The Pragmatic Metaphysics of Belief

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Abstract: Suppose someone intellectually assents to a proposition but fails to act and react generally as though that proposition is true. Does she believe the proposition? Intellectualist approaches will say she does believe it. They align belief with sincere, reflective judgment, downplaying the importance of habitual, spontaneous reaction and unreflective assumption. Broad-based approaches, which do not privilege the intellectual and reflective over the spontaneous and habitual in matters of belief, will refrain from ascribing belief or treat it as an intermediate case. Both views are viable, so it is open to us to choose which view to prefer on pragmatic grounds. I argue that since “belief” is a term of central importance in philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and epistemology, we should use it to label most important phenomenon in the vicinity that can plausibly answer to it. The most important phenomenon in the vicinity is not our patterns of intellectual endorsement but rather our overall lived patterns of action and reaction. Too intellectualist a view risks hiding the importance of lived behavior, especially when that behavior does not match our ideals and self-conception, inviting us to noxiously comfortable views of ourselves.

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1. Introduction.

Who you are is how you live. Your attitudes, including the attitudes that make you the interesting and wonderful person you are, are not just revealed by, or correlated with, or the inner causes of, but constituted by how you tend to act and react, both actually and counterfactually, to the people and things around you. This essay will defend a piece of that general picture.

In thinking about our personality and attitudes – for example, in thinking about what we believe – most of us depend too trustingly on the stories we tell ourselves. We say “All I really want for my children is that they be happy” or “I think that black people are just as trustworthy as everyone else” or “I believe that everyone is basically good at heart”. When we say such things, we usually feel sincere and well-intentioned. We think that these statements reflect our real attitudes. We pat ourselves on the back a little, maybe, if we think that these beliefs reflect well upon us.

On one approach to belief, the sincere endorsement of such admirable sentiments is sufficient, or nearly sufficient, to qualify as believing them, if you really do wholeheartedly judge these propositions to be true when you reflect upon them. On an alternative approach – the one I will defend – it is not enough to sincerely embrace such propositions in reflective moments. To qualify as someone who genuinely believes such things, you must live that way.

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1 For example, Cohen 1992: “belief that p is a disposition, when one is attending to issues raised, or items referred to, by the proposition p, normally to feel it true that p and false that not-p, whether or not one is willing to act, speak, or reason accordingly” (p. 4); and Kripke’s 1979/1988 “disquotational principle”: “If a normal English speaker, on reflection, sincerely assents to ‘p’, then he believes that p” (p. 112-113). Some view of this sort also appears to be implicit the practice, standard in survey methodologies and also just in everyday interaction, to ascertain people’s attitudes by asking them what they believe and then treating their answers as authoritative.
Your actual behavior, including your spontaneous and unreflective behavior, as well as your dispositions to respond in various ways to counterfactual circumstances, must also fit. On this second approach, someone who believes that their children’s happiness is more important than their academic or financial success must not only sincerely say that that is so, but also tend to act and react accordingly. Someone who believes that black people are just as trustworthy must not only embrace that idea in the study, but also actually tend to trust black people as much as she trusts other people.

I will call these two competing views intellectualist and pragmatist, respectively. Intellectualism about belief treats sincere endorsement as central to belief. Pragmatism about belief treats one’s day-to-day choices and habits as more central. I will argue against intellectualism on the grounds that it encourages us to turn our eyes away from our actual choices and actions, permitting us too easily to paint ourselves in flattering colors, while the pragmatic approach encourages unpleasant but salutary self-examination.²

The approach I favor is pragmatist in two ways. First, it fits with the pragmatist tradition of Bain (1868/1973), Peirce (1877, 1878), James (1896/1912, 1907/2004), and Dewey (1920/1957, 1938³) in emphasizing behavioral patterns as the core of belief. Second, it is metaphilosophically pragmatist in relying on pragmatic criteria to choose among competing metaphysical approaches, as I will now explain.

2. Pragmatic Metaphysics Generally.

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² See also Marley-Payne 2015 for a related critique of intellectualism which has influenced my thinking about these issues.
³ However, Dewey tended to prefer the terms “judgment”, “knowledge”, or “assertability” to “belief” (see 1938, p. 7). See also Brown 2015.
Sometimes the world divides into neat types – neat enough that you can more or less just point your science at it and straightforwardly sort the As from the Bs. Sometimes instead the world is fuzzy-bordered, full of intermediate cases and cases where plausible criteria conflict. When the world is the latter way, we sometimes face *antecedently open cases*. In antecedently open cases, the world does not force a classification scheme upon us. More than one classificational option fits things well enough; you could legitimately go either way. You could classify the case as an A, without doing too much violence to the phenomena, or you could classify it as a B, or maybe you could refuse to classify it either way, leaving it indeterminate or intermediate.

