

ON FOOLISHNESS: IN ARGUMENTS WE MUST VALUE ONLY THE TRUTH

Robert Trueman
Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge University

I would like to offer some advice as subversive as when Russell suggested that we believe only what we have reason to. When entering a debate, inquiry, investigation or any other activity involving the conflict of different beliefs, that we do so with an attitude of impartiality until, upon summary of the evidence and the arguments, we find one belief to be superior to another.

Most of us are convinced that whatever we think is right, by virtue of the fact that we think it. After all, if we take everyone's self-assessment to be accurate, none of us are even remotely foolish. Only foolish people entertain false beliefs and, therefore, none of us entertain false beliefs. Perhaps we could lend this belief some credence if it were not for the fact that people hold views which are a flat contradiction to others'.

So where does the falsehood lie in our valid syllogism? To be sure, sadly, it is not the case that only foolish people entertain false beliefs; perhaps foolish people merely entertain more false ones than true. However, I have a suspicion that this is not the only fault. If it were, according to our own assessments, that none of us are foolish, therefore none of us entertain more false beliefs than true, and therefore there ought to be a great deal (although not unanimous) agreement on all subjects. Unfortunately, especially in matters of importance, agreement is rare and where it is found it is rarely wholehearted; people hold back a small portion reserved for a subtle modification that only they, as such supremely unfoolish people, can make.

This all leads me to consider that at least some of our self-assessments are wrong. Some of us are foolish.

Obviously you and I are not foolish, but many others are. Even more unfortunate for them, they believe that they are not foolish and, perhaps do so with the same firmness as you and I. When they consider their beliefs, so obviously false to you and I, they honestly believe them to be plainly true. In fact, when they survey our superior beliefs, these poor, misguided people may even accuse us of being fools.

From these considerations it is plain that we cannot rely on our convictions, and their *prima facie* reasonableness, as a proof that they are true. We must instead consider all the arguments and evidence available to us, and then not reach our conclusion until new arguments or evidence become available. Surely, this imperative is declared more often than it is followed. To the common man, even the possibility of subjective ethics is so ridiculous that it warrants no consideration. Sadly, the undergraduate is often found to forget difficult questions in opposition to her essay's argument when she produces it. Even some professional academics, Heaven forbid (assuming I may posit such a place), may be reasonably accused of similar crimes.

It may be sensible to ask what has caused this sad state of affairs, where reasonable people preach something that they do not practice. At least one answer, it would appear, is plain: When entering any conflict of beliefs, most of us do so with an agenda. This agenda may be as mild as perpetuating the beliefs we find most appealing. At other times, our motivations are more sinister, like monetary or political profit. When we do this, we are likely to focus our minds (or at least our performance in the conflict) on the strengths of the beliefs that we are supporting and the weaknesses of those that we oppose. We will rarely consider our beliefs' problems or our

opponents' advantages; when we do, we rarely travel very far. We think of minor setbacks in our own beliefs, which are easily repaired, and trivial superiorities in our opponents', which are deftly dealt with. Should we ever find devastating flaws in our own beliefs or an unconquerable strength in our opponents', we are as likely to ignore them as we are to actually accept the consequences.

Some might be thinking that although it is true that most of us do suffer from this vice, it is no sad situation. Darwin's theories have been applied to so many other fields, so why not here as well? There are many different beliefs, and sometimes they come into conflict. Fortunately for beliefs, they all have weapons and defences. Their weapons are arguments which show the inadequacies of other beliefs in the same subject, increasing the likelihood that this particular belief is true. They have two defences; arguments which show their strengths and counterarguments to the weapons of other beliefs. When two or more beliefs find themselves in some contest, unless they are evenly matched, one belief normally defeats the other by virtue of their defensive or offensive capabilities. Once a belief has been defeated, one of two things will happen: the belief is left for dead, or it is modified in such a way that it becomes stronger. No matter which is the case, we end-up with a stronger body of beliefs than before. Either the weak mutate or they die. It is through this survival of the fittest that the best beliefs are created and therefore the current state of affairs, insofar as it facilitates this evolution, is a good thing.

