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Thinking Critically About Beliefs It's Hard to Think Critically About

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Abstract: There are some beliefs that are difficult to think critically about, even for those who have critical thinking skills and are committed to applying them to their own beliefs. These resistant beliefs are not all of a kind, and so a range of different strategies may be needed to get ourselves and others (in particular our students) to think critically about them. In this paper we suggest some such strategies.

Keywords: belief, confirmation bias, critical thinking

1. Introduction

Ideally, one might think, people should subject their own beliefs to impartial scrutiny, weighing up the evidence for and against them and modifying them as the evidence demands. There are psychological barriers to doing this even when the beliefs in question are everyday and inconsequential. Examples include confirmation bias [preferentially noticing and over-rating the significance of evidence in favour of our current belief (Koriat, Lichtenstein, & Fischhoff, 1980)], belief perseverance [a tendency to continue to believe things even after our reasons to believe them have been undermined (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975)], the tendency to evaluate arguments whose conclusions we believe more favourably than equally good ones whose conclusions we don't believe (Markovits, 2003; Stanovich & West, 2008), and the tendency to be less sensitive to our own inconsistencies than to the inconsistencies of others (Paul, 2002, p. 181). These psychological tendencies are not dependent on any feature of the beliefs in question other than their being one's own.

In this paper we concern ourselves with beliefs that are even more than usually difficult to think critically about. These intransigent beliefs are not all of a kind, and strategies for getting ourselves and others (in particular, our students) to think critically about them will differ accordingly. Some beliefs are resistant to critical thinking because we are unaware that we hold them, some because we are unaware of our *reasons* for holding them, some because they are identity-constituting or in some other way central to how we live our lives, some because they are socially or culturally reinforced. A belief can belong to more than one of these categories, and not every belief that has one of these characteristics is resistant to critical thinking: for example, sometimes simply having it pointed out to you that you have no good reason to hold a previously unexamined belief suffices to dispel that belief.

Other things being equal, it is a good thing to subject your own beliefs to critical scrutiny: the very point of critical thinking is the forming of true beliefs and the avoidance of false ones, and in general, true beliefs tend to help one navigate the world successfully. However, there may be exceptions: some cases in which it's not clear that critically examining one's own beliefs is the best thing to do will come up towards the end of this discussion.

2. Inherited beliefs, beliefs we are unaware of and beliefs we are unaware of our reasons for holding

Richard Paul (1993) and others suggest that many of our fundamental beliefs are not rationally thought through, but uncritically accepted after being inherited from the groups within which we were brought up as children and to which we belong as adults (pp. 192, 259, 463). Paul (1993) suggests that the process and its results are largely invisible to us (p. 192). We may not realize *that* we have a particular belief, let alone why we do. A belief like this cannot be subjected to critical examination, at least not without first being brought to the surface.

Consider James, a 50-year-old who has voted for the same party (the party his parents voted for during his childhood) in every general election since he reached voting age. (Suppose, for the sake of simplicity, that there are only two parties to choose between.) During every election campaign, he listens to the arguments put forward by the competing parties, considers their merits, and decides (always in the same direction) which one to vote for. He regards himself as a conscientious epistemic citizen—he thinks that he evaluates the arguments open-mindedly and that during each election campaign he is open to the possibility that this time he should vote for the other party. However, external observers can see that James is mistaken about this. Even when the parties shift their ground so that the other party occupies the political ground formerly occupied by James's party, James, while still asserting the same substantive political views as ever, continues to vote for the same party. On the basis of his behaviour, it seems clear that James has a set of beliefs about the two political parties that he does not know he has.

Not knowing that he has these beliefs, James may not respond properly to evidence against them. For example, if part of what drives James's voting behaviour is the unacknowledged belief the National Party is the party of big business and that its policies always disadvantage regular working folk, and he notices evidence that current National Party policies are more centrist, he may not regard this as relevant information, since he is unaware that he has the belief in question.

