

The Nature of Believing

David Hunter

Philosophical accounts of the nature of belief, at least in the western tradition, are framed in large part by two ideas. One is that believing is a form of representing. The other is that a belief plays a causal role when a person acts on it. The standard picture of belief as a mental entity with representational properties and causal powers merges these two ideas. We are to think of beliefs as things that are true or false and that interact with desires, intentions, and emotions to bring about rational action. Both ideas, I think, are ill-founded. One effect of abandoning them is a further blurring of the distinction between what is inside and what is outside our minds. Another is a shift towards a less mentalistic picture of the roots of rational action.¹

Few will endorse what I've called the standard picture when put so bluntly, but I think it continues to inform standard views of belief, and its deep roots can make it seem inevitable. Resisting it is essential to understanding the nature of believing and, indeed, of what it is to have a mental life. My alternative account puts the believer as a rational being at the heart of the story and rejects the picture of a mind as a space of entities with representational and causal properties. On my view, for a rational being to believe something is for them to be in position to do, think, and feel things in light of a possibility whose obtaining would make them right. That a believer is right or wrong when they believe something is the kernel of truth in the first idea. That they can act in light of what they believe is the kernel in the second one.

To flesh out this alternative picture, it helps to start with knowing. When one knows some fact one can do, think, and feel things in light of it. That fact can explain one's actions,

¹ This opening paragraph pays homage through imitation to (Quine 1951.)

thoughts, and feelings.² One can take it into account as a potential reason. In this way, knowing is like being at home among facts, set to do, think, and feel things in light of how things are. Since knowing requires believing, something similar is true of it. When one merely believes, one is in position to do, think, and feel things, not in light of a way things are, but in light of a way things might be or could have been. If one is right, then things are that way, even if one does not know it. If one is wrong, then things are not that way, but they could have been. In either case, believing is being in position to do, think, and feel things in light of a possibility, of a way things might have been. If we think of knowing as like being at home among the facts, then we can think of believing as like being at home among the possibilities. On this picture of knowing and believing there are no mental entities with representational or causal properties. Instead, there is a rational subject positioned so that her actions, thoughts, and feelings can depend on how things are or might have been. The image of being at home among facts and possibilities is meant to convey this externalist theme in my conception of mind.

I develop this view of belief in detail in my (2022). My aim in this essay is to make its contrasts with the standard picture as sharp as I can and to suggest how it fits into a broader conception of our rational lives. The most important contrasts concern representation and causation, but it is hard to see these clearly without first tackling the ontology of mental states. This is the topic of section 1. In section 2, I explain how my conception captures the two kernels of truth in the standard view of belief. In section 3, I clarify my account's ambitions. My final

² This is a traditional account of knowledge with contemporary roots going back at least to (Ryle 1949). But my take on it is influenced by (McDowell 2013), and (Hyman 1999) and (Hyman 2015). Similar views are found in (Stalnaker 1984).

section will flesh out how belief and desire, as I propose we think of them, lead to rational action. What I have called the standard view of belief is commonly paired with one about desires, on which they too are entities with representational properties and causal powers. According to my externalist alternative, wanting is just lacking something one needs to be good in some way. If one knows or believes that one wants something, then one can act on that knowledge or belief. That is one form of rational action. If believing is fundamentally about being right or wrong about how things are, then wanting is fundamentally about being a good thing of a certain kind. In this way, my view captures the traditional idea that rational action is guided by the true and the good.

1. On my view, to say what a person knows or believes is to describe how they, as a rational being, are positioned in the world. It is to say which facts and possibilities they are set to act in the light of. But on standard views, to say what a person believes is to identify, not a state or position she is in, but a state *inside* her or her mind. These views hypostasize or reify believing, treating belief states as if they were particulars inside a person or her mind. Thinking of a mental state as an entity can make the representational and causal ideas I mentioned at the outset seem almost inevitable.³ Getting clear on an alternative requires seeing why we should resist reifying beliefs. That is the aim of this section.

As a historical matter, contemporary accounts of the mind, at least in the western tradition, trace back to philosophical ideas and projects from the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴ Against

³ Richard Floyd (2017) contains an excellent discussion of this.

⁴ An excellent study of these early-modern views of the mind is (Radcliffe 2018).

a background of substance dualism, philosophers tended to think of the contents of our minds as items—ideas or impressions—in a stream of consciousness. Beliefs, desires, pains and hopes were taken to be entities in the same ontological category as hearts, lungs and bones but composed of immaterial spirit or consciousness. Knowing that one believes or desires something is knowing, through a distinctive cognitive process, the presence of an item in one’s mind, and not in the first instance knowing one’s place in the world. But because those items are (on that view) representations of external things, one’s knowledge of them can ground knowledge of the world. And when one acts to change the world, those mental items work together to move one’s body. Those mental entities have the power to move bodies rationally just as merely physical entities can move them mindlessly.⁵

My description of the early modern picture of the mind is but a rough caricature. I know it blurs important subtleties and ignores significant differences. But it will enable me to draw most sharply (and in a few pages) the alternative picture I have in mind, and its basic outlines are still present in more contemporary views. Bertrand Russell, writing two centuries after those early modern theorists, wrote that each of us is immediately aware of the “events which happen *in our minds*”, and this awareness is the “source of all of our knowledge of mental *things*” (Russell 1912, 27; emphasis added). We also find it in work by theorists who explicitly reject the dualism that framed early modern views. José Luis Bermúdez, in an introductory text on

⁵ The question of how passions and other mental things motivate was widely discussed among early modern theorists. The image of these passions as pushing and pulling our bodies was a common if often disputed one. Tamar Schapiro discusses some of the key texts in Chapter 2 of her (2021).

philosophy of cognitive science, says that contemporary accounts of the mind treat “beliefs and desires as the sorts of things that can cause behavior” (108).

