

The Human Person as Believer

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Man can be defined as an animal that makes dogmas. As he piles doctrine on doctrine and conclusion on conclusion in the formation of some tremendous scheme of philosophy and religion, he is, in the only legitimate sense of which the expression is capable, becoming more and more human.—G. K. Chesterton¹

What does it mean to be a human person? One sliver of the answer to this immense question, suggested by this quotation of G. K. Chesterton, is that to be a human person is to be a *believer*.² If this is so, then a complete understanding of the human person must incorporate an understanding of *belief*. In turn, such an understanding must, if it is to be complete, account not only for the *nature* of belief, but also for the *norms* governing belief. That is, we must be able not only to say of some person *S*, that she believes that *p*, but also be able to say whether *S* is *right* to hold her belief that *p*. Thus, if Chesterton's suggestion is correct, to understand what it means to be a human person is also, in part, to understand the norms of belief.

But it is inadequate to consider the norms of belief in isolation from the subject of belief, namely the believing human person. For norms are always norms *for some entity or other*. To understand the norms of belief, then,

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. David Dooley, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 196.

² An important question which, for reasons of space, cannot be addressed here, is that of the contents of the beliefs that are essential to the person as believer. As Chesterton suggests, these will be *especially* one's philosophical and religious beliefs.

requires reference to that entity for whom they are norms. In other words, while any understanding of the human person will require an understanding of the norms of belief, it is equally true that any understanding of the norms of belief will require an understanding of the human person.³ Now this goes against the grain of how one tradition of philosophy, the analytic tradition, has approached the questions of personhood and belief. The contemporary literature of this tradition has (by and large) separated the questions, attempting to give accounts of human personhood that prescind from accounts of the norms of belief, and attempting to give accounts of the norms of belief that prescind from accounts of human personhood. Appealing to a distinction made by Gabriel Marcel, we can say that such a method instantiates *primary reflection*—a reflection that “tends to dissolve the unity of experience”—about personhood and belief.⁴ While such reflection has a role to play in thought, what is missing is an attempt at *secondary reflection* on the unity of personhood and norms of belief. Such reflection is, as Marcel says, “recuperative,” allowing us to reconquer the unity that is dissolved under primary reflection.⁵ Making sense of Chesterton’s suggestion of the person as believer requires embarking upon a secondary reflection of the unity of person, belief, and the norms of belief. It is the beginnings of such a recuperative reflection that I set out to provide in what follows.

Belief and Truth

To focus the discussion, I propose to consider truth as a norm of belief, that is, that we ought to believe a proposition *p*, only if it is true that *p*.⁶ We must first consider, then, the relationship between belief and truth. The dominant analysis of this relation is that belief *aims at truth*.⁷ I will refer to this as the “aimedness thesis” about the relationship between belief and

³ Have we entered a circle? I do not think so, for, while to understand what it means to be a person we must understand the norms of belief, to fully understand these will require appealing not just back to person as believer, but to other aspects of personhood.

⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, *Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser (London: Harvill Press, 1950–1951; South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 83 (citations refer to the 2001 edition).

⁵ Marcel, *Mystery of Being*, 1:83.

⁶ Whether truth is a norm of belief has generated a considerable debate. For a review of some recent literature, see Conor McHugh and Daniel Whiting, “The Normativity of Belief,” *Analysis* 74, no. 4 (2014): 698–713.

⁷ The *locus classicus* of this claim is Bernard Williams, “Deciding to Believe,” ch. 7 in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 148.

truth. The interpretations of this claim in the contemporary literature fall into two broad categories. On the one hand, there is the view that beliefs aim at truth in the sense that *believers* form beliefs as a means to satisfy their desire for truth (or, alternately, in the sense that *sub-personal* processes of belief-formation act *as if* their goal was to satisfy such a desire).⁸ This is known in the literature as the teleological account. On the other hand, there are those who interpret the aimedness thesis as a constitutive feature of belief. These thinkers claim that a “mental-state” just does not count as a belief unless it is a state to which one applies truth as a norm when one is considering whether to believe that *p*.⁹ This is known in the literature (perhaps misleadingly) as “normativism.”

It is not my intention here to get bogged down in the details and exact problems of these views, but to point to a more fundamental problem with the aimedness thesis as such. When we consider what it means to hold a belief, I think that it is quite clear that to form a belief, and then to hold that belief, is never to *aim* at the truth. In forming and holding a belief, we are not taking aim at the truth, but rather we are *claiming already to possess it*. That is, by conceiving of the relationship between belief and truth as one of *aiming*, we make the relationship out to be one that obtains extrinsically.

