

## Believing Wishfully

Thesis: To refuse as a matter of principle or habit ever to believe something wishfully is to live under a debilitating prejudice.

This thesis is true for all except those who

- 1) value for its own sake, and
  - 2) value above all else they value for its own sake
- understanding things accurately.

Persons who value for its own sake understanding things accurately, and value it above all else they value for its own sake,  
are right to be committed never to believe wishfully.

And no one else is right to have an overriding commitment not to believe wishfully.

### I. Believing wishfully

- 1) To believe some proposition wishfully is to believe it because one would like for it to be true or because one desires that it be true

Sally would like that her cat is healthy,  
and that she would like that her cat is healthy brings Sally to believe that her cat is healthy.

So: Sally's belief that her cat is healthy is a wishful belief.

- 2) To believe some proposition wishfully is to believe it because one would like to have the belief or because one desires to have the belief

Sally would like to believe that her cat is healthy,  
because in believing that her cat is healthy she can avoid taking him to the vet  
or because she is comforted or pleased by believing that her cat is healthy.  
And that she would like to believe that her cat is healthy (for one or another reason) causes Sally to believe that her cat is healthy.

So: Sally's belief that her cat is healthy is a wishful belief.

### II. The argument from prudence against believing things wishfully

In many cases, believing something because one would like it to be true or because one would like to believe it will bring one to suffer bad consequences.

In these cases, pursuing the benefits one might reap by believing wishfully isn't worth the risk of taking the penalties that one might take.

But why adopt a policy of refraining from believing wishfully?

Why not simply judge cases on their merits?

Why not adopt a policy of refraining from believing wishfully only when either the risk of penalty is high or the penalty one risks is large?

Wouldn't it be prudent to be open to believing things wishfully so that one can take advantage of situations in which believing wishfully is a good gamble?

An argument that it is prudent to believe only on good evidence:

Part I

1. We guide our pursuit of our ends by our beliefs.

2. An action guided by a false belief is highly likely to fail to attain its intended end.

3. We forfeit rewards and pay penalties when our actions fail to attain their intended ends.

Therefore: 4. It is prudent to avoid believing that which is false.

Part II

4. It is prudent to avoid believing that which is false.

5. Beliefs for one has poor evidence are more likely false than beliefs for which one has good evidence.

Therefore: 6. It is prudent to believe only on good evidence.

—But not all beliefs guide actions. Why not believe wishfully when one won't guide any action by that belief?

1) It is hard to tell whether one will or won't ever find oneself guiding an action by some belief

2) Believing wishfully and reaping a reward in one case can cause one to be more inclined to believe wishfully in other cases.

The upshot of this argument: It is almost always a bad gamble to believe something wishfully.

III. Believing wishfully: In theory

The argument above says

that it is imprudent to be open to believing something wishfully

because,

most often,

the reward to be had by believing something wishfully is outweighed either by the probability of suffering harm or by the magnitude of the harm one might suffer.

So it is not imprudent to believe that p when:

1) by believing that p, one will likely reap some benefit (chance of significant benefit or high chance of minor benefit)

and

2) by believing that p, one will likely not disadvantage oneself overall (low chance of significant penalty or chance of only minor penalty)

—even should one lack good evidence that p.

Well, sure, and:

In theory, I could someday have a prudential obligation to drive a pencil through my hand.

But since most likely that day is never going to come, I do well by being closed in principle to driving a pencil through my hand.

#### IV. Believing wishfully: In practice

For most of us, often it happens that conditions 1) and 2) obtain.

Consider propositions from these four broad categories:

A. Propositions belief in which helps to make them true:

“I can win this race.”

“Our marriage is strong.”

“People like me.”

B. Propositions belief in which helps to sustain one in one’s endeavours:

“It matters that I treat people fairly, whether I benefit or not.”

“Whatever happens, I am safe in God’s hands.”

“Each setback is actually an opportunity.”

C. Propositions belief in which helps to sustain one’s preferred self-image:

“I possess free will and am responsible for my actions.”

