

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR FALL 2022

WHY PEOPLE BELIEVE THINGS

Coordinator: James Smith

People believe in ghosts, gods, political dogmas, conspiracy theories and moral precepts. How are these beliefs born, formed, reinforced, challenged, changed and extinguished? Current research upends the traditional thinking about how humans form beliefs about the world. Simply put, beliefs come first and explanations for beliefs follow. The brain is a belief engine. From sensory data flowing in through the senses, the brain naturally begins to look for and find patterns, and then infuses those patterns with meaning. Our brains connect the dots of our world into meaningful patterns that explain why things happen, and these patterns become beliefs. Once beliefs are formed the brain begins to look for and find confirmatory evidence in support of those beliefs, which accelerates the process of reinforcing them, and round and round the process goes in a positive-feedback loop of belief confirmation. We will outline the numerous cognitive tools our brains engage to reinforce our beliefs as truths. We will provide countless real-world examples of how this process operates. Ultimately, we demonstrate why science is the best method ever devised to determine whether or not a belief matches reality.

James has coordinated many study groups on psychology, neuroscience, and their relationship to culture.

Type of Study Group: Lecture/Discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services :

The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies—How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths by Michael Shermer.

******* SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *******

WEEK 1

TOPIC: Exemplary stories of belief formation

READING:

Prologue, Chapter 1

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QUESTIONS:

What are some instructive examples of how people form beliefs? How do their beliefs change (or not) with life experiences? How important is evidence?

WEEK 2

TOPIC: From neurons firing to personal belief

READING:

Chapter 2

QUESTIONS:

What does your brain actually do when you form a belief? When you change one? How does the brain interact with its environment and influences in this process?

WEEK 3

TOPIC: Brain recognition and organization of patterns in the world

READING:

Chapter 3

QUESTIONS:

How did our brain evolve to use patterns to make predictions? What kind of pattern recognition is helpful in identifying “real” patterns in the world? What kind of errors do people typically make?

WEEK 4: Belief in agents and causality

WEEK 5: The believing neuron

WEEK 6: Belief in God and the afterlife

WEEK 7: Belief in conspiracies

WEEK 8: The politics of belief

WEEK 9: Belief and its confirmations

WEEK 10: Geographies of belief: world patterns

WEEK 11: Cosmologies: believing and the universe

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WEEK 12

TOPIC: Wrap Up