

JOSEF PIEPER

FAITH

—

HOPE

—

LOVE

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ON FAITH

He who wishes to learn
must believe
—Aristotle—

I

WHO REALLY DETERMINES what is meant by "belief"? Who is empowered to decide what should be the "true" meaning of this and other root words in the language of men? No one, of course. No individual, at any rate, no matter how great his genius, can possibly determine and fix anything of the sort. It is already determined in advance. And all elucidation must start with this preexistent fact. Presumably Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas knew precisely what they were doing when they started any discussion by querying linguistic usage: What do men mean when they say "freedom", "soul", "life", "happiness", "love", "belief"? Evidently these ancestors of Western philosophy did not consider such an approach a mere didactic device. Rather, they held the opinion that without such a link to human speech as actually spoken, thinking would necessarily be ethereal, insubstantial, fantastic.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to imagine that determining what is truly meant by the living language of men is an easily mastered task. On the contrary, there is much evi-

The motto [on p. 13 above] is taken from Aristotle's book *Sophistical Refutations*, chap. 2.2; 165b.

The German word *Glaube* may mean "belief" or "faith". In this translation we have usually rendered it by "belief"; but the reader should bear the other possibility in mind if any phrases strike him as slightly strange. In quotations from Thomas Aquinas, *fides* has been translated by "belief" instead of the more customary "faith" for the sake of consistency with the German text.—TRANS.

dence that it is virtually impossible to exhaust the wealth of meanings in words, especially root words, and to paraphrase them precisely. Perhaps the individual mind is scarcely capable of holding their full richness of meanings in his consciousness. Then again, it seems to be the other side of the coin that an individual ordinarily, when he uses words unself-consciously, usually means *more* than he ever consciously realizes.

It may be that this sounds at first like a romantic exaggeration. But we can show that it is not. Everyone, for example, thinks he knows precisely what so commonplace a word as "resemblance" means. He will say, perhaps, that resemblance is "agreement in several characteristics, in contradistinction to likeness, which is agreement in all characteristics". And what objections can be raised to so precise a definition, which is, moreover, borrowed from a well-known philosophical dictionary?¹ Nevertheless, the definition is wrong, or at least it is incomplete. An essential element of the meaning is lacking. That, to be sure, will be observed only by one who examines the living usage of language. For a part of living usage is not only what men actually say but what they do *not* explicitly say. Another aspect of living usage is that certain words cannot be employed in certain contexts. Thus Thomas Aquinas once made the point² that we can meaningfully speak of a man's resemblance to his father, whereas it is obviously nonsensical and inadmissible to say that a father resembles his son. Herein it becomes apparent that the concept of "resemblance" contains an element of meaning that has been overlooked in the apparently exact definition quoted above ("agreement in several characteristics")—namely, the element of descent and dependence. But who

¹ Johannes Hoffmeister, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe*, 2d ed. (Hamburg, 1955), 19.

² I, 4, 3 ad 4; I, d. 28, 2, 2.

would claim that this initially hidden aspect of the meaning had been present to his consciousness, explicitly and fully, from the very beginning?

We are therefore—let no one be surprised at this—electing a task that may possibly prove extremely difficult when we attempt to discover the full and undiminished meaning of a root word—the meaning, *nota bene*, that every mature person has in the back of his mind when he uses the word.

Such preliminary considerations are necessary lest we succumb to the lures of excessively precise definitions. For example, we are told that belief simply means "emotional conviction"³ or else "practical" certainty about matters that cannot be justified "theoretically". Or it is said that belief is the subjectively adequate but objectively inadequate acceptance of something as true.⁴ When we hear such suspiciously exact definitions, we would do well to receive them with a good deal of wariness and distrust.

But then, what do men really mean when they speak of belief? What is the true, rounded, complete signification of this concept? That is the first question we must take up in the following pages.

Someone gives me a news item to read that he himself thinks rather strange. After I have read it, he asks me: "Do you believe that?" What answer does he really want? He wants to hear whether I think that the fact given comports with the potentialities of the real world, what stand I take on it, whether I think it is *true*, whether I consider that it really

³ Cf. David Hume, *An Inquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 5, 2.

⁴ Kant defines belief as acceptance of something as true on "objectively" and "theoretically" insufficient grounds. So certain is he of this definition that he says he will not "waste time" on further explanation. Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. R. Schmidt, Philosophische Bibliothek (Leipzig, 1944), 741f.

happened. It is obvious that there are various possible answers aside from yes or no. I might, for example, say: "I don't know whether it is true; to my mind, it might just as well not be." Or my reply might be: "I imagine that the report is accurate; it seems to me that it is probably right—although, as far as I can see, the contrary is not absolutely out of the question." It is also conceivable that I might reply with a firm: "No." This "no" in turn could have several meanings. It might mean that I think the news untrue, a mistake, a lie, a deliberately false trial balloon. On the other hand, my "no" might mean the following: "You ask me whether I believe it. No, I do not *believe* it, for I *know* that it is true. I have seen the incident reported here with my own eyes; I happened to be there."

Finally, there is the possibility that I might reply: "Yes, I believe that the report is true, that it happened as described." Perhaps I would be able to say that only after having quickly determined who the author of the story is or what newspaper printed it.

A first, approximate definition, then, would have to go as follows: To believe is equivalent to taking a position on the truth of a statement and on the actuality of the matter stated. More precisely, belief means that we think a statement true and consider the stated matter real, objectively existent.

The example just cited displays all the "classical" modes of potential attitudes: doubting, supposing, knowing, believing. How are they to be distinguished from one another? One distinction, for example, lies in assent or dissent. Supposing, knowing and believing are forms of assent. These in turn can be distinguished in terms of the conditionality or unconditionality of the assent. Only the knower and the believer assent unconditionally. Both say: "Yes, it is so and not different." Neither of the two attaches an overt condition to his "yes".

