

Beliefs and Identity

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Our definition of human nature gives us a conceptual foundation for our ideas about human rights, individual responsibility and personal freedom.
(Donald in Rees and Rose (eds) 2004 p 34)

How have we come to be able to appreciate the fact that our beliefs may be false, that there is a basic difference between what we believe and what is the case ?
(Davidson 2004 p 4).

Our identities are formed through the assimilation and articulation of narratives, but these identities are not fixed and transcendental: they shift according to where we are, what knowledge is available to us and who we are with. So the construction of identity may change depending on where, or by whom, the description is being made.
(Shakespeare and Erickson in Rose and Rose (Eds) 2000 p 202)

We are on the edge of an extraordinary new frontier in the human story when we will be able to manipulate the genetic code – ours and the code of others - creating new synthetic forms of human life, and perhaps growing up beyond contemporary humanness. Does this scare you ? Does it raise deep ethical questions ? Well, whether or not it doesn't matter, says Adrian Woolfson, because it's going to happen anyway.
Andrew Marr 'Start the Week' 6 December 2004. (www.bbc.co.uk/radio4 'Listen again')

. . . the creation of synthetic life is an inevitability.
(Woolfson 2004 p 8)

. . . in principle you could replace your wet, organic brain with a bunch of silicon chips and wires and go right on thinking (and being conscious and so forth).
(Dennett 2005 p 135).

God, it would be good to be a fake somebody rather than a real nobody.
Mike Tyson. New York Times, 21 May 2002.

Consensus is the enemy of thought. Irwin Stelzer

We urge you to rethink your personal view and embrace the church's consensus.
From the letter sent by 17 of the 38 Anglican Archbishops to the Archbishop of Canterbury.
17 November 2005.

Whatever you say it is, it isn't. Korzybski.

Abstract

We are not born with beliefs. Our beliefs are learned and become so embedded that we cease to be conscious of them. They become habits of thought, feeling and behaviour. We are not born with identities. We are what we come to believe ourselves to be. To change our beliefs is to change our identities. To have our beliefs challenged is to have our identities threatened. That's why it's difficult to change our beliefs. It's also why competing beliefs cause so much conflict – identity is at stake.

Introduction

Everything anyone does is motivated by beliefs, conscious or otherwise. . . To create and maintain distinct groups, concepts of identity are required. These in turn require special sets of beliefs that explain the differences between one's own group and others, and (typically) the superiority of one's own group over others. Historically, the most powerful source of these adventitious identities has been religion.

(A C Grayling. 'Amen to the pursuit of truth and reason' the Times Higher Education Supplement 7 October 2005).

The church receives from the Lord Jesus Christ, its Divine King and Head, and from Him alone, the right and power subject to no civil authority to legislate, and to adjudicate finally, in all matters of doctrine, worship, government, and discipline in the Church, including all questions concerning membership and office in the Church.

Church of Scotland Act, 1921.

Exploring the relationship between beliefs and identity is very significant for me. I take neither my beliefs nor my identity lightly ! That's why beliefs have, in various ways, been a constant theme of my adult life.

My discussion is intended to demonstrate five aspects of my view of the relationship between beliefs and identity:

- 1 Beliefs are central to our sense of who we are, our sense of self and identity. Some beliefs are conscious and easily accessible, others are deeply embedded. Beliefs and therefore identity become habits.
- 2 Beliefs are central to our sense of being and agency in the world. They guide our actions and aspirations, influence our choices and provide the bases for our valuations of ourselves and others.
- 3 Beliefs are not certainties, they are fundamental assumptions which cannot be ultimately tested. It therefore follows, for me, that our identities are not certainties either. If I change my beliefs I change my identity.
- 4 Our beliefs originate in the cultures in which we are embedded, but we may, with some effort, change the beliefs which our culture validates.
- 5 My beliefs define who I am – and who I am not.