Yet, on the face of it, causation by content is deeply mysterious. It depends upon representations (stored information about the environment). *In one sense representations are simply objects like any other—they might be patterns of sound waves, populations of neurons, or pieces of paper.* Thought of in this way, it is no more difficult to understanding [sic] how representations can cause behavior than it is to understand how the doctor’s hammer can make my leg move.

But the representations we are interested in (*such as beliefs and desires*) are also things that bear a special semantic relation to the world (Bermúdez 2020, 108; italics added)

Bermúdez claims that “almost all cognitive scientists and the vast majority of philosophers hold that brains and *the representations that they contain* are physical entities.” (2020, 108–9; italics added). What I find striking in this passage is how Bermúdez grounds his representational and causal views on the idea that mental states are “objects like any other.” He considers them physical objects, but aside from this his view of the mind is nearly indistinguishable from the early modern picture I sketched. This conception can seem inevitable, especially in the absence of a clear alternative. One aim in this essay is to describe an alternative. But the ontological idea underlying the standard view—that mental states are entities fit to have representational and causal properties—has roots of its own that are worth identifying.

One root is a familiar ambiguity in the word “belief.” It is easy to slide from “belief” in the sense of *what* a person believes to “belief” in the sense of their *believing* it. On standard views, propositions are what people believe. Propositions are usually considered to be abstract

objects with representational properties essentially. And the standard view is that belief states are individuated by them.⁶ But it does not follow that believing is itself an entity. An analogy with owning is helpful. For while owning is also individuated by the object owned, there is no ambiguity with “owning” as is there with “belief”. There is no word in English that can mean both the thing owned and the owning of it. We have “possession” for the thing owned, and this naturally takes a plural, since these are entities. The word “possessing” can be used for the act of taking or keeping possession of something. But there is no form of “possessing” or “owning” that is used for the state one is in when one owns something and that takes a plural. That there is no ambiguity in “possession” as there is in the case of “belief” seems to me instructive.⁷ It shows that we can allow that belief states are individuated by entities without concluding that belief states are themselves entities.

In addition to this relatively superficial root, the picture of beliefs as entities has a deeper and more persistent one. It concerns how to categorise what I will call belief properties. I take it that to believe something is to have a certain belief property, say that of believing that Ingrid

⁶ In my (2022) I argue that belief properties are individuated by possibilities, not propositions. Possibilities are ways things might have been and are not representations. This won't matter for my purposes here.

⁷ Owning and believing are similar, but they are also different. Ownership is at least in part a legal matter dependent on contingent decisions and practices of a community. I think believing and knowing must predate such decisions and practices. So while I recognise that there are important differences between believing and owning, the logical similarities are, I think, worth noting.

owns twenty books, or that the 504 streetcar stops at Garden Avenue. Some properties are sortals while others are qualities and that matters for an account of believing.⁸ The property of being a chair is a sortal while that of being tall is a quality. While a quality is instantiated *in* a particular individual, the instantiation of a sortal *is itself* an entity. This is a subtle distinction, but seeing that belief properties are qualities and not sortals can help us resist thinking of belief states as entities.

Sortal properties differ from qualities in several respects. First, a thing's sortals contribute to its essence, making it the sort of thing it is. While it is (arguably) essential to a chair that it be a chair, it is not essential that it be tall, since we could shorten it. Second, a thing's sortal properties individuate it and distinguish it from other things. This is connected to both counting and to plurals. We can count the chairs in a room, and we can distinguish one chair from another, but we cannot count the tall in the room. We can count the tall chairs, or the tall cupboards, or the tall people, but this is done by counting the chairs, cupboards, and people who have the quality of being tall. To count, we need a sortal. Likewise, we can sensibly ask whether some chair in the room now is the very same chair that was in the room earlier, but it makes little sense

⁸ The distinction between sortals and other kinds of properties rose to attention in discussion of identity, essence, and reference in (Strawson 1959). For discussion of this history and of the relevance of the distinction between sortals and other properties, see (Feldman 1973). Eric Marcus highlighted its relevance to the ontology of belief and other mental states, in (Marcus 2006) and (Marcus 2009); views similarly opposed to the idea of a 'token' belief are in (Kenny 1989) and (Steward 1997). Richard Floyd (2017) argues at length against the reification of belief, though his arguments do not start from a distinction between sortals and qualities.

to ask whether the tallness of the chair now is the very same tallness it had earlier. A thing's size might change over time, and we can even imagine a chair's being tall in the morning, becoming short at lunch, and then becoming tall again in the afternoon. But it makes little sense to ask whether its morning tallness was the same or a different tallness from its afternoon tallness.

