

Pop psychology has a habit of taking ideas from psychology and science and transforming them into half-truths - ideas that can be simplistic and misleading.

Some examples are examined below.

## **Ego**

Sigmund Freud defines the *ego* as a psychological entity that seeks to mediate between the *id* (the impulsive, child-like entity) and the real world. For example, the *id* may want sex or food NOW but the ego's adult role attempts to rein in inappropriate behaviour. Whilst the field of psychology does not use Freud's model, it does provide some useful concepts.

This is substantially different from pop psychology that considers the ego as the attachment to the judgements of the personality. Some consider that the personality is something that should be "dissolved" which is impossible.

There is a difference between making a judgement and having a preference. Having a preference for a red or black coat is not making a judgement about the coat. This can change from the time the front door closes and the car door opens.

Also, an observation is not a judgement. Observing that being slim is healthier than being overweight is not a judgement.

Making an judgement is not the same as having a preference or making an observation.

## **Intuition**

Intuition is another term that is frequently used in pop psychology without a clear definition. Mainstream psychology's definition is somewhat nebulous as well. Carl Jung defines intuition as "*the unconscious recognition of previous patterns*". A similar, poetical definition from Zen Buddhism is "*Knowledge that has come inside*".

A farmer may know that rain is on the way without being able to articulate why.

Intuition is more than just doing what "feels right". "Feeling right" can be based on familiarity, social consensus or a compelling story that could be recent or recalled from decades ago. Stories have a tendency to become more entrenched and less reliable as time elapses.

Professor Joel Pearson and researchers Galang Lufityanto and Chris Donkin research intuition at *The Future Minds lab of University of NSW*. They define intuition as

"the ability to make successful decisions without rational, analytical thought or

interference”.<sup>1</sup>

Subjects were instructed to decide whether random dot motion on a computer screen was left-to-right or right-to-left. At the same time, an emotional image was presented to one eye. The direction of the motion was 100% correlated with a positive or negative emotional impact. The participants clicked a button to record if they recognised a positive and emotional experience.

There were 36 positive emotional images and 36 negative emotional images. Examples include guns, snakes, pets and babies.

Even though the images were below the threshold of conscious awareness, there was still a very high correlation with the ability to be aware of the emotional response. Results were validated by measuring stress related skin conductance results.

The outcome was that the brain uses these images that are unconsciously perceived to help decide the direction of the dots. Also, “the harder the decision task, the more benefit subjects got from their images. Their response times also got faster, and they felt more confident about their decisions.”

Pearson has written the *Intuition Field Guide*.

1. **Only use your intuition where you have expertise and experience.** The art world frequently finds examples of the power of intuition in discovering fraud. Because of the high financial rewards to fraudulently authenticating art works, the art world provides many examples of fakes. Whilst elaborate compliance certificates and high-quality reproductions may fool not only the public but those involved in art administration, experts who have an intimate knowledge of the art in question can frequently “know” that the fake does not measure up.
2. **Do not use intuition at moments of high emotion.** Intuition does not work when high levels of emotion are involved such as meeting a new partner, breaking up from an existing partner, death of someone close or obtaining lots of money.

3. **Do not rely on intuition to predict low-probability events.** Events that have a low-level of probability (getting attacked by a shark or a aeroplane accident) are not good candidates for using intuition.
  
4. **Do not mistake primal system impulses for intuition.** Our primal instincts such as hunger, lust, fear and aggression are swamped by a sense of intuition. “Intuitive eating” - forget it. Feeling that the presented cheesecake is really good for you is simply wishful thinking.
  
5. **In a new environment, do not trust your intuition.** Intuition should only be trusted in a cultural or physical environment that you are familiar with.

## What is Evil?

### The Stoics

The concept of evil occupies much complex debate in psychology. Does evil really exist?

It appears that the concept that evil does NOT exist arose with Zeno of Citium (334-262 BCE) who founded the Stoic school of philosophy. This Zeno was active two hundred years after the death of Socrates.

This is not the Zeno of Elea (495-430 BCE) of the Zeno Paradox fame. Zeno of Elea was before the Socrates period. The Stoics, who included Cato the Younger, Seneca the Younger, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, believed in a deterministic world.

How can evil exist when people are simply carrying out their predetermined roles?

As the Stoic Chrysippus (279 - 206 BCE) wrote,

“all statements whether past or future are either true or false. If there is going to be a sea battle tomorrow it is either true or false – it is already determined”.<sup>2</sup>

The Stoics and all those that follow with similar deterministic views get into a philosophical tangle attempting to reconcile a supreme, ineffable deity with the problem of suffering. Since such a deity is also aware of the future then it follows that the future is predetermined.

Stoics are mentioned in the bible. The *Gospel of Truth* is one of the Gnostic texts that was found at Nag Hammadi. This text equates evil to '*what is bad*' such as physical pain, sickness, suffering, misfortune, harm, fear, confusion and grief as well as the anticipation of death and destruction.

### **The Bible**

The bible's deterministic world cannot be reconciled with the notion of free will which is also a foundation of Christian belief. Our fall from grace resulted from Adam and Eve *choosing* to disobey the lord.

