

The Trouble with Elon Musk



[Sam Harris](#)

I didn't set out to become an enemy of the world's richest man, but I seem to have managed it all the same. Until this moment, I've resisted describing my falling out with Elon Musk in much detail, but as the man's cultural influence has metastasized—and he continues to spread lies about me on the social media platform that he owns (Twitter/X)—it seems only appropriate to set the record straight. I know that it annoys many in my audience to see me defend myself against attacks that they recognize to be spurious, but they might, nevertheless, find the details of what happened with Elon interesting.

Of all the remarkable people I've met, Elon is probably the most likely to remain a world-historical figure—despite his best efforts to become a clown. He is also the most likely to squander his ample opportunities to live a happy life, ruin his reputation and most important relationships, and produce lasting harm across the globe. None of this was obvious to me when we first met, and I have been quite amazed at Elon's evolution, both as a man and as an avatar of chaos. The friend I remember did not seem to hunger for public attention. But his engagement with Twitter/X transformed him—to a degree seldom seen outside of Marvel movies or Greek mythology. If Elon is still the man I knew, I can only conclude that I never really knew him.

When we first met, Elon wasn't especially rich or famous. In fact, I recall him teetering on the brink of bankruptcy around 2008, while risking the last of his previous fortune to make payroll at Tesla. At the time, he was living off loans from his friends Larry and Sergey. Once Elon became truly famous, and his personal wealth achieved escape velocity, I was among the first friends he called to discuss his growing security concerns. I put him in touch with Gavin de Becker, who provided his first bodyguards, and recommended other changes to his life. We also went shooting on at least two occasions with Scott Reitz, the finest firearms instructor I've ever met. It is an ugly irony that Elon's repeated targeting of me on Twitter/X has increased my own security concerns. He understands this, of course, but does not seem to care.

So how did we fall out? Let this be a cautionary tale for any of Elon's friends who might be tempted to tell the great man something he doesn't want to hear:

1. When the SARS-CoV-2 virus first invaded our lives in March of 2020, Elon began tweeting in ways that I feared would harm his reputation. I also worried that his tweets might exacerbate the coming public-health emergency. Italy had already fallen off a cliff, and Elon shared the following opinion with his tens of millions of fans :

[the coronavirus panic is dumb](#)

As a concerned friend, I sent him a private text:

Hey, brother—I really think you need to walk back your coronavirus tweet. I know there’s a way to parse it that makes sense (“panic” is always dumb), but I fear that’s not the way most people are reading it. You have an enormous platform, and much of the world looks to you as an authority on all things technical. Coronavirus is a very big deal, and if we don’t get our act together, we’re going to look just like Italy very soon. If you want to turn some engineers loose on the problem, now would be a good time for a breakthrough in the production of ventilators...

2. Elon’s response was, I believe, the first discordant note ever struck in our friendship:

Sam, you of all people should not be concerned about this.

He included a link to a page on the CDC website, indicating that Covid was not even among the top 100 causes of death in the United States. This was a patently silly point to make in the first days of a pandemic.

We continued exchanging texts for at least two hours. If I hadn’t known that I was communicating with Elon Musk, I would have thought I was debating someone who lacked any understanding of basic scientific and mathematical concepts, like exponential curves.

3. Elon and I didn’t converge on a common view of epidemiology over the course of those two hours, but we hit upon a fun compromise: A wager. Elon bet me \$1 million dollars (to be given to charity) against a bottle of fancy tequila (\$1000) that we wouldn’t see as many as 35,000 cases of Covid in the United States (*cases*, not deaths). The terms of the bet reflected what was, in his estimation, the near certainty (1000 to 1) that he was right. Having already heard credible estimates that there could be 1 million deaths from Covid in the U.S. over the next 12-18 months (these estimates proved fairly accurate), I thought the terms of the bet ridiculous—and quite unfair to Elon. I offered to spot him two orders of magnitude: I was confident that we’d soon have 3.5 million cases of Covid in the U.S. Elon accused me of having lost my mind and insisted that we stick with a ceiling of 35,000.

4. We communicated sporadically by text over the next couple of weeks, while the number of reported cases grew. Ominously, Elon dismissed the next batch of data reported by the CDC as merely presumptive—while confirmed cases of Covid, on his account, remained elusive.

5. A few weeks later, when the CDC website finally reported 35,000 *deaths* from Covid in the U.S. and 600,000 cases, I sent Elon the following text:

Is (35,000 deaths + 600,000 cases) > 35,000 cases?

6. This text appears to have ended our friendship. Elon never responded, and it was not long before he began maligning me on Twitter for a variety of imaginary offenses. For my part, I eventually started complaining about the startling erosion of his integrity on my podcast, without providing any detail about what had transpired between us.

7. At the end of 2022, I abandoned Twitter/X altogether, having recognized the poisonous effect that it had on my life—but also, in large part, because of what I saw it doing to Elon. I’ve been away from the platform for over two years, and yet Elon still attacks me. Occasionally a friend will tell me that I’m trending there, and the reasons for this are never good. As recently as this week, Elon repeated a defamatory charge about my being a “hypocrite” for writing a book in defense of honesty and then

encouraging people to lie to keep Donald Trump out of the White House. Not only have I never advocated lying to defeat Trump (despite what that misleading clip from the *Triggernometry* podcast might suggest to naive viewers), I've taken great pains to defend Trump from the most damaging lie ever told about him. Elon knows this, because we communicated about the offending clip when it first appeared on Twitter/X. However, he simply does not care that he is defaming a former friend to hundreds of millions of people—many of whom are mentally unstable. On this occasion, he even tagged the incoming president of the United States.

