

July 22, 2014

Arthur Brooks, the head of the American Enterprise Institute with a NY Times OpEd suggesting the root of happiness comes from our relationships with people.

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Easier said than done, I realize. It requires the courage to repudiate pride and the strength to love others — family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, God and even strangers and enemies. Only deny love to things that actually are objects. The practice that achieves this is charity. Few things are as liberating as giving away to others that which we hold dear.

This also requires a condemnation of materialism. This is manifestly not an argument for any specific economic system. Anyone who has spent time in a socialist country must concede that materialism and selfishness are as bad under collectivism, or worse, as when markets are free. No political ideology is immune to materialism.

Finally, it requires a deep skepticism of our own basic desires. Of course you are driven to seek admiration, splendor and physical license. But giving in to these impulses will bring unhappiness. You have a responsibility to yourself to stay in the battle. The day you declare a truce is the day you become unhappier. Declaring war on these destructive impulses is not about asceticism or Puritanism. It is about being a prudent person who seeks to avoid unnecessary suffering. ...

Last week we had an offering from David Harsanyi on "economic patriotism." **Kevin Williamson** tackles the same subject.

... This is where my fellow conservatives who write off Barack Obama as a Marxist really get it wrong: He has no meaningful economic philosophy whatsoever. Marxism might be a moral step backward for Barack Obama, but it would be an intellectual step up in the sense that it at least represents a coherent worldview. ("At least it's an ethos.") In years of listening to Barack Obama's speeches, I've never detected any evidence that he understands, or even has any interest in, economic questions as such. He is simply a keen political calculator. The conflation of the national interest — "patriotism" — with the interest of the party or the supreme leader is too familiar a demagogic technique to require much explication.

That's the Washington way: Create stupid financial incentives, complain when people respond to them — and then declare that conformity with your political agenda is identical to patriotism. The production values may be Hollywood slick, but this is just another third-rate sequel: Banana Republic: The Tax Code Strikes Back.

Except the tax code is not striking back. Democrats complain about it, but they rarely if ever try to do anything about the industry handouts and sweetheart deals enshrined therein — given that they wrote so many of them, why would they?

If we have to have a definition of “economic patriotism,” how about this: Economic patriotism means, at the very least, not creating a tax and regulatory environment so cumbrous and counterproductive that a drugstore chain that has been operating in Chicago since the McKinley administration decides that Zurich or Geneva is more hospitable, while politically favored interests benefit from their relationships with political power. After all, Walgreen's never promised to straighten out the U.S. economy — Barack Obama did.

Maybe Switzerland would take him, too.

Gerald Seib writes on why Putin is taking risks with Ukraine.

To understand what Vladimir Putin is really up to in Ukraine—why he is willing to take the kinds of risks that produced the destruction of a civilian airliner, and why the U.S. and its allies should see his power play as an effort to alter not just the arc of Ukraine but all of Europe—it's necessary to look at the tale of two countries.

The first is Poland, a country of 38 million. After the end of the Cold War, this former Warsaw Pact nation turned westward. It almost immediately sought membership in the European Union and joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1999. After modernizing its economy, it officially became part of the EU in 2004.

Next door to Poland lies Ukraine, a country of 44 million. After the end of the Cold War, this former Soviet satellite didn't turn west but rather stayed focused on its traditional relationship with Russia to the east.

What has happened to these two neighbors in the quarter-century since the Berlin Wall fell? In a nutshell, they have moved in opposite directions.

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Slate tells us the sad story of Robert Kennedy, Jr..

Most paranoid, grandiose, relentless conspiracy theorists can't call a meeting with a U.S. senator. Then there's Robert F. Kennedy Jr. A profile of Kennedy in this weekend's Washington Post

Magazine shows that Sens. Barbara Mikulski and Bernie Sanders listened politely while Kennedy told them that a vaccine preservative causes autism.

It doesn't. It just doesn't. Every major scientific and medical organization in the country has evaluated the evidence and concluded that the preservative thimerosal is safe. The question is settled scientifically. Thimerosal, out of an abundance of caution, was removed from childhood vaccines 13 years ago, although it is used in some flu vaccines. And yet Kennedy, perhaps more than any other anti-vaccine zealot, has confused parents into worrying that vaccines, which have saved more lives than almost any other public health practice in history, could harm their children.

