

Beliefs and Believers

(draft)

In contemporary philosophy, the problem of belief appears in two related forms. First, there is the problem of the content of beliefs — whether they are narrow or broad. Second, there is Frege's substitution problem: why does a substitution of coreferential terms in a belief context fail to preserve truth-value? The two problems are related in that a solution to the second problem depends on what we take to be the content of beliefs. For example, if the content of beliefs are broad, then coreferential names indeed can be substituted (Salmon 1986, Bilgrami 1992). But then one wonders whether the notion of broad content meshes with the concept of belief at all (Fodor 1987). There is a growing worry that a simultaneous solution to these problems is perhaps not available (Schiffer 1989).

In this paper, I am not directly concerned with either of these problems. But notice that the *impasse* sketched above seems to arise with what is taken to be our ordinary concept of belief. Is that a valid concept? If it is not, then may be a great deal of philosophical energy since Frege has been spent on wrong grounds, for the stultifying nature of the impasse darkly suggests that we might have been wrong about what the ordinary concept in fact is. Maybe the problems disappear once we locate the right ordinary concept of belief.

Section I

Folk psychology develops the idea that the human mind is basically a repository of beliefs — lots of them — such that regularity in human action is explained via the regularity of beliefs that guide these actions. We explain why Mary came running out of the building by ascribing to Mary the belief that the building is on fire. We ascribe many other beliefs to Mary to show that when these beliefs interact with Mary's belief that the building is on fire, and with Mary's basic desire to be safe, Mary's action of running out of the building follows. Depending on the initial stimulus, some of the beliefs that interact with Mary's belief that the building is on fire and with Mary's basic desire, may be listed as follows: that smoke is coming out of the window, that where there is smoke there is fire, that it is unsafe to continue to stay in the building, that it is

safe to run out of the building. These, among others, will ensure that Mary gets up from her seat. Many more beliefs are needed to take Mary from her seat to the final exit. These will include, *inter alia*: that there is an exit, that she has an access to the exit, that it wasn't a case of false alarm, that the exit is to the front of the building, that the passage that leads to the front turns right at the next corner, and so on.

All of this and much else besides must have acted in an inferential chain to cause Mary to run out of the building. If the stimulus varies – e.g., if someone shouted “fire”, or if the alarm clock sets off – then a somewhat longer story is needed. If Mary is to act on a linguistic signal such as “fire”, then we need to ascribe various linguistic beliefs including beliefs regarding Gricean implicatures. Once these longer stories reach the point where Mary is picking up her bag, they rejoin the earlier story. In this way, an account of Mary's actions is given which generalizes over varying circumstances, capturing thus the regularity of Mary's beliefs.

One thing that follows immediately is that Mary's actions, in those fateful moments, couldn't have been the result of conscious, deliberate planning. She didn't have the time either to judge her beliefs or to count them to see if she had enough of them or to arrange them in a hierarchy to get the more particular ones from the more general. In fact Mary didn't have the time to ponder *which* beliefs she had, not to speak of judging them, counting them or arranging them. Since things happened so fast, her beliefs and the inferences reached from them must have been, for all that we know, *unconscious*.

(COMPUTATIONAL STORY)

Beliefs, then, as folk psychology views them, are denizens of the dark, to use a phrase popularized by Quine. In this, folk psychology has at least two illustrious ancestors. Freud used the notion of *hidden* beliefs to explain various cases of psychosis – cases in which patients were unaware of the beliefs they held until Freud intervened. Also, the Socratic method essentially consists in digging up deeply buried truths that reside inside people. Socrates himself was said to have proposed nothing: he only helped in getting some of the denizens out of the cave. With such ancestry, it is no wonder that the notion of unconscious beliefs typing mental states has gained wide currency.

