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Philosophical Inquiry and the Ethics of Religious Belief



[前沿问题研究]

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尝试 (Ante Pazarin著, 牟春译)

Philosophical Inquiry and the Ethics of Religious Belief
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I. Is Philosophical Inquiry Incompatible With Religious Belief?

One might think that doing philosophy requires that one be open to change one's mind. One might also think that keeping an open mind is not compatible with having a serious religious commitment, to Christianity for example. Those committed to free and open exchange of ideas in higher education may then fear that Christians do not share this commitment and, ironically, seek to exclude or at least marginalize them. Is there, then, any reason to think Christian belief is a barrier to vigorous and free intellectual exchange?

Let's examine an argument for thinking that there is. The argument begins by examining what it is to have a belief and what it is we are trying to do when we do philosophy.

- (1) To believe that something is true, with full awareness of having that belief, involves seeing oneself as having arrived at the truth of that matter.
- (2) The goal of philosophical inquiry is to get to the truth of the matter on various philosophical topics.

From these two premises, it seems to follow that if one has a belief regarding some philosophical topic, then one no longer has any incentive to continue inquiry, for one already regards oneself as having achieved the goal of the inquiry. So, we have:

- (3) If one has a philosophical belief, then one has no philosophical motivation to continue to inquire into whether or not that belief is true.

Why should this conclusion be a problem for the Christian believer? Well, Christianity has broad implications for a large number of philosophical topics. Christians are committed to taking a position on the existence of God, the possibility of immortality, and the objectivity of value, to name just a few. In sum,

- (4) Christianity has widespread implications, committing the Christian to a vast array of philosophical beliefs.

From (3) and (4), we can conclude:

- (5) Christians have no philosophical motivation to inquire into the truth or falsity of a wide variety of philosophical claims.

From (2) and (5) we can conclude:

- (6) Christians have no philosophical motivation to engage in philosophical inquiry.

So, there shouldn't be Christian philosophers. And yet, here we are! Something must be wrong with the argument. In this paper, I

will concede that Christian belief does have consequences that bear upon the goals and the value of philosophical inquiry. Yet, while the believer may not have an interest in philosophical investigation into Christian belief, *for the sake of getting to the truth about Christianity*, there will still be other aims of philosophical inquiry that can provide the Christian believer a philosophical motivation to engage in philosophy on a wide variety of topics, even in those areas where Christian doctrine has a rich set of implications. To see how Christian belief bears upon the goals and value of philosophical inquiry, we need first to examine the nature of belief itself.

II. Partial and Full Belief

Some belief is only partial belief. Many beliefs about events in the future fall into this category. If I hear the weather report predict a 95% chance of rain, I am apt to accept, *but only to a certain degree*, that it will rain. If asked whether it will rain, I am likely not to answer categorically but to hedge. I may say: "Yes, at least I think it is very probable that it will." Our beliefs about gambles are also likely to be partial. If we buy a ticket to a lottery, we obviously do not believe that the ticket will lose. Yet, we have little expectation that it will win. Our belief that any particular ticket we buy will lose is only *partial*.

Since partial belief comes in degrees, we can compare the strength of one partial belief to another. For example, we might believe more strongly that a particular lottery ticket we purchased will lose than we would believe that *all* of the tickets sold are going to lose.

Does a Christian have only a partial belief, say, that there is a God or a partial belief that this God has provided a means to our salvation from sin by sending His only Son in the person of Jesus Christ to die for us? Christians who are committed to such doctrines are unlikely to think so. If one's commitment to Christian doctrines were of this partial sort, then we would expect that one would have a higher level of belief for the claim that there is a God than one would have for the claim that there is a God who has provided a way for our salvation. For a large and complex set of distinctively Christian claims, if one's commitment to each is only partial, one would expect that the level of one's belief in all of them being true would be correspondingly rather low (just as one would have a rather low level of belief that all of the lottery tickets sold are going to lose). Indeed, if one's commitment to each individual claim of Christian doctrine was only partial, it could easily be that one's commitment to the totality of all of these claims would be lower than the commitment to thinking at least some of the doctrines are false. This would mark having a rather weak commitment to Christian doctrine, indeed.