These five statements about beliefs indicate why people often find it difficult to change their beliefs and indeed become very defensive about them. Challenges to our beliefs are challenges to our sense of *who we are* and *how we are* in the world. People's beliefs are about their very sense of being. In order to avoid the anxiety of uncertainty, people have a strong tendency to confuse beliefs with certainties. Just as beliefs can be deceivers, so our certainties are our deceivers.

What is a belief? A belief is an idea or set of related ideas which enable us to make some meaning in relation to ourselves, others and the world in which we live. Beliefs help us to construct our sense of reality. Beliefs are fundamental assumptions about ourselves and the world. A famous belief statement opens one of the Christian creeds:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

The opening belief statement of my creed would be:

I believe that we are the outcome of random evolutionary processes. I believe that we are the only source of our meaning. (Heath 2003).

Beliefs not only have verbal content but they are infused with emotion and they inform our behaviour. Beliefs are crucial to our (changing) sense of identity.

Our capacity to believe things about ourselves and the world was a necessary aspect of our evolutionary development. Being able to believe things about the world enabled us to sustain ourselves as a species of animals. All animals need to develop ways of internalising their relationships with aspects of the world which will increase their chances of survival. If they don't then they become extinct. If we continue to believe that we can damage the planet with impunity perhaps we too will become extinct.

What is identity? It is my conscious sense that I am the centre of all that goes on around me. My sense of a personal past, present and future. My sense of being in time, place and culture. My sense that I am the recipient of changing events. My sense of being an agent in the world. My sense of aloneness and relatedness. My sense that I was born and I shall die. My identity is temporary.

You may have noticed that concentrated repetition of a word for a longish period seems to make the meaning of that word very uncertain. Perhaps words and the beliefs which they frame have meaning only as long as we don't think about that meaning too much. Similarly, constantly asking the question: Who am I? can be a destabilising experience. Who I am is essentially insecure. Perhaps my identity only feels secure as long as I don't question myself too carefully. Socrates is reputed to have said that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. The paradox is that the over-examined life tends to lose the apparent security of its identity.

Those who believe that identities are fixed are usually religious people who believe that God created male and female in his own immutable image. For such people homosexuality, bisexuality and trans-sexuality are at least pathological and at worst sinful conditions. Notions of a fixed identity easily shade into dogmatism and the desire to exclude and devalue those who have a different sense of identity.

It's those who believe that identity is a psycho-socio-cultural construct who tend to value and validate a range of sexual identities. Valuing diversity is premised on a fluid notion

of origins of identity. Concepts of identity can be more inclusive if the very idea of identity is seen as multifaceted and enigmatic.

Any belief system and the identity which derives from it becomes particularly potent and potentially dangerous to others when allied to nationality, language, history, tradition, myths and territory.

I end this introductory section with a two-part question: Can I *know* who I am or do I only *believe* who I am? (See Dennett 2005).

The five headings under which I explore these issues are:

- 1 Origins of beliefs and identity.
- 2 On not knowing what to believe.
- 3 Options for beliefs.
- 4 Implications of beliefs.
- 5 Does identity have a future?

1 Origins of beliefs and identity.

... the self is neither a result of abstract (philosophical) generalisations, nor something located exclusively in the brain, but the result of socially interactive processes that are memorised and constantly evaluated.

(Kolleck in Rees and Rose (eds) 2004 p 79).

People sometimes identify with their views so deeply that these become part of their sense of self and therefore sacred.

(Karen Armstrong. 'The Guardian' 27 July 2005).

I suggest that there are contributing factors which create our sense of identity: biology, culture, sexuality and gender, the roles which we adopt in life, ethnicity, nation, place, family settings, age, our sense of success and failure, our aspirations, our socio-economic status and so on. Our *beliefs* influence how we try to make meaning of all these factors. Beliefs are the processes through which we interpret our experiences, our memories and personal histories. (Draaisma 2004).

Identity is a narrative which we tell ourselves and which we are told by significant others. This identity narrative is located in culture. The narrative includes notions of where we believe we came from, who we are now that we are here and where we believe we are going to.

Different cultures inculcate different beliefs and people in different cultures have different senses of identity. Different beliefs significantly influence how people interpret what happens to them and what they need to do about it.

