

Introduction

BELIEVING IN "BELIEF"

Imagine yourself as the central actor in the following scenarios:

- First-time voter contemplating the choice between candidates in the presidential election
- Pacifist member of the National Guard summoned to active military duty overseas
- Graduating senior considering employment offers from both the Peace Corps and Goldman Sachs
- Student in a college physics class who has happened onto the answers to an upcoming midterm exam
- Shopper deciding whether to spend rent money on a new outfit
- Pedestrian on a city street approached by a homeless person asking for money
- Journalist ordered by a judge to divulge a confidential news source

Although these examples touch on different issues, they are alike in one crucial way: Each situation requires you to make a value judgment, to choose between what matters more and what matters less. In other words, each choice hinges on *what you believe*.

The concept of belief turns our attention to what lies *underneath* the choices we make: to the embedded, unspoken, and often subconscious assumptions that make these choices feel natural or normal. It's easy for most of us, given a set of circumstances, to say *what* we believe. But how often do any of us stop to think about *how* we came to hold the beliefs we take for granted? When we really stop to think about it, *how* do we make up our minds about what are the right and wrong things to do? Who or what teaches us to draw these kinds of distinctions? And how do these lessons come to feel so natural to us? Beliefs are not hypotheses. Grounded as they are in faith, in our intuitive or instinctive conviction that something is so, they require no recourse to empirical proof, factual data, or concrete evidence in order to stand in our minds as truth. Indeed, it might be said that belief encompasses all the things in our lives we're convinced are true simply because they *feel* right.

Of course, this is also what makes explaining or defending our beliefs such a tricky matter. If ultimately we can't prove the validity of our beliefs, then how can we ever hope to make others understand, accept, or share them? This dilemma — which in many ways seems hardwired into the very concept of belief — explains in part why our society is marked by so many disputes and controversies over what is and is not proper for us to believe.

If beliefs are not hypotheses that can be proved but rather convictions that are "right" because they feel so to their believers, how can different members of society ever establish common ground?

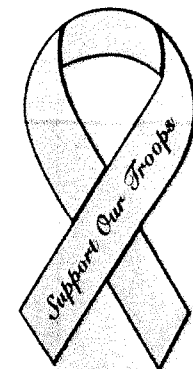
Although it is often assumed that belief applies only to questions of religion, it lies at the heart of some of our most urgent and intractable debates: from gay marriage to abortion to the war against terrorism. Belief also underlies countless decisions we confront every day in our personal lives: from how (or even whether) we vote to where we shop, from the work we perform to the money we earn, from the movies and television we watch or the books and magazines we read to the clothes we wear. Whatever the individual focus or context, belief always boils down to the same basic questions: What are the ideas and values we feel most committed to? Which ones end up just feeling right?

If we are not born already hardwired with ingrained assumptions about what is and is not right, then how did it happen that our beliefs feel like second nature to us now? By what process did we learn to regard only certain viewpoints and values as articles of faith?

PERSONAL BELIEFS, CULTURAL NORMS, AND SCRIPTING BELIEF

To pose questions like these is to begin connecting belief to the broader question of social *norms*. Stated differently: It is to wonder about the ways our own assumptions about right and wrong intersect with — perhaps even derive from — the standards and instructions mapped by our larger culture. Indeed, such questions might even prompt us to rethink the idea of *personal* belief altogether. To be sure, we are far more used to thinking of our personal beliefs as things that belong exclusively to ourselves: those values, ethics, and priorities that, in the final analysis, remain beyond the influence of our larger culture. This definition is an attractive one because it not only reaffirms our faith in our individuality but also seems to confirm our irreducible *agency*: our ability to control and determine the choices we make. But this conceit misrepresents our fundamental relationship to the larger culture around us. Far from being tangential or irrelevant, our culture plays a central role in shaping what we come to believe, suggesting that the values we consider to be our own private domain do not belong to us alone.

What is normal?



Sandra Dawes/The Image Works

What does this image ask us to believe? What are the ideas/values/attitudes it asks us to accept as normal?

What is normal?**“All in one rhythm.”***The official slogan of the FIFA 2014 World Cup in soccer***Do you share this belief? Should we automatically accept it as normal?**

understood as *scripts* we are encouraged to follow. In attempting to make sense of all this, our goal is less to “pick sides,” to vote up or down on the validity of a given belief, than to better understand how beliefs take shape in the first place, how certain ideas come to acquire this special status as unexamined and cherished norms. Stated a bit more abstractly, our job is to assess the process of *legitimation*: the operations through which only select ideas and actions come to be promoted as the proper role models for the rest of us.

