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A Journal of Social Epistemology

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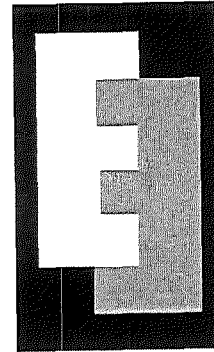
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# EPISTEME

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RATIONAL FUNDAMENTALISM?  
AN EXPLANATORY MODEL OF FUNDAMENTALIST BELIEFS<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT

The article sketches a theoretical model which explains how it is possible that fundamentalist beliefs can emerge as a result of an individual rational adaptation to the context of special living conditions. The model is based on the insight that most of our knowledge is acquired by trusting the testimony of some kind of authority. If a social group is characterized by a high degree of mistrust towards the outer society or other groups, then the members of this group will rely solely on the authorities of their own group for their acquisition of knowledge. In this way they can adopt a corpus of beliefs which may seem absurd from an external point of view. However, they may be locked in a “fundamentalist equilibrium” in which particularistic trust, common sense plausibility, epistemic seclusion, social isolation and fundamentalist beliefs are mutually reinforcing – and in which individuals who adopt the “fundamentalist truths” of their group do not behave more irrationally than individuals in an open society who accept the “enlightened” worldview of *their* culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ideology of fundamentalist groups seems to be based on simplified, naive and sometimes bizarre beliefs about the natural, social and super-natural world. These views are often explicitly justified with reference to “salvation goods” and otherworldly remunerations which entail that their followers renounce worldly interests and mundane happiness. They believe in global conspiracies and unremitting hostilities. “Passions” rather than “reason” seem to guide actors who preach and obey such principles. However, it is both theoretically and practically wise not to abandon the assumption of rationality too quickly. Theoretically we may get wrong explanations if we attribute the belief in fundamentalist ideas to frantic passions or a fixation on absurd ideas – when they may in fact emerge as a result of individual rational adaptation to the context of special living conditions. Practically, we may choose the wrong strategies in dealing with people who believe in fundamentalist ideas when we treat them as barbarians, maniacs or helpless victims of brainwashing and manipulation – when in fact we could influence them by the same kind of measures and factors as people who, for example, believe in the truth of Christianity or modern science.

I want, therefore, to try and sketch in the following a theoretical model which “ideal-typically” exemplifies empirical conditions under which the adoption of

fundamentalist beliefs can be rationally explained. The focus is on the ordinary members of a group who accept the views of their authorities and leaders – not on the authorities and leaders themselves. The model is ideal-typical because I do not want to claim *a priori* that, in fact, all fundamentalist convictions can be rationally explained. The model tries to exemplify the main conditions under which such an explanation would be possible. If we apply this model, we have to look at whether in a concrete empirical case its conditions are actually fulfilled and to what degree we have to consider irrational influences. This is the method which Max Weber recommends.

For my project, I utilize the insights of social epistemology (Coady, C. A. J. 1992) and an economic theory of knowledge developed by Russell Hardin (1997, 2007). One of the main theses of these theories states that almost all of our knowledge is acquired, not by our own autonomous exploration, but by relying on information from others. Thus it follows that the quality of our beliefs is not dependent on the quality of our individual insight but on the quality of collective knowledge acquisition. Whether individual rationality results in true beliefs is to a large extent dependent on external conditions which are beyond the control of any single individual. Therefore, under certain conditions, people can adopt a corpus of beliefs which may seem absurd from an external point of view – but under which individuals who believe in “fundamentalist truths” do not behave more irrationally than individuals in our society who believe in the truth of science or the value of democracy. We have to recognize that fundamentalist views can be accepted and believed in the same way as other convictions are accepted and believed.

To make my thesis plausible I will use as a basis the analysis of an example which represents in some way the other extreme of fundamentalist convictions: the belief in the truth of modern science.

2. FAITH IN SCIENCE

2.1 Epistemic Trust

Our knowledge of the world is largely dependent on testimony. In a modern world with a high degree of division of cognitive labour we are especially dependent on the testimony of experts and specialists whose qualifications and competence cannot directly be judged by us as laypersons (Hardwig 1985). One can indeed call it a “paradox of knowledge” that the more we know collectively the less we know as individuals.