Take illness as an example.

If I believe that the origin of my illness is sent from God as punishment for my sins, then my actions will be such as to make me confess my sins, seek absolution, hope for remedy of the punishment and seek God's cure for the illness. In traditional Christian thought the body is the location of the conflict between God and evil. Being a body in the world is to be a body given over to God's will and is a profoundly spiritual and moral project. Illness is therefore believed to be caused by sin and evil.

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer (1662) contains a prayer for the sick which opens: *Wherefore, whatsoever your sickness is, know you certainly that it is God's visitation.* This version is still available in Anglican churches. Some people still ask: *What have I done to deserve this ?*

A major strand of Chinese thought and culture developed beliefs in the dynamic polarities of *yin* and *yang* which play out in the cosmos, in the world, in society and of course in the body. If I believe that the origin of my illness is due to my being out of balance with the *yin* and *yang* of cosmic realities, then my actions and tasks are to seek to reinstate the natural balance which will result in improvement to my illness.

Illness, in this model, is believed to be lack of balance - being out of balance with the cosmic forces of *yin* and *yang*. A quotation from the Radio 4 'The Other Medicine' programme (28 September 2004): *Chinese medicine has a lot of resonance with the entire universe, the celestial world, mountains, valleys, rivers. This, said the programme presenter Anna Ford, is a million miles away from western science.*

From a very different belief perspective in western science, since the discovery of viruses, bacteria and toxins, the body was still a location of conflict. Not a spiritual conflict of good and evil, not cosmic conflict of balance between cosmic forces, but a conflict between germs and the body's immune system. In western thought and culture the body is an individual person trying to survive toxic, bacterial and viral invasion. For most of us healing is not a matter of repentance and forgiveness of sins, nor getting in touch with cosmic forces. If I believe that my illness is due to either innate or acquired immune system deficiencies then I will seek treatment from an immunologist with a view to getting my immune system strengthened and supported.

Western healing is often seen as a matter of literally attacking the sources of the problems of pain and disease. The allopathic approach.

The point I'm making is that it is my beliefs which not only construct the meanings I give to my illness but they also result in different approaches to healing. My understanding of my illness relates to my sense of identity – not least because illness portends my mortality.

The development of careful observation and scientific thought have given rise to other radical changes to our beliefs.

Copernicus changed not only our beliefs about the apparent movement of the sun. He also changed our sense of identity. We ceased to live at the centre of the universe. We became marginal in all sorts of respects. Some people still believe that the sun goes round the earth.

Darwin not only changed our beliefs about the evolution of species. His ideas changed our sense of identity from being the culmination of God's creation to being animals with big brains. Some people still believe in the Genesis version.

From Copernicus and Darwin it's a short step to North Staffordshire !

I was brought up in a working class Methodist family in North Staffordshire. My upbringing inculcated a wide range of beliefs about myself, other people and the narrow world in which I was living. My sense of past, present and future were shaped in that family.

I was given a name – indeed a Christian name. I was and I believe I still am Geoffrey Malcolm Heath. Other beliefs were instilled.

Beliefs about myself as a boy in contrast to girls. This belief that I am a male remains deeply part of my identity.

Beliefs about how children should behave. My Grandmother was not alone in being famous for saying that children should be seen and not heard. Fortunately my mother disagreed.

Beliefs about how Sundays and Christian festivals should be spent – chapel, Sunday School, no games and no buying sweets in shops.

Beliefs about money and its abuses – no gambling. Money should be earned and spent carefully. I have retained these beliefs almost unchanged.

Beliefs about what to wear and on which occasions. I still wear trousers.

Beliefs about games and the rules of games. Cheating was frowned upon.

Beliefs about the value of work and leisure. Unwittingly we practised the Protestant work ethic.

Beliefs about family relationships and loyalty to family.

Beliefs about the roles of men and women. A woman's place was in the home and men went out to work. Men were dominators. House work was only done by women. It took me a long time to change those beliefs because they were part of my male identity.

Beliefs about friends and friendships. Friends have always played a central role in my life and still do.

