“Alief and Belief”

Initial example of alief without belief—the Grand Canyon Skywalk. The tourists believe that the walkway is safe but they alieve that it is not (basically). Also the sympathetic magic (contagion and similarity) examples: eating fudge shaped like dog poop, drinking out of a brand new (clean) bedpan, or throwing darts at faces of people you like. And the APA meeting and horror movie examples.

1.
1. Gendler thinks it is clear that the subjects believe the rational thing (e.g., that the walkway is safe or the green slime poses no threat) in these examples. For example, that is what they would avow, bet on, infer, and (globally) behave as-if. But there also are belief-discordant behaviors/reactions. And we see this kind of disharmony in cases of deception. But the alief features are not the result of any (self-)deceptive enterprise. Nor are they explained by doubt, forgetting, or as cases of in-between believing (as Schwitzgebel would have it).

In these cases of belief-discordant alief, a stimulus triggers some string of affective, cognitive, and behavioral (e.g., motor routines) associations.

“The alief has representational-affective-behavioral content that includes, in the case of the Skywalk, the visual appearance as of a cliff, the feeling of fear and the motor routine of retreat. Similar appeal to belief-discordant alief can be made in each of the other cases. The visual appearance of the feces-shaped fudge renders occurrent a belief-discordant alief with the content: “dog-feces, disgusting, refuse-to-eat”—an alief that runs counter to the subject’s explicit belief that the object before her is composed of a substance that she considers delicious and appealing.” (641)

2.
2. Alief: associative, automatic, and arational; shared with other animals; affect laden and action generating. We need a concept of alief to explain behaviors not adequately accounted for by belief-desire psychology.

“A paradigmatic alief is a mental state with associatively linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated—consciously or nonconsciously—by features of the subject’s internal or ambient environment. Aliefs may be either occurrent or dispositional.” (642)
3. Application to vomit example: visual representation generates vomit-related thoughts, the emotion of disgust, and avoidance behavior.

Note that in most cases alief and belief align. We are just more interested in the discordant cases.

II. 1. In this section she responds to those who would attempt to account for alief in terms of belief or imagination. She claims that, unlike belief and imagination, alief is not a propositional attitude. She also holds that it differs from belief and imagination in that alief is not a regarding-as-true state—the “not poison” study is supposed to show this. The subjects believe and imagine that it is not poison, but they alieve that it is. (649-650) Alief is the activation of an associative chain that cannot be performed at will.

In a healthy person, alief and belief are in concord.

2. Maybe states besides belief—states like acceptance, imagination, or pretense—can occupy a similar role when generating certain kinds of behavior. She discusses, with some approval, Price’s handling of the walking under the ladder case. But she objects to him when he seems to claim that this behavioral hesitation can be overcome/dismissed in high stakes situations.

III. Gendler claims that recent work on automaticity (e.g., by John Bargh’s group) shows the prominent role that alief, as an automatic response to a prime, plays in behavior—rudeness and elderly examples. The effects of various primes are discussed.

“To a reasonable approximation, it looks like all depictive representations—even those that we explicitly disavow as false—feed into our behavioral repertoires, and that it is only through a process of conscious or habit-governed inhibition that representations whose accuracy we endorse come to play a distinctive role in governing our actions.” (660-661)

IV. The passage from Hume illustrates the effect that specific details, as opposed to general description, can have on judgment and action (in an alief-like manner). And Aristotle advocated having our habitual responses align with our reflective beliefs.

Since alief generates behavior in belief-discordant cases, we should not be surprised if it generates behavior in belief-concordant cases as well.
“Alief in Action (and Reaction)”

Gendler gives various examples of belief-discordant alief, which she says involves a violation of some norm. These violations are largely involuntary, however. Sometimes these violations are actually welcomed (such as those induced by riding a roller coaster), but oftentimes they are not (e.g., phobias).

Aliefs can be either innate or the product of habituation. They are non-conscious or automatic.

