

Attitudes as Positions: How and Why?

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David Hunter in his book *On Believing* defends and applies the following thesis:

Believing as Being in a Position. To believe something is to be in a position to do, think, and feel things in light of a possibility whose obtaining would make one right.

There's a lot to like about this view, in my opinion. As Hunter ably demonstrates throughout the book, it renders optional or even inapplicable a lot of questions that have dogged theorists of belief for a while. And there's something very intuitive about the view, at least in its extensional adequacy: someone who believes that *p* *does* seem to be in a position to do things in light of it.

But believing is just one of the attitudes we can have. We also, of course, desire, intend, fear, hope, regret, and many more. Accepting **Believing as Being in a Position** would make me want to accept analogues of the account for these other attitudes, as well. Why should one attitude, believing (or as I'll sometimes say despite some of Hunter's warnings, belief) be so different from the other attitudes? I'll argue that we cannot generalize this account to plausible accounts of the other attitudes. So that suggests we should reject **Believing as Being in a Position**. Along the way I'll investigate some interesting features of **Believing as Being in a Position** that attempting to generalize it to other attitudes will help us see better.

To make this argument, I need to develop possible approaches to generalizing **Believing as Being in a Position**. Many of these approaches might conflict quite strongly with how Hunter was thinking or would like to think about these matters. If so, I'd very much like to hear how he thinks we should extend his approach to the other attitudes,

and if we shouldn't do that, why we shouldn't. This'll be a personal exploration of interesting and important questions Hunter raises for someone with my general approach and commitments. In that spirit I'll conclude something very important that I think Hunter gets completely right about believing, even if I would spell out the details differently from him.

1 *On Generalizing the Account in General*

To know how to generalize **Believing as Being in a Position**, we have to have a better sense of how it works. There are, as I see things, seven conceptual ingredients we can identify in that principle: BEING IN A POSITION TO φ , DOING, THINKING, FEELING, IN LIGHT OF, A POSSIBILITY'S OBTAINING, and BEING MADE RIGHT. Obviously how we carve these is somewhat arbitrary. But if we are to generalize properly, we should know which of these conceptual ingredients we would ultimately like to keep. To do that we need to understand them in more detail.

I take it that being in a position to φ in light of something is the core of the view—that DOING, THINKING, and FEELING are just ways of cutting up the potential assignments to ' φ '. That will, at any rate, be a nonnegotiable part of any generalization I attempt. What is it to be in a position to φ ? The paradigm case that might help us understand this language is of course spatial position. I am in a position to return my book to the library, a spatial position, because I'm right at the library's drop-off. But I'm *also* in a position to return the book because I have it: I checked it out, which makes it possible to return it (rather than donate it), and I have it with me to put in the slot. Everything is ready. In other words, given my position, circumstances will not prevent me from exercising my capacity to φ , to return the library book. There will be cases where it's hard to say whether circumstances prevent me from φ -ing even though I have the capacity to φ , or I simply don't have the capacity to φ , but in many cases the distinction is clear.

What, exactly, is a position, though? For Hunter, spatial position cannot be the only sort of position one can be in. He thinks believing that p is being in a position to do, think, and feel various things in a certain way. He doesn't mean just spatial position,

because I can come to be in that position without ever changing my spatial position, as when I read some news on my laptop without moving. Let's say that a person's position has *dimensions* D_1, \dots, D_n , all the relevant factors concerning whether someone is in a position to φ . Spatial position, of course, has three spatial dimensions, whose values might be vague or indeterminate, intervals, etc. But we can get baroque and specific to all sorts of actions, for example whether we've checked out a library book can be a dimension of our position, as well as our job, citizenship, and so many other things. Then we can say that someone is in a position to φ just in case, given S 's position, there is no combination of dimensions D_i, D_j , etc. with values d_i, d_j , etc. such that there are any true conditionals of the form \lceil necessarily, if for S D_i 's, D_j 's, ..., values are d_i, d_j , etc., then S does not φ \rceil . The exact flavor of this necessity will have to be worked out, but we can leave that for later work; to fix ideas, let's assume we're interested in nomic necessity.

