In Defence of Believing Wishfully

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To believe something wishfully is to believe it not on the basis of evidence but because either one would like that it is true or one would like to believe that it is true. Should one ever believe something wishfully? Of course not, for believing wishfully is always a bad gamble. One who believes something wishfully and gets away unharmed has simply been lucky. Almost always, what one would gain by holding a belief wishfully is outweighed by the risk of loss and, so, prudence requires that one adopt a stringent policy against believing wishfully. Or at least so goes a first response to our question.

I will argue that this first response is misguided. My view is that to refuse ever to believe something wishfully is to live under a debilitating prejudice. To refuse, as a matter of principle or habit, ever to believe something wishfully is to live under a debilitating prejudice—except when one values for its own sake understanding things as those things are, and values for its own sake understanding things as these things are above all else that one values for its own sake. One who values for its own sake above all else understanding things as they are is wise to be committed never to believing wishfully. But no one else is wise to have an overriding commitment not to believe wishfully. Everyone else does well to be open to believing wishfully, for there are easily discerned cases in which we can reap the benefit of believing as our heart desires without in the process putting anything dear to us at risk.

Should one be a person of the sort who values for its own sake understanding things as they are, and who values this above all else she values for its own sake? It *can* be wise to be a person of this sort. For most of us, though, we would not be wise to be a person of that sort. For most of us, wisdom counsels instead that we place some of our ends ahead of the end of understanding things, even if we do have as one of our ends understanding things. And so, even though it can be wise to believe only according to the evidence one has, most of us are wise to be open to believing wishfully.

I

To believe something wishfully is to believe it. The attitude in question is belief, not supposition or hypothesis or any cognitive attitude different from belief. To daydream that one is successful isn't to believe that one is successful, and so it isn't to believe it wishfully. Wishful belief is even less a non-cognitive attitude. A wishful belief, because it is a belief, is not itself a hope or a desire or a liking. A wishful belief is a belief like all one's other beliefs. What makes a belief wishful is what sustains it. A wishful belief is a belief sustained by a conative or affective attitude. One believes that p wishfully when one believes that p because of a desire or wish or hope or preference or liking that one has. Now it is possible that one believes that p wishfully even though one does have, according to one's own epistemic standards, evidence that "p" is true sufficient to warrant one's believing that p. What makes a belief wishful in the presence of sufficient evidence is that the evidence is not the cause of the belief. Without the evidence, the belief would remain; but without the relevant conative or affective attitude, the belief would depart. Typically, of course, we believe a proposition wishfully only when we lack what is, by our standards, sufficient evidence that that proposition is true. Though it is possible for one to believe something wishfully in the presence of

good evidence for that something, it will simplify matters to speak of wishful beliefs as beliefs sustained by conative or affective attitudes in the absence of sufficient evidence that they are true. In any case, in believing wishfully, one is at least indifferent to one's epistemic standards. Usually, though, one is flouting them.

The conative or affective attitude responsible for the belief held wishfully might have the same propositional content as the belief, but it need not. Sally would like that her cat is healthy, and this liking causes Sally to believe that her cat is healthy. Roger desires that people like him, and this desire causes him to believe that people like him. In these cases, the affective or conative attitude has the same content as the belief it sustains. Martha, on the other hand, would like to believe that her dog is healthy, not because she would like that her dog is healthy, but rather because should she believe that her dog is healthy, she would see no need to take her dog to the vet, and Martha would like to avoid the expense and trouble of taking her dog to the vet. The conative or affective attitude responsible for Martha's wishful belief concerns taking the dog to the vet, not the dog's health. Jim is indifferent to the idea that lower taxes for the wealthy means better economic times for all, but he wants to be part of the in-crowd and members of the in-crowd believe that lower taxes for the wealthy mean better economic times for all, and so Jim wants to believe that lower taxes for the wealthy mean better economic times for all.

This distinction, the distinction between believing that p because one wants that p or would like that p and believing that p because one wants to believe that p or would like to believe that p, won't concern us much in what follows. Either way, a belief sustained on the basis not of evidence but on desire or liking is a belief held wishfully.

