

# Bringing Up Our Brainchild Real Life and the Omnipotence of Thought

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There has long been a struggle between those who want to face reality and those who want to frame it. The wish to face it has been around at least since the early Greek philosophers 2,600 years ago, who were the first thinkers we know of who attempted to explain the world in natural rather than supernatural terms. That's not very long ago considering modern humans have been around more than 200,000 years.

The wish to frame it has been around a lot longer, perhaps as long as there have been minds capable of pondering what and why things are the way they are. These explanations, based on supernatural myths about magical deities, spirits, and anthropomorphized animals, have predominated our thinking about the world throughout most of human history, and still do for many, if not most, of us. Today, however, our superstitious thinking must at least account for what has been proven by our modern rational and scientific worldview, even if only to explain it away. In his recent book, *Rationality*, Stephen Pinker says this is possible because, "People divide their worlds into two zones. One consists of the physical objects around them, the other people they deal with face to face, the memory of their interactions, and the rules and norms that regulate their lives."<sup>1</sup>

People have mostly accurate beliefs about this zone, and they reason rationally within it. Within this zone, they believe there's a real world and that beliefs about it are true or false. They have no choice: that's the only way to keep gas in the car, money in the bank, and the kids clothed and fed. Call it the reality mindset.<sup>2</sup>

He calls the other zone *the mythology mindset*, based not on immediate experience, but upon "the distant past, the unknowable future, faraway peoples and places, remote corridors of power, the microscopic, the cosmic, the counterfactual, the metaphysical."<sup>3</sup>

Beliefs in these zones are narratives, which may be entertaining or inspiring or morally edifying. Whether they are literally "true" or "false" is the wrong question. The function of these beliefs is to construct a social reality that binds the tribe or sect and gives it a moral purpose.<sup>4</sup>

Keep in mind, the mythology mindset is not limited to origin stories about how we got here or why there are stars in the sky. Many of today's myths are unsubstantiated and unprovable conspiracy theories that originated from little more than somebody's fearful stream of consciousness, as with whomever the anonymous "Q" is who started QAnon. Yet millions have come to embrace the unfounded conspiracy theories creating, just as Pinker says, "a social reality" that gives the QAnon sect both a "tribe" to belong to and a "moral purpose" in the world.

Placing the mythological mindset over the reality mindset is always about maintaining control. On an individual level, it enables us to feel like we can control what happens in our uncertain world and keep status in our community by accepting common beliefs, dogmas, and creeds. On a social level, the mythology mindset helps a few people maintain power

over everyone else, except the outliers and dissenters they and their minions must occasionally deal with.

The result is that we live in communities that by definition, since they are held together by commonalities, gravitate toward myth rather than reality. Our societies, that is, are mostly delusional, which is the condition of not adequately accepting reality. This explains why throughout human history we have engaged in religious and ideological wars, condemned heretics and blacklisted dissenters, and today use the news and social media to demonize and cancel those our ideological and identity tribes disagree with.

All of this is based upon the general preference for the mythology mindset over the reality mindset. As somebody once said, “My mind is made up. Please don’t bother me with the facts.” And what this implies is that our ideas and stories about the world are far more important to many of us than is the world itself. Classical psychology refers to this as the “omnipotence of thought,” the false belief that we can control the world with our minds. In his book, *Dogma as Compulsion*, classical psychologist Theodor Reik wrote, “The impression of the miraculous is dependent on the psychical process by which a situation is deprived of its natural character, determined by the laws of Nature, and transformed by the belief in the ‘omnipotence of thought,’ into a supernatural situation.”<sup>5</sup> That’s why myths about the world, old and new, are believed by many to be more true than what they experience with their own eyes. It is why many believe nonsense instead of their own senses, the supernatural rather than the natural.

Additionally, there may be something innate about the information stored in beliefs and ideas, as is so of all information, that drives it to propagate and become dominant. *Memes*, as Richard Dawkins named them, behave the same way as genes in this sense. Today, many experts have begun to think the underlying structure beneath everything—memes, genes, molecules, and atoms included—are bits and qubits of information, that everything in the Universe and the Universe itself is comprised of information, and information, again, has the propensity to spread and become dominant.

Whatever the case, whether we want our own ideas to become dominant so we can maintain social status and control, or if the ideas themselves drive us to help them propagate, we often treat our ideas and beliefs as if they were our offspring whom we are compelled to help survive and thrive. We are instinctively driven to love and protect them. Somewhat ironically, we can turn to mythology itself to prove the point.

Perhaps the most familiar of these is the Hebrew myth of Adam and Eve. You will recall that Adam, the obvious male in the story, is not born but fashioned by Yahweh out of mud. He is then put to sleep while Yahweh removes one of his ribs and makes Eve from it, the first woman. But this mythology, in which males give birth—Yahweh to Adam and Adam to Eve — is a reversal of what we know is true in reality, that the females of a species give birth. At least the story does initially have Adam being formed of Earth, which is the mother of all life. Indeed, the word *mother* comes from the same Greek word as *matter*. Matter is our mother, and *matter*, I will posit as a materialist, is reality.