Antecedently open cases are, or can be, decision points. If there’s more than one way to build a legitimate metaphysics or classificational scheme, you have some options. You can consider, do you *want* to classify the thing in question as an A or a B? Would there be some advantage in thinking of category “A” so that it sweeps in the case? Or is it better to think of “A” in a way that excludes the case or leaves it intermediate? Such decisions can reflect, often do at least implicitly reflect, our interests and values. Such decisions can also shape, often do at least implicitly shape, future choices and values, influencing both how we think about that particular type of case and how we think about the As in general.

*Pragmatic metaphysics* is metaphysics done with these thoughts explicitly in mind. For instance: There are lots of ways of thinking about what a *person* is. Usually the cases are not antecedently open. You are a person, I am a person, this coffee cup is not a person. It wouldn’t be reasonable to adopt a classificational scheme that yielded a different result than that! However, some interesting cases seem to be antecedently open, breaking in different directions depending on what criteria are emphasized: a fetus, a human without much cortex, a hypothetical
conscious robot, a hypothetical enhanced chimpanzee. The world does not seem to force a
classificational scheme that sorts these types of cases neatly into persons and non-persons. We
can choose to think of personhood in a way that includes such cases, or excludes them, or leaves
them intermediate. In doing so we both express and buttress certain values, for example, about
what sorts of being deserve the highest level of moral consideration.

In characterizing pragmatic metaphysics in this way, I draw upon at least three strands of
thought in recent philosophy. One is the self-avowed later pragmatists, such as Richard Rorty
(1980/2010, 1993/2010) and Hilary Putnam (1990), who saw all classificational decisions as
pragmatically governed, but who are also sometimes interpreted as embracing more radically
open views about the classificational possibilities than the view I intend.4 Another strand is the
pragmatic strand in post-Kuhnian philosophy of science, especially in the “Stanford school”
thinkers, who see the world as sufficiently complex that it defies simple modeling, with the result
that we can only choose, on practical grounds, between competing scientific models with
different tradeoffs in terms of simplicity, accuracy (to a certain extent, over a certain range of
phenomena of interest), social utility, and other virtues (Cartwright 1983, 1999; Dupré 1993;
Horst 2016; relatedly, Carnap 1950 on “explication”). A third strand is the view in metaethics
and meta-metaphysics that treats some of the debates in these areas as linguistic disputes but not
therefore trivial. Given how much can ride upon choices of language, disputants can sometimes
be interpreted as (implicitly or explicitly) disagreeing not about non-normative facts but instead
about the normative issue of how the terms in question, such as “object” or “torture”, should be
used (Varzi 2011; Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Plunkett 2015; Thomasson forthcoming).

4 See Page 2006 in defense of a relatively moderate reading of Rorty and Putnam.
Pragmatic metaphysics requires that there not always be a single best way of classifying things, independent of our projects and interests. It requires enough fuzziness or multivocality that we can legitimately appeal to our projects and interests in pushing for one articulation of our metaphysical categories over another.

The human mind is a complex, fuzzy-bordered thing, right at the center of our values. Because it is complex and fuzzy-bordered, interesting classificational questions will arise, with lots of antecedently open cases – lots of cases that are intermediate or where the usual criteria point in different directions. And because the mind is at the center of our values, it matters how we classify such cases. Does being happy require feeling happy? Is deep compassionate concern that doesn’t privilege its object as special love? Answers to these classificational questions aren’t compelled by the phenomena. Instead, we can decide. What ranges of phenomena deserve such culturally important labels as “happiness” and “love”?

We might think of metaphysical battles over the definitions of important disciplinary terms such as “person”, “happiness”, and “love” – also, arguably, “name”, “explanation”, “harm”, “justification”, “cause”, “reason”, “knowledge”, and “justice” – partly as political battles, between philosophers with different visions and priorities, for control of our common disciplinary language.


Suppose someone intellectually assents to a proposition but fails to act and react generally as though that proposition is true. Does she believe the proposition? If cases of this sort are antecedently open, we face a pragmatic metaphysical question: How should we classify such cases? What values are expressed and buttressed in saying, about such cases, that we really
do believe or really do not believe what we explicitly endorse? What vision of the world manifests in these different ways of talking about belief, what projects are supported, what phenomena are rendered more or less visible?

The cases are familiar. Duy-Anh\(^5\) sincerely says that God sees all and damns the wicked to Hell; but he does not tend to act and react in the way we would expect of someone who believes that to be true. Alejandro sincerely says that people in wheelchairs are just as smart as those who can walk easily without aid; but in fact he tends to act and react in ways more consistent with assuming people in wheelchairs to be intellectually inferior. Daniel sincerely says that low-wage workers deserve as much respect as people who are handsomely paid, maybe even more respect; but he neither distributes his own respect accordingly nor finds others’ inegalitarian behavior jarring. Kennedy sincerely says that money doesn’t matter much, above a certain basic income; but her choices and emotional reactions seem to tell a different story.

