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The Trinity and the Light Switch: Two Faces of Belief
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1 Introduction: A Curious (Apparent) Overlap

I grew up in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Every week when I was a child, my family went to church twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday. I attended Oakdale Christian School, which had mandatory Bible class. My parents taught at Calvin College, a small Christian liberal arts college with an associated seminary. This childhood of mine took place in Grand Rapids, Michigan, often called (only half-jokingly) the "Jerusalem" of the CRC.

The CRC was a tribe—a Calvinist in-group that differentiated insiders from always-suspect outsiders. Our Catholic next-door neighbors, as neighborly as we were to each other, were somehow just *not us*, not part of *our* group, though it always bothered me even as a child that it (seemingly) had to be so. ("Are Catholics Christians?" I asked my father when I was about ten—a common question among intellectually curious CRC youth. I can't recall his exact answer, but I remember it was prefaced by a pregnant pause.) "Onward Christian Soldiers" was my favorite hymn, because it was so spirited, though I have long since come to resent the image it inculcates: *we* (Christians) are soldiering on—fighting—against that which is non-Christian, which by implication is fighting against *us*, yet still we march forward, in the words of the hymn, "with the cross of Jesus going on before!"

What did it take to belong to this pack, to be a member in good standing of this closely knit in-group? Many things: church attendance, sending one's kids to a Christian school, tithing, and so on. But there was one thing that mattered above all else, without which it was definitionally impossible to be a *true* member of the group—to be "saved." That something was called "belief."

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Thus, if someone were to ask, "What makes someone Christian Reformed?", a good answer would include, among other things, appeal to some of a person's "beliefs." For example, the sentence

1) Neil <u>believed</u> *that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*.

would help explain why I *belonged* to the CRC.[1]

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[1] This formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is a shortening of what appears in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day Eight. The *Heidelberg Catechism*, at least when I was young, was a commonly used resource in the CRC for teaching high school-aged church members church doctrine.

This general phenomenon—"believing to belong," in the phrasing of Helen De Cruz[2]—is hardly specific to the CRC. Setting aside the doctrine of the Trinity, lots of *other* "beliefs" play roles in constituting *various* group identities around the world. The CRC is just a good example of this striking wider phenomenon.

This brings me to the first major point of this paper, which I develop and clarify in what follows: "beliefs" (in *some* sense of that term) play an important explanatory role. They help explain what *group identity* someone has.[3] Going forward, I'll call this role in explaining group identity The Groupish Explanatory Role for "Belief"—or just Groupish Role for short.

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I am now a philosopher of mind and cognitive scientist, having become interested in philosophy as a teenager and then having gone on to study it in college and graduate school. Many philosophers of my stripe also have a keen interest in something called "belief." But if you look at discussions of "belief" in contemporary philosophy of mind and action, you'll see that many and probably most have a different character from what we just saw.

Consider this passage from Alvin Goldman's classic book *A Theory of Human Action*, where he is discussing the relation between "believing" there is a connection between a switch and a light and the *act* of flipping the switch:

> Thus, the statement that *S* flipped the switch *in order to* turn on the light implies more than that *S had* the indicated want and *had* the indicated <u>belief</u>. It also implies that his having this want and his having this <u>belief</u> *caused*, or *resulted in*, his flipping the switch. Such an explanation not only implies that he *had* an action-plan that included the indicated want and <u>belief</u>, but also implies that this action-plan *caused* (in the characteristic way) the act of flipping the switch.[4]

Something is being explained by "belief" here, but that something is *not* group identity. It's flipping a light switch.

In this approach to explaining goal-oriented action, someone who knew I wanted the room lit up could explain my act of flipping of the switch by uttering this sentence:

2) Neil <u>believes</u> *that the switch is connected to the light*.

The general form of action explanation here goes like this: beliefs (e.g., that the switch turns on the light) together with desires (e.g., that the room be illuminated) cause actions (e.g., the flipping of the switch) that will make the desires come true (the room gets illuminated!) *if* the beliefs in question are *true* (the switch really is connected to the light, etc.).

This notion of "belief" designates a mental state that tracks what the world is like so that agents can figure out what actions in it will attain their goals. Importantly—and I will return to this point repeatedly—if the actions explained in this fashion are to succeed, the "beliefs" in

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[2] See De Cruz (2020) for a probing article with that phrase as its title.
[3] I leave the phrase "group identity" unanalyzed here. I give an explicit theory of it in Van Leeuwen (2023: Ch. 6).
[4] Goldman (1970: 78); his italics; my underlining.

question generally need to be true or mostly true (largely accurate to the state of the world), since otherwise agents won't be doing what they think they're doing. When my belief about the connection between the switch and the light is false, for example, I run the garbage disposal by accident (or something like that) instead of turning on the light.

The kind of "belief"-invoking action explanation that has just been brought forth is not peculiar to philosophers. Lay people employ it all the time, though at least in American English, they are more likely to use "thinks" than "believes" in this connection, as in this sentence:

3) Neil <u>thinks</u> *that the switch is connected to the light*.[5]

And psychologists who employ the "false belief task" have something similar in mind under the term "belief": a child who understands false "beliefs" will predict that an agent who falsely believes her candy is in Box A will look in Box A, even if the candy is really (unbeknownst to the agent) in Box B. That is, the agent looks where she "believes" the candy is, and she finds it *if* the belief in question is true (and she is thwarted otherwise).[6]

Flipping a switch to illuminate a room or opening a box to get candy are mundane instrumental actions that can be partially explained by "beliefs" *as that term is being used here*. So appeal to "belief" (in some sense) can play another, very different explanatory role from the Groupish Role we just saw. Putting "belief" in this role in instrumental action explanation goes back at least to David Hume and occurs prominently in the work of Donald Davidson and others in the 20th century. Decision theory is a formalization of that tradition. Once again, on this usage, we have this structure: beliefs and desires cause and explain actions that cause (or would cause) the desires to be satisfied, if the beliefs are (or were) true. Going forward, I'll call this role in explaining instrumental action The Mundane Explanatory Role for "Belief"—or just Mundane Role for short.

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So some "beliefs" (e.g., about the Trinity) play the Groupish Role, while other "beliefs" (e.g., about the light switch) play the Mundane Role. For concision, I'll just call the "beliefs" in the first set Groupish Beliefs and "beliefs" in the second set Mundane Beliefs.

