

**BELIEF IN NATURALISM:**

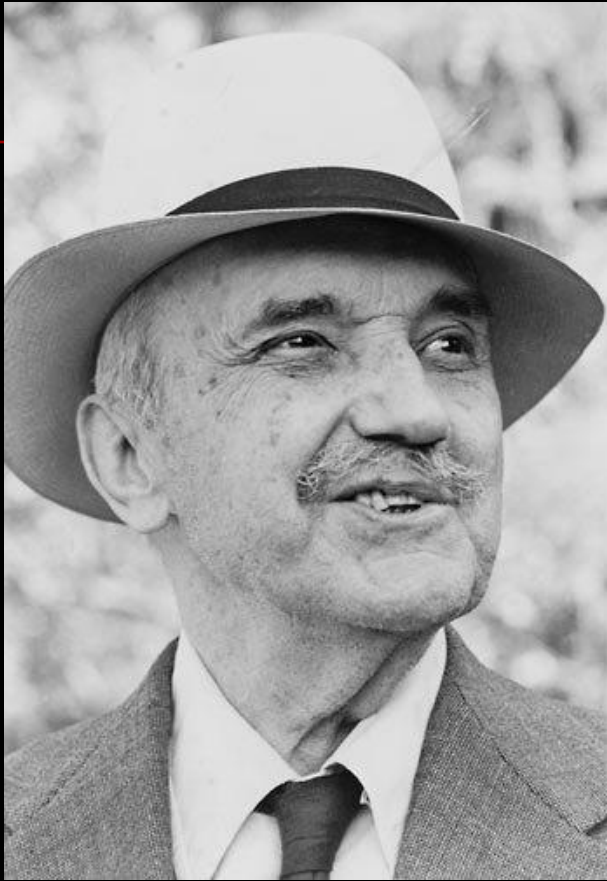
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**An Epistemologist's  
Philosophy of Mind**

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“Partisanship is treason  
in philosophy” – George  
Santayana

... so this talk is not about

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- faith in naturalism
- but about the nature of belief, and
- the place of the concept of belief in a modestly naturalistic epistemology

# 1. Varieties of Naturalism

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- literary, artistic, etc.
- philosophical, including:
  - in metaphysics
  - in ethics
  - in philosophy of science
  - in epistemology

# philosophical naturalisms differ in strength

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- most modest: simply eschew supernatural or purely *a priori* approaches
- more ambitious: hope to turn philosophical questions over to the sciences to resolve
- most ambitious: repudiate phil. questions



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Sidney Hook (1902-1989) explored the interrelations between naturalism in metaphysics, in epistemology, and in philosophy of science

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- connections of the kind Hook's argument suggests
- can be found running through my work



e.g., in metaphysics

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- my approach is modestly naturalistic, contrasting
- *both* with Lewis's or Kripke's *a priori* approaches
- *and* with Quine's readiness to let metaphysics tag along after science

## as I see it, metaphysics

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- is not about our language or our concepts, but about the world, & hence empirical
- but requires not fancy equipment, experiments, etc., but
- close attention to familiar, everyday experience

## in philosophy of science

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- my view is again modestly naturalistic, contrasting
- *both* with the formal-logical models of Popper, Hempel, etc.
- & with purely descriptive SSK, STS models

## & I conceive of the sciences

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- as continuous with the methods of everyday inquiry
- but enormously enriched, refined, and amplified by the scientific “helps” to inquiry developed over generations

## & in both

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- I eschew both supernatural entities and
- supernatural “explanations”
- (which by my lights are not really explanatory at all)

but from here on

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- I will set other forms of naturalism aside
- and focus on epistemological naturalism(s)  
specifically

## 2. Epistemological Naturalism

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- reformist aposteriorist naturalism
- reformist scientific naturalism
- revolutionary scientific naturalism

