

Belief

THE DUAL-COMPONENT VIEW OF BELIEF

The standard philosophical analysis of belief is that it has two components, ‘content’ and ‘attitude’.

Content

The content of a belief is what the person believes, e.g. that ‘elephants are grey’. This content takes the form of a proposition. A proposition is what is claimed by an assertion or expressed by a complete declarative sentence. To say what someone believes, we say ‘he believes that ...’, and what fills in the gap is a sentence, which states the proposition they believe, e.g. ‘God exists’, ‘murder is wrong’, ‘seals are cute’.

As indicated, this is an analysis of belief that... However, we also talk about believing a person (‘Do you believe him?’) and about believing in something or someone (‘I believe in love’, ‘I believe in God’). This suggests that the content of a belief is not always a proposition, but can be a direct object (him, love, God).

But we shouldn’t draw this conclusion. Believing someone is shorthand for saying you believe that ‘what he says is true’; so the content of your belief is a proposition. Believing in someone or something can either be analysed in terms of believing that (e.g. ‘I believe in God’ = ‘I believe that God exists’); or ‘believing-in’ is not the same as believing-that. It is a different ‘attitude’, e.g. it is a form of faith or commitment. To understand this properly, we need to discuss the ‘attitude’ component of belief.

Attitude

Just as we say, ‘she believes that she is late’, so we can say, e.g. ‘she fears that she is late’, ‘she hopes that she is late’, ‘she is ashamed that she is late’ and so on. The verb picks out the ‘attitude’ the person has towards to the state of affairs (being late) picked out by the proposition.

What is it to believe something? Hume described belief by contrast with imagination: ‘belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain’ (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 125). But there are many problems with attempting to pick out belief just in terms of vividness, etc. compared with other ideas. Being afraid that the lion will pounce can be just as forceful as believing that the lion exists. So vividness doesn’t distinguish between belief and fear.

A better approach is to say that belief (belief-that, not belief-in) ‘aims at’ truth:

1. We can evaluate a belief as true or false – which distinguishes it from fear, hope, desire, and many other attitudes.
2. To believe that p is to believe that p is true. To believe ‘she is late’ is to believe that it is true that ‘she is late’. So if you recognise that p is false (you realise she is not late), you abandon your belief that p.

3. To say 'I believe that p' implies that p is true. For instance, it is paradoxical to say 'I believe that p, but p is false'.

All of this is also true of judgment. But judging that p is something you do and do at a particular moment in time. Once you have judged that p, from then on (until you judge that not-p), you believe that p. Having a belief is not something you do and is not something that happens at a time, but over time. It is not an 'episode', but a 'disposition'. To believe that Paris is the capital of France, for instance, is not for anything to be happening in my mind. For example, I do not constantly think (consciously or unconsciously) 'Paris is the capital of France'. How we should understand belief as a disposition we discuss next.

REALIST AND INSTRUMENTALIST NOTIONS OF BELIEF

Realism

It is perhaps natural to think of beliefs as 'things' 'in the mind'. At some point, you acquire a particular belief, after which you 'have' it. We can think of the belief as involving a representation of the proposition believed. Furthermore, together with my desire to drink, my belief that 'there is a glass of water' causes me to pick up the water and drink. Anything involved in causation must be a 'thing'; so beliefs must 'really' exist.

According to this realism about belief, beliefs are part of the structure of the mind. Acquiring a belief changes the structure of the mind. If the mind is, or is very closely connected to, the brain, beliefs will be reflected in the structure of the brain, e.g. in connections between neurones.

This is a standard model for understanding dispositions in science. For example, sugar has the disposition to dissolve in water. This disposition corresponds to the molecular structure of sugar. Identifying the disposition with a structural property provides a way of explaining how dispositions are 'real'. So it is with beliefs.

Instrumentalism

However, realism faces a serious objection. Suppose we came across an alien species, who behaved in ways very similar to us. On the basis of their behaviour, we would say they have beliefs – without knowing anything about the internal structure of their minds or brains. Beliefs are dispositions to behave – but we don't have to find some 'real thing' that a belief corresponds to. Beliefs don't 'exist' as things at all.

One version of instrumentalism is logical behaviourism. However, this theory faces serious objections. While we can accept that beliefs are dispositions to behave, we can question the claim that this is all they are.

