

Belief's aim and its justification

Although there might be some dissent, the standard view regarding belief seems to be that belief has as its aim the truth.¹ While we may agree that all false beliefs fail to fulfill their aim and all true beliefs can fulfill their essential function, we might still ask why it is that belief has this aim rather than some other. Here is a brief explanation. Beliefs play certain roles in theoretical and practical deliberation. Among other things, when beliefs fulfill their essential function they provide us with reasons from which we might reason to a conclusion. In the case of theoretical deliberation, that conclusion would be a further belief. In the case of practical deliberation, that conclusion might be an action, intention, or a belief of a special kind. Any belief that is not fit for playing this role is not a fit belief. Any belief that can provide us with reasons can play this role.

Because we know what reasons are, we can see why belief has truth as its essential aim. We know that reasons are considerations that favor an action or an attitude. In other words, reasons are non-psychological items such as facts, states of affairs, or propositions that are true. (They have to be *more* than just that. The fact that there is a bit of lint on the ground is not by itself a reason to think that Truman's presidency was a failure, but they have to be that much at least.) Any false belief will, if called upon for the purposes of deliberation, pass off non-reasons as reasons. It will tell us that something that is not a fact is a fact that potentially favors some course of action. It will tell us that non-states of affairs are states of affairs which we might then judge gives us grounds for doing something or believing something where there are no such grounds. In short, any false belief will fail to do what it must if it is to fulfill its function. Such beliefs cannot provide us with reasons for the purpose of theoretical or practical deliberation. True beliefs, however, will provide us with reasons. They might not be reasons we are interested in. But, it is not the belief's job is to make the decision whether the reasons they provide us are reasons we ought to be concerned with.

If this is right, we have an explanation as to why belief aims at the truth. It involves a pair of claims. The first is a claim about belief's functional role. Beliefs should be able to provide reasons for the purpose of theoretical deliberation and practical deliberation. There should not be two stages of scrutiny, one at which beliefs are formed and another at which beliefs are selected for deliberation on the basis of whether they can supply reasons or merely pass off non-reasons as reasons. (This is *not* to say that we cannot have reasons for ignoring certain kinds of reasons. There can be exclusionary reasons that give us reason to exclude certain kinds of consideration while trying to determine what to do or what to believe.² That the case of deliberating in awareness of exclusionary reasons is a special case indicates that the basic point is correct.) The second is a claim about the ontology of reasons. Reasons are considerations or objective matters of fact. As we are speaking here of guiding or justificatory reasons, it seems that this is the dominant view in the literature.

If this much is correct, I think we can learn something about the justification of belief. It is a lesson that will come as a shock to the epistemological community as only one epistemologist seems to have put forward a view in print consistent with the conclusion I hope to establish.³ As epistemologists are going to be unwilling to accept the conclusion of the argument I about to

¹ Notable exceptions include Williamson (2000) and Sutton (2005, 2007) who maintain that belief aims at knowledge. They do not deny that truth is, in some sense, part of belief's aim. While we should expect continued debate between the knowledge-first crowd and those who defend the view that truth is belief's aim (e.g., Velleman (xxxx), Wedgwood (xxxx), and Williams (xxxx)) the outcome of that debate will not have much bearing on the arguments of this paper unless someone comes along and argues that belief does not have truth as even part of its aim.

² For a discussion of exclusionary reasons, see Raz (1990).

³ I am speaking of Sutton's (2005, 2007) knowledge account of justified belief on which a belief is justified iff that belief constitutes knowledge.

offer, I think the time has come for a frank discussion. Ask the ethicists what reasons are and most will tell you that they are what I have said they are (i.e., objective facts or considerations that favor an action or attitude rather than psychological states of an individual). Ask me, and I shall tell you that if the ethicists are right, we have an explanation as to why belief's aim at the truth. Put us together and we end up with an argument for the factivity of justified belief. That all epistemologists (save one) reject the conclusion suggests that we need to have a meeting of the minds. One side must be getting it wrong and we need to figure out which side it is.

Here is the argument.

- (1) The belief that p could contribute a reason to practical or theoretical deliberation only if p is true. If p is false, the belief that p is true would contribute a non-reason to deliberation if included in deliberation.
- (2) There cannot be a reason to include the belief that p in practical or theoretical deliberation by allowing it to provide a reason from which to reason towards a conclusion if the belief that p would only pass off a non-reason as a reason if included in deliberation.
- (3) There is, however, a reason to exclude the belief that p from practical and theoretical deliberation whenever that belief would pass off a non-reason as a reason if included in deliberation.
- (4) When there are reasons against an action or attitude, the justification of that action or attitude requires an overriding reason that defeats the reasons against.
- (C1) Only true beliefs can justifiably be included in theoretical and practical deliberation.
- (C2) Only true beliefs can be justified.

