

Symbolic Belief in Social Cognition

Evan Westra 

Purdue University

Correspondence

Evan Westra, Purdue University.

Email: ewestra@purdue.edu

Abstract

Keeping track of what others believe is a central part of human social cognition. However, the social relevance of those beliefs can vary a great deal. Some belief attributions mostly tell us about what a person is likely to do next. Other belief attributions tell us more about a person's social identity. In this paper, I argue that we cope with this challenge by employing two distinct concepts of belief in our everyday social interactions. The *epistemic* concept of belief is primarily used to keep track of what other people take to be true, and this informs how we predict and interpret their behaviors. The *symbolic* concept of belief, in contrast, is primarily used as a means of signaling one's social identity to other members of one's community. In turn, community members closely monitor each other's symbolic beliefs as a means of enforcing social norms.

1 | SALLY AND GEORGE

Consider the following two cases of belief:

Sally has basket and Anne has a box. Sally also has a marble, which she places inside of her basket. Then Sally leaves the room and goes for a walk. While she's gone, Anne removes Sally's marble and places it in the box. When Sally returns, she looks for her marble in her basket.

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The most natural explanation of Sally's behavior in this scenario is that she has a (false) belief about the location of her marble. This case is based on the Sally-Anne False-Belief Task (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985), a vignette-based task typically given to children between the ages of three and five to determine whether or not they understand the representational nature of belief. Children generally start to pass this task (by correctly predicting where Sally will look for her marble) around age 4.5, while younger children systematically choose the incorrect location (Wellman et al., 2001).

The second case is an excerpt from an interview on the satirical news program *The Daily Show* between correspondent Jordan Klepper and a supporter of the Q-Anon conspiracy theory named George.¹

JORDAN KLEPPER: Wasn't Q's whole thing that Trump would be reinstated as president?

GEORGE: He's never left. There's no doubt in my mind, 150,000 percent.

JORDAN KLEPPER: That he's still president of the United States. Really? Does he still hold the powers of the presidency?

GEORGE: Well, he's been flying around the world on Air Force One. It says something.

JORDAN KLEPPER: I thought Joe Biden's technically on Air Force One.

GEORGE: No.

JORDAN KLEPPER: So they're they're [sic] faking it.

GEORGE: Yeah, it's not even a presidency.

JORDAN KLEPPER: Who is running the government right now?

GEORGE: President Trump.

JORDAN KLEPPER: He's running the government?

GEORGE: And the military.

JORDAN KLEPPER: And he's running the military, so we should blame him for what happened in Afghanistan.

GEORGE: No.

JORDAN KLEPPER: But it's still his fault.

GEORGE: It's way beyond my ...

JORDAN KLEPPER: ... understanding (Klepper, 2021)

Here again, the most natural explanation of George's behavior is to appeal to a (false) belief about who is currently the real President of the United States.

There are several notable differences between these two cases of belief, particularly when it comes to how Sally and George might respond to counterevidence. For example, if we showed Sally that her marble was really in the box, we would expect her to realize that her belief was false and update accordingly. In contrast, it seems unlikely that George would give up his beliefs about the US Presidency even if we brought him to Andrews Air Force base to inspect Air Force One himself. One imagines George coming up with an elaborate explanation of this apparent counterevidence: perhaps this is not the real Air Force One, but a fake designed to fool the broader public. In other words, it seems like George but not Sally is likely to engage in motivated reasoning in order to insulate his belief from counterevidence.

Another difference between these two cases has to do with how Sally and George's peers would react upon learning that Sally or George was behaving in a way that seemed inconsistent with these beliefs. If, upon her return, Sally spontaneously searched for her marble in the box instead of the basket, someone expecting Sally to search in the basket would probably infer that their original belief attribution was incorrect. But if one of George's fellow conspiracy theorists learned

that he had (say) admitted to Klepper that Trump was not currently running the US government, they would probably respond with accusations of disloyalty, and perhaps even ostracize George from their community. Meanwhile, responding in this way to Sally because she changed her mind about the location of her marble would be unthinkable. Here, we might say that peer responses to erroneous social predictions are likely to be *regulative* in George's case, while in Sally's case they are likely to be purely *epistemic*.

How then should we explain the differences between these two cases of belief?

One common approach in contemporary philosophy of mind has been to treat this as a question about the *cognitive ontology of belief*. For example, some philosophers and cognitive scientists (call them *splitters*) have suggested that attitude underlying Sally's behaviors is architecturally distinct from the attitude underlying George's behaviors (Dieguez, 2022; Luhrmann, 2020; Mercier, 2020; Munro, 2023; Van Leeuwen, 2014, 2023). On this sort of view, the attitude at work in Sally's case is what most philosophers tend to have in mind when they think of beliefs. This kind of attitude functions as a truth-oriented "map by which we steer" (Ramsey, 1929), and is defined primarily by epistemic characteristics such as practical-setting independence (Van Leeuwen, 2014) and sensitivity to evidence (Helton, 2020). Meanwhile, the splitters would say that the attitude in George's case is not a belief as they are understood in the traditional philosophical sense. It is more akin to a form of imagination or make-believe practice that expresses his social identity and is not bound by the same sort of epistemic constraints. This is why he does not seem to update his belief even when it is exposed by Klepper as inconsistent with this other attitudes.

In contrast, other philosophers (call them *lumpers*) have argued that despite their differences, *both* of these attitudes are best understood as beliefs (Bendaña & Mandelbaum, 2021; Porot & Mandelbaum, 2021). For example, Bendaña and Mandelbaum (2021) argue that the cognitive science of belief supports a "Spinozan" model whereby beliefs are acquired automatically and unreflectively, but are rejected only with some cognitive effort, meaning that even very far-fetched beliefs are acquired with relative ease and rejected only with considerable effort. These beliefs are then stored in a context-specific, fragmented manner, which enables people to hold multiple inconsistent beliefs at once. Some have also argued that belief-updating is not solely driven by rational, truth-seeking processes, but by a variety of intrapsychic and social motivations that allow false beliefs to persist in the face of counterevidence (Mandelbaum, 2019; see also Williams, 2021). Such architectural characteristics can then be invoked to explain why someone like George appears to hold inconsistent beliefs and updates in an evidence-insensitive manner.

