

MOTIVATED SKEPTICISM OR INEVITABLE
CONVICTION? DOGMATISM AND THE STUDY
OF POLITICS

ABSTRACT: *Taber and Lodge's 2006 paper provides powerful evidence that one's prior beliefs shape one's reception of new evidence in a manner that can best be described as "inadvertently dogmatic." This is especially true for people who are well informed, which dovetails with findings going back to Converse (1964) showing political beliefs to be ideologically constrained (rigid) among the relatively well informed. What may explain the coincidence of dogmatism and knowledgeability is the very process of learning about politics, which must use theories, schemas, ideologies, or Lippmannesque "stereotypes" to target certain political information as germane by putting it into an interpretive framework. This interpretive process is likely to create for each of us a growing database of information that is congruent with our extant convictions but that excludes incongruent information: in light of the data we have already processed, incongruent information seems increasingly implausible (if not incomprehensible), and is therefore rationally ignored or dismissed. But this does not necessarily mean, as Taber and Lodge follow Robert Abelson in suggesting, that people are "motivated" to be dogmatic rather than being unintentionally closed minded as a result of the plausibility they involuntarily accord to their priors. Recognizing the inadvertent (unmotivated) nature of dogmatism is essential if political science is to take seriously political actors' beliefs—and to assess the gravity of the problem posed by dogmatism.*

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Critical Review's republication of Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge's "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Information" (2006), courtesy of the authors and the *American Journal of Political Science*, is an important step in our ongoing effort to integrate three currents in political science that are not often drawn together: survey research on ideology,¹ experimental research on dogmatism, and normative political theory.

When normative theorists occasionally take notice of survey and experimental research, they usually assume that it is relevant only to voting behavior and, therefore, to democratic theory.² Taber and Lodge, however—in line with survey research going back to "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (Converse 1964)—point to a pronounced tendency toward dogmatism among those who are relatively well informed. Their findings may therefore be more relevant to policy-making elites than to voters at large.

Early on, survey research operationalized "ideology" as the degree of constraint, or predictability, exerted by a "belief system" on the elites who are well-enough informed to understand its meaning and its policy implications (Converse 1964). Normally, someone who predictably expresses opinions that are determined by an ideology might be considered *dogmatic*. But most scholars in the field came to see ideological attitude constraint as desirable because the citizens who were its victims were among those with the most knowledge about politics, and it was assumed that more knowledge is necessarily better than less. If ideology facilitates knowledgeability, political scientists thought, then ideology is good. By the same token, if attitudinal constraint goes with ideology, then it, too, is good.

Yet the conclusion that constraint is good because it is connected to an information-boosting belief system is a non sequitur. This is all the more true if one considers *how* ideological knowledge and ideological constraint might come together. It cannot just be that an understanding of ideology allows one to understand political discussions that are conducted in ideological terms, since this would not explain why ideological knowledge correlates not only with general political knowledge but with ideological constraint. That is, it is possible to know about ideologies without being an ideologue, yet it seems that ideological knowledge and general political knowledge both tend to coincide with ideological constraint (Friedman 2012, Appendix).

Arguably, Walter Lippmann ([1922] 1997) provided the best explanation for this coincidence. In *Public Opinion*, he maintained that we need

stereotypes—essentially, schematic templates—if we are to make sense of a mass of disorganized information. In this view, schemas, such as those provided by theories and ideologies, allow us to learn about the world by noticing as important the relatively small class of information that fits the schemas. A schematic template increases the ability to assimilate schema-congruent information as important; an all-encompassing ideological schema enables one to become much more knowledgeable about things political than those who are innocent of such schemas. The downside is that the information ideologues assimilate tends to buttress the ideology that has highlighted ideologically congruent information as significant. “When a system of stereotypes is well fixed, our attention is called to those facts which support it, and diverted from those which contradict. . . . We do not see what our eyes are not accustomed to take into account” (*ibid.*, 78). Thus, politically well-informed ideological elites, may be, in comparison to the non-ideological masses, learning great heaps of information, but information drawn from a sample that is biased by their convictions. However, since the sampled information seems to confirm certain societal realities (the ones explained by the ideology), their confidence in the accuracy of the ideology will increase as the biased pile of data grows, explaining the constraint by ideology—i.e., the dogmatism they display.

One of the many merits of Taber and Lodge’s paper is that even though, like Converse, they find a correlation between dogmatism and knowledgeability, they do not mistake dogmatism for desirable behavior. (Whether it is undesirable *per se* is a question to which I shall return.) Moreover, they tie dogmatism and knowledgeability together not only empirically but theoretically. As they see it, kernels of conviction create preconceptions that people “are typically unable to control” (Taber and Lodge 2006, 756): these preconceptions lead people to “deposit more supportive evidence and affect in memory” (*ibid.*, 765), reinforcing the initial conviction. “Selective information processes are,” therefore, “particularly important because of their impact on subsequent attitudes and behavior” (*ibid.*, 756). One’s initial attitude filters the reception of the next impression, adding attitudinally congruent information to one’s database. Even if this information is subsequently forgotten, it may be preserved in the form of a stronger preconception that exercises an even greater filtering effect on future information.