What does it mean to do, think, or feel something *in light of* something else x ? Here's my best reconstruction of Hunter's proposal: S φ -s in light of x just in case either x is S 's reason for acting, thinking, or feeling that way, or (ii) it would be S 's reason if x had obtained and S knew x , or (iii) x is a reason for S to act, think, or feel in that way. This isn't quite plausible to me given Hunter's aims. It seems to me that one acts in light of something just in case one's behavior (broadly construed) is guided by that thing. But when x is just *a* reason for S to act in the relevant ways, not necessarily something that is in fact somehow guiding S 's behavior, then can we really say that S is behaving in light of the possibility? The reason might not motivate at all! But behaving in light of requires motivation by the thing one acts in light of. Reasons are one's reasons for their φ -ing when they guide the person in their φ -ing, in part by partly determining whether they φ at all.

I suspect temptation to violate this kind of constraint comes from the desire not to posit inner representations—something of the right general kind to be part of the guiding story—as an important part of believing, of being in position to act in light of something. Nevertheless, I won't explicitly assume there's necessarily an inner representation doing the guiding in cases of mere belief rather than knowledge that p . I will simply assume that

when S is in a position to act, think, or feel in light of x , then x can and appropriately would guide the agent to act, think, or feel in that way should x become relevant to S 's acting, thinking, or feeling. As a substantive matter, it may turn out that we require inner representations of the possibility in order to make the guidance work, but I won't assume that; I think I won't need much more precision than this.

Putting this together, when S believes that p , given S 's position, for S there is no combination of values d_i, d_j , etc. in dimensions D_i, D_j , etc. such that there are any true conditionals of the form 'necessarily, if D_i, D_j, \dots 's values for S are d_i, d_j, \dots , then S is not guided in the relevant way in how they act, think, or feel by the possibility that p '. Hunter also has a "rightness" condition, that the possibility that p 's obtaining would make one *right*. I am not sure it makes a difference to the analysis of believing, but it might for distinguishing it from fantasy, for example.¹ The issue of correctness/rightness is interesting for the project I'm exploring in this paper, because it's not at all clear how to generalize it very much to the other types of attitude, though there have been some attempts.² But I'll mostly ignore it in this paper, interesting and important though it is.

So, we get that when S believes that p , given S 's position, for S there is no combination of values d_i, d_j , etc. in dimensions D_i, D_j , etc. such that there are any true conditionals of the form 'necessarily, if D_i, D_j, \dots 's values for S are d_i, d_j, \dots , then S is not guided in the relevant way in how they act, think, or feel by the possibility that p , and when the possibility that p obtains, S is thereby made right'. This is still imprecise in certain key respects, most especially what dimensions go into the relevant kind of position. Are they states of the body? States and dispositions? Relations with the environment? Historical facts? I'll proceed on the assumption that this can be answered in a satisfying way, since here also the details won't matter too much for me.

The account generalizes without too much difficulty to (apparently³) doxastically committal attitudes like regret. We can say that regretting that p , for example, is regretting

¹For this kind of line of thought, see, e.g., Velleman (2000).

²For desire, see, e.g., Hazlett (2021).

³I'd say only apparently; see Drucker (2019) for conditionals that seem to me to refute this kind of thesis. But I'd say most people think regret is doxastically committing, for whatever reason. See, e.g., Dietz (2018).

the *fact* that p , which we then think of like Hunter thinks of knowledge. That is, regretting that p —the possibility or the fact that p —would amount to being in a position to act, think, or feel various other things in light of that fact. Of course, the specifics of both the dimensional values involved in being in this position as well as the specific ways of acting, thinking, and feeling would differ between belief and knowledge. We would have to say what would make one *right* when one regrets that p . For now we can just stipulate that S 's regretting that p —that they φ -ed, say—is correct when p is regrettable for S , or their φ -ing really was regrettable.

