Chapter 5
Objections to Believing Wishfully

What is so great about believing truly and what's so bad about believing falsely? Why care whether one believes only that which is true?

In Chapter 3, the first chapter of this part of the text, we said that believing truly helps one to attain one's ends while believing falsely almost always ensures one will fail to attain one's ends. That's why one should be concerned that what one believes is true and not false. We repeated this answer in Chapter 4. We added that to care that one's beliefs are true and not false is to care to believe a proposition when and only when one has, by one's own standards, good evidence or other good epistemic reason in favour of it. We should care to have high epistemic standards for belief, then, and care always to live up to them, because that is the best means there could be to believe propositions that are true and not to believe propositions that are false.

Things, it turns out, are not quite so straightforward. The argument why it is important to have true beliefs and not have false ones is strong only in the case of beliefs that might guide actions. Not all beliefs are even potentially action-guiding, though, or so it appears. Certainly, if you desire some end E, it is to your benefit that all your beliefs of the form "Action A is an effective way in circumstances C to bring about end E" are true. And so you do well to believe according to high epistemic standards, and only according to high epistemic standards, any proposition of that form (and any proposition that supports any proposition of that form), at least so far as you might pursue the end mentioned in it. But large though the class of your beliefs about means to ends is, not every proposition you believe falls either into that class or into the class of evidence for propositions of that class. The argument we developed why one should care to believe truly and only truly does not apply to any proposition belief in which is not action guiding. Should we care deeply whether we believe truly when it comes to propositions by which we will guide no action?

No, we shouldn't, says the argument in defence of wishful believing we developed in the second half of Chapter 3. According to that argument, for most of us there are plenty of propositions we do well to believe even though we lack evidence, by our own epistemic standards, that they are true. Believing the proposition "I can pass this test," even when one has no evidence that one can pass it, can help one to pass the test. Believing the proposition "This setback is actually an opportunity," even when one doesn't see any opportunity in it, can help one to persevere and find an opportunity. Believing the proposition "I've earned my high station in life," even though one has evidence that actually one had lots of advantages along the way, can help one to enjoy the benefits that come with one's high station. Believing the proposition "God understands me and loves me," though one has no evidence that He does (or even that God exists), can comfort one when times are tough. A person who will lose little but gain much by believing one or another such proposition is foolish to refuse to believe it just because she would violate her epistemic standards were she to believe it.

One's happiness shouldn't be held hostage to epistemic principles—especially not when the point of those principles is to serve one's happiness.

In this chapter, we will consider six different objections to the idea that one should be open to believing things wishfully.

1. An objection from ethics

Almost all of the previous chapter was devoted to preparing ground for the objection we will consider in this section to the idea that each of us should be open to believing things wishfully. In that chapter, we developed an argument in favour of the contention that it is always ethically wrong to believe something on evidence that falls short of one's epistemic standards for belief. The argument is this: It is always ethically wrong to put people at risk of harm; believing something on insufficient evidence puts people at risk of harm; therefore, believing something on insufficient evidence is always ethically wrong. Since to believe something wishfully (or fearfully) is to believe it against one's epistemic standards, believing something wishfully (or fearfully) is always ethically wrong.

We concentrated on the second premise of this argument, the statement that believing something on insufficient evidence puts people at risk of harm. The argument in favour of that statement is this: actions guided by false beliefs almost always fail to attain their intended ends; actions that fail to attain their intended ends have unforseen and unwanted consequences; among their unforseen and unintended consequences can be occurrences of pain, injury, and disappointment for others; beliefs held on insufficient evidence are more likely false than beliefs held on good evidence; therefore, believing something on insufficient evidence puts people at risk of harm.

So, then: It is always ethically wrong to believe something wishfully. Let us suppose that the argument for this claim is sound and, thereby, that the claim itself is true. How is the claim that it is always ethically wrong to believe wishfully an objection to the claim that it is sometimes prudentially sound to believe wishfully?

The two claims can both be true. It could be ethically wrong for one to perform a particular action in some set of circumstances though prudentially required that one perform it. Lying to your prospective employer about your qualifications might be both ethically wrong and prudentially wise, if lying is the best or only way to get the job and no one is going to discover your lie. It could be ethically wrong to believe wishfully that one has earned one's high station in life and yet prudentially required that one does.

To find an objection to the claim that one does well to be open to believing things wishfully in the claim that it is always ethically wrong to believe something wishfully, we need first to draw from each of these claims a piece of practical advice. If the pieces of advice clash, and the advice got from ethics is better than that got from prudence, then we we can formulate a strong objection to being open to believing things wishfully.

