

Tacit Belief

Although – and probably because - the notion of belief is so widespread in the social sciences, in psychology and in philosophy, it is very often vague. There are at least two ways of ascribing beliefs to people: through their explicit avowals and through what they do. The latter criterion seems, however, to be the more reliable, for it often happens that we do not believe what we say we believe; in such cases, better look at what the person does. Minimally, a belief is a disposition to act in certain ways. This seems to be a necessary condition: of course many beliefs are so concealed that they never get out of our mouths, but it is extremely difficult to conceive of a belief which could never, at least potentially, influence one’s mental life. The minimal condition for predicating a belief to someone is that it should at least be *able* to play some role within our



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psychology. If this is so, it seems correct to say that many, possibly most, of our beliefs are implicit or tacit, in the sense that, even if they do not manifest themselves in our actions and in our psychology, they *could* do so. Some, and probably most, of our beliefs have to be tacit, for cognitive life would be impossible if we had in

front of our minds all the things that we believe. Our predicament would be that of Borges’ character, Funes the Memorious, who kept *all* his memories and perceptions explicit, and whose mind was consequently like “a garbage can”.

The idea that some representations and mental states are tacit or implicit is quite common in psychology. Since Chomsky at least it is customary to talk of tacit knowledge of grammar; psychologists talk of implicit memory, and distinguish between procedural memory, which is implicit, and declarative memory (Schacter 1989); perception through some senses such as touch is largely implicit, whereas pointing to a target is not; in blindsight subjects report not being conscious of some information which they nevertheless use in some tasks; some capacities in development, such as the capacity to attribute mental states to others (“theory of mind”) are largely implicit. “Tacit” is often another name for “unconscious”. But the former notion is distinct from the latter if we suppose that a tacit state is one which can in principle be accessed. And there lies our problem: how is such information attributed and accessed?

In the case of belief, the problem is that there seems to be no limit to the number of beliefs one can ascribe to us when we perform one single action. If Sam runs to catch his train, he must certainly believe that his train has not yet left – otherwise he would not be running. But he must also believe that the station is not too far, that trains leave on time, that the platform is accessible, that trains are machines, that they do not go faster than the speed of light, etc. Where should we stop? The problem is not

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simply, as it is often said, that in order to have a belief, one must have quite a lot of other ones. It is that if most beliefs are tacit, which beliefs are we allowed to ascribe to an agent in a given circumstance? Some are immediately present to consciousness. Others are tacit in the sense that they could come to consciousness if we attended to them. So one could try the following definition of tacit belief: *X tacitly believes that P if and only if X is disposed to believe explicitly that P.* This seems to account for the dispositional character of our beliefs. But it is open to obvious counterexamples. Thus, on this definition, when I ask you: “Did you believe that elephants did not wear pyjamas?” or “Did you believe that Kant’s left earlobe was smaller than the Sea of Tranquillity?”, you will probably say yes, and believe explicitly the content of these sentences, but are these things that you *believed*, even tacitly? These beliefs probably never occurred to your mind before. Such “beliefs” rely on general knowledge, but others may rely on simple consequences of what one believes. For instance if you believe explicitly that Rome is north of Naples, it is likely that you believe implicitly that Naples is south of Rome. But tacit beliefs seem to be just pseudo-beliefs, and not beliefs at all: they play no role within our psychology. What is special about them, when compared to other dispositional beliefs, is that the very fact that you raise them creates a disposition to believe them. Normally, a disposition, such as fragility, manifests itself in the presence of a stimulus. We can imagine dispositions which go out just when they are about to manifest themselves: for instance a poison which every time it is about to act is prevented from doing so by a sudden antidote. David Lewis (1996) calls such dispositions “finkish”. Here we have dispositions which are triggered by a single stimulus. Tacit beliefs, unlike ordinary dispositions, do not have a causal basis (which is usually memory: I do not *remember* that elephants do not wear pyjamas). And they are very different from the kind of implicit representations that psychologists talk about, for instance when they analyse the feeling of knowing or the “tip of the tongue” phenomenon (Koriat 1992). In the latter case, you feel that you know, but you do not have access to what you know. In the present case of tacit beliefs, you do not feel that you believe, but you have access to it! Hence we can be sceptical about tacit belief as defined above.



We should not conclude, however, that the notion of tacit belief is incoherent. It is too useful in psychology, for instance to explain common dissociations such as amnesia, to be dropped out. But we must find a way

of restricting its scope. One proposal (Maloney 1989) distinguishes two sorts of belief: those which are responsible for our actions, and those which are sensitive to evidence (this is more or less a version of the procedural/ declarative distinction). But this is not very helpful, for it begs the question: which is which? A better proposal is this (Crimmins 1992): *X tacitly believes that P if and only if it is as if X believes that P*, or as if one's cognitive dispositions were relevantly similar to one's believing that P. On this view a tacit belief can be ascribed on condition that it could be relevantly similar to a belief that one could have in the course of one's psychology. But counterfactual sensitivity (as if) is notoriously vague. Just the same, postulating the existence of an "extrapolator deducer" which would extract the appropriate beliefs is unsatisfactory, just like the postulation of a "supervisory attentional system" (SAS).



If we want to make sense of the notion of tacit belief, we certainly have to incorporate a proposal like Crimmins'. But we also have to take a different tack, and to notice three things.

1) Belief is a mental attitude which falls short of knowledge. This is a banality: beliefs, by definition can be true or false, whereas knowings are necessarily true. But it does not follow that our tacit beliefs, are, as it were, tacit *opinions*. They are tacit (dispositional) beliefs because belief in general aims at knowledge, and not simply at truth; to believe that P is to have an attitude towards P which is *as if* one knew that P, it is "botched knowledge" (Williamson 2000). If we take this perspective, tacit belief is necessarily connected with tacit knowledge. Indeed, it is because it belongs to our semantic memory and our general knowledge that elephants do not wear pyjamas, and that earlobes of people are smaller than seas, that one can ascribe to us such tacit beliefs. But of course we do not *believe* such things, we do not have any *attitude* towards them. It is only within a given cognitive task, in a certain contextual setting, and with respect to giving a certain kind of explanation, that we can ascribe tacit beliefs. 2) Knowing is not necessarily knowing that one knows. Tacit knowledge is a case at hand: if we have a tacit knowledge of the grammar of our own tongue, or of certain clues in our navigation in space, we do not know that we know. The same is true of belief. Some philosophers claim that to have beliefs one must have the concept of belief. If this means that our beliefs must be beliefs about our beliefs, this is false, not only for a number of creatures (animals, infants), but also for us in general. Beliefs are not necessarily reflexive, and neither are tacit beliefs. 3) Most of the time tacit knowledge is understood in terms of capacities and abilities. In Ryle's (1949) terminology, it is said to be "knowledge how", or practical knowledge, and not "knowledge that", or propositional knowledge. But this distinction is moot (Stanley and Williamson 2001). But belief is propositional, it is by definition an attitude towards a proposition, and there is no "belief how" in the

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sense in which there is a knowing how (you can know how to make a chocolate mousse, but it seems odd to say that you *believe how* to make a chocolate mousse). So, if there is tacit belief, it is unlikely that it is procedural, if “procedural” means a form of knowledge how. Hence we should also revise the distinction between procedural and declarative knowledge as well.

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