

Beyond Belief

“Two-thirds of what we see is behind our eyes.” – Chinese Proverb

“To begin with it was only tentatively that I put forward the views that I had developed... but in the course of time they gained such a hold of me that I can no longer think in any other way.” – Sigmund Freud

When I was young, about 8 years old, my mother took me to a showing of a holiday film sponsored by the local Baptist church. I don't remember much about the movie other than a Christmas tree falling on top of the female lead character and a bunch of people crying in the audience.

At the conclusion of the movie someone from the church walked to the front of the theater and began talking about the film and the relationship that the characters had with Jesus. He shared some insight, some scripture, and then asked that anyone interested in becoming baptized to please remain. As two-thirds of the audience shuffled towards the exits, Mom and I stayed in our seats. After a short wait, one of the church staff carrying a bowl of water in one hand and the Bible in the other approached the two of us. He seemed to know right away that it was I who needed “saving” and so wasted little time.

“Would you like to join our church, little man?” he asked in a pleasantly calming voice.

“Yeah, I think so,” I responded, just a little more than slightly nervous.

“Do you accept Jesus Christ as your savior?” he said, much more forceful this time.

“Yeah, I think so.”

The man dipped his fingers into the bowl of water, closed his eyes, said something about washing my sins away, and then flicked... dipped... flicked... dipped... and flicked again. As he backed up to survey the job he'd done I wiped water from my face and eyes. Finally he said, “I do believe that I see a glow in you, little man. One that wasn't there before.”

As I look back on that evening I can't help but smile at the possibility that what he might have seen was the theater lights reflecting off of a water-drenched face.

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As I tried to decide what to post in my second article for this website, it occurred to me that it might be important to discuss the science of “belief” and what my personal beliefs

might be. Readers should not have to guess at my particular system of perspectives as I've collected them over the years. I "believe" that it might help you to understand how I process information that I've learned, and knowledge I have yet to learn. It might also help you to decide whether or not to "go there".

But "going there" is exactly what I did throughout my childhood. As I was tugged (willingly) in the wake of my mother's search for God, I became exposed to a myriad of religions, Baptist being only one of them. If you want a comprehensive list of what and how many religions we visited (and often became full fledged members of) then you'll need to ask my mom. I recall that there were many. I remember going to Midnight masses, Easter Sunrise services, church picnics, and Sunday schools of all sorts. We even have pictures to prove it! As I got a little older I eagerly attended a few dances and other church-sponsored socials with whatever congregation I happened to be involved with at the time.

The strongest and most distasteful memory I have was when I was fourteen. I had gone rogue and left my mother's influence of choices when I joined the Mormon church. I wasn't as much curious about Mormonism as I was interested in hanging with a buddy of mine and playing for the church basketball team. The team really stank, and I was one of their best players. Who could pass up an opportunity like that! Being the team's "star player" had an extraordinary appeal.

One particular weekend, after the basketball season had ended, I attended a church dance with my friend. There were a couple dozen kids about our age at the dance, but I was immediately drawn to the blond in the pale blue dress. In a bold move that was well beyond my normal introverted approach, I asked her to dance. She accepted and I was immediately drawn into her web, staring into those beautiful eyes and not for an instant feeling uncomfortable about it. For the first time in my shy youth I had connected to someone of a different gender than I. The two of us danced every dance for almost the entire afternoon. I was smitten. The fact that she was only thirteen, a whole year younger than I, created a foreboding feel to my attraction. When you're that young, such a gap in age was almost taboo in the eyes of your peers. This point might have been a good enough excuse to justify my inaction over the coming months, but I would be lying to myself if I said that it was the reason. The truth is that I was scared to reach out and reconnect with her. I was frightened to make that phone call and ask her if she wanted to go to the movies. What if her mom or dad answered? What if she said "NO!""? God, the thought of rejection sat on my ego like an elephant on a rabbit.

Eventually I gathered enough courage to make that fateful phone call. After several dozen attempts to dial her number I finally allowed the call to go through. With a stroke of luck she answered the phone. Once she remembered who I was and the time we spent dancing together on that blissful day, I knew the time was right to ask if she would like to do something with me.

