

Replies to Gäb, Schmidt and Scott on Religious Belief

Tim Crane

I am very grateful to Sebastian Gäb, Eva Schmidt and Michael Scott for their generous and thoughtful comments on my paper. While there are some significant differences of opinion, it was gratifying to find some points of agreement. In particular, each of them accepts that there is something to what I am calling the 'puzzle': the apparent failure, in paradigm cases of religious belief, to integrate one's beliefs, and a common lack of concern with this among believers. Does the failure to integrate what one says and does show that we need to treat what are commonly called beliefs as different psychological phenomena? I do not pretend that this is a new question, or that I have a fully worked out answer, but I am happy that each of my commentators treats the question as a serious one.

However, each contributor has criticisms of my proposals in the paper, and here I try to address them briefly.

Reply to Gäb

Sebastian Gäb adds a beautiful example to the two given in my paper: the use of ancient Greek *lekythoi* in funerary rites. Gäb uses this example to argue, plausibly, that the practices involved in many religious rituals are not the result of belief at all. If anything, belief comes in at a subsequent stage of the practice, and does not govern it.

Gäb is right, I think, that there can be such cases. And they clearly involve important phenomena which need to be given a central place in an understanding of religion. But this point does not threaten my overall view of religious belief. Indeed, one main message of my work on religious belief is that participation in ritual is one thing that many 'cognitivists' (for example, New Atheists) find hard to make sense of. And in my paper, I explicitly acknowledge that people's participation in rituals may not involve belief. But are all cases like this? I say no.

What Gäb would have to show, to make his point, is that there are *no* cases where belief (or some kind of mental configuration) constrains or gives rise to ritualistic action. All he shows, in his valuable discussion, is that there are cases where it does not. I agree with him that there are such cases. But I also think that there are also cases, some of them central to religious practice

and doctrine, where religious belief does produce ritual action, and where the belief seems to be sincerely held, and yet the belief cannot be reconciled in its content with other things the believer believes. These are the things that give rise to the puzzle.

Reply to Schmidt

Schmidt makes two points against my view of religious belief. The first is against my view of belief in general. She argues that I cannot argue from the existence of the puzzle to the fact that religious beliefs are indeterminate in their content, since similar puzzles can be raised for explicit endorsements in conscious judgements — and I claim these are not similarly indeterminate in content. So either whatever is going on with the puzzle is not specific to belief (considered as an unconscious state, as opposed to conscious judgement).

This is an important point, and shows me that I should not argue from the existence of the puzzle to indeterminacy in belief content. I hadn't myself aimed to have such a direct argument to indeterminacy; my argument was more of the following shape.

There is a puzzle about religious belief, about how believers fail to integrate their religious beliefs with their other beliefs. On a standard understanding of belief, this is hard to understand. Two options are: to say believers are simply irrational, or to say this is not really belief. My approach is to question the standard understanding. On my alternative view, the concept of belief (and other attitude concepts) are used to model unconscious mental dispositions. As such, which specific propositional content is associated with a belief depends on a range of explanatory concerns and differences in context; so there is no such thing as 'the' unique content associated with a particular disposition. This picture, I think, makes good sense of a lot of what is called religious belief as genuine belief, and this is what my examples are supposed to illustrate.

Where does that leave conscious assertions or acts of judgement? I agree with Schmidt that these could exhibit the puzzle too. (And this, *pace* Gäb, is true of the non-religious cases too.) What this means, I think, is that we need another understanding of this kind of failure of integration in conscious thinking in both religious and non-religious cases. Belief involves an ideal, and this ideal — consistency, rationality, coherence — are things that also apply to conscious judgement. Why do we fail to meet the ideal in some cases, while still believing/judging, in some cases? This is a question to which I plan to turn in forthcoming work.

Schmidt's second point is that the normative constraints on religious beliefs are different from those on regular beliefs. Her argument for this is based on the currently popular paradigm for discussing so-called 'peer disagreement'. When two subjects are epistemic peers, in this very technical sense, and they encounter disagreement on some specific matter, then there seem to be two approaches recommended by standard formal epistemology: either stick with your position ('steadfastness') or meet your opponent half way ('conciliation'). But as Schmidt plausibly argues, neither approach can plausibly apply to religious belief; hence her conclusion about the different norms that apply here.

My response here is somewhat less conciliatory. Despite the evident ingenuity which has gone into the peer disagreement debate, I cannot get beyond my scepticism about its starting point, as Schmidt describes it. This is the idea of peer disagreement itself:

disagreement between believers who have fully exchanged all their relevant information and who are equals regarding intelligence and reasoning powers. In such disagreements, one person believes that p and the other person believes that not- p , so that only one of the two can be right. They have conflicting beliefs even though they are peers who have fully exchanged their evidence

There is a lot to say about such an imagined situation; but for the purposes of this brief response, I will only say that I have never been given any evidence that there can be such a thing. No plausible example has ever been given in the literature, and even a modest holism of belief should persuade us that it can never exist. So rather than try and approach the question of religious belief by assuming these normative constraints, I would prefer to question these constraints themselves. As above, there is more to be said of course; but I will leave it here for the time being.

