Belief

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



Belief rarely announces itself as belief. It usually appears as obviousness. This essay explores belief as an activity that stabilizes experience into a world, and what becomes visible when that stability loosens.

Belief as an activity

For a long time I thought belief was something you either had or did not have. You were religious or not. Spiritual or not. An atheist, an agnostic, a seeker, a skeptic. Positions. Labels. Worldviews.

Only much later did it become clear to me that belief is not primarily a doctrine. It is an activity.

Belief is what quietly organizes experience into a world.

It does this so effectively that it becomes almost invisible. It does not feel like an idea we hold, but like the way things are. A self here. A world there. Time passing. Causes producing effects. Choices being made. Meaning either present or absent. A future that matters. A past that explains.

Belief stabilizes.

The first belief: a someone

Without it, experience does not automatically arrange itself into something inhabitable. There is sound, color, sensation, thought, memory, impulse. But no obvious center. No clear author. No built-in meaning. Belief gathers this into something coherent. It introduces identities, objects, narratives. It turns open appearing into a navigable landscape.

The most fundamental belief is not belief in God or in an afterlife. It is the belief that there is someone here to whom all this is happening.

That belief forms very early. Through mirrors. Through language. Through being addressed. Through learning a name. Gradually, experience becomes organized around a presumed center. Thoughts appear to belong to someone. Feelings seem to happen inside someone. Perceptions are interpreted as arriving from a world “out there.”

This feels so basic that it is almost never questioned. It feels like fact, not belief.

Secondary beliefs and livability

On this foundation, countless secondary beliefs grow. If there is a self, it must have a history and a future. If there is a world, it must consist of stable things. If there are actions, there must be agency. If there is suffering, it must have a reason. If there is death, it must be compensated.

Belief in free will, in meaning, in progress, in transcendence all unfold almost automatically once the basic structure is in place.

These beliefs take different cultural forms. Gods, heavens, rebirth, cosmic consciousness, human destiny, technological salvation, awakening, simulation theories.

But psychologically they function in remarkably similar ways. They orient. They console. They protect the narrative center from dissolving into indeterminacy.

Belief is not mainly about truth. It is about livability.

Where knowledge ends

It steps in where knowledge ends, but not neutrally. It enters charged with need. Fear of disappearance. Fear of chaos. Fear of insignificance. Fear of groundlessness. Belief does not solve ultimate questions. It closes them.

Where did we come from? Why is there something rather than nothing? What happens when we die? Does life have meaning? Who am I?

Beliefs anesthetize these questions. They transform them into positions.

Religion and atheism

This is why the opposition between religion and atheism always felt superficial to me. Both usually preserve the same underlying architecture. Remove God, and the central subject remains. The objective world remains. The narrative of progress remains. The belief in explanation as ultimate access remains. The belief that meaning must either be secured or denied remains.

Science as closure

Even science, when unconsciously absolutized, easily becomes another belief system. Not science as method, which is one of the most powerful tools ever developed for producing reliable, limited knowledge, but science as metaphysical closure. As the conviction that reality is fundamentally exhaustible by explanation. That subjectivity will be reduced. That what cannot be objectified will eventually become negligible.

Here too, belief fills the gap where evidence cannot go.

Magical thinking

Magical thinking is simply belief with its emotional logic exposed. The idea that intention bends reality. That moral alignment attracts reward. That history moves somewhere. That humanity is evolving toward a higher state. That personal optimization leads to existential fulfillment.

The belief in awakening

Spiritual culture often refines this even further. The belief in awakening. In a final shift after which the basic problem of existence is resolved. The self dissolves. Fear ends. Life aligns. Suffering is transcended.

This belief often presents itself as anti-belief. As direct seeing. As radical truth. Yet it easily reproduces the same structure: a deficient present, a privileged future, a path, authorities, validations, identities organized around proximity to an imagined resolution.

The search for enlightenment often turns out to be the last refuge of the need for a ground.

Belief as contraction

What slowly became unavoidable for me is this: belief is not an error inside experience. It is a movement inside experience. A contraction. A way of stabilizing appearance by turning it into a world. A way of producing inhabitable reality by generating structure, identity, and meaning.

The question then is no longer which beliefs are true.

The question becomes: what is belief doing?

And what happens when it weakens.

When belief loosens

When belief loosens, the first thing that usually appears is not clarity, but disorientation. Explanations stop consoling. Identities stop fitting. Narratives lose their authority. The sense of standing somewhere erodes.

This is usually interpreted as a problem. A crisis. A loss of meaning. Something to be repaired with a better story.

But it can also be seen differently. As exposure.

Exposure to the fact that experience never depended on belief in order to occur. That sound, color, sensation, and thought were always happening before they were organized. That there is seeing before a seer. Feeling before a self. Change before a world.

Without belief, experience does not vanish. It de-coagulates.

What dissolves is not reality, but the scaffolding that made it interpretable as a world inhabited by a someone.

This does not answer the old questions. It removes their footing.

Where did we come from? What happens when we die? Does life have meaning? Who am I?

Without belief, these questions no longer point anywhere. Not because they are solved, but because the position from which they were asked no longer holds.

What remains

What remains is not knowledge. And not a new metaphysics.

What remains is simply this: whatever is appearing, as it is appearing. This sound. This sensation. This thought. This movement. This fading. This arising.

Not as something happening to someone. Not as evidence of something else. Not as a step on a path. But simply as what is occurring.

This is not an achievement. It is not a state. It offers no authority and no promise. It cannot be maintained, cultivated, or applied. It does not solve the problem of existence.

It reveals that the problem was a belief-structure.

Seeing belief as belief

Belief will return. It always does. Language requires it. Function requires it. Social life is impossible without it. Science depends on it. Memory depends on it. Identity depends on it.

The point is not to eliminate belief, but to see it as belief.

To notice the moment when open appearance contracts into a world. When fluidity crystallizes into things. When immediacy is translated into explanation. When experience is quietly annexed by a position.

In that noticing, belief loses its invisibility. It becomes a phenomenon rather than a foundation.

And something else becomes available. Not certainty. Not freedom. Not meaning.

But a strange, quiet honesty.

The honesty of not knowing what this is.
The honesty of not standing anywhere.
The honesty of letting appearance appear without asking it to justify itself.

Not as a conclusion.

But as what remains when belief stops pretending to be the ground.