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Responsible Believing

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In most of our decisions as parents or educators concerning how we should talk to children about difficult subjects, the question turns to what degree we should withhold the truth, how much information we should provide, or what details are appropriate. We, as adults, know the answer to the child's question, and the difficulty arises in figuring out what to convey and how. Questions about death and the afterlife are not like this. We – and by "we," I mean especially educated adults of the Western world – are often as confused about what we should believe about these matters as are our children. It seems that an initial step in our thinking about how to engage with children on this topic is to become clearer about how we ought to think about it. I will discuss this matter by engaging with the question of which norms ought to govern the formation and maintenance of our beliefs in general. We can then see how these norms would apply to beliefs about anything supernatural. What we ought to believe does not settle the question of how we should talk to children about our beliefs; we do not always want our children's beliefs to match our own. There may be particular reasons we want our children to believe things we do not (like Santa Claus brings them presents) or not believe things we do (like their noncustodial parent is a jerk); but I will concentrate on how one is a responsible believer in general, which will provide insight into how we can educate children to be responsible believers.

In my first section, I discuss what it can mean to be responsible for beliefs given that one does not exercise control over beliefs the way one does over action. In section two, I turn to the question of whether it is possible to both believe without evidence and still believe responsibly. Most contemporary philosophers would deny the possibility of this conjunction, because most hold that an evidential norm governs belief, namely that one should only believe on sufficient evidence. It may seem that we often

restrict the term "belief" to a less confident attitude. That is, when we have compelling evidence for a proposition, we would say we *know* it rather than merely believe it. Most philosophers think of knowledge as a particular kind of belief, one that is at least both true and justified. However, in evaluating beliefs, we can assess whether one has good reasons for holding a particular belief even if it falls short of knowledge.

This evidentialist perspective allows two possible answers to what one should believe about what occurs after death or about the reason for seemingly bizarre or significant life events. The first is that we should suspend judgment about such matters because the evidence is silent – and when we have no evidence or the evidence is neutral, the proper evidentialist attitude is to refrain from forming a belief. The other possible response is to hold that the evidence favors the belief that there is nothing that occurs after death and there is no reason why events occur beyond what can be explained scientifically or causally.

I argue that this evidentialist framework is impoverished and has led to a narrow and overly intellectual picture of the concept of belief. Arguments for evidentialism can show that evidential norms do a good job of providing us with general rules for belief maintenance, but once we understand the reason for why they ought to be followed in general, we see that these norms do not always hold. If beliefs are thought of as having a purpose, the purpose must be of a practical kind. Our beliefs serve the purpose of providing coherence, meaning making, prediction, and navigation, both individually and collectively. It is thus possible for these practical norms to override evidential ones. Once non-evidential norms are admitted, I argue some "supernatural" beliefs are permissible and can be responsibly believed. In my final section, I suggest some ways in which this conclusion impacts decisions about how to talk to children about death.

RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTROL

The notion of responsibility in the realm of believing is commonly invoked in ordinary practice. We express disapproval and approval for each other's beliefs; we ask in an incredulous tone, "How can you believe that?" or exclaim, "What a ridiculous thing to believe!" Such admonishments seem to reveal that we think the person in question has formed the belief irresponsibly, and it seems we hold him responsible for forming this belief. This notion of responsibility is not simply one that is pointing out the causal genesis of the belief. Holding someone responsible for his beliefs is not like holding the wind responsible for knocking over the tent. That we praise and blame

each other for the beliefs we hold seems to indicate, rather, that we view the beliefs one forms to be the consequence of one's agency. Yet attributions of responsibility and other deontological judgments in the doxastic (belief) realm are puzzling, for much of what we believe is beyond our control; we cannot decide to believe the way we can decide to act. It seems that such lack of control should excuse us from responsibility and judgment.

We can formulate our puzzle by considering the following argument:

The Voluntarism Argument

1. If attributions of responsibility for beliefs are appropriate, then people have voluntary control over their beliefs.
2. People do not have voluntary control over their beliefs.
3. Attributions of responsibility about beliefs are not appropriate.