So, if the cognitive attitude of many Christians is not that of partial belief, what is it? In some matters, it seems correct to ascribe what we might call *full* belief. With respect to what is rationally evident, say that $2+2=4$ or that *I exist*, it seems plain that my cognitive attitude is not one of partial belief but of full belief. Yet, I may similarly have such a cognitive attitude toward propositions that are not rationally evident. Contrast my attitude toward future events with my attitude toward events I have witnessed. It is appropriate for me to have only a partial belief that my team will win tomorrow's game. Yet, if I witnessed yesterday's game, and can vividly recall my team winning, I do not merely have a partial belief that they won. My belief commitment is full.

Full and partial beliefs do not exhaust the kinds of attitude one might hold toward a set of claims. For example, consider what would be the appropriate attitude for a scientist to take toward a successful scientific theory. It does not seem correct to say that the scientist even has a partial belief in such a scientific theory, inasmuch as, typically, the level of belief that a scientist would have in a lengthy conjunction of all of the claims of the theory would reasonably be quite low. Instead, we might take the scientist to have an attitude not of believing (even partially) in the theory but rather that of holding the proposition *as a hypothesis*.

To hold a proposition as a hypothesis involves a commitment to further inquiry to decide on the issue of its truth-value. Plausibly, a scientist regards a scientific theory in this way. One holds the hypothesis as true, but only for the aim of further testing and inquiry. One's commitment to the hypothesis is provisional and correspondingly tentative. Still, though one's commitment in holding a proposition as a hypothesis is tentative, it is nonetheless a case of a more general cognitive attitude of regarding the proposition as true. [III](#)

Plainly, belief (both full and partial) is also a kind of regarding-as-true. Yet, intuitively, believing is not the same cognitive attitude as holding a hypothesis. The commitment to a belief is more solid, and correspondingly less tentative, than the commitment to a hypothesis. To understand the difference between holding a hypothesis and having a belief, we need to address a difficult question of whether and how the aim of belief is truth, and thus, to investigate the question of whether belief has any tendency to inhibit, or even preempt, further inquiry.

III. The Belief-Truth Connection

If we can understand the difference between holding a hypothesis and holding a belief, we will then understand why it seems

intuitive that holding a belief, but not holding a hypothesis, appears to take away an aim of further theoretical inquiry: that of settling the issue or getting the truth-values right. Some philosophers have argued that the feature of belief that distinguishes it from other cognitive attitudes (such as holding a hypothesis or supposing) is that belief aims at the truth. Yet, what does this mean?

Bernard Williams has argued that the special relationship that belief has to truth should help us to understand other peculiar features of belief. For example, it would appear that one cannot hold a belief that one regards oneself as having formed at will in the absence of reasons that bear upon the truth of what is believed.^[2] To see why one cannot hold a belief at will that one regards as unreasonable, reflect upon the oddity of claiming that one holds to the Christian beliefs, but only because of the comfort these beliefs provide. We might think that such an attitude is psychologically impossible. Yet, on further examination, the impossibility appears to be deeper. To regard oneself as believing the creeds of Christianity only because of the pragmatic usefulness of those beliefs is not correctly characterized as regarding oneself as believing the creeds at all. Why this is so appears to involve some special relationship that belief has to the truth.

Yet, what is this relationship? The relationship of beliefs to the truth cannot be that truth is partly constitutive of belief. For, many of our beliefs are mistaken. The propositional content of a false belief is not true, and thus the sense in which beliefs aim at the truth must allow for the possibility that the mark can be missed.

Neither, can the special relationship of belief to the truth be the fact that believing is the same attitude as believing-true. For, we could say the same of wishing, desiring, and imagining. To wish is to wish-true, to desire is to desire-true, and to imagine (in the propositional sense) is to imagine-true.^[3]

David Velleman has suggested^[4] that what distinguishes belief from other cognitive states is that it is a specific kind of a more general attitude, the attitude of *regarding-as-true*. To believe is to regard as true, *for the sake of getting right the truth-value of the proposition believed*. Thus, believing is distinct from, say, *supposing*. When one supposes, one does not suppose for the sake of getting the truth-value of the supposition right. Instead, one supposes for the sake of the argument, or for the sake of deducing the consequences of the supposition.

