

Faith: How to be Partial while Respecting the Evidence

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Abstract:

Some think that partiality is normative requirement of faith. Katherine Dormandy disagrees, arguing that partiality runs afoul of epistemic norms that faith requires. We offer an account of how one can respect the partiality requirement while respecting the epistemic norms as well. Central to the account is the role that *confrontation* plays in negotiating faith relationships in the face of damning evidence about the object of faith. We claim that in confrontation one satisfies the seemingly competing norms for faith.

Keywords: faith; evidentialism; religious epistemology

1. Introduction

What norms for belief are entailed by faith? One natural thought is that faith demands partiality. That is, it is a normative requirement on faith that one form positive beliefs about the object of faith. For example, faith in a lover might require believing that they are trustworthy, faith in a political cause might demand believing it is just, and faith in God might oblige us to believe that God is good. Katherine Dormandy [2020] disagrees. She argues that partiality norms run afoul of noetic entrenchment, viz. holding positive beliefs about the object in a way that flouts evidence to the contrary. By contrast, she argues faith is governed by no norms over and above the standard evidentialist norms for belief.

She establishes this by showing that partiality views fail to give the right responses to encounters with stubborn counterevidence. Either they (anti-epistemic-partiality views) recommend flouting the evidence altogether in order to hold on to positive beliefs about the object of faith or they (epistemic-partiality views) lower the epistemic standards in objectionable ways to alleviate the epistemic pressure imposed by the counterevidence. But one cannot have praiseworthy faith when one refuses to grapple with the evidence against the goodness of the faith's object. So, partiality norms, far from constituting what makes for great faith, importantly stand in its way. Thus, we should reject any partiality norms on faith.

We disagree. We claim that cases of praiseworthy faith involve dispositions to confront the object of faith when presented with stubborn counterevidence against their goodness. Recognizing this enables us to endorse a partiality norm while avoiding Dormandy's worries of noetic entrenchment. We argue that dispositions to confront the object of faith presuppose positive beliefs about it, thus vindicating partiality. We further argue that confrontation best respects the epistemic norms that other partialist views flout.

2. Confrontation as a Normative Requirement on Faith

Consider a lover who comes by stubborn counterevidence that her partner is cheating. Suppose she receives good evidence that her partner is cheating from a very reliable friend. Her friend claims to have seen him out with another woman with whom he was interacting in blatantly romantic ways. How should the lover respond to this evidence? She could simply update her belief and regard her partner as a cheater. This, however, seems hasty. Simply updating her belief seems to make her blameworthy in a certain respect. How? Because in virtue of the relationship that she has with her partner, her partner has the right to respond to the evidence against him. The one suspected of cheating may justifiably ask “Why didn’t you come talk to me about it? Don’t I deserve a chance to clear things up?” Cases like these suggest that there is an interpersonal normative dimension to faith; that the object of faith be held to account for what threatens the relationship of faith. And failure to confront the object of faith in light of stubborn counterevidence insufficiently respects this second-personal feature of faith.

Some western religious traditions give us reason to think that this generalizes to the case of divine-human relationships as well. When one encounters evidence against the goodness of God (perhaps when witnessing or undergoing some horrific suffering) there is reason to believe that one ought to confront God with this evidence and ask for an explanation. Using one of Dormandy’s examples, consider the biblical figure Job. As the story goes, God permits Job to suffer profoundly. Not only does he suffer the tragic loss of family, but he suffers near complete economic ruin and is afflicted with loathsome sores all over his body. After learning of Job’s misfortune, Job’s friends try to give justifying reasons for why God has allowed Job to suffer so. Perhaps God is punishing Job for his sins,¹ or perhaps Job is being tested for some greater divine reward.² If true, either of these explanations would help reconcile Job’s stubborn counterevidence. If Job deserved to suffer on account of sin, then God is just and there is no threat to God’s goodness. After all, aren’t we all sinners? If Job is being prepared to receive some greater divine reward, then God is still good. Who can fault God for making Job’s life ultimately much better than it presently is?

Updating on either of these two explanations would enable Job to undercut the epistemic force of his stubborn evidence against God’s goodness. But instead Job rejects the epistemic outs offered by his peers. Yet he doesn’t give up his faith. Rather, he prays, confronting God, and demands an explanation: “Why do You hide Your face, And regard me as Your enemy?”³ Later, Job’s friends who had condemned him for what they took to be his faithless confrontational attitude toward God are divinely reprimanded: “My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has”⁴ The suggestion here is that God found Job faithful *because* Job confronted God.⁵

¹ Job 22: 4–5

² Ibid 22: 21–30

³ Ibid 13:24

⁴ Ibid 42:7.

