CrossMark

INTRODUCTION

There are (at least) two ways in which we can attempt to influence the beliefs of others:

(i) We can use *reason*. We can provide scientific and other evidence to support beliefs, subject them to critical scrutiny, reveal contradictions and inconsistencies, and so on.

(ii) We can appeal to such mechanisms as peer-pressure, emotional manipulation, reward and punishment, humour, sarcasm, repetition, fear (especially of uncertainty), tribalism, censorship, vanity, and so on.

Now, we philosophers put a lot of emphasis on (i) rather than (ii), don't we? Why is that?

I suggest the answer is: because reason is *truth-sensitive*. Try to make a well-reasoned and well-evidenced case for believing the Earth's core is made of cheese, or that the Antarctic is populated by ant-people, or that George W. Bush is an alien lizard in disguise. You are going to find it very, very difficult. Apply the filter of reason – under which I include the scientific method – to incoming beliefs and only those with a fairly good chance of being true are likely to get through. *That's* why we favour the filter of reason. We want to believe, and want others to believe, what's true.

The mechanisms listed under (ii), on the other hand, *can just as easily be used to instil true beliefs as false beliefs*. They are truth-*in*sensitive.

Cults, advertising salespeople, and so on tend to favour the latter mechanisms in order to try to get people to believe. Applied consistently and systematically, they can be very powerful mechanisms. Religious schools have

doi:10.1017/S1477175617000082 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2017
Think 46, Vol. 16 (Summer 2017)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000082 Published online by Cambridge University Press

traditionally relied primarily upon such mechanisms for inculcating religious belief in young people. Religious schools are traditionally tribal; they apply: peer pressure, fear of hell, hope of heaven, rose-tinted versions of belief in which the less attractive parts are airbrushed out or ignored, endless repetition of key dogmas, positive images of saints, Popes, imams and rabbis, and scary images of the world of the unbeliever and all its terrifying uncertainties. Political parties also exploit these mechanisms very effectively.

So, if we want to believe what is true (and I do) applying reason is a very good idea.

But that's not to say that the other mechanisms are not important. Yes, no one with an interest in promoting a concern with truth should rely *wholly* on the latter, truth-insensitive mechanisms. However, the fact is, reason alone will likely fail in many cases to persuade. A cogent argument is often far less persuasive than a few emotive anecdotes, for example. Compare statistics on alternative medicine with a few well-chosen tales of astonishing 'cures' – the latter will emotionally trump the former, and sit more easily in the memory, every time. Tabloid front pages almost always lead with anecdotes rather than dry data, and for good reason – juicy, personalized tales sell, statistics and charts do not.

So, it's not that philosophers and freethinkers should *shy away* from using humour, emotive anecdotes, peer pressure, and so on. These mechanisms probably should form a part of our arsenal. But the bottom line is, they should not be the *foundation*. Our foundation should always involve applying reason as far as it will go. Once we lose that foundation, we're no better than the cults or advertising agencies ourselves.

And of course, when people accuse the free thought movement, philosophers, etc. of being a cult, of being just another 'religion', and so on, we can now explain why we are not.

We free thinkers always reach for the sword of reason. It is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways. It favours not

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000082 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the 'teacher's' view over the 'pupil's' but the truth. It's a weapon that the pupil can just as easily and effectively use against their 'teacher'. Which is why many so-called educators either downplay the role of reason or avoid it altogether. They rely instead on those *other* mechanisms which do, always, favour the view of the teacher over that of the pupil, *irrespective* of what's actually true. Trouble is, the result is not education, but indoctrination.

This issue of THINK was co-edited by Katerina Zacharias.

Stephen Law
Editor, THINK

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000082 Published online by Cambridge University Press