All of this remains socially and professionally awkward, because Elon and I still have many friends in common. Which suggests the terms of another another wager that I would happily make, if such a thing were possible—and I would accept 1000 to 1 odds in Elon's favor:

I bet that anyone who knows us both knows that I am telling the truth.

Everyone close to Elon must recognize how unethical he has become, and yet they remain silent. Their complicity is understandable, but it is depressing all the same. These otherwise serious and compassionate people know that when Elon attacks private citizens on Twitter/X—falsely accusing them of crimes or corruption, celebrating their misfortunes—he is often causing tangible harm in their lives. It's probably still true to say that social media “isn't real life,” until thousands of lunatics learn your home address.

A final absurdity in my case, is that several of the controversial issues that Elon has hurled himself at of late—and even attacked me over—are ones we agree about. We seem to be in near total alignment on immigration and the problems at the southern border of the U.S. We also share the same concerns about what he calls “the woke mind virus.” And we fully agree about the manifest evil of the so-called “grooming-gangs scandal” in the U.K. The problem with Elon, is that he makes no effort to get his facts straight when discussing any of these topics, and he regularly promotes lies and conspiracy theories manufactured by known bad actors, at scale. (And if grooming were really one of his concerns, it's strange that he couldn't find anything wrong with Matt Gaetz.)

Elon and I even agree about the foundational importance of free speech. It's just that his approach to safeguarding it—amplifying the influence of psychopaths and psychotics, while deplatforming real journalists and his own critics; or savaging the reputations of democratic leaders, while never saying a harsh word about the Chinese Communist Party—is not something I can support. The man claims to have principles, but he appears to have only moods and impulses.

Any dispassionate observer of Elon's behavior on Twitter/X can see that there is something seriously wrong with his moral compass, if not his perception of reality. There is simply no excuse for a person with his talents, resources, and opportunities to create so much pointless noise. The callousness and narcissism conveyed by his antics should be impossible for his real friends to ignore—but they appear to keep silent, perhaps for fear of losing access to his orbit of influence.

Of course, none of this is to deny that the tens of thousands of brilliant engineers Elon employs are accomplishing extraordinary things. He really is the greatest entrepreneur of our generation. And because of the businesses he's built, he will likely become the world's first trillionaire—perhaps very soon. Since the election of Donald Trump in November, Elon's wealth has grown by around \$200

billion. That's nearly \$3 billion a day (and over \$100 million an hour). Such astonishing access to resources gives Elon the chance—and many would argue the responsibility—to solve enormous problems in our world.

So why spend time spreading lies on X?

[Donald Arteaga](#)

[1d](#)

"If you want to test a man's character, give him power."

[John Corso](#)

[1d](#)

I believe it is always incredibly important to set the record straight. So well done.

Anyone with a shred of social awareness will recognize that Elon has psychological problems that put his emotional maturity at about the level of a 14-year-old.

[Helen Pluckrose](#)

[20h](#)

Nonsense. The problem being identified with Elon is not to do with his social skills but his honesty & integrity. I've been told before that I am "punching down" on a socially disabled man when I criticise his dishonest rhetoric and this is frankly ludicrous. I strongly resent the implication that being on the autistic spectrum leads one to be unable to distinguish what is true, maintain ethical integrity and recognise cause and effect in one's own actions. My father was autistic and he was the most scrupulously honest person I have ever known. He was, if anything, too unforgiving of lapses in ethical integrity as his autism made him rather rigid. His ability to recognise cause and effect made him a millionaire and was absolutely related to his systemising brain. My daughter is autistic and it is fundamentally difficult for her to say things that are not true or are misleading even in games. She absolutely has integrity and is repelled and mystified by people who do not. She also does particularly well with recognising cause and effect. I am the member of my family least observably affected by autism but I am still affected by it and this may lead me to miss social cues and be somewhat awkward in gatherings and not know what to do with my face in photos, but it absolutely does not make me prone to a lack of honesty or ethical integrity or an inability to recognise cause and effect.

This just isn't a thing. (I have also worked with autistic people for many years). If anything, people with Aspergers are likely to be higher than average in honesty and integrity because they are likely to suffer from a rather excessive need for precision and accuracy and be so focused on having every little detail straight that it can take them forever to feel confident to opine on anything or do so in so much detail that the most salient points get lost in the weeds. Some difficulties with theory of mind can also cause a rather rigid sense of integrity where some autistic people are inclined to be unforgiving of someone behaving in a way that is inconsistent or unethical. This is because they have failed to recognise that somebody else is experiencing strong emotions which can affect their judgement or make them

temporarily behave in a way that is out of character and does not define their reasoning abilities or character generally.

Please stop saying that Musk's Aspergers explains or excuses his blatant dishonesty and lack of integrity. It's factually incorrect and insulting to all the autistic people whose attention to detail, precision, accuracy and professional and personal integrity make the world a better place.