

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?
A DEFENSE OF BELIEVING PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES
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Abstract: What attitude should philosophers take toward their favorite philosophical theories? I argue that the answer is belief and middling to low credence. I begin by discussing why disagreement has motivated the view that we cannot rationally believe our philosophical theories. Then, I show why considerations from disagreement actually better support my view. I provide two additional arguments for my view: the first concerns roles for belief and credence and the second explains why believing one's philosophical theories is superior to accepting them. I close by addressing objections, including implications my view has for the Lockean thesis, the view that there is a normative connection between belief and high credence.

Keywords: Belief; Credence; Disagreement; Lockean Thesis

1. INTRODUCTION

What attitude should philosophers take toward their favorite philosophical theories? This paper concerns this question. Note that our question is not a descriptive one, about what attitude philosophers in fact take to their philosophical theories, which is largely an empirical matter. Instead, we are concerned with a normative question: what attitude is *rational* to take to one's favorite philosophical theories?

You might think that, at first blush, it's perfectly rational to believe your favorite philosophical views. After all, your favorite views are the ones you champion, assert, and argue for. Presumably, you're not only aware of arguments in their favor, but you also have answers to common objections and good reasons to reject rival views.

Recently, however, a number of authors have argued that it is *not* rational to believe our philosophical views. A common motivation for this involves disagreement. Philosophical matters are highly controversial, and there's significant disagreement among smart people about almost everything in philosophy. Given *conciliationism*, the popular idea that we should change our opinions when we encounter smart, well-informed people who disagree, it's natural to think that we likewise should not believe our philosophical views. Call the view that it is epistemically unjustified to believe philosophical theories *the no-belief view*.

My goal in this paper is to argue, contra the no-belief view, that philosophers *can* rationally believe their philosophical views. More precisely, my thesis is that it is epistemically permissible for philosophers to believe their favorite philosophical views; however, they should have middling or even low credences in them. This paper is structured as follows. **Section 2** is about disagreement. I raise some objections to common conciliatory arguments for the no-belief view. Then, drawing on my previous work and the work of Lara Buchak (2021), I explain why my approach can solve these problems the no-belief view, while also doing justice to many of the intuitions that underlie conciliationism. In **Section 3**, I provide two additional arguments for my view. The first appeals to the roles of belief and credence, and the second explains why believing philosophical theories is preferable to accepting them. In **Section 4**, I address objections, including the worry that it seems irrational to believe something if one has a middling or low credence in it. I conclude in **Section 5**.

A clarification before we begin. When I use the phrase “favorite philosophical views” or “philosophical views”, I don’t simply mean any view that a philosopher defends in print; that’s too broad, and in some cases, people explicitly disavow views even though they publish in their defense. Instead, I’m focused on theories that a researcher personally identifies with—theories about which someone would say “that’s *my* view.” Often, this is associated with a set of behaviors, including a commitment to the view, defending the view, advocating for the view, the view’s shaping one’s future research, and one’s asserting that the view is correct (Fleisher 2018: 2650). These are the views it is permissible to believe.

2. DISAGREEMENT

One of the primary motivations for the no-belief view appeals to the problem of *disagreement*.¹ Will Fleisher (2021: 365) notes, “There seems to be pervasive disagreement at the cutting edge of just about any field. It’s hard to imagine what a cutting-edge field would look like without such disagreement.” Furthermore, disagreement seems to infect philosophy as a discipline in a special way. As Jason Brennan (2010: 1) says, “Philosophers disagree immensely in significant ways. Our best philosophers disagree over the doctrines, methods, and even the aims of philosophy.” Similarly, Tom Kelly (2006: 173) observes, “[p]hilosophy is notable for the extent to which disagreements with respect to even those most basic questions persist among its most able practitioners, despite the fact that the arguments thought relevant to the disputed questions are typically well-known to all parties to the dispute.”

Because of this widespread disagreement, a number of philosophers maintain that we ought not believe philosophical theories.² Zach Barnett (2019: 109) explains, “Given certain assumptions about the nature of these philosophical disagreements, and given certain assumptions about the epistemic import of disagreement more generally, one might come to doubt that our controversial philosophical beliefs are rational.” Even stronger, Sanford Goldberg (2013: 277) says, “...the sort of disagreements we encounter in philosophy—disagreements that often take the form that I have elsewhere called *systematic peer disagreements*—make it unreasonable to think that there is any knowledge, or even justified belief, when the disagreements themselves are systematic.” David Christensen (2014: 147) largely agrees: “Indeed, it would seem that I should probably have few, if any, confident beliefs at all about philosophically controversial matters!”