The practical advice, the directive, that follows from the claim that it is always ethically wrong to believe something wishfully is: Never believe something wishfully. The practical advice, the directive, that follows from the claim that it is sometimes prudentially sound to believe something wishfully is: Sometimes believe things wishfully. Now we have a conflict. The directive never believe a proposition wishfully conflicts with the directive believe this proposition wishfully, given any proposition one is prudentially required to believe but yet

which cannot be believed except in violation of one's epistemic standards. The directive from ethics don't believe that you have earned your high station in life conflicts with the directive from prudence believe that you have earned your high station in life.

The conflict here is the same as the conflict between the directive from ethics don't lie about your qualifications and the directive from prudence lie about your qualifications.

We have discovered a conflict between ethics and prudence, then, in the matter of believing things wishfully. (We have discovered such a conflict given that it is true that it is always ethically wrong to believe something wishfully. Perhaps, despite the argumentment for it, this claim is false. We will consider this possibility in the next section.) Discovering such a conflict was, we said, the first step in finding an objection to being open to wishful believing in the claim that it is always ethically wrong to believe something wishfully. But that a directive conflicts with another directive does not in itself constitute an objection to anything. We need, then, second, to state a principle or directive that resolves cases of conflict, and resolves them on the side of ethics. Here is a candidate principle: "Whenever the prudent thing to do is unethical, don't do the prudent thing." It's more important that one does the ethically sound thing (or avoids doing an ethically unsound thing) than that one gets ahead (or doesn't fall behind) in one's pursuit of one's good.

The idea here is quite common. It is that one should always act rightly, or at least never act wrongly, where "rightly" and "wrongly" are understood in their ethical senses. One should never act unethically. One should never act unethically, not even when something very important is at stake and will be lost if one doesn't act unethically.

Is this idea true? Should one pursue one's ends only in ethically sound ways? It would seem to depend on who one is, what one values. If one values ethics above all else, then one should always refrain from pursuing an end unethically. But if one doesn't value ethics above all else, then while the fact that some action would be ethically wrong to perform counts for one as a reason not to perform it, it is a reason that might be outweighed by reasons one has to perform it. If one cares deeply about getting the job and one judges lying in the case to be only a little bit wrong, then one is wise to lie to get the job. Likewise, though it is ethically wrong to believe a proposition wishfully, still, if the benefit to oneself that can be had by believing a proposition wishfully is very great, then, unless one has an overriding commitment to ethics, one should do the ethically wrong thing and believe it wishfully.

2. Is it ethically wrong to believe wishfully?

In the section above we supposed, for the sake of argument, that it is always ethically wrong to believe something wishfully, and we sought to find in this claim an objection to the idea that one should be open to believing things wishfully. We saw that ethics and prudence can conflict. But we found no reason that everyone must accept to value ethics over prudence, and so we concluded that whether the ethical wrongness of an action is, for a person, a decisive reason not to perform that action will depend on what that person most values. If you think that to believe something wishfully is to do something ethically wrong and you value ethics above all else, then you will properly decide not to be open to believing things wishfully. If, though, while you agree that to believe something wishfully is to do something ethically wrong, you do not value ethics above all else, then you will properly decide to be open to believing things wishfully.

But what about the claim itself, that it is always ethically wrong to believe something wishfully? Is it true?

Prudent wishful believing, we have said, always concerns propositions that do not guide actions. One is never prudent to believe on insufficient evidence any proposition of the form "To attain end E in circumstances C, perform action A." One is never prudent to believe on insufficient evidence any proposition that is evidence for or against a proposition of the above form. One is never prudent to believe on insufficient evidence any proposition of the form "These are circumstances C." One is prudent to believe only a proposition that will not guide's one pursuit of any end. But this means that prudent wishful believing will never put people at risk of harm. Putting people at risk of harm, we can agree, is always ethically wrong. Since, though, prudent wishful believing will never put people at risk of harm, prudent wishful believing cannot be ethically wrong in virtue of putting people at risk of harm. Unless it is ethically wrong in virtue of something else, prudent wishful believing is not ethically wrong.

The argument that it is always ethically wrong to believe a proposition wishfully is unsound for the same reason as the argument that it is always imprudent to believe a proposition wishfully is unsound. Not all beliefs guide actions. Thus, not all false beliefs lead to failed actions or put people at risk of harm.

