Rationality and Religious Belief

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What Is It to Believe Someone?

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There were three men, A, B and C, talking in a certain village. A said "If that tree falls down, it'll block the road for a long time." "That's not so if there's a tree-clearing machine working," said B. C remarked "There *will* be one, if the tree doesn't fall down." The famous sophist Euthydemus, a stranger in the place, was listening. He immediately said "I believe you all. So I infer that the tree will fall and the road will be blocked."

Question: What's wrong with Euthydemus?

Believing someone is not merely a neglected topic in philosophical discussion; it seems to be unknown. I have found people experiencing difficulty in grasping it from the title —found them assuming, for example, that I must really mean "believing *in* someone." How do I mean, believing someone? If you told me you had eaten sausages for breakfast, I would believe you. The thing itself is extremely familiar. Does it deserve the attention of a philosophic enquirer? I hope to show that it does. It is of great importance in philosophy and in life, and it is itself problematic enough to need philosophical investigation.

If words always kept their old values, I might have called my subject "Faith." That short term has in the past been used in just this meaning, of believing someone. (Of course that term had also other meanings like *loyalty*, etc.) This old meaning has a vestige in such an expression as "You merely took it on faith"—i.e., you believed someone without further enquiry or consideration. This is only actually *said* as a reproach—but it is often true when it is not blameworthy.

At one time, there was the following way of speaking: faith was distinguished as human and divine. Human faith was believing a mere human being; divine faith was believing God. Occurring in discussion without any qualifying adjective, the word "faith" tended to mean only or mostly 'divine faith'. But its value in this line of descent has quite altered. Nowadays it is used to mean much the same thing as 'religion' or possibly 'religious belief'. Thus belief in God would now generally be called 'faith'—belief in God at all, not belief that God will help one, for example. This is a great pity. It has had a disgusting effect on thought about religion. The astounding idea that there should be such a thing as *believing God* has been lost sight of. "Abraham believed God, and that counted as his justification." Hence he was called "the father of faith." Even in this rather well-known context where the words appear plainly, they are not attended to. The story itself has indeed remained well known even to ignorant intellectuals mainly because of the thoughts of the fictitious author Johannes de Silentio.* Interesting as these thoughts are, we should notice that the author gets into the territory of his interest by cunningly evading the first point of the story, that *Abraham believed God.* He knows it is there, but he does not confront it. This has had its effect; for in matters of intellectual fashion we tend to be like sheep. And so, even though the words appear plainly, they are not, it seems, reflected on. Rather, we are deluged with rubbish about 'believing in' as opposed to 'believing that'. Like the chorus of animals in Orwell, there is a *claque* chanting "believing in goo-ood, believing that ba-ad."

Naturally anyone thinking on those lines won't take an interest in belief with a personal object. For that is necessarily always also 'believing that'. It is indeed convenient, and for my purposes all but necessary, to coin the form of expression: believing x that p.

**Fear and Trembling,* to be obtained from booksellers by citing the author S. Kierkegaard.

I am not interested here in any sense of 'believing in ———' except that in which it means 'believing that ——— exists'. This belief, with God as argument, could not be "divine faith." This comes out quite clearly if we use my suggested form: believing *x* that *p*. It would be bizarre to say that one believed N that N existed. Let us consider the most favorable case for this being possible: an unheard-of relation, who writes to you out of the blue to apprise you of his existence and circumstances. Believing that he does indeed exist is accepting the letter as genuinely what it purports to be, and hence that the writer is who he says he is. If you do accept that, you may believe more things—as, that he has a sheep farm in New South Wales—on his say-so. That will be believing him. But the actual existence of the ostensible *he,* whose say-so this is, cannot be believed in the same manner. "He says he exists, and I suppose he knows and doesn't mean to deceive me."

My topic is important not only for theology and for the philosophy of religion. It is also of huge importance for the theory of knowledge. The greater part of our knowledge of reality rests upon the belief that we repose in things we have been taught and told. Hume thought that the idea of cause-and-effect was the bridge enabling us to reach any idea of a world beyond personal experience. He wanted to subsume belief in testimony under belief in causes and effects, or at least to class them together as examples of the same form of belief. We believe in a cause, he thought, because we perceive the effect and cause and effect have been found always to go together. Similarly we believe in the truth of testimony because we perceive the testimony and we have (well! often have) found testimony and truth to go together! The view needs only to be stated to be promptly rejected. It was always absurd, and the mystery is how Hume could ever have entertained it. We must acknowledge testimony as giving us our larger world in no smaller degree, or even in a greater degree, than the relation of cause and effect; and believing it is quite dissimilar in structure from belief in causes and effects. Nor is what testimony gives us entirely a detachable part, like the thick fringe of fat on a chunk of steak. It is more like the flecks and streaks

