

To believe is to believe true

Howard Sankey

I.

The aim of this note is to make the following point. When we believe a proposition, we believe the proposition to be true. Hence, to believe is to believe true.¹

I believe that snow is white. If I believe that snow is white, I believe it to be true that snow is white. In believing that snow is white, I thereby believe it to be true that snow is white. In other words, if I believe that snow is white, I believe that ‘Snow is white’ is true. I believe with respect to the proposition that snow is white that it is true.

The point may be stated in general terms. To believe a proposition is to believe that the proposition is true. It is to believe, with respect to the proposition that forms the content of the belief, that that proposition is true.

From this, it follows that there is something that one cannot believe in relation to a proposition that one believes. Namely, it is not possible to believe with respect to a proposition that one believes that that very proposition is false. It is not possible to believe, of a proposition that one believes, that the proposition is false. For believing a proposition just is to believe that it is true.

Of course, it is possible to believe that a proposition is false. For example, I believe it to be false that snow is green. I believe that “Snow is green” is false. When one believes that a proposition is false one does not believe the proposition. One disbelieves the proposition. One believes its negation. To revert to the example, one believes that it is not the case that

snow is green. In believing that a proposition is false, one believes that the negation of the proposition is true. What one believes is the negation of the proposition, not the proposition.

It should be noted that it is possible to neither believe nor disbelieve a proposition. There may be cases in which one has no basis to form either a belief in a proposition or in the negation of the proposition. In such cases, one withholds judgement or suspends belief with respect to the proposition. My focus here is not on cases of suspension of belief. My focus is on what is involved in the positive attitude of believing a proposition.

II.

What is the relationship between the idea of belief and the fact that if one believes a proposition, then one believes it to be true?

It is tempting to say that it is part of the concept of belief that what it is to have a belief is to believe the content of the belief to be true. Someone who denies that to believe a proposition is to believe that the proposition is true fails to understand what is meant by the term 'believe'. They fail to grasp the concept of belief. In short, it is tempting to think that it is analytic to the concept of belief that to believe is to believe true. If one believes with respect to the content of a belief that it is false, then one does not believe it. Believing the content of a belief just is to believe that the content is true.

There is perhaps a different way to make the same point. One might say that to believe true is essential to belief. It is essential to the attitude of belief that when one believes a proposition, one believes the proposition to be true. What it is for an attitude to be a belief just is that the content of the belief is taken to be true. It is constitutive of the attitude of belief that the proposition that forms the content of the belief is believed to be true.

Of course, to be analytic and to be essential are not the same. On the one hand, to say that to believe true is analytic to the concept of belief is to make a point about the concept of belief. On the other hand, to say that it is essential to the attitude of belief that one believe its content to be true is to say something about the attitude. The first is a point about a concept. The second is a point about the mental state picked out by the concept.

To be analytic and to be essential are distinct. But, in relation to the present point, it is not clear how to distinguish between the two. It is not clear how to distinguish between saying that it is analytic to the concept of belief that one believes the content of the belief to be true and saying that it is essential to the attitude of belief that the content of the belief is to be believed true. Thus, for present purposes, I shall not distinguish between the two. My point, then, can be put either in terms of analyticity of the concept or the essential nature of the mental state.

III.

Can any sense be made of the idea that belief does not entail belief in the truth of a proposition?

It might be suggested that it is a fact of our psychology that to believe P is to believe that it is true that P. This is just a fact about our ordinary mental make-up. But perhaps there may be non-standard psychologies. For example, an epistemic subject might be irrational in some way. Or perhaps computer scientists succeed in building a computer with artificial intelligence, but the computer is capable of a non-standard form of belief not open to ordinary believers. In such a non-standard psychology, belief is the reverse of ordinary belief. When one believes a proposition what one believes is that the proposition is false. That is, one believes the content of one's belief to be false.

This is not a successful counter-example to the idea that in believing a proposition one believes that the proposition is true. The only sense that can be made of the idea that one believes the content of one's belief to be false is that the belief just is the belief that the proposition is false. One does not believe that P. Rather, one believes that not-P. The imagined non-standard psychology is not in fact a case in which one succeeds in believing a proposition to be false rather than believing it to be true. Instead, it is a situation in which one believes that the proposition is false.

