

The Pragmatic Metaphysics of Belief

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Abstract: On an “intellectualist” approach to belief, the intellectual endorsement of a proposition (such as “the working poor deserve as much respect as the handsomely paid”) is sufficient or nearly sufficient for believing it. On a “pragmatic” approach to belief, intellectual endorsement is not enough. To really, fully believe, you must also “walk the walk”. I argue that the pragmatic approach is preferable on pragmatic grounds: It rightly directs our attention to what matters most in thinking about belief.

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1. Introduction.

If asked to list three beliefs I have that are important to me, I might offer the following:

1. that my children's happiness is far more important than their academic or financial success.
2. that women and men are equally moral and equally intelligent.
3. that most people are basically good at heart.

I care that I believe these things. I want to be the kind of person who believes such things. I feel as though, if I didn't believe those things, it would be rather sad.

I also feel like I am saying something *true* when I assert these propositions. When I pause to reflect on the matter, I am strongly inclined to say that it is in fact the case that my children's happiness is more important than their academic or financial success, and that women and men are equally moral and equally intelligent, and that most people are basically good at heart. I feel sincere inner assent. I feel confident that these claims are right. I explicitly and consciously judge them to be so. In other words, I *intellectually endorse* the target propositions.

Now on one view of belief, my intellectual endorsement of such propositions is sufficient for my believing them – or nearly sufficient, or sufficient in normal circumstances. If upon reflection I say “most people are basically good at heart” with a feeling of confidence and sincerity, then that's what I believe. My beliefs are, as it were, written on the face of my intellectual endorsements. Let's call this view *intellectualism* about belief.

On another view, intellectual endorsement isn't enough for belief. To determine whether I genuinely believe the propositions I sincerely affirm, we must inquire farther. We must look at my overall pattern of actions and reactions, or at how I live my life generally. Do I in fact tend

to treat my children's happiness as far more important than their academic success? For instance, am I generally more heartened by signs of their emotional health than by their good grades? Similarly, in my day-to-day interactions with women and men, do I tend to treat them as intellectually and morally equal? For instance, am I as ready to attribute academic brilliance to a woman as to a man? If it turns out that I do not steer my way through the world in a way that reflects the wise, egalitarian, un-cynical vision that I proudly endorse in affirming propositions 1-3, then, on this second type of view, it's not quite right to say that I really or fully have those beliefs. (I might simply fail to have those beliefs; or alternatively, I might be in a muddy, inconsistent, indeterminate, or in-betweenish state. On the latter, see Schwitzgebel 2002.) Let's call a view of belief *pragmatist* if it treats belief as behaviorally demanding in this way.

In this essay, I will argue for a pragmatic approach to belief and against an intellectualist approach. I will argue that the pragmatic approach is preferable because it directs our attention where it properly belongs. That is, it directs our attention toward how we live our lives generally. It directs our attention to what we ought to care about most in thinking about belief.

The approach I favor is pragmatist in two distinct ways. First, it fits with the pragmatist tradition of Bain (1868/1973), Peirce (1877, 1878), James (1896/1912, 1907/2004), and Dewey (1920/1957, 1938¹) in emphasizing behavioral patterns as the core of belief. Second, it is metaphilosophically pragmatic in relying on pragmatic criteria to choose among competing metaphysical approaches, as I will now explain.²

¹ However, Dewey tended to prefer the terms "judgment", "knowledge", or "assertability" to "belief" (see 1938, p. 7; Brown 2015).

² For a similarly pragmatic metaphilosophical approach to belief, see Zimmerman 2016. For some contrasts between Zimmerman's view and my own, see note 8.

2. *Pragmatic Metaphysics Generally.*

Sometimes the world divides into neat types – neat enough that you can more or less just point your science at it and straightforwardly sort the As from the Bs. Sometimes instead the world is fuzzy-bordered, full of intermediate cases and cases where plausible criteria conflict. When the world is the latter way, we sometimes face *antecedently open cases*. In antecedently open cases, the world does not force a classificational scheme upon us. More than one classificational option fits things well enough; you could legitimately go either way. You could classify the case as an A, without doing too much violence to the phenomena, or you could classify it as a B, or maybe you could just leave it indeterminate or intermediate.

Antecedently open cases are, or can be, decision points. If there's more than one way to build a legitimate metaphysics or classificational scheme, you have some options. You can consider, do you *want* to classify the thing in question as an A? Would there be some advantage in thinking of category "A" so that it sweeps in the case? Or is it better to think of "A" in a way that excludes the case or leaves it intermediate? Such decisions can reflect, often do at least implicitly reflect, our interests and values. Such decisions can also shape, often do at least implicitly shape, future choices and values, influencing both how we think about that particular type of case and how we think about Category A in general.