of fat that are often distributed through good meat; though there are lumps of pure fat as well. Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. You have received letters; how did you ever learn what a letter was and how it came to you? You will take up a book and look in a certain place and see "New York, Dodd Mead and Company, 1910." So do you know from personal observation that that book was published by that company, and then, and in New York? Well, hardly. But you do know it *purports* to have been so. How? Well, you know that is where the publisher's name is always put, and the name of the place where his office belongs. How do you know that? You were taught it. What you were taught was your tool in acquiring the new knowledge. "There was an American edition" you will say, "I've seen it." Think how much reliance on believing what you have been told lies behind being able to say that. It is irrelevant at this level to raise a question about possible forgery; without what we know by testimony, there is no such thing as what a forgery is *pretending* to be.

You may think you know that New York is in North America. What is New York, what is North America? You may say you have been in these places. But how much does that fact contribute to your knowledge? Nothing, in comparison with testimony. How did you know you were there? Even if you inhabit New York and you have simply learned its name as the name of the place you inhabit, there is the question: How extensive a region is this place you are calling "New York"? And what has New York got to do with this bit of a map? Here is a complicated network of received information.

With this as preamble, let us begin an investigation.

'Believe' with personal object cannot be reflexive. Since one can tell oneself things, that may seem odd. We shall see why it is so later.

One might think at first blush that to believe another is simply to believe what he says, or believe that what he says is true. But that is not so, for one may already believe the thing he says. (If you tell me "Napoleon lost the battle of

Waterloo" and I say "I believe you," that is a joke.) Again, what someone's saying a thing may bring about, is that one forms one's *own* judgment that the thing is true. In teaching philosophy we do not hope that our pupils will *believe us,* but rather, that they will *come to see* that what we say is true —if it is.

A witness might be asked "Why did you think the man was dying?" and reply "Because the doctor told me." If asked further what his own judgment was, he may reply "I had no opinion of my own—I just believed the doctor." This brings out how believing x that p involves relying on x for it that p. And so one might think that believing someone is believing something on the strength of his saying that it is so. But even that is not right. For suppose I were convinced that B wished to deceive me, and would tell the opposite of what he believed, but that on the matter in hand B would be believing the opposite of the truth. By calculation on this, then, I believe what B says, on the strength of his saying it—but only in a comical sense can I be said to believe *him.**

Now we have the solution to the puzzle which I set at the head of this essay. Euthydemus' utterance is crazy. But why? If logic is concerned only with what follows from what, his logic is impeccable. The conjunction of A's and B's remarks implies that there will be no machine working; from that and C's contribution we derive that the tree will fall. Why then is Euthydemus' remark so off-key? The answer is, that he cannot be telling the truth when he says "I believe you all." He cannot be believing A at that stage of *that* conversation, unless A still purports to believe what he said. But A does not purport so to believe if he gives no sign, and if what B said is not merely true, but also as pertinent as it must be if what C said is true. The assumption that A privately sticks to what he said, indeed, makes it questionable what he meant, i.e., what thought lay behind A's saying "If the tree falls, the road will be blocked." (It might for example be the conviction that the tree *will* fall and block the road.) Now Euthydemus makes

*This case was described to me in discussion by Mary Geach.

no check on A; he does not wait a moment to see how A reacts to what B and C say. The natural way to understand B's remark is to take it as casting doubt on what A said, and that is what makes Euthydemus' "I believe you all" so insane. For *insane* is just what Euthydemus' remark is and sounds—it is not, for example, like the expression of a somewhat rash opinion, or of excessive credulity.

We also see why one cannot "believe oneself" when one tells oneself something. To believe N one must believe that N himself believes what he is saying.

So far we have considered cases of believing people who are perceived. But often all we have is the communication without the speaker. This is so almost any time we find something out because it is told us in a book.

Of course we may be handed the book by a teacher who tells us something about the author. Then we have a communication with a perceived person communicating; and this is about another communication where the communicator is unperceived. It is interesting that when we are introduced to books as sources of information in our childhood it does not usually go like that. We are taught to consult books like oracles, and the idea of the author is not much brought to our attention at first. In any case, after a time we come to receive communications in books without anyone introducing them to us, and we are apt to believe—as we put it—what the book says about itself; for example that it was printed by a certain printer.

