

Review of Aaron Z. Zimmerman's *Belief: A Pragmatic Picture*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xi + 179 pp.

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Faced with the live, forced, and momentous option of whether to accept some form of theism, William James had the will to believe in God. Moved by similar pragmatic principles, Aaron Zimmerman advises self-professed egalitarians to believe they lack racist beliefs—even in the face of less explicit indices that, for some, point in the opposite direction.

He finds this advice on the “two main theses” of his book *Belief: A Pragmatic Picture*: first, that “belief is canonically manifested in *controlled, attentive* information-guidance and can be distinguished from other mental/neural phenomena on this basis”; and, second, that “the nature of belief cannot be determined by scientific theorizing alone, but must be relativized to a set of theoretically underdetermined taxonomic choices” (98, emphasis added). In light of the first of these principles, behaviors that are not controlled and attentive are, by definition, not guided by beliefs and perforce not evidence of racist beliefs. When they are “relatively automatic,” Zimmerman explains, “a white person’s differential construal of other races, her differential reactions to their faces or speech, the different associations she draws from recognizably black names than white, her different micro-behaviors in the presence of the two groups, and so on . . . fail to warrant a diagnosis of illiberal belief” (113). In light of his second thesis, should a scientist of any stripe beg to differ—noting, perhaps, that the internal states guiding one’s “automatic” behaviors are of the same neurocomputational kind as those guiding “controlled, attentive” behaviors—Zimmerman will respond that such a conclusion is beyond the remit of empirical investigation, as it follows from siding just one way on a “theoretically

underdetermined taxonomic choice.” “Within the limits set by brain science and communicative need,” he asserts, “you needn’t defer to others on how ‘belief’ is best defined” (127).

While this advice might strike one as overly generous to the implicit racist, it can be granted that all sides are hard-pressed to give a principled account of what such a person *truly* believes. Zimmerman has reasons for reading the tea leaves as he does. The less convincing of them are pragmatic in nature. Noting the distress it would cause a (would-be) progressive to believe himself a racist, he asks: “Is it reasonable to grant a stranger [viz., a scientist] the authority to determine the answer to a question that will so greatly affect your mental health? Is there a form of ‘expertise’ that would warrant such deference?” Zimmerman thinks not. “If nothing is to be gained by reasoning in scientific ways and much to be lost,” he concludes, “insisting that we must nevertheless reason scientifically borders on epistemic fetishism” (138).

There are plenty of worries one might have about this brand of pragmatism. How can we know what is to be gained or lost by our epistemic fetish before we satisfy it? And, after inquiry, isn’t it too late to ignore our findings? Surely it cannot be a good policy to reject unflattering truths whenever the self-perceived “limits set by science and communicative need” make it possible. Also, what sort of person would be comforted by her own egalitarianism, when she knows it was only guaranteed by a metatheoretic decision to adopt a self-affirming view of belief? Won’t such an individual be *less* motivated to root out her racist reflexes than the person who, unwilling to define belief for herself, still believes—to her horror—that she harbors some racist beliefs? It is hard to see a strong *pragmatic* case to be made for Zimmerman’s brand of pragmatism.

Tabling his proposal to insulate definitions of belief from science, we can assess the first main thesis of Zimmerman’s book on its own merits. This is the idea that beliefs are “the

representations that guide our deliberate movements in body and mind” (80), and that “you believe the information poised to guide your controlled and attentive actions” (22). At a first pass, this sounds like a plausible way to draw a distinction that everyone will need: that between intentional and unintentional bodily movements. The former, being attended, controlled, and deliberate, are guided by beliefs; the latter—like eye blinks and the ducking of Frisbees—are not. Moreover, Zimmerman sees an important pragmatist upshot to this way of analyzing belief: if you only believe whatever information guides your more controlled thoughts and actions, then “you have a kind of control over your beliefs that resembles, in some ways, your control over these actions” (101). Indeed, he sees “the kind of control the pragmatic conception grants us over many of our beliefs” as his view’s most important distinguishing feature (43). The orthodox view with which it contrasts is that belief formation and revision is largely *involuntary* and that this is what distinguishes beliefs from states like imaginings and suppositions. While Zimmerman is careful to qualify that, even on his view, there are some beliefs we are powerless either to acquire or rescind (“You can’t stop believing in the Earth beneath your feet” [81]), he wants to leave us with wide latitude in what we can choose to believe. “The kind of irresistibility that attends our belief in physical bodies,” he explains, “is not a feature of the class as a whole” (82). Indeed, “irresistibility has no place in the concept’s definition” (82–83). He is thus committed to distinguishing believing from imagining and supposing in some way other than by their differential relations to the will.

