

Ethics of Belief

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The broad question asked under the heading “Ethics of Belief” is: What ought one believe? An ethics of belief attempts to uncover the norms that guide belief formation and maintenance. The dominant view among contemporary philosophers is that evidential norms do; I should always follow my evidence and only believe when the evidence is sufficient to support my belief. This view is called “evidentialism,” although, as we shall see, this term gets applied to a number of views that can be distinguished from one another. Evidentialists often cite David Hume (1999: 110) as their historic exemplar who said “a wise man ... proportions his beliefs to the evidence” and thus argued against the reasonableness of believing in miracles (*see* HUME, DAVID; WISDOM). Those who argue that there can be good practical reasons for believing, independent of one’s evidence, can turn for inspiration to Blaise Pascal (1966: 124), who argued that the best reason to form a belief in God was a practical one, namely the possibility of avoiding eternal suffering (*see* REASONS; REASONS FOR ACTION, MORALITY AND; FAITH).

For much of the twentieth century, most philosophers seem to have thought that there is no project concerning norms for belief distinct from that of what constitutes a belief’s justification. To answer the question what ought one believe, one must turn to the question of what provides belief with justification (a necessary ingredient for knowledge) and believe accordingly. Given this view, there was very little written directly about norms for belief during that time, and when the “ethics of belief” was discussed it would usually refer historically to the nineteenth-century debate between W. K. Clifford and William James (*see* JAMES, WILLIAM). Clifford’s paper is called “The Ethics of Belief,” and in it he insists that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence” and that we have a duty to withhold beliefs for which we do not have evidence (Clifford 1987: 23). James, in “The Will to Believe,” responds directly to Clifford’s strong evidentialist stance. He agrees that, in many contexts, evidential considerations will settle the matter of what to believe, but when questions cannot be decided by the evidence, he (1956: 23–8) says our “passional nature” takes over and the question of what we ought to believe remains open. In such contexts, what we believe, James argues, depends partly on what will help us make sense of ourselves and our world, what will provide us with meaning or even give us peace and solace. Thus, for James, at least some of the norms governing belief are practical.

In the past decade, this debate has been revived, and the question of whether it is ever permissible to believe on insufficient evidence has once again become a live question. Though it is never simple to account for what brings a question back into philosophical fashion, one likely reason for this revival is that there was a perceived

need to answer “reformed epistemologists” who defend religious belief by saying that beliefs are sometimes justified even if one has no evidence or them. For example, Jonathan Adler (2002: 3) explicitly states that his motivation for his defense of a very strong version of evidentialism came after engaging with these anti-evidentialist arguments. Adler argues that the concept of belief guarantees the truth of evidentialism; he defends the evidentialist thesis conceptually. So according to Adler, the guiding question of the ethics of belief is misleading. There is no question about what I ought to believe beyond what I *must* believe; to say I believe something though I lack evidence for it, Adler says, is incoherent. Briefly, his argument is as follows: If I believe something, then I must be willing to assert what I believe. But to assert something is to claim that it is true. So to say I believe *p* is just another way of stating *p*. This can be seen by the incoherence of the following assertion, “It is raining, but I do not believe it is raining.” Adler would add that the following is equally incoherent: “It is raining but I lack sufficient evidence that it is raining,” which (if assertion expresses belief) would also show that the following assertion is incoherent “I believe it is raining, but I lack sufficient evidence that it is raining.” Adler (2002: 32) concludes: “We cannot recognize ourselves as believing *p* while believing that our reasons or evidence are not adequate to its truth and conversely.” And the “cannot” is conceptual, not psychological.

One problem that has been noted with Adler’s account is that it seems to deny that, in certain cases, belief can arise for nonevidentiary reasons such as wishful thinking. A recent account, one defended by Nishi Shah (2006), also provides a conceptual defense of evidentialism, arguing against what he calls “pragmatism,” namely the view that there are some nonevidential reasons for believing. Yet he concedes that when beliefs are formed in a nondeliberative context they can be induced by nonevidentiary processes such as wishful thinking. Shah argues that it is built into the concept of belief that truth is the standard of correctness for belief. Thus, when one applies the concept in one’s reasoning, truth-relevant considerations must be applied, but in nondeliberative contexts, where the concept is not *exercised*, one’s cognitive activity need not be regulated by truth-relevant dispositions. Shah would admit that, from a third-person perspective, we can attribute a nonevidentially based belief to someone, but he argues that I cannot think of myself as having a belief without thinking of it as grounded in evidence. This is because, when attending to, applying, exercising the concept, the standard of correctness must be invoked. So I can think that my friend has good practical reasons to *bring about the belief* that her husband is faithful despite the mounting evidence that he is not. But when *she* is thinking about *whether to believe* that her husband is faithful, and thus exercising the concept of belief, questions of the belief’s desirability are irrelevant (see SELF-DECEPTION).

