

## Belief and believing

Benjamin, Geoffrey

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# Belief and Believing

Geoffrey Benjamin

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## 0. Talking points to start with

- My experience in giving an invited lecture at a colleague's 'Sociological Methods' class years ago, when I asserted that people's 'values' could not be studied by survey techniques, because whatever the respondents explicitly *said* could not actually be their values.
  - I was not invited back the next year.
- 'Religion would be fine if it would only do away with all the rituals.' Mr S. J. Rajaratnam (or words to that effect), while opening a Hindu temple in the 1970s.

## 1. No system of thought can criticise its own foundations

- The instant you change your pattern of thought you necessarily shift to a new set of unspoken assumptions. It is the unspoken assumptions at any moment that constitute what you 'believe'.
- Kurt Goedel, a leading 20th century mathematician, is said to have shown that no mathematical system can prove its own axioms – which must therefore be accepted as if they were a matter of faith.
- Michael Polanyi said something essentially similar. Every time we *do* anything: we cannot simultaneously focus articulatedly on the subjective source of our actions while we're actually performing those actions. We can only do so when not performing the action.
- In other words, for everything we do, while we're doing it there is always an ineffable framework of understanding from which we pour ourselves into our actions. These are the peripheral, out-of-focus notions *from which* we focus on our articulated, talkable-about concepts.
- I propose that this is where true belief lies, and not in the overt statements that are normally paraded as one's 'beliefs'.
- Moreover, we need to distinguish (on the one hand) between such explicit beliefs, as talked about after or before the event, and (on the other hand) our state of mind when we are actually involved in the event.
- In this sense, we should be talking, not about 'belief' or 'beliefs', but about *believing*, as an action we find ourselves engaged in. (Note the dialectic: we are simultaneously the doer and the undergoer of our actions.) Our storable 'beliefs' are statements that we produce later, in the attempt to

rationalise or justify *to others* the experiences we underwent when we were embedded in those actions.

## 2. Let me elaborate on this with reference to two key areas: ‘art’ and religion

- ‘Art’ (a blanket term I am not happy with) likewise involves the wilful *pouring of oneself* into the art object or performance. Familiar examples of this include:
  - Attending a theatrical or cinematic performance, and flip-flopping between pouring ourselves into it and standing back critically from it.
    - There is good evidence that the cortical hemispheric lateralisation of the human brain provides the neurological basis for this ability.
  - Musicians falling *bodily* into their performance, frequently joined by a sympathetically swaying or foot-tapping audience.
  - Some Singaporeans watching the supernaturalist or sleight-of-hand ‘magic’ programmes that now appear too frequently on TV, are reported to actively *will* themselves into believing that the magic is ‘real’, even though they must also know that what they see is no more than computer-generated or done by trickery (and therefore natural, not supernatural).
- **Religion**, rather than being thought of as a set of cognitive ‘beliefs’, should primarily be seen as referring to certain kinds of communicative *action*, in which non-empirical beings are communicated-with directly in the second person (‘thou...’), in a symbolically condensed mode.
- In performing these rituals, people generate in themselves the directly-felt experience of having poured out the contents of their subjectivity, while retaining its highly condensed symbolic character.
- Thus, religious *experience* is empirical, even if the addressee is non-empirical. (Prayer, food-offerings, sacrifice, trance, dance, singing, all fit in here, and all are highly *ritualised*, so as to heighten the sense of *undergoing* an experience.)
  - Explanations for these performances vary, but they are not necessarily relevant to the present discussion. (I happen to favour the view that emphasises the ‘existential loneliness of the human subject’ as the root source of such religious action.)
- In the cases of both religion and art, so long as the situation remains in the peripheral, out-of-focus condensed, symbolic mode, *the action itself* puts the performer into a complete state of belief. (‘Appreciation’ too is a performance.)

- But once the performer is pushed into a situation of having to focus conceptually on those experiences, the circumstances change. By bringing into focus what was necessarily kept out of focus while undergoing the experience, that experience is now subject to verbal articulation and rationalisation, and consequently reappears expressed as the performer's 'beliefs'.
  - A notorious example from the domain of religion concerns the differences between Catholic and Protestant ways of talking about the wine and bread in the ritual of Holy Communion.
  - For Catholics, the bread and wine 'literally' *transubstantiate* into the flesh and blood of Christ. For Protestants, the bread and wine explicitly memorialise (i.e. *symbolise*) Christ. Yet, it is the Catholics who have retained the imagery's symbolic power (by refusing to articulate it), while the Protestants have weakened it (by explicitly articulating it as a case of 'symbolism').
  - Consequently, the Communion rite is both more frequent and more central to Catholic liturgy, while it is rarer and less central to Protestant liturgy. The Catholic approach makes it easier for the communicants to pour themselves freely into the imagery, while the Protestant approach makes it harder. This is no accident: the Protestant tradition of salvation by faith alone makes it necessary for that faith to be a *hard-won* victory over disbelief.

### 3. Articulated statements of one's 'beliefs' are not the norm

- People are usually perfectly content to leave their religious or artistic experiences untalked-about. Indeed, they will usually *resist* talking about them in any manner that seeks to analyse it, fearing (correctly?) that any such articulation will destroy the symbolical wholeness that they wish to enjoy.
  - Teachers of music or literature regularly meet with students who resist analysing the works because they fear it will kill their artistic enjoyment.
- It is only when some interlocutor, for whatever reason, forces the performer to talk about those experiences, that the performer will then try to articulate and rationalise what he or she underwent. The interlocutor in question may range from a pesky friend, to a visiting ethnographer or fellow religionists, all the way to a tribunal concerned with generating public assent to an established religious or aesthetic dogma.
- Historically, Protestantism, and certain developments associated with the increasingly *rationalised* character of modern life have tended to give greater authenticity to explicit (and preferably printed) statements of 'belief'. However, this takes us into the realm of *ideology*, and correspondingly further away from real belief.

- How then are we to relate people's statements of belief to their actual belief?
  - This question is especially important in relation to the recent spate of books critical of religion, such as Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. While I have sympathy for their critique of religious dogmas, I feel that their stance falters in taking intellectualising rationalisations ('beliefs'), instead of behaviourally generated feelings ('believing'), as the core of religion.

**4. In all such cases, people's stated 'beliefs' will not be a true representation of their belief as they experience it**

- At best, the words – the stated or assented-to 'beliefs' – can do no more than *allude* to those experiences. Consequently, every time we *say* what it is that we ostensibly believe, we do so from a position outside of our actual state of *believing*.
- This does little harm if our interlocutor gets the point, by building up in his or her own mind a parallel subjective imagery of whatever it is we are alluding to. (C. S. Lewis's term for this manner of understanding metaphor is 'magistral'.)
- But if the interlocutor gets stuck, and fails to move beyond the mere words we utter, and takes those words literally (i.e. referentially), then those stated 'beliefs' will assuredly not have been a reliable guide to our actual beliefs. (This mode of understanding is termed 'pupillary' by C. S. Lewis.)

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