

Chapter 6

Understanding Things As They Are For the Sake of Understanding Them As They Are

To believe something wishfully is to believe it not on the basis of evidence but because either one would like that it is true or one would like to believe that it is true. Should one ever believe something wishfully? Of course not, for believing wishfully is always a bad gamble. One who believes something wishfully and gets away unharmed has simply been lucky. Almost always, what one would gain by holding a belief wishfully is outweighed by the risk of loss and, so, prudence requires that one adopt a stringent policy against believing wishfully. Or at least so goes a first response to our question.

We have seen that this first response is mistaken. Indeed, as things appear to us now, after having discussed wishful believing for three chapters, we would have to conclude that to refuse ever to believe something wishfully is to live under a debilitating prejudice.

To refuse, as a matter of principle or habit, ever to believe something wishfully is to live under a debilitating prejudice—except when one values for its own sake understanding things as those things are, and values for its own sake understanding things as those things are above all else that one values for its own sake. That, at least, is what we will argue in this final chapter on wishful believing. One who values for its own sake above all else understanding things as they are is wise to be committed never to believe something wishfully.

But no one else is wise to have an overriding commitment not to believe something wishfully.

Everyone else does well to be open to believing wishfully, for there are easily discerned cases in which we can reap the benefit of believing as our heart desires without in the process putting anything dear to us at risk.

Should one be a person of the sort who values for its own sake understanding things as they are, and who values this above all else she values for its own sake? It *can* be wise to be a person of this sort. For most of us, though, we would not be wise to be a person of that sort.

For most of us, wisdom counsels instead that we place some of our ends ahead of the end of understanding things, even if we do have as one of our ends understanding things. And so, even though it can be wise to believe only according to the evidence one has, most of us are wise to be open to believing wishfully.

1. Wishful believing

To believe something wishfully is to believe it. The attitude in question is belief, not supposition or hypothesis or any cognitive attitude different from belief. To daydream that one is successful isn't to believe that one is successful, and so it isn't to believe it wishfully. Wishful belief is even less a non-cognitive attitude. A wishful belief, because it is a belief, is not itself a hope or a desire or a liking. A wishful belief is a belief like all one's other beliefs.

What makes a belief wishful is what sustains it. A wishful belief is a belief sustained by a conative or affective attitude. One believes that *p* wishfully when one believes that *p* because of a desire or wish or hope or preference or liking that one has. Now it is possible that one believes that *p* wishfully even though one does have, according to one's own epistemic

standards, evidence that “p” is true sufficient to warrant one’s believing that p. What makes a belief wishful in the presence of sufficient evidence is that the evidence is not the cause of the belief. Without the evidence, the belief would remain; but without the relevant conative or affective attitude, the belief would depart. Typically, of course, we believe a proposition wishfully only when we lack what is, by our standards, sufficient evidence that that proposition is true. Though it is possible for one to believe something wishfully in the presence of good evidence for that something, it will simplify matters to speak of wishful beliefs as beliefs sustained by conative or affective attitudes in the absence of sufficient evidence that they are true. In any case, in believing wishfully, one is at least indifferent to one’s epistemic standards if not flouting them entirely.

The conative or affective attitude responsible for the belief held wishfully might have the same propositional content as the belief, but it need not. Sally would like that her cat is healthy, and this liking causes Sally to believe that her cat is healthy. Roger desires that people like him, and this desire causes him to believe that people like him. In these cases, the affective or conative attitude has the same content as the belief it sustains. Martha, on the other hand, would like to believe that her dog is healthy, not because she would like that her dog is healthy, but rather because should she believe that her dog is healthy, she would see no need to take her dog to the vet, and Martha would like to avoid the expense and trouble of taking her dog to the vet. The conative or affective attitude responsible for Martha’s wishful belief concerns taking the dog to the vet, not the dog’s health. Jim is indifferent to the idea that lower taxes for the wealthy means better economic times for all, but he wants to be part of the in-crowd and members of the in-crowd believe that lower taxes for the wealthy means better economic times for all, and so Jim wants to believe that lower taxes for the wealthy means better economic times for all.

This distinction, the distinction between believing that p because one wants that p or would like that p and believing that p because one wants to believe that p or would like to believe that p, won’t concern us much in what follows. Either way, a belief sustained on the basis not of evidence but on desire or liking is a belief held wishfully.

