

On Foley’s “Justified Belief as Responsible Belief” and Wolterstorff’s Agreements and Disagreements

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1 Beliefs in Everyday Life and Philosophy

Justified, warranted, epistemically rational belief, and knowledge are the core subjects of epistemology. In his paper Foley

1. aims at giving an account of rational belief and epistemically rational belief which is embeded in a theory of rationality,
2. on basis of this account he gives an account of justified belief, which should be “relevant to the assessments of beliefs that we are interested in making in our everyday lifes, [...] where the focus [...] [is on responsible belief].” ([1] p. 313)

1.1 The Evaluation of Beliefs in Everyday Life

In everyday life we evaluate beliefs and belief forming practices as being rational, efficient, responsible, morally wrong, entitled, justified, etc. Foley seems to believe that we rarely care whether beliefs meet requirements for knowledge and that we often evaluate the responsibility and rationality of holding certain beliefs. Because of that Foley is mainly interested in evaluating beliefs for everyday life. He is not so much interested in knowledge and requirements for knowledge. Foley, for this reason, does not discuss warranted belief and knowledge. These are, according to him, merely of theoretical interest. ([1] pp. 313, 321,)

1.2 The Evaluation of Beliefs in Philosophy

In epistemology we are mainly interested in what Foley calls ‘warranted belief’; belief that is necessary and together with other conditions sufficient for knowledge. ([1] p. 321) According to Foley (traditional) externalists and internalists accept the following methodological assumption:

Assumption of Externalists and Internalists “[T]he properties which make a belief justified are by definition such that when a true belief has those properties, it is a good candidate to be an instance of knowledge.” ([1] p. 314)

This assumption has, corresponding to Foley, bad consequences for theories of justification, knowledge and rationality ([1] p. 315):

1. “The theory of justified belief is divorced from our everyday assessment of each other’s opinions, which tend to emphasize whether we have been responsible in forming our beliefs rather than whether we have satisfied the prerequisites for knowledge.”
2. “[T]he fact that most people cannot provide adequate intellectual defenses for much of what they know, the assumption forces the theory of knowledge into awkward attempts to read back into the account of knowledge some duly externalized notion of justified belief.”
3. “The concepts of rational belief and justified belief ought to be closely linked, but if justified belief is closely linked with knowledge, then so too will be rational belief. But the more closely the concept of rational belief is connected with the prerequisites of knowledge, the more the concept will be cordoned off from our ways of understanding the rationality of actions, decisions strategies, plans and other phenomena whose rationality we regularly assess.”

“The remedy is to jettison the idea that knowledge can be adequately understood in terms of rational or justified true belief plus some condition to handle Gettier problems, and, correspondingly, to jettison although the idea that there is a simple, necessary tie between either the theory of justified belief or the theory of rational belief and the theory of knowledge.” ([1] p. 315)

Comment: Foley means by ‘warranted belief’ the same as traditional epistemologists mean by ‘justified belief’. And he seems to assume that “the everyday meaning” of ‘justified belief’ is more related to rational and responsible belief than to knowledge.

2 Rationality Theory

2.1 Rationality in General

Rationality Schema *A decision, plan, action, strategy, belief, etc. x is rational in sense y for an individual i if (iff?) it is epistemically rational for i to believe that x will do an acceptably good job of satisfying i ’s goals of type y .* ([1] pp. 318, 324)

Where ‘ y ’ refers to any set of goals of the individual. Hence, a decision, plan, etc. can be rational concerning one set of goals and not rational concerning another one. ([1] p. 318)

A decision, plan, etc. will do an acceptable good job of satisfying the goals of an individual if (iff?) “its estimated desirability is acceptable high given the context, where the context is determined by the relative desirability of the alternatives and their relative accessibility.” And its “[...] estimated desirability is a matter of what is rational to believe about its probable effectiveness in promoting one’s goal and the relative value of these goals.” ([1] p. 316) For rationality it is not required to believe epistemically rational that the decision, plan, etc. will do the best job of satisfying one’s goals.

The notion ‘epistemically rational belief’ is central for understanding the schema.

Comment: (i) It is unclear which status this schema has. Is it an explication (a definition which is theoretically fruitful and at least partly captures our usage) hence adequate or inadequate, or is it a thesis hence true or false? (ii) Additionally, it is unclear whether there is always a decision, plan, etc. with an estimated desirability which is acceptably high enough; whether there is always a rational decision, plan, etc.