Obviously we'd want to look into the details; since I think even **Believing as Being in a Position** is likely false, I'd expect analogues for regret to be false, too. But that's not what I'll look into here. Rather, I want to point out that there's a common kind of "propositional"⁴ attitude that this kind of story seems hopeless to account for. Knowledge, of course, is factive: $\lceil S$ knows that $p \rceil$ entails that p , and speakers making typical utterances of instances of that schema will presuppose that p . Regret and 'regrets' at least seem to work similarly. 'Believes' isn't factive, but someone who believes *takes* themselves to know, or at least takes some possibility to be a fact. This is what allows any guidance at all, even on Hunter's account. Believing that p doesn't entail that p and speakers making belief ascriptions that p don't typically presuppose that p , but they nevertheless take p to be true, and thus the possibility that p to obtain.

But many attitudes are not at all like that. When I hope that p or fear that p , I don't even *take* it to be that p . So I'm no position to act, think, or feel anything guided by the possibility that p . **Believing as Being in a Position** cannot extend very neatly to attitudes like hope and fear, because hoping and fearing just aren't positions to be guided by a possibility one takes to obtain, takes to be a fact.

Perhaps this is all right for the prospects of **Believing as Being in a Position**; perhaps we shouldn't expect all attitudes to have a common core. I'll address that question in section 4. Or you might think that attitudes should have a common core and it should include guidance, but we should not understand guidance in the way that I've

⁴Not to beg any questions about whether their objects really are propositional; see, e.g., Moltmann (2003) and Merricks (2009) for some doubts.

been thinking of it. I'll turn to that issue in the next section.

2 Attitudes and Guidance

We've seen that attitudes like hope and fear that p cannot amount to being in a position to be guided by a possibility that p , since the agent doesn't even necessarily take there to be such a possibility that obtains and which can thus guide them. But perhaps with attitudes like fear and hope that p , a person can be guided by the *mere* possibility that p , without needing to take it to obtain.

I don't think that will help, for the following interesting reason. When we come to have an attitude—to put in a less reified way, when we come to believe, hope or fear that p , for example—reasonably, we have *reasons* that make it reasonable to come to believe, hope, or fear in that way. With belief, actually believing is really important for what we can reasonably or appropriately do. That is, we can have very strong reason to believe that p , but until I actually do come to believe it, it is inappropriate to use it as a reason, or to take it to be a reason, for anything else I do. Believing that p makes a difference to what we can do, think, or feel beyond just what our evidence for p is, or perhaps it *is* that difference.

I don't think that the same will be true of fear or hope. Suppose S has reasons that are good enough for hoping or fearing that p ; let's say fearing particularly. But S doesn't fear it. This doesn't have to be because S *resists* fearing it or anything like that; even though she understands that the possibility that p 's obtaining would be bad for her or others she cares about, she just doesn't fear it; she doesn't have the affect required for fearing, not even dispositionally. But so what? Does that mean she can't appropriately or reasonably use the possibility that p 's threat as a reason to try to make it that $\neg p$? No, of course not; we take precautions against many things we do not fear, reasonably and appropriately so. Our affective resources aren't infinite, and reasons to fear that p are enough to legitimate trying to make it that $\neg p$, even without ever using those reasons to come to fear that p .

It's not that there's *nothing* that actually fearing that p will add to having good

reason to fear that p in terms of what a person may reasonably or appropriate do, feel, or think. Here are some things S would be able to reasonably or appropriately do when she fears that p :

- She can believe that she fears that p .
- She can tell others that she fears that p .
- She can tell others that she has the affected associated with fearing that p .

There will be other things like this. But they have a unifying feature, at least as far as I can tell: they're just what follow from bearing the attitude in the first place. They're not a real extension of our powers in any interesting sense, certainly not in a way that reveals their nature as I think **Believing as Being in a Position** is meant to do.

Let me repeat the line of thought again very briefly. Believing does make or is a difference over and above the reasons one has to believe, for example one's evidence; that's part of what makes **Believing as Being in a Position** initially plausible. But it seems that the same is not true for hoping and fearing. One way to put things is that *having* good reason to hope and fear that p is already enough to put one in a position to do, think, and feel whatever hoping and fearing that p would put one in a position to do, act, and feel, except for believing that one fears that p , etc.

