

The Arrogance of Belief

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THE ARROGANCE OF BELIEF

Introduction

Belief is the lens through which we interpret the world, but when held with unyielding certainty, it becomes a blinder instead of a guide. The arrogance of belief—the tendency to confuse subjective conviction with objective truth—has shaped human history and continues to underwrite some of our most destructive systems: patriarchy, religious extremism, ideological warfare, and conspiracy-fueled violence. This essay explores how belief, when infused with arrogance, becomes a force of exclusion, domination, and suppression of dissent.

We live in a time where access to information is unprecedented, yet so is the hardening of ideological lines. Why? Because belief offers not just meaning—it offers identity, status, and power. And when belief becomes identity, to question it feels like existential death. This is not merely a personal psychological pattern but a sociopolitical force with global consequences.

The arrogance of belief is not just about fundamentalism or fanaticism—it's about the everyday assumptions we carry, the systems we uphold without questioning, and the people we marginalize because "we know better." This arrogance is everywhere, from the boardroom to the pulpit, from Twitter feeds to political debates. And until we learn to recognize it, question it, and deconstruct it, it will continue to shape our world in increasingly dangerous ways.

Historical Roots of Arrogant Beliefs

Throughout history, belief systems have often been structured to serve those in power. Whether through the divine right of kings, religious hierarchies, or colonial ideologies, belief has been used to justify domination. The problem is not belief itself, but the uncritical, rigid, and self-righteous way it has been wielded.

Take the notion of the "natural order," long used to justify slavery, gender inequality, and caste systems. This idea has persisted because those at the top believed not only in their superiority but also in the moral rightness of their dominance. This is where

arrogance enters: not merely believing in one's perspective, but refusing to admit that it could be flawed, limited, or harmful.

Systems like the patriarchy have been built and maintained not because they are true or just, but because people believed they were. That belief became a form of currency—something inherited, rarely questioned, and often enforced through religion, law, and violence.

The Patriarchy and the Certainty of Male Authority

The belief in male superiority is perhaps one of the most deeply embedded forms of arrogant belief in human history. Patriarchy, far from being a neutral or natural system, is a belief structure disguised as inevitability. For centuries, men have claimed authority based not on evidence or mutual agreement, but on divine will, biological determinism, and “tradition.”

Consider how religious texts have been used to justify female subservience—Eve as the origin of sin, the Apostle Paul's declarations about women remaining silent in church, and countless cultural codes that link female virtue with obedience. These are not divine truths; they are belief-based interpretations chosen and enforced by human institutions.

The danger is that belief in male superiority became not only normalized but internalized—by women and men alike. Even today, women in many cultures are taught to doubt their perceptions, defer their opinions, and downplay their achievements. This is not just sexism; it's epistemological arrogance—the assumption that one gender inherently knows, governs, and judges better.

To dismantle patriarchy is not merely to achieve equality but to deconstruct a long-standing, unexamined belief in the moral and intellectual superiority of men—a belief so arrogant that it once passed as common sense.

Religious Dogma and the Pretense of Absolute Truth

Religion, at its best, can be a source of comfort, community, and compassion. At its worst, it becomes a closed system of belief immune to questioning—a self-reinforcing ideology that not only explains the world but also demands obedience to a particular interpretation of it.

The arrogance of religious belief emerges when faith becomes fused with the illusion of exclusive truth. This is most dangerous when religious institutions claim to speak not on behalf of a perspective but on behalf of God. When this happens, to dissent is not merely to disagree with humans—it is to defy the divine. This theological

absolutism has justified centuries of persecution, colonialism, war, and cultural erasure.

Consider the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the witch hunts. These were not acts of collective madness but coordinated efforts driven by people who believed they were executing the will of God. It is difficult to overstate the harm that can arise when humans mistake their own ideologies for divine imperatives.

Even today, religious arrogance persists—in the refusal to extend equal rights to LGBTQ+ individuals, in the suppression of reproductive rights, and in the silencing of women's voices within many religious traditions. Behind each of these lies not just belief, but the belief that one's truth is **the** truth, and that all others are misguided at best or heretical at worst.