Now here is the crucial open question for present purposes. *Do Groupish Beliefs and Mundane Beliefs typically involve the same cognitive attitude, i.e., the same way of processing ideas?*

Let's get clear on the focus. Generally speaking—and this formulation will do for present purposes—a *cognitive attitude* is a way that an agent cognitively relates to a given idea or content: one can <u>suspect</u> that *p*, <u>suppose</u> that *p*, <u>hypothesize</u> that *p*, <u>imagine</u> that *p* as part of make-believe play, <u>assume</u> that *p* <u>for the sake of argument</u>, all of which involve different cognitive attitudes (suspecting, supposing, etc.) toward some idea or another.

We can now see why I've been putting "belief" in quotation marks. There might be *different* cognitive attitudes that go under the name "belief" or "believe" in different

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[5] For empirical work on the thinks/believes phenomenon, see Heiphetz, Landers, and Van Leeuwen (2021), and see Van Leeuwen, Weisman, and Luhrmann (2021) for a crosscultural replication. See Westra (forthcoming) and Van Leeuwen (2023: Ch. 5) for discussions of the significance of this phenomenon for social cognition.

[6] The false belief task literature is vast. See Spaulding (2018: section 3.1) for a concise overview and entry point.

explanatory contexts. Suppose Max has a "belief" that *p* that plays the Mundane Role (he relies on the truth of *p* in order to figure out how he can accomplish his goals, or at least is disposed to rely on it), and Greta has a "belief" that *p* that plays the Groupish Role (embrace of the idea of *p* partly determines an identity group she belongs to). Uncritical reliance on the *word* "believe" might lead us astray, by rendering the question I just raised invisible. That is, we might look at these two reasonable-seeming sentences

    4)   Max <u>believes</u> *that p*.
    5)   Greta <u>believes</u> *that p*.

and conclude that Max and Greta relate to the content *p* (whatever that may be) in the *same* way. After all, they both "believe" that *p*! But the fact that 4) is more likely to be reported as follows

    4') Max <u>thinks</u> *that p*.

should give us pause. It is an *open question* whether Max and Greta are disposed to do the same things with the idea that *p*, regardless of the fact that there may be *some* overlap among the words that can be used to describe their respective mental states. In other words, groupishly believing might be a different cognitive relation from mundanely believing, though we won't know until we've investigated the question thoroughly.

       The point of this essay is to address this open question. I argue that Groupish Beliefs and Mundane Beliefs in fact *do* typically involve distinct cognitive attitudes, or ways of relating to ideas—contrary to what the conflating use of the words "believe" and "belief" in much philosophical writing seems to imply. To have a name for the view that contrasts with mine, let's call it the Single Belief View. That view holds that Groupish Beliefs and Mundane Beliefs always involve the same cognitive attitude (the attitude of Simply Believing, whatever that is!) and thus that any differences they make to downstream thought, feeling, and behavior are to be explained by differences in content or in surrounding psychological conditions, rather than by differences in the "believing" attitude one takes. My aim here is not to argue conclusively that the Single Belief View is false (that's a project for a different time), but rather to sketch a more compelling theoretical alternative.[7]

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       Here is the plan.

       Section 2 clarifies the broader psychological picture I wish to present and differentiates my view from other socially laden views of "belief."

       Section 3 better defines the explanatory roles just introduced, Groupish and Mundane.

       Then, in section 4, I examine the *logic* of the two explanatory roles. The basic contrast is this: as suggested earlier, "beliefs" that play the Mundane Role need to be (for the most part)

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[7] The Single Belief view is more often tacitly assumed than explicitly articulated: one just uses "believe" and "belief" to cover all the mental states in question and then goes on to discuss what "the" attitude of belief is or what "the" concept of belief involves. But see Levy (2017) for an explicit defense in response to Van Leeuwen (2014). See Van Leeuwen (2017a) for reply. This debate continues in various subsequent publications, including Levy (2022) and Van Leeuwen (2023).

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true in order for the actions they generate to succeed (otherwise I turn on the garbage disposal by accident), but "beliefs" that play the Groupish Role have no such truth requirement. A "belief" that partly constitutes one's group identity can still do that even (or especially!) if it is false: e.g., even if it is *not true*—and it certainly is not—that the earth is younger than 10,000 years, "believing" that still groupishly *succeeds* in making one a Young Earth Creationist in good standing. More generally, if groupishly believing that *p* makes you part of a club, it still makes you part of that club if the content *p* is false.

In section 5, I show how this difference in truth dependence predicts significant differences in how people psychologically process Groupish versus Mundane Beliefs. That is, I show why people are likely to deploy *distinct cognitive attitudes* in either case. I focus on the following contrasts in how ideas can be processed: (i) voluntary control versus evidential constraint on the input side and (ii) mere signaling behavior versus non-representational/plain action on the output side. Section 5 is mainly theoretical, but at various points I indicate how empirical findings to date cohere with the theory I develop.

To encapsulate my main points, I defend two theses:

> **The Logical Thesis**: The Mundane Role and the Groupish Role differ in the relations they imply between "belief," truth, and their respective *explananda* (plain instrumental action *versus* group identity and social signaling), with the Mundane Role having a truth requirement that the Groupish Role lacks.

> **The Psychological Thesis**: Mundane Beliefs and Groupish Beliefs (in typical cases) differ sharply in how people process them psychologically, to the point where we (as theorists) should regard them as involving distinct cognitive attitudes; the differences in question are predicted by The Logical Thesis.

