

Chapter 11: Patterns of irrationality

Case 17: Pervasive bad ideas and misinformation

This Case considers bad ideas and misconceptions that are widespread, at least within a population of people. Examples include simple urban legends (rarely dangerous), beliefs now known from research to be wrong (e.g. eating honey helps with hay fever), and beliefs that might lead to sympathy with, or support for, more uncooperative people (e.g. thinking the 9/11 attacks were organized by Israeli intelligence to incriminate Muslims).

These beliefs may form small but mutually reinforcing networks but do not constitute an ideology with the backing of an organized group (covered in Case 19).

The recommendations given earlier in this book are relevant, especially Case 14 (small-scale), Case 15 (large-scale), and Case 5 (misconceptions in one-to-one encounters).

The following guidelines aim to shape a campaign that:

- addresses ignorance on a large scale; and
- addresses the other drivers of false belief, also on a large scale.

Address ignorance

Case 5 offered recommendations for tackling an isolated misconception. However, when there are related misconceptions and many people who hold them, a higher-level view is helpful.

Identify bundles of demonstrable facts that contradict the misconceptions directly and indirectly, and share them systematically across the campaign.

E.g. If there are people with misconceptions about differences in education between men and women then share facts about how many men and women have taken courses at different levels and in different subjects. Whatever the misconception, knowing more facts is likely to be progress. For example, some people might be surprised to learn that in the academic year 2019/20 in the UK, more women than men enrolled in STEM courses (HESA, 2020). This was not just because of their preference for subjects related to medicine. Women were also in the majority for courses in psychology, agriculture, food and related subjects, and

geographical and environmental sciences. For subjects outside STEM, the preponderance of women was much greater.

This kind of education is not infallible. Sometimes the evidence is too complicated or inconclusive to settle things. Sometimes there remains doubt on issues where doubt is the problem (e.g. mistaken worries that vaccines cause autism).

Partial, selective information can create a false impression so take care to cover all relevant facts fairly.

E.g. Teaching facts just about how the transatlantic slave trade operated is likely to leave a generally negative impression of Britain at that time and British people even today. A fuller coverage would include slavery in other civilisations before, during, and after; more detail on who enslaved black Africans in Africa and who transported them across the Atlantic; how the trade was abolished and by whom; how the slaves were freed; how the trade ban was enforced; where slavery continued even after the British had stopped it; and where in the world it continues illegally today.

Address drivers of false belief

Misconceptions are sometimes widespread because of factors that make them attractive. So it may be important to address relevant causes of false belief.

Social proof: If a person keeps hearing a widespread idea from lots of people then it can gain credibility from massive social proof. It may help to either (1) dispel the myth that most people believe the idea by showing the true proportion of people who believe it or (2) explain that many people have the belief but direct evidence shows it is false – so you will explain the direct evidence.

Tribal: An idea can be attractive if it seems to be supported by most people in a person's group. Agreeing with the idea may help cement their place in the group, raise their status, or be important to getting or keeping a job. Some branches of journalism, university teaching, and entertainment are populated by such a high proportion of left-leaning people that it is difficult to work in them without going along with it. In tackling false beliefs supported in this way, it may be helpful to acknowledge that the false belief is widespread in the group and give suggestions on how to cope if a person knows it is false.

E.g. Some people think that if a demographically defined group is in some way worse off than another (e.g. men have lower life expectancy than women) then that must be because the better off group has treated the worse off group badly. A person in a group that often uses this false inference may fear the consequences of knowing it is unreliable. They will need to think about how to justify acknowledging that other factors may be at work and disparities do not even prove bad treatment has occurred. That justification might say why it is in the best interests of the worse off group to understand the reasons correctly and not over-estimate the contribution of bad treatment.

Consistent with other beliefs and experiences: For example, if you have recently survived a bitter divorce then the idea that men or women are all bad may seem attractive and true. If you have been beaten up by a religious gang for being a

non-believer then you will more easily believe that everyone in the religion is dangerously aggressive. Misinterpreting single events and over-generalizing from them are mistakes often made. It may help to explicitly address this possibility as a contributing factor to a false belief.

Promising: The promise may be of rewards to the person (e.g. reparations, 'positive' discrimination, removal of competitors), punishment to someone they dislike, or both. They just need to agree with, endorse, and spread the idea and hope for the benefits. It may help to discuss the chances of these benefits being received (usually remote) and then focus on practical actions more likely to bring a better life.

Attractive to addicts: Some ideas are particularly attractive to addicts. For example, the idea that a little bit of alcohol is good for you, or that the 'war on drugs' is not working and racist so cannabis should be legalized. It is hard to make progress when addiction is the motive.

Reassuring: Perhaps the idea reassures some people. For example, many are reassured by claims that experts are wrong, especially when the experts recommend something the person does not like. Most people are happy to hear that they should 'go with their gut' because they worry that they are not good at thinking things through properly. Hearing that they are oppressed by someone else may be more reassuring than thinking about their own poor productivity and bad decisions. Learning that their life of crime is the inevitable result of bad parenting and failures by government relieves guilt. It may help to discuss the practical advantages of being realistic so that problems get solved instead of just trying to feel happier with them unsolved.

Case 18: Entrenched bad practices

Entrenched bad practices are practices still used widely even though there is now a much better alternative and plenty of time has passed to make changes. Historical examples include slavery, restricting voting to just high-status men, and useless medical treatments such as trepanning and blood-letting. Modern examples include homeopathy, unnecessarily large cars, boozing, ritual circumcision of children, takeaway cups made from bonded plastic and card, null hypothesis significance testing, complex numbers, budgetary control systems with fixed targets, Risk Listing, and calculating Internal Rate of Return.

Dislodging entrenched bad practices is harder because changing behaviour usually requires rearrangements that take time and effort to work out, especially if agreements with others must be revised.

In some cases there are many people to be influenced to switch from a bad practice to a better one.

E.g. When the recommended treatment for a disease changes there may be many doctors to tell about the change. They may be too busy to attend to messages, or forget. Even if there is no resistance, bad old practices take time to end.

Entrenched bad practices often have supporters who believe they have a vested interest in keeping them going, even if just to avoid being seen as people who promoted a bad idea for years. They may be making a living through consulting, a powerful job, book sales, training courses, software sales, or supplying staff. Their position of prominence, perceived expertise, and power may rest on the credibility and continued use of the bad practice.

Others may have no preference for the bad practice itself but think it would be easier to promote the dominant practice.

E.g. A politician who wants to seem to act on a problem might impose the bad practice because it is easy to agree even though it might prove ineffective eventually.

E.g. The chairperson of a national or international standards committee might want to be responsible for agreeing a standard and just want the method that is easiest to get agreed, regardless of quality. That may seem to be the one that is already dominant.

If many people have a vested interest in protecting and promoting the bad practice then they may work together without explicit collusion. When they see someone doing something that helps their side, they join in.

When an entrenched bad practice is overdue for replacement there are usually many more people who would gain from that reform than would lose. The defenders of the status quo are putting their interests ahead of those of other people.

If one person or a small group controls whether the bad practice continues then change may be blocked until they retire or die and new people with different views gain control.

The recommendations given earlier in this book are relevant, especially Case 13 (small-scale) and Case 14 (large-scale e.g. on targeting people), Case 5 (misconceptions in one-to-one encounters), Case 6 (behaviour change in one-to-one encounters), and Case 7 (uncooperative people e.g. on proposing a better way).

The following guidelines aim to:

- suggest plans for reform that can be used despite difficult circumstances;
- tackle forces that resist reform; and
- encourage changes that favour reform.

Choose the right improvements

Pick practices where people can be influenced. That might mean choosing something not too big or hard to change but still worth doing.

Share net benefits

Reforming an entrenched bad practice should lead to net benefits and it should be possible to find a way forward where those benefits are fairly shared around so that the only losers from reform are those who unfairly or irrationally resist it.

E.g. Suppose a government suggests having its public schools teach more material that is useful in adult life. In theory this would be advantageous to students and society. However, inevitably there would be complaints from many thousands of people. Teaching unions would spot an opportunity to show their value. Teachers would worry about the extra work needed to prepare to teach new material and the risk of some staff becoming obsolete. Private schools would worry about being left out of discussions. Current students who would not benefit from any new curriculum would feel unfairly disadvantaged against younger students who would benefit. Universities would worry about the effect on demand for their existing courses and their staff would have similar worries to teachers.

Incremental change is necessary, as discussed in the next section. In addition, the benefits would need to be shared. The initial cost would be the extra work needed from teachers and university instructors. The benefits would be later, to students when they leave education and to society as a whole. To bridge the time gap, government would probably have to make an investment. That may mean paying people a bit extra for the extra work they will do or dropping other requirements of jobs for a while so that extra work is not needed.

If, hypothetically, a union demanded a permanent pay increase then that might also be fair up to a point. However, if it tried to squeeze more than a fair amount, seeing that there is enthusiasm for change and they can block it, that demand would have to be resisted.

Suggest an incremental change pathway

Suggest a way to migrate from the entrenched bad practice to something better in small steps. People, especially in groups, much prefer to change incrementally at a gentle pace. They get reassuring feedback as they change, and cope better with the pace. Often it reduces the maximum investment needed before things start to improve. Risk is reduced. Getting started is easier.

E.g. A company that uses Internal Rate of Return (IRR) as its main measure of project profitability can start to eliminate it by initially presenting additional measures alongside the IRR. (Some good alternatives can be calculated conveniently from the same underlying cash flow model as the IRR.) The next stage might to add informative graphical summaries. Once people are used to the new indicators, the next stage might be to start using them alongside the IRR as part of the formal evaluation process. The IRR can then be removed from the formal decision process. Most likely nobody will notice when it is finally dropped altogether.

E.g. A big difference between a conventional budgetary control system and something better is the frequency of revising targets and limits. The way to progress is to increase the frequency gradually (e.g. annual → half yearly → quarterly → monthly). In a large organization it is possible to do this on a different schedule at different levels in the organization and for different divisions, again making change incremental. Adjustments are needed to make revision easier and allow organizational units on different revision schedules to work

together. Performance indicators used can be changed incrementally by gradually adding new indicators before gradually reducing use of the old ones.

A common mistake is to call for a massive 'culture change'. This is off-putting to most people and can kill the change. Instead, just make incremental changes to practices and gradually 'culture' will change.

