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THE IRRELEVANCE OF ECONOMIC THEORY TO UNDERSTANDING ECONOMIC IGNORANCE

ABSTRACT: *Bryan Caplan's* The Myth of the Rational Voter *treats several immensely important and understudied topics—public ignorance of economics, political ideology, and their connection to policy error—from an orthodox economic perspective whose applicability to these topics is overwhelmingly disproven by the available evidence. Moreover, Caplan adds to the traditional and largely irrelevant orthodox economic notion of rational public* ignorance *the claim that when voters favor counterproductive economic policies, they do so deliberately, i.e., knowingly. This leads him to assume (without any evidence) that "emotion or ideology" explain mass economic error. Straightforward, unchosen mass ignorance of economic principles—neither "rational" nor "irrational," but simply mistaken—is a more coherent explanation for economic error, and it is backed up by the vast body of public-opinion research.*

A long tradition of research in political science has found that most members of the public are abysmally ignorant about politics (e.g., Hyman and Sheatsley 1947; Erskine 1962, 1963a, 1963b, and 1963c; Bennett 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). As Philip E. Converse (1975, 79) has noted more than once, "the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys in all countries is that popular levels of information about public

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affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low." However, this endlessly reconfirmed, deeply disturbing finding is not widely known outside the ranks of the survey researchers who have done the research, let alone among scholars who are not political scientists.

The reason for widespread scholarly ignorance of political ignorance is not just academic overspecialization, although that is part of it. The survey researchers themselves have downplayed the significance of their findings: most recently, by arguing that members of the public use heuristics, such as party labels and interest-group endorsements, in place of political knowledge (e.g., McKelvey and Ordeshook 1990; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Popkin 1994; Lupia 1994 and 2006; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002).

While we do not dispute that members of the public use heuristics, the assumption that these heuristics are reliable proxies for sound public-policy information is just that: an a priori assumption that has little basis in the research (Somin 1998; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000). Thus, for example, Samuel L. Popkin (1994) brought forth the Tamale Heuristic as Exhibit A in his contribution to the "low-information rationality" literature (Herbst 1999): Because President Ford was caught on camera eating a tamale without shucking it, Hispanic voters turned against him, apparently because they assumed that a president needed to understand how to eat their cuisine in order to serve their public-policy interests. We find this a troubling example of the foolishness of the actual heuristics that voters use, but Popkin celebrated it as an instance of "the reasoning voter." No matter how ignorant the public is, according to Popkin's theory, the public finds, in compensation, reasonable heuristics for the knowledge it lacks—which entails comparing voters' decisions to those that the researcher considers reasonable.[1]

Benjamin Page and Robert Y. Shapiro also extenuated the public's ignorance of politics in their classic work, *The Rational Public* (1992), which played a pivotal role in the genesis of Bryan Caplan's *The Myth of the Rational Voter* (2007).[2] The aspect of Page and Shapiro's argument on which Caplan seizes is that the public is, in the aggregate, "rational" in the extremely limited sense of having *nonrandom* political "attitudes" (which had been in dispute because of the depth of public ignorance about politics). Page and Shapiro's larger point, however, was that the public's political attitudes respond, in predictable fashion, to media messages about changing real-world conditions, such that *if* these messages are accurate, the public should, in the aggregate, be making "sensible" political judgments. Rather than showing that the messages themselves were accurate, Page and Shapiro (1992, 366) inferred this from the fact that the public's judgments themselves were sensible—meaning, in part, that they conformed to the policy positions that Page and Shapiro thought appropriate.

If the topic is public error, then researchers' own judgments about what constitutes an error, and therefore what constitutes a sensible policy (or a reasonable heuristic), might seem inevitable (although Shapiro himself has recently shown a way out of this conundrum; see Part III below). In turn, if researchers' own judgments about which policies are sensible happen to match those of the public, then complacency about public ignorance is the likely result. This, we think, may have contributed to the failure of public-ignorance research to trouble public-opinion researchers themselves, let alone their colleagues in political science and other disciplines.

Therefore, we believe that the field of public-opinion research could stand to be shaken up. And if our analysis is accurate, there might be nobody better suited to shaking up the field than a scholar who hails from another discipline and who thinks that the public is often wrong.

Bryan Caplan is a likely candidate: he is an economist and he is a libertarian. He is therefore well positioned, at least in principle, to connect public ignorance to public preferences for un-"sensible" policies. However, in place of the political scientists' complacent assumption that public opinion is sensible because it reaches policy conclusions political scientists find reasonable, Caplan substitutes the equally complacent assumption that *economists'* policy conclusions—at least those with which Caplan, as a libertarian, agrees—are sensible, and should be the standard against which public opinion is judged wanting. Therefore, his assertion that the public is doing everything wrong is just as tendentious as have been the political scientists' more tentative conclusion that the public must be doing something right.

Whether in indicting or absolving the public's choices, the extant research has understandably, but unnecessarily, taken shortcuts that have conflated ontology (Are the public's judgments correct?) with epistemology (Why does the public make the judgments it makes—whether or not they are correct?). If we want to know whether the public is prone to error, we have to ask two questions: Where does the public get its ideas?

And does that epistemic source make ontic error likely? The two questions need to be kept distinct, lest the researcher's own ontological judgments substitute for an epistemology of public opinion. Caplan hopelessly confuses ontology and epistemology by asserting that the public *willfully* refuses to accept the economists' accurate free-market policy ideas—as if the public has any idea what those ideas might be, let alone that they are true. Caplan thus takes off the table what the public-opinion researchers had left there, even when they downplayed it: the *possibility* of ignorance-based public error. Caplan is not saying that the public *may* err because it doesn't know what it is doing. He is saying that the public *must* err because it has an "emotional and ideological" commitment to doing the wrong thing. Thus, Caplan's ringing conclusion is that "voters are worse than ignorant; they are, in a word, *irrational*—and vote accordingly" (Caplan 2007, 2, emph. original).

This would be very bad news for democracy—even worse news than mass voter ignorance. In principle, somebody who is ignorant might become well informed; it is harder for someone who is irrational to become sane.

However, Caplan provides no evidence of public insanity. He does not even provide evidence of public error. He merely shows that in 1996, in a one-shot poll about economic issues, a random sample of the public tended to answer the survey questions in a manner that Caplan (2007, 69) considers to be, literally, "crazy"—because these answers differed from the free-market answers that Caplan's fellow economists tended to give to the same questions.

We believe that Caplan has mistaken simple, inadvertent public ignorance—in this case, ignorance of economic theory—with *deliberate* (rational) *avoidance of the truth* (irrationality). In Caplan's view, the public consciously decides to be ignorant of truths it does not *want* to know. "Don't confuse me with the facts"—i.e., with the truth—is his summary of the public's posture on economics (Caplan 2007, 102). Thus, the public's so-called economic errors are actually perverse choices, *not* inadvertent mistakes.

We will maintain that Caplan has provided no case for his theory of "rational irrationality": no evidence of public error; no evidence of rational calculation or deliberate decision on the part of most members of the public; no evidence that most people are "emotional" or "ideological" about economic issues; no specification of which emotions or ideology supposedly motivates them. This might seem to warrant quick dismissal of *The Myth of the Rational Voter* as groundless from beginning to end. But we think that the importance of Caplan's topic merits close attention to where he went wrong. Moreover, our view is that Caplan's economistic, rational-choice approach is the source of the problem, and for political scientists tempted by such an approach, this makes careful scrutiny of Caplan's shortcomings mandatory. Although critics of rational-choice theory have shown that, when it comes to analyzing politics, the theory tends to produce predictions that are either trivial or false (Green and Shapiro 1994), they have not gotten at one of the main reasons for these failures: the inappropriateness, in the political sphere, of standard economic assumptions about the knowability, hence the weighability, of costs and benefits. Since this assumption leads directly to the fallacies of Caplan's variant of rational-choice theory, we hope to nail down its deficiencies here.

Additionally, political scientists who have no interest in rational-choice theory or economic policy have recently been paying long-overdue attention to "emotion and ideology," or at least to affect and dogmatism, in politics (e.g., Marcus 2002; Taber and Lodge 2005; Marcus 2008). This may be the next big trend in political science, and while welcoming it, we hope to sound a warning note: In their enthusiasm for studying political affect and dogmatism, political scientists should guard against the commonplace assumptions that taint Caplan's treatment of emotion and ideology: namely, the epistemological assumption that dogmatism is a matter of affect *rather than* cognition, and can be avoided if only one retains a cool head; and the ontological assumption that emotionalism leads to error—such that cool-headedness leads to truth. These assumptions are based on an all-too-simple view of an all-too-transparent world, according to which the truth is manifest to anyone who calmly and fearlessly seeks it, while, conversely, error must be the result of "irrationality."

I. THE CAPLAN THESES, EXPLICIT AND OTHERWISE

We agree with Caplan's desire to question the competence of mass opinion, and to extend this questioning to the very important matter of the public's economic competence. But this means challenging a widespread cultural (and scholarly) consensus about whether the public has what it takes to make sensible policy judgments on such questions as whether to raise the minimum wage, overhaul the health-care system, or diagnose the causes of financial crises. While we have argued for the strong possibility that the public is incompetent in such areas (e.g., Friedman 1998 and 2005), this is ultimately an empirical claim that one needs, in some way, to prove. Caplan does not prove it. Caplan does not prove *anything* except that, in 1996, the public's answers to certain survey questions were less friendly to free markets than the answers of Caplan and his fellow economists.

In saying that Caplan does not prove anything but that, we do not mean to say that Caplan provides inadequate evidence: He provides no evidence.

In the interest of clarity, we will now outline what we understand Caplan's argument to be, point by point. This is not as easy to do as we wish it were. There are key ambiguities in Caplan's explicit theory, so we place asterisks before points that we take to be logically essential but about which Caplan is less than clear.

A. First, we present what we take to be Caplan's argument for the *existence* of his dependent variable, the "irrational voter":

A1. A 1996 random sampling of Americans who hold doctorates in economics found that the respondents tended to favor free trade, market mechanisms, and labor-saving technology, and that they tended to have a rosy view of economic conditions (relative to the view of the general public).

A2. A 1996 random sampling of the general American public found that the respondents tended to favor free trade, market mechanisms, outsourcing, and technological change less than the economists did, and to have a more pessimistic view of current economic conditions than the economists did. These are what Caplan calls the public's four economic "biases," although at this stage in our reconstruction of Caplan's argument, we use the term *biases* only in the neutral sense of "systematic (nonrandom) patterns of belief."

A3. Because the economists have Ph.D.s in economics, their opinions tend to be accurate; therefore, the public's four economic biases are inaccurate. Thus, the public's economic views are also "biases" in the pejorative sense.

*A4. Voters know that their economic biases are erroneous.

A5. Therefore, the voters' economic biases are *irrational* in the sense that in holding these biases, voters deliberately choose to "avoid the truth" (Caplan 2007, 123).

B. Separately, we now present what we take to be the argument for Caplan's independent variable, "rational irrationality"—his explanation for the public's allegedly irrational biases:

B1. In mass elections, the chance that an individual vote will tip the election is infinitesimally small.

*B2. Voters know that their votes are likely to be inconsequential.

B3. Therefore, voters also know that their political opinions are likely to be inconsequential.

B4. Therefore, voters do not "care about the truth" of their political opinions, including their economic beliefs (Caplan 2007, 2).

B5. Therefore, voters will prefer to "indulge" any political beliefs that are pleasurable to them, and will "actively avoid the truth" in order to do so (Caplan 2007, 123).

B6. Therefore, voters' false beliefs *must* originate in "emotions and ideologies" that make holding the beliefs pleasurable enough to justify, to the voters, their decision to avoid the truth.

We now turn to evaluating the evidence and reasoning for and against each point in detail, before stepping back for a broader look at why we believe that Caplan's important enterprise went aground (Part II), and at what might be learned from the experience by future researchers (Part III).

A1–A3. The Argument from Authority and the Epistemology of Omniscience

Caplan shows that, in 1996, American public opinion diverged from economists' opinions on several subjects (claims A1 and A2), and we allow that this divergence reflects longstanding patterns of public opinion, even though Caplan merely assumes the latter point. (We agree with that assumption because there is evidence for it, some of which we present in an end note.)[3]

We have now stated the sum and substance of what Caplan actually proves: that the American public and American economists disagree (about some things). However, this tells us nothing about whether the public or the economists are right (claim A3). To claim that economists have a corner on economic truth by virtue of their graduate degrees would be an argument from authority and, as such, would be prima facie invalid. To infer that the public's "biases" (in the neutral sense of nonrandom opinions) are *wrong* from the mere fact that they depart from the consensus biases of economists (in the same neutral sense) would overlook the possibility that the economists themselves are wrong.[4]

Caplan (2007, 81–82) urges us to consider that, in cases such as "math, science, history, and car repair," it is reasonable to trust "experts" rather than laymen. We respond by pointing out that economics is not necessarily a science that confers expertise *about reality*, as natural sciences do. The opinions of those who hold economics Ph.D.s do not stem from the results of controlled experimentation (Backhouse 1997, ch. 14), nor even from the experimental tinkering and experience that might warrant placing one's trust in an auto mechanic. Economists' opinions stem, instead, from a series of assumptions they were taught in graduate school (Klamer and Colander 1990; Alston et al. 1992). Unlike mathematical axioms, the assumptions taught to economists are supposed to describe the real world, and we think that they often do. But without empirical testing of a type that is usually unavailable in social science—controlled experimentation—they cannot merely be assumed to do so, *a priori*. In principle, economists' opinions *per se* have no better grip on reality than did the opinions that were taught to theologians at the University of Paris 700 years ago.

Economists are, by virtue of their Ph.D.s, "experts" only in the literature of contemporary economics (just as political scientists are, by virtue of their Ph.D.s, experts only in the literature of contemporary political science). Any claims about the nature of the realities being studied in this literature stands or falls on the substance of a given "expert's" arguments—not on his authority as an "expert."[5] We tend to agree with Caplan and his colleagues about the benefits of free trade, market mechanisms, and labor-saving technology (although we find an "optimistic bias" across all circumstances to be as foolish as a "pessimistic bias"). But this is due to our understanding of the substantive arguments for these conclusions—not because we take it on faith that whatever economists were taught in graduate school, or whatever consensus economists might reach at a given time, has a presumption of truth in its favor.

Caplan needs the argument from economists' authority in order to show that the public's economic opinions are wrong. (In turn, he needs to show that the public's opinions are wrong in order to show that its biases are irrational.) Why couldn't Caplan simply have *demonstrated* that the public's economic opinions are wrong, using whatever logically valid arguments are available? We assume that it is because Caplan was writing a book about politics, not an economics treatise. Had he tried to demonstrate that the public is wrong in its economic judgments, it would have been a very long book.

