PART ONE

“PEOPLE MAY SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY, BUT THEY DON’T REALLY WANT TO”: *MAD MEN* AND PROBLEMS OF KNOWLEDGE AND FREEDOM

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WHAT FOOLS WE WERE: *MAD MEN*, HINDSIGHT, AND JUSTIFICATION

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That *Mad Men* takes place in the 1960s is no accident. The creator, Matthew Weiner, could have made a series about modern advertising executives, but he chose not to. By showing us the differences between Don Draper's time and ours, *Mad Men* deftly underscores the ways in which we aren't so different after all. One thing does stand out, however, at least for me. Every time I watch the show, I find myself asking, "Were these people just *stupid*?"

Let me explain myself. I don't *actually* think that the people on the show are idiots. Nonetheless, sometimes they just seem *so dense*. There are things in their world that it seems like they *ought* to know, but, for some reason, *don't*.

For instance, here in the twenty-first century we know that one of the most successful ad campaigns of all times is Marlboro's use of the "Marlboro Man." Cowboy hat pulled low to shade his squinty gaze, he stares into the empty distance,

alone in rugged country—the Marlboro Man is still an iconic figure, even though he hasn't been seen in a decade. The campaign traded on the notion of smoking as manly, the smoker as a hardy individualist. It was a runaway success.

Why is it, then, that when advertising genius Don Draper is presented with a similar idea by his firm's research department, he rejects it? Maybe *we* wouldn't have known at first sight that it was a good idea for a campaign, but it seems we could reasonably expect Don to know—yet he doesn't. What's more, Pete Campbell, the junior man on the team, *does* see the potential of the angle. What's going on?[1]

Let's use that case, and others like it, to examine exactly what it takes to *know* something. As we'll see, Don's a smart guy, but what he does and even *can* know is limited by the resources available at his particular time and place in history. Like any effective salesman, though, I need to wind up a bit and get a good lead-in before I can sell you on the bottom line. So before we get to the part where I try to convince you that we're all blinkered by time and place, let's start with something a little more general: What do we mean when we say we "know" something?[2]

"He Could Be Batman for All We Know"

In "Marriage of Figaro" (episode 103), Harry Crane points out to his co-worker Pete Campbell how little they really know about their boss, Don Draper. "Draper? Who knows anything about that guy? No one's ever lifted that rock. He could be Batman for all we know." Pete shrugs the comment off, but Harry's right—they don't know much about Don, because he doesn't really talk about himself. He doesn't give them anything to go on. The junior account executives could sit around making *guesses* about Don if they wanted. But at the end of the day, even if some of their guesses turned out to be correct

(without their realizing it), they still wouldn't *know* anything because, right or wrong, they wouldn't have any *reasons*.

The philosophical study of knowledge is called *epistemology*. Epistemologists have long recognized that having *knowledge* involves having *reasons*. Reasons, or—put another way—justification, are one ingredient of what you might call the formula for knowledge. (Philosophers will argue about anything, so I'm necessarily glossing over some quibbles about the details here.) Briefly, we can think of knowledge as *justified true belief*.

Let's take the three ingredients of knowledge in reverse order. When epistemologists talk about "believing" something, they just mean that you think it's true. "Belief" can sometimes carry other connotations, and in everyday speech it's often even set up as an alternative to knowing. That's not how we're using the word here. For our purposes, belief is an *ingredient* of knowledge, not an alternative to it. So to have a belief is, roughly, to just "buy into" something. For instance, after her employee orientation with Joan in the pilot episode ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"), Peggy *believes* that if she doesn't butter up the switchboard girls, she won't be able to do her job as a secretary.

The next ingredient is *truth*. You can't *know* what isn't true. In other words, you can believe something false. Betty Draper, for example, believes her husband's name is really Don Draper. She may even think she knows it, but she would be wrong. "Don," as we learn in "5G" (episode 105), is really Dick Whitman. His ruse has fooled everyone, Betty included, into thinking he's someone he really isn't, so that they don't really *know* who he is.

Truth and belief seem pretty straightforward, and they are, indeed, fairly uncontroversial elements of the definition of knowledge. They're also of the least interest to us in trying to answer our initial question. People in all times and places wind up with false beliefs, and therefore come short of having

knowledge. What we're interested in figuring out is how so many seemingly smart people wound up being so wrong about so many things that seem pretty obvious to us, while still yet apparently believing they have knowledge. To answer that, we need to talk about the last ingredient—justification.