Is belief the only cognitive attitude held for the sake of getting the truth-value right? Consider *guessing* and the corresponding attitude of being disposed to guess. To guess is to have the aim of getting the truth-value of what is guessed right.^[5] Yet, to guess is not to believe. Nonetheless, neither is guessing a cognitive attitude. Guessing is an *action*; it is something we *do*.^[6] The act of guessing itself, then, is not a cognitive attitude, though we may be disposed to guess because of our holding some cognitive attitude. If the guess is an earnest one, then the cognitive attitude that disposes us to guess the way we do is normally a partial belief. When we guess that there are a certain number of peanuts in a jar, the strength of our partial belief that disposes us to guess may be low, but it is at least as strong as any other partial belief concerning the exact number.

What does it mean to regard-as-true for the sake of getting the truth-value right? Let me offer a suggestion. Consider whether one *ought* to regard a proposition as true (for the sake of getting the truth-value right). Initially, one might think the truth of a proposition is a reason (objectively) for why one ought to hold that attitude. Yet, this is too quick, for one might think that believers like us, having finite minds, have no reason to fill them with the clutter of trivial or useless truths. There is no reason why I ought to believe claims about the precise number of blades of grass on my lawn, or about the precise number of hairs on my head, for the simple reason that I ought not to believe these truths. It would be a waste of my cognitive resources to bother with them. Nonetheless, we still could say that *if* one ought to regard a claim as true (for the sake of getting the truth-value right), then the truth of that claim is at least part of the reason why one ought to regard that claim as true (for the sake of getting the truth-value right). So, belief is a cognitive attitude that satisfies this condition: if it is correct to hold that attitude toward a claim, the truth of the claim is part of the reason why it is correct to hold that attitude.

With this understanding of the special relationship that belief has to truth, we can explain why one might regard belief as an inquiry-stopper. From the standpoint of the believer, when one holds a belief, one regards that proposition as true *for the sake of getting the truth-value right*. If one's sole aim in philosophical inquiry is to get the truth-values right, then one will take oneself as having attained the goal of the inquiry, and thus will have no reason to continue the activity. Yet, we might question whether getting to the truth of the matter is the sole aim of philosophical inquiry. Let us turn then to inquire into the nature of inquiry itself.

IV. The Goal(s) of Philosophical Inquiry

So far, we have seen that to hold a propositional belief is to regard that proposition as true for the sake of getting the truth-value right, and to regard a proposition as true is to hold an attitude toward that proposition that, if appropriate, is appropriate in part because of the truth of the proposition itself. Consequently, to take oneself as having a belief is to take oneself as having achieved the

aim of truth. If philosophical inquiry can only be sustained on the assumption that one has not achieved the aim of truth, then it would seem that belief robs us of the motivation to engage in philosophical inquiry.

Yet, one might object that the proper aim of philosophical activity is not just to get things right, but instead that we get things right for the right reason. Perhaps the goal of philosophical activity is not just finding the truth, but being rationally justified or warranted in thinking that one has found the truth.

You might think that this puts the cart before the horse. For, you might think that the value of satisfying norms about what one ought to believe derives entirely from the value of believing what is true. Suppose the obligation to be rational, reasonable, or warranted in what one believes derives entirely from the fact that satisfying such demands is likely to produce beliefs that are true. In so, then if one thinks that one has already achieved the ultimate end of truth, there will be no additional value in pursuing those things whose value only derives from their tendency to further that ultimate end.

On the other hand, if one takes rational, reasonable or warranted belief to be valuable in its own right, independent of the value derived from such belief leading to the truth, then it is open for one to identify these further ends as legitimate aims of philosophical inquiry. We could then provide an opening for a believer to have an adequate philosophical motivation to carry on with philosophical activity, even into areas where the believer thinks he already has the answers settled by his religious belief.

