

Christoforos Ioannidis

*Paper prepared for the  
Second Euroacademia Global Forum of Critical Studies  
Asking Big Questions Again*

*Prague, 21 – 22 February 2014*

*This paper is a draft*

*Please do not cite*

# Social Causes and the Pursuit of Social Beliefs: Is there a Neutral Start?

Mr. Christoforos Ioannidis

PhD candidate at King's College London

## Abstract

How do we form beliefs? This is obviously an epistemological, thus philosophical, question. This paper explores the formation of social beliefs in particular, and the social causes that bring them about. I argue that in the modern world, one main social cause, namely the media, presents information and evidence, or “evidence”, in such a way, so that given certain assumptions of human psychology (which I will prove with certain experiments done in the field of psychology), people using media make people have certain social beliefs that would be unjustified if the belief formation process had been performed in a more neutral and personal environment. I finally suggest that art could be a way with which people can communicate in a safer environment so that individuals can allow themselves to reason better about their beliefs, and reach justified (and hopefully true) beliefs. I use Aronson’s model of the analogy of pyramid to explain the belief formation process in modern societies. This model shows how it is often the case that the factor that may determine whether an individual becomes more and more confident about a belief he starts to form may even depend on luck, and how it is that while going down at the same side of the pyramid, the conviction of the individual becomes stronger and stronger. I will use extreme examples, like how individuals came to strongly believe that the end of the world would come about on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 2011 after listening to Harold Camping on the radio. I will explain why art could help individuals form social beliefs in a safer environment and open the floor for discussion. My project has been inspired by the event “Truths, beliefs, convictions” which took place at King’s College London, by Dr Kris de Meyer.

Keywords: social beliefs, media, self-justification, art

## 1. Belief formation: General Background

### 1.1. Basic philosophical approaches

How do we form beliefs? To the extent that this question is linked to knowledge, or the intention of humans to try to reach knowledge with their beliefs, this is an epistemological, thus philosophical question, as it is translated to how we link belief with knowledge. Empiricists like David Hume maintain that we form beliefs by experience, whereas on the other hand rationalists like Kant hold that we form beliefs based on reason. As it is often the case between two opposite views, some try to stand in between and link the two. In a more contemporary context, Anil Gupta argues for a logical relationship of experience to knowledge with interdependencies: both our experiences and reason interact dynamically and they influence each other. A common possible outcome is stabilization and convergence. In stabilization, given a coherent view A, there is always a succession B of experiences that only confirm and never undermine any fundamental tenet of the view<sup>i</sup>. In convergence, there are two different beliefs that are adjusted in the light of experiences<sup>ii</sup>. Gupta mentions the following example. Suppose that as I am turning the street, I find myself before a large, green wall. I can bring to bear two distinct beliefs: A) everything is normal and I am simply standing in front of a large, green wall, and B) I believe that things that look green to me are actually blue. Imagine that after experiencing the wall, I undergo a series of experiences with color charts in an optometrist's office. It is easy to imagine that, as a result of these experiences, there is convergence in the sequences of beliefs generated by A and B. The experiences can easily force me to revise B and to conclude that my eyes are normal after all, that they were not diseased, and that the wall I faced was in fact light green. Two ideally rational beings that suffer the experiences I suffered and that begin respectively with the views A and B will, after a time, have virtually identical views. Their views will differ slightly because of their different histories. One will believe, correctly, that it had taken the wall to be blue, while the other will have no such belief. However, letting aside such minor differences caused by the differences in their initial views, their later views will be identical. They will believe the same things about the wall and about the functioning of their eyes.

### 1.2. What does this all mean?

Notably, what happens in stabilization and convergence, certain beliefs, in our example belief B, function as starting points which can later be revised. What causes that revision? In this example, Gupta does not neglect to mention that “two rational beings” will inevitably reach the same views. Rationality forces the subject to reflect on two opposing views and try to verify, in this example empirically, which one is true and which one is false. At this point, I have to add that obviously, beliefs are of course not always ontological statements, so they are not always either true or false. Beliefs are often deontological statements, which makes them unable to be either true or false, so a rational subject

cannot try to empirically verify either of the two sequences in order to reach stabilization and convergence. This is obviously true, but the critical relevant point here is not how the subject will try to check whether either of the two sequences is true. The relevant critical point is one step before this stage: the mental act with which the subject reflects on his/her thoughts and realizes that he/she needs to verify – somehow – whether either of the two starting beliefs are true. What is important is that the subject behaves rationally and that means that he/she does not accept either notion for granted, but tries to check if a belief is true, without having been influenced by any social causes, without any psychological obstacles accepting that he/she might be mistaken, and being psychologically fully ready to entirely accept that a belief he/she previously held might be mistaken, as he/she realizes that being human entails being fallible. In the case of beliefs based on perception, things look simple enough. Is it the same with social beliefs?