A common reason for not starting change is lack of spare resources (e.g. people, time, cash). All resources might currently be committed to other things. Even if switching to a different way of working would quickly increase efficiency, finding resources for the initial change may be difficult. Even if careful thought would reveal a way around this, people often do not give that careful thought and instead assume change would be too difficult, at least for the foreseeable future. Their assumption may be reasonable and they may not have time to think through an alternative plan. If several people or groups must agree to change, it only takes one of them to lack resources for change to hold everyone back. Perhaps if they reallocated resources the problem could be overcome but this too is an effort that people may not be able or willing to make. In these ways the status quo has an inbuilt advantage over alternatives.

Plans for incremental change are usually easier to get started. Incremental change might mean making small changes, making a change with just some people each time, or both. Sometimes it is possible to free up resources immediately, for example by stopping a useless activity. If those freed resources can be dedicated to supporting change then they can help free up more resources and so on until even large change is possible.

In some cases you may be able to provide your own resources to help.

Suggest ways to reform individually

It is sometimes possible to suggest an easier way for individuals to change their practices without waiting for others they live or work with to change theirs.

E.g. Imagine a company uses Risk Listing as its required method for managing risk. Departments must write lists of risks and report what they are doing about each risk. Suppose the manager of a department is a qualified actuary and knows a better method using decision models. At first it seems impossible to use the better method because she is expected to have a list of risks to show the Corporate Risk Manager and internal auditors. Then she realises her modelling tool can list the stochastic variables and she can format these as a table of risks in minutes. This meets the Risk Listing requirements and lets her work better.

Influence activities focus on people less committed to the entrenched practices, who may be distributed inconveniently. As discussed in Case 15, some people are quicker to adopt changes than others. It helps if some people can switch even though others around them have not.

Suggest compatible reformed behaviours

Alternative behaviours are even easier to adopt if they require minimal adjustment by the person adopting them.

E.g. If non-meat alternatives to meat provide similar nutrition to meat then they require less adjustment. In particular, if they provide about the same level of proteins and in a good quality mix then they can be adopted with less adjustment to other aspects of a person's diet.

E.g. Adapting to LED lights has been easier than adapting to CFLs was. This is because the CFLs tended to be larger and a different shape to the bulbs they were designed to replace. LED alternatives have been smaller and more suited to existing light fittings.

E.g. Non-alcoholic gin often tastes similar to real gin, is served with tonic in the same way, and comes in bottles that look like gin. The non-alcoholic gin is also expensive, just like the real thing. Consequently, replacing gin with non-alcoholic gin is easy. It can even be given as a gift in just the same way.

Resolve uncertainty about replacement behaviours

Sometimes the switch to a better practice is delayed because a generally accepted standard is needed and it is not clear which should be the new standard.

E.g. Null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) with p-values has caused serious problems that are now well understood and have been published many times over decades. Areas of research where they are used, such as psychology, have been biased to a potentially huge extent. Most people who understand this topic recognize that reform is crucial and long overdue.

But what should a scientist use instead on the next study? How about focusing more on effect sizes and adding confidence intervals? What about likelihood ratios, statistical power, equivalence tests or effect tests? Alternatively, what about going down the Bayesian route with Bayesian updating, Bayes factors applied to models or model families, and credible intervals? Are such analyses even necessary, or can one rely on information graphics, more descriptive analysis, and clear effects with massive data sets so that nobody is in any serious doubt that the findings are real?

There are at least several techniques that sound promising so each one would have to be understood and critically evaluated using logic and whatever empirical evidence is available. There are numerous other less well-known proposals for alternatives.

Knowing that NHST needs replacement, many people have come forward with alternatives they think are better. Some are also logically flawed in non-obvious ways or conceptually too slippery for use. Often the techniques are complicated to use or possible only in rather narrow situations. Since inventors of alternatives have competed, there is controversy rather than a clear-cut best alternative.

Although the scientist may, after some study, develop a preference in principle for a particular combination of approaches there is still the problem of identifying specific techniques that can be applied to the data in the study, obtaining suitable software, and possibly also writing code to apply the techniques to the study's data using the software.

Even having done that, the scientist will be unsure of how the readers of the paper will interpret the statistical analysis provided. Will they understand it correctly? Will they be negative about the study because of the choice of statistical analysis technique, or will they approve? Lack of familiarity on the part of the scientist and readers increases uncertainty as to the ultimate effect of adopting an alternative practice.

Now consider the problem from the perspective of the editorial board of a journal. Should they provide authors with guidelines on statistical analysis? What should they say? Should they suggest particular alternatives to NHST that they will accept? Should they say that NHST is no longer acceptable? Because many people may react to their position, they will worry about the reactions of even small but angry minorities.

Finally, consider the problem from the point of view of a regulator, perhaps setting standards for statistical analysis of pharmaceutical trials. In a high-stakes field like this, every regulatory requirement is analysed minutely by many people to work out how to comply, criticize, or subvert it. Since regulations imply some standardization across many people and organizations, the desire to choose the best alternative from the wide range of better-but-not-perfect alternatives is very strong, so more time is spent on that choice.

It may help if you can do a lot of the required analysis of alternatives and move the debate towards a resolution.

E.g. Continuing with the example of NHST, you could:

- Provide information about, and analysis of, the alternatives that is clear, accessible, and compact.
- Show which techniques can be applied in each potential situation.
- Do the analysis of which is better or show that some alternatives should be ruled out.
- Suggest a combination of techniques including some that sometimes take the pressure off the statistical 'test' element of a paper. Good descriptive analysis and the right information graphics applied to the right types of experiment (generating high volume data) often give confidence that renders statistical 'testing' unimportant.
- Provide software that makes complicated techniques easy in practice and explain it well.
- Show exactly how the techniques and software can be used for the specific application involved.
- Suggest an incremental approach to change.
- Suggest ways to find out more about the potential reaction to changes, such as pilot studies, experiments, and monitoring.
- Suggest wordings for guidelines and regulations that gently constrain people to just the better alternatives.

Suggest a politically expedient way forward

People may agree that a reform is right in principle but feel constrained by factors that should not be a problem. Maybe it is their past statements in public, or the reaction of someone they fear. Maybe the systems of their organization (such as budgeting cycles) put up obstacles that mean it is hard to act, or just hard to act now.

To increase the chances of action being taken, suggest an expedient way forward. This does not have to be a lie or a fudge. It might just be a small step in the right direction that will make other steps easier after a short delay.

Tackle social proof arguments

Entrenched practices have been in use for a long time, often by many people, so naturally this is often used as a justification for continuing to use them. People with such vested interests often rely heavily on these social proof arguments (because the true performance of the practice is not a good argument for using it).

While arguments from social proof can be relevant and have some weight, when people with vested interests defend a bad practice, their use of social proof typically goes beyond what is reasonable. They don't just argue that their method is good because many informed people have studied the matter and reached that conclusion. They say their method is widely used, for a long time, is popular, has authoritative endorsement (even being part of regulations or laws), and is supported by experience. They imply that if you challenge the practice then you are challenging their experience and judgement, you are wrong, eccentric, deviant, odd, and perhaps even disruptive.

Consequently, the rational tactics for devaluing social proof described in Case 10 may be useful.

Tackle vested interests

Talk openly about the interests of all the main stakeholder groups, including those with a vested interest in stopping reform. Be factual, logical, and comprehensive. Include the positive impacts of change on those who currently resist it, because some or all of them might be wrong about their own best interests.

The defenders of a bad practice link their reputations to it. Usually, they would be better off opening the door to other methods and then promoting them. That way they link their reputation to improvements and might even get paid for introducing something better.

E.g. Imagine you are arguing against ritual genital cutting of boys. The groups whose interests you might discuss would include:

- *The children themselves*, who will suffer distress at the time and while healing, may suffer permanent harm if a problem occurs during the operation, and who will usually get no medical benefit from the procedure, particularly in a modern, hygienic country.

- *Their parents*, who may be distressed by the effect on their child but also scared of the reactions of others in their religion and of their god(s) if they refuse the procedure.
- *Religious leaders*, who may be concerned that refusal of the procedure would weaken their authority or the power of their religion, and may also be scared of angering their god(s). Their alternative might be to openly recognize the progress of modern medicine and hygiene, and announce that the ritual is no longer required, winning praise and gratitude as a result, but also angry criticism from some.
- *Other people*, who could otherwise be given worthwhile medical treatment using the resources expended on performing ritual circumcision and dealing with complications resulting from it.

The religious people who insist on ritual circumcision will probably say these considerations are irrelevant because it is their religion that requires the ritual, not the consequences of the ritual. However, by running through these interests the power of fairness is brought to bear and the full set of motives of the defenders is made plain. The conversation is refocused on the effects on all concerned instead of being diverted into a discussion of religious freedom, which is something that can and often is used to try to justify bad practices. This is even better than just focusing on the effects for children.

The problems posed by vested interests are much greater if the decision-makers in a situation see themselves as having vested interests in continuing with the entrenched bad practice. A reason-based approach to this is to work out a plan by which the new practice would be good for them, not bad. Do the planning that they are unwilling or unable to do and show them how reform could work for them personally. If that is not possible, then perhaps there is a plan that would at least reduce their loss.

Ride waves of motivation

Willingness to think about and make changes to practices often rises and falls with events. Events may turn attention to a problem, change perceived risk levels, or bring in people with different perspectives.

Faced with obvious and serious problems (e.g. starvation, disease, mass movement of people, over-population, severe pollution) people (even politicians) can become decisive and capable of agreeing to change that will help solve the problems.

Make more effort for change during periods of openness and do not waste effort at other times.

Encourage objective performance evaluation

Sensible measurement of performance promotes practices that perform better.

E.g. This is typical in many sports but in Formula 1 racing the continual innovation in every aspect of vehicle technology, strategy, team organization, driving style, and race preparation is particularly well known.

If the new and old practices are tried out and their performance is properly measured then the case for change is greatly improved. If there is competition based on performance then change is accelerated.

Encourage respect for innovators and innovation

Some fields value innovation more than others. For example, accountants are trained primarily to follow rules accurately and carry out repetitive processes reliably. Innovation is not highly valued most of the time. In contrast, architecture, design, and fashion are fields where creative innovation is highly valued.

Only a campaign on a massive scale could hope to create an enduring culture that values innovation, but it may be possible to make the virtues of innovation more salient for short periods during discussions.

Case 19: Unreasonable groups

Introduction to unreasonable groups

Definition and examples

This chapter considers the extra challenges posed by groups that are (partly) organized and unreasonable (i.e. do not rely on reason and fairness). Often, such groups use manipulative strategies (tricks, abuses of power), though not always consciously. Often, they want more than is fair.

