

**Belief as Practice and as Epistemology:
A Response to Rutherford's "The Enchantments of Secular Belief"**

Danilyn Rutherford's invitation to reconsider the importance of the concept of belief in anthropology is both thoughtful and challenging, and I am happy to have the opportunity to comment on some parts of it. Let me start by saying I am entirely persuaded by the argument that anthropologists should approach belief statements made by their informants *as practices*, or as a constitutive element within practices. As Rutherford's article wonderfully demonstrates, belief talk and the attitudinal repertoires that accompany it remain integral to a wide variety of contexts and practices. There is a second, broader claim made in the article, however, that I find less persuasive and that I wish to address in my comments here. Rutherford argues that belief is implicit within the metaphysical foundations of secular knowledges (including anthropological knowledge), and that anthropologists would do well to recognize this unstated but pervasive background to their own intellectual practice. There is a slide in the article from an argument about practices involving the *language of belief* (as both a saying and a doing) to a claim about the "*metaphysical presuppositions*" of discourses that involve no public recourse to the concept of belief. Along this slide, belief is abstracted from the domain of moral attitudes to become an epistemological category: disembodied from particular ways of speaking and acting ("practices"), belief is universalized as a condition of possibility of ("secular") speech and action. Thus, an article that starts with a call for treating belief as a practice ends up evacuating belief from the scene of public action.

Part of the confusion in the article, it seems to me, owes to the very different approaches Rutherford takes to her ethnographic examples versus her philosophical ones.

In her discussion of both Betty, the political activist from Biak, and Becky Herz, the woman whose husband is serving with the US military in Iraq, Rutherford examines how belief is integral to particular moral attitudes, to sensibilities and emotions embodied in specific ways of speaking and acting. When she turns to the work of Locke and Hume, however, she takes a very different tack. Instead of critically analyzing the role assigned to the concept of belief within the philosophical practices of these thinkers as yet another unique tradition of belief talk and action, she calls on us to accept the universalist claims of the epistemological tradition that these thinkers gave shape to. Importantly, the central problem within this tradition is not the fact of human action, but the problem of establishing a philosophical foundation for human knowledge given the gap between sensory experience and the world as it truly is. Rutherford invokes this conundrum of early modern philosophical thought in order to argue that belief is an ineluctable condition of *all* knowledge. Thus, she writes, “If Hume is correct, ‘getting things done’ always entails overcoming a deep-seated uncertainty: all human action presumes faith in the continuity of past and future” (13).

This strikes me as the wrong conclusion to make. To argue that most forms of knowledge cannot be described in terms of a rational calculus, and therefore involve kinds of inference, in no way implies that they necessitate “belief.” When a glass falls off the table, one does not reach out and grab it because one *believes* it will fall. As Wittgenstein noted in his discussion of such actions, the notion of belief is completely extraneous to the context. Moreover, such acts do not require any particular cognitive content of the actor: one could easily be reciting a poem or working on a math problem at the moment of seizing the falling glass. It is only in a philosophical context, one far from

the term's ordinary scenes of use, that such actions seem to present epistemological problems for which belief becomes a solution. What would be the difference between the action of grabbing the glass on the basis of a belief in causality and doing it without such a belief? If there is no difference (and I can't see how there would be) then in what sense can we speak about belief as a practice? At certain points in the article Rutherford seems to recognize this point (e.g. in her references to Wittgenstein), but then inexplicably returns to the standpoint of philosophical skepticism.

Let me add, to note that conditions of crisis and uncertainty may lead people to speak about belief cannot be cited as evidence for the claim that belief is therefore a background assumption of secular knowledges. As we see in the case of Betty Herz, such invocations of the language of belief in times of breakdown and crisis tell us something about the grammar of the concept of belief, its place within a specific form of life, including one shaped by great uncertainty and stress, but they tell us nothing about belief as an epistemological category of universal scope. For example, while Herz, writing in a predominantly Christian context, finds belief to be essential to her ability to persevere, it would be highly unlikely that the citizens of war-torn Iraq, mentioned by Rutherford, would turn to belief to confront the devastation they face. Within Islamic traditions, the act one should undertake when facing great adversity and threat is not belief but "*tawakkul*," a moral concept that entails placing one's fate in the hands of God, as one would appoint an agent to act one's behalf (*taukil* the verbal noun from the same root verb as *tawakkul*, means to appoint a counselor or representative). While there is not space here to elaborate on some of the key distinctions between the notions of belief and *tawakkul*, it is important to stress that one cannot assimilate one term to the other without

significantly distorting its meaning. (If one key aspect of Asad's work has been to caution anthropologists about the extent to which their concepts are indebted to developments within Christianity and are therefore not necessarily applicable to all contexts, Rutherford encourages us in the opposite direction, to recognize and embrace a concept profoundly indebted to Christianity, as essential to our knowledges.)

Most practices of inference do not require belief, though one can also imagine some contexts where they might. Rather, skills of inferential reasoning are learned through training as well as through the experience accumulated in the course of repeatedly engaging in a practice. What about anthropology? Rutherford asserts that anthropological method "entails the impossible belief that one can assume another's point of view" (14). But does it really? Clearly, we describe the point of view of people we know all of the time, so in what sense is this kind of descriptive and analytical practice "impossible"? To say that such a practice is "impossible" is certainly not to use this term in its everyday sense. And belief? How do anthropologists cultivate this belief? How would one begin to describe its affective and attitudinal contours? Do those anthropologists who fail to learn such a belief make bad anthropologists? In short, it seems to me that belief in this formulation becomes an empty category, one devoid of any specific content, and therefore not a part of the practices and disciplines of anthropology. Let me emphasize, I agree with Rutherford that there are forms of knowledge and practice for which belief is an integral and necessary element. Anthropologists should approach them in their specificity, however, and not assume that belief performs some invisible but necessary function beneath the surface of *all* social practices.

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