To question this is not to attack faith itself, but to challenge its appropriation as an unassailable justification for power, exclusion, and harm. Faith and humility can coexist—but only when belief is held with the awareness that it may be limited, subjective, and fallible.

The Spanish Inquisition and the Enforcement of Orthodoxy

Few historical episodes illustrate the destructive consequences of arrogant belief more vividly than the Spanish Inquisition.

Established in 1478 by Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, the Inquisition was not simply a religious tribunal—it was a political and ideological weapon. Its goal: to ensure the "purity of faith" by identifying and punishing heresy among Jews and Muslims who had converted to Christianity, as well as any others who strayed from orthodox Catholic doctrine.

Under the banner of divine righteousness, inquisitors conducted brutal interrogations, forced confessions under torture, and executed thousands. Public burnings of "heretics" were staged as religious spectacles. The arrogance here was theological and systemic—the belief that those in power had divine authority to define truth, and that dissent deserved extermination.

The Inquisition institutionalized arrogance. Questioning the Church was not an intellectual act—it was treason against God. And yet, many of those targeted were not rebellious zealots, but ordinary people caught in a web of suspicion and fear. The legacy of the Inquisition still haunts Spain's cultural memory and reminds us of how belief, when fused with political authority and stripped of humility, leads to institutionalized cruelty.

As historian Henry Kamen notes in *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, the Inquisition was less about protecting faith and more about consolidating power. “It was,” he writes, “a policing mechanism for ideas, rooted in the notion that the powerful are entitled to control the minds of the governed.”

Political Certainty and Ideological Rigidity

Politics is meant to be the art of negotiation, governance, and collective decision-making. But when political ideologies harden into unyielding belief systems, they become religions of a different kind—complete with prophets, heretics, and sacred texts.

Today, political discourse often resembles theological warfare. On both the left and the right, many engage not in good-faith debate but in battles of moral superiority. Each side believes itself to be the guardian of truth and justice, and views opposition not as alternative perspectives, but as threats to be eliminated.

This is particularly evident in the rise of populism, where complex societal problems are boiled down to simplistic narratives: “They are destroying our country.” “We are the real people.” “They hate freedom.” These slogans are not rooted in fact but in belief—specifically, the belief that one’s group is righteous, and others are not just wrong but dangerous.

The arrogance of political belief lies in this conviction that one’s side owns the truth. It dismisses nuance, ignores evidence that challenges ideology, and dehumanizes opponents. This is why political conversations so often devolve into shouting matches—because we are not talking to each other; we are defending beliefs as if they were sacred.

In democratic societies, this rigidity is especially dangerous. Democracy depends on compromise, humility, and openness. When belief overrides all, politics ceases to be a means of governance and becomes a theater of division. When that happens, democracy itself is at risk.

Belief as a Comfort Against Chaos

Belief often arises not from strength but from vulnerability.

In times of uncertainty, humans crave order. When life feels chaotic, a clear belief system—no matter how irrational—can offer comfort. This is why conspiracy theories flourish during crises. It’s also why authoritarian leaders rise to power by offering absolute answers.

In this sense, arrogant belief is not just a product of ideology—it's a coping mechanism. It gives people a feeling of control, even if illusory. It transforms complex, ambiguous problems into battles of good vs. evil, us vs. them, truth vs. lies.

But this comfort comes at a cost. It narrows our view of the world, alienates us from those who differ, and makes us susceptible to manipulation. The stronger the belief, the harder it becomes to see the humanity in those who hold other views.

The challenge, then, is to find other sources of stability—community, shared values, and flexible meaning systems that honor mystery rather than erase it. As poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: *“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.”*

Conspiracy Theories and the Seduction of Secret Knowledge

One of the most fascinating (and frightening) forms of arrogant belief is found in conspiracy theories. These belief systems flourish not despite their absurdity but because of it. Their allure is psychological: to believe in a conspiracy is to feel enlightened, special, and in-the-know—unlike the “sheep” who believe what they're told.

The core arrogance of conspiracy thinking is epistemic: the belief that / know what others don't. It appeals to the ego, granting the believer an elevated sense of awareness. This is not unlike the feeling of religious or political superiority, but it is often even more insidious because it masquerades as skepticism.

