

The Role of Belief in the Evolution of Consciousness

The *evolution of consciousness* that I've referred to in the title of several pieces about a process. It is an ongoing process that in the view of some can spread over many lifetimes. It can never, in any absolute sense, come to a conclusion because the possibilities for *spiritual growth* may be virtually infinite. By spiritual growth I mean development of one's consciousness in ways that lead to an experience of connectedness with a larger reality that yields a more comprehensive understanding of the essence of one's being and the reality in which we live.

It can be argued that the whole of human motivation and action is predicated upon what one believes. By way of an analogy, think of the brain as the processing chips in a computer and the mind as the software all of which depends upon the operating system. I would suggest that our mind functions according to a belief system, which is similar to an operating system in a computer. If you change the operating system on a computer from Windows to Linux, the computer will perform differently. It will still be a computer and it will still have the limitations inherent in its hardware but it will use some capabilities differently and will have access to some capabilities that were previously unused and may lose access to still other capabilities. If computers aren't your thing, here is another but weaker analogy. Think about the output from your DVD player (hardware) when you change the DVD disc (software) from one of a traditional, small screen, black and white movie with monaural sound to a disc containing a modern, widescreen, color movie with stereo sound. The DVD player hasn't changed but the output has been significantly affected by a change in the software. We all have a belief system. Just as you can change the operating system on your computer, you can change or modify your belief system. Such change is not always easy, nor without difficulties but it can also be quite self-enhancing. In fact, there is little reason to prefer one system of personal beliefs over another, except for how well the system works for you. It can be argued that any system of belief that doesn't lead to coercion or violence toward others, for egotistical reasons, and is self-affirming is a personally valid belief system.

What is a belief system? A belief system is a set of filters through which we process experience and thereby come to an understanding of events. The late psychologist George Kelly called these filters *personal constructs*. Kelly believed that we have what he calls a *core construct* with subsidiary constructs that are *superordinate* and *subordinate* to one another. A given set of beliefs would then create a pyramid of constructs or filters, not unlike a flow chart for a chain of command. When there is a conflict between beliefs, a superordinate belief will take precedence over a subordinate belief, at least in a functional system. Another psychologist, Robert Hogan, suggests that most people have one of two constructs that underlie their beliefs about morality, which he characterizes as *personal conscience* and *social responsibility*. In the former, the superordinate belief is that people are inherently good and that injustice arises from oppressive social institutions. In the latter, the superordinate belief is that people are inherently bad and that social institutions protect people from injustice.

Once we process an event through our beliefs and think we understand the nature of it, we are better able to formulate a response to it. It does not necessarily follow that the response will be a functional response or even a rational response. For a belief system to take root it need only produce a functional response more often than not. Belief systems that produce a preponderance of non-functional responses and fail to adjust become the basis for various psychological or mental disorders. Sometimes a belief system is dysfunctional because we hold contradictory superordinate beliefs that alone might be functional but when in opposition are dysfunctional. The psychologist and psychotherapist Albert Ellis suggested that the primary task of childhood socialization is to establish a belief system. A noted psychiatrist, Michael Gazzaniga, has even argued that human beings are belief-creating machines. Ellis

would agree but add that we are also predisposed to creating irrational beliefs, an assertion supported by scientific evidence.

Beliefs are important and powerful. On the positive side, consider the placebo effect in medical experiments. Individuals who are diagnosed with an illness and are unknowingly included in the control group often have as much improvement in their condition from the placebo treatment as do the patients in the experimental group who get the experimental treatment. On the negative side, consider the possibility that your beliefs could just as easily cause you to acquire an illness. Or, consider the role of beliefs in hate crimes or the powerful beliefs that lead some individuals to engage in suicidal attacks on their perceived enemies. In the area of education, research on methods of teaching reading have found that the effectiveness of a method is strongly influenced by whether or not the teacher using it believes it to be effective. Finally, research has shown that teachers' beliefs about their students' abilities affect the way they interact with those students, which in turn affects the beliefs of the students about themselves. This research study found that student performance was independent of measured ability. In short, a teacher's beliefs can lead a student to under- or overachieve relative to measured ability. Beliefs then are potent enough to affect all aspects of our lives.

