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The Doubting Game and the Believing Game—
An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise (Excerpts)

Writing Without Teachers
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Abridged by Donna Bowman

"I can't believe that," said Alice.
"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again; draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."
Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't *believe impossible things."*
"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. . . ."
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Through the Looking Glass
Lewis Carroll

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…An intellectual is someone who tries to figure out what is true by means of the best processes available, and uses them in a rational, disciplined way to try to avoid deluding himself.

…[C]onsider a general situation of looking for the truth: you have a pile of conflicting assertions about some matter and you want to know which are true. There are two basic games you can use, the doubting game and the believing game.

The doubting game seeks truth by indirection—by seeking error. Doubting an assertion is the best way to find the error in it. You must assume it is untrue if you want to find its weakness. The truer it seems, the harder you have to doubt it. …

To doubt well, it helps if you make a special effort to extricate yourself from the assertions in question—especially those which you find self-evident. You must hold off to one side the self, its wishes, preconceptions, experiences, and commitments. (The machinery of symbolic logic helps people do this.) Also, it helps to run the assertion through logical transformations so as to reveal premises and necessary consequences and thereby flush out into the open any hidden errors. You can also doubt better by getting the assertions to battle each other and thus do some of the work: They are in a relationship of conflict, and by getting them to wrestle each other, you can utilize some of *their* energy and cleverness for ferreting out weaknesses.

The believing game also proceeds by indirection. Believe *all* the assertions. (If you merely look through the pile and pick out what seems truest, that would be the guessing game or the intuition game, not the believing game. Guessing has its own special power but I won't be exploring it here.)[1]

In the believing game the first rule is to refrain from doubting the assertions, and for this reason you take them one at a time and in each case try to put the others out of your head. You don't want them to fight each other. This is not the adversary method.

In the believing game we return to Tertullian's original formulation: *credo ut intelligam:* I believe in order to understand. We are trying to find not errors but truths, and for this it helps to believe. It is sometimes impractical to give to some assertions the fullest sort of belief: commitment and action. But there is a kind of belief—serious, powerful, and a genuine giving of the self—that it is possible to give even to hateful or absurd assertions. To do this requires great energy, attention, and even a *kind* of inner commitment. It helps to think of it as trying to get inside the head of someone who saw things this way. Perhaps even constructing such a person for yourself. Try to have the experience of someone who made this assertion.

To do this you must make, not an act of self-extrication, but an act of self-insertion, self-involvement—an act of projection. And similarly, you are helped in this process, not by making logical transformations of the assertion, but by making metaphorical extensions, analogies, associations. This helps you find potential perceptions and experiences in the assertion—helps you get a toehold so you can climb inside and walk around.

These then, in thumbnail form, are the two games that occupy this chapter. They could be called different names to bring out different characteristics. The doubting game could be called the self-extrication game, the logic game, or the dialectic of propositions. The believing game could be called the involvement or self-insertion game, the metaphor game, or the dialectic of experience.

The Monopoly of the Doubting Game

In a sense this essay is an extended attack on the doubting game. But I make this attack as someone who himself values the doubting game and is committed to it. Indeed I attempt to make my argument persuasive to someone who accepts only the doubting game. My goal is only to make the doubting game move over and grant a legitimacy to the believing game.

For somehow the doubting game has gained a monopoly on legitimacy in our culture. I'm not quite sure how. I see in Socrates this tendency to identify the intellectual process with the doubting game. I think this is the reason why his "voice" had a vocabulary of only one word, "no." Socrates believed a lot of things, but he seemed to have an overriding commitment to logic—what he called "reason." The essential quality of the Socratic dialogues is reductive and deflating: some belief is shown to be silly or empty or contradictory. Occasionally he tried to affirm something by logic (for example, the existence of the soul after death), but usually when affirming, he relinquished the doubting game and logical dialectic, and turned to myth, metaphor, and allegory.

Descartes gave us the name "doubting" or "skepticism" for our method. He felt the way to proceed to the truth was to

doubt everything. This spirit has remained the central tradition in western civilization's notion of the rational process. Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living. Descartes said, in effect, that the undoubted thought is not worth entertaining.