Pragmatic metaphysics is metaphysics done with these thoughts explicitly in mind. For instance: There are lots of ways of thinking about what a *person* is. Usually the cases are not antecedently open. You are a person; I am a person; this coffee cup is not a person. It wouldn't be reasonable to adopt a classificational scheme that yielded a different result than that! However, some interesting cases appear to be antecedently open, breaking in different directions depending on what criteria are emphasized: a fetus, a human without much cortex, a hypothetical

conscious robot, a hypothetical enhanced chimpanzee. The world does not seem to force a classificational scheme that sorts these types of cases neatly into persons and non-persons. We can *choose* to think of personhood in a way that includes such cases, or excludes them, or leaves them intermediate. In doing so we both express and buttress certain values, for example, about what sorts of being deserve the highest level of moral consideration.

I am drawing here upon three strands of thought in recent philosophy. One is the self-avowed later pragmatists, such as Richard Rorty (1980/2010, 1993/2010) and Hilary Putnam (1990), who saw all classificational decisions as pragmatically governed, but who are also sometimes interpreted as embracing more radically open views about the classificational possibilities than the view I intend.³ Another strand is the pragmatic strand in post-Kuhnian philosophy of science, especially in the “Stanford school” thinkers, who see the world as sufficiently complex that it defies simple modeling. On this view, theory choice and model choice are nearly always a matter of evaluating, on pragmatic grounds, tradeoffs among virtues such as simplicity, social utility, future research promise, and relative accuracy across ranges of phenomena of interest (Cartwright 1983, 1999; Dupré 1993; Horst 2016; and relatedly Carnap’s 1950 pragmatic approach to “explication”). A third strand is the view in metaethics and meta-metaphysics that treats some of the debates in these areas as linguistic disputes but does not dismiss them as trivial. Given how much can ride upon choices of language, ethical and metaphysical disputants can sometimes be interpreted as (implicitly or explicitly) disagreeing not primarily about non-normative facts but instead about the normative issue of how the terms in question, such as “race” or “torture” *should* be used (Haslanger 2012; Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Plunkett 2015; Thomasson forthcoming).

³ See Page 2006 in defense of a relatively moderate reading of Rorty and Putnam.

Pragmatic metaphysics requires that there not always be a single best way of classifying things, independent of our projects and interests. It requires enough fuzziness or multivocality that we can legitimately appeal to our projects and interests in pushing for one articulation of our metaphysical categories rather than another.

The human mind is a complex, fuzzy-bordered thing, right at the center of our values. Because it is complex and fuzzy-bordered, tricky classificational questions will arise, with lots of antecedently open cases – lots of cases that are intermediate or where the usual classificational criteria point in different directions. And because the mind is at the center of our values, it often matters how we classify such cases. Does being happy require *feeling* happy? Is deep compassionate concern that doesn't privilege its object as special *love*? Answers to these classificational questions aren't compelled by the phenomena. Instead we can decide. What ranges of phenomena deserve such culturally important labels as “happiness” and “love”?

We might think of metaphysical battles over the definitions of important disciplinary terms partly as *political* battles between philosophers with different visions and priorities, for control of our common disciplinary language.

3. Intellectual Endorsement Versus Spontaneous Lived Behavior: The Case of Daniel.

Some classificational decisions about belief are straightforward. I believe that my car is parked in Lot 30. You believe that Confucius lived in ancient China. Neither of us believes that the moon is made of green cheese. Other cases appear to be antecedently open: cases of

marginal confidence, cases in which faith is coupled with serious doubt, certain sorts of conceptual confusion, certain sorts of instability or fragmentation or partial forgetting.⁴

The type of antecedently open case that interests me most is this: the case in which someone intellectually endorses a proposition but fails to act and react generally as though that proposition is true. If intellectualism is correct, as I defined it in the introduction, then we should generally classify these cases as cases in which they believe the endorsed proposition. If pragmatism is correct, then we should not generally classify these cases as straightforward belief – either classifying them as outright failures to believe or instead (as I prefer) treating them as intermediate and “in-betweenish”.

In earlier work (Schwitzgebel 2010), I argued against intellectualism primarily on theoretical grounds. The in-betweenish approach, I argued, makes better psychological sense. Here, I set those arguments aside. Instead, I will argue as follows: It is *morally and personally important* that you reject intellectualism and accept some sort of pragmatic view in its place.

It’s like the cases in section two. In defining “person” or “torture” or “happiness” in one way rather than another, I am both expressing and buttressing a particular vision of the world. I am saying that this case is importantly like that one; they deserve to be classed together. And I am saying that this case is importantly different from this other one; they deserve to be classed differently. These types of differences matter more; these other types of differences matter less. Such classificational decisions highlight selected features of the cases, rendering certain phenomena more visible. Other phenomena become less visible. Some projects are implicitly

⁴ For a range of such cases, see Stalnaker 1984; Dennett 1987; Schwitzgebel 2002; Sommers 2009; Myers-Schulz and Schwitzgebel 2013; Elga and Rayo 2015.

encouraged, while other projects are implicitly discouraged. This is obvious with “happiness” and “torture”. It is less obvious but still true, I will argue, with “belief”.

To see why, we need cases. I will develop one case in detail, then sketch a few others.