However, believing in testimony must not be “blind”. It can be rationally justified from the point of view of the recipient. But the criteria for “rational justification” cannot be taken from philosophical epistemology and its highly developed standards for “justified true beliefs”. They have to be developed on the basis of a pragmatic “street-level epistemology” (Hardin 1992) which tries to explain how ordinary people acquire their personal knowledge. In this context the term “rational justification” has a strictly *subjective* meaning. A person may be subjectively rationally justified in believing something, even though it is not an objectively rational thing to believe (Lehrer 1994).

In its most general form, the basic strategic structure of knowledge transfer between a recipient and an informant can be characterized as a “trust-problem” (Lahno 2002, 25ff., Hardwig 1991, Govier 1997, 51ff.). A trust-problem is embodied in situations in which one person, the “truster”, makes himself vulnerable to another person, the “trustee”, by an act of “trust-giving”. Situations with trust-problems are universal and significant elements of human co-operation and coordination and their structure is responsible for the fundamental dilemma of social order (Coleman 1990, 175ff.).

It can be rationally justified for recipients to believe in the truth of information which they cannot verify themselves only if it is rationally justified for them to believe in the trustworthiness of the informant. An interplay among at least three sets of factors and conditions is crucial in this respect:

1. *Competence*: reliable and useful information from informants is dependent on their appropriate cognitive and intellectual abilities as well as on their external resources to identify the truth in the relevant area.

2. *Extrinsic incentives*: benefits and costs, rewards and sanctions, recognition and contempt can motivate informants to exhaust their cognitive potential and utilize their resources to discover reliable information and transmit their knowledge to recipients. Extrinsic incentives can also tempt informants to behave opportunistically, to underachieve, to misuse their resources and to manipulate and deceive recipients with wrong, misleading or useless information.

3. *Intrinsic incentives*: emotional bonds of solidarity, sympathy and benevolence, the internalisation of common social values and norms, moral virtues and personal integrity can motivate informants to transmit valuable knowledge and reliable information to a recipient. Emotional aversion and hatred, the internalisation of deviant values and norms, moral vices and malignance are potential reasons to deceive and cheat a recipient and to give false and deceptive testimony.

The complexities in situations of information-transfer vary greatly. To judge the reliability and sincerity of information about the time of day does not require deep insight into the special competences, incentives or motivations of the informant (Fricker, E. 1994). But whatever possibilities are available for recipients, it cannot be a rational strategy for them to scrutinize thoroughly each case of information-transfer individually. The decision costs of such a case-by-case evaluation would be prohibitive (Thagard 2005). The only rational strategy to deal with testimony seems to be in most cases to apply appropriate *heuristic rules* which tell us which sources we can normally trust in a given context and which we cannot.

Heuristic rules have the character of default rules which prescribe certain behaviour as long as no exceptional conditions obtain. That does not simply mean that people usually tend to accept testimony by default. It means that people usually accept testimony by the *default criteria* of heuristic rules – where the default criteria themselves can be very specific and context-differentiated. A general “trusting behaviour” cannot be a sensible attitude for *all occasions* when we are dependent on

testimony. Obviously there are contexts in which the only prudent strategy is to be highly selective in “trust-giving”.

My starting point is testimony from scientific experts and academic authorities. In this case not only is the “normal” information-asymmetry between recipients and informants present, but also a competence-asymmetry between experts and laypersons which poses more serious problems for the recipients than a pure information-asymmetry.

## 2.2 *Trust in Scientific Authority*

In all modern societies a variety of heuristic rules are employed to identify trustworthy scientific experts and academic authorities. The core criteria of these rules refer to the officially licensed indicators of scientific competence and academic expertise like certifications from approved educational institutions or employment in professional institutions (Fricker, M. 1998, Manor 1995). These rules tell us not only to believe that the experts in our society are competent and able but also to believe that, provided normal conditions apply, they are acting according to appropriate extrinsic and intrinsic incentives.

But how can ordinary people and laypersons judge the quality of the prevailing heuristic rules in identifying experts and authorities whose special competences and arcane knowledge they will never be able to fully understand and judge? It is helpful here to use the distinction between *esoteric* and *exoteric* statements made by Alvin Goldman (2001, 94ff.). Esoteric statements belong to the sphere of expertise which is opaque for laypersons and which they therefore cannot evaluate. Exoteric statements are statements which are comprehensible for laypersons and whose truth-value and coherence with each other they can judge (Coady, D. 2006a). Scientific disciplines with a direct connection to technology, like physics, chemistry or medicine, produce many exoteric statements which can be verified or falsified by almost everyone: the claim that airplanes fly, cars drive, computers calculate or tablets cure are checked in the everyday practice by the countless uses and applications of the devices and tools of a technology and science based society.

