both reinforce ideological separation. But they are different in their origins, mechanisms for operation, and avenues for treatment. Both are structures of exclusion – but epistemic bubbles exclude through omission, while echo chambers exclude by manipulating trust and credence. However, the modern conversation often fails to distinguish between them. (p. 2)

According to Nguyen, “an epistemic bubble is *a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission*” (p. 5, emphasis in original). Epistemic bubbles form when people leave out relevant sources of information, rather than through actively discrediting those sources. Nguyen maintains that the omission that creates an epistemic bubble can be attributed to two primary forces. First is people’s tendency to seek out like-minded sources and shun those that contradict their core beliefs. Second, there is the disturbing fact that our informational landscape is modified by the actions of other agents. Arguably the most worrisome aspect of this latter force is what Nguyen refers to as the algorithmic personal filtering of online experiences. As he (2020) explains:

Internet search engines, for example, will track personal information for each particular user, and adapt their search results to suit each user's interest. Certainly, newspapers and other traditional media technologies do place external filters on their readers, but the modern instantiation is particularly powerful and troubling. (p. 6)

An echo chamber, on the other hand, is “*an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously amplifying insider members' epistemic credential*” (p. 10, emphasis in original). Nguyen uses the phrase “amplifying of epistemic credentials” to refer to the way in which members of a community place very high levels of trust in other members of that community. In contrast, “epistemic discrediting” means that non-members are not simply denied the right to participate in the conversation, but are actively assigned some epistemic demerit, such as unreliability or maliciousness. The danger is, according to Nguyen, that once a sufficient disparity in credence between insiders and outsiders has been established, then it becomes almost impossible to question and dispute the echo chambers' beliefs system. As such, echo chambers are far more pernicious than epistemic bubbles.

In contrast to both epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, Nguyen points out that “a healthy epistemic network will supply a steady stream of contrary evidence and counterarguments; thus, no single individual or group will ever go unchallenged” (p. 17). Epistemic bubbles, he argues, tend to exaggerate the level of credence of sources inside the bubble, thereby making it significantly less likely that mistakes will be discovered. However, when an echo chamber is in place and all outside sources have been effectively discredited, then the potential for epistemic errors to gain credence and conspiracy theories to flourish is endless. For instance, in the case of climate change denialism, deniers operate inside an epistemic structure whereby all outside sources of evidence pointing to global warming or environmental degradation have been thoroughly discredited.

Haidt's and Nguyen's respective investigations of information in an era of hyper- polarization are not meant to suggest that the rise of social media *caused* American society to become more fractured and less informed. Their point is rather that the changes in the way that we consume news and ideas have greatly exacerbated the fragmentation and structural stupidity that already existed in our politics, culture, and social circles. Like the people who attempted to construct the Tower of Babel who were dispersed and prevented from communicating with each other, the different factions who are active on social media in the United States today are so polarized that they struggle to find a shared language with which to communicate. Nor is it easy to identify common values and principles to fall back on that could alleviate some of these fractures. As Hare and Poole (2014) have demonstrated, “the level of polarization in Congress is now the highest since the end of the Civil War and shows no sign that it will abate” (p. 413). Likewise, researchers such as Gordon (2018) have pointed out that in many cases liberals and conservatives in the United States cannot even agree on a set of basic facts (e.g., what causes global warming or who won the 2020 presidential election) that would enable them to work together to advance the public good. The trouble is that, educationally, people are being shortchanged when they are confronted only with ideas that make them feel comfortable and safe. In contrast, as researchers have shown, “the cognitive dissonance that results from our views being challenged by those that have different perspectives can lead to new insights and enhanced learning” (Gordon, 2022, p. 94).

