

# Morality and the Foundations of Practical Reason

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## **1. The Requirement to Strive for Truth**

The normativity of practical reason derives at least partly from morality. The reason is that the norms of practical reason must include a requirement to strive to ensure that both one's relevant beliefs and one's relevant belief-like propositional attitudes are true; the only plausible justification for this requirement is a moral one. It may seem artificial to make a distinction between beliefs and belief-like propositional attitudes. However, the importance of the distinction will become clear as the argument unfolds. It will unfold as follows. First, I shall argue that this particular norm is a necessary element in any plausible set of norms of practical reason. I shall enumerate the possible types of justifications for it, and immediately eliminate the possibility that it is a matter of the antecedents of belief. Second, I shall argue that an effective norm of practical reason cannot be based on the contention that it is logically true that beliefs ought to be true. In other words, it cannot be based on the intrinsic properties of beliefs. Third, I shall argue that a rational person need not commit himself to believing truly in all cases. Instead, he might commit himself to believing that which will promote successful action. In fact, I will argue that the latter commitment is more rational than the former. Fourth, I shall examine potential consequentialist justifications. I shall argue that only the one that appeals to moral considerations can provide an adequate foundation for a requirement to strive to believe truly.

## **2. The Requirement as Part of Practical Reason**

As for the necessity of the requirement to strive to believe truly, if you are to discover what you ought to do, you must possess true propositional attitudes about the relevant aspects of your situation. If you have false ones about some relevant aspects of it, if you conclude that you ought to perform a particular action, and if your conclusion is correct, then you have merely been lucky. For instance, if you want to treat others in morally appropriate ways and if you are wrong about the beings who are worthy of moral respect, you may fail to respect those who merit respect and treat with respect those who

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do not merit it. (For example, the animal rights activist who holds non-humans in greater regard than he holds humans may go wrong even if he wants to do right.) If you are right about what you ought to do, it is an accident. The odds are against your being right by chance, though, and you can alter them only by striving to ensure that both your beliefs and your belief-like propositional attitudes are true. It is inconsistent to contend that one ought to do something but that one does not have to do what is necessary to succeed or to increase the probability of success. Therefore, the norms of practical reason must include a requirement to strive for truth with respect to at least some of one's propositional attitudes. Trying to ensure that one's action-guiding propositional attitudes are true is a necessary condition for objectively rational action. That one strives to ensure that they are true is a necessary condition for being a rational agent.

As for justifying the requirement to strive for truth, any justification must have to do with the antecedents, the intrinsic properties, or the consequences of beliefs or belief-like propositional attitudes. With respect to the first option, it is not plausible that it is a matter of antecedents. The justification for a process always depends on the justification for the products. Some faulty products may be tolerable, but, on the whole, the process must issue in good things in order to be justified. The process of acquiring beliefs or belief-like propositional attitudes is no different. Therefore, there are two main types of possible justification left to consider.

In the case of the first of the two main types, there are two variants. First, there is the possibility that it is conceptually true that proper beliefs are truth-bound, that is, that it is logically true that beliefs ought to be true. (The "ought" used here is an epistemic, not a moral, "ought.") The nature of beliefs is such that false ones are naturally faulty. This seems to be the most widely accepted view. As I shall argue, the problem is that, even if proper beliefs were truth-bound, the conceptualist (as I shall call the proponent of this view) could not show that all belief-like propositional attitudes are beliefs. Hence, he cannot show that all belief-like propositional attitudes ought to be true even though their truth-value is important when it comes to practical reason. This subverts practical reason.

Second, there is the notion that rational individuals are bound to commit themselves to the view that beliefs are truth-bound. I shall argue that the rational person has a better option and, therefore, that there is no justification for requiring him to commit himself to the view that beliefs are truth-bound. The better option, as already indicated, is for the rational person to commit himself to believing only propositions that promote successful action.

The second main type of possible justification is that it is a matter of the consequences. There are two sub-types. With the first of the sub-types, the justification for the requirement is in terms of the consequences for the

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believer alone (or all those whom the believer cares to take into account). With the second, it is justified in light of the consequences for the believer and those affected by the believer's actions. In the case of the second of these options, the justification for the requirement is a moral one. The moral justification is the only one that survives examination.

### 3. Conceptualism

What distinguishes what I shall call "conceptualism" is the view that if a belief is false, then it is "necessarily faulty or defective."<sup>1</sup> Quite a number of philosophers seem to hold something like this view.<sup>2</sup> They, like so many philosophers, seem to assume that actual beliefs are the only possible belief-like propositional attitudes. Unfortunately, the conceptualist cannot justify an effective demand that we always strive for truth. An effective demand that we always strive for truth would require us to forgo some beliefs. The most that conceptualists can justify is the demand that we forgo or re-categorize them. In the second instance, what we thought were beliefs would be re-categorized as belief-like propositional attitudes that are not beliefs. The reason conceptualists cannot do more is what I call the classification problem.

