

IN-BETWEEN BELIEVING

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For any proposition p , it may sometimes occur that a person is not quite accurately describable as believing that p , nor quite accurately describable as failing to believe that p . I shall say that such people are 'in between' believing that p and not believing it, or that they are in an 'in-between state of belief'. The aim of this paper is to indicate the prevalence of such in-between states of believing, and to assert the need for an account of belief that allows us to talk intelligibly about in-between believing.

I. EXAMPLES OF IN-BETWEEN BELIEVING

When I was in college, I knew the last name of the fellow whose first name was 'Konstantin' and who lived across the hall from me in freshman year. I have not been in contact with him since 1987, and my memory of him is slowly fading. When I was twenty-five, if you asked me his last name, I probably but not certainly would have given you the right answer. Reminiscing with college buddies, it might easily have come to mind; in a distracting circumstance alien from my college environment, it might not have come at all, or maybe with effort, or maybe only later as I was driving home and not giving the matter any conscious attention. Now, at thirty-two, I cannot give you the answer with any certainty, and I would probably get it slightly wrong – but maybe if I chanced to see him in San Francisco I would find the correct name coming out of my mouth. I could tell you that his name starts with a 'G', and if you told me what it was I would confidently recognize it – maybe even correct you if you made a little mistake in pronouncing it. I could pick it out on a multiple-choice test with similar-looking alternatives. Ten years from now, I shall not be able to recall it under any circumstances, but I could probably still pick it out on a multiple-choice test, unless the alternatives were very close. As I get older, I could be misled by

less and less similar alternatives, until success requires alternatives so divergent as no longer to test my knowledge that his name was such and such, but only my knowledge of whether, for example, his name was a short Chinese name or a mid-length German one. At eighty, I shall have no memory of Konstantin whatsoever.

At twenty, I fully and completely believed that Konstantin's last name was – well, whatever it was. Let us say it was 'Guericke'. At eighty, I shall be completely without this belief. But is it plausible to think that in the years between there was a discrete moment before which I absolutely had this belief and after which I absolutely did not? There is a temptation to say that so long as I can recall or recognize the name in some set of circumstances, however rare, the belief is really there in my head, but simply less and less 'accessible'. But unless one thinks that nothing is ever truly forgotten, this manoeuvre only puts off the inevitable: at some point, the belief must pass from fully present, if difficult to access, to absent; and it seems odd to say that this happens at some individual moment. There is no single proper test of whether the belief is really there. At some point during the course of forgetting, I must be between believing and failing to believe that his last name is 'Guericke' (or whatever). My view is that most of my time is spent in this in-between state, but it is not essential that you agree with me in this.

Another example: Roshini teaches fourth grade. In her lessons on fractions, she sometimes, as an aside, mentions the existence of prime numbers, and she correctly lists as examples the low primes '2', '3', '5', '7', '11', etc. Sometimes she feels moved to define more formally what a prime is, and typically she says that a prime number is any positive integer that can be divided evenly only by 1 and itself. Now this definition is not quite correct, as the number 1, though not prime, is a positive integer evenly divisible only by 1 and itself. Still, Roshini knows that 1 is not a prime. She would never list it among the primes, and if a student were to ask about it, she would (perhaps with a little hesitation) say that it was not prime. On certain occasions, if the need to exclude 1 from the list of primes is made salient to her, she might be inclined to define as prime any integer *greater than* 1 which is evenly divisible only by 1 and itself. However, the occasions on which she would be disposed to offer this more correct definition of primes are few. For the most part, she would happily assent to her erroneous definition.

Should we say that Roshini believes that all positive integers which are evenly divisible only by themselves and 1 are prime? If we are interested in her assessments of particular numbers as prime, we shall probably find ourselves inclined to say no, she does not believe that all numbers satisfying that definition are prime. If we are interested in how she would agree on most occasions to characterize primes, we may want to describe her as having

that belief. However, the most careful and accurate description of her would neither simply ascribe the belief to her nor simply deny it of her.

In certain moods and in certain contexts, Antonio feels quite sure that the universe is guided by a benevolent deity. In other moods and contexts, he finds himself inclined to think of talk about God as ‘a beautiful metaphor’ or even, sometimes, ‘a crock of hooley’. When his atheistic buddies at work mock religious belief, he does not join in, but neither does he feel an impulse to defend belief in God; at such moments, especially if it is mid-week, the whole God business seems rather silly. When Antonio goes to church with his wife, he is not inclined to believe everything the pastor says, but, particularly if the pastor waxes poetic about the magnificence of creation, he may feel that there must be a divine force guiding the world. At the birth of a child or the death of a friend, he feels certain God is involved; when the church gossip group has invaded his house, the idea of taking literally talk about the existence of a benevolent deity strikes him as foolish.

