

Philosophy 2²3³: Intuitions and Philosophy
Fall 2009
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1pm - 2:15pm
Library 209

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Class 18 - Self-Trust
Richard Foley, "Rationality and Intellectual Self-Trust"

I. Self-trust and the Lockean/Reidian distinction

In Foley's article, we see hints of the third part of the class, when we will return to the question of the veracity of our intuitions, and whether the experimental (and otherwise empirical) results we have examined have ramifications for philosophical methodology.

Foley's article may belong more properly in that third section of the course, since the central theme of his article concerns the necessity of trusting one's intuitions, at least to some degree.

Still, there are empirical results about interviewing fallacies on which Foley relies that I thought would be appropriate for this middle portion of the course.

Some of those results, as Foley notes, are available in Robyn Dawes' *House of Cards*, which is owned by the Hamilton library.

There has also been a lot of work on the merits (or not) of interviews more recently.

The question of self-trust is most salient, for our purposes, as a question of whether we can trust our philosophical intuitions.

Foley sees the question as epistemological: how can we know that our philosophical beliefs are true, especially in light of my understanding of the possibility of skepticism?

If I know of the skeptical hypotheses, then I know that there are conditions under which my beliefs could be radically false.

Those beliefs include, as Descartes, and every other epistemologist since Descartes, noted, beliefs about my belief-forming apparatus.

Foley contrasts Locke and Reid on the matter of self-trust.

Locke takes our belief-forming processes to require justification.

Trusting one's beliefs entails trusting one's tools for gathering those beliefs.

To find a justification for one's beliefs, it looks like we need to have some sort of immediately-given, self-justifying principles on which to found the rest of my belief set.

But, as Sellars and Quine showed, all attempts at indubitable foundations are failures.

Further, attempts (like those of Cavell, Davidson, Putnam, and Rorty) to show some kind of incoherence in the skeptical hypothesis are also failures.

What makes epistemology possible also makes skeptical worries unavoidable, namely, our ability to turn our methods of inquiry and our opinions into objects of inquiry (243).

Thus, the skeptic seems to undermine all possible self-trust.

Alternatively, Reid takes our belief-forming processes to be innocent until proven guilty.

The Reidian doesn't engage with the skeptic as the foundationalist does.

Instead, the Reidian refuses to let the skeptical hypotheses about our belief-forming apparatus infect our other beliefs.

As a matter of intellectual necessity, Foley argued, we have to ignore the skeptic and move on to other matters.

Once we abandon the aspirations of traditional foundationalism, the only realistic answers to questions of how to arrange and how to organize our intellectual lives are ones that involve large elements of unargued-for intellectual self-trust (243).

Foley's claim, then, is that philosophical rationality is just like rationality in general. We need some starting points, and we can't defeat the skeptic.

The fact that I have to rely on challenged abilities and procedures to reach an opinion, if I am to have an opinion at all, does not completely eliminate the possibility of my rationally having an opinion (252).

Foley has recommended an attitude toward our beliefs much like that which Hume suggested: give up trying to prove that our senses are veridical and that our beliefs are indubitable, and proceed with caution about, but confidence in, one's beliefs.

Given that we need to trust ourselves, the questions of when and how much to trust ourselves arises. Foley distinguishes breadth and depth (aligned with confidence) of our opinions, and intuitions, and other belief-like phenomena (like suspicions).

We will not pursue explication of those suggestions.

Instead, we will pursue the question of how to proceed, in Reidian fashion, in cases in which we our beliefs (or belief-forming processes) are no longer innocent because we have reason to believe that they have been proven guilty.

II. First-order beliefs and second-order skepticism

How should we proceed in cases like the following?

I have a confident and deep opinion that P, but I then acquire information that this opinion belongs to a class of opinions about which people in general are unreliable, and at least at first glance there is no reason to think I am different from most people (248).

In particular, Foley refers to empirical evidence concerning the beliefs we form on the basis of interviews.

It is an exaggeration but only a very slight one to say that for any predictions of future behavior that have been studied, personally interviewing the subjects for one hour harms rather than aids predictive accuracy (248).

Dawes discusses a study made at the University of Texas at Houston medical school.

The original pool of about 2200 applicants was narrowed to about 800 on the basis of pre-interview qualifications.