Postulations of Mary's psychological states via our ascriptions of beliefs to her supplies a rather useful answer to the issue of how these psychological states are to be described. Since according to the view just sketched, an attribution of a particular belief entails that the attributee is in a psychological state, it is quite natural to think of these psychological states as individuated just as the particular attributions are individuated. So when I say "Mary believes that the building is on fire", her psychological state must be individuated just as the relevant token of the sentence "the building is on fire" is individuated. A token of "the building is on fire" is individuated in terms of its form and content, viz., the form and the content of the English sentence "the building is on fire" in the given occasion of its use. So if we knew how to capture the form and the content of this English sentence – its syntax and its semantics --, then we know how to capture the form and the content of the relevant psychological state. So doing enough philosophy of language with some caveats about causal connections, token-identities etc., amounts to doing enough philosophy of mind. Wasn't that a breakthrough?

Sentences, however, belong to particular languages, English for example. So if Mary believes that the building is on fire and Shyamali believes that BARITHE AGOON LEGECHE, then Mary and Kavita must be in different psychological states. Since this plainly clashes with our ordinary notions of belief, there must be a neutral language of thought available to both Mary and Shyamali to whose representations the cited sentences of English and Bengali have a unique translation.

Recall once again the things that need to converge for this story to go through: the attributer comes up with a sentence, the sentence attributes to the attributee a certain belief contained in the embedded clause, and the attribution of the belief via the embedded clause signals that the attributee is in a certain psychological state identified by the content of the embedded clause. The language of thought hypothesis requires and ensures that things do converge this way. So what causes Mary to run out of the building is some sentence in the language of thought, among other things, where that sentence itself is derived, fast and loose, from a very large number of other sentences in the language of thought.

As Jerry Fodor has argued over the years (1975, 1981, 1990, 1994, 1998), the language of thought hypothesis is forced on us because we are attracted to two

theoretical ideas: the theory of mental representations and the theory of computation following Turing. The hypothesis thus is a theory-driven idea and, is, therefore, no part of our *ordinary* concept of belief. So the hypothesis needs to be judged on independent grounds, i.e., grounds other than our belief-ascribing sentences. There is a growing body of literature which suggests that the hypothesis doesn't work because things just don't converge in the desired ways. Accounts of regularities of beliefs fail to predict regularities of actions; regularities of actions can not always be traced back to regularities of beliefs. We ascribe differing beliefs where folk psychology makes no distinctions; we generalize, i.e., ascribe identical beliefs where folk psychology requires distinctions. These objections by now seem overwhelming following the discussion that took place after Stephen Stich's work. One could get a feel of the general problem as follows.

My ascription of a belief to Mary, say, that the building is on fire, can go through only if, were I to be in Mary's shoes, I would come to have that belief. In other words, first I counterfactually ascribe a belief to myself in saying that the building is on fire. Then I factually ascribe this very-same belief to Mary; that is, given the correct circumstances as I view them, Mary and I would exchange our shoes; that is, Mary and I are believers of the *same type* via our being same-sayers in the language of thought. Given the grip of folk psychology on contemporary philosophy, it is no wonder that Donald Davidson got there too.

But suppose our shoes don't fit. Suppose Mary belongs to a very different believer-type. Then, of course, my ascriptions will not go through. The result is that, for various categories of weird believers – animals, children, people with acute psychosis, people with severe brain-damages, aliens, foreigners, authors of the past, postmodernists etc. – either we say, dogmatically, that my ascriptions *make* them have those beliefs simply because I could entertain them, or, giving an account of the psychological make-up of these folks falls outside the scope of science.

What options are now available for the general concept of belief? One answer that is gaining growing popularity is that we should give up on beliefs and focus directly on the properties of psychological states themselves. In other words, the suggestion is to de-link the theory from philosophy of language and view psychological states as

properties of brain-states. So, we keep to the idea that psychological states are typically unconscious and mechanical without routing this idea through beliefs. The concept of belief is just not required.

We may be inclined to accept this form of explanation insofar as Mary's action of running out of the building on being singed by the fire is concerned. We may not be so inclined insofar as Mary calmly walks out of the building a few minutes before the actual fire starts, as Mary herself is a party to the conspiracy. We await a neural story that describes conspiratorial brain states.

Personally, I am not particularly worried that neither folk psychology nor hard cognitive science gives an account of people's beliefs and actions with sufficient generality. My worry lies elsewhere.