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But the more people dismiss Kennedy, unfortunately, the more obsessive and slanderous he becomes. Keith Kloor describes some of Kennedy's recent outrageous claims in the Post profile: ...

NY Times

[Love People, Not Pleasure](#)

by Arthur C. Brooks

ABD AL-RAHMAN III was an emir and caliph of Córdoba in 10th-century Spain. He was an absolute ruler who lived in complete luxury. Here's how he assessed his life:

"I have now reigned above 50 years in victory or peace; beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting to my felicity."

Fame, riches and pleasure beyond imagination. Sound great? He went on to write:

"I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot: They amount to 14."

Abd al-Rahman's problem wasn't happiness, as he believed — it was unhappiness. If that sounds like a distinction without a difference, you probably have the same problem as the great emir. But with a little knowledge, you can avoid the misery that befell him.

What is unhappiness? Your intuition might be that it is simply the opposite of happiness, just as darkness is the absence of light. That is not correct. Happiness and unhappiness are certainly related, but they are not actually opposites. Images of the brain show that parts of the left cerebral cortex are more active than the right when we are experiencing happiness, while the right side becomes more active when we are unhappy.

As strange as it seems, being happier than average does not mean that one can't also be unhappier than average. One test for both happiness and unhappiness is the Positive Affectivity and Negative Affectivity Schedule test. I took the test myself. I found that, for happiness, I am at

the top for people my age, sex, occupation and education group. But I get a pretty high score for unhappiness as well. I am a cheerful melancholic.

So when people say, "I am an unhappy person," they are really doing sums, whether they realize it or not. They are saying, "My unhappiness is x , my happiness is y , and $x > y$." The real questions are why, and what you can do to make $y > x$.

If you ask an unhappy person why he is unhappy, he'll almost always blame circumstance. In many cases, of course, this is justified. Some people are oppressed or poor or have physical ailments that make life a chore. Research unsurprisingly suggests that racism causes unhappiness in children, and many academic studies trace a clear link between unhappiness and poverty. Another common source of unhappiness is loneliness, from which about 20 percent of Americans suffer enough to make it a major source of unhappiness in their lives.

THERE are also smaller circumstantial sources of unhappiness. The Princeton psychologist [Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues](#) measured the "negative affect" (bad moods) that ordinary daily activities and interactions kick up. They found that the No. 1 unhappiness-provoking event in a typical day is spending time with one's boss (which, as a boss, made me unhappy to learn).

Circumstances are certainly important. No doubt Abd al-Rahman could point to a few in his life. But paradoxically, a better explanation for his unhappiness may have been his own search for well-being. And the same might go for you.

Have you ever known an alcoholic? They generally drink to relieve craving or anxiety — in other words, to attenuate a source of unhappiness. Yet it is the drink that ultimately prolongs their suffering. The same principle was at work for Abd al-Rahman in his pursuit of fame, wealth and pleasure.

Consider fame. In 2009, researchers from the University of Rochester conducted [a study](#) tracking the success of 147 recent graduates in reaching their stated goals after graduation. Some had "intrinsic" goals, such as deep, enduring relationships. Others had "extrinsic" goals, such as achieving reputation or fame. The scholars found that intrinsic goals were associated with happier lives. But the people who pursued extrinsic goals experienced more negative emotions, such as shame and fear. They even suffered more physical maladies.

This is one of the cruelest ironies in life. I work in Washington, right in the middle of intensely public political battles. Bar none, the unhappiest people I have ever met are those most dedicated to their own self-aggrandizement — the pundits, the TV loudmouths, the media know-it-alls. They build themselves up and promote their images, but feel awful most of the time.

That's the paradox of fame. Just like drugs and alcohol, once you become addicted, you can't live without it. But you can't live with it, either. Celebrities have described fame like being "an animal in a cage; a toy in a shop window; a Barbie doll; a public facade; a clay figure; or, that guy on TV," according to research by the psychologist Donna Rockwell. Yet they can't give it up.

