

BELIEF & CONSEQUENCE

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I will preface these remarks with three statements. The first is that these remarks have been edited for comprehension & clarity by my son Thomas B. Adams.

The second represent an example of what I consider unconscious and uninformed beliefs. It is a quote from the book "Denialism" by Michael Specter (a science writer for the New Yorker magazine who is not uninformed) . "Denialism is what happens when an entire segment of society, often struggling with the trauma of change, turns away from reality in favor of a more comfortable lie."

The third statement is to tell you about a group of people who seem to be well informed and claim to be eagerly awaiting a coming inevitable crash of civilization because they want the expected survivors to have a fresh start. They also hope and expect them to do better than we did. This group seems to have given up hope for saving anything.

INTRODUCTION

I am a retired, 84-year-old medical physicist, with pretensions of being a philosopher. This diatribe is my attempt to try and find a way to usefully respond to the threats I perceive. Threats which, in my view, stem primarily from what I consider to be the uninformed and unconscious beliefs of the mass of people who I feel essentially control my environment.

When I was a relatively young man, at the height of the cold war, the USSR was perceived as our enemy, and both we and they were waving nuclear arsenals - arsenals which everyone agreed could destroy our civilization, and possibly our world, were they deployed.

Fortunately for the world, the man controlled nuclear threat, while still present, seems much reduced; since both sides realized the massive down side of any large-scale use of nuclear weapons. But now, 60 or so years later, I find myself discussing other potential world-wide disaster scenarios: overpopulation and global warming. Neither of these looming problems seems to be as easily man controlled as the former was.

My personal view of the long-range survival potential of what I currently call our "I centered culture" is that it is not long for this world. Climate change and population stresses on ever more limited resources will very likely bring about major changes - changes which will disrupt, or even destroy our way of life. These major changes will very likely occur because various factors within our "I culture", acting to prevent any change, will

prevent any effective action from being taken in time to minimize the damages.

I believe the apparent inevitability of these changes to be largely a result of the actions of the many people who do not want to face change, and in fact refuse to even consider that any change might be potentially useful or necessary.

I am not vain enough to believe that everyone should see things exactly my way. But I would be more at ease, living in the environment they create, if I thought their decisions were considered choices, made on the basis of some knowledge of the subject. And I do not believe this is the present case.

My unease arises from the fact that our current "I culture" permits, even encourages, the opinion of uninformed and uninterested people to have equal weight with the opinion of informed and interested people when making group survival decisions on proposed actions. And even though I am in favor of democracy, I believe that this former stabilizing influence in our culture will lead to serious damage when serious unattended environmental changes occur.

Therefore I will try to improve the situation, by explaining what I believe to be the nature of some of the problems that confront us, and then what might be done to improve the situation. To do this, I will first try to explain my beliefs on the nature of our world, and the realities (as I perceive them) which have brought us to where we are.

MY WORLD VIEW

Being a scientist, I am biased toward explanations of a "presumed reality," (our experienced universe) that appear to be supported by acceptable evidence. Thus, I currently subscribe to the popular creation theory called the big bang. This unlikely event seems to have produced an evolving universe, the current contents of which appear to be relatively homogenous. One apparent in-homogeneity in our universe is the presence of life on the planet we call home. I do not know if there is other life in the universe; however, since it seems to have happened once, and the universe appears vast and homogenous, I believe it is likely that it has happened at other times and places as well.

My current personal view is that the universe is indifferent to the presence of life, and that all life, including human, is the result of a random collection of components that had certain natural properties. Some collections survived because they engendered an emergent property

3 of 13

of responding to their environment in ways that promote survival in that environment.

I believe that the existence of a set of responses to environmental stimuli implies an internal mechanism that evaluates the stimuli, selects the appropriate response, and communicates this decision to the components of the life form that cause the response activity. In animal life forms, this diffuse nexus of evaluation, selection and communication has, in the higher animals, evolved into an identifiable brain and nervous system.

Many animal life forms seem to have to the ability to conceive of the concept of I or self as something somehow separated from their environment. In this initial "I" stage, the environment does not have components. Everything in the environment, even other life forms, are treated as potentially hostile resources. Later evolved life forms have the ability to identify useful components in the environment. For example, adult stalking animals do not stalk non food objects.

