

The ethics of religious belief

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Abstract: On some religious traditions, there are obligations to believe certain things. However, this leads to a puzzle, since many philosophers think that we cannot voluntarily control our beliefs, and, plausibly, ought implies can. How do we make sense of religious doxastic obligations? The papers in this issue present four responses to this puzzle. The first response denies that we have doxastic obligations at all; the second denies that ought implies can. The third and fourth responses maintain that we have either indirect or direct control over our beliefs. This paper summarizes each response to the puzzle and argues that there are plausible ways out of this paradox.

Introduction

Does God require us to believe things? On some religious traditions, we have an obligation to believe that God exists or that certain core religious doctrines are true. Some even teach that having certain beliefs is a necessary condition for salvation. However, the idea that there are obligations to form beliefs is puzzling. This is because beliefs are normally not taken to be under our voluntary control. Unlike action, we can't simply believe things because we want to or because having a belief would confer some benefit—beliefs aim at truth, not at pragmatic utility.¹ However, if ought implies can, then it's not clear that there could be an obligation to believe in God. If one cannot believe in God, then it's not the case that they ought to believe in God. In other words, the following three claims each have intuitive appeal, but are inconsistent:

- (1) We ought to believe certain things (e.g. certain religious doctrines).
- (2) Ought implies can.
- (3) We cannot voluntarily control our beliefs.

This paradox is one of the core puzzles in what might be called the ethics of religious belief. While the ethics of belief simpliciter is a familiar topic that concerns our obligations to have certain beliefs, the ethics of *religious* belief is of interest in its own right. One reason for this is because many religions claim that we ought to hold certain

¹ Doxastic involuntarism, the view that beliefs aren't subject to voluntary control, is quite popular and orthodox among philosophers. See, for example, Williams (1973), Alston (1988), and Hieronymi (2006). This view has even been defended in past issues of *Religious Studies*, notably by Pojman (1978).

beliefs (and perhaps ought not to hold others). This is one way to motivate the first claim in our puzzle. This essay, then, focuses on the ethics of religious belief.

How should we respond to this inconsistent triad? The essays in this special issue represent four possible responses. The first denies (1), that we have obligations to hold religious beliefs at all. It locates those obligations elsewhere: perhaps as obligations to act in certain ways, as obligations to accept religious claims, or as obligations to make a religious commitment. In this issue, Speak (2007) and Zamulinski (2008) defend this response.

The next response denies (2), that ought implies can. Note that here, one need not deny that ought implies can in general to escape the paradox; one may simply deny that ought-to-believe implies can-believe. This response is represented by Lints (1989) in this issue.

The final response is divided into two camps. Both deny (3), but for different reasons. The first camp maintains that (3) is false because we have *indirect* control over our beliefs; this is represented by Davis (1991) and Ferreira (1983) in this issue. The second camp argues (3) is false because we sometimes have a more *direct* kind of control over our beliefs. I've chosen Bishop (2002) and Cockayne et al (2017) in this issue to represent motivations for this response.

The main goal of this paper is to show that there are plausible ways out of this paradox, as each response is broadly defensible. I will thus outline key considerations in favor of each response. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. **Section 2 and 3** focus on the first two responses: that we don't have obligations to believe, and that it's not the case that ought implies can. **Section 4** focuses on the third and fourth responses: that we have some kind of voluntary control over our beliefs. **Section 5** concludes with upshots and other areas of philosophy of religion this discussion bears on (e.g. faith, taking Pascal's wager).

No doxastic obligations

The first response to the puzzle denies that we ought to believe certain things, at least from a religious perspective. The first two papers in this issue represent this view. The first paper is Daniel Speak's "Salvation without Belief." Speak's argument has two parts. In the first, he assesses an argument by Louis Pojman (1986) for the conclusion that having certain beliefs is required for salvation. Pojman argues for Clifford's principle—that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (Clifford 1877). In other words, believing without sufficient evidence violates a moral obligation. If Clifford's principle is true, then those who don't have sufficient evidence for religious propositions would violate a moral obligation by believing them. If God is just, God wouldn't require us to violate a moral obligation to gain salvation. Thus, belief is not a requirement for salvation.

