

Decision-Making and Credibility
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Part III of an Exchange between Wayne Riggs and David Coady

Professor Wayne Riggs has made a generous and thoughtful response to my comments on his article. I would like to offer some further comments on the matter, which I hope will be constructive.

Both Riggs and Fricker claimed that the fictional character Herbert Greenleaf was not culpable for the epistemic harm he did Marge Sherwood. They both argued that since Greenleaf could not reasonably be expected to know better (and so avoid causing the harm), he is not to blame. I responded that this argument lets Greenleaf (and others like him) off too lightly. One can reasonably expect (i.e. predict) that people will do bad things (or fail to do good things), and still rightly hold them responsible for what they do (or fail to do). Riggs responds to my objection by noting an ambiguity in the word “expect”:

I was not using the word “expect” in a merely predictive sense. Rather, I was using it in a somewhat normative sense. The condition is meant to express the idea that a negligent person *should have* been aware of the relevant facts whether or not she was and whether or not it was predictable in advance that she would be. (original emphasis, 17-18)

I think that Riggs is right that there is an ambiguity between predictive and normative uses of the word “expect”. Notice, however, that once Riggs’s position is clarified in this way, his claim that Greenleaf could not reasonably be expected to know better appears to be equivalent to the denial that he should have known better. Once this is made explicit, the argument that he is not culpable looks much weaker. Riggs acknowledges that Greenleaf *could* have known better, i.e. it was not impossible for him to acquire the relevant knowledge, nonetheless Riggs does not seem to think this alone is enough to establish his culpability, saying that “much hangs on just how difficult it would have been to accomplish this” (18). My own view is that difficulty reduces culpability, but does not eliminate it. As I read the novel, Greenleaf is culpable, albeit less culpable than someone in a better epistemic situation, who did the same thing, would have been.

My second disagreement with Riggs concerns his characterization of epistemic injustice as a form of negligence. In the following passage, I argued that some cases of epistemic injustice are not merely negligent, they are active and intentional:

People are sometimes culpable, not merely for failing to act to compensate for (or eliminate) their objectionable prejudices, but also for actively and intentionally seeking evidence to confirm them, as well as actively and intentionally interpreting evidence in ways that seem to confirm them. (5)

Riggs responds in the following passage:

[S]uch activity is not, strictly speaking, possible on the part of psychologically normal agents. Belief is peculiar in that to hold a belief is to take it to be true. Hence, we generally cannot come to hold genuine beliefs on the basis of what present themselves to us as merely practical, rather than evidential, reasons. (18)

It seems to me that this account of the psychology of belief formation is mistaken. Consider the words of another fictional character, Ben, from Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*:

It's a fundamental difference in the way we see the world. You see it as harsh and empty of values and pitiless. And I couldn't go on living if I didn't feel with all my heart a moral structure, with real meaning and ... forgiveness. And some kind of higher power. Otherwise there's no basis to know how to live.

Now whatever you think of Ben's reasoning here, it seems clear that his belief in a higher power is based on "practical, rather than evidential, reasons". What is more, it seems clear that that is how these reasons present themselves to him (after all that's how he presents them to his interlocutor). Finally, it seems clear that there is nothing psychologically abnormal about Ben or his reasoning. When I say that Ben's reasoning is "psychologically normal", I am not, of course, endorsing it. On the contrary, I am sympathetic with W. K. Clifford's view that it is (at least *prima facie*) wrong to hold beliefs on the basis of practical rather than evidential reasons. But that does not mean it is impossible. On the contrary, the existence of a norm condemning the practice implies that it is possible to engage in it.

On the more general question of the extent to which our beliefs are under our control, Riggs has the following to say:

I (and I assume Fricker as well) think that we have a fair bit of control over our beliefs, and are often properly praised or blamed for them. But this control does not primarily come in the moment of belief, at which point we are more or less at the mercy of how things seem to us, together with our epistemic temperaments and habits. (19)

This seems to be an overly passive account of what goes on at "the moment of belief". I don't think we are (even more or less) at the mercy of "how things seem to us", because how things seem to us is very often up to us. Consider, for example, the duck-rabbit picture, which we can choose to see as a duck or as a rabbit pretty much at will.

It is true that the extent to which our beliefs are under our direct control can appear vanishingly small if we take into account enough facts about ourselves and our environment. But this seems to be an instance of a general truth, which has nothing in particular to do with belief. The extent to which anything is under our direct control can

appear vanishingly small if we take into account enough facts about ourselves and our environment, but we don't, I think, want to conclude that we have little direct control over anything. In particular, we don't want to conclude that we have little direct control over our actions. If I am right, belief is a kind of action and believing is a kind of acting, and just as many, though not all, of our actions are intentional, many, though not all, of our beliefs (including those which are epistemically unjust) are intentional. Hence, not all cases of epistemic injustice should be classified as cases of negligence, as this would imply wrongly that epistemic injustice can never be intentional.

Riggs's position and mine are not terribly far apart. Our disagreement about whether the fictional character Herbert Greenleaf is culpable for his beliefs about Marge Sherwood seem to be at least as much about interpretation of the novel as about philosophical theory. Our disagreement about the general issue of whether epistemic injustice is a form of negligence may not be as significant as it first looks either. In a brief discussion of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Riggs draws our attention to some of the ways in which an instance of epistemic injustice can lead to further injustices, which are not merely negligent but intentional and malicious. An epistemic injustice done to the character Tom Robinson (the failure to give his testimony the appropriate amount of credibility) causes the prosecutor to humiliate him intentionally and maliciously. Whether this further injustice is appropriately characterised as "epistemic" is a semantic question, which may not matter very much. We can all agree that Tom Robinson has been treated unjustly, and that at least one aspect of that injustice is not merely negligent, but malicious. But Riggs and I still (I think) disagree. We disagree about how intention (and malice) comes into the story in the first place. He says that "whereas one cannot *choose* to believe whether or not someone is credible, one certainly can *choose* to publicly humiliate that person" (original emphasis, 20). I don't accept this contrast. I submit that we are constantly making decisions (i.e. choices) about whether or not to believe people are credible. Readers of this article will have to decide for themselves whether or not to believe me.

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References

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