

belief
and
evidence

evidentialist
arguments

two
challenges

seemings

SHOULD I BELIEVE WITHOUT EVIDENCE?

Last time we introduced the question of what we should believe. We began by considering this rule of belief:

No Proof → No Belief
If you can't prove P, don't believe P.

But we saw that this led to the result that you should not believe anything at all, which seems very implausible.

At the very least, it seems, we should believe things that we can be certain of:

Certainty → Belief
If you can rule out any situation which would make P false, you should believe P.

Since we can be certain that we exist, and that $2+2=4$, this rule says (correctly, it seems) that we should believe these things.

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Since we can be certain that we exist, and that $2+2=4$, this rule says (correctly, it seems) that we should believe these things.

We then considered Descartes' idea that we should believe **only the things we can be certain of:**

Doubt → No Belief

If you cannot rule out a situation which would make P false, you should not believe P.

We encountered a challenge to that rule at the end of last time. The challenge was that that rule seems to imply that I should not believe that I have hands; but surely I should be more secure in this belief than in the principle No Doubt → No Belief.

Certainty → Belief

If you can rule out any situation which would make P false, you should believe P.

We encountered a challenge to that rule at the end of last time. The challenge was that that rule seems to imply that I should not believe that I have hands; but surely I should be more secure in this belief than in the principle No Doubt → No Belief.

Suppose, for now, that we accept this. What rule of belief would explain the fact that I should have this belief?

A plausible suggestion would seem to be:

Experience → Belief

If your sense experience tells you that P, and you have no reason to think that your sense experience is misleading, you should believe P.

After all, the reason why I should believe that I have hands, it seems, is that my experience tells me that I do.

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After all, the reason why I should believe that I have hands, it seems, is that my experience tells me that I do.

Last time we also encountered one other positive rule of belief:

Proof → Belief

If you can prove P, you should believe P.

Where a “proof” in the relevant sense is a valid argument whose premises you should believe.

Certainty → Belief

If you can rule out any situation which would make P false, you should believe P.

Experience → Belief

If your sense experience tells you that P, and you have no reason to think that your sense experience is misleading, you should believe P.

Proof → Belief

If you can prove P, you should believe P.

But this still leaves us without any plausible negative rules of belief: rules which tell us when to discard beliefs that we already have. And it seems like there must be some rules of this kind, since it seems like one thing we ought to be able to do is to examine our beliefs to see which ones we should discard.

But the above suggests a plausible candidate for such a rule. Maybe I should believe what (i) I can be certain of, (ii) what my senses tell me, and (iii) what I can argue for on the basis of (i) and (ii), and **that's all**.

This is a version of a view known as **foundationalism**.

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This is a version of a view known as **foundationalism**.

It can be summed up with the following negative rule of belief:

No Foundations → No Belief

If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, you should not believe P.

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This rule of belief is one way of making precise what looks like a very plausible guiding thought about what we should believe:

“It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.”

This slogan, from W.K. Clifford, captures the idea that there is something wrong with forming a belief on **no evidence at all**.

Our rule of belief makes this more precise by saying what “evidence” is. Our evidence is what our senses tell us and what we can be certain of. We should only believe things that we can argue for on the basis of our evidence.

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Last time we introduced the idea of a **properly basic belief**: a belief that you should have, even though you have no argument for it. The proponent of No Foundations → No Belief says that there are exactly two kinds of properly basic beliefs: the ones you can be certain of, and the ones you have sensory evidence for.

We have encountered this idea twice already in this course. One place it came up was in the following argument against the existence of immaterial souls:

No Foundations → No Belief

If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, you should not believe P.

We have encountered this idea twice already in this course. One place it came up was in the following argument against the existence of immaterial souls:

THE EVIDENTIALIST ARGUMENT AGAINST BELIEF IN IMMATERIAL SOULS

1. We have no sensory experience of immaterial souls.
2. You can't be certain that there are immaterial souls.
3. We have no good argument for the existence of immaterial souls.
4. If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you don't have a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

C. You should not believe in the existence of immaterial souls. (1,2,3,4)

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The last premise of this argument just is our proposed No Foundations → No Belief rule.

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The last premise of this argument just is our proposed No Foundations → No Belief rule.

It also came up earlier in the course. On the second day, I said that there were two main kinds of arguments against belief in God.

