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Evidence for Multiple Kinds of Belief in Theory of Mind

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Lay people routinely appeal to “beliefs” in explaining behavior; psychologists do so as well (for instance, in explaining belief polarization and learning). Across three studies ($N = 1,843$, U.S.-based adults), we challenge the assumption that “belief” picks out a single construct in people’s theory of mind. Instead, laypeople attribute different kinds of beliefs depending on whether the beliefs play predominantly epistemic roles (such as truth-tracking) or nonepistemic roles (such as social signaling). We demonstrate that epistemic and nonepistemic beliefs are attributed under different circumstances (Study 1) and support different predictions about the believer’s values (Study 2) and behavior (Study 3). This differentiation emerges reliably across three distinct signatures of attributed belief and even when the believed content and attributed level of certainty about that content are held constant across cases. Our findings call for a more fine-grained characterization of theory of mind and provide indirect support for the hypothesis that human cognition itself features multiple varieties of belief.

Public Significance Statement


Lay people routinely appeal to “beliefs” in explaining and predicting behavior. Psychologists do so as well—for instance, they describe *belief* polarization and explain placebo effects by appealing to beliefs. But are beliefs really a unitary phenomenon? Recent work suggests that beliefs come in different flavors: Some beliefs are mainly about representing the world; others play important roles in social signaling, emotion regulation, and more. We find that this distinction has an analog in people’s “theory of mind.” When attributing beliefs to others and predicting behavior on the basis of those beliefs, participants systematically differentiated kinds of believing: beliefs that aim at truth and accuracy and beliefs that have other functions, such as social signaling or emotional regulation. These findings support a new and nuanced picture of how people represent and reason about the minds of others.


Keywords: belief, theory of mind, epistemic reasoning, cognitive attitudes, mental state attribution


Notions of “belief” play central roles in both scientific and intuitive theories of mind. Psychologists posit beliefs to explain various phenomena (Porot & Mandelbaum, 2021), from placebo effects, which are a consequence of individuals’ *beliefs* (Ossipov et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2012), to learning, which generates changes in *belief* (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Rivers, 2021; Yan et al., 2014). Some phenomena even have belief in their name, as in *belief* bias and *belief* polarization (Campbell & Kay, 2014; Cohen, 2003;

Pronin, 2007). And, unlike many other constructs in psychological science, such as semantic memory or reward prediction error, “belief” is also common in everyday folk explanations. People posit beliefs to explain others’ behaviors (“she took an umbrella because she believes it will rain”), inferences (“she accused the butler because she believes he was the one at the crime scene”), and social allegiances (“they get along because they both believe the 49ers are the best”; Bendaña & Mandelbaum, 2021; Quilty-Dunn &

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Mandelbaum, 2018; Westra, 2023). Belief is so central to intuitive psychology that it claims half the billing in the paradigmatic framework for theory of mind: “belief-desire psychology” (Goldman, 2006; Wellman & Woolley, 1990).

Yet, despite the ubiquity of belief—or perhaps because of it—the task of characterizing this mental state remains elusive (Jong, 2018; Van Leeuwen & Lombrozo, 2023). Some research suggests that beliefs are responsive to evidence; other work suggests the opposite (Bergamaschi Ganapini, 2020; Bortolotti, 2010). Some findings suggest that counterevidence leads to belief polarization; other findings suggest otherwise (Kahan, 2015; Ranney & Clark, 2016). Some research suggests that beliefs are not under voluntary control; other research suggests that they are (Cusimano et al., 2024; Cusimano & Goodwin, 2019, 2020; Gilovich & Regan, 1986; Malle & Knobe, 1997; Turri et al., 2018). This heterogeneity is a challenge for efforts to define belief and renders it puzzling how appeals to belief can and (often) do succeed in offering psychological explanations or predictions.

One approach to this heterogeneity has been gaining recent traction: positing different *kinds* of beliefs or belief-like “cognitive attitudes”—different flavors of believing (Apperly & Butterfill, 2009; Chinn et al., 2014; Davoodi & Lombrozo, 2022a, 2022b; Metz et al., 2023; Rutjens & Preston, 2020; Van Leeuwen, 2014, 2023; Westra, 2023). One version of this hypothesis, which we call the *Varieties of Belief* hypothesis, posits the existence of at least two kinds of cognitive attitude, where one is more closely aligned with truth-tracking (epistemic) functions, such as representing the world to support accurate predictions, and the other with social and motivational (nonepistemic) functions, such as group cohesion and emotion regulation. On this account, different kinds of believing are viewed as algorithmic-level processes shaped by different computational-level problems (Marr, 1982). That is, the different processes involved in generating and utilizing distinct kinds of beliefs can be understood in light of the epistemic or nonepistemic aims that those beliefs serve. Beliefs that serve epistemic aims (such as accurately representing the world) may fall short in achieving nonepistemic aims (such as maintaining emotional and social well-being) and *vice versa*. To best handle these conflicting epistemic and nonepistemic aims, cognition operates with more than one variety of believing.

In the current research, we explore an idea that parallels the Varieties of Belief hypothesis and arises in the context of “theory of mind,” or people’s mental toolkit for understanding minds. We call it the *Belief Pluralism* hypothesis. One might ask: If it is indeed likely that there are different kinds of belief serving different cognitive functions, do laypeople (not just researchers) track those differences in their own representations of people’s beliefs? In other words, do everyday attributions of belief show differentiations that align with epistemic and nonepistemic functions? The Belief Pluralism hypothesis says that the answer to these questions is “yes.”

Of course, the Varieties of Belief hypothesis and its correlate in theory of mind, Belief Pluralism, are in principle logically independent claims. Nevertheless, support for the former motivates the latter, and support for the latter indirectly supports the former. Theory of mind is typically understood as an aspect of human social cognition that emerges—through maturation or learning—for the purpose of predicting and explaining behavior. If the Varieties of Belief hypothesis is correct, such that human cognition in fact involves distinct varieties of believing, then we should expect that at least in some cases, behavior will be more successfully predicted and

explained by attributing different varieties of belief. Hence, support for the Varieties of Belief hypothesis at least motivates the question of whether there is a correlate in people’s intuitive theory of mind or, in our terms, whether the Belief Pluralism hypothesis is true. In turn, the finding that people attribute different kinds of beliefs along epistemic and nonepistemic lines would lend indirect support to the Varieties of Belief hypothesis. If people systematically distinguish between epistemic and nonepistemic beliefs when reasoning about people’s minds, it is plausible that people are indeed tracking a real cognitive distinction.

Whether or not the Varieties of Belief hypothesis is ultimately true, finding that people’s theory of mind systematically differentiates beliefs with epistemic and nonepistemic functions would have important implications (see also Westra, 2023).¹ First, it would call for revision in a core construct in standard views of theory of mind: the notion of belief itself. Paradigmatic accounts of theory of mind posit a simple distinction between desire and belief. This distinction, as well as the unitary conception of belief that it seems to presuppose, has guided research in developmental psychology, comparative psychology, clinical psychology, and beyond, where motivating questions include: Do children and nonhuman animals represent others’ false beliefs? Do two populations (that differ in age, autism spectrum disorder diagnosis, or otherwise) reason about other minds in the same way? If the Belief Pluralism hypothesis is true, these questions must be refined to target specific varieties of belief. More generally, attributions of belief play an important role across the social sciences (for instance, in explaining attributions and misattributions of belief across political divides and across cultures), such that pluralism about belief would have widespread implications.

The Belief Pluralism Hypothesis

The Belief Pluralism hypothesis posits that people’s theory of mind distinguishes between two kinds of beliefs: epistemic and nonepistemic. This is intended as a distinction in cognitive attitudes, or ways of “believing,” not in belief contents. To illustrate, suppose Jane believes that a Republican will win the next election, and this belief comes from her foray into sociological research about American politics and informs her predictions about how economic markets will behave. That is, Jane’s belief serves largely epistemic functions. Jack, on the other hand, may also believe that a Republican will win the next election (the same content), but does so because of the emotional weight of his political identity and the role this belief plays in signaling his commitments to his social network. In other words, Jack’s belief serves nonepistemic functions. Observers might attribute the “belief” that a Republican will win to both Jane and to Jack, but these attributions could involve different kinds of believing that license different expectations—for example, that in light of new evidence, Jane will more readily change her belief than Jack will change his.

While some prior work supports a distinction between epistemic and nonepistemic aspects of belief, this work has not controlled for differences in belief content (Davoodi & Lombrozo, 2022a, 2022b; Metz et al., 2018, 2023; Shtulman, 2013). As one example, Heiphetz et al. (2013) investigated differences between factual beliefs,

¹ See Westra (2023) for an important precedent congenial with our questions. Westra distinguishes between *epistemic* and *symbolic* concepts of belief that are deployed differentially in intuitive theory of mind.

ideological beliefs, and preferences. They found that both adults and 5- to 10-year-old children judged that two people who disagree about a factual belief (for instance, whether germs are very big or very small) cannot both be right, whereas two people who disagree about a preference (for instance, whether pink or green is the prettiest color) can be. Participants' judgments about ideological beliefs (for instance, whether there is one God or many) fell in between. These findings reveal systematic differentiation across kinds of beliefs in lay theory of mind, but the study was not designed to isolate differences in cognitive attitude, as posited by the Belief Pluralism hypothesis, so it remains in principle possible that the differences that surfaced reflect content alone. In our own studies, we aimed to investigate differences in cognitive attitude while holding content fixed, as in our example of Jane and Jack.

