Understanding Beliefs

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Beliefs are central to political psychology, but in many ways remain undertheorized. A good starting place for further thought is the typology of Smith, Bruner, and White that separates reality testing from the social and psychological functions of beliefs. The concept of beliefs has several connotations, some of which involve faith and emotions. It is often difficult to grasp others' beliefs, especially when they are foreign to us or morally repugnant. It is even more difficult to determine whether beliefs are powerful in the sense of determining behavior and autonomous in the sense of not being directly derivable from other factors. The Smith, Bruner, and White typology is useful here, helps us understand the operation of biases, and points to the multiple roles that beliefs play in people's lives, including managing trade-offs and generating what looks to others like hypocrisy.

The question with which Smith, Bruner, and White began their classic *Opinions and Personality* 50 years ago is still appropriate today, albeit with a change in the pronoun: "Of what use to man are his opinions?" (1956, p. 1; also see Eagly & Chaiken, 1998, pp. 303–309; George, 1958; Hammond, 1996, chapter 11; Herek, 1987; Katz, 1960; Sarnoff & Katz, 1954; Tetlock, 2002). I think their answer was essentially correct as well: People adopt opinions not only to understand the world, but also to meet the psychological and social needs to live with themselves and others. I want to use this basic insight to examine some of the puzzles in what people believe. Since I specialize in international politics, I will draw most of my examples from that realm but do not think what we see there is limited to this arena.[1]

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[1] My concern is with beliefs that matter a great deal to the individual and so I will put aside discussion of nonattitudes and the stability of political beliefs in the general public (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992).

Beliefs and Related Concepts

There are terminological and conceptual thickets surrounding the words we use here. I will focus on beliefs partly about facts but more about cause-and-effect relationships. How do things work? Why do others act as they do? What will be the consequences of my own behavior? Definitions of related terms differ and the notions of beliefs, opinions, attitudes, ideas, and even policy preferences overlap and interweave. Attitudes and opinions involve a strong evaluative component. Indeed, this dimension often dominates, as when people say they have a negative attitude toward radical Islam even if they know little about it. But when an attitude is different from a purely subjective taste, it also involves causal claims. For example, I abhor radical Islam because I think it produces oppression and violence toward other religions.

Overtones of Beliefs

Although my focus is on beliefs in the sense of what people think about causes and effects, it is noteworthy that the term is used in other senses as well, and I think this tells us that equating beliefs with scientific or social scientific knowledge would be limiting. Although political psychologists rarely deal with statements like the following, they are important to people's lives: "I believe in God." "I believe I am falling in love." "I believe that it is vital to win the war in Iraq." Even this abbreviated list illustrates three things. First, beliefs can refer to inner states as well as outer realities. We often interpret our feelings and seek to understand exactly what it is that we believe. Second, beliefs and statements about beliefs can be exhortatory. To say "I believe we must do this" is to urge others—and ourselves—on. Statements like "I believe my views will prevail" combine these two elements.

The third and perhaps most important point is that many beliefs have a strong element of commitment and faith, even when religion is not involved. Scientists say that they believe in their theories or findings, and this often means not only that they have confidence in their validity, but that they are important to them and that it is important that others accept them as well. When people talk about "beliefs to live by," moral and empirical considerations are fused. When people say that they believe that democracy can be brought to the Middle East and that doing so will make this a better world, they are combining how they see the evidence and what their values and desires lead them to think should and must be true. The other side of this coin is revealed by a doctor's response to his critics' rejection of his findings that a controversial treatment helped many victims of a heart attack: he said they suffered from "emotional disbelief" (quoted in Wade, 2005).

One can argue that this only shows that the word "belief" has multiple meanings and that we would be better off separating them and attaching different labels to each. I suspect, however, that the common term may be pointing to something deeper, which is the inextricable role of emotion in sensible thought.

Over the past decade or so, psychologists and political psychologists have come to see (to "believe"?) that a sharp separation between cognition and affect is impossible and that a person who embodied pure rationality, undisturbed by emotion, would be a monster if she were not an impossibility (for good summaries, see McDermott, 2004; Marcus, 2000, 2003; Zajonc, 1998).

Investigating Beliefs

We want to understand why people believe what they do, whether these beliefs are warranted by the available evidence, and whether they are correct. Although these tasks are different, we often fuse them. Thus we often think that correct beliefs require no explanation, implicitly assuming that they are self-evident and follow directly from commonly available evidence. But we often believe as much in the face of evidence as because of it, and in some of these cases we turn out to be correct. In other cases, correct beliefs may be adopted to smooth our relations with others or to increase our psychological comfort.

Wrong Beliefs May Be Sensible and Sincere

It is then tempting, but a mistake, to seek to explain correct beliefs in a way fundamentally different from the way we explain incorrect ones (Laudan, 1977). Nevertheless, people are prone to associate faulty reasoning processes with incorrect beliefs even when more careful analysis would indicate that this comforting association does not hold. Given the complexity and ambiguity of our world, it is unfortunately true that beliefs for which a good deal of evidence can be mustered often turn out to be mistaken (for an application to intelligence, see Jervis, 2006).

In parallel, we often have difficulty taking seriously beliefs with which we disagree. This is not only a mistake, it is also disrespectful of the people we are trying to understand. When someone believes something that we cannot, we often ask whether she is a fool or a knave. This is obviously most likely to be the case with beliefs that are now unpopular. Thus because most academics believe that it was a mistake for the United States to have fought in Vietnam, they cannot believe that a sensible person could have accepted the domino theory. Rather than explore what evidence the people who held these beliefs pointed to, what theories of politics were implicitly evoked, and why a more complacent view did not seem compelling, they seek hidden motives and psychological pressures. These may indeed have been present, but the fact that most of us now find the domino theory disastrously incorrect should not lead us to conclude it was not central to decision makers. Similarly, if the reconstruction of Iraq and other events in the Middle East continue to go badly, future generations are likely to reject the idea that Bush and his colleagues actually believed that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or expected his overthrow to produce democracy, concluding instead that they must have been motivated by concern for oil and Israel.