Finally, we could examine the various modes of potential

attitudes as to whether and to what extent they assume insight into the subject matter. On that score, we must distinguish between the knower and the believer. Assent on the basis of knowledge does not only presume familiarity with the subject—knowledge *is* that familiarity. Incidentally, refusal to take an unconditional position—the refusal implied in supposition or doubt—can be based precisely on familiarity with the subject. The believer, however, does not know the subject at all, although he regards it as true and real. Precisely this distinguishes the believer. But then we must ask: On what basis can he, like the knower, say without reservation or condition, "Yes, it is so and not different"? How is this possible if, as we have established, he is *not* familiar with the subject? This is precisely the point at which the difficulty is to be found—both the theoretical difficulty of illuminating the structure of belief as an act and the difficulty of justifying the act of belief as a meaningful and intellectually responsible act.

By way of preliminary, however, it seems essential for us to assure ourselves that both elements of meaning are actually present: unfamiliarity with the subject matter and yet, at the same time, unconditional conviction of its truth.

First: it is very easy to demonstrate that the believer is, as commonly understood, someone who possesses no exact knowledge of the thing he believes. When has an eyewitness ever begun his account of a happening with the words: "I *believe* it took place as follows . . ." ? And no one who has arrived at a given result after careful investigation and after checking his reasoning can logically say: "I *believe* it is so." This negative proposition, at least, seems undeniable. And if we do not trust our own instinct about the use of words but seek some positive confirmation, we will find it in any standard dictionary. Thus we will find belief defined as follows:

"Confidence in the truth of a statement *without personal insight into the substance*";⁵ "to be convinced *without having seen . . .*";⁶ "conviction of the truth of a given proposition . . . *resting upon grounds insufficient to constitute positive knowledge*".⁷

The great theologians, too, attest to the same thing. *Creduntur absentia*, Augustine says.⁸ That means that the formal subject of belief is what is not apparent to the eye, what is not obvious of its own accord, what is not attainable either by direct perception or logical inference. Thomas Aquinas formulates the same idea as follows: "Belief *cannot* refer to something that one sees . . . ; and what can be proved likewise does not pertain to belief."⁹

Naturally, this cannot mean that in the act of belief the believer simply takes leave of his own perceptions. A word must be said at this point to avert possible misunderstanding. Naturally it would not make sense to talk about "belief" if the subject for belief could be proved. Nevertheless, the believer must (for example) know enough about the matter to understand "what it is all about". An altogether incomprehensible communication is no communication at all.¹⁰ There is no way either to believe or not to believe it or its author. For belief to be possible at all, it is assumed that the communication has in some way been understood.

In asserting this we are saying something whose full im-

⁵ J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, article "Glaube", vol. 4, I, 4, col. 7805.

⁶ Trübner, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, article "Glaube", 3:192.

⁷ *The Century Dictionary* (New York: The Century Company, 1911), I:513, col. 1.

⁸ Letter 147 (to Paulinus). Migne, *Patrologia Latina* [hereafter PL] 33:599.

⁹ 3, d. 24, 2, 1; cf. III, 7, 4.

¹⁰ Cf. Alexis Decout, *L'Acte de foi. Ses éléments logiques. Ses éléments psychologiques* (Paris, 1947), 77, 79.

port will only be revealed in the specific area of *religious* belief. For what we are asserting is as follows: Even the revelatory pronouncements of God must, in order for men to *be able* to believe them, be "human" at least to the extent that the believer can grasp out of his own knowledge what they are about. Of course, human reason will never be able to fathom the event concealed behind theology's technical term "incarnation". Yet this event could never become subject to human belief if it remained utterly incomprehensible to men, if men had no means whatsoever of grasping what is meant by "incarnation". To put this in more "philosophical" terms: if God is conceived exclusively as "absolute Otherness", and if all direct analogies between the divine and human spheres are barred, then it is impossible to expect of men believing acceptance of any divine pronouncement; it is impossible to make "belief in revelation" comprehensible to men as a meaningful act. The great teachers of Western Christendom have expressed this idea many times. Thus Saint Augustine says that there is no belief without preceding knowledge and that no one can believe in God if he understands nothing.¹¹ And Thomas Aquinas states: "Man could not believably assent to any proposition if he did not in some way understand it."¹²

But this remark is anticipation of our argument. What we are at present discussing is not the theological concept of belief but belief in general, taken in its most comprehensive but nevertheless strict and proper meaning. And an essential element of this meaning is the fact that the believer cannot know and verify out of his own knowledge the matter to which he assents.

There is a second vital element in the concept of belief: that the assent of belief is, as it were by nature, unqualified

¹¹ *De praedestinatione Sanctorum*, cap. 2, 5. PL 44:962f.

¹² II, II, 8, 8 ad 2.

and without reservation. Now this statement seems far less easy to substantiate. Living usage, it might be objected, rather suggests the reverse: that to say, "I believe it is so", implies a reservation. When we say that, we are clearly not making a simple asseveration; rather, we are implying that we are not wholly sure; we suppose, we think probable, we assume, we consider—and so on. (In fact—this by way of a digressive comment—everyday language recognizes a meaning of "believe" that is equivalent to "pretend". To "make believe" is to pretend that what is not true is true. And colloquially the meaning can be stretched even farther. "You cannot make me believe that" need not mean "You cannot convince me", but "You cannot fool me.") Linguistic usage, it would seem, contradicts the thesis that "belief" implies unqualified acceptance of something as true.

