

The Rationality of Faith

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God, Faith and Infinity » Lecture 9

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James' Religious Epistemology

Passions, Biases, and Belief

- › We may, says James, rationally believe without sufficient evidence, especially in cases where we **must** act, and any act reflects some commitment to a certain **world-view**:
 1. In cases where belief 'can help create the fact' (James 1896: §9): e.g., James' case of trust and joint action; or a case of 'someone who reads in the psychological literature that people are much more likely to survive a cancer diagnosis if they firmly believe that they will survive it' (Chignell 2018: §2.1).
 2. Cases where our desires help constrain the **space of options**: where 'what has made [an option] dead for us is for the most part a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind' (James 1896: §3) – e.g., voting Labor was just not a live option for many Queenslanders in the 2019 federal election – regardless of whether the concrete policy offer would have benefited them. (This has apparently changed in 2022!)

The Normative Order

- › The will may also play a role in **evaluative** beliefs: beliefs not about how things are, but about whether it is **good** (or right, or important) that they be that way.

The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for us, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide? If your heart does not *want* a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. (James 1896: §9)

- › A moral belief, for James, is linked to a disposition to **respond** in a particular way to some situation – positively or negatively. It is more an **emotional habit** than an evidence-based judgment.

James on Religious Belief

- › James thinks religious options are momentous, forced, and live. Since they are also cases where the evidence is insufficient, we need passion to decide.
- › In part, this is because he thinks that a generic religious worldview is a **moral hypothesis**:
 - religion says essentially two things. ... that the best things are the more eternal things ... [and] that we are better off even now if we believe [the] first affirmation to be true. (James 1896: §10)
- › If he is right that moral options are decidable on passional grounds, and religion is a moral option, then we already see a role for the passions.
- › But there are also reasons distinctive to the religious hypothesis that make it a genuine option.
 - › He does not say that it **must** be live – only that he is addressing his remarks only to those for whom religion is a live option.

Why Religion is a Genuine Option

religion offers itself as a *momentous* option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief, a certain vital option. Secondly, religion is a *forced* option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively choose to disbelieve. ... Scepticism, then, is not avoidance of opinion; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk. *Better risk loss of truth than chance of error....* To preach scepticism to us as a duty until 'sufficient evidence' for religion be found, is tantamount to telling us ... that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. (James 1896: §10)

Theory Choice and the Passions

An Objection

- › An objection suggests itself:

This is all very well if religion just is a moral belief – e.g., the belief that our actions have meaning and significance beyond their mundane physical implications and effects.

But many religions also have consequences for how things are, not just how they ought to be regarded. They say that the world we see is the product of intentional action, that it was caused by a divine person, that supernatural explanation is legitimate, etc. How can our passional nature be involved here – esp. when James himself says that scientific options are generally not forced?

- › Can James – or a broadly Jamesian view – give a role to the passions in our **theoretical beliefs**?

Epistemic Norms and Uniqueness

- › Note that even our **epistemic norms** are evaluative: whether to ‘seek truth’ or ‘shun error’ is implicitly evaluative, a strategy adopted based on considerations about which rule for belief management is **best**.
- › As Buchak observes, our ‘passional nature’ thus also ‘comes into play in figuring out how to interpret evidence’ (Buchak 2012: 231).
- › These epistemic norms aren’t straightforwardly themselves based on evidence however. They are more like **starting points** for inquiry, something like an **innate disposition governing responses to evidence**.
- › It might be argued that adopting a starting point isn’t the result of considering the evidence, since they must be in place before evidence can be evaluated.
- › Then any differences in belief licensed by those different prior habits of thought will yield counterexamples to **Uniqueness**: the very same evidence might suffice for belief for A, but not for B.

Inconclusive Scientific Evidence

- › This may not matter, if we can always get sufficient evidence for our any theoretical hypothesis – we can just suspend judgment until it arrives.
- › Unfortunately (?), our theoretical hypotheses outrun the evidence we can adduce for them, perhaps permanently: this is the so-called **underdetermination of theory by evidence** (Duhem 1914; Quine 1951).
 - › There is the problem of **empirical equivalents**, where distinct theories make the same empirical predictions (van Fraassen 1980: 44–53);
 - › There is also the problem of **unconceived alternatives**, where we don't know what theories our evidence supports, and we may never develop all the theories we could (Stanford 2001).
- › Given this, 'Shun Error' seems to lead to permanent suspension of judgment – perhaps we are even required to suspend judgment on how **probable** the options are.

