

Belief without Evidence

“We find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why...Our next duty, having recognized this mixed-up state of affairs, is to ask whether it be simply reprehensible and pathological, or whether, on the contrary, we must treat it as a normal element in making up our minds.”

- The Problem of Unjustified Belief
 - We often believe propositions with little or insufficient evidence. Yet we nonetheless continue to believe such propositions.
 - Perhaps most significant is that these limitations do not seem like *flaws*. Rather, they are built into our very nature, as fallible and finite beings.
 - As a given, we (both as individuals and as a species) have a limited, imperfect knowledge of (at least some aspects of the world).
 - Even if there are some cases of genuinely-rational, evidence-based knowledge, we will still hold vast amounts of beliefs that outstrip such evidence.
 - Religious Belief: As formulated above, the problem we're encountering is quite general. Then, we might ask, why do the authors both focus on belief in the divine?
 - This is because a belief in the divine is arguably *the* quintessential 'Belief without Evidence': belief in a specific religious doctrine is (in most cases) without strict justification, yet is incredibly foundational to how we live our lives.
 - So Pascal, for example, attempts to 'bridge the gap' between faith and reason. Pascal argues that even if we cannot know for certain whether God exists, we can still rationally choose to believe in God.
- Pascal's Famous Wager
 - Pascal assumes from the outset that there is no rational/uncontroversial proof of the existence of (his particular conception of a Christian) God. Rather, the rationalization of religious belief must come from elsewhere.
 - So he puts the situation in terms of a *decision* between believing in God or not, where we aim to guarantee the best outcome.
 - Some assumptions: there is a 50% chance that God exists.
 - He argues that it is always in our 'rational self-interest' to live as though God exists and seek to believe in God.
 - If God does not exist, such a person will have only a finite loss (luxury, etc.), whereas they stand to receive infinite gains (heaven) if God does exist.
 - If God does exist, a person who does not believe in God will suffer infinite losses (damnation) and receive finite gains (luxury, etc.).
 - An infinite good is always worth betting on (no matter the odds), when the other options are neither an infinite good nor infinite losses.
 - Some Central Objections

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- The Many Gods Objection: Pascal's argument is based on a false dichotomy, assuming that the only two options are believing in God or not believing in God. There are many other worldviews, such as agnosticism and atheism.
- Criticisms of Pascal's conception of belief: assumes that we can choose our beliefs, which is not always possible (e.g., that an atheist could simply 'choose' to believe in the divine).
- Criticisms of Pascal's theology: there are many variations, but central to his argument is the controversial claim, both within and without his particular religious context, that God is the kind of being who would reward and punish people based on their beliefs, rather than their actions (e.g., the super-friendly atheist).
- James on the Will to Believe
 - James holds that our will to believe, even in the absence of rational evidence, should be seen both as a function of our natures and of the kind of claims that call for belief.
 - 'Epistemic situations' (i.e., moments in which we decide what to believe) can be characterized by a series of dichotomies, which inform us about whether and how we might form non-evidential beliefs.
 - **Living or dead:** an epistemic situation is living iff more than one hypothesis seems plausible (God does or does not exist; I will have 2, 3, or 4 cups of coffee today). A dead epistemic situation in which there is only one (or no) plausible hypothesis.
 - These are situations in which willing to believe a proposition is possible: "the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem
 - absurdities to him who has them to consider."
 - **Forced or avoidable:** an epistemic situation is forced iff the options form a logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing a further option (either stay where you are or move; either believe in God or do not). An epistemic situation is avoidable iff there is a legitimate intermediary or alternative option.
 - Agnosticism here is not an option: "to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth."
 - **Momentous or trivial:** an epistemic situation is momentous iff the the situation is not unique, the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible.
 - **Cannot be resolved on intellectual grounds** There is insufficient evidence to make any option in a given epistemic situation more likely.

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- It is important to note that these features are not 'agent-independent' (i.e., independent of the believer in question). For some, but not for others, certain epistemic situations will appear living/dead or momentous/trivial.
- James make sense of such epistemic situations by appealing to the fact that, in the absence of required evidence, we have another, 'desiderative' aspect of belief formation.
 - In such situations, our 'passional nature' (desire/self-interest/aims/moral values, etc.) determine which belief
 - **Questions:**
 - This only should occur in situations that are **living, forced, undecidable, and momentous**. **Question:** Why is this so? Why should this occur in and only in such situations?
 - James holds that religious belief meets this criterion (that it is live, momentous, and forced). In what sense is this true?