So, the lumpers and splitters have different stories to tell us about the psycho-functional properties of the attitude types at play in these two cases. This sort of framework is helpful when it comes to explaining differences in Sally and George's behaviors and how they respond to evidence, but it leaves out something important: the difference *in social responses* to Sally and George's beliefs. Why is it that our own predictions about Sally and George's behaviors differ so dramatically? And why would Sally and George's peers respond so differently to belief-inconsistent behaviors in these two cases? These questions cannot be settled by appealing to facts about cognitive ontology alone. This leads us to a second, *folk psychological* reading of our question about Sally and George: are we deploying the same mental-state *concept* when tracking Sally and George's "beliefs"? Or are our diverging responses to Sally and George a reflection of two distinct mental-state concepts, two different ways of thinking about other minds?

These are the questions I will be addressing in this paper. Drawing on evidence from pragmatics, linguistic corpora, experimental philosophy, and developmental psychology, I will argue that we are indeed deploying two distinct mental-state concepts in the cases of Sally and George – what I'll call the *epistemic concept of belief* and the *symbolic concept of belief* (or *epistemic belief* and *symbolic belief*, for short).² Briefly, epistemic belief is a concept quite similar to the notion of

belief traditionally invoked by philosophers and epistemologists. Symbolic belief, in contrast, is a socionormative construct closely tied to the way we think about people's social identity, and has much more in common with certain colloquial, nonphilosophical uses of the word "belief." Next, I'll consider why it is that our folk psychology contains these two distinct concepts of belief. I'll propose that we can shed light on this question by invoking a distinction from the philosophy of social cognition between *mindreading* and *mindshaping* (McGeer, 2007; Nichols & Stich, 2003; Zawidzki, 2013).

Throughout this discussion, I will remain more-or-less neutral regarding the debate about cognitive ontology. However, I will at several points explore the implications of different conclusions about the ontology of belief for the folk psychology of belief, and vice versa.

2 | TWO FOLK PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS OF BELIEF

In this section, I'll show that our everyday folk psychology includes two distinctive concepts of belief. First, I'll review direct empirical support for this claim drawn from several converging lines of evidence. Then I'll suggest that evidence for a parallel ontological distinction provides indirect support for this claim as well.

2.1 | "Thinking" and "believing"

If you ask a philosopher for one of their *beliefs*, and they are likely to give a very mundane example like "It is raining outside" or "The cat is on the mat." This is probably because philosophers tend to use *to believe* interchangeably with *to think*, which is our default verb for expressing nonfactive mental states (Dorst, 2019; Hawthorne et al., 2016). In contrast, if you ask a non-philosopher for one of their beliefs, they are likely to mention a religious, political, or moral attitude. Consider, for example, the ubiquitous lawn signs found in front of progressive American households that read:

In this House, We Believe

Black Lives Matter

Love is Love

Women's Rights are Human Rights

Science is Real

Water is Life

Injustice Anywhere is a Threat to Justice Everywhere

Notably, if we were substitute the word "believe" for the word "think," it would read quite differently:

In this House, We [Think]

Black Lives Matter

Love is Love

Women's Rights are Human Rights

Science is Real

Water is Life

Injustice Anywhere is a Threat to Justice Everywhere

The latter text somehow fails to convey the same conviction as the first; one wonders whether a household with such a sign on their lawn is truly committed to these values. If *to believe* and *to think* were perfect synonyms, this result would be quite puzzling. Clearly, there is something communicated by *believe* in the first sign that is missing in the second.

Part of this effect is surely due to subtle differences between the pragmatic functions of *to think* and *to believe*. With a first-person subject, both verbs can function both as pragmatic markers that can be used to either amplify or attenuate the pragmatic force of an utterance in certain linguistic contexts (Dehé & Wichmann, 2010; Kaltenböck, 2010). However, *I believe* is used as a “booster” more often than *I think*, suggesting that this is its primary pragmatic function (Fetzer, 2014).³ In other words, speakers are more likely to use say that they *believe* something when they are trying to convey greater degree of commitment to it. This is perhaps why Fetzer (2014) finds that *I believe* is used more often than *I think* in political speeches, despite the latter being more common in dialogic contexts. Simply put: compared to *think*, *believe* tends to pack a bit more *oomph*. It makes sense, then, that we should use the latter to express attitudes that reflect our identities.

This is also apparent when we look at the way we use *believe* to express religious attitudes. In an analysis of the Corpus of Contemporary American English, Heiphetz, Landers, and Van Leeuwen (Heiphetz et al., 2021) found that *believe that* has many more collocates pertaining to religion than *think that*, and that religious propositional complements are more commonly associated with *believe* than *think*. In several follow-up experiments, they subsequently found that participants were much more likely to use *believe* than *think* when describing religious attitudes, both in forced-choice and free-response tasks. In their fourth study, they controlled for the possibility that their results reflected a difference in content rather than a difference in attitude by giving participants fill-in-the-blank vignettes where propositional content was held constant (e.g., “the aspirin was not a cure”) but the surrounding context implied either a religious or nonreligious rationale (e.g., “prayer is more effective than aspirin” vs. “aspirin has been ineffective in the past”). When presented with a forced choice between “think” and “believe,” participants were much more likely to choose “believe” for the religious vignette. The authors interpret this as evidence for an underlying conceptual distinction between attitude types: “in the minds of laypeople, religious mental states are not of the same type as other mental states, such as factual beliefs” (Heiphetz et al., 2021, p. 9).

Interestingly, a similar tendency to lexically distinguish religious and nonreligious attitudes also occurs in several other languages besides English. Following up on the work of Heiphetz et al. (2021), Van Leeuwen, Weisman, and Luhrmann (2022) first asked speakers of English, Fante, Thai, Mandarin, and Bislama to report either a religious claim or a “matter-of-fact” claim using one of two words (which roughly corresponded to *think* and *believe*). They then followed up with a free-response version of the same task and vignette-completion completion task. They found that “participants were generally more likely to use the word “believe” (or its counterparts in

other languages) to describe cognitive attitudes that relate to gods, ancestors, souls, and other supernatural phenomena, than to describe matter-of-fact beliefs” (Leeuwen et al., 2022, p. 96).⁴

Here is what these data tell us: in everyday life, people need a way to distinguish between mundane belief-like states and attitudes to which they hold a strong commitment (especially religious attitudes). In English, this is reflected in a subtle pragmatic difference between the way we use *to think* and *to believe*. The fact that we see parallel patterns of usage across multiple unrelated languages shows that this need recurs across a wide range of cultural and linguistic contexts, suggesting that its social significance cuts very deep.

