How Can We Believe Anything?

The Question of Truth and Reality in the 21st Century

Jack Grassby

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Also by Jack Grassby:
The Unfinished Revolution
Revolution in the 21st Century
Postmodern Humanism

for

Jack and Ben

Acknowledgments

This book is the outcome of the author's long concern with matters of belief: from indoctrination in Catholic theology as a child, to involvement in direct political action in the 1960s, to exposure to formal philosophy in the 2000s. Consequently, perhaps inevitably, the approach taken here is one which Marx would have applauded. In an often quoted (but not often heeded) remark, Marx asserts:

> 'Hitherto, philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it.'
>
> *The German Ideology* [1]

The book is based, partly, on my previous book Postmodern Humanism[2] and on two papers delivered at meetings of Café Philosophique of Newcastle Philosophy Society.

Any writer on philosophical matters must acknowledge their dependency on the work of past writers, whether or not he/she consciously expresses their views. We have all assimilated the ideas (pro or con) and to some extent the language of the canonical philosophical texts. Indeed, it is a theme of this book that philosophy represents the progressive unfurling of the human project. As Hegel put it:

> 'The history of the world is none other than the progress of [intellectual] freedom.'
>
> *Lectures on the Philosophy of Freedom* [3]

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Introduction

Philosophers in every age reflect the concerns of their time and we can see in this process a progressive understanding of the human condition. The questioning of our beliefs, as for example expressed in the scepticism of the early Greeks, can be seen as a search for a secure grounding for our views of ourselves and the universe. This search for certainty fired the Enlightenment's interest in ideas of rationality and empiricism and can be seen to have led, paradoxically, to the views of our postmodern philosophers who now question the very meaning of that certainty.

We can see, at least in Western thought, that science and the scientific method have played a paramount role in this process: from the works of Bacon to Newton; Galileo to Einstein; Darwin to Watson and Crick. We can note, in the history of ideas, the progressive discarding of mystical, supernatural explanations of our universe and a continued questioning of the status of our beliefs about it. Scientific knowledge and the scientific method now inform much of our thinking.

This historical process, together with recent advances in genetic engineering and the neurosciences, has led to a renewed questioning of the nature of human nature and a re-evaluation of our cognitive processes. Our postmodern philosophers seem to tell us we can believe anything (or, what amounts to the same thing, believe nothing). Meanwhile, as our neuroscientists are laying bare the physical basis of consciousness, our geneticists are rejigging the human genome.

Consequently, it seems, we no longer know what we are or what to believe. This book seeks to describe a philosophical but at the same time practical answer to the question: how, at the start of the 21st century, can we believe anything?

The book is addressed to those who are prepared to approach ideas concerning belief with interest, openness and imagination at a general philosophical level. Previous knowledge of philosophical matters is not essential – although a nodding acquaintance with some philosophical issues would help.

It will be necessary to venture into the dark heart of some fundamental philosophical questions. Be brave! If the works of the philosophers are to have significance, if they are 'to change the world', it must be possible for their views to be accessible to those interested and concerned.

Some basic philosophical concepts need to be addressed but the language used is as straightforward and direct as this author can muster. However, it is necessary to use traditional philosophical terms where they carry a weight of meaning, an authority or historical significance, which cannot be otherwise easily expressed. An explanation of these terms, as used here, is given as we go along. Reference is made to the views of individual philosophers and philosophical schools in order that the views expressed can be located in the tradition of philosophical ideas.

All the issues addressed here concern matters raised within canonical philosophical thought – even if this author does not always recognise or acknowledge the source. An attempt is made to address some contemporary thinking in terms of traditional philosophy and, by identifying the nature and the status of our beliefs, draw some philosophical and ethical conclusions.

The philosophical perspective advanced here is what can be described as anthropocentric subjectivism or qualified postmodernism (or post-postmodernism). This perspective is understood as a view which denies supernatural explanations and transcendental revelations and

accepts the full consequences of our species subjectivism. The book consequently seeks to find answers, consistent with subjectivist postmodern thinking, to the recurring and now pressing question of how, and what, we can believe.

This book, then, seeks first to identify the profound consequences of our unavoidable subjectivity. Consideration is given as to how our use of language, reason and traditional bivalent logic, has resulted in philosophical (and social) problems concerning our account of belief, truth and reality. The book goes on to identify the possible philosophical structure of a belief system which takes account of traditional philosophic thought but which, at the same time, acknowledges more recent advances in philosophy, science, cultural theory and the lessons of history. The possible content of such a belief system is then considered.

It is argued that the anthropocentric subjectivist stance adopted here allows us to identify a secure, practical, basis for a system of universal human beliefs and behaviour, a universal monoculture, upon which individual personal beliefs can be safely located. A central thesis of this book is that, notwithstanding our obvious differences, we can think there is something it is like to be human and go some way in showing what that is.

The book follows a linear narrative and is better read as a whole, but each chapter is designed to stand fairly independently. This, it will be noted, requires some repetition and the central ideas are repeated in different ways as we go along.

The Epistemological Problem
how can we believe anything?

At the start of the 21st century the question of belief has become a central issue for us all. On the one hand, history shows the dangers of belief when expressed in terms of teleological dogmas of religious faiths or political ideologies – particularly when connected to concepts of ethnicity, race and/or nation state. On the other hand, our philosophers seem to insist that we can believe anything.

The American philosopher Willard V.O. Quine says:

> 'Any statement can be true if we make drastic enough adjustments
> elsewhere in the system [of our beliefs].'
>
> *Word and Object* [4]

For many of us, belief, viewed in terms of an objective truth, has become discredited and, for some, it has been discarded.

Accompanying this threat to belief, perhaps as a direct consequence, there has been a resurgence of religious fundamentalism (Christian and Islamic); an outbreak of political extremism (racism and nationalism); and a renewed challenge to science and reason which it would be dangerous to ignore.

We can see that our everyday behaviour is driven by many factors; a range of physical and emotional needs and drives which develop and change as we go through life. The way we express these needs is

conditioned by our physical and cultural environment and, beginning in early childhood, we begin to form concepts which develop into beliefs and associated values. By adulthood we have generally acquired a hierarchy of concepts, beliefs and values from the mundane (which govern our everyday behaviour) to the profound (which govern our life choices).

For most of us, for most of the time, these beliefs are unquestioned. Our behaviour is governed by many interlocking beliefs, concepts, attitudes, emotions and assumptions which are often unconscious and usually unarticulated. However, we can see that we operate with belief at many levels – some with more serious consequences than others. We believe that two plus two is four; we believe the rose is red; we believe that all men are equal (or unequal); we believe that capitalism is best (or worst); we believe (or don't believe) in God.

Most of us at some time (and some of us most of the time) seek to identify a core of beliefs, an overarching narrative for our life; we seek to identify a world view, a coherent structure of beliefs giving meaning and purpose to our existence. It is this question of how we can form a coherent structural basis for our central beliefs that is the focus of this book. However, to do this, as we shall see, the status of all beliefs must be addressed.

Some social theorists, such as H. Garfinkel[5] see society as a flux upon which, in the form of beliefs, we are predisposed to recognise relationships, patterns, purpose and meaning. Social psychologists such as D.G. Myers[6] describe an edifice of belief as a practical tool for making sense of a complex situation which, over time, becomes linked with other beliefs in delivering effectiveness of action.

Whatever we might make of these social theories we can see that our beliefs, mediated by the emotions and dispositions of the mysterious 'self', are the motivators of our actions. Beliefs underlie and explain, rationalise, our attitudes and behaviour – although we can see that our beliefs and our behaviour can be mutually reactive (beliefs become what Kant called a 'social dynamic'). Even our instinctive actions are expressed in a manner conditioned by our beliefs. What we believe,

what others believe and, crucially, the status we attribute to our beliefs (i.e. how we hold our beliefs) affects us all.

The early problems of the human species were largely ones of surviving the physical challenges to existence. The central problem of the 21st century is surviving the consequences of our belief (or disbelief). On the one hand, in the 20th century, we were told by Friedrich Nietzsche it was 'the death of God'[9], and now Francis Fukuyama tells us it is the 'end of history' and even 'the end of Man' [10]. On the other hand we are threatened by fundamentalist's beliefs in vengeful gods; pictures of heavens populated by martyrs and (exclusively female) virgins; visions of religious and political utopias with proselytising zealots eager to impress their truths upon us – even unto death (ours as well as theirs).

As a consequence of this challenge to belief some humanists, and others susceptible to moral panic, have sought to resolve the resultant ethical problems by replacing a transcendental God with transcendental Man in what John Gray describes as 'a shoddy replica of Christian faith' [11]. With the Enlightenment, some, in denying God, have deified science and reason as the source of certainty and objective truth. That 'modern' view, it is argued here, is not only wrong, it is as dangerous as the superstitious beliefs of the Dark Ages that preceded it.

Now, at the heart of the belief controversy is the pervasive influence, in all cultural areas, of what has become known as 'postmodernism'. Postmodernism is a term which is used here to describe a stance, a perspective, the central tenet of which is the recognition of our unavoidable subjectivism and a denial of the transcendental (by which I mean ideas which claim to transcend our sense experiences i.e. claim a supra–human status).

Crucially then, as used here, the term postmodernism implies the recognition and the acceptance of the full consequences of our anthropocentric subjectivism. It is argued that our sciences and our philosophy, our arts and our politics, is just us, the members of the human species, talking to ourselves. We ourselves are the source of

our beliefs; we construct our reasons, meanings, purposes and values. We invent the questions and we create the answers.

Traditionally, philosophers have been engaged in a struggle to transcend this subjectivism – to identify a secure, objective basis for our beliefs. Now, in a paradigmatic shift, postmodern philosophers assert that, because beliefs are subjective constructs, there can **be** no objective grounding for belief. We can, in a way, believe anything. Consequently, some assert, we cannot adjudicate between beliefs, one belief is as good (or as bad) as another – a view finding political expression in ideas of multiculturalism. Hitherto, philosophers have been concerned (some might say obsessed) with finding a secure, objective, basis for our concepts and beliefs. Now, with postmodernism, we are faced with a concern for finding a method of dealing with our subjective relativism.

Some recent postmodern philosophers, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, challenge the very grounds of traditional analytic philosophy including the notions of truth and reality, reason and meaning. Generally, our postmodern philosophers have taught us how to deconstruct beliefs but, as yet, have failed to show, convincingly, how to construct them. Indeed, some social philosophers with Marxist leanings, such as Terry Eagleton, express concern that postmodernism's undermining of Enlightenment values makes a progressive cultural politics difficult, if not impossible[13].

It is the intention here to challenge this extreme postmodern position and to argue that, while postmodernism insists that all values are subjective, we can claim that, within a given epistemé (i.e. a given coherent belief and cultural system), all values do not have equal status – some values, we can say, are more valuable than others. Some truths are more truthful than others. We can recognise a hierarchy of beliefs.

The rationale, features and implications of this qualified postmodern position should become clear as the book proceeds but they can be summarised briefly as follows.

First, the extreme, 'hard', postmodern position denies reason as the means of reaching objective truths and, in doing so, rejects the use of reason per se. The qualified view adopted here endorses the view that reason cannot deliver objective truths, but accepts the use of reason, rationality, as a cognitive tool which has evolved because it works. This 'instrumentalist' perspective accepts that we can (indeed we are so conditioned that we must) use reason, because it delivers the goods.

Second, the extreme postmodern position asserts that, as all concepts are human constructs, all beliefs and values are of equal status; we cannot by the use of reason validate beliefs or adjudicate between beliefs. It is accepted in this book that the use of reason alone cannot validate beliefs or adjudicate between beliefs in an absolutist sense. However, it is argued that we can identify a hierarchy of beliefs on an instrumentalist basis and on the recognition of our evolved genetic and cultural condition; on an understanding of what we are.

It will be argued here that some beliefs are more soundly based than others, not because they are more 'true' in a metaphysical, transcendental sense but because they have been shown to be more useful, or indeed, necessary, in defining what we are. Our epistemology has an evolutionary basis.

Thus, the perspective adopted here starts from the recognition of our unavoidable species subjectivism; it accepts the postmodern premise that our truth and reality, meaning and purpose, can be only subjective human constructs. And, having dispensed with the idea of transcendental truths, it leaves us free to adopt other reference frames, other criteria, for our beliefs and values.

We could, then, it would seem, adopt **any** reference frame for our beliefs – that is the problem that besets the 'hard' postmodern philosopher. The recognition of our unavoidable subjectivism has, according to them, dumped us in an intellectual and moral vacuum. That dilemma is addressed here by reassessing the status, meaning and purpose of beliefs; by recognising that beliefs are evolved cognitive constructs and belong with the identification and acceptance of what it is we are at this moment in our evolutionary history.

The philosophical stance adopted here posits the view that beliefs are instrumental in attending to our physical and emotional needs and drives, and that some are beliefs are universal and species-specific– useful and, indeed, necessary. They arise from what we can see we are – a short lived speck of existence, an evolved and evolving species embedded in the universe, the product of a continuing cosmic process. This requires us to think of the nature and status of our cognitive processes in evolutionary terms; as how we have been conditioned to form beliefs; how we see ourselves in a relationship with the evolving universe; how we recognise what it is to be human.

It is argued here that we are, as a species, genetically programmed and culturally conditioned to reason, and to think that:

(a) we exist and there is 'something out there' – the view of an autonomous 'self' as well as the 'non-self';

(b) we are conditioned to act as if the empirical world of space and time is in some sense 'real' and what we can know about it is in some way 'true';

(c) we share, as a species, some universal cognitive processes and some universal beliefs and culture which we can recognise as human.

These matters are considered more fully in the following chapters. Meanwhile we should note that the universal human beliefs referred to above are not objective 'Truths', they are not the 'Universals' of classical philosophy. They are, rather, the consequences of the mutual evolution of our biology and the physical and cultural environment; the co-evolution of our genes (biological units) and our memes (cultural units). The question of belief becomes not so much an epistemological question of what we think is true but rather an ontological question of what we think we are.

The Human Condition
what we are

We now know we are the product of some 4,000 million years of biological evolution, with life emerging some 11,000 million years after the 'Big Bang'. Our evolution is part of a continuing cosmic process and if we seek to identify a function, an aim, for evolution, it can be only that of exploring, blindly, the possibilities of existence within the constraints of the physical/biological laws. We can note that the universe has no discernible purpose, and the human species no discernible value, other than that which we ourselves confer.

This evolutionary 'exploration' has been manifested in random genetic mutations which have allowed the different species to emerge, develop and change, and be tested for survival advantage. From this process evolving genes have produced the human brain and what we recognise as 'consciousness', culminating in species-specific cognitive processes and resultant behaviour. It would be wrong to think of 'us' on one hand and 'it', the rest of the cosmic process on the other, as separate entities. We are part of it and it is part of us.

We can note that the essential characteristic of biological evolution is the ability to survive and reproduce. This requires a successful encounter with the environment. For us this encounter has been aided by the emergence of a brain and senses capable of forming concepts, cognitive models, of ourselves and the external universe. It will be argued here that these innate cognitive processes are the source of necessary, given, a *priori* concepts which give rise to some universal species-specific beliefs.

This book is concerned with how we might idedntify and address these innate cognitive processes, concepts and beliefs, and how we might come to regard them.