# reformist aposteriorist naturalism

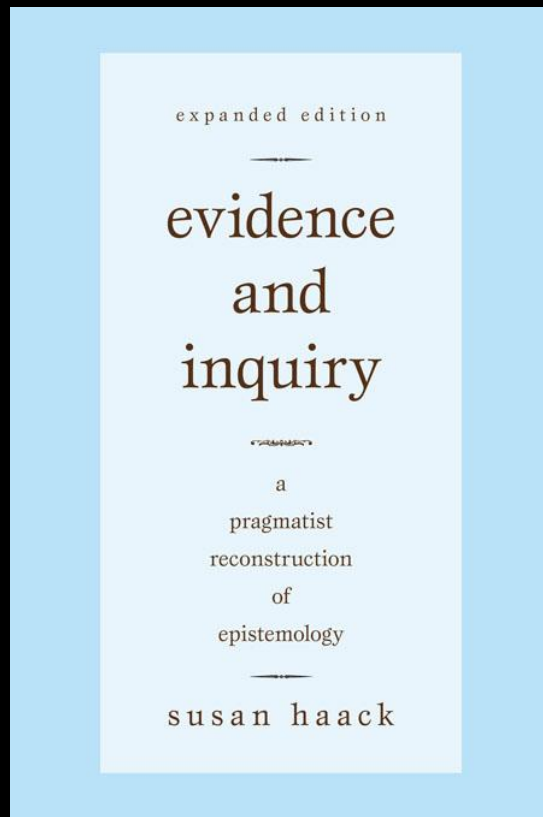
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- conceives of epistemology, not as wholly a *priori*, but as continuous with the sciences of cognition
- acknowledges the contributory relevance of scientific results to epistemology



... this view is defended in my book  
*Evidence and Inquiry*

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... recently out in its 2<sup>nd</sup>,  
expanded edition!

## reformist scientific naturalism

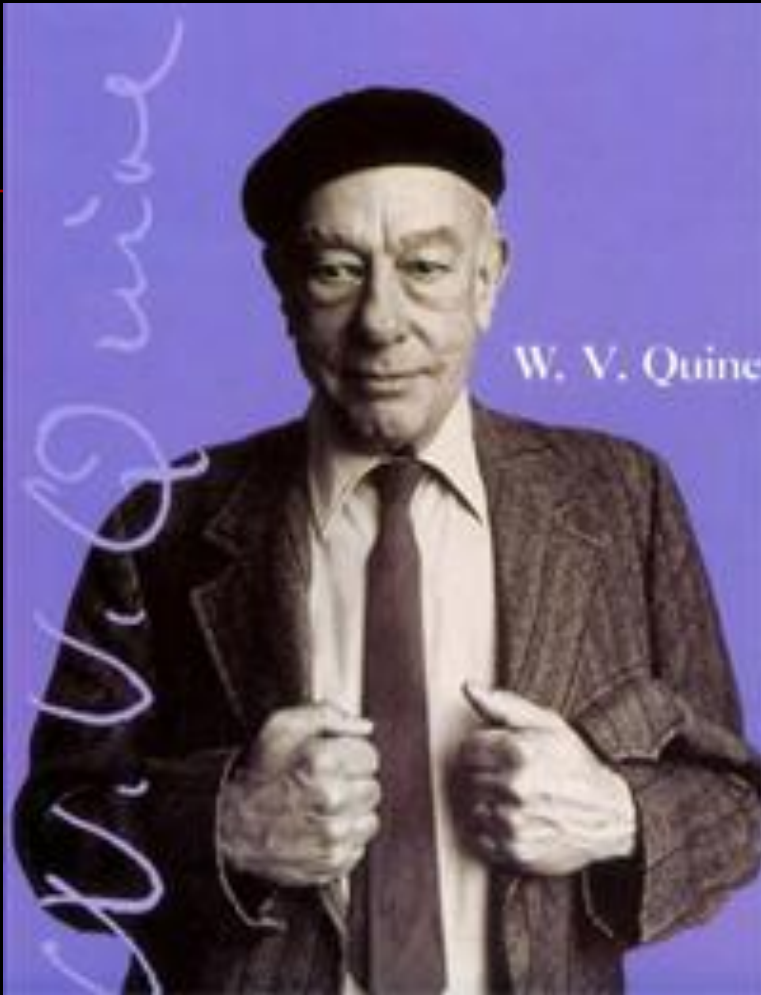
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- looks to the sciences of cognition to answer epistemological questions
- this seems to be Goldman's official view – though his practice in *Epistemology and Cognition* doesn't conform to it!

# revolutionary scientistic naturalism

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- denies the legitimacy of traditional epistemological projects
- urges that they be abandoned in favor of natural-scientific projects
- defended by Stich (1983) & Churchlands



all three positions can  
be found in Quine –  
sometimes in the  
same sentence, or  
paragraph!

