

Why do People Believe things that are Obviously Untrue?

Many of us stand aghast at the nonsense people believe. What follows is my own take on this subject. If the reader googles the title then they will find many relevant articles and videos. Please do this and pick your own favourite explanations for discussion.

Nevertheless, to get things started these are my own thoughts on the subject:

We all know people who believe in things that we think are manifestly untrue. For example, the flatness of the earth or the existence a personal god (except, of course, our own personal god who obviously exists and answers our prayers). But let us avoid debating the truth of things and ask WHY people believe things that are untrue. To this end it may be easier to concentrate on less stupid and emotive beliefs – for example, the more extreme statements relating to the impact of climate change or the latest dietary fads.

Nearly everything we accept as fact depends upon the input of others. Life is busy and complicated. Simplifications are useful. Laziness or lack of time may be a big factor for some people. Not everyone uses the correct simplifications – for example reference to peer reviewed literature, reproducibility of empirical observation, consistency with other knowledge, absence of logical fallacies, healthy scepticism, appreciation of the motives of sources etc.

It may be politically incorrect to say this (sorry), but some people ARE just generally stupid or ignorant. However, that is not necessarily true of people with bizarre beliefs. Stupidity and ignorance are partial but far from sufficient explanations. We can sometimes find very bright people who compartmentalise their beliefs. For example, there are a few senior scientists who believe in god but they never apply scientific standards of scrutiny to that aspect of their lives.

There is a well proven psychological tendency to believe things that fit our pre-existing, often emotional, biases. However, I do not think that can explain counterfactual beliefs or beliefs where much simpler explanations exist.

Perhaps we need to ask what makes people WANT to believe something rather than WHY they believe it. Reasons might include the need to belong to a group, self-importance, security, laziness, a lack of concern for truth if it suits your needs, wishful thinking. In 16 Strivings for God, reasons are identified (based on large scale empirical research) in the form of human needs (eg power, influence, control, a sense of superiority, belonging). Truth is not one of them.

Misrepresentation of ideas and information as science is another problem. Pretty much everything I learned in my chemistry degree 40 years ago is still true, although today many things have been added to the body of knowledge and understanding. The same could not be said of a degree in nutritional science. Perhaps we need a new word to distinguish real solid science from, say, the best effort modelling of COVID epidemiologists or the latest dietary advice. That form of science is much better than mere guessing or heavenly inspiration, but it can still be wrong – especially if it's a new field or resources are limited.

People who are not concerned to seek the truth using reason and evidence (and even ignore the evidence) lack moral integrity. If it suits their physical and emotional needs why would they care if it is true?

David.