



This is a repository copy of *Why beliefs are not dispositional stereotypes*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/199753/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Moore, A.G. orcid.org/0000-0002-1774-6621 and Botterill, G. (2023) Why beliefs are not dispositional stereotypes. *Theoria*. ISSN 0040-5825

<https://doi.org/10.1111/theo.12475>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Why beliefs are not dispositional stereotypes

Andrew Garford Moore¹  | George Botterill²¹University of Derby, Derby, UK²University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK**Correspondence**

Andrew Garford Moore, University of Derby, Derby, UK.

Email: garfordmoore@gmail.com**Abstract**

In a series of papers, Schwitzgebel has attempted to revive the dispositionalist account of belief by tweaking it a little and claiming a previously unconsidered advantage over representationalism. The tweaks are to include phenomenal and cognitive responses, in addition to overt behaviour, in the manifestations of a given belief; and to soften the account of dispositions by allowing for *dispositional stereotypes*. The alleged advantage is that dispositionalism can deal with what Schwitzgebel calls cases of *in-between belief*, whereas representationalism cannot. In this paper we argue that Schwitzgebel's attempted improvements do not succeed and that, as an account of belief, dispositionalism is seen to be unsatisfactory. The case for this verdict also enables the representationalist position to be enhanced by drawing attention to the diversity of formats in which beliefs are stored.

KEYWORDS

belief, dispositions, in-between beliefs, interactive function, representations, Schwitzgebel, stereotypes

1 | IN-BETWEEN BELIEFS

Schwitzgebel characterises dispositionalism as *superficial* because it identifies belief possession with patterns in surface phenomena. He contrasts his superficial account with *deep* accounts, such as representationalism, which identify belief possession with the presence of some feature that causes those patterns of surface phenomena (Schwitzgebel, 2012).

Schwitzgebel's primary argument in favour of his account is that his superficial dispositionalism is better able to explain instances of what he calls *in-between believing* (Schwitzgebel, 2002, 2003, 2013). In-between beliefs are a sort of case in which it is not clear whether someone has the belief or not.¹ On the dispositional account, having a belief is a matter of matching, to a greater or lesser extent, some *dispositional stereotype*. There is no further fact

¹There is another sort of case in which it is unclear whether somebody holds a belief or not because of borderline indeterminacy of content, as when you are aware that a few drops of water are falling, but do not know whether this should count as an instance of rain.

of the matter. In contrast, Schwitzgebel argues, if whether someone has a belief or not is determined by possession of a certain internal structure (a representational state) as in the deep accounts, then we are forced to say that the agents described in the cases of in-between believing either have the belief or they do not.

In this section we will show that Schwitzgebel's claim that representationalism is unable to explain instances of in-between beliefs is based on a mischaracterisation of representationalism. Contrary to Schwitzgebel's claim, instances of in-between beliefs can be explained using the resources of representationalism. Furthermore, we point out that the in-between belief cases discussed by Schwitzgebel fall into several distinct categories, each of which has a different type of explanation in representationalist terms. So the representationalist account, far from struggling to explain cases of in-between belief, actually provides a preferable explanation of such phenomena.

Examples of in-between beliefs, adapted from Schwitzgebel's writings include:

1. The situation in which you have a gradually fading belief as to what an old friend's (Konstantin's) name is. Back in the day you could recall it instantly. Twenty years later, after losing contact, the name eludes you. But with a little conscious effort, you may be able to arrive at it. You may also be able to pick out the name if presented with a multiple choice. Perhaps you can still correct someone else's close guess at the name. Go forward another 20 years and the memory will have faded even further. You may be unable to correct somebody else's mistake as to what the name was. But more helpful prompts (a multiple choice, or reference to a vivid incident involving use of the name) may yet enable you to remember what it was.
2. Juliet, a white, politically liberal professor rails against conventional standards of beauty and explicitly states her belief that all races are equally beautiful. But trials reveal that she responds more favourably to images of conventional white beauty (Schwitzgebel, 2013).
3. Antonio, when in church listening to a sermon on the magnificence of creation, feels sure that there must be some kind of higher power. Yet at other times he views religion as metaphorical and does not defend religious belief during debates (Schwitzgebel, 2003).
4. Ben receives an email informing him that a bridge on his daily commute will be closed. But the following day he still takes his usual route (Schwitzgebel, 2010).

In all these examples it is tempting to ask, what do they really believe? Do you really believe his name was Konstantin? Does Juliet really believe that all races are equally beautiful? Does Antonio really believe that God exists? Does Ben really believe the bridge is out? But in all four cases, there seems to be no clear answer. To say that each of the agents above must believe one way or the other seems counterintuitive. It would oversimplify each case. The most natural response would seem to be that in some respects they believe that p , while in others they do not believe that p .

