

INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell once said that an exemplary philosophical investigation uncovers problems with matters that are apparently beyond controversy, and gives rise to intellectually fruitful debates.¹

Among the beliefs whose acceptance seems beyond controversy both in philosophy and common opinion is that the search for truth is successful in proportion to the readiness of truth-searchers to put aside their own beliefs and accept whatever belief will appear to be proven.

Two quotations from classical thinkers exemplify this view. The first quote is from Plato's *Gorgias*, where Socrates emphasizes the primacy of evidence over his own beliefs:

I am one of those who are very willing to be refuted if I say anything which is not true, and very willing to refute anyone else who says what is not true, and quite as ready to be refuted as to refute. For I hold that this is the greater gain of the two, just as the gain is greater of being cured of a very great evil than of curing another.²

Although Socrates does not mention the concept of evidence, this passage means that, if the available evidence suggests that one's beliefs are to be refuted, then the truth-searcher must change her mind, a change which Socrates sees as a sort of recovery from 'a great evil' constituted by erroneous opinion.

¹ To use Russell's words, philosophy 'keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect' (Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], p. 88).

² Plato, *Gorgias*, 458 a3 – b3. For more on this, see below, Chapter 4, note 6.

The second quotation is from Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. According to Locke, assent to propositions comes in degrees, and we should proportion our degree of assent to the available evidence. As he says, we should not entertain 'any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant'.³ No commitment to one's beliefs should, therefore, prevent one from changing one's mind if the available evidence requires this.

I call this view *mere epistemology*. I will later show my reasons for coining this expression. For now, let me describe it as follows: *one should always prefer beliefs supported by more evidence to beliefs supported by less evidence*. This view seems incorrigible, as shown by the fact that it is usually taken for granted by practitioners in every field and philosophers of various orientations, including epistemologists whose views are very different from the ones I have mentioned so far.⁴

Mere epistemology is arguably aimed at achieving agreement among debaters. According to Thomas Aquinas, for example, evidence necessarily leads us to assent,⁵ from which follows that, once evidence in support of certain beliefs is provided, everybody should hold those beliefs. In this connection, Locke exemplarily devotes his *Essay* to showing that an agreement among debaters should follow if assent is proportioned to the available evidence.

³ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (London: Printed for Awhsham and John Churchil, at the Black-Swan in Pater-Noster-Row, and Samuel Manship, at the Ship in Cornhill, near the Royal Exchange, 1700, hereafter: *An Essay*), IV, xix, 1.

⁴ This seeming incorrigibility does not mean that mere epistemology is self-evident, perhaps in the way the principle of non-contradiction is. As Aristotle famously showed once and for all (see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, 4, 1006a35ff.), the self-evidence of the principle of non-contradiction can be confirmed by way of demonstration. Mere epistemology, instead, simply falls into self-referential contradiction, as I will show later in this Introduction.

⁵ He says that 'the assent of science is not subject to free will, because the scientist is obliged to assent by force of the demonstration' (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, tr. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second and revised edition [London: Oates and Washbourne, 1920, hereafter: *Summa theologiae*], II-II, q. 2, a. 9, ad 2). In some cases, I will propose a different translation of the Latin text. (Aquinas's Latin texts are mostly taken from the Leonine and the Marietti editions.) 'Evidence', for example, does not render '*evidentia*', as Aquinas takes it in regard to faith. It should be replaced by 'full evidence' or 'evidentness'. For more on this, see below, Chapter 3, notes 45ff.

At the beginning of the work in question, Locke famously tells the reader that he formulated his new epistemological perspective as an attempt to help debaters ‘avoid the greatest part of the disputes and wrangling they have with others’.⁶

This aim, however, has not been achieved. Locke’s view has counterproductively fuelled new controversies and disputes. This fact has led John Jenkins to affirm that ‘the very existence of the controversy attests the failure of Locke’s epistemological project’.⁷

This is a sign of a more general condition in which philosophers, as well as practitioners in other fields and even common people, find themselves. In proportion to the interest they pay to the subject of their debates, debaters seem to be unwilling to accept the available evidence that disproves their original belief. More precisely, the more they care about certain views, the more they try to re-propose such views by arguing against the evidence in question or starting to research anew from the beginning.

The attitude I have just described may be seen as positive support for research and its advancement, as recent debates on disagreement have opportunely noticed.⁸ This means that the attitude in question, unlike what I have noted above, would be perfectly in line with mere epistemology. After all, there is more evidence than not that, at least in some circumstances, this is the best method to follow if one intends to take the research a step further.

This, however, does not have anything to do with the state of affairs I am describing here. I do not refer to those who, by way of hypothesis, try to further explore the outcome of their research by methodologically questioning the evidence they have at the moment. Once they find new evidence, they will accept it, however inconsistent with their original commitment.

⁶ Locke, *An Essay*, Epistle to the Reader.

