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Believing Against the Evidence

Agency and the Ethics of Belief

Miriam Schleifer McCormick

Introduction

1. THE ETHICS OF BELIEF AND THE NORMS OF AGENCY

The way we think and talk about beliefs reveals that our doxastic practices are infused with normative judgments. For example, 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!" We seem to think that one's actual belief can deviate from how one *ought* to believe, just as we think one can act in a way that deviates from how one *ought* to act. The broad question asked under the heading of "The Ethics of Belief" is: What ought one believe? The dominant view among contemporary philosophers is that the only good reasons for believing are evidential, namely reasons based on evidence. I will call this view "evidentialism." On this view, the only legitimate criticism of belief is that it violates evidential norms and any belief formed against the evidence is impermissible. I will use the term "pragmatism" to refer to the opposed view that some non-evidentially based beliefs are permissible and that doxastic norms are not wholly evidential.¹ Pragmatists can allow that most beliefs that violate evidential norms are impermissible but deny that the *only* relevant considerations when assessing beliefs are evidential. One central aim of this book is to defend pragmatism as I have here defined it.

One way of framing the question of what norms guide belief is to compare them to the norms that guide action, which are often treated as unproblematic; the question is whether the norms that guide belief are the same as, related to, or wholly different from the norms that guide action. Of course, the question of what norms guide action is not unproblematic. The entire field of normative ethics would not exist if it were. But despite deep divisions and debate about how to evaluate actions, broad agreement exists that if one engages in practical reasoning, this should include thinking about the dictates of morality and prudence. We should think about what principles guide our actions, what the consequences of our actions are likely to be, and what our actions say about our characters. It is difficult to provide a fully articulated theory as to which principles matter most, or what the ultimate grounds are for such principles. Some theorists think the project of articulating such

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general principles is misguided. But we at least know what area, broadly speaking, to look in when making these practical determinations. I will refer to the norms that guide action as the “norms of agency.”

If we were wondering what norms governed the game of chess, we would not turn to the norms that guide action. We would need instead to examine this specific practice, figure out how one plays the game, how one wins, consult the rule book, or ask an expert. A particular decision I make when playing the game might be based on moral or prudential considerations. For example, one might decide not to take the queen yet because, in doing so, one’s novice opponent would be embarrassed. But such considerations are irrelevant in trying to determine what counts as a permissible chess move.

Most contemporary theorists think that the norms of belief are analogous to the norms of chess; to appeal to the norms of agency in thinking about how to believe, they think, is to make a category mistake. Beliefs are not actions and so should not be assessed according to the same criteria. In assessing a belief, the relevant criteria, it is argued, are *alethic* or *epistemic*. In believing, we seek to gain truth (or, more importantly, avoid falsehood), and so when we believe for reasons that are opposed to truth-gaining or falsehood-avoidance, we can be criticized for violating these norms. While there is some disagreement about the precise relationship between belief and truth, very few people fundamentally question the view that beliefs require their *own* separate ethics.² The central contention of this book is that they do not; that, instead, the ethics of belief and action are unified. The norms of agency apply to both action and belief.

In arguing for a disparity between the norms of action and belief, many theorists argue that to understand what norms guide a practice, one must investigate the aim or purpose of the practice. The norms provide rules that help one achieve this aim. I assess your skill as a cyclist by appealing to standards of ideal bicycle riding, for example being able to use your bicycle with maximum efficiency so that you expend minimal effort to travel far and fast. The idea that one assesses an x based on x ’s function is found clearly articulated in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*:

For just as the good, i.e., [doing] well for a flautist, a sculptor, and every craftsman, and in general, for whatever has a function and [characteristic] action, seems to depend on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function.³

The idea of extending this teleological framework to humans in general is something most contemporary theorists reject. Yet, extending this framework to include beliefs has typically not been viewed as problematic. In assessing whether someone is believing well, it is argued, we must look at the function (aim, purpose) of belief. While we shall see this aim is characterized somewhat differently depending on the specific account given, most are variations on the theme that beliefs aim at truth.