The remaining 800 were interviewed, and ranked by admissions and faculty members.

150 were accepted, all of whom were in the top 350 of the interview rankings.

Then, the Texas legislature demanded the school increase its incoming class to 200, adding 50 more students.

The only students remaining were below 700 in the interview rankings; still more 50 were admitted.

Faculty were not told which students were in the first-admitted 150 or in the later-admitted 50.

A study was conducted by Robert DeVaul comparing the achievements of the persons in the two groups:

class standing at various points during their schooling and during residency.

There were no differences at all between the groups in terms of who graduated, who received honors, and all other criteria.

DeVaul and his colleagues concluded that the interviews - the sole method for obtaining the final rankings - were a total waste of time (Dawes, *House of Cards* 88).

Further evidence reveals implicit sexist, ageist, and racist biases among interviewers.

Some schools, e.g. Princeton's philosophy department, have given up interviewing candidates both for admission and for hiring.

Foley considers a concrete example of Smith, a candidate for a teaching job.

Suppose we interview Smith, and decide, on the basis of that interview and background beliefs about teachers, that Smith is likely to be a good teacher.

On the one hand, we have first-order beliefs, based in evidence, that Smith will be a good teacher.

On the other hand, we have second-order beliefs that the first-order-belief-forming process which led to our belief that Smith is likely to be a good teacher is faulty.

I have Reidian reasons to maintain my first-order belief.

I have empirical evidence for the second-order belief.

Uh-oh.

III. Sanguine and bleak responses

If we want to hold on to the first-order belief, we may pursue what Foley calls the sanguine response to the dilemma: find reasons to deny the second-order belief on the basis of my superiority to the subjects in the relevant empirical studies.

Other people may be mis-led by interviews, but I am not!

Unfortunately, this response looks like mere bluster unless there is some evidence indicating I really am different (250).

I might defend my rejection of the applicability of the evidence to me, by learning of the evidence, and making concerted, conscious efforts to avoid the mistakes that others make.

I can recalibrate.

For instance, some sources of interview unreliability trace to the dress and manner of candidates.

Well-dressed candidates tend to score higher in interviews than poorly-dressed candidates; well-spoken candidates tend to score higher, as well.

I can consciously observe these factors, and try to balance my responses in order to avoid being subconsciously swayed.

Still, the factors which cause the errant interview scores may not be so easily counter-balanced.

For example, we have many subconscious biases, and we all bring those to interviews.

See, for example, the annoying [implicit association tests](#) which demonstrate subconscious racist, sexist, and otherwise prejudiced attitudes.

Additionally, as with smokers, people tend to think that we are members of an exceptional sub-class when they really have no legitimate reasons for that belief.

Recalibration is not as easy as it seems, or as we hope it might be.

If we can not recalibrate, then the bleak response (251) may be our only other option. On the bleak response, we give up all self-trust, and rely only on the empirically-supported evidence. That is, we accept that the second-order belief defeats our first-order belief.

The strategy, in other words, is to protect myself from the harmful effects of the interview, and to do so by numbing myself intellectually with respect to the interview, so that it has no effect on my opinion. The goal is the intellectual equivalent of looking the other way (251).

The bleak approach is characteristic of some recent critics of the medical establishment, like one medical researcher who has criticized use of the flu vaccine because of his perception that there is not enough hard data to support its distribution. In such cases, it is important to be judicious. But, as one counter-critic writes:

There is nothing judicious about..., whose problem was described by one of my colleagues as “methodolatry,” the profane worship of the randomized clinical trial as the only valid method of investigation (scienceblogs.com/effectmeasure/2009/10/journalists_sink_in_the_atlant.php).

Our experimental evidence in many cases is limited. In an ideal world, we would have solid empirical evidence for all our beliefs. But, we can't run studies on everything. Further, we are often forced to make decisions in the absence of evidence. We have to make educated guesses.

For more on the flu story, see the [piece in the Atlantic](#) which spurred recent discussion and got many people upset. As Foley argues, rejecting our own experience in favor of distal empirical evidence is intellectually defeatist. Still, a defeatist answer may not be a false answer. We want to know that our self-trust is veridical, not merely inevitable.