Perhaps the doubting game gets some of its monopoly through the success of natural science since the seventeenth century. There seems to be a skeptical ideology to science. Scientists pride themselves on not being gullible, not believing things easily. Some scientists talk as though they never really believe anything at all, but merely *act as though* certain things were true if they haven't yet been disproved. In this view, the experimental method is nothing but the attempt to disprove things.[2]

However it happened, we now have a state of affairs where to almost anyone in the academic or intellectual world, it seems as though when he plays the doubting game he is being rigorous, disciplined, rational, and tough-minded. And if for any reason he *refrains* from playing the doubting game, he feels he is being unintellectual, irrational, and sloppy. Even those few people who are actually against the doubting game nevertheless give in to the same view of the intellectual enterprise: they assume they must be against intellectuality and rationality itself if they are against the doubting game.

This is the trap that results from the monopoly of the doubting game.

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The Believing Muscle

The monopoly of the doubting game makes people think the doubting muscle—the sensitivity to dissonance—is the only muscle in their heads, and that belief is nothing but the absence of doubt: the activity of believing something consists of refraining from doubting it; or better yet, trying to doubt it but not succeeding.

But there is a believing muscle and it is different. It puts the self into something. The way it gets at the truth is illustrated by the following common occurrence in visual perception. We look off into the distance and see an animal in a field but we don't know what it is. It looks as though it might be a horse or a dog. Perhaps our list of alternatives is longer. But we have no special knowledge to draw on (such as whose field it is) and there is no other object nearby that settles the matter for us. Yet within 30 seconds or so we *do* know it is a dog and not a horse. What happened? Where did our knowledge come from?

In most cases it did not come from a negative testing such as, for instance, holding up some kind of picture of horse and finding dissonance or contradiction. This is possible in some cases, of course: check it out for tail-behavior, perhaps. But not what we usually do. In most cases it is a matter of trying to "believe"—in this case "see"—both dog and horse and doing better with dog. We don't disprove horse, we affirm dog. We try to put ourselves into the object as horse and as dog, and we get ourselves further into it as dog. Subjectively, this is the experience of having it appear sharper as dog. When we try to see it as horse, it stays blurrier. I think we could say that we get more visual information when we consider it as dog than when we do

as horse. We see *more* dog than horse.

By believing an assertion we can get farther and farther into it, see more and more things in terms of it or "through" it, use it as a hypothesis to climb higher and higher to a point from which more can be seen and understood—and finally get to the point where we can be more sure (sometimes completely sure) it is true. This was only possible by inhibiting the doubting game: if we had started doubting we would have found so many holes or silly premises we would have abandoned it. Only by getting far enough into it could we get to the point where there was sufficient evidence and understanding to show that it was indeed true, and this was only possible by believing it.

Imagine the paradigm use of the believing game to find the correct reading of a text: you believe the text means X; someone else believes it means Y; as it happens, you are wrong and he is right, but of course neither of you can know that at first. The question is how you get to the truth and abandon your error? If you engaged in the doubting game, neither person's argument would get anywhere. The "power of your arguments" would simply reflect each person's rhetorical skill and have nothing to do with the truth. At some level, both of you would probably realize this and stubbornly stick to your guns. And so it would go till weariness, fashion, or authority had its way.

The only way you can know that X is wrong is if you do in fact *try* as hard as you can to believe Y. If you are good at believing, you will at some point be able to see or feel that Y is truer. It will be just like the dog and the horse. You will be able to see more of the text with Y and see it more coherently and sharply.

This then is the leverage of the believing muscle: believing two things and thereby being able to have a trustworthy sense that one is better than the other. But there is no leverage—no increased trustworthiness—unless *both* are believed. This can be illustrated by considering the paradigm situation again, but this time put yourself in what turns out to be the trickier position: *you* start out with the right answer—you believe Y. But of course you don't know you're right. The question this time is how you can attain any trustworthy knowledge that Y is true. Your only strategy is to try to reproduce the previous paradigm situation of leverage. Your belief in Y will become more trustworthy only if you can get *yourself* to really believe X. If you can really do that and come back to Y and find Y better again, then at last you have attained leverage. Your knowledge of Y is at last much more trustworthy.

In performing this strange little dance with yourself, you have played the believing game. People with good judgment in areas like literature where disproof is impossible—people who simply turn out to be right in their judgment more often than most of us do—are distinguished, I would assert, by being especially good believers, especially good solitary players of the believing game. They attain more truth because they can believe more things than most of us can. And believe them *better—really* believe them: for in the ceremony just described, if you were only half-hearted in your attempt to believe X—if you were just doing it to bolster your belief in Y—then you might have missed any truth in X. For X *might* in fact have been true and Y false, and so you would have erroneously believed Y

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because you weren't good enough at believing.

There are people who are particularly good at the doubting game—who can always sense a contradiction or lapse in logic even if it is very hidden. It would seem that they have a very fine, very highly developed doubting muscle. We see the same thing with the believing game: some individuals are particularly good at being many people, being a chameleon, seeing the truth in very different and contradictory propositions or perceptions, making metaphors and building novel models.

…

The Two Dialectics as Games

It's true that you can't force someone to play the believing game. If he doesn't want to try honestly to believe all assertions, stop arguing, and try to enter into other people's perceptions and experiences, there is nothing you can do to force him. This is too bad, perhaps. But neither can you force someone to accept the rules of logic and play the doubting game. It sometimes seems as though you can but that's only because we have defined the intellectual world as a club where the ticket of admission is a willingness to abide by the rules of the doubting game. The huge numbers of people who are not members of that club—who started out, most of them, as children enjoying the rule-governed process of trying to figure out the truth but somewhere in their lives (usually in school) grew sleepy or angry at the game—these people are a testimony to the fact that you cannot force people to play a game they don't want to play.

Unnecessary attrition from the doubting game is caused by people who play it without realizing it is a game. One of the most important fruits of this whole investigation of the believing game is the heightened realization that the doubting game is *only* a game—and it's *not the only* game.

If you are playing basketball and someone starts carrying the ball around without dribbling or keeping score wrong, what you do next is not part of the game but part of real life. You can shoot him, you can try to have him locked up, you can cry, you can say you won't play with him tomorrow, or you can try to persuade him to start playing again by talking to him. Here, I think the believing game has an inherent advantage over the doubting game. The activity of the believing game (trying to share perceptions and experiences) is more likely than the activity of the doubting game (trying to find holes in the other person's view) to keep people willing to talk to each other if the game breaks down.

I am not arguing against rules but *for* rules. The power and fun of a game is in the submission to a set of rules. The pleasure of a game is in the ritualized process itself, its coherence and structure, rather than in a final goal or content. The release of energy and spirits characteristic of a game also comes from this submission to rules and structure: because one is in a rule-bound structure—because it is not real life—one can let down some of one's guard, and there is a sense of release.

Both games are probably inherently social. Language and reasoning are probably simulations in a single mind of processes first occurring between minds. Socrates thought of reasoning as necessarily a social process. I think that is part of the reason he refused to write anything down. And the doubting game still benefits from being played by a group rather than as solitaire. But because we have taken it for granted so long and worked at it so much, we tend to be much better at it when alone than we are at the believing game. When we are more practiced at the believing game, more people will be better at playing it alone. But I suspect it will remain more inherently social since it is *only* a group which gives the believing game its maximum trustworthiness.

For entrance into the intellectual world, we tend to require willingness to play the doubting game. This would be all right if we also required willingness to play the believing game and said to people who refuse to play, as we say to people who refuse to play the doubting game: "What a foolish, irrational, and self-indulgent person you are. You must be trying to preserve some favorite self-delusion as a security blanket."

We can see, then, something about how to apply all this to the reality of school and college activity. Though the two games are complementary and mutually beneficial, they cannot be played simultaneously. We cannot say, "Well let's try not only to be as critical as we can, but also be a bit more believing too." Though that's really what we want in the end, when adopted as an immediate goal it results in mere muddling: people merely doubting what's easy to doubt but never questioning what they don't want to question; and at the same time believing what's easy to believe and never risking swallowing what is alien. Each should be played in severely delimited ways: presented as artificial activities of heightened organization, structure, and energy expenditure. With a definite end so you can stop and rest. One or two hours a week in which people really played the believing game well—that is, really followed the rules—and another hour or two in which they really played the doubting game well: that would be a revolution.

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[1] See my essay, "Real Learning" in the *Journal of General Education,* XXIII, #2, July, 1971.

[2] For the view that science is nothing but the organized enterprise of trying to disprove—associated with the name Carl Popper—see two very lucid books by the Nobel Prize winner, Peter Medawar, *Induction and Intuition in Scientific Thought* (The Jayne Lectures, 1968), and *The Art of the Soluble* (London, 1967). For the competing view of science which insists that it operates by affirming propositions, not just disconfirming them, see Carl Hempel, *The Philosophy of the Natural Sciences.*