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TRYING TO BELIEVE AND THE
ETHICS OF BELIEF*

The problem I want to discuss has to do with believing as distinct from perceiving, imagining, positing, resolving, and hoping, as well as from knowing. Since these distinctions are not always observed, we must remind ourselves what 'belief' means when it is deliberately preferred to other intentional descriptions, and we ought to characterize it in such a way that we can see why it matters *immediately*, not just consequentially, whether one believes in something or not. I propose putting it this way: Believing in X (where X is what a belief-proposition is about) means taking X to be real, which in turn means accepting X as something to be dealt with. (A further implication of 'real', precluding private fantasy zones, is that any real X is dealt with not in isolation but in connection with everything else one has to deal with. 'Real' implies 'the world'.) Unlike knowledge, which is originally conceived, so to speak, from the object to the subject – given that X is there, if I come along and see it there, then I am among those who know it is there – belief is conceived from the subject to the object: given that I am looking about me, if I see X there, then X is among the things I believe in, unless I mistrust it for some reason.

There is a deep puzzle about belief. As a relationship with something taken to be real, one must (in believing) take it to depend fundamentally on the real thing rather than on oneself, on the existence and nature of the real thing, which means that a crucial condition of belief formation is involuntary, outside of one's control. On the other hand, people can refuse to believe or, in interesting cases, *try* to believe – exerting themselves to believe in cases where they think they ought to. Some people can call on others to believe, e.g. to believe what certain religious propositions assert. All of which would imply that believing has a crucial voluntary condition. But how can believing be both voluntary and involuntary?[1] The readiest answer would be that the voluntary and involuntary conditions of belief are alike necessary but not sufficient. In addition to the evidence there must be an affirming of the evidence; in addition to the affirming, there must be the evidence. Very well;

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* Ted Ammon, Jimmy Kimbrell and Louis Pojman gave me very helpful criticisms of an earlier version of this essay.

[1] For a comprehensive survey of the many variations of 'volitionalist' and non-volitionalist accounts of belief, see Louis Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

but there are curious situations wherein the involuntary condition is not met, or anyway isn't met yet – where people set themselves to believe in the absence of affirmation-compelling evidence.

That there is such a thing as trying to believe does not mean that the involuntary condition of belief is not a necessary one. It only means that trying to believe is not the same as believing. But trying to believe is frequently associated with certain kinds of belief, kinds of belief which, perhaps, *have* to be tried for, and which are regulated by a distinct branch of the ethics of belief. Let us try to make out why this would be so by reflecting on how people come to be afflicted with difficulty in believing.

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Kantian moral theologians have a belief problem which is representative of much popular theism, although their case is especially difficult. They think that our rational moral sense tells us that people deserve to be happy in proportion to their moral virtue, and thus they say that our moral reason demands that virtue ultimately be rewarded with happiness – which could only be brought about by a God, and only in an unseen world.[1] Their life as moral agents would become incomprehensible to them if they could not postulate this context for it – would make as little sense as, say, chasing and hitting tennis balls without being able to see court markings on the ground. Thus it is necessary for them to *believe* in this state of affairs, to treat it as real and not imaginary. Even though this belief is enjoined on them by reason, however, they still find it hard *really* to believe it, because the Kantian heaven is not, after all, evident in the way in which things-to-be-dealt-with normally assert themselves over against one; it is evident neither bodily (as a constraint on perception) nor logico-mathematically (as a constraint on formal intuition). While Kant gives reasons to postulate that virtue will be rewarded, happiness does not stand before the mind's eye in connection with virtue in the way that '4' stands connected with '2 + 2'. The virtue-happiness union is the synthetic wish of subjects at once rational and natural, inconsistent with natural conditions but still conceivable as a *possibility* under other-than-natural conditions. It is 'known' as a necessary goal of striving, not as a real thing, event, or tendency.[2] No wonder they have trouble believing in it.

Think of these Kantians, disturbed by the invisibility of their providential heaven, as though they were tennis players demoralized by the invisibility of their tennis court (obscured, let us say, by a permanent knee-deep fog). They are beginning to feel like *would-be* players of tennis, rather than tennis players

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[1] See *Critique of Pure Reason* B 856, and the second part of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For a critique of Kant's reasoning see S. Smith, 'Worthiness to Be Happy and Kant's Concept of the Highest Good', *Kant-Studien* LXXV (1984), 168–90.