Let me sketch Daniel’s case in more detail. Politically, Daniel tilts left. Let’s say he’s thirty years old, an advanced graduate student in philosophy. He votes liberal Democrat. When political candidates say that existing social structures give working-class people a raw deal, he cheers them on. He went to an elite undergraduate university, and he admires his classmates who chose personally meaningful careers over money-oriented careers. He makes it his policy to tip generously. He says, to friends and family – especially in arguments with his right-leaning uncle Jordan – that undocumented farm laborers and hotel staff, people who work at the lowest levels in food service and retail, day-laborers and custodians, deserve as much respect as do lawyers and engineers and professors of philosophy. Maybe they deserve even more respect.

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\(^5\) Names in all examples were selected randomly, after the examples were already written, from lists of former lower-division students in my classes. To avoid confusion or offense, I exclude “Jesus”, “Mohammed”, and very uncommon names. I hope that this policy reduces implicit bias and increases cultural representativeness. See Schwitzgebel 2015 for discussion.
Life’s full of hard knocks for them, he says. They don’t have the same safety net. It’s a struggle for them just to get by. Viewed properly, they are often more admirable, overall, than are full professors cozily ensconced in tenure. He says this passionately, maybe too passionately. He feels immensely confident that he is right. He doesn’t feel at all ambivalent about it. He even tries to be especially nice to these people.

Here’s the twist. He tries to be nice. Usually there is something ill-tuned in the way he goes about this. He doesn’t find it natural to be nice to them, to think of them as equals. He has to work his way toward it. It’s forced, maybe even condescending. “Oh, bussing tables at Denny’s diner is more valuable than writing philosophy!” he says to a busser he has somehow cornered. He’s not deliberately lying or misrepresenting himself – he means it in a way – but it has the air of inauthenticity, and both he and the busser know it. He’s trying to be respectful but he’s failing, and this failure is typical of him.

Daniel admires eminent professors. He is spontaneously deferential to doctors, lawyers, managers, engineers. He does not admire or respect food service staff in the same way. He loathes the most vapidly ostentatious Maserati drivers, but of course that’s only a small portion of the wealthy. If someone who looked like a well-dressed engineer and someone who looked like a migrant laborer were both sitting in the coach section of an airplane, the laborer spread out comfortably in an exit row aisle seat with extra leg room, the engineer jammed into a tiny middle seat, he’d think something was wrong about that situation. Maybe after a second thought he’d decide it was fair turnabout – but it would require an actual second thought, which he wouldn’t usually give. Who will Daniel listen to more respectfully, who will he step aside for in the hallway, whose approval or disapproval matters to him more? Always the well dressed, financially successful person, never a member of the working poor. Or rather, almost never.
Sometimes, if the situation is right, he can really connect with a poor person, in an admiring and respectful way, if he stops and listens, notices some common ground, hears a story about some impressive obstacles she has overcome. When he does this, maybe he feels a little proud of himself in retrospect.

Likewise, usually but not always, when other people show more deference and respect to the socially powerful, that seems entirely appropriate to Daniel, while the reverse does not. In a department store, it would not seem jarring to him to watch a well-dressed man interrupt a conversation between an employee and a poorly-dressed customer; whereas if the poorly-dressed customer were to interrupt the well-dressed man, that would strike him as rude.

Daniel, let’s suppose, knows all this about himself, or at least suspects it. Let’s also suppose that it’s not a matter of temporary back-and-forthing: He has all of these tendencies stably and can manifest different ones simultaneously – for example pontificating against classism in a way that manifests disrespectful classism toward the housekeeper at whom he is speaking.

I like Daniel. I don’t mean to be harsh. I see a lot of myself in him – how much of myself, exactly, I’m not in a great position to judge.

So here’s the question: Does Daniel believe that the working poor deserve at least as much respect as do people with higher social status?

We can imagine similarly convoluted cases for Duy-Anh’s attitude about the existence of a punitive God, for Alejandro’s attitude about the intelligence of wheelchair riders, for Kennedy’s attitude about the unimportance of money.