Some life forms seem to have the ability to conceive of the concept of time. Stalking animals have at least managed to utilize time. If the ability to consider and learn from the events in the past is evidence of the utilization of the experienced passage of time, the ability to plan a course of action seems like evidence of the ability to use time that has not yet been experienced, an abstract concept of time.

In the larger primates, the utilization of the concepts of self, time and abstract thought are well developed survival responses that have been added to the original set. When the survival advantages of group activities became apparent, it became useful to "invent" new protocols for how to interact with each other.

These invented survival protocols, now known as a culture, are a set of rules designed to help the group survive and thrive. However, many cultural rules for survival, like those derived from genetic limitations and unconscious beliefs, are often unrecognized. This is because they are learned as we grow up, and because they are supported by most other people in our environment, they seem like and are perceived as part of our environment.

Humans, in their pride of believing themselves special, invented a host of different cultures to promote their group survival, and to maintain the comforting fiction that the universe considered our needs, desires and even our continued existence "important." And in times of increased stress, these differing belief systems often come into conflict, as each culture strives to ensure its own survival.

BELIEF

But what is a belief. I will offer several interpretations of the concept of "belief," and add some comments on how I believe beliefs affect our society.

From Wikipedia:

1. In a notion derived from Plato, philosophy has traditionally defined knowledge as *JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF*. The relationship between belief and knowledge is that a belief is knowledge if the belief is *true*, and if the believer has some *justification* for believing it is true.
2. Beliefs are the assumptions we make about ourselves, about others in the world and about how we expect things to be.
3. Beliefs are also how we think things really are.

From The Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy

1. Contemporary philosophers generally use the term "belief" to refer to the attitude we have, whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true. To believe something, in this sense, needn't involve actively reflecting on it: Of the vast number of things ordinary adults believe, only a few can be at the fore of the mind at any single time. Nor does the term "belief", in standard philosophical usage, imply any uncertainty or any extended reflection about the matter in question. Forming beliefs is thus one of the most basic and important features of the mind, and the concept of belief plays a crucial role in the philosophy of mind. Most contemporary philosophers characterize belief as a "propositional attitude". Propositions are generally taken to be whatever it is that sentences express.

From The American Heritage dictionary

1. The mental act, condition, or habit of placing trust or confidence in a person or thing; faith.
2. Mental acceptance or conviction in the truth or actuality of something.
3. Something believed or accepted as true; especially, a particular tenet, or a body of tenets, accepted by a group of persons.

The more philosophical of these definitions seem to me to refer to beliefs that are the result of conscious decisions; and some others seem to imply the existence of unconscious belief states. Some of these unconscious belief states may be the culturally conditioned survival responses that we grew up with.

5 of 13

My definition of Belief is a state of the believers mind which holds a given proposition or set of propositions to be true. This state may be the result of an unconscious indoctrination or a conscious deliberation. Beliefs are the remembered consequences of the assumptions we make about ourselves and others in the world, and how we expect things to be. They are also, in many cases, how we think things really are.

These definitions and my experience lead me to believe that all of us live with some mixture of unconscious and conscious belief states. Each of us can be placed on a "degree of mixed beliefs" distribution with these two extreme states at either end. I put the unconscious belief states at the left end.

I further believe that any conscious consideration of the various belief options from which to choose, will make it obvious that the decision is yours and may not be that of others. This may introduce some degree of caution and acceptance of others into your responses.

I currently believe that all people operate under the influence of a collection of unconscious and conscious beliefs, and can be placed somewhere on this distribution, which I believe is log-normal. That is the mass of the people are way to the left of the center of the distribution.

There are very few if any current people who would be at either of the extreme ends of this distribution, but the more beliefs based on some knowledge and conscious decision you have, the farther to the right end of the distribution you fall. I suspect we all harbor many unconscious belief states, but as demonstrate by our moderated actions, we also hold one or more conscious belief states.

All believers act on their beliefs when triggered by environmental events. If you are part of a community and you fall on the left side of the peak of the distribution, your untempered responses will cause trouble. So a good part of the cultural conditioning we undergo as we grow up is to learn and internalize the rules of getting along with each other. This mostly requires that we learn how to selectively suppress our initial emotional response to some environmental stimulus. It appears that some people do this better than others.