That impulse to fame by everyday people has generated some astonishing innovations. One is the advent of reality television, in which ordinary people become actors in their day-to-day lives for others to watch. Why? "To be noticed, to be wanted, to be loved, to walk into a place and have others care about what you're doing, even what you had for lunch that day: that's what people want, in my opinion," said one 26-year-old participant in an early hit reality show called "Big Brother."

And then there's social media. Today, each of us can build a personal little fan base, thanks to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and the like. We can broadcast the details of our lives to friends and strangers in an astonishingly efficient way. That's good for staying in touch with friends, but it also puts a minor form of fame-seeking within each person's reach. And several studies show that it can make us unhappy.

It makes sense. What do you post to Facebook? Pictures of yourself yelling at your kids, or having a hard time at work? No, you post smiling photos of a hiking trip with friends. You build a fake life — or at least an incomplete one — and share it. Furthermore, you consume almost exclusively the fake lives of your social media "friends." Unless you are extraordinarily self-aware, how could it not make you feel worse to spend part of your time pretending to be happier than you are, and the other part of your time seeing how much happier others seem to be than you?

Some look for relief from unhappiness in money and material things. This scenario is a little more complicated than fame. The evidence does suggest that money relieves suffering in cases of true material need. (This is a strong argument, in my view, for many safety-net policies for the indigent.) But when money becomes an end in itself, it can bring misery, too.

For decades, psychologists have been compiling a vast literature on the relationships between different aspirations and well-being. Whether they examine young adults or people of all ages, the bulk of the studies point toward the same important conclusion: People who rate materialistic goals like wealth as top personal priorities are significantly likelier to be more anxious, more depressed and more frequent drug users, and even to have more physical ailments than those who set their sights on more intrinsic values.

No one sums up the moral snares of materialism more famously than St. Paul in his First Letter to Timothy: "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." Or as the Dalai Lama pithily suggests, it is better to want what you have than to have what you want.

SO fame and money are out. How about pleasures of the flesh? Take the canonical hedonistic pleasure: lust. From Hollywood to college campuses, many assume that sex is always great, and sexual variety is even better.

This assumption actually has a name: the "Coolidge Effect," named after the 30th president of the United States. The story (probably apocryphal) begins with Silent Cal and Mrs. Coolidge touring a poultry farm. The first lady noticed that there were very few roosters, and asked how so many eggs could be fertilized. The farmer told her that the virile roosters did their jobs over and over again each day. "Perhaps you could point that out to Mr. Coolidge," she told him. The president, hearing the remark, asked whether the rooster serviced the same hen each time. No, the farmer told him — there were many hens for each rooster. "Perhaps you could point that out to Mrs. Coolidge," said the president.

The president obviously figured these must be happy roosters. And notwithstanding the moral implications, the same principle should work for us. Right?

Wrong. In 2004, [two economists](#) looked into whether more sexual variety led to greater well-being. They looked at data from about 16,000 adult Americans who were asked confidentially how many sex partners they had had in the preceding year, and about their happiness. Across men and women alike, the data show that the optimal number of partners is one.

This might seem totally counterintuitive. After all, we are unambiguously driven to accumulate material goods, to seek fame, to look for pleasure. How can it be that these very things can give us unhappiness instead of happiness? There are two explanations, one biological and the other philosophical.

From an evolutionary perspective, it makes sense that we are wired to seek fame, wealth and sexual variety. These things make us more likely to pass on our DNA. Had your cave-man ancestors not acquired some version of these things (a fine reputation for being a great rock sharpener; multiple animal skins), they might not have found enough mating partners to create your lineage.

But here's where the evolutionary cables have crossed: We assume that things we are attracted to will relieve our suffering and raise our happiness. My brain says, "Get famous." It also says, "Unhappiness is lousy." I conflate the two, getting, "Get famous and you'll be less unhappy."

But that is Mother Nature's cruel hoax. She doesn't really care either way whether you are unhappy — she just wants you to want to pass on your genetic material. If you conflate intergenerational survival with well-being, that's your problem, not nature's. And matters are hardly helped by nature's useful idiots in society, who propagate a popular piece of life-ruining advice: "If it feels good, do it." Unless you share the same existential goals as protozoa, this is often flat-out wrong.