Let us examine each step. We have seen that (1) is a consequence of a certain view about what reasons are. On the view that reasons are considerations that favor an action or attitude, insofar as it seems natural to assume that the considerations that really favor our actions or attitudes are sometimes considerations that pertain to matters external to us, some reasons will be facts that are not facts about us. Beliefs about such matters can never provide us with the reasons they purport to when the facts are not as those beliefs represent them being. Note that this is consistent with saying that when someone falsely believes p that they believe p can be a fact that provides them with a reason. We have to insist that the reason is different from the reason provided by the true belief that p is true. For example, if someone believes *falsely* that everyone is out to get him, the fact that he has such a belief means that there is a reason for the believer to seek the help of a therapist. If someone believes *truly* that everyone is out to get them, that everyone is out to get them is a reason for them to hide from therapists that might just be part of a conspiracy. We do not have to deny the possibility of reasoning from the fact that some proposition is believed to some conclusion while consciously refraining from reasoning from what is believed. On the couch, I might reason from the belief that I have such and such beliefs to the conclusion that I need the help of a therapist.⁴

As for (2), I have never seen anyone offer an example of a reason that could serve as a counterexample to (2). Examples that purport to be examples in which reasons are given for including beliefs that cannot give us reasons for the purpose of deliberation tend to be examples in which reasons are given for manipulating ourselves into forming a belief rather than reasons for believing. In other words, they give us the wrong kinds of reasons. Here is one such example. Suppose you are offered an obscenely large sum of money to believe p . In such a case, you might have a practical reason to do what it takes to get that belief in your head. If joining a cult would

⁴ See Dancy (2000) and Moran (xxxx) for discussion.

do it and the cult would let you keep the money, there might be good reason to join the cult. If banging your head against the wall would do it, you might have reason to find a wall. These are not, however, reasons to believe p . They are reasons to try to induce the belief that p . They are reasons to undertake a course of action, not to conclude theoretical deliberation by judging that p . Such reasons do not weigh against or defeat the more familiar sorts of reasons that bear on whether to believe p . If one really wishes to press the point, I suppose we might make the following concession. There is overriding reason to form false beliefs when doing so is necessary for some significant practical aim and only such beliefs could potentially be justified when they happen to be beliefs in false propositions. It does not seem to follow that the reasons to form the belief are reasons to allow that belief a role in deliberation, but let that pass. That concession would give little comfort to the epistemological community whose members believe that the justification of a false belief involves much less. The standard evidentialist line is that false beliefs are justified provided that they stand in the right relation to a body of evidence and the reliabilist will allow for the odd false, justified belief provided that the belief is produced by a sufficiently reliable process. Neither of these views appears to recognize reasons that override the reason to refrain from reasoning from falsehoods. If the case I have offered is really a case in which practical reasons are reasons for belief, the practical reasons can be weighed against the falsity of belief in the course of coming to an all-things considered judgment as to whether to believe p . We do not weigh the reasons provided by the evidence concerning p against the falsity of p in determining whether to believe p or whether another ought to believe p . The same goes for facts about the reliability of processes that could lead to the belief that p .

As for (3), it seems to follow from a rather homely truth about reasons. If there were not reasons not to treat non-reasons as reasons, treating non-reasons as reasons would itself be all the reason you would need to do so. However, surely there is *some* reason to not give non-reasons the role in deliberation that ought to be reserved for reasons only.

As for (4), that seems to be a truth about justification and defeating reasons. There can be *some* justification for Φ -ing even when there are stronger reasons to refrain from Φ -ing than to go ahead and Φ , but the crucial question is not whether there is *some* justification for Φ -ing. The crucial question is whether there is sufficient justification for Φ -ing. I doubt that there can be sufficient justification for Φ -ing under the very conditions where the reasons against Φ -ing defeat the reasons that favor it. Perhaps the point is obvious, but surely when we ask whether suicide bombing is ever justified or whether killing in self-defense is justified we are not asking whether there is some reason for suicide bombers to kill civilians or someone to shoot someone who threatens them. There might be absolutely trivial reasons to do all sorts of things. These questions are hard because in asking these questions we are asking whether the case in favor of an action is conclusive or if the reasons against defeat them. At any rate, until someone shows that (2) is false, we are not in the situation of someone who has to consider the respective merits of the reasons that favor a belief's inclusion in deliberation and reasons that favor its exclusion. We have only a reason for its exclusion when the belief is false because it passes a non-reason off as a reason. We have never seen a reason that favors the belief's inclusion when it could only fail to fulfill its essential role when included in deliberation.

The move from (C1) to (C2) rests on a suppressed premise. The premise seems to be something to the effect that beliefs that cannot justifiably be included in deliberation cannot justifiably be held. The justification for that premise is simply that it seems only in special cases could it be the case that the considerations that determine a belief's justification come apart from the considerations that determine a belief's eligibility for deliberation. We know that any belief that would pass off a non-reason as a reason by virtue of its inclusion in deliberation is one that cannot be justifiably included in deliberation. We also know that any false belief would be such as to pass a non-reason off as a reason if it were included in deliberation. If you think there can be justified beliefs that can *never* be included in any sort of practical or theoretical deliberation, so be it. You will not accept the inference from (C1) to (C2). Those that think that a belief that can

never be included in any sort of deliberative process properly would thereby be unjustified ought to accept the inference.