Yet our practices seem to assume such attributions are appropriate. We would disapprove of someone who believes that whales are fishes or that her neighbor littered the sidewalk when she did not. We think a typically well-informed American ought to believe that the Earth revolves around the Sun and would be critical of someone who believes that the Sun revolves around the Earth. Yet it seems quite clear that one with such a belief could not just decide to change it in the direct way he could simply decide to change his shirt. Nor did he originally decide to acquire the belief the way one could decide to acquire a new pair of shoes.

Three responses to this puzzle are possible. The first response denies the second premise, arguing that, at times, we can effectively decide to believe; this view has come to be called doxastic voluntarism. On one reading of Descartes's fourth meditation, he articulates a very robust form of such voluntarism. He says that our will is completely free to affirm or deny what is presented to the intellect: "The will consists solely in the fact that when something is proposed to us by our intellect either to affirm or deny, to pursue or to shun, we are moved in such a way that we sense that we are determined to it by no external force" (Descartes, 1993, pp. 38–89). For Descartes, we are as free to choose our beliefs as we are our actions, and this is his explanation of both doxastic and moral error; it makes as much sense to blame me for my beliefs as it does my actions, which come from the same faculty. Thus, I can consider the proposition "The Sun revolves around the Earth," and then decide whether to assent to it or not. According to Descartes, I ought to restrain my will and only assent to those propositions that are "clearly and distinctly represented to it [the will] by

the understanding." I am thus clearly responsible for not restraining my will when I let myself believe those propositions that I "conceive more confusedly and obscurely." Although contemporary doxastic voluntarists are more moderate, they still hold that, at times, what one believes can result directly from a decision to believe.

A second response to the puzzle argues that although we lack control over our beliefs, we can nonetheless be held responsible for them, thus denying the first premise. This is currently the most common response. Those who argue that we lack meaningful control in the doxastic realm must say what doxastic responsibility does require. If I cannot exercise control over my beliefs, what justifies holding me responsible? The answers given to this question say that when we admonish people for holding certain beliefs, we are really admonishing them for their defective characters or for their failure to cultivate certain virtues. So it is not the holding of the belief, for example, that the Sun revolves around the Earth that is blameworthy. Rather, there is something defective in the person who holds such a belief. Perhaps it is a character flaw that prevents him from being properly attentive or from weighing evidence properly.

Finally, one can respond by accepting the argument as sound, and so deny that we are responsible for beliefs and argue that our common practices of attributions of responsibility are misguided; we are mistaken if we think, for example, someone should be praised or blamed for a belief he holds. Just as I cannot help feeling wet when rain falls on me or hot when the sun is strong, my believing that it is raining or the sun is strong is not something that is "up to me"; it is a state I find myself in when the world impinges on me in certain ways. On such a view, belief is a passive phenomenon and it must be able to do its job. David Hume is often invoked as the exemplar of such a view.[1] Although I ultimately think this is a mistaken characterization of Hume's view, some of what he says about belief supports this passive reading.

If our practice of attributing responsibility for beliefs is appropriate, I think a sense needs to be articulated in which we do have a kind of control

[1] For example, David Owens (2000) characterizes Hume's position in the following way: "In denying the existence of epistemic agency, doxastic responsibility and intellectual freedom, Hume means to reject the idea that belief is subject to reason. He allows that beliefs are governed by the sort of biological norms that apply to the process of breathing, or the workings of the human heart but no one thinks us responsible for non-compliance with such norms." (2) There are many passages in Hume's works where it is evident he does blame people for having or failing to have certain beliefs. How such admonishments are consistent with his theory of belief is a topic discussed extensively by Hume scholars. I discuss these issues in "Why Should We Be Wise?"(McCormick, 2005a) Hume Studies, Vol. 31, no 1, April 2005, pp. 3–19.

over our beliefs. In developing this notion of doxastic control, I draw from John Fischer's discussions of "guidance control." A central feature of this kind of control is the idea of "ownership." Those aspects of our lives for which we take responsibility are the ones we own. I will argue that we can own our beliefs and that we expect each other to do so. Beliefs are products of our agency, something we have an active role in shaping and maintaining. Although we cannot believe at will, neither are we passive in the beliefs we form and maintain. We take responsibility for our beliefs, and taking responsibility includes taking control of them. We are blamed when we lose this grasp, when we do not exercise our reflective competence that helps us believe the way we ought to believe.