I was not prepared for her response.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. My parents won’t allow me to see anyone. Besides, you really don’t want to have anything to do with me. I’m pregnant. I’m sorry.” She hung up the phone. The sadness in her voice was as audible as the gasp leaving my throat, charged from somewhere deep down in my heart.

A few weeks later I attended a church picnic with hopes of seeing her. Of course she wasn’t there. Perhaps her absence was the reason that conversation about her achieved much higher than whisper levels. I learned within the first hour of the picnic that not only was she already eight weeks into her pregnancy...

... but the father was a “thirty something” year-old member of the church.

Being eight weeks into her pregnancy meant that she had conceived around the same time that we had met and danced the afternoon away! What if I had been bolder and asked her “out” the next day? Would the world be a different place for both of us today? Would I have prevented a despicable act of abuse and stopped the raping of someone that I had inexplicable feelings for? Was I partially to blame due to my lack of courage?

I left the picnic confused and on the verge of tears. I would never return to the Mormon church, nor any other church for that matter (with the exception of weddings, funerals, and family baptisms). When I joined the Army five years later my “Dog Tags” would state my name, my blood type, and the words “No Preference” to identify my religion.

Four decades have passed since my divorce from formal religion. Though many might think such an attitude to be sacrilege, I have never given up on the idea that a “God” exists. My derailing from the church only pointed me in a different direction. The result is a collection of ideas that remain in a perpetual state of fluidity, morphing as each new piece of the puzzle presents itself.

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On 17 February, 1600, Giordano Bruno was gagged and stripped naked, watching as his accusers lit the fire that would consume his body in the coming minutes. Had he recanted his beliefs – that the earth revolved around the sun and that the universe possessed other planets capable of harboring intelligent life – then his own life might have been spared. Perhaps he might even have found his freedom after seven years of imprisonment in Rome. But due to the popularity of his philosophies and his resistance to admit the error of his ways, the Roman Inquisition had no other choice than to remove him from worldly influence. Giordano Bruno’s genius would be ignored or forgotten for several generations to come.

Ten years after Bruno’s violent execution, the great Galileo began publicizing his discoveries and theories developed after gazing through his telescope. The Catholic church was not amused. Here stood before them yet another potential heretic pushing a heliocentric lie down the throats of an ignorant and gullible audience. He had to be dealt

with! Though Galileo would never face the same fate as Bruno, the Roman Inquisition would place him under house arrest from 1633 until his death in 1642.

Note: it would not be until 1992 that Pope John Paul II would officially concede that the Earth was not stationary – that it revolved around the sun.

The enigmatic sticky solution that binds the concepts of beliefs so strongly to the human psyche is amongst the most mystical of substances that our species shares. If other creatures that share our planet's oxygen possess the ability to believe, they show no significant signs of it, at least not to the same degree of our own affliction. Often the simple proclamation of a belief comes hinged to a commitment and obligation to display behaviors consistent with those acquired values – even if those values might cost the lives of others to enforce.

Working through the research, I've discovered that there is no true science that assigns an explanation to how and why we believe. It falls mainly under the softer disciplines of Psychology, where the hard wiring of our brains is under continuous scrutiny, but the isolation of specific contributors is nebulous at best. Though our individual genetic codes go a long way in helping us to understand behavior, they do not always answer the mail. So far the most interesting concept of beliefs I've discovered is by Professor Lewis Wolpert, author of a book on the topic titled "Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast." In his book he insists that beliefs originate from early humanity's creation of tools. To best illustrate his logic I've developed an anecdote about a caveman I've named Jake:

Jake the caveman realizes that rocks have a profound effect on cracking open the shells of nuts. His new discovery leads him to "believe" that the purpose of a rock is to crack nuts. Upon showing his best friend, Jimbo, this new and wonderful tool, Jimbo realizes that there might be other functions for Jake's rock. Unfortunately Jake, steadfast in his convictions about the purpose of the rock, will have nothing to do with Jimbo's revelation. Jimbo's attempt to reinvent the rock's purpose goes against Jake's newly established beliefs. Even after Jimbo shows Jake multiple experiments that prove his point, Jake's only response is one of anger and resentment.

