

Stories, Skepticism, Belief versus Knowledge

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

Date: Tue, 25 Apr 1995 19:18:41 -0700  
Subject: Disturbing Words

[From Rick Marken (950425.1915)]

What we say makes a difference. For the last several years there has been a continuing din of hateful speech in this country. The enemy has been "liberals", "immigrants", "welfare mothers", "government", etc. The bombing in Oklahoma has shown that "government" is not just faceless "ATF agents"; it's individual human beings: men, women and children.

Nobody questions the "right" of people to say almost anything they want in the media; I am all for free speech myself. But I want to join with President Clinton in his plea for a voluntary cessation of the hateful speech that passes for political dialog in this country. The fact that most of this comes from the political "right" is irrelevant; wherever it comes from, it is not a good approach to solving control problems.

I think that I myself may have been guilty of a kind of hateful speech on this net and I want to apologize for it now. Whenever a category of people (like "conventional psychologists") is referred to as "idiots", "the problem" or "the enemy" it is hateful speech. I have been guilty of hateful speech and I am profoundly sorry for it. Oklahoma will always remind me of the human consequences of hateful speech.

It would be nice if some of the people who have exercised their "right" to hateful speech in the media would not only change their ways but would also apologize publicly for their past contribution to the tone of the political dialog in the country. If they did, I think it would go a long way toward lessening the hatred that exists in many of the people who admire them. It would also mean that the children who died in Oklahoma will not have died in vain but, rather, for the most precious gift of all; peace.

Here's a prayer for a future of peaceful political debate; we can get there if we can get beyond our hate. And we can get beyond our hate if we can go up a level and see our hate as something we are doing; something we are controlling for. If we can see what we are controlling for we can stop controlling for it

Best Rick

Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1995 03:24:21 -0600  
Subject: How Can Words Disturb?

[from Gary Cziko 950426.0305 GMT}

Rick Marken (950425.1915) wrote:

> What we say makes a difference. For the last several years there has been a continuing din of hateful speech in this country. The enemy has been "liberals", "immigrants", "welfare mothers", "government", etc. The bombing in Oklahoma has shown that "government" is not just faceless "ATF agents"; it's individual human beings: men, women and children.

Rick, I don't think I like hateful speech anymore than you do and I was moved by the sentiment evoked by your words.

But it also got me thinking of how it is that "words can make a difference." If certain words "disturb," then we have control systems to compensate for the disturbances. When I hear hateful words, I am not moved to join in the hate, but rather I become suspicious of the judgement and motives of the producers of the hateful words. But you must feel that hateful words can cause at least some of the people who hear the words to hate, too, or else you probably wouldn't be concerned about the hateful words. But how does the suspected effect of hateful words mesh with PCT? How can words cause one to hate or do anything if hateful reference levels are not already there? This looks like an input-output (S-R) view of behavior to me.

This question also came up in my mind when preparing for my talk at the American Educational Research Association at which Hugh Petrie, Bill Powers, Ed Ford, and Dag Forssell participated. I argued against an independent variable - dependent variable approach to educational research, but then Ed Ford shows some dramatic reductions in school violence and discipline problems in a school that uses his "responsible thinking" program. But this looks like the old-fashioned IV (responsible thinking) - DV (reduced discipline problems) approach to educational research.

Perhaps the answer is that IV-DV doesn't work for well established control systems, but that IV - DV can be used to understand reorganization.

Any thoughts that anyone wishes to share concerning my conundrum would be appreciated.--Gary

Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1995 07:42:40 .  
Subject: Disturbing Words

SUBJECT: Disturbing Words

{from Joel Judd 950426.0730 CST}

Gary (950426):

I'm not sure I understand what you're asking about the effects of words. Are you suggesting that words are stronger evidence for an IV -> DV view of behavior than a red rose or a bullwhip? Human beings are pretty much language-based for communication, but it seems that it's the "post-linguistic" perceptual levels that run the show. If you control for "Freedom of Speech" regardless of the speech, then particular words won't be a significant disturbance, will they? On the other hand, if you're functioning under a "Government's a Conspiracy" POV, then warmongering and similar sentiments confirm your perceptions.

In either case, the language stems from and contributes to our Systems Level perceptions.

Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1995 10:25:18 -0400  
Subject: Re: How Can Words Disturb?

[Dan Miller (950426)]

Gary Cziko and Rick Marken,

Rick,

Your ideas about hate speech were much appreciated. Over the past few years I have had the misfortune of driving across country to see to an ailing parent. During these trips I have listened to the radio (my tape player is fried). I hadn't listened for some time, and to my amazement I was treated to some of the most frightening talk I had heard since I overheard some Iowa vigilantes talking about teaching a lesson to the commie peaceniks down at the university.

Rush Limbaugh is a pussycat compared to Gordon Liddy (Isn't he a convicted felon?) and a couple of others I heard. If the sentiment they espoused is widespread, then we are in for some "interesting" times. Interspersed throughout their interpretation of the news is antigovernment, antiSemitic, xenophobic, racist, and militant rhetoric. Certainly, this promotes the idea in listeners that these ideas are widespread and reasonable. I hope that they are not.

Last summer, after a few hours of particularly disturbing speech, I told a friend that I wouldn't be surprised if some of the crazies who take this seriously begin to act on their hateful reference signals. They have. Only now is the generalized public becoming aware of right wing militias and other fascist paramilitaristic organizations that have proliferated in recent years. How many? Dozens of organizations (often linked with FAX, short wave and broadcast radio, computer bulletin boards, mailing lists, and numerous magazines and newsletters), tens of thousands of members in varying degrees of involvement, and lots of supporters. These people are dangerous not just because of their intolerance, hatred, and ignorance, but more so because they are organized. We know what these people and organizations represent. If we think that we got rid of fascism fifty years ago, then we are wrong.

Gary,

In your post you questioned Rick's allusion to the causality of hate speech. I agree that hate speech does not cause violent behavior. However, I do not see why we must immediately reduce influence to mechanical causality. It might work in this way: The hate speech might support ideas (even clarify them) already held by people, thus creating an illusion of popular support and movement. Also, hate speech might make people aware of ideas and plans of action. That is, when we listen to music, read books, etc. we often come into contact with ideas that we had not considered previously. It is possible to adopt those ideas/plans of action as reference signals and take purposive action.

Kids, hearing about killing cops, are aware of alternative plans of action. They may adopt these plans. Young people reading the Kama Sutra may adopt the alternative approaches to love making therein. Being aware of alternatives does not cause one to behave in a certain fashion. Should the government, or "we the people" pull the plug on the hate speech dominating broadcast radio? Probably not. However, it is our responsibility to call them by their name, inform people about who they are and what they are up to. It is a good excuse to discuss fascism and the consequences of such ideas in our classes, church groups, community associations, labor unions, and radio broadcasts that are truly democratic.

Later, Dan Miller

Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1995 09:04:37 -0700  
Subject: Re: How can words disturb? Revelations

[From Rick Marken (950426.0900)]

Gary Cziko (950426.0305 GMT) --

> how it is that "words can make a difference"... you must feel that hateful words can cause at least some of the people who hear the words to hate, too, or else you probably wouldn't be concerned about the hateful words. But how does the suspected effect of hateful words mesh with PCT? How can words cause one to hate or do anything if hateful reference levels are not already there? This looks like an input-output (S-R) view of behavior to me.

It did to me too, when I wrote it. So let me try to clarify my point.

I don't think one person's words can cause another person to hate. I think "hate speech" is a "level of perception" problem. "Hate speech" points to possible causes of control error at too high a level of abstraction. For example, people who are uncertain about their jobs have a real control problem. "Hate speech" identifies the cause of the problem at the category level of perception; "government", "liberals", "welfare mothers". People can easily be convinced that these categories are the source of their problem, especially when they see individual instances of these categories (the tax collector, the lawyer defending a criminal, the person on welfare getting a guaranteed wage). I define "hate" as a chronic error in a category control system; the reference for the existence of the category is set to "zero" so the perception of instances of the category creates error. Hitler and his buddies managed to get in a position where they were actually able to systematically control for the error created by the existence of "jews", "homosexuals", "gypsies" and "communists"; they actually got rid of them, physically. The Oklahoma bomber tried this on a smaller scale.