Grasping others' incorrect beliefs also poses severe difficulties for contemporary observers. Thus it was very hard for American leaders to believe that Japan would attack Pearl Harbor, even though they (partly) expected an attack against the Philippines. Knowing that Japan could not win this war made the Japanese beliefs inaccessible. During the run-up to the war in Iraq it was similarly impossible for outsiders to see that Saddam was more afraid of his generals, his people, and Iran than he was of the United States, with the result that everyone—even opponents of the war—concluded that his refusal to fully cooperate with the UN showed that he was developing WMD.

It is especially hard to appreciate the empirical beliefs that underpin views that are now morally unacceptable, for example those supporting slavery. It is then very tempting to attribute the beliefs to economic interests, which spares us the difficulty and the pain of reconstructing a worldview in which slavery appeared appropriate, effective, and beneficial for all. The line between understanding and approving is too thin to make this a comfortable task.

Ambivalence and Unawareness

It may be hard to tell what a person believes because she is ambivalent, confused, or contradictory. We sometimes say that a person does not know her own mind, and we often half believe something, or simultaneously believe it and do not. I think this was the case with whether Kissinger and Nixon believed that the peace agreement with North Vietnam could be sustained. They were under no illusions that the North had given up its commitment to take over the South. With its troops already in the South and a large army on its own territory, the North could be restrained only by the fear that blatantly breaking the agreement would call forth an American military response, most obviously a resumption of bombing. Nixon and Kissinger told themselves, each other, and the South Vietnamese that this threat was credible enough to prevent major North Vietnamese violations and that they would carry it out if it were not. While it is impossible to be certain whether they believed what they were saying, my guess is that what they were expressing was something between a hope and an expectation. They partly believed it, or believed it on some days but not others, or believed it with some probability but less than certainty. A related way of thinking was revealed by the diary entry of a top Foreign Office official after Hitler seized the non-German parts of Czechoslovakia: "I always said that, as long as Hitler *could pretend* he was incorporating Germans in the Reich, we *could pretend* that he had a case" (Dilks, 1972, p. 161, emphasis added).

Further problems are created by the fact that the driving beliefs may be so widely shared they need never be expressed, at least not in a way that is connected with specific actions. Because they are rarely analyzed by the person, we often call them "assumptions," and we need to excavate them, as Joll (1972) did in "1914: The Unspoken Assumptions" in which he argues that the specific beliefs discussed

below say less about the origins of World War I than does the prevailing intellectual climate that was built on Social Darwinism and the outlook that the leaders absorbed when they were in school. In other cases, the driving beliefs may not be voiced because they are disreputable or illegitimate. Thus a search of even confidential or private documents will rarely reveal an American decision maker saying that he favored overthrowing a Third World regime in order to benefit American corporations or further his own domestic political interests. Although the person will not express these views, here he or she perhaps is aware of them.

In a third category of cases even this is not true (and one might therefore question whether they should be called beliefs at all). It is not only those schooled in psychoanalysis[2] who argue that we do not understand how we reach many of our conclusions because much cognitive processing is beyond the reach of conscious thought (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2002). The reasons we give for many of our beliefs are sincere in that we do believe them, but these are stories we tell ourselves as well as others because we understand as little about what is driving our beliefs as we do about what is driving others. To extend the previous example, someone who was in fact moved to favor military intervention because of economic or political interests might not be aware of this because of the strong societal norms of putting national security interests first. All we can do is infer operative beliefs from behavior, often by arguing that the explicit reasons given are implausible. As I noted earlier, this is how many scholars explain the U.S. policy in Vietnam. It is not surprising that arguments in this vein will be particularly contentious. Those who use ego-dynamic may look for Freudian slips and Marxists will look for benefits accruing to large corporations, but it is hard to get evidence that will carry weight with people who approach these questions from different perspectives. Skepticism here, like that called up by the concept of false consciousness, is warranted but does not do away with the problem that people's self-knowledge is sharply limited.

Understanding Beliefs

Understanding beliefs means trying to fathom what caused them and what consequences they had. We are interested in whether beliefs are powerful in the sense of producing behavior and autonomous in the sense of not directly following from other factors. To return to the Smith, Bruner, and White formulation, this means trying to determine the relative weights of reality appraisal, personal needs, and social adjustment. The latter two are similar in that they serve purposes other than seeking an accurate view of the world, and we can refer to them together as a functional explanation because they explain the person's beliefs by the social and psychological functions that they serve.

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[2] The classic applications of Freud to politics are the works of Harold Lasswell.

This is not to say that the line between appraisal and functionality is always clear or to deny that many of the ways in which we try to make sense of our world combine them. Susan Clancy's fascinating and empathetic but not credulous study of why people come to believe that they had been abducted by space aliens shows how this belief not only renders coherent what was previously confused, but also provides an explanation that, while disturbing on one level, gives a meaning that restores a form of integrity to the person's life. One chapter is titled "Why Would I Want to Believe It?", which indicates both that people ward off attacks on their beliefs by claiming there could be no ulterior (or interior) motive and that there can be quite different but reinforcing reasons for holding beliefs.

Consistency and Excess Reasons

It is often hard to tell what beliefs were causal, not only in separating statements the person knows are false from what she "really" believes, but in the sense of determining which of a plethora of justifications played the largest role. In examining the beliefs that precede action, we often find claims that contradict or are in some tension with one another and see people generating more arguments for the conclusions than would be necessary to produce them. While these two phenomena are in one sense opposites, the first revealing inconsistencies and the second displaying excess reasons or belief overkill, they have common psychological roots in the conflicting needs of reality appraisal and serving psychological, social, and political functions. In the end, definitive conclusions are often beyond reach, but the exploration of why this is so is itself illuminating, as we can see in the beliefs leading to World War I.