It may seem, then, that I am siding with the voluntarists and so denying the second premise of the Voluntarism Argument. Yet I do not think a belief can arise directly from a decision to believe. Many of those who oppose doxastic voluntarism admit that we have a kind of indirect control over beliefs, but they do not think our attributions of responsibility are tied in any way to this kind of control. The kind of control for which I will argue is not the indirect kind that these theorists concede; it is not simply derived from other states over which we do have control. It may be, in the end, that the kind of control I claim we have over beliefs is robust enough to count me among the moderate doxastic voluntarists. It may be that it lacks sufficient directness for those who advocate doxastic voluntarism. It matters little into which category the account is placed. What I want to defend is (i) that attributions of responsibility and other deontological judgments about beliefs are appropriate, and (ii) these attributions and judgments presuppose that we have control in the doxastic realm.

One of the reasons it may seem that we lack control over our beliefs is that so many of them are unavoidable and irresistible. If it is impossible for me to avoid holding a particular belief, how can I be said to have any control over my holding it? For doesn't being in control entail that I could have done otherwise or could have chosen differently? Many theorists have been concerned with formulating a concept of control (and responsibility) that does not entail that one could have done otherwise. For if causal determinism is true (or if God has created one and only one perfect world plan), there may be a sense in which we can never act other than we do. However, it seems we would not want our notions of responsibility and all the practices that go along with them to be rendered meaningless if it turned out that we did live in a deterministic universe. John Fischer calls the kind of control that does not entail alternative possibilities "guidance control." To illustrate the kind of thing he has in mind, imagine that you are driving a car that is a "driver

instruction" automobile with dual controls. As long as you are driving in a relatively safe manner, the instructor lets you control the car, and so when you, at the correct time, turn to the right, it is you who is guiding the car to the right. If you had shown signs of confusion and were about to mistakenly turn to the left, however, the instructor would have stepped in and steered it to the right. Thus you could have gone in no other direction but to the right. So although you have guidance control over the car, you lack what Fischer calls "regulative control" – the instructor has that.

In their book, Fischer and Mark Ravizza provide detailed elaboration of this concept of guidance control and argue that it is sufficient for moral responsibility. They are adamant that responsibility requires control, just not the kind of "regulative control" that requires alternative possibilities. An agent exhibits guidance control of an action "insofar as the mechanism which actually issues in his action is his own, reasons-responsive mechanism" (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998, p. 39). Some theorists have argued that only reasons-responsiveness is needed, but if all that were required for responsibility is that the mechanism issuing in the action (or belief) is reasons-responsive, then even if you were directly manipulated (say, had scientists kidnapped you and implanted such a reasons-responsive mechanism), you would still be responsible.

For the mechanism that actually issues in certain behavior to be one's own, one must take responsibility for it. Taking responsibility is understood historically. As one comes to view oneself as an agent, as having an effect on the world as a consequence of one's intentions and decisions, one comes to view oneself as a fair target for the reactive attitudes such as punishment or praise. By viewing oneself as an appropriate target for the consequence of a particular mechanism (say, ordinary practical reasoning), one thereby takes responsibility for it and the behavior resulting from it. Once one takes responsibility for a particular mechanism, then this ownership extends to future operations of the mechanism. It is a process that occurs over time, in which we develop a concept of ourselves as engaged in a kind of conversation. When we are addressed and treated as responsible agents through such attitudes as praising and blaming, we begin to form an internal view of ourselves as responsible and develop our own way of assessing and reacting to others. Fischer and Ravizza describe the process like this: "The goal of achieving a correlation between external and internal attitudes supports the practices that we use to train individuals who are not yet full members of the moral community and to encourage them to develop the internal view that we are extending to them" (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998, p. 212). Thus, taking responsibility need not be any conscious act; rather, the way we react to

others and feel about ourselves reveals whether we have taken responsibility for the mechanism in question.

