The Believing Game and How to Make Conflicting Opinions More Fruitful

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Don Quixote says he admires Sancho Panza because he doubts everything and he believes everything.

In the chapter before this, Chris Weber suggests ways to help students speak their minds, listen well, and engage in nonadversarial dialogue rather than debate. His suggestions focus on outward behavior. In this essay, I will move inward to the mysterious dimension of thinking and feeling. I'll start by asking you to imagine that you are looking at an inkblot (for examples, ask Google Images for "inkblots").

Imagine that you see something in it that interests and pleases you---but your colleagues or classmates don't see what you see. In fact they think you are crazy or disturbed for seeing it. What would you do if you wanted to convince them that your interpretation makes sense?

If it were a matter of geometry, you could <u>prove</u> you are right (or wrong!). But with inkblots, you don't have logic's leverage. Your only hope is to get them to <u>enter into your way of seeing</u>---to have the experience you are having. You need to get them to say the magic words: "Oh <u>now</u> I see what you see."

This means getting them to exercise the <u>ability</u> to see something differently (i.e., seeing the same thing in multiple ways), and also the <u>willingness</u> to risk doing so (not knowing where it will lead). In short, you need them to be flexible both cognitively and emotionally. You can't make people enter into a new way of seeing, even if they are capable of it. Perhaps your colleagues or classmates are bothered by what you see in the inkblot. Perhaps they think it's aberrant or psychotic. If you want them to take the risk, your only option is to set a good example and show that you are willing to see it the way they see it.

From Inkblots to Arguments

Interpreting inkblots is highly subjective, but the process serves to highlight how arguments also have a subjective dimension. Few arguments are settled by logic. Should we invade countries that might attack us? Should we torture prisoners who might know what we need to know? Should we drop a nuclear bomb on a country that did attack us? And by the way, what grade is fair for this paper or this student? Should we use grades at all?

I'm not denying the force of logic. Logic can uncover a genuine error in someone's argument. But logic cannot uncover an error in someone's <u>position</u>. If we could have proven that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction, that wouldn't have proven that it was wrong to invade Iraq. "We should invade Iraq" is a claim that is impossible to prove or disprove. We can use logic to strengthen arguments for or against the claim, but we cannot prove or disprove it. Over and over we see illogical arguments for good ideas and logical arguments for bad ideas. We can never prove that an opinion or position is wrong---or right. No wonder people so seldom change their minds when someone finds bad reasoning in their argument. (By the same token—or at least a very similar token—it is impossible to prove or disprove the interpretation of a text. For more on this, see my longer essays on the believing game.)

This explains a lot about how most people deal with differences of opinion:

- Some people love to argue and disagree, and they do it for fun in a friendly way. They enjoy the disagreement and the give-and-take and they let criticisms and even attacks roll right off their backs. It's good intellectual sport for them.

- Some people <u>look</u> like they enjoy the sport of argument. They stay friendly and rational---they're "cool"---because they've been trained well. "Don't let your feelings cloud your thinking." But inside they feel hurt when others attack ideas they care about. They hunker down into their ideas behind hidden walls.

- Some people actually get mad, raise their voices, dig in, stop listening, and even call each other names. Perhaps they realize that language and logic have no power to <u>make</u> their listeners change their minds---so they give in to shouting or anger.

- And some people---seeing that nothing can be proven with words---just give up on argument. They retreat. "Let's just not argue. You see it

your way, I'll see it my way. That's the end of it. There's no use talking." They sidestep arguments and take a relativist position: any opinion is as good as any other opinion. (It's worth pondering why so many students fall into this attitude.)

But sometimes people actually listen to each other, come to really see the merit in opinions they started off fighting. Through listening to someone else's views, they do something amazing: they actually change their thinking. Sometimes strong differences of opinion are resolved---even heated arguments.

When this happens people demonstrate the two inkblot skills I just described: the ability and the willingness to see something differently---or in this case to think or understand something differently. (We often say "I see" when we "understand" something differently). These are precious skills, cognitive and psychological. We won't have much luck encouraging them in other people unless we develop them in ourselves.