Speak's main objection to Pojman's argument involves his use of Clifford's principle. Speak is not convinced that believing without sufficient evidence violates a *moral* obligation—this is a very strong version of evidentialism. I'm in full agreement with Speak on this point. Evidentialism is more traditionally construed as something we *epistemically* ought to do, not something that concerns morality. And in fact, there appear to be cases where we have a moral obligation *not* to proportion our beliefs to the evidence. In Jackson (2016: 100), I offer the following case:

The mafia kidnaps your family and is going to kill them all unless you meet their demands. Their condition is that you take a pill that will give you the following false belief: the 500th digit of pi is 2. (It is actually 1.) It seems clear that you should take the pill...

Even if you're fully aware that taking the pill will give you a belief unsupported by the evidence, you should take it. Thus, it sometimes seems permissible, and maybe even obligatory, to believe against the evidence, if a greater moral good is at stake. Insofar as evidentialism confers an obligation, it's much more plausibly an epistemic obligation, rather than a moral one.

Speak then argues that belief isn't required for salvation without relying on Clifford's principle. Instead, he relies on something quite like our initial paradox—we cannot control our beliefs, and ought implies can, so we don't have an obligation to believe certain things. Since plausibly, God wouldn't require us to violate an obligation to gain salvation, Speak concludes that belief isn't required for salvation.

While Speak doesn't say much by way of a positive view (i.e. if not belief, what is required for salvation?) he provides the following case, which is instructive (p. 232):

Consider Thomas who does not trust the police. He has been raised in circumstances in which trusting the police has been unjustified... Now, however, he is confronted with a police officer attempting to save him from a dangerous situation. The officer announces that Thomas needs to jump down from a precarious position so that the officer can catch him. Furthermore, Thomas has seen this officer behave in ways that powerfully suggest he is reliable... Nevertheless, the force of his early childhood circumstances prevents his forming the belief in the officer's trustworthiness (and, therefore, in the proposition that the officer will catch him when he jumps). Still, let us assume, Thomas jumps. In this case, it seems reasonable to me to say that Thomas has put his faith in the officer even though he didn't believe the officer was trustworthy...

This case compellingly illustrates the possibility of taking a leap of faith without forming the corresponding beliefs. Maybe God doesn't require belief, but instead, requires *commitment*. And maybe acting in ways—especially ways that require taking a risk on God's trustworthiness—is actually at the root of what God desires from us. This motivates denying (1) from our paradox.

This is similar to Zamulinski's account in "Christianity and the Ethics of Belief." Zamulinski responds to the complaint that religious belief is irrational by arguing that the heart of faith is *assumptions* one is committed to, rather than propositions that one believes. Zamulinski, like Speak, is worried about the idea that we don't have sufficient control of our beliefs, but, unlike Speak, is quite sympathetic to Clifford's principle. He uses both considerations to motivate the idea that God wouldn't require belief. He then argues that *assuming*, rather than believing, is what demonstrates genuine religious faith. One thing I found interesting about Zamulinski's account is that he thinks genuine religious faith is thicker than mere acceptance (in Cohen's 1989 sense), as we can accept a proposition casually or contingently. He argues that religious faith involves a commitment one will not readily give up, and one that results in consistent action. Zamulinski also suggests that the emphasis on belief in some religions may simply be a confusion, since the distinction between belief and assumption is subtle, and assumptions often function like beliefs. Further, his account is consistent with the idea that many

religious people do in fact believe religious doctrines, but he insists that doing so is not at the core of faith.

Ought without can

Let's now move to the second response. This response denies that ought implies can—at least when it comes to belief. In other words, we may sometimes have obligations to believe things, even if we cannot believe them. This perspective is suggested by the third paper in this issue, Richard Lints, "Irresistibility, Epistemic Warrant, and Religious Belief." Lints understands epistemic warrant as a kind of intellectual obligation—i.e. when one's belief that *p* is warranted, it is because one has fulfilled one's obligations concerning *p*. He notes that sometimes, the evidence forces our hand, and we cannot help but believe. In these cases, our beliefs can still be warranted in some sense. He explains, "When it is not possible to believe otherwise and thus when the relevant intellectual obligations have been overridden, I want to suggest there is still a legitimate sense of epistemic warrant which remains" (p. 428). Lints motivates this by focusing on the analogy with perceptual belief. Often, perceptual beliefs seem to simply happen to us—when we see a tree, we simply believe that there's a tree. However, it still makes sense to ask which perceptual beliefs we ought to have. Lints thinks this is instructive for understanding religious belief. Even if sometimes the evidence forces our hand—consider Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus—we can nonetheless epistemically evaluate religious beliefs. While Lints is focused on the case of one who cannot help but believe in God, his remarks also apply to those who withhold belief or even disbelieve (as he acknowledges on p. 433).