“PLEDGING ALLEGIANCE”: ACTING ON AND ACTING OUT OUR COMMITMENTS

An example from everyday life will clarify the kind of work this involves, as well as the implications for us in undertaking it. Virtually all of us are familiar with reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. The Pledge offers an especially useful case study because it underscores how intimately connected belief is to issues of social scripts and role-playing. Whether it involves the reverential pose we are supposed to maintain toward the flag, the obligatory “hand-over-the-heart” gesture, or the language through which we express our “allegiance,” the rules by which this ritual is defined couldn’t be more detailed. One way to better apprehend the values underlying this performance is to ask what kind of objectives stand behind this kind of mandatory

We do, after all, live in a world that promotes very specific messages about what is right and what is wrong, a world in which countless instructions get issued telling us what we should and should not care about. From political campaigns to our Facebook news feed, from *Cosmopolitan* magazine to the *New York Times* business section, our cultural landscape is littered with sources that tell us, often in very authoritative tones, which things truly matter and which things do not. To compile even so cursory a list as this is to shift the terms of our conversation from individual or personal *choice* to cultural and social *power*; to confront the possibility that our own distinctions and value judgments are better

performance. Why have schoolchildren been required to recite the Pledge as a daily part of their scholastic lives? This line of inquiry leads us to wonder next about the particular assumptions this ritual reinforces — assumptions defining what our proper duties to the nation are supposed to be or the role that such patriotic expressions are supposed to play in our educational system. Building on this, we then consider the implications of endorsing these assumptions. We ponder, for instance, what it means for children to memorize and recite the loyalty oath at the center of the Pledge. What would be different if the words of the Pledge were different, if students were allowed to recite the oath silently or even to opt out from it altogether? Finally, we ask where else in our culture we are presented with opportunities to demonstrate our “allegiance” to the nation.

It is precisely this kind of work that each of the selections included in this chapter invites us to conduct. Referencing a wide range of contemporary issues — from patriotism to consumerism, environmentalism to race — this collection shows how complex and overlapping the connection between personal beliefs and social scripts can be. Stephen Asma starts us off with an ironic and critical look at the ways our culture has turned eco-friendly behavior into a barometer of our moral character. Next, Ty Burr directs our attention to the culture of fame, asking why we invest so much time and energy tracking the lives of celebrities. Thinking about beliefs that underlie current economic orthodoxy, Michael Sandel tests the limits of our faith in markets by drawing a distinction between the kinds of things money can and cannot buy. Michael Eric Dyson, on the other hand, complicates our received ideas about patriotism, detailing how racial difference can shape the various ways “love-of-country” gets expressed. Switching from race to gender, Katie Roiphe offers a pointed defense of single motherhood, challenging what she views as our culture’s all-too-easy assumptions about what does and does not get to count as a “real” family. David Brooks, meanwhile, enters into the debate over racial and gender difference

What is normal?

“I believe in . . . an America that lives by a Constitution that inspires freedom and democracy around the world. An America with a big, open, charitable heart that reaches out to people in need around the world. . . . An America that is still the beacon of light to the darkest corner of the world.”

Colin Powell, “The America I Believe In” from the National Public Radio series This I Believe

What kind of social script does this norm create? What would it feel like to act out this script in our personal lives?

What is normal?

“I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Can this social script be rewritten? Is there an alternative way to act upon or act out the norms promoted here?

from another angle, pushing back against what he claims is our unthinking embrace of “diversity” as a social ideal. Pursuing her own investigation of what it means to be nonwhite, Debra Dickerson digs into this debate even more deeply, offering a historically rooted challenge to our assumptions of what constitutes “race” altogether. And finally, Amitava Kumar rounds out our investigation by making a powerful case for forgiveness through the concept of “restorative justice.”

 macmillanhighered.com/actingout
e-Readings > Duke University, Fuqua School of Business, *The Context of Our Character*

STEPHEN ASMA

Green Guilt

Can political convictions become so intense that they rise to the level of a religious belief? In our increasingly secular age, Stephen Asma argues, we seem to have increasingly turned our debates about social and political issues into theological disputes. Assessing the scope and intensity of current debates over “going green,” Asma considers where the line between political conviction and personal belief should be drawn. Have modern politics, he asks, become our preferred vehicle for airing our moral differences? And if so, is this a good thing? Stephen Asma is a professor of philosophy at Columbia College Chicago. His books include *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (2009) and *Why I Am a Buddhist* (2010). This essay appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2010.

