

The All-Things-Considered Approach to the Ethics of Belief
by Matt Deaton

Most epistemologists assume that we should base our beliefs on evidence, and evidence alone. We might attribute this to an underlying commitment to the truth. But those who have actually *argued* for the evidentialist standard for belief formation have rarely grounded it in truth for its own sake, or qualified the resulting obligations as purely truth-oriented. Instead, from Clifford to Wood, arguments for evidentialism are laden with moral overtones and appeals to the importance of self and other. But while obligations to ourselves and others are indeed relevant, I argue that fully meeting them sometimes requires believing *without* sufficient evidence.

Inspired by the challenge of Richard Feldman, who doubted the reconcilability of disparate values, I propose and defend an approach to the ethics of belief able to balance competing duties concerning what one ought to believe. Applying the work of ethicist Besty Postow to the realm of epistemology, my all-things-considered approach gives epistemic, prudential and other-regarding obligations equal weight, and delivers a judgment of what a person ought to believe depending on how strongly particular duties obtain within their given realm in comparison to the rest. For example, an incredibly strong self-regarding duty to believe *P* may trump comparatively weak other-regarding and epistemic (truth-oriented) duties to disbelieve *P*.

Perhaps the biggest challenges to this approach are whether it is even psychologically possible to believe a claim consciously recognized as epistemically unjustified—a claim *not* based on something that somehow ensures it is likely *true*—and

whether we have any voluntary control over our beliefs in the first place. Saying only for now that believing *P* entails internal assent that *P* is true, I save my full account of belief for a later section. There I articulate and argue for the plausibility of an admittedly controversial conception of belief that enables the psychological and philosophical possibility of choosing to believe certain claims for extra-epistemic reasons.

If this account succeeds, certain reflective religious agnostics are notably among those susceptible to this new approach to the ethics of belief. Given the high stakes involved in religious belief for themselves and those with whom they have close personal relationships, and in light of the inconclusive, contradictory and controversial evidence with which religious agnostics are typically confronted, I argue that they sometimes have an all-things-considered duty to commit to a determinate stance. My argument can be used to nudge them off the fence—require that they *at least try* to believe, one way or the other—depending on whether religious commitment or denial would best satisfy duties to themselves and their loved ones. But as we will see, the ATC approach is content neutral, and could actually recommend that an agnostic remain agnostic, or even compel an agnostic’s family to drop their determinate beliefs.

Fully Appreciating the Implicit Premises Behind Clifford’s Evidentialism

The current state of epistemic ethics can be traced to William Clifford. He famously argued in his 1877 essay, *The Ethics of Belief*, that “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for

anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”¹ He supported his standard by arguing that it is necessary to promote the safety and welfare of ourselves and others, illustrated by the following tragic example, paraphrased by Richard Feldman.

A negligent shipowner decides, without doing any careful checking, that his ship is seaworthy. The ship sets sail, and then sinks. Many lives are lost, largely because this shipowner believed that his ship was seaworthy without bothering to get it checked out.²

Clifford goes on to say that belief upon insufficient evidence generally corrupts the populace, encourages the propagation of harmful superstition, and threatens social stability. We all have an unbending obligation to only believe claims that we have thoroughly investigated, and for which we have the requisite degree of evidence.

Though Clifford’s sunken ship example has some purchase, his response is too strict. He wants us to think that promoting our interests *always* requires thorough investigation and a high degree of evidentially-based certainty. But as Feldman points out, sometimes believing according to moderate or even weak evidence does a better job of this.³ For example, it’s reasonable to think that baseball players who confidently approach the plate, despite a consistently miserable batting average and no evidentially-based reason to think they’ll get a hit, are more likely to get on base than those who resign themselves to a strikeout. Scientific studies are lacking, but those of those who have played a sport can attest that confidence, epistemically justified or not, has some bearing on performance. Similarly, a patient recovering from a serious illness may not be able to will herself into

¹ Originally published in *Contemporary Review* (1877), reprinted in *Clifford’s Lectures and Essays* (London: MacMillan, 1879): 183.

² *Epistemology*. Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River New Jersey, 2003: 41, 42.

³ *Epistemology* 43.

immediate full health through wishful thinking. But it seems reasonable to think a positive outlook can hasten recovery, or at least make it more bearable—both delivering some prudential benefit.

Our beliefs can affect others too—especially if they're communicated. If the same baseball player's team believes he'll get a hit, and openly expresses that confidence, he'll probably do better than if they were openly pessimistic. And if the same recovering patient's family openly expresses their confidence that she'll heal fully and quickly, she's more likely to do so than if they openly planned her funeral. In each case, believing on insufficient evidence (or even contrary to the evidence) actually promotes our interests better than believing in accordance with available evidence.