The overwhelming validation of the exoteric statements and the successful practical performance of scientific experts as well as their agreement in essential questions does not only produce positive evidence that modern science endows its experts with special epistemic competence. It also provides positive evidence that the large majority of scientific experts also fulfil the other necessary requirements for being trustworthy and reliable authorities. If airplanes fly, generating plants produce power, technological systems function properly, and ill persons are cured, then it can hardly be true that the experts behind those achievements are all opportunistically delivering inferior products, that institutional incentives in the system of social knowledge production and implementation all work in the wrong direction or that the majority of experts and scientists are ill willed and vicious people lacking any personal integrity.

Of course, laypersons do not scrutinize the exoteric statements of science and its

technological performance themselves by means of scientific methods. Science and its achievements are tested by common sense understanding. But to base decisions and convictions on common sense is neither wrong nor irrational if that is all we can have at reasonable costs. That does not mean that evidence which underlies common sense plausibility must be weak – in fact, it can be very strong, as in the case of modern science and technology.

Up to now I have spoken of laypersons as of a collective actor who is uniformly evaluating the achievements of science and technology on the basis of a vast collective experience. But this would be an unduly holistic perspective. Even if we presuppose that laypersons can *in principle* judge the epistemic quality of modern science, it does not follow that *individual* laypersons *alone* on the basis of their personal experience can do this. Their individual experiences are much too limited to justify a general judgement about science and scientists: the fundamental dependence on testimony is therefore *iterated*. What then is the basis for a rationally justified trust in other laypersons as testifiers in this area?

### 2.3 Social Trust

If we look at the social facts in this case too, we likewise can uncover a number of heuristic rules which incorporate criteria to distinguish those of our ordinary fellow citizens we should trust with regard to certain issues from those we should mistrust – these rules are highly context-dependent and cover a wide range of areas (Fricker, E. 1994, 139). The criteria of these rules are not as specific and clear-cut as in the case of the criteria for scientific expertise. The reason is that they are informal, socially evolved criteria.

If we examine the heuristic rules which guide us in our evaluation of testimony about the performance of science and scientists, then we notice that they attribute epistemic trustworthiness in a highly *generalized* form. That means that these rules resemble rules which entail the presumption of epistemic trustworthiness as a true default position – according to these rules a recipient should assume that an informant conveys the truth unless there are special circumstances which defeat this presumption. We can say that a heuristic rule which in a highly generalized manner ascribes epistemic trustworthiness to ordinary persons creates a *generalized social trust* at least in regard to certain topics and areas. Generalized social trust in the epistemic sense enables people to utilise a huge reservoir of collective knowledge at a low cost.

It is indeed a contingent empirical fact that people living in modern societies under normal conditions could be trusted as testifiers with respect to the successes and failures of science and technology. Normally everyone has epistemic competence in regard to this topic and neither extrinsic nor intrinsic incentives to withhold the truth from others. Furthermore, in modern societies trust in experts is not only based on everyday experience and the occasional testimony by our ordinary fellow citizens. A major role is played by the professional media. Advanced societies develop specialized institutions of communication which create particular incentives for their members

to systematically collect and distribute information and knowledge – including information about science and technology, how they work and perform, and about their successes and failures. In a society with a high level of social trust the media will often be included in the scope of this trust.

But this is not the end of the story. We are again confronted with an iteration of our problem: the heuristics of social trust embody a kind of knowledge which is hardly at the disposal of one individual alone. It is based on generalizations which can only make some sense if the data basis is not too small. As single individuals we cannot acquire sufficient information about the average competence of the members of our society, the incentives they face in different social contexts and situations and the motivations and attitudes they normally possess. To form a reasoned opinion about whether I am justified in trusting most of my fellow citizens or the media in my society I have to know relevant facts about the institutions and the social structure of my community, the ethnic and political composition of the population, possible conflicts between the values and interests of different sub-groups and much more.

### 2.4 Personal Trust

So far we have seen that people are not only irreducibly dependent on testimony to learn things about the world at large, but also seem to be unavoidably dependent on testimony if they want to know which testifiers they can trust and which not: I need the knowledge of other people to assess the trustworthiness of experts, but I am not able to judge the trustworthiness of these other people either without the help of further testifiers. If an infinite regress is to be prevented, the choice of trustworthy testifiers cannot be guided by the advice of other people in *all* cases (Mackie 1971).