Beliefs about how to behave towards a 'better class of people' – deference was the approach to them as it was towards elders. I've been working on my deference problem !

Beliefs about honesty and being trusted if you give your word.

Beliefs about God, Jesus, my self as a sinner in need of salvation, eternal life. This belief became so dominant that I gave up teaching to become a Methodist Minister.

Beliefs about being English, about the monarchy and 'foreigners'.

Beliefs about sex and sexual behaviour – mostly prohibitive and guilt inducing.

Belief in the importance of education. This belief has become stronger over time.

All these beliefs, and more, created my sense of identity. They became habits of thought, feeling and behaviour. I wasn't even aware of them until later reflection. As my beliefs slowly began to change so my sense of my identity began to change. I became more critical about what I believed. I also became more self-critical.

In summary, as my beliefs about myself became more self-affirming, so my sense of identity became more confident. Another consequence was that I began to lose my faith in and dependence upon God.

2 On not knowing what to believe.

The most basic form of thought is belief. But one cannot have a belief without understanding that beliefs may be false – their truth is not guaranteed by anything is us. . . Awareness of the possibility of surprise, the entertainment of expectations – these are essential concomitants of belief. . . We cannot occupy a position outside our own minds; there is no vantage point from which to compare our beliefs with what we take our beliefs to be about.
(Davidson 2004 p 7).

A quotation from Martine Wright in an interview in 'The Guardian' 26 September 2005. She was the last person to be taken out of the underground train after the bombs of 7 July. Both her legs were amputated above the knee.

So I have to believe that this happened for a reason, otherwise it is unthinkable. Maybe I was chosen to have no legs at all as opposed to someone who lost one leg because I am stronger than them, because I can deal with it. I would love to have a magic wand and be able to say 'ting' you've got legs. But that is not going to happen. People say to me that I

am amazing and that they don't think that they could do this. But what choice have I got? This changes your whole perspective, your values, what is important. What I am thinking now is that if I could help some other young person with the same or similar injuries in future, then maybe some good could come out of this.

I have to believe that this happened for a reason.

If there is no reason, nothing in which to believe about devastating events, then the trauma is unrelieved and she would not be able to make sense of the event. The events deeply disturbed her sense of identity. She is now in the challenging process of developing a new sense of who she is as compared to who she thought she was.

A Spaniard in Madrid (12 March 2004) interviewed after terrorist explosions had killed over 200 people and injured hundreds: *'There are no words to describe this'*. In other words, he did not know what to believe about the tragedy.

The head teacher of Dunblane Primary School after the massacre by shooting of children in his school in 1996: *'There are no words'*. In other words he did not know what to believe about this tragedy.

The depth of the tragedy and its impact on people's sense of what has happened and who they are in the chaos is magnified if they cannot make any sense of the tragedy. What do I believe about all this? Who am I in all this pain and chaotic mess?

... we have found remarkable similarities across different victim populations ... The traumatic event has had a profound impact on their fundamental assumptions about the world. Janoff-Bullman a trauma researcher (in Bracken 2000 p 58).

Even when not experiencing pain and chaotic situations my sense is that is that people have a strong tendency to avoid confusion because this is disorientating and destabilising. So, beliefs are held on to tenaciously. To lose them is to lose a sense of identity – a loss of personal bearings. Not knowing what to believe can result in anxiety, stress and deep insecurity. One of the aphorisms which I trotted out to my students from time to time was: Confusion is a growth point. It took time for them to appreciate that I was not talking rubbish – at least not on that occasion.

Perhaps the essential benefit of a university education is to encourage creative uncertainty.

3 Options for beliefs.

The most common of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably untrue. (H L Mencken quoted in Ashman and Baringer (eds) 2001 p 140).

Things should be made as simple as possible – but not simpler. (Einstein).

Richard Lewontin (Professor of Biology and Zoology) in his review of two books * on evolution in the New York Review of Books, 20 October 2005.

How then are we to explain the continued strength of the campaign against evolution ? We can do no better than listen to the Reverend Ron Carlson, a popular preacher, lecturer and author.

