

Swallowing the Blue Pill
How We Become Our Own Worst Enemies
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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Even if you're not a movie buff, you probably understand my reference to, "swallowing the blue pill." In the 1999 science fiction film, *The Matrix*, the lead character, Neo, a name meaning, "new," has been searching for a man named Morpheus, a name meaning "change." So, Neo represents someone who is seeking to become new, seeking transformation, seeking to understand things in a new way. When they meet, Morpheus says, "I imagine that right now you're feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole."

"You can say that," Neo responds.

"Let me tell you why you're here," Morpheus continues, "You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is the feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"The Matrix," Neo says.

"The Matrix is everywhere," Morpheus says. "It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth."

"What truth?" Neo asks.

"That you are a slave Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell, or taste, or touch—a prison for your mind. Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself."

Morpheus then presents Neo with two pills, "This is your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

Naturally Neo chooses the red pill, otherwise the movie would be over in 30 minutes. But today I want to talk about the predominant choice most of us make, to take the blue pill, the choice, as Morpheus says, *to continue believing whatever we want to believe*. I'm not sure if the colors *The Matrix* writers chose for these pills, *red* and *blue*, have intentional political allusions or not, but I do think all of us today are living in a "this I believe" society. Whether conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat, we all value the fundamental right to believe whatever we want, the right to swallow the blue pill.

Conservatives may more eagerly believe whatever they want to believe, conserving old ideas despite evidence they don't work anymore (if they ever did), despite the terrible consequences of their beliefs, despite being proven wrong. They also seem to feel strongly this right to believe whatever you want is reserved only for those who believe as they do. Liberals on the other hand, true to the idea of freedom for which they are named, more

readily promote the principle that everyone should have the right to believe whatever they want, period. Between 2005 and 2009, for example, NPR, the radio network progressives love to listen to, had a popular, “This I Believe” series during which individuals from many walks of life shared their beliefs. It was interesting, for sure, but it also goes to show how much progressives value and promote individual belief.

But I would prefer a series on what it means to believe; about where beliefs come from and how we can better gauge their reliability, to a show that just expresses various beliefs. I’d prefer a show that doesn’t presume all beliefs are equal and, therefore, should be broadcast to the world, but one that celebrates intellectual integrity, reason, and empirical reality by promoting ideas that are not just believed, but are believable. I hope it’s obvious that I’m all for freedom of expression, but I also think we ought to feel okay about holding others accountable for their beliefs and being held accountable for our own.

A couple of weeks ago, for example, I was speaking with a woman I met at an event who mentioned she was a little concerned our region of the world might be heading for a new Ice Age. Given all we know about our changing climate, that this has been the warmest year on record, including in the arctic where our glaciers are quickly disappearing, I told her, due to all the fires and droughts we’ve been having, we need to be concerned more about it burning up than freezing. “It is getting hotter,” she admitted, “but that’s what the Earth does, it heats up and freezes, and heats up and freezes.”

I then realized, not knowing me, that she was seeking affirmation of her choice, the choice to ignore the facts about global warming and its causes, first by suggesting we’re in danger of the Earth entering a new ice age, and then by insinuating global warming is perfectly natural and has nothing to do with human behavior. She was inviting me to take the blue pill, to pretend, with her, that it’s okay to believe whatever we want to believe despite all evidence to the contrary. Given that I was an invited guest in someone else’s home, I simply dismissed myself from the conversation rather than fulfilling my urge to point out the ignorance of such thinking, and the harm and destruction it’s causing. But I do hope my abrupt departure from the conversation was enough to signal that I was unwilling to play make-believe with her.

In his 1896 essay, *The Will to Believe*, the great philosopher-psychologist William James, suggested that when it comes to matters of faith, to matters that are yet to be proven, we have no option but to make a choice about what we believe. Sometimes we must act, and, without having all the facts, we may need to take a leap of faith. In his essay, James defends the right of religionists to choose what they believe without proof. To do so, he specifically argues against, *The Ethics of Beliefs*, written by the mathematician and philosopher, W. K. Clifford, who said, “The talk of believing by our volition seems... from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile.”¹ Compared to magnificence of science, “how absolutely impersonal it stands in its vast augustness,” Clifford said, “then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his

¹ McDermott, John J., ed., *The Writings of William James*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1967, 1977, p. 720.

private dream!"² For Clifford, choosing to believe whatever one wills, with no evidence at all, is akin to what he termed a "pestilence," further stating that, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."³