We can go a little bit further. Not only is wishful believing not always unethical; sometimes a person can be required by ethics to believe something wishfully. Instead of guiding actions, some beliefs help to set one's moods and to make certain ends appealing. Certain beliefs, for instance, can put a person in an optimistic frame of mind, and other beliefs can set that person on the project of helping others. The belief that everything is for the best can help one remain optimistic through a dark time. The belief that it matters that people are treated well can set one on the task of promoting justice in one's community. To the extent that a person is required by ethics to be optimistic and to pursue justice, a person might then be required by ethics to hold these beliefs. If a person required by ethics to hold these beliefs cannot hold them except in violation of her epistemic standards, then she is required by ethics to violate her epistemic standards. Not only would she be doing no wrong in believing wishfully, she would be doing some good.

Let us now set aside objections from ethics to the contention that prudence requires that one be open to believing things wishfully. Let us consider five further objections.

3. Being open to believing things wishfully is to play with fire

There are certainly propositions that, for one or another of us, we would do well to believe even though we lack evidence or other epistemic reason in their favour. The objection now under consideration begins with this admission. Still, this objection says, over all and in the long run we do better to be closed to believing things wishfully.

There are two problems with believing things wishfully, problems that make wishful believing dangerous, like playing with fire. Wishful believing is prudent only when it concerns propositions that are not the sort of propositions by which one might guide an action. The two problems are that 1) we cannot always have a firm sense whether a proposition is or isn't potentially action guiding and 2) successful wishful believing will embolden us to step over the line.

Point 1) is that the distinction between propositions that are potentially action guiding and those that are not is not a distinction people like us can always draw accurately. We can easily take a proposition that could guide an action for one that couldn't. Were we to believe that proposition and were it to be false we could get into trouble. Point 2) begins with the observation that we are prone to form habits on the basis of our successes. By believing things wishfully and reaping the benefits, we will come to develop a habit of wishful believing. Having acquired this habit, we will not be careful about the distinction between propositions that might guide actions and those that won't.

That being open to wishful believing is like playing with fire should incline us not to be open to wishful believing. The chance of getting burned is too great.

The hazards mentioned in this objection are real, but whether even together they amount to an objection to being open to wishful believing is not clear. It depends on how careful and in control of oneself one is. A careful person will not be taking a great risk in being open to believing things wishfully. If the benefits to that person of believing one or another proposition for which he lacks evidence are large, then it is worth that person's while to take the risk.

4. Believing is not doing something

We have been discussing the idea that it is prudent to be open to believing things wishfully as though a person could decide to believe some proposition and then, on the basis of that decision, believe it, just like that. We have been discussing the prudence of wishful believing as though believing something were an action we can perform. (A person can decide to look both ways and then do it, just like that. We can perform actions by willing to perform them.) But coming to believe something is not an action. Belief is not under the control of our wills. What we believe is not up to us.

To see that belief is not under the control of our will, pick a proposition, any proposition you do not currently believe true (though not one you think is false). Now direct your will toward that proposition and try to believe it. You will fail. And, so, we see, what we believe is not up to us. Since what we believe is not up to us, it makes no sense to consider whether we should believe some proposition or not. We simply will or will not believe it, whether we should (in whatever sense of "should" we have in mind) or shouldn't.

The flaw in this objection is that it incorporates a very narrow view of how our wills can influence our beliefs. It is true that we cannot decide to believe something and then, on that decision, believe it just like that. But that what we believe is not directly or immediately under the control of our wills does not mean that what we believe is not at all under the control of our wills. Perhaps we have some degree of indirect or mediated control over what we believe. Perhaps the degree of indirect or mediated control we have is control enough for questions about what it is prudent for us to believe to have substance.

First, when thinking whether to believe some particular proposition, we are not thinking whether to believe some arbitrary proposition chosen at random. We have in mind some proposition we would like to believe, some proposition to which we are attracted. (We are attracted to it in that we think we would benefit by believing it.) So we are not exercising our wills capriciously when we direct our will toward a proposition. Second, given that we have determined that we would do well to believe it, there is much we can do to increase the

probability that we will believe it. There is much that we can do that is directly under the control of our wills. We can turn our attention away from evidence against it. We can concentrate on whatever evidence we might have for it. We can pretend that it is true and enjoy in thought the benefits of believing it. We can act as though we believe it. We can associate with others who already believe it. In doing one or another of these things we can increase the chance that we will come to believe it.

The point that believing a proposition is not doing something is true. We cannot come to believe at will, just like that, what we would like to believe, or even what we would like to believe because we see it would be good for us to believe it. Nonetheless, we can do various things at will, just like that, that might well cause us to believe some proposition, and we can do these things with the intention of causing ourselves to believe that proposition. Since we have at least a small degree of indirect control over our beliefs, we can speak meaningfully of what we should and shouldn't believe.