⁷ John Jenkins, ‘Faith and Revelation’, in *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide to the Subject*, ed. by Brian Davies (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), p. 214.

⁸ See below, Chapter 4, section 2.

By contrast, I refer to those who, in proportion to their commitment to certain views, might indefinitely continue rejecting the available evidence that seems to disprove those views and continue reflecting on the subject to re-affirm them. This is simply unacceptable from the viewpoint of mere epistemology.

Debates on religious subjects are probably the most persuasive example of this attitude.

Given the deep commitment to some fundamental beliefs that the faithful are expected to take on and the fundamental role that these subjects can play in the experience of both believers and unbelievers, it does not surprise that endless disagreement and consequent inconclusiveness copiously characterize debates when such subjects are at stake. Modern debates between believers and unbelievers seem to be almost always inconclusive, as both believers and unbelievers show usual recalcitrance to changing their original position.

Therefore, the inconclusiveness in question can be defined as the property of those debates whose protagonists are not ready to change their minds, *however convincing the evidence in support of such a change may be*. In other words, those who conduct inconclusive debates, *qua* inconclusive debaters, *prefer beliefs supported by less evidence to beliefs supported by more evidence*. This openly contradicts mere epistemology, yet debates conducted by supporters of mere epistemology frequently fall into inconclusiveness.

In this book, I intend to explore why this is possible, and whether unexpected epistemological results might emerge from this exploration.

Before showing how I intend to develop this research, let me make two decisive points.

First, when I say that those who conduct inconclusive debates prefer beliefs supported by less evidence to beliefs supported by more evidence, I do not for a moment mean that they *always* conduct research in this way. I only mean that they do so *as protagonists of inconclusiveness*,

that is, to the extent that they reject the available evidence because of their own commitments. But when do they act so?

As I said above, inconclusiveness is proportioned to the commitment of debaters to their original beliefs. Scientific and mathematical truths, for example, might be of no interest to debaters, in the sense that no one seems to care whether or not a molecule of water is composed of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. It follows that inconclusiveness cannot occur in scientific and mathematical debates unless debaters care about something related to the truths in question – debater's professional success, for example.

If my argument is correct, all debaters put mere epistemology into practice. However, they do so in inverse proportion to their commitment to certain beliefs. This has a substantial consequence. I mean that this fact allows debaters to avoid the self-referential contradiction into which mere epistemology would inevitably fall. If mere epistemology were always put into practice, it should apply to any belief, including itself, which is not plausible. In fact, there is no more evidence for mere epistemology than for its negation. Saying that *one should always prefer beliefs supported by more evidence to beliefs supported by less evidence* is not supported by more evidence than the belief that *one should not always prefer beliefs supported by more evidence to beliefs supported by less evidence*.

Considering inconclusiveness, therefore, leads us to argue that mere epistemology should be included in a more comprehensive epistemological view. Mere epistemology's fundamental tenet that *one should always prefer beliefs supported by more evidence to beliefs supported by less evidence* may turn into a more moderate view. Namely, *with some exceptions, one should prefer beliefs supported by more evidence to beliefs supported by less evidence*.

Second, one may object that there is no evidence that the inconclusiveness of debates is due to one's will to not change one's mind. After all, a disagreement might simply be caused by

different competence levels among debaters, which might also be due to intellectual insanity and moral deficiency. It is known that debates on religion, which are probably the most inconclusive ones, have often been accompanied by mutual accusations of deficiency, both intellectual and moral, among believers and between believers and unbelievers.⁹ This might explain why inconclusiveness, as I take it, has usually been overlooked by scholars. Different competencies among debaters, as well as forms of deficiency that afflict them, are unworthy of epistemological consideration.

In reply to this objection, it seems that the amount of inconclusiveness that characterizes debates, such as those on religious matters, is unlikely to be explained by recourse to different levels of competence. Persistent disagreement accompanies a long history of debates among apparently equally competent philosophers and theologians. Consequently, when equally competent scholars are involved, it is equally unlikely that accusations of intellectual insanity and/or moral deficiency can reasonably apply.

At any rate, my idea that inconclusiveness is due to a voluntary opposition to the possibility of changing one's mind is justified by substantial suggestions that emerge from religious debates, which are especially characterized by inconclusiveness. The suggestions at stake, which I find in Thomas Reid's and especially Thomas Aquinas's reflection, clearly show that inconclusiveness *is due to the will* of the faithful to stick to their religious commitments.

Let me make it explicit that by 'religious', I mainly mean Christian, though I cannot exclude that aspects of other doctrines similar to the Christian one, especially Jewish and Islamic theism, may be included in this discussion. In other words, other religious beliefs might profitably expand and enrich this reflection. I focus on Christianity, however, for at least two reasons. First, because of the role that this religion has played in shaping Western culture.

⁹ See below, Chapter 5, section 2.