A different form of instrumentalism is interpretationism. Daniel Dennett (*The Intentional Stance*) argues that, in understanding, explaining, and predicting anything in the world, we can take different approaches or 'stances'. The 'physical stance' explains and predicts how something behaves in terms of physical properties, e.g. the weather. The 'design stance' explains and predicts behaviour in terms of purposes, e.g. a plant 'seeking' sunlight, a thermostat 'keeping' the room at a certain temperature. The 'intentional stance' explains and predicts behaviour in terms of belief, desires and other mental states.

Different stances are useful for different things, and in different situations. To say that something has beliefs, says Dennett, is just to say that we can usefully use the intentional stance to explain and predict its behaviour. The intentional stance is useful when something's behaviour illustrates certain kinds of complex patterns, e.g. patterns that depend on the way it processes ('interprets') stimuli. On Dennett's theory, we don't have to reduce individual beliefs to individual patterns of behaviour. It is only useful to adopt the intentional stance once something's behaviour has become quite complex, and then we attribute many beliefs all at once. This avoids some of the problems of reduction faced by logical behaviourism.

We could, for example, explain a thermostat from the intentional stance ('it clicked off because it believed the room was warm enough and didn't want it any warmer'), but in this case, it is obviously forced. A thermostat's pattern of behaviour isn't complex enough. But a sophisticated computer, or a robot, may well exhibit such complex behaviour. If it becomes useful to talk about what the computer 'believes', then the computer has beliefs.

Realists object: how can the intentional stance be useful unless it is picking out and describing something real? Dennett responds that instrumentalism does not imply that we can interpret something's behaviour according to any pattern. We do not impose the pattern by interpretation. The pattern is 'real', but there is no 'thing' that corresponds to the pattern. Dennett suggests an analogy between beliefs and centres of gravity or the equator. No 'thing' exists that corresponds to either of these examples; but the concepts are useful.

Instrumentalism means that beliefs do not cause anything – a pattern of behaviour is not a cause of a pattern of behaviour. But it is very counterintuitive to deny that our beliefs cause our behaviour.

WHETHER BELIEFS CAN BE VOLUNTARY

Try to believe (not just imagine) that there is an elephant standing in front of you. Try really hard. Why can't you succeed? The nature of belief – that it aims at truth – suggests that forming beliefs can't be voluntary. We cannot believe at will. If we could, then we could form a belief without any regard to the truth of the proposition we believe. Furthermore, having consciously chosen to have the belief, we would know that we formed it irrespective of its truth. But to believe that *p* is to believe that *p* is true.

Of course, someone can voluntarily say that they believe that *p*. But asserting that *p* is not the same as believing that *p* – because we can be insincere. An insincere assertion that *p* involves asserting that *p* without believing that *p*.

All this does not mean that there is no connection between the will and belief. First, what people want to be true does tend to affect what they believe. For instance, we may only pay attention to evidence that confirms what we want to believe, and ignore evidence that undermines it. Creationists, who deny evolution, for example, might place much more weight on evidence that challenges evolution than on the massive amount of evidence that confirms it.

That our desires can indirectly influence what we believe can be harmless. For instance, we might believe that our family and friends are nicer people than, in fact, they are. But

again, we have the belief by paying attention to the evidence that they are nice, and playing evidence to the contrary. But someone cannot believe that p while also believing that the only reason they have that belief is because they want to have it. If you want to believe that p, you want to have the belief because it is true.

A second connection between the will and belief is that we can voluntarily undertake some action that will lead to us coming to have the belief that p. For instance, I could go to a hypnotist and ask him to cause me to have the belief that p. My belief, though, is not voluntary – I am caused to have it, though in this case by hypnotism rather than evidence. While this is possible, it is very irrational. Presumably, I would only do this because I want to believe that p. But, as just noted, when I want to believe that p, usually what I want is for p to be true. But being hypnotized into believing that p will not make p true.

We might object: surely people form and hold on to all sorts of ethical and religious beliefs without any real attempt to discover the truth. Their beliefs are simply prejudices, and no form of evidence or argument changes their minds. Doesn't this show that beliefs can be voluntary?

We can make two replies. First, can someone really accept that there is no evidence for their belief while still holding on to their belief? This sounds peculiar. More likely, they think there is evidence, even if they don't know what it is. Alternatively, are ethical and religious points of view really beliefs, rather than 'beliefs-in', 'commitments', or 'faith'? These are all distinct attitudes, which we sometimes confusingly call 'belief'. For example, some philosophers have argued that ethical 'beliefs' are not beliefs at all, but expressions of commitment, because there is no moral truth. If these attitudes are not belief, then they are not counter-examples to the claim that beliefs cannot be voluntary.