5. We cannot be clear-headed about self deception

Prudent wishful believing requires that we be clear-headed about the risks and benefits of believing something for which we recognize we lack evidence. But we cannot believe something for which we lack evidence while at the same time recognizing that we lack evidence for it. After all, to recognize that one has poor evidence that a proposition is true is immediately not to believe it. In order to believe something for which one lacks evidence, one has to ignore or hide from oneself the fact that one lacks evidence. One cannot believe wishfully, then, except by deceiving oneself about one's lack of evidence or other epistemic reason for believing. But if one is self deceived, one is not clear headed. And so one cannot be prudent in believing something wishfully.

This objection fails because it mistakes just what prudent wishful believing requires us to be clear-headed about. We are to be clear-headed about the risks and benefits of believing a proposition for which, we recognize, we lack evidence or other epistemic ground for believing. That is, if we are prudent, we will consider whether it pays to believe the proposition firmly aware of the risks and rewards involved. We must not deceive ourselves about the risks or rewards. Once we have determined that we would do well to believe the proposition, then we must engage in self deception—at least if it is true that one cannot believe a proposition for which one lacks evidence except by deceiving oneself about that lack of evidence. We engage in self-deception only after determining that it would be in our interest to believe a proposition, a proposition for which, during our deliberations, we recognize to be poorly evidenced. And so we can be clear-headed up to the moment we set out to believe the proposition. Moreover, that is the extent of clear-headedness required by prudence.

It is true, we can allow, that we must cease to be clear-headed once we determine that we should believe the proposition. But that is no objection to the claim that a person can be prudent in believing something wishfully. Her prudence consists in her clear-headed evaluation of the drawbacks and benefits of ceasing to be clear-headed about why she believes something.

Is it true that one cannot believe a proposition against one's epistemic standards except by deceiving oneself that one's believing meets one's epistemic standards? It appears to be written into the very concept of belief that one believes only in accordance with one's

epistemic standards, for those standards are one's own standards of being worthy of belief. To believe against one's standards is to believe something one doesn't believe worthy of one's belief; so it would seem impossible to believe something against one's standards except by deceiving oneself into thinking that one is not believing against one's standards. Nonetheless, there also appear to be plenty of cases in which a person both believes something and recognizes that she lacks evidence or other epistemic ground for believing it. Many people who have religious beliefs, for instance, openly admit that their beliefs do not meet the standards by which they believe in other contexts. Perhaps this fact can be interpreted in such a way as to preserve the idea that we cannot believe against our epistemic standards except by deceiving ourselves. It at least should make us wary of the idea that we cannot be clear-headed all the way down when we believe wishfully.

6. Benefits that can be gained by believing wishfully can be gained elsewise

Sally has a prudential obligation to believe that every setback is actually an opportunity, though she has no good evidence that every setback is actually an opportunity, if and only if by believing this she can reap benefits overall that she cannot reap otherwise. We can agree that Sally might well be able to reap benefits by believing that every setback is actually an opportunity. Believing it might make Sally optimistic and being optimistic could be part of Sally's happiness. Believing it might make Sally look hard for opportunities and, thereby, find some that she would have missed had she not been looking hard. But is it true that Sally could not have reaped the same benefits without having believed wishfully?

Sally is under no prudential obligation to believe something wishfully when the benefits to be had by believing it are available to her elsewise. And it would appear that there are many routes to the benefits in question other than by believing wishfully that every setback is actually an opportunity. Sally could, for instance, believe merely that sometimes a setback is actually an opportunity. She could believe that without violating her epistemic standards. Or Sally could just simply adopt an optimistic view of things. (That is, her optimism need not rest on any belief about the world tending to come out aright. A person can be both optimistic in attitude and clear-eyed about how things stand and about her prospects.) Believing that setbacks are sometimes opportunities could cause her to look hard for an opportunity just as well as would believing that every setback is actually an opportunity; simply being optimistic could do so as well.

Generally, then, according to this objection, whenever, or almost whenever, one can reap a benefit by believing something wishfully, one can reap that same benefit in another way. One can, for instance, believe a different proposition, or gamble that the proposition is true, or adopt the appropriate attitude without believing the proposition. One can simply act as if the proposition were true, without believing it is.

