Our Duty to the Truth Makes Us Responsible for What We Believe

Every Tuesday I join fellow Bloomington Rotary Club members in reciting what we call the Four Way Test. It begins, "Of the things we think, say or do: First . . . is it the TRUTH?"

Our culture is infused with a strong sense of commitment to the truth, thanks in part to Socrates, who urged us to follow the argument wherever it leads.

I belong to a religious community that identifies its founder with the Truth.

USS Enterprise Captain Picard admonished, "The first duty of every Starfleet officer is to the truth, whether it's scientific truth or historical truth or personal truth! It is the guiding principle on which Starfleet is based!"

I submit we have a duty to the truth, first, because no human society can flourish based on lies and deception.

Absence of truth is not always occasioned by intent to deceive, however. Sometimes the truth escapes us. We all labor with illusions, misconceptions, mistaken perceptions. We have a duty to the truth, also, because it can be enormously harmful, even fatal, to be in error.

The corollary to this, which may not immediately seem obvious, is that we are morally responsible for our beliefs. What we believe is significantly determinative of what we do. And what we do has real-world effects. If our actions follow from our beliefs, shouldn't we be morally responsible for those beliefs?

Religious and political communities have often ostracized, sometimes persecuted, and even killed those among them who dissent from certain core beliefs. This would always be morally indefensible were such communities without grounds for regarding those who are "heretics" as morally at fault.

In our time various "heresies" are regarded as morally objectionable. For example, the sane person who denies the Holocaust will likely be regarded as morally deficient, and grievously so. Similarly, those who deny the realities of global climate change may be judged as morally obtuse or worse. Yes, there's some room for debate about primary causes, but no reasonable denying that average global temperatures are rising, glaciers are disappearing, and ice caps are melting. In both cases, the potential consequences of disputing what can be evidentially confirmed are ominous for future human existence.

Still, is it true that most people freely choose what they believe or disbelieve? Aren't we all more or less *compelled* to believe or disbelieve by unconscious societal pressures, personal experience and interests, as well as what we take as facts, evidence, logic, the testimony of trusted authority, and such? *Perhaps we should reserve our disapprobation for those who hold absolutely and uncritically to their beliefs, refusing to admit contrary evidence or the possibility of being wrong and dismissing the opportunity to pursue potentially inconvenient truths.*

In this light, most Americans remain complicit in one of the greatest moral failings of our time. That moral failing is the uncritical acceptance of the "official narrative" of the events of 9/11/2001, according to which a terrorist attack was effectively executed *principally* by a group of nineteen Arab terrorist hijackers conspiring under the leadership of bin Laden and al Qaeda. The consequences of uncritically believing this demonstrably implausible story have been devastating for millions of Afghans and Iraqis, as well as tens of thousands of American military families. It has led to a permanent state of "war on terror," the trashing of human rights and civil liberties, extraordinary abuses of executive power, and untold economic hardship and ecological destruction. This false belief has drastically skewed the political agenda of the past nine years. Our democracy has been severely diminished, and may not survive, if citizens do not come to their senses.