

The Problem with Belief

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This essay defines “belief” to be an assertion of something as a public fact that is unsupported by evidence. A fact is defined as an assertion that is supported by evidence. Evidence is experiential and is of two types. The first type is what might be called objective, external and public. Evidence of this type is often experimental but is not limited to experimental evidence. The second type is what might be called subjective, internal and private. Evidence of this type is always experiential. Both types of evidence can establish something as factual. However, in some cases the fact is public and in others the fact is private. Public facts and their evidence can be communicated and accepted as valid by members of the public. Private facts and their evidence cannot be evidentially communicated to members of the public. Communication, however, between persons who share a similar experiential base might be possible. Public facts can be contested but private facts cannot be disproven. Only the individual possessor of a private fact can overturn it. The phenomenon of quantum entanglement is a public fact. The oneness of all-that-is would be a private fact. God resides in heaven is belief. In short, a belief is an unsupported idea asserted as a fact and taken on faith to be truth.

Lying somewhere between beliefs and facts are assumptions. In this essay, assumptions are defined as ideas tentatively taken to be valid for the purpose of logical argumentation. Usually, assumptions are things that have, at least, the potential of being established as public facts. Assumptions are, at best, only a working hypothesis. One can build a rational explanation for something beginning with an assumption. The logical explanation might lead to investigations establishing public facts that indirectly support the assumption. Making assumptions is at times unavoidable, however, assumptions, as defined herein, are not beliefs because the truth attribution made for each are different.

Beliefs as defined herein are not factual in either manner discussed, nor are they assumptions as defined. They are merely ideas which can under some circumstances become elaborated into ideology. To be clear, I am not belittling these unsupported ideas, for they can have powerful influences. In general, I consider beliefs to be problematic. The problem with beliefs is that they lead to expectations about how things in the world should be and how people should think and act. These are expectations that are frequently not met. Unfulfilled expectations lead to disappointment, rationalization, scapegoating, delusional thinking, anger and even violence. In the worse case, there is an effort to coerce or force the realization of

the unfounded expectations. I read, in a book by Leonard Jacobson, an expression that described people invested in their beliefs as “lost in their minds,” which is a polite way of saying that they are out of touch with the actuality in which they exist.