

Democratic Dialogue and the Memetic Right: A Polemic

Gabriel Keehn

University of Northern Iowa

In early June of 2023, the board of the Temecula Valley Unified School District, in Southern California, held a meeting, resembling many others around the country before and since, about how the district should handle discussions of sexuality and gender in classrooms. The specific question the board was to vote on in this case was whether to approve for use an elementary school social studies textbook that contained information about pioneering gay rights activist and the first ever openly gay man elected to political office in the state of California, Harvey Milk. After public comments, discussions with teachers, and debate within the board, the board voted 3-2 to reject the textbook. At one point over the course of the discussion, Board Chairman Dr. Joseph Komrosky, who is also a professor of philosophy at a local community college, where, per his twitter profile, focuses on “logic and critical thinking,” made the following comment regarding the section of the textbook discussing Harvey Milk: “My question is, why even mention a pedophile?”¹ Komrosky, in making this shocking and baseless accusation, was riffing on a recently emergent popular theme on the right, namely the idea that all leftists, and members of the LGBTQ community specifically, are pedophilic in some way or are engaged in the “grooming” of young children into their ideological and political positions around gender. Examples of this discourse playing out in educational spaces are increasingly common. In September of 2021, for example, an Ohio mayor threatened to bring child pornography charges against an entire school board that allowed writing prompts of a sexual nature to be given to high school seniors in a college-credit creative writing class; Florida’s infamous House Bill 1557 (commonly referred to as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill), was explicitly described by Florida governor and now presidential candidate Ron DeSantis’ then-press secretary as “an anti- grooming bill.”²

The language of grooming as it has been adopted and deployed by the right in this country is a meme, a term I will discuss below. If this claim sounds surprising, it is worth considering the fact that one common usage of the lan-

guage of grooming in response to, for example, any defense of LGBTQ issues as legitimate inclusions in school curricula is the pithy “OK groomer,” a phrase which is itself riffing on another recently popular meme, namely “OK boomer.” Grooming language and accusations are, of course, one of many memes that have been adopted and mobilized for political ends in the Trump, post-Trump, and neo-Trump eras, and it is what these memes signify, and how the right orients itself toward and around them, that form the central conceit of this paper. I argue that the constitution of the contemporary American right, as read through its own internal memetic logic, is not that of a political movement or ideology as ordinarily understood, but is rather a form of meta-ironic mystical occultism, where magical and occult rituals and symbols (often in the form of memes) are deployed, iterated on, and repeated in place of the traditional trappings of political discourse, like argumentation, persuasion, mutual intelligibility, and the like. Put differently, the modern right is, I suggest, not a political movement, but an aesthetic or affective movement that happens to have political effects, albeit incredibly serious ones. This view of the right has important implications for democratic theory and philosophy of education, specifically, theories of democratic education that foreground dialogic engagement as a means of bridging divides or simply coming to grips with difference and disagreement. If my description of the nature of the contemporary American right is correct, which I hope to motivate later in this paper, I argue that it renders members of the right today ineligible as democratic interlocutors, and renders theories of democratic dialogue as a pedagogical and political practice at best ineffectual, and at worst, playing into the hands of the far-right. I conclude by briefly suggesting a more promising avenue of engagement with this new memetic right.

POST-TRUMP PANIC AND THE PROMISE OF DIALOGUE

One of the most pressing questions that emerged, or more precisely, re-emerged with a new urgency, in the aftermath of the 2016 election of Donald Trump, not only in philosophy of education but across disciplines and mainstream discourse more broadly, was the question of how it is that we are supposed to live, learn, and work together with people whose epistemic, ontic, and moral orientations and axioms are incompatible with our own; people with

whom, in real but perhaps indefinable ways, we do not share a lifeworld, but with whom we must share a nation. The psychosocial rifts exposed (though not necessarily created) by the 2016 election and culminating in the January 6 Capitol insurrection, prompted many on the moderate and farther left to engage in a process of introspection regarding their assumptions and views regarding many of their countrymen, about whom they had rarely previously thought or outright found deplorable (a moniker that would of course be adopted with gusto by many of Trump's supporters). Texts such as now-Ohio senator J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* were read and discussed widely in an attempt to understand how precisely Trump had done the seemingly impossible; what his appeal was to so many voters, and what bridges might be buildable across the newly visible moral chasms between those who did not support Trump and their fellow citizens.³