In Part III, we will suggest an alternative strategy for dealing with this very real problem—a version of the problem that, as we said above, confronts public-opinion researchers in political science: How can the public's errors be studied without smuggling the scholar's own "biases" about what constitutes the truth into his judgment of what constitutes an error? (In brief, we will maintain that assessing public error does not require the researcher to make specific judgments of error: he may instead focus on cases in which public opinion is divided, such that, whichever side is right, a significant portion of the public *must be* wrong.) However, we note at this point that Caplan's shortcut around the problem is fully in line with the master defect of the book: its implicit epistemology, or nonepistemology—where, as we have said, judgments about the "ontological" truth do not merely supplement, but *replace*, an investigation into where the public gets its economic ideas.

An epistemology is a theory of the acquisition of knowledge. The Catholic Church held that God had infused man with knowledge of natural law, but that original sin had obscured these innate ideas. A widespread early Enlightenment epistemology maintained that our minds are passive receptacles of "sense-data" and that, if we are "rational" (untainted by "enthusiasm and superstition"—i.e., "emotion and ideology"), we will automatically perceive these data clearly enough to form an accurate picture of the world. There are echoes of both of these epistemologies in Caplan's implicit theory of knowledge. But his epistemology is, we suspect, not the half-digested fruit of long-exploded philosophical doctrines, but an unwitting extension of economists' ruling analytical tool: the theory of rational choice.

As an ideal type, the theory of rational choice is unobjectionable: It is simply the hypothesis that sometimes, people's actions may be based on weighing the costs and benefits of those actions. Caplan makes two common but fatal steps beyond this hypothesis. The first step is usually called economic imperialism: the a priori assumption that *all* human action is based on weighing its costs and benefits (Friedman 1996). The second step is to assume that science necessarily discovers predictive laws, such that if economics is to be a true science, it must make predictions about human behavior.

Rational-choice theory, even imperialistically applied to politics, would not allow predictions of human behavior, because it would not tell the economist how a rational chooser might assign weights to the costs and benefits of his contemplated actions. The only way the economist can make "scientific" political predictions, then, is to treat costs and benefits as *objectively knowable by the economist, and not subject to varying interpretations by the actors*. That way, the economist can assume he is looking at the same "data" (the same "supply and demand curves") that are driving the decisions of the people whose behavior he wants to predict.

With the exception of "the economics of information" (which we discuss in a moment), the orthodox economic view, even among non-imperialist economists, is that people know everything they need to know if they are to make *correct* rational choices. We will call this position "the epistemology of omniscience." But, of course, it is not really an epistemology at all: no economist has ever proposed a mechanism, whether divine or sensory, by which people could overcome their ignorance and learn everything they need to know.[6] The epistemology of omniscience substitutes, for any plausible epistemology, an implausible view of ontology according to which the world is so transparent to economic actors that they unproblematically know whatever they need to know.

The economics of information is an orthodox neoclassical economic attempt to amend this naïve view by responding to the obvious fact of human ignorance, but it fails to take the problem seriously. Information economics reduces ignorance to the *known* cost of searching for *knowable* "information"—as if the searchers knew what they were looking for, where it was to be found, *and its value*.[7] None of that would be possible, however, unless the searchers already knew the very things of which they are supposed to be ignorant (Kirzner 1997). Here, the epistemology of omniscience reasserts itself in a subtler form: As long as the ignorant agent has sufficient *incentives,* she will (somehow) acquire the requisite knowledge. But one cannot have an incentive to learn something whose value one does not yet know—not yet having learned it. And even the most intense incentives do not instruct someone who is truly ignorant *that* he is ignorant, let alone where he should look for the missing knowledge (Ikeda 2003).

The same naïve epistemology is at work in Caplan's argument from economists' authority. Economists, according to Caplan, are rational enough to avoid the snares of emotion and ideology. His thinking seems to be that an economist's professional reputation depends on her being right; therefore, she has high incentives to be right; *therefore, she puts on her "thinking cap"* (Caplan 2007, 128) *and gets it right*. In short, she knows the truth because she *wants* to know the truth. One could call this magical thinking on Caplan's part, but it is no more magical than the entire orthodox economic approach to the problem of knowledge, which is basically to assume that it is no problem at all—if only one has adequate incentives to know the truth. Caplan then applies this epistemology, or nonepistemology, to a public that, according to rational-choice theory, does *not* have adequate incentives to know the truth about politics or economics (which we will treat as interchangeable in this essay). If, in addition, members of the public find certain false political positions emotionally attractive, then Caplan concludes that they won't *want* to know the truth about them—and therefore, that they will insistently believe in what is false.

That, in a nutshell, is the theory of "rational irrationality," which, amazingly, does mark a theoretical advance over earlier versions of information economics as applied to politics: theories of the public's rational choice *of ignorance*.

According to rational-ignorance theories, voters are ignorant about politics because they realize that the cost of searching for information about public policy would outweigh the negligible benefit of finding it, given the infinitesimal chance that a lone vote, as informed in one policy direction or another by the acquired information, would shift the outcome of an election (and thus have any effect on policy). However, rational-ignorance theory seems to predict that voters should, at most, have only *random* opinions about public policy, because they do not have the incentive to acquire any public-policy information that might bias them (in the neutral sense of the term) nonrandomly toward one policy position rather than another. In reality, however, as Caplan observes, the public does have nonrandom opinions (A2). This is the empirical problem that, to his mind, threatens the viability of rational-choice theories of electoral politics.

Paradoxically, however, there is (in Caplan's view) salvation for economic theories of politics if the public's nonrandom biases are also biases in the pejorative sense, i.e., if the public's nonrandom beliefs are incorrect (A3). For in that case, the economist can *assume* that the public *prefers* to believe in what is incorrect—if the public (somehow) *knows* that what it prefers to believe is incorrect (*A4). *Given this knowledge*, erring members of the public can be seen as rationally choosing to indulge their "demand for political delusion" (Caplan 2007, 18). In this way, Caplan tries to bring economic theories of politics back into line with empirical reality—or, rather, with one relatively small aspect of empirical reality: the sheer existence of nonrandom public opinion:

> How can economic theory accommodate the empirical evidence on systematic bias? Conceptually, the necessary change is not radical: Just add one new ingredient—preferences over beliefs—to the rational-choice stew. (Caplan 2007, 21)

**A4. "'Not Ignorance, But the Refusal to Know'"*

It is not at all implausible that the public's economic opinions are incorrect, given public ignorance—which surely must extend to ignorance of correct economic theories (whichever ones those are). Unfortunately, that is not Caplan's point. Caplan's point is, in fact, the opposite: at some level, voters *know* that their economic opinions are wrong (A4). Or at least we infer that this is Caplan's point.

Why do we make this inference? Because, as we see it, *only A4* can lead from the premise that voters' opinions are wrong (A3) to the conclusion that the voters are "irrational" (A5)—which can then, given further rational-choice assumptions (B1–B4), justify the final inference that voters' (putative) economic errors, rather than being due to voters' possibly cool-headed, open-minded beliefs (however ill-informed, poorly reasoned, or incorrect) about *the truth* (B5), must instead be due to an "emotional or ideological" commitment to biased opinions (in the pejorative sense) (B6). Without some version of A4, Caplan would simply be stating that voters don't know the truth about economics (A3)—i.e., he would be claiming voter ignorance (rational or otherwise), not voter irrationality.

We wish that is what Caplan were doing. Even if voters are biased toward having certain beliefs that are incorrect (which we accept is often the case), the readiest explanation, and we think the only logically coherent explanation, is that the public is ignorant of the fact that its opinions are incorrect. However, granting *arguendo* Caplan's claim that public ignorance could not be *rational* ignorance (because the public's opinions are nonrandom) does not mean granting that it cannot be ignorance of the type we encounter every day, in life, in politics, and in all human endeavors: *inadvertent* ignorance—not the deliberate result of a cost/benefit calculation, but the accidental result of processing information that, at best, reflects only part of the whole truth about the world.

Sheer, accidental public ignorance of economics would be an interesting story in itself, but it would not solve the economists' problem of why a public with low incentives to have *any* opinions about politics or economics nonetheless has them (A2). This is Caplan's puzzle. A4, coupled with A3, would solve the puzzle economistically by wheeling in rational-choice theory: Voters deliberately choose to believe things that they know aren't true, because, given the incentives, *they must take pleasure in believing what is false.* Otherwise, why would they believe what is false?

The idea of "believing" in what one knows (or senses) is false (A4 without the asterisk) is so implausible that it is not endorsed very clearly in *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, and we are not entirely certain that Caplan himself believes it (see Appendix). Our argument is that *his* argument doesn't work without A4, but the reader is entitled to an idea of how close Caplan comes to stating A4 outright. If the reader is unconvinced that Caplan believes A4 by his earlier-cited claims that the public "actively avoids the truth" (Caplan 2007, 123), and that its attitude is "'Don't confuse me with the facts'" (ibid., 102), here are three more examples:

> Aristotle says that "all men by nature desire to know," but that is not the whole story. It is also true that all men by nature desire *not* to know unpleasant facts. (Ibid.)

We ask: If one did not already know such a fact, how would one know that knowing it would be unpleasant?

> Holding fast to beloved opinions increases subjective well-being. When the typical person defends the claims of his religion, to take the clearest example, he *cares* about the answer, and meets pertinent information with hostility if it goes against his convictions. . . . As [Deirdre] McCloskey says, "The man in the street cherishes his erroneous ideas about free trade. . . ." (Ibid., 100)

We ask: If the man in the street thought that his own opinions were *true*, why would his hostility toward opposing views be irrational in the pejorative sense, i.e., based on some pleasure emanating from his opinions *other than* their putative truth-value? Cherishing an idea that one thinks is true is *not* irrational.

> Since most of the cost of voter irrationality is *external*—paid for by *other people*—why not indulge? If enough voters think this way, socially injurious policies win by popular demand. (Ibid., 3)

We ask: How could a voter "think" such a thing without already knowing that his views are likelier than not to be socially injurious?

To be sure, there are several recurrent ambiguities in such passages. Let us clear up an important one. While elsewhere in the book, Caplan (2007, 148–53) endorses political scientists' empirical finding that voters tend to vote "sociotropically" instead of selfishly (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981), in the final passage just quoted, and elsewhere, he forgets this, and assumes that voters would value economic truth only if it were in their self-interest to do so. Let us rephrase the passage so that it is consistent with sociotropic voting:

> Since no single voter's irrationality affects the outcome when there are millions of voters in an electorate, why not indulge? If enough voters think this way, socially injurious policies win by popular demand.

The revised passage assumes that the voter (somehow) knows three things: (1) that her policy opinions don't matter when there are millions of other voters; (2) that her preferred policies are sociotropically counterproductive (they hurt people more than they help them); and (3) that it is "pleasant," somehow, to prefer such policies, other things being equal. It is logically conceivable that the first assumption (a k a assumption B3) is true. But, with the ambiguity about voter selfishness removed, the second proposition (a k a A4) now emerges in all of its incoherence: one cannot believe that a policy that one considers good on sociotropic grounds (and thus favors) is, in fact, sociotropically bad (such that one considers it to be an irrational "indulgence").[8]

Instead of recognizing this self-contradiction as a product of his own imagination, dictated by the imperatives of rational-choice theory, Caplan groundlessly attributes it to the voters in order to establish that they are "irrational" (A5), and thus that they must derive "pleasure" from their "delusions" (B6). We will argue that, instead, voters appear to be *ignorant* that their votes don't matter in a large electorate and *ignorant* that their preferred policies are socially injurious. Once these two forms of ignorance are taken into account, we are left with no reason to believe that voters derive any special pleasure from the (arguably incorrect) policies that they "prefer"—that is, any pleasure apart from the pleasure of thinking that these are, in fact, the best policies (from a sociotropic perspective). Thus, if voters are mistaken about these policies being sociotropically desirable, the default explanation would be, simply, that they are ignorant of that fact.

The heart of Caplan's theory is the claim that the voter's putatively incorrect economic views are the product of rationally weighing two forms of "utility" against each other: the utility of believing what is true versus the utility of believing in what feels good—regardless of whether it is true:

> Human beings value *both* their material prosperity [enabled by knowledge of economic truths] and their worldview. In economic terms, they have two arguments in their utility function: personal wealth and loyalty to their political ideology. What happens if people rationally make tradeoffs between their two values? (Caplan 2007, 17)

Set aside the fact that, once again, Caplan forgets that his voter is sociotropic, such that she would actually value the "material prosperity" of all, not just her "personal wealth." The real problem, it seems to us, is that the "tradeoff" between "arguments" in the voter's "utility function" could not be a tradeoff in any meaningful sense unless it were made in awareness of the fact that the voter's "worldview" or "ideology" is *false* (A4). Without that awareness, then no matter how beholden to her ideology a voter might be, she would still be supporting socially injurious policies not because, as Caplan would have it, she thinks that the utility of supporting these policies *outweighs* the utility of supporting sound policies; but rather because she is ignorant of the fact that her ideology is unsound. But if she is thus equating her ideology with the truth, she cannot possibly be balancing the utility of believing in her ideology against the utility of believing in the truth. To her, the two are identical, so there is nothing to be balanced.

Therefore, if there are indeed, as Caplan maintains, two "arguments" in her utility function, she must be aware that her ideology is false (A4)—which, as we have said, is logically incoherent (self-contradictory).

In Caplan's defense, maybe he is speaking loosely. Maybe he really means to say that erring voters are, by virtue of their errors, *inadvertently* acting *as if* they were consciously trading social injury against personal ideology—but that in fact, they do *not* know that the policies they favor are socially injurious, so they are not literally "thinking" that they might as well "indulge" themselves in voting for what they *know* is harmful to others. But this reading is inconsistent with the theory of rational irrationality, because, we repeat, this reading gives us an account of voter ignorance, not an account of voter irrationality.

There is nothing irrational about believing what one *thinks* is true—indeed, it seems to us that there is no other way to "believe" something—even if, inadvertently, one has made a mistake, and what one thinks is true is actually false. It is only by implicitly adding claim A4 (the *willful* perversity thesis) that what would otherwise be an argument about voters' (putatively) mistaken opinions, perhaps due merely to their ignorance of economics, becomes a proof of voters' "preference" for irrationality—in the sense that voters "actively avoid" the truth (A5), as opposed merely to accidentally failing to discover the truth. In short, only A4 *conjures into existence* the dependent variable—the irrational public—that Caplan is trying to explain through rational-choice theory. Only A4, therefore, allows Caplan to move beyond rational-ignorance theory toward his theory of "rational" irrationality: Without A4, there would be nothing for his theory to explain.

Moreover, only A4 makes Caplan's argument truly "economic," in the narrowly *economistic* sense of the study of "choice, responsive to incentives" (Caplan 2007, 123). In other words, A4 is needed not only to get beyond *rational*-ignorance theory, but to uphold the doctrine of rational *choice* in the study of political error. "Rational irrationality" is an economic theory of politics, as Caplan intends it to be, only if those whose behavior is being described do indeed literally choose "*actively*" to "avoid the truth" (ibid., 123). But this requires that they (somehow) know what the truth is. Rational irrationality cannot be an economic theory of inadvertent (unchosen, passive) ignorance of the truth: unchosen, passive ignorance would, ipso facto, *not* be a choice, and therefore would not be responsive to incentives.

