

Braver Angels Book Discussion Guide: *The Knowledge Illusion – Why We Never Think Alone*, by Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach

Optional resource for pre-discussion reflection

Co-author Philip Fernbach TED Talk explaining a key point in the book:

<https://youtu.be/2SlbsnaSNNM>

Discussion questions

1. Cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach write: “For humans, ignorance is inevitable: It’s our natural state. There’s too much complexity in the world for any individual to master.” They cite David Dunning, a psychologist who spent much of his career at Cornell University:

[Dunning] has been shocked by how much ignorance he has seen in daily life and in scientific surveys, and he has documented much of it. What alarms Dunning is not the amount of human ignorance, but that ignorant people don’t know how ignorant they are. He points out that “we’re not very good at knowing what we don’t know.”

The problem, according to Dunning, occurs when the only way to evaluate how much you know is via your own knowledge.

[T]hose who lack skills also lack the knowledge of what skills they’re missing. So they think they’re pretty good. Those who have skills have a better sense of what the terrain looks like: They know what skills they could improve on.

The unskilled just don’t know what they don’t know. And, according to Dunning, it matters because all of us are unskilled in most domains of our lives.

What do you think about this concept – sometimes referred to as the Dunning-Kruger effect – particularly as it applies to discussions of political and moral issues? Might this suggest that all of us can benefit from engaging regularly with people who think differently from us and who can challenge our thinking?

2. Sloman and Fernbach write that when people think about their position on a political issue, they usually come up with reasons why they believe what they do and then generate arguments in favor of the position they already have. This is usually rather easy and tends to reinforce people’s current thinking. To try something different, Sloman and Fernbach ran experiments in which they asked participants whether they supported or rejected various hot-button political policies, and then asked the participants to engage in “causal explanation”:

For instance, the instructions for the cap-and-trade issue read, “Please describe all the details you know about the impact of instituting a cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions, going from the first step to the last, and providing the causal connection between the steps.”

As in most experiments of this kind, participants were pretty bad at generating explanations. With very few exceptions, they simply had very little to say when we asked them to explain how a policy worked.

Their attempt to explain the issue revealed to them that they didn't understand it as well as they thought they had.

We found that attempting to explain how a policy worked not only reduced our participants' sense of understanding, it also reduced the extremity of their position. If we consider the whole group together, the fact that people were on average less extreme means that the group as a whole was less polarized after the explanation exercise. The attempt to explain caused their positions to converge.

Do you think Braver Angels should try using causal explanation to discuss controversial political issues? Should we encourage others to use causal explanation – for example, by asking those advocating in social media for or against a particular policy to explain in detail how their preferred policy would work in the real world?

3. Citing Dan Kahan, a law professor from Yale, the authors write:

Our attitudes are not based on a rational, detached evaluation of the evidence, Kahan argues. This is because our beliefs are not isolated pieces of data that we can take and discard at will. Instead, beliefs are deeply intertwined with other beliefs, shared cultural values, and our identities. To discard a belief often means discarding a whole host of other beliefs, forsaking our communities, going against those we trust and love, and in short, challenging our identities. According to this view, is it any wonder that providing people with a little information about GMOs, vaccines, evolution, or global warming has little impact on their beliefs and attitudes? The power that culture has over cognition just swamps these attempts at education.

What do you think about Kahan's statement? Aren't information and logic the best ways to change people's minds when we think they are wrong? If not, what does it take to convince people to change their position?

The Braver Angels Pledge

- As individuals, we try to understand the other side's point of view, even if we don't agree with it.
- In our communities, we engage those we disagree with, looking for common ground and ways to work together.
- In politics, we support principles that bring us together rather than divide us.