Part I

Belief
1

The Nature of Belief

The purpose of this brief chapter is to give a first view of a theory of the nature of belief, preparatory to working out the theory in later chapters.

In one of his posthumously published ‘Last Papers’ (‘General Propositions and Causality’, in Ramsey 1931) F. P. Ramsey takes as an example the belief that everybody in Cambridge voted. He says that such a belief is ‘a map of neighbouring space by which we steer’ (p. 238). Here he attributes two characteristics to the belief: it is a *map*, and it is something *by which we steer*. Here in miniature is the account of belief to be defended in this work.

Wittgenstein has little to say directly about belief in the *Tractatus*. But I suppose that his comparison of sentences to pictures inspired Ramsey’s comparison of beliefs to maps.

If we think of beliefs as maps, then we can think of the totality of a man’s beliefs at a particular time as a single great map of which the individual beliefs are sub-maps. The great map will embrace all space and all time, past, present and future, together with anything else the believer takes to exist, but it will have as its central reference point the believer’s present self. But we must not think of the great map as like a modern cartographer’s map of the earth’s surface. Such a map is too good a map to be a suitable image. (It is not just belief, it is knowledge.) The great belief-map will be much like the maps of old, containing innumerable errors, fantasies and vast blank spaces. It may even involve contradictory representations of portions of the world. This great map, which is continually being added to and continually being taken away from as long as the believer lives, is a map within his mind. If the mind can be (contingently) identified with the brain, as I believe it should be, the map will be literally a map in the believer’s head. But the correctness or otherwise of this identification will not be at issue in this book.

The belief-map will include a map of the believer’s own mind, and even, as a sub-part of this sub-part, a map of the believer’s
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belief-map (that is, his beliefs that he holds certain beliefs). But this entails no vicious infinite regress. If you try to make a complete map of the world and therefore try to include in the map a complete map of the map itself, you will be involved in an infinite series of maps of maps. But since the belief-map is not a complete map of the world, and since the map of itself that it contains is even more incomplete, the situation is no worse than those actual pictures which contain, as part of the scene pictured, little pictures of themselves.

In the case of ordinary maps a distinction can be drawn between the map itself, and the map-reader’s interpretation of the map. No such distinction can be drawn in the case of beliefs. We do not read off our interpretation of reality from the data supplied by our beliefs. Our beliefs are our interpretation of reality. But, despite this clear difference between beliefs and ordinary maps, the analogy, as I hope will gradually emerge, is still of the greatest value. Beliefs are to be thought of as maps which carry their interpretation of reality within themselves. Of their own nature, apart from any conventions of interpretation, they point to the existence of a certain state of affairs (though there may be no such state of affairs). They have an intrinsic power of representation.

We must distinguish between beliefs and mere thoughts: between believing that the earth is flat and merely entertaining this proposition while either disbelieving it or having no belief one way or the other. Now, if beliefs can be thought of as maps, mere thoughts – the mere entertaining of propositions – seem equally entitled to be considered maps (however wild and inaccurate) of the world. What marks off belief-maps from thought-maps? In his Treatise (Book 1, Part iii, Section 7) Hume asks what marks off believing something from merely entertaining that thought. He claims to be the first philosopher to pose the question. So we may call the problem of distinguishing belief-maps from mere thought-maps ‘Hume’s problem’.

Ramsey’s formula gives us the solution (which was in some degree anticipated by Hume). Beliefs are maps by which we steer. Unlike entertained propositions, beliefs are action-guiding. Entertained propositions are like fanciful maps, idly scrawled out. But beliefs are maps of the world in the light of which we are prepared to act.

The task of the remaining chapters of this Part of the book will
be to spell out and articulate in detail Ramsey’s suggestion. The suggestion is bold and simple. But, as might be expected, its working out is laborious and complex.