Signatures of Distinct Belief Attributions

To test the Belief Pluralism hypothesis, we identify diagnostic "signatures" that could plausibly differentiate attributions of epistemic versus nonepistemic beliefs. To motivate this approach, consider a parallel with accounts of human cognition that posit two systems, such as System 1 and System 2 (Evans, 2008; Sloman, 1996; Stanovich & West, 2000; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). On these views, System 1 tends to be fast, automatic, and emotional, whereas System 2 is slower, controlled, and more logical. Measured processing speed, automaticity, and emotional involvement are therefore "signatures" that can be used to diagnose which system is in operation. Of course, these signatures will not be perfect. On some occasions, a slow response could still reflect the operation of System 1, and a fast response could reflect the (unusually speedy) operation of System 2. Responses could also reflect a combination of both systems. But in general, there will be some association between measured response time and system type, such that System 1 responses are more likely to be fast, and System 2 responses are more likely to be slow.

Similarly, we propose three signatures that help differentiate people's attributions of epistemic versus nonepistemic beliefs. Our signatures, unlike those for System 1 and System 2, reflect the sociocognitive roles for different concepts of belief. As we explain further below, our signatures are binary versus probabilistic construal, perceived directional versus nondirectional control, and the use of "believe" versus "think" in natural language ascriptions (see Figure 1). The signatures are not expected to perfectly trace the hypothesized distinction between cognitive attitudes, but we expect them to express patterns that are somewhat diagnostic of which cognitive attitude people are attributing, just as response time is somewhat diagnostic of cognitive systems. If these signatures reliably differentiate attributions of epistemic versus nonepistemic beliefs, it should be possible to elicit judgments concerning these signatures as a way of diagnosing whether a belief attribution posits epistemic or nonepistemic belief and to use these signatures to induce epistemic versus nonepistemic attributions.

Binary Versus Probabilistic Construal

Our first signature reflects the extent to which a belief is construed as a categorical or more probabilistic commitment. In particular, a belief can be construed as binary (one believes that p or not) or as a

Figure 1

Signatures of Distinct Belief Attributions

Epistemic Belief	Non-Epistemic Belief
Probabilistic construal "There's a 98% chance that aliens exist"	Binary construal "Aliens exist"
Non-directional control "I decided whether to believe that aliens exist"	Directional control "I decided to believe that aliens exist"
'Think' description "I think that aliens exist"	'Believe' description "I believe that aliens exist"

Note. Three signatures to distinguish ascriptions of epistemic beliefs from ascriptions of nonepistemic beliefs: Probabilistic versus Binary construals, Perceived Nondirectional versus Directional control, and "Think" versus "Believe" descriptions. The leftmost element of each signature is its epistemic pole; the rightmost element of each signature is its nonepistemic pole. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

subjective probability (one believes with $x\%$ probability that p is true). Intuitively, if a belief's function is to accurately represent the world, it should be proportional to evidence and updated incrementally as new evidence is obtained (for instance, by following Bayes' rule). This suggests that an epistemic cognitive attitude should support or at least allow for a probabilistic (or, more generally, graded) construal. However, a probabilistic construal seems less appropriate if a belief's function is to signal religious or moral convictions or to signal group allegiance (compare "I believe that a Republican will win the next election" with "I believe there is a 94% chance that a Republican will win the next election"). In such cases, a binary belief may function more effectively by obscuring uncertainty or hesitation.

Note that a belief's being preferentially construed in binary terms does not rule out the possibility that the person who has the belief *also* has or can assign some subjective probability or degree of certainty about the truth of the belief's contents, which they may or may not wish to reveal. Religious believers, for example, may generally report their religious beliefs in binary terms ("I believe!"), though they may still privately harbor more or less doubt about the truth of the professed belief (Davoodi et al., 2019; Luhrmann, 2012; Van Leeuwen, 2022). So—importantly for our experimental design—people attributing beliefs may tend to construe them in binary terms when they serve nonepistemic aims, while still being able to reach an independent judgment about the degree of certainty of the person holding the attributed (nonepistemic) belief (Nelson & Lombrozo, 2025).

Based on this signature, our first hypothesis is that attributions of epistemic cognitive attitudes are more likely than attributions of nonepistemic cognitive attitudes to involve probabilistic (vs. binary) construals. Returning to our example, while Jane might be naturally described as believing with some probability that a Republican will win the next election, Jack will more naturally be described as believing this categorically.

Perceived Directional Versus Nondirectional Control

Our second signature concerns voluntary control. Voluntary control over belief is often taken to threaten belief's ability to reliably track the truth: If we can decide what to believe at will, then our beliefs will be determined by our preferences, not reality (Arpaly & Brinkerhoff, 2018; Kelly, 2003). For example, a president who lost an election could make themselves feel better by simply choosing to believe they actually won. This motivates the prediction that people will associate epistemic cognitive attitudes with limited voluntary control. In contrast, nonepistemic cognitive attitudes that support social signaling or identity preservation may well be under the influence of directional motives, since their need for accuracy is lower. If, for example, the president's "belief" about the election does not serve the psychological role of accurately representing the world and instead serves the role of signaling values or mobilizing followers, it may be more voluntary and perceived as such.

For those steeped in the philosophical literature on doxastic voluntarism, control over belief might seem like an implausible attribution—the orthodox view is that direct control over belief is absent or limited (Alston, 1988; Audi, 2001; Hieronymi, 2006). By contrast, empirical work has found that laypeople are generally quite willing to endorse various forms of control over belief. For instance, recent work by Cusimano and colleagues has found that people judge others to have considerable control over their beliefs and indeed sometimes endorse directional influences on belief, such as believing in line with one's moral obligations (Cusimano & Goodwin, 2020; Cusimano et al., 2024; Cusimano & Lombrozo, 2021a, 2021b, 2023; Cusimano, 2024 see also Turri et al., 2018). Combining these trains of thought, we developed the expectation that participants would find it natural to classify beliefs as resulting from *different* forms of control: what we call *nondirectional control* (one decides whether to come to a belief about something, but without presupposing a conclusion) versus *directional control* (one decides *to* believe something).

Our second hypothesis is that in people's belief attributions, epistemic cognitive attitudes are more likely than nonepistemic cognitive attitudes to be associated with nondirectional control ("S decided to believe whether *p*"), as opposed to directional control ("S decided to believe *p*"). To return to our running example, it should be natural to judge that Jane can exert *nondirectional* control in deciding to form a belief about whether or not a Republican will win the next election—for instance, she can decide to give it more thought or to gather more evidence. What she cannot (or at least should not) do is exert *directional* control by simply deciding to believe that a Republican will win the next election. Such directional control would threaten the link between her belief and reality and thus threaten the belief's epistemic status. By contrast, it might be natural to judge that after joining his young conservatives club, Jack exerted *directional* control in deciding to believe *that* a Republican will win the next election. If Jack's belief is nonepistemic, then directional influences on belief will not necessarily undermine the belief's (nonepistemic) functions.

"Believe" Versus "Think" Descriptions

Our third and final signature concerns the use of "believes" versus "thinks." Recent research has found that people tend to use different words for religious and nonreligious beliefs in a number of different

languages (Heiphetz et al., 2021; Van Leeuwen et al., 2021). In English, for instance, beliefs with religious contents or held for religious reasons are more likely to be reported using "believe" than "think" (e.g., "she believes that Jesus turned water into wine" but "she thinks that the wine is a merlot"). This pattern is also found in other languages, as with "dwen" and "gyi dze" in Fante (an Akan dialect common in Ghana) and 认为 (rènwéi) and 相信 (xiāngxìn) in Mandarin Chinese. A plausible explanation of this effect is that these linguistic differentiations tend to track whether a belief is perceived to be held with an epistemic or a nonepistemic cognitive attitude. If so, the differential pattern of use of "thinks" versus "believes" should also surface in ascriptions of beliefs with epistemic versus nonepistemic roles more generally (whether or not those nonepistemic roles are religious).

Hence, our third hypothesis is that ascriptions of epistemic cognitive attitudes are more likely than ascriptions of nonepistemic cognitive attitudes to involve "think" (e.g., "S thinks that *p*") versus "believe" (e.g., "S believes that *p*"). So while Jane will be more likely to be judged as *thinking* that a Republican will win the next election, Jack will be more likely to be judged as *believing* that a Republican will win the next election.