⁵ There is a worry here about how this works for faith in God in general. After all, most of us aren’t having direct conversations with God. The answer here will turn on the conventions governing the divine-human relationship as set

Confrontation is central to our understanding of the partialist position. The loving partner shouldn't immediately discard her positive beliefs when presented with stubborn counterevidence any more than she should ignore the stubborn counterevidence. She should respond to the new counterevidence by confronting her partner. Likewise, the faithful believer shouldn't immediately attempt resolve the epistemic pressure introduced by stubborn counterevidence by making excuses for why God permitted them to undergo a certain kind of horrific suffering. She should respond to the new counterevidence by confronting God. This suggests that confrontation in the face of stubborn counterevidence is a normative requirement on faith. Call this the confrontational norm.

In the next section we develop an account of the nature of this sort of confrontation. However, before going on, it is worth pointing out that a confrontation norm, while plausible for faith, fails to hold in the case of mere belief. Suppose that, never having been to the local government office, I falsely believe that it is an efficiently run government department that promptly and enthusiastically assists the public's relevant need. Now suppose that a reliable friend gives me testimonial evidence to the contrary. The organization is terribly inefficient, she says, and customer service is poor. I am not blameworthy in any respect for not marching down to the office and confronting them about my friend's testimony. In fact, if anyone did this, we would regard them as deeply mistaken. When their number is called and they begin demanding an epistemic accounting of the government employee sitting across the desk, we might very well imagine the employee justified in dismissing them with an abrupt "Next!" This is because in the case of mere beliefs, there is no relationship of the relevant sort that grounds interpersonal accountability norms. I can simply exchange my positive beliefs about the bureaucratic office for negative ones. This brings out the fact that faith is normatively richer than mere belief.

3. Confrontation, Evidential Norms, and Partiality

Let us now turn our attention back to the case of a lover who comes by stubborn counterevidence that her partner is cheating. With the testimony of her reliable friend in hand, that her partner is a cheater becomes a very live epistemic possibility. When such an epistemic possibility is opened, she may reason, "perhaps my friend only saw someone who looked like him. He has never given me reason in the past to think that he would be unfaithful. It would be out of character for him to act this way." In such a case we have exactly the kind of conflict that Dormandy describes. On the one hand, there is incriminating impartial evidence that her partner is a cheater. On the other hand, there is relationship-internal partial evidence that he is not. Moreover, the impartial evidence is stubborn, not easily dealt with. She initiates an epistemic confrontation.

Why initiate a confrontation? She wants to *know* whether he is a cheater. Thus, a chief aim of the confrontation is to settle what is true. As such, confrontations of this sort impose an epistemic demand on the confrontation: that all the evidence be weighed appropriately. Failing to

out by the relevant religious tradition. For example, in the Judeo-Christian case, if one is not having direct communication with God, one can have indirect contact with God through ecclesiastical mediators.

appropriately weight the evidence undermines the lover's ability to obtain knowledge. Now there are a couple of ways confrontations of this sort might go, but they share a basic structure. At some point (most often at the opening stages of the confrontation) the problematic evidence is presented to the object of faith and an explanation is demanded. Then the one confronted gives a response. When things go right, the confronted party gives new evidence that sheds light on what the confronter ought to all-things-considered believe. For example, the lover's partner may produce an alibi. Perhaps he can show that the location tracking services on his phone places him in a location distinct from the venue her friend purportedly saw him at. Or perhaps he can't. Maybe he really did it, and he confesses. He then produces additional reliable testimony that diminishes the force of the partialist evidence the lover has. Either way it settles the way in which the evidence ought to be appropriately weighted.

Unfortunately, things often go wrong. On one such way, the confronted party may attempt to inappropriately leverage the confronter's partialist evidence to distract focus from the weight of the incriminating impartial evidence. To see this more clearly, imagine a priest being confronted by his congregations after accusations of abuse have surfaced. The congregation hopes to learn by confrontation whether their priest has committed the abuse. It would be inappropriate for the priest to respond to the accusations by saying things like: "C'mon, you know me. Think about all the good I've done for this congregation; do you really think I would be capable of such a thing? Who are you going to believe? A man of the cloth or some kid?" What is inappropriate about responses of this sort is that they are evasive. The priest makes no attempt to square the counterevidence with the congregation's evidence that he is no abuser. In the background of his response seems to be an attempt to salvage the relationship of faith by means of a subtle lowering of epistemic standards—the impartial evidence can simply be set aside in the face of all the partial evidence. In sum, he attempts to manipulate the congregation to weight their evidence in his favor without offering new reasons to do so. This conflicts with the high epistemic standards constitutive of the confrontation.⁶

