

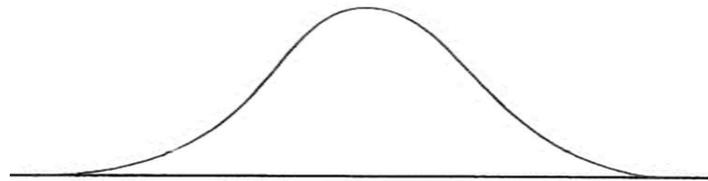
The Bell Curve

by Bill Herbst

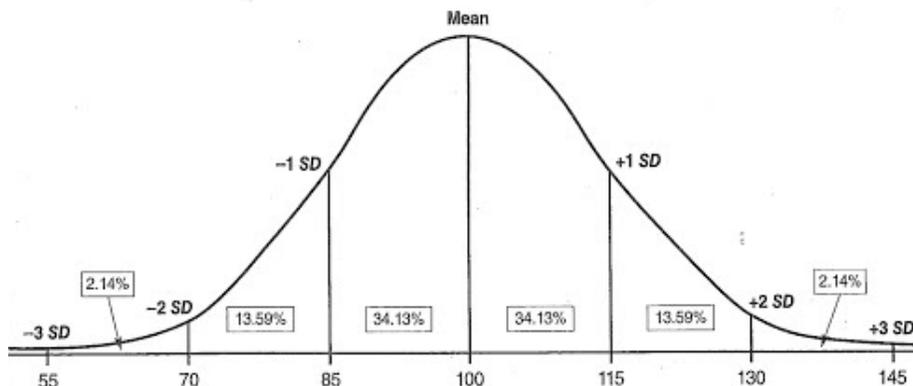
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For about ten seconds when I first got the inspiration to write this commentary, I considered various titles: "The Tyranny of the Bell Curve," "The Tragedy of the Bell Curve," or even "The Reality of the Bell Curve." All those were quickly tossed out in favor of the simpler title that now adorns this post. No adjectives, just the thing itself. The text that follows will make it obvious how I've limited the subject for this piece.

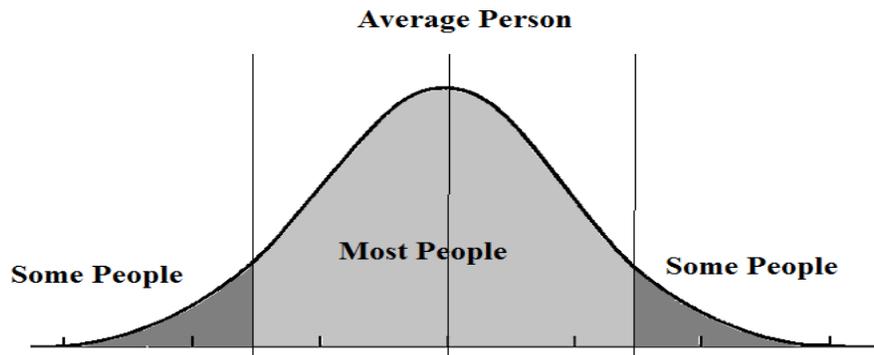
I'm pretty sure that most of my readers know what a Bell Curve is, so I'll give as brief a definition as possible: *A bell curve is used in statistics to describe "normal distribution."* Although it can be expressed as a mathematical formula, it's more often presented as a graph that has a bell shape.



The area under the bell is delineated on either side of the bell's top curve midpoint by what are called *standard deviations*:



The typical way I use the idea of a bell curve in my writing is to refer to the predictable ways that people align themselves into groups, based on different assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs they hold, as well as ways they act:



In group dynamics, each standard deviation out from the center defines a percentage of the total population. 68% fall inside the first standard deviation, only 27% within the second, a mere 4% in the third, and less than 1% in the fourth and beyond.

OK. Enough of that. You probably knew most of it anyway.

A question that arises in many forms these days for me and others is: *Why do so many people so often fail to stand up for obvious truth — not subtle truth or nuanced truth or paradoxical truth, but truth that is simple, straightforward, and patently obvious to everyone (or should be, anyway) — and instead give in to, support, or even fervently believe lies, fictions, and illusions?*

The answer is complicated, of course, and brings up so many of the knotty problems associated with “human nature,” but the *expression* of the answer is easily illuminated by the bell curve.