2.2 Epistemically Rational Belief

According to Foley there are two meanings of ‘rational belief’. Both are substitutions in the Rationality Schema. “The first is the notion of epistemic rationality, which is defined in terms of the purely epistemic goal. The second is a derivative notion, which is defined in terms of the concept of epistemically rational belief and one’s total constellation of goals” ([1] p. 318)

Epistemically Rational Belief *A belief x is rational in an epistemic sense (epistemically rational) for an individual i if [iff?] it is epistemically rational for i to believe that x will do an acceptably good job of satisfying i ’s epistemic goal, namely, of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs now. ([1] p. 325 (footnote))*

Rational Belief *A belief x is rational (in an all goals of an individual i covering sense) for an individual i if [iff?] it is epistemically rational for i to believe that x will do an acceptably good job of satisfying all goals of i . ([1] p. 318)*

The first substitution seems to have a problem of circularity. Foley believes that this circularity is circumventable by using foundationalistic, coherentistic, reliabilistic or similar accounts of rationality. These accounts, pursuing the epistemic goal of having now accurate and comprehensive beliefs, explicate ‘epistemically rational belief’ without reference to rationality. That is why, according to Foley, “the concept of epistemically rational belief [...] serves as a theoretical anchor for introducing” other epistemic ones. ([1] pp. 317f, 325 (including footnote))

Foley suggests that the Rationality Schema is “compatible with all the major theories of epistemically rational belief. For example, according to coherentism, it is epistemically rational for one to believe that believing P would acceptably contribute to the epistemic goal of one’s now having accurate and comprehensive beliefs only when [iff?] [...] P coheres appropriately with one’s other beliefs and hence it is epistemically rational to believe that P is true; [...]” ([1] p. 325 (footnote))

Foley mentions the following reasons for why we seldom evaluate beliefs as being ‘rational belief’ in a pragmatic sense (second sense):

1. “[M]any of our discussions and debates concerning what is rational to believe take place in a context of trying to convince some person [...] to believe some proposition. But [...] citing practical reasons is ordinarily ineffective.” (Even if they were effective we should not try to convince others on the basis of practical reasons because they may have goals we do not consider.)
2. Our epistemic goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs normally overrides practical reasons to believe something epistemically irrational. “[T]he beliefs that are likely to do the best overall job of promoting the total constellation of our goals are beliefs that are both comprehensive and accurate.” However, this last claim is not an analytic truth about the structure of rationality, since its truth depends heavily on the actual goals and beliefs of the person under consideration. ([1] p. 318f.)

Comment: (i) Traditional foundationalistic, coherentistic and reliabilistic accounts of justified belief seek to capture what Foley calls ‘warranted belief’, i.e. belief that is a good candidate for knowledge. Using such accounts to explicate ‘epistemically rational belief’ would suggest, contrary to what Foley seems to suppose, that the theory of knowledge or of warranted belief is more basic than the theory of rationality. (ii) If the Rationality Schema is intended as an explication/definition it is inadequate. His definition of ‘epistemically rational belief’ via the Rationality Schema is circular. To provide another definition of ‘epistemically rational belief’ via foundationalistic, coherentistic, reliabilistic, etc. accounts makes matters worse as it implies that these two definitions are creative. (iii) The Rationality Schema requires that it is epistemically rational to believe that P if (iff?) there is a meta belief $M(P)$ (that P will do an acceptable good job w.r.t. the individuals epistemic goals) that is epistemically rational to believe as well. Hence, the existence of an epistemically rational belief implies that there are infinitely many meta-beliefs that are epistemically rational as well. This is counterintuitive. Accordingly, if the Rationality Schema is intended as a thesis, it is probably false. Since Foley tries to explicate epistemically rational belief via warranted

belief (foundationalistic, coherentistic, reliabilistic, etc. accounts) too, the same must hold true for warranted belief. A belief in P is warranted iff there is a meta-belief $M(P)$ that is warranted as well. This shows that Foley's definitions are creative because these sentences are not implied by an (unspecified) theory of warranted belief.

2.3 Justified, Responsible and Non-Negligent Belief

Although pragmatic ends seldom influence our beliefs directly they often do so indirectly by influencing directly our gathering and evaluating of evidence. They influence whether we have responsible and justified belief. ([1] pp. 320f.)

Responsible Belief *x has responsible belief that p if (iff?) x believes that p and x has epistemically rational belief that her procedures of gathering and evaluating the evidence (on which basis x believes p ?) have been acceptable given limitations (time, capacities) and given all of one's goals. ([1] p. 322, [2] p. 339)*

Justified Belief *x has justified belief that p if (iff?) x has responsible belief that p . ([2] p. 339)*

Foley says "[b]ecause of the relative unimportance of many topics and the pressing nature of many of our non-intellectual ends, we can have justified beliefs [or responsible beliefs] about these topics even when we have spent little or no time gathering evidence about them or deliberating about them. [...] This is one of the ways in which justified belief and epistemically rational belief can come apart." ([1] p. 323)

If we do not have an epistemically rational belief concerning the procedures of gathering and evaluating evidence, there is still the possibility of having non-negligent belief.