Schwitzgebel argues that the dispositionalist account can comfortably handle the indeterminacy of cases such as these, reflecting our intuitions. Ben, for example, matches to some extent the dispositional stereotype for believing that the bridge is closed. He may say to his wife on receiving the email about the bridge 'Aargh! The bridge over the river is down. What a nightmare!'. In his head he may visualise the closed bridge, he may start to work out a new route, and he may calculate the additional time it will take to travel to work. All of these seem like manifestations of a dispositional stereotype appropriate for an agent who has a belief that the bridge is closed. However, Ben sets off for work in the morning taking his usual route – a behavioural manifestation consistent with the belief that the bridge is open.

While Schwitzgebel sees his account as 'a description of the conditions under which particular beliefs can properly be attributed to human beings' (Schwitzgebel, 2002, p. 258), in this instance we would want to hold off making an attribution and remain agnostic, leaving it as

Ben having a strong match for the dispositional stereotype appropriate for believing that the bridge is closed and also matching to some extent the dispositional stereotype appropriate for believing the bridge is open. The dispositionalist is not forced to make a choice one way or the other. 'Once all the relevant dispositions have been made clear, the case is closed. There are no further facts to report' (Schwitzgebel, 2002, p. 262).

We can give a similar treatment to the other examples. In some respects, they match the dispositional stereotype for belief that p , while in other respects they match the dispositional stereotype for not believing that p (or holding some other belief q , inconsistent with p). This approach might be held to provide a nice match to our intuitive thoughts about these cases.

Representational accounts of belief are, according to Schwitzgebel, unable to do justice to our intuitions in these cases. If belief possession is determined by the presence of a specific internal representational state, then an agent either has that state or they do not. Schwitzgebel draws on the popular metaphor of the belief box, which has been used extensively, by Fodor (1987) and Nichols and Stich (2003), among others. In this metaphor, to have a belief is to have a representation in the belief box, which is to say that it interacts with other representations in a characteristically belief-like way. The metaphor encourages us to think that either there is a belief in the belief box or there is not. Juliet either believes that all races are equally beautiful, or she does not.

Appealing to degrees of confidence in a belief is not going to help the representationalist explain the cases of in-between belief. It is not the case that Juliet is only 70% confident that all races are equally beautiful, or that Ben is 10% confident that the bridge will be open and decides to take a chance. Unlike the dispositionalist, then, the representationalist does not have the resources to account properly for our intuitions about these cases. Or so maintains Schwitzgebel. However, he fails to do justice to the resources of representationalism. We believe that it is indeed possible to provide a satisfactory representationalist account of cases of in-between believing.

One point to be made here is that the claim that representationalism is unable to handle cases of in-between believing involves a failure to recognise the distinction between 'failures of storage and failures of access' (Quilty-Dunn & Mandelbaum, 2018, p. 2359). From the fact that a belief has not played a role in the production of a specific output, it does not follow that that belief is not present. It could simply mean that whatever process led to that output was unable to access the representation during its working. There are several reasons why this could be the case. Cognitive load could prevent the belief from being accessed; or some beliefs may only be accessible to all systems under certain circumstances, while some beliefs may only ever be accessible to specific modular systems. Thus Schwitzgebel's criticism of representationalism rests on an oversimplification. It seems to require that if a belief is present it must influence behaviour in every possible circumstance. A more nuanced account of belief possession will recognise that an agent's belief may only influence behaviour under certain types of circumstance, or where the agent's cognitive situation allows it to do so.

Furthermore, by using the resources of representationalism, we can see that Schwitzgebel's in-between beliefs are actually a mixed bag. We can identify at least two, possibly three, different types of in-between beliefs, and start to construct a different kind of explanation for each of these types.

Some of the examples of in-between beliefs involve issues of access, whereas some involve contradictory (or conflicting) beliefs. The example of our old university friend (named *Konstantin* in Schwitzgebel's paper) seems like a clear example of issues in accessing a representational state. The state representing our friend's name as *Konstantin* is stored in some kind of way, in some place, in the brain. During our time at university, we access the belief regularly, swiftly and reliably. Who are you going to meet in the library? *Konstantin*. Who is dating Jenny? *Konstantin*. Who is that fast asleep in my bed? *Konstantin*. Many years after leaving university the memory has faded. As we think and talk about *Konstantin* less, we do not access

the representation of his name nearly as often. So our swift and reliable recall of his name begins to fade. However, the fact that, with effortful attention or with subtle prompting, we are still able to recollect the name demonstrates that the representation that Konstantin's name is *Konstantin* is still stored somewhere in the brain.

The second category of in-between beliefs are those which involve an agent simultaneously holding two contradictory beliefs, or conflicting beliefs involving some sort of inconsistency. Which of the beliefs influences behaviour in any particular case depends on the circumstances. A representationalist account of belief should not exclude the possibility that one can hold inconsistent beliefs. That can happen and it does happen, even though rational people will feel under pressure to resolve the inconsistency when it becomes obvious to them.

