

Avoid making that committment to \_any\_ belief

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

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[From Bill Powers (940517.2120 MDT)]

There was an article in the Durango Herald today about a 13-year-old boy in a class for students who have been expelled from school. The article said "He says he would fight anyone who challenged him because 'that's how life is'". I wanted to know what he meant by that, but of course the article didn't say. The reporter wasn't a therapist, and knew nothing of PCT.

When I read those words, I realized that to this boy they made sense. Behind all the details of his behavior -- which included bringing to school the gun that got him expelled-- there is a system of thought, a set of principles that fit that system, and a logical structure that supports the principles. All this in a boy 13 years old.

Right now, of course, that structure is still incomplete in that boy; it must contain all sorts of contradictions and would collapse if explored in any detail. But, we can imagine, he isn't finished with school yet. He will first go to college, in a few years, in some sort of youthful offender program. This will firm up the basis of his structure and eliminate some of the contradictions. Then, a while later, he will attend graduate school, where he will be taught, behind bars, by advanced practitioners of the art: professors of crime. He will learn the logic, the principles, and the system concepts of crime so well that he will become an expert. He will no longer be part of the society that we know, but will live in a different world.

But let's suppose that something happened to turn this boy around. Let's suppose that he encountered a charismatic teacher who managed to get him interested in physics and mathematics, and that he found he had a talent for such things. Let's suppose that his former structure collapsed and was replaced by a new one, and he became an avid student. Now the defective logic with which he started would be replaced by proven methods of reasoning, by techniques and procedures of the intellect. The principles he would learn would be all those that science has developed, and instead of thinking of himself as a lone eagle, an outcast, a Robin Hood, he would begin to get a picture of himself as a real scientist, a pursuer of truth, a member of a great community of scholars and thinkers. He would learn the logic, the principles, and the system concepts of mathematical physics so well that he would become an expert. He would rise above the society that we know, and would live in a different world.

So we have two imaginary versions of this boy, living in alternate futures. Which one, I wondered as I mused about the article, would be most likely to grasp PCT and join in the quest for understanding of human nature that goes with PCT? And I answered myself, neither one.

The reason is that this boy is behind the power curve, an expression that I probably need to explain.

Some decades ago there were some spectacular and widely-publicized airplane accidents involving powerful delta-wing aircraft. The engines in these aircraft were almost powerful enough to drive the plane straight up from the standing start -- but not quite powerful enough. Furthermore, because of the design, these planes had to land in a sharply nose-up attitude, with a considerable amount of lift being provided by the thrust of the jet engines, in order to keep the landing speed low enough to be handled.

The problem was that if the nose-up attitude became too extreme, the airplane would begin to slow, requiring more power from the engines to keep it in the air, and beyond a certain point it was not possible to recover from the configuration while landing. Putting the nose down to gain airspeed would let the plane drop hard into the ground; raising the nose to maintain altitude would require greater and greater power from the engines, and eventually more than they could produce. Once this regime had been entered, the aircraft was

said to be "behind the power curve" -- adding more power would just make the situation worse and the crash would occur sooner. And not adding power would result in a crash anyway. Some of you might remember the pictures on television, as the aircraft trying to land nosed farther and farther up, just above the runway, with the engines on afterburner, and finally crashed tail-first into a ball of flames that killed the pilot. About then, the expression "behind the power curve" became popular for a little while, although I doubt that many who used it understood what it meant. (Somebody will probably point out that this term also applies in automotive engineering. No quibbles, please).

The boy growing up under my two imaginary scenarios is working, I am saying, behind the power curve. In either case, he is simply coping with his environment by learning a system of logic and principles that inevitably settles into a groove from which, after enough time, it is impossible to escape. All the mental resources that are available become more and more tied up in supporting the system of thought that has been learned, in coping with its internal problems and in warding off disruptions.

What is missing here? For all I know, it's not missing in this boy and he will not live out either of my imaginary futures. But what would be missing that would prevent slowly becoming frozen into a way of thought -- either a "good" way or a "bad" way? What is it that enables some people to look at their own convictions with skepticism, to stand back from them and to avoid becoming literally lost in thought until it's too late to recover?

If I really knew I would probably disappear in a cloud of ectoplasm, but I don't really know. I can only guess. I think it may be some glimmer of a higher level of organization, perhaps what we call awareness. I think that everyone has it, but that in the attempt to learn how to control what matters in a complex and uncooperative world, many people gradually fall behind the power curve, with less and less awareness left free to ask what is going on, and more and more of it committed to the demands of learning ever more complex modes of control. Beyond a certain point, there isn't enough influence from this higher level or awareness or whatever-it-is thing to permit any more major changes in the organization that has come into being. There's no way to recover from the attitude any more, without crashing. The only choice is to crash, or to keep the throttle at full bore as long as possible.