The story, especially on the German side, at first seems straightforward. The war was essentially a preventive one. German leaders felt that an eventual war was inevitable, that Germany could win it at a relatively low price if it were fought in 1914, and that growing Russian military strength meant that Germany would lose or at least greatly suffer if the war was postponed. At bottom there remains much to this argument; indeed, I do not think there is a better one-sentence explanation of the war. But there are problems (a good summary is Herwig, 2003).

We find forms of troubling inconsistency. One is temporal: these beliefs were quite long-lasting yet did not produce war prior to 1914. Part of the reason for the different effect is that events in the preceding years deepened the beliefs and created a sense of urgency, compounded by the fact that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand allowed Germany to mobilize both its Austro-Hungarian ally and its domestic opinion. But I do not think this entirely disposes of the problem since the basic German geostrategic problem was not new.

There are other forms of inconsistency as well. German policy in July 1914 had as its preferred outcome not war with Russia, but the Russian abandonment of its Serbian client, perhaps because Russia itself feared being deserted by Britain and France if it fought. The problem is not so much that such a Russian retreat was

unlikely (German leaders recognized this) as it is that this "solution" would not have dealt with the fundamental threat of growing Russian strength. Indeed, if Russia had been forced to back down it probably would have stepped up its rearmament, and even if the bonds between Russia, Britain, and France were severed, there was no reason to believe that this would be permanent. At best, Germany's nightmare would be postponed, not eliminated. This means that it is hard to square German hopes for peace with the beliefs that are posited to be central for the decision to go to war.

Another inconsistency appears in the beliefs themselves. Although many statements support the position that the decision makers thought that the war would be short, there were discordant notes. The Russian defense minister realized that signing the mobilization orders might be sentencing his country to death, the British Foreign Secretary famously said at dawn of the day Britain went to war: "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our life-time," and the Chief of the German General Staff declared that war "would destroy the culture of almost the whole of Europe for decades to come" (quoted in Mombauer, 2001, p. 202; also see p. 206). Furthermore, Germany respected Holland's neutrality in order to permit the entry of supplies from neutrals and most German leaders were deeply disturbed when Great Britain joined the war. These responses would not make sense if the war was expected to end quickly.

In casting doubt on what the decision makers believed, these inconsistencies open up four lines of inquiry. First, it can be extremely difficult to determine what people really believe. We might want to rule this a metaphysical question that we should not ask. But then we would have to abandon much of the notion of beliefs.

The second point shows why this would be a mistake: knowing whether German leaders thought the war would be long or short points us toward very different explanations of their behavior. If they thought a war would be short (and that they would win it), it would be seen as relatively cheap, which means that any number of impulses could have produced war. But if the war was expected to be long (and therefore very costly), only the strongest motivation would have been sufficient to overcome the obvious reasons not to fight. In the same way, the initial scholarship on the Vietnam war assumed that American decision makers believed that they could win quite quickly. This focused people on why the officials were so wrong (the "quagmire theory"), with less attention paid to the motives to fight because the decision seemed relatively easy if the price tag was believed to be low. But when the publication of the *Pentagon Papers* revealed that the leaders had fairly accurate perceptions of the costs and risks, the question to be answered was not why they so misperceived the likely course of the war, but what goals and beliefs were so pressing as to make them fight in the face of such daunting prospects.

A third line of inquiry is whether we can explain the contradiction in the beliefs in 1914 by reality appraisal or whether they were strongly functional. I will discuss this general topic in more detail later, but the obvious point is that holding

to discrepant beliefs allowed decision makers to keep in touch with the possibility that turned out to be the case without having to abandon the belligerent policy that they felt was necessary. They *had* to believe that the war would be short. To have seen that it not be would have put them in an intolerable position because if they could not fight, they would have had to alter many of their policies, beliefs, and values. The historian Elie Halevy argues that the diplomatic and strategic inter-connections linking the European states were so tight and obvious that "every one knew, *who chose to know*" that an Austrian attack on Serbia would bring in all the other Continental powers (1966, pp. 232–233). But the phrase I have italicized is a telling one—people can indeed choose not to know things when knowing them would generate terrible pressures.

A final question in this series is about the consistency of people's beliefs. Scholars greatly value consistency. Consistency to them means rigor, logic, and rationality; its lack implies error if not moral weakness. Although as I will discuss below, decision makers do feel pressures for consistency on some occasions, they do not appear to put it among their highest values. Perhaps because they are not trained to seek great rigor, perhaps because they see life as full of contradictions, and perhaps because they appreciate the extent to which seeming inconsistencies can bring political success, they do contradictory things and hold contradictory beliefs. When Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, "I am a juggler, and I never let my right hand know what my left hand does" (quoted in Kimball, 1991, p. 7), he was only being more explicit than most. So when we look at his policy toward Japan before Pearl Harbor it may not be surprising that in November 1941 he seemed to believe: the United States should enter the war as soon as possible; Germany not Japan was the main enemy; the United States was so much stronger than Japan that the latter would not dare attack; economic sanctions against Japan might not force that country to comply with American demands; Japan was likely to attack the Philippines (an American possession) in the belief that the United States would otherwise use it as a base to interdict Japanese attacks on British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies; but Japan would not attack Pearl Harbor.