Ellis offers a model for understanding the role of belief. In its simplest form it is called the ABC model. The A is for an antecedent event. The B is for our belief about the event. The C is for the consequences of our belief about the event. There are two possible consequences. One is an emotional consequence or response, which often motivates a behavioral response. In short, our emotions and behavior follow our beliefs. When we construe an event through our belief system, we may choose to ignore the event on the basis that no further attention or other response is called for. We may interpret the event as bad and have a negative emotional response to it. If the negative emotional response is strong enough, it will motivate a negative behavioral response. We may interpret the event as good and have either a positive emotional response or both a positive emotional and behavioral response to it. Emotions, especially primal emotions like fear arising from the limbic system, are, evolutionarily speaking, older than thought, especially rational thought originating in the neocortex. Thus, in some sense primal emotions and rational thought have an hierarchical relationship. On the one hand, we should attempt to move toward decreased negative functioning by freeing ourselves from irrational negative emotions through the use of rational thought. On the other hand, we should attempt to increase positive functioning by strengthening rational positive emotions through the expansion of empathy. Becoming reflective about our beliefs, emotions and behavior rather than being reactive is an essential task in the evolution of consciousness.

Rational thought is the best tool available for evaluating our beliefs about events and the emotional responses that those beliefs elicit. Ellis contends that our tendency to think irrationally results in distortions, flaws, and inaccuracies in our belief system. Parents, peers, community institutions, such as schools, churches, political parties, and the media can introduce distortions into our belief system, if we accept their influence uncritically. Not only are distortions possible in commonly held beliefs, but personal aspects of our belief system are prone to distortions that result from our own faulty thinking. Ellis suggests that we must evaluate our beliefs, particularly when they are leading us into dysfunctional behavior, which is usually but not always motivated by negative emotion. Ellis' full model is ABCDE. The D in his model stands for disputation, which requires that one challenge the validity of a belief and dispute the rationales offered in its defense. If the belief is found wanting, the goal is to find a more self-affirming way of construing (believing and thinking about) events so that they don't elicit negative emotions and dysfunctional behavior in the future. The E stands for evaluation of the subsequent results produced by the disputation process. Correctly identifying and changing irrational beliefs is not easy and may sometimes require assistance and an investment of time.

If you have any question, as most of us probably should, about the rationality of our belief system, you should undertake an exploration and evaluation of your beliefs. When engaged in such a practice, you should not attempt to suppress emotional responses because you must experience emotions in order to trace them back to the beliefs that produced them. You may want to suppress a direct behavioral response or engage in as neutral a response as possible until you are more certain about what a rational and self-affirming response would be. Exercising careful control over behavior during this practice also ensures that there is a minimal probability of your behavior exacerbating a situation. Even if the belief under examination appears to be valid and the emotion elicited by the belief is appropriate, the behavioral response motivated by the emotion could be dysfunctional either because it is situation inappropriate (you don't really know what to do) or at an inappropriate intensity level (you over- or under react). One should always attempt to attain an optimal fit between a situation and one's response to it.

Positive emotions such as love and compassion can also be based on irrational beliefs and lead to dysfunctional behavior, though negative emotions probably result more frequently from irrational beliefs. The critical test is whether or not the emotion leads to behavior that is self-depreciating. Avoiding reactive responses under negative circumstances can be self-enhancing and potentially beneficial both to you and to an antagonist in a situation. Initially, it is more difficult to draw on love or compassion to motivate one's response in such a situation than to merely be emotionally detached from it. As one progresses in the evolution of consciousness, it should become easier to draw on positive feelings in a negative situation and to act from those feelings. In short, what I am proposing is that there is an emotional/behavioral continuum along which one might select a response in a given situation that runs from **negative** to **detached** to **positive**. For most of us, the bridge between negative and detached is probably rationality. The bridge between detached and positive is probably empathy. You may recall that in a previous presentation I talked about expanding empathy as being the way to crowd out egotism and selfishness, which are rooted in irrational beliefs.

