

Influences on Belief¹

DISCUSSION

1. Consider a college student who claims, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” What factors may have led this student to hold this belief? List out as many as you can come up with.
2. Do some of these factors seem like a better basis for belief than others? Which ones?
3. How might you categorize these different factors into different groups?

INTRODUCTION

Last time we looked at belief and doubt. We saw that people change over time what they believe or what they doubt. College can be a time of dramatic shifts in one’s beliefs and doubts. We plotted ourselves on a graph of belief/doubt in terms of Christianity.

This time, we’ll consider what influences our beliefs and doubts. In a way, we should have done these lessons on belief in the beginning of our course. After considering why we believe and doubt the things we do, we should have proceeded with the reasons for believing in Christianity. But... oh well. I didn’t think of this until the end of the course!

BELIEF AND DOUBT

When people ask, “Do you believe X” (with X referring to any proposition), we often think the answer is a simple “Yes, I do believe,” or “No, I don’t.” But in reality, there is a continuum of belief.

James Sire suggests a helpful way to look at belief along two axes: certainty and specificity. The vertical axis goes from doubtful to certain. And the horizontal axis goes from vague to specific.²

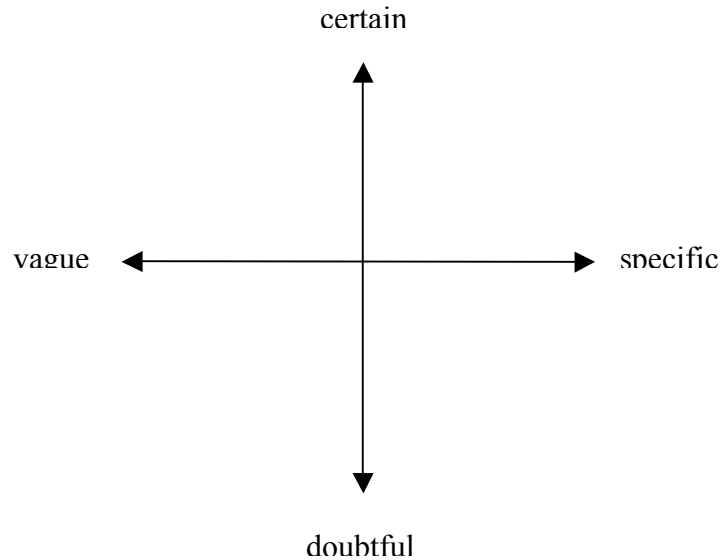
You can plot your belief in any proposition on this graph. We’ll look at belief in Christianity in general. You could plot where your belief is on this graph in terms of Christianity. You could plot where you *were* before, say prior to college. You could also plot where you think your belief in Christianity may be in the future. You could also plot

¹ Much of the material for this lesson comes from *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* Chapters 1-5 by James W. Sire. If you see page numbers referenced, it from this book.

² P.22-24. I have switched Sire’s horizontal axis so that the left is vague and the right is specific. It seems to me helpful to use the typical Cartesian graph of increasing specificity from left to right (rather than increasing vagueness).

where you think other people appear to be and compare what they actually wrote. We could have all sorts of interesting conversations with this simply graph!

Go ahead and plot your belief in Christianity today, in the past, and the future.



DIFFERENT INFLUENCES ON BELIEF (pp.29-39)

Sociological Reasons

1. My parents believe X.
2. My friends believe X.
3. My society believes X.
4. My culture generally holds X.
5. X is all I know about.
6. X is all I understand.
7. Communities brainwash people into believing X.

Psychological Reasons

1. X gives meaning, purpose, and direction to my life.
2. X gives me a sense of identity.
3. X relieves guilt and fear of a future in hell; it gives me a sense of peace.
4. X makes me feel good.
5. X is a crutch for those who can't stand reality.

Postmodern Psychological Reasons

1. One should believe only what one wants to believe.
2. One should believe in order for anything to exist, including the believer.

Religious Reasons

1. My pastor/guru/religious authority figure told me. I read it in a book (Bible, Qur'an/Rig Vedas).
2. Miracles prove the truth of X.
3. I have a direct experience of God.
4. I have had a profoundly deep religious experience.

Philosophical Reasons

1. X is true.
2. X is reasonable.
3. X is logical.
4. There is empirical evidence for X.
5. I have experienced X.
6. X gives the best explanation for the tough issues of life.

CONSIDERING THE DIFFERENT FACTORS

Sociological Context: *Only causes, no good reasons*

Some group believes X, so I believe X.
Group could be parents, friends, society, culture, etc.

But these are *causes* and not *reasons*.

Causes act on us without passing through our self-conscious cognitive faculties. A reason is a rational justification for our belief. Reasons enter the picture when we become old enough to be intellectually and morally aware. (pp.47-8)

So here we are, people formed and shaped by factors over which we have no control, yet moral agents responsible for our beliefs. Sociological factors are only causes. As thoughtful adults, we will find no justification for our beliefs there. (p.49)

Personal Context: *Surely Powerful, But Are They Real?*

Personal experience—whether one's own or reports of others'—has an ambivalent value. On the one hand, there is nothing stronger or more compelling than seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting, touching, even smelling for oneself... Experience can be positive evidence for belief. But there is a negative side as well, a limitation to experience as a judge of a person's character... No amount of experience can take us all the way to philosophical certitude... Sometimes we see only what we want to see. (pp.60-1)

Crutches are very important to people with broken legs. Like crutches to help the injured to walk, beliefs indeed provide support for hope. The problem with crutches is that some of them do not hold the weight put on them. They break under stress. Beliefs that are not strong enough will not hold us through the agonies of life. Beliefs that are not true will not hold us beyond death. (p.60)

Religious Dimension: Accepted on Authority, Confirmed by Experience

In Sire's experience, this was oddly the most uncommon answer among college students. And after considering this idea, we quickly realize something about believing X because it's in the Bible or some other religious book. We accept religious belief based upon religious authority.

This may seem unacceptable and naïve, until we realize that we accept beliefs based upon authority in almost every other area of life.

We go to doctors when we are ill because we trust them to know a lot about what might ail us. They have studied and practiced for years... That doesn't prove the truth of the doctor's diagnosis and therapy, ... but the evidence for therapy is overwhelming.

We ask physicists about the physical shape of the universe; few of us have any idea how they have arrived at the answers they give. We realize that the subject requires more study and more mathematical ability than most of us have. We trust the community of physicists to weed out the eccentric pseudoscientist who could easily fool most of us.

We accept the authority of the auto mechanic who fixes our cars, the butcher who helps us select the best cut of steak for a special dinner, the librarian who finds the unfindable book for us. In short, we accept authority all the time. And we learn by experience whether the trust we have placed in those authorities has been misplaced. (p.65)

Philosophic Dimension: What We Need is Truth, What is Real

There are many causes operating in the development of our beliefs. Family, friends, the media, society, culture all impinge on us, and it is only within their context that our beliefs develop. The older we become, the more our mind and character mature, the more conscious we become of our beliefs and the most responsible we become for them.

Our hopes and desires tug at us, demanding fulfillment. We want security, a sense of direction and purpose... We would like to be happy...

Our experience... weighs our beliefs, sometimes confirming them, sometimes challenging them, sometimes totally undermining the foundations on which our hopes have rested. Our religious experiences overwhelm us with their intensity without guaranteeing that what is intense points to the way things really are.

Behind all these reasons, what we really need is the truth. Is there any hope of finding it? (p.78)

Next Week: How to Grow as a Thinker, Reader, and Believer