To illustrate this, I’ll offer the well known quote that’s commonly (but perhaps erroneously) attributed to U.S. President Abraham Lincoln:

“You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you can’t fool all the people all the time.”

Consider the question of the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. Did the virus arise zoonotically (meaning in nature, presumably through bats, from which it subsequently infected humans) or was it engineered in a lab (through a process of genetic manipulation called “Gain of Function”), but then escaped into the world beyond the lab (meaning that the containment safeguards failed). The reasons that this matters have little to do with fighting the current virus, but a great deal to do with limiting, preventing, or preparing for future pandemics that might be many times worse.

In the spring of 2020, this question arose — natural origin or technological screw-up? President Trump immediately embraced the “lab hypothesis” that pointed to the biological research laboratory in Wuhan, China. Trump used the hypothesis to attack the Chinese government. The centrist mainstream media (CNN, PBS, MSNBC, NYT, WaPo, etc.) was quick to disavow the theory. Part of

that was due to Trump Derangement Syndrome — *"If Trump said it, it must be a lie."* But the lab hypothesis was rejected also by the scientific community, meaning the experts who should know about such things, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci. That group rose up, seemingly en masse, not only to deny or debunk the theory, but also to excoriate and shut up anyone who might raise the question.

And so, for much of the past year, the lab hypothesis was verboten to be discussed in mainstream society. Anyone who even considered the possibility was painted as a full-blown nut-job. Recently that changed, in part due to new information surfacing about early infections of workers at the Wuhan lab, but also because some of the experts who flatly denied the lab hypothesis (including Dr. Fauci) turned out to be implicated in having lobbied for Gain of Function research, specifically by using their authority and institutional influence to help secure funding for it.

The question for civilization is this: *Just because we have the technology to pursue something, should we?* What if our zeal to flex our technological muscles underestimates or overlooks the dangers to humanity should something go haywire? This has always been an issue with nuclear power and weaponry, but it has equal relevance to agriculture and our use of chemical herbicides and pesticides, as well as many other practices that our society routinely employs. Are we inadvertently setting up our own demise through sheer hubris?

We can't expect the public to ever be reliably informed about the truth of COVID-19's origins. Doing so might undermine the whole basis of institutional authority — political, scientific, commercial, and military. The elite powers-that-be don't want that, having as they do a huge stake in not allowing it to happen, so the truth (whatever it may be) will remain obscured. That situation isn't limited to the pandemic; it extends into just about every nook and cranny of the Empire.

This is where the bell curve comes in — not to address the ethical and practical concerns, despite their seriousness — but at least to help us better understand why things are as they are, and why they are unlikely to change.

People who ask questions tend to be clustered on the wings of the bell curve. They may be cranks or geniuses, fantasists or clear thinkers. Either way, they're iconoclasts. By contrast, people clustered under the big middle bulge of the curve (meaning the 68% within the first standard deviation) tend not to question authority at all. This includes regular people, of course, but also many "experts" and most authorities as well. These are the "go along to get along" folks. They don't rock the boat, especially if they're standing in the wheelhouse.

Why not? Well, lots of reasons: social acceptability (fear of censure), careerism, feathering their own financial nests, protecting their power and status, etc. Truth is dangerous. Maintaining the system that rewards them by their support for manufactured consensus is what counts. Such people are in a position where putting self-interest above the common good makes perfect sense to them.

OK, now consider a blue-ribbon, independent commission, like the ones that investigated the JFK assassination and 9-11 attacks. Republicans in the Senate recently voted down the House-passed bill to establish an impartial, independent commission to investigate the January 6th assault on the Capitol. Democrats lost their minds asking why anyone would be averse to finding out “the truth.”

The reason I’m not upset about the bill’s defeat is that I don’t trust blue-ribbon, independent commissions as far as I can throw them. Why not? Because of the implications of the bell curve. The people appointed to blue-ribbon commissions are invariably among the big winners of society. Wherever they started out on the bell curve, they ended up right at dead center. By definition, such people are the apotheosis of what it means to be mainstream. As such, they cannot be trusted to speak truth to power, because they *are* the elites in power who represent, defend, and maintain the status quo. Whatever a commission composed of such authorities concludes will serve the Empire.

