

Religion and belief. Belief overrides evidence

Unedited posts from archives of CSG-L (see INTROCSG.NET) :

Here is a recent comment on religion, followed by a few posts from a discussion in 1992, and a comment in 1994. Note also the post on beliefs in the file AUTISM.

May 1, 1995: See also HATEFUL.WRD on stories and (dis-) belief.

Date: Tue Feb 07, 1995 3:24 pm PST  
Subject: Islam

[From Dag Forssell (950207 1130)]

Lars-Christian SMITH Tue Feb 07, 1995

> You were right about my post about Islam, I should have posted it to the net. It was clearly relevant to the discussions of punishment and responsibility. I just didn't want to start a discussion about Islam or other matters not directly relevant to CSG.

Discussions \_of\_ religion are fruitless on CSGnet, but discussions \_about\_ religion are appropriate (in principle for sure). Religion fits at the principle and systems concepts levels, and illustrates very well how we develop and control perceptions-- particularly when you recognize the proliferation of incompatible religions. Religion has been discussed from time to time. If you have a strong interest, I can send a disk with about 350 Kb discussion from spring of 1992. While appropriate, discussion about religion is difficult. As a PCT'er, I see it purely as discussion \_about\_ how we develop and control (necessarily subjective-it's ALL perception) perceptions. But I also have observed that those who are religious don't easily see it that way, and discussions easily turn acrimonious. Unfortunately, that makes it very awkward to discuss religion at all. The subject is best avoided, even on CSGnet--a forum for dispassionate discussion of the PCT explanation of all experiences.

Best, Dag

Date: Wed Apr 29, 1992 7:40 pm PST  
Subject: Belief systems

[From Bill Powers (920429.0900)]

The religious thing seems to be coming up again, with the usual sniping between the True Believers and the Unbelievers. It's obvious that the Unbelievers are not suddenly going to be converted to Control Theory for Christ, and that the True Believers are not going to switch from BEING believers to STUDYING believers. I don't think that railing against a belief is going to advance PCT much, nor is blindly defending any particular belief going to win the day. Perhaps what we might more profitably do is examine belief as a phenomenon.

Belief is a phenomenon worth studying, quite aside from what is believed. What is most interesting is not just a single belief -- there will be a sunrise tomorrow -- but a SYSTEM of belief. A single belief is usually defended for rather simple reasons: it's hard to find an alternative. But a system of beliefs is an elaborate thing that has the power to take over the mind and shape every aspect of experience to fit it -- perceptions, goals, and actions.

In Perceptual Control Theory (PCT), and even more in Hierarchical Perceptual Control Theory (HPCT), we attempt to build up a concept of how individual human systems work. In trying to learn and improve this theoretical system, we have all come up against our own beliefs; those who have spent years in conventional disciplines have often found their private confrontations of the new with the old unsettling, painful, and even costly.

It seems that simply growing up in a normal educational system, devoting oneself to study, learning what others have found, and meeting the demands of one's mentors is enough to allow systems of belief -- or of unbelief -- to get a grip that is hard to loosen. Consider the biologist's resistance to the concept of inner purpose. When children who are to become biologists do things on purpose, they take their own intentions, hopes, wishes, and goals for granted: the main problem is how to satisfy them. But put them through the series of educational courses that produces professional biologists, and they come out of it knowing in their hearts that organisms are just biochemical mechanisms with no purposes at all but survival to the age of reproduction. And not only do they "know" this, they BELIEVE it. To say they believe it means that they now consider their beliefs to be self-evident aspects of the world -- not beliefs, but facts. They consider it their duty to inform the world of this truth, to reinterpret the descriptions offered by the misinformed so they properly acknowledge the purposelessness of life, and to deal with other people and more particularly animals as if they had no inner goals of their own. And of course they conscientiously interpret their own experiences so they fit the belief that purpose is an outmoded illusion -- in their speech, as least, if not in their actions.

This phenomenon of belief isn't confined to biology. People arrive at firmly fixed belief systems about electron flow, quarks, continental drift, natural selection, grammar, etiquette, construction practices, and proper forms of music, art, poetry, and dancing. If you challenge their beliefs they will defend them. In most cases having to do with less material beliefs, the ultimate defense is "I was raised to think that ...". and of course that is true, although it doesn't make the belief true.

Repudiating or even examining beliefs or unbeliefs is as much a social as a personal problem. To examine a belief or unbelief closely is already to devalue it slightly. To doubt it is to doubt all the circumstances that led one to adopt it in the first place. It is to question people whom one has admired, respected, submitted to, and loved. In effect, it is to see the truthtellers of one's formative years as liars, although of course they were telling what they believed to be the truth.