It's one thing to have a belief, and even to be right about it, but it's quite another to have good reasons for that belief. We need reasons to believe the way we do—in other words, justification. Justification is the magic stuff that transforms merely being right into knowing. Earlier, we observed that the junior execs could make guesses about Don all they wanted and they still wouldn't *know* anything about him, even if they somehow came up right on some of the guesses. You can't *know* just by taking shots in the dark. You have to have *reasons*, too.

Of course, reasons aren't enough, not all by themselves—you need justification as well as true belief, and it's very important to understand that having justification doesn't entail having the truth, and vice versa. Betty doesn't *know* her husband is really named Don Draper for the obvious reason that he isn't. That much seems right. But wouldn't we say that she's *justified* in thinking he's Don Draper? Seeing a person use a name on a day-to-day basis, buy a house and conduct business under that name, get married under that name, and so on certainly constitutes good reason to think that that is the person's real name.

Betty's a smart woman, but she's dead wrong about her husband. Still, she's also justified in believing as she does. Can that possibly be right? Perhaps something about how this whole justification thing works can explain how an otherwise smart person who seems to have all the good reasons in the world to believe something is true can somehow wind up with a false belief. If so, then we'll be in a position to better understand why, with the benefit of hindsight, some of these folks from 1960 come across as so obtuse. So let's dig into justification.

"Every Day I Make Pictures Where People Appear to Be in Love. I Know What It Looks Like."

What constitutes being justified? Where do justifications for beliefs come from? The most obvious sources of justification for beliefs are our senses. Some philosophers maintain that we cannot regard beliefs that come about from relying on our senses as justified, but it's clear that what we perceive about the world *must* play an important role in justifying our beliefs. It certainly seems that the chest pains Roger Sterling felt in "Long Weekend" (episode 110) constituted justification for thinking he was experiencing *some* sort of problem, even if it didn't necessarily mean he was justified in thinking he was having a heart attack, specifically.

Another means of justifying beliefs that is a bit more complex than pure sense data, but still pretty basic, is personal experience. In "The Hobo Code" (episode 108), Don observes from their behavior around each other that Midge, his Greenwich Village mistress, and Roy, her fellow beatnik, are in love. "Every day I make pictures where people appear to be in love. I know what it looks like," he says, and he's right. They *are* in love. Don's not justified in thinking that it's true in the same way as he might be justified in reporting some mundane fact about the world around him, like the color of Midge's wallpaper, for instance, but he *is* justified. He can't *see* love in the same way he can see the color of the walls, but, owing to his personal experience, he can nonetheless "see" it when it's right in front of his face.

So far, so good. We can be justified in our beliefs in virtue of what we sense directly and in virtue of what we can figure out based on our own personal expertise. That certainly seems plausible enough. We can imagine we'd accept such first-hand accounts as fairly solid justification for beliefs. But this hasn't helped us answer our initial question at all, or at least not in a satisfactory way.

Normally, if someone doesn't see something that's very obvious to most other people, we think that person is either being careless with the evidence or just isn't "getting it." But all this started when we noted that some things that we regard as obvious are obscure to the *Mad Men* characters. For instance, even the most well-behaved characters on the show are rather startlingly sexist. Their behavior is just wildly inappropriate—it's offensive, intimidating, and unpleasant to a lot of the women on the show. It's hardly surprising that Peggy would come across Bridget crying in the bathroom of Sterling Cooper (episode 102, "Ladies Room")—who knows what she had to put up with that day? So if this is so obvious to us, why don't the characters get it?

On the account I've just given of justification, when someone fails to grasp something it either means that the evidence is difficult to perceive or the person is somehow at fault, epistemically speaking. Since the fact that the behavior of the junior account executives at Sterling Cooper is clearly inappropriate, and would seem so to just about anyone watching the show, it doesn't seem right to say that the evidence isn't clear. But that means the characters must be either very careless or just not very bright. There's something that doesn't seem quite right about that, either. We must be missing a piece of the puzzle.

As it happens, we are. What the preceding account of justification does *not* take into account is that there's only so much we can know first-hand. If we could rely only on ourselves for justification, we'd have relatively little of it, and would therefore know next to nothing. The idea that we must depend on ourselves and only ourselves for justification, and therefore knowledge, is called *epistemic individualism*. Very few thinkers have actually held this view, but for many years, most of the epistemology that was done *acted as if* we were isolated, solitary knowers, focusing solely on the ways in which we were or were not justified with respect to our senses and our own internal mental processes. Relatively little attention was

paid to the fact that most of the evidence for our beliefs comes from other people, but that's been changing recently, and this new approach is commonly known as *social epistemology*. Social epistemology recognizes the importance of the social nature of humans in thinking about what and how we come to know things. As a result, it has been able to shed some light on issues that might otherwise be puzzling. Some of the concepts used in social epistemology can help us fill out our picture of justification a little more, and get us closer to an answer to our question that rings true.