Some mental phenomena, such as aches and pains, instantiate sortal properties. These are conscious occurrences that we can count. Imagining, inferring, and dreaming also seem to be particular mental entities and so to be instantiations of sortal properties. But other psychological phenomena, such as being happy or being honest, involve qualities and not sortals. We can't count a person's states of happiness, even if she is happy about both her job and her marriage. Anthony Kenny drew attention to this by noting that it is a mistake to ask how many senses of humour Oliver Cromwell had. (Kenny 1989, 72) But it is not a mistake in counting. It is not that, as a contingent matter, Cromwell only had one sense of humour, whereas someone else might have five or twenty-seven. The mistake is in thinking that having a sense of humour is a sortal property instead of a quality. In this sense, it is a category mistake.

Consider now belief properties. If the property of believing that the 504 streetcar stops at Garden Avenue were a sortal, then we it should make sense to count instantiations of it.⁹ That is, we should be able to count *believings*. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, the idea of counting

⁹ The property of being water and the property of being gold are not sortals, since we cannot count the golds or the waters. Gold and water are stuffs, and while we cannot count them, we can measure them, and this distinguishes them from qualities. There can be more or less water or gold, but not more or less red or more tallness. Here again, believing is not a stuff, since there cannot be more or less believing that the 504 streetcar stops at Garden Avenue.

believings is odd. Jones believes that the 504 streetcar stops at Garden Avenue. How many believings of this by her are there? It is tempting to say just one. But is this just a contingent matter? Could she in fact have two believings of it, in the way she has two lungs? She might have two reasons for believing it, but would this generate two believings? Might someone else have five believings of it? It seems to me that this is like asking how many senses of humor Oliver Cromwell has. But if belief properties were sortals, then these questions would make sense. It should make sense to ask if Jones has two or three believings that the 504 streetcar stops at Garden Avenue and whether her believing it now is numerically the same as her believing it five minutes ago. We should be able to count and distinguish those believings. That we cannot indicates that belief properties are not sortals.

One reason it is hard to see this, I think, is the familiar fact that there *are* things we can count when we ask how many beliefs a person has. We can do this by counting the propositions that would be true if she were right. Since the proposition that the 504 streetcar stops at Garden Avenue is distinct from the proposition that it stops at Fern, we can say that Jones believes at least two things. So we *can* count the things a person believes, and this can make it seem easy to count their believings of them. Again, the analogy with ownership can be helpful here. Suppose Ingrid owns twenty books. She thus has at least twenty possessions. But how many *possessions* by her are there? Is there one possessing for each book, and so twenty possessions. Or is there one possessing of twenty books? How are we supposed to decide? It seems to me that nothing in our ordinary understanding of ownership helps us answer these questions, and not because we are ignorant of some fact about ownership whose discovery could settle the matter. It is because ownership states are not entities we can count and identify over time. Owning is in a different

ontological category from the objects owned. I think believing is in the same ontological category as owning.

Seeing that belief properties are qualities and not sortals helps us avoid treating believing as if it were an entity. And if believing is not an entity, then a state of believing don't have representational properties.¹⁰ The idea that belief states are themselves true or false was never, it seems to me, very well-motivated. The best version of the standard view says that it is *what* a person believes that can be true or false, not their believing it. This is neatly expressed by Scott Soames.

It is a truism that a belief, assertion, hypothesis, or conjecture represents the world as being a certain way, and so is capable of being true or false.

Ordinarily, what we mean by this is that *what is believed, asserted, hypothesizes, or conjectured* represents the world and so is true or false.

(Soames 2010, 63-4; italics in original)

Still, that early-modern picture of the mind, as a place populated by entities with semantic properties and causal powers, continues to inform standard contemporary accounts of believing, at least in the western philosophical tradition. It encourages treating belief states as in the same

¹⁰ One might reply that a belief state is true if the proposition that individuates it is true. But should we also say that Jones' owning of *War and Peace* is exciting since that book is exciting? Should we say that Sarah's weighing 60kg is even since the object that individuates her mass—the number 60—is even? In general, states don't inherit the properties of the objects that individuate them.

category as hammers, although with representational properties. To that extent, this standard view rests on a mistaken picture of the ontology of mind.

2. The temptation to hypostasize beliefs can make the two ideas I mentioned at the outset seem almost inevitable. Appreciating that belief properties are qualities rather than sortals makes it easy to resist the representational idea. Since belief states are not entities, they are not the right sort of thing to be true or false. What a person believes may be true or false, but their believing it is not. The fact that a person is right or wrong in believing something captures the way believing is connected to truth but without the representational idea.

The causal idea, though, is harder to resist. In part this is because that early-modern project of explaining rational action as the effect of mental forces remains compelling, even once its dualism is rejected. But it is also because some qualities are causal qualities, ones that make a difference to a thing's causal powers. One familiar version of the standard view says that believing is a behavioral capacity or disposition.¹¹ As I see it, fully rejecting the standard view requires seeing that belief properties are not causal qualities and do not play a causal role when a person acts on a belief. Believing something does not make a difference to one's powers, capacities or dispositions. Rather it makes a difference to what reasons one has to exercise the capacities and manifest those dispositions one already has or will acquire.

