

PRAGMATISM, TRUTH, AND THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

Aaron Zimmerman
University of California, Santa Barbara
aaronzimmerman@ucsb.edu



The following paper is part of an author-meets-critics session sponsored by the William James Society and delivered at the 2020 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Philadelphia, PA. *William James Studies* is pleased to present this session for our readership's enjoyment.



What is it to believe something? Though much of what we believe is false, must we nevertheless “aim at the truth” in believing what we do? And how can we answer questions about the nature and function of belief? Are the methods employed by cognitive scientists up to the task? In *Belief: A Pragmatic Picture*, I try to answer these questions and connect my answers to the origins of pragmatist philosophical thought. The bridge between the two is constructed with a theory of belief defended by Mill’s protege, Alexander Bain, a theory C.S. Peirce would go on to describe as “the axiom of pragmatism.” I would like to thank John Capps and the William James Society for organizing this discussion of *Belief* and to thank Capps, Miriam McCormick, and Henry Jackman for providing me with a great deal of incisive critical commentary on the work.

I will begin my response where Capps begins his critique: the fascinating example of Sviatoslav Richter, an accomplished concert pianist, who insisted in a letter to his aunt that he couldn’t perform on stage without the plastic lobster he took on tour with him. How ought we to diagnose Richter’s frame of mind? Did he really believe he needed the lobster?

As a preliminary, we might ask whether Richter’s belief was true. Did Richter really need the lobster to perform? I think the answer is “no,” because the truth of Richter’s belief that he needed the lobster around was “screened off” by his merely having that belief. In other words, the presence of the lobster itself didn’t aid Richter’s performance insofar as Richter would have played just as well if someone had tricked him into falsely believing the lobster was with him.

The question, then, is whether Richter really needed *to believe* he had the plastic lobster nearby to perform up to his standards. And I don’t see anything absurd in allowing that he did need to employ this belief as a crutch. Of course, Richter might have wondered from time to time whether he might be able to pull off a great show without the lobster in attendance, despite the anxiety he would initially feel knowing he was playing without the thing. But he

would have recognized the potential costs of conducting the experiment with a house packed with fans waiting to witness a confident performance. If the costs of having the lobster nearby were minimal, there would have been no sufficiently weighty reason of self-interest or prudence to induce Richter to test whether he needed to believe his lobster was on hand, and so no pressing need to test that belief itself.

Now, those epistemologists who work on the ethics of belief might agree that there was no “practical” or “pragmatic” reason for Richter to experiment. What they would want to ask Richter (so described) is whether there mightn’t have been a sufficiently weighty “epistemic” reason for Richter to have subjected his belief to the test of experience. This seems, for instance, to be one of McCormick’s central questions: Do we always have reason to regulate our beliefs by the evidence, even when prudential concerns trump or outweigh these reasons?¹

I join the Jamesian pragmatists, helpfully described by Jackman, who think that we do not always have these epistemic reasons. And I agree with James that “overbeliefs” are often fine and ought not to be subjected to blanket criticism. (So, I side with the Jamesians as against the Peirceans in the normative squabbles Jackman identifies.) First, I agree with James that epistemic obligations are not definable or knowable *a priori*. We must build up from examples any general guides we might endorse. This is as true of evidentialist principles as it is of any other general norms. More controversially, I agree with James that all norms are social and can only be fruitfully analyzed with reference to interactions between people (or nonhuman social animals) and the expectations that structure their interactions. I think this is as true of epistemic principles, reasons, and obligations as it is of moral principles, reasons, and obligations. As James recognizes, we can make sense of duties to self, but the relationship between a person and her future self is a kind of limiting case of the relationships between people that institute obligations and other normative phenomena in the first instance.²

Now, if we bring this Jamesian understanding of epistemic reasons and obligations to our analysis of the cases on hand, we must

ask *who* Richter is supposed to be letting down in believing he needs his plastic lobster to play his instrument for the crowd. And it is surely relevant to our answer to this question that Richter is not a scientist, nor a historian, nor a journalist. Richter does not purport to be someone who has adopted the pursuit and communication of truth (however defined) as a guiding principle in his professional endeavors. And though Richter may consume and communicate science, history, and journalism throughout the day, his belief in the talismanic effects of his lobster is not part of this engagement. Richter's private thoughts about his lobster are not part of any realm of discourse in which respect for the truth (as defined in that discourse) is justly enforced as a regulative norm. At any rate, that's how I will understand the case. For if Richter were instead pushing possession of plastic lobsters on his piano students and insisting that the music theory department at his university incorporate his theory of lobster possession into their curricula, the example would be importantly different from a normative point of view. As Jackman rightly notes, in my view there is more to life than science. In many of the discourses operative outside of science, history, and journalism, respect for the truth (however defined by those engaged in that discourse) is nonessential.