On the teleological-aim interpretation, this is to think of truth as an end that we seek to obtain through the means of forming beliefs. But if this is so, then, unless we are infallible, it is a means that *may* fail to obtain its end. That is, we must be willing to admit that our belief that *p*, say, might be a poor means to getting the truth (that is, our belief that *p* might be false). But no one says, of their belief that *p*, that it is false, for to believe that *p* is, minimally, to believe that *p* is true. The idea that I am trying to express here is that the normal position that we find ourselves in with respect to something that we take to be a means to some end, is such that our insistence on its fittingness as a means is *not* as strong as our insistence that what we believe is true. We are, on pain of irrationality, bound to claim that what we *believe* is *true*, but we are not so bound to claim that our *means* must be the *best possible means*. But if belief is a means to truth, and we must (rationally) take our beliefs to be true, then this would be equivalent to claiming that our beliefs are the best possible means to truth. Given this implication of the teleological-aim interpretation, the teleological-aim interpretation is false. In other words, it is *not* the case that belief

⁸ See, e.g., J. David Velleman, “The Aim of Belief,” ch. 11 in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 244–81.

⁹ See, e.g., Nishi Shah, “How Truth Governs Belief,” *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 4 (2003): 447–84.

is to truth as means are to ends.

On the normativist-aim interpretation, to believe that *p* is to apply truth as a norm when deliberating over whether to believe that *p*. But, again, this makes the belief–truth relation out to be extrinsic. It makes the relation between belief and truth out to be one on which you can neatly separate what you believe from what you take to be true. Truth is not a standard that we *aim at meeting*, but is rather a standard that we always already take ourselves to have satisfied, if only tacitly, in believing that *p*.

Let us turn, then, to an alternative. Perhaps the nature of the relationship between belief and truth is rather one of *commitment*. But what is the nature of this commitment? It has at least three dimensions. It is, first, a commitment of *rationality*. If someone asks you whether you believe that *p*, and you answer, “yes,” you cannot go on to deny that *p* is true. Believing that *p* rationally commits you to the truth of *p*.¹⁰ It is, second, a commitment of *agency*. Our beliefs play a role in our determining for ourselves the answers to questions of the form *ought I to perform an action A*. Thirdly, it is also a commitment of one’s *interpretations*. A world created by God looks different from a world without him. The historical crucifixion of Christ takes on a different significance for the believing Christian. How we interact with others when we see them as God’s children differs from how we might approach them if we see them as purely material entities. It is because of these ways in which the relationship between belief and truth can be *enacted*, that commitment, rather than aimedness, best describes the relationship between belief and truth.¹¹

Person and Belief

To review, beliefs embody a commitment on the part of the believing person to the truth of the proposition believed. So, for a person to count as believing that *p*, the person must be committed to the truth of *p*. Considered dyadically (*belief as committed to truth*), we have already seen what this commitment entails. But the commitment of belief is not merely dyadic, but triadic. The third element comes from considering the person who believes, and, more specifically, by considering the *locus*, or emphasis, of the commitment in question. It is with respect to the *loci* or emphases of our commitments that there lurks an ambiguity. A commitment to the

¹⁰ See John Gibbons, *The Norm of Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 199–203.

¹¹ I would also point out that, as the examples have been crafted to show, these dimensions (rationality, agency, interpretation) are not radically separable in practice.

truth of *p* can have one of two diametrically opposed emphases. Either it can instantiate a commitment to *maintaining the truth of p come what may*, or else it can instantiate a commitment to *maintaining the truth of p only so long as one has no sufficient reason to think that it is false*.¹²

Once he comes to believe that *p*, a person can take one of two paths: either he can place the truth first, and hold on to his belief that *p* only insofar as it squares with objective truth, or else he can hold on to his belief that *p* no matter what. This might be seen as a manifestation of a sort of “epistemic fallenness” on the part of the human person—that is, the ever-present temptation to reverse the nature (and emphasis) of the commitment from the *truth* of what I believe to the truth of what *I believe*.

We can understand these two possible ways of being committed to the truth of our beliefs with the help of some insights of Aquinas and Marcel. Belief, as Aquinas notes, is a thoughtful assent (to some proposition). By such an act of thoughtful assent, the person cleaves firmly to the proposition in question.¹³ Which way we live out the commitment to the truth of our beliefs will depend on the *character* of our thoughtful assent to the truth of some proposition.