# Quine's equivocations are lubricated by an ambiguity

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- he uses “science” to mean sometimes
  - (broad sense) “our presumed empirical knowledge” -- SCIENCE
  - (narrow sense) “the sciences” -- *science*

... so that he shifts from

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- epistemology is part of SCIENCE (= reformist aposteriorist naturalism), to
- epistemology is part of *science* (= reformist scientific naturalism)

... and from there to

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- epistemological questions are misconceived (= revolutionary scientific naturalism)
- presumably because it is SO implausible e.g., that physics, say, could tell us what makes evidence better or worse

# I focus here on the place of belief in naturalism

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- Quine, Stich, and Churchland all suggest, as (one) reason for their revolutionary naturalism, skepticism about the concept of belief
- but they rely on *different* “atheist” positions



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- **Quine:** *extensionalist* atheism
  - **Stich:** *functionalist* atheism
  - **Churchland:** *smooth-reductionist* atheism

# Karl Popper

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- was also an atheist---an *objectivist* atheist
- who proposed an “epistemology without a knowing subject”
- but he had confused the *personal* and the *subjective*

- 
- unlike Popper, I don't believe that “epistemology without a knowing subject” – and hence without belief – is viable
  - & so, unlike Popper, I need an account of what it is to believe something

# 3. What is Belief?

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- my account has three elements
  - i. dispositional (behavioral)
  - ii. neuro-physiological
  - iii. socio-historical

## (i) the behavioral (dispositional) element

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Alexander Bain (1816-  
1903) connected belief  
and *action*



... inspiring C. S. Peirce's conception of  
belief as a *habit* of action



H. H. Price (1899-1984) added the insight that belief involves *multi-form* dispositions

# someone who believes that snakes are dangerous

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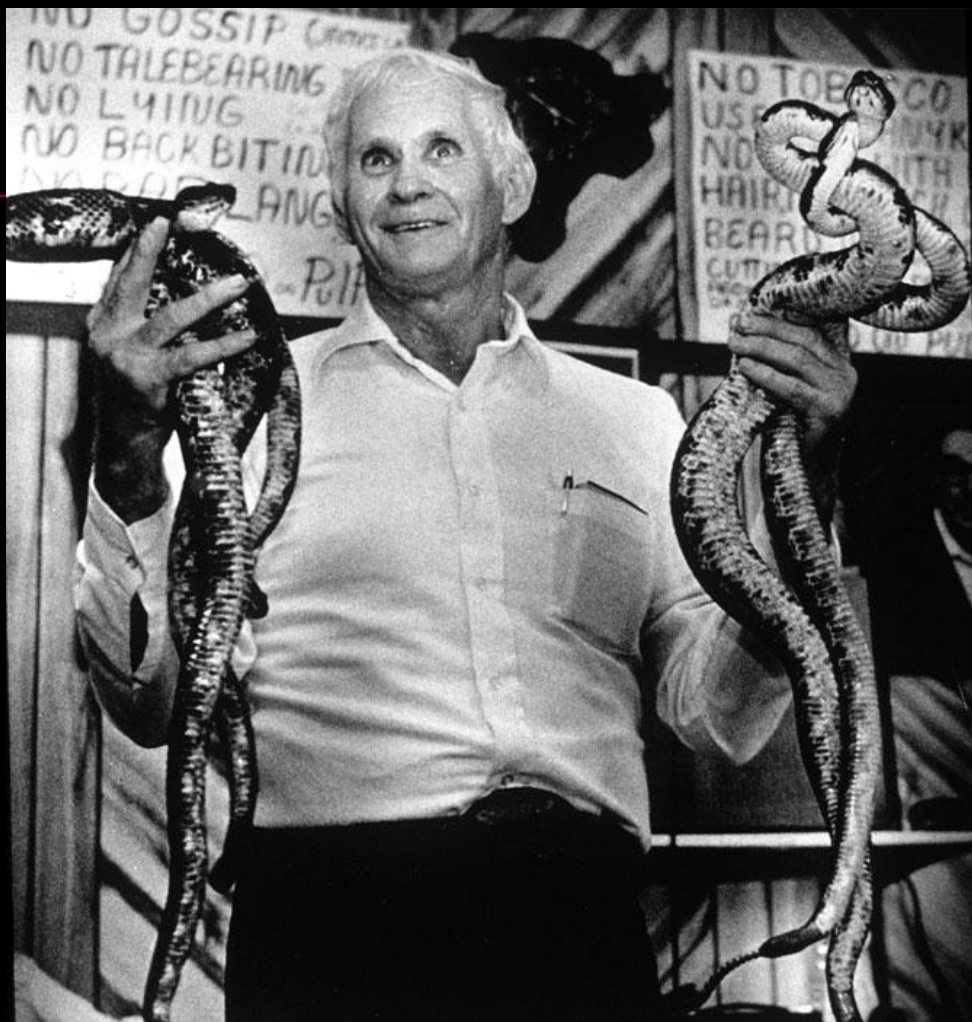
- will (normally) be disposed
  - to shriek at the sight of, & run away from, snakes
  - to assert/assent to sentences in his language saying that snakes are dangerous
  - to be surprised if he sees someone stroking a pet snake