Arguments for the no-belief view frequently appeal to *conciliationist* views of disagreement. According to conciliationism, we should change our opinions in response to disagreement with smart people.³ And there’s something intuitive about this position: Ignoring the fact that smart people disagree with us seems close-minded and dogmatic. Christensen’s (2007: 193) classic restaurant case brings out this intuition clearly: if we are trying to decide how to split our bill at the restaurant, and you calculate we each owe \$45 while I calculate we each owe \$43, how should I react upon learning you disagree with me (assuming we are equally good at math)? Most would argue that I should change my opinion—moving, in some way, closer to your opinion. Conciliationists are divided on how exactly we should alter our opinions—some endorse an “equal weight” view on which we should give our peer’s opinion the same weight as our own opinion

¹ Some key works in the epistemology of disagreement include Kelly (2005), Christensen (2009), Lackey (2008), Pittard (2019), and the essays in Warfield and Feldman (2010) and in Christensen and Lackey (2013).

² For arguments along these lines, see Brennan (2010), Kornblith (2010, 2013), Licon (2012), Goldberg (2009, 2013, 2015), Christensen (2014), Barnett (2019), Plakias (2019), Fleisher (2018, 2019, 2021a, 2021b).

³ For defenses and discussions of conciliationism, see Christensen (2007, 2009, 2016), Elga (2007), Feldman (2007), Kornblith (2010), Turnbull and Sampson (2020), and Fleisher (2021b), among others.

(see Elga 2007); others discuss more nuanced updating rules (Easwaran et al 2016). Nonetheless, they agree that peer disagreement ought to change our opinions.

However, the fact that the no-belief view relies on conciliationism (or, at least conciliationism about philosophical matters) creates two serious problems. First, conciliationism itself is controversial. Other philosophers defend *steadfastness*, the view that we can maintain our opinions—philosophical and otherwise—in the face of disagreement.⁴ The arguments that we shouldn't believe our philosophical views will have much less appeal to those who accept or lean toward steadfastness.

A second problem for the no-belief view is that conciliationism is subject to several serious objections. In general, you seem to lose something epistemically valuable if you constantly defer to the opinions of others. If conciliationism is true, virtually no one can rationally have strong opinions about controversial topics.

This general skeptical worry has been made more specific in two ways. First, some have also argued that always changing your views in response to disagreement leads to a problematic *spinelessness*—a requirement to give up our most deeply-held beliefs (see Elga 2007; Sherman 2015; Fritz 2018). Fritz (2018: 103) explains, “Certain moral beliefs are both very intuitively secure and deeply controversial. For this reason, several conciliationists attempt to explain why their theories do not recommend spinelessness about moral belief in particular.” While Fritz focuses on beliefs about morality, other deeply-held philosophical beliefs in domains like politics and religion seem to fall prey to the same worry: we can't take a stand on our deepest convictions in the face of controversy, but must spinelessly surrender these beliefs. Second, conciliationism is subject to the *self-undermining worry*. If conciliationism is true, we cannot rationally believe conciliationism, since many smart people disagree about it (see Christensen 2009: 762; Sampson 2019; Fleisher 2021b).

Not only does conciliationism seem to potentially lead to problematic skepticism, but there's also evidence that remaining steadfast in the face of disagreement has epistemic benefits. For instance, Kitcher (1990, 1993), Muldoon (2013), De Cruz & De Smedt (2013), and Dormandy (2020) argue that diverse opinions among researchers lead to epistemic goods, e.g. making it more likely that a group will reach the truth in the long run. Loughheed (2020) directly frames these facts as a challenge for conciliationism. Both of these skeptical problems arise for a general conciliationist view, and also for a more restrictive conciliationism that applies specifically to philosophical disagreements.⁵

While steadfastness and conciliationism both seem to have things going for them, we cannot accept both. Or can we? Notice that we've framed both views in terms of one's “opinions”, but this is ambiguous between two mental states: beliefs and credences. Believing *p* is taking *p* to be the case or regarding *p* as true. Beliefs are a coarse-grained mental state, on which there are three attitudes one can take toward a proposition: believe *p*, disbelieve *p*, and withhold belief on *p*. Credences, on the other hand, are a fine-grained mental state that measures the subjective probability of a proposition on a scale from [0,1], where 1 represents certainty that *p* is true, and 0 represents certainty that *p* is false. I may believe both that modus ponens is valid and that it will be sunny tomorrow, but my credence in the former is quite close to 1, whereas my credence in the latter may be around 0.9.