Another example is the Greek myth of Zeus who, in a fit of anger, hurls a thunderbolt and kills Semele who is pregnant with his child. Zeus quickly rescues the fetus from the ashes and sews it into his own thigh until it is ready to be born. So it is Zeus, the father, who gives birth to Dionysus, the god of wine, pleasure, and madness.

There's also the myth of his daughter Athena who is born fully-grown from Zeus's forehead. In a Greek drama centering on the trial of Orestes who is accused of murdering his mother, Apollo uses the story of Athena to prove the accused's innocence. "There she stands," Apollo says, "the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus, she who was never fostered in the dark womb, yet such a child as no goddess could bring forth."<sup>6</sup> From this, Apollo concludes, "The mother is no parent of that which is called her child."<sup>7</sup> The court finds the argument so convincing that Orestes is acquitted on the grounds that it would be impossible for him to kill his mother if he never had a mother to begin with.

This third reversal myth is particularly relevant because Athena, being born from Zeus's head, is a brainchild, a metaphor of idealism. Idealism, the philosophy of Plato, is a metaphysic that continues to be taken seriously by many if not most people, whether they know it or not. Idealism is the belief that reality is a realm of perfect ideals and the world we live in represents only an imperfect version of those ideals. In other words, our ideas about the world are truer than our experience of it. What we think inside our heads is truer than what's right in front of us.

Despite the undeniable reality in front of us, that only females give birth, we may embrace ideas that insist it is the father, and that an invisible Father-god is our creator, not the Mother-Earth from which we truly evolved. This explains why industrialized Western society, rooted in Christian theology, has behaved so disdainfully toward the Earth, because, in our worship of the Father, we have come to believe ourselves separate from the Earth, our true mother, *mitéra*, matter. And the Earth, Mother Nature, Eve, the mother of all living things, the moist muddy ground from which we are all born, is being desecrated by the untruths that spring from our heads and our refusal to face the realities we are truly experiencing.

Scientists began warning us and our leaders of the Greenhouse Gas Effect more than a hundred years ago. They knew our recently industrialized planet was warming up even then. And the environmental movement was born with the success of Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, in 1962. It was in the mid 1970's that President Jimmy Carter publicly acknowledged climate change and initiated plans to reduce our carbon emissions. He lowered the national speed limit to 55 mph to help accomplish this, asked us all to conserve energy, and even put solar panels on the White House roof. And it was in 1979 when the first World Climate Conference took place in Geneva to find solutions to "prevent potential man-made changes on climate that might be averse to the well-being of humanity."<sup>8</sup>

Tragically, just as soon as Ronald Reagan took office in 1980 he removed the solar panels and the speed limit was eventually increased to 65 mph and as high as 75 mph in some states. The Republicans, perhaps for little more reason than the kneejerk compulsion to disagree with their ideological opponents, those outside their tribe, went into full denial of

reality mode, birthing nonsensical excuses from their foreheads to dissuade and prevent us from doing anything about the most existential threat humanity has ever faced.

First, they laughed at us and claimed global warming is a Democratic hoax, falsely claiming there was lots of disagreement among scientists about it. Later, when it became too evident to wholly deny, they shifted the myth just a bit, to claim instead that scientists disagree about its cause. They didn't. And even today, with the disastrous impacts of global warming right in front of us all, in more ways that we can count, they still do everything they can to prevent us from addressing this crisis in meaningful ways. (One of the first things Trump did, you will recall, was to pull the U.S. out of the Paris Climate Agreement.) This is so, because to the Republican party, at least in this case, matter doesn't matter. What matters most is their ideology, the brainchildren they are driven to nurture and help become dominant, even if they are so obviously leading us all to our doom.

Imagine how much better the situation would be today if 45 years ago these obstructionists, trapped in the mythology mindset, had put their faith in reality rather than in the omnipotence of their own thoughts. This is not to say that all of us don't ultimately function based upon our beliefs, but those beliefs ought to be based upon the reality mindset rather than unsubstantiated ideas we hold because they give us a sense of belonging and a false sense of security and certainty. Just this week I spoke with a fellow who told me all about how China is taking over our country, passionately explaining in detail what it is they are secretly after. Yet he concluded by saying, "Now, I don't have any evidence for this, but it's what I think." That's a brainchild born from his own forehead rather than from reality, mother, *mitéra*, matter, a belief without evidence, a belief that is not evident.