A similar line is pushed by Feldman (2000). Feldman argues that while doxastic voluntarism is false—i.e., we don't have voluntary control over our beliefs—we nonetheless have doxastic obligations. Feldman explains that this is because epistemic oughts are *role* oughts. For example, "Teachers ought to explain things clearly. Parents ought to take care of their kids" (p. 676). Plausibly, role oughts apply even if those in the roles *cannot* fulfill their obligations. Suppose two swimmers are drowning far apart, so a lifeguard cannot save both. Intuitively, the lifeguard nonetheless *ought* to save both, because this is part of their role as a lifeguard. Similarly, there are things we ought to believe due to our role as a believer. These oughts apply to us even if we cannot believe at will, because believing certain things is one of our roles as an epistemic agent. Thus, even if doxastic voluntarism is false, we may still have obligations to believe. This is a notable reason to deny (2).

Controlling beliefs

The third response denies (3) and maintains that, in some sense, we can voluntarily control our beliefs. I divide this response into two main camps.² The first focuses on *indirect* control. Examples of things one has indirect control over include one's fitness level or blood pressure. While we cannot control these immediately, in a simple act of the will, we can influence them in significant ways over a longer period of time. In

² For an even more fine-grained way of distinguishing different kinds of doxastic control, see Alston (1988) and Jackson (Forthcoming).

this issue, Davis argues that we have indirect control over our belief in the existence of God, and that this can vindicate Pascal's wager. This would amount to a long-term project to believe that God exists by, e.g. attending church, participating in a religious community, and gathering evidence that supports theism. Ferreira, explicating and defending John Henry Newman's ethics of belief, defends a nuanced species of indirect doxastic control.

In "Pascal on Self-Caused Belief," Davis considers someone who wants to believe that God exists, perhaps for Pascalian reasons. He considers the advice Pascal gives after his famous wager, i.e. "Follow the way...by acting as if they believe, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness" (Pascal 1162/1958). Davis defends this advice against three objections: that this is impossible, that this is intellectually dishonest, and that this cannot demonstrate genuine faith. Davis argues that if five conditions are met, then we can indirectly believe p in a way that avoids these objections:

- (i) The truth or falsity of p is not discoverable by reason.
- (ii) I strongly desire to believe p .
- (iii) I understand that belief in p is warranted for me because of prudential considerations.
- (iv) I act as if I believe p .
- (v) p is one of the alternatives of a forced option.

Davis explains that, in these cases, even if one cannot believe p directly, one can come to believe p , especially if p is the proposition "God exists." We can take actions that will influence our beliefs over time; Davis provides a long and helpful list (p. 30):

I need to change my bad habits, form new dispositions. If I want to cause myself to believe p I ought to behave as those who believe p behave. Perhaps I could not only attend religious services... but also change my moral behaviour. I could do my best to become (as Pascal says) 'faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful'. Going beyond Pascal's specific advice, it seems that I could also: associate regularly with believers, commit myself publicly to the religious life, look for evidence that supports the existence of God, have long conversations with intelligent apologists for belief in God, never question or criticize the central claims or practices of religion, look for new interpretations of the evidence that causes me to doubt, read the books of great theologians, etc.

Davis also helpfully and rightfully points out that it's inevitable that we all make selective choices about evidence. We have to decide what evidence to focus on, who we listen to, and what we read in almost every epistemic situation. Being selective about evidence-gathering is an inevitable result of the fact that we have limited time and resources. This picture provides a nice challenge to claim (3)—even if we cannot will to believe directly, we can take steps that make it likely we will form certain beliefs. Maybe this is the source of our religious doxastic obligations. And Davis argues that, in cases where his five criteria are met, we can reliably bring ourselves to believe p .

Our next paper is M. Ferreira, "Newman and the 'Ethics of Belief'". Ferreira's goal in the paper is to explain and expand upon John Henry Newman's ethics of belief. Newman's view responds to strict doxastic involuntarists such as Williams, Pojman, Price, and Swinburne. I enjoyed this paper for two reasons. One, it provides a timely

reminder that the popularity of strict doxastic involuntarism is relatively recent. When one looks at the history of philosophy, doxastic involuntarism is not at all the orthodox view—in fact, arguably, it was the other way around, with authors such as Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Kant, Malebranche, Kierkegaard, Pascal, Clifford, James, Newman, and others embracing versions of doxastic voluntarism (for a historical overview, see Barnes 2006). This historical context is important to keep in mind; many today treat involuntarism as obvious or even as a datum, and justify this by citing a few contemporary defenders of the view. But if the contemporary popularity of a view should be given weight, then so should the fact that doxastic *voluntarism* enjoys quite a bit of popularity throughout the history of philosophy. Maybe we shouldn't be so quick to assume doxastic voluntarism is so clearly and obviously false, and be open to the possibility that it is a dogma of contemporary philosophy.