Hatred is error in a control loop that can only be eliminated by 1) killing millions of innocent people or 2) ceasing one's control of the category perception. I prefer option 2) and I think that hateful people can be encouraged to move in this direction if they can be encouraged to go up a level and see their hatred (control for the existence of categories of individuals) as something they are doing. Hate speech in the media just keeps hateful people's consciousness at the level of their existing hatred -- and implicitly approves of it (which is why the audiences for this stuff are so large). I suggest that people like Rush Limbaugh might say something like the following before every show:

"We have real problems but they are not caused by "liberals" or "government"; we have problems because some liberal ideas are wrong, some government policies are wrong; but the people who have these ideas (like the President) are people like you and me; individuals who are just trying their best to live their lives. From now on let's challenge the ideas and policies but lets remember that the people who disagree with our ideas are still good people."

If he said something like this I think the level of hatred in this country would suddenly go down several dB, not because it was "caused" to but because many people would be able to go up a level and stop trying to control their problems by controlling categories.

The IV-DV model of behavior is still wrong. Hate speech does not cause hate; it just sustains it.

Greg Williams (950426) --

> Hard as it has been, I've vowed to stay off the net ever since I decided that my presence contributed to the outpouring of hateful words in your posts. Now that you've seen the light, I'm tempted to return -- but I think I'll wait a bit to see how thorough your recantation actually is. ;-}

I have been trying, since last year's "exile" to avoid what I consider "hateful speech". Bill Powers showed me (by doing a database search on the

keyword "idiot") that I would often refer to groups of people ("conventional psychologists", "republicans", "religious believers") as "idiots". I didn't consider this "hateful speech" at the time but it fits my definition now; it implies that I have a reference of "zero" for these categories of individuals. I have not only tried to eliminate such hateful speech from my posts, I have also tried to remember that it's the ideas, not the individuals who espouse them, that I don't like. But I think talking (and thinking) in categories is very seductive (for me, anyway) so I always will have to "watch myself" when I post; but I think it's worth it, given the downside of what I had thought of as relatively "innocent" hate speech.

I think that the level of what I consider to have been "hate speech" has declined markedly in my posts since last year. If you have still been perceiving a lot of hate speech in my posts over the last few months, then I think you might be perceiving things as "hate speech" that I don't perceive as such. So you might end up being disappointed by the thoroughness of my "recantation". I will still, for example, feel free to act as the "PCT policeman"; if someone says that a model or theory is consistent with PCT (when it's not) I will say that it's not and explain why. I don't consider giving an accurate description of PCT (including pointing out when someone is wrong about PCT or the nature of behavior) to be "hate speech". If you do, then I guess you will just have to endure it in silence or expose it for all to see.

Best Rick

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Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1995 08:36:36 -0700  
Subject: Re: Disturbing Words

(Rick Marken (950425.1915))

> What we say makes a difference.

I echo your sentiments completely and support your aim reduce what you perceive to be hateful speech. But, please don't hold back on clarifying speech. I have found posts on "anticipation" and related matters extremely useful in clarifying my thinking. All the efforts to insist on the precision helps me realize how far I have to go in really "getting it. " It works though.

Lurkin' and learnin'

Dennis.

Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1995 10:57:59 -0700  
Subject: Scarey Haters

[From Rick Marken (950426.1100)]

Dan Miller (950426) --

Great to hear from you!

> Rush Limbaugh is a pussycat compared to Gordon Liddy

I just heard a report about him on NPR -- yikes!

> Only now is the generalized public becoming aware of right wing militias and other fascist paramilitaristic organizations that have proliferated in recent years.

I was happier when I was ignorant.

There is a funny(?) side to this. I seem to recall that one big complaint from many cold war conservatives (like Limbaugh and Liddy) about "commies" was that they advocated the violent overthrow of the government. Now we've got paramilitary groups that are openly preparing for the violent overthrow of the government and many of these same conservatives are defending them. Maybe it wasn't the "government overthrow" thing that was the real problem (disturbance) after all? Gives one a better idea of what some of these cold warriors were controlling for.

> The hate speech might support ideas (even clarify them) already held by people, thus creating an illusion of popular support and movement.

My point exactly. Well put!

Best Rick

Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1995 17:20:41 +0200  
Subject: Re: Disturbing Words

>[re Rick Marken (950425.1915)]

>

> What we say makes a difference.

What we say does make a difference. It makes a difference in the assertions of presidents, in the assertions of talk show hosts, in the writings of scholars, and even in the instructions experimenters give to subjects as they are asked to participate in a rubber band exercise or a tracking task. What is "said" is not a stimulus that evokes an automatic response. There are no intrinsic stimulus properties in any language behavior. That does not mean, to me, that language behavior is unimportant or nonconsequential. So I agree with you that "what we say makes a difference."

> Oklahoma will always remind me of the human consequences of hateful speech.

As a native Oklahoman, a resident of Oklahoma City for 24 years, a regular visitor over the subsequent 33 years, a childhood friend of the architect who designed the Federal Bldg, I know many people who lost friends, colleagues and acquaintances in that tragedy. I do not write here to diminish that tragedy in any way.

> Nobody questions the "right" of people to say almost anything they want in the media; I am all for free speech myself.

As a student of first amendment activities (political demonstrations) over the past three decades I share those opinions.

It is clear to me that the phenomena I study cannot occur independent of the language behaviors that planners and organizers employ to engage others' assistance in mobilizing people and other resources for these predominantly nonviolent gatherings of people and the various collective actions in which some members of those gatherings engage. From my study of both terrorist and police manuals it is equally clear that complex sequences of violence - whether bombing attacks by enemies of the state or SWAT raids by agents of the state - cannot take place without the use of verbal utterances and writings and nonverbal gestures. Speech or language behaviors were inextricably involved in both the planning and execution of the tragedy in Oklahoma City as well as in the rescue efforts which we have witnessed in the aftermath. What we say makes a difference.

> Here's a prayer for a future of peaceful political debate; we can get there if we can get beyond our hate. . . . If we can see what we are controlling for we can stop controlling for it

What we say makes a difference. My request for the future of productive scholarly debate is that we take the phenomena of spoken, written and gestured language seriously and come to better understand this in terms of PCT, including the labels (symbols) of categories of experience upon which we draw in order to communicate to others that we presume (?anticipate?) share those symbols and perhaps some of the experiences to which those symbols refer. One of the most useful PCT discussions I have heard of symbol acquisition and communication came from Martin Taylor at the CSG meeting in Durango in 1993. I will not attempt to summarize his position here but hope that Martin will take this occasion to reintroduce his PCT analysis of language acquisition and use. What we say makes a difference.

Clark

Clark McPhail  
Professor of Sociology

Date: Wed, 26 Apr 1995 15:43:33 -0700  
Subject: Re: Disturbing Words

[From Rick Marken (950426.1540)]

Dennis McCracken (950426) --

> I echo your sentiments completely and support your aim reduce what you perceive to be hateful speech. But, please don't hold back on clarifying speech. I have found posts on "anticipation" and related matters extremely useful in clarifying my thinking. All the efforts to insist on the precision helps me realize how far I have to go in really "getting it. " It works though.

Thank you. Thank you. What a wonderful, heartening post.

As I said to Greg Williams in an earlier post, I will certainly continue to insist on precision in matters PCT. What I will try to avoid (and what I hope I have avoided for some time) is giving the impression that I think anyone who doesn't understand something about PCT is anything other than a wonderful person who (from my perspective) doesn't understand something about PCT.

Nice to have you here, Dennis.

Best Rick

Date: Thu, 27 Apr 1995 10:26:50 -0700  
Subject: Disturbing Words, Anticipation

[From Rick Marken (950427.1030)]

Clark McPhail (950426) --

> My request for the future of productive scholarly debate is that we take the phenomena of spoken, written and gestured language seriously and come to better understand this in terms of PCT

We have had some excellent (in my opinion) discussions of language on this net but it seems like the last sustained discussion of language happened a couple years ago. It would be great to have more of these discussions; language is certainly a very important human activity; just look at all the blabbing we do on the net! But all you have to do to have a productive scholarly debate about language on this list is to start talking about language; the discussion won't happen on its own.

Best Rick

Date: Thu, 27 Apr 1995 17:56:10 -0700  
Subject: Rick Marken's "Disturbing Words"

[From Phil Runkel on 950427]

TO Rick Marken in reply to his post of 950425.1915:

I am very grateful to you for saying what you did on the 25th. You enabled me to weep for the dead.

Date: Sat, 29 Apr 1995 17:11:47 -0600  
Subject: Re: Hate talk

[From Bill Powers (950429.1540 MDT)]

Rick Marken (950426.0900) -- Gary Cziko (950426.0305 GMT) --

Gary asked the following about Rick's powerful post on hatred, and Clark McPhail's commentary on it:

> ...how it is that "words can make a difference"... you must feel that hateful words can cause at least some of the people who hear the words to hate, too, or else you probably wouldn't be concerned about the hateful words. But how does the suspected effect of hateful words mesh with PCT? How can words cause one to hate or do anything if hateful reference levels are not already there? This looks like an input-output (S-R) view of behavior to me.

