1. Ethics of belief

- Main q of field: When is it right/wrong to hold a belief?
- Question I’m most interested in: doxastic norms (epistemic, prudential social/moral, friendship) often in conflict. How do people weigh these norms?
A shipowner was inclined to sell tickets for a transatlantic voyage. It struck him that his ship was rickety, and that its soundness might be in question. Knowing that repairs would be costly and cause significant delay, the shipowner managed to push these worries aside and form the “sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy.” He sold the tickets, bade the passengers farewell, and then quietly collected the insurance money “when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales”
1. Ethics of belief

- Clifford 1877: shipowner “verily guilty of the death of those men,” because even though he sincerely believed that the ship was sound, “he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.” Why did he have no such right? (SEP)

- Can you be wrong for sincerely holding a belief?

- Now consider the case where the ship ends out being fine

- Clifford: says outcome should make no difference

- Do the folk think the same?

  - Moral psych (MP): research of outcomes on perceived actions (e.g., if something was intended but somehow something else intervened and the bad thing never happened) key q, but hard to isolate critical variables

  - MP would predict outcome matters, classic deontics of belief says no. I would be most intrigued if moral judgments about beliefs were stable regardless of outcome

  - How does outcome of belief influence moral judgments about belief? Does perceived relation between belief and action matter? Gets @ broader q re whether beliefs are perceived as wrong in themselves or as a function of what they do.
1. Ethics of belief

• Norms about forming and holding beliefs
  
  • **Epistemic** (truth-tracking) norms
  
  • **Prudential** (whether it is useful/ beneficial to believe that P)
  
  • **Moral** (broad category, e.g. may be immoral to obtain evidence in certain ways)
  
  • **Friendship** (personal fav, idea that friendship has obligations that conflict with epistemic norms)
  
  • E.g. of prudential & friendship: positive illusions and self-deception
  
  • **How do people balance competing norms in forming and justifying beliefs?** (aside: intuition/deliberation)
1. Ethics of belief

• Friendship (Keller, 2004)

  • *Friends* example, poetry vignette

  • “Good friends believe in each other; they give each other the benefit of the doubt; they see each other in the best possible light.” (Keller)

  • Friendship obligations and epistemic obligations sometimes at odds

  • At same time, can’t ignore all evidence just bc of friendship. Finding some kind of ideal balance between conflicting norms

  • Does friendship require “epistemic irrationality”? (Stroud, 2006)
1. Ethics of belief

• Certain kinds of beliefs don’t require evidence (e.g., religion, love?) (In what cases is faith valued vs. disparaged? When is it wrong to use “best” epistemic practices? E.g., do you still need a high level of evidence to believe your friend?)

• Most ethicists of belief think bias is bad, think beliefs should be truth-tracking, etc., value epistemic norms above other norms (this is an oversimplification)

• What if epistemic norms don’t really matter to people in the way that social and moral norms, friendship obligations, and personal identities do?

• In a philosophical realm, certain ways of forming and holding beliefs are considered to be bad practice. But what if normal people value objectivity less than philosophers do? You hear people praised for “standing up for what she believes in” — something that may be regarded by the folk as a virtue in its own right
1. Ethics of belief

• In law, “presumption of innocence”

• Different standards of evidence to believe something bad than to believe something is good

• Though this is ideal, is this how jurors actually think?

• How do personal relationships e.g. friendship, come into play? Prudential/social norms would dictate you should believe in your friend’s innocence for longer / hold a higher standard of evidence. Epistemic norms do not account for the role of social distance

• Norms are in tension. How to people value and weigh various norms?

• How do people interpret doxastic norm violations in context
1. Ethics of belief

• Dual character of belief / thick-thin (Knobe, Prasada, & Newman 2013; Buckwalter, Rose, & Turri 2013)

• Which kind of norms map onto different “levels” of belief?

• Could it be the case that people at one level think their friend did it, but at another level refuse to believe it?
2. Conspiracy theory

- situationism vs. character trait debate re who can be blamed for such “crippled epistemologies” and “epistemic vices” (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009)

- most philosophers agree that it is not epistemically/morally justified to believe in conspiracy theories or extremism

- but how can a widespread, categorical ban on an entire set of beliefs and mode of inquiry be justified either?

- conspiracy theories can turn out to be true. Highlights tension b/t *mode* of inquiry and belief outcome. Is it better to believe something that happens to be true, even if arriving at that belief in an irresponsible way, or is it better to use a good way of thinking that leads to a false belief?

- Can the practice of engaging with ideas, even if they are false, even if you’re pursuing knowledge in the wrong way, really be worse than disengaging with the world altogether?