Crisis of Authority

As much as we might be tempted to rely on the myth of the Tower of Babel to account for the increased polarization and misinformation in American society, attending to the lessons that emerge from that myth can take us only so far. Put differently, unlike Haidt, I do not believe that the metaphor of the Tower of Babel can *fully* explain the crisis in the authority of knowledge that we are witnessing in the United States. In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, William Davies describes this crisis as follows:

As politics becomes more adversarial and dominated by television performances, the status of facts in public debate rises too high. We place expectations on statistics and expert testimony that strains them to breaking point. Rather than sit coolly outside the fray of political argument, facts are now one of the main rhetorical weapons within it. How can we still be speaking of “facts” when they no longer provide us with a reality that we all agree on? (2016)

Davies’s point is that the emergence of online and social media has led to a world in which almost every fact can be disputed, in which lies are routinely regarded as truths, and in which the authority of the expert is regularly called into question.

To refer to the present conflict as a crisis in the authority of knowledge suggests that there is widespread disagreement on *what* counts as true versus false, *how* we distinguish between the two, and *who* gets to determine whether something is factual. Examples of this crisis of knowledge are widespread; suffice it to recall that Kellyanne Conway used the term “alternative facts” in justifying press secretary Sean Spicer’s false claim about the crowd size at President Trump’s inauguration. The myth of the Tower of Babel points to the *symptoms* of a crisis of knowledge in a democracy (when citizens struggle to communicate with and understand each other), but it cannot adequately account for the origins of this crisis. To address the origins of the crisis of knowledge, I would like to revisit some ideas from Lippmann and Ortega y Gasset that speak to the role of the public in the life of a democracy.

In his book *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann took issue with various theories that claim that ordinary citizens are inherently competent in their ability to direct the course of public affairs. Lippmann (1925/2022) referred to such theories as false ideals, not because they are undesirable, but rather because they are unattainable:

An ideal should express the true possibilities of its subjects. When it does not it perverts the true possibilities. The ideal of the omniscient, sovereign citizen is, in my opinion, such a false ideal. It is unattainable. The pursuit of it is misleading. The failure to achieve it has produced the current disenchantment. (p. 29)

In contrast to such idealized accounts of the power of citizens in a democracy, Lippmann suggested that ordinary people do not have opinions about most of the public matters that affect them since they do not know what is happening, why it is happening, or what should be occurring. Lippmann stated bluntly that “there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs” (p. 29).

Distinguishing between ordinary citizens and experts, and between outsiders and insiders, Lippmann argued that only the latter (experts, insiders) can arrive at an informed opinion on how to direct public policy. Unlike the latter, the former (ordinary citizens, outsiders) lack the experience and expertise to provide judicious responses to social issues (like reducing crime and enacting immigration reform) that affect a broad range of people. Indeed, Lippmann was convinced that it was unfair to expect an ordinary citizen to understand such complex problems, let alone be able to propose solutions to address them: “He cannot do it. No scheme of education can equip him in advance for all the problems of mankind; no device of publicity, no machinery of enlightenment, can endow him during a crisis with the antecedent detailed and technical knowledge which is required of executive action (p. 137).”

Perhaps Lippmann overstated the distinction between ordinary citizens and experts even as he underestimated the potential of education to diminish the gap between the two. Still, I believe that we need to take his distinction seriously, especially in the context of the current crisis in the authority of knowledge, described above. As mentioned previously, one of the characteristics of the present crisis is that the authority of experts (e.g., in healthcare and election integrity) have been undermined by many politicians and ordinary citizens in the United States. Such undermining of expert knowledge in medicine and politics has had devastating consequences for many Americans in the past few years (think of unnecessary COVID-19 deaths). Hence, while it may be true that a vibrant democracy requires an active and informed citizenry, as thinkers like John Dewey (1916) and Hannah Arendt (1958) have advocated,

it is also true that democratic societies rely on professional experts to function smoothly and avoid economic, political, or environmental calamities.

