

BELIEF

If you're familiar with Tolkien's *The Hobbit* I don't need to tell you that Mirkwood is a dangerous place. As bad as we might feel for Thorin and company as they try to navigate the forest and fall prey to its traps, we should feel worse for ourselves. Our world is also dangerous and difficult, but in a different way. Although it's some comfort that the spiders of our world are smaller, it is easier to travel through Mirkwood than it is to know what to believe. At least when it comes to navigating Mirkwood the directions are clear.

As Frank Ramsey has remarked, beliefs are the “map by which we steer.” Beliefs help us navigate because, unlike other attitudes we have, beliefs aim to represent the world exactly as it is. Beliefs, following an influential argument from G. E. M. Anscombe, are generally taken to be distinguished from other mental attitudes by their *direction of fit*. Desires aren't any less desires if they're either unfulfilled or don't match the world; beliefs, on the other hand, must match and represent the world as it is. Anscombe demonstrates this point with the example of someone shopping in a grocery store while being followed by a detective. In this case there are two lists: the shopper's list of what they intend to buy at the store, and the detective's list of what's in the shopper's cart as they follow them around. If the shopper decides not to get something from their list, they don't have to revise their list. But, if the detective includes something on the list that doesn't end up in the shopper's cart, the detective does need to revise their list. The shopper's list is a list of their desires. We want the world to fit our desires and when it doesn't we aim to change the world. The detective's list, on the other hand, represents our beliefs. Beliefs are maps of the world and what's in our mind should fit the world. If our maps are mistaken we don't change the world, we change our beliefs.

So, now we can ask: how should we go about making sure our beliefs accurately reflect the world? One route is to argue that our beliefs are accurate insofar as they are properly attuned to the world; that is, they accord with the evidence. This route keeps our beliefs grounded in reliable connections to the world. However, there's a well-known problem for this approach: evidence only takes us so far, and it's often fallible. For example, evidence in the form of how things appear to us is notoriously flawed. As Descartes warns

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in the *Meditations*, our senses are deceptive. A straight stick can appear bent when in a glass of water. Taking this doubt further, can we really trust anything our senses tell us about the world? These sorts of doubts undermine our reliable connection to the world and we are left wondering what we can safely believe. Descartes does offer some help for an individual struggling with these sceptical doubts. For example, here's at least one thing you can know for sure: that you exist! From that firm foundation, Descartes promises that we can scaffold our way to more knowledge.

However, there are significant challenges to this kind of individualist epistemology exemplified by Descartes. We can see this lesson in Thorin and company's journey through Mirkwood. After travelling for days, and frustrated with no end in sight to the forest ahead of them, Thorin suggests that someone climb a tree to see how much forest lay ahead. As the lightest in the group, Bilbo climbs to the top of the tallest trees. The news, alas, is not good. As Tolkien writes, "gaze as much as he might, [Bilbo] could see no end to the trees and the leaves in any direction." Disheartened, Bilbo conveys this news to the dwarves. But, as Tolkien writes, Thorin and company were not in fact "far off from the edge of the forest; and if Bilbo had the sense to see it, the tree that he had climbed, though it was tall in itself, was standing near the bottom of a wide valley, so that from its top the trees seemed to swell up all round like edges of a great bowl, and he could not expect to see how far the forest lasted." What Bilbo misses is the shape of forest. Descartes similarly fails to grasp the real shape of the challenge. Our connection to the world is not only mediated through the senses, senses that can deceive, but through other people, institutions, and history, all of which can also deceive. To take an important example of how social institutions can be deceptive, *systemic oppression* can operate as a veil between us and the world. As Charles Mills notes, individualist epistemologies of the Cartesian variety will tend to overlook systemic oppression by being "blithely indifferent to the possible cognitive consequences of class, racial, or gender situatedness."

To see the importance of how we can miss the forest from the trees because of systematic oppression, consider the following example from Melville's short novel *Benito Cereno* as retold by Charles Mills. When the protagonist, Amasa Delano, boards the slave ship

San Dominick he fails to see what's really happening. All around him is evidence that the ship "has been taken over by its human cargo, with the white crew being held hostage." But because it is so unthinkable "that the inferior blacks would have accomplished such a thing... Delano searches for every possible alternative explanation of the seemingly strange behaviour of the imprisoned whites." Delano's belief in the inferiority of a race of people marks a failure to really see what is happening. As Mills goes on to note, "concepts orient us to the world, and it is a rare individual who can resist this inherited orientation."

