

“MORALLY BAD” BELIEFS: A TAXONOMY

Pamela Hieronymi

1. Introduction
 - a. Goals:
 - i. Lay out a few different ways in which a belief, or a believing, may be morally wrong or “morally bad.”
 - ii. Do a bit of ground-clearing by presenting some examples.
 - b. Two surprises:
 - i. It seems possible for a belief to “wrong” someone even though the believer does not wrong anyone.
 - ii. It also seems possible for a believer to wrong someone by believing while fully justified in believing.
 - 1) The latter seems a previously unidentified form of bad moral luck.
2. The Quality of Will: Virtues and Vices
 - a. Examples in which it is natural to attach terms ascribing moral virtue or vice to someone’s believing: Someone is being uncharitable, generous, hasty, admirable, biased, prejudicial, spiteful, in believing what they believe.
 - b. Account:
 - i. We are assessing the reasons on which the belief is “based,” the “operative justification.”
 - 1) A person’s operative justification reveals features of their mind, their “quality of will.”
 - ii. We might respond to beliefs with reactive attitudes and therein hold the believer responsible.
 - 1) To respond with such attitudes is to treat the believer as someone whose quality of will matters to other adults in the usual way. Elsewhere I have called this “responsibility-as-mattering*.”
 - iii. Note this simply applies, to believing, what is true of intentions and intentional action:
 - 1) A complication: the operative justification of an action might include considerations that do not “directly” count in favor of or against acting—that do not, themselves, show something good or bad about so acting: you canceled our dinner plans so I decide to go to the concert.
 - c. No need for skepticism due to the non-voluntariness of belief.
 - i. Intentions and the weighing of reasons is also non-voluntary. Neither the voluntariness nor discretion characteristic of action are required for responsibility-as-mattering*.
3. Permissibility, Obligations, and Belief Management
 - a. Two foci of moral concern:
 - i. The quality of other’s wills
 - ii. More concrete concerns about the overt actions of others and how they impact our material well being.
 - 1) We live in a complex framework of obligations concerning how we affect and impact others’ interests and well-being (a framework that includes “deontological” concerns about fairness and justice).
 - b. Obligations of Belief-Management:
 - i. Examples: You stay in the conversation and learn the identity of the candidate. You read my diary.
 - 1) Each are “morally bad” beliefs
 - 2) But the moral obligation and the moral vice attach to the action, so to speak, not the belief.
 - a) You have reason to excuse yourself from the conversation or to avoid reading, but no reason to doubt what you heard or read.
 - b) The operative justification of your action will show vice, not the operative justification of the belief (or, the operative justification of the belief may show a different vice).
 - i) Drunkenness example: foolishness of drinking too much vs. the meanness of the comment
 4. Evidence, “Pragmatic Encroachment,” and Reasons for Believing
 - a. Why do the obligation and vice, in these cases, attach to the action and not to the belief?
 - i. A tempting line of thought:
 - 1) The obligation and vice “attach to” the action, not to the belief, because the reasons for avoiding the belief (obligations of fairness, privacy) are not evidence for or against the truth of what is believed.
 - 2) Therefore, they must be the “wrong kind of reason” for believing
 - 3) Therefore, they could only be reasons for self-management.
 - 4) And, because the reasons for avoiding the belief are only reasons for self-management, the obligation and vice concern only the activity of self-management.
 - ii. Incorrect: Some considerations that are not evidence for or against *P* can nonetheless be among one’s reasons for believing *P*. [(ii) does not follow from (i), above]