Because epistemic confrontations of this sort demand that the relevant evidence be given appropriate weight, we avoid the worries that Dormandy raises for partiality views of faith. Dormandy's main concern is that partiality views of faith run afoul of noetic entrenchment. This occurs when one holds positive beliefs about the object in a way that flouts evidence to the contrary. Dormandy thinks this occurs in one of two ways: either by considering the counterevidence in the course of managing one's beliefs, but not giving it the appropriate epistemic weight, or by altogether

⁶ The priest case also brings out the affect that power disparities have on relationships of faith. The confrontation may also go wrong when the party in power uses that power to subordinate or silence their confronter. But this doesn't save the relationship of faith. If anything, it trades faith for some kind of pernicious counterfeit. What's doubly significant then about the confrontation between God and Job is that God does neither of these. And what starker power difference could there be! But suppose, unlike God, the priest doesn't care. A distinctive feature of our conception of faith is that the confrontation requirement can open the faith holder to distinctive kinds of additional harms (subordination and silencing), in much the same way a lover can be doubly harmed by confronting an insensitive or abusive partner.

ignoring the counterevidence when deciding how to manage one's beliefs. According to Dormandy when one's positive beliefs about the object of faith come into question, anti-epistemic partiality views advocate for non-rational resolutions to the conflict. For example, they might advocate making a Kierkegaardian leap of faith or doggedly holding to the positive beliefs despite the stubborn counterevidence.⁷ Not so on our view. Faith driven confrontations seek a rational resolution to the epistemic tension generated by the stubborn counterevidence. Ultimately the positive beliefs must be squared with rather than be held while disregarding the counterevidence. Moreover, because confrontation demands that the relevant evidence be given its due, it avoids the problems Dormandy attributes to the epistemic-partiality view.⁸ Our confrontational account then vindicates the role that Dormandy carves out for traditional evidentialist norms and does not run afoul of noetic entrenchment.

All that remains now is to show how our account vindicates partiality. We have already argued that praiseworthy faith involves dispositions to confront the object of faith. Absent these dispositions one's faith fails to be as it ought. These dispositions, we argue, presuppose certain positive beliefs about the object of faith. Absent these positive beliefs, the disposition to confront will diminish. So, without some positive beliefs, we have no dispositions to confront. Without dispositions to confront our faith will fail to be as it ought. Thus, without some positive beliefs our faith will fail to be as it ought.

What positive beliefs are presupposed by our dispositions to confront the objects of our faith? When the lover confronts her partner, when the congregation confronts their priest, when Job confronts God, all take the other party in the faith relationship to be cooperative participants in a confrontation. That is, someone with whom they can communicate openly and honestly. Moreover, they take there to be some relationship of mutual trust and respect. That these positive beliefs are presupposed by those with a disposition to confront nicely explains the effect that certain responses to being confronted have on the relationship of faith. Take again the case of the evasive priest. When he sidesteps the demand to respond directly to the evidence presented against his goodness, it's guilt implicating in a faith eroding way. Why? Because it shows that he fails to have the qualities that the disposition to confrontation presupposes that he would have. It reveals a certain uncooperativeness on his part. It shows that he may not be willing to be appropriately forthright, or that he does not have the kind of respect his congregation took him to have for them.

Contrast this with the case of the lover's partner. Suppose that he responds to the counterevidence by confessing to the affair. This, like the previous case, is guilt implicating and faith eroding, but not to the same extent. His lover may very well take his confession as grounds for the rehabilitation of the relationship of faith. This seems well explained by the fact that confessing to the affair vindicates the positive presuppositions that disposed her to confront him in the first place. There is some level of mutual respect and willingness to be cooperative that remains.

⁷ See e.g., Keller [2004]; Stroud [2006]; Hazlett [2013]; Kierkegaard [2009/1846].

⁸ Dormandy cites as examples: Hawley [2014]; Alston [1991]; Plantinga [2000].

In summary, in the face of stubborn counter evidence to the goodness of the object of faith, those with praiseworthy faith will confront the object of faith. Such a confrontation consists in a demand for a rational resolution producing high confidence in whether the object of faith is still worth having faith in. The upshot of this observation is three-fold. First, because praiseworthy faith seeks confrontation, ultimately the positive beliefs must be squared with rather than flout the evidence. Thus, it avoids the problems Dormandy attributes to the anti-epistemic-partiality view. Second, because confrontation demands the relevant evidence be given its due, it avoids the problems Dormandy attributes to the epistemic-partiality view. Third, we vindicate partiality: confrontation presupposes that the relevant parties can communicate openly, will be truthful, and have mutual respect. Absent these positive beliefs, the disposition to confront will diminish. And since praiseworthy faith involves dispositions to confront, the praiseworthiness of the faith will likewise diminish. We can now see that one really can be both a partialist and an evidentialist about faith.

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