When I think of that poor doomed son of a bitch trying to keep that airplane in the air, I get a vivid picture of what life does to us all. We become committed to whatever seems to work for us, and end up being trapped inside of it because we have come to depend on it totally for our survival and well-being. The harder we try to get ahead of the process, the farther behind the curve we get.

Is there a way out? I think there is, and that one way is to become aware of the phenomenon, the earlier the better. I think that at a certain age, which I can remember and have seen many others (in retrospect) going through, there develops a strong resistance to being educated any further. There is a sense that a commitment is about to be made, and that if you go any further down the same path, a certain kind of freedom of the mind is going to be lost. There is an awareness that if you do accept the premises that are now presented to you, your own logic will suck you in the rest of the way and there will be no turning back. It feels the way I imagine it would feel to sign a consent form for a lobotomy: the last act of free will you will ever make.

The way out, I think, is to avoid making that commitment, forever. No matter what it is: to crime, to a science, to a profession, to a religion, to a political movement, to a theory, to anything. I'm talking about the phenomenon of belief. To believe is to seal off the system from any further major modification, from the development of any higher levels of control. To believe is to eliminate all inner conflict, and therefore all need to develop any higher levels of perception. Belief offers relief from inner turmoil; it provides peace of mind, a sense of inner unity, and blessed calm. That is why people want to believe, and why they do it by the hundreds of millions.

The problem, of course, is that people commit themselves to very different and very incompatible beliefs, in each case the whole point being to eliminate any trace of thought that they could be wrong. Belief is behind the nazis and neo-nazis, the KKK and the John Birch Society. It is behind the new-age crystal gazers, the flat-earthers, the Lemurians and Atlantaeans, the Hesballah, the Mafia, the survivalists, and the man up in the mountain town of Nederland, Colorado, who (before being deported back to Norway as an illegal alien) had been keeping his father and his father's friend in a crate in a shed behind his house, packed in dry ice against the day when they can be cloned back into life.

To a person who has managed to avoid commitment to any particular belief, there is one simple perception that applies to all beliefs that exist, whether we think of them as nice or nasty. They can't all be right. By definition, each person who has made a commitment to a belief no longer even considers that it might be wrong. So it is obvious that if a belief, such as the belief that the United States is being systematically and purposively undermined by Jews in the banking and entertainment industries, is incorrect, those who believe it will never know that it is incorrect. If our 13-year-old boy believes that the right thing to do when challenged is to fight, then he will never consider that this belief could be wrong, and he will conduct his life accordingly. If our boy becomes a mathematical physicist who believes that mathematical physics contains the answers to all problems, then he will never consider that this belief might be wrong, and he, too, will conduct his life accordingly.

But the person who has not found relief from inner conflict by settling on a belief will see clearly that all these other people are mistaken -- or if any of them are right, they will never be able to settle among themselves who is right. It is, after all, possible to believe something that is true: there are many more Round-Earthers than Flat-Earthers. But from within any framework of belief, it is impossible to verify a belief. To test a belief means to conceive of a circumstance in which it could possibly be proven wrong. And even to conceive that, seriously enough to perform a test, is to see the belief from a higher level and to be free of it.

If people lived in small groups isolated from all other small groups, belief could be a satisfactory end-point of human development. Elimination of inner conflict, inner doubt, frees the energies for productive use and leads to great inner peace. The "truth" of a belief, if the belief is at all well constructed, is irrelevant. The question of truth becomes relevant only when one belief system leads to behavior that conflicts with another belief system. Then believing is no longer a satisfactory end-point.

We no longer live in small isolated groups; we ceased to do so at the dawn of history. For something like 10,000 years, and with increasing urgency, there has been a need to develop a new level of perception and control from which conflicts between belief systems -- which I associate with system concepts -- can be resolved. I suspect that this new level is in the process of appearing, unrecognized but becoming increasingly effective. How else would we be able to make sense of the very concept of a system concept? Even to name it is to make of it an object to be observed, not a place from which to observe everything else.

If system concepts were the highest level of perception, we would not know about them or even suspect that they existed. We would simply adopt them as beliefs, and see the world as organized according to the belief. The Catholic, Protestant, Jew, or Muslim would not even say "I believe in God." They would simply refer to God, as they refer to a river or a mountain. They would not say "I believe God is punishing me." They would simply say, humbly reporting the truth, "God is punishing me."

This essay has about exhausted its theme. It lacks a conclusion, but perhaps this sort of thing is best left unconcluded.

Best, Bill P.