IV.

A further possible counter-example arises from constructive empiricism in the philosophy of science (van Fraassen, 1980). The key notion for the constructive empiricist is the notion of empirical adequacy. A theory is empirically adequate if all of its observational claims are true. By contrast with empirical adequacy, a true theory is one all of whose observational and non-observational consequences are true.

For the constructive empiricist, the appropriate attitude for a scientist to take toward a highly confirmed theory is to accept the theory as empirically adequate. Instead of believing that a highly confirmed theory is true, the theory should be taken to be empirically adequate. In accepting a theory as empirically adequate, one believes that the observational consequences of the theory are true. But one suspends judgement with respect to the non-observational consequences of the theory.

It might be thought that acceptance of a theory as empirically adequate is a counter-example to the thesis that to believe is to believe true. For in accepting the theory as empirically adequate, one believes the theory to be empirically adequate rather than true.

Here it is important to note that the attitude of believing that a theory is empirically adequate does not constitute a unified attitude of belief. There are in fact two belief modalities involved in the belief that a theory is empirically adequate. On the one hand, a scientist believes with respect to the observational consequences of the theory that those consequences are true. Hence, the scientist believes those consequences. On the other hand, the scientist does not believe that the non-observational consequences are true. To the contrary, the scientist withholds judgement with respect to the non-observational consequences of the theory.

Acceptance of a theory as empirically adequate does not constitute a counter-example to the thesis that to believe is to believe true. It does not constitute a counter-example because the attitude of acceptance as empirically adequate is in fact two attitudes. It combines the state of belief in the observational consequences of a theory with the state of suspension of belief with respect to the non-observational consequences of the theory. Another way of putting the point is to say that, if one were to believe that a theory is empirically adequate, then what one believes is that the observational consequences of the theory are true. There is no belief with respect to the non-observational consequences of the theory.

V.

Another possible counter-example derives from the T-scheme. According to this line of thought, it is not that it is analytic to the concept of belief that one believes that the content of one's belief is true. Nor is believing to be true essential to the attitude of belief. Rather, the reason that one believes that the propositional content of a belief is true is simply a matter of semantic ascent in accordance with the T-scheme.

To see this objection, suppose that an epistemic subject believes that P. The T-scheme tells us that 'P' is true iff P. Given that the subject believes P, and the T-scheme, it follows

that the subject believes that 'P' is true. The reason that one believes the content of a belief to be true is due to the fact that if one believes P, then, via the T-scheme, one thereby believes P to be true. Given the T-scheme, to believe that P just is to believe that P is true.

Because of the way that the T-scheme governs the transition from belief that P to belief that P is true, there is no need to say either that believing true is analytic to the concept of belief or that it is essential to the attitude of belief.

One problem with this line of thought is that an epistemic subject need not be aware of the T-scheme. The subject may believe that P. They might not be aware of the T-scheme. Hence, they are unable to infer from their belief that P together with the T-scheme that they believe that P is true.

But the main problem with this line of thought is that the transition from the belief that P to the belief that P is true is an inference. The subject infers from their belief that P to the belief that P is true. This inference is licensed by the T-scheme. But the relationship between the belief that P and the belief that P is true is not an inferential relation. Rather, it is constitutive of the belief that P that one believes that P is true. That's just what it is to believe that P.

VI.

The point I have sought to make here may appear to be a truism. If so, that supports the point. But I have sought to bolster the point by supplying further reasons to think that it is a truism. If the point appears not to be a truism, then the reasons I have provided may serve to weaken that appearance.

The point may also seem to be a trivial one. But, if that is so, it is worth noting that the making of the point is not trivial. Try explaining it to someone who does not already accept it.

References

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¹ The point is sometimes made in passing in relation to the aim of belief (e.g. Engel 2004, p. 77; Williams 1973, p. 137). The point is not that the aim of belief is truth (e.g. Whiting 2012). Nor is the point that the norm by which belief is judged is the norm of truth (e.g. McHugh 2012). The point is conceptually prior to discussion of the aim or norm of truth. It is a constitutive point: namely, that to believe that P just is to believe that P is true.