

Remaining Unconvinced



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“One Improved Unit” is an original column appearing sporadically on Monday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found here. OIU-only RSS feed available here.

In a January 2014 column titled “Down with Conviction!” I argued that if one is committed to the pursuit of truth, conviction should be avoided. At least one question remained, what if logic, observation, and experience overwhelmingly supports the truth of something, is it still necessary to avoid having a conviction of it? I think so, but to understand why, let’s invert things.

Approaching Truth

I recently read that “mathematicians don’t believe anything until it’s proven true, physicists believe everything until it’s proven false, chemists don’t care, and biologists don’t understand the question.” Joking aside, mathematicians sound more like my kind of people. If we are avoiding conviction, then rather than being convinced of something, how about we remain unconvinced of that something’s opposite or alternative concepts? For example, instead of claiming to be convinced that God does not exist, merely claim (to yourself and others) that you are unconvinced, or less convinced that God exists (for the time being, of course). Another example, instead of claiming to be convinced that the “paleo diet” is best for optimal health and longevity, claim instead that you remain unconvinced that any other diet is better.

What is the Point?

If our commitment is really to the pursuit of truth, then having convictions can blind us to their faults. If we remain unconvinced by certain arguments rather than convinced by others, then our focus is less on what we know and more on what we don’t know. Acknowledging the knowledge we don’t have keeps us searching and pursuing it. Once we “rest on our laurels,” we’ve concluded our search and closed our minds to the possibility of being wrong. There’s nothing more dangerous, in my opinion, to the rational mind than to close it to new information and new possibilities.

Final Thoughts

Two final thoughts: 1) I am a proponent of voluntaryism, peaceful parenting, and radical unschooling (among other things, of course). Why? I could say that I am convinced of their merits. In fact, I have said as much in various ways. But I think the safer claim is that I remain unconvinced of the merits of coercivism, violent parenting, and compulsory education. And 2) At some point we all must act, or do something in regards to our beliefs. I act as a voluntaryist, peaceful parent, and radical unschooler. Those are positive actions (yes, unschooling is a positive action). It's rational for others to interpret what I do as the result of conviction. But others are not searching for truth for me. I am, and so I must stay open-minded to the possibility of being wrong. I think the preceding, as well the humility and skepticism that I wrote about last week, keeps me that way.

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