

## Commentaries

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### On the Nature of Belief

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Professor Goodenough ("Evolution of the Human Capacity for Beliefs," *AA* 92:597-612, 1990) performs an invaluable service when he attempts to specify the evolutionary prerequisites for the emergence of capacity for belief and, by implication, the potential for belief-related phenomena such as religion. Some of these prerequisites are unique to humans, others not:

These capabilities are: (1) categorization of experience; (2) perception and categorization of things in structural arrangements; (3) abstraction of higher-order categories from lower-order ones on the basis of common features, while overlooking a perceived difference; (4) potential for analogizing, largely undeveloped in the absence of language; (5) intuitive grasping or perceiving of relationships that would, if expressed in language, constitute propositions; and (6) the ability to act on these perceptions in the definition and pursuit of goals. . . . An additional prerequisite . . . is a system of manipulable signs capable of representing categories of thing (including self and other) and categories of feeling, quality, act, and relationship. [p. 599]

A large part of his development draws attention to the appearance of language. Without language, he reminds us, we cannot form propositions, and propositions are the raw material for belief systems. By linking a psychological abstract such as "belief" to specific, if as yet poorly understood historical events such as the emergence of language, Goodenough points the way toward, among other benefits, more valid interpretations of possible ritual/religious acts in archeological and ethnological data. If certain capabilities are conceded to be necessary for belief, for example, then the absence of any of them will preclude reading artifact or behavior as religious, despite sometimes seductive appearances to the contrary.

There is, however, a problem. Goodenough argues persuasively that the emergence of lan-

guage results in an ability to form propositions. A proposition "about the relations among things to which those who believe have made some kind of commitment" is, in his gloss, a "belief" (p. 597). This definition is imperfect at the outset, using as it does "believe" in the phrase intended to define "belief," rendering it vulnerable to charges of circularity. Yet the difficulty goes deeper. While the two components he includes (propositions and emotional commitment) are inarguably *part* of "belief," I am unconvinced that they are sufficient to render completely the term as it is meant by most speakers.

"Believing" is different from both "knowing" and "having faith," although all of these fall into Goodenough's definition of belief. Missing are variables of the estimated truth-value of the proposition and whether holding the proposition is tantamount to committing oneself not merely emotionally, but behaviorally as well.

I can refer, for lack of space, to only one essay on this problem of semantics. Abelson argues that to "know" is to assert a "categorical claim . . . to the truth of a proposition" (1961:120) with an incumbent commitment to act accordingly. To "believe" and to "have faith" both make only tentative truth claims, but in the case of the former there is a positive correlation between perceived probability of a proposition being true and the strength of commitment to act on it. Having faith entails a strong commitment to act on the proposition irrespective of its degree of plausibility; this is why a proposition held by faith is notoriously immune to counterevidence. As Abelson explains:

Like "know that" and "believe that," "faith that" makes a claim to the truth of the proposition which it introduces. But like "believe that" and unlike "know that," it warns the listener that the claim it is making is not supported by conclusive evidence and is therefore subject to future cancellation. Yet unlike "believe that" and more like "know that," it makes a firm and definite commitment to *action* relevant to the truth of the proposition it asserts. If I say, "I have faith that this parachute will open," I am promising to rely on this parachute when necessary. But if I say, "I believe that it will open," I may be urging someone else to try

it out and be unwilling to try it myself, without being guilty of insincerity. [1961:121]

We can see that in Abelson's elaborations, to "know," "believe," and "have faith" all can be reduced to "propositions about the relations among things to which those who believe have made some kind of commitment." Most differences arise only when one seeks to expand the phrase "some kind of commitment."

That said, we can now briefly consider what implications these distinctions have for Goodenough's evolutionary scheme. Much of the problem could have been avoided by changing a few phrases. The article, despite the title, is about the evolution of capacity to frame propositions, belief being brought in only because the author defines beliefs as propositions of a kind.<sup>1</sup> It is conceivable that he could make exactly the same argument for propositions without using the word "belief" at all.

This resolution assumes that Goodenough's commitment to the word "belief" is in fact fairly weak, and that after having been shown that his argument does not require the word, he would refrain from its use. But without evidence to the contrary, we must assume that he chose his words carefully, that he means what he says, and conclude that he intends more than he achieves.

To go beyond discussing the evolution of capacity to hold propositions, it seems that the first cognitive mode to emerge is not believing, but rather self-conscious knowing. Language and reflexivity to enable the entertainment of propositions permit "knowing" (+ commitment, + true). This is really as far as Goodenough gets. It is a further elaboration which leads the person to realize that thinking something to be true does not necessarily mean that it is true in fact; only at this later stage can "faith" (+ commitment, - true) appear: I may not know X to be true, but I both admit that I do not know this, and behave as though I was certain that it were. Believing (- commitment, - true) requires still further elaboration after having faith, this time altering the default value of "knowing" on the dimension of commitment to act.

