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– The Failure –

A chameleon changes its colouring to hide among the leaf litter. A cat flattens its shape and creeps soundlessly in the long grass. They do not announce to their prey that they are hungry and wish to kill to sate their desire.

Human life also requires that we suppress open expressions of desire. The range of circumstances in which this suppression is necessary may be greater than for other forms of life – hiding signs of sexual arousal, hiding envy, hiding dislike – but the principle remains the same: if we desire things, we may have to dissemble in order to gratify that desire or simply in order to be able to continue living alongside others.

Humans treat some desires as illegitimate. Further, humans generate a vastly more complex and diverse range of desires than non-humans, and they are enmeshed in a vaster range of circumstances. That leads to a similarly wide variety of ways of suppressing signs of desire.

How do we do this? Through *language*.

Human language allows us to speak not just of concrete needs, but also of abstract ideals. Language allows us to cooperate in small groups and to conduct

projects that coordinate the lives of billions. The language we use is unique to us as individuals and at the same time a collective accomplishment.

Language is used to conceal as much to reveal. From the most sophisticated diplomatic language to the baldest lie, humans find ways to deceive. Deceptions are not necessarily malign; at some level they are vital if humans are to live together with civility. As Richard Sennett has argued: 'In practising social civility, you keep silent about things you know clearly but which you should not and do not say'.[1]

The same capacity of language that allows us to be social beings also allows us to shape how we understand ourselves and our desires. Just as we can suppress some aspects of ourselves in our self-presentation to others, so we can do the same to ourselves in acknowledging or not acknowledging what we desire.

When does deception become harmful? In this book, I want to explore one of its most pernicious forms. This book is about denialism, the danger it poses and what we can do about it.

Denialism is an expansion, an intensification, of denial. At root, denial and denialism are simply a subset of the many ways humans have developed to use language to deceive others and themselves. Denial can be as simple as refusing to accept that someone else is speaking truthfully. Denial can be as unfathomable as the multiple ways we avoid acknowledging our weaknesses and secret desires.

Denialism is more than just another manifestation of humdrum deceptions and self-deceptions. It represents the transformation of the everyday practice of denial into a new way of seeing the world and – most importantly to this book – a collective accomplishment. Denial is furtive and routine; denialism is combative and extraordinary. Denial hides from the truth; denialism builds a new and better truth.

In recent years, the term denialism has come to be applied to a strange field of 'scholarship'.[2] The scholars in this field engage in an audacious project: to hold back, against seemingly insurmountable odds, the findings of an avalanche of research. They argue that the Holocaust (and other genocides) never happened, that anthropogenic (caused by humans) climate change is a myth, that AIDS either does not exist or is unrelated to HIV, that evolution is a scientific impossibility, and that all manner of other scientific and historical orthodoxies must be rejected.

In some ways, denialism is a terrible term. No one calls themselves a 'denialist', and no one signs up to all forms of denialism. In fact, denialism is founded on the assertion that it is *not* denialism. In the wake of Freud (or at least the vulgarisation of Freud) no one wants to be accused of being 'in denial' and labelling people denial*ists* seems to compound the insult by implying that they have taken the private sickness of denial and turned it into public dogma.

Denialism and denial are closely linked. What

humans do on a large scale is rooted in what we do on a small scale. While everyday denial can be harmful, it is also just a mundane way for humans to respond to the incredibly difficult challenge of living in a social world in which people lie, make mistakes and have desires that cannot be openly acknowledged. Denialism is rooted in human tendencies that are neither freakish nor pathological.

All that said, there is no doubt that denialism is dangerous. In some cases, we can point to concrete examples of denialism causing actual harm. In South Africa, President Thabo Mbeki, in office between 1999 and 2008, was influenced by AIDS denialists, who deny the link between HIV and AIDS (or even HIV's existence) and cast doubt on the effectiveness of anti-retrovirals. His reluctance to implement national treatment programmes that made use of anti-retrovirals has been estimated to have cost the lives of 330,000 people.[3] On a smaller scale, in early 2017 the Somali-American community in Minnesota was struck by a childhood measles outbreak, as a direct result of the discredited theory that the MMR vaccine causes autism, persuading parents not to vaccinate their children.[4]

