

REASONABLE BELIEF

Reason is the power of mind to think, form opinions and judgements and reach logical conclusions. For it to reach logical conclusions, however, it needs to be based on a firm factual premise.

Belief is a principle or idea accepted as true, especially without proof. (*1)

The quality of a reasoned conclusion or judgement is wholly dependent on the verity of the premise. So what has belief got to do with reasoning? In theory, absolutely nothing; in practice I argue that belief and reason interact in most of our cognition.

In this essay I want explore three common manifestations of the interaction between reason and belief:

(i) Beliefs are formed through short-term psychological pressures, where reason may eventually become more soundly based. It may also be a tendency in us to operate intuitively.

(ii) Beliefs are part of a culturally internalised system, open dialogue allows reason from a different premise to be explored. This depends on society and ourselves allowing it.

(iii) Where an unyielding dogmatic belief distorts reasoning, no questioning is tolerated and all conclusions are made internally valid, even if externally unsound.

In all these situations reason is like a vehicle which travels from wherever the driver turns on the ignition. Belief does not necessarily suppress reason, but rather directs it.

Experience is the raw material of all cognition. It triggers us to reason but also may invoke perceptions that are consistent with beliefs.

Hume identified it as the overwhelming basis of reason. He asks the question “What is the nature of all our reasonings concerning the matter of fact?” (*2) He concludes that the relation of cause and effect is founded on experience. Nature he says “has kept us at great distance from all her secrets [...]” (Ibid) In his example of bread, he claims that “our senses inform us of the colour, weight and consistence of bread: but neither sense nor reason inform us of those qualities which fit it for nourishment and support of the human body” (Ibid) It is experience; the frequent repeating of the experiment which enables us to reason that nourishment occurs. He concludes: “Custom then, is a great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect for the future, a similar train of events with those that have appeared in the past.” (Ibid) Hume concludes that experience has its own inherent logic, which would reduce belief to an extension of past experience.

Kant puts experience into context in the introduction of his *Critique of pure reason*: “Experience is without doubt the first product that our understanding brings forth as it works on the raw material of sensible sensations [...] Nevertheless it is far from the only field

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to which our understanding can be restricted. It tells us, to be sure, what is, but never that it must necessarily be thus and not otherwise.” (* 3) Kant enables us to consider belief as something derived from a cognitive faculty quite separate from sensory experience.

For experience to be a sound basis for judgment, one needs to carefully examine the facts on which the premise is constructed and the reasonableness of the projected period. It is common sense to look at past patterns, but they are open to interpretation and beliefs can configure that interpretation.

Science proceeds with a careful blending of deductive and inductive reasoning. But what of life on the street? I want to look at the first manifestation mentioned above through an example:

A production manager is asked to find a solution to a particular product quality problem. There is an urgent order for an important customer and everyone is putting him under pressure, even questioning his ability to do the job.

He searches his memory for a similar experience, remembers two factors: poor workmanship and faulty raw materials. Because of the pressure he is under, he comes to believe that faulty materials is the answer. His self-belief eliminates all doubt and he goes ahead with his solution. One outcome might be that the faulty material was the problem. The other outcome is that the doubt that was eliminated made him miss an important fact and he had not trained his operators properly. An objective analysis would have identified the true solution to the problem. The particular psychological pressures prejudiced the process of reaching a sound solution.

This is an example that could be easily remedied with an open organisation, stressing the importance of facts, and some management coaching.

We all, to a greater or lesser extent, operate on what I am calling short-term beliefs: *I believe this is the way to go, therefore let's give it a try.*

Jung differentiates between rational and intuitive types. (*4) So someone who operates intuitively (sometimes known as gut-feel) is processing reality almost regardless of any sensory data. His judgements are based on internalised knowledge, past experience or the interpretation of past experience. So there is a tendency for belief and reason to interact either because of pressures of circumstances or personality bias.

By and large, what I call short-term beliefs can be altered by being open to the experience of reality. But what of those beliefs internalised by culture and education?

The philosopher Jonathan Glover suggests that beliefs have to be considered holistically, and no belief exists in isolation in the mind of the believer. (*5)

Glover emphasizes that beliefs are difficult to change. We might seek to try to rebuild our beliefs on more secure foundations, like rebuilding a house. He says, however, we should

see beliefs not like houses but like boats: “Maybe the whole thing needs rebuilding, but inevitably at any point you have to keep enough of it intact to keep it afloat” (Ibid).

He uses the *Neurath Boat* concept where there is a recursive replacement of rotten planks with new ones, without the danger of sinking the boat. Glover explains that philosophers should encourage a Socratic dialogue of peoples’ beliefs, where the sense and reason of aspects of the belief are explored, rotten plank by rotten plank, without the fear of drowning. (Ibid)

The *rotten planks* are of course aspects of beliefs which do not stand up to sound reasoning or are perceived to have a negative social impact. Whether a plank is rotten or seasoned is always open to discussion. Such a discussion should be led by the believer, who is open to reviewing his boat’s structure. A group of young students may well be in that position.

For some people, beliefs take the form of a complete dogma and believers have the tendency to adjust argument to fit the beliefs, even to shape their perception of reality to suit them.

Why don’t we set aside all belief systems and operate with tested premises and pure reason? One answer might be that we have all been through a process of internalising norms and values through our childhood, and it requires a changed consciousness that these are not the whole truth.

Erich Fromm described the difficulties of seeking freedom from ingrained values. And whilst the journey to freedom can be wonderful, there is a dangerous and painful journey to leaving the old values behind. He describes how we are often prepared to surrender to authoritarian control rather than lose our mooring. Being freed from authority leaves us with a feeling of hopelessness. We need to belong, and therefore we are easy prey to dictators. (*6)

His book, first published in 1942, was considering the effect of Nazism on middle-class Germans, but it is powerfully relevant to today when well-educated Muslims, brought up in the West, become ensnared by Islamic extremists.

Even if we are not in danger of extremism, we may seek to fill the gap with consumerism. The craving “to have” may be a response to a stultified personal growth. Belief can operate like a basic need that needs to be satiated before we will listen to, or use, reason.

So how do we reconcile belief and reason? Not by socially outlawing belief as something false or strange, but more by allowing beliefs to be expressed and then encouraging dialogue. This works on all of my three types. In the case of what I have called short term beliefs, it is about encouraging open meetings, coaching and counselling. With the more internalised belief systems, encouraging the kind of Socratic dialogue proposed by Jonathan Glover is the answer.

There will always be the dogmatic type who has closed the door to any reasoned argument. Who sees the rotting planks as sacred relics. Here it is a question of helping them to open

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the door and, rather than condemning them, showing by example how reasoned belief can help to mend boats rather than sink them.

My proposition is that belief and reason are interactive elements of our cognitive process. I have looked at three manifestations to illustrate this point. In any situation, we should aim for the ideal of reasonable belief.

References:

*1 - both definitions taken from Chambers 21st Century dictionary

*2 - Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: David Hume Part II paras 28-36.

*3 - Critique of Pure Reason –Immanuel Kant: Cambridge Edition: Page 136: Introduction - On the difference between pure and empirical cognition.

*4 - Jung Selected writings introduced by Anthony Storr (Fontana Pocket Reader) Part 5, Introduction to Psychological Types

*5 – Jonathan Glover on Systems of belief - Philosophy Bites Podcast Oct 9th 2011.

*6 – THE FEAR OF FREEDOM: Erich Fromm 1942: particularly chapter V, Mechanisms of Escape.

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