

The Aim of Belief Is To Avoid Falsity

Abstract: Beliefs aim at the truth. That is, our beliefs are under some normative constraint that says that they must, in some way, line up with the truth. This claim is highly appealing, but has proved difficult to render both precise and plausible. In this paper I argue against Allan Gibbard's and Ralph Wedgwood's interpretations of this claim, and argue that the best interpretation of this claim is that we always have a reason not to believe falsehoods.

Beliefs aim at the truth. That is, our beliefs are under some normative constraint that says that they must, in some way, line up with the truth. This claim is highly appealing, but has proved difficult to render both precise and plausible. Here I attempt this task. I argue that we should understand it as amounting to the claim that we always have a reason not to believe falsehoods. This claim is relatively modest, but captures the intuitive relationship between belief and truth.

I shall argue for this view by comparing it with two rival views, Allan Gibbard's (2005) and Ralph Wedgwood's (2002). Often, I shall compare these views by appeal to worries that Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi have raised (2007). So let me begin by describing Gibbard's view, and showing why it is wrong.

Gibbard's view on the aim of belief is both natural and straightforward (2003: 338):

G: For all P, you ought to believe that P if and only if P

We can see that G is false by noting two counterexamples to it. First, G says that you ought to believe all true propositions, no matter how obscure, pointless, and/or trivial. So, you ought to have the correct belief about the number of moles Shakespeare had on his nose (and his head, and his left leg, and so on). But this seems false: you needn't fill your head with pointless facts like this.

Second, G says that you ought to believe all true propositions, regardless of whether you are able to or not. So, you ought to have the correct belief about Riemann hypothesis, whether you are capable of understanding it or not. But this seems false (Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007: 279): if you can't understand the hypothesis, it can't be true that you ought to have the correct belief about it.

If G is false, we might hold some other view. Here is Wedgwood's view (2002: 275):

W: For all P, you ought to believe that P if and only if (P and you're considering whether P)

One might think that W, unlike G, avoids the two counterexamples above. It says that you needn't have the correct belief about the number of moles on Shakespeare nose, though if you consider the matter, then you ought to have the correct belief about it. And it says that you needn't have the correct belief about the Riemann hypothesis, though if you consider the matter, then you ought to have the correct belief about it. On the plausible (if contestable) assumption that you can't consider the hypothesis without being capable of understanding it, W entails that those who can't understand the Riemann hypothesis need not have the correct belief about it.

But there is a further problem for both G and W alike. Take the proposition: [grass is green and I don't believe that grass is green]. On the plausible assumption that belief distributes over conjunction, this is a proposition which is true if I don't believe it, and false if I do. If I believe it, I must also believe that grass is green, in which case the second conjunct is false and so I believe a falsehood. But if I don't believe it, both conjuncts of the proposition are true, and so I fail to believe a truth.

G and W both entail that if I do not believe this proposition, and then consider it, I ought to believe it, because at this stage it is true. But presumably they also say that once I've started believing it, it becomes false, and so I ought to stop believing it, after which I ought to believe it again, and so on. But this seems odd (Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007: 281-3).

W is also subject to one last objection. Imagine that I am trying to find an objection to a view. I proceed by working out its implications, and checking the truth of each in the hope that one will be false. According to W, for each implication I consider and which is true, I ought to believe it. But it seems far from obvious that this is correct. It seems permissible for me to simply forget about the truth value of at least some of those implications which turn out to be true. I need not bother believing them if they are both trivial and unimportant for my purposes.¹

To see the alternative view that avoids all of these problems, note that both G and W state conditions under which we ought to believe something. But we could instead

¹ It is easy to get distracted here by the thought that once you realise some implication is true, then you must *already* believe it. But (a) it is clear that one could forget this truth very shortly afterwards, and in these circumstances it is not clear that we assent to the proposition long enough for it to really count as a belief, and (b) if we accept that we could forget this truth very shortly afterwards, it is not clear why we should think that we could not also forget it instantaneously.

understand the aim of belief in terms of when we should *not* believe something. Here is the view I suggest that we hold:

N: For all P, if $\neg P$, you have reason not to believe P

N is different from G and W in three ways. The first difference is the most crucial. It is that unlike G and W, N states conditions under which we have a reason not to have beliefs, not conditions under which we should have them. This is what allows N to avoid the counterexamples above:

First, N says that if you believe something pointless but false, you have a reason to abandon your belief. But N doesn't say that you have a reason to adopt the true belief about just all propositions, no matter how pointless.

Second, N says that if you already believe some complicated proposition, you have a reason to abandon your belief if the proposition believed is false. But N doesn't say that you have a reason to adopt the true belief about just all propositions, no matter whether you can understand them or not.

Third, N says that if you believe that [grass is green and I don't believe that grass is green], then you have a reason to stop believing this proposition, because it is false. But N doesn't say that you have a reason to believe this proposition whenever it's true.

And fourth, N entails that if you consider a proposition and it's false, you have a reason not to believe it. But N doesn't entail that if you consider a proposition and it's true,

then you have a reason to believe it. It permits you to simply forget about the proposition and move on.

The other two ways in which N differs from G and W are less significant, but worth noting. The second difference is that, unlike G and W, N makes a claim only about reasons, not about oughts. It says that we have a reason not to have false beliefs, not that we ought not to have false beliefs. This seems correct. There might be propositions which you believe and which are false, but which are harmless and so difficult to give up that it's not the case that you ought to abandon them. Still, N does entail that when there are no countervailing considerations like these, you ought to abandon false beliefs.

The third way in which N differs from G and W is that N states a conditional, not a biconditional. N only says that when $\neg P$, you have a reason not to believe P. N doesn't say that when you have a reason not to believe P, it must be the case that $\neg P$. This seems correct. There might be propositions which you have a reason not to believe even though they are true. Perhaps we sometimes have reasons not to believe true propositions because they are too difficult to believe.

In summary, the aim of belief consists in the fact that we have reasons not to believe falsehoods. This states a clear normative constraint on belief, but one modest enough to avoid various counterexamples, including those raised by Bykvist and Hattiangadi.

Bibliography

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