Non-negligent Belief *x has non-negligent belief that p if (iff?) x believes that p , x does not believe one's procedures in gathering and evaluating the evidence (on which basis x believes p ?) have been unacceptable given limitations (time, capacities) and given all of one's goals, and it is not epistemically rational to believe this. ([1] p. 322)*

Comment: Problematic is that (i) Foley does not give a precise account of when the procedures of gathering and evaluating evidence (on which basis i believes p ?) have been acceptable given the limitations of time, etc. and all of i 's goals. This seems more in need of a clarification as the notion of responsible belief itself. (ii) Additionally, it seems that such statements about acceptability can be normative/evaluative in nature. The belief that one's procedures in gathering and evaluating evidence have been acceptable must be epistemically rational, and hence, also warranted (in the sense of foundationalistic, coherentistic, reliabilistic, etc. accounts), in order to responsibly believe. Usually, however, theories of warranted belief do not address when beliefs about normative/evaluative statements are warranted.

3 Wolterstorff on Foley's Account of Responsible Belief

3.1 Wolterstorff's Agreements

Wolterstorff is also interested in our everyday evaluations of beliefs. He does not believe that these evaluations depend solely on whether beliefs meet the requirements for knowledge. He agrees with Foley that "accounts of rationality (and justification) have been in thrall to attempts to render an account of knowledge" and that "accounts offered of rationality have been framed with an eye on that use, and often thereby distorted." ([3] p. 327) Wolterstorff uses 'entitled to believe' instead of 'responsibly or non-negligently believe' but thinks that he and Foley refer to the same. According to Wolterstorff we are entitled to our beliefs if we believe as we ought to believe. "If a person ought not to have that knowledge [, belief,] or ignorance that she does in fact have, let me say that she is not entitled to that knowledge [, belief,] or ignorance."

3.2 Wolterstorff's Disagreements

1. Entitlement has, according to Wolterstorff, an uneliminable deontological component. "Definitive of the *deontological* 'ought' is that failure to act, believe, and so forth in accord with the 'ought' implies culpability and blameworthiness [...]" ([3], p. 330) "[E]ntitlement is radically deontological, in the sense that no attempt to identify the phenomena on which it supervenes without making use of the deontological 'ought' will be successful." According to Wolterstorff, Foley's account does not make use of the deontological "ought".
2. Another worry of Wolterstorff is that Foley's account allows to have a responsible belief without having acquired the associated meta-belief in a responsible way. (Imagine a scientist who designed and implemented an experiment correctly and came to believe that *p* because of this experiment. If she believes the associated meta-belief only because she asked a crystal ball whether her experiment was designed and implemented appropriately, she still would be a responsible believer.)
3. Wolterstorff offers, but does not develop, his own characterization of entitlement, and thus responsible and non-negligent belief:

Entitlement: *A person is not entitled to some feature of his belief- or knowledge-system [...] [iff] (i) there is some practice of discovery or rendition that he failed to employ but ought to have employed [...] such that, had he done so the presence of that feature would have been forestalled or eliminated; or (ii) there is some practice of discovery or rendition that he employed [...] but ought not to have (thus) employed, and which is such that, had he not employed it thus, the presence of the feature would have been forestalled or eliminated.*

3.3 Foleys Response to Wolterstorff

1. Foley thinks that the deontological ought is as much in need of an explication as the concept of responsible belief itself. Foley argues that an explication of the latter with the help of the first is not desirable. (Foley could add that the deontological ought is analyzable in terms of rationality as well. For example: an action *x* is obliged for an individual *i* iff it is epistemically rational to believe that *x* will do an acceptably good job of satisfying *i*'s moral/ethical goals.)
2. Foley's response on Wolterstorff's second criticism is that it is not necessarily the case that an irresponsibly acquired meta-belief is also irresponsibly held. As Wolterstorff rightly points out this does not help Foley as long as he admits that there are cases where the meta-belief is irresponsibly acquired and held and that in such cases the belief itself is not responsible.
3. What Wolterstorff does not notice is that Foley hints at a way how to construe counterexamples to Wolterstorff's account of entitlement. ([2], p. 339) (Imagine a crazy scientist employed practices of discovery or rendition he should not have employed in his experiments, and if he had not employed them thus, the presence of the belief would have been forestalled or eliminated. Given the experiment actually took place it is yet responsible to believe in the results instead of rejecting these beliefs on moral grounds.)

References

- [1] Foley, R. (2008) Justified Belief as Responsible Belief. In M. Steup, E. Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, 313-326.
- [2] Foley, R. (2008) Response to Wolterstorff. In M. Steup, E. Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, 338-341.
- [3] Wolterstorff, N. (2008) Obligation, Entitlement, and Rationality. In M. Steup, E. Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, 326-338.