Guidance by x , I will assume, is a matter of responding to reasons concerning or maybe constituted by x . It is a rational, not merely a mechanical process. But the difference in reasons to φ when one has good reason to hope or fear that p will differ only in an unimportant way from the reasons one has when one hopes or fears that p . So, there won't be an important difference between being guided by the possibility that p when one just has good reason to hope or fear that p on the one hand and actually hoping or fearing on the other hand. So, guidance facts will not reveal the nature of hoping or fearing.

Thus, even if we allow possibilities that don't obtain to guide agents, as we'd need to for fearing and hoping, guidance would still not reveal the natures of these attitudes, as we want **Believing as Being in a Position** to do. At a minimum, then, that means

Believing as Being in a Position is hard to generalize to other kinds of attitude. I haven't yet really argued that that is a problem for **Believing as Being in a Position**. To do that, I'd need to argue that we should want a unified account of the different attitudes. Obviously one can doubt that, but I'll try to make the best case for that view that I can.

3 *Do We Want a Unified Account of the Attitudes?*

I'll argue we should have a unified account of the attitudes, and thus that it should be a pretty strong desideratum for an account of believing. The basic thought is that we should trust that there's something important underlying the class that we in philosophy call attitudes that should be reflected in the nature of each kind of attitude. It's a kind of one-over-many argument: we would like an explanation of the seeming unity of the genus, and that should be reflected in each species of the genus.

Why do attitudes seem like they belong to such a robust genus? Each kind of attitude exhibits very distinctive behavior that doesn't seem like very much else in nature. Here are some of the relevant phenomena exhibited by the class:

1. *Original aboutness*. To aim for neutrality on some issues, note that there's a theoretically distinct and significant notion of aboutness where, where $\lceil \mathcal{A} \rceil$ is an attitude expression ('believes', 'hopes', 'is angry that', etc.), each of $\lceil S \mathcal{A}\text{-s } o \rceil$ and $\lceil S \mathcal{A}\text{-s that } o \text{ is } F \rceil$ entails $\lceil S\text{'s attitude is about } o \rceil$. Very few things, in any ontological category, can be about other things. Attitudes can be. Perhaps perceptions and intuitions also can be about objects, but not much else, except as inheriting it from the aboutness of attitudes as with books or speeches.⁵
2. *Reasoning*. In my view, we reason to all the types of attitudes, not just belief or knowledge. In saying this I mean to be neutral about what reasoning (or inference) is.⁶ Thus, one way to put it is: sometimes, when we hope that p , or are relieved that p , we came to hope or be relieved in that way by reasoning. As far as I can

⁵It's customary to point to Brentano (1874) for this view of the attitudes.

⁶See Drucker (2021) for details.

tell, we reason to all and only attitudes; we don't even reason to perceptions and intuitions. It's less clear that we reason *from* every attitude, but for now the point about the attitudes we reason to suffices.

3. *Expression.* We can not only report our attitudes in language but express them “directly”. That is, we can not only self-ascribe attitudes (‘I believe that the 504 stops at Garden Street’) but express them. With belief the way we typically do this is just to assert the content of what we believe; with other attitudes we have other means, including intonation contours and specific expressions called expressives (‘damn’, ‘yikes’, ‘wow’, etc.).⁷ It can be difficult to say exactly what the distinction between expressing and reporting amounts to; it's very important for some philosophical programs, like expressivism in metaethics, to get the details right.⁸ While in the present dialectical context we can afford to be a little looser, I'll stipulate my personally preferred account: *S* expresses an attitude with a (possibly purely internal) utterance of a sentence just when the rules of the language entail that *S*'s utterance is or would be made insincere by *S*'s knowing their utterance isn't caused non-deviantly by the occurrence of the attitude.⁹ We can express attitudes in this way because of their connection to sincerity, on this view. I should mention, perhaps it's not *only* attitudes that we can express in this way; the famous example of ‘ouch’ suggests maybe not, so long as pain isn't an attitude. But most of what we can express in this direct way will be attitudes.

