

My friend Maurice Bloch and I have been arguing since even before we first met in the 70s. What makes it worthwhile is that there is much we agree on, and, once in a while, one of us causes the other to change his mind on some issue. There has been one issue however where I have failed to convince Maurice (and reciprocally, of course); it is about an old argument of mine regarding the disunity of beliefs. Since my 1982 paper "Apparently irrational beliefs", I have argued that we should distinguish two mental attitudes toward a belief content, an 'intuitive' and 'reflective' belief attitude (see [here](#)). Intuitive beliefs are experienced as plain knowledge of fact without attention and generally without awareness of reasons to hold them to be facts. Reflective beliefs are held for reasons that are mentally entertained. These reasons can be of two kinds: the authority of the source of the belief, or the sense that their content is such that it would be incoherent not to accept them.

I have also argued that we should distinguish two kinds of belief contents: 'propositional' and 'semi-propositional'. A propositional belief content is one that is understood well enough by the believer for ordinary purposes: she knows well enough what the belief presupposes and entails in ordinary situations. For instance, Joan's belief that coal burns or her belief that she does not speak Swahili have a propositional content in this sense. A semi-propositional belief content is one that is only half-understood: the believer, however strongly committed to the belief itself, has limited commitments as to what it presupposes and entails, even in ordinary situations. For instance Bill's belief that he has a guardian angel or that a budget deficit is bad - he knows little economics - have a semi-propositional content in that sense. (I am not denying that there are unclear and borderline cases.)

So, combining types of belief attitude and type of belief content, there could be, in principle, four categories of beliefs:

Intuitive beliefs of propositional content    Intuitive beliefs of semi-propositional content    Reflective beliefs of propositional content    Reflective beliefs of semi-propositional content

However, I have argued, there are no intuitive beliefs of semi-propositional content: that category is empty! Semi-propositional contents are not like facts to us; we don't intuit them, we believe them for a reason, i.e., we always hold them reflectively. Moreover, given that their exact content is somewhat obscure, it is unclear whether it would be incoherent either to accept them or to reject them. Hence the main reason for holding such half-understood beliefs has to do with the authority of the source.

As children (and even as adults) we often encounter ideas which are hard to understand and impossible to evaluate on the basis of their contents but which are put forward by people whom we trust. A child is told for the first time that there are negative numbers! Initially she does not quite understand what these numbers might be, even if she understands that they are written with a minus sign, and that one can use them in various arithmetic operations. Negative numbers don't seem to cohere with what she took numbers to be. Still, for what she understands, maybe they cohere after all. Given that she is told about negative numbers by the teacher whose authority in the matter she does not question, she does, in a sense believe that there are such things. I would say that her belief is a reflective belief of 'semi-propositional' content. After many encounters and exercises with negative numbers, her uncertainties about them may be reduced to point where, to all

practical purposes, the content of her belief has become propositional and her belief attitude has become intuitive. So, the reflective attitude provided her with a transition toward a sufficient understanding, a way of keeping in memory a piece of information that she did not yet fully understand or know how to use.

Other hard to understand belief contents that are accepted because of trust in the authority of the source may never become sufficiently understood to end up being treated as plain facts. For instance, the child is told – and believes – that God is everywhere, and the uncertainty about what this means is not going to be resolved by any experience or arguments. The belief may be strong, but the content is partly mysterious (I just saw the other day a poster put by adults who presumably believe that God is everywhere and that read: “Don’t turn your back on God!”)

Typical examples of reflective beliefs of semi-propositional content are of course ‘religious’ beliefs held because of the authority of the religious community or of its leaders (I put ‘religious’ in scare quotes because Maurice and I agree that this is a potentially misleading shorthand description for a variety of phenomena that do not come under a single and specific explanation).

Maurice has been adamant: ‘religious’ beliefs are typically intuitive. They are just as obvious to the believers as the most mundane beliefs. For the Zande, for instance, witches are just as obviously part of their environment as are cows. And I keep telling Maurice that a belief may be wholly familiar and self-evident to a believer and still not be intuitive as I have defined the term. It is held with attention to reasons for holding it, making it in my terms a reflective belief. The Zande, I maintain always hold their beliefs about witches and witchcraft-events with awareness of the reasons and often with attention to these reasons. These reasons are, for instance, the authority of divinatory procedures which itself is based on the authority of the diviners, and so on, with no good parallel in Zande beliefs about cows and cow-events. But Maurice denies that there is that difference, and we drink some more wine and talk about something else.

But now the same Maurice Bloch beautifully illustrates in his [post](#) about “Doubting among the Zafimaniry” an idea that is as close to mine as one side of a coin is close to the other. He recounts how he provoked conversations among his Zafimaniry hosts in Madagascar on philosophical topics: Is language necessary for thought? Do animals think? Having such a conversation encourages a reflective attitude to all the beliefs discussed, whether they were held intuitively or reflectively: one is now looking for reasons and arguments. And indeed, some people found sensible arguments in favour of the view that language is not a necessary condition for thought, and that animals think. People who had not known how to answer these questions were happy to accept these arguments and conclusions.

Then, Maurice asked whether trees think, and whether people think when they are asleep and when they are dead. And here people had no simple way to reconcile cultural views about these matters implicit in their ritual practices with commonsense considerations that would have been consistent with what they had argued before. So, instead of enjoying the doubts raised by Maurice’s question as an occasion to find ways to dispel such doubts, they had, this time, to leave the matter hanging. As he writes:

“What I now think was being expressed was something like this: “We are in an area in which we are in doubt and where we shall remain in doubt. Those in authority are expressing an opinion but we cannot pass judgement on their views as we are in an area beyond our competence. We listen to them with respect but that does not remove our doubt, nor should it”.

I would say that Maurice had forced them to confront the semi-propositional character of some of their beliefs (more precisely of some of their commitments implicit in their ritual practices), beliefs

that they could only justify by deference to authority. I would suggest that their doubt was not about whether to believe or not to believe: appeal to authority was sufficient to support the belief, it was a doubt, better left dormant, about the very content of the beliefs.

(Note that in cultures with exegetical traditions, the interpretation of semi-propositional belief contents becomes the object of arguments. These typically are in favour of interpretations that are themselves semi-propositional, and hence the exegesis never comes to a conclusion (except by the use of legal or military force).)

So, I believe Maurice should grant me the distinction between two types of reflective attitudes to beliefs: a reflective attitude appropriate for propositional beliefs and where the reasons envisaged for holding these beliefs are arguments in favour of their propositional content (which must, for this, be well enough understood); and a reflective attitude appropriate for semi-propositional beliefs where arguments for the beliefs, inasmuch as they need to be explicitly given at all, are based on authority, and where arguments about the content are bound to be inconclusive, which may be a reason to avoid them altogether as do the Zafimaniry.

I'll make it easy for Maurice: He may grant me that this distinction is appropriate but correctly point that I have not given any new argument for my claim that semi-propositional contents can only be believed reflectively, that is for a reason - and typically for a reason of authority. He may then persist in claiming that these semi-propositional belief contents can be and are in fact believed intuitively. A chaque jour suffit sa peine. And what shall we drink now?