

Functionalism is, first and foremost, a theory of beliefs and desires. Moreover, it's a theory that is motivated by particular concerns: namely to achieve a reduction of the mental to the physical. We can question how well it achieves the reduction. But even setting these worries aside, we can ask how well it actually accounts for beliefs.

There are reasons for thinking that, if what we are after is a theory that gives us a full account of beliefs, we will have to complicate our picture.

Gendler on Alief

Gendler argues that there are many cases in which it's unclear how to make sense of an agent's behavior solely in terms of what she believes.

Examples:

- Experimental subject refuses to eat fudge shaped to look like dog poop.
- Experimental subject refuses to sign contract selling her soul to the devil, even when the contract says on the bottom "not a real contract, only a prop in psychology experiment."
- A man safely suspended in an iron cage, trembles when he surveys the precipice below him. (Hume)

Three observations:

In all these cases, the relevant agents seem to manifest some kind of irrationality or incoherence. There's a sense in which the subject "should" eat the fudge, sign the contract, not be worried about looking down into the precipice.

Second, this kind of irrationality is not easy to overcome. The tendency is recalcitrant.

Third, nevertheless, it's not like the ensuing action is 'mere behavior'. It's not in the same boat as a twitch or a seizure. But admits of something less than a full rationalizing explanation.

Gendler suggests that to make sense of these cases, we should introduce a novel mental state, distinct from belief: *alief*.

What is alief?

"An alief is, to a reasonable approximation, an innate or habitual propensity to respond to an apparent stimulus in a particular way." (553)

Aliefs have, according to Gendler, the following main features:

- Associative: Aliefs encode patterns of responses to particular (internally or externally prompted) mental images.
- Automatic: Though a subject may be consciously aware of her aliefs, aliefs operate without the intervention of conscious thought.
- Arational: Though aliefs may be useful or detrimental, laudable or contemptible, they are neither rational nor irrational.
- Shared by human and non-human animals: Any creature capable of responding differentially to features of its environment that impinge upon its sensory organs has aliefs.
- Conceptually antecedent to other cognitive attitudes that the creature may go on to develop: Aliefs are more primitive than beliefs or desires. While it may be possible to paraphrase the content of aliefs using the language of belief and desire, alief cannot be factorized into belief and desire.

- Action-generating: Aliefs typically activate behavioral proclivities (though these may not translate into full-blown actions), and can do so directly, without the mediation of classic conative attitudes like desire.
- Affect-laden: Aliefs typically include an affective component.

It's worth pointing out that, on Gendler's account of alief, aliefs and beliefs are really very different things:

(1) A belief is a propositional attitude: an agent believes that p. But aliefs are not propositional attitudes.

Alief, in contrast, is at least a four-place relation:

"[it] involves a relation between a subject and an entire associative repertoire, one that paradigmatically includes not only representational (or 'registered') content, but also affective states, behavioral propensities, patterns of attentiveness, and the like."

(2) Beliefs and aliefs play different cognitive roles. Beliefs change in response to evidence. But aliefs are not responsive to evidence in this way; they change in response to changes in habit. That's another reason for thinking that beliefs and aliefs are distinct.

Why do we not recognize this distinct mental state in our folk psychology, if, as Gendler argues, it's so pervasive? Gendler gives a debunking explanation: just as we are prone to over-attributing intentional action, we are equally prone to over-attributing belief.

Schwitzgebel on In-Between-Believing

The cases that Gendler discusses are puzzling. But another strategy to dealing with them is to re-think our conception of belief, rather than introduce an additional mental state.

Schwitzgebel argues that we should embrace a phenomenal, dispositional account of belief.

We first need some terminology.

- A stereotype is a cluster of properties that it is apt to associate with a thing, phenomenon, or property.
- Dispositions can be characterized by means of conditional statements, i.e.: "If condition C holds, then object O will (or is likely to) enter (or remain in) state S. O's entering S we may call the manifestation of the disposition, C we may call condition of manifestation of the disposition, and the event of C's obtaining we may call the trigger.
- A dispositional stereotype is a stereotype whose elements are dispositional properties. (For example, being hot-tempered)

Schwitzgebel's central thesis is that we should think of belief as a dispositional stereotype.

What kinds of dispositions does belief involve? According to Schwitzgebel, they fall in three kinds:

- (1) Behavioural: to act in certain ways, to make certain utterances, etc
- (2) Cognitive: to acquire new beliefs and desires, to draw inferences, etc.
- (3) Phenomenal: to have certain experiences, for example surprise when one's belief turns out false.

Note that because the account makes reference to phenomenal dispositions, it's not reductive. But that's ok because it's not trying to offer a reductive account of the mental in terms of the physical.

Schwitzgebel argues that the phenomenal, dispositional account is particularly well-suited for making sense of puzzling cases of in-between believing. He presents the following two cases:

Case 1: “Ellen, a twenty-year-old, studied Spanish for four years in high school. On the basis of her studies and her exposure to such Spanish words as ‘mesa,’ ‘niña,’ ‘oreja,’ and ‘vaca,’ she is willing, sincerely and cheerfully, to assent to the claim that all Spanish nouns ending in ‘a’ are feminine. Ellen has, however, occasionally come across certain words ending in ‘ista,’ such as ‘anarquista’ and ‘bolchevista,’ that can be used either as masculine or as feminine ~depending on the gender of the anarchist or Bolshevik!, and she uses them correctly as masculine when the situation demands. She would not assent to the claim that all Spanish nouns ending in ‘a’ are feminine if an ‘ista’ word came to mind as a counterexample; nevertheless, in most circumstances she would not recall such counterexamples.”

Case 2: “Geraldine’s teenage son Adam smokes marijuana. Usually Geraldine is unwilling to admit this to herself, and sometimes she adamantly denies it. Eating lunch with a friend, Geraldine can deplore her friend’s parenting because of his daughter’s drug use while denying in all sincerity that Adam has any similar problems. Yet she feels afraid and suspicious when Adam slouches home late at night with bloodshot eyes, and when she accuses him of smoking pot, she sees through his denials. In a certain kind of mood, she would tell her therapist that she thinks Adam smokes marijuana, but in another kind of mood she would genuinely recant such a confession. When Geraldine’s husband voices concern about Adam’s behavior, Geraldine sincerely comes to her son’s defense. What does Geraldine believe on the subject?”

Schwitzgebel argues that neither Ellen nor Geraldine straightforwardly believes either the relevant claim or its negation. Rather, they seem to believe it for some purposes but not for others, or some but not all the time. Thinking of belief as a phenomenal, dispositional stereotype helps explain why.

Readings:

- Gendler, Tamar Szabó (2008). Alief in Action (and Reaction). *Mind and Language* 23 (5):552--585.
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Schwitzgebel, Eric (2002). A Phenomenal, Dispositional Account of Belief. *Noûs* 36 (2):249-275.