

THE CONCEPT OF BELIEF AND EVIDENTIALISM: A REVIEW OF *BELIEF'S OWN ETHICS* BY JONATHAN ADLER

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Jonathan Adler's *Belief's Own Ethics* is a contribution to the ethics of belief tradition and a defense of evidentialism. According to the ethics-of-belief tradition, we have epistemic obligations to believe or disbelieve propositions. Evidentialism makes the claim that these obligations are fixed by the evidence we have. The novelty of Adler's approach to these issues is that he seeks to develop and defend the view that, upon analysis, the very concept of belief itself sets some requirements for belief which have a surprisingly far reach when embedded within a first-person perspective. Adler develops many interesting theses, including:

- an admission of fallibility does not provide one with a reason to avoid full belief
- there is a distinction between confidence and full belief that allows some sorts of *epistemic* reasons to reduce confidence in a full belief without undermining the attitude of full belief itself
- there is a robust and important difference in the functional/social roles that partial- and full-beliefs play, such that full-belief cannot be eliminated in favor of partial-belief

While many of these warrant discussion, I will focus on Adler's more central theses, and primarily on his defense of evidentialism.

Adler is explicit from the start that his project is intended to be modest; for example, he proposes simply to ignore skeptical concerns in favor of common-sense thinking about what we can and should (or cannot and should not) believe (p. 7).¹ This approach is refreshing insofar as it seeks to grapple with straightforward, everyday problems about belief. Certainly there are issues about what to believe from the first-person perspective; people do sincerely ask themselves "Should I

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¹ All references are to Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics* (2002), unless otherwise specified.

believe this proposition?" However, I think the modesty at points turns out to be false modesty, and the book is sometimes overly ambitious without realizing it.

Adler begins with evidentialism, the doctrine that a person should only fully believe that p if the person has adequate evidence that p is true (p. 5). Evidence is conceived by Adler as consisting in (propositional) reasons, and all reasons are beliefs, either implicit or explicit. The argument for evidentialism relies upon various claimed inconsistencies in representation, e.g., the assertion of (INC) " p , but I lack adequate evidence that p " is heard as inconsistent (pp. 25-43; also see pp. 193-209 for discussion of putatively related problems such as Moore's paradox).² This cannot be explained on the basis of a superficial reading; for example, there is no heard inconsistency in the assertion of "Brynn believes that p but she lacks adequate evidence for p ." Adler brings in the first-person perspective and norms of assertion to help explain the heard inconsistency of (INC). His idea is that one cannot truly assert that p while simultaneously representing oneself as having inadequate reasons to believe that p is true; from the first-person perspective, this is to involve oneself in an inconsistency. To assert that p is to represent oneself as believing that p . More formally, and ignoring details like sincerity, etc.: $\text{Assertion}_s(p) \rightarrow \text{Bel}_s(p)$. The inconsistency of asserting (INC) is explained by one's first-person commitment to evidentialism. Assertion implies belief, and the concept of belief requires that one take oneself to have adequate evidence. So, the evidentialism embodies a conceptual constraint on belief that (along with norms of assertion) explains the inconsistency of asserting (INC).

From this and other similar arguments for evidentialism Adler begins to build his ethics of belief. He argues that many intuitively unjustified beliefs (although this is not a terminology much employed by Adler) can be explained as involving a person in an inconsistency that is hidden or suppressed for some reason (pp. 73-101). Further, Adler thinks that in many cases mistaking inadequate evidence for adequate evidence will itself commit the person to a contradiction. Given the ethics imposed by the very concept of belief through the adequate evidence requirement, were a person to be made fully aware of his other rational commitments, the person would no longer be able to conceive of themselves as believing the unjustified proposition. Some epistemic norms can be generated that will help us from the first-person to discover and avoid such inconsistencies, e.g., don't deceive yourself and be explicit. This sort of argument is also used to attack the Jamesian view that in rare cases a person can simply will himself to believe when the evidence is indecisive or necessarily inconclusive or that a person can sometimes decide to believe on the basis of what he takes to be purely pragmatic reasons (pp. 9, 116-120).

