

# Belief

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*I shut my eyes in order to see.*

—Gauguin

*We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.*

—Vonnegut

**T**HERE is a game you can play, though it hardly counts as entertainment. Stand at your window on a clear day and try to believe that it is raining. Not to imagine rain, not to remember rain, not to wish for rain—to believe, with the full weight of conviction, that water is falling from a sky that is plainly blue and dry. You will find that you cannot do it. The belief will not come. You can mouth the words and entertain the proposition, but the state of actually believing it, of

taking it to be true in the way you take it to be true that the floor will hold your weight, simply refuses to arrive on command.

This is the observation that made Bernard Williams, the British moral philosopher, skeptical that we have any direct control over our beliefs at all. He argued in a 1970 essay that believing is not like raising your arm or closing your eyes. Those are actions. Believing is more like digesting: something happens, and you find that you believe, the way you find that you are hungry or that a joke was funny. The evidence lands in your mind and the belief forms, or it doesn't, and you do not get a vote.

The philosophical name for the question is doxastic voluntarism, from the Greek *doxa*, meaning belief or opinion. Can we choose what we believe? The dominant position since Williams has been that we cannot, at least not directly. You can do things that make certain beliefs more likely to form—you can read selectively, surround yourself with people who think a certain way, avoid arguments you suspect might be persuasive—but these are all indirect. The belief itself, when it finally shows up, arrives uninvited or not at all. Williams called this the transparency of belief: when you try to decide what to believe about some matter, you find

yourself looking straight through the question and at the evidence, which is doing the deciding for you.

This sounds clean and final and probably correct when you are standing at the window watching the sun. But step away from the window and into a house where something is wrong—really wrong, in the way that everyone can see and no one will say—and the picture breaks apart almost immediately.



Consider a family with an alcoholic father. Not a dramatic television alcoholic, not a man who throws furniture and weeps on the stairs, but the ordinary kind, the kind who drinks steadily every evening and is perhaps a bit too loud at dinner and falls asleep on the couch and has not been fully present for years. The bottles are visible. The behavior is visible. The evidence is not ambiguous. And yet the people in that house will adopt wildly different beliefs about what they are seeing, and the differences will not track the evidence at all, because everyone has the same evidence and no one agrees.

The wife may believe, and by all appearances genuinely believe, that there is no problem. She sees the bottles and the slurred speech and the slow retreat from family life, and she arrives at the conclusion that every-

thing is fine, that this is just how he relaxes, that other families have it worse. This is exactly what Williams says you cannot do—believe against clear evidence. But she is doing it. Or something so close to doing it that the distinction between belief and deep denial becomes a philosophical question with no clean answer. From the inside, from her own experience of her own mind, she does not think she is maintaining a fiction. She simply does not think there is a problem. The evidence is right there and the belief has bent around it like water around a stone.

One of the children may adopt the opposite stance and decide that the drinking is catastrophic, that the household is in ruins, that everything is falling apart. The evidence may support a milder reading, but the child has chosen—if that is even the right word—a belief that overshoots the data in the direction of disaster. Perhaps this is because fear magnifies things, or because the child needs a narrative that explains why she feels the way she feels, or because naming the catastrophe is its own kind of control. Whatever the cause, the belief is not tracking the evidence any more faithfully than the mother's is.

And a third person in the house—maybe a sibling, maybe a visiting friend—may adopt what is perhaps the

strangest strategy of all: deliberate doxastic abstention. They simply refuse to form a belief. They neither think there is a problem nor think there is not a problem. They have achieved a kind of suspension of judgment that the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics would recognize, except that in a Greek symposium it was a philosophical achievement and in this kitchen on a Tuesday evening it is a survival mechanism. You go blank on the subject. You route around it. You can discuss the weather and the weekend and whether to get a new car and everything is fine as long as no one mentions the shape in the room that everyone can see and no one will name.

