

Hugh Greenway on the joy of scepticism

On holiday this summer, I had the pleasure of reading Nassim Nicholas Taleb's book *The Black Swan*. As well as gleefully lobbing metaphorical hand-grenades at the academic disciplines of economics, history and the social sciences, Taleb's book challenges all experts to stop claiming knowledge where there is none. In short, he believes that we know a lot less than we think we do and encourages us to embrace empirical scepticism. We should be happy to say "I don't know".

The title of his first book, *Fooled by Randomness*, indicates the direction of his challenge and he goes to great lengths to show how we tend to reverse-engineer our theories and beliefs to fit the available data. Numerous psychological experiments have shown that humans are very good at spotting patterns, even when they are not actually there. Indeed, he explains how difficult it is to embrace scepticism as a discipline as it feels counter-intuitive: we have to fight our nature to achieve it.

The idea that it is difficult, possibly even against our nature, to be sceptical was reinforced when I read recently of scientists in the USA who claimed to have found the "God spot" in human brains. Prof Jordan Grafman, from the US National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, said: "Our results... support contemporary psychological theories that ground religious belief within evolutionary-adaptive cognitive functions."

Essentially, natural selection may have favoured a disposition to believe in God and other things rather than to keep questioning. Or, more specifically, those beings who believed derived evolutionary advantages from their belief and their genes have survived.

I find the idea fascinating that 'believing' has evolutionary advantages. I am extrapolating here (which may be dangerous, given my limited knowledge of evolutionary theory and, for that matter, everything else) but

I can see how, for our mutual ancestor hunter-gatherer

exposed on the plain to any number of potential threats, a tendency to sit down and think problems through in detail might be dangerous. I can see how the image of Rodin's Thinker looks to us like art but to a lion might look like lunch.

Yet I wonder if our environment has changed significantly compared with the lion's share (pun intended) of our evolutionary history. The sheer volume of content on the Internet (US anthropologist Michael Wesch has calculated that more content has been posted on YouTube in the last three years than the output of the entire history of the US TV broadcast networks) means that there is simply more wrong (and, in some cases, downright dangerous) information immediately available to the average human than ever in our history. Yet, if evolution has thus far favoured those who act over those who question, does this not present a huge risk to our future? We are, collectively, innocents abroad.

If you don't believe me, take the relatively safe example of modern myths. Modern myths are mostly harmless, but wrong, stories that are perpetuated by our innate lack of scepticism and our liking for good and easy-to-remember stories.

Men think about sex every seven seconds; the suicide rate jumps around Christmas; eating carrots helps you see in the dark; most of our body heat is lost through our heads etc. All of these are untrue but we accept and repeat them without question.

If men thought about sex every seven seconds, nothing would ever get done, but it is a good story. The idea that more people commit suicide at Christmas makes sense to us because we reason that people might have more to be sad about, but it is just not true. Carrots don't help you see in the dark; the story originated from disinformation put out by the British during the Second World War to explain the RAF's success at finding the Luftwaffe planes in the dark and thus conceal knowledge of the development of radar. And the last one you only have to think about for a moment to realise that, if it were true, more people would wear hats than trousers.

How many other fallacies have you happily swallowed today? Does the future belong to the doubting Thomases or is it more worrying than that? ■



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