"Well, I Never Thought I'd Say This, but What Does the Research Say?"

Testimony occupies a central place in social epistemology. Testimony is a pseudo-religious-sounding term for sincere communication of belief, and social epistemologists have come to understand that it plays a hugely important role in individual knowledge. Freddy Rumsen, Don Draper, and the others didn't do any *personal* exploration of "the Electrosizer" (which made its infamous debut in "Indian Summer," episode 111), but they're nonetheless justified in believing that it gives "sensations" of a certain sort. Why? Peggy told them, and they have good reason to believe that she is in a position to know. Their justification for the belief (and, incidentally, the belief itself) came from her testimony.

So we get a lot of our beliefs through testimony, and likely most of our justification, too. Since beliefs and justification are both required before we actually know anything (the other part, of course, is being *right*), this means that we're remarkably dependent on other people for the ingredients of knowledge. We need other people in order to know much of anything. We depend on other people for knowledge, so maybe it's the case that if otherwise intelligent people fail to know something that seems obvious to us, something's gone wrong in the realm of

testimony. So we should ask ourselves, who do the characters on the show depend on, epistemically speaking?

Then and now, one of the best kinds of testimony is expert testimony. After Betty's accident in "Ladies Room," she's very worried because she doesn't know *why* she had the strange attack that caused the car accident. Don, frustrated and worried as well, appeals to the promise of knowledge that experts offer us. "Well, go to a doctor, another doctor. A good one!" Of course, he's also got a healthy sense of skepticism about at least *some* doctors. "That Dr. Patterson is not thorough. I swear when we walked down Park Avenue, I could hear the quacking."

It's all well and good when we can find a qualified so-and-so to answer our queries and be done with it. If any of the secretaries at Sterling Cooper have a question about how the office runs, they can always ask office manager Joan Harris; they do *not* ask Don, even though he's senior to Joan. We may be stuck getting our knowledge from other people, but we can be judicious about who we listen to. What's worrying, however, is when experts in the same area disagree—like Betty's doctors. There's an interesting example of this phenomenon in the first episode ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"). It's an incident we touched on earlier—the tobacco ad campaign and Pete Campbell's insight that playing on the danger of smoking could be a viable advertising option.

In case you haven't seen the episode recently, let me refresh your memory. In the wake of widely publicized research revealing that cigarette smoking is linked to various diseases, the Lucky Strike cigarette company is worried about its image. They want an ad campaign that'll still sell a product now known to be potentially dangerous, and they can no longer rely on the dubious doctors' testimonials and vague health claims they'd made in the past. Don Draper is the man in charge of delivering the pitch, and mere hours before the meeting, he still doesn't have any ideas. Grasping at straws, he takes

a meeting with Dr. Guttman, a psychologist who works for Sterling Cooper's research department, with Pete Campbell sitting in. The researcher tells him that the best psychological theory available suggests that many people have, on some level, a "death wish," and that it should be possible to sell cigarettes precisely by highlighting the rebellious, death-defying aspect of it. Don sums it up pithily: "So basically, if you love danger, you'll love smoking."

Dr. Guttman is clearly a capable individual who is quite confident about her conclusions. Don, on the other hand, isn't confident. When the big meeting comes, Don doesn't pitch the "death wish" angle, but Pete—without Don's go-ahead—does. As a result, Don's pretty upset with Pete. Not only was it Don's pitch to make, but, as he says later in his office, "If Greta's research was any good, I would have used it."

The difficulty lies in the fact that we have *two* experts in roughly the same area—how to influence consumers—who are saying *opposite things*. What do we do when experts disagree? Some philosophers say that when two people who are epistemic peers disagree, they should both suspend judgment. There are some good arguments for this as a kind of ideal practice, but Don was *not* in a situation that allowed for him to suspend judgment. He had a pitch meeting in just a few hours. He *had* to make some decision. So why make the decision he did, which was to ignore Dr. Guttman's advice?

The answer to this question is going to prove useful to our analysis, but to see it we need to step back a bit. Now, normally, Don's own expertise would be a good reason for having certain beliefs about an ad campaign. Suppose that one of his junior execs, like Ken Cosgrove, had "spitballed" the idea of positioning smoking as "dangerous." If Don's gut instinct was to reject the idea as unworkable, he'd surely be justified, and we'd have no worries about it, either. Why? Well, because while Ken might know *something* about advertising (he'd better, if he wants to keep his job), he's not an expert in the same class as

Don. If Don doesn't listen to his advice, even if Ken happens to be right (as we might know with the benefit of hindsight), we don't think Don's behaving unreasonably, because we don't class Ken as an expert, and neither does he.