What all three of these people have in common is that their beliefs are not being formed by evidence. They are being formed by emotion, by dependency, by fear, by love, by the need to keep the household functional for one more day. Belief is bending to social and psychological pressures in ways that look like voluntary control from the outside, even though no one in the house would describe themselves as having chosen what they believe. They feel, each of them, that they are simply seeing things as they are.



There is a condition known as pathological demand avoidance, or PDA, that reveals something even stranger about the relationship between belief and the will. A person with PDA experiences external demands—even demands that align perfectly with their own desires—as threats. The nervous system treats the demand itself as an intrusion, irrespective of content. The result is a pattern so counterintuitive that it can take decades to recognize from the inside.

Say you want to clean your room. The desire is genuine. You might even be looking forward to it in a mild, Sunday-morning kind of way. Then someone walks in and says: clean your room. And the wanting dies. Not the ability to clean—the wanting to clean. Five minutes ago you had a perfectly good belief about your own desires: I want to do this. That belief was based on solid introspective evidence. You could feel the wanting. And now an external speech act, three words from another person, has retroactively destroyed the belief that underwrote the action. You can no longer access the desire. You know it was there. You might even know, in some abstract propositional sense, that you still want a clean room. But the felt sense of wanting it has been overwritten, and what has taken its place is

something between refusal and revulsion, and it arrived entirely without your permission.

This is the mirror image of what the wife of the alcoholic is doing. She is holding a belief in place against evidence that should dislodge it. Her will, or something in her that functions like will, is too strong—it is overriding reality in order to preserve a livable picture of her life. The person with PDA has the opposite problem: their will is too reflexive. It has a kind of autoimmune response that attacks any desire, any belief about what you want, the moment it detects that the same desire has an external source. The will is destroying the will. The immune system has begun attacking the body's own tissue.

And the mechanism is not exactly involuntary, but it is not exactly voluntary either, which is what makes it so disorienting to live with. It is your own reflexes doing it. Your own system. You are not being overridden by an external force; you are being overridden by yourself, by a part of yourself that does not negotiate and does not explain and does not care that you were about to do the thing anyway. The standard free will debate assumes a unified agent who either has or does not have the capacity to choose. PDA reveals that the agent is not unified at all. The part that wanted to clean and the

part that revolts against being told to are both you, and there is no executive function sitting above them both to adjudicate. The demand arrives and one part of you simply overrules another, and the word “choice” starts to feel like it was designed for a simpler animal than the one you actually are.



Here is a scenario that has nothing to do with any of this, except that it does.

You have a girlfriend. Things are good. She comes home in a hurry one day, tosses her jacket aside, and later, when you are doing the laundry, you find a condom in her pocket. You hold it up. She sees your face and says: oh, that is not mine—my friend gave it to me because she did not want her boyfriend to find it. And you believe her, because you know her, because she is not the kind of person who lies poorly under pressure, because the explanation is coherent and specific in the way that true stories tend to be. Justified true belief: you believe it, it is true, and your justification is sound.

And it is true. The condom really is her friend's. Her friend really is hiding it from her boyfriend because she is cheating on him. Your girlfriend told you the truth,

the whole truth, nothing but the truth about that particular condom.

She is also having an affair. They never use a condom.

There is something here that the standard philosophical vocabulary does not quite reach. It is not a Gettier case, not really, because your belief about the condom is genuine knowledge—true, justified, connected to the truth through the right kind of causal chain. Your girlfriend told the truth and you believed her and she was not lying. The epistemology is clean. You know what you think you know. The affair is simply a separate fact, drifting in a different orbit from the evidence that actually landed in your hands.

And yet the scenario is funny, in a way that the classic epistemology examples never are. The sheep-shaped rock in the field is clever. The stopped clock that happens to show the right time is neat. Nobody laughs. Here you might laugh, or wince, or both, and the laughter is pointing at something the philosophical framework cannot see. The condom is the canonical evidence of infidelity. It is the cliché, the thing that is supposed to blow the whole story open. And it appeared, right on cue, in the jacket pocket, like an actor hitting a mark—and it was innocent. The smoking gun fired a blank.

