

The Hypothetical¹

The human race has no tolerance of the hypothetical. It likes to turn hypotheses into opinions. It does not matter at all if someone believes that you hold an opinion about the situation which is diametrically opposed to their own, but it seems that the concept of a permanent, irrefutable, and yet uncertain hypothesis occasions them discomfort.

This is a curious and intriguing feature of human psychology, which I believe has hitherto escaped comment.

To illustrate what I mean, suppose that you are discussing solipsism with somebody. You point out that it is an irrefutable possibility that no one other than yourself has a consciousness. He will immediately start discussing this as if you had asserted your personal belief that no one other than yourself has a consciousness. (He, almost certainly, will have a quite definite personal belief that everyone who seems to have a consciousness actually has one.)

Similarly, if you point out the vast quantity of possibilities which are constantly left out of account by the human race in running its affairs on a basis of pseudo-omniscience, he will not be in the least interested in all the irrefutably possible possibilities which you may bring to light, but only in trying to guess at some system of dogmatic belief, different from his own, which he would like to believe you believe in.

It might be supposed that this lack of interest in the concept of the hypothetical might stem from lack of adequate mental resources. There is, presumably, a level of intelligence below which the notion of a permanent but unproven possibility is difficult to grasp. However, this desire to discuss only *beliefs* is found in people of the highest supposed intelligence, so it must be supposed that the preference is emotional. There is an almost audible sigh of relief, an almost visible sinking back onto restful accustomed cushions, when your interlocutor can persuade you to express a personal preference for one side of the possible alternatives. Even if, be it noted, this is only a tentative preference, it removes the matter from the realm of fact. It is no longer necessary to discuss the facts, as such, at all. We can discuss it all in terms of 'I think so and so ...' 'Well, myself, I think so and so ...' 'I believe in reincarnation, actually, and I think domestic animals go to heaven, but not wild ones.' 'Do you really? Well, myself, I don't think *all* domestic animals go to heaven, but I think there is a special part of heaven set aside for the wild animals ...' and so on.

A final refinement of this state of affairs should be noted. People not only want you to *believe* things (and not just entertain hypotheses, or be aware of possibilities), but they want you to *disbelieve* their own beliefs. If you do not, for example, absolutely believe in reincarnation, and they do, they do not want you to say that you do not reject the possibility of reincarnation. They want you to be *hostile* to reincarnation, and keep putting words into your mouth until they have convinced themselves that you are.

¹ extract from Celia Green, *Advice to Clever Children*