Philosophy of education as a field was, and remains, perhaps uniquely positioned to engage with these questions. Educational thinkers have long centered the relationship between civic learning, democratic living, and how we talk with one another, from Socrates to Dewey to Freire to more recent post-Rawlsian developments in liberal theory. Jim Garrison, for example, opens his well-known discussion of democratic listening by glossing Dewey's overall project in the following way: "Growth through freedom, creativity, and dialogue was, for John Dewey, the all-inclusive ideal, the greatest good."⁴ Sarah Stitzlein, writing importantly in the post-Trump/post-truth era, suggests that dialogue can serve salutary epistemic, democratic, and metacognitive functions:

Through dialogue and inquiry, students can come to see both their own cognitive limitations at work and how their beliefs can be improved through the experience and evidence offered by others... Students can experience how epistemic habits such as listening to others generously, testing beliefs through the empirical method, and demonstrating intellectual humility enhance democracy... Moreover, within those dialogues, students come to better understand their beliefs, and, importantly from a Deweyan perspective, how they think and believe.⁵

Alison Jones, who I should note is otherwise critical of certain conceptual background assumptions in the idea of cross-cultural dialogue, helpfully summarizes the intuitive appeal and promise of democratic dialogue: “In its ideal form, dialogue between diverse groups dispels ignorance about others, increases understanding, and thus potentially decreases oppression, separation, violence, and fear.”⁶ These are only a few articulations of the promise of democratic dialogue in education (a search in the *Philosophy of Education* database yields over forty results for the phrase “democratic dialogue”), and there are additional theoretical and practical distinctions made between the terms “dialogue,” “discussion,” and “deliberation” that all bring their own conceptual conundrums and opportunities.⁷ I have moved deliberately cursorily here because my goal in the rest of this section is not to engage with the specificities of any of these particular approaches, but rather to isolate what I see as a foundational assumption that undergirds all of them, whatever their other differences. To draw this out, I offer a reading of Hannah Arendt’s posthumously published essay “Philosophy and Politics.”⁸

In the essay, Arendt returns the discussion about democratic dialogue to its roots in the Socratic maieutic tradition, in which the goal of dialogue is not arriving at a pre-existing truth, reaching a publicly justifiable consensus, as some contemporary liberal theorists would have it (Habermas being perhaps chief among these), or even persuasion more simply. Rather, on this conception, dialogue is about interlocutors mutually eliciting from one another (birthing, in Socratic terms) one another’s *doxa* (opinion or belief, in Greek). Arendt puts it this way:

Yet, just as nobody can know beforehand the other’s *doxa*, so nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion. Socrates wanted to bring out this truth, which everyone potentially possesses. If we remain true to his own metaphor of *maieutic*, we may say: Socrates wanted to make the city more truthful by delivering each of the citizens of their truths. The method of doing this is *dialegesthai*, talking something through, but this dialectic

brings forth truth not by destroying *doxa* or opinion, but on the contrary reveals *doxa* in its own truthfulness.⁹

Dialogue then, is constitutive of democratic life in the sense it allows us to understand one another even where our subjective experiences of the world are deeply distinct, and perhaps incompatible. Further, dialogue assumes a level of democratic equality between interlocutors; that no individual has a monopoly on the truth or any privileged insight into reality. Indeed, we can only become whole selves in the co-exploration of our *doxai*, which reveal themselves in our engagement. Arendt explicitly makes the argument that dialogue is fundamentally a public endeavor in precisely this sense:

The word *doxa* means not only opinion but also splendor and fame. As such, it is related to the political realm, which is the public sphere in which everybody can appear and show who he himself is. To assert one's own opinion belonged to being able to show oneself, to be seen and heard by others.¹⁰

If we accept Arendt's reading of the maieutic method, we have the *sine qua non* of any theory of dialogue that I referenced earlier; that is, for any form of dialogue to take place, there must be *doxai*. There must be beliefs, views, and experiences of the world to be opened up and shared. One cannot dialogue in this sense, barring perhaps some posthuman provisos, with objects, with things to which the world does not appear, that do not have beliefs or opinions and cannot illuminate your own.

Of course, neither Arendt nor any other theorist of dialogue is perfectly sanguine about its democratic possibilities, as there are always those who might wish to avoid or sabotage a possible dialogue in its nascency. For example, Winston Thompson, in his response to Michele Moses' Presidential Address to this society in 2023, highlighted the need for philosophers of education to attend to the possibility (and actuality) of bad dialogic actors who are characterized by "a relatively deep degree of insincerity regarding their articulated reasons and an unwillingness to respond to arguments that engage their privately held reasons."¹¹ These types of actors are indeed a significant philosophical and

practical problem, but in the final section of this paper I want to explore what I see as a more difficult, darker, and pressing reality, namely the existence of actors to whom genuine democratic dialogue is barred not because they choose to hide their genuine beliefs, but because they do not hold any genuine beliefs in the ways required for dialogue at all, for whom there are no *doxai*. I will suggest that for broad swathes of the contemporary American right this is the case; that for them political life is fundamentally non-cognitive, consisting instead of magical, occult associations, various affective states, and ritualistic evocations.