To question beliefs or unbeliefs is also to question the reasons for which one adopted, or once and for all rejected, a belief. A belief in the ability of one person to control another is not just an article of faith adopted because of love for the teacher, or rejected because the teacher was unpleasant. Believing in the ability to control others suggests all kinds of interesting possibilities if one sees the chance of becoming one of the controllers, and all kind of horrifying possibilities if it looks as though one will be among the controlled. Beliefs are adopted or denied in part because of what they imply about one's ability to achieve other goals. They are, or at least certain details of them are, expedient in furthering one's own interests.

And finally (although not exhaustively), belief systems are intertwined with one's self-esteem. A scientist who believes in science above all doesn't hold this as an abstract belief. Along with it goes the consciousness that I AM A SCIENTIST. Science is the best of all possible approaches to life, and being a scientist is the best of all possible ways to be. And of course those who reject science and choose some other belief system feel that they are among those living some other best-of-all- possible lives, while scientists are either neutral or the worst of all possible people.

The most serious conflicts that take place between people, and the most difficult to resolve, are those that originate at the highest levels of organization. It is not systematic belief per se, nor systematic unbelief, that produces the conflict, but the inability to step back and re-examine a belief when it is confronted by a contrary one. If the Jews and the Moslems come into conflict over their divine destinies, the productive thing for the Jew to do would be to say "Wait a minute -- my beliefs say that this land is historically mine, and you seem to believe it isn't, or that it's yours just as much as mine. How strange -- these beliefs can't both be true. What's going on here?"

Of course that isn't what happens, because to most people a fundamental system of belief is to be defended, not examined. The defense, however, guarantees conflict to the limits of brutality.

At the level of systematic belief, both principles and reasoning become subservient to preservation of the belief system. When you look at the arguments against purposiveness in behavior that were advanced -- and thought rather clever -- in the early parts of this century, you find elementary logical errors and straw-man arguments that wouldn't convince a schoolchild if the subject were something else. You find abandonment of principles of scientific detachment and objective argument in favor of emotional attacks and innuendo. The belief system justifies these alternative uses of principle and reason, because above all, the belief has to remain true. When you are defending something that is above logic and principle, logic and principle must be bent to the higher purpose.

I count belief and unbelief together as system concepts. There is nothing inherently wrong with either -- if there were, we wouldn't have evolved the capacity to form beliefs or unbeliefs. What goes wrong at this level of organization is loss of the ability to alter the organization of one's belief systems to achieve harmony among all the different belief systems necessary to a complete life -- different belief systems inside oneself, and different belief systems among different people. I have not identified yet a higher level of organization than system concepts, but this may be entirely due to the fact that the currently-highest level of consciousness is never itself an object of awareness; one must occupy a higher viewpoint to see that level as a level, an object of awareness and a subject for potential modification. Even to speak of belief systems as belief systems rather than as truths implies, intellectually, that one is looking from a higher-level viewpoint. But there reason speaks; if there is no still higher level to which one can retreat, as there evidently isn't for me, the viewpoint can only be experienced as a ghostly sense of something just outside the range of peripheral vision that eludes the attempt to see it directly.

As I believe on all the evidence that I am not unique, I can only recommend that others who want to see belief systems as objects of study try to see them that way, thus occupying if not being able to describe this viewpoint from which one sees belief systems without identifying with them. To see them this way is not to accept or reject them, or to make them seem less than what they are. It is only to see them FOR what they are.

Best to all            Bill P.

Date: Fri May 01, 1992 4:08 pm PST  
Subject: Nirvana, mysticism, welcome, language. Wow.

[From Bill Powers (920501.1430)]            Greg Williams (920430) --

> How about this way: DURING ecstasy, one is AWARE OF no reference signals, whether they are met or not -- perhaps because awareness is focused above all reference signals. Certainly, homeostasis goes on, even during ecstasy!

I don't know about "ecstasy," or even if I've experienced the much advertised and sought-after states of mind referred to in the mystical literature. All I know about is what happens when you keep going up levels and find, finally, that there's no more. I would describe the experience as observation without judgment or interpretation. But this doesn't mean that you're unaware of reference signals or perceptual interpretations -- they're all laid out in front of you to examine if that's what you do. But there's nothing to conclude about them -- they're just there. The whole system goes right on working. Even your personality goes right on working. You're just not in it at the moment.

The reference signals (and perceptions) you're aware of are at a lower level. They aren't a problem. The "attachment" doesn't have to do with them. Attachment, I think, is the viewpoint(s) you're occupying but are unaware of occupying. The desires are the reference signals that you project into the world of experience as values, not realizing that you're putting them there

and that they're not objective. You don't have to get rid of them; you just have to realize who's creating them.

