

Remarks on Belief

Distinguish ordinary and religious belief.

Ordinary belief is the believing that goes on continuously in childhood, at school and university, in interpersonal relations, at play and at work, in listening, reading, speaking, writing.

Religious belief is believing the truths of faith or what one considers the truths of faith.

The Importance of Attending to Ordinary Belief.

The views people entertain about ordinary belief automatically are extended to religious belief. So the errors and absurdities found in ordinary belief (whether in primitive tribes, in alien cultures, in the members of other classes, in the odd individuals in one's own class or group, etc.) all are so many stumbling blocks preventing consideration of religious belief.

Two Approaches to Ordinary Belief.

Newman once considered the alternatives of believing everything and doubting everything.

He pronounced both of these approaches to be mistaken and unacceptable.

He maintained that, were it to happen that he had to choose either one of these alternatives, he would prefer to believe everything. He argued that by believing everything, he would have some truth along with error and that in time the truth would be more and more confirmed while the error would reveal more and more its deficiencies. On the other hand, if he doubted everything, he would have nothing to go by, and would remain in perpetual ignorance.

Individualist and Modern Approaches to Belief

On Newman's own showing his disjunction was unreal. But there does exist an equivalent disjunction that is very real indeed.

There is an individualist approach that has its affinities with Cartesian universal doubt, the protestant principle of private judgement, rationalist philosophy, and the propaganda of the eighteenth century philosophes.

There is a modern approach that shifts from belief to a sociology of knowledge. It has its antecedents in traditional cultures and religions. Nineteenth-century traditionalism attempted to defend it, but did so on mistaken individualist grounds.

The Individualist Approach

The individualist approach seems basically to be apologetic. Many beliefs are demonstrably false. The apologist defends his own beliefs by arguing that he has sufficient grounds for considering them to be true.

But are the sufficient grounds personally acquired knowledge or are they just other beliefs?

If they are personally acquired knowledge, then he is not believing but knowing and inferring.

If they are just other beliefs, the issue recurs. What are the sufficient grounds for each of the other beliefs?

It would seem that this approach cannot escape the dilemma: either belief is reducible to knowledge or else belief is a distinct and self-grounding category.

The Modern Approach: Belief as General Category

The modern approach would distinguish between believing as a general category and particular acts of believing. Again, in particular acts of believing, it would distinguish between believing by minors (legally or culturally) and believing by adults.

To accept believing as a general category is to accept the human condition. Human knowledge is an achievement, not of the individualⁱ, but of the race. Any individual's knowledge principally is a participation in that ongoing human achievement. The process of coming to participate has many names: philosophers call it historicity, anthropologists call it acculturation, sociologists call it socializing, teachers call it education, media people call it information.

One may distinguish between what a person knows and what he believes. But one cannot separate one from the other. The two are inextricably intertwined and interdependent and by far the preponderant part is due, not to personal experience, personal understanding, personal judgement, but to belief.

Nor is science any exception. For Aristotle science was a habit in the mind of the scientist. But no modern science is in any one individual's mind. It is parcelled out among the members of the scientific community. Each scientist has his little corner cultivated by his personal experience, personal understanding, personal checking and verifying. Many would be able to determine for themselves the accuracy of new proposals. But no one does so for all new proposals. In the main all are content to let others do this checking, while each concentrates on making his own fresh contribution to the advance of knowledge.

When one is asked why one believes, the general answer accordingly would run as follows:

- (1) before the question can arise, one already has been believing to an unmeasured extent; everyone participates in the millennial division of labor that advances human knowledge;
- (2) there does not exist the possibility for each individual to distinguish sharply and accurately between what he knows by personal experience, understanding, and judgement, and what he accepts because of belief;
- (3) much less is there the practical possibility of tracing his beliefs back to their origins and through their developments and aberrations in order to settle on the basis of personally acquired knowledge just what was true and what was doubtful or false;
- (4) moreover, it would be lunacy to reject everything one has believed and everything one has come to accept partly because of one's beliefs; that would be to reject all that one knows, to revert to the state of the infant or the unadorned primitive, to leave oneself incapable of any intelligent development or balanced judgement on the level of one's times;
- (5) accordingly, in the general case, one believes because it is part of the human condition, because human knowledge is the achievement not of the individual but of the race, because it develops through a millennial division of labor, because it is in general a good thing and, in any case, far preferable to the alternative of believing nothing and so knowing nothing but one's own minute and insignificant discoveries.

Belief: Two Particular Cases

But besides the general case there are two particular cases to be considered: there is the case of the minor whether legally or culturally a minor; and there is the case of the adult.

The operative ground of the distinction between the two is one's capacity to criticize one's beliefs. This capacity increases the more successful has been one's education and the fuller and more accurate becomes one's information. The capacity is exercised principally when one discovers that one has believed what subsequently one learns to be mistaken. In the critique of beliefs such a mistaken belief constitutes the starting point: one scrutinizes connected beliefs; one assembles as many as one finds to be mistaken; one goes to their source whether in one's own credulity or in the unreliability of others; one takes the necessary steps to avoid the recurrence of such mistaken believing.

In the measure that any individual has a developed capacity for the critique of his beliefs, he has to that extent passed to the stage of the adult.

In the measure that a lack of education or of accurate information marks one as less than competent to institute a critique of one's own beliefs, he is in this matter culturally a minor.

Accordingly, minors as long as they remain minors act in accord with the human condition in accepting the tradition which they have inherited. On the other hand, adults in the measure they are competent owe both to themselves and to their inherited tradition a critique of the beliefs they have found to be mistaken.