Can this notion of a mechanism be intelligibly applied to the doxastic realm? Fischer and Ravizza are clear that all they mean by "mechanism" is the process that leads to the relevant upshot. This upshot is some kind of behavior, and by "behavior" they mean to include actions and omissions. They also consider that the upshot may be a trait of character or, as we shall see, perhaps an emotional reaction. It seems plausible that one such upshot can be a belief. Examples they give of mechanisms or processes are deliberation, practical reason, brain-stimulation, irresistible (physically based) urges, hypnosis, addiction, and intentions. Given how broadly mechanisms are construed, it seems perfectly legitimate to talk about the mechanisms that result in beliefs. Some of the processes that result in beliefs are inquiry, evidence gathering, attending, reasoning, memory, and perception. We can now ask if any of these mechanisms are such that we can take responsibility for them. Can we own them as a consequence of our agency the way we can the mechanisms that lead to actions? I think we can see that this is possible if we think about our capacity to feel guilty about having certain beliefs. So imagine that I believe, on inadequate evidence, that my brother stole some money from me. I discover my error, perhaps by finding the money or finding the real thief. Even if I never acted on it in any way, I can still feel guilty for having formed this belief at all. Those who deny that responsibility entails control will say my guilt is not really about holding this belief, and it certainly is not about a failure of control, but rather it is my feeling bad about not being a good person in general. Yet if I really viewed myself as lacking control over this belief, would I feel the same kind of guilt for having it? Say I discovered that I had undergone some kind of psychic manipulation such that the mechanism responsible for issuing in beliefs about my brother was one that was controlled (via some remote control) by some evil scientist. I may still feel some shame and view myself as somehow defective, but part of the reason I feel guilty has to do with this belief being a result of my agency. I have taken responsibility for the mechanism issuing in evidentially based beliefs. When the mechanism is faulty it is my fault, and I can be said to have lost some control over this mechanism given that I am failing to guide my beliefs appropriately.

That some notion of control is in play when assigning blame to beliefs is reinforced if we consider when and why we mitigate such blame. If you *cannot* make your higher-order judgments effective about how you ought to believe, there is a sense in which your belief is no longer your own; you are divided and overpowered. In such a case I would blame you less if you

really are compelled to believe in a way that deviates from how you ought to. You are not as open to blame as someone who can believe the way he ought but who fails to put in the care and effort required to do so.[2] Let us now look at a number of different cases of defective believing and see where we are apt to assign responsibility and where we are not. It seems that the more control we have over the belief-issuing processes, the more likely we are to attribute responsibility for it. This kind of control seems to come in degrees, and the more control we have, the less it seems we are apt to mitigate responsibility.

Many of our beliefs result from perception. Perceptual beliefs also seem to be the ones that are most obviously not under one's regulative control. However, if we think again about what it means to take responsibility and accept that this is properly seen as a developmental process, it seems that even this most apparently passive mechanism is one over which we do have some degree of guidance control. Imagine that someone is insistent that he sees a unicorn galloping toward him, and based on the usual trustworthiness of his senses, believes there is a unicorn galloping toward him. If, however, this person is aware that he just took powerful hallucinogenic drugs and still believes there is a unicorn galloping toward him, it seems appropriate for us to criticize him. For if I point out to you reasons for thinking that your normally well-functioning mechanism has gone awry, you should revise your assessment of the resulting upshot. Further, you see yourself as appropriately chastised for being overly confident or hasty in the proper functioning of this mechanism. Imagine a case of misperception that is not a result of an external agent (like a hallucinogenic drug). Sam believes his girlfriend was kissing Jack in the car, and he believes this because he saw her doing so. It turns out she was, in fact, not kissing Jack, and somehow his perception was faulty and misled him into forming a faulty belief. If through pleading and insistence, Sam's girlfriend convinces him that she did not kiss Jack, how should Sam view the belief he formed? It seems appropriate that he should feel some shame about it, and again, he should be criticized for forming and maintaining it.

Of course, it is not possible for us to constantly monitor our perceptual faculties to ensure that they are operating free of biases or neuroses that may be leading us astray. Yet there is some presumption that we should be ready to do some monitoring to ensure that this mechanism for which we have taken responsibility is operating correctly. If I find this mechanism is regularly leading me astray, it seems that there is something wrong with me.

[2] I offer a model of a loss of doxastic control in "Compelled Belief" (McCormick, 2005b).

It would not seem appropriate for me to insist that "these beliefs result from perception over which I lack control and so it is not my fault that I keep forming false beliefs." If your perceptual faculties really are "taken over," say, by some severe psychosis, a point does come where we would excuse you from responsibility. However, this again underscores the difference of our assessment in the nonpathological case in which we think assessments of responsibility are appropriate, and so some degree of control is possible.