Perplexed, Jimbo stomps out of the cave to look for a rock of his own. Following closely behind him is a very upset Jake with his new "nutcracker" in hand. In a violent fit of hostility, Jake hits Jimbo over the head with the new tool, killing him instantly. It is in this tragic moment that Jake realizes Jimbo was correct – this new device does in fact have more uses than only the cracking of nuts. A new set of beliefs are born.

Meanwhile Jane, Jimbo's mate, sobs over the loss of her loved one and, after a time, begins to wonder what might happen once the light disappears from our eyes. She decides on one possibility. The result is the birth of a new philosophical concept that sustains itself through a system of shared beliefs.

Though exaggerated in its simplicity (please forgive me, professor) the gist of the argument is the point of discussion here – that it was prehistoric man's graduation to tool

usage which catapulted creative thought into ideological and strategic concepts. The domino effect that would follow continues to topple its way through time into the present and quite probably well into the future.

Let me share another flavor of the professor's insight: *"Beliefs, once acquired, have a kind of inertia in that there is a preference to alter them as little as possible. There is a tendency to reject evidence or ideas that are inconsistent with current beliefs, particularly if they undermine central beliefs; this is known as the principle of conservatism."*

He also writes: *"A frequent feature of beliefs is that when examining evidence relevant to a given belief, people are inclined to see what they expect to see and conclude what they expect to conclude. We only become critical of information when it is clearly not consistent with our beliefs, and even then may not give up that belief."*

It is impossible to dismiss his claims when analyzing their content against the realities of this world. The idea of becoming trapped inside a box of preconceptions is one of my greatest concerns. To paraphrase Professor Wolpert's words as I understand them – you will always be able to find "evidence" through your preferred method of observation proving you to be right and others to be wrong.

For instance, in 2004 as the Swiss Neurologist, Dr. Olaf Blanke, was conducting a brain mapping test using electric stimuli on a female patient, the woman had a sudden out of body experience claiming that she could see herself from above. In his report he says that by electrically stimulating the woman's **angular gyrus**, a part of the temporal parietal junction, he could induce her out of body experiences. He discovered that each time her angular gyrus was arbitrarily stimulated she reported the out of body sensations.

Dr. Blanke would later create an experiment using Virtual Reality (VR) technology. In this experiment, the person wearing the VR visor would see himself through the visor's monitor standing about two feet in front of him. Dr. Blanke would use a pole and stroke the subject's back. Each person who participated in this exercise reported that it was as though they were experiencing the "touch" in the projected body and not their own.

How easy it would be to allow this new evidence to discount all of the other beliefs about out of body experiences. How a person might process this information is frequently based on their preconceptions of the topic. For instance, someone who has never believed in the idea of the soul exiting the body might consider that this information legitimizes their views, while others who believe in the idea of a soul taking flight might be somewhat disheartened by Dr. Blanke's research, are still unlikely to kick their beliefs to the curb. There are still plenty of unanswered questions that Olaf's research doesn't address. As an example, interviews with people who have had near death experiences show that they possessed knowledge about their surroundings they couldn't possibly be aware of during their catatonic state. While Dr. Blanke's new evidence might suggest one thing, it does not address all of the questions surrounding this issue. Therefore it is unlikely to succeed at removing the power of differing beliefs.

There are many other examples of how the force of our beliefs can propel us into our futures with such a casual shove that we rarely even realize that we've been pushed. The gravity of those things that we cling to so dearly might also render us as paralyzed, unmovable objects whilst we assert our convictions. I could write volumes on the topic. But it would only be a repetitious mantra trying to make a point that almost seems pointless – at least to this point.

