

Is Belief Possible ?

A noteworthy conclusion of Needham's Belief, Language and Experience is that: "Indifference to the constraint of possibility is a curious property in a psychological verb, but it is certainly a distinctive mark of the notion of belief" (Needham, 1972; 66). While this statement is not the keystone of Needham's argument, it is still one of the more suggestive points on which his conclusion is founded, and for that reason provides an opportunity for re-examining its more important implications. Needham's conclusion that belief is indifferent to possibility comes by reflecting on Tertullian's paradox; an alternative approach is to consider the nature of possibility, which is, after all, a notion of some importance in the writings of Needham's acknowledged inspiration, Ludwig Wittgenstein. The complexity of Wittgenstein's writings is such that a dedicated adherent can find himself in the odd situation of disagreeing on almost every matter of philosophical importance with one who is equally entitled to wave his banner. This is the case concerning Needham's treatment of the possibility of belief; for while one must admire his handling of Wittgenstein's later writings, he makes not a single reference to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Indeed, this work is not even listed in his bibliography.

Wittgenstein's own repudiation of the Tractatus has contributed to its unpopularity, but since a reader's opinion of a book need never be the same as its author's, it is possible to see Wittgenstein's several published volumes as parts of a whole. Naturally, some parts of the Tractatus are more convincing than others, but there are, to use Wittgenstein's own metaphor, enough overlapping threads from one book to the next to string the ideas together. One of the arguments begun in the Tractatus that persists through the later writings is a certain notion of possibility. The argument of this essay is, in part, that had Needham used the word "possibility" in the sense imparted to it by Wittgenstein in the Tractatus, his statement concerning the possibility of belief would be reversed, and that this would in turn alter his reflections on the universality of belief.

Wittgenstein's idea of possibility can be seen in the following statements both from and about his work:

Thought can be of what is not the case. (Philosophical Investigations, # 95).

Thought is surrounded by a halo. - Its essence, logic, presents an order, in fact the a priori order of the world: that is, the order of possibilities, which must be common to both world and thought. (Philosophical Investigations # 97)

It is essential to things that they should be possible constituents of states of affairs. (Tractatus, # 2.011)

.... if a thing can occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be written into the thing itself. (Tractatus, # 2.012)

A thought contains the possibility of the situation of which it is the thought. What is thinkable is possible too. (Tractatus, # 3.02)

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. (Tractatus, # 5.6)

We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either. (Tractatus, # 5.61)

Just as the only necessity that exists is logical necessity, so too the only impossibility that exists is logical impossibility. (Tractatus, # 6.375)

'Possible' is for Wittgenstein what is expressible in language. (Maslow, 1961; 25)

An impossible thought is an impossible thought (5.61) - and that is why it is not possible to say what it is that cannot be thought. (Anscombe, 1959; 163)

.... 'possibility' must here be taken as excluding both certainty and impossibility. (Anscombe, 1959; 157)

These quotations need little elaboration. Thought, possibility and language are related. What can be thought can be put into language, what can be put into language is possible. Within the scheme of the Tractatus, none of these terms has anything to do with reality, the world, or the way things are. "Possibility" is a logical constraint. One can say of a statement whether it is possible or impossible before one holds it up against experience to see whether or not it is part of the world. If logical, then thinkable and hence possible. Examples are few, since it is difficult to think of things that are unthinkable. Suffice it to say that any abrogation of the rules of logic is an unthinkable state of affairs. The round square, the three-dimensional triangle, the bounded infinity, are all logically contradictory. They defy conception; there can be no general notion of what they would be if they were the case. Here, then, are legitimate uses of the words "possible", "impossible", "possibility", "impossibility". Considering this definition, what can Needham mean by saying that "to believe" shows an "indifference to the constraint of possibility"?

Putting the question "is belief possible" into Wittgenstein's terminology is to say: does believing describe a state of affairs? Is there a picture of what would be so if believing were the case?

Is the English concept "believing" thinkable? There are several approaches to these questions, but before elaborating them, it is expedient to consider their general nature, and, as a consequence, the nature of any statement that could be a satisfactory answer. The first point is quite obvious, that each of these questions is posed in the same language, and, therefore, that any answer to them will only be relevant to that one language, and only be valid for that one culture. These are general questions about a specific language, or way of thinking, and any answers to them will not necessarily reflect on other languages.

