

## Who Believes What?—The Range of Human Beliefs

God can make a cow out of a tree, but has He ever done so? Therefore show some reason why a thing is so, or cease to hold that it is so.<sup>1</sup>

—WILLIAM OF CONCHES

IMAGINE THAT WE HAVE just met at a party. During the introductions and obligatory small talk, I drop one of the following bits of information that, I claim, describes an actual event in my life:

1. I fell 20,000 feet without a parachute.
2. I once did 3,000 non-stop push-ups.
3. I landed in a tree in my kayak.

Which would you believe to be true? Having actually presented these options to others and noted their responses, I believe that I know which you are most likely to select. Of course, you don't have their advantage, so I might be wrong. For example, if my proclamation was made while you stared at my horribly disfigured body, you might be inclined to accept the first option as the most plausible. Alternatively, observing a tight shirt that could barely contain my bulging shoulders, you might lean toward option two. I'm not sure what visage I would have to present to make you think

1. Thorndike, *History of Magic*, volume II, book IV, chapter 37, 58 (referring to 1531 edito princeps of Basel, 29).

option three the most probable but I'm willing to bet that, in the absence of any additional information, it is the one you will select. (For the record, that would be the correct choice but I'll wait until the next chapter to try to convince you to believe me.)

Your actual choice, however, is not really the issue. What you should be asking yourself is why you made the choice you did, whatever it was. As you ponder that, you might also wonder whether you would have been more or less likely to believe any one of these statements if they were made about someone else rather than about me—for example, if I told you that I just read that *someone* fell 20,000 feet without a parachute. Claims one and two are both, in fact, presumably true about someone else.<sup>2</sup>

As for the reasons for your choice, there could be several. Clearly, the odds of any one of these statements applying to someone are better than for a particular someone (i.e., me). Or, maybe you are familiar with Guinness (the record book, not the beverage) and have run across enough unlikely stories that you give me (or someone) the benefit of the doubt. If you're a knowledgeable pragmatist, you may know how incredibly difficult it is to perform more than even 100 consecutive push-ups and rule that out while conjuring up ways a body falling at a terminal velocity of 120 or so miles per hour might not be smashed to smithereens. Perhaps option three seems a bit bizarre but mundane enough to be true, especially if you're not into believing things that seem incredulous (even though someone could have met you at a party, made statements one or two, and been telling the truth). And so forth.

In any event, your choice is a statement about your beliefs and is based on your background including your personal experiences as well as those stories you have determined to believe (or not). Similarly, my conjecture above was really nothing more than a declaration of my belief about your belief. Belief is what we do.

This is not to say that we believe the same things, and therein lies a wondrous phenomenon of the human condition. Although it might have been otherwise, it is hard for us to imagine a world or even a (non-trivial) scenario in which we would all share identical beliefs. Furthermore, the range of things that people believe is truly astounding.

One need not look far to discover people accepting assorted end-of-the-world prophecies, the efficacy of séances, or various paranormal processes. But the scope of belief is not restricted to views of the minority. Select practically any period of human history and you'll find large numbers

2. Ruffin recounts several cases of lengthy but survived falls (*Aviation's Most Wanted*, 257–58). The website <http://www.recordholders.org/en/list/pushups.html> lists the record for consecutive push-ups as more than 10,000.

of people subscribing to a belief in many gods, another group to belief in a single god, and still others with belief in no god at all. Surely they can't all be right. Moreover, beliefs in different eras about origins, the structure of matter, and the processes of life indicate that science is not immune, even if one does sometimes find a higher degree of consensus. Polls, such as those conducted periodically by organizations like Pew and Gallup, not only highlight the diversity of beliefs, they also chart their changes with time. But temporal variation in summary values only occurs when the beliefs of individuals are changing, and ours sometimes do. A dramatic shift in belief such as that by formerly prominent atheist Antony Flew<sup>3</sup> may be well publicized but most of us can point to noteworthy shifts in our own lives, possibly equally striking.

So, this is personal. Beliefs are at the core of who we are, both as individuals and a society. They place us in conflict with some and in harmony with others. Sometimes the turmoil is strictly internal. On occasion the conflict can be heated. At times it seems inconsequential. A teenage boy believes he looks suave with unruly hair that reaches his shoulders while his mom believes he is far more handsome with shorter, well-groomed locks. The Marines believe differently still. Trivial beliefs, perhaps, but important to those who hold them and easily elevated to the non-trivial if the issue changes from removal of one's hair to removal of a cerebral tumor where the risk of surgery is believed (by one physician) to outweigh the risk of non-intervention (as suggested by another).

If you're paying close attention, you may object that I have been a bit loose with my choice of words. Why say the boy, mother, Marines, or physicians "believe" this way or that? Why not just acknowledge that this is what they "think." Why not admit that each has different objectives and that each perspective is really just a matter of context? Ok, I admit it. But this kind of thinking *is* their belief. Although not all thinking pertains to belief, the two are often so intertwined with our perspective as to be synonymous and context is always a factor. This is not to say that all beliefs are equally thoughtful—examining why people entertain certain beliefs is often more illuminating than merely observing what they believe.<sup>4</sup> Their reasons can vary widely, from complex analysis to wishful thinking and, frequently, to almost no thinking at all. Soon we will explore this in much more detail but for now it is sufficient to note that belief permeates all of our thinking, from the deep questions of meaning and value to the way we imagine we look. In

3. Flew and Varghese, *There is a God*.

4. Cf. Gilovich, *How We Know*.

fact, just acknowledging that all perspectives are really matters of belief can precipitate change in some of those very perspectives.