Lippmann was not alone in his skepticism that democratic societies could thrive by empowering their citizens to become autonomous and informed agents. Only a few years after the publication of *The Phantom Public* in 1925, Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset echoed Lippmann's concerns in his book *The Revolt of the Masses*. In the opening chapter, Ortega y Gasset (1932) expressed his concern that in the first few decades of the 20th century, Europe was suffering from a crisis, which he attributed to the accession of the masses to complete social power. He noted that although in previous generations it was possible to identify multitudes of individuals, these multitudes did not exist as *masses*:

Scattered about the world in small groups, or solitary, they lived a life, to all appearances, divergent, dissociate, apart. Each individual or small group occupied a place, its own, in country, village, town, or quarter of the great city. Now, suddenly, they appear as an agglomeration, and looking in any direction our eyes meet with the multitudes. (p. 13)

Ortega y Gasset was alarmed by the shift in the way multitudes of people were being represented – from *quantities* of relatively isolated individuals to a *qualitative* sociological category (“masses”). One problem with this category is that it assumed that people were undifferentiated from each other. Moreover, Ortega y Gasset was concerned that the new sociological determination of multitudes failed to distinguish between minorities and masses. He noted that “the minorities are individuals or groups of individuals which are specially qualified. The mass is the assemblage of persons not specially qualified” (p. 13). The minorities are the experts, the persons with special skills and experience, whereas the masses are the ordinary people who lack such expertise. Yet, Ortega y Gasset emphasized that the distinction that he was making between the select minorities and the masses was not a distinction between different social classes, but rather a division between a nuanced and refined intellectual life and one that is unreflective and vulgar. Much like Lippmann, Ortega y Gasset was troubled by the elevation of the unqualified individual citizen and the pseudo-intellectual to the role of decision-maker in public affairs.

Ultimately, Ortega y Gasset condemned what he called the “triumph of hyperdemocracy” – that is, the inclination of the masses to impose their aspirations and will on the direction of the country by exerting material pressure. It is astonishing to think that Ortega y Gasset, writing in the 1930s, could have foreseen that democracies can become volatile and toxic through the actions of masses of individuals who are not experts. In his words, “*the characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will*” (p. 18, emphasis in original). For Ortega y Gasset, the masses were dangerous insofar as they could undercut anything that was unique, different, or excellent while enforcing a type of conformity that discouraged independent thinking and dissent. The masses, he believed, could impose a stern groupthink that could mask individual differences even when they did not represent the will of the majority.

Taken together, the insights of Lippmann and Ortega y Gasset advance our understanding of the origins of the crisis in the authority of knowledge mentioned previously. Earlier I characterized this crisis as one pertaining to the epistemological foundations of knowledge; namely, what counts as factual, how we distinguish facts from lies and opinions, and who gets to determine whether something is true. Lippmann helps us come to terms with the fact that ordinary citizens lack the necessary technical expertise and experience to make such determinations on their own, and that they need to rely on professional experts to assist them in arriving at sound opinions on public matters. Ortega y Gasset calls our attention to the dangers that arise when the masses (ordinary citizens and groups) seek to impose their will on the future of a democracy despite lacking the necessary intellectual sophistication. Taking the insights of Lippmann and Ortega y Gasset seriously helps us become more aware of some of the major factors contributing to the current crisis of knowledge. First, democratic societies have periodically allowed the lines distinguishing between ordinary citizens and professional experts to blur, thereby undermining the authority of the latter. Second, in undermining the authority of the expert, democratic societies have also elevated what Ortega y Gasset called the commonplace mind, discouraged

independent and nuanced thinking, and promoted a pseudo-intellectualism that is detrimental to society and education.

In my reading of their respective works, both Lippmann and Ortega y Gasset push us to think further about the value and limits of being an informed and active citizen in a democratic society. They do this by helping us realize that granting political rights to all citizens (e.g., the right to vote and protest), together with providing a worthy education to these citizens, is not enough to enable democracies to thrive. Aside from political freedoms and good education, something else needs to exist in democracies if we want these societies to be healthy and vibrant. In part, a healthy democratic society also requires a respect for the knowledge and opinion of experts, which can inform the public about complex social, political, and medical issues. Yet, aside from expert knowledge, Lippmann and Ortega y Gasset seem to be suggesting that we need *mechanisms* that can help us sift through and evaluate all the misinformation and disinformation with which we are being flooded today. Were they living today, they would be very concerned that in the United States and other democracies, such mechanisms and protections are inadequate at best or non-existent at worst.