It's clear that you can't think critically about such a belief until you come to be aware that you have it. How might a critical thinking teacher encourage such self-awareness in her students? Some critical thinking textbooks include discussion of psychological barriers to critical thinking, such as confirmation bias. Students, although interested in such biases as problems that other people have, tend to be initially disinclined to think that *they themselves* have these tendencies. A first step towards getting them to see that there may be things going on in their heads that they can't introspect might be to have them do some of the Harvard Implicit Bias tests—they provide a striking illustration of this point. Once students see this, they may be more inclined to notice when their behaviour is at odds with their avowed beliefs, and providing them with case studies such as the James case discussed above may help them with this.

Of course, not all inherited beliefs are ones that we are unaware of: some have been thought through and endorsed, and some are beliefs that the believer is aware of having but has never critically examined. In a study in which we interviewed undergraduates about beliefs that

were in some sense “deeply held,” many of the interviewees claimed to never have considered why they thought it was morally okay to eat meat (Goldberg, Kingsbury, Bowell & Howard, 2015). They’d always thought it was okay, their families thought it was okay, they’d never considered it might be otherwise. These participants know what they believe, but they seem to have no idea why they believe it.

A three-part exercise we sometimes set our students may help to address this issue. First the students are asked, early in the critical thinking course, to pick some belief they care about and give the best argument for it they can think of (Part I). Their argument is then critically evaluated by one of their fellow students (Part II), and also receives constructive feedback (suggestions for making it a better argument) from the instructor. At the end of the course, hopefully having a better understanding than before of the difference between good and bad reasons for belief, the student improves their original argument in response to the feedback they have received from the fellow-student and the instructor, presenting it both in standard form and as an argument tree (Part III). Sometimes the feedback convinces them that their original conclusion was too strong, or even that it was completely misguided: in such cases, they are allowed to argue for whatever they now believe about the topic at issue. The final versions of the arguments are typically greatly improved, and in those cases where students really have argued for something they feel strongly about, we hope (and we are explicit about this in class) that the process has provided a model for future examination of their own reasons for belief.

3. Hard-won beliefs

The literature on the influence of worldviews on critical thinking focuses heavily on beliefs that have been imbibed with our mother’s milk. (See, for example, Paul, 1993; Bezinka, 1994; Mezirow, 1990). However, another possible etiology for an intransigent belief may be having put a lot of effort into reasoning your way to it. People may be reluctant to critically examine *hard-won* beliefs, since doing so brings with it the possibility that they will have to give them up. A person who has made an immense effort to overcome the religious inclinations she was brought up to, for example, may be particularly disinclined to give proper consideration to arguments in favour of religious belief.

This effect may be reinforced if the believer has been an outspoken evangelist for her hard-won beliefs, as there is the risk of loss of face. Consider Paula, a former meat-eater who has reasoned her way to the view that meat-eating is never morally okay and now loses no opportunity to try to convince others that they should be vegetarians. If Paula is faced with arguments for the morality of meat-eating and begins to have a glimmer that there is something right about them, the prospect of having to eat humble pie if she re-examines her reasons for being vegetarian and decides that after all the policy is unjustified might provide strong motivation *not* to re-examine them.

Pedagogically, it seems that the way to address these problems is to keep up a consistent emphasis on the importance of having good reasons for belief and on the efficacy of critical reasoning as a way of achieving this. Most critical thinking textbooks and courses open with this—for example, in our first lecture we use an extended example involving being on a jury, where you are required to evaluate arguments and also present them (to your fellow-jurors), and the defendant’s future hangs on whether you and your fellow-jurors do it well. It would be a mistake, however, to think this suffices—it is easy for students to later lose sight of the point of the enterprise, as they get entangled in the intricacies of validity and inductive force and in the

welter of fallacies. One way of getting students into the habit of thinking critically in their everyday lives is to have one of the items of assessment be a critical thinking journal, in which they reflect each week on occasions on which they have deployed their critical capacities and occasions on which they didn't but should have (Bowell & Kingsbury, 2015); this, combined with regular reminders of the practical importance of being a critical thinker and an emphasis on the epistemic virtuousness of the critical thinker (and the epistemic viciousness of those who lack the courage to follow the evidence when doing so would cause them embarrassment) might help to overcome such problems.