We have noted that the search for objective, transcendental truths has been a primary, but elusive, project for philosophical thought. In a desperate, but essentially doomed, attempt many (perhaps most) philosophers have struggled to find ultimately secure grounds for their theories: Hegel, his 'unfurling of reason'; Nietzsche, his 'will to power'; Russell, his 'analytic logic'.

Immanuel Kant is possibly the most influential philosopher of the modern era, and his ideas inform much of this book. Kant acknowledged the subjectivity of human knowledge but, appropriately for his time and culture, sought to identify secure, universal, moral values with his 'categorical imperative' *. In doing this Kant thought it necessary to transcend his subjectivity and introduced ideas of 'transcendental idealism'.

The perspective adopted here insists that we should not, and indeed cannot, abandon our subjectivity like that. It accepts that reason, logic and analytical philosophy cannot deliver objective truth, meaning or value; that is the human condition. So, how then might we deal with our inescapable anthropocentric subjectivity?

The view taken here is that the human species has emerged, as we have noted, as a part of a continuing cosmic process. The structure and cognitive processes of the human brain have been determined by evolutionary considerations of survival. Human concepts and beliefs are species-specific cognitive constructs, the consequence of (or, for some writers, nothing more than) the pattern of synaptic connection of neurons formed as the result of our brain and senses reacting to the environment.

The manner by which these evolutionary physical processes have produced consciousness, and the nature of that consciousness itself, continues to be the subject of debate for our neuroscientists and philosophers of mind. It seems that consciousness is only a small part of the brain's activity and some recent discussion centres on the idea

of consciousness as biological information-processing, rather in the manner of virtual machines.

Whatever we might make of these micro-state studies we can see, at the macro level, the relationship between the output of the synaptic activity of our brain (our concepts, beliefs and emotions) and our environment, physical and cultural, is dynamic rather than static. Our beliefs determine our behaviour and thus, to some degree, our environment, and our environment predisposes, to some degree, our beliefs.

Our neuroscientists tell us that most of our neurons are present at birth but that most of the synapses mature after birth, giving ample opportunity for the synaptic connections to be modulated by experience. Thus we experience specificity from our 'hard-wiring' and, in our encounter with the environment, physical and cultural, we acquire plasticity by adaptation. We can, it will be argued here, identify a characteristic, hard-wired, human brain, modulated by a common human culture, producing some universal cognitive processes and beliefs.

These universal cognitive processes involve, *a priori*, concepts such as rationality and autonomy, reality and truth, and can be seen to define for us what it is to be human. These matters will be considered further when we come to consider belief systems. Meanwhile, those readers of adventurous mind might seek here a connection with Carl Jung's 'collective subconscious' which he describes as 'a reservoir of the experience of a species' [19].

For Sartre, the human species is 'doomed to be free'. But, we are constrained intellectually by the chains of the human condition i.e. by the characteristics of our innate cognitive processes. Whatever we might say about the nature of the cognitive processes of any sentient being we can recognise they are species-specific. We can never know what it is like to be a bat.

Thus, our concepts of 'truth' and 'reality' are human constructs. Our supposed truths can be only our species-specific human truths, contingent and pragmatic. They are, like scientific facts, true for us for

now. If there are other sentient beings they might be assumed to have their truths, their facts, and their reality.

From this premise we can note that if we rule out, or at least set aside, the revelations of some transcendent supernatural being (a god), delivering some mystical, supra-human, truths, the idea of an objective, universal truth is not simply wrong, it is senseless.

The human species is bound to our human truths, to our species-specific subjectivity. That is the human condition; how we have evolved to confront and engage with the universe. It is not a condition we have chosen, it is simply the way evolution has delivered us and we can only make the best of it. There is no point the realists, the anti-relativists, the moral absolutists, complaining about the difficulties and uncertainties this places on us. They might just as well complain about gravity.

We can accept the ideas of 'truth' and 'reality' as convenient (indeed necessary) human constructs. Our evolving species found the idea of truth and reality to be instrumentally advantageous in allowing us to focus and direct our behaviour as social animals. Evolution has conditioned us to act in these terms.

And there is no doubt that the ideas of truth and reality remain useful – perhaps even essential. We need the idea of truth – even if we recognise we have to make it up. It will be argued here that it is the **status** of our truths that we must remember. We must, as Nietzsche puts it, never forget that our truths are myths [(9)].

Our evolved condition presents us with a paradox. We programmed to act as if there were objective truths about an objective reality, but our reason insists that these truths, this reality, are species-subjective. We can act as realists but must think as idealists.

What, then, can we believe to be 'true'? And what do we mean by 'belief', or indeed by 'true'? Can we proceed from the recognition of the subjective status of our concepts to a structured belief system?

Can we produce a coherent philosophical narrative that provides a secure basis for our beliefs and values?

Bertrand Russell says:

> 'I am quite certain that I ate my breakfast this morning, but if I were as indifferent to my breakfast as a philosopher should be, I should be doubtful.'
>
> *The Problems of Philosophy* [12]

We cannot, generally, in our everyday life, afford this luxury of philosophical doubt – unless we happen to be a professional philosopher. We might, in more reflective moments, question the nature of reality, but generally we feel we just have to get on with it. The purpose of this book, then, is not to question our everyday beliefs per se, but rather to identify the status of these beliefs, to question how we hold them, and to recognise how we can locate them securely in a wider belief system.

The view taken here is not that we should reject metaphysical concepts traditionally associated with ideas of truth and reality, but rather we must reassess our view of their status, their use, and the language in which they are expressed.

In doing this, we can identify some characteristics of the human cognitive condition which we can recognise as universal.

Hegel says:

> 'The concept of human nature must fit all men and all ages, past and present. This universal concept may suffer infinite modifications; but actually the universal is one and the same essence in its most various modifications.'
>
> *Reason in History* [20]

It is argued here, then, that we can recognise certain universal cognitive and behavioural characteristics of our species. Not withstanding our obvious differences, we can think that there is

something that it is like to be human. The nature, status and content of these universal cognitive processes and beliefs are the concern of the following chapters.

Footnote

* Kant's categorical imperative appears in his *Critique of Practical Reason* [7]. It states: 'Act only in accord with a principle which you would at the same time will to be a universal law.'

Belief and Ontology
the question of reality

We understand the meaning of the term 'being', our 'is', intuitively – at least as regards our behaviour. We experience no difficulty in acting in the belief that that 'is' or 'is not' a table. However, we have difficulty when we come to define the term 'being' in a metaphysical sense. We have only to ask what 'being' really 'is' to reveal the linguistic difficulties. The metaphysical philosophers have, generally, sought to explain 'being' by defining its categories: abstract and concrete; universal and particular; existence and subsistence. The question has particular relevance (and difficulty) in theories of logic and ultimately Bertrand Russell resorted to the tautologous 'whatever "is" is' [12].

We can note that the question of 'being' raises problems also for the scientific community, for example when discussing concepts of imaginary numbers, multi-dimensions or the complexities of quantum mechanics.

We must, for the moment, leave these esoteric debates to those philosophers and scientists concerned. From the perspective adopted here we need consider the idea of 'being' only in the instrumentalist sense – a cognitive tool that works for us in facilitating our involvement in the universe. This view does not excuse us from considering the origin, status and use of this term, but it does allow us to take a more focussed stance. We can examine the term 'being' as a concept, a cognitive construct, rather than a transcendental metaphysical item.

It is generally accepted that our concepts represent a cognitive state (or, as some neuroscientists might say, a pattern of synaptic connections). This state is the consequence of the reaction of our brain and our senses to our physical and cultural environments. *
In philosophical terms, 'belief' can be defined as:

> 'a mental state representational in character, taking a proposition (either true or false) as its content and involved together with motivational factors in the direction and control of voluntary behaviour.'
>
> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* [31]

We can see that ideas of truth, being and belief are intimately connected. We can see that the status we attribute to our beliefs is determined by ideas of what we think our 'is' is. Our epistemology (our 'truth') is dependent on our ontology (our 'is'). **

It is clear that there is an advantage in being able to think and speak in bivalent terms of what 'is' or 'is not' the case. It allows us to adjudicate between different conceptual models of the external world and thus direct our behaviour effectively. For example, we act on the basis of a belief that that bus 'is' or 'is not' the number 6 bus. In this way, our ontological reality (our belief that that bus 'is') is combined with an epistemological truth (our belief that that bus 'is' or 'is not' the number 6 bus).

However, we confuse ourselves when we do not recognise that here we are using our 'is' with different meanings and intentions. Our ontological 'is' of being is not the same as our epistemological 'is' of truth. Indeed we compound the confusion when, in a proposition, we use a single 'is' to identify both an ontological and an epistemological state (e.g. in the proposition, 'that is the number 6 bus').

Encouraged by analytical philosophers such as Russell and Gödel we tend to speak (what we think of as authoritively) in terms of this bivalent language of logic. We assert a proposition 'is' or 'is not' the case – either it 'is true' or it 'is false' – and we tend, often unthinkingly, to attribute to our 'is' a transcendental objective status.

However, some writers now question the use of these bivalent concepts. We should have been cautioned by the theories of our quantum physicists which tell us to think in different terms. Schrödinger's cat simultaneously 'is dead' and 'is not dead'. An atomic particle 'is', and 'is not', a wave. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle tells us we can talk only in terms of 'probability'.

On the mathematical front, the inadequacies of bivalent logic have been recognised in the study of the indeterminism of unstable dynamic systems. Here, attempts have been made to describe states in non-bivalent terms e.g. through the concepts of 'chaos theory' [21] and 'fuzzy logic' [22].

Indeed, some contemporary philosophers propose that we should allow for intermediate stages of being and argue that the bivalent logic of the analytical philosopher does not adequately address these states. Physics and philosophy together seem to be telling us that our 'reality' cannot be captured entirely in bivalent terms – and, when analytic logic alone is thought sufficient to address ontological or epistemological matters, it is an error.

However that might be, we can see that this attempt at an account of 'reality' using the same term (our 'is') for both ontological and epistemological concepts, adds to the confusion concerning the status of our ontological 'being' and the status of our epistemological 'truth'. We should, in strict analytical terms, seek to distinguish between them – although, with our present terminology, we might think this does serious damage to our syntax.

We might recognise that the proposition 'that is a table' is expressed more soundly as:

'that (what we think of as) is, is (what we think of as) a table'.

The question of how we perceive 'reality' thus comes to asking 'in what sense can the table be said to "exist"; and in what sense is it "true" that it is a table?' What is the status of our ontological 'is' of being and our epistemological 'is' of truth?

Traditionally, philosophers have questioned the relationship of our concepts to the 'reality' of the external world. We can see that, traditionally, philosophers fall into one of two camps.

1. On one hand, 'realist' philosophers assert (more or less) that the external world is made up of accessible objects we can truly know.

2. On the other hand 'anti-realist', or 'idealist', philosophers, assert (more or less) that all we can know are our thoughts and ideas.

The view taken here (as indicated by the qualifications in the definitions) is that of many contemporary philosophers – a quasi-realism (or indirect realism) or a qualified idealism. This view does not claim that the 'thing in itself' does not exist, but rather asserts that the 'thing in itself' is unknowable and indefinable in any objective way. In other words, it is recognised that our concepts cannot give an objective account of reality but, nevertheless, our concepts are constrained by the 'thing out there' in some way.

It is argued here that, through evolution, we are genetically and culturally conditioned to form concepts, cognitive constructs, of external objects in an external world. We can now recognise that our concept of the 'things out there' is the result of a process, the result of the reaction of our brains and senses to the rest of the universe.

We can think, for our practical purposes, that the 'thing out there' is in some sense 'real' and what we can know about it is in some way 'true'. But there is no way we can confer on the 'thing out there' the status of an objective ontological 'is' or an objective epistemological 'truth'. Our realities and our truths are instrumental subjective constructs.

The view taken here is that, for us, 'reality' is represented in the form of patterns of synaptic connections by which we 'experience' the patterns and relationships we identify in nature. Thus, our view of reality is the consequence of a process; the reaction of our evolved brain and senses with the 'things out there'. The position taken here

on the realists-versus-idealists debate is, then, not to deny the existence of the 'thing in itself' but rather to say that the idea of the 'thing in itself' as an objective metaphysical item is not only not possible but that it is also meaningless. This is shown by the following discussion.

We need a sentient creature to have a concept of being, to have ideas of an 'is'. We can, and do, form ontological concepts of what 'is real' and epistemological concepts of what 'is true' for practical, instrumental, purposes. We can recognise that these concepts have evolved because of their usefulness in helping us deal with the external world.

We can see that our concepts of reality arise from the character of our cognitive processes but must relate, in some way, to the external world (a view of a sort of qualified idealism or quasi-realism). In other words, we can choose to see Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit drawing in Philosophical Investigations, Part II [18] as a duck or a rabbit, but not, in the same sense, as an elephant. *** Our concepts are dependent on our cognitive processes but also, in some indefinable way, on the external world. Our consciousness is embedded in the cosmic condition.

The above discussion might be thought esoteric, of concern only to the professional philosophical community. It isn't. This issue of the status we attribute to our view of 'reality' and our 'truth' lies at the heart of what beliefs are – and even threatens to take them away from us!

We can see that when our concept 'is' is carelessly transposed from ontological language of being into epistemological language of truth it can carry with it the baggage of ideas of transcendence – objective logic, absolute truth and 'real' reality. We have noted earlier the philosophical and social problems this incurs.

We must resist this temptation to transpose the status of our ontological concepts in order to define the status of our epistemology concepts. We can choose to think that something exists (if only our

self) with absolute certainty. We can define our ontology in absolutist terms: as Russell says 'whatever "is", is' [12]. But we must not then transpose this self-attributed objective 'is' of being into an objective 'is' of knowledge.

We can see the dangers in this confusion not only in philosophical discourse but most dramatically in religious dogma. Here, claims are made to speak of reality in terms of an epistemological absolute often described, or understood, as a 'revealed Truth'. Thus, our religious and political terrorists are encouraged by their concept of absolute truth of an objective reality to pursue their beliefs with passion and ruthlessness.

The view taken in this book is, then, both phenomenological and existential. The status of our ontological 'is' of being and our epistemological 'is' of truth, properly relate to cognitive experiences resulting from the synaptic activity of an evolved human brain in reaction with the external universe. Nevertheless, our concept of 'being' and our concept of 'truth' are important to us, not because they represent some metaphysic item but because they have been found, instrumentally, to work. They are now, in some important way, an expression of the condition of what it is to be human.

Recognising the nature and status of our ontological 'is' and our epistemological 'is' in this way should affect the way we view our beliefs and how we act on them. It reveals the necessity to differentiate between the status of different beliefs and this distinction is crucial to the thesis advanced here.

From our instrumentalist perspective we can recognise that our beliefs form a spectrum, a hierarchy, ranging from 'hard beliefs' on one hand (our mathematical, scientific and historic facts), to 'soft beliefs' (our religious and political narratives) on the other.

Rationally, we would be prepared to act decisively on matters of 'hard' belief. We would, for example, act confidently on questions of mathematics or the law of gravity. Rationally, we would be (should be) less decisive in acting on 'soft' beliefs. We might, for example,

hesitate to act unreservedly on questions of religion or politics. The status and content of these hard and soft beliefs is central to the thesis advanced here and this matter is considered further in the following chapters.