Understanding pretense then becomes important to Zimmerman’s project, as ordinary pretenses look like straightforward counterexamples to William James’s pragmatist slogan (quoted at the beginning of *Belief*) that “the test of belief is willingness to act.” After all, the child pretending that she is a lion appears willing to act on the information that she is a lion—and

to do so attentively, and voluntarily—without believing she is one. Zimmerman devotes chapter 4 to addressing this wrinkle; by chapter’s end, it has widened to a chasm. The problem lies in Zimmerman’s attempt to understand the distinction between believing and pretending (or imagining) as one of degree. “A full belief,” he explains, “is poised to guide *any* attentive, well-regulated action or deliberation to which it might prove relevant” (emphasis added). By contrast, “states of acceptance, assumption, and pretense are more circumscribed in their effects” (96). His idea is that the girl pretending to be a lion only acts on the information that she is a lion within a certain circumscribed context; whereas, the person who, having lost his mind, believes himself to be a lion will be guided by that information during “any attentive, well-regulated action or deliberation to which it might prove relevant.”

There are several problems with this. First, a pretense can be comprehensive and long-lasting. Think of anyone with a dark secret: the murderer pretending, for years on end, to be innocent. Every action relevant to his guilt or innocence is guided by the pretense that he is innocent. Yet he is no *nearer* to believing himself innocent than is the girl to believing herself a lion. (Sure, there are cases of talking oneself into a belief over time—but this obviously isn’t the case, as a rule, for everyone harboring a dark secret). Second, the lying murderer may show his true beliefs only in unintentional, involuntary behaviors of the kind detected by a polygraph test. Zimmerman’s account turns this common assumption into a confusion, as, on his view, an information-bearing state is a belief *only* when it guides voluntary behavior. Whatever it is that is making the polygraph needles jump, it can’t be a belief—*by definition*. What might have seemed a compassionate policy in the case of implicit racism allows anyone who wishes to rid himself of an unsavory belief to do so by not acting on it voluntarily. Surely there is no use in preserving

the liberal's self-image at the cost of clearing the murderer's conscience and making his perjury impossible.

Zimmerman may think this problem is avoided by his appeal to "internal" actions, which he stipulates can include "purely mental achievements like drawing a conclusion or imagining a scenario" (1). Is the murderer not reasoning from the belief that he needs to hide his guilt and, in that sense, still having his attentive (mental) actions guided by that information? That sounds like a reasonable thing to say, but Zimmerman has no grounds for saying it. If we really can choose what to believe by consistently acting on it, the murderer can choose to consistently reason from the premise that he is innocent, instead of from the premise that he needs to hide his guilt. Surely that's a better policy for him, pragmatically speaking. To say that doing so is beyond his powers—that he simply cannot avoid reasoning from the premise that he needs to hide his guilt—is to give up the most distinctive aspect of the view. We then lack the special autonomy over our beliefs that was to be the hallmark of Zimmerman's pragmatism.

Coming from the other direction, when we believe some information, we typically do so without its guiding *all* the attentive actions to which it might prove relevant, simply because we don't appreciate its relevance to various matters. This does not shade us back toward pretending that information. So, whatever the difference is between pretending (or imagining) that  $p$  and believing that  $p$ , the scalable variable Zimmerman identifies—of having one's attentive actions guided by the information that  $p$  in greater or fewer relevant contexts—does not latch on to it.

A more promising way for Zimmerman to deal with the problem of pretense would be to hold that beliefs (and not imaginings) are what guide pretend actions. For if imaginings are not directly action-guiding, that fact alone can distinguishes them from beliefs. Zimmerman thinks this option is foreclosed by Shaun Nichols and Stephen P. Stich (2000), who, he claims,

“convincingly argue that children lost in their imaginations are directly guided by states of the same” (91). Yet, not only do Nichols and Stich not *convincingly* argue that pretenders are directly guided by their imaginings; they argue, to the contrary, that the states guiding pretenses are beliefs. Specifically, it is one’s beliefs in conditionals with pretend premises as their antecedents that guide pretend actions, with imaginings (tokened within the “Possible Worlds Box”) only playing a role in how such beliefs are generated (Nichols and Stich 2000: 128). It would be interesting to see Zimmerman work with this understanding of imagination’s relation to pretense in future writings.

In sum, *Belief* aims to undermine orthodox views about belief while serving as an advertisement for pragmatism in general. While those predisposed to pragmatism may feel buoyed by Zimmerman’s enthusiastic defense of the view, serious questions can be raised for the book’s two main theses. Viewed from the outside, the pragmatism on offer feels more like an apology for escapism than a vindication of individual autonomy.

## Reference

Nichols, Shaun, and Stephen P. Stich. 2000. “A Cognitive Theory of Pretense.” *Cognition* 74, no. 2: 115–47.