The Spiral of Conviction and Technocracy

The path-dependent filtering of information over time produces what may be called a “spiral of conviction.” The more an initial impression or framework allows one to learn about an otherwise-confusing aspect of the world (such as politics), the more effect the initial bias has on one’s perceptions of, and thoughts about, new information. Taber and Lodge provide empirical confirmation of this process beyond the confirmation found in survey data, introspection, and close observation of ideologues—even though, in both the motivated-skepticism paper republished here, and in their forthcoming book on *The Rationalizing Voter*, they restrict themselves to the spiraling impact of incidental influences on initial impressions, such as the presence of a flag next to a candidate. Similarly, Taber et al. (2009, 154) contend that “many politically consequential attitudes are born of whim and fancy and justified on the flimsiest of grounds (attitudes on gay rights, abortion, or almost any form of prejudice, e.g.).” *A fortiori*, the impact of a political schema that targets and integrates a great deal of consequential information should be quite significant, as ideologues’ development over time seems to suggest. An ideological naïf whose first exposure to politics was a reading of *Atlas Shrugged* at age 12 is likely to end up with very different political opinions than one whose first exposure was to *The Communist Manifesto*, even if both people were to read exactly the same things in the interim: Taber and Lodge’s model makes path dependence crucial in the development of one’s ideas, because each perception colors the reception of the next.

How should an awareness of spirals of conviction affect normative views of our democratic technocracy? Conventional political ideologies are hardly the only sweeping schemas for understanding politics and society. The social sciences offer theoretical “ideologies” in abundance. If flimsy preconceptions automatically shape the perception and valence of all subsequent associated information, then (again, *a fortiori*) spirals of conviction can surely be expected to indoctrinate those who are, for example, introduced to neoclassical economics in college and graduate school as opposed to those who learn anthropology, history, psychology, or sociology. Social scientists are likely to come to see the world in the very distinct manners that are typical of these disciplines, and to dismiss the literature of the other disciplines—if they even read it—as hopelessly naïve or self-absorbed (Lamont 2009, ch. 3). The implications may be

quite disturbing: the experts on whom a technocracy relies may be locked into their theoretical biases, their opinions constrained by the mountains of information these biases allow them, over time, to perceive and register as significant.³ Their theoretical preconceptions, having screened in confirmatory evidence and screened out disconfirmatory evidence, may color their subconscious judgments of which new evidence and which sources of evidence are plausible. Worse, the preconceptions may persist even when the evidence they once screened in has been forgotten, and possibly even when it has been refuted.

It is at this point that affect plays a crucial role in Taber and Lodge's schema, as it did in the "online processing" model earlier developed by Lodge and his colleagues at SUNY Stony Brook (e.g., Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). We forget most of what we learn, but the conclusions we draw from what we learn may be preserved in positive or negative summary judgments. Our summary judgments of old evidence will be the first things that come to mind when a related issue appears, and these judgments may influence our evaluation of new evidence wherever ambiguity allows diverse interpretations of it. Conceivably our prior judgments will be *strengthened* if we cannot remember their basis, even in the face of counterevidence, since we will know there must have been *some* basis for them, but will be unable to subject the actual basis to a comparison with the new, contrary evidence.⁴ Again, the political implications for technocracy may be grim. It seems undeniable that technocrats, like social scientists, tend to persist in their theoretical and ideological leanings. There are "Republican" economists and "Democratic" economists—those who will serve in just one type of administration. There are "liberal" and "conservative" economists, "freshwater" and "saltwater" economists, Keynesians, Post Keynesians, monetarists, New Classicists, Austrians, Marxists, critical realists; and these identifications tend to persist over the scholars' entire careers. For the most part, these scholars read the same journals, yet their theoretical convictions persist. The role of affect in coloring their evaluations of the evidence in these journals may help to explain this anomaly.

It is important to emphasize that by "affect," Taber and Lodge do not necessarily mean emotions, let alone strong emotions, although the 2006 paper republished here could be clearer about this. More recent papers and their forthcoming book show that by affect, Taber and Lodge usually mean System 1 (pre-conscious) responses based on previously

assimilated data or impressions (Taber et al. 2009; Kim et al. 2010; Lodge and Taber forthcoming). Jonathan Haidt (2012, 44–45, 55) distinguishes between System 1 outputs of this sort, which he calls intuitions, and emotions. Most intuitions, even though they have an affective valence because they are appraisals, are too vague or intellectual to produce any of the recognized emotions (happiness, surprise, fear, sadness, anger, disgust) (Ekman 1992). However, the stronger the affect—based on what seemed, when it was formed, to be stronger evidence justifying it—the more it is likely to persist, and the more it is likely to stimulate the biased assimilation of new evidence, further strengthening it. Taber and Lodge show that those with more definite initial priors and those with more information prove to be more dogmatic than those with weak priors and those with less information. Thus, given both what experts have learned and forgotten and what they have learned and remembered, they are likely to resemble the ideal type of the doctrinaire ideologue, combining strong priors with the information to back them up, yet persisting in their beliefs even when they cannot remember the information that initially started their spiraling conviction that the beliefs are true.

In light of the dogmatism that Taber and Lodge (2006, 767) discover among ordinary citizens, they discount the possibility that, normatively speaking, “John Q. Public” might be more suited to political decision making than “ideal citizens” with “elite skills.” But of course ideal citizens are not live options. The actual possibilities are more democracy or more technocracy. From an information-processing perspective, this may truly be a Hobson’s choice (Friedman 1998), pitting relatively ignorant but therefore open-minded masses against relatively well-informed but dogmatic elites. However unpleasant it is, however, the nature of the choice at least demonstrates that long-standing questions about the ignorance of the public have to be counterbalanced by newer questions about the closed minds and partiality of experts (Tetlock 2005).

Is Dogmatism a Motivational Phenomenon?