It may be thought that the question of whether 'reality' exists independently of our perceptions is too pedantic for practical consideration. Nevertheless, the question is important not because of any 'yes' or 'no' answer but rather because of the status we attribute to the terminology in which the question is posed.

Bertrand Russell says:

> 'Now obviously this point in which the philosophers are agreed – the view that there is a real table, whatever its nature may be – is vitally important…'
>
> *The Problems of Philosophy* [12]

Russell's statement endorses the view taken here, but we can note it is expressed in terms which we can now see as part of the problem. He expresses an ontological proposition ('there is a real table') in epistemological terms ('Now obviously…'). And the verb 'to be' is implicit in both contexts.

It has been recognised by philosophers – including, notably, Nietzsche [9] – that any objective, metaphysical status we attribute to the verb 'to be' leads inexorably to ideas of the transcendental. In other words, if there were to be a universal 'is', it could be only in the mind of God.

We have noted that for us, in rejecting ideas of the transcendental, the idea of an objective, metaphysical 'is' is untenable. We must recognise that our ontological 'is' can be only a human is; our epistemological 'truths' can be only human truths and we must now seek to recognise and distinguish the status we confer on them.

So far, we have seen that the concept of being is intimately (and often confusedly) related to our concept of truth. For many purposes the terms 'belief' 'truth' and 'being' have the same force. We cannot,

usually, believe something to 'be the case' and, at the same time, in the same sense, think it is not 'true'. In a practical sense we are able to say:

> I believe X
> X is true
> X is the case

In the esoteric world of analytic philosophy we can (if we are careful) recognise some distinction of between these terms 'belief' 'truth' and 'being'. In the 'rough ground' of everyday life we tend to be more careless. Nevertheless, we can note a different connotation, a difference of emphasis, in the everyday use of the terms. For example, we are asked, in a court of law, to swear to tell the truth. We are not asked to tell what we believe – that is left to the ceremonies of the religious devotee. The concept of a truth seems to be more immediate, more objective, than a belief and the use of the term 'truth' will be now considered more carefully.

Footnotes

* It is not necessary to discuss the nature-versus-nurture argument here but we may note in passing that advances in neuroscience indicate that the genetic influence is greater than many thought or, in the case of our earnest Marxists, hoped. That debate must be left to our neuroscientists, psychologists and politicians.

** We are not concerned here with the 'existence' addressed by the physicists. We are not concerned with existence as expressed in space-time or quantum probability. We are concerned here only with the idea of 'being' in a linguistic sense, as a grammatical instrumental tool (the verb 'to be') insofar as it informs our understanding and our behaviour.

*** This follows the view of John McDowell, in 'Mind and World'. McDowell argues that the external world affects our conception of it but does not determine our concept of it; we are, to a degree, free to choose [23].

Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit picture is a simple drawing that can be perceived as either a duck or a rabbit. There has been much discussion of how it is that the object of perception remains the same but the concept changes.

Belief and Epistemology
the question of truth

Giving a watertight account or proof of a universal, objective, Truth has been the 'holy grail' of philosophers over the ages. This elusive Truth continues to obsess religious and political fundamentalists – and some others who should know better.

We have noted that traditional philosophy addresses the question of reality in terms of ontology (what 'being' is) and epistemology (what 'truth' is 'is'). To do this philosophers have generally used logic as a vehicle for ideas of truth in a bivalent sense, i.e. a proposition either 'is true' or 'is not true' and nothing else.

The challenge in this book is not to this logic per se but rather to the way, and where, it is used. It will be argued that this bivalent approach can lead (and too often has led) to a fundamentalist 'realist' view. This is the view that there is an accessible objective reality and that we can really 'know' it (whatever that means); that the concepts and views we form of reality can be objectively true; that they apply universally and hence can be imposed as unquestionably correct.

We have noted that we can, unthinkingly, ignore our subjectivity and attribute to our ontological 'is' of being a transcendental objective status and then transfer this objective status to an epistemological 'is' of truth. We can be led to adopt the concept of an objectively knowable truth, which sits (conveniently for some) alongside the idea of a transcendental God who knows (or even 'is') it. We can see how the idea of an objective truth has been appropriated throughout history by

religious and political leaders who have found the concept of an unchallengeable truth useful in the exercise of power.

Putting this argument differently we can see that the idea of a 'really is', an objective reality and truth, has provided a survival advantage in an evolutionary sense. It has facilitated our control of ourselves and the external world. But we have been led astray by our grammar (and by some over-ambitious analytic philosophers) to think of our subjective 'truth' in terms of a self-attributed objective 'is' of being.

We can recognise that the **idea** of an absolute objective truth has got us into a lot of trouble. What we should do is recognise that all our concepts are subjective, and the epistemological 'is' of truth can be understood only in the context 'is true for us'. We must recognise that the idea of an objective universal truth is not only untenable, it is senseless.

We can go on to recognise that our 'is' as a function of language, and here, we must note, language compounds our difficulties. Philosophical problems arise when, as Wittgenstein puts it, language is forced from the 'frictionless ice' of metaphysics to the 'rough ground' of everyday life. We confuse ourselves when we use the same term (our 'is') in different contexts and expect it to carry the same meaning, status and implications. As Wittgenstein puts it:

> 'We remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all every-day language because the clothing of our language makes everything [look] alike.'
>
> *Philosophical Investigations II, xi* [18]

We have to learn that if we seek to transfer the status of the language of the analytical philosopher (whatever 'is' is) to the language of everyday use, we encounter problems. The status of the 'is' of 'two plus two is four', is not the same as the status of the 'is' of 'the rose is red', nor the same as the 'is' of 'that is the number 6 bus' – although, as we shall note, we are conditioned to act as if it was.

The perspective adopted here recognises the unavoidable subjectivity of all our concepts and denies the possibility (and indeed the meaning) of an objective truth. We can have only reality **for**, truth **for**, some sentient being. We bring to our perception of reality a species-subjective reference. At best, we can have only our human 'reality', our human 'truths', our human 'is'.

Let us illustrate this point with a homely example. Here is a Geordie football fantasy:

It is the 89th minute of the Newcastle-Sunderland cup final. I did say it was a fantasy! There is, as yet, no score. Alan Shearer traps a forward pass. He turns. He shoots. He scores … or does he?

> The linesman flags for offside.
> The video camera images show offside.
> The referee blows his whistle … and declares a goal.

The Newcastle supporters rise in ecstatic acclamation of a brilliant goal and a historic victory. The Sunderland fans erupt in anger at a visually challenged referee of doubtful parentage.

What is the 'truth' of this event? That Shearer scored a goal is the truth of the Newcastle fans and the referee. But that is certainly not the truth of the Sunderland fans or the linesman.

This Geordie football fantasy warns us that the 'truth' is not the unambiguous account of warring football fans, religious fundamentalists, or worried moralists. 'Truth' is more complicated than that.

Let us return to our consideration of Shearer's goal or non-goal. According to the Football Association (F.A.) rules a goal was recorded, for the referee's decision is final. From the perspective of the Newcastle fans, a goal was scored. From the perspective of the linesman and the Sunderland fans, Shearer was offside and a goal was not scored. The 'truth', it would seem, depends upon the mind-set of the observer – on their interpretation of the F.A. rules.

To complete our story it is necessary to report that after the match the referee stepped in front of a number 6 bus (driven, coincidentally, by a Sunderland supporter), and was killed. The autopsy showed that the referee was suffering from a softening of the brain (a well observed occupational hazard for his profession) and that, in the words of the coroner, 'he would have been unable to recognise a number 6 bus, never mind get out of the way of one'.

In view of the medical evidence that the referee was *non composmentis* Sunderland placed an appeal before the F.A. Board. Their verdict is awaited, and when their chairperson was asked what was the likely outcome he remarked 'God knows'. And, if He existed, so indeed He would.

What are we to make of this cautionary tale? If we dismiss the possibility of a god-like referee with 20:20 vision and an infallible interpretation of a holy rule book, we may be tempted to seek a scientific, third-person, account of our football drama.

From a scientific 'third-person' perspective (i.e. a view acceptable to any neutral observer), after a player in a black and white shirt was observed to kick the ball into the net the referee then declared a goal. Even the Sunderland supporters could agree with that account, albeit reluctantly. That view is certainly a truth in the sense of a historical fact. *However, we would be wrong to claim that it is an objective, universal truth for it is conditioned by our human subjectivity.*

We have stripped out the cultural subjectivity of the Newcastle and Sunderland fans and their partisan interpretation of the F.A. rules, but we are left with the physiological subjectivity of our species – e.g. our perception of time and space, cause and effect.

For example, a Martian might see our account of the Newcastle-Sunderland cup-tie differently. What, he/she might ask (if Martians have such genders) is this 'after' and 'then' of your scientific account? What omniscient gods wrote this Holy Rule Book? Or what, he/she might ask (if Martians have developed their own metaphysics) do you mean by your 'is'?

Bringing in an Aristotelian distinction, the opposing football fans (and our scientists) were referring to the 'one subject' (the ball in the net) but not to the 'one significance' (the meaning of 'goal'). In other words, whenever we make a judgement we necessarily bring our own reference frame, our own significance, and hence our own 'truth' to the question.

The view advanced in this book is that we are inclined to forget this subjective status when we address an issue simply in bivalent terms, saying that it either 'is' or 'is not' the case. So, while we can use our reason in terms of bivalent logic within our anthropocentric reference frame, we must recognise that this does not lead us to objective, transcendental truths but only to our own subjective species-dependent truth. Our 'facts', our 'truths' and our 'is' only relate to the species we are. And even our scientific 'facts' can be only species-valid – and selectively at that.

Most postmodern philosophers recognise 'truth' in the instrumental sense: that 'truth' is concerned with the rhetorical and practical as much as the metaphysical. Calvin O. Schrag says:

> 'Truth must no longer be conceived of, metaphysically or epistemologically, as the correspondence of ideas with so-called objective reality … Truth must rather be seen to be a practical notion, an "implicate" of our being and action.
>
> Truth is not merely to be discovered; it is something we have the responsibility for making … the disclosure of possibilities for agreed-upon perspectives for seeing the world and acting within it.'

The Task of Philosophy after Postmodernism [29]

When we acknowledge the subjectivity of our truths the manner by which we 'discover' truth and how we express it becomes crucial. The status of ideas of knowledge and language needs our further consideration.

Knowledge and Language

So, how are we to accommodate this predisposition to speak in terms of an objective 'truth' of a 'real' reality while, at the same time, acknowledging our subjectivist perspective?

We can see that language has evolved as a tool to enable us to identify concepts and exchange ideas; to facilitate our dealings with others and the external (and internal) world. We can go on to recognise that this process has resulted in a basic universal language structure, as identified for example by Noam Chomsky [15] at least insofar as it refers to a universal grammar which requires us to speak in bivalent terms of the verb 'to be'. We are conditioned to speak in terms of what 'is', or 'is not' the case.

Early Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Protagoras questioned the relationship between our concepts and the external world. Plato discussed the status of our view of reality and recognised, percipiently, that it was our language, and in particular the use of the verb 'to be' (our 'is') which determines our account of reality. Later, Nietzsche was to argue that it was this aspect of grammar that caused us to continue to believe in God:

> 'I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar…'
>
> *Twilight of the Idols* [9]

Ludwig Wittgenstein is recognised as the great linguistic philosopher of the 20th century. His philosophy is difficult to summarise (some

would say impossible) but in his later work he saw that a word does not have a single meaning with a bivalent truth value ('is true' or 'is not true'). Wittgenstein saw that words are not symbols we can account for using the bivalent concepts of logic. Language is, rather, a multivalent instrument with several functions, meanings, intentions and consequences. We cannot, as Wittgenstein pointed out, apply the 'frictionless ice' of logic to the 'rough ground' of everyday life. Language is too fluid a vehicle to properly uphold the rigid bivalent conclusions of our analytic philosophers – a conclusion already familiar to our poets and playwrights (and politicians).

Further, we can see that in the absence of a celestial dictionary we can never say with absolute finality what we mean in language, for a word can be explained only by reference to other words. There is no privileged interpretation of a text. Ultimately, as Wittgenstein came to recognise, we can only show.

We can note where these philosophers are coming from – even if we don't always want to follow where they are going. As we have seen, ultimately, the question of reality is a question of ontology (what we mean by 'is') and the question of truth is a question of epistemology (how we recognise what our 'is' is). Knowledge involves both concepts when we identify it as synonymous with the idea of 'what is true'. We can note the potential for confusion when in our language we use the same term (our 'is') to address concepts of being and truth, belief and knowledge. This can be illustrated by the following extract.

The contemporary philosopher Duncan Pritchard writes:

> 'One way of approaching the topic of the value of knowledge is to note that one can only know what is true, and truth in ones beliefs does seem to be valuable. If truth in ones beliefs is valuable, and knowledge demands truth, then we may be at least halfway to answering our question of why knowledge is valuable.'

The use by Pritchard of the term 'truth' as a (seemingly) objective concept would appear, at first, to contradict the relativist understanding we have adopted here. The use, by Pritchard, of the

term 'true beliefs' would seem to imply an ultimate utility and an objective reality. However, Pritchard continues:

> 'Truth in one's beliefs is at least minimally valuable in the sense that, all other things being equal, true beliefs are better than false ones because having true beliefs enables us to fulfil our goals'.

What Is This Thing Called Knowledge? [(29)]

Here, Pritchard's concept of beliefs ('to fulfil our goals') is consistent with the instrumentalist view adopted in this book. However, Pritchard goes on to query the validity of the term 'true' in this context. He points out that a 'false belief' might lead to 'better' results than a 'true belief'.

The view taken in this book is that the use of the term 'true belief' in this context is misleading. For us here, the status of a belief is to be judged by its instrumental value, by its consistent usefulness and predictability, as judged by empiric evidence. When a 'belief' is universally observed to work for us consistently over a period it becomes, for us, a 'fact' – or, as it will be termed later in this book, a 'hard belief'.

The view taken here is, then, behavioural or instrumentalist. Language is a tool which allows us to identify and construct concepts, cognitive models, which, when they work consistently, we recognise as knowledge or facts. The status of our facts is to be judged not in terms of their objective truth, not as descriptions of an objective reality, but rather by their effectiveness as instruction or advice as how 'best', how most effectively, to act. The question of how we judge what aims our concepts and beliefs are to be instrumentally best **for**, is considered in the following chapters.

J.T. Blackmore writes:

> 'A piece of knowledge is never false or true – but only more or less biologically and evolutionarily useful.'

Ernst Mach – A Deeper Look [(32)]

This evolutionary view of epistemology by Mach is compatible with the instrumentalist view taken in this book. But the view taken here is wider and more immediate than historical biological survival. The view taken here allows us to include in our perspective the continuing instrumental usefulness of the concept 'knowledge' employed in our philosophical discourses and in our everyday affairs.

The different understandings of the word 'knowledge' when expressed in terms of 'truth' or 'reality' can, as we have noted, cause confusion both when deployed at the philosophical and practical level. To avoid this confusion the term 'belief' is generally used in this book in place of the tem 'knowledge'.

