

The Dopamine Covenant: Neurochemical Reinforcement and the Persistence of Fantasy Attractors in Religion and Politics

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Abstract

Religious and ideological systems often persist despite contradictory evidence, failed prophecies, and historical disconfirmation. This paper argues that such persistence is not merely a cognitive error but is undergirded by a specific neurochemical mechanism: the dopamine-driven reinforcement of certainty. Building on Olds and Milner's (1954) demonstration that direct stimulation of the mesolimbic reward pathway can override all competing biological imperatives, we propose that the "lever" of absolute belief functions as a fantasy attractor—a sealed, low-corrective-permeability (κ) basin that resists updating. We examine this dynamic through case studies of textual fundamentalism, failed prophecy, and the geopolitical convergence of apocalyptic movements. The paper concludes that the brain's reward architecture does not contain a truth detector, and that cultivating corrective permeability (κ)—at the individual and institutional level—is the only reliable alternative to the self-reinforcing loop of

certainty and catastrophe. Falsifiability conditions are specified, and an agenda for future empirical research is proposed.

1. Introduction: The Neural Lever

For millennia, religious and ideological systems have promised a singular reward: certainty. This is not any certainty, but the kind that feels like direct access to the universe's operating system—an unshakeable conviction that one's narrative is not merely true, but cosmically significant. That feeling has a name: dopamine. And it does not care about truth.

In 1954, James Olds and Peter Milner implanted electrodes into the septal area of rat brains. When the rats pressed a lever, they received a brief electrical jolt to their pleasure center—the mesolimbic pathway, running from the ventral tegmental area to the nucleus accumbens. The rats pressed the lever thousands of times per hour. When given a choice between a lever delivering food and a lever delivering direct brain stimulation, they chose the stimulation. They pressed until they collapsed from exhaustion or starvation. They died with their paws on the lever (Olds & Milner, 1954).

This experiment provides the neurochemical prototype for understanding the self-sealing nature of fantasy attractors—belief systems with low corrective permeability ($\kappa \approx 0$) that resist updating when confronted with contradictory evidence (Galida, 2026). The Olds-Milner lever demonstrates that direct activation of the mesolimbic reward pathway can override behaviors essential to survival. Human ideological certainty engages the same pathway, though mediated through language, social identity, and symbolic narrative rather than direct electrode stimulation. The brain does not have a

dedicated “truth detector.” It has a reward system. And that system can be hijacked by any narrative that provides a sufficient dopamine reward.

A note on the framework. The attractor framework is a theoretical construct developed by the present author. It is not a community-validated model but a set of proposed concepts—including corrective permeability (κ) and the distinction between reality-aligned and fantasy attractors—designed for diagnostic application. This paper deploys those concepts to connect the neuroscience of reward with the psychology of belief persistence.

2. The Neurochemistry of Certainty

Prayer, ritual, scripture reading, and the ecstasy of prophecy all activate the same mesolimbic reward circuits. Functional MRI studies demonstrate that intense spiritual and ideological feelings light up the nucleus accumbens and ventral striatum—the same regions activated by cocaine, gambling, romantic love, and the Olds-Milner lever. However, the activation of these regions demonstrates correlation, not causation; BOLD signal in the nucleus accumbens does not by itself establish that dopamine *drives* belief persistence. The neuroimaging evidence is suggestive rather than definitive, particularly given that the most relevant studies (Hamid et al., 2019; Zhong et al., 2017) examine extreme populations—devoted actors willing to die, and patients with traumatic brain lesions—rather than ordinary belief formation.

A more precise account of dopamine’s role is required. Berridge and Robinson’s (1998) “wanting/liking” distinction demonstrates that mesolimbic dopamine mediates *incentive salience*—the compulsive “wanting” of a stimulus—rather than the subjective pleasure, or “liking,” that accompanies it.

Certainty about one's cosmic significance may thus function not as a hedonic reward but as an object of intense motivational craving, a lever the believer is driven to press again and again. Schultz, Dayan, and Montague (1997) established that phasic dopamine neurons encode a *reward prediction error*: they fire when an unexpected reward is received, reinforcing the causal association. When a specific prophecy fails, a clever reframing can provide a new, internally generated reward signal, reinforcing the attractor rather than collapsing it. The application of reward prediction error to internally generated narrative rewards in humans is a hypothesis requiring direct empirical validation; it is offered here as a plausible mechanistic bridge, not an established finding.

