6. Nguyen 2020: Cognitive islands and going off the rails

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I. Going off the rails?

We've seen arguments that polarization can be expected due to differential trust, limited memory, and selective sharing.

But none directly addressed what might seem to be the elephant in the room: lots of people believe that (to you) seem *nuts*.

QAnon; election fraud-vs.-fair.

Is that enough to dismiss the other side?

Nguyen: our dependence on experts, combined with the existence of *cognitive islands*, shows how reasonable people can easily go off the rails.

Q1: might *you* have gone off the rails? Q2: even if not, might those who have be no less reasonable than you—just less lucky?

Notice: this dynamic is not new. Religion vs. atheism. Capitalism vs. socialism.

II. Experts on the island

Recognize importance of social networks and trust for epistemic success.

So far we've focused on *epistemic peers*; but many of our core beliefs rely on identification of (apparent) *experts*.

Q: How can we do so reliably and rationally?

After all, *we* aren't experts!

In some cases this is no problem. We can rely on past track records and/or uncontroversial credentials. But this doesn't always work...

Mechanics; doctors; etc.

Classification of domains:

	Clear	Subtle
Linked	Car repairs	Particle Physics
Isolated	Axe-throwing	Morality? Aesthetics?

Q: linked *according to what?*

"Cognitive mainland" = Linked domains
"Cognitive islands" = Subtle, isolated domains

Rise of specialization: "You need to be an __-ologist to evaluate a __-ologist.

III. How pessimistic to be about cognitive islands?

Focus on moral judgment first.

Contrast between accepting empirical testimony vs. accepting moral testimony.

· "You car needs a new serpentine belt" vs.
· "Medical euthanasia is wrong."

Q: What's driving this contrast?

Nguyen: granting that there are moral experts, problem is how non-experts are to identify them.

Claim: morality is a cognitive island.

Cholbi:

P1 If you're a moral expert, you don't need moral advice.
P2 If you're not, you can't distinguish good moral advice from bad!
C. Moral advice is either unnecessary or unhelpful.

Nguyen's cases: Faster; Blind Spot; Corroboration.

Problem solved?

Objection: *agreement problem.* Partial experts must use their own judgment to assess putative experts. If the testifier agrees with them, at best judge them to be peers; if disagree, judge them to be less competent. So can't identify genuine *experts*!

Nguyen: We can use points and profiles of agreement to **bootstrap** our way to giving people extra trust.

IV. The danger of bootstrapping

Problem: the above method is *imperfect* at identifying experts.

What if we identify the *wrong* people as experts?

Public license problem: For cognitive islands, there's no hope of an *uncontroversial* indicator of expertise.

The risk is falling into a *runaway personal echo chamber* on domain D:

1) You rely on experts to check and reinforce your beliefs about D.
2) You evaluate experts' through deployment of your own beliefs/abilities about D.
3) There's no way to check expertise independent of your beliefs about D.

Compare to talk of "echo chambers"/"filter bubbles" in public discourse

· Not about whether message comes through, but about *trust*.
· Not necessarily a group of people.
· But technology may exacerbate, because increasing choice.

Q1: Has Nguyen's definition picked out what he intends?
Q2: How—if at all—does this apply to politics? E.g.: do political questions fall on cognitive islands? Discuss!

Margin notes:

Q: does that seem right?

Look at reasoning?
Reply: Just pushes the problem back. How to identify good reasoning?

Challenger; Explainer; Demonstrator.

Liberals: think Tucker Carlson.
Conservatives: think Barack Obama.

So experts don't reliably function as "safety net" or "guard rails".

Remember O'Connor & Weatherall!