

# Evidence Through a Glass, Darkly

Penultimate Draft

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**Abstract:** Dormandy’s “True Faith” presents two views on the proper epistemological stance towards faith: doxastic-partialism and evidentialism. Here, I argue for a third option that cuts across the evidentialism/partialism distinction. I first analyze the Pascalian conception of faith, arguing that Pascal begins with the cognitive attitude of *acceptance* rather than *belief*. Next, I discuss Dormandy’s case for evidentialism, and contend that some evidence—the kind gained through transformative experiences—presents a difficulty for her argument. Finally, I offer my proposed view—Partialist Evidentialism—and argue that this approach is necessary for acquiring some unique kinds of evidence for religious faith.

**Key Words:** Belief; Epistemology; Evidentialism; Faith; Philosophy of Religion.

## 1. Introduction

In Katherine Dormandy’s “True Faith”, she presents two views on the proper epistemological stance towards faith—doxastic partiality and evidentialism—and argues for the latter. Here, I will argue in favor of a third view that cuts across the partialism/evidentialism distinction. After discussing Dormandy’s categories of partialism and evidentialism, I look at Pascal’s discussion of faith as presented in the *Pensées*: faith as beginning with a practical orientation, a way of being engaged in the religious life. I argue that, instead of understanding *belief* as the primary epistemic category of faith, we (like Pascal) should focus on *acceptance* which, although similar to belief, is a more pragmatic and volitional attitude.<sup>1</sup> Next, I argue that accepting a stance of religious faith in

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<sup>1</sup> Audi (2008) distinguishes between belief, acceptance, and faith, though his definitions of these terms differ somewhat from my own.

the face of counterevidence does not entail a disregard for counterevidence, provided the current epistemic position of the agent yields insufficient information about the object of faith. Finally, I argue that my proposed view—Partialist Evidentialism—is similar to prominent views discussed in the literature on transformative experiences and aspiration. If, I will argue, faith is relevantly like the key examples in these literatures, then a commitment to evidentialism requires partiality toward the object of faith. I conclude that committed evidentialism about faith requires first accepting the object of faith, in order to fully access the justifying reasons.

## 2. Partialism vs. Evidentialism in Dormandy

Dormandy's paper<sup>2</sup>, which focuses on how epistemic norms relate to faith, identifies two different understandings of this relationship, which she labels "doxastic-partiality" and "evidentialism" respectively. She understands doxastic-partiality as the view that "positive beliefs about the object of faith are an excellent-making feature of faith" (2020: 1). Dormandy compares doxastic-partiality about faith to two other attitudes—*friendship* and *trust*—both of which also seem to be made more "excellent" by exhibiting an attitude of partiality toward the object of that attitude. Faith, for the doxastic-partialist, is another such attitude which is improved by showing partiality toward the object or person that one is having faith in. This stance is, Dormandy argues, taken as a "badge of loyalty" toward the object of faith (ibid: 8).

Within the category of doxastic-partialism, Dormandy recognizes two sub-categories: *anti-epistemological-partiality* and *epistemological-partiality*. The difference between these two categories is the role they give to evidence regarding the object of faith. The anti-epistemological-partialist regards the eschewing of evidence against the object of faith to be an excellent-making feature of the faith. That is, when the person of faith encounters evidence that ought to count against this faith (e.g., evidence that God is not to be trusted with one's well-being), the anti-epistemological-partialist takes the ignoring of this evidence to be partially constitutive of good faith—for example, reassuring herself that "God has a plan" for her suffering, instead of taking her suffering as evidence against God's goodness or God's existence. Conversely, the epistemological-partialist thinks we ought to form beliefs by rationally weighing partialist evidence (evidence gathered through personal experience or interpretation) about the object of faith and impartialist evidence ("scientific" evidence that is available to everyone), but denies that

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Dormandy will be to her 2020 paper "True Faith" (forthcoming).

impartialist evidence about the object of faith is very weighty (ibid: 6). In her paper, Dormandy rejects both arms of doxastic partialism in favor of evidentialism, which she defines as follows: “Respect for evidence about the object of faith is an excellent-making feature of faith, even though this may, in a world like ours, mean forming negative beliefs about that object” (ibid: 2). Throughout her paper, Dormandy defends the evidentialist against both types of partialism listed here. Yet, in her carving up of the conceptual landscape, I believe Dormandy has overlooked a category of partialism that is not at odds with evidentialism—indeed, a category which may be, in certain cases of faith, the *only* way to access certain relevant evidence.