2 The Big Picture: Two *Distinct* "Belief" Attitudes

You might wonder what the big deal is. It's hardly new to suggest that "beliefs" play social roles—and that these are in tension with other features that many philosophers take to constitute beliefs, such as being constrained by evidence. Sarah Stroud (2006), for example, writes about the epistemic partiality that arises from *friendship*, or why being someone's friend places demands on what one "believes" that depart from impartial epistemic rationality. Miriam Schleifer McCormick (2015) writes about believing without evidence for practical reasons, where some practical reasons can be social commitments. Eric Funkhouser (2017) writes about "beliefs as signals"—and he means *social* signals. Helen De Cruz (2020), as noted, writes about "believing to belong." Daniel Williams (2020) posits "socially adaptive belief." Rima Basu (2018) argues that moral considerations, not just evidence, affect what "beliefs" one *should* have. Eric Mandelbaum (2019) writes about a "psychological immune system" that shields ideologically central beliefs from being revised in light of evidence. And so on. Some of these positions are descriptive ("beliefs," in point of psychological fact, *are* influenced in such fashions); others are normative ("beliefs" *ought* to be influenced in such fashions) with significant descriptive implications (due to "'ought' implies 'can'"). But in all cases, these philosophers claim there are influences on "belief" that are independent of, or even contrary to, evidential/truth-oriented influences. Let's take it as given that the work just mentioned is onto something important

(social psychologists cry out: "That's what we've been saying!"). And that something, whatever it is, is *prima facie* at odds with the idea that beliefs are rationally responsive to evidence. So, isn't Groupish Belief just another term for what quite a few theorists have already recognized?

Importantly, there are two very *different* cognitive architectures one could posit to make sense of social influences on "belief," and these architectures are rarely distinguished.

The first architecture recognizes that there are social and moral influences on "belief," but it posits only *one* cognitive attitude of "belief." Such a "combined influence" architecture looks like this:
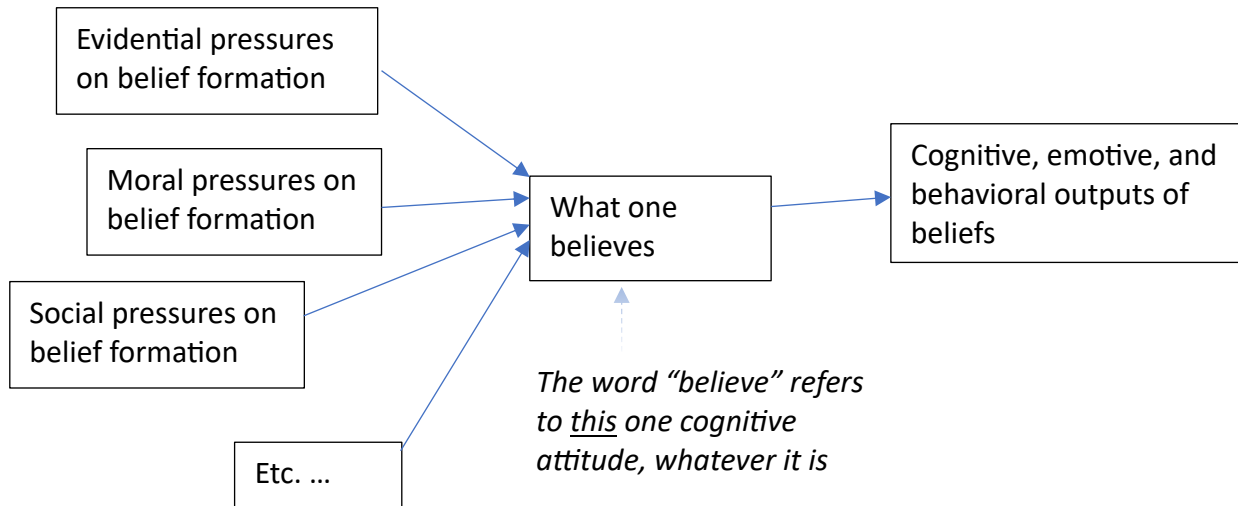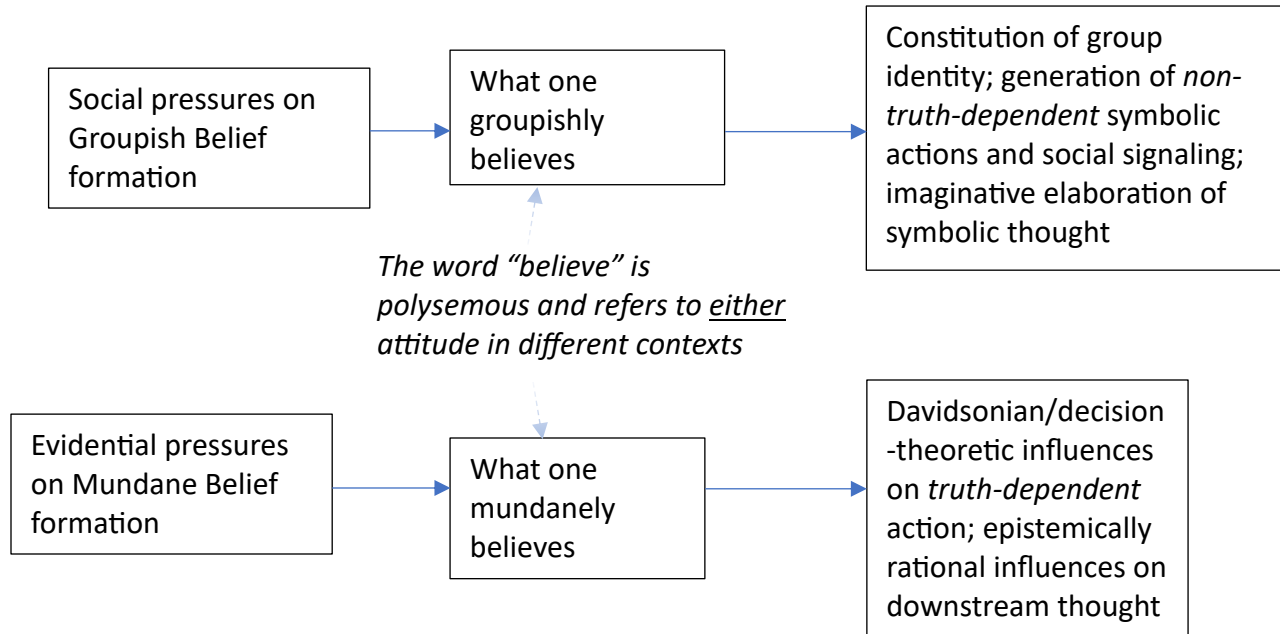

My impression is that most (and maybe all) of the theorists just mentioned have a descriptive picture roughly like this in mind (with many variations in detail). The way one arrives at this cognitive architecture could easily be something like this (I make no claims about individual cases): first, one starts with the traditional picture of "belief" in epistemology and action theory, according to which evidence constrains beliefs on the input side and then beliefs produce Davidsonian/decision-theoretic action and downstream reasoning on the output side; second, one notices that there appear to be lots of *non-evidential* influences on what people (so to speak) "believe;" third, one concludes that there are *also* such influences on *the very same thing* that action theorists and epistemologists were trying to talk about all along ("beliefs!"). Thus, one arrives at a Single Belief View with a few extra levers (formation conditions) posited on the input side.

