

Truth as the Constitutive Aim of Belief

I. Velleman's Proposal

Velleman holds, following Williams, that beliefs constitutively aim at the truth.

Why the qualification “constitutively”? Because this characteristic “reveal[s] something about the nature [of] belief, something that distinguishes it from other propositional attitudes” (p. 247).

Three ways of understanding the slogan “beliefs aim at the truth” that Velleman rejects:

proposal #1a: Beliefs aim at the truth in the sense that believing $\langle p \rangle$ entails believing $\langle p \rangle$ to be true.

objection: It's true that believing $\langle p \rangle$ entails believing $\langle p \rangle$ to be true, but this doesn't distinguish belief from most other propositional attitudes: wishing that p entails wishing $\langle p \rangle$ to be true, hoping that p entails hoping $\langle p \rangle$ to be true, desiring that p entails desiring $\langle p \rangle$ to be true, etc.

proposal #1b: Beliefs aim at the truth in the sense that believing $\langle p \rangle$ entails believing $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle .

objection: If believing $\langle p \rangle$ and believing $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle require distinct representations on the part of the subject, then it's false that the former entails the latter, since that would require every subject to have an infinite number of mental representations. On the other hand, if believing $\langle p \rangle$ and believing $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle don't require distinct mental representations, then the proposed account of belief is uninformative.

proposal #2: Beliefs aim at the truth in the sense that believing $\langle p \rangle$ entails regarding $\langle p \rangle$ as true.

objection: This distinguishes believing that p from conative attitudes such as desiring that p . However, it fails to distinguish believing that p from many other cognitive attitudes, such as assuming (or supposing) that p , imagining that p , etc.

Somewhat stipulatively, Velleman uses the term “acceptance” to encompass every propositional attitude that involves regarding-something-as-true.

[Note: Velleman's use of the terms “belief” and “acceptance” here is quite different from the use of those terms by L. J. Cohen, Bas van Fraassen, Keith Lehrer, and others.]

In slogan form, Velleman's own proposal is: “Belief is truth-directed acceptance.” More precisely, he holds:

Velleman's proposal: Beliefs aim at the truth in the sense that for S to believe $\langle p \rangle$ is for S to accept $\langle p \rangle$ with the aim of [accepting $\langle p \rangle$ only if $\langle p \rangle$ is true].

This aim can be realized in two ways:

- i. *realization at the personal level:* S intends [to accept $\langle p \rangle$ only if $\langle p \rangle$ is true], and whether or not S accepts $\langle p \rangle$ is regulated by this intention.
- ii. *realization at the sub-personal level:* Part of S includes a cognitive system that is designed (by natural selection, by education/training, or by a combination of the two) to ensure that [S accepts $\langle p \rangle$ only if $\langle p \rangle$ is true], and whether or not S accepts $\langle p \rangle$ is regulated by this cognitive system.

Thus there are two crucial elements in Velleman's proposal: his insistence that belief is a species of acceptance, and his insistence that belief is guided by the aim of accepting something only if it is true. Let's consider each of these in turn.

II. What Is Acceptance?

Recall Velleman's way of understanding the cognitive state of acceptance:

to accept that p = to regard $\langle p \rangle$ as true

Some ways of accepting that p :

- believing that p
- assuming (or supposing) that p [esp. for the sake of argument]
- imagining that p [where this is distinguished from merely imagistic imagining]
- pretending that p [same as above, for Velleman?]
- (unconsciously) fantasizing that p

Velleman proposes a roughly functionalist way of defining acceptance, in terms of its motivational role:

to accept that p = to be disposed to behave in ways that, if $\langle p \rangle$ were true, would satisfy one's conative states (i.e. one's desires, one's wishes, one's hopes, etc.)

Thus Velleman's account of acceptance is controversial for at least two reasons:

- it involves denying (standard versions of) a functionalist account of belief;
- it involves denying the Humean thesis that every action is motivated by (and thus can be explained by) a \langle belief, desire \rangle ordered pair.

