

**Review of: Katja Maria Vogt, *Belief and Truth. A Skeptic Reading of Plato*, Oxford University Press, 2012.**

[*Mind*, In print]

This is a stimulating book on the history of philosophy which systematically defends a single message: *beliefs are deficient cognitive attitudes*. According to Vogt's reading of ancient philosophy, such attitudes are to be avoided for at least two reasons:

- (V1) For all issues x, you should suspend belief concerning x because beliefs often come with a dangerous form of ignorance.
- (V2) For all issues x, you should suspend belief concerning x because you should remain inquisitive.

In the following, I will not address the historical support Vogt offers for these claims (drawn mainly from Plato, but also from Stoicism and Pyrrhonism): the claims themselves are interesting enough on their own. I will consider each in turn, and then draw attention to the suggested interplay between the attitude of belief and certain vices, specifically the vices of *overconfidence* and *laziness*.

(V1): Beliefs are bad because they are often accompanied by a dangerous form of ignorance. Surely not all kinds of ignorance are bad, and Vogt helpfully distinguishes five kinds (pp. 27-30). The first three are relatively innocent. First, ignorance as mental blank: if I have never thought about whether Socrates was guilty, for example, then I am ignorant about this in this first sense. Second, conscious ignorance: here I am aware of the topic and have thought about it, but simply formed no opinion about it. Third, ignorance as mere belief: here I do have an opinion about whether Socrates was guilty, but am aware that my opinion does not constitute knowledge.

The final two kinds of ignorance Vogt identifies are less innocent. Fourth, ignorance as presumed knowledge: here I again have an opinion, but also assume that it constitutes knowledge, while in fact it does not and I am also not in the position to assume that this is the case. Fifth and finally, transferred ignorance: in this case, I have an inflated view of myself, and due to my self-image make overconfident knowledge claims in all sorts of domains in which I have no expertise, and often do not even understand the things I say.

As Vogt points out, transferred ignorance is especially bad when it concerns people in power. That is, I myself might have all sorts of beliefs

about whom should be punished, about how cities should be organized, lives lived, and books written, yet this is all fairly harmless given that I am not in charge. In contrast, the transferred ignorance of powerful people (politicians, priests, and perhaps nowadays also the directors of companies and media personalities) is more problematic. For their beliefs are not easily able to be criticised without consequences: “if one were to laugh at them, they would lash out” (p. 50). (Moreover, it seems to me, their ignorance is also harmful because they make decisions on its basis and because they can easily influence other people’s views.)

To avoid ignorance of the latter two sorts, one should carefully check which knowledge claims one is entitled to make, and indeed refrain from forming beliefs in the first place.

(V2): Beliefs are bad because we should remain inquisitive, and beliefs make us lazy in this respect. According to Vogt, forming beliefs is the default activity; it is “like swimming with the current” (p. 139). We have a tendency to form beliefs about all sorts of matters that lie outside our domain of expertise (science, politics, religion, morality, art, and so on—in fact everything which extends beyond how things appear to us in everyday life), and often these beliefs are false. To counteract this, we should actively work against this tendency, and never stop calling into question the things we are tempted to believe. Vogt therefore sees a direct interaction between the attitude of belief and laziness: we take a stance on things exactly when we forget to raise questions, to take seriously the problems involved with their answers, and terminate our investigations.

Yet, as Vogt rightly asks, what is the point of such investigations if they only stop us from forming beliefs? Indeed, it seems the whole purpose of investigating something is to discover the truth about it and take a stance on this truth. It might seem useless to investigate whether Socrates is guilty, for example, unless we intend to make up our minds on the issue. Vogt disagrees. Surely a possible goal of inquiry is to obtain true beliefs, yet another possible goal is to avoid false beliefs. As Vogt puts it: “One might devise strategies that reflect [...] values according to which, for any given question, it is preferable to acquire no view at all as compared to acquiring a view that could turn out to be false.” (p. 133)

Thus, Vogt draws attention to the interplay between belief and the vices of overconfidence (V1) and laziness (V2). The first link is plausible. If you believe something, then you are confident that the world is a certain way even though you are often not in a position to know whether your belief is true. For all you can tell, your belief might well be false—and still you believe. In this, you are overconfident. Moreover, if this is a general character trait of yours, you may be overconfident regarding other matters as well

(even matters outside your expertise). The second link seems to me more controversial, for several reasons.

Having no opinion on something can be just as easy as having an opinion that we have formed too easily. Indeed, the mental blanks mentioned earlier are easy to come by. Moreover, people who suspend their beliefs are also lazy, as therefore they have no beliefs to defend against challenges. Everyone is lazy, then, except for those who actually inquire.

Yet there is more. For if really our *only* goal is to avoid false beliefs, we can suspend all our beliefs from the outset (including all the false ones, that is) and in this way reach our goal on the cheap: no inquiry needed. (Vogt seems to be aware of this on p. 133, yet does not develop the point in her text.) Hence, the link between doxastic attitudes, inquisitive attitudes, and epistemic goals must be more complex than Vogt seems to acknowledge. Consider each of these three elements in relation:

<i>Doxastic attitude</i>	<i>Inquisitive attitude</i>	<i>Epistemic goal</i>
Belief	Lazy and close-minded	Obtaining truths
Suspension	Active and open-minded	Avoiding falsehoods

The epistemic picture presented by Vogt consists of the elements in the lower row: epistemically responsible people suspend their beliefs and are always actively considering new arguments and ideas in order to avoid falsehoods. As can be seen from the table, a variety of other combinations are also possible. I just mentioned the variety which differs only, but importantly, regarding the inquisitive side: people who suspend belief in an effort to avoid falsehoods, but do so out of laziness. I shall not discuss all possible options, but merely identify one alternative view that is particularly worth considering.

On this alternative view, epistemically responsible people suspend their beliefs and are always actively considering new arguments and ideas in order to obtain truths. The only major difference between this view and Vogt's view concerns how the epistemic goal is understood. On first sight, the proposed view appears incoherent: one cannot *really* aim to obtain true beliefs if one continues to suspend them. Yet, perhaps this tension or instability is exactly what triggers an active inquisitive attitude. For suppose I really care about whether Socrates was guilty, and want to form a true belief about it. On the view just described, I suspend belief and stay neutral on the issue. There is a tension in this situation, for although I am neutral I do not *want* to be neutral: I want to discover the truth! To my mind, this tension is exactly what makes a person active and open-minded, always receptive to new arguments and considerations.

Further details on this line would have to be spelled out, of course, and probably such details would extend beyond what the ancient texts can offer us. But that should not worry us.

Vogt's book is to be recommended because it revives a long-standing skeptical tradition from Plato onwards and addresses important systematic questions. As Vogt comments at the beginning of her book, this tradition is not concerned with whether I have hands or with whether you are not a zombie (as other familiar skeptical problems have it), but concerns rather the importance of forming beliefs about such matters in the first place. This tradition, as Vogt emphasizes, can be seen as a battle against one's own ignorance—and this is a message worth telling. This battle does not imply, indeed, that we should make more knowledge claims. It means rather that we should know which knowledge claims we are entitled to make—namely, hardly any.

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