If the world is deterministic and always perfect then how can Judas be judged for simply performing his allocated task of turning Jesus over to the authorities.

Hence we have such beliefs as:

- God's in His heaven – All's right with the world!<sup>3</sup>
- It is meant to be
- Insh'allah – if Allah wills it.

References to *evil* occur throughout both the Old and New Testament.

- Amos 3:6 – Does evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it?
- Isaiah 45:7 – I make peace and create evil; I am the Lord who does all these things.
- Job 2:10 – Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?
- Matthew 12:32 – And whosoever speaketh word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.
- Mark 3:29 – But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

According to the bible, the word of God, you can be guilty of the most heinous crimes against millions of people but the only one that is unforgivable is blasphemy.

### **Alice Through the Looking Glass**

In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice meets Humpty Dumpty sitting on his wall.

- Alice: I don't know what you mean by 'glory'.
- Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously: Of course you don't—till I tell you. When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.
- Alice: The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things.
- Humpty Dumpty: The question is which is to be master—that's all.

Alice walks away, only to hear Humpty to fall off his wall and "*All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again*".

It is not known why Lewis Carroll included this in his 1872 book but presumably it was in response to some contemporary issue.

If we use a word, we all must be clear what is meant and the same goes for EVIL.

### **Definition of EVIL**

We cannot begin to even discuss whether evil exists or not unless it is clear what we are talking about.

Lets keep it simple. Below is my definition of evil.

Evil is when we allow harm or suffering happen to others - people, animals or the world that we live in. It does not matter whether it is a result of wilfulness, ignorance or negligence.

We can also state that *evil* exists when *The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights Preamble* is violated.

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Many choose to suffer enormously instead of betraying their conscience or their fellow beings

in an effort to ensure that the inalienable rights of others are not being violated.

For those who deny the existence of *evil*, in what way does that belief help to make the world a better place.

## Common Popular Myths

### Logic and Reason is Bad - Feelings are Good

Marianne Williamson claims that Rene Descartes treated the body as a machine – push a lever and it will result in a predetermined outcome. It is obvious that Williamson has never read any of Descartes’s works or attempted to understand the world that he lived in.

Descartes’s “goal was not to discover a multiplicity of isolated truths. Descartes included in his philosophy metaphysical and physics and natural science. He included anatomy, medicine and morals. [...] According to Descartes, all the sciences are interconnected and must be studied as a single entity.”<sup>4</sup>

He received information in the form of dreams – dreams that changed the course of history. He opposed the concept of bleeding for treating illness some 150 years before the rest of Europe. According to Descartes, “bleeding shortens the days”.

Descartes proposed that the most effective treatment for disease was bed-rest and vegetable broth. He was a vegan and rarely drank alcohol – something that the rest of the world still has not woken up to 400 years later.

Rosicrucians (Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross) arose in the early 17th century in Germany. It was a secret society which wanted to transform all aspects of society – science, mathematics, art, religion and politics through the exploration of esoteric knowledge. This was a time of bitter and bloody wars, primarily driven by divisions in between Catholic and Protestant religions.

It is not known if Descartes was a member but he was certainly in contact with members of the Rosicrucians and was influenced by them.

A coded notebook was discovered after Descartes death. It was decoded by the brilliant German mathematician, Gottfried Leibniz. His coded notebook contains alchemy symbols and astrological symbols. Descartes desired to combine ancient Greek geometry with

mathematics. It is clear that Descartes had discovered the relationship between the vertices, edges and faces of the Platonic regular solids which was later rediscovered by Leonard Euler – that is, the number of faces plus the number of vertices equals the number of edges plus two. Descartes later found this formula worked for any polyhedra – not just the five regular Platonic solids.

Descartes believed this discovery was very significant – far beyond the simple geometrical relationship. Why did Descartes think this esoteric knowledge to be kept secret? One reason is that Johannes Kepler linked these regular solids with Copernicus's cosmology of placing the sun at the centre of creation. Revealing his discovery, would have roused the attention of the Catholic Inquisition – a fate worth avoiding.

The time of Galileo and Descartes is an alien world – full malevolent spirits, virulent illnesses such as bubonic plague that resulted from divine displeasure and the masses were at the mercy of a bitter European climate and warring rulers. Religious fervent resulted in bloody religious wars and the church exploited the fears of population to control their subjects. A world where, if you swore at a neighbour and something bad happened to them, you could be in big, big trouble.

All that Galileo, Descartes and others advocated was an examination of existing beliefs to verify if it really was true.

The popular view that reason and intellect cannot coexist with emotion, imagination and passion is clearly not true.

### **Additional Reading**

[The Enlightenment and the Age of Reason](#)

#### **“All is Well” because “Everything Works Out For the Best”**

The Theogony (Birth of the Gods) is a poem by Hesiod, a Greek poet from the time of Homer. It was written in BCE 730-700 and describes the origins of the Greek gods.

According to Hesiod, “at first Chaos came to be”. He described Chaos as either “the gaping void above the Earth created when Earth and Sky are separated from their primordial unity” or “the gaping space below the Earth on which Earth rests”.