2.2 | Thin belief and thick belief

Another line of evidence for a distinction between two folk psychological conceptions of belief (reflected to some degree in our usage of *think* and *believe*) comes from Buckwalter, Rose, and Turri’s (2015) experiments on folk intuitions about the *entailment thesis*: if S knows that P, then S believes that P (Lehrer, 1968). Despite its orthodox status in epistemology, several experimental philosophy studies have found that participants will consistently judge that an agent knows that P without believing that P (Murray et al., 2013; Myers-Schulz & Schwitzgebel, 2013). To explain these counterintuitive results, Buckwalter and colleagues propose a distinction between two concepts of belief:

A thin belief is a bare cognitive pro-attitude. To have a thin belief that P, it suffices that you represent that P is true, regard it as true, or take it to be true [...] A *thick belief* requires more than a bare cognitive pro-attitude. As a rough first approximation, thick belief also involves emotion or conation [...] For example, in addition to representing and storing P as information, you might also like it that P is true, emotionally endorse the truth of P, explicitly avow or assent to the truth of P, or actively promote an agenda that makes sense given P. (P. 749)

The authors’ central contention is that the folk concept of knowledge entails *thin* belief but not *thick* belief. According to this account, when participants deny that an agent believes P while affirming that they know P, they are employing their thick concept of belief.

To test this hypothesis, Buckwalter and colleagues gave participants a series of vignettes describing individuals who know certain propositions but are not emotionally committed to them (e.g., a college student named Karen who was raised by her parents to believe in a geocentric model of the solar system, and who remains ambivalent about the matter despite being able to correctly answer questions about the heliocentric model in her physics class). Participants were first asked to judge whether the protagonist in the vignette knows that P, followed by a question that aimed to cue either thick or thin belief. The thick belief probe asked whether the protagonist also “believes” that P, while the thin belief probe asked whether she “On some level... thinks” that P is true. Consistently, they found that participants were less likely to violate the entailment thesis when cued with a thin belief probe.

In a later paper, Buckwalter and Turri (2017) invoked the thin belief/thick belief distinction again to shed light on a longstanding debate between motivational internalists and externalists about whether moral beliefs are intrinsically motivating (Rosati, 2016). In that study, they found that cuing a thin conception of belief (again, by using the word “think” in the prompt) resulted in more externalist intuitions, with participants more willing to say that a person could believe one ought to phi and yet not be motivated to phi. Cuing a thick conception of belief (again, by using the

word “belief”), meanwhile, yielded more internalist judgments. They suggest that hypothetical cases normally cited in support of internalist intuitions tend to cue thick conceptions of belief; when belief is understood thinly, externalist intuitions prevail.

2.3 | “Factual” and “ideological” beliefs in developmental psychology

Finally, there is evidence that a distinction between types of belief starts to emerge by at least five years of age, and that it becomes increasingly pronounced over the course of development. Heiphetz, Spelke, Harris, and Banaji (2013) explored whether 5–10-year-old children and adults would draw an epistemic distinction between beliefs concerning matters of fact and “ideological beliefs,” of which their primary example is religious belief. In particular, they examined whether both age groups would treat disagreements over ideological beliefs more like disagreements over matters of fact (where only one person can be right) or more like individual preferences (where more than one person can be right).

Across two studies, Heiphetz and colleagues found that both children and adults agreed that in disagreements over matters of fact (e.g., about whether germs are large or small), only one person could be right; in disagreements about preferences (e.g., whether oranges are the tastiest fruit), both children and adults tended to say that more than one person could be right. Responses to disagreements about ideological beliefs fell somewhere in between. Compared to disagreements about factual beliefs (but not compared to disagreements about preferences), all participants were more likely to say that two people who disagreed in their ideological beliefs (e.g., whether God can perform miracles) could both be right. This tendency to treat ideological beliefs as somewhat preference-like also increased with age and was most pronounced in adults, suggesting that a distinction between factual beliefs and ideological beliefs emerges gradually over the course of development.

Interestingly, these results are somewhat in tension with the way that Buckwalter and colleagues initially characterized the distinction between thin and thick beliefs. Both sets of results identify a folk concept of belief that includes a conative element. However, in Buckwalter and colleagues work, the concept of thick belief is portrayed as a *subset* of the broader category of thin beliefs. In order to have a thick belief that P, as they define it, it is necessary that one regard P as true. This is less clear in Heiphetz and colleagues work: if it is understood that one person can have the thick/ideological belief that P, another person can have a thick/ideological belief that not-P, and yet both can be right, this suggests that thick/ideological beliefs are not seen as aiming at truth. This suggests that thick/ideological beliefs are seen as having a something like what Millikan calls a “pushmi-pullyu” direction of fit, with both descriptive and conative elements (Millikan, 1995). This possibility is not explored in Buckwalter and colleagues’ work, but their results are not inconsistent with it.

2.4 | Indirect evidence from the cognitive ontology of belief

Thus far, we have only reviewed evidence of a folk psychological distinction between types of belief. Importantly, this need not imply a corresponding distinction in our cognitive ontology. It is entirely possible that we ought to be splitters about the folk psychology of belief while remaining lumpers about belief *qua* psycho-functional kind. Nevertheless, it will be useful for our purposes to review the splitting hypothesis in a bit more detail. Shortly, I’ll argue that regardless of whether

this view is correct, the evidence for it (which needs to be explained by lumpers and splitters alike) is also indirect evidence for a distinction at the level of folk psychology.

