



Climate change and doubt

Description

Who could doubt, in the face of evidence from climate science, â??that it is extremely likely that human activities, especially emissions of greenhouse gases, are the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th centuryâ?• (10)! Thatâ??s from the recent report by the US-based Global Change Research Program. The report maintains that from the evidence thereâ??s no â??convincing alternative explanation.â?•

In spite of that, some prominent US politicians and administrators treat climate change as a matter of considerable *doubt*. Under its Trump-appointed miscast fossil-fuel-promoting Chief Administrator, the US Environmental Protection Agency recently removed references to climate change from its website (see [NYT article](#)).

As climate change denial is mostly a US thing, and that matters to the rest of us, itâ??s worth looking at what a prominent American intellectual said about doubt.



Transforming doubt

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) discussed how doubt transforms into belief in his essay “The fixation of belief.”

Peirce assumed that it is unsettling to be in a condition of *doubt*, and this negative feeling prompts us to move to a position of *belief*, if not certainty. A thoughtful person would rather believe with some certainty that human activity is/isn’t responsible for climate change, than doubt that human activity is/isn’t responsible for climate change.

Peirce seems to insist that we find doubt repugnant. I’m not sure how this accounts for the psychological state of [blissful ignorance](#), but it’s worth pursuing his argument.

1. The bubble

Peirce identified such a thing as *tenacity*. It’s possible for people to “go through life, systematically keeping out of view” (116) anything that may change their opinion, which is to say their beliefs.

For Peirce this “method” of holding on to belief ultimately denies the pressures of sociability, as everyone is subject to shifts in belief, even if gradually, by virtue of being in a community. So how long could one remain a believer that human activity is not responsible for climate change in the face of overwhelming opinion (right or wrong) to the contrary? (He was writing long before mass communication and contemporary ideas about filter bubbles.)

2. Follow the leader

A marginally superior means of attaining belief is to succumb to some authority or other. Such a source tells us what to believe. That's an easy journey as you don't have to think too hard. Just follow the leader. I suppose other factors must support the appeal of an authority figure, and you have to see that others are committed as well.

Peirce cites submission to the dictates of the church as such a method of attaining beliefs. It's worth noting that Peirce is not particularly disparaging of any of these methods. They each have their place, and if we hope to persuade others away from their beliefs or towards ours then we need to be aware of these methods. Something similar applies to persuading doubters to believe.

3. Common sense and taste

Sometimes there's an elegance of reasoning that leads one to a position of belief, independently of evidence. I can think of an example on the side of climate change denial: whatever we do to earth systems they will always rebalance. That's an elegant notion. On the side of climate change affirmation: there has to be a cost for looting the earth's resources. It will turn against us. There's something satisfying, though unsettling, about that proposition as well.

For philosophers these are *a priori* arguments, depending on reason alone. Peirce sees them as matters also of fashion, and fashions change. Though they are simple and elegant, ideas about balance and retribution are in opposition here, and are held according to taste.

4. Science

Peirce's final and superior method is that of science, grounded in empirical evidence. Here Peirce affirms the 18th century confidence in scientific certainty and progress. At least we would say now that there's an openness to the scientific enterprise unavailable to the other three methods.

Of course, it's the latter by which people seek to explain and persuade others that climate change is real, severe, and influenced by human activity – hence the recent *Climate Science Special Report*, and its scientific authority (drawing on method 2 as well).

Inquiry

Peirce's essay on belief is subject to some fairly obvious criticisms and revisions. In his account of Peirce's essays, Albert Atkin notes that Peirce the pragmatist sidesteps issues of truth and reality in favour of the practical process of conducting an inquiry.

For the pragmatist, inquiry proceeds from doubt to belief. At least by my reading, pragmatism puts the focus on what difference it makes to believe (or doubt) one thing over another. In the case of climate change I, along with many others, believe it makes a big difference.

References

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1. Nature

Tags

1. belief
2. climate change
3. doubt
4. Peirce

Date Created

November 11, 2017

Author

rcoyne99

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