### 3. Pascal: The Attitude of Faith

Dormandy does not spend much time discussing Pascal, other than to pin him as an example of anti-epistemological-partialism. According to Dormandy, a “Pascalian” leap involves hoping “against all probability” (ibid: 5). Here, I see a point of agreement between myself and Dormandy: Pascalian faith is (at least initially) a hope or perhaps a gamble. But here lies an important detail that Dormandy fails to discuss, namely: the Pascalian leap is not the same sort of propositional attitude as a belief, and there is no reason to think that this attitude is subject to the same epistemic norms to which beliefs are subject. In order to portray Pascal as an anti-epistemological-partialist, Dormandy needs Pascalian faith to be a doxastic attitude that carries with it norms of belief. She also needs it to be true, as she claims, that Pascal’s attitude of faith is taken “against all probability” of God’s existence. But Pascal’s position in the *Pensées* is that *no* amount of information could give us an accurate probability of God’s existence (1995/1670: 154). In a passage immediately preceding his discussion of the famous Wager, Pascal writes the following:

“If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, having neither parts nor limits, he bears no relation to ourselves. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is, or if he is. That being so, who will dare to undertake a resolution of this question? It cannot be us, who bear no relationship to him.”

There are several interesting things about this passage, but for now I only want to discuss what is immediately apparent: Pascalian faith is neither in line with, nor against, “all probability”, but rather is an attitude taken with insurmountable *ignorance* of the probability. This ignorance is, in fact, a feature of the kind of creatures we are.

While Pascalian faith may culminate in a belief (ibid: 155), because reason cannot give a verdict on the question (ibid: 153), faith must begin another way: “concentrate not on convincing yourself by increasing the number of proofs of God but on diminishing your passions.” Instead of advocating for a kind of implausible doxastic voluntarism where one *chooses* to have a belief on the basis of a decision matrix, Pascal encourages unbelievers to start with a pragmatic acceptance of some of the basic tenants of religion. “Follow the way by which [believers] began: by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc.” To be clear, Pascal himself does think that belief will follow from such obedience. He gives two distinct reasons for thinking belief will follow: first, because “according to your animals reactions” the act of living as though some hypothesis is true tends to result in corresponding doxastic affirmation; second, because when one partakes in the sacraments one can experience the presence of God (ibid: 156).<sup>3</sup> The first reason for thinking belief will follow from acceptance clearly does not relate to evidence. The second reason, however, identifies a special class of evidence for belief that is only available to people who wager enough to take the initial step of accepting faith. Recall in the previous quoted passage that Pascal doubts the ability of those “who bear no relationship to [God]” to even attempt to infer the existence of God from evidence (“reason”). Participation in the sacraments places one in a new relationship to God—one oriented toward the faith in an attitude of open acceptance. One accepts faith, at least in part, in order that evidence for the object of faith may be revealed to the devotee *in* the practice. Pascal specifies two sources of post-acceptance evidence: the dulling of the sinful passions that act as epistemic blinders, and God’s personal revelation of himself to the devotee through rituals such as the Eucharist and liturgy (ibid: 156).

#### **4. Towards Partialist Evidentialism**

While Pascal sees faith as requiring a sort of partialist acceptance in order to access some reasons to believe, Dormandy’s argument for evidentialism about faith proceeds as follows. Partialism demands disrespect for negative evidence about the object of faith. This is in order to make the faith excellent through: i) the display of loyalty and ii) (in the case of anti-epistemological-partiality) through the experience of struggling with cognitive dissonance. However, partiality about faith fails to display loyalty and fails to maintain faith. It also causes

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<sup>3</sup> This experience is not guaranteed, for Pascal, but is rather a gift God may bestow on one partaking in the sacraments.

“noetic entrenchment” by sealing off the agent from counter-evidence and denying the authority of any possible counter-evidence. Since partiality about faith hinders its own goals, and leads to a comprised state of epistemic agency, it is unlikely to be the best epistemic approach to faith.

By contrast, Dormandy favors an evidentialist approach to faith, which she defines in terms of three commitments:

1. A commitment to give partialist and impartialist evidence equal weight (2020: 14).
2. A commitment to actively monitor your beliefs (sometimes by putting yourself into a position where you are relatively certain to encounter counter-evidence) (ibid: 15).
3. A commitment to try to bear the burden of unbelief or negative beliefs, should the evidence point in this direction (ibid: 16).

Dormandy argues that evidentialism performs better than partialism with respect to truth-conduciveness and loyalty because, first, evidentialism is better suited to *correctly evaluate* the evidence, and second, loyalty to another requires doing what is best for them, which in turn requires *knowing the relevant facts* about them (ibid: 16).

It is important to note that Dormandy’s original definition of partialism specifies *belief* as the cognitive attitude in question. Still, one could imagine a partialism that attached to a different cognitive attitude; indeed, one could reimagine a partialism that is compatible with both the method and goals of evidentialism. Such a partialism, I believe, more accurately characterizes Pascal’s approach to faith. This version of partialism is what I’ll call “Partialist Evidentialism”:

**Partialist Evidentialism:** Respect for evidence about the object of faith is an excellent-making feature of faith, but some of the relevant evidence is accessible only through positive acceptance of the object of faith.

