

COMMENTS ON AARON ZIMMERMAN'S
BELIEF: A PRAGMATIC PICTURE

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When philosophical views become entrenched orthodoxies, they are not seen as in need of defense; they are taken as obvious, as the fixed positions around which more contentious, disputed questions revolve. If one questions these orthodoxies, points out that certain views taken as assumptions need to be defended, and that certain views that have been dismissed as untenable are worthy of consideration, it is very difficult to get the philosophical community to take up such challenges. Most people in the position to decide what gets serious consideration have accepted certain views as settled.

Until very recently, this has been the case concerning certain matters related to the nature and norms of belief. While theorists would dispute the exact way to characterize the idea that beliefs “aim at truth,” all would agree that belief is a paradigmatically *cognitive* state. What it means for a state or attitude to be cognitive, as opposed to conative or affective, theorists rarely make explicit, but a core idea is that such attitudes constitute *thinking* about the world in a way that can lead us to knowledge or to accurate representations. Despite differences in the way this state is characterized, it is commonly held that beliefs are evidence-sensitive, meaning that if one does not think one’s belief is supported by one’s evidence, one will cease to have the belief. Further “normativism” about belief has become very widespread among epistemologists. Here is Kate Nolfi’s clear statement of the view:

According to the normativist about the nature of belief, it is built into what it is to be a belief (as opposed to some other sort of mental attitude) that beliefs are subject to certain norms. In this sense, the normativist maintains that the nature of belief is normative . . . Any view maintaining that belief has a constitutive aim and so that some standard of success or correctness is built into the nature of belief itself is a version of normativism.¹

So when Aaron Zimmerman counters this intellectualist tradition with a picture of belief which “is neither invariably nor essentially propositional,”² which denies that belief and desire occupy distinct domains,³ and which states that “people often believe against the evidence in full awareness that this is what they are doing,”⁴ he offers a radical view in the contemporary philosophical landscape.

In recent work, I have also questioned these orthodoxies, though I didn’t see myself as putting forth an alternative picture of belief;⁵ instead, I have seen my main task as exposing that what are put forth as descriptions about the concept of belief are actually normative, and disputable, claims about the value of certain kinds of beliefs over others. Zimmerman makes a similar point in Chapter 5, arguing that although science and common usage place some constraints on how we define belief, the answer to the question “What is belief?” is not entirely scientific, and there are normative implications to which picture one chooses.⁶ For example, the intellectualist picture of belief may well have implications for the way we treat nonhuman animals. Many theorists of belief claim to offer neutral observations about our belief systems akin to those made by those studying our circulatory or digestive systems. But Zimmerman argues that beliefs, and so, beliefs about beliefs, are not best thought of like this; we have a kind of control over beliefs which resembles control we have over our actions.⁷

So, Zimmerman and I are on “the same side,” so to speak, and I label my view a “pragmatist” one. While there are certainly Jamesian strands in it, I see the view I put forth as very influenced by Hume and begin my book with his words that “belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part our nature.”⁸ The sense in which my view is “pragmatist” is not primarily in its connection to classical pragmatism but in contrast with a position that has been termed “evidentialist,” the view that there are only evidential reasons for belief. According to this taxonomy, anyone who thinks that one can believe for practical reasons is a pragmatist. This is Nishi Shah’s way of dividing up the territory and has become standard usage in recent discussions about reasons for and norms of belief.⁹ In this sense, when I first began

working on these issues, almost everyone was on the evidentialist side. This is now changing. The revisions I made last year to a 2012 encyclopedia entry on the ethics of belief made these changes apparent; there are now two sides to this debate, each with arguments to evaluate and references to cite.¹⁰

I am thus sympathetic to much of what Zimmerman says, but I also have a number of points of disagreement or resistance. It is always helpful to try to understand where and why I disagree with those who share a broadly similar outlook. The way I will bring these tensions into focus is by thinking about the implications of Zimmerman's view for the ethics of belief, though this is not the central focus of his book: I see the book's main focus as exposing the deep flaws of the intellectualist view. A second important focus is to make Alexander Bain's view, and its import in the pragmatist tradition, more well known. This latter focus is important in its own right as we all realize that who has made their (or mostly his) way into the canon is largely based on the contingencies of history. Zimmerman devotes the longest chapter (over a quarter of the book) to making the idea of animals lacking belief (or only having impoverished or lesser beliefs) seem absurd. But the book discusses the normative implications of the view throughout, most explicitly in Chapter 6, the book's shortest chapter, and here is where I desire more clarity. I will pose three related questions on this topic.