To believe a person is not necessarily to treat him as an original authority. He is *an* original authority on what he himself has done and seen and heard: I say *an* original authority because I only mean that he does himself contribute something, e.g., is in some sort a witness, as opposed to one who only transmits information received. But his account of what he is a witness to is very often, as in the example of there being an American edition, heavily affected or rather all but completely formed by what information *he* had received. I do not mean that if he says "I ate an apple this morning" he is relying on information that that was an apple; if he is in the situation usual among us, he knows what an apple is—i.e., can recognize one. So, though he was "taught the concept" in learning to use

language in everyday life, I do not count that as a case of reliance on information received. But if he says he saw a picture by Leonardo da Vinci, that *is* such a case. He has necessarily depended on some tradition of information. Thus a speaker may be a total original authority for the fact that he gives, as would usually be the case if one of us said he had eaten an apple, or *an* original authority, but not a total one, as if he says he saw some of Leonardo's drawings; or he may not be an original authority at all, as if he says that Leonardo made drawings for a flying machine. In this latter case he almost certainly knows it from having been told, *even* if he's seen the drawings. (It is true that he *might* have "discovered it for himself." If so, then all the same he has relied on information received that these are Leonardo drawings; or that drawings like to these are Leonardo drawings; and he has noticed—*here* he is an original authority —that *these* drawings are drawings of a flying machine; that *Leonardo* made drawings for flying machines will then be inference on his part.)

When he knows it just from being told (as most of us do) then, as I say, he is in no way an original authority. But that does not mean that there is no such thing as believing *him*. Much information is acquired from teachers who are not original authorities, and their pupils who acquire it believe *them*. As opposed to what? As opposed to merely believing that what they say is true. Consider belief reposed in what an interpreter says—I mean the case of believing the sentences he comes out with. If you believe those communications, probably—i.e., in the normal case—you are believing his principal: your reliance on the interpreter is only belief that he has reproduced what his principal said. But *he* is not wrong if what he says is untrue, so long as it does not falsely represent what his principal said. A teacher, on the other hand, even though in no way an original authority, *is* wrong if what he says is untrue, and that hangs together with the fact that his pupils believe (or disbelieve) *him*.

These various considerations draw attention to the further beliefs that are involved in believing someone. First of all, it must be the case that you believe that something is a communication from him (or "from someone") and second, you have to believe that by it he means to be telling you *this*. It is important

for us that natural noises and visual phenomena do not usually sound or look like language, that the question whether someone is speaking or whether this is a bit of written language is hardly ever a difficult one to answer. Someone who saw the markings of leaves as language and strove to decipher them as messages, possibly directed to himself, would strike us as demented. And this brings out another aspect: that the communication is *addressed* to someone, even if only to "whom it may concern," or "the passer-by" or "whoever may happen in the future to read this."

We see, then, that various questions arise: (1) Suppose that someone gets hold of written communications, but they are not addressed to him at all, not even meant to reach him. Can he be said to believe the writer if he believes what they tell the addressee? Only in a reduced or extended sense, though the matter is perhaps not of any importance. (2) Suppose someone gets a written communication which is addressed to him, but the actual writer—I mean the author—is not the ostensible communicator. For example, I write letters to someone as from a pen-friend in Oklahoma. Can the recipient be said to believe (or disbelieve) either the actual author or the ostensible communicator? Surely not the former, except in a very special case and in a roundabout way: I mean, he might himself discern that this comes from the actual writer, myself; and judge that I was trying to tell him something. But otherwise not. This case, where there is intervening judgment and speculation, should alert us to the fact that in the most ordinary cases of believing someone, there is no such mediation. In order to believe NN, one "must believe" that, e.g., this is a communication from NN; but that is not believing in the sense of forming a judgment. If one learned it was not a communication from NN, one would straightway cease to say one was believing NN. Now can the recipient, if he *is* deceived, be said to believe or disbelieve the ostensible communicator? Here we have to consider two distinct cases, according as the ostensible communicator exists or not. If he does not exist, then the decision to speak of 'believing him' or 'disbelieving him' is a decision to give those verbs an "intentional" use, like the verb 'to look for'. "The child had an imaginary companion whom he called Efelin and

who told him all sorts of things—he always believed Efelin." And so one might speak of someone as believing the god (Apollo, say), when he consulted the oracle of the god—without thereby implying that one believed in the existence of that god oneself. All we want is that we should know what is called the god's telling him something.

If on the other hand the ostensible communicator does exist, then a third party may be the less likely to use the verb 'believe' "intentionally," i.e., to say "So, thinking that NN said this, he believed him." But it is an intelligible way of speaking. And NN himself might say "I see, you thought I said this, and you believed me." If the recipient, however, says "Naturally I believed *you*," NN might reject this, saying "Since I didn't say it, you weren't believing me." Thus there is an *oscillation* here in the use of the notion of believing and disbelieving a person.

