UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

Theoretical philosophy:
The ethics of belief

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The contemporary debate

- takes up themes we have already encountered, such as the distinction between evidentialism and non-evidentialism;
- Distinguishes more clearly between different types of rationality;
- Deals more explicitly with the problem of the lack of control over our beliefs.

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Richard Foley, 'Non-epistemic reasons for believing', in *The theory of Epistemic Rationality*, Harvard University Press 1987.
- ➤ Distinguishes between epistemic rationality and 'all things considered' rationality.
- ➤ Discusses how a non-evidentialist position can deal with the fact that our beliefs do not seem under our control.

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Rationality: 'All else being equal, it is rational for a person S to bring about Y if he has a goal X and he would believe were he to be ideally reflective that Y is an effective means to X.' (209)

- Epistemic rationality: The end being pursued: believing true propositions and not believing false propositions.

- The role of epistemic rationality for rationality in general: All else being equal, it is rational for S to bring about Y if he has a goal X and it is epistemically rational for S to believe that Y is an effective means to X.' (209)

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Practical reasons for belief:

- All else being equal, it is rational for S to bring about Y if he has a goal X and it is epistemically rational for S to believe that Y is an effective means to X.' (209)

- X= a practical end

- Y= believing a proposition p

- It is epistemically rational to believe that believing in proposition p is an effective means to achieve the practical end X

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Examples:
- 'For example, suppose that it is epistemically rational for S to believe that his believing he will recover from his illness will aid his recovery (by improving his attitude). Then, all else being equal, it is rational in a practical sense for him to believe that he will recover. Or suppose it is epistemically rational for S to believe that his believing that he is more talented than his peers will help him succeed at his job (by adding to his self-confidence). Then, all else being equal, it is rational in a practical sense for him to believe that he is more talented than his peers.' (210-211)

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Problem: How can conflicts between epistemic rationality and practical rationality be solved?
- They can be solved within a theory of rational belief that determines what is rational to believe 'all things considered':
  - ➢ 'it is rational all things being considered for S to believe p if it is epistemically rational for S to believe that the estimated benefits of his believing p are greater than either the estimated benefits of his withholding judgment on p or the estimated benefits of his believing notp….' (211)

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Evidentialism assumes that our epistemic ends are always more important than other ends.
- Why do we tend towards evidentialism?
- 'Perhaps because it is impossible for someone to believe a proposition p as long as he is convinced that his evidence indicates that p is likely to be false. Just as it may be impossible for a person S to believe p and also to believe its contradictory notp, so too it may be impossible for him to have "near contradictory" beliefs, such that he believes p while also believing that his evidence indicates that p is likely to be false. …Perhaps it is even impossible for him to believe p while also believing that he has no evidence indicating that p is likely to be true.' (215)

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Given our nature, we cannot believe in the absence of evidence.
- Consequence: if non-epistemic reasons are to have an effect on belief (especially in the case of a conflict with epistemic reasons), they must do so *indirectly*.
- 'It implies only that insofar as these nonepistemic considerations do play a role in getting the person to believe the proposition, they must do so indirectly, since it is impossible, or at least unlikely, that he will believe the proposition as long as he believes that there is no evidence indicating it is true' (216).

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- '…his nonepistemic reasons for believing p nonetheless might motivate him to undertake a project of manipulating his situation so that at some future time he comes to have what he takes to be good evidence for p.' (217)
- 'Perhaps, for example, S could have himself hypnotized and given posthypnotic suggestions that will result in his placing himself in situations in which what he sees, hears, and so on will cause him to believe propositions that he thinks make p likely and will not cause him to believe propositions that he thinks make p unlikely.' (217)

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Problem: manipulating one's situation in this way can have the effect of worsening our epistemic situation.

- 'Given the holistic nature of our beliefs, such a project frequently will involve S not just in changing his attitudes toward p but also in changing his attitudes toward an enormous number of other propositions.' (218)

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- We should ask?: 'is there...something inevitably irrational, all things considered, about a person deliberately trying to worsen his epistemic situation?' (222)

- 'If, to return to the most extreme case, it is epistemically rational for S to believe that the earth will be destroyed unless he somehow gets himself to believe p, which he now with good epistemic reasons believes to be false, it will be rational on any plausible theory of goals for S to undertake a project of getting himself to believe p. And this is so even if the only way to do this is to get himself to believe a whole host of other propositions that he now has good epistemic reasons to regard as false.' (222)

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- Question: 'is there…something inevitably irrational, all things considered, about a person deliberately trying to worsen his epistemic situation?' (222)
- In most cases it is irrational.
- Not because evidentialism is valid.
- Rather: there are practical reasons why we do not want to worsen our epistemic situation.
- Believing that certain false propositions are true is an obstacle to achieving our practical goals.
- For this reason, 'all things considered', it is generally irrational to undertake a project that would worsen our epistemic situation.

Foley, Nonepistemic reasons for believing

- While practical reasons often make it irrational to worsen our epistemic situation, for the same reasons it is irrational to want to improve that situation at all costs.
- Two considerations:
- 'the time and effort one spends in trying to improve one's epistemic situation reduces the time and effort one has to devote to the pursuit of one's nonepistemic goals, and at some point additional increments of epistemic effort will begin to worsen significantly the chances one has of achieving these nonepistemic goals.' (226)

Foley's examples

- 'For example, suppose that it is epistemically rational for S to believe that his believing he will recover from his illness will aid his recovery (by improving his attitude). Then, all else being equal, it is rational in a practical sense for him to believe that he will recover. Or suppose it is epistemically rational for S to believe that his believing that he is more talented than his peers will help him succeed at his job (by adding to his self-confidence). Then, all else being equal, it is rational in a practical sense for him to believe that he is more talented than his peers.' (210-211)

Foley's examples

- 'Likewise, suppose that it is epistemically rational for S to believe that an eccentric philantropist will give him a million dollars if he comes to believe that the earth is flat (the philantropist has a way of distinguishing S's actually believing this from his merely acting as if he believes it). Then, all else being equal, it is rational in a practical sense for S to believe that the earth is flat.' (211)
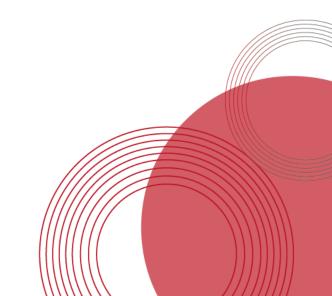
Foley's examples

- 'Suppose that the survival of the earth somehow is dependent upon a person S believing a proposition p that he has good epistemic reasons to believe is false. Suppose, for example, that a mad scientist will blow up the earth if S does not come to believe p. Surely, any plausible theory of goals will imply that in such a case it might be rational, all things being considered, for S to believe p.' (213)

Foley's examples

- 'If p here, for example, is the proposition that the hearth is flat and S is convinced that his evidence indicates that p is likely to be false, or even if he is merely convinced that he lacks evidence for thinking that p is true, he may not be able to believe p no matter how much money is at stake.' (215)

Foley's examples

- 'If, to return to the most extreme case, it is epistemically rational for S to believe that the earth will be destroyed unless he somehow gets himself to believe p, which he now with good epistemic reasons beleives is false, it would be rational on any plausible theory of goals for S to undertake a project of getting himslef to believe p. And this is so even if the only way to do this is to get himself to believe a whole host of other propositions that he now has good epistemic reasons to regard as false.' (222)