

Anti-Intellectualism

It is tempting to simply attribute the reckless irresponsibility of conservatives to scientific ignorance. After all, anyone who fully understands all of the available scientific evidence for phenomena like evolution or climate change cannot possibly deny that they are facts. But a moment's reflection shows that ignorance is not actually a barrier to responsibility. Millions of people accept the truth of these scientific propositions without any real understanding of the details at all. In fact, we all accept thousands of scientific propositions every day with scarcely a second thought. You undoubtedly accept the fact that water is comprised of hydrogen and oxygen, for example. But how well do you actually understand the evidence for the atomic theory of matter? Your personal knowledge on the subject is probably close to zero, and yet you readily accept the fact that water is H₂O. Clearly you don't have to be an atomic physicist to accept scientific propositions about water. More to the point, it would be positively asinine for you to *deny* that water is H₂O, given that tens of thousands of chemists and physicists who do fully understand the evidence agree that it is. The atomic theory of matter also happens to be integral to dozens of scientific disciplines, as well as to all of the technology upon which your modern lifestyle is based.

Given that you do not deny that H₂O is water, why do you deny the facts of evolution or climate change when these facts were arrived at using precisely the same

scientific methods? Why is your acceptance of these facts selective? The answer, not surprisingly, is that you are selfish. Evolution and climate change are inconvenient truths to you, and you deny them because you don't *want* them to be true. It's all about what you want. You listen only to those who agree with what *you want*, you cling to any cherry-picked detail that supports what *you want*, and you refuse to listen to anyone who disagrees with what *you want*. It doesn't matter that none of the biological or medical sciences even make sense without evolution. It doesn't matter that the Pentagon and NASA think climate change is real. Your mind is made up by your personal desires rather than any consideration of logic or evidence, and if the actual facts contradict your desires, well, then it's all just liberal "elites" colluding to hoodwink you. (And why, I might ask, do you respect elite soldiers and athletes, but not elite scholars or scientists?)

Take, for example, your insistence that anthropogenic climate change is a hoax. Although the purpose of this alleged hoax is laughably unclear, you maintain that you are the hapless victim of a vast conspiracy involving tens of thousands of poorly paid scientists, rich investors, and liberal politicians. And not just Americans, mind you, but scientists, investors and politicians from around the world. In your mind it is somehow perfectly reasonable for the governments of India, Russia, China and dozens of other countries to pump hundreds of billions of dollars into climate change research and green technology for the sole purpose of raising *your* taxes and

making a few environmental activists like former Vice President Al Gore rich. Do you have even the slightest inkling of how preposterously selfish it is to think that the *entire world* is conspiring to persecute you?

It has been trivially easy for liberals to call conservatives out on the issues of evolution, climate change, and a range of other social, economic and environmental issues where the scientific evidence is overwhelming. But rather than admitting you are wrong when the evidence flatly falsifies your beliefs, you have doubled down on your denial by disparaging *all* of science. Allow me a brief aside to remind you what a truly astonishing act of hubris this is.

Science cured smallpox and put men on the moon. Science is the reason why you didn't die from polio as a child, why a box that fits comfortably in your pocket allows you speak to people thousands of miles away as if they were standing right next to you, and why you can cross oceans in a single afternoon while sitting in a chair – *in the sky*.⁹⁶ Science has not only saved *billions* of lives, but has added *decades* to each of them as well: average life expectancy at birth worldwide in 1850 was 29; today it is 67.^{24,97} Thanks to science, a mundane trip to the shopping mall today offers a cornucopia of riches and experiences that would have eclipsed the wildest dreams of Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great. Everything you touch from the moment you wake up in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night is the product of science, from the shoes on your feet and the clothes on your back to the food you eat and the words you are

reading at this very moment. Science has been so much more successful at producing useful knowledge than any other form of inquiry that it is almost impossible to overstate its importance. To deny this fact requires truly spectacular feats of both selfishness and hypocrisy.

The purpose of science is beautifully simple: *describe reality as accurately as possible*. Why has science been so incredibly successful in fulfilling this purpose? Because its core value is *honesty*. Cold, unforgiving, unrelenting, brutal honesty. Honesty is the only way to ensure that knowledge is consistent with reality, and the incomparable power of science stems from the fact that every last drop of scientific knowledge has been mercilessly reality-checked to the best of our current ability. This honesty is what distinguishes science from all other sources of knowledge.