The classification problem begins with the claim that beliefs are not like daisies. One cannot pick them up or pick them apart. (The beliefs in question here are mental states rather than propositions—as propositional attitudes, they are the attitude and not the proposition.) We do not directly observe them. We postulate them in order to explain what we observe. Since beliefs are not like daisies, it is impossible to treat them like daisies. With directly observable specimens, one can do two things. First, one can identify them as the sort of thing they are. Second, having identified them, it is possible to determine whether they are good specimens of their kind. One can first identify a flower as a daisy and then one can observe that it is defective. For instance, one might observe that the stamens or pistil was underdeveloped and that it was incapable of reproduction. Thereupon, one could reasonably conclude that the daisy was defective. Thus, it is possible, in principle, to evaluate daises effectively at least in some respects.

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<sup>1</sup> J. David Velleman, "On the Aim of Belief," in his *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> I. Lloyd Humberstone, "Direction of Fit," *Mind* 101 (1992), pp. 59-83; Ward E. Jones, "Explaining Our Beliefs: Non-Epistemic Believing and Doxastic Instability," *Philosophical Studies* 111 (2002), pp. 217-49; Mark Leon, "Responsible Believers," *Monist* 85 (2002), pp. 421-35; Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe," in his *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 136-51.

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We can't evaluate beliefs in the same way that we can evaluate daisies. The case of beliefs is more like the following. Let us suppose that we have concluded that being white is an *essential* property of daisies. Let us also suppose that there are some flowers that are just like daisies except that they are pink. Moreover, let us suppose that they equal white daisies in terms of reproductive success and in all other respects. Confronted with them, we have to decide how to classify them. On the one hand, we could conclude that the essentialist definition was wrong and that they were daisies despite being pink. For proponents of the essentialist definition, this would constitute capitulation and, no doubt, they would prefer not to capitulate. On the other hand, we could try to cling to the essentialist definition. In the latter case, we would have to choose between classifying the pink flowers as defective daisies and categorizing them as specimens of a new species. The problem is that there is no way to make the decision non-arbitrarily. The arbitrariness is a consequence of the fact that we cannot show either that the pink flowers *ought* to be white or that *it is not the case* that they *ought* to be white. Therefore, we are never justified in concluding that they are defective daisies rather than perfectly good specimens of a new species. The impossibility, in principle, of deciding whether they are defective daisies or good examples of another kind of thing is an instance of the classification problem.

In general terms, the classification problem is that, when we have an essentialist definition of a kind  $K$  and when specimen  $S$  has all of the essential properties of a member of the kind  $K$  bar one or two, there is no non-arbitrary way to decide whether  $S$  is a defective member of the kind  $K$  or a good example of another kind,  $K_1$ . Intuitively, it is more reasonable to conclude that our definition is wrong or that we're dealing with a new kind of thing. The notion that there could be a defective example of an old kind of thing that is defective because it lacks an essential property of instances of the kind at least verges on the incoherent. However, I am trying to be as charitable as possible and, hence, will assume that the position is coherent. I will not press an incoherence objection because, obviously, conceptualists don't regard their position as incoherent. Conceptualism fails nonetheless.

At any rate, the classification problem confronts the conceptualist. People often reject beliefs because they are false. Conceptualists contend that it is because it is conceptually true that beliefs are truth-bound, that is, that they ought to be true. They claim that if something is really a belief, that is, if it is a proper belief, then it is truth-bound. When they say things to the effect that false beliefs are "necessarily faulty or mistaken," it is clear that they hold that beliefs necessarily ought to be true. If they encountered a propositional attitude that was like a belief in all respects except that it was not true, however, they would face the same choices as we faced in the case of the pink "daisies." They would have either (1) to give up their concept of belief or (2) both to retain it and either (a) to declare the propositional attitude defective or

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(b) to conclude that it is a new kind of belief-like propositional attitude that is not actually a belief. If conceptualists want to retain their concept of belief, they must decide between declaring the specimen in question to be defective and conceding that it is a new kind of thing. But they cannot decide at all. They have no grounds on which to justify a preference for either alternative (unless the defective-belief view is incoherent). They have no grounds because they cannot establish that the propositional attitude in question is truth-bound or that it is not. Given that being truth-bound is an essential property of beliefs, this is equivalent to saying that they cannot show that it is a belief or that it is not.