Daniel⁵, let’s suppose, sincerely says that low-wage workers deserve as much respect as do people who are handsomely paid, maybe even more respect. Politically, he tilts left. He’s thirty years old, an advanced graduate student in philosophy. He votes liberal Democrat. When political candidates say that existing social structures give working-class people a raw deal, he cheers them on. He went to an elite undergraduate university, and he admires his classmates who chose personally meaningful careers over money-oriented careers. He makes it his policy to tip generously. He says, to friends and family – especially in arguments with his right-leaning uncle Jordan – that undocumented farm laborers and hotel staff, people who work at the lowest level in food service and retail, day-laborers and custodians, deserve as much respect as do lawyers and engineers and professors of philosophy. Maybe they deserve even more respect. Life is full of hard knocks for them, he says. They don’t have the same safety net. It can be a struggle for them just to get by. Viewed properly, they are often more admirable, overall, than are full professors cozily ensconced in tenure. He says this passionately, maybe too passionately. He feels immensely confident that he is right. He doesn’t feel at all ambivalent about it. He even tries to be especially nice to those people.

Here’s the twist. He *tries* to be nice. Usually there is something ill-tuned in the way he goes about this. He doesn’t find it natural to be nice to them, to think of them as equals. He has

⁵ Names in all examples were selected randomly, after the examples were already written, from lists of former lower-division students in my classes. To avoid confusion or offense, I exclude “Jesus”, “Mohammed”, and very uncommon names. See Schwitzgebel 2015 for discussion.

to work his way toward it. It's forced, maybe even condescending. "Oh, bussing tables at Denny's diner is just as valuable as writing philosophy!" he says to a busser he has somehow cornered. He's not deliberately lying or misrepresenting himself – he means it in a way – but it has the air of inauthenticity, and both he and the busser know it. He's trying to be respectful but he's failing, and this failure is typical of him.

Daniel admires eminent professors. He is spontaneously deferential to doctors, lawyers, managers, engineers. He doesn't admire or respect food service staff in the same way. He loathes the most vapidly ostentatious Maserati drivers, but of course that's only a small portion of the wealthy. If someone who looked like a well-dressed engineer and someone who looked like a migrant laborer were both sitting in the coach section of an airplane, the laborer spread out comfortably in an exit row aisle seat with extra leg room, the engineer jammed into a tiny middle seat, Daniel might passingly think that something was wrong with that situation. Maybe after further reflection he'd decide it was fair turnabout – but he wouldn't usually give the matter further reflection. Who will Daniel listen to more respectfully, who will he step aside for in the hallway, whose approval or disapproval matters to him more? Always the well dressed, financially successful person, never a member of the working poor. Or rather, almost never. Sometimes, if the situation is right, he can really connect with a poor person, in an admiring and respectful way, if he stops and listens, notices some common ground, hears a story about some impressive obstacles they have overcome. When he does this, maybe he feels a little proud of himself in retrospect.

Likewise, usually but not always, when *other* people show more deference and respect to the socially powerful, that seems appropriate to Daniel. In a department store, it would not seem jarring to him to watch a well-dressed man interrupt a conversation between an employee and a

poorly-dressed customer, whereas if the poorly-dressed customer were to interrupt the well-dressed man, that would strike him as rude.

Daniel, let's suppose, knows all this about himself, or at least suspects it. Let's also suppose that it's not a matter of temporary back-and-forthing. He has all of these tendencies stably and can manifest different ones simultaneously – for example pontificating against classism in a way that manifests disrespectful classism toward the housekeeper to whom he is speaking.

I like Daniel. I don't mean to be harsh. I see a lot of myself in him – though how much of myself, exactly, I'm not in a great position to judge.

So here's the question: Does Daniel believe that the working poor deserve at least as much respect as do people of higher social status?

We can imagine similarly convoluted cases on range of topics. Duy-Anh sincerely says that God sees all and damns the wicked to Hell; but he does not tend to act and react in the way we would expect of someone who believes that to be true. Alejandro sincerely says that people in wheelchairs are just as smart as those who can walk easily without aid; but in fact he tends to act and react in ways more consistent with assuming people in wheelchairs to be intellectually inferior. Kennedy sincerely says that money doesn't matter much, really, above a certain basic income; but her choices and emotional reactions tell a different story. Nancy sincerely says that her underachieving adult son will soon become one of the best salespeople in his company, but lots of her other behavior seems more realistically pessimistic.

How should we think about such cases?

4. Situating Intellectualism.

Intellectualism, as I've characterized it, is the view that we should think of Daniel and the others as genuinely and unambiguously believing the propositions that they intellectually endorse. The alternative view I aspirationally label pragmatism – “aspirationally” because I hope that this alternative view will appeal to pragmatically motivated philosophers. According to this alternative view, how you live your life, how you walk through the world, the choices you make, the spontaneous reactions you have, and what you unreflectively take for granted – such things are sufficiently central to belief that Daniel and the others don't deserve to be called straight-up, unambiguous believers, despite what they would sincerely say about the topics in question. On the intellectualist approach, intellectually endorsing a proposition is sufficient, or nearly sufficient, for believing it. On a pragmatic approach, intellectual endorsement is not enough. To qualify as someone who fully or truly believes, you must also live that way.