Historically, the strongest case for the splitting hypothesis has come from the cognitive science of religion. The splitters argue that attitudes taken towards supernatural contents like “God spoke to me” or “the sorcerer transformed himself into a dog” should not be understood in the same way as attitudes taken to more mundane contents like “Paris is the capital of France” or “It is currently raining” for the simple reason that people do not *act like* they believe such things. Scott Atran makes illustrates this point vividly with a discussion of the various supernatural beliefs of the Maya-speaking Itza. When understood as claims about the true state of the world, Atran argues, they seem to imply that the Itza’ think it is literally the case that,

... someone eating a pork chop might be a cannibal, expect healthy houses to give birth to little houses, believe that animal species can interbreed as indiscriminately as people can mate, turn on the radio to stop the wind from spreading fire, avoid provoking rocks that could fly up and strike you dead, look for flocks of snakes flying in from the East but not the West. (Atran, 2002, p. 87).

The fact that the Itza manifestly do not act on such beliefs, Atran claims, implies that the Itza’ do not take their supernatural attitudes to be a genuine “map” of the world around them. The anthropologist Tania Luhrmann expresses a similar view in her book, *How God Becomes Real*:

This is my puzzle: People may talk as if the gods are straightforwardly real, but they don’t act that way—not in the Bible Belt, not in medieval England, not in Fiji, and not among the Nuer. People behave as if making invisible others real enough to impact one’s life in a positive way takes effort, as if one has to learn to think in certain way and—in consequence—to behave as if invisible others are not real in the way that ordinary objects are real. They seem to treat gods and spirits with different ontological attitudes than they do things of the everyday world. (Luhrmann, 2020, p. 12)

Splitters explain this discrepancy between religious attitudes and action in a variety of ways. Sperber (1997) argues that it has to do with the fact that religious beliefs are *meta-representational* (they are represented *as beliefs*), which has the effect of isolating them from other doxastic processes.⁵ Atran (2002) suggests that religious attitudes are “quasi-propositions” with indeterminate yet affectively laden and memorable contents that only get activated in specific ritual contexts. Van Leeuwen (2014) was the first to explicitly characterize religious beliefs as a distinct type of attitude – a pretense-like state aimed at maintaining one’s social identity that he calls “religious credence.” Similarly, Luhrmann (2020) describes religious attitudes in terms of a “faith frame” characterized by intense cognitive effort, introspective attention, imagination, and ritual practice.

Similar proposals have also been made about conspiracy theories and cultic beliefs. In a recent paper, Daniel Munro (2023) suggests that the outlandish beliefs adopted by proponents of conspiracy theories like Q-Anon are best understood as a state of make-believe motivated by a desire for belonging and pleasurable fantasies of possessing secret knowledge. The social manner in which these fantasies are practiced has the effect of reifying them, leading conspiracy theorists and cult-members to become increasingly immersed in their collective fictions. Dieguez (2022) offers a similar account, coining the term *croivance* (in contrast with *croyance*, the French noun

for *belief*) to describe the quasi-doxastic attitudes that people take towards conspiracy theories and fake news.

All of these authors seem to agree that such attitudes are mostly strongly activated in very specific ritual and social contexts, but otherwise have limited epistemic and practical effects. Take Mercier and Altay's recent example of the "PizzaGate" conspiracy theory that Democrats were operating a satanic pedophile ring in the basement of the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in Washington DC, which was believed by millions of people in the run-up to the 2016 US Presidential Election. This conspiracy theory rose to international prominence when a lone individual armed with an assault rifle showed up at Comet Ping Pong attempting to liberate the children trapped in the cellar, and was promptly arrested. While this individual appeared to treat the PizzaGate theory as factual, he was the exception that proved the rule: the vast majority of people who believed this theory did not attempt to intervene, as one might expect of a person who truly believed that children were being abused there. Instead, they contented themselves with sharing the conspiracy theory amongst each other and posting negative reviews on the restaurant's Google page (Mercier & Altay, 2022). This suggests that for their adherents, the real function of the PizzaGate conspiracy theory was tied to the social experiences it engendered rather than a genuine attempt to uncover facts about the world (Wagner-Egger et al., 2022).

But what does all this have to do with the folk psychology of belief? Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the splitters are correct, and that there really is an important architectural distinction between different kinds of belief-like state, and that two kinds of state impact behavior in noticeably different ways. Given some plausible assumptions about the way we acquire new folk psychological concepts (Hoemann et al., 2020; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996), it stands to reason that this underlying ontological distinction would become increasingly reflected in our intuitive folk psychological theories – and in folk psychological discourse – over the course of development. Understanding that not all belief-like states are alike would enable us to better understand the people around us. Conversely, if we did not draw such a distinction, we would be constantly surprised whenever people failed to act in line with their beliefs. The fact that we don't find it surprising when these people fail to follow through on the extreme implications of their beliefs⁶ suggests that we understand on some level that not all beliefs are alike.⁷

Of course, this argument begins with an assumption that will be rejected by the lumpers, who deny that we need to posit two kinds of attitude to explain these divergent patterns of behavior. For example, Mandelbaum and colleagues (Bendaña & Mandelbaum, 2021; Porot & Mandelbaum, 2021) could explain apparently inconsistent behavior by appealing to the context-sensitive way in which our beliefs are stored and activated: the Itza's beliefs about shapeshifting sorcerers don't affect how they think about the animals they see on the street because those beliefs only get activated in specific ritual contexts. They could likewise explain the difference between Sally and George's beliefs by appealing to the claim that we have two distinct systems for belief-updating: a Bayesian system for beliefs that we hold dispassionately and a psychological immune system that protects beliefs that we self-identify with (Mandelbaum, 2019). Because George's beliefs about the 2020 election are a part of his identity, they are not updated in accordance with evidence, but rather shielded from counterevidence by our psychological immune system.

Again, let us assume for the sake of argument that the lumpers are correct: there is only one attitude type at work here, and any superficial patterns of behavior taken as evidence for two types of attitudes are fully explicable through appeals to the cognitive architecture of belief storage and updating. Note that this kind of account still accepts that there really is a pattern of behavioral differences here that stands in need of an explanation: some beliefs appear to be sensitive to evidence, while other beliefs appear to be actively resistant to counterevidence. Some beliefs seem

like they only guide behavior in ritual contexts but are otherwise causally inert. Our question is, how should we expect this pattern to affect our folk psychology?

