

# Evaluating Beliefs

by Peter Graham

This article examines what an evaluation of an idea or datum is and how it is done and it suggests some ways to improve the quality and usefulness of evaluations.

Our beliefs and viewpoints determine how each of us views, interprets, experiences and responds to reality. And, our decisions, choices and solutions in life are all based on our beliefs, whether we consciously know it or not.

An *idea* becomes a *belief* through the process of and as a result of *an evaluation* of that idea. As beliefs play such key roles in our lives, the subject of evaluation is important and therefore developing and enhancing our evaluation skills is vital.

## Beliefs

Definition: In this context, a belief can be defined as an idea, thought, datum or information that is held, accepted or assumed to be true, factual or right. An idea or thought is not necessarily a belief. It is the acceptance of or agreement with an idea that makes it a belief. There may or may not be any supporting evidence or logic for a particular belief.

There are different *types* of beliefs, including: thoughts, opinions, interpretations, assumptions, expectations, considerations, judgements, meanings, definitions, predictions, conclusions, agreements, assertions, etc. All of these satisfy the above definition providing that they are *considered, accepted or assumed to be true or valid*.

## Evaluations

Definition: An evaluation is the process of determining or estimating *the value* of an idea or datum by attempting to ascertain its meaning(s), context(s), truthfulness or validity, usefulness and importance.

*An idea or datum is only as valuable as it has been competently evaluated. An unevaluated idea may or may not have any value or usefulness. A partially evaluated idea may have some value and/or may cause some problems (especially where the idea is assumed to be completely true and acted upon). The quality and completeness of an evaluation can be very important.*

Some of us have (at one time or another) appointed someone to be our respected teacher or guru and then accepted his or her truths as our truths without question. The challenge is to learn how to do our own thinking and evaluating and to not depend on another or others to do it all for us.

Useful *self-certainty* comes from one's own ability *to evaluate ideas and information competently*. Spending some time to explore evaluating is an excellent investment and can have profoundly beneficial consequences.

No belief exists in isolation. Every belief is part of a person's belief system (or a subset thereof) and is associated with certain other related beliefs and it may be held in place or reinforced by them. A *core belief* is a belief that is more important or more basic than some other related beliefs. A competent re-evaluation of a core belief can sometimes bring about a spontaneous "ripple effect" of useful re-evaluations and re-alignments of a number of other related beliefs and ideas.

## The Evaluation Process

There is no one way or right way to do an evaluation. However, it is possible to identify the main "steps" or actions that are typically involved. The steps are not necessarily done sequentially or in any set order. More often than not, a person tends to jump around, doing what is considered necessary on each, skipping some to shortcut the process and filling in gaps or revisiting some if regarded as needed. The principal steps of an evaluation include:

- **Receipt or Conception:** Receipt (from without) and/or conception (by self) of the idea or datum. Awareness or identification of the idea or datum. Recognition of where it came from (and, maybe, when).
- **Meaning(s):** What is its meaning(s) or possible meaning(s)? Understanding or clarification of the idea's meaning(s) or implication(s).
- **Intuitive Responses:** Intuitive responses to the idea or first impressions of it or a gut feeling about it. Do I have an initial position or attitude concerning its validity? How thorough should the evaluation be? Is it worth pursuing (evaluating) any further? How important does it seem (at this point)?
- **Context or Possible Context(s):** What does it apply or relate to? Where does it fit? What context(s) are relevant here and what aren't? How wide or narrow is its context? Can it be classified or categorized? What is it associated with? Any noteworthy associations? What does it *not* apply or relate to or fit in with?
- **Relevant Information:** What information or data will be relevant and needed for the evaluation? Sources or possible sources of relevant information? What assumptions or expectations are there with respect to the idea? Are they valid or useful? Note: Relevant information may include: available knowledge and data, direct and indirect observations, research, current beliefs and attitudes, personal experiences, accumulated experience, passed on or second hand information, learnings, understandings, existing paradigms, assumptions, expectations, etc.
- **Test the Idea:** Select and use one or more appropriate ways to *test* the idea. Test the idea by using relevant beliefs, information, observation(s), experiment(s) or criteria that are considered reliable enough and/or by using some other test(s). How valid and reliable are these methods and/or their results? Review the test results and assess their usefulness. If not satisfactory, re-test using revised and/or other approaches. See the section "Testing an Idea or Datum" below for more options regarding doing this vitally important step.
- **Preview Possible or Preliminary Conclusions:** Simplify the evaluation by identifying the most relevant and important factors. Summarize the most relevant and important details. Determine or "intuit" some likely conclusions or suspicions. Look for any other alternative or possible conclusions. Assess or examine the relative merits of each likely conclusion. Test each "short listed" conclusion by challenging or criticizing it and checking it for consistencies and inconsistencies with available information and observations (especially those flagged as important and not to be omitted).
- **Final Conclusions (for now):** How valid, true or right does the idea or datum seem to be now? To what degree of probability? What are its context(s)? Where does it apply and not apply? Are there any conditions or limitations on its validity or truth? How important is it? How useful is it likely to be? How reliable does it seem? How do I feel about the evaluation? What is my intuition telling me about it now? What assumptions am I making? What are my expectations? How complete is the evaluation? Will the idea benefit from further review or refinement? etc.

