

## Belief

In my hometown there is a famous automobile plastered with religious slogans in huge letters. My students call it the Jesus-saves-mobile. If an artist painted a collage of famous sights around town, there next to our ancient courthouse and the bronze dog waiting patiently beside his bronze food dish in front of Yogurt Extreme -- would be the Jesus-saves-mobile. The slogans change from time to time, but one recently caught my attention, "BELIEVE OR BURN." Belief is evidently important. Every Sunday Christians in church recite creeds consisting of lists of things that are believed. For example, "I believe in God the Father maker of Heaven and Earth." But what of the word "believe," what does it mean?

We should distinguish between two kinds of belief, belief *that* and belief *in*. Belief *in* denotes trust and assurance. To believe *in* God is to trust God as one would trust a kindly father. God can be relied on to give kindly support and advice, to reward good behavior and perhaps punish bad. God will comfort the afflicted and console the dying. God will do what is best to protect His children and see to their joy and fulfillment. But this is a secondary sort of belief. Suppose God doesn't exist? Before it is possible to believe *in* God, one must first believe *that* God exists. So what does it mean to believe *that*?

Blaise Pascal offered an argument for belief that has come to be called Pascal's wager. Suppose you are betting on the existence of God. It's just like flipping a coin; heads, God exists, tails, He doesn't. The chances are 50-50. Human reason can't decide. How would you bet? Consider the stakes. If you believe in God, you will bet on heads. If the coin comes up heads, you gain eternal life; if it comes up tails, you lose very little. But if you bet on tails, i.e. that God does not exist, and the coin comes up heads, you risk eternal damnation. So by believing in God you risk very little, but the reward, if God does indeed exist, is an infinity of infinite happiness. Any reasonable man would believe in God and bet on heads.

Two objections spring to mind immediately. First, which god? Allah, Krishna, Wotan? And second, suppose God (whichever god) reserves a special place in Hell for people who believe for such mercenary and self-serving reasons.

William James in his essay *The Will to Believe* offers a weaker version of the wager that bypasses, at least to some extent, both objections. According to James, the choice is not in whether or not to believe in God, but rather whether or not to believe in "religion" (defined in very general terms). Also the wager only makes sense if both options, to believe or not to believe, are "live" options. By this he means that both options would be acceptable except that one is prevented from believing either by a fear of being duped (his word, not mine) or because one is adhering to some principle of skepticism, for example, a resolve to never believe anything until it has been conclusively proven.

Both forms of the wager however, beg the question, can you, as James' title suggests, will yourself to believe? Pascal addresses this in the following way.

"But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and yet you cannot believe. Endeavor then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way, you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those that have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are the people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe and deaden your acuteness."

It seems that unbelief is a kind of disease brought about by the passions. The way to cure yourself of the disease is to go through the motions of belief and worship in the company of those who have already cured themselves of the disease. This is not promising. We know of many people who have tried this cure only to have a more severe attack of the disease later in life.

Let's look at a simpler belief system, solipsism. The solipsist believes that only the self exists, nothing else has independent existence. Strictly speaking, this is metaphysical solipsism. Everything else is some sort of phantasy. I have never met anyone who actually believed this, but the position is logically unassailable. Any bit of evidence you might adduce and any contrary argument you might present

can be dismissed as part of the phantasy. In fact, you might as well be dismissed also. You don't really exist. Pascal's analogy of the coin toss seems apt here. The truth of the matter cannot be decided by pure logic. The chances might be 50-50. So if this is the case, why are we not all solipsists? (Or at least 50% of us.) There are several reasons, and it's worthwhile looking at them carefully.