Concerning benefits to one's self, hope can produce similar benefits, though perhaps only to a lesser degree. The sportsman who excitedly *hopes* he'll succeed or the patient who earnestly *hopes* she'll recover will perhaps fair better than if they were indifferent. But it would seem that simply *desiring* that *P* is true would fail to deliver as great a benefit as fully *affirming* that *P* is true. Hope may be all the struggling hitter or downtrodden patient can muster. But since confidence has some bearing on performance, those capable of full belief reap greater rewards. Concerning benefits to others, the team and the family could also fake it—*express* beneficial beliefs but not actually *hold* them. And depending on how convincing they are, this might produce some benefit as well. But beyond prima facie prohibitions on deception, insincerity has a tendency to shine through, often doing more damage than silence. So while hope and expressed faux beliefs may sometimes help, neither is as consistently beneficial as the real thing.

None of the above rules out the very real possibility that believing without proper evidence can do harm to self and other. Just as the shipowners's unjustified confidence contributed to the death of innocents, the unjustifiably confident batter could foolishly bet his life savings on the outcome of a swing, or the unjustifiably confident patient could fail to make plans for the possibility of death. My point here is simply to use Clifford's own implicit premises to conclude that his standard is unnecessarily restrictive—to show that while believing without proper evidence can sometimes harm self and other, it can sometimes benefit self and other too.

Feldman's Challenge

Feldman suggests that one way to salvage Clifford's standard is to segregate what one *epistemically* ought to believe from what one *morally* ought to believe, and to recast Clifford as arguing only for the former. "One notion concerns morality (or prudence or self-interest). The other is more intellectual or epistemological. A plausible thing to say is that in these examples the beliefs are morally right but epistemically wrong."⁴ On this model, what one ought to believe would be based on a goal—a purely hypothetical ought. If their goal was to believe in accordance with moral duty, then the batter, his team, the patient and her family should all be optimistic, despite evidence that they should not. But if their goal was to believe the truth, they should all be very pessimistic, in accordance with the evidence.

Though Feldman's solution is an improvement, we're now presented with a new problem—what to believe as a matter of practice, *full stop*. When our epistemic duties

⁴ Epistemology 44.

conflict with our moral duties, which should take precedence? And what if other forces have some sway over our beliefs as well? We can quickly identify at least three: epistemic, prudential and other-regarding. When all point in the same direction, the choice of what to believe is easy and the decision (assuming we can choose at all) is uncontroversial. But when they conflict—when epistemic standards recommend we believe one thing, prudential considerations another, and other-regarding obligations yet another—how should one decide what to believe? According to the evidence? Personal advantage? Duty to others?

Feldman says that one thing we can't do is compare the relative worth of each of these pressures and decide what we *all-things-considered, just plain ought* to believe. If we ought to believe P according to our epistemic duties, $\sim P$ according to our prudential duties, and it's unclear according to our other-regarding duties, what we *just plain ought* to believe can't be analytically decided.

For each "ought" there is an associated value. We ought, in the relevant sense, to do the thing that maximizes that value, or perhaps something that does well enough in achieving that kind of value. For example we morally ought to do what maximizes, or produces enough, moral value. We prudentially ought to do what maximizes, or produces enough, prudential value. If there is such a thing as "just plain ought" then there is a value associated with it. The thing we just plain ought to do is the thing that comes out highest, or high enough, according to that measure. It's far from clear what that value would be—it isn't to be identified with any of the more determinate kinds of value and there seems to be no uniquely correct (or range of correct) ways to combine moral, practical, epistemic and other values. We've disambiguated "ought" and we can't put the various senses back together again. There is no

meaningful question about whether epistemic oughts “trump” or are trumped by other oughts.⁵

Feldman’s challenge has some merit. Not only are these values distinct, it’s plausible to think that they’re incommensurable—that there’s no such thing as just plain ought, but only distinct hypothetical oughts, dependent on distinct goals (the truth, self-interest, satisfying relational or other-regarding obligations). They’re so irreconcilably distinct that comparisons seem ad hoc. However, if it were possible, wouldn’t lexically ranking these values help?

Even if we could ask meaningful questions about whether one sort of ought trumps another, it seems implausible to think that any of the three should *always* override the other two. Even if we recognized a strong obligation to always and only believe claims with adequate evidence, surely this obligation could be loosened if the belief was trivial, the evidence for and against it controversial, and the stakes surrounding the other considerations incredibly high. Also, even if we agreed that our other-regarding obligations were strong in most cases, surely they could sometimes be overridden when a particular obligation didn’t bind too tightly, and especially when epistemic and prudential considerations pointed strongly in another direction. And even if we agreed that we should take care of ourselves first, at least to some minimum degree, we often expect trivial personal sacrifice when the implications for others are grave.

⁵ “The Ethics of Belief.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Vol. LX, No. 3, May 2000: 694.

Can we make sense of these judgments without resorting to ad hoc particularism?
How can we (at least partially) systematize our decisions to accommodate our inclination to give this value primacy in one case, but another value primacy in another?

Betsy Postow's All-Things-Considered Ethics

In her posthumously published article *Care Ethics and Impartial Reasons*, Betsy Postow attempted to solve a problem brought to the surface by feminist ethicist Virginia Held. A strong proponent of the relational ethics of care, Held didn't forsake all other ethical traditions—she acknowledged the importance of impartial justice, utilitarian considerations, and personal virtue. Her problem was that in some cases, considerations of care recommend one course of action, while considerations of justice recommend another. Leaving it for someone else to solve, Held called for additional work explaining how an agent ought to act when presented with such a conflict. Expounding on the difficulty, Postow wrote, "We will sometimes need to reach an all-things-considered moral judgment in particular cases where care and justice, for example, pull in opposite directions. The question arises, then, how to give due weight both to considerations of care and to different sorts of moral considerations, such as those of justice."⁶

Postow set aside formulating a "top-down" hierarchical approach. Instead, acknowledging that some considerations will be more or less important depending on the situation at hand, she pursued a "middle-down" and "bottom-up" approach.