[2] See chapter II of the second part of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. 110–19, on the 'antinomy of practical reason' and its 'critical resolution'.

in the full sense, and of course they are discouraged, since the actual playing of tennis is much more interesting and worthwhile than mere practice. Player 1 offers an argument to boost their spirits:

Listen, the regular pattern in our hitting implies that a court is *functioning* even though we can't see it. Our very acting as if a court were there guarantees its existence in the sense that matters. We are apprehending its reality through our actions.

Player 2 replies:

You're suggesting that there is no important difference between pretending to play tennis, or merely going through all the motions appropriate to tennis, and engaging in an actual tennis game. On your view it doesn't finally matter whether there is a court under this fog; but it does matter to me. To believe that I have served an ace on you I must believe that the ball bounced on the ground within a certain area before shooting by your racket. We will act *as if* that happened, but it is only because the 'as if' links our actions to a presumed reality that we can count our actions as tennis. Whether this presumption has real grounds is precisely the problem; the 'as if' cannot create the reality by itself.

What matters to tennis players and Kantian moral subjects alike is being serious about their activities. And it is not just that they would like to *feel* serious; in all genuine action (as opposed to pretending) one addresses what one understands to be the real environment, acts in such a way as to deal with what is (relevantly) *there* to be dealt with. The need to believe is the need, attendant upon serious action, to apprehend and assent to a truth (like the existence and particular character of some thing or state of affairs) really and not merely notionally. Real apprehension and assent involve an experience of subjection to the claim of a reality, whether or not by means of a direct impingement on the mind's faculty of representation like an 'impression'; they are distinguished from mere readiness to 'go along' with a proposition or to act as if something were the case.[1] Player 1's argument tries to generate real assent to the existence of the tennis court from the reality of their play; Player 2 detects in this a distortion of the tennis reality principle. Tennis ought to be understood not only as persons pitted against each other under certain formal constraints but as an engagement of those persons with a particular material theatre of action, the tennis court. Player 2 needs to be given grounds for affirming the tennis court that derive from the court's own actuality. The fog puts this player in a bad position. For Kantians the position is actually hopeless, inasmuch as their epistemology rules out the very possibility of apprehending the Kantian heaven or anything other than natural phenomena.

Kant himself, it is instructive to note, finessed this problem in the way he formulated the concept of belief. While he rightly distinguished between

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[1] I follow Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, ch. 4.

the objectively sufficient grounding of 'knowledge' and the objectively-insufficient-but-subjectively-sufficient grounding of 'belief', he proceeded to disregard objective grounds for belief altogether, equating belief with sub-jective compulsion.[1] Since the subject's own nature is a thought-compelling factor distinct from apprehension, apprehension is no longer essential to belief. The tennis players can play tennis out of their own necessary inten-tions and quit straining to see through the fog. Kant would side with Player I but correct him as follows: 'You are not exactly apprehending the reality of a tennis court in your actions; you are merely postulating the court. But because the postulation is required by the very nature of your tennis-playing intention, which is a given in your case, you are not merely imagining or pretending'.

In sympathy with Player 2, I would respond that while this sort of postulation may be a fine thing and wholly defensible, and may even correspond perfectly with one meaning commonly attributed to 'faith', it does not accord with the normal meaning of 'belief'. Collapsing belief into faith by not recognizing the element of apprehension in belief is simply a conceptual error. (Is there some epistemological bad humour here – that is, an indifference to anyone's having an apprehension if it can't be guaranteed for everyone?) At any rate, if the deal offered by Kant is the best available, then let it be acknowledged that the players are postulating *rather than* believing, and that they must accept the sense of unreality that goes with unbelieving postulation. They will continue to be bothered by the incon-gruity between their action and the apparent theater in which it is per-formed, for their need to believe will not go away.

