Religious credence is not factual belief

Neil Van Leeuwen *

Department of Philosophy & Neuroscience Institute, Georgia State University, United States
Department of Philosophy, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

I argue that psychology and epistemology should posit distinct cognitive attitudes of religious credence and factual belief, which have different etiologies and different cognitive and behavioral effects. I support this claim by presenting a range of empirical evidence that religious cognitive attitudes tend to lack properties characteristic of factual belief, just as attitudes like hypothesis, fictional imagining, and assumption for the sake of argument generally lack such properties. Furthermore, religious credences have distinctive properties of their own. To summarize: factual beliefs (i) are practical setting independent, (ii) cognitively govern other attitudes, and (iii) are evidentially vulnerable. By way of contrast, religious credences (a) have perceived normative orientation, (b) are susceptible to free elaboration, and (c) are vulnerable to special authority. This theory provides a framework for future research in the epistemology and psychology of religious credence.

© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

0. Introduction

Many philosophers and cognitive scientists have a habit of using the word "belief" as though it refers to one simple sort of cognitive attitude. And when we talk about differences in "beliefs," we tend to focus on differences in *contents*, without considering the possibility that we are lumping distinct *attitudes* under this one word. But, I will argue, if we examine the matter carefully, we will soon find empirical reasons to think this habit is a source of confusion. Just as the word "jade" refers to two different substances[1] from the standpoint of modern chemistry, "belief," we will see, refers to at least two different kinds of attitude from the standpoint of a well-developed, empirically-informed theory of cognitive attitudes.[2]

Three interesting phenomena, broadly religious, help motivate this view.

Consider, first, Astuti's and Harris' (2008: 734) description of the results of their experiments with the Vezo tribe in Madagascar, which focused on how the Vezo represent physical and psychological properties of the deceased:

> Vezo do not believe in the existence and power of the ancestors in the abstract, but they believe in them when their attention is on tombs that have to be built, on dreams that have to be interpreted, and on illnesses that have to be explained and resolved. In other contexts, death is represented as total annihilation, and in these contexts it would be misleading to insist that Vezo believe in the existence of ancestral spirits.

If they are right, then being in the ritual-religious setting toggles the Vezo mind toward using a special class of "beliefs," a class that largely does not guide behavior outside the ritual-religious setting. If this is so, then different classes of "belief" representations have different functional properties.

---

* Address: Georgia State University, P. O. Box 3994, Atlanta, GA 30302-3994, United States.

[1] Jadeite: $NaAlSi_2O_6$. Nephrite: $Ca_2(Mg, Fe)_5Si_8O_{22}(OH)_2$.

[2] Cognitive attitudes, like factual beliefs and hypotheses, represent *how situations are or might be*. They contrast with conative attitudes, like desires and hopes, that represent *how situations are to be made*—how the agent would like things to be (Shah & Velleman, 2005).

Sauvayre (2011), second, describes stages individuals go through in exiting a cult. She finds in 71% of cases that a *conflict of values* triggers what she calls the last stage of doubt, which results in an individual's finally exiting the cult. A cult member, for example, may conclude that the "guru" behaved immorally. *This* realization, more than cognition of empirical evidence, leads to departure from the cult and to a shedding of its "beliefs." But humans are also capable of giving up at least some "beliefs" in response to evidence. If I believe (so to speak) the water cooler is full and then *see* it has no water in it, I give up this "belief." This contrast suggests that some "beliefs" respond to perceptual evidence, while others respond to a special kind of perceived leader, a leader whose prestige biases their transmission (Henrich, 2009), such that loss of this special prestige in the eyes of the adherent can result in loss of corresponding "belief."

Third, Boyer (2001) gives examples that suggest people elaborate inventively on religious "beliefs" they hold. He mentions how the details of Greek *exotiká* (demons or devil incarnations) change over time (82); how local Indian practitioners of Hinduism invent deities not described in official Hindu texts (282–3); and how Kwaio religious specialists make things up on the fly about the ancestors they revere, "improvising all sorts of new details about these agents" (302). Examples can be multiplied. With other "beliefs," however, people are far less inventive. I believe, in a mundane way, there are almonds in my cupboard and not cashews; nor do I invent "beliefs" that the almonds are roasted or that there are cashews, though I may *imagine* such things. So some "beliefs" generate other "beliefs" *of their kind* by creative processes; others do not.