With inkblots, the risk seems small. If we manage to see a blot the way a classmate or colleague sees it, we don't have to say, "Stupid me. I was wrong." It's "live and let live" when we're dealing with inkblots. With arguments, however, it feels like win or lose. We often want people not just to understand our position; we often want them to give up their ("wrong, stupid") position.

I used inkblots earlier to look for the subjective dimension in most arguments (given that logic cannot prove or destroy a position). Now inkblots can teach us something else. They can teach us that there's actually a "live-and-let-live" dimension in many arguments---probably most. But we often feel arguments as win/lose situations because we so naturally focus on how our side of an argument differs from the other person's side. We assume that one person has to say, "Stupid me. I was wrong."

The believing game will help us understand ideas we disagree with, and thereby help us see that one one needs to lose or give up their central idea. The believing game can help us see that both sides in an argument are often right; or that both are right in a sense; or that both positions are implicitly pointing to some larger, wiser position that both arguers can agree on.

What is the Believing Game?

In a sense I've already explained it with my analogy between inkblots and arguments. I can summarize it quickly now by contrasting it with the doubting game.

The doubting game represents the kind of thinking most widely honored and taught. It's the disciplined practice of trying to be as skeptical and analytic as possible with every idea we encounter. By doubting well, we can discover hidden contradictions, bad reasoning, or other weaknesses in ideas that look true or attractive. We scrutinize with the tool of doubt. This is the tradition that Walter Lippman invokes:

> The opposition is indispensable. A good statesman, like any other sensible human being, always learns more from his opponents than from his fervent supporters. For his supporters will push him to disaster unless his opponents show him where the dangers are. So if he is wise he will often pray to be delivered from his friends, because they will ruin him. But, though it hurts, he ought . . . to pray never to be left without opponents; for they keep him on the path of reason and good sense.

The widespread veneration of "critical thinking" illustrates how our intellectual culture venerates skepticism and doubting. ("Critical thinking" is a fuzzy, fad term , but its various meanings usually appeal to skepticism and analysis for the sake of uncovering bad thinking. When people call a movement "critical linguistics" or "critical legal studies," they are saying that the old linguistics or legal studies are flawed by being insufficiently skeptical or critical---too hospitable to something that's wrong.)

The believing game is the mirror image of the doubting game or critical thinking. It's the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them, but actually trying to believe them. We can use the tool of believing to scrutinize not for flaws but to find hidden virtues in ideas that are unfashionable or repellent. Often we cannot see what's good in someone else's idea (or in our own!) till we work at believing it. When an idea goes against current assumptions and beliefs---or seems alien, weird, dangerous---or if it's poorly formulated---we often cannot see any merit in it.

"Believing" is a Scary Word

Many people get nervous when I celebrate believing. They point to an asymmetry between our sense of what "doubting" and "believing" mean. Believing seems to entail commitment, where doubting does not. It commonly feels as though we can doubt something without committing ourselves to rejecting it---but that we cannot believe something without committing ourselves to accepting it and even living by it. Thus it feels as though we can doubt and remain unscathed, but believing will scathe us. Indeed believing can feel hopelessly bound up with religion. ("Do you BELIEVE? Yes, Lord, I BELIEVE*!*")

This contrast in meanings is a fairly valid picture of natural ,individual acts of doubting and believing. (Though I wonder if doubting leaves us fully unchanged.) But it's not a picture of doubting and believing as methodological disciplines or unnatural games. Let me explain the distinction.

Natural individual acts of doubting happen when someone tells us something that seems dubious or hard to believe. ("You say the earth is spinning? I doubt it. I feel it steady under my feet.") But our culture has learned to go way beyond natural individual acts of doubting. We humans had to struggle for a long time to learn how to doubt unnaturally as a methodological discipline. We now know that for good thinking, we must doubt everything, not just what's dubious; indeed the whole point of critical thinking is to try to doubt what we find most obvious or true or right (as Lippman advises).

In order to develop systematic doubting, we had to overcome believing: the natural pull to believe what's easy to believe, what we want to believe, or what powerful people tell us to believe. (It's easy to believe that the earth is stationary.) As a culture, we learned systematic doubting through the growth of philosophical thinking (Greek thinkers developing logic, Renaissance thinkers developing science, and Enlightenment thinkers pulling away from established religion). And we each had to learn to be skeptical as individuals, too---for example learning not to believe that if we are very very good, Santa Claus/God will bring us everything we want. As children, we begin to notice that naïve belief leads us astray. As adults we begin to notice the dreadful

things that belief leads humans to do---like torturing alleged witches/prisoners till they "confess."