Considered within the context of care, some care considerations are very weighty and others are relatively trivial, at least in given circumstances. Likewise, considered within the context of justice, some justice considerations are relatively

⁶ Hypatia Vol. 23, no 1 (January-March 2008): 3.

weighty and others are relatively trivial. The suggestion would be that when one consideration is very weighty, considered in terms of its own sort, and another is relatively trivial, considered in terms of its own sort, then the first should have priority over the second, other things being equal. For example, on the one hand, there is a very strong reason, within the domain of care, to respond to the urgent request of a good friend. The consideration that cutting through someone's yard is trespassing, on the other hand, is relatively weak within the domain of justice. Thus, we might presume that, other things being equal, we should be willing to trespass if necessary to respond to the urgent request of a good friend.

In her Spring 2007 Feminist Ethics course at the University of Tennessee, Postow illustrated this approach via analogy with a deck of cards.⁷ The separate suits represented different sorts of considerations (care, justice, consequences), and the face value of a particular card represented a specific consideration's value within its own realm (the weight of the care consideration, within the ethics of care, or the impartial justice consideration, within the realm of justice). Assuming that the suits were otherwise equally worthy, a queen of hearts would trump a jack of spades, a queen of spades would trump a jack of hearts, and an ace of clubs would trump all four. In the realm of all-things-considered decision-making, assuming the different sorts of claims are equally powerful, a strong relational obligation to one's family would trump a trivial duty of justice to respect another's property rights, an incredibly strong duty of justice to respect property would trump a minor relational obligation to one's family, and an incredibly powerful duty to one's self would override both.

I argue that this approach can be plausibly applied to the ethics of belief, overcoming Feldman's difficulty, and allowing us in some cases to decide what we all-

⁷ Recalled from personal memory.

things-considered ought to believe. Doing so assumes that each sort of consideration is equally powerful, mainly because our attempt at establishing a hard and fast hierarchy was met with immediate counterexamples. By reducing the pull of each consideration to a rough net number, Postow's method allows us to weigh otherwise potentially irreconcilable values. Though it was intended to weigh different sorts of moral obligations, I see no reason why it can't accommodate epistemic obligations as well. Incomplete knowledge will often make judgments difficult, but this of course is not a unique or disqualifying factor. Many cases will remain unclear, but if nothing else, the all-things-considered approach can deliver guidance when the judgments are obviously skewed in one direction or the other.

Before exploring the different values at play we should note how they dynamically interact. An increase or decrease in duty strength within one realm can immediately affect duty strength in another. For example, a weakening in one's epistemic duty to believe that one's spouse is faithful can in turn weaken one's general other-regarding duty to that spouse, making the all-things-considered duty to maintain confidence in his or her fidelity no more burdensome than our intuitions demand. (Wives aren't compelled to ignore lipstick on their husbands' collars—cheating weakens that relational tie and opens the door to believe in line with the evidence.) Similar dynamism occurs among competing moral values—fluctuations in the strength of care obligations can influence the strength of consequentialist obligations. This certainly complicates the calculus, but hopefully delivers judgments best in line with what we ought to all-things-considered believe.

Epistemic Considerations

Clifford laid the groundwork for formulating what we epistemically ought to believe—according to the evidence. I’m willing to endorse the basic evidentialist line—that we have an *epistemic* obligation to believe claims according to the objective truth-oriented evidence alone, so long that it’s clear that this is an epistemic, truth-oriented obligation alone, and not an overarching obligation able to compel ethical belief by itself.

When it comes to determining what counts as sufficient evidence, given the limits of this project, we can leave our standards somewhat open. But one thing we can and should do is emphasize that epistemic justification comes in degrees.⁸ We’re typically strongly justified in believing claims with widespread and overwhelming evidential support, a little less justified in believing claims with strong but controversial evidential support, very unjustified in believing claims when the evidence supports the contrary, and so on. Meshing a qualified Clifford with this common view gives us the standard that we’re epistemically justified in holding a belief based on the weight of the net evidence in its favor. This is exactly what should be kept in mind when determining how powerfully an epistemic obligation pulls within its own realm—whether we’re epistemically dealt a 4 or a king of clubs.

Prudential Considerations

Our beliefs have enormous bearing on our personal wellbeing. Pointing out that this is relevant for an all-things-considered approach to belief justification needn’t be seen as pejoratively selfish. The fact that it is morally permissible to peacefully pursue our own interests, while of course respecting and tending to the interests of others, seems so widely

⁸ Feldman, Richard. Epistemology. Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2003: 21.

accepted that it needn't be argued for. But if necessary, one can appeal to our intrinsic worth, distinct rationality, vested interests, ability to experience life's joys and pains, imperfect (Kantian) obligation to develop our talents, and other arguments that establish our dignity and the corresponding permission and obligation to tend to ourselves. However, whether we construe prudential duties as a species of self-directed moral duties or as wholly distinct and amoral has little bearing on the all-things-considered approach. Regardless, what we believe sometimes affects our wellbeing, and it's plausible to segregate this sort of consideration from other-regarding duties, if only for the sake of completing an all-things-considered analysis.