Moreover, Lippmann and Ortega y Gasset were skeptical of the notion that the crisis in the authority of knowledge can be remedied by offering citizens in democracies more or better education. Such skepticism has been confirmed recently by researchers like Kahne and Bowyer (2017), who argue that “a growing body of research demonstrates the limited value of knowledge and analytical abilities when it comes to making evidence-based judgments in highly partisan contexts” (p. 5). The study conducted by Kahne and Bowyer suggests that providing students with content knowledge and teaching them analytical skills (e.g., critical thinking) is not enough to meet the challenges of the current hyper-polarized environment in which we are living. In fact, the results of their research indicate that more education often leads people to cling even tighter to their preconceived notions and gravitate toward perspectives that reinforce them. Although there is some evidence that “media literacy learning experiences that aim to promote accurate judgment of truth claims appear to be helpful,” Kahne and Bowyer’s research (p. 17) suggests that Lippmann and Ortega y Gasset were correct in their assumption that education can only play a limited role in protecting people from misinformation and disinformation.

Despite their visionary ideas, neither Lippmann nor Ortega y Gasset could have anticipated that the crisis in authority of knowledge would become even worse in an era marked by rapid technological change, virtual realities, and a heavy reliance on social media as a major source of information. Today, when a tweet spreading a false claim can reach millions of viewers in seconds, when anyone without expertise can post on a blog about important political and social issues, and when many Internet sites lack appropriate filters and monitoring, the authority of experts has been further eroded. Such a world – wherein many people are attracted to clickable stories that feed into their existing prejudices, while never leaving their trusted media sites – is indicative of a society in which the space of truth and fact is diminishing. It is as though we are living in a new age of Babel on steroids, in which people on opposing sides of the political spectrum struggle to understand each other, feeling no need to ever exit their filtered media bubbles, let alone interact with people who think differently than them, and in which expert knowledge is routinely mocked or ignored. In the last part of this paper, I consider various stances that philosophers of education can take in this new age of Babel, marked by a crisis in authority of knowledge.

Stances of Philosophers of Education

What stances or positions can philosophers of education take in these times of epistemic crisis characterized by misinformation, disinformation, and an inability to communicate with others? Are we doomed to just follow the historical winds while resisting the latest technological inventions (like AI)? Or is there a more constructive function that philosophers of education can fulfill? I can imagine several possible responses to these questions. One is to stick to our guns, insist that we are engaged in essential research and practice, and defend our turf at all costs (let’s call this a “defensive stance”). On this view, philosophers of education have a key role to

play in the current era of misinformation and disinformation, since these phenomena fall under one of their areas of expertise – namely, addressing questions of epistemology and what should be considered knowledge. In short, a defensive stance insists that the perspective of philosophers of education is unique and needs to be prominently featured in educational debates and policy decisions about information and misinformation.

There is no doubt that philosophers of education have had a long and productive relationship with the field of epistemology, which can be traced back to Plato, at the very least. As such, it is not a stretch to argue that philosophers of education can be considered experts on questions of knowledge, information, and disinformation in a democratic society. Still, the problem with assuming a defensive stance, as the field of clinical psychology has shown us, is that responding defensively serves to push people away and shut them down rather than bringing them in and encouraging them to listen. Indeed, reflecting on the personal relationships we have with our significant others teaches us the same basic lesson – that responding in defensive ways serves to undermine rather than deepen those connections.

An alternative to trying to defend one’s turf, a stance that I can imagine philosophers of education advancing, is to retreat inward, seeking solace among close colleagues in the field while adopting an attitude of gloom, self-pity, and despair (a “depressive stance”). Such a reaction would consist of an attitude that, if professional educators and policymakers cannot recognize the value of adopting a philosophical approach to the crisis of information, well, “the hell with them.” We philosophers of education are better served when we debate with each other about theoretical questions such as the meaning of democracy, social justice, or a liberal education. Retreating inward while embracing an attitude of gloom and despair may be an understandable act of instinctual self-preservation when one is faced with adversity. However, as with adopting a defensive stance, a depressive position cannot help us deepen our connections with others or help us think of creative solutions in times of crisis.