4. Beliefs that are central to how we live our lives and beliefs that are socially reinforced

Some beliefs are very deeply embedded in people's lives, such that giving them up would necessitate rethinking many of their other beliefs and changing their behaviour. This may provide an incentive to avoid critically examining them. Some participants in our study had this kind of defensive response to questioning about why they thought meat-eating was morally okay. For example, one says:

I don't know, I don't really think about it, and later, in response to some arguments (defensively): Everyone's entitled to their beliefs, I guess.
After some further discussion, she says
I try not to think about it.

Some of the interviewees don't want to be faced with evidence for fear of what they might have to conclude from it, and how they might feel they might have to change their behaviour in response. Behaving as you think you ought might be very difficult; it might be easier not to come to the conclusion that you ought. A second participant says she *wishes* she was a vegetarian, because she is fond of animals, but when she is told about some of the evidence of how badly the meat industry treats animals, she says: *To a certain extent, ignorance is bliss*, and later remarks that life is easier if you don't look at the evidence.

It seems clear these participants *ought* to think through their reasons for believing in the moral acceptability of eating meat and change their behaviour if this reasoning process necessitates it. But note that it may be especially difficult to do so in the environment these participants are in: most of them are in their late teens, many are still living with their parents, many of them live in a farming area in which meat-eating is taken for granted. There may be considerable social pressure not to give up meat, as well as the difficulty of finding anything to eat at home if you do so. The pedagogical suggestions from the previous section apply here as well.

There are other kinds of case in which it is less clear that we should expect or encourage people to think critically about their beliefs. Consider someone in a society in which being overtly non-religious is very severely punished, who has begun to have doubts about her religious beliefs. She could critically examine her reasons for holding them and then, if this causes her to cease to believe, continue to act as though she does believe. Or she could refrain from critically examining them so as not to risk putting herself in this position. On the face of it, it isn't obvious that the first of these approaches is better than the second. However, going through the reasoning process might put her in a position to consider other alternatives. If she comes to the conclusion that her former religious beliefs are unjustified, she is then in a position

to weigh up the consequences of being open about her beliefs and consider ways to do so that might reduce the negative consequences (for example, taking steps to find like-minded others who together might have resources that might enable some dramatic alternative such as escape or reform). If she concludes that the best thing to do is dissemble, that may be an uncomfortable position, but it isn't obvious that it is more uncomfortable than having to avoid looking front-on at beliefs you are beginning to have doubts about. This may in the end be a matter of individual psychology—what helps with survival in a difficult environment will be different for different people.

This is a case in which there is extreme social pressure to maintain a particular belief, and pedagogically it is important to be sensitive to the possibility that for some students, the consequences of critical thinking about some socially or culturally-reinforced beliefs may be non-trivial. This may be true also for some beliefs or sets of beliefs that are central to the way people live their lives, whether or not they are socially reinforced. Wittgenstein talks about religious belief this way:

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence although it's a belief, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. (Wittgenstein, 1998, p. 24)

This is an instance of the broader Wittgensteinian thought that some of our talk of belief and reasons for belief is misplaced, and not everything we might normally call a belief requires justification or is straightforwardly up for revision.

This is not to say that we should not encourage students to think critically about their religious beliefs or other beliefs that frame their lives. There are innumerable examples of misguided religious beliefs having appalling consequences, so it is worth reasoning about them if we can, and it is clear that sometimes we can. But we should approach such matters with sensitivity, and not be surprised if the process is difficult or if students resist it altogether. And perhaps sometimes, when what may be overturned is a whole way of life, reasoning about particular beliefs is beside the point.

5. Conclusion

Thinking critically about one's own beliefs is difficult, and this is especially so for some kinds of beliefs. In this paper we have talked about beliefs we are unaware of, unexamined beliefs, beliefs that are socially or culturally reinforced and beliefs that are central to how we live our lives, and made some suggestions about ways to encourage students to critically examine such beliefs. Our overall pedagogical approach is to be very explicit about the value of critical thinking in everyday life and the importance of developing good epistemic habits: we have also suggested some particular assignments that we think help with developing such habits. We conclude by suggesting that although critical thinking about one's own beliefs is generally a good thing, there may be cases in which it is too much to expect.

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