

## Week 7: Freedom to believe

Ideas of Freedom  
University of Warwick

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## Evaluating beliefs

- “How can you believe such nonsense?”
- “You should not just believe everything you read on the internet!”
- “Hear what this person believes - what a terrible racist she is!”
- “He just believes that climate change does not happen because that suits his interests best.”

## Evaluating beliefs and freedom to believe

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- Is it fair to hold someone responsible for their beliefs only if they have control over their beliefs, i.e. if they could have believed otherwise?
  - Maybe not: see the arguments against the Principle of Alternate Possibilities.
- But in evaluating actions, even if the agent could not have acted otherwise, we need a strong link between their desires at different levels, their whole person, and the action.
  - The person may not need freedom of will in the sense of being able to will otherwise, but they need freedom of action, in the sense of doing what they will to do.
- But are our beliefs likewise subject to what we will to believe? Can they be linked to our desires etc., so that they can be ascribed to our person, and we can be held responsible?

**1** (How) can we believe what we want to believe?

**2** (How) can we be responsible for what we believe?

**1** (How) can we believe what we want to believe?

- Williams: Only by means of self-deception
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## Contingent and necessary limits on willing

- Some things we cannot do at will are *contingently* out of our control: e.g. blushing or making our heart stop.
  - contingent: could well be otherwise, either in this world by training, or at least in another world where our bodies function differently.
- But we *necessarily* cannot believe at will.
  - necessary: could not be otherwise, even in a different world.
  - the necessity here comes from the nature of belief: It's the kind of thing that you just can't conjure up at will.

# Why we necessarily cannot believe at will: The nature of beliefs

- Beliefs aim at truth:
  - To believe that  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  is true.
  - It is paradoxical to say “I believe that  $p$ , but  $p$  is not true.”
- Beliefs are ideally based on evidence or processes that reliably produce true beliefs.

## Why we necessarily cannot believe at will: Deciding to believe I

- Not all our beliefs are based on evidence or reliable processes.
- But once we realise that our belief that  $p$  lacks such a link to truth, we lose the belief (or at least significantly lower our credence (i.e. degree to which we believe it)).
- If we could believe at will, by training or in another world where our minds work differently, then we would know that we can do that, and would know in a given instance that we did it.

# Why we necessarily cannot believe at will: Deciding to believe II

- Why would we will ourselves to believe something?
  - If we don't have the belief due to another, reliable belief-producing process.
  - But we want to have it anyway, even though it might be false: Pragmatic reasons!
    - Avoid pain and disillusionment.
    - Wishful thinking.
    - Social reasons, fit better in somewhere, related differently to people.

## Why we necessarily cannot believe at will: Deciding to believe III

- If you believe at will that  $p$ , then you know that this belief lacks a link to truth (otherwise you wouldn't have to will to believe it).
- But then you won't actually succeed in having the belief!
- Conversely, if there is a mental state directed at the world that you can adopt at will even without holding it to be linked to truth, then this mental state is not a belief.
  - It might be a wish, or a hope.

## How we can at will make ourselves believe

- We can still take roundabout steps to make ourselves believe something.
  - Hypnosis.
  - Drugs.
  - Seek evidence in a one-sided manner.
  - Surround ourselves with people who believe it.

## How the roundabout route works

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- What do the roundabout steps add over just believing at will?
- They add a distance between the decision to believe and the belief generated by it.
- This distance allows us to forget or make ourselves forget that we decided to have that belief for pragmatic reasons.
- So when making ourselves believe something works via **self-deception**:
  - We must become unaware of our own motives and decision.
  - We are then in error about these facts about ourselves - we are deceived about ourselves and by ourselves.

**1** (How) can we believe what we want to believe?

■ Williams: Only by means of self-deception

■ Cook: By changing ourselves without self-deception

## Example: Nick the young biologist I

- Nick believes creationism.
- For pragmatic reasons, Nick wants to believe in the theory of evolution.
- Nick takes steps to make himself believe in evolution. He enters a prestigious mainstream graduate school in which
  - he constantly needs to affirm and assume evolution.
  - he is under the impression of the prestige of his professors, who believe in evolution.
  - he is among peers who consider evolution to be obviously true, and who consider creationists to be benighted.
- Nick graduates and wholeheartedly believes in evolution.