These phenomena, to which I shall return, deserve to be captured by a thesis that can guide further psychological and epistemic inquiry. I hold:

> **Religious Credence Thesis**: psychology and epistemology should posit distinct cognitive attitudes of *religious credence* and *factual belief*, which have different characteristic etiologies (how they're formed and revised) and different forward effects (downstream consequences).[3]

My aim is twofold. First, I review further evidence that supports this thesis. This aim is achieved in preliminary fashion, since more evidence is relevant than I can document here. The thesis, in conjunction with the theory that elaborates on it, is meant to guide further research. Second, accordingly, I present a theory that makes precise the differences between the two attitudes I posit. This theory locates religious credence and factual belief in relation to other cognitive attitudes, like *fictional imagining, hypothesis, acceptance in a context*, and *assumption for the sake of argument*. I argue that religious credence has key features in common with these latter attitudes that that distinguish them from factual belief.

In Section 1, I clarify my methodological framework and explain how my claims should be understood. In Section 2, I present and motivate my theory of factual beliefs; factual belief is an attitude we typically take toward contents so mundane as to be not worth mentioning, like *dogs have noses, silver is a metal*, or *the faucet spouts water*. In Section 3, I present empirical evidence that strongly suggests many religious cognitive attitudes lack the defining characteristics of factual beliefs. If this is right, we should define a different notion to capture distinctive features of those religious attitudes; I do this in Section 4, where I characterize religious credence in conjunction with motivating psychological, anthropological, and historical data. I conclude, in Section 5, with two normative principles, Balance and Immunity, designed to help us think about which cognitive attitudes belong to a well-functioning human cognitive system and by outlining the epistemological and psychological research programs my theory suggests.

Here's a snapshot of my theory. Factual beliefs have three characteristics beyond their Davidsonian/decision-theoretic role in generating action (Davidson, 1963). They (i) are practical setting independent, (ii) cognitively govern other attitudes, and (iii) are evidentially vulnerable. (i) means factual beliefs are used in practical reasoning and action choice across practical settings; (ii) means they are the basis for drawing inferences among other cognitive attitudes; and (iii) means they tend to be extinguished by evidence contrary to them. Religious credences generally lack (i)–(iii). By way of contrast, religious credences (a) have perceived normative orientation, (b) are susceptible to free elaboration, and (c) are vulnerable to special authority. Factual beliefs do not characteristically have properties (a)–(c).[4]

"Jade," as mentioned, is analogous to "belief." Historically and pre-theoretically, its class of referents appeared unified. The relevant data, viewed with the right theoretical apparatus, revealed otherwise. "Star" is also analogous. Both Venus and the North Star are "stars" in everyday speech. Ordinary language delivers one appellation for two distinct but *apparently* similar phenomena, a satellite of the sun and a burning ball of gas much farther away. These examples reveal a *desideratum* on scientific theories: scientific theories recognize distinct phenomena, despite conflations of pre-theoretic speech. The theory and vocabulary that follow aim to satisfy this *desideratum* within cognitive science of religion.

1. Clarifications and methodological assumptions

Sperber (1996: 16) expresses the need for more clarity about *belief*. He lists a number of notions anthropologists have used and discussed, ranging from 'taboo' to 'totemism' and including 'belief,' and observes the following:

> The vagueness or arbitrariness of these terms has been repeatedly pointed out. Yet, in spite of this critical work, there are no signs that anthropologists are converging on a set of progressively better defined, better motivated notions.… so, if we want proper theoretical terms in anthropology, we should construct altogether new ones.

---

[3] Having different characteristic etiologies and forward effects does not imply no *overlap* in terms of forward effect and etiology. There is much overlap. But there are also very important differences.

[4] As I emphasize later, mixed attitudes exist as well. For example, I discuss intuitive beliefs at the end of Section 2 and extremist credences in the Conclusion.