At times, inconsistencies can be used to uncover the beliefs that are driving a person's stance. This is especially true when people claim to be following a principled belief but change their conclusions depending on the principle's sub-stantive implications. For example, at first glance it would seem that American conservatives uphold the principles of decentralization, Federalism, and states' rights and that liberals want to give more power to the central government. But each group has no difficulty endorsing the "wrong" position when it leads to the "right" outcome. Thus conservatives favor taking class-action suits out of the hands of state courts, pass legislation that removes much of the state and local control over education, and prevent states from permitting assisted suicide or the medicinal use of marijuana. Liberals, being no more consistent, shamelessly call for states' rights here. Conservatives generally see genes as playing a large role in human behavior, but make an exception for sexual orientation, which liberals, who

usually stress the role of the environment, see as fixed. In the foreign policy area, beliefs about whether a policy of "engagement" will be efficacious are almost always driven not by general beliefs about cause-and-effect relationships, but rather by how deeply the person abhors the regime in question. During the Cold War liberals urged engagement with Eastern Europe but isolation for South Africa, while conservatives took the opposite position.

If it is sometimes difficult to analyze the causal role of beliefs because they are inconsistent, in other cases people adduce more beliefs than are necessary to produce the behavior. The war in Iraq provides a nice example. Bush and his colleagues apparently believed that: Saddam had a large and growing WMD program; there were close links between his regime and al Qaeda; the war would be quick; political reconstruction would be relatively easy; and liberation would light the path for the rest of the Middle East. This is odd. If a nuclear-armed Iraq could not have been deterred from coercing its neighbors, then this menace to American interests was sufficient to have triggered war. If Saddam was harboring al Qaeda, this by itself could have led to an invasion, as it did in Afghanistan. Had the prospects for establishing democracy in Iraq been great and likely to trigger positive domino effects throughout the region, then overthrowing Saddam would have been a great opportunity even if there were no pressing danger. It is the excess rather than the paucity of reasons that confuses us. This is probably why Richard Haass, who was head of the State Department Policy Planning Staff during the run-up to the war and personally heard all of these beliefs expressed, replied to the question of why the administration went to war by declaring: "I will go to my grave not knowing that. I can't answer it" (quoted in Lemann, 2004, p. 157).

In order to disentangle excess beliefs and determine which of them were primarily responsible for the policy, we can try to see which was most compatible with what the person believed over a prolonged period as well as fitting with other actions she had taken.[3] Although this assumes a degree of consistency that, as I have noted, may be problematic, it is noteworthy that Bush and his colleagues consistently held a healthy—or unhealthy—respect for the utility of American force in world politics. Although this still leaves us with the question of the sources of these beliefs (and there is no logical stopping place once we start down that road, important as it is to explore),[4] this at least tells us that the claim that force would work was not developed in order to justify the war.

A second long-standing belief was that while force is efficacious, deterrence is flawed. This position was taken by leaders of the Bush administration during the Cold War when they (except for Bush, who was not deeply involved in these questions) strongly favored nuclear counterforce and missile defense. Their belief

[3] For a similar demonstration that the positions taken by American leaders on what emerged as the Monroe Doctrine can only be explained by their maneuvering for domestic advantage, see May, 1975.
[4] For a good study of the sources of beliefs in historical explanations, see Roberts, 1996, chapter 10.

that an Iraq armed with nuclear weapons could not be deterred from coercing its neighbors fit with this outlook, even if it was badly flawed (Jervis, 2005, chapter 3).

It is harder to find roots for the belief that there were serious links between al Qaeda and Saddam, even putting aside the lack of evidence and plausibility for the claim. No one reached this conclusion before they contemplated invading Iraq, and the speed and avidity with which Bush and his colleagues searched for Saddam's connections to terrorism suggest a conclusion in need of justification. So I think it would be reasonable to doubt that this belief was an independent pillar of the behavior.

The final set of beliefs supporting the war concerned democracy: democracies are peaceful and share interests with each other; democracy could readily be established in Iraq once Saddam was overthrown; the example of Iraq would encourage democratic movements throughout the region. Were these beliefs a foundation of the policy? Bush and the advisors he most relied on did not have a history of propounding these beliefs and had not hesitated to cooperate with tyrannical regimes in the past. Furthermore, although September 11, 2001, changed a great deal, there is no reason why it should have led anyone to have greater faith in democracy as the antidote to world problems. Indeed the value of democracy and the possibility of spreading it was not stressed during the run-up to the war but only became salient in the wake of the failure to find WMD. So here too the causal role of the beliefs is questionable.

Reality Appraisal

The difficulty of determining whether and how particular beliefs affect behavior stems in part from the fact that they can form for quite different reasons. Further exploration then requires us to return to the categories used by Smith, Bruner, and White.

Many of our beliefs are dominated by the need to understand our environments, and almost all of them embody an element of this objective. It is impossible here to summarize how reality appraisal operates, but central is the fact that the world is so complex and our information processing capabilities so limited that in significant measure people must be theory driven. Beliefs are hard won from our world, and so it is not only ego that leads us to be quite attached to them. Although this model of people as "cognitive misers" (see, e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991) needs to be modified by the findings that people will deploy more cognitive resources in areas that are most important to them, that people vary in the extent to which they are theory driven, and that people who are more open to discrepant evidence tend to make more accurate predictions (see, e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Tetlock, 2005), there remains much to the basic argument.

Four implications follow for how beliefs operate. First, people are strongly influenced by their expectations: people tend to see what they expect to see. In international politics perhaps the most striking examples come from cases of

surprise attack (the literature is very large: key works include Betts, 1982; Whaley, 1973; Wohlstetter, 1962; also see Jervis, 1976, chapter 4). The Israelis were certain that Egypt lacked the military strength to attack in 1973 and so misinterpreted what in hindsight were obvious tip-offs that an attack was coming;[5] in April 1940 the British and Norwegians were so sure that Germany would not expose its forces to British naval superiority that they were unmoved by their sinking a transport containing German soldiers who told them that they were on their way to invade Norway; when Secretary of War Stimson was told of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he said "My God, this can't be true. This [message] must mean the Philippines," where he had expected the attack; when a Soviet front-line unit reported coming under German artillery fire as the latter country attacked, it received the reply, "You must be insane. And why is your signal not in code?" (quoted in Ransom, 1958, p. 54; quoted in Erickson, 1962, p. 587).

