

THE INFALLIBILITY OF OUR KNOWLEDGE OF OUR OWN BELIEFS

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By U. T. Place

It would seem to be the case that if I assert a proposition of the form 'I believe that p ', I cannot be mistaken. The proposition of the form 'I believe that p ' may be false; but if it is, it must be the case that I am lying. Why should this be?

On what Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind*, called 'the official doctrine', the infallibility of my knowledge of my own beliefs is explained on the assumption that a belief is a private inner state that I and only I can inspect. The objection to this theory is that if it were true, our knowledge of our own beliefs would be incorrigible in the sense that no one else is able to inspect my beliefs and thus correct any error I may have made in reporting them; but it would not be infallible, because there is no reason in principle why I should not make a mistake through careless introspection even though I am the only person who is in a position to correct it.

A more promising answer to the problem is suggested by Ryle's dispositional theory of mental concepts. It might be argued on this theory that to believe that p is to be disposed to assert p on occasions when the truth of p is a relevant consideration. Now since I cannot assert that I believe p without *ipso facto* asserting p , it would follow that in asserting that I believe p , I have *ipso facto* exercised and thus displayed my disposition to assert p . On this view, I cannot be mistaken in asserting that I believe p because the statement 'I believe p ' is a self-verifying statement. It cannot be asserted without *ipso facto* demonstrating its own truth.

There is, however, a formidable objection to this explanation of the infallibility of our knowledge of our own beliefs in that it does not allow any room for the case where my assertion that I believe p is a lie. For if to believe that p is merely to be disposed to assert p , I cannot assert that I believe p without demonstrating that I believe p . The statement can never be false. Consequently, in order to allow for the case of lying, we have to amend the dispositional theory of belief by adding to the disposition to assert p the disposition to act on p in circumstances where p is or would be a relevant consideration. It may be objected that an account of belief in terms of the disposition to act on a proposition one is disposed to assert, runs into difficulties in the case of beliefs that are related to matters far removed from the believer's immediate

life situation, such as the non-historian's belief about the remote past or the non-astronomer's beliefs about the heavenly bodies.¹ However, since no one could conceivably have a motive for lying in claiming to believe something about a matter of no immediate concern to himself, the problem of distinguishing between lying about one's beliefs and sincerely asserting them does not arise with beliefs of this type. Hence there is no objection to supposing that where the belief concerns matters outside the believer's immediate life situation, his belief consists solely in a disposition to assert the proposition he believes and that it is only in the case of beliefs that relate to the individual's immediate life situation that believing p also involves a disposition to act on p .

On this amended form of the dispositional theory, the case where I sincerely assert that I believe p is a case where I am disposed both to assert and to act on p , whereas in the case where I am lying in asserting that I believe p , I am disposed to assert p , but am not disposed to act on p . On this amended view, the statement 'I believe that p ' is still partially self-verifying in that it demonstrates the existence of the disposition to assert p which is part of what is meant by saying that I believe p . On the other hand it is not self-verifying with respect to the disposition to act on p which, as we now construe it, is also implied by the statement that someone believes that p . But if I do not show that I am disposed to act on p , when I claim to believe p in the way that I show that I am disposed to assert p , how does it come about that I can lie, but cannot be mistaken, when I falsely assert that I believe that p ? Why should I not sincerely assert that I believe p , and yet be honestly mistaken in supposing that I am disposed to act on p ?

It is no use saying here that if I assert that I believe p in a case where I am not disposed to act on p , I must necessarily be telling a lie. This is merely to sweep that problem under the carpet. For to lie is to assert a proposition that one knows to be false. Hence a situation in which any false proposition must necessarily be a lie, is merely a situation in which the speaker cannot avoid knowing that the proposition is false, if it is false. If, therefore, I am necessarily lying, in asserting that I believe p , when I am not in fact disposed to act on p , it follows that in asserting that I believe p , I cannot avoid knowing that I am not disposed to act on p , if I am not so disposed. But why should I necessarily know that I am not disposed to act on p ,

¹ I am indebted to Professor P. T. Geach and Mr. W. J. Rees for drawing my attention to this objection.

when I assert that I believe p , but am not in fact disposed to act on p ? What is the force of ‘necessarily’ here? Is this a matter of logical necessity? Or is it merely a contingent psychological necessity?