⁴ For defenses and discussions of steadfastness, see van Inwagen (1996), Rosen (2001), Kelly (2005, 2007, 2010, 2013), Pettit (2006), Conee (2010).

⁵ Thanks to Sandy Goldberg.

If we change our credences, but not our beliefs, in response to disagreement, this carves a middle way between these two main positions in the epistemology of disagreement. In virtue of conciliating with our credences, we can acknowledge and give weight to smart people's opinions, avoiding dogmatism and close-mindedness. On the other hand, in virtue of remaining steadfast in our beliefs, we can take a stand on controversial matters, avoid spinelessness, and glean disagreement's benefits (see Jackson 2021 and Buchak 2021). Maybe we can actually have our cake and eat it too.

There are several additional reasons that disagreement should change one's credences, but not one's beliefs. First, it deals with all three worries for conciliationism: spinelessness, self-undermining, and loss of epistemic benefits. On the view in question, we aren't forced to spinelessly give up our most deeply-held beliefs. We can believe—and thus take a stand on—these controversial convictions; we should just have middling to low credences in them. It also solves the self-undermining problem. The problem of how we can rationally believe conciliationism if conciliationism is true is only a problem if one holds to belief-conciliationism. On my view, conciliationists should lower their credence in conciliationism, but there are no qualms about believing it. Finally, the view permits researchers to maintain diverse beliefs in the face of philosophical disagreement, and thus glean the epistemic benefits of steadfastness.

The final two reasons to prefer belief-steadfastness and credal-conciliationism are related. Third, credal-conciliationism is flexible in a way belief-conciliationism is not. In the belief case, if I believe *p* and you, my peer, believe not-*p*, perhaps we should both suspend. But what if I believe *p* and you withhold? Forming a new belief, e.g. probably-*p*, doesn't tell me what attitude I should take toward the bare proposition *p*. Assuming conciliation is a matter of changing our attitude toward a certain proposition, beliefs are too coarse-grained to capture nuanced updating rules. Credences, by contrast, are fine-grained enough to capture a variety of updating rules, including the split-the-difference view (although, this can lead to failures of communitivity—see Gardiner 2014), conditionalization, and the “UPCO” rule proposed by Easwaran et al (2016).

Fourth, credences allow us to conciliate in different ways, depending on if the disagreement is with a peer, superior, inferior, expert, or novice. Much attention in the disagreement literature has been put on epistemic peers—those who are essentially your epistemic equals (but see King 2012 for an argument that peerhood is rare). But disagreement's epistemic significance goes beyond peerhood; in fact, if conciliationism is true, we should potentially conciliate more, rather than less, when we encounter disagreement with superiors or experts. Credal-conciliationism allows us to conciliate in different ways depending on who we disagree with; beliefs are again too coarse-grained to allow this.⁶

Given that disagreement is one of the main reasons on offer for the no-belief view, this suggests that, contra the no-belief view, maybe we've been conciliating with the wrong attitude. There are several reasons the combination of belief-steadfastness with credal-conciliationism is attractive. Then, even a relatively conciliatory approach to disagreement does not force us to give up our beliefs in the face of disagreement. Next, we turn to two additional arguments for the permissibility of believing philosophical theories.

⁶ See Jackson (2020) for an expansion on, and further defense of, these third and fourth considerations.

3. TWO ARGUMENTS

3.1 *Roles for belief and credence*

As discussed above, beliefs are a coarse-grained, tripartite mental state, whereas credences are a fine-grained mental state. One might wonder why epistemologists discuss and appeal to both attitudes; except for the (unpopular) eliminativist views, most epistemologists think that we have both beliefs and credences.

A common answer to this question appeals to different *roles* that belief and credence play. For example, beliefs enable you to take a stand and have a view of the world. When you believe that it is raining or that God exists, you represent the world in a certain way, and you're taking a stand on the truth of some matter. A 0.9 credence that it is raining or that God exists does not take a stand or represent the world in the same way. Non-extreme credences leave possibilities open in a way that beliefs do not (cf. Ross and Schroeder 2014). When it comes to philosophical theories, the ability to believe them lets us take a stand on our favorite theory, and represent the world such that it is true.