One possibility is that we should expect our folk psychology to directly reflect the complex realities underlying the architecture of belief as posited by the lumpers. This is clearly not the case. Another possibility is that we simply form one concept of belief that works reasonably well at tracking attitudes managed by the Bayesian updating system but goes awry when applied to attitudes managed by the psychological immune system. This proposal fits poorly with the evidence we've already reviewed in this section: generally, people don't seem to expect that all beliefs behave alike. A third possibility is that we would attempt to accommodate the aforementioned patterns of behavior by drawing a conceptual distinction that roughly tracks the activity of the two belief-updating systems: we form one folk concept of belief to track attitudes that get updated in an ordinary, Bayesian fashion, and another folk concept of belief to track the attitudes that are managed by the psychological immune system. While it wouldn't perfectly reflect all the underlying cognitive complexities, this folk psychological distinction would do a good job of guiding our social interactions. In short, the lumpers should still posit the emergence of a folk psychological distinction between types of belief here, if only as an error theory that explains away intuitive support for the splitting view.

Here is the upshot: *regardless* of whether the lumpers and splitters are right, the fact that there are striking differences in the ways that people act upon and reason about certain classes of belief creates a need for a conceptual distinction within our folk psychology. Since both the lumpers and the splitters acknowledge and aim to explain these differences, both views should also predict the formation of two distinct folk psychological concepts of belief.

On its own, the preceding argument from the cognitive ontology debate only provides weak support for the claim that we have two concepts of belief. But in conjunction with all the other evidence for this claim, it gains considerable plausibility. Moreover, it establishes a connection between our folk psychological thesis and a much broader body of evidence about the nature of religious, conspiratorial, and cultic beliefs. This body of evidence will prove useful in the next section, when we consider the socio-cognitive functions of these two concepts.

2.5 | Interim summary: epistemic belief and symbolic belief

Now that we have pulled together enough evidence from across several distinct empirical literatures, we are at last in a position to characterize the distinction between the epistemic and symbolic concepts of belief.

2.5.1 | Epistemic belief

Typically expressed in English using the verb *to think*, this is the concept of belief that young children employ when they pass the false-belief task. It is understood to be a very basic type of mental state that is entailed by the possession of knowledge and aims to represent the world and facts about it in an accurate and coherent way. We don't think that epistemic beliefs can be voluntarily chosen, nor are they seen to be intrinsically motivating or indicative of a preference. They are, as Buckwalter and colleagues put it, bare cognitive pro-attitudes.

2.5.2 | Symbolic belief

This concept of belief is most often expressed by the English verb *to believe* or the noun *belief*. Symbolic beliefs tend to be about things that are important to a person's social identity, such as religion, morality, and politics. Unlike epistemic belief, symbolic belief is not entailed by the possession of knowledge, and it does not necessarily aim at truth: ordinary folk tend to think that two people can have conflicting symbolic beliefs and yet "both be right." They do however have a strong conative and affective element: if someone has a symbolic belief that P, then they are seen as *liking* and being affectively motivated by P as well.

2.5.3 | Objections

There are several ways that one might resist the conclusion that there is a genuine folk psychological distinction here. It might be argued, for instance, that this distinction really tracks the way we think about *degrees* of belief. It's not that we have two concepts of belief: we are simply able to distinguish between beliefs that are held more or less strongly. This certainly fits with the fact that saying *I believe* often amplifies the pragmatic force of an utterance (Fetzer, 2014). Perhaps the affective elements of symbolic beliefs merely reflect the fact that we hold these beliefs more strongly than other more mundane beliefs. However, this proposal is at odds with what we know about how people express their symbolic beliefs. While it true that in some surveys, people initially *claim* to be quite confident in very controversial beliefs like these, their levels of confidence actually oscillate quite a bit over time; meanwhile, control questions reveal that confidence in beliefs about less controversial subjects remain quite stable (Graham, 2022). There is also a tendency among promoters of conspiracy theories to rhetorically hedge their assertions in ways that allow for plausible deniability – for example, by saying things like "I'm just asking questions!" (Byford, 2011). It is also very common for religious believers to struggle with doubt; as Luhrmann puts it, "Faith is hard because it is a decision to live as if a set of claims are real, even when one doubts" (Luhrmann, 2012, p. xiv).

Of course, it could be that this reading of the "strength of belief" argument gets things backwards: perhaps it is what I've called epistemic belief that tracks strongly held beliefs, while so-called symbolic belief tracks beliefs with low degrees of certainty. The trouble with this proposal is that it renders the pragmatic, motivational and affective dimensions of these beliefs quite puzzling. Why would we consistently expect people to strongly avow beliefs that they are only weakly committed to?

Overall, the problem with this objection is that it conflates two orthogonal dimensions of belief strength: *epistemic confidence* and *identity centrality* (Van Leeuwen, 2022). A belief can be strongly held in the sense that one is highly confident that it is true, like my belief that Toronto is in Canada. It can also be strongly held in the sense that it is experienced as important to who they are and their sense of belonging within their community, like George's belief that Trump won the 2020 election. The folk concept of symbolic belief tracks beliefs that are high on the identity centrality dimension, but not necessarily on the epistemic confidence one.

A different objection to the current proposal might be to try to explain the distinction at the level of belief content. Rather than distinct mental-state concepts, people simply recognize that beliefs with certain identity-relevant contents tend to come along with affective and motivational baggage that can lead to striking differences in reasoning and behavior. Two pieces of evidence speak

against this possibility: first, if epistemic and symbolic beliefs differed only in content, then why would children and adults treat symbolic beliefs as preference-like (Heiphetz et al., 2013)? Second, Heiphetz et al. (2021) were able to uncover a distinction between religious and nonreligious attitudes even when propositional content was held fixed. This points to a folk distinction between mental state types with divergent functional roles, rather than a mere difference in content.

3 | THE REGULATIVE FUNCTIONS OF SYMBOLIC BELIEF

Having established that our folk psychology likely includes two distinct concepts of belief, I now turn to a further question: why? What purpose does it serve us to represent to belief-like states in this way? In this section, I'll explore how different frameworks for thinking about the function of folk psychology can shed light on this question.