Because of what is at stake for people who need to believe, they will not neutrally watch for the sorts of experiences that form the right basis for belief; rather they will actively cultivate such experiences. This *trying* to believe is a strange project, since it involves the would-be believer shaping up an experience which should be determined by the object if it is to support real apprehension and assent. How can the subject and the object take charge at the same time?

The obvious course open to a subject who needs to believe something is to search for telling evidence: to be in place when the fog lifts so as to glimpse the normally hidden tennis court, to have a detective keep tabs on a beloved whose fidelity is in doubt, to read an allegedly holy book waiting for a holy spirit's endorsement of it, etc. But although evidence collection is a way of pursuing belief, and is most likely a sign of desire to believe, it is not the same as trying to believe, which involves looking at whatever evidence is already

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[1] *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 850.

on hand *as* a factor subjecting one to the reality of the object. Look at what might be an owl on a high tree branch; try to believe it is one – not arbitrarily but because it *must be* an owl (nothing else would look just like that). Look at the evidence *as* evidence of an owl because, as you will *realize*, the owl's really being there must *make* the evidence take on that aspect...

One way to satisfy this condition of non-arbitrariness in believing is to interpret the subject's very construing of evidence as part of his or her subjection to the real thing. If, for example, someone reads a book as the Word of God (that is, as the vehicle of a real apprehension of God), then that very reading, apparently an initiative of the subject, is assigned to God's more fundamental initiative. The Word of God speaks only to the hearer's belief, which in turn is understood as God's gift. (Not that every object *acts* in the way that this extraordinary 'object' is thought to; but every object *has an effect* in some fashion on the subject who apprehends it.) Thus the trying to believe that led toward belief may come to be interpreted retrospectively as having constituted in itself relevant evidence for the belief. In a hopeful mood, one can *prospectively* interpret it in this way (Why would I be trying to believe in X if X were not exerting some claim upon me?); but as long as one is still trying to believe rather than believing, the choice between the X and not-X aspects has not yet been done away with, the justifying constraint is not yet attained.

There is another, rather different way in which looking at evidence as evidence of a certain reality is taken to be constrained by reality and thus authenticated. Consider this example. The belief that the sun is about 93,000,000 miles away does not come easily, for nothing can look to us nearly so far away. Of course I did not have to put forth any great effort to believe this fact when I first learned it; it must have seemed as reasonable to me as all the other astronomical figures I learned at the same time. But that was only notional assent. If at any moment I try to make *real* to myself the sun's remoteness – and if I disentangle the question of real distance from the difficulty I may have in appreciating huge magnitudes as such, in the weakness of my mathematical imagination – I find it hard to believe that an object so intensely present to me, in visual brilliance and heat, can be separated from me by so many miles. In order to believe this I have to apprehend the sun via scientific reports of it, which are trustworthy for complex reasons having no direct connection with the sun's presence to my senses. This apprehension involves placing the sun in a whole world-system that has been built up in my understanding by various reports and subject to manifold partial confirmations. Thanks to my understanding, I *can* see the sun as 93,000,000 miles distant, albeit with an effort of stretching my imagination. I have to believe in the sun's enormous size and temperature at the same time.

The ordinary ethics of belief requires me to make the effort to believe in

the sun's distance. The fundamental reason for this is that the available evidences of reality are interconnected in such a way that hosts of them would have to be disregarded if we failed to believe in one of them. The authority granted to 'science' in our ethics of belief rests precisely on its maintaining and expanding this system of apprehensions. It is the whole system weighing on me that furnishes the justifying constraint. In looking at the sun as immensely distant, I am being subjected to this system.

When we compare the sort of case where the object of belief is unavailable for apprehension, like Kantian heaven, with the sort of case where the object is apprehension, like the sun, we encounter a typical difference between two classes of beliefs: religious, metaphysical, and moral, on the one hand, and scientific and everyday factual beliefs, on the other. Let us call these classes non-observational and observational. (I am not counting as 'moral' conduct-guiding views based solely on observation of what people do.) To be sure, science at least is also concerned with unobservable beings. Failure to observe X, when X is, say, a quark, does not seem to be crucial, when one can construe certain phenomena as traces of X. Nevertheless, in such cases the strictest scientific ethics of belief asks us to sit loose, to make believe rather than to believe in the proper sense, due precisely to the absence of a clinching apprehension. Availability for apprehension is a standard after all: we might have better reason some day to think that we are dealing with zarks instead of quarks.