In my view, however, the intellectual path just described involves theorists being seduced to conflation by the commonality of a difficult-to-define word: "belief."

The cognitive architecture I posit is strikingly different. And that is because I think there are also impressive typical differences between Mundane Beliefs and Groupish Beliefs *on the output side*. On the picture above, a Simple Belief that *p* will have the *same* downstream effects on cognition and behavior, regardless of whether it was formed under the influence of social (and/or moral) pressures or evidential pressures alone: a belief does what a belief does no matter how it got there, on such a view. On my view, however, that way of thinking misses something consequential: a Mundane Belief that *p* and a Groupish Belief that *p* typically differ

dramatically in their *downstream* influences on thought, feeling, and behavior as well. It's not just that they were formed differently; what people will *do* (cognitively and behaviorally) with the idea that *p* will also differ.

     The picture of the "two-map" cognitive architecture I posit is thus this:

| Social pressures on Groupish Belief formation | → | What one groupishly believes | → | Constitution of group identity; generation of *non-truth-dependent* symbolic actions and social signaling; imaginative elaboration of symbolic thought |

The word "believe" is polysemous and refers to <u>either</u> attitude in different contexts

| Evidential pressures on Mundane Belief formation | → | What one mundanely believes | → | Davidsonian/decision-theoretic influences on *truth-dependent* action; epistemically rational influences on downstream thought |

     This is all much simplified. A more complete architecture would have scores of crossing arrows to designate causal pathways that get activated under specific conditions; common performance errors of various sorts could be highlighted; and so on. But this streamlined picture helps to show how my "two-map" picture is in one way *more unconventional* than the "combined influence" architecture, yet in another way *more conservative*.

     The unconventional aspect should be obvious: a prevailing assumption in philosophy for some time (typically unspoken) has been that political, ideological, religious, loyalty-based, etc. "beliefs" involve the same <u>attitude</u> as my belief that the switch goes to the light; just <u>that attitude</u> is taken toward political, ideological, religious, loyalty-based, etc. *contents* (such as *that God is triune*). (This is just a special case of the Single Belief View: "S believes that *p*, so the attitude is *belief*!") What is unconventional in my approach, then, is to trample on that assumption: a different attitude is typically at work in Groupish Belief—a different way of *relating to* ideas, whatever those ideas happen to be—so there will be downstream differences that aren't predicted by contents alone. Now note how the "combined influence" architecture upholds the typically unspoken assumption (and the Single Belief View) on which I wish to trample. That is the respect in which my approach is more unconventional.

     But now look only at the bottom stream of my "two-map" architecture. That Mundane Belief stream is much like the descriptive picture of "belief" that we might get from more traditional philosophers of mind like Fred Dretske (1983), where evidential inputs causally constrain beliefs that figure into decision theoretically rational action. It is also parallel to the traditional evidentialist picture of belief in normative epistemology, according to which only

evidence that *p* can be a proper reason *for* believing that *p*. Thus, if we set aside naïve insistence that the word "belief" is monolithic in its semantic value, it becomes clear that my psychological theory is in fact a ray of sunlight shining on William Kingdon Clifford's somber grave, since it positions Mundane Beliefs as at least *the sort of* mental state to which his evidentialism has a chance at being appropriate. It also gives Clifford a good response to William James and his ilk, namely: *the cognitive attitude (or attitudes) to which your pragmatist arguments apply is not the one I'm talking about.*[8] In short, if we give up misguided reification of the *word* "belief" in order to separate Groupish Beliefs from Mundane Beliefs, it turns out that Mundane Beliefs are far *better* behaved (by traditional epistemological standards) than the "combined influence" architecture would lead you to think. In this way, my view is in fact more conservative.

It should be clear now why the big picture I am painting is distinctive and, if it is right, a corrective to much current thought about belief.[9]

Let's now look at the two explanatory roles in more depth.

3 The Groupish and Mundane Explanatory Roles

An *explanatory role* is a useful intellectual device that is more familiar than it may at first seem. Here I start by covering the general idea of explanatory roles by means of an easy example, and then we'll move to the "belief" explanatory roles.

Between 2007 and 2012, the FBI indicted and successfully prosecuted a series of Wall Street players on charges of insider trading. As this was happening, various reporters at various financial reporting outlets noticed that there was some sort of pattern. The players being brought down were roughly in the same circle (connected to the Galleon Group), and the sequencing appeared to be no accident. It seemed like *someone* was tipping off the FBI in this distinctive range of cases. But who? The financial community settled on a useful term: "Tipper X." Tipper X was just *whoever it was that was responsible for the FBI's having all the relevant information on the range of insider trading cases in question.*[10]

"Tipper X," in short, was their name for *whoever* played a particular explanatory role (which I state here in elliptical form):

*The X such that X's informant activity **explains** why the FBI knew a, b, and c about . . .*

More generally, an explanatory role, like this one, includes a variable (here it's X), along with designations of some set of phenomena that will eventually be explained by whatever it is that satisfies that variable, once we discover it.

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[8] Canonical references: Clifford (1877/1999) and James (1896/1995). See Soter (2023) for a sophisticated intervention in this dialectic that appeals to an empirically realistic notion of *acceptance*.

[9] Here are three mistakes I take my position to be correcting. 1. The typical social psychologist's mistake: in focusing on the Groupish stream, ignoring or taking for granted the impressively *rational* capacities implicated in the Mundane stream. 2. The typical analytic epistemologist's mistake: struggling to make sense of "beliefs" from the Groupish stream in terms appropriate to the Mundane stream, since that's what the analytic epistemologist has traditionally theorized as "belief." 3. The typical pragmatist's mistake: getting the two streams confused.