It might be objected straightaway that this Ramseyan account of belief can at best give an account of beliefs concerning things at particular times and places – beliefs of a historical/geographical sort in that widest sense of ‘history’ and ‘geography’ which ranges over all time and all space. (Such beliefs will in future be referred to as ‘beliefs concerning particular matters of fact’.) But what of the beliefs that arsenic is poisonous or that every even number is the sum of two primes? How can beliefs in the truth of such unrestricted universally quantified propositions be represented as maps of reality?

I think that the objection is justified, and that a different account must be given of such beliefs. Ramsey himself saw the necessity for a different account. Indeed, his solution to the problem of what it is to believe that an unrestricted universally quantified proposition is true is much more widely known than his quickly thrown-out remark about beliefs concerning particular matters of fact. He suggested that such ‘general beliefs’ (as we shall in future call them) were ‘habits of inference’ which dispose us to move from a belief about some particular matter of fact to a further belief about some particular matter of fact. General beliefs are dispositions to extend the original belief-map according to certain rules.

Ramsey was following C. S. Peirce here. (See, for instance, Peirce’s essay ‘The Fixation of Belief’, reprinted in Peirce 1940.) But Douglas Gasking has pointed out to me that Ramsey was probably led to this view by reflecting upon the difficulties of Wittgenstein’s Tractarian view of unrestricted universally quantified propositions as infinite conjunctions of particular propositions. Any attempt to give an account of general belief along such lines would clearly face impossible problems.

In Chapter Six a version of this Ramseyan doctrine will be developed, and linked with the notion of a man’s holding a belief for a certain reason. It will be found to be applicable to general beliefs in the truth of both necessary and contingent propositions.

A note on symbolism. At a number of points, formulae familiar from ‘epistemic logic’ will be employed. Thus, ‘A believes that p’ will sometimes be written ‘Bap’ and ‘A knows that p’ will be
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written ‘Kap’. Very often, however, when I use such expressions as ‘Bap’ and ‘Kap’ reference will not be being made to some proposition but to some state of affairs or situation: A’s believing or knowing that p. Thus, in the course of the argument it may be said that ‘Baq is the cause of Bap’. This will mean that A’s believing that q brings it about that A believes that p. Max Deutscher has suggested that on such occasions it might be better to write ‘\(^8\)Baq is the cause of \(^8\)Bap’ to indicate that it is situations, not propositions, that are in question. I will occasionally adopt his suggestion. But since I think that the context normally makes it clear how the formulae are to be taken, aesthetic reasons plead in favour of omitting such superscripts wherever possible.
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Beliefs as States

I  Three Ways of Conceiving of Beliefs

Having sketched a theory of the nature of belief in the broadest outline, let us begin detailed investigation by asking under what general category belief falls. I think that there exist in our philosophical tradition three different answers to this question, not always explicitly spelled out. First, there is the view that beliefs are conscious occurrences in the believer’s mind. Second, that beliefs are dispositions of the believer. Third, that beliefs are states of the believer’s mind. In this section these three views are set out.

1. Beliefs as Conscious Occurrences. The classical instance of such a theory is Hume’s account of belief (Treatise, Book I, Part III, Section 7) as a vivid or lively idea associated with a present impression. The ‘association with a present impression’ will only fit those inductively acquired beliefs concerning particular matters of fact which Hume is especially interested in at that point of the argument of the Treatise. Hence we may take his view of belief in general to be that A’s believing that p is equivalent to A’s having present to consciousness a vivid or lively idea of p.

Such a view, it is notorious, fails to do justice to the way we talk and think about belief. For it is perfectly intelligible to attribute a belief to somebody although there is no relevant vivid idea in his consciousness. We can, for instance, intelligibly attribute a current belief that the earth is round to a man who is sleeping dreamlessly or is unconscious. Hume’s vivid ideas may or may not occur, and may or may not have something to do with a man’s beliefs, but asserting the presence of such an idea in a man’s consciousness cannot be what it means to assert that he has the corresponding belief.