Strange as it may seem to us here in the twenty-first century, this may be exactly the same reason that Don didn't use Dr. Guttman's research—he didn't consider her an expert. We're used to thinking of psychologists as having great insight into the human mind, but Don doesn't seem impressed. Maybe it's because he regards psychology as something new and unproven; Roger Sterling's comments in "Ladies Room" make it sound as if psychology is something of a fad.[3] Whatever the reason, Don makes his assessment of the field clear when he tells Dr. Guttman that "psychology might be great at cocktail parties" before dismissing her ideas. To *us* it appears that Don is behaving irrationally, because we have decades more experience with the sorts of insights that psychology can provide us about how and why people do things. As far as Don's concerned, though, research psychology still has yet to make good on its claims—it's "bullshit," as he says in "Ladies Room."

Pete ran with Dr. Guttman's research angle, but he probably doesn't put much more stock in psychology than Don; if he does, we're never given any indication of it. His motivations for bringing out the "death wish" approach are clear enough—he wanted to prove himself where Don seemed to be flailing. As Don told Midge about Pete in the first episode, "There's this kid who comes by my office every day, looks where he's going to put his plants." Pete probably went with the research not because he had more reason to believe that it was correct than Don did, but rather just because he thought it gave him a shot at Don's job.

But there's another instance of Pete going against the popular opinion that doesn't seem to have such a shallow motivation. In "Red in the Face" (episode 107), the Sterling Cooper guys are brainstorming about the upcoming presidential election,

assessing Kennedy's chances against their candidate, Nixon. The partners don't seem to think much of Kennedy's prospects. After Sterling notes that Kennedy doesn't even wear a hat, Pete Campbell says, "I don't know. You know who else doesn't wear a hat? Elvis. That's what we're dealing with." The others dismiss his observation.

Pete certainly didn't improve his chances of getting promoted by plumping for Kennedy, so why did he do it except that he actually believed that Kennedy was more of a threat than the others did? Clearly he did, and he was right, too, as we know. He was right because he was able to see something that the others couldn't, something importantly relevant to the situation at hand—Kennedy's youth appeal. Being young, Pete saw what Roger Sterling and Bert Cooper did not. Cooper apparently never even considered the possibility that the vantage point of youth could provide any worthwhile insights. "Remind me to stop hiring young people," he says.

We're now closing in on the real answer to our question. Don didn't grasp the importance of the angle that would eventually come to define one of the most successful ad campaigns ever because he didn't recognize the person presenting the evidence as being appropriately trustworthy. He failed to know because Dr. Guttman's say-so was not enough to provide justification for a belief. Don, along with the other senior execs, failed to know that Kennedy was a threat to Nixon's campaign for the White House because Pete Campbell's insights were not proper justifiers. To them, the opinion of some wet-behind-the-ears junior account executive was just not enough to provide *reason to believe*.

But why would they think that? Wouldn't knowing that Kennedy had youth appeal be pertinent information? Wouldn't being able to understand different viewpoints be of use in forming our beliefs and seeking justification? Some epistemologists have explored that very question. So to get to the bottom of this, once and for all, we're going to look at just a

few more examples, this time with the help of an analytical approach known as *standpoint theory*.

"It's Like Watching a Dog Play the Piano"

Standpoint theory, or *standpoint epistemology*, assumes that some individuals in a society are better situated, by virtue of their experiences, to know certain things, even things that it might be impossible for anyone who doesn't occupy a similar place in society to know first-hand. This isn't the same as simply recognizing the importance of expertise, but it is related. Expertise is, in principle, something that anyone can acquire—all things being equal, anyone could work on Madison Avenue long enough to acquire expertise in advertising. The kind of privileged viewpoint that standpoint theory addresses comes from a whole existence that is shot through with the relevant kinds of experiences.

Even the relatively unenlightened characters in *Mad Men* seem to have *some* intuitive grasp of the notion. In "Babylon" (episode 106), Freddy Rumsen and the ad boys use the secretaries to brainstorm for the Belle Jolie lipstick account. They don't have a high opinion of their secretaries' intelligence, referring to them at one point as "morons." The only reason they even bother asking is because they don't know anything about lipstick themselves. Thus they're aware that the girls have *some* information that they don't. But standpoint theory goes further than merely to suggest that some people have access to certain facts that others don't. It proposes that there may be a *great deal* of valuable knowledge that one might acquire from having a particular vantage point, and *that* is something Freddy and his crew never even entertained. When Peggy actually comes up with a good pitch for Belle Jolie lipstick, most of the people in the office are fairly amazed.