Of course these cases are selected on the dependent variable, to use a phrase common in political science, because we are looking only at instances of surprise. This makes it impossible for us to say that this cognitive bias is a central cause of error. Indeed most correct inferences are also strongly influenced by expectations, leading to the second implication of the role of theory-driven beliefs, which is that a proposition is most likely to be accepted when it is seen as plausible—i.e., when it fits with more general beliefs. This is why almost everyone interpreted the scattered and ambiguous evidence as showing that Saddam Hussein had vigorous WMD programs (Jervis, 2006). This inference made a great deal of sense, as the regime had used gas against Iran and its own Kurds, pursued nuclear weapons before the Gulf War, initially tried to maintain these programs despite UN sanctions, and engaged in a great deal of denial and deception. Without this background, the intelligence reports would have been read very differently.

The third general proposition is that judgments of plausibility can be self-reinforcing as ambiguous evidence is taken not only to be consistent with preexisting beliefs, but to confirm them. Logically, the latter is the case only when the evidence both fits with the belief and does not fit with competing ones. But people rarely probe the latter possibility as carefully as they should, assuming it instead.

The fourth implication of theory-driven processing is that the model of Bayesian up-dating not only does not but cannot fully apply (for a good review, see Gerber & Green, 1999). The basic point of Bayesianism is that people should and do modify their beliefs according to the likelihood that observed new events or information should occur if the prior beliefs are correct. The difficulty is that people who hold different beliefs will see the new event or information in different ways, and there is no objective arbiter to which we can appeal. This is not a problem when we are trying to adjust our estimate of whether a jar has more blue balls than red ones as they are drawn out at random. The evidence of a ball's color

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[5] A recent reexamination of the Israeli case stresses not general cognitive processes but the rigid views and personality of the head of Israeli intelligence: Bar-Joseph & Kruglanski, 2003.

is clear enough so that people can agree on it irrespective of their priors. This is sometimes true in politics, but often is not. For example, supporters of the Bush administration would argue that the events in countries like Lebanon and Egypt in the months following the Iraqi elections in January 2005 show how the American policy is reshaping the Middle East. Those who disagree not only argue that their beliefs need not be fundamentally changed because they are underpinned by so much other evidence, but dispute the interpretation of these events themselves, seeing them as either superficial or as products of internal politics. In other words, the inevitable impact of priors on new "facts" undercuts the thrust of a significant part of the Bayesian model.

Although—and because—we need theories, strong beliefs, and expectations in order to make any sense of our complex and contradictory world, reality appraisal can lead us astray. But, more importantly, this is not the only impulse shaping our beliefs, as Smith, Bruner, and White so clearly showed.

Functions of Beliefs

Functional explanations of beliefs cast doubt on their causal role. A full understanding of how beliefs operate requires backward as well as forward linkages; we need to look for the causes as well as the consequences of the beliefs in order to see whether the connection between beliefs and behavior is spurious with both being driven by a common third factor. Beliefs may be rationalizations for policies as well as rationales for them. When social, political, and personal needs are strong, the results can be summarized by the saying, "If you want something really bad, you will get it really bad." The explanation for why a policy is adopted and why it was carried out so incompetently often are linked as the need to see that it can succeed will diminish reality appraisal and draw the actor into a conceptual and perceptual world that, while comfortable, cannot provide good guidance for behavior.

If the discussion of reality appraisal and how it goes wrong is linked to cognitive biases, the functions of beliefs are linked to motivated ones.[6] People's needs to work with others, further their political goals, and live with themselves tap into their emotions and drive them to certain beliefs. A classic demonstration is the study by Hastorf and Cantril (1954), "They Saw a Game." Purely cognitive biases cannot explain why students at Dartmouth and Princeton who viewed films of a penalty-filled game between their two football teams saw the other side as at fault. When we look at elite beliefs and decision making, we see four overlapping areas in which motivated biases are at work and beliefs are highly functional. These are the hesitancy to recognize painful value trade-offs, the psychological

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[6] On the difficulties and possibilities of separating kinds of biases, see Kaufmann, 1994; Tetlock & Levi, 1982. For a general discussion of motivated processing, see Spencer, Fein, Zanna, & Olson, 2003; also see Pears, 1984.

and political need for people to see that their policies will work, the impact on beliefs of goals and feelings of which people are unaware, and the propensity of people to infer their own beliefs from how they behave.

One can reply that these sorts of functional pressures are unlikely because they imply knowledge of the very cognitions that people are trying to ward off, if not the conclusions to which they are being steered. At times, the line between awareness and lack of it is very thin. People often say things like "I don't think that this is something I want to hear about," or "That is a subject we are better off not analyzing."[7] But beyond this borderline a great deal of cognitive processing is preconscious, and the understanding that a certain position *must* be affirmed can affect the person's thinking without her being aware of it. One does not have to accept Freudian notions of the unconscious and repression to conclude that we can be strongly influenced by impulses of which we are unaware. The requirement for bolstering beliefs can be triggered by the implicit realization that the decision is a hard one and that more thorough analysis could lead to high conflict. When people lack good choices, they are likely to imagine that the one they select is better than it is.

Varied forms of self-deception are then common in politics, but they are not unique to this realm, as novels make clear. Scientists also feel the same social and psychological pressures, and Richard Feynman famously said to his fellow-scientists: "The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool." This is one reason why errors in science are often detected by people not involved in the original discoveries and why the scientific community cannot be trusted to make unbiased judgments about the danger of experiments and technologies in which it has a large stake.