From flat Earth theory to QAnon, anti-vaccine movements to 9/11 “truthers,” these beliefs reject overwhelming evidence in favor of cherry-picked data, anecdotal accounts, and sheer speculation. They thrive in online echo chambers, where dissent is not examined but exiled. To question the theory is to reveal one's status as brainwashed or complicit.

And yet, the consequences are real. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed just how deadly these beliefs can be. Vaccine hesitancy, driven by misinformation and conspiracy, led to countless avoidable deaths. Insurrections like the one on January 6, 2021, in the U.S. were fueled not by fact but by the unshakable belief that the system was rigged—even in the absence of any credible evidence.

The seduction of conspiracy is emotional, not intellectual. It provides meaning in chaos and community in alienation. But at its heart lies an arrogant belief: that only “we” see clearly and that “they” are either blind or evil. This binary thinking undermines truth, destabilizes society, and leads people further away from reality.

The Rise of QAnon and the Collapse of Shared Reality

One of the most disturbing modern illustrations of belief gone awry is the QAnon conspiracy theory.

QAnon began with cryptic posts on anonymous message boards in 2017, claiming that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles controlled world governments, media, and finance. The theory alleged that former President Donald Trump was waging a covert war to expose and defeat this global cabal.

Despite its absurdity, QAnon spread rapidly—particularly through Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—gaining millions of followers. Why? Because it offered an alluring belief system: a narrative of secret truth, righteous struggle, and promised redemption.

The arrogance of QAnon believers was not just in the content of their claims, but in the confidence with which they rejected reality. They dismissed every disconfirming fact as part of “the cover-up.” When predictions failed (like Trump’s supposed mass arrests of political enemies), believers revised the timeline rather than the theory.

This is classic belief perseverance, magnified by algorithmic echo chambers. And it culminated in real-world violence—most notably, the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Fueled by QAnon and election fraud conspiracies, insurrectionists stormed the building, convinced they were heroes defending democracy.

What QAnon reveals is the extent to which arrogant belief can sever people from consensus reality—and how social media can accelerate the process

Cognitive Biases and the Neuroscience of Belief

Why is it so hard to let go of our beliefs—even in the face of contradictory evidence? The answer lies partly in the brain itself. Cognitive science has shown that humans are not rational processors of information. We are pattern-seeking, meaning-making creatures whose brains are designed to favor coherence over contradiction.

This is where cognitive biases come into play:

- **Confirmation bias** leads us to seek out evidence that supports our existing beliefs and ignore what contradicts them.
- **Motivated reasoning** allows us to twist facts to fit our preferred conclusions.
- **Belief perseverance** means we continue to believe something even after it has been discredited.

What's striking is that intelligence does not protect against these biases—sometimes, it amplifies them. Highly intelligent people are often better at defending bad ideas, not necessarily abandoning them. This is because the need to protect identity often trumps the pursuit of truth.

These tendencies are not moral failings; they are human traits. But when left unchecked, they reinforce the arrogance of belief. They create the illusion that we are being logical and objective when we are actually filtering reality through a lens shaped by emotion, ego, and identity.

The antidote is intellectual humility: the willingness to be wrong, to change one's mind, and to listen without defensiveness. Without this humility, belief becomes a trap—comforting but ultimately confining.

The Arrogance of the “Rational” Elite

It's easy to critique conspiracy theorists and religious fundamentalists. But arrogant belief exists on the other end of the spectrum too—in scientific elitism, secular absolutism, and technocratic condescension.

Many modern thinkers assume that belief itself is irrational, and that science, logic, and evidence are the only valid frameworks. This is known as scientism—the belief that science is not just a method but the ultimate arbiter of all truth.

But scientism can become arrogant in its own way, dismissing human experience, intuition, and cultural wisdom as superstition. It assumes that if something cannot be measured, it does not matter. In doing so, it alienates people and reinforces anti-intellectual backlash.

This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. While public health officials emphasized evidence-based guidelines, some communicated with condescension—ignoring the emotional and cultural dimensions of public trust. This created space for anti-science sentiment to flourish.