2. The argument against being open to believing things wishfully

The prudent person avoids believing wishfully, according to the argument we first saw back in Chapter 3, for almost any case of believing something wishfully is a bad gamble. Certainly, by believing something wishfully, we might benefit in some way; after all, only the expectation of benefit could cause us to violate our epistemic standards so as to believe wishfully. But we also put at risk things that matter to us when we indulge ourselves by believing wishfully. If the risk is great, or if the thing that matters to us matters significantly, then it is foolish to believe wishfully. And, according to this line of thought, often by believing something wishfully either probably we will sooner or later suffer bad consequences or the bad consequences we could suffer would be very bad indeed. And, so, most often it is foolish to believe wishfully.

The argument for the prudence of believing only on good evidence concerns the relation of belief to action. Specifically, we act as we do in pursuit of our ends because we believe what we do. We guide our pursuit of our ends by our beliefs. If we want milk, we go where we believe we can get milk and do what we believe will get us milk. If we want a

good liberal arts education, we enrol in what we believe is a good liberal arts programme and we participate in that programme in ways we believe will provide us with a good liberal arts education. Now suppose that one of the beliefs that guides us in the pursuit of some end is false. We're in a shopping mall, and we believe we can get a small carton of homogenized milk at just about any outlet at the food court. Our belief is false; no outlet at this food court carries homogenized milk. We want homogenized milk, and, so, guided by our false belief, we head to the nearby food court rather than out the doors and across the street to the grocery store. We fail to attain our end. We fail to purchase a small carton of homogenized milk because we guided our quest by a false belief. In failing to purchase milk we forfeit the reward we sought and we pay penalties in wasted time, wasted effort, and bad feelings. The conclusion to draw is that it is prudent to avoid believing that which is false.

It can happen that an action guided by a false belief manages to succeed in attaining its intended end. When that happens, though, it happens by accident. Such fortunate accidents must be extremely rare. So prudence certainly counsels against believing falsely. This isn't, though, the conclusion that prudence counsels in favour of believing only on good evidence. The argument continues, then, with the thought that propositions for which a person lacks evidence are more likely false than are propositions for which he has good evidence. The more evidence there is, or the stronger any piece of evidence is, the more likely the proposition is true. So, if it is prudent to guard against believing falsely, it is prudent to believe on good evidence, for well evidenced propositions are less likely to be false than poorly evidenced ones. To believe wishfully is, typically, to believe despite lacking good evidence. Thus, beliefs held wishfully are more likely to be false than are beliefs held on good evidence. Therefore, it seems that, in the end, prudence counsels us not to believe wishfully.

Let us grant, for the moment, that most often it would be foolish to try to reap some benefit by believing something wishfully. Let us grant, that is, that most often the risk of harm or the extent of the harm risked outweighs whatever benefits one might reap by believing something wishfully. This result by itself does not imply that it is foolish to be open to believing things wishfully. It does not establish that it is wise to adopt a commitment not to believe anything wishfully. What it shows is just that it is prudent to be careful when tempted to believe something wishfully. The advice that follows from the above argument is only to weigh potential benefits and potential harms carefully in light of the probabilities, mindful that most likely the temptation to believe wishfully should be resisted. The prudent person is, then, the person who evaluates whether it is wise to believe wishfully on a case-by-case basis. Most often he refrains from believing something in violation of his epistemic standards, despite his desire to believe it-but if the probability of reaping a benefit while avoiding harms is high enough, or if the benefits to be reaped are significant enough, he believes wishfully (or at least tries to).

Can we find our way to the contention that the prudent person avoids believing wishfully generally, as a matter of principle or habit? Again, grant that believing wishfully is almost always a bad gamble. Now note that estimating costs, risks, penalties, and benefits in any particular case is time and trouble, as is weighing them to arrive at a decision. Add that people are not especially good at estimating costs, risks, penalties, or benefits. We tend to overestimate benefits and to underestimate both the probability of bad consequences and how bad those bad consequences are. All these points together tell us that it's not worth the time

and trouble to take matters on a case-by-case basis, especially as we cannot be confident that we've got the case right. And, so, prudence says to commit oneself generally to refrain from believing wishfully. In time and with luck, a person's principled commitment not to believe wishfully will harden into habit, and she will seldomly if ever even be tempted to believe wishfully anymore.