This is the best explanation for the example of Antonio, who when in religious settings feels that there must be some kind of higher power, but does not profess to be a believer during debates on the topic of religion. Rather than in-between believing in a higher power, the case seems better explained in terms of Antonio possessing the belief in a higher power, supported by a strong feeling that is aroused in religious contexts. Yet, in the context of a debate, Antonio is unable to support this belief with reasoned argument and further is swayed by arguments against the existence of a higher power. In church he is a theist. In the seminar room he is an agnostic or atheist.

It could be argued that examples (2) and (4) are also best explained by positing contradictory beliefs, as in the case of Antonio. However, we believe these two examples form a distinct third category, that of a belief representation in tension with a belief, or belief-like representational state, with informational content that is only available to cognitive subsystems and not directly accessible by consciousness.

Consider the example of forgetful Ben. Ben's behaviour can be explained by positing two, contradictory beliefs. The first belief is that the bridge on his commute has been closed, the second is that the bridge is open as usual. After Ben receives the email, he acquires the belief that the bridge is closed. This belief produces a series of behaviours consistent with that belief – planning an alternative route, calculating the additional time required for the journey to work under the new circumstances, informing his wife of the closure, and so forth. However, when he wakes early the following morning, he follows his usual routine, and takes the route straight towards the closed bridge. In the groggy consciousness of early morning, Ben's newly acquired belief that the bridge is closed fails to influence his behaviour. One explanation of this behaviour is that his old belief that his best route to work is over the bridge still controls his actions. Another possible explanation is that Ben has a belief that the bridge is out and a set of habitual behaviours which he is accustomed to follow in particular circumstances. In his tired state Ben fails to access his newly acquired belief that the bridge is out and his behaviour defaults to habit.

A similar explanation can be applied to the case of Juliet. It is not that Juliet has two contradictory beliefs about the equality of beauty versus conventional beauty, rather she has beliefs that all races are equally beautiful and an informational state or states that have certain physiological effects when presented with different examples of beauty (these different effects could perhaps be detected using skin conductivity tests or using the Implicit Association Test, e.g., Greenwald & Farnham, 2000).

Whatever state or states cause Ben's habitual behaviour and Juliet's physiological responses, they do not seem to be of the same kind as the conscious beliefs that they are in tension with. They operate below the level of consciousness and can only influence behaviour where conscious attention is fixed elsewhere, as in the case of Ben, or in non-consciously controlled physiological processes, as in the case of Juliet.

The general conclusion to be drawn from consideration of cases such as these is that representationalism is well equipped to cope with the complexity of cognition. The existence of some modular subsystems isolated from broader cognition has long been well established

(Fodor, 1983). Some more recent thinkers have gone further than Fodor, arguing in favour of a massively modular cognitive architecture (e.g., Carruthers, 2006; Sperber, 2005). Others have advocated a dual-process view, proposing a division between two different modes of cognition (e.g., Evans & Frankish, 2009; Evans & Stanovich, 2013). While debate continues on the extent to which cognitive architecture is modular and the specific nature of the different types of processes involved in cognition, the claim that *there are multiple streams of processing* is not controversial. These different streams of processing are accessible to different levels of cognition and yet may have both affective and behavioural manifestations.

One striking demonstration of this is the phenomenon of blindsight (e.g., Cowey, 2010; Weiskrantz, 2002). Blindsight patients have damage to their primary visual cortex and report that they are unable to see any stimuli in the affected areas of their visual field. However, despite this, blindsight patients have been shown to be able to perform a range of behaviours that are informed by visual information about objects that they deny they are able to see. Examples include the ability to identify different shapes, demonstrating appropriate affective responses to emotional faces, and the ability to navigate around objects in their path.

We think it likely that examples (2) and (4) involve different processing streams, with one element of behaviour caused by processing and involving beliefs available to consciousness, and another element of behaviour caused by processing and beliefs at a non-conscious level. However, we will not here attempt to defend a categorisation of the many possible examples of in-between belief. What our brief discussion does make clear is that a representationalist treatment of the examples set out by Schwitzgebel can provide a richer and more detailed explanation of such cases than the dispositionalist account.

There is an additional lesson to be taken from these examples. It is that we should take note of something that philosophical parlance of *propositional attitudes* tends to obscure: namely, that the informational content of beliefs may come in different formats. One thing a dispositionalist would be right about would be thinking that taking beliefs to be sentences in a belief box gives a distorted view of belief. But that should only ever have been taken as a metaphor. The conventional view that beliefs come with *that-clauses* attached is double-edged. While it rightly stresses that beliefs have content, it concentrates exclusively upon linguistic content, either in natural language or in Fodor's *language of thought* (Fodor, 1981, 1987). Elizabeth Camp and others (e.g., Camp, 2007, 2018; Rescorla, 2009) have argued that some beliefs have a map-like structure, rather than a language-like structure. In addition, we should accept that there are a range of different potential structures and types of content. As there are multiple types of processes, available to different levels of cognition, it is plausible that these processes involve representations with a range of different structures and formats.

