



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TORINO

Theoretical philosophy: The ethics of belief

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CFU 6 - A.A. 2022/23 – 6

Philosophy International Curriculum



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- Thomas Kelly, 'The rationality of belief and some other propositional attitudes', *Philosophical Studies* 110:163-192, 2002.
 - defends an evidentialist position.
 - The type of rationality that governs action is fundamentally different from that which governs belief.
 - Belief only responds to epistemic rationality.



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- Richard Foley, 'Non-epistemic reasons for believing'.
 - It can be rational for me 'all things considered' to believe in a proposition in the absence of evidence if it is epistemically rational for me to believe that the overall benefits of believing in that proposition outweigh the overall benefits of suspending judgement or the benefits of believing in the falsity of the proposition.
 - Given our nature, we tend to conform our beliefs to the evidence.
 - Practical reasons can only have an effect on our beliefs indirectly.
 - Only in limit cases is it rational to undertake a project to achieve this indirect effect.



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- Thomas Kelly, 'The rationality of belief and some other propositional attitudes'
 - Kelly also starts from the observation that, given our nature, we are not capable of believing in a proposition on the basis of practical reasons.
 - Practical reasons cannot be a determining causal factor in belief formation.
 - Since practical reasons are not a determining factor in explaining how a belief is generated, they cannot be what makes it rational.
 - 'With respect to beliefs, rationality just is epistemic rationality.' (172)



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- The non-evidentialist response to the ineffectiveness of practical reasons for belief.
- The ‘Standard response’: ‘Roughly put, the advice is this: one should act in ways that are conducive to the acquisition of religious belief. Pascal’s idea is that what one believes is, to a considerable extent, determined by what one does. And inasmuch as one can control what one does, one can exert a certain amount of indirect control over what one believes’. (167)
- Non-evidentialists recognise that practical reasons can only have an effect on belief indirectly.



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- ‘The cases in which I am interested have the following form: ...An individual knows that her believing some proposition (which she does not now believe) would have good consequences, so she deliberately undertakes a course of action which results in her acquiring the desired belief....’ (167)
- How can we obtain this indirect effect?



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- One way we can achieve this indirect effect is by acting on the world in such a way that the proposition that it would be useful for us to believe becomes true.
- ‘Plausibly, self-respect requires that one hold certain beliefs about oneself – or at least, it requires that one not hold certain beliefs about oneself. Someone who believes that his or her activities are utterly worthless does not possess self-respect. One might then act in worthwhile ways in order to maintain (or acquire) the belief that one’s activities are worthwhile, and (thereby) achieve self-respect.’ (188n13)



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- Difference between:
 - (1) some individual's ϕ -ing while having a reason R to ϕ , and
 - (2) some individual's ϕ -ing for reason R
- From the fact that I believe in a proposition while having a reason to believe it does not follow that I believe in the proposition for that reason.
- Only in the second case can I say that my belief is based on the reason in question.



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- When is a belief based on reason?:
- Even adopting a causal analysis of this relationship, it is not sufficient that reason plays a role in the 'causal history' of belief. The causal role must be 'of the right kind':
- 'Suppose, for example, that my recognition that I have strong evidence that *today will be a bad day* leads me to consult my horoscope – in the hope, perhaps, of being told otherwise. Suppose further that upon consulting my horoscope, I immediately forget about my original evidence, but believe that today will be a bad day simply because this is what my horoscope portends. In this case, my belief is not based on my original evidence – although my possession of that evidence plays an indispensable role in my coming to hold the relevant belief.' (173)



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- ‘Notice that in cases in which one succeeds in acquiring a desired belief indirectly, the acquired belief is not based on one’s recognition that the belief would be practically advantageous to hold. If my desire to hold a belief results in its acquisition via the acquisition of evidence which supports that belief, my belief is not based on practical considerations: rather, it is based on the newly-acquired evidence. Of course, my recognition that the belief in question would be practically advantageous might very well have played an indispensable role in the causal history of my coming to hold it. But from this it does not follow that the belief is based on that recognition’. (174)



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- ‘Similarly, if, having been convinced by Pascal, an agnostic undertakes a program of religious self-indoctrination, then her undertaking this program is based on the belief that the expected utility of being a religious believer is greater than the expected utility of not being a religious believer. But if the program ultimately succeeds, the newly-arrived at belief that God exists will not be based on this belief about the expected utility of religious belief’. (174)



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- How does one determine whether a belief B is based on reason R?
- One must ask whether we would continue to believe in B even if reason R were to fail.
- In this case, our belief B is not based on reason R.



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- ‘Imagine an agnostic who, having become convinced that the expected utility of being a religious believer is higher than the expected utility of not being a religious believer, undertakes a project designed to induce religious belief. ...In time, she genuinely becomes convinced that God exists. Suppose further that a tragic irony subsequently ensues: the expected utility of belief in God suddenly and dramatically changes. (A despot bent on persecuting religious believers unexpectedly seizes power.) Even if she recognizes that the expected utility of being a believer is now lower than the expected utility of being a non-believer, this recognition will typically not prompt the abandonment of the newly-acquired belief.



Kelly, The rationality of belief...

- Why cannot beliefs be based on practical reasons?
 - 'I offer the following hypothesis. The reason why actions but not beliefs can be based on practical considerations is simply this. Actions are not beliefs. One of the central features which distinguishes a given response as an action rather than a belief is that it is the kind of response which can be based on practical considerations. Conversely, one of the central features that makes a given state a belief – as opposed to an action, or some other kind of propositional attitude – is that it is the kind of response which can be based on epistemic considerations but not on practical considerations.' (177)



Kelly's examples

- ‘Consider, for example, the countless number of people who exercise regularly and carefully monitor their diets in order to avoid being overweight. No doubt, there are many reasons why people act in this way, but one fairly common motivation seems to be this: if one is overweight, then that makes it considerably more difficult to avoid believing that one is overweight. And for many, the psychological costs of believing that one is overweight are (or would be) considerable.’
(168)



Kelly's examples

- ‘For many years, one of the largest American insurance companies maintained a highly-successful advertising campaign which peddled life insurance under the slogan “Peace of Mind”. (Their slogan was not “Take Care of Your Family”.) The intended appeal of the advertisements seemed to be the following. An individual without life insurance might believe that his or her family would face extreme financial hardship in the event of his or her death and thus lack peace of mind. By purchasing life insurance, one would be acquiring good reasons to believe that one’s family would escape this fate. This in turn would enable one to believe that one’s family would remain financially solvent and (hence) enable one to achieve peace of mind.’ (188)



Kelly's examples

- 'Having been told (falsely) that Smith has just won the lottery, I immediately drive to his home in order to congratulate him and to ask for money. Upon my arrival, I see that Smith lives in a great mansion and realize that he has been extremely wealthy all along. When Smith informs me that the lottery story is false, I do not abandon my belief that he is rich.' (177)



An example from Foley

- ‘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 is false, it would 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)