The first are the various versions of the argument from evil which we discussed at length.

The second is the argument that you should not believe that God exists because there is no evidence that God exists.

We can now put that second argument in a more precise form.

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THE EVIDENTIALIST ARGUMENT AGAINST BELIEF IN GOD

1. We have no sensory experience of God.
2. You can't be certain that God exists.
3. We have no good argument for the existence of God.
4. If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you don't have a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

C. You should not believe in God. (1,2,3,4)

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1. We have no sensory experience of God.
2. You can't be certain that God exists.
3. We have no good argument for the existence of God.
4. If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you don't have a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

C. You should not believe in God. (1,2,3,4)

One might of course reject premise (3), if you found one of the arguments for the existence of God we discussed in class convincing. And you might reject (1) if you have had certain kinds of mystical experiences.

But many religious believers have not had mystical experiences, and don't take themselves to be in possession of good arguments for God's existence. The above argument says that these people are making a mistake. They are forming a belief with no evidence and, as Clifford says, this is "wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone."

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But many religious believers have not had mystical experiences, and don't take themselves to be in possession of good arguments for God's existence. The above argument says that these people are making a mistake. They are forming a belief with no evidence and, as Clifford says, this is "wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone."

Might the religious believer just reject the assumption of this argument, and say that it is perfectly fine to believe that God exists on no basis at all?

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Q: How do Pastafarians believe our world was created?

A: We believe the Flying Spaghetti Monster created the world much as it exists today, but for reasons unknown made it appear that the universe is billions of years old (instead of thousands) and that life evolved into its current state (rather than created in its current form). Every time a researcher carries out an experiment that appears to confirm one of these "scientific theories" supporting an old earth and evolution we can be sure that the FSM is there, modifying the data with his Noodly Appendage. We don't know why He does this but we believe He does, that is our Faith.



<— A ChrisFSMas
tree

Pastafarianism has its uses. For example, it can be used to get a religious exemption from the rule that one cannot wear a hat in a driver's license photo:



As you might guess, many Pastafarians take a somewhat less than serious attitude toward the tenets of Pastafarianism. But it can be used to make a serious philosophical point.

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But suppose that someone were a serious Pastafarian. We would, I take it, be inclined to think that there is something irrational about their beliefs.

And this might be so even if we could not come up with any decisive argument against Pastafarianism. After all, Pastafarianism is designed so as to avoid arguments against it. When presented with such an argument, the Pastafarian will simply say that the evidence on which the argument is based is misleading, and was planted by the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

So we seem forced to say that the Pastafarian is irrational not because there is some good argument **against** it, but rather just because there is no good argument **for** it.

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Our evidentialist arguments against souls, God, and the FSM all employ our rule of belief:

No Foundations → No Belief

If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, you should not believe P.