II

The prudent person avoids believing wishfully, one might think, for almost any case of believing something wishfully is a bad gamble. Certainly, by believing something wishfully, we might benefit in some way; after all, only the expectation of benefit could cause us to ignore our epistemic standards so as to believe wishfully. But we also put at risk things that matter to us when we indulge ourselves by believing wishfully. If the risk is great, or if the thing that matters to us matters significantly, then it is foolish to believe wishfully. And, according to this line of thought, often either by believing something wishfully probably we will sooner or later suffer bad consequences or the bad consequences we might suffer would be very bad indeed. And so most often it is foolish to believe wishfully.

The argument for the prudence of believing only on good evidence concerns the relation of belief to action. Specifically, we act as we do in pursuit of our ends because we believe what we do. We guide our pursuit of our ends by our beliefs. If we want milk, we go where we believe we can get milk and do what we believe will get us milk. If we want a good liberal arts education, we enrol in what we believe is a good liberal arts programme and we participate in that programme in ways we believe will provide us with a good liberal arts education. Now suppose that one of the beliefs that guide us in the pursuit of some end is false. We're in a shopping mall, and we believe we can get a small carton of homogenized milk at just about any outlet at the food court. Our belief is false; no outlet at this food court carries homogenized milk. We want homogenized milk, and, so, guided by our false belief, we head to the nearby food court rather than out the doors and across the street to the grocery store. We fail to attain our end. We fail to purchase a small carton of homogenized milk because we guided our quest by a false belief. In failing to purchase milk we forfeit the reward we

sought and we pay penalties in wasted time, wasted effort, and bad feelings. The conclusion to draw is that it is prudent to avoid believing that which is false.

It can happen that an action guided by a false belief manages to succeed in attaining its intended end. When that happens, though, it happens by accident. Such fortunate accidents must be extremely rare. So prudence certainly counsels against believing falsely. This isn't, though, the conclusion that prudence counsels in favour of believing only on good evidence. The argument continues, then, with the thought that propositions for which a person lacks evidence are more likely false than are propositions for which he has good evidence. The more evidence there is, or the stronger any piece of evidence is, the more likely the proposition is true. So, if it is prudent to guard against believing falsely, it is prudent to believe on good evidence, for well evidenced propositions are less likely to be false than poorly evidenced ones. To believe wishfully is, typically, to believe despite lacking good evidence. Thus, beliefs held wishfully are more likely to be false than are beliefs held on good evidence. Therefore, it seems that, in the end, prudence counsels us not to believe wishfully.

Let us grant, for the moment, that most often it would be foolish to try to reap some benefit by believing something wishfully. Let us grant, that is, that most often the risk of harm or the extent of the harm risked outweighs whatever benefits one might reap by believing something wishfully. This result by itself does not imply that it is foolish to be open to believing things wishfully. It does not establish that it is wise to adopt a commitment not to believe anything wishfully. What it shows is just that it is prudent to be careful when tempted to believe something wishfully. The advice that follows from the above argument is only to weigh potential benefits and potential harms carefully in light of the probabilities, mindful that most likely the temptation to believe wishfully should be

resisted. The prudent person is, then, the person who evaluates whether it is wise to believe wishfully on a case-by-case basis. Most often he refrains from believing something in violation of his epistemic standards, but if the probability of reaping a benefit while avoiding harms is high enough, or if the benefits to be reaped are significant enough, he believes wishfully (or at least tries to).

Can we find our way to the contention that the prudent person avoids believing wishfully generally, as a matter or principle or habit? Again, grant that believing wishfully is almost always a bad gamble. Now note that estimating costs, risks, penalties, and benefits in any particular case is time and trouble, as is weighing them to arrive at a determination. Add that people are not especially good at estimating costs, risks, penalties, or benefits. We tend to overestimate benefits and to underestimate both the probability of bad consequences and how bad those bad consequences are. All these points together tell us that it's not worth the time and trouble to take matters on a case-by-case basis, especially as we cannot be confident that we've got the case right. And, so, prudence says to commit oneself generally to refrain from believing wishfully. In time and with luck, a person's principled commitment not to believe wishfully will harden into habit, and she will seldomly if ever even be tempted to believe wishfully anymore.

