Book Reviews

Belief's Own Ethics

Jonathan Adler

Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press. Pp. 373. ISBN:0-26201-192-1.
Hardcover $45 USD.

Reviewed by Jeff Kasser

In his famous contribution to the ethics of belief literature, William James cites a schoolboy's account of faith as "when you believe something that you know ain't true."[1] The schoolboy's funny remark shows that there's something funny about faith. James, of course, counts on us to realize that the remark exaggerates the epistemic awkwardness of belief in the absence of ordinarily sufficient evidence. The schoolboy's view seems to render faith impossible.[2] One cannot believe something while realizing that it's not true. On the other hand, faith conceived in a looser and less entertaining way as "believing something that you know you don't know to be true" seems possible and even common. Jonathan Adler argues that this apparently more plausible, Jamesian conception of faith involves an incoherence nearly identical to the one that afflicts the schoolboy's comical notion. Thoughts of the form:

p, but I lack adequate evidence that p

are incoherent, according to Adler. As a result, the truth of evidentialism (the view that legitimate belief requires adequate evidence) gets established conceptually, rather than through moral philosophy or the theory of rationality. Classic evidentialists like W. K. Clifford think that belief in the absence of sufficient evidence is widespread, if not immoral and/or irrational. Adler's evidentialism pronounces such beliefs impossible. If Adler is right, James falls victim to his own joke.

This is a pretty exciting thesis, and it remains so even after a number of qualifications increase its plausibility while decreasing its dramatic flair. Adler abstracts from "conditions that obscure the concept of belief, even if these conditions are natural to the process of believing" (p. 9). So it is only under conditions of full awareness of what one believes and of one's reasons for the belief that he takes belief in the absence of adequate evidence to be impossible. Furthermore, Adler's thesis concerns only full belief, which amounts to taking the content of the belief to be true without qualification. It does not concern high degrees of partial belief, acceptance as a working hypothesis, belief in, or other cousins of belief. Finally, as in the case of an anorexic who claims to believe that she's overweight even though she can see that she's not, Adler maintains that "it is credible that the disparate

thoughts are not held in a single consciousness – that, in short, the assertion does not represent the recognition in full awareness of a belief and her having opposed evidence to it" (p. 35).

Like any good philosopher, Adler tries to render these qualifications independently plausible. And, to his credit, he also seizes on several opportunities to offer bold and unqualified claims. For instance, Adler's construal of adequate evidence is refreshingly demanding. Self-aware believing requires, not just a balance of favorable evidence, but evidence sufficient for knowledge (assuming that the other epistemizing conditions are met). Quite surprisingly, adequate reasons for belief are conclusive reasons for belief.[3] Adler thus makes his evidentialism the demanding conception, and gives the anti-evidentialist plenty of room to make her case. Adler sticks himself with the strong and interesting claim that full belief and knowledge are common achievements, but achievements that meet demanding standards.

Adler gives primacy throughout the book to the first-person perspective, in opposition to what he calls "the dominant standpoint." The latter views the agent externally, treats her beliefs as her theory or story of the world, and asks how well the beliefs serve the agent's ends. It can then seem rational or otherwise valuable for the agent to adopt beliefs which are not supported by her evidence. In contrast, Adler emphasizes the transparency of full belief from the agent's point of view. First-personally, full belief that *p* amounts to seeing through our believing attitude and so it simply appears as *p*. Adler then relies heavily on a generalized Moore's Paradox, claiming to unpack the incoherence involved in believing: "The number of stars is even, but I lack sufficient evidence that the number of stars is even." His reasoning is as follows:

> I believe that the number of stars is even. All that can secure for me the belief's claim of truth is adequate evidence (reason) of its truth. I lack adequate evidence. So I am not in a position to judge that the number of stars is even. So I do not judge it true. So I do not believe that the number of stars is even (p. 30).

One hardly seems inexorably forced through these steps. Many people at least apparently profess a non-evidential entitlement to claim truth for some of their beliefs, and the above reasoning doesn't by itself show that they've contradicted themselves. They can deny the second claim or the inference from the third to the fourth claim, for instance.