Does Antonio believe that God exists? A simple yes or no answer to this question would be misleading. One might say that his beliefs change from occasion to occasion – that as he is grouching about the church social, he does not believe that God exists; as he is rejoicing in the magnificence of spring, he does believe – but most of the time he is doing neither: he is eating breakfast or mowing or writing code and not giving the matter any thought. At such moments he may be simultaneously disposed to marvel at the wonder of creation if a robin were to fly past and to embrace atheism if Madge were unexpectedly to drop by.

Examples of in-between believing could be run up indefinitely, and can have a wide variety of causes. The three causes discussed here – gradual forgetting, failure to think things through completely, and variability with context and mood – are hardly a complete set. They should, I hope, be sufficient to make the case that philosophers and cognitive scientists interested in belief would profit greatly from an account of belief that allows us to talk intelligibly about such in-between states of believing – that allows us to say more than just that the subject ‘sort of’ believes something.

II. BAYESIAN AND REPRESENTATIONAL APPROACHES ARE OF LIMITED HELP

One way of thinking about belief that prominently features in-between cases of believing is the Bayesian approach, on which a person’s beliefs are characterized with a degree of confidence ranging from 1, indicating absolute confidence in the truth of the proposition, down to 0, for absolute

confidence in its falsity. If someone has a degree of confidence of 0.8, say, that it will rain on Tuesday, it may be not quite right to say that he believes it will rain on Tuesday and not quite right to say that he does not believe this.

The kinds of cases I have been describing cannot straightforwardly be described in this way. Roshini, often misdefining the primes, and Antonio, of two minds about God's existence, do not have the kind of simple uncertainty that can be characterized in Bayesian terms as a unitary degree of belief – the kind of uncertainty one might have about tomorrow's stock prices or the value of an unseen card. It is not a matter of degree of belief fluctuating over time; rather Roshini and Antonio are, at a single time, disposed quite confidently to assert one thing in one sort of situation and to assert its opposite in another. Nor does it seem quite right to describe my gradual forgetting as a slow decline of my confidence that Konstantin's last name was 'Guericke' and a slow increase in my confidence in competing propositions. In some situations, I might confidently burst out with the answer, while in others I am completely at sea. Describing me, at any particular moment when I am not considering the matter, as having a unitary degree of confidence misses important features of the cognitive situation.

Furthermore, degree of confidence is only one of the dimensions of variation relevant to the appropriateness of a belief ascription. Not only does Antonio's degree of confidence in the existence of God vary from situation to situation, so also does his emotional attachment to his religion, his potential for surprise were God suddenly to reveal himself through miracles, his likelihood of uttering statements consistent or inconsistent with the proposition that God exists, his willingness to blaspheme, pray, sin, and so forth. There is no reason to suppose that all these dimensions of variation must march in step, or that degree of confidence somehow deserves unique privilege. One might argue that at least in 'normal' cases these factors will co-vary in regular and predictable ways, but many cases of in-between believing, including Antonio's as I conceive it, are likely to be abnormal in the relevant sense. A wholly Bayesian approach to in-between believing misses the delightful variegation of detail.

Many philosophers of mind today advise us to think of mental states, especially belief, as representations or representational states. To believe that p is the case is, for example, regarded as having the sentence ' p ' inscribed in one's 'belief box' in the language of thought, or having the right kind of internal representational system indicating that p is the case. Whatever other merits they might have, however, representational accounts of belief do not readily provide an approach to the elucidation of in-between states of believing. The metaphors and ways of speaking they engender resist

it. Sentences in the language of thought either are or are not inscribed in the belief box. The internal fuel gauge hovers at some distinct point between 'empty' and 'full'. To speak of the subject as 'sort of' or 'halfway' representing something is unnatural, and does not seem to be an advance over speaking of the subject as 'sort of' or 'halfway' believing it.

The metaphors of representationalism could be pushed. Slowly forgetting something might be compared to the sentence which expresses that proposition slowly losing its colour, becoming less legible, until only an undecipherable trace, or no trace at all, is left in the belief box. Conditions under which the fact is recalled might be characterized as bringing more light to bear on the fading proposition, whereas conditions under which the fact is difficult to recall might be characterized as dark. Having external cues might be like having portions of the sentence filled in more boldly.

Extending the metaphor in this way may seem odd, but what else are subscribers to the language of thought supposed to do in the face of in-between believing? Either they must insist, implausibly I think, that sentences in the language of thought are each either completely present in or completely absent from the mind of the in-between believer, or they must find some helpful and fruitful way to make sense of saying that a sentence in the language of thought is 'sort of' in the mind of the in-between believer.

In general, philosophers of mind and others interested in belief have not fully confronted in-between cases of the sort I have been describing here, although Stephen Stich and Daniel Dennett in their more critical moods make a start.¹

But why not view such cases positively as important, informative cases which a robust, realistic account of belief ought usefully to be able to handle?