- 1) Example: trusting beliefs. (If I treat your say-so as evidence, I am not trusting you. Moran.)
 - b. Complication: Non-evidential reasons for setting the threshold of sufficiency
 - i. Recall: some reasons for acting do not directly count in favor of acting by showing the action good or bad, but that instead undercut reasons against acting.
 - ii. An analogous class of non-evidential reasons for believing: “pragmatic encroachment” (the bank case)
 - 1) The foreseen badness of an incorrect belief can be a reason for requiring more evidence, while the relative unimportance of being incorrect can be a reason for being satisfied with the evidence at hand.
 - iii. Reasons that bear on the “threshold” are less puzzling than reasons of trust:
 - 1) Whenever you employ some set of considerations *C* to come to the conclusion that *P*, you make a determination about how much evidence is enough evidence to conclude that *P*.
 - 2) Cases of encroachment make clear that setting that threshold is something for which you might have your own reasons.
 - iv. “Threshold setting” is not a voluntary action.
 - 1) If it were, you would be able to do it for any reason you take to count sufficiently in favor of doing it.
 - 2) But you can’t. Examples: the spoiler case and your tennis-playing friend
 - 3) We find ourselves satisfied with the evidence despite taking ourself to have good reason not to be.
 - v. “Threshold setting” is not forming a belief.
 - 1) If we posit an additional belief, we would thereby start a regress worthy of the tortoise.
 - vi. What is “threshold setting”? A provisional account to avoid problems:
 - 1) In answering the question of whether *P* for reasons, one therein *treats* those reasons as sufficient, and therein *commits* to a threshold of sufficiency, and, one sometimes has reasons for so treating them.
 - 2) But treating considerations as sufficient is not forming a belief about their sufficiency.
 - c. Return to the question: Why do the obligation and vice attach to the action, rather than to the belief?
 - i. We cannot say that obligations are not reasons for believing simply because they are not evidence.
 - ii. We can say:
 - 1) The obligation attaches to the action *insofar as* it provides one with reasons for acting.
 - 2) The vice attaches to the action *insofar as* it describes the operative justification of the action.
 - 3) In general, the question of whether consideration *C* bears on question *Q* is a “substantive” question, to be answered in the details of the subject matter at hand. (Cp. the stars and my interview.)
 - 4) Likewise, whether a given consideration bears on whether *P* by bearing on whether other considerations are sufficient to conclude that *P* is also a “substantive” question, case-by-case.
5. “Moral Encroachment”
- a. Do unto others. In cases in which other people would bear the costs of our error, one ought to do unto others as one would do for oneself: require more evidence.
 - i. Failing to do so is a “moral” failing, in that you have not taken others’ interests into account.
 - 1) The operative justification of your belief will reveal this.
 - 2) If your belief has costs, they will be due, in part, to your failure to require more evidence.
 - b. But you might find the evidence sufficient, despite the harms your belief will foreseeably cause. What to say at that point? Are all such beliefs “morally bad”? I will merely attempt to clear some brush.
6. Bummer Beliefs
- a. Not every case in which a belief would foreseeably impose undeserved costs on someone else is a morally bad belief. Some costly beliefs, and some undeserved costs, are, we might say, just a bummer.
 - i. Example: your belief that your friend will lose her match.
 - 1) You will offer an apology to acknowledge her hurt feelings and your role. Cp. Williams’ case.
 - 2) The spouse who didn’t fall off the wagon: seems that it is probably just a bummer (to me).
7. Societal Injustice: The Classroom Case
- a. A belief might be morally bad, and “wrong” someone, without the believer wronging anyone.
 - i. Example:
 - 1) Stipulate: Some of your students are underprepared due to societal injustices. Fairness requires that you apply a single, uniform standard to the entire class. Your grade for the assignment is to reflect the quality of the work submitted, measured against that impersonal standard. To ensure fairness, you grade student work anonymously. You take all due care in reaching your evaluation.

- 2) You believe one of your disadvantaged students earns a C+ on their assignment.
 - 3) Claim: your belief may be both accurate and also a vehicle of societal injustice.
 - 4) Yet we have stipulated that the belief is fully justified—or, if you prefer, fully “epistemically” justified.
 - ii. Is your belief “morally wrong”? Here’s what we can say:
 - 1) The belief is a vehicle that will perpetuate societal injustice. In that sense, it is certainly “morally bad” and I am even happy to say it is, in that sense (as a vehicle of injustice) morally wrong.
 - 2) You, as the instructor, have not done anything wrong, either in acting or in believing. The injustice in your situation does not, so to speak, transfer to or impinge upon your own activities as the instructor.
 - 3) So, though the belief is morally bad (or even, in a sense, “wrongs” someone), you are not believing wrongly (or, you do nothing wrong in believing).
 - b. Objections:
 - i. The belief is wrong because it represents the student in a “belittling” way.
 - 1) Reply: There is nothing “belittling” in thinking that a student wrote a C+ paper. (Don’t moralize academic ability or achievement.)
 - ii. Because the belief perpetuates the injustice, the instructor is, so to speak, “taken up” into the injustice, in believing. They are “blamelessly” implicated in injustice and so “believing wrongly”.
 - 1) Reply: I prefer to use “believing wrongly” for activities done wrongly, but I do not otherwise disagree.
 - iii. The instructor can and should avoid perpetuating the injustice. So long as they do not *express* their belief, they will have done no wrong, but if they do express it, then they will be acting *and* believing wrongly.
 - 1) Reply: It’s odd to suggest a belief can become wrong simply because it is expressed or acted upon.
 - 2) Reply: The instructor is not *avoiding* the injustice, but rather attempting to *redirect* it onto themselves.
 - c. Surprise 1: a belief may “wrong” someone, even though the believer has not done anything morally wrong.
8. Offensive Content and Moral Luck
- a. In addition to revealing an operative justification and having impacts in the world, a belief has representational content, and that content might include morally problematic meanings or cultural items.
 - i. Example: a slur.
 - 1) It is possible for someone new to a culture and language to have a belief that uses a slur innocently.
 - 2) Even if they never express that belief, they might rightly feel they have (inadvertently and blamelessly) participated in a wrong, and so done something that wronged those maligned by the slur.
 - 3) An apology would typically be inappropriate.
 - 4) But in special circumstances an apology might be apt—though also be appropriately deflected.
9. Conclusion: A partial taxonomy?
- a. The quality of will revealed by the believer’s reasons/operative justification.
 - i. The operative justification of a belief grounds ascriptions of virtue and vice and apt reactive attitudes.
 - b. The costs or impacts of the fact that someone believes something (or, does so for certain reasons).
 - i. Those costs or impacts can ground obligations of belief management on the part of the believer.
 - ii. They can provide reason for the believer to raise the threshold of sufficiency.
 - iii. Or, they may be just a bummer.
 - iv. A belief can be a crucial part of a larger structure of social injustice and may perpetuate that injustice.
 - 1) It may do so even when the believer does nothing wrong.
 - c. The content of a belief may include specific representations that are morally problematic, such as a slur.
 - i. A believer may wrong someone simply in virtue of believing something with such content.
 - 1) In rare cases, this might be a kind of bad moral luck.