

Constructive inquiry amidst fear and polarization

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As some issues divide opinion and create controversy, reasoned and critical inquiry could help develop empathetic understanding among people who need to work together. Whether climate change, public health, or socio-economic disparities, many debates polarize due to wide-ranging fear and uncertainty about the future. Above all, these feelings, especially the sentiment of fear, create deeply held impressions on the public view and political behavior. Widespread misinformation acts both as fuel and symptom of fear in the face of an uncertain future. We need to address this by promoting informed and rational civic conversation.

Understanding Fear and Its Impact on Political Behavior

Fear as an emotion is uniquely capable of influencing personal and collective decision-making. According to research (McGrew et al., 2018; Nabi et al., 2018), fear increases partisan polarization, reinforcing confirmation biases and deepening ideological cleavages. Individuals retire to their "echo chambers," looking for information that assures them in their belief systems and avoid others' messages. In this process, misinformation gets spread, and critical inquiry—real critical inquiry to solve problems with depth and nuance—is hindered. Studies (Hibbing et al., 2014) have found that the group of individuals exposed to a fear-inducing stimulus are more likely afterward to support authoritarian policies or leaders promising stability and protection. This may give a feeling of temporary security but most often sacrifices a much larger reward because of a long-term viable solution. Policy goals, for instance, set by the fear of economic insecurity and/or immigration can provide the breeding ground for unsustainable social cleavages and impede progress toward problem-solving in cooperation on a global scale.

The Role of Reason and Critical Inquiry

Reason and critical inquiry could work against the effects of fearful, reactive decision-making, at least from a normative perspective. We need to empirically test the effectiveness of this prescription though. If effective, reason and critical inquiry could open up possibilities to challenge assumptions, weigh available evidence, and consider other viewpoints—important precursors to well-considered, adaptive decisions. Similar to media literacy programs and even critical thinking courses in general, training in critical inquiry could enhance capacities to analyze credible information against misinformation. Such capabilities might reduce susceptibility to the fear mongering narrative (McGrew et al., 2018).

To this end, it is important to understand the psychological mechanisms through which emotions like fear influence political behavior. Drawing together insights

from psychology, sociology, and political science will help us devise strategies that channel emotions into constructive action rather than divisive rhetoric. For example, reframing socio-economic security concerns in terms of opportunities for collective growth, rather than as threats, can motivate more cooperative and forward-thinking solutions (Nabi et al., 2018).

Addressing Socio-Economic Security and Misinformation

Probably one of the most pervasive sources of fear in modern society is uncertainty about socio-economic security. The rising gap in income, job replacement by automation, and risks linked to climate change further raise the uncertainty, making those who are already vulnerable to socio-economic risks more vulnerable to misinformation and scapegoating. It is not just reassurance on the surface that will handle such fears but a deep transformation for equity, resilience, and transparency.

Equally important is countering misinformation. This is a process of not only debunking with facts, but also building an environment of information that prioritizes accuracy, context, and access to information. Platforms and policymaking will need to lead in ways that ensure public dialogue is evidence-based and not built on sensationalism.

Navigating an increasingly uncertain future requires instilling a culture of reasoned inquiry and critical thinking. It will be by addressing the psychological and socioeconomic roots of fear that we equip people with the ability to enter informed argument and constructive debate. We thereby prepare the ground upon which sustainable solutions that bridge ideological divides to create a future of mutual understanding, collaboration, and resilience may be achieved.

Etikk i praksis aims to contribute to this end by publishing papers that promote critical inquiry. In addition to the special issue articles introduced earlier, two more papers are included in the Open Section of this December 2024 Special Issue.

In the article “*What’s the beef with cultivated meat?*”, Henrik Andersson and Andrés G. Garcia question whether cultivated meat is truly an ethical solution to traditional meat production. While supporters argue that it could significantly reduce environmental harm and lessen the suffering of animals (Heidemann et al., 2020), the authors maintain that ethical concerns remain unresolved. Critics from a consequentialist viewpoint suggest that resources devoted to cultivated meat might be better used to tackle pressing global issues like hunger or climate change (Specht, 2020). From a deontological perspective, the use of animal-derived components, such as fetal bovine serum, raises ethical concerns about violating animals’ rights, particularly their bodily integrity (Van der Valk et al., 2018). Virtue ethics adds another layer, questioning whether consuming cultivated meat tacitly endorses exploitative practices and stifles moral progress (Alvaro, 2019). Symbolic concerns, such as parallels to eating human flesh replicas (Fischer & Ozturk, 2017), further suggest that cultivated meat might reinforce associations between animals and consumption. Despite these critiques, one could ask the question whether cultivated meat might serve as a transitional option for those hesitant to fully embrace veganism. The authors argue that efforts could be better directed toward promoting vegan diets and removing barriers to their widespread adoption. Before we can do this, we need to critically address unresolved issues related to how

cultivated meat fits within diverse cultural contexts, strategies for phasing out factory farming, and its implications for global food justice. There is a need to continue discussing these ethical dilemmas alongside practical considerations, exploring whether cultivated meat could support a larger shift toward sustainable and equitable food systems (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2022). As the article challenges the idea that cultivated meat is a definitive ethical solution, we should critically examine other unresolved issues.

Sean Clancy's paper, "*Jet Travel and Desert*", gives a rather contrarian look at climate ethics and, more precisely, the moral plausibility of lifelong travel pledges to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, according to Clancy, such pledges are usually morally impermissible insofar as they would deny individuals their due deserts. This perspective opens up a new tension between individual virtue and moral desert in applied ethics, adding significantly to the current debate on personal responsibility in climate change mitigation.

Clancy argues against the belief that personal emissions reductions, such as giving up air travel, are an effective way of combating climate change. Using the work of Sinnott-Armstrong and Kingston, he argues that if an action does not make a difference in the world, it cannot be morally justified. He further says that travel pledges require the personal costs of reduced well-being to be virtuous, yet this is not rewarded. He concludes that this inconsistency—the fact that individuals act selflessly without receiving what is owed to them—makes such pledges morally questionable.

The main contribution of the article is the application of desert theory to climate ethics, which challenges the assumptions that have been made so far about individual responsibility and altruistic behavior. However, there are a number of issues to be explored further. For example, there is a need to inquire whether Clancy's reliance on a desert framework risks overlooking more general collective benefits of creating a culture of climate-conscious behavior. Moreover, there is a need to further develop ideas related to systemic incentives and institutional accountability for the promotion of sustainability.

Indeed, further research is needed. We need to find out how we could reconcile the individual virtues in a manner to bring on system-level changes. We need to consider alternative understandings of our individual and collective roles to help in striking a balance between responsibilities for climate ethics. Works of this sort from Clancy further galvanize discussion on all the nuances accompanying personal sacrifices towards global sustainability.

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Note

The editors of this journal would like to note that, for this Special Issue honoring the contributions of Icelandic philosopher Vilhjálmur Árnason to applied ethics,

we have adopted the Icelandic citation custom of using the first names, rather than their last names, which is the usual practice in academic publications outside of Iceland. As such, we will refer to Icelandic authors by their first names both in in-text citations and in the reference list. In Icelandic naming conventions, last names are patronymic or matronymic and are not used in the same way as surnames in other cultures. Therefore, we believe it is more appropriate to follow the Icelandic custom and use first names for citation purposes. We also see this as an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the diverse practices our authors bring to the *Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics*.

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