“Despite my flaws, I’m really a good person.”

“I’ve earned my [high] station in life.”

“I’ve done nothing to deserve my [low] station in life.”

D. Propositions belief in which is comforting (or propositions it would be painful not to believe):

“God understands me and loves me.”

“That bastard’ll get his.” (Time wounds all heels.)

“My cat is healthy.”

For most of us,

one or another proposition from one or another of these categories is both  
poorly evidenced and  
not imprudent to believe.

One or another might be such that indeed we are prudentially required to believe it.

V. The general form of an argument in favour of believing a proposition wishfully

1. I want very much [to possess peace of mind].

Thus: 2. 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.

3. Were I to believe that [God understands me and loves me], I would [possess peace of mind].

4. Unless I believe that [God understands me and loves me] I will not [attain peace of mind].

5. Believing that [God understands me and loves me] will not create any serious problems for me, for the costs of believing this are low and the risk of my taking (substantial) penalties in believing it is also low.

Therefore:

6. I am under an obligation of prudence to (try to) believe that [God understands me and loves me].

—But maybe I have no reason to think that God exists and some reason to believe that I’m not lovable.

Still, I am required by prudence to believe that God understands me and loves me.

(For “peace of mind” substitute any desired outcome and for “God understands me and loves me” substitute any proposition for which one lacks good evidence.)

VI. The fifth premise

Why think it can often be true that the cost of believing something wishfully is low or that either the risk of penalty is low or the penalty itself would be small?

—This premise is the crucial difference between the argument that believing wishfully is almost always a bad gamble and the argument that quite often believing wishfully is a good gamble.

Suppose it false that God understands Sally and loves her (God doesn't exist or doesn't love her).

Still, Sally pursues no end she has differently than she would were she not to believe that God understands her and loves her.

But Sally might pursue ends she wouldn't pursue were she not to believe God understands her and loves her.

—If she comes to harm pursuing these ends, it would be in virtue of the beliefs that guide her actions,

not in virtue of the beliefs that help to set her ends.

## VII. The lesson so far

Many of us are loath to believe wishfully, even when it is in our best interests to do so.

Our disdain for wishful believing is debilitating.

Our lives would be improved were we to be open to believing wishfully, so long as we can do so judiciously.

We would be happier, more contented, and more efficient in our pursuits were we to examine cases individually and to believe wishfully when it is judicious to do so.

## VIII. Objections

- 1) Believing something is not itself doing something.
- 2) We cannot be clear-headed about whether to deceive ourselves.
- 3) We cannot reliably determine that a belief will not guide an action.
- 4) Any advantage we could gain by believing something wishfully we could gain in some other way.
- 5) So-called wishful beliefs aren't actually beliefs. They are conative or affective attitudes.
- 6) Even when believing something wishfully is prudent, believing it wishfully puts other people at risk of harm.
- 7) It is ignoble to believe something wishfully. People of integrity simply do not go in for it.

—Each of these seven objections to being open to believing things wishfully can be answered decisively.

(An exercise: develop each of the sketches of an objection given above into a full-fledged objection, explaining exactly how it supposed to show false the contention that it is wise to be open to believing things wishfully. Then answer that objection decisively.)

## IX. Understanding things accurately for the sake of understanding things accurately

To believe a proposition wishfully is to be indifferent to one's epistemic standards, if not to violate them.

Believing according to one's epistemic standards is the best defence one has against believing falsely.

But why should one care overridingly not to believe falsely?

1) For the sake of this or that of one's projects.

—But sometimes, as the argument in Section V above shows, one's projects can be advanced by (and sometimes advanced only by) believing something wishfully, even if that means believing falsely or at risk of believing falsely.

2) For the sake of the project of understanding things accurately.

—Here avoiding false beliefs is constitutive of the project.

One who values above all else understanding some range of things cannot have a determining reason to believe wishfully any proposition about things in that range. His epistemic standards are, for that range of things, ultimate.

And 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 above all understanding things accurately is prudentially wise to be closed on principle to believing things wishfully.