The next consideration is even more important: that these are questions of conceptualization, not fact. Every question here encountered is so framed that reference to the gross facts of language would be inappropriate. The generality of the statement sought as an answer demands the application of deductive reasoning. Thus, particular uses, or misuses, of "to believe" do not signify.

The problem is not whether every use of "to believe" describes a state of affairs, but whether any use of the verb describes a state of affairs, which is to say whether or not there is a possible use of "to believe" that describes a state of affairs; this after all is the problem: is belief possible? Such questions express no interest in examples of believing where other words can be substituted, but rather in those where

"believing" seems to find no substitute.

Because this essay flirts with the idea of meaning, it is essential to recognize that in order for a word to have a meaning, it need not have one meaning, or even a single clear meaning. Indeed, one can imagine few words with even remotely clear meanings. Likewise, a word need not picture a clear state of affairs for it to describe a state of affairs. After all, there is nothing self-contradictory, i.e. impossible, about vague, fuzzy, strange, preposterous, fantastical, or even silly meanings; they are meanings nonetheless. Furthermore, that "belief" may be an "odd-job" word is not a problem. Being an odd-job word would frustrate any attempt to define the essence of a word. But one can hardly imagine a lexicographer denying a word dictionary space because its meanings are unrelated. Words with entirely different meanings are still thinkable.

Now, on to the question: Is believing a state of affairs? The most tempting answer is one which begs the question yet deserves consideration. Insofar as one can only think about the world through the media of the language which one has received more or less passively, and the conception of belief is a part of the English-speaker's world, would it ever be possible to think of a world without belief? If English lacked "belief" and its related conceptions, what would the world be like, and how would one think about it? Or, if it has no meaning, why do people use it? These are questions that anyone who claims that believing has no meaning must answer. One would do well to heed the admonition of J. L. Austin:

.... our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon - the most favoured alternative method. (Austin, 1961: 182)

From this, one could also say that because people use and understand "believe" it obviously has a meaning; or, that people who use the word seem to know what it means. Thus, the argument that "belief" has a meaning gains weight from the inertia of culture. Because it is used so frequently, and because it is at the foundation of many important Western ideals, because it would be difficult to think about certain things at all without it, it is tempting to claim that its meaning is obvious. Thus, a Dr. Johnson of the idealist persuasion might argue. But, of course, this is no proof at all. In fact, this argument is only likely to convince those who stand in awe of language. Philosophers who see their task as purifying, or cleaning up language, as do many in the Wittgenstein tradition, would not sympathise with this. Nevertheless, the English language limps along, ignorant of the prunings and amputations of philosophers. If not awe, respect for language is vital. Cleaning up language can be likened to sweeping a dirt floor; the debris and dust are pushed away, but nothing is really changed; sweeping forever will not find the floorboards. So, one must find a meaning between the urge to destroy the mystifying elements of language and the pleasure of being awed by its venerable majesty.

The only substantial answer to the title of this essay is that believing does describe a state of affairs. This is certainly not easy to describe, for believing is unquestionably a difficult conception. Nevertheless, to begin with the obvious, "belief" is a word that never appears alone. Someone must always believe something. Only people believe, and they never believe

in nothing. So, believing always has an object; it is a relational conception. This necessitates a distinction between the believing itself being a state of affairs and its object being one. Sometimes "believing" seems not to describe a state of affairs because it is coupled with an inappropriate object. When one believes in the Loch Ness Monster, the Abominable Snowman, or a flat earth, it is more or less clear what one believes, after all people write books about these things; but it is not clear what one believes when one believes in a spatial object outside of space. Although one could say that the sentence "he believes in a round square" has no meaning, this is not a comment on the verb, because it is not the "believing" but the "round square" that is absurd. A purple cow is a state of affairs, a purple green-spot is not. Thus, the question "does believing describe a state of affairs" can only be answered in the context of a complete and legitimate use of the word in a sentence, bearing in mind that for this to be so it must have an object which is itself a state of affairs. The question, then, becomes: what is the state of affairs described by the relation of a believer to any possible object of belief? This state of affairs will define the verb.

