

Chapter Three

How Authoritarian Followers Think

We meet again. If you are keeping track of my promises, as we roll along together on the internet, I said in the Introduction that we would figure out why authoritarian followers think in the bizarre and perplexing way they so often do. The key to the puzzle springs from Chapter 2's observation that, first and foremost, followers have mainly copied the beliefs of the authorities in their lives. They have not developed and thought through their ideas as much as most people have. Thus almost anything can be found in their heads if their authorities put it there, even stuff that contradicts other stuff. A filing cabinet or a computer can store quite inconsistent notions and never lose a minute of sleep over their contradiction. Similarly a high RWA can have all sorts of illogical, self-contradictory, and widely refuted ideas rattling around in various boxes in his brain, and never notice it.

So can everybody, of course, and my wife loves to catch inconsistencies in my reasoning when we're having a friendly discussion about one of my personal failures. But research reveals that authoritarian followers drive through life under the influence of impaired thinking a lot more than most people do, exhibiting sloppy reasoning, highly compartmentalized beliefs, double standards, hypocrisy, self-blindness, a profound ethnocentrism, and--to top it all off--a ferocious dogmatism that makes it unlikely anyone could ever change their minds with evidence or logic. These seven deadly shortfalls of authoritarian thinking eminently qualify them to follow a would-be dictator. As Hitler is reported to have said, "What good fortune for those in power that people do not think."

1. Illogical Thinking

Sitting in the jury room of the Port Angeles, Washington court house in 1989, Mary Wegmann might have felt she had suddenly been transferred to a parallel

universe in some Twilight Zone story. For certain fellow-jury members seemed to have attended a different trial than the one she had just witnessed. They could not remember some pieces of evidence, they invented evidence that did not exist, and they steadily made erroneous inferences from the material that everyone could agree on. Encountering my research as she was later developing her Ph.D. dissertation project, she suspected the people who “got it wrong” had been mainly high RWAs. So she recruited a sample of adults from the Clallam County jury list, and a group of students from Peninsula College and gave them various memory and inference tests. For example, they listened to a tape of two lawyers debating a school segregation case on a *McNeil/Lehrer News Hour* program. Wegmann found High RWAs indeed had more trouble remembering details of the material they’d encountered, and they made more incorrect inferences on a reasoning test than others usually did. Overall, the authoritarians had lots of trouble simply thinking straight.

Intrigued, I gave the inferences test that Mary Wegmann had used to two large samples of students at my university. In both studies high RWAs went down in flames more than others did. They particularly had trouble figuring out that an inference or deduction was *wrong*. To illustrate, suppose they had gotten the following syllogism:

All fish live in the sea.
Sharks live in the sea..
Therefore, sharks are fish.

The conclusion does not follow, but high RWAs would be more likely to say the reasoning is correct than most people would. If you ask them why it seems right, they would likely tell you, “Because sharks are fish.” In other words, they thought the reasoning was sound because they agreed with the last statement. If the conclusion is right, they figure, then the reasoning must have been right. Or to put it another way, they don’t “get it” that the reasoning matters--especially on a reasoning test.

This is not only “Illogical, Captain,” as Mr. Spock would say, it’s quite dangerous, because it shows that if authoritarian followers like the conclusion, the logic involved is pretty irrelevant. The reasoning should justify the conclusion, but for a lot of high RWAs, the conclusion validates the reasoning. Such is the basis of many a prejudice, and many a Big Lie that comes to be accepted. Now one can easily overstate this finding. A lot of people have trouble with syllogistic reasoning, and high RWAs are only *slightly* more likely to make such mistakes than low RWAs are. But in general high RWAs seem to have more trouble than most people do realizing that a conclusion is false.

Deductive logic aside, authoritarians also have trouble deciding whether empirical evidence *proves*, or does not prove, something. They will often think some thoroughly ambiguous fact verifies something they already believe in. So if you tell them that archaeologists have discovered a fallen wall at ancient Jericho, they are more likely than most people to infer that this proves the Biblical story of Joshua and the horns is true--when the wall could have been knocked over by lots of other groups, or an earthquake, and be from an entirely different era (which it is).

High RWAs similarly think the fact that many religions in the world have accounts of a big flood proves that the story of Noah is true--when the accounts vary enormously, big floods hardly mean the story of the ark, etcetera also occurred, and the tale of Noah was likely adapted from an earlier Sumerian myth. They are sure that accounts of near-death experiences in which people say they traveled through a dark tunnel toward a Being of Light prove the teachings of Christianity are true--even though these stories also vary enormously, the “Being” is usually interpreted according to whom one expects to meet at death, and the vision could just be an hallucination produced by an oxygen-depleted brain.

Not only do authoritarian followers uncritically accept conclusions that support their religious beliefs, they have a problem with evidence in general. They are more

likely than most people to think that, since airplane crashes *sometimes* occur when the pilots' "biorhythms" are at a low point, this proves biorhythms affect our lives. They buy the argument that if skeptics have introduced controls against cheating in ESP experiments, and no ESP appears, that proves skepticism interferes with the ESP powers. They think that any time science cannot explain something, this proves mysterious supernatural forces are at work. True, they are less likely to believe in Bigfoot than in the Shroud of Turin. But they do not in general have a very critical outlook on anything unless the authorities in their lives have condemned it for them. Then they can be extremely critical.

You can appreciate their short-fall in critical thinking by how easily authoritarian followers get alarmed by things. When I asked a group of students if the *most* serious problem in our country today was the drug problem and the crime it causes, a solid majority of the high RWAs said yes.¹ When I asked another group if the destruction of the family was our most serious problem, the great majority of authoritarians in that group said it was. When I asked a third group if our most serious problem was the loss of religion and commitment to God, a solid majority of those authoritarians said yes. And a solid majority of the high RWAs in a fourth group agreed the destruction of the environment was our biggest problem. We've apparently got a truck load of "biggest" problems.