While Rick's answer denies that one person can cause another to hate (and I agree), I think we need to look into this further, because a lot of hatred seems to be spread through words -- and not only hatred, but fear, love, plans, and knowledge. I've been puzzling about this for several days, and not for the first time. Clark McPhail and Chuck Tucker have told us often in their writings that "words make a difference," but we've given only a superficial treatment of just how they make a difference. There's a lot more to this subject that I can deal with, but a few ideas have occurred to me.

One of the ideas came about through reading a story, one of the mysteries I like to enjoy as an alternate reality. Reading a well-wrought story is an interesting experience because the reading itself quickly turns into a complex and detailed world that unfolds itself in imagination under the direction of the words that one takes in by eye. The mind's eye is not on the printed page, but on a village scene, a conversation between two characters, a journey by train through a half-familiar landscape, a stroll through an old churchyard, a participation in someone else's consciousness as he or she puzzles over some problem, enjoys some experience, suffers a shock, solves a mystery. For a



while one is somewhere else and often someone else, learning about human nature through another's point of view, learning facts and attitudes as if discovering them for oneself.

Vivid writing is not just a narration of sequential occurrences. It describes details of sight, sound, smell, touch, pain, and pleasure so that experiences of many levels are evoked in the reader. The reader creates, from these low-level experiences, higher-level perceptions that are not explicitly described but which fill in the more abstract descriptions and give them life and presence. Not "He sympathized with her plight," but "He reached for her hand and found it cold and trembling; he looked into her small sad face and ached with sorrow for her."

So it seems very clear that words can create experiences very much as if they were real experiences coming from the normal world. And it is equally clear that these experiences do not actually have to happen in order to be believed in, at least temporarily. This is a power that one human being has over another: the power to create experiences in the other person merely through the medium of words.

We can't, of course, interpret those experiences for the other person. But by creating experiences we can give the other person something to think about, and we can often make an educated guess as to what the other person might decide to do about these experiences. I am finally coming to my point.

When you hear hate talk or read hate literature, what do you find? Do you find statements like "Black people ought to hate Jews" or "White people ought to hate black people?" Not at all. What you find are stories about things that happened or are happening now. Jewish biologists created the AIDS virus in order to infect black people with it. Once a white woman has been raped by a black man, she is so enslaved by the sensations from his enormous penis that she can no longer be satisfied by a white man. The FBI, the CIA, and the White House are planning to make common citizens register all their weapons so that when the time comes to install the Clinton Dictatorship, federal marshals and troops can swiftly seize all private weapons and prevent resistance to the takeover. If you have read the Protocols of the Elders of Zion or the literature promulgated by the John Birch Society or the KKK or other such groups, you will be familiar with dozens more stories like these as well as others more extreme.

Just suppose for a moment that you were innocent and ignorant, and heard these stories for the first time from a person you had no reason to disbelieve. Any one of them could be true, as far as you know: that is the art of story-telling, to create a believable narrative. And what if they were true? What if it never even occurred to you to wonder if they were true -- what if you just took them as given, as if you had known these things from your own experience. What then would you want to do? I think that a lot of people would feel full of anger, outrage, or fear, and would wish to do something to counteract these horrible things that are going on. How did you feel, when you first heard the descriptions of the scenes discovered in Buchenwald and Auschwitz by the liberation troops? Was there not horror, and hatred for those who did such things, and a desire to exact justice, however futile it might be after the fact? Remember, very, very few of us actually saw those scenes ourselves, in our own present-time perceptions. We saw pictures, we heard stories, and we translated them into experiences of our own, almost as if we had actually experienced them. And we had feelings about these indirect experiences, and we wanted to do something about them. We spoke of the damned Nazis just as others might speak of the damned blacks or the damned Jews or the damned Government.

So maybe this can give us some insight into what it would be like to be a member of a so-called hate group and believe in all the things such hate groups say and do. These are not particularly hate groups; they are fear groups, and outrage groups, and escape groups, and self-protection groups, and justice groups. All we have to do is realize that they take the stories literally and seriously, as real things being done by real people, now, to other real people. All we have to do is ask ourselves what we would think and do if, by some monstrous chance, some or all of these terrible stories were

actually, literally, true: if we had actually perceived for ourselves what the words describe.

When we approach the problem from this angle, the real problem would seem to be not hatred, but gullibility, an inability to judge what is and is not a likely story. To this, of course, we have to add questions about what could make some people at certain times in their lives more willing to suspend disbelief and swallow stories with obvious flaws and contradictions in them; what could lead some people to trust their imaginations more than their senses. But basically we aren't talking about crazy people, about people behaving in inhuman or incomprehensible ways. We are talking about people who are fearful, or outraged, or offended by certain events, and who are trying to maintain control of their lives despite these events. The fact that the events never happened is almost a side-issue -- except, of course, that in the final analysis it is only the realization that these events never actually happened that can persuade the hate groups to abandon their pitiful efforts.

The next time you hear discussions of the hate groups, listen carefully. They don't preach hate. What they do is tell stories, and leave the hating up to the listener who believes the stories.

Best to all, Bill P.

Subject: Willing suspension of belief

[From Rick Marken (950429.2230)]

Bill Powers (950429.1540 MDT)--

> When you hear hate talk or read hate literature, what do you find?...What you find are stories about things that happened or are happening now.

> When we approach the problem from this angle, the real problem would seem to be not hatred, but gullibility, an inability to judge what is and is not a likely story. To this, of course, we have to add questions about what could make some people at certain times in their lives more willing to suspend disbelief and swallow stories with obvious flaws and contradictions in them.

My personal experience is that it is often difficult to disbelieve what I hear, especially when the story evokes a great deal of familiar detail. It is often an act of will for me to be skeptical. When I was a kid I just accepted many stories that were told to me; I still believe far too much of what I am told. I think this might be true of others too; I have noted a tendency for many people to believe something simply because it has been said (especially if it has been said well); and to believe it even more if it has also been written down.

It's much easier for me to be skeptical, even when a story is wonderfully rich with familiar detail, when I can see obvious internal inconsistencies or conflicts with experience. But skepticism is not an easy stance for me; I'm lucky that I managed to muster enough skepticism about the stories told in conventional psychology to see that they didn't match my experience. I have learned a great deal about skepticism from PCT. But what I have not learned yet is why it is apparently so difficult for people to be skeptical.

It seems that some people actually want to believe; they see belief in untested stories as a good thing; skepticism as a bad thing. My step-father (an avowedly deeply religious man) once asked me, in anger, "don't you believe in anything"?. I'm proud to say that it took me a few moments to think of some things I did believe in (number one, of course, being that "behavior is the control of perception"; that left him a bit cold). But what I should have said is "What is more important to me than the few things I believe are the many things about which I am skeptical". There is obvious entertainment value to be derived from "willing suspension of disbelief"; but it seems that there is something about human nature that makes

it a little too easy to suspend disbelief. I would like to know what we can tell people to improve their ability to willingly suspend belief.

Best Rick

Date: Mon, 1 May 1995 09:08:52 .  
SUBJECT: Re: "Hate" Groups

{from Joel Judd 950501.0820 CST}

Bill P. 950429:

The topic of language influence in and on our behavior could go many directions, but a couple of things you mentioned rang bells (BTW, does that cliché come from Pavlov's work?).

I have always found it intriguing that one of my most favorite poets was a Spaniard who died 30 years before I was born, wrote about a people and place with which I have never had direct contact, and in a language I didn't learn to understand until I was 19. But Antonio Machado's images and themes "make sense" to me and I can "see" both the actual physical things he bases most of his poetry on--lemon trees, water fountains, laughing children--as well as the metaphorical ones--"las galerias del alma" (the chambers or galleries of the soul) for example. Long before I became acquainted with theories about how the mind works, I wondered how I could "understand" words that were written by someone who had no clue (I don't think) that I would ever exist.

As a parallel, it is interesting to me that much of most religions' writings considered as scripture were eventually written down "on purpose" by those who DID want to communicate to future generations. Among other things, they wanted to help others avoid the pitfalls of their day. But to do that, they had to use words, and the metaphors and symbolism and style of their words stem from their experiences. That, plus the fact that some writings have gone through several languages in translation, can make understanding, or even WANTING to understand them extremely taxing.