Gilbert Ryle criticized the causal idea in his *Concept of Mind*, but his critique did not have lasting effect. Some thought his preferred alternative was a form of Behaviorism, for he

¹¹ For recent defenses of the idea that believing is a disposition, see (Schwitzgebel 2002) and (Zimmerman 2018).

described it in terms of dispositions to behavior, which was a favourite behaviourist idea. Many consider Behaviorism little better than Eliminativism about the mind. Moreover, as a dialectical matter, Ryle's focus on dispositions was unfortunate. For one thing, the idea of a disposition does not capture the contrast he had in mind, which was between occurrent and non-occurrent, and not between categorial and dispositional. More importantly, though, paradigm dispositions, such as solubility and acidity, are causal qualities, ones that make a difference to a thing's causal powers. Thinking of believing as a disposition thus does not contrast cleanly with the idea that belief states play a causal role in generating rational action. My aim in this section is to sketch a better alternative.

To start, it is worth getting clear on the contrast Ryle had in mind, at least as I understand it. That early-modern picture of the mind held that all mental entities are, by their very nature, composed of non-material stuff. This was part of the picture's dualism, but it was encouraged by thinking of beliefs, desires and other mental states as entities that must be composed of something, and consciousness seemed the best alternative to whatever constituted body. It is true that sensations and some emotions are conscious in the sense of having an occurrent phenomenology. There is something it is like to be hungry, to have a toothache, or to be surprised. But we can accept this without holding that being hungry, having a toothache, and being surprised are entities composed of consciousness. And anyway some mental phenomena have no phenomenology and this includes believing. There is nothing it feels like to believe that Ingrid owns twenty books. One can believe this even when sound asleep. It is true that when one reflects on what one believes—on the fact that she owns twenty books—this can involve feelings, including ones of certainty or surprise. But we need to distinguish believing something—which is a state—from considering something—which is an event. States and events

belong to different ontological categories. States cannot be occurrent because states do not occur—they obtain. The contrast here between believing something and considering something is between what is occurrent and what is non-occurrent, it is not a contrast between what is categorial and what is dispositional. A spatial analogy can help. Being in Tucson is not a conscious occurrence—it has no phenomenology and is in no sense a state of consciousness. My utterly non-conscious watch was in Tucson. But neither is being in Tucson a dispositional matter. My watch didn't acquire a new disposition or power when it landed in Arizona. So we can agree that beliefs are not occurrent without saying that they are dispositions. Ryle's alternative to the standard view would have been better put, at least if his goal was to offer a contrast to the standard view's causal idea, by saying that believing is being in a certain position to do, think, and feel certain things.¹²

What matters most, though, is seeing why belief properties are not causal qualities. We should first distinguish the idea that they are from two closely related ideas, neither of which I will deny. One is that a person who believes something is likely to guide her actions in light of what she believes. (The other is that people have a capacity to believe things.) I accept this first idea. Jones knows that Ingrid owns twenty books, and because she believes it, she is likely to formulate and adjust her plans in light of that fact, more likely anyway than if she did not believe it. But this does not show that believing is a disposition. We need to distinguish a thing's capacities and dispositions from the opportunities or occasions it has to exercise them. What a

¹² Perhaps Ryle had in mind the sense of “disposition” on which it means being positioned in a certain way. The Oxford English Dictionary offers as a primary use: “The plan shows the *disposition* of the rooms”. This usage was pointed out to me by Charles Travis.

thing is likely to do depends not just on what capacities it has but also on its circumstances. In saying that an agent *can* do something, we may mean that she has a certain causal capacity. But we may instead mean that she has an opportunity or occasion to exercise a capacity she has. When Tamar visits London she can walk along Regent Street and she is likely to ride the tube. In walking along Regent Street she would exercise her capacity to walk, a capacity she had in Toronto. What she gained, in arriving in London, was an opportunity or occasion to exercise that capacity on Regent Street, not a newly acquired capacity she lacked while in Toronto. Likewise, it seems to me, in saying what someone believes we are describing, not her capacities or dispositions, but rather the rational position from which she will exercise and manifest the capacities and disposition she has. Someone in that position is more likely to act in light of those reasons than someone who is not, just as someone in London is more likely to ride the tube than someone who is not.

The second idea I won't deny is that people have a capacity to believe things (though as I explain in the next section, I doubt that believing invariably results from an exercise of a capacity). Arguably, perception and inference are capacities or powers that people have and that can yield states of belief. But it would not follow that believing is itself a disposition. We need to distinguish a capacity from both its exercise and from its results. Sonja has a capacity to play piano, but her exercise of that capacity—a particular playing by her of a piano—is an event not a capacity. A drop of vinegar has the capacity to stain, but its exercise of the capacity (its staining the rug) is not a capacity, and neither is the result of that exercise (the stain). So to show that believing is a disposition or capacity, we would need to show more than that people have a capacity to believe.