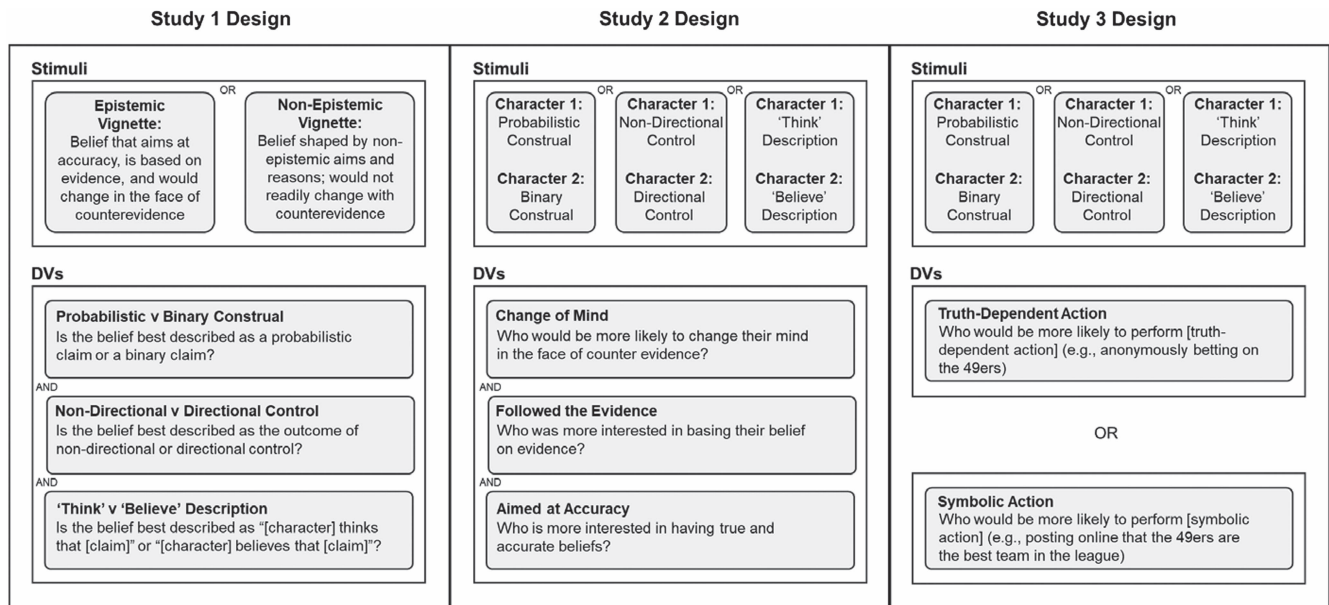
Importantly, this signature of cognitive attitude—like those above—is not deterministic. There are likely to be some uses of "thinks" that correspond to a nonepistemic attitude and some uses of "believes" that correspond to an epistemic attitude (just as response time will be a noisy indicator of whether some judgment is the output of System 1 or System 2). "Thinks" and "believes" overlap extensively in their usage, and they play roles beyond those we focus on here. For instance, both can be used as a hedge to indicate uncertainty ("I *think/believe* the party is on Friday"). Nonetheless, we predict that some signal can be extracted from uses of "thinks" versus "believes," such that we will see an association between word choice and epistemic versus nonepistemic cognitive attitude (especially when controlling for belief certainty).

Present Research

Across three studies ($N = 1,843$ U.S.-based adults), we use these hypothesized signatures of belief attributions to investigate whether laypeople differentiate epistemic and nonepistemic cognitive attitudes. In Study 1, we test whether beliefs that play epistemic roles are more likely than those that play nonepistemic roles to support a probabilistic (vs. binary) construal, to be perceived as involving nondirectional (vs. directional) control, and to be described in terms of "think" (vs. "believe"). In Study 2, we test whether participants make the reverse set of inferences: that beliefs that are reported as probabilistic (vs. binary), achieved through nondirectional control (vs. directional control), and expressed using "think" (vs. "believe") are more likely to be epistemic. Finally, in Study 3, we test an important consequence for theory of mind: whether participants predict different kinds of behavior (truth-dependent vs. symbolic) from agents who express their beliefs in keeping with the signatures associated with epistemic versus nonepistemic attitudes. See Figure 2 for the design scheme.

All studies were approved through the institutional review boards of Princeton University and preregistered using <https://aspredicted.org>. Preregistrations, data, materials, and additional online material are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/38ygn/?view_only=1f86f065f54549239f2117c4b34beb15.

Figure 2
Schematic Representation of the Designs of Studies 1–3



Note. DV = dependent variable.

Transparency and Openness

All studies adhere to the Transparency and Openness Promotion Guidelines. All experimental materials (including surveys and stimuli), deidentified data, preregistrations, and scripts for data processing and analysis necessary to reproduce the results are openly available in the OSF repository at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/38YGN>. The analyses were conducted using R (v 4.4.2). The scripts include calls for required packages and were tested in a separate system to ensure reproducibility.

Studies

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested whether beliefs that play epistemic roles are more likely than those that play nonepistemic roles to receive a probabilistic (vs. binary) construal, to be perceived as involving nondirectional (vs. directional) control, and to be described in terms of "think" (vs. "believe").

Method

Participants. Study 1 had a total sample of 400 U.S.-based adults recruited through Prolific and compensated \$0.55 for a 3-min study. We excluded 17 participants for failing one or more basic attention checks, for a total of 383 participants in our analyzed sample (age: $m = 38.82$, $\sigma = 13.39$; male = 192, female = 183, other = 8). Sample sizes were determined by power analyses based on effect sizes obtained in pilot studies.

Although we did not collect additional demographic information from our samples, a study of online data quality recruiting a Prolific sample (Douglas et al., 2023) found that the majority of participants

identified their ethnicity as White (72.38%), followed by Asian or Asian American (12.90%); Black or African American (9.88%); and Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, or Puerto Rican (8.67%). Family income was distributed from less than \$10,000 per year (6.25%) to over \$150,000 per year (7.86%), with 47.57% in the \$10,000 to <\$60,000 range and the remaining 37.90% in the \$60,000–<\$150,000 range (.40% of the sample did not respond). With regard to highest education, the sample ranged from less than a high school education (.40%) to a graduate degree (15.12%), with the modal response corresponding to a 4-year degree (36.29%), followed by having completed some college (24.40%).

Procedure. Study 1 employed a fully between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight vignettes describing a character with a given belief. Half of these vignettes corresponded to the epistemic condition, the other half to the nonepistemic condition. Below are two sample vignettes illustrating how the same belief content was preserved across the epistemic and nonepistemic conditions:

Adam and John were best friends in their childhood and teenage years. However, after graduating from high school John left to serve in Water Without Borders, a humanitarian program based in the Global South. Ten years later, after traveling the world with the organization, John came back to his town and rebuilt his friendship with Adam, who never left. However, one day, Adam hears a rumor that John came back because he was stealing money from the organization he was working for.

Epistemic condition: Adam has trouble accepting this, because it doesn't fit with what he knows about John. If Adam were presented with strong evidence, he would fully accept John's guilt. Ultimately, what's important to Adam is to accept whatever is true. But, based on the evidence he has, Adam currently ____ that John did not steal money from the organization he was working for.

Nonepistemic condition: Adam has trouble accepting this, because he wants to be a loyal friend to John. Even if Adam were presented with strong evidence, he would have trouble accepting John's guilt. It would feel like wronging John. What's important to Adam is nurturing his friendship with John, and he wouldn't want to betray that. Given these feelings, Adam currently ____ that John did not steal money from the organization he was working for.

After reading their assigned vignette, participants were asked to make several judgments pertaining to the character's belief, expressed in the last sentence of the vignette (e.g., that "John did not steal money from the organization he was working for"). Our three primary dependent variables captured the signatures of cognitive attitudes described in the introduction.

Believe/Think. Participants were asked, "What is a more natural way of completing the blank in the sentence?" They selected between "thinks" and "believes." This question was adapted from Van Leeuwen et al. (2021). After participants made a choice, the blank in the vignette was replaced with the word they selected.

Binary/Probabilistic. Participants were asked, "Do you think it is natural to describe [Character's] belief as corresponding to some probability (= '[Character] believes that there is an x% chance that [claim]')?" They responded either "No: [Character] simply believes that [claim] (as opposed to not believing this)" or "Yes: It is natural to describe [Character's] belief as corresponding to some probability."

Directional/Nondirectional. Participants were asked, "Which of the following is a better description of what happened?" They selected between "[Character] decided to believe that [claim]" and "[Character] decided whether to believe that [claim]."

Across our four pairs of vignettes, we varied the nonepistemic considerations relevant to the nonepistemic condition. Besides the concerns with loyalty in the John/Adam vignette illustrated above, we included a vignette concerning religious faith, one concerning a teacher's moral commitment to see potential in her students (motivated by Cusimano & Lombrozo, 2021a), and one about an individual's identity and desire to be true to herself.