III

According to the argument just presented, it is foolish to believe something wishfully when one might guide one's pursuit of some end by that belief for if one calls on that belief in some pursuit, one stands an almost certain chance of failing to attain one's end. Still, as we noted, it is possible in one or another case that the end one could successfully pursue by believing something wishfully is

so important to one that considered as a single case, one ought to take the risks involved in believing that thing wishfully. But, finally, determining in any specific case whether indeed the risk of believing wishfully is a risk worth taking is both difficult to do and uncertain, and it is always costly in time and effort. And, so, prudence counsels that we simply refrain generally from believing wishfully.

The one weakness with this argument is that it concerns only those beliefs that guide actions. But not all beliefs guide actions. Some beliefs we have are never called on to direct us in our endeavours. Indeed, some beliefs are by their very nature not beliefs that could guide an action. Sally will never, just as a matter of fact, call on her belief that rising too quickly from the depths of the sea can cause the bends, for Sally will never find herself in the depths of the sea. When the topic is deep-sea diving, Sally can believe with impunity whatever she would like to believe, true or false. Roger will never, for in principle he cannot, call on his belief that the universe is expanding to guide him in pursuing any of his ends, for he would pursue none of those ends any differently were he not to believe this.

There are two responses possible here, and one who rejects as imprudent being open to believing wishfully can help herself to both at once. First, it is hard to tell whether a belief one has will or will not ever guide one's pursuit of some end. It's best not to have a false belief just in case it does get pressed into service. Second, believing wishfully and reaping a reward in one case can incline one to believe wishfully in other cases, cases in which one won't be so lucky. To protect against eventually falling victim to an action that failed because of a false belief, don't believe wishfully even when you judge that the rewards are sure and the costs minimal.

IV

Are there important cases in which the rewards of believing some particular proposition are substantial and a person can be reasonably sure that he or she won't come to harm, or to much harm, in either the short or the long run, by believing that proposition even should he or she lack evidence that it is true? Yes, there are, and that is why the arguments of Sections II and III fail to establish that it is best for a person generally to refuse to believe wishfully. We ought to be careful when tempted to believe something for which we have little or no or contrary evidence, but we ought not to refuse categorically ever to believe wishfully, for then we will miss safe opportunities to improve our lives.

For most of us, there are plenty of propositions we would do well to believe even should we lack evidence they are true, and even given most of the premises of the arguments above. These propositions can be grouped under four heads. First are propositions belief in which helps to make them true. Examples are "I can win this race," "Our marriage is strong," and "People like me." Second are propositions belief in which helps to sustain one in one's endeavours. Examples are "It matters that I treat people fairly, whether I benefit thereby or not," "Whatever happens, I am safe in God's hands," and "Each setback is an opportunity." Third are propositions belief in which helps one to sustain one's preferred self image. Examples are "I possess free will and am responsible for my actions," "Despite my flaws, really I am a good person," "I've earned my [high] station in life," and "I've done nothing to deserve my [low] station in life." Fourth are propositions that are comforting to believe or painful not to believe. Examples are "God understands and loves me," "That bastard will get his," and "My missing cat is alive and well." (We might, of course, for any one of these propositions, have adequate evidence that it is true, adequate evidence by our own

standards. They are meant simply as examples of propositions that we could well be prudent to believe even should we lack adequate evidence.)

It is not a bad gamble to believe a proposition for which one lacks evidence whenever: 1) by believing it, one will likely reap some benefit (some chance of a significant benefit or a high chance of a minor benefit); and 2) by believing it, one will not likely disadvantage oneself overall. So long as a person tempted to believe one or another of the propositions listed above can reasonably conclude that both 1) and 2) hold with regard to it, that person is not imprudent to believe it. Indeed, if the benefit one judges one likely will reap cannot be got in any other way than by believing that proposition, then one is positively foolish not to believe. (The presence of this last condition along with 1) and 2) turns prudential permissibility into prudential obligation.)