Probability and Evidential Support

- › But even if we shun ‘Shun Error’, there are many ways to implement ‘Seek Truth’.
- › One rule that has been proposed involves **evidential support**:
 - Support When faced with a genuine option, come to believe a hypothesis if its truth is on balance supported by the evidence more than its falsity.
- › This rule invokes a notion of ‘on balance support’, which is often spelled out **probabilistically**: e supports p over $\neg p$ iff $\Pr(p | e) > \Pr(\neg p | e)$.
- › But where does this probability function come from? The **subjective Bayesian** approach says: it is **your probabilities**, your prior judgment of the impact of evidence on hypotheses (Howson and Urbach 1993).
- › If different people can rationally have different ‘**priors**’, that’s another way in which Uniqueness can fail, because there may be equally rational attitudes to p deriving from disagreement over whether the evidence supports p .

Method and the Passions

- › To give an example closer to James', which is more overtly normative or evaluative, we might consider this rule:
 - Simplicity** When faced with a genuine option, come to believe the simplest hypothesis compatible with the evidence.
- › Perhaps following Simplicity could be described as making an epistemic decision based on one's **desire** (or hope) for simplicity.
 - › This could be a **methodological** rule that is accepted for its practical benefits despite not making a difference to how probable the hypothesis is.
 - › For many people, admittedly, Simplicity is an **epistemic virtue** of a theory – a quality that makes it more likely to be true.
- › This is a rule for going beyond the evidence: a normative principle regulating the formation of belief which guides us in **how** to go beyond what we have sufficient evidence for.

The Theory-Dependence of Observation

- › Rules like Simplicity are intended to help us in theory choice when the evidence is **indecisive** (not even favouring one hypothesis over another).
- › But James thinks that sometimes **the hypotheses you accept constrain the evidence you can get**:
 - the evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way. (James 1896: §10)
- › This foreshadows a major theme of 20th century philosophy of science, the **theory-dependence of observation**. As Hanson puts it, 'there is more to seeing than meets the eyeball' (Hanson 1958: 7).

Ways of Thinking and Hypotheses

- › As Kuhn and others have noted since (Kuhn 1962), adopting a hypothesis commits one to **seeing the world in its terms**.
- › We need a theory **before** we can see – for we do not report what we see as patterns of sensory irradiation.
 - › Our observational evidence is reported by the complement clause of *I saw that ...* statements we accept – and we don't say 'I saw a brownish quadrilateral region in the left of my visual field' – we say 'I saw a table'.
- › When we share our evidence in this way, it is nevertheless dependent on our prior judgments about what there is to be observed – that, e.g., 'table' is a legitimate observational category.
- › For a more theoretical example: adopting **Newtonian mechanics** involves rejecting the Aristotelian conception of natural places. After the choice of the new theory, **one no longer sees motion as a matter of things moving by their own nature**.

Religion and Observation of the World

- › According to James, the religious worldview is an **expansive** one – it postulates a richer set of properties than its atheistic rival.
- › If we don't accept that theory, we **cannot see** those richer properties in our observations (we cannot make **observation reports** employing that richer framework).
- › If so, even if the religious hypothesis were knowable, atheists would be unable to know it. Without access to the richer concepts it presupposes, they literally cannot see the theological evidence for what it is.
- › But when we are open to theism, we can **see** that even mundane experience indicates the involvement of God, as in Plantinga's 'reform epistemology':

Calvin holds that God 'reveals and daily discloses himself to the whole workmanship of the universe' there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe. (Plantinga 1981: 46)

Can we Avoid Profligacy?

- › James says this kind of case is a problem for Clifford's rule, since that rule, strictly applied, would render us unable to get to the truth (at least, without epistemic fault) in cases where we don't happen to believe the truth already.

I ... cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that *a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.* (James 1896: §10)

- › Does this overgeneralise – including as rational too many beliefs? How do we distinguish misplaced passion for crazy theories from rational ways of going beyond the evidence?
 - » After all, if Hanson is right, every theory puts its own stamp on the observational evidence; so for **each** theory which provides a way of **interpreting experience into evidence for that theory**, James' rule permits rational belief in it.

The Nature of Faith and Faithful Belief

Faith and Belief

- › One thing has been absent from our explicit discussion so far – **faith**.
- › This is a fundamental aspect of religious belief for many people.
- › One way of bringing our discussion into contact with **faith** would be to construe all talk of *having faith that God exists*, etc., as simply a disguised way of talking about belief in God.
 - › This idea predicts some aspects of how faith works: other things we believe we also use *faith* to express, such as faith that a sketchy-looking rope bridge will hold, or faith that your friends will stand by you after a scandal.
- › But other things we say about faith look rather less like belief.
 - › For example: cases of **objectual** faith – **having faith in someone or something** (trust that they will do the right thing by you and promote your interests) (Rettler 2018: 3).
 - › One might also be **faithful**: loyal to someone or something. If you have faith in your friends, you believe that they will be faithful to you.