3.1 | Mindreading

According to the standard account in the philosophy of social cognition, belief-attribution is a form of *mindreading*. According to this view, we represent other agents' beliefs because keeping track of beliefs enables us to predict and interpret behavior (Nichols & Stich, 2003). The paradigmatic example of this form of belief-attribution is the false-belief task, which was the basis for our Sally case above (Wimmer & Perner, 1983): we predict that Sally will mistakenly search for her marble in the box instead of the basket, because Sally has a false belief about the location of her ball. Mindreading theorists have long taken this kind of belief-based reasoning to be a core form of social cognition (Dennett, 1978; Fodor, 1992; Kovács, 2016; Nichols & Stich, 2003), though there has also been persistent skepticism about the how central the representations of belief are to everyday social interaction (Andrews, 2012; Nagel, 2017; Spaulding, 2018). The trouble is that the mindreading literature on belief-attribution has focused almost exclusively on epistemic belief. Will the same model prove suitable for explaining the function of symbolic belief attribution?

From a mindreading-based perspective, the reason to conceptually distinguish between two related types of mental state would be because it yielded more accurate behavioral predictions. Distinguishing between *goals* and *intentions*, for example, allows for more fine-grained predictions about expected behavioral outcomes and how those outcomes are achieved. Likewise, one might expect that distinguishing between epistemic and symbolic beliefs could produce some added predictive value. For instance, knowing about George's symbolic beliefs enables us to predict that he engages in social practices like attending Trump rallies. It also enables us to predict how he would react to certain claims or arguments (which could be quite important information in certain social contexts). Insofar as the Q-Anon conspiracy theory fits into a broader ideological framework, it would also facilitate predictions about George's other symbolic beliefs – say, about immigration or the coronavirus vaccine.

In other respects, attributing symbolic beliefs is much less predictively useful than attributing epistemic beliefs. One feature of epistemic belief attributions is that they can support behavioral predictions by using one's own practical reasoning systems in an offline, simulationist mode (Goldman, 2006; Gordon, 1986; Heal, 1996). If I infer that Sally believes that her ball is in the basket, and that Sally wants the ball, I can predict what Sally would do by imagining how I might act if I shared her beliefs. But if I followed this procedure when attributing beliefs based on the Pizza-Gate conspiracy theory, I would probably arrive at the wrong answer. Except for one gun-wielding

conspiracy theorist who took it literally, most adherents of the PizzaGate conspiracy theory did not really act like there was *actually* a Satanic pedophile ring in the basement of Comet Ping Pong. The same could be said of attributions of the Itza' beliefs about shapeshifting sorcerers. The connections between these attitudes and action are particularly tenuous. Splitters like Mercier (2020) and Sperber (1997) have a ready explanation for this: because these beliefs are inferentially insulated from our everyday commonsense beliefs, they do not enter directly into practical reasoning, and so their relationship to behavior cannot be easily divined on the basis of their content.

It may be a mistake, however, to treat symbolic belief attribution as directly analogous to epistemic belief attribution. Perhaps it is more akin to attributions of *character traits*, a non-doxastic form of mindreading that has been relatively neglected by mindreading theorists (Westra, 2018). Like symbolic beliefs, trait attributions do not fit so neatly into a belief-desire model of action-prediction and explanation, because they do not figure directly in practical reasoning. Instead, trait information reveals broad tendencies towards certain types of trait-consistent mental states and emotions (e.g., extraverts enjoy social events, paranoiacs form implausible beliefs, etc.). This information is somewhat less useful in direct predictions of action, but it does provide mindreaders with a way of inferring what sorts of action-relevant mental states a person is likely to form in a given context. Symbolic belief-attribution may function in a similar way, licensing attributions of emotions, desires, and inferences.

The analogy with traits is useful in another way: sensitivity to information about moral character in particular is widely seen as a strategy for selecting long-term cooperative partners (Feinberg et al., 2012; Helzer & Critcher, 2018; Sperber & Baumard, 2012; Turpin et al., 2021; Westra, 2022). This too is a likely function of symbolic belief attribution: moral beliefs – like moral character traits – are viewed as central to personal identity, especially when these beliefs are seen as widely shared within one's community (Heiphetz et al., 2017; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). There is also widespread evidence that attributions of religious belief (or lack thereof) are used to make inferences about a person's underlying moral character traits (Barnett et al., 2021; Clifford & Gaskins, 2016). More generally, symbolic beliefs tend to express norms linked to social identity, which reveal whether someone is a member of one's own ingroup, and whether their identity-linked values align with ours (Marques et al., 1998; McElreath et al., 2003). All this provides symbolic-belief attributors with valuable information about a target's potential as a cooperative partner.

3.2 | Mindshaping

This mindreading-based picture is incomplete, however. It leaves out the key role played by the *target* of these symbolic attributions. Being viewed as a reliable cooperative partner carries great strategic value. This is why symbolic beliefs are not merely inferred by third parties but are actively and vocally expressed by the targets themselves. Whether consciously or unconsciously, these expressions of symbolic belief (and, perhaps, the symbolic beliefs themselves) are often shaped by the incentive to be viewed as a desirable cooperative partner (Funkhouser, 2022a; Williams, 2021). These incentives can explain why many avidly expressed beliefs appear absurd, irrational, or downright dangerous to outgroup members (Bergamaschi Ganapini, 2023; Funkhouser, 2022b; Williams, 2022a): the true function of these actions is not to express what one takes to be the literal truth, but to *signal* one's social identity and maintain one's status within the ingroup.

The active role of the target in manipulating the mindreader's behavior and mental states indicates that the folk psychology of symbolic belief also has a strong *regulative* or *mindshaping* component (Andrews, 2015; McGeer, 2007; McGeer, 2021; Zawidzki, 2013). Both mindreading

and mindshaping are strategies for navigating complex social environments. Mindreading manages this complexity by generating predictively accurate causal models of other agents' minds. "Mindshaping" refers to a class of sociocognitive strategies that aim to reduce the complexity of the social environment through actions that make the mental states and behaviors of other agents more predictable, as a form of social niche construction. Some of these strategies involve altering one's own behavior so that it is easier for others to predict (e.g., through imitation and conformity to social norms) (Theriault et al., 2021). Others mindshaping strategies involve regulative behaviors that incentivize others to act in more predictable ways (e.g., by teaching and punitively enforcing social norms or by preferentially affiliating with norm conformers). We see both kinds of mindshaping strategies in the folk psychology of symbolic belief.