At the beginning I said that it would be not rational to decide on a case-by-case basis in each and every instance whether to trust a source or not. But this does not exclude the possibility that there *are* situations in which I can and should base my trust on such an individual evaluation – we can characterize these cases as instances of *personal trust*. The best chances to create this kind of personal trust exist in the context of ongoing and close relationships which are producing a lot of information about other persons. But even if there is no direct relationship with a person but otherwise a regular or intensive flow of information and impressions, I may be in a position to make good guesses at the abilities, the situation and the character of that person. We also have a certain ability to intuitively judge trustworthiness and personal integrity – at least up to a certain degree (Frank 1992, Baurmann 1996, 65ff.).

The more individuals I trust personally, the broader the potential reservoir of independent information and knowledge from which I can draw to judge the validity of social rules and criteria for the credibility and trustworthiness of people, institutions and authorities. This judgement would also involve reference to testimony to a large extent – but it is testimony from sources whose quality I can evaluate myself. Therefore, I can ascribe a high “trust-value” to the testified information.

I will also be inclined to ascribe a high trust-value to information which stems

from sources whose trustworthiness is not approved by myself, but by the testimony of people I personally trust. In this way it is possible to profit from a more or less widespread network of personal trust relations which is linked together by people who trust each other personally and thus simultaneously function as mutual trust-intermediaries (Coleman 1990, 180ff.). Such trust-networks pool information and knowledge and make them available for the individual at low costs or even for free. Thus they represent important instances of “social capital” (Baurmann 2007, Baurmann and Zintl 2006).

The efficiency of personal trust-networks as information pools is enhanced if they transgress the borders of families, groups, communities, classes, nations or races. The more widespread and the larger the scope of trust networks, the more diverse and detailed the information they aggregate. The possibility of individuals getting from their trust-networks the quality and quantity of information they need to form a realistic and balanced picture of their world is, therefore, largely dependent on the coverage their trust-networks provide.

Trust-networks can remain latent and silent about the established social criteria for epistemic credibility and authority for a long period. Their special importance becomes evident when, for example, under a despotic regime a general mistrust towards all official information prevails. But personal trust-networks also provide fall-back resources in well-ordered societies with usually highly generalized trust in the socially and formally certified epistemic sources. Under normal circumstances in our societies we consult books, read newspapers, listen to the news and pay attention to our experts and authorities if we want to learn something about the world. And even when we develop mistrust in some of our authorities or institutions, we normally do so because we hear suspicious facts from other authorities or institutions. Nevertheless, the ultimate touchstone of my belief in testimony can only be my own judgement. And it makes a great difference whether I can base this judgement only on my own very limited personal information or if I can fall back on the information pool of a widely spread network which is independent of socially predetermined criteria for epistemic credibility and authority.

### 2.5 Collective and Individual Epistemic Rationality

If I summarize my analysis of how trust in scientific experts and authority in our society is created, stabilized and rationally justified from the perspective of an ordinary citizen and layperson, a *prima facie* satisfying picture emerges. The institutions of scientific research, education and technological application provide criteria for scientific expertise and know-how. These criteria are incorporated in heuristic rules which serve laypersons as tools for the identification of scientific authority and technological expertise. Science and technology produce a stunning output of successful applications which can be judged by common sense wisdom and everyday experience. The individual gets information about these successes from his own personal experience and from the converging testimony of other laypersons and the

professional media. Belief in the truth of this information is embedded in a highly generalized social trust which can, in turn, utilize a large number of informal channels of information and communication. Ultimately the trust of the recipients of scientific knowledge is supported by the confirmation of their personal trust-networks which are typically widespread and inclusive in an open and democratic society. So, even if we have only common sense plausibility at our disposal, our conviction that, all in all, scientific experts and authorities are truly competent and trustworthy seems to be fully justified, in the pragmatic meaning of the term, and far from revealing “blind trust” or gullibility.