But can a person tempted to believe something for which he lacks evidence reliably determine whether 1) and 2) hold in such cases? Consider Sally, who reasons as follows: "I want very much to possess peace of mind. Thus, I am prudentially required to do whatever will bring me peace of mind, so long as attempting to attain peace of mind in that way will not create serious problems for me and I can attain peace of mind no other way. Were I to believe that God understands me and loves me, I would possess peace of mind, and unless I believe that God understands me and loves me, I will not possess peace of mind. In believing that God understands me and loves me, I will not put anything I care about at risk, for there is no end I might pursue that I would pursue differently should I believe that God understands me and loves me rather than not believe this; so, believing it will not cause me to fail in any project I undertake. Therefore, I am under an obligation of prudence to (try to) believe that God understands me and loves me. And yet, I have no evidence that God understands me and loves me. Maybe there is no God; anyway, I'm not

sure I'm lovable. But none of that is to the point. My conclusion stands: I am under an obligation of prudence to (try to) believe that God understands me and loves me." Each undefended premise in this chain of thought could well be true in Sally's case, and Sally could reasonably believe each true. Given that the inferences are strong, if Sally does reasonably believe each premise, then Sally should indeed attempt to believe that God understands her and loves her, though to do so would be to ignore her epistemic standards for believing.

Sally can reliably determine whether believing some proposition against her epistemic standards might put at risk something she values because Sally can readily see whether believing that proposition will affect the way in which she pursues what she values. Suppose that it is false that God understands Sally and loves her. Sally has come to believe that God understands her and loves her, but she believes this mistakenly. Nonetheless, there is no project she has that she will pursue differently in virtue of having this false belief. And, so, this false belief will not bring her grief through causing some project of hers to fail. Her belief that God understands her and loves her is not relevantly like her belief that she can purchase homogenized milk at the food court, and she can easily note that it isn't.

Similar reasoning applies to the each of the propositions given above as examples. Roger has entered the race and wants to win it. If believing that he can win it will increase his chances of winning it, Roger ought to (try to) believe that he can win it. Roger can see that though believing the proposition that Roger can win the race will put him in a better frame of mind for running the race, it will not itself guide his endeavour; hence, Roger can see that he has nothing to lose by believing it. If he loses the race, he loses it not in virtue of believing he can win it. Martha, for her part, is a happy person because she is an optimistic person, and her optimism rests on her believing

wishfully that every setback is actually an opportunity. This belief causes her to seek opportunities when otherwise she would give up in despair—and, sometimes, she finds them. Her life would be poorer were she to lack this belief. Martha is wise to believe that every setback is actually an opportunity, for she has seen that she puts nothing at risk even should her belief be false.

V

One might say in response to the argument of Section IV that Sally's believing that God understands her and loves her certainly *will* affect what she does. Having this belief might cause her to become more devote, to spend more time in worship and in doing what she deems would please God. Or it might well cause her to spend less time trying to please God, as she now takes God's love for granted. In either case, some change in Sally's behaviour since coming to believe that God understands her and loves her could very well have as its cause her coming to have this belief. Moreover, the projects that Sally assumes as a result of coming to this new belief could fail or otherwise bring trouble to Sally. The claim that the above argument rests on, one might contend—that claim, that is, that her having this belief will not affect the ways in which she makes her way in the world—, is false.

This response fails to note an important distinction, the distinction between a belief that helps to guide a pursuit and a belief that helps to set a pursuit. Sally will do whatever she does in the same way she would do it were she not to believe that God understands her and loves her, and so her new belief will not help to guide her pursuit of any end. That, together with the claim that Sally can reasonably determine that this is so, is all that is needed to reach the conclusion that Sally is not imprudent to be open to believing things wishfully. Of course it is true that now, with her new

belief, she will have new ends and will be motivated to undertake different projects. Her having this belief can explain why she values certain things that she now does or why she pursues certain ends that she didn't pursue before. Her confidence that God loves her brings her new goals and makes it possible for her to consider pursuing them. But her success in these pursuits will depend on the beliefs that guide her in them. The belief that made it possible for her to *want* to pursue these new ends is not a belief that will guide her pursuit of them, and so its falsity will not be responsible for any misstep she takes.