I feel uncomfortable talking about this because there's an implicit claim that I've stumbled into enlightenment or know the secret of the great mysteries. That's not how it is. Insights are the hierarchy being surprised. The experience I'm talking about, to quote Susan Gulick from an early CSG meeting, isn't a big "AHA!," but just sort of "oh." All the big aha stuff is the lower levels thinking "Goody, now I AM perfect."

Of all the people I met who've claimed or implied attainment of some unusual state of being, the only ones I've believed have been those who seem to treat the whole thing as sort of amusing. The ones who spin fairy tales about the experience and embed it into some elaborate mystical system concept are just commercializing it. I don't think they know what they're talking about. The basic route is extremely simple. Go up a level. Keep going up a level, when you remember to try, until there's nowhere left to go.

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I might as well unload what I think of extra-normal experiences. I don't for a second doubt that they happen, but I don't think they're of much importance. Before you consider any happening "unusual," you have to get rid of the desire to make it so. Then you can - unattachedly -- consider how many unusual happenings there must be every day on a planet with 5 billion people living on it 24 hours a day. Certainly, "ordinary" explanations of many happenings would require very unusual circumstances to occur at the same time. If six unusual conditions would have to hold simultaneously, each one having a probability of occurring on a particular day of one in a thousand, the probability of all of them happening at once in one day is one in a billion ( $10^9$ ). That means that on the average, this coincidence happens five times a day to someone on the earth -- that's over 1800 times a year.

I don't think that people who enthuse over unusual phenomena try very hard to distinguish something truly unusual from a merely unlikely but perfectly ordinary coincidence. Coincidences that can occur and be witnessed on a given day only one time in million must happen 5000 times a day, somewhere. And collectors of stories are very likely to hear of them, because nobody who experiences them believes they could have happened by chance. Why, it's a million to one against such a coincidence! When you're the one who experiences it, it doesn't seem rare at all.

My other point is that few people have any model of the brain, or any conception of what a brain can do to provide itself with imagined experiences. The imagination connection feeds information into the perceptual channels, when it's connected, just as if it were coming from the sensory organs. A person can generate internally any experience and any reaction to any experience that is -- imaginable.

When most people say "You're imagining things," they mean that you're a little crazy. But a control theorist would just say, "Of course I am, all the time. Everybody is." Most of what you think you're experiencing as an objective world is being filled in by your imagination. The imagined parts look just as real as the sensed parts.

It's perfectly possible for a person to experience coherent, repeatable, and extended internal scenarios, and even to learn how to get them started at will. If the person is unaware of the extent to which a brain can manufacture experiences for itself, the only logical explanation is that this person is in contact with something supernatural, beyond the scope of ordinary experience. Any suggestion that people are internally generating these experiences, of course, leads to denial and even anger, because it seems that one is questioning the balance of their minds, or some such old- fashioned phrase. Not so. One is only questioning their understanding of what a perfectly normal brain is capable of doing.

Nobody can say that we have exhausted all possible knowledge, or that our current concepts of perception cover all that will ever be discovered. But there's a difference between being open-minded to possibilities and being

gullible. There is no trait of gullibility, of course, but there is the desire to believe something is true. When one desires to believe something, the brain is admirably equipped to come up with all the evidence (and the means of interpreting it) that is needed to support the belief. When you get used to seeing how your own brain handles reference signals at the higher levels, you will no longer be surprised to find your wishes turning into realities, even if most of the reality has to be constructed from inside.

The only way to handle possible instances of paranormal phenomena is to become acquainted with your own desires before even looking at the evidence. Do you want it to be true? Do you want it not to be true? If it's true or if it's not true, will this damage your relationship with someone? Reinforce or deny something else that matters to you? Support or deviate from some other belief?

I don't think a person can evaluate a paranormal phenomenon unless that person simply doesn't care whether it's real or not. I have met very, very few people who don't care one way or the other. Those whom I have met or whose works I have read who seem unattached (or know how to get there when it's called for) feel just as I do: they don't care, either. They don't think its very important. Most of the stuff that is important is far easier to check up on, and happens not just a few times in a million, but every second of every day. And most of it we don't understand any better than we understand paranormal phenomena. You think ESP is hard to explain? Try explaining how we recognize a friend's face.

Best to all, Bill P.

Date: Tue May 05, 1992 8:34 am PST  
[From Dag Forssell (920505:0930)]

These thoughts came to me this morning during my exercise run in an unusually humid Southern California air. A light drizzle hangs in the air, full of aroma from flowers. What a delight. The net is eerily quiet. Have I been cut off?