Some beliefs must have quasi-imagistic content. How otherwise could one recognise familiar places or familiar faces? The information in some of those imagistic beliefs may have been extracted and linguistically encoded, as when one actually succeeds in the difficult task of giving a good description of what one of your friends looks like. But even in that case a little reflection should convince us that the content of the linguistic description (which would, after all, surely fit numerous other people that you would never mistake for your friend) falls very far short of all the details of your imagistic beliefs about your friend's appearance.

In addition, there are beliefs with content peculiar to other sensory modalities. We all have beliefs about what rosemary or coffee smells like, what orange juice tastes like, how chardonnay tastes different from sauvignon blanc, what the surface of a slate or a brick feels like. Strikingly, even though these beliefs do not come in a linguistic format (and so hardly seem to be propositional, unless *it tastes like that* or *it smells like that* can qualify as propositions), they can ground inferences. Thus, we have beliefs about what words in our native language sound like, which will enable us to detect very quickly when someone is speaking with a foreign accent.

So far we have seen that thinking of beliefs as having informational content, rather than attached *that-clauses*, broadens and enhances the somewhat impoverished philosophical

understanding of belief. We have also seen how the representationalist account is able not only to explain cases of in-between believing, but even to distinguish between several different types of case. But is it true, as Schwitzgebel claims, that the representationalist is forced to decide whether the agents *really believe* something or not? Do we really believe that our old friend's name is Konstantin, despite only being able to recall his name when presented with a multiple-choice list? Does Juliet really believe that all races are equally beautiful, despite her non-verbally responding more favourably to images of conventional white beauty under certain conditions?

What our analysis above shows is that belief possession is more complex than the '*what do they really believe?*' question assumes. Belief possession is not always a simple yes-or-no matter. On the representational account, having a belief (with given content) is a matter of having a representational state with the right sort of influence over behavioural, cognitive and phenomenal effects. A representation with given informational content may function only in particular circumstances or be available only to certain cognitive systems. The circumstances under which a representation is in operation as a belief may obtain on a daily basis or could occur once in a lifetime. A representation may impact on general cognition or a single sub-system. Representationalism about belief does not need a general rule as to the point on these spectra at which an agent *really believes*.

An objector might still insist that if an agent has a representation that *p*, even though it might only produce effects in exceptionally rare circumstances and even then only via a limited number of cognitive systems, then the representationalist is forced to concede that the agent has the belief that *p*. But such black-and-white thinking ignores the explanatory depth that is precisely the strength of the deep account. Possessing a representation that *p* should not be confused with an answer to the question of what an agent really believes at the personal level. We can be comfortable with indeterminacy in some cases and a degree of vagueness about what an agent really believes at a personal level precisely because the deep account shows that in many cases clear-cut answers are not possible.

Schwitzgebel has argued that we should abandon representationalism because it is committed to simplistic yes-or-no answers regarding belief possession. We have shown in this section that representationalism has no such commitment. Rather, it can provide nuanced and detailed accounts of the role that representations play in generating behaviour, and phenomenal and cognitive responses. For Schwitzgebel, in-between believers partially match the stereotype for possessing a belief. There is no further fact of the matter. On the contrary, we would agree with Quilty-Dunn and Mandelbaum (2018, p. 2360) when they argue that 'If the empirical facts suggest that, despite superficial messiness in folk belief ascription, there are deep facts of the matter about our beliefs that a superficial account cannot explain, then that is very good evidence in favour of a deep theory'.

2 | DISPOSITIONS AND INTERACTIVE FUNCTION

Before Schwitzgebel resurrected the dispositionalist account of belief, most philosophers of mind would have been agreed in rejecting it. The consideration that appeared to dispose of dispositionalism was what we will call *the argument from interactive function*: that what some person with a certain belief (that *p*) will be liable to do depends not only upon that particular belief, but also upon the interaction of that belief with all of the individual's other mental states (other beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, inclinations, etc.). Thinking that a cup contains hemlock, you would probably not drink from it. But Socrates did, even though he certainly believed there was enough hemlock in it to put an end to his life. In order to meet this objection to traditional, Rylean, dispositionalism, Schwitzgebel (see Schwitzgebel, 2001, 2002, 2009, 2013) has modified the dispositionalist account in two ways: (1) It is not just overt behaviour that is to be counted

as the manifestation of a disposition, but also phenomenal and cognitive responses; and (2) the account of what dispositions consist in is softened by allowing for *dispositional stereotypes*.

We have no argument with the first of these tweaks, at least in so far as the phenomenal and cognitive responses are taken to be effects of beliefs, rather than what those beliefs actually consist in. Anybody who has felt for his wallet and found it gone will have experienced how immediate and strong the phenomenal manifestation of a belief can be. A belief can make you take action. It can also make you weep, or feel like weeping. But we firmly reject the idea that introducing the notion of a dispositional stereotype can provide anything like a satisfactory answer to the argument from interactive function. To suppose that it could do so shows inadequate appreciation of the force of that argument.

