



Discussion

Two paradigms for religious representation: The physicist and the playground (a reply to Levy)



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ABSTRACT

In an earlier issue, I argue (2014) that psychology and epistemology should distinguish religious credence from factual belief. These are distinct cognitive attitudes. Levy (2017) rejects this distinction, arguing that both religious and factual “beliefs” are subject to “shifting” on the basis of fluency and “intuitiveness.” Levy’s theory, however, (1) is out of keeping with much research in cognitive science of religion and (2) misrepresents the notion of factual belief employed in my theory. So his claims don’t undermine my distinction. I conclude by suggesting some approaches to empirically testing our views.

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0. Introduction: Representation-discrepant behavior

Should psychology and epistemology recognize *religious credence* as a distinct attitude from *factual belief*? In other words, is the cognitive attitude one typically has when one “believes” Jesus Christ is alive *different* from the attitude one typically has when one “believes” one’s cat is alive? Both underlying attitudes—ways of relating to and processing representations—can be called “belief.”¹ But I argue (2014), appealing to a broad range of evidence, that they are different. My longer paper gives a full theoretical description of the difference, but for present purposes we can think of factual belief as a very matter-of-fact way of relating to descriptive contents, while religious credence is a reverential, identity-constituting way of relating to descriptive contents. Levy (2017), however, attempts to deny my distinction by appealing to the “fluency” and “intuitiveness” of processing various representations in order to explain the relevant data. If fluency and intuitiveness can

do the explanatory work, there is no need to posit my distinction. Or so he seems to think.²

Levy and I do agree about an important fact that frames our disagreement. Religious “believers” often do not act on their internal religious representations in ways one would expect, if those representations were straightforward, fluently processed factual beliefs (however one understands those terms). Here are some examples.

Once-a-week Christians, against whom preachers rail, exemplify that many Christian “belief” attitudes are inoperative six days a week. And Edelman (2009) shows that *on Sundays* people in predominantly Christian states look at pornography less than the rest of the population, but they look at it *more* during the rest of the week. Charitable giving shows the opposite pattern (Malhotra, 2008). A factual belief that *God is always watching*, however, should lower pornography use to some extent *every day*, so it’s puzzling that internal representations with *God-is-watching* contents don’t inhibit “sinful” behavior more generally (Dennett, 2006).

Members of the Vezo tribe in Madagascar, to give a cross-cultural example, report different things about ongoing psychological capacities of deceased ancestors, depending on whether they are probed in a ritual context (Harris & Astuti, 2008). They are less likely to say that an ancestor can *see* or *think* when asked in a non-ritual setting, and Levy and I agree that this merits reflection.

² There are several components to Levy’s paper. For reasons of space, I focus on those I take to be most central.

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¹ It seems likely, however, that when people use *verbs* for such mental states, they are more likely to use “believe” for religious credences and “think” for factual beliefs (Heiphetz, Landers, and Van Leeuwen, in preparation). Note also that this kind of distinction doesn’t *only* apply to *religious credence* and *factual belief*. Bloom (2015), for example, generalizes my original notion of credence into the political/ideological realm.

Similar results emerge in studies in Spain (Harris & Giménez, 2005), in Austin, Texas, and on the Melanesian island Vanuatu (Watson-Jones, Busch, Legare, & Harris, 2016).

A religious geoscientist, to turn to a different domain, can compartmentalize his “belief” in Young Earth Creationism, ensuring that it has no impact on his scientific thinking and practices in the lab or in the field, though he professes it in church (Dean, 2007; Marcus Ross, personal communication). But that is strange, since if he factually believed it, he should think that such apparent knowledge³ might lead to breakthrough.

And Shariff, Willard, Andersen, and Norenzayan (2015) offer a meta-analysis that shows religious *primes* make a significant difference to how prosocial “believers” are. Religious “beliefs” do not increase prosociality (such as charitable giving) all the time, but only when they are primed. Muslim shopkeepers in Morocco, relatedly, selected the most altruistic option for charitable giving in one-shot games *within a short time after hearing the call to prayer*, but the effect was transient.

Interestingly, the data collected on the amount of time that had passed since the most recent call to prayer suggests that this effect is short-lived. While 100% of participants who responded while the prayer was audible chose the most charitable option, less than 50% of those who responded in the 20 min following the call to prayer did.

[Duhaime, 2015: 595]

Studies show that representing God as punitive underlies religious prosociality: God punishes people who do not cooperate (Norenzayan et al., 2016; Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2016). So it is puzzling why many people are motivated to avoid divine punishment *only in certain contexts*. The *brevity* of the prosociality effect is striking.

To have a general term, let’s use “representation-discrepant behavior” to refer to behaviors that diverge from what one would do, if one’s relevant “beliefs” were straightforward, well-understood factual beliefs. There are many kinds of representation-discrepant behavior. The examples above are *religious representation-discrepant behaviors*.