Caplan (2007, 14–15) writes:

> In economic jargon, people have *preferences over beliefs*. Letting emotions or ideology corrupt our thinking is an easy way to satisfy such preferences. Instead of fairly weighing all claims, we can show nepotism toward our favorite beliefs. Ayn Rand calls it "blanking out": "the willful suspension of one's consciousness, the refusal to think—not blindness, but the refusal to see; not ignorance, but the refusal to know."

In order to "refuse" to "fairly weigh all claims," the voter would have to *know* about them—and, indeed, not only to know that the claims exist, but to know what the arguments behind the claims are. Only after knowing these things would it be *possible* to "choose" to weigh the claims in a "nepotistic" manner, because of the low incentives to do otherwise—as opposed to favoring one's own opinion simply because one doesn't know the counterarguments, or even that there *are* counterarguments. Voters who actively "let" emotions or ideology "corrupt" their thinking—as opposed to voters who passively assume that the conclusions they have reached (no matter how emotionally or ideologically) are appropriate, given assumptions and "facts" that they think are true—would have to *know* that these conclusions are false (A4).

Thus, unless Caplan's theory is to collapse into what we wish it were (a simple account of innocent, inadvertent, uncalculated, naïve, *unchosen* voter ignorance of economics), it appears to boil down to the willful perversity thesis. (For further discussion about whether Caplan *intends* to defend this thesis, see the Appendix.) We find this thesis incoherent, simply because we do not know what it would mean for someone to hold an economic opinion (or any other kind of opinion) if she did not think the opinion were correct. We do not know what a "demand for political delusion" (Caplan 2007, 123) might mean, *except* in the purely metaphorical sense in which people do *not* "choose," let alone "demand," but merely *stumble into* mistaken ideas. If by "demand for delusion" Caplan is simply using an inapt metaphor for people's inadvertent belief in what is false, however, we reiterate that Caplan would be presenting an account of economic ignorance, not an *economic* theory of economic *irrationality*.

A5: Evidence against Willful Perversity

Caplan provides *no empirical evidence* that voters choose to "actively avoid the truth" about politics and economics, rather than simply being ignorant of it. But there is a great deal of evidence pointing the other way.

Consider the vast political-science literature devoted to establishing gross public ignorance. Caplan (2007, ch. 1) initially recognizes the public's gross ignorance, but he gets distracted by the rational-ignorance explanation, which would predict zero nonrandom public opinion. Regrettably, Caplan fails to notice that grossly ignorant voters are unlikely to hold even nonrandom views about something as arcane (to them) as economics with conviction—let alone, as Caplan contends, with religious fervor. Somebody who holds a fervent conviction about something might, one would think, be interested enough in the subject to pick up *some* information about it. Yet the general public fails to pick up the most elementary information about politics. It is implausible to think that rabid proponents of protectionism or any other political cause would fail to know virtually anything at all about politics.

The reader may judge whether this inference is justified by the most up-to-date evidence of gross public ignorance that we can find. In February, 2007, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press asked a random sample of voting-age Americans twenty-three questions tapping knowledge of public affairs (Pew Research Center 2007a).[9] Many called for recognition of prominent public personalities, such as Hillary Clinton, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Condoleezza Rice, Nancy Pelosi, and Harry Reid. Six questions focused on Iraq. Respondents were also asked whether the United States had had a trade deficit recently; whether the new Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was a liberal, a moderate, or a conservative; and which house of Congress had passed a new minimum-wage law. The average score was 12.5 correct. If respondents had been assigned letter grades, nearly half would have flunked the test, and only 16 percent would have gotten an A or a B.

In *The Rational Public,* Page and Shapiro (1992, 10–11) provide an older compendium of some of the most striking instances of public ignorance in their Table 1.2. Here we learn that in 1961, at the height of the Cold War, only 56 percent of the American public could correctly identify the term *fallout*, and that in 1964, only 38 percent knew that "Russia is not a NATO member." Even more relevant: in 1989, only 57 percent knew what a "recession" is. How likely is it, then, that by 1996, the year from which Caplan draws his data on the public's economic opinions, a substantial majority of the public could hold strong convictions about, let alone "actively avoid," *any* economic doctrine, whether true or false?

In that very year, Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996, 100) found that "fewer than a quarter [of Americans surveyed] could define terms like *fiscal policy* or *monetary policy* or describe what is meant by 'free trade between nations.'" It beggars belief to assume that people are protectionists out of a perverse refusal to fairly weigh the arguments for free trade if they don't even know what free trade is. But only such a perverse refusal would yield the "irrationality" conclusion—rather than the ignorance conclusion.

B1–B4. Evidence against Rational Ignorance

The cascade of assumptions that leads to the theory of irrationality begins with the theory of rational choice as applied to voting in a mass election. The rational-choice theory of voting, in turn, begins with the observation that it is irrational to vote in such an election (claim B1)—if one's purpose in voting is to affect the outcome—because the odds are exceedingly high that one's vote will *not* affect the outcome. By the same token, according to rational-ignorance theory, it is irrational to spend any resources on informing one's inconsequential vote: It is rational, then, to know absolutely nothing about politics.

The theory of rational irrationality is parasitic on the theory of rational ignorance, because only rational-ignorance theory produces puzzlement over the existence of nonrandom opinions, calling in Caplan's theory to solve the puzzle. Otherwise, we would have nonrandom opinions that could be explained the old-fashioned way: as the result of psychological and cultural conditioning.

The theory of rational ignorance is logically airtight, like most theories of rational choice. But as usual with such theories, the question is whether the logic describes actual behavior. Many logically possible hypotheses are not actualized in reality. The theory of rational ignorance requires us to believe not only logically inarguable claim B1, but empirical claims B2 and B3: that voters *know* the odds against an individual vote making a difference, and therefore *recognize* the irrelevance of their political opinions: in other words, that voters have a clear perception of the ontology of voting, even though epistemologically, they have been conditioned from an early age to believe that "every vote counts." We do not mean to reject out of hand the possibility that most people see through this propaganda, even though our experience in the classroom indicates otherwise. However, if people really do know the odds against their votes counting, we would have to explain why, en masse, they routinely go ahead and vote (and consume political information), often at considerable cost, all over the world.

The fact that members of mass electorates vote, despite the instrumental irrationality of doing so, is the so-called paradox of voting, which Morris Fiorina (1990, 334) once called "the paradox that ate rational-choice theory." Caplan does not solve the paradox, or even mention it.

Rational-*ignorance* theory creates the further paradox (for Caplan) of voters who would be irrational to know, or even to know about the existence of, the very doctrines that Caplan depicts them as fanatically defending. (One might call this the paradox that ate rational-irrationality theory.) But Caplan needs rational-ignorance theory anyway. It is supposed to nullify the voters' desire to believe in the truth, and to explain why they would choose to "cas[t] off the workaday shackles of objectivity" (Caplan 2007, 141). Thus, if voters know that their votes don't matter (B2), and thus that their political beliefs don't matter (B3), it also won't matter to them whether their beliefs are objectively true (B4).

It turns out, then, that in rational-ignorance theory and rational-irrationality theory alike, voters do know one *true* thing about politics, and it happens to be the one true thing that economists know about it: namely, that the average voter's political actions (hence his acquisition of any political knowledge) don't really matter (B1). That much is a matter of statistics, but the notion that voters *know* the statistics (B2–B3) is an empirical claim for which Caplan provides no evidence,[10] any more than he provides evidence for the claim that people don't care about the truth of their political beliefs (B4).

B5. The Irrationality of Rational Irrationality

As Caplan recognizes, even if claim B4 were true, it would not suffice, for it would merely restate the theory of (rational) ignorance. According to Caplan (2007, 123), "the difference" between the theory of rational ignorance and the theory of rational irrationality "is that rational ignorance assumes that people tire of the search for truth, while rational irrationality says that people actively avoid the truth" (B5).

We do not understand how that is possible without already knowing that one's own opinions are false (A4). Without knowing that one's opinions are false, one would have no incentive to actively avoid other opinions, including true opinions.

Caplan cannot be saying merely that people are dogmatic about whatever they believe in the sense that nobody likes to be told that what they believe is wrong. For this would not explain why voters believe what is wrong in the first place—no matter how dogmatically they later defend such beliefs (in imaginary encounters with economists who stipulatively know the truth). Caplan rightly calls his view a theory of "preferences over beliefs." In other words, people prefer holding *specific* beliefs, which is different from saying that people prefer to hold onto *whatever* beliefs they already happen to prefer (because they become emotionally invested in the truth of those beliefs). Since the ultimate dependent variable is voters' support of counterproductive policies, the task is to explain not voters' alleged pigheadedness about these policies, but their *agreement* with them. Thus, Caplan's theory must attribute to the wrong policies some special "comfort" that makes believing in them feel good, aside from the comfort of thinking that *whatever* one believes is true (Caplan 2007, 16). The incentive to accept false belief X has to be a pleasure inherent in believing *it*, as opposed to believing not-X, not merely the discomfort of having to abandon X if faced with the objective reality that X is false once one already believes X—for such discomfort would attend the abandonment of *any* belief one might hold (X, Y, Z . . . n), and therefore would not explain nonrandom beliefs.

Caplan is trying to do what economics is inherently unequipped to do: explain people's preferences, as a psychologist or cultural historian would. In the next section, we will point out that Caplan fails to fulfill his self-assumed duty as a psychologist or cultural historian: he provides absolutely no evidence that believing in protectionism, for example, is more satisfying than believing in free trade. Here, though, we simply note that when Caplan says that people prefer actively to avoid the truth, if he does *not* mean that this is because particular false beliefs are "preferred" because they are pleasurable (as he would have to demonstrate empirically), then he would have to mean that people take some innate pleasure in believing what they know is false. This would merely add an emotive exclamation point to the notion of willful perversity (A4), which we have already criticized as logically incoherent.

B6, pt. 1. Absence of Evidence for Emotion or Ideology

Now we come to the strangest aspect of *The Myth of the Rational Voter*. For all its talk of "emotion" (Caplan 2007, 15, 100, 101, 102, 116, 117, 118, 126, 132, 146, 181, 201) and "ideology" (ibid., 2, 16, 17, 18, 40, 54, 55, 58, 82, 101, 111, 116, 129, 130, 147, 152, 153, 154, 171, 174, 177, 183)—and sometimes "emotion and ideology" (ibid., 2, 20), "emotion or ideology" (ibid., 14), and "emotional ideologue" (ibid., 116)—and for all its quotations from, and about, ideologues such as Marxists, the book does not contain a scintilla of evidence that modern American voters resemble Marxists, or any other ideologues, in the intensity of their economic beliefs; nor does it specify which ideologies are supposed to be motivating American voters; nor does it specify which emotions are supposed to be in play (other than fear of disillusionment about whatever beliefs one may "prefer" to hold).

The reader will not be surprised that we find the explanation for this mystery in Caplan's nonepistemology. If the truth about economics is self-evident to anyone who "puts on their thinking cap" (Caplan 2007, 128), then any departure from the economists' putative consensus around the truth is just "silly" (ibid., 83, 141, 151, 161). People who make *silly* errors must not be troubling to think. And yet, again, this would be a theory of rational ignorance: voters know their views don't count, so they don't *bother* to think: rational *laziness* leads to ignorance, hence error. Caplan (2007, 15) has to go farther, and say that knowledge of the truth is so omnipresent that it has to be "actively avoided": evidence for the truth would bump into people if they did not deliberately get out of the way.

This may be why Caplan does not restrict himself to blaming economic fallacies on "emotion." There is also the equally vague "ideology." "Ideology" seems to mean, to Caplan, dogmatism. But dogmatism is unwillingness to change one's beliefs—which, as we have just pointed out (B5), does not explain what Caplan is trying to explain, which is why voters are supposed to be dogmatic adherents of *false* beliefs.

Not that Caplan offers any evidence that voters *are* dogmatic about their economic beliefs. Dogmatism would lead to a stubborn refusal to change one's mind over time, and one could not conceivably demonstrate this using a one-shot survey. But dogmatism is helpful to the theory of rational irrationality, because it would police the mind against the supposedly terrible emotional consequences of discovering free-market truths whose self-evidence would otherwise be obvious. This, we suggest, explains why Caplan (2007, 15 and *passim*) insists with no evidence that (most) voters are so dogmatically attached to their economic "superstitions" that their fervor for them is akin to religious fanaticism. Fanaticism is psychologically necessary for these imaginary voters, it seems, because otherwise they might inadvertently find themselves embracing stunningly obvious—but horribly unpleasant—economic truths:

> Human beings *want* their religion's answers to be true. They often want it so badly that they avoid counterevidence, and refuse to think about whatever evidence falls into their laps. (Ibid.)

Notice that Caplan is now claiming much more than that people zealously defend *whatever* they believe is the truth about religion. That claim would apply to atheists as well as theists. Rather, he is claiming that people have a preference for believing in some religion or another *rather than* in atheism—which, in Caplan's mind, is analogous to believing in protectionism rather than believing in free trade: preferring the obviously false belief. As it is to the village atheist, it is all very clear to Caplan: The fallacious nature of religion is so self-evident that only the wilfully deluded could be religious. By implication, the untruth of protectionism, of fearing technological unemployment, of opposing the profit motive, and of being economically "pessimistic" is simple common sense; and to keep at bay the awful emotional consequences not only of changing their minds, but of believing in the economic truth, people need to frantically push away the evidence for the economic truth that falls into their laps.

In short, the argument for the public's alleged dogmatism about technical points of economic theory is entirely inferential, and the ultimate basis of the inference is the glaringly self-evident accuracy, to Caplan, of his own economic opinions. Moreover, we believe that the same holds for "ideology's" sibling in the vague Caplan demonology, "emotion." Thus, while he is ostensibly concerned with investigating voters' "emotional and ideological" views about economics, there is in fact no such investigation, and what does all the evidentiary work in establishing that the public's ecomonic opinions are "emotional or ideological" in the first place is the assumption that what is self-evident to Caplan would be self-evident to any "objective" observer. In that case, economic error *must* result from "emotional or ideological" desires to avoid the otherwise-obvious truth (B6)—so we need not demonstrate the existence of the specific desires.

For example, Caplan (2007, 119, emph. added) writes, of Marxists:

> Suppose an adult sees trade as a zero-sum game. Since he *experiences the opposite every day,* it is hard to blame his mistake on "lack of information."

Caplan is arguing that ignorance of the benefits of capitalism cannot explain why somebody would believe in the Marxist theory of exploitation. Every day, after all, the Marxist engages in trades that she must *know* benefits both parties. Therefore, in endorsing the Marxist theory of exploitation, she must be letting "emotion or ideology" push away the objective evidence (that falls into her lap) showing that wage labor is not exploitative.