Karl Popper, one of the most important philosophers of science, proposed a criterion for the scientific status of a theory, its falsifiability or refutability or testability. He was impressed by the political theories of Karl Marx and the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Karl Adler. He noted that they had great explanatory power. In fact, they could explain anything. Every event recorded in the newspaper could be understood in light of Marx's theories, if only by claiming that the paper was so biased that the event was reported incorrectly! Everything and anything that transpired in psychoanalysis could be explained in light of the theories of Adler and equally well by the theories of Freud. But their success was not a virtue, it was a vice. This sort of explanatory power was not the mark of science but of pseudoscience. Scientific theories, by contrast, are risky. They can, in principle, be disproved or modified by a single observation. This is an oversimplification of Popper's thought, but we can come up with our own weaker version of his criterion; a theory that can explain anything explains nothing. No one would claim that solipsism is a scientific theory, but it has the sort of explanatory power that Popper distrusted. So why, despite that fact that it can never be refuted, do we not all buy into solipsism? Precisely for that reason.

There are other reasons; one is that it is wildly counterintuitive. The world that I see is so solid and consistent. When I bump my head it hurts. Is this just an image causing pain to a fantasy? And where are all these images and sensations coming from? How is it that I sense the existence of other people who seem to think and perceive much as I do? And worst of all, if the physical world is not real, then I do not exist as a physical creature. Even my brain does not exist!

Finally, if I were to take solipsism seriously, it would drain all the joy and satisfaction from my life. The people I love don't exist. The natural world I love to study is not real. Perhaps the decisions that I thought that I had made with my

own free will are just being fed to me by whatever is the source of the entire illusion.

The issue is not whether or not solipsism is true. That can never be decided. The issue is whether you should believe that it is true. You have to decide for yourself. There is no argument I can make to compel belief. You must decide on the basis of the arguments I have given, and no doubt different people will come to different conclusions. Nonetheless I have thought about these arguments and I believe that the chances are not 50-50; the coin is heavily weighted; the world I perceive is real.

Solipsism is an esoteric matter. Let's take something more mundane. Suppose I say that I believe it will rain tomorrow. What does the word "believe" mean in this context? I mean something like the following. I have checked [www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com) and they are predicting a 90% chance of rain. I know from experience that they are correct about 90% of the time. I also know a little about meteorology; I know how the winds move counterclockwise around the Pacific Ocean bringing in storms from the southwest. Finally, I know that meteorologists have special training. Most qualified meteorologists would look at the same set of data and come up with the same prediction. There are four elements here: personal experience, statistical analysis, the existence of a community of experts, and perhaps most important, an intellectual framework in terms of which all this makes sense. I believe it will rain tomorrow. I know that I may be wrong, but I am still going to take my umbrella!

These examples illustrate my understanding of belief.

One is faced with a set of options and must choose among them. The choice will affect one's life. The effect may be trivial as in the case of the weather, or it may be profound as in the case of religion. Because of this it is not possible to not choose. For example, if I don't think about the weather, I have in effect decided that it won't rain. I won't take my umbrella and I may get wet. Put it another way, one of the choices is not to choose, and this choice will also have its effect.

Although all the options have at least some plausibility, there is no way to decide conclusively which is correct.

It is necessary to consider all the evidence, and the evidence can take many forms: logic, intuition, experience, the opinion of experts, probability analysis, and an intellectual framework in terms of which the rest of the evidence makes sense. In the case of religion, the evidence might include the testimony of people who are thought to have a profound understanding and communion with God, religious traditions and documents, and personal religious experience.

Take reason as far as it will go, consider the effect the choice will have on your life, and then decide the best option.

The findings of modern science are certainly relevant to religious decision making if only in a negative way. A religion that insists that the world was created in six literal days or that Adam and Eve were created ex nihilo or that the earth is at the center of the solar system needs to be modified. There are many other ways that science might be relevant to belief, but the evidence is much more ambiguous. The universe seems to be fine-tuned in such a way as to make carbon-based life possible. Is this the mark of divine creation? Evolution seems to evidence a direction toward greater complexity and organization. Could there be some purpose and direction built into the laws of nature? It is far from clear how life could have ever emerged from some putative primordial soup. Was it a miracle? Special relativity proves that there is no such thing as free will; the future is already in place. Are we missing something here? These and many other issues will be discussed in these podcasts. Many of these questions involve technical details that may not be familiar to the general reader. Because of this and because of the ambiguous nature of the evidence I will linger without apology over some technicalities. I beg your indulgence.