Arrogance, then, is not limited to any one worldview. It emerges whenever belief is held without humility—whether that belief is in a deity, a political ideology, or a peer-reviewed study. The antidote is not anti-science or anti-faith, but meta-cognition: the awareness that even our most reasoned beliefs are provisional.

The Patriarchal Framing of “Rationality”

Even the concept of rationality has been shaped by patriarchal assumptions. For centuries, reason was seen as a masculine virtue—cool, detached, superior to

emotion. Women, by contrast, were framed as emotional, intuitive, and thus less capable of serious thought.

This binary—rationality vs. emotion, mind vs. body, man vs. woman—has justified the exclusion of women from leadership, academia, and public discourse. It wasn't just sexist—it was epistemologically arrogant. It assumed that one kind of knowing was inherently better.

Feminist philosophers like Carol Gilligan and Lorraine Code have challenged this notion, arguing for an *epistemology of care*—a framework that values relational knowledge, moral intuition, and lived experience. In this view, rationality divorced from empathy is incomplete.

Today, we are still unlearning these assumptions. In politics, corporate boardrooms, and media debates, “passion” is often coded as weakness, while cold certainty is rewarded. But as research in emotional intelligence has shown, empathy and reason are not opposites—they are complementary tools for sound judgment.

To move forward, we must recognize that arrogance is not just in what we believe, but in how we define what counts as “knowledge.”

Social Media, Algorithms, and the Weaponization of Belief

In the digital age, belief is no longer just personal or cultural—it is algorithmically curated and commercially amplified. Social media platforms, driven by engagement and profit, have become belief accelerators. The more emotionally charged and polarizing a belief is, the more visibility it receives.

Algorithms are not designed to reward truth; they reward attention. As a result, outrageous, simplistic, and extreme beliefs outperform nuanced, balanced ones. In this environment, arrogance is not just tolerated—it is rewarded.

Influencers and pseudo-experts exploit this system, packaging certainty as credibility. The result is a media landscape where being loud is confused with being right, and where beliefs are not examined for validity but for virality.

Moreover, social media fosters performance. People aren't just expressing beliefs—they are broadcasting them for validation. This performative certainty feeds into groupthink, discourages doubt, and turns complex issues into moral battlegrounds.

In this context, the arrogance of belief becomes a social currency. To express uncertainty is to invite ridicule. To change your mind is to be seen as weak or

untrustworthy. So, we double down, we escalate, and we entrench. And the result is a world that feels more divided, more hostile, and more irrational.

Why Belief Feels Like Identity

To understand the persistence of arrogant belief, we must delve into its emotional and psychological underpinnings.

Beliefs are not simply rational conclusions—they are bound to our sense of self. To change a deeply held belief feels like losing a part of who we are. This is why attempts to “debate” people out of extremist views often backfire: the challenge feels like an existential threat.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in *The Righteous Mind*, explores how moral intuitions precede reasoning. We feel before we think. Beliefs are often post-hoc justifications for instincts and group loyalties. Once adopted, they become social glue, binding us to communities, tribes, and identities.

This fusion of belief and belonging explains why people resist new information, even when it’s credible. It also explains the rise of epistemic closure—when people surround themselves only with information that confirms their worldview. The more isolated the belief, the more intensely it is defended.

So, what can break through? Empathy. Curiosity. Trust. As studies from the University of Michigan and Stanford have shown, people are more likely to revise their beliefs when they feel psychologically safe and respected—not shamed or cornered. The arrogance of belief thrives in confrontation. It dissolves through genuine dialogue.

Humility, Uncertainty, and the Path Forward

To counteract the arrogance of belief, we must cultivate its opposite: humility.

But humility doesn’t mean weakness, timidity, or lack of conviction. It means recognizing the limits of our knowledge, the contingency of our perspectives, and the humanity of those who disagree with us. It’s about holding our beliefs firmly but not infallibly—strong enough to guide us, but flexible enough to evolve.

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates famously claimed that wisdom begins with the admission that “I know that I know nothing.” This wasn’t nihilism—it was the foundation of inquiry. By embracing uncertainty, we create the space to learn, revise, and grow.