"The more bizarre a mistake is," Caplan (2007, 119) writes, "the harder it is to attribute it to lack of information" (cf. ibid., 99). Caplan illustrates the point by comparing belief in the Marxist theory of exploitation to someone's delusion that he is the reincarnation of Napoleon. It must be pleasant to believe such things, Caplan is saying—because nobody who isn't letting "emotion" cloud their thinking could possibly believe such things. But this is simply to beg the question Caplan himself has just asked: Are voters' putative errors caused by ignorance (lack of accurate, representative "information") or by irrationality? Only if we suppose in advance that the belief in question is self-evidently "silly" does it follow that holding the belief constitutes behavior so "bizarre" that it cannot possibly be due to simple, unadulterated ignorance. But we would presuppose that only if we thought, just as Caplan says, that, in their everyday lives, the raw, unmediated truth about economics falls into people's laps unless it is "actively avoided." Only by making this assumption—that people's default setting about economics is omniscience—would we conclude that people who don't know the truth must have an "emotional or ideological" inclination to avoid it, such that this inclination need not be demonstrated empirically.

Caplan (2007, 119) approvingly quotes the great Austrian critic of Marxism, the economist Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk:

> What people wish to believe, they believe very readily. . . . And so [they] will in large measure *neglect to apply that critical acuity which [they] ordinarily would devote to an examination of scientific justification.* Naturally it goes without saying that the great masses will become devotées of such doctrines. Critical deliberation is of course no concern of theirs, nor can it be; they simply follow the bent of their wishes. They believe in the exploitation theory because of its conformity to their preferences.

Maybe so. But this does not mean that they don't care about the truth, let alone that they are averse to the truth. It could well mean that they just don't *know* the truth. Their "preference" is Böhm-Bawerk's term for their belief *in the truth of* the exploitation theory. Believing this is *not* irrational: those who believe in it may be thoughtless, they may be ignorant, and they may be wrong, but, knowing what they *think* that they know, their conclusions are rational.

Böhm-Bawerk was trying to explain the passionately held beliefs of millions of self-proclaimed Marxist workers in *fin-de-siècle* Europe. Caplan is *inferring* that there *must be* millions of passionate believers in "make-work," protectionism, and so on in late twentieth-century America. He infers this solely from the fact that randomly sampled 1996 survey respondents held these "patently silly" economic beliefs. Given the assumptions of rational-ignorance theory, the survey respondents must have known that their beliefs didn't matter, and therefore must not have cared about holding true beliefs. Yet even lazy, silly voters would "prefer" to hold correct opinions over incorrect ones: believing the truth is supposed to be one "argument" in their "utility function." So how did most of them arrive at the same incorrect conclusions? Well, according to rational-*irrationality* theory, some "comfort" (Caplan 2007, 15, 16, 116, 126, and *passim*) *must* flow from being wrong, or else people would simply "put on their thinking caps" and be right. Therefore, merely proving that people have nonrandom false opinions shows that people are deranged (when it comes to economics)—like those damn-fool Marxists.

Thus, despite making many assertions that, for example, "protectionist thinking is hard to uproot because it feels good" (Caplan 2007, 2), Caplan provides scant empirical evidence about how *any* of the biases actually feel. By "scant," we mean the following: at one point, Caplan mentions a study of the evolutionary advantages of xenophobia (ibid., 178). This, one might conclude, explains why protectionism would feel good. In the case of the other three biases, he mentions nothing at all—save his inferences from the self-evident wrongheadedness of the biases.

In the next section but one, we will rebut the relevance of xenophobia to Caplan's argument about protectionism feeling good. Pending that rebuttal, the big picture is that Caplan's only evidence *for* mass "emotion and ideology" about economics is the mere fact that people make what he considers to be silly mistakes about economics.

B6, pt. 2. Innate Tendencies or Cultural Influences? (The "Pessimistic" Bias)

Next we will present some of the evidence *against* the four biases "feeling good." In each case, the evidence leads back to psychology or culture in specific, historically contingent, identifiable senses (as opposed to "emotion and ideology" in a vague, even tautological sense).

We begin with one general consideration before turning to Caplan's specific economic "biases." The general point is that from personal experience, we suspect that supporters of free trade, free markets, and labor-saving technology feel just as good about these positions as their opponents feel about the contrary positions. (As for pessimism, we cannot imagine why people would *prefer* it to optimism.) We also know quite a few dogmatic ideologues of free trade, free markets, technology, and "progress." We conclude from these observations that whichever side one thinks is right in these disputes, emotion and ideology have no necessary relationship, positive or negative, to the truth. One can be dogmatic and emotional in holding true claims, and coolly detached in holding false ones. So Caplan's deduction of "emotion and ideology" from *error* is unsustainable.

Now we turn to the "pessimistic bias." Confessing our own lack of "expertise" in the psychological literature, we consult the survey data.

On two dozen occasions between January, 1988 and September, 2007, for example, the *Times Mirror*/Pew Research Center asked random samples of the public: "A year from now, do you expect that economic conditions in the country as a whole will be better than they are at present, or worse, or just about the same as now?" (Pew Research Center 2007c). Generally speaking, the percentages expecting better times next year were about the same as those anticipating worse ones, and in almost every instance, the modal category, sometimes exceeding 50 percent, was "the same." In short, neutrality about the economic future, not pessimism about it, has been modal for most of the last 20 years. A neutral position may have been less optimistic than the economists' consensus, but neutrality does not bespeak some emotional bias toward pessimism. (Caplan's technical definition of "pessimism" as relative to economists' optimism has to be handled with care. Surely there could not be an inbuilt human disposition to "feel good" by being more pessimistic than late twentieth-century American economics Ph.D.s.)

Even on that score, we doubt Caplan's evidentiary case. He shows that ordinary people's judgment of *current* economic conditions was, in 1996, more pessimistic than the judgment of most American economics Ph.D.s. According to the theory of rational irrationality, this would be due to the fact that ordinary people didn't care about the real condition of the economy as much as they cared about "indulging" their alleged inclination to believe that things were worse than the economists thought. But it doesn't look to us as if many people are in a position to make a "rational tradeoff" between these "two arguments in their utility function" to begin with, because the survey data suggest that they would have no way to know the real condition of the economy in the first place.

The 1988 and 2004 American National Election Studies[11] (ANES) included several questions probing the respondents' knowledge of economic conditions, and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press asked three questions about economics in its 2000 Media Consumption poll (Pew Research Center 2000). The 1988 ANES asked if unemployment had gotten worse or better in the last year, if inflation had gotten worse or better during the same interval, and whether the national economy had gotten better or worse in the last twelve months. In 2000, the Pew Research Center asked respondents if they knew who Alan Greenspan was, if they knew whether the Federal Reserve had recently raised or lowered interest rates, and if they knew the level of the Dow Jones Industrial Average. The 2004 ANES asked if respondents knew whether unemployment had gotten better or worse in the last year, whether inflation had gotten better or worse, whether taxes had increased or decreased under George W. Bush, and whether the national economy had gotten better or worse since Bush assumed office.

In 1998, a third of the respondents got all three questions wrong, and nearly 6 percent got all three right. In 2000, 33 percent of the respondents got all three wrong, but 23 percent got all three right. Just over a quarter of the respondents answered all four of the questions asked in 2004 wrong, and slightly less than 1 percent got all four right.

These data confirm Russell Hardin's contention that Americans "know almost nothing about recent economic performance" (Hardin 2006, 180). Why infer, then, that people were more pessimistic than economists, as of 1996, because (contrary to our introspective experience) pessimism somehow "feels good"—rather than (if we are going to make assumptions rather than doing research) inferring that, starting from a foundation of gross ignorance, people were misled toward making pessimistic assessments by unduly pessimistic media reports? In the 1992 election, for example—which brought Bill Clinton to power on the catchphrase, "It's the economy, stupid"—the media "repeatedly misrepresented the state of the economy by not reporting clear signs of [economic] recovery" (Buell 1998; cf. Buchanan 1996, ch. 8). Is it more plausible that voters believed the news reports, or that they somehow knew these messages to be false but preferred to "believe" that they were true anyway (because feeling bad about the future somehow feels good)?

Most of what little Americans know about public affairs comes from the mass media (Stanley and Niemi 2000). Students of media coverage of economics argue that, on balance, bad news outweighs good news (Parker 1997; Reese, Daly, and Hardy 1987). This alone would account for an overall "pessimistic" bias. Keeping in mind that Caplan infers this allegedly inherent, emotionally satisfying bias from a single 1996 survey, however, we note that between late March of 1998 and early January of 2000, positive assessments of the nation's economy considerably outnumbered negative perceptions among the general public. Whether this was because the media were reporting real conditions, stock-market euphoria, or a presidential campaign in which the incumbent party was Democratic is unknown. But we assume that it was not because people's genetic dispositions suddenly changed.

Caplan (2007, 208) actually seems to endorse a media-centric view on the penultimate page of his book, even though it would contradict the theory of rational irrationality. Media "bias" cannot be the problem, according to his theory, because that would be an exogenous source of people's inaccurate economic beliefs, while Caplan's theory is that these beliefs are motivated by an endogenous emotional "demand for political delusion": a preference "to believe whatever makes them feel best" (Caplan 2007, 99). This means that pessimism, opposition to markets, and so forth must "feel good," as opposed to these biases (if they exist) simply being mistaken cognitions picked up inadvertently in people's "search" (to use the economists' term), however diffident or accidental, for the sociotropic (or even consumption) good of knowing the truth.

Until the penultimate page of the book, therefore, Caplan downplays any exogenous role for the media, which he portrays as dutifully catering to its audience's inbuilt preferences for predetermined content that, within limits, will be "entertaining" to its consumers—i.e., content that will be put on the page or on the air only insofar as it is responsive to readers' or viewers' preferences for certain endogenously determined economic beliefs:

> For all the power ascribed to it, the media are [like politicians] consumer-driven. . . . The media show viewers what they want to see and tell them what they want to hear. . . .
>
> So while the conventional view gives the media too much credit—the private good of entertainment vitiates the public good of information—it is even more wrongheaded to treat the media as the source of popular fallacies. As we shall see, the fallacies preceded the modern media: they

> continue to flourish because the audience is *predisposed* to be receptive. (Caplan 2007, 20)

Contrary to this promissory note, however, Caplan later shows only that *policy makers* (not ordinary people) "from ancient Athens to modern Islamabad" have accepted what he considers to be economic fallacies (ibid., 33). He neglects the fact that everybody, everywhere has to rely on other people to report and interpret—i.e., mediate—the economic world, which even in ancient Athens encompassed far more than any one policy maker could comprehend. "Media reports" need not be printed on newsprint or broadcast on television to count as media reports. They can be delivered orally or written on papyrus. Once delivered, they can bias their consumers to see the world the way the reporter sees it (about which we will say more in Part III).

B6, pt. 3. Delusion or Illusion? (The "Anti-Foreign" Bias)

Earlier we mentioned the sole piece of evidence in *The Myth of the Rational Voter* that might be viewed as showing that protectionism "feels good": the fact that xenophobia makes evolutionary sense. This evidence, however, does not suffice.

Being attached to the welfare of one's group does not determine which policies one will consider effective means to that end. The Ricardian theory of comparative advantage, with which economists tend to agree, holds that protectionism *harms* the nation imposing the tariffs. Somebody who is fully subject to the furies of nationalist xenophobia should, therefore, be all the more devoted to free trade—if he understands the theory of comparative advantage. Only if he is ignorant of economic theory would a xenophobe support protectionism. The xenophobia alone cannot explain the protectionism, and a xenophobe would have no reason to "actively avoid" the theory of comparative advantage. In fact, he would have every reason to actively seek it out—if he had any reason to think his protectionism fallacious; and any idea that there was another theory, the theory of comparative advantage. The first possibility, that he would know that his view is wrong, is incoherent; the second, that he would know about Ricardo without having any exposure to economics, is implausible.

We grant that people find it emotionally satisfying to "blame foreigners" (Caplan 2007, 16). But blame them for what? Protectionism blames foreign economic competition for job loss among one's fellow citizens. If this is a mistake, it is a mistake at the level of economic theory—witness, in contrast, Ricardo's theory. The voters' economic theory may be simplistic and inchoate compared to Ricardo's, but it explains why they do not blame foreigners for the rising price of gasoline: they blame "big oil companies" or "speculators" for that. No matter how emotionally committed a protectionist might be to blaming foreigners, his assignment of blame to foreigners for *raising the unemployment rate* of his conationals has an implicitly theoretical, *cognitive* component.

The failure to distinguish between cognition and *emotion* is a fundamental shortcoming in Caplan's enterprise, and a fatal one.

Wherever Caplan sees viewpoints with which he disagrees, he sees people who have "turn[ed] off" their "rational faculties" and who then, in place of reason, indulge "emotion" (and "ideology"). But what if these people are simply making cognitive errors (a k a "mistakes")? A child may think that a straw inserted diagonally into a glass of water has been cut in half at the waterline. Do we insist that this child suffers from an emotional need to believe that the optical illusion is real? Or do we allow that the child may not know about optical illusions?

Let us change the example slightly to acknowledge that in many cases, cognition and emotion are intertwined. Somebody who sees a mirage in a desert is not *necessarily* "delusional," as Caplan might assert—rather than being the innocent victim of an optical illusion. But it could be a little of both. If he is thirsty, his desperation might prompt him to engage, unwittingly, in "motivated reasoning" (Kunda 1987 and 1990), and this may keep him trudging toward the ever-receding mirage; or he may inadvertently display "motivated skepticism" (Taber and Lodge 2006) about the possibility that the "lake's" apparently changing shape might indicate that it is, in fact, a mirage (as our thirsty traveler might have heard from somebody who had "mediated" the experience of desert travel to him). However, there still has to be a cognitive component in the delusion: namely, the initial perception that the shimmering thing in the distance could be a lake. Without that perception, illusory as it may be, there could be no delusion about what the perception signifies.

We do not deny, then, that people may be emotional and even delusional. We insist only that delusion and illusion, emotion and cognition, be kept conceptually distinct. It is one thing to say that people suffer from tendencies toward cognitive error—whether genetically transmitted, as in the case of optical illusions; or culturally mediated, as in the notion that "every vote counts." It is quite another thing to say that the truth is obvious to anyone who troubles to look, so that anyone who makes a mistake must be letting emotion determine perception. Even motivated reasoning has to have a faulty cognitive basis if it is to lead to *error*. And error—economic error—is Caplan's real dependent variable, even though he makes the (cognitive) mistake of perceiving error as "irrationality."

B6, pt. 4. Is Economics Intuitive? (The "Make-Work" Bias)

We have shown that Caplan provides no evidence that two out of four of his biases actually "feel good." What about the other two?

In this section, we will dispute whether Caplan has shown that a "make-work bias" even exists—let alone that it is emotionally motivated. This will leave one bias—the "anti-market bias"—which, we agree, does exist. But, we will suggest, it exists because it seems justified to people, rather than because it feels so inherently good to them that they actively avoid the knowledge that it is unjustified. Our reason for saying this will be the same reason that we dispute whether the make-work bias exists: For the make-work bias to exist, or for the anti-market bias to "feel good" *in contradistinction to appearing justified,* people who held these biases would have to understand economics. So in this section we explicitly examine the elephant in the room: public ignorance of economics.