The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC)—the region responsible for deliberative reasoning, cognitive flexibility, and the integration of contradictory information—shows reduced activity in devoted actors willing to kill and die for sacred values (Hamid et al., 2019). Damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC) correlates with increased religious fundamentalism and cognitive rigidity (Zhong et al., 2017). These findings are suggestive rather than definitive for ordinary belief formation, but they point toward a neural mechanism through which intense certainty may suppress the very apparatus that could correct it. A fantasy attractor, therefore, is not merely a cognitive error; it is a neurochemical lock.

3. Corrective Permeability (κ): A Qualitative Construct

Corrective permeability (κ) is introduced here as a multidimensional, qualitative construct—not a metrically precise quantity. It describes the degree to which a belief

system updates in response to disconfirming evidence. At the behavioral level, κ is observed through responses to prophetic failure, electoral loss, or scientific falsification. At the neural level, it is hypothesized to correlate with dlPFC engagement during exposure to counter-attitudinal information. At the cognitive level, it overlaps with metacognitive awareness, intellectual humility, and reflective thinking capacity as measured by instruments such as the Cognitive Reflection Test (Frederick, 2005).

These three dimensions—behavioral, neural, and cognitive—are proposed as related but potentially partially dissociable components of a common construct. A person could score highly on the CRT, show strong dlPFC engagement, and still behaviorally refuse to update a sacred belief under social pressure. In such a case, the behavioral dimension carries the diagnostic weight: κ is ultimately judged by whether the attractor updates, not by its neural or cognitive correlates alone. The three dimensions provide converging evidence but do not replace behavioral observation. Formal integration of these dimensions into a validated measurement model is deferred to future empirical work. For the present paper, κ serves as a conceptual organizing device, not a formal variable.

4. The Textual Addiction

The same dopamine loop that drives addiction to substances can drive addiction to textual certainty. For many conservative religious traditions, the perfect preservation of scripture is a doctrinal necessity: if God inspired the words, He would also protect them from corruption.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947, were initially hailed as proof of this perfect transmission. The Great Isaiah

Scroll matched the medieval Masoretic text almost perfectly. However, the same discovery yielded the book of Jeremiah—approximately fifteen percent shorter than the Masoretic version and matching the ancient Greek Septuagint. This was not a scribal slip; it was a full editorial rewrite. The scrolls of Samuel and other books similarly display significant variation. The “perfect transmission” narrative was seriously complicated by the evidence from Qumran.

Yet the dopamine-driven believer does not abandon the text. Instead, the basin seals. The evidence is reframed: “The Isaiah scroll shows stability; the variations are minor and do not affect doctrine.” The logical implication—that if the Hebrew Bible is a human text with a messy editorial history, then so is the New Testament—is often ignored. Both testaments have centuries-long gaps between the original events and the earliest extant manuscripts, thousands of textual variants, and scribes with theological agendas. Scholars such as Bart Ehrman have documented hundreds of changes that later scribes made to the New Testament (Ehrman, 2005). Ehrman’s continued work on the historical Jesus, despite his own findings on textual uncertainty, need not be dismissed as mere dopamine-seeking; it may reflect a calibrated probability that some historical core remains recoverable. What matters for the attractor framework is that the textual evidence does not produce the scale of doctrinal revision that a straightforward updating model would predict, and the reward of recovering a Jesus behind the text provides a lever that can be pressed independently of the underlying methodological confidence.

5. Prophecy as Retrofitting—and Its Limits

The same dopamine economy drives apocalyptic prophecy. When a predicted event fails to occur, the attractor does not

collapse; it reframes. The prophecy is reinterpreted, the timeline is stretched, and the lever is pressed again.

Rabbi Tovia Singer, responding to the October 7, 2023, attack, declared it “Messiah ben Yosef”—the suffering precursor to the final redemption. Ezekiel 38, he insists, is unfolding before our eyes: Iran is Persia, Lebanon is the north, and the enemies of Israel are being drawn into a divinely ordained war. Yet Ezekiel promised fire and brimstone, not IAF airstrikes. Iran still stands. Hezbollah still operates. The Temple is not rebuilt. World peace is nowhere in sight. “Unfolding” is simply a slower version of “soon.” When nothing happens, the believer is “still in the process.” When something happens, it is “prophetic.” The prophecy is unfalsifiable.