The real betrayal left no evidence at all, because the one piece of evidence that could have caught it was already used up on a perfectly truthful explanation.

This is not an epistemic structure. It is a dramatic structure. It is situational irony, the kind where the audience knows something the character does not, and what they know makes his competence look absurd even though he is doing everything right. Comedy has always been better at this than epistemology. Epistemology asks: do you have knowledge? And the answer is yes, you do, move on. Comedy asks: do you have any idea what is going on? And the answer is that you do not, and the reason you do not is precisely that you handled the evidence correctly. You trusted when trust was warranted. You believed the true thing. And you are standing in a burning house holding a fire extinguisher that works perfectly and is pointed at the one thing that is not on fire.



Søren Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, imagined a young man who falls in love with a princess he can never have. The impossibility is total—not difficult, not unlikely, but genuinely impossible, the kind of impossibility that reason can verify and confirm beyond all

doubt. Kierkegaard imagines three responses to this situation, three modes of being, and the differences between them turn out to be entirely about belief.

The first is what he calls the aesthetic mode. This is the person who says: well, the princess is out of reach, but the neighbor's daughter is just as pretty. He gives up, replaces the object, and moves on. His beliefs about what he wants are flexible enough to rearrange themselves around what is available. This is pragmatic and sane and, in Kierkegaard's judgment, not very interesting.

The second is the knight of infinite resignation. He knows the princess is impossible and he does not pretend otherwise. He accepts the loss completely, fully, without reserve—and then he keeps the love alive anyway, in a purified inward form, renouncing any hope that it will be fulfilled in this world. His belief about the impossibility is total. His belief about the value of the love is also total. He holds both at once, and the result is a kind of noble sadness that Kierkegaard finds admirable but insufficient.

The third is the knight of faith, and this is where it gets strange. The knight of faith makes exactly the same movement of infinite resignation—he fully accepts the impossibility—and then, in the same breath, he believes

that he will get the princess anyway. Not in another world, not in heaven, not metaphorically. In this world, in this life, by virtue of the absurd. He knows it is impossible. He believes it will happen. Both states coexist in the same person at the same time, and Kierkegaard insists that this is not madness but the highest form of existence, though he also admits that he cannot quite understand it himself.

This is the most radical doxastic voluntarism ever proposed. It is not believing against ambiguous evidence, like the wife of the alcoholic. It is not believing into a gap where the evidence has simply run out. It is believing against certainty. The knight of faith has done the math, confirmed the impossibility, resigned himself to it, and then chosen to believe anyway—not because the evidence shifted but because something in him refuses to let the evidence have the last word. The Latin tag is *credo quia absurdum*—I believe because it is absurd—attributed to Tertullian though he probably never said it in quite those words, and it captures the structure perfectly: the absurdity is not an obstacle to belief but the very thing that calls it forth.

This connects, in ways that are not immediately obvious, to a whole constellation of practices and experiences that involve the deliberate cultivation or dissolu-

tion of belief. Cognitive behavioral therapy asks you to stand in front of a mirror and repeat affirmations—I am worthy of love, I am capable of handling this—and the theory is that repetition will, over time, reshape the underlying belief. This is indirect doxastic voluntarism dressed up as clinical practice. You cannot simply decide to believe you are worthy, but you can perform the belief until it takes root, which is essentially Pascal’s wager conducted in a bathroom. Pascal told the doubter: go to church, take holy water, have masses said, and eventually you will believe. CBT tells the self-critical: say the words, write the journal entries, challenge the automatic thoughts, and eventually the new belief will form. Both are programs for generating belief through practice rather than through evidence, and both take for granted that the direct route is closed.