And perhaps if these claims were true, the current situation would not be too bad a thing; however, defeated beliefs do not always get left for dead or evolve into something better. Sometimes the empty carcasses of beliefs are hauled about as if they were still alive or they are transformed into confusing, disfigured creatures that only appear more convincing as

they have become harder to understand. People refuse to let go of a belief in which they have a vested interest. This often results in people holding onto beliefs with little or no reason, or even onto beliefs which have been conclusively shown to be false. Others inject liberal amounts of sophisms or delicate complexities into their beliefs that create a façade of reasonableness but add nothing to the substance below the surface. Successful beliefs are not necessarily truer than those they defeat. The evolutionary struggle of ideas is not a guarantee of enlightenment.

Having explained why the present situation is a problem, it would seem proper to offer a solution. Mine is a simple one: when entering a conflict of beliefs, one's only agenda should be to find the most-likely-true beliefs. If we were to enter all arguments, debates, and so on without a prejudice for one belief to defeat another, then we could create impartiality. Rather than being trapped in the point of view of one belief, we would move freely between them all. In doing so, we would view and even invent arguments from each side objectively, by considering their merits. After this, we will be able to draw some conclusion until some new evidence is revealed or argument created. As these conclusions would be based on a full consideration of all the relevant factors available to us, they would be more likely to be true than the beliefs we entertain now. This would be the case even if the conclusions we arrive at after this practice are the same as the beliefs we currently hold, as this method would give us more reason to believe that they are true.

It would, of course, be foolish to think that this process can be performed in all conflicts of beliefs. In law, politics or even most every-day arguments, people are not particularly interested in reaching beliefs which are more likely to be true than any others. They are concerned with some gain they can bring themselves, whether it be success, power or merely the ability to say, "I

was right.” The problem for these people is that perhaps because of the competitive nature of conflicts, they have a sense of winning and losing. They find that they are drawn to one point of view more than any other, for whatever reason, and if that opinion is shown to be mistaken or inferior then they feel as though they have lost. As such, their aim of reaching beliefs which are most-likely-true is lost in the shadow of the desire to win.

For this last group there is, I hope, a solution. Rather than being in the mind-set of having opponents in a contest of pride, they should consider winning to be the completion of the one positive agenda, that is the aim of reaching the most-likely-true beliefs. If this occurred, for example, atheists would not find in believers an enemy to defeat, but instead, a partner in the search for most-likely-true beliefs. Stripped of this competitive element, the atheist and the theist would be able to properly and impartially consider one another’s views—a most desirable state of affairs that, for the most part, does not currently exist.

There is one objection which, although troublesome, I must address if I do not wish to be foolish myself. If we should enter each conflict of beliefs with impartiality, eager to consider everyone’s views in detail, then should we waste our time on things such as myth and legend? If we say “no”, then it would seem the only reason that we do so is because we consider such views to be plainly ridiculous; however, if we are allowed to make such judgements about the prima facie reasonableness of such views, then why not all others?

My answer is that we should, if we are at all concerned with having true beliefs about such things as mythical creatures, give an impartial survey of all the relevant views as I have advocated so far. For instance, the only evidence available to me about the existence of mythical creatures consists of second-hand reports of legends in

which they play such a central role. The evidence against their existence is the fact that I know that the surface of the world has been for the most part, although not entirely, explored and even in the places where mythical creatures are reported to have existed no convincing evidence has been found to indicate that they do. It does not take many moments to conclude, impartially, that the evidence available to me is stronger on the side of their non-existence. Should, however, someone present to me more evidence and arguments in favour of mythical creatures roaming the world, then insofar as I am interested in having most-likely-true beliefs in regards to mythical creatures, I should impartially consider the evidence, whether this takes a longer or shorter time. If such inconveniences are the price of having the most-likely-true beliefs in other, perhaps more important, subjects, then I for one will happily pay it.

If more of us followed the humble suggestion of this essay then, perhaps, more of our self-assessments would be accurate, and fewer of us would be foolish.