VI

We have defended the contention that it is prudentially wise to be open to believing things wishfully. We have defended it on the grounds that there are certain propositions belief in which can bring one benefits while not putting one at risk of harm, propositions belief in which one can confidently determine will not put one at risk of harm. Let us consider some objections.

1) We cannot believe what we want at will. "You say," this objection goes, "that one should believe that p when certain conditions are met. But that presupposes the false idea that we can believe what we want at will. In fact, we believe what we do as a result of psychological factors beyond our control."

This objection fails, for the contention that one should believe that p when certain conditions are met does not presuppose that we can believe what we want at will. All it presupposes is that we can choose to do things, things that we can do at will, that increase the chance that we come to believe that p. There are often things we can do at will to increase the chance that we will come to believe some proposition, and we can choose to do them. We can, for instance, as Pascal tells us we

should, associate with believers and shun unbelievers, take holy water, have masses said. We can encourage ourselves by enjoying the thought that the proposition we should believe indeed is true. If evidence is in the least relevant, we can focus on the positive evidence we have and ignore or not bother to find contrary evidence. Nothing we do guarantees we will come to believe as we should, but often enough we will find that we have come to believe.

2) We cannot be clear-headed about whether to violate our epistemic standards. "To believe something in violation of one's epistemic standards is possible so long as one is not aware that one is believing that thing in violation of them. But you," this objection goes, "propose that one test to see whether one's holding true a proposition for which, as one acknowledges, one has no good evidence would meet certain conditions, and then to (try to) believe it if believing it would meet them. Testing to see whether holding the proposition true would meet these conditions makes sense only if one is aware that one has no evidence for holding that proposition true. And so what you propose implies that one hold true a proposition while aware that that proposition rests on no evidence, and that is something that cannot be done."

Believing a proposition wishfully might well require self-deception. One indeed might not be able to believe something except that one thinks one has reasons that justify one in thinking that things are as one believes they are. If one doesn't have such reasons, one is necessarily deceiving oneself in thinking that one does. Believing something wishfully might well require self-deception—but, if it does, there are many cases of what appear to be beliefs held knowingly wishfully that would need to be explained away. The fact that many religious believers acknowledge their beliefs to be groundless, for instance, poses a difficulty to the thesis that believing wishfully requires self-deception, as does the fact that many people confident of something don't

mind saying that they are confident (merely) because their belief feels right to them and not because that belief is well supported by other beliefs within their web of belief. Let us accept, though, for the sake of considering this objection, that in order to believe something wishfully, one has to engage in self deception.

The objection fails because a person considering whether to believe something against her epistemic standards makes her clear-headed decision to (try to) believe it before actually setting out to believe it. It is only when she is believing it that she must wrongly think that she believes it because it is true. While she merely wants to believe it and is considering whether it would be imprudent to believe it, she can be perfectly well aware that she lacks evidence for it or even that she has evidence against it.

3) Any benefit we could gain by believing wishfully we could gain otherwise. Sally wants very much to have peace of mind and believes she would come to have peace of mind were she to believe that God understands her and loves her. But believing that God understands her and loves her is surely not the only way in which Sally can come to have peace of mind. She could gain peace of mind, for one, by discovering what truly matters to her and arranging her life around what truly matters to her. She could gain peace of mind, for another, by cultivating close friendships with people she admires and noting that they admire her. The same point applies to any case of supposedly prudent wishful believing. Just about any comfort, confidence, or result that would be worth one's wanting (worth one's wanting in that wanting it wouldn't disrupt too many other of one's wants or likings) can be had through something other than wishful believing.

The point is true but it is not an objection to the thesis that one is prudent to be open to believing things wishfully. As long as in believing it one will increase the chance of gaining some

benefit without putting anything much at risk, one is not imprudent to believe a proposition wishfully, even if there are other ways to increase that chance. Of course, one is at least a little bit imprudent not to choose the very best (easiest, least risky) means to attain the benefit one seeks. A person who believes wishfully when there is a slightly better means to the benefit she seeks acts a little imprudently, then, even though the two conditions are met. But when all goes well, and goes well not by accident, it is silly to charge that she acted imprudently because she could have used an even better means to her benefit. In any case, even if there are always alternatives to believing wishfully, the objection would succeed only if in all or almost all cases one of the options were better than wishful believing. It's hard to imagine that for any benefit that can be prudently attained by believing something despite one's lack of evidence, that benefit can be attained more efficiently or securely in some other way. The point that there are always alternatives doesn't tell against even the claim that sometimes we are prudentially required to believe wishfully, let alone against the more modest claim that sometimes we are prudentially permitted to do so.

