Position Papers

Don't Have to Believe Anything I Don't Want To

Jonathan Miles



Technology has reached the point that you don't have to believe anything you really don't want to believe. See a video of something you don't want to be true? It was probably AI-generated, anyway. Hear a story that would make you question your own beliefs? It was probably doctored. Read a piece and you don't like the implications, you can dismiss it with another article that backs up what you already believe. Someone you admire caught in a lie by sources you used to trust? No problem, mistakes were made (sure) just not by, you know, the person I admire.

In epistemology, we have a term for some state of affairs in which you'd be justified in doubting just about anything. For instance, how do you KNOW the universe wasn't created 5 minutes ago with all the appearances of age and with our memories intact? These "universal belief falsifiers" are the favorite weapon of skeptics to undermine the possibility that knowledge is even possible. After all, how can you prove that you AREN'T really just a brain floating in a vat somewhere or that the universe and all your experiences aren't just a simulation? (like Elon Musk thinks it is).

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I remember someone trying to run this sort of skepticism at Norm Geisler. He responded something like, "Look, I *know* I exist. I'm pretty sure you exist. Everything else is a matter of degrees of evidence."

That sort of skepticism doesn't scare me. What scares me is that we have reached the point that trained experts can't tell an AI-generated video from a real one. One forensic media expert, Farid Haney, said that it's getting to the point he can't distinguish between a genuine video of a missile striking a school in Iran and a deep fake.

Politicians want me to fear the midterm elections. Pshaw. I fear people who can't face facts and, thanks to deep fakes, don't have to do it. Social psychologists call this sort of motivated reasoning, cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias. I see in it echoes of the fall of man.

We've always been susceptible to this sort of darkened mind. It shows up in countless experiments:

1. Israeli Jews rated an actual Israeli-authored peace plan less favorably when it was attributed to the Palestinians than when it was attributed to their own government.

2. Subjects were shown a study linking caffeine use with fibrocystic disease (originally thought to be a major risk factor for breast cancer). Those who rated the study the most poorly were women who drank coffee. Men who drank coffee did not.

3. Supporters and opponents of capital punishment read two purported studies, one confirming and one disconfirming their beliefs about deterrence. Both sides rated the belief-confirming results as more convincing and reported shifting their beliefs further toward their own bias.

And now, just the knowledge of AI-generated images is enough to provide disconfirmation for anything we don't want to be true. Motivated reasoning is becoming America's favorite drug.

And yet, the scripture is still the same. Isaiah still warns:

> *Woe to those who call evil good*
> *and good evil,*
> *who put darkness for light*
> *and light for darkness,*

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who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!

Technology doesn't change our responsibility to discern good from evil. It doesn't absolve us from the sort of self-examination that reveals when we are tempted to be only wise in our own eyes. We must still call evil, "Evil" even when we don't want to accept it. Especially when we don't want to accept it. Especially when it comes from the other side. When comes from "them." and not "us." 1 Peter 4:17 says "For it is time for judgment begins with the house of God. Socrates said, "The Unexamined Life is not Worth Living," and Jeremiah said:

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?
"I the Lord search the heart
and test the mind,
to give every man according to his ways,
according to the fruit of his deeds."

In a post-truth age, let us redouble our efforts to call good "Good" and evil "Evil" no matter its source. And may the Holy Spirit give us power and grace to fight our temptation to believe only what we want to believe.Ω

Jonathan Miles is husband to Stacie, dad to Wesley, Gloria, and Caroline, professor of philosophy and ethics to his students, and teaching elder/pastor to the wonderful folks at Faith Journey Church. He lives in Quincy, Illinois.

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