All beliefs are recognised here as subjective concepts, but some beliefs are recognised as more subjective (with less rational and less empirical support) than others. This allows us to view beliefs on the basis of their instrumental efficacy without the distractions of ideas of transcendental truths or concepts of an objective reality. We can identify a spectrum of beliefs and distinguish between our 'hard' beliefs (e.g. our mathematics and scientific facts) and our 'soft' beliefs (e.g. our faiths and secular grand narratives). The nature and relative status of these beliefs is considered later.

Science, as we have noted, is regarded as a primary source of (relatively) secure beliefs and the scientific method is an important paradigm in our consideration of belief systems. We can usefully examine the nature of scientific knowledge and its methodology in our consideration of the construction of reality and truth.

Science and the Scientific Method

Scientific concepts and the scientific method have emerged as the consequence of our curiosity to understand and control our environment. We can see how this feature has served an evolutionary survival advantage: science is important to us because it works. Through science, supernatural explanations of the universe have been replaced progressively by rationalist, materialist ones and, at least in the West, science has been founded on reason and empiricism.

Scientific concepts and methodology and their accompanying technologies have been a determining factor in the history of the human species. More than religion or political beliefs, more than art or philosophy, the ideas of science have changed the way we live and what we think. And now, with genetic engineering, science has the power to change not only how we live but also to change what we are. Whether or not we think this is a benevolent development, we can recognise that the techniques of science have delivered huge gains in knowledge and human physical welfare.

The scientific method is a potent technique (for some, the only technique) for gaining a secure understanding of ourselves and the universe. Importantly, we can see that the scientific method has delivered a body of knowledge which is universally recognised, accepted and used – and yet remains open to challenge and to change. We will see in the following chapters that this provides us with a useful paradigm for a universal belief system which embraces a full range of human concepts, beliefs and values.

It is useful to recall the methodology of science insofar as it relates to knowledge and belief. The scientific method can be summarised as:

a) Forming a hypothesis (often involving a mathematical model) based on observation.

b) Testing the predictions of that hypothesis and its coherence with other scientific theories. Does it work?

c) Seeking the endorsement of peers.

d) Confirming, rejecting or amending the hypothesis in the light of further considerations and observations.

e) Accepting that no number of observations can prove the hypothesis to be definitively and objectively 'true', and recognising that theories must be open to potential disproof.

Science has caused us to review our concepts of the external (and internal) world and, importantly, to reconsider the status of our beliefs about them. Currently, science and philosophy converge in one important aspect, namely in recognising the subjective nature of our descriptions of the physical world. The idea of the reference frame of the observer has been written into our scientific and philosophical accounts of reality.

For the positivist scientist, truth is the correspondence of our conceptual models with observed reality. As we have noted, such a correspondence theory begs the question of what we understand by 'reality'. And, most scientists now assert that concepts of 'truth' and 'reality' are not their business – this, they say, is the business of the philosophers.

Scientists such as Stephen Hawking recognise that ideas of 'reality' are not their concern:

> 'As I am a positivist the question "Do extra dimensions exist?" has no meaning. All one can ask is whether mathematical models with extra dimensions provide a good description of the universe.'
>
> *The Universe in a Nutshell* [25]

As we have noted, accounts of 'reality', as the term is commonly

used, involve both our ontological 'is' and our epistemological 'truth' (we tend to talk in terms of 'what is really true'). This draws us into the linguistic debate set out above, which led us to the conclusion that the bivalent language of metaphysical propositions (the 'is' or 'is not' the case), when viewed as having an absolute, objective status, conflicts both with our anthropocentric subjectivity and with the multivalent understandings of ordinary language. And, now we can see, the bivalent language of analytic philosophy, when viewed as carrying the status of ultimate truths, conflicts with the more modest claims of science.

The view of science as progressively revealing an objective truth has been replaced by the idea of science producing robust hypotheses; in other words producing structured beliefs that work for us for now. Subjectivity, the role of an 'observer', is at the heart of the scientific paradigm.

Einstein showed that our observations of space and time are subjective, even when expressed in mathematical terms. His General and Special Theories of Relativity, for example, are premised on the reference frame of an observer (although we might think that Einstein himself took an 'objective', god-like, view of his 'observer'). Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg saw that our observation of sub-atomic particles must be viewed as a 'wave function' of probability. And Heisenberg summed up his Uncertainty Principle thus:

> 'We can no longer speak of the behaviour of the particle independently of the process of observation … nor is it possible to ask whether or not these particles exist in space and time objectively. … Science no longer confronts nature as an objective observer … the scientific method of analysing, explaining and classifying has become conscious of its limitations.'
>
> *Uncertainty Principle* [24]

Quantum physicists adopt a phenomenological position and explain that what we refer to as our 'reality' is brought about by empiric observation. For example, in the famous thought experiment, Schrödinger's cat in a box is the victim of a sub-atomic quantum

event which is not caused, not predictable, and not 'real' until it is observed. The cat simultaneously 'is dead' and 'is not dead' until we open the box and observe it.

We now understand that the position and the momentum of an electron can only be expressed in terms of quantum probability. This is not to understand the electron as somehow smeared out along its path, but rather as existing along all possible paths in some non-classical form of being. And even the basic reality of sub-atomic particles is uncertain. As Stephen Hawking says:

> 'particles appear and disappear at random. At this quantum level even reality is uncertain.'
>
> *Master of the Universe* [26]

So, our physicists tell us that the notion of an objective reality explicable in terms of objective bivalent ontology ('it is' or 'it is not') is no longer tenable.

One consequence of this understanding is a call by some quantum physicists for philosophers to reconsider their concept of reality. There is the view of some physicists (and some philosophers) that while our language causes us to think in terms of individual subjects and verbs it is rather holistic, dynamic 'processes' which need to be addressed.

Our astrophysicists see the universe (or perhaps a multiverse) as a continuing cosmic process following, or perhaps generating, its own laws. However, we must resist the temptation to see this process as something independent of us. We ourselves and the concepts we form are part of that process. The 'processes' we see are by us and for us.

The positivist scientists say that the only proper way to proceed is to recognise that we construct models which work according to current rules and which are recognised as provisional and revisable. The question, for them, is not 'is it a true description of reality?' but rather an instrumentalist one: 'does it work for now?' We can see that ideas of an account of a universal reality and an objective truth have been largely abandoned by the scientific community. Scientists no longer

view the **status** of their models in objective ontological or epistemological terms.

Nevertheless, the ideas of an objective 'reality' and a corresponding objective 'truth' are now part of our evolutionary heritage – we find it natural, indeed necessary, to talk in these pro-realist terms: we act as if that 'is' or 'is not' the number 6 bus. We must now consider how we can proceed to deal with this condition from our subjectivist perspective. To do this we must examine further the genesis of our beliefs.

Kant saw that 'the order and regularity in appearances, which we entitle nature, we ourselves introduce' [7]. In this 'regularity' Kant recognised reason as *a priori*, a necessary given, and it is necessary to consider reason from our qualified postmodern perspective.

Reason
logic and rationality

The concept 'reason' and the use of reason (rationality) lie at the heart of analytic discourse. Hegel, for example, equates reason with the unfurling of reality [3]. Immanuel Kant remarks:

> 'All our knowledge begins with the sense, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing higher than reason.'
>
> *Critique of Pure Reason* [8]

Many Enlightenment thinkers viewed reason as the means of delivering universal scientific truths and absolute social and artistic values – what can be identified, in a cultural sense, as 'modernism'. That view is questioned by many contemporary writers who have come to recognise both the error and the dangers in such conclusions. The American philosopher Richard Rorty argues that this 'modern' view has led us to reductive quasi-scientific practices, and worse to the pseudo-sciences of fascism and Soviet so-called communism. Rorty remarks:

> 'In our century, the rationalist justification of the Enlightenment compromise has been discredited.'
>
> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [33]

We should, it would seem, approach the outcome of our rationality with caution.

In philosophy, reason appears in its strongest form in formal logic. W.D. Ross quotes Aristotle to give us an example:

> 'It is impossible then that "being a man" should mean precisely "not being a man" if "man" not only signifies something about one subject but also has one significance'.

Metaphysics by Aristotle [(30)]

We can observe here an early example of the use of the bivalent concept (the 'is' or 'is not') of the analytical philosopher.

Bertrand Russell, as we have noted, expressed a bivalent view of logic as follows:

1. Law of identity. 'Whatever is, is.'

2. Law of noncontradiction. 'Nothing can both be and not be.'

3. Law of excluded middle. 'Everything must either be or not be.'

The Problems of Philosophy [(12)]

The third law is famously described as the law of the excluded middle (LEM): 'Not(a and Not a)'. We can see this expressed symbolically in bivalent terms as $\neg(a \ \& \ \neg a)$. In our case LEM would hold that 'it is not the case that the same thing, in the same sense, is both true and not true'; or, in symbols $\neg(Ta \ \& \ \neg Ta)$.

Perhaps there is nothing we can do about this innate binary approach to reason and to logic. Perhaps, in our cognitive processes, we are prisoners of the binary condition of our synapses for which connections are either 'on' or 'off'. We may speculate that this is a form of process replicated in computers where the digital electronic circuits have only an 'on' or an 'off' state. Perhaps this binary condition is the explanation of our evolved universal grammar which forces us to speak in terms of the verb 'to be'. As Hamlet would have it we must ask 'to be or not to be?'.

It is not the intention here to question this view of logic per se. If analytic philosophers need to talk in these bivalent terms, that's fine. What we must question here is the ontological and epistemological **status** of these terms 'is' and 'is not'.

As we have noted, Wittgenstein came to understand that logic will not (cannot) lead us to universal objective truths or meaning; reason cannot lead to truths outside our chosen reference system. But reason and logic are useful, necessary even, when used to explore relationships within a chosen reference frame.

Wittgenstein argued that all 'atomic' propositions can be expressed in terms of symbolic logic. But, he also showed, all propositions of logic are tautologies and hence all philosophical propositions are meaningless – or at least their meaning is inexpressible [17]. There is, Wittgenstein argued, a relationship between the structure of our propositions and the structure of the 'facts' (their 'logical structures' have something in common) – but, Wittgenstein argues, we are unable to say what that relationship is.

We have noted that this matter is concerned with the epistemological status of the 'is' of the proposition and the ontological status of the 'is' of the 'fact' to which it relates. Russell, as we have observed, addressed this issue by resorting to the declaration: 'whatever "is", is' – but, we can note, we are unable to say what that 'is' is. However, it is argued here, we can recognise the instrumental value of the ontological 'is' and epistemological 'is' in dealing with matters of belief in a behavioural context.

We can, perhaps, more easily explain this point in concrete terms. We can see that the bivalent logic of a computer programme cannot tell us anything about the non-computer world that it has not been told to tell us. It cannot produce an output without an input. The computer's logic can, however, clarify what it is it has been told to tell us. We can see that logic has an instrumental value in clarifying what it is we are telling ourselves.

Kant made a distinction between 'pure' reason and 'practical'

reasoning. Wittgenstein, in his later work, adopted a not-dissimilar approach. He recognised logic as an 'idealised delusion', something 'sublime', which enables language to work[18]. There is an apocryphal, but epistemologically revealing, story of Wittgenstein when briefly a resident of Newcastle upon Tyne, addressing a local Geordie:

'Is it the case the number 6 bus will take me to South Shields?'

The Geordie replies 'yes', or more likely, 'whae aye man'.

Wittgenstein returns and accosts the Geordie:

'I thought you said the number 6 bus would take me to South Shields; it took me to Sunderland.'

'Whae man', says the Geordie, 'when I say the number 6 bus goes to Shields I mean the number 6 bus that goes to Shields will take you to Shields. The number 6 bus that goes to Sunderland will take you to Sunderland.'

Wittgenstein is reported to have been overwhelmed by this Geordie logic and abandoned analytic philosophy – and Geordie public transport.

The fatal error in Enlightenment thinking was, then, not in regarding reason as an epistemological device, but rather in elevating reason as a means of delivering transcendental absolute truths. We can recognise we must accept reason and bivalent logic, but only as a cognitive tool. The human species is 'homo rationalist'. Reason is indeed *a priori*, a necessary given, to our thinking. But it is necessary, not sufficient, for our beliefs.

In other words, we should note that rationality is inherent in human thought. Our evolved conceptual capacities, our cognitive processes, require the use of reason and logic, our 'is' or 'is not' *a priori*. We think, therefore we reason. This means that our beliefs must be logically coherent within a given belief system, but, we must

recognise, the outcome of our rationality cannot be granted the status of an objective absolute.

The powerful, but misguided view of an accessible transcendental truth, a 'real' reality, an objective 'is', remains the source of many of our problems, philosophical and social. Thus, while the Enlightenment can be welcomed as identifying rational, liberal, secular values, it can also be seen to have seduced us with a view of dangerous concepts of transcendental metaphysical absolutes.

We have noted that entangled in the question of rationality is the question of what the meaning, the status, of our 'is' is. This matter was discussed in the chapters 'Belief and Ontology' and 'Belief and Epistemology'. The use of reason to lead us to say that this proposition 'is true', or 'is not true', involves not only our view of epistemology but also how we view our ontology.

We must recognise that the status we attribute to our epistemological 'is' (of truth) has not necessarily the same status we attribute to our ontological 'is' (of being). Our epistemological 'truth' can be ascertained by logic (if we choose to define it in that way). The ontological status of our 'fact' requires us to step outside that belief system with an assertion. We will have cause to remember this point in the following chapters.*

The effect of reason in constraining our cognitive freedom remains the subject of philosophical debate.

As the contemporary philosopher Paul Pietroski puts it:

'concepts are part of a revisable classification system that makes free thinking possible; although given a system of concepts at a particular time, we can find ourselves saddled with the content of our experiences, in the sense that we cannot [rationally] make the world appear differently.'

Critical Notice of Mind and World [34]

We can think of Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit picture as a duck or as a

rabbit. We cannot, rationally, in the same sense, think of it as an elephant [18].

We can think that it 'is true' that 2 apples plus 2 apples is 4 apples. That is a tautology arising from our everyday concept of number and the concept of 'is' (as Russell puts it 'whatever "is", is'). But from a different mathematical perspective of so-called 'imaginary' numbers, say, 2 plus 2 can be any number from -4 to 4. We have to recognise that even our arithmetic depends upon our chosen mathematical model.

So, while bivalent logic is a useful conceptual tool we must be cautious of defining its content in absolute terms and then transferring that status to our ontological and epistemological concepts.

For us, then, rationality is not optional. But we must remember the status of the concepts that reason delivers, i.e. we must remember they are species-subjective human constructs. The cognitive consequences of our rationality can be only a working hypothesis of how we should behave within our chosen frame of reference; as how we should act 'as if'. We can believe that it 'is true' that that is the number 6 bus, but we must be prepared to get off the bus if we observe it is going in the wrong direction.

We can note that, for an individual, our beliefs evolve over a lifetime in accordance with our experiences and the innate cognitive processes of our brain. We can see that, for the human species, some universal beliefs and cognitive processes have evolved over our biological and cultural history and that these universal beliefs and cognitive processes can be recognised as cognitive *a priori*, as necessary cognitive characteristics of our species.