Importantly, there is also good reason to deny that believing is a disposition. It concerns what manifests or reveals a person's belief when they act, and so the role believing plays in explaining action. When a person acts on something they believe, they are exercising capacities they have, but their belief is manifested, not in the exercise of those capacities, but in the fact that they are exercising them *in light of what they believe*.¹³ When Tamar walks to Covent Garden because the tube station is there, she is exercising (among others) her capacity to walk. She has that capacity and can exercise it regardless of what she might believe about London's Underground. What manifests her belief is that she walked there *for the reason* that the tube has a station there. Her belief is made manifest, not in her walking, but in her walking for that reason. We figure out what a person believes, not just by observing what they do, but by identifying why they are doing it.

This point about what manifests a person's belief is obscured in a famous passage where Ryle characterizes a person who believes that the ice is dangerously thin.

...to believe that the ice is dangerously thin is to be unhesitant in telling oneself and others that it is thin, in acquiescing in other people's assertions to that effect, in objecting to statements to the contrary, in drawing consequences from the original proposition, and so forth. But it is also to be prone to skate warily, to shudder, to dwell in imagination on possible disasters and to warn other skaters. *It is a propensity not only to make certain theoretical moves but also to*

¹³ For more on this see Chapter 3 in my (2022), but also (Hacker 2013), (Williamson 2000), (Setiya 2013) and (Hyman 2015.)

make certain executive and imaginative moves, as well as to have certain feelings. (Ryle 1949, 117-8; italics added)

This passage suggests that skating warily, asserting that the ice is thin and, more generally, making certain ‘executive moves’ manifest the skater’s belief. But these are exercises of other capacities altogether: a capacity to skate and a capacity to assert. What manifests or expresses the skater’s belief is the fact that she is doing those things *because (or so she thinks) the ice is thin*. By confusing the manifestation of belief with the actions, feelings and thoughts in which the knowledge or belief is exercised, Ryle needlessly opened himself to the charge that his view was a form of Behaviorism.

Relatedly, we should resist the familiar idea that linguistic assertion is a privileged manifestation of belief. My point is not that one can assert something without believing it. Nor is it that animals can believe things without even being able to assert anything. Nor is it that believing is expressed in what one feels and thinks and not just in what one does. Rather, my point is that assertion—that action—is not the right sort of thing to be a manifestation of one’s belief. For there is nothing that can be done, felt or thought such that believing that P is being disposed to do or feel or think that thing. When a person acts on a belief, their belief is revealed, not in the action itself, but in the fact that they acted in light of the what they believed. Believing is a matter of being positioned in a space of reasons, and what a person believes is manifested, not in her acts, thoughts, and feelings, but in the fact that she did, thought, and felt something because of how (as she sees it) the world is.

Let me summarise my discussion. Contemporary accounts of believing are framed by two ideas, both of which I have urged us to resist. One is that believing is a matter of representing the world. The other is that beliefs play a causal role in generating rational action. The tendency to

treat beliefs as entities encourages both ideas. We can resist this tendency by seeing that belief properties are qualities and not sortals. The causal idea gets independent support from thinking that believing is a dispositional state. I have argued that this misunderstands how believing is manifested in action.

In place of the standard view, I propose we think of believing as being in a position to do, think, and feel things in light of a possibility whose obtaining would make one right. That one is right or wrong in believing something captures the kernel of truth in the representational idea. That believing makes a difference to the reasons one has captures the kernel of truth in the causal idea. We should think of knowing and believing as a matter of a rational agent's being more or less at home in a world of facts and possibilities.

3. My proposed account of believing takes for granted the idea of a rational being. One might think this begs the very question the standard view aimed to answer. Shouldn't we explain what makes a being rational in terms of beliefs and other mental states? Haven't I opposed the standard view of believing only by shifting its substance to the idea of a rational being? While I admit to some sympathy for this complaint, I also think the explanatory ambitions behind it are not easy to make clear or justify.

I won't try to define what it is to be rational. As I see it, being rational and being a believer go together. Only rational beings have beliefs, and only believers are rational beings. The rational beings we are familiar with are all living things and being alive involves being able to make one's actions depend on states and events in one's environment. Plants send their roots deeper into the soil during a drought. Cats grow thicker coats as winter approaches. My cat tends to run to her food bowl at meal times. Plants are not rational beings, although I do think they are

agents. They don't know or believe things, and their actions are not done in light of the facts. (But as I will explain in the next section, I think that they do have wants.) It seems to me that many animals know and believe things. My cat can usually tell when her bowl contains food, though sometimes she makes mistakes. I think she can also act in light of how she takes things to be. It is not easy for me to understand or say what she believes, but that is because my concepts and words draw much finer distinctions than she can recognise. It is not because the distinctions she can draw don't really exist or that she can't act in light of them. My view of believing is meant to extend to my cat, and I count her as a rational being, though of course people differ from cats and other animals in important ways. I will say more about one such difference in the next section.