Now that we've finally learned systematic doubting with its tools of logic and strict reasoning and its attitude of systematic skepticism---critical thinking---we are likely to end up afraid of believing itself. We had to learn to distrust natural believing ("My parents/country/God will take care of me whenever I am in need."). So believing can seem a scary word because our culture has not yet learned to go beyond natural acts of naïve believing to develop <u>unnatural believing</u> as a <u>methodological discipline</u>. In short, the believing game is not much honored or even known (though it's not new).

The methodology of the doubting game gives us a model for the methodology of the believing game. When the doubting game asks us to doubt an idea, it doesn't ask us to throw it away forever. We couldn't do that because the game teaches us to doubt all ideas, and we'll learn to find weaknesses even in good ideas. We can't throw all ideas away. The scrutiny of doubt is <u>methodological</u>, <u>provisional</u>, <u>conditional</u>. So when a good doubter finally decides what to believe or do, this involves an additional act of judgment and commitment. The doubting game gives good evidence, but it doesn't do our judging and committing for us.

Similarly, when the believing game asks us to believe <u>all</u> ideas---especially those that seem most wrong---it cannot ask us to marry them or commit ourselves to them. Our believing is also <u>methodological, conditional, provisional</u>---unnatural. (It's hard to try to believe conflicting ideas all at once, but we can try to enter into them one after another.) And so too, if we commit ourselves to accepting an idea because the believing game helped us see virtues in it, this involves an additional act of judgment and commitment. The believing game gives us good evidence, but it doesn't do our deciding for us.

In short, we must indeed continue <u>to resist</u> the pull to believe what's easy to believe. But believing what's easy to believe is far different from using the disciplined effort to believe as an intellectual methodological tool in order to find hidden strengths in ideas that people want to ignore.

A Surprising Blind Spot for the Doubting Game

The doubting and believing games have symmetrical weaknesses: the doubting game is poor at helping us find hidden virtues; the believing game is poor at helping us find hidden flaws. But many people don't realize that the doubting game is also poor at reaching one of its main goals: helping us find hidden flaws in our own thinking.

The flaws in our own thinking usually come from our assumptions---our ways of thinking that we accept without noticing. But it's hard to doubt what we can't see because we unconsciously take it for granted. The believing game comes to the rescue here. Our best hope for finding invisible flaws in what we can't see in our own thinking is to enter into <u>different</u> ideas or points of view---ideas that carry different assumptions. Only after we've managed to inhabit a different way of thinking will our currently invisible assumptions become visible to us.

This blind spot in the doubting game shows up frequently in classrooms and other meetings. When smart people are trained only in critical thinking, they get better and better at doubting and criticizing other people's ideas. They use this skill particularly well when they feel a threat to their own ideas or their unexamined assumptions. Yet they feel justified in fending-off what they disagree with because they feel that this doubting activity is "critical thinking." They take refuge in the feeling that they would be "unintellectual" if they said to an opponent what in fact they <u>ought</u> to say: "Wow, your idea sounds really wrong to me. It must be alien to how I think. Let me try to enter into it and see if there's something important that I'm missing. Let me see if I can get a better perspective on my own thinking." In short, if we want to be good at finding flaws in our own thinking (a goal that doubters constantly trumpet), we need the believing game.

The Believing Game is Not Actually New

If we look closely at the behavior of genuinely smart and productive people, we will see that many of them have exactly this skill of entering into views that conflict with their own. John Stuart Mill is a philosopher associated with the doubting game, but he also advises good thinkers to engage in the central act of the believing game:

> [People who] have never thrown themselves into the mental
> position of those who think differently from them . . . do not, in any

proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess. (129)

Yet this skill of sophisticated unnatural belief is not much understood or celebrated in our culture---and almost never taught.