These modes are not necessarily temporally sequential in terms of evolutionary development, but they are progressively more complex and structurally inclusive. Any organism capable of having faith, in other words, can be assumed to also be capable of knowing, but not vice versa. Such a scheme allows propositions held by the individual to be hierarchically ordered based upon their amount of divergence from and increased complexity over the base state of knowing.

A complete model for the evolution of the human capacity for beliefs, then, must go further than does Goodenough's present essay. While he has accounted for the process by which humans come to hold propositions, the next step would be to describe how they establish strategies to evaluate the probable truth of these propositions (i.e., do a "reality check"). Finally, the model would need to allow for the variable behavioral strategies in response to differing propositional truth-values, the hallmark of "believing."

Goodenough's article, then, is not "wrong" in any sense of the word. Excellent as far as it goes, it is incomplete, stopping short of its stated goal. But by setting us firmly on what is undoubtedly a productive path toward that end, he has accomplished no small feat.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>Although I have maintained Goodenough's claim of beliefs as being fundamentally propositional, it should be noted that not all workers would agree. In the same symposium wherein Abelson appears, another writer asserts something quite different. Wyschogrod (1961) denies that beliefs, being emotional as opposed to logical/propositional, necessarily entail any predictable behavioral consequences.

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#### Reply to James Donovan

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I am pleased that James Donovan feels that my article has helped get consideration of the evolution of the human capacity for beliefs started in a useful way, despite, in his judgment, my having fallen short of my stated goal. My goal was to examine different capacities without which people cannot hold beliefs

and to see what among them are peculiar to humans and what seem already to have been in place, if in a rudimentary way, among our prehuman ancestors. My conclusion was that everything was in place except language and that it was the human capacity for language, especially grammatically developed language, that was the significant additional cognitive capability.

Donovan does not take issue with this; rather, he is unhappy with my definition of "belief." What appears to him as a possible circularity in my definition does not strike me as such at all. A proposition cannot be a belief without a believer. When a person believes a proposition to be true or accepts it as such, the proposition becomes a belief for that person. To believe is to make a commitment to the proposition as a basis for action. Even if a person does something he believes to be wrong, the belief is a basis for his seeking to make amends afterward.

I recognized that commitment could be made for pragmatic reasons, emotional reasons, or some combination of both. I chose not to go into a typology of these reasons and referred to an earlier work in which I had discussed emotional reasons for commitment (Goodenough 1963). Nor did I concern myself with whether one "knows" a proposition to be true by virtue of personal experience or only "believes" it to be true for other reasons (e.g., everyone says it is, those whose knowledge I respect say it is, etc.). There are obviously differing degrees of commitment on both cognitive and emotional grounds. I choose, myself, to see the difference between "knowing" and "believing" as a matter of degree rather than of kind (a choice about which people with different theories of knowing will argue). These are in any event distinctions that are not relevant to the task I had set myself, however much they have beset philosophers and theologians. As an anthropologist I am not concerned with the human capacity to "know" what is "true." I take the position, widely held among modern scientists, that the world out there "as it really is" and the truth with a capital "T" are beyond the human capacity to know. We can only have propositions about our world and both cognitive and emotional bases for committing ourselves in varying degrees to considering them true.

My concern, then, has been to look at the things, both cognitive and emotional, that taken together constitute a belief as I defined it, and, in a very preliminary way, to examine what evidence we presently have as to where these things come into play phylogenetically. Since the human capacity for language is so

crucial in this, I devoted much of my discussion to the current debate about language in human evolution.

I recognize that consideration of the evolution of the human capacity for beliefs has obvious implications for theories regarding the emergence of the phenomenon of religion in human evolution, especially if one defines religion in terms of beliefs, which I do not, taking, rather, a functional approach to its definition (Goodenough 1974, 1981, 1988). In the paper here under discussion, I have carefully avoided any consideration of such implications. I leave that to others.

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### Population Pressure, Agricultural Origins, and Cultural Evolution: Constrained Mobility or Inhibited Expansion?

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Michael Rosenberg (1990) suggests highly plausible motives for the transition from population pressure to food production. Yet in the course of contributing to population-pressure theory, he inadvertently undercuts it by subscribing to the claim—erroneously attributed to Bennet Bronson (1975)—that "constraints on [foragers'] movement . . . are *always* necessary to produce resource scarcity" (Rosenberg 1990:408, emphasis in original). I will argue that, first, this claim is not true; second, it is not the point Bronson made; third, Bronson's actual point has profound implications