On this score, the following may be said. Every historical language that is the product of natural growth is characterized by something that does not occur in an artificial terminology: namely, *improper* use of words. "Improper" here means neither "vague" nor "meaningless" nor "arbitrary". Rather, it means to use words not in the strict and full sense that "properly" belongs to them. Impropriety in usage of a word can be recognized by one unmistakable sign: a word used in its improper sense can be exchanged for another without altering the meaning of the sentence. Thus, for example, in such cases the word "believe" can be replaced by

¹³ Some writers have absurdly attempted to base a whole theory of the basic relationship between belief and knowledge on this improper meaning of the word "belief". For example S. Thompson ("A Paradox concerning the Relation of Inquiry and Belief", *Journal of Religion*, annual volume [Chicago, 1951]) has advanced the thesis that research assumes "belief" in the possibility of the fact being investigated. An archaeologist, he says, would not undertake to search for a lost city if he did not "believe" the possibility that it once actually existed in the given region. That is of course undeniable, but it is also utterly uninteresting since it has nothing whatsoever to do with the problem of "belief and knowledge".

"think", "assume", "consider probable", "suppose".¹³ Contrariwise, we know a word is being used in its "proper" sense when any such substitution is impossible. We therefore must ask: In what context can the word "believe" not be replaced by any other?

Let us assume that I receive a visit from a stranger who says that he has just returned home from many years as a prisoner of war and tells me that he has seen my brother in prison camp; that this brother, missing for so long and believed dead, will probably soon be repatriated. Let us say that much of what he tells me fits into my own picture of my brother; thus there is the confirmation of internal probability. But I have no way at all of checking upon the decisive factor—whether my brother is still alive and what his state is. To a certain extent I can check on the credibility of the witness, and naturally I would do everything in my power to find out as much as possible about him. But sooner or later I shall inevitably be confronted with the decision: Am I to believe or not to believe the man's story; am I to believe *him* or not? In these interrogative sentences, it is quite clear that the word "believe" cannot be replaced by any other word. And that tells us that here "believe" is being used in its full, strict, proper sense.

Two things come to light immediately as corollaries of this argument. The believer, in the proper sense of the word, has—*first*—to do not only with a given matter, like the knower, but also with a given person: with the witness who affirms the matter and on whom the believer relies. *Secondly* (and this is the question we have been examining), belief in the proper sense really means *unqualified* assent and *unconditional* acceptance of the truth of something. Suppose that as the result of my pondering the matter I should say to the returned prisoner, now sitting at my table as my guest, that his account has greatly impressed me and that I am inclined to think it accurate, but since I do not have any means of

checking. . . . If I were to say anything of the kind, I should have to be prepared for him to break in and say bluntly: "In other words, you don't believe me!" In order to soften the affront I might reply: "Oh, yes, I have full confidence in you, and I'm quite prepared to believe you, but of course I cannot be completely certain." If my visitor should insist that I do *not* really believe him—he would be entirely right. To say, "I believe you but I am not quite certain", is either to use the word "believe" in the improper sense or to be talking nonsense.

When the word "belief" is used in its proper sense, when no substitute for it is possible, then it signifies (in everyone's opinion, be it noted) an unrestricted, unreserved, unconditional assent. In respect to knowledge of the subject, the eye-witness and the knower are superior to the believer, but not in respect to undeterred firmness of assent.¹⁴ "It is part of the concept of belief itself that man is certain of that in which he believes."¹⁵ John Henry Newman, who, as is well known, was deeply interested all through his life in the structure of the act of belief, expressed the same thought in an almost challenging manner: "A person who says, 'I believe just at this moment . . . but I cannot answer for myself that I shall believe tomorrow,' does not believe."¹⁶

The question then arises all the more pointedly: How is it meaningfully possible for someone to say unconditionally: "It is thus and not different"? How can this be justified when the believer admittedly does not know the subject to which he thus assents—does not know it either directly, by his own perceptions, or indirectly, on the basis of conclusive arguments?

¹⁴ "Perfectio intellectus et scientiae excedit cognitionem fidei quantum ad maiorem manifestationem non tamen quantum ad certiores inhaesionem" (II, II, 4, 8 ad 3).

¹⁵ "De ratione fidei est, quod homo sit certus de his, quorum habet fidem" (II, II, 112, 5 ad 2).

¹⁶ John Henry Newman, "Faith and Doubt", in *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* (London, 1881), 216.

II

TO BELIEVE ALWAYS MEANS: to believe someone and to believe something. "Ad fidem pertinet aliquid et alicui credere."¹ The believer—in the strict sense of the word—accepts a given matter as real and true on the testimony of someone else. That is, in essence, the concept of belief.

Strangely enough, in theological disputation the two elements of belief that we here present as linked—assent to the truth of a subject and assent to a person—have repeatedly been isolated and played off against one another, as though they were by nature incompatible. Martin Buber, for example, states that there are "two modes of belief",² the "Greco"-Christian mode and the Jewish mode. The first, he says, depends exclusively upon holding propositions to be true, whereas the second affirms a relationship of trust to God as a Person. It is not for me to define the nature of belief as it is conceived in religious Judaism. But the Christian concept of belief, at any rate, explicitly embraces both the material and the personal element. "Everyone who believes assents to the testimony of someone."³ "Belief is always addressed to a person."⁴ The first of these two sentences is by Thomas Aquinas; the second by Martin Luther—evidence

¹ II, II, 129, 6.

² Martin Buber, *Zwei Glaubensweisen* (Zurich, 1950).

³ II, II, 11, 1.