To ensure that differences across epistemic and nonepistemic conditions did not just reflect belief strength or confidence, participants were asked, "How certain do you think [Character] is that [claim]?", and they responded on a 7-point scale from -3 (*not certain at all*) to 3 (*completely certain*). Note that this measure is not redundant with our Binary/Probabilistic measure: Someone could believe that it is more natural to describe a belief in binary terms even if the belief is not held with maximal certainty (see Nelson & Lombrozo, 2025).

For exploratory purposes, participants were also asked to report whether the character had good reasons for their belief and whether the belief was important to their identity; these questions and corresponding analyses are reported in the OSF repository at https://osf.io/38ygn/?view_only=1f86f065f54549239f2117c4b34beb15.

Results and Discussion

To analyze our primary measures (Binary/Probabilistic, Directional/Nondirectional, and Believes/Thinks), we fit mixed-effects logistic models with condition (epistemic, nonepistemic) as a predictor and random intercepts for vignette to control for possible variability across vignettes. In all cases, we coded the feature that we associated with the epistemic condition as 0 (Probabilistic, Nondirectional, Thinks) and the feature that we associated with the nonepistemic condition as 1

(Binary, Directional, Believes). All three measures conformed to our predictions (see Figure 1). Comparing the nonepistemic context to the epistemic context, participants were significantly more likely to select a binary construal over a probabilistic construal ($\beta = .527$, $SE = .224$, $p = .018$), to select a directional construal over a nondirectional construal ($\beta = .981$, $SE = .259$, $p < .001$), and to select "believes" over "thinks" ($\beta = .8881$, $SE = .289$, $p = .002$; Figure 3).

Given that the vignettes involved beliefs that were matched in content across the epistemic and nonepistemic conditions, we have some evidence that the signatures differentiate how a belief is held (the cognitive attitude) rather than belief content. However, an important concern is that the characters across the paired vignettes might have been judged by participants as merely holding their beliefs with different levels of *certainty*. If our signatures track differences in certainty (for instance, with a binary belief simply judged to be more certain than a probabilistic belief), then our differences across conditions could reflect differences in the certainty with which a cognitive attitude is held, rather than a difference in the cognitive attitude itself. To address this concern, we analyzed our measure of certainty. A linear regression predicting certainty from condition (epistemic, nonepistemic) and vignette found that there was no significant difference between judgments about the character's certainty across the epistemic and nonepistemic conditions ($\beta = 0.181$, $SE = 0.121$, $p = .138$). Most importantly, however, the differences that we observed across all three signatures remained significant when our certainty measure was added as a predictor to the original mixed-effects model reported above (Binary/Probabilistic: $\beta = .488$, $SE = .228$, $p = .032$; Directional/Nondirectional: $\beta = .942$, $SE = .262$, $p < .001$; Believes/Think: $\beta = .881$, $SE = .289$, $p = .002$), indicating that the predicted effects were not an artifact of differences across conditions in inferred certainty.

Study 2

Study 1 found that participants differentiated epistemic and nonepistemic beliefs in line with all three signatures. Study 2 tests whether participants make the reverse inference: When a belief is expressed as binary (vs. probabilistic), directional (vs. nondirectional), or using "believes" (vs. "thinks"), are participants more likely to infer that the belief plays a nonepistemic role? To assess this, we asked participants to draw inferences about the three aspects of functional role manipulated across the epistemic versus nonepistemic conditions in Study 1: whether the belief aims at truth (vs. a nonepistemic value), is based on evidence, and would change in light of new evidence.

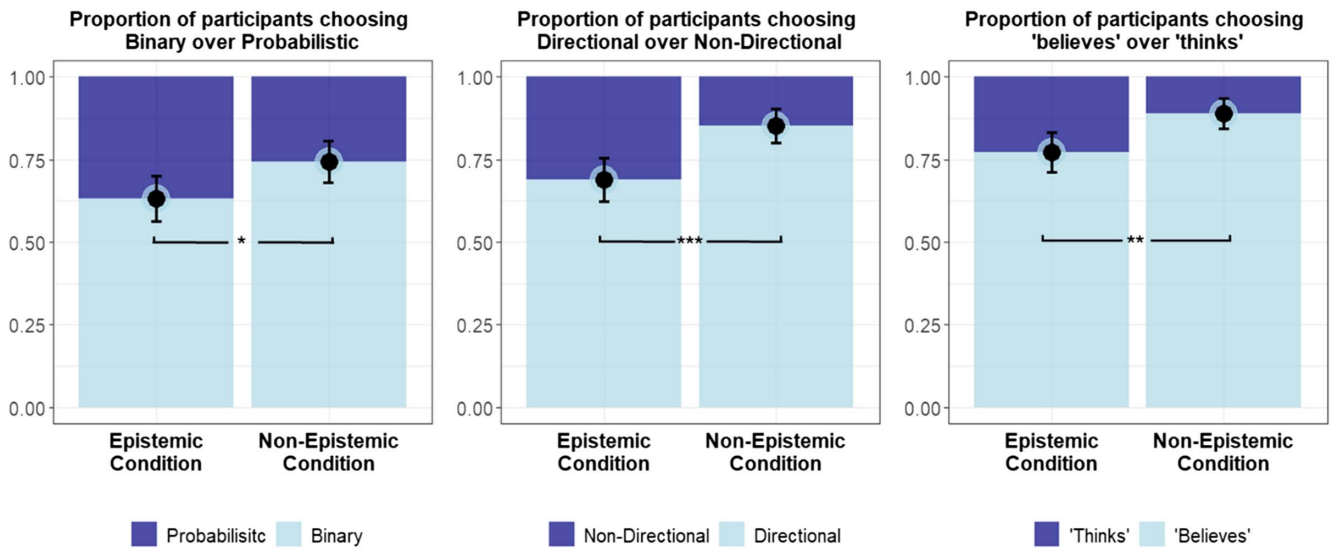
Method

Participants. Study 2 had a total sample of 732 U.S.-based adults recruited through Prolific and compensated \$0.68 for a 4-min study. We excluded nine participants for failing one or more basic attention checks, for a total of 723 participants in our analyzed sample.² Sample sizes were determined by power analyses based on effect sizes obtained in pilot studies.

² Study 2 is a composite of two studies. The first study ($N = 482$, eight excluded after attention checks) measured the Binary/Probabilistic and the Think/Belief conditions. The second study ($N = 250$, three excluded after attention checks) measured the Directionality condition. Due to experimenter error, we only collected age and gender demographics for the latter study (age: $m = 37.92$, $\sigma = 13.00$; male = 105, female = 133, other = 9).

Figure 3

Proportions of Participant Responses for Our Three Signatures Across the Epistemic and Nonepistemic Conditions in Study 1



Note. Dark blue bars represent participants choosing a probabilistic construal (first panel), nondirectional control (second panel), and "thinks" (third panel). Light blue bars represent participants choosing a binary construal (first panel), directional control (second panel), and "believes" (third panel). Dots represent mean proportions choosing binary, directional, and "believes," with error bars representing 95% confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Procedure. In a fully between-subjects design, participants read one of 15 possible vignettes, the result of crossing our three signatures (Binary/Probabilistic, Directional/Nondirectional, and Believe/Think) with five claims ("A Republican will win the next presidential election," "Jesus was born in a Manger near Bethlehem," "There is alien life on Earth," "Chickens feel fear and anxiety before being sacrificed for food," and "Artificial intelligence will never achieve human-like consciousness"). These claims were selected because they could plausibly support an epistemic or a nonepistemic cognitive attitude.

Each vignette involved two characters who agree that the given proposition is true, but express their belief differently. Below are sample vignettes illustrating the difference across contrasts:

Alex and Blaine were both called by the same survey company. The survey company asked them each several questions. One question concerned their take on whether [there is alien life on earth]. Here's what they both said:

Binary/Probabilistic:

Alex: "[there is alien life on earth]."

Blaine: "There's a 98% chance that [there is alien life on earth]."

Believe/Think:

Alex: "I *believe* that [there is alien life on earth]."

Blaine: "I *think* that [there is alien life on earth]."

The vignette was slightly different for the Directional/Nondirectional contrast:

Alex and Blaine were both called by the same survey company. The survey company asked them each several questions. One question concerned their take on whether [there is alien life on earth]. Both Alex and Blaine agreed that [there is alien life on earth]. They were then asked whether any decision was involved in coming to have this belief.

Directional/Nondirectional:

Alex: "I decided to believe that [there is alien life on earth]"

Blaine: "I decided *whether* to believe that [there is alien life on earth]"

Participants were then asked to provide ratings concerning the epistemic and nonepistemic features of the characters' beliefs. Each participant evaluated the same three dimensions used to manipulate epistemic and nonepistemic context in Study 1: whether a character would change their mind in light of new evidence, base their belief on evidence, and aim at truth. The lower bound of the 7-point scale was associated with the nonepistemic profile, and the upper bound was associated with the epistemic profile.