Some proponents of the mindshaping framework have argued that the original function of belief-attribution – and of propositional attitude attribution more generally – is social regulation. In this view, expressions of belief constitute a kind of public normative commitment (Brandom, 1994); the capacity for belief-attribution evolved means of monitoring, enforcing, and negotiating these commitments (Zawidzki, 2013). For example, when Thag says to his fellow cavemen, "There are mammoths over yonder," this leads them to view Thag as publicly committed to the claim that *there are mammoths over yonder*. If it turned out that this claim were false, this would license Thag's peers to sanction him; this threat of social sanctions can in turn motivate agents to adhere to their public commitments. Beliefs can also be invoked in justificatory contexts when agents rationalize unfulfilled commitments: Thag isn't blameworthy when it is discovered that there are no mammoths if he can show that his belief was appropriately grounded.

This picture of belief attribution seems to fit quite well with the social dynamics of symbolic belief. The signaling functions of extreme symbolic beliefs can be understood as a form of mindshaping specifically aimed at manipulating the kinds of mental states others attribute to us, leading them to treat us in more desirable ways. Expressing identity-linked symbolic beliefs leads others to view us as trustworthy, reliable members of the ingroup, which makes them more likely to include us in mutualistic or reciprocal cooperative endeavors. However, the audiences of these symbolic belief displays do not simply take them at face value, which would leave them quite vulnerable to exploitation by false-signalers. When we attribute a symbolic belief to someone, we do not merely form predictive expectations about what they will do, as we might when attributing an epistemic belief. We also form normative expectations about how the holder of such a symbolic belief ought to behave, which can be either met or disappointed. With these expectations come practices of normative accountability and enforcement.

We see this most clearly in the way we respond to *hypocrisy*. When an individual's belief expression is viewed as a false signal of their underlying character (say, publicly condemning performance enhancing drugs while secretly using them), we scorn them as a hypocrite (Jordan et al., 2017). Being perceived as a hypocrite by one's ingroup members can have significant social costs, which creates a form of accountability for false signaling. Thus, attributions of symbolic beliefs end up having a regulative dimension of their own: when an individual publicly expresses a symbolic belief, audiences then hold them to a set of normative standards, the violation of which can result in costly sanctions. Overall, this yields a distinctively interactive dynamic: symbolic beliefs are first expressed by an actor, which shapes the audience's mental-state attributions. This can lead to cooperative behaviors and social acceptance, but it also triggers normative expectations that serve to regulate the behavior of the actor.

The mindshaping model fits less well with epistemic belief attribution. Consider again the case of Sally and her false belief about the location of her marble. Sally never expresses her belief verbally, and even if she did, it's not obvious how her belief might have symbolic content: nobody's

social identity depends on the location of a marble.⁸ It is hard to read her behavior as a form of social signaling or as a bid to be treated as a viable cooperative partner. Likewise, violations of expectations based on epistemic belief attributions do not engender strongly regulative responses. If we took Sally to have the factual belief that her marble was in the basket, and then she searched for it in the box, we would simply update our mental model of her beliefs accordingly: she must have known that Anne would move her marble while she was gone. This points to a promising way of characterizing the functional roles of epistemic and symbolic belief within our folk psychology: while the former is primarily a tool for mindreading, the latter is much more strongly implicated in mindshaping.

This conclusion is unlikely to sit well with proponents of the mindshaping framework who argue that *all* folk psychology is inherently regulative (Andrews, 2015; McGeer, 2007; Zawidzki, 2013). In this spirit, a mindshaping theorist might point to the various ways that we do regulate epistemic beliefs through the enforcement of epistemic norms, like when we criticize someone for holding contradictory or incoherent sets of beliefs. They might also point to the way we sometimes use verbs like *to think* as hedges to attenuate our discursive commitments and insulate ourselves from epistemic criticisms (Simons, 2007).⁹

While it is true that people sometimes regulate one another's adherence to epistemic norms, this kind of regulative activity is not analogous to what we see in the regulation of symbolic belief. Whereas the social functions of symbolic belief seem to play a crucial role in explaining the norms governing their expression (Blancke, 2023; Van Leeuwen, 2023), this is not the case with epistemic norms about consistency and sensitivity to evidence. Epistemic norms hold both in social and in nonsocial contexts, and do not require mindshaping to persist. Violations of epistemic norms like updating in response to evidence do not have to be enforced by other agents (even if they sometimes are), because epistemic norms are enforced by the world itself. Failing to update in response to evidence is, generally speaking, *bad for you*. An agent living in total isolation like Robinson Crusoe would still need to adhere to epistemic norms, because failure to do so would swiftly lead to their demise. In contrast, symbolic beliefs seem to be an intrinsically social and regulative phenomenon. Compared to the intensely regulative nature of symbolic belief attribution, the mindshaping dynamics of epistemic belief are quite attenuated.

3.3 | Symbolic beliefs in intergroup contexts

One upshot of the current proposal is that the meanings of symbolic belief will be most readily grasped by other members of the relevant community. When an individual avows their symbolic beliefs to an audience of ingroup members, it is not understood as an expression of a factual claim about how they take the world to be. Instead, it is understood as an expression of their bona fide commitment to the community and its collective goals. It signals that they are accountable to the norms of the ingroup, and that they stand ready to enforce them. To borrow a phrase that grew popular during the 2016 US election cycle, symbolic beliefs are taken *seriously* but not *literally*.

The meaning of symbolic beliefs expressions should be much harder to understand when one is not a member of the relevant community. In general, mindreading is most reliable in closer relational contexts, and more prone to error with outgroup members (Westra, 2020). But outsiders may have an especially hard time distinguishing outgroup members' symbolic belief from their epistemic ones. Insofar as a symbolic belief functions as a signal, the signaling system that it belongs to extends only to the boundaries of the relevant community. Just as the British colonial army would not have known the meaning of Paul Revere hanging two lanterns rather than one,

an outsider is unlikely to be sensitive to the information conveyed by a given symbolic belief – except, perhaps, as a sign that the believer is a member of an outgroup.