It's much harder to catch low RWAs doing this sort of thing. When someone says one of their favorite issues is our biggest problem (e.g. the destruction of individual freedom, or poverty), they seem to ask themselves, "Is it?"--whereas authoritarian followers usually respond, "It is!" So what happens when a demagogue asserts "The Jews are our biggest problem" (or feminists or the liberal press or the United Nations or Iraq--you name it)? Are high RWAs likely to make an independent, thoughtful evaluation of that statement? Or are they going to get riled up and demand repression or censorship or a war? "Yes sir, we've got trouble, right here in River City, Trouble, with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for pool!"²

The lack of independent, critical thinking goes back some ways in the authoritarian's life. Here's a question I asked a large sample of university students.

"Almost everybody believes in God when they are children, and polls show the vast majority of adults continue to believe in God--although a distinct minority does not. It turns out that almost everyone goes through a period of *questioning* the existence of God, usually during their teen years. "Does God really exist?" we ask ourselves. It is obviously a very important question. If you ever began to question the existence of the traditional God, to wonder--because of things that happened or doubts that arose in your mind--if this God really exists, *HOW did you decide?* Below are ten things that people *might* do in this situation to help them make of their minds.

I talked it over with friends and acquaintances who believed in God.

I read books by atheists or agnostics to see what their arguments were.

I brought my questions to a religious authority, such as a minister, priest or rabbi.

I talked with my parents, asking for their help in figuring things out.

I talked with people who had decided God did not exist, or who had big doubts about it.

I prayed for enlightenment and guidance.

I studied up on scientific findings that would challenge the traditional account of God, creation, etc.

I read scriptures, or other religious books, believing they would contain the answers to my questions.

I purposely read books, plays, etc. that went against my family's religious beliefs.

I made a determined effort to figure it out for myself, not going to anyone else nor seeking any new information.

Which one of these did you do *the most* to reach your decision?

What else did you do, *more than anything else except* the answer you just gave?

Did you do something else besides these two? If so, what?

(If you never questioned the existence of God, then skip these questions.)"

Interestingly, virtually everyone said she had questioned the existence of God at some time in her life. What did the authoritarian students do when this question arose? Most of all, they prayed for enlightenment. Secondly, they talked to their friends who believed in God. Or they talked with their parents. Or they read scriptures. In other words, they seldom made a two-sided search of the issue. Basically they seem to have been seeking *reassurance* about the Divinity, not pro- and con- arguments about its existence-- probably because they were terrified of the implications if there is no God.

Did low RWA students correspondingly immerse themselves in the atheist point of view? No. Instead they overwhelmingly said they had tried to figure things out for themselves. Yes they talked with nonbelievers and studied up on scientific findings that challenged traditional beliefs. But they also discussed things with friends who believed in God and they talked with their parents (almost all of whom believed in God). They exposed themselves to both yea and nay arguments, and then made up their minds--which often left them theists. In contrast, High RWAs didn't take a chance on a two-sided search.

2. Highly Compartmentalized Minds

As I said earlier, authoritarians' ideas are poorly integrated with one another. It's as if each idea is stored in a file that can be called up and used when the authoritarian wishes, even though another of his ideas--stored in a different file--basically contradicts it. We all have some inconsistencies in our thinking, but authoritarians can stupify you with the inconsistency of their ideas. Thus they may say they are proud to live in a country that guarantees freedom of speech, but another file holds, "My country, love it or leave it." The ideas were copied from trusted sources, often as sayings, but the authoritarian has never "merged files" to see how well they all fit together.

It's easy to find authoritarians endorsing inconsistent ideas. Just present slogans and appeals to homey values, and then present slogans and bromides that invoke opposite values. The yea-saying authoritarian follower is likely to agree with all of them. Thus I asked both students and their parents to respond to, "When it comes to love, men and women with opposite points of view are attracted to each other." Soon afterwards, in the same booklet, I pitched "Birds of a feather flock together when it comes to love." High RWAs typically agreed with *both* statements, even though they responded to the two items within a minute of each other.

But that's the point: they don't seem to scan for self-consistency as much as most people do. Similarly they tended to agree with "A government should allow total freedom of expression, even if it threatens law and order" and "A government should only allow freedom of expression so long as it does not threaten law and order." And "Parents should first of all be gentle and tender with their children," and "Parents should first of all be firm and uncompromising with their children; spare the rod and spoil the child."

3. Double Standards

When your ideas live independent lives from one another it is pretty easy to use double standards in your judgments. You simply call up the idea that will justify (afterwards) what you've decided to do. High RWAs seem to get up in the morning and gulp down a whole jar of "Rationalization Pills." Here is a "Trials" case I have used many times in my research, except only half of the sample gets this version.

Imagine that you are the judge presiding over the trial of Mr. William Langley. Mr. Langley is a 44-year old civil servant who is also the founder and president of a local chapter of Canadians for Gay Rights, a noted pro-homosexual organization. Last spring Mr. Langley was leading a demonstration on the steps of a provincial legislature, supporting Bill 38--a proposed law that would redefine marriage and allow homosexuals to be legally married across Canada. A crowd of approximately 100, mainly

members of Mr. Langley's organization, had gathered around his speaker's stand. A large banner that read, "GAY POWER" was tied between two columns immediately behind Mr. Langley, and some of his supporters were passing out literature to adults passing by.

About half an hour after the rally began, a group of about 30 counter-demonstrators appeared and began walking slowly and silently around the outside of Mr. Langley's audience. They carried signs which read, "THE FAMILY IS SACRED" and "MARRIAGE IS BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN." At first Mr. Langley did not seem to notice the counter-demonstrators, but when he did he stopped his speech and, according to several witnesses, said, "There are some of the people who are trying to keep this bill from passing. I say we run them out of here right now. Let's show everybody we mean business."

Upon hearing this, many members of Mr. Langley's audience turned on the counter-demonstrators and began physically to attack them. By the time the police restored order, many of the counter-demonstrators had been injured and one person had to be taken to hospital for overnight observation.

A jury has found Mr. Langley guilty of inciting a riot. He may be sentenced to from 0 to 18 months in jail, with parole possible after 1/3 of the sentence has been served. To how many months in jail you would sentence Mr. Langley?