The main examples of organized, unreasonable groups are (1) many religions, including long established religions, cults, and sects, (2) some political groups, (3) many crime gangs, (4) some industrial lobby groups, and (5) the perpetrators of some health and wealth scams. (Religions, political groups, crime gangs, industrial lobby groups, and scammers are not the same but some of their characteristics and tactics are the same in principle.)

This chapter will not name any unreasonable group and if you belong to a group then you should not assume I am saying your group is unreasonable even if some of its behaviours match those described.

Why tackle unreasonable groups?

Some acts by some unreasonable groups harm others unfairly and harm their own members. Crime gangs are overwhelmingly harmful in their effect. Industrial lobby groups can be immensely harmful when they delay reforms. Through delaying reforms on tobacco smoking, eating too much sugar, and pollution from diesel fuel such groups have cut short hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of lives worldwide, so far. Health scammers have also caused many deaths, often by discouraging people from getting vaccinated (and encouraging them to buy fake treatments and pay to attend seminars instead). Cryptocurrency scams have been costly to many.

Some political ideologies have led to terrorist attacks, bloody revolutions, and repressive regimes whose mismanagement has caused mass starvation and death.

In the UK we often think of religions as being wholly benign – just kindly vicars visiting old ladies for a chat and a cup of tea or organizing charity events. Clearly, this is not the whole story.

The Church of England was created as a breakaway from the Catholic Church and subsequent strife involved many brutal killings by both sides. The tradition of 'bonfire night' (5th November) commemorates the foiling of an attempt by Catholic terrorists to blow up the houses of parliament, many politicians, and the king. The perpetrators were hung and then cut into pieces⁴, which was the standard punishment for high treason at that time.

Religions have at various times tried to hold back scientific and technological advancement, though at other times they have benefited from and exploited them.

Today, in some countries, it is possible to be executed for blasphemy or apostasy – if an angry mob doesn't get you first.

In the UK today religions enjoy special privileges. The Church of England receives many tens of millions from the government to help pay for the maintenance of its buildings despite its great wealth. It has bishops in the House of Lords whose votes can affect UK laws. Religions run about a third of UK schools and receive government funding for them but use those schools to gain members. Religions can get charity status and so obtain tax breaks even if they just evangelize.

The UK's religions have special exemptions that mean they are not prosecuted for certain acts of cruelty to animals, cutting children's genitals, and unequal treatment of people on the basis of sexuality. They can also print, publish, distribute, and teach children and adults from books that powerfully advocate a wide range of acts illegal in the UK, including stoning, taking slaves, and killing non-believers. The books can state that people of particular religions or with no religion are inferior, evil people. Without the special status of religions this incitement to hatred and illegal acts would lead to prosecution under the Public Order Act at the very least.

The cost of following a religion can be considerable, particularly with some modern cults that have taken the follower's money and their sanity.

In summary, there are many reasons why we might tackle unreasonable groups because some of their behaviours are harmful. In particular, we might aim to do these:

- Extract someone from an unreasonable group, or at least reduce their level of commitment.
- Get an unreasonable group to influence fairly.
- Stop an unreasonable group gaining unfair power or remove unfair power they already have.

⁴ Only a lucky few died from the hanging.

- Stop an unreasonable group getting an unfair privilege or remove an unfair privilege they already have.
- Stop an unreasonable group doing something harmful.
- Turn an unreasonable group into a reasonable one.
- Stop the unreasonable group from continuing to exist (e.g. stop a gang from recruiting new members using its unfair tactics so the gang dwindles to nothing). This might involve reducing the rate at which it gains new members and increasing the rate at which it loses them.

Typical characteristics of unreasonable groups

These groups can be extremely hard to deal with. We must understand their characteristics and tactics.

These groups are unreasonable, in that they do not rely on reason or fairness. They are organized, with individuals who act as organizers and often gain a living, status, and influence from doing so. Sometimes what looks like one group is really more than one group.

The tactics used by these groups are the result of conscious development and a form of evolution. That is, the unreasonable groups we have today are the ones that grew and survived over time, and they did so because of their tactics. These tactics help to (1) gain members and stop them leaving, and (2) gain and maintain power.

Within a group there are similarities of thinking that we can think of as an ideology even though there are large differences in beliefs and level of commitment between people within a group. There are often revered texts (e.g. sacred books) that support the ideology and systematic teaching programmes to spread and maintain it.

E.g. A political ideology might include beliefs in large scale conspiracies such as by the 'military industrial complex', the 'patriarchy', people with old school ties, people who went to Eton, people determined to wipe out white people, or exploit black people. It might include a belief in the unlimited power of unconscious bias and discrimination, free markets, freedom from government, devolution of power, or state control. It might include a belief in the inevitability of violent class struggle or the eventual victory of one race or religion over others.

E.g. Some crime gangs too have an ideology. Perhaps some gangs see themselves realistically as bad guys trying to take an easy route to wealth by cheating, intimidating, and exploiting others, and view the police as good people doing a difficult job, mostly fairly. Perhaps they are aware that the gang's activities damage the society from which the gang arose and ruin the long-term life prospects of most of its members. That's possible, but it's more likely that they see themselves as a club or family, looking after each other against an oppressive, unfair system or society. If you grow up on the streets who else is going to look after you? In this view the police are bad, unfair people doing an unnecessary job cruelly. Drugs are something everyone should be able to use as much as they like and the criminalization of them is unfair and wrong. Helping the police is a very bad thing to do.

Many unreasonable groups put huge effort into developing and maintaining the ideological knowledge and psychological commitment of members, who may spend hours each week on this activity. In support of this groups generate a lot of published material (videos, books, articles, images) and spend effort creating arguments to give followers something fresh or to counter resistance.

Unreasonable groups have often been in long-term violent and/or non-violent conflict with others and developed a victim or martyr mentality. That is, they often complain about how they are treated but usually do not notice when they treat others badly. They often hold a conspiracy theory that helps insulate their ideological beliefs from logic and evidence.

Because they do not rely on reason and fairness, unreasonable groups are vulnerable to societies that (1) use reason and have applied science and science-based technology effectively, and (2) have highly developed (secular) moral systems such as the guidelines of fairness discussed in Chapter 2. In these societies the unreasonable groups have less to offer potential members.

Aims for tackling unreasonable groups

With these points in mind, what can be done to tackle organized, unreasonable groups? The following guidelines aim to:

- understand the unreasonable group so that it can be tackled efficiently;
- form campaign groups strong enough to tackle the unreasonable group;
- take preventive action;
- focus efforts; and
- use effective arguments.

Understand the unreasonable group

The better you understand an unreasonable group the easier it is to tackle it effectively. There are many important variations between groups.

Structure

What appears to be an unreasonable group is often better understood as a loose alliance of sub-groups and individuals. The alliance members may have similar aims but still be rivals. They may be allies only on some issues and become rivals later. Some sub-groups may be more powerful than others.

The people involved will also vary in how extreme and how committed they are, forming layers of support.

E.g. Imagine that a country was conquered by another a century ago and now has many people who want independence from the conqueror. They include a small number of terrorist groups who all want independence but hate each other. Their supporters include groups that argue for non-violent independence while secretly colluding with and funding some of the terrorist groups. There are people

who support non-violent independence campaign groups without realising those groups secretly fund terrorists. Other people just think independence would be good and say so when surveyed, which the organized groups claim as popular support for their activities.

The motives and methods of the various allies may be surprisingly different even though they all seem to be pushing in a similar direction. The level of deliberate coordination may be much less than it seems.

E.g. Imagine that a new social justice cause has emerged that champions the welfare of people who keep snakes as pets. Suddenly it seems that many advertisements feature someone with a snake, oppressed snake owners are appearing in TV dramas, charities have formed to remind everyone that snake lovers are people too, historically significant people are being re-evaluated because of their alleged poor treatment of snakes, and twitter storms are claiming victims as people make clumsy references to snake owners, snakes, reptiles of any kind, and even amphibians. It seems as if there is a concerted effort to push snake ownership into society that is run by big companies, the mainstream media, celebrity elites, and shadowy internet thought leaders. In reality, the effort is far from coordinated. People acting in support of this, usually on their own initiative and just reacting to events, may include:

- owners of snakes and similar pets who have been treated unkindly;
- people who will support almost any social justice movement to make friends, have something to talk about, feel important, feel like good people, upset their parents, and so on;
- people who are trying to start a romance with someone who owns a snake or seems passionate about justice for snake owners;
- people who love snakes and whose main interest is the snakes rather than their owners;
- companies in the pet industry who just want to sell more snakes and snake related products and services; and
- companies in other industries, politicians, actors, and other celebrities who just want to look like caring people, up to date with the latest causes.

Understanding these variations helps with several of the tactics discussed below.

Looking at the origins of an unreasonable group may help you understand it, but groups can change considerably over time.

Demographics

It may help to know the mix of ages, sexes, locations, ethnicities, nationalities, education levels, and income levels among followers, maybe even broken down between sub-groups.

Ideologies

Unreasonable groups vary in the extent to which they use an ideology, though it is very common. They also have different ideologies, though there are often similar elements such as supernatural beings, an after-life, and group conflict.

Funding

Groups also differ in how they are funded. Some have just one or a very few wealthy backers. This is typical for industry lobby groups and there are campaign groups backed by billionaires who have switched from making money to using it.

Others depend on extracting smaller donations or other payments from many supporters. In this they may depend on the goodwill of supporters whose views are less extreme than those of the group's organizers.

Others are funded by crime. This is typical for crime gangs but some terrorist groups have also used crime to increase their funds.

Still others are funded by legitimate business activities.

How they gain and retain followers

Unreasonable groups use a variety of methods to gain and keep followers. Understanding the methods used by a particular group is important when the aim is to reduce the number of followers and so the power of the group. Consider the extent to which each of the following is used.

Payment

A simple way to gain followers is to pay them for their support. This is typical for industrial lobby groups but has also been used by militant religious groups to gain fighters.

Required evangelism

Thriving groups usually encourage their members to try to recruit more members.

Targeting the psychologically vulnerable

The easiest people to influence with reason and fairness are usually fair, logical, rational, intellectually strong, critically minded, and able to identify flawed thinking and sophistry.

Unreasonable groups often target differently. Followers do not have to be vigorous, rational, capable people. Every extra follower increases the group's apparent support and voting power. The vote of a thoughtful, well-informed person counts the same as that of a gullible fool. Unreasonable groups gain their followers most easily among people with little defence against them.

Most new followers of religions are the babies of existing followers. Children aged 10 to 13 are often targeted by criminal gangs as new recruits and often are younger relatives of existing gang members. Some political ideologies are old enough that children acquire the politics of their parents.