Schwitzgebel tells us that: ‘A *dispositional stereotype* is a stereotype whose elements are dispositional properties’; and that ‘to believe that *p*, on the view I am proposing, is nothing more than to match to an appropriate degree and in appropriate respects the dispositional stereotype for believing that *p*’ (Schwitzgebel, 2002, pp. 251 and 253). He points to an analogy between beliefs and personality traits, since traits such as being hot-tempered, or shy, or taciturn will also have stereotypical manifestations. But there can be interfering conditions, so the link between a trait and its stereotype holds only *ceteris paribus*. In the presence of a stern authority, the hot-tempered may well suppress their usual outbursts; and at a well-lubricated party the shy may become surprisingly bold. So while there are, according to Schwitzgebel, stereotypical manifestations of beliefs, these may be inhibited by other factors, including other states of mind, much as the greedy person may show restraint when wanting to create a good impression. Can this idea serve to meet the force of the argument from interactive function?

We should first note something about the employment of the notion of a *stereotype*. A familiar and prior philosophical deployment of this notion is due to Hilary Putnam (Putnam, 1975) in regard to natural kinds. In the case of natural kinds, stereotypical properties of a kind are observable properties (such as shape, colour, taste or smell) by means of which instances of the kind can be identified. But rare and unusual members of a kind may lack such properties – for example, the albino tiger or the human hexadactyl. It should be noted that in the case of natural kinds the stereotype only contingently serves as an identifier for the kind. So it would definitely *not* be correct to say that to be a member of kind *K* is to match the *K*-kind stereotype to an appropriate degree. There has to be something more to it than that. What makes something a member of a particular kind is some underlying nature (whatever it is, hypothesised but quite possibly unknown) which causally generates the stereotype in normal developmental conditions. So if that were the notion of a stereotype which Schwitzgebel was deploying, then he would already be surrendering the major initial motivation for dispositionalism – namely, avoiding the postulation of inner causes. For it would seem that there would have to be something which *produced* the dispositional stereotype, in order for whatever that was sometimes to be interfered with.

But let us leave that rather general point on one side (since essentialists about natural kinds have not been granted an exclusive patent on the term ‘stereotype’) and consider the alleged analogy with personality traits. We agree with Schwitzgebel that there are dispositional stereotypes for such traits. However, we would then go on to add that one can only understand what beliefs are by appreciating that they are quite unlike that. The most important property of beliefs is that they have informational contents, and those contents enable them to interact in an endless variety of ways with other contentful intentional states and attitudes. As Churchland pointed out (Churchland, 1979, 1981), the contents of beliefs operate in theory of mind rather as numerical values for functions in some scientific theory. It is standard philosophical practice to think of beliefs as being propositional attitudes. Yet, as we have noted in the previous section, it is in fact preferable to take them to have *informational content*, without restricting that content to linguistically encodable propositions. For one can also have beliefs with sensory content (as when one believes that *that* is what lavender smells like), or imagistic content (as when

one believes that *that* is what an oak leaf looks like), or map-like content (which helps one to find one's way around a familiar city). The informational contents of beliefs are not instructions to behave or to react in certain ways. What somebody with a particular belief will do, *or feel*, depends upon a host of other factors.

So are there such things as dispositional stereotypes for particular beliefs, individuated by content? For some beliefs there is at least something like a dispositional stereotype, in culturally normal settings. Any plausibility in the idea that particular beliefs might be characterised in terms of their dispositional stereotypes derives from the use of a narrow range of examples (such as the belief *that there is beer in the fridge*), where what is stereotypical is really explicable in terms of cultural norms or common preferences, rather than the content of the belief. It is, of course, fortunate that we do share norms and preferences with many other people and can therefore rely upon manifestations of their dispositions to infer some of their beliefs. Without the availability of such default similarity in terms of mindreading, folk psychology would not work very well and we would remain more mysterious to each other than we are. But that concedes nothing to Schwitzgebel's position. Any account of belief is going to accept that behavioural and reactive dispositions can provide evidence of beliefs. But that is because they are in part caused by beliefs. They do not *constitute what beliefs are*. For even in the case of those beliefs for which there may be something like a dispositional stereotype (like the belief *that there is beer in the fridge*), it is not difficult to imagine a social and psychological setting in which an individual might react to acquiring that belief in a non-stereotypical way – for example, by urgently proceeding to throw the stuff out, or immediately deciding to leave a dwelling contaminated by the presence of alcohol.

Schwitzgebel is prepared to allow that there can be such departures from the supposed stereotypical manifestations of a given belief. According to him, dispositional stereotypes can be relied upon to hold, as many scientific laws do, *ceteris paribus*. They can admit of exceptions, but then there must be some explanation as to why the exceptional case differs from the stereotype. There is a general point to be noted here, following on from our earlier remark that Schwitzgebel's notion of a *stereotype* can hardly be the same as that found in relation to natural kinds, if he is really advocating a dispositional account of belief. For what can the belief actually *be* in the exceptional cases which depart from a supposed dispositional stereotype? We cannot see any way of answering that question that upholds Schwitzgebel's position as offering a distinctively dispositionalist account of belief.