That belief aims at truth is supposed to be an explanatory hypothesis.⁴ First, if one thinks that a successful belief is a true one, then the truth-aim hypothesis will explain why this is so. Just as an archer is successful when his arrow hits the literal target, so, too, a believer is successful when his belief hits the target of truth. The truth-aim hypothesis can also explain why we cannot believe at will. We cannot choose what is true⁵ and if beliefs, in some sense, are *conceptually tied* to truth, then this shows why we cannot choose what to believe. In recent years, there have been many attempts to illuminate the conceptual connection between belief and truth. A better understanding of the truth-aim, it is argued, can make normative statements about belief less mysterious. If it turns out to be a fact about our cognitive systems that beliefs aim at truth, then it can also be a fact that false beliefs are incorrect. Knowing the purpose for which a machine is designed allows us to make normative claims about the machine. If my car won't start and so cannot serve its purpose of transporting me, something is wrong with my car. So, it is argued, understanding the purpose of the "belief-forming machine" allows us to assess how well or poorly the "machine" is functioning.

Thinking of believing as analogous to chess playing or bicycle riding is problematic. What you believe is at least as central to who you are as how you act (and, of course, how you act is connected in fundamental ways to what you believe). Even if we eschew talk of a distinctive human function, we can take from Aristotle that the best (most excellent, virtuous) human will always act correctly, but such an ideal person will also always believe correctly and feel correctly.⁶ The implications of accepting this unity between action, belief, and feeling is one of the themes I will be exploring throughout this work.

I have been referring to "norms" for belief, but what do I mean when I claim there are such norms and how, if at all, are these related to rules for believing or to the aim or goal of belief? What concerns me when thinking about norms for belief is primarily the criteria of assessment or evaluation of belief. I am asking what criteria distinguish a belief being good or permissible from a belief being bad or impermissible. One way of approaching this question is to think about what the aim or goal is and then evaluate beliefs according to how well they achieve this goal. I will be examining many such approaches and arguing that they are flawed. This is not to say that such reflection cannot help deepen our understanding of the doxastic norms, but one cannot, as some argue, identify one aim or goal that then provides us with the norm. Thinking about rules that tend to guide us in forming and maintaining beliefs can also help in furthering our understanding of belief norms, but they cannot be identified with them. Any rule explicitly articulated will be an evidentialist one such as, "if one's current evidence is against a proposition, one ought not believe it" but, I will argue, that it is possible for a belief to be permissible even if it violates one of these rules. By contrast, it makes no sense to say that a move in chess is permissible even if it violates the rules of chess. Many evidentialists go wrong in thinking that evidentialist rules apply absolutely, rather than in general.

2. SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

David Hume is one of the historical figures most commonly invoked in defending evidentialism.⁷ Hume's statement, "a wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence."⁸ is often taken to summarize the evidentialist view. Hume does think, *in general*, that believing well means believing according to evidentialist rules—what can be termed "the rules of the wise"—but Hume, famously, recognizes that if one were to universally follow these rules, one could find oneself with no beliefs at all. The belief that one should proportion one's belief to the evidence, for example, is not one that can, without circularity, be evidentially grounded; this is the case with many of our most basic framework beliefs. So, when Hume puts forth his evidentialist dicta, it is within this accepted, though ultimately rationally ungrounded, framework. And the reason why we should proportion our belief to the evidence is, I argue, for Hume, ultimately *practical*.

Some may take Hume's evaluation of beliefs as purely descriptive. He has described a prevalent and important human practice, namely the practice of reasoning. This practice has developed with certain rules so that we can distinguish good reasoning from bad. We can say, according to the reasoning game, that this belief is more warranted than that one, and that those who follow the rules of the game correctly are epistemically responsible. That is, we can say the "wise," who play the reasoning game well, proceed in *this* way and form beliefs on *this* basis. But it seems Hume wants to go beyond mere description. He thinks it is *better* to follow reason, and strive to be wise, than to stick with vulgar, unreasonable habits. What is the nature of Hume's approval for the wise person?