I suggest that in order to answer this question we need to consider what is involved in asserting a proposition. Clearly, if I assert a proposition p , I am performing a social act, an act that presupposes not only a speaker, but also an audience. Moreover, my intention in asserting p must necessarily be to influence my audience in the direction of believing p . If I do not have this intention, I cannot properly be said to have asserted p . But if the account we have given of what is involved in believing p is correct, it follows that in trying to influence my audience to believe p , I am trying to influence them in the direction not only of asserting p themselves, but also in the direction of acting on p . Thus, in asserting p , I am necessarily recommending p to my audience as a reliable basis for action.

However, from the fact that in asserting p I necessarily intend to influence my audience to adopt p as a basis for action, it does not follow that my audience cannot avoid being influenced in this way. Nevertheless, there is a substantial body of empirical evidence relating to the phenomena of suggestion and hypnosis which supports the view that the initial reaction of every human being who hears and understands a proposition asserted by another person is to accept that proposition at its face value as a reliable basis for action, and that the ability to question the propositions that are put to him by another person, rejecting some, while accepting others, is a skill that is superimposed on this basic tendency to accept what one is told without question. Thus a study by Messerschmidt quoted by Hull² shows that the responsiveness of children to verbal suggestions of postural movement increases rapidly as the child's understanding of language increases up to an average age of 8 years and then slowly declines. Hull comments as follows:

As a plausible hypothesis to account for this reversal, it may be supposed that suggestion is based in a primitive habit tendency (of responding directly to verbal stimulation) which is useful in most situations but maladaptive in the special type of situation represented by this suggestion test. Presumably the maladaptivity is related largely to the fact that if a person responds positively and indiscriminately to all suggestions made by other, he is likely to be taken advantage of by his associates in that the energies needed for his own welfare will be diverted to that of those giving the suggestions. The rise of the curve accordingly represents the acquisition of a working knowledge of the language, which obviously must proceed a certain distance before its maladaptive possibilities may be encountered; and the gradual fall observed from about eight years on may be regarded as an indication of the progress in ‘unlearning’ those particular reactions to verbal stimuli which, having been established have proved maladaptive. (p.85)

² C. L. Hull, *Hypnosis and Suggestibility*, New York, Appleton-Century, 1933.

In the light of empirical evidence such as this, as well as in the light of a theoretical consideration of what is required for a child's acquisition of the ability to understand what is said to him, it seems not unreasonable to suppose that the child must necessarily begin by learning to accept a statement made by another person as equivalent in all respects to the actual existence of the environmental situation which the statement describes, and that unless he begins in this way he cannot learn to understand the meaning of what is said to him. In other words, unless a child begins by accepting whatever he is told and believes it implicitly, he cannot learn to understand what is said to him. If this is correct, it follows that anyone who listens to and understands an assertion made by someone else will necessarily believe that assertion and thus be disposed to act upon it, unless he has acquired an overriding disposition to reject assertions of that kind.

Now, in learning to reject assertions while admitting others, the individual must have available to him certain cues which enable him to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable assertions made by others. It seems, moreover, that the cues to which he learns to respond in this way are of three kinds. In the first place he may learn to reject out of hand, or not to admit without serious question, propositions which are asserted by certain persons whom he has learned to identify as persistently unreliable informants or inveterate liars. Secondly, he may learn to reject or seriously question propositions asserted by persons whose propositions he would otherwise accept at their face value in a situation where the person concerned is judged to have a strong motive for lying or otherwise misrepresenting the true state of affairs. Finally, he will also learn to question and ultimately reject certain propositions purely on their merits, regardless of the source from which they come. When he does this, he will do so on the basis of some contradiction that he notices or suspects between the proposition that is being asserted and certain other propositions which he already believes and has successfully acted upon in the past. It would seem to be the case, moreover, that if he has no reason to question the veracity of his source and is not aware of and does not suspect any conflict between his existing beliefs and the proposition being urged upon him, there is nothing to prevent him from giving way to this underlying tendency to accept what he is told as a basis for subsequent action.

