

A Short Note on the Logic of (Christian) Belief

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What does it mean to believe that such and so is the case? In saying, “I believe that P ,” what am I expressing? My aim is ultimately to explain what is involved in expressing one’s religious belief, particularly a Christian one—I believe in God (or that God exists or that God is such and so). For brevity, I will neglect citing sources. But those trained in philosophy will be able to recognize what influences I had in formulating my theory of (Christian) belief.

Putatively, a typical expression of belief has the following grammatical structure:

<I>subject [<believe>transitive verb <(that) P >object]predicate.

The expression of a belief is likewise a complete statement (subject + predicate). Whether this statement expresses a proposition is debatable. Is the statement that I believe (that) P something that can be true or false in respect to some fact of a matter? That is, does the predicate in this statement play a role of a truth-function for the subject as an argument? Or, does this linguistic piece rather function as a Wittgensteinian report akin to that of pain? Is this statement as a proposition (or assertion) self-justifying? Or, as Sellars would put it, does this piece belong to the language-game in which one posits psychological states (thoughts, feelings, etc.) to explain one’s outward behaviors? It seems that belief expressions have both characteristics. One could not be *wrong* about one’s report of pain, but one could be *wrong* about one’s report of belief. This is evident from our ordinary conversation in which we often deny the truth of one’s self-report of belief. (E.g., “You don’t really believe *that!*”) Yet, at the same time, it seems that self-report has the final word in settling whether one has a specific belief or not.

I will assume that there is a sufficient sense to the subject indexical term “I” as expressing *self-identity*. As a transitive verb, “believe” expresses something that the subject does or is in position in regard to the object. As such, “believe” or *belief* is a kind of relation (between subject and object). The object here is a subordinate clause, and this clause expresses a proposition, i.e., an assertion about matters of fact, which has a truth-value. In other words, belief is a relation between the subject and an assertion.

Another digression, here is a version of the Tarskian T-schema:

“ P (of L)” is true iff P .

As well known, there are primarily two readings of this schema: correspondence and disquotational theory. I will be neutral as to which reading is the right one. In fact, it will turn out that the *meaning* of belief is compatible with either reading.

Now, what kind of relation is belief? Here, we must proceed rather intuitively, for the analysis should make the least number of assumption possible. (We already made a few above. So, we

should be very frugal from now on.) The hope is that the final product of this analysis would turn out to be coherent enough to generate an explanatorily powerful framework.

At the onset, belief is a psychological state, or attitude. So, a belief is a specific state one is in (or an attitude one has) in regard to an assertion. In the language of phenomenology, a belief has intentionality, or aboutness. The object of this intentional state or attitude is (the content of) an assertion. Thus, traditionally, belief is identified as a form of propositional attitude (i.e., an attitude that is about a proposition). If so, what distinguishes belief from other propositional attitudes such as desire? What kind of aboutness is belief such that it is taken to be different from conative aboutness?

As Searle points out, the direction of fit of belief and of desire are opposite. Belief has the mind/word-to-world direction of fit whereas desire has the world-to-mind/word. Thus, the condition of satisfaction is different for each state. Whereas a desire is *satisfied* when and only when the world changes to match the (propositional) content of the desire, a belief is *satisfied* when and only when the (propositional) content of the belief (not the world) changes to match the world. This is why that which concerns desire is practical, for the satisfaction of a desire depends on taking actions to change the features of the world. On the other hand, that which concerns belief is theoretical: the *satisfaction* (or *success*) of a belief depends on reflecting on and changing one's belief in respect to the features of the world.

Thus, in having a belief, one is taking a semantical stance, i.e., one is taking a stance in which he is treating the content of his psychological state as that which (a) is capable of being true or false and (b) *ought* to match the world (in respect to which the belief is true).

The direction of fit explanation has a strong correspondence flavor. However, one could come up with a deflationary explanation of the propositional attitude that belief is. In having a *desire* attitude towards a proposition, one is taking the proposition to be inert—in respect to which the assertibility conditions should be constructed as to allow the assertion of that proposition. In contrast, in having a *belief* attitude, one is taking the proposition to be *responsive* to the assertibility conditions—if the conditions do not allow the assertion of that proposition, the subject is to abandon it and come up with a different proposition. Whether one adopts the correspondence theory or the disquotational theory, the difference is at the ontological level, not at the linguistic level in which belief has a logical function.