Footnote

* This question of the meaning, status and relationship of our ontological and epistemological concepts remains the concern of many philosophers. The impossibility of defining the meaning of, and the relationship between, our 'is' of being and our 'is' of truth in metaphysical terms led Wittgenstein to resort to the 'inexpressible' and the 'mystical'.

This question is addressed here in this book by the rejection of any metaphysical or mystical notions of truth or reality and the adoption of an instrumentalist perspective – we need only note their subjective status and address the question of how they are used. The account given here should be adequate for the general purposes of this book but the anxious reader can find fuller postmodern expositions in the published work of the more significant thinkers of the 20th century, including the usual suspects: Sartre, Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida.

Universals and Universality

For the past hundred years or so most philosophers have regarded 'universals' as grammatical items (the ontological 'is' of governed by grammatical rules that explain how we use them (the epistemological 'is' of truth). Few, and certainly not the postmodern seriously regard them now as metaphysical items.

The view taken here is that both the ontological and epistemological uses of our 'is' (e.g. when used in the term 'is true') are subjective, instrumental constructs, grounded in the evolved structure of our brain and conditioned by our physical and cultural environments. The view of objective transcendental universals, as free-standing entities, 'out there' is not only wrong, it has become meaningless.

Nevertheless, as Russell pointed out, there are metaphysical problems here when we consider the question of the 'existence' of some abstract ideas such as truth; justice; whiteness; etc, which are not concepts of a particular object and would appear to have some form of universal standing. Russell says:

> 'Thus thoughts and feelings, minds and physical objects **exist** But universals do not exist in this sense: we shall say they **subsist** or **have being**, where "being" is opposed to "existence" as timeless.'
>
> *The Problems of Philosophy* [12]

In this way Russell makes a distinction between things existing in time, in the way external objects 'exist', and conceptual 'things' which exist out of time i.e. 'subsist'.

Russell's position illustrates the difficulty and ambiguity concerning the use of the concepts 'existence' and 'being' in a metaphysical sense – and, as we have seen, we can add to these difficulties the problems concerning the concepts 'reality' and 'truth'. From a strict metaphysical view the status of these concepts is uncertain and their meaning ambiguous. The view taken in this book is that they are all human instrumental constructs. That is not to say that it is all just in the mind, but rather that the external universe 'exists' for us only insofar as it allows (causes) us to form concepts of it in the terms we do.

Russell's universal 'whiteness' does not exist for the postmodern philosopher as some form of abstract metaphysical item. Whiteness exists for us only insofar as some external 'things out there' allow us to relate our concept 'whiteness' to them.

The view taken here is that the idea of an objective, free-floating, depersonalised 'truth' or 'justice' or 'whiteness' is untenable. They cannot just exist 'out there' in some abstract state. It takes a sentient being to have a truth, a belief, a whiteness (or, indeed, an 'is').

A similar critique applies to our ideas of meaning and language. Meaning doesn't exist 'out there' in some sort of celestial dictionary. We can agree with Wittgenstein that a word has different meanings for different hearers, in different circumstances, and, indeed, in different sentences. So, it takes a sentient being to 'grasp' a meaning. In this way, we can see that 'truth', 'reality', 'meaning' (and our 'is') are all subjective human constructs.

Earlier philosophers believed, appropriately for their time and culture, in the existence of non-material spirits and metaphysical items. Plato referred to concepts such as truth and justice as 'universal ideas' and they have become known in traditional philosophy as 'universals'. The postmodern perspective adopted in this book denies us the use of the term 'universals' in this way, i.e. as an abstract noun in a metaphysical sense. As used in this book, the concept 'universal beliefs' is not a belief in metaphysical 'universals'.

Nevertheless, it is useful to be able to use the term 'universal' as an adjective when we consider any species-specific belief system. Here, it is necessary to recognise species universality *a priori*; that is to say that there are some necessary cognitive processes of the species that facilitates a universal understanding. For example, for the human species, properly functioning, the proposition '2 apples plus 2 apples is 4 apples' is a universally understood construct. Mathematics and logic (and indeed science) are not private languages.

We must accept that there are some innate universal understandings that are trans-cultural; meanings and intentions we can exchange across the species. If this was not the case we would not be able to communicate with each other – and language translators would be out of a job.

It should be obvious, then, that the term 'universal' is used here in this text in the sense of being 'global', applicable to the whole species. We need to think we can recognise some species universality. Indeed, the recognition of some innate cognitive processes, common to our species, is crucial to the principal thesis advanced in this book.

It is generally acknowledged that our concepts are the consequences of patterns of synaptic connections of the neurons of the brain. It is argued here that some of these cognitive processes are common to our species. We can identify a common architecture of the human brain, which, in a reaction with the environment, delivers what we will call our universal 'hard beliefs'. We can surmise that what we will call our individual 'soft beliefs' will emerge as neurons mature and, progressively, form other synaptic connections due to a further reaction with the environment.

We can, then, identify the status of our 'hard beliefs' (our mathematics, science and historical facts) as universal concepts arising, mainly, from the architecture of a characteristic human brain and senses in a reaction to the universe. We can identify the status of our 'soft beliefs' (our personal faiths and human narratives) as concepts arising, mainly, from the influence of our local, cultural environments (see the chapters 'Hard Beliefs' and 'Soft Beliefs').

However, we can recognise also some universal human culture in the form of universal human values and behaviour. This universal culture can be seen to predispose a sub-set of soft beliefs which are universal. Thus, in addition to our universal hard beliefs, we can recognise some universal soft beliefs.

The processes by which our species has developed a universal culture have been recognised by our social biologists and evolutionary psychologists as being the result of the co-evolution of evolutionary biological units (genes) and evolutionary cultural units (memes). This process is thought to have occurred over many millennia* and produced what E.O. Wilson calls 'epigenic rules':

> 'Culture is created by the communal mind, and each mind in turn is the product of the genetically structured human brain … For most of the evolutionary history of homosapiens cultural evolution was slow enough to remain tightly coupled to genetic evolution … the Palaeolithic genes [have] stayed in place and continue to prescribe the foundations of human behaviour.'
>
> *Consilience* (³⁷)

To sum up, we are now universally genetically predisposed (or programmed as some would have it) to some species-specific cognitive processes delivering some universal hard beliefs and some universal soft beliefs. These universal beliefs and accompanying values and behaviour (comprising together our mathematics, logic and sciences and some universal ethics) show us that we can think there is something that it is like to be human.

It is argued here that the identification of these common universal beliefs can provide us with a secure and acceptable universal belief and cultural system, a human monoculture, upon which we can safely locate our individual multicultural beliefs and values. The following chapters are directed to that task.

These universal beliefs are, then, an expression of a genetically delivered human condition; of how we have evolved to perceive reality and of how 'best' to behave individually and collectively as

social beings in meeting our physical and emotional needs and drives and experiencing what it is to be human.

For reasons argued earlier, these universal beliefs and ensuing values cannot be regarded as absolute or objective metaphysical items. (They are not the 'universals' of the metaphysical philosophers.) So, although they have a special status, they are contingent beliefs. As argued elsewhere, they are subject to genetic and, perhaps crucially, to mimetic evolution. This means that our identification and description of these beliefs must be expressed in a form which recognises them as universal but also as provisional and contingent.

Consequently, any attempt to identify a contemporary belief system must be so structured that the content is seen to be open to revision and change, in the same way the scientific belief system allows for its hypotheses to be tested, accepted, rejected or amended. This point will be considered further when we come to discuss the possible structure and content of a universal belief system.

We have noted that our hard beliefs, together with those soft beliefs we can identify as universal, can be held to express a common human essence. This is, of course, not to say that the expression of humanity is identical for the entire human species, but only that there is sufficient commonality in some areas.

What might these common cognitive processes and universal human beliefs be? We have recognised, as *a priori*, rationality and the view of an ontological 'is' of being and epistemological 'is' of truth. Our scientists and mathematicians have identified our 'hard' beliefs (our universal facts). Our anthropologists, sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists have identified some universal, trans-cultural, 'soft' beliefs and values including autonomy, empathy and an ethical sense.

E.O. Wilson in Consilience [37] identifies universal 'epigenic rules'. Other writers such as Matt Ridley in The Origin of Virtue [41] purport to recognise universal evolved moral values. Daniel Dennett in Freedom Evolves [35] identifies the evolution of an autonomous self. Sigmund Freud, of course, recognised a universal structure and

dynamic of sexual drives underlying our attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. Carl Jung went on to identify a 'collective subconscious' – the 'reservoir of the experience of a species' [19].

The nature and identity of these universal human beliefs and values will be considered further in the chapter 'The Contents of a Universal Belief System' but we might note, in passing, the ubiquitous values expressed in human narratives from the Greek myths to modern novels, films and television 'soaps'. Such concepts can be readily seen to include ideas of individual rights and responsibilities, freedom, fairness and justice, together with the seemingly inexhaustible permutations and combinations of the manifestation of human love (and hate).

It is, then, a principal theme of this book that all our beliefs must be recognised simply as human cognitive constructs, arising from our genetically delivered brain and senses reacting with the environment, physical and cultural. In this we can recognise some universally held human beliefs, values and behaviour; the outcome of a co-evolving process of human genes and human culture. We can go on to identify these evolved beliefs and values as providing the basis of a universal belief system which we can recognise as definitive of our species. That task is the aim of the following chapters.

When we abandon the elusive and ultimately futile search for free-floating, metaphysical 'universals' of truth and reality we can attend to the real question of identifying what 'truths' we can 'believe' because of what we are.

Footnote

* Susan Blackmore reckons this co-evolution has been more or less stable for the past 10,000 years [36]

Belief Systems

As used here the term 'belief system' refers to a coherent philosophical structure for a range of beliefs, a world view, which informs our conscious behaviour. Philosophers have generally sought to establish a certainty, a secure basis, for these beliefs. Our concern here has been to examine the meaning and to establish the status of our beliefs.

We have noted that all our concepts and beliefs are anthropocentric and subjective – the consequence of our species-specific brain reacting with the universe. We do not approach the universe with a 'blank sheet'. Our concepts and beliefs have their genesis in the architecture of our brain and senses which delivers some specific cognitive processes. Thus we are conditioned to think in some characteristic manner involving *a priori* concepts some necessary given premises. These *a priori* grounds are implicit, but sometimes not acknowledged, in traditional philosophical discourse.

René Descartes is probably the best recognised in a search for philosophic certainty. Consider Descartes' well-known (and much abused) assertion 'cogito ergo sum' ('I think therefore I am'). On analysis, deconstruction if you like, we can see that this proposition rests on *a priori* grounds as follows:

> The 'I', recognises a conscious 'self'.
> The 'think', indicates an innate subjectivity.
> The 'therefore', recognises logic and reason.
> The 'am', indicates an epistemological certainty … or does it?

Descartes thought with his famous phrase to have established an objective certainty. However, we can see that the conclusion of his assertion can be expressed in more revealing terms:

> …the construct I think of as 'I' has the status of the construct I think of as 'am'.

Or, in more traditional philosophical terms:

> …the epistemological status attributed to the proposition 'I am' is determined by the ontological status attributed to the construct 'am'.

Expressed in this way Descartes' sought after objectivity becomes less convincing. We can see that Descartes was misled in his project on two accounts. First he (seemingly) viewed the ontological status of 'being' in terms of bivalent logic (everything either 'is' or 'is not'), and as an objective absolute. Thus he attributed to his ontological 'am' a objective status. He then transferred what he saw as the objective status of his 'am' to the epistemological status of the proposition 'I am' – Q.E.D.! The self- conferred objectivity of his 'am' of being has morphed into an objective 'am' of truth. Descartes' objectivity was written into his project from the start. He arrives at his sought-for objectivity by a linguistic sleight of hand.

From our postmodern perspective we can see that both terms, the 'am' and the 'I', are separate cognitive constructs and we cannot transfer the status we attribute to our concepts of 'being' (whatever that status might be) to the status of our concept of 'truth'. We tend to confuse ourselves by the conflation of ontological and epistemological concepts when we use terms such as 'I am' or 'is true'. This argument is addressed more fully in the chapters 'Belief and Ontology' and 'Belief and Epistemology'.

We have already established the status we must assign here to these terms 'am' and 'I'. From our perspective all concepts are subjective human constructs and we must ask (as does the positivist scientist), not whether these terms 'am' and 'I' are objectively 'real' or 'true' in a metaphysical but rather whether they work well for us in an instrumental sense.

It has been noted earlier that philosophical (and social) problems arising from the use of the verb 'to be' are often the consequence of a bivalent approach to the concepts 'being' and 'truth'. In analytic philosophy a proposition either 'is true' or 'is not true' (the 'law of the excluded middle'). We have seen that this bivalent language is too easily viewed in transcendental objective terms and that this causes us, often unthinkingly, to attribute an objective epistemological status to our propositions.

The view taken here is that the verb 'to be', our 'is', together with our concept 'truth', are evolved human constructs, evolved functions of language. They are, as we have noted, useful, necessary even, but they cannot be taken to provide us with an objectively 'true' account of an objective 'reality'. When we claim that a proposition is the case (or is not the case), we must be conscious of the ontological status we attribute to our 'is' – and be cautious of the epistemological status we grant to our propositions.

Similarly, the concepts of 'self' and 'agency' must be addressed from the position of human subjectivity. The question of the nature (or indeed the existence) of self and human agency continues to exercise both philosophers of mind and neuroscientists alike. The position taken here is, as we have noted, that of Daniel Dennett in Freedom Evolves [35] and Susan Blackmore in The Meme Machine[36], i.e. what we perceive as human agency is an evolved historical cognitive construct. We can see that the ideas of 'being' and 'self', 'agency' and 'rationality' have been advantageous in the evolutionary struggle for survival and we can conclude that the human species is now genetically programmed to think in these terms.

We can have our 'is', our 'truth', our 'reason' and our 'self' as useful cognitive constructs. Indeed, if we are to attempt to give a coherent analytical account of our beliefs, we must adopt these concepts as *a priori*, a necessary given.

There is, then, an innate human cognitive process which gives rise to concepts of an autonomous core self (however that might be seen to have been constructed); a universal rationality (however that might be

seen to be contingent); a realist ontology and epistemology (however that might be seen to have evolved). These are now the *a priori* of our cognitive processes.

We have noted that we must resist the temptation to view these a priori as being, or leading to, objective truths of a 'real' reality. We have come to recognise the impossibility, indeed the meaningless, of our search for transcendental truths and, having abandoned this mythology, we are free to seek other grounds for our epistemology.

We have noted that we are the outcome of an evolutionary process. If we were to seek to identify a purpose, a direction, for evolution, we can see this only as an exploration of the possibilities of being. If we are disposed to mega-narratives, we can see this evolution as part of a continuing physical cosmic process (or, if we are of a religious disposition, the 'hand of God'). However we view this we should, it would seem, respect what evolution has delivered for us so far – indeed we cannot avoid it for that is what we now are.

Consequently, the ontological and epistemological criterion for our beliefs adopted here is behavioural or instrumentalist – what cognitive processes, evolution has delivered for us as a species. The 'aim' of this evolutionary process has been to provide the necessary concepts, beliefs and behaviour to meet our physical and emotional needs for survival and for our expression as a species.

As we have become conscious of this evolutionary process, we can decide, as part of that process and within the constraints of the human condition, what the objective(s) of our species should now be. How best that project might be identified and pursued is considered in the following chapters.