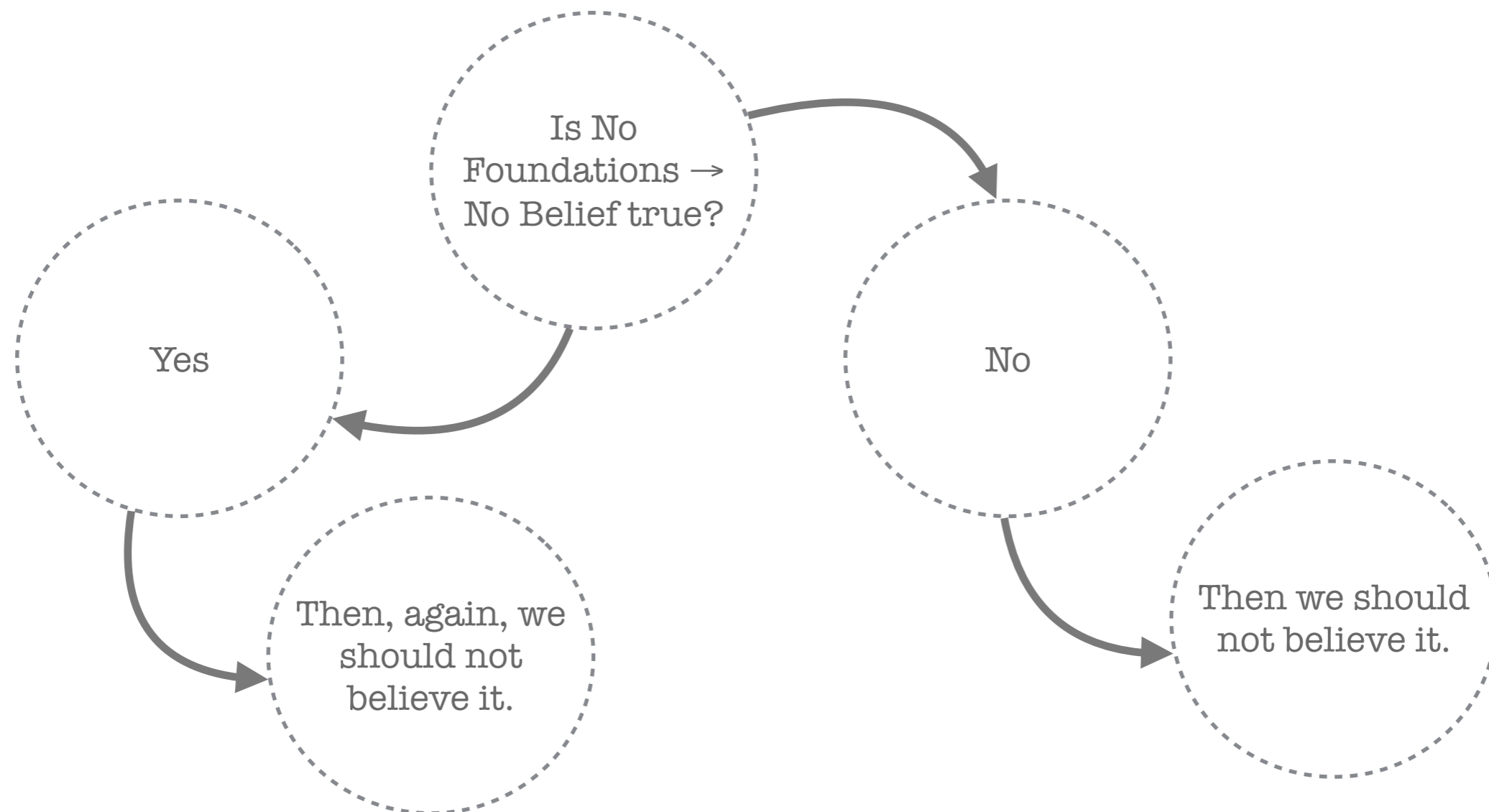
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Here's an argument by dilemma that we should not believe this principle:



Let's use "Foundationalism" as a name for our rule of belief. Then we can turn this dilemma into an argument as follows.

THE SELF-REFUTATION ARGUMENT AGAINST FOUNDATIONALISM

1. If Foundationalism is true, you should believe it only if you can be certain that it is true, your senses tell you that it is true, or you have an argument that it is true.
 2. You can't be certain that Foundationalism is true.
 3. Your senses don't tell you that Foundationalism is true.
 4. You have no good argument that Foundationalism is true.
 5. If Foundationalism is true, you should not believe it.
(1,2,3,4)
 6. If Foundationalism is false, you should not believe it.

- C. You should not believe Foundationalism. (5,6)

This argument seems to show that Foundationalism is self-refuting in a certain sense: it itself implies that you should not believe it.

But Foundationalism was a premise of our evidentialist arguments. So it follows that you should reject those arguments.

No Foundations → No Belief
If you can't be certain that P and
your senses don't tell you that P
and you can't prove P, you
should not believe P.

But even if this is an effective rebuttal to the evidentialist arguments, it does not tell us whether Foundationalism is true or false. (In that sense, it is like the evidentialist arguments themselves.)

Let's consider an argument that tries to show that Foundationalism is false.