Credences, on the other hand, track one's precise level of evidential support. Credences change (via conditionalization) as you encounter new evidence. Not all evidential changes need to change your beliefs though, even though they should change your credences. For example, suppose I check the forecast tomorrow at there's a 95% chance of rain, so I both believe and have a high credence it will rain tomorrow. Then, I check the forecast again a few hours later; now there's only an 85% chance of rain. This small change in my evidence need not change my belief that it will rain tomorrow, as I still have strong evidence that it will rain. However, I should alter my credence—from 0.95 to 0.85. Even those who think credence and belief are closely connected would agree that small changes in evidence can change our credences without requiring us to alter our beliefs.⁷ Thus, credences are fine-grained enough to tightly track our level of evidence for and against some proposition; beliefs are too coarse-grained to play this role.

These natural and intuitive roles for belief and credence fit well with the idea that we can believe, but should have middling (or low) credences in our favorite philosophical views. Believing our philosophical views lets us take a stand on their truth, mentally represent the world such that they are true, and honestly say, “that's my view!” However, we should lower our credences in light of the counterevidence against our favorite theory—e.g. the pervasive disagreement and lack of consensus in philosophy.

3.2 *Belief vs. acceptance*

Some who argue for the no-belief view have suggested an alternative: we ought to *accept* them. Acceptance is acting as if something is true, and various stories have been told about why it can be rational to act as if our favorite philosophical views are true, even if we do not believe them.⁸ Fleisher (2018), for example, argues for a kind of acceptance called *endorsement*. Endorsing a theory is associated with acts such as: a disposition to assert and defend a theory, treating a theory as a premise in one's reasoning, having a commitment to a theory, and the theory's shaping one's research program.

⁷ One exception is those who defend the belief-is-credence-1 view, e.g. Greco (2015), Dodd (2016).

⁸ For similar proposals, see Goldberg (2013), Palmira (2019, 2020), Barnett (2019), Fleisher (2020, 2021a, 2021b).

Fleisher argues that a research community should endorse a wide range of theories—but not believe them. This is, in part, because some of the epistemic benefits of disagreement can be gleaned via diverse endorsement. He explains (2018: 2657), “Endorsement enables the kind of resilient commitment and advocacy of a theory which leads to the valuable disagreement described by both the psychological literature and scientific cases studies.” He also explains how diverse endorsement promotes collective epistemic goals—what he called “extrinsic epistemic reasons”—such as making it more likely a group will reach the truth in the long run, and promoting other epistemic goals of inquiry (even if indirectly; see p. 2662).

Fleisher’s view and others raise the question: why not just accept (or endorse) our philosophical theories, especially if the epistemic benefits of disagreement are available without belief? There are at least two reasons that believing our philosophical theories is superior to accepting them. First, the spinelessness worry seems to infect the acceptance-only view in a problematic way. Consider philosophical views at the core of my web of belief: factory farming is morally objectionable, God exists, epistemic permissivism is true. On the acceptance-only view, I can act as if these are true, defend them in print, and even assert them. However, there is still something missing. Imagine the following conversation:

Me: I believe that factory farming is immoral.

Conciliationist Cam: Philosophers disagree about whether factory farming is morally wrong, so it’s not rational for you to believe that.

Me: Wait, really? I can’t take a stand on a firm conviction that I have, simply because people disagree with me?

Conciliationist Cam: Don’t worry! You can still act as if factory farming is wrong! You just can’t believe it.

Me: That doesn’t offer much comfort. You’re still saying it is irrational for me to take a doxastic stance on one of my deeply held philosophical convictions.

I cannot truly take a stand on my favorite theory in the way that beliefs allow. This is because beliefs are inherently representational states; if I believe *p*, then I represent the world such that *p* is true. But if believing my favorite philosophical view is irrational, then representing my favorite philosophical theory *as true* would be irrational. My loyalty to my views can only be a matter of action, but the mental, representational loyalty is irrational. This raises the spinelessness worry all over again.

Furthermore, on at least some of the acceptance views, my commitment to a theory is domain-relative. As Fleisher (2018: 2652–3) explains: “Endorsement is specific to a research domain: a subject endorses something for the purposes of a particular domain of inquiry... Endorsement is a “fragmented” attitude, meaning that it is compartmentalized rather than being a global feature of the subject’s mental state.” Fleisher goes on to explain that we may give up our commitment to a theory, or stop acting as if it is true, outside of a research context; we may also endorse different theories in different domains of inquiry. However, this makes the spinelessness problem even worse. If I can only accept my theory *in certain research domains*, then not only can I not believe it in any domain, but