It's possible that the majority of philosophers who have written extensively about belief would reject intellectualism. Daniel Dennett is pretty clear about it, contrasting belief with the more intellectual “opinion” (1991). Brian Loar (1981), Donald Davidson (1984), Ruth Millikan (1984), Robert Stalnaker (1984), Jerry Fodor (1987), Fred Dretske (1988), Lynne Rudder Baker (1995), Robert Cummins (1996), Robert Matthews (2007), and Peter Carruthers (2015) all characterize belief in ways that suggest that its manifestation in choice and action generally is at least as important as its influence on sincere assertion. Still, it's not always clear how these philosophers would handle cases like Daniel's. One complication derives from the commonly accepted notion of “occurrent belief”. Occurrent belief seems to be treated, in the mainstream functionalist-interpretationist-representationalist literature, both as similar to what I am here calling intellectual endorsement and also as sufficient for belief.⁶

⁶ For example, de Sousa 1971; Audi 1994; Huddleston 2012.

Some philosophers are explicitly committed to intellectualism or to principles from which intellectualism appears to follow. For example, Saul Kripke recommends a “disquotational principle” according to which “If a normal English speaker, on reflection, sincerely assents to ‘p’, then he believes that p” (1979/1988, p. 112-113). L. Jonathan Cohen writes:

belief that p is a disposition, when one is attending to the issues raised, or items referred to, by the proposition p, normally to feel it true that p and false that not-p, whether or not one is willing to act, speak, or reason accordingly (1992, p. 4).

Matthew Boyle argues that “the very existence of [a rational subject’s] belief that P is constituted by her persisting assent to P” (2009, p. 143). Aaron Zimmerman (2007) and Tamar Gendler (2008a&b) explicitly consider cases like Daniel’s and defend views on which their Daniel-like characters are properly described as “believing” what they explicitly endorse. On such views, the behavior at odds with a person’s endorsements is best explained by appeal to such non-belief causes as habit, association, emotional reaction, or (in Gendler’s terminology) “alief”.^{7, 8}

Intellectualism also fits nicely with optimism about self-knowledge or “first person authority”. Daniel would probably say “I believe that the working poor deserve equal respect”. Kennedy would probably say, “I believe that money isn’t really very important”. If knowledge

⁷ Though see Marley-Payne 2015 for some problems for such a division between the rational and the arational that this version of intellectualism appears to rely on.

⁸ Zimmerman 2016 argues extensively in defense of “pragmatism” and against “intellectualist” views that deny belief to non-human animals. So it might seem odd to classify him as an “intellectualist” here. Zimmerman does reject the necessity, for belief, of the *most intellectual* of intellectual dispositions, such as the disposition to assert P linguistically or to self-ascribe belief that P. Also, he shares my metaphilosophical pragmatism. However, in defining belief Zimmerman still privileges the attentive and self-controlled, and one’s best judgment upon considering the matter carefully, over the spontaneous, inattentive, uncontrolled and seemingly thoughtless; and he classifies cases like Daniel’s in the characteristic intellectualist manner.

of one's own beliefs is sufficiently easy that Daniel and Kennedy have it, presumably what they know about their beliefs is that they have the handsome ones that it feels so natural to self-ascribe.

That we have privileged self-knowledge of our beliefs is widely accepted among philosophers. Sydney Shoemaker (2009) argues that second-order beliefs contain the first-order beliefs that they self-ascribe as a part, and that therefore, necessarily, if a person genuinely believes that she believes something she does in fact believe that thing. Alex Byrne (2005) describes a "transparency" procedure of answering questions about what one believes by investigating the outside world, arriving at conclusions, and then self-attributing belief in those conclusions. Self-attributions arrived at in this way, Byrne argues are "self-verifying" in the sense that if the procedure is followed, the resulting second-order belief must be true. Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich characterize self-knowledge of belief as a "trivial" matter of detecting representations in the Belief Box, appending "I believe that ____" to them, and placing them back in the Belief Box (2003, p. 161). Dorit Bar-On (2004) argues that when we speak our minds or express our opinions, those avowals have a special epistemic security. In general the more a philosopher emphasizes the ease, simplicity, or near-infallibility of self-knowledge of belief, the more she invites us to treat intellectual endorsement as close to sufficient for belief. Knowing what you believe is much more challenging if it requires knowing not only what you intellectually endorse but also how you behave in general.

We have a metaphysical choice. "Belief" is in part a technical term in philosophy. "Belief" is a mushy, multi-valenced term in ordinary use. We can adopt, cheer for, and push relatively intellectualist conceptual and linguistic practice, or we can adopt, cheer for, and push

relatively less intellectualist conceptual and linguistic practice. Which approach better serves our interests?

5. *The Trunk Argument Against Intellectualism.*

My argument has a trunk and three branches.

The Trunk Argument. *Belief* is one of the most central and important concepts in all of philosophy. It is central to philosophy of mind: It's the most commonly discussed of the "propositional attitudes". It is central to philosophy of action: It's standard to view actions as arising from the interaction of beliefs, desires, and intentions. It is central to epistemology: Much of epistemology concerns the conditions under which beliefs are justified or count as knowledge. Religious belief is a major topic in philosophy of religion. "Belief reports" is a major topic in philosophy of language.