The first thing I want to suggest about all these cases is that they are antecedently open. There’s room for a pragmatic metaphysician to do some work. We can, if we want, craft a
metaphysics of belief that counts Daniel as someone who genuinely believes that the working poor deserve equal respect but has some psychological features regrettably misaligned with that belief; or we can craft a metaphysics that does not credit Daniel with that belief, or at least does not fully credit him with that belief. I am going to assume this openness rather than argue for it, though for a few reflections see this note.⁶

4. Intellectualist Versus Broad-Based Views.

We can sort reactions to Daniel’s case into two rough classes. What I will call intellectualist views privilege the intellectual, the consciously endorsed, the reflective, and the explicitly reasoned, in matters of belief. Intellectualist approaches entail that Daniel believes that the working poor deserve as much respect as the handsomely paid, since this is the proposition he sincerely endorses when he stops to think about it. An alternative approach is broad based. On a broad-based view, the intellectual, conscious, reflective, explicitly reasoned side of Daniel is not privileged. What matters is his overall approach to or cognition about the

⁶ Here are two ways in which the case might be covertly closed rather than open as I suggest:

(1.) There might be a difficult-to-discover fact about whether the proposition or representation “low-wage workers deserve as much respect as though who are handsomely paid” (or similar) is contained in a belief-like way in Daniel’s mind (for example, stored in Daniel’s functionally-defined “belief box”), even in cases of apparently mixed or conflicting functional role. Against this view, see Schwitzgebel 2002 and 2013 against “belief box” models of belief and Schwitzgebel 2010 for an argument that that even on stored-representation or belief-box models, cases like Daniel’s rarely admit neat resolution, given the apparent failure of the putatively stored representations to operate consistently in stereotypically belief-like functional roles.

(2.) Metaphysics might be highly resistant to stipulative or pragmatic negotiation of terminological boundaries, even in apparently vague or borderline cases, and even with respect to complex structures like the human mind. I doubt that many readers would find this general view attractive on reflection.

See also Zimmerman 2016 for metaphilosophical defense of a pragmatic approach to the metaphysics of belief.
world – how he is disposed to act and react generally, or the possibly implicit or nonconscious brain states or representations or associations that govern his cognition broadly speaking.

My own preferred metaphysics of belief is one way of developing a broad-based view. On my view, to believe is to be disposed to act and react in ways that ordinary belief ascribers would regard as characteristic of or stereotypical of the belief in question (Schwitzgebel 2002, 2010, 2013). I analogize to personality traits. To be courageous or extraverted is nothing more or less than to be disposed to act and react in characteristically courageous or extraverted ways. Similarly, to believe that the working poor deserve as much respect as the handsomely paid is nothing more or less than to be disposed to act and react in ways that ordinary people would regard as characteristic of that attitude. Among the relevant dispositions, in my view, are not just dispositions toward outwardly visible behavior but also phenomenal and cognitive dispositions – dispositions to have certain emotional reactions, feelings of surprise, and inner speech, and also dispositions to leap more readily along certain paths in one’s private reasoning than along other paths (for example, to be readier to regard a certain type of behavior as rude when it’s aimed at a formally dressed person than when it’s aimed at someone in dusty work jeans).

Personality traits permit a wide range of mixed-up and in-betweenish cases, if different dispositions point in different directions. Consider someone who has great physical courage but who is a social coward. Is she courageous full stop? If we’re on the battlefield and physical courage is all we care about, then maybe it’s fine simply to say she is courageous. If we’re at a social gathering and someone needs to step forward and risk disapproval to fight for justice, then maybe it’s fine to say she’s not courageous. But if we care broadly about how she deals with risk, we might want to refrain from simple yes-or-no attribution and dive into the details of the case: She is courageous in these ways, cowardly in these other ways. If forced to make a
summary assessment, we just have to say it’s kind of intermediate. On my approach to belief, this is how we should handle the case of Daniel, too: It’s an intermediate, mixed-up case that resists summary assessment.

However, it is not my goal now to convince you to accept my dispositional approach to belief, and I will not rely upon it in this essay. Other approaches to belief that are broad based in the relevant sense include other forms of liberal or “broad-track” dispositionalism (e.g., Ryle 1949; Marcus 1990; Hunter 2011), Daniel Dennett’s (1987) “interpretationist” approach, and functionalist and representationalist views that do not privilege the intellectual aspects of functional and representational role over the less intellectual aspects (which is how I prefer to understand Loar 1981; Millikan 1984, 1993; Fodor 1987, 1990; Dretske 1988; and Carruthers 2015). For an overview of these positions, see Schwitzgebel 2006/2015.

Among the philosophers I read as implicitly or explicitly advocating intellectualist views, I would include three groups:

1. Philosophers who explicitly endorse principles on which conscious endorsement or sincere utterance of a proposition P is normally sufficient for belief that P, such as L. Jonathan Cohen and Saul Kripke (see note 1 for quotes).

2. Philosophers who endorse highly optimistic principles of first-person privilege or first-person authority in belief self-attribution, according to which self-attribution of a belief is normally sufficient for possession of that belief (Shoemaker 1988; Byrne 2005; Boyle 2011).