One has to move ahead a couple of chapters in order to see why Adler thinks this argument solid. He needs the claim that "[c]ertain commitments are to be counted as beliefs for purposes of determining incoherence, even when they are not strictly beliefs" (p. 91). Adler argues that each of us is internally committed (i.e. the standards are ours, not externally imposed) to procedures and standards which force us through the above-quoted line of reasoning. Our everyday practices of assertion and investigation show that we think evidence essential to an entitlement to believe. It is only when we hide our commitments from ourselves (via distraction, self-deception, or a failure to be explicit) that we are able to say that we believe in the absence of sufficient evidence: "as full awareness is blocked or diminished, it

becomes easier for a person to believe what is unbelievable" (p. 72). Even if we grant Adler that our ordinary practices generate roughly the commitments he needs and that these commitments "generate precedents that are forceful constraints on further uses" (p. 89) it remains unclear why the commitments yield precedents that are sufficiently general and sufficiently strong to force the anti-evidentialist into incoherence. Why, exactly, does the fact that she seeks evidence before buying a car show that the anti-evidentialist has committed herself to a claim that only evidence can "secure" a belief's claim to truth? Is it really incoherent of her to make exceptions for, say, religious beliefs?

The argument above relies heavily on the value of explicitness as a way of living up to one's own epistemic commitments. Adler also, however, recognizes that explicitness has significant theoretical, as well as practical costs. Rendering one's claims, commitments and inferences explicit slows down thinking and speaking, through both prolixity and distraction. And the increased vulnerability to which explicit claims are subject gets abused when they are subjected to preemptive refutations. "Explicitness, while a manifestation of intellectual honesty, is also a burden on it" (p. 97). Finally, explicitness can throttle diversity of opinion and can make it difficult to endure dissent. We would find it difficult to tolerate one another if we were explicitly aware of the diversity of judgments, inferences and norms that inform our discussions with friends. Readers of this journal are likely to be especially interested in Adler's sophisticated discussion of the virtues and vices of explicitness and his other forays into what he calls normative epistemology, the business of which is to offer advice about becoming a better believer.

Adler's most extensive contribution to normative epistemology occurs in Chapter 4, where arguments from ignorance get classed with tactics of isolation (which claim that certain beliefs cannot be understood, much less criticized, except from within a framework of beliefs and practices) and inflation (which redirect attention from the matter at hand to more controversial issues). All such arguments serve to direct attention away from the evidence for the propositions directly under consideration. Arguments from ignorance exploit conversational expectations and the principle of charity to have us move from a thesis not having been disproved to the serious possibility of the truth of the thesis. Their threat to evidentialism becomes clear when we realize that "the possibilities thus granted also constitute undermining reasons. And because these possibilities are so cheaply harvested, they would undermine a vast number of innocent beliefs. This is the central wrong and danger with arguments from ignorance" (p. 111). If I grant, under pressure from a misleading conception of open-mindedness, that my evidence is inadequate to rule out such hypotheses as that Iraq was manufacturing chemical weapons in 2002, I might well find myself convinced that many of my beliefs (e.g. that a preemptive war was not urgently needed) are maintained only by going beyond adequate evidence. Attending to the importance of background beliefs (which, Adler forcefully argues, receive much more impressive tacit confirmation than we generally realize) would help us adopt a more defensible understanding of open-mindedness. Adler maintains that "what marks an open-minded person is not what he regards as live possibilities. That is a conclusion to be reached. It is the way the conclusion is

reached that marks an open-minded person" (p. 112). Evidence, and evidence alone, settles what the explicit and self-aware thinker suspends judgment about, as well as what she believes and disbelieves. Adler similarly argues that an evidentialism suitably aware of its resources can handle such challenges as Wittgensteinian *tu quoque* arguments about the lack of evidential support for such framework beliefs as that material objects exist when unperceived.

