

## **Handout 2: Belief Chapter 2**

### **1. The Pragmatic Definition of “belief”**

We generally know when we wish to ask a question and when we wish to pronounce a judgment, for there is a dissimilarity between the sensation of doubting and that of believing. But this is not all which distinguishes doubt from belief. There is a practical difference. Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions. The Assassins, or followers of the Old Man of the Mountain, used to rush into death at his least command, because they believed that obedience to him would insure everlasting felicity. Had they doubted this, they would not have acted as they did. So it is with every belief, according to its degree. The feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions. Doubt never has such an effect. (Peirce, 1877, 4)

Recall the more central components of our pragmatic definition of belief: (1) You believe the information poised to guide your controlled and attentive actions. (2) “Assimilating” information allows you to act on that information without bringing your beliefs to bear. (3) The operation of highly assimilated information is in evidence when your attention and capacities for self-control are largely diverted away from a given action to other components of your overall activity.

States of Concord: The normal case

States of Discord: The initial case of absentminded assertion, cases from my original essay *The Nature of Belief* (2007): moved the trashcan, unknown fear of heights, driving the old route etc. Examples by Bain and James and others in the literature: dressing, reaching into pocket to check watch you just gave to repair shop, etc.

### **2. Ramsey’s General Definition: Rejecting Phenomenology**

“The degree of a belief” Ramsey said, “is a causal property of it, which we can express vaguely as the extent to which we are prepared to act on it” (1931, 169).

### **3. Different Measures**

1. Willingness to bet
2. Phenomenological or “felt” conviction
3. Entrenchment

**Task:** Distinguish these using my extension of Peirce’s example in the quote above

### **4. The Superficiality of the Pragmatic Account – It is Non-Reductive**

Articulating a full understanding of belief would require the statement and defense of definitions, theories, or accounts of “information,” “guidance by information,” “attention” and “self-control.”

“Guidance by information” is a concept meant to place the analysis “in-between” the causal functionalism of Armstrong, Shoemaker and Lewis on the one hand and the agent causation theories of Chisholm and O’Connor

But the account is not wholly superficial: (a) analyzes the more politically controversial in terms of the less; (b) has real teeth insofar as it conflicts with most theories of belief now actively defended: Velleman, Frankish, Schwitzgebel etc.

## 5. Against the Two-Systems Account

**Two Systems:** The most common choice is to divide the mind into “automatic” processes executed by system 1 and “effortful” processes executed by system 2. But some theorists go on to describe system 1 as “experiential” and system 2 as “rational”; some claim system 1 is “associationist” in its operations whereas system 2 is “rule-governed”; some posit an “affective” or emotionally “hot” system 1 which is distinct from a “deliberative” or relatively “cool” system 2; some argue that system 1 operates in an “unconscious” manner whereas the operations of system 2 are introspectively accessible to those in whom they unfold, and so on. After cataloging this diversity in defining characteristics, G. Keren and Y. Schul (2009) argue that almost all self-described two systems theories identify system 1 by the *automaticity* of the processes it executes, the *inaccessibility* to introspection of these processes, their *associationist* character, and the *emotional salience* of their products. In contrast, almost all such theories identify system 2’s characteristic processes with their *effortfulness*, their conscious *accessibility*, their *rationality* or rule-governed nature, and the *emotional quietude* of their products. On this basis, Keren and Schul propose to use “system 1” to refer to a hypothesized cognitive system that is “intuitive, associative, experiential, and affectively hot,” while reserving “system 2” for a purportedly distinct cognitive module that is “rational, rule-based, reflective, and cold.”

Questions: What is the relationship between positing two systems of cognition distinguished, at least in part, by the attention and control necessary to execute their characteristic processes, and defining “belief” in terms of the information we utilize when thinking or acting in an attentive and self-controlled manner? Can we adopt the pragmatist definition of “belief” articulated above without taking a stand on the utility, fecundity or tenability of distinguishing our minds into these two distinct systems? And which taxonomy provides a better means for integrating our common sense understanding of belief with substantive (neurological) explanations of attention and control: pragmatism or the dual systems view?