⁴ Cf. P. Dietz, *Wörterbuch zu Dr. Martin Luthers deutschen Schriften* (Leipzig, 1870), 2:128.

that on this score no difference of opinion existed between the Reformer and the last great teacher of a still undivided Western Christendom.

These twin elements, to believe *something* and to believe *someone*, are not to be taken as a structureless parallel, a mere coordinate existence of the two elements side by side. It may very well happen that one person can accept as true something another says without necessarily believing the other. For to believe means: to regard something as true and real on the testimony of someone else. Therefore, the reason for believing "something" is that one believes "someone". Where this is not the case, something other than proper belief is involved. A judge listening to the interrogation of members of a gang charged with some crime may very well be convinced that certain items in their statements are true; but the reason he thinks them true is not that he trusts the witnesses, that he assents to the witnesses as persons. His belief may be due to other causes—such as, let us say, a congruity between various independent statements. We might speak here of an assumption of probability, or perhaps even of a kind of knowledge. Such knowledge has been called *scientia testimonialis*, knowledge on the basis of the testimony of witnesses. But the phrase "on the basis of" may give rise to confusion. Strictly speaking, it is not the statement itself but the congruence of various testimonies that provides the basis for certainty. Thus this certainty has nothing to do with belief.

It presumably happens fairly often that something that in reality is not belief is nevertheless regarded as belief—possibly even by the "believers" themselves. Thus someone may accept the doctrines of Christianity as truth, *not* because they are witnessed and warranted by the revealing Logos of God, but because he is impressed by their "coherence", because the boldness and depth of the conception fascinate him, because those doctrines fit in with his own speculations on the

mystery of the universe. This man would then regard the content of Christian religious doctrines as true, but "*alio modo quam per fidem*": in a different way from that of belief.⁵ He might without any qualms consider himself a "believing Christian"; and others might likewise so regard him. Possibly the error would come to light only in a crisis; then it would become apparent that what was "collapsing" might have been various things: a kind of "philosophy of life", or "ideological" wishful thinking, or respect for tradition—but not at all belief in the strict sense.

If now we were to ask one who truly believes: "What do you really believe?" he would not need to name individual items of his creed; but if he wished to be perfectly precise, he would have to point to his authority and reply: "I believe what that person has said." In replying thus he would have named the essential common feature of all the individual items of his creed. He would be stating the reason for his accepting them as true. For that reason is merely the fact that someone said so. "In all belief, the decisive factor (*principale*) is who it is whose statement is assented to; by comparison the subject matter assented to is in a certain sense secondary." Thus Thomas Aquinas in his "Tract on Belief".⁶

If we pursue this consistently, it follows that belief itself is not yet "purely" achieved when someone accepts as truth the statement of one whom he trusts, but only when he accepts it *for the simple reason* that the trusted person states it.⁷ That, of course, is an extreme position, which seems almost to verge upon unreality. What normally happens among human be-

⁵ II, II, 5, 3; cf. II, II, 5, 3 ad 1.

⁶ II, II, 11, 1.

⁷ B. H. Merkelbach says in his *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1935), I:534: "Propriissime credimus ea quae nobis non sunt evidētia, sed quae non dubitando admittimus *unice propter testimonium* seu auctoritatem alterius . . . etiam si non appareat testimonium esse verum."

ings is that one person trusts and believes another but that he does not accept the other's statements *exclusively* on his word; rather, an element in his acceptance is their inner probability, their concordance with what he already knows, and so on. Nevertheless, at this juncture I wish to carry precise definition of the formal concept of belief to the extreme. For only at that extreme does another and hitherto hidden element come to light. For if that extreme case does occur (that someone should accept something unreservedly as true without any other supporting evidence, for the sole reason that someone else says so), then this wholehearted believer must logically accept as true *everything else* that his authority has said or will ever say in the future. We need only consider this proposition for a moment and it becomes clear beyond the possibility of doubt that in human relationships belief of this sort cannot exist. Belief of such an extreme sort, such as is involved in the expression "believe *in* someone", can neither be practiced by mature human beings nor be asked of them. (The immature child believes what his mother says for the sole reason that she says it. But the very fact that the child has no other reason for regarding things as true is, precisely, the measure of his immaturity.)

Here living language offers corroboration that has a certain topical significance. Let us assume that someone says, in all seriousness, that he believes "in" another person, and let us assume also that by this phraseology he means all that the words really signify (namely, that he is ready to accept as true and valid whatever this other person says and will say, even if such acceptance involves radical changes in his own life). It seems to me that if we make that assumption, the language itself—perhaps somewhat indistinctly, but nevertheless audibly enough—will impress upon us the fact that certain limits have been overstepped. The volume of the Grimms' *German Dictionary* containing the article on *Glaube* (belief) was first

published in 1936. It oversteps the limits in the following definition:⁸ "In the eighteenth century 'belief' was transferred from the sphere of the supernatural and religious with a special meaning to the area of the natural and this-worldly, and in the later usage usually signifies a strong emotional relationship to secular values, ideals, personalities, and so forth, which appear to be akin, in inner force and ethical content, to religious 'belief'." As evidence for this statement, the following linguistic examples are listed: "belief in oneself", "belief in humanity", "belief in Germany", "belief in the Führer". It seems to me that the sinister slogan that caps this series has here been placed in a manner as accurate as it is memorable within its "genealogical" context.

To repeat: wherever, in the relationships of men to men, "belief" in the strict sense is demanded or practiced, something essentially inhuman is taking place, something that is contrary to the nature of the human mind, something that is equally incompatible with its limitations and its dignity. The ancients expressed the same idea in their more temperate manner: "The cognition of one man is not by nature so correlated with the cognition of another man that the former may be governed by the latter."⁹ That is to say: no mature man is by nature so spiritually inferior or superior to another that the one can serve the other as an absolutely valid authority.