It has been argued that we can recognise some species universality in our innate cognitive processes and some universality in the beliefs they deliver. We can recognise some cognitive processes, some basic beliefs and behaviour that define for us what it is like to be human.

It now becomes possible, from this instrumentalist perspective, to

distinguish between our 'hard' beliefs' (our mathematics, sciences and historical facts) and our 'soft' beliefs (our visions, faiths and personal narratives). We would be prepared, generally, to act upon our hard beliefs with confidence. With our soft beliefs we might be prepared, sometimes, to take a chance.

Our hard beliefs are innate, universal, and determined mainly by the common cognitive processes resulting from the characteristic architecture of the human brain and senses. Our soft beliefs are for the most part acquired, individual and culturally predisposed. With this understanding we can now consider the nature and the status of these beliefs and how they might be located in the structure of a coherent universal belief system.

Hard Beliefs
sciences and historical facts

The status we attribute to our hard beliefs, including our mathematics, scientific knowledge and our historical facts, is dependent on the view we take of what we think of as 'reality' and what we think we can say about it. We have noted that, from our qualified postmodern perspective, we cannot adopt either the extreme 'realist' (an objective view of the 'out there') or the extreme 'idealist' ('it's all in the mind') position. The position taken here is quasi-realist or qualified idealist. This understanding is crucial to the thesis advanced here and the following is aimed at further elucidation of this perspective.

Our freedom of thinking is not absolute. We do not approach the universe with a 'blank sheet'. Kant famously recognised that the architecture of our brain and senses determines the concepts we form; that our concepts of reality do not emerge from a void:

> 'the order and regularity in the appearances, which we entitle nature, we ourselves introduce. We could never find them in appearances had not we ourselves, or the nature of our mind, set them there.'

> *Critique of Pure Reason* [8]

We can recognise also that, in the reaction of the brain and senses with the universe, the universe plays some part in the process. Brendan Carter, when considering the question of the apparently fine balance of the fundamental physical parameters of the universe, first enunciated the anthropic principle thus:

'what we can expect to observe must be restricted by the conditions
necessary for our presence as observers.'

The Anthropic Principle [14]

Carter means that the physical parameters of the universe must be such that it was able (or necessary) to evolve us. This does not mean that those 'necessary conditions' can be known to us directly. It does not mean that we can observe those necessary physical conditions objectively. We can only observe what we ourselves have evolved to observe. This means that our observations, our models of reality, are restricted to those concepts that the physical conditions of the universe and our evolved brain and senses, together, allow (or cause) us to form.

Kantians address this question by distinguishing two aspects of reality – 'noumena' (things in themselves) and 'phenomena' (things as they are perceived). The view taken in this book is phenomenological insofar as it is accepted that all we can say about a 'thing in itself' is that it is that which allows us to experience it, to perceive it, in the way we do – and, we must presume, allows other sentient beings to perceive it in the way they do.

This is very different from the idea that the 'thing out there' is only a human construct. It does not mean that without an observer the 'thing in itself' does not exist. It is rather to say that without an observer the concept 'thing in itself' is untenable, or, indeed, meaningless. This view is, as we have seen, compatible with the view of the positivist scientists (see the chapter 'Science and the Scientific Method').

We can think and act as though there is something noumenal (indeed we are conditioned to do so) but the concept 'is' is meaningful only when related, directly or indirectly, to the use of empirical propositions. This means it takes a sentient being to use 'is' meaningfully.

We can see that the external world affects our concepts but does not determine our concepts. Our cognitive processes and conceptual

capacities set limits to what concepts we can hold. Within these limits we are free to choose what concepts we hold according to our empirical experience, but it is important to recognise that we are not entirely free. As we have noted, we can choose to see Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit drawing as a duck or a rabbit, but we cannot choose to perceive the image, in the same sense, as an elephant [18].

It can be seen that our concepts of being and truth are predicated on our innate conceptual processes and capacities and, in some indefinable way, on their relationship with the rest of the universe. It is with this recognition of our subjectivism that we must identify the foundations for our beliefs. It is with this understanding of the status of our beliefs that we can proceed to construct a human belief system.

Now, we commonly express our concepts and beliefs in terms of 'knowledge'. We have noted that the use of the term 'knowledge' tends to cause us to think in terms of an objective truth about a 'real' reality. To avoid this tendency the term 'knowledge', is viewed here as synonymous with the term 'hard belief' and the latter term is generally used here.

We can usefully introduce here Kant's premise that any coherent system of belief (Kant's 'knowledge') has two elements:

a. 'analytic concepts' which are independent of empirical experience, and
b. 'synthetic concepts' which are dependent upon empirical experience.

We can recognise that these concepts are themselves dependant upon certain necessary first premises identified here as *'a priori'* – the terms in which we are conditioned to think.

We can recognise the *a priori* for analytic concepts to include reason and an ontological view (a view of what our 'is' is). And we can recognise the *a priori*, for synthetic concepts to include, in addition, causality, space-time and an epistemological view (a view of what our 'truth' is).

Our analytic *a priori* and synthetic *a priori* and give rise to our universally held 'hard' beliefs, i.e. to mathematics and science and also those concepts open to the scientific method – our universally held historical facts.

In this way we can identify our current hard beliefs the totality of which represents the sum of human 'facts'. In this, we recognise our analytic and synthetic *a priori* as necessary cognitive characteristics of the human brain, and the universal hard beliefs to which they give rise, as characteristic of the evolved human condition. We hold these beliefs, not because they are 'true', but rather because they embody what we are.

Soft Beliefs
value, meaning and purpose

Strictly taken, our hard beliefs, our scientific and historical facts, are without value. We cannot assign importance or significance to our hard facts until we declare our soft beliefs, until, that is, we declare our world view. These soft beliefs include our political/social beliefs, religious faiths, humanist narratives and all declarations of human values. The assertion of our soft beliefs allows us to attribute to our hard beliefs, to our facts, a value, a meaning and purpose.

Our hard beliefs are predominantly genetically determined. Our soft beliefs are more personal and culturally predisposed. Thus, while soft beliefs might differ within a culture they differ chiefly between cultures. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify an important sub-set of our soft beliefs that is trans-cultural and universal. This was discussed in the chapter 'Universals and Universality'.

So what is the status of our soft beliefs? Reason or empirical experience alone cannot lead us to our soft beliefs, for they can be only contingent assertions. But reason and empirical evidence must condition and delimit our assertions, i.e. our soft beliefs must be internally rationally coherent, and must be rationally consistent with our hard beliefs, i.e. with how we view our empirical evidence.

Soft beliefs are, then, asserted concepts, rationally cohesive but not dependent on reason alone; not dependent on empirical experience but consistent with it.

We have recognised the status of hard beliefs to be species-subjective, delineated by our human physiology. We can recognise our soft beliefs to be mostly individually shaped and culturally delineated, but with a transcultural, universal sub-set – an expression of our common humanity.

Our hard beliefs need to be continually reassessed in the light of further empirical evidence and scientific (and philosophic) thought. Our soft beliefs are more contingent and pragmatic and need to be continually reviewed in the light of our changing hopes and expectations – by the unfurling human vision – and the evidence of history.

In our everyday world the origins of our soft beliefs are complex and controversial. They are the results of the changing architecture of the brain as neurons mature and synaptic connections are formed as we adapt to the physical and cultural environment. Beliefs emerge over a lifetime in the form of cognitive models, patterns of synaptic connections, which allow us to engage with the world. Further consideration of the genesis of our soft beliefs, the psychology of these beliefs, is outside the scope of this book, but the ideas of faiths and transcendental secular narratives are discussed, briefly, in the chapter 'Visions, Myths and Grand Narratives'.

Whatever the physical and/or psychological genesis of our beliefs we can recognise their subjective and relative status; we can see that some beliefs are more believable than others. From our instrumentalist perspective, some beliefs and their associated values can be held to be 'better' than others. This means they are more rational, with more empirical support, and are observed to achieve more effectively the desired outcomes, namely the satisfaction of our physical and emotional needs and drives and the achievement of our life's narratives.

The view taken in this book is that just as our hard beliefs, our mathematics and scientific concepts are universally held, so we can identify some evolved universal soft beliefs, some universal human values and behaviour, which are now characteristic of our species.

And these beliefs are no less real, no less important, than our scientific beliefs.* As social animals evolution has endowed our species with rationality and a sense of 'right' and 'wrong' - an ethical sense of 'good' and 'bad'. David Hume in his A Treatise on Human Nature [42] identified universal empathy as the necessary foundation of morality and in his later work insisted that this was part of the nature of man. We can, with Hume, recognise some view of the universal morality of our species.

The manner by which these soft beliefs have emerged from the co-evolutionary process of our genes and memes has, as we have noted, received the attention of our sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists. Hume argued that one could not derive an ought from an is, nevertheless we can see that, for our species, recognition of some ethical structure is genetically and developmentally incarnated. As Kant put is:

> 'The "ought" of the moral imperative is an "is" for such a being.'
> *Critique of Practical Reason* [7]

Our soft beliefs are, by their nature, less secure than our hard beliefs – they lack the same support of reason and direct empirical evidence. We can act upon our hard beliefs with confidence; we must act on our soft beliefs with caution. Nevertheless, as we have noted, **some** soft beliefs, conditioned by a common human culture, are **universal**, an expression of the human condition; of how we think and behave individually and collectively as social beings.

We have recognised the *a priori* of hard beliefs. Our universal soft beliefs derive from our experiences as social animals and require the recognition of additional social (and therefore contingent) apriority in the form of autonomy and universality. We can then recognise some common human culture, producing some universal soft beliefs. In a cognitive and behavioural sense, notwithstanding our obvious differences, we can recognise some universal soft beliefs and their universal associated values. The identity of these universal soft beliefs will be considered further in the chapter 'The Contents of a Universal Belief System.

In addition to these **universal** soft beliefs, predisposed by our universal human culture, we can recognise another sub-set of **individual** soft beliefs which are predisposed and delineated by different cultures and different human dispositions. These are our personal, individual, beliefs such as religious faiths, political convictions and secular narratives, and also those other concepts, beliefs and values we can attribute to local customs and traditions and the vagaries of the human mind.

It is argued here that these individual beliefs can be most securely accommodated, intellectually and socially, within the context of a universally recognised belief system. Consideration of the structure and content of such a universal belief system will be considered in the following chapters.

Footnote

* John McDowell has observed that our world view of ideas cannot be downgraded as being less real than talk of quarks or the Higgs boson [23].

The Structure of a Universal Belief System

We have noted that our concepts and beliefs are to be recognised in an instrumentalist sense; i.e. our beliefs are significant insofar as they are instrumental in affecting (or, perhaps, rationalising) our behaviour. The objective of our beliefs is to meet our physical and emotional needs and drives, as expressed in our everyday affairs and our worldviews – as adjudicated by reason, empirical evidence and the lessons of history.

We can recognise some common, genetically delivered architecture of the evolved human brain and senses producing some species-specific cognitive processes. We can recognise that these processes, in a reaction with the physical and cultural environment, produce some universal concepts and beliefs. We must now attempt to give a systematic account of this process.

The term *a priori* has been used earlier to indicate 'a necessary given'. We can now define the use of the term here more carefully, i.e. as describing the experiential content of the innate processing capacities of the brain. We are now genetically programmed to think in these *a priori* terms. The term *a posteriori* is used here to indicate concepts or beliefs formed following exposure to the physical and/or cultural environment.

We have defined those concepts which are formed independent of empirical experience as synthetic concepts. We have defined earlier those concepts dependant on empirical experience as analytic concepts.

Thus, we can recognise reason and an ontological view of 'being' as *a priori*, a necessary given, for our synthetic concepts. We can recognise causality, space-time and an epistemological view of 'truth' also as *a priori*, a necessary given, for our analytic concepts.

We can see that our synthetic and analytic *a priori* together, conditioned by our empiric experiences, will deliver our universal *a posteriori* 'hard' beliefs (our logic and mathematics, sciences and historical facts).

We can see that our universal 'soft beliefs' require the recognition of additional social *a priori*, autonomy and universality, which, when conditioned by a universal human culture, will deliver our universal *a posteriori* human values.

We can now illustrate the basic structure of a coherent universal belief system in diagrammatic form - see Fig 1. on page 68.

This is, of course, a gross simplification. For a start there is a dynamic interaction between all the elements of our belief system and it is not possible to address that aspect here. And life is a complex business! Our behaviour is governed at any one time by many, interacting beliefs and driven by our attitudes and emotions as social beings. We must not expect this structure to deliver any answers to these debates.

Nevertheless, the above analysis does allow us to draw up a coherent structural basis for a system of universal, trans-cultural, beliefs upon which our individual beliefs, however they might be formed, could be securely based and safely negotiated.

In philosophical terms we can recognise our belief system as locating Hegelian, culturally conditioned, individual beliefs on a base of universal Kantian knowledge. In Wittgensteinian terms we have sought to combine the 'frictionless ice' of metaphysics with the 'rough ground' of everyday life. Or, as Husserl argued in phenomenological terms, we can see subjective acts of consciousness (psychology) arising from a base of logical ideas (mathematics and science).

Fig 1.

A Universal Belief System

Anthropocentric subjectivism

Analytic	Synthetic
a priori:	*a priori:*
Reason	Causality
Ontological 'is'	Space-time
(being)	Epistemological 'is'
	(truth)

(logic and maths)

Empiric experience

a posteriori
UNIVERSAL HARD BELIEFS
(science and historical facts)

Social *a priori*

Autonomy
Universality

Universal human culture

a posteriori
UNIVERSAL SOFT BELIEFS
(universal human values)

We must remember that these concepts and beliefs identified here are not the objective transcendental 'Universals' of traditional philosophy.

We have recognised the status of all our beliefs to be that of subjective human constructs. But evolution has delivered a distinctive human brain which, in turn, has delivered some universal cognitive processes and beliefs. Our universal beliefs and cognitive processes are those which evolution has conditioned us to adopt, not because they are objectively true, but because, in an instrumentalist sense, they work to address our physical and emotional needs and drives.

Our universal hard beliefs (mathematics, science and historical facts) and some universal soft beliefs (our universal human values) can thus be seen as an expression of the human condition; of what, at this moment in our evolutionary history, it is like to be human. The possible philosophical structure of such a universal belief system has been described above. The possible content of such a belief system will now be considered.

The Contents of a Universal Belief System

First, let us review, briefly, the structure of our belief system. We have seen we need to recognise *a priori* concepts arising from the characteristic architecture of our brain and senses and its innate cognitive characteristics.

Our analytic beliefs (not dependent on empirical evidence) are based on *a priori:* reason and an ontological account of 'being'. For our analytic beliefs our ontological 'is', our 'reality', is congruent with reason.

Our synthetic beliefs (dependent on empirical evidence) are based on *a priori*: causality; space-time, and an epistemological account of our sense experiences. For our synthetic beliefs our epistemological 'truth' is congruent with empiric experience.

Our analytic and synthetic *a priori* together give us the basis for our 'hard' beliefs; our mathematical, scientific and historical facts. We have noted that our hard beliefs alone are without value, without meaning. To identify value and meaning we must introduce additional social *a priori:* autonomy (a 'self'), and universality (a species-specific cognitive essence). This *a priori*, is recognised here as providing the basis of our 'soft' beliefs; our human values, ethics, and secular narratives.