[10] See, for example: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703672104574654693200452698

A big part of the utility of explanatory roles is this: often there is a pattern of phenomena that seems to have a unified source, though we don't know exactly what that source is (maybe Tipper X is a janitor? maybe a family member of one of the traders? maybe two people working together? etc.). Explanatory roles thus give us an intellectual directive to hunt for something, even if we're not quite sure what we'll find: we need to find whatever it is that explains the interesting cluster of phenomena.

The *occupant* of an explanatory role is the entity that ultimately satisfies its open variable. So, for example, "Who is Tipper X?" is one way of asking who the occupant of the Tipper X explanatory role is. Note that *occupant* is a metaphysical notion, not an epistemic one: if, for example, the Tipper X explanatory role has an occupant, that's the occupant of that role even if we never figure out who it is (it is the person who *would* explain the FBI's knowing a, b, c, etc., *if* we knew who it was).

As it happens, the occupant of the Tipper X explanatory role did come to light. It was Tom Hardin, a buddy of mine who graduated in 1999 from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. After he graduated, Tom had been working on Wall Street as an analyst before getting caught for a minor insider trade by the FBI. The FBI then flipped him and used him for his connections to climb up the chain of inside traders. (More on the metaphysical versus epistemic point: since Tom stayed in my extended circle of friends, there was a period of a few years where I knew the person who was *in fact* the occupant of the Tipper X role without knowing *that* he was the occupant of that role.)

Now that we have the idea of explanatory roles, let's return to "belief." Just as "Tipper X" could be used for the occupant of the Tipper X explanatory role, even before people knew who that was, so too can "belief" be used for the *psychological* occupants of certain other explanatory roles—even before we have a clear theory of the nature of the underlying mental states that are those occupants. The difficulty arises because the word "belief" can be used this way in relation to (at least) two *very different* explanatory roles.

First, we have the Groupish Role:

A cognitive attitude Y that (partly) explains why someone belongs to a social group associated with Y's contents.

Second, we have the Mundane Role:

*A cognitive attitude Z that (partly) explains why people are disposed to perform actions whose success **depends on** the contents of Z being true.*

To continue our running example, then, it is fair to say that my former "belief" in the Trinity satisfied the Y variable in the Groupish Role; it was an occupant of that explanatory role, because it helps explain why my group identity was (CRC). But my "belief" about the light switch occupies the Mundane Role, since it explains my action of flipping the switch, when I want illumination, and the success of that action (succeeding in turning on the light) depends on the truth of the belief (otherwise I turn on the wrong appliance).

On this way of construing things, Groupish Beliefs comprise the set of all mental states (including my former Trinity "belief") that satisfy Y and hence occupy the Groupish Role. And

Mundane Beliefs comprise the set of all mental states (including my light switch "belief") that satisfy Z and hence occupy the Mundane Role.

The first thing that should be obvious by now is that the set of Groupish Beliefs and the set of Mundane Beliefs are widely divergent (though likely overlapping). My light switch "belief" never played the Groupish Role, and my Trinity "belief" never played the Mundane Role, for example. And the same comparative point could be made for countless other "belief" pairs.

The second thing that should be obvious is that the discussion so far leaves open what underlying processing mechanisms are responsible for the "beliefs" in each set—for putting them in place, maintaining them, generating outputs from them, or extinguishing them. Just as specification of the Tipper X role didn't determine that the occupant of that role was medium height and had brown hair, so too does the Mundane Role not specify that its occupants will tend to be processed this way or that (and likewise for the Groupish Role). That's as it should be: roles give us something to look for, and then we discover the more specific properties of the occupants of the roles as we go. The aim here is to discover three things: (i) what sort of psychological processing is *typical* for Mundane Beliefs, (ii) what sort of psychological processing is *typical* for Groupish Beliefs, and (iii) whether (i) and (ii) are different enough to make it worth positing distinct cognitive attitudes of *groupishly believing* versus *mundanely believing*.

The key point to take away from this section is that, despite the common label "belief," it is neither *a priori*, analytic, definitional, or in any way necessary that there should even be much convergence at all in terms of how people's minds process Groupish Beliefs versus Mundane Beliefs. In the next section, I articulate key differences in the logic of the two explanatory roles that should lead us to expect that the underlying manners of processing are different.

4 True Versus *Distinctive*

Highlighting these explanatory roles as I have done brings out a sharp contrast:

Mundane Beliefs work well if they are *true*.
Groupish Beliefs work well if they are *distinctive*.

When it comes to the point about truth, various questions and qualifiers arise. Is truth really needed, or is approximate truth sufficient? What about useful idealizations that are strictly speaking false? Maybe in some cases an exaggerated version of the truth will work even better, given an agent's tendencies? And so on. Issues such as these are all worth addressing. But they shouldn't obscure the overall picture: when successful plain action depends on a certain fragment of reality being as the agent expects it to be, that agent's Mundane Beliefs concerning that fragment of reality have to be largely true in order for the action to succeed. Otherwise, in reaching for the candy, you reach into an empty box. Or you dial the wrong number. Or you take the wrong medicine and don't get better. Or you wind up at a stranger's housewarming party instead of your friend's. Or you turn on the garbage disposal instead of the light. And so on, and so on. I can grant various qualifiers to the truth requirement on Mundane Belief, without having to change that big picture point.

By way of contrast, in order for Groupish Beliefs to do *their* job of constituting an in-group well, they needn't be true; they only need to be *distinctive* of that in-group. In-groups, after all, require properties that will *distinguish* their members from members of out-groups.

Otherwise put, if having a property is to help *constitute* a certain in-group, it had better be one that is *not* shared by members of the relevant out-groups. Hence, around the world and throughout history, in-groups have come marked with distinctive manners of dress, tattoos, rituals, dialects, dietary habits, scarification, and so on—and (in a great many cases) distinctive "beliefs."[11]

Conversely, Mundane Beliefs, as a general fact, do *not* need to be distinctive in order to do their job of guiding truth-dependent action in the world successfully. My Mundane Belief *that water quenches thirst*, for example, is not at all distinctive, but it works perfectly well at guiding the goal-oriented action of drinking a glass of water in order to quench thirst. Alternately, if I mundanely believe truly that the switch goes to the light, your mundanely believing this does not undermine my Mundane Belief's ability to guide the successful action of flipping the switch to illuminate the room. Again, qualifiers arise: in various cases, one agent might not want another to know something, since a certain resource might be scarce, so one might for that reason want to be the only one who has a certain Mundane Belief (which makes that Mundane Belief "distinctive" in some sense). But in other cases, the more agents who mundanely believe the truth the better, since they can then better coordinate. And in a broad range of cases, whether others mundanely believe the same is neither here nor there. So distinctiveness is not a feature that Mundane Beliefs *generally* need to have.