Our thanks are due to Taber and Lodge and to Jason C. Coronel and James H. Kuklinski; James N. Druckman; Arie W. Kruglanski and

Lauren M. Boyatzi; and Lee Ross for agreeing to participate in this symposium. Druckman questions the robustness of dogmatism in real-world settings. Coronel and Kuklinski point out the reliance on non-cognitivist psychology of Taber and Lodge's interpretation of their findings. Kruglanski and Boyatzi provide a more cognitivist understanding of dogmatism than do Taber and Lodge, while challenging the use of studies of dogmatism to sustain normative judgments of irrationality. Ross, too, asks whether Taber and Lodge's findings are as inconsistent with cognitivism as they suggest when they call dogmatism "motivated skepticism."

Ross's comments point toward a cognitivist interpretation of Taber and Lodge's findings much like the spiral-of-conviction view I have outlined above. The alternative, motivated-skepticism interpretation attributes dogmatism to the existence of an *incentive* for sustaining one's prior convictions in the face of countervailing evidence. Unlike the incentive to reach sound conclusions based on a posited "accuracy motive," the motivated-skepticism interpretation posits an illicit personal motive to be skeptical about evidence that contradicts one's prior attitudes—a dogmatism motive, in effect.

In psychology, the motivated-reasoning literature calls non-accuracy motives "directional"; Taber and Lodge call the directional motive they have in mind "partisan." What exactly is this motive? Put differently, what psychological need is supposed to be served by dogmatism? Taber and Lodge's answer borrows from Robert P. Abelson (1986; Abelson and Prentice 1989) the notion that "beliefs and attitudes may be thought of metaphorically as possessions to be protected" (Taber and Lodge 2006, 767). Taber and Lodge (*ibid.*; cf. Taber et al. 2009, 138, and Lodge and Taber forthcoming) summarize the motive that Abelson attributes to the dogmatist as: "This belief, this feeling, is mine!" By contrast, a cognitivist interpretation of Taber and Lodge's findings would hold that the spiraling process of opinion reinforcement over time creates, all by itself, an understandable, rational, and possibly normative reason not to "ignore one's prior beliefs when processing arguments or evidence" (Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009, 137). As Robert Jervis (2010, 150) puts it in a study of cognitive failure among technocrats, "Being strongly influenced by [perceptions of] plausibility can be criticized as being closed-minded or assumption driven. But this is a powerful and legitimate habit of the mind, necessary for making sense of a complex and contradictory world."

In such a world, we cannot start over again and forget what we (think we) know each time new evidence arises, or we would never learn anything. Nor can we avoid the need to close off inquiry, at least temporarily, when opinions have to be rendered or actions taken: this need for closure is the basis for Kruglanski's alternative, semi-cognitivist theory of closed-mindedness. Moreover, the online tallies, or affectual tags, left by old judgments whose basis has been forgotten provide powerful reasons for defending these judgments. One knows that one had a basis for rendering these judgments, so—in the interest of obtaining an accurate new conclusion—it seems only right to devote relatively close scrutiny to information that challenges them. Thus, the so-called accuracy motive may be all that is necessary to explain dogmatism, especially when this motive—better called “the weight of the prior evidence”—is combined with affectually summarized online processing.

Ziva Kunda (1990, 480), who pioneered the recent psychological literature on motivated reasoning, notes that an early efflorescence of such research had grown from Leon Festinger's (1957) cognitive-dissonance theory, but that this line of research foundered when, in the 1970s, it was pointed out that all of the studies that “purported to demonstrate motivated reasoning could be interpreted in entirely cognitive, non-motivational terms,” because “people could draw self-serving conclusions, not because they wanted to but because these conclusions seemed more plausible, given their prior beliefs and expectancies.” The same, arguably, is true of motivated skepticism. In the remainder of this introduction I will make that argument, suggesting that Abelson's notion of a dogmatism motive is qualitatively different from the motives adduced in the motivated-reasoning literature; that Abelson's theory adds nothing to the interpretation of Taber and Lodge's evidence that cannot be sustained by a cognitivist interpretation; that the efficacious action of an Abelsonian motive is contradicted by the extant evidence; and that explaining people's dogmatism by appealing to their motives is an inappropriate practice for social scientists who take political opinions seriously—something that political scientists should do.

Motivated Reasoning vs. Motivated Skepticism

The second wave of motivated-reasoning literature, signaled by Kunda's 1990 paper, shows that, given ambiguous information, people are liable

to spot confirmatory evidence for interpretations that are, as she says, “self-serving.” That is, directional motives favor confirmation bias for interpretations that are favorable to people’s personal situation—not favorable to their beliefs. This marks an important difference between the type of motive adduced in this literature and the type posited by Abelson.

For example, in research reported in “Motivated Skepticism: Use of Differential Decision Criteria for Preferred and Nonpreferred Conclusions” (1992), Peter H. Ditto and David F. Lopez told students that they would be asked to work with other students whom they judged to be the most intelligent available partners. However, when given evidence that the most intelligent students were unpleasant, the subjects tended to require more evidence of their potential partners’ intelligence before they concluded that the unpleasant students were indeed the most intelligent ones. Evidently the subjects hoped that if they kept looking, they might find evidence that the unpleasant students were unintelligent and thus need not be worked with. In another experiment, half the subjects received evidence that they had a genetic trait that indicates a higher likelihood of developing a pancreatic disorder. Here the subjects who received bad news, but not those who received good news, double-checked the evidence; further, those who were told that they did have the genetic trait, and thus *might* develop pancreatic problems, took advantage of this ambiguity to view their prognosis more optimistically than they could have.