Velleman defends his account of acceptance by producing a number of cases in which behavior appears to be motivated by a variety of acceptance other than believing:

1. *make-believe*: A child imagines *that she's an elephant next to a pail of water* and wishes *to take a drink of water*, and as a result she moves her arms (= her imagined trunk) toward the chair next to her (= the imagined pail of water).

Against explaining the child's actions in terms of a belief *that an elephant would act in such-and-such a way* and a desire *to behave like an elephant*:

- It makes the child out to be "depressingly unchildlike," for according to this explanation the child never enters *into* the fiction, and instead "the child keeps a firm grip on reality while mounting an appearance conceived as such" (p. 256).
 - The belief-desire explanation "fails to account for children's ability to invent and to understand novel ways of pretending," not by realistically impersonating an elephant, but by entering into the elephant fiction and seeing what happens (p. 257).
 - The belief-desire explanation is wrong developmentally: children have a less firm grip than adults do on the distinction between fact and fiction, but children are usually better than adults at pretending/imagining.
2. *talking to oneself*: I imagine *that I'm talking to my boss* and wish *to tell him what he can do with his report*, and as a result I say certain words out loud.
 3. *psychoanalytic examples*: A wife fantasizes *that a certain table-cloth was her wedding-night bed-sheet* and wishes *to prove her husband's potency*, and as a result she rearranges the table-cloth so that a stain on it is visible.
 4. *Hume's example*: A man who is suspended at a great height in a metal cage imagines *that he's falling* and desires *that he not fall*, and as a result he clings to the bars of the cage (even though he knows the cage is securely supported).
 5. *expressive behavior*: I fantasize *that my head is a balky machine* and wish *to punish it for making a mistake*, and as a result I smack my head.

objection #1: Velleman's data is compatible with a less unified way of accounting for the different varieties of acceptance, along roughly the following lines:

- to believe that p = to be disposed to behave in ways that, if $\langle p \rangle$ were true, would satisfy one's desires;
- to imagine that p = to be disposed to behave in ways that, if $\langle p \rangle$ were true, would satisfy one's wishes;
- etc.

Velleman's first reply: There are cases in which imagining motivates in conjunction with desire (for example, Hume's man in a cage). And there may be cases in which belief motivates in conjunction with wish (perhaps when one buys a lottery ticket, one merely wishes to win, rather than desires to win).

[Still, this doesn't explain why such cases are so rare: why is the norm for beliefs to motivate in conjunction with desires, for imaginings to motivate in conjunction with wishes, etc.?)

Velleman's second reply: On this alternative account, "the problem would remain how to distinguish the one kind of pair from the other" (p. 262). In virtue of what is one pair of attitudes the belief-desire pair, and another pair the imagining-wishing pair?

[Velleman has a similar problem, since he says very little about what distinguishes (say) desires from wishes, and moreover he can't avail himself of a functionalist way of construing these attitudes. But if Velleman is allowed to appeal to an independent characterization of the difference between desires and wishes, why can't his opponent do so as well?]

objection #2 (Rosen's worry): When adults imagine *that there's a bear on the table in Emerson 310*, they are not disposed to run for cover (despite desiring *not to be eaten by a bear*). And when scientists conjecture *that a certain hypothesis is true*, they are not disposed to act as if it is true (rather, they are disposed to test it).

Velleman's reply: In such cases, one's imagining or conjecturing is accompanied by countervailing beliefs, such as (in the first case) a belief *that there is not really a bear in Emerson 310*. These beliefs exert their own motivational force, thus counteracting the motivational effects of the imagining or conjecturing.

[However, this explanation only works if we already assume that the countervailing beliefs motivate in conjunction with one's desires and not in conjunction with one's wishes. Otherwise we'd also lose the motivational ability of \langle imagining, wish \rangle ordered pairs.]

[On Velleman's account, beliefs and imaginings are identical in their dispositional profile; the only difference is found in the aim that regulates *whether or not one is in one of these states*. But then in cases in which *whether or not one is in one of those states* is not at issue, Velleman has no way of accounting for a motivational difference between beliefs and imaginings.]