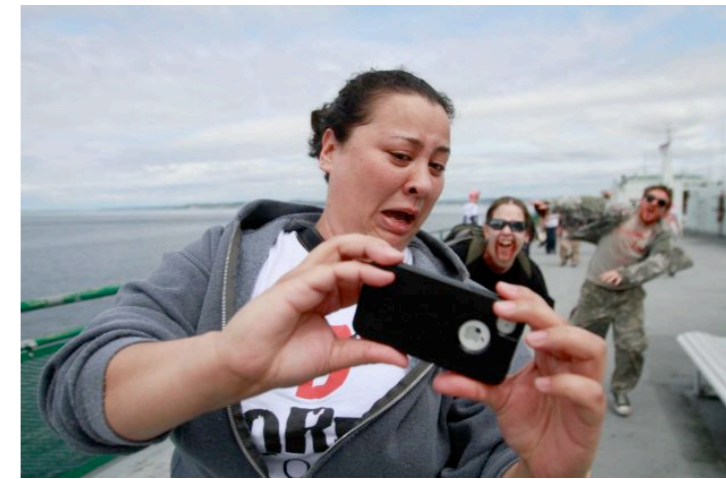
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A zombie (in the philosophical sense) is not a bloodthirsty undead monster. A zombie is a creature who is externally indistinguishable from a human being, but lacks consciousness.

We can ask: how do you know that everyone besides you is not a zombie, in this sense? This question is sometimes called **the problem of other minds**.



Your senses don't tell you one way or another whether the person to whom you are talking is conscious. And it does not seem that you can be certain that the person is conscious — nothing rules out them being a zombie.

So, if Foundationalism is true, it looks like we can know that other people are conscious only if we can give a good argument for the claim that they are conscious. Can we?

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Here is an argument you might give:

I know that I am conscious, and I observe that in my case there is a correlation between my conscious states and my outward bodily movements. But I also notice that the outward movements of the bodies of other people are similar to my own. So it is reasonable for me to believe that, just as there is a correlation between outward movements and conscious states in my case, so there is such a correlation in the case of other people. Hence it is reasonable for me to believe that they too are conscious.

This argument — which is sometimes called the [argument from analogy](#) — sounds plausible. But it faces a serious problem.

An **inductive argument** is an argument which generalizes from cases.

Here is an example of an inductive argument:

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1. The sun came up today.  
2. The sun came up yesterday.  
3. The sun came up the day before yesterday.  
....  
....  
-----  
C. The sun will come up tomorrow.
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In general, inductive arguments are not valid — but it does seem as though they can give us good reason to believe certain claims which go beyond our sense experience.

The argument from analogy for the conclusion that other people are conscious seems to be an inductive argument: it generalizes from my own case to the case of other people.

But it is a very weird argument of this sort: it is induction **from a single case**. Is this sort of inductive reasoning a good way to reason? Compare the following:

Yesterday, I saw my first sushi roll. It had salmon in it. So, I think that all sushi rolls must have salmon in them.

This is pretty clearly a bad piece of reasoning. But then the question is: why isn't the inductive argument for the conclusion that other people are conscious just as bad?

But it is hard to see how we could argue that other people are conscious, other than on broadly inductive grounds.

So it seems as though, if No Foundations \rightarrow No Belief is true, we should not believe that other people are conscious. But that, one might think, is very implausible. So No Foundations \rightarrow No Belief is false.

This might remind you of our Moorean Anti-Skeptical Argument against Doubt \rightarrow No Belief. And they are very similar. They both try to use a (alleged) fact about what we should believe to show that a certain negative rule of belief is false.

We can formulate the argument in much the same way.

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THE ANTI-SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT AGAINST FOUNDATIONALISM

1. I should believe that other people are conscious.
2. I am not certain that other people are conscious, my senses do not tell me that other people are conscious, and I have no good argument that other people are conscious.
3. Sometimes I should believe P, even if I am not certain that P, my senses do not tell me that P, and I have no good argument for P. (1,2)

C. No Foundations → No Belief is false. (3)

This might seem like good news for someone who wants to believe in God without arguments. But it leaves us without a real answer to the challenge posed to religious belief by Pastafarianism.

Surely the religious believer should want to say that there is some sense in which their religious belief is reasonable, while Pastafarianism is not.

But they seem to be completely on par. We are conceding (for now) that we have no good arguments for either; but we have no good arguments against the Pastafarian. So what's the difference?

Let's return to the idea of a properly basic belief. If you think that we should believe that other people are conscious, then it seems like we need to think that there are some properly basic beliefs of which we cannot be certain and for which we have no sensory evidence. After all, our belief that other people are conscious seems to be (for all we have said) properly basic.

