

## Wishful believing

The Cranky Professor

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Believe according to the strength of your evidence and only according to the strength of your evidence, or so at least taught David Hume, the eighteenth-century philosopher whose account of the nature and limits of reason continues to set the terms of debate.

To the extent that your evidence in favour of a proposition is weak, Hume said, hold lightly your belief that that proposition is true. To the extent that your evidence is strong, hold your belief strongly, with real confidence that it is true. If you have evidence both ways, believe in accordance with the weight of evidence overall, but maintain a level of doubt appropriate to the evidence against. If evidence is more or less equal both ways, suspend judgement. Certainly suspend judgement should the evidence you have fail to meet proper standards of evidence for belief.

Proper standards of evidence? Some people are more credulous than others; perhaps by nature we are all at least a little prone to believing things readily. Even so, as we gain experience and note the example of others, we fashion and firm more exacting standards of evidence. For the most part we do this unconsciously, or at least unthinkingly. There's a danger that as our habits of belief develop and improve, we'll become too exacting, thereby cutting ourselves off from some amount of truth and understanding. This danger, though, is more speculative than real. More likely is that despite our efforts we fail to become exacting enough.

So the first task on this view of believing responsibly is to acquire proper standards for believing. To meet this task, we study probability theory and statistics, for instance, and we investigate the methods of science.

The main task, though, does not concern belief or reasoning at all. The main task concerns the will. Even a person whose standards of warrant are high might simply fail to live by them. The chief obstacle to believing responsibly isn't believing in light of poor standards of belief. It is, rather, believing against one's standards of belief, believing in violation of them. This phenomenon, the phenomenon of believing a proposition in violation of one's own standards for belief, we call wishful believing.

We believe a proposition wishfully when our belief is sustained not by evidence but by our desire that the world be as the proposition describes. Keep the evidence the same but subtract the desire; if the belief disappears, then the belief was held wishfully. Sally believes that Martin is still alive. Since, though, her belief is sustained not by whatever evidence she has that he is alive, but rather by her desire that he still be alive, Sally believes that Martin is still alive wishfully.

Why care to believe responsibly? Why care always to believe in accordance with high epistemic standards? If Sally does better from her own perspective by believing that Martin is still alive, why shouldn't she believe he is?

One argument against being open to believing wishfully tells us that since beliefs held wishfully are less likely to be true than beliefs held on good evidence are, we should always be concerned to believe only on good evidence. The key idea in this argument is that acting on a false belief is no way to get what you want. Thus, prudence counsels us to have high standards for belief and to endeavour to live up to them.

The argument is unsatisfying in two ways. First, not all beliefs we might hold wishfully are beliefs we can act on in ways that could get us into trouble. One who believes wishfully that God understands him and loves him will not order breakfast or apply for a job in a way different than one who doesn't hold this belief. Second, the argument underestimates our ability to violate our norms prudently. Safe drivers obey the speed limit—for the most part. That is, sometimes they speed, for they recognize that overall in the situation it's worth sacrificing a tiny, tiny bit of safety to gain something else that matters.

In the end, the only strong reason one could have for refusing to be open to believing wishfully is that one wants to understand things as they are. Since to understand something is to have true and interconnected beliefs about it, one who believes something wishfully doesn't understand the thing about which he has beliefs. He doesn't understand it, even if his wishful belief is true.

Now the project of understanding things as they are attracts only a minority of people, or perhaps only a minority of people pursue it frequently and committedly. Yet for those who do pursue it frequently and committedly, the project of understanding things as they are is never to be traded for any of the bliss that might come from believing what one wants to believe.