## 2. Formation of Social Beliefs

### 2.1. Social Beliefs and Social Causes

In short: obviously not. In the modern world, one main social cause, namely the media, presents information and evidence, or “evidence”, in such a way, so that people using the media come to have certain social beliefs that would be unjustified if the belief formation process had been performed in a more neutral and personal environment. In our example above, another subject intervenes suggesting that B is true and thus my perceptual system is false. There are many such subjects in the formation of social beliefs, the most efficient one being the media.

### 2.2. The media

The media influences the formation of social beliefs of people in almost all areas of life: religion, politics, relationships, etc. The problem is not when we realize that the media are creating opinions in our minds. The problem is when we do not, and that is often the case. Not only sometimes information presented is incorrect, but it is often not entirely complete and not objective or unbiased. For example, Julia T. Wood, referring to how we view men and women in particular, states that “media insinuate their messages into our *consciousness* at every turn.”<sup>iii</sup> (The emphasis in Italics is mine). She holds that a primary way in which media distort reality is in under-representing women and she explains how both genders are presented but also how they are not presented, etc. She also shares some interesting facts about rape, distinguishing myths from fact, e.g. the media presents the myth that rapists are abnormal, whereas the fact is that “rapists have not been shown to differ from non rapists in personality, psychology, adjustment, or involvement in interpersonal relationships”.

From these simple examples alone, it becomes apparent that the media do not allow people to form social beliefs in a neutral environment and that people, perhaps consciously, but mostly subconsciously, form their beliefs, or rather say “have their beliefs formed” by the media, and especially television, where the situation of the subject is more passive. The social belief that rapists are abnormal is a false belief because it does not respond to reality, but it is also a justified false belief. Since people have not been exposed to the fact that rapists are actually often not abnormal and do not differ in many respects from non rapists, people are justified in believing<sup>iv</sup> – even though they don’t realize that they are believing it - that what the media presents is true, under the false assumption that media presents reality to the public.

### 2.3. How far can we go?

What is the extent of this wrong belief formation process? How far could people go following the media? How extreme could false beliefs that they come to hold because of the media be? The answer is rather disappointing: quite extreme.

In the limited scope of this discussion, I will refer to one example alone: Harold Egbert Camping. He is an American Christian radio broadcaster, author and evangelist. He publicly announced that the world would end on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 2011, when the physical rapture of the world would take place. Many people followed Harold and came to believe that the world would indeed end. Some left their jobs where they had been working for years. These were not people that were mentally unstable or in any way less intellectually able to assess their views in comparison to average people. They did not come to believe that the end of the world would come because of internal or external pressure that would deprive them their autonomy. However, they came to seriously believe that the world would end because they were convinced by Harold Camping after listening to his radio. How could that be possible?

### 2.4. The Pyramid of Choice

With one word: self-justification. Carol Travis and Elliot Aronson provide an explanation with the metaphor of pyramid of choice<sup>v</sup>:

“Imagine two young men who are identical in terms of attitudes, abilities, and psychological health. They are reasonably honest and have the same middling attitude toward, say, cheating: They think it is not a good thing to do, but there are worse crimes in the world. Now they are both in the midst of taking an exam that will determine whether they will get into

graduate school. They each draw a blank on a crucial essay question. Failure looms...at which point each one gets an easy opportunity to cheat, by reading another student's answers. The two young men struggle with the temptation. After a long moment of anguish, one yields and the other resists. Their decisions are a hair's breadth apart; it could easily have gone the other way for each of them. Each gains something important, but at a cost: One gives up integrity for a good grade, the other gives up a good grade to preserve his integrity.

Now the question is: How do they feel about cheating a week later? Each student has had ample time to justify the course of action he took. The one who yielded to temptation will decide that cheating is not so great a crime. He will say to himself: 'Hey, everyone cheats. It's no big deal. And I really needed to do this for my future career.' But the one who resisted the temptation will decide that cheating is far more immoral than he originally thought: 'In fact, people who cheat are disgraceful. In fact, people who cheat should be permanently expelled from school. We have to make an example of them.'