Contrast this with the tone of much modern discourse: smug certainty, unwillingness to listen, weaponized identity, and moral posturing. Too often, we assume that if

someone holds a different belief, they are not just wrong but defective—ignorant, evil, or brainwashed. This framing leaves no room for persuasion, growth, or peace.

Humility invites a different path. It encourages listening, not just waiting to speak. It treats disagreement as a potential source of insight, not just an obstacle to be overcome. And it acknowledges that we, too, have been wrong before—and will be again.

Intellectual humility also changes how we approach institutions, ideologies, and even science. We recognize that no system has a monopoly on truth, that all knowledge is provisional, and that progress depends on continual questioning. The scientific method itself is built on humility: every theory is subject to testing, falsification, and refinement.

In a world awash in arrogant belief, humility is radical. It is an act of resistance. And it may be the only way forward.

Why We Must Teach Intellectual Humility

Educational psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Krumrei-Mancuso has conducted extensive research on **intellectual humility**—the ability to recognize the limits of one’s knowledge and value others’ perspectives.

In a 2016 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences*, she found that intellectually humble people were more open to learning, better at evaluating arguments, and more willing to engage with opposing views. Importantly, intellectual humility correlated with curiosity and critical thinking—not indecisiveness.

Krumrei-Mancuso writes: “It’s not about doubting everything; it’s about knowing when to doubt and being willing to revise.” Her findings suggest that teaching intellectual humility could be a crucial step toward reducing polarization and misinformation.

Schools, she argues, should incorporate humility training alongside debate and critical reasoning. The goal is not just to teach students *what* to think, but *how* to think in a way that acknowledges uncertainty without paralysis.

This insight aligns with the core thesis of this essay: arrogance is not an excess of belief, but a deficit of doubt.

Learning to Believe Differently

Rather than abandon belief, we must learn to believe differently—to approach belief as a provisional framework, not a fortress.

This means asking not only *what* we believe, but *how* we believe. Are we open to disconfirming evidence? Do we seek out voices different from our own? Can we tolerate the discomfort of ambiguity, or do we rush to premature certainty?

Believing differently also means distinguishing between identity and ideology. When beliefs become identity—when “I believe” becomes “I am”—we become defensive, tribal, and rigid. But when beliefs are tools rather than definitions, we can use them without being used by them.

Education systems can help foster this mindset by teaching not just facts but thinking skills: how to evaluate sources, how to identify bias, how to debate constructively. Media literacy, critical thinking, and empathy training should be foundational, not optional.

Leaders also play a role. When political, religious, and business leaders model certainty without humility, they embolden followers to do the same. But when leaders admit mistakes, revise opinions, and invite dialogue, they create space for collective learning.

At a cultural level, we must reward curiosity over confidence, dialogue over dogma. This means reshaping our social media platforms, our institutions, and our conversations to value depth over drama, nuance over noise.

The Danger and Promise of Belief

Belief is not the enemy. It is what makes us human—what allows us to build communities, envision futures, and take moral stands. But when belief becomes arrogant—when it refuses doubt, punishes dissent, and props up hierarchies—it becomes destructive.

The arrogance of belief is visible in the way patriarchy justified inequality, in the way religious dogma silenced dissent, in the way political ideologies harden into hatred, and in the way conspiracies fracture families and societies. It is reinforced by our cognitive wiring, exploited by algorithms, and normalized by the culture of certainty we inhabit.

But the same minds that cling to belief can learn to hold it more gently. We can train ourselves and our children to question without contempt, to seek truth without needing to own it, and to challenge ideas without dehumanizing those who hold them.

Humility is not the absence of belief—it is its evolution.

If we can learn to believe differently—to balance conviction with curiosity, and passion with perspective—we might begin to dismantle not just the arrogance of belief, but the systems of harm it has long upheld. And in doing so, we might rediscover a better way to live, together.

Belief in the Age of Identity and Influence

We are living through a time of unprecedented access to information—and yet, paradoxically, a time of epistemic chaos. Competing narratives, algorithm-driven media, and declining trust in institutions have created a world where belief is both fractured and weaponized. In this environment, belief does not simply inform behavior—it signals identity, allegiance, and perceived virtue.