Exactly how do beliefs affect our wellbeing? Most obviously, they influence our psychological states. Setting aside the truth of the matter, believing that I'm a good husband and father, a decent martial artist and a growing philosopher produces generally pleasant mental states. Since success in these areas is important to me, believing the opposite would produce generally unpleasant mental states. Mental states constitute a huge part, if not the main part, of wellbeing, and beliefs concerning our most cherished values have much influence on these states, since they put us in good or bad moods, setting the backdrop for consciousness.

For many, beliefs about one's ultimate place and fate in the universe impact mental wellbeing more than anything else. Though many seem to accept it without trouble, some are seriously distressed by the idea that their existence will end with their bodily death. Believing that one has an immortal soul is one way to cope. Also, beyond worries about our own death, the death of loved ones is troublesome as well. The thought that we'll never see them again hurts. Here too, belief in an afterlife provides some comfort—it would be nice

to see grandma in heaven. And last, while some can shoulder great adversity on their own, others need to believe that they can appeal to a higher power. Prayer with the expectation that a god is listening, willing and able to assist us, achieves just that, even if his methods can only be described as mysterious.

However, for some, consciously acknowledging that one's beliefs are guided by other than epistemic considerations could lead to lowered self-esteem and increased stress—even more than if one faced mortality and a lack of control head on. If the evidence indicated that I was most likely a bad husband and father, a terrible martial artist, and a philosophical hack, attempts to convince myself otherwise might seem temporarily effective, but the underlying disingenuousness could haunt my false convictions.

This is especially the case for anyone sympathetic with Allen Wood's neo-Cliffordian evidentialism. In *The Duty to Believe According to the Evidence*, Wood provides a scathing denunciation of anyone intellectually shameful enough to try and trick herself into believing a claim she knows to be epistemically unjustified for the sake of personal benefit.⁹ Tying our dignity to sober self-honesty, he denounces any and all attempts to suppress what we know to be the evidentially-based truth, in the name of human dignity.

Beliefs held on insufficient evidence require one or another among certain kinds of psychic mechanisms to sustain them, and these mechanisms display patterns of dishonesty and self-contempt. One mechanism is wishful thinking—holding a belief because you wish it were true and because it therefore brings you pleasure or comfort to believe it is true. It is cowardly and contemptible not to face the facts, which also means facing up to what the evidence says the facts probably are.¹⁰

⁹ Wood, Allen. "The Duty to Believe According to the Evidence." *Ethics of Belief: Essays in Tribute to D.Z. Phillip*. Long, Eugene Thomas and Patrick Horn, eds. Springer Publishing, 2008: 7-24.

¹⁰ Wood 18.

Though genuine self-deception may be contemptible, the sort of reflective analytical believer following the all-things-considered approach I'm working toward is fully aware of the nature of his beliefs, and thus is not guilty of the disingenuousness Wood attacks. Taking seriously our epistemic obligations to tend to the evidence, the all-things-considered approach does not suggest that evidence should be suppressed or that one should profess an unwarranted degree of confidence (see the *disclosure* requirement below). But in some cases it may suggest that we believe things for which we lack sufficient evidence, simply as a matter of qualified belief.

One last thing to consider is how belief, or at least public profession of belief, can impact a person's standing in the community. I'm certainly reluctant to argue for ideological conformity in the name of personal advantage, but the possible benefits in friendship, love and career can't be neglected if our list is to be complete. Adopting a culture's beliefs opens doors denial holds shut—theists are often reluctant to deal with atheists, communists are often wary of capitalists, Kantians are often suspicious of consequentialists. One could of course prefer to forego social and business opportunities if they depended on accepting what one couldn't conscientiously endorse. But here we're just pointing such opportunities out.

This last point that one might choose to do without the potential benefits in favor of retaining one's epistemic integrity suggests that the nature and power of prudential concerns varies from individual to individual. Someone who took our epistemic obligations as seriously as Allen Wood would be hard pressed to cite an example where their self-interest would be promoted by believing in a way contrary to the evidence. This doesn't mean our approach collapses into relativism, but it does mean that discerning in which

direction and how strongly one's prudential reasons to believe a claim pull may only be decidable from a first-person perspective.

Other-Regarding Considerations

With an epistemic standard and our prudential obligations to believe claims on the table, we now turn to how our beliefs can affect others, simply by virtue of being held and perhaps communicated, but nothing more. I argue that our relationships often produce prima facie duties to do all sorts of things—some argue even to prematurely end our lives—and that included here is a duty to take seriously how our beliefs affect others.

