

Comments on “Against Intellectualist Theories of Belief” by Jack Marley-Payne
for Minds Online 2015

August 24, 2015

How boring it is for philosophers to agree! I agree with almost everything in Jack Marley-Payne’s nicely argued essay. I’ll try not to be too boring.

Sometimes we sincerely say or silently think one thing but lots of our other reactions and behavior seem more consistent with the contrary opinion. Example: Someone sincerely says or silently thinks that all the races are intellectually equal; but in most of her reactions, when confronted with real people in daily life, she shows substantial racial bias in assessing intelligence, e.g. feeling surprised when a member of a black person says something smart but when not when an otherwise similar white person does. Another example: Someone sincerely says or silently thinks that his dear dead friend has gone to Heaven; but his emotional reactions don’t really fit with that. On *intellectualist* views of belief, what we really believe is the thing we sincerely say or silently think, despite the other reactions.

Jack raises some problems for intellectualism. I’ll get to those in a bit. I agree they are problems, and I agree with his final anti-intellectualist view.

Intellectualism might be defended on four grounds.

(1.) *Intellectualism might be intuitive.* Maybe the most intuitively plausible thing to say about cases of sincerely denied racism is that the person really *believes* that all the races are intellectually equal, but she has trouble putting that belief into action. Similarly, the man really believes that his friend is in Heaven, but it’s hard for him to avoid reacting emotionally as if his friend is ineradicably dead rather than just “departed”.

(2.) *Intellectualism might fit well with our theoretical conceptualization of belief.* For example, maybe it’s in the nature of belief that beliefs are responsive to evidence and deployed in reasoning in a manner that suggests that they are present when, and only when, they are intellectually affirmed. The implicit racist’s intellectual attitude is reasons-responsive in a belief-like way, while her spontaneous negative assessments of certain ethnic minorities are not. Relatedly, but somewhat differently, it might be partly definitional of belief that beliefs are easily knowable through introspection, and this too might favor intellectualism, since the implicit racist better knows what she is disposed to say about the races than she knows her pattern of spontaneous reactions when confronting with people of different race.

(3.) *Intellectualism might cohere nicely with the idea of belief as generally used in philosophy.* Epistemologists widely regard knowledge as a type of belief. Philosophers of action commonly think of beliefs as coupling with desires to form intentions. Philosophers of language have created a large literature on “belief reports” like “Lois Lane believes that Superman is strong.” If we want philosophy to be a unified discipline, we ought to prefer an approach to belief that fits

with its use in epistemology, philosophy of action, and philosophy of language. And maybe the intellectualist approach fits best.

(4.) *Intellectualism might be the best practical choice for the use of the term “belief” because of its effects on people’s self-understanding.* For example, it might be more effective, in reducing unjustified racism, to approach an implicit racist by saying “I know you *believe* that all the races are intellectually equal, but here, look at these spontaneous responses you also have” than to say “I know you are sincere when you say that all the races are intellectually equal, but it appears that you don’t through-and-through *believe* it”? Tamar Gendler, Aaron Zimmerman, and Karen Jones have all plausibly suggested that something like the former approach is more promising in opening people toward personal change.

Marley-Payne’s essay focuses on the second of these four reasons. Gendler and Zimmerman especially have argued that our intellectual responses are responsive to evidence in a way that our emotional and habitual responses are not. According to Gendler and Zimmerman, this is good theoretical reason to embrace an intellectualist approach to belief. Gendler calls the pattern of spontaneous and emotional responding, which tends not to be immediately responsive to evidence, *alief* rather than *belief*. Marley-Payne presents a nice range of evidence suggesting that the intellectual sides of our minds are often not as reasons-responsive as the Gendler-Zimmerman view appears to suggest and also that our non-intellectual spontaneous responses are often more reasons-responsive than their view suggests.

I agree with Marley-Payne about this. I don’t think he quite closes the case, since there’s plausibly still room for defenders of the Gendler-Zimmerman view to argue that that the intellectual side of our mind is substantially *more* responsive to reasons and evidence than the less intellectual side. But I think the ball is in their court now: They owe it to us to articulate more precisely in what way this is supposed to play out and to deal with Marley-Payne’s cases. To Marley-Payne’s evidence I would also add the work of Jonathan Haidt on people’s moral rationalizations and the large psychological literature on motivated reasoning. If, as these literatures suggest, our intellectual patterns of reasoning are quite often (mostly?) post-hoc defenses of judgments arrived at spontaneously from a complex mix of causes, many of which have little to do with evidence, then those intellectual judgments are not going to be especially responsive to reasons, despite the human tendency to construct lawyerly defenses that make them seem as though they are responsive.

How about some of the other defenses of intellectualism?

Let’s set aside the issue of whether it’s theoretically definitional of belief that beliefs are easily introspectible, which is an alternative version of the theoretical argument for intellectualism. How easily introspectible beliefs are is an issue that should fall out of an account of belief rather than drive an account. If intellectualism is true, beliefs are probably easily introspectible. If intellectualism is false and we often fail to believe, or fail to fully believe, what we sincerely endorse, then introspectibility is not so straightforward. But let’s not decide in favor of intellectualism just to save claims of easy introspectibility.

