



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TORINO

Theoretical philosophy: The ethics of belief

Gabriele Gava

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Philosophy International Curriculum



Introduction

Main problems of the ethics of belief:

- Assumption: we can be criticized for the way in which we form our beliefs (i.e. fake news)
- Are there norms that govern the formation of beliefs?
- What kind of norms these are?
- What are the implications for our understanding of belief?



Introduction

What we will do:

- We will reconstruct how some authors have answered to the central questions of the ethics of belief, taking into consideration both 'classics' and contemporary figures;
- Each week we will analyse two texts (made available through Moodle);
- Each class will be divided in two parts: The first part will be dedicated to explaining the argument in a text; the second part will be dedicated to discussion.
- (For further information on the structure of the course see the dedicated file in Moodle).



Introduction

- The exam will have a written and an oral part. You will have to write a short paper (4.000 words) on themes and texts discussed in class. Additionally, there will be an oral exam on the texts discussed in class and an additional volume.
- The lists of the texts that we will analyse during class can be found in Moodle (where the texts will also be made available).
- The additional volume can be chosen between:
 - Jonathan Adler, *Belief's own ethics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002.
 - Berislav Marušić, *Evidence and agency: norms of belief for promising and resolving*, New York: Oxford, 2015.



Introduction

What we will do today:

- We will have a closer look at the main problems of the ethics of belief (for a good introduction: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-belief/>);
- We will analyse two ‘classics’ of ‘evidentialism’ and ‘non-evidentialism’, respectively: John Locke and Blaise Pascal.



The origin of the term

The term was used for the first time in:

- William Kingdon Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief', *Contemporary Review* 1877;
- Clifford's principle: 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.'



The origin of the term

William James's response:

- William James, 'The will to believe', in *The will to believe and other essays in popular philosophy*, New York 1896.
- There are cases in which it is legitimate (if not required) to believe in absence of evidence.



Evidentialists and non-evidentialists

- The claim: it is never legitimate to form a belief in absence of evidence.
- ‘A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. [...] Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. [...] In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy [...] and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.’



Evidentialists and non-evidentialists

- The claim: in some cases, it is legitimate (or required) to form a belief in absence of evidence.
- ‘Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of maybes, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss.’



Types of norms

- Epistemic: they determine what we should do in order to have true beliefs.
- Moral: they depend on moral obligations.
- Prudential: they rest on what maximizes our wellbeing.



Relationships among the norms

- Option: while it is always irrational (from an epistemic point of view) to believe on insufficient evidence, it is sometimes rational (from a prudential point of view) to believe without evidence.
- Option: there is a moral obligation that requires that we form our beliefs according to epistemic norms. Prudential norms cannot override moral norms.
- Some speaks of «all-things-considered rationality»



Some additional problems

- What is the aim of belief?
- Can we control our beliefs?



John Locke's evidentialism

- Even though John Locke does not use the term 'ethics of belief', he identifies an evidentialist principle in his discussion of the relationship between faith and reason in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*.
- Faith: belief that is based on a (supposed) divine revelation.
- We will follow: Wolterstorff, N., 'Locke's philosophy of religion'. In V. Chappell (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (pp. 172-198). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



John Locke's evidentialism

The principles that govern belief in Locke (according to Wolterstorff):

- *Immediate Belief*: One is to believe something immediately only if it is certain for one - that is, only if one knows it.)
- *Evidence*: One is not to believe something mediately until one has acquired evidence for it such that each item of evidence is something that one knows and such that the totality of one's evidence is satisfactory.
- *Proportionality*: Having determined the probability, on one's satisfactory evidence, of the proposition in question, one ought to adopt a level of confidence in it which is proportioned to its probability, on that evidence.



John Locke's evidentialism

Consequences for faith:

- Faith: belief that is based on a (supposed) divine revelation.
- In order for our faith to be rational, we must evaluate the evidence on the basis of which we believe that a certain proposition P is the object of a divine revelation.
- I can rationally believe P on the basis of faith, if the evidence I have makes the proposition ' P is the object of a divine revelation' more probable than its contrary.



Pascal's wager

- Prudential argument for belief in God, contained in the section 'Infinity-Nothingness' of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*.
- Unlike traditional argument for the existence of God (e.g. the ontological argument), it does not attempt to prove the actual existence of God. Rather, it establishes that believing in God is the most rational thing to do.
- It is considered one of the first examples of rational choice theory.



Pascal's wager

- Assumption: we are not in a position to determine whether God exists or not.
- The argument determines whether it is more rational to believe in God or not, taking into consideration which option has the greater 'expected utility'.



Pascal's wager

- Which are the options?
- ‘-No; I will not blame them for having made this choice, but for having made one at all; for since he who calls heads and he who calls tails are equally at fault, both are in the wrong. The right thing is not to wager at all.
- Yes; but a bet must be laid. There is no option: you have joined the game’.
- Agnosticism does not present a third option. Whoever is agnostic acts *as if* God did not exist.



Pascal's wager

- How can we choose between these options?
- 'Let us weigh the gain and the loss involved in wagering that God exists. Let us estimate these two probabilities; if you win, you win all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager then, without hesitation, that He does exist.'



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Pascal's wager

	God exists	God does not exist
Wager for God	You win all	No relevant change
Wager against God	Misery/no relevant change	No relevant change



Pascal's wager

- 'Let us see. Since there is an equal risk of winning and of losing, if you had only two lives to win you might still wager; but if there were three lives to win, you would still have to play...; and being thus obliged to play, you would be imprudent not to risk your life to win three in a game where there is an equal chance of winning and losing. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. That being so, if there were an infinity of chances of which only one was in your favour, you would still do right to stake one to win two, and you would act unwisely in refusing to play one life against three, in a game where you had only one chance out of an infinite number, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to win. But here there is an infinity of infinitely happy life to win, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you stake is finite. That removes all doubt as to choice... all must be given.'



Pascal's wager

	God exists	God does not exist
Wager for God	Infinite happiness	Finite degree of happiness
Wager against God	Infinite pain/finite degree of happiness	Finite degree of happiness



The objections

- The objection based on the plurality of cults

	(Christian) God exists	(Muslim) God exists	No God exists
Belief in God (christian)	Infinite happiness	Infinite pain/finite degree of happiness	Finite degree of happiness
Belief in God (muslim)	Infinite pain/finite degree of happiness	Infinite happiness	Finite degree of happiness
Atheism	Infinite pain/finite degree of happiness	Infinite pain/finite degree of happiness	Finite degree of happiness



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The objections

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The objections

- The evidentialist objection
- If, as Locke and Clifford claim, there is a moral obligation to form our beliefs according to the evidence, believing on the basis of Pascal's wager would violate such obligation.



The objections

- The anti-voluntarist objection.
- What we believe and what we do not believe is not under our control.
Pascal's argument might be valid, but it cannot serve as the basis for belief.
- Pascal does consider this issue:
- '-Quite; but my hand are tied and my mouth is gagged; I am forced to wager, and am not free; no one frees me from these bonds, and I am so made that I cannot believe. What then do you wish me to do?'