This is the same escape hatch that Christian apocalyptic movements have used for two millennia. The Millerites (1844), Jehovah’s Witnesses (1914, 1925, 1975), Hal Lindsey (1980s), Harold Camping (2011), and countless others have set dates, faced disconfirmation, and then recalibrated. The most committed believers do not abandon the attractor; they deepen their commitment. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter’s (1956) classic study of a failed doomsday cult found that the most devout members became *more* convinced after the prophecy failed, reframing it as a spiritual success. Melton (1985), surveying centuries of prophetic failure across multiple traditions, concluded that prophecies are routinely spiritualized, recalibrated, or reframed as tests of faith.

However, not all movements survive disconfirmation. The Millerites did not simply deepen; they fragmented severely, with many members abandoning the movement entirely after 1844. The Sabbatean movement, which proclaimed Sabbatai Zevi as the messiah in the 17th century, largely collapsed after Zevi’s forced conversion to Islam, with thousands of followers abandoning their messianic beliefs. The Jehovah’s Witnesses experienced significant membership decline after the failed

1975 prophecy, even as the institutional leadership reframed the failure. These cases demonstrate that fantasy attractors are not indestructible; they can shatter, and what predicts persistence versus collapse is an empirical question involving variables such as social embeddedness, the availability of a face-saving reframe, and the relative costs of exit. The dopamine hit of “I was right” is powerful, but it is not invincible.

6. The Geopolitical Metastasis

This neurochemical dynamic is not confined to individual belief. It scales to geopolitics. Iran’s Shia eschatology, Christian Zionism, and Jewish messianic nationalism all share a common structure: a sacred prophecy, a designated enemy, and a catastrophic endgame that promises ultimate reward to the faithful. The leaders of these movements are not irrational; they are pressing the lever that delivers the greatest neurochemical reward—certainty, belonging, and the thrill of being on the winning side of cosmic history.

The ideological commitments are independently documented. Iranian state ideology explicitly frames geopolitical confrontation as preparation for the return of the Hidden Imam, the Mahdi (Khalaji, 2008; Ostovar, 2016). Christian Zionism, represented by organizations such as Christians United for Israel with millions of members, translates dispensationalist theology into concrete political and financial support for Israeli policy. Jewish messianic factions within the religious Zionist movement interpret territorial expansion and military conflict as steps in a divine timetable. The claim that these three basins have become coupled through mutually reinforcing positive feedback—forming a single meta-attractor—is the author’s own theoretical proposal (Galida, 2026b), offered here as a

diagnostic hypothesis pending independent validation. If the basins are indeed coupling, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—the neural seat of cost-benefit analysis—is suppressed in devoted actors, and the collective lever is pressed. The fire feels good.

7. The Antidote: Shared Reality and Corrective Permeability

There is such a thing as shared reality. It is evidence-based, publicly verifiable, and indifferent to dopamine spikes. Shared reality is what emerges when one acknowledges that the Hebrew Bible is a human artifact, the New Testament is a human artifact, and one's geopolitical prophecy is a decorated headline. Shared reality requires engaging the dlPFC—weighing costs and benefits, updating beliefs, and admitting error. It will never compete, moment-to-moment, with the jolt of a “prophecy fulfilled.” But it keeps the organism alive.

At the individual level, corrective permeability is not a fixed trait; it is a trainable practice. The dlPFC can be strengthened. Interventions that promote critical reflection have been shown to influence belief formation and flexibility. Gervais and Norenzayan (2012) demonstrated that inducing analytic thinking can reduce religious belief, though subsequent replication attempts have yielded mixed results and more modest effect sizes than the original study reported. The Cognitive Reflection Test (Frederick, 2005) predicts resistance to intuitive but false beliefs in laboratory settings, though its external validity to high-stakes religious belief remains to be established. Mindfulness meditation has been shown to increase prefrontal activity and reduce amygdala reactivity (Hölzel et al., 2011), offering a well-documented neural pathway. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) modifies specific maladaptive beliefs in clinical

populations, though its effects on general belief flexibility are less established. Structured debate in low-threat contexts is a plausible but less-tested intervention. The simple daily question, “Did I update any belief yesterday?,” is a practical heuristic for engaging the correction apparatus.

