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BELIEFS BEYOND CONTROL: ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ACTIONS IN A WORLD SHAPED BY EXTERNAL FORCES

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Abstract

This article researched on whether people should be accountable for their beliefs. Culture, religion, environment, and mental health are factors wholly outside of one's control to develop beliefs; therefore, holding people blameworthy for their beliefs is problematic. To this end, one's cultural upbringing seems to shape beliefs unconsciously from an early age. Environmental factors, which may include media and propaganda, go further to shape beliefs through the constant exposure to messages to which may result in the adoption of ideas they would otherwise not have had. Mental health conditions, such as depression and bipolar disorders, distort a person's thinking about oneself and the world. These factors can thus mean that belief is essentially a product of external forces, and did not spring from personal will. From this perspective, holding an individual responsible for his or her beliefs may create some undue prejudices, given that belief formation is a complex process, stemming from both objective and subjective inputs. On the other hand, it is easier for society to judge a person by the actions the person takes, rather than by the

beliefs a person inherits or is influenced to align with which are beyond the person's control. Although beliefs can motivate behavior, the final decision to take or not take the action is the responsibility of the individual. These actions are directly linked to an impact to the society. The individual deserves consequences from the resulted impact. This is a more accurate judgement rather than one based on the subjective impulses and motivations which triggered the actions to happen. This distinction is crucial in displaying fairness and not prejudice. In a world shaped by many external forces, beliefs beyond a person's control should not be used to punish the person. People should be held accountable for actions rather than beliefs.

Keywords

Beliefs, Actions, External Forces, Accountability

1. Introduction

Should individuals be held accountable for their beliefs? The question of responsibility for one's beliefs remains complex, especially when external factors deeply influence such beliefs. This issue does not just pertain to a question of personal reflection and responsibility but has a centuries long history of also triggering innumerable wider debates and conflicts. Worldwide atrocities that have devastated humanity continue, most poignantly, to demonstrate our question's ongoing salience. For instance, on October 7th, 2023, Hamas – an Islamist political and military faction based in Gaza, Palestine – viciously attacked neighboring Israel due to contrasting belief systems and stands on political and territorial conflicts. In response, Israel retaliated and war ensued. Since the start of the war, Israel has ruthlessly decimated Palestinian regions, particularly in Gaza but also on the West Bank, sparking a devastating humanitarian crisis that many governments and organizations across the world consider genocide. Both sides in this war and crisis – Israel and Palestine – are certainly responsible for what has unfolded. But are they responsible for their beliefs or their actions? Indeed, Israel and Palestine should be held responsible for their acts of war. However, we should not hold them responsible for the beliefs underlying their acts as this could precipitate or intensify prejudice and bias. Holding Israelis responsible for their Judaism could result (and often has) in antisemitism; holding Palestinians or Hamas responsible for their Islamic beliefs could result (and, again, often has) in anti-Muslim hatred and prejudice. Thus, we must make a crucial distinction: people should be held responsible for their actions rather than their beliefs. Moreover, analysts cannot overestimate the role of media and propaganda in belief formation. Throughout history, but even more so in this digital era, media has played a

significant part in influencing general opinions and individual beliefs. Some of the ways through which belief formation occurs, deviating from the real values and knowledge an individual may possess, include propaganda, misinformation, or targeted messaging. For example, political propaganda may urge people to adopt extreme views that they would not have embraced by themselves. Are the media's audiences responsible for those beliefs which, in effect, others control and "guide them" to accept? This renders the issue of determining the responsibility for beliefs more complicated because of the powerful impact that media may have in changing beliefs in a manner purposefully designed to convince or control. Such an assertion becomes especially true since one's personal circumstance does not actually determine one's beliefs. Instead, beliefs are derived from the complex interplay of environmental, cultural, and mental health factors. As nobody independently creates his/her beliefs, then – once again – everyone should be held responsible for their actions, but not their personal beliefs.