Now, in response to this objection, one can certainly allow that sometimes believing something wishfully is only one route to a benefit among others. But one needn't accept that always or even most often wishful believing is just one route among others. There's no reason to think that Sally herself can, at the moment when it matters, stir herself to look hard for an opportunity except that by believing that really there is an opportunity there. The thought that always, or almost always, there is something other than believing something

wishfully that will do as well as believing wishfully will is just false. (It is so ill-evidenced that one can believe it only by violating one's epistemic standards.)

Even should the objection succeed, it would show only that one is never prudentially obligated to believe wishfully. It would not show that it is never prudentially sound to believe wishfully. If two routes open to a person to the same goal are equally good, that person is not wrong to choose either of them. So if in some case believing something wishfully is but one route among many to a particular good, still one is not wrong to pass on the other routes and believe something wishfully.

7. What we have called wishful beliefs aren't actually beliefs

We have been assuming that the propositions it can be prudent to believe without evidence are, in fact, propositions. We have been assuming that they are descriptions of states of affairs that might or might not obtain. We have been assuming that each is either true or false, depending on whether it describes accurately some state of affairs. According to the present objection, that assumption is false. What we have called propositions are not propositions at all; thus, they are not objects of belief. Since we cannot believe them, we cannot believe them wishfully.

A form of words might look to express a proposition but in fact not express one, or at least so goes an idea that underlies this objection. A string of words that forms an indicative sentence will look to express a proposition just in virtue of its grammar. But looks can be deceiving. A proposition must describe a state of affairs. So, when no state of affairs is either described or misdescribed, then no proposition has been expressed, even if one has spoken a perfectly fine indicative sentence.

The "propositions" we have said it might be prudent for a person to believe despite lacking evidence of their truth do not answer to evidence at all, according to this objection. What evidence could one have for or against the supposed proposition that every setback is actually an opportunity? None at all, according to the objection. That one fails to find an opportunity does not indicate that there is no opportunity there, but just that one didn't find it. And so not finding an opportunity in a setback is not evidence of anything. Where no experience one could have is evidence against a "proposition," what one thinks is a proposition actually isn't.

Really, what we are doing when saying "every setback is actually an opportunity" is avowing that we will look for an opportunity or expressing our hope of finding an opportunity or just expressing our optimism. We are not describing a feature of setbacks. We are expressing our emotional attitude toward setbacks or our commitment not to be daunted by any setback we meet; we are not expressing any belief about them.

If it is true that what we have been calling propositions are not propositions, then it makes no sense to propose that it is wise to be open to believing them wishfully, for there is nothing there to believe. Our claim that it is wise to be open to believing things wishfully amounts to the claim that it is wise to adopt certain attitudes or commitment towards things, attitudes or commitments that promise to enable us to reap rewards. But that is trivial as a general piece of advice.

According to this objection, only those sentences that express propositions about how to achieve one's ends and that express propositions about evidence about how to achieve one's

ends are actually propositions. But these are just the sorts of propositions it is foolish to believe wishfully, for when one's beliefs regarding propositions of these sorts are false, one gets hurt. So, it would turn out, it is always foolish to believe something wishfully, for believing wishfully always puts one at risk of failing to realize one's ends.

We might want, in responding to this objection, simply to deny that a form of words must describe or misdescribe something if it is to express a proposition. We might, that is, hold that even when no possible evidence can speak against a "proposition," still that "proposition" can well be a proposition. But we needn't make this claim in order to respond adequately to it.

We can say, rather, that at least many of the sentences we have considered do express propositions even on the view that nothing that doesn't describe or misdescribe a state of affairs is a proposition. That one fails to find an opportunity *is* evidence that there was no opportunity to be found and, thus, that it is false that every setback is actually an opportunity. It is not conclusive evidence, but it is some evidence. The sentence "I can pass this test" certainly looks descriptive of a state of affairs (truly or falsely descriptive); that one has passed a previous test in the course is evidence in favour of it, that one has failed a previous test is evidence against it. Even if some of what we have called propositions are not really propositions, still a great lot of them are, no matter how stringent an account of the nature of propositions one takes.

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We have considered a variety of objections to the contention we developed in Chapter III, the first chapter of this Part of the book. That contention is: It is prudentially wise to be open to believing things wishfully. One should be open to believing wishfully a proposition just so long as that proposition isn't one that could guide an action or serve as evidence for a proposition that could guide an action. Each objection we canvassed has some merit, we found, or at least brings out possibilities worth considering. But yet the contention that it is foolish not to be open to believing things wishfully has survived these objections. In the next chapter we will consider one final thought, that being open to wishful believing is contrary to living a specific worthy sort of life.