

Nydwracu's Fnords

Posted on May 24, 2014 by Scott Alexander



I

The fnords first appear in Anton-Wilson and Shea's book *Illuminatus*. Educators, operating as tools of the titular conspiracy, hypnotize all primary school children to have a panic reaction to the trigger word "fnord". The children, who remember nothing of the sessions when they wake up, are incapable of registering the word except as an unexplained feeling of unease.

This turns them into helpless, easily herded adults. Every organ of the media – newspapers, books, cable TV – contains a greater or lesser number of fnords. When some information is counter to the aims of the conspiracy – maybe a communist party organizing in a state where the conspiracy wears a capitalist hat – the secret masters don't bother censoring or suppressing it. Instead, the newspaper reports it on the front page, but fills the article with fnords. Most people read partway through, become very uncomfortable and upset without knowing why, and decide that communists are *definitely* bad people for some reason or other and there's no reason they need to continue reading the article. Why should they worry about awful things like that when there's the whole rest of the paper to read?

According to the book, the only section of the newspaper without any fnords at all is the advertisements.



Last week, some Internet magazine published the latest attempt at the genre of Did You Know Neoreaction Exists You Should Be Outraged. A couple of reactionaries wrote the usual boring “actually, nothing you said was true, why would you say false things?” responses. Nydwracu, a frequent commenter on this blog, did something I thought was *much* more interesting. He wrote a post called [Fnords](#) where he removed all of the filler words and transitions between ideas and thin veneer of argument until he stripped the essay down to the bare essentials. It looked like this:

Mouthbreathing Machiavellis Dream Of A Silicon Reich
strange and ultimately doomed stunt flamboyant act of corporate
kiss-assery latest political fashion California Confederacy total
corporate despotism potent bitter Steve Jobs Ayn Rand Ray
Kurzweil prominent divisive fixture hard-right seditionist
aggressively dogmatic blogger reverent following in certain
tech circles prolific incomprehensible vanguard youngish white
males embittered by “political correctness” Blade Runner, but
without all those Asian people cluttering up the streets like to
see themselves as the heroes of another sci-fi movie “redpilled”
The Matrix “genius” a troll who belches from the depths of an
Internet rabbit hole frustrated poet cranky letters to alternative
weekly newspapers preoc-

cupations with domineering strongmen angry pseudonym J.R.R. Tolkien George Lucas typical keyboard kook archaic, grandiose snippets cherry-picked from obscure old lack of higher ed creds overconfident autodidact's imitation fascist teenage Dungeon Master most toxic arguments snugly wrapped in purple prose and coded language oppressive nexus teeth-gnashing white supremacists who haunt the web "men's rights" advocates nuts disillusioned typical smarmy, meandering (Sure. Easy!) Incredible as it sounds, absolute dictatorship may be the least objectionable tenet espoused by the Dark Enlightenment neoreactionaries. Chinese eugenics impending global reign of "autistic nerds These imaginary übermensch sprawling network of blogs, sub-Reddits old-timey tyrants basically racism scientific-sounding euphemism familiar tropes of white victimhood perhaps best known for his infamous slavery apologia poor, persecuted Senator Joe McCarthy. Big surprise. pseudo-intellectual equivalent of a Gwar concert, one sick stunt after another, calculated to shock the attention he so transparently craves "silly not scary" "all of these people need to relax: P.G. Wodehouse football get drunk Internet curio "sophisticated neo-fascism" must be confronted "creepy" future-fascist dictator sadly Koch brothers no matter how crazy your ideas are, radicalism neoreactionaries flatter the prejudices of the new Silicon Valley elite enemies patchwork map of feudal Europe Forget universal rights; signposts of the neoreactionary fantasyland anti-democratic authoritarianism bigotry blue-sea libertarian dream extreme libertarian advocacy Ted Cruz libertarian a small and shallow world a dictatorial approach mythical

“god-kings” Stupid proles! They don’t deserve our brilliance! shockingly common would never occur to other people precisely because they’ve refused to leave that stage of youthful live forever escape to outer space or an oceanic city-state play chess against a robot that can discuss Tolkien fantasies childhood imagination perhaps too generous the fundamental problem with these mouthbreathers’ dreams of monarchy. They’ve never role-played the part of the peasant.

That... sure gives one a different perspective on political discourse. I am reminded of those Renaissance artists who secretly cut up cadavers to learn what was inside people, and from then on all of their human figures would be a little bit creepy because you could almost see how the internal bones and muscles were animating the flesh.

Since no one is meta and everyone only pays attention to things when it’s their own opinions under threat, I suppose I have to do the same thing with [an article from some website on the right](#):

socialism completely government run pure single-payer “an island of socialism in American healthcare” that won’t change a thing in fact it’s a distraction excessive delays tragically predictable bureaucratic rationing price controls, inefficiencies, and the inevitable cover-ups bureaucratic incentives statist VA healthcare system mirrors the government-run healthcare problems slipshod failure run-amok bureaucrats don’t tell me the problem is not enough government

money the Paul Krugmans of the world and their leftist allies socialist medicine socialism doesn't work who opposed market choice and competition Senator Harry Reid and House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi Obamacare job-destroying tax and regulatory provisions

Interestingly, both of those came out to between 13 and 14% of the length of the original article. I wonder if that's some kind of iron law.