2. Cultures

Indeed, diverse aspects of the cultures in which we are raised profoundly shape our beliefs. These include values, traditions, and religion. Chi-yue Chiu, a professor of psychology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, states the following in regard to man's relationship to his beliefs: "his conceptualization of the relationship between values and norms has evolved to account not just for personal choice, but for the unconscious influence of cultural context" (Armstrong 2018). Evidently, individuals obtain foundational cultural values, from an early age, that help to form their beliefs and attitudes towards various important life trajectories: including career choices, relationships, and moral decisions. People who live within cultures that highly value money, equality, or power might have beliefs that align with those values respectively. Whereas a culture that values education will inspire people to believe in the values of education and learning, which in turn influences career paths and life goals. In contrast, cultures that value freedom will support people who express themselves and advocate for equality and liberty. A social psychologist at the University of Michigan, Richard Nisbett, agrees with the statements of Chiu. His recent study suggests that "modern Asian cultures are relatively collectivist or interdependent, whereas western cultures thrive on independence and individualism, and it follows that these societal values sculpt one's point of view" (West 2007). This latter quote serves as a prime example of commentary on the difference in beliefs in cultures around the world.

Collectivist cultures concentrate on cooperation while western cultures focus on direct communication. People in collectivist societies value family responsibilities and teamwork more than personal goals. However, these values directly derive from the society in which they live. Thus, people should not be held responsible for what they are led to believe and instead, once again, should be held accountable for their actions. Individuals in Western cultures should not be held responsible for believing in prioritization of personal success because the values of their cultural milieu shape their beliefs. However, suppose they commit actions based on those beliefs such as exerting the logic of their, say, excessive greed? This scenario demonstrates that it is a personal choice to act upon the underlying belief.

3. Religion

Religion too remains another central aspect of culture that plays a significant part in shaping beliefs. In fact, religion plays a massive role in swaying belief as Manag suggests: “Religion is a universal human pursuit, affecting many different cultural parameters, moral concepts, and ideals, and influencing human thinking and behavior by offering answers on the meaning of human existence” (Manag 2014). Clearly, religion offers a system of moral concepts and ethical rules that influence people's beliefs, behavior, interactions, and decision-making. Marriage is an example of a religious belief that can vary across religions: Roman Catholic Churches and Oriental Orthodox Churches are opposed to same-sex marriage whereas Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism has supported same-sex marriage since the 1990s. Evidently, the religion which happens to have raised you will influence your beliefs regarding same-sex marriage. Indeed, since the majority of individuals across the world do not choose their religion and, rather, are simply born into it, individual members of an organized religious shouldn't be held directly responsible for their religious beliefs. In rare cases, an individual may choose to change their religion: “In 2021, only 16% said they had changed religions” (DeRose 2023). Yet, if an individual does choose or change his or her religion, he or she still should not be held liable for his/her religious beliefs because these continue separate from their individual actions at the level of the organized, broader religion itself. Overall, cultural norms, such as those deriving from organized religion, profoundly influence beliefs, and individuals are therefore not accountable for them.

4. External Environment

Furthermore, the observations and influences of others within any given environment have profound impacts upon the beliefs of individuals. These external factors induce views and ideas that are inextricably bound up with individual will. Authors from the Center for Adaptive Behavior and Cognition have written that, "In many social and biological systems, individuals rely on the observation of others to adapt their behaviors, revise their judgments, or make decisions" (Moussid 2013). Their observation illustrates how a fundamental process of social learning amounts to the capacity for seeing the choices and activities of others. When people alter their views and behaviors to 'fit in' with the group, it results in false impressions. Prejudices frequently develop because of the constant observation of social norms and behaviors in a specific setting, which causes people to absorb particular views without being explicitly aware of them. In a fascinating and famous real-life experiment, researchers conducted the Stanford University Prison Experiment in order to prove this concept, publishing their findings in a paper entitled: "The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil" (Zimbardo 1971). Philip Zimbardo's experiment, conducted in 1971, involved randomly assigning college students to roleplay either as guards or inmates to provide a false prison setting. Interestingly, the guards quickly became abusive, as their role led them to believe that such behavior was acceptable and necessary to maintain authority. Similarly, prisoners in this artificial milieu adopted beliefs of inferiority and powerlessness. Thus, the Stanford Prison Experiment strongly suggests how environmental conditions can dynamically mold people's beliefs.

Turning to sheer social influence on the individual, Napoleon Hill famously said, "Think twice before you speak, because your words and influence will plant the seed of either success or failure in the mind of another" (Napoleon Hill - Think Twice Before You Speak, Because Your..., n.d.). This poignant quote succinctly shows that words can affect others strongly, whether consciously or subconsciously. Words, like opinions or judgments, can hold weight and amend someone's thoughts and perceptions. People tend to believe as "true" that to which they are repeatedly exposed. Once again, this pattern of social influence suggests yet another reason beliefs are not purely a product of personal will but are heavily shaped by environmental factors.