4) What we have been calling beliefs held wishfully are actually conative or affective attitudes and not beliefs at all. That God understands me and loves me; that each setback is an opportunity—how would one go about collecting evidence for or against these supposed claims? What could count as evidence either way? If we cannot conceive of evidence for or against claims like these, then we are wrong to think them claims at all. These indicative sentences do not express propositions; for that reason, they cannot express beliefs. Someone who says, and says sincerely, that each setback is an opportunity is proposing nothing but only expressing his optimism. (His optimism doesn't rest on his belief that each setback is an opportunity; instead, it partly consists in

his hardy attitude toward setbacks.) Since what we have been calling beliefs held wishfully are not actually beliefs at all, but rather are non-cognitive attitudes, they cannot be beliefs held wishfully.

Let us agree that that a person speaks an indicative sentence, and speaks it sincerely, does not mean that that person expresses a proposition. A convinced subjectivist about value who sincerely says "It's good to help people in need," then, given our agreement, expresses no belief but only one or more of an attitude of approval toward helping people in need, a commitment to help people in need, a desire that people in need be helped, an injunction to help some person in need, and so on. He does not express a belief for he does not intend "is good" to capture any property a thing might have. We must, in any individual case, then, be aware that what we might assume to be a belief actually is some non-cognitive attitude. A person who says "Each setback is an opportunity" might well not be expressing any belief. He might be an optimist by nature and simply find congenial this way of letting people know about his optimism. And yet: a person who says "Each setback is an opportunity" might indeed be expressing her belief that each setback is an opportunity. Her optimism might rest on this specific belief about the things of the world and their properties and relations.

We can, to some extent, reply to this objection without challenging the verificationist theory of meaning or cognitive significance that underlies it. The objection fails at least for being too general, for very many of what we have called propositions a person might be wise to believe wishfully clearly are propositions even on the verificationist theory. They are propositions, that is, about which questions of evidence can be raised, even if not easily settled. Still, it's hard to conceive of what could count as evidence for some of what we have called propositions, and so the objection remains alive with regard to them. Here, then, if we are to meet the objection, we must say

something against verificationism as a theory of cognitive significance. One important point is that the phrases we have called propositions can feel, psychologically, like descriptions of things. We can in mind take their grammatical predicates to refer to properties that things in the world can have and we can take their grammatical subjects potentially to refer to objects or events. There are, we can think, such occurrences as setbacks and such a property as being an opportunity; thus, we can conceive of a setback as an opportunity, even though we can think of nothing that would count as evidence that some setback wasn't an opportunity. We might, of course, be wrong that there is or could be any such property as that of being an opportunity. In that case, though, the phrase in question does not cease to have cognitive significance; it remains a proposition, just one that is false. For a clearer example, consider "Despite my flaws, really I am a good person." Suppose the property of being good is no property that anything at all could have. One who nonetheless thinks that being good is a real property can believe, though falsely, that despite his flaws, really he is a good person.

VII

A final objection is that while it might well be prudent, still one ought not be open to believing things wishfully, for it is always ethically wrong to believe wishfully. The objection is based on the contention that believing wishfully puts people at risk of harm, a contention defended on the grounds that actions guided by false beliefs tend to fail to attain their goals and, thereby, tend to have unanticipated consequences. One puts people at risk of harm when one acts without a good understanding of the effects one's action will likely have on others. Since beliefs held on insufficient evidence are more likely false than beliefs held on sufficient evidence, actions guided by beliefs held

wishfully put people at risk of harm. Thus, since believing wishfully puts people at risk of harm and it is ethically wrong to put people at risk of harm, it is ethically wrong to believe wishfully.