People struggling with poverty, debt, homelessness, imprisonment, addiction, loneliness, some mental health problems, or physical illness are also promising potential recruits. The tactic is to offer help while telling them about the group and material benefits of joining (some perhaps provided by an invisible supernatural being).

E.g. Potential recruits to street crime gangs are sometimes offered food. If you think it unlikely that recruits in a developed country would be starving then remember that teenage boys feel hungry most of the time and are a typical target.

Some people are simply less critically minded and easier to persuade. Maybe they already believe in the tooth fairy, homeopathy, crystal healing, and alien visits hidden by the government. A group's ideas may be easy for them to accept with enthusiasm.

People who resent their treatment by another group (or could be encouraged to) are also likely recruits. The unreasonable group can offer them a better life, punishment for someone resented, or both.

The resentment need not be justified. Perhaps they belong to a demographic group that was unfairly treated in the past but is not today and even enjoys preferential treatment. Perhaps it is easier to believe their disappointments are due to someone else's wickedness than their own freely-made bad choices, laziness, or lack of talent.

In politics this often goes along familiar lines. Most political groups promise fairness. Those on the political 'left' usually offer to take more from the rich and the white, and give more to the poor and non-white. Those on the 'right' offer to reduce those transfers or at least stop them getting bigger. A poor person might be persuaded to see their poverty as caused by the wealth of others, making them resentful of anyone wealthy and vulnerable to groups who intensify those feelings and promise to get wealth from the wealthy and punish them. Similarly, a well-off person might be persuaded to see the problems of the world as due to the behaviour of the lazy, under-achieving poor.

Crime gangs also exploit resentment. For example, if an innocent young person is questioned in the street by police officers and feels distrusted then that might lead to resentment that can be exploited by a crime gang.

Targeting members of similar groups

Members of other similar groups are also a popular target. These people have already accepted a lot of the ideology of the unreasonable group but may be dissatisfied in some way. The unreasonable group may offer them something more energetic, pure, or appealing for some other reason.

Targeting friends

Existing friends of unreasonable group members are also a source of new recruits. People are less quick to dismiss ideological claims and other recruiting messages when they come from a friend, even a friend who has changed recently.

Moral justification

Potential recruits are often offered moral justification for the group's existence and activities. Crime gangs often present themselves as more of a club than a gang. They are there to take care of their own community. The police are not good guys; they are dishonest bullies who unfairly persecute the recruit's community. Gang members object to being stopped and searched by the police, not because it makes their criminal activities harder but because it is racist or otherwise unfair. They argue that drug use does no harm and should be legal anyway.

Religions and political movements typically lead with their moral justification. Religions sometimes claim morals are unique to their system or came from their system even when they constitute cooperation that probably evolved before humans.

Followers are often encouraged to see themselves as in some way superior to non-followers. Non-followers have value as potential recruits but otherwise are less important or enemies.

Converting to a religion may also reinforce or dignify a claim of conscientious objection and avoid being drafted into war.

The moral justification for some activities by some groups uses consequences that are imaginary but believed by followers. These include consequences via a supernatural being and in a life after death. For example, deadly actions may be motivated by a sincere fear of eternal suffering after death.

Rewards and promises of rewards

As mentioned above, recruits can be offered or given rewards to encourage them to spend time with group members. They may start to feel indebted for rewards they have received but hopeful of more, especially if they get closer to the group or become members.

Those rewards might include money, girls, and glamour, or perhaps less specific rewards by a supernatural being soon in life or later after death. One key reward is friendship – or at least social contact that seems supportive and caring even if later it emerges as exploitative.

In ancient history, civilizations sometimes converted to the religion of a wealthy nearby civilisation to encourage trade. Today some religions offer local services and make it necessary for people to convert (or at least pretend to) to use those services.

E.g. Faith schools in the UK push some parents towards church attendance to get their children into the school simply because it is the only reasonable school locally.

Threats and punishments

Potential new recruits to the group can be pressured to join or stay using threatened or actual punishments by group members or supernatural forces.

Harm from group members is straightforward. Boys and girls may be threatened with physical violence if they refuse to join a gang. Religious conversion by violent

coercion has been common in history with people converted on pain of death threatened by a conquering religious army or ruler who imposed his religion. It is easy to imagine how, during the French revolution, fear of grisly death motivated people to declare loyalty to the revolution.

In the case of harm from supernatural forces, the mechanism is less obvious but still powerful; it is sometimes called Pascal's Wager. Blaise Pascal described an argument based on the notion of a god who will send people to eternal suffering if they don't believe in him. The argument goes like this: it is rational to believe in God (or at least try to, or behave as if you do) because if you do and there isn't a God then the consequences are somewhat serious, but if you don't believe and there is a God then the consequences are much, much more serious and eternal.

This cunning argument has traction even with people who think the existence of the god is unlikely. Dare they take the risk of being wrong? The more serious the consequences of not following the ideology the lower the required probability that the ideology is correct for them to convert to it.

The wager is weakened when people are aware of other ideologies making similar claims but requiring different behaviours for compliance. Whose version do they bet on? Suppose one ideology says they must not pick up sticks on a Sunday but another says Saturday is the rest day. Who is right? Maybe atheists are right because there is a god but He is fed up with people who pray and worship when He thinks they should rely on their own efforts. Maybe that is why He lets more bad things happen to people who take no practical precautions and just trust in Him to look after them.

Ideologies often claim serious consequences will follow from not obeying their rules. These may happen during your lifetime (e.g. illness). For example, perhaps there is a god who makes things happen (in a mysterious way) or some kind of karma. Alternatively, perhaps on a day in the not-too-distant future the god will come to earth and kill everyone who has not pleased him.

Or maybe the payoff comes after death, when you get either eternal rewards or punishment depending on your compliance in life. Alternatively, reincarnation might extend the consequences of earthly compliance into a longer and more important future.

The threat is further increased if it is said that the god is always watching, knows what you are thinking, is all powerful, and even created the universe.

Some groups cultivate a feeling of guilt in their members about bad things they have already done or often do. Continued faith and compliance can save them from the negative consequences.

Threats and rewards are also often used to retain members. People who leave a group can expect their former group friends to be unhappy, at least. In some countries leaving the dominant religion is a crime punishable by death. Facing such threats, most people stay in the group.

With this threat in place, requirements to maintain behaviours that show continued devotion are more significant. If you miss a prayer meeting, cut off your beard, or stop wearing your headscarf (to take some typical religious examples), you may be

risking death or at least the displeasure of your friends and family. Even without the death threat, the less severe consequences can still be powerful.

Meetings and social proof

People are encouraged to believe something is true when others seem to believe it. Groups exploit this effect by holding frequent meetings of their followers so they are confirmed in their loyalty and potential new recruits can be shown how many people already agree. The meetings also provide social contact that most people enjoy and value.

Active Facebook pages, websites, discussions online, and even advertising can be used to project the impression of a large, confident, supportive group.

The effect of seeing one's friends and relatives involved is naturally stronger than seeing strangers. Seeing people like you is best of all, so a large group can organize sub-group meetings for people who are similar in some obvious way, such as age or sex.

Humour and ridicule can be used to influence newcomers and existing members.

Failing to attend sends a potentially dangerous signal to other followers, who may respond.

Conspiracy theories

A conspiracy theory is often present that insulates ideological beliefs from logic and evidence. When people have accepted the theory, they usually ignore counter arguments, assuming they are lies and tricks created by the evil conspirators.

The conspiracy theory can be as simple as seeing people outside the group as enemies who cannot be trusted.

Marriage

Rules about marriage can help expand a group. Usually there is pressure to marry only within the group. This means that if someone outside the group wants to marry a group member then they will have to become group members.

Breeding

Breeding new members is surely one of the most powerful and reliable recruitment mechanisms in the long run. Large religions often have rules encouraging large families and discouraging contraception and abortion. Parents are expected to teach those children the ideology of the religion and ensure they become followers. Crime gang members are often related.

Education

Unreasonable groups often try to control the education of children. This increases the effect of breeding new followers.

Migration and colonization

A growing group may need more territory and one way to get it is to migrate and colonize land. It is important for the group to maintain its cohesion and avoid its

members becoming an integrated part of any society within which its colonies might be growing.

Violent conquest

Communism would not have got far without violent conquest as a means of gaining party members. Some religions have expanded by violent conquest followed by forced conversion on threat of death, and by imposing laws.

Infiltration

Another route to a large, organized group is to change an existing group by a combination of moving people into it and converting people within the group. The ideology of a comparatively mild and reasonable group might be gradually pushed towards extreme and dangerous ideas.

How they beat opponents and gain power

Unreasonable groups can become extremely powerful by being organized and clever, without using reason or fairness. It is vital to understand how a particular group does it.

Democracies are vulnerable to organized manipulation. Politicians are greatly influenced by their perceptions of public support because they need votes and these perceptions can be influenced by demonstrations, online comments, emails, letters, consultation responses, and votes. There is freedom to speak in public, hold rallies, and distribute written material (with some restrictions on content). Voting is used at many levels and perceived as fair (even though often it is not). There are also many opportunities to participate in decision-making through multiple levels of government, other organizations, committees of local representatives, standardization bodies, and so on. The effort of understanding issues and responding puts many people off voting and responding to consultations when the issues have only a small though negative effect on them. In contrast, small but committed groups take every opportunity to press their case.

It is often said that debate is healthy and winning debates is evidence that a person is right. There may be a loose statistical link between being right and winning debates, but too many other factors are involved for winning to be a reliable indicator. Sadly, most debates, including in the UK's Houses of Parliament, are useless arguments where nothing is learned and participants just talk to build popularity with their own tribe. All we see is that they hate the other tribes, which we already know.

None of this is cause for rejecting free elections and occasional referendums, but it is cause to promote reason and fairness and push back on other methods of influence. What are the tactics that unreasonable groups can use?

Looking like a big group

The power and persuasive impact of a group are related to its apparent size. Groups gather to remind each member of the existence of the others. In addition to meetings, the group can organize rallies, marches, protests, concerts, and so on, always trying to maximize turnout.

The group can appear larger than it really is by being busy. It can bombard politicians, journalists, and social media with comments, petitions, open letters, and other communications designed to create the impression of growing popular opinion.

It can hold demonstrations and rallies, making sure that as many of its supporters turn up as possible, and involve celebrities duped into supporting the group.

At wider meetings where groups members are a minority, they can be first to speak, as often as possible, and speak the most. It can seem that the group members have spoken for everyone when a silent majority disagrees but lacks the will to speak up.

