

The Basis of Reality: What is real to you may not be real to me

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Don't ask if it is real. Just ask if it is useful.

- Barbara Brennan

This editorial musing has been stimulated by two very thought-provoking articles. The first, by Larry Dossey (2011) discusses the confident but ignorant responses of scientists who trashed research showing that university students could make predictions about the future, such as which of two computer windows would be programmed by an automated system to display an erotic picture. The second, by Chris Mooney (Web reference), considers fascinating data showing that the more educated Republicans were, the more likely they were to reject scientific evidence for global warming. Following a discussion of these articles, I consider several important conclusions from these observations about how people form and hold onto their opinions. This is a vital issue in a world that is threatened by humanity's suicidal and homicidal behaviors, and seems unable to alter its course towards and killing every living being on our planet.

Larry Dossey summarizes interesting recent research by Daryl Bem, a respected Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Cornell University in New York. Bem summarizes his research:

...This article reports 9 experiments, involving more than 1,000 participants, that test for retroactive influence by "timereversing" well-established psychological effects so that the individual's responses are obtained before the putatively causal stimulus events occur. Data are presented for 4 time-reversed effects: precognitive approach to erotic stimuli and precognitive avoidance of negative stimuli; retroactive priming; retroactive habituation; and retroactive facilitation of recall. All but one of the experiments yielded statistically significant results...

Bem's article appeared in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, a mainstream professional journal. When it was reviewed in the *New York Times* on January 6, 2011, it raised a storm of letters from prominent academics in the "Room for Debate" pages of the *Times*. Represented among these are (per Wikipedia entries):

David J. Helfand was the chair of the Department of Astronomy at Columbia University as well as the co-director of the Columbia Astrophysics Laboratory. He has also served as part of the university's Physics Department. His stated research interests include radio surveys, the origin

and evolution of neutron stars and supernova remnants, and active galactic nuclei. Helfand has been instrumental in the creation of general education classes oriented around the sciences, developing a course, *Frontiers of Science*, that has subsequently become part of the Core Curriculum of Columbia College, the university's undergraduate liberal arts and sciences division.

Douglas Hofstadter is "an American academic whose research focuses on consciousness, analogy-making, artistic creation, literary translation, and discovery in mathematics and physics. He is best known for his book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, first published in 1979. It won both the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction and a National Book Award for Science."

Lawrence Maxwell Krauss is a Canadian-American theoretical physicist who is professor of physics, Foundation Professor of the School of Earth and Space Exploration, and director of the Origins Project at Arizona State University... He is an advocate of scientific skepticism, science education, and the science of morality.

None of these scientists who wrote in to the *Times* appears to have any familiarity with parapsychology research, which amply confirms the existence of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis (Benor, summary). Yet each of these highly educated scientists was vehement in his condemnations of the research and of the *Times* for reporting on this.

Dossey points out that this is very similar to the responses of the Catholic Church to Galileo's observations, which proved that the earth circles around the sun rather than the sun around the earth. Church officials refused to even look through Galileo's telescope, feeling that such data were not relevant.

Reality is "that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."
- Philip K. Dick

Anyone who deviates from the prevalent majority beliefs is hounded and vilified as being a heretic. The so-called science of today has degenerated into a religious cult that can be called 'scientism.'

It is in some ways hard for me to criticize other skeptics in these regards. I used to be a horrible skeptic about intuition and healing. A lawyer whom I strongly advised to stay away from Reiki healing called me on the carpet with the question, "Dr. Benor, are you speaking from a place of knowledge or of opinion?" He stopped me in my critical tracks! I had to admit I really didn't know anything about healers, but was certain from my training in psychology, medicine and psychiatry that healing could be no more than a placebo. I imagined that this would be even more likely the effects of suggestion because people who were seeking healing were often desperately hoping for a cure for serious or terminal illnesses, when conventional medicine had declared there was nothing more that could be done for them.

I've found this question very helpful with others, over the years, now that I'm on the other side of the beliefs fence.

Chris Mooney wrote an article with surprising observations, titled "The ugly delusions of the educated conservative: Better-educated Republicans are more likely to doubt global warming and believe Obama is a Muslim. Here's why." Mooney points out that US Conservatives and Republicans (people are frequently identified with both of these groups) ignore or deny the validity of strong scientific evidence human contributions to global warming. The most puzzling aspect of his observations is that

the more educated among these groups tend to be more resistant to accepting the evidence than the less educated and less informed.

Mooney observes that a recent Pew Report (2008) showed that

...better-educated Republicans were *more skeptical* of modern climate science than their less educated brethren. Only 19 percent of college-educated Republicans agreed that the planet is warming due to human actions, versus 31 percent of non-college-educated Republicans.

For Democrats and Independents, the opposite was the case. More education correlated with being more accepting of climate science – among Democrats, dramatically so. The difference in acceptance between more and less educated Democrats was 23 percentage points...

This was my first encounter with what I now like to call the “smart idiots” effect: The fact that politically sophisticated or knowledgeable people are often *more* biased, and less persuadable, than the ignorant. It’s a reality that generates endless frustration for many scientists – and indeed, for many well-educated, reasonable people...