[Change of Mind] We know that one of them (either Alex or Blaine) would be likely to change their view if presented with evidence indicating that it is not the case that [there is alien life on earth]. We also know that the other one (either Alex or Blaine) would resist changing their mind even in the face of such evidence.

Who do you think is the person who is more likely to change their mind if they were presented with evidence indicating that it is *not* the case that [there is alien life on earth]? (–3 definitely Alex to 3 definitely Blaine)

[*Followed the Evidence*] We know that, in arriving at their view, one of them (either Alex or Blaine) was most interested in following the evidence, no matter which view it led them to adopt. We also know that the other one (either Alex or Blaine) was most interested in adopting the particular view most consistent with their values—things like their morals, loyalties, and religious faith.

Who do you think is the person who was most interested in basing their view only on the evidence? (–3 definitely Alex to 3 definitely Blaine)

[*Aimed at Accuracy*] We know that one of them (either Alex or Blaine) is most interested in having true and accurate beliefs about the world. We also know that the other one (either Alex or Blaine) is more interested in holding the beliefs that best reflect other values, such as morality, loyalty, or faith.

Who do you think is the person who is more interested in having true and accurate beliefs about the world? (–3 definitely Alex to 3 definitely Blaine)

Because these were precisely the three aspects of functional role manipulated across the epistemic versus nonepistemic conditions in Study 1, this study was the mirror image of Study 1, looking not at inferences to each signature from epistemic versus nonepistemic role, but at inferences to epistemic versus nonepistemic role from each signature.

As in Study 1, participants also answered questions about the characters' certainty: "Who do you think is more certain that [there is

alien life on earth]?" (–3 = *definitely Alex* to 3 = *definitely Blaine*). We also included questions about which character had better reasons for belief and about centrality to identity. See the OSF repository at https://osf.io/38ygn/?view_only=1f86f065f54549239f2117c4b34beb15 for all items and questions and corresponding analyses.

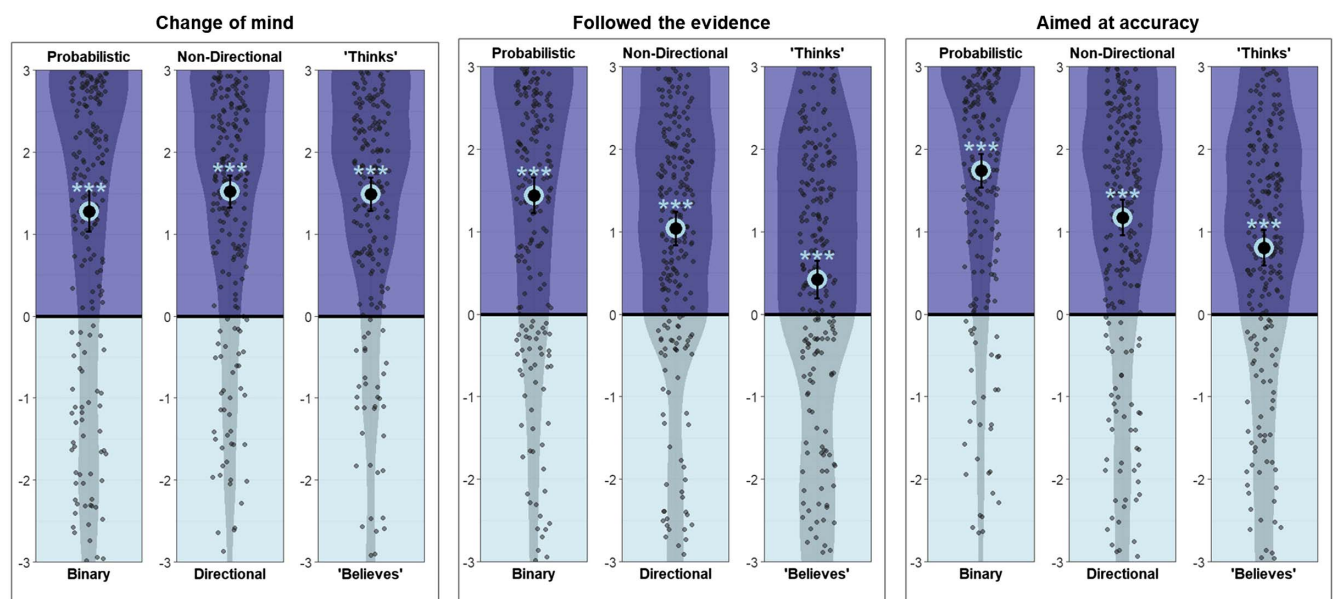
Results and Discussion

For all three measures, the character who expressed their belief using the epistemic pole of the corresponding signature (Probabilistic, Nondirectional, and "Think") was seen as more likely to exhibit the epistemic feature, as verified statistically with *t* tests comparing responses to the scale midpoint. In other words, and as reflected in the positive means in Figure 4, participants judged it more likely that a character would change their mind in light of evidence, base their belief on evidence, and aim at accuracy when they expressed their belief using the epistemic pole of our signatures (Probabilistic, Nondirectional, and "Thinks") compared to the nonepistemic pole of our signatures (Binary, Directional, and "Believes").

As in Study 1, we also analyzed certainty. *T* tests revealed that the means for certainty were significantly below the midpoint for all conditions (Binary/Probabilistic: $m = -1.183$, $t = -28.214$, 95% CI $[-1.183, -1.028]$; Directional/Nondirectional: $m = -1.004$, $t = -112.53$, 95% CI $[-1.021, -0.986]$; Believe/Think: $m = -1.535$, $t = -258.32$, 95% CI $[-1.547, -1.524]$), indicating that participants judged the character at the nonepistemic pole (Binary, Directional, and "Believes") to be more certain. Most importantly, however, the significant differences for each signature were maintained after regressing a generalized linear model with item and certainty scores as

Figure 4

Mean Ratings Given by Participants in Study 2, in the Binary/Probabilistic, Directional/Nondirectional, and Think/Believe Conditions, Organized by Measure



Note. Large points represent mean ratings; small points represent individual participant responses. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Each row of three asterisks represents $p < .001$ in a one-sample *t* test. Labels above and below each figure correspond to the signature reflected by each character in the vignette (Alex v. Blaine). See the online article for the color version of this figure.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 1
*Results of a One-Sample *t* Test Over Projected Data*

Signature and measure	<i>t</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>m</i>	CI	<i>p</i>
Change of mind					
Binary/probabilistic	20.039	235	1.279	[1.153, 1.405]	<.001
Directional/nondirectional	33.232	246	1.522	[1.432, 1.612]	<.001
Believe/think	32.416	236	1.489	[1.398, 1.579]	<.001
Followed the evidence					
Binary/probabilistic	83.662	235	1.741	[1.700, 1.782]	<.001
Directional/nondirectional	66.657	246	1.174	[1.139, 1.208]	<.001
Believe/think	75.026	236	0.805	[0.784, 0.827]	<.001
Aimed at accuracy					
Binary/probabilistic	58.010	235	1.440	[1.391, 1.489]	<.001
Directional/nondirectional	46.448	246	1.040	[0.996, 1.084]	<.001
Believe/think	18.134	236	0.421	[0.376, 0.467]	<.001

Note. Results of *t* tests over projected data from a generalized linear model for each measure with item and certainty scores as factors: *t* = *t* statistic, *n* = number of participants in the condition, *m* = mean rating; CI = 95% confidence interval.

factors (to control for item variation and certainty scores) and running *t* tests over the model's projected data (see Table 1). As in Study 1, this suggests that the inferences drawn from each signature reflected the perceived epistemic versus nonepistemic roles of the attributed beliefs and not their contents or levels of certainty. See the OSF repository at https://osf.io/38ygn/?view_only=1f86f065f54549239f2117c4b34beb15 for further statistics and supplementary measures.

Study 3

Study 3 tests an important consequence of the hypothesis that theory of mind posits more than one kind of belief: Epistemic and nonepistemic cognitive attitudes should be associated with different predictions about behavior. We test this by presenting participants with the signatures of cognitive attitudes manipulated in Study 2 and eliciting judgments about behavior. In particular, we predicted that participants would be more likely to judge that characters who express their beliefs employing the epistemic poles of our signatures (Probabilistic, Nondirectional, and "Think") would perform truth-dependent actions, as opposed to symbolic actions, than characters who express their beliefs employing the nonepistemic poles of our signatures (Binary, Directional, and "Believe").

