

*On Being a Believer*  
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Abstract

This book is about being a believer, about having a cognitive perspective on the world. The leading idea is simple enough: to believe something is to be right or wrong, correct or incorrect, about how things are. But to fill out this idea, to say what makes believing different from other mental states, to see what difference believing makes, and to understand why there are things a person ought to believe, we need to combine the logical and psychological aspects of believing. Here is the combination I explore.

At its heart, believing concerns a contrast between actuality and possibility, between ways things are and ways they might have been. A person who knows how things are has a grasp of what is actual. One who merely believes has a grasp of what is possible. If she is right, then the possibility she has grasped obtains, though because she merely believes it she does not know it. Still, what she has grasped is the very thing grasped by one who does know it. If, on the other hand, our mere believer is wrong, then she has anyway still got hold of a way that things might have been, even though things are not that way. But even here, she has grasped the very thing a knower of it would have grasped. So in either case, a mere believer has got hold of a possibility, a way things are or might have been. In this sense, the objects of believing are possibilities, just as the objects of knowing are facts.

In Chapter 2, I sketch an account of the metaphysics of believing. I distinguish the property of believing something from a person's having such a property and then both of these from propositions and possibilities. For a person to believe something is for her to have a certain belief property, and together the belief properties she has form her belief state. As I see it, a person is in one state of believing many things, rather than in many states of belief. An analogy with ownership is helpful: it is more natural to say that a person owns many books than to say she is in many ownership states. Some hold that a person's believing something is always realized by an internal state, perhaps a physiological one. I take no stand on this, but if it is true, then the state of believing is the state that is realized and not the realizer state. Finally, I argue that belief properties are qualifiers as opposed to sortals. Believing is more like being tall than being human. Seeing this can help us avoid hypostasizing belief states, treating them as individuals in the same ontological category as hearts, lungs, and legs. Avoiding this will prove crucial for understanding the role believing plays in action, the nature of inference, and the ethics of belief.

In Chapter 3, I suggest that the objects of belief are possibilities. The view is that belief properties are individuated by possibilities, by ways that things are or might have been. This *modal view* is meant to contrast with the more standard *propositional view* on which the objects of belief are representations, things that by their very nature are true or false. I argue that the modal view fits better with independently plausible accounts of knowledge and rational inquiry. And it does as well as the propositional view at explaining both why the objects of belief are also the objects of assertion and imagination, and the sense in which believing is about things, properties and relations in the world. Despite its virtues, the modal view has suffered a history of neglect, stemming largely from early 20<sup>th</sup> century skepticism about (and even hostility towards) the very idea of possibility. By the mid 1960s that skepticism had dissipated, but the

propositional view was by then so firmly established that no alternatives seemed conceivable. The main aim of Chapter 3 is simply to put the modal view back onto the table.

In Chapter 4, I consider the relation between believing and truth. The idea that beliefs are true or false lends support to the propositional view, but only through an ambiguity in the word 'belief' between the object of believing and the state of believing. While a proposition can be true or false, a person's believing something can't. A person who believes something is right or wrong depending on how things are. Indeed, that is the very heart of believing. But we don't need to appeal to propositions to make sense of this. All we need is the contrast between the ways things are and the ways they might have been, and this is surely a contrast we need in any event. One virtue of the modal view is that it helps us see how believing no less than knowing is being in touch with reality, and not merely with representations of reality. Once we see this, we can see that certain philosophical projects need to be rethought or at least reframed. The question how it is that people can have beliefs is distorted if we take it to ask how it is that people can have states that are true or false. And projects that aim to understand the normativity and teleology of believing, in particular those that assume that believing aims at truth, need to be reframed.

Chapters 5 and 6 concern the limits of believing. On the modal view, what there is to believe depends on what is possible, and what is possible is an objective matter set independently of any believer. These limits are objective, or better, impersonal, since they apply to everyone. Any account of believing must admit that there are limits, though their existence is especially salient on the modal view. I take this to be a virtue of that view, since it helps us to see how people can suffer *credal illusions*, where they think they have got hold in belief of a way things might be when, in fact, they have not. Such illusions always involve grasping a general possibility, but one that lacks a specific witness. The idea of such limits is puzzling, and the puzzle is deepened by the contingency of the limits. Had things been different in various ways, or had a person been differently positioned in her world, she would have been able to believe things that she cannot now believe. This is illustrated by familiar puzzle cases involving people who are mistaken or confused about which thing is which, or what is what, or who, when, or where they are. These cases are usually taken to show that there is more to believe than what is possible, but my interest is in showing how they all involve credal illusions, something that any account that considers believing to be an objective matter needs to understand. I end the chapter by critiquing recent accounts of the objects of belief that are designed to avoid these puzzles.

