

5.2 Own Your Echo Chamber

Recognize your default influences and make an effort to get out of the bubble they create.

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It's easy to get trapped in your own echo chamber and only surround yourself with people who think like you and consume similar media. If you succumb to this temptation, however, you will limit your ability to investigate your own bias. This will leave you at the mercy of the content you consume and the people who shape your opinions. At its most extreme, you may find yourself caught up in a belief system or a social circle that makes you blind to what's really happening in your world and unable to see your shackles.

Plato's Cave is a famous allegory depicting this state. A group of prisoners live chained in a cave, facing a blank wall. Objects passing behind them are projected onto the wall of the cave by a fire at the cave's entrance. The prisoners, unaware that what they see is but a pale shadow of life, name the shadows and believe them to be real. Owning your echo chamber is the equivalent of breaking out of the cave and investigating life as it is, not merely its reflection.

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- The ability to see all sides of a situation is a prerequisite to thinking critically and seeing often-hidden truths.
- Periodically challenging and updating your worldview is necessary for personal growth.

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- Admitting to uncertainty or a lack of knowledge can be frightening.
- Listening deeply to views we disagree with can feel like a waste of time and energy.

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When we've been exposed exclusively to particular patterns of thought, it's hard to see them as anything other than facts. If you grew up in a religious community, for example, you may believe the Bible is the literal truth without giving it a second thought. If you are a member of a pro-gun community, you will not hear a lot from those who wish to make it harder to own an assault rifle.

Many of us find it nearly impossible to challenge deeply ingrained beliefs on our own. Instead of exploring our own beliefs, we prefer to defend them with rhetoric. Strawman tactics, for example, purposely simplify or distort the views of others to misrepresent them and thus win the debate. We have a tendency to view our own arguments as soldiers in a war and feel compelled to defend them, even those that may be weak or unconvincing. If each argument is a soldier, then letting go of one is akin to stabbing a fellow soldier in the back on the field of battle. This approach blocks off the possibility of changing our minds and learning new truths.

If we wish to counter these tendencies, we need to become curious enough about alternatives to consciously expose ourselves to other viewpoints and, in doing so, empower our inner skeptic. One way to do this is to adopt the steelman approach. As the name suggests, the steelman is the opposite of the strawman. Instead of tearing down your opponent's argument, you bolster it to its strongest

form before attacking it. Even if you don't agree with it fully, you may be able to discover some valuable insights this way.

To really get outside your echo chamber, you'll need to be open to the possibility that much of what you currently believe may be erroneous. If you're conservative, you may need to make an effort to read stories from the liberal media—and vice versa. Our natural biases may make it hard to do this, but they too should be challenged.

Exposing ourselves to many other points of view and other sources of news and information will help us to determine what is accurate and potentially break out of habits of thinking that are keeping us trapped. The ultimate point of this exercise isn't to prove ourselves right and others wrong but to discover the truth.

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1. Plato's Cave Allegory: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_cave.
 2. Strawman: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straw_man.
 3. Steelman: <https://umbrex.com/resources/tools-for-thinking/what-is-steelmannig/>.
 4. Arguments as soldiers: <https://www.lesswrong.com/tag/arguments-as-soldiers>.
 5. Tools for rational thinking and analyzing pseudoscience:
https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Main_Page.
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