By truth-dependent actions, we mean actions whose success depends on the truth of the belief(s) on which they are based. For example, the success of anonymously betting \$1,000 that the San Francisco 49ers will win the Super Bowl depends on whether it is ultimately true or false that the 49ers win the Super Bowl. The success of a symbolic action, on the other hand, depends on the signaling consequences of said action, independently of whether the belief on which it is based is true. For example, posting on Facebook that the San Francisco 49ers will win the Super Bowl can be successful in signaling one's allegiances whether or not the 49ers win the Super Bowl. The idea of "symbolic actions" comes from research in cultural psychology, which suggests that certain culturally significant actions can gain symbolic functions that aim to negotiate, signal, or prompt culturally significant responses from relevant community members (Boesch, 1991; Sperber, 1997; Straub,

2021; see also Westra, 2023). Here, we use the distinction between symbolic actions and truth-dependent actions to investigate whether and how attributing epistemic versus nonepistemic beliefs affects predictions about behavior, a core function of theory of mind.

Method

Participants. Study 3 had a total sample of 751 U.S.-based adults recruited through Prolific and compensated \$0.33 for a 2-min study. We excluded 11 participants for failing one basic attention check, for a total of 740 participants in our analyzed sample (age: $m = 39.28$, $\sigma = 13.13$; male = 355, female = 372, other = 13). Sample sizes were determined by power analyses based on effect sizes obtained in pilot studies.

Procedure. We modified the paradigm from Study 2 to test whether our three signatures elicit different inferences about people's *truth-dependent* and *symbolic* actions, respectively.

Participants were presented with one of 30 vignettes, the result of crossing three contrasts (binary/probabilistic, directional/nondirectional, believe/think), the same five propositions from Study 2, and two action types: truth-dependent or symbolic. As in Study 2, participants learned about a pair of characters who expressed their belief regarding some proposition following one of our three signatures. Unique to Study 3, participants were then told that one of those characters performed an action (truth-dependent or symbolic), and they were asked to judge which of the two characters was more likely to have performed that action. Below is our behavior prediction measure illustrated in the Binary/Probabilistic condition for a particular proposition:

Alex and Blaine were both called by the same survey company. The survey company asked them each several questions. One question concerned their take on whether [there is alien life on earth]. Here's what they both said:

Binary/Probabilistic:

Alex: "[there is alien life on earth]."

Blaine: “There’s a 98% chance that [there is alien life on earth].”

[*Action prediction*] We know that, sometime later, one of the two (Alex or Blaine) did the following:

[*Truth-Dependent*] Anonymously donated \$1000 to a scientific organization investigating how to combat potential threats to humans from alien life on earth.

[*Symbolic*] Became an avid spokesperson for the organization “We are not alone” that supports alien enthusiasts all around the country.

Who do you think did this? (−3 = *definitely Alex* to 3 = *definitely Blaine*)

As a control, participants also answered the same certainty question as in Study 2. See the OSF repository at https://osf.io/38ygn/?view_only=1f86f065f54549239f2117c4b34beb15 for all items and questions and corresponding analyses.

Results and Discussion

Our primary prediction was that participants would be more likely to judge that truth-dependent actions, as compared to symbolic actions, were performed by characters who expressed their beliefs using the epistemic signatures (Probabilistic, Nondirectional, “Think”). We therefore expected that, for each of our signature contrasts, the ratings for our action prediction measure would be significantly higher for truth-dependent actions, compared to symbolic actions.

To test the effect of action type in each of our signatures, we separated our sample into three subsamples that corresponded to the action prediction ratings given for each of our signatures (Binary/Probabilistic, Directional/Nondirectional, and “Think”/“Believe”). Then, for each signature, we conducted separate mixed-effects models with the action prediction rating (−3: Alex, −3: Blaine) as a dependent variable, action type (truth-dependent coded as 0/symbolic coded as 1) as the fixed effect, and vignette as a random intercept to control for variability across vignettes. Results showed that for each signature, participants gave significantly higher ratings for truth-dependent actions than for symbolic actions, meaning that truth-dependent actions were judged closer to the epistemic pole of each signature than were symbolic actions (the coefficients for action type were as follows across conditions: Binary/Probabilistic: $\beta = .762$, $SE = .239$, $p = .0016$; Directional/Nondirectional: $\beta = .911$, $SE = .220$, $p < .001$; Think/Believe: $\beta = .567$, $SE = .219$, $p = .010$). Figure 5 illustrates this pattern, with mean ratings for the truth-dependent action higher (closer to the epistemic pole) than mean ratings for symbolic actions given each of our signatures.³

Notably, all mean ratings in Study 3 fell numerically below the scale midpoint, indicating that despite the predicted (and observed) variation across symbolic and truth-dependent actions, participants generally thought that the character who expressed the nonepistemic pole of our signatures (Binary, Directional, and “Believe”) was more likely to engage in both kinds of action. This is likely a consequence of attributing greater *certainty* to this character. *T* tests comparing certainty ratings to the scale midpoint found that, in all cases, participants judged the character who expressed the nonepistemic pole of our signatures (Binary, Directional, and “Believe”) to be more certain (Binary/Probabilistic: $M = -1.364$, $SE = 0.128$, $p < .001$; Directional/Nondirectional: $M = -1.482$, $SE = 0.110$, $p <$

.001; “Believes”/“Thinks”: $M = -1.743$, $SE = 0.103$, $p < .001$). Compensating for this approximately 1-point offset in certainty favoring the nonepistemic character, the mean judgments in Figure 4 would straddle the scale midpoint, with symbolic actions falling on the side of the nonepistemic character, but truth-dependent actions falling on the side of the epistemic character.

Importantly, we also verified that differences in certainty could not account for the difference across symbolic and truth-dependent actions. While we did find that participants gave significantly lower certainty ratings for truth-dependent actions than for symbolic actions in the Binary/Probabilistic condition ($\beta = -0.524$, $SE = .249$, $p = .036$), the effects of condition reported above remained significant when adding certainty to the model as a control (Binary/Probabilistic: $\beta = 1.038$, $SE = .196$, $p < .001$; Directional/Nondirectional: $\beta = 1.091$, $SE = .197$, $p < .001$; Think/Believe: $\beta = .427$, $SE = .195$, $p = .030$).

General Discussion

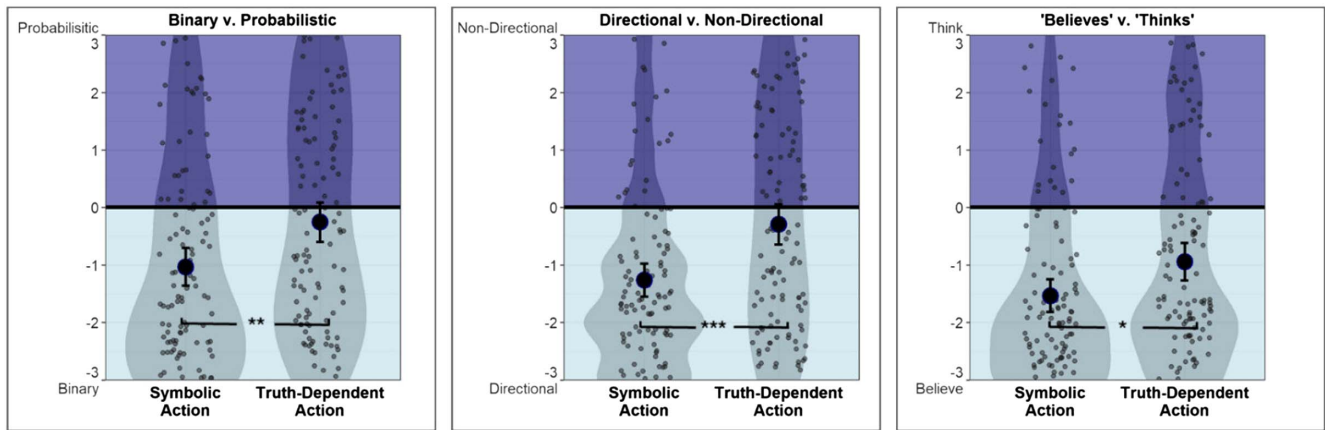
Is there more than one category of “belief” represented in people’s theory of mind? Study 1 suggests that people systematically differentiate beliefs that are held with epistemic versus nonepistemic cognitive attitudes: The former are more likely than the latter to be construed as probabilistic (vs. binary), judged to be the outcome of nondirectional (vs. directional) control, and expressed using the verb “think” (vs. “believe”). Study 2 documents novel patterns in people’s inferences from these signatures to judgments about a belief’s epistemic versus nonepistemic role, and Study 3 extends these results to people’s predictions concerning truth-dependent versus symbolic action.

Importantly, we observed these effects despite controlling for both the *content* and *certainty* of beliefs, suggesting that our participants made distinctions between cognitive *attitudes*—between kinds of believing. That said, content and certainty may well be cues to cognitive attitude in many real-world cases. For instance, we expect that someone who asserts “the president is alive” will be judged to hold an epistemic belief more readily than someone who asserts “Jesus is alive” and will be so judged using content as a cue. Our decision to hold belief content fixed—and to control for effects of certainty—was methodologically important in testing our hypothesis that theory of mind differentiates epistemic and nonepistemic cognitive *attitudes*, as posited by Belief Pluralism. This is a key aspect of our proposal and one way in which it differs from prior theoretical and empirical work introducing distinctions between kinds of belief (Abelson, 1986; Apperly & Butterfill, 2009; Buckwalter et al., 2015; Skitka et al., 2021). That said, our methodological choice to hold content fixed likely explains why our effects are relatively small. It is reasonable to expect that the differences across our signatures would be considerably larger if content and certainty were allowed to vary as well.