I propose that we use the term “belief” in a “thin” sense (as that of an attitude that persons bear toward propositions that they regard as true) to range over what Aquinas calls “belief” and “opinion,” interpreting Aquinas’s “belief” and “opinion” as *modes* of the commitment that we bear toward the truth of our beliefs. To believe according to the “belief-mode” is concomitant with, or accompanied by, inquiry and ongoing discursive thought regarding *p*.¹⁴ To be clear, “inquiry” should *not* be understood to imply the presence of *doubt* regarding *p*. In fact, it is this association that leads Newman, in the *Grammar of Assent*, to eschew talk of “inquiry” in favor of talk of “investigation.” The former implies doubt, whereas the latter denotes looking into the credibility, or “argumentative proofs,” of that to which we assent.¹⁵ Now since Aquinas clearly distinguishes belief from doubt, we need not quibble about the precise word (in fact, “investi-

¹² I put the point in this way to allow for beliefs held as a matter of faith. As Aquinas notes in the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], propositions knowable only by faith cannot be proven to be true by human reason, but we are able to refute their negations (i.e., the claims that they are false) by human reason, since truth cannot contradict truth. Aquinas, SCG I, ch. 7, especially no. 7.

¹³ For these and the other points made by Aquinas that are referred to in what follows, see *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 2, a. 1, and *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

¹⁴ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 1; *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

¹⁵ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906), 191–92.

gation” seems just as good a translation of Aquinas’s Latin). Whether you call it “inquiry,” or you call it “investigation,” it is a disposition to work through one’s beliefs, with an eye both to understanding why they are true, and to harvesting the logical and existential implications of our beliefs.

On the other hand, to believe in the mode of opinion is to believe *cum formidine* (with fear) that the content of one’s belief is false.¹⁶ This point of Aquinas neatly explains an insight of Marcel regarding opinion, namely that it is an attitude that develops aggressively over the course of its “lifetime” from a claim about what *seems to one to be the case* to a claim about what “*everybody knows*” to be the case.¹⁷ Opinion, then, is an attitude that begins its life wed with fear and doubt, and, as a result, disposes the person to soothe and assuage his fear of possible error by arrogating to his opinions the status of knowledge and universal acceptance. But to believe in such a way is to believe in a tenuous manner. It requires the opposite of working through one’s beliefs—it rather requires that one detach oneself from any serious scrutiny of one’s beliefs. Thus, the commitment-relation can be enacted in two radically different ways. On the one hand, we have a commitment, in the first instance, to our beliefs’ *actually being true*. As a result, believing that *p* in this sense is concomitant with an openness to the truth with respect to *p*. This openness manifests itself in our belief being accompanied by a disposition to inquire into that which we believe. On the other hand, we have a commitment, in the first instance, to maintaining that our beliefs, whatever they happen to be, are true.¹⁸ As a result, believing that *p* in this sense is concomitant with a more-or-less suppressed fear of error (according to Aquinas) or with a fear of not being taken seriously by others (according to Marcel).¹⁹ This fear in turn underlies a disposition both to disengage from our beliefs, and to aggrandize them into that which is universally known. Such a way of living the commitment-relation is a closedness to the truth, marked by detachment from, and a lack of

¹⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 1; *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1

¹⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 2, *Faith and Reality*, trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 70–71.

¹⁸ See Marion David, “On ‘Truth is Good,’” *Philosophical Books* 46, no. 4 (2005): 296, for a similar statement of this distinction in terms of truth as an epistemic goal.

¹⁹ More specifically, we fear not being taken seriously by others on account of our not sticking by our established opinions. This is a familiar problem in political life, manifested, for example, in the reluctance of candidates for public office to revise their beliefs, fearful of being labelled as “flip-floppers.” For Marcel’s point see Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, trans. Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952; South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010), 124 (citations refer to the 2010 edition).

engagement in, what we believe.

Beliefs, then, as commitments to the truth, do not inevitably obey the norm of truth. All that is “inevitable” about the commitment-relation is, as was pointed out above, that one is rationally committed to claiming that what one believes is true, and that one is influenced in one’s agency and interpretations by what one genuinely believes. But what is *not* inevitable is that these commitments really are commitments to having actually true beliefs, as opposed to merely maintaining that whatever we *happen* to believe is true. How we live out and enact this commitment determines whether we comply with truth as a norm of belief. Neither (supposed) conceptual necessity (as on the normativist-aim interpretation), nor some universally held truth-aim (as on the teleological-aim interpretation) will get us to live this commitment to the truth itself. We must make a choice for the truth. To use a phrase of Marcel’s, we must choose to incarnate the spirit of truth in our lives.²⁰