This brings us to the disagreement: while wholeheartedly agreeing it exists, Levy and I have different strategies for explaining religious representation-discrepant behavior.

Levy’s explanation is that the processing of many religious beliefs is *disfluent*, which makes them lack “intuitiveness.” That means they can be hard to think with, to understand, and sometimes to retrieve (disfluency), which makes a difference to whether they “seem to be true to the agent” (intuitiveness, 110). *Context*, however, makes a difference. In religious contexts, religious beliefs are processed more fluently, so they may become intuitive and ripe for guiding behavior. Levy writes, “Processing fluency is sensitive to context, because context affects whether representations are retrieved, how easily they are retrieved and how fluently they are processed” (115).

My explanation for religious representation-discrepant behavior is that many religious “beliefs”—*religious credences*—are not factual beliefs in the first place. Rather, they are secondary cognitive attitudes, which do not play as widespread a role in guiding inference and action as factual beliefs do, though they still provide normative orientation and are identity constituting (among other distinctive properties). Thus, religious credences often cease guiding actions in non-religious contexts for reasons that, *contra* Levy, have nothing to do with how fluently they are processed. Ideas like *God is watching* or *God punishes sinners* are perfectly easy to understand (they are fluent and intuitive), regardless of context. The fact

that “believers” often do not act in accord with those ideas is due to their *attitude* to them, which is religious credence, not factual belief. Reverential attitudes are setting dependent in ways that matter-of-fact attitudes are not.

Levy’s argument against my position appears to have two aspects. First, he thinks his appeal to lack of intuitiveness explains the relevant data. Second, he thinks that “factual beliefs” themselves are also subject to context-based “shifting.” Taking these points together, he seems to think there is no basis for distinguishing religious credence from factual belief. The main purpose of this present paper, correspondingly, is to make two points:

1. Levy is wrong to think that the relevant religious ideas are not intuitive; that view is out of keeping with a mountain of empirical research in cognitive science of religion.
2. Levy’s title claim—that religious beliefs are factual beliefs—is only plausible if one uses the phrase “factual belief” in a loose way that misrepresents the meaning I give it as a term of art, so his arguments don’t logically impinge on the distinction I in fact draw.

Since Levy’s explanation strategy is not likely to work (point 1), that leaves my approach as a contender for explaining the sorts of religious representation-discrepant behavior mentioned above. After making points 1 and 2 in Sections 1 and 2, I conclude by suggesting research directions that could both test and deepen my view.

Two brief logical points are necessary before moving on. First, Levy and I both recognize that religious behavior is a complex and varied enough domain that no single theory will cover *all* the psychologically interesting data—far from it. So our dispute is about which theory will be more fruitful for explaining patterns in the extant research and generating more research in the future. Second, there is an asymmetry between our positions: Levy denies my distinction, but I don’t deny that disfluency and lack of intuitiveness are real phenomena. The result is that I can hold that *some* religious credences are unintuitive, like those that encode theologically abstruse doctrines; I just don’t think that *all* or even *most* are, which is why Levy’s approach won’t work.

1. Intuitive religious representations

Levy thinks the un-intuitiveness of many religious beliefs resembles the un-intuitiveness of scientific beliefs: “they do not differ from many scientific beliefs in being counterintuitive” (112). Elsewhere, Levy assimilates the “practical setting dependence” of religious beliefs to that of beliefs about *physics*: “adults with college level education in mechanics invoke folk physics to explain and predict motion... This exhibits the practical setting dependence of factual beliefs...” (111). While this passage doesn’t use the phrase “practical setting dependence” according to my intended meaning, it does show that Levy thinks much the same thing is going on when religious “beliefs” fail to guide behavior as when reflective beliefs about physics fail.

Simply put, Levy thinks the religious person who does not act on her religious “beliefs” is like the physicist who does not use $d = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$ to estimate in real time when a ball will hit the ground: the processing is too unintuitive to be real-time workable.⁴ On

³ As Sperber writes, “From the point of view of the ‘believing’ subject, factual beliefs are just plain ‘knowledge,’ while representational beliefs could be called ‘convictions,’ ‘persuasions,’ ‘opinions,’ ‘beliefs,’ and the like” (1985: 52). This perspective suggests that Marcus Ross’s “belief” in Young Earth Creationism does not lie on the factual belief side of the divide.

⁴ Physicists have sophisticated theories of how the world works. But importantly, there are many ways in which people’s *intuitive physics* departs from physicists’ theories, *even among the physicists themselves* (McCloskey, 1983). Even physics teachers make errors about factors that influence how fast a wheel rolls down a hill or in predicting the trajectory of a ball shooting out of a curved tube (Proffitt & Kaiser, 2006). That’s because doing theory-based calculations requires slow, reflective thinking. Processing physical theory is not *intuitive*. So here is one paradigm to which religious representation-discrepant behavior might be compared: the physicist who doesn’t act on her theoretical physical beliefs outside of academic settings *because those theories aren’t intuitive*.

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