³ In an exploratory analysis, we also investigated whether the effect of action type (Truth-Dependent vs. Symbolic) was moderated by signature (Binary/Probabilistic, Directional/Nondirectional, Think/Believe). To do so, we fit a mixed-effects model with action prediction rating as the dependent variable, action type and signature as fixed effects, and vignette as a random intercept. This analysis included an interaction term between action type and signature. A Type III analysis of variance on the interaction term revealed that it was not significant, $F(2, 730.63) = 0.727$, $p = .484$, indicating that the effect of action type on ratings was comparable across the three signatures.

Figure 5

Mean Ratings in Study 3 for Symbolic and Truth-Dependent Actions in the Binary/Probabilistic, Directional/Nondirectional, and Believe/Think Conditions



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. v. = versus. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Considerations about content could also explain a notable pattern in our data. While our results indicate that participants differentiate epistemic and nonepistemic features of beliefs, in Study 1, a majority of participants described characters' beliefs using the nonepistemic poles of our signatures—that is, a majority of beliefs were described as binary, under directional control, and using the word “believes.” This could be an artifact of our belief contents, which were selected for their plausibility in both epistemic and nonepistemic contexts (e.g., believing that a friend is innocent). This may have provided content-based cues that beliefs were nonepistemic, with our experimental manipulations resulting in systematic variation around judgments that were skewed nonepistemic. Had we instead used belief contents that do not readily support a nonepistemic construal (“The year is 2025,” “The atomic number of Gold is 79,” “Water is wet,” etc.), we would expect judgments skewed in the other direction. And with the liberty to vary content alongside epistemic versus nonepistemic context, we would expect much larger effects, with epistemic beliefs generating a majority of responses at the epistemic poles (Probabilistic, Nondirectional, and “Think”) and nonepistemic beliefs at the nonepistemic poles (Binary, Directional, and “Believe”). Exploring such interactions between content and other cues to cognitive attitude would be a valuable direction for future research.

Relationship to Prior Empirical Work

The present findings contribute to recent research that offers a refined picture of the psychological constructs involved in theory of mind (Ho et al., 2022; Navarro, 2022; Schaafsma et al., 2015; Spaulding, 2018; Wellman & Miller, 2008; Westra, 2018, 2023). In particular, our findings support pluralism about “belief” in intuitive psychology and offer one way to characterize the two broad belief kinds involved: in terms of their epistemic or nonepistemic roles.

The hypothesis that theory of mind involves more than one kind of belief can explain several findings from prior research. For example, many studies have found differences between religious and scientific beliefs, such that the former are more likely to be based

on affiliative, moral, and intuitive considerations (all plausibly nonepistemic), while the latter are more often grounded in evidence (a paradigmatically epistemic consideration; Metz et al., 2023; Shulman, 2013). In both children and adults, religious beliefs are more likely than scientific or factual beliefs to be considered subjective, in the sense that two people who disagree can both be right (Heiphetz et al., 2013; Liquin et al., 2020; Metz et al., 2023; Wainryb et al., 2004). On the assumption that religious beliefs, compared to scientific beliefs, typically play more nonepistemic roles, these findings suggest that beliefs are systematically differentiated along the lines that our distinction between epistemic and nonepistemic belief would predict. However, this prior work has contrasted beliefs that differ in content (i.e., religious vs. scientific content), so while the evidence is consistent with our posited distinction in *cognitive attitudes* (or kinds of *believing*), the findings reported here are the first to find the posited differentiation while controlling for content and thus offer the strongest support for a distinction in attitude.

Only two prior results, to our knowledge, have similarly isolated judgments of belief attitude from effects of belief content. In Study 4 of Heiphetz et al. (2021), participants were presented with vignettes in which individuals endorse a given content, but where the context is matter-of-fact versus religious. For example, in one matter-of-fact vignette context, Kerry believes that aspirin is not a cure for headaches because she had tried it many times before with no success, while in the related religious vignette context, Terry believes the same thing because the church she is a member of teaches that prayer and not medicine cures medical ills. Participants were asked to choose between “thinks” and “believes” to fill in the blank in the following sentence: “Kerry/Terry always refused the aspirin her friends offered, because she _____ that aspirin is not a cure.” Participants were much more likely to use “thinks” for matter-of-fact vignette contexts (62% of the time), but “believes” for religious vignette contexts (74% of the time), even though the attributed contents were matched (in this case, *that aspirin is not a cure*). Study 3 of Van Leeuwen et al. (2021) replicated this result

across four out of the five languages and cultural contexts they investigated.

Our present work builds on these findings in three important ways: (i) by suggesting that the relevant (and more general) distinction is between a belief's epistemic versus nonepistemic roles, rather than being just between matter-of-fact versus religious contexts (which is arguably a special case of our more general distinction), (ii) by identifying two additional signatures of attitude type beyond uses of "thinks" versus "believes," and (iii) by investigating inferences from signatures to the epistemic and nonepistemic features and consequences of belief (as in Studies 2 and 3), not only the conditions under which different kinds of belief attitudes are attributed (as in Study 1).

Alternative Hypotheses

It is worth considering how the Belief Pluralism hypothesis differs from three alternatives. First, consider what we call the "masked" belief hypothesis. On this view, there is only one kind of belief attitude, but typical properties of this single belief type (such as responsiveness to evidence) can be "masked" by social or motivational pressures (Flores, *in press*; Helton, 2020). To translate this hypothesis to theory of mind, it could be that laypeople represent others as having a single type of belief, but recognize that said type of belief can be distorted or masked by nonepistemic considerations, such as emotion or conflicts of interest (cf. Pronin & Hazel, 2023). On this hypothesis, what we call attributions of nonepistemic beliefs are just attributions of distorted (masked) epistemic beliefs.

A second alternative can be called the "enhanced" belief hypothesis. On this view, people's theory of mind does trace separable kinds of belief attitudes. However, beliefs fulfilling epistemic functions are more basic and can be "enhanced" into more complex beliefs that are sensitive to nonepistemic considerations. Thus, enhanced beliefs (which we are hypothesizing to be nonepistemic beliefs) entail the properties of basic epistemic beliefs but not the other way around.⁴ To translate into our terms, this hypothesis holds there are no distinctive nonepistemic beliefs represented in lay theory of mind: instead there are only epistemic beliefs with and without nonepistemic enhancement.

Finally, consider the "masquerading" belief hypothesis. On this view, people's intuitive theory of mind does recognize a distinctive cognitive attitude responsive to nonepistemic factors. However, this attitude only passes as a belief without being belief in its own right.⁵ Only purely epistemic doxastic attitudes deserve the label "belief." On this view, only what we call an epistemic belief can be properly called a belief.

In different ways, these views all attempt to do without the existence of what we call nonepistemic beliefs. Applied to our study, the masked belief hypothesis would hold that our signatures do not track ascriptions of distinct varieties of belief, but rather people's sensitivity to how much beliefs (conceived of as one sort of thing) may have been masked or corrupted by nonepistemic considerations. Similarly, the enhanced belief hypothesis would hold that our nonepistemic signatures are not tracking ascriptions of a differentiable nonepistemic belief attitude, but of an enhanced belief that builds upon, and thus entails, a more basic epistemic belief. Finally, the masquerading belief hypothesis would hold that our signatures distinguish genuinely different cognitive attitudes, only one of

which can be called belief. Although our studies were not designed to differentiate these hypotheses, we think a few considerations speak in favor of Belief Pluralism, or the need to posit nonepistemic beliefs. (That said, we will not be arguing that there are no such things as masked, enhanced, or masquerading beliefs, or their theory of mind representations; those may *also* exist. We are only arguing here that there are considerable data that the hypotheses under discussion struggle to explain, but that Belief Pluralism explains well.)

One reason to doubt the sufficiency of the masked and masquerading accounts comes from recent work demonstrating that (many) people classify nonepistemic reasons as legitimate reasons for at least some of their own or others' beliefs, not as illegitimate distortions that compromise a belief's importance or justification (Cusimano & Lombrozo, 2021a, 2021b, 2023; Metz et al., 2023). For instance, Cusimano and Lombrozo (2021a) found that many participants thought characters should adopt the belief that was more loyal, rather than the belief that was more strongly supported by evidence, and moreover judged a character's belief to be more *justified* when it aligned with loyalty rather than evidence. Metz et al. (2023) found that many participants judged the moral value of a belief to be a "good reason" for belief. These findings suggest that nonepistemic considerations are routinely recognized and even condoned in evaluating beliefs, challenging the masked belief hypothesis (on which nonepistemic influences *distort* belief) and the masquerading belief hypothesis (according to which masquerading beliefs would likely be judged by the same epistemic standards as the things they are masquerading as, i.e., epistemic beliefs). More generally, the masked and masquerading hypotheses on their own have difficulty making sense of the interesting variation in normative stances people take toward (what we call) epistemic versus nonepistemic belief.