Granted that my characterization of the defensive and depressive stances is sketchy and lighthearted, I do believe that they represent two potential ways of responding to the current crisis in the authority of knowledge. While I have nothing personal against the defensive and depressive stances, my analysis suggests that they are not particularly helpful for addressing the crisis of knowledge described in this paper. The problem is that both the defensive and the depressive stances represent cynical and negative – rather than constructive – responses to these difficult times of persistent misinformation and disinformation. Although these stances may help shield philosophy of education from those who would rather eliminate this field altogether, they are not very effective at forging connections and initiating conversations with policymakers, leaders, and other educators who may have different perspectives on the crisis in the authority of knowledge. Thus, I believe that philosophers of education must consider a third alternative, which I call a *probing* stance. A probing stance is fundamentally different from the defensive and depressive stances in that it is inquisitive and analytical. Moreover, a probing stance is neither derisive nor naïve, and is based on two of our strongest attributes: *cautious skepticism* and *good listening*. To conclude this paper, I outline how each of these attributes can help to diminish the crisis in the authority of knowledge.

Cautious skepticism refers to the ability to ask good questions, not take ideas for granted even if they sound plausible, and make decisions based on evidence and sound reasons rather than intuition or whim. Of course, one could argue that cautious skepticism was exhibited by members of the “anti-vax” movement, who questioned the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines and challenged the intentions of the corporate medical industry. However, in most of these cases the opinions voiced by the vaccine skeptics were not grounded in medical data. Simon Blackburn (2019) reminds us that people tend to be credulous, meaning that they “believe what

they want to believe, however flimsy or non-existent the evidence, and refuse to believe what they don't want to believe, however well attested it is." Thus, while cautious skepticism implies the ability to *not* take public information for granted, it also necessitates that we evaluate that information based on the best available evidence. Moreover, as Lippmann insisted, since the available evidence is often technical and complex, expert knowledge is required to help the public make sense of it.

With respect to the current crisis of disinformation and misinformation, cautious skepticism implies that philosophers of education can learn and model for others how to vet sources properly and how to determine whether something we are reading is true or false. Cautious skepticism can help us mitigate the risks of the cognitive biases mentioned earlier, as well as tackle a host of pressing issues such as the promises and dangers of employing artificial intelligence in education. Philosophers of education who tend to be naturally skeptical are particularly equipped to wrestle with this issue and other ethical questions.

In addition to cautious skepticism, a probing stance entails the ability to display and model the characteristics of good listening. By good listening, I mean as Joseph Beatty (1999) does – the ability to focus one's "attention on the other's communication in order to understand the other's meaning or experience. The fundamental project is understanding the other and so achieving a kind of fidelity to the meaning or intention of the other" (p. 282). Beatty reminds us that when we listen well, our other projects or goals recede to the background and become less important. This means that while listening to friends as they share something personal, we are not simultaneously thinking of the response that we will provide the moment that they are done talking. Likewise, Beatty argues that good listening is inconsistent with "solving the other's problem, morally appraising the other's behavior, counseling the other, gaining the approval of the other, or reducing the other to an emotionally manageable object" (p. 282). Good listening, in short, implies a willingness to attend to the other's words and how he or she is expressing those words, including all the nuances of communication like tone, body language, and facial gestures.

Good listening is more essential today than ever, when political adversaries and diverse groups are talking past rather than to each other. Recall that the myth of the Tower of Babel, with which I opened this essay, recounted how God confounded the speech of those who built the tower so that they could "not understand one another's speech." Likewise, it appears that Americans on opposite sides of the political spectrum find it increasingly difficult to communicate effectively with each other. We might also infer from the Tower of Babel metaphor that the descendants of Noah were *not* deprived of the capacity to *listen*. They were not deprived, in other words, of the capacity to attend to their adversaries' words and meaning, even as their speech was jumbled and their languages dispersed. My contention is, therefore, that Americans have not lost the ability to listen to one another and that philosophers of education need to take the lead in displaying this ability. And my contention is that, unlike expert knowledge, a probing stance is one that every student can develop and that any citizen can hone.

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