The difficulty has nothing to do with the particular form which Hume’s theory takes. The difficulty faces any theory which equates a man’s current belief with some current content of his consciousness, whether it be a vivid idea of p, an inward motion of assent
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to the proposition ‘p’, or whatever. For it always seems intelligible to suppose that the content of consciousness should be absent and yet that the believer held the relevant belief at that time.

2. Beliefs as Dispositions. At least since Ryle’s Concept of Mind (Ryle 1949), it has been common for philosophers to compare the attribution of beliefs with the attribution of dispositions to objects. The word ‘disposition’ is a philosopher’s term of art here. In ordinary language, dispositions such as cheerfulness and irritability are attributed to persons and animals, not to ordinary physical objects. But the philosopher’s paradigms of a disposition are properties of physical objects such as brittleness, solubility, elasticity and friability. It would be a matter for inquiry whether such traits as cheerfulness and irritability, although they bear obvious analogy to philosopher’s dispositions and are the source of the term, are in fact dispositions in the technical sense. Nevertheless, the philosopher’s paradigms do seem to pick out a class of properties with clearly marked formal similarities. So, in this book, the term ‘disposition’ will be used to refer to this class.

The comparison of beliefs with philosopher’s dispositions certainly shows promise of illuminating the nature of belief. We distinguish between a thing’s disposition and the manifestation of that disposition; between the brittleness of a piece of glass and its actually breaking. We recognize further that having the disposition does not entail manifestation of the disposition: a piece of glass may be brittle and yet never break. In similar fashion, we distinguish between a belief and its manifestation, or, as we also say, its expression: between A’s belief that p and the speech-act and other actions or occurrences in which the belief is manifested or expressed; and we recognize that having the belief does not entail manifestation or expression of the belief. Such a distinction enables us to give a plausible account of the case of the sleeping or unconscious believer. So it is certainly an hypothesis worth investigation that beliefs stand to their manifestations or expressions just as dispositions such as brittleness stand to their manifestations.

Ryle’s dispositional account of belief was developed as part of, and in order to support, a Behaviourist or Behaviourist-orientated theory of mind. It is important, therefore, to appreciate that there is nothing in the mere dispositional view of belief which entails that the manifestations or expressions of a man’s belief (if they occur at all) are all pieces of outward bodily behaviour. Unspoken
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thoughts, mental images or inward motions of assent are, *prima facie*, possible manifestations of A’s belief that p. Hume’s ‘vivid ideas’ are not beliefs, but, provided there are such things, there is no reason why they should not be *manifestations* of beliefs. It is awkward to use the word ‘manifestation’ in connection with inner mental occurrences – an awkwardness which the word ‘expression’ shares – but it is no more than awkward. There may be other arguments to show that such inner occurrences cannot be manifestations of belief, but the mere demonstration that beliefs are dispositions would do nothing to support any limitation of possible manifestations to outward behaviour.

3. Beliefs as States. The dispositional view of belief is certainly more satisfactory than the ‘conscious occurrence’ view. There is, however, a third and, I believe, a still more satisfactory way of thinking about belief which is at least implicit in Western philosophical thought. According to this view, A’s believing that p is a matter of A’s mind being a *continuing state*, a state which endures for the whole time that A holds the belief. In the case of beliefs which are acquired, this view thinks of A’s belief that p as a matter of A’s mind being *imprinted* or *stamped* in a certain way. Plato’s image in the *Theaetetus* (191 C–E) is that of the imprint made by a seal on a block of wax, an imprint which then endures for a greater or lesser time. I would add to this by saying that there is no reason why this state should be something which the believer is conscious of being in. He may or he may not know that he holds a certain belief.

The notion of a *state* of an object deserves some consideration. To say that an object is in some state is to attribute a property to the object. But what sort of property? First, it is a non-relational property of the object. We distinguish a thing’s state from its circumstances. Of course, the state may itself involve relation, that is to say, the state may be a structural property. Indeed, the concept of the state of an object is naturally associated with the idea of a structure of, or within, the object. (But I doubt whether the idea of a structure is part of the concept of a state. The particular temperature of an object is naturally said to be a state of the object. Yet the concept of temperature does not *entail* that the hot object is structured in any way.)