I. WHAT OUGHT WE TO BELIEVE?

At the end of the introductory chapter, Zimmerman says he will argue against the "epistemic scolds" of the evidentialists who say it is not okay to believe for pragmatic reasons.¹¹ He says: "Sometimes, we can ignore the evidence and believe what we want to believe knowing full well this is what we are doing. The will to believe is real. Within limits, it can even be a good thing."¹² When elaborating on this view, he says a certain kind of scientific reasoning and "credence calibration" that only considers probabilities has its place in many contexts but that this "is compatible with the undoubtedly reasonable view of the matter that patients and their families do not apportion their credences to the evidence and even *ought not* do

so.”¹³ What is the nature or force of such “ought” claims? Zimmerman spends some time critiquing a certain view about what one ought or ought not believe. Evaluative judgments that go “beyond the controlled, attentive behavior of those she is judging” and are instead targeted at my character or “deep self,” he says “should be kept out of the courts. . . . They are not at all helpful when we are trying to interact with a community of persons each one of whom thinks she is due the respect of the others.”¹⁴ Pragmatists “have little tolerance for institutionalized judgments of character, and little use too for psychological taxonomies that justify them.”¹⁵

This talk of courts and institutions is somewhat extreme and distracting. Most theorists do not think doxastic criticism (which some call blame) carries this kind of force with it. They claim instead that one can be criticized when one’s belief falls short of a certain standard according to the norms of the epistemic domain. To be sure, many claim that violation of these norms matters in a more substantial sense than violation of more “conventional norms” such as those of etiquette (and I think their attempts at such differentiation ultimately fail), but their scolds are not that fierce, and they would not think, as Zimmerman sometimes characterizes them, that such violations are worthy of any punishment.

Now Zimmerman has rejected the idea that these so-called epistemic norms are the ones to which beliefs are beholden. What is the source of normativity, then, that these ought statements appeal to? Is it the same “ought” that refers to action? This has been my view, but while he says that the involuntary nature of many of our beliefs does “not reflect a distinction in kind between belief and action,” he also says, “Of course, belief is not itself an action.”¹⁶ But given that beliefs often result from various voluntary mental actions, he says one can sometimes “defend her act of believing.”¹⁷ Are beliefs, then, only subject to criticism in those rare contexts where you have it within you to believe “at will”? And, again, what is the target and nature of the criticism? Further, are these “oughts” those of obligation, or are they permissive? If the family of a patient reasons in the scientific manner, are they doing something wrong,

or is it the weaker claim that they are permitted to believe in a way that deviates from the scientist?

II. ARE WE RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT WE BELIEVE?

Some are skeptical as to whether there is anything worthy of being called an ethics of belief, given belief's seemingly involuntary nature. Zimmerman clearly thinks that this passive view of belief is wrongheaded: "Questions about the nature of belief are inextricably bound up with concerns about autonomy. . . . Beliefs differ from instinct and habits, because they are manifest in our attentive and self-controlled activities."¹⁸

While I agree we exercise agency in believing as we do, this idea is somewhat in tension with his view that nonhuman animals have beliefs that do not differ substantially from human ones. Do we see the same kind of decisions and autonomy about what to believe, and so hold nonhuman animals responsible for what they believe, in the same sense? Or, in the end, is it not beliefs we are responsible for but instead "various acts of belief-formation, entrenchment, retention, resurrection, and the like?"¹⁹ At times, it seems like Zimmerman wants to resist that these can be pulled apart. Is the idea that when "we" have a choice about how to integrate information into our activities then "we" can be held responsible, but these choices are only possible for certain kinds of creatures? And again, while at times it seems that Zimmerman thinks this freedom is quite widespread, saying that "people can believe what they want to believe because they want to believe it,"²⁰ he also says that his pragmatic definition articulates a conception of belief that is only "voluntarist" in a limited sense.²¹ I would like to have a better understanding of Zimmerman's view of the nature and extent of doxastic agency.