But my aim was not to show how “objective” and “subjective” rationality work together in perfect harmony. If, in the case of modern science, subjective rationality coincides with objective rationality, it is not because the individuals behave rationally but because the rationality of social knowledge is produced collectively. In an open and liberal society with a highly competitive system of science, “absurd” and questionable claims by experts and authorities are contradicted by dissenting experts and authorities, scientific hypotheses and theories are systematically contested and scrutinized, the achievements and failures of science and technology as well as the controversies between scientists are checked and reported by independent and professional media and also by many different kinds of ordinary people. All this information influences the convictions and opinions of individuals and prevents them from trusting charlatans and false prophets and believing one-sided and selective worldviews. But the fact that individuals live in an environment which provides them with these kinds of institutions and information is not an outcome of their individually rational strategies of knowledge acquisition. The opposite is true: the outcome of their individually rational strategies of knowledge acquisition is dependent on the “epistemic environment” in which the individuals live and seek orientation.

In the following section I want to show that the same mechanisms which in the case of modern science and an open society lead to the rational acceptance of an objectively superior system of knowledge will, under different conditions, lead to the rational acceptance of an objectively *inferior* and epistemically *deficient* system.

## 3. FAITH IN FUNDAMENTALISM

### 3.1 What is Fundamentalism?

I understand by “fundamentalism” belief-systems which display at least the following three attributes:

1. They propagate the supreme value of *salvation goods* over *worldly goods*: thus for the ultimate fulfilment of human existence it is important to overcome the obsession with mundane happiness and material utility and to strive instead for eternal redemption and ends which are more valuable than profane satisfaction in the life here and now. Salvation goods may not necessarily be religious: to realize the mission of world history, the welfare of mankind or cosmic destiny can also gain supreme value in the sense of gaining lexicographic superiority over worldly aims (Bernholz 2006).

2. Fundamentalists claim that their view is *certain* and that there is no room for *doubt*: an essential part of their thinking is their conviction of the absolute truth and infallibility of their *Weltanschauung* and that critique or discussion of their views is superfluous and a sign of misunderstanding or personal weakness. The truth is guaranteed by superior comprehension and higher forms of knowledge, disclosed by divine revelation and holy scriptures, irrefutable theories or charismatic enlightenment.

3. Fundamentalism includes *Manichaeism* and *intolerance*: the world is clearly divided into the good and the evil and there is a huge difference between them – good persons are *much* better than the evil ones and the good have to be constantly on the lookout for the conspiracies of the evil. Consequently, there is no room for tolerance because the evil are too evil to be tolerated. That does not necessarily mean that they must be killed or suppressed by violent means – although there may be no strong reasons against such an idea. But it could also mean avoiding contact and strictly isolating the good from the evil.

Such convictions are objectively unjustified and irrational from a scientific and enlightened perspective. Nowadays they must be upheld in a world in which alternative views are present which have undergone a long process of examination, revision and refinement and which are advanced by authorities whose epistemic qualifications have been proved in a fierce competition with rivals and are open to public assessment and scrutiny. So, how is it possible that belief in the truth of fundamentalist views and in the epistemic trustworthiness of its proponents can be rationally justified at all?

I will argue that this is possible if four conditions are fulfilled: if people can only develop a particularistic social trust, if they live in epistemic seclusion and social isolation and if the fundamentalist views have common sense plausibility. Under these conditions people can be locked in a “fundamentalist equilibrium” in which an acceptance of “fundamentalist truths” is no less rationally justified from a subjective point of view than the belief of individuals in our society in science and technology as the most advanced manifestations of truth and intellectual progress.

### 3.2 Particularistic Trust

Individuals adhere to a particularistic trust if they only trust members of a clearly demarcated group and generally mistrust members of all other groups. Particularistic trust is supported by heuristic rules which are the exact mirror image of those heuristic rules which embody a generalized trust: while rules of generalized trust state that one should *trust* everybody unless exceptional circumstances obtain, rules which constitute a particularistic trust state that one should *mistrust* everybody with the exception of some specified cases.

Particularistic trust can emerge in a group and become consolidated if this group has alienated, conflict-ridden or hostile relationships to other groups. In such a situation I am likely to have good reasons to distrust members of the other groups; they are likely

to have strong incentives to act against my interests and the interests of my group and to fight, cheat and deceive us systematically. In such circumstances there is no basis for personal commitment, benevolence or sympathy, no common social embeddedness in shared values and norms. Instead of benevolence or sympathy, malevolence, antipathy or hatred may thrive; instead of common values and norms, conflicting values and norms and hostility may prosper. Such constellations do not only emerge in situations which are shaped by deep conflicts. If I am member of a cultural sub-group with a provocatively deviant life-style, I will also experience the fact that benevolence and sympathy towards me will be limited, that the basis of common values and norms may be very thin.