More philosophically, the problem stems from dissatisfaction — the sense that nothing has full flavor, and we want more. We can't quite pin down what it is that we seek. Without a great deal of reflection and spiritual hard work, the likely candidates seem to be material things, physical pleasures or favor among friends and strangers.

We look for these things to fill an inner emptiness. They may bring a brief satisfaction, but it never lasts, and it is never enough. And so we crave more. This paradox has a word in Sanskrit: upadana, which refers to the cycle of craving and grasping. As the Dhammapada (the Buddha's path of wisdom) puts it: "The craving of one given to heedless living grows like a creeper. Like the monkey seeking fruits in the forest, he leaps from life to life... Whoever is overcome by this wretched and sticky craving, his sorrows grow like grass after the rains."

This search for fame, the lust for material things and the objectification of others — that is, the cycle of grasping and craving — follows a formula that is elegant, simple and deadly:

Love things, use people.

This was Abd al-Rahman's formula as he sleepwalked through life. It is the worldly snake oil peddled by the culture makers from Hollywood to Madison Avenue. But you know in your heart that it is morally disordered and a likely road to misery. You want to be free of the sticky cravings of unhappiness and find a formula for happiness instead. How? Simply invert the deadly formula and render it virtuous:

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Easier said than done, I realize. It requires the courage to repudiate pride and the strength to love others — family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, God and even strangers and enemies. Only deny love to things that actually are objects. The practice that achieves this is charity. Few things are as liberating as giving away to others that which we hold dear.

This also requires a condemnation of materialism. This is manifestly not an argument for any specific economic system. Anyone who has spent time in a socialist country must concede that materialism and selfishness are as bad under collectivism, or worse, as when markets are free. No political ideology is immune to materialism.

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Abd al-Rahman never got his happiness sums right. He never knew the right formula. Fortunately, we do.

Arthur Brooks is a contributing opinion writer and the president of the American Enterprise Institute.

National Review

The Canard of 'Economic Patriotism'

Or, "What's good for Democrats is good for America."

by Kevin D. Williamson

Jack Lew, late of Citigroup and currently of the Obama administration, has issued a call for "economic patriotism." This phrase, which is without meaningful intellectual content, is popular in Democratic circles these days. Ted Strickland, the clownish xenophobe and nearly lifelong suckler upon all available taxpayer teats who once served as governor of Ohio, famously denounced Mitt Romney as a man lacking "economic patriotism" during the 2012 Democratic convention. President Barack Obama has used the phrase. It's not that I do not appreciate lectures on "economic patriotism" from feckless former executives of dodgy Wall Street enterprises, guys who get rich monetizing their political celebrity, and second-rate ward-heelers from third-rate states; it's just that nobody ever has been able to explain to me what the term is intended to mean.

The proximate cause of Mr. Lew's distress is the fact that many U.S. firms either are up and leaving the country entirely or are acquiring foreign competitors in order to reorganize themselves as companies legally domiciled in friendly tax jurisdictions. U.S. pharmaceutical firms in particular have been in a rush to acquire partners in order to escape punitive U.S. corporate taxes for the relatively hospitable climates of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Walgreen's, a venerable firm that, like the lamentable political career of Barack Obama, has its origins in Chicago, is considering abandoning its hometown of 113 years for Switzerland. Eaton, a Cleveland-based manufacturer of electronic components, moved to Ireland. The list goes on.

Note that in spite of the would-be class warriors' "race to the bottom" rhetoric, these firms are not moving to relatively low-wage countries such as China or India. Switzerland is not a Third World hellhole — especially if your immediate point of comparison is murdericious Chicago, which endures more homicides in a typical July than gun-loving Switzerland sees in a typical year. The Netherlands is not Haiti, and Ireland is not Bangladesh. Mr. Lew is correct in his assertion that relative tax rates are a main driver in the desire of firms to relocate, though it is not the only driver — arbitrary and unpredictable regulation, a lousy tort environment, and unstable public finances surely play a role as well. The United States has the highest statutory corporate-income-tax rate in

the developed world, and though effective rates are typically lower than the nominal rate, that is more of a bug than a feature: Our corporate-income-tax regime is riddled with handouts and political favoritism. Crony capitalism is not an inspiring condition for firms looking to make long-term investments.