III. CAN PRACTICAL REASONS JUSTIFY BELIEF?

The claim that there are no practical reasons for belief is a surprisingly common one made by theorists. In thinking about different kinds of reasons, some will say there are those that pertain to belief (called epistemic or theoretical) and those pertaining to

action (called practical), and that these are completely exclusive domains. When the claim that there are no practical reasons for belief is developed or defended, it is usually modified so that what is being denied is the possibility of a quite specific phenomenon. All will admit that practical considerations, in fact, can contribute causally to what one believes. Many will even say that such considerations can count as reasons for these subjects *to* believe and, again, such reasons may partially cause the beliefs. What they deny, however, is that these non-evidential reasons are reasons *for which* these subjects believe; beliefs, they say, cannot be *based* on such reasons. Sometimes this is put in terms of “motivating reasons”; it is argued that one cannot, in full awareness, recognize that one is believing for practical reasons.

The question of whether beliefs can be based on practical reasons needs to be divided into two separate questions. The first is: Can one take oneself to believe for practical reasons? The further question is: Can it be correct, proper, or rational to believe for practical reasons? Even if I succeed in convincing someone to answer the first question affirmatively, they still may resist the idea that such reasons can ever be good ones.

Zimmerman doesn't often put things in the language of reasons or rationality, but as I mentioned earlier, he does end his first chapter by saying it can sometimes be a good thing to believe for practical reasons and that one can know full well that this is what they are doing, thus seeming to answer “yes” to both questions. The example he gives is from his own life, where he decided to believe that his daughter did not have a tumor and that surgery would not be necessary. His belief was not based on evidence; indeed, he did not seek out evidence about probabilities or base rates to justify his belief. Zimmerman calls his belief “epistemically irrational,” but is it rational in some other sense?²² Does he want to say it is sometimes good to be epistemically irrational? If so, what delineates the good cases from the bad ones?

When I have described similar kinds of cases of believing for practical reasons, I am often met by skepticism that the attitude described is *really* belief. Some would sometimes suggest that what

I call belief in these contexts is better described as hope. While I, like Zimmerman, have resisted the idea that belief and desire occupy completely separate domains, one way that I have distinguished beliefs from desires or hopes is by the way they feel. Beliefs include an endorsement and commitment that hopes do not. The preface of his book begins with a series of questions posed to the reader in the form: “Do you believe x?” Any affirmative response to such questions includes regarding the proposition contained in the question as true. If the question is “do you hope x?”, no commitment to truth is needed.

I am not sure Zimmerman would accept this distinction and, if not, how does he distinguish the hope that his daughter would not need surgery from the belief that she would not? Given the powerful effects of hope, it seems all the behavior of the day he describes—where he focused his energies and attention—could result from hope. Indeed, he ends the book by saying we need to leave space for “hopeful belief.”²³ What does that mean, and again how do we go about figuring out when such beliefs are to be encouraged and when they are not?

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NOTES

¹ Nolfi, "How to Be a Normativist," 181.

² Zimmerman, *Belief: A Pragmatic Picture*, 44.

³ Zimmerman, 80.

⁴ Zimmerman, 134.

⁵ McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence*, especially the first chapter.

⁶ Zimmerman, 127.

⁷ Zimmerman, 101.

⁸ Hume, *Treatise*, 183.

⁹ See Shah, "A New Argument for Evidentialism."

¹⁰ McCormick, "Ethics of Belief."

¹¹ Zimmerman, 21.

¹² Zimmerman, 21.

¹³ Zimmerman, 139.

¹⁴ Zimmerman, 114, 119.

¹⁵ Zimmerman, 118.

¹⁶ Zimmerman, 85.

¹⁷ Zimmerman, 86.

¹⁸ Zimmerman, 122.

¹⁹ Zimmerman, 86.

²⁰ Zimmerman, 39.

²¹ Zimmerman, 85.

²² Zimmerman, 136.

²³ Zimmerman, 140.