Mooney points out that we commonly assume education frees us from misinformed, distorting biases. This assumption appears to be wrong. Mooney speculates that

For one thing, well-informed or well-educated conservatives probably consume more conservative news and opinion, such as by watching Fox News. Thus, they are more likely to know what they’re supposed to think about the issues – what people like them think – and to be familiar with the arguments or reasons for holding these views. If challenged, they can then recall and reiterate these arguments. They’ve made them a part of their identities, a part of their brains, and in doing so, they’ve drawn a strong emotional connection between certain “facts” or claims, and their deeply held political values. And they’re ready to *argue*.

Discussion

Humanity may end up serving the interests of scientific progress rather than the other way around. Science and technology are powerful tools, but we must decide how best to use them. What matters above all is the motivation that governs the use of science and technology, in which ideally heart and mind are united.

- Dalai Lama

Why would educated scientists reject evidence from research that has been performed according to the accepted formats for modern scientific research, and published after careful peer reviews in respected scientific journals? I've discussed elsewhere a variety of individual psychological mechanisms that may apply (Benor, 1990; 2001).

What I draw from Mooney's observations is that Conservatives rely on

1. faith in what they have been told is true and right (or wrong);
2. adherence to rules about the world that they accept as gospel truth.

Although they are unlikely to agree to this, the evidence suggests that their peer group identification is more important to them than reason and logic. They bow in obedience to the rules and dictates of their religion and peer groups and reject scientific evidence that contradicts their beliefs.

The same behaviors regarding beliefs are evident in many scientists. They remain carefully loyal to the prevalent beliefs of their peers and reject any evidence that seriously challenges or contradicts these beliefs.

A serious inducement for scientists to maintain their beliefs lies in the economics and politics of academic employment and tenure. Researchers spend many years building theoretical models of the world and supporting their theories with research, publications and lectures. New discoveries and shifts to new paradigms may sideline or derail them from their career tracks. Unemployment – in the form of dwindling or disappearing grants may be a real threat.

In the worlds of business and politics the same processes apply. A new discovery or development, such as a car running on electricity, is bad news for well-established businesses, particularly the oil industry, that are built around gasoline powered cars. It is no surprise that although numbers of US automobile manufacturers have developed electric cars, most have been withdrawn from the market and scrapped at the end of their terms of lease (none of these were sold) – even though the people leasing the cars wanted to keep them (e.g., Chrysler: Scott, 2009; GM: Hari, 2007). There are recent additions to this series – hopefully to remain in production (Web refs).

This is no longer just a problem of academic rigidities. The survival of our planet is at stake. The evidence for global warming is very clear. The melting of glaciers and the rising levels of carbon emission are very clearly documented and the correlations between them are convincingly clear.

The claims that there are not enough funds available to pay for reductions in carbon emissions are absurd, considering the enormous sums paid out for arms (including vast numbers of nuclear weapons) and wars; and for support of corporate greed in companies that are destructive to the environment. The dangers of nuclear disasters in plants that are liable to suffer meltdowns are clear from the ongoing debacles of Fukushima.

Governments on the whole appear to be in total denial about the seriousness of these problems. The majority of world populations appear unable to grasp the enormity of the problems and the threat to survival of all living beings on our planet if we remain passive to these problems. Most of the people involved in environmental movements with whom I have spoken say, "It is disempowering to talk with the average person about problems of such magnitude. Individuals simply feel overwhelmed and powerless to do anything. If their minds do not balk at the enormity of the problems, they become depressed when confronted with the figures that our entire planet is at risk of permanent destruction."

There is hope... but is this enough?

There are hundreds of thousands of groups of people around the world, with an estimated several million individuals working on some aspects of local and global problems (e.g., WiserEarth.org). I am participating in a [Transition Town movement](#) group in my home town of Guelph, Ontario ([Transition Town Guelph](#)). Many groups like these focus on ways of raising environmental consciousness; preventing or repairing damages to the environment; political activism and advocating for global healing in various ways; and more. I am focalizing explorations of [how to prepare ourselves for better self-care](#) – both for our personal benefit and to reduce the enormous amounts of medications and biochemical residues that are excreted into the environment.

These problems are of increasing urgency. We have no idea when some identified or unknown tipping point might be exceeded that will put humanity, and possibly all living organisms on this earth, at risk

of total extinction. I have written elsewhere of the underlying suicidal tendencies of humanity and how we can extend spiritual healing to address this problem ([Benor, 2008](#)).

We know it is possible to confront and change dysfunctional systems of government.

- Ghandi told the British that 300,000 British cannot control 600,000,000 Indians if they do not wish to be controlled.
- Nelson Mandela focalized changes to South African Apartheid.
- Martin Luther King confronted lingering segregation laws in Montgomery, Alabama and with just a few people – and real press coverage of those days – got these laws repealed.

We have the wherewithal to halt and work on reversing all of the major problems confronting us today, if we just allocate the monetary and human resources appropriately. The challenge is to find and promote the concepts that will galvanize the imagination and will of individuals around the world to join together to invest in healing actions to save our planet.

This is the only game worth playing today.

I hope you will join and participate in these healing activities.

Reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled.
- Richard Feynman

Beyond the ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there lies a field. I'll meet you there.
- Rumi

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This essay is adapted from Chris Mooney's forthcoming book, "[The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality.](#)" due out in April, 2012 from Wiley.

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