From this void, the primordial entities were formed: Gaia (Earth, the ancestral mother of all life), Tartarus (the underworld abyss, a place of judgement), Eros (the masculine primordial deity of love and desire), Erebus (Darkness, the primordial force of darkness and evil) and Nyx (Night, the feminine primordial force of the night).

Some Chinese creation myths involve creation arising from chaos. In the beginning was Qi, the universal life force that is differentiated into yang and yin, the masculine and the feminine, day and night, light and dark, order and chaos.

The earliest references to the yin-yang symbol occur in the I Ching which was written in 700 CE as part of the Tao philosophy.

Throughout human civilisation, the yang has been predominant with order being imposed by men through war, political structures and physical power.

Allan Watts claims that “You are in relationships with the external world that, on the whole, are incredibly harmonious.”<sup>5</sup> Watts’s followers will smile knowingly – only those very special, advanced souls can see the perfection in the apparent chaos.

It is obvious from the atrocities of Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and Auschwitz (“where humans were reduced to a whisper from a chimney”), to the “banality of everyday evil” that harmony and order are rare conditions.

The reality is that we are not comfortable with the idea that life is random, unpredictable, chaotic and at times incredibly harsh and brutal.

Hence the need to provide order with an imaginary underlying plan to tame the chaotic reality of life.

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**In the search for truth, the wise deny nothing.**

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## **Left brain / right brain personality**

The left-brain / right-brain personality myth is an enduring belief that contrasts logical thinking and the analytical with the creative and intuitive.

Left-right asymmetries of brain are common. Other animals such as monkeys, whales, birds, frogs, mice show strong asymmetrical behaviour.

The two hemispheres of the human brain function differently. Whilst the left brain is dominant for language and the right hemisphere is involved more strongly in emotional processing for most people.

Split-brain surgery was initially developed in the 1940s as a treatment for seizures.

Roger Sperry and Michael Gazzaniga performed split-brain experiments in the 1960s. As a last resort treatment for epileptic patients, the corpus callosum, the bundle of fibers connecting the left and right hemispheres of the brain were severed. The two hemispheres acted independently.

Both the left and right lobes process visual information but the left hemisphere processes information from the right visual field, and the right hemisphere processes information from the left. That same pattern is seen for other functions too with the left frontal lobe controlling the right side of the body.

In 95% of right-handed people, language is processed predominantly in the left hemisphere. For the other 5%, language processing seems to be distributed bilaterally between the hemispheres. In left-handers, the left-hemisphere performance dominance in language processing is reduced to around 75%, while language is processed bilaterally in 14% and a weak right-hemisphere predominance is found in the remaining 11%. Approximately 10% of the world's population are left handed.

$$R_{\mu\nu} - \frac{1}{2}g_{\mu\nu}R = \frac{8\pi G}{c^4}T_{\mu\nu}$$

### **General Relativity Formula**

It is certainly true that some people tend to be stronger in analytical types of thinking with others are stronger in creative thinking. Creative thinkers can be very analytical. Einstein is frequently cited as an intuitive thinker (which is true). He took some 8 years of intensely detailed work to transform his initial intuitive ideas of general relativity into a mathematical framework. Many quotes regarding imagination and intuition purported to be said by Einstein are simply not true.

There is no reason to suggest that logic and creativity are associated with the predominance of one hemisphere over the other. <sup>6 7 8</sup>

As Galileo Galilei wrote in a letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany 400 years ago.

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**But I do not feel obliged to believe that that same God who has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect has intended to forgo**

their use.<sup>9</sup>

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## Additional reading

Belief Versus Truth

## Other Popular Myths

Tornadoes, Seagulls and the Butterfly Effect

The Secret Life of Water and Masaru Emoto

Sugar Causes Cancer

Sugar Causes Diabetes

Sugar Causes Heart Disease

Eggs Cure Diabetes

## Footnotes

1. Lufityanto, G., Donkin, C., & Pearson, J. (2016). Measuring intuition: Nonconscious emotional information boosts decision accuracy and confidence. *Psychological Science*, 27(5), 622-634.
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3. From Pippa Passes by Robert Browning. It was published in 1841.
4. Aczel, A. D. (2005) *Descartes' Secret Notebook*. New York: Broadway Books.
5. Alan Watts from *Philosophy and Society* Lectures.
6. Allen, D. K.-A. (2019). The Myth of Left- vs Right-Brain Learning. *International Journal of Innovation*, 5(1), 12.
7. Grimshaw, G. M. & Wilson, M. S. (2013) A sinister plot? Facts, beliefs, and stereotypes about the left-handed personality. *Laterality: Asymmetries of Body, Brain and Cognition*. 18 (2), 135-151.
8. Jarrett, C. (2012) Why the Left-Brain Right-Brain Myth Will Probably Never Die | Psychology Today [online]. Available from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-myths/201206/why-the-left-brain-right-brain-myth-will-probably-never-die> (Accessed 29 June 2017).
9. Galileo Galilei - Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina (1615)