

# KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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# Why do you believe?

*People believe what they need to believe to protect the value of their prior investments.*

By GLENN CAMPBELL

What makes someone a liberal or a conservative? Why do they believe in one religion and not another? Why do some people become vegans or lawyers or skiers or con artists? Why do they choose a certain spouse and stay with them? How do they choose their personal preferences? How do they know which sports team to root for?

If you ask someone why they believe something, they will usually give you rational-sounding reasons. "I am a liberal because X, Y and Z." They claim logic is their only guide. Alternatively, they may insist the decision was in the stars, and they present a mythology showing no other choice was possible.

But these are rationalizations, not true causes. Beliefs usually arise from emotion, not logic or fate. Beliefs are largely egotistical and self-serving. The "reasons" are assembled only later, after the belief has already been established by emotional necessity.

Both liberalism and conservatism have their strengths and weaknesses, their absurdities and excesses, and you can debate endlessly which one is right. If a person chooses one over the other, it's not because it is demonstrably "correct" but because their ego in some way benefits from this choice. They have already invested in a certain way of life and can't go back, so they tailor their beliefs to support this investment and make it seem heroic.

What *really* determines human belief? Two factors: (1) the quest for personal identity, and (2) the defense of one's prior investments.

The first trend tends to happen early in life. If your parents are conservative, you might embrace liberalism to distinguish yourself from them. You may also choose outrageous fashions, hobbies, behavior or body art to tweak your elders and define your own path.

Such defiance of convention can also happen later: A successful businessman who built his life on capitalism can vote liberal to show how independent and well-rounded he is. Both young and old are using their beliefs to say: "Look at me, I'm unique and special!"

The second motivation for belief is to maintain internal consistency. Whatever you have already done with your life, it needs to be defended or you will experience great emotional discomfort. "Is my whole life worthless?" you would ask if you fairly consider a contradictory belief, so you don't fairly consider any. If you have already committed yourself to a certain set of assumptions, your current beliefs are usually going to support this investment.

Due to the second factor, beliefs tend to be self-reinforcing over time. That's one of the reasons old people get stuck in their ways. You may choose a certain religion to be unique and annoy your elders, but once you start investing, you tend to retain the belief forever. You believe in your religion because you have already invested in it and you continue to invest because you believe.

For most people, beliefs change only when they smack hard into reality. If you believe you can fly and you jump off enough cliffs trying, eventually you *might* begin to see the error of your assumptions. On the other hand, each attempt to fly is in itself a costly investment. Instead of withdrawing, each failure may reinforce your resolve, leading you to repeat the behavior.

Belief can become a drug. Whatever

people invest in at the beginning of their life is usually what they continue to believe for the remainder. It's an addiction they rarely escape from.

There is no sense in faulting humanity for this trait. Humans are matched only by dogs for their fierce loyalty to their clan, regardless of logic. It has always been true that people will defend the prevailing beliefs of whatever group they are invested in. "My country, right or wrong!" is as old as the hills.

But while it may be good for social cohesion, invested belief is a burden to one's personal problem solving. People who are heavily invested in certain belief systems may do well within the artificial protection of their clan, but they make poor decisions when presented with the complexities of the outside world.

Wise decisions do not arise from ideology. They depend more on assessing current conditions as they actually exist and fairly considering all the available options. An entrenched belief system blocks out many of those options and may prevent you from seeing the problem as it really is.

To protect the integrity of the decision-making process, you must eschew belief. Is that even possible? Never entirely, but you protect your discretion by avoiding situations where you have no choice but believe. If you remain lightly invested over time and return to a neutral base whenever possible, then you will be under less pressure to believe your own dogma.

Freedom is not just the ability to choose your own beliefs but also the privilege of not believing in anything. All that really matters is the decisions you make and how well they turn out.

—G.C.

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