Imagine, for example, a seminar or a meeting where lots of ideas come up. One person is quick to point out flaws in each idea as it is presented. A second person mostly listens and gets intrigued with each idea--and tends to make comments like these: "Oh I see" and "That's interesting" and "Tell me more about such and such" and "As I go with your thinking, I begin to see some things I never noticed before." This second person may be appreciated as a good listener, but the first person will tend to be considered smarter and a better thinker because of that quick skill at finding flaws.

I used to feel that I was unintelligent because when one person gave an argument I would feel, "Oh that's a good idea," but then when the other person argued the other way, I found myself feeling, "Oh that sounds good, too." I wondered what was the matter with my loose, sloppy mind to let me agree with people and ideas that are completely at odds with each other. The "smart people" tended to argue cleverly and find flaws that I didn't notice. But now I'm finally insisting that my instinctive ability to play the believing game is not just "niceness" or sloppy thinking; it's a crucial intellectual strength rather than a weakness---a discipline that needs to be taught and developed.

Let me emphasize that I'm not arguing <u>against</u> the doubting game. We <u>need</u> the ability to be skeptical and find flaws. Indeed, the doubting game probably deserves the last word in any valid process of trying to work out trustworthy thinking. For even though the scrutiny of belief may lead us to choose a good idea that most people at first wanted to throw away, nevertheless, we mustn't commit ourselves to that idea before applying the scrutiny of doubt to check for hidden problems.

My only argument is against the <u>monopoly</u> of the doubting game as the <u>only</u> kind of good thinking. We need both disciplines. Some of our most needed insights come from opinions that are easy to criticize or dismiss. But those insights are only available if people work at entering into such opinions in search of unnoticed virtues.

Concrete Ways to Learn to Play the Believing Game

As teachers and students we are in a good position to learn the ability to see things differently from how we usually see them, and the willingness to risk doing it. If we want to learn those skills, it helps to notice the <u>inner stances</u> ---the cognitive and psychological dispositions---we need for doubting and believing:

- If we want to doubt or find flaws in ideas that we are tempted to accept or believe (perhaps they are ideas that "everyone knows are true"), we need to work at <u>extricating</u> or <u>distancing</u> ourselves from those ideas. There's a kind of language that helps here: clear, impersonal sentences that lay bare the logic or lack of logic in them.

- If, on the other hand, we want to believe ideas that we are tempted to reject ("Anyone can see that's a crazy idea")---if we are trying to <u>enter in</u> or <u>experience</u> or <u>dwell in</u> those ideas---we benefit from the language of imagination, narrative, and the personal experience.

Here are some specific practices to help us experience things from someone else's point of view.

1. If people are stuck in a disagreement, we can invoke Carl Rogers' application of "active listening." John must not try to argue his point till he has restated Mary's point to <u>her</u> satisfaction.

2. But what if John has trouble seeing things from Mary's point of view? His lame efforts to restate her view show that "he doesn't get it." He probably needs to stop talking and listen; keep his mouth shut. Thus, in a discussion where someone is trying to advance a view and everyone fights it, there is a simple rule of thumb: the doubters need to stop talking and simply give extended floor time to the minority view. The following three concrete activities give enormous help here:

- The three-minute or five-minute rule. Any participant who feels he or she is not being heard can make a sign and invoke the rule: no one else can talk for three or five minutes. This voice speaks, we listen; we cannot reply.

- Allies only---no objections. Others can speak---but only those who are having more success believing or entering into or assenting to the minority view. No objections allowed. (Most people are familiar with this "no-objections" rule from brainstorming.)

- "Testimony session." Participants having a hard time being heard or understood are invited to tell stories of the experiences that led them to their point of view and to describe what it's like having or living with this view. Not only must the rest of us not answer or argue or disagree while they are speaking; we must refrain, even afterwards, from questioning their stories or experiences or feelings. We may speak only to their ideas. (This process is particularly useful when issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation are being discussed.)

The goal here is safety. Most speakers feel unsafe if they sense we are just waiting to jump in with all our objections. But we listeners need safety, too. We are trying to enter into a view we want to quarrel with or feel threatened by. We're trying to learn the difficult skill of in-dwelling. It's safer for us if we have permission simply not to talk about it any more for a while. We need time for the words we resist just to sink in for a while with no comment.