Another common belief-issuing mechanism is memory, and again, like perception, this seems to be a process over which I exercise relatively little control. If I have a very vivid memory of an occurrence, it seems almost impossible for me to fail to believe that the thing occurred. However, as in the case of perception, thinking about when and how this mechanism goes awry can help show that the appropriateness of attributions of responsibility are tied to our having some guidance control over this process. Unfortunately, I think we have all been in the following situation: Imagine you are conversing with a friend, and you start talking about a conference you were both at the previous summer. You begin recalling together who else was at the conference. You say, "Oh and John was there – I remember liking his talk." Your friend insists that John was not there, and you are emphatic that you remember him being there. If the next day, your friend shows you the program and convinces you that you misremembered, it seems you will feel very sheepish about your firm belief that John was there, and a certain degree of blameworthiness seems appropriate for you having this belief. One may think it is not the believing that is blameworthy, but rather your having certain character traits like dogmatism or overconfidence that we blame you for. Even if I rarely find myself emphatically persisting in my belief and so do not have this character trait, it seems I am blameworthy in this instance.

Contrast this case again with a pathological one. If someone has Alzheimer's disease and so has a severely defective memory mechanism, there comes a point in which we excuse him from responsibility in his memory-induced beliefs; at the point in which he loses ownership of the process, he becomes incapable of correction and of keeping his beliefs in line with his and others' judgments. As such diseases are often gradual, we can find that, at first, we do continue to react in ways that reveal we hold the agent responsible for his beliefs. We will say with frustration, "Don't you remember? You left the keys on your desk." As the disease progresses, however, such admonishments seem less and less appropriate. Just as lack of control over one's faculties excuses one from being admonished for how one acts, similarly it excuses one from being admonished for how

one believes. Again, it is not a question of whether I could have believed otherwise about John's presence at the conference. Rather, this is a belief that I have ownership over in that I have the capacity to keep it in line with how I think I ought to believe.

Attributions of responsibility are the most obviously warranted in cases where beliefs result from deliberation or inquiry, and these are processes over which we clearly have guidance control. These mechanisms are responsible for issuing in actions as well as beliefs. One of the examples that Fischer and Ravizza consider is taking responsibility for "acting from the mechanism of practical reason." They refer to these actions as "reflective actions." Beliefs that come about as a result of reflection are clearly ones for which we have taken responsibility in Fischer and Ravizza's sense.

How, then, would this account of doxastic guidance control address the initial puzzle of doxastic responsibility? Consider again the example of the person who thinks the Sun revolves around the Earth. The most prevalent view argues that our criticism of one's holding this belief is in no one way tied to whether having the belief or not is in one's control. I have argued that such criticism and other manifestations of attributions of responsibility are tied to our expectations that one can do better. We expect a well-informed American to be sensitive to the amount of evidence that supports the heliocentric view and expect that his belief will conform to this evidence. This expectation comes, at least in part, from the fact that he has seen himself as a fair target for being chastised in this way, that he takes responsibility for what he believes, and sees his beliefs as issuing from himself as an agent. These are all the necessary components of guidance control. If one does not exhibit this kind of control, it would be inappropriate to criticize him or otherwise hold him responsible.

THE LIMITS OF EVIDENTIALISM

The examples I have given of faulty beliefs seem to support the view that believing responsibly entails believing on sufficient evidence. If in the investigation of grounds for believing, one discovers that one lacks evidence or epistemic reasons for one's belief, it seems the responsible believer will give up that belief. This is the dominant view among contemporary philosophers: They say that evidential norms govern beliefs; I should follow my evidence and only believe when the evidence is sufficient. Closely tied to this view is that following evidence will tend to provide me with true beliefs, and that beliefs aim at truth.

I think it is important to acknowledge that truth and knowledge are sub-goals; they are instrumental, not intrinsic goods, and so the possibility is left open that they can be trumped by other norms or goals. If the purpose of belief is to help us achieve our goals, flourish, and be excellent human beings, it is possible that some beliefs can do this independently of their truth value or of their being evidentially based.