Suppose that we identify knowledge of the truth, rather than truth itself, as the proper aim of philosophical inquiry. Will this also leave the believer with a motivation to pursue philosophical inquiry, even into areas settled by belief? That depends upon whether the aim of belief is not just truth but knowledge of the truth. There is some reason to suspect that belief has the stronger aim. Consider claims that you take yourself to believe fully. You have full beliefs about your age, your name, your birthplace and other biographical details. Notice that you regard yourself not just as believing these things, but also as knowing them. Try to think of something you take yourself to believe, but not to know, and you are likely to be thinking of something you only partially believe.

Here is another argument that what you take yourself to believe you take yourself to know. Characteristically, we assert what we believe. Yet, when we assert something, we represent ourselves as knowing what we assert. For, if this were not the case, it would not be paradoxical to assert claims such as "It is raining, but I don't know that it is." (G. E. Moore is normally credited with being the first to note the oddity of claims of this sort.) In short, what we take ourselves to believe, we can sincerely assert, and what we can sincerely assert we take ourselves to know. So, what we take ourselves to believe, we take ourselves to know.

Yet, even if we do not generally take ourselves to know what we take ourselves to believe, many Christians regard their Christian beliefs to be items of knowledge and not just belief. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism states:

True faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.^[7]

One might think that even if truth itself does not end inquiry, knowledge of the truth settles matters and leaves little point for further inquiry. Yet, do Christians typically take themselves to know the creeds that they believe? Let us turn to this question.

V. Faith

Christian believers typically speak of what they believe as being a matter of faith. What, then, is faith? Mark Twain satirically defined faith to be "believing what you know ain't true."^[8] Twain's suggestion can only be taken in an ironic spirit. Taken literally, it is paradoxical. Knowledge involves belief, and thus, if one knows that a proposition is false, one believes it is false. Yet full awareness that one regards a proposition as false conceptually precludes regarding it as true.

Robert M. Adams suggests, provisionally, that faith "...is, or involves, believing something that a rational person might be seriously tempted to doubt, or even not to believe."^[9] Adams does not restrict faith to belief in religious creeds, inasmuch as he thinks that our moral convictions require a kind of faith: a faith, for example, that our lives are worth living and that causing gratuitous suffering is wrong. Adams notes that the commitment to the claims that morality requires is not like the tentative commitment one has to a hypothesis or a partial commitment to what one only regards as probable. Nonetheless, when our moral commitments are challenged, it is not always obvious how they can be adequately defended.

While we can obviously believe what others may doubt, it does not at first seem possible to doubt one's own beliefs. Yet, this is too quick. For, there are at least two senses of confidence and, correlatively, two senses of doubt that need to be distinguished. Sometimes when we speak of confidence, we are referring to the level of evidence that is the basis for our belief. At other times, we are talking about the degree of our belief in that proposition. For example, suppose I flip a coin one hundred times and see that the coin

comes up heads roughly half of the time, I may form a partial belief, say to degree 0.5, that the coin will come up heads on the next toss. Suppose, I toss the coin a few hundred more times and the coin continues to come up heads roughly half of the time. I will have correspondingly more confidence in my partial belief. Yet, the degree of my belief, the level of my credence, has not changed. I still believe to the same degree (0.5) that the next toss will be a heads. So a degree of belief can remain constant even as one's confidence in the evidence for that belief increases.[\[10\]](#)

There is no reason to think the distinction cannot carry over to the case of full belief. To say that I gain or lose confidence in a belief does not contradict the assumption that my belief remains full. The level of belief need not track the level of confidence I have in the basis for that belief.[\[11\]](#)

It is then quite compatible with one's claiming full conviction and commitment to the Christian creeds to admit that one's confidence can be augmented or diminished by considerations of the evidence and the results of rational inquiry. Thus, to the extent that rational inquiry can affect one's confidence in the evidential basis for one's belief, there is yet another way for philosophical inquiry to have a point for the Christian, even when that investigation turns to items upon which the Christian already has a settled belief. Acquiring arguments and justifications can change one's level of confidence in the evidence, but need not thereby affect the degree of one's belief.