3. An objection to the argument above and responses to it

According to the argument just presented, it is foolish to believe something wishfully when one might guide one's pursuit of some end by that belief for, if one does call on that belief in some pursuit, one stands an almost certain chance of failing to attain one's end. Still, as we noted, it is possible in one or another case that the end one could successfully pursue by believing something wishfully is so important to one that, considered as a single case, one ought to take the risks involved in believing that thing wishfully. But, finally, determining in any specific case whether indeed the risk of believing wishfully is a risk worth taking is both difficult to do and uncertain, and it is always costly in time and effort. And, so, prudence counsels that we simply refrain generally from believing wishfully.

The one weakness with this argument is that it concerns only those beliefs that guide actions. But not all beliefs guide actions. Some beliefs we have are never called on to direct us in our endeavours. Indeed, some beliefs are by their very nature not beliefs that could guide an action. Sally will never, just as a matter of fact, call on her belief that rising too quickly from the depths of the sea can cause the bends, for Sally will never find herself in the depths of the sea. She can believe what she likes about deep sea diving with impunity. Roger will never, for in principle he cannot, call on his belief that the universe is expanding to guide him in pursuing any of his ends, for he would pursue none of those ends any differently were he not to believe this.

There are two responses possible here, and one who rejects as imprudent being open to believing wishfully can help herself to both at once. First, it is hard to tell whether a belief one has will or will not ever guide one's pursuit of some end. It's best not to have a false belief just in case it does get pressed into service. Second, believing wishfully and reaping a reward in one case can incline one to believe wishfully in other cases, cases in which one won't be so lucky. To protect against eventually falling victim to an action that failed because of a false belief, don't believe wishfully even when you judge that the rewards are sure and the costs minimal.

4. Propositions belief in which is not action guiding

Are there important cases in which the rewards of believing some particular proposition are substantial and a person can be reasonably sure that he or she won't come to harm, or to much harm, in either the short or the long run, by believing that proposition even should he or she lack evidence that it is true? Yes, there are, and that is why the arguments of Sections 2 and 3 fail to establish that it is best for a person generally to refuse to believe wishfully. We ought to be careful when tempted to believe something for which we have little or no positive evidence, or some contrary evidence, but we ought not to refuse categorically ever to believe wishfully, for then we will miss safe opportunities to improve our lives.

For most of us, there are plenty of propositions we would do well to believe even should we lack evidence they are true, and even given most of the premises of the arguments above. These propositions can be grouped under four heads. First are propositions belief in which helps to make them true. Examples are “I can win this race,” “Our marriage is strong,” and “People like me.” Second are propositions belief in which helps to sustain one in one’s endeavours. Examples are “It matters that I treat people fairly, whether I benefit thereby or not,” “Whatever happens, I am safe in God’s hands,” and “Each setback is an opportunity.” Third are propositions belief in which helps one to sustain one’s preferred self image. Examples are “I possess free will and am responsible for my actions,” “Despite my flaws, really I am a good person,” “I’ve earned my [high] station in life,” and “I’ve done nothing to merit my [low] station in life.” Fourth are propositions that are comforting to believe or painful not to believe. Examples are “God understands me and loves me,” “That bastard will get his,” and “My missing cat is alive and well.” (We might, of course, for anyone of these propositions, have adequate evidence that it is true, evidence, that is, that is adequate by our own standards. These propositions are given simply as examples of propositions that we could well be prudent to believe even should we lack adequate evidence for them.)

It is not a bad gamble to believe a proposition for which one lacks evidence whenever: 1) by believing it, one will likely reap some benefit (some chance of a significant benefit or a high chance of a minor benefit); and 2) by believing it, one will not likely disadvantage oneself overall. So long as a person tempted to believe one or another of the propositions listed above can reasonably conclude that both 1) and 2) hold with regard to it, that person is not imprudent to believe it. Indeed, if the benefit one judges one likely will reap cannot be got in any other way than by believing that proposition, then one is positively foolish not to believe. (The presence of this last condition along with 1) and 2) turns prudential permissibility into prudential obligation.)