One of the philosophers most closely associated with the evidentialist thesis is Richard Feldman. Feldman would (mostly) insist, however, that he is not interested in the view of what we ought to believe. Rather, evidentialism is a theory of justification; our beliefs are justified and rational if they follow the evidence, but there may well be a difference, he says, from what I should believe *epistemically* and what I should

believe either *practically* or *morally* (Feldman 2000). He argues that the “ought” regarding belief is an epistemic ought which is distinct from the oughts of morality or of prudence. If these “oughts” conflict, there is no way, he says, to adjudicate between them, no meaningful question about what I ought to believe, all things considered: “We’ve diasambiguated ‘ought’ and we can’t put the various senses back together again” (2000: 694). Feldman wonders what value would be associated with this “just plain ought.” Interestingly, Feldman does not seem to deny that it is possible to believe for pragmatic or moral reasons, but he thinks that, in doing so, one will be led away from rationality (*see* RATIONALITY).

One of the reasons for thinking that it is not even possible to believe (even irrationally) against the evidence has to do with our lack of control over beliefs. Many have pointed out that we cannot simply decide to believe the way we can decide to perform many actions. The following is a standard conceptual argument, first formulated by Bernard Williams (1973: 136–8) against believing at will: Given that the aim of belief is truth, any states that I can achieve at will would not recognizably be beliefs. For if what I believe were up to me, seemingly, I could form a belief regardless of whether I thought it true – but if I knew this, then I would know that there is no reason to think that this “belief” accurately represents reality. But to have a belief entails viewing the belief as representing reality. Believing at will is thus incoherent because it entails viewing a belief as (1) necessarily representing reality, and (2) not necessarily representing reality. Thus, believing at will is not only a contingent impossibility; the very concept of belief renders the idea incoherent (*see* WILLIAMS, BERNARD). Further, it seems that because the action-guiding aspect of belief would be severely undermined if we could believe at will, we should not even want this kind of control. Here, then, is another reason for thinking that the whole idea of an “ethics” of belief is misguided. An ethics provides guidance for how one ought to behave, and it is usually assumed that ought implies can (*see* OUGHT IMPLIES CAN). If what one believes is beyond one’s control, what sense can be made of saying one ought to believe one way or another? The issue of doxastic (which means “pertaining to belief”) control is thus very closely connected to any discussion of an ethics of belief. Although many theorists admit that we have a kind of indirect doxastic control, in that beliefs are derived from other states over which we do have control, they do not think our attributions of responsibility are tied in any way to this kind of control.

Feldman (2000) argues that our lack of doxastic control does not entail a lack of doxastic responsibility (*see* RESPONSIBILITY). He argues that when we say one ought (or ought not) to believe a certain way, the “ought” results from playing the role of believer (*see* OUGHT). There is a right way to play this role, and we can be blamed if we do not do it well, regardless of whether we could have done otherwise. Just as incompetent teachers, incapable parents, and untrained cyclists may be unable to do what they ought to do, he thinks that forming beliefs is something people do, and that anyone engaged in this activity ought to do it right. It does not matter that, in some cases, we are unable to do so.

Feldman's description of our judging performance seems to ignore that the force of the "ought" will differ depending on who the actor is. Compare a cyclist who just took off her training wheels to one who is training for the Tour de France. Our expectations differ for what they ought to do, for how close they ought to measure up to performing the movements of the ideal cyclist. Part of what each ought to do is to perform the role as best she can, that is exert the effort needed to perform the role to the best of her ability. It seems then that some of the judgments we make about being a good parent, teacher, cyclist, or believer do presuppose that we have some kind of control, namely control over improving. If a parent is truly incapable of taking care of her kids, say because of extreme mental retardation, it seems wrong to say that she ought to do so. If one lacks all control over even approximating the ideal, or coming closer to it, the obligation ceases (*see* DUTY AND OBLIGATION). It seems that whether we blame people, and to the extent we do, depends on their having some control over getting better at the role they play, but Feldman thinks that our attributions of responsibility for belief do not require that we have any control in this realm.

Matthew Chrisman (2008) has argued instead that the kinds of "oughts" which are applied to beliefs should be seen as akin to rules of criticism as distinct from rules of action. Rules of criticism apply to states of things, of how things ought to *be* rather than to what one ought to *do*. Chrisman thinks doxastic oughts tell us, in general, truths about beliefs and believing. Rules of criticism are usually applied to states of things, and not to states of agents, but Chrisman points out that "none of this implies that believers cannot be agents. We just have to appreciate that they do not exercise agency in believing what they believe" (2008: 364). Chrisman comes to this conclusion, largely, because we do not exercise the same kind of voluntary control over beliefs as we do over actions. Like Feldman, he is concerned with providing an account of the doxastic "ought" which does not require doxastic control or even any kind of doxastic agency.