## Self-deception?

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- Does Nick need to be deceived about his motives for making his beliefs change for the process to work?
- It seems not: Nick can look back and think: “Back in the day, I was a benighted creationist who merely wanted to believe in evolution to be a successful biologist. But how glad am I that I have gone that way to now see that evolution is actually true.”
- What has happened?
  - Nick has successfully planned and executed a strategy to change his sense of what is believable.
  - That changed sense works backwards and redescribes his initial epistemic situation.
    - NB: “epistemic”: pertaining to knowledge (Greek “epistḗmē”, cf. epistemology)

## Reverse example

- NB: The example does not rest on an assumption that the theory of evolution is true.
- Cf. Reverse-Nick:
  - Nick studies biology at a non-evangelical mainstream university, and wholeheartedly believes in evolution.
  - But Nick wants to believe in creationism, e.g. to get his partner to marry him or to get a job at a university near his home town.
  - Nick moves into a setting in which creationism is assumed and belief-influencing processes work the other way: e.g. a creationist missionary organisation, think tank, etc.
    - These processes involve giving him a different picture of his former situation: explaining belief in evolution by social pressures or moral depravity.
  - Nick ends up believing creationism, being glad that he set out on the process of making his beliefs change, so that now he sees the truth.

## 2 (How) can we be responsible for what we believe?

- For what beliefs might we want to hold people accountable?
- Types of failings and responsibility

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## Morally bad beliefs

- A person's false beliefs can be morally outright *bad* beliefs:
  - Ann believes that she is so special that ordinary rules of morality do not apply to her.
  - Ben believes that women are inferior to men.
- A person's false beliefs can be morally highly problematic:
  - Charlotte believes that climate change does not happen and we can just continue emitting as many greenhouse gases as we like.
  - Dan believes that all atheists are necessarily immoral people.

## Otherwise bad beliefs I

- A person's false beliefs can be objectionable without necessarily being morally bad:
  - Erika believes that condensation trails of airplanes are actually "chemtrails" places there by conspiring government agencies to poison the population / exert mind control / ...
  - Ferdinand believes that the writings of Jacob Lorber are divinely inspired because no person could have written that much of their own thinking in so little time.

## Otherwise bad beliefs II

- Gabriela believes that evolution is clearly false because it is as absurd as assuming that throwing some silicon, plastic, and metal in a box, and shaking it for long enough, will result in a computer.
- Hubert believes “if John is the most important person in the company, then John occupies the nicest office”, “John is the most important person in the company”, but fails to believe that John occupies the nicest office, or believes that John does not occupy the nicest office.

## Note: bad beliefs vs. false beliefs

- There can be false beliefs that are not objectionable:
  - Igor believes physical theory  $X$ , but  $X$  later turns out to not be true.
- Some objectionable beliefs might well be true: e.g. Jacob Lorber's writings might be divinely inspired, God might have made the world in six days in a way that looks like evolution is true, John might well, out of modesty or cunning, deliberately not occupy the nicest office.

## 2 (How) can we be responsible for what we believe?

- For what beliefs might we want to hold people accountable?
- Types of failings and responsibility

## Truth-unresponsive “believings” I

- Take the case of Hubert, who believes “if  $p$  then  $q$ ”, “ $p$ ”, but fails to believe “ $q$ ”.
- What is wrong with Hubert’s beliefs?

## Truth-unresponsive “believings” II

- What does Hubert *do* that we can hold him accountable for?
  - Maybe he doesn't even think about the implications of his beliefs: he is inattentive, sloppy in his reasoning and belief-forming.
  - Or he thinks about  $q$ , but fails to see that he is committed to its truth.
- What if Hubert just can't form the belief that  $q$ ?