4. *Internal standards that automatically rationalize.* Each of the attitudes has an internal standard. By that I mean this: for each type of attitude \mathcal{A} , there's some property *F*-ness such that, necessarily, if *S* knows that *x* is *F*, then *S* can reasonably bear \mathcal{A} to *x* based on that knowledge.¹⁰ For believing that *p*, *F*-ness is being true, or maybe obtaining, depending on what the object of believing is; I think that's

⁷See Potts (2007) for a lot on these expressions, along with the charming talk Kaplan (2008).

⁸See Schroeder (2008), e.g., for discussion of this problem.

⁹In addition to Schroeder, see Alston (1967) for another antecedent of something like this account. I'm quoting this from Drucker (2021, page 421).

¹⁰This is meant to recall Kenny (2003)'s conception of a “formal object”, but it's a bit broader and different from his concept.

what led Hunter to include in **Believing as Being in a Position** “whose obtaining would make one right”. Other types of attitude have other properties like this. For example, if you know that it would be good for you or people that you care a lot about, or the world, were it true that p , then hoping that p for that reason would then be reasonable. Similarly, if you know that it is very bad for you or people you care about because it’s true that p , then it’s reasonable for you to be sad that p for that reason. Though I can’t begin to make this case here, it seems that *every* attitude is like this. Are non-attitudes like this? I suspect actions in general are not. For my choice to φ to be rational, I need to know just about φ -ing’s properties but also the properties of at least some of my options other than φ -ing. There doesn’t seem to be anything I can know *just* about φ -ing rather than its alternatives that would *ipso facto* make my choosing to φ rational; at least, nothing substantive and informative in a way that “my most choiceworthy option” isn’t.

For all of these reasons, I think the class of attitudes is an importantly unified class: they exhibit different behaviors, all together, that very little or even nothing else exhibits. It would be a wild coincidence, then, if there was nothing that *unified* the class of attitudes. Of course, for particular *apparent* attitudes, we can say that they’re really something else. This is how I interpret Hunter’s view of wanting, at least as he develops it in Hunter (2023). On the view he defends there, to want something is to need it and lack it. Given his understanding of needing and lacking, there turns out to be nothing psychological about wanting; chairs can want things, or plants. I assume an attitude must be psychological, and anyway if something isn’t psychological it can’t exhibit phenomena 1. through 4. in the list I just presented. That’s fine; my goal is not to adjudicate whether Hunter’s view of wanting is correct. I am happy to say that wanting is not an attitude, unlike believing, hoping, and fearing.

But we can’t say that too much. There *are* attitudes other than believing, and some of these, like fearing and hoping, will be very hard to understand in the way that Hunter wants us to understand believing. There should be *some* explanation why all these attitudes exhibit the 1.–4. phenomena. The most likely way to succeed at doing that

would be to trace a common element in the nature of each kind of attitude. But, I have argued, that common element cannot be *being in a position to act in light of* anything, since hoping and fearing cannot be understood in that way.

Hunter might object that we *already know* the class of attitudes is disunified in pretty fundamental ways. For example, not every attitude is even propositional: there seem to be both “objectual” attitudes¹¹ and “interrogative” attitudes, attitudes like curiosity that seem to have interrogative rather than propositional contents.¹² So don’t we already have to settle for disunified explanations of the class of attitudes? I’m not so sure; since even these attitudes seem to me to exhibit the 1.–4. phenomena (though reasoning is a tough one to settle convincingly), I think a theoretically ideal account will apply to even these attitudes as well.

The only option left that I can see is to say that, yes, believing, hoping, and fearing exhibit all these phenomena, but the explanation of why believing does will be very different from the explanation of why hoping and fearing do. I’m not especially optimistic about whether an account like that can be made to work, for the following reason. Consider an attitude like *suspecting*, as in:

- (1) I suspect Biden’s the strongest candidate the Democrats have for 2024, despite his prominent weaknesses.