It must be admitted that successful communication typically requires a minimum of consistency. (I say "typically" because there are poetic effects that effectively communicate emotions and ideas through contradictions.) But one can avoid outright contradiction in literal speech without imposing evidentialist norms or regarding oneself as beholden to such norms. And I see nothing wrong or objectionable with these modes of life and their a-alethic discursive components. Those Cliffordians who wag their fingers at Richter from the bleachers are, I think, justly dismissed as "epistemic scolds." Though I won't pursue the allegation here, there are rabid atheists on the scene today (e.g. Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins) who may fall prey to this criticism.

Capps wonders whether there might be a pragmatic conception of truth that does not come apart from belief in the way I have envisioned here. Of course, if "truth" is defined as correspondence

to reality (as reality is “in itself” apart from us), belief does not inevitably aim at the truth. For example, when I come to believe that the moon looks pretty tonight, I am not even *trying* to characterize the moon as it is independently of its effects on me. Still, I think it would be an overreaction to say that belief *never* aims at truth as correspondence. Those scientists interested in accurately characterizing the Earth as it was before the evolution of life may aim at truth in this sense. It is precisely because of this aim that it will bother scientists if they discover that aspects of their theories of the present universe are colored or impacted in substantial ways by the use of a scheme of categorization that can only make sense to enculturated humans. (No sense can be made of the claim that the solar system coalesced on a day in January.) I agree with Rorty on this. “Truth” can be defined as correspondence for certain purposes, but we must define the concept differently to structure our debates about human history, psychology, morality, and aesthetics.³

But what if we follow Capps’s suggestion and define “truth” in pragmatic terms as successful, good, or adaptive belief, thought, and language? Might we therein secure some necessary connection between belief and respect for truth? I am suspicious of this move too, and for several reasons. First, while there is definitely something true about James’s characterization of truth in terms of adaptiveness, it cannot be straightforwardly applied to individual beliefs framed within a discourse without absurdity. For example, Frank’s belief that he’s the prettiest boy in town may be adaptive because he won’t find a mate without the confidence this belief imbues. But that doesn’t mean Frank’s belief is true. And this is so even if we define “truth” about prettiness in an anti-realist way so that “X is pretty” is used to state a truth in the discourse in which Frank participates so long as X strikes a majority of those engaged in this discourse (or a representative observer or [supply your favorite anti-realist account here]) as pretty.

To summarize: if we define “truth” in terms of correspondence to mind-independent reality, it is neither true that Frank is pretty nor true that he is ugly. We know in advance that “pretty” is not a concept we can apply to mind-independent reality in a meaningful

way. But even if we define “truth” for aesthetic judgments in the way Frank and his interlocutors define it, Frank’s belief is not true. And yet, for all that, Frank’s belief that he is the fairest of them all remains adaptive. The same is true of Richter’s belief that he needs his lobster to play well. That belief is not just false in the sense that it fails to accurately represent the world as it is, independently of us. It is also false insofar as Richter will play just as well when he falsely believes he has his lobster with him. If the lobster is not there and Richter plays beautifully because he falsely believes the lobster is there, we must conclude that Richter’s belief that he needs the lobster to play well is a false belief. Try as I might, I cannot redefine “truth” to avoid this conclusion.

I have a similar reaction to the neo-Kantian attempts of Misak and Talisse and other contemporary pragmatists who offer transcendental grounds for defining belief in terms of acceptance as truth and insist that we must conceptualize a mental state as something other than belief when we learn it is not responsive to evidence or argument.⁴ Perhaps Kant was right that assertion entails some respect for truth insofar as a linguistic community is bound together by their use of a symbol system and its constitutive rules, where respect for truth is inevitably required by those rules. If you’re going to assert something in the language that unites such a community, you are in some sense bound by the rules of their language game, in the same sense in which you are bound by the rules of chess if you’re going to play that game. But if I am right in arguing that animals who cannot assert things have beliefs in the very same sense in which humans do, belief is not like assertion in this respect. It is not a move in a psycho-social game. We must reject what McCormick describes as “normativism” (following Kate Nolfi). “Belief” is not best defined in terms of norms. As I plead in the book, “Don’t tell me what something is by telling me what it ought to be.”⁵ (I should have noted, however, that the analysis of games is an important exception to this appeal.) As I argue in the book, respect for truth and evidence is not “internal” to belief or definitional of it. Instead, the epistemic virtues must be forced upon animals who are disposed by nature to disregard the truth when

doing so suits their interests. Trump is an exaggerated example of just such an animal.