Feminist ethicists have perhaps been the most successful in illuminating the moral importance of relationships. They argue that ethical mandates that recommend the same response to moral dilemmas without attention to relational nuance are woefully detached from our lived moral experiences. I owe my wife special consideration, not due to any abstract principle, but because of our lived emotional bond. This consideration not only factors into my moral decisions as a matter of phenomenological fact—in light of our shared interdependence, it *should* as a matter of ethics. Virginia Held, the same prominent care ethicist engaged by Postow, explains.

It is characteristic of the ethics of care to view persons as relational and as interdependent. Deontological and consequentialist moral theories of which Kantian moral theory and utilitarianism are the leading examples concentrate their attention on the rational decisions of agents assumed to be independent, autonomous individuals. Virtue theory also focuses on individual persons and their dispositions. The ethics of care, in contrast, conceptualizes persons as deeply affected by, and involved in, relations with others; to many care theorists persons are at least partly constituted by their social ties. The ethics of care attends especially to relations between persons, evaluating such relations and valuing relations of care. It does not

assume that relations relevant for morality have been entered into voluntarily by free and equal individuals, as do dominant moral theories. It appreciates as well the values of care between persons of unequal power in unchosen relations such as those between parents and children and between members of social groups of various kinds. To the ethics of care, our embeddedness in familial, social, and historical contexts is basic.¹¹

Though Held extends obligations of care beyond our family and friends, and indeed beyond our fellow citizens,¹² it is at least uncontroversial that we have special obligations to the closest of our close loved ones. The extent of those obligations has perhaps been taken furthest by John Hardwig.

Pejoratively referred to as “Dr. Death,” Hardwig has convincingly argued that in some instances, we may have a duty to end our own lives sooner than medically necessary, out of consideration for our loved ones.¹³ Since it is those closest to us who often shoulder the financial and emotional burdens when we are terminally ill, when the burden is great, their needs and interests can sometimes override our desire to continue living.

Our individualistic fantasy about ourselves sometimes leads us to imagine that lives are separate and unconnected, or that they could be so if we chose. If lives were unconnected, then things that happen in my life would not or need not affect others. And if others were not (much) affected by my life, I would have no duty to consider the impact of my life on theirs... But this is morally obtuse. The fact is we are not a race of hermits — most of us are connected to family and loved ones. We prefer it that way... But being with others is not all benefits and pleasures; it brings responsibilities as well. For then what happens to us and the choices we make can

¹¹ The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global. Oxford University Press, 2006: 46.

¹² Held 31.

¹³ “Dying at the Right Time: Reflections on (Un)Assisted Suicide.” Ethics in Practice, 3rd Ed. Hugh LaFollette, ed. Blackwell Publishing, 2007: 48-59.

dramatically affect the lives of our loved ones. It is these connections that can, tragically, generate obligations to die, as continuing to live takes too much of a toll on the lives of those connected to us.¹⁴

To be clear, Hardwig isn't suggesting independent healthy people who happen to be an emotional and financial burden on their families commit suicide—those sorts have a duty to just *stop being a burden*. He's addressing the terminally ill, and especially the elderly terminally ill—those whose only way to stop being a burden is to die. The greater and longer the burden your artificially prolonged life creates—emotionally and financially—the stronger the duty to die. And to the extent that your loved ones have made great sacrifices for you in the past, and especially if you haven't reciprocated the favor, the greater the duty to die.¹⁵

We needn't agree with Held that care ethics should qualify our obligations to strangers in far away lands (as she ultimately suggests¹⁶), and we needn't endorse Hardwig's thesis fully to appreciate that we indeed have strong obligations to our closest loved ones. So, how do our beliefs fit in?

Chiefly, earnestly religious people don't want to see their loved ones miss out on eternal bliss. And more pointedly, they don't want to think their loved ones will burn in hell. Believing your son or mother or wife or best friend will spend eternity in a lake of fire is incredibly distressing. If we're to take our relational obligations seriously, we must consider how religious disbelief can negatively impact our loved ones. If Hardwig's argument has any purchase—if we agree that persons should seriously consider hastening

¹⁴ Hardwig 51.

¹⁵ Hardwig 53.

¹⁶ Held 154-168.

their deaths when their lives have become a significant intractable emotional or financial burden—it seems an easy extension that persons should take seriously the impact their beliefs have on their loved ones, and *at least try* to modify their beliefs when doing so would avoid great harm or produce great benefit. It would also seem that the obligation to believe would be stronger to the extent that one’s loved ones are troubled by disbelief, to the extent that they would be bettered by belief, and to the extent that they have been faithful, helpful and generally worthy of reciprocal sacrifice. As we will see, the ATC approach can also recommend that the religious drop their beliefs, but first we need to explore the plausibility of the conception of belief at work.