Being a founder of Pragmatism, James disagreed with Clifford on practical grounds, saying that, "As a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use."⁴ And, on practical grounds, because there is so much we cannot know, especially regarding the most momentous decisions in our lives, we often find ourselves in the position of needing to choose what we will believe, based on little more than what we *want* to believe. "The psychology of human opinion," James said is of a "passional and volitional"⁵ nature. So, as a pragmatist and psychologist, James felt it pointless to talk about well-reasoned beliefs when most our beliefs are based on our emotions and desires. This may be so, but even James agreed this "will to believe" is permissible only when, in the words of his primary thesis, "*it is a necessary option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.*"⁶

So, whether we agree with Clifford's categorical imperative that it is always wrong to believe anything on insufficient grounds, or with James' notion that it is often necessary to choose what we are going to believe for practical reasons, both would agree that no beliefs held contrary to the best evidence should be maintained. "Can we, by just willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth," James asks, "Can we, by any effort of our will, or by any strength of wish that it were true, believe ourselves well when we are roaring with rheumatism in bed, or feel certain that the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars?"⁷ Even James agreed, no matter how much we wish such things to be true, we are "absolutely impotent to believe them," because they are contrary to both fact and reason.

Thus, on the one hand, it may be, as James argued, that we often, especially when it comes to the momentous and most meaningful decisions in our lives, need to take a leap of faith, to trust our guts, our passions and desires, rather than doing nothing at all, which is itself a kind of choice. On the other hand, when there is sufficient evidence, as Clifford demands, deciding against the facts is unforgivable. Yet I think James got something wrong. It is possible, in our society, to continue believing in things that have been proven false, and to disbelieve in what has been proven. It's possible to believe Abraham Lincoln was just a myth and still be taken seriously. It's possible to completely ignore the empirical evidence in favor of "whatever you want to believe" and still to be considered perfectly sane.

I considered the women I mentioned a few moments ago, who feigned concern about a new Ice Age, and tried to engage me in her fantasy that Global Warming is somehow both a hoax and a natural cycle, to be delusional on the matter, and I wasn't about to have a serious

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 721.

⁴ Ibid., p. 722

⁵ Ibid., p. 719.

⁶ Ibid., p. 723.

⁷ Ibid., p. 719.

conversation with someone who so willfully chooses to ignore what is more than “sufficient evidence” proving that Global Warming is happening and that it’s caused by our overuse of fossil fuels. On the other hand, as a society, we have inaugurated a man who not only denies global warming is happening, because it’s one of those “facts” for which he “has no use,” but is an originator of the so called “Birther Movement,” making the insane claim that Barack Obama wasn’t eligible to President because he was actually born in Africa, a belief he repeated throughout the recent election campaign, years after the White House released Obama’s birth certificate proving his U.S. citizenship. So, yes, it is entirely possible for those who believe whatever they want to believe to not only be taken seriously in our society, but to occupy some of our highest positions of honor and power.

So, the only question left is why? Why do so many choose the blue pill instead of the red? Why do they prefer to go on believing whatever they want to believe than waking up to reality? Those who were here last week may recall something I quoted from psychologist Erich Fromm, “We have become automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willing individuals,⁸ ...under the illusion that [we know] what [we want], while [we] actually [want what we’re] *supposed* to want.”⁹ This really complicates the matter because now we’re told we don’t simply believe whatever we want to believe, as fictional Morpheus says, or are exerting our “will to believe,” as James puts it, but we only believe we believe what we want to believe. How’s that for convoluted?

If this is so, then who’s pulling strings? Who’s the guy behind the green curtain? Whose beliefs are they? The answer, I think, lies in something else you may recall me saying last week, that, as Freud put, “...every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization,”¹⁰ and, “civilization has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed to that task.”¹¹ This is not part of some pathological conspiracy theory. I’m not suggesting a few individuals are intentionally conspiring together to get hundreds of millions of people to embrace the beliefs and values that are most beneficial to those running the show, but I do believe this is how our society has evolved to work, to keep individual expression and novelty in check.

Consider the work of the Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who was imprisoned and exiled in 1964 for teaching the poor people of his country to read. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire says the greatest difficulty in liberating the oppressed is that, without realizing it, they have internalized the values of their oppressors, thus helping to maintain the status quo. At most, then, freedom only means becoming oppressors themselves. As Freire says, “because of their identification with the oppressor, they have no consciousness of themselves as persons or as members of an oppressed class. It is not to become free that they want agrarian reform, [for example,] but in order to acquire