It must be true, according to Caplan's theory, that masses of voters have a religious attachment to their erroneous economic opinions: otherwise, how could they ignore the obvious truth (about economics)? Therefore when, on page 32 of his book, Caplan allows that economic theory is "counterintuitive," we believe that he has made a slip.

Counterintuitive knowledge would *not* have to be actively avoided. We wish Caplan were saying that economic theory can be inadvertently avoided simply if someone doesn't take an economics course or read books of economic theory—or that economics is, indeed, counterintuitive. But that would be a theory of economic ignorance, not a theory of economic irrationality.

Likewise, then, we think that Caplan's many persuasive examples of inadvertent, innocent economic ignorance are slips: for instance, his mother explaining (with no reported emotion) why price supports really don't cause higher prices (Caplan 2007, 30); his own innocence of the counterproductive effects of labor regulations—until he studied economics (ibid., 11); the fact that "it takes hours of patient instruction to show students the light of comparative advantage" (ibid., 10); the crucial fact that "most voters never take a single course in economics" (ibid., 13). Similarly, Caplan cites his own favorite public-ignorance statistics (ibid., 8), as we have done above; he allows that "people *do not understand* the 'invisible hand' of the market" (ibid., 10); and he claims to disagree with the view (held by the consensus of economists) "that the typical citizen understands economics and votes accordingly" (ibid., 13). All of this makes for instructive reading, and it leads us to the hypothesis that economics is, indeed, counterintuitive, such that people do not understand it unless they are somehow instructed in its intricacies. But in that case, no further explanation is needed for why people who have not received such instruction support policies that are believed, by a consensus of those who *have* received such instruction, to be fallacious.

Where we differ with Caplan, then, is not over the fact that the public can (and probably does) make economic errors, but over Caplan's explanation of this—the theory of rational irrationality—which contradicts all the shrewd observations of economic ignorance, like those we have just listed, that are scattered through his book. Overshadowing these observations is his unfortunate, theory-driven refrain that economics is nothing but "common sense," as he puts it on pages 41, 50, 94, and 114. (Economics has to be common sense if, as rational-irrationality theory maintains, people's mistakes about economics are so silly that they can be explained only by people's willful avoidance of the evidence that falls into their laps.) Admittedly, on three out of four of these pages, Caplan is quoting other writers on people's wilfully perverse antipathy to "common sense." But consider the fourth instance in some detail, which occurs during Caplan's analysis of the public's so-called make-work bias.

According to Caplan (2007, 40, emph. original), the "make-work bias" consists of "*a tendency to underestimate the economic benefits of conserving labor.*" The two survey responses that Caplan classifies as proof of the existence of this bias are questions about whether unemployment caused by technological change, and unemployment caused by outsourcing, are major economic problems.

Now why should we infer that the public underestimates *the benefits of conserving labor* from the fact that the public finds technological and outsourcing *unemployment* a significant problem? "Conserving labor" is never mentioned by the pollster; why is it mentioned by Caplan? Apparently because he assumes, in effect, that voters know the economic theory that he takes to be "common sense." Only this assumption would allow him to infer that voters have any opinion at all about whether "conserving labor" is a good idea.

Economic theory tells Caplan (2007, 41) that technology and outsourcing "conserve labor." Moreover, economic theory tells him that conserving labor means "producing more goods with fewer man-hours" (ibid.). Thus, "where noneconomists see the destruction of jobs, economists see the essence of economic growth—the production of more with less" (ibid.). In other words, where noneconomists worry about unemployment, Caplan misconstrues them as *knowingly* opposing economic growth—because they "underestimate" the benefits of something that, in fact, we have no reason to believe they have ever thought about: the causal link between technology and outsourcing, "conserving labor," and economic growth.

Caplan (2007, 40) quotes Princeton economist Alan Blinder trying to explain this link to a popular audience:

> Jobs can be created in two ways. The socially beneficial way is to enlarge GNP, so that there will be more useful work to be done. But we can also create more jobs by seeing to it that each worker is less productive. . . .

This statement would be gibberish to anyone who did not already know the economic theory Blinder is trying to explain. To Blinder, and Caplan, "technology or outsourcing" means greater productivity, hence enlarged GNP—not unemployment. Why? Because of a whole series of assumptions and doctrines that have been developed by professional economists over the last 250 years, and which Caplan and Blinder, who were taught these assumptions and doctrines in graduate school,[12] and who spend most of their time teaching them and talking to other people who have been taught the same things, apparently consider to be self-evident.

Here is a much-simplified and underargued version of what we take to be what Caplan and Blinder take to be so obvious that it warrants no explication: (1) Outsourcing and technological innovations would not be widely adopted if they were not profitable. (2) They would not be profitable if they did not allow the production of "more" goods that somebody wants to buy, and can afford to buy, at "less" cost than before. (3) Even when the reduction in costs enabled by technology or outsourcing is the result of savings in wages paid out by a given employer because he can now fire some of his workers, the "more" side of the equation amounts, in the aggregate, and given the previous assumptions, to more goods for sale that are purchased by consumers for less money. (4) With the money consumers thus save, they can buy other goods previously unbought, and therefore previously unproduced. (5) Somebody will have to be employed to produce those goods. (6) Therefore, in the aggregate and in the long run, technological innovations will cause economic growth by conserving labor, but not at the expense of a net gain in unemployment. (Say's Law.)

When members of the public fail to agree with the conclusion of this long chain of reasoning, is it fair to infer that "the public often *literally believes* that labor is better to use than to conserve" (Caplan 2007, 40, emph. added), such that the public knowingly prefers "make-work" jobs to productive ones? We don't think so. Caplan can make such inferences only by assuming something with which he claims to disagree: "that the typical citizen understands economics" (ibid., 13). If the typical citizen does *not* understand economics, then she would not even understand what is meant by the proposition that "it is better to use labor than to conserve it." One cannot "literally" believe something that one does not understand.

Nonetheless, Caplan (2007, 41, emph. added) feels entitled to conclude:

> The crudest form of make-work bias is Luddite fear of the machine. *Common sense proclaims* that machines make life easier for human beings. The public qualifies this "naïve" position by noting that machines also make people's lives harder by throwing them out of work.

The rational-irrationality analysis of "Luddism" is that the public doesn't want to accept the unvarnished truth, so the public adds a varnish that makes it appear as if the price of convenience is unemployment. That is, they are averse to the "obvious truth" that technology has no downside. Why would they prefer to fear technology rather than embrace it? Because doing so must be pleasant to them. Thus, we don't need evidence that this particular fallacy actually makes them feel good. Why else wouldn't they believe in a commonsensical truth, if not because believing in this truth is unpleasant?

Yet one cannot know that this truth is unpleasant unless one already knows this truth, and recoils from this knowledge. And that would be the case with voters untutored in (i.e., ignorant of) economics only if the truth is, indeed, "common sense." *To Caplan*, it is "common sense," and only a perverse fool would fail to acknowledge it. To noneconomists, it would be unintelligible if it has never been explained to them clearly—or explained to them at all.

B6, pt. 5. Seeing the Unseen (the "Anti-Market" Bias)

Caplan's slip about the "counterintuitiveness" of economics is in reference to the "anti-market bias." "The public links greed with almost everything bad," Caplan (2007, 35) writes, and we concur. There is more variation in the survey data than would be the case if this bias were the result of a constant, universal tendency for people to "actively avoid" the knowledge that greed is good,[13] but in general, it seems that people are quick to blame perceived economic problems on greedy businesspeople.

Thus, we have no reason to disagree with Caplan (2007, 35) that Adam Smith's notion that greed can be good was, indeed, "counterintuitive to his contemporaries, and remains counterintuitive today." But this suggests that the reasoning and, thus, the potential validity of Smith's point was, and remains today, unknown to those who have not been instructed that their intuitions are wrong.[14] Even if people have heard Smith's point (most probably through a movie, "Wall Street," in which it was put into the mouth of the *villain*), its *validity* might be widely unknown because of the counterintuitive reasoning behind it. And even if that reasoning were widely known—an incredible hypothesis, given the public's lack of economic education—it might still be misunderstood or resisted because of the way hunter-gatherer minds, hence our own, were structured by evolution (a specific psychological hypothesis about why Smith's insight is counterintuitive). Or it might be misunderstood or resisted by people raised as we are, given the many ways that cultural sources from movies to philosophers teach us the desirability of altruism and the evil of greed (a specific cultural hypothesis).

Whether the cause is psychological or cultural, though, if the idea that "greed is good" is counterintuitive, then it would never occur to many people who haven't gotten economics training that Smith's greedy butcher and baker could end up doing unto others just what an altruistic philosopher might prescribe. Thus, the average member of the mass public could hardly be resisting Smith's idea by deliberately choosing not to put on "the shackles of objectivity." Even among the few members of the public who have heard Smith's idea and rejected it, we have no reason to think they rejected it for any reason other than their (psychologically and culturally derived) understanding of the objective truth of the matter, which would, therefore, remain unchanged regardless of a higher incentive to understand the objective truth—unless these few happened to be instructed in the truth of the matter, by being taught about it, say, in a graduate program in economics.

As noted, Caplan denies that the *news* media are an exogenous cultural source of economic error, but people are also instructed, both directly (at home, in church, in school) and through the entertainment media, that greed is positively evil—indeed, the root of all evil. If people believe what they are taught, and think that it's really true that greed is the ultimate evil (as they would tend to do, unless the opposite view is intuitive), then while they would end up with an anti-market bias, they would not *know* or even suspect that it is (putatively) a mistaken bias—such that they must take pleasure in it in order to believe it. Caplan, however, never discusses any possible cultural influences except the news media, and then only to dismiss them, a priori, by assuming what is at issue: that people have antecedent "tastes" for the four biases, and therefore would reject media messages that told the economic truth. He provides no evidence that, at least over the long term, news-media and other cultural influences are not themselves the sources of whatever biases actually exist.

If we consider the public's anti-market bias to be real but mistaken, and if we therefore consider much of public opinion concerning economics to be mistaken, and if we want to understand these mistakes, then it behooves us to investigate the possible genetic and/or cultural roots of such mistakes empirically, rather than through dogmatic assertion. Caplan cannot do so, we assume, because his economistic conceptual framework lacks the concept of mistake. Mistake is not a *preference*. It is involuntary. People do not ever deliberately choose it. And if it has a cognitive (e.g., intuitive) basis, then "putting on our thinking caps" will not help us to avoid it. The harder we think, the farther astray our intuitions will lead us.

Consider, in this light, Caplan's finding that "if a person of average means got an econ Ph.D., he would change his mind" about the evils of corporate downsizing (Caplan 2007, 70). If getting a Ph.D. in economics would change people's minds about downsizing, then perhaps people's worries about downsizing are due to the fact that they haven't gotten a Ph.D. in economics. But this explanation would make cultural inputs (the tenets that are taught to economics Ph.D.s) the source of (putative) economic insight. And it would make the lack of these inputs (i.e., ignorance of economic theory) the source of (putative) error—if, indeed, economic theory is counterintuitive. However, that, in turn, would mean that there is nothing irrational about the public's putative economic errors. The child who thinks the straw is cut in half by the water is not irrational.

In the very next sentence, then, Caplan assures us that

> the most plausible way to defend the public's [poor] grasp of economics is to blame lay-expert disagreement on varying time horizons. Economists emphasize the "long run"; the public cares about the here and now. *Perhaps experts and laymen covertly agree about facts*, but have different levels of patience. (Ibid., emph. added)

But the "fact" in question is whether downsizing creates unemployment, and on this, surely, the public and the economists *dis*agree. If we allow that people who haven't gotten economics Ph.D.s might instead have absorbed other cultural influences—such as the media reports that are the only things that could make people aware of "downsizing," *per se*, in the first place—then all that would be visible to such people would be the unemployment, hence the suffering, of the "downsized" employees, who can readily be identified and shown on TV. The invisible effect, according to economic theory, is that elsewhere in the economy, consumers are spending the money they saved on the now-cheaper products produced by the downsized firms, and are thereby giving employment to still other people at other firms—people who *cannot* be identified and put on TV because they, and their employers, have no idea that they have their jobs thanks, ultimately, to downsizing. They, like the media, and like the public, would simply and straightforwardly be ignorant of what Bastiat, the nineteenth-century French popularizer of economics whom Caplan likes to quote, would have called "the unseen" positive effect of downsizing.

In this view, those with economics Ph.D.s have been *taught* to "see" what is unseen by those without economics Ph.D.s. The only way it could be otherwise is if "the facts" somehow speak for themselves—just as Caplan claims in the extracted passage. In that case, the facts would be revealed to everyone by their "common sense." And in *that* case, errors about facts would have to be due to a perverse desire not to know the commonsensical facts. For Caplan's theory to work, then, economics would actually have to be quite intuitive after all—as intuitive as it is to Caplan and Blinder. Down deep, every human being with experience in a market economy would have to know, and agree with, Say's Law, Gresham's Law, the Law of Comparative Advantage, and all the rest, whether or not he ever receives patient classroom instruction. If that isn't implausible enough, the voter, (somehow) traumatized by how unpleasant it (somehow) *would be* to be optimistic and to believe in the benefits of free trade, market mechanisms, and labor-saving devices, would then (somehow) actively avoid believing in these self-evident truths.

II. RELIGION, IDEOLOGY, INCENTIVES, AND ELITES

"Political/economic ideology," Caplan (2007, 16) writes, "is the religion of modernity. Like the adherents of traditional religion, many people find comfort in their political worldview, and greet critical questions with pious hostility." We agree, but for this reason, we regret that Caplan did not explore and explain—rather than denounce and deride—political, economic, and other forms of "religion."

Religious Zealots and Political Ones

Caplan is, again, precluded from undertaking such an exploration by his economistic theory. According to that theory, *low* incentives (due to knowledge that one's political/economic opinions are inconsequential) allow voters' "emotion and ideology" to displace their "rational faculties." Yet the stakes could hardly be *higher* than one's eternal salvation, or the salvation of the world. How, then, can it be rational to be irrational about one's religious or political ideology? Moreover, religious and political ideologues often devote great quantities of resources—in many cases, their whole lives—to their cause. Would this not give them the highest incentive to ensure that the object of their devotion really exists?

If one sees oneself as an instrument of the proletarian revolution, or of God's will, then news that the revolution is a myth or that God does not exist could not be more important. If incentives determine one's "preferences over beliefs," then we should expect the religious or ideological fanatic to have the truest beliefs.

Political ideologies are crucial and understudied. But the study of them will not begin if we start from the assumption that ideologues are crazy. And this assumption is a logical consequence of the idea that ideologues know they are wrong, such that their political beliefs "'satiate' their demand for political delusion," i.e., their desire "to believe whatever makes them feel best" (Caplan 2007, 18). Caplan's use of *whatever* is telling. Those nutty ideologues—they are beyond understanding, because they believe whatever they want to believe, just like those idiot religious fanatics! This attitude, we predict, will not produce insight into what ideologues specifically do believe, or why.