Furthermore, beliefs are contagious. On any given autumn Saturday in the United States, significant numbers of individuals with great differences in their beliefs as to which team should be favored by the sports gods can be found occupying opposite sides of rather large stadiums, each group infected after a multi-year exposure to a particular collegiate climate. Inconsequential? Maybe, but such a belief contagion is clearly mirrored at larger scales where the objects of one's faith—in the political arena, perhaps—can make critical differences for an entire nation. Interestingly, we sometimes have an adverse reaction to the beliefs to which we are exposed and end up on what appears to be the opposite side of the belief fence from the progenitors of those beliefs—teenage rebellion is an obvious, if not dramatic, example. As we'll later see, however, some of these clashes are more apparent than real.

Observation of conflicts in belief suggest that the venues for our faith come in opposites—that you and I will either agree or have diametrically opposed beliefs about a thing. One of us believes in free will but the other does not. There either is an immortal soul or there is not. Human existence has an intrinsic purpose or it does not. And so forth . . . Yet, in most cases, there is actually a range of beliefs related to a given topic and the polar opposites merely receive most of the attention. Richard Dawkins, for example, classifies himself as a six on his own one to seven scale where one denotes complete assurance that God exists and seven denotes complete assurance that he does not.<sup>5</sup> We could assign the belief about the merits of a one to seven scale to another one to seven scale but only if the beliefs it reflects cover the entire spectrum of possibilities.

Recognizing the range of beliefs is not surprising but it should make us pause to consider why beliefs can vary to such a significant extent on matters both important and not. The fundamental cognitive mechanisms that underlie belief formation are, after all, shared by everyone. Although there are minute differences in the initial wiring of each brain, it seems apparent that the predominant cause of differing beliefs is simply related to differences in background.<sup>6</sup> In the ongoing nature/nurture debates, aside from the largely discredited ideas of Lamarck,<sup>7</sup> this has seldom been questioned, as few could conceive how anyone could be born with a ready-made set of

5. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 50–51.

6. Small initial differences in brains can also have large effects but that is the exception, not the rule.

7. Lamarck proposed that traits acquired through learning or effort could be inherited. Except for the Baldwin effect and the possibility of certain epigenetic influences, his ideas are not currently accepted.

beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Even if there are genetic tendencies to certain types of belief—posulated, for example, based on observations that humans appear to share an innate religious instinct—specific beliefs are always developed in some cultural context.

But is it important to be on the same page with regard to our beliefs? Does it matter that we believe the same things? Isn't there value in diversity? It is not hard to imagine the disastrous consequences that would ensue if we all believed that we should pursue the same career or marry the same person. Clearly, life would be less interesting if we shared every belief, but it is also apparent that there are plenty of areas in which conflicting beliefs can have significant and potentially disastrous consequences. For example, you and I may differ in our beliefs about how best to care for the environment but unless we share the general belief that there is a need to do so, we will likely end up with one of two very different kinds of planet.<sup>9</sup>

It is not at the species level only, however, that differences in belief have significance. As noted earlier, belief is personal. From religious convictions to decisions pertaining to education, occupation, lifestyle, and finances, our beliefs affect us in important and lasting ways. In my collection of memorabilia is an old invitation to a wedding tea, given in honor of my wife prior to her marriage to someone else—a marriage that never took place because she called it off two weeks prior to the event. The engagement was only possible because both had faith that marriage was an appropriate next step in their relationship. Luckily for me, her beliefs could change (for which our kids will forever be grateful).

Now, if I were writing the script for one of the many television shows that parade people's petty pasts, I might speculate ad nauseam as to the reasons for her change in belief (for TV, we would label it a change of heart). But that is not our goal. Suffice it to say that it was not a matter of looks, physique, intelligence, job, hobbies, philandering, or fiscal irresponsibility that convinced her she was on the verge of making a mistake (my term, I admit). The bottom line—and this she admits—was that they didn't share certain basic beliefs. In other words, her belief about their relationship and, eventually, about our own, was not only based on her other beliefs, it could not exist without them.

This observation about the pervasive integration of beliefs into every aspect of our existence does not constitute some shocking new perspective on human thought, but I am suggesting that it is seldom granted the significance it deserves. Consequently, let's try one more example to drive this

8. Cf. Locke, *Human Understanding*.

9. Cf. Diamond, *Collapse*; Wilson, *Creation*.

point home. To do so, return to our environmental scenario and imagine that I am what someone would label an “insensitive ecological moron.” In other words, I believe that I am perfectly justified in consuming resources willy-nilly, in discarding my trash wherever I please, in laughing at the very concept of clean energy, and so forth. What, pray tell, could explain my beliefs? Actually, there are any number of possible explanations, including an overestimation of the capacity of the earth to absorb my waste, miscalculation of the cumulative effects of dimwits like me, or some religious impulse suggesting that this world doesn’t really matter. Regardless, the key idea is this: no belief exists in isolation. As in both examples, each and every belief is typically supported by (and in tension with) many other beliefs. We are belief machines, blending, mixing, and matching that special concoction that makes us who we are at any given moment of our lives. Thank goodness, our tastes can change.

Nevertheless, although it is painless enough to acknowledge that our beliefs *can* change and equally easy to think that the beliefs of others *should* change, it is far harder to admit that our own beliefs may actually be in need of revision. But some beliefs are inevitably wrong.<sup>10</sup> Surely we aren’t so vain or deluded as to suggest that none of those are ours? In addition, because a number of errant beliefs will necessarily be about things with crucial and perhaps enduring consequences, it behooves us to get them right. An understanding of the nature and role of belief is essential to this process but, before we can continue our journey, we need to take a detour to consider several wrong-headed views of faith itself.

10. The fact that so many people can be wrong about the same things leads to entire books devoted to debunking false beliefs (e.g., Numbers, *Galileo Goes to Jail*; Burnham, *Dictionary of Misinformation*). One goal of this book is to counter false beliefs about faith.