(3) This comes out in another way where the recipient does not believe that the communication *is* from NN. This, it seems, lets him off the hook of any reproach from NN about his not having believed him, not having done what he asked, and so on. But may not NN have a complaint at the very doubt whether a communication that *is* from him, really is so? It depends on the circumstances; but NN may well regard it as an evasion, if the recipient seizes on the possibility of treating the communication as not coming from him when it did. NN may call it a refusal to believe him.

(4) If X is to believe NN, something must be being taken as a communication, and since X must be believing something "on NN's say-so," there is also involved the belief that *this* communication says such-and-such. This may seem absurd; surely I may simply believe *your words*, and not have a different version of their meaning and say that what you said meant *that*. On the other hand I ought to be able to elaborate upon anything that I believe: to be able to say who is being referred to, or what time, or what sort of action if I am told, and believe, e.g., "John's daughter eloped at Christmas." Nor are one's beliefs tied to particular words; one reproduces the gist of what one has been told in various ways, and so there is, after all, room for the belief that *that* communication told one such-and-such. So when

someone says that he believes such-and-such because he believes NN, we may say "We suspect a misunderstanding. What did you take as NN's telling you that?"

Now, therefore, instead of speaking of the "actual writer"—by whom in the case of the pen-friend I understood the author—we can speak of the immediate producer of what is taken, or makes an internal claim to be taken, as a communication from NN. Such a producer may be a messenger, anyone who "passes on" some communication, or an interpreter (translator) of it. And the recipient can at any rate *fail to believe* (as opposed to disbelieving) NN out of a variety of attitudes. He may not notice the communication at all. He may notice it but not take it as language. He may notice it and take it as language but not make anything of it. He may notice it and take it as language and make something of it but not take it as addressed to himself. Or he may notice it and take it as language and yet, whether or not he takes it as addressed to himself, he may make the wrong thing of it. And he may take it as addressed to himself and not make the wrong thing of it but not believe that it comes from NN.

Only when we have excluded all the cases—or, more probably, simply *assumed* their exclusion—do we come to the situation in which the question simply is: Does X believe NN or not? That is to say, there are many presuppositions to that question as we ordinarily understand it.

It is an insult and it may be an injury not to be believed. At least it is an insult if one is oneself made aware of the refusal, and it may be an injury if others are. Note that here the difference between disbelief and suspension of judgment is of less importance than where the object is only a proposition and not a person. And failure of some of the presuppositions allows scope for reproach. If A has not believed that something was a message from NN when it was, or has given it some false interpretation, NN may (perhaps justly) see in this a readiness on A's part not to believe him. And even if A has falsely believed that something *was* a message from NN and has disbelieved it, while NN cannot say (except in an extended sense) "You disbelieved me!" he may be able to say "You showed yourself very ready to disbelieve me." Or: "You showed yourself ready to credit me with saying something that could not be worthy of belief." For it would be a

megalomaniac who complained of not being believed, when he agrees that the thing that was not believed was, anyway, not true. Falsehood lets one off all hooks. Compare the irritation of a teacher at not being believed. On the whole, such irritation is just—in matters where learners must learn by believing teachers. But if what was not believed should turn out to be false, his complaint collapses.

Let us suppose that all the presuppositions are in. A is then in the situation—a very normal one—where the question arises of believing or doubting (suspending judgment in face of) NN. Unconfused by all the questions that arise because of the presuppositions, we can see that believing someone (in the particular case) is trusting him for the truth—in the particular case.

I will end with a problem. I imagined the case where I believed what someone told me, and got the information from his telling me, but did not believe *him*. This was because I believed he would tell me what he thought was false, but also would be clean wrong in what he thought. Now I *may*—it is not the normal case, but it certainly occurs—have to reflect on whether someone is likely to be right and truthful in a particular case when he is telling me that *p*. If I conclude that he is, I will then believe him that *p*. I think it is clear that this could not be the case for learners, at least elementary learners or young children. But someone might say: "What is the difference between the two cases, culminating in belief that *p* because NN has told one that *p*? In both cases there is calculation; in one, you believe what the man says as a result of a calculation that he is a liar but wrong, and in the other, you calculate that he is truthful and right. (No belief in his *general* truthfulness is involved.) The difference between the two cases is only as stated. When you say that in the first case you do not believe *the man*, only what he tells you, and in the second you believe the man, that is just a bit of terminology: you are only willing to *call* it believing the man when you believe he is right and truthful in intent.

It appears to me that there is more to be said than that about the priority of rightness and truthfulness in this matter, but I am not clear what it is.

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