Second, Ferreira's paper argues that Newman's voluntarism suggests we have a fascinating kind of indirect control over our beliefs, challenging claim (3) of our puzzle. According to Newman, the will can confer a commitment or confirmation onto an already-existing belief, making it more likely that we maintain that belief in the face of counterevidence. Likewise, the will can disown or suppress a belief, making it more likely we give up the belief more quickly. Thus, even if we can't directly form a belief based on the will, we need not immediately jump to the conclusion that beliefs are totally passive things that just "happen to us." Instead, we can own or disown our beliefs, making it much more likely we maintain them or give up them down the line. For example, if I believe in God, I can willfully endorse that belief, declaring my belief in God as an important and central life commitment. This makes it likely that belief persists over time. On the other hand, if I find myself believing, say, that my colleague is unfriendly and rude, I can disown that belief and distance myself from it, making it likely I will give it up more quickly. Interestingly, Ferreira even argues that in some situations, if we confer a strong commitment on a belief that *p*, we might be able to continue to believe *p* even if over time we gain counterevidence renders *p* unlikely; this forecasts a common contemporary move in favor of the possibility (and rationality) of belief and low credence (see Buchak forthcoming, Jackson 2019).

The final two papers in this issue argue that non-evidential believing is psychologically possible. I'll argue that this allows for the possibility of exercising a species of *direct* control over our religious beliefs. Here, by direct control, I have two things in mind. The first is that believing is a basic action. Basic actions are ones we can perform without doing anything else to perform them, like raising one's hand. Second, even if believing isn't a basic action, we can control our beliefs via a short series of other actions. Hieronymi (2006) explains that we have voluntary control over making dinner or going on a run, even though we cannot do those things in a swift, uninterrupted single act. In the belief case, this would look like forming a theistic belief as a result of a short-term process, maybe one of deliberation or of focusing on certain aspects of one's evidence. This process is shorter, more direct, and more reliable than the process involved in indirect control. So, by "direct control", I mean a disjunction that includes both basic actions (e.g. hand-raising) and things we can do as a result of a short series of acts (e.g. making dinner).

The first paper is John Bishop's, "Faith as Doxastic Venture." Bishop argues that faith is a kind of doxastic venture that involves believing beyond or even against the evidence. He responds to three objections to the view: that a doxastic venture is impossible, that a doxastic venture is unjustified, and that the doxastic venture view of faith fails to reconcile faith and reason. His response to the first objection most directly

challenges claim (3) of our puzzle. Here, Bishop focuses on what he calls “believing-acceptance” in which one both believes *p* and acts on *p*. He argues that we can let our beliefs guide us or not, and when we let our beliefs guide us, this solidifies them in our minds. This is one kind of control we may exercise over our beliefs. Furthermore, following William James, Bishop argues that certain propositions (including what he calls “framework principles”) are evidentially undecidable, meaning our evidence doesn’t strongly push us one way or another. In these cases, we can form beliefs for reasons non-evidential reasons—e.g. beliefs can be caused by desires, emotions, affections, affiliations, etc. This non-evidential believing enables us to believe beyond the evidence, and control our beliefs in a robust way.

The final paper in this issue, Cockayne et al. “Non-evidential believing and permissivism about evidence: a reply to Dan-Johan Eklund,” defends Bishop’s view from an objection, presented by Eklund (2014). Eklund argues that Bishop doesn’t establish that we have a robust kind of control over our beliefs. According to Eklund, since beliefs aim at truth, we cannot form beliefs for non-evidential reasons. In other words, you cannot believe that the evidence for God’s existence is undecidable and also consciously believe that God exists. In response, Cockayne et al. invoke *epistemic permissivism*, the view that in some evidential situations, there is more than one rational attitude one can take toward a proposition *p*. If permissivism is true, then two people can share evidence and take different positions on whether God exists, and both be perfectly rational. In permissive cases, evidence *underdetermines* rational belief. Cockayne et al. rightfully point out that in this situation, it’s not at all clear that non-evidential factors couldn’t play a role in determining whether one believes. If there’s an epistemic tie, why couldn’t that tie be broken by one’s will or desires? This especially seems possible if, as James says, there’s a forced choice. In a forced choice, one’s evidence is balanced between, say, belief and withholding, rendering either attitude rational. If you can’t do both but must pick one, it’s not clear that you couldn’t pick one for practical reasons. Thus, one can admit that the evidence for God’s existence is undecidable and nonetheless believe in God—and even do so rationally.