“normally” reveals that this needs some amplification

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- to accommodate interrelations among beliefs
- to allow for abnormal desires, e.g. to show faith by handling snakes without showing fear



... which is  
religious ritual  
in some  
protestant  
sects

## there is no difficulty about spies or confidence tricksters

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- though they lie for a living, they don't act contrary to all, or even most, of their beliefs
- & even in their professional lives, they still have the *disposition* to speak and act in accordance with what they believe, though it is overridden

& I can explain the difference between

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- *degree* of belief: which depends on how strong the dispositions are, how much you would bet that  $p$ , how surprised you'd be if not- $p$ , &
- *firmness* of belief: which depends on how entrenched the disposition is, how easily changed

usually the two go together

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- but you can believe something with high degree of confidence but low degree of firmness, and
- you can believe something with a high degree of firmness but a low degree of confidence

(ii) these dispositions are physically realized

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- not “smoothly reducible” to physical states
- but realized via meshes of interconnections
  - between receptors (whatever registers input from the world)
  - and activators (whatever activates verbal or other behavior)

## my picture is of ...

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- neuro-physiologically generic parts of the brain that get associated, in this person, to this object, property, word, thing
- not a specific part of the brain that lights up, or turns pink, or whatever, in every person who believes that  $p$

this, as it turns out ...

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- is confirmed by some recent work in brain science
- showing that a single neuron in a patient's brain would fire whenever he heard the name of, or saw a picture of a person, object, etc.



for example ...

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in each subject there  
was some (generic)  
neuron that fired when  
he saw a picture of  
Homer Simpson, or  
heard the name



(iii) so the content of beliefs is determined

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- *not* by physical features of their neuro-physiological realizations
- but by *their* connections to (i) the world and (ii) the use of words in the subject's linguistic community

... think of an alarm clock

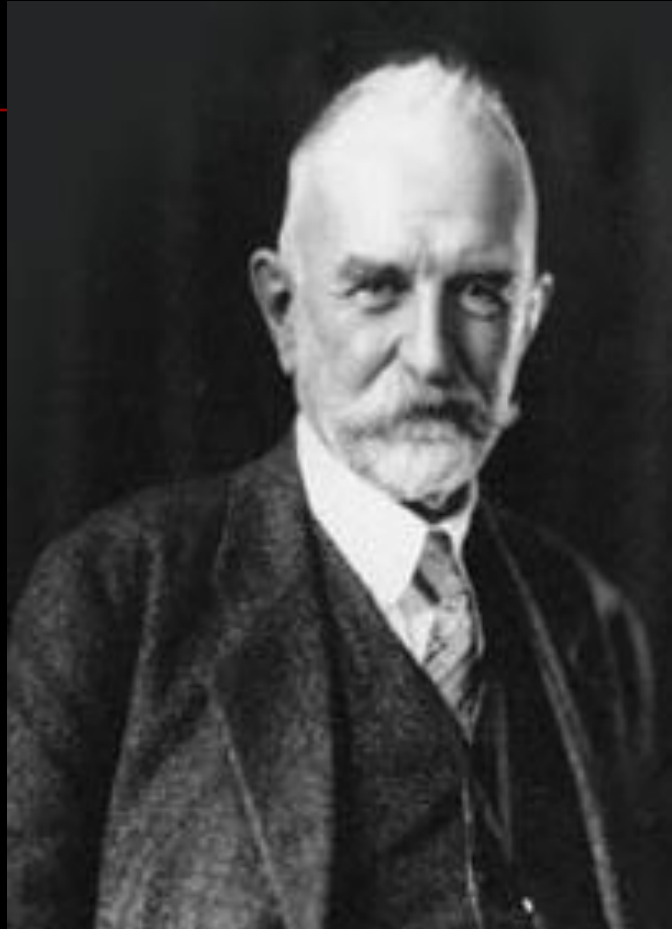
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the clock is  
physical, &  
works  
according to  
physical laws



but to say it is  
set for 7:05  
a.m. is to  
refer to social  
conventions





... here, my inspiration is George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), the founder of social psychology

in *Mind, Self, and Society* Mead asks:

