Phil. 244: Epistemic Normativity
Jan. 31, 2011

Doxastic Voluntarism, Pt. 1

I. Introduction

The thesis we'll be discussing this week and next:

> *doxastic voluntarism*: We can voluntarily form beliefs (*or*: we can believe at will; *or*: we can decide or choose to believe things).

Why does it matter whether doxastic voluntarism is true?

> Some people think that if doxastic voluntarism is false, then there is a deep difference between the epistemic realm and the practical realm, since we (presumably) can voluntarily perform actions.
>
> Moreover, if we assume some version of an "ought"-implies-"can" principle, it looks like we can conclude that if doxastic voluntarism is false, then talk of epistemic duties, requirements, permissions, blameworthiness, responsibility, and the like is inappropriate.

Arguments against doxastic voluntarism generally take two forms:

- Sometimes the conclusion is that believing at will is not possible for us, but this is just a *contingent fact*.

  > A useful contrast here is with *blushing*: we humans are not able to blush at will, but this is merely a contingent fact about us. (Or is it? Would someone who could change the tinge of her cheeks irrespective of whether she was embarrassed or ashamed count as *blushing at will*?)

- Other times the conclusion is that believing at will is a *conceptual* or *logical impossibility*.

This week we'll focus on the most famous *conceptual argument against believing at will* (due to Bernard Williams); next week we'll focus on the most famous *contingent argument against believing at will* (due to William Alston) and spend some time thinking about whether it really follows from the falsity of doxastic voluntarism that certain sorts of normative terms do not apply to beliefs.

II. Formulating Doxastic Voluntarism

Doxastic voluntarism comes in various strengths; here are some varieties:

> *insane doxastic voluntarism*: It is possible for us to choose to believe any proposition at any time (provided we're conscious, not overly inebriated, etc.).
>
> *evidential-tie-breaker doxastic voluntarism*: When the evidence [*or*: when what one takes the evidence to be] doesn't settle whether to believe that *p*, it is possible for one to choose to believe that *p*.
>
> *pragmatic doxastic voluntarism*: When [one believes that] pragmatic considerations decisively count in favor of one's believing that *p*, it is possible for one to choose to believe that *p*.

And, of course, various combinations of these are possible. (For example, James can be read as defending a hybrid version of *evidential-tie-breaker* and *pragmatic doxastic voluntarism*.)

It is important to keep these different varieties in mind:

> The fact that you right now can't choose to believe *that Clarke Gable is the President of the United States* tells against *insane doxastic voluntarism*, but not against the other varieties listed above.
>
> Defending *evidential tie-breaker* or *pragmatic doxastic voluntarism* (and nothing stronger) doesn't seem to be much help in vindicating the appropriateness of talk of epistemic requirements and blameworthiness, since presumably I can be *epistemically required to believe that p* or *epistemically blameworthy for not believing that p* in cases in which *there is decisive evidence in favor of <p>* or in which *it is not the case that pragmatic considerations decisively count in favor of believing that p*.

Nearly everyone agrees that one can voluntarily act so as to bring it about that one believes that *p*:

- Pascal on hanging out with believers, going to mass, etc.
- Feldman's lights example.
- Hypnotism.
- Belief pills (the philosopher's fiction).

But these sorts of examples—which Hieronymi calls cases of exerting *manipulative control* over one's beliefs—don't show that doxastic voluntarism is true. (Compare: the fact that I can get myself to blush by deliberately putting myself in an embarrassing situation doesn't show that I can blush at will.)

> To make clear that cases of manipulative control aren't what's at issue, sometimes people build into the definition of *believing at will* a requirement that the belief be formed "immediately."
>
> This is supposed to pick out the same sort of contrast that holds between so-called "basic actions" (i.e. actions that are performed without performing any other actions in order to perform them) and "non-basic actions."
>
> However, as Hieronymi points out, this stipulation is a mistake. Non-basic actions (such as cooking dinner) are not involuntary. So the basic vs. non-basic action distinction can't be what the voluntariness of belief turns on.
>
> Maybe the assumption is that *if* beliefs are voluntary, *then* they must be immediately voluntary. But even if this is true, it is better not to build this assumption into our very definition of believing at will.

III. Williams' Five Characteristics

Before launching into his argument against believing at will, Williams sketches five characteristics of belief:

1. *Beliefs aim at truth*.

   What Williams takes this slogan to come to is rather different from what people since him have taken it to come to. Williams says he has in mind three things:

   a. "...truth and falsehood are a dimension of an assessment of beliefs as opposed to many other psychological states or dispositions" (p. 137).

      Williams apparently means this in the minimal sense that beliefs can be assessed as true or false (not in the more robust sense that beliefs have a constitutive standard of correctness, and that standard is truth).

   b. To believe that *p* is the same thing as believing that <*p*> is true.

      (Some philosophers dispute this on the grounds that the putative identity does not hold for people who don't possess the concept *true*.)

   c. To say, "I believe that *p*," is a way (though a qualified way) of asserting that <*p*> is true.

      Williams takes this fact to explain the air of paradox surrounding assertions such as "I believe that *p*, but <*p*> is false."

   Reasons to doubt whether Williams has succeeded in glossing what it means for belief to aim at truth:

   against (a) and (b): These are true of *imagining that p* and *supposing for the sake of argument that p*, yet presumably those mental states do not aim at truth.

   against (c): At most this seems to be a *consequence* of the fact that beliefs aim at truth, not *what that fact consists in*; and even then it is unclear why it is a consequence. (The mere fact that beliefs aim at truth doesn't, by itself, explain why saying, "I believe that *p*," is a qualified way of asserting that <*p*> is true, but saying, "She believes that *p*," isn't.)