A first response to this objection is that being prudent is one thing, having a commitment to ethics is another. It is no objection to the claim that prudence requires one to cultivate some value or habit that ethics requires one not to cultivate. One has a choice: will one take one's own good most seriously, or will one take one's concern to act in ethically sound ways most seriously?

Our central contention, though, is that only someone who values for its own sake understanding things as they are, and who values this above all else she values, is wise to refuse ever to believe something wishfully. The response sketched above implies that a person who values for its own sake the dignity or well being of others, and who values this above all else she values for its own sake, would also be wise to adopt a strenuous policy against believing things wishfully. Thus, if we accept the first response, we must reject our central contention, for the first response implies a second case in which a person would be wise to refuse ever to believe something wishfully. We need to show that even a person committed to doing the ethically sound thing does well to be open to believing things wishfully.

Our defence of the prudence of being open to believing wishfully rests on the claim that some beliefs a person might have are not, in their nature, action guiding, in that they cannot be coupled to a desire to create an intention. Having such a belief cannot cause one to fail in anything that one sets out to do. Thus, it is at least not imprudent to hold such beliefs against one's epistemic standards. And if one can benefit by holding such a belief, then one does well to hold it, even wishfully. It is because there are such beliefs that it is not inevitably unethical to believe something wishfully, even if we accept that acting on a belief held on insufficient evidence puts people at risk

of harm and that it is always wrong to put people at risk of harm. Since such a belief will not be called on to guide an action, a person who holds one wishfully will not thereby bring about unintended consequences through her actions, consequences that could, as the argument that it is always ethically wrong to believe on insufficient evidence insists, involve harm to others.

We can conclude that it is at least not unwise for a person seriously committed to act in ethically sound ways to be open to believing things wishfully—so long, of course, as she is careful about what she believes wishfully. But we can do a little better even than this. Some people seriously committed to ethics actually would do better in their pursuit of ethics were they to be open to believing some particular propositions wishfully. Consider a person concerned to treat people fairly and with kindness. A commitment to fairness and kindness can be very costly to one from the point of view of any number of one's interests; as well, oftentimes one's commitment goes unacknowledged or underappreciated by one's fellows. For these reasons, sustaining one's commitment can be difficult. And yet one cares to be committed to acting fairly and kindly; one wants one's commitment to endure. Now consider the proposition that whether or not I myself benefit from doing so, it matters very much that I treat people fairly and with kindness. Believing this proposition can, for many people, go a long way toward sustaining a commitment to ethics in the face both of its costs and of people's indifference to one's efforts. Perhaps some people who would benefit in their pursuit of ethics were they to believe this proposition do have what they properly consider, given their epistemic standards, good reason for believing it; such people can believe this proposition without ignoring or violating their epistemic standards. Many people, though, could not believe it except wishfully. As the proposition in question is not one that could guide an action, a person would not be imprudent to believe it. If believing it helps to sustain one in

one's endeavour to treat people fairly and kindly, and one wants to be a fair and kind person, then one is well advised to (try to) believe that proposition. "Whether or not one oneself benefits from doing so, it matters very much that one treats people fairly and with kindness" is a proposition a person who wishes to remain committed to treating people fairly and kindly might be well advised to believe, even should she lack evidence that it is true.

This particular example, involving the (supposed) proposition that it matters very much that one treats people fairly and with kindness, invites, more clearly than most other examples we have discussed, the objection that what we are calling a belief really is no such thing. To whom does it matter that I act fairly and kindly? What is this "mattering"? —That these questions lack sensible answers suggests that nothing is proposed by the phrase we are considering and, thus, that it cannot be the content of a belief. Perhaps this is right and we are here without an example of prudent wishful belief simply because we are without anything to believe. But yet, if we take the phrase simply to express the person's commitment to treat others fairly and kindly rather than to be a ground of that commitment, we fail to explain the psychological force her entertaining it in mind has for her. Her commitment, we have said, is sustained by her attitude toward this phrase, and that is reason to think that her attitude is belief. Better, then, that we take the phrase to be a false proposition (false given that there is nothing to whom it does or could matter that she treats people fairly and with kindness) and, so, after all, a proposition and, thereby, an object of belief.