Another tactic is to give the group a name that suggests it represents a community and act as if it does even if it does not.

Groups can exploit social proof by mentioning it explicitly (i.e. 'lots of people agree and support us') as evidence that they are right and deserve more power.

Groups can also ally with other groups with similar objectives. Instead of just saying one organization is angry about something they can say lots of organizations are angry.

Using voting mechanisms, committees, and the law

A modern democracy provides endless opportunities to gain influence and power. Members of an unreasonable, organized, manipulative group can join research focus groups, student committees, committees at work, consultative groups, standards committees, political parties, trade unions, working groups, task forces, Facebook groups, think tanks, editorial boards, advisory groups, local councils (though this requires getting elected), and even become members of parliament and government ministers.

Once in place they can raise objections, inject emotion into discussions, get nasty if it will block or discourage opponents, suggest or demand wordings for documents, suggest or demand wordings for public statements, demand policy changes, propose motions, propose amendments, resist ideas they don't like by wasting time, send public letters, organize petitions, and fund legal cases. They can build on each concession won by asking for a bit more next time. Legal changes and cases that create a precedent can be exploited by pushing interpretations to the limit and beyond. Passing seemingly innocuous rule or definition changes can open the door to unexpected or extreme interpretations that give powers not envisaged by those who might have opposed the rule changes. Step by step the manipulative group can create a system of rules and established practices that favours its position.

Voting mechanisms provide opportunities to gain more power. To win a vote you don't have to be right; you just have to outnumber other people. Votes are used within tiny committees as well as across whole countries. In those smaller votes it is easier to ensure your team is in full attendance when opponents are not. Making meetings stressful and unpleasant for opponents eventually drives them from the committee.

Groups can use their growing power to get their people into positions of greater influence and power. Many committees and similar groups struggle to find volunteers, so getting on them may be easy. They may struggle even more to find

people willing to do the more time-consuming roles, like chairing meetings. Even an unpopular person can become chair of a committee with power if nobody else wants to do that work.

Politicians can be offered support (e.g. votes, money) in return for championing the group's causes.

The system of rules and powerful roles can be used to threaten people with job loss, loss of funding, or legal action. Bureaucrats can be pushed into extreme enforcement of rules by similar fears. Larger organizations may institutionalize the dysfunction in their bureaucracies. They may appoint people to roles dedicated to enforcing unreasonable interpretations of rules, written or unwritten. Their officials might be scared into behaving unreasonably, or they may be supporters, empowered by their role and their perception of the rules, eager to control and bully people.

Angry protest, intimidation, and attacks

Angry protest discourages opposition. It can make some issues and groups too hot to discuss and so suppress opposition. When someone says something against the interests of the group it can react angrily. It can complain of being offended or attack the speaker for being offensive, bullying, or oppressive. It can call them 'elite', 'racist', 'ignorant', 'phobic', or whatever it needs to say to make it hard for opponents. If experts disagree then they can be denigrated as 'elitists' involved in a conspiracy or collective delusion. This can be strengthened by denigrating the idea of objective truth, denigrating conscious thought, and promoting the power of intuition and emotions.

These reactions are made more effective by differences in behaviour between followers. If the group is criticized over the behaviour of its most extreme members then it can complain that this is unfair and point to its moderate members.

The group can encourage news media to be unsympathetic to opponents. The group can publish and broadcast, expressing disapproval and attacking opponents. With some control over news and entertainment media it is easier to make it seem that the whole world agrees with the group, except for a few awful people.

This can be taken further with physical attacks on opponents to suppress resistance. Members can be encouraged to carry out these attacks by promises of rewards, either in life or after death, and by presenting the victims as less than human or as threatening enemies. To avoid legal problems the group can maintain a public position that the violence was not carried out by its members or under its instructions. In some countries it is legal to incite people to violence as long as you are not too specific.

At its most extreme this becomes gaining power by violent revolution or conquest.

Attacking and removing individuals

The effectiveness of intimidation, outrage, and attacks is often increased by focusing on individuals one at a time. The objective might be to remove the person from a powerful role, destroy their career, get suppliers to stop serving them (e.g. social media platforms, broadcasters, banks), stop them from speaking in public or having

their work published, or get a retailer to stop stocking their products. The attacks continue until the objective is achieved.

Techniques to do this include:

- Exaggerated emotion, usually anger, outrage, or distress.
- Saying someone is extreme (e.g. far-right, far-left, alt-right, communist, Marxist, hyper-rationalist, scientist, extremist, militant, fascist, nationalist, socialist).
- Saying they are horrible (e.g. homophobic, transphobic, Islamophobic, bigoted, racist, authoritarian, oppressive).
- Saying they are the wrong demographic (e.g. men talking about women, white talking about black).
- Unfounded allegations (e.g. sexual).
- Digging back over a person's published history (e.g. tweets, articles, interviews) for tiny things that can be taken out of context (if necessary) and used to support an attack.
- Trying to get people to say things that can be used to write them off, potentially after stripping away context.
- Blocking the audience from entering a speaker's appearance venue. Making noise so the talk cannot go ahead.
- Encouraging journalists to help with the vilification.

This is different to explaining why someone is wrong and respectfully asking them for a correction. Instead of sticking with reason and fairness until it is clear that this has failed, the unreasonable group simply attacks immediately to eliminate opponents and discourage other resistance.

Organize

Having considered the characteristics and behaviour of a group, what can be done?

Unreasonable groups can be enormous. Members are often unusually dedicated to their cause and tend to be determined, persistent, and collectively ruthless in increasing the size and power of their group. Group ideologies often make members resistant to reason and fairness.

Regardless of your tactics, tackling such groups usually requires a group that is also well organized, persistent, and large enough to combat them on every battlefield. That means you need a sustained group with the time and money to do battle. Being right and having the inherent advantages of reason and fairness are not enough to overcome this requirement.

E.g. The UK's National Secular Society campaigns for secular societies, focusing on the UK, but including the UK government's responses to international events. Every week it identifies and responds to another wave of attempts by religious groups to defend their existing privileges or gain new ones. These range from

being legally permitted to strap down baby boys and cut off the most sensitive part of their genitals with no therapeutic reason to free parking in council car parks only for people going to church on a Sunday. Keeping up this level of response is a full-time activity for a highly professional and dedicated team. Similar efforts on almost the same issues and events are kept up by Humanists UK.

And yet, even though today most UK people are non-religious, removal of religious privileges is rare and sometimes there are reversals with religions gaining new powers and privileges.

An individual who wants to help might be more effective as part of a group that is reasonable and organized, or as a supporter.

All recommendations in Chapter 9 on the scale of campaigns apply to influence in the face of organized, unreasonable groups. However, it also helps to be organized to make best use of those resources and respond to the organized nature of the unreasonable activity, especially when competing for influence and power.

To form and build a reasonable group to tackle one or more unreasonable groups:

Seek, attract, and retain like-minded people: Join groups, test people to understand how they think and influence, be encouraging, and educate. Look for people doing activities that require and value reason and fairness.

Explain that reason is not enough: People who might help tackle the manipulative organized group may need to understand that just setting out some logical arguments will not be enough. Sometimes it is hard to understand how very differently some others think and use power.

Avoid bad experiences: It is hard to keep going if it feels emotionally bruising and stressful, so try to avoid these bad experiences. Try to retain control of encounters to maintain good quality discussions. Avoid encounters where reasonable people are outnumbered.

Operate efficiently: Use the methods described earlier for large scale campaigns to be efficient. In addition, monitor your opponents by searching the internet efficiently. Set up news services and run your own tailored queries regularly. Automate what you can.

Educate and inoculate

The power of tricks and abuses of power can be greatly reduced by teaching people (1) relevant facts, (2) reason and fairness, and (3) to resist specific manipulative tactics (known as psychological inoculation).

Unreasonable groups have a harder time in societies with more education in reason, empirical knowledge, and fairness. Educating everyone, or perhaps just particularly vulnerable people, is a useful tactic. It helps to reduce recruitment into the unreasonable group and can even pull away some of its supporters.

That education must thoroughly cover reason and empirical knowledge.

E.g. Progress in science and technology seems to reduce the power of religion. It is not hard to see why.

If you know nothing of the major scientific discoveries of the past few hundred years then you might be impressed by a book that explains how the world came to exist, how humans appeared, and what causes good and bad things to happen to people. The natural world is intricate and amazing. Every living thing seems so well adapted to its environment that it would be easy to think some intelligence must have made it so.

But, if you know of the existence of multiple galaxies, solar systems, planets, and other objects in space then a story that features only the earth with lights shining on it seems inadequate. If you know enough geology and biology to understand that the earth is a few billion years old and life has been on it for hundreds of millions of years then the short story seems to be missing a lot. If you know about the mechanisms of natural selection then you have an alternative explanation of those adapted living things that requires no intelligent design. The more you know about how living creatures work the easier it is to see there is no need for a mystical entity (a 'soul') to animate the physical body. Concepts of causality, complexity, and randomness reduce your need to guess at reasons for the ups and downs of life. The lack of an obvious physical location for 'heaven' or 'hell' and the lack of evidence for reincarnation undermine life-after-death stories.

Religions also take a battering from science-based technology. When very little anyone could do protected people from disease, it made more sense to try implausible options like prayer. When you know effective medical interventions exist, prayer makes much less sense. The same applies to other things a person might hope for in life. If there is a technology that does it then we can focus on that and not waste time asking a supernatural being who might not exist to intervene on this occasion (instead of ignoring the request as usual).

It is not surprising that fundamentalist religious groups often try to control the education of their children by setting up their own schools or home-schooling. The typical education provided in UK schools covers scientific methods and knowledge that includes the development of the universe, the true age of the earth, the origin of species, science-derived technology, contraception, equal rights, and non-discrimination on grounds of sexuality.

E.g. Religious parents have objected to their children being told that gay people exist and are seen as equal and not immoral in the UK. Statements by these parents show many think being gay is a lifestyle choice and that a person can be persuaded to become gay by lessons in school. These parents need to learn that gay people do not choose which sex they are attracted to and, even though the biological basis of being gay is not yet understood, it is clear that people cannot be persuaded to become gay or stop being gay. Children raised by same sex parents are not more likely to be gay than would be expected of genetically related children of a gay person, so even being raised by same sex parents cannot persuade someone to become gay. In addition, 'conversion therapy' using powerful psychological methods with willing volunteers (usually with a religious reason for wanting treatment) has proved ineffective and traumatic. While

behaviour may be influenced (temporarily), the person's sexuality is not changed. These are facts that protesting parents need to learn.