In taking a doxastic stance, one is immediately taking a semantical stance. This is why it is difficult, if not impossible, to disengage belief from other semantical attitudes such as judgment. And, to the extent that the function of these semantical attitudes is to track truth (whichever reading one has of the notion of truth), belief is inseparable from the epistemic language game of knowledge-seeking. There is a significant difference between belief and knowledge. A belief could still be true without becoming knowledge. That is, one could (accidentally) have a true belief without being conscious (or without being in the position to be attributed with the qualification) that the belief is true. What elevates a (true) belief to knowledge is justification. It is beyond the scope of our current discussion to talk about various theories about justification

The main point is that, in having a belief, one cannot help taking a semantical stance (towards the world or in respect to linguistic activities). In turn, in taking a semantical stance, one cannot help engaging in epistemic activities in which one is to attain a true belief (the means for which are those that enable knowledge claims). That is, if in taking a doxastic stance, one treats the (propositional) content of his psychological state to be something that *should* be true, i.e., match the world or is compatible with the assertibility conditions, the subject must aim to attain a true belief. Part of what is involved in *aiming* to attain a true belief is assurance, which is an effect of knowledge. If so, by taking a doxastic stance, one logs into the language game of episteme.

Now, one of the reasons why the disquotational theory (as well as its epistemological counterpart, coherentism) was devised was because the epistemological counterpart of the correspondence reading of truth, viz., foundationalism, is ever vulnerable to skepticism. The foundationalist counterpart of the correspondence theory of truth requires infallibility as one of the conditions for a belief to be qualified as knowledge—whereas infallibility is often accounted in terms of some self-justifying stratum of epistemic items. However, the problem of induction persists as to show that infallibility is in principle unachievable. The problem of induction is *not* a problem to be solved within the paradigm of the correspondence theory. It is a *Gödelian* part that is congenital to (and is a logical component of) such an alethic paradigm.

Notice that “*P*” is always formulated within a specific language system, *L*. Thus, the meaning of a proposition is relative to the linguistic framework that it belongs to as an inferential piece. If one adopts the correspondence theory, there is in principle no way for the person to infallibly claim that “*P*” is true because one cannot observe whether a specific linguistic framework matches reality without observing it by adopting another language (viz., meta-language), which itself can only be observed from another linguistic perspective, and so on. As Davidson puts it, one cannot get out of his own skin to see reality as it is (whatever “seeing reality *as it is*” may mean). “Thing-in-itself” or in Kantian term *noumenon* only functions as an ideal or regulative notion. By definition, noumenon is something one *cannot* consciously experience. Thus, within the correspondence theory, *belief* is a commitment to one’s adoption of a specific linguistic framework, and the only reason that can account for this commitment is pragmatism. (That is, in *believing* that *P*, one is acting as if “*P*” is true—or the world is such that it corresponds with or conforms to the linguistic framework in which “*P*” is the correct move for the present—because that is the most practical, although fallible, thing to do for now.)

The state is not too different if we adopt the disquotational theory in lieu of the correspondence reading. In believing that *P*, one is adopting a specific set of linguistic rules that lay out certain assertibility conditions—according to which one’s belief (assertion) is to be judged. But how does one know that the specific set of linguistic rules is the right one to adopt? One cannot decide this matter without appealing to another (meta-)set of rules *ad infinitum*. To avoid the infinite regress, one must at some point just appeal to some pragmatic reasons for settling with the present set of linguistic rules. At some point, as Wittgenstein points out, we just *do*.

Now, we have enough apparatus to analyze religious beliefs. They are propositional attitudes one takes towards certain assertions. These attitudes are doxastic. Naturally, they are subject to the linguistic rules of episteme operating within a certain alethic paradigm.

Within the correspondence theory, religious beliefs are the commitments one has towards the conceptual or linguistic framework—within which the contents of the beliefs are meaningful—for pragmatic reasons. Just as I believe that there is a tree in front of me that I should avoid by walking around, I *believe* that there is God to whom I should pray in a certain way. Nothing infallibly assures to me that my belief in the presence of the tree is true. (That is, nothing assures to me that the conceptual scheme of “tree” and “hard object” match reality.) But that belief is abductively the best inferential information I possess. So I act as if reality matches my belief all the while I have no full assurance that this is so. The logic of religious beliefs is the same.

Within the disquotational theory, religious beliefs are the linguistic moves I make in respect to a certain set of linguistic rules. Just as I speak out “two” in response to the sound “one-plus-one-equals-to” for no other reason than that *that* is the right move to make within this language game, I speak a thread of phonetic units such as “Lord, save us from the evil” under certain circumstances (such as when I am sitting on a long wooden chair in a building decorated with crosses and stained glasses). Why do I uphold this set of linguistic rules rather than another? The reason is purely pragmatic, and as such I just *do*. Beliefs cannot be (conclusively) justified—in the sense that (a) matters of facts are unpredictable within a linguistic framework or (b) the employed framework itself is not subject to the grammar of justification. Once we adopt a linguistic framework and play its justification game, we are to constantly engage in reflections on our beliefs in resistance to skepticism without *ever coming to a conclusion* about the truth of our beliefs. For knowledge sets an ideal or regulative end (limit), not a factual or concrete one.