The other half of the sample gets a mirror-image version of the case. Mr. Langley headed "Canadians Against Perversion" and he was addressing a demonstration opposed to legalizing marriage between homosexuals. The banner behind him read, "The Family is Sacred." When 30 counter-demonstrators appeared carrying signs which read, "Gay Power" and "Rights for Gays," Mr. Langley directed his supporters to attack them, with the same results. He was found guilty of inciting a riot, and the subject was asked what sentence, up to 18 months, he would impose.

When you look at the sentences low RWA subjects imposed on the gay Mr. Langley and the sentences other low RWAs imposed on the anti-gay Mr. Langley, you find no difference. Lows typically punish the crime, not the person. But among high

RWAs, Mr. Langley's beliefs make a large difference. The gay Mr. Langley always gets a stiffer jail term than the anti-gay Mr. Langley. Highs think the attack led by the former was more serious than that led by the latter. But the attacks were identical, so that amounts to pure rationalization. Highs simply have a big fat double standard about homosexuals and punish the person as well as the crime. A jury composed of high RWAs would hardly administer "blind justice."

I have found many other instances in which authoritarian followers show a double standard in their judgments of people's behavior or the rightness of various causes. For example they will punish a panhandler who starts a fight with an accountant more than an accountant who (in the same situation) starts a fight with a panhandler. They will punish a prisoner in jail who beats up another prisoner more than they will punish a police officer who beats up that second prisoner. (Remember when I said in chapter 1 that high RWAs will go easy on authorities, and on a person who attacks someone the authoritarian wants to attack?) On the other hand I have found it difficult to catch low RWAs using double standards. In all the cases above they seem to operate by principles which they apply in even-handed ways.

4. Hypocrisy

You can also, unfortunately, find a considerable amount of hypocrisy in high RWAs' behavior. For example, the leaders of authoritarian movements sometimes accuse their opponents of being anti-democratic and anti-free speech when the latter protest against various books, movies, speakers, teachers and so on. They say leftists impose restrictions for "political correctness." I know some who would. So I wondered if ardent liberals' desire to censor ideas they disliked was as strong, or stronger, than that of right-wing authoritarians. I asked two large samples of parents of university students to give an opinion in the following twelve cases.

Should a university professor be allowed to teach an anthropology course in which he argues that men are naturally superior to women, so women should resign themselves to inferior roles in our society?

Should a book be assigned in a Grade 12 English course that presents homosexual relationships in a positive light?

Should books be allowed to be sold that attack “being patriotic” and “being religious”?

Should a racist speaker be allowed to give a public talk preaching his views?

Should someone be allowed to teach a Grade 10 sex education course who strongly believes that all premarital sex is a sin?

Should commercials for “telephone sex” be allowed to be shown after 11 PM on television?

Should a professor who has argued in the past that black people are less intelligent than white people be given a research grant to continue studies of this issue?

Should a book be allowed to be published that argues the Holocaust never occurred, but was made up by Jews to create sympathy for their cause?

Should sexually explicit material that describes intercourse through words and medical diagrams be used in sex education classes in Grade 10?

Should a university professor be allowed to teach a philosophy course in which he tries to convince his students there is no God?

Should an openly white supremacist movie such as “The Birth of a Nation” (which glorifies the Ku Klux Klan) be shown in a Grade 12 social studies class?

Should “Pro-Choice” counselors and abortion clinics be allowed to advertise their services in public health clinics if “Pro-Life” counselors can?

I hope you’ll agree that half of the situations would particularly alarm liberals, and the other half would raise the hackles on right-wingers. Would low RWAs want to censor the things they thought dangerous as much as high RWAs would in their areas of concern? It turned out to be “no contest,” because in both studies authoritarian followers wanted to impose more censorship in *all* of these cases--save the one involving the sex education teacher who strongly believed all premarital sex was a sin. How can this be?

It happened because the lows seldom wanted to censor anyone. They apparently believe in freedom of speech, even when they detest the speech. Some low RWAs may insist on political correctness, but the great majority seemingly do not. Authoritarians on the other hand, spring-loaded for hostility, seem all wound up to clamp right down on lots and lots of people. So when authoritarians reproach other people who call for censorship, the reproach may be justified. But a lot of windows probably got broken in the authoritarians' own houses when they flung that stone.³

5. Blindness To Themselves

If you ask people how much integrity they personally have, guess who pat themselves most on the back by claiming they have more than anyone else. This one is easy if you remember the findings on self-righteousness from the last chapter: high RWAs think they had lots more integrity than others do. Similarly when I asked students to write down, anonymously, their biggest faults, right-wing authoritarians wrote down fewer than others did, mainly because a lot of them said they had *no* big faults. When I asked students if there was anything they were reluctant to admit about themselves to themselves, high RWAs led everyone else in saying, no, they were completely honest with themselves.

Now people who abound in integrity, who have no faults, and who are completely honest with themselves would seem ready for canonization. But we can wonder if it is really true in the case of authoritarian followers, given what else we know about them. So I have done a simple little experiment in my classes on several occasions in which I give some students higher marks on an objective test--supposedly through a clerical error--than they know they earned. High RWAs, for all their posturing about being better than others, are just as likely to take the grade and run as everyone else. But I 'spect they forget such misdeeds pretty quickly. Self-righteousness comes easily if you can tuck your failings away in boxes and put them at the back of the shelf.

In fact, despite their own belief that they are quite honest with themselves, authoritarians tend to be highly defensive, and run away from unpleasant truths about themselves *more* than most people do. Thus I once gave several classes of students, who had filled out a booklet of surveys for me, personal feedback about how they had done on a measure of self-esteem. Half the students were told they had scored quite high in self-esteem, and the other half were told they had scored quite low. (These scores were assigned at random, which I confessed to them at the end of the experiment.) I then told them these self-esteem scores predicted later success in life, and I would bring copies of the evidence supporting the scale's validity to the next class meeting for all the students who wanted to see the evidence.

High RWAs were quite interested in finding out the test was valid IF they thought they had done well on the scale. But if they had been told they had low self-esteem, most right-wing authoritarians did not want to see evidence that the test was valid. Well, wouldn't everyone do this? No. Most low RWA students wanted to see the evidence whether they had gotten good news, OR bad news about themselves.

