

Précis of *On Believing: being right in a world of possibilities* (OUP 2022)

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My book develops and defends a novel account of the nature of believing. I'll start this précis by sketching the account and then I'll roughly describe the book's three main parts.¹

1. To believe something, I argue, is to be in position to do, think, and feel things in light of a possibility whose obtaining would make one right. The logical aspect of belief is that whether one is right or wrong in believing something depends only on whether that possibility obtains. Beliefs are individuated, I argue, by how things are or might have been, that is, by possibilities. The psychological aspect is that what one believes can rationalize what one does, thinks, and feels, but beliefs, I argue, are not dispositions or causal powers. A person is right or wrong in believing something, but believing is not (I argue) a matter of representing the world and belief states are not themselves true or false. There are limits to what a person can believe, and these are set by who she is and by what is possible. The limits give rise to what I call credal illusions and ground the essential subjectivity of belief. I argue that through voluntary acts of inference a person can make up her own mind and so become responsible for believing what she does. Whether a person ought to believe something depends, not on the evidence she has, but on whether she ought to know it, and this in turn depends on what she ought to do, think, feel, and

¹ This précis is an abridged version of the book's introduction.

be. The normative aspect of belief, I argue, is not fundamentally an evidential matter. Rather, it concerns what reasons a person ought to have—how she ought to be positioned in a world of possibilities. (The Introduction spells out this overview in more detail.)

2. The book's first part (its first four chapters) concerns what it is to believe, and so the ontology of believing. I argue that belief states are not causes or causal properties, that belief states are individuated by possibilities, and that believing is not a representational matter.

On my view, to believe something is to be in a certain rational position. What do I mean by *a position*? The primary contrast I have in mind is with capacities and dispositions. In gaining knowledge or belief a person does not gain an ability to do, think, or feel anything. The change, rather, is in the reasons (or potential reasons) she has to exercise the capacities and to manifest the dispositions she already has or will acquire. And this makes a difference to what she is likely to do because she is reasonable, not because knowing and believing are themselves capacities. A believer is able to act in light of how she takes things to be, but states of belief are not themselves capacities, and nor are they causes or causal properties. When a person deliberates, she sees herself as set—as *in position*—to respond to those reasons. It is up to her whether, how, and when to respond. That is what I mean when I say that believing is a matter of being in a certain position. It is in some ways like being in a spatial position, and I draw heavily on this analogy in my book. (This is the topic of Chapter 1.)

My account rests on a view about the ontology of belief. I take it that to believe something is to have a belief property and I argue that belief properties are qualities and not sortals. The contrast is between properties (like being rich or being heavy) that are instantiated *in* objects or substances and those (like being human or being gold) whose instantiations *are* objects or

substances. Seeing this helps us avoid the temptation to hypostasize belief states, treating them as if they were objects. The familiar ambiguity in “belief” between the state of believing and the object believed encourages this temptation and the idea that belief states have semantic, causal, and normative features. As I see it, belief states have no such features. In developing these points I rely on a different analogy, this time between believing and owning. (All of this is the topic of Chapter 2.)

A second ontological matter concerns the individuation of belief properties. I take it that belief properties are individuated by their objects. On my view, these are possibilities—ways things are, were, might yet be, or could have been. This contrast between what is actual and what is possible, between the reasons there are and those there could have been, is at the heart of believing. It is at the heart of knowing too, since the objects of knowing are facts. In knowing something, a person is set to do, think, and feel things in light of a way things are, in light of the obtaining of some possibility. On my view, believing is like knowing in this respect. In believing that some possibility obtains, a person takes herself to be set to respond to the world’s being that way. She sees herself as set to do, think, and feel things in light of what she takes to be a fact. If she is right, then that possibility does obtain, though if she merely believes it then she does not know it. If she is wrong, then she has anyway got a grip on a way that things could have been. The objects of belief are possibilities because, as I see it, the objects of belief are (potential) reasons.

The view that possibilities are the objects of belief is, to put it mildly, controversial. It entails that when people differ in their beliefs, or when a person changes her mind, this always involves a difference or change in which contingent possibilities they take to obtain. This is a traditional view about the individuation of belief, though it has always been a minority one. Most

theorists take certain familiar stories to be straightforward counter-examples to it. In the book I argue that these stories are not counterexamples to that view, since they always involve a difference over which contingent possibilities obtain, but I don't deny that they are puzzling and instructive. I argue that they will arise on *any* account that takes it to be an objective matter what there is to believe. Any view of the objects of belief will face cases where someone seems to believe beyond the limits. As I see it, these puzzle cases are a price we pay for the objectivity of belief. (I discuss these views in Chapter 3.)

On standard views, the objects of belief are propositions, things that by their very nature are true or false. I think this gets the connection between believing and truth wrong. Believing is not a form of representing and its objects are not representations. A person who believes something is right or wrong depending on whether the possibility that is the object of her belief obtains. But her believing is not true or false and it has no semantic or aboutness properties. The temptation to hypostasize believing can lead us astray by suggesting that beliefs are mental representations. So can the idea that believing is like inner assertion or like picturing. The image of believing as like being in a position is meant to suggest an alternative to this representational idea. (These claims about representation are the topic of Chapter 4.)

