What is belief, then? And why do we feel the way we do about beliefs? There seem to be two kinds of feelings we can have toward the idea of believing in things. We have all felt both of them during our lives, so in reading we can at least appreciate the existence of these feelings even if we agree with one feeling more than the other as a general matter.

**Negative Reactions to Negative Beliefs**

One way we can respond is to not like belief because it is close minded, unfounded in facts, and eventually harmful to our own psyche. Belief becomes harmful to others especially when they are hateful, segregatory or me-vs-you beliefs. The fact that we generally don’t like harmful beliefs is a good thing, right? It’s important that at least initially we have a negative feeling toward beliefs that are harmful or closed minded. For instance, I personally don’t like most of the beliefs that Donald Trump holds.

This feeling of negativity toward harmful beliefs is actually informative. The initial distaste with a limiting belief *is* our motive to try to find out what exactly it is about the belief that we don’t like. We are moved to clarify our displeasure, like a scientist (I know this is a loose analogy). For example, I’ve been able to clarify to myself that what I don’t like about most of what Donald Trump says is his *use of rhetoric of fear to inspire division*. This clarification is helpful because I have recognized that there is something wrong about capitalizing on a nation’s fears. If I didn’t have a negative reaction, I couldn’t have clarified this point to myself. And I continue to clarify this point to the extent that it still irks me.

But, you might ask, how do we tell if a belief is negative? Could it be something in me that is negative, whereas Donald Trump is actually morally correct in using fear-talk? Maybe there’s a negativity in me that needs ousting. There’s always some negativity in me, so I do have to be very self-critical in my introspection.

Like Alex said,

**Positive Reactions to Positive Beliefs**

The other kind of feeling we can have is

When I wrote ‘any hypothesis is a belief’ I was referring to the positive kind of belief.

How do I distinguish between beliefs which are harmful and beliefs which are helpful? Unfortunately, there is no measuring stick or particle collider precise enough to help me here. That is because feelings are not physically informative. They are morally informative

There seems to be something informative

In the last post I wrote about the role of belief in the 21st century, but it seems from the comments that a follow up blog on the same topic would be worthwhile. I’ll try to clarify some of what I was saying and respond to what was said in the comments. This is an open discussion for everyone, so continue to chime in as you feel moved.

The question of the last post was focused on the role of belief, not the meaning of the word belief. I tried to stay away from definitions because I didn’t want to be nit-picky, but maybe a few words should be said now about the meaning of belief since that wasn’t as clear as it could have been.

Bear with me for a brief analogy: imagine a small child, who knows very little about the world, staring up in wonder at a starry night. They sit in their parent’s lap, trusting that their parent knows all about the moon, the stars, the darkness, and how the world works in general. Now imagine that the small child sees the moon for the first time and doesn’t yet grasp the fact that the moon is very far away. They believe, not intellectually yet but as an intuitive feeling, that the moon is near enough to touch. Their parent explains to them that the moon is many many miles away, just very big, which is why it appears close. An explanation is given, and the belief changes. Later in life, that child becomes a cosmologist and understands intellectually the precise measurements of geometry between the earth and moon. They pass from false belief, to more correct belief, to what we would actually call scientific knowledge.

Unlike beliefs that are calcified with egotism, an innocent child is quite willing to ‘give up’ their incorrect belief that the moon is close enough to touch. They are happy to stand corrected because in that way they grow in understanding. Though we don’t remember this process in our own life so well, there was a time when we didn’t have opinions or any cemented beliefs at all. What we had was a kind of trust, a kind of faith in the wisdom of our elders and the order of the world. The specifics of what we believed in (Santa Claus, that stuffed animals had feelings, that our parents were perfect) were absolutely healthy to our development as individuals. To reject such feelings as naïve and therefore useless is to not recognize that *it is only out of belief that we pass to knowledge.* It is only correcting our initial, untested beliefs that we develop the necessary energy in ourselves to have the thought, ‘I believed something in general, and later on my thinking clarified what I believed so that I was able to differentiate imagination from reality.’