The argument's starting points consist of things people are often prepared to say, the denial of which strikes many as puzzling. Reasons are considerations that favor actions and attitudes. Beliefs are supposed to provide us with reasons that can serve as the basis of our actions and further beliefs. The argument's conclusion is something the epistemologists will most certainly reject. Either we have a *reductio* on our initial assumptions or some indication that something is terribly wrong with the standard views concerning the justification of belief. Suppose we treat the argument as a *reductio*. Which of our starting assumptions should we reject?

Epistemologists might say that my argument has just shown what is wrong with treating reasons as considerations that favor an action or attitude. Perhaps reasons are just psychological states such as belief.⁵ This response seems to conflict with some apparent platitudes about reasons. For example, it seems to conflict with the platitude that reasons are the sorts of things that we *can* reason from. Perhaps we can reason from claims about our own psychologies (e.g., I am really afraid of heights, so I ought not look down), but we can also reason from claims about non-psychological matters. When we engage in that sort of reasoning, the elements of reasoning are surely reasons. Those reasons are (or strike us as being) facts about things external to us. It also seems to conflict with the view that reasons favor things. We know that while facts about our psychologies favor some things, when we try to determine which course of action will be most favorable or which belief is favored by the facts as they appear to us, it does not seem to us from the deliberative standpoint that it is relations among mental states exclusively that do the favoring. If we say for some sort of theoretical reason that the favorers are not as expansive as ordinary reasons take them to be, we end up saying that ordinary folk are systematically misled in their ordinary judgments about which courses of action are most favorable. To avoid positing such error, we would have to say that reasons do not favor. That makes matters worse. Reasons play the role they do in reasoning in virtue of how they favor (or seem to favor) certain things. Now we have to say that ordinary subjects are systematically misled about how reasons get their work done in the course of determining what we ought do or believe. They are not so ignorant about a reason's proper use. Unless we have good reasons to do so, we should not adopt views on which ordinary rational subjects are systematically mistaken about what their reasons are (e.g., by denying that the facts they take to be relevant to settling some practical or theoretical consideration are not even among the reasons that bear on whether they ought to believe or do something) or how their reasons get their work done (i.e., by favoring some course of action).

As I said earlier, we need to have a meeting of the minds. If you look through the literatures on the justification of action, it is not uncommon to see someone defending the following sort of view. We are told that the law permits us to use force in cases of self-defense. When someone only appears to be an aggressor, however, the use of force is not justified. At best, we can hope to be excused for, say, using mace on a jogger that looked like a mugger. We know that someone equipped with mace will in all likelihood use the mace if they are not paralyzed by fear and come to believe the jogger to be a mugger who intends them harm. The view seems to be that in virtue of facts the agent is non-culpably ignorant of, the agent cannot spray the mace and act with justification. There seems to be something terribly odd about a view that says you must not spray the mace, that there is not sufficient justification for causing the harm or imposing the risk of harm that comes with spraying the mace, allows that you know that *if* the man approaching intends harm you are within your rights to spray the mace, and then adds that there is nothing wrong with the belief that the man approaching is a mugger that intends harm because that is how he looks. That view tells you, in effect, that it is not wrong to hold a belief the holding of which inevitably leads you to perform an action you must not perform. When you know that

⁵ Davidson (1986) held that *only* beliefs could give reasons for belief. If we look at those arguments, however, it seems those arguments alone can only show that psychological states with marks

you should feel free to Φ if p and refrain if $\sim p$, and we know that if you were to believe p you would Φ straight-away, to the extent that you ought to avoid Φ -ing you ought to avoid those beliefs that would make your Φ -ing all but inevitable. If, however, there is nothing wrong with reasoning from the belief that p , when we know you know that p entails that it is not wrong to Φ , it seems there is not much we can say against your Φ -ing.

I suppose the epistemologists might say that that there is something wrong with reasoning from the belief that p when you know that p entails that Φ -ing is not wrongful when p is false. It leads you to do the wrong thing. That, however, is not an epistemic wrong and a theory of epistemic justification ought to be concerned only with epistemic wrongfulness. This reply will not do, however. On the best test I know of for distinguishing the right kind of reasons from the wrong kind of reasons, a reason is the wrong kind of reason for Φ -ing when it does not bear on a question that would lead one to Φ if settled. If, however, a reason bears on a question that would lead you to Φ if settled, it is the right kind of reason. The fact that the man approaching is out for a morning jog is a fact that bears on the question whether you ought to mace him. The fact that you ought not mace him bears on the question whether you ought to believe you ought to feel free to mace him. Since you know that you should feel free to mace him if the man approaching is a mugger, the reasons that speak against spraying the mace also speak against believing that it would be fine to spray the mace thereby speak against believing that the man approaching is a mugger and not a jogger. Our actions and beliefs about the actions we ought to perform should 'sway together', and the reasons that speak against the one speak against the other. Since our beliefs about the actions we ought to perform ought to cohere with our beliefs about non-moral matters, to the extent that our normative beliefs ought to be sensitive to the facts our beliefs about non-normative matters ought to be sensitive to these same facts. Either we ought to reject the assumptions we started with about belief's functional role and the ontology of reasons or we ought to revise much of the recent literature on epistemic justification.