Science represents mankind's very best effort to avoid self-deception. As it turns out, this is a surprisingly formidable challenge. No matter how honest a person's intentions may be, unconscious biases coupled with inherent flaws in our subjective perception, our memory, and even the structure of language itself always obscure the truth (a fact that attorneys routinely exploit in the courtroom when examining eye-witnesses). Scientists therefore use evidence, logic, and mathematics to root out inconsistencies between their claims and reality, and thereby hold themselves accountable to the truth. While the specific tools of a given discipline vary considerably, honesty in inquiry is the overarching principle that guides scientists of all kinds. This is not to say that there

is no such thing as a dishonest scientist, of course. Human beings are flawed creatures and scientific fraud, while rare, does happen. But charlatans are quickly discovered (and permanently expelled) because science has draconian self-policing measures built into it that reward rather than punish skepticism and criticism. Anecdote, authority and dogma are shunned in science, and any scientist with sufficient training in the appropriate tools is free to evaluate the work of any other. Indeed, the process of peer-review mandates that every piece of scientific work must withstand multiple critiques before it can be respectably published.

The point I mean to make here is that your disrespect of science signals a deeply malignant form of selfishness: dishonesty. This can, of course, manifest itself as blatant lies – that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction in 2003⁹⁸, that waterboarding isn't torture⁹⁹, that HPV vaccines cause mental retardation¹⁰⁰, that 5 percent of all deaths in the Netherlands are *involuntary* euthanasia of the elderly¹⁰¹, that abortions “are well over 90 percent of what Planned Parenthood does”¹⁰², or that President Obama is secretly a Muslim Kenyan who wants to use youth re-education camps to turn America into a socialist dictatorship¹⁰³, and so on. Such lies are, of course, deliberately intended to deceive others. But more often, conservative dishonesty takes the form of *self-deception*, or what might be more charitably described as *wishful thinking*.

Wishful thinking is very seductive and very convenient, especially when you aren't the one who has

to suffer the negative consequences that result from it. For example, environmental devastation from pollution and climate change is a very grim reality and it is easier for you to believe that EPA regulations are a socialist plot to kill jobs than to accept the truth and make responsible changes to your lifestyle. But denying the truth is only easier because you aren't the person of color whose neighborhood was chosen as the site for a toxic waste dump; because you aren't the woman who makes a living by recycling circuit boards filled with mercury, arsenic and lead in China; because you aren't the boy who subsists by scavenging cans and bottles out of a flowing river of garbage in Indonesia; because you aren't a citizen of the Maldives whose country will literally disappear from the face of the Earth if sea level rises even a few feet; and because you aren't the grandchild who will inherit a world without tigers, polar bears or blue whales.

Wishful thinking can slip under the radar of conscious awareness in a way that outright lying, which normally requires both effort and intent, cannot. When it becomes habitual, wishful thinking is difficult to distinguish from delusion, and this is what provokes so much frustration among liberals: you seem to inhabit a fantasy world walled off from facts and beyond the reach of reason. In this fantasy world, comfortably sheltered from the insults of reality, tax cuts pay for themselves and wealth trickles down from the rich to the poor like manna from Heaven. In this world, abstinence-only education prevents teen pregnancy and birth control promotes

promiscuity, while homosexuality is a lifestyle choice instead of a biological attribute, and the universal healthcare systems in other advanced countries are all wretched failures. In this world, firearm ownership makes people safer and marijuana is more dangerous than alcohol or tobacco. And in this fantasy world, people are only poor because they are lazy, every welfare recipient drives a Cadillac, and Ayn Rand's explicitly atheist philosophy of selfishness and greed is perfectly compatible with the teachings of Christ.

How can we have any meaningful discussion about government policy if you can't distinguish reality from fantasy? How can we discuss the best way to deal with climate change if you have convinced yourself it's all a hoax? How can we discuss sex education and abortion when you think a 150-cell blastocyst is a person? How can we discuss the optimal way to structure our tax code when you think trickle-down economics is legitimate? Whether you are lying to others or just to yourself, dishonesty cripples your capacity to enter into a reasonable debate on any issue of substance.

I don't mean to say that wishful thinking is always a bad thing. Fantasy is a vital source of determination, inspiration and creativity. But like competition and aggression, the range of usefulness for fantasy is exceedingly narrow and it must be exercised with great care. It should therefore go without saying that fantasy makes for a woefully irresponsible way to design and evaluate government policy, although this fact seems to elude conservatives with rather startling ease. To be

clear, the point I am trying to drive home is that much of the conservative platform is built upon lies and wishful thinking, and that this dishonesty is entirely a function of selfishness.