VIII

Many of us are loath to believe wishfully, even when we perceive that it is in our best interests overall to do so. The lesson to draw from our discussion in Section IV is that for many of us, our

disdain for believing wishfully is debilitating. Our lives would be improved were we open to believing wishfully. Our lives would be improved, for there are plenty of instances in which believing something though we lack evidence for it will aid us in securing our goals, and we can reliably distinguish these instances from those in which believing without evidence would put us at risk. We would be happier, more contented, and more efficient in pursuing our goals were we to examine cases individually and to believe, despite lacking evidence, whenever we conclude it judicious to do so.

We have, though, so far spoken only about the instrumental value of believing something. Our discussion has concerned the place of believing something in bringing about some end, some end we value for its own sake. It is prudent to be concerned to believe truly whenever one's belief might guide some action, for actions guided by false beliefs are likely to fail. (We can agree that it is also unethical not to be concerned to believe truly whenever one's belief might guide some action, for actions that fail can well unintentionally bring harm to others, and it is always ethically wrong to put people at risk of harm.) One's best defence against believing falsely is to believe according to one's best epistemic standards; so, when it comes to propositions belief in which might guide an action, the prudent person believes only on what he deems sufficient evidence. But it is imprudent to be concerned not to believe falsely when having the belief will likely bring one reward overall whether it is true or false. Since for most of us there are many propositions belief in which will likely bring us reward overall whether they are true or false, for most of us it is foolish to refuse on principle to believe except on good evidence.

But what of those people who value for its own sake understanding things as those things are? As one does not understand something as it is if within one's understanding of it there are false

beliefs, believing truly is constitutive of the project of understanding things as they are. Anyone who wants, for its own sake, to understand things as they are ought not, then, believe anything in violation of her epistemic standards, at least if she is never willing to put the project of understanding things aside for awhile in favour of other projects.

The project of understanding things is not, it should be noted, identical to the project of believing truly. We understand something only when our true beliefs about it are arranged in patterns of implication and explanation and serve to support some counterfactuals and not others. Moreover, while clearly a person could value for its own sake understanding things as they are, not so clearly could a person value for its own sake simply believing truly. We value believing truly, when we do, because believing truly is a constitutive part of understanding things. It is because we value believing truly only in the context of tying to understand things that an openness to wishful belief cannot be defended on the grounds that a careful wishful believer will possess more true beliefs than a person who believes only according to high epistemic standards will. The claim that a careful wishful believer will occasionally hold a true belief when a doubter, in virtue of having suspended judgement for want of evidence, will not, might be right. But it is pointless merely to have a true belief when that belief stands alone or when one does not appreciate its connections to other true beliefs.

We all, of course, have many projects, and we all know the pain of compromising or abandoning one of them so that another project might fare well. So even a person committed for its own sake to the pursuit of understanding things might do well to be open to believing wishfully. That leaves, in the end, only the person strongly committed for its own sake to the pursuit of understanding things who is committed to no other pursuit more strongly. For only such a person

cannot possibly have a determining reason to believe without good evidence any proposition about any range of things. And that implies that only such a person can have good reason for thinking that his projects will never be advanced overall by believing something wishfully. So only a person who values for its own sake above all else she values for its own sake understanding things as they are is prudentially wise to be closed on principle to believing something wishfully.

Now most readers of *International Journal of Applied Ethics*, I hazard, are disgusted by the idea of believing something wishfully. It is repellent to them. They are unhappy when they find they have been believing something on evidence insufficient to warrant belief and they disparage and feel uncomfortable around people given to believing wishfully. Their strong emotional reaction is evidence that they do not reject being open to believing wishfully on the grounds that being open is always a bad gamble, though they might (falsely) believe that it is. They reject it instead because believing wishfully is a repudiation of something they hold dear, namely, seeing things as they really are. They find ignoble any attitude contrary to a strong concern to see things as they really are. Most readers of *IJAP*, then, value for its own sake, and value it strongly if not, ultimately, above all else they value for its own sake, understanding things as they are.

Can it be wise to be a person who values for its own sake above all else understanding things as they are? Yes, it can—but only when one is aware of all that one must live without in being such a person.