More commonly though, denialism's effects are less direct but more insidious. Global warming denialists have not managed to overturn the general scientific consensus that global warming caused by human activity. But what they have managed to do is provide support for those opposed to taking radical

action to address this urgent problem. Achieving a global agreement that could underpin a transition to a post-carbon economy and slow the temperature increase was always going to be an enormous challenge. Global warming denialism has helped to make the challenge even harder by, for example, influencing the non-ratification of the Kyoto Protocol during the George W. Bush presidency and Donald Trump's stated intention to withdraw the US from the Paris Accord. There is no shortage of frightening predictions about what will happen if we do not act now to stall or reverse climate change.[5]

Denialism can also create an environment of hate and suspicion. Forms of genocide denialism are not just attempts to overthrow irrefutable historical facts, they are an assault on those who survive genocide and their descendants. The implacable denialism that has led the Turkish state to refuse to admit that the 1917 Armenian genocide occurred, is also an attack on today's Armenians, and by implication any other Turkish minority that would dare to raise troubling questions about the status of minorities in Turkey both today and in the past. Similarly, those who deny the Holocaust are not trying to disinterestedly 'correct' the historical record; they are, with varying degrees of subtlety, trying to show that Jews are pathological liars and fundamentally dangerous, as well as to rehabilitate the reputation of the Nazis. Holocaust denial gives succour to antisemites worldwide and has become an

important part of opposition to Israel in some Muslim states.

The dangers that other forms of denialism pose may be less concrete, but they are no less serious. Denial of evolution, for example, does not have an immediately hateful payoff; rather it works to foster a distrust in science and research that feeds into other denialisms and undermines evidence-based policy-making. Even 'far-out fringe' denialisms, such as Flat Earth theories, while hard to take seriously, help to create an environment in which real scholarship and political attempts to engage with reality, break down in favour of all-encompassing suspicion.

The current controversy over the 'post-fact era', 'alternative facts' and 'fake news' did not come out of nowhere. Donald Trump, Alex Jones and Breitbart did not materialise from the ether. Rather, their prominence and success are the outcome of decades of hard work by denialists to encourage suspicion towards scholarship and science. In the post-war period, when the tobacco industry began its epic attempts to cast doubt on research that demonstrated the danger of their product, they were laying the groundwork for an even more ambitious project.[6]

Denialism has moved from the fringes to the centre of public discourse, helped in part by new technology. As information becomes freer to access online, as 'research' has been opened to anyone with a web browser, as previously marginal voices climb

onto the online soapbox, so the opportunities for countering accepted truths multiply. No one can be entirely ostracised, marginalised and dismissed as a crank anymore.

The sheer profusion of voices, the plurality of opinions, the cacophony of the controversy, are enough to make anyone doubt what they should believe. Denialism's ability to cast doubt can ensnare any of us. The writer Will Storr, in his book on 'enemies of science', reflected on the corrosive impact of this doubt:

> It is as if I have caught a glimpse of some grotesque delusion that I am stuck inside. It is disorientating. It is frightening . . . It is as if I am too angry, too weak to bear the challenge of it. And there is a fear there too, lying secretly among all the bluster: what if they're right?[7]

While certainty can be dangerous, so is unbounded scepticism. Denialism offers a dystopian vision of a world unmoored, in which nothing can be taken for granted and no one can be trusted. If you believe you are being constantly lied to, paradoxically you may be in danger of accepting the untruths of others. Denialism blends corrosive doubt with corrosive credulity.

It's perfectly understandable that denialism sparks anger and outrage, particularly in those who are directly challenged by it. If you are a Holocaust survivor, a historian, a climate scientist, a resident of a flood-plain, a geologist, an AIDS researcher or

someone whose child caught a preventable disease from an unvaccinated child, it is obvious how denialism might feel like an assault on your life's work, your core beliefs or even your life.

Those whose life or work is challenged by denialism can and do fight back. This can even include, in some countries, laws against denialism, as in France's prohibition of Holocaust denial. Attempts to teach 'creation science' alongside evolution in US schools are fought with tenacity. Denialists are excluded from scholarly journals and academic conferences.

The most common response to denialism, though, is debunking. Just as denialists produce a large and ever-growing body of books, articles, websites, lectures and videos, so their detractors respond with a literature of their own. Denialist claims are refuted point by point, in a spiralling contest in which no argument – however ludicrous – is ever left unchallenged. Some debunkings are endlessly patient and civil, treating denialists and their claims seriously and even respectfully; others are angry and contemptuous.

Respectful debate and angry abuse, legal protest and marginalisation . . . None of these strategies works, at least not completely.

Take the libel case that the Holocaust denier David Irving brought against Deborah Lipstadt in 1996. Irving's claim that accusing him of being a Holocaust denier and a falsifier of history was libellous were forensically demolished by Richard Evans and other