A few things should be clarified about this definition of Partialist Evidentialism. First, by “acceptance”, I refer to a propositional attitude of the sort described by Elliott and Willmes: “A subject S accepts a hypothesis [...] H if and only if S presupposes H for specific reasons in her deliberation.” (2013: 811). While acceptance is a propositional attitude, it is not strictly a belief, but rather something more pragmatic. There are conditions under which it seems as though acceptance is impossible—e.g. I cannot accept a hypothesis H which is straightforwardly contradictory. But one may choose to accept H for reasons beyond displaying loyalty to the object

of H. Pertinent here, one may accept H because one takes H to be, for one reason or another, worthy of pursuit.<sup>4</sup> One may choose to accept a life of faith in God, at least for a time, in order to discover whether this sort of post-acceptance evidence that Pascal speaks of is real.

New philosophical work on the nature of rationality draws attention to other situations in which one must first accept a hypothesis before becoming privy to all the evidence in favor of it. One prominent example is L.A. Paul's work on transformative experience. In her paper "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting" Paul writes about the choice to have a child as a choice that defies standard decision-theoretic models because it is not possible to know what it would be like to have a child. That is, all relevant evidence to consider, when deciding whether or not to have a child, is unavailable to someone who has not had a child. Paul dubs this type of experience an "epistemically transformative experience" (2014: 155). There is evidence about whether or not it would be good for me to have a child—but before actually having a child, I lack epistemic access to much of it. So limited is my ability to know what it would be like to have a child, in fact, that I cannot even imagine the situation vividly enough to form a set of subjective credences about what I *think* the experience would be like.<sup>5</sup>

One may object at this juncture that accepting faith (or child-bearing), as a search for evidence, is perniciously partialist on the grounds that one accepts the hypothesis to the exclusion of other incompatible hypotheses. After all, such rival hypotheses might also have been accepted. I am not concerned about this objection, however, as evidentialism does not purport to tell us when and where to seek out evidence, or how much to look for. The answers to such questions may be entirely practical. As Feldman points out:

"Further checking is almost always possible. Depending upon the seriousness of the situation, the likelihood that new information will be helpful, and other factors, it is sometimes in your interest to do some further checking. (2002: 48)

Feldman argues that the questions of when and where to search for evidence are often pragmatic, and that these questions are separate from the question of the reasonableness of one's belief given

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<sup>4</sup> For more on what makes a hypothesis pursuit-worthy, see Cabrera (2018).

<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Agnes Callard's book *Aspiration* (2018) recognizes that we often choose projects in an effort to deeply change ourselves. Like Paul's case, this appears as a challenge to standard decision theory due to a difficulty accessing relevant evidence (or coming up with subjective credences); in Callard's examples, however, we lack evidence for what our future, transformed self will want or benefit from.

the evidence one has. Evidentialism leaves us free to make a wager based on utility, preference, hope, and fear when deliberating over the details of our search for evidence, so long as our beliefs conform to the evidence we obtain.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

Partialist Evidentialism, I propose, is the right way to understand Pascal's discussion of religious faith, as well as a good way of forging a middle ground between Dormandy's proposed dichotomy of evidentialism and epistemic partialism. Here, faith is seen as a kind of transformative experience—a decision one makes to access a special kind of evidence on the other side. This faith begins with the cognitive attitude of acceptance, and the partialist movement of accepting the object of faith can be understood as the movement of a committed evidentialist in search of evidence. If we accept Paul's conclusion—namely, that relevant evidence for some of the decisions we make cannot be accessed until we have committed ourselves to acting in a particular way—then the evidentialist should be extremely amenable to partialist acceptance. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the evidentialist can fulfill Dormandy's second criterion for evidentialism—that one must actively monitor one's beliefs, which involves actively seeking out relevant evidence where one expects to find it—without acknowledging the necessity of such partialism.

Partialism as concerning an attitude of acceptance—rather than a doxastic attitude—would also fit more comfortably with Dormandy's examples of friendship and trust. That is, one does not usually become acquainted with a would-be friend because of positive beliefs one already has about the person in question; rather, one pursues the friendship in order to find evidence regarding the features of the new acquaintance. Likewise, we may trust someone because we have sufficient evidence that they are trustworthy, but often this is not the case the first time we decide to trust someone (e.g. trusting a new romantic partner to not break your heart). The beginnings of trust, and the beginnings of friendships, often begin with attitudes of acceptance rather than with beliefs because the evidence necessary to justify these beliefs is unavailable to one who has not yet pursued the relationship. So too, the partialist-evidentialist contends, faith begins in acceptance precisely because much of the relevant evidence about the object of faith is only available to the person engaged in the practice of faith.

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