A way into the idea of believing is through further consideration of the things that form its possible objects. What sort of things can one believe? Do they form a class? Certainly, one would not say of everything that he believed or disbelieved it, even if the word were being used very loosely. And, even when the word is used very strictly, there are not many things which the ordinary speaker would be inclined to believe or disbelieve. Only some things then are possible beliefs. About what sort of things can one say that one believes them? To what do belief statements apply? The key to this is found in Needham's own pages, where he lists as an attribute of believing its independence of "canons of reality" (Needham, 1972; 71). This is supported by a quotation from Wittgenstein to the effect that if there were evidence bearing on matters of belief, "this would destroy the whole business" (Wittgenstein, 1966; 56, quoted in Needham, 1972; 71). Here, then, is the nature of the words which one believes. The objects of belief statements have but a tangential relation to the world. One does not hold an object of belief up against the world to see if it exists or not; nor does comparison with the world render a belief statement true or false. Hence, the inevitable failure of attempts to hold an idea of God up against the world, or to infer a conception of God from the world. And due to the nature of believed objects, the adherent of the flat earth theory rejects all evidence. Also from this comes the sense of a believer saying, "though I cannot prove God, nor can you disprove Him". Likewise, one will never prove that the Loch Ness Monster does not exist. The objects of belief make no claim against reality, rather, to put it another way, they make only a claim against language, and, therefore, not against our world, but against our conception of all possible worlds. In this way, belief statements and their objects are radically different from ordinary discourse. In thinking about belief statements one cannot make a simple hop from language to verifiable reality. Belief statements are a projection of the possibilities of language onto a void beyond what one can conceive of as world. If one could make correspondences between beliefs and reality, one could be related to them in some way besides believing; if that were the case, beliefs could be experienced, known, proven, verified, dismissed, or refuted. It is because of the nature of beliefs themselves that the only relation one can have to them is to believe, or disbelieve. They are metaphysical.

In what state of affairs is the believer caught up? The relation of a believer to the non-experiential states of affairs called beliefs is that he is convinced of their truth, existence, or value. Because a legal proof is necessarily an after the fact interpretation of an episode, a jury never

"knows" that a man is guilty; and they never send a man to prison because they "think" he is guilty, but they would certainly do so if they "believed" in his guilt. This is a common situation where there is no alternative to convictions strong enough to be labeled "belief". These convictions may or may not be persistent, in evidence, the cause of action or the subject of doubt. These are qualities of belief that may be inseparable from it, but are not a necessary part of its conception and hence have no bearing on its existence as a state of affairs. Although Belief, Language and Experience (pp. 89-92) rejects "conviction" as a criterion of belief, this seems to be based on a confusion of essence with attribute. Admitting the truth of what Needham says, the problems he finds in the word "conviction" make it difficult to tell how firmly a person may believe something, or even whether in fact he does believe it, but they do not make it inconceivable that people do have convictions, and thus are irrelevant to the question of whether or not believing is a state of affairs. Throwing these objections aside then, the state of affairs described by believing is that of a man having convictions about non-experiential states of affairs. This is a simple picture of what it means to believe; but it is strong enough to suggest that belief is indeed possible.

What follows from the conclusion that believing is a state of affairs? Considering what states of affairs are, no concrete revelations could be expected. Belief is still an obstreperous word, both difficult to explain and difficult to do without. It is hard to imagine that philosophers will purge it either from the English language, or from the attempt of social science to produce technical languages. But if the argument that belief is possible is able to disclose but a small part of the substance of that idea, it does have the power to suggest the reasons for both the persistence and vagueness of the word. "Believing" is one of many non-experiential states of affairs. In fact, language is strewn with words describing what is beyond empirical experience, and few speakers ever notice the peculiarity of these conceptions. There are sound reasons for this being so, and they are suggested by reflecting on the nature of language and world and the intuitive semantic theory through which they are related.

The difference between experiential and non-experiential states of affairs suggests a similar distinction between factual and conventional discourse. The Tractatus is Wittgenstein's attempt to define factual discourse. Hence, his preoccupation with truth and the resultant development of the theory of verifiability. "Facts", as the Tractatus describes them, are produced by confirmation of propositions about the world which are derived from states of affairs. The "world" is the totality of known facts. One can think about states of affairs that are not facts, but, in Wittgenstein's scheme, when one speaks of "knowledge", one refers to facts, *i.e.* states of affairs that actually are the case. Thus, the alternatives are to speak of facts, factual discourse, or to speak of states of affairs that are not facts. The term "conventional discourse" is being suggested for the latter arrangement of speech. In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein sets out to define the limits of factual discourse, to partition what can be said from what cannot be said. In his treatment, factual discourse becomes coextensive with the language of science. Following from this, Wittgenstein argues that what can be known is equivalent to the sum of all propositions of natural science. Beyond natural science, one knows nothing; about which one knows nothing, one may not think; where there is no thought there can be no speech; and, finally, the concluding statement of the Tractatus: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 1921, # 7). The language of science, or factual discourse, encompasses only a fraction of linguistic phenomena, and the theory of meaning in Wittgenstein's Tractatus is intended to refer exclusively to this small part of the whole. That Wittgenstein recognized the limitations of his endeavour is clear: "We feel

that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched" (Wittgenstein, 1921. #6.52).

