View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Asbury Theological Seminary

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 13 | Issue 3 | Article 15

7-1-1996

Helm, BELIEF POLITICS

Trenton Merricks

Follow this and additional works at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy

Recommended Citation

Merricks, Trenton (1996) "Helm, BELIEF POLITICS," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 15.
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol13/iss3/15

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

avoid by making deliberate breaks with tradition. A chief aim of the moderns during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to restore order to a culture which they thought had been fragmented by their predecessors. The one error many of these moderns refused to tolerate was eclecticism, or the lack of a rigorous foundation for one's own beliefs.

Dupré's suggestions for a critique of modernity in this book seriously underestimate the extent to which the very moderns whom he criticizes were dedicated to achieving a goal similar to his own: the creation of a new Christian synthesis of nature and the human subject with a transcendent God. Why does he think that his twentieth-century project stands a better chance of succeeding where the attempts of modern philosophers from Descartes to Kant failed? More importantly, why does he think that what *the late humanists and late scholastics*, such as Gassendi and Suarez, could not accomplish can possibly be achieved by anyone else? My own view is that the late humanists and late scholastics were better placed than both the moderns and the critics of modernity to fulfill Dupré's aims, and their failure to do so is one of the great lessons of history. There were indeed good reasons to become a modern in the context of that failure. Whatever else their shortcomings, the modern philosophers had no illusions about this and recognized that the methods of the late humanists needed radical revision. Dupré, who seeks to resuscitate the outlook of Christian humanism with the help of Heideggerian metaphysics, would do well to consider that much of what he regards as modernity's errors began as the rational choices of those who knew firsthand the excesses of too many beliefs about transcendent realities. *Passage to Modernity* is certainly right in its claim that modern values and attitudes were well established long before the Enlightenment, but this highly engaging book obscures a central feature of its two-stage narrative: the modernity of the Enlightenment was in many ways an unavoidable outcome of the modernity of the Renaissance. Any project which tries to revive the latter while subverting the former cannot base its claim to plausibility on an argument from history.

NOTES

1. Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 349-50.

Belief Policies, by **Paul Helm**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xiii and 226. $54.95 (Cloth).

TRENTON MERRICKS, Virginia Commonwealth University

A *belief-policy*, according to Paul Helm, is a type of belief. A belief-policy is, to a first approximation, a belief about how what one believes ought to be related to one's evidence, given that one's goal is forming true beliefs. There is no question that many of us have higher-order

beliefs about how we ought to form our beliefs in the face of evidence. And of course one can, as Helm does, understand much of what occurs and has occurred in epistemology as the development and defense of one such higher-order belief or another. Helm's project is to elucidate the notion of a belief-policy and to show that a proper understanding of belief-policies casts light on other topics of interest to the epistemologist.

A central tenet of the book is that belief-policies provide the key to understanding the role of the will in belief formation (Chapters 1 and 2). Helm notes that we praise and blame people for the beliefs they have and the way they form those beliefs; he then argues that this sort of normativity makes sense only if we assume that a person's will is intimately involved in what she believes. (Helm's account of the will and voluntary action and belief is explicitly compatibilistic (see esp. 176ff.).) But what exactly is the role of the will? Helm rejects a straightforward doxastic voluntarism, denying that one can simply form beliefs at will—I cannot simply believe that, for example, I am King of North America, and neither can you. Instead, says Helm, the will is involved in the formation of belief-policies, which formation is, to some extent, voluntary.

Two questions ought immediately to leap to mind. If most belief formation is not voluntary, why is the formation of belief-policies—which are themselves a kind of belief—voluntary? And how does the will's involvement in forming a belief-policy, only one of the many beliefs a person has, translate into the will being involved in all (or most) of our other beliefs, thus allowing for the normativity associated with most of our believings?

Helm's answers to these questions flow from a single elegant picture. Doxastic voluntarism is false because, according to Helm, most of one's beliefs are the involuntary result of a combination of the evidence presented to one and one's belief-policy. Given that one has a certain belief-policy, there is no room for the will to act in forming beliefs based on evidence (except perhaps in unusual circumstances, such as when the evidence is balanced between a belief and its denial). And this diagnosis of why doxastic voluntarism fails leaves open the possibility that one's belief-policy is not involuntary, since one cannot argue that one's belief-policy itself is an involuntary result of one's belief-policy (combined with evidence). Moreover, once we grant that the will is involved in belief-policy acceptance, and that most other beliefs are determined, in part, by one's belief-policy, it follows that in most of one's beliefs the will plays an important role, albeit at one remove. (And Helm maintains that other accounts of the will's involvement in belief formation, such as Pascalian attempts to undertake actions that eventually result in belief, are unsatisfying since they apply to only limited cases, and thus fail to provide a role for the will in the majority of our believings.)

To better understand Helm's overall picture, suppose, for example, that I have a belief-policy that includes: if p is a proposition about (say) physics, believe p if and only if the evidence makes p more likely than not. You, however, may have a competing belief-policy which instructs you, if p is a proposition about physics, to believe p if and only if there is a high level of evidence indicating that p is almost certainly true.