The difficulties in basing our concepts on words arise both from MISinterpreting words whose authors are no longer around, and from uncritically accepting words from those who would deliberately mislead. In either case, it seems that most if not all of those who become fanatically attached to particular ideas (words) are trying to reduce error in systems concepts. They are often people described with adjectives such as disenfranchised; people who don't perceive themselves as "fitting in" either the group they actually live in or a group they would LIKE to live in. Perhaps counselor lurking on the net could say something about these generalities.

Your use of group several times fits in with what little information I have on sociolinguistic thought. Oftentimes groups share facts and figures for which none of the members of the group have any real connection except that the knowledge makes them part of the group: Haight-Ashbury and The Summer of Love, for example.

When I taught a class where we could touch on sociolinguistic aspects of language, I tried to instill a little understanding of HPCT with the idea that as the semester progressed we might flesh out the Hierarchy with more language-specific labels. The class members found, as was found several years ago when we had the single hierarchy for everything or separate language hierarchy discussion that there is this sort of "post-linguistic" moving beyond language especially after sequential perceptions. Systems Concepts was given such items as: {YOUR NAME HERE}, {OCCUPATION}, and {GROUP ALLEGIANCE}. While we can talk ABOUT such things, they really have been developed through the socialization of growing up.

I wouldn't be surprised if intrinsic error leads each person to seek group membership--ANY group membership--with the result that a society which is based on such messages as HAVING and NOT HAVING, DESERVING and NOT DESERVING,

and PRESTIGIOUS and NOT PRESTIGIOUS will constantly have problems incorporating all members into it in satisfying and peaceful ways. Furthermore, the greater the perceived gaps between such descriptions of societies' members, the more fanatical the special interest groups become.

Joel

Date: Mon, 1 May 1995 14:51:58 -0400  
Subject: Belief / disbelief

[From Dag Forssell (950501 1150)]

[Bill Powers (950429.1540 MDT)]

> Just suppose for a moment that you were innocent and ignorant, and heard these stories for the first time from a person you had no reason to disbelieve. Any one of them could be true, as far as you know: that is the art of story-telling, to create a believable narrative. . . .

> When we approach the problem from this angle, the real problem would seem to be not hatred, but gullibility, an inability to judge what is and is not a likely story.

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[Rick Marken (950429.2230)]

> My personal experience is that it is often difficult to disbelieve what I hear, especially when the story evokes a great deal of familiar detail. It is often an act of will for me to be skeptical. When I was a kid I just accepted many stories that were told to me; I still believe far too much of what I am told. I think this might be true of others too; I have noted a tendency for many people to believe something simply because it has been said (especially if it has been said well); and to believe it even more if it has also been written down.

Bill and Rick,

Thank you for two wonderful posts on the power of stories.

I have long thought that HPCT shows me that there is absolutely no difference (in terms of how they are handled by our minds) between scientific understanding Newton style and beliefs evangelist style. Principles and systems concepts are developed in the individual mind the same way for each. Any difference lies in the validity -- ability to replicate -- the experiences, real and imagined, which give rise to principles and system concepts. From time to time, Bill P. has posted on science. The strength of the modern physical sciences is that each student can replicate the basic experiments and so learn from and incorporate personal experience which is the same as the experience of the next student. In religion, in much of the life sciences, and in hate groups (which are religions, thought perhaps without gods), the situation is different. Stories -- "true" and "untrue" -- are the rule.

Either way, once principles and systems concepts are developed and in place in the individual, they control further development and determine which additional stories are accepted and which are disbelieved.

I speculate that some people develop principles and systems concepts that suggest it is important to understand correctly. Such people would be open to new and challenging information such as PCT.

It appears clear that early stories (told by people important to a (gullible) youngster and therefore readily accepted) can and do exert a major influence on what the young person studies and accepts later.

Historians exhort us to learn from past atrocities so we will avoid them in the future. As PCTers we know that you can't tell what a person is doing from

watching what they are doing. You need to ask what people want. People determine their wants from their understanding, and their understanding (with precious few exceptions) from stories. It appears clear that stories gave us the Crusades and the Holocaust; stories give us Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia and now Oklahoma city; stories give us persecution and discrimination all over. Stories also give us loving relationships, mutual support and cooperation.

This subject of belief and disbelief is important. In an ideal world, we would teach our toddlers in preschool to be skeptical of stories and show them how to ask for evidence. Since we don't think toddlers are capable of much reasoning and we want to shield them from reality, we tell them fairy tales of all kinds. We call it our cultural and religious heritage. Later, we are amazed that the same minds have diminished capacity to separate reasonably valid information from pure fantasy. What an abominable situation!

The world will be a better place when PCT is taught in preschool and kindergarten. Our toddlers will understand with ease that they control perceptions only and that it is all perception. They will be alert to how fantasies are woven into stories and will grow up to be skeptics who think clearly. It is nice to fantasize, isn't it?

Best, Dag

Date: Tue, 2 May 1995 11:30:23 EST  
Subject: Believing Stories

[Avery Andrews 950502] (Bill Powers (950429.1540 MDT))  
(Rick Marken (950429.2230)) (Dag Forssell (950501 1150))\_

I think there may be a very simple reason why people are so gullible: in our evolutionary environment, the fact that Uncle Fred was still alive was an excellent reason to believe that he knew what he was talking about, over a broad range of topics - where there is water to be found, where the antelope go in springtime, etc. Presumably believing Uncle Fred's junk information was less costly than being skeptical of the stuff he was actually on target about, so our dumb genes bias us in favor of believing what we are told, at least until the teller is clearly revealed as a liar and/or fool.

But in a modern environment, this isn't true at all, so skepticism has to be \*taught\* (a certain WTP being one of my instructors in this area), and I certainly agree 100% with Rick's observation that it takes a while to learn!

Avery.Andrews@anu.edu.au

Date: Tue, 2 May 1995 22:35:54 -0700  
Subject: Skepticism

[From Rick Marken (950502.2230)]

Avery Andrews (950502)--

I agree with you 100%, Avery. Skepticism must be taught. And I agree with Dag Forssell and Bill Powers, too. We do have an emergency need to teach skepticism in the schools. Otherwise, in a few years we're looking at Dark Ages II (With a Vengeance). This time the believers don't just have swords and stakes; they're armed with AK 47s and high explosives; they'll really be able to prove they're right this time.

Best Rick

Date: Wed, 3 May 1995 11:01:59  
SUBJECT: Skeptical

{from Joel Judd 950503.1020 CST} Bill P., Rick, Avery:

The cry seems to be going up (on the net) for "skepticism" in the schools. Without necessarily making a whole thread out of this, would you elaborate a little bit? Are you suggesting a simple questioning attitude about all information we see and hear? A principled approach to determining accuracy? A way to get each person to say "before I blow up that building I'm gonna make sure the people inside intentionally killed my soulmates at that compound last year"?

If you would prefer, outline a "learning objective" reflecting skepticism for a given grade or age level (the younger the better).

Date: Thu, 4 May 1995 09:40:24 -0700  
Subject: Ode to Uncertainty

[From Rick Marken (950504.0940)J

Joel Judd (950503) --

> The cry seems to be going up (on the net) for "skepticism" in the schools... Are you suggesting a simple questioning attitude about all information we see and hear?

I am suggesting that education at all levels emphasize the importance of knowledge over belief. We should teach children, as soon as possible, the difference between these two notions. We should teach kids that a little quality knowledge (like the knowledge that  $f=ma$ ) is more valuable than a ton of personal belief. We should not be afraid to tell kids that most of what passes for knowledge is really belief. Nobody knows, for example, the best way to run an economy, a government, a family, a culture, etc.

Kids could be taught that there is nothing wrong with not knowing things; in fact, they could be taught that, next to "I love you", "I don't know" is the nicest thing one person can say to another. They could be taught that it is not necessary to use belief as a substitute for knowledge. Belief is something that is satisfying to the believer so different believers will find different beliefs satisfying. I think people might be more accepting of each other's beliefs if they had a better understanding of what belief is for.

People seem to want to "know"; they want to have knowledge. Belief is a problem when it is used to satisfy this want; it is knowledge through imagination. When I was a kid I wanted my little brother to think I knew everything so I had an answer to every one of his questions. Both he and I believed the answers I gave. It has taken over 40 years to learn that the real "knowledge" one gets from an education is the knowledge that we know almost nothing. I think educators should teach kids to question everything they think

they know; kids should be taught to value uncertainty. I think it was Jacob Bronowski who wisely noted that the great horrors of the world are committed by people who are certain that they "know" what's going on.