The difficulty of understanding belief statements is obviously not susceptible to any solution that is solely concerned with scientific discourse. Belief statements about non-experiential states of affairs are not verifiable in the same way as Wittgenstein's "facts". "Are you a trinitarian?" is of a different order than "Is that book red?". The latter question is articulated to the physical world and is answered on the basis of sensory experience. The former is not articulated to the physical world and sensory experiences are no help in answering it. But the puzzle of belief statements is that questions of this form are answered. How is this possible?

Assuming that belief statements are in the realm of conventional discourse, the problem is to define that realm. How does it differ from factual discourse: What semantic principles operate in this non-scientific domain? The statements of conventional discourse are neither true nor false, since there is no "thing" to which its words can be correlated. Conventional discourse floats free of the world. Even to verify the assertion "he is married" one must first of all know where "he" lives and what people in that country think about marriage. Or, to put it another way, one must know what the conventions are that deal with marriage. Knowing the convention, one could compare the history of the person concerned to see whether he had committed those actions deemed necessary for marriage to be in effect. The nature of a convention is obvious from the word itself. A convention is an agreement. Only people make agreements. Agreements are often broken; they are easily changed. Thus, conventions are human creations; words that have conventional meaning are artificial both in the Saussurian sense and in a more absolute sense. "Dog" is a human creation insofar as the same class of objects can just as easily be called "Hund", but only the word is artificial. Language permits the statement "a dog is a cat", but the world intervenes with this statement and contradicts it. In conventional discourse the thing itself is artificial; it is created and dispelled by human contract. A criminal may be called by some other equally arbitrary name, "Verbrecher" for example, but also the thing that is criminal today may not be criminal tomorrow. Language permits these statements: "Murder is criminal", "Priests are criminal", "Property owners are criminal", "Students are criminal"; but concerning the validity of each, the world is mute. This is the oddity of conventional discourse, that the world itself changes at man's whim. Or, to reverse Wittgenstein's aphorism, the conventional world does depend on man's will.

Statements made in the conventional domain are precisely those about which Wittgenstein advises us to be silent. Yet conventional discourse is a remarkably large part of what people do with speech, and the efforts of logical positivism have not yet prevailed against it. What then are the semantic principles of this segment of discourse. How do people think about conventional discourse? Oddly enough, Wittgenstein himself gives the answer to this, albeit by implication.

This is in fact a question that answers itself. One does not think about conventional discourse as if it were different from factual discourse. Indeed, one does not usually think of conventional discourse at all; it is a term whipped up for the purposes of this essay, not a standard English conception at all. But even when one does ponder language, one does not make this division and erect one semantic theory for one kind of language, and another theory for the other. The truth is that people, philosophers included, think about conventional things as if they were physical things. Conventional discourse operates as if it were factual discourse. The two

are very different, but that people often lose sight of the art underlying their words, agreements and institutions is a common error. Even in the **Age of Reason**, constitution builders did not appreciate this fact. The theory of "natural law" has gone hand in hand with the theory of social contract for precisely this reason (see Sir Ernest Barker, 1946). In the very act of drawing up conventions, men could not take full responsibility for their deeds. "We hold these truths to be self-evident" says Jefferson, not "we find these ideas expedient". Even Marx does not argue that artificially conceived institutions are wrong, but that those who formed them were out of touch with the natural course of history, and its claims to be scientific are still its great temptation.

That the semantic principles of factual and conventional discourse are the same is indicated in the Tractatus. The structure of language, says Wittgenstein, reduplicates the structure of the world. Thus, the order of the world generates the order of language, a statement that applies to all language as opposed to all speech. Factual and conventional discourse are different types of speech, but they are epiphenomena of the same language, so that once the order of the world is duplicated by language, all speech will have the same form. Hence, it is inevitable that factual and conventional speech are built on the same semantic principles. One really need only say that they are speech, and all else follows from the nature of the language/speech division (see deSaussure; 7-32). Now, this essay is not an attempt to develop a theory of meaning, but rather to direct any theory of meaning to the sort of speech of which believing is a part. And, following from this, to determine the relation of believing to conventional discourse as a whole.