2. *The most straightforward and basic way of expressing one's belief that p is by asserting that p.*

   Does this mean that non-linguistic animals don't have beliefs? Williams thinks we can still ascribe beliefs to such animals, though they are "beliefs in a somewhat impoverished sense" (p. 138).

3. *Asserting that p is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for believing that p.*

   Against necessity: reticence is possible (as are mutes). Against sufficiency: assertion can be insincere.

4. *Beliefs can be based on evidence.*

   By this, Williams does not merely mean to be saying that the following is possible: "S believe that *p*, and there is evidence in favor of <*p*>."

   Rather, he means that the following is possible: "E is evidence in favor of <*p*>, and S believes that *p* because of E." (I've formulated things here so as to avoid assuming, as Williams does, that one's beliefs are what one's evidence consists in.)

      How do we analyze that "because"? Good question. Williams thinks the "because"-relation is causal, but not any old causal relation will do (need to rule out deviant causal chains, etc.).

5. *Belief is an explanatory notion: we can explain what someone does by appealing to her beliefs (and her projects).*

   More generally, a person's (i) *projects* (i.e. desires), (ii) *beliefs*, and (iii) *actions* are connected in such a way that if one knows two out of three of these, one can infer the third.

On the basis of these five characteristics, Williams argues that *knowledge does not entail belief*:

   He asks us to imagine a machine that possesses states that satisfy conditions (1), (2), and (4) but do not satisfy (3), since the machine lacks a will and so cannot choose to make insincere assertions.

   Williams thinks we would be willing to ascribe *proto-knowledge* to this machine, but would not willing to ascribe *proto-beliefs* to it.

IV. Williams' Argument against Believing at Will

Williams offers two reasons for thinking that believing at will is a conceptual impossibility: one on the bottom of p. 148, and one on the top of p. 149. We will focus on the former, since it seems more promising. It reads:

> "Belief cannot be like that; it is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing. Why is this? One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth. If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire I whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will. With regard to no belief could I know—or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect—that I had acquired it at will. But if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do this; and could I know that I was capable of this feat, if with regard to every feat of this kind which I had performed I necessarily had to believe it had not taken place?" (p. 148).

I think there are actually two arguments here, separated by the clause "At the very least": the first argument concerns what happens *before* one believes at will, the second concerns what happens *after* one believes at will.

   In both cases, the central idea is that there is tension between conceiving of one's action as a case of believing *at will* (and so freely chosen whether or not the truth dictates it), and conceiving of it as a case of *believing* at will (and thus the sort of thing that aims at truth). The trick is to figure out how to sharpen this tension into a genuine contradiction.

Here is my best attempt at glossing the before-the-fact argument:

P1. If it is possible for me to believe at will, then there exists a circumstance C and a proposition <*p*> such that, in C, I can will that I believe that *p* irrespective of whether <*p*> is true. [*premise*]

P2. If I can choose to ϕ in a given circumstance, then I can in full consciousness choose to ϕ in that circumstance. [*premise*]

C1. If, in C, I can will that I believe that *p* irrespective of whether <*p*> is true, then, in C, I can in full consciousness will that I believe that *p* irrespective of whether <*p*> is true. [*follows from P2*]

P3. It is not possible to in full consciousness choose to believe that *p* irrespective of whether <*p*> is true. [*premise*: *that would be like choosing to lie to someone irrespective of whether you deceive that person*]

C2. It is not possible for me to believe at will. [*follows from P1, C1, P3*]

Potential problems with this argument:

- Advocates of *evidential-tie-breaker doxastic voluntarism* will deny P1.
- One might doubt P2. (Maybe some baseball players can voluntarily hit a pitch, but not in full consciousness of what they're doing.)
- The argument appears to equivocate. "I will that I believe that *p* irrespective of whether <*p*> is true" can mean either "I will that [I believe that *p* irrespective of whether <*p*> is true]" or "I will that [I believe that *p*] irrespective of whether <*p*> is true." The former reading makes P3 more plausible; the latter reading makes P1 more plausible. (Is there a single reading for which both are plausible?)

Here is my best attempt at glossing the after-the-fact argument:

p1. If I can believe at will, then I must be able to know that I can believe at will. [*premise*]

p2. If I am able to know that I can believe at will, then it must be possible for me to know, on a specific occasion, that [I believe that *p* and originally acquired that belief at will (and still hold it on the same basis)]. [*premise*]

p3. If I originally acquired the belief that *p* at will, then I originally acquired that belief irrespective of whether <*p*> is true. [*premise*]

c1. If I know that [I believe that *p* and originally acquired that belief at will (and still hold it on the same basis)], then I know that [I believe that *p* and originally acquired that belief irrespective of whether <*p*> is true (and still hold it on the same basis)]. [*follows from p3*]

p4. It is not possible for me to know that [I believe that *p* and originally acquired that belief irrespective of whether <*p*> is true (and still hold it on the same basis)]. [*premise*]

c2. I cannot believe at will. [*follows from p1, p2, c1, p4*]

Potential problems with this argument:

- c1 only follows from p3 given a dubious closure principle for knowledge.

  reply: Still, it doesn't seem like *this* is why I'm able to know that a belief of mine was formed at will—because I might not be very good at working out the consequences of that claim.

- p3 seems overly strong. (For example, p3 is stronger than P1 in the previous argument.)
- p2 could be doubted; for example, I am able to know that I can *forget things*, despite the fact that it is not possible for me to know, on a specific occasion, that [I forgot that *p* in the past and still forget it].

  reply: But forgetting is not an action, and p2 presumably gains its plausibility from a general principle to the effect that our knowledge of what we can do is ultimately grounded in practical knowledge of what one is doing (and has done?).

- p1 is open to debate; why must we be able to know everything that we're able to do?