# What makes morally bad beliefs bad?

- Morally bad beliefs are bad
  - a) because of their consequences: they tend to lead to morally bad, because disrespectful or harmful, behaviour.
- But this is not enough to explain the badness of these beliefs. Consider
  - James Watt believes that burning coal to fuel steam engines has no bad effects on the climate.
- Morally bad beliefs are bad also
  - b) because of the attitudes they express: they express disrespect for other persons, disregard for bad outcomes, excessive preoccupation with one's own projects.

# Holding people accountable for morally bad beliefs

- Someone who holds morally bad beliefs can be charged with being a bad person in that respect:
  - a racist, sexist, chauvinist nationalist, . . .
  - an egomaniac
- But there is something more wrong with them:
  - e.g. Ben could just *feel* negatively towards women, without cognitively holding them to be inferior.
  - so people with morally bad *beliefs* also have some *epistemic* failings next to failings of character.
- We hold them accountable in a specific way because they have morally bad *beliefs*, not just feelings.

## Morally bad beliefs and epistemic failings I

- So what else is wrong with Ben's sexist beliefs, next to its consequences, the attitudes it expresses, and the defect of character it shows?
- It is a false belief, and one that he should know better about. (contrast: Igor and the physical theory)
- Ben's *epistemic situation* is one in which he has all the evidence he needs to revise his belief, but his belief resists that evidence and fails to be truth-responsive.
- That lack of truth-responsiveness shows some further failing of Ben's: not taking the moral repercussions of his belief seriously enough to spend time investigating it and attending to the evidence. He is morally and epistemically sloppy.
- He may be more than just sloppy, and more sinister: He may prefer to not attend to the evidence as his present belief suits his interests better.

## Morally bad beliefs and being able to believe otherwise

- Does our negative evaluation of Ben's sexist belief require that Ben can change his belief? Suppose Ben has been fully effectively indoctrinated into sexism and can't ever get beyond it.

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- It seems not: Ben's epistemic situation does not change, and his beliefs still lack a truth-connection. Epistemic norms still apply: he should revise his beliefs.
- But in this case, we may attenuate our judgment of Ben's character: He need not be morally and epistemically sloppy, or sinister.
- But the belief still expresses morally reprehensible attitudes.

## Morally bad beliefs and being shielded from evidence

- But what if Ben is both indoctrinated and systematically shielded from the evidence (he never meets women, or only meets women who have perfectly internalised sexism and behave accordingly, confirming his views)?

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- But what if Ben is both indoctrinated and systematically shielded from the evidence (he never meets women, or only meets women who have perfectly internalised sexism and behave accordingly, confirming his views)?
- We can't say of Ben's beliefs that, *given his epistemic situation, he* should revise them. He may hold them rationally.
- We can't say of Ben that he is morally and epistemically sloppy, or sinister. Maybe he spend a lot of time gathering and attending to the filtered evidence he has.
- But Ben's beliefs are still morally bad:
  - They express disrespect.
  - They have bad consequences.
  - The beliefs still should *be changed*, even though it's not up to Ben to change them on his own.

## Are there blameless morally bad beliefs? I

- It is very easy to unsettle Ben's epistemic situation: Just suggest that he has given only highly selective and biased evidence.
  - Once agents have that suspicion, then the truth-norm of beliefs requires that they go out and look for more evidence etc.
- Question: In real world sexism, racism, nationalistic chauvinism, etc., in which of Ben's three situations do people find themselves?
  - Being morally or epistemically sloppy, or sinister.
  - Being indoctrinated to not be able to process the available evidence appropriately.
  - Being shielded from evidence.

## Are there blameless morally bad beliefs? II

- Historically vs. present-day.
  - Differences in how easy it is to hold the better belief, how available the evidence is.
  - But even historically, there have always been people who did not hold the above morally bad beliefs.
- The circumstances that reduce moral and epistemic responsibility come in degrees - so does responsibility and blame!
  - Possible position: A sexist in the 17th century is still blameworthy, but less so than a sexist today.