But can a person tempted to believe something for which he lacks evidence determine whether 1) and 2) hold? Can we reliably determine in such cases whether 1) and 2) hold? Consider Sally, who reasons as follows: I want very much to possess peace of mind. Thus, I am prudentially required to do whatever will bring me peace of mind, so long as attempting to attain peace of mind in that way will not create serious problems for me and I can attain peace of mind no other way. Were I to believe that God understands me and loves me, I would possess peace of mind, and unless I believe that God understands me and loves me, I will not possess peace of mind. In believing that God understands me and loves me, I will not put anything I care about at risk, for there is no end I might pursue that I would pursue differently should I believe that God understands me and loves me rather than not believe this; so, believing it will not cause me to fail in any project I undertake. Therefore, I am under an obligation of prudence to (try to) believe that God understands me and loves me. And yet, I have no evidence that God understands me and loves me. Maybe there is no God; anyway, I’m not sure I’m lovable. But none of that is to the point. My conclusion stands: I am under an obligation of prudence to (try to) believe that God understands me and loves me. –Each premise in this chain of thought could well be true in Sally’s case, and Sally could reasonably believe each true. Given that the inferences are strong, if Sally does reasonably believe each premise, then Sally should indeed attempt to believe that God understands her and loves her, though to do so would be to ignore her epistemic standards for believing.

Sally can reliably determine whether believing some proposition against her epistemic standards might put at risk something she values because Sally can readily see whether believing that proposition will affect the way in which she pursues what she values. Suppose that it is false that God understands Sally and loves her. Sally has come to believe that God understands her and loves her, but she believes this mistakenly. Nonetheless, there is no project she has that she will pursue differently in virtue of having this false belief. And, so, this false belief will not bring her grief through causing some project of hers to fail. Her belief that God understands her and loves her is not relevantly like her belief that she can purchase homogenized milk at the food court, and she can easily note that it isn't.

Similar reasoning applies to the each of the propositions given above as examples. Roger has entered the race and wants to win it. If believing that he can win it will increase his chances of winning it, Roger ought to (try to) believe that he can win it. Roger can see that though believing the proposition that Roger can win the race will put him in a better frame of mind for running the race, it will not itself guide his endeavour; hence, Roger can see that he has nothing to lose by believing it. If he loses the race, he loses it not in virtue of believing he can win it. Martha, for her part, is a happy person because she is an optimistic person, and her optimism rests on her wishful belief that every setback is actually an opportunity. This belief causes her to seek opportunities when otherwise she would give up in despair—and, sometimes, she finds them. Her life would be poorer were she to lack this belief. Martha is wise to believe that every setback is actually an opportunity, for she has seen that she puts nothing at risk even should her belief be false.

5. Beliefs that guide pursuits and beliefs that set pursuits

One might say in response to the argument of Section 4 that Sally's believing that God understands her and loves her certainly *will* affect what she does. Having this belief might cause her to become more devote, to spend more time in worship and in doing what she deems would please God. Or it might well cause her to spend less time trying to please God, as she now takes God's love for granted. In either case, some change in Sally's behaviour since coming to believe that God understands her and loves her could very well have as its cause her coming to have this belief. Moreover, the projects that Sally assumes as a result of coming to this new belief could fail or otherwise bring trouble to Sally. The claim that the above argument rests on, one might contend—the claim, that is, that her having this belief will not affect the ways in which she makes her way in the world—is false.

This response fails to note an important distinction, the distinction between a belief that helps to guide a pursuit and a belief that helps to set a pursuit. Sally will do whatever she does in the same way she would do it were she not to believe that God understands her and loves her, and so her new belief will not help to guide her pursuit of any end. That, together with the claim that Sally can reasonably determine that this is so, is all that is needed to reach the conclusion that Sally is not imprudent to be open to believing things wishfully. Of course it is true that now, with her new belief, she will have new ends and will be motivated to undertake different projects. Her having this belief can explain why she values certain things that she now does or why she pursues certain ends that she didn't pursue before. Her confidence that God loves her brings her new goals and makes it possible for her to consider pursuing them. But her success in these pursuits will depend on the beliefs that guide her in

them. The belief that made it possible for her to *want* to pursue these new ends is not a belief that will guide her pursuit of them, and so its falsity will not be responsible for any misstep she takes.

6. Understanding things as they are for its own sake

We have defended the contention that it is prudentially wise to be open to believing things wishfully. We have defended it on the grounds that there are certain propositions belief in which can bring one benefits while not putting one at risk of harm, propositions belief in which one can confidently determine will not put one at risk of harm. Let us now turn to the matter of those people, few though there might be, who value highly and for its own sake understanding things as those things are.