Of course, I am not suggesting that James was ignorant of these elementary reflections. Instead, I think that when James defines “truth” in terms of successful or adaptive action, he is abstracting from individual cases to describe the background assumptions that structure the belief-forming processes of the particular individuals engaged in a form of life made possible by those background assumptions. In other words, I think James has in mind the truth of what Wittgenstein would go on to call “hinge propositions.”⁶ (These include the “presuppositions” or “regulative assumptions” of uniformity in nature, etc. on which Peirce focused, as Jackman describes them.) James’s idea, I take it, is that the principles we take for granted (e.g. *modus ponens*, pain is bad, red is a color) cannot be vindicated without recourse to pragmatic considerations.⁷ If you reject one of these principles, you must propose a real, psychologically accessible alternative and explain why we would be better served by adopting it. Truth *within* a discourse structured by these principles cannot be defined in terms of adaptiveness on pain of absurdity. (Frank just isn’t pretty; Richter just doesn’t need the lobster.) But the truth *of* such a discourse as a whole must be defined in terms of utility on pain of transcendental pretension. In particular, truth as correspondence cannot be meaningfully applied to *modus ponens*. This is a point Carnap took from Schlick, who took it from Wittgenstein, who took it from James. And it is a point I explicitly endorse in the book while attempting to trace its origins to Bain’s influential account of belief. Jackman points out that Peirce suggested we can just assume hinge principles without believing them once we realize that we cannot ground these principles in evidence or argument. But this thought betrays what Peirce acknowledged as the very axiom of pragmatism: Bain’s account of belief. As Jackman says, “If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck” even if it lacks the “gold star” awarded for evidential or argumentative support.⁸

At any rate, though I agree with Capps that “truth” has pragmatic meanings, especially in philosophical discourse about the

foundations of thought, I am not convinced that we should join Capps in supplying “truth” with an exclusively pragmatic interpretation. Moreover, though Capps does an excellent job of describing the central theses of *Belief* (and I am indebted to him for this), I would like to close by clarifying the position I defend in the book in reference to the argument he attributes to me in his comments.

First, I do indeed argue in *Belief* that believing something does not always involve treating or regarding a representation as true. Humans consider claims and endorse assertions, and belief often results from these activities. But the expectations and memories of nonhuman animals are also beliefs, and these beliefs are *themselves* representations of the future or the past rather than *attitudes toward* representations of one sort or another.

I also argue, as a distinct matter, that belief is not essentially propositional. Animal belief is not essentially sentential because the other animals can neither construct nor evaluate the sentences people construct; and yet the other animals have beliefs. So, it’s at best misleading to describe, for example, a bee’s mental map as a “propositional attitude.” It confuses the scientists who are trying their best to describe how bees communicate the location of a resource to one another, as well as similar feats of animal cognition. I have read and conversed with animal ethologists who think they can’t use “belief” to reference an action-guiding structure that isn’t propositional because “philosophers” have supposedly converged on the view that beliefs are propositional attitudes. We can and should fix this.

But I don’t think the propositional should be contrasted with the dispositional as Capps seems to do.⁹ For example, Fodor argues that beliefs are propositional insofar as they are sentential tokens in a language of thought that “express” propositions. But Fodor thinks that these tokens acquire their status as beliefs by playing a certain functional role, where functional roles can be characterized in terms of characteristic causes and imbued *dispositions*. So, Fodor incorporates both propositional representations and dispositions into his analysis of belief. Of course, I join the pragmatists in arguing

that beliefs are dispositions of a different sort than those countenanced by Fodor insofar as Fodor fails to incorporate attention and control into his analyses, and I argue, separately, that beliefs are not essentially propositional, though some beliefs are; i.e. the discursive beliefs we express in sincere assertion in those favorable circumstances in which we are poised to act on what we assert.

I also join Jackman in thinking beliefs are often short-lived. Suppose I hear my grandmother's voice in the hall and "light up" at the prospect of seeing her, only to realize moments later that she has been dead for some time. It seems to me that my momentary expectation of seeing her in the hall is a belief that she is out there, but its tenuousness is compatible with its constituting a dispositional complex and therein satisfying the pragmatic definition of belief I defend in *Belief*. For a brief interval, I was disposed to use the information that my grandma was in the hall to guide my actions, by saying "Hi, grandma," jumping up to get the door for her, and so on. We must not conflate the defining *modal* profile of a belief with its inessential *temporal* properties.