RECENTLY WHILE I WAS BRUSHING MY TEETH, MY 6-YEAR-OLD SON scolded me for running the water too long. He severely reprimanded me, and at the end of his censure asked me, with real outrage, “Don’t you love the earth?” And lately he has taken up the energy cause, scampering virtuously around the house turning off lights, even while I’m using them. He seems as stressed and anxious about the sins of environmentalism as I was about masturbation in the days of my Roman Catholic childhood.

Not too long ago, at a party, a friend confessed in a group conversation that he didn’t really recycle. It was as if his casual comment had sucked the air out of the room—I think the CD player even skipped. He suddenly became a pariah. A heretic had been detected among the orthodox flock. During the indignant tongue-lashing that followed, people’s faces twisted with moral outrage.

Many people who feel passionate about saving the planet justify their intense feelings by pointing to the seriousness of the problem and the high stakes involved. No doubt they are right about the seriousness. There are indeed environmental challenges, and steps must be taken to ameliorate them. But there is another way to understand the unique passion surrounding our need to go green.

Friedrich Nietzsche was the first to notice that religious emotions, like guilt and indignation, are still with us, even if

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we're not religious. He claimed that we were living in a post-Christian world—the church no longer dominates political and economic life—but we, as a culture, are still dominated by Judeo-Christian values. And those values are not obvious—they are not the Ten Commandments or any particular doctrine, but a general moral outlook.

You can see our veiled value system better if you contrast it with the one that preceded Christianity. For the pagans, honor and pride were valued, but for the Christians it is meekness and humility; for the pagans it was public shame, for Christians, private guilt; for pagans there was a celebration of hierarchy, with superior and inferior people, but for Christians there is egalitarianism; and for pagans there was more emphasis on justice, while for Christians there is emphasis on mercy (turning the other cheek). Underneath all these values, according to Nietzsche, is a kind of psychology—one dominated by resentment and guilt.

Every culture feels the call of conscience—the voice of internal self-criticism. But Western Christian culture, according to Nietzsche and then Freud, has conscience on steroids, so to speak. Our sense of guilt is comparatively extreme, and, with our culture of original sin and fallen status, we feel guilty about our very existence. In the belly of Western culture is the feeling that we're not worthy. Why is this feeling there?

All this internalized self-loathing is the cost we pay for being civilized. In a very well-organized society that protects the interests of many, we have to refrain daily from our natural instincts. We have to repress our own selfish, aggressive urges all the time, and we are so accustomed to it as adults that we don't always notice it. But if I was in the habit of acting on my impulses, I would regularly kill people in front of me at coffee shops who order elaborate whipped-cream mocha concoctions. In fact, I wouldn't bother to line up in a queue, but would just storm the counter (as I regularly witnessed people doing when I lived in China) and

muscle people out of my way. But there is a small wrestling match that happens inside my psyche that keeps me from such natural aggression. And that's just morning coffee—think about how many times you'd like to strangle somebody on public transportation.

When aggression can't go out, then it has to go inward. So we engage in a kind of self-denial, or self-cruelty. Ultimately this self-cruelty is necessary and good for society—I cannot unleash my murderous tendencies on the whipped-cream-mocha-half-decaf latte drinkers. But my aggression doesn't disappear, it

just gets beat down by my own discipline. Subsequently, I feel bad about myself, and I'm supposed to. Magnify all those internal daily struggles by a hundred and you begin to see why Nietzsche thought we were always feeling a little guilty. But historically speaking we didn't really understand this complex psychology—it was, and still is, invisible to us. We just felt bad about ourselves, and slowly developed a theology that made sense out of it. God is perfect and pristine and pure, and we are sinful, unworthy maggots who defile the creation by our very presence. According to Nietzsche, we have historically needed an ideal God because we've needed to be cruel to ourselves, we've needed to feel guilty. And we've needed to feel guilty because we have instincts that cannot be discharged externally—we have to bottle them up.

Feeling unworthy is still a large part of Western religious culture, but many people, especially in multicultural urban centers, are less religious. There are still those who believe that God is watching them and judging them, so their feelings of guilt and moral indignation are couched in the traditional theological furniture. But increasing numbers, in the middle and upper classes, identify themselves as being secular or perhaps “spiritual” rather than religious.