Chapter 6 concerns personal or subjective limits to believing. To be a believer is to have a perspective on what is possible, and this perspective is essentially one's own. What makes a person's perspective her own is that there are things that she and she alone must believe. These are her *credal necessities*. Most fundamentally, she must believe in her own existence as a believer. The world as she takes it to be must be one containing herself with that very perspective. This distinctive subjectivity is not a matter of *what* she believes, since anyone else can believe the same things. It is a matter, rather, of the things that she alone *must* believe. This essential subjectivity is thus a matter of limits to belief revision. A person who believes something knows that she believes it, but this is no achievement over and above her believing it. And this does not entail, as some have recently argued, that believing something just is knowing that one believes it. We need not collapse the distinction between believing something and what is believed. The self-consciousness of believing is the simple fact that considering which possibilities obtain is, from a believer's own perspective, the same as considering what possibilities she believes obtain. In asking herself which world she is in, she is asking herself

which world she takes herself to be in. This helps us to understand the so-called transparency of believing.

Chapter 7 concerns the difference that believing makes. When a person believes something, she is in a position to do, think, or feel things in light of a certain possibility and people who believe different things are in different such positions. This is meant to parallel the idea that to know some fact is to be in position to act in light of it, and people who know different things can act in light of different facts. When someone acts in the belief that a certain possibility obtains, the possibility she believes can rationalize what she does. According to many, the believing can rationalize only by *generating* the action, thought or feeling. This idea takes different shapes. Some say the action is an *effect* of the believing, others that it is a *manifestation* of it, and still others that it is an *exercise* of it. These in turn are paired with views about the nature of believing itself: that belief states are (internal) causes, dispositions, or capacities. These views misunderstand the role believing plays when a person acts. It is a category mistake to think that believing is a cause, a disposition, or an ability. And it is a mistake that makes it harder to understand puzzling cases where a person seems unable to act on something she knows or believes. Believing something, rather, is a matter of being in a certain position for the ways things are or might have been to shed their light on what one does, thinks, and feels. People who believe different things are in different such positions, and this is the difference that believing makes.

Chapter 8 concerns a person's agency in believing. The leading idea is that a person is responsible for believing what she does and for keeping or changing her mind when she does. A natural thought is that this is causal responsibility, that for a person to maintain or change her beliefs is for her to be their sustaining and originating cause. But two familiar ideas threaten this natural thought. One is that belief states are particulars; the other is that to cause (or sustain) a state is to perform an action that causes (or sustains) it. Together, these ideas suggest that for a person to be responsible for her beliefs she must perform actions that cause or sustain them, in the way a gardener can be responsible for her garden only by performing actions that make and keep her plants healthy. But this is an alienated conception of a person's relation to her perspective. To recover the natural thought, we need to resist those two ideas. As I argued in Chapter 2, a person's belief state is not a particular that can be acted on. An analogy between believing and owning is helpful, for while we can causally affect what a person owns we cannot causally interact with her state of ownership. But the analogy has limits, for one can act on the objects one owns but not on the possibilities one believes. An analogy of being in a spatial position is more apt. Knowingly maintaining a belief is knowingly holding oneself in a position among ways things might be. And changing one's position, through judgement and inference, is not an action that causes a change in that position. It is, rather, knowingly causing that change. In this way, we can recover the natural thought that a person is responsible for her conception of things by being its cause.

Chapter 9 considers some topics in the ethics of believing. A standard view holds that the nature of believing sets standards that can ground epistemic norms. I think this is wrong. Belief properties are not goodness-fixing properties. There is no such thing as one believing being better, *qua* believing, than another. Not even when the person is right or reasonable in believing what she does. This follows from the fact that no quality is a goodness-fixing property, and it means that accounts that posit a constitutive aim or norm for believing are misguided. It can, of course, be good for a person to be right or to be rational in believing something, though this is not invariably so. But even when it is so, this is not because being right or rational makes her

believing itself good or better. And this matters for an account of what a person ought to believe. Whether a person ought to believe something depends on whether she ought to know it, and this has little to do with what else she believes or knows, that is, with what evidence she has. What matters is how she should be positioned among ways things are. It is a matter of what light she needs in order to do, think, and feel what she ought to do, think, and feel.

I end the book with four brief appendices. Appendix A considers how believing differs from being certain and distinguishes certainty from the strength of a person's belief. Appendix B considers and rejects the idea that believing is an act or activity as opposed to a state. Appendix C considers and rejects the idea that believing is a relation a person bears to a possibility or proposition. Both ideas have, I think, made it difficult to see clearly a person's agency in believing. Appendix D considers and rejects the idea that the familiar puzzles about believing show that there are more belief properties than there are possibilities. In my view, the importance of these puzzles has been exaggerated and their real lessons have been misunderstood. I place these discussions in appendices, not because I think they are unimportant, but because I did not want to distract from the main thread of the book.

That thread is the idea that to believe something is to actively be in a certain rational position among the ways things are and might have been. In such a position one is right or wrong depending only on how things are. It is rational because it casts a rationalising light on what the believer does, thinks, and feels. It is active because a believer knowingly sustains and adjusts it. And it matters because there are things a person ought to believe.