I would also like to contrast my methodology with the one Capps endorses in his essay when he states, "A good pragmatic elucidation requires balancing the variety of ways concepts are actually used with the need to identify the core meaning that makes the concept philosophically interesting." This is not quite the role I assign to definitions in the construction of a philosophy or worldview. First, I think "philosophical interest" is a maximally relative concept and it only has a core meaning when used within a homogenous philosophical community. We have more pressing, practical, or pragmatic needs for definitions than this. As McCormick notes, in the book I focus on our need to define "belief" for the purposes of legal punishment because this is perhaps the most serious context for those caught up in the machine. And "belief" is a crucial legal concept because the "intention in action" of the accused can be defined as that agent's belief as to what she was doing when she was doing whatever she's been accused of doing. A judge or jury's

understanding of “belief” in these contexts really matters to the person whose fate may depend on the contours of that definition.¹⁰

But the need to define “belief” for the purposes of our social interactions outside the courtroom is equally pressing. The assignment of racially prejudicial belief that I discuss in the book is just a particularly fraught example of a more general phenomenon. As I argue in *Belief*, a person’s mental health depends on her self-image, which in turn depends on her beliefs about herself and her beliefs about what other people believe about her. We need to keep this in mind when we analyze candidate definitions of “belief” and the metaphysical theories or pictures we can develop through the explication of these varying definitions. I think our definitions ought to cohere with the relevant sciences (i.e. the cognitive sciences) because I embrace the unity of knowledge as a working hypothesis. But I argue in the book that several different definitions can be made to cohere with results in these sciences, even when the disputing parties bring the same theoretical virtues to their evaluation of the field. It’s at this stage that we ought to consider the overall consequences of adopting one or another of the definitions in play.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- James, William. “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” *The International Journal of Ethics* 1, no. 3 (1891): 330–54.
- Misak, Cheryl. *The American Pragmatists*. Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Misak, Cheryl, and Robert Talisse. “Pragmatist Epistemology and Democratic Theory: A Reply to Eric MacGilvray,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (2014): 366–76.
- Rorty, Richard. “Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 53, no. 6 (1980): 719–38.
- Schwitzgebel, Eric. “Belief.” In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E.N. Zalta. Stanford University, 2019. Article published August 17, 2006; Revised June 3, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/belief/>

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty*, ed. and trans. by Anscombe, G.E.M. and G.H. von Wright. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965–75.

Zimmerman, Aaron. *Belief: A Pragmatic Picture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

NOTES

¹ McCormick also asks whether one can take oneself to believe for practical reasons. My answer is “yes.” She asks whether it can be “good or proper or rational” to believe for practical reasons. My answer is “yes.” She asks whether an optimistic belief (which runs contrary to the evidence) can be epistemically irrational. My answer is “yes.” She asks whether it might be good in some sense to adopt and retain an epistemically irrational belief. My answer is “yes.” Finally, she asks what “delineates” the cases of good epistemic irrationality from wholly bad beliefs. My answer is that it depends on the case, and the needs and interests of those involved. Normative and evaluative principles are not given to us a priori.

² See James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” We can also discuss the norms that govern the relationship between humans and other animals as McCormick presses me to do when asking whether the other animals can be held to the epistemic norms to which historians, scientists, and journalists hold one another. I join the Spinozans in thinking that belief is the default and that we must learn to distrust our senses and memories. Self-control is necessary for doubt and the deliberate regulation of belief it enables. But I agree that some of the other animals are capable of self-control. So, it is possible to criticize a nonhuman animal for epistemic frailty (e.g. gullibility). But it is currently impossible to communicate epistemic expectations to nonhuman animals, so there is no room for the paradigmatic normative judgment that such an animal failed to consider what she knew she ought to have considered (because she was told she ought to have considered it) or failed to reason as she ought to have reasoned (because she was instructed to reason in this way) or, more generally, failed to do what she knew she was supposed to do. This is one of the reasons why the other animals don’t conduct anything like science, history, or journalism. These activities are constructed through the communication and enforcement of expectations once communicated.

³ See Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism.”

⁴ See Misak and Talisse, “Pragmatist Epistemology.”

⁵ Zimmerman, *Belief*, 84.

⁶ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 341.

⁷ The intended class of hinge propositions is uncertain, but it was meant to include more than just our basic inductive principles and the assumptions we must make to accumulate observational evidence and reason from it. In addition to these traditional sources of knowledge, Wittgenstein includes among the “hinges” various less general propositions acquired via enculturation: an adult’s knowledge of her own name and the meanings of other words in her native language, a man’s assumption that he hasn’t been to places he can’t remember visiting, and the supposition, common at the time of composition, that no one had yet been to the moon. The list goes on, “We know, with the same certainty with which we believe any mathematical proposition, how the letters A and B are pronounced, what the colour of human blood is called, that other human beings have blood and call it ‘blood’” (Wittgenstein, 340).

⁸ This is not the only case in which “pragmatists” have abandoned the movement’s central axiom. For instance, Misak classifies Davidson as a pragmatist even though Davidson restricted beliefs to humans and therein rejected one of Bain’s central insights.

⁹ See too Schwitzgebel, “Belief.”

¹⁰ McCormick says she finds this discussion “extreme and distracting.” But I think it *should* distract us from less pressing academic questions about the scope of distinctively “epistemic” criticisms. We can, of course, discuss both sets of questions if we have the time. But we ought to prioritize discussion of those conceptual decisions that most impact the lives of people and other animals.