What do you think would happen if someone gave right-wing authoritarians a list of all the things that research has found high RWAs are likely to do--such as be prejudiced and conformist and supportive of government injustices? The respondents are simply asked, for each characteristic, "How true do you think this is of you, compared with most other people?" (Are you more prejudiced? Are you more of a conformist? Etcetera.)

High RWAs show little self-awareness when making these comparisons. Sometimes they glimpse themselves through a glass, darkly. For example they agree more than most people do with, "I like to associate with people who have the same beliefs and opinions I do." But they have no idea *how much* they differ from others in that way. And most of the time they get it quite wrong, thinking they are not different from others, and even that they are different in the opposite way from how

they actually are. For example they are sure they are *less* self-righteous than most people are--which of course is what self-righteous people would think, isn't it? And when I give feedback lectures to classes about my studies and describe right-wing authoritarians, it turns out the high RWAs in the room almost always think I am talking about someone else.⁴

6. A Profound Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism means dividing the world up into in-groups and out-groups, and it's something people do quite automatically. You can see this by how easily we identify with the point of view of a storyteller. If we're watching a cavalry & Indians movie, told from the point of view of the cavalry, that's whom we cheer on. If we're watching the same kind of movie, only from the aboriginal point of view, as in *Little Big Man* or *Dances with Wolves*, we root for the Indians, don't we?

As natural as this is, authoritarians see the world more sharply in terms of their in-groups and their out-groups than most people do. They are so ethnocentric that you find them making statements such as, "If you're not with us, then you're against us." There's no neutral in the highly ethnocentric mind. This dizzying "Us versus Everyone Else" outlook usually develops from traveling in those "tight circles" we talked about in the last chapter, and whirling round in those circles reinforces the ethnocentrism as the authoritarian follower uses his friends to validate his opinions.

Most of us associate with people who agree with us on many issues. Birds of a feather do, empirically, tend to flock together. But this is especially important to authoritarians, who have not usually thought things out, explored possibilities, considered alternate points of view, and so on, but acquired their beliefs from the authorities in their lives. They then *maintain* their beliefs against new threats by seeking out those authorities, and by rubbing elbows as much as possible with people who have the same beliefs.

As a path to truth, this amounts to skipping on quicksand. It essentially boils down to, “I know I’m right because the people who agree with me say I am.” But that *works* for authoritarians. And it has lots of consequences. For example, this selective exposure is probably one of the reasons high RWAs do not realize how prejudiced they are “compared with most people.” If you spend a lot of time around rather prejudiced people, you can easily think your own prejudices are normal.

Because authoritarians depend so much on their in-group to support their beliefs (whereas other people depend more on independent evidence and logic), high RWAs place a high premium on group loyalty and cohesiveness. Consider the following statements:

For any group to succeed, all its members have to give it their complete loyalty.

If you belong to a club or some other identifiable group, you should always be a faithful member of that group.

Working side by side for a group goal and “sticking together” come what may are among the best things in life.

There is nothing lower than a person who betrays his group or stirs up disagreement within it.

If we become truly united, acting with one mind on all issues, there is no difficulty we could not overcome.

A person should stick with those who think the way he does, and work together for their common beliefs.

Authoritarian followers usually agree with these notions more than most people do. Similarly they *disagree* more than most with these ideas:

People can easily lose their individuality in groups that stress being “a good, loyal member.”

Lots and lots of “group loyalty” is bad for the individual and bad for the group.

It would be very dangerous if everyone had the same ideas and beliefs about life.

Members of a family do NOT have to be loyal to each other, no matter what.

Just because you work for a company, you do NOT have to feel “team spirit” with your co-workers.

The worst thing in the world would be for us to all start acting together “with one mind” about something.

Authoritarian followers want to belong, and being part of their in-group means a lot to them. Loyalty to that group ranks among the highest virtues, and members of the group who question its leaders or beliefs can quickly be seen as traitors. Can you also sense from these items the energy, the commitment, the submission, and the zeal that authoritarian followers are ready to give to their in-groups, and the satisfaction they would get from being a part of a vast, powerful movement in which everyone thought the same way? The common metaphor for authoritarian followers is a herd of sheep, but it may be more accurate to think of them as a column of army ants on the march.

The ethnocentrism of high RWAs makes them quite vulnerable to unscrupulous manipulators. Suppose your city is electing a new mayor and the big issue becomes how to handle urban crime. Suppose further that a poll shows the citizens of your fair burg strongly favor a “tough, law and order” approach to the problem. After the poll is released, one of the candidates steps forward and fearlessly endorses a “tough, law and order” approach to crime. Can you trust him? I’d say there’s room for doubt, since he might simply be saying whatever will get the most votes. It would be more convincing, wouldn’t it, if he came out for law and order after polls showed only half the voters favored that course, while the other half wanted a “community development” approach aimed at eliminating the causes of crime.

You’ve probably already figured out that high RWAs generally *do* favor a tough law and order approach to crime. And you know what? If somebody comes out for that during an election, but only *after* polls show this is a popular stand, authoritarian followers still believe him. It doesn’t matter whether the candidate really believes it, or might just be saying it to get elected. High RWAs tend to ignore the many devious reasons why someone might lie and say something they find agreeable. They’re just glad to have another person agree with them. It goes back to their relying on social support to maintain their ideas, because that’s really all they’ve got besides their authorities (and one “last stand” defense to be discussed soon).

Well, aren't most people likely to trust someone who seems to agree with them? Probably, but people differ enormously in gullibility. Low RWAs are downright suspicious of someone who agrees with them when they can see ulterior motives might be at work. They pay attention to the circumstances in which the other fellow is operating. But authoritarians do not, when they like the message.