He presents his audience with two stories and asks them repeatedly whether it matters which one is true. In the secular story:

you are descendants of a tiny cell or primordial protoplasm washed up on an empty beach three and a half million years ago. You are a mere grab-bag of atomic particles, a conglomeration of genetic substance. You exist on a tiny planet in a minute solar system in an empty corner of a meaningless universe. You came from nothing and you are going nowhere.

By contrast the Christian view is that:

you are the special creation of a good and all-powerful God. You are the climax of His creation . . . not only is your kind unique but you are unique among your kind . . . Your Creator loves you so much and so intensely desires your companionship and affection that he gave His only Son that you might spend eternity with Him.

What is at issue here is whether the experience of one's family, social and working life, with its share of angst, pain, fatigue and failure can provide meaning in the absence of an ordained higher purpose.

The continued appeal of a story of divine creation of human life is that it provides, for those for whom the ordinary experience of living does not, a seductive relief from what Eric Fromm called the Anxiety of Meaninglessness.

Or as John Gribbin said on Melvyn Bragg's 'In Our Time': 'We are the products of the stars. We are absolutely literally star dust'. (BBC Radio 4, 10 January 2002).

And to quote Genesis: *God made man in his own image.*

I think that these quotations neatly summarise two very different, if not opposite and mutually exclusive, belief systems each of which has profound implications for ideas of identity for those who believe in them. Believing in evolution results in a very different sense of identity as compared to believing in Creationism. Even belief in Intelligent Design is a deep problem for evolutionists. You will have heard the joke about the clinching argument against Intelligent Design being the existence of George Bush.

*Ruse M	2005	'The Evolution-Creation Struggle',	Harvard University Press
Richerson P J and Boyd R	2005	'Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution'	Chicago University Press

It's evident that the adoption of one or other of these sets of beliefs will have deeply significant affects on one's sense of self, meaning and identity. It's no wonder that there are still tensions between religious believers and humanists given the discrepancy between belief systems as to the origins and meaning of life.

Alistair McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford, and a Christian, has recently written a book (2005) in which he criticises Richard Dawkins' dogmatic atheistic views on God and religion.

McGrath seeks to encourage dialogue between religious believers and those who believe that science has effectively removed the need for religious belief. I agree with such dialogue. But as I stated in the fifth of my opening statements: *My beliefs define who I am – and who I am not.* It's not easy for us to give up entrenched beliefs because we are giving up our sense of who we are. The religion/science tension is much more than an intellectual discussion – it tends to become an existential conflict about why we are and who we are. (Heath 2004).

More than beliefs are at stake – it's identity.

Our beliefs about where we came from influence or even determine our sense of who we are. To believe that we are the outcome of evolutionary processes and that we are animals with big brains leaves us with a sense of identity which is located in the animal order of living. We ourselves are then solely responsible for what we try to be. We are on our own in the cosmos. We are autonomous. We are free to be anxious.

To believe that we are the culmination of God's creative power and are made in his image locates us in a metaphysical order of things which means that God has ordered our being and therefore we are not finally responsible for who we are. We are dependent and heteronomous. We are created and owned.

4 Implications of beliefs.

One of the noblest human struggles is against power and its grip on historical memory. (Pilger 2004 p xiv).

. . . implicit beliefs are often so deeply held that they affect the way in which people process information and arrive at judgements. Both religious and anti-religious belief systems are often resistant to anything that threatens to undermine, challenge, qualify, or disconfirm them. Deeply held assumptions often render these implicit theories 'almost impervious to data'.

McGrath (2005 p 83. Final quotation from Nisbett and Ross, p 169)

It will be obvious by now that for me that there are massive implications for our behaviour which derive from the beliefs which we hold. Beliefs are not as ephemeral as fashion statements. They define our sense of being.

For those who hold religious beliefs it is likely that their sense of identity will be one of dependence on the God who they believe has created them. This sense of dependence may also lead to a sense of obligation to fulfil the will of the God who is believed to

exist. This God makes demands. One of these demands may be to convert those who do not believe in the same God. The religious beliefs of some also condemn those who do not adopt the 'correct' beliefs to a problematic posthumous existence. I put it delicately. Some call it 'hell'.