People further down the food-chain of institutional authority tend to do what they’re told. An example of this is western medical doctors who are trained to prescribe statins to patients, and do so despite mounting evidence questioning the linkage between cholesterol and coronary disease. Another is university professors who get grants to do research funded by (and for) the Pentagon.

Science is an incisive tool to reveal how certain realities work (especially in the densest levels of the material world), but, in the hands of fallible human beings, science is too easily corrupted and bent to serve agendas that are sometimes ideological, but more often personal, and frequently hidden. Self-interest often cloaks itself behind a false mask of principle. Such deception may be intentional or self-deluded. Either way, the end result is snake oil sold to a gullible public.

So far, I’ve made this analysis of bell curves simpler than it should be. So, let’s go to the next level: The fact that human personalities are multi-faceted is a complicating factor here. We may believe that we have only a single, unified self, but actually we have many selves that are different from each other and often contradictory. And yet, all our selves speak with the same voice. Does anyone occupy just a single point along the bell curve? Probably not. We are likely to be way out on the wings in certain activities, values, or beliefs, but then also find ourselves dead-center in numerous others.

The center of the bell curve is all about belonging. That big section bounded by the first standard deviation on either side is where we seek social acceptance through herd mentality and group conformity. We may have many reasons for being in the center — job security, career advancement, protection of status or income, even just wanting to be liked and accepted — but personal integrity and “truth” have no place there and don’t matter. What matters is shared belief.

So, for whichever facets of ourselves fall within the big middle — whether about politics, culture, which cars we drive, what foods we eat, or how we raise our kids — we go with the group, no matter how sane or crazy that may be. Where

our individuality shines is out on the wings, past the second and third standard deviations. Whatever beliefs we hold that fall out there, far from the center, are where we take our stands as rugged individualists or outright rebels. That's where we challenge authority and buck the tide. Whistleblowers operate from the wings — never from the center. And they do so at great peril, since anything that challenges the status quo center is immediately and fiercely rejected. Standing alone requires courage or some other motivation of intense resolve.

Thus, Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, and Edward Snowden are regarded as heroes by some, but as traitors by many. Watergate was denied and derided until the very end, when the evidence for President Nixon's guilt finally became overwhelming. The basic tenets of Black Lives Matter (or Critical Race Theory) are, in my opinion, correct. But as long as the center of Law-and-Order, White America regards BLM as being on the wings (and thus unacceptable), any change to law enforcement will be bogus — mere lip service, if even that. For real change to occur, the wings must become the center, supplanting the former consensus for a new one.

The bell curve doesn't offer any insights into the veracity or reliability of what we believe and how we act. Whether in the center or out on the wings, it can't tell us whether a certain assumption is truly accurate or hideously false. What it can do and does quite well, however, is reveal the social dynamics at play around any specific issue, value, or concern.

Bell curves tell us that in almost every situation, expecting most people to act with integrity and stand up for an unpopular belief, attitude, or value (especially when doing so goes against the existing consensus of any large group of which they are members) is *guaranteed* to result in disappointment. So, centrist Democrats who wonder why Republicans insist on all the crazy shit they do, particularly the claim that Trump won the 2020 election, and ask why those on the right won't "admit the truth" or "get a spine" are just pissing into the wind.

What's going on in America is not and never has been about the truth. It's about who wins, who calls the shots, and who gets the big bucks. While oversimplified and often difficult to do, the old admonition to "*Follow the Money*" is usually the most reliable way to discover what's actually happening and why.

Of all the different attributes or values for which we could compile a single bell curve to best describe what America has become (and why), greed is almost certainly the most revealing. It's not the only trait that matters, of course — our disregard for nature, our narcissism, and our belief in American Exceptionalism certainly factor in — but all those fit neatly under the general heading of greed.

Want to know why Americans don't have (and probably won't ever get) universal health care? Why our food has become so poisonous? Why we've ravaged the environment faster and more devastatingly than any nation or culture before us? Look no further than good old unvarnished *avarice*. Despite being one of the seven deadly sins, greed is considered normal and socially acceptable in America.