Recall that folk psychology supposedly generalizes over our ordinary concept of belief. So if the folk psychological notion of belief is to be set aside as descriptively useless, so must be case with our ordinary concept of belief. I wouldn't be worrying if the folk psychological notion of belief was merely a technical notion and *that* is found to be useless. We do give up scientific terms without residue and regret – "ether", for example. But here we are asked to give up the baby of ordinary belief itself.

This is somewhat hard to swallow. I do continue to say, on occasion, that Mary believes that *p*, and, in saying that, I do continue to ascribe beliefs to Mary. I do not see how I can disengage myself from such activity even if folk psychology has turned out to be false. Am I then persisting blindly under the influence of a false theory? It is quite possible that the folk psychological concept of belief, given its illustrious ancestry, surrounds my ordinary concept as well in part; so this part needs to be given up as folk psychology is given up. Yet, since folk psychology contains certain purely theory-driven ideas such as the notion of hidden beliefs, the language of thought hypothesis etc., it is unlikely that our ordinary concept of belief, which I continue to find profitable to use, is *entirely* infected with the requirements of folk psychology.

However, this last speculation will not be of much theoretical value unless I am able to argue that not only is folk psychology wrong as above, it is also wrong at least in part about the concept of belief I use when I ascribe beliefs to Mary. In other words, I need

to argue that, in the garb of extending the ordinary concept of belief, folk psychology is, in fact, using a technical concept of its own.

Recall for the last time that folk psychology needs two ideas crucially among other things: it needs that in ascribing the belief that *p*, I am stating that the subject is in the psychological state that *p*; further, it needs that both myself and Mary are believers of the same type. The trouble, as we saw, is that an account which is restricted to believers of the same type isn't much of a general account of the psychological states of individuals whose actions are supposed to be captured by the theory. Could it be that our ordinary concept of belief is such that it *is* supposed to be used by and among believers of the same type, and that it is *not* intended to be used to describe psychological states at all? Is this where folk psychology, and much of the tradition, puts words of its own in the ordinary mouth?

It goes without saying that when I ascribe the belief that *p* to Mary, Mary must be in some psychological state or other. But this fact about Mary's mental life may have nothing to do with the content of my ascription. Our ordinary concept of belief, in that case, will not serve the purposes of the psychologist or the "functionalist" philosopher of mind.

SECTION II

I wish to examine whether the preceding conclusion can be reached by looking closely at some of the relevant words, especially the word "believer". The task here is a modest one. We already have some idea of the concept we are seeking, as detailed above. To that extent, if only to dissociate ourselves from folk psychology, we are led to another folk theory of beliefs, this time devoid of psychological content. If this theory is to get off the ground, there must be some cases of our actual usage of related terms in which the theory is displayed. If we can find those cases, then by examining the contours of such cases in detail, we might have a better hold on the folk theory of ascription I am anxious to promote.

The case I wish to look at in some detail concerns some typical usages of the word "believer", or its opposite, "non-believer". The study of beliefs leads to the believers as follows. In saying "S believes that *p*", I am ascribing a certain link between *S* and *p* in

that S is thought to be a p-believer. So in focussing on the term “believer”, I am not going out of the gambit of terms at issue. Similarly, if S does not believe that p, i.e., if S *disbelieves* that p, then S is a p-non-believer.

If it is already beginning to sound bad, so much the better. There is a fairly standard usage of “believer” or of “non-believer” in which the notion of a **p**-believer is not explicitly invoked. We say simply that Gandhi was a believer, or that Bertrand Russell was a non-believer, period, without explicitly mentioning the particular belief that Gandhi held, or the one that Russell did not hold. Given folk psychology, in which Gandhi’s or Russell’s mental lives are completely described by detailing their beliefs (and their connections to stimulus and behavior), it is hard to make literal sense of such ascriptions. Since Gandhi and Russell are rational agents, the ascription that Gandhi was a believer amounts to a truism, and the ascription that Russell was a non-believer amounts to a contradiction, strictly speaking. It just couldn’t be the case that, given the set of all beliefs, Russell didn’t believe any of them.

The ascriptions then are not to be taken in their literal senses. The ascriptions are to be taken to mean that while Gandhi believed in God (or Ram Rajya, or whatever), Russell didn’t. Especially for Russell, the ascription is to be understood in the context of a particular belief such as that God exists, and Russell was said to have denied *that* and only that. No sweeping denial of Russell’s rationality was ever intended.