But why should we make a choice *for the truth*? Given the limits of space, my response here will be somewhat schematic. I think that making the case for why we ought to make a choice for the truth needs to involve an attempt to elucidate the value of truth. Before saying anymore, let me first say briefly what I think that such a response should look like. Following an insight of Bernard Williams, I think that what we should aim for is *explanation without reduction*.²¹ That is, in trying to answer this question for someone, we should aim for an *explanation* that says more than just that truth is intrinsically valuable (however true that may be) but that does not *reduce* truth to a merely instrumental value. Rather, we want an account of the value of truth that situates it alongside other fundamental values of the person, in such a way that we are attracted to, grasp, and choose to incarnate, the value of truth in our lives.²²

Person and Truth

In the remainder of this paper, I propose to examine how it is that truth is situated alongside the value of friendship. To understand this relationship, we must inquire, with Marcel, into how one goes about living so as to incarnate the value, or spirit, of truth. According to Marcel, the spirit of

²⁰ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 133.

²¹ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 90.

²² Although this is not the course that the subsequent reflection explicitly takes, what I think that this requires is an investigation into those values the incarnation of which makes for an objectively good life, *qua* person.

truth is incarnated in the act by which we stop indulging in self-complacency.²³ Self-complacency takes many forms, but in the domain of belief, it is best understood as indulging in a kind of *easiness* with respect to what we believe. We become, as it were, unthinking adherents of our beliefs, falling into that intellectual torpor characteristic of the opinion-mode of belief, whereby we are no longer open to understanding, and harvesting the fruits of, the truths that we believe. Think, in this regard, of one whose belief in his religion is merely “tribal,” or whose political views are taken over wholesale from certain websites or social media. But think mostly of those who indulge in a truly *self*-complacency, whose self-understanding, if it exists at all, is based on a combination of wishful thinking and conformity to the opinions of others.

Incarnating the value of truth is, as Marcel describes it, a “perpetual struggle against easiness.”²⁴ As persons, we are beings not *determined* to live up to the full potentiality of our condition. If we do not strive to actualize our personhood through the incarnation of values such as truth, the default is a slide into a state of the merely instrumental, where all that is of “value” is whatever can maintain us in a stable state of self-complacent easiness.

Nowhere is this more crucial for the person than with respect to his answer to the question, “Who am I?” For it is partially by reference to answering this question—*who am I*—that I come to actualize myself as a person. It is primarily through an authentic grappling with this question—one that does not, as I mentioned above, rest upon the shifting sands of wishful thinking and the opinions of others—that I set myself apart from what Marcel calls the “*one*,” the faceless everyone and no-one, the irresponsible, illusive phantom that is the negation of our capacity for agency and thought.²⁵ It is through opposing myself to the “one” that I come to actualize my personhood more and more. As Marcel rightly notes, this opposition is established through the courage to confront one’s situation, with the opinions and values latent in it, and to subject it to an active evaluation and appraisal. By this act of confrontation and evaluation, I refuse to be a mere spectator of the beliefs I passively come to hold, and instead become an active participant in the formation of my beliefs.²⁶ By way of

²³ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 133–34.

²⁴ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 135

²⁵ Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 1964), 110.

²⁶ Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, 111–13. It is through these acts, as well as communicating our beliefs to others, that we assume responsibility for what believe, which, for Marcel, is another hallmark of the personal as an “active negation” of the impersonal.

contrast, we can think of those individuals who seek out content that reinforces their preexisting opinions and then go on to form further opinions (unthinkingly) by absorbing associated content. If, for example, you view President Obama favorably, then you are likely to watch MSNBC. If, on the other hand, you view President Trump favorably, then you are likely to view Fox News. This will serve both to confirm you in an already-held opinion (in favor of the president in question) as well as to expose you to other possible contents of opinions that you are likely to just acquire passively. An analogue exists in the case of trying to answer the question of *who am I*—we surround ourselves with those who implicitly promise to ratify our preexisting self-image.

We can begin to see the connection between truth and friendship when it comes to answering the question of *who am I*. Coming to grips with the truth of myself is not a project that can be realized alone. It requires the mediation of friends. It is only through the love of friendship that certain truths—the good and the bad—come to light for me: my friends not only grasp that I exemplify certain values that I may not have realized I embody, but also, through their solicitous concern for my own growth as a person, that I exemplify certain disvalues, and fail to see that I do. I may, for example, think of myself as just an “average” friend, but my friend may see what I, in either modesty, ignorance, or both, fail to see, namely that I am a very loving, supportive friend. Or, I may have a hidden fault which escapes my attention, either due to pride, ignorance, or both. Perhaps, for example, my friend helps me to see that I can be very insensitive in my humor, and so unwittingly come to wound those I claim to love. Either way, true friendship is what enables us to correct for the distortions of pride, false humility, or just plain ignorance.