Faith as a Distinctive Attitude

- › Another approach is to split faith from belief; while it is **belief-like**, it may not simply **be** belief.
- › One principal way in which it is belief-like is that to have faith is fundamentally a **propositional attitude** – *having faith that ϕ* is the basic form of a faith claim (Rettler 2018: §4).
 - › Propositional attitude verbs in English take a *that*-clause complement: *S knows that p*, *S hopes that p*, *S imagines that p*, etc.
- › This idea might allow us to thread a **middle way** between Clifford and James.
 - › Clifford might be right that one ought not believe beyond one's evidence (so we interpret Clifford as talking about the attitude of *belief*).
 - › But James might be right that sometimes we need to seek the truth, and that having a faith that goes beyond the evidence is what that involves.
- › If there is a middle way here, we will have to avoid saying that one believes when one has faith.

Characterizing Faith

- › In addition to its being a propositional attitude, Buchak makes a number of other straightforward observations about faith (Buchak 2012: 225–28):
 1. One only has faith in matters of personal importance – as James observes, it is only momentous issues that seem to require a response akin to having faith.
 2. Faith is expressed in **action** – having it makes a potential ‘difference to her behaviour’ (Buchak 2012: 226) (though it needn’t be an all-or-nothing matter, because the **stakes** seem to matter too).
 3. We have faith only when we are uncertain ‘or when the evidence we have is inconclusive’ (Buchak 2012: 227) – we cannot have faith when we already know. Indeed,
 - ▮ having faith seems to involve going *beyond* the evidence in some way. (Buchak 2012: 227)

Does Faith Entail Belief?

- › Even if having faith isn't just believing, can you have faith **without** believing?
- › If not, then when one has faith that goes beyond the evidence, one ends up believing based on insufficient evidence. So if having faith involves belief, Clifford's principle entails that it is **epistemically wrong to take things on faith**.
 - › No doubt Clifford would be happy enough to endorse this consequence.
- › James explicitly discusses trust and faith – he opens his essay by describing it as 'in justification of faith' which he glosses as 'a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters' (James 1896, Introduction).
 - › And his basic argument against Clifford's principle – that it would prevent knowledge of some truths that might otherwise be knowable – is exemplified in some cases of faith, both religious and his example where 'faith in a fact can help create the fact' (James 1896: §9).
- › So James cannot avail himself of the 'middle way' **we talked about above**.

The Analysis of Faith: Clifford

- › If faith is involved in the cases James focuses on, both he and Clifford seem to be committed to **analyses** of what having faith is – analyses of what is involved in acting beyond the evidence, analyses which entail that **faith is a species of belief**.
- › Clifford seems to think that faith is **wishful thinking**, and ‘requires believing X to a higher degree than one thinks the evidence warrants’ (Buchak 2012: 229).
- › I.e., this is an analysis of faith in p on which it involves (i) recognizing that the evidence is sufficient only for a certain level of commitment to p , and (ii) being more committed than that to p .
- › Buchak agrees with Clifford: this is not rational.
 - › It almost commits one to the rationality of a form of **Moore’s paradox**: *X , but I don’t think X is credible*. (Though some forms of **dualism** about belief and credence allow it: Weisberg (2020).)
 - › And it seems hard to maintain the kind of shadow mental accounting that this view requires.

A Jamesian Analysis of Faith

- › The idea that faith involves having unjustified confidence resonates with some aspects of James' approach, but doesn't reflect James' idea that our passions operate **prior to inquiry**, determining which options are live, and also determine which norms govern our responses to evidence.

faith might require taking evidence into account in a particular way – a way that favours X or gives the truth of X the benefit of the doubt, so to speak. Following this line of thought, a third analysis of faith holds that faith requires setting one's degree of belief to $p(X) = 1$ prior to examining the evidence. On this view, one interprets evidence, not with an eye towards finding out whether or not X holds, but in light of the assumption that X does hold. On this view, we might say that faith goes *before* the evidence, not beyond it. (Buchak 2012: 230–31)

- › But is this faith? **Phenomenologically**, it seems not – faith is compatible with (maybe even requires?) clear-eyed doubt (Buchak 2012: 232) – and this proposal entails that faith involves certainty.
 - ›› For James, faith is **optimistic**, and optimism is compatible with doubt.

Buchak's final analysis

A person has faith that X , expressed by A , if and only if that person performs act A , and performing A constitutes taking a risk on X ; and the person prefers {to commit to A before he examines additional evidence} rather than {to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence}. (Buchak 2012: 234)

- › This account reflects the compatibility of faith and doubt, together with the practical significance of faith (and, like James, she restricts faith to forced choices, since in other choices one can always wait and see).
- › 'Passional grounds' are involved, since **preference** is involved – one **decides** to stop seeking evidence, and act on faith (Buchak 2012: 234).