INTERLUDE: WHAT DO YOU MEME?

Since the next section will be referencing and mobilizing the concept of memes as a critical aspect of the contemporary right's identity, I will briefly say something about what I mean by the term, though I generally find Potter Stewart's "I know it when I see it" standard to be sufficient.¹² The term "meme" was introduced in 1976 in *The Selfish Gene*, by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (who later rose to internet fame as part of the "New Atheism" movement of the mid 2000's, which became in some ways an incubator for subsequent right-wing movements, though that is a different story). Dawkins' larger project was to apply the principles of evolutionary theory to cultural change, and he understood memes (chosen as a term for its similarity to "genes") to be any unit of cultural information that is transmissible from person to person over time through imitation or adoption. His definition is purposely broad, and includes things such as melodies, fashion choices, abstract ideas and belief systems (such as religion).¹³ Later, theorists such as Susan Blackmore, adopted similarly inclusive understandings of the term, using it "indiscriminately to refer to memetic information in any of its many forms; including ideas, the brain structures that initiate those ideas, the behaviors these brain structures produce, and their versions in books, recipes, maps and written music."¹⁴ I think there is something importantly true in these comprehensive definitions, but for my purposes here, they lack a certain analytical sharpness, and must be specified further. Limor Shifman, in his understanding of "meme," isolates the digital element as constitutively important, suggesting the following tripartite definition: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of

content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users.”¹⁵ My own sense is that the most useful understanding of memes is somewhere in the middle. I would modify Shifman’s definition by removing the requirements that memes be both digital and inter-aware, leaving us with this working definition of “meme”: a group of items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance which are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed by many users. I think this captures most instances of what are, intuitively, memes. Regardless of which definition appeals to one the most, what is arguably most important about memes is not what they *are*, but what they *do*. We might say, riffing briefly on Wittgenstein, that memeing is use. It is to what memes do in and for the contemporary right that I now turn.

DE OCCULTA MEMETICA: THE RIGHT’S HIDDEN WORLD

In the days immediately following the 2016 election, mainstream media outlets began the post-mortem of their failed coverage of the leadup to Trump’s victory. How had the pundits almost uniformly gotten it so wrong? Perhaps the polling had used malformed sample groups, or Trump voters had been reticent to publicly identify as such in those same polls, or out of touch “coastal elites” had mistakenly ignored the white working-class voter. These and many more academic and technical explanations were hand-wringingly proffered. For the anonymous denizens of far-right forums such as 4chan, Kiwifarms, and even further reaches of the internet (known colloquially as “anons”), the answer was much simpler: what had happened on election night in 2016 was meme magic. The most upvoted post that evening on r/The Donald, a now banned and deleted subreddit dedicated to far-right memes, rhetoric, and networking around Trump’s candidacy, was titled “Meme Magic is Real!” and similar threads were started all through the night and the following days on 4chan and elsewhere.¹⁶ Meme magic as a term had existed before the Trump candidacy, and was meant to capture seemingly felicitous similarities between certain highly viral memes and real-world events. As Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg observe in their comprehensive history of the memetic leadup to the January 6 insurrection, *Meme Wars*, the idea of meme magic is:

Part of a trend [in far-right internet spaces] to embrace the occult. Even as anons mocked SJWs [Social Justice Warriors] and crystal-toting new age liberals, they embraced their own forms of numerology, developing elaborate theories about the number codes generated automatically on 4chan posts. A whole satirical religion was born involving quasi gods such as the froglike Kek, whose name was a transliteration play on the acronym LOL, and who anons said wielded meme magic.¹⁷

While it may be tempting to read the term meme magic as a simple exaggerative joke, I think Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg are too quick to label these mystical elements in the contemporary far-right as “satirical.” The name Kek, for example, was not chosen at random, but rather, as historian of religion Egil Asprem observes, is:

Also the name of one of the eight gods of the Egyptian Old Kingdom Ogdoad theology. More specifically, he/she (both male and female forms of the god existed) was associated with primordial chaos and darkness, and was typically represented with the head of a snake, a cat—or a frog.¹⁸

