

EDITOR'S PICK

Public Health column: Philosophy, faith, science and vaccines

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It is hard to be human. We do not know what we do not know.

How do we discern truth from fiction? It is a classic human problem giving rise to a branch of philosophy as old as civilization and language. Empiricism - the theory of knowledge.

Prior to the start of the Scientific Revolution in the 17th century and the practice of the scientific method, magical thinking almost entirely ruled human civilization. Today, we now know a solar eclipse is a particular astronomical event in which the moon passes between the Earth and the Sun. Ancient people, who did not have access to the Google search bar, were justifiably terrified.

Unlike modern humans, they received no forewarning. But the phenomenon had to be explained somehow, fodder for great mythologies about demons and dragons and gods and celestial battles.

Now, we chase solar eclipses for fun. Yet so much else remains a mystery. Hundreds of years after the birth of the Scientific Revolution, most people do the best they can with the information available to them, the beliefs they inherited, the education they received, and the lived experience they survived.



Amber Johnson
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Indeed, our current struggle is not with the lack of information, but the endless amounts of it.

The internet is a "choose your own adventure" labyrinth; a labyrinth is defined as "an intricate combination of paths or passages in which it is difficult to find one's way or to reach the exit." Sit alone in your house long enough, trip down a few rabbit holes, and you too could be convinced the earth is flat and the moon landing was staged. "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

And if you want "proof" for something you already believe in, you will be sure to find it on the World Wide Web. Misinformation, selective facts, false studies, propaganda, altered photos and videos, artificial intelligence, greedy pharmaceutical corporations, exploitative gurus, corrupt politicians. What is up and what is down? Pundits screaming at each other on the 24/7 "news" cycle. People screaming at each other on Facebook 24/7. Reason and critical thinking have been lost in the chaotic milieu.

All this noise has created epidemic levels of distrust and confusion. Distrust in our institutions, distrust in our neighbors, distrust in ourselves. Many people are not talking to each other anymore; they have retreated into camps and taken sides.

It is the year 2025, but it is no wonder that increasing numbers of people do not want to get vaccinated. If the echo chamber you belong to repeatedly tells you that you will get blood clots and that your children will get autism, you will not get vaccinated and you will not vaccinate your children. And it makes complete sense. People still do not know what they do not know.

Grace urges us to remember that most people are doing the best they can to figure out how to live and survive, let alone thrive, as one of billions of humans on an absurd ride through time on a round and spinning rock.

Faith and science

Unless you claim omniscience (you know all things), life requires us to embrace a certain level of mystery. This is often where faith comes into the equation. Be we religious or atheist, I would argue that we are all people of faith. Faith is trust or confidence in someone or something; it is certitude without total proof.

When I drive across a bridge, I have faith it will hold my weight. I do not study engineering blueprints and interview the construction crew for every bridge I cross. Instead, I trust that Lewis and Clark County and the state of Montana have hired educated and experienced engineers, project managers and construction workers to build, test and maintain safe infrastructure that will get me from point A to point B with low probability of death. As we all know, bridges fail sometimes. They do not fail often, but it happens. I choose to travel anyway. So far, so good.

In the context of this particular argument, vaccines are no different than bridges. I have reason to believe vaccines work; not 100% proof, but general certitude. Brilliant scientists, researchers, doctors and nurses have been working on the science of vaccines for hundreds of years, resulting in incredible health outcomes we now take for granted.

Here is a list of communicable diseases almost forgotten about in the Western world thanks to vaccines: polio, tetanus, hepatitis b, hepatitis a, rubella, hib, measles, pneumococcal disease, rotavirus, mumps, rabies and diphtheria. The symptoms and side effects of some of these diseases are too brutal to describe at length. Sadly, measles is staging a comeback due to a lag in childhood immunizations.

According to Statista and the Journal of the American Medical Association, over the past 160 years, life expectancy (from birth) in the United States rose from 39.4 years in 1860, to 76.4 years in 2021. One of the major reasons for the overall increase in life expectancy in the last two centuries is the fact that the infant and child mortality rates decreased by so much during this time, in large part because of vaccinations.

Just 100 years ago, in 1924, life expectancy for American men was 56.1 years; life expectancy for American women was 58.5. Modern medical advancements, vaccines included, have given us an extra 20 years of life span. That is 20 years of reasons to have faith in the safety and efficacy of vaccines, among other medical marvels like penicillin and insulin.


Finally, having faith in the science of vaccines does not mean you cannot also hold faith in the religious or spiritual tradition of your choice. Too often religious faith and science are pitted against each other in some needless wrestling match. The two are not diametrically opposed.



Many incredible scientists, including vaccine scientists, have also been people of great faith.

Edward Jenner himself, the father of vaccine science in the Western world, was a committed Christian. He was concerned that the glory and praise for his work should not be credited to himself but go to the God who created him and used him to save more lives than any other person on Earth.


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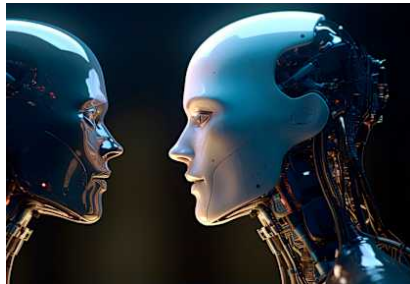
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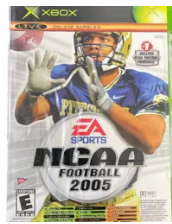
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