It is fairly clear that this idea has a further drift. It tends to delimit the conditions in which belief in the full and strict sense can be meaningfully possible. One essential condition is this: that Someone exists who stands incomparably higher above the mature man than the latter stands above the immature man and that this Someone has spoken in a manner audible to the mature man.

⁸ Vol. 4, 1, 4, col. 7816.

⁹ 3, d. 24, 3, 2 ad 1.

Only on this assumption is it proper for a man simply to believe. Only then is it permissible; only then can belief be demanded of him. To be sure, if that is so, then belief is both demanded and necessary. If that condition is met, then belief is above all "natural" to man: that is to say, it is consonant with both his limitations and his dignity.

III

MAN CAN BE COMPELLED to do a good many things. There are a good many other things he can do in a halfhearted fashion, as it were, against his will. But belief can never be halfhearted. One can believe only if one wishes to. Perhaps the credibility of a given person will be revealed to me so persuasively that I cannot help but think: It is wrong not to believe him; I "must" believe him. But this last step can be taken only in complete freedom, and that means that it can also not be taken. There may be plenty of compelling arguments for a man's credibility; but no argument can force us to believe him.¹

The unanimity of statements on this point is astonishing; and the agreement ranges all the way from Augustine and Thomas to Kierkegaard, Newman and André Gide. Augustine's phrase from the *Commentary on John* is famous: "Nemo credit nisi volens": No one believes except of his own free will.² Kierkegaard says that one man can do much for another, "but give him belief, he cannot".³ Newman is forever stressing, in one guise or another, the one idea that belief is something other than the result of a logical process; it is precisely *not* "a conclusion from premises". "For directly you

¹ Christian Pesch, *Praelectiones Dogmaticae* (Freiburg, 1908-1916), 8:127f.

² The text runs: "Intrare quisquam ecclesiam potest nolens, accedere ad altare potest nolens, accipere Sacramentum potest nolens: credere non potest nisi volens." In *Johannis evangelium tract.* 26, 3. PL 35:1607.

³ *Über den Glauben. Religiöse Reden*, trans. Theodor Haecker (Leipzig, 1936), 49.

have a conviction that you ought to believe, reason has done its part, and what is wanted for faith is, not proof, but *will*.”⁴ And André Gide? In the last jottings he published after his *Journals* we may read these sentences: “There is more light in Christ’s words than in any other human word. This is not enough, it seems, to be a Christian: in addition, one must *believe*. Well, I do not believe.”⁵ Taken all together, these statements obviously mean the following: It is one thing to regard what someone else has said as interesting, clever, important, magnificent, the product of genius or absolutely “true”. We may feel compelled to think and say any and all these things in utter sincerity. But it is quite a different matter to accept precisely the same statements in the way of *belief*. In order for this other matter, belief, to come about, a further step is necessary. A free assent of will must be performed. Belief rests upon volition.⁶

Indeed, this cannot be otherwise. When the knower says, “It is so and not otherwise”, he may speak thus because the subject matter has been shown to him personally; the truth compels him to admit it. “Truth”, after all, means nothing but the showing of what is. Precisely this self-demonstration of what is does *not* happen to the believer. It is not the truth, then, that compels him to accept the subject matter. Rather, he is motivated by the insight that it is good to regard the subject matter as true and real on the strength of someone else’s testimony. But it is the will, not cognition, that acknowledges the good.⁷ Thus, wherever belief in the strict

⁴ Letter to Mrs. Froude dated June 27, 1848. See Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (New York, 1912), 1:242.

⁵ André Gide, *So Be It, or The Chips Are Down* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 146.

⁶ “[Fides] quae in voluntate est . . .” (Augustine, *De praedestinatione Sanctorum*, cap. 5, 10; PL 44:968). Cf. also II, II, 6, 1 ad 3.

⁷ “Scientia et intellectus habent certitudinem per id quod ad *cognitionem* pertinent. . . . Fides autem habet certitudinem ab eo quod est extra genus cog-

sense is involved, the will is operative in a special fashion, the will of the believer himself. The will even takes precedence in the cognition of faith; it is the most vital element.⁸ We believe, not because we see, perceive, deduce something true, but because we desire something good.

It is scarcely possible to make such a statement without at once being troubled by the thousand misunderstandings to which it gives rise—which, in fact, it encourages and provokes. I shall therefore plunge right in and discuss the most common of these misunderstandings.

If the believer is really led to believe “not by the reason but by the will”,⁹ then *what* is it that is actually willed; what does this volition aim at; what is its object? To this question the answer has been given: What is willed is the act of belief itself; the believer believes because he *wants* to believe. But this answer still throws no light upon the role played by the will as it is formulated in the Western doctrine of belief. From the psychological point of view, such a “will to believe” can of course exist. And pragmatism is by no means wrong when it asserts that believing is one of the needs of

nitionis, in genere *affectionis* existens” (3, d. 23, 2, 3, 1 ad 2).—“Quandoque . . . intellectus . . . determinatur . . . per voluntatem, quae eligit assentire uni parti determinate et praecise propter aliquid quod est sufficiens ad movendum voluntatem, non autem ad movendum intellectum, utpote quod videtur bonum vel conveniens huic parti assentire: et ista est dispositio credentis” (*Vér.* 14, 1).—“Alio modo intellectus assentit alicui, non quia sufficienter moveatur ab obiecto proprio, sed per quamdam electionem voluntarie declinans in unam partem magis quam in aliam; et si quidem hoc sit . . . cum certitudine . . . erit fides” (II, II, 1, 4).—“Bonum, quod movet affectum, se habet in actu fidei sicut primum movens” (*Vér.* 14, 2 ad 13).—“Intellectus credentis assentit rei creditae non quia ipsam videat . . . sed propter imperium voluntatis moventis intellectum” (II, II, 5, 2).—“Credere . . . non habet assensum nisi ex imperio voluntatis” (*Vér.* 14, 3).