3. Philosophers who explicitly consider cases like Daniel’s and argue that only the reflectively endorsed attitude (“the working poor deserve as much respect”) reflects

7 The interpretationism of Davidson (1984) is a less clear case, given his emphasis specifically on linguistic interpretation.
the person’s beliefs (Zimmerman 2007, 2016; Gendler 2008a&b). Behavior at odds
with the person reflective assessments is explainable, on such views, by appeal to
non-belief causes such as habit, association, emotional reaction, or (in Gendler’s
terminology) “alief”.

Clearly, this is a broad class of views, rather than a single view. What these views share in
common, which I think merits describing them as “intellectualist”, is that in matters of belief
attribution they privilege the intellectual, the consciously endorsed, the reflective, or the attentive
best judgment of the person about the matter in question, and they downplay or disregard the
habitual, automatic, unguarded, unreflective, and spontaneous.  

So here’s where I hope to have brought you so far:

A. In an interesting range of cases, like Daniel’s, people will sincerely intellectually
endorse one proposition while having a broad range of other dispositions, especially
spontaneous, habitual, and unreflective reactions and assumptions, that appear to
manifest quite the opposite attitude.

B. Two viable metaphysical approaches are (i.) an intellectualist approach on which, in
such cases, belief aligns with sincere intellectual endorsement, and (ii.) a broad-based
approach on which spontaneous, habitual, and unreflective reactions and assumptions
are no less central.

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8 Aaron Zimmerman argues extensively in his 2016 manuscript against “intellectualist”
views that deny belief to non-human animals, so it might seem odd to describe him as an
intellectualist here. Zimmerman does reject the necessity, for belief, of the most intellectual of
intellectual dispositions, such as the disposition to say or think P linguistically and to self-
attribute P; but he nonetheless privileges the attentive and self-controlled, and one’s best
judgment upon considering the matter carefully, over the spontaneous, inattentive, uncontrolled,
and seemingly thoughtless – and is thus “intellectualist” in my intended sense. As noted above,
he classifies cases similar to Daniel’s in the characteristic intellectualist manner.
C. The matter is antecedently open: We can legitimately choose, on pragmatic grounds, between the two approaches.

I will now argue that the broad-based approach is pragmatically better.

5. The Trunk Argument Against Intellectualism.

My argument has a trunk and three branches.

The Trunk Argument. Belief is one of the central and most important concepts in all of philosophy. It is central to philosophy of mind: It is the most commonly discussed of the “propositional attitudes”. It is central to philosophy of action: It’s standard to view actions as arising from the interaction of beliefs, desires, and intentions. It is central to epistemology: Much of epistemology concerns the conditions under which beliefs are justified or count as knowledge. Religious belief is also a major topic in philosophy of religion.

A concept this important to philosophical thinking should be reserved for the most important thing in the vicinity that can plausibly answer to it.

The most important thing in the vicinity is not our patterns of intellectual endorsement and our most thoughtful, attentive behavior. It is our overall patterns of action and reaction. Although what we say matters and what we do when we are most on our guard matters, what we do in general and how we live our lives overall matters even more. Since the general pattern matters more, we should attach this powerful word, this very central word in our discipline, to that general pattern.

We can use a different word to capture the intellectual side of ourselves. I recommend “judgment”. We can say of Daniel that he judges and is disposed to judge that the working poor deserve equal respect. “Judgment” is an important term too in philosophy, even if not as
important as “belief”, and it sounds a bit conscious and intellectual, well suited to capture the thoughtful, intellectual side of Daniel.

Let me repeat this thought, since it is the main idea of the essay. It is open to us to ascribe belief in a way that primarily tracks one’s patterns of intellectual endorsement and conscious judgment. Alternatively, it is open to us to ascribe belief in a way that tracks the whole wide swath of one’s actions and reactions. Since the latter is more important than the former, it makes better pragmatic sense to attach his disciplinarily central word to the latter.

I will now elaborate this trunk argument with three branches.

6. Three Branch Arguments Against Intellectualism.

Branch 1. Too intellectualist a view invites us to adopt noxiously comfortable opinions about ourselves.