In situations which give rise to particularistic trust, my personal trust-network will quite naturally be strictly limited by the confines of my group – not because of my prejudices, but because of the factual conditions. I will observe that only members of my own group are embedded in a sufficiently similar social environment and that only they exhibit the kind of personal commitment which creates a foundation for personal trust-relations. There will be no opportunity to establish such relations with the members of other groups if there is in fact no real basis for trust and confidence. And I do not need to have extraordinary social competence and cultural empathy to recognize that I better not trust my enemy on the battlefield, the agents of an occupying force or public prosecutors who condemn my group, its values and life-style.

In such circumstances my personal experience will be strongly confirmed by the experience and testimony of the members and trust-intermediaries of my trust-network. Our collective knowledge will validate the rule in our society which states that our social trust should be strictly confined to members of our own group. My only reliable sources of information will be the individuals who are within the scope of my personal and social trust – and they will belong exclusively to my particular group.

### 3.3 Common Sense Plausibility

It is not irrational or unreasonable *per se* to trust in the superior competence of authorities and experts even in ideological matters such as religion, politics or ethics. The crucial point here, as in the case of scientific experts, is the question of how ordinary people can assess the trustworthiness and reliability of epistemic authorities, when they lack the special competence which these authorities claim to have. In regard to the assessment of competence in ideological matters, an additional restriction applies: although experts in religious matters, for example, do produce exoteric statements which can be understood by laypersons – there is an afterlife, the kingdom of Christ will come, God is almighty – there is no reliable and unambiguous method to test statements of this kind and there is no easy way to judge the rightness or wrongness of such claims on the basis of everyday experiences and common sense wisdom. They are not exoteric statements that can be easily refuted or confirmed by reference to hard facts.

But although the evidence for and against the competence and trustworthiness

of experts in ideology and faith is considerably weaker than in the case of scientists and engineers, it is not negligible and can also provide a basis for a reasonable and pragmatically sound judgement. Ideologies produce many exoteric statements which, as I said, are understandable with common sense even if there is no simple way to verify or falsify them. This is also true of fundamentalist views: it is not hard to understand that you should value salvation-goods higher than worldly goods, that something is claimed as irrefutable and that the world is divided into good and evil – but the validity of these statements is not a simple matter of fact, and ordinary people usually will not have the ability, the knowledge, or the resources to examine their truth and the framework of background assumptions thoroughly. However, that does not mean that they have to abstain from judging the common sense plausibility of fundamentalist views or their pragmatic usefulness and practical relevance.

From this perspective the proclamation of the supreme value of salvation goods over worldly goods will have a chance to impress people and to correspond to their experience if they actually live in a “vale of tears”, in a desperate social, political or economic situation which offers no realistic hope for the future and for a better or decent life. Under such conditions, the propagation of salvation goods instead of unachievable material goods, the promise of redemption from all worldly hardship, the prospect of a better existence in the afterlife or the personal fulfilment in the service of unchangeable laws of history may be welcomed and appear plausible as an alternative to a miserable reality and its inescapability and hopelessness – at least a bet on their truth may seem better than a bet on an improvement of actual living conditions. But a higher ranking of salvation goods in relation to worldly goods may not only appear plausible against a backdrop of bleak misery. It could also be convincing in a situation of “relative deprivation” in which a group of people find themselves constantly excluded from important and valuable goods and positions, or even in a situation in which people are personally disgusted by the “shallowness” and “emptiness” of a culture of materialism and consumerism.

The claimed certainty and infallibility of fundamentalist views and principles will appear as important and desirable if people see themselves in a situation in which action is of urgent necessity and crucial decisions have to be taken: whether to begin a war or an insurrection, how to react in face of suppression or attack, whether to launch terrorist assaults or whether to withdraw completely from normal life. In situations like these the stakes are high, and uncertainty and fickleness are hard to accept. The offer of certainty and security is an attractive option in such circumstances. However, the attraction of fundamentalist views is not only a product of dramatic or extreme conditions. Due to personal idiosyncrasies, people in a peaceful and well-ordered society can also experience the costs of everyday decisions on the basis of refutable assumptions and preliminary knowledge as being unbearably high. They may develop strong incentives to look for and adopt “better”, less insecure and less sceptical worldviews.

