REJECTION SEEN IN TERMS OF DOUBT AND BELIEF

KENNETH LAINE KETNER

Philosophy should be more than just analysis or a search for clarity. It should have the courage to investigate and comment upon intellectual and spiritual difficulties which we encounter in our communal lives in the present era. That kind of activity will, it seems to me, include speculation of a modest kind as one of its instruments. In the spirit of this way so seeing the task of philosophy, I want to briefly consider a problem that has arisen for me in the context of my duties as a teacher in introductory philosophy. Before announcing the problem which concerns me, I shall introduce a speculation. Then I hope to see whether that hypothesis will illuminate the issue which troubles me.

Let us suppose that "self," at least in one of its meanings or senses, can be understood in terms of beliefs held by a person. Here I want to use the term "belief" in the way which Peirce initiated; that is, I understand a belief to be a habit such that given a certain situation, one will act in a particular way. Thus, suppose that we could somehow prepare a list of all the beliefs that a particular person has at some given point in time. My speculation is that the content of this list would be the same as that person's self at that time, at least in some useful sense of the word "self." I know that this sounds like a very unrigorous formulation. That is exactly what it is meant to be. Given that it presently lacks rigor and precision, the question that I want to raise is whether it suggests possible lines of thought which might illuminate problems of interest to us in present-day society. This is what I meant when I said that speculation can be very useful philosophically. It can help us see familiar phenomena in new ways, with the occasional result that something really new *and* rigorous can be created. But, I would insist, without the initial "crazy" idea, the subsequent well-wrought answer might be missed because no one had attempted to realign thought in a new and eventually appropriate way.

So, in terms of this possibly quite crazy notion, one that is admittedly vague and germinal, I want to try to have a better understanding of rejection. As I mentioned earlier, this issue interests me because unhappily I see a kind of rejection occurring with increasing frequency among beginning students in philosophy as they interact in class. The syndrome is especially prevalent among persons who are involved with one or another of the various absolutist political or religious groups found on many campuses. By "rejection" I mean cases in which one person considers a second person as being unworthy, unfit, unsound, sinful, helping anti-progressive forces, in league with Satan, and so forth. This includes a recognition that the person rejected is different from the person rejecting, and that the rejection occurs or arises out of this difference in conjunction with the rejecting person's conviction that he is in possession of the unvarnished truth. The counter-part to rejection is acceptance. Here one person regards another person as being different, but can somehow see the second person as wholesome, or valuable, or worthwhile in his own right. In short, the first person sees the other one as acceptable in spite of noted differences.

If my original speculation about a possible connection between self and beliefs is correct, then this difference factor which is common to both rejection and acceptance can be understood in terms of doubt and belief. This is the case, because if self is seen in terms of belief, then accepting or rejecting another self will involve accepting or rejecting belief or doubt. In order to trace this in more detail, let us consider a hypothetical example. Suppose that I meet another person and we engage in a discussion. Slowly I become aware that the other person has a belief that contradicts with a belief that I have. When I become aware of this contradicting belief, I will be thrown into a doubt of some kind with regard to my original belief. Here I seem to have at least two possible courses of future action. I can acknowledge the doubt and then proceed to inquire about its resolution, or I can reject the doubt and simply insist upon my original belief.

If I accept the doubt I will in some sense be partially accepting the other person, for one of his beliefs is incorporated in that doubt. If he likewise accepts me, at least provisionally, then we have the conditions for dialogue or inquiry. We have a chance to work together to try to achieve a new stability of belief which will be mutually acceptable, hopefully because of appropriate evidence. Of course, we will be somewhat uncomfortable because we will be in doubt for a period of time. But one can learn to tolerate the uneasiness of doubt: indeed, an ability to do that seems to be one prerequisite for engaging in a dialogue or inquiry.

On the other hand, possibly because of a high sensitivity to the uneasiness of doubt (or perhaps due to absolutist leanings), I could simply reject the other person, thus thinking that I would rid myself of the discomforting doubt. This would be some kind of tenacious (or perphaps authoritarian) maneuver, in which I simply would insist upon my original belief, and reject the source of the doubt. If I were to make a habit of this kind of rejection, then various kinds of well-known syndromes would begin to emerge. For example, I might, especially if I were already an absolutist, claim that others who differ with me are possessed by evil, or that they are members of a benighted group of idiots—here various kinds of ethnic, cultural, racial, regional, or ideological stereotypes can be

created or reinforced. I could create elaborate explanatory schemes to show why I and others who have identical beliefs are being persecuted, or why we must go out into the world in service of the grand truth to try to show the unredeemed the terrible error of their ways. I could even resort to less than peaceful means in service of the one true way. Furthermore, I would be likely to ascribe humankindness and other such civilized attributes only to those people who shared my beliefs. I might even be led to infer that someone who is kind and understanding must be a member in my own belief-system, only to discover later that he disagrees in some way, and hence cannot be accepted as a true believer.

Now it seems to me that this general line of thinking illuminates many areas of human life in interesting and fruitful ways. We see a connection being made between dialogue and the logic of belief-systems, between kinds of social systems or interactions and epistemology, between belief and human relations. And all this suggests something about what it is to be a philosopher, namely that a philosopher is one who can engage in dialogue or inquiry when faced with a doubt. A philosopher is one who has learned the skills of tolerating doubts that might arise, especially those which arise in conversation with other persons. A philosopher is one who, like Socrates, can *seek* (as opposed to *dispense*) the truth with some passion, but always with tolerance and acceptance for all kinds of other persons. Thus, a philosopher is one who has found one source for a kind of personal peace, whereas a person who employs rejection to try to get rid of irritating doubts is a person who only increases his sensitivity to doubt, thus possibly requiring stronger measures in the future, stronger or more drastic measures, to meet a doubt. Such a strategy for handling one's life seems to be one that creates a kind of vicious circle or entrapment. One is even tempted to suggest parallels between such a circle and the "wheel of reincarnation" or perhaps "attachment" which our eastern brethern often mention. To break out of this circle, to become a philosopher by acquiring the skill of tolerating one's doubts and dealing with them in a straightforward manner and in a spirit of inquiry or dialogue, is a skill about which one could say, "It is not much." Socrates and others, to be sure, have often told us this. Yet it is amazing how something so simple can have deep effects upon persons who acquire the skill.

These, then are some of the after-effects, so to speak, of trying to make a connection between a theory of the self and a theory of belief-systems. I suspect that in this paper I have probably answered no question in a way that has convinced anyone with finality. That may mean that I have presented a bad paper to you, or it might suggest that we are philosophers who somehow enjoy being here together in doubt about what I have been saying.