A concept this important to philosophical thinking should be reserved for the most important thing in the vicinity that can plausibly answer to it. The most important thing in the vicinity is *not* our patterns of intellectual endorsement and our most thoughtful, attentive behavior. It is our *overall* patterns of action and reaction. Although what we say matters, and what we do when we are most on our guard matters, it matters even more what we do in general and how we live our lives in general. Since the general pattern matters more, we should attach this powerful word, this very central word in our discipline, to this general pattern.

We can use a different word to capture the intellectual side of ourselves. I recommend "judgment". We can say that Daniel *judges* and is *disposed to judge* that the working poor deserve equal respect. "Judgment" is an important term too in philosophy, even if not as

important as “belief”. And “judgment” sounds a bit conscious and intellectual, well suited to capture the thoughtful, intellectual side of Daniel.

In the next section, I will elaborate the Trunk Argument with three Branch Arguments, which explore plausible downstream consequences of too intellectualist a focus in thinking about belief. But first let me suggest the following:

All else being equal, it is *intrinsically better*, independent of any such downstream consequences, to attend to what is important rather than to what is unimportant. This is so both at an individual level and at a disciplinary level. Part of human flourishing, part of the awesomeness of philosophy, part of the awesomeness of life on Earth, is that there are moments at which complex bags of mostly-water can step back to reflect seriously about the big picture. It is simply great, without need of further justification, that we can devote our intelligence to thumpingly hard questions about issues of fundamental importance. It is simply great that our world hosts a thriving academic discipline that encourages doing just that. Philosophy surrenders some of this greatness if we philosophers focus too much, without good reason, on things of secondary importance. This is one reason to insist that the central disciplinary terms of philosophy prioritize what it most important.

6. Three Branch Arguments Against Intellectualism.

Branch 1. Too intellectualist a view invites us to adopt noxiously comfortable opinions about ourselves.

Daniel asks himself, “Do I believe that the working poor deserve equal respect?” He finds that he is inclined to sincerely judge that they do deserve equal respect. If intellectualism about belief is correct, he can rightly conclude that he has that belief. Daniel can say to himself,

then, that he has the attitude that philosophers care about most – that attitude so central to philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and epistemology – *belief*. Maybe he lacks something else. He lacks “*alief*” maybe, or the right habits, or something. But based on how philosophers usually talk, and based on where their professional attention is usually directed, that’s kind of secondary. Daniel appears to have the most important thing straightened out.

Intellectualist philosophers can deny that Daniel does have the most important thing straightened out. They can say that how Daniel treats people matters more than what he explicitly endorses upon reflection. But if this is their view, their choice of language does not invite us to think so. Instead, let’s build the importance of people’s patterns of action right into the foundational terms of the discipline.

Branch 2. Too intellectualist a view hides our splintering dispositions.

Here’s another, maybe deeper, reason Daniel might find himself too comfortable: He might not even *think to look* at his overall patterns of behavior in evaluating his attitude toward the working poor. In Branch 1, I assumed that Daniel knew that his spontaneous reactions were out of line, and he only devalued those reactions because he didn’t think of them as central to what he believes. But how would he come to know that his spontaneous reactions are out of line? If he’s somewhat reflective and self-critical, he might just happen to notice that fact about himself. But an intellectualist view doesn’t *encourage* him to notice that fact about himself.

A pragmatic view, in contrast, encourages Daniel to cast his eye more widely. It encourages him to think about his patterns of behavior, including his spontaneous behavior. It encourages him to consider his emotional responses and implicit assumptions. Daniel might then learn, or at least remind himself of, something important. The pragmatic approach to belief *brings our non-intellectual side forward into view* while the intellectualist approach tends to hide

our non-intellectual side. Or at least these views do so to the extent we are talking specifically about belief – which is a large part of what philosophers do in fact actually talk about in philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and epistemology.

Suppose Suleyma has the same intellectual inclinations as Daniel but unlike Daniel her whole cognitive or dispositional structure is egalitarian. She really does, and quite thoroughly, react to custodians and food-service workers as though they deserve as much respect as the handsomely paid. An intellectualist approach treats Daniel and Suleyma as the same in any discussion where what matters is what they believe about the working poor. They both count as believing that the poor deserve equal respect, so now let's talk about how that belief couples with desire to beget intentions, let's talk about whether that belief is sufficiently well justified to be knowledge, let's talk about what set of possible worlds would make that belief true. For all these purposes Daniel and Suleyma would be modeled in the same way. The difference between them is obscured unless we make additional effort to bring it to light.

If you think that Daniel's and Suleyma's differences are sufficiently minor that the two of them should be treated as equivalent in the matter of what they believe about the working poor, then intellectualism is for you. If you think that their differences are sufficiently important that they should not be treated as equivalent in what they believe about the working poor, then intellectualism is not for you. Of course their differences matter for some purposes and not for other purposes. The question is whether it's better to put those differences in the foreground or tuck them away as a nuance.

Branch 3. Too intellectualist a view risks downgrading our responsibility.