Avoiding Painful Trade-Offs

In difficult political and psychological situations, reality appraisal, far from pointing the way out, can be a menace to the person if the reality it points to is too painful to contemplate. My first discussion of the tendency to avoid value trade-offs (Jervis, 1976, pp. 128–142) treated it as cognitive, but this was a mistake because its roots are primarily motivated or functional. Although people often have to make trade-offs—budgets, for example, force them on us—avoidance is often possible and necessary.[8] People are especially prone to shy away from trade-offs

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[7] The importance of preconscious processing helps explain why many decisions, including ones that prove to be very successful, are made quickly and intuitively rather than on the basis of prolonged calculation: Gladwell, 2005; Larson, 2003. This also means that the person's sense that there are no viable alternatives to his policy that triggers the functional pressures may be incorrect and that a fuller and less biased search could have led to a better outcome, as we will discuss below. Under U.S. law, being willfully blind to facts or the likely consequences of one's actions can make the person legally culpable and the "ostrich" defense is of questionable value: Baker & Young, 2005; Simon, 2004.

[8] For strongly political interpretations that argue that leaders sometimes can succeed in avoiding trade-offs, see Farnham, 1997; Neustadt, 1986. Although there are obvious political reasons why

when dealing with incommensurable realms and moral choices (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997), which explains why those who oppose the use of torture on moral grounds resist the argument that its use might save lives. I would similarly predict that if Bush and his colleagues decide that the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons is truly intolerable, they will come to see the negative consequences of an air strike as quite small.

The desire to avoid trade-offs is clear in the discussion of Iraq. As a soldier's mother put it: "I know my son's there for a reason. And whatever might happen, that's the way it's supposed to be. And if I took it any other way, I'd be in a funny farm" (quoted in Abramsky, 2004, p. 11). Elites do not put it this revealingly, but their beliefs often serve the same functions. As I discussed above, proponents of the war had more reasons than they needed, and opponents differed on all these points. If reality testing were shaping the beliefs, then one should have found quite a few people who believed that while the war was necessary, it would be very costly, or who thought that while threat was present, opportunity was not (or vice versa), or that the war would be cheap, but was not necessary. But these positions are uncomfortable, and so it is not surprising that we do not find people taking them. For political leaders as well as the mother quoted earlier, if they took it any other way, they'd be in a funny farm.

Policies Call Up Supporting Beliefs

The second and relating functional source of foreign policy beliefs is the pressure generated by policies. One reason why political leaders are slow to see that their policies are failing is that good reality appraisal would force them to acknowledge the high costs and risks they are facing. Thus building on the psychological work on defensive avoidance (Janis & Mann, 1977), Richard Ned Lebow and others (Jervis, Lebow, & Stein 1985; Lebow, 1981) have shown that if the actor is committed to proceeding, even highly credible threats by the adversary are likely to be missed, misinterpreted, or ignored. This is one reason why attempts to explain wars as the product of rational choices on both sides will often fail, just as the policies themselves fail.

One of the hallmarks of the functional source of beliefs is that planning on the surface looks meticulous, but in fact is terribly deficient because it is built on unrealistic and unexamined assumptions. As Hull (2005) notes in regard to Germany thinking about colonial warfare in the early twentieth century, "realistic planning would have revealed the impossibility of the grand goals; rather than giving these up, planning itself was truncated" (p. 143; see Herwig, 2003, p. 155 for a similar discussion of German planning for World War I). Indeed, when a part of the organization does engage in effective reality appraisal, it may be neutered,

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people would want to downplay the costs of their preferred policies even if they were aware of them, the beliefs discussed here seem to have been sincere and were expressed in private as well as in public.

as was the case with a planning division in the Japanese army in the 1930s (Barnhart, 1987, pp. 200–202, 240, 258). It is tempting to dismiss this as the product of military culture, but the U.S. Forest Service, committed to stamping out all forest fires, disbanded its research arm when it showed that healthy forests required periodic burning (Schiff, 1962, pp. 169–173).

British planning for the bombardment of Germany throughout the 1930s illustrates the ways in which beliefs supporting the efficacy of a policy can be shielded from reality appraisal. The incredible costs of fighting World War I not only contributed to the subsequent appeasement policy, but also convinced the British that if war were to come, they could not fight it as they had done before. A way out was strategic bombardment that could deter devastating German air attack on Britain and win the war without having to suffer the horrendous losses of ground warfare. It then *had* to be true that an effective bomber force could be developed, and supporting beliefs were called up to meet this demand. So it is not surprising that British planners convinced themselves that the bomb loads their planes could carry would be sufficient to do grave damage to German industries and cities, that British bombers could fly without protection from fighter escorts, that the aircraft could readily find their targets, and that bombing would be accurate. Although many plans were cranked out, these central assumptions were never scrutinized. In fact, even rudimentary questioning and military exercises would have revealed that German cities were obscured by clouds much of the year, that navigation systems were not adequate to direct planes to them, that bombs would miss their targets, and that even direct hits would rarely put factories out of action for long (Carter, 1998; Jervis, 1982/83). A history of Bomber Command notes that "seldom in the history of warfare has a force been so sure of the end it sought—fulfillment of the Trenchard doctrine [of strategic bombardment]—and yet so ignorant of how this might be achieved as the RAF between the wars" (Hastings, 1979, p. 44). In fact, the certainty with which the ends were held and the ignorance about means were closely linked. Reality appraisal was unacceptable because it would have called the highly valued goals into question.