Now the secular world still has to make sense out of its own invisible, psychological drama—in particular, its feelings of guilt and indignation. Environmentalism, as a substitute for religion, has come to the rescue. Nietzsche's argument about an ideal God and guilt can be replicated in a new form: We need a belief in a pristine environment because we need to be cruel to ourselves as inferior beings, and we need that because we have these aggressive instincts that cannot be let out.

Instead of religious sins plaguing our conscience, we now have the transgressions of leaving the water running, leaving the lights on, failing to recycle, and using plastic grocery bags instead of paper. In addition, the righteous pleasures of being more orthodox than your neighbor (in this case being more green) can still be had—the new heresies include failure to compost, or refusal to go organic. Vitriol that used to be reserved for Satan can now be discharged against evil corporate chief executives and drivers of gas-guzzling vehicles. Apocalyptic fear-mongering previously took the shape of repent or burn in hell, but now it is recycle or burn in the ozone hole. In fact, it is interesting the way environmentalism takes on the apocalyptic aspects of the traditional religious narrative. The idea that the end is nigh is quite central to traditional Christianity—it is a jolting wake-up call to get on the righteous path. And we find many environmentalists in a similarly earnest panic about climate change and global warming. There are also high priests of the new religion, with Al Gore (“the Goracle”) playing an especially prophetic role.

We even find parallels in environmentalism of the most extreme, self-flagellating forms of religious guilt. Nietzsche claims that religion

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has fostered guilt to such neurotic levels that some people feel culpable and apologetic about their very existence. Compare this with extreme conservationists who want to sacrifice themselves for trees and whales. And teachers, like myself, will attest to significant numbers of their students who feel that their cats or whatever are equal to human beings. And not only are members of the next generation egalitarian about all life, but they often feel positively awful about the way that their species has corrupted and defiled the whole beautiful symphony of nature. The planet, they feel, would be better off without us. We are not worthy. In this extreme form, one does not seek to reduce one's carbon footprint so much as eliminate one's very being.

Pointing out these parallels is not meant to diminish the environmental cause. We should indeed do the things in our power, and within reason, to sustain the planet. But we have a tendency to become neurotic and overly anxious, especially when we are regularly told, via green marketing ploys, that each one of us is responsible for the survival of the planet. That's a heavy guilt trip.

The same demographic group for whom religion has little or no hold (namely white liberals) turns out to be the most virulent champion of all things green. Is it possible that these folks must vent their moral spleen on environmentalism because they don't have all the theological campaigns (e.g., opposing gay marriage, opposing abortion, etc.) on which social conservatives exercise their indignation?

If environmentalism is a substitute for religion—a way of validating certain emotions—then we might expect to find other secular surrogates for guilt and indignation. Our tendencies to sin, repent, and generally indulge in self-cruelty can be seen cropping up in our obsessions about health and fitness, for example. Struggling with our weight (diet and relapse) has risen above the other deadly sins to take a dominant position in our secular self-persecution. And our resentful aggression still manages to find some occasional pathways to the external world. We may not be able to punch the people we want to punch in real life, but we can turn some of our aggression outward at the reprobates of TV land. What a joyful hatred we all felt at the Octomom or Britney. It was a thoroughly cleansing bit of moral outrage. Or consider the inflamed moral drama for viewers of the *Jon & Kate Plus Eight* debacle. And more of this kind of indignation, previously reserved for religious condemnation, can be seen and heard everywhere on the screens and airwaves of the 24-hour “news” cycle. Large segments of the news seem calculated to facilitate the catharsis of our built-up resentment. Daytime talk shows and reality shows seem similarly designed to elicit our righteous anger. They form the other side of the religious coin—in addition to the self-cruelty of guilt, we can vent our aggression outwardly (like a crowd at a witch drowning) as long as it's justified by piety and the defense of virtue and orthodoxy.

Environmentalism is a much better hang-up than worrying about the spiritual pitfalls of too much masturbation. Even if it's neurotic, it's still doing some good. But environmentalism, like every other ism, has the potential for dogmatic zeal and obsession. Do we really need one more humorless religion? Let us save the planet, by all means. But let's also admit to ourselves that we have a natural propensity toward guilt and indignation, and let that fact temper our fervor to more reasonable levels.

DISCUSSION

1. Asma refers to contemporary politics as our “veiled value system” (p. 26). What do you think he means by this phrase? What vision of political life does this suggest? Does this vision accord with your own views?
2. In our day, writes Asma, environmentalism has come to serve as “a substitute for religion” (p. 27). How do you respond to this claim? In your view, is it valid to liken this kind of political stance to religious belief? And how does such a comparison change the way we typically think about environmentalism?
3. In Asma’s reading of Western history, guilt has long served as the glue for keeping society intact. “All this internalized self-loathing,” he writes, “is the cost we pay for being civilized” (p. 26). Do you agree? Is “guilt” or “self-loathing” necessary to maintaining social cohesion? Can you think of an example that confirms this hypothesis?