III

I don't know if he ever read *Illuminatus* or whether it was just one of those coincidences, but Jonathan Haidt [did the thing with the fnords in real life](#).

(Warning: a tangentially related study by the same group has recently [failed to replicate](#))

He wanted to test the role of disgust in moral judgments. So he hypnotized a bunch of people to feel disgust at a trigger word – “takes” for half the participants, “often” for the other half – and hypnotically instructed them to forget all about this. Then in an “unrelated study” he asked them to rate the morality of different ethically controversial vignettes. For example:

*“A brother and sister fall in love with each other. They frequently **take** vacations together where they have sex. Both are freely con-*

senting and she is on very careful birth control.”

or

*“A brother and sister fall in love with each other. They **often** go on vacations together where they have sex. Both are freely consenting and she is on very careful birth control.”*

The participants hypnotized to hate the word “take” found the behavior more objectionable with the “take” version of the vignette than the “often” version, and the participants hypnotized to hate the word “often” displayed the opposite pattern. When they asked subjects to explain their judgment, they gave perfectly reasonable explanations, which could be anything from “incest is just wrong” to “what if they have a child and it’s deformed, yeah, I know it said they were on birth control, but it still bothers me.”

Then Haidt and his team presented the following story:

*“Dan is student council president. It is his job to pick topics for discussion at student meetings. He frequently **takes** suggestions from students and teachers on which topic to choose.”*

or

*“Dan is student council president. It is his job to pick topics for discussion at student meetings. He **often** accepts suggestions from students and teachers on which topic to choose.”*

Participants were asked to judge how evil a person Dan was. And when their trigger word was in the sentence, their answer was: pretty evil! When asked to explain themselves, they came up with weird justifications like “Dan is a popularity-seeking snob” or “It just seems he’s up to something”.

IV

A few weeks ago, I noticed something strange.

Every time someone complains about climate denial, they make extraordinary efforts to get the name of the Koch brothers in. Like it’s never just “Why do so many people believe climate denialism?” it’s more “Why do so many people believe climate denialism, as funded by people like the Koch brothers?”

This is strange because it seems to me that they are acting like associating climate denialism with the Koch brothers will lower its credibility or make it sound vaguely evil.

But this shouldn’t work. The only thing the average person knows about the Koch brothers is that they are people who fund climate change denial. So if you already don’t like climate change denial, this will make you dislike the Koch brothers. But mentioning “Koch brothers!” won’t make you dislike climate change denial more, it will just remind you of one of the downstream effects of your disliking climate change (not liking the Kochs). On the other hand, if you’re still neutral on climate change denial, then you have no rea-

son to dislike the Kochs, and mentioning them won't help you there either. And if you actively support climate denial, you probably think the Koch brothers are heroes, so associating them with the movement won't be a good way of discrediting it.

Basically, since your opinion of the Koch brothers should equal your opinion of climate denial, trying to tar climate denial by association with the Kochs is trying to make people dislike an idea by linking it to itself. It shouldn't work.

But I think it does. When you read articles on the other side, they always mention Al Gore. In fact, there are a lot of these people who get brought up as bogeymen every so often.

I have two boring hypotheses and an interesting one.

The first boring hypothesis is that the Koch brothers are white male billionaires. This is enough to make them suspicious. Therefore, global warming skepticism is tarred by association with them, even though we know nothing else about them.

The second boring hypothesis is that it doesn't matter who the Koch brothers are, what matters is the claim that there is some figure funding the movement, that it's not a grassroots upswelling of people genuinely doubtful of global warming, but just one guy (well, two guys) trying to inflict their own weird contrarianism on everyone else.

The interesting hypothesis is that the brain is [going loopy](#), having one of those rare experiences where it forgets not to condition on itself.

Imagine that you don't like climate denialism. You hear that the Koch brothers support climate denialism. You use that information to decide you don't like the Koch brothers very much.

Then a month passes and you forget *exactly* why you don't like the Koch brothers. You just have a very strong feeling that "it just seems like they're up to something."

Then someone tells you the Koch brothers support denialism. And you say: "If *those bastards* support it, then I hate it *even more!*"

In other words, you have undergone a two step process to ratchet up your dislike of climate denialism by associating it with itself.

We know this idea is evil because it's pushed by such terrible people. We know the people are terrible because they push such an evil idea.

— [Scott Alexander \(@slatestarcodex\), May 18, 2014](#)

I wonder if this is part of what makes politics so divisive. You start off with a weak preference in one direction. Gradually, certain words like "Koch brothers" or "Exxon Mobil" become fnoords, reservoirs of your negative feelings, and then every time you read about

climate change, even if there's no real argument, you get triggered and become pretty sure denialists are up to something, in the same way Dan the student council president is up to something. And the other side gets different fnords – “Climategate”, “hockey stick graph”, and they go through the same process. And finally you get totally incomprehensible arguments: “But how can you be a climate change denier when that associates you with the Koch brothers?! Did you know climate change denialism is *literally* sponsored by the Heartland Institute?!” And the other side is just nodding their head and going “Oh, yeah, my sister used to work there.”

V

IF YOU DON'T SEE THE FNORD IT CAN'T EAT YOU