Faith, Belief and Action

- › Buchak's account of faith doesn't require belief: faith that X is expressed through X -related action, and one may act even though one has fallen short of belief.
 - » So it doesn't seem to involve irrationally believing because one wishes something to be true; nor does it involve the idea that belief is under the control of the will.
- › In this, she departs from James, who clearly thinks that faith entails belief, and its influence on action is via the familiar influence of belief on action.
- › But if we were forced to shoehorn James into Buchak's framework: for him, **faith is expressed through belief**: to believe something on faith is to trust that **potentially undermining evidence** will not eventuate, so one stops seeking it – and one might also then gain access to new sources of previously unavailable evidence.

Is Faith Without Belief Coherent?

- › Consider how **odd** this sounds: 'I have faith that God exists, but I don't believe that God exists'. Isn't this some evidence against Buchak's view, on which this kind of utterance should be perfectly coherent?
- › One response focuses on **what is communicated** by 'I don't believe that ϕ '.
- › It looks to say that the speaker **lacks** a certain belief. But it's often used to express that the speaker **has** a disbelief. We can communicate 'I believe that God doesn't exist' by an utterance of 'I don't believe that God exists'.
 - › This may be because often a **self-ascriptions of belief** functions as a 'hedged assertion about how things are in the world, rather than an autobiographical report' (Kauppinen 2010: 438).
 - › The idea then is that often a **disavowal** of belief is a hedged assertion about how things **aren't** in the world.
- › If this is right, then 'I have faith but don't believe' can be true, but tends to communicate that speaker has faith with disbelief, which isn't rational on Buchak's view.

Can Faith Be Rational?

- › Buchak with Clifford assumes **evidentialism** (Buchak 2012: 235): epistemic rationality involves proportioning one's belief to the evidence.
 - › Clifford and James think that faith involves violating evidentialism; since they differ over their commitment to evidentialism, they differ over whether this suffices for the irrationality of faith.
- › On Buchak's account, since having faith in X implies nothing about purely epistemic rationality:
 - › whether one has faith is completely separate from whether one is epistemically rational. (Buchak 2012: 237)
- › But is faith **prudentially rational**?

Actions based on faith

- › On Buchak's account, having faith involves a complicated double action:
 - ›› Choosing action A ; and
 - ›› Choosing not to collect further evidence.
- › Buchak commits herself to the expected utility framework; so action A is prudentially rational iff it maximises present expected utility.
- › But is this enough? What if the credences themselves strike one as **poorly supported**?

Premature Action

Gas Pains Patient P presents to the doctor complaining of abdominal pain. The doctor's initial hunch is appendicitis – they are confident to degree 0.7. Given the risks of untreated appendicitis, the doctor immediately (without even feeling the patient) anaesthetises the patient and operates. It was just gas pains.

- › This is clearly irrational – but it maximised subjective expected utility.
- › So we need not only to have actions based on credences, but on **well-supported credences** – credences which are appropriate given the evidence and based on sufficient evidence.
- › Indeed, Good's theorem (Buchak 2012: 239ff) entails that, when gathering evidence is **cost-free**, and the rational action may change depending on the evidence received, it is always utility-maximising to gather more evidence and update one's credences in its light.

Faith and Missing out

- › If this is so, then the only time gathering further evidence isn't a good idea is when there is a great cost to gathering the evidence; and since (for Buchak) having faith is precisely acting without gathering further evidence, faith will only be rational

in circumstances in which the costs of delaying the decision are high enough to outweigh the benefit of additional evidence. Holding fixed the costs of delay, whether these costs outweigh the benefits depends both on one's credence in the proposition one has faith in and on one's beliefs about the potential evidence one might encounter.

faith in X is rational only if the available evidence is such that no possible piece of evidence tells conclusively enough against X . (Buchak 2012: 244-46)

- › Faith is likely to be rational if potential evidence against X will be inconclusive, so that delay won't noticeably improve your epistemic situation.

Religious Faith

- › Religious faith is rational is when there isn't much risk of further evidence changing one's mind.

I don't think that it is rationally permissible to *believe* that God exists when one does not have conclusive evidence, if this means setting one's credences differently from what one has evidence for... However, I do think that it is sometimes rationally permissible (and indeed, sometimes rationally required!) to *have faith* in God - as evidenced by doing some particular religious act without looking for further evidence - in circumstances in which postponing the decision to act is costly. (Buchak 2012: 243)

- › Since collecting evidence does have at least **opportunity costs**, faith is sometimes rational.

Summing Up

Table 1: The Epistemology of Faith

Epistemology	Faith	Faith \Rightarrow Belief	Faith \nRightarrow Belief
Evidentialism		Clifford	Buchak
Non-evidentialism		James	?

- › Nothing conclusive here: I think all three options remain live.

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