Living Control Systems, Volume II:

Last night, I read the foreword to Living Control Systems II out loud to Christine. I could not get through to the end. I choked and my eyes watered. I am truly "blessed" to be in touch with CSG and HPCT, a very significant part of my personal systems concepts.

ABOUT systems concepts:

PCT shows us plainly that all our behavior is designed to create or (much more often) re-create perceptions we want. (See Marken's paper: The behavior of perception, file BEHAVE\_P.ERC). From the lowest motor control perceptions to the highest systems concept perceptions.

We perceive that which we want to perceive.

At systems concept level, you can re-phrase that to say: We make come TRUE that which we want to be TRUE.

"Skinner's Mistake" was to work only to prove true that which he already perceived to be true.

Skinner's mistake is not unique to Skinner. All of us make the same mistake every day. This explains the nature of any discussion of particular beliefs/understandings, academic, religious or otherwise.

Five billion people controlling to confirm that what they already individually KNOW to be TRUE continues to be TRUE.

Progress takes place only when people experience an error signal with regards to a system concept; where it fails to explain or satisfy.

Then, a person is open to consider alternative principles which will adjust the existing system of concepts to a new, revised one.

It has been a few centuries since one person claimed to have and have read all books; to know all knowledge.

Today it is impossible to know it all. Ignorance is the rule. The only question is one of degree and area.

I am comfortable knowing that I am ignorant in vast areas of knowledge. This recognition makes for a sense of wonder and makes it easier to be open to new information in all areas.

A delightful, mind opening, very graphic book that deals with these issues of perception is: INFORMATION ANXIETY by Richard Saul Wurman. 1990, Bantam paperback \$12.95. Highly recommended!

The sequel: FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD; Learning to Give, Take & Use Instructions (Bantam hardcover 1992, \$24.50) is more specialized. (I have not looked closely at it yet, and have no opinion).

Best to all      Dag Forssell

Date: Sun Jun 21, 1992 12:31 pm PST  
Subject: Belief Systems

[From Dag Forssell (920621-1)]

I should have posted this "reinforcement" of Bill's point in his post on Belief systems long ago. Better late than never?

Bill Powers (920429.0900)

> At the level of systematic belief, both principles and reasoning become subservient to preservation of the belief system. When you look at the arguments against purposiveness in behavior that were advanced -- and thought rather clever -- in the early parts of this century, you find elementary logical errors and straw-man arguments that wouldn't convince a schoolchild if the subject were something else. You find abandonment of principles of scientific detachment and objective argument in favor of emotional attacks and innuendo. The belief system justifies these alternative uses of principle and reason, because above all, the belief has to remain true. WHEN YOU ARE DEFENDING SOMETHING THAT IS ABOVE LOGIC AND PRINCIPLE, LOGIC AND PRINCIPLE MUST BE BENT TO THE HIGHER PURPOSE.

(CAPS emphasis by Dag)

Here is an illustration of this, taken from the editorial pages of The Los Angeles Times, May 8, 1992:

THE JURY'S THINKING HAS BEEN HEARD BEFORE

Verdict: Police footprints on the victim's face couldn't persuade a Miami panel.

By ANDY COURT

As I listened to a juror explain that Rodney King was in "control" during his beating by Los Angeles police officers, I thought of Bernie and Rubina and Bill, down in Miami. They were nice people, and they, too, reached a verdict that set parts of a city on fire.

What they told me more than a year ago is relevant now because it might dispel the illusion that most of us still embrace: that the King verdict was the work of fools or overt racists. Something much more universal is at work, and race, in my opinion, is only one part of it.

Bernie, Bill, Rubina and nine others served as jurors in a federal civil-rights case against six Miami narcotics officers. The allegedly brutal

officers represented a rainbow coalition of blacks, whites and Latinos; the victim was Latino. The jury, though mostly white, included three blacks and one Latino.

The prosecutors didn't have a videotape this time, but they had just about everything else. Leonardo Mercado, a smalltime drug dealer, had been beaten to death after entering a house with the officers. His corpse had 44 bruised areas, and marks on his forehead corresponded to some of the officers' sneaker-prints. A patrolwoman who did not participate in the beating testified that three of the defendants encouraged her to kick Mercado while he lay on the floor bleeding,

Nonetheless, the jury acquitted the officers of some charges and couldn't agree on the rest. After interviewing 11 of the 12 jurors, here's what I found:

Richard, a 38-year-old engine mechanic, said (during deliberations) that Mercado was "only a drug dealer, anyway."