The strange thing is that the very people who insist on inserting all those special breaks and sweetheart deals into the tax code then turn around and rage when companies use them — i.e., when they comply with the law as written. Firms such as GE and Verizon (a significant Obama donor) have been blasted by the Left for having paid no taxes in some years, and President Obama himself gripes about corporate tax breaks — and then, in every single State of the Union address, he proposes more special exemptions, credits, and carve-outs for politically favored industries. Which is to say, Democrats demand special tax breaks be written into the law, and then they complain when companies or individuals take advantage of those tax breaks. It's absurd, and it's intellectually dishonest.

“Economic patriotism” and its kissing cousin, economic nationalism, are ideas with a fairly stinky history, having been a mainstay of fascist rhetoric during the heyday of Franklin D. Roosevelt's favorite “admirable Italian gentleman.” My colleague Jonah Goldberg has labored mightily in the task of illustrating the similarities between old-school fascist thinking and modern progressive thinking on matters political and social, but it is on economic questions that contemporary Democrats and vintage fascists are remarkably alike. In fact, their approaches are for all intents and purposes identical: As most economic historians agree, neither the Italian fascists nor the German national-socialists nor any similar movement of great significance had anything that could be described as a coherent economic philosophy. The Italian fascists put forward a number of different and incompatible economic theories during their reign, and the Third Reich, under the influence of Adolf Hitler's heroic conception of history, mostly subordinated economic questions as such to purportedly grander concerns involving destiny and other abstractions.

Which is to say, what the economic nationalism of Benito Mussolini most has in common with the prattling and blockheaded talk of “economic patriotism” coming out of the mealy mouths of 21st-century Democrats is the habit of subordinating *everything* to immediate political concerns. In this context, “patriotism” doesn't mean doing what's best for your country — it means doing what is best for the Obama administration and its congressional allies. This is where my fellow conservatives who write off Barack Obama as a Marxist really get it wrong: He has no meaningful economic philosophy whatsoever. Marxism might be a moral step backward for Barack Obama, but it would be an intellectual step up in the sense that it at least represents a coherent worldview. (“At least it's an ethos.”) In years of listening to Barack Obama's speeches, I've never detected any evidence that he understands, or even has any interest in, economic questions as such. He is simply a keen political calculator. The conflation of the national interest — “patriotism” — with the interest of the party or the supreme leader is too familiar a demagogic technique to require much explication.

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WSJ

[Why Putin Is Willing to Take Big Risks in Ukraine](#)

A Look at Differing Fates of Poland, Ukraine Gives Clues

by Gerald F. Seib



To understand what Vladimir [Putin](#) is really up to in Ukraine—why he is willing to take the kinds of [risks that produced the destruction of a civilian airliner](#), and why the U.S. and its allies should see his power play as an effort to alter not just the arc of Ukraine but all of Europe—it’s necessary to look at the tale of two countries.

The first is Poland, a country of 38 million. After the end of the Cold War, this former Warsaw Pact nation turned westward. It almost immediately sought membership in the [European Union](#) and joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1999. After modernizing its economy, it officially became part of the EU in 2004.

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What has happened to these two neighbors in the quarter-century since the Berlin Wall fell? In a nutshell, they have moved in opposite directions.

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This is the contrast that must scare Mr. Putin. It also is the one that set off alarm bells when Ukraine, emulating neighboring Poland, began to pivot westward earlier this year. To allow that turn to happen, in the most important of Russian satellites, would have been the end of any near-term dreams of rebuilding a Russian empire.

In short, the goal of re-creating a Russian sphere of influence was colliding head-on with the spread of a Westernized, EU model for Europe, which was seeping toward Russia's doorstep. Mr. Putin faced a historic choice: swim with the tide or try to turn it. He chose the latter.

"I think [Russia's] goal is a weak and divided Ukraine, and a bigger goal is a weak and divided Europe—a weak and divided EU," says Robert Hormats, under secretary of state in the first [Obama](#) term. Moreover, to the extent a country such as Poland prospers, he adds, "it creates a very, very stark contrast to the troubled economic prospects in Russia" itself.

