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NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

TO BELIEVE IS NOT TO BELIEVE TRUE: REPLY TO SANKEY

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Abstract.   Howard Sankey (this issue) has recently argued that to believe is to believe true. In this short reply, reasons are provided for thinking that to beleive is not to believe true.

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In 'To Believe is to Believe True', true to his word, Howard Sankey (this issue) argues that to believe is to believe true. Sankey clarifies at the outset of his essay: "To believe a proposition is to believe that the proposition is true. It is to believe, with respect to the proposition that forms the content of the belief, that that proposition is true" (p.131). And just before ending his essay: "[I]t is constitutive of the belief that *P* that one believes that *P* is true. That's just what it is to believe that *P*" (p.136).

But we should not follow Sankey's suggestion. To believe that *P* is not to believe that *P* is true and there are two interrelated reasons why this must be so.

First, consider the belief that dogs bark. Belief is a conceptual matter in the sense that in order to have that belief one must possess (and indeed deploy) the concepts DOG and BARK. But on Sankey's view, to believe that dogs bark is to believe that dogs bark is true, so one must also possess and indeed deploy the concept TRUE. But one needn't possess the concept TRUE in order to believe that dogs bark. One who believes that dogs bark may lack the sophistication to think thoughts concerning truth. So Sankey's view demands of all beliefs a level of cognitive sophistication not in fact demanded.

But suppose that one does have the concept TRUE. In fact, let us grant that in order to be a believer one *must* possess the concept. A further problem looms. On Sankey's view, to believe that *P* is to believe that *P* is true. Call the proposition that

P is true '*Q*'. On Sankey's view, to believe that *P* is to believe that *Q*. But to believe that *Q* must be to believe that *Q* is true. Call the proposition that *Q* is true '*R*'. To believe that *R* (which is the very same belief as the belief that *P*) must be to believe that *R* is true. And on and on. But let us now unpack the belief that *R*: it is, by simple substitutions of identicals, the very same belief as the belief that *P* is true is true is true. On Sankey's view, this is the very same belief as the belief that *P*. On the very face of it this seems absurd. To believe that *P* is not the same as to believe that *P* is true is true is true. One is a relation to a simpler proposition than the other. But perhaps worse still, this commitment leads to a serious problem for believers like us. If to have the belief that *P* is to have the belief that *P* is true is true is true … then in order to believe that *P* one must deploy her concept true infinitely many times. And if it takes time to deploy a concept, then no belief could be had within a finite amount of time. But of course many beliefs are had in finite time, so those beliefs must not set us off on Sankey's regress. So, to believe that *P* is not to believe that *P* is true; to believe is not to believe true.

References

Sankey, H. 2019. To Believe is to Believe True. *Principia* **23**(1): 131–36. (this issue)