It is to be emphasized that I am not now challenging the view that beliefs are truth-bound. The problem is that there can be belief-like propositional attitudes that are not beliefs. The fact that water is essentially H<sub>2</sub>O does not show that there are no other liquids. The “fact” that beliefs are essentially truth-bound does not show that there are no other, belief-like, propositional attitudes that are not. It would not help the conceptualist to say that being truth-bound is a contingent property of beliefs. If this were contingent, it would be necessary to argue consequentially that it should be rejected.

It follows that conceptualists cannot justify the rejection of any belief-like propositional attitude. The most they can justify is either rejecting it or categorizing it as another kind of thing. Surely, however, if someone possessed a propositional attitude that would be defective if it were a belief and if he were confronted with a legitimate requirement to do something about it, it would not always be enough for him to call it something else. The re-categorized propositional attitude would still have an effect on action and would still be a matter of concern for practical reason. Indeed, the re-categorized attitude would have the same effect on action as beliefs do. If re-categorization were enough, practical reason would be subverted. Consequently, conceptualists cannot justify the effective regulation of beliefs and belief-like propositional attitudes. Effective regulation would require us sometimes to reject some propositional attitudes, period. It might be all right to decide the issue arbitrarily one way or the other for the sake of ontological convenience. It is not all right when it comes to the propositional attitudes that we *ought* to accept or reject for the sake of discovering what we *ought* to do.

If conceptualists are to have any hope of justifying the requirement to strive to believe truly, they must respond to the classification problem. If they are to respond adequately to it, they need to show both that any re-categorized belief-like propositional attitudes really are beliefs and that they should be rejected. However, they face a dilemma in connection with this double task.

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On the one hand, if they were to *define* a belief as a truth-bound propositional attitude, they would equivocate. The belief-like propositional attitude in question would have to be identified as a belief on the basis of some properties it possessed but rejected as defective on the basis of others. If being truth-bound were a *defining* characteristic of beliefs, however, any candidate that ended up being rejected as defective because it was not truth-bound should not have been identified as a belief in the first place. Any argument to the effect that it was a defective belief would involve equivocation with one concept of belief being used for its categorization and another for its rejection.

On the other hand, if being truth-bound were not a defining characteristic of beliefs, it would be impossible to justify a requirement that all belief-like propositional attitudes be truth-bound. The fact that a propositional attitude has some particular properties does not entail that it has another, distinct, property. In the present case, the fact that a propositional attitude *is* a representation does not entail that it *ought* to be accurate. Moreover, the existence of such an entailment would violate Hume's Law.

It follows that any conceptualist argument to the effect that a propositional attitude was defective because it was not truth-bound when there was no independent evidence that the attitude was a belief (and there never is) would involve either equivocation or an invalid inference. Since the two types of response, depending on whether being truth-bound is a defining or a non-defining characteristic, exhaust the alternatives, there can be no good conceptualist responses to the classification problem. Therefore, if a belief-like propositional attitude is not true, we have no more reason to think that it is a defective belief than that it is a different kind of propositional attitude that is perfectly unobjectionable.

Moore's paradox<sup>3</sup> cannot be used to help the conceptualist. It may be paradoxical to say "It is raining but I believe that it isn't." It is not paradoxical to say "It is raining but I will assume that it isn't." There is nothing paradoxical about proceeding on the basis of counterfactual assumptions. Moore's paradox gives us no reason to think that a belief-like propositional attitude is a defective belief rather than some other perfectly good belief-like propositional attitude that resembles an assumption rather than a belief when it comes to being truth-bound. An essentialist analysis of belief enables us to distinguish beliefs from non-beliefs. It does nothing to support the contention that beliefs are the only belief-like propositional attitudes that exist.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Clark, *Paradoxes from A to Z* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 117-21.

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These results can be generalized. We can reach a similar conclusion no matter what non-relational properties of beliefs we consider. Any propositional attitude that would be rejected as a defective belief could be rehabilitated as an instance of another kind of propositional attitude. Moreover, the results can be generalized in that the same sorts of moves could be repeated with respect to other propositional attitudes. No matter the propositional attitude and no matter its properties, the classification problem remains. It does not matter whether the properties are connected with the origin, the intrinsic nature, or the function of the propositional attitude. Therefore, conceptualists cannot justify the effective regulation of any of our propositional attitudes.

### 4. Adler's Conceptualism

So far, I have assumed that being truth-bound is an objective property that exists independently of human beings. Another approach would be to claim that a rational person who reflects on the reasons for accepting some beliefs rather than others must commit himself to accepting true beliefs and rejecting false ones. This approach may overcome the classification problem. It could be argued that a rational person would commit himself to accepting truth and rejecting falsity no matter the propositional attitude. I will not try to argue otherwise. Instead, I will consider the question by examining the views of Jonathan Adler.