I am arguing that education should be aimed at teaching kids to be comfortable saying "I don't know -- but I'm trying to find out". Education should also be aimed at teaching kids how to find out. That means teaching them the most powerful approach to finding out that we know -- and one that was only discovered 300 years ago: the scientific method. The two centerpieces of this method are testing and modelling but the real heart of it is the beautiful refrain: "I don't know -- but I'm trying to find out".

Best Rick

Date: Fri, 5 May 1995 08:27:17 .  
SUBJECT: Ode to Knowledge

{from Joel Judd 950505.0800 CST} Rick M. (950504):

Is there not some semantic clarity needed for "belief" and "knowledge" from a PCT point of view? Strictly speaking, how does a control system know the difference between knowledge and belief? Without bringing too much philosophy into the picture, I would think the state of a control system hierarchy at any given point in time is its knowledge, or its state of knowing. That state is based on previous experiences, as is belief. Whether I know the earth revolves around the sun or I believe it makes no difference to the state of my hierarchy, does it? What seems to concern people is the basis for that belief/knowledge. Having some sort of rational, objective basis are the reasons for a Scientific Method.

More to the educational point, if one wanted to emphasize skepticism, then it might be better to say--given the apparent ontogeny of a control system--that we actually value belief over knowledge. This would be especially true if, as you believe, we can't know the best way to run an economy, government, family, etc.

As you say, it would be more valuable to say "I believe (or imagine) I know." If one admits and understands what such a statement means, then saying as much would be less dangerous than to say "I know." That's because in such a scheme Knowledge is the belief that what is known doesn't change. And it's the unwillingness to change (or entertain the possibility) that makes systems inflexible, dogmatic, and so on.

Date: Fri, 5 May 1995 15:41:56 -0600  
Subject: Re: skepticism

[From Bill Powers (950505.1515 MDT)]

Joel Judd (950503) --

> The cry seems to be going up (on the net) for "skepticism" in the schools... Are you suggesting a simple questioning attitude about all information we see and hear?

In effect, yes, but not blindly. I would like to teach children that there is a scale of believability for every person, starting with what you have observed for yourself and descending through second-hand knowledge, third-hand and so forth to the bottom of the scale where you can't find anyone who will admit to having started the story. I'd like to teach them that when someone else tells you something, you have to ask what's in it for that person if you decide to believe what you're told. I'd like to see the old reporter's dictum taught to children: if you get it from only one source, wait until you get independent confirmation before you use it. I'd like to teach children to ask a basic question when they're presented with a supposedly factual statement: "How do you know that?" And of course the equally basic follow-up question: "How could I verify that for myself?"

Maybe I would teach children how to lie. Get them together and see if they can convince each other of things that aren't true, by making up facts and constructing slippery reasoning and using emotional pressure to get others to believe them. And then teach them how to uncover the lies by asking the right questions, looking for the right evidence of a lie. I would go through advertising messages, newspaper stories, newspaper columns and editorials with them, challenging them to find the lies or simply the statements that look like facts but are only statements.

What I would like to teach children is how much less other people know than they claim to know. Children will spend many years with other people cramming statements of fact into them, and most of those statements of fact are not facts at all; they're just someone's opinion, and you can always find someone with a different opinion.

But I don't just want children to develop skepticism, a negative attitude toward knowledge. I would also want to teach them that there are ways of finding out for yourself, of checking, verifying, applying standards of belief when you can't verify, cross-checking one source against another, and eventually finding a reasonable basis for reasonable beliefs that have a good chance of standing up against a lot of criticism. It is possible to know useful things about the world you live in, things in which you have confidence, things you don't have to memorize but can work out from scratch any time you want to. I want children to develop confidence in their own ability to judge what is true enough to believe and what isn't, instead of just swallowing whatever they are told.

Of course my teaching program would never get past the PTA, because parents are very sensitive to any threats to teach their children something that might call the parents' omniscience into question.

Best, Bill P.

Date: Sun, 7 May 1995 07:47:10 -0600  
Subject: Re: knowledge and belief

[From Bill Powers (950507.0630 MDT)]

Joel Judd (950505.0800 CDT) --

> Strictly speaking, how does a control system know the difference between knowledge and belief?

I have a little different take on the difference between belief and knowledge. Given any statement, we can either believe or disbelieve the statement, meaning that we can accept it as being true or not accept it. So in that sense belief is a decision by an observer: the decision to accept a statement as true.

But there is another dimension: the degree to which we can back up the statement by showing how it is derived from experience. If the statement can be related to experiences in all particulars, and if we can show how we reasoned out the relationship, we would call the statement "knowledge." When there is no backing at all, we would call it a pure "belief."

All the combinations are possible: accepting knowledge, not accepting knowledge, accepting a belief, and not accepting a belief. This boils down to two dimensions in which we deal with statements: acceptance-nonacceptance, and supportability- nonsupportability. Most statements belong somewhere in this space, but not at the extremes.

Consider miracles. To say that a miracle occurred is to say that something happened that is apparently unexplainable in the framework we usually use to explain things. So to say that a happening was a miracle involves two factors: the decision to accept the happening as actually having happened and the



inability to reconcile the happening with statements based on observations -- with knowledge.

Obviously, reconciling the happening with knowledge depends on the scope of one's knowledge. In investigating UFOs, I ran across this phenomenon frequently. On the one hand, we have reports of bright lights hovering for several hours low in the Western sky and then turning red and disappearing, from people who did not recognize the planet Venus and were not aware of the autokinetic phenomenon. On the other hand, we had people from Project Bluebook explaining a sighting as the planet Venus when the bright light was reported to be directly overhead, a position in which Venus is never seen against a dark sky.

Many miracles rest on the supposed knowledge that the mind has no effect on the body, and that perceptions are always reports of happenings in the external world. If a person suddenly recovers from a disease, or mends a broken bone, the knowledge-based statement is that such things can't happen according to our knowledge of physiology and internal medicine. Of course if that knowledge is wrong (not actually supportable by observation), then there may not have been any miracle. Similarly, if one or more persons reports seeing an apparition of some sort, the statement that a miracle occurred is based on the knowledge that such experiences can't be generated internally by the brain. If that knowledge is incorrect, then the apparition was not necessarily a miracle.

As I understand it, the Catholic Church is quite strict about accepting happenings as miracles; if there is a conceivable explanation from our knowledge base, the claim is rejected. But of course this also means that what once was accepted as a miracle may cease to be accepted when our knowledge of what is physically and mentally possible changes.

However, it is possible either to accept or reject any purported miracle without regard to the knowledge base. This is merely a matter of whether one desires the miracle actually to have occurred. If there is a desire to accept it as real, then one accepts it as real and that is all there is to it. If one desires to reject it, one rejects it. The knowledge factor never has to be considered. If you want to believe that the Oklahoma City bombing was the work of Middle Eastern terrorists, then nothing stands in the way of believing that. That is nature of pure belief: it is unconstrained by observations.

We accept many statements as true without any observational support. We do this for convenience as much as anything. When data are missing, we fill in what is missing in order to arrive at some acceptable picture of reality -- and then we accept it as true, not because we can be certain it is true, but because we want to have a complete picture. This sort of closure goes on all of the time, at all levels or at least all higher levels of perception.

Belief is a necessity, considering the spotty nature of our understanding of the universe and ourselves. We must act under circumstances where we have to substitute assumptions for some missing perceptions. As one who prefers knowledge to belief whenever possible, however, I do not treat belief -- acceptance -- as something that is done once and for all. Belief to me is always provisional and subject to change in the light of new knowledge. And of course this also applies to knowledge, which is never permanent and immutable. Neither belief nor knowledge reveals to us the nature of the universe; both are perceptual phenomena, phenomena of the mind. I prefer knowledge to belief when it is possible to obtain, because relating ideas to simple experiences seems to me our best hope for learning something about the reality that lies beyond the senses.

Best, Bill P.

Date: Sun, 7 May 1995 12:28:51 -0700  
Subject: Know/believe

[From Rick Marken (950507.1230)]

Bill Powers (950507.0630 MDT) to Joel Judd (950505.0800 CDT) --

> This boils down to two dimensions in which we deal with statements: acceptance-nonacceptance, and supportability-nonsupportability. Most statements belong somewhere in this space, but not at the extremes.

I like this mapping. It suggests a nice symmetry between religious statements and PCT statements: religious statements are accepted and unsupported; PCT statements are unaccepted and supported.

> Neither belief nor knowledge reveals to us the nature of the universe; both are perceptual phenomena, phenomena of the mind. I prefer knowledge to belief when it is possible to obtain, because relating ideas to simple experiences seems to me our best hope for learning something about the reality that lies beyond the senses.

