

Suspending Judgment

*“My own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose,
but queerer than we **can** suppose.”*

–J.B.S. Haldane

Consider the hypothesis that the entire universe—exactly as it is—came into existence only 5 minutes ago. It instantly materialized just then, complete with all your apparent memories, all my apparent memories, and all other evidence for a distant past (e.g., the fossil record).¹

Incredible! On the other hand, it also seems *very hard* to rule out that hypothesis... You might try searching the internet for evidence, but the hypothesis implies that the internet also just came into existence! More broadly, any historical evidence you find might be completely misleading.

So: Does this mean *you don't know* when the universe came into existence??? Well, perhaps you don't know *with absolute certainty*...but you still might be entirely rational in rejecting the “newborn universe” hypothesis. Regardless, it is surprising that even such a basic, commonsense belief like “the universe has existed for more than 5 minutes” can be put in question.

This is an exercise in **suspending judgment**. When you entertain the newborn-universe hypothesis, then at least for the moment, you refrain from many beliefs that you otherwise hold. You put into doubt your own age, your life story, the whole of archaeology, etc. It's rather amazing that you are capable of withholding belief on all these things, if only temporarily.

But if you can suppose that you are radically wrong about *such elementary facts*, then so too can you suppose that you are radically wrong about *more complicated issues* concerning feminism, God, Vladimir Putin, etc.

Admittedly, the latter issues are more emotional—so it is harder to suppose that you are “radically wrong” about them. But the fact that it is harder is revealing. Specifically, it reveals that you are *emotionally invested* in those opinions, even more so than the idea that the universe just began! Those must be some powerful emotions, capable of causing powerful biases.

So to minimize bias, it is best if we can **develop skill** in suspending judgment, even on emotional topics. One way to do this is to read authors that you disagree with...see if you have the strength to read them without automatically condemning them. Can you suspend judgment and take them seriously, without flinching? I find it an entertaining “game,” in a way, to see how long and how earnestly I can consider that an opponent's opinion might very well be true.

But the point, of course, is for us to think about controversial issues with a minimum amount of bias, and a maximum of understanding. That is a game where everyone wins.

¹ The newborn universe hypothesis was devised by Bertrand Russell in his (1921) *The Analysis of Mind*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., pp. 159-160. However, the master of suspending judgment about basic facts was the father of modern philosophy, René Descartes, in his (1641) book *Meditations on First Philosophy*. See especially the first meditation.