One problem that surfaces at this point is the gap between *taking* oneself to have adequate evidence and actually *having* adequate evidence. Assuming the argument sketched above is persuasive for a moment, Adler has shown that a

² Moore's paradox is that the assertion of " p , but I don't believe that p " seems inconsistent or contradictory although the components of the sentence are consistent. Notice that the fact that p is true does not entail of a given person that they believe this.

person cannot believe that p and simultaneously believe that he lacks sufficient evidence (from the first-person perspective). How does this show on its own that we should not and cannot believe without adequate evidence? One issue, for example, is that from the first-person common-sense perspective we may have a poor and ambiguous conception of what counts as evidence. The folk have a sloppy, loose notion of evidence, which could cause the folk to count all sorts of non-evidence as evidence and to and relax the evidential standards for belief so much that evidentialism becomes plausible. If this is the case, though, once we tighten our understanding of evidence, Adler's examples might lose their force. While Adler does address objections to evidentialism (e.g., its standards are unattainably high and unrealistic), by widening the evidential base by including massive numbers of tacit beliefs, it is not clear how successful this response would be to the concern just noted. The more tacit a belief becomes, the less consciously accessible it becomes to the agent. Once these beliefs become very inaccessible, it seems unclear why an agent would represent himself as having adequate reasons for a belief even when he did. Put differently, the appeal to tacit beliefs as providing the justifying reasons for many other beliefs seems to be in tension, to some extent, with the first-person methodology employed by Adler.

A related concern is Adler's focus on comparisons between belief and assertion. He goes so far as to present in summary form a long list of similarities between the two late in the book (pp. 274-277). At points, though, Adler risks relying too heavily on the comparison. While priming and making appropriate an assertion is one functional/normative component of belief and self-representations of belief, if we give belief a loosely functionalist treatment, as Adler seems to rely on elsewhere in the book (e.g., when distinguishing explicit from tacit beliefs in order to explain how it is that we have enough evidence about the general reliability of testimony to give us reasons to trust testimony of strangers—pp. 168-172; also pp. 135-161), then there is the risk that Adler's inconsistency test (one application of which is described above in [INC]) begins to collapse. Assertions about what one believes can be useful for explanations of *non-verbal* behavior, even in the face of contrary verbal evidence, e.g., a disposition to deny the proposition. There does not seem anything all that odd or contradictory about stating "I believe that p but I lack adequate evidence for belief" in a rather puzzled tone upon having discovered some pattern in one's non-verbal behavior.

Given Adler's insistence that we extend the concept of non-articulated beliefs to (1) widen the evidential base by giving a person more beliefs (reasons) and (2) avoid overly intellectualized internalist conceptions of reasons that, e.g., require that a person be able to express all epistemically relevant beliefs verbally, it creates a difficulty for Adler's inconsistency test, which seems to depend on explicitly articulated, conscious, first-person accessed beliefs to gain its punch. When we move to beliefs that are not consciously first-personally accessed but rather inferred from behavior, the supposed incoherence embodied in the incoherence test seems less obviously a contradiction. Beliefs have several core functional roles (often directly accessible to the conscious mind, backing assertions, moving us to action, characteristic relationships to desires, etc.) that need not always come as an

integrated package. Given this variety of roles, Adler may overestimate his arguments by focusing explicitly only on the components of belief (directly consciously accessible and assertable) that lend weight to instances of his incoherence test. Given a wider view of belief, evidentialism seems less plausible even from the first-person perspective.

One final issue worth touching on is Adler's treatment of the regress problem in epistemology (pp. 163-185; also see pp. 135-161). Since this problem is often taken to support foundationalism (the view that some beliefs are justified and are permissibly held that are not based on propositional reasons), it is especially important that an evidentialist try to find some alternative to foundationalism. Adler proposes an infinite-regress view according to which we have an infinite amount of past evidence to shore up our beliefs. First, the view is highly underdeveloped as presented. The relatively undefended assertion that we have an *infinite* (as opposed to a huge finite) amount of past evidence confirming testimony is unconvincing and reopens concerns about foundationalist objections to evidentialism. Further, the regress problem is most at home in discussions of skepticism, something Adler sets aside at the beginning of his work. This makes his arguments unsatisfying, if only because it seems that he hasn't really addressed the most difficult part of the problem, the part that often seems to drive foundationalism. A related issue is that while perhaps an adult may have the adequate reasons to trust testimony, a small child (whom Adler seems to want to allow can have justified, full beliefs) may have to rely on testimony or other practices of belief formation to generate full beliefs *prior* to possessing such evidence. If correct, then Adler's thesis that a person should only believe that *p* when he has adequate evidence may turn out to place constraints that are impossible to meet. Lastly, his highly cursory treatment of epistemic circularity does not seem to face up to the issues. It is impossible to have any *external* empirical test of sense perception that does not tacitly rely on the senses at some point. Adler seems to simply deny this and move on, despite the work that can be taken to show this (e.g., Alston, 1986, 1993).

Adler's book is well written and organized, and it offers challenging and persuasive arguments in favor of several contentious theses. While I find some of the arguments unconvincing in the end, Adler certainly succeeds in presenting a detailed and novel defense of evidentialism by focusing on the concept of belief itself.

References

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