And when people say they have lost their faith—in God, in a partner, in a political project, in themselves—they are describing the involuntary departure of a belief that no amount of will can call back. They did not decide to stop believing. The belief left, the way a guest leaves, and they woke up one morning and it was gone. You can go through the motions, attend the services, say the prayers, stand at the mirror and mouth the words, but the belief itself, the felt conviction, is not something

you can reinstall by wanting it. Losing your faith is the lived experience of the limits of doxastic voluntarism, and it is among the most disorienting things that can happen to a person, because it reveals that something you thought was yours—your deepest conviction, your foundational commitment—was never fully under your control to begin with.

There is a parallel here with the concept of face in East Asian social life, though the parallel is not exact. When people talk about saving face or losing face or giving face, they are describing a social economy in which what everyone believes—or more precisely what everyone agrees to act as though they believe—is maintained through collective effort. Face is not a private possession but a shared construction, and maintaining it requires everyone in the room to participate in a kind of coordinated belief management: choosing what to notice, what to mention, what to let pass, what to pretend you did not see. The family around the alcoholic father is managing face, whether they would use that word or not. They are engaged in a group project of curating the believable, and the project requires each person to calibrate their expressed beliefs to what the situation can bear. The elegance of the concept, and the reason it has no perfect English equivalent, is that it

locates belief not inside a single skull but in the space between people, as something maintained collaboratively, like a conversation or a ceasefire.



In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, and shortly afterward the Stasi archives opened, and an entire country found itself standing in front of a filing cabinet trying to decide whether to look inside.

The East German Ministry for State Security had been, by the time it dissolved, one of the most thorough surveillance operations in human history. At its peak the Stasi employed roughly ninety thousand officers and maintained a network of nearly two hundred thousand civilian informants in a country of sixteen million people. The files ran to over a hundred kilometers of shelving. They contained, in meticulous bureaucratic detail, the daily lives of millions: who met whom, who said what, who was sleeping with whom, who could be trusted and who was suspect and who might be turned. The paranoia was so comprehensive and so banal that the files often read less like intelligence reports than like the world's most invasive diary, kept by someone who could not stop taking notes.

Timothy Garton Ash was a young British graduate student in East Berlin in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He studied, made friends, drank coffee in kitchens, had conversations about politics and life and literature. After the Wall fell and the archives opened, he went and read his own file. What he found there became a book called *The File*, and what makes the book extraordinary is not the revelation of betrayal, though there is betrayal, but the quality of confusion that the file produces. Several people he had known, liked, considered friends, had been reporting on him. And in some cases the friendships were real. The informers were not all cynical. Some of them had convinced themselves that what they were doing was harmless, or necessary, or that everyone did it, or that the state had a right to ask. They had performed acts of doxastic voluntarism so thorough that the friendship and the betrayal coexisted in separate compartments, each one genuine in its own domain, neither quite aware of the other.

But the question that precedes all of this—the question that the newly unified Germany had to face as a practical matter of governance and psychology—was the question of whether to open the file at all. You knew the files existed. You knew there was one with your

name on it. You could go to the records agency and request to see it. Or you could choose not to.

This is a choice about what kind of epistemic agent you want to be going forward. Right now, before you open the file, you might suspect your neighbor was an informant. Or you might not. You might have a complicated, ambiguous, livable set of beliefs about the people in your life—beliefs that are probably wrong in some particulars but that allow you to function and to love and to get through a day. The moment you open the file, whole categories of belief become impossible. You cannot choose to believe your friend was loyal when you are looking at his signature on a report filed with the ministry. The file destroys doxastic freedom. It forecloses exactly the strategies—the denial, the abstinence, the generous interpretation—that everyone in that society had been using to survive.

And there were people whose job it was to help others through this decision. Counselors at the records agency who would sit with you and prepare you for what you might find, and then help you metabolize it afterward. Think about what that job requires. You are sitting across from a woman who is trying to decide whether to find out if her husband of thirty years was reporting on her the entire time. There is no right answer

you can give her. If she opens the file and he was, she loses the marriage retroactively—not just going forward but backward, every memory rewritten, every tender moment contaminated by the question of whether it was surveillance. If she does not open the file, she keeps the marriage but lives forever with the knowledge that the answer exists and she chose not to look, which is its own kind of prison, a voluntary blindness that she will be conscious of every time he hands her a cup of coffee.

