



## Web of belief

### Description

There's a scene in the CGI animated Christmas film *The Polar Express* where the little hero boy who is skeptical of Santa's existence has to make a verbal declaration that he truly believes in Santa, of course. That's a relatively easy call if Santa is staring you in the face, and you're at the North Pole surrounded by elves. If only all belief questions could be resolved by such incontrovertible evidence of the senses. But then perhaps the boy is dreaming.

*The Web of Belief* is the title of a book by the analytical philosophers Willard Quine and Joseph Ullian, written before the advent of that major vehicle for circulating beliefs, the world-wide web, the web of which the book's insights to the hypertextual worlds of Wikipedia,



The book is suitably corrective, in keeping with the age in

which it was written an age emerging from rampant scientism. Experimentation with ouija boards, divining, new age philosophies and mystery cults enjoyed high profile.

Quine and Ullian offer the wise warning to be wary of those who peddle small measures of uncertainty to affirm an opposite: charlatans who assert that as scientists have not yet proven the causal connection between smoking and lung cancer, you should keep buying cigarettes.

I have heard similar but less consequential claims not that far from home: no one has yet been able to access the inner reaches of the Apprentice column in Rosslyn Chapel to check if it does *not* contain the holy grail; so it may. Residual doubt serves to magnify the opposite claim, that before you know it verges on a certainty, easily circulated and amplified further on the Internet as well as elsewhere.

The book leaves out an important factor of belief — that is, its communal nature. I once asked a theologian friend who seemed skeptical about most matters of christian belief how he could come to recite the creed. He explained that belief need not be a personal thing (only), but is something to be affirmed communally. Replace *I believe* with *we believe*. The contemporary idea of *faith communities* seems to capture something of the role of belief in stabilising identity, or at least encouraging solidarity.

## The mood of belief

For Quine and Ullian, belief is different to mood, like joy or grief or astonishment (p.10). They assert that beliefs are practical *dispositions* to act in certain ways. Belief is a practical matter. Believing that the world is flat makes little difference if you don't have to travel outside your neolithic commune. Beliefs get tested in action, eg by travel. But beliefs do come and go, like moods, which are also *dispositions* and prompt us to act; and moods are shared. This is what makes censuses difficult. Do you believe in god? There's never a tick box for *sometimes*.

Finally, as everyone in the arts knows, to believe in an absurdity, or to act as if you believe in an absurdity, is a commonplace. Think of the role of imagination and its linguistic vehicle — metaphor. The message for grown ups in *The Polar Express* is that we need to believe in the power of imagination. If that's too sentimental then be content with metaphor, expressed in Friedrich Nietzsche's ode to truth.

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms; in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the sense, coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal (p.180).

Now that's something to believe in.

## References

- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 1974. *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche Vol II, Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Gordon Press.
- Quine, W.V., and J.S. Ullian. 1970. *The Web of Belief*. New York: Random House.
- Van Allsburg, Chris. 1985. *The Polar Express*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

## Notes

- On metaphor see: the category [Metaphor](#).
- Nietzsche's apparent irrationalism may well represent the kind of (muddled) thinking the analytic philosophers seek to correct.
- Of course, the 2011 UK census did not ask "do you believe in god," but "What religion are you?" which is an easier question to answer. A 2011 US Gallup Poll did ask citizens "Do you believe in God?" with the options of "yes," "no," and "no opinion" with a 92% "yes" response, if their website is to be believed.
- Derrida's article "White mythology" makes much of the Nietzsche quote.



## Category

1. Culture

## Tags

1. belief
2. Christmas
3. metaphor
4. Quine

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