Acknowledging the asymmetry. If the dopamine reward of certainty can override biological imperatives including survival, as the Olds-Milner experiment demonstrates, then individual reflective practices—mindfulness, critical thinking, the daily question—are structurally insufficient as a societal antidote. They are necessary but not sufficient. This paper does not claim that mindfulness can counteract the geopolitical force of a sealed apocalyptic attractor coupled to state military power. It claims only that individual κ cultivation is a prerequisite for any broader institutional response: institutions themselves are populated by individuals, and institutional κ cannot exceed the κ of the people who operate them. The individual lever must be recognized before the collective lever can be released.

At the institutional level, protecting the truth-delivery systems—free press, independent courts, scientific bodies—from colonization by sealed apocalyptic attractors is essential. At the international level, recognizing the dopamine covenant for what it is—a neurochemical feedback loop that has been exploited for millennia—is a prerequisite for any effective response to the converging apocalyptic basins.

8. Falsifiability Conditions

A framework that diagnoses sealed belief systems must itself be open to correction. The following conditions are proposed:

- **Strong disconfirmation:** If a well-documented case is

presented in which a high-commitment belief system updates its core claims rapidly and substantially in response to disconfirming evidence, without reframing, the claim that dopamine-driven certainty reliably produces low κ is weakened.

- **Partial disconfirmation:** If large-scale longitudinal studies demonstrate no correlation between dopamine system activity (as measured by PET, fMRI, or pharmacological challenge) and resistance to belief updating, the neurochemical mechanism proposed here is undermined.
- **Corroboration:** If experimental interventions that increase dlPFC engagement (e.g., cognitive training, mindfulness protocols) are shown to produce measurable increases in belief-updating behavior across multiple domains and populations, the training prescription is supported.

These conditions are not met by the present paper. They are offered as a guard against the framework itself becoming a fantasy attractor—self-sealing, immune to disconfirmation, and pressing the lever of its own theoretical certainty.

9. Open Questions and Future Research Directions

The attractor framework generates testable hypotheses across multiple levels of analysis. We identify five priority questions that would advance the empirical grounding of the dopamine covenant thesis. Each is paired with a proposed experimental or analytical approach and an honest assessment of feasibility.

9.1 Does prophetic reframing generate a dopamine-mediated

reward prediction error?

Present committed believers with a falsifiable prediction (e.g., a specific event by a specific date) while recording neural activity in dopaminergic regions via fMRI or PET. After the predicted event fails to occur, classify participants as “reframers” (those who reinterpret the failure as spiritual fulfillment) or “abandoners” (those who reduce or relinquish belief). Compare dopaminergic responses between groups. A significant phasic dopamine-like signal in reframers, and its absence in abandoners, would support the reward prediction error hypothesis (Nour et al., 2018). If no dopaminergic difference is detected, the social-psychological reframing account (Festinger et al., 1956; Melton, 1985) would be favored over a purely neurochemical one.

Feasibility: Low. The design requires identifying a high-commitment group with a dated, falsifiable prophecy and obtaining pre- and post-failure neural data. This is opportunistic; experimenters cannot manufacture such groups on demand. Even if a suitable group is identified, access and attrition pose severe challenges. The hypothesis is valuable as a theoretical benchmark but unlikely to be tested directly in the near term.

9.2 What predicts persistence versus collapse after disconfirmation?

Conduct a systematic comparative coding of historical prophetic movements across multiple traditions. Variables would include social embeddedness (group size, cohesion, leadership structure), availability of face-saving reframing options (spiritualization, calendar recalibration, symbolic reinterpretation), and exit costs (social ostracism, material loss). Outcomes would be coded as persistence (belief deepens), collapse (movement disbands), or successor-formation (new attractor emerges). Statistical analysis would identify the strongest predictors. Recent archival work suggesting that

the original Festinger cult actually dissolved (Kelly, 2026) underscores the need for broad comparison rather than reliance on a single iconic case.