So on my view rationality and belief are closely tied. But I don't see this as an especially deep point: it just amounts to the fact that to be rational is to be able to act in light of the ways things are or might have been. But one might adopt a more ambitious project. One might hope to explain a given being's rationality in terms of capacities it has that can be defined or understood independently of rationality itself. And one might think that a capacity to believe would be one such capacity. My account of belief can't help with this reductionist project, since it defines believing in terms of rationality. From the point of view of that project, my account does beg the question. But I have doubts about this project. I have already explained why I think that believing something is not itself a disposition or a power. Coming to believe something does not add to one's capacities. Rather, it makes a difference to the reasons one has (or thinks one has) for exercising the capacities one already has or will acquire. I suggested we think of believing as, in this respect, like being in a certain geographical location. It strikes me that in assuming that believing is itself a capacity this reductionist project rests on a mistake.

One might, though, agree that believing something is not itself a capacity or power, but hold that our believing something results from our exercising a capacity or power to believe. And one might think that this capacity can be defined independently of rationality and so help in this reductionist project. But I have doubts about this too. It is true that humans can believe things, whereas plants can't. But it does not follow that our believing something invariably results from our exercising a power or capacity. A geographical analogy is again helpful. People can be in various spatial locations. In this sense, people have a capacity for spatial location. But this does not show that our being in a given location is invariably a result of our exercising a capacity to occupy a given location. This is not to deny that we can change our locations, just as we can change our beliefs. But just as travel presupposes location, inference presupposes belief, and so cannot explain it.

A slightly different but equally ambitious project is worth mentioning. One might hope that an account of believing could help us see how beings composed of muscles and bones can be believers. I suspect that this may explain some of the appeal of the standard view. Just as some early modern theorists hoped that taking mental entities to have causal powers could explain how the mental can make bodies move, so some contemporary theorists hope that taking believing to be a disposition can make believing fit into the same explanatory category as the natural properties of muscles and bones. For the record, I agree with contemporary theorists who resist the early modern dualism. I think people are just natural, living beings. I think that our being rational is just a way of our being physical. And I would like to better understand in natural terms how beings who can act in light of the ways things are or might have been came into existence. I would like to better understand how life itself emerged. Nothing in my account

of belief, I think, is incompatible with gaining such understanding. I think of my account as aiming to make clear what such a naturalising account of the mind aims to naturalise.

I have tried to clarify the ambitions behind my account of believing and how these might differ from those behind the standard view. I think of my view as naturalistic, at least in the sense of contributing to understanding what it is for a natural, living being to believe something. But I also resist reductionist ambitions, ones that aim to define rationality in terms of independently defined mental states. It might help for me to step back and sketch how my account of belief fits into a broader picture of our mental lives. That's the task of my final section.

4. I have proposed that we think of knowing and believing as like being more or less at home among facts and possibilities. When we know some fact we are in position to do, think, and feel things in light of it. This includes facts about what we need and lack. We can discover that we need something and then act on that knowledge. I think this is one form of rational action. But we don't always know what we need and we can think we need something when we don't. Acting on a mistaken belief about our needs is also a form of rational action. Understanding all of this, I think, is key to understanding how belief and desire lead to rational action.¹⁴

¹⁴ The account of desire and rational action I discuss here is explored in more detail in (Hunter 2021).

As I see it, what one needs depends on what it would take to be good in some way.¹⁵ Being healthy—that is, having good health—requires eating properly and exercising regularly. A good soccer coach needs equipment, some knowledge of the game, and skills for teaching and training players. A good parent needs patience, tolerance and good humour. The variety of goodness I have in mind here is sometimes called “goodness of a kind” or “attributive” goodness. The idea is just that certain sorts of things have an associated standard of quality. Some chairs are better than others; some roses have excellent root systems; some species of pine tree are very good at resisting the cold; some back-hand shots in tennis are better than others; some movies and books are outstanding and others are dreary; some people are splendid and others are pretty deplorable. Because this variety of goodness involves a standard that allows for degrees, I think of it as *quality*. And since that standard is associated with a sort of thing (chairs; people; health; kinds of acts and activities), I think of it as *sortal* quality. This label avoids identifying the variety of goodness in linguistic terms and marks it off from what others call simple or intrinsic goodness.¹⁶

A thing can lack something it needs to be good in some way. My plant is suffering because it does not get enough sun. Henry does not have the pan he needs to bake the cake

¹⁵ What follows relies on the discussion of goodness in (Thomson 2008). Her views can be traced back to (Anscombe 1958), (Geach 1956), and (von Wright 1963).

¹⁶ I discuss the differences between sortal quality, what is sometimes called “goodness-for”, and simple goodness in work in my (2023), where I also explore whether being a good person, understood as a case of sortal quality, is fit to ground morality.

properly. George would be a better teacher if he had more patience. Living things usually have mechanisms that ensure they get what they need to maintain their health. The plant can move towards the sun. My cat gets hungry when it needs to eat. So do I. The plant doesn't know that it needs more sun. It doesn't know anything. When it moves towards the sun it is not moving in light of the fact that it needs more sun. But my cat, it seems to me anyway, runs to her bowl when she's hungry *because* she is hungry. She is acting in light of that fact, even though she doesn't understand her nutritional needs. (Again: it is hard for us to use our words to identify the real distinctions my cat can identify and act on.) People typically know much more about what it takes to be healthy and about how to do various things well. Our ability to understand and identify quality is, I think, an under-appreciated part of what makes us different from most other animals.