The question might be raised whether it is possible to defend Schwitzgebel's position by saying that beliefs are dispositional stereotypes which obtain *relative to certain desires*. There are several reasons why this cannot be made to work, some of which may already be familiar to readers.² Probably the best way of seeing why the idea of a dispositional stereotype will not do as a general account of the nature of belief is to review how regular the interactions between beliefs and desires are at the level of types. For we should be clear that it is of course only *types* of beliefs that can have stereotypes, and Schwitzgebel's thesis must be that it is types of beliefs *as classified by their content* which have dispositional stereotypes. There is no need to seek for dispositional stereotypes for types of belief classified in other ways, such as true beliefs, false beliefs, carefully considered beliefs, irrational beliefs, religious beliefs, beliefs of the politically liberal-minded, and so on. Those are not the belief types of interest in this inquiry. So is it possible that there should be dispositional stereotypes for types of belief as classified by content, relative to given desires? Broadly speaking, we can say that the connections between belief types and desires fall into three major classes: (i) *customary*, (ii) *active but variable* and (iii) *remote and relatively weak*. Cases of the first class, of a customary interconnection, are those in which either socio-cultural norms or widely held desires dependably interact with a given type of belief to

²Such as that this would confound an ontological question with an epistemological one; or that formulating a disposition conditional upon desires sits uncomfortably with desires themselves being considered dispositional.

affect behaviour in a predictable way. The examples used to illustrate and purportedly support dispositional theses are invariably taken from this class, as when the belief *that it is raining* combines with a desire to keep dry to dispose people to carry an umbrella or wear a raincoat when going outdoors. In cases of this kind one could indeed maintain that the stereotypical dispositions hold only *ceteris paribus*, and that there can be interfering desires. Someone who wants to go out for a 10 k jog is unlikely to encumber herself with a raincoat or an umbrella.

But while one could give what might appear to be an account of dispositional stereotypes for beliefs in relation to various desires in type (i) cases, that would only cover a tiny fraction of the connections between beliefs and desires. There are also cases of type (ii) in which responses are likely to result from interaction between an agent's belief and some desire. But what the response might be will vary depending upon what desires the agent has, and also other attitudes and the situation of the agent. Believing *that it is 6.30 a.m.*, someone with a desire for a good rest may just snuggle back under the duvet. Wanting to catch a train or get the children to school on time, the response would probably be to leap out of bed and get moving. It is easy to see that any list of the dispositions for a belief such as *it is 6.30 a.m.*, relative to varying desires, is going to get horribly disjunctive. It is also going to vary with the situations of believers: in bed, at an airport, driving along a motorway, on a battlefield, and so endlessly on. The dispositions associated with a given belief are also going to be affected by other attitudes that the believer may have and also all the many factors that go to make up the character of an individual. Knowing that the presence of Yellow Archangel (*Lamiastrum galeobdolon*) is an indicator of ancient woodland, you see a plant with those dark green, nettle-like leaves and so come to believe that the woods you are in have been there for hundreds of years. For some this might prompt feelings of reverence and a felt obligation to protect something that has been on the Earth longer than any human being. But not everyone is going to feel that way, and there will be all manner of gradations in the strength those feelings have when they come into conflict with other desires.

Moving even further away from the hackneyed type (i) examples of belief with content that *p*, we can enter the vast range of esoteric beliefs (such as historical or theoretical beliefs) which have little in the way of regular connection with everyday desires for most ordinary people. There is nothing particularly puzzling about the informational content of beliefs such as the belief *that Napoleon died on St. Helena*, or the belief *that the sun is just another star*, or the belief *that Pluto is the outermost planet of the solar system*, or the belief *that acquired characteristics are not heritable*. But there certainly is a puzzle about specifying what stereotypical dispositions such beliefs might consist in or be associated with. Now, it might be thought that there is at least a stereotypical disposition in terms of linguistic behaviour: that those who believe that *p* will be disposed to assert *p*, or will answer in the affirmative when queried as to whether *p* is the case. This would be a sort of quiz-game version of dispositionalism about belief. (As in: What would be the stereotypical disposition for believing that *the capital of Norway used to be called Christiania*?) Without relativising the disposition to desires, such a ploy would not help, since assertion and affirmation will only align neatly with believing for those committed to abiding by conversational norms of informativeness and truthfulness, or for some other reason desiring to be informative. Otherwise the response from a *p*-believer to a question as to whether *p* is the case might be 'What's it to you?', or 'Don't ask me', or something else altogether. But what we are then left with in the way of an account of belief in terms of dispositional stereotypes is that, at least for type (iii) beliefs, those who believe that *p*, if they desire to be informative as to whether *p*, will be disposed to assert or affirm that *p*.

That would give us at best a lamentably thin dispositional stereotype for vast numbers of beliefs. Nor could it be made to apply to beliefs in a non-linguistic format, or any animal beliefs. Now, the advocate of dispositionalism à la Schwitzgebel might attempt to turn the tables at this point and urge that we should be more careful and selective about what beliefs are. Perhaps types (i), (ii) and (iii) should not all be lumped together as *beliefs*. Perhaps also there are non-linguistic perceptual *registrations* which do not deserve to be called beliefs proper.