The frog is significant here, as it lines up with another well-known meme associated with the far-right, Pepe the Frog, and the theological significance of Kek resonates with the anons nihilistic drive for political confusion, discord, and “the lulz” (a common turn of phrase in these spaces). Other occult gods are also often referenced in far-right spaces, such as the egregore, which has its roots in the apocalyptic Hebrew text, the *Book of Enoch*. The egregore is thought to be a non-physical, borderline demonic entity that emerges as a sort of epiphenomenon of the thoughts and behaviors of certain small groups of people and is able to control aspects of reality.¹⁹ The clear implication here, when the term is invoked by the online far-right, is that the breakthrough of memetic phenomena into the real world (that is, meme magic) can also be conceptualized as a manifestation of the egregore.

Right-wing movements embracing elements of the occult is not a new

phenomenon, and this strange marriage has historically led to disastrous real-world effects. Julius Evola, a significant philosophical forerunner of many contemporary fascist movements, was deeply involved in various esoteric societies and pagan worship practices.²⁰ The various strains of so-called “esoteric Nazism” (which held, among other things, that Adolf Hitler was an extraterrestrial, and used the Aztec belief in the creator god Quetzocoatl descending from Venus as a reference point for this view) and the degree to which occult practices and systems influenced the German Nazi Party have been well-documented.²¹ Importantly, as Eric Kurlander argues in his history of Nazi occultism, it is precisely the element of the absurd, the unbelievable, and the supernatural that gives these far-right movements much of their power. He writes:

The NSDAP’s appeal to such [supernatural] ideas helped the party transcend the thorny social and political reality of Depression-era Germany. It allowed a party with no clear political or economic programme to supersede the materialist, class-based rhetoric of the left, the pragmatic, incremental republicanism of the liberal centre, and the more traditional, nationalist conservatism of the Catholic and Protestant centre right.²²

I argue that this is roughly the situation we are faced with today in the American right. Their orientation toward politics has become one in which political positions, as traditionally understood, have been superseded by the ritualistic sharing of memes (semi-broadly understood) as a means of engendering psychological connection and adherence, pseudo-religious worship of often mysterious figures (such as Q, the anonymous and possibly multiple representative of the deeply dangerous Qanon movement, about which much more could be said if space permitted), and meta-ironic nihilistic detachment, as exemplified by the half-joking, half-serious (or some other indeterminable admixture) embracing of the figure of The Joker from the Batman universe as an avatar of online rightism. The contemporary right across all of these modalities is driven by one non-cognitive imperative: “own the libs.” This drive expresses no propositional content and is outside the space of reasons. Indeed, it is often

unclear when engaging with individuals who are part of these communities whether they themselves even have a firm grasp on their own cognitive and doxastic states with respect to the political and cultural views expressed via their memeing. In a rare candid admission, poster child for meta-ironic online Nazism Nick Fuentes (a name you may recall from his attendance at the dinner meeting between President Trump and rapper and former presidential candidate Ye), articulates the experiential base of the contemporary right:

The biggest reason [behind my activism] is that it's hilarious to me. I'm not going to pretend that I put on my 'Make America Great Again' hat and get the Trump flag out because of some political crusade. It's just fun for me to go out and engage with people.²³

Fuentes is describing precisely a non-doxastic state, one of engaging in politics not out of any sense of belief, or of being convinced of positions through experience, interpersonal deliberation, or argumentation. Rather, he operates in the public sphere in the way he does because of the way it feels, namely "fun." His advocacy for the variety of hideous policy and philosophical positions he espouses (which are too numerous to list) is not sincere in any normal sense but is part of a sort of non-instrumental aesthetic expression. This is a phenomenon commonly referred to in online spaces as "irony poisoning" or the condition of being in a type of liminal space between sincerity and irony, oscillating between the two perpetually (this is also sometimes referred to as "Schrodinger's irony," a reference to the famous thought experiment demonstrating the concept of quantum superposition). As Angela Nagle pointedly asks in her seminal, if controversial, diagnosis of the online right, *Kill All Normies*:

Do those involved in such memes any longer know what motivated them and if they themselves are being ironic or not? Is it possible that they are both ironic parodists and earnest actors in a media phenomenon at the same time?²⁴

Barring direct phenomenal access to the experiences of people like Nick Fuentes, the frustrating philosophical truth is that we do not and cannot know

the answers to Nagle's questions, a situation that is arguably intentional. The contemporary right thrives, spreads, and ultimately achieves political victory in no small part due to the slipperiness (or, in my view, non-existence) of any stable political positions or programs to which it is committed. It creates rituals, idols, and hermetic signals of association that draw people in in ways more powerful and magical than any set of evidence or strength of argumentation ever could. As the prophetic voice of the movement Andrew Breitbart is reported to have said: "Politics is downstream from culture." It is perhaps poetic that this is itself a meme, there being no direct or clear account of when or even if Breitbart ever uttered this phrase other than the testimony of those who knew him; today it only exists as an iterated inscription in the passed-down oral grimoire of the modern right.