But if incarnating the spirit of truth requires friendship, friendship just as equally requires incarnating the spirit of truth. Whereas friendship is needed *fully* to incarnate the spirit of truth, we must at least have begun to incarnate the spirit of truth if friendship is to be made possible for us in the first place. In the first place, this is because friendship is a form of being with another. But we cannot be with another unless we communicate the truth of ourselves to the other and, correlatively, are receptive to the other’s self-revelation of the truth to us. By deliberately refusing to incarnate the spirit of truth, we close ourselves off to the prospect of being with others, and thus to the prospect of an authentically personal existence. Such a refusal may take the form of lying about myself to others, thus keeping them at arm’s length from who I really am, and dominating the “relation-

ship” through controlling the other’s idea, or image, of me.²⁷ Alternatively, it may take the form of believing falsely about the other, either benignly, as in the case where I am a victim of the other’s lying attempt to keep me at bay and dominate me, or else malignantly, as when I attempt to imprison the other in my idealized representation of him.²⁸ Either way, the very possibility of being with the other, and thus of friendship, is thwarted.²⁹ Second, as Jason Kawall has observed in recent work, the spirit of truth is necessary for the exercise of certain central acts of friendship, among them forgiveness, encouragement, and acceptance.³⁰ All of these acts depend on an acquaintance with the truth of our friends. Insofar as friendship, as a form of love, must be solicitous for the growth of the beloved friend, the absence of these acts of acceptance and forgiveness (wed, as they are, to encouragement to be better) destroys the friendship. This is, of course, a matter of degree, but the point remains that if we cannot lovingly accept our friends, while also acknowledging their faults, and pushing them to be better, then we cannot be friends. While there are liminal cases, the end result of this is the degeneration of friendship into something merely transactional: a doxastic *quid pro quo*. Thus, incarnating the spirit of truth, so crucial to one’s *being a person*, both requires, and is required by, another aspect of being a person—namely of being that entity which is capable of giving and receiving love.

What we have learned, then, is that truth is a norm of belief insofar as truth is a value for the person. Truth is a value for the person insofar as it is interconnected with another fundamental value of the human person, namely friendship. Placing this within the larger context of this paper as a whole, the results of this secondary reflection are as follows. To believe that *p* is not to aim at, but to be committed to, the truth of *p*. But introducing the concrete person into our reflections shows us that the enactment of

²⁷ See Harry Frankfurt, *On Truth* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 80–81.

²⁸ See Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 53.

²⁹ To see this, consider one phenomenon of friendship: two friends enjoying each other’s presence in silence. This can be difficult, but if you believe the truth about your friend, and have communicated the truth of yourself to her, then you have at least made this possible metaphysically. For if you have lied, then you have erected a barrier around yourself which your friend cannot pierce. To the extent that such a barrier is built, being with another becomes increasingly impossible. And to the extent that you believe falsely about your friend, you live either behind a barrier of your (supposed) friend’s lies or else imprison your friend within the cell of your own idealization.

³⁰ Jason Kawall, “Friendship and Epistemic Norms,” *Philosophical Studies* 165 (2013): 356–57.

this commitment is fraught with temptation. If truth is a norm of our beliefs, this is not because of some standing desire we have for truth (such a desire can be perverted, as we saw), nor is “conceptual necessity” going to do the job: we can accept that truth is the constitutive norm of belief, and just maintain that what we believe meets that standard, or, in a radically Protagorean vein, maintain that what we believe *just is* the standard of truth. Rather what this reflection on the ambiguity of belief as a commitment to the truth has shown us is that if truth is (as has been plausibly assumed) a norm of belief it must be so in virtue of being a value for the person, one that is neither merely instrumental nor “merely” intrinsic, one that we can grasp through its situation alongside other values, and one which we can make a choice for. In this paper, I considered truth in relation to friendship, which I just assumed was uncontroversially a value. Vindicating that assumption requires widening the scope of the present secondary reflection, but that is a task for another day. For now, however, we have seen how introducing the person into our thinking about belief and its norms shows (1) how better to understand the relationship between belief and truth, (2) what the norm of truth must look like (in its broad contours) if it is to be a norm *for the person*, and (3) how we might articulate truth as a value of the person alongside others. N.V