The belief that I am right and that I have God on my side carries the inevitable converse that you, who believe differently, are wrong. Further, my confidence that I am right and that God supports my being right may so devalue your being wrong that you become evil. Once I have defined you as evil that may give me permission to destroy you. You are not just wrong, you are essentially evil and wrong. You don't count as a valid human being.

We are all aware of the conflict which some Christian Churches are experiencing over issues relating to sexual identity. Some Christians assert their belief – as if it were an immutable fact - that if one's sexual identity is female, that very fact prevents women from taking the top functions in the priestly hierarchy. No women bishops or archbishops. Some Christians in Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and some Christian fundamentalist groupings totally exclude those with a female identity from all priestly functions. For many Christians and members of other faiths, being a woman is a condition of deficit. No secular equality of opportunity here. Indeed, religions are allowed to opt out of the legislation on equality of opportunity which is obligatory for other employers. (See the Church of Scotland Act 1921 above). The Sex Discrimination Act was passed in 1975. Discrimination humiliates people and denies them a sense of dignity.

If one's identity is expressed as homosexual, then for some Christians and other faiths the priesthood *per se* is a totally no-go area.* For some Christians and other faith groups a homosexual identity is believed to be evidence of a moral and biological deficiency - being gay is a combination of being evil and being pathological. As Bishop Gene Robinson said (4 November 2005): (being gay) *is not something of which I should repent and I have no intention of doing so . . . it is my belief that my orientation is value-neutral.*

I understand that in some religious belief systems being overtly gay warrants the death penalty. In Iran two homosexuals were recently executed (Timothy Garton Ash, 'The Guardian' 24 November 2005). The recent papal document of Benedict 16th tells Roman Catholic seminaries around the world that they have a duty to weed out homosexual candidates for the priesthood. The recent letter sent by 17 Archbishops to Rowan Williams requires what they call Anglican 'consensus' against gay relationships and gay priests. The irony is that the consensus is on their prejudiced terms and based on traditional pre-Modern ideas.

I prefer the observation that *consensus is the enemy of thought.*

*There is an increasing literature about the ways in which sexual identities are constructed and processes by which some such identities are pathologised. (Spargo 1999, Whitehead 2002, Adams and Savran 2002).

Some faiths seem to adopt the following position:

We are the true believers. What we believe is therefore the truth. Only we know what valid identity is. If your identity is not real and valid in our terms, then you are not a valid and authentic person.

My own belief is that all human beings are members of the same species – optimistically called *homo sapiens* as a rather arrogant self-definition.

This implies for me that I should try to treat all my fellow human beings with respect and to try to honour their sense of their own dignity and well-being.

I do not believe that it is acceptable to treat people prejudicially on grounds of their sexuality, gender, ethnicity, physical condition, socio-economic status, age. To treat people who are validly different with prejudice is oppressive and denies people a sense of dignity and well-being.

To exclude people from equality of opportunity is to deny them the possibility of achieving their own sense of potential. Inequality of opportunity instils a poverty of aspiration.

The first quotation heading this section argues for a critical approach to all those who merely rely on selective versions of history or partial interpretations of tradition as immutable sources of belief and identity. Those who write the history tend to write it from the point of view of the powerful. Those who learn the history are in danger of embedding that view of history into their identity. That's why Black history and women's history, for example, are so crucial in challenging the power of those in charge of knowledge creation. That's the force of Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) dictum: *knowledge is power*. History is a form of memory and memory is an aspect of identity. Hence, those who have the power to create historical memories have the power to influence our sense of identity because we believe the history. Perhaps that explains in part the constant re-run of Second World war films on TV – we need a national identity.

The second quotation suggests that beliefs can easily become dogmas of resistance to change of beliefs and ideas. Rigid beliefs have transmuted into false certainties. *Almost impervious to data*. Dogmas of all sorts are resistant to data.