## Jumping to a Conclusion

The phenomena of "jumping to a conclusion" usually occurs when a person gets an intuitive response or first impression about an idea and then jumps to a possible (or final) conclusion, omitting the intervening steps. This is not necessarily a bad practice as most people do this often as *part* of the evaluation process, where one or more possible or likely conclusions may then be considered and the most likely conclusion(s) are then "tested" by filling in the blanks (i.e. doing the missing steps).

However, some people "jump to conclusions" habitually and seldom do a thorough evaluation. Their conclusions may intuitively "feel" right to them and be accepted on that basis alone. Such conclusions can be seriously flawed or skewed (but not always). Some people are much better at jumping to conclusions than others, probably because they are more experienced in the area concerned and/or their natural intuitive abilities are more highly developed or accessible.

## Testing an Idea or Datum

Testing an idea or datum is a critical part of an evaluation. There can be *different tests* for *different types* of ideas or data and there can be various ways of testing the validity or factualness of a particular idea or datum. The challenge is to select, find or design a test or a number of tests that will be appropriate and produce some useful and reliable results. The possible testing methods listed below are not a complete list but are included to present an idea of some *types of approaches* that might be used.

- **Source:** Who or where did it come from? And, when and how? How is the source regarded? How reliable is the source? How probable is that reliability? Is it safe to assume the idea or datum is valid if the source is considered to be reliable or more advanced or awakened?
- **Feelings and Emotions:** How does it make me feel (at this point)? What are my feelings or emotions telling me about it (at this point)? Can I completely trust my feelings or intuition in this context? Are my emotions getting in the way? What is my gut feeling about it (at this point)? Any inner messages or whisperings that I should listen to? Any inner messages or whisperings that I am ignoring?
- **Observations:** Take a look or make a series of observations or measurements. Is it or are they valid observations or measurements? Measuring or observing the right thing or things? What do they tell me? Is the number of observations adequate? What does a statistical analysis of them indicate? Is the sample large or broad enough? Is there a missing observation?
- **Experience:** Compare the idea with related personal experiences, knowledge, observations, lessons learnt, accumulated experience in the area, expectations, models (of how things work or are supposed to work), secondhand experiences and observations, common knowledge, etc. Do they support or contradict the idea/datum or throw it into question?
- **Logic:** Is it logical or reasonable? Does it make sense? Does it hang together logically? Is it *consistent* with my own observations, experience, beliefs, expectations and knowledge? Is it *inconsistent* with any of my own observations, beliefs, expectations, experience and knowledge? Is it consistent or inconsistent with another's (reliable) observations, knowledge or viewpoints?
- **Criteria:** What criteria are needed to evaluate it? Is that the right approach for this idea? Define the needed criteria and rate each according to its relevance and importance. Compare the idea or datum to the established (or provisional) criteria. Review and assess the results, and revise the criteria if needed and compare again.

