Epistemic Humility and Confidence

I allowed myself to briefly engage in a conversation on Twitter that I normally avoid. It was about data. Worse, it was someone asking me to opine on data shared by someone else. I really had no business engaging, but I was feeling charitable so I did.

It was a waste of everyone's time. I shared the data I found, they shared theirs which did not agree, and everyone was supposed to base their interpretation of reality off one of these conflicting data sets. Inevitably, the motives or credulity of the person sharing the data comes into question, since the conflicting data itself can't be resolved by staring at it.

Of course neither of us can prove the veracity of any the data. It's all aggregated from third parties (most of whom have a history of poor data and all of whom have bad incentives and public choice problems). Does that mean beliefs about reality must be formed *a priori,* and not need any data?

Probably not. But it has to start there. That's inescapable. Data is meaningless without a theoretical lens through which to interpret it. That lens is always there, acknowledged or not. So you've got to at least work out a foundation *a priori*.

After that, when it comes to external data, I try to work in concentric circles of probability. Things I observe and experience first hand have the highest probability of being true and useful. Things one layer of reality removed have slightly less (e.g. something I have observed before, but not this time, being shared by someone I know in a context where motives are known). The further removed the data from my own experience, the lower the probability it is true and the less it should factor in to my view of what is real.

I consider this epistemic humility. *To discount the probability of truth in proportion to its closeness to experience.* I don't have to have solid true/false answers to everything. Nor do I need to pretend such answers don't exist. I can approach what I know directly with high probability and lower it with each step beyond experience.

Where does the confidence part come in?

It's the part that keeps me sane.

Epistemic confidence is *to not need anyone else to perceive reality the same way you do.*

It's incredible how freeing this is.

At any given time, I have ideas about reality, informed first by my *a priori* theories (law of identity, non-contradiction, action axiom, etc.), then by my direct experience, then by

lessening degree with increased remoteness, data shared by others. It's always probabilistic, and changes as the information changes. Any conclusion is temporary fair game except those which violate basic logic. And at any given time, I don't need anyone else to understand or agree with this flux of worldviews.

That's when enjoyable discourse and discovery are possible.

Still, I sometimes get sucked into conversations about data and counter data that is so far from my experience I have no reason to weight it enough to justify serious debate.