Before we look at the case with more details, notice that I am using the locutions “believes in” and “believes that” more or less interchangeably. It is quite possible that big conceptual issues lie in distinguishing between the locutions. However, it is likely that in some cases at least the contents of the two locutions converge. So when I say that Gandhi believed in Ram-Rajya, I mean to say that Gandhi believed that Ram-Rajya was both desirable and attainable. Let us pretend that we keep only to such convergent cases.

Returning to Russell’s disbelief, the issue is this: how could we, on simply hearing that Russell was a non-believer, jump into the context of a rather specific belief? Why didn’t we ask, before we made sense of the report, “Russell didn’t believe in what?” Suppose someone reported that Russell was a non-knower, non-perceiver or a non-rememberer or some such stuff which, we are taught, comes in a package with non-

believer. In each such case, we are certain to raise our eyebrows and, if we are polite, we will at least ask, “Russell didn’t know what?”, “Didn’t perceive what?” Without further specifications, such reports verge on incredulity and are, therefore, not made. If we want to draw attention to Russell’s ignorance, lack of perception, failure of memory etc., then we are likely to come up with particular reports: Russell didn’t know Urdu, couldn’t smell the difference between jeera and kalaonji etc. How do we get away with a non-particular report about Russell’s beliefs to have a particular effect?

We may get out of this problem by suggesting that the usage of “non-believer” at issue is a quasi-technical usage of the term reflecting the oddities of English language and the culture in which the usage is embedded. Given the trauma of the conflict between the Church and science, occidental culture became obsessed with classifying individuals, especially prominent individuals, in terms of whether or not they believed in God. The persons who did or did not believe in God surely did or did not believe in other things. That goes without saying and is of not much consequence. What is of consequence, for the culture at issue, is whether or not they believe in God. The use of “non-believer” enables us to get the focus because the belief concerned does stand out in the culture in which it is embedded.

The point of worry in this otherwise plausible explanation is the claim that here we are dealing with a quasi-technical usage of an ordinary term. The suggestion, to repeat, is that I have used “believes” in the standard way when I say that Mary believes that the building is on fire. I have used “believer” in a quasi-technical, non-standard way when I say that Russell was a non-believer. But that is exactly what folk psychology would like to claim. Is the explanation then already laden with a theory we are anxious to get rid off? If we are not in the grip of folk psychology, could we make a counter-claim to the effect that *this* use of “believer” is the standard one or that it carries some of the central features of standard usage while the folk psychological notion of beliefs is in fact the non-standard one? The difficulty is that, since the term “believes” or its cognates have been used to describe some aspects of both Russell and Mary, it is not at all clear how we choose between the opposing claims. Whose fact of language is it, anyway?

The trouble here seems to be that the same word “believes” or its cognates have been put to two rather different uses. Then, assuming that a unitary concept has been

displayed in either case, we are unable to determine which concept it is. Still we have made some progress in the sense that we have been able to raise an alternative to the folk psychological concept of belief. That the same word or its cognates have been used in two varying contexts with indeterminate theoretical significance may be an oddity of the English language. So we may have a better theoretical hold on the issue if we can find some uses of words in which the alternative concept as found in the standard usage of “believer” is displayed without invoking the general term “belief” at all. This, as we noted, is not possible in English.

At this point, I find it instructive to look at the *Bengali* words “Astik” and “Nastik”. Notice the “in L”, i.e., the “in Bengali” clause here. I am willing to settle for Hindi as well, but I will definitely not settle for “in Sanskrit” precisely because I do not know Sanskrit, and I do not know what it is for a Sanskrit word to have an ordinary use now. These remarks are needed because it could very well be the case that the Bengali and the Hindi words at issue originated, in some sense lost in history, from the Sanskrit words I am trying to stay away from. Yet it does not at all follow that the *etymology* of the Sanskrit words applies to the Bengali words as well. For example, it is said by the experts I consulted that the Sanskrit word “Astik” is derived from “Asti”. Since I do not know the meaning of the word since I do not know Sanskrit, I couldn’t have been displaying my concept of Asti in my occasional use of “Astik”. As far as I am concerned, the occurrence of “Asti” in “astik” is an orthographic accident, like, as Quine famously pointed out, the “nine” in “canine”. Ignorance does turn out to be a blessing on occasion.