- **Predictions:** What consequences might flow from this idea if I accepted and acted upon it? How might things be different if I accepted or acted on this idea? Would an acceptance of the idea cause me any problems? Are these predictions valid or reasonable? Can they be experienced or tested?
- **Experimentation:** What are the best way(s) to objectively test the idea in an unbiased way? Design and execute an experiment to test it or measure it by making accurate observations or measurements. Review and criticize the experiment and its results. What conclusions can be drawn? Did it test the right thing or things? Did it do so successfully? Was the experiment designed and done objectively and without bias? What level of proof or evidence would be acceptable or appropriate in this context? How important are the accuracy and reliability of the results? Modify or change the experiment and re-test as needed.
- **Illogicalnesses:** Look for *illogicalnesses* or *incongruences* in the relevant data being used in or omitted from the evaluation. Ask questions like: Is something false or untrue or only partly true? Is there any contradictory or inconsistent data? Any incorrect, uninspected or unsuspected assumptions or expectations? Is there something important that is missing, incomplete or possibly hidden? Unreliable data or sources? Irrelevant information? An incorrect importance (too much or too little) given to something? Something missing in a sequence or something out of order? Is the source of something not recognized or acknowledged? An unexamined or inappropriate viewpoint (including too general or broad or too narrow)? An incorrect or inappropriate context? An incorrect or inappropriate purpose, objective or agenda for the evaluation?
- **Usefulness:** Will it work? Try it. Did it work or was it effective? Have others used it? If so, what were their results? How and where can it be used or applied? To what? Predict possible applications and their outcomes. Is it useful? In what contexts? Any limitations? Any exceptions?
- **Preferences:** Compare to your own personal likes, dislikes and preferences. Do I have some preferred conclusions, hopes, expectations or even biases in this context? Is there anything I am ignoring, rationalizing, exaggerating or minimizing about the idea or datum? Is it OK for me to believe what I choose or prefer to believe in this context? What are the likely consequences of that?
- **Faith:** Does an acceptance of the idea or datum depend upon faith or trust? Is the datum or idea revealed or channeled knowledge or wisdom from a higher source? Is that enough to completely accept the information or revelation in this context? Can I trust my intuition in this framework?
- **Is it Testable?** Can the idea be meaningfully or usefully tested in some way (*at this time*)? Do I have the time and resources to do so adequately and completely (*at this time*)? Would it be appropriate at this point to put it in the "pending tray" until further time, data, experience, inspiration and/or insights become available. Important: Where appropriate, consciously and intentionally *flag the evaluation as incomplete*.

The selection of an appropriate test method(s) is critical for the success of an evaluation. Use multiple testing methods, if required. The above list of possible testing methods is not a complete list, the order of them is not significant and they are not "mutually exclusive."

## Evaluation Tips and Advice

If an idea or datum is regarded as a fact or to be "absolutely true or false", it is likely to *never* again be questioned, reviewed or updated or even suspected. When doing an evaluation, it is exceedingly wise to only think in terms of *possibilities* or *probabilities* rather than in *absolutes*. It is much more useful to think in "shades of grey" or gradations regarding the degree of *possible* or *probable* validity or rightness of an idea or datum (even if it currently feels like a 100% true or is currently regarded as a fact).

Leave the door open even if only a little, knowing or suspecting that every belief is up for possible review or at least some ongoing refinement. Thinking in "black and white" can prevent an evaluation from arriving at useful and practical conclusions. Everyone thinks in "black and white" at times and noticing it when it occurs can help us to move over to a more useful "shades of grey" point of view.

Negative *emotions* and *feelings* that are associated with an idea or datum can greatly interfere with or severely bias its evaluation. If you notice that some negative emotions or feelings are present or you're very assertive or defensive about the idea or viewpoint, become fully aware of that and make some allowance for it or choose to transcend it or do what needs to be done to get them reduced or eliminated. The Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) is by far the most effective way that I know for lessening and removing such negative (and subconsciously driven) feelings, emotions or impulses and their associated energy. And, the EFT tapping technique is easy to learn and apply.