The approach to religious education in UK schools is usually to explain the beliefs and practices of some large religions without promoting any as true. Seeing a range of different ideologies usually reduces their appeal. Faith schools and religiously committed teachers often try to subvert this and preach instead but in a largely non-religious country this can be difficult. Even young students often find religion alternately time wasting and funny.

Likewise, political ideologies, crime gangs, industrial lobby groups, and scam movements are weakened when many people have protective factual knowledge. For example, knowing more about human nature and the results of past experiments with communism tends to reduce the appeal of extreme leftist thinking. Knowing how much most members of crime gangs earn compared to people in legitimate jobs is a reason to get a legitimate job. Industrial lobby groups aiming to block or delay good reforms find it harder with well-informed politicians and voters.

Fairness should also be thoroughly taught because it shows followers that people outside their group can be good people and followers can be good people without the group. This can weaken the moral justification unreasonable groups often use.

The guidelines in Chapter 2 that characterize modern fairness show the level of detail and the type of justification possible. The guidelines are not just the seemingly arbitrary choice of a supernatural being or group of politicians; they arise from thinking deeply about what promotes good lives in a thriving society.

E.g. A person who does not drop litter just because their parents told them not to does not know the practical reasons why dropping litter is bad. They are not protected from later temptation to be lazy or arguments to justify it. For example, they might be swayed if someone said 'Yeah, so if you drop something it is not a problem because someone from the council will pick it up. Dropping litter makes a job for someone and that's a good thing. You wouldn't want to do someone out of their livelihood would you?' Inoculation would cover the various practical reasons why dropping litter is bad but could specifically cover this false argument. If council resources are not wasted on picking up litter then they can be spent instead on more useful activities such as improving recycling or maintaining council houses. Besides, litter is not picked up immediately by council workers and often is overlooked completely.

Other forms of moral system are likely to be less convincing. In particular, talking in terms of 'rights' or 'freedoms' is less satisfactory. Almost any position can be framed as a right or freedom. Harms and benefits get forgotten. Educating people about laws can be helpful but it needs to include their practical justification or they sometimes seem rather arbitrary.

Psychological inoculation against a manipulative tactic involves explaining the tactic and giving practice at resisting it in a situation where the person is unlikely to be taken in. For example, resisting a trick in a school classroom is much easier than resisting it in a gang of friends hanging out in a park after dark.

E.g. A basic trick argument used by anti-vaxxers is to say 'This child was vaccinated and after that it died/became autistic/etc.' Children who suffered before being vaccinated or despite not being vaccinated are ignored. If a person knows beforehand about this inference situation, understands the inference mistake or trick, and knows how to check properly then the trick is much less likely to work.

E.g. Psychological inoculation against tactics that might draw young people into violent extremist groups might cover tactics such as befriending, gifts, pressure to abandon other groups, promotion of group conflict theories, dehumanizing the enemy, and statistical tricks.

E.g. When I joined an auditing firm many years ago I had to watch videos about tactics used by fraudsters and money launderers. This had a big impact on me because I had recently seen several of those tactics used and realized I had a legal obligation to report my newly formed suspicion of money laundering.

Unreasonable groups often use a form of inoculation themselves. They tell their members about potentially unsettling things outsiders might say, and teach them that these messages are lies or mistakes made by people who are blind to the truth. This tactic is itself something that honest inoculation can anticipate and combat.

Inoculation is useful against all misconceptions, not just those promoted by organized, unreasonable groups.

Monitor and compete

To use resources efficiently it is essential to keep track of what the unreasonable group is doing and compete with it intelligently. What tactics is it using? Who is it targeting? What is it trying to do? How strong is it? How is it changing?

Specifically, to counter a group's recruitment activity it helps to monitor and meet the group's evangelical activities, including those targeting vulnerable people harder to reach with reason. The unreasonable group's deceptive inducements should be countered. For example:

- If the group uses exaggerated claims of oppression in its recruitment then provide data on the real level of unfair treatment of demographically defined groups, which in the UK is often lower than people think.
- If the group offers a better life then explain more direct and reliable ways to get a better life than just supporting a group that promises to change society for you or get a supernatural being's aid. Provide evidence that practical strategies work better (e.g. showing that stacking shelves pays better than dealing drugs and is safer).
- If the group claims that its members are morally superior and others are morally inferior then explain fairness, its justification, and how it is developing.
- If the group provides charity but with ideology attached then provide help free of ideology.

- If the group uses intimidation to bring in members or to keep members from leaving then protect unreasonable group members and almost-members from punishments. Let them know when the law is there to protect them.

Similarly, to counter a group's attempts to gain and use power it helps to monitor and meet their tactics.

If the unreasonable group exaggerates its support then the true support for an unreasonable group should be researched, including the breakdown of different levels of commitment and extremism. This information can be provided to anyone who might otherwise be deceived by the group's shows of strength. Is a group truly representative? How many people really contributed to a consultation response? How many would actually vote and in what way?

Revealing the true level of support for other views is also important. Silent majorities are common but can be uncovered using surveys.

Groups that use complaints of oppression and hate speech to discourage criticism can be tackled if you avoid saying anything that really is hate speech and use the pattern: 'I am not X. It is not X to ...'.

E.g. 'I am not suppressing your freedom of religion. It is not suppression to point out that your sacred book says non-believers should be stoned to death. That is factually true and something many people are not aware of. Religious freedom does not allow you to stone people to death so there is a conflict between what your sacred book calls for in that passage and what is acceptable and legal in this country.'

All the fair and correct points you might want to make can be defending this way, with some thought.

To counter a group's relentless exploitation of voting, committees, and the law requires monitoring and coordinated, sustained opposition using reason and fairness. Reasonable people must volunteer and turn up too. Reasonable consultation responses must flood in. Meetings must be pleasant and productive, which requires reasonable people to turn up and control the discussion so that manipulative tactics are neutralized and eliminated. Voters must all turn out, which may require anticipating when votes in a committee are likely.

Attempts by the unreasonable group to exploit rules unfairly must be opposed at every stage. Stop them getting rules changed, have rules removed or changed back, push back unreasonable interpretations, fight cases, and highlight where bureaucrats have gone too far.

If meetings, conferences, committees, journals, news media, and so on are controlled by a manipulative organized group then try to weaken their control or, if you have the resources, create your own.

That focused opposition requires at least some individuals as committed as the unreasonable group, which may require a team of specialists funded by donations from a much wider population of people who care but not enough about each individual issue to spend a lot of their own time on the work. Less committed people can also help, however.

Attacks and intimidation must be neutralized and discouraged. False claims must be contradicted. It does not work to appease an unreasonable group. Assuming you have used only reason and fairness – with no ridicule, unnecessary antagonism, and so on – do not apologize or make concessions in response to the attacks. Simply neutralize and carry on with reason.

If the threats or attacks are serious enough then use the law. Do not break the law yourself. Call on law enforcers for protection. The relevance of laws against physical violence is obvious and of course terrorists should be chased down and arrested. The relevance of other laws is less obvious.

Laws are broken every day but not enforced. Often a law change is not needed because what unreasonable groups are doing is already illegal.

E.g. Jehovah's Witnesses in the UK now accept blood transfusions for children after a case in which they denied one and lost in court.

Here are some behaviours that could be tackled with existing UK laws:

- Preaching that encourages followers to despise non-followers, gay people, or people of a particular race may be an offence under the Public Order Act (1986). The Act excludes what happens inside a dwelling but a place of worship is not a dwelling.
- Publishing or distributing books that advocate criminal acts and/or hatred on the basis of religion, race, or sexuality may also be an offence under the Public Order Act (1986).
- Forcing young people to remain in a group using threats of physical violence, loss of a home, or shunning may be illegal. If physical violence from a relative is feared then this could be an offence under the Serious Crime Act (2015).
- Keeping people in a group by threats may involve illegal threats.
- Keeping up a threatening protest that makes people feel unsafe or by repeatedly emailing them with angry, threatening messages may constitute an offence under the Protection from Harassment Act or the Communications Act.
- Withholding children from school might be a form of child abuse.
- Putting someone out of a job in reaction to a baseless Twitter-storm or unreasonable complaint may constitute unfair dismissal or perhaps a breach of contract. Many contracts, such as publishing contracts, give the parties the right to end the contract if the other does something disreputable. However, this does not give a right to opt out just because some people are making a fuss.

Consider court action for defamation because your reputation has been attacked and you have lost as a result. Let people know if you are willing to take legal action.

To help others who have been unfairly attacked or fear they will be, organize protection. This might include people who will speak in support, advice on responding, legal advice, and even funding for legal action.

Governments can stop funding groups that prove unreasonable, remove charitable status, and implement laws that protect speech that is reasoned and fair (even when others get angry at what is being said).

Reveal and isolate influential extremism

Unreasonable groups are most dangerous when driven by people and books that promote extreme, threatening ideas. It is important to reveal the extent of this extremism because many people are not aware of it. This may help to disrupt the internal power and funding structures of an unreasonable group.

Members of unreasonable groups lie on a threat scale. At the bottom of the threat scale are the least committed members. At the top are deeply committed members who are dangerous to people, freedom, and democracy. In addition, where a group is really several groups some are usually more threatening than others.

The key members whose extremism should be revealed are those who are highly committed and influential. Members who are extreme but not in powerful roles can be dangerous but are less representative of the group. Focusing on them looks like cherry picking evidence.

Less threatening members tend to support more threatening members, though not necessarily the most threatening members. That support is sometimes indirect, non-obvious, and may be unwitting.

E.g. A follower might give money to a religious charity run by other followers because it does good work with disabled children. The charity organizers are slightly more of a threat and provide opportunities for another yet more threatening follower to come and preach to the children and their parents. The fundamentalist preaching advocates actions the charity donor would not support. Donors can be made aware of this mechanism.

The following behaviours have been arranged with the most threatening first to show how these are supported by less threatening behaviours, usually by less committed followers:

- **Physical attacks on opponents designed to eliminate them and intimidate others, inside and outside the group.** That is, terrorism.
- **Activities to increase the political power of the group and weaken opposition, including activities not based on reason and fairness.** This includes lying and tricking people, trying to discredit opponents with smears, hiding the follower's real intentions, and wasting time by creating false controversy and doubt. These followers may work within democracy (just about) but have no interest in sustaining it. Some, as soon as they have sufficient power, would happily dismantle free, open democracy and replace it with permanent domination by their group. Alternatively, they may seek political power but for their group, not for the good of all. Or they may simply want a career in politics. Political operators intent on domination may say, when pressed, that they do not support terrorism and yet they try to benefit from the intimidating effect of terrorism and are visible and available for political negotiations, which terrorists

usually are not. Terrorists and political operators intent on domination support each other even when not in direct contact.