Unpacking the ATC Account of Belief

I now turn to the task of fully articulating and defending the conception of belief that the ATC approach deploys. This account is admittedly unconventional, but I argue that it is philosophically cogent, psychologically possible (within defined limits), and ethically sound. The five main features of the ATC conception of belief are:

1. ATC believing *P* entails internally affirming that *P* is true
2. ATC beliefs can be held in varying degrees
3. ATC beliefs can be motivated for extra-epistemic reasons
4. ATC beliefs are subject to quarantine
5. ATC beliefs require disclosure

1 needs little defense. It is the central feature of belief that epistemologists take for granted. 2 is also widely held. We can be more or less certain that P is true, varying degrees of certainty influence how strongly we affirm P, which affects the strength of our belief that P (since belief is defined in terms of affirmation). What is controversial about this account is that not only can ATC beliefs be motivated by extra-epistemic reasons in a *psychological* sense, they can be motivated by extra-epistemic reasons in an *ethical* sense. Even Allen Wood would admit that prudential and other regarding considerations sometimes creep into the belief forming process. His complaint isn't that extra-epistemic considerations empirically *do not*, but that they ethically *should not* have any bearing on what we believe. The ATC approach, on the other hand, welcomes and indeed *requires* incorporating extra-epistemic reasons into our belief forming process. However, attention to the motivating factors behind the ATC approach points to the need for some mechanism that enables *holding* epistemically unjustified beliefs, but blocks agents from acting on them, using them to derive further inferences, or recklessly expressing them to others without qualification.

One solution might be to appeal to the ATC approach all the way down. That is, to defer to Postow's All-Things-Considered Ethics of *action* when deciding whether to act on an epistemically unjustified ATC belief. From this approach, if an action is all things considered morally permissible, then epistemically unjustified beliefs can give us reason to pursue them. So for example, were I to form an ATC belief that the bible is true, and find some scriptural reason to give to charity, since giving to charity is in most cases all things considered morally permissible even without scriptural support, I'm justified in giving.

But this presents a deeper problem. Even if we agree to only act on epistemically unjustified ATC beliefs when the action is all things considered morally permissible, simply holding such beliefs can skew our judgment of what seems all things considered permissible. If I believe that I will recover from a potentially terminal illness for extra-epistemic reasons, despite my physician's insistence that I only have at most a month to live, incorporating the belief that I will survive may have some bearing on whether I find it all things considered morally permissible to postpone reconciling a quarrel with my father. Believing that I will survive may stave off the dread of death, but it may also prevent me from using my final days wisely—indeed from using them *ethically* if I have pressing obligations to friends and family to satisfy.

The solution is to place epistemically unjustified ATC beliefs in a sort of inferential *quarantine*, whereby we can hold them, but not draw logical inferences from them. This would require compartmentalizing one's beliefs such that the epistemically ungrounded remain segregated from those enjoying epistemic support. Actual practice may prove difficult, but I believe this is at least psychologically possible for some. For example, I recognize an ATC obligation to believe the essential core of Christianity. Given the evidence for and against the Christian story, I find agnosticism the most rationally defensible position, and for a time, self-identified as such. But adopting an ATC belief in Christianity prevents my mainly Christian family from fretting over the status of my soul, and provides some solace when I consider the unsavory prospect of my consciousness ending with bodily death. However, recognizing that the reasons behind my Christian belief are not truth-oriented, I am cautious to defer to the bible when it calls for action. Some say (though I have not investigated deeply enough to confirm or deny this reading) that the bible

condemns homosexuality as an abominable sin. However, as an applied ethicist, I find the secular arguments against homosexuality less than compelling. Thus, while I maintain a qualified Christianity, since I find the evidence supporting that belief inconclusive, I do not personally condemn homosexuals and indeed have publicly argued against so-called “defense of marriage” legislation ¹⁷.

Also notice how unquarantined ATC beliefs might cause us to unnecessarily adopt *more* ATC beliefs, none of them grounded in truth-oriented reasons. To avoid spiraling into a fantasy of mistaken ATC beliefs we are thus only justified in holding an epistemically unjustified ATC belief when the evidence used to arrive at that belief is itself epistemically justified. For example, the evidence must support our belief that our loved ones firmly believe *P*, that our current lack of belief in *P* is causing them great strain, that believing *P* in spite of a lack of adequate evidence won't severely undermine our self-respect, and so on. Since a lesser standard could quickly enable a web of falsehoods completely removed from what's likely true, beliefs contrary to the evidence not only fail to serve as a legitimate reasons to act, but they do not serve as legitimate reasons to believe (anything further).

So while the ATC approach to the ethics of belief may recommend that a person affirm the truth of a religion, consistency with its foundation also demands that we not recklessly act on those beliefs or combine them with other beliefs to draw further inferences. Since the approach is built on respect for not only what is likely true, but for how beliefs affect ourselves and others, we must also take into account possible harms to self and other when belief translates into action. And an important part of this entails

¹⁷ “Gay Marriage Ban Indefensible.” SocratesVotes.com (personal blog), posted 22 Oct 2008. <<http://socratesvotes.com/2008/10/22/gay-marriage-ban-indefensible/>>

quarantining epistemically unjustified ATC beliefs from our broader set of affirmed propositions to prevent skewing our determination of what we ought to ATC believe or act. So while a person may have an all-things-considered duty to believe religious claims for which the evidence is neutral, this doesn't entail an automatic duty to embrace a lifestyle shift, defer moral judgment to religious leaders, or (more dramatically) blow oneself up.