When we know we lack something that we need we can act on that knowledge. Either to get what we lack or to remove the need for it. This sort of action is at the heart of standard philosophical accounts of rational action and practical deliberation. One starts with an idea that something would be good in some way. ("Protein would be good for my health.") One then looks for an effective means for getting it. ("Eating this tofu would be a good way to get some protein.") One then decides to act on the knowledge. ("I will eat some of this tofu.") This sort of reasoning mixes together knowledge of various topics. Some of it is about sortal quality (protein is good for health). Some of it is about causal matters (eating tofu is a way to get protein). Some of it is about the nature of things (tofu contains protein.) In typical cases, when a person does something intentionally she is acting in light of facts of various kinds.

There is room for error and ignorance in this sort of reasoning. One can be wrong about what one needs to be good in some way. Sarah thinks she needs more salt in her diet, when in

fact she should be cutting back. One can be wrong about causal matters. Henry mistakenly thinks that threatening harsh punishments helps students learn. One can be ignorant or mistaken about the natures of things. Frank mistakenly believes that beans don't contain protein. Or just about particular matters of fact. Monica thought Peter was hoping she would help with the baking. Practical deliberation, just like theoretical deliberation, can proceed even with ignorance and error. Our account of intentional action should allow that person sometimes act in the light, not of how things are, but of how they merely could have been. People can act rationally, not just when they act on what they know, but also when they act on what they merely believe.

I have described practical reasoning and rational action without mentioning desire. But my description does include what Davidson (1963) called "pro-attitudes", since beliefs about sortal quality are one kind of pro-attitude. They concern the positive change the agent was aiming at, how the action they took would, at least in their eyes, lead to an improvement in something's quality. And, as I have argued elsewhere (Hunter 2021), lacking something one needs is one form of wanting. My description of practical deliberation gives a central role to knowledge and beliefs about needs, lacks, and quality because rational action is, by its very nature, self-conscious. When one acts rationally, one knows at least something about what one is doing, how one is doing it, and why one is doing it.¹⁷ When a person acts to get something she wants, she is acting in light of that want, which means she knows she has that want. But her action can be just as reasonable if she merely believes she wants it. Acting on a mistaken belief about what one wants or desires is perfectly compatible with acting rationally, and is central to understanding the springs of action. It can be disappointing not to get what one wants, but so can

¹⁷ I explore the nature of such practical knowledge in (Hunter 2015.)

not getting something that one merely thinks one wants. A person's beliefs about what they want are just as important as those wants themselves in understanding their actions and feelings.¹⁸ For this reason, my description of practical deliberation places beliefs about one's wants at its heart.

But I acknowledge that my description of practical reasoning has no place for desires, at least as these are typically understood by the standard view. I have explained why I recommend rejecting the standard view of believing. The standard view of desire, it seems to me, shares that view's flaws. It treats desires as mental entities with representational properties¹⁹ and causal powers of their own.²⁰ On some versions, wanting is paradigmatically an occurrent state with a

¹⁸ My discussion is indebted to (Schueler 1995) and (Schueler 2009). He argues that a person's intentional actions are best explained by her beliefs *about* her desires and wants together with means-ends beliefs about how to satisfy them. The idea that rational action is explained in part by an agent's beliefs about what she wants or needs is also explicit in Hempel's influential early treatment of rational action, (Hempel 1961-2).

¹⁹ The representational idea takes a variety of forms; see for instance (Searle 1983), (Stampe 1986), (Stampe 1987), (Oddie 2017), (Tenenbaum 2007), (Scanlon 1998), (Milona & Schroeder 2019), (Gregory 2021).

²⁰ On some versions of the standard view, wanting something is intrinsically motivating (Schapiro 2009), a cause of intentional actions (Armstrong 1968), (Davidson 1963), a behavioural disposition (Stalnaker 1984), (Smith 1994), (Alvarez 2017), or a form of action itself (Thompson 2008).

phenomenological character.²¹ It strikes me that to understand our mental lives we need an alternative account of desire.²² On the externalist view I favour, wanting is just lacking something one needs to be good in some way. When one knows that one wants something, then one can act on that knowledge. But this is no different from acting on any other fact. My all-too-brief remarks about how needing is connected to sortal quality and so to one variety of goodness are meant to suggest such an alternative, but a full development will have to wait.²³

My conception of mind has a rational agent at its heart, one whose acts, thoughts, and feelings can depend on how things are or could be, including how she is and could be. Neither knowing nor believing essentially involves representing those facts and possibilities. Rather, they involve being so positioned that those facts and possibilities can explain what one does, thinks, and feels. Knowing how things can be includes understanding what I have called sortal quality. People can appreciate a thing's degree of excellence as a thing of a certain kind and can identify

²¹ Harry Frankfurt called occurrent feelings our “most elementary desires”. (Frankfurt 2002, 184). But I think it is better to treat these feelings separately from wanting. I can want something without feeling a craving for it, and crave something I don't want. For more on this, and on what a theory of desire is a theory of, see (Schapiro 2014).

²² I am taking my cue here from (Anscombe 1958) who said that it is not profitable to do moral theory until we have a better philosophical psychology, which would include (as I read her) a better understanding of how desire connects to goodness.