Thus, neither Mundane Belief nor Groupish Belief needs the characteristic feature that the other needs in order to succeed at what the respective explanatory role defines as its job.

Furthermore, distinctiveness and truth are in tension with one another as properties of "beliefs" of any sort. This is easily illustrated. If one group of people have a true "belief" that there is a river on the other side of the hill, what the truth of this "belief" implies, among other things, is that there really *is* a river on the other side of the hill. That being so, others outside that initial group of people will easily come to "believe" the same thing, as soon as they go to the other side of the hill. And then the "belief" isn't distinctive anymore. So if a "belief" is true, its prospects for staying distinctive for very long are usually dim. So true "beliefs" in general are unlikely to work very well as Groupish Beliefs, due to their likely lack of long-term distinctiveness.

To see the point clearly, consider some contents that would make *horrible* candidates for Groupish Beliefs:

that fire is hot
that grass is green
that London is in England
that cats have whiskers
that orange is a color
that ATM machines dispense money
that clouds bring rain
that breathing is needed to live (for a range of animals)
that most lions can kill people

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[11] The literature one could point to here is vast. As an entry point, see McElreath, Boyd, and Richerson (2003) on the cultural evolution of shared norms ethnic markers.

that lemons are sour
etc. etc.

Such contents as these are not likely to divide Clan A from Clan B (or whatever), because they are contents to which *any* rational person, when confronted with the relevant portions of reality, would subscribe. True contents like these would undermine the distinctiveness of the "beliefs" that house them.

Now consider contents such as these:

that the world ends on December 21, 2012
that vaccines cause autism
that Trump won the 2020 presidential election
that the world was created in seven literal days less than 10,000 years ago
that American Indians descended from exiled Israelites
that climate change is a hoax

Some will no doubt think me irreverent to point out that these contents are false. But they are, and pointing out their falsity facilitates the following point: *their falsity helps their distinctiveness*, which is something that is needed for their being internal badges of one in-group or another.

The tension between truth and distinctiveness is not without its exceptions: in a range of cases, "believing" a certain thing truly will be distinctive enough, at least for a time (especially if the out-group is committed to "not" believing it). But the tension in question is widespread, and acknowledging it helps make sense of a certain puzzle that people continually face when confronting the "beliefs" of an out-group. I have often heard bewildered questions like this: How can *those* people "believe" such *obviously crazy and false things*? The answer to this question, effectively, is that it is the sociological *point* of those "beliefs" (Groupish Beliefs) that they seem crazy *to you*, because *you* are in the out-group.

Thus, falsity and even obvious falsity—so much a bug when it comes to Mundane Beliefs—is often a feature for Groupish Beliefs. This concludes my case for the Logical Thesis set out in section 1.

5 A Tale of Two Attitudes

No doubt both classes of "beliefs"—when we look at all the Mundane Beliefs and all the Groupish Beliefs in people's heads around the world—are somewhat motley crews. Each class will be heterogeneous in various ways: in contents, in surrounding psychological conditions, *and* even (despite what I have been saying) in the attitudes people have toward the contents that they in some sense "believe." (Two CRC members, for example, may both profess the Apostle's Creed and thus have its contents encoded in their Groupish Beliefs, even if they relate to those contents in somewhat different ways.)

Nevertheless, given what we've just observed, we can expect there to be some patterns in the variation, particularly in how Mundane versus Groupish Beliefs *tend* to be processed. Mundane Beliefs will tend to be processed in ways that ensure their truth. Groupish Beliefs will tend to be processed in ways that ensure their distinctiveness. If that is true, it will make sense

to regard one cluster of processing characteristics as constituting one cognitive attitude, at which I have provisionally gestured using the phrase *groupishly believes*, and another cluster of processing characteristics as constituting another cognitive attitude, at which I have provisionally gestured using the phrase *mundanely believes*. The view that both attitudes exist is a high-level empirical hypothesis, whose ultimate success depends on downstream research. So the main work of this section is to flesh out this hypothesis in a theoretically coherent way, while pointing to some work that has already been done that gives reason for optimism.

Let's now identify some of the processing differences in question.

Processing difference 1: Are "beliefs" voluntary? Yes and No.

One of the most persistent debates in philosophy concerning "belief" is the question of whether "beliefs" are under voluntary control. The interesting question here concerns *direct* voluntary control, since presumably enough indirect manipulation can cajole one into believing one thing or another. So the question is this: can I (within limits) simply choose to believe a proposition I want to believe, just like I can choose to raise my arm in the air?

The majority of philosophers of mind hold that belief is not subject to voluntary control. As Mandelbaum and Levy (2014) put it, "I can't just decide to believe that today is Wednesday." However, a minority of philosophers of mind and epistemologists claim that (within certain limits) "beliefs" can be chosen. This debate, in my view, has been going in circles for some time.

Here's a way out.

Does it make sense that Groupish Beliefs would be, at least to some extent, under direct voluntary control? The answer is that Groupish Belief should be about as much under voluntary control as joining a certain group or team is, which is a fair amount. If that's right, then groupishly believing involves willingly forming or maintaining allegiance to ("believing") an idea that is explicitly or implicitly a criterion of inclusion for a certain group. *Converting* is often voluntary; it thus makes sense that groupishly believing is (to a large extent) too.

But does it make sense that Mundane Beliefs would be under direct voluntary control? Let's think in terms of our running example. I hit the switch, intending to turn on the light, and the garbage disposal goes on. I am frustrated by the sudden obnoxious sound. But would it help me, given the role that Mundane Beliefs play, to be able to voluntarily decide to mundanely believe that the switch for the garbage disposal in fact turns on the light? I might *pretend* to believe that to calm myself down. But given that Mundane Beliefs guide actions that in general fail if the guiding beliefs are false, it is hard to see what good direct voluntary control could do: it would likely just put me into a state where I am apt to make the same mistake again.