It's a common idea in philosophy that we are responsible for our beliefs. We don't choose our beliefs in any straightforward way, but if our beliefs don't align with the best

evidence available to us, we are epistemically and maybe morally blameworthy for that failure of alignment.⁹ In contrast, our habits, our spontaneous reactions, those sorts of things, it's sometimes said, are not under our control, at least not directly, and so we are less praiseworthy or blameworthy for them, especially if we would prefer not to have them. Our "true" selves, our "real" attitudes, the beings we most fundamentally are, the locus of our freedom and responsibility and human awesomeness, manifests in what we endorse upon reflection, or what we embrace or identify with in some other privileged way.¹⁰ This class of views fits naturally with intellectualism about belief: Unless we would endorse an attitude upon reflection, we neither believe it nor can be held directly responsible or blameworthy for it. Daniel might excuse himself by saying, "I can't help it if some of my spontaneous responses and assumptions are classist! That's not my true opinion. That sort of stuff is subpersonal, automatic, out of my control, not the real me, and it's unfair to blame me for it."¹¹

I think that view is almost exactly backwards. Our intellectual endorsements, when they don't align with our practical behavior, count for little in assessing who we are. What matters more is how we spontaneously live our way through the world, how we actually treat the people we are with, the actual practical choices that we make. If there's any "real" us, that's it. It

⁹ See Chignell 2010/2016 for a review of this literature.

¹⁰ Aspects of this type of view – maybe never every feature of it in unqualified form – have been expressed by Frankfurt (1971) and Watson (1975) and others in that tradition through at least Levy (2014, 2015). Levy is especially helpful in addressing implicit bias cases similar to the case of Daniel. Contrary views include those of Nietzsche (1886/1966), Freud (1923/1960, 1933/1933), Arpaly (2002), and Smith (2005, 2008). See also Arendt's (1963/1965) portrayal of the notorious Nazi Adolf Eichmann, who would endorse high-sounding phrases that gave him a feeling of "elation" but which bore little connection to his actually lived values and choices. One way of framing my worry about intellectualism is that it flatters the Eichmann in us.

¹¹ Some recent treatments of implicit bias emphasize that even if we don't have direct control and responsibility for our biases, we do have substantial indirect control over time and can be held responsible and blameworthy on those grounds (esp. Holroyd 2012). I worry that this already concedes too much to the intellectualist picture.

Daniel says, however sincerely, that he is an egalitarian, but he doesn't live that way, I don't think we should all him a straight-up egalitarian. I don't want to excuse him by saying that his inegalitarian reactions are mere uncontrollable habit and don't reflect the real him.

It's easy to talk. It's hard to change your life. I don't want to let you off the hook just because you feel sincere when you say certain handsome thing, and I don't want to let myself off the hook. I don't want to say that I really believe all the lovely truths I tell myself I believe, if I don't live that way. I don't think I ought to disown my unlovely habits and reactions, view them as somehow alien to me, say that fail to reflect my real attitudes. If I don't walk the walk, it's more appropriately condemnatory to say that my attitude, my belief state, is pretty mixed up.

People do not reliably live according to the opinions and values they intellectually endorse in the matters they care about most. Indeed, it is this very caring about what our attitudes are that tempts us into self-deception and wishful thinking, and which makes frank self-examination so unpleasant. I am stunned by the breadth and diversity of our failures. How do we really treat our family, our colleagues, our students, strangers in the world around us? What do we really prioritize in our choices? What we sincerely say we believe about ourselves and the people around us, what we sincerely say we find valuable, and how we actually live our way through the world – so often they are so far out of line with each other!¹² I see no better way to highlight this important and disappointing fact than to refuse to place the intellectual side of ourselves at the center of philosophy.

7. Two Roles for Belief Attribution.

¹² See Nietzsche, Freud, and recent empirical reviews of the generally only moderate relationship between expressed attitudes and chosen behavior (Kraus 1995; Knobe and Leiter 2007; Fabrigar, Wegener, and Macdonald 2010).

Another way of thinking about the fundamental issue at stake is this: Belief attribution, both in philosophy and in ordinary language, normally serves two different types of role. One is predicting, tracking, or reporting what a person would verbally endorse. When we attribute belief we are doing something close to indirect quotation, speaking for them, expressing what we think they would say (e.g., in the simple versions of the “myths” of Sellars 1956/2000, 1969; and Wettstein 2004). The other role is predicting and explaining non-linguistic behavior (e.g., Dennett 1987; Fodor 1987; Andrews 2012). We might call the first role *testimonial*, the second *predictive-explanatory*. Normally, in adult human beings, the two coincide. You attribute to me the belief that class starts at 2 pm. It is true both that I would say “Class starts at 2 pm” and that I would try to show up for class at 2 pm (assuming I want to attend class). But what happens when these two roles for belief attribution come apart, as with Daniel?

Self-attributions of belief typically testimonial. If we ask Daniel whether he believes that the working poor deserve equal respect, he would presumably answer with an unqualified *yes*. Any other answer would be misleading. If he said “kind of” or “it’s complex”, he would probably give his conversational partner the wrong idea. If he went into detail about his spontaneous reactions to people, he would probably be missing the point of the question. Rejecting intellectualism thus risks disrupting ordinary important testimonial practice. Daniel might have to shift to talking about his “judgments” rather than his “beliefs”, or at least we might have to reinterpret him in that way, if we mean to be careful.