Bringing Ideology Back In

Caplan is trying to explain *mass* politico-economic "emotion and ideology" using the rational-choice theory of voting. This is another key mistake.

The only type of political behavior that can be explained by the theory is the behavior of people who realize that their behavior doesn't matter. Rational-ignorance theorists derive from this assumption the prediction of zero political information gathering, just as rational-choice theorists *simpliciter* derive the assumption of zero voting (the paradox that ate the theory). Caplan's innovation is to notice that with zero information gathering, people's opinions would be random. Thus, he argues, his evidence of nonrandom opinions about economics (never mind whether they are erroneous) proves that rational-ignorance theory must be wrong. We agree. But only a myopic economism would prevent us from concluding that, as a result, we should simply drop the "rational" part of rational-*ignorance* theory and call it a day. People who do not deliberately, rationally *choose* to be ignorant will *not* form random opinions, unless the genetic and cultural influences on them are also random—which flies in the face of everything we know about genes and culture.

Caplan (2007, 21), however, proceeds in Ptolomaic fashion. He wants to know how the assumption that all human actions are "choices, responsive to incentives" can be *rescued* from the fact that voters hold nonrandom opinions. Caplan's answer is to add an epicycle to rational-ignorance theory: If voters' nonrandom opinions are also false (which he can establish if he treats some group of "experts"—in this case economists—as omniscient), then the public's nonrandom opinions *must* be explained by a perverse desire not to know the truth (as if voters, too, are omniscient about economics, and choose actively to avoid believing what they know is true). So the patterned errors of mass opinion must be due *mass* "emotion and ideology" about economics.

That, in turn, flies in the face of virtually everything we know about public opinion:

1. The dominant finding of decades of public-opinion research is that there is very little consistency among most people's policy attitudes *across time* (e.g., Bardes and Oldendick 2007, 113). It is hard to imagine a "protectionist fanatic" (Caplan 2007, 18) who frequently changes his mind about protectionism. Yet this is what political scientists have been finding ever since the seminal document in the literature, Converse's "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (Converse [1964] 2006) (see Converse 1970; Nie and Anderson 1974; Pierce and Rose 1974; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Bishop et al. 1978a, 1978b, and 1979; Converse and Marcus 1979; Erikson 1979; Nie and Rabjohn 1979a and 1979b; Sullivan et al. 1978 and 1979; Hagner and McIver 1980; Pierce and Hagner 1980).

2. Caplan's theory also suggests, although it does not demand, that people's various opinions at any given time *across issues* will be consistent with some specific ideology (political scientists call this ideological "constraint") more often when people are politically impotent and therefore lack the incentive to care about the truth than when people are politically powerful. Caplan might have tested his theory by investigating whether ideological constraint is more common among the politically impotent masses—or among politically powerful elites. But Converse ([1964] 2006, 17) covered this territory, too. He found that the vast majority of the public (as of the mid-1950s) was ideologically unconstrained: they mixed opinions according to no liberal or conservative pattern, and according to no "idiosyncratic" ideological pattern of their own devising (ibid., 44) (because, if there were some such pattern, it would produce *cross-temporal* attitude consistency, and as just mentioned, that is not what Converse found).

This does not mean that ideologically relevant *cognitions* are absent from mass opinion. As Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider

(1987, 180) note, "the higher the estimate of 'profit out of a sales dollar,' the more likely a person is to be a self-identified liberal or Democrat." Recent *Times Mirror*/Pew Research Center polls confirm Lipset and Schneider's finding. Democrats and liberals are much less likely than Republicans and conservatives to think that businesses strike a fair balance between profit and serving "the public interest," and they are far more likely to say that businesses make too much profit.

How can such findings be squared with the finding of lack of mass ideological constraint? Well, Converse also found that the mass American electorate is startlingly *ignorant* of the dominant political ideologies, in the sense of having very little idea of which positions are considered "liberal" or "conservative." Arguably, taking political positions individually, "on their merits"—rather than being constrained by the ideological "quasi-logic" (Converse [1964] 2006, 7] that links, say, being pro-choice and anti-war—indicates open-mindedness. Yet Caplan's theory leads us to expect the ignorant mass public to be closed-minded for the same reason that it is ignorant: its members know that their votes don't matter.

3. While the relative *absence* of ideology among the general public is bad enough for Caplan's theory, so might be the other side of the coin: its presence among the fraction of the public that consists of politically well-informed people.

Recall Caplan's Pakistani judges who ban interest payments: such people *do* make public policy, unlike any lone modern voter. So even if these victims of economic fallacy are judged "irrational" in Caplan's sense (i.e., even if we think they are wrong), they cannot be "rationally" irrational—preferring to believe in a fallacy *because they know their beliefs don't matter.* Their beliefs *do* matter, very much. Caplan (2007, 33, emph. original) similarly undermines his theory by citing with approval "a fascinating survey of 63 environmentalists, congressional staffers, and industry lobbyists," which found that "*not one* could explain economists' standard rationale for tradable [pollution] permits." Environmental activists, congressional staffers, and industry lobbyists are much more politically powerful than individual voters. According to the logic of rational-irrationality theory, such people *should* want to know the truth—so if they are ignorant of economics, it must be *despite* the incentives.

Caplan's theory asserts that dogmatically held fallacies flow from a low incentive to know the truth, due to people's awareness of their own political inefficacy. But political decision makers have real power, hence a high incentive to know the truth—like religious believers. To the extent that the politically efficacious are also politically well informed, and to the extent that the politically well informed are also ideological, Caplan's theory faces another Waterloo.

Unfortunately, political scientists have not devoted much attention to this subject, although Converse ([1964] 2006, sec. V) found that a randomly selected group of candidates for Congress was far more ideologically constrained than were randomly selected members of the general public. Were there more research on political elites, we suspect that it would produce the following finding: among the most politically efficacious people, knowledge of *and* devotion to ideology is far more prevalent than it is among typical voters.

The evidence for this hypothesis is merely anecdotal—albeit, on that basis, very plausible (to us). Consider, however, the plausibility of what Caplan's theory would predict: that the most politically efficacious people would be the *least* ideological—and, by implication, not only the most open minded, but the most in possession of the self-evident truth, about which they would therefore tend to form a consensus: after all, they have fearlessly donned "the shackles of objectivity," allowing them to see the truth that falls into their laps. We wonder, in that case, what might explain the sharp *disagreement* with each other of those who are highly informed about politics, which seems to us to be far more pronounced than the diffident political disagreements of average citizens.

Ideologues (whether at the elite or the mass level) who strongly disagree with each other for *cognitive* reasons could be readily explained, depending on the accident of whether the ideologue's worldview was shaped by an initial encounter with *The Communist Manifesto* or, instead, *Atlas Shrugged*. Once we take radical political disagreement into account, then, it would seem that discovering the truth is not, as Caplan's epistemology presupposes, a simple matter of "turning [on] one's rational faculties" (Caplan 2007, 2), because that is just what these stylized ideologues did when they read Marx and Rand. Despite "putting on their thinking caps," one or both of these groups of ideologues seem to have made a mistake: either Marxists or Objectivists (or both) are wrong, since they disagree with each other on fundamental points.

Ordinary citizens, relative to well-informed elites, are inattentive to politics, don't understand it, and therefore don't know how to organize the political impressions they gather. By contrast, a small minority of people may come across some grand belief system—a political ideology—that allows them to understand, integrate, and remember relatively large amounts of political information. These ideologues then go through life perceiving and retaining ever-more political "data": the data that fit the schema of politics that their ideology has taught them to expect. They would end up being extremely well informed, relative to most people, and—because of the amazing ability of their perceptions of the world to confirm their ideology's picture of the world—extremely dogmatic about the veracity and profundity of their ideology. Far from being grounded in a stubborn refusal to acknowledge obvious truths, such people's ideological dogmatism springs from the ability of their ideological schemas to make so much sense of a complex world that the schemas themselves take on the appearance of obvious truths—the evidence for which is so inescapable that only the "willfully deluded" would deny it.

To the ideologue, those who disagree with the self-evident ideological truth are "irrational" because a refusal to see the obvious is, ultimately, inexplicable. Caplan's primitive reduction of "ideology" to willful perversity is, by the same token, no explanation at all. It is unable to account for specific ideologies, let alone contradictory ideologies, because what "ideology" means, to Caplan, is not a specific conceptual schema based on a particular, historically individuated genetic-cultural matrix (with different genetic or cultural inputs producing different ideologies), but rather a blanket refusal to recognize "obvious truths"—an undifferentiated, irrational blindness to the ontological dictates of "common sense."

In short, Caplan's own schema, his theory of rational "irrationality," epitomizes the ideological mindset.

III. RATIONALITY IS NOT THE ISSUE: DISAGREEMENT AND POLITICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Caplan sees error and infers a deliberate decision to avoid the truth. Noneconomists, in contrast, see error and infer, at least in the first instance, inadvertent ignorance of the truth. Knowledge is not already "there," waiting for us merely to activate our "reason" in order to perceive it clearly. Put differently, the world that human beings are trying to understand is (from the perspective of human minds) a complex place, a blooming, buzzing confusion—obscure to mere mortals. The theory of rational irrationality (like the theory of rational ignorance) implies that if only we had sufficient incentives, we would be omniscient. The human default position is assumed to be not ignorance, but knowledge. Therefore, behind apparent human error must stand a decision to be deluded.

Caplan (2007, 3) writes: "Voter irrationality is precisely what *economic theory implies* once we adopt introspectively plausible assumptions about human motivation." We do not find Caplan's assumptions about human motivation to be coherent, let alone plausible, but our main objection is to what "economic theory implies" about error (including error about economic theory). What economic theory implies about error, through its assumption of "rational choice," is that if two people disagree with each other, then the one who is in error must be "actively avoiding" the truth. Only then is it a matter of logical demonstration (as Caplan treats it), not a matter of empirical research, to conclude that errors are caused by irrational forces that must be motivating a "desire to be deluded," rather than being caused by the inherent obscurity of the truth.

One needs no epistemology if reality is pellucid and the truth, self-evident.

Rational Ignorance vs. Political Epistemology

In its epistemic nullity, Caplan's *The Myth of the Rational Voter* is very different from its foil, Page and Shapiro's *The Rational Public.*

Page and Shapiro *did* have an epistemology: information about the world goes from the media to the voters, and depending on the accuracy and representativeness of the information, the voters will or will not make a "sensible" decision. That may be a simplistic epistemology, but it is one that clearly allows for errors of perception and interpretation to be introduced, either by the media or by the voters. Page and Shapiro happened to think (as of 1992) that the information relayed by the media to the public tended to be accurate about, and representative of, objective reality. But this was not something that was built into their theory. They might just as well have concluded differently, as Shapiro (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008) has now done.

Page and Shapiro did tend to assume that the public's errors were the result of deliberate manipulation rather than accident, and they did not think there were many important errors to begin with—but they did not conclude that this meant anything about voters' magical ability to know the objective truth, if sufficiently incentivized. If the voters were making "sensible" choices, as Page and Shapiro thought, it was because they were, in effect, the passive recipients of unbiased media messages, and the messages could as easily have been false, such that the voters would err inadvertently. Caplan's theory, by attributing error to active "choice, responsive to incentives," precludes inadvertent error at the start.

Thus, the only type of "biased" information that Caplan (2007, 103) considers is propaganda—deliberately misleading information, disseminated by liars. This is to assume, again, that the truth is self-evident, so that only people who know the truth but have incentives to *hide* it (liars) could get between the public and the truth. (Page and Shapiro [1992, 356] allow the alternative that the public may be *inadvertently* "misled.") Still, Caplan needs to do something about the possibility of deliberate deception, which could account for public error *sans* public irrationality. Caplan's solution is to assert that "highly ignorant voters" would simply "*tune out* unreliable sources" (Caplan 2007, 103) He is assuming that these voters would already know which sources are reliable; but how would they know that, without already knowing the truth—in which case they would *not* be highly ignorant? Apparently, they "know," as Caplan does, the truth that *all* "sources" are unreliable—because the only sources he contemplates are (propagandizing) *politicians,* who, "everybody knows," are liars (because they have an incentive to lie).

Therefore, from what Caplan calls the "theoretical" perspective (i.e., from the perspective of rational-choice theory), we are left with highly ignorant voters who know enough not to listen to anybody (not even the "objective" media; but this is only because Caplan rules out that possibility on the theoretical grounds that the objective media *must* be catering to subjective public preferences, not shaping them). Under these tightly constrained "theoretical" conditions, public opinion would be random. Compared to *that,* Caplan's story is highly *empirical,* because his data from 1996 show nonrandom opinions (as does *every* opinion poll). But Caplan does not ask where nonrandom opinions originate, or else the book would contain psychological or cultural answers—the only kind there are. He asks, instead, where nonrandom opinions would originate *if rational-choice theory could explain them* (begging the question of whether it *does* explain them). Caplan then reasons that, if the public's opinions are wrong, rational-choice theory requires that voters must be rationally irrational. And given assumption A3, he can conclude that the public's opinions are wrong. And so, without any further consideration of the possibility that nonrandom, erroneous culturally or genetically transmitted perceptions of the truth might cause nonrandom voter errors, we get the theory of rational irrationality, by deduction. Since nonrandom error, like random ignorance, is assumed to be deliberate (rational), it must, therefore, be due to a "preference" not to know the truth.

Caplan presupposes, economistically, that what people want, they get (if they are willing to pay the price)—and, absurdly, that this also works in reverse. Therefore, if people have gotten false ideas, they must have wanted to be deluded.

This is why it is important to emphasize again that public ignorance need not be *rational* ignorance. Rational ignorance, unlike rational irrationality, is a logical possibility. But it is not the only one. Inadvertent ignorance explains everything putatively explained by rational-ignorance theory. And it is fully consistent with the public-opinion literature. And it is not epistemically vacuous.

We have two choices in explaining nonrandom error: the theory of rational irrationality, or a theory—any theory—of political epistemology. Take Page and Shapiro's political epistemology. If "sensible" public opinion requires that accurate and representative information gets from the world to the public through the media, then culturally or genetically introduced inaccuracies ("biases") in *interpreting* the world—biases on the part of the public or on the part of the media—can lead to erroneous interpretations of the world, hence erroneous political judgments, even if the biased interpretations, hence the errors, are inadvertent. While Page and Shapiro did not think this likely in 1992, Shapiro's recent reconsideration of the "sensible public" thesis does not require a whole new epistemology, or nonepistemology. Page and Shapiro started in the same place Caplan starts—the possibility of totally random public opinion—and, finding what they took to be evidence of nonrandom, "sensible" aggregate opinions, they concluded that the information the public was getting must be "good" information. This was a shortcut, like Caplan's argument from economists' authority; but it was also subject to reversal when, as seems to Shapiro is now the case, the evidence tells against it. Caplan, however, assumes that errors must be intentional (either the propagandist chooses to lie or the voter chooses to avoid the truth), such that genuine, inadvertent ignorance of the truth due to "bad" information *cannot* be at fault.