I note that the controversial Christopher Meyer portrays Tony Blair as a man of 'moral and philosophical certitude'. The consequences of being at the receiving end of others' moral certitude can be very bad news.

In terms of the implications and consequences of beliefs you might like to ponder what kind of person wrote the following. You are unlikely to know his name.

I did not escape from you, but I did what I was supposed to do. You should be very proud of me. It's an honour and you will see the results, and everybody will be happy. I want you to remain very strong as I knew you, but whatever you do head high with a goal.

Never be without a goal, always have a goal in front of you and always think: 'what for?'. Remember always who you are and what you are. Keep your head high. The victors never have their heads down !

It was Ziad Jarrah and he wrote this love letter to his wife before he boarded the flight which he would then hijack and fly into the Pentagon. He was a 9/11 suicide martyr and in his eyes doing the will of God in whom he believed. *

As I say, the beliefs which we hold not only create our sense of identity but these same beliefs massively impact on what we think, how we feel and how we behave. And, of course, our beliefs impact on the values by which we rank other people in terms of their significance.

An extreme consequence of some people's religious beliefs is that those who do not believe the same are deemed not to have an identity of any value. Suicide bombers exhibit this particularly narcissistic morality. But moral narcissism is not limited to them. It is still the case that the Coalition Forces do not count Iraqi deaths because Iraqis do not count as people. Only those who count are counted.

So we know precisely how many American and British troops have died because Coalition Forces count. If you happen to live in the 'axis of evil' your death does not count.

It's a year since the devastation of Falluja. The tone for that offensive was set by Lt. Col. Gary Brandl, who is presumably one of the educated members of the Coalition Forces.

He said: *The enemy has got a face. He's called Satan. He's in Falluja. And we're going to destroy him.*

The Iraq compensation commissioner reported that 36,000 of the city's 50,000 homes were destroyed along with 60 schools and 65 mosques and shrines. (Mike Marqusee, 'The Guardian' 10 November 2005). If you claim a different identity you just don't matter and therefore it doesn't matter whether you exist.

Some beliefs held with certitude can have disastrous consequences for other people. Our certainties are our dangerous deceivers. Cultures of certainty are cultures of conflict.

5 Does identity have a future ?

Just before I quote from academic sources I make three sobering observations:

* 'New York Review of Books' 22 September 2005 . Christian Caryl's review (titled: 'Why They Do It') of seven books all of which are dealing in depth with analyses of why suicide bombers are willing to engage in these acts.

- 1 Brain trauma through stroke or accident can delete beliefs and memory and drastically impact on a sense of identity. (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1999).
- 2 Senile dementia and Alzheimer's diseases remove beliefs, memories and, presumably, identity.
- 3 Some people experience multiple personalities. Perhaps we all do to some extent.

The following quotations are pointers to future developments in terms of brains, beliefs and identity.

But it has been well said that the one thing which we cannot forecast is the future.

We are on the edge of an extraordinary new frontier in the human story when we will be able to manipulate the genetic code – ours and the code of others - creating new synthetic forms of human life, and perhaps growing up beyond contemporary humanness. Does this scare you? Does it raise deep ethical questions? Well, whether or not it doesn't matter, says Adrian Woolfson, because it's going to happen anyway. Andrew Marr 'Start the Week' 6 December 2004. (www.bbc.co.uk/radio4)

... the creation of synthetic life is an inevitability.
(Woolfson 2004 p 8).

Due to the inevitable death of brain cells: *Today's brain is not yesterday's and will not be tomorrow's.* (Rose 2005 p 147).

The work of Woolfson and Rose provides indications of what the future of human identity might be – at least in some respects.

We are living at a time of mind-boggling developments, the implications of which it is difficult and perhaps even intimidating to ponder.

We are beginning to take control of our own evolution.

We are making modifications to the very brain which is the basis of mind and identity.

Rose's assumption, which I share, is that our brains are totally crucial to our being. Not only do brain cells change imperceptibly by both development and decay, they can change catastrophically in terms of accident, deterioration and eventually brain death. Thus Rose is asserting the absolute role of the brain in identity maintenance and change. No brain – no identity.