Second, because my reflection is stimulated by suggestions that emerge from the above-mentioned Christian thinkers' thoughts.

Returning to how I intend to proceed with this research, let me point out that, in the case of debates regarding the Christian religion, an additional reason seems to lead scholars to overlook inconclusiveness. I say 'additional' here because I have already listed the above reasons that apply to any debate – different competence levels among debaters, which may also be due to intellectual insanity and moral deficiency. I am referring to a restricted understanding of the Christian faith and its relationship to reason. This restricted understanding excludes what I argue is the specific way in which the Christian faith must be related to reason. Typical of this way is an attitude that causes inconclusiveness. The love for God, which should inspire (paradigmatic) believers in any activity, rational investigations and debates included, requires that they firmly commit themselves to God and the related beliefs – that God exists, loves us, sent Jesus Christ into the world for our salvation, and the like – no matter how convincing the evidence that contradicts such beliefs might appear to be. This does not mean that the believers in question cannot review ~~any~~ aspects of their faith if other views may suggest so. It only means that fundamental beliefs, such as those I mentioned above, cannot be given up.

The first three chapters of this book aim to reject the above-mentioned restricted understanding of the relationship between the Christian faith and intellectual activity; then, they aim to support a more convincing, though unexpected, view of this subject. Chapter 3, devoted to Aquinas's thoughts on faith, reason, and charity, will allow me to advance several considerations that unequivocally support my thesis. In the following chapters, even more unexpected views will emerge.

First, the love and the commitments that I have mentioned above might be only one of the causes of the inconclusiveness here under consideration. Non-religious commitments to the good and related beliefs might equally inspire debaters. From this, it follows that not only believers but also unbelievers – although this is not equally documented in the existing literature – can be responsible for inconclusiveness.

Second, stimulating perspectives that can **reorient** and make more effective any dialogues, both on religious and non-religious topics, may emerge. On the one hand, believers are expected to increase their love for God and match it with love for the neighbor and the search for the good. On the other hand, the search for the good may inspire not only believers but also unbelievers. This may enable them to generate the best possible condition to successfully conduct rational inquiries and discussions. If they commit themselves to the good and consequently assume good habits, they can cause mutual understanding and friendship as well as increasing opportunities to achieve conclusiveness, at least in some cases. (I am only able to hypothesize such commitments. Unlike believers, unbelievers are – at least in principle – expected to commit themselves only to reason and arguments, which is equally expected to render them adopters of mere epistemology.)

I call *spiritual turn in epistemology* this assumption of good habits (including its beneficial effects on the intellectual activity) as due to commitment to God and/or the good. Similarly to the *linguistic turn*, according to which the problems of philosophy are problems of language and of the relationship between language and the world,¹⁰ the spiritual turn is based on the conviction that epistemological matters can fruitfully be treated by recourse to factors that are

¹⁰ As is known, this intuition was popularized by Richard Rorty in *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. by Richard Rorty (Chicago, IL – London: University of Chicago Press, 1967). Let me also mention an edited book whose topic is whether good reasons for belief are *facts* and whose title resembles that of the present book: *The Factive Turn in Epistemology*, ed. by Veli Mitova (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

not strictly epistemic. The spiritual turn emphasizes the primary importance of human flourishing, taken as a commitment to God and the good. ‘Spiritual’, therefore, is not opposed either to ‘non-religious’ or ‘physical’. It rather designates the overall perfection of humanity.

This employment of the word ‘spirit’ can be traced back to Georg F.W. Hegel. As is known, he was the first to use this word in philosophy to mean the totality of what exists, especially if taken *at its highest level of perfection*, which Hegel called ‘absolute spirit’. This explains why, although it occurs when good habits are assumed, the turn here under consideration is ‘spiritual’, and not merely ‘moral’. Those who take the spiritual turn order everything, including the assumption of good habits, to the ultimate end, which is God and/or the good. They take a turn from mere epistemology, whose supporters first commit themselves to the mere search for truth – they maintain that every commitment must first be determined epistemically. This is why I call this view *mere* epistemology. Mere epistemology, in fact, only considers what is usually involved in epistemological discussions, whereas human flourishing, spiritual betterment, and good habits are not taken into consideration. One might object that searching for truth, wherever it can be found, is a sign of spiritual profundity. I agree if this does not mean that we need first to attain the truth, from which every other good will follow. Unlike those who support this view, adopters of the spiritual turn first *commit themselves to God and the good*, based on the conviction that spiritual betterment brings the ability to perfect any human activity, including the intellectual one.

This conviction emerges from a theological reflection on the subject. I intend to develop our understanding of the epistemological consequences of the virtue of faith. This is in line with a traditional synergy between theology and philosophy, a synergy that started at least with Augustine’s understanding of creatures, which he promoted and deepened on the conviction

that they show traces of the Trinity. This explains why this book focuses on epistemological matters and, nonetheless, was written starting from a theological point of view.