But not every non-relational property of an object defines a state of the object. A thing is a horse in virtue of a conjunction of
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non-relational properties, and a conjunction of properties is a property. But we could not say that last year’s Melbourne Cup winner is in the state of being a horse. Consider Proteus, however, who could take on the form of any animal he pleased. If he becomes a horse, is he not in the state of being a horse?

This suggests that when we speak of states of an object we always have in mind some classification of the object relative to which the state is an accidental or changeable feature of the object. Perhaps the object always possesses the feature, but it will be an intelligible supposition that the feature should be lost. If beliefs are states, then they will be accidental and changeable features of minds (or, if this is objected to, of persons).

But our account of states is still too broad. We should not want to say that a man is in the state of running, but this is permitted by what has been said so far. How is running to be excluded? I think the answer is that the concept of running is of necessity the concept of a process: meaning by ‘process’ here something whose different phases are different in nature. (Uniform motion would not be an example of a process.) But a state need not involve a process. It may in fact be a process, but it is not entailed that it is a process. Beliefs might in fact be processes. For instance, if physicalism is true, beliefs might be reverberating circuits. But, unlike the concept of running, it is not part of the concept of belief that belief is, or involves, a process.

A counter-instance may be proposed to the argument of the previous paragraph. We speak of a person or a liquid as being in an agitated state. Yet does not agitation involve processes? I think, however, that what is meant by ‘an agitated state’ is that state, whatever it may be, which is responsible for the agitation of the person or thing. We do draw a distinction, even if a fine one, between a person’s being agitated and his being in an agitated state. The latter seems to refer to some continuing condition, of unspecified nature, which produces a good deal of agitated behaviour. So perhaps the counter-instance fails.

So much by way of explicating the notion of a state. Although I think that the view that beliefs are states is to be preferred to the view that beliefs are dispositions, I think also that the dispute is a very confusing one. For it seems that (i) although not all states are dispositions, dispositions are a species of state. (ii) There is one species of belief, viz. general beliefs, which may be plausibly said
to be dispositions. (iii) In respect of other sorts of belief, despite the undoubted important resemblances between disposition-states and belief-states, there are significant differences between them. These differences make it very misleading to say that non-general beliefs are a species of disposition. The next two sections try to substantiate these three propositions.

II Dispositions are States

The argument appears to have seven steps.

1. It seems obvious that for every true contingent proposition there must be something in the world (in the largest sense of ‘something’) which makes the proposition true. For consider any true contingent proposition and imagine that it is false. We must automatically imagine some difference in the world. Notice that it is not being argued here that for every different true contingent proposition there is a different something in the world which makes that proposition true. (I think the latter doctrine is in fact demonstrably false. See Part II.)

2. As a corollary of 1, where a predicate ‘F’ is not applicable to an object, a, up to the time t but is applicable to that object after t, it must be the case that a has changed in some way at t.

Dr D. H. Mellor has objected (in discussion) that this corollary is falsified by a case where a man is not a hundred years old up to t, but becomes a hundred years old at t. Previously the predicate ‘a hundred years old’ was not applicable to him, now it is. Yet the man himself need not have changed in any way. This objection enables me to make clear how small a claim it is that is being made at this stage of the argument. For one of the man’s relational properties (viz. his relation to his birth date) has changed. And for the purpose of this argument a change in a relational property is a change in the object.

3. It follows immediately that if a dispositional predicate is not applicable to an object up to t but is applicable to the object after t then there must have been a change in the object at t. For instance, if a piece of glass cannot truly be said to be brittle up to t but can be truly said to be brittle after t then the object must have changed at t.

4. It will now be argued that the change must be a change in the non-relational properties of the disposed object. A disposition