As a result, it's likely that we often mistakenly attribute epistemic beliefs to outsiders instead of symbolic beliefs.¹⁰ This then leads us to infer that these individuals must be either ignorant, irrational, or dishonest (e.g., Doherty et al., 2019, 2022): how else could we explain why *those people* come to have such outlandish beliefs? But this is often a misunderstanding, since symbolic belief discourse does not aim at truth.¹¹ Conversely, understanding the real function of symbolic beliefs might foster better intergroup understanding. Even if some beliefs appear extreme or alien from the outside, from inside of a community they are experienced as an ordinary part of how one relates to one's peers. Grasping the non-epistemic role of these beliefs – and the fact that they probably have analogues in one's own ingroup – could help to reduce false impressions of epistemic and political polarization (Fernbach & Van Boven, 2022; c.f. Joshi, 2020).

4 | CONCLUSION

I have defended two claims. First, our folk psychology includes two distinct concepts of belief, one epistemic and one symbolic. I've attempted to characterize some of the core features that distinguish these two concepts, though in some places the distinction remains rough and stands in need of further clarification. Second, while our epistemic concept of belief is best understood as a part of our capacity for mindreading, our symbolic concept of belief primarily functions as a tool for mindshaping. Notably, I have not said that this division of labor is exclusive: sometimes epistemic belief gets used in a regulative manner, and sometimes symbolic belief can be successfully used to predict and interpret behavior. Rather, the suggestion is that a mindshaping lens is crucial for understanding the folk psychology of symbolic belief in the same way that mindreading is crucial for understanding epistemic belief.

Let us conclude with a word on the implications of this account for the cognitive ontology of belief. The mindshaping processes that drive individuals to adopt and convincingly profess symbolic beliefs create a powerful set of social incentives that have profound effects on cognition and behavior (Williams, 2021, 2022b). Over time, these effects are likely to become engrained as habits, and come to play a major role in explaining why people think and act as they do. This means that even if the attitudes underlying symbolic beliefs are not a psychological natural kind distinct from the broader category of belief, it is highly likely that symbolic belief constitute a robust *social kind* with “looping effects” on human psychology (Barrett, 2017; Hacking, 1996). If this is right, then any analysis of these attitudes and their place in our broader cognitive architecture that does not reckon with their functional role in folk psychology is bound to be incomplete.¹²

ORCID

Evan Westra  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2005-7998>

ENDNOTES

¹“Q-Anon” refers to a sprawling online conspiracy theory first promulgated on the website 4chan by an anonymous poster who called himself “Q” and claimed to be a high-level member of the US Military. A core tenet of this conspiracy theory is that Donald Trump has been secretly recruited by the US Military in a Manichean war against a vast Satanic pedophilia and cannibalism ring comprised of top Democrats (Roose, 2021).

²I owe the term “symbolic belief” to Atran (2002).

- ³Fetzer (2014) suggests that this is because *I think* has undergone a process of grammaticalization, resulting in a partial loss of semantic content, whereas this has not yet fully occurred with *I believe*.
- ⁴Notably, this difference was attenuated in Ghana, where (the authors suggest) people may hold more matter-of-fact attitudes towards the supernatural.
- ⁵It's not completely clear whether to classify Sperber as a splitter or as a lumper, but in my view he reads most naturally as a splitter. See Chapter 8 of Van Leeuwen (2023) for an in-depth discussion.
- ⁶At least, we don't find it surprising when the symbolic belief is attributed to a member of the ingroup. There are intergroup biases in social cognition that diminish the accuracy of our mental-state attributions to outgroup members and our sensitivity to subsequent prediction errors (Westra, 2019). More on this in section 3.3.
- ⁷Heiphetz and colleagues (2021) give the mirror image of this argument: if there is evidence for a folk psychological distinction, this should be viewed as *prima facie* evidence for a corresponding ontological distinction.
- ⁸This is not to say that such a belief could never take on a symbolic role. In principle, symbolic beliefs could have any content whatsoever. Consider the way beliefs about elections in the United States have changed in recent years. Not long ago, who won more votes in an election would have been viewed as a simple matter of fact not up for dispute. But after the 2020 Presidential election, this expressing this kind of belief became a test of ingroup loyalty for members of the Republican Party. Politicians and public figures who publicly disavowed these symbolic beliefs were ostracized and driven from the party.
- ⁹Alternatively, the mindshaping theorist might accept that most epistemic belief attributions do serve a mindreading function, while at the same time insisting that the practice of folk psychology as a whole is regulative. According to this view, folk psychological discourse enculturates us into a system of social norms and expectations about behavior that help us become more interpretable to one another (McGeer, 2021). In this view, if it were not for the regulative dimensions of folk psychology, predictive and interpretive forms of folk psychology could never succeed. Addressing this kind of claim would take us well beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that mindshaping theorists also endorse a host of anti-mindreading arguments, and that deeply regulative models are motivated by a perceived need to replace traditional mindreading-based accounts of the of human social cognition and its evolution. Elsewhere, I have argued that many of these anti-mindreading arguments do not succeed (Westra, 2021).
- ¹⁰Van Leeuwen (2023) makes a similar point about the way some atheists are prone to mistake religious credences for factual belief, which can lead to counterproductive mockery and derision (e.g., Hitchens, 2008).
- ¹¹This does not mean that "anything goes" when it comes to the contents of symbolic beliefs. Symbolic belief discourse is probably still governed by some quasi-epistemic norms – namely, what Daniel Williams has called the "rationalizability constraint" whereby "individuals can only bring themselves to believe things for which they can find appropriate rationalizations" (Williams, 2022b, p. 2).
- ¹²Thanks to Taylor Davis, Carolina Flores, Daniel Munro, Jennifer Nagel, Neil Van Leeuwen, Chris Vogel, Liane Young, Tad Zawadzki, and members of the audience at the 2023 Meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology for helpful comments and discussion.

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