This is one means of telling whether someone is operating from the reality mindset or the mythology mindset. The mythology mindset is quick to begin statements with, "I think" or "I believe" or "I feel," but seldom offers any reasons why it believes what it does, at least not reasons based on facts and empirical evidence. It is enough to merely present us with its beautiful bouncing baby belief, newly born, like Athena, from one's forehead, disconnected from hard labor and material reality.

The reality mindset, on the other hand, has plenty of sound reasons for its beliefs, precisely because it requires such evidence before it is willing to even entertain an idea. Again, as Pinker says, "We children of the Enlightenment embrace the radical creed of universal realism: we hold that all our beliefs should fall within the reality mindset. We care about whether our creation story, our founding legends, our theories of invisible nutrients and germs and forces, our conceptions of the powerful, our suspicions about our enemies, are true or false."<sup>9</sup> By Enlightenment, Pinker is referring to the tools we've developed, only in recent centuries, that have allowed the reality mindset to form.

In addition to empirical science, Pinker says these tools "include logic, critical thinking, probability, correlation and causation, the optimal ways to adjust our beliefs and commit to decisions with uncertain evidence, and the yardsticks for making rational choices alone and with others."<sup>10</sup> In short, the reality mindset never begins with "I think," "I believe," or "I

feel,” but by asking, what does the evidence tell me. As economist and philosopher John Maynard Keynes once asked, “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?” For the reality mindset requires that we allow the facts to shape our beliefs, not our beliefs to shape the facts.

While it is true that we cannot manipulate the world with our minds, at least not without using them to move our hands and feet, and that our minds ought to be shaped by reality, ideas do influence what we do with our hands and feet, and some ideas influence millions, even billions, of people, whether they are based in reality or not. And some people are able to control others, sometimes thousands and millions of others, by spreading their ideas. So the question before all of us is what kind of person do we want to be? Do we want to spend our lives using whatever lies we tell ourselves and others to feel a false sense of control, or to unethically maintain control over others just because we can? Do we want to risk living our lives unauthentically, having committed ourselves to fostering obvious lies, just so we can fit in with others? Do we want to live a lie, or a whole life full of lies, just because it feels better than facing reality? Do we want to squander this brief opportunity we have to experience something real? Do we want to spend our energy nurturing and protecting our brainchildren, the thoughts in our heads, or do we want to pay attention to matter, to what matters?

To help ponder these questions, let me begin to close by briefly mentioning another myth from the ancient Hebrew tradition. After meeting an everchanging entity in the form of a burning bush, Moses, who was to lead his people to freedom, asks to see the being’s true form. Burning Bush explain that it is not possible for someone to fully grasp its form while alive, but asks Moses to shield himself by ducking behind the cleft of a rock, “and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”<sup>11</sup> So the entity allows Moses to see its backside, because this is the only way to catch even a glimpse of the larger reality.

I think this myth is meant to help us admit that none of us can fully understand reality, nor even come close to doing so. Yet we can understand a bit of it by observing its backside. In the Hebrew story, the backside is the Creator’s creation, Earth, Mother, Matter. That’s how we comprehend ultimate truth, by exploring the empirical world around us, which is the best we can know of reality, the closest we can come to understanding it. Theologians tend to define God a lot like that movie that just won all those Oscars, as “Everything, Everywhere, all at Once.”

If so, then “God” is just another word for reality, because reality is all there is. Whether we understand it all or not, whatever is, if it is, must be real. And reality, for this reason, is the most abundant resource in the Universe because it is everything, everywhere, all at once. And yet it is also life’s rarest gem because it is impossible for us to ever grasp it fully. Like Moses, we can only catch glimpses of it by observing what it leaves behind—physical evidence, matter, Mother Earth—by taking advantage of material science, empiricism, and reason.

Our ideas about the world, on the other hand, the dogmas and creeds and common beliefs — the brainchildren we care so much about and often devote our lives to—don't always reflect reality, and are often a denial of it. And so the quest to know the Truth requires that we be first be true to ourselves. Sometimes, as we often hear it said, the truth hurts, but can the truth hurt any worse than the lies we cling to? What can hurt us more than the self-interested lies that have prevented us from addressing climate change before now? Lies may feel good but, in the end, they hurt us far worse than the truth. The truth shall set us free, but such freedom requires us to face reality and reality is not our brainchild. On the contrary, we are the children of reality, and this is the mother we ought to love and devote our lives to.

<sup>1</sup> Pinker, Steven. *Rationality* (pp. 289-290). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Reik, Theodor, *Dogma as Compulsion*, (Greenwood Press Publishers, Westport, CT, 1951, 1975), p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Eisler, *ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> "Declaration of World Climate Conference," World Meteorological Organization, Feb. 1979, [dgvn.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/DOKUMENTE/WCC-3/Declaration-WCC1.pdf](http://dgvn.de/fileadmin/user_upload/DOKUMENTE/WCC-3/Declaration-WCC1.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Pinker, *ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. xv.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 33:21-23.