Moreover, even if one has knowledge about a particular topic, it does not follow that there is nothing to be gained by inquiring into arguments or justifications regarding that topic. In fact, sometimes knowledge is quite independent of reasons and arguments. For example, when we know something on the basis of our perceptual experiences, our knowledge does not depend upon producing arguments and reasons. If I see a tree in front of me, I can know that there is a tree in front of me, not because I have an argument based upon other things I believe, but rather (roughly) because my belief that there is a tree is produced by a reliable sensory process. Suppose that the Christian's faith has a basis similar in some respects to a perceptual belief. Suppose that Christian belief is the result of a revelatory act by God in the person of the Holy Spirit. In that case, as Alvin Plantinga has argued[\[12\]](#), the Christian's belief would have been produced by a reliable, albeit supernatural, process. The Christian could then have the same sort of knowledge that we all have in the perceptual case. Yet, inasmuch as this knowledge would be independent of being able to provide reasons and arguments, philosophical inquiry could still provide us with something that knowledge does not.

So, even if one takes oneself to know the claims of Christianity, it does not follow that one should have no interest in finding reasons and arguments that bear upon that belief. Arguments and other rational considerations can affect the confidence that one has in the rational basis of one's beliefs, without thereby undermining the underlying commitment to those beliefs or even the knowledge of them.

VI The Social Utility of Philosophical Inquiry

We have discovered, then, that a commitment to Christian doctrine, while it settles several matters of philosophical controversy for Christians, need not make philosophical inquiry pointless, even for the believers themselves. Moreover, even if there were no self-interested motivation to carry inquiry into matters already settled by belief, there would still be an obvious point in engaging in discussion with those who do not share that belief. For, if one believes that one has discovered a valuable truth, there is every reason to want others to believe it as well. So, the desire to persuade others is yet another motivation for the believer to engage in philosophical inquiry and discussion.

The committed Christian believer need have no interest in the suppression of contrary opinions, despite the fears of many secularists who regard devout faith as dangerously intolerant of other points of view. Indeed, the idea that those who are committed to Christian doctrine should have an interest in preventing free and open discussion is either an error on the part of the believers themselves or on the part of those who fear them. For, while believing involves a special commitment to regard what one believes as true, for the purpose of getting the truth-value right, this commitment does not diminish the value of engaging in inquiry with those who do not share the commitment. From the point of view of the believer, such inquiry will have the value of getting others to see matters aright. Thus, arguments and justifications, even if not necessary for the settling of one's own mind, nor even for the obtaining of knowledge, can nonetheless have great social utility.

Thus, we have seen that there is some merit to the claim that Christian belief diminishes some of the point of philosophical inquiry, insofar as the believer will not regard inquiry as being required for the sake of arriving at the correct opinion. That is a goal the believer will see himself as already having achieved on matters of doctrine. Yet, there is independent worth in philosophical inquiry that uncovers reasons and arguments, inasmuch as such activity can be valuable for the sake of its effect on the confidence the believer invests in the belief, and for the sake of seeking agreement on matters of great, indeed ultimate, importance.

The secular academy should eschew the suppression of thought and opinion within higher education, and not exclude or marginalize those deeply committed to Christian doctrine and belief. Sincere religious commitment is no barrier to vigorous participation in free philosophical inquiry.

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[1] I owe this distinction between belief and the more general cognitive attitude of *regarding-as-true* to David Velleman (2000), pp. 248-9.

[2] Williams (1973), p. 148.

[3] See Velleman (2000), pp. 247-8.

[4] Velleman (2000), p. 251.

[5] See Owens (2003), pp. 289-96.

[6] Note also that though we guess for the sake of getting the guess right, the value of getting a guess right is purely instrumental. Perhaps we guess to win a prize or in the hopes of getting an examination question correct

[7] Quoted in Alvin Plantinga (2000) p. 247.

[8] Quoted in Plantinga (2000), pp. 246-7.

[9] Adams (1995), p. 75.

[10] I owe this point to Jonathan E. Adler (2002), pp. 250-4.

[11] This contradicts David Hume (1977, p. 73) who urges that "A wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence."

[12] Plantinga (2000), pp. 280-9.