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Are Your Beliefs Meaningful or Arbitrary?

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

ARE YOUR BELIEFS MEANINGFUL OR ARBITRARY?

By Mary Culp

We start out carrying the views our parents and social environment hands us on the world regarding various subjects from politics to religion. It's also common for a person to adopt an opposing view as a way of rebellion, though it may involve careful contemplation.

A typical catalyst for doubting one's opinions is an experience that does not fit with them. It's difficult, though not impossible, for one to deny empirical evidence against accepted views. One may choose to reinterpret his experiences so that they correspond to his conceptual view of the world, but this process will cause a person to spend great amounts of mental energy in order to sustain a view that does not correspond to the world. However, if the experienced tension leads to doubt of one opinion, it may lead to doubting others.

In realizing the circumstantial elements involved in the formation of our conceptual organization of the world, the commitment to our opinions may be lessened. This may result in openness to and tolerance of other possibilities.

Many will continue to hold opinions inherited through environmental influences over a lifetime without ever challenging them, while others will find the need to question their beliefs. Having a rational argument that corresponds to the world of experience to justify a particular belief, it seems, would give a person peace of mind at least in that one area.

On the other hand, the opinions that matter most to us often come hand in hand with strong emotions and may not be easily explained rationally. Perhaps the very opinions which we struggle with most, applying numerous arguments as a sort of logical test, are the most difficult to express commitment to linguistically.

What is the deciding factor when choosing a spiritual view of the world? Because logical arguments can be given for the existence of God, and valid counter-arguments can be formed, it seems that, whether consciously or not, one chooses based on cultural tradition and/or underlying feelings when forming these convictions.

Is belief or non-belief concerning religion or anything else arbitrary or a sort of therapy? It is easy to embrace a poem, for example, that expresses a similar belief because of the reassurance we get that at least one other in the

world has come to the same conclusion. But what of those that challenge our way of thinking and shake the seemingly solid foundation on which our convictions stand? Dismissing them because they are contradictory to our conceptions of the world seems the natural response; however, there may be great value in exploring the possibility that there are loose ends.

William James questions our ability to rationalize or even explain our religious beliefs throughout *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He states that "in all sad sincerity I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless".

If religion involves a personal element as James suggests, and is not merely a commitment to a set of doctrines, then it would follow that these experiences could never be clearly articulated. We cannot describe a movie we just saw so that the person we are talking to experiences the emotion we felt in the theatre. How then are we to describe an experience of divine presence so that another is persuaded to believe in its validity?

James argues that because the experience of the

divine cannot be forced, (he never states that this is more than a feeling), religious experience is difficult to share with others. Constructing a rational argument for such experiences helps one to accept a belief in the reality of the supernatural. It also allows for a connection between human experiences.

James includes various experiences in his work in which the subject may interpret his or her experience differently, yet there is always a common thread: the subject always feels an undeniable sense of presence of the divine.

Though the views and religious denominations of the subjects vary, they are all able to rationalize their experiences so that it fits their conception of the world and does not threaten their mental health.

Left open for debate is the question of whether this human phenomenon is genuinely inspired by the divine. Perhaps we are just biologically programmed to heal our psyches however possible. This argument that we are programmed to seek survival and our survival is put at risk if we are mentally unhealthy is a valid one.

Certainly, agonizing over unexplainable experiences may disturb one's mental state. Having a secure grasp on the world, whether real or invented, would be an advantage for human consciousness.

The pragmatic stance would be that it makes no difference in practice whether one's beliefs correspond to some

absolute reality as long as those beliefs are working for the individual who holds them. In which case, this essay is meaningless in so far as it doesn't get me to Truth. It may, however, be useful in sustaining my mental health.

If, on the other hand, there is something to be said of this common experience, the inability to capture the depth of our devotion to certain beliefs in language may add meaning to our experiences.

An argument can be logically made for all empirical truths, in which case, they are rationally irrefutable. There is no real risk in standing by scientific discoveries. The questions that come with great anxiety—that mean something about how we live in the world—are not to be so easily dealt with.

Our sense of the existence of something just out of reach parallels with the dichotomy between human intellect and emotion. We often are compelled to commit to beliefs we cannot rationally defend; yet, our feelings are too strong to deny. We hold onto our views emotionally with the risk that they may be wrong.

Perhaps true meaning is found not in individual views about the world, but in the act of taking the risk to hold onto them despite the lack of empirical evidence.

We have a need to explain our experiences so that reason can organize our conceptualizations into a totality. This too may be explained psychologically.

Unanswered questions are much more difficult to accept than the possibility of the answers being wrong.

The reality of the human condition is that the answers to our burning questions will never be realized. I see two choices given to us. We can either throw out philosophy and the pursuit of knowledge to avoid the "burning" because it is meaningless, or we can continue the "burning" search in hopes of finding even a glimpse of meaning in the questioning.

After all, to borrow from James, the truth of one's opinions may only be measured according to the degree that they help an individual go through life with peace of mind. Which of the two choices above provide greater peace of mind?

**Please Join Us
for Discussion
Friday, Feb. 17
at 2:00 in Gamble 213**

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, or would like to write a brief article for the *Philosopher's Stone*, please contact either Mary Culp or Dr. Nordenhaug.

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