I found the book by Rose a fascinating read. He's making the simple and yet enormously consequential point that, to put it in the mouth of Heraclitus: You never step in the same brain twice !! You recall that Heraclitus actually said: *You never step in the same river*

twice. Change is endemic. Identity is therefore not only belief dependent, it also brain dependent.

Woolfson's ideas read as if they were science fiction – but which may become true. One of his chapters is titled: *Reprogramming Life*. Another is titled: *Making Creatures From Scratch*.

Then there are the challenging ideas of the philosopher Dan Dennett.

... in principle you could replace your wet, organic brain with a bunch of silicon chips and wires and go right on thinking (and being conscious and so forth).
(Dennett 2005 p 135).

I'm interested in issues of artificial intelligence and consciousness, (Edelman and Tononi 2000, McGinn 2004) but I will leave you to ponder the implications of Dennett's typically provocative statement.

Habermas (2003) has only two main chapters in his book which explores the implications of genetic research on human identity and ethical issues:

Are There Postmetaphysical Answers To The Question: What is the good life ?

The Debate on the Ethical Self-Understanding of the Species.

The final somewhat chilling sentence in his book is as follows:

Would not the first human being to determine, at his own discretion, the natural essence of another human being at the same time destroy the equal freedoms that exist among persons of equal birth in order to ensure their difference ? (Original emphasis).

Conclusion

For myself, I like it best when I have no such simple and public 'identity'. I don't know what I 'am', and I don't especially want to. (Philip Pullman 'The Guardian' 19 November 2005).

How do we help people secure their identity in the modern world ? Andy Burnham MP, Home Office Minister. 'The Guardian' 22 November 2005.

The beliefs which we hold arise from the narratives which we tell ourselves about who we are (or might be), what we ought to be (or have the potential to be) and what the world is (or may be) like. Beliefs are our basic assumptions about our being. Beliefs are not 'things' which exist in their own right independently of the cultural milieu. They are mental symbols and processes by which we engage with others and with the world. Different cultures inculcate different beliefs and people in different cultures therefore have different senses of their identity because they believe different things about themselves and about the world.

Identity is symbolic. *Whatever you say it is, it isn't.* Korzybski.

I now pose six questions:

- 1 What do you believe ?
- 2 Why do you believe these things ?
- 3 What are the implications of your beliefs ?
- 4 What would happen to you if you changed your beliefs ?
- 5 What would convince you that you needed to change your beliefs ?
- 6 Do you find that you believe some things which you would rather not believe and which cause you difficulties ? If so, why do you continue to believe them ?

And finally.

You will have noticed that the government is determined to introduce identity cards at a cut price rate of £30. At last I can know who I am. However, this apparent good news needs to be balanced by the increase of identity theft. So, having found out who I am, I am in danger of you stealing my identity. You will then be able to believe that you are me. What might be our response to each other on our first meeting after you had stolen my identity ? Of course, you wouldn't really believe that you were me – you would only pretend that you were me.

That leads me to wonder whether I really believe that I am me or whether I sometimes pretend to be me. Talk about identity crisis !! And it's all the government's fault for introducing the wretched ID cards. Last year, I understand, 70,000 families had the identities of dead relatives stolen.

I noted, as did you, that on 8 November 2005 a man was jailed for 21 months for stealing the identity of a baby 23 years ago. He refused to admit his true identity. The baby died 20 years ago. Since then this man has claimed to be the Earl of Buckingham, and has asserted that his son would inherit his peerage. The police will be examining the contents of a deposit box in Zurich in the hope of establishing his true identity. (BBC News).

All this made me wonder. How did earls originally come to have the identity of real earls? Why does this man have a false identity ? What would happen if the deposit box in Zurich reveals what the authorities deem to be his 'real' identity ? Will the man consequently change his identity ? Why should he ?

I suggest that if you intend to steal my identity you might wait until I'm dead. But note that you could be imprisoned for pretending to be me !

And now, will the real Earl of Buckingham with the real identity please stand up ?

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