⁸ “In cognitione . . . fidei principalitatem habet voluntas” (C. G. 3, 40).

⁹ “Intellectus credentis determinatur ad unum non per rationem, sed per voluntatem” (II, II, 2, 1 ad 3).

human nature. But it is nonsense to think that belief can be justified by the fact that it satisfies this need.¹⁰ On the contrary, to take this view is to renounce the possibility of such justification; it is acceding entirely to the charge that belief is a wholly irrational matter, a form of intellectual untidiness that cannot pass muster or meet the test of the mind's obligation to face the truth.

We must also give short shrift to the notion that the will's precedence in the act of belief means that the believer is arranging his beliefs to conform with his deeper wishes. Thus, does one say, "I believe in eternal life", because one wishes for an eternal life? The doctrine of the precedence of the will cannot possibly mean that; we need waste no further words on such a conception. Nevertheless, there remains that old statement that the believer's mind is directed toward that which he hopes for and loves.¹¹ In the act of belief, therefore, the will may very well be engaged with the subject of belief. Before the human act of belief is possible, we must presuppose that the believer experiences the subject to be believed as something that really concerns him, as an object of hope, longing and love, and in that sense as a goal of volition. Nevertheless, it is not this kind of volition that is intended when it is said that the assent of belief is motivated by the will.

The question, therefore, still remains open: What is the aim of that volition which marks belief—if that volition is bound up with neither the act nor the content of belief? The answer is: The will of the believer is directed toward the person of the witness, toward the warrantor.

At this point, it is true, we find ourselves obliged to make a slight correction in our ordinary, narrowly activist conception of volition. To will does not only mean "to decide . . .

¹⁰ Cf. William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York, 1927), 59 and 91.

¹¹ "Per fidem apprehendit intellectus quae sperat et amat" (I, II, 62, 4).

for actions . . . on the basis of motives."¹² Volition is not merely the will to *act*; it is not directed solely toward something that is to be "brought about" and that consequently is not yet real. Rather, so say the ancients, volition has also the property of "wanting", affirming, loving, what already exists. Love is participation in and consummation of the beloved's being, as it is. It is, incidentally, not quite precise to say that in the traditional conception of volition love is one attribute among others; rather, love is conceived as the primal act of the will, as the fundamental principle of all volition and the immanent source of every manifestation of the will.¹³

Once more, then: Toward what does the believer direct his will when he believes? Answer: Toward the warrantor and witness whom he affirms, loves, "wills"—insofar as he accepts the truthfulness of what that witness says, accepts it on his mere word. This wholly free, entirely uncoercible act of affirmation, which is enforced neither by the power of self-evident truth nor by the weight of argumentation; this confiding, acknowledging, communion-seeking submission of the believer to the witness whom he believes—this, precisely, is the "element of volition" in belief itself.

The great German theologian Matthias Joseph Scheeben¹⁴ has expressed this association in a long sentence that may strike one as somewhat schoolmasterly and old-fashioned but that is nevertheless a vital and extremely precise description:

Assent of the intellect to the witnessed truth takes place only to the extent that the will . . . seeks and wishes to bring about consent or agreement with the judgment of the

¹² Johannes Hoffmeister, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe*, 2d ed. (Hamburg, 1955), 670.

¹³ "Amor est principium omnium voluntariarum affectionum" (*Car.* 2; cf. I, 20, 1).

¹⁴ M. J. Scheeben, *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, ed. M. Grabmann, 2d ed. (Freiburg, 1948), I:291, no. 633.

speaker, participation in and communion with his insight or, in other words, a spiritual union with him; the will seeks this union as a good and thus motivates the intellect to accept the insight of the witness as if it were its own—"so that the believer¹⁵ stands in exactly the same relationship to that which the other knows, and which he does not know, as it does to that which he knows himself."

That is to say, the "good" toward which the will of the believer is directed is communion with the eyewitness or knower who says "it is so"; this communion comes to life and reality in that the believer, repeating this "it is so", accepts what the other says as truth—and accepts it *because* he says it. This idea has been summed up most cogently by John Henry Newman in his Oxford University addresses: "We believe because we love."¹⁶

Communion, spiritual union, love—these are, to be sure, grand words. And one might well ask with some misgiving whether they are not too grand, when, after all, what is involved is something so commonplace as men's trusting one another in ordinary human intercourse. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that even so grand a word as "love" is not malapropos in talking of man's relationship to his fellowmen. Perhaps this becomes completely clear to us only when we consider the subject against the dark background of a contrasting reality. This does not call for any difficult intellectual operation; contrasting reality is by no means foreign to our experience. I refer of course to the life of our fellowmen under the conditions of tyranny. As we all know, under such conditions no one dares to trust anyone else. Candid com-

¹⁵ At this point a quotation from Thomas Aquinas begins: ". . . ut stet illis quae alius scit et sunt sibi ignota, sicut his quae ipse cognoscit" (*In Trin.* 3, 1).