One answer to the question as to why we should regulate our beliefs according to evidentialist rules is that doing so can provide us true beliefs or knowledge. This answer does not take us very far. For it seems we can just as easily ask the question, "Why should we want true beliefs?" as we can ask, "Why should we be wise?" Instead, Hume's preference for reason is given a moral justification. The wise have the virtues of reasonableness and, so, excite our moral approbation.⁹ According to Hume, a person's virtue "consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful or agreeable* to the *person himself* or *others*."¹⁰ He provides examples of each kind in considering a paragon of virtue named Cleanthes. Cleanthes's benevolence is useful to others, his assiduousness useful to himself, his wit and gallantry agreeable to others, and his tranquility of soul agreeable to himself.

Hume seems to think that one can locate the *main* source of approval for the various mental qualities we call virtues as falling predominantly into one of these four categories. The approval felt toward the mental quality of the wise, it seems, stems more from the wise person's character being useful to society than from it being agreeable to the possessor or others, or even useful to the possessor. I think Hume's preference and recommendation for following reason is *politically* motivated. The point is that the *world* will be a better place if more people choose reason as their guide.

While Hume is taken as the evidentialist's historic exemplar, he recognized the limits of evidentialism, a recognition that eludes many contemporary theorists. They form theories about belief that seem primarily aimed at closing off all gaps so that no non-evidentially based belief can sneak in as legitimate. As we shall see, one strategy for such gap-sealing is to argue that it is conceptually impossible to believe against the evidence.¹¹

For much of the twentieth century, most philosophers seem to have thought there is no question concerning norms for belief distinct from that of what constitutes a belief's justification. During that time when "The Ethics of Belief" was discussed, it would usually refer historically to the nineteenth-century debate between W. K. Clifford and William James. In Clifford's paper "The Ethics of Belief," he insists that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything on insufficient evidence" and that we have a duty to withhold beliefs for which we do not have evidence. In James's "The Will to Believe," James 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, James says it is permissible to let our "passional nature" take over, and for our beliefs to depend partly on what will help us make sense of ourselves and our world, on what will provide us with meaning, or even on what will 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 against the 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 for them.¹² For example, Jonathan Adler explicitly states that his motivation for his defense of a very strong version of evidentialism came after engaging with these anti-evidentialist arguments.¹³ If Adler is right that the concept of belief guarantees the truth of evidentialism, then 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. But the price Adler pays for this victory is that he has committed us to widespread error in many of our doxastic practices.¹⁴ An alternative is to allow that some beliefs are not based on evidence and then figure out when such beliefs are pernicious and when they are not. So doing would allow us to respond to the anti-evidentialist arguments Adler considers without committing us to the view that our doxastic practices are fundamentally confused.¹⁵

Just as Hume is seen as the historic founder of evidentialism, those who argue that there can be good practical reasons to believe independent of one's evidence turn for inspiration to Pascal's claim that the best reason to form a belief in God was a practical one, namely the possibility of avoiding eternal suffering.¹⁶ Similarly, part of James's motivation was to defend

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a certain religious perspective. However, opposition to evidentialism need not be motivated by the desire to defend religion: consider Hume, who, I've argued, should be understood as a pragmatist. For while Hume says a wise man ought to proportion his belief to the evidence, he also sees that for some of our most central beliefs, for example our belief in external objects, "experience is and must be entirely silent." Yet he does not think this belief should, or could, be abandoned: "Nature is always too strong for principle."¹⁷ If we think of belief as isolated, narrow, and purely intellectual instead of as deeply entwined with our emotions, desires, and well-being, then we ignore who we are. Recognizing and accepting this complexity will allow us the proper kind of reflection and, when needed, correction.

I have been discussing evidentialism as if it applies uniquely to one view although, as we shall see, many different views can be termed evidentialist. One may think that being an evidentialist does not prohibit one from seeing evidential norms as grounded in practical or moral ones, and that one may only mean that we should follow evidence *because* things will go better for us. Given that I agree that evidential norms are most often the ones to follow, perhaps I could be classified as a moderate evidentialist. There are different ways one could classify these positions. I have termed any position "pragmatist" that allows that some non-evidentially based beliefs have *nothing* wrong with them. It seems that, despite the differences among contemporary evidentialists, they would all reject that view. I will argue that whereas having true beliefs is extremely important, the truth of a proposition does not always count in favor of believing it; holding some non-evidentially based beliefs is possible, permissible, and need not be irresponsible.