Adler advances what he calls "the subjective principle," which is that "when one attends to any of one's beliefs, one must regard it as believed for sufficient or adequate reasons."<sup>4</sup> Adler asserts that we take "the demand we impose on ourselves for sufficient reasons as having the force of necessity"<sup>5</sup> and that "we impose the demand for adequate reasons on ourselves as a demand of belief."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately for Adler's argument, this is not the only option for a rational person and it may not be the best choice. A rational person who reflected on the reasons for accepting beliefs might instead commit himself to accepting beliefs that enable him to act successfully in the world, where acting successfully is achieving the goals he sets out to achieve, barring interference and changed circumstances. For such a person, truth would be important because, in almost all cases in which beliefs enable us to act successfully in the world, they do so because they represent the relevant

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan E. Adler, "The Ethics of Belief: Off the Wrong Track," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 23 (1999), p. 268.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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aspects of the world accurately enough. However, accurate representation would be only of instrumental value. Its value would depend on the value of successful action. Truth would not be an end in itself. It would merely be the means to an end. This would be the case even if all and only true beliefs promoted successful action.

It might be objected that we reject beliefs when they are inadequately supported and that that is evidence that we put truth above advantageousness. It is certainly true that beliefs do not usually persist if someone realizes that he holds them for reasons other than that he has acknowledged and respected the evidence for them. However, it does not follow that we have to regard all of our beliefs as believed for sufficient reason. On the contrary, Adler's subjective principle is demonstrably false. As for a counter-example, I believe in the external world but skeptical philosophers have persuaded me that I lack sufficient evidence for its existence. My belief endures despite the fact that I have no answer for the skeptics. Moreover, I am not convinced that I will ever get a proof or that any proof would turn out to be relevant to the explanation for my now believing in an external world. I believe, but I do not believe for what I regard as sufficient reason. Adler might object that someone like me is "not being honest with himself,"<sup>7</sup> which is his response to those who would deny his contention, but that is just an abusive *ad hominem*. Even if I were being disingenuous, someone exposed to skeptical arguments could end up in the position I claim to be in without self-deception and that is enough to justify rejecting the "subjective principle." Naturally, if the rational person chooses to believe what enables him to act successfully, he probably will believe in an external world despite the lack of evidence. After all, he will lose nothing thereby except potentially paralyzing doubts about whether it really exists. There are other examples, but this is the least controversial.

Not only are there counter-examples to the subjective principle, there is, in some cases, an alternative explanation for the fact that we reject beliefs when we understand that we believe for reasons other than the evidence. While Adler is no doubt right about most cases of the phenomenon, he is not right about all. While believers typically know that truth has a strong tendency to correlate with evidence and almost always find it advantageous to acquire truths rather than falsehoods, the reason for rejecting unsupported beliefs might sometimes have to do with wanting to maintain a reputation as a reliable informant. The latter factor is definitely a better explanation for one of the cases Adler discusses. He mentions a psychological experiment in which people chose the right-most item in a display of identical items and then "explained" their choice by saying that the item was better than the others. He claims that this phenomenon can be explained by the subjective

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 268-69.

principle. But the subjective principle cannot provide a complete explanation for the phenomenon. In particular, it cannot explain the human preference for rationalizing the belief instead of rejecting it. Given the subjective principle, the two reactions should be at least equally probable, but they are clearly not. In contrast, if people were disposed to maintain reputations as reliable informants, the reason for the bias would be clear. Admitting that they had believed something for no good reason would constitute an admission that they were not always reliable sources of information about the world. We can get away with believing in the external world without having sufficient evidence for it because that is what others expect us to believe. We can't get away with "overbeliefs" so readily in other circumstances.

Adler is thus mistaken. It is as improbable that we have a "rational commitment to the truth" as that it is conceptually true that beliefs are truth-bound. It is as mistaken to think that "the function of the belief-forming system is to produce true beliefs"<sup>8</sup> as it is wrong to think that "beliefs aim at truth."<sup>9</sup> We are opportunistic Darwinian organisms, not fixed Aristotelian creatures. There has been natural selection for the capacity to see because the ability confers advantages on sighted organisms. It would be bizarre to think that the function of vision was to enable beauty to be admired. It is just as bizarre to think that the function of our belief-forming system is to enable truth to be apprehended. If we are rational beings, we are rational *biological* beings. Even if believing truly were a naturally selected *heuristic* for acquiring advantageous beliefs, it could conceivably be rational consciously to override it and to act contrary to our naturally selected instinct for truth on some occasions.