If I have compelling evidence that *p* is true, my default state will be to mundanely believe it, in which case direct voluntary control would only be useful for steering me *away* from mundanely believing that which I have compelling reason to think is true, namely *p*. If I lack evidence concerning *p*, being able to voluntarily mundanely believe it would render me just as likely to believe a falsehood as a truth. And so on. So given what mundane beliefs do in terms of action causation, *voluntarily* believing would amount to my deciding to put myself in a state that would render me more likely to perform actions that will fail than I otherwise would be. The general tendency, then, will be for Mundane Beliefs (like the one about the light switch) to be processed in a way that is *not* susceptible to voluntary control.

Processing difference 2: Are "beliefs" responsive to evidence? No and Yes.

Again, philosophers debate whether "beliefs" respond to evidence. The question can be posed in various terms, but in general, being responsive to evidence can occur in two ways: in *formation conditions* and *extinction conditions*. Formation condition responsiveness means that, other things equal, an agent's encountering evidence that *p* is true tends to cause a "belief" that *p*. Extinction condition responsiveness means that, if one "believes" that *p* already, that belief (other things equal) will tend to be extinguished by evidence contrary to *p*. One can put many bells and whistles on definitions of the relevant notions, but the present discussion can remain at the current level of abstraction. Let's focus on extinction condition responsiveness, which I call *vulnerability to evidence*.

Does it make sense that Groupish Beliefs would be vulnerable to evidence? Well, why would they be? First, my loyalty to the in-group would be highly questionable, if my Groupish Beliefs could be extinguished by evidence. Group allegiance, if I am loyal, should stay, *come what may*. And that means Groupish Belief should stay, *come what evidence may*. Second, given that Groupish Beliefs do not *need* to be true in order to play their role well (recall, they need to be distinctive, which often tends *away* from truth), there is little to no direct pressure on them to track the truth.

Thus, another processing characteristic of groupishly believing will be to *lack* evidential vulnerability.

Can the same be said for Mundane Belief? Consider the absurdities that would arise. Say my Mundane Belief that the switch goes to the light is false. What do I do when I want illumination? I flip the switch. What happens? I hear the garbage disposal going, and the room is no more brightly lit than before. That, in short, is strong evidence that my Mundane Belief was false. Now consider what would happen if that Mundane Belief were *not* vulnerable to evidence. *It would stay in place*, despite my having cognized evidence of its falsity. In that case, I would keep re-performing the same unsuccessful action *over and over again*. After all, my desire for illumination hasn't gone away. And lacking vulnerability to evidence, my Mundane Belief about the switch's going to the light remains in place. So I would go back to the same (wrong) switch again and again. I would be an ill-fated creature, if this were my cognitive set-up.

More generally, the truth requirement in the Mundane Role makes sense of why Mundane Beliefs would be vulnerable to evidence. False Mundane Beliefs cause failed instrumental action, so successful creatures will need to be responsive to evidence of a Mundane Belief's falsity.

Thus, another processing characteristic of mundanely believing will be to *have* evidential vulnerability.

*   *   *

I have just canvassed differences in the processing of groupishly versus mundanely believing on the *input side* or etiology: groupishly believing is to a large extent voluntary, while mundanely believing is evidentially constrained. What empirical evidence comports with this picture? Interestingly, Corey Cusimano and colleagues have found that when people attend to the evidential reasons for a given "belief," this decreases to the extent to which that "belief" is

perceived as voluntary.[12] Thus, the trade-off I have highlighted here between voluntariness and evidential constraint has some empirical support. Furthermore, if we grant the plausible assumption that many religious "beliefs" are Groupish Beliefs[13], the ethnographic record that documents people's speaking of their religious "beliefs" as being a matter of *choice* supports the idea that groupishly believing is voluntary (see Luhrmann 2012, 2020). This contrasts, again, with mundane believing, which is evidentially constrained (Ganapini, 2020; Helton, 2020; Van Leeuwen, 2017b).

Be that as it may, one might think that in order for mundanely believing and groupishly believing to be distinct *attitudes* there must be some downstream differences as well. To that end, I highlight what I take to be important differences in action generation (I have highlighted downstream cognitive differences in other work[14]).

Processing Difference 3: **Mere** *"Belief" Signaling Behavior*

Much human behavior conveys information—speech, writing, gesture, sign, etc. Hence much human behavior involves sending a signal of something or another. Furthermore, much human behavior signals internal states of "belief." If I just tell you where the light switch is, my speech has both signaled something about the external world *and* (though this is not the main focus) something about the contents of my "beliefs."

Yet there is an important distinction to be drawn between (i) behavior that sends a signal as a means of enabling another agent to use the signaled information in a way that is instrumental to some goal (like turning on the light) and (ii) behavior that treats the signaling as an end in itself. As an example of (ii), reciting the Apostle's Creed, which signals internal belief states, is regarded in the CRC as an *intrinsic* good. There is nothing *in particular* that the knowledge that Person A "believes" the relevant doctrines is supposed to enable Person B to do. Person B just knows that Person A is a "believer" and regards this as a good thing. Differences in how B acts toward A will ensue or not. But either way, A is perceived by herself and others in the group as having done something good and right in and of itself for having professed her "beliefs" (see Boyer & Liénard, 2006, for a related perspective on ritual).

Let's call signaling behavior that falls in category (ii) *mere signaling behavior*, since it needn't have another end. It will not always be clear which signaling behaviors are *mere* and which ones do serve another end, since people often have ulterior motives. But let's grant that much ritual action, liturgy recitation, singing of group anthems, etc. are mere signaling behaviors, since very often they have no obvious further end than simply making it known that one has certain "beliefs" and are often enjoyed in and of themselves.

The present point is that Groupish Beliefs have a strong tendency to generate mere signaling behaviors that are expressive of their contents, since that way other group members will know who is in the group and who isn't, which is crucial for making group identity a property worth having.

Thus, as a downstream processing characteristic, groupishly believing that *p* will result in a strong tendency to produce mere signaling behaviors that in some way express the content *p*.

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[12] Cusimano *et al.* (2021).
[13] For which I argue in other work (Van Leeuwen, 2023: Ch. 6).
[14] Van Leeuwen (2014, 2023).