Inadvertent error, however, would seem to be at work every time people disagree. Anyone who tries (not to denounce, but) to understand people who disagree with each other would first assume (absent evidence of lying by one or the other party) that (at least) one of the two parties must have made an inadvertent mistake, somewhere down the line. Thus, Shapiro has seen his way clear of complacency about public error by focusing on the conflicting beliefs of partisans—some of whom must, in principle, be mistaken (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008). This is an important methodological advance because, by sidestepping the question of which party is right in political disputes, it short-circuits any tendency of the observer to blame the disagreement on the deliberate obtuseness, or worse, of the party with whom the observer disagrees. *The Myth of the Rational Voter* is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the latter tendency.

Disagreement: The Starting Point of Political Epistemology

We close, then, by reconsidering Caplan's analogy between political and religious errors, but applying the logic of disagreement instead of the theory of rational choice.

Most human beings, over time, have believed in one religion or another. By and large, the religions in which they have believed are incompatible with each other. Therefore, it is a logical necessity that most religious beliefs have been wrong. (This may just as easily apply to atheism.) Yet most human beings have been wrong about this topic despite their very high incentive to be right about it. The logic of disagreement tells us that most religious belief has, of necessity, been mistaken. But something other than incentives must explain these mistakes. What could this be?

People would have no evolutionary reason, nor the ability, to reach an intuitive grasp of the cosmos beyond their immediate surroundings. So their default position would be religious ignorance—and, if they had opinions, these would tend to be erroneous, although they might accidentally hit on the truth. In different times and places, various conjunctions of events, as filtered through people's slightly varying cognitive apparatus, seem to have struck them as having cosmic causal significance. These divergent theories would have then been taught as true to their children. There is no reason to assume that the children would not have believed what they were taught as long as it did not clash with whatever intuitions (about their immediate surroundings) they had acquired genetically. Eventually these culturally taught, intuitively plausible theories would have developed into genuinely believed and fervently defended "religions."

Religious disagreements suggest that most religious beliefs, or all of them, must be false. Genuine belief in what is false, however, cannot be due to a failure to care about religious truth. It must be due to the fact that religious truth is not self-evident—no matter how self-evident a culturally taught, psychologically plausible religious belief may come to *appear* to an adept of the religion.

In this regard, we respectfully suggest that economic theory is as much a "religion" as the "ideologies" Caplan has in mind. In reality, the "unseen" benefits of capitalism do not speak for themselves, as they seem to speak so clearly to Caplan—any more than the objective truth about God or an afterlife is self-evident. An accurate understanding of the economy no more "falls into our laps" than does an accurate understanding of the cosmos.

Economists may have acquired an accurate understanding of the economy (their religion may be true). But, if so, their religion has not—until Caplan came onto the scene—purported to deliver knowledge of where true or false economic religions themselves originate. Economics in Caplan's sense—rational-choice theory—does not explain the origin of *any* beliefs, accurate or inaccurate. Rational-choice theory treats beliefs as "preferences," which has hitherto meant that they are black-box givens, like a taste for Mozart rather than Madonna. This practice is, for the limited purposes of non-predictive economics, perfectly defensible and even necessary: Economists are not psychologists or cultural historians, and they need not pretend to be, if they confine themselves to explaining how people pursue *given* preferences, rather than trying to predict what those preferences will be.

We are not suggesting that scholars should be barred from trespassing across the artificial boundaries of historically contingent disciplines (and in fact we wish that political scientists did far more political psychology and cultural history than they do). But if they trespass, they should bring along with them appropriate theoretical tools. Rational-choice theory starts by assuming that in a given case, agents are instrumentally rational, and it thinks through the strategies such agents might pursue as instruments to their ends—whatever ends those might be. The ends that people pursue *have* to be treated, for this purpose, as givens; therefore the economic approach cannot, *in principle*, explain why some people "prefer" Mozart to Madonna, or vice versa.

An intellectually defensible economic theory of politics would treat what voters "buy" as what they "prefer"—a harmless tautology. But such a theory could not explain why people prefer one political belief over another. In trying to explain that, Caplan is inadvertently assuming the mantle of psychologist or historian. But rational-choice theory is inherently unable to explain what lies inside the black box of given preferences, because one cannot know *a priori* the costs and benefits that people will assign to, say, protectionism or free markets.

Caplan thinks he can skip any serious historical or psychological investigation of voters' economic policy preferences because voters are so *obviously wrong* about economics that the source of their economic preferences is clear: they must enjoy being wrong, or at least they must enjoy their wrong beliefs too much to allow them to be questioned. Caplan is entangling the question of where voters get their preferences with the putative inaccuracy of the preferences: he is substituting ontology for epistemology. As we have seen, the result is both logically incoherent and empirically empty, regardless of whether the ontology—the set of economic truths posited by Caplan—is correct.

An epistemology is a theory of the acquisition of ideas, but to say that one "prefers" to have the ideas that one has (tautologically) does not explain where one got them. "Preferences over beliefs" is a purported answer to this question that conflates (voluntary) will, which may be exercised by a rational agent in pursuit of a given objective, with the (involuntary) cognition of which objectives to pursue, which must come from genes and/or culture. When it comes to beliefs, then, we would replace Caplan's slogan, "Choice, responsive to incentives" (Caplan 2007, 123), with one of our own: "Cognition, responsive to perceptions."

We conclude that economists have little or nothing to tell us about political epistemology, even the political epistemology of economic ideas. But more importantly, we conclude that if political scientists are to do better, they, too, should stipulate that some political opinions are right, and that others are wrong; but that their rightness or wrongness tells us nothing about where they came from. (Nor does the degree of emotionality or stubbornness with which they are held.) The fact of political disagreement indicates not, as in Caplan's view, that some people don't care about getting politics right, but that getting it right is difficult.

This is true because the truth in political disputes is *not* so obvious that anyone who doesn't see it must willfully prefer to be deluded. The only starting point for political epistemology, in short, is a recognition of the complexity, hence the opacity, of political truth.

APPENDIX: THE "PSYCHOLOGY" OF RATIONAL IRRATIONALITY

Some readers of this essay have objected that Caplan could not possibly be saying that his rationally irrational voters *think* that the economic truths that they "actively avoid" are really true. They cannot believe Caplan's theory would be so obtuse.

Certainly, this is a matter of interpretation. One way of framing the question is: When Caplan (2007, 2) says that irrational voters are "worse than ignorant," does he mean that they are *both* ignorant and irrational, or does he mean that they are irrational *instead of* being ignorant? If their knowledge of their own economic "biases" includes the knowledge that these biases are false (A4), the voters' alleged irrationality would *supersede* their ignorance. So (a) Do they hold their alleged biases despite knowing (somehow, as if by magic) that these biases are wrong (A4)? Or (b) Does the alleged pleasure emanating from the biases lead them to endorse the wrong policies by accident, because they are ignorant that their biases are wrong?

We view (b) as the charitable interpretation. In support of it, there are Caplan's many anecdotal observations of the public's sheer economic ignorance, mentioned above. In support of interpretation (a), however, there is, for one thing, the fact that Caplan must be saying that the public is not only in possession of nonrandom *beliefs,* but nonrandom *knowledge*: whatever knowledge it takes to sustain its nonrandom beliefs. At a minimum, this knowledge would include knowing what words like *outsourcing* and *protectionism* mean (which, in the real world of public opinion, is a tall enough order). Presumably, it would also mean knowing some of the arguments, however implicit, that back up the unspecified "ideologies" that are supposed to make voters "feel good." Even more ambitiously, Caplan seems to be saying that the public knows about views (presumably economists' views) that are opposed to its own biases, and that it "actively avoids" these views (Caplan 2007, 123)—indeed, that it avoids them with religious fervor. "To a large degree," he writes, "we expect religious discussions to be 'dogmatic,' with believers on all sides refusing to give rival sects a fair hearing" (ibid., 100), and this is supposed to describe the practices of the average voter when it comes to economic issues. If so, it would seem to entail at least that the average voter knows that "rival sects"—primarily economists—exist, and perhaps even that she knows the arguments made by these rivals, although she avoids engaging with these arguments or assesses them with bias. Caplan's irrational voter thus comes at least very close to knowing what economists (supposedly) know—the truth—even when she doesn't agree with it.

Textually, many passages support the uncharitable interpretation. For instance, here again is the original version of the passage that, in our text, we needed to rephrase so it would incorporate Caplan's acknowledgement that most voting is sociotropic:

> Since most of the cost of voter irrationality is *external*—paid for by *other people*—why not indulge? If enough voters think this way, socially injurious policies win by popular demand. (Caplan 2007, 3)

A literal reading of this passage entails interpretation (a), hence claim A4: Voters know what they're doing when they endorse socially injurious policies; but they go ahead and do it because they "think" to themselves: "These policies injure other people, not me." Even though the voter knows about the policies' antisocial effects, she doesn't *care,* because only other people, not the voter himself, will be harmed.

Rephrasing the passage to take account of sociotropic voting does not help: Voters still *know* about the socially injurious effects of the policies they favor; the problem remains that they don't care about these effects. The only difference is that now they have a different motive for not caring about what they know to be the harmful effects of the policies they favor: they (also) know that their individual votes will not be decisive in enacting the policies they favor. However, that extra knowledge provides an instrumentally rational motive for favoring "emotionally and ideologically" satisfying policies rather than other, sociotropically preferable policies only if the voter is aware that a non-emotional, non-ideological voter, one who donned "the shackles of objectivity," would favor those other policies—which is to say, only if the voter is aware that she is letting emotion and ideology drive her in the wrong policy direction (but doesn't care). Such a voter is, again, supremely knowledgeable—omniscient—about economics, but is perversely motivated to disregard his knowledge.

In a brief section on "Psychological Plausibility," Caplan (2007, 125–31) allows that his theory seems to entail the "odd" position that people "figure out the truth" to the best of their ability but, after weighing the costs and benefits of believing in the truth, decide to "purge the truth from" their minds "and embrace error" (ibid., 125). Caplan proceeds to *defend* this odd position: "The psychological plausibility of this stilted story is underrated" (ibid., 125). In support of the stilted story, Caplan invokes Orwellian "doublethink": People consciously know that X is true even though they simultaneously know that X is false (ibid., 126). However, that does not clear up the problem at all.

Perhaps realizing this, Caplan (2007, 127) then backs away from *1984* by introducing a different psychological scenario, according to which voters need only "keep a 'lookout' for questions where false beliefs" are dangerous, in which case they can "raise [their] level of intellectual self-discipline in order to become more objective" (ibid.). In non-dangerous situations, however, they can choose, instead, to indulge their subjective preferences, "tacitly" balancing the small benefits of objectivity when danger is small against "the emotional trauma of heightened objectivity—the progressive shattering of comforting illusions" (ibid., 126). Given the assumption that putting on "the shackles of objectivity" is traumatic, it is rational, in non-dangerous situations, for people to go on believing "whatever makes [them] feel best" (ibid.). Thus, Caplan concludes,

> There is no need to posit that people start with a clear perception of the truth, then throw it away. The only requirement is that rationality remain on "standby," ready to engage when error is dangerous.

Thus, if voters know that their opinions cannot be dangerous, because they know that their votes do not matter, then they won't care if the beliefs motivating the votes would, upon closer inspection, turn out to be false, so they will not more closely inspect their beliefs. Notice, however, that having finally distinguished between an erroneous belief and the dogmatic adherence to it, or between cognition and emotion, Caplan does not even attempt to explain the former. His question has to be why people tend to *start with* unclear perceptions of the truth, such that if they don't more closely examine their perceptions, these will tend to be erroneous. Otherwise he has not explained the public's economic errors. "Emotion or ideology" does not answer the question, except in the sense that *something* that originates in genes or culture must (tautologically) lie behind *all* beliefs. This tautology does not explain why people tend to have the specific, nonrandom, erroneous beliefs that they have: Caplan's dependent variable.

Thus, it seems to us that Caplan is caught between insisting that "emotion or ideology" explain only dogmatism about existing beliefs, which would remain randomly acquired; or going back to Orwell (A4) to explain how people would nonrandomly acquire their putatively false beliefs (before becoming dogmatic about them). In the Orwellian scenario, voters who typically have never taken a single course in economics (Caplan 2007, 13) would somehow know that there are opinions about "economics" other than the specific, nonrandom deliverances of their own "common sense" (i.e., their intuitions and the things they have heard); and would know that these alternative opinions (held by economists of whom they have probably never heard) are likelier to be true than is their own common sense; and would know that to believe in these views would be "traumatic" in some sense *other than* the trauma experienced by the dogmatist who changes his mind. It would seem, then, that, through some magical process, they must have already known about; agreed with; and been traumatized by agreeing with the economic doctrines that Caplan and his colleagues believe—i.e. (*arguendo*), the truth.

Only in comparison to this alleged trauma would their subjective beliefs feel "comforting": and only then would they be "in denial" about economic truth (Caplan 2007, 124), rather than simply being innocent of it—and thus (*arguendo*) dogmatic about their *random* opinions. Unlike the rationally lazy ignoramus, therefore, the rationally irrational voter would, indeed, be willfully "ignoring" truths she once knew but would prefer to forget, just as in the original, Orwellian scenario Caplan lays out—because otherwise, she would not know that her opinions are merely "subjective" *rather than being objectively true*; nor would she know about the alleged psychological cost of believing the specific things Caplan believes, as distinct from the psychological cost of changing one's mind. Practically speaking, she is, again, omniscient. Her "irrationality" would consist in choosing to avoid knowing what she knows is true.

Are we imputing to Caplan views he does not hold? As we said before, we are not sure; but the important question is whether we are imputing to him views that his theory demands. In this regard, we note in closing what happens when Caplan extends the theory from public opinion about economics to public opinion about other things, such as toxicology:

> The public has numerous prejudices about this apparently dry, technical field. . . . Toxicologists are . . . likely to emphasize dosage. Nontoxicologists "tend to view chemicals as either safe or dangerous and they appear to equate even small exposures to toxic or carcinogenic chemicals with almost certain harm." . . . The public's views are often patently silly, and toxicologists who work in industry, academia, and regulatory bureaus largely see eye to eye. (Caplan 2007, 161)

In other words, even when the public is *uninformed about findings in natural science*, the resulting beliefs count as "patently silly." Apparently, then, truths discovered by scientific experimentation would be self-evident even before the experiment had been conducted, as long as one had a high enough incentive to think clearly about the nature of, say, cancer. (If only the Nobel committees knew this, they could ensure the quick discovery of all scientific truth with prizes big enough to encourage scientists to think really, really hard.)