Such a move might be given some plausibility by the thought that not every input of perceptual processing deserves to be ranked as a belief, and that there are significant differences between (say) the owner's opinion that it would be good to take a walk for the sake of the exercise and the dog's reaction to hearing the sound of its lead being picked up.

We acknowledge that there is an issue about where to draw the line between beliefs and sub-doxastic states. When you glance through the window of a speeding train there are many things that you must see without taking much notice. Do those streams of perception produce myriads of evanescent beliefs that are soon extinguished without producing any further cognitive or affective effects? That issue deserves further consideration than we can give it in the present paper. But fortunately that is not needed in order to see that the appeal to dispositional stereotypes cannot really meet the force of the argument from interactive function. Examples of what we could classify as type (ii) beliefs are clearly not sub-doxastic states, but because of their variable interconnections with desires and other attitudes, any attempt to analyse them as desire-relative dispositional stereotypes would be hideously complicated (if not endlessly disjunctive). That is an indication that Schwitzgebel's dispositional stereotype account gets things the wrong way round. It is as if one were to try to specify the distance between points *A* and *B* as a matter of the time it would take to get from *A* to *B* using different modes of transport, with limping along falling under *ceteris paribus*.³ Instead of the existence of exceptions to standard responses which can be specially explained by particular other beliefs, desires or attitudes (or unusual settings), responses to beliefs with a given content are only generated in combination with other psychological states. The vast majority of belief types (typed by their content) are not associated with any stereotypical dispositions at all. In this respect, beliefs are quite different from personality traits like being greedy, or short-tempered, or soft-spoken, which have a definite way of showing up on the behavioural surface. There is nothing in particular that beliefs incline us to do or to feel, absent other psychological factors. Even the broad classification that we have suggested into beliefs of types (i), (ii) and (iii) must be allowed to be fluid. With changes in situation and other attitudes, a belief could move from one of these types to another. Background geological training might lead you to believe that the rocks under your feet, once mined for tin, also contain lithium. That could remain as a type (iii) belief, an inert recognition of geological fact. But if lithium becomes urgently needed for electrical batteries which are essential to vast industrial projects, that same belief will acquire active connections with many desires. Shopping in a supermarket you may hear somebody sneeze, and will perhaps think nothing of it. The case will be quite different in a pandemic when it is generally known that there is a potentially lethal source of airborne infection.

So we would submit that, properly appreciated, the argument from interactive function should actually be taken as establishing that there can be no such things as dispositional stereotypes for beliefs. Schwitzgebel espouses the motto 'to have an attitude is, at root, to live a certain way' (Schwitzgebel, 2013, p. 76). But that should really help us to realise that the philosophical characterisation of beliefs as *propositional attitudes* is somewhat misleading. Beliefs are not attitudes, they are information (sometimes *misinformation*). How someone with that information acts or reacts will indeed depend upon their attitudes (and the setting – allowing that all of us have countless stored beliefs which we will probably never act upon in any way). This is why Schwitzgebel's example of some guy who 'believes he is God's gift to women' is not an example of a belief at all, but rather an example of an attitude.

3 | CONCLUSION

Schwitzgebel's work on beliefs as dispositions introduces several changes intended to make the position more defensible. We have seen that Schwitzgebel's new dispositionalist account of

³A light-year is indeed a unit of distance in astrophysics. But that only works because there is a standard velocity for travel.

belief fails on two major counts. Firstly, his primary argument in favour of dispositions, based upon cases of in-between belief, was shown to provide no support for dispositionalism because those cases are actually better explained in representationalist terms. Secondly, the appeal to *dispositional stereotypes* fails to blunt the force of the argument from interactive function, which remains a decisive objection to dispositionalism.

In terms of in-between beliefs, Schwitzgebel describes several cases in which it is difficult to say whether an individual possesses a belief or not. Schwitzgebel argues that such cases are handled in an unproblematic way by his account. We are not required to say the subjects either have the belief or they do not. An individual can partially meet the dispositional stereotype for a belief and we can leave it at that. If, however, to have a belief is to possess a representational state with the content of that belief, then the agents in these in-between cases either have the belief or they do not, which is contrary to our intuitions.

We argued that this characterisation of representationalism is unfair. Rather than being unable to handle cases of in-between belief, we maintain that representationalism actually provides a better account of the cases, showing how some of the cases are due to issues of access, whereas others may be caused by contradictory beliefs. The representationalist account, in addition to explaining facts of the matter at the sub-personal level, is able to show why there can be vagueness at the personal level. It is not committed to unwelcome answers about what an agent really believes.