The same pressures for beliefs to support policy explain many of the deficiencies in American planning for the aftermath of the overthrow of Saddam. Reality appraisal would have been politically and psychologically painful; to have recognized that reconstruction was likely to be long, costly, and uncertain would have been to give ammunition to the war's critics. When confronted with the Army Chief of Staff's estimate that it would take several hundred thousand troops to garrison Iraq, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz told Congress "it's hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself. . . . Hard to imagine" (quoted in Slevin & Priest, 2003). This was indeed a failure of imagination, but under these circumstances imagination could not be allowed free rein. It is hard to ask important questions and conduct unbiased analysis when the answers may be unacceptable.

Beliefs Supporting the Established Order

The third function of beliefs is much broader, consisting of people's conceptions of the political and social structures that gratify them. In his pioneering study, Lippmann (1922) argued that stereotypes form not only because they permit "economy of effort," but because they "may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society" (p. 95). Marxists—and cynics—analyze the beliefs of the ruling classes in this way. During the Cold War, members of the political and economic elite who incorrectly said that the establishment of revolutionary regimes anywhere in the world would menace American security interests were not lying. Rather, the knowledge that such regimes would adversely affect their economic interests led them to believe that American national security was at stake as well. People in the upper income brackets can cite many reasons why cutting their taxes would benefit the entire economy and pull others out of poverty. These beliefs, which can involve somewhat complicated economics, are not insincere, but they nevertheless derive from personal interest.

Beliefs about what is right and just may have similar roots. Carr (1946) famously showed how the morality espoused by status quo states nicely justified the prevailing arrangements that suited them so well; most Americans join president Bush in believing that the vigorous exercise of American power abroad is in the world's interest. Looking within U.S. society, trial lawyers believe that unimpeded access to the courts for liability and class action suits is the best way to control rapacious companies; police officers believe that the establishment of civilian oversight boards will encourage criminals to produce false claims and defy the police; professors believe that government support for universities in general and their specializations in particular will produce a stronger and better society (but that government direction of research harms these goals). Some or all of these beliefs may be correct, but they are remarkably convenient.

Beliefs Produced By Actions

In contrast to the usual method of explaining actions by the beliefs that we think generated them, the previous pages have discussed how beliefs form to provide rationalizations for actions. In the final category of cases, actions not only produce beliefs, but, once formed, these new beliefs influence later actions. The theory was developed over 30 years ago by Daryl Bem, and the basic point is related to the one noted above that people often do not know why they act as they do. They then implicitly analyze their own behavior in the same way they analyze that of others and ask what beliefs and motives could have been responsible for it (Bem, 1972; also see Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993). Answers like inadvertence, fleeting impulses, the desire to do something and get on with it, all seem inappropriate if not frivolous and, although often correct, are rejected. Instead, the

person looks for more serious and lasting beliefs and motives, and then attributes her behavior to them. This would be no more than a psychological curiosity if the effects stopped there. But, once formed, these explanations guide future behavior. If I think that I gave money on one occasion because I am a generous person, I will give more in the future; if as a national leader I ordered the use of force to free hostages, I must believe that this instrument is efficacious and therefore should respond similarly in other situations; if as president I gave a stiff response to another country, it must be because that state is deeply hostile and that deterrence if not force is required to meet it.

The last example is not hypothetical but is the foundation for Larson's (1985) fascinating analysis of the psychological origins of American Cold War policy. Most scholars have seen Truman's containment policy as growing out of his steady response to increasing Soviet provocations. Revisionist scholars disagree, seeing the impulse as being generated by the need to keep the world open to capitalist penetration, but they too explain Truman's actions as following from his beliefs, albeit ones that were formed by the functional process noted previously. Larson argues that both these views fail to see that Truman was at first unsure of himself and inconsistent and that his position hardened only after he came to interpret his hesitant steps as implying that the Soviet Union was aggressive and could only be countered by firmness. Having attributed these beliefs to himself, Truman then acted on them more consistently.

Beliefs: Powerful and Autonomous

An intriguing article on learning and reality testing begins: "The Aztecs apparently believed that the corn on which their civilization depended would not grow unless there were human sacrifices. What seems to us an absurd belief caused thousands of people to be sacrificed each year" (Boulding, 1967, p. 1). This brings us back to the question of whether beliefs are powerful and autonomous. Boulding claims that here they were. They were powerful in that they drove human sacrifices and the wars that were necessary to procure them, and they were autonomous in the sense of not being a direct product of the Aztecs' objective situation. It is easier to demonstrate the former than the latter. The Aztecs did indeed act on their belief in the potency of human sacrifices. Such a correspondence is not automatic. A classic study in the 1930s showed that many people who said that they would discriminate against nonwhites in fact did not do so (LaPiere, 1934; for a review of the literature see Schuman & Johnson, 1976). Overall, the relationship between expressed attitudes and behavior is mediated and complex, but we often do find beliefs to be linked to behavior. One important example is that Ronald Reagan's readiness to deal with Mikhail Gorbachev (on American terms, to be sure) can in part be explained by his image of the Soviet Union, which despite being highly skeptical and critical, involved more openness to change than was true of the beliefs of his hard-line advisors (Shimko, 1991).