Here's one idea we might try out. Certain claims just **seem** true to you. It isn't that you can be certain that they are true, or that have sensory evidence that they are true. They just seem true.

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Maybe just the fact that it seems true to us that other people are conscious, and we have no argument against that claim, is good reason for us to believe it. That suggests the following positive rule of belief:

Seems → Belief
If it seems to you that P is true,
and you have no argument
against P, you should believe P.

We'll turn in a second to some challenges to this idea. But let's first ask what would follow if this were correct.

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First, it would seem to permit a rather straightforward response to the challenge of Pastafarianism. After all, the following two claims both certainly seem true.

Spaghetti is a human invention. There is no spaghetti (anywhere in the universe) which was not made by a person.

No person has ever made any magical spaghetti.

But these two claims would seem to rule out the existence of the FSM.

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So perhaps the religious believer should just say that the difference between Pastafarianism and more ordinary religious belief is just that there is a good argument against the former, but not the latter.

Of course, the Pastafarian could then turn to the argument from evil against traditional religious views. But that would be to just give up on the evidentialist argument — we already knew that the religious believer had to have something to say about the different versions of the argument from evil.

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A second reason why this rule of belief might seem attractive to the religious believer is that it promises to make sense of the reason many people would give for their belief in God.

Many religious believers cite as a reason for their belief things like the beauty of nature.

This can seem puzzling; it isn't as if there is a straightforward argument from the beauty of nature to the existence of God. A more plausible understanding of what they mean is that when they contemplate nature it just seems to them that God must exist.

If the above rule of belief is right, then — again presuming a satisfactory reply to the arguments from evil — this can be a reasonable basis for religious belief.

Seems → Belief

If it seems to you that P is true,
and you have no argument
against P, you should believe P.

I want to look now at three challenges to this kind of rule of belief.

The first goes back to Descartes. His idea was that if we don't carefully examine our whole structure of belief, we can allow error to slip in. Surely just going by how things seem is not going to be a foolproof way to escape error! So why is this not just an irresponsible way to go about forming beliefs?

One response to this is suggested by the following quote from William James.

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“There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion ... We must know the truth, and we must avoid error. These are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws.”

In this spirit, one might say that Descartes' advice is the best one if we only care about minimizing error. But this is not our only aim: we also want to believe the truth. If we limit ourselves to the beliefs we can be certain of, we will in so doing prevent ourselves from believing many truths.

Seems → Belief

If it seems to you that P is true,
and you have no argument
against P, you should believe P.

Here's a different problem for Seems → Belief. We saw above that one can argue against negative rules of belief by showing that they rule out too much — for example, the belief that I have hands, or that other people are conscious.

Similarly, one can argue against positive rules of belief like this one that they let in too much — they tell us to believe things which we shouldn't.

Here's an example. Suppose that I am looking at a table, which looks red. I know that a red table is indistinguishable from a white table bathed in red light. Should I form the belief, on the basis of my visual experience, that the table is red rather than bathed in red light?

Intuitively, I should not — after all, the table would look the same either way!

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Intuitively, I should not — after all, the table would look the same either way!

But our rule of belief seems to imply that I **should** form this belief. For I can reason as follows:

The table seems red to me, and I have no argument that it is not.

So, by Seems → Belief I should (1) believe that it is red. But I also believe that (2) if it is a red table, it is not a white table in red light. (Nothing can be red and white.) But then it follows from my two beliefs that (3) it is not a white table in red light.

So, I should believe that it is not a white table in red light.

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red light. (Nothing can be red and white.) But then it follows
from my two beliefs that (3) it is not a white table in red light.
So, I should believe that it is not a white table in red light.

Many people think that this looks like a bad chain of reasoning. But it
seems perfectly ok if Seems → Belief is true.

This is sometimes called the **problem of easy belief**. If you find Seems
→ Belief plausible, you should think about how you would respond.

Seems → Belief

If it seems to you that P is true,
and you have no argument
against P, you should believe P.

Let's now introduce our third problem, which will take us into the topic we will discuss next time.

This is the problem that not all “seemings” are created equal. For example, to many people individuals of another race “seem” more threatening or untrustworthy. To many men, women “seem” less intelligent or capable.

On its face, Seems → Belief would seem to license these people to form all kinds of beliefs about people of another race or gender that they surely should not form. What should we say about cases like this?