

On Beliefs

A belief is a specific kind of mental content. Apart from the acceptance of indisputable facts (e.g. "*tomorrow the sun will rise again*"), beliefs form the basis for judging what is happening in the world in general (e.g., "*tomorrow the sun will shine again*"). They can take the form of assertions assumed to be true (without necessarily being so) or considered useful (without necessarily being so) in making decisions that can affect the conditions of life of a person or a group. People are not necessarily aware of the beliefs they hold or the origins of their beliefs. They often do not care about evidence and questioning the validity of their beliefs can lead to strong emotional reactions.

"*What makes people believe (whatever or in whatever)?*" and "*How can one be sure of anything?*", are questions that touch on the very – philosophical - notions of knowledge and understanding. And on social phenomena such as religions and their less highly reputed little siblings, sects and all sorts of cults, as well as adherence to all sorts of ideologies, political parties and "movements".

Presumably, in a social context, what makes people believe whatever or in whatever is mainly the influence of other people (present or past) who, for some mysterious reason (it might have to do with the alphas in primeval hordes), are (or were) able to impose their views, will, alleged insights (however specious or far-fetched they may be), etcetera,... on respective commoners, usually pursuing goals (often monetary and materialistic, often sheer power) favourable to them, not to the rest. People, being conditioned in many ways (phylogenetic, ontogenetic, social, economic, or by early childhood trauma) to bow to supposed authority, to look up in awe to those they think are in the know, to long for simple explanations, to be guided - they go along with it, believing, trusting, more or less unquestioning, often against their own vital interests, an easy prey for indoctrination (and, yes, exploitation).

The "others" are usually the powerful, the opinion leaders and "truth makers", the so-called "elite", the rulers and their lackeys, the obfuscators known as the "media", masters of the narrative. What do they believe in? How do their beliefs come about? How do their beliefs affect a particular society? What are their motives for influencing the common folks? Interesting questions that would need a chapter of their own.

Of course, among the opinion leaders and “truth makers” there is always fierce competition (unless one of them manages to get rid of or otherwise silence, his or her competitors), making the choice quite hard for Joe Blow. But then, having settled for the bargain of his life, Joe is rewarded with a “home” - spiritual, political, “ideological” where he then “belongs” and feels in sync with fellow “belongers” who share his beliefs. Could this be the gist of the story, drastically simplified, of course, in a nutshell? Adopt the beliefs the most awe-inspiring alleged authorities want you to adopt?

The daily press, the daily news and, indeed, “*l’éclaboussure du bruit*” (“*splash of noise*”) around us are testament to this competition (in high-school I used to impress my teachers by coining catchy phrases like “Die Welt ist ein einzig gross Geschwätz (The world is one big chatter)”; our current Internet drives it to an extreme). Are our opinions our own opinions (on this, that or the other – the war of the day for instance, and why and how it is waged, all sorts of issues arising and pushed by those in power for more or less dubious and intransparent reasons)? On the face of it, perhaps, yes. But it is all second hand. Hence, when it comes to forming opinions on current issues, we are as susceptible as anyone to getting ensnared by pied pipers or duped by notorious misinformers. Fortunately, there are (actually quite a few) people who doubt, who disagree, who challenge the “truth-tellers”, the alleged “experts”, the powerful and their porte-paroles, without imposing their own views on others. People whose voices can still be heard if we want to hear them. This does not mean that these people are always right, but at least they can provide examples of critical and probing thinking. However, it remains difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. Beware of those who think they are in possession of the truth. So never stop questioning and challenging your own beliefs and their likely origins!

Admittedly, the world’s complexities seem to require beliefs as no perfect knowledge of anything is possible (I believe ;-)). (No, we cannot be sure of virtually anything, we never could, and we never will. The only thing we can absolutely be sure of is our own and everybody else’s eventual death.) So beliefs cannot be bad in themselves as long as they are open to revision (given new evidence – irrefutable facts, for instance). Formally, that has been reasonably well researched by logicians and probability theorists. In practice, it is as difficult as it gets. Prejudice and superstition (and in science, the old and tried and tested paradigms) are as inert as can be. (“A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but by its opponents eventually dying and a new generation growing up familiar with it”, attributed to Max Planck).

PS: I have been ignoring other ways of imposing beliefs, such as the “*cuius regio, eius religio*” method (also known as: “*whose bread I eat, their song I sing*”) practiced in the 16th century to get some religious order restored in Europe be-

fore mayhem broke out in 1618; I am also ignoring “*inheriting beliefs*”, etc. To me beliefs such as in the “*immaculate conception*” are just as nonsensical if taken literally as a belief in the actual existence of a multitude of willing virgins in Allah’s heaven, both “*inherited beliefs*”.

Indeed, much of what has been said above applies, with suitable adaptation and generalisation (“*mutatis mutandis*”), to the “classical” religious belief systems – where “power over people” plays a decisive role. Like in our secular societies with their sprawling “belief communities”.

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