I share your view, of course. But it seems that a large segment of the population (including many "scientists") is much happier learning about the reality beyond the senses by relating ideas to other ideas; "simple experience" is what you hear on talk radio;-)

Best Rick

Date: Sun, 7 May 1995 21:08:46 -0400  
Subject: Belief and Knowledge

[From Dag Forssell (950507 1800)]

(I have not yet seen the digest for May 6 or any later messages)

>[Joel Judd 950505.0800] responding to Rick M. (950504):

> Is there not some semantic clarity needed for "belief" and "knowledge" from a PCT point of view? Strictly speaking, how does a control system know the difference between knowledge and belief?

We are dealing not with one control system, but with the entire HPCT hierarchy, where memories "behave" by being specified as reference signals, and memories supplement real time perceptions by being fed back up the perceptual levels. At any one time, I don't think there is any difference between belief and knowledge (as I said (950501 1150)). Both words mean acceptance of something as true. The difference comes in the next section, where we deal with what is accepted (fantastic stories, by the gullible, or accepted after scrutiny by the skeptic) and recorded in those memories in the first place.

> Without bringing too much philosophy into the picture, I would think the state of a control system hierarchy at any given point in time is its knowledge, or its state of knowing. That state is based on previous experiences, as is belief.

My understanding of knowledge is that it is based on evidence; experiences that can easily be replicated. You and I both have plenty of experience with the physical world and corresponding knowledge of food, water, streets, bathtubs and perhaps experiments with magnetism and acceleration in physics experiments. My understanding of the word belief is that it suggests an acceptance of something as true in the absence of evidence. Thus I don't see that belief is based on previous experiences. It is based on stories, fairy tales, suggestions and guesses, and (as in the life sciences) scientific rumors.

> Whether I know the earth revolves around the sun or I believe it makes no difference to the state of my hierarchy, does it?

You appear to say that knowledge and belief are synonymous. As I have said, once accepted as true, they are.

> What seems to concern people is the basis for that belief/knowledge. Having some sort of rational, objective basis are the reasons for a Scientific Method.

Yes indeed. As PCTers we do keep in mind, however, that the "Scientific Method" as it is usually practiced, (seeking Independent Variable -- Dependent Variable relationships) is appropriate for the inanimate physical sciences, but has been inappropriately applied in the life sciences.

> More to the educational point, if one wanted to emphasize skepticism, then it might be better to say--given the apparent ontogeny of a control system--that we actually value belief over knowledge.

Quite the other way around. Skepticism leads to dependable knowledge, but exposes belief as waporknowledge - fantasy, if that is what it is. Thus skepticism mitigates the enormous damage that can be done by various incompatible beliefs held around the world today; beliefs firmly held by millions or billions of people for many centuries; beliefs based on stories told and retold with great eloquence, parables and allegories perhaps written as educational software for illiterate people long ago, enhanced with miracles for suitable dramatic effect with a trusting audience; beliefs elevated to divine status over time -- still without verifiable foundation in the experience of even a single person.

> This would be especially true if, as you believe, we can't know the best way to run an economy, government, family, etc.

You are not quoting Rick quite correctly.

Rick said:

>> Nobody knows, for example, the best way to run an economy, a government, a family, a culture, etc.

In a future, once PCT becomes widely understood, I think remarkable progress will be done in these areas, because we will shift from beliefs and miscellaneous misunderstandings to knowledge about them. That is my conviction based on belief, not (yet) experience or knowledge. Beliefs do motivate us, don't they (just like real knowledge does--there is no difference inside the brain once an idea has been accepted). What I know and understand based on replicable evidence is PCT and, with less compelling demonstrations and more room for alternative detail explanations, HPCT. So while my belief is subject to revision, it does have some basis that is meaningful to me.

Joel again:

> As you say, it would be more valuable to say "I believe (or imagine) I know." If one admits and understands what such a statement means, then saying as much would be less dangerous than to say "I know."

I think you are right, but the step from saying "I imagine I know" to "I know" is small. We say "I know" all the time on all kinds of subjects, when in reality all we have is beliefs. This applies not only to the many religions in the world, (which are all belief) but also to a very large assortment of prejudices, political beliefs, preferences, and "skills" which may be based on anecdotal experiences (one's own or stories from others) generalized to take on validity far beyond what the original experience (if there was one) warrants. Beliefs about the inherent value of sundry political views, conventional psychology, implications of PCT for management practice (Bill P. is the first to apply the brakes on that one, as when I overstate them), and other subjects appear regularly on CSGnet.

As autonomous living control systems we learn to genuinely respect and even love each other despite the fact that we hold large numbers of conflicting beliefs about "the meaning of life," GOD or no, naive left liberals who want to take care of people, right conservatives who want people to help themselves, teetotalers, lacto-vegetarians, new-age aquarians etc. etc. Every one of us holds many questionable beliefs!

> That's because in such a scheme Knowledge is the belief that what is known doesn't change.

What comes first here? You say Knowledge - belief - known. I guess I would agree if you said Knowledge is a belief that is based on replicable evidence of aspects of the world that don't change. I think a believer could read your statement to mean that belief that does not change becomes knowledge. I am inclined to believe that believers believe such, but would not agree that belief becomes knowledge just because the belief has a 4,000 year history of eloquent storytelling by intelligent, decent, wellmeaning people. Basic knowledge in the physical sciences has not changed in the last 300 years, but been refined and extended. This is not inflexible dogma but scientific progress which has yielded remarkable results. > And it's the unwillingness to change (or entertain the possibility) that makes systems inflexible, dogmatic, and so on. Your use of the words inflexible and dogmatic suggest that beliefs are arbitrary, without foundation in replicable experience. I hope these musings offer "semantic clarity needed for "belief" and "knowledge" from a PCT point of view". Best, Dag

Date: Sun, 7 May 1995 22:33:22 -0400  
Subject: Re: Skepticism, Making up data  
<[Bill Leach 950507.21:11 U.S. Eastern Time Zone]  
>[From Rick Marken (950502.2230)]

Rick, I am not keeping up with the net much do to unrelated personal reasons but finally got around to doing some "housekeeping" and noticed the first line in the above mentioned message and felt compelled to "take you to task" for your statement:

> ...Skepticism must be taught.  
Sorry, but I feel that this statement is unmitigated bull if by the statement you mean that we can not learn to be skeptical except by being taught. Without bothering to use Bill P.'s most 'obvious' and logically bullet proof challenge to such statements... We do need to teach skepticism to those that blindly accept any "authority" (assuming that we would like to have any chance for an improving future -- or are just plain sick and tired of "arguing" with people that believe everything that they read or hear from the media as "absolute truth"). My position on this is that in general we "teach" children NOT to be skeptical and we "kill" their curiosity.

-bill

Date: Sun, 7 May 1995 23:34:35 EDT  
From: Kim Tan <V2006G@TEMPLEVM.BITNET  
Subject: Re: Belief and Knowledge

Hello, I'm just an "observer", but your current discussion is quite fascinating. So I decide to come forward with a question.

Did OJ do it?

I have my beliefs. But will I ever know (ledge)?

p.s. If you do not like the word "OJ", you can change it to something else.

Date: Mon, 8 May 1995 02:33:29 -0400  
Subject: Re: skepticism

<[Bill Leach 950508.00:56 U.S. Eastern Time Zone]  
>[From Bill Powers (950505.1515 MDT)]

> ... I would go through advertising messages, newspaper stories, newspaper columns and editorials with them, challenging them to find the lies or simply the statements that look like facts but are only statements.

Humm, you may have you work REALLY cut out for you if you try to find advertisements that are facts!

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I wanted to post this one when I read your message a while back saying that you would be off the net for a period of time but "saved it".

I chuckled a bit at your "dumbing of America" (better than crying) and ran into another phrase that about sent me to the floor. I am quite certain that others here will appreciate this one:

In some advertising flyer that I received was a product billed for our "Post Literary Society"!!

-bill

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Date: Mon, 8 May 1995 02:33:46 -0400  
Subject: Re: Belief and Knowledge

<[Bill Leach 950508.01:47 U.S. Eastern Time Zone]  
>[From Dag Forssell (950507 1800)]

Not really intending to "pick specifically upon Dag" but lest we engender yet another "religious war":

Dag, you stated:

> ... Thus I don't see that belief is based on previous experiences. It is based on stories, fairy tales, suggestions and guesses, and (as in the life sciences) scientific rumors.