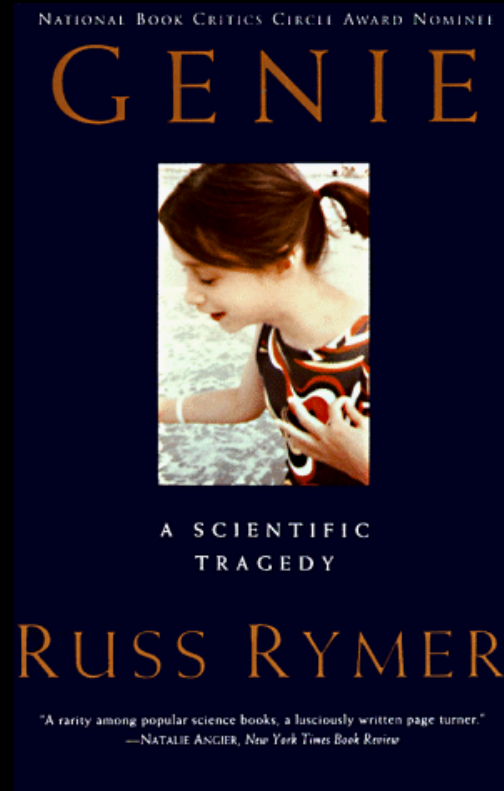
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- in what ways are humans like other animals, and in what ways unlike them?
- how could the human capacity for language have arisen out of our animal ancestry (e.g., the “conversation of gestures” in a dogfight)?

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- I take from Mead the insight that “mindedness” depends on social, specifically on linguistic, interactions (now in part empirically verified)
  - my conception of the content of beliefs as depending on socio-historico-linguistic factors is in this spirit

# Genie, the “wild child”

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... there may be different realizations of  
the belief that  $p$

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- in a (monolingual) English speaker
  - which will involve dispositions to use/respond to English sentences
- & in a (monolingual) Russian speaker
  - which will involve dispositions to use/respond to Russian sentences



So: what makes both of their beliefs the belief that  $p$ ?

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- the parallels in their dispositions to non-verbal behavior
- the similarity of meaning of the relevant Russian and English sentences

# BUT

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- as I conceive it, a language is a congeries of a vast number of close-enough idiolects
- & similarity of meaning (across languages or within a single language) is a matter of degree

& how much similarity we need to attribute sameness of belief-content

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- is context-dependent
- mostly: similar-enough is good enough
- in logical contexts, finer-grained distinctions are needed

## 4. Applying the Theory

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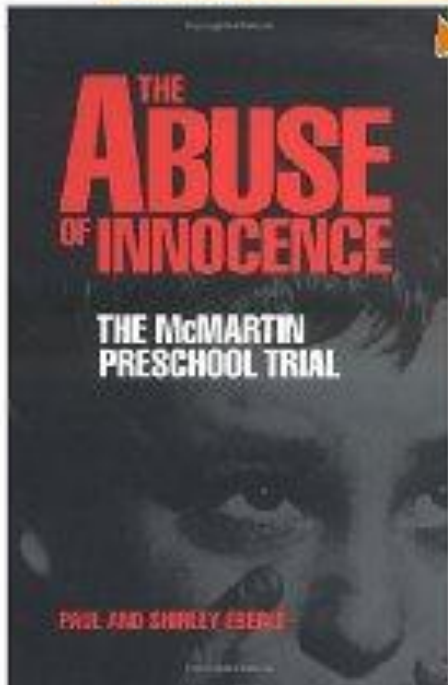
- *do animals and pre-linguistic babies have beliefs?*
- no, not in the fullest sense: they have dispositions to non-verbal but not to verbal behavior

... which is not to deny that

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- *maybe* some other animals have limited linguistic ability
- *certainly* small children gradually get closer to having full beliefs as they gradually acquire language

Click to **LOOK INSIDE!**



I think of little Tanya,  
in the McMartin  
Preschool case ...

... what about Stich's "Mrs. T."?

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- apparently she had Alzheimer's
- her capacity for full belief was diminishing as connections in her brain failed
- but it is CRAZY to conclude, as Stich does, that no one believes anything!

## both Stich and Churchland

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- make much of the fallibility of introspection
- yes, it's fallible (think of the joke about two behaviorists meeting on the street)
- but the no-belief thesis clearly doesn't follow



# our beliefs aren't always transparent to us

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- because we are so good at self-deception, fooling ourselves about what we believe
- fortunately, my account suggests how we do this

# Blaise Pascal had the key idea

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to make yourself  
believe that  $p$ ,  
behave as if you  
*do* believe it---  
and if you keep it  
up, you *will*  
believe it!



of course, questions remain ...

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- what is inference?
- what is occurrent belief?
- how exactly does what you perceive change what you believe?

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**... dakujem za  
vasu pozornost!**

**... thank you for  
your attention!**

