Psychology

Groupthink

Can communal beliefs be reconciled with empirical facts?

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Steven Pinker
When Everyone Knows That Everyone Knows
Common knowledge and the science of harmony, hypocrisy and outrage
384pp. Allen Lane. £25.

"Secrets and Stories" by Paula Rego, 1989; from *The Shelter of Stories: Ways of telling, ways of dwelling* at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, until February 22, 2026

When Monica and Chandler get together in *Friends*, they think they're keeping it a secret. Joey finds out, and is sworn to secrecy. Rachel finds out, but has made a new year's resolution not to gossip. So when Rachel and Joey realize that they both know about the relationship, they have to find ways to signal their knowledge to one another. They know, and they know the other knows, and they know the other knows that they know, but until it can be openly acknowledged, the fact that Monica and Chandler are dating isn't "common knowledge" between them, knowledge on the basis of which they can and are expected to act.

The importance of common knowledge to many aspects of our lives is at the core of Steven Pinker's new book: it can explain, he claims, phenomena as ostensibly disparate as financial crashes and the significance of eye contact, friendship and crying. Much of our social interaction is geared towards monitoring and controlling who has common knowledge, and of what. Many moral and social norms are structured around common knowledge: we applaud anonymous charitable giving, for example, while finding public charity distasteful. Reporting on a study he conducted, Pinker writes:

> Astonishingly, when it came to the donor who simply made himself known, there was no amount of money he could give – not even a hundred times as much – that would make him as charitable in the eyes of our respondents as the anonymous giver.

Pinker has done empirical research on the psychology of common knowledge – including mildly humiliating participants in a lab by making them preform a karaoke version of Adele's "Rolling in the Deep" – and he draws extensively on that in the course of this book, blending it with work in philosophy, economics, an enjoyable romp through various aspects of game theory and a decent sprinkling of properly funny jokes.

This is a return from Pinker's large-scope, political work of recent years (*The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 2011; *Enlightenment Now*, 2018) to the stomping ground of his earlier books: using evolutionary biology to shed light on the sometimes peculiar operations of our minds. (*The Language Instinct*, 1994; *The Blank Slate*, 2002). He is nonetheless concerned, at points, to put his understanding of common knowledge to political application. He argues that free speech wars and cancel culture are grounded in the friction between two ways of forming belief, one based on empirical testing and fact, the other on the affirmation of "uplifting communal creeds" that "uphold a moral order". Of course, in affirming the importance of empirical testing and fact-checking, Pinker is himself affirming an uplifting communal creed.

His genius is to take a phenomenon with which we're intimately acquainted, such as blushing or talking or crying, to invite us to ask why we do it – that is, to stand at a remove from the mystery of our workings – then to hand us a sense-making narrative that returns us to ourselves with a satisfying feeling of renewed understanding. Still, there comes a point where one craves something a little less reductive than what Pinker's favourite framings of evolutionary adaptation and game theory can offer. In his game-theoretic explanation of friendship, for instance, he writes that "the large payoff" of a consummated friendship "comes not just from the warm glow of becoming and staying friends but from the open-ended stream of positive-sum coordination games it enables in the future" – which leaves one with little appetite to make friends with game theorists.

Nonetheless, when the book is at its best, it provides real explanatory traction on certain situations. Why, Pinker asks, do we so often take pains to communicate covertly, as a driver might do when subtly offering a bribe to a police officer to avoid a ticket for speeding? The cost to the driver of doing so depends on how sensitive an honest cop will be to treating ambiguous utterances as attempts at bribery. Since the driver doesn't know if he is dealing with an honest or a corrupt cop – he has incomplete information – he needs to maintain plausible deniability, and covert communication allows for that. So far, so straightforward. But Pinker shows that it's not plausible deniability of the bribe that we are trying to avoid, but *common knowledge* of the bribe. Game-theoretic calculations show that it is only rational to maintain plausible deniability if honest and corrupt cops have different thresholds for the interpretation of ambiguous statements, otherwise the rationality of offering a bribe depends entirely on the proportion of cops who would accept it, and it makes no difference whether it is done covertly or not. What makes it rational to maintain plausible deniability is if "the corrupt cop would take the payola with subtler bribes than an honest cop would arrest the driver for. With this extra assumption, the math works: a veiled bribe is the way to go". But to arrive at that conclusion, we have to consider the relevant pay-offs not from the driver's point of view, but from the *officer*'s.

Yet Pinker claims common knowledge is relevant to such a broad range of phenomena that it's difficult at times to feel that the concept gives us much insight. He argues that laughter generates common knowledge that challenges a convention of dominance or status or prestige – a theory that works beautifully in cases of laughter spreading through a class at the expense of the teacher, but less well for the laughter evoked by jokes that are simply surprising or absurd. Tears, meanwhile, constitute common knowledge of defeat. For Pinker, common knowledge is the predominant ingredient in all types of social behaviour. But saying that a quiche and a cake each contain flour does not distinguish them from one another. The interesting task then becomes understanding what *other* factors inform behaviour.

Take Pinker's exploration of the role of common knowledge in co-ordinating revolutionary action, including the overthrow of colonial regimes such as the British in India, and the success of non-violent resistance movements "even when pitted against brutal dictatorships". Public demonstrations show that there is public knowledge and a will to act, changing the calculus of the risks of doing so. Oppressive governments today seek to shut down social media to avoid that common knowledge arising. But this doesn't mean that common knowledge is *sufficient* for public action. There is currently widespread knowledge of the atrocities that have occurred in Gaza, and of the repeated accusations of genocide in the region. What we need to understand is why common knowledge of something so morally execrable isn't enough to result in co-ordinated social action.

One of the oddities of the book, given its title, is that many of the phenomena Pinker is most interested in – cancel culture, fluctuations in the stock market – require not common knowledge, but, as he admits, "highly confident common belief". It doesn't matter that the belief in question be true; it is enough that it be common knowledge that it will be treated as such.

Common belief is in many ways more powerful than common knowledge, which is, after all, constrained by how the world is. Steven Pinker refers to the Two Minutes Hate from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: a moment when Party members watch a film vilifying the enemies of the state, and that is about the co-ordination of common *feeling* to support the creation of a social reality that involves systematic departures from the truth. As in the case of moralized social media, belief and emotion *create* the reality that societies co-ordinate around, and which establishes their moral norms and infractions, knowledge be damned.

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