WRITING

4. For Asma, the intense debates around environmentalism are but one example of a much broader trend within our current pop culture: “Large segments of the news seem calculated to facilitate the catharsis of our built-up resentment. Daytime talk shows and reality shows seem similarly designed to elicit our righteous anger” (p. 28). Conduct your own pop culture analysis to assess the validity of Asma’s claim. First, choose a cultural text (i.e., TV show, website, advertisement, etc.) that, in your view, seems designed to elicit audience anger. Then use this text as a case study for testing out Asma’s hypothesis. Given the issues it raises, the tone it strikes, the audience it addresses, does this text seem “calculated to facilitate catharsis”? If so, what kind? And how do you evaluate the ultimate effect? Is it positive? Negative?
5. “Instead of religious sins plaguing our conscience,” Asma declares, “we now have the transgressions of leaving the water running, leaving the lights on, failing to recycle, and using plastic grocery bags instead of paper” (p. 27). Write a longer essay (three to five pages) in which you identify and evaluate the comparison Asma is making here. According to Asma, what are the key differences between the “religious sins” of the past and the “transgressions” that characterize everyday life today? And what larger point is he trying to make here about the way our understanding of “sin” has changed? Then take a closer look at each of the “transgressions” he lists here. To what extent, in your view, is it valid to feel “guilty” about each? Is it helpful, necessary, and/or right for these oversights to “plague our conscience”? Why or why not?
6. “[L]ike every other ism,” writes Asma, environmentalism “has the potential for dogmatic zeal and obsession” (p. 29). In light of his own examination of an “ism” — in this case, “patriotism” — do you think Michael Eric Dyson (p. 52) would agree? Given what he has to say about different forms patriotism can take in modern America, do you think Dyson would express sympathy or agreement with Asma’s point regarding the “dogmatic” or “obsessive” nature of all “isms”? Why or why not? As you answer this question, look for passages from Dyson’s essay that seem most pertinent, and spend some time explaining how they help support your own argument here.

TY BURR

The Faces in the Mirror

Celebrities have beguiled us since the days of the earliest silent movies. But why we have remained so fascinated for so long is far from a straightforward matter. Do we obsessively focus on celebrities because we love them or loathe them? Do we look upon their lives as an unattainable ideal or a cautionary tale? Taking up these kinds of questions, Ty Burr presents us with a brief history of celebrity and celebrity worship in modern America. When we look at celebrities, he asks, what exactly do we see? To what extent do we use celebrities as a kind of mirror, reflecting back what we wish (or fear) to see in ourselves? Ty Burr is film critic for the *Boston Globe*. He is the author of two books: *The Best Old Movies for Families: A Guide to Watching Together* (2007) and *Gods Like Us: On Movie Stardom and Modern Fame* (2012), from which the selection below is excerpted.

WHAT ARE THE STARS REALLY LIKE?

That question is not the subject of this book. The subject of this book is why we ask the question in the first place.

Still, people want to know. In my day job, I’m a professional film critic for a major metropolitan daily newspaper and throughout the 1990s I wrote reviews and articles for a national weekly entertainment magazine. Over the years, I’ve interviewed a number of actors and directors, ingénues and legends, and often the first question I’m asked by people is just that: What are they *really* like?

The answers always disappoint. Always. They range from “Pretty much what you see on the screen” to “Not all that interesting sometimes” to “Pleasantly professional” to an unspoken “Why do you care?” When pressed (and I’m usually pressed), I’ll allow that Keira Knightley and I had a lovely chat once and Lauren Bacall was nastier than she needed to be to a young reporter just starting out. That Laura Linney seemed graciously guarded, Steve Carell centered and sincere, Kevin Spacey cagey and smart. I once took the young Elijah Wood to a Hollywood burger joint while interviewing him for the magazine. He was a kid who really liked that burger, no more and no less.

They are, in short, working actors, life-sized and fallible. There is no mystery here. But this is not what you want to hear, is it? If there’s nothing genuinely special about movie stars, why do we give them our money? Why do we pay for cheaper and cheaper substitutes—reality stars, hotel heiresses, the Kardashians? Are we interested in the actual person behind the star façade, or just desperate to believe the magic has a basis in reality?