A REALITY CHECK TO FORM YOUR PHILOSOPHY

William Irwin

Your philosophy consists of your beliefs and your reasons for your beliefs. Beliefs form a garden; we need to learn to weed out the dandelions and water the flowers. The readiness to weed out a previously held belief takes courage and is the sign of a true philosopher. In particular we need to avoid committing the aesthetic fallacy*, the mistaken idea that what is true is necessarily pleasant, good, or beautiful.*

Belief does not dictate reality. Rather, reality dictates what can truly be believed. While sometimes self-deception may be helpful – for example, thinking I am a better lecturer than I am will build confidence and help me lecture somewhat better – knowing the truth about ourselves and the world helps us live more effectively. Believing something false will usually, eventually result in a rude awakening.

Reality dictates the facts, but beliefs can sometimes be chosen in the form of the attitude taken towards the facts. If I have twenty dollars in my wallet, reality dictates the fact, and believing I have one hundred dollars will not change the fact in the moment. On the other hand, the twenty dollars in my wallet does not dictate what or how I should feel, what attitude I can or should take. I can choose whether to believe that twenty dollars makes me rich or poor, lucky or unlucky, and thus I can choose how I will feel. And, of course, adopting a positive attitude and belief can help me to change the reality, not by magic in the moment but by action in the long run.

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Belief

Philosophy isn't about comfort; it's about believing what is most likely to be true and learning to deal with it. Being a philosopher is not about being clever or ingenious (although every age has had its share of ingenious impostors); it's about being dedicated and genuine in your search for the truth. Your philosophy consists of your beliefs and your reasons for your beliefs. Ultimately, they are yours; you are not theirs. Fundamental beliefs, assumptions, and values constituting a philosophy steer your life whether you realize it or not.

Beliefs actually have the power to transform you: Beliefs affect your thoughts, which affect your words, which affect your actions, which shape who you are. Sometimes a new belief implies so much that it reroutes ways of thinking, leading to changes in who you are. 'The unexamined life is not worth living', because you have a philosophy, whether you realize it or not. And since having a philosophy is necessary and inevitable, you might as well have a good one, or at least a coherent one, not filled with contradictions and inconsistencies, producing cognitive dissonance – that tension and dis-ease we all know too well.

We often run on autopilot or internal GPS, looking at the world through our beliefs, following the directions dictated by these beliefs. But these beliefs need to be examined and sometimes they need to be changed. We need to ask ourselves what we believe and why we believe it, what we value and why. We have the power to change the contents of our beliefs and values if we find they are not true. We cannot choose to believe something we think is false, and we cannot choose what to believe all at once, like the flip of a switch. But we can change a belief we suspect is false by examining our reasons for believing it. Changing a false belief, like breaking a bad habit, does not always happen all at once.

Many beliefs and values are transmitted to us without reason or argument. And so it makes sense to ask what

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reasons and arguments there are for these 'programs', these beliefs, that drive us. We cannot examine our beliefs and values in every situation, at every moment; it simply isn't practical. So we come to rely on them as trustworthy defaults, automatic pilots running on our internal GPS. But without proper inspection and maintenance such defaults and autopilots will be of dubious service. Anyone who has ever gotten lost by following the disembodied voice from the GPS in their car can confirm this. We need to check our beliefs and values to see whether they are reliably taking us where we want to go; we need to become aware of the beliefs and values we have passively internalized. To use another metaphor, our beliefs form a garden; we need to learn to weed out the dandelions and water the flowers.

We need to ask ourselves, to whose advantage is my belief? Mine or someone else's? Beliefs constructed and dictated by an institution – a church, a government, a company – should not be accepted without scrutiny. To whose advantage is it that I believe that I can only achieve salvation through this church? To whose advantage is it that I believe that taxes must be raised? To whose advantage is it that I believe the products we make are safe? Our trust is sometimes too easily won, sometimes given out of laziness. Are the beliefs we have adopted without question true? Does their acceptance benefit their source but not me? We must dig deeper into their justification. Self-interested authorities can sometimes provide us with true beliefs, but such beliefs should be regarded with suspicion and verified.

The readiness to abandon a previously held belief takes courage and is the sign of a true philosopher. By contrast, most people will protect a handful of cherished, privileged beliefs, no matter what. But believing them doesn't make them so. For some people, the psychological need to believe overrides all reason and logic. It would be too terrible if, for example, there was no God, or there was no afterlife. Unfortunately, the feeling that something would be

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too terrible is never a good enough reason for thinking it isn't true.

Not only do most people accept too many beliefs without proper consideration, but contradictions and inconsistencies in most people's thoughts and actions produce tension and dissonance in their minds, cognitive dissonance. The most obvious inconsistency is simple hypocrisy, in which a person says one thing and does another. If the person does not believe what he says, then there may be some anxiety about being caught in hypocrisy, but there will be no internal disruption. For other people, ignorance is bliss to a certain extent, in that lacking awareness of contradiction or inconsistency generally exempts a person from discomfort. Consider, for example, a person who does not realize that fudging on his tax forms conflicts with the importance he places on honesty. At worst, such a person may have a vague sense that something is out of sync. By contrast, the person who, for example, believes adultery is wrong and yet is unfaithful will have tremendous discomfort with himself.

