9.9: Belief Perseverance Bias

Belief Perseverance bias occurs when a person has clear evidence against, they still hold on to their previous belief. Many people in the skeptic community are often frustrated when, after they have laid out so many sound arguments based on clear reasoning, they still can’t seem to change what someone believes. Once you believe something, it is so easy to see the reasons for why you hold that belief but for others it seems impossible. Try as you might to share your beliefs with others, you still fail at winning them to your side.

“The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects.”

– Francis Bacon

What we are talking about here is, at the least, confirmation bias, the tendency to seek only information that supports one’s previous belief and reject information that refutes it. But there is also the issue of belief perseverance. In other words, Much of this stems from people’s preference for certainty and continuity. We like our knowledge to be consistent, linear, and absolute. “I already came to a conclusion and am absolutely certain that what I believe is true. I no longer want to think about it. If I exert all of the work required to admit that I am wrong and was wrong, there will be a lot of additional work to learn and integrate that new information. In the meantime, I will have a very difficult time functioning. My life will be much easier if I simply accept that my previous belief was true.” Or as Daniel Kahneman says:

“Sustaining doubt is harder work than sliding into certainty.”

– Daniel Kahneman