

BELIEFS AND NEEDS

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Beliefs are impelled by needs. And needs in their turn are being increasingly impelled by beliefs. It is instructive to examine how needs and beliefs are inter-related and inter-connected.

Let us first examine how needs generate and determine the form and content of beliefs. All our endeavours are relative to goals of one kind or another. A goal achieved is a need fulfilled. The compelling presence of a need sets up a goal to be realised. But needs by themselves do not bring about their fulfilment. Needs that cry out for fulfilment generate the impulse to purposive actions. The mind is the determinant of our purposive actions. What is called the 'mind' is a useful and convenient intellectual fiction wherewith we avoid a lot of unnecessary circumlocution. The empirical minds in fact a plurality of complex processes born of the collocation of a wide variety of casual factors, occurring as a series of events in terms of conceptual and perceptual situations. Our conscious behaviour in thought, word and deed is governed basically by three aspects of this mind, namely the affective, cognitive and the conative. The affective is that which imparts to our actions their feeling tone. The cognitive is the intellectual aspect that covers the sphere of belief and knowledge. And the conative is that which imparts to actions their element of volition, effort, purpose and determination. The affective, the cognitive and the conative have each a vital part to play in the generation of needs and beliefs.

Each one of us has a wide variety of needs, physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural, moral and economic. Some needs are common to all of us such as the need to overcome hunger and thirst. Some needs are not universal in this sense such as the need to smoke tobacco. All needs, both the universal and the particular, appear to fall under two basic categories, primary and derivative. It is unnecessary to dogmatise on this categorisation and draw hard and fast distinctions between the two kinds of needs. What is considered by one as a primary need may well be considered as a dispensable luxury by another.

A careful and intensive examination of needs brings to light a number of home truths largely ignored by us in the course of our hectic lives. The needs of man in society are somewhat different from those of a Robinson Crusoe to involve the fundamental question of culture. Needs gather around a nucleus of primitive instincts and continue to snowball in the course of progressive sophistication in the matter of cultural development.

Let us consider the history of an instinctive need such as that for self-preservation. Survival in a hostile environment consisting of the physical elements, beasts and men engenders the need for security of life and limb, property, family and tribe. This basic need easily promotes belief in a protector at different levels, terrestrial, atmospheric and celestial. The need for collective security in organised political life gives rise to such arrangements as governmental contracts between a leader viewed as king and people viewed as subjects. In the psychology of religion this need for protection gives to beliefs in gods and demons fit to propitiated and placated.

The need to survive death and destruction has occasioned belief in immortality. The need to punish enemies and evil-doers has promoted belief in hell and purgatory. The need to reward followers has promoted belief in heaven and paradise with bliss unlimited. It is indeed no wonder that the heaven of desert peoples has running water, that the heaven of the Red Indians provides happy hunting grounds and that the hell of the Tibetans terrifies evil-doers with horrors of cold many times more dreadful than Himalayan winters.

Belief appears to be an intellectual effort to rationalise needs of many kinds. Where a need clearly appears to explain a particular belief we all too often come across people who use ingenious arguments to justify the need on the grounds of the belief. We have here evidence of a curious process. First a need impels a belief. Then that belief impels a further need. And this need in turn impels another set of beliefs which again in its turn impels another further set of needs and so on and so forth.

This brings us to the question of how beliefs impel needs. We all know that while some needs are instinctive, the vast majority of our needs are acquired. For instance, we know that advertisements in newspapers and commercials on the radio have been very successful in creating needs within individuals and among groups by promoting new beliefs of a tempting and compelling nature. Captains of industry and tycoons of business who have to make profits in a world of fierce competition are compelled to sell their products by ingenious methods which consist of the skilful use and abuse of the well-known truths of human psychology. The creation of needs through the inculcation of beliefs is by no means confined to the world of commerce alone. All missions are prompted by visions. Religious creeds and political ideologies continue to function as the most potent factors that exercise the greatest influence on the formation of popular beliefs and attitudes born of such beliefs. Every aspect of human behaviour is influenced, governed, determined and directed by a considerable number of beliefs which provide the motive power for action oriented towards the fulfilment of needs. We have more beliefs in our heads

than we care to think we have. Our zest for the manufacture of beliefs is almost pathological.

Let us consider the interesting manner in which new beliefs associated with our ordinary needs of food, clothing and shelter give rise to needs of a second order. The primary function of food and drink is to eliminate hunger and thirst. This, however, is true only in a very elimination of hunger and thirst is one among many consequences of taking food and drink. With some of us the most important consideration in regard to food is not its basic function of elimination hunger but meeting acquired needs prompted by beliefs of many kinds. Some take food to beautify their figure, some to convey messages to others about their fastidious tastes, some to advertise their level of income, some to prove their capacity for extravagance, some to prove their simplicity and so on.

Take the case of clothing. One might think that the basic reason why people wear clothes is because of the sense of shame and because of the need for protection and health. The psychology of clothes and the sartorial habits of people make such a thought appear very naïve. In the case of some of us the function of clothes is more to reveal than to conceal. Some wear clothes to attract attention, some to be 'mod' and 'fab', some to conform to social custom, some to outrage orthodoxy, some to show evidence of their wealth and power, some to prove their patriotism, some to hide reality and convey appearances, some to get into the fashion page of a newspaper and so on. It is clear that clothes are an effective vehicle for the expression of an amazing number of beliefs which have very little to do with clothes in their primary function.

Now take the case of shelter. The basic function of housing might appear to one as that of proving shelter and protection. This is true only in the case of the poorest of the poor and certainly during particular state in the history of man. Our attitudes to shelter are similar to our attitudes to food and clothing. Given half a chance even the poor man in our country is ready to put up an 'American-pattern' house. This is a measure of the power of beliefs in determining our ordinary behaviour throughout our waking consciousness.

The moral I wish to draw from this discussion is not to urge the reader to return to a life of bare necessities. Cultural enrichment begins only after we have passed the level of bare subsistence. We cannot make a virtue out of poverty or regard wealth as an evil. What I have attempted to show is the correlating between needs and beliefs. The fewer the beliefs the fewer the needs. The fewer the needs the fewer the beliefs. Conversely where there are more beliefs there are more needs, and where there are more needs there are more beliefs. Once we forget the causal relation between need and belief we are inclined to regard beliefs as absolute. One with absolute beliefs is certain to be a victim of

bigotry. Intolerance and arrogance. Those who fail to see the inter-relation of need and belief are very likely to discover absolute beliefs and absolute needs in the spheres of religion and politics. The constant contemplation of the relativity of need and belief is one of the effective ways of cultivating mindfulness and self-awareness. This awareness makes us less rigid and less dogmatic. The less rigid we are the more liberal we are. The less dogmatic we are the more tolerant we are. The liberal and tolerant outlook helps us to recognise things as they truly are and it further makes us fit to participate in life with freedom and responsibility.