I believe there are factors which can influence our beliefs - the first of these is genetics. The parameters of these hereditary influences can be detected because gene mutations produce variations in both the various structural elements of the brain and the various chemical mechanisms involved in the functioning of the brain components. Thus, variations in how the brain functions may cause variations in how the brain interprets the

events it experiences. This will affect both the kind and content of memories it can form, and thus the beliefs it may hold. Thus all brains may not be created equal.

Another factor is education. I believe Public schools were originally designed to do two things - provide every one with the essential background of understanding of the local culture to be able to effectively contribute to the continued survival of that culture, and teach everyone the minimum life skills needed to live in and support the culture. The ability of most people to consciously think about some subject was assumed. It is only recently that we have discovered that this assumption is not as good as we initially thought.

I believe this original educational activity, designed to maintain the status quo, was a very effective but short sighted mechanism, in that it provided, over time, little adaptability, and even less information on how to manage any adjustment to the inevitable changes in our social and physical environment.

The third factor to consider is community. Communities are classes of families and organizations who band together for some mutual benefit. The mechanisms by which these benefits are delivered and the rules of interaction between people are important aspects of a culture which will be part of the belief set of the community. In the past, when communities were more homogeneous , it was easy for the community to have a common belief set. In modern communities, the benefits are still present, but the belief sets are no longer homogeneous.

CONSEQUENCES

So what are the consequences. Communities of various sizes, as well as states and countries, act as if they want to persist, and so must provide mechanisms to promote survival in their environment. The Greek creation democracy was one such mechanism. It worked well because it was based on the requirement that the decision makers were a relatively small group of informed people. As populations grew, it was recognized that the society was too large to have every one directly participate in all decision-making, so it was common practice to have large groups of people with some common cause select one of their members to represent them. However, it was still assumed that the members of the group were literate, informed citizens, who understood the assumptions, benefits and responsibilities that accompanied democracy. The elected representatives were well informed about the problems that required decisions, and recognized that

7 of 13

compromise was a necessary activity in a democracy. Thus they might, on occasion agree to some action that was thought to be essential for the group as a whole, even though that action might cause some damage to the life style of some of the people being represented.

The Democratic paradigm was adopted by the founders of our country at its inception, with largely positive results. The original immigrants from Europe were seeking only freedom from religious oppression, but the cultural values of communal living they brought with them were needed for the small groups to survive in the years of living in the new environment they found. In those groups that survived and eventually banded together to reject the control of the English King, the rights and responsibilities of the citizens in the new country being forged were well understood. Of course, by this time the people were also seeking freedom from control by another oppressive government.

When the Constitution was written, it included the phrase "all men are created equal" which was a strike against the special privileges of the English King. The word "men" in this case meant educated and informed men, and specifically did not mean uneducated and uninformed men. The right to be governed and judged by men of equal status (one's peers) was the intent of the revolution. And remembering the original reasons for leaving England, they left God out of the Constitution.

As a mechanism designed to protect the organizational form of government, and support and protect the cultural conditions they desired, the Constitution was a huge success. But that culture also included the concept of individual responsibility to understand and support the organizations that provided the desired benefits. And now, some 200 plus years later, some fissures are showing up in these support mechanisms - fissures which threaten our culture, even as we continue to enjoy the extraordinary benefits that this culture has brought.

I believe that the primary reason these fissures are expanding is because we have continued to teach the content of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, while neglecting the context within which the words in these documents had meaning. Given this, it is not surprising that the meaning of many phrases have changed.

One particular problem I see currently is the effect the evolution in the meaning of the word "freedom" has brought about. There is today a great emphasis on exercising individual freedom - and I am a great believer in individual freedom when practiced with sufficient attention to the restrictions on that freedom imposed by nature and the various organizations that set

boundaries for acceptable behavior in our culture. It now seems that we have expanded the idea of individual freedom far beyond the practices intended by our founders - which has resulted in some unintended consequences.

The worst case may be the extension of individual freedom to mean that the individual is free to ignore their responsibility to be knowledgeable about the things that affect their lives. For over 200 years, our cultural support mechanism, our government, has been so successful in providing the essentials of life, that people have come to believe that this degree of support is their "right." Because of this, they no longer feel it necessary to be knowledgeable about the things needed to support the culture supplying these "rights." So they are making decisions without sufficient understanding of the role of the world environment in permitting this way of life they think they have a right to.