This is not to say that every contradiction or inconsistency makes itself clear in such a way that the person has to hide from it in denial. Some contradictions and inconsistencies are rather subtle, for example secretly looking at pornography and valuing fidelity in marriage. Sometimes it is the dissonance itself that makes us aware of the contradictions and inconsistencies; sometimes it is someone else pointing them out; sometimes it is open-minded discussion and argument. The cognitive dissonance that results from inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, and actions can be maddening. A person may deny to herself and others (if need be) that her thoughts, beliefs, and actions are inconsistent, but once the inconsistencies have truly reached the level of awareness, there is no safe retreat to comfort.

We naturally desire to be at ease with ourselves and have a complete and consistent set of beliefs. This desire, though, can only be imperfectly satisfied because of our human limitations. Complete consistency requires not only

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right views but right thought, right speech, and right action. We will likely never have a full and complete set of beliefs, never mind a set that is consistent with itself and all our words and actions. Yet admirably, we try. There are lots of things we don't have good justification for believing, and yet about which we have beliefs. And practically speaking it does not make sense to limit our beliefs to only those things about which we have excellent evidence. When we are playing theoretical philosopher that is fine, but daily life calls for action and arouses curiosity. So we should realize and accept that we are fallible and likely to have some level of cognitive dissonance; the important thing is to be vigilant in acting to minimize inconsistency and its accompanying dissonance.

Truth

A statement is true if it reports what is the case. For example, it is the case that the sun is a star. Belief is relative. I may believe the sun is a star and you may believe it is not. If we believe contradictory things, one of us must be right and the other must be wrong; one of us has the truth and the other does not. Sometimes this is easy to settle; sometimes it is difficult; sometimes it is impossible, at least for the moment. Of course we may disagree about matters of taste. There is no contradiction here. Asparagus may taste delicious *to you* but *not to me*. In such a case we both know the truth about how asparagus tastes to each of us. There is no fact of the matter about whether or not asparagus tastes delicious in general. At best we could take a poll and report the findings, for example that 65% of people find that asparagus tastes delicious. That would be true.

'I can't believe it', is sometimes said not as an exclamation but as a declaration. Why? Because reality could not be that ugly. To refuse belief on such grounds is to commit the *aesthetic fallacy*, the mistaken idea that what is true is

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pleasant, good, or beautiful. Often the truth is all those wonderful things. Scientists are particularly fond of speaking of the elegance of their theories, and part of the testimony to the truth of their theories is their beauty. But often the truth is not beautiful. In its extreme form the aesthetic fallacy asserts that what is true must be good and beautiful no matter what the evidence to the contrary.

In its most horrifying form we find examples of the aesthetic fallacy such as ordinary Germans in the 1930's and 1940's denying that the Holocaust was being perpetrated. In its more mundane form we find it in the stubborn belief that a person or institution can be trusted despite the obvious and mounting evidence to the contrary. In fact, few people actually espouse the aesthetic fallacy or would admit to committing it. It is usually subtle, insidious, and unrealized, as for example with a father who believes his son is well-behaved in school despite complaints from the teacher to the contrary.

Justification and Knowledge

Justification settles a disagreement between two beliefs. The justification for believing that the sun is a star is conclusive. By contrast, you may believe there is life after death whereas I do not. There is no justification to conclusively settle this matter. I may argue that the best evidence suggests we are purely physical beings and thus there is nothing about us that could possibly survive the death of the body. You may argue that the design of the universe and your religious faith lead you to believe that this life is not all there is. Neither of us can provide incontrovertible justification that our belief is true. There may be better arguments on one side of this issue than the other, but the issue cannot be completely settled for all time.

There is no such thing as false knowledge; knowledge is always rooted in true belief. Because true belief can result from luck or accident, more is required for knowledge,

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namely justification (though as Edmund Gettier showed, this may not be enough).[1] If I believe that it will rain tomorrow but I have no good reason – justification – for believing so, then we would not say I *know* it will rain tomorrow, even if it does rain.

But does any belief really have enough justification behind it to count as knowledge? Not if we require absolute certainty for justification. That '$1 + 1 = 2$' and that 'I'm a human being living in the 21st century' may seem like the kind of true beliefs so firmly justified that they surely count as knowledge. But it is always at least remotely possible that we (or I, if I am alone in the universe) are the victims of mass deception in a Matrix-like scenario, that even the most fundamental, obvious, and justified things we believe are actually false. For practical purposes, then, we cannot require absolute certainty for justification.

Truth and justification depend on one another in a way that listing them as separate conditions does not reflect. With truth and justification we rob Peter to pay Paul. Thus although the truth exists objectively and independently of us, we can never be absolutely certain we grasp it. We may have justification for believing that something is true, but no amount of justification is ever sufficient to absolutely guarantee truth. Even the preceding assertions may not be true, though if anything I believe is true, I would wager they are!

Don't Unplug Those Who Can't Handle the Truth

Just because we are confident that we have arrived at knowledge, that does not mean we should force that knowledge on everyone. Some people are not ready to be unplugged, not ready to be shown the truth. Such forced honesty without compassion is brutality. We should good-naturedly shake and prod and rouse, but we should not unplug. No good comes from shoving the truth in the face of someone unwilling to accept it, and in fact it may harm

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the chances of changing another mind in the future. Beyond that, becoming overly zealous missionaries for the truth is not good for us. We need to remain humble and mindful that what we believe to be justified and true may, no matter how unlikely, still turn out to be false.[2]

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Notes

[1] Edmund L. Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' *Analysis* 23 (1963), 121–123.

[2] This essay is inspired by Ayn Rand, Ch. 1 'Philosophy: Who Needs It', in *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1984), 1–11.

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