Confronted with the same data, I might believe that p, whereas you might withhold belief altogether. The evidence *alone* does not dictate whether to believe or withhold p. And Helm argues that evidence alone is never sufficient to dictate which belief-policy to endorse. Other factors, such as a decision about whether to maximize truth or minimize falsehood, are relevant. So we can explain why I believe p but you do not—even though we are confronted with the same evidence—by reference to differing voluntary choices we have made, choices in belief-policy selection and construction.

In order for a certain belief to be a person's belief-policy, must that person *explicitly embrace* that belief? Presumably not, for Helm's use of belief-policies presupposes that every person who may be praised or blamed for belief has a belief-policy, and surely many—probably most—people lack an explicit account of how their beliefs ought to relate to the evidence. And it is at least odd to think that my belief that there is a tree in front of me is a result (causal?) not just of my sense perception and way of conceptualizing the world, but also of a higher-order belief I have about how my beliefs ought to conform to the evidence. So perhaps, instead, a belief-policy is a belief we *attribute* to someone on the basis of how they form beliefs in the light of differing kinds and quantities of evidence. But if this is case, then it is vacuous to claim that the same evidence results in different beliefs in different people because these people have different belief-policies. Moreover, if belief-policies are abstractions, descriptions of the way one involuntarily forms particular beliefs given certain kinds of evidence, it is unclear how belief-policies themselves could be voluntary. Helm does not address these worries, nor is there enough detail along these lines in *Belief Policies* to know how he would address them.

Above I considered two "partial" policies, policies restricted to propositions about physics. A "complete" policy would include, of course, instructions concerning under what conditions beliefs of every sort ought to be accepted or rejected. One completely general belief-policy Helm discusses is "sufficient evidentialism"—the doctrine that one ought to form all of one's beliefs only on the basis of sufficient evidence. Sufficient evidentialism is widely recognized to suffer from serious, perhaps fatal, self-referential problems. But if Helm is correct, we can go beyond seeing that sufficient evidentialism is false, and *explain* what is wrong with it. For if Helm is correct, *no* belief is the result of only evidence; rather belief is the result of evidence evaluated in the light of a voluntarily chosen belief-policy, a policy that itself cannot be the result of evidence alone. This is one example of how Helm's overall project suggests new insights into issues already of interest to epistemologists.

Another epistemological issue that Helm connects with belief-policies in an interesting way is that of *responsibility* for belief (pp. 168ff.). It is reasonable to suppose that someone who is hypnotized to believe that p is not, in some important sense, responsible for her belief that p, whereas one who believes that p as a result of normal causes is. How do we explain the difference in responsibility, if we deny, along with Helm, doxastic voluntarism? Helm says that the belief-policy of the subject of

hypnosis plays no role in forming (or sustaining) her belief that p; we might therefore say that the belief that p is not truly "her own", and she cannot be held responsible for it. Thus Helm, while denying that we have voluntary control over most of our beliefs, can distinguish between beliefs that are truly our own and those that are foisted upon us. And of course those beliefs that result, in part, from one's own belief-policy owe part of their genesis to the act of one's will in choosing a belief-policy. I think Helm's understanding of belief ownership should be found interesting and plausible by anyone who, like Helm, wants to maintain a distinction between involuntary beliefs for which one is responsible and involuntary beliefs for which one is not responsible.

Helm's final chapter, on fideism, should be of particular interest to readers of *Faith and Philosophy*. Helm understands fideism as a family of belief-policies, sharing in common the claim that knowledge of, or belief in, certain religious doctrines is not grounded in evidence, reason, or argument. But Helm notes that, while this is not true of all the belief-policies in the fideistic cluster, some fideistic belief-policies can be defended by argument, and that such policies are, therefore, not obviously an affront to reason. So one could have reasons and arguments for embracing the second-order belief that one's religious beliefs ought not to be grounded in reason or argument. Helm's distinction between the belief-policy of fideism and fideistically formed religious beliefs shows clearly that the claim that the religious beliefs of the fideist are not the result of reason does not imply that fideism itself must be unreasonable.

Helm also thinks that belief-policies provide the resources for one useful understanding of rationality. According to Helm, rationality is to a large extent person-relative; a belief is rational if and only if it accords with one's belief-policy *and* one's belief-policy does not violate certain "necessary conditions for rationality as such" (p. 113). Of course, any belief-policy will accord with itself, so it seems that any belief policy which meets Helm's "necessary conditions" will itself be rational. And perhaps there is an important sense of 'rational' according to which we should acknowledge that a wide range of belief-policies count as rational.

Helm thinks there are two necessary conditions for rationality that any belief-policy ought to satisfy:

> Such conditions will include logical consistency; that is, as far as the holder of any belief-policy knows or is aware, the beliefs warranted by it must be consistent. Further, a belief-policy should be subjectively closed under deducibility and conjunction. That is, as far as the believer is concerned, if a belief-policy commits such a person to believing p, and p entails q, then the believer is committed to believing q. And likewise with conjunction. (p. 114)

But there are serious problems with Helm's supposed necessary conditions. Consider the (so-called) Paradox of the Preface. An author makes many claims in a book, claims that she believes; yet in a preface she acknowledges that surely one or another of the claims she makes is

mistaken. Such an author, therefore, does not believe the conjunction of each of her beliefs; moreover she holds—and could well be aware that she holds—beliefs that are not all possibly true (it is not possible that her assertion in the preface and all the other assertions contained in the book be true). So by Helm's account, the author's belief-policy *and* all of her beliefs formed in accord with that policy are irrational. But this is obviously a *reductio* of Helm's purported necessary conditions, and we ought therefore to reject them. Helm does not address the Paradox of the Preface. (It is only Helm's claims about consistency and closure under conjunction that are threatened by the Paradox of the Preface; that a rational belief-policy ought to be closed under deducibility is also controversial—consider the literature on truth-tracking and skeptical hypotheses—but much more plausible.)

Helm endorses another criterion for choosing a good belief-policy. He thinks one ought to select a policy that is *conservative*, that is, that (at least at the outset) sanctions most of one's beliefs (123 ff.). So he advises a "particularist" as opposed to a "methodist" approach to epistemology. But conservatism and particularism are themselves belief-policies, beliefs about which belief-policies (which are themselves beliefs) one ought to hold given the evidence of what one already believes. If Helm were just to assert that conservative belief-policies are preferred, he would be doing no more than recommending a policy without giving reasons for it.

Helm does seem to offer one reason to endorse conservatism. He says that conservative policies are less arbitrary than others. The argument seems to be, roughly, that if we are to pick a belief-policy that sanctions some set of beliefs, the least arbitrary choice is the one that sanctions those beliefs we already have. But the problem with this should be apparent—the belief that one's belief-policy ought to be chosen in a manner that is not arbitrary is itself a belief-policy. It is a belief-policy about how one ought to form beliefs given the evidence of what is, and is not, arbitrary.

While addressing issues of belief-policy selection and construction, Helm notes that there are other perfectly respectable areas of philosophy, such as ethics, in which decisive evidence does not determine the theory one embraces. There is, however, a crucial difference between belief-policy selection and ethical theory selection. One might be able to give a reason (not necessarily decisive) for an ethical theory that was not itself an ethical theory; but reasons for belief-policies—that is, claims about what policies are reasonable in the light of the evidence—must be belief-policies.

None of this is to say that conservative belief-policies are not best. Maybe they are. Personally, I am convinced they are. But Helm offers no defense of conservatism or any policy or class of policies that does not itself presuppose a belief-policy. On the one hand this is disappointing, especially given Helm's explicit claim at the start of the book that what he says will be "overtly prescriptive" (p. 1). On the other hand, it is probably unavoidable, since it appears to be *impossible* to give a reason to endorse a belief-policy that is not itself a belief-policy (any such reason will be the expression of a belief about which belief-policies—themselves

beliefs—are best given whatever evidence is deemed relevant).

Even if Helm's defense of certain belief-policies is not as satisfying as one might hope, we can still learn something from his way of conceptualizing the issues. For example, Helm would have us ask "What can we say in support of the higher-order belief that beliefs formed by sense perception have some presumption in their favor?" in place of the more familiar "Can we give a non-question-begging defense of the reliability of sense perception?". It may be that Helm's way of asking these questions will open new possibilities for those who wish to answer them, or perhaps make clearer that certain answers must always be unavailable.

Belief Policies offers a novel and, in my judgment, useful approach to its subject matter. This book provides a new perspective from which to view some issues in epistemology that already receive a good deal of attention. It also pushes to the surface interesting and important issues that do not receive enough attention, such as questions about the role of the will in belief formation and parallels between epistemology and ethics—parallels that can be eclipsed by other ways of approaching epistemology. This is a fine book well worth reading.*

* Thanks to my colleagues Tony Ellis, Gene Mills, and Peter Vallentyne for helpful comments on an early draft of this review.

The God Who Acts, edited by **Thomas F. Tracy.** University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994. Pp. x and 148. $28.50 (Cloth); $14.95 (Paper).

CHARLES TALIAFERRO, St. Olaf College.

This is a fine collection of four original papers by philosophers and theologians on the theistic concept of Divine agency. Each of the papers is followed by a critical response from different authors and the result is a book that is genuinely a case of philosophical theology (or, if you like, theological philosophy).

In "Divine Action: Some Moral Considerations" Maurice Wiles articulates an ostensibly deistic version of Christianity. He defends the intelligibility of thinking of God as the creator and sustainer of the cosmos, a God who creates but does not author miracles or other specific providential events. He adopts a free-will defense to preserve the belief in God's goodness. According to Wiles, creation involves a severe divine self-limitation and "the concept of divine intervention clearly constitutes a qualification of the nature and extent of that divine self-limitation" (p. 22). Supernaturalist versions of theism in which God does intervene in human history face a serious ethical problem. If God intervenes to save some people and not others, this is unfair. With respect to the Matthaen story of the Massacre of the Innocents, Wiles asks: "If God warns through dreams, why only Joseph? Were the other children of Bethlehem dispensable?"(p. 21) If specific divine acts that prevent disas-