
MISBELIEF: WHAT MAKES RATIONAL PEOPLE BELIEVE IRRATIONAL THINGS by Dan Ariely

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The volume *Misbelief: What Makes Rational People Believe Irrational Things*, published in 2023 by HarperCollins, constitutes a significant intervention in contemporary debates on the persistence of false beliefs in a context marked by information overload, social polarization, and a visible erosion of traditional epistemic authority. Dan Ariely, widely known for his contributions to behavioral economics, proposes a deliberate shift in perspective: rather than seeking explanations in the technological architecture of digital platforms or in the strategies of political actors, he relocates the analysis to the micro-social level of belief formation, focusing on the psychological and relational mechanisms that sustain the acceptance and maintenance of factually erroneous claims.

The central argument of the book is that misbelief cannot be satisfactorily explained through ignorance, irrationality, or lack of education. Instead, Ariely argues that such beliefs are often the outcome of deeply human needs: the desire for belonging, identity coherence, the search for meaning, and emotional protection. From this perspective, false beliefs do not appear as mere cognitive accidents but as functional structures that fulfill essential psychosocial roles for individuals and groups. The stakes of this reorientation are significant, as it implicitly challenges the corrective-rationalist paradigm that continues to dominate a substantial part of the literature on combating disinformation.

In relation to the existing body of scholarship, *Misbelief* is situated at the intersection of the social psychology of conspiracy beliefs and behavioral approaches to individual decision-making. Research over the past two decades has consistently shown that adherence to conspiracy beliefs or factually erroneous narratives is more closely related to identity-based, emotional, and relational factors than to levels of education or cognitive competence. Ariely's contribution lies in the empirical consolidation of these findings and in their integration into a coherent narrative, even though the author deliberately avoids rigorous theoretical formalization of the concepts employed.

Conceptually, the book operates with an implicit yet crucial distinction between factual truth and what might be termed identity-based truth. In *Misbelief*, truth does not appear as a value that imposes itself automatically through evidence, but rather as a fragile construct, socially negotiated and subject to the pressures of group belonging. False beliefs thus become mechanisms of social integration, while resistance to counter-evidence is explained through the symbolic and relational costs associated with abandoning them. This perspective resonates with important strands of social psychology and social epistemology, yet it is distinguished by Ariely's preference for a narrative



exposition supported by behavioral experiments and case studies, rather than by an explicit and systematic theoretical framework.

The book's proximity to social epistemology is particularly evident in the way knowledge is treated as a relational and collective product. Scholars such as Miranda Fricker have emphasized the role of power relations and social credibility in access to truth (Fricker, 2007), while studies on epistemic polarization have shown how interpretive communities come to establish their own criteria of informational validity (Sunstein, 2009). *Misbelief* engages implicitly with these perspectives but differentiates itself through its refusal to directly address the normative dimension of epistemic injustice or the effects of structural exclusion, instead favoring an explanation centered on individual motivations and interpersonal dynamics.

Methodologically, the volume adopts a hybrid approach, combining experimental data, qualitative observations, and autobiographical reflections. This strategy enhances the accessibility and illustrative force of the text, but it also raises concerns for the academic reader. The boundary between empirical evidence, theoretical inference, and personal interpretation often remains implicit, and in the absence of a clear conceptual architecture, central notions such as belief, misbelief, or truth are employed more intuitively than analytically. This choice limits the book's capacity to function as a stable theoretical reference in academic research.

One of the book's most substantial contributions is its analysis of cognitive radicalization. Ariely describes this process not as an abrupt break from epistemic consensus, but as a sequence of gradual adjustments to an individual's interpretive framework, facilitated by social validation, informational isolation, and the consolidation of group identity. This perspective offers a useful lens for understanding conspiracy theories and systemic distrust in scientific and political institutions, in line with research in the psychology of conspiracy beliefs that highlights the role of identity-based and emotional factors in adherence to such narratives (Douglas et al., 2019).

In comparison with other influential works addressing false beliefs and disinformation, *Misbelief* is distinguished by its emphasis on the psychological and relational dimensions of adherence to erroneous factual narratives. Unlike normative and legal approaches to disinformation, which analyze the phenomenon through the lens of discourse regulation and institutional responsibility (Sunstein, 2009), or works focused on media architecture, attention economies, and the logic of digital platforms (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018), Ariely offers an explanation oriented toward individual motivations and the dynamics of social interaction.

Compared with structural analyses of digital propaganda or epistemological perspectives that problematize the status of truth in the public sphere, *Misbelief* relinquishes the ambition of a general theory of disinformation and instead concentrates on the psychosocial conditions that render individuals vulnerable to false beliefs. This explanatory choice gives the volume analytical strength at the micro-social level, but makes it less suitable for understanding the institutional and political mechanisms that sustain the systemic production of disinformation.

At the same time, this near-exclusive focus on the individual constitutes the book's principal analytical limitation. *Misbelief* tends to re-individualize a phenomenon that is fundamentally produced and amplified through structural processes. The role of digital platforms, algorithmic architectures, attention economies, and strategic actors who deliberately exploit cognitive vulnerabilities is treated marginally, in contrast to structural analyses of digital propaganda and contemporary informational power (Benkler et al., 2018). The result is a refined psychological diagnosis, but a relatively weak theory of informational power and the systemic production of disinformation.



This analytical orientation clearly differentiates Ariely's volume from the critical literature on digital disinformation, which conceptualizes false beliefs as the outcome of complex institutional and economic processes. In relation to these approaches, *Misbelief* can be read both as an attempt to rehumanize the phenomenon of disinformation and as a form of analytical depoliticization, insofar as it shifts attention away from structures and actors toward individual experience.

The normative implications of this perspective are significant. The emphasis on epistemic empathy and on understanding individual motivations risks diluting the responsibility of institutional and political actors involved in the deliberate production and dissemination of false beliefs. While the proposed approach is useful for educational interventions and public communication strategies, it remains insufficient for explaining the large-scale persistence of disinformation or for grounding effective public policies in the field of informational security.

Despite these limitations, *Misbelief* remains a relevant and necessary contribution to the interdisciplinary literature on false beliefs and resistance to truth. Its strength lies in dismantling overly simplistic explanations and in bringing the emotional and relational dimensions of knowledge back to the center of analysis. The volume is particularly valuable as a starting point for research seeking to integrate psychological-level explanations with broader structural and political analyses.

In conclusion, *Misbelief* offers a compelling theory of individual epistemic vulnerability, but not a comprehensive theory of disinformation as a systemic social phenomenon. The tension between the psychological depth of the analysis and the underdeveloped structural dimension renders the volume simultaneously highly useful and conceptually incomplete. For scholars interested in the intersection of psychology, politics, and information ecosystems, Ariely's book is an essential read—albeit one that calls for substantial theoretical supplementation.



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