Should I be held responsible for what I believe?

Introduction

Imagine a teacher asked a student to bring a textbook from her office. Obediently, the student did as he was told. Meanwhile, the principal witnessed the student entering the office alone and punished him for breaching the code of conduct, which prohibits touching teachers' property. Surprisingly, the student was held responsible and bore the consequences, while the teacher neither took a stand for the lad nor was she penalised for overlooking the common norm.

Through this, I would like to showcase the potential of my argument. Holding someone responsible for their belief is as absurd and insane as holding the student responsible for his unintended mishap!

Over the centuries, mankind has deliberately pondered over the answer to the question and yet has failed to do so. This is the marvel of every philosophical wonder. Unlike other fields, a justifiable conclusion to a philosophical enigma is something out of reach.

Hence, by no means do I claim to answer this question through this essay. However, I would like to put forward a fair argument that man shouldn't be held responsible for his beliefs. I hold this rationalisation on the grounds of three principles.

Firstly, figuring out what one really believes, through actions or even words, is something beyond the reach of our abilities. If we can't be sure what someone truly believes, how can we then hold them responsible for those beliefs?

Secondly, the beliefs we form are not our own beliefs. They are a culmination of certain dynamic factors. These factors leave some room for human contemplation, which is however insignificant.

Thirdly, if people were to be held responsible for their beliefs, and we were to act in accordance with this, there would be consequential changes in society, which would be dreadful indeed.

Moving on, there are very broadly two societies of belief.

One is the *activist* tradition, which holds that belief is something that is pressed upon us from the outside. In some cases, belief is a matter of introspection and the giving or withholding of assent to certain propositions. This line of thought was popularized by Rene Descartes.

The other is the *passivist* tradition, which holds that belief is merely something which happens to us. As we look at the world, beliefs are established for us by the state of affairs around us and only by that, do we have no input into that belief. This was deduced by David Hume.

These two traditions form the basis of any controversy regarding belief. Simply put, the activist tradition says that your beliefs are your own beliefs and you are certainly responsible for them. On the contrary, the passivist tradition contests that our beliefs are not our own beliefs. Rather, they have been indoctrinated, or brainwashed, by the world. This indirectly means we are not responsible for them.

First Principle: Staying in the dark about the truth

The first principle is an indispensable part of my argument. The only way to know what a person believes is through his words and his actions. For we may never know what he really thinks. People may or may not express what they actually believe due to some circumstances, expectations or even certain people. Then we are left to analyse their behaviour and actions, which brings up a complication we will delve into soon.

For example, the entire world is against the repugnant idea of the Nazis to get rid of the Jews. But imagine a person has a belief that the Nazis were not wrong due to some particular reason. But when this person is asked to share his thoughts about the same, he would probably go with the general idea that the Nazis are to blame. From another human's perspective, this man has the same belief that everyone has. Yet deep inside, he knows that is not the case.

In fact, any judgement or opinion that goes against the bulk of the crowd is often silenced by our humility within. In some other cases, we may be obliged to hide our belief as a part of sacrifice for a cause or a person. It may save your job or a relationship. In the end, many times, others end up believing that we too, are a part of them. This goes to show that words aren't the best choice when it comes to finding out what one believes.

I believe I shouldn't eat junk food. Yet I end up doing so. Maybe I have a strong liking for such kinds of delicacies. I believe I should study hard. Yet I don't do so. Maybe I have a passion for a talent which I would like to pursue further. I believe I should donate to the poor. Yet I don't do so. Maybe my financial status doesn't allow me to do so. I believe I should be kind to my neighbours. Yet I don't do so. Maybe my neighbours don't deserve respect. I believe it will rain today. Yet I don't carry an umbrella. Maybe I feel that the umbrella will not help keep out the rain.

Throughout our lives, there are several instances where you believe you shouldn't or should do something, but end up doing the opposite. This nature, where one succumbs and acts against one's better judgement, is called *akrasia.* Such kind of akratic behaviour is common in the world today. Now, judging people based on their actions makes a baseless cause to figure out what they believe, as it is not always in accordance with their belief.

Put simply, we cannot judge what a person truly believes, neither by actions nor by words. So, holding humans responsible for something we just cannot figure out is true, is another worthless argument. If you don't know what is true, you cannot take any further actions on it, whatsoever. Just like having no evidence against a criminal holds you back from sending him behind bars, similarly, not having a complete picture of what one believes restrains you from holding one responsible. In the end, there is no true measure of what one believes.