So (to foreshadow later chapters a little) suppose you are a completely unethical, dishonest, power-hungry, dirt-bag, scum-bucket politician who will say whatever he has to say to get elected. (I apologize for putting you in this role, but it will only last for one more sentence.) Whom are you going to try to lead, high RWAs or low RWAs? Isn't it obvious? The easy-sell high RWAs will open up their arms and wallets to you if you just sing their song, however poor your credibility. Those crabby low RWAs, on the other hand, will eye you warily when your credibility is suspect *because you sing their song? So the scum-bucket politicians will usually head for the right-wing authoritarians*, because the RWAs hunger for social endorsement of their beliefs so much they're apt to trust anyone who tells them they're right. Heck, Adolf Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany running on a law-and-order platform just a few years after he tried to overthrow the government through an armed insurrection.

You sometimes hear that paranoia runs at a gallop in "right-wingers". But maybe you can see how that's an oversimplification. Authoritarian followers *are* highly suspicious of their many out-groups; but they are credulous to the point of self-delusion when it comes to their in-groups. So (in another experiment I ran) subjects were told a Christian Crusade was coming to town led by a TV evangelist. The evangelist (the subjects were further told), knowing that people would give more money at the end of the evening if he gave them the kind of service they liked, asked around to see what that might be. Finding out that folks in your city liked a "personal testimonial" crusade, he gave them one featuring his own emotional testimonial to Jesus' saving grace. How sincere do you think he was? Most subjects had their doubts, given the circumstances. But High RWAs almost always trusted him.

The need for social reinforcement runs so deeply in authoritarians, they will believe someone who says what they want to hear even if you tell them they should *not*. I have several times asked students or parents to judge the sincerity of a university student who wrote arguments either condemning, or supporting, homosexuals. But some subjects were told the student had been *assigned* to condemn (or support) homosexuals as part of a philosophy test to see how well the student could make up arguments for anything, on the spot. Other subjects were told the student could *choose* to write on either side of the issue, and had chosen to make the case she did.

Obviously, you can't tell anything about the real opinions of someone who was assigned the point of view of her essay. But high RWAs believed that the *anti-homosexual* essay that a student was *forced* to write reflected that student's personal views almost as much as when a student had chosen this point of view. In other words, as in the previous experiments, the authoritarians ignored the circumstances and believed the student really meant what she had been assigned to say--when they liked what she said.

You've got to feel some sympathy for authoritarian followers at this point, don't you, because they get nailed coming and going. First of all, they rely on the authorities in their lives to provide their opinions. Usually they don't care much what the evidence or the logic for a position is, so they run a considerable chance of being wrong. Then once they have "their" ideas, someone who comes along and says what authoritarian followers want to hear becomes trustworthy. High RWAs largely ignore the reasons why someone might have ulterior motives for saying what they want to hear; it's enough for them that another person indicates they are right. Welcome to the In-group! As Gilbert and Sullivan put it in *The Mikado*, "And I am right and you are right and everything is quite correct."

But everything is not correct, for the authoritarian follower makes himself vulnerable to malevolent manipulation by chucking out critical thinking and prudence

as the price for maintaining his beliefs. He's an "easy mark," custom-built to be snookered. And the very last thing an authoritarian leader wants is for his followers to start using their heads, to start thinking critically and independently about things.⁵

7. Dogmatism: The Authoritarian's Last Ditch Defense

But the leaders don't have to worry, because their followers are also quite dogmatic. By dogmatism I mean relatively unchangeable, unjustified certainty. And I'm certain that is right, beyond a doubt. So that establishes how dogmatic I am. If you want a hint as to how dogmatic you are, simply answer the items below--completely ignoring the fact that if you strongly agree with them it means you are a rigid, dogmatic, and totally bad, bad, bad person--and you get no dessert.

The things I believe in are so completely true, I could never doubt them.

My opinions and beliefs fit together perfectly to make a crystal-clear "picture" of things.

There are no discoveries or facts that could possibly make me change my mind about the things that matter most in life.

I am absolutely certain that my ideas about the fundamental issues in life are correct.

These statements are from a survey I call the DOG scale, and as usual there are some items that you'll have to strongly *disagree* with to look awful. Such as:

There are so many things we have not discovered yet, nobody should be absolutely certain his beliefs are right.

It is best to be open to all possibilities, and ready to reevaluate all your beliefs.

Flexibility is a real virtue in thinking, since you may well be wrong.

I am a long way from reaching final conclusions about the central issues in life.

Guess who tend to strongly agree with the first set of items, and strongly disagree with the second set. Yep, high RWAs. Which, all kidding aside, suggests they have a dogmatic streak in them a mile wide and a hundred denials deep.

It's easy to see why authoritarian followers would be dogmatic, isn't it? When you haven't figured out your beliefs, but instead absorbed them from other people, you're really in no position to defend them from attack. Simply put, *you don't know* why the things you believe are true. Somebody else decided they were, and you're taking their word for it. So what do you do when challenged?

Well first of all you avoid challenges by sticking with your own kind as much as possible, because they're hardly likely to ask pointed questions about your beliefs. But if you meet someone who does, you'll probably defend your ideas as best you can, parrying thrusts with whatever answers your authorities have pre-loaded into your head. If these defenses crumble, you may go back to the trusted sources. They probably don't have to give you a convincing refutation of the anxiety-producing argument that breached your defenses, just the assurance that you nonetheless are right. But if the arguments against you become overwhelming and persistent, you either concede the point--which may put the whole lot at risk--or you simply insist you are right and walk away, clutching your beliefs more tightly than ever.

That's what authoritarian followers tend to do. And let's face it, it's an awfully easy stand to take. You have to know a lot nowadays to stake out an intelligent, defensible position on many issues. But you don't have to know anything to insist you're right, no matter what. Dogmatism is by far the best fall-back defense, the most impregnable castle, that ignorance can find. It's also a dead give-away that the person doesn't know why he believes what he believes.

To illustrate, evidence has been slowly mounting over the years that sexual orientation is, to some extent, biologically determined. Particular genes may have a say, events in the prenatal environment may play a role, and so on. The upshot is that people *may* have about as much control over which gender attracts them as they do over their eye color. I present this evidence in my introductory psychology classes

when we are discussing prenatal development, and sometimes I run a little study to see if the findings have had any effect on people's attitudes toward homosexuals.

