

Human beings possess beliefs. People's beliefs such as Lions are animals, London is the capital of the United Kingdom, belief in divine power etc are common examples. Beliefs are after all one kind of mental state. Other types of mental states include thoughts, desires, expectations, intentions, will, perceptions, feelings and so on. Given this classification, beliefs combined with other types of mental states form a constituent part of the mind in a significant way. This essay argues that the possession of all types of beliefs does not amount to the ascription of responsibility. Such an ascription is rather restricted to the agent's possession of a particular class of belief states such as conscious beliefs.

### **Mind & Mental States**

Mental states can be structurally analysed in terms of what is called their content and form according to Searle (1983). For example, the content of the desire-state of a child could be that there is a Choco vanilla ice cream in the refrigerator and its form is that of a desire. Likewise, the same content can be the content of a mental state such as expectation. The child can expect that there is a Choco vanilla ice cream in the refrigerator. This shows that the same content can be part of different kinds of mental states. Different mental states can have varying functional capacities based on their form and content.

The functional capacity of the human mind can be defined as the propensity of mental states to initiate further mental states and actions. The belief that there is an ice cream in the refrigerator can lead to the expectation that I can have that ice cream. This can lead to the decision to change my bodily location and to the action of walking to the refrigerator with an intention to open it and have the ice cream. A single mental state such as a belief thus forms a series of other mental states and actions thereby forming a network of mental and bodily activities. Based on the paradigmatic thesis regarding human beings that they are a combination of mind and body which is evident in the philosophy of Rene Descartes (1641), human actions are generally explained with reference to such a mind-body complex.

An important feature of mental states according to Jerry Fodor (1981) is that they carry information. The content of mental states individuates the mental states. The belief (based on the trust) in a particular car manufacturing brand is different from the belief that Venice has many canals because of the difference in their respective contents. Beliefs range from simpler ones to complex ones depending on their capacity to carry the amount of information as a part

of their contents. Simple beliefs carry lesser degrees of information whereas more complex ones carry loaded information. For instance, the belief that water is wet is comparatively less simple than the belief that water can be transformed into solid, liquid and gaseous states. Mental states which have complex contents may have more functional capacity whereas their lesser complex counterparts may have lesser functional capacity.

### **Agency & Responsibility**

A crucial fact about human beings is that we have agency (Taylor 1977). It implies that we have the capacity to initiate and carry out actions. Actions are always ascribed to agents unlike other events in nature. Someone accidentally falling down into a pit and the same person jumping into the pit are thus fundamentally different events. In the first case, there is no conscious involvement of the person in the event and it happens to the person, but in the second, the person's conscious involvement is what makes the very event possible. So, in the former case, there is no agency and therefore no action while in the latter there is both agency and action present.

The notion of responsibility is intertwined with the concept of agency. We usually ascribe responsibility to agents alone. This gives us a good reason, for example not to ascribe responsibility and agency to machines or non-human animals. A malfunctioning or dysfunctional machine may give gratuitous outputs, but still, we do not *blame* the machine in the strict sense of the term. Human beings are thus a species who typically possess agency according to this view.

Human agency presupposes the agent's possession of conscious mental states, especially beliefs. A conscious mental state is a state which the agent who possesses such a state is aware of. According to the Freudian model, the human mind has three different layers of which some are conscious, some are subconscious and some are unconscious states (Freud 1924). The contents of the conscious mind float on the mental surface whereas that of the unconscious are fully sinking beneath the conscious mental surface. Subconscious states are those states of mind which partly sink and partly float. They are not always available to the agent's conscious mind. The agent cannot be aware of the unconscious states and therefore the contents of such states are also unknown to the agent. However, unconscious mental states can have causal efficacy such that they can lead the agent to further mental states and bodily movements. We cannot

identify such bodily movements which are resulted from the non-conscious mental states as actions because such movements happen without the agent being aware of it. For example, if an agent has undergone a traumatic experience during his or her childhood which in turn left some mental residue in the form of an unconscious, yet causally efficacious belief that all water bodies are deep and dangerous. Such a hydrophobic-belief may not be consciously available to the person every single time s/he approaches a water body, yet it works in keeping the person away from going near the seashore. Such a belief being unconscious may give rise to another mental state namely fear of water bodies. This indicates that although being causally efficacious, non-conscious mental states as such cannot come to the fore, that is, to the awareness of the person. So, if agency is predicated on the conscious awareness of the agent, then non-conscious mental states seem to be falling out of such a realm of awareness.

### **Beliefs: Conscious, Unconscious and the Subconscious**

Now the question is what kind of mental states, especially belief states can be considered as contributing to the constitution of the agency of the person who possesses mind. As we have discussed so far, conscious mental states are the usual candidates for agential states since they are making the person who possesses it aware of the content and form of such states. So, such states can be said to possess agential function. Unconscious mental states do not possess agential function. This implies that the possession of such states does not necessarily lead to the ascription of agency although they seem to have causal powers.

An important question which might arise at this juncture is what if the category of sub-conscious mental states might at least partly contribute to agency. Hypothetically subconscious mental states are mental states which can potentially be conscious states of mind too. In other words, it is possible that sub-conscious mental states sometimes surface in the mind yet they remain below the conscious surface of the mind. So, one may ask as long as they are available in consciousness, can't they contribute to the agency of the person? My response to such a question is as follows. Although sub-conscious mental states do not fully appear before the mind of the agent every time, whenever they come to the conscious part of the mind, they are available for the agent. Thus the agent becomes aware of such states. So the agent can be said to have the responsibility for holding such states. The content of my belief that my grandfather was a soldier can be a subconscious belief. Such a belief, like many other such mental states, is not located in the centre of my conscious mind. Rather it lies in the periphery of mind. It comes to the centre only when someone asks about my grandfather's profession or when I

memorize the military stories which he told me during my childhood. As long as such a memory episode persists, I am consciously aware of the content of my belief. When such an episode fades away, my belief goes back to the unconscious domain. So, in effect, subconscious mental states and unconscious mental states are not alike. The former one acquires functional capacity when conscious and loses the same when not conscious, the latter permanently remains unconscious.

## **Conclusion**

Coming back to the specific case of beliefs, the above analysis follows in tandem. Conscious, subconscious and unconscious belief states may be possessed by human agents, but all of them do not contribute to the constitution of human agency. Thus, the central question which this essay addresses is answered in the following manner. The agent can be held responsible only for the possession of conscious beliefs. Something, be it an action or event which happens without the awareness of the person cannot be ascribed to the person himself or herself. If awareness is lacking, then responsibility too is lacking. Thus, I being an agent can be held responsible only for holding beliefs about which I am consciously aware of.

## **Bibliography**

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