By the time the students are through with their increasingly intense levels of self-justification, two things have happened: One, they are now very far apart from one another; and two, they have internalized their beliefs and are convinced that they have always felt that way. It is as if they had started off at the top of a pyramid, a millimeter apart; but by the time they have finished justifying their individual actions, they have slid to the bottom and now stand at opposite corners of its base. ...

Instead of cheating on an exam, for example, now substitute: deciding to begin a casual affair (or not), ... stay in a troubled marriage (or not), ... have children (or not), pursue a demanding career (or stay home with the kids). When the person at the top of the pyramid is uncertain, when there are benefits and costs of both choices, then he or she will feel a particular urgency to justify the choice made. But by the time the person is at the bottom of the pyramid, ambivalence will have morphed into certainty, and he or she will be miles away from anyone who took a different route.''

Therefore, for example, let us suppose that an average religious housewife, while doing housework, goes through many radio stations and out of pure luck, she starts listening to Harold Camping on the radio. If her first reaction is not to quickly change the station disregarding what she is listening to, then the more she listens to it, the harder it is for her to change station: if she changes station, she needs to justify to herself why she was listening to him for so long. Was she silly to listen to such nonsense? If an image of self-esteem excludes this choice, then she will continue to listen to this radio station using self-justification: she will keep finding excuses of why she is listening to the radio, for example, "oh he is a nice guy who believes in God, let him say his thing", and so on and so forth, until she has heard him for so long she decides to go to his church, "just to see this old man." Then she will see a kind man preaching. She will feel sympathy for him. She will listen to him more carefully and start accepting his arguments, etc. Every step down the pyramid reduces her chances of her ever walking up. The process is extremely simple: "one step at a time"<sup>vi</sup>. "Congressman Tom DeLay, former leader of the House of the Republicans, had accepted a trip to the legendary St. Andrews golf course in Scotland with Jack Abramoff, the corrupt lobbyist-turned-informer in the congressional corruption scandal ensued." It makes one wonder "why would someone risk his or her reputation and career for a lobbyist-bestowed freebie like a vacation at a deluxe resort?" It would be very hard to accept this vacation if this was the first step. However, if the process starts from a different, small step, e.g. a small lunch with a lobbyist (because it is an efficient way to get information), then the ride along the slippery slope begins. Similarly, in our example with the housewife listening to Harold Camping's radio, if, when she had turned on the radio for the first time, she was asked whether she would believe that the end of the world would come, she would most probably reply negatively. However, it is very probable that she would reach this absurd belief after going through all the small steps of the process.

## 2.5 Cognitive dissonance

In the Gupta's example, we saw the subject being reasonable in processing information and relying on evidence. However, this seems not to be the case in social beliefs.

"The engine that drives self-justification, the energy that produces the need to justify our actions and decisions – especially the wrong ones- is an unpleasant feeling that Festinger called 'cognitive dissonance'. Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent."<sup>vii</sup>

Although behavioural laws do apply to human beings, behaviorism, the theory that people's actions are governed by reward and punishment, was challenged by dissonance theory. The latter proved and explained why and how it is that if we voluntarily go through a difficult or a painful experience *in order* to attain some goal or object, then we are happier with that than if it came to us easily.<sup>viii</sup> Not only do human beings look for evidence to prove what they already believe, not only is absence of evidence taken as evidence for what they believe (Franklin Roosevelt had no evidence that Japanese Americans were planning to sabotage the war effort in WWII), but they also become more convinced about being right, even when reading information that goes against their view.<sup>ix</sup> In one experiment, researchers chose subjects who favoured or opposed capital punishment and asked them to read two scholarly and well documented articles on whether the death penalty deters violent crimes, with one article concluding that it did and the other that it didn't. The readers did not realize that the issue is more complex than they had previously believed and did not move closer to each other in their beliefs about capital punishment as deterrence, exactly because unlike Gupta's example, the readers were not processing information rationally. On the contrary, the readers distorted the

articles and found reasons to credit the arguments of the confirming article and discredit the arguments of the disconfirming article. Dissonance theory explains two things: people are unreasonable in processing information and that there reasons why people continue to be biased after they have made important decisions. Neuroscientists have even shown that biases are built in the very way the brain processes information. Just to add on to the dim picture, even ethicists are subject to such biases. Bioethicists, the very people who write about, among other things, the dangers of conflicts of interests between physicians and drug companies, receive consulting fees, contracts and honoraria from pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries, making “objectivity a myth”, according to Carl Elliot, who describes his colleagues’ justifications.<sup>x</sup> To complete the picture, letting aside plentiful examples and experiments, it will suffice to say, for the purposes of this conversation, that even memory has a self-justification function.<sup>xi</sup>