Daniel asks himself, “Do I believe that the working poor deserve equal respect?” He finds that he is inclined to sincerely judge that they do deserve equal respect. If intellectualism about belief is correct, he can rightly conclude that he does believe that they deserve equal respect. If self-knowledge of attitudes is generally easy and reliable, then Daniel ought to have self-knowledge. Daniel can say to himself, then, that he has the attitude that philosophers care

9 Possible objection: Daniel’s attitude about egalitarianism is unusual because he cares whether he has that belief (beyond having a general desire for true beliefs). Response 1: Defenders of first-person privilege or authoritative self-knowledge don’t tend to explicitly exclude attitudes we care about having. Response 2: One of the most-cited examples for optimistic “transparency” approaches to self-knowledge is Gareth Evans’s (1982) example of whether you believe that there will be a third World War. Unlike some other popular examples in the literature (“it’s raining”, “snow is white”) this is not a trivial belief, people might well care whether they have that belief, and there are lots of life-involving relevant decisions, such as how one plans for the future – and yet it is treated as a canonical case in which self-investigation is not required for accurate self-attribution. (On the model I favor, if someone says they believe there will be a third World War, but they lack any inclination to plan for that eventuality, lack
about most – that attitude so central to philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and epistemology – belief. Maybe he lacks something else. He lacks alief, maybe, or the right habits, or something. But based on how philosophers usually talk, and based on where their professional attention is generally directed, you’d think that’s kind of secondary. Daniel appears to have the most important thing straightened out.

Intellectualist philosophers can deny that Daniel does have the most important thing straightened out. They can say that how Daniel treats people matters more than what he explicitly endorses upon reflection. But if this is their view, their choice of language mismatches their priorities. They ought instead to join me in building the importance of people’s general patterns of action right into the foundational terms of the discipline.

**Branch 2.** Too intellectualist a view hides our splintering dispositions.

Here’s another, maybe deeper, reason Daniel might find himself too comfortable: He might not even think to look at his overall patterns of behavior in evaluating his attitude toward the working poor. In Branch 1, I assumed that Daniel knew that his spontaneous reactions were out of line, and he only devalued those reactions because he didn’t think of them as central to whether he believes. But how would he come to know that his spontaneous reactions are out of line? If he’s a somewhat reflective, self-critical person, he might just happen to notice that fact about himself. But an intellectualist view of the attitudes doesn’t encourage him to notice that fact about himself. In encourages Daniel, instead, to determine what his belief is by introspection upon or reflection upon what he is disposed to sincerely say or accept, or (not so

any appropriate emotional response, continue implicitly assuming that their grandchildren will live lives unaffected by war, etc., then it’s a case like Daniel’s.)
differently for present purposes) by producing a thoughtful assertion about the world which he presents as the content of his belief.  

In contrast, a broad-based view of belief encourages Daniel to cast his eye more widely. It encourages him to think about his patterns of behavior, including his spontaneous behavior. It encourages him to think about his emotional reactions and implicit assumptions. In doing so, he might learn, or at least remind himself of, something important. The broad-based approach *brings our non-intellectual side forward into view* while the intellectualist approach tends to hide our non-intellectual side. Or at least these views do so to the extent we are talking specifically about belief – which is a large part of what philosophers do in fact actually talk about in philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and epistemology.

Another way intellectualism hides our splintering dispositions is this: Suppose Suleyma has the same intellectual inclinations as Daniel but unlike Daniel her whole dispositional structure is egalitarian. She really does, and quite thoroughly, react to custodians and food-service workers as though they deserve as much respect as the handsomely paid. An intellectualist approach treats Daniel and Suleyma as the same in any discussion where what matters is what they believe about the working poor. They both count as believers, so now let’s talk about how that belief couples with desire to beget intentions, let’s talk about whether that belief is justified, let’s talk about what set of possible worlds would make their belief true – for all these purposes Daniel and Suleyma would be modeled in the same way. The difference between them is obscured unless additional effort is made to bring it to light.

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10 I am thinking here of the difference between introspective self-monitoring views like Nichols and Stich 2003 and Goldman 2006, which suggest the former, and transparency or expressivist views, like Bar-On 2004, Byrne 2005, and Gordon 2007, which suggest the latter.
If you think that Daniel’s and Suleyma’s differences are sufficiently important that they should not be treated as equivalent in the matter of what they believe about the respect owed to the working poor, then an intellectualist view should be unappealing to you. Of course, the differences matter for some purposes and not for other purposes. The question is whether on balance it’s better to put those differences in the foreground or tuck them away as a nuance.

**Branch 3.** Too intellectualist a view risks downgrading our responsibility.

It’s a common idea in philosophy that we are responsible for our beliefs. We don’t choose our beliefs in any straightforward way, but if our beliefs don’t align with the best evidence available to us, we are epistemically (and maybe morally) blameworthy for that failure of alignment. In contrast, our habits, spontaneous reactions, that sort of thing – it’s commonly said – are not in our control, at least not directly, and so we are less praiseworthy or blameworthy for them; our true selves, our “real” attitudes, the beings we most fundamentally are, the locus of our freedom and responsibility and human awesomeness, is constituted by the aspects of ourselves that we consciously endorse upon reflection. This class of views fits naturally with an intellectualist approach to belief. It’s a nice package deal: Unless we would endorse an attitude upon reflection, we neither believe it nor can be held directly responsible or