One might object that holding and expressing a belief but refusing to act on it is the very definition of hypocrisy. And since hypocrisy is a serious moral wrong, the ATC approach is inherently flawed. However, hypocrisy seems to be morally wrong for one of two reasons: because it reveals either a) a lack of conviction or b) a desire to promote a double-standard to then be used to one's advantage. Concerning the former, a refusal to act on *P* doesn't reveal a lack of conviction that *P* is true, but rather sensitivity to the potential negative consequences of acting on epistemically unsupported beliefs. Such agents should actually be *applauded* for refusing to act, not chided. With the latter, taking seriously our broader obligations to others, the ATC approach would be hard pressed to legitimate conscious deception or trickery. Indeed, the fifth feature of the ATC conception of belief precludes both consciously attempting to deceive and unintentionally implying one has good epistemic backing for their beliefs. Not only should epistemically unjustified beliefs be internally quarantined, their non-epistemic support should be explained when expressed, so as to prevent warping the inferences and decisions of others who might otherwise mistakenly believe we have good truth-oriented reason to believe such claims and treat our testimony as authoritative. The requirement of full *disclosure* saves the ATC approach from the charge of hypocrisy, or at least makes it excusable.

The Practical Implications and Limitations

Both the practical limits and the realizable benefits of the ATC approach should now be apparent. Depending on the religion, it may not deliver salvation. I have intentionally set aside Pascal's Wager in order to focus on terrestrial benefits we can all take seriously. But those considering Pascal's famous argument might ask themselves whether the ATC approach would satisfy a deity. (I obviously think it is sound, but deities reserve the right to disagree.) The ATC approach may also fail to satisfy one's family. They may deny that ATC beliefs arrived at in such a cold, calculating manner are *real* beliefs, or complain that he who is unwilling to *act* on P doesn't truly *believe* P. In those cases where one is convinced the ATC approach would not guarantee God's favor, the psychological benefit decreases and the ATC obligation to belief weakens. In those cases where one's family would not be satisfied, the other-regarding benefit diminishes and the ATC obligation to believe dissolves. This approach entails a calculating, stoic path to religious belief indeed—one traversing largely unmapped territory between Cliffordian evidentialism and Kierkegaardian leaps of faith. But however it is judged by God and family, perhaps the ATC approach is the most we can expect from earnest, reflective rational agents.

That said, the ATC approach has its limits. I've supplied my own testimony as an anecdotal example supporting its psychological plausibility. But we can only expect the ATC approach to recommend something contrary to the traditional rational epistemic approach when the claim in question is an epistemically *live* option for a particular agent. This supposes that agents exercise some discretion over their beliefs. Bernard Williams largely rejects this possibility, arguing that while we can exercise control over the sorts of

evidence we expose ourselves to, once confronted with it, we're unconsciously compelled to believe one way or the other—no choice is involved. However, Williams seems to have in mind clear cut cases dealing with straightforward evidence or the lack thereof. And he actually implies that some sorts of beliefs are indeed subject to some degree of voluntary control, or at least that the case that they are *not* isn't as solid. "I am not going to take cases of religious or moral beliefs, but cases of more straightforward factual belief; the sort of belief when one just believes that it is raining, or believes that somebody over there is one's father, or believes that the substance in front of one is salt."¹⁸ So what sorts of beliefs are subject to voluntary control and what sorts are not?

Countering Clifford on the other side of the classic ethics of belief debate was William James. He offered a direct counterargument in his 1896 address to the philosophical clubs of Yale and Brown, entitled *The Will To Believe*.¹⁹ Calling him "that delicious enfant terrible,"²⁰ James argued that Clifford was overly cautious—that he blocked us from coming to hold beliefs we both psychologically can believe, and indeed have every moral right to believe. "Believe nothing, [Clifford] tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies." James argued that this is a mistake, and an arbitrary one at that. "[H]e who says, 'Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!' merely shows his own

¹⁸ Problems of the Self. Cambridge University Press, 1973: 136.

¹⁹ Transcribed into HTML by William O'Meara, copyright, 1997.

<<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~omearawm/ph101willtobelieve.html>> accessed 6 October, 2008.

²⁰ James 3.

preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe... It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound.”²¹

So James implies not only that some beliefs can be voluntarily accepted or rejected, but that in some cases we ought to exercise this power, lest we needlessly err on the side of caution. But James doesn't suggest we can believe or are allowed to believe just anything contrary to our better rational judgment. Serious candidates for belief must be *live* options.

If I say to you: “Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan,” it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: “Be an agnostic or be a Christian,” it is otherwise. Trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief.²²

For the options both to believe and not believe a proposition to be live, it would seem that the evidence for and against it must be controversial, unclear, contradictory and the like. And when an option is completely dead, no amount of rationalization can bring it back to life.

Such is the case for Julian Barnes, an English author with a paralyzing fear of death, but for whom religious belief is out of the question. Deep in the grip of thanatophobia, Barnes reveals in his bestselling 2008 memoir, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*, a personal struggle that makes his prudential reason to believe very powerful. But Barnes lacks the disposition to get religious belief off the ground.

I had no faith to lose... I was never baptized, never sent to Sunday school. I have never been to a normal church service in my life... I am constantly going into

²¹ James 7.