²³ What I say in this section is the topic of a book project, tentatively entitled ‘On Wanting’, under contract with Oxford University Press.

how to improve it. This understanding is fundamental to human rational action. For in acting rationally, a person has her eye not just on the how things are but on how they can be improved. She is acting in light of facts about sortal quality. Part of what is distinctive about people, as compared to cats and dogs anyway, is the extent of their understanding of sortal quality. Importantly, this includes their own quality as a person, which is at the heart of morality. My conception of rational action thus captures, albeit in a somewhat novel form, the traditional idea that rational action is guided by the true and the good, but it does this while resisting the representational and causal ideas that have framed philosophical thinking about the mind, at least in the western tradition.²⁴

References

- Alvarez, M. 2017. Desires, Dispositions, and the Explanation of Action. In Lauria, F. & Deonna, J. (eds.), *The Nature of Desire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Anscombe, G.E.M. 1958. Modern Moral Philosophy. *Philosophy*, 23(124), 1-19.
- Armstrong, D. 1968. *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*. London: Routledge.
- Bermúdez, J. L. 2020. *Cognitive Science: An introduction to the science of the mind*. 3rd. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, Donald. 1963. Actions, Reasons, and Causes. *The Journal of Philosophy*. 60(23), 685-700
- Feldman, F. 1973. Sortal predicates. *Noûs*, 7(3), 268-82.

²⁴ Work on this paper was supported by a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

- Floyd, R. 2017. *The Non-Reificatory Approach to Belief*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Frankfurt, H. 2002. Reply to T.M. Scanlon. In Buss, S., and Overton, L. (eds.), *Contours of Agency: Essays on themes from Harry Frankfurt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geach, P. 1956. Good and Evil. *Analysis*, 17(2), 33-42.
- Gregory, A. 2021. *Desire as Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hacker, P. 2013. *The Intellectual Powers: A study of human nature*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hempel, Carl. 1961-2. Rational Action. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 35, pp. 5-23
- Hunter, D. 2015. Davidson on Practical Knowledge. *Journal for the History of Analytic Philosophy*. 3(9),
- Hunter, D. 2021. Lacking, Needing, and Wanting. *Analytic Philosophy*. DOI: 10.1111/phib.12242
- Hunter, D. 2022. *On Believing: being right in a world of possibilities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hyman, J. 1999. How knowledge works. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 49(7), 433-451.
- Hyman, J. 2015. *Action, Knowledge and Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kenny, A. 1989. *The Metaphysics of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marcus, E. 2006. Events, sortals, and the mind-body problem. *Synthese*, 150, 99-129.
- Marcus, E. 2009. Why there are no token states. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 34, 215-241.
- McDowell, J. 2013. Acting in the Light of a Fact. In D. Bakhurst, B. Hooker, & M. Little, (eds.), *Thinking about Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 13-28.

- Milona, M. & Schoeder, M. 2019. Desiring under the Proper Guise. Shafer-Landau, R. (ed.)
Oxford Studies in Metaethics, 14. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 121-143.
- Oddie, G. 2017. Desire and the Good: In search of the right fit. In Lauria, F. & Deonna, J. (eds.),
The Nature of Desire. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Quine, W.V.O. 1951. Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review*, 60, 20-43.
- Radcliffe, E. 2018. *Hume, Passion, and Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Russell, B. 1912. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ryle, G. 1949. *The Concept of Mind*. New York: Barnes & Noble.
- Scanlon, T. 1998. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Schapiro, T. 2009. The Nature of Inclination. *Ethics*, 119(2), 229-256.
- Schapiro, T. 2014. What are theories of desire theories of? *Analytic Philosophy*, 55(2), 131-150.
- Schapiro, T. 2021. *Feeling Like It*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schueler, G.F. 1995. *Desire: Its role in practical reason and the explanation of action*.
 Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schueler, G.F. 2009. The Humean Theory of Motivation Rejected. *Philosophy and
 Phenomenological Research*, 78(1), 103-122.
- Schwitzgebel, E. 2002. A phenomenal, dispositional account of belief. *Noûs*, 36(2), 249-275.
- Searle, J. 1983. *Intentionality*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Setiya, K. 2013. Causality in Action. *Analysis* 63, 501-12.
- Soames, S. 2010. *What is meaning?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stalnaker, R. 1984. *Inquiry*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Searle, J. 1983. *Intentionality*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, M. 1994. *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Stampe, D. 1986. Defining Desire. In Marks, J. (ed.), *The Ways of Desire*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Stampe, D. 1987. The Authority of Desire. *The Philosophical Review*, 96(3), 335-381.
- Steward, H. 1997. *The Ontology of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, P. 1959. *Individuals*. London: Methuen.
- Tenenbaum, S. 2007. *Appearances of the Good: An essay on the nature of practical reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomson, J. 2008. *Normativity*. Peru, IL: Open Court.
- Thompson, M. 2008. *Life and Action*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Von Wright, G. H. 1963. *The Varieties of Goodness*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Williamson, T. 2000. *Knowledge and its limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zimmerman, A. 2018. *Belief: A pragmatic picture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.