Last but not least, the Manichaeism of fundamentalist positions, the lack of tolerance for people who think and act differently will be more plausible the more

one is surrounded by conflict and war, hostility and hatred. If I am entrenched in a fierce struggle with another group and the fight is a matter of life and death, then there is no room for tolerance, and the view that either the good or the evil will prevail seems to be the only way to see things realistically. Under such conditions the belief in conspiracy theories could be subjectively as well as objectively justified (Coady, D. 2006b). Even moderately antagonistic relations can add to the plausibility of the Manichaeism classification of the world. Even without hostile acts and open aggression, the fact of irreconcilable life-styles, emotional aversion, and deep gaps between the values and norms of groups, feed the conviction that there must be an essential difference between people with the right attitude and people with the wrong attitude towards the world.

If all supporting conditions are fulfilled, the common sense plausibility of fundamentalist views seems to be no weaker than – under more favourable circumstances – a crude materialist position which postulates worldly goods and pleasures as the exclusive values of life, and which takes a thoroughly relativist or nihilist stance in regard to all convictions, and is ready to accept and tolerate everything and everyone.

### 3.4 *Epistemic Seclusion*

In an open and plural society with free competition between ideas and worldviews, formal and informal institutions for the systematic distribution of these ideas and views, and a scientific production of knowledge, fundamentalist beliefs will not remain unchallenged but will be confronted with alternative positions and views. The individual in such a society will get a lot of information and criticism by happenstance and on the cheap without investing many personal resources. Many bits of this information will conflict with a fundamentalist worldview and can create doubts, whether the individual believer welcomes these doubts or not.

Therefore, faith in the epistemic authority of fundamentalist preachers will be more steadfast if alternative views and information from other sources will not come to the attention of their followers. An effective device to prevent such threats to fundamentalist ideologies is to keep a group as much as possible under “epistemic seclusion”. Epistemic seclusion describes a situation in which individuals are systematically restricted in their options of getting acquainted with dissenting views and opinions and are limited to a flow of information which uniformly supports a selective point of view (Breton and Dalmazzone 2002).

The first – and most important – step to achieve epistemic seclusion is to prevent inner-group competition between different worldviews from occurring. The socially enforced criteria for epistemic authority must single out only one kind of credible source of ideological instruction, and alternative sources should be altogether absent. A free market of ideas must be prevented. This could be achieved by simple measures of information control, such as closing channels for information and communication. This may not necessarily happen by force or fraud. It will be sufficient if it is simply too costly to get this kind of information by individual effort.



If particularistic trust prevails, a further step into epistemic seclusion is taken unintentionally and unavoidably by the members of a group themselves: under this condition their personal trust-networks will only include members of their own group. Given the important function of trust-networks as ultimate sources of reliable information and testimony, this restriction has serious consequences. The aggregated collective knowledge on which people could base their judgement both of the trustworthiness of fellow citizens outside their networks and of the competence and credibility of the authorities in their group will be severely limited.

A further mechanism to fortify the epistemic seclusion of a group is to establish norms by which those who develop dissident views are excluded from the group (Hardin 2002). Dissenters and less committed members of a group will depart and the epistemic homogeneity of a group will be reinforced and secured among the remaining faithful. The exodus of the weak leaves the steadfast in control.

However, it is possible to consolidate the faith of individuals in the truth of their particular beliefs even when they know that others generally believe differently. Epistemic seclusion can also work by constant reinforcement. Such “indoctrination” need not refer to a strategy of “brainwashing” or otherwise thumping beliefs into people by overriding their ability to reason. Indoctrination could very well address the rationality of people if it consists of a continuous and systematic supply of consistent information and explanation which exclusively support a certain view. For individuals who are confronted with a self-contained *Weltanschauung* which is, so to speak, constantly updated and systematically defended against external critique and attacks, it is not irrational for them to be influenced in their beliefs by such an “information policy”.

Finally, “monks and martyrs” play an essential role in corroborating fundamentalist views. Fundamentalist views are extreme views and are seen by outsiders as absurd and bizarre – a fact that is known by many followers of fundamentalist ideas themselves. Therefore, it is important for internal reassurance that inside the group of followers the power of their views and the sincerity of their belief is demonstrated and confirmed as impressively as possible. Fundamentalists proclaim the supreme value of salvation goods over worldly goods and the infallibility of their credo. What could be a better proof of these convictions than people who as “monks” or “martyrs” demonstrate convincingly that they do indeed reject worldly happiness and material satisfaction and instead choose the promise of eternal redemption in the afterlife? Their sincerity and the power of their beliefs seem to be beyond doubt.