Some of my students do become more accepting, and people in general say such biological findings have led them to feel more positive toward homosexuals. But High RWAs seldom move an inch. When I ask them why, they typically say they still believe homosexuals have chosen to be homosexuals, and if homosexuals wanted to they could become heterosexual. The evidence of any biological determination simply bounces off their hardened position. You might as well talk to a brick wall. Thus authoritarian followers may really mean it when they say no discoveries or facts could change their beliefs about the important things in life.⁶

You can often find elements of dogmatism in religion. Thus I have asked people who believe in the traditional God, "What would be required, what would have to happen, for you to not believe in the traditional Judeo-Christian God? That is, are there conceivable events, or evidence, that would lead you to not believe? Virtually all right-wing authoritarians say there simply is nothing that could change their minds.

Here's another example. I have often asked students and parents how they would react if an archaeological discovery revealed that most of the Gospels came from an earlier Greek myth. *Suppose* a parchment were discovered that clearly predated the time of Jesus, but it contained almost all of the New Testament accounts of his teachings and his life, including the crucifixion and resurrection. Only the central character is someone named Attis who lived in Asia Minor after being born of a virgin and a Zeus-like god. The parchment is inspected and tested by scientists and declared to be genuine and from an era before Jesus' time. Scholars eventually conclude that the long forgotten myth of Attis was adapted and embellished by a group of Jewish reformers during the Roman occupation of Palestine, and there never was a Jesus of Nazareth.

I remind my subjects that the whole story is made-up. But IF this all actually happened, I ask them, what effect would it have on their beliefs in Jesus' divinity? Most Christians acknowledge that they would have to qualify their belief. They seldom say their faith would disappear, but they confess they would be less certain than they had been before. But the great majority of high RWA Christians do not budge at all. They say their belief in Jesus is based on personal experience and could never be affected by such a discovery. Others say, "I know it would be a test by God to see if I would remain true." Others respond, "This would just be one of Satan's tricks."⁷

Perhaps one should admire such conviction. One person's dogmatism is another person's steadfast commitment. But if authoritarian followers *are* mistaken about something, will they ever realize it? Not likely, for they appear to have been inoculated against catching the truth when they are wrong.

Before I close this chapter I want to remind us that none of the shortcomings we have discussed is some mysterious illness that only afflicts high RWAs. They just have extra portions of quite common human frailties. The difference in their inability to discover a conclusion is false, in the inconsistency of their ideas, in their use of double standards, and so on are all *relative*, not absolute. Almost everyone rationalizes, thinks he's superior, etcetera. When high RWAs condemn "political correctness" and we say they are "kettles calling the pot black," we should bear in mind the darkness of our own kettle.

A Little Application

That said, let's take what we have learned in this chapter about how authoritarian followers think and see if it explains what otherwise might seem quite baffling. Beginning in late 2001, the Bush administration stated that Saddam Hussein was a source of terrorist activities around the world, and frequently implied he was

involved in the attacks of September 11th, even though nearly all the attackers had come from Saudi Arabia, and none had come from Iraq. The administration also said Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, even though United Nations inspectors had never found any, so an invasion of Iraq was necessary. A choir of “theocons” seconded this “neocon” outlook with the argument, however implausible, that it was *highly moral* to start a war with Iraq. In fact, it was God’s will.⁸

The polls showed most Americans supported the president, although a significant minority did not. Besides observing that no terrorist connections had been demonstrated, and no “WMDs” or facilities for making them had been discovered, critics said an invasion would make it easier for Muslim fanatics to launch suicide attacks on Americans, and would probably tie down America’s mobile armed forces for years to come because civil war was likely to develop after Saddam’s removal. They also observed that the war would seem not only unjustified to most Muslims, but totally unfair given America’s greatly superior military forces. An American/British slam-dunk victory would probably create so much hatred for those countries in Islam that the number of zealots plotting terrorist attacks against them would probably *increase* rather than decrease as a result of the war. It *would* prove a monumental step in the war against terror--but backwards.

The critics were castigated by administration officials and their backers with a vehemence not seen since the anti-Vietnam war protests. Those who urged caution were denounced, even as late as the fall of 2006, as traitors, fools, and idiots by officials and supporters who will likely never admit that the critics were proved right. For after the successful military invasion of Iraq, no pre-existing ties to al-Qaida were discovered and no weapons of mass destruction were found. Some Americans then realized their country had invaded another country on false premises--which would seem to be very wrong morally, and which would have outraged many supporters of the war had certain other countries done such a thing. But several months after the administration itself conceded that no weapons of mass destruction had been

discovered, pollsters found a lot of Americans believed such weapons *had been found*.⁹ And for these believers and others the new justification for the invasion, viz., to remove Saddam and bring freedom to Iraq, to make it a shining example in the Middle East of what democracy will bring, was good enough anyway.

But as American casualties steadily mounted after the war was declared over, and as chaos descended upon Iraq, and as the Bush administration had no response other than, “We know this is the right thing to do, no matter what,” and as the war helped drive the national debt to such unprecedented heights that the United States became the world’s largest debtor, most Americans finally saw the war had become a national disaster.

Still, nationwide polls for Newsweek, CNN, and USA Today revealed that in October 2006, as the mid-term election drew near, 40 percent of the American people did *not* think the United States made a mistake in invading Iraq, 30 to 34 percent approved of President Bush’s handling of the situation in Iraq, 30 percent said the administration did not misinterpret or misanalyze the intelligence reports they said indicated Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and 36 percent said the administration had not purposely misled the public about this evidence to build support for the war. Thirty-seven percent even thought the U.S. military effort was going “well” (either “fairly” or “very”)” And 35 to 37 percent approved of how Bush was doing his job in general, while 35 percent also were satisfied with the way things were going in the country. In all cases, the solid majority of Americans saw it otherwise. But you have to wonder, who were all those people who thought everything was fine?

Well, what’s not to understand, if that hard-core of supporters mainly consists of authoritarian followers, given what the experiments described in this chapter show us about them? The justification for the war in the first place was largely irrelevant to high RWAs. They liked the conclusion; the reasoning didn’t matter. If the United Nations refused to sanction the war, so what? There’s no contradiction, in a highly

compartmentalized mind, between believing that America stands for international cooperation and the peaceful resolution of conflict on the one hand, while on the other hand insisting it has the “right” to attack whomever it wants, no matter how weak they are, whenever it wants for whatever reasons *it* decides are good enough. Those who protested were trouble-makers; everyone should support the government.