Suspecting exhibits each of the 1. through 4. phenomena. As reported by (1), my suspecting (or, to reify it, my suspicion) is clearly about Biden or maybe the 2024 US presidential election (or both). I can reason to a suspicion. I can express my suspicion, e.g., with ‘maybe’ or ‘might really’, as in:

- (2) Biden might really be the strongest candidate the Democrats have for 2024, despite his prominent weaknesses.

And finally, knowing that p is very likely true seems like it automatically rationalizes the suspicion that p . We could say the explanation for why suspecting works this way

¹¹See, e.g., Montague (2007) and Forbes (2000), and Grzankowski (2016); some philosophers have famously defended propositionalism about attitudes, though, e.g., Quine (1956).

¹²The (fairly recent) *locus classicus* is Friedman (2013).

is very different from the explanation of why believing works this way, just as we could say for hoping and fearing. But I find that very implausible: suspecting is so similar to believing in its nature that we should want their natures to be similar, too, which really leads us to expect that there's a common explanation of the 1. through 4. phenomena. And yet suspecting that p works like hoping and fearing that p , in that in many cases, the person who suspects but does not believe p cannot even *take* p to be a reason to φ , since they need not believe that p . Suspecting seems like a doxastic attitude, and that should be reflected in its nature, but it also seems difficult to see how it *could* be very similar to believing in its nature, given an account of believing's nature like **Believing as Being in a Position**.

Why do I think believing and suspecting are so similar, so that they should be similar in their natures as well? They seem both to be about an agent's "take" on the world. They seem to differ only in confidence and commitment: if you strengthen a suspicion by making it "very strong", and then you make the person at least somewhat committed to the idea, then it seems to me you have a belief. That is, suspecting that p and believing that p seem to me to have only those minimal differences, along with whatever phenomenological differences are consequent on those ones. That's why their natures seem very, very similar to me. If I'm right and the class of doxastic attitudes is wider than belief and knowledge, and that some of the members of this class do not involve the kinds of takings to be reasons that believing does.

My worry, then, is that we can't generalize Hunter's account even to every apparent doxastic attitude, much less every attitude more generally. Given that I think we should want to do both, but especially the former, I have come to doubt that Hunter's account of believing, **Believing as Being in a Position**, can be right. We should want, rather, an account of believing that makes it just one attitude among many.

4 *Conclusion*

Hunter's account of believing has many virtues, and it clarifies a lot of issues that needed clarifying; I especially liked his discussion of believing's relation to possibility and the

related discussion of modal illusions, though with respect to the former issue (possibilities) I have worries related to the worries I presented here about how to generalize the idea to other attitudes. In general I think he's onto something right and important in the basic form of the account, specifically with the "whose obtaining would make one right". We have to be careful with normative explanations of phenomena, because a lot of the time we'll end up confusing explanans and explanandum; a thing's nature typically explains its normative features rather than the other way around. But "being right" does nevertheless seem crucial to attitudes like believing. One way philosophers have tried to make this idea work is with the "direction of fit" idea that people sometimes trace back to Anscombe,¹³ to distinguish doxastic and desiderative attitudes. But I suspect that the right account of all the attitudes will just involve a generalized notion of being right or correct. Hazlett (2021) argues for a particular view of when a desire is correct, but the general view is suggested as early as Plato's *Philebus*, I think. In my own view, we should think that coming to have an attitude is really just answering certain kinds of questions in a certain way. Having an answer would then be what makes one right.¹⁴

That said, even if I have my own ideas about how to extend the idea to the other attitudes, I'd be interested in seeing a more thoroughgoing attempt to extend a view like Hunter's to all the other attitudes. I suspect this would be a rich vein to mine, even if difficult work.

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¹³See of course Anscombe (2000). Frost (2014) objects to thinking of this as what Anscombe was really up to. I can't adjudicate that.

¹⁴I gave a chunk of the overall picture in Drucker (2020), and am working on hopefully a better version of some of the ideas now.

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