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11 For a review of this literature, see Chignell 2010/2016.
12 Versions of this class of views run from Frankfurt 1971 and Watson 1975 through at least Levy 2014. Levy is especially helpful in addressing implicit bias cases similar to the case of Daniel. (See also Levy 2015b and critiques and response in Caruso 2015; Robichaud 2015; Sripada 2015; Levy 2015a.) Contrary views, with which I am largely sympathetic, include Arpaly 2002 and Smith 2005, 2008. Nietzsche (1886/1966) and Freud (1923/1960; 1933/1933), of course, also downplay the centrality of what we consciously endorse. Another reference point is Arendt’s (1963/1965) treatment of the notorious Nazi Adolf Eichmann as tending to endorse high-sounding phrases that give him a feeling of “elation” when he says them, but which bear little connection to his actually lived values and choices. We all have shades of Eichmann in us.

Some recent treatments of implicit bias emphasize that even if we don’t have direct control and responsibility for our biases, we do have substantial indirect control over time, and can be responsible and blameworthy on those grounds (esp. Holroyd 2012). This already concedes too much to the intellectualist picture.
blameworthy for it. Daniel might excuse himself by saying something like, “I can’t help it if some of my spontaneous responses and assumptions are classist! That’s not my true opinion. That sort of stuff is subpersonal, automatic, out of my control, not the real me, and it’s unfair to blame me for it.”

I think that view is almost exactly backwards. Our intellectual endorsements, when they don’t align with our lived behavior, count for little in assessing our moral character. What matters more is how we spontaneously live our way through the world, how we actually treat the people we are with, the actual practical choices that we make. If there’s any “real” us, that’s it. If Daniel says, however sincerely, that he is an egalitarian, but he doesn’t live that way, I don’t think we should call him a straight-up egalitarian. I don’t want to excuse him by saying that his inequalitarian reactions are mere uncontrollable habit and don’t reflect the real him.

It’s easy to talk. It’s hard to change your life. I don’t want to let you off the hook just because you feel sincere when you say certain handsome things, and I don’t want to let myself off the hook. I don’t want to say that I really believe all the lovely truths I tell myself I believe, that my unlovely habits and reactions are somehow alien from me, fail to speak for me. If I don’t walk the walk, it’s more appropriately condemnatory to say that my attitude, my belief state, is pretty mixed up.

Few of us live according to the opinions and values we intellectually endorse in the matters we care about most. Indeed, it is this very caring about what our attitudes are that tempts us into splintering self-deception and wishful thinking, and which makes frank self-examination so unpleasant. I am stunned by the breadth and diversity of our failures. How do we really treat our family, our colleagues, our students, strangers in the world around us? What do we really prioritize in our choices? What we sincerely say we believe about ourselves and about the
people around us, what we sincerely say are our priorities in life, and how we actually live our way through the world – so often they are so far out of line with each other!\textsuperscript{13} I see no better way to highlight this important and disappointing fact than to refuse to place the intellectual side of ourselves at the center of philosophy.

7. Is This Too Harsh?

Here’s a practical worry: Daniel might react negatively to being spoken of, or spoken to, in the way I recommend. He might react defensively, angrily, feel that his authority to speak for himself has been undercut if we describe him as not entirely or unambiguously believing what he intellectually endorses. We might do better, if our aim is actually to help him see and change his behavior, if we use a lighter touch, if we say instead something like “of course you believe that the working poor deserve equal respect, but look at all these reactions you have that are out of line with that belief”.\textsuperscript{14}

This is an open empirical question. Although some evidence suggests that it can be helpful to ascribe positive traits or virtues to people aspirationally, even if they don’t yet entirely live up to those traits (Alfano 2013), other evidence suggests that frank confrontation can be

\textsuperscript{13} Nietzsche and Freud are again relevant, as is the body of work in recent social psychology on “attitude-behavior consistency” (for reviews see Knobe and Leiter 2007; Fabrigar, Wegener, and MacDonald 2010). Although some early reported findings of almost no relationship between expressed attitudes (for example about racism) and lived behavior are probably overstated, the modern consensus favors median correlations typically in a range of about $r = .3$ to $.4$ between people’s expressed attitudes and their attitude-related behavior (Kraus 1995) – a rather modest effect size, consistent with a large degree of counter-attitudinal behavior. (At $r = .3-.4$, about 10-15\% of the variance in behavior would be predictable from variance in expressed attitude.) Schwitzgebel and Rust 2014 found similarly modest correlations between the expressed norms, self-reported behavior, and measured behavior, with respect to ten different moral issues, among professors, including ethics professors.