¹⁶ J. H. Newman, "Love the Safeguard of Faith against Superstition", in *Oxford University Sermons* (London, 1880), 236.

munication dries up; and there arises that special kind of unhealthy wordlessness which is not silence so much as muteness. This is what happens to human intercourse under the peculiar pressures of dictatorship. Under conditions of freedom, however, human beings speak uninhibitedly to one another. How illuminating this contrast is! For in the face of it, we suddenly become aware of the degree of human closeness, mutual affirmation, communion, that resides in the simple fact that people listen to each other and are disposed from the start to trust and "believe" each other. We do not wish to rhapsodize about this, and grand words should always be used with caution. Still, we do well to recognize that everyone who speaks to another without falseness, even if what he says is not at all "confidential", is actually extending a hand and offering communion; and he who listens to him in good faith is accepting the offer and taking that hand. This very advertence of the will, which, admittedly, we cannot quite call "love", though it partakes somewhat of love's nature—this sense of mutual trust and free interchange of thoughts produces a unique type of community. In such a community he who is hearing participates in the knowledge of the knower.

It is an axiom of theology that belief puts man into contact with the knowledge of God himself.¹⁷ Something of the same sort is vouchsafed everyone who believes a credible witness: he is placed in a condition of seeing something that would never be attainable by his own unaided sight, of seeing with the eyes of him who sees directly. This miracle, however, is the fruit of that loving advertence. Not only is belief based upon the turning of the will toward the witness; it is that very turning of the will which makes belief.

¹⁷ ". . . Fides, quae hominem divinae cognitioni conjungit per assensum" (*Vér.* 14, 8).

IV

TO BELIEVE MEANS: to participate in the knowledge of a knower. If, therefore, there is no one who sees and knows, then, properly speaking, there can be no one who believes. A fact everyone knows because it is obvious can no more be the subject of belief than a fact no one knows—and whose existence, therefore, no one can vouch for.¹ Belief cannot establish its own legitimacy; it can only derive legitimacy from someone who knows the subject matter of his own accord. By virtue of contact with this someone, belief is transmitted to the believer.²

There are several statements implicit in this proposition. To begin with: Belief is by its nature something *secondary*. Wherever belief is meaningfully held, there is someone else who supports the believer; and this someone else cannot be a believer. Before belief, therefore, come seeing and knowing. These take precedence over belief. Any serious examination of human modes of thinking and speaking will bear this out. The same obtains for the concept of belief in Occidental theology. Neither the theological nor the epistemological approach will permit us to elevate belief into something supreme and sublime that cannot be surpassed. Thus, Newman states rather sternly: "Faith, then, must necessarily be resolv-

¹ "Utroque . . . modo tollitur fides: tam scil. per hoc quod aliquid est totaliter manifestum quam etiam per hoc quod a nullo cognoscitur, a quo possit testimonium audiri" (III, 36, 2 ad 1).

² "Oportet cognitionem eorum, de quibus est fides, ab eo derivari, qui ea ipse videt" (C. G. 3, 154; cf. I, 12, 13 ad 3).

able at last into Sight and Reason; unless, indeed, we agree with enthusiasts."³

Therefore, when we rank belief as secondary to seeing and knowing, we are not going counter to the traditional doctrine of belief. Rather, we are completely in accord with that doctrine. "Visio est certior auditu", says Thomas;⁴ seeing is surer than hearing. That is to say, in seeing for ourselves we are achieving more contact with reality and are in greater possession of reality than when we espouse knowledge based upon hearing.

This statement, to be sure, promptly calls for an important addition or, we might also say, a correction. The aphorism quoted from the *Summa theologiae* was quoted only partially. The entire statement is as follows: "Ceteris paribus visio est certior auditu"; that is, *under otherwise similar conditions*, seeing is surer than hearing. That is to say: if both possibilities are equally available to us, if we have the choice, then we choose knowledge based on seeing and not knowledge based on hearing.

But perhaps man's situation is that he cannot choose, or, at any rate, not always. What is he to do when decision lies between *either* no access whatsoever to a given subject matter *or* knowledge on the basis of hearing; *either* incomplete knowing *or* no knowing at all? The fact remains, as we have said, that, *ceteris paribus*, seeing for oneself is surer than hearing. But what if seeing for oneself is impossible? Should we then, instead of accepting a less than complete access to reality as the best we can hope for, rather forgo all access, following the heroic maxim: "All or nothing"? That precisely is the question each man confronts when he has to decide between belief and nonbelief.

³ J. H. Newman, "Faith and Reason", in *Oxford University Sermons* (London, 1880), 236.

⁴ II, II, 4, 8 ad 2.

Let us take the case of a naturalist who around the year 1700 has set himself the task of describing the pollen grains of the flowers he knows. No doubt he would be able, with the naked eye and the aid of simple magnifying glasses, to find out a good deal by "seeing for himself". But suppose he is visited by a colleague who has seen such pollen at Delft under one of the first microscopes made by Antonie van Leeuwenhoek. Suppose this visitor tells him that the black dust that adheres to one's hand when one brushes a poppy is in fact a mass of geometric structures of extremely regular shapes that can be clearly differentiated from the pollen granules of all other flowering plants, and so on. Let us assume further that our naturalist has had no opportunity to look through a microscope himself and has never observed these things that his visitor reports. Granted these assumptions, would not our naturalist be grasping more truth, which means more reality, if he did *not* insist on regarding as true and real only what he has seen with his own eyes, if, on the contrary, he could bring himself to "believe" his visitor? In such a situation, what about the ranking of knowledge based upon seeing for oneself and knowledge based upon hearing? Does not hearing and believing take precedence?

Here is the point for us to present in its entirety the sentence of Thomas that we have hitherto abbreviated: "Under otherwise similar conditions, seeing is surer than hearing; but if the one from whom we learn something by hearing is capable of grasping far more than one could obtain by seeing for oneself, then hearing is surer than seeing."⁵ Naturally, this sentence was originally formulated in regard to belief in the theological sense. But it is equally true of all kinds of belief; belief has the extraordinary property of endowing the be-

⁵ "Ceteris paribus visio est certior auditu; sed si ille, a quo auditur, multum excedit visum videntis, sic certior est auditus quam visus" (II, II, 4, 8 ad 2).

liever with knowledge that would not be available to him by the exercise of his own powers.