III. What Is Truth-Directed Aiming?

Recall that there are two ways the aim of [accepting $\langle p \rangle$ only if $\langle p \rangle$ is true] can be realized in a subject:

- i. *realization at the personal level:* Subject S intends [to accept $\langle p \rangle$ only if $\langle p \rangle$ is true], and whether or not S accepts $\langle p \rangle$ is regulated by this intention.
- ii. *realization at the sub-personal level:* Part of S includes a cognitive system that is designed (by natural selection, by education/training, or by a combination of the two) to ensure that [S accepts $\langle p \rangle$ only if $\langle p \rangle$ is true], and whether or not S accepts $\langle p \rangle$ is regulated by this cognitive system.

Why Velleman needs (ii) in addition to (i): the vast majority of our beliefs are formed automatically, and not as a result of a self-conscious project of truth-seeking.

[In fact, are *any* of our beliefs/acceptances formed on the basis of an intention, even in cases of self-conscious deliberation? Put another way: if acceptance is not a form of action, then can we really form intentions about what to accept?]

Rosen's counterexamples to the sufficiency of aiming at truth, in Velleman's sense:

- Your history teacher instructs you to imagine the Battle of Waterloo as accurately as possible. As a result, you imagine that p , and your imagining is regulated by an intention [to imagine that p only if $\langle p \rangle$ is true]. Yet you do not count as believing that p .

[Possible reply on Velleman's behalf: deny that you are engaging in the sort of imagining that is a species of acceptance; rather, what you're doing is forming various mental images.]

- It's visually seeming to you that p counts as a state of acceptance. Moreover, your visual system has been designed by natural selection so as to ensure that your visual seemings are for the most part veridical. Yet it's visually seeming to you that p is not a state of believing that p .

[Possible reply on Velleman's behalf: deny that visual seemings involving regarding-something-to-be-true, and thus deny that they are a variety of acceptance.]

Rosen's counterexamples to the necessity of aiming at truth, in Velleman's sense:

- Suppose you live in a Russell-world that was created 15 years ago (long enough for thoughts to have acquired worldly content, but not long enough for there to have been significant phenotypic change). The creatures in this world clearly have automatically-formed beliefs. But their cognitive systems were not designed, let alone designed so as to ensure that they accept only truths.

[Possible reply on Velleman's behalf: bite the bullet and deny these creatures have beliefs.]

- We probably possess psychological mechanisms that are designed to cause beliefs that happen to diverge from the truth. Evolution or education may have given us dispositions to err on the side of caution in perceiving predators, to overestimate our own popularity, and so on. But on Velleman's account, the outputs of these mechanisms do not count as beliefs.

Velleman's reply: My conception of belief doesn't require them to be governed by truth-seeking mechanisms alone; beliefs can be governed by mechanisms that tend to make them false, as long as they are *also* governed by truth-seeking mechanisms.

In favor of this hypothesis: note that the beliefs in the above examples do respond, however imperfectly, to indications of truth.

[Note: this means that, in Velleman's gloss of the second way in which the aim of truth can be realized, we need to replace "whether or not S accepts $\langle p \rangle$ is regulated by this cognitive system" with "whether or not S accepts $\langle p \rangle$ is *partially* regulated by this cognitive system."]

IV. An Aim Other than Truth?

Could we hold onto the basic shape of Velleman's account, but swap in a different aim instead of truth?

Some candidates for such an alternative aim:

- knowledge
- instrumental success
- empirical adequacy (i.e. fit with how things appear to one)
- "rational coherence" (i.e. fit with one's evidence)

Velleman on why an aim-that-entails-but-is-not-entailed-by-truth (such as knowledge) won't do: Then there is no explanation for why even an unjustified true belief is correct or right.

Velleman on why an aim-that-does-not-entail-truth (such as instrumental success) won't do: Then there is no explanation for why an instrumentally successful (or empirically adequate, or ...) false belief is incorrect or faulty.

In offering these responses, Velleman is making some assumptions about (i) when a belief counts as correct or incorrect, and (ii) the connection between a belief's constitutive aim and its standards of correctness. These will be our topics next time.