In one of his papers, Schwitzgebel draws a distinction between deep and superficial accounts of psychological states and announces that '[his] approach to the attitudes is superficial rather than deep' (Schwitzgebel, 2013, p. 78). But unless one were misled by the jargon of 'propositional attitudes', whoever would take beliefs to be attitudes? We consider deeper accounts to be, *ceteris paribus*, methodologically preferable: they carry commitments which are fruitful avenues for further investigation. Apart from that general consideration, there is a quite specific advantage in relation to in-between believing. Deeper accounts give more space for causal mechanisms to operate and therefore provide room for distinctions that we need to make: as in the case with the distinction between degraded mnemonic access (as, e.g., to the name of an old acquaintance) and a belief that cannot entirely supplant some other, behaviour-controlling belief. Here the dispositionalist account, in saying that the subject conforms to a dispositional stereotype, but only to a certain extent, simply neglects distinctions between significantly different cases.

We also saw how Schwitzgebel's defence of dispositionalism failed against the argument from interactive function. The basic reason for this is that beliefs store informational content.⁴ How that informational content is put to use, if it is used at all, then depends upon further psychological states of the agent and upon the settings.

It is also clear that deep accounts, are able to provide richer accounts of the processes that cause human behaviour than superficial accounts such as dispositionalism. Deep accounts allow it to be recognised that the informational content of belief representations is stored in many different formats, as discussed above. Each of these formats may have their own issues with storage and access, while some may degrade faster than others.

So, while Schwitzgebel's ingenious attempt to revive dispositionalism fails, we are not just back where we started. Understanding why Schwitzgebel's attempt failed enables the representational theory of belief to be significantly enhanced. An account that allows for a multiplicity of storage formats readily explains how animals and pre-linguistic children can have similar beliefs to adult humans, while at the same time lacking key capacities for other types of belief. The example of the vast network of map-like beliefs that any qualified taxi-driver with 'the Knowledge' has should also remind us of how much we are missing, if we only think of belief as an attitude to linguistically encoded propositions.

⁴Beliefs can of course be false. So their informational content can be misinformation – though this is most particularly a danger in the case of beliefs in linguistic format.

So we conclude that Schwitzgebel's neo-dispositionalism has to be rejected. As was previously taken to be the case because of the argument from interactive function, beliefs are not dispositions. Nor are they dispositional stereotypes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for comments that helped us in working on this paper.

ORCID

Andrew Garford Moore  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1774-6621>

REFERENCES

- Camp, E. (2007) Thinking with maps. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 21, 145–182.
- Camp, E. (2018) Why maps are not propositional. In: Grzankowski, A. & Montague, M. (Eds.) *Non-propositional intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 19–45.
- Carruthers, P. (2006) *The architecture of the mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Churchland, P.M. (1979) Our self-conception and the mind/body problem. In: *Scientific realism and the plasticity of mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 89–120.
- Churchland, P.M. (1981) Eliminative materialism and the propositional attitudes. *Journal of Philosophy*, 78, 67–90.
- Cowey, A. (2010) The blindsight saga. *Experimental Brain Research*, 200(1), 3–24.
- Evans, J.S.B.T. & Frankish, K. (2009) *In two minds: dual processes and beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans, J.S.B.T. & Stanovich, K. (2013) Dual-process theories of higher cognition: advancing the debate. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(3), 223–241.
- Fodor, J. (1981) *The language of thought*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fodor, J. (1983) *The modularity of mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fodor, J. (1987) *Psychosemantics: the problem of meaning in the philosophy of mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Greenwald, A.G. & Farnham, S.D. (2000) Using the implicit association test to measure self-esteem and self-concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(6), 1022–1038.
- Nichols, S. & Stich, S.P. (2003) *Mindreading: an integrated account of pretence, self-awareness, and understanding other minds*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Putnam, H. (1975) The meaning of 'meaning'. In: *Mind, language and reality: philosophical papers II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 215–271.
- Quilty-Dunn, J. & Mandelbaum, E. (2018) Against dispositionalism: belief in cognitive science. *Philosophical Studies*, 175, 2353–2372.
- Rescorla, M. (2009) Cognitive maps and the language of thought. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 60(2), 377–407.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2009) Knowing your own beliefs. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 35, 41–46.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2010) Acting contrary to our professed beliefs or the gulf between occurrent judgement and dispositional belief. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 91, 531–555.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2012) Mad belief? *Neuroethics*, 5, 13–17.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2013) A dispositional approach to belief or thinking outside of the belief box. In: Nottelmann, N. (Ed.) *New essays on belief: constitution, content and structure*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 75–99.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2001) In-between believing. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 51, 76–82.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2002) A phenomenal, dispositional account of belief. *Nous*, 36, 249–275.
- Sperber, D. (2005) Modularity and relevance: how can a massively modular mind be flexible and context-sensitive? In: Carruthers, P., Laurence, S. & Stich, S. (Eds.) *The innate mind: structure and content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 53–68.
- Weiskrantz, L. (2002) Prime-sight and blindsight. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 11, 568–581.

How to cite this article: Moore, A.G. & Botterill, G. (2023) Why beliefs are not dispositional stereotypes. *Theoria*, 1–12. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/theo.12475>