Granting, for the sake of argument, Caplan's mystifying assertion that it would somehow be more comforting to believe that a small exposure to a "toxic chemical" amounts to a death sentence than to believe that low dosages are probably harmless, the larger, epistemological point is that, to an ordinary person who hears media mentions of "toxic chemicals," the interpretive frame of "either a chemical is toxic/or else it is safe" is built into the only information she is likely to have about the subject: namely, that a certain chemical has been found to be "toxic." This would produce a nonrandom bias in favor of an incorrect toxicological belief, but the holder of this incorrect belief would have no idea that there is any other way of looking at the matter. She would be passively unaware of a truth that is, to her, an unknown unknown; she would not be actively avoiding "an inconvenient truth" for emotional reasons. *Only if she somehow knew that her belief was false*, however, would anyone be entitled to classify her behavior as bizarre enough to be irrational—rather than as simply being a mistake produced by ignorance of toxicology.

NOTES

1. For another example of such complacency, see Graber 2006.
2. Caplan takes Page and Shapiro's *The Rational Public* (1992) to be central to his story because he vastly exaggerates the importance of the "miracle of aggregation" in that book. Page and Shapiro were merely responding to a part of the public-opinion literature that should, strictly speaking, be segregated from the literature on public *error* with which Caplan is concerned.

   The part of the literature to which the "miracle of aggregation" was a response originated in Section VII of Converse's "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" ([1964] 2006, 44–52). In Secs. III-VI of the paper, Converse had shown that most people are (or were, in the 1950s) so inattentive to politics that they are *ignorant* of the tools for organizing political information typically used by sophisticated political observers: conservative and liberal "belief systems," i.e., ideologies. But it occurred to Converse that, however ignorant of conventional ideologies most people were, they might be using their own "idiosyncratic" ideologies, rather than conservatism or liberalism (ibid., 44), to organize political beliefs. So he devoted Sec. VII of his paper to testing this possibility. Converse reasoned that if people's issue positions were being "constrained" by ideologies of their own devising, then even though, perforce, he could not know which specific issue positions these ideologies would dictate, any given person should hold any given issue position consistently over time. However, Converse found that this was not the case for most people. Many of their issue positions fluctuated over time, as if they were so inattentive to politics that on many issues, they did not really have political "attitudes" at all. Thus, the attitudes that people appeared to have in a one-shot survey sometimes turned out, in panel surveys over time, to be merely random nonattitudes.

   The "nonattitudes thesis" became Converse's most famous finding, and commanded a good deal of attention in the subsequent literature—but for reasons that were almost completely orthogonal to any concern one might have about public *incompetence* or *error*. As Christopher Achen (1975, 1227) put it, the worry raised by the nonattitudes thesis was that a certain conception of normative democratic theory would lose "its starting point" without intertemporally stable public attitudes. This conception of normative democratic theory is democratic *voluntarism* (Friedman 1998), according to which *the will of the people* is sovereign. Without stable public attitudes, there would be no meaningful will of the people. But in the voluntarist conception of democratic theory, *there is no such thing as public error or incompetence*—except in *executing* the public's (self-legitimating) will. That is, a sovereign may err by appointing deputies who fail to carry out its will. But in the voluntarist view, the sovereign's will itself, or, in the present context, the public's "policy preferences" themselves, *cannot* be mistaken: that would contradict the notion of popular sovereignty. *Vox populi, vox dei*.

   Page and Shapiro had data showing intertemporally stable *aggregate* opinion. Thus, it seemed that individual fluctuations such as those limned by Converse in Section VII were random noise—and that at the aggregate level, one could hear, through the static, a public will. The "miracle of aggregation" answered the nonattitudes thesis by showing that, over time and in the aggregate, the "public will" did exist. But Page and Shapiro had bigger fish to fry: They wanted to know whether the public will, however existent and minimally "rational," was also wise, i.e., "sensible." And they certainly did not assume that they could infer this from the "miracle of aggregation."

The "miracle" is a *deus ex machina* brought in to answer a question—the non-"existence" of a public will—that had been raised by a section of Converse's paper that was interesting only to the extent that one assumes that the public will can do no wrong. To ask whether the public is sensible is to *contradict* that voluntarist premise.

Caplan commendably rejects voluntarism, as Page and Shapiro did. He, too, has bigger fish to fry than whether the public will merely "exists." But Caplan is so caught up in the economists' theory of rational ignorance that he neglects the bulk of Page and Shapiro's book, and the bulk of the public-opinion literature.

Rational-ignorance theory makes a point prediction of zero public "information" about politics (just as the underlying theory of voting predicts that nobody will vote). *Therefore,* the "miracle of aggregation" seems, to Caplan, supremely important, since it shows that the random opinions that would result from zero information could be offset by a few well-informed voters. *Therefore,* if Caplan can show that public opinion is *nonrandom*, he has restored at least the logical possibility of systemic *error* to rational-choice analysis of public opinion—by disproving a "miracle" that is so remote from the realities of politics that political scientists pay it little heed. Scholars such as Page and Shapiro, who were intimately familiar with the realities of nonrandom public opinion, considered the "miracle" relatively unimportant, except as a response to an orthogonal branch of the literature, and went about arguing that *despite* the nonrandomness that Caplan takes to be so crucial, accurate media signals could render public opinion sensible. Caplan, failing to notice the context of the "miracle," does not even attempt to rebut Page and Shapiro's other grounds for confidence in the *wisdom* of public opinion. Had he done so, however, he might have had to consider whether reality is so transparent to the media as Page and Shapiro tended to think. And in that case, he might have had to reconsider his own epistemology, in which knowledge of the truth falls directly into voters' laps, such that "lack of mental discipline, not lack of information" (Caplan 2007, 99) must explain voters' errors.

3. Surveys over the years have indicated that the public consistently overestimates businesses' profit margins (Lipset and Schneider 1987, 176–78). Data from merged polls conducted for the *Times Mirror*/Pew Research Center for the People and the Press between 1987 and 2007 (Pew Research Center 2007b) reveal that over the twenty-year span, the percentage of the public believing that businesses make too much profit has exceeded that demurring by a thirty-point margin (62 percent agreeing vs. 32 percent disagreeing). On the other hand, the mix of attitudes about whether businesses strike a fair balance between profit and serving "the public interest" has been closer (42 percent agreeing vs. 54 percent disagreeing). If these results seem inconsistent, perhaps it is because, as Seymour

Martin Lipset and William Schneider (1987, 178) noted, "most people do not have a very precise understanding of the term 'profit.'"

4. Caplan rebuts two weak counterarguments: that economists are biased because they are rich and because they are politically conservative. He does not address the real problem, which is that economists are human beings. Whatever processes of "emotion or ideology," i.e., psychology or culture, might bias an ordinary member of the public might also bias an economics teacher, hence an economics student, hence an economics Ph.D.

   Caplan seems to view "education" as the transference of truth from teacher to student—begging the question of how the teacher acquired this "truth." Thus, the fact that "educated Americans in general" tend to agree more with economists than uneducated Americans do (Caplan 2006, 83) does not impress us, any more than we are impressed by the fact that even Soviet engineers who studied no economics *formally* would have undoubtedly tended to agree more with the labor theory of value than American engineers would have. "Perhaps education just increases exposure to brainwashing," Caplan writes (ibid.). Yes: that is precisely the point about formal and cultural education. So we are at a loss to understand how he can conclude, without argument, that the "more likely" alternative is that educated people "think clearer [sic] and know more" (ibid.). (Knowing *more* is not at all inconsistent with having been "brainwashed.")
5. Philip E. Tetlock's *Expert Political Judgment* (2005) demonstrates that academic social-science experts are no better at making accurate predictions than "dart-throwing chimps."
6. This was the point that, eventually, the first distinctively "Austrian" economists, Ludwig von Mises and F. A. Hayek, realized that they were making in the course of a scholarly debate over central economic planning that raged in the 1920s and 1930s: How would the central planners know what they needed to know? Mises and Hayek had considered themselves to be standard neoclassical economists, but their interlocutors were standard neoclassical economists who simply assumed that the central planners would know what they needed to know (Lavoie 1985). This gave Mises and Hayek the first hint that their own version of neoclassical economics was no longer "mainstream" (Boettke 1997)—because it took epistemology too seriously.

   However, Mises and Hayek gave a hostage to fortune by making "market prices" their answer to the question of how participants in market economies would "know" what central planners, bereft of market prices, could not know (i.e., accurate supply and demand curves). This inadvertently fed into the illusion among epistemically naïve mainstream economists that costs and benefits are objectively knowable, both to economists and to the market participants they are studying—as if prices need not be *interpreted*, such that people with faulty interpretations will make economic mistakes and, perhaps, suffer economic losses. As subsequent Austrian critics never tired of pointing out, there is no real conceptual space in the mainstream neoclassical view for *ex ante* economic errors (Kirzner 1997).
7. This passage is quoted, in Caplan's Reply, as the only evidence for his incorrect claim that we challenge the rationality of the rational *ignorance* hypothesis—i.e.,

that we claim that rational ignorance is self-contradictory. In fact, we do no such thing. We do reject the rational-ignorance hypothesis as empirically *irrelevant*: it is an *implausible* explanation for public ignorance, given the paradox of voting, but Caplan does not seem to understand the difference between implausibility and impossibility. The rational-ignorance explanation is, as we say quite clearly (p. 213), a logical possiblity; ipso facto, it is not logically incoherent. "But as usual with such theories," we write, "the question is whether the logic describes actual behavior. Many logically possible hypotheses are not actualized in reality." Contrary to rational-ignorance theory, millions of people vote, indicating that they probably *don't* think that their votes, hence their political views, are inconsequential, as the theory maintains. This is an objection to the empirical relevance of the theory, not to its logical internal consistency. Similarly, we reject the empirical relevance of economic theory *tout court* to understanding political ignorance and ideology (as the title of our paper suggests)—but we have no problem with the logical coherence of economic theory. And we do not reject information "search theory" as a logically impossible account of what actually happens in either the economy or the polity: in fact, information searches happen all the time. We claim only that, to the extent that people start out genuinely ignorant (e.g., when they are new to email and have never heard of spam or tricks), such that they face important unknown unknowns, their informational searches are not necessarily *likely* to be accurate; the economics of information is logically consistent, but in overlooking the empirical possibility of unknown unknowns, it fails (as we say in the sentence immediately prior to the one Caplan chooses to quote) to take ignorance *seriously*. The *only* aspect of economic theory that we reject as logically impossible is Caplan's theory of rational irrationality—not economic theory in general, not the economics of information, not rational-choice theory, and not rational-ignorance theory.

8. Caplan (2007, 137–40) makes a similar point in objecting to a predecessor to his approach, Geoffrey Brennan and Loren E. Lomasky's hypereconomistic theory of "expressive voting" (1993). Caplan (2007, 137) begins his critique of Brennan and Lomasky's theory by acknowledging his great debt to it. But then he backs away from it, because according to Brennan and Lomasky, "you can safely vote for 'feel good' policies even if you know they will be disastrous in practice" (ibid., 138). While Caplan does not see the underlying logical problem with this notion, he does think that it is "psychologically" untenable to maintain, as Brennan and Lomasky do, that people would support policies that they *knew* were disastrous—especially when, according to the theory of expressive voting, the purpose of such support is to make the supporters feel good. Caplan writes:

> Few protectionists see their policies as economically harmful. If they realistically assessed the effect of this "feel-good" policy, supporting the policy would no longer make its friends feel good. (Ibid., 139)

Thus, Caplan suggests, "support for counterproductive policies and mistaken beliefs about how the world works normally come as a package" (ibid., 140). We could not have said it better ourselves.

However, we dispute Caplan's subsequent words: "Rational irrationality emphasizes this link." For, on the very next page, in explicating rational irrationality, he writes that "when voters talk about solving social problems, their primary aim is to boost their self-worth by casting off the shackles of objectivity" (ibid., 141). We do not dispute that people tend to do things that make them feel good. But recall Caplan's criticism of Brennan and Lomasky: It would not make people feel good to support what they *knew* was disastrous. By the same token, it would not boost their self-worth if they *knew* they were casting off the shackles of "objectivity," because this would amount to knowingly opening the door to supporting disastrous policies. Caplan has simply recast Brennan and Lomasky's implausible voter knowledge that the voter is wrong into voter knowledge that the voter is being "subjective" *rather than objective,* which we think is a distinction that does not make the needed difference.

For the decision not to "put on my thinking cap" to be irrational, I must think that it is at least *more likely than not* that if I "shackled" myself to the rigors of "objectivity," I would *change my mind* about the truth of my subjective opinion—but that, since I prefer to "indulge" the subjective belief, I choose not to think about it. But now we are back in Brennan-Lomasky territory (deliberate mistakenness), for to believe that X is more likely to be wrong than right would deprive X of its "feel-good" power. (Or, as we would put it: To believe that X is more likely wrong than right makes it impossible to believe in *the truth of* X in any coherent sense.) Like Brennan and Lomasky, who portray the truth as obvious to all, Caplan portrays voters as hiding it from themselves. In order to do that, they still have to know that "the truth is out there," objectively, and that it *probably falsifies what they subjectively believe.* Otherwise, they would not have to actively avoid it, nor would they know *what* to actively avoid. So the truth really is obvious to them, as it is to Brennan and Lomasky's voter, even though Caplan bifurcates people's psyches into a level that "subjectively" believes X to be true, and a "level" that (somehow) knows that X is, "objectively," false.

9. The Pew Research Center's data were released directly to Stephen Bennett, who is responsible for all analyses and interpretations. The authors thank Andrew Kohut and Scott Keeter at Pew for releasing the information.
10. Caplan (2007, 132) does point out that poll taxes tend to reduce turnout, which shows that (some) people must be weighing the costs and benefits of voting. However, he infers from this, illogically, that voters who are *not* confronted with a poll tax—or, more crucially, voters who *are* confronted with one, but pay it—know that their votes are inconsequential, albeit "subconsciously" (ibid., 132). Even if we concede for the sake of argument, however, that all voters and all nonvoters are engaging in the same type of calculus (rather than some of them not thinking about it at all, and others voting out of perceived duty), it doesn't mean that all voters and nonvoters *know the same thing* (i.e., the odds against their votes mattering), and that the thing they know is true, and that, therefore, they assess the costs and benefits of voting *accurately*. If they did, nobody would vote. The paradox of voting remains untouched by Caplan's invocation of the subconscious.

11. The American National Election Studies are conducted by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies, and the data are made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Stephen Bennett is responsible for all analyses and interpretations.
12. Indeed, Caplan, who went to Princeton, might have been taught *by* Blinder in graduate school.
13. As we have noted, public-opinion polls indicate that the public consistently overestimates businesses' profit margins (Lipset and Schneider 1987, 176–78). But Lipset and Schneider note that views of profits, and support for business, vary considerably over time (ibid., 181–83). Data from merged polls conducted for the *Times Mirror*/Pew Research Center for the People and the Press between 1987 and 2007 (Pew Research Center 2007b) reveal similar variations.
14. Adam Smith (or, rather, Bernard Mandeville) did not come up with his counterintuitive thesis because he had the "incentive" to think about greed more objectively than had centuries of moralists before him. He simply made a conceptual breakthrough—the reasons for which may be found in the untidy currents of intellectual history, or in unique aspects of his biography, but not in the elegant thesis that the supply curve for knowledge slopes upward.

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