



Beliefs:

Where do they come from and how do they impact on us?

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1. Summary

The two main sources of our beliefs are the “truths” we are given by others and the theories that we construct in our minds as the result of events in our lives. The approach we take to formulating and adopting our beliefs from these two sources is one of the great paradoxes of the human condition. On the one hand, almost all our academic and working life requires us to constantly evaluate our beliefs in order to provide the evidence to support, modify or abandon that belief. Indeed, every scientific, medical and technological advance ever made by man has been dependent on this process. At the same time, science has itself proven that our personal happiness is significantly affected by the degree to which we are prepared to accept religious, spiritual and moral beliefs that are not based on evidence but on faith or intuition. The daily lives we lead sit uneasily across this divide; with the result that we often believe things about ourselves with very little empirical evidence. One of the most important tasks of any life coach is to help their clients resolve this paradox in the clients’ best interests.

2. Introduction

This essay considers the nature of beliefs, where they come from and how they affect us. It opens with a definition of belief and then looks at two very different approaches that all of us take towards belief in different circumstances: a scientific challenge approach and a spiritual or moral acceptance approach. The essay concludes by considering the role of life coaching in helping clients resolve this paradox by supporting them to nurture their positive beliefs and to overcome their negative or limiting beliefs.

3. What is belief?

Belief is the psychological state in which an individual holds a proposition or premise to be true (1). It is important to stress at this early point in the essay that belief does not require the proposition to actually be true. In fact, as we shall see later, it could be argued that there is no such thing as an absolute truth: That many of the things we believe today might at some point be proven to be untrue, or that we might simply change our mind and choose not to believe certain things any longer. Ultimately, we have complete freedom to believe whatever we choose, even if most of the available evidence does not support that belief. And without the aid of truth drugs or lie detectors, it can often be very difficult to tell if a person actually believes the things they claim to believe.

Beliefs can be about small personal things such as: “I am too shy”, “Jane looks better with short hair”, and “Jack’s tattoos are ugly”. Or they can be about big, global concepts such as: “all drugs should be legalised”, “the Iraq war was wrong”, or “organic food is a waste of money”. We all of us have literally thousands of beliefs at any one time, many of them being background beliefs that we are not even consciously aware of, or that we don’t often think about.

4. Where do beliefs come from?

Beliefs begin as propositions and there are two key sources: External and Internal

An external proposition is usually presented to us as a fully formed belief or “truth” that we are asked to accept on the basis of either the credibility of the proponent or the scale of the evidence to support it. When we were very young children, these external propositions mostly came from our parents and we usually accepted them without question. Over time, the list of people who have presented us with their beliefs because they would like us to believe them too grows ever longer. Teachers, religious leaders, politicians, the media, advertisers, friends and colleagues, even enemies: Sometimes it seems that everybody in the world would like us to believe something or other. And of course, we are not immune either: Every day we tell people things we believe about ourselves, about them and about the world, usually with the hope that they will also start to believe it.

Internal propositions are the ideas that we construct after one or more incidents or events in our lives. For example, if I began to get more colds than usual I might wonder if my immune system was starting to fail, without any external person suggesting this to me. At first this might just be a proposition that would only become a belief with further evidence (possibly as the result of a blood test). The next stage of our journey in this essay is therefore to consider the process by which we move from a proposition to a belief and then to what a philosopher would refer to as knowledge.

5. From belief to knowledge: The philosophy of understanding

One of the fundamental building blocks of philosophical thought is the distinction that is made between belief and knowledge. Classical philosophers define knowledge as a “justified true belief”. In other words, they contend that knowledge requires three conditions to be present: The proposition must be consistent with other beliefs, it must be true, and it must be believed. Much of philosophy is ultimately a debate that either challenges or is based on this distinction between belief and knowledge. Similarly in science the term “the scientific method” is used to describe the process of gathering evidence to move from a theorem (or belief) to knowledge, a truth based on the best available evidence (2). Almost all our academic learning in school and university was governed by

this approach. From history to English Literature, from chemistry to economics, we were required to only state something as true if we could lay out the evidence to support our belief. And we also learned that things that were once held to be unquestionably true (such as the earth being flat) might be considered no longer true in the light of new evidence. This scientific approach has served man extremely well over the millennia; and indeed every scientific, medical and technological advance ever made has been dependent on this approach.

But is there any such thing as an absolute truth: A statement that we can make that we know with 100% certainty will always be true in all circumstances? I asked my 16 year old son to tell me something that he knew to be an absolute truth and he replied with commendable speed “ $2+2 = 4$ ”. So I asked him how many drops of water there would be if he got a test-tube and added two drops of water to two other drops. He complained that was a “trick” reply but I suggested to him that all absolute truths are like that: As soon as we start to question the truth deeply we have to start qualifying the original statement to make it more and more precise until eventually it stops being a “truth” at all but just a description of a set of circumstances. Sooner or later, you have to let faith in – faith in the sense that you reach a point that where you have to accept that your “justified true belief” is nothing more than the most logical conclusion you can reach given all the evidence you can find at the present time; and that others may reach a different conclusion to you even when they have exactly the same evidence as you do. Which takes us, as almost all discussions about belief inevitably do, towards a reflection on religious and moral beliefs...