One might say that in these cases, people were counter-arguing the evidence, but the evidence was ambiguous. As Ditto and Lopez (1992, 579; cf. Kunda 1990, 486) put it, “the effect of preferences on information processing and judgments is constrained, ultimately, by the clarity of the information itself.” This is important in establishing the rationality of the biased information processing seen in these studies—in contrast to the irrationality of being attached to a belief merely because it is one of one’s “possessions.”

Given the ambiguities in most evidence, Ditto and Lopez argue that, in contrast to Kunda’s canonical view, their findings do not suggest either the existence of an anti-accuracy motive or the self-deception that such a motive might entail. Ditto and Lopez point out that according to Kunda (1990, 480), people *choose* the processing strategies they think “most likely to yield the desired conclusion,” but that in order to make this choice, they must know, but also somehow suppress the knowledge, that their

chosen strategy may lead to inaccurate beliefs.⁵ They must suppress this knowledge because it is impossible in principle to “believe” something that one thinks is more likely than not to be false: that is the very nature of belief. For this reason, we should not posit an accuracy “motive,” which makes belief formation seem deliberate. We form opinions involuntarily, in response to what we perceive to be relevant evidence and valid argument. The degrees of doubt and importance that are evoked by a particular belief may affect how actively we seek out, and how receptively we respond to, contrary evidence and argument. But a perception of accuracy is less a goal than something that either attaches to an opinion or does not. If we perceive an opinion to be accurate, the perception *compels* us to believe the opinion (to be true). This occurs regardless of our intentions. Thus, in contrast to Kunda’s incoherent voluntarism about information-processing strategies, Ditto and Lopez (1992, 581) maintain that “individuals faced with preference-consistent information” may simply be “less motivated to critically analyze the available data than are individuals faced with preference-inconsistent information,” such that there is “no need for individuals to knowingly opt for one hypothesis or inference rule over another.” When confronting either type of evidence, “the goal of the cognitive process [is] the same”: “people are attempting to construct an accurate view of themselves and their world—it is the vigor with which that goal is pursued in the two situations that differs.”

One might therefore interpret Ditto and Lopez’s findings as proving nothing but the fact that people have hopes that they try to square with reality by closely scrutinizing evidence that runs counter to their hopes. At worst, such behavior would constitute wishful thinking, not motivated skepticism.⁶ The difference between the two is illustrated by the fact that, presumably, no one would admit to subjecting counterattitudinal evidence to heightened scrutiny out of a possessive attachment to their opinions, *no matter how inaccurate they now seem to be*. But there is little reason to doubt that, if asked, the subjects in most motivated-reasoning experiments *would* admit that they subjected personally unfavorable information to more scrutiny than personally favorable information—for example, because they hoped to find evidence that would spare them the need to work with an unpleasant partner or the need to worry about their health. Similarly, other experiments in the motivated-reasoning literature required subjects to interpret ambiguous evidence about the likeability of people with whom they “expected to hold intimate sexual discussions,” or, in other cases,

people with whom they expected to go on a date (Kunda 1990, 486). It does not stretch credulity to believe that most subjects in these situations preferred to work with a nice partner, that they preferred to anticipate a pleasant date, and so on. Thus, they would have a real motive—hope—for interpreting the ambiguous evidence favorably. That such preferences would exist, and that they would lead to asymmetrically close scrutiny of unpleasant but ambiguous evidence, indicates neither irrationality nor dogmatism.

Abelson, however, is positing an irrational preference *for dogmatism*: regardless of the accuracy of one's current beliefs in the light of new evidence (and regardless of how favorable these beliefs are to one's personal situation), changing these beliefs is supposed to be painful because an opinion is something that one "owns." Thus, if one were already convinced that one had the undesirable genetic trait posited in Ditto and Lopez's experiment, one should, in Abelson's view, resist abandoning this opinion/possession if evidence against its accuracy came to light. Likewise, if Abelson were right, then there would be a stage of denial and perhaps anger before one reluctantly accepts wonderful but counterattitudinal news, just as there is before one accepts that one has contracted a fatal disease (Kubler-Ross 1969). If, contrary to one's expectations, the object of one's love accepts one's proposal of marriage, one would tend to ignore or dismiss this news rather than welcoming it. Needless to say, Abelson (1986) provides no evidence that any of this is the case. Although the "beliefs-as-possession" view seems plausible at first glance, its absurdity can further be tested by asking oneself whether one has ever found oneself defending a belief (in the privacy of one's own mind—not a belief to which one is publicly committed, and might therefore defend so as to avoid embarrassment) because "it's mine" rather than because "it's [apparently] true."

Evidence against a Dogmatism Motive

The Taber and Lodge study provides evidence against Abelson's view. If, as Abelson would lead us to expect, people were irrationally attached to their policy conclusions, then we should see more counter-arguing of counterattitudinal evidence among the least-informed participants in Taber and Lodge's experiments, since by implication, these participants do not have a large store of supporting evidence on which they can fall

back in order to sustain their treasured conclusions. The slightest evidentiary challenge will threaten their priors, to which they are supposed to feel emotionally linked. Therefore, they should fiercely resist such challenges in comparison to those who have a greater store of evidentiary ammunition for their priors. But Taber and Lodge find that, just as in the survey research on ideology, it is not the relatively ignorant but the relatively well informed who seem to be stubbornly “constrained” by their extant opinions. This pattern, however, is precisely what a cognitivist interpretation of dogmatism would lead us to expect. The accumulation of more prior evidence in favor of an attitude should lead the well informed to resist interpretations of new evidence that, by virtue of the prior evidence, appear to them to be wrong. Indeed, it is unclear, within the motivated-skepticism framework, why those who are the best informed but who *lack* strong priors would display bias against counterattitudinal information. Yet this is one of Taber and Lodge’s findings.