III. HOW A DISPOSITIONAL APPROACH MIGHT HANDLE IN-BETWEEN BELIEVING

I want to suggest that a dispositional account of belief in something like Ryle's sense provides a promising approach to in-between belief, once it is divorced from the behaviourism that is usually, and not quite accurately, I think, associated with Ryle.²

¹ See, e.g., D. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (MIT Press, 1987), and *Kinds of Minds* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); S. Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science* (MIT Press, 1983); W. Ramsey, S. Stich and J. Garon, 'Connectionism, Eliminativism, and the Future of Folk Psychology', in J.D. Greenwood (ed.), *The Future of Folk Psychology: Intentionality and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge UP, 1991), pp. 93–119.

² G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949).

Although I cannot here defend a dispositional approach to belief in detail, I shall sketch out briefly how a dispositional account of belief might help us in thinking about in-between believing.

Ryle argued that to believe something is simply to be disposed to do and feel certain things in appropriate situations. For example, to believe that the ice is dangerously thin is, in Ryle's words (pp. 134–5),

to be unhesitant in telling oneself and others that it is thin, in acquiescing in other people's assertions to that effect, in objecting to statements to the contrary, in drawing consequences from the original proposition, and so forth. But it is also to be prone to skate warily, to shudder, to dwell in imagination on possible disasters and to warn other skaters. It is a propensity not only to make certain theoretical moves but also to make certain executive and imaginative moves as well as to have certain feelings.

A person who has the dispositions described in Ryle's example matches what I shall call a *dispositional stereotype*. By a *stereotype* I mean a cluster of properties that we are apt to associate with a thing, or a class of things, or a property. A *dispositional stereotype* is a stereotype whose elements are dispositional properties. So, for example, an affable person has a variety of related dispositions, such as the disposition to greet people warmly, the disposition to put others at ease in conversation, the dispositions not easily to become offended, not to push a criticism or an argument too far, to agree to minor requests, and so forth. These dispositions belong to the stereotype for affability; to be affable is really nothing more than to match this stereotype to an appropriate degree. Other personality traits are structured similarly. To be courageous or disciplined or stingy is simply to match sufficiently well a particular dispositional stereotype. The core idea of the Rylean account is that belief works in essentially the same way.

Although Ryle did not pursue his ideas in this direction, it should be apparent how a dispositional account can be appropriated to handle in-between belief. Just as there can be in-between cases of extraversion in which a subject has some but not all the stereotypical dispositions of the extravert, so also there can be in-between cases of believing in which the subject has some but not all of the dispositions that we would naturally associate with the belief. Roughly speaking, the greater the proportion of stereotypical dispositions a person possesses, and the more central these are to the stereotype, the more appropriate it is to describe him as having the belief in question. Complex issues obviously arise here about the nature of the dispositions in question and their defeasibility.³ Although I think it

³ I explore these issues at length in my doctoral dissertation *Words about Young Minds: the Concepts of Theory, Representation, and Belief in Philosophy and Developmental Psychology* (University of California, Berkeley, 1997), and in 'A Phenomenal, Dispositional Account of Belief' (in preparation), both of which are available at <http://www.ucr.edu/philosophy/schwitz.html>.

would be a distraction from the main point of the paper to pursue such issues in detail here, my inclination is to think of the relevant dispositions as simple dispositions of the sort an untutored adult might naturally ascribe to people, allowing for *ceteris paribus* defeasibility.

One way to approach in-between cases of believing, then, is to describe in what respects the subject matches and in what respects the subject fails to match the dispositional stereotype for the belief in question. It is essentially to describe the cases as I did at the beginning of this paper, to give the listener a sense of when to expect stereotypical feelings and behaviour and when not to. Of course, this is something that can equally well be done by those who do not advocate a dispositional account of belief. But here is the difference: for the advocate of a dispositional account of belief, describing the dispositions is describing the cognitive state of the subject, whereas for others, describing the dispositions is only describing the *manifestations* of the belief. For those who reject the dispositional view, there will always be a further question to be answered after all the subject's dispositions have been made clear – some additional, non-dispositional facts that must be invoked before we can definitively assess what the subject believes.

There is a natural impulse to say 'Grant that some of Antonio's dispositions accord with the belief that God exists and some do not. Which ones are telling? Underneath it all, which does he really believe?' There is a natural impulse to insist on a simple answer. He either believes that God exists or he does not. Konstantin's last name is either recorded somewhere deep in my memory or it is not.

I hope that the examples with which I began this paper are strong enough to support the view that a yes or no answer to such questions is not always available – sometimes the person will not be accurately describable as fully believing or as fully not believing. One virtue of a dispositional account of belief is that by discouraging the pursuit of a further truth about the subject's real state of believing underlying his mixed dispositional profile, it allows us easily and appropriately to settle with in-between answers to questions about belief.⁴

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