

## Unraveling Beliefs

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If I were an average white woman living in the United States in 1850, I would already have been dead for ten years. Not an ideal position from which to contemplate optimism about the future, you say. But consider this: In the course of 150 years, the life expectancy of this group catapulted from a dismal forty to a respectable eighty years.

How can life expectancy, seemingly determined by biology and the conditions of one's life, double so fast? Advances in science and technology are drivers of the rapid changes in nutrition, medical care, and standards of living that account for this doubling. But such advances were possible because of something else: changes in the mental states we call beliefs – beliefs about the worth of a life, beliefs about what it means to be happy, beliefs about health and prosperity, including about who deserves it and who does not.

Many others in this volume will speak about specific accomplishments that are grounds for optimism. I am inclined to focus on an aspect of the mind, because I believe it's the font of our optimism. I am bullish about the mind's ability to unravel the beliefs contained within it – including beliefs about its own nature. What makes me optimistic is the ability of humans everywhere to go against the grain of their beliefs – beliefs that are familiar, feel natural and right, and once appeared to be

fundamentally true. We can (and do) unravel the contents of traditional beliefs and even the process by which they were constructed.

We've done this sort of unraveling many times before, whether it is about the relationship of the sun to the earth or the relationship of other species to us. We've put aside what seemed natural and felt right, in favor of the opposite. I am optimistic that we are now ready to do the same with questions about the nature of our own minds. From the work of pioneers such as Herb Simon, Amos Tversky, and Danny Kahneman, we know that the beliefs about our own minds that come naturally, feel right, and are easy to accept aren't necessarily true. We know that bounds on our rationality keep us from making decisions that are in our interest and that of those we love, in the long-term interest of our societies and even the planet (even perhaps the universe, with which we will surely have greater opportunity to interact in this century).

Research on the implicit beliefs and preferences we hold has shown that such 'mind bugs' extend to the beliefs and preferences we have not only about members of our own social groups but also about those farther away on the social scale. We don't intend to discriminate or treat people unfairly, but we do. Such unintended consequences come from aspects of our mind that seem natural (helping somebody close to us, like a neighbor or a nephew, rather than somebody distant) and feels right (fearing somebody who looks physically different from us). Such responses are natural and feel right because they evolved in a world where such responses were doubtless useful. And yet they continue to operate.

Becoming aware of the buggy aspects of our minds is the first step toward unraveling them. How we discover what needs

unraveling, how we do it, and how successful we are at it are complex issues. But the *fact* that we do it is impressive. One of the stories to come out of the 2006 election is that some of the congressmen who had been successful at bringing home earmarks to their states lost anyway, because the voters cared about something larger than their own backyards. The ability to think about one's own long-term interest, to self-regulate, to delay gratification, to consider the well-being of the collective – especially, to view the collective as unbounded by religion, language, or nationality – requires a mental leap that isn't natural or easy, yet each new generation seems to be able to do it more successfully than the previous one. The standards for how we treat ourselves and others get higher, we examine our beliefs with more and more powerful lenses, and we turn our minds inside out and shake out the rot.

Why do we do this? For at least three reasons. First of all, because new laws demand it. Second, it is in our self-interest. Third, and most important, we unravel existing beliefs and preferences because we wish them to be in line with our intentions and aspirations and we have recognized that they are not. I see evidence of this realignment everywhere – small acts undertaken so that one may be the person one wishes to be rather than the person one is – and it is the constant attempt at this realignment that gives me optimism.

## Long-Term Trends Toward Honesty to Others and Oneself

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What goes up comes down, what goes around comes around, for each action there is a reaction, and so on. Life is intrinsically self-correcting at almost all its levels, including evolutionary, physiological, historical, and genetic. This permits a limited optimism. Wickedness and stupidity are ultimately self-destructive and self-limiting, so we need not trouble ourselves that any particular trend in that direction will go on indefinitely.

On the other hand, the principle of self-correction also applies to love, friendship, and high intellectual powers. No movement in these directions can proceed long without setting up counterpressures against their further spread. In short, we should neither be too despondent nor too elated at the trajectory of current events. Sooner or later – and usually sooner – they will be reversed.

Two questions arise:

Are there long-term trends we can feel optimistic about? Thirty years of work on the evolutionary trajectory of cooperative strategies suggest long-term trends (under a broad range of conditions) toward greater cooperation, contingent on ever more sophisticated discrimination. It seems likely that when similar models are produced for varying degrees of deceit and self-deception, long-term trends toward honesty to others and oneself will (at least under some conditions) be favored.