3. The language of story and poetry helps us experience alien ideas. Stories, metaphors, and images can often find a path around our resistance. When it's hard to enter into a new point of view, try telling a story of someone who believes it; imagine and describe someone who sees things this way; tell the story of events that might have led people to have this view of the world; what would it be like to be someone who sees things this way? Write a story or poem about the world that this view implies.

4. Step out of language. Language itself can sometimes get in the way of trying to experience or enter into a point of view different from our own. There are various productive ways to set language aside. We can draw or sketch images (rough stick figures are fine). What do you actually <u>see</u> when you take this position? It's also powerful to use movement, gesture, dance, sounds, and role-playing.

5. Silence. For centuries, people have made good use of silence for in-dwelling. If we're having trouble trying to believe someone's idea, sometimes it's helpful for <u>no one</u> to say anything for a couple of minutes. That's not much time out of a meeting or conference or class hour, but it can be surprisingly fertile.

6. Private writing. There's a kind of silence involved when everyone engages in private writing. Stop talking and do 7-10 minutes of writing for

no one else's eyes. What's crucial is the invitation to language in conditions of privacy and safety.

7. Use the physical voice. When it's hard to enter into a piece of writing that feels difficult or distant, for example something written by someone very different from us---or an intricate work like a Shakespeare sonnet---it helps to try to read it aloud as well and meaningfully as possible. (When I'm teaching a longer text, I choose crux passages of a few paragraphs or a page.) The goal is not good acting; the goal is simply to say the words so that we feel every meaning in them---so that we fully <u>mean</u> every meaning. Get the words to "sound right" or to carry the meanings across—for example, to listeners who don't have a text. After we have three or four different readings of the same passage, we can discuss which ones manage to "sound right"---and usually these readings help us enter in or assent. (It's not fair to put students on the spot by asking them to read with no preparation time. I ask students to prepare these reading at home or practice them briefly in class in pairs.)

This activity illustrates something interesting about language. It's impossible simply to say words so they "sound right" without <u>dwelling in</u> them and thus feeling their meaning. So instead of asking students to "study carefully" this Shakespeare sonnet, I say, "Practice reading it aloud till you can say every word with meaning." This involves giving a kind of <u>bodily assent</u>.

8. Nonadversarial argument. Finally, the classroom is an ideal place to practice nonadversarial forms of argument. Our traditional model of argument is a zero-sum game: "If I'm right, you must be wrong." Essays and dissertations traditionally start off by trying to demolish the views of opponents. "Unless I criticize every other idea," the assumption goes, "I won't have a clear space for my idea." But this approach is usually counterproductive--except with readers who already agree with you and don't need to be persuaded. This traditional argument structure says to readers: "You cannot agree with my ideas---<u>or even hear them</u>---until after you admit that you've been wrong or stupid."

The structure of nonadversarial argument is simple, but it takes practice and discipline: argue only <u>for your position</u>, not against other positions. This is easy for me here since I have no criticisms at all of the doubting game or critical thinking in itself. It's much harder if I really hate the idea I'm fighting. It's particularly hard if my essential argument is negative: "Don't invade Iraq." So yes, there are some situations in which

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we cannot avoid arguing why an idea is wrong. Yet even in my position on Iraq, there is, in fact, some space for nonadversarial argument. I can talk about the <u>advantages</u> of not invading Iraq---and not try to refute *for* invasion. In this way, I would increase the chances of my opponent actually hearing my arguments.

The general principle is this: If all I have to offer are <u>negative</u> reasons why the other person's idea is bad, I'll probably make less progress than if I can give some <u>positive</u> reasons for my alternative idea---and even acknowledge why the other person might favor her idea. (For more on nonadversarial argument, see my "Introduction" xviii-xxiii.)

I can end by glancing back at the inkblots. Arguments that <u>look</u> conflicting <u>might</u> both be somehow valid or right. They might need to be articulated better or seen from a larger view---a view the disputants haven't yet figured out. I may be convinced that someone else's idea is dead wrong, but if I'm willing to play the believing game with it, I will not only set a good example, I may even be able to see how we are both on the right track. Nonadversarial argument and the believing game help us work out larger frames of reference and better ideas.

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