Mr. Putin had to move quickly to reverse those trends, for he is at a moment of relative but passing strength. Today, Western Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas gives him some economic leverage. As Europe has gobbled up more of Mr. Putin's gas, EU trade with Russia has tripled in value over the last decade.

This Russian economic advantage doesn't figure to last; eventually, Europe will wean itself away from its dependence on Russian carbon fuels. But for now, Mr. Putin must have calculated, he could make his play in Ukraine and face a muted Western response.

And if that was his calculation, he was mostly correct. Business interests, not just in Europe but in the U.S., have resisted toughening economic sanctions. Perhaps the downing of an airliner has changed that; we'll learn more at a meeting of EU leaders Tuesday.

This also explains why Poland looks with alarm at Russian bullying of Ukraine, and at the Western response so far. Poland knows from history that it is vulnerable to being yanked back toward the east, so it seeks more help from the Western club to which it now belongs.

"The crisis in Ukraine could have been prevented," Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said in an interview with German journalists published over the weekend. "Europe has done too little to influence Russia's behavior in the different stages of the conflict. When a Russian trade boycott against Ukraine was imposed last year to punish it for its European course, I pleaded with my colleagues to take action." If the West had moved then, he added, today's "escalation" probably would have been avoided.

If Poland is indeed the success story, it's a particularly troubling note for President [Barack Obama](#) that a Polish magazine last month quoted Mr. Sikorski as saying, in a leaked tape of a private conversation, that Poland's defense ties to the U.S. were "worthless."

In his weekend interview he was more diplomatic but still argued for more Western defense help to avoid Ukraine's fate. "The reality [is] that there are large [Western] military bases in countries that are safe. And there is a hesitation to build these bases in states that feel threatened."

Slate

Don't Feel Sorry for Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

A Washington Post profile portrays him as passionate and sympathetic. He's actually obsessive and dangerous.

by Laura Helmuth



Rebel with a terrible cause

Most paranoid, grandiose, relentless conspiracy theorists can't call a meeting with a U.S. senator. Then there's Robert F. Kennedy Jr. A profile of Kennedy in this weekend's *Washington Post Magazine* shows that Sens. Barbara Mikulski and Bernie Sanders listened politely while Kennedy told them that a vaccine preservative causes autism.

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Mikulski and Sanders, to their credit, both politely blew Kennedy off. That's a sign of great progress: Not that many years ago, Rep. Dan Burton held congressional hearings on the entirely made-up dangers of vaccines. I'm especially proud of Sanders, who represents Vermont, a state with one of the highest rates of vaccine denial and misinformation.

But the more people dismiss Kennedy, unfortunately, the more obsessive and slanderous he becomes. Keith Kloor describes some of Kennedy's recent outrageous claims in the *Post* profile:

The more Kennedy talked on the subject, the more his rhetoric became hyperbolic. During one 2011 segment on his Air America radio show, he accused government scientists of being “involved in a massive fraud.” He said they skewed studies to demonstrate the safety of thimerosal. “I can see that this fraud is doing extraordinary damage to the brains of American children,” he said. Last year, he gave the keynote speech at an anti-vaccine gathering in Chicago. There, he said of a scientist who is a vocal proponent of vaccines and already the object of much hate mail from anti-vaccine activists that this scientist and others like him, “should be in jail, and the key should be thrown away.”

I got a taste of Kennedy’s delusions last year. After ***Slate***’s Bad Astronomy blogger, Phil Plait, criticized Kennedy for speaking at an anti-vaccine conference, Kennedy called me to complain, and I wrote about our very one-sided conversation. He told me scientists and government agencies are conspiring with the vaccine industry to cover up the evidence that thimerosal is “the most potent brain killer imaginable,” and journalists are dupes who are afraid to question authority. He claimed that several specific scientists had admitted to him that he was right. I called these scientists up. Here’s one representative answer, from a researcher who preferred I not use his name because he gets death threats from anti-vaccine activists: “Kennedy completely misrepresented everything I said.”