²² James 1, 2.

churches, but for architectural reasons; and, more widely, to get a sense of what Englishness once was.²³

Barnes's fear of death is profound. From almost daily dread to frequent nightmares, he is haunted by the inevitable. And although he recognizes that religious belief could help him if he could bring himself to adopt it, the option has been long dead—slain by both science and philosophy. Strangely though, Barnes says (perhaps jokingly) that he dropped his weak religious faith during puberty because he didn't like the thought of God watching him masturbate.²⁴ This seems to be a clear case of willing oneself to *not* believe a claim for prudential reasons. Yet for Barnes years of reflection reveal that the evidence against God's existence is insurmountable, even when acknowledging that belief could save him incredible psychological strife.

Considering the different conclusions reached by Barnes and myself, we might infer that how much epistemic controversy a claim must endure to be a live option varies from person to person. We might say that as a philosopher, and not merely the brother of a philosopher (as Barnes is), my own assessment of the evidence for and against the plausibility of theism is better informed and judged. Though this could account for some disagreement, given Barnes's obvious intelligence and endless reflection, I suspect that our personalities—our belief-oriented dispositions—contribute just as much to our differing assessments of the evidence. For me, it's a live debate, opening the door to prudential and

²³ Keillor, Garrison. "Dying of the Light" Published October 3, 2008. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/books/review/Keillor-t.html>> accessed 4 Dec, 2008.

²⁴ Jonathan Cape Publishing, London, 2008.

other-regarding considerations. For Barnes, despite his suffering, the option is thoroughly dead.

Thus, perhaps the ATC approach is useful only when the evidence leads us to a dead end. Though I have convinced myself to believe religious claims for the sake of self and family, I don't think I could bring myself to believe that the sky is green, even if doing so would dramatically benefit myself and my family. Brainwashing might make some temporary headway, but direct experience would eventually win out. For as the reasons against a claim mount, once live options die, and if Barnes's increasing pessimism is any example, over time dead options wither. Thus we can agree with Williams that *some* claims are not subject to voluntary control, but affirm with James that we can indeed choose to accept or reject live options.

So, when does the all-things-considered approach make a practical difference? Most clearly, for reflective religious agnostics in certain sorts of relationships with certain sorts of people. With much for themselves and their families to gain or lose depending on belief, and with scanty, contradictory, and elusive evidence that's led them to provisionally suspend judgment, this seems to be one clear case where epistemic uncertainty can be overridden by prudential and other-regarding concerns. This could be the case for other sorts of agnostics as well, but I suspect our beliefs about religion have the most dramatic implications for ourselves and others.

Conclusion

I have used Betsy Postow's all-things-considered approach to ethical decision-making to overcome the apparent irreconcilability of the different obligations at play when deciding what to believe. Granting each sort roughly equal weight, I have argued that we can and should decide what we ought to believe only after examining how strongly particular obligations pull within their respective realms, and that this is likely only psychologically possible when claims under consideration are genuinely live options. I have given us some reason to think that it is psychologically possible for some to believe claims for extra-epistemic reasons, and have speculated that how much evidence is necessary to make an option live probably varies from person to person.

I have argued that attention to self and other at the stage of belief formation requires similar attention at the stage of action, and have thus limited the impact of epistemically unjustified ATC beliefs as a matter of rational consistency. Such beliefs are subject to *quarantine* in that they cannot (ethically) serve as a basis for action and must be segregated from our broader set of evidentially supported beliefs to prevent unwarranted inferences (which could otherwise cause us to make mistakes about what's ATC actionable, or what we ATC ought to believe). This limits the benefit of ATC beliefs, but keeps in check their potential harm. And given that this is an unconventional approach not yet widely practiced, we are also ethically required to fully *disclose* the thought process behind our ATC beliefs. This prevents others from mistakenly thinking we have good evidential reason for our beliefs and incorporating our testimony into their own thought processes.

If this approach can overcome its psychological difficulties, certain reflective religious agnostics would seem to be most liable to its force. In light of their epistemic impasse, those with religious family members and little to lose or much to gain personally can be compelled to embrace qualified religious belief. However, since this analytical path to belief formation has very weak (or even negative) epistemic justification, it justifies no positive action beyond belief itself, and can't serve as grounds for further inferences. Indeed, it requires the believer retain discretion over subsequent moral decisions, blocks them from engaging in otherwise unjustified actions, and even mandates disclosure of the ATC process. All of this limits the benefit of such beliefs to self and other, but is necessary if we're to take serious the very foundations of the approach.

Interestingly, the same sorts of considerations that lead one agnostic to hold qualified religious beliefs could actually compel another to hold qualified *anti*-religious beliefs—perhaps someone with a vehemently anti-religious family and a strong personal aversion to religion. ATC calculations could also recommend that a religious family drop their beliefs and join a lone agnostic. And forces could even align such that certain satisfied agnostics with agnostic or ambivalent family members should remain just as they are—agnostic. Whatever the practical upshot for particular cases, I believe that the ATC approach to the ethics of belief does a better job of accurately extending the premises used by Clifford and Wood to support evidentialism, and that it is therefore ethically superior, even if psychologically unorthodox.