Many of us are loath to believe wishfully, even when we perceive that it is in our best interests overall to do so. The lesson to draw from our discussion in Section 4 is that for many of us, our disdain for believing wishfully is debilitating. Our lives would be improved were we open to believing wishfully. Our lives would be improved for there are plenty of instances in which believing something though we lack evidence for it will aid us in securing our goals, and we can reliably distinguish these instances from those in which believing without evidence would put us at risk. We would be happier, more contented, and more efficient in pursuing our goals were we to examine cases individually and to believe, despite lacking evidence, whenever we conclude it judicious to do so.

We have, though, so far spoken only about the instrumental value of believing something. Our discussion has concerned the place of believing something in bringing about some end, some end we value for its own sake. It is prudent to be concerned to believe truly whenever one's belief might guide some action, for actions guided by false beliefs are likely to fail. (We can agree that it is also unethical not to be concerned to believe truly whenever one's belief might guide some action, for actions that fail can well unintentionally bring harm to others, and it is always ethically wrong to put people at risk of harm.) One's best defence against believing falsely is to believe according to one's epistemic standards; so, when it comes to propositions belief in which might guide an action, the prudent person believes only on what he deems sufficient evidence. But it is imprudent to be concerned not to believe falsely when having the belief will likely bring one reward overall whether it is true or false. Since for most of us there are many propositions belief in which will likely bring us reward overall whether they are true or false, for most of us it is foolish to refuse on principle to believe except on good evidence.

But what of those people who value for its own sake understanding things as those things are? As one does not understand something as it is if within one's understanding of it there are false beliefs, believing truly is constitutive of the project of understanding things as they are. Anyone who wants, for its own sake, to understand things as they are ought not, then, believe anything in violation of her epistemic standards, at least if she is never willing to put the project of understanding things aside for awhile in favour of other projects.

The project of understanding things is not, it should be noted, identical to the project of believing truly. We understand something only when our true beliefs about it are arranged in patterns of implication and explanation and serve to support some counterfactuals and not others. Moreover, while clearly a person could value for its own sake understanding things as

they are, not so clearly could a person value for its own sake simply believing truly. We value believing truly, when we do, because believing truly is a constitutive part of understanding things. It is because we value believing truly only in the context of trying to understand things that an openness to wishful belief cannot be defended on the grounds that a careful wishful believer will possess more true beliefs than a person who believes only according to high epistemic standards will. The claim that a careful wishful believer will occasionally hold a true belief when a doubter, in virtue of having suspended judgement for want of evidence, will not, might be right. But it is pointless merely to have a true belief when that belief stands alone or when one does not appreciate its connections to other true beliefs one has.

We all, of course, have many projects, and we all know the pain of compromising or abandoning one of them so that another project might fare well. So even a person committed for its own sake to the pursuit of understanding things might do well to be open to believing wishfully. That leaves, in the end, only the person strongly committed for its own sake to the pursuit of understanding things who is committed to no other pursuit more strongly. For only such a person cannot possibly have a determining reason to believe without good evidence any proposition about any range of things. And that implies that only such a person can have good reason for thinking that his projects will never be advanced overall by believing something wishfully. So only a person who values for its own sake above all else she values for its own sake understanding things as they are is prudentially wise to be closed on principle to believing something wishfully.

Now most people who take science or philosophy seriously are, I hazard, disgusted by the idea of believing something wishfully. It is repellent to them. They are unhappy when they find they have been believing something on evidence insufficient to warrant belief and they disparage and feel uncomfortable around people given to believing wishfully. Their strong emotional reaction is evidence that they do not reject being open to believing wishfully on the grounds that being open is a bad gamble, though they might (falsely) believe that it is. They reject it instead because believing wishfully is a repudiation of something they hold dear, namely, seeing things as they really are. They find ignoble any attitude contrary to a strong concern to see things as they really are. Many readers of this text, I suppose, take science or philosophy seriously; many people around you in your class, then, perhaps including you yourself, value for its own sake understanding things as they are, and value it strongly if not, ultimately, above all else they value for its own sake. Some, at least, of these people are right to be closed on principle to believing things wishfully.

Can it be wise to be a person who values for its own sake above all else understanding things as they are? Yes, it can—but only when one is aware of all that one must live without in being such a person.