Setting aside one’s level of knowledge, if, as Abelson holds, we are attached to our opinions because they are our possessions, then there should be no difference in biased processing between those with strong priors and those with weak ones. One’s priors are, by definition, one’s “own,” whether one thinks they are highly likely to be accurate or just barely likely to be so. By contrast, if involuntary perceptions of accuracy alone were at work, then *both* one’s store of information and one’s confidence in the accuracy of one’s prior attitude should mediate the strength of one’s dogmatism. Taber and Lodge find that they do.

Moreover, as Ross notes, the very fact that participants bother to counter-argue evidence against their priors is incongruent with the motivated-skepticism analysis of dogmatism. A motivated skeptic about incongruent evidence should simply dismiss it without bothering to counter-argue it.⁷ In this respect, it is unfortunate that Taber and Lodge told their subjects that they would have to explain the political issues they were reading about to other students, since this instruction may have prompted the subjects to explore the arguments against their views rather than simply ignoring these arguments. Had they ignored them, however, it would not necessarily have established the presence of a dogmatism motive. Someone attached to her opinions as possessions might tend to ignore contradictory opinions rather than counter-arguing them, but so might someone who is convinced that her opinions are highly likely to be accurate: in that case, why waste time dealing with

arguments that are highly likely to be wrong? In sum, counter-arguing that is not an artifact of the experimental design would be persuasive evidence *against* a dogmatism motive; but the failure to counter-argue would be inconclusive about whether there is or is not a dogmatism motive.

More definitive evidence against Abelson's hypothesis is found in earlier research. Charles G. Lord, Ross, and Mark R. Lepper published the classic cognitivist treatment of dogmatism in 1979. Lord and his colleagues presented pro- and anti-death penalty subjects with the same descriptions of the findings of two (fictional) studies that, respectively, confirmed and undermined the deterrence effect of the death penalty. Proponents of the death penalty found the first study more persuasive; opponents found the second one more persuasive. After reading a methodological criticism of each study, proponents and opponents split in predictable fashion over the validity of the two studies' designs. The net effect of all subjects' exposure to *the same information* was to make proponents more favorable to the death penalty and opponents more opposed to it, and similarly, their conclusions about the measure's deterrent effect and their evaluations of the validity of the two studies polarized.

The authors interpreted these results as indicating the effect of an ambiguous epistemic situation on accuracy-seeking subjects—not the effect of a non-accuracy motive. A precondition for the observed dogmatic behavior was that the subjects were presented with “mixed or inconclusive evidence of the sort that is bound to arise for most complex social issues, especially where full-fledged experiments yielding decisive and easy-to-generalize results are a rarity”; this type of evidence “will lead to increased polarization rather than to uncertainty and moderation” (Lord et al. 1979, 2099, 2104). Indeed, given these environmental preconditions, the authors write that

there can be no real quarrel with a willingness to infer that studies supporting one's theory-based expectations are more probative than, or methodologically superior to, studies that contradict one's expectations. When an “objective truth” is known or strongly assumed, then studies whose outcomes reflect that truth may reasonably be given greater credence than studies whose outcomes fail to reflect that truth. Hence the physicist would be “biased,” but appropriately so, if a new procedure for evaluating the speed of light were accepted if it gave the “right answer” but rejected if it gave the “wrong answer.” (Ibid., 2106)

The problem, then, was not that the subjects interpreted new evidence “in the light of past knowledge and experience. . . . Rather, their sin lay in their readiness to use evidence already processed in a biased manner to bolster the very theory or belief that initially ‘justified’ the processing bias. In so doing, subjects exposed themselves to the familiar risk of making their hypotheses unfalsifiable—a serious risk in a domain where it is clear that at least one party in a dispute holds a false hypothesis” (ibid., 2107).

This is an eloquent statement of the cognitivist view, but how do we know that non-cognitivist, Abelsonian motivations were not responsible for the subjects’ cognitive “sin”? One reason is that Lord, Lepper, and Ross’s experimental design revealed that subjects “did show a willingness to report a shift in their attitudes in the direction of findings that were contrary to their beliefs, at least until those findings were exposed to methodological scrutiny and possible alternative interpretations” (Lord et al. 1979, 2108). One’s grip on one’s valued “possessions” should not waver according to the strength of the case against their accuracy, lest the dogmatism motive collapse into the accuracy motive.