In fleshing out his evidentialist thesis, Richard Feldman says that if one adopts any attitude toward a proposition, "that person ought to believe it if his current evidence supports it, disbelieve it if his current evidence is against it, and suspend judgment about it if his evidence is neutral (or close to neutral)" (Feldman, 2000, p. 683). It is the last part of this claim I wish to question. There may be times when there is no evidence (and so is neutral), but that it can still be permissible or even a good thing to believe something. There is some evidence from cognitive psychology that suggests that not only have we humans evolved to be able to decode and interpret meaning from our fellow creatures, but that our brains have also adapted to see meaning in life events. To see both other people and life events as meaningful is a distinctive human capacity and one that those with certain cognitive disorders (like autism) lack. In a sense, it is a developmental accomplishment to be superstitious. This meaning making could translate into a theistic or religious perspective, but it need not. Even those people whose illusions have been disrupted by science still have a lot of trouble letting go of this naturally adapted interpretive power.

Jesse Bering calls this capacity to see significance in life events having an existential theory of mind (EtoM). He says, "it is my impression that we would be hard pressed to discover an individual of normal cognitive functioning who has never exercised his or her EToM." He asks us to imagine the following:

> You are on a crowded bus, lost in the newspaper before you, when suddenly you are caught in a dizzy fury of screams, blackness and crushing metal. Your bus has crashed and flipped over a steep embankment. You crawl out of the window, dust yourself off, and realize that you are the sole survivor out of dozens of other passengers. If a week from now, or a year or decade later, you find yourself asking, "Why me?" then quite simply you have an intact EToM. Even if you brush such questions aside because you see them as rather foolish, you still betray your EToM insofar as you can entertain this type of question in the current context. (Bering, 2002, p. 1)

One could see this as evolutionary design of self-deception, but if we are adapted to believe in meaning, it seems this adaptation serves a purpose.

Maybe it is an outdated purpose and one we should try to get rid of, like "natural" male aggression when faced with rivals. Feldman, and others, would clearly see these beliefs as irrational (and irresponsible) because they violate evidentialist injunctions. However, if we remember the reason for following evidentialist norms (because they will help us maximize epistemic value) and if this value is instrumental (it is valuable because it helps us flourish and contributes to our overall good), then these kinds of meaning-making beliefs may be another way of serving this greater good.

We want our beliefs to conform to our view of the world, to help us succeed in the world, to make us happier. Yet once the practical side is acknowledged it becomes clear that even though evidential norms generally govern belief formation, there are times when it may be rational to believe despite a lack of evidence. The problem with this acknowledgment is that we want a way of distinguishing the "warranted" non-evidentially based beliefs from those that are not warranted.

I think there is an important difference between believing against your evidence and believing when you have no evidence or the evidence is neutral. The difference can be illustrated by reflecting on the nineteenth-century debate between W.K. Clifford and William James. Here is Clifford's flourishing defense of evidentialism:

> It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything on insufficient evidence ... Belief, that sacred faculty which prompts the decisions of our will, and knits into harmonious working all the compacted energies of our being, is ours not for ourselves, but for humanity ... Every hard-worked wife of an artisan may transmit to her children beliefs which shall knit society together, or rend it in pieces. No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe. (Clifford, 1987, p. 24)

In the case of believing against evidence, I think Clifford is right; believing in this way is harmful and opposed to collective good. However, James is right in the second context, the context in which we have no evidence or it is equally balanced. In James's, "The Will to Believe," he responds directly to Clifford's strong evidentialist stance. He agrees that in many contexts, evidential considerations will settle the matter, but on questions that cannot be decided by the evidence, he says the following:

> Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional

> decision, – just like deciding yes or no, – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (James, 1956)

If our "passional" nature has developed to form beliefs about there being significance or meaning in life events, even when there is no evidence, this may give further support for James's view.

In helping to further flesh out this distinction between non-evidentially based beliefs that are pernicious and those that are not, it is helpful to think of true belief as a common good, that the value of true beliefs is comparable to the value of clean water.[3] It may be the case that a particular body of water is 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 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. It is because, in general, having true beliefs and knowledge is helpful for an individual and useful for society, that they are valuable. Yet it may also be good and useful for society for people to see meaning in life. Non-evidentially based beliefs that detract from the common good are different from ones that contribute.