**Critique:** dual systems theories—as defined by Keren and Schul—are committed to psychological clusters that are not implicated by our pragmatic conception of belief. Are automaticity, inaccessibility and emotional salience more highly correlated with each other than they are with effortfulness, accessibility and quietude? Are effortfulness,

accessibility and quietude more highly correlated with one another than they are with automaticity, inaccessibility and emotional salience? Keren and Schul argue that we lack the evidence we would need to make this determination. No two systems theorist has yet to present evidence against the existence, regularity or normalcy of automatic judgments unaccompanied by high emotion (i.e. bare intuitions), or states of high emotion that result from bouts of fantasy or imagination that are directly accessible to those who experience them (e.g. masturbatory fantasies), or the unconscious and affectively barren knowledge we seemingly employ when interpreting the syntax and meaning of sentences spoken to us in our native languages (e.g. my knowledge that you are using “I” to refer to you).

Are these examples best conceptualized as exceptions to the general rule posited by the two systems theorist? Or have cognitive scientists posited a fissure in our “mental architecture” where none exists? The pragmatist would do well to remain agnostic on these issues.

Critique of Frankish: Frankish’s “supermind” lumps together the sources of spontaneous assertion, conscious, effortful reasoning, introspection, and self-characterization. The “mind” also joins together several seemingly distinct phenomena: degrees of confidence as measured in terms of willingness to risk, inarticulate opinions, sensory expectations, memories of distal features of one’s environment to which one plans to return, instinctive responses to perceived threats and affordances, and various dispositions to affective response. And Frankish’s attempt to read unity into this diversity raises questions comparable to those articulated above. For example, should language be associated with conscious states that are actively formed? Widespread evidence of verbal priming with stimuli that are presented too rapidly to be consciously processed tells against such a move. Consider, too, verbal slips (Freudian and otherwise), sleep talking, and the linguistic manifestations of Tourette’s syndrome. Because of these phenomena, common sense countenances linguistic habits, associations and mechanisms that do not constitute beliefs, alongside articulable beliefs that are acquired, stored and expressed without conscious effort (cf. Proust, 2015, 722). And are conscious, effortful beliefs typically flat-out or all-or-nothing as Frankish suggests? Consider, as a counterexample, a jurist who thinks long and hard about the purported guilt of the party on trial and finds herself, at the end of this process, leaning more toward guilt than innocence, but not by much. Isn’t the jurist’s frame of mind here best characterized as an effortful credence? Or should we say, with de Sousa, Dennett and Frankish, that she has tried and failed to accept a verdict or tried and failed to commit herself to the truth or falsity of the allegations on hand, and that her minimally-greater-than-.5 credence in guilt is the result of passive, non-conscious processes distinct from her more articulate deliberations? Again, no evidence of any kind has been presented to buttress so radical a reinterpretation of our self-conceptions.

## **6. Critique of Kahneman**

There are passages in which Kahneman does try to integrate his proposal with our more “folkish” conception of our own minds. These are passages in which Kahneman suggests that our *beliefs* are typically system 2 products. System 1 is thought to produce sub-

doxastic or pre-doxastic states—impressions or intuitions—which can only be converted into belief through a system 2 process that Kahneman labels “endorsement.”

System 1 continuously generates suggestions for system 2: impressions, intuitions, intentions and feelings. If endorsed by system 2, impressions and intuitions turn into beliefs, and impulses turn into voluntary actions. (2011, 24)<sup>1</sup>

And this claim, couched as it is, in folk psychological terms including “belief,” would allow us to directly compare Kahneman’s two systems approach to the pragmatist account of “belief” articulated above.

But the resulting interpretation jars so radically with folk psychology it cannot be taken to seriously represent Kahneman’s considered view.<sup>2</sup> First, unless a person is plagued by radical skeptical doubt, her acceptance of the products of system 1 processes of perception and intuition is more often than not a passive or effortless affair. (E.g., in most cases we just believe what we see.)

We are all faith at the outset; we become sceptics by experience, that is, by encountering checks and exceptions. We begin with unbounded credulity, and are gradually educated into a more limited reliance. (Bain, 1868/1884, 382)

Often we suppose and then believe...But these cases are none of them primitive cases. They only occur in minds long schooled to doubt by the contradictions of experience. (James, 1890/1950, 946)

Thus, given Kahneman’s considered taxonomy, acceptance is itself a system 1 process. But then those mental states that arise through passive acceptance of the contents of perception and intuition must either be described as system 1 states of belief—contrary to the passage excerpted above—or we must instead say that they are not beliefs at all.

