

Effortless English

No Belief

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This remark was made, in these very words, by John Gribbin, physics editor of New Scientist magazine, in a BBC-TV debate with Malcolm Muggeridge, and it provoked incredulity on the part of most viewers. It seems to be a hangover of the medieval Catholic era that causes most people, even the educated, to think that everybody must "believe" something or other, that if one is not a theist, one must be a dogmatic atheist, and if one does not think Capitalism is perfect, one must believe fervently in Socialism, and if one does not have blind faith in X, one must alternatively have blind faith in not-X or the reverse of X.

My own opinion is that belief is the death of intelligence. As soon as one believes a doctrine of any sort, or assumes certitude, one stops thinking about that aspect of existence. The more certitude one assumes, the less there is left to think about, and a person sure of everything would never have any need to think about anything and might be considered clinically dead under current medical standards, where absence of brain activity is taken to mean that life has ended.

My attitude is identical to that of Dr. Gribbin and the majority of physicists today, and is known in physics as "the Copenhagen Interpretation," because it was formulated in Copenhagen by Dr. Niels Bohr and his co-workers between 1926-28. The Copenhagen Interpretation is sometimes called "model agnosticism" and says that any grid we use to organize our experience of the world is a model of the world and should not be confused with the world itself. Alfred Korzybski tried to popularize this outside physics with the slogan, "The map is not the territory." Alan Watts, a talented Oriental philosopher, restated it more vividly as "The menu is not the meal."

Belief in the traditional sense, or certitude, or dogma, amounts to the grandiose delusion, "My current model" -- "contains the whole universe and will never need to be revised." In terms of the history of science and knowledge in general, this appears absurd and arrogant to me, and I am perpetually astonished that so many people still manage to live with such a medieval attitude.

remark: n. comment,
very: adj. exact
debate: n. argument, discussion
provoked: v. caused (a reaction)
incredulity: n. surprise
hangover: n. leftover, effect (usually the leftover effect from drinking too much)
medieval: adj. time period between 600 A.D. to 1500 A.D.
Catholic: adj. The Christian church ruled by the Pope in Rome
era: n. time period (in history)
theist: n. religious person
dogmatic: adj. strong believer (usually in a religion)
atheist: n. person who does not believe there is a "God"
fervently: adv. very strongly
blind faith: n. total belief in something, belief without any doubt
alternatively: adv. on the other hand,
reverse: n. opposite, converse
doctrine: n. philosophical rules
assumes: v. believes, accepts
certitude: n. having no doubt, totally sure
aspect: n. part
clinically: adv. medically, scientifically
standards: n. rules, guidelines
absence: n. lack of
taken to mean: idiom. believed to mean
identical to: adj. equal to
Interpretation: n. understanding, theory, analysis
formulated: v. made, created
model: n. theory
agnosticism: n. idea that nothing is definite or sure
grid: n. table, model, theory
popularize: v. make popular
territory: n. land
restated: v. said again
vividly: adv. clearly, colorfully
dogma: n. strict rules & beliefs
amounts to: equals, is
grandiose: adj. theatrical, too showy
delusion: n. illusion, wrong belief
revised: v. changed
absurd: adj. foolish, crazy
perpetually: adv. constantly, always
astonished: adj. surprised
manage to: v. are able to

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plural: adj. more than one, multiple
mutable: adj. changeable, able to be changed

singular: adj. only one
subliminally: adv. unconsciously, subconsciously
programs: v. teaches, trains
entity: n. thing
linguistic: adj. related to language, re: languages
pervasive: adj. extensive, universal, happening everywhere
gibberish: n. nonsense, babble, words with no meaning
notion: n. idea
derives from: v. comes from
biological: adj. related to biology, re: the body
block-like: adj. physical
instant: adj. immediate
cues: n. messages, programs,
dissolve: v. melt into
processes: n. actions, happenings
transmuted: v. changed (a lot)
aided: helped
instruments: n. tools, machines
mysticism: n. direct religion (meditation, yoga, etc.)
constructed: v. made
systems: n. wholes, combinations
bundles: n. groupings, groups, packages
So much for: idiom. enough of,
sealed: v. closed (permanently)
does not jibe with: idiom. does not agree with
be considered as: v. be thought of as, appears
flowing: v. moving like water
meandering: v. wandering, roaming, moving without a destination
evolving: v. changing over time
perceived by: v. directly experienced by
senses: n. sight, hearing, taste, etc.
construct: n. creation, something we make, something built
interaction: n. joining, working together

Briefly, the main thing I have learned in my life is that "reality" is always plural and mutable.

"Reality" is a word in the English language which is (a) a noun and (b) singular. Thinking in the English language (and in many Indo-European languages) therefore subliminally programs us to imagine "reality" as one entity, sort of like a huge New York skyscraper, in which every part is just another "room" within the same building. This linguistic program is so pervasive that most people cannot "think" outside it at all, and when one tries to offer a different perspective they imagine one is talking gibberish.

The notion that "reality" is a noun, a solid thing like a brick or a baseball bat, derives from the biological fact that our nervous systems normally organize the dance of energy into such block-like "things," probably as instant survival cues. Such "things," however, dissolve back into energy dances -- processes or verbs -- when the nervous system is joined with certain drugs or transmuted by spiritual exercises or aided by scientific instruments. In both mysticism and physics, there is general agreement that "things" are constructed by our nervous systems and that "realities" (plural) are better described as systems or bundles of energy functions.

So much for "reality" as a noun. The notion that "reality" is singular, like a sealed jar, does not jibe with current scientific findings which, in this century, suggest that "reality" may better be considered as flowing and meandering, like a river, or interacting, like a dance or evolving, like life itself.

Most philosophers have known, at least since around 500 B.C., that the world perceived by our senses is not "the real world" but a construct we create -- our own private work of art. Modern science beginning with Galileo's demonstration that color is not "in" objects but "in" the interaction of our senses with object, understands that "reality" is created by our own brains.

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