The fact that people live and act in a situation of epistemic seclusion is something which they may or may not recognize. But even if they are conscious of their epistemological constraints, they may individually have no incentives to overcome them and to gather new information by their own efforts. The costs of doing so may appear much larger than the gains they can expect from enlarging their individual knowledge pool, especially when they cannot estimate beforehand whether the new information will have any value for their personal situation and life prospects.

### 3.5 Social Isolation

In an open and inclusive society I can obtain information which may consolidate or shake my general convictions about the world, but I also come into contact with a lot of people who may consolidate or shake my convictions especially about other human beings. I may learn that the rules I once adopted about whom I should trust and whom I should mistrust do not accord with my experience of other people any longer.

But social contacts might not only contribute to correcting wrong perceptions of the world and other people and to preventing epistemic seclusion. They also open up the chance of hostility and conflict, ingrained antipathy, and mutual hatred being overcome by cooperation and social exchange. Social contacts can create cooperative bonds, reciprocal commitment and elementary trust and can help trigger positive feelings and generate common interests – and thus thwart essential elements of a fundamentalist view of the world.

Because of this potential of social contact and exchange a decisively helpful instrument for the stabilization of fundamentalist views is the social isolation of the group of believers. This isolation can be a result of outside as well as inside forces. If there are already antagonistic and hostile relations to other groups, a certain degree of social isolation will already be existent. It will of its own accord lead to a restriction in the scope of social trust and to exclusive personal trust-relations which reserve social contacts of a certain intensity to other members of the same group.

Social isolation can be effectively consolidated if a social group offers its members an “all-inclusive package” which covers more or less completely all needs and interests from the cradle to the grave. If kindergartens, schools, universities, hospitals, employment possibilities, sports clubs, social associations, newspapers, television programs, nursing homes, social welfare and cemeteries are all supplied by the social group itself – and may be even of a better quality than the external alternatives – then there is no necessity for the members of a community to leave the context of their own group if they want to enjoy such facilities and institutions.

For individual members of a group with a high degree of social isolation and an efficient internal supply of social benefits, the exit-costs will easily become prohibitive and exit could even become factually impossible. On the one hand there will be the security and the amenities of their own group and the feelings of solidarity, social embeddedness and commitment. On the other hand there is the threat of contempt and hostility from the members of other groups and a high degree of uncertainty about whether and how it would be possible to live outside the old group and if the outer world would even accept a dissident. A migration of people in or out of a fundamentalist group will be discouraged and a fluctuation between different groups or an overlapping of group membership will be minimal.

### 3.6 Fundamentalist Equilibrium

The more these conditions obtain, the more people will be locked in a “fundamentalist equilibrium” in which the factors conducive to the adoption of fundamentalist beliefs



are mutually reinforcing. Social isolation of a group will deepen mistrust towards outsiders and strengthen the relations of particularistic trust to fellow members. It will also contribute further to epistemic seclusion, which in turn secures the fundamentalist views. Those views are positively supported by the evidence which stems from social isolation and hostile relationships to other groups, whereas fundamentalist views also deepen the process of social isolation and hostility. A vicious circle will come into effect in which all elements strengthen each other and drive the group down the fundamentalist track.

Of course, fundamentalist ideas themselves can be the crucial factor which start the whole process and lead as a catalyst to social isolation, aversion and hostility, particularistic trust and epistemic seclusion, and thus confirm their own views as self-fulfilling prophecies. But for the members of fundamentalist groups the stigma, hostility and contempt of other groups are real and so is the justification of their particularistic trust from their subjective point of view.

The essential message is that the individual follower of fundamentalist authorities can behave subjectively rationally and reasonably. Individuals who adopt the "fundamentalist truths" of their group may not behave more irrationally than individuals in an open society who accept the "enlightened" worldview of *their* culture. The mechanisms are basically the same, the external conditions differ. Both kinds of individuals trust their authorities on the basis of common sense plausibility, the epistemic rules in their group and the testimony of people whom they trust socially and personally. In both cases the rational justification of their trust is necessarily a pragmatic justification which refers to a "satisficing explanation" in view of the available evidence. It is pure luck for the inhabitants of an open and liberal society that they live under conditions in which they can practise a generalized social trust and obtain the kind of information which harmonize the outcome of their individual epistemic rationality with objective epistemic rationality. But this objective rationality resides in the institutions of modern science and the culture of an open and liberal society, and not in the individual rationality of the single citizen.

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#### NOTE

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