I will consider two objections to this distinction. It seems that some obviously false beliefs, or ones that go against all evidence, can be very useful. Imagine that a plane crashes in the middle of winter high in the Rocky Mountains and some people survive. It seems that, even if all evidence points to the likeliness of their imminent demise, it would be good for the survivors to believe against their evidence that they can live. There are abundant examples of people ignoring the evidence of the doctors who tell them they only have a few months to live and such ignoring, perhaps, allows them to live longer. In these cases, even though one can gain personally by believing against the evidence, and we would excuse these believers, they are still cases of pernicious believing. It is important that, in general, we do not believe in this way; the value of attending – of not ignoring – evidence is of more importance overall than the individual value of believing against the evidence in particular cases. The situation is analogous to the value of truth telling. Telling a lie in a particular case can be very valuable and excusable, but this does not undermine the general moral rule that lying is wrong. I think in the cases where there is no evidence, or where there is neutral or barely any evidence, there is nothing pernicious about believing in a way that contributes to your well-being (and perhaps overall

[3] I have taken this analogy from Stephen Grimm (Grimm, 2009).

common good). A caveat needs to be added here. Beliefs that lead directly to harmful acts may not be permissible, but this is not because they violate evidentialism; rather, it is because they are so closely tied to immoral action. I will return to this question later.

Second, one may think in the Bering-type cases, where one sees life events as significant, or in questions about what happens after death, that the evidence is not silent. One may think that the principle of simplicity shows that the straightforward causal explanation of why you didn't get killed in the bus wreck is the one supported by the evidence, and so it would be pernicious to believe that there was anything significant in your survival. Bering imagines three cases of mothers – an autistic mother, a religious mother, and a nonreligious mother with normal cognitive functioning – and we are told that each of them just sadly lost her infant as a result of a disease. He says, "We might expect the following responses (or something similar) after asking them why the death occurred ... the autistic mother would speculate that cancerous lesions had gotten a stronghold on her baby's immunosuppressive system; the religious mother would tell us that it was the will of God; and the nonreligious mother would tell us that her baby died so that she can help other bereaved mothers" (Bering, 2002, p. 20).

Someone defending the view that the evidence is not silent on these questions of why things happen would have to say that the autistic person's answer is the one that exhibits the "correct" belief. Yet there is something disturbing in this response, some kind of lack of humanity. James would say that this is a case where our passions have a role to play in what we believe. The problem with the autistic mother is that she has no access to those passions, or emotions, that help answer the question of why her baby died. For her the "why" question cannot be anything but "what was the cause?" Rather than see the noncausal "why" question as meaningless, we could see it as a question which cannot be answered based on the evidence. One could then answer by saying, "I don't know why," but it does seem that one has a certain degree of freedom with respect to what one believes about it. Rather than try to force beliefs of this kind into an evidentialist framework, I think it is better to expose this framework as impoverished – admit that we have no evidence about why our infants die or what happens after death, but still see our beliefs in these matters – whatever they are – as permissible. I say "whatever they are," but a caveat is needed here. Beliefs that lead directly to harmful acts may not be permissible, but this is not because they violate evidentialism. Rather, it is because they are so closely tied to immoral action. I will return to this issue of how much flexibility is acceptable in these matters in my final section.

When I say these non-evidentially based beliefs are valuable, I do not mean merely epistemically valuable. Some will agree that they are prudentially or morally valuable, but that they are incorrect from an epistemic or doxastic perspective. For example, Feldman argues that the "ought" regarding belief is an epistemic ought that is distinct from the oughts of morality or of prudence. He has argued that if these oughts conflict, there is no way to adjudicate between them, no meaningful question about what I ought to believe, all things considered: "We've disambiguated 'ought' and we can't put the various senses back together again" (Feldman, 2000, p. 694). I think this separation of evaluative domains is problematic. There may indeed be a source of normativity that provides force to our practical, moral, and epistemic judgments. Feldman wonders what value would be associated with this "just plain ought." This is a good and difficult question, but not necessarily one that is meaningless or unanswerable. Maybe we just plain ought to do what most contributes to human excellence. It may be hard to adjudicate between different dimensions of excellence, but it could be a meaningful adjudication nonetheless.

The source of normativity that gives truth and knowledge value is the same source that gives value to acting according to common good. When we say one ought to act a certain way and when we say one ought to believe a certain way, the source of these "oughts" is not entirely distinct. It seems there is an ought associated with all our activities as agents, whether these result in beliefs or in actions; beliefs are products of our agency, something we have an active role in shaping and maintaining. Although we cannot believe at will, neither are we passive in the beliefs we form and maintain. We take responsibility for our beliefs, and taking responsibility includes taking control of them. We are blamed when we lose this grasp, when we do not exercise our reflective competence that helps us believe the way we ought to believe. Doxastic, moral, and prudential faults are all faults of agency.