5. Mental Health

In addition to cultural and environmental influences in belief formation, the biology and psychology of an individual's mental health often mold their beliefs in significant ways. Mental states can strongly impact how one views oneself and those around oneself and, in turn the formation of one's own beliefs. Winston Churchill and his bipolar condition provide us with a famous example of this phenomenon during his leadership of the UK during World War II. Churchill's mental illnesses significantly induced his beliefs. This included his bipolar disorder, a condition wherein patients exhibit trouble with emotional expression and rapid thinking, while experiencing intense mood swings. On Churchill's bipolar disorder, author and historian Anthony Storr wrote that if "he had been a stable and equable man; he could never have inspired the nation. In 1940, when all the odds were against Britain, a leader of sober judgment might well have concluded that we were finished" (Storr 1990). Storr raises this point to suggest strongly that Churchill was not a leader of "sober judgment." Rather, Churchill's bipolar disorder likely helped form a belief of indomitable and frankly irrational resilience. Churchill's now famous "stubbornness and defiance" in the face of the reality that the Nazi's had just taken over of most of the rest of Europe shows how bipolar disorder and other mental health conditions can temper personal beliefs – in a pivotal leader – in a manner beyond one's personal agency. In short, Churchill defiantly believed what "a rational person" would never have believed – resulting in leadership of a successful national effort to resist the Nazis "beyond all odds." This case of a key allied leader strongly suggests another reason why one should not be held responsible for beliefs. Regardless of the overwhelming odds facing Britain in 1940, Churchill's bipolar disorder fueled his resilient beliefs which eventually led to British victory – an amazing feat for which Churchill deserved much credit. Mental health conditions can alter and distort beliefs in manifold ways. Another strong example is depression which affects many people at some point in their lives. A recent study confirms that "for people with depression, beliefs about the self, other people, and the world are often decoupled from actual experience in a damaging way – a problem that is amplified by negative emotions and exacerbated by social withdrawal and inactivity" (Kube 2023). Depression causes people to perceive the world through an unrealistic lens that aligns with neither reality nor actual experiences. This disconnect between belief and reality is not a choice but rather a consequence of illness. This testifies that the state of a person's mental health can determine their beliefs. Numerous other examples of mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia, ADHD,

autism, OCD, and more also strongly suggest the salience of this point. As all mentioned evidence suggests, it is critical to understand that when people have mental health conditions, they may lack control over their thoughts and beliefs. This demonstrates the unreliability and unaccountability of one's beliefs and further emphasizes the need for mental health services, social support, and advocacy. On the other hand, it also suggests that "conditions," "diagnoses," and "mental challenges" may have unforeseen consequences that we cannot always necessarily consider, *a priori*, "entirely negative:" such as Churchill's fantastically successful wartime leadership.

Finally, it is crucial to consider the complex interplay between cultural environmental conditions and the individual's mental state. For instance, statistics from England, in 2020, highlight how systemic societal issues can precipitate mental health issues that in turn shape beliefs: "Around 40% of people in England who have overlapping problems including homelessness, substance misuse and contact with the criminal justice system in any given year also have a mental health problem" (Mental Health Facts and Statistics 2020). Evidently, an individual's mental health is intricately intertwined with the circumstances which the surrounding society dictates. When one suffers from mental health issues resulting from environmental conditions, one's beliefs may change as a result. The harsh realities of people leading such lives may lead to the formation of beliefs such as negative self-perceptions or that the world is excessively hostile. For instance, repeated experiences of rejection or failure in someone's life may reinforce beliefs of worthlessness. One should not be held responsible for such beliefs when they are so inextricably tied to the culture, society, and environment in which one resides.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the preponderance of evidence suggests that external factors – including culture and environment – are inextricably linked to one's mental health and, together, collectively shape and modify one's beliefs. Consequently, people do not form their beliefs purely on the basis of personal will and, therefore, we should not hold them directly responsible their beliefs. Instead, we should hold accountable individuals purely for measures taken that are based on those beliefs – drawing an essential distinction between beliefs and actions. Embracing this viewpoint sheds new light on ethics and social justice. Individuals may inherit or adopt beliefs that derive from his or her culture, environment, and mental health. Yet, they are responsible for the choices they make and their resulting behavior and not their beliefs. Consequently, while external factors play a vital

role in shaping beliefs, it is ultimately the decisions and actions that individuals take that determines the individual's responsibility in society.

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