Another fissure I see is displayed by one of the hidden problems with what I consider to be our overextended, representative form of democracy. The local voter groups are so large, and our various life styles so diverse that, from the questions seen in the newspapers, a great number of the voting public (and many of their representatives) cannot understand the issues these representatives are voting on. It also seems that many people do not trust the government, do not believe they are represented by the government, and don't see any reason to try to understand the issues. Their life style is their right, and they are therefore not required to understand (or even consider) the needs and beliefs of others, or to become "informed" voters, in the sense that is assumed for the reasonable operations of a democracy. They simply vote for the person who promises the most of "what they want now". But still we encourage them to vote, in the vague hope that the many extremes will cancel out, and we will be left with the correct decision.

I now address the issue of religion, as it relates to and influences those factors which I believe threaten our way of life. It is my belief that around the world, over the course of time, the impulse toward religion expressed itself in many different cultures and with many different labels, but apparently in very similar ways. Those groups survived by providing what the local groups wanted - which appears to have frequently included a refusal to accept the beliefs and practices of other religions.

Currently, the Christians and the Jews are in conflict with the Muslims again. This antagonism seems self supporting because, whenever the

moderates of one group progresses toward acceptance of the other, the radicals of the other group act to cause an unconsidered response from the mass of the first group that destroys the possibility of acceptance - thus perpetuating the conflict. This kind of continuing conflict does not have an end, like secular wars. It is ongoing, and will continue to be ongoing until the non radical people of each conflicting group decide to inhibit their own radicals.

In my opinion, this will not happen until a large fraction of each of the conflicting groups understands what is going on and decides to minimize the conflict to their mutual benefit. And I am not optimistic that this will happen in time to end these conflicts without serious damage to our way of life.

My pessimism is based in my perception of an ever increasing tendency toward irrational if not unconscious belief states. In an article in the Plain Dealer of 12/27/09 titled "More Americans Experience Varied Religions" by Michael O'Malley, he cites a Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life study which showed that 33 percent of those surveyed, either regularly or occasionally, attend religious services in more than one place, often in faiths different than their own. This sounds like it might indicate the beginning of religious tolerance, but this survey also revealed that a significant number of Christians believe in reincarnation, astrology, the evil eye, casting curses and the spiritual energy of natural objects. 17% had contact with ghosts, 14% had consulted psychics of various kinds. half of Catholics and 25% of evangelical Christians believe in two or more of the above.

T Beal, professor of religious studies at Case Western Reserve University says his research supports the Pew study results, and claims that the hybrid religious identity is growing faster in the younger population. He claims this is due to the remarkable religious diversity of their environment.

J Kelly, Professor of History of Christianity at John Carroll University, says, "this objective approach to other religions is a 20th century phenomenon, mostly in the United States."

In the early 20th century, immigrants to the US segregated themselves, both by ethnicity and religion. But now these segregated areas have been broken up and the ethnicities mixed. This has significantly reduced each family's sense of security.

One of the apparent results of this is that the population of the US is becoming more religious with time. Since the religions that are growing the fastest are mostly of the “we can save you” type, I am led to suspect that this is largely due to the fact that many in our current population have little confidence in the ability of public figures and institutions to provide the high degree of security to which they have come to believe they are entitled.

This does not surprise me for two reasons. The first is the problem with government mentioned above, and the second is the problem of servicing an ever growing population from a finite and changing world environment. I believe the growing trend toward “we can save you” religions, coupled with the current belief that the people can vote to get whatever they want, will eventually threaten the well established separation of church and state in this country.

SOLUTIONS

So are there any potentials solutions to these perceive threats. What can be done to change the belief structures of others, so that they make more considered decisions. What would it take to make the mixed conscious - unconscious belief distribution more closely resemble a normal distribution?

In searching the available information for ways to change belief structures, it appears that the most effective time to act is when some expectation of support for an unconscious belief about the current culture fails in some serious fashion. And as I indicated earlier, I believe this is already happening in some limited ways, and is driving the increase in association with the “we can save you” religions.