WE CANNOT GO BLITHELY INTO THE WORLD BELIEVING WHATEVER WE WANT BECAUSE BELIEF IS A COMMUNAL OBJECT

Here we hear echoes of a warning from W. K. Clifford: our beliefs "are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handled on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork." We must be careful with regard to our beliefs because our beliefs become common property, our beliefs will be passed down and inherited by future generations. For Clifford, this means that no belief is insignificant. Every belief we accept prepares us for beliefs of the same kind. If we're lazy and believe on the basis of insufficient evidence, that laziness leaves a stamp on our character that makes us more susceptible to poorly formed beliefs in the future. That laziness is not just a personal failing, according to Clifford, as we also fail others who rely on us. We cannot go blithely into the world believing whatever we want because belief is a communal object. As a result, Clifford notes, no one "can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe."

However, even if we're careful, even if we subject all our beliefs to rational scrutiny and make sure we only believe on the basis of the best evidence, there are still risks of being led astray. As Jessie Munton warns, we have good reason to think that the unjust structures of

the world have “gerrymandered” the regularities and the evidence an individual is exposed to in ways that can reinforce racist and sexist beliefs. As a result, there may well end up being a lot of evidence for morally problematic beliefs. In my work, I refer to this as the problem of the seemingly rational racist. To see the shape of this problem, consider the following two facts. Racist beliefs are a paradigm of bad beliefs, yet a racist world will present individuals with significant evidence to support their racist beliefs. Consider the fact that people often defend stereotypes on the basis that the stereotype wouldn’t exist unless it were true – unless there was in fact something that the stereotype captured about the world. And if stereotypes are attuned to the world, then what would be so bad about using the stereotype in our reasoning? But in that reasoning we again miss the forest for the trees.

Let’s take the example of the so-called “positive” stereotype that Asian Americans are highly educated. Absent any context it would be difficult to explain what’s negative about this stereotype. After all, on a surface reading, the stereotype says that Asian Americans are highly educated – and what’s so bad about that?

But if we look closely at history, we can see how this stereotype functions as part of a harmful ideology: the model minority myth. As Emily S. Lee writes, the concept of Asians as the model minority was created in 1966 by the sociologist William Petersen, just one year after the immigration laws changed to allow the immigration of highly educated professionals from Asia. Without knowledge of these immigration practices that only permitted highly educated Asians to immigrate to the United States, one might think that what explains the high level of educational achievement amongst Asian Americans must just be that they’re really hard workers, or have a culture that promotes educational achievement, and thus can serve as a model of success for other minorities. The stereotype, when stripped of its historical context, can be used to argue that if Asian American immigrants can “make it” in America, then everyone should be able to. That is, if you just worked as hard, you could be just as successful.

So, if African Americans are not as successful, the stereotype declares that this must be due to some personal failure on their part. As David Haekwon Kim notes, this stereotype functions to uphold “a

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tool of social stratification or political domination” and promotes intra-minority conflict. The stereotype, though attuned to the fact that Asian Americans have high levels of educational achievement, makes it easy to fail to see the forest for the trees (amongst other flaws).

RACIST BELIEFS ARE A PARADIGM OF BAD BELIEFS, YET A RACIST WORLD WILL PRESENT INDIVIDUALS WITH SIGNIFICANT EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THEIR RACIST BELIEFS

Responsible belief formation, at the end of all of this, seems to require a lot from a person. Mirkwood forest is difficult to traverse, but at least there is a path. In a world radically shaped by injustice, there may be no path that is entirely safe from certain risks. There is

no clear non-contradictory advice that can be given for what you should believe. As William James notes, when it comes to the question of what to believe we have to choose between two competing demands. From one direction we are advised to believe the truth; after all, true beliefs are certainly better guides to the world than false ones. But from the other direction we are advised to avoid error; after all, believing falsely can be quite costly. But determining what is true and what is false can be difficult, and we must make choices about how much evidence is enough, when to open and when to close off inquiry, and so on. So, when it comes to belief we can be brave and believe despite risk of error, or we can be cautious and hold off on believing because of that same risk of error. How we choose to balance these competing demands, James notes, “may end up colouring differently our whole intellectual life.” And yet despite all the attendant risks, we must take responsibility for our choices. There are traps all around us, traps that have been set by legacies of oppression and injustice, and how we choose to navigate those paths will not only be a reflection of our character, but also in making those choices we answer not just to ourselves, but to others.

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