DEALING WITH THE DUNNING EFFECT

by James Patrick Holding

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Perhaps one of the most endearing characters in television history is Ted Baxter from the 1970s sitcom, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Played by actor Ted Knight, Baxter was a news anchorman with an excellent voice, a handsome face, and little else to commend him to his job. He was best known for hilarious mispronunciations during his news broadcasts, and for believing himself to be one of the greatest anchormen on the airwaves. His self-confidence was symbolized by his dressing room, which he set up as a veritable shrine to himself, the walls filled with his own pictures and reputed awards. The interplay between the egotistical Baxter and the more sensible members of the news staff was a constant source of humor for the program.

Baxter’s inflated assessment of his own abilities offers a fictional example of a real-life behavioral condition called the Dunning Effect. In 1999, David Dunning, a professor of psychology at Cornell University, and Justin Kruger, a graduate student, completed a study for the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that led to a disturbing conclusion: like the fictional Ted Baxter, most incompetent people are unaware of their own incompetence, often blissfully, and possess an unwarranted assurance in their own capabilities and knowledge.

Dunning and Kruger focused their study specifically on their subjects’ competence in logic, grammar, and humor, but it does not take a great deal of experience in Christian apologetics and evangelism to discover that the Dunning Effect is prevalent in religion and spirituality as well. As apologists, we often will find ourselves in conversation with people who suffer from the Dunning Effect, and if we are not prepared for these encounters, they can become frustrating or difficult experiences.

**Dunning Effects.** It is quite normal for someone to assert an incorrect position confidently on a given topic. A person who does this merely occasionally is not necessarily afflicted with the Dunning Effect. The Dunning Effect only becomes apparent when someone makes incorrect assertions repeatedly, and substantive corrections do not erode his or her confidence. The Dunning Effect also may be detected by a question such as, “Do you consider yourself to be knowledgeable about this subject?” A person who confidently answers this question in the affirmative, yet repeatedly makes considerable errors regarding the subject matter may be a victim of the Dunning Effect.

Here is an example based on a real-life encounter of mine. Let us suppose that our conversation partners declare without hesitation that the Roman Emperor Constantine (AD 272–337) was at the head of a massive conspiracy to make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, using his military power to persuade others to his views. Ideas like this can be found in a number of popular sources that are antithetical to Christian belief, such as Dan Brown’s book, *The Da Vinci Code*. Let us assume that you investigate this matter and find that it is false. You research credible sources such as Philip Schaff’s *History of the Christian Church* or Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity*, and find no evidence for the claim that Constantine manipulated church history.
You return to inform your conversation partners of your findings. They assure you, however, that they have done a great deal of research and will not retract their conclusion. Frustrated, you inquire as to their sources for their claim, and find out that they include works such as Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*!

In cases like this, your conversation partners may have unwarranted confidence in their abilities. First, they unjustifiably may believe themselves competent to evaluate critically sources and to determine their credibility. Hence, they have arrived at the conclusion that something like *The Da Vinci Code* is a reliable source for historical information. Second, they may believe that their knowledge of subjects such as history is sufficient for them to choose the claims of someone like Dan Brown over the claims of someone like Schaff or Stark who is recognized as a credible source of information in the field of Christian history. Indeed, such may be their confidence that they may ask you, for example, if Stark has ever read *The Da Vinci Code* and considered its claims!

**Dunning and Discernment.** Dunning’s discovery, of course, was not new, but was merely a verification of something that has been known for a very long time. Solomon could have warned about the Dunning Effect with no more clear words than those found in Proverbs 12:15: “The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice” (NIV). The Dunning Effect is nothing more than a notable lack of the biblical virtue of discernment, and a refusal to heed the counsel of those who know better.

The Dunning Effect is now widespread. Two social factors have aided this spread, together producing conditions in which the Dunning Effect can flourish.

The first is the current atmosphere of postmodern society. Postmodernism has declared that there is no objective truth, and a natural corollary of this view is that any person’s understanding is as competent as any other person’s; therefore, there is no need for anyone to educate him- or herself and become competent in the facts of topics like church history. By default, everyone is already competent simply by virtue of having an opinion. Postmodern society therefore considers it sufficient to select any source one wishes for information (such as *The Da Vinci Code*), and anyone can have a view of history that is as good as anyone else’s, even as good as a professional historian’s.

A second factor that has enabled the spread of the Dunning Effect is the desire for ease, convenience, and quick answers. Many people with informational needs will seek out sources they can consult with a minimum of effort. These sources unfortunately tend to be far too “democratic” and (corresponding with the first factor of postmodernism) allow any person to voice his or her view as to what is “true.” The popular Internet resource Wikipedia is an example of this hypertrophic or excessively developing democracy in action. Wikipedia often is used as a source, not because it is reliable, but because it is easy to use, and because its entries usually come up first in Internet search engines.

**Dunning Defenses.** Victims of the Dunning Effect hold beliefs that are not dependent on rational argument; because of this, they may resort to using a series of defense mechanisms as a substitute for argument. These mechanisms seem sound to people who are under the influence of the Dunning Effect, precisely because they are unaware of the actual lack of effectiveness of those mechanisms in defending their positions. It is important to know how to refute these defenses effectively—if not for the sake of your conversation partners, then for the sake of any who may be witnessing your efforts at dialogue.

“That source you used is biased or has an agenda.” An appeal to a source’s “bias” is often taken as a slam-dunk refutation that automatically renders anything found in that source to be suspect, unreliable, or untrue. Truth, however, is by nature biased—toward the truth. “Bias” or “agenda” does not affect the content of an argument, nor does it relieve a doubter of the burden to make his or her own case against or in response to that argument.

“It’s arrogant to act like you’re right.” Conducting an immediate psychoanalysis of someone who is presenting an argument does not counter the content of that argument. Like the claim of bias, it is a diversion from the issue.
“You’re not giving both sides of the argument.” This response assumes that we are required to present not only our arguments, but those of our opposition. People who know of opposing arguments generally do not use this defense mechanism. It places an unfair burden on us by insisting that, although we often do address opposing arguments in our rebuttals, we must seek out and present those views for our conversation partners to consider.

“You can’t prove it didn’t happen.” A myth of postmodernism is that any simple assertion, like the one that constitutes this defense mechanism, grants a thesis automatic validity. Critics of Christianity may have no proof, for example, that Constantine manipulated church history, but because they merely can conceive of the possibility that he did, it becomes our responsibility to provide a refutation. (The irony is that the same people who present this defense also may dismiss our opposing statements as “just [our] opinion” and therefore not in need of any detailed refutation.)

What can apologists or evangelists do when confronted with victims of the Dunning Effect? We initially may try to lead them gently into a realization of their need for more or better knowledge. A Socratic method of asking questions may be helpful in leading Dunning victims into an intellectual quandary in which they realize that they do not know the facts as well as they think they do. Naturally, we ourselves must be sufficiently expert in a given topic in order to use it as the basis for our questions.

If our conversation partners begin to acknowledge that they cannot answer our questions, then we have taken the first steps toward circumventing the Dunning Effect. If, however, they clearly are unable to admit to their lack of knowledge—if, for example, they attempt to invent answers to questions in order to avoid confessing ignorance—then we have a signal that we should consider seeking more fertile ground for evangelism. Jesus did not counsel His disciples to persist in evangelism in a town that rejected their message, but told them to shake the dust from their feet as a testimony against that town (Luke 9:3–5). We judiciously must weigh our evangelism encounters and decide whether our time and abilities are of better use.

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