A common mistake is to look only for information or evidence that supports the validity of a certain idea or only look for what opposes or doesn't support the idea. A competent evaluation requires enough objectivity to include and review any and all relevant data that is consistent and/or inconsistent with a possible or probable outcome or point of view.

Be willing to be confused during an evaluation. If you are not confused at some point during an evaluation, the chances are that you are not discovering or examining anything new. If something really doesn't add up or you just can't make sense of it, then look for and spot any "*illogicalnesses*" in the information that is included in or missing from the evaluation (as outlined above).

It is generally advisable to regard evaluations as ongoing processes of *continual review and refinement* over time in the light of possible new data, experiences or viewpoints. Thus, ideas get re-visited from time to time, each time hopefully moving the evaluations forward a little more each time and gradually achieving higher levels of *certainty* regarding the outcome - and therefore greater usefulness.

It is strongly recommended that you notice and identify the *assumptions* you are making and the *expectations* you have in an evaluation. Assumptions and expectations can cause major problems when they are faulty or are so taken for granted that they are never consciously recognized, examined, challenged or even suspected. Assumptions and expectations can be part of conscious thinking or they can be totally invisible in the background or somewhere in between. Remember the old saying, to "ass-u-me" something can make an "ass" out of "u" and "me".

We nearly always include some (or a lot) of our *existing beliefs* when doing an evaluation. Some of them may have been working in the background for a very long time (such as from childhood) and have never been consciously questioned, reviewed and updated since. This can sometimes "throw a spanner in the works" and prevent a useful outcome. With respect to an evaluation, be alert for and recognize

this situation when it's come across and take it into account, which may involve re-evaluating it/them where necessary (or stuffing them in the pending basket).

*Be willing to challenge and re-evaluate your own beliefs and viewpoints whenever you sense or suspect that one of them may be a bit "shaky", even if that's a little scary to start with. If you do this quite often, your beliefs will gradually become more and more useful. Ask yourself questions like "Is that really true?" "In all contexts?" plus "Is it useful?" and "Does it cause me any problems?" and "Where did that idea come from originally?" Remember that some of our beliefs would have come from our childhood and may have been running in the background ever since and never been challenged (till now).*

Realize that you are not your thoughts or beliefs but that you have beliefs because you can be aware of and re-examine them. Know and remind yourself that you are the stable "reference point" (the Observer and Evaluator) when any confusion arises. It is a step forward to even notice and accept that you don't know for sure whether a particular idea is really true or not but you can at least be *certain* about that!

## Usefulness

A belief should be useful or, at least, not harmful. If it's not useful or has harmful consequences or side-effects, it is most probably faulty in some way. It may have outlived its usefulness or is being used outside of its original context or wasn't evaluated completely or competently enough in the first place. Ask yourself if it is genuinely useful and whether or not it's empowering (or the opposite).

An idea that we run into now and again may be a "fixed belief" that has some unresolved upsets or traumas connected with it that "set it in concrete" originally. A fixed belief or attitude may predispose a firm bias of some sort and it is very useful to at least notice if we are being excessively assertive or defensive about it. The negative emotional energy connected with it may need to be reduced and dissipated by using a technique such as the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) before the belief can be loosened up enough to successfully (and cheerfully) re-evaluate it. Byron Katie's simple process, which she calls "The Work", can also be very useful to help challenge and shift a fixed viewpoint or belief.

A preferred belief is a belief that is chosen or consciously assumed to be true or valid and useful, even though it may or may not turn out to be true or always true or true in all contexts or when it can't be proven. It may be an idea or datum that one feels really comfortable with or good about or that can be beneficially operated on in life. It often arises from or is confirmed by a gut feeling and works for us. Some philosophical or religious beliefs may come under this heading. Knowing that it's a preferred belief leaves the door open for later review if ever needed.

One way to learn more about evaluations is to become more familiar with the various ideas in this document and then closely observe yourself operating in life and see how you go about evaluating ideas to arrive at conclusions, decisions and choices. You can also do the same with others, observe and ask how they arrived at a particular conclusion or position. It can be quite an eye-opener!

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