If no connections to al-Qaida and no weapons of mass destruction turned up after the invasion, just believe they had turned up. An aluminum tube that could have been designed to help enrich uranium *was* used to enrich uranium, *proving* Saddam was making atomic bombs! Trailers that could have been used to make biological weapons *were* used to make them.¹⁰ Besides, people whom the followers look to, such as the evangelist Franklin Graham (son of Billy Graham) said they still believed Saddam had such weapons, even if there was no evidence he had. And anyway, if the first reason for the war comes up lame, just invent a new one. Everybody knows Saddam is our *biggest* problem! And when later the president insisted he never said America would “stay the course” in Iraq, when actually he had said it over and over again, most people knew that was an outright, almost pathological lie. But it would not make much of a dent on an authoritarian follower’s mind, which is quite capable of believing white is black when his authority says so.

Authoritarian followers aren’t going to question, they’re going to parrot. After all, in the ethnocentric mind “We are the Good Guys and our opponents are abominations”--which is precisely the thinking of the Islamic authoritarian followers who become suicide bombers in Iraq. And if we turn out not to be such good guys, as news of massacres and the torture and murder of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers, by the CIA, and by the arms-length “companies” set up to torture prisoners becomes known, authoritarian followers simply don’t want to know. It was just a few, lower level “bad apples.” Didn’t the president say he was sickened by the revelations of torture, and all American wrong-doers would be punished?

However the policy came from the top, and the administration scrambled to make sure *it* could not be punished. When the White House said it would veto a bill *because* it prohibited cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of prisoners, you had to be nearly blind not to realize what was going on. When the White House also insisted, successfully, that Congress pass a bill allowing it to use torture, you had to be completely blind. But high RWAs are quite capable of such blindness.

And while most Americans came to realize what a mistake the war in Iraq has turned out to be, high RWAs lagged far behind. They listen to the news they want to hear. They surround themselves with people who think like they do. They believe the leaders who tell them what they want to be told. They make about as much effort to get both sides of an issue as the Bush administration does to foster different points of view within the White House. And if six high RWAs are sitting in a room talking about the war, and all six now have misgivings, it will still be hard for any of them to say so because the ethic of group solidarity is so strong in the authoritarian mind.

Is there any conceivable evidence or revelation that will lead them to admit the war was a mistake? I suspect some of them will eventually, begrudgingly reach that point, and others will rewrite their personal histories and say they had their doubts from the start.¹¹ But others, petrified by their dogmatism, will never admit the undeniable. Did they ever about Viet-Nam? No. “We just didn’t use enough force!”-- which is exactly the argument those who proposed the invasion of Iraq are using now as they tried to shift the blame for the failure of their incredibly unsound policy.¹²

Chapter 4, “Authoritarian Followers and Religious Fundamentalism,” will be released on this website on February 5.

Notes

¹ Although it pains me deeply I am going to continue my pledge of not choking the narrative of this book with numbers. So when I say “most” of some group did something, I mean at least 51 percent did. When I say “a solid majority,” it means somewhere between 60 and 75 percent. When I say a “great majority” I mean over 75 percent. When I say “virtually everyone” I mean over 90 percent. [Back to Chapter](#)

² For the 99 percent of my readers (“virtually everyone”) who are blissfully younger than I, the quote is from a song in *The Music Man*, in which a traveling salesman whips the good citizens of River City, Iowa into a frenzy because a pool hall has opened in town. I know, I know, I should have found a hip-hop lyric instead. But... [Back to Chapter](#)

³ Why do high RWAs want to censor, for example, a racist when they themselves are prejudiced? Because they don't know they are, so a racist is a socially condemnable outsider to them. Furthermore, experiments show authoritarian followers are turned off by blatantly racist appeals. A skilled demagogue knows you play the “race card” best by disguising it as something else, like law and order. [Back to Chapter](#)

⁴ So if you've been thinking I've been talking about someone else as I described high RWAs, does that mean you are a high? No. Because low and moderate RWAs also think I am talking about someone else--and they are right. [Back to Chapter](#)

⁵ Once someone becomes a leader of the high RWAs' in-group, he can lie with impunity about the out-groups, himself, whatever, because he knows the followers will seldom check on what he says, nor will they expose themselves to people who set the record straight. Furthermore they will not believe the truth if they somehow get exposed to it, and if the distortions become absolutely undeniable, they will rationalize it away and put it in a box. If the scoundrel's duplicity and hypocrisy lands him on the front page of every daily in the country, the followers will still forgive him if he just says the right things.

As a consequence, I think, politicians, authors and commentators who lead the authoritarian followers in our society get seduced by how easy it is to just lie about things, from obfuscation to equivocation to prevarication. For a charming example of this, read *They Never Said It* by Paul F. Boller, Jr. and John George (1989, New York: Oxford University Press). As one reads through all the misquotes, distortions and inventions attributed to Washington, Lincoln, Lenin, and so on, one is struck first by how many of these falsehoods originated, predictably, with political extremists. Then one notices that most of the time, they were right-wing extremists, as Boller and George themselves noted (p. x).

Often the quotes get picked up by other, un-checking right-wingers and spread like wild-fire (pp. 15-16 in *They Never Said It*). One can easily find examples of left-wingers doing this too, and I say “a plague on both their houses.” But right-wing leaders appear to do it more, and one reason might be that they know it’s easier for them to get away with it with their devoted readers, listeners, viewers, followers. (Another reason, we shall see two chapters hence, is that the people most likely to become the leaders of right-wing authoritarians simply don’t believe very much in telling the truth.) [Back to Chapter](#)

⁶More powerful yet, as we saw in Chapter 2, is the effect on an authoritarian follower of personally knowing a homosexual. And I have found that the few high RWAs who score low in dogmatism *are* influenced by the biological findings. So I don’t mean to say that all high RWAs are so dogmatic that they will *never* change their positions. (If I give you the impression anywhere in this book that I have discovered Absolute Truths, I beg you to flay me with angry Comments.) But I do believe the evidence to date indicates high RWAs tend to be more dogmatic than most people.