I think that this is a bit of an oversimplification. Belief is not necessarily without any basis in experience it is rather without repeatable, verifiable causal experience.

also;

> ... This applies not only to the many religions in the world, (which are all belief) but also to a very large assortment of prejudices, ...

It is, I think, an error to categorize religion flatly as "all belief". There is much in "religious beliefs" that stands the scrutiny of close examination (just as there is much that does not). The belief in God itself is purely "belief" in the sense in which you define the term (and is openly admitted to be the case in the Christian religions at least).

I will even go so far as to say that in terms of "how to live" most religious doctrine is far better than the behavior of its' practitioners and certainly better than what you will hear from most "behavioral scientists". Of course all of that requires a belief that living to certain standards is "good".

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Causal relationships

Causal relationships, cause and effect, all the known laws of physics and chemistry all apply to PCT. The analysis of a control system requires the use of Control Theory to obtain useful knowledge of how the control system will behave (macroscopic behavior). A detailed "cause-effect" analysis "around"

the loop will always yield "correct results" with the only difficulty being that if one is concerned with the behavior of said system then such an analysis is likely useless.

[Dag, I am fully aware that you know this and am only making the comment because it seems that there have recently been a number of statements that while correct may mislead people into thinking that PCTers think that the laws concerning causal relationship do not apply to a control system as opposed to the idea that "lineal cause and effect analysis" applies but yields no useful information concerning behavior]

-bill

Date: Mon, 8 May 1995 09:48:27 -0600  
Subject: Re: knowledge/belief (Mary)

[from Mary Powers 9505.08] Joel Judd 9505.05 -

On knowledge and belief. Knowledge is awareness or recognition of the truth of something, and belief is the confident conviction of the truth, according to the dictionary I'm looking at, which begs a lot of questions. I wondered for a while whether these were two points (or segments) along a continuum involving more or less actual experience - now I'm leaning towards thinking them hierarchical, with belief on top, and knowledge occupying various levels below, depending on how much processing through the levels there is.

There is a strong emotional component to belief that knowledge lacks. I liked Avery's Uncle Fred, who inspires belief because he has survived as long as he has, and does know where the antelope go in the springtime. Sticking with Uncle Fred, and believing what he says, is a good way to keep important errors (like hunger) small (even if he is wrong about some less important things). And all important errors involve one physiologically - emotionally. Uncle Fred, of course, is a metaphor for 100,000 years or more of human evolution; belief is valuable or there wouldn't be so much of it around.

There's a quote in the May 1 New Yorker (an article called "Explaining Hitler") from another Uncle Fred - Nietzsche.

> Men believe in the truth of all that is seen to be strongly believed.

He then goes on to talk about "deceivers" [like Hitler] who begin cynically, and end up believing themselves, and that it is the intensity of that belief as it develops [rather than its content] that is so convincing to followers.

So the interesting question is why is belief important, i.e. have a large emotional component? Why do most people have a need, a reference signal, for a strong belief in something? Why is an intense belief so desirable and so easily adopted? This is about religion, and it is also about things like the scientific method, and political arrangements, ethics and morality in general - the idea of having an ethic at all. Hard to think of Hitler and his buddies as having an ethic, but no one ever said an ethic has to be nice, and there was a belief there which made a program of getting rid of Jews and Gypsies and so on seem like a good thing to do. Which is equivalent to believing, say, in PCT and therefore thinking that replicating conditioning experiments is a good thing to do too.

I certainly don't have any answers. Beliefs in general may be essential, perhaps to having a coherent personality, or a consistent and integrated group of reference signals, or, come to think of it, because people who go through life with a confident conviction (as the dictionary said) do better than those who don't), one of the beliefs we usually have is that some beliefs are better than others. So I'd better stop here, because this is beginning to look a bit recursive, and the next thing you know, I'll be talking about the cybernetics of cybernetics ;-)

Mary P.

Date: Tue, 9 May 1995 13:17:35 -0700  
Subject: God and OJ

[From Rick Marken (950509.1315)] Kim Tan (950507) --

> Did OJ do it?

> I have my beliefs. But will I ever know (ledge)?

Bill Leach (950508.03:46) gave an excellent response to this one but here's mine:

Given the evidence, I count it as belief that he didn't do it and knowledge that he did. But, then, given the evidence, I count it as belief that there is a god and knowledge that there isn't.

I don't know if we will ever know whether or not there is really a god (or gods) and I don't really care. But I would love to know whether or not OJ really did it.

Best Rick

Date: Thu, 11 May 1995 20:20:27 -0400  
Subject: Belief and Knowledge

[From Dag Forssell (950510 1700)]

>[Bill Leach 950508.01:47] >>[Dag Forssell (950507 1800)]

>> ... This applies not only to the many religions in the world, (which are all belief) but also to a very large assortment of prejudices, ...

> It is, I think, an error to categorize religion flatly as "all belief". There is much in "religious beliefs" that stands the scrutiny of close examination (just as there is much that does not). The belief in God itself is purely "belief" in the sense in which you define the term (and is openly admitted to be the case in the Christian religions at least).

> I will even go so far as to say that in terms of "how to live" most religious doctrine is far better than the behavior of its' practitioners and certainly better than what you will hear from most "behavioral scientists". Of course all of that requires a belief that living to certain standards is "good".

We seem to agree. I was referring to belief in GOD or GODS, as the case may be. "How to live" is another matter entirely, subject to much experience. I posted on that in the discussion about religion that took place in the spring of 1992.  
a sampling:

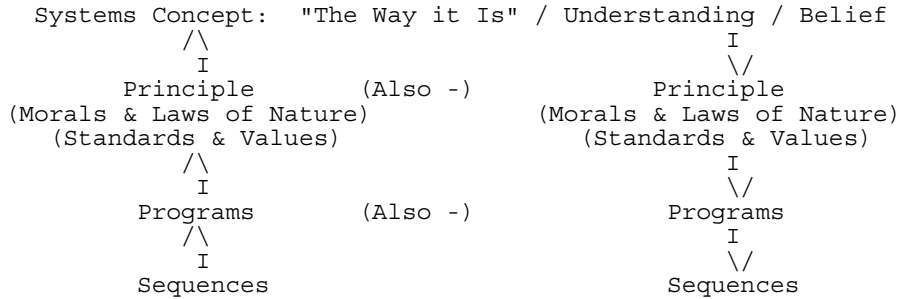
Subject: Standards

[From Dag Forssell (920504)]

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If indeed the Principles/Standards/Values are what count, and most people on reflection and discussion will arrive at a similar set, it will not be surprising that there is a great uniformity in that area between all religions. . . .

I find it interesting to look at the HPCT hierarchy, which may confirm this suggestion:



Notice that the (SAME) Principles/Standards/Values used to create a particular Systems Concept structure logically could be expected to be derived from it. It is also possible that a principle taught or experienced "on the way up" is remembered and used "on the way down" without being explicitly recognized as part of a system of concepts. We experience a lot as we grow up in our families, which stays with us as principles/ values/ standards without deliberate connection with, reflection on, or support by our religious beliefs, [whatever they are].

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Best, Dag

Date: Sun, 4 Jun 1995 16:21:28 -0400  
 Subject: Hate talk, Belief and Knowledge

[From Dag Forssell (950604 1330)]

I found the recent thread on Hate talk, stories, belief and knowledge very interesting and important for our appreciation of how HPCT helps us understand our experience.

Bill P's post on hate talk was part of this:

[Bill Powers (950429.1540)]

> When you hear hate talk or read hate literature, what do you find? Do you find statements like "Black people ought to hate Jews" or "White people ought to hate black people?" Not at all. What you find are stories about things that happened or are happening now. . . .

In today's paper I find a book review that embellishes this perspective.



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EXTREMISM IN AMERICA

A reader

Edited by Lyman Tower Sargent

(New York University Press: \$17.95 paperback; 380 pp.)

Skipping the introductory paragraphs, here is most of a Los Angeles Times book review by Katherine Dunn and Jim Redden.

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The great majority of Americans believes that it is not just our right but our duty to criticize government in all its forms. And citizens' complaints don't materialize out of thin air. Government--unintentionally and otherwise--does things to irritate people. Within memory, the federal government has withheld information from us about the Kennedy assassination, lied to us about the war in Vietnam, disgusted us with Watergate, insulted us with the Iran/Contra affair, picked our pockets with the savings-and-loan scandal, horrified us with the Waco fiasco--and now wonders what everybody's so mad about.

Rushing to help answer this question, New York University Press is pushing forward the publishing date of an anthology peculiarly suited for the times. "Extremism in America," edited by political scientist Lyman Tower Sargent of the University of Missouri/St. Louis, collects original source material from a broad range of fringe political groups. Read together, they may provide insight into not only the social concerns that fueled the 1994 Republican landslide but also the radical sentiments that may have led to the Oklahoma City bombing.

