The Ethics of Belief

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Beliefs

• 2 + 2 = 4
• Paris is in France
• People are in this room
• Murder is wrong
• It is daytime
Some beliefs are false

• $60 + 60 = 110$
• Abraham Lincoln was born in 1807
Morally wrong to have a false belief?

• Mentally add 60 and 60 and believe the sum to be 110,
  • Morally wrong?
  • Morally blameworthy? Morally culpable?
  • Evil act?
Morally responsible for actions, not beliefs

• Telling a lie
• Littering
• Assaulting a neighbor
• Robbing a bank
Why morally responsible for such behavior?

• Such actions are voluntary
• That behavior was under my control
• Nobody forced me to act that way
• Free to do otherwise
Beliefs are involuntary

• Wake up, see sunlight through window, believe it is daytime
• Automatic; I just find myself believing
• No deliberation about whether to believe
• Hold me morally responsible for robbing a bank, yes, but not for believing it is daytime
Further evidence that beliefs are not under our control

• Someone comes up to you and says they will give you a million dollars if you believe the moon is made of green cheese
• Could you do it? Nope, though you could pretend to believe it or act as if you believed it
But some claim belief is a moral matter

• William Kingdon Clifford (1845-1879): *The Ethics of Belief*:
  • “...it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

• Clifford thinks would be *morally* wrong not for false beliefs as such, but, rather, for beliefs *not supported by evidence*
Inspiring, but impractical?

• Seems we have no way to use this dictum if our beliefs are involuntary and automatic

• I don’t go through some conscious, decision-making process before believing

• I do not first consider a possible belief (“it is now daytime”), assess the evidence (“sunlight is entering the window”), and then make a decision (“OK, from this point forward I will believe it is daytime”); I just find myself believing
Yet Clifford is saying something important

• Sometimes I really should do an investigation before coming to a conclusion
• Important, controversial issues
• Investigation is under your control
• Don’t listen to only one side
• Indirectly morally responsible for some of our beliefs because morally responsible for investigating
Investigation?

• Seek to understand both sides
• Don’t listen to only those who tend to reinforce your views
• If you don’t investigate controversial political, economic, religious, etc. claims, in such cases you may uncritically believe one side or the other
• Moral obligation to investigate further
• This is the sense in which we can speak of an ethics of belief
Examples of investigation needed

• Whether the government should spend money to prevent a recession
• Whether globalization and free trade are good for the world
• Whether current drug laws are fair
• Whether the government should provide free, unlimited healthcare services to anyone who cannot pay
Belief influences behavior

• Our beliefs about moral, religious, and political issues influence our actions.

• For example, political beliefs:
  • what government policies and laws we advocate
  • where our contributions go
  • whom we vote for
  • who gets elected to office and what policies they create