

Believing that life is fair might make you a terrible person

Faced with injustice, we'll try to alleviate it – but, if we can't, we'll do the next best thing, psychologically speaking: blame the victims of the injustice



How much sympathy you have for this woman probably depends on whether you feel the universe is a just place

Oliver Burkeman: Feb. 3, 2015

If you've been following the news recently, you know that human beings are terrible and everything is appalling. Yet the sheer range of ways we find to sabotage our efforts to make the world a better place continues to astonish. Did you know, for example, that last week's commemorations of the liberation of Auschwitz may have marginally increased the prevalence of antisemitism in the modern world, despite being partly intended as a warning against its consequences? Or that reading about the eye-popping state of economic inequality could make you less likely to support politicians who want to do something about it?

These are among numerous unsettling implications of the "just-world hypothesis", a psychological bias explored in a new essay by Nicholas Hune-Brown at Hazlitt. The world, obviously, is a manifestly unjust place: people are always meeting fates they didn't deserve, or not receiving rewards they did deserve for hard work or virtuous behavior. Yet several decades of research have established that our need to believe

otherwise runs deep. Faced with evidence of injustice, we'll certainly try to alleviate it if we can – but, if we feel powerless to make things right, we'll do the next best thing, psychologically speaking: we'll convince ourselves that the world isn't so unjust after all.

Hence the finding, in a 2009 study, that Holocaust memorials can increase antisemitism. Confronted with an atrocity they otherwise can't explain, people become slightly more likely, on average, to believe that the victims must have brought it on themselves.

The classic experiment demonstrating the just-world effect took place in 1966, when Melvyn Lerner and Carolyn Simmons showed people what they claimed were live images of a woman receiving agonizing electric shocks for her poor performance in a memory test. Given the option to alleviate her suffering by ending the shocks, almost everybody did so: humans may be terrible, but most of us don't go around being consciously and deliberately awful. When denied any option to halt her punishment, however – when forced to just sit and watch her apparently suffer – the participants adjusted their opinions of the woman downwards, as if to convince themselves her agony wasn't so indefensible because she wasn't really such an innocent victim. "The sight of an innocent person suffering without possibility of reward or compensation", Lerner and Simmons concluded, "motivated people to devalue the attractiveness of the victim in order to bring about a more appropriate fit between her fate and her character." It's easy to see how a similar psychological process might lead, say, to the belief that victims of sexual assault were "asking for it": if you can convince yourself of that, you can avoid acknowledging the horror of the situation.

What's truly unsettling about the just-world bias is that while it can have truly unpleasant effects, these follow from what seems like the entirely understandable urge to believe that things happen for a reason. After all, if we didn't all believe that to some degree, life would be an intolerably chaotic and terrifying nightmare in, which effort and payback were utterly unrelated, and there was no point planning for the future, saving money for retirement or doing anything else in hope of eventual reward. We'd go mad. Surely wanting the world to make a bit more sense than that is eminently forgivable?

Yet, ironically, this desire to believe that things happen for a reason leads to the kinds of positions that help entrench injustice instead of reducing it.

Hune-Brown cites another recent bit of evidence for the phenomenon: people with a strong belief in a just world, he reports, are more likely to oppose affirmative action schemes intended to help women or minorities. You needn't be explicitly racist or sexist to hold such views, nor committed to a highly individualistic political position (such as libertarianism); the researchers controlled for those. You need only cling to a conviction that the world is basically fair. That might be a pretty naive position, of course – but it's hard to argue that it's a hateful one. Similar associations have been found between belief in a just world and a preference for authoritarian political leaders. To shield ourselves psychologically from the terrifying thought that the world is full of innocent people suffering, we endorse politicians and policies more likely to make that suffering worse.

All of which is another reminder of a truth that's too often forgotten in our era of extreme political polarization and 24/7 internet outrage: wrong opinions – even deeply obnoxious opinions – needn't necessarily stem from obnoxious motivations. "Victim-blaming" provides the clearest example: barely a day goes by without some commentator being accused (often rightly) of implying that somebody's suffering was their own fault. That's a viewpoint that should be condemned, of course: it's unquestionably

unpleasant to suggest that the victims of, say, the Charlie Hebdo killings, brought their fates upon themselves. But the just-world hypothesis shows how such opinions need not be the consequence of a deep character fault on the part of the blamer, or some tiny kernel of evil in their soul. It might simply result from a strong need to feel that the world remains orderly, and that things still make some kind of sense.

Facing the truth – that the world visits violence and poverty and discrimination upon people capriciously, with little regard for what they've done to deserve it – is much scarier. Because, if there's no good explanation for why any specific person is suffering, it's far harder to escape the frightening conclusion that it could easily be you next.