Now if, as I have argued, a human being has an in-built tendency to accept as a basis for action any proposition that is asserted by another person which he hears, or reads, and understands, unless there is

something that restrains him from doing so, it seems not unreasonable to suppose that he will likewise have a built-in tendency to accept as a basis for action any proposition which he himself asserts. For no one can effectively assert a proposition without hearing and understanding what he is saying or without reading and understanding what he is writing. Hence on the principle whereby the inveterate liar eventually comes to believe his own propaganda³, an individual who asserts a proposition will not be able to resist the temptation to take the proposition he asserts as a reliable basis for action, unless there is something to prevent him from doing so. Now we have seen that the only conditions under which an individual can be restrained from accepting a proposition that he hears or reads and understands, are (a) in a case where he has learned that the speaker is, or is likely to be, a systematically unreliable informant, (b) in a case where he has learned that the speaker is likely to have motives for mendacity or misrepresentation and (c) in a case where he is aware of or suspects a conflict between the assertion and his existing beliefs. Applying this to the case where the individual understands the proposition he himself asserts, as he must do whenever he asserts it, it is evident that no rational being could learn to treat himself as a systematically unreliable informant without systematically undermining all rational connection between what he says whether to himself or to others, and what he does. That way lies madness.

On the other hand, he can very profitably learn to question, though not systematically to reject, those propositions that he asserts or is inclined to assert where he himself has strong motives for mendacity or inclined to assert where he himself has strong motives for mendacity or misrepresentation. This is a highly desirable habit of self-criticism which few people manage to acquire in the face of the strong impulse that we all have to believe, whenever possible, what it suits us to believe, rather than what the evidence demands. So difficult is it to learn this discrimination, so directly does it conflict with the individual's natural inclinations as far as the beliefs he accepts and rejects are concerned, that it is inconceivable that a man who for this reason does not accept as a basis for action a proposition he has just asserted should be unaware that he does not in fact believe that proposition in question. The only other case in which he could reject as a basis for action a proposition which he himself has just asserted is a case in which he is aware of or suspects a

³ I am indebted to Professor P. T. Geach for drawing my attention to this principle and for his criticisms of an earlier draft of this section of my paper.

conflict between the proposition he has just asserted and other beliefs of his that he accepts as a basis for action. In this case, if, as I have argued, he is aware of, or suspects, a conflict between the proposition he has asserted and his other beliefs, it is again inconceivable that he should fail to be aware that he has been led by this apparent conflict to reject the proposition in question as a basis for action. But if in the only two cases where a rational man can reject as a basis for action, a proposition he has just asserted, it is inconceivable that he should be unaware that he has so rejected it, it follows that it is inconceivable that he should not know that he does not believe the proposition he has asserted, if he does not. And if he cannot avoid knowing that he does not believe a proposition he has asserted, if he does not, it follows that in such a case he must necessarily be lying if he claims to believe the proposition he asserts.

It will be noted that on this account not only is it inconceivable that an individual should not know that he does not believe a proposition he asserts, if he does not believe it, it is equally inconceivable that he should not know that he believes a proposition which he has considered, has accepted as a basis for action, but denies that he believes. For, as we have seen, someone who hears or reads and thereby understands a proposition, as he must have done if he has considered it, cannot fail to be influenced in the direction of accepting it as a basis for action, unless he consciously rejects it either on the grounds of the probable mendacity of its source, or on the ground of a conflict with his existing beliefs. But since he cannot fail to know that he has consciously rejected it, if he has, it follows that he cannot fail to know that he believes it, if he has considered it and has not consciously rejected it. Hence in denying that he believes a proposition that he has not consciously rejected, he necessarily knows that he does in fact believe the proposition in question in which case he is lying in denying that he believes it.

On the other hand, the account I have given does appear at first sight to allow that someone might either believe or not believe a proposition and yet not know that he believes it or does not believe it, provided that the proposition in question is one that he has not yet asserted or considered; since if he has not either asserted or considered it, he would not have any grounds for knowing whether or not he believed it. His situation would be like that of the woman who said she would not know what she thought about the question at issue until she heard what she had to say about it.