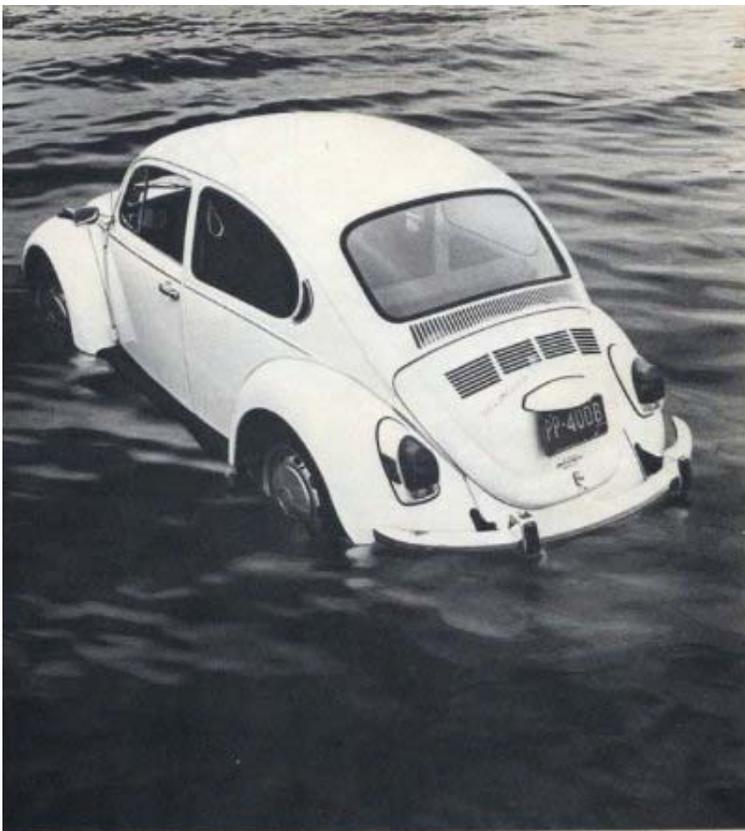
To recap: Kennedy accuses scientists of fraud, which is pretty much the worst thing you can say about a scientist. He distorts their statements. He says they should be thrown in jail. He uses his powerful name to besmirch theirs. That name, the reason he has power and fame, is inherited from a family dedicated to public service. He now uses the Kennedy name to accuse employees of government agencies charged with protecting human health—some of the best public servants this country has—of engaging in a massive conspiracy to cause brain damage in children.

In his profile of Kennedy and in blog posts about the story, Keith Kloor is remarkably generous to his subject, presenting him as dogged and genuine. (I have a lot of respect for Kloor and have published his work in ***Slate***.) I asked Kloor what he thinks about Kennedy after spending so much time with him. “I have conflicted feelings about Robert Kennedy Jr. and this story I wrote. I’m sympathetic to him on a human level,” Kloor said. “I came to believe he genuinely believes he’s pursuing the truth. He has a moral certitude about what he’s doing ... I really think he sees himself as a martyr for a cause.”

When I read the *Post* story, I worried that some readers would see Kennedy as a heroic underdog. Kloor disagrees that the story depicts him in that way, and I hope he’s right. “I think he comes off as an obsessive, tone-deaf crusader on an issue that nearly everyone he respects in his professional sphere thinks he should drop immediately. ... The fact that he’s been willing to keep at it, even while he’s alienating close friends and associates—truly pissing them off—astounds me. That level of stubbornness and self-righteousness is fascinating in a public figure like Kennedy, and it’s one of the elements that convinced me this was a legitimate story.”

Fascinating it is, and absolutely maddening. And dangerous. Even if some senators know enough to nod politely, thank him for stopping by, and then ignore him, Kennedy still commands large and rapturous audiences. He is publishing a book about the supposed dangers of thimerosal, which will bring him another burst of publicity and potentially cause even more parents to refuse to vaccinate their children. The number of measles cases in the United States tripled last year—an entirely preventable disease whose resurgence has been made possible in part by Kennedy’s tireless efforts.

There are a lot of people who deserve your sympathy as they work tirelessly and thanklessly to improve the world. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is not one of them.



If Ted Kennedy drove a Volkswagen, he'd be President today.

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