We can identify, as a sub-set, some soft beliefs that are universal. These arise from a common human cognitive ability reacting with an

evolved universal human culture producing some universal human beliefs, values and behaviour.

We have recognised that, in philosophy, 'an is not an aught' [42]. Reason alone cannot deliver an ethical 'ought' until we have asserted an existential 'is'. Nevertheless, the 'is' defines some 'aughts' for our species in an evolutionary, instrumentalist sense, as an implicate of our being. We need to recognise what it is we are in order that we may choose what it is we are to become.

It has been argued here that we can recognise some universal concepts, beliefs and behaviour which define what it is to be human. We must recognise and accept some universal belief and behavioural characteristics which allow us to exercise properly the essential characteristic of the human condition – to be consciousness of what it is we are and to recognise we can choose what it is we might become. The objective here is to identify what these universal concepts and beliefs might be.

The evolutionary process is dependant on genetically determined characteristics concerning survival and reproduction. We can, therefore, expect our evolved 'epigenic rules' to be concerned with these matters. For example, according to Sigmund Freud our human behaviour and culture is the expression of an underlying universal sexual structure and dynamic. We should expect, therefore, our epigenic rules to be concerned with survival and reproductive sexuality (as well as those other needs and drives that Freud claims are the consequences of a repressed sexuality – manifested in what we recognise as 'civilisation').

Whatever we might make of this conjecture, our anthropologists, sociobiologists and evolutionary biologists (Richard Dawkins [40], Susan Blackmore [36], E. O. Wilson [37], Matt Ridley [41], and many others) purport to identify a common core of trans-cultural human beliefs, values and behaviour.

These trans-cultural features have been identified to include: kin preference; tribal and territorial identity; the permutations and

combinations of romantic and carnal love; sexual traditions and taboos; and ideas of the nuclear and extended family. Also included are concepts of truth and reality; justice and equality; expressions of empathy; recognition of rights and responsibilities; ideas of 'right' and 'wrong'; and expressions of the transcendental.

We can see how these beliefs and values have been acted out in history. They have been recognised by writers over the ages in myths and fables, in narratives of classical and popular culture – historically, literature has given an account of the universality of the human condition.

We can see these beliefs and behaviour have provided an evolutionary advantage in instrumentalist terms and now, we can claim, they have come to be identified with what it is to be human. We can recognise that evolution has delivered a brain with cognitive processes which performs, in some predescribed ways, concepts which have proved to be advantageous in meeting the requirements of our physical existence and emotional needs – how we have learned to co-exist, to 'resonate', with the universe.

Thus, in seeking to identify the contents of a coherent belief system, we must recognise the output of our evolved, universal, cognitive processes which are characteristics of our species (including *a priori*, rationality and empiricism) and, at the same time, accommodate our acquired universal cultural beliefs (including *a priori*, autonomy and universality) – all moderated by reason and an assessment of the evidence of history.* These universal beliefs are not to be viewed as 'true' in any metaphysical or mystical sense. They are, rather, an expression of what it is we must recognise we are in order that we can choose, effectively, what it is we are to become.

We are now potentially able to attempt to identify the content of a coherent system of universal human beliefs in traditional philosophical terms. This could give us a system of secular beliefs ** that looks something like this:

The content of a universal belief system

Anthropocentric Subjectivism

Recognition that our ontological 'is' of being and epistemological 'is' of truth are subjective and species-specific.

Rationalism

Reason as necessary, but not sufficient, for belief, values and ethics.

Empiricism

Insofar as it involves scientific facts and the scientific method. Our facts are what works 'as if' for now; quasi-realism.

Pragmatism

Beliefs recognised as provisional and contingent; to be judged by observation of their instrumental effectiveness.

Universalism

Recognition of an innate universal human essence and equality: distinctive human cognitive processes and culture producing a monoculture of core beliefs and values. Empathy; we can recognise that there is something that it is like to be human.

Autonomy

An existential view of personal and collective freedom; individual rights and responsibilities.

Pluralism

An acceptance of multicultural differences based on a universal unicultural structure.

Ethicalism

We should endeavour to act consistently in accordance with our beliefs (as a secular version of Kant's 'categorical imperative'); a conditional recognition of 'right' and 'wrong'.

Democracy

Organisational structures for reviewing our universal beliefs and negotiating our individual and collective freedoms and cultural differences. A utilitarian view of power; political, social and economic.

Creativity

Allowing for the non-rational as well as the rational.

The above, of course, can be illustrative only. It is one person's presumptuous judgement at a particular moment in history. The identification of relevant and appropriate beliefs must be seen as an ongoing human project. The principal concern of this book has been the form and status of such a belief system rather than its actual content.

The recognition of the status of beliefs as subjective human constructs demands that all our beliefs are constantly assessed and reviewed. Every belief system, in its historical location, is dynamic rather than static. It must allow for future discoveries and the progressive unfurling of what we perceive it is to be human.

Crucially, it is argued here, the system must provide a basic structure of universal beliefs, a monoculture, within which individual multicultural beliefs can be safely accommodated and explored.

The task of the identification, acceptance and implementation of these basic beliefs would need to be global – involving the sources and structures of social, political and economic power. It is this question of power and control which has attracted the attention of many recent postmodernist philosophers – and some postmodernist politicians.

For the Marxist, that concern relates to the ownership and control of the means of production. The 'structuralist' Marxist might be unhappy with the subjective perspective adopted in this book (unnecessarily so, in the view of the author). The 'humanist' Marxist might welcome it. However we view this, we can recognise that the great unresolved political issue of our time is the ownership, control and use of capital.

That issues is clearly of concern to the issues raised in this book but, regrettably, cannot be pursued further here.

To be effective, a universal system of beliefs would need to be a secular project of continuous assessment with the prospect of global acceptance – what Immanuel Wallerstein calls:

> 'the human enterprise of creating global universal values.'
>
> *The Modern World System* [45]

The task of identification of our hard beliefs can be left to our scientists and the scientific method – although we might note, with Wallerstein, that scientific research is often directed by financial greed rather than social need.

The task of identification of our universal soft beliefs (our universal human values and secular grand narratives) would require the attention and cooperation of our philosophers and sociologists, scientist, artists and politicians, at a global level.

The formal organisational structures for such a project do not yet exist but we can see evidence of global cooperation producing documents which seek a similar international goal:

> The United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights [I]
> The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
> The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural
> Rights which constitute The International Bill of Human Rights
> The European Declaration of Human Rights
> The Humanists' Amsterdam Declaration 2002 [II]

We can note that the need is not so much to identify universal human beliefs and values (much of that initial work has been accomplished), the need now is to identify a sound philosophical structure which authenticates these beliefs and values and, by recognition of their status, provides a secure basis for the safe exercise of individual faiths, traditions and cultures. The principle purpose of this book has been to indicate what that philosophical structure might be.

Footnote

* In this we should remember that our beliefs will be mutually reactive with our culture. We can adopt the ethnomethodological view that we are predisposed to see certain structures in society and that their assertion will dispose their realisation. As Kant remarks:

> 'The Enlightenment [and its values] must be self-willed, but once established, exerts a centrifugal force to become a social dynamic. Thus, we can retain our political perspective, our grand narrative, as a social dynamic.'
>
> *Critique of Pure Reason* [8]

** The foregoing arguments have been made from a secular perspective. However, it is possible to include a religious or political narrative in this context provided the beliefs concerned are not ideologically dogmatic or claim the infallibility of a transcendental authority. Indeed, it might be thought that a socio-political structure based on a monoculture of universal secular beliefs offers the most secure, mutually acceptable, basis for a multiculture of different religious, secular and political narratives.

Further, although the subjectivist view taken here denies the idea of transcendental revelations, and while the Western religious canon would seem to demand this form of epistemological authority, some Western religious groups are unspecific in their beliefs, adopting a form of amorphous deism (as, for example, do the Sea of Faith group), and the anthropocentric view of belief, as argued here, could hold some attraction

Visions, Myths
and Grand Narratives

We have observed that what we think of as our voluntary behaviour is governed by concepts and beliefs, emotions and attitudes. These are, of course, not separate entities, for our beliefs affect our emotions and we tend to rationalise our emotions and attitudes in the form of beliefs. The genesis of, and relationship between, these factors must be left to our psychologists (and psychiatrists). However, it is relevant to note here that our neuroscientists can relate emotions and beliefs with electro-chemical activity of specific sections of the brain. For some philosophers and neuroscientists our emotions and beliefs, our cognitive processes, simply **are** this synaptic activity. Whatever we might make of these conjectures we can now observe that some emotions can be induced by direct electro-chemical intervention in this neuron activity.

What we think of as 'rationality' is an innate characteristic of human cognitive activity – although it might be sometimes difficult to recognise this property. Nevertheless, as we have seen, reason alone cannot lead us to values or ethical judgements. At the practical level we must take account of what we are – rational beings (for the most part) but with emotions and passions and that part of the human condition that sometimes seeks an experience of existence, an encounter with 'reality', which transcends the everyday. In an instrumentalist sense we must acknowledge the idea of emotional truths as well as analytic truths.

This tendency to seek a transcendental truth is, of course, fertile ground for the religious proselytiser. More relevant for us here, our creative artists seek to identify and express these truths in universal terms. For some with a musical disposition they have been understood as the way in which we, the human species, 'resonate' with the universe. And who is to say that other sentient beings do not 'resonate' in their own way? For those of us of a less romantic disposition, the idea of seeking an 'accord' with the universe might be more appealing.

In traditional philosophy this non-rational view has been observed by many writers, and, as we have noted, David Hume in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* [42], recognises the passions which drive our moral and political life. Hume shows how our passions have their foundations in pleasure and pain and describes how many of our beliefs owe more to our imagination than to our reason. In philosophy this emotional, non-rational aspect of belief is prominent in the works of many writers including Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre as well as in the more recent postmodern writings of Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault.

We can recognise that the propensity for forming transcendental narratives presented a survival advantage in evolutionary terms as we sought concepts to explain and control our environment. Narratives that transcend the everyday (often expressed as myths or fables) have given encouragement to strive for survival in times of adversity, and a meaning and purpose in times of plenty. Mircea Eliade, one of the leading 20th-century academics in this field, says:

> 'A myth is the integration of religious symbols into a narrative form. Myths not only provide a comprehensive view of the world, but they also provide the tools for deciphering the world.'
>
> *Myth and Reality* [43]

We can recognise, also, that myths and transcendental; narratives have been invented, appropriated and sustained by the religious and political establishments to locate their power and enforce their control.

We can trace evidence of this tendency to describe reality in mythical form as least as far back as the ancient Greeks. Currently, we can see this tendency expressed in the narratives of religious and political ideologies as well as in local stories of the supernatural. For most of us, of course, this tendency is now generally expressed in more mundane form and we seek the transcendental in our everyday life in less exalted form – in the 'bread and circuses' of our culture; in the promises of a consumer society; in the myths of the football fan. Nevertheless, some of us (most of us?) dream at some time of a world that while not utopian 'best' is somehow 'better'.

Our everyday beliefs and long-term human narratives are, then, conditioned by our culture and our emotional needs and drives as much as, and perhaps more than, reason and logic. This means that our beliefs are as much the concern of cultural and social commentators as of analytical philosophers. It would seem useful, therefore, to explore the cultural and emotional contribution to our beliefs by looking, briefly, at some of those aspects of belief commonly termed 'the vision thing'. It is convenient for us here to identify two distinct forms:

1. the personal experience of a super-reality, however that experience may have been induced and,
2. the social, historical narratives – the myths which act as a vehicle for collective traditions and ambitions.

It is not possible to address here the religious or chemically induced 'altered states' which, reputedly, give access to an altered reality. Some religious groups, particularly Buddhists, claim to achieve this condition by prayer and meditation. Others achieve this enviable state by chemical means. Aldous Huxley, in *Doors of Perception* [44], was one of the first to investigate and report the effects of psychedelic drugs in a systematic manner. Sidney Cohen in *Drugs of Hallucination* [46] gives a more recent account. Now these effects, previously regarded by some as a unique religious experience, are replicated nightly in dance-clubs around the world. That aspect of human consciousness is interesting and relevant but, regrettably, cannot be considered further here.

Neither is it possible to address, adequately, the many other different non-rational factors that lead us to our collective myths and visions. That task must be left to our psychologists and anthropologists. We can simply note here that myths are another sub-set of our 'soft beliefs'. They are those narratives which we are sometimes prepared to act 'as if' while, paradoxically, recognising that they are not 'true'. This means that we can recognise they are not supported by empirical evidence; they are not predictive in the scientific sense; they are, as it were, outside of our scientific 'truth' of space and time – but, nevertheless, remain a dynamic of individual and social behaviour.

Nietzsche is perhaps most widely known for his incursion into this terrain. In a particular blend of mysticism, poetry and metaphysical insight he can write:

> 'One must speak with thunder and heavenly fireworks to feeble and dormant senses.'
>
> *Thus Spake Zarathustra, Part I* [28]

For some, then, myths are the vehicles of important emotional truths. For some, they are simply the way we tell lies. For some, they are an instrument for social cohesion. For others they are simply a source of emotional entertainment.

However we might view this universal tendency to myth- making, we can note that, when identified with a teleological religion or political narrative, our visionaries seek to tempt us with views of a utopian world beyond experience and reason. History shows that when such visions take on a predictive status they can be horrifyingly destructive and repressive e.g. the murderous impulse of modern terrorists; the repressive policies of some central religions; and, of course, centuries of brutal wars fought for religious and/or political ends.

The position taken here is that we are genetically conditioned to form cognitive constructs of our environment which we recognise in the form of patterns and relationships, causes and effects, meanings and purpose. These concepts are not to be judged by the criterion of an objective 'truth', but rather by the instrumentalist standard of what

works in satisfying our physical and emotional needs and drive.

We can see that our 'hard' beliefs (scientific and historical facts) cannot, alone, perform this task and insofar as our myths and grand narratives contribute to this end they cannot be dismissed from our philosophical vocabulary. With a nod to Nietzsche we can recognise that our truths are myths and our myths are truths.

We can see the 'continental' philosophy of Hegel and Sartre is more relevant here than the analytical thought of Russell and Gödel. Our creative writers are more relevant here than our analytic philosophers. As William Blake wrote:

> 'I will not reason and compare:
> My business is to create.'
>
> *Jerusalem*

Some writers view a future delivered by this predisposition to create myths in apocalyptic terms. Many see the dangers of a 'clash of cultures'; others see dangers in a religious or political hegemony. However, most social theorists now accept that analytic philosophy cannot account for the totality of the human condition. We need to allow, in some way, for the non-rational aesthetic.

This recognition has been expressed in the thought of many postmodern writers. Wittgenstein, as we have noted, moved from analytic philosophy to quasi-mysticism. Martin Heidegger sought to move to a mystical notion of 'Being'. Heidegger recognised the role of language in thinking and saw that art, and especially poetry is crucial – but that did not prevent him from life-long membership of the Nazi Party! The perceived failure of analytic thinking brought Derrida in an excess of enthusiasm (or perhaps financial need) to deny the entire analytic tradition. Other writers have, notoriously, proffered visions which were, or have become, associated with racism or xenophobia.