But the most impressive evidence comes from a followup study conducted by Lord, Lepper, and Elizabeth Preston (1984). In “Considering the Opposite,” these authors tested two possibilities: first, “that the subjects in Lord et al.’s (1979) study were not sufficiently motivated to be honest, accurate, and unbiased”; second, that the subjects had simply failed to consider “that the same methodology” they found questionable in studies that produced counterattitudinal results “might [conceivably] have produced an opposite,” pro-attitudinal conclusion (Lord et al. 1984, 1232–33). Subjects were presented with the same fictional studies and the same methodological critiques of them that had been used in the 1979 research, but this time some of the subjects were instructed to “ask yourself at each step whether you would have made the same high or low evaluations had exactly the same study produced results on the *other* side of the issue.” By contrast, other subjects were simply instructed to be unbiased: “We would like you to be as *objective* and *unbiased* as possible in evaluating the studies you read” (ibid., 1233). The second set of instructions actually produced a slightly greater biasing effect, but the first set of instructions almost completely de-biased (and depolarized) the students’ assimilation of the new evidence. As Lord (1989, 515) later wrote, the failure of the second set of instructions suggested that “putting greater effort into an inappropriate strategy only made matters worse.” By contrast,

the simple strategy of imagining that the same methodology had produced an opposite result, even in the absence of attempts to increase motivation to be fair, proved effective. *It was not motivation to be unbiased that was lacking, but knowledge of an effective reasoning strategy.* Thus even in retrospect a motivational account of any sort (of which a dissonance theory account would be one sort) remains unlikely as an explanation of the Lord et al. 1979 attitude polarization result. (Ibid., emph. added)

Accordingly, it would seem that dogmatism is not an irrationally motivated choice; it is not a choice at all. Rather, people are truly convinced by previously assimilated data and arguments that their priors are sound and therefore worth defending, on grounds of accuracy alone, against new, apparently spurious evidence; and they are ignorant of the concrete possibility that their method of evaluating new evidence employs a double standard. The double standard, and the dogmatic assimilation of new evidence to which it leads, disappear once they are brought to the subjects' attention; prior to that, the subjects were only inadvertently dogmatic because it had not occurred to them to "consider the opposite." Thus, there is no need to posit a motive that would explain their dogmatism, which resulted from nothing more than a mistake in reasoning. Similarly, the ultimate explanation for the erroneous conclusions of those who dogmatically defend what turn out to be inaccurate priors is the fact that when they formed their priors, they were ignorant that the arguments for them were inadequate: this is why they found them persuasive. The spiral of conviction is, in both its genesis and in its outcome, a product of human ignorance: ignorance that one is wrong, and ignorance that one is reasoning circularly.

Motivational Reductionism and Political Science

Abelson and Prentice (1989, 362) present the theory of beliefs as possessions as a solution to the following paradox:

Many individuals develop passionate beliefs about matters that are remote from their personal experience, such as whether sanctions should be used against South Africa, or whether UFOs are real, or whether life begins at conception. Because the common sense function of beliefs is to orient the individual to real world contingencies so as to guide everyday behavior, cases of deep personal involvement with distant causes or conjectures present something of a theoretical puzzle.

The authors' resolution of this alleged puzzle is to embrace the "rebirth of interest in functional theories of attitudes" in psychology that is discussed by Coronel and Kuklinski in the symposium. This movement away from cognitivism posits "that people hold and express certain attitudes and beliefs because doing so meets psychological needs" (*ibid.*, 361).

Abelson and Prentice are strikingly quick to attribute irrationality to those whose behavior differs from their own. Again, at first glance, there is something to this: These people *must know* that their opinions about sanctions against South Africa don't matter—in the same sense in which one vote in a large electorate doesn't matter. Then again, many voters appear not to know that. (And one's beliefs about cognitive psychology or about "beliefs as possessions" don't matter, either. Conversely, in the case of anti-apartheid activists, as opposed to mere voters, their actions, hence their beliefs, may very well matter.) Abelson and Prentice treat their own beliefs about whether it makes sense to hold strong opinions about these things as if they are shared by those who hold those opinions. With this assumed knowledge as a given, it is easy to conclude that those who hold these opinions must be irrational, like those who believe in UFOs. It does not occur to Abelson and Prentice that, just as they have been exposed to information and arguments about various aspects of psychology that "motivate" them to hold certain beliefs about it, those who had heard about apartheid or UFOs might similarly have been moved to hold opinions about them—weak opinions or strong ones, depending on the plausibility of what they had heard. Had Abelson and Prentice engaged in *Verstehen* and treated the beliefs of others as conceivably having had cognitive causes, the dependent variable of their theory of irrationality/rationalization would have vanished.

Similarly, the founding text of the motivated-reasoning paradigm, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, is premised on attributing irrationality to those it attempts to explain. It was as puzzling to Festinger (1957, 5) that somebody would continue to smoke after having "learned that smoking is bad for his health" as that somebody would have strong beliefs about UFOs was puzzling to Abelson and Prentice. According to Festinger, the inconsistency between knowledge of the health risks of smoking and the practice of smoking creates a psychological tension that "motivate[s] the [smoker] to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance. . . . Cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent

condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction” (ibid., 3). In the course of this activity, “attempts are made to rationalize” the inconsistency (ibid., 2). Thus, the smoker might rationalize his smoking by

chang[ing] his “knowledge” about the effects of smoking. This sounds like a peculiar way to put it, but it expresses well what *must* happen. He might simply end up believing that smoking does not have any deleterious effects. (Ibid., 6, *emph. added*)

Festinger is projecting into the mind of the smoker Festinger’s own opinion that smoking is undesirable, *all things considered*—even though the smoker’s stated beliefs and actions indicate a failure to share this opinion.⁸ Given the imputation of Festinger’s opposition to smoking to those he is trying to understand, *any* rationale for continuing to smoke *must* be a mere “rationalization,” even though Festinger elsewhere has the imagination to suggest that the smoker may continue to smoke because “he enjoys smoking so much [that he thinks] it is worth it”; or because he “can’t always avoid every possible dangerous contingency and still live”; or because “perhaps even if he stopped smoking he would put on weight which is equally bad for his health” (ibid., 2). All of these quite reasonable justifications for smoking are transformed by Festinger’s theory into rationalizations, meaning that what is, to Festinger, the clearly normative action, non-smoking, is treated as the default position for any rational person, such that some non-cognitive, or rather pseudo-cognitive, rationalizing process serving emotional needs must account for non-default behavior. A huge body of research proceeded in like manner, but as the cognitivist critiques of the 1970s pointed out, this research may not have shown anything but that the researchers failed to understand the beliefs of those whose behavior was supposed to be explained by cognitive dissonance. Arguably this is true whenever social scientists explain beliefs as rationalizations: the scholars have not grasped whatever it is that might make these beliefs seem reasonable to those who hold them. Psychological reductionism is almost inevitably a confession that the social-scientific enterprise has failed.