To each class of belief we can assign a maxim that is both descriptive and normative. Observational beliefs rest finally on the 'seeing is believing' principle (for all that perception is conditioned by conceptual and aesthetic predispositions). On the other hand, the testimony of non-observational believers suggests that the principle of religious, metaphysical, and moral beliefs is 'believing is seeing' (for all that believing is constrained by the form and actual contents of sense-perception). If this division is real, then 'trying to believe' must have quite different meanings in the two belief-worlds. In the former, one will reach for belief (acknowledgement of a reality, subjection of self to it) by accomplishing a perception, for instance, *seeing* the sun *as* very big, hot, and distant. In the latter, one will reach for a sense of something's reality by provisionally subjecting oneself to it, or find the reality in the self-subjection.

The implication of this difference for the ethics of belief is important. For science as well as everyday factual awareness, the subject's capacity of acknowledgement is greater cause for concern than perception. Perception takes care of itself, relatively speaking, or can be gotten to taken care of itself with the right instruction, but what the subject is prepared to make of perception is variable and in need of discipline.[1] (A disciplined attitude toward perception may require us to disallow certain 'credulous' perceptions, e.g. seeing ghosts.) In religion and morality, however, the supreme

concern is with the subject's awareness, with the real vs. notional quality of apprehension and assent, while the chief issue in metaphysics is quality of understanding. Credulity may be a genuine problem in this frame of reference, too, but only a secondary one. In the realm of piety, for instance, maintaining all the right attitudes is relatively easy, and relatively dispensable, while experiencing as real the basis of pious attitudes, such as God's holiness or one's own sinfulness, is harder and more important.

Under either aspect, the ethics of belief is concerned with what kind of people we are – credulous or tough-minded, proud or humble. Either way, the ethics of belief sinks a root into the ethics of personal virtue. The distinction we are entertaining reflects a division within moral sensitivity itself between the conditions of right dealing with the perceptible or intuitable and the conditions of right dealing with what is imperceptible in principle, the intentional reality of other persons and one's relationships with them. We have a faulty relationship to nature if we hold beliefs that are not warranted by available real apprehensions, but on the other hand it is disrespect toward other persons to fail to believe in the naturally imperceptible moral community of free and responsible subjects to which we all belong – something not unreal, but the reality of which is only accessible through subjection of oneself to it, and through undergoing the personal change that accompanies that subjection.

Probably *any* belief that seems worth trying for beckons with the possibility of a personal transformation. Religious conversion is the most striking instance of this, but would one try to believe in so much as the sun's distance if not to attain an attractively higher consciousness? Thus a prime reason for trying to believe would be to become the sort of person that one necessarily is if one is engaged with the reality targeted by the belief. Tennis players want to be real tennis players – which requires belief in a real court. Kantians want really to be moral – which (they think) requires belief 'that in the end it must make a difference whether a person has acted honestly or deceitfully, fairly or violently'.[1] We treat it as significant information about people that they are moral agents or even tennis players, not just because this affects our predictions of what they will do, but as qualifications of what they immediately are. One's own reality is not unaffected by the realities one apprehends.

The point can be made the other way: the existence of the distinctive sort of people who are engaged with a certain reality constitutes in itself a basis for apprehending that reality, evidence for it that is apparent both to others and to themselves. There would not be real tennis players if tennis could not be apprehended, real moral agents if morality could not be apprehended, genuine devotees if the divine were unrealizable. (Tennis Player 1's first argument can be developed along these lines, adjusting 'Our very acting as

[1] *Critique of Judgment* 458 (Akademie ed.); tr. W. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 349.

if the court were there guarantees its existence in the sense that matters' to 'Our personal engagement in tennis is a notable sign of the reality-for-us of all of the necessary circumstances of tennis'. Player 2 is right that 'acting as if' does not guarantee anything's reality, if the acting is supposed to *produce* the reality; but Player 1 means only to *correlate* the acting with the reality.) Now this sort of evidence is encouraging, not constraining – the existence of a worshipper hardly counts as a proof of the existence of God – and so can be rejected, although it will be welcomed by those who seek footholds for their believing or trying to believe. One can be sceptical of the personal qualities allegedly associated with believers' believing in X just as one can be sceptical of X.