In a like manner, Adler boldly defends the evidentialist *bona fides* of beliefs grounded in testimony. The idea that such beliefs are based on trust rather than evidence gets undermined once we appreciate the force of our background knowledge about the ease with which we can detect serious evidence of ignorance or untrustworthiness, the inductive evidence for the reliability of testimony, and the powerful constraints to which speakers are generally subject. Adler argues that our situation with respect to testimony "is both Humean and Reidean. We both have an enormous grounding for accepting a piece of testimony and do not first investigate its credibility" (p. 157). The foundationalist's basic beliefs do not receive a similar vindication, as Adler argues that evidentialism is incompatible with foundationalism and that an appeal to tacit confirmation allows the evidentialist to handle the regress-of-justification problem.

Chapter 8 and its successors introduce and answer an important and broadly Jamesian challenge. Adler admits that circumstances frequently compel us to form full beliefs in ways to do not allow for much, if any, reflection or investigation. Furthermore, we can recognize that many of our beliefs arise in large part through non-evidential mechanisms. Adler combines a contextualist account of justification with his reliance on background evidence to defuse the charge that the constraints that impose full belief on us show his evidentialism to be excessively demanding. In an intriguing discussion in Chapter 10, he further mitigates worries about evidentialism by insisting that full belief in a proposition is compatible with genuine doubt with respect to the proposition. Appealing to the "directionality of weight fallacy," Adler distinguishes between belief and confidence. Awareness of the limitations of one's evidence in favor of a belief can lower confidence without thereby destabilizing full belief or vacating one's entitlement to full belief. Since evidential limitations cannot legitimately be given a "direction" and construed as undermining evidence, doubt (in the sense of diminished confidence) can coexist with full belief.

As I hope to have suggested, even readers unconvinced by Adler's central argument can find much to admire in this book. Not only have I been unable to do justice to the arguments sketched above, I have been unable to so much as mention (until now) Adler's valuable discussions of the Lottery and Preface Paradoxes, which stand out among other heretofore unmentioned arguments.

Footnotes

[1] "The Will to Believe." In *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publishing, Inc., 1956), p. 29.

[2] Someone who defends a closure principle and who doesn't mind spoiling a good joke might

urge that the schoolboy's characterization actually holds of me when, for example, I believe that Thursday falls on the fourth despite knowing that Tuesday falls on the first. This hardly counts as a vindication of the possibility of faith, however.

[3] Though the notion of conclusive reasons gets hedged somewhat on p. 37.

Jeff Kasser
Department of Philosophy
Colby College
Waterville, ME 04901

j_kasser@colby.edu

Evidence-Based Practice: Logic and Critical Thinking in Medicine

Milos Jenicek and David L. Hitchcock

Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 2001. Pp. ix, 1-215. Paper. ISBN 0-7872-8156-5. $62.95 USD.

Reviewed by Peter A. Facione

Physicians and philosophers of note agree that a book aimed at explaining how logic and critical thinking can improve medical practice is much needed. They agree that such a book should emphasize an evidence-based approach to practice because "our entire professional life is a wild world of arguments–meant in the sense of exchanges between people sharing information and giving reasons which form the bases, grounds, and warrants for their claims. Since "logic and critical thinking is about rational uses of evidence," a valuable preparation for professional practice would naturally include learning "the proper uses of evidence in daily practice and research." This text book, co-authored by two practicing professionals, one a physician and the other a philosopher, sets out to be that book. The authors explain in their preface that the book is intended to be "a textbook that should guide its readers in choosing the objectives of teaching, what to teach, how to teach it, and what to retain from the whole message for better practice, for better research, and, most important, for the benefit of the patient." Given that objective, of being a guide in choosing the objectives of teaching, the book in organized into two main parts: Theory and Methodological Foundations, and Practical Applications.

The theory and methodological foundations section devotes 134 pages to four chapters. Chapter one introduces the reader to philosophy as a professional academic discipline, locates the place of logic among the branches of philosophy, and explains how philosophy seeks to apply itself in a broad array of practice fields and research areas. This chapter places good emphasis on those aspects of the application of philosophical principles which relate to medicine, including communicating