Others, however, think there is a sense in which we can be doxastic agents even though we lack the kind of control we have over actions. Pamela Hieronymi (2008), for example, argues that the common assumption that we are only responsible for what is voluntary comes from thinking too narrowly about the way in which we are responsible for *actions*. She argues that believing is not voluntary because it is not an action (*see* ACTION). The question of whether to *do* P is settled by reasons that count in favor of doing P. The question of whether to believe P is settled by answering the question of *whether* P, not by focusing on considerations that count in favor of the second-order question of *whether to believe* P. Yet, Hieronymi argues, we are responsible for such states because they reveal one's "moral personality" or "the quality of one's will," and it is states of this kind through which we express our agency (2008: 361). But she, like the others, thinks we can only believe for truth-related reasons, agreeing that the question *whether to believe that p* always collapses into the question of *whether p is true*. This phenomenon, that one question collapses into another, has come to be called "transparency" (Shah 2006: 481).

The two positions that are the least represented in the literature are (1) doxastic voluntarism, namely the view that deciding to believe is possible, and (2) pragmatism, namely the view that it can be permissible (and possible) to believe for nonevidential reasons. These positions can be pulled apart, but we can see how advocating the two together makes sense. We have seen that one way to defend evidentialism is to point out that the evidentialist thesis *explains* why we are unable to choose what to believe. We cannot choose what is true, and if beliefs in some sense *aim* at or are *governed* by or are conceptually tied to truth, then this shows why we cannot choose to believe. One way to counter evidentialism is to deny that the phenomenon it purports to explain is genuine. Maybe some sense can be made of the possibility of deciding to believe. One can ask – against the evidentialist – is it the case that *no* belief can possibly result from a decision; is it really conceptually impossible to decide to believe? Voluntarists will deny this and claim that there are times when belief is voluntary. This can occur, they say, when the evidence is not conclusive. To say “I believe *p*, though not-*p* is equally supported by the evidence” is not paradoxical; it is not even clear that such an attitude is irresponsible. It seems, in such a case, that what I believe is “up to me” (Carl Ginet 2001: 64).

Another way of questioning evidentialism is to take a cue from James and argue that the concept of belief is not as closely tied to truth and reason as many assume. Perhaps, ultimately, the norms that govern belief are practical: A pragmatist can explain transparency by focusing on the interest we all have in our beliefs being true. In asking myself whether to believe *p*, I focus on the question of whether *p* is true because I have an interest in having a true opinion about *p*. A problem with this account is that, while it can explain why truth is relevant to doxastic deliberation, it cannot account for the fact that truth is hegemonic with respect to doxastic deliberation (Shah 2006: 490). The only way this could be explained is if everyone always had overriding interest in having true beliefs. This may seem implausible because we can certainly imagine cases where it would be more in one’s interest to have comforting false beliefs than to have discomfoting true ones. One can find an answer to this worry in the writings of Hilary Kornblith. Kornblith (1993) argues that, for epistemic norms to have the force they do, they must be grounded in some universal desire. He recognizes, however, that no desire or goal one posits (truth, knowledge, rationality) will be sufficiently universal, and we would thus have different norms depending on our desires.

Kornblith’s view is that we all – that is, anyone who has any goals at all – have a reason to favor a cognitive system which is effective is generating truths. So we should care about beliefs being justified or reasonable because these are the norms that, in general, will help to make us achieve our goals. Therefore, anyone with any goals must care about their beliefs being true. The reasons I care about truth are ultimately pragmatic reasons.

The worry about viewing truth’s value as instrumental is that it seems that if a particular truth does not serve this practical goal then it is permissible to believe what is false though comforting (*see* INSTRUMENTAL VALUE; INTRINSIC VALUE). Should the importance of truth be so precarious? Clifford’s dictum to never believe

on insufficient evidence had an ultimate moral grounding; humanity will suffer if we do not constantly question our beliefs to make sure they are solidly grounded. The challenge to the anti-evidentialist is to explain what distinguishes pernicious nonevidentially based beliefs from ones that are not. One way to do this might be to think of true belief as a common good comparable to the value of clean water (Grimm 2009). A particular body of water may be of no value to me, and so if I pollute it I will not suffer, but we still think it is wrong because the water has value and should be respected, regardless of whether it is useful to me; clean water plays such an indispensable role in our well-being, we have an obligation – to others – not to pollute it in this way, but rather to treat clean water with due respect. Similarly, not every true belief is of value to me; it may even be that one can be harmful. However, in general, having true beliefs and knowledge is helpful for an individual and useful for society, and so engaging in practices which lead away from truth and knowledge will detract from the common good. It will thus only be permissible to hold nonevidentially based beliefs if doing so does not violate any epistemic duty (see COMMON GOOD; VIRTUE). It has been suggested by James (1956) and Ginet (2001), among others, that the evidentialist dictum calling for suspending judgment when faced with equally balanced evidence is one that can be violated without detracting from the common good.

see also: ACTION; COMMON GOOD; DUTY AND OBLIGATION; HUME, DAVID; INSTRUMENTAL VALUE; INTRINSIC VALUE; JAMES, WILLIAM; OUGHT; OUGHT IMPLIES CAN; RATIONALITY; REASONS; REASONS FOR ACTION, MORALITY AND; RESPONSIBILITY; SELF-DECEPTION; VIRTUE; WILLIAMS, BERNARD; WISDOM

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