Rubina, a 53-year-old saleswoman, didn't believe several prosecution witnesses from the neighborhood because "these are the people we're paying the policemen to protect us from."

Herbert, a 59-year-old airline mechanic, believed that "criminals give their civil rights away when they elect to lead a life of crime."

Bernie, a 48-year-old butcher, thought the police were guilty, but he changed his vote because "I didn't want to be the one that was sitting out there with them pointing at [me]."

Most telling, perhaps, was one juror's observation that the officers had to be found guilty "beyond an absolute doubt." This juror had single-handedly changed the standard of doubt in a criminal case. I suspect he did so because he felt more sympathy for police fighting the drug war than for a drug dealer with a violent past.

Most of these people weren't racists or fascists. In fact, they appeared so well-intentioned, so intent on applying the law as the judge had explained it to them, that it was all the more painful to witness how far they strayed from the realm of common sense.

They were working-class people who believed what the defense said about the defendants being the only thing standing between them and the chaos of the streets.

As one lawyer put it, most of the jurors had "never been on the wrong side of a nightstick." They did not sell drugs on street corners or engage in high-speed chases with police. Nor were they psychologically prepared to uphold the rights of those who did.

"To know what actually happened," one of the Miami jurors told me, "you'd have to be there or have a tape of it." Now it appears that even a tape isn't enough. That's because the problem is attitudinal. The jurors who produced the Rodney King verdict are a reflection of the American middle class's law-and-order mentality, which has been fired by the Administration's ill-conceived war on drugs and the widespread perception that too many criminals get off on technicalities.

Convenient as it is, the bashing of the King jury is hypocritical, because a lot of Americans would have done the same misguided thing when the fate of these veteran police officers was put in their hands. In such situations, a weighing of souls occurs, and unless there are allegations of corruption, the police will almost always win over the criminal suspect.

The sad truth is that people not so different from ourselves as we'd like to believe will undertake Herculean feats of logic to acquit officers of blatantly brutal acts. They seem to sense that the police are, "us" and the criminal suspect is "them"-- and apparently "we" don't ever expect to end up on the wrong side of their nightsticks.

Footnote: Andy Court is editorial director of American Lawyer magazine, where material for this article first appeared.

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Best, Dag

Date: Wed Mar 30, 1994 9:32 am PST  
Subject: Misc

[From Bill Powers 930430.0600 MST)]

Either I woke up dumber this morning or several people on the net woke up smarter yesterday. Some really illuminating posts today!

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Oded Maler (940329) --

Yes, it's possible to perceive PCT as a new religion and call down the wrath of the God of Feedback on its opponents. Every now and then the thought of following in L. Ron Hubbard's footsteps occurs to me -- the Church of PCT would be tax-exempt, for example, and PCT-based psychotherapy would not require a license, because it would be Pastoral Counselling. Furthermore, all the people who criticize PCT and its adherents would have to shut up, because it's not polite to criticize someone's religion. We could do any damned silly or offensive thing we liked, and nobody could oppose us because we could haul them into court for violating our civil rights. And we could make bundles of money by offering courses to ordain Holy Ministers of PCT, who would get their congregations to tithe. Yes, indeed, all kinds of attractions in becoming a religion.

The problem with treating anything as a religion -- even a religion -- is that it's too easy to interpret its teachings as an excuse for doing what you wanted to do anyway. Think of the people who punish deviants, saying "Vengeance is mine!", and leave off "...saith the Lord." The God of the Old Testament was actually saying "Leave that vengeance stuff to me, pal," but those in whose hearts the thirst for vengeance rages manage to find the interpretation that lets them slake it.

> "Spill your heated anger on the gentiles ..."

... is a welcome admonition to those who are inclined to violence anyway, and is ignored by those who aren't. What if you don't have any heated anger toward the gentiles -- are you supposed to whip some up so you can spill it? It seems to me that little incentive is needed for people like Arabs and Israelis to spill their heated anger at each other. They can both cite scriptural justifications for what they are doing for other reasons, and would do anyway.

Behind all the accumulated gimcrackery of the centuries, religion is simply a human enquiry into the basic problems of existence, particularly problems that science has chosen to ignore until quite recently. What is consciousness? Who is this Observer inside me, that I am? What is it to have purpose? How can we live together without pain? How can I make sense of this limited existence of mine and the world in which I have it? What are these longings inside me that draw me onward? Why is there beauty? Why is there sadness? Why is there goodness, why is there evil?

Scientific theoreticians turned their backs on these questions, so to find answers people turned to theological theoreticians. Who can blame them? I hope that PCT will not also turn its back on these questions.

Best to all, Bill P.