In my opinion, permissivism is the key to one of the most interesting responses to our original puzzle. Permissivism is woven through much of the ethics of belief, and goes back to at least William James, who maintains that the truth of some matters is not “decidable by reason.” Most of the authors in this issue similarly invoke a certain kind of permissivism as well (even they don’t use the term “permissivism”). Briefly, here is why I think permissivism provides a compelling reason to deny (3). Many of the cases used to motivate doxastic involuntarism involve propositions that are clearly true or false—e.g. the authors point out that you cannot believe something that is clearly false, even for a significant practical benefit. However, these arguments fail to consider the possibility that one is in a permissive case. Suppose someone is truly torn about what to believe. If their evidence underdetermines some question, then it’s not clear that one couldn’t adopt an attitude for a practical reason. For example, suppose your very best friend is accused of a serious crime, and the evidence underdetermines whether she is guilty. You can choose to believe she is innocent until more decisive evidence comes in—and do so in part because you want to be loyal to your friend (McHugh 2013: 1127). Similar considerations apply to belief in God. Consider, for example, Peter van Inwagen’s conversion story. He explains that, while he was in the process of converting, he was able to see the world in two ways. Notably, he remarks that “there was a period of transition, a period during which I could move back and forth at will, in the “duck-rabbit” fashion, between experiencing the image as representing the world as self-subsistent and

experience the image as representing the world as dependent” (1994: 35). Thus, while I don’t take myself to have fully defended this here, I think permissivism clears space for doxastic voluntarism, even of a direct sort, and at least enables us to control our beliefs in a short series of acts. This is a straightforward and powerful reason to deny (3).³

Upshots and conclusion

I conclude with three points. First, these responses may be even stronger together than individually. One worry for my final response to (3), for example, is that even if we are in permissive cases concerning *some* propositions, we may not be in a permissive case concerning *all* religious propositions pertinent to our original puzzle. Thus, we may not have direct doxastic control over all of our religious beliefs. However, in cases where we cannot exercise direct control, we can still act on the propositions in question, and accept or commit to them, as the first response suggests. Furthermore, this may be a route to exercising indirect control over our beliefs, as accepting religious propositions could lead to belief. Thus, we may need to invoke different responses to different cases, but when considered together, these considerations provide a powerful solution to our original puzzle.

Second, as the Bishop paper suggests, the ethics of religious belief bears on the nature and rationality of faith. Two of the big questions in the faith literature are whether faith involves belief and whether rational faith can go beyond the evidence. If faith is a kind of belief then this same puzzle arises regarding faith, and so the solutions above will be instructive. Of course, the first response would simply amount to denying that faith involves belief, a move that many in the faith literature have made. However, the possibility of doxastic control makes it more appealing that faith entails belief. In general, our views on the ethics of religious belief—concerning topics such as evidentialism, permissivism, and the possibility of non-evidential believing—have significant implications for our theory of faith.

Finally, the ethics of religious belief has important implications for Pascal’s wager. Pascal argued that we should believe in God because we have much to gain if God exists, and little to lose if God doesn’t exist. Whether non-evidential believing is possible and potentially rational has implications for the possibility and permissibility of taking Pascal’s wager. The ethics of religious belief, then, may provide resources to respond to common objections to the wager, as Davis suggests.

In conclusion, while the ethics of religious belief presents us with a difficult puzzle, and the papers in this issue present four plausible solutions. First, maybe we have obligations to act as if God exists or to commit to God, rather than to believe in God. Second, maybe it’s false that ought implies can, at least when it comes to believing. Third, we may have voluntary control over our beliefs, and if permissivism is true, this control may be more direct than many philosophers think. Finally, I’ve suggested this puzzle has notable implications for other areas of philosophy of religion, including faith and Pascal’s wager.⁴

³ For extensive defenses of the claim that permissivism clears space for doxastic voluntarism, see Frankish (2007), Nickel (2010), McHugh (2013), Roeber (2019), Jackson (Forthcoming).

⁴ Thanks to Marc-Kevin Daoust for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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