The researchers find that when the failure is serious enough that the unconscious expectations of the person experiencing the failure come to the conscious level, that person will most often try to move to a more conservative stance of the same belief, if such an adjusted position is available. It is only when no such adjusted position seems available that the emotional distress state becomes high enough for the person to consciously consider what other information might be available about this current problem. Then the introduction of new information on the available choices, and supporting arguments for these choices may be possible.

So are there any possible mechanisms we can utilize to facilitate this process? At this time, a voluntary approach is the only one consistent with the culture we live in, so those advocates who desire that others change to a more considered belief state have only two choices: either to create

conditions that will expose the problem, thus creating the belief crisis so that they can present the arguments for the array of choices that might solve or at least lessen it; or to make sure the information is already present and available as common knowledge, so that when the crisis occurs, the population can take advantage of it.

There are, in fact, several organizations, including this one, that promote discussion of these problems, and are in a position to try to do this. Unfortunately, discussion of potential global problems is not a popular activity of the mass of people that would be needed to participate in any meaningful discussion - so any effort to make sure that the necessary information is present and available would require an extensive advertising campaign promoting the advantages of consciously considered beliefs, and directing people to the available public discussion groups. And while this activity might make some progress over time, it would need a dedicated organization and the funds to support the campaign. Because of this, I believe that even if both the above activities were carried out at high levels, the net result would be small and ineffective until the threat is much more obvious.

Of course, it may happen that various cultural forces will, at some point, abandon the voluntary approaches, and attempt a more forceful approach. One of these might be a "current" certification of knowledge on a subject, in order to vote on issues that involve that subject.

In theory, we already have such a requirement. It is called citizenship. But people who were born here are allowed, even encouraged, to vote - even if they failed every subject in every school they attended. Unfortunately, it seems to me that this entitlement is no longer helping. Immigrants at least have to take and pass courses in the mechanisms of our government in order to vote. Consequently, they often know more about the requirements for effective governing than our citizens who were born and grew up here.

As I said before, I would be more accepting of decisions made by unconstrained and informed people. But how to decide who is informed.

We could in theory upgrade our citizenship system to establish additional qualifications, provide information courses and issue certificates to qualify people. And while this might at some point lead to better informed people making better decisions, such an activity would again need a dedicated organization, and the funds to support the program. And it would definitely require a huge effort to overcome the resistance to any such program.

The above mentioned things we might do are unfortunately only long-range potential solutions to the problems I have mentioned. And I don't believe we will have time for them to function long enough for them to be effective. I suspect the climate change threat will become much more obvious in the short-range; and when it does, people will demand that the government protect them like they did during and after the Katrina disaster. But, as the weather changes progress, the government will not be able to assist all the different disaster areas, and serious disruptions in our culture will occur. Many changes in belief structures will occur in the resulting survival activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Since I wrote most of this paper in December of last year, and it turned out much more pessimistic than I originally intended, I have found myself more sensitive to two things. The first is the abundant examples of the problems I have described in our government system as evidenced by our press reports, and this supportive but not comforting quote from Theodore Dreiser, "Our civilization is still in a middle stage, no longer wholly guided by instinct, not yet wholly guided by reason."

Second is my increased emotional responses to various messages of hope I have encountered. Apparently, I cannot not hope. Mostly, I hope I am wrong. And although I have not yet joined the group eagerly awaiting the catastrophe, I do believe there will be a catastrophe and many human survivors. I wish them well.

So, I have told you some of what I believe and some of why I believe it. I believe the best beliefs are the consciously considered ones. I wish more people had them because I believe their decisions about things that affect my environment would be better.

I have also discussed some of our current problems that I believe are the consequences of reacting to what I have called "unconscious beliefs."

And while I don't believe I will last long enough to see the chosen responses to these problems, I do believe that any serious attempts to moderate the intensity of any of these coming problems should have started some time ago.

And so, you have been subject to my rant how about why they did not start years ago. It was 60 years or so ago that I made my first conscious acceptance of a possible dire fate. And now, I find myself having to do it again. But this time I am not remaining quiet. This time I will be as loud as I

13 of 13

can manage to be, in the time I have left to rant. As part of this new action on my part, I recommend the book "Denialism" by Michael Specter.

Thank you for your attention. Are there any questions?