CONCLUSION

The implications of this picture of the contemporary American right as an irony-poisoned occult movement for theories of democratic dialogue as an educational and political enterprise are at this point, I think, clear. Despite our most cherished ideals, commitments, and, dare I say it, memes as philosophers of education, the project of democratic dialogue is, faced with the memetic right, inert. What would it mean, precisely, to dialogue democratically with an individual like Dr. Joseph Komrosky, who simultaneously sees himself as a man of logic and reason and believes, or claims to believe, in the face of all available biographical and historical evidence, that Harvey Milk was a pedophile?²⁵ Ought we concern ourselves with divining the roots of his misunderstanding, hashing out together the definition of the word "pedophile?" Should we attempt to outline for him the particular misleading trajectory of the right-wing narrative of LGBTQ people as pedophiles? Does anyone really think he would believe us, or change his position even if he did? If my understanding of the contemporary right is at all correct, all of these questions are, functionally, meaningless. Like the object to which the world does not appear at all, today's right exists in a world outside of the space of dialogue. The call for the 2024 Philosophy of Education conference asked us as philosophers of education to consider whether we had a place as actors in history, or whether we were constitutively

relegated to the role of observer. My suggestion here is that the best effect we could hope to have on history as philosophers of education at this moment is, rather than continuing to theorize the possibility of a dialogue that might breach the sealed occult world occupied by the contemporary right, to accept the reality that a large portion of our fellow citizens are not to be dialogued with, but rather are to be simply defeated.

REFERENCES

- 1 Tom Wait and Matthew Rodriguez, “Temecula School Board President Calls Harvey Milk ‘pedophile’ before Book Banning Vote,” CBS News, June 6, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/temecula-school-board-president-calls-harvey-milk-pedophile-before-book-banning-vote/>.
- 2 Keith Griffith, “Ohio Mayor Tells ENTIRE School Board to Resign or ‘Face Child Pornography Charges’ after Teachers Gave Children Writing Prompt to ‘Write a Sex Scene You Wouldn’t Show Your Mom,’” Daily Mail Online, September 16, 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9996345/Ohio-mayor-tells-ENTIRE-school-board-resign-sexual-writing-prompts-classes.html>; Kimberlee Kruesi and Karena Phan. “‘Grooming’: The Ubiquitous Buzzword in LGBTQ School Debate,” AP News, March 29, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/education-gender-identity-adf10ff5f169fae9c9af4d08a7b0c2bc>.
- 3 J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper, 2016)
- 4 Jim Garrison, “A Deweyan Theory of Democratic Listening,” *Educational Theory* 46, no. 4 (1996), 429.
- 5 Sarah Stitzlein, “Teaching Honesty and Improving Democracy in the Post-Truth Era,” *Educational Theory* 73, no. 1 (2023), 51-73.
- 6 Alison Jones, “Talking Cure: The Desire for Dialogue,” in *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*, ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004): 57
- 7 See, for example, Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 8 Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 73-103.

- 9 Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 81.
- 10 Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 80.
- 11 Winston C. Thompson, "Education within a Damaged Democracy: A Few Diagnoses and Definitions," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 1 (2023): 33.
- 12 *Jacobellis v Ohio*, 378 U.S. 197 (1964) (Stewart, P., concurring).
- 13 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
- 14 Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66.
- 15 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 41.
- 16 Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022): 152.
- 17 Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg, *Meme Wars*, 123.
- 18 Egil Asprem, "The Magical Theory of Politics: Memes, Magic, and the Enchantment of Social Forces in the American Magic War," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 23, no. 4 (2020): 24.
- 19 Asprem, "The Magical Theory," 27.
- 20 Jacob Christiansen Senholt, "Radical Politics and Political Esotericism: The Adaptation of Esoteric Discourse Within the Radical Right," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 21 See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Eric Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
- 22 Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 298.
- 23 Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg, *Meme Wars*, 229.
- 24 Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2017): 7.
- 25 For example, Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2008).