### 3. Is Art a Salvation?

Are we doomed to self-justification? As one would expect, Tavis and Aronson maintain that by understanding why and how our minds work the way they do is the first step toward breaking the self justification habit, and they naturally suggest that we are mindful and critical<sup>xii</sup>. Though I can hardly imagine the possibility of this reasonable position to be doubted, it seems that it could also be complemented, since the same writers talk about blind spots such as pride and prejudice<sup>xiii</sup>. The mind is designed with optical and psychological blind spots. One of the cleverest tricks our minds play with us is that they confer on us the comforting delusion that we, personally, do not have any. Humans are convinced that they perceive objects and events clearly, “as they really are” and we assume that other reasonable people see things the same way we do. Social psychologist Lee Ross calls this phenomenon “naive realism.” Since Tavis and Aronson regard this conviction as “inescapable”, it seems that we ought to find alternative means for neutral and unbiased social belief formation, in support, off course, to our efforts of more profoundly understanding how and why our mind works the way it does and being mindful and critical. I suggest art to be this very mean.

Tavis and Aronson make with an interesting observation which is very close to the suggestion of art as being suggested in this paper.

“When you enter the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, you find yourself in a room of interactive exhibits designed to identify the people you can’t tolerate.. The familiar targets are there (blacks, women, Jews, gays), but also short people, fat people, blond-female people, disabled people, ... You watch a video on the vast variety of prejudices, designed to convince you that everyone has at least a few, and then you are invited to enter the museum proper through one of two doors: one marked PREJUDICED, the other marked UNPREJUDICED. The latter door is locked, in case anyone misses the point, but occasionally some people do. When we were visiting the museum one afternoon, we were treated to the sight of four Hasidic Jews pounding angrily on the Unprejudiced door, demanding to be let in.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Similarly, I see art having a similar capability. I suggest that art could be a way with which people can communicate in a safer environment so that individuals can allow themselves to introspect, and reach justified (and hopefully true) beliefs. In debates, it is only expected that people hide behind their beliefs and self-justification, or at least the need for self-justification, is maximized. It is extremely rare for people to rationally understand and psychologically accept that their view is wrong and admit their mistaken belief after a rational debate and evaluation of arguments. This atmosphere of opposition which increases self-justification seems to vanish in art. When visiting an art exhibition, people are not focused on their disagreements, even if it is a themed exhibition. People do not express their beliefs, not through words and statements at least, and they do not feel the need to justify anything. In an artistic environment, people are in a sense united as human beings who want to enjoy art, rather than beings belonging to different groups depending on any beliefs they hold and different justifications they provide for their beliefs.

Let us think of it this way. If a politician states a view, he is expected to justify his opinion. Justification is everything. People who support this political party may believe the statement because he belongs to the party they support, but they will believe the justification so they can justify to themselves why they believe what he says, thus justifying themselves as rational people and creating a positive self-image. The opposite happens in art. Artists do not, or do not typically at least, provide justifications for their artwork, nor for their beliefs expressed through their art, even when their beliefs are obvious. In the same atmosphere, visitors relieve themselves from the pressure of justification and more importantly, they relieve themselves from the pressure of expressing or even holding an opinion on the theme. They can justify their visit as “visiting an art gallery”, “being interested in art”, a notion and sentiment shared by many. Furthermore, if the art gallery makes everyone accept the premise that they are prejudiced and then exhibits express myths and facts of both sides of the topic, then people may become less certain about their beliefs without the pressure of self justification, because they entered the prejudiced entrance because they “had to” – after all, it was the only entrance. After walking through the “prejudiced” entrance, they did not openly and voluntarily expose themselves to the arguments of the opposite side, but they “enjoyed looking at art”. Exposure to the artwork of the arguments of the opposition is the first step. Indeed, this exposure consists in the illusion that there is nothing else going on apart from exposition of art. However, as the saying goes, “sometimes you have to be a bit deluded to stay motivated.” Besides, it is with delusions that blind spots trick our mind into self-justification, so it does not seem unreasonable to fight back with the same way.