How do we make up our minds whether another person is or is not a self-deluder? It seems that we treat the amount and kind of trying involved in someone's believing as a criterion of its genuineness. In our dealings with matters that are essentially perceptible or intuitable, trying to believe is suspect, for it usually means that the phenomena are not supportive. But when it comes to things imperceptible, such as other intentional beings and relationships as such, the most suspect beliefs are the ones that are held with no effort – for example, the sort of moral belief that is only subscription to prevailing social mores, or the 'Christendom' sort of Christianity that Kierkegaard attacked. Two things are chiefly wrong with these effortless beliefs: they confuse the visible with the invisible ('what people do' and 'what people say' with 'right' and 'true'), which is disrespect of the object, and they leave the subject in sloth, unroused and unattuned, less than fully actual qua subject. For both of these reasons, crucial beliefs ought to be tried for. Knowing that a moral agent has to try to believe in moral community is a sign that it is there, since if it *were* there that is what *would* be involved in apprehending it. Self-deluders are less likely to take the difficult way (unless, due to special psychological problems, they take the *excessively* difficult way).

Trying in itself is reckoned a good thing and, up to a point, a good sign for whatever it aims at. We appreciate trying as a necessary condition for reaching many goals; more fundamentally still, we honour the *revelation* in trying, as it brings out both what the trier is capable of (adding to the trier's known being) and the capacity of the trier's goal to support exertion, that is, to seem worthwhile so durably that its seeming valuable looks more and more like really being valuable. Trying is a basic additive gesture in the drama of the waxing and waning of things that excites our hopes and fears. Most important is trying's *responsiveness* in cases like trying to believe – a goodwill gesture toward other beings, a dedication to the basic good of being aware of them and in partnership with them, which completes their presence. Trying has a life-cycle, though. It needs to succeed. Heroic up to a point, it is tragic or foolish after that point. The addition to the trier's being of *sheer*

trying without achievement is finally unfocused, ungrounded, misplaced: at best a potential greater being and never a real one.

Accordingly, if one were aware *only* of a person's trying to believe in moral community, or in a specific moral good, one would judge the person a would-be moral agent rather than a real one. People who have to try too hard to see the good of honesty make us feel a serious imperfection in our community with them. People who continually struggle with the feeling that adultery might be a good thing are not fully married. (In the analogous religious case, 'believers' who try too hard are not properly believers at all; an *absurdum* proclaimed as the object of *credo* cannot simply be the maximally difficult object of belief.)

It might be objected that the distinction between real and would-be moral agency is meaningless, since any affair of intention whatsoever is 'would-be'. But intentions are clearly affected by whether or not they engage something real. For example, there is a great difference between my intending to be a friend to a stranger, with whom I sympathize from a distance, and my friendly intention as it is maintained through the ups and downs of actual acquaintance. On the other hand, a real moral agent cannot be completely beyond trying for moral beliefs, or else these would lose their non-natural character. *There must a certain balance between struggle and success, between postulation and confirmation, whereby the endeavour of the believer is qualified as a being-drawn-by-the-object while at the same time the reality of the object is qualified as a to-be-realized-by-the subject.*

It is easiest to see this happening between persons intensely concerned with each other's unobservable intentional being, like lovers. Each lover loves because of the manifest lovableness of the other, yet that lovableness is conditioned, in a sense even created, by the loving that reaches toward it. One of them goes away on a trip; the other is assailed by doubt, must try to believe in the beloved, marshalling his or her own power of trust and conferring out of it trustworthiness on the other; then the remembered gestures of the beloved and the letter that comes in the mail *meet* the trusting intention and confirm it, though not in such a way as to remove the need for it. The success requirement is satisfied, and yet trying continues. While it might be thought that perfect trust is quasi-instinctive and supersedes trying, a distinction surely ought to be preserved between trust and 'animal faith', and it seems that this distinction can only be founded on an irreducible trying in trust's element of belief.