A dictum from Hesiod's *Works and Days*⁶ makes the very same point. As Hesiod puts it, being wise with the head of someone else is undoubtedly a smaller thing than possessing knowledge oneself, but it is far to be preferred to the sterile arrogance of one who does not achieve the independence of the knower and simultaneously despises the dependence of the believer.

Before we, as believers, accept the testimony of another, we must be sure that he has authentic knowledge of those things that we accept on faith. If he himself is, in his turn, only a believer, then we are misplacing our reliance. It becomes clear, therefore, that this reliance itself, which is the decisive factor in the act of belief, must be founded upon some knowledge on the part of the believer if it is to be valid. This is still another aspect of the proposition that belief rests upon knowledge.

To be sure, trusting reliance is by nature a free act. No argumentation, no matter how "compelling", can actually bring us to "believe" in someone else. Nevertheless, this act does not take place in a vacuum and without reason—without, for example, some conviction of the credibility of the witness on whom we rely. But this conviction in turn cannot possibly be belief; the credibility of the witness whom we believe cannot also be the subject of belief; this is where real knowledge is required. The matter is, to be sure, somewhat complicated.

Let us return to our example of the returned prisoner of

⁶ *Works and Days*, 293ff. The passage is quoted by Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 2; 1095b) and also by J. H. Newman (*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 342). Unfortunately, the vigor and vividness of Newman's version does not correspond with the original wording.

war. We can single out fairly clearly the element that requires belief. It is the information that my brother is alive. Let us say I have assured myself of the reliability and credibility of the witness by checking up, by sharp observation and direct experience. On the other hand, the credibility of the man might be underwritten for me by someone else, by one of my friends, say, who I discover knows my informant very well. In such a situation it would once again be an act of belief that assured me of my visitor's credibility. Nevertheless, it is clear that the conviction "My brother is alive", not only has a different content and has come about in a different way from the conviction "My informant is trustworthy", but also that these two acts of belief are based upon two altogether different testimonies from two different witnesses. In short, we see that the premises of belief cannot be the object of that same belief.

The real implications of this thesis dramatically come to light in the theological realm. We might imagine the following dialogue: "On the basis of what, really, are you convinced that there is an eternal life?"—"On the basis of divine revelation; he who is the absolute Knower and the absolute Truth has said so, and I *believe* him."—"On the basis of what are you so sure that anything like God exists and that he is absolutely knowing and truthful?" We obviously cannot simply respond: "I believe it." To put the matter more cautiously, there must at least be a possibility of responding: "I know it."

But the following question might also be asked in that dialogue: "On the basis of what are you certain that God has spoken at all and that he has actually said there is eternal life?"

Here, again, we could not legitimately respond with a simple profession of belief.

If man is prohibited from obtaining by his natural powers some kind of knowledge that God exists, that he is Truth

itself, that he actually has spoken to us and that this divine speech has said and meant thus and so—then belief in revelation is likewise not possible as a meaningful human act (by a *human* act theology also understands the act of "supernatural", "infused" faith, for we ourselves are the ones who do the believing!). To put this as sharply as possible: If *everything* is said to be belief, then belief has been eliminated.

This very thing underlies the old idea of the *praeambula fidei*; the premises of belief are not a part of what the believer believes.⁷ They pertain rather to that which he knows, or at least must be able to know. It is another matter that in the ordinary course of events, only a few really know what is in itself knowable. In any case this does not detract from the validity of the proposition: "Cognitio fidei praesupponit cognitionem naturalem."⁸ Belief does not presuppose knowledge based upon belief in its turn dependent upon someone else, but rather knowledge out of one's own resources.

Nowhere, to be sure, will we find it written that this *cognitio naturalis* must always or primarily be derived by means of rational deduction. "Credibility", for example, is a quality of persons and can only be known in the same manner as we apprehend the other personal qualities of a person. In this realm, of course, syllogistic argumentation plays only the most minor part. When we direct our gaze upon a human being, we engage in a rapid, penetrating and direct cognition of a unique kind. Certainly we bring nothing of the sort to our examination of facts of nature, however earnest and searching this may be. On the other hand, such "intuitive"

⁷ "Deum esse et alia huiusmodi, quae per rationem naturalem nota possunt esse de Deo . . . non sunt articuli fidei, sed praeambula ad articulos" (I, 2, 2 ad 1; cf. 3, d. 23, 2, 5 ad 5).

⁸ *Ver.* 14, 9 ad 8; I, 2, 2 ad 1.

knowledge may be neither verifiable nor provable. Socrates declared that he could recognize a lover at once. *By what signs* do we recognize things of that sort? No one, not even Socrates, has ever been able to answer this question in a way that can be checked and demonstrated. Yet Socrates would stoutly insist that this knowledge was no mere impression but objective, true knowledge, that is to say, knowledge that had risen out of contact with reality.

Of course, we do not intend in the least to deny the necessity and the importance of rationally demonstrative argumentation (for the existence of God, say, or for the historical authenticity of the Bible), especially in the realm of religious truth. But it is equally evident to me that we might say: Whoever undertakes to defend belief against the arguments of rationalism should prepare himself by considering the question: "How do we apprehend a person?"⁹

⁹ Jean Mouroux, *Ich glaube an Dich. Von der personalen Struktur des Glaubens* (Einsiedeln, 1951), 36.