

Phil 490: *Consciousness and the Self*

Handout [19]

Eric Schwitzgebel: : *Acting Contrary to Our Professed Beliefs, or The Gulf Between Occurrent Judgment and Dispositional Belief*

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§ Main Claims:

1. We often act contrary to our professed beliefs. I argue that it is best to think of such cases as cases in which occurrent judgment diverges from dispositional belief, and in which the individual's belief state is "in-between."
2. Belief does not always flow passively from sincere judgment. In fact, many of our most morally important beliefs change only transiently, gradually, and with effort.
3. There is no such thing as occurrent belief. There is only occurrent *judgment*.
4. Moral beliefs require effort and time to change, and our professed beliefs do not fully represent our dispositions.

§ Cases of Inconsistent Beliefs/Behavior

1. The implicit racist (the case of Juliet) — professed belief: non-racism; behavior: racist
2. The trembling Stoic — professed belief: death is not bad; behavior: fear and regret death
3. The cognitive non-cognitivist — professed belief: non-cognitivism is right that moral and aesthetic claims cannot literally be true or false; behavior: embracing moral cognitivism
4. The forgetful driver — professed belief: a bridge he normally takes to work will be closed for a month; behavior: keep driving to the bridge to work

Claim:

___ What I would reject is [the view] that in cases of this sort there are generally determinate facts about whether the subject believes or fails to believe the proposition in question. I would suggest, instead, that Juliet is somewhere between believing and failing to believe, so that it's not quite right either to say that she believes or to say that she fails to believe that all the races are of equal intelligence.

§ Occurrent Belief vs. Dispositional Belief

[occurrence]: An occurrence is an event – a particular event that transpires at a particular time and place.

[disposition]: A disposition is a proneness or tendency to be involved, in a particular way, under particular conditions, in events of a particular type.

Why there are no occurrent beliefs:

___ possible arguments:

1. There is no such usage as 'x is believing that *P*.'
2. When one's mind turns to something else, one does not "cease to believe that *P*'
3. Structurally, 'believe' is not a typical case of a term with both a dispositional and occurrent sense.

§ Proposal: Cluster of Dispositional Beliefs

1. Dispositional approaches to belief are generally built upon a broad base — they're not "single track" dispositions.
2. If to believe is to possess a multi-track disposition or a broad-track disposition or a cluster of dispositions, then there will be "in-betweenish" cases in which the relevant disposition or dispositions are only partly possessed.
3. The cases mentioned above fall into this category. We should say of such cases that it's not quite right, as a general matter, either to ascribe or to deny belief *simpliciter* — though certain limited conversational contexts may permit simple ascription or denial.
4. A behavioral criterion: We believe that P if our actions and reactions generally seem to reflect a P-ish take on the world, whether those actions and reactions are spontaneous and automatic or deliberate and reflective.

Summary:

1. There are in-between cases of dispositional beliefs.
2. Ascription of belief should be contextual.
3. To ascribe a belief to an agent, we should check the agent's actions and reactions to see if they reflect the agent's attitude.
4. If one's dispositions are divided, then our ascriptions should be nuanced.

§ The gulf between occurrent judgment and dispositional belief

The central empirical fact is this: A person may be absolutely, completely persuaded of the truth of a proposition, in the sense of reaching a sincere, unequivocal, unmitigated, unqualified, unhesitant judgment, and yet that judgment may fail to penetrate her entire dispositional structure. → **the gulf between occurrent judgment and dispositional belief**

View 1: marginalize the gulf

___ On this marginalizing model, the normal situation is that our actions reflect our beliefs and our beliefs correspond to our judgments.

View 2: disconnection

___ On the model I propose here, the disconnection between judgment and belief is no exception but the norm, especially in the case of moral beliefs.

* On Moral Beliefs:

Our morally most important beliefs, the ones that reflect our values, our commitments, our enduring ways of viewing the world, change slowly, painfully, effortfully. It takes work to bring one's overall dispositional structure in line with one's broad, life-involving judgments. And unless we do that work and bring about that change, people are quite right to rebuke us for not really or fully or deeply believing what we say we believe.

From the standpoint of moral psychology, the most important of our beliefs are exactly those that do not change in a twinkling with a sincere judgment. They're the beliefs that shift only gradually and piecemeal.

§ Conclusion

1. It is evident that many of our most important beliefs change only incompletely, transiently, or gradually. Sometimes we have to work to bring our overall dispositional structure in line with our occurrent judgments.
2. Genuine belief does not always flow passively from sincere judgment. (*Kripke's principle of disquotatation from assertion to belief is too simplified a model*).
3. It's exactly because we so often fail to live according to our avowals that we need a clear distinction between judgment and belief.