Feasibility: Moderate. Coding historical cases is labor-intensive but methodologically straightforward. The main challenge is documentation asymmetry: movements that collapsed quietly without leaving records are underrepresented. Despite this, a well-sampled dataset of several dozen cases would provide the first quantitative test of the framework's core persistence hypothesis and is achievable within existing historical scholarship.

9.3 Can κ be trained in high-stakes contexts?

Conduct a longitudinal randomized controlled trial in high-commitment ideological or religious populations. Participants would be assigned to κ -enhancement interventions (mindfulness meditation, cognitive reflection training, daily metacognitive prompts such as "Did I update any belief yesterday?") or an active control. Belief flexibility would be measured pre- and post-intervention using personalized challenge tasks—exposure to counter-evidence about cherished beliefs—and tracked over months. Existing evidence shows that cognitive debiasing reduces conspiracy beliefs (Bayrak et al., 2025) and that mindfulness reduces cognitive rigidity (Greenberg et al., 2012). Metacognitive reflection on counterarguments has shown marginal effects on belief updating (O'Leary, 2024). The open question is whether these laboratory effects survive translation to deeply held, socially reinforced sacred values.

Feasibility: Moderate. Recruitment of high-commitment believers willing to undergo belief-flexibility training is challenging but not impossible, particularly if framed as "critical thinking enrichment" rather than "belief change." Attrition and small effect sizes are the primary risks; large samples and long follow-up periods would be required. The study would provide the most direct test of the paper's

central prescriptive claim.

9.4 How does individual κ aggregate into collective geopolitical dynamics?

Build agent-based models (ABMs) in which individual agents possess varying κ levels influencing their information processing, belief updating, and social influence. Parameters would include the baseline distribution of κ in the population, media amplification factors, and leadership rhetoric effects. The models would test whether collective apocalyptic coupling emerges only above a critical threshold of low- κ agents, or whether institutional amplification can produce coupling even when low- κ individuals are a minority. Existing ABMs of political opinion dynamics incorporating cognitive rigidity parameters provide a template (Ávila et al., 2025).

Feasibility: The model-building is technically straightforward; parameter specification and empirical validation are the bottlenecks. Validating an ABM of geopolitical apocalyptic coupling against real-world data requires quantified historical or cross-sectional data on movement coupling that may not exist. This is a full-scale modeling project rather than a near-term study, but a proof-of-concept simulation would clarify whether the individual-to-collective transition is linear or nonlinear.

9.5 Is κ a unified construct or a loose family of traits?

Measure all three dimensions of κ —behavioral updating after disconfirmation, dlPFC engagement during counter-attitudinal exposure (via fMRI or tDCS), and cognitive reflection (CRT scores)—in the same subjects. Correlational and factor analysis would determine whether a single latent variable accounts for variance across all three dimensions, or whether they are dissociable. Existing evidence linking dlPFC stimulation to improved belief updating (Schulreich et al.,

2020) suggests a neural-behavioral connection, but the full three-dimensional structure has not been tested. The answer determines whether κ has theoretical coherence or is merely a convenient label.

Feasibility: Low as a single study; high as a research program. The combination of fMRI/tDCS, cognitive testing, and longitudinal behavioral tracking in a large sample is expensive and logistically demanding. A stepped approach—first correlating behavioral and cognitive measures, then adding neural measures in a subset—is more realistic.

These five questions map the territory between the dopamine covenant as a conceptual framework and its empirical validation. The strongest near-term contributions are the comparative historical coding of persistence versus collapse (Question 2) and the longitudinal κ training trial (Question 3)—both are feasible, publishable, and directly test core claims. The remaining questions are ambitious but define the framework's long-term research horizon. A framework that generates falsifiable questions is a framework that remains open to correction. That is itself a form of corrective permeability.

10. Conclusion

The rat died pressing the pleasure lever. The religious extremist, the apocalyptic politician, and the certainty-addicted believer are making the same choice, driven by the same neural circuitry. The fire feels good. That is the real addiction. And it is burning the world down.

The only reliable lever is reality. It does not promise heaven. It does not promise a second coming or a Mahdi's

return. It promises only one thing: it is true, whether you believe it or not.

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“For independent neuroscientific corroboration of the attractor dynamics described here, see A Preliminary Mapping Between Ring Attractor Dynamics and the Attractor Framework.”