6. Belief in a religious and moral context

The great monotheistic religions of the Western world – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – do not generally take a scientific approach to belief when it comes to God. Quite the opposite: They all set great emphasis on God requiring us to accept the truths laid out in their Holy books without question. And doubt is something that religious leaders repeatedly ask us to pray to be relieved from, often quoting from their own particular Holy book in the process. For example, Christian teachers might refer us to passages in the Bible in which Jesus very specifically told his disciples that they should “*become like children*” in relation to their beliefs in order to enter the Kingdom of God (3). Or we might be reminded that after His resurrection, Jesus tells doubting Thomas “*Blessed are those who, not ever having seen me, nonetheless believe*” (4).

Secular documents can be equally as demanding when it comes to the acceptance of absolute moral truths. One of the best examples is the American Declaration of Independence the second sentence of which famously begins with the words “*We hold these truths to be self evident...*” (5). It is not

important here to look at what those self-evident truths are; only to reflect on the meta-message of the founding fathers of America that some truths are so fundamental that to even question them is tantamount to declaring yourself un-American.

It might be imagined that these two approaches, the “scientific” and the “faithful acceptance”, are completely at odds with one another. And indeed most atheistic writings that ridicule a belief in God are usually based on the lack of credible scientific evidence for an all-powerful creator of the Universe. But here’s the strange thing: Modern psychological experimentation has proved that having a religious or spiritual belief system is one of the key determinants of human happiness. Some psychologists have even begun to put a measurement on it. For example, Richard Layard reports that (all other factors being equal) a person who agrees with the simple statement “God is important in my life” will on average be 3.5% happier than a person who disagrees with the statement. In comparison, a fall in family income by one third will on average only result in a 2% drop in happiness (6). Incredibly, science itself has proven that the scientific approach to belief can have major limitations. Man’s material development as a species has been dependent on his scientific approach. But his psychological and spiritual development clearly requires a belief system that is more dependent on intuition and an acceptance of the unknowable.

7. Where does this leave us as individuals?

Quite frankly, in a bit of a pickle! Every day we read and receive messages from people like scientists, doctors and technologists encouraging us to believe certain propositions because of the evidence and disbelieve other propositions because of the lack of evidence. And perhaps we would all be more inclined towards the scientific approach to belief if the experts didn’t so often disagree with one another: Just think of the climate change debate, or the daily advice we are given about diet. At the same time, other major influencers on our lives such as politicians, newspaper opinion writers and TV advertisements constantly seek to persuade us to accept their own versions of the “self-evident truths” that we should live by either without offering any real evidence to support these beliefs, or at best, just a few carefully selected one-sided facts.

Not surprisingly, the result is that for most of us even our strongest beliefs – including the beliefs we have about ourselves – are a tangle of evidential facts, received wisdom and simple gut instinct. And the consequential impacts that these beliefs can have on our lives can be either positive or negative.

8. The positive and negative impacts of belief

Whether or not there are any fundamental scientific truths that will never be disputed or disproved, there are certainly no such truths when it comes to the things we believe about ourselves. Whatever evidence we might gather to prove or disprove it, every belief we have about ourselves is a matter of opinion. Some of these beliefs can be extremely positive. In fact the term “self belief” is always interpreted positively; and is recognised as one of the pre-requisites of success in any endeavour. On the other hand, negative beliefs have the opposite effect – virtually guaranteeing that activities affected by that belief will end in failure. As Henry Ford is regularly quoted as saying *“If you think you can do a thing, or think you can’t do a thing, you’re right!”* (7)

Thinking you can’t do something (such as sing, have a successful relationship, or find a job you will enjoy) is called having a limiting belief: A belief that literally limits your life by becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Limiting beliefs are usually sustained through a mix of gut instinct and evidence, in which the only evidence that is noted is evidence that will support the belief.

9. Conclusion: The role of coaching in relation to beliefs

Coaching is action-orientated. No-one ever achieved anything just by talking about it. But equally, no-one ever achieved anything if they didn’t believe they could achieve it. Therefore, coaching is often concerned with helping clients to nurture and sustain the positive beliefs they have about themselves and to overcome or put aside their limiting beliefs.

Earlier in this essay we reflected on the way that the three great Western religions encourage us to take a “spiritual acceptance” approach to belief, that is not reliant on scientific evidence. But this approach is not taken by all religions. In fact the teachings of Buddha suggest that people should take a very different approach. He taught that before we believe any proposition, it should pass two tests: Firstly it should agree with reason; and secondly (and most remarkably) we should only believe it if it *“is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all”* (8). This idea that we should only believe something if it is in the best interests of ourselves and those around us is a very strange concept to those of us brought up in the West, conforming neither to the scientific method, nor to faithful acceptance. But it is a marvellous way of looking at things from a life coaching perspective; and if enacted would literally transform the lives of many of our clients.

10. Notes and References

- (1) Definition of belief taken from “The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy” (Stanford University Online Encyclopedia)
- (2) Definition of the scientific method taken from “A Dictionary of Science” by E B Uvarov, D R Chapman and Alan Isaacs, published by Penguin Books
- (3) “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for it is to those such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of God; for whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Matthew 19:14)
- (4) ‘Jesus when Thomas began to reverence him said “Thomas, because you have seen me you believe. Blessed are those who, not having seen me, nonetheless believe” (John 20:29)
- (5) “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” from the United States Declaration of Independence (1776).
- (6) Statistics taken from “Happiness: Lessons from a New Science” by Richard Layard, published by Penguin Books – Chapter 5, So What Does Make Us Happy?
- (7) Henry Ford quote from www.quotationspage.com
- (8) The full Buddha quote is “Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumoured by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.” From www.thinkexist.com

11. Bibliography

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