- **Support people willing to break the law, lie, cheat, and deceive in the interests of the group.** This may be by helping to hide their activities, providing money, providing accommodation, and allowing children to be educated by those people.
- **Use unfair tactics to bring people into their group or to hold followers within it.** These include presenting the ideology of the group as kinder and more plausible than it really is, targeting vulnerable people, and threatening social and economic consequences for leaving the group.
- **Take decisions influenced by fear of other followers or the supernatural.** These might lead to obeying practices required by the revered texts even though they seem cruel and unnecessary or behaving like a devout follower despite weakening faith. Even if the follower is not truly devout this compliance is nearly as bad for most practical purposes.
- **Vote for political candidates from their group regardless of policies.** This is all the support that political operators intent on domination need to increase their power and achieve their objectives.
- **Vote in referendums for policies that suit their group even if they personally would not support them otherwise.** Fortunately, such referendums are rare in developed countries.
- **Support others of their group, even strangers, in preference to others.** This might be by repeating, agreeing with, or just not objecting to statements and actions made by more dangerous followers.
- **Hold attitudes that are no longer rational and fair in the light of what is now known.** For example, thinking that gay sex is inherently immoral or that adultery should be punished physically.
- **Make donations to charities linked to the group.** These may then spend some of the money on activities the donor might not approve of.
- **Buy from businesses that support the group financially.** This allows the group to fund activities, some of which the customer might not approve of. This includes paying the group's organizers for approval of business activities.
- **Siding with much more committed and extreme members when they are publicly criticized for their actions or statements.**

Threatening followers often use moderate followers to deflect criticism. They complain that everyone in their group is being treated harshly for the actions of a few (who are not really followers anyway). They also point to their less committed follows and say 'Look at all these perfectly nice followers we have. Your criticism is unfair on them.'

The system of support by less threatening members should be disrupted. It is often important to spotlight the extremists and extremist ideas, and encourage others to distance themselves from them.

- Clearly explain the variations of belief in the group using survey statistics, if available, and statements by extremists. Help relatively reasonable members see who they might be unwittingly supporting and what those people really believe and are trying to do.
- Carefully distinguish between different sub-groups, where they exist.
- Some less committed followers may not realize how they are supporting more threatening followers. Explain how the mechanisms work and ask more moderate followers to make sure they are not supporting the dangerous ones in any way.
- Ask moderate followers to publicly distance themselves from dangerous followers, anonymously if they are afraid. For example, if some in the group complain angrily about being mocked in some trivial way then moderates can post online saying they are in the group too but not angry and see no need for anyone to apologize or withdraw the mockery.
- Suggest that, if they have control of copies of a revered text, they insert a certification that they do not endorse any interpretation of the text that encourages criminal behaviour.
- Highlight when extremists say or do something that reveals their true nature (e.g. contacts with dangerous people, explicitly threatening speeches, correspondence that has been made public legitimately, payments made, votes cast). Highlight extreme aspects of the ideology or content of sacred texts to ensure less committed followers are aware of them (but do not imply that such extremism is typical of all members of the group).

Always make clear which followers are being addressed or criticized. If you do not then tricksters will complain that all followers are being blamed for the bad behaviour of some or that the bad few are not really followers. This deflects legitimate criticism, particularly of the content of the sacred texts and the concerning attitudes and behaviours of the less violent but still influential majority.

Extreme organizers of unreasonable groups are usually well aware that their extremism repulses people outside the group and less committed group members. When recruiting new members, they often explain only the attractive aspects of their ideology such as kindness, peace, equality, liberty, respect, brotherhood, and love. Once the new member becomes sufficiently committed, they gradually introduce other ideas, ultimately perhaps arriving at the conclusion that violence is justified by the attractive ends sought by the group. Organizers also know they must avoid public statements that are illegal.

E.g. In an interview on BBC Newsnight in 2010, Majid Nawaz (once imprisoned for extremism but now a counter extremism worker) asked Anjem Choudary (later imprisoned for supporting terrorism) if he would have Nawaz killed as an apostate in the Caliphate he wanted to bring about. Choudary was slow to answer but

eventually said an Islamic judge would consider the matter and then 'we will see'. He did not want to say 'yes, you should be killed because you are an apostate.' Nawaz asked repeatedly if non-Muslims deserved death but got no answer as Choudary continued to talk about how Muslims are oppressed. The question was put repeatedly but Choudary evaded repeatedly. (See Newsnight Archives, 2010.)

Reduce their funding

Some unreasonable groups are created specifically to enrich their organizers and backers. These include crime gangs, industrial lobby groups, and scams. Other unreasonable groups are created for other reasons but individuals come to appreciate the living they gain from participating. Finally, all unreasonable groups are more capable if they have large revenues to fund their activities.

Funding allows organizers to work at it full time, employ helpers, buy specialist services (e.g. hackers), travel, buy advertising, buy tools (e.g. computers, weapons), and use impressive locations for events. They may also enjoy luxurious lifestyles.

Understanding the financial model of an unreasonable group may suggest ways to reduce its funding. These should be attempted. Reducing the number of relatively less committed followers is often a way to do it.

Focus on less committed followers

On meeting someone who is a follower of an unreasonable group it will often be useful to assess their commitment to the group and its ideology. This makes it easier to decide how to continue interacting with them, if at all. It is also usually better to focus on less committed followers.

Consider first how strong their vested interest in membership is likely to be. Are they perhaps organizers? Do they gain a living from being members or rely on other members for their living? If they left the group would it significantly worsen their material circumstances, at least initially? Do they have many friends who are also members? If they left the group would it make a large difference to their social support network?

In conversation it may be possible to ask questions that probe for ideological commitment. Rather than starting with the most fundamental of beliefs start with peripheral beliefs that are more often not held by some followers.

E.g. For a follower of a hypothetical religion, here is a progression of questions starting with some that are peripheral and building up to core beliefs:

- 'If you had not been brought up from childhood as a member of your religion, do you think you would be a member today?'
- 'Do you agree with everything said by the leaders of your religion? Are there any points where you think their interpretation of the sacred text is wrong, exaggerated, or too literal?'
- 'Do you think everything said in the sacred text is literally true? Are there any points you think need to be interpreted non-literally?'

- 'Do you think there is a God with exactly the characteristics described in the sacred text? Are there any points you think are unlikely?'
- 'Do you support <name a cruel practice many followers should find distressing>?'
- 'Do you agree with the idea that <name a rule held by the group but not by a similar group that uses the same sacred text>?'
- 'If you were recruiting someone to work with you, would you put up with a less good candidate if they were in your group?'
- 'When you make day-to-day decisions at work and at home do you often think about your religion and use it to solve your problems?'
- 'If a candidate from your group was standing in a political election, would you vote for them regardless of the policies of other candidates?'
- 'Do you want to increase the political power of your group?'
- 'Would you vote to have your group's sacred text adopted as a basis for law in this country if there was a referendum on the issue? All of it, even the stricter parts.'
- 'Are you afraid of the consequences of angering God?'
- 'How confident are you that there really is a God of some kind?'

There are wide variations in beliefs and behaviours between followers in many unreasonable groups. For example, a surprisingly large proportion of people who say they are within a religion that features a single god are not *sure* that a god exists – even in the USA (Pew Research Centre 2015).

Some people who would say they are followers:

- Do not believe the supernatural story or underlying theory.
- Do not pay attention to, or even agree with, much of the content of the revered texts. Some simply have not read them and are not aware that they would disagree.
- Attend group meetings only occasionally and just to be sociable.
- Favour their family and friends as most people do but do not have a general preference for other followers over non-followers.
- In elections do not have any particular loyalty to candidates that are also followers (e.g. Catholics who would not automatically vote for the Catholic candidate).
- In referendums do not have any particular preference for policies that suit their group (e.g. Muslims who would not vote for Sharia if offered).
- Have no interest in increasing the power of their group.
- Make decisions without being influenced by fear of other followers or of a supernatural being or fate.

These very low commitment members give others little to worry about. They pose little immediate danger to people or to freedom and democracy, though that could change. They nevertheless provide support to the group by:

- adding to the number of followers the group can claim; and
- giving birth to more people who might be turned into followers.

They may also be providing other support without realizing it.

While probing for ideological commitment you may notice the follower using strategies that insulate their beliefs from reason and evidence. The ideologies of unreasonable groups often have features that make them resistant to evidence and logic.

One of these is a *Pascal's Wager element*. As already explained, the wager argues that it is wise to believe in God to avoid the risk that there is a God and his punishment for non-belief is eternal suffering. Believers who have accepted the Pascal's Wager element of a religion must be very confident that the ideology is wrong to abandon it. Mere doubt is not enough.

The Wager's threat has no relevant, tangible evidence to prove or disprove it. Like the theory that there is a teapot orbiting the sun, the Wager's threat *might* be true even though the probability of truth is very low.

Another frequent element is a *conspiracy theory*. Religious believers may be encouraged to suspect anyone who challenges their beliefs of being an evil trickster, perhaps sent by a devil. The evidence these tricksters provide (e.g. fossils and geological evidence of the true age of the Earth) is said to be fabricated by that same devil to trick the follower, or perhaps by their god to test them.

Political ideologies more often build their protective conspiracy theory from ideas like gaslighting, pervasive unconscious bias, shadowy government agencies, and global elites.

Within an ideology defended like this there is no limit to how elaborate and effective the conspiracy can be. Whether it is the devil or government spies, they can fake anything so no 'evidence' need be taken seriously.

As part of their conversion and education, many followers spend a long time learning to repeat and use *complicated arguments* said to support their faith. Their central texts are often ambiguous, in archaic language, and internally inconsistent. If challenged with clear logic and tangible evidence honestly collected, the believer retreats into a complicated network of justifications and confident conclusions based on ambiguous quotations selectively taken from their texts.

A less elaborate form of insulation is a *retreat into abstractness*. Many modern believers in religions have accepted that some details in their holy text are, if taken literally, wrong. So they interpret the text in an abstract way, progressively letting go of details as research shows them to be false or modern morals make behaviours illegal and unacceptable to most people.

A follower who fluently uses insulating beliefs and arguments will be difficult or impossible to sway with reason or in any way.

A general recommendation in group encounters is to communicate with the cooperative people, even when talking to the uncooperative people. In other words, send information for the people likely to use it well.

With unreasonable groups, the low commitment members may be cooperative or nearly cooperative. It makes sense to talk with them too even though, individually, they tend to be less influential within the unreasonable group.

