

Living with humble uncertainty benefits all

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It is psychologically satisfying to believe that we have arrived at the best solutions when deciding on important matters. If we purchase a new car and discover later the car we bought does not work properly or that we should have bought a different kind of vehicle we tend to hang on to the feelings and ideas that we had when we first purchased the car. We work hard at convincing ourselves that our original decisions were the correct ones.

When we choose an occupation or buy a new house that we judged at the time to be perfect, later as years go by we may start to wonder if we made mistakes. Yet we will work hard to mentally convince ourselves that our original decisions were correct. Some psychologists explain this human tendency as an effort to avoid “cognitive dissonance” (Leon Festinger, 1957). We want to avoid the unpleasant possibility that we made a mistake.

How should I invest my savings? Which politicians should I support? To which charities should I donate? What university courses should I choose? There are many such questions for which we cannot know with absolute certainty what directions we ought to take. If we did know for sure how to proceed we could be comforted by feelings of certainty. Yet there are many important questions where it is impossible to know the absolute best and most accurate answers in advance.

In religious and philosophic questions often we cannot know the best answers with certainty. What’s the purpose for my life? Is there really a God? If so, can I know if I will have a heavenly afterlife? It is in religious and metaphysical matters that we may be better off learning how to live life without 100% certainty than to imagine we know when we really don’t.

Political leaders throughout history have made serious mistakes when they were too certain about the things they thought they knew but didn’t. There have been

times when inflexible certainty has needlessly led to wars and loss of human life. Wars in Afghanistan and Viet Nam and Iraq offer examples of mistaken choices when leaders in western societies were too certain about the things they thought they knew accurately about other countries, but didn't. Historically, similar mistakes were made by authoritarian leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, and Pol Pot who were driven to violent acts and massacres by their over-confidence and their feelings of authoritarian certainty.

Religious leaders and sometimes scientists too have made similar mistakes about their own convictions. Fundamentalist religious leaders throughout history who were certain they knew how God thinks have sometimes initiated decisions and actions resulting in wars and deaths even among religious followers. Differences of opinions concerning beliefs held by religions outside one's own may sometimes lead to violence and conflict.

Often when differences of opinions occur many people believe the way to resolve differences is by searching for scientific evidence. But even among scientists, too much certainty can be unscientific. The best advances occurring in science have frequently happened when scientists remained open to further investigation and modification. Important discoveries of notable scientists such as Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein have now been modified to bring their ideas into a growing body of more accurate information. The most useful scientists in the future will be those driven by curiosity and testing of new theories and hypotheses, rather than by those who believe they have arrived at complete accuracy and final answers. Progress in science is usually achieved when scientists are not content to believe they have already arrived at permanent conclusions with absolute certainty. A more open-ended approach can allow science over time to become self-correcting as it ought to be.

Too much psychological desire for certainty in politics, religion, or science – as in other disciplines – leads to stagnation and conflict and mental gridlock. To advance knowledge we need to learn the humility that helps us live comfortably without absolute certainty while enabling us to continue an on-going search for

truth. As the humanist philosopher, A. C. Grayling wrote, “one mark of intelligence is an ability to live with as yet unanswered questions.”