On the other hand, consider Daniel’s grandmother. She scolds him: Do you *really* believe that the working poor deserve equal respect? You sure don’t act that way, for all your fine talk. Or consider a couple of custodians gossiping about Daniel behind his back. They say, with some justice, that he doesn’t think that people like them deserve much respect. Or consider

Daniel at age sixty, after a miserable experience in academia as a long-term adjunct, followed by a series of disappointing jobs, under horrid bosses, as a bartender and low-level librarian. His visceral respect for the social elite is long gone. He can say, looking back: When I was thirty, I didn't deep-down believe that the working poor deserved equal respect. Now I do believe that. Not all folk attribution is testimonial.

It is a simplifying assumption in our talk of "belief" that these two roles of belief attribution – the testimonial and the predictive-explanatory – converge upon on single thing, what one *believes*. When that simplifying assumption breaks down, something has to give, and not all of our folk practices can be preserved without reinterpretation.

8. *Is This Too Harsh?*

Here's a worry. Daniel might react negatively to being spoken of, or spoken to, in the way I recommend. He might react defensively, angrily. He might feel that we have undercut his authority to speak for himself about what he believes. We might do better, if our aim is to help him see and change his behavior, if we use a lighter touch, if we say instead something like "of course you *believe* that the working poor deserve equal respect, but look at all these reactions you have that don't fit with that belief".¹³

This is an open empirical question. Some evidence suggests that it can be helpful to ascribe traits or virtues to people aspirationally, even if they don't entirely live up to those traits (reviewed in Alfano 2013). However, other evidence suggests that frank confrontation can be more effective than too soft a touch, and it remains unclear what level of aggression or

¹³ Tamar Gendler, Karen Jones, and Aaron Zimmerman have all expressed this concern in conversation. See also Saul 2013, sec. 4.3.

assertiveness is most effective in dealing with prejudice (Czopp, Monteith, and Mark 2006; Becker and Barreto 2014; Scaife, Stafford, Bunge, and Holroyd 2016). The empirical case is not currently clear enough either way, I think, to overcome the considerations I've advanced in my trunk-and-branch argument.

Also note that it is not a commitment of the pragmatic view that we *simply* say that Daniel doesn't believe what he is saying, much less that he believes the opposite of what he says. We can instead, if we wish, decline to give a simple answer and instead attribute to Daniel a complex, mixed-up state that is not helpfully summarized by saying either that "he believes" or that "he fails to believe". This might be easier for him to hear than flat denial that he believes.

Another softening move is this. Once we recognize how pervasive cases like Daniel's are, the blame we feel toward Daniel ought to lose some of its sting. Blame will, or should, be tempered by sympathetic understanding. If *all* we cared about were classism, and if we see ourselves as non-classist, then we raise ourselves above Daniel and distance ourselves. But if we see Daniel's condition as just the normal human condition, including in ourselves, the blame and holding responsible take a different color. It would be rare person who was immune to Daniel-like manifestations of sexism, racism, ageism, and the many forms of ableism. Do you think that you respond in the same way to people you regard as physically beautiful as you do to people you regard as unattractive, in matters on which physical appearance should have no bearing?¹⁴

¹⁴ On the relationship between judgments of beauty and other traits such as academic intelligence, see Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, and Smoot 2000; Talavas, Mavor, and Perrett 2016. From the Langlois et al.: "Contrary to conventional wisdom, there is strong agreement both within and across cultures about who is and who is not attractive. Furthermore, attractiveness is a significant advantage for both children and adults in almost every domain of judgment, treatment, and behavior we examined. The magnitude of attractiveness effects is roughly the same as or larger than that of other important variables in the social sciences. In most cases, the benefits of attractiveness are large enough to be "visible to the

Consider, also, other idealistic attitudes you endorse. Maybe you're a professor, like me. You probably endorse a generous attitude toward the welfare of your students, a generous attitude toward other members of the department, a positive attitude toward the balance between work and home life, and so forth. But do your spontaneous reactions and actual lived choices consistently reflect these aspirational attitudes, which are so pleasant to express and flow so easily from the tongue?

Looking at myself, I sympathize with Daniel. I still want to hold him responsible. I still want to blame him rather than excuse him. I still want to say that his belief state is not quite as handsome as he might think it is. But I have no desire to do this in a stinging way. After all, what kind of model am I?

9. Four Objections.

Objection 1. Is this an unrepresentative selection of beliefs? You might ask: What about mathematical beliefs? The belief that snow is white? The belief that there's a coffee cup right here? Have I cherry-picked a few weird beliefs?

Reply. I have focused on beliefs that we care about having (beyond just having a general desire for true beliefs). Often these are beliefs about norms and values, but they don't have to be. Some are closer to purely factual in content (e.g., that women and men are equally intelligent). Empirically, I think it's the case that the intellectualist and pragmatist approaches diverge mostly regarding big picture beliefs that are important to people's self-conception. However, in principle they might diverge even for mathematical beliefs. Consider the belief that

naked eye" and are of considerable practical significance" (p. 404 with in-line citations removed).

the number of points in a line segment is the same cardinality as the number of points in all of space. If someone assented to that proposition upon reflection and yet regularly drew mathematical inferences that depended on its falsity, that might be a mixed or in-between case on a pragmatic view but a straight-up belief on an intellectualist view.