Sargent's book is drawn from the remarkable Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements at the University of Kansas. Compiled by Laird Wilcox, the country's unofficial archivist of volatile-political movements, it includes material from about 8,000 radical and fringe organizations, including posters, flyers, pamphlets, books, newsletters, magazines, photographs, videotapes and taped and transcribed interviews.

Choosing seminal writings from dozens of organizations on the Far Right and both the Old and New Left, Sargent offers a sampling of direct, unexpurgated statements delineating the political stances of groups ranging from the right-wing American Nazi Party to the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society, from the racist Aryan Nations to the Black liberation-oriented African People's Party, from the ultra-conservative John Birch Society to the Communist Party of America.

Sargent has organized the tracts into chapters dealing with common themes: race relations, family values, education, taxes and so forth. The arrangement usually offers various right-wing views of the topic, followed by some representation of left-wing thinking on the same subject. Each section and group is introduced by Sargent's remarks placing the material in historical and political contexts. The writings are largely products of the last 25 years, primarily because that is the period covered by the Wilcox Collection.

As Sargent acknowledges, this anthology gives substantially more space to far-right organizations than to the left wing. The feminist presence, for example, is extremely limited. Very few black organizations are represented, and there is a notable absence of other minority groups. Sargent offers two reasons for this slant. The Wilcox Collection itself includes more far right-wing than leftist material, and, in Sargent's view, the New Left has traditionally been discussed more seriously and in a more balanced fashion. The far right has more often been viewed as the ravings of a few lunatics, and is better known for what it is against than for what it supports.

The result is a demonstrative primer of the intricate complex of themes and views that make up the modern history of American extremism. What might have been simply a required text for undergraduate poli-sci classes takes on more general relevance now because extremism is in the air, and this volume contains original documents from some of the groups that are making news today. By drawing the voices of so many different groups together, Sargent

allows w to see how much they have in common, despite their opposing positions on the political spectrum.

Most of the texts in this volume--right, left and otherwise--presume a mind-numbingly vast conspiracy theory. Some shadowy group is always portrayed as pulling the levers of power, lining its pockets at the expense of average citizens. The power-brokers vary from conspiracy to conspiracy, depending on the group doing the theorizing. To the Aryan Nations, the villains are the Jews. To the Left Green Network, they're capitalists. To the Posse Comitatus, it's the Federal Reserve Board. To the Lavender Left, it's the Patriarchy. To other groups, the villains are Masons, Humanists, the Illuminati, blacks, feminists--but whatever the case, government is nearly always a part of the conspiracy. Although it's hard to imagine the John Birch Society and the Association of Libertarian Feminists agreeing on much, both oppose public child care as a government plot.

The enemies always have monumental power, which naturally enhances the prestige of the groups who are fighting them. A powerful enemy can only be defied by a noble and courageous hero. Or, to use the emotional rhetoric of the Posse Comitatus: "We are facing a lawless group in power who are in the process of destroying our freedoms and making us serfs of a ONE-WORLD GOVERNMENT, ruled by the ANTI-CHRIST. It is time that we stand up and be counted. This is no game for weak-knees or panty-waists. This calls for men with guts--men who will fight to protect their rights and God-given heritage, not those who would feed their neighbors to the crocodiles in hopes that the crocodiles would eat them last."

The layout of this book inadvertently clarifies the profound similarities in tone and style between the various groups. Sargent's explanations of each group are italicized at the beginning of their tracts, but it's easy to overlook these transitions and plow through an entire chapter without realizing where, exactly, one screed ended and another began. This is partially due to the stentorian pomp that seems endemic to political diatribes. But sometimes opposing groups even attack the same targets, as in these passages railing against international bankers by the far-right Lord's Covenant Church and the socialist Left Green Network

"America will not shake off her Banker-controlled dictatorship as long as people are ignorant of the hidden consequences. International Financiers, who control our government, as they control almost all governments in the world, and the news media, have us almost completely within their grasp. They can begin and end wars at will, bring prosperity or depression to our nation, give w peace or unleash 'urban guerrilla warfare' on our cities." (from LCC's The Constitutional Way--Every Citizen a Stockholder)"

"The world economy today, under both corporate capitalism and state-'socialism,' is an interconnected system based on the exploitation of the many. Its goal is not to meet human needs in harmony with nature, but the investment of capital to create more capital in order to satisfy the profit and power motives of the elite few that control the means of production and militarist nation-states." (from "Principle of the Left Green Network," 1989)

The virulence of the "enemy" rhetoric has prompted more objective readers to apply the "Hate Group" label to extremists. But it is also apparent that many of these groups exhibit a similar style of "love" for their cause. Their enemies may be evil incarnate, but their friends and supporters are equally good--incapable of wrong, and prepared to create heaven on earth, if only the conspiracy which they oppose were put to rest.

Sargent is alert to the progression of ideas through time, and the fact that an extremist view may eventually become mainstream, and vice versa. Consider the following quote.

"Legal and illegal aliens are citizens, adding to already overburdened welfare rolls, and contributing to violent crime. The time has come to demand enforcement of our laws concerning illegal immigration and to severely limit legal immigration."

These words are taken not from a recent speech by Gov. Pete Wilson but from a 1980 flyer from the rabidly racist National Assn. for the Advancement of White People. This doesn't necessarily mean that the NAAWP has infiltrated the California Republican Party; it simply shows that the group happened to identify a hot-button issue long before it was acknowledged by politicians.

Perhaps Sargent's most important contribution to the escalating debate is his analysis of populism. In his scholarly introduction, Sargent discusses the rise in the 19th Century of a movement to make government more responsive to the needs of farmers and small business owners, to limit federal activity and retain more power on the state level. Not surprisingly, populism and its fundamental question--who holds the power, who makes the decisions--is also at the heart of many of today's radical fringe movements. This thinking is apparent in tracts from groups on both the right and left. The right-wing Posse Comitatus, for example, believes that the county sheriff should be the highest government official. This small and diffuse group has clashed with officials over taxes and weapons since its founding in 1969. But the leftist Students for a Democratic Society (from the same era) and the Left Green Party have also argued for radical decentralization of government and devolvement of power to the governed.

Although civil rights groups and the media are quick to label the Far Right as racist and anti-Semitic, these modern populists are obsessed less with blacks and Jews than with the growing size and power of such agencies as the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Bureau of Land Management. If the material in this book is any indication, these anti-government views can be just as passionately felt as bigoted belief. This may come as a revelation to a nation groping to understand an act of the enormity of the Oklahoma City bombing and may help explain how someone like Timothy McVeigh, who does not seem overtly racist or anti-Semitic, or conform to our clearest image of someone filled with hate, could carry out such a barbaric act. As Sargent explains in his introduction "If there is something seriously wrong with the world--and everyone in this book believes there is--it is only sensible to go to whatever lengths are necessary to correct that wrong or those wrongs."

In recognizing the intense convictions and volatile emotions revealed by the groups depicted in this book, one can't help but remember that this is only a small sampling of the 8,000 groups represented in the Wilcox Collection, and that the primary focus of the collection itself is on just the last 25 years of American history. The reader may come away from all this vehement rhetoric convinced that it's not at all surprising that the Federal Building in Oklahoma was bombed. What is surprising is that much more violent terrorist activity does not happen in this country.

We can only suppose that, for the great majority of sympathizers with these extremes, talking about it, writing about it, getting together with a few like-minded cronies over pizza and beer to staple and mail pamphlets or to pass out flyers are sufficiently satisfying actions. The evidence suggests that in many cases the First Amendment may act as an effective steam valve releasing pressure by nontoxic means and that attempts to suppress it would only increase the incidence of violence in the future.

The United States is an ongoing experiment in the evolution of a culture based on idealistic principles. The same energy that spawns our multifarious, constantly changing music, art, literature and technology, the chaotic diversity that makes this nation a prolific source of innovation in every field is also expressed in our politics. Today's government is far from perfect in the eyes of most Americans. It is not the same government as it was 50 or 100 years ago, much less identical with what was designed by its founders. And it will continue to change, to shift and grow and shed like the enormous and complex human ecology it serves. Part of the reason government changes is the constant spawning, growing and dying of political groups and views that test each other and the status quo. This huge and intricate social organism we call a nation is far more complex and interdependent than that of the deepest rain forest. It may be that, as in other complex ecologies, it is the balance created by opposing forces that sustains life for the whole.

END