How should we treat unwelcome belief-discordant alief? Gendler sees the ancients as addressing this question in their talk of “harmonizing the parts of the soul”, as well as the moderns with their concern for adjudicating conflicts between reason and passion. (Note: Many of these classic discussions didn’t concern alief-like discord, though. There are other types of conflicts, of course.) Gendler claims two general strategies here. First, we could choose to cultivate contrary habits (Aristotle). Second, we could use imagination to refocus our attention (Descartes).

Two caveats: She is not claiming that alief will be a fundamental category in ideal psychology (though she thinks it is as legitimate and essential as belief, desire, and the like), and she is open to modification as to how widely or narrowly this state should be characterized.

Alief-explanations fall somewhere in between rational explanations and purely physical explanations of behavior.

1. Note the varied examples that Gendler presents on p. 556 – e.g., frogs and BBs, movie-goers, precipice cases, implicit bias, etc. She thinks that these have a unified explanation.

1.1 Features of alief: associative, automatic, arational, shared with non-human animals, more primitive than belief and desire, action-generating, and affect-laden.

Aliefs can generate behavior immediately, without mediation by desires.

1.2 Alief is not a propositional attitude. It is a relation a subject bears to, among other things, a representation, affective responses, and behavioral outputs.

2. Gendler denies that classical cognitive accounts do justice to these phenomena. (Perhaps not, but are these behavioral responses actions?)

We might wonder whether some of the disputes here are merely terminological, as opposed to being substantive.
Gendler claims that these behavioral responses can both be prompted by instinct, habit, imagination, or false belief, and still due to an alief.

2.1
Some have taken precipice cases as showing how affective responses can lead to false beliefs (e.g., about danger). Here, behavior and hesitancy are supposed to support attributing a false belief in danger. This response could also generalize to the movie-goer case and others. Gendler rejects all such moves.

Significantly, Gendler claims that beliefs must be evidence-sensitive:

“In particular, in order for an attitude to count as a belief, the attitude needs to be responsive to changes in the world, and in our evidential relation to it. I will argue that the attitude present in the cases presented above does not satisfy these criteria.” (563)

There is a tendency to attribute intentions and beliefs on the basis of behavior, even for inanimate objects. But this tendency gets things wrong in the case of inanimate objects. It also gets things wrong in these alief cases, Gendler claims.

Precipice cases (and the like) do not involve a genuine belief in danger, because the subject is not evidence-sensitive in that regard:

“Indeed, the argument can be made on the following simple grounds: Beliefs change in response to changes in evidence; aliefs change in response to changes in habit. If new evidence won’t cause you to change your behavior in response to an apparent stimulus, then your reaction is due to alief rather than belief.” (566)

2.2
Another proposal states that imagination generates these affective and behavioral responses. Gendler grants that imagination can prompt alief-responses, but this is when the norm of quarantining is violated.

2.3
The etiology of aliefs – that some are instinctual and others are products of habit – is irrelevant to their shared classification.

3.
When alief and belief motivate us toward opposing behaviors, Gendler says the alief is norm-discordant. This discord will often happen simply because alief is not sensitive to the appearance/reality distinction. Aliefs can also motivate behavior when they are norm-concordant.
There are cases in which norm-discordant alief is actually desirable – e.g., cinema, amusement parks, therapy, video games, and bungee jumping. But, typically, a well-functioning soul is one in which alief and belief coincide.

4. Conflicts between alief and belief are almost unavoidable, given that we are both embodied and rational beings. But, how should we deal with norm-discordant alief?

4.1 One strategy is to cultivate new, norm-concordant habits (Aristotle). Or, we can re-direct our attention via imagination (Descartes).

4.2 Racist (discordant) alief is common among White Americans. Such people avow (and believe) racial egalitarianism, but they have an unconscious and automatic negative response to appearances (in different ways – faces, names, etc.) of black people. This can be treated, to some extent at least, by practicing “no” responses to the presentation of stereotypical traits!

4.3 There are costs of living in a society that violates your ideals – you can pick up those regularities as aliefs, if not beliefs. Note the problems that this can cause, as evidenced in the Stroop color-naming test example Gendler discusses.