3. The book's middle part (Chapters 5 and 6) concerns what there is to believe, and so the limits of belief. I argue that some limits are objective or impersonal while others are subjective or personal. The former give rise to what I call 'credal illusions' while the latter ground 'credal necessities.'

The objective limits apply to all believers. Most fundamentally, what anyone can believe depends on the facts—on which possibilities obtain—and on their relations to those facts. These

credal limits make believing an objective matter, but this objectivity comes at the cost of credal illusions, where a person thinks she has got hold in belief of a way that things could have been when in fact she has not. They are starkest as one reflects on the limits of possibility itself. My view of belief faces these puzzles most directly, because it takes the objects of belief to be possibilities. But that is not the source of the puzzle and we cannot avoid the illusions by rejecting it. The risk of credal illusion arises because believing distinguishes how things are from how they could have been. Without this distinction, and so without the risk of such illusion, there can be no believing. (These objective limits and the credal illusions they generate are the topic of Chapter 5.)

There are also subjective or personal limits. There are things that a person cannot help but believe. Some of these are about herself, and they mark her perspective on the world as essentially hers. This subjectivity is not a matter of *what* she believes, since others can believe those things too. The subjectivity, rather, is that for her those possibilities are credal necessities, things that she—but only she—must believe if she is to believe anything. One central credal necessity, I will argue, is that a believer must believe that the world contains herself believing the things she does. (These subjective limits and the credal necessities they ground are the topic of Chapter 6.)

The presence of such objective and subjective limits to belief is inevitable if a person is to be right or wrong about how things are. The credal illusions they generate and the credal necessities they ground are the price of belief itself.

4. The book's final part (Chapters 7 and 8) concerns normative matters. I argue that through inference a person can become responsible for believing what she does and that inference is

voluntary in an important sense. I also argue that norms of belief are not grounded in the nature of belief itself, since belief properties are not goodness-fixing properties but derive instead from what a person ought to know to be good in various ways.

A person cannot infer at will, since inference is always a response to how things are from her point of view. But inference is voluntary, since different responses will be equally reasonable and how and when she responds will be up to her. Focusing on cases of deductive inference can obscure this voluntariness. It is hard to see how a person could believe the premises of a valid bit of reasoning without believing the conclusion. But in cases where the person has good but not conclusive evidence for the conclusion she draws it is then up to her whether and when to draw the conclusion. And because she knows, as she draws the inference, the reasons she has and the conclusion she draws, inference involves the sort of self-knowledge present when a person acts voluntarily. It is by exercising this ability to make up our own minds through inference that we become responsible for believing what we do. (This is the topic of Chapter 7.)

I end the book by considering three normative matters. I first argue that belief properties are not goodness-fixing properties. No instance of believing is a better or worse instance of believing than any other. In particular, the fact that a person is right or reasonable in believing something does not make their believing a better believing. This normative point follows, I argue, from the ontological claim, defended in Chapter 2, that belief properties are qualities. No qualities are goodness-fixing properties and this, I argue, means that norms of belief cannot be grounded in the nature of believing itself. Rather, I argue, they are grounded in facts about the believers themselves.

Believing something can be to a person's credit and there are things a person ought to believe. These are grounded, I argue, in the goodness-fixing sortal properties she falls under.

Some sortal properties are goodness-fixing but not all are. Being a parent is, since some parents are better parents than others. Likewise for being a streetcar driver, being a teacher, and, of course, being a person. But there is no such thing as being a good object, a good living thing, or even a good believer. Believing something is to a person's credit when it is evidence that she is good with respect to some goodness-fixing sortal she falls under. Jones' believing that the streetcar she drives stops at Garden Avenue is to her credit as a streetcar driver since it does stop there and a good streetcar driver knows her route.

What a person ought to believe also depends on the sortals she falls under, but here the story is more complicated. For a person can fall under a goodness-fixing sortal that she ought not to. She might then believe something that she ought not to believe even though believing it is to her credit. A spy might believe something she shouldn't even if she is a good spy for believing it. What someone ought to believe, I will argue, depends on what she needs to know to be good with respect to her permitted goodness-fixing sortals. There are things Jones needs to know, and so needs to believe, because knowing them is required for her to be a good parent, streetcar driver, or person. These credal requirements have little to do with what else she believes or knows. Credal credits and requirements turn on a believer's sortal properties and are not an epistemic or evidential matter. Rather, they are a matter of the position she does or ought to occupy among the ways things are. (This is the topic of Chapter 9.)

5. Knowing and believing fundamentally concern a contrast between ways things are and ways they could have been, between actuality and possibility, but knowing and believing are not ways of representing that contrast. Instead, and here is a new metaphor, they are ways of being more or less at home among the ways things are. Knowing is being set to do, think, and feel in light of

the actual. Mere believing is being set to do, think, and feel in light of the possible. To say what a person believes is to identify those possibilities that can explain what she might knowingly do, think, and feel. The main task of inquiry is to settle ourselves among the facts, to find our home among them, so that we are positioned to do, think, and feel as we should in light of the ways things are. The goal is to be as good as we can in the world we are in. Since we are limited and fallible we will never fully be at home, but even in merely believing we are settled in among a world of possibilities, and the light they cast is still that of reason, since possibilities are potential reasons. In the light of ways things could have been we can be reasonable even if not fully right or perfectly good.