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Let us consider again the plight of the Kantians. They cannot get confirmation of their belief in Kantian heaven because they understand their idea of it to be a production of their own reason, and they think it is

impossible to have a real apprehension of the object of the idea, which must lie beyond all sense-experience. They are doomed, therefore, to trying to believe without any success – which undermines their very trying. This is a pall that hands over the whole Kantian strategy of 'the postulates of practical reason'.

There really are, on the other hand, believers in virtue's reward who are not exempt from the difficulties involved in the belief yet do not run into a total absence of confirmation. They do not merely postulate, they believe. By what amendment of Kantianism would this be possible? It could happen in one or both of two ways:

(1) By encountering some confirmation in divine revelation of what human reason projects; for example, by hearing the words of a psalm on the expectations of the righteous as a divine speaking or as in some other way vouched for by God.

(2) By apprehending certain phenomenal events as indicative of the postulated noumenal order; for example, by interpreting one's satisfied feeling upon freely turning in lost money as a confirmation of the belief.

In both cases one would experience a kind of commandeering of the perceptible by the imperceptible, the imperceptible becoming by this means indirectly perceptible. The possibility that this event is caused by an imposition of the subject's expectations or wishes on the phenomena cannot be ruled out; but to the extent that worrying about this possibility impedes us in dealing fairly with all that we experience as real, we should put the worry itself in brackets (as Hume did with his sceptical doubts).

Further, we ought to reflect that just this sort of event is requisite for our everyday relations with the intentions of other persons, *which we are not free to disavow*. I encounter the other person's intentional being through perceptible events that are not identical with it. The other's intention is unquestionably there for me to deal with, is often very plainly shown in one sense, and yet it is fair to say that I never simply *see* it. If I *saw* it, I would not have epistemic space to entertain the Cartesian question whether the being I face is a robot or a person, and I do have that space; yet I am not really at liberty not to credit a person with being a person, for I am bound by a supra-cognitive 'moral certainty'. I *have to* believe in the other's full personhood, or, more exactly, am called upon to do so. The belief may be built on a kind of involuntary basis, a 'possession' of me by other persons prior to any choices I might make, but beyond this it always involves a certain variable exertion, usually invisible, like the exertion of moving the pedals by which one stays up on a bicycle.

Suppose I want to put myself in someone else's place, as an exercise in moral imagination. I have to make real to myself what it is to be that other person. (The bicycle speeds up, makes a tighter turn ...) If I try to apprehend this other as real by means of the concept of an alien subjectivity, generically

like yet specifically unlike my own, 'over there', I have to exert myself considerably to succeed; somehow I have to invest the *alter ego* concept with my 'moral certainty' of the reality of others which I have in *dealing* with them. (These dealings are originally with You's, not with Other-I's.) It takes subjective effort to bring these factors together. It is a trying to believe, but not simply of the doomed sort, since – as we see in reviewing the ways in which we can become aware of other persons – we find plenty of confirmation, and more of it the better we are ourselves.

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We have investigated the partnership between subject and object in the realm of 'belief', which is relative to the individual subject, rather than in the any-and-all-subjects realm of 'knowledge'. We have explored an unstable and ambiguous aspect that at least sometimes appears in this partnership, the trying by which a subject takes proportionally more responsibility than the object for the realizing of the object's existence and nature. We have found that trying to believe belongs unavoidably to the formation of some beliefs, even though belief proper is not voluntary, and that trying is especially called for in the realm of nonobservational beliefs, serving (up to a point) as a sign of the genuineness of such belief or (past that point) as a sign of its futility.

A background assumption that has undergirded the inquiry, without receiving much elucidation, is this: the quality of a conscious being's life is enriched or impoverished according to whether other beings are accepted as real. In other words, belief matters, for the closely allied reasons that (1) the identity and richness of the world, as the subject experiences it, depends on whether A or B or C is taken to be in it, and (2) the identity and richness of the subject's being depends at least partly on what the subject has to respond to. It goes beyond the scope of this essay to offer a complete argument for such points, and indeed they may be more like axioms than arguable points, but they should always be held in view; many discussions of belief ignore them.