Going straight to the Bengali words then, the Bengali-English dictionary I have states that “Astik” means a believer in God, in the scriptures etc; “Nastik” means someone who does not believe in these things. As a competent speaker of Bengali, I agree with these statements and I also find, to my surprise, that identical statements have been made in the Hindi-English and the Sanskrit-English dictionaries I have.

Now notice the meaning-giving statement for “Astik”. We can think of this statement as a definition of the word in which the concept of belief occurs only in the right-hand side; no concept of belief occurs in the left-hand side, i.e., in the word itself. This contrasts sharply with the definition of “believer” in English which means one who

believes in God. The Bengali word then is immune from the difficulty which plagued the English word. Notice as well that, in the definition, the concept of belief occurs as a part of belief-in-God; an Astik is not just a believer – he is a God-believer or a scripture-believer. In English, in the usage under consideration, he is simply a believer. It need not be the case at all, as we saw, that “believer” always means God-believer. It may well amount to a belief in the scriptures – may be even, not just *any* scriptures, but the Vedas – in a community different from the Judaic-Christian community in which a believer is taken to be a God-believer. The important thing is that, given a community with very definite cultural demands, certain beliefs stand out whose acceptance makes someone a believer. This point is well reflected in the definition of a “Nastik” which says that, apart from being a disbeliever, he is a heretic, an infidel.

Not much mileage about a concept should be drawn from a single usage of a word. It is the concept that is at issue provided we get some usage in which the central features of a concept are displayed. What then are the central features of the concept of belief displayed in the usages examined so far?

First, beliefs are held or rejected in the face of a community. As such, beliefs fall outside the scope of two basic pillars of a science of the mind, viz., individual psychology and methodological solipsism. Beliefs seek to justify or reject certain general, community-wide practices held significant by the community.

Second, in order for someone to be a believer or a disbeliever, one must be taken to *understand* the belief as ascribed to him, and the community already acknowledges that he so understands. Only then the issue of whether someone is a believer or not arises. So one would not ascribe a belief or a disbelief to a dog or a child. A believer and a disbeliever agree on understanding, but they disagree on acceptance. A belief then is an item of potential *dispute* between persons of largely similar mental make-ups. That is why we are so disturbed in the presence of a disbeliever – so near, yet so far.

Thirdly, ascriptions of beliefs, i.e., saying that someone is a believer, has nothing to do with the psychological states of the attributee. Given a taxonomy of beliefs frequently debated in a community, we may withhold an ascription of any of them to some creatures, without claiming that the creature, e.g., a child, is empty of mind. Further, it hardly makes any sense to *blame* someone, for example, by calling him an

“infidel”, if the problem with that person is that he lacks a psychological state. If anything, he deserves proper treatment, not blame. That is why we are so aghast with the belief that people can be treated out of their disbelief.

Let us now see what light does this concept of belief, just outlined, throw on an individual’s repertoire of beliefs. For example, I wonder what I genuinely believe. Concerning the discipline of philosophy, for instance, I believe that philosophy need not be taught at the undergraduate level, and that Indian philosophy should occupy only a minor but significant place in any graduate programme; further, that every student of philosophy must thoroughly master either contemporary linguistics or quantum physics, preferably both. These are some of my curricular beliefs. I entertain them with the full knowledge that most people who have largely similar mental make-ups, viz., other philosophers in India, disagree with my beliefs. So I am prepared to argue for them, find evidence to support my arguments, and I feel annoyed when contrary beliefs are simply implemented without arguments.