EDUCATING CHILDREN TO BELIEVE RESPONSIBLY

If how one ought to believe is importantly connected to how one ought to act, then teaching our children to believe responsibly is just one part of their broader moral education. Here there can be disagreement over the best way to teach children to treat others well, to be kind and honest, and so forth, and I do not here have the space to fully defend one perspective on this topic. It seems to me, drawing on my experience as both a mother and teacher of moral philosophy, that it is best to articulate a clear set of rules but to insist on reflection concerning these rules – to realize that for even the seemingly

most fixed rules, a time can arise when they can be legitimately violated. We know this from "ticking time bomb" thought experiments. Raise the stakes high enough – to saving the entire universe – and it becomes unclear whether torture is not morally acceptable. Teaching children to be reflective, attentive, to avoid hasty judgments will all tend toward supporting evidential norms for belief. Yet when it comes to questions about death or "supernatural" phenomena, they will have some flexibility in how they believe. How much flexibility? Is any belief permissible when the evidence is silent? Here I return to the caveat I mentioned earlier concerning beliefs that are very closely tied to harmful actions. When we blame someone for having a racist belief, although part of this judgment is owing to the epistemic vices displayed in forming the belief, part of the blame stems from knowledge of how closely tied such beliefs are to treating others unjustly. Similarly, some beliefs about the afterlife are closely tied to questionable moral practices. If your belief about the afterlife entails that I will suffer eternal damnation, this will impact the way you think about me and treat me. Or perhaps even more worrisome are beliefs about the afterlife that seem to condone suicide for a God-serving cause. It seems likely that the strong evidentialist dictum that supports suspending judgment when the evidence is silent is motivated by the worry that permitting freedom here will permit beliefs of this kind. Yet beliefs about a greater power or in something transcendent can also bring one to care more about others, to recognize a connection among all humans and all nature, and to view the world in a more positive and beautiful light than if one chose to suspend judgment. Furthermore, as James pointed out, when there is no evidence even suspension is a choice. It seems that as parents and educators we can teach our children that it is in these moments, the rare ones when one is faced with some freedom of what to believe, that one has to think carefully about what kind of person one wants to be and recognize that the beliefs we adopt both express and shape who we are.

A further worry about accepting that evidential norms do not always prevail is that it may seem to legitimize some policies that we would not want to condone. An example of such a practice is the teaching of intelligent design as part of a standard school curriculum.

As I hope is clear from this discussion, evidential norms can only be overridden in rare contexts – contexts in which evidence is either silent on the issue or where the evidence is completely balanced. Neither of these is the case when it comes to belief about the truth of evolution. To disbelieve evolution requires active suppressing or ignoring of the evidence. These constitute epistemic vices that are unacceptable. One could recognize that some beliefs are resilient and persist even while the epistemic grounds

are suspect. However, to teach others to hold views that require a kind of shutting out of overwhelming empirical data is not a sound practice.

Yet it is also important to recognize that in every domain, there will be some presuppositions that are and must remain unquestioned. For science to be so successful in its predictive power and practical success, it must rely on certain assumptions. In ordinary life, I must accept certain truths without grounds or evidence just to be able to navigate my way in what (I assume to be) the world. The beauty of philosophical thinking and philosophy courses is they offer us a chance to examine and question these presuppositions. We can ask why one sort of thing counts as evidence and another does not. We can quite seriously doubt the external world hypothesis and wonder whether there is an objective world beyond my private thoughts. We can even examine why the creation story of Genesis has been seen as a real alternative explanation of the universe by some people. Yet to give it equal attention and legitimacy as a naturalistic explanation would be akin to, in the very earliest stages of the teaching of basic science, introducing the evil-demon hypothesis as an equally plausible explanation of what causes our sense-perceptions. No question should be deemed unacceptable and no topic entirely closed for discussion. Yet the overwhelming success of certain presuppositions – including the presupposition that evidential norms guide belief – permits us to rely on them most of the time. It should not be forgotten, however, that their value is ultimately practical.

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