

Factual beliefs / Symbolic beliefs

spect for all religious-minded people, including his Hasidic Jewish ancestors.

The exercise of finding rationality in the seemingly irrational became an academic focus for Sperber in the nineteen-seventies. Staying with the Dorze people in southern Ethiopia, he noticed that they made assertions that they seemed both to believe and not to believe. People told him, for example, that “the leopard is a Christian animal who observes the fasts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.” Nevertheless, the average Dorze man guarded his livestock on fast days just as much as on other days. “Not because he suspects some leopards of being bad Christians,” Sperber wrote, “but because he takes it as true both that leopards fast and that they are always dangerous.”

Sperber concluded that there are two kinds of beliefs. The first he has called “factual” beliefs. Factual beliefs—such as the belief that chairs exist and that leopards are dangerous—guide behavior and tolerate little inconsistency; you can’t believe that leopards do and do not eat livestock. The second category he has called “symbolic” beliefs. These beliefs might feel genuine, but they’re cordoned off from action and expectation. We are, in turn, much more accepting of inconsistency when it comes to symbolic beliefs; we can believe, say, that God is all-powerful and good while allowing for

cestors. in the face of contradictory evidence.
ality in One of Van Leeuwen's insights is that
an ac- people distinguish between different cat-
eteen- egories of belief in everyday speech. We
e peo- say we "believe" symbolic ones but that
oticed we "think" factual ones are true. He has
t they run ingenious experiments showing that
to be- you can manipulate how people talk
le, that about beliefs by changing the environ-
al who ment in which they're expressed or sus-
n Or- tained. Tell participants that a woman
he av- named Sheila sets up a shrine to Elvis
estock Presley and plays songs on his birthday,
other and they will more often say that she
some "believes" Elvis is alive. But tell them
Sper- that Sheila went to study penguins in
s it as Antarctica in 1977, and missed the news
l that of his death, and they'll say she "thinks"
he's still around. As the German sociol-
ogist Georg Simmel recognized more
than a century ago, religious beliefs seem
to express commitments—we believe in
God the way we believe in a parent or
a loved one, rather than the way we be-
lieve chairs exist. Perhaps people who
traffic in outlandish conspiracies don't
so much believe them as believe *in* them.
Van Leeuwen's book complements a

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