The challenge to the pragmatist view I defend is to allow us to distinguish pernicious non-evidentially based beliefs from those that are permissible. The challenge, in other words, is to show that abandoning strict evidentialism does not simply allow one to believe whatever will make one happy. I argue that a number of constraints can be placed on when it is permissible to violate evidentialist rules. Given my view that the norms of agency guide both action and belief, these constraints will be the similar to those that prohibit one from *acting* in any way that makes one happy.

3. A WORD ON METHODOLOGY: WHAT IS A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION?

One of my main criticisms of evidentialism is that the phenomenon evidentialists call "belief" bears little resemblance to what we ordinarily think of as belief; its complexity is diminished, its scope and purpose narrowed. But, what do I mean by "belief?" I will say more about this at the end of Chapter 3, but I want to make it clear from the outset that my lack of explicit definition is deliberate. My claim is that to understand the nature of belief, we must carefully investigate our doxastic practices.

Some philosophers deny that their theories need to match up with our ordinary practices. Ordinary usage is complex and messy, and one of the aims of a theory, one may argue, is to offer clarity and precision about the phenomenon under investigation. That a theory shows that our common practice is fundamentally flawed is not always thought of as revealing a problem with the theory.

I agree that if, in the course of our investigation, we discover confusion or even inconsistency, then some revision makes sense. In a discussion of how epistemology can be naturalized, Hilary Kornblith discusses the interplay between pre-theoretical observations and scientific description. He imagines a rock collector gathering samples of an interesting kind of stone for the purposes of trying to figure out what they have in common.¹⁸ Early on in this investigation, the collector may have some ideas of what kind of rock this is but as his theoretical understanding increases, he may find that some of the rocks he initially thought were examples of the kind of rock in question turn out not to be so. Kornblith argues that our pre-reflective intuitions about knowledge (or belief) are based on a certain amount of understanding but that we can come to revise these views as our understanding of the phenomena increases.

Although I try as much as possible to avoid entering the debate between naturalists and their opponents, I do think a better, deeper understanding of any subject will likely change one's pre-reflective view.¹⁹ But when a philosophical account is revisionist and asks us to restrict usage (as we shall see is the case with many of the evidentialist views we will look at), we need a good motivation to do so. If the account, for example, has great explanatory power, then the restriction may be worth it. But if the restriction's only purpose is to allow one's theory to be consistent, then I question its worth. If we end up with a consistent theory that describes a phenomenon bearing little resemblance to our ordinary practice, what has been illuminated? One of my guiding assumptions when evaluating theories of doxastic norms and agency is that they should help to illuminate our doxastic practices. I take it as a strike against a view if it deviates too much from our ordinary practices; I realize this is not an assumption everyone shares.

4. STRUCTURE AND CHAPTER SUMMARIES

This book is divided into two main parts, "Doxastic Norms" and "Doxastic Responsibility." In Part I, I review and critique a number of defenses of evidentialism before turning to my argument that the norms for belief are ultimately practical. In Chapter 1, I consider various accounts in which a proper understanding of the concept of belief reveals the truth of evidentialism. Despite the differences in detail among these accounts, they all agree that a belief is correct if and only if it is true, and that it is impossible for us to form beliefs without good reasons or evidence for these beliefs being true. I think

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both these claims can be questioned, and that none of these defenses succeed in showing that practical reasons for belief are conceptually impossible.

In Chapter 2, I consider the view that although it is not *impossible* to believe for practical reasons, it is always wrong to do so. Following evidential norms, According to this view, the way to promote epistemic values such as truth, knowledge, or rationality. Those who offer this kind of defense may agree that there are times when holding a non-evidentially based belief is not *prudentially* or *morally* wrong, but that evidentialism is concerned only with what one ought to believe from an *epistemic* point of view. I argue that this separation of evaluative domains is problematic, and that the only way to make sense of epistemic value is to link it or ground it in the practical.