This leaves us with defenses 1, 3, and 4: intuitiveness, coherence with uses of “belief” in other areas of philosophy, and the practical effects of the linguistic decision on people’s self-understanding. All of these defenses have some merit, I think.

On intuitiveness: Intuitively, what do people say about cases like the implicit racist and the mourning friend? I don’t think the intuitions are entirely univocal. Sometimes we seem to want to say that the people in question believe whatever it is that they intellectually endorse. It’s natural to say that the racist really does believe in intellectual equality of the races, that the mourning friend really does believe her friend is in Heaven.

On the other hand, sometimes it seems natural or intuitive to say that the implicit racist doesn’t *really*, or *fully*, or *deep-down* believe that the races are equal, and that the mourner maybe has more doubt about Heaven than she is willing to admit to himself. I’m inclined to think it’s approximately a tie, intuitively, between straight-up intellectualism and the more nuanced view that Marley-Payne and I would favor on which intellectual endorsement isn’t sufficient for belief.

On coherence with other areas of philosophy: Discussion of knowledge as justified true belief and discussion of “belief reports” in philosophy of language do seem to work from a background assumption of something like intellectualism. Mainstream epistemologists are interested in cases of whether what one intellectually believes is knowledge, if it is also true and justified. Philosophers of language tend to take sincere assertion as criterial for belief. So if the aim is coherence with these areas of epistemology and philosophy of language, the intellectualist view seems to fit neatly.

However, maybe coherence with intellectualist views of belief in epistemology and philosophy of language is a mistaken ideal and not in the best interests of the discipline as a whole. For example, for example, some of the puzzles in philosophy of language around the use of names might seem less puzzling if we rejected the kind of intellectualism on which assertion is criterial for belief and allowed that maybe that “Superman is strong” is something that Lois Lane only kind-of believes, or toward which she has a messed-up in-betweenish attitude, despite her sincere assertion.

Also it’s not clear that intellectualism is favored if we consider coherence with philosophy of action. If we think not just of intellectual plans – “I will do A!” said to oneself – and instead of enacted choices, we maybe create some troubles for intellectualism. Why did seeing the name “LeShaun Jackson” on the top of the resume cause the implicit racist to set aside the application? Well maybe because she wants to hire someone smart for the job and she believes that someone with that name will belong to a race of people who are not smart. I’m inclined to think that’s not quite the right thing to say, partly because I think the belief-desire model of action explanation is too simplistic, but *if* one wants to accept the belief-desire model of action explanation that is commonly seen in philosophy of action, such cases seem to fit better with anti-intellectualist views of belief than with intellectualist views.

On practical effects on people’s self-understanding: I don’t doubt that Gendler, Zimmerman, and Jones are right that many people’s immediate reaction to being told that they don’t really have all

the handsome-sounding egalitarian beliefs that they think they have, and all the handsome-sounding religious beliefs that they think they have, will be to get defensive. People don't want to be told that they don't *really* believe the self-flattering things that they think they believe! They'll react better, and probably be more open to rigorous self-examination, if you start on a positive note and coddle them a bit. Right.

But I don't know if I want to coddle people in this way. I'm not sure this is really the best thing to do in the long term. I think there's something painfully salutary in thinking to yourself, "Maybe deep down I don't really think that black people are very smart, or at least important parts of me don't think that. Maybe my attitude toward the Heaven is mixed up and multivocal." This is maybe a more profound kind of self-challenge, a fuller refusal to indulge in self-flattery. It highlights the uncomfortable truth that our self-image is often ill-tuned to reality.

So this issue, too, I could see cutting either way.

Although all four defenses of intellectualism have some merit, none is decisive. This tangle of reasons seems to leave us approximately at a tie so far. But we haven't yet come to...

The most important reason to reject intellectualism about belief.

The reason is this: Given the central role of the term "belief" in philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, epistemology, and philosophy and language, and given the importance of the term in our self-understanding (especially if we include the related attribution "I think that P"), we should reserve the term for something centrally important. We should reserve the term for, probably, the most important thing in the psychological vicinity – the thing, whatever it is, that *deserves* such a central role in so many areas of philosophy and in our folk psychology.

What we sincerely say to ourselves, what we intellectually endorse, is important. But it is not as important as how we live our way through the world generally. What I say about the intellectual equality of the races is important, but it's not as important as how I actually treat people. My sincere endorsements of religious or atheistic attitudes are important, but they are only a *slice* of my overall religiosity or lack of religiosity.

For this reason, I favor – and I think Marley-Payne also favors – a broad conception of what it is to have a belief on which to have the belief that all the races are intellectually equal is, in part, to be disposed to sincerely say that they are all intellectually equal, but also just as much or more to be disposed to act and react generally as if it were true – to have the full suite of reactions to people, and spontaneous responses, and self-talk, and implicit assumptions, and emotional reactions, that fit with possession of that egalitarian attitude. To believe the races are equal, or that God exists, or that snow is white is to steer one's way through the world, in general, as though the races are equal, or God exists, or snow is white, and not only to be disposed to say they are. It is this *overall* pattern of self-steering that we should care most about, and to which we should, if we can do so without violence, attach the philosophically important label "belief".

This is all just a complicated – I hope not too boring – way of saying *I agree with Jack*.