Reply to Scott

Michael Scott objects to my conception of the puzzle, to my use of the concept of non-cognitivism, and to my brief proposal about how to think about religious phenomena. However, on all these three points, there is less real disagreement between me and Scott than it might seem from reading his commentary.

On the puzzle, Scott says that my formulation relies on an excessively demanding conception of belief. It is actually not clear what the demandingness consists in, nor that Scott's examples of less demanding conceptions (e.g. those of Shah and Velleman, or Evans) are really less demanding. But we can put that to one side, since in order to get the puzzle going, I did not assume anything more than what is contained in Georges Rey's comment about believers, which Scott apparently endorses. This is their 'lack of seriousness about filling in the details of how religious claims can be true, and their insensitivity to empirical evidence'. This is exactly what I was discussing in my examples, so why does Scott think it is opposed to my conception of the puzzle?

The answer, I suspect, is that Scott and I understand the significance of Rey's comment in a different way. Scott says that Rey's point is that 'religious commitments are not aimed at the truth'. I disagree: the practices of believers Rey describes are consistent with their having a concern with the truth. What they do not have is inferential integration, and it is this which is what gets the puzzle going, not an appeal to any more robust theory of belief. Scott says 'to arrive at a puzzle, we will need evidence that people with religious commitments pay no heed to considerations of consistency or explanatory coherence, or even deliberately violate these norms'. This is what I was taking myself to have described.

I do not think that Scott and I differ significantly on the nature of the puzzle, then. However, Scott also takes me to task for using the term 'non-cognitivism' to describe the view that religious beliefs are not really beliefs. He writes that I introduce the cognitivism/non-cognitivism 'framework based on treatments of the topic in metaethics, rather than in the philosophy of religion, apparently on the basis that realism/antirealism debates in the two fields are going to be the same'.

In fact, that was not my point. The comparison with non-cognitivism was only supposed to be an analogy. The idea was only that when people use fact-stating discourse which is normally used for the expression of belief, this can sometimes be used to express other attitudes — and I introduced ethical non-cognitivism just as one example of how this has been conceived in philosophy. I did not intend to draw any other conclusions about religious belief from this analogy. In fact, I agree with Scott's points about non-cognitivism — but they are irrelevant to my paper.

I also agree with Scott that 'if the utterances of [religious statements] conventionally express a non-cognitive state, nobody has yet identified a plausible candidate for what it is'.

Indeed, it is for this reason, together with the general conception of belief that I defend elsewhere, that I conclude that we should treat expressions of religious beliefs as beliefs. My scepticism goes further than Scott's, in that I very much doubt that the English words *acceptance*, *assent*, *assumption*, *acquiescence* (etc.) mark genuine distinctions in psychological reality. I do agree with him, though, that faith is something different, and something distinctively religious. I discuss it in my book, *The Meaning of Belief*.¹ But faith is not belief, and should not be confused with it. I hope Scott would agree with that too.

In general, then, I find more agreement with Scott than he finds with me. I put this down to his misinterpretations, or my failure to explain myself properly, or a bit of both.

I am pleased that Scott thinks that taking a 'descriptive' approach to religious phenomena is pushing at an open door. My experience has been the opposite; but perhaps this is because of the company we keep. On the philosophical side, I find that the fanatical New Atheism of Dawkins and others has a disappointingly large number of philosophical followers. Scott is right that sometimes religious belief is presented by these writers as if it is a wholly irrational state, not just a cognitive state that contingently fails to meet the norms of rationality. But interpreting them charitably, I think the New Atheist view is a paradigm of the cognitivist view I sketch in my paper: religious belief is a truth-directed attitude, and such belief is largely refuted by empirical evidence.

On the other hand, in anthropology, belief is often contrasted sharply with ritual, and the importance of belief is underplayed. From some anthropological perspectives, it is often said, religion is about ritual, not belief. And I want to resist this because, despite what I said in response to Gäb, belief and ritual should not be exclusively opposed. So this is the second reason why I do not find the door as open as Scott finds it.

Where I do differ more fundamentally from Scott, I think, is in my scepticism about the importance of the idea of a distinctively 'religious language'. Scott ends his comment by asking how we identify the phenomena to be explained or described. He describes two standard ways of identifying religious language — either by its subject-matter or its context of utterance. He says that I adopt both approaches, implying that this is a problem for my view.

My approach is rather that there is no such thing as a distinctively religious language. Or rather, to the extent there is such a thing, it should be understood in terms of the social

¹ *The Meaning of Belief* (Cambridge: MA, MIT Press 2017) pp.74-76.

phenomenon of religion, rather than in terms of some distinctively semantic, syntactic or pragmatic feature of language itself (and not even in terms of whatever it was that Wittgenstein called 'grammar'). As I argue in *The Meaning of Belief*, we should identify the religious phenomena by means of a proper account of the social/historical phenomenon of religion itself, and the psychological phenomena which it (contingently and non-systematically) relies on. Talk about 'religious language' has little role to play here, in my view.