## 4. Conclusion

In this discussion, I stated very basic philosophical approaches regarding belief formation and then referred to social beliefs in particular. I stressed the media as a social cause which prevents individuals from forming social beliefs in a neutral environment and I stated examples in which the media causes people to have biased social beliefs. I then referred to the extreme example of Harold Camping, who actually persuaded many people that the physical rapture of the world would take place on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 2011 and the world would then thus end. I used the metaphor of the pyramid of choice of Tavris and Aronson in the context of Festinger's "cognitive dissonance" to explain how it is that individuals can come to hold such extreme beliefs, even when they are obviously absurd, and even after people are confronted with no or contrary evidence. Finally, as an answer to the natural question of whether there is a way out, in addition to the suggestion of Tavris and Aronson regarding understanding our mind and being critical, I suggested art as a solution by arguing that it can provide a neutral environment for neutral and unbiased belief formation, relieved from the often unconscious pressure of self-justification.

Very recently, based on Prentice and Gerrig, Anna Ichino quite reasonably holds that stories, and especially fictional stories,

“absorb readers’ attention, lowering their epistemic vigilance and preventing them from activating the appropriate process of belief rejection. Reader’s epistemic vigilance might well be lowered also by the fact that they take the purpose of the narrator to be mere entertainment, rather than persuasion, so they’re even less motivated to assume critical stance.”<sup>xv</sup>

On first glance at least, I see no good reason of excluding the possibility of art having similar effects. Isn't art an expression of human imagination and thus, comparative to fictional stories? Doesn't artwork absorb our attention? Don't we, non-artists, visit art galleries for entertainment rather than persuasion? Is it not the case that while being entertained we are prevented from rejecting beliefs we come across and we are thus more receptive? It seems to me that art, with the creativity and imagination it is expressed, can provide a neutral environment for social belief formation without biases, helping people stand at the very top of the pyramid, and not at any corner of its base.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gupta, Anil. 2006. *Empiricism and Experience*. Oxford University Press. (Gupta 2006, 92)

<sup>ii</sup> Gupta, Anil. 2006. *Empiricism and Experience*. Oxford University Press. (Gupta 2006, 93)

<sup>iii</sup> Wood, Julia T. 1994. 'Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender.' In *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* by Julia T. Wood Chapter 9 231-244. Wadsworth Publishing Co Inc. (Wood 1994, 231)

<sup>iv</sup> Although I do not mention it in the paper because it is not directly relevant to the discussion, I believe in the conventional philosophical definition of "knowledge", namely that knowledge is a justified true belief that is not a Gettier case. Therefore, a false belief, either justified or unjustified, is not knowledge. Similarly, unjustified true beliefs are not knowledge.

<sup>v</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 32-33)

<sup>vi</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 45)

<sup>vii</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 13)

<sup>viii</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 14-17)

<sup>ix</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 19-20)

<sup>x</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 54)

<sup>xi</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 75)

<sup>xii</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 38)

<sup>xiii</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 42)

<sup>xiv</sup> Tavris. Carol and Aronson, Elliot. 2013. *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. (Tavris and Aronson 2013, 41)

---

<sup>xv</sup> Anna, December 27, 2013 (11:58 p.m.), 'Getting (more or less) rational beliefs from fiction', blog on delusional beliefs, distorted memories, confabulatory explanations and implicit biases, 'Imperfect Cognitions', July 24, 2013 (07:41 p.m.) '*Art and the Nature of Belief Conference*'  
<http://imperfectcognitions.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/getting-more-or-less-rational-beliefs.html#more>

Short bio-note of Mr Christoforos Ioanniids

Mr Christoforos Ioannidis is currently pursuing a PhD at King's College London, School of Law. In 2005, he completed his undergraduate degree in law at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Immediately after he completed his LLM in International Law at The University of Edinburgh and wrote his thesis on Medical Ethics: 'Is there a case for the right to die?'. He then taught for four years in Bangkok, the last three years of which he worked as a university lecturer at Chulalongkorn University. He then completed his two-year MA in Philosophy at Arizona State University with a thesis in International Legal Theory: 'How to modify Kelsen's Legal Positivism in International Law in the light of the New Haven School, in order to account for Regime Change.' After working for a while as a university lecturer at Thammasat University, he moved to London to start his PhD at King's.