In Chapter 3, I defend my pragmatist view of doxastic norms. The value of truth and knowledge is instrumental; having true beliefs helps us achieve our goals, flourish, and be excellent human beings. It is thus possible that some beliefs can help us achieve these goals independently of their truth-value, or of their being evidentially based. But truth and knowledge are so highly valuable that engaging in practices that lead away from truth and knowledge is problematic in every sense—prudentially, morally, and epistemically. It will, thus, only be permissible to hold non-evidentially based beliefs if doing so does not allow for practices that *undermine* truth. This chapter also considers a number of objections and implications of my view, including a discussion of what this view reveals about the nature of belief.

Those who oppose this pragmatist conception of doxastic norms will point out that, given the involuntary nature of belief, we cannot believe for practical reasons. This is why a discussion of doxastic norms is intertwined with the issue of doxastic control and responsibility. Part II focuses on these issues; I argue that beliefs *are* products of our agency, something we have an active role in shaping and maintaining. In Chapter 4, I introduce a tension in ordinary thinking about belief and consider two responses to what I call “the puzzle of doxastic responsibility” that I reject. Briefly, the puzzle is as follows: while much of what we believe is beyond our control, belief is also open to normative assessment; we hold each other responsible for our beliefs. But it seems that such lack of control should exempt us from responsibility and judgment.

One can respond, on one hand, by arguing that we can effectively decide to believe or, on the other, by arguing that we are, in fact, not responsible for beliefs and that our common practices of attributions of responsibility are misguided. I reveal deep problems with both these approaches. Chapter 5 engages with the third, and currently most common, response to the puzzle, which argues that although we lack voluntary control over our beliefs, we can nonetheless be held responsible for them. In Chapter 6, I turn to my own response to the puzzle. I argue that if we want to hold people responsible for their beliefs, then there must be a sense in which we have control over them. 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.

The two parts of the book are two sides of the same coin. That the norms of agency apply to both belief and action demands that we can make sense of doxastic agency. And that we can exercise control in the doxastic realm naturally leads to the view that the same norms guide both action and belief.

NOTES

1. One could be an evidentialist and think there are no positive duties to believe but instead only norms of permissibility. If this is so, it may seem that one has no answer to the question “what ought I to believe?” But even if the norms only dictate how not to believe, this answers the positive question to some extent. I ought to believe only those propositions that are not ruled out.
2. Jonathan Adler’s book on this topic is titled *Belief’s Own Ethics*. One of his central contentions is that it is a mistake to appeal to “normative notions” in assessing what to believe. He refers to such approaches as “extrinsic,” and he argues that this notion is based on a faulty assumption, namely that the concept of belief alone does not fix the ethics of belief. Beliefs, thus, have their own “ethics,” discovered by a clear analysis of the concept of belief. Many defenses of evidentialism in the last decade have followed Adler in adopting what he calls the “intrinsic” approach, namely focusing on how we *must* believe given what “belief” means. These defenses are the topic of Chapter 1.
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.
4. The first extensive discussion of the view that beliefs aim at truth is found in Bernard Williams’s “Deciding to Believe” in *Problems of Self*. His discussion and some more recent accounts will be discussed in Chapter 1.
5. That we cannot choose what is true may be overstating the point. In certain matters, matters that are up to us, there is a sense in which I can choose what is true. Berislav Marusic argues for this view in “Belief and Difficult Action.” I will return to the question of what kind of control one has over belief in Part II. I will discuss, in more detail, how the truth aim is supposed to explain why we cannot believe at will in Chapter 1.
6. Virtue of character, Aristotle says, is about feelings and actions. A virtuous person will have “feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 24.
7. For example, in the first chapter of *Belief’s Own Ethics* where he defends his strong version of evidentialism, Adler begins by saying, “Evidentialism, an ethics of belief advocated by David Hume, John Locke, W.K. Clifford, and many others” (5).
8. Hume, *Concerning Human Understanding*, 170.
9. David Owen argues that Hume’s preference for reason has a moral ground. He says, “the moral approval we feel towards the wise and reasonable person, on the grounds that the characteristics of that sort are pleasing and useful to their possessors and others, is the ultimate ground of Hume’s preference for reason” (Owen, *Hume’s Reason*, 220). He is one of the few to engage with the question as to why Hume prefers the ways of the wise. This is the central question that I engage with in “Why Should We Be Wise?”
10. Hume, *Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 268.