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## The Ethics of False Belief\*

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### Abstract

According to Allen Wood's "procedural principle" we should believe only that which can be justified by evidence, and nothing more. He argues that holding beliefs which are not justified by evidence diminishes our self-respect and corrupts us, both individually and collectively. Wood's normative and descriptive views as regards belief are of a piece with the received view which holds that beliefs aim at the truth. This view I refer to as the Truth-Tracking View (TTV). I first present a modest version of TTV, one which is sensitive to standard criticisms and one which is fully consistent with the procedural principle. I then raise some doubts about TTV by considering both anecdotal cases and empirical studies. These studies suggest that certain types of belief are designed to aim away from truth, in limited, carefully calibrated ways. Moreover, it seems to be the case that selectively aiming away from the truth is important for human well-being and performance. Beliefs that are designed

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to aim away I dub “Tertullian” beliefs (t-beliefs). I then list the distinguishing characteristics of t-belief and proceed to evaluate the procedural principle in light of the evidence which suggests that t-belief plays an important role in our cognitive economy. Next I argue that t-beliefs might be essential to the maintenance of self-respect and that they do not corrupt in the way that Wood claims. Finally, I argue that the fate of Wood’s procedural principle will be determined by the results of further empirical research—sociological, psychological, and neuroscientific.

**Key Words:** belief, procedural principle, positive illusions, depressive realism, and Moore’s paradox