Social theorist Zeynep Tufekci has called this the “attention economy of belief.” In her research, she highlights how platforms like YouTube and Facebook reward bold, emotive claims—especially those that affirm group identity or moral outrage. The more extreme the belief, the more engagement it garners.

This has led to a form of *belief inflation*: ideas become louder, more absolute, and more insulated from challenge. People are no longer just debating facts—they’re defending their very sense of self. And that’s where belief becomes most dangerous: when it can no longer be separated from ego, tribe, or status.

Public intellectuals like Yuval Noah Harari argue that we are wired for shared mythologies—stories we tell to coordinate behavior. But in a pluralistic, digital world, these shared stories are breaking down. Instead, we cling to narrower ones—conspiracies, cults, ideological silos—where the cost of doubt is social exile.

What’s needed is not just better facts, but better belief practices. Belief, like language or diet, must be cultivated with care. It shapes not only how we think, but who we become.

How to Identify Arrogant Belief in Yourself

Self-reflection is the first defense against the arrogance of belief. Below is a set of questions that can help anyone examine the health of their belief system.

1. How do I respond to disagreement?

- Do I feel threatened, angry, or dismissive when others challenge my beliefs?
- Do I listen to understand—or only to refute?

2. Where did this belief come from?

- Was it inherited (family, religion, culture) or chosen?
- Have I ever seriously interrogated or revised it?

3. What evidence would change my mind?

- If the answer is “none,” that’s a red flag.
- True belief should be distinguishable from dogma.

4. Do I treat those with different beliefs as lesser?

- Do I see them as stupid, evil, or brainwashed?
- Or do I see them as people with different life experiences?

5. Do I feel smarter or better because of this belief?

- Beliefs that inflate the ego often blind us to nuance.
- Humility detaches belief from self-worth.

This framework is not meant to create guilt, but awareness. Just as we audit our finances or health, we should regularly audit our beliefs. Arrogance thrives in the unexamined mind.

How to Cultivate Intellectual Humility Daily

Building a more humble belief system is a lifelong practice. Here are some strategies:

- **Curate your media diet.** Follow thinkers you disagree with. Read beyond your bubble. Make intellectual discomfort a habit.
- **Adopt “epistemic pause.”** Before declaring something as fact, ask yourself: *How do I know this? Could I be wrong?*
- **Engage in dialectical learning.** Seek out conversations with those who challenge you, not just validate you.
- **Use provisional language.** Phrases like “I think,” “It seems,” and “In my experience” are not signs of weakness—they’re signals of flexibility.
- **Model fallibility.** Admitting you were wrong, even in public, encourages others to do the same. Vulnerability is contagious.
- **Teach children to question with kindness.** Encourage curiosity over certainty. Praise questions, not just answers.

These are not just techniques for self-improvement. They are cultural interventions. If enough people adopt them, they can shift norms and expectations in families, classrooms, organizations, and nations.

Belief as Burden and Possibility

The arrogance of belief is not a flaw in human nature—it is a consequence of forgetting what belief is for.

Belief is a bridge between the known and the unknown. It helps us navigate ambiguity, make sense of our experiences, and commit to values. But when belief becomes too rigid, it stops being a bridge and becomes a wall—a barrier between people, a prison for the mind, a weapon in the hands of the powerful.

Throughout this essay, we have examined how arrogant belief manifests in various domains:

- In **patriarchy**, it props up inequality under the guise of tradition or biology.
- In **religion**, it sanctifies violence and intolerance.
- In **politics**, it turns partisanship into a purity test.
- In **conspiracies**, it seduces people into rejecting reality and community.
- In **rational elitism**, it dismisses other forms of knowing as inferior.
- In **media ecosystems**, it accelerates certainty and drowns out nuance.

And yet, we have also seen glimpses of another way—a path defined by humility, dialogue, curiosity, and courage.

This is the path we must choose if we are to thrive as individuals and survive as a society. Because in an interconnected world, arrogant belief is not just unkind—it is unsustainable. It leads to fragmentation, extremism, and erosion of the shared trust needed for democracy, innovation, and peace.

To believe well is to believe with care. To believe with care is to leave space for others.

In the end, belief should not be about being right. It should be about becoming wise.