\textsuperscript{14} Tamar Gendler, Karen Jones, and Aaron Zimmerman have all independently suggested this objection to me.
more effective than too soft a touch, and it remains unclear what level of aggression or assertiveness is most effective in dealing with prejudice, for example (Czopp, Monteith, and Mark 2006; Becker and Barreto 2014). The empirical case is not clear enough either way, I suggest, to overcome the considerations I’ve advanced in my trunk-and-branch argument.

Another softening move is this. Once we recognize how pervasive cases like Daniel’s are, the blame we feel toward Daniel ought to lose some of its sting. Blame will, or should, be tempered by sympathetic understanding. If all we cared about were elitism, and if we see ourselves as non-elitist, then when we hold Daniel blameworthy for his spontaneous reactions and say that his attitude is less egalitarian than he probably thinks it is, we raise ourselves above him and distance ourselves. But when we see that Daniel’s condition is just the normal human condition, including in ourselves, the blame and holding responsible take a different color. We might not be (we think!) half-elitist in the way Daniel is, but it would be a rare person who was immune to Daniel-like manifestations of sexism, racism, ageism, and the many forms of ableism. Do you think that you respond in the same way to those you regard as physically beautiful as you do to those you regard as physically unappealing, in matters on which physical appearance should have no bearing? Broadening our focus away from issues of egalitarianism, consider other idealistic attitudes that you intellectually endorse. Maybe you’re a professor, like me. You probably endorse a generous attitude toward the welfare of your students, a generous attitude

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On the relationship between judgments of beauty and other traits such as academic intelligence, see Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, and Smoot 2000; Talavas, Mavor, and Perrett 2016. From the Langlois et al.: “Contrary to conventional wisdom, there is strong agreement both within and across cultures about who is and who is not attractive. Furthermore, attractiveness is a significant advantage for both children and adults in almost every domain of judgment, treatment, and behavior we examined. The magnitude of attractiveness effects is roughly the same as or larger than that of other important variables in the social sciences. In most cases, the benefits of attractiveness are large enough to be “visible to the naked eye” and are of considerable practical significance” (p. 404 with in-line citations removed).
toward other members of the department, a positive attitude toward the balance between work life and home life, and so forth. Do your spontaneous reactions and actual lived choices consistently reflect these aspirational attitudes, which are so pleasant to express and flow so easily from the tongue?

Thinking these thoughts and looking at myself, I sympathize with Daniel. I still want to hold him responsible, blame him rather than excuse him, and say that his belief state might not be as handsome as he thinks it is; but I have no desire to do this in a stinging way. After all, what kind of model am I?

8. Conclusion.

We have a choice in constructing a metaphysics of belief. We can emphasize our patterns of intellectual endorsement, our most thoughtful responses, what we would say or judge upon reflection. Alternatively, we can emphasize the overall pattern of lived behavior, spontaneous as well as thoughtful, implicit as well as explicit. The latter pattern, being the more important is the better choice as referent for this word, “belief”, which is so central to our discipline.

I am particularly concerned about our tendency to sincerely endorse handsome attitudes – egalitarianism of various sorts, the unimportance of money and prestige, the importance of the welfare of people around us – while behaving in ways that align poorly with those attitudes. My empirical, pragmatic conjecture is that it better helps us to frankly confront our regular failure to live up to these handsome ideals if we demote intellectual endorsement from the center of philosophy, that is, if our basic philosophical terminology does not treat intellectual endorsement as the most important thing. The broad-based view of belief is also the **pragmatic** view.
Wang Yangming, the 16th-century neo-Confucian philosopher, argued for the unity of knowledge and action: To know a truth, especially a moral truth, is to act accordingly. If you claim to know but do not act, you don’t really know (Wang Yangming, circa 1600/2009). There is a type of moral excuse-making that Wang Yangming saw as common: the excuse of saying that although you know what is right to do, you are having trouble putting that knowledge into action. To say this is to claim a kind of half-credit. It is to suggest that you are on the path toward full moral goodness, though you still have some way to go – maybe you have your heart in the right place, but are just a bit weak or need some practice. Wang Yangming does not want to give people that half-credit. To know the Confucian way to treat your parents is just to treat your parents that way. Your lived choices express your knowledge. If you really knew that it was wrong to neglect your parents, you would not neglect them.

Our affirmations and avowals, our heartfelt judgments in our most reflective moments, they do matter at lot. Maybe they *are* worth half or quarter credit – especially if we feel genuine guilt, shame, and regret when we act contrary to those espoused values. But if our affirmations and avowals are important it’s not because of anything special about them that makes them especially speak for us, or that makes them especially central to who we are. Rather they matter because they are one interesting piece of what it is to live a rich human life, neither more nor less.\(^{16}\)

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