Another thing that I’ll bet would change authoritarian followers’ opinions quite dramatically is a reversal of position by their trusted authorities. Remember when Richard Nixon went to China to normalize the relationship? Suppose Lyndon Johnson, or Jimmy Carter had done it instead. [Back to Chapter](#)

⁷ Very *unauthoritarian* people can also be dogmatic on the same issue--although not as dogmatic as high RWAs. Bruce Hunsberger and I asked a sample of active American atheists the same question, only it was along the lines, “Is there anything conceivable that could happen that would make you believe in the traditional God?” Fifty-one percent of them said no--which is a lot, but not nearly the 91% of the high RWAs in a large sample of Manitoba parents surveyed in 2005 who said nothing conceivable could make them *not* believe in the traditional God. Most (64%) of our active atheists also said they would be uninfluenced by the discovery of a “Roman file on Jesus” that confirmed much of the Gospels, including the resurrection--but 76% of those aforementioned high RWA Manitoba parents said the discovery of the “Attis” scrolls would not lower their belief in the divinity of Jesus. See *Atheists*, by B. Hunsberger and B. Altemeyer, 2006: Prometheus Press, Chapter 4.

Are you surprised that I described a study in which people who are probably quite low RWAs looked bad? I try to develop testing situations that will let both high and low authoritarians show their virtues or their warts, and sometimes the low RWAs look bad too. I always report those findings. But so far they’re pretty rare, especially compared with the high authoritarians’. [Back to Chapter](#)

⁸See Damon Linker’s, “The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege,” by Doubleday, 2006. [Back to Chapter](#)

⁹ The United States government called off further searches for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq on January 12, 2005, conceding none had been found. A Harris Poll taken the following month found that 36% of the American public believed such weapons *had* been found--a drop of only 2 percent from a pre-concession poll taken in November 2004. By December 2005 the figure had fallen to 26 percent, but that’s still a quarter of the American people. [Back to Chapter](#)

¹⁰ Dunwoody, Plane, Rice and Rothrock thus found that as late as August 2005 and January 2006 high RWA Pennsylvania college students were likely to have inaccurate perceptions of the war in Iraq in all the areas tested. They believed Iraq had used chemical or biological weapons against American troops, that Iraq's government was highly connected with al-Qaida, that Americans had found evidence in Iraq that Saddam was working closely with al-Qaida, that most people in the world favored the United States' going to war in Iraq, and so did most people in Europe. They also believed that the U.S. had found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but this was only statistically significant at the .09 level. In general the students were better informed than the American public as a whole, but the authoritarian followers among them still carried a lot of demonstrably erroneous beliefs around in their heads.

McWilliams and Keil's nationwide poll of 1000 Americans in 2005 found a correlation of .51 between RWA scores and being satisfied with "the job President Bush and his administration are doing." [Back to Chapter](#)

¹¹ An NBC News/Wall St. Journal poll released on December 12, 2006 found only 23% of Americans still approved of President Bush's policy on Iraq. Support on this issue is boiling down to the bed rock of hard-core right-wing authoritarians, who seem to make up roughly 20-25% of the American public. The same poll, and several others at the same time, found 34% still gave Bush's overall performance positive marks. A month later, on the eve of Bush's address to the nation pushing for a "surge" in troop strength in Iraq, a Gallup poll found his overall approval rating had dropped to 26%. A CBS News Poll on January 22, 2007 put the figure at 28%.

At the end of 2006 an Ipsos Poll of the American public for AP/AOL News found the president was spontaneously named the baddest "bad guy" on the planet more often (25%) than anyone else. But he was also named by others the best "good guy" more (13%) than anyone else. GWB was also spontaneously named the "most admired man" in the annual Gallup Poll at the end of the year--again by 13% of the respondents, more than anyone else.. [Back to Chapter](#)

¹² When bad news spills out about things that high RWAs support, they *want* to be told it isn't true. So some governments have gotten used to issuing "non-denial denials" and flimsy counter-arguments, because that's all it takes and it's so effortless. If a well-researched paper by a prestigious scientific body concludes that human activity is seriously increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, culprit governments will say "the evidence is incomplete" and they will find *someone, somewhere, with some* sort of credentials, who will dismiss a great number of studies with a wave of the hand and give them the sound-bite they want.

When someone responds to evidence with "a wave of the hand" or a bland dismissal like "It's just nonsense," they're usually revealing they can't say anything more specific because they're whopped. But the government's supporters will be reassured. For them, one sound bite cancels the other, and there really is no difference between a widely-confirmed fact and a speculation, between fifty studies and one.

To take a non-political example of walking extra miles for authorities, when people first began to reveal they had been sexually assaulted as children by priests and ministers, bishops often issued statements saying they had thoroughly investigated the charge and found it had no merit. That was good enough for the authoritarian followers. If the evidence nevertheless grew against Father X, church authorities asked the public, "Whom are you going to believe, this obviously disturbed person who claims to have been assaulted, or the Church?" That too was an easy one for the high RWAs.

If it eventually became known that the bishops' own inquiries had discovered that Father X was indeed a pedophile, but the bishops still denied he was and sometimes even quietly transferred Father X to another parish, where he sexually assaulted still more children, do you think the high RWAs learned anything from this? How many "disconnects" do you think they have at hand to avoid realizing *they allowed themselves* to be deceived?

I fear you will wait a long time before authoritarian followers wise up to their chosen leaders, and to themselves--and their leaders know it. When the Watergate revelations were sinking his ratings in the polls, Richard Nixon pointed out to his chief of staff, H. R. Haldemann, "I think there's still a hell of a lot of people out there...[who] want to believe. That's the point, isn't it?" "Why sure," Haldemann replied. "Want to and do." (Conversation of April 25, 1973 recorded on the "Watergate tapes," reported by the *New York Times* on November 22, 1974, p. 20.)

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