Consider, in contrast, the view of Lord, Ross, and Lepper, who were quoted earlier as defending “a willingness to infer that studies supporting one’s theory-based expectations are more probative than, or

methodologically superior to, studies that contradict one's expectations"; or Anderson, Lepper, and Ross (1980, 1046), who point out that

not every particular instance of belief perseverance should be viewed as unreasonable or counter-normative. For example, exposure to even a demonstrably inadequate data set might lead one to appreciate the role of potential causal mechanisms that might have produced such a data set. Or it might lead one to recall or recognize additional evidence that is not subsequently undermined and that had heretofore been given insufficient weight in one's formulation of beliefs. Under such circumstances persistent changes in belief in the direction suggested by ultimately discredited data may be quite appropriate.

This attitude of interpretive charity is essential if *political* psychology is to grasp the beliefs it is trying to explain—and if it is not to degenerate into the invention of irrational forces to explain beliefs that scholars find objectionable or incomprehensible. The better path is to make a genuine effort to comprehend them. This entails investigating the information and theories that shape political beliefs—especially the ones with which one does not agree. Disparaging the views of one's political opponents as irrational is an important phenomenon that political scientists should be able to explain, rather than one they should exemplify due to a simple failure to investigate the ideational sources of beliefs that are, to them, counterattitudinal. An interpretively charitable political science might require, for example, that its practitioners make their first priority immersion in the news media, political magazines, and books read by political actors in their areas of interest. An effort along similar lines surely would have dissolved the mystery of impassioned beliefs that Abelson and Prentice, having failed to decipher, instead ascribed to irrational motives. If any discipline should offer a model, it would be intellectual and cultural history, or the old cultural anthropology of “thick description” (Geertz 1983), not the psychology of motivation.

Motivational Reductionism and Political Theory

The symposium reminds us repeatedly, however, that the effort to convict or absolve political actors of irrationality frequently stems from trying to address the *normative* issues raised by findings such as those of

Taber and Lodge. Perhaps this is a case where the division of scholarly labor is necessary, simply given the size of the task of putting such findings into normative context.

As things stand, the empirical researchers have taken up normative theory at an inappropriate level. If any question of normative *political* theory arises from the prevalence of “motivated skepticism” (or “dogmatism,” or the “biased assimilation of information,” or the asymmetrically early closure of inquiry into one’s own priors compared to extended scrutiny of countervailing information), it is whether these phenomena are likely to lead to unsound policy opinions. As Kruglanski and Boyatzi note, in line with the charitable view taken by Lord, Ross, and their colleagues, there is not necessarily anything wrong with being partial toward, or even dogmatic about, *the truth*. Moreover, even if some normative criterion of individual reaction to new information were available (several symposiasts suggest Bayesian updating), systemic evaluations of democracy or technocracy cannot be derived from such a criterion if we are judging the system by its policy outputs, since—in a cognitively complex environment—any method of inquiry can lead to sound *or* unsound conclusions depending on the data and the theory with which one is working. For example, in *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, Jervis studied the interpretation of evidence that led U.S. intelligence agencies to conclude that Iraq was actively pursuing weapons of mass destruction. He found that the evidence of Iraq’s past pursuit of WMD was so overwhelming that it misleadingly colored analysts’ interpretation of new evidence. Only *faulty reasoning* (or different information) could have avoided this outcome. As Jervis (2010, 149) put it, “incorrect conclusions may be warranted” by the available evidence. Teasing out the normative implications of dogmatism, then, is not as easy as it may seem.

Moreover, if the normative question is whether dogmatism is likely to lead to policy error, any easy answer may inadvertently rest on equating one’s own policy preferences with “the truth.”

Consider two parallels from the history of survey research on public ignorance. In *The Rational Public* (1992), Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro concluded that contrary to the survey research showing public ignorance, the public must have been absorbing adequate information about real-world conditions from the media—because the public reached policy conclusions that Page and Shapiro (1992, 366) found

“sensibl[e].” In short, Page and Shapiro agreed with most of the public’s policy conclusions, and they inferred from this agreement that the public was both “rational” and adequately informed, even though they did not explore the process of information mediation: that is, they did not adduce a mechanism that could plausibly account for the knowledgeability they posited.⁹ Similarly, heuristics researchers in the 1990s pointed out that survey research on public ignorance has no systemic implications if, in real-world contexts, people can use adequate information substitutes (e.g., Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). But they did not explain how real-world heuristics *could* be adequate to understanding a complex society, and critics argued that there was reason to think they probably could not (Somin 1998; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000). Such criticisms, and responses to them, are almost inevitably made on the basis of whether or not one agrees with the policy preferences produced by the public’s heuristics.