So where does that leave us? Are we to abandon our beliefs because of the frailty with which they exist? I'm certainly not recommending any such thing. It is too often that the positive benefits of our internal ethical systems are guided by our values and beliefs. Erasing a brand that has so successfully provided strong moral character and instilled the ability to practice good judgment would not be a particularly good idea. But there appears to be a void in the process of beliefs that compels a price be paid. This tariff on our views exists simply because we believe. It is also charged on those who don't believe – it doesn't even matter what belief you're talking about. I hope we might someday find a way to fill that void.

For myself there is little that I am willing to claim as my own personal inventory of beliefs. Please understand that I am using the strictest form of the word. While I might believe that I'm a damned good looking dude, beliefs as they apply to ego and pop culture are not what I'm referring to. Though similar arguments can be made for the same, I'm just not in the mood to argue over them. Besides, there are far too many people that may think my looks to be average at best.

So I move my thoughts swiftly to the things that I know.

Through quantum mechanics I know that we flicker in and out of existence, indiscernible to our observational ability. I know that we “entangle” with our environment, effecting outcomes and behaviors through our own actions, even though we are not often aware of those outcomes or the actions that caused them. I know that the energy our thoughts possess do not simply bounce around within the confines of our skulls when left unspoken, but that they find targets well beyond the vessels of our souls.

Through chaos theory I know that the most tumultuous and confusing times of my life have created form and function in their wake. As I reflect on my past I can clearly see the beauty of that form and feel the lessons their function provided. I know that nature procures the phenomenon of “Strange Attractors” such as the Starling “Murmuration”, an event that makes even the most jaded disbeliever consider the existence of a greater power.

Through self- synchronizing systems I know that, though absent of our awareness, there exists information we all possess that seamlessly prompts us to participate in a well choreographed dance. This dance as witnessed from a distance observer provides the excitement of a Tango, the elegance of a Waltz, and the passion of a Flamenco. All the

while our intellects grow and the connectivity with the environment gels. Even mundane activities in our daily routines often find symmetry with the environment.

When I step back to examine all of these things collectively (along with much, much more not listed here), it becomes almost impossible to ignore the picture that takes its form.

The great physicist Niels Bohr said of quantum physics that it should not be a considered part of the physics which guide the macro world. Instead it should be something that happens there, but never here. This is a jagged pill to swallow when you understand that everything that we are as well as everything that we see throughout the entire universe is composed of the building blocks of quantum particles. Therefore, to say that they have no impact on our existence other than to create that which we observe is (for me) the same as saying that once a brick is laid in the construction of a building, its individual qualities lose their meaning and importance – that the building becomes the only observable rule worthy of our attention. We all know better than this, so why don't we all know better than that?

With my brain in a quantum spin I can only think of a single and simple way to fill the void that beliefs might leave in my head and heart: the concept of “open-mindedness”. I try with all of my might to analyze each and every new byte of information through eyes of curiosity and unbiased examination. I ask myself, “Can this new concept or revelation morph the stew within my mortal soul? Do the things that present themselves each and every day compel me to reconsider the things I once believed to be a part of universal truth?” I wish to allow my mind the ability to cultivate information as it presents itself based on its merits and not based on my own preconceptions. If my beliefs become a handicap and remove me from capably assessing new evidence properly, then it is time for me to re-evaluate the legitimacy of those beliefs.

We are in an age where open minds are gaining momentum. It is time to ask ourselves if, in the future millennium of our civilization, will those advanced generations look upon our era as a renaissance? Or instead will the void inherent in our beliefs snub the light of a million brilliant minds, seemingly lost forever, whisked away in cosmic winds?

Few have captured the theme of my entry with his words as well as our martyred hero, Giordano Bruno, in a play he wrote in 1582 titled “Il Candelajo” (The Chandler):

"Behold in the candle borne by this Chandler, to whom I give birth, that which shall clarify certain shadows of ideas ... I need not instruct you of my belief. Time gives all and takes all away; everything changes but nothing perishes. One only is immutable, eternal and ever endures, one and the same with itself. With this philosophy my spirit grows, my mind expands. Whereof, however obscure the night may be, I await the daybreak, and they who dwell in day look for night ... Rejoice therefore, and keep whole, if you can, and return love for love."