How might Kahneman best clear things up? Other features of his two systems approach are instructive. For instance, because ordinary conversation or “small talk” is effortless—and so doesn’t dilate a speaker’s pupils—Kahneman attributes the phenomenon to system 1 processes (2011, 34).<sup>3</sup> But, if folk psychology is to be trusted at

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<sup>1</sup> I’m not being uncharitable here: Kahneman often repeats this characterization (see, e.g., 2011, 105). We might compare Kahneman’s talk of “system 2 endorsement” with C. Peacocke’s (1999) idea of a person taking the content of one of her perceptual experiences “at face value.” For a more in-depth discussion see Lyons (2009).

<sup>2</sup> It also lies in tension with Kahneman’s (2011, 80-1) endorsement of D. Gilbert’s (1991) “anti-Cartesian” and “pro-Spinozan” theory, according to which all representations constitute beliefs unless they are prevented from this by self-conscious monitoring, or what Kahneman would call “system 2 processes” of critical appraisal and consequent doubt. On Spinoza’s view see Della Rocca (2003). The pragmatists also endorsed this theory of “primitive credulity.” See Bain (1888, 526-7), Fisch (1951) and Kauber (Jan 1974). For a more recent attack on accounts of belief that require substantive epistemic agency see Korblyth (2012, 73-107).

<sup>3</sup> See too, “System 1 understands language, of course, and understanding depends on the basic assessments that are routinely carried out as part of the perception of events and the comprehension of messages” (2011, 91). For the distinction between tacit and explicit processes of grammar acquisition see Reber (1993), and for the neurological differences between automatic

all, small talk regularly involves the expression and relatively passive acquisition of beliefs.

Q: “How’s your day going?”

A: “Fine, I just got back from the park.”

Q: “Lovely, I had a great time there yesterday.”

Here Q comes to believe that A just went to the park, and expresses her belief—either “based in” or “constituted by” memory—that she (i.e. Q) went to the park the previous day. But it is consistent with this that Q and A are not expending much effort in speaking to one another and that their attention is almost entirely occupied by their children, or their dogs, or their knitting, or whatever else they are doing while chatting away. Communicative processes needn’t be any more system-2-ish than other psychosocial processes.

It seems, then, that the best interpretation of Kahneman’s theory would countenance both system 1 and system 2 beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, though instincts are perhaps invariably automatic and so always attributable to Kahneman’s system 1, those habits that partially constitute hard-won skills are invariably the result of Kahneman’s system 2. After all, it’s hard to figure out how to do most of the things worth doing, and this knowledge can be difficult to sustain. Effortful, attention-consuming, belief-guided movement and thought continues to play an important role in the maintenance and greater perfection of almost all our mechanical skills.

## 7. Meta-level Critique

As is typical among such theorists, system 2 processes are supposed by Kahneman to be effortful and require greater attention than system 1 processes, which are in turn supposed to be more automatic and require less focus and exertion. And yet, in contrast to what is typically maintained by psychologists working within this framework, Kahneman now asserts that his talk of two systems is supposed to be entirely *metaphorical* (2011, 28-30).<sup>5</sup> So understood, Kahneman claims no more than that we can usefully distinguish

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and effortful uses of language see Jeon and Friederici (2015). On the intermingling of fear and language comprehension see Olsson, Nearing, and Phelps (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kornblith (2012) who, because he adopts the same system 1/system 2 taxonomy as Kahneman, concludes that, “Reasoning which is carried out by System 2 is always influenced by System 1 as well. There can be no wholly autonomous System 2 reasoning” (2012, 152).