One reason to doubt the sufficiency of the enhanced belief account comes from its contention that nonepistemic beliefs have all the properties of epistemic beliefs (plus a few more). Westra (2023), who advanced a theoretical position similar to our own, noted that this claim is in tension with the results of Heiphetz et al. (2013) mentioned above. Recall that Heiphetz et al. (2013) contrasted responses to disagreements involving factual beliefs, which are presumably epistemic, with those involving ideological beliefs, which are presumably nonepistemic. Participants often judged that two people who endorse conflicting ideological beliefs "can both be right." This suggests that such beliefs are not seen as aiming at truth; thus, they have features that depart from, rather than build on, those of epistemic beliefs.

In some ways, the masquerading belief hypothesis is the closest to our own, insofar as it recognizes two functionally distinct attitudes. Indeed, if it admits that what we call nonepistemic belief is a functionally distinguishable attitude that can be held independently

⁴ Arguably, Buckwalter et al. (2015) defend this view. They posit notions of a "thick" kind of belief that adds nonepistemic features to a "thin" notion of belief that is characterized by epistemic features; thus, the properties of thin belief are entailed by thick belief but not *vice versa*. A wrinkle to their version, however, is that they hold that thin belief is likely conceived as involuntary, but thick belief is (or can be) voluntary, which is puzzling since thick beliefs are supposed to also have the properties of the thin beliefs they entail (which presumably includes involuntariness). See below for more discussion of the enhanced belief view.

⁵ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

from epistemic beliefs, we fear the contention is merely terminological. By using the label “belief” to denote these attitudes, we aimed to mark that people’s theories of mind recognize distinct doxastic states that fulfill some of the core functions of belief (e.g., they represent the world as actual, take in reasons, and serve in our inferences about people’s behavior) but are still different from the classic epistemic beliefs posited by philosophers and psychologists. Once this is accepted, not much more hangs on the decision to label it a kind of “belief” or not.

Open Questions

Do people’s representation of epistemic and nonepistemic beliefs differ in kind, or only in degree? While we have framed our distinction between epistemic and nonepistemic beliefs as a difference in kind, we are sympathetic to the possibility that people’s representations of others’ epistemic and nonepistemic beliefs could instead describe two ends of a continuum (or two clusters in a multidimensional space), with many beliefs falling in between. In fact, some of our additional analyses, reported in additional online material at <https://osf.io/h89rt>, suggest that it may be useful to think of beliefs as falling within a multidimensional space, as opposed to lying along a single continuum. For example, while we find that responses along our three signatures tend to be correlated, the associations are modest. In preliminary work, we also explored an additional dimension—whether a belief’s content is regarded as an objective matter of fact—and found that it did not pattern with choices between think versus believe and binary versus probabilistic construal (Vesga et al., 2024). These findings suggest that representations of belief are not unidimensional.

On the other hand, our exploratory measures revealed reliable relationships between our manipulation of belief type and additional epistemic versus nonepistemic considerations: We found that participants were more likely to judge the characters in the epistemic (vs. nonepistemic) condition to hold their belief for good reasons and the characters in the nonepistemic (vs. epistemic) condition to regard the belief as important (see additional online material at <https://osf.io/h89rt>). These measures were also reliably associated with some of our signatures. This suggests that additional factors—such as justification and importance to identity—might reliably relate to the dimension or dimensions along which attributions of belief can vary. We suspect that in real-world contexts, where belief content, belief confidence, and other factors are not controlled, beliefs will tend to cluster along correlated dimensions (for instance, the beliefs that have our nonepistemic signatures will also tend to be high-stakes and important to identity), but that in more controlled scenarios, it will be possible to tease some of these dimensions apart.

A related question for future research concerns the relationships between epistemic and nonepistemic beliefs. Many or even most people hold beliefs to norms of consistency (one should not believe both *P* and *not-P*). Yet, it appears to be the case that inconsistency is psychologically common, both among beliefs in an individual’s mind (Porot & Mandelbaum, 2021; Sommer et al., 2022) and among people’s folk theories more generally (e.g., Davoodi & Lombrozo, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Shtulman & Lombrozo, 2016). Does that mean that people are routinely in violation of such norms? Importantly, if beliefs come in multiple varieties, it may be that the inconsistencies among “beliefs” are less evidence of irrationality than they are of

attitude compartmentalization: While there may be inconsistencies across an agent’s nonepistemic and epistemic beliefs, her epistemic beliefs considered in themselves may be highly consistent. For example, Metz et al. (2018) found that some participants simultaneously endorsed inconsistent forms of evolution and creationism. While that appears to be a flagrant inconsistency, uses “thinks” and “believes” varied across some of these endorsements. For example, one participant reported that, due to his upbringing, “I *believe* we were created by a God;” but another reported that, as a biologist, “I *think* [human origins are] based in evolutionary principle” (emphasis added). Thus, with pluralism in cognitive attitudes, perhaps individuals can maintain some *beliefs* while simultaneously *thinking* alternatives are true (at least with some probability). Although maintaining inconsistent “beliefs” may well come with risks, it could also support more flexible reasoning and behavior. And importantly, if nonepistemic beliefs are compartmentalized in relation to epistemic beliefs (cf. Van Leeuwen, 2023), the latter may typically constitute a more rationally consistent “web” than it might appear at first blush. Understanding the relationships between epistemic and nonepistemic beliefs could thus have significant implications for human rationality more generally.

Another relevant question concerns the nature of what we call nonepistemic beliefs. Ours is a general contrastive claim holding that people recognize beliefs with epistemic functions and beliefs that lack these epistemic functions. In this sense, our hypothesis is more general than Westra’s (2023) hypothesis that people’s theories of mind recognize nonepistemic beliefs with specifically symbolic functions. While we admit that symbolic functions are plausibly important, we are open to the possibility that nonepistemic beliefs fulfill other functions, such as emotional regulation and identity preservation. Hence, it is worth exploring in future research whether people’s intuitive theory of mind has a unified category of nonepistemic beliefs or, alternatively, whether this category is systematically subdivided into different but stable kinds of nonepistemic beliefs. The possibility of multiple belief-like cognitive attitudes also raises new questions for subdisciplines of psychology that have been traditionally concerned with theory of mind. For example, developmental psychologists have charted the emergence of theory of mind using paradigms like the false belief task (e.g., Wellman, 2018), which implicitly involve an epistemic notion of belief. One possibility is that as soon as children demonstrate some understanding of belief, they differentiate epistemic from nonepistemic believing. Another possibility, which we judge more likely, is that the differentiation between epistemic and nonepistemic belief we see in our adult sample emerges over the course of development. Indirect support for this possibility comes from research on children’s trust in others’ testimony: For instance, 3-year-olds do not reliably favor a more knowledgeable informant (an epistemic characteristic) over one who is nice or prosocial (a nonepistemic characteristic), but 4- and 5-year-olds typically do (Tong et al., 2020). More generally, research on selective trust suggests that over the course of development, children become sensitive to differences between informants along both epistemic dimensions (such as past accuracy) and nonepistemic dimensions (such as social group membership) and learn to coordinate these sources of information (for relevant discussion, see Koenig et al., 2022). This suggests that with age, children develop a stronger differentiation between the

epistemic and nonepistemic, including the relevance of each kind of information for different judgments.

Conclusions

To sum up, we document an important nuance in “belief-desire” psychology: In representing and reasoning about the beliefs of others, people track distinctions in cognitive attitudes, systematically differentiating beliefs that play predominantly epistemic roles from those that play important nonepistemic roles. This supports the Belief Pluralism hypothesis that theory of mind represents more than one variety of believing. It also offers indirect support for the Varieties of Belief hypothesis, that the mind itself supports more than one flavor of believing.

Constraints on Generality

Our sample was restricted to U.S.-based adults participating in online experiments. That said, we drew from a participant population with considerable variation in age, income, and education. Hence, it is plausible that the patterns in our data would generalize to the broader population of North American adults. But we are not yet licensed to draw conclusions (a) about whether those patterns would also surface in other cultures or (b) about the developmental timeline on which the patterns of differentiation we document emerge. On the first issue (cross-cultural comparison), Van Leeuwen et al. (2021) give reason for optimism, since participants in the Fante, Thai, Mandarin, and Bislama versions of their studies displayed sensitivity to analogues of our thinks/believes signature in their respective languages. But experimental cross-cultural studies focusing on our other signatures and on action type have yet to be done, so it is worth exercising caution. As for the developmental question (at what point does the differentiation we document emerge?), the existing literature on theory of mind development may furnish some guidance as to which hypotheses in this space are plausible, but any specific views at this point would still be speculative.

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