However, the implication in the case of the woman who did not know what she believed until she heard herself speak is that she has not yet made up her mind on the issue and only does so as she speaks. In other words, she does not yet either believe or not believe the propositions she will come to believe when she asserts them. But the case we are considering is one in which someone already believes something, but does not know that he believes it because he has not yet asserted or considered it. The existence of such a case is in fact ruled out on the account of belief that I have suggested, since the only way in which an individual can acquire a disposition either to act or not to act on a proposition is as a result of hearing or reading and thereby understanding the proposition in question. If he has never asserted or considered it, he cannot have heard, read or understood it, and cannot, therefore, have a disposition to act on it; and if he does not have a disposition to act on it he cannot be said to believe it.

These considerations do not rule out the possibility that someone who has never in fact considered a given proposition or, if he has, has rejected it, might nevertheless be disposed to act *as if* he believed the proposition in question. For example, someone who suffers from an irrational phobia for cats is disposed to act as if he believes the proposition 'Cats are dangerous', although he would quite properly deny believing this proposition. In such a case, his disposition to behave in this way does not proceed from his acceptance of the proposition he denies believing. It is an irrational impulse that exists independently of and despite his beliefs. Nevertheless, although the cat phobic can quite properly claim not to believe the proposition 'Cats are dangerous' since he is not in fact disposed to assert this proposition, he cannot claim that he believes the contrary proposition 'Cats are not dangerous'. For on the view I am defending, to believe that cats are not dangerous entails being disposed not only to assert that they are not, as the cat phobic usually is, but also being disposed to act on this proposition which the cat phobic is manifestly not disposed to do.

Thus we cannot say of the cat phobic either that he believes that cats are dangerous, or that he believes that they are not. The trouble is that he does not behave like the man who cannot make up his mind whether to believe p or not- p and hence does not believe either. The phobic behaves like a man who *has* made up his mind and has made up his mind that cats are dangerous. Consequently, both the phobic himself and those who observe his behaviour find themselves in some conceptual perplexity when they attempt to characterise his state of mind. Going on his behaviour, we are inclined to say in spite of his

protestation to the contrary that he shows quite unambiguously that he believes cats to be dangerous. But if he really believes that cats are dangerous, then his denial that he believes they are dangerous must be false and he must either be lying or be mistaken. Yet in such cases it is usually quite evident not only that the phobic is perfectly sincere in denying that he believes cats are dangerous, but also that he is in no way deceived as to the character of his own mental and behavioural disposition.

The truth is that in denying that he believes cats to be dangerous, he is not denying for one moment that he has an overpowering disposition to act as if they were. All he is denying is that this disposition proceeds from an acceptance of the proposition 'Cats are dangerous'. It is true that his acceptance of this proposition at some time in the past may have contributed to his present disposition to avoid cats. But if so, it is equally true that it is no longer sustained by any such acceptance. This is shown by the fact that however often he may rehearse to himself the contrary proposition 'Cats are not dangerous' together with all the arguments and evidence that can be adduced for this proposition and against the proposition 'Cats are dangerous', he cannot induce in himself a disposition to act on the proposition 'Cats are not dangerous' in the face of the overwhelming irrational impulse to act as if they were.

Thus the case of the irrational phobia is not an example of someone who is mistaken in his assessment of his own beliefs; it is an example of someone in whom there is a disturbance of the normal and 'rational' relationship between what a man asserts and the way he behaves, which is implied by the concept of belief.

If this account, or something like it, is correct, it is apparent that no definitive answer can be given in the present state of knowledge to the question 'Is the necessity that makes it impossible to avoid knowing that we believe a proposition, if we do, or that we do not believe it, if we do not, a logical necessity or a contingent psychological necessity?' If it turns out, as it may, that it is logically impossible to conceive of a language learning process which does not involve the initial acquisition of the tendency to accept at its face value as a basis for action any proposition that is understood, we should then, I suggest, be perfectly justified in regarding the necessity as logical. If, on the other hand, this turns out to be a purely accidental feature of the way human beings are constructed, we might accept it as a contingent psychological necessity. But in either case, the story that has to be told is too complicated for any short answer to have much value.