

PHILOSOPHY

# SCIENCE – A BELIEF SYSTEM

13.12.2010

I haven't followed up most recent developments in philosophy and was therefore quite intrigued by a lecture of Hannes Leitgeb last week about "Reducing belief simpliciter to degrees of belief" – or should I say degrees of probability? Details about the lecture in my [notes](#). While common sense would put belief more to the theology department, modern philosophers have a quite different position as he further explained me (and which are excellently summarized at [plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu))

contemporary analytic philosophers of mind generally use the term "belief" to refer to the attitude we have, roughly, whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true. To believe something, in this sense, needn't involve actively reflecting on it: Of the vast number of things ordinary adults believe, only a few can be at the fore of the mind at any single time. Nor does the term "belief", in standard philosophical usage, imply any uncertainty or any extended reflection about the matter in question (as it sometimes does in ordinary English usage). Many of the things we believe, in the relevant sense, are quite mundane: that we have heads, that it's the 21st century, that a coffee mug is on the desk. Forming beliefs is thus one of the most basic and important features of the mind, and the concept of belief plays a crucial role in both philosophy of mind and epistemology.

Philosophers target a universal definition here

We philosophers distinguish knowledge from belief, too: roughly, knowledge is justified true belief, so if one knows that A one also believes that A, but not necessarily the other way round (since one's belief might well be false or unjustified).

And what is faith in this context – the (partially justified) belief in the supranatural? The [plato entry](#) of Bishop has a good take on that but doesn't even mention believe in the first two or three paragraphs. At its most general 'faith' is seen much the same as 'trust'. Only

later, faith is introduced – and mixing up the rather universal definition of belief that we used as our starting point.

- the ‘purely affective’ model: faith as a feeling of existential confidence
- the ‘special knowledge’ model: faith as knowledge of specific truths, revealed by God
- the ‘belief’ model: faith as belief that God exists
- the ‘trust’ model: faith as belief in (trust in) God
- the ‘doxastic venture’ model: faith as practical commitment beyond the evidence to one’s belief that God exists
- the ‘sub-doxastic venture’ model: faith as practical commitment without belief
- the ‘hope’ model: faith as hoping—or acting in the hope that—the God who saves exists

I think that all these are mostly ornamental descriptions while faith as “belief in God model” fits best. Maybe we need to agree with Kant who

found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.

Kant, Immanuel, 1787/1933. Critique of Pure Reason, 2nd edition, Norman Kemp Smith (trans.), London: Macmillan, p 29.