## 5. How Consequentialism Succeeds

In contrast to the two conceptualist approaches discussed, consequentialism is capable of justifying a requirement to strive to believe truly. It could be argued that beliefs ought to be so proportioned to the evidence that the probability of their being true is maximized because it would be imprudent for the believer to do otherwise or because the believer would be more likely to perform wrongful actions if he did otherwise. Neither potential argument is compromised in any way by the possibility that we have propositional attitudes that are not beliefs. Consequentialist justifications for the regulation of beliefs can be readily extended to cover such cases. If beliefs' having undesirable consequences justifies regulating them, then non-beliefs' having undesirable consequences justifies their regulation as well.

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<sup>8</sup> Leon, "Responsible Believers," p. 421.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, "Deciding to Believe," p. 136.

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The question now is to determine which of the two possible types of consequentialism is the better one.

It is not always in the interest of an agent to strive to ensure that his relevant beliefs and belief-like propositional attitudes are true. For example, it would be in the interest of a consciously and conscientiously Kantian slave-owner to believe that his slaves were not human beings if his owning slaves increased his material well-being. If the slave-owner's aim were to live according to Kantian principles, however, his false belief that his slaves were not human beings would prevent him from achieving his goal even as it served his self-interest. Since they can diverge in this way, the requirements of practical reason are not the same as the demands of self-interest. Self-interest permits us to believe falsely. Practical reason still requires us to strive to believe truly. Therefore, an appeal to self-interest cannot justify a requirement to strive to ensure that our propositional attitudes are true.

In contrast, it is possible to justify the requirement to strive for truth by appealing to moral considerations—morality might require us to forgo some advantageous falsehoods. First of all, there seems to be something of a moral case for trying to avoid inadequately supported beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Of course, there are cases in which false beliefs are innocuous or beneficial as well as ones in which they lead the believer to perform wrongful actions. Therefore, it is necessary to argue that we are not capable of making the right decisions on a case-by-case basis and that the best policy is to try to avoid believing falsely on all occasions. As for the former conjunct, we cannot believe at will. All we can do is to try to develop adequate standards of evidence and to believe only in cases in which they are met. As for the latter, given things like the master-race syndrome that afflicts some nations, we probably gain more than we lose when we eschew inadequately supported beliefs. There are certainly losses, but the gains outweigh them. The policy is justified in the light of the interests of all, not just the believer, and in the light of all of its consequences.

Second, if we have an obligation in a particular situation, we will have a secondary obligation to investigate thoroughly enough to determine the nature and extent of our primary obligation. Moreover, we have an obligation to try to determine whether we have any obligations in any situation. So, given the usual caveats about having the requisite time, ability, and opportunity, we have a moral obligation to acquire relevant true beliefs as

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<sup>10</sup> William Kingdon Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in his *Lectures and Essays*, vol. 2, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (London: MacMillan, 1879), pp. 177-211; Brian Zamulinski, "A Re-evaluation of Clifford and His Critics," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 40 (2002), pp. 437-57; Brian Zamulinski, "A Defense of the Ethics of Belief," *Philo* 7 (2004), pp. 79-96.

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well as to avoid false ones. It is not permissible to substitute false belief-like propositional attitudes for true beliefs. If truth matters in the case of beliefs for consequentialist reasons, it matters in the case of belief-like propositional attitudes that have the same effect on action as beliefs do.

It might be objected that the moral justification for the requirement would require us to give up believing in the external world and that that is too high a price to pay. However, that unsupported belief might be excusable because we can't help believing otherwise. One possible explanation for this is that there has been natural selection for the belief and that it therefore isn't as susceptible to rejection as the beliefs that we have acquired through our immediate contact with the external world. An evolutionary account for the origin of our belief in the external world is plausible in a way that an evolutionary account for the Kantian slave-owner's belief in the non-human status of his slaves is not. Certainly, the belief in the external world has persisted and seems likely to persist, while the belief in the inferiority of slaves has faded. Of course, this is not an adequate defense against this objection to the moral justification for the requirement, but it is evidence that the moral justification is defensible.

### **6. Conclusion**

If the options canvassed so far are all of the options, and they seem to be, appealing to moral consequentialism is the only way by which to justify a requirement to strive for truth. Since the requirement to strive for truth has to be justified in moral terms, if it is to be justified at all, and since it is a necessary ingredient in all possible sets of norms of practical rationality, it follows that the normativity of practical reason derives at least partly from morality. The claim made at the outset is thus true.