<sup>5</sup> “‘System 2 calculates products’... is intended as a description, not an explanation... It is shorthand for the following: ‘Mental arithmetic is a voluntary activity that requires effort, should not be performed while making a left turn, and is associated with dilated pupils and an accelerated heart rate’” (2011, 30; cf. 77-8). “The two systems do not really exist in the brain or anywhere else. ‘System 1 does X’ is a shortcut for ‘X occurs automatically.’ And ‘System 2 is mobilized to do Y’ is a shortcut for ‘arousal increases, pupils dilate, attention is focused, and activity Y is performed’” (2011, 415). Cf. “These terms [“system 1” and “system 2”] may suggest the image of autonomous homunculi, but such a meaning is not intended. We use the term ‘systems’ as a label for collections of processes that are distinguished by their speed, their controllability, and the contents on which they operate” (Kahneman and Frederick, 2002, 51). In

those mental processes that require more attention and effort from those that require less, as dividing large numbers with other large numbers is more effortful than dividing small even numbers in half. According to his avowed interpretation of his two-systems theory, then, Kahneman is not committed to the surgical dissociability of effortful from effortless processes, nor to the evolutionary or developmental priority of effortless processes, nor to the relative ease with which effortful processes can be introspectively accessed in comparison to relatively effortless processes, nor to correlations between effort, conscious accessibility and emotional salience. Indeed, if we restrict the literal content of Kahneman's account to the postulation of degrees of attentiveness and self-control, its truth *is* entailed by the pragmatist's definition of belief.

Nevertheless, even if we follow Kahneman's instruction to interpret his talk of "two systems" in an entirely metaphorical way, his project cannot be fully reconciled with various *meta-level* aspects of the pragmatic picture of belief I will sketch in what follows. That different cognitive processes evolved at different times, emerge at different stages in an animal's development, and yield states of mind that are differently related to introspection or language or affect are all substantive, relatively "extra-conceptual" theses. But the claim that belief, habit, instinct, emotion, effort, language, introspection and attention are related to these dissociable processes in the manner envisaged by such theories is as much a claim about the concepts we associate with "belief," "habit," "instinct," "effort," "language," "introspection," and "attention," as it is about the reality we use these concepts to describe, categorize, predict and explain. What should we say about Kahneman's metaphor? Is it offered as a "true claim," or a recommended reform to our ordinary ways of describing one another? And how should we interpret the pragmatic definition of "belief" we advanced above? What is its purpose? From what does it derive its authority?

Since Kahneman is a Nobel prize-winning scientist, it is surprising to read that his avowed goals when presenting his view are more normative than descriptive. He is less interested in integrating our folk psychological concepts with the relevant science than he is with "introduc[ing] a language for thinking and talking about the mind" (2011, 13). Indeed, each chapter of Kahneman's popular presentation of his view in *Thinking Fast and Slow* ends with sentences intended to instruct the reader as to how she can incorporate the "system 1"- "system 2" vocabulary into her lexicon. E.g., "He didn't bother to check whether what he said made sense. Does he usually have a lazy system 2 or was he unusually tired?" (Kahneman, 2011, 49).

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this Kahneman appears to have abandoned a more realistic interpretation of "two systems" language. See Kahneman and Fredrick (2007), which concludes, "Behavioral and brain imaging data are required to understand how best to conceptualize the susceptibility to framing effects and the ability to resist them...serious theorizing in the domains of judgment and decision making can be informed by imaging results and the integration of concepts from both lines of research is necessary and feasible." According to J. Evans, "Dual-process accounts... cannot be architectural, if they posit a continuum between one form of thinking and another." Thus, according to Evans' taxonomy, Kahneman's latest iteration of his theory is not an "architectural" form of the view. See Evans (2009, 35). For an alternative taxonomy that would include Kahneman's theory within the intended class see Fiske, Lin, and Neuberg (1999).

In contrast, the pragmatist picture I develop in what follows would reject Kahneman's use of his epistemic authority to advance this frankly normative project as presumptuous if not anti-democratic. Normative proposals to reform our speech should be advanced without the imprimatur of science. We should not pretend that they "fall out" of experimental work or academic reflection upon it. For this reason, the pragmatist must offer her definition of "belief" as a piece of philosophy, not science.

I think this is an important point. We, philosophers, should follow Hume's advice to articulate transitions from "is" to "ought," to evaluate them in clear prose, and to limit deference to the premises of these transitions when they are propounded by experts. But let me dull the argument's critical edge: Kahneman is a great scientist and a good philosopher. My request is just that he clarify for his audience where his science ends and his philosophy begins. I will argue in what follows that acceptance of a pragmatic definition of "belief" is in some ways incompatible with deference to the authority of academic psychologists to adopt and enforce definitions. But deference to pragmatist philosophers would be almost as bad.