The whole country was living inside a version of the alcoholic's kitchen, except the elephant was the size of the state and the kitchen was sixteen million people wide, and now someone had opened the cabinet where the bottles were kept and you could either count them or close the door. Some people counted. Some people closed the door. Some people stood in the hallway and did neither. Each of these was a belief-strategy, and none of them was wrong, and none of them was sufficient.

The Stasi also had its own epistemic comedy, though no one was laughing. The officers who compiled the files were working inside a paranoid interpretive framework that distorted everything it touched. They clocked innocent meetings as conspiratorial. They missed genuinely subversive activity happening under

their noses. They drew correct conclusions from fabricated evidence and wrong conclusions from accurate evidence. The condom in the jacket pocket, scaled up to the level of a state apparatus: an entire intelligence service holding justified beliefs about specific facts while understanding nothing at all about the world those facts inhabited.

There is a much smaller version of this that happens outside of history, in the space between two people who love each other, when one of them disappears.

Not long ago a person I love stopped answering messages. She had been going through something difficult, and I had reasons to suspect things might be bad, and after an hour of silence I clocked it as real. After a day the silence was loud. After five days it was deafening. She had been suicidal in the past, and the scenarios that suggest themselves in that kind of silence are not gentle. I recruited friends to reach out, to text, to call—my reasoning being that if she saw a wave of people trying to make contact, she might feel less alone, might sense that there were people out there who cared, might respond to one of them even if she could not respond to me. They reached out. She did not respond. Ten days passed before she came back.

During those ten days I had the option of trying harder to find out what was happening. I could have escalated. I could have called authorities. I could have sent someone physically to check. Each of these would have been reasonable. Each would have been, in some sense, opening the file—forcing knowledge into existence, collapsing the ambiguity into fact.

Instead, around day two or three, I chose to believe she was alive. Not because new evidence arrived. Not because someone reassured me. Not because the probabilities shifted. I just decided. I stood in the gap between what I knew and what I feared and I picked a belief and I moved in. It did not feel indirect. It did not feel like I was cultivating the belief through careful management of my information environment. It felt like a choice, the way raising your arm feels like a choice, the way Bernard Williams says belief never feels.

And maybe this is what the knight of faith is doing—not believing against evidence exactly, but believing into a void where evidence has run out and fear is the only thing still generating predictions. The evidence was compatible with her being alive and with her being dead, and rather than suspend judgment or assume the worst or spiral through probabilities, I stepped across the gap and landed on the side where she was fine. She

was fine. She came back. She is talking to me now, talking to my brother, talking to everyone, as if the silence never happened, and the ten days that I spent inside a chosen belief have closed behind us like water.

I do not know if what I did counts as doxastic voluntarism in the way that philosophers mean the term. I do not know if the knight of faith is doing the same thing or something more extreme. I do not know whether the wife of the alcoholic is performing something brave or something catastrophic, or whether those are even different things when the alternative is leaving. What I suspect is that the clean picture Williams drew—belief as transparent to evidence, belief as something that happens to you rather than something you do—is true in the sunlit case and almost nowhere else. The moment the stakes rise, the moment love or fear or survival enters the frame, belief begins to move in ways that the clean picture cannot account for. You find yourself believing things you chose to believe, or unable to believe things you need to believe, or believing and not-believing the same thing in different rooms of the same mind, and the question of whether any of this is voluntary starts to feel less important than the question of whether it is livable.

The file is always there. The cabinet is always in the hallway. The question is never really about your right to look inside. The question is what kind of person you become in the looking or the not-looking, and whether the beliefs you carry out of that hallway—however you came by them, whether chosen or inherited or grown in the dark like something with no name—are ones you can live inside without losing the capacity to love the people standing next to you, who are carrying their own files, their own silences, their own ten days, and who have chosen, each in their own way, to believe what they need to believe in order to still be here in the morning.