Objection 2. Couldn't we just urge more attention to behavior while retaining intellectualist usage for "belief"? This is probably Gendler's (2008a-b) intended strategy, in urging the importance of her new concept of "alief".

Reply. I have no objection in principle. Still, my best guess about the sociology of the discipline is that a reduction of intellectualism in philosophy would be more swiftly and thoroughly achieved by intervening on this central term "belief", emphasizing the non-intellectualist strands it already contains, than by *reinforcing* the intellectualist strands while also saying "look over here at this other important stuff!"

Objection 3. Could we decide to say that there are two types of belief, one for which intellectual endorsement is sufficient and the other which requires more? We might call the first "thin belief" and the second "thick belief" (Buckwalter, Rose, and Turri 2015); we might call the first "superbelief" and the second "basic belief" (Frankish 2004); we might call the first belief "de dicto" and the other belief "de mundo" (Sommers 2009).

Reply. I doubt that cases like Daniel's splinter as cleanly as simple a two-types-of-belief model would appear to suggest (Schwitzgebel 1999, 2002, 2011). Furthermore, it's confusing to attribute two different belief attitudes with different adjectival modifiers. Since we don't

normally use adjectival modifiers in belief attribution, the practice threatens to make unmarked use of “belief” ambiguous.¹⁵

Objection 4. Philosophy is an enterprise that ought to focus on the intellectual. For example, philosophy of language ought to focus on our linguistic endorsements. Logic ought to focus on the relationship between intellectually affirmed propositions. Etc.

Reply. I find this a sadly narrow view of philosophy. Even philosophy of language and logic can consider what we implicitly accept and react to, the preferences and assumptions hidden beneath our words and choices, and language as a means of social action.

10. Conclusion.

Condensing to a motto: What you believe is not what you say you believe, it’s how you live.

We have a choice in constructing a metaphysics of belief. We can emphasize our patterns of intellectual endorsement, our most thoughtful responses, and what we would say or judge upon reflection. Alternatively, we can emphasize our overall pattern of lived behavior, spontaneous as well as thoughtful, implicit as well as explicit. The latter pattern, the bigger pattern, being the more important, is the better choice as referent for this word “belief”, which is so central to our discipline.

¹⁵ A related strategy would be to attribute contradictory beliefs: both P and not-P at once (Shoemaker 2009; Borgoni 2016; Mandelbaum 2016). However, this is possibly even more confusing, unless care is taken to explain in what respects the person behaves or reasons belief-that-P-ishly and in what respects they behave or reason belief-that-not-P-ishly. Once that move is made, it’s not clear what explanatory advantage the contradictory belief strategy would have over competing approaches.

I am especially concerned about our tendency to endorse handsome attitudes – egalitarianism of various sorts, the unimportance of money and prestige, the importance of the welfare of the people around us – while we behave in ways that align poorly with those attitudes. My empirical, pragmatic conjecture is that it better helps us to frankly confront our frequent failure to live up to our handsome ideals if we demote intellectual endorsement from the center of philosophy, that is, if our basic philosophical terminology does not treat intellectual endorsement as the decisive thing.

Wang Yangming, the 16th-century neo-Confucian philosopher, argued for the unity of knowledge and action: To know a truth, especially a moral truth, is to act accordingly. If you claim to know but do not act, you do not really know (Wang Yangming, c. 1500/2009). There is a type of moral excuse-making that Wang Yangming saw as common: the excuse of saying that although you know what is right to do, you are having trouble putting that knowledge into action. To make such an excuse is to claim a kind of moral half-credit: You have your heart in the right place, but are just a bit weak or need some practice. Wang Yangming did not want to give people that half-credit. To know the Confucian way to treat your parents is just to treat your parents that way. Your lived choices express your knowledge. If you really knew it was wrong to neglect your parents you would not neglect them.

I'm not sure I'd go all the way with Wang Yangming here. Our affirmations and avowals, our heartfelt judgments in our most reflective moments, they do matter a lot. Maybe they *are* worth half or quarter credit – especially if we feel genuine guilt, shame, and regret when we act contrary to those expressed opinions. But if our affirmations and avowals are important it's not because of anything about them that makes them especially speak for us, or that makes

them especially central to who we are. Rather they matter because they are one interesting piece of what it is to live a rich human life, neither more nor less.¹⁶

¹⁶ For helpful discussion, thanks to Rima Basu, Michael Brownstein, Karen Jones, Janet Levin, Neil Levy, Alex Madva, Randy Mayes, Dana Nelkin, Jeremy Pober, Richard Vulich, Ralph Wedgwood, Jesse Wilson, Aaron Zimmerman, and audiences at the Pacific APA in 2015 and 2016, University of Hong Kong, University of Southern California, and Northwestern University.

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