But sometimes I am also uncertain about these very beliefs. Their very lack of acceptance in my community keeps me on my toes. Thus, I am not prepared to act fully on them without further acceptance in my community in the future. Let us say I have a contemplative attitude towards the subject matter to indicate the sum total of my attitudes towards philosophy curriculum. Similarly when I ascribe beliefs to others, I hold that person to have a contemplative attitude towards a specific subject-matter, i.e., we expect the ascriber to hold a belief that is not generally shared by his community, that he is prepared to defend it though he himself is open to repudiation. Notice that we typically ascribe beliefs to someone when we ourselves do not hold them. I, say X, typically ascribe a belief to Y to report to Z. The point of the report usually is that Y believes differently from us, X and Z; “do you know that he believes that Subhas Bose is alive?”

The trouble is, I simply cannot locate any contemplative attitude, in the sense just sketched, towards the toothpaste I use. I know where it is, I know whether enough is left for the coming week, I know the price, the taste, and so on. That is, thought of toothpastes occupy a fairly large sector of my psychological space, and I act on them on a daily basis. These actions are not routed through a dispute, a debate with the heretic

who believes otherwise. Why stop at toothpastes? I know that Kant wrote the *Critique*, that Plato was a Greek philosopher, that Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* contains five basic propositions, that ice is cold, and fresh grass is green. I know a lot – and so does Mary whose rushing out of the room started all this. Let us say, Mary and I have *adoptive* attitudes to these things. We may be mistaken in some cases, as you saw; we will acknowledge our mistakes and change our adoptions.

Various questions of detail and terminology arise at this point. For example, one may question my free use of the concept of knowledge in my description of adoptive attitudes. Now, of course, the point of the distinction between adoption and contemplation collapses if the concept of knowledge itself contains the concept of belief. So let us give up the concept of knowledge, and settle for *cognition*. Thus I cognize various facts about my toothpaste, my language, geometry and geography. Still, we may ask various questions of detail about how to distinguish between cognition and beliefs on a case by case basis. Can I, for example, have a contemplative attitude towards my toothpaste?

The best I can do here is to sidestep the query. The topic for this essay is not cognition but belief. It seems to me pointless to ask, with respect to this entertainment or that, whether a given entertainment is an item of cognition or of belief such that all possible entertainments neatly subdivide into two clean blocks, in advance so to speak. All that we need right now is a *synchronic* distinction between beliefs and cognition for each individual. Beliefs, under the current conception, are going to be rare in any case: we really cannot afford to withhold judgement and action subject to further examination and willingly seek opposition except for a small number of items at a time.

What seems to be interesting, however, is that when we get armed with the current conception of beliefs, two consequences follow. First, it is now possible to be rather suspicious of the very notion of *hidden beliefs*. These are the denizens of the dark, we saw, which lie deeply buried in the person's unconscious without the person being aware of them, although he acts according to them. We saw that both Socrates and the psychoanalyst, with differing motivations, require hidden beliefs. While Socrates digs them up to show his patient the essential grandeur of the patient's thoughts, the psychoanalyst digs them up to persuade the patient to give them up.

There is something essentially sinister about this line if we look at the actual things supposedly dug up. The line of treatment is not intended to help the patient remember where he kept his toothpaste or how he can solve a given numerical problem. The intention is to dig up “big” beliefs such as the nature of virtue, the true meaning of life or anxieties regarding impending catastrophe. We have one way of saying now that beliefs are held with a contemplative attitude such that the believer is aware of them, is prepared to defend them and that he entertains the possibility of a disbeliever. Beliefs are thus out in the open for everyone to see. This openness to community examination *is* what makes them beliefs.

The second consequence I wish to look at has to do with whether radical skepticism is possible. It has often been argued that radical skepticism cannot be coherent in an interesting way since the septic must share a large set of beliefs even to formulate and announce his skeptical position. The set of beliefs he shares with the non-skeptic defeats the very motivation of being a skeptic who does not want to believe anything. So the skeptic can at best be a friendly critic challenging this belief or that. Such critics abound in any case.

But given the notion that beliefs are few and open, and given the idea that any such belief is always held with a disbeliever in view, we can now entertain the idea of disbelieving everything. Beliefs, in this view, require a certain suspension of judgement in any case. What the skeptic does is to go all the way and suspend every judgement. He actualizes the possible disbeliever in every case; we will always find him when we are seeking opposition in our contemplative attitude. This he does with all his cognitive abilities in tact, while disengaging himself from the historical burden of beliefs that has been passed on to him.

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