Currently, the hegemonic political view of is neo-liberal, free-market capitalism – although we can observe that currently (early 2009)

capitalism is undergoing one of its periodic convulsions. The market, it would seem, is called upon to deliver our personal visions and define the collective destiny of the human species. Throughout history we can see that our tendency to seek visions, myths and grand narratives has been appropriated by the establishment to bolster its power and deflect attention from the injustices of its rule. With global capitalism it continues to do so.

We can see that our myths and transcendental narratives can encourage social cohesion but, while recognising our predisposition for creative thinking, for invention, for imagining, we must be wary of embracing these narratives as objective, transcendent truths. By elevating the status of beliefs to absolute truths we have been led to the collective horrors of the past centenary and now to the tyrannies and terrorism of the 21st. Our protection against visionary extremism lies not simply in positing one belief against another but rather in the recognition of the status of our all our beliefs as subjective human constructs, pragmatic and contingent, dependant ultimately on a collective account of experience and empirical evidence, answerable to reason, adjudicated by history.

So, reason cannot deliver the whole picture. Any prospective universal belief system must be able to incorporate creative, secular, non-rational ideas, for example, the feelings of awe at our encounter with the universe; the consciousness of our brief moment of existence; human empathy; the authenticity of artistic expression. With recognition of both the rational and the non-rational, we find full expression of what it is to be human. It is the **status** of our beliefs, how we hold our beliefs, that has been our concern here.

We cannot live in a free-wheeling belief vacuum. We need our dreams and visions, our myths and grand narratives, as well as our everyday constructs of 'being' and 'truth'. It has been argued here that this condition can be most securely accommodated with the recognition of a coherent system of universal beliefs upon which our individual beliefs and visions can be safely located; a universal monoculture underpinning our local multicultures.

It has been the intention of this book to show what the structure of such a universal system of belief might be like. Within such a system, we could look to our artists and writers, to our psychologists and sociologists, to our philosophers and politicians, to inspire us with ongoing visions of what we have been, what we are, and what we can hope to become.

Summary and Conclusions

What we believe, and how we act on our beliefs, has become a crucial issue at the start of the 21st century. Contemporary philosophical discourse (relativist and postmodern); advances in genetics and the neurosciences; the evidence of history, has led us to question afresh what it is we are, and to ask how can we now believe anything?

The principal task of this book has been to show how it is possible, and indeed necessary, to construct a universally acceptable belief system in accordance with philosophic tradition but which, at the same time, recognises our anthropocentric subjectivity.

We must, it has been argued, face up to the full consequences of our unavoidable subjectivity. There can be no place in our philosophy or our human narratives for an absolute 'truth', no view of an objective 'reality' and no recognition of transcendental 'meaning'.

When we abandon the futile search for an absolute truth of an objective reality; when we stop seeking a transcendental status for our beliefs; when we accept what it is we are; we become free to adopt other criteria for our human narratives. The challenge, then, is to construct a convincing account of what beliefs we can hold while, at the same time, acknowledging their genesis and their status as subjective constructs.

We can start with the recognition of what we can see (what evolution has produced us to see) we are. We can recognise the co-evolution of our brains and culture (our genes and memes). We can recognise that

our beliefs are the consequence of how we have evolved to engage most effectively with the universe. Our beliefs are historical, evolutionary and contingent, a feature of the continuing cosmic process that has produced us. Our beliefs are contingent on what we are, and what we are is contingent on our beliefs.

How we address this paradox has been the concern of this book. We could, it has been noted, resort to narratives of mysticism and myths. It has not been the intention here to deny these visions – their use, too, is part of our evolutionary inheritance. It has, rather, been the intention to identify the status of these (and all) beliefs and to place them within a secure philosophical structure.

However, it has been noted that, when viewed as predictive absolutes, our mystical 'truths' can be reductive and terrifyingly destructive. When viewed as transcendental metaphysical entities they close down further thinking – they represent an end, and sometimes the destruction, of the human narrative. It has been argued that we must reject visions expressed with the certainty of a universal absolute - this represent a repudiation of our evolutionary status, a denial of the human condition.

It has been argued here we must keep open the human narrative and, at the same time, recognise what cognitive tools we have at our disposal for this task – not because they lead to transcendental truths but because they are an expression of what it is we are. It has been argued that we must retain our reliance on the use of reason and empiric evidence but recognise the status of our conclusions as subjective constructs. Our concepts of reality and truth have been delivered to us as evolutionary tools, instrumental in our recognition of, and engagement with, the universe. Our concern here has been the status and use of these of these terms.

Evolution has delivered the human species with a distinctive brain and thereby a set of delimited cognitive processes. This requires us to think in specific terms: reality and truth, reason, causality, autonomy – our cognitive *a priori*. In engaging with our physical and cultural environment we are led to *a posteriori* concepts and beliefs – our sciences and human values.

Our concepts and beliefs have evolved to meet our evolved physical and emotional needs and drives. Our ontology and epistemology is instrumental and evolutionary. 'Truths' emerging from our cognitive processes are thus best seen as subjective historical constructs, as advice as how best to behave 'as if' for now.

An idea of an ontological 'is' and an epistemological 'truth' is useful, indeed necessary (we are conditioned to think in these terms). But we must remember the status of these terms can be only instrumental: pragmatic, contingent and provisional. We must be wary of our disposition to attribute to our ontological 'is' an objective status, and then transferring this objective status to our epistemological 'truth'.

However, we cannot operate in an abstract conceptual vacuum. The universe does appear in some way 'real' to us and what we know about it does seem to be in some way 'true': we are programmed to act accordingly. Further, although reason tells us that the universe is not accessible in any meaningful objective sense, the universe does condition and constrains what cognitive models we construct of it. Consequently, although the concept of an objective reality and transcendental truth must be rejected, we are conditioned to act in terms of a pro-reality and a pro-truth because that works instrumentally. In other words we are genetically programmed to act as quasi-realists but to think as qualified idealists.

From this instrumentalist perspective, our beliefs can be seen to fall along a spectrum: from 'hard' beliefs which we can (usually) act upon with certainty, to 'soft' beliefs upon which we might (sometimes) be prepared to take a chance.

We can recognise our hard beliefs (our mathematics, science and historical facts) as universal and chiefly genetically determined. Our soft beliefs (our personal religious faiths and secular narratives) are chiefly culturally predisposed.

However, a sub-set of our soft beliefs has also a universal content insofar as we can identify some beliefs and behaviour which are common to our species. We can recognise that some beliefs and

ethical values are genetically and developmentally incarnate as the result of the characteristic human brain reacting with a universal human culture. These universal soft beliefs can be identified in concepts and values such as freedom, equality, justice, and ethical judgements. These universals, we should note, are not the transcendental Universals of classical philosophy. We cannot ask, are they objectively true? We can only ask, are they in accord with our human condition at this moment in our evolutionary history?

The principal focus of this book has been to identify the status of these beliefs and to show that our universal hard beliefs, together with our universal soft beliefs, can form a framework of transcultural beliefs and culture, a human epistemé, which can be recognised as the grounding of the human condition – an expression of what it is we are. Insofar as they are widely accepted and seen to operate successfully, we can acknowledge these universal beliefs as human 'truths' or 'facts' yielding universal human 'knowledge'. The possible philosophical structure for such a system of beliefs is given in the chapter 'the Structure of a Universal Belief System'. The possible content of such a system is given in the chapter 'The Contents of a Universal Belief System'.

It has been argued here that the recognition and acceptance of such a universal belief structure provides the only secure basis for the accommodation of our individual and tribal beliefs: our religious and political faiths, our personal visions, ambitions and secular narratives. We must recognise a monoculture of universal beliefs, a global citizenship, upon which our multicultural beliefs can be safely accommodated.

This places an additional and often unrecognised task on humanity for we need to learn how to identify our universally agreed soft beliefs (our human values and grand narratives) as we have learned to identify our universal hard beliefs (our mathematics, sciences and historical facts). In facing this task, the scientific method might be seen as a useful paradigm involving the use of reason and empirical evidence. It is argued here that this identification of universally acceptable beliefs and values is most securely and most safely achieved, progressively and empirically as a democratic secular enterprise. *

The global structures for such a democratic exercise already exist in embryonic form in several global organisations: the United Nations, the Humanist, Rationalist and other international groups. The work of the identification of universal human beliefs and values has already begun – it has, indeed, a long history. But we will need to learn how to codify, and express this work at a global level and, crucially, in the context of a convincing philosophical framework. The identification of such a framework has been the principal task of this book.

Modern technology has so magnified the threat posed by extremists that the future existence of our species is threatened. We can, at a global level, recognise the 'clash of civilisations' posited by Huntington [39]. We can see that the Enlightenment's view of a community of democratic nation states based on defined geographic areas has proved to be fragile. Governmental structures are now also envisaged to cohere within religious and political ideological boundaries i.e. bounded by cultural beliefs. It is argued here that these visions of religious, ethnic and national identity can be positioned safely only in the context of a recognised and globally agreed system of beliefs which delineates what it is to be human.

The identification of such a universal system will not end the violence the human species exercises on itself. But the rejection of the status of beliefs and ideologies as objective universal Truths will deny the fundamentalists their claim to the right to impose their values on others. The recognition of our subjectivism will not prevent wars, but its acceptance would make (some) wars patently absurd.

We might think that the postmodern style of thinking has served its purpose. It has run its course not because it has been abandoned but because it has been absorbed in our disbelief. We have learned how to deconstruct our beliefs but, as yet, have not learned properly to construct them.

To meet this challenge we must find the answerable intellectual, moral and emotional resources to engage with our condition. To aid us here we can now see more clearly what our concepts and beliefs are; their status, and what purpose they serve. We no longer need to seek their

endorsement in the ideas of transcendental truths of metaphysical entities. We can seek and construct our truths as implicates of our being.

The principal aim of this book has been to show that the acceptance of a universal system of belief, based on ideas of anthropocentric subjectivism, provides the only safe foundational resources to meet the situation we confront

This qualified postmodern perspective enables us to believe and to act but, at the same time, confers on our chosen narratives a provisional status which allows for the possibility of the emergence of other narratives in their historical context. It keeps open the prospects of an evolving vision of human destiny in the context of an evolving cosmic process.

We can, it is argued, recognise the grandeur of the universe and the complexity of the human species – what some have called 'a secular enchantment' – without recourse to narratives expressed in terms of transcendental truths or in views of a mystical reality. This recognition, we may hope, can be expressed as a universal secular vision which is, at the same time, rational, empirical, passionate and compelling.

This view of a universally recognised and accepted philosophic structure offers a distinctive and secure basis for evolving human beliefs with the prospect of a non-confrontational future. It would allow us to decide, in a cooperative, non-self-destructive manner, what the human species is, and what it is to become.

Footnote

* It is unlikely that we will ever agree an intellectual process for settling all differences of culturally predisposed beliefs and we will need to turn to global political structures to negotiate and accommodate these differences if we are to survive as a species. The proposal made here is that we can recognise some basic universal cognitive processes and beliefs which make such a project possible.

Summary and Conclusions

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Other References

I The United Nations' Universal

Declaration of Human Rights:

An edited version of the rights enshrined in the 1948 Declaration's 30 Articles:

* All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

* Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

* No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.

* No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

* Everyone is equal before the law.

* No one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

* Everyone is entitled to a fair hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal in the event of any criminal charges.

* Everyone has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

* Everyone has the right to privacy and to protection by the law from attacks on their honour and reputation.

* Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

* Everyone has the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their country.

* Everyone has the right to seek asylum from persecution.

* Everyone has the right to a nationality.

* Men and women, irrespective of race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and found a family.

* Everyone has the right to own property.

* Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

* Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

* Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

* No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

* Everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country directly or through freely chosen representatives.

* Everyone has the right of equal access to public services in their country.

* The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government. This will be expressed in periodic and genuine elections, which shall be by universal and equal suffrage, held by secret or equivalent free voting procedures.

* Everyone has the right to social security.

* Everyone has the right to work and to protection against unemployment.

* Everyone has the right to equal pay for equal work.

* Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions.

* Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including holidays from work with pay.

* Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living and to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood or old age.

* Mothers and children are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, are entitled to equal social protection.

* Everyone has the right to free education.

* Everyone has the right to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

* Everyone has the right to protect the moral and material interest resulting form any scientific, literary or artistic production of which they are the author.

II The Humanists' Amsterdam Declaration 2002:

Amsterdam Declaration 2002

Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself.

The fundamentals of modem Humanism are as follows:

1. Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.

2. Humanism is rational. It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.

3. Humanism supports democracy and human rights. Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.

4. Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility. Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.

5. Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion. The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognizes that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.

6. Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.

7. Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising free inquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavour.

IHEU Congress 2002

Endorsements of Earlier Books by Jack Grassby

The Unfinished Revolution

"From 1970 to 1975 a Labour Government was working with activities up and down the country. Jack Grassby's book covers this period and should be widely read to help us with the future."

Rt. Hon. Tony Benn MP

Revolution in the 21st Century

"Jack Grassby has a wonderful sense of radical history, but never stops thinking about the future. His writings are now a feature of the debate."

Rt. Hon. David Miliband M.P.

Revolution in the 21st Century

"It is a thoroughly enjoyable book aimed at students of politics and other potential activists. It is not the first such book, but it is one of the best"

David Renton, University of Sunderland

How Can We Believe Anything?

The question of what we believe, and how we act on our belief, concerns us all. On the one hand, our religious and political terrorists assert their beliefs with indiscriminate violence. On the other hand, our postmodern philosophers tell us we cannot believe anything. Meanwhile, our neuroscientists and geneticists question the very notion of what it is to be human. Many of us no longer know who we are or what to believe – if, indeed, we can believe anything.

It is argued here that to address the problem of belief we must question the status of all our beliefs – to ask anew, what is 'truth' and 'reality'? This book attempts to answer this question at an accessible level in the context of traditional philosophy and from the perspective of recent advances in philosophy, science and social theory. No previous knowledge of philosophy is necessary – but a nodding acquaintance with some philosophical issues would help.

The thesis advanced here is that we can recognise the philosophical basis of a universal system of belief which acknowledges our evolved anthropocentric subjectivism. The possible structure of such a system is described and its potential contents examined.

It is argued that the identification of such a universal belief system provides the only secure basis for the exercise of our individual multicultural faiths and secular narratives. Such a universal belief structure, it is argued, is necessary to enable us as a species to be what we are, and to choose, safely, what it is we are to become.

Jack Grassby's book offers an approachable account of how a humanist thinks about the big questions. Rather than indulge in polemics, Jack takes time and trouble to explain how we can account for a range of major issues.

This makes the book valuable for the general reader and provides a good starting point for all those interested in understanding the world around them.

David Large
Former Chair, Newcastle Philosophy Society

Also by Jack Grassby
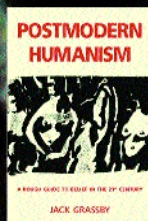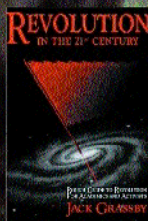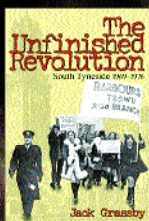
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