This might be done by communicating directly to people known to be less dangerous and more reasonable or by broadcasting messages (e.g. through social media) designed to help the less committed.

Followers are likely to be more defensive about their ideology in public than in private. They are more likely to admit doubts about details if other followers are not listening.

It may help to present survey evidence showing that some followers do not believe the ideology at all and some are not sure.

E.g. In a Pew Research Centre study (2015), which was done in the USA, 64% of Catholics said they were absolutely sure that God exists, 27% were fairly sure that God exists, and 5% were not too/not at all certain. Even if we are generous and count the 5% as believers that still leaves 4% of Catholics with no belief in God, in the USA. Those who are not absolutely certain are a third of followers.

Followers tend to think everyone in their group is highly committed because the people who most often speak are highly committed. The less committed and sometimes more reasonable followers tend to be underestimated.

Focus on less crucial harmful practices

The ideology of an unreasonable group, whether explicit or implicit, can sometimes be analysed into (1) a set of rules about behaviour (expressed as a mixture of commandments and stories) and (2) a back story that justifies them in some way and motivates followers to meet the requirements diligently. Within religions the back story might include one or more gods, aliens, energies, an afterlife, or a doomsday and these support many specific commandments and illustrative stories about how to behave. With some other unreasonable groups the back story is a conspiracy theory where some other group is conspiring against the unreasonable group.

Rather than tackle the ideological back story, focus on harmful practices, especially those that are less strongly determined by the ideology. Make clear when your aim is to get those harmful practices modified or stopped, not to end the unreasonable group. For example, perhaps the details of a practice might be modified to reduce the pain it causes.

Ideologies usually drive a mix of harmful, neutral, and beneficial behaviours. Typical beneficial behaviours include taking care of the sick and poor, treating animals kindly, physical exercise, and avoiding booze and other addictive drugs. Typical neutral behaviours include vegetarianism, prayer, and having a beard.

Ideologies seem more acceptable to others when they promote some beneficial behaviours and followers publicize those energetically. This, and concern for tolerance, can make it wiser to focus on harmful behaviours and avoid challenging the motivating back story. Another reason for leaving the ideological back story is that it is often well protected by insulating beliefs and patterns of thought.

It may help to explain and demonstrate the real-world harm a behaviour produces. Put forward sensible reforms, properly explained and evaluated. In a large audience of followers of an ideology there may be some who respond to this, at least to the extent of beginning to wish that the rules of their ideology were different. It may be possible to tap into or develop their understanding of fairness.

It may also be possible to raise doubt about the proper rule to apply by pointing to conflict between the ideology's rules.

Another approach may be to look for ideologies that have the same back story but slightly different prescriptions on behaviour. This might be just one 'church' within a larger group. If some followers sincerely believe the correct rule is a less harmful one then perhaps they are right and it is time for other followers to think again?

It might also be possible to suggest compensating behaviours, or sneaky ways around the rule.

Only tackle doubted elements of the ideology

Tackling a person's belief in the full back story behind the harmful practices (e.g. existence of gods, reincarnation, heaven, hell, reptile aliens) is likely to be very, very difficult because these ideologies are bristling with features that protect the back story from being undermined (e.g. a Pascal's Wager element, a conspiracy theory, retreat into abstractness). For people who have accepted the back story, continued belief (at least outwardly) may be essential to many of their social relationships and even their livelihoods.

However, if you have already assessed a person's commitment (including their level of ideological acceptance and tendency to use insulating tactics to protect their beliefs) then you may have found that they disagree with some parts of the ideology and doubt some others.

If you are going to tackle ideology at all then focus on the doubted elements. Point to other ideologies that are similar but different (e.g. other religions based on the same sacred text but with different interpretations). Disarm Pascal's Wager by mentioning other religions with a Pascal's Wager element to show that the bet is not a choice between God and no-God, but between a host of alternatives, including no-God.

Successfully tackling the back story may not require removal of the idea of a god if it is possible to chip away enough of the back story's details to stop it from driving harmful behaviours.

Be direct and open

Do not antagonize unnecessarily and do not use influence methods other than RF/FP. These fundamental recommendations apply to all influence and especially to dealing with unreasonable groups. For example, mockery gives them something to complain about and may even win them sympathy. Some groups are physically dangerous in response to mockery.

However, if you are going to tackle an element of the ideology and need to state the truth then speak plainly. The unreasonable person may be antagonized but it is a necessary tension.

E.g. Things you might say in different conversations include:

- 'There almost certainly are no supernatural beings.'
- 'It is extremely unlikely that any god, if it existed, would have the characteristics described in your sacred text.'
- 'When we die that is almost certainly the end. There is almost certainly no life after death. No heaven or hell.'
- 'Prayer does not work in any measurable way during our lifetimes.'
- 'Society is not against you and you have many opportunities to find paying work that is safe and pleasant.'
- 'The drugs you want legalized are almost certainly harmful and if used on a much larger scale would ruin and shorten millions of lives.'

A major reason for always being direct and open with members of unreasonable groups is that they are often suspicious of outsiders. The slightest perceived deception might destroy any slight trust that exists. They might be more trusting towards a person who was once a member of their group but has since left. Such people have been powerful agents against crime gangs and radical groups. However, once unreasonable groups identify someone like this, they often start to inoculate their followers against them, generating reasons to distrust the former follower.

Discuss practical impacts

The usual approach of reason and fairness to decisions is to focus on the practical impacts for all those affected. With some unreasonable groups it is tempting to depart from this and focus on their ideology, as they seem to. However, it is better to do the usual thing and focus on practical impacts.

Membership of unreasonable groups often brings significant practical disadvantages and these should be explained.

E.g. Many crime gang members would earn more stacking shelves in a supermarket (even after tax) and the work is safer and more comfortable.

E.g. Children taught at fundamentalist religious schools despite living in a developed democracy are disadvantaged as adults. Their schooling may lack basic scientific knowledge (e.g. of the solar system, evolution, sexuality) due to

ensorship and time wasted memorizing sacred texts instead of learning facts and useful techniques. They may struggle to get along with non-followers because of their early segregation and unacceptable attitudes (e.g. towards gay people), appear eccentric and ignorant because of their scientific knowledge gaps, and have weaker qualifications when applying for jobs and higher education. Parents should understand this when choosing schools.

Followers still understand practical effects even if they decide that religious effects (e.g. in a life after death) are more important.

E.g. Adults within unreasonable religious groups can save many hours each week by leaving the group and stopping prayers and other religious meetings. What could they do with that time? They can also keep money they would otherwise donate to support the religion (e.g. its staff, building programmes, evangelism). This is not a trivial matter. The construction of religious buildings is often a major expense for followers and wastes land that could be better used.

E.g. Organizers of unreasonable groups with distinctive beliefs and behaviours (including appearance) often cite harsh treatment by non-followers as a reason to be more insular, which involves stricter adherence to all the rules of the group. This makes conflict with non-followers even more likely. Instead, members could avoid this conflict by leaving the unreasonable group, ignoring its rules, and learning to live happily with others.

A likely counter-argument to this is to claim that in fact members of the unreasonable group are better off because of it.

E.g. It might be said that religious people are happier, on average, than non-religious people. Some studies appear to show this. However, it depends on the country where the study is done. More importantly, the comparison includes non-religious people who have no social support network and no sense of morality. A follower does not have to be like that. They can leave the unreasonable group and join a reasonable social group for friendship. They can also develop non-religious morality. Also, the comparisons include many people who belong to mild religions that do not involve the same level of wasted effort and other disadvantages as extreme groups.

Another counter-argument is to claim that the disadvantages suffered by members of the unreasonable group are not the result of their ideology or behaviour but, instead, are the result of bullying by others. Sometimes it is hard to debunk this efficiently because of the complexity of the analysis involved. It is more efficient to focus on the practical details of how the ideology and behaviour lead to specific disadvantages rather than take a high-level, statistical view.

E.g. The economic track record of centrally planned economies is poor compared to countries with similar attitudes to science and technology that rely on markets instead. Comparisons might be made between the USA and USSR, East and West Germany before unification, and Venezuela and other countries with massive oil fields. Supporters of central planning sometimes claim that the problem was not the impracticality of central economic planning, but bullying by other countries in the form of trade embargoes and war. This defence pushes the debate into complex historical arguments that can be inconclusive. It is better to focus on the

specifics of how central planning fails, which can easily be understood from everyday experiences.

The tactic of focusing on practical implications of group membership encourages followers to apply their powers of reason to their group membership.

It is also useful to focus on the practical impacts of behaviours when arguing against the harmful practices of an unreasonable group. Group followers may still have some understanding of fairness.

Highlight similar false beliefs

Ideologies often require belief in something that does not exist (e.g. a god, alien reptiles, an all-powerful military conspiracy). Some followers think they have directly perceived the imaginary thing (e.g. their god has spoken to them). The fact that others do not believe in the existence of this imaginary thing is not a strong challenge to the beliefs of followers. Obviously, others have not had the experience they have had.

However, a follower who believes in something that does not exist may still think someone else's different baseless belief is silly. For example, a person who thinks that the world is controlled by an alien race of reptiles may still think it ridiculous to believe there are ghosts or the earth is flat. Knowing others believe in these ridiculous things and even think they have seen them (e.g. seen a ghost, been abducted by aliens) should be more unsettling; 'If others can make these mistakes and be so confident, why not me?'

Educate about the revered texts

Followers are sometimes ignorant of the content of their revered texts. They are often aware of the nice passages in their revered texts but not the nasty ones (perhaps directly contradicting the nice passages). Modern cults usually tell new recruits just some of their beliefs and save the more outlandish beliefs until later.

Passages to focus on include those that are plainly factually wrong (e.g. for an unreasonable group that uses the Bible: grasshoppers have four legs, Leviticus 11:20-22), barbaric (e.g. relating to stoning, amputation, killing people for following the wrong religion), contradictory, or outlandish for other reasons.

Another reason to focus on revered texts rather than ideologies is that ideologies are harder to pin down. Apologists just dodge criticism by disputing characterizations of their ideology. In addition to being long and self-contradictory, the sacred texts of older religions tend to be in archaic language and hard to translate. Nevertheless, they have passages that are easier to pin down than interpretations.

Draw attention to the nasty content of sacred texts and the possibility of dangerous interpretations. (Sometimes it is hard to interpret them any other way.) Some followers may be unaware of these passages and shocked to learn about them. They are more likely to be revolted than inspired to become dangerous fundamentalists, though that is a risk.