⁸ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 279.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹⁰ Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

land and thus become landowners—or, more precisely, bosses over other workers.”¹² Under these circumstances and individual’s position may change, but not the social context surrounding them, thus society remains oppressive, regardless of who’s on top. It’s like the disgruntled college students we see around the nation who think it’s appropriate to silence speakers they disagree with. The context of oppression, the Matrix of domination, still exists when we don’t understand freedom is only freedom when both the oppressed and oppressor are freed from tyranny, not just when they trade places. Freire says, “Only as they discover themselves to be ‘hosts’ of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy.”¹³

This is why those on top were so troubled by Freire’s attempt to educate peasants, because they might awaken to the reality of their circumstances. Prior to this, as theologian William Herzog explains, “Whatever education had been provided to the peasants was a form of ‘banking education’ aimed at depositing the worldview of the dominant class in the peasant’s minds and hearts, thereby persuading them that they were nothing more than objects in the reality of the ruling elites.”¹⁴ In this way, the oppressed, who have become as afraid of freedom as their oppressors, work to undermine their own interests by policing themselves on behalf the ruling minority.

This is so because it becomes extremely difficult for what historically has usually amounted to just 1 or 2 percent of the population to police everyone else. Not only would it require a massive and expensive police force draining much of their wealth, it also exposes them to the constant threat of a military coup. It’s much cheaper and safer for the small but dominant class to instill their values in those they oppress. Theologian Walter Wink says this is accomplished by the promotion of a cultural story explaining “how things got this way,” that convinces us this is the way it’s supposed to be, that oppression, and domination, and a few people having everything is the way it’s meant to be. “For a story told often enough,” he says, “and confirmed often enough in daily life, ceases to be a tale and is accepted as reality itself. When that happens, people accept a story even if it is destroying their lives.”¹⁵ They become, what B. F. Skinner referred to as, “The happy slave,” in “a system of slavery so well designed that it does not breed revolt...”¹⁶

This helps explain why in our own country, as Walter Wink says, “American blue-collar workers, who are among those victimized by the ruling elite, continue not only to support their oppressors but to be among their most vociferous fans?”¹⁷ It explains why a woman whose State has recently experienced its worst fire season in recorded history prefers to believe a new Ice Age is upon us. It explains how delusional politicians, who not only ignore

¹² Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, The Continuum Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1970, 1993, p. 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁴ Herzog, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994, p. 19.

¹⁵ Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, A Galilee Book, Random House, Inc., New York, NY, 1998., p. 42.

¹⁶ Skinner, B.F., *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1971, 1987, p. 37.

¹⁷ Wink, *ibid.*, p.59f.

and deny global warming, but also want to dismantle the programs that assist those most in need, like Medicare, Obamacare, Meals on Wheels, school lunch programs, and so on, and whose only economic strategy is cutting taxes for the wealthiest Americans, and who vow to eliminate any regulations that protect consumers, or the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land we depend upon, and on and on we can go, are continually placed in power by those who stand to lose the most by doing so. It explains why some African Americans in our nation, according to Implicit Bias Tests, share the same biases favoring whites as white Americans do.¹⁸ For “It is in keeping with the course of human development,” Freud said, “that external coercion gradually becomes internalized...¹⁹ One thus gets the impression that civilization is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority which understood how to obtain possession of the means to power and coercion...”²⁰ turning them from being opponents of civilization into being its vehicles.”²¹

None of this can change until we wake up to the context our society exists in, to the Matrix, if you will, that has convinced us this is the way things are supposed to be. To do so, we must first stop swallowing the blue pill, stop thinking it’s okay to believe whatever we want to believe, and start basing our beliefs on sufficient evidence. This means working diligently to become aware of our own biases, or, should I say, the cultural biases that have been instilled within us and have “been pulled over our eyes to blind us from the truth,” as Morpheus tells Neo. Only then, in seeing the context, the Matrix of our society, can we understand how it needs to change, not by exchanging one tyrant for another, or one dominant class for another, but by creating a society that is fundamentally different, that bases its success on the success and equality, including economic equality, of everyone, male and female, gay and straight, brown or white or any other color, Christian or Muslim, native or immigrant; and on business and corporate practices that protect the welfare and wellbeing of the environment we all share; a society in which there is no longer any need to coerce, or dominate, or oppress anyone because all people are truly free to achieve their full potential in a system that encourages and empowers them to do so.

This is the new way of seeing things that hundreds of millions of people around the world are waking up to. It may seem unrealistic, given the recent political turn of events, but as those seeking to repeal Obamacare discovered just this week, destroying this new vision isn’t going to be easy. It’s already out there. We can see it. And if, together, we reach for it, it shall be ours.

¹⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/12/black-on-black-racism-the-hazards-of-implicit-bias/384028/>

¹⁹ Freud, *ibid.*, p.7f.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.