But beliefs are not unmoved movers. Although an explanation of behavior in terms of beliefs does not have to trace all their roots, it does have to rule out spurious correlation by meeting the objection that they were formed to meet social, political, or psychological needs and that, relatedly, they merely reflect self-interest. Upton Sinclair put it crudely but correctly: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it" (quoted in Krugman, 2005). In cases like these, we can explain both the beliefs and the behavior by some underlying factor, and we need to scrutinize statements like Boulding's in this light. Without claiming any expertise on this case, I doubt that the Aztec practices of human sacrifices are best explained by their beliefs, or, at the very least, we cannot leave it at that but need to ask how and why those beliefs formed. This would not be a problem if there were reasonable grounds for the conviction that corn would not grow without human blood, but it probably developed because it was highly functional for the maintenance of Aztec society, justifying as it did constant warfare, the prominence of warriors and warrior values, and hierarchical control.[9]

While ideas can indeed have consequences, in this case I doubt if we should make them the center of our attention. It is similarly doubtful that we can explain President Clinton's initial refusal to intervene in the former Yugoslavia by his reading Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* and being convinced that the conflict was generated by "ancient hatreds." Instead, it is likely that he was attracted to the book and its claim because of his need for reasons not to intervene. In much the same way, when in a private note vice president Cheney characterized as "a junket" ambassador Joseph Wilson's trip to Niger to investigate the reports that Saddam had sought uranium from that barren country (quoted in Johnston, 2006), it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he saw it in this way in order to discredit Wilson's motives in his own mind. By contrast, Reagan's image of the Soviet Union, flawed as it may have been, was relatively autonomous. The perception that change was possible pre-dated Gorbachev's rise to power and does not seem to be a rationalization for anything else.

The relationship between interests and ideas (and of course neither concept is unproblematic) is one of the oldest in social science and if Marx, Mannheim, and Weber could not settle it, I certainly cannot. The extremes are easy enough to rule out. Even if we believe in the existence of objective interests, they do not dictate all beliefs. Not only do some wealthy people think that tax cuts for the rich are ethically wrong, they believe that such policies are bad for the economy (but note that those who think that such cuts violate our obligations to follow citizens also think they will reduce overall economic growth).

Reality appraisal and the functional role of beliefs conflict and combine in complex ways. While few of us can accept Richard Nixon's claims that national

[9] For a general discussion of the functional nature of beliefs in societies, see Harris, 1979. The methodological weaknesses in his arguments are more disturbing than their rejection by most of his fellow anthropologists, which is not surprising as they cut against the core precepts of the discipline.

security required harassing Vietnam dissenters, punishing his political adversaries, and covering up the Watergate break-in, this was not a conscious rationalization. Nixon made these claims in private (Haldeman, 1994; Kutler, 1997), and I am sure that he could have passed a lie-detector test. Furthermore, one can defend his conclusions. The North Vietnamese were looking for signs about what the American public would support, and Soviet leaders may have looked to Nixon's handling of domestic opponents for clues as to whether he would back down in a crisis. Nevertheless, the coincidence between these beliefs and Nixon's strong impulses to quash his opponents in order to gratify his psychological needs and maintain his domestic power invites suspicion, and no leader likes to recognize that he is more concerned about his own future than with the good of the country.

Others displayed similar patterns. One of Reagan's associates reported that he had the capacity to "convince himself that the truth is what he wants it to be. Most politicians are unable to do this, but they would give their eye teeth if they could" (Nofziger, 1992, p. 45; also see p. 285). Thus Reagan was able to make himself believe that he was not trading arms for hostages in Iran, although later he had enough self-insight to realize that this is what he had done. But he was not unique, and perhaps not unusual in this regard. Nixon not only thought his version of Watergate was accurate, but earlier told his top assistant that "PR [public relations] is right if it emphasizes the truth. It's wrong, at least for us, if it isn't true" (Haldeman, 1994, p. 287, also see p. 521). An associate of Slobodan Milosevic similarly reports: "He decides first what is expedient for him to believe, then he believes it" (Burns, 1992). Bill Clinton convinced himself that the donors he invited for overnight stays at the White House were his friends (Kurtz, 1998, pp. 138–139), and Harry Truman noted in his diary that "I have told Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use [the atomic bomb] so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children" (Ferrell, ed., 1980, p. 55).[10]

The capacity for self-deception bordering on delusion enables people to work their way through difficult situations (on more limited and often healthy forms of self-deception, see Taylor, 1989; Gilbert, 2006). Before World War I British leaders were able to pursue a policy of containing Germany without building a large army by convincing themselves that the intervention of its small army would be decisive. When the war started, Woodrow Wilson was able to reconcile his preference for a British victory with his desire that the United States remain a neutral by believing in the face of clear facts that Britain was abiding by international law and respecting the rights of neutral trade (Coogan, 1981).

But as these and other cases show, self-deception often eventually brings political and personal grief. It was very convenient for Nixon to believe that his actions were required by the imperatives of national security, but in the end they

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[10] I believe that Truman later understood what he had done and while he claimed never to have had second thoughts about dropping the bomb, in fact he did doubt its morality in ways that affected his later attitudes toward nuclear weapons. As Trivers (2002, pp. 55–93) argues, self-deception may also be functional because it facilitates the actor's deception of others.

served neither the country nor his own interests. What he did was extremely risky, and he was unable to make an accurate cost-benefit calculation in terms of his own political stakes in part because he had convinced himself that the national interest required these unacceptable tactics. He and the country would have been better off if he had been more of a hypocrite. Had he realized that while his own and the national interest were both legitimate, they were not identical he might have seen the world more clearly and sought a better way to deal with the conflicts between them. Wilson might have been able to develop an effective strategy to preserve neutral rights, restrain both Britain and Germany, and put the United States in a position to end the war sooner had he not quickly avoided the trade-offs but instead carefully thought about them (Coogan, pp. 217–219). A fuller if more painful search might similarly have revealed better ways for Germany to deal with its dilemmas before 1914 (Snyder, 1984).

Beliefs are filled with puzzles and ironies like this, and I think they deserve more attention. A scientist starts his book on the brain by declaring that "Believing is what we humans do best" (Gazzaniga, 1985, p. 3). We certainly are quick to form beliefs, but how and how well we do so is another question. According to Bob Woodward, on his deathbed CIA Director William Casey gave a deceptively simple answer to the question of why he had engaged in a series of arguably illegal covert actions: "I believed" (Woodward, 1987, p. 507).

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