How does one become more empathetic? The primary tool for working on empathy is *perspective taking*, which depends upon the development of *social perception*. Perspective taking is the process of trying to identify with another person and see things as you imagine they see them. There is an interesting developmental sequence that one goes through in refining perspective taking. Robert Selman, a psychologist, has found that we first learn to identify with other people on the basis of external *physical similarities* such as age, sex and race. Second, we learn to identify with other people on the basis of *psychological similarities* such as mutual interests, beliefs and attitudes. Third, we learn to identify with other people through *self-reflection*, that is, by recognizing social roles played by others and imagining oneself filling that role. This is the limit of social perception attained by a significant proportion of the population. Fourth, we learn to identify with others through *third-person role-taking* or being able to take the perspective of an abstract point-of-view. This is a significant refinement of social perspective taking that is achieved by a minority of adults. The final way in which we learn to identify with others is through a *generalized perspective* based on multiple, abstract social perspectives, such as, political vs. legal vs. religious vs. moral vs. personal vs. professional. In short, acquiring an understanding of another person as a complex, multidimensional social being. This is the most advanced and rarest form of social perception and permits the most sophisticated identification with others and thereby empathetic understanding of them.

The process of developing better social perception and expanding our capacity for empathy requires cultivating relationships, especially with people who we perceive as different from ourselves. Another psychologist, Sidney Jourard, has emphasized the role of what he calls the *transparent-self* in

establishing empathetic relationships with others. What Jourard means by transparent-self is that in order to identify with another it is necessary to have some understanding of that person. The best way to gain understanding of another person is for them to be willing to share their inner self with you. One of the necessary ingredients in making this happen, according to Jourard, is a willingness to reveal yourself to that person. Revealing oneself is often threatening and a block to developing greater social perception. If you cannot reveal what you believe and feel about your own life and circumstances, it is hardly reasonable to expect someone else to do so.

Thus, the first step is to consider how functional your emotional responses are, especially in relation to the behaviors that they motivate. For example, imagine someone walking through a mall who sees their spouse having lunch with a member of the opposite sex. Further, suppose that person's emotional reactions include anger, jealousy and betrayal. Based on this emotional reaction, the person storms into the restaurant and confronts the spouse and lunch companion with accusations of infidelity. What does this emotional reaction and behavior motivated by it suggest about the person's beliefs? Clearly, it suggests that the spouse is not believed to be trustworthy and that the spouse is believed to be capable of infidelity. Suppose that in fact it turns out that the lunch companion is actually a legitimate business client and the lunch is purely business related. It seems reasonable to conclude that our imaginary person very likely holds some irrational beliefs and it is not hard to imagine that these beliefs will lead to disaster. On the other hand, suppose there is good reason to think that the beliefs are justified. One can still ask if the emotional and behavioral consequences in this situation are rational and self-affirming. I would argue that they are not. Further, one might ask what other beliefs does this person hold that is keeping them in a relationship in which the other party is known to be untrustworthy? How rational are those beliefs?

When you identify beliefs that are problematic, examine your belief system and deal with any irrational beliefs that lead you to dysfunctional feelings and actions. Second, even if the beliefs you hold are valid one should consider if their consequences are in balance with the situations in which they occur. Third, rational analysis and thoughtful application of what one learns from self-analysis can lead to both more self-affirming beliefs and consequences that better fit circumstances. Following this work one can most effectively begin developing social perspective taking abilities and expanding one's empathic connection to others. The next step is to allow your improved empathetic understanding to further refine your beliefs and extend your range of positive emotional and behavioral responses, even in situations that appear to call for negative responses. Not only will this be a better response for your own spiritual development, but it will have the greatest potential for moving an antagonist in a more positive direction.

Becoming spiritually whole through the evolution of consciousness is a process. It is the process of sculpting ourselves, especially our beliefs, emotions and behavior. It is a personal journey that few if any of us will ever see completed.

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