The alternative would be to reflect on the nature of the cognitive resources that are systemically available in democratic technocracies, the better to gauge the likelihood that real-world processes of information gathering and processing will generate desirable decisions. To do this, one would have to synthesize a wide array of specialist research on political psychology, public opinion, and public policy, and to reflect on such questions as whether the environment that decision makers are trying to understand is indeed (as I have been assuming) complex, such that the information about it is likely to be ambiguous or misleading. If it is, then good policies might inadvertently flow from invalid reasoning, while bad policies might flow from valid reasoning.

Thus, normative theorists who gave due consideration to the findings of political psychology would have to situate these findings in an extra-individual context, asking questions not about norms of rational belief updating but about the likelihood that tendencies toward the biased assimilation of evidence will, in fact, lead to unsound policy conclusions given the complexity of the problems being addressed, the likely adequacy of the available information, and the reasoning processes and the theories that decision makers use. If, in a given case, decision makers are dogmatically assimilating evidence confirming sound, experimentally tested theories, it would pose no more of a normative problem for technocracy than it would in physics, to use Lord, Ross, and Lepper’s

example. If, on the other hand, there is reason to think that in politics, experimental evidence will be scant or relatively unilluminating, then dogmatic biases may not just favor, but may help to preserve, inaccurate interpretations of reality grounded in little but one's graduate training. In turn, however, if the biases are "motivated," then as Druckman's contribution to the symposium notes, incentives might be established that would counteract the motive (cf. Tetlock 1983; Tetlock 1989; Lerner and Tetlock 1999; Tetlock and Anastasopoulos 2011). If, by contrast, the biases are inadvertent, then "considering the opposite" might be a corrective—contrary to the dire portrait of technocracy I painted in opening this essay. Whether either of these correctives would be likely to work in the real world, however, depends not only on a systemically applicable definition of what would count as "working," but on the extent to which actual political conditions differ from laboratory conditions.

Thus, the normative issues cannot be reduced to whether undergraduates in laboratory settings are "rational," nor to whether they *try* to reach accurate conclusions. At first glance, dogmatism is undesirable, *ceteris paribus*—just as more information is better, *ceteris paribus*. But more information may be worse if it contributes to the dogmatic defense of an inaccurate position, and dogmatism may be beneficial if it sustains an accurate position against a tide of misleading arguments. Perhaps the best way to view the motivated-skepticism paradigm (based on the idea of beliefs as possessions), then, is as a normative shortcut: an inadequate heuristic for what might be produced if political psychology were better integrated with political science in general and political theory in particular. The normative questions raised by political dogmatism are as complex as the society a democratic technocracy attempts to improve. We cannot just assume that if only political decision makers would be brave enough to let go of their preconceptions, they would know which decisions to make.

NOTES

1. See our special issue on Converse's "Nature of Belief Systems": volume 18, nos. 1–3 (2006).
2. E.g., Brennan 2011; Beerbohm 2012; Caplan 2006; Oppenheimer and Edwards 2011.

3. This is one interpretation of Tetlock's (2005) finding that experts with broad theories made worse predictions than those who were more theoretically eclectic. Since raw empiricism is not an option in a world of unlimited information, however, attempts to be eclectic, like attempts to be open minded, are unlikely to be of much help in combating spirals of conviction.
4. A slightly different, but no-less-disturbing, possibility is highlighted by Anderson et al.'s 1980 paper on "Perseverence of Social Theories," which demonstrates that when subjects are prompted to give a theoretical explanation of scant data, the explanation perseveres even after the subjects are informed that the initial data were fabricated. The very act of explaining the world seems to lock in the explanation to some extent, regardless of the evidence favoring the explanation.
5. The same incoherent voluntarism marks Caplan 2006, which attempts to show that voters who are ignorant of, or who disagree with, economists' policy conclusions are irrationally suppressing knowledge that "falls into their laps" by virtue of participating in a market economy, since this knowledge supposedly leads to emotionally unsatisfying policy conclusions. See Bennett and Friedman 2008 for a critique.
6. It would be *delusional* wishful thinking if it were not constrained by perceptions of reality, but all the evidence suggests that it is thus constrained.
7. Ross also points out that it is possible that the greater amount of time that participants devoted to reading counterattitudinal arguments was due to unfamiliarity with them. It is also possible that participants found counterattitudinal arguments difficult to grasp at first; this would be suggested by Lippmann's theory that stereotypes help to make pro-attitudinal evidence legible. The only evidence that the time was spent counter-arguing counterattitudinal evidence rather than understanding it is that the thoughts reported by participants during these periods tended to be denigrating of the new evidence. But this does not preclude the possibility that the time spent reading incongruent arguments was required, in part, by the difficulty people had in getting their minds around unfamiliar points of view.
8. Similarly, economists project into the minds of "rational" agents precisely the knowledge and reasoning skills the economists think that they need if they are to make optimal decisions (Simon 1985, 294).
9. Later, however, Shapiro (with Yaeli Bloch-Elkon) pointed a way out of this conundrum by noticing that partisans disagreed with each other about matters of fact, such as whether WMD were discovered in Iraq following the 2003 invasion. This disagreement indicated either that the media were not delivering adequate information or that partisans were not processing it adequately. As soon as one recognizes the contested (and therefore contestable) nature of "the facts" relevant to political opinions, one moves beyond facile attributions of rationality and knowledgeability to those whose picture of the facts is similar to one's own—or irrationality and ignorance to those whose picture is different from one's own. If concepts such as irrationality and ignorance are to have any usefulness in the study of politics, they have to be general possibilities whose applicability to a specific case is established a posteriori, not assumed a priori.

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