Why is it so difficult for speakers to admit the arbitrary nature of those words which if not the most clear are certainly the most important? One approach to this is through consideration of the way in which conventional discourse is arbitrary. While one may well argue that language is arbitrary in deSaussure's sense, and that conventional discourse is arbitrary in an even more absolute sense, this is not the final word. Conventional discourse is not only arbitrary, it is imperative; one simply cannot do without it. In fact, it seems possible that the more obviously arbitrary a word is, the more imperative it becomes. After all, the words for which wars are fought, the words for which one lives and works, are the most resistant to definition. Likewise, the social institutions most closely united with human happiness are in fact the most arbitrary and varied. The only moral vision of anthropology is this: that marriage, family, friendship and love are neither ubiquitous nor universally desirable; human organization and thought are relative, and what pleases some may horrify others. Thus, when men take their own felicity to heart, they develop firm attachments to the most arbitrary parts of their language and their arbitrary ways become imperative. Even when one is distressed by the arbitrariness of a favourite institution, it is only replaceable with another equally arbitrary one. Yet the chronicles of anthropology are also filled with accounts of people becoming demoralised by the revelation of their culture's relativity. While doubt is resisted by the natural mechanisms of language, once it sets in, cures are not easy. The most popular ideas of sociology are in fact names for this condition: Marx's "alienation"; Weber's "disenchantment"; Durkheim's "anomie". The quaint customs of the exotic people who have taught us the relativity of culture are imperatively natural to them. Significantly, this discussion parallels Needham's own attitude toward language when he refers to "the contingent and arbitrary forms of order that for them [men] are reality itself" (Needham, 1972; 244). As a supplement to this he continues:

I am not saying that human life is senseless, but that we cannot make sense of it. If only it were at least a tale told by an idiot, we might arrive at some coherent meaning, but the metaphor presupposes criteria of intelligibility and sanity that we do not possess except by convention. Once outside a given form of life, man is lost in a 'wilderness of formes'. (Needham, 1972: 244).

In part, it is language that convinces us of the "naturalness" of the conventional meanings of our words, by encouraging us to think about them as if they were experiential reality. Language is thus the first obstacle to doubt, or, from another point of view, the strongest protection against it. Moreover, language has an arsenal to keep speakers on the narrow path implied in its being learned. One of the most effective tools in this arsenal is "belief". If one feels unable to "know" the reality of human conventions (this is, once one has performed the very unnatural act of thinking about language at all? then one can still "believe" in them. In the realm of conventional discourse, believing it is so makes it so. The conscious artifice of Pirandello's plays is their most natural quality. Belief is a way of relating conventional ideas to the realm of factual discourse. Considering the limitation of thought and the importance of what one tries to think about, the persistence of the word is not surprising. To purge English of "belief" would involve more than a change in the language itself; omission from language implies a radical change in that strange and only partially knowable entity one thinks about as "world".

There is a final twist to "possibility". Because belief is possible in a general sense, it may be possible in a universal sense. This argument is a simple one. Believing arises from the way that language is articulated to the world. And since this is a philosophical argument, and not an exegesis of English, this means the relation of all possible, *i.e.* all conceivable, language to any possible world. Remember what was said above about belief statements making a claim only against all possible worlds. The question then is: is it conceivable that any language could have a one to one attachment to the world? Is it possible that a determined language exists, *i.e.* one that is not arbitrary in any way? Will the research of anthropology unearth a language that is the same as the world? If the previous part of this essay is correct, these questions must all be answered no. Regardless of how much comparison is done, no man's language will be the world.

Thus, not only are all known languages arbitrary and conventional, but any conceivable language is so as well. Conventions, since they are neither true nor false, can be doubted; and, generally speaking, what can be doubted can be believed. Thus, the possibility of believing in English points to the possibility of believing in every language. Needham's particular question, about the universality of belief must be answered in the negative if Evans-Pritchard is correct. "God's existence is taken for granted by everybody" says Evans-Pritchard referring to the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard, 1956; 9) and from that it is clear that they have no need to believe in God. It is possible not to doubt. It is possible not to be worried by the difference between factual and conventional discourse, and whenever this is the case it is inappropriate to think about belief. So, belief is possible but not necessary; and, it is possible in two senses. First in the sense that it describes a state of affairs, and second that the state of affairs it describes is a comment on the relation of language and world and hence is one in which the speaker of any conceivable language may find himself. Thus, although belief itself cannot be considered a human universal, it may be said that belief is a universal possibility.

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