Yet such a tendency would be absurd for Mundane Beliefs. If nothing else, that tendency would result in a massive waste of time, due to the vast multitude of Mundane Beliefs about the world that any given person has. *I believe that ATMs have buttons. I believe that dogs have tails. I believe that grass is green. I believe that some people eat turnips.* And so on without end. Much more useful is to signal Mundane Beliefs when someone else needs to learn something that could benefit them ("Yes, Billy, turnips can be eaten."), and in those cases, the signaling is predominantly about the *world* and only incidentally indicative of internal "belief" states.[15]

Much more can be said here, but to sum up, we can posit that mundanely believing that *p* will not generally eventuate in a tendency to express *p* as part of mere signaling behavior. In any case, as Williams (1973) points out, one who mundanely believes that *p* will tend simply to say "*p*" when appropriate, rather than making the professing pronouncement "I *believe p*."[16]

Processing Difference 4: Generation of Truth-Dependent Action

Much action will fail if the guiding "belief" is false, as I've been at pains to say throughout this essay. This is, however, not so for mere signaling behavior, which treats signaling of "belief" as an intrinsic good (if one signals a "belief" for its own sake, the signaling of *having* that "belief" can succeed, whether or not the "belief" is false). Let's call action that will fail if the focal guiding "beliefs" are false *truth-dependent action*.

It is trivially truth that, as a matter of its downstream processing characteristics, mundanely believing produces truth-dependent action, since this is built into the explanatory role that defines the class of Mundane Beliefs.

So the only remaining question, for purposes of this paper, is this: does groupishly believing *also* tend to produce truth-dependent action?

Here appearances can be deceiving. Much expression of Groupish Belief *appears* instrumental. Prayer for healing or performing a rain dance appear instrumental and truth-dependent. Yet sociologists and anthropologists of religion have frequently observed that apparently instrumental action that is expressive of religious "belief" is typically *supplemental to* genuinely instrumental action, rather than replacing it (Chaves, 2010; Luhrmann, 2020). People pray, but they still go to the doctor. People do rain dances, but they still make irrigation ditches. So there is reason to suspect that much apparently truth-dependent action that is expressive of Groupish Belief is in fact *mere signaling behavior* that accompanies the actual truth-dependent instrumental action guided by Mundane Beliefs, such as going to the doctor or setting up irrigation ditches for one's fields.

Importantly, there is a principled reason for thinking that Groupish Beliefs *won't* have the tendency to produce truth-dependent action. The reason for this is that, due to their need to be distinctive, Groupish Beliefs often are *not* true. It therefore makes sense that groupish believing should lack the tendency to produce truth-dependent action, which is definitive of mundanely believing. Otherwise put, the action output of groupishly believing will tend to be

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[15] On this point, see Heiphetz *et al*. (2014).

[16] Interesting linguistic point. "I believe *p*" can either be used to express a Groupish Belief that *p* or as an epistemic hedge that indicates uncertainty on the matter of *p*. But importantly, the different uses appear to have different prosodies when spoken.

compartmentalized to mere signaling actions that are not truth-dependent—in ways that mundanely believing is not.[17]

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Now consider: cognitive attitude A can be formed voluntarily and has a strong tendency to generate mere signaling behavior; cognitive attitude B is highly vulnerable to evidence and characteristically guides truth-dependent action; each lacks the processing characteristics that are constitutive of the other. If we accept the functionalist assumption that attitudes are *individuated by* their functional processing characteristics, we will also accept that A and B are *different* cognitive attitudes. If this is right, then groupishly believing and mundanely believing are distinct cognitive attitudes, however much they have been conflated by many under the name "belief." This concludes my case for the Psychological Thesis set out in section 1.

Conclusion: "Belief" and Shared Reality

In "believing" *that God is triune* and in "believing" *that the switch is connected to the light*, I was not only relating to different contents; I was *relating differently*. I was groupishly believing in the first case and mundanely believing in the second. Both attitudes, in some sense, "guide action," but that is no reason to conflate them, for they guide different sorts of actions and in different ways: symbolic action that expresses and signals contents versus plain instrumental action that relies on the truth of contents. The attitudes are also formed and revised in different ways and in response to different pressures: voluntariness ("choosing to believe") versus evidential vulnerability. Losing my Groupish Belief in the Trinity was something I *did* because I no longer wanted to belong to the CRC—I no longer desired allegiance. Losing my Mundane Belief about the light switch is something that happens to me: the evidence of the grinding garbage disposal does all the work—I can't keep the belief even if I want to.

Let me summarize all this in different terms. Groupish Beliefs have a different relation to the shared reality in which we all live from the relation Mundane Beliefs have to it. Since Mundane Beliefs guide actions that *fail* if they get that shared reality wrong (if they're false, one turns on the garbage disposal accidentally or falls in a ditch), they tend to be processed in ways that keep them *true* to that shared reality (one quickly *learns* which switch is which and where the ditch is). As a result, Mundane Beliefs have a strong tendency to be shared across distinct social groups that happen to come across the same portions of reality: Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Communist, Capitalist, etc.—all alike (*mirabile dictu!*) mundanely believe that lions have teeth and that rain comes from clouds. Yet the Groupish Beliefs of those groups are all quite *different*, because they have to be: otherwise, those Groupish Beliefs won't do their job of keeping the respective in-groups distinct. Consequently, it will be characteristic of Groupish Beliefs to *depart* from shared reality in pervasive ways, in order to *be* distinctive. Groupish Beliefs thus tend to have odd, implausible, distorted, or even plainly false contents. And they

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[17] Conversely, as Hugo Mercier (2022) points out, people often *signal* "beliefs" in ways and in situations that would be absurd or dangerous, *if* the "beliefs" in question were true: e.g., people who post openly online about the nefarious "deep state" that is running everything and can make people disappear in prison. One would be unlikely to post such things so glibly, if one mundanely believed them. But such posting makes sense as an expression of Groupish Belief.

thus need to be *processed* in ways that can sustain such contents, even or especially when evidence is contrary. Oddness, implausibility, distortion, and falsity in turn make the behavioral expressions of Groupish Beliefs strong signals of who one is and of the group to which one belongs.

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