It seems obvious enough to us now that things worth knowing are spread out, diffuse in society. In 1960, however, that was

hardly the prevailing opinion. *Mad Men* is a world dominated by middle- to upper-class white males. And although things were changing, in their day and age the dominant opinion was that everything that was worth knowing was known, or at least knowable, to those selfsame privileged white men.

This opinion tracks with the notion of epistemic individualism, which, in its extreme form, holds that the only justification available to us is the kind that anyone can, in theory, get ahold of. The idea of justification that only *some* people can have would have seemed frankly bizarre to most ad execs *and* most philosophers in 1960. But here in our day, on the other side of the civil rights movement and the feminist movement and the gay rights movement, it doesn't seem so strange to suggest that not just anyone can really *know*, in a first-hand sort of way, what it's like to be on the other side of sexism, or racism, or homophobia. Although it's far from completely uncontroversial, there's clearly *something* to the idea that people in those situations might have a better understanding of the ins and outs of discrimination, for instance, and that we ought to regard them as experts on the subject whose testimony can justify our second-hand beliefs.

The mistake that Don makes when he rejects Dr. Guttman's research isn't that he's stupid or careless with the evidence. It's that he doesn't recognize her as having the kind of insight on the subject that we think she does. Likewise, the mistake that the senior partners make when dealing with Pete is not recognizing that there are particular, relevant facts that only a young person would be in a good position to grasp. This one in particular is a mistake they do *not* continue to make, as changing times force Sterling Cooper to move to bring on younger creative staff to reach the youth market in "For Those Who Think Young" (episode 201).

There's so much that the *Mad Men* characters seem ignorant of. Isn't it *obvious* that dry cleaning bags are dangerous, Betty? How can you *not* realize that Salvatore is gay, Don?

Don't you all know that you're treating the women in your lives like animals, and that it's just unfair?

And yet, we can't call them *stupid*, because they aren't. They are products of their time, their place in history, right down to what they know and *can* know. Surely by 1960 *some* people have had dry-cleaning-bag tragedies, but until the testimony is out there to be picked up on by Betty Draper, she probably won't have any reason to think they're dangerous unless she has a personal experience with that sort of mishap. There are plenty of gay people around in 1960, but they live such deeply closeted lives, it would take someone who *was* gay to recognize the signs (as in "The Hobo Code"). There's plenty of rampant sexism in 1960 as well, but women's unhappiness is chalked up to "childishness," as Betty's psychoanalyst characterizes her malaise. So, unfortunately, women's insight into the *real* issue at hand goes unheeded. What we can recognize as justifying reasons depends on society, and thus, so do the limits of our knowledge. People in the 1960s weren't dumb—they were just limited by what their era, their culture, would *allow* them to know.

NOTES

1. We need to stop for a moment and acknowledge that while the show's creator, Matthew Weiner, strives for as much realism as possible in *Mad Men*, there are *some* liberties taken. In particular, my central example—Don's negative reaction to a Marlboro Man-style cigarette ad campaign—highlights one such liberty, since the Marlboro Man was created (by Leo Burnett) in the mid-1950s, less than a decade before the setting of the show's first season. Why do I assume this is Matthew Weiner taking liberties, rather than just concluding that my analysis isn't any good, and that Don's reaction doesn't signify what I think it does? Fair question, but there's a fair answer. The whole cigarette ad campaign plot arc is shot through with anachronisms that most viewers wouldn't catch. For instance, Lucky Strike was using the phrase "It's Toasted" to promote their cigarettes in *1916*. There's also Don's dismissive reaction to the use of psychology in advertising, which would be odd given that psychologists were instrumental in the founding of professional advertising in the early twentieth century. I think we're okay in proceeding to take Don's reactions at face value, as I've interpreted them, even though they mark one of the show's rare departures from strict historical fidelity.

2. In order to minimize spoilers for those who are fans of the show, I'll be drawing almost all of my examples from first-season episodes. I'm pretty confident that by now,

every fan should have seen at least *that* much of the show. Later in the chapter, I touch on something that happens in the first episode of the second season, but I don't think it spoils any plotlines.

3. Of course, as already noted, such a reaction to psychology as a tool in advertising would be a bit odd, to say the least, if we were to hold the show to a *strict* standard of verisimilitude. Let's just let 'em have this one, what say?