Second Principle: Formation of beliefs

Delving into the second principle. A question, which remains of immense importance, is the process of the formation of beliefs. This directly refers to the passivist hypothesis.

The people you socialize with play a crucial role in influencing your beliefs. The people you cherish your time with play an imperative role. You inherit many personality traits from your parents. Your companions are influential as well. Vygotsky's social development theory helps us further understand the authority figures in belief formation. His theory states that learning is a crucially social process as opposed to an independent journey of discovery. A child's learning benefits greatly from being guided by a more knowledgeable community member - such as a parent or teacher. It also suggested that children internalise and learn from the beliefs and attitudes that they witness around them.

Age also plays a salient role in shaping your beliefs. Your belief on whether you should eat healthy changes with age. Your belief in the importance of studies changes with age. Your belief in the importance of time, people and money changes with age as well.

The environment also has a part of its say. For example, it depends on your geographical features whether you consider 100 degrees Fahrenheit warm or 50 degrees cold. The vast expanse of geographical locations is accountable for this. You are not responsible for where you were born.

The same condition goes with materialistic possessions. Your income decides whether you consider a product or service, cheap or expensive. This belief is pivoted on your economic condition. Something which you may be responsible for. But that doesn't imply that it makes you accountable for the belief based on such a situation. Therefore, all such relative objectives, which are not directly under our control, vary our beliefs.

Furthermore, common societal beliefs are indoctrinated in our minds. It refers to some beliefs that have been passed on from generation to generation without any tinkering. For example, you should save money, you should respect your elders, you shouldn't waste time, you should go to bed early and many more. These beliefs are something that both me and you have in common!

All these factors, and many more, ultimately condense to the fact that we don't solely form our own beliefs, and being responsible for something that isn't ours, makes no manly sense.

Third Principle: A reality check

The third principle stands as a counter to the eyebrows being raised on this rationalization. Let us take into account a situation. In some imaginary court of philosophy, the decisive verdict is that people are held responsible for their beliefs.

Imagine how damaging an insistence on holding people accountable for their beliefs could be in a medical scenario, especially in situations where superstitions are a superior source of belief. Take for example the chickenpox disaster in India. Most of the population strongly believed that chickenpox was due to their past evils against the spirit of 'devi' and this disease can be cured by the Goddess only. Neither did they have formal education nor did

they have awareness regarding the matter. Not holding them responsible, allows the society to improve this situation. It leaves room for empathy in this world full of emotions. If we hold them responsible for their belief, they have themselves to blame. While this may sound true, it is not their fault that they never got the opportunity to learn as they got trapped in the vicious cycle of religious beliefs.

Imagine the impacts on developing, youthful minds, who have a lot to learn. For instance, a young child is amusing himself with a knife because he believes it has no harm. Obviously, a knife is not a toy. A teenager starts showing arrogance to his family and friends because he believes that he is on top of the world and nothing can stop him. Actually, in the real world, he stands nowhere as of now. A young adult starts spending his earned money because he believes he has earned enough. Whereas in reality, he has no idea what costs lie ahead of him. In such situations, holding them responsible for their beliefs again seems unconvincing. It is natural for one to have such half-baked beliefs at different stages of life. Holding them responsible would mean that they are guilty of their beliefs and the actions that follow them.

People would question the efficiency of such an approach in criminal cases as well. Now, consider people involved in horrible crimes. They have cruel beliefs that are generated by their circumstances or dictated by other people. Holding the criminal responsible for his belief will not solve the problem. The chain of thought will continue amongst the gang. Rather, it is the belief that needs to be changed and not the individual.

After all that, we can certainly conclude that holding humans responsible for their beliefs is not a viable choice for the world that is shaping up. To uphold moral values in society, one must forgo the idea that man is responsible for his beliefs. With that, I conclude the rationalizing of my three principles.

Conclusion

Coming back to the very beginning of this essay. You are the student. The teacher represents the influencing factors that shape your actions and ideals, over which you don't have demanding control (second principle). The principal considers that you intentionally went against the law, by judging you based on your actions (first principle). Then, the principal holds you responsible for your belief and subsequently your actions, leading to dreadful consequences (third principle). This is what would happen every day if people were held responsible for their beliefs, which is pathetic indeed!

After all this reasoning, ask yourself this again. For the sake of humanity, are we really responsible for our beliefs?

I believe not……

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