

# Examining our lives



Socrates famously said that the unexamined life is not worth living. He meant that we have taken so much beliefs for granted in our lives that to live on such suppositions without scrutiny can bring adverse impacts on our behaviour preventing us from seeking true meaning in our lives and impeding the enjoyment of our lives as a consequence. The basic formula is: beliefs lead to perception and perception to action. This process can operate at the level of the individual or at the level of the broader society.

Among individuals much misery in interpersonal relations have been caused by false assumptions about 'the other.' Lacking in empathy one often tends to interpret another's behaviour of action in terms of one's own collected assumptions as to what is appropriate behaviour. Perceptions accumulate around such misconceptions and the end result is estrangement and maybe even murder. One cannot, therefore exaggerate the importance of acquiring true meaning in our existence by scrutinising our various beliefs from time to time or as they arise. In a sense, you and I as individuals live in different 'worlds' of meaning and we find difficulty in realising this fact. We are in different realities.

the dead man didn't misbehave too badly. In this way, a Christian can cope with death. Buddhists believe that death offers scope for a better samsaric existence in the next life.

The religious, depending on his particular brand of faith will presumably base his activities in line with his beliefs. Thus, we observe vastly different sets of lifestyles among the different practising religionists.

The fact is that ever since birth one is bombarded and cajoled by different beliefs and assumptions influencing simple and complex sets of actions. At school and in the workplace one is further influenced by peers and workmates, the school and work environment. Formal education can go a long way as another influencer. The media representations of events often form part of an individual's actions system,

In this way, we are typically loaded with true and false bits of information that alter our attitudes and lifestyles. We have collected, probably, a lot of garbage too. Why not we clean our cupboard and start anew? Rene Descartes held an attractive proposal of this kind. Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was a mathematician, scientist and philosopher who was born in France but who went to live in The Netherlands for over twenty years. Compared to France at the time Netherlands had been a haven of tolerance and Descartes had no fear of being burnt on the stake for holding different views as happened to the Italian philosopher Lucilio Vanini (1585-1619) for proposing natural explanations of miracles.

Descartes is known as the first modern

philosopher. Let us doubt all we "know," Descartes suggested in his books, *Discourse on Method*, and *"Mediations"*, and start all over again beginning with the most certainly truthful of propositions, namely that, "I am alive." This truth cannot be refuted. Descartes argued, because I am thinking and to think one must live. "Cogito Ergo Sum," (I think, therefore I am alive) was his famous proposition. Descartes doubted all authority to begin with and he did not rely even on his senses as a source of truth.

Most of us would think today that Rene Descartes was crazy. However, there is something very important in the substance and tenor of his message, namely, the importance of questioning the whole array and gamut of our beliefs. Often we are imprisoned in these belief systems and unaware how much we miss out on reality. Thus, the process of self-examination becomes, in effect, also a process of opening our minds. We observed in our reference to religion how many of us have inherited our fundamental belief systems that constitute most of our world views. If you were born in a Buddhist-dominated land you would most likely end up being a Buddhist. On the other hand if you were born in Afghanistan it would have been a different story altogether. Thus to a large extent our "knowledge," is socially located. The error margin of such beliefs can be dangerously high. To Descartes, doubt is the beginning of knowledge. He continued the vision of Socrates and became the precursor of the scientific method.

## Making Sense

Shyamon Jayasinghe



Invalid beliefs lead to invalid perceptions to negative-oriented activity.

In Nazi Germany masses were fashioned to believe that Jews were an abominable lot. Such beliefs translated into the perception of the masses, which, in turn, created the holocaust and all as-associated cruelties. Not so far ago, Catholics in Ireland had developed negative perceptions about Protestants and a protracted war that decimated some part of the population ensued. In the Middle East today we observe similar collective perceptions arising out of questionable beliefs with regard to the Sunni versus Shia conflicts.

The world views of most of the population are typically influenced by religion. To the unsophisticated person the faith of the family into which he is born determines his system of belief about reality and about what the appropriate conduct in a given situation would be. The jihadist firmly and irrevocably believe that his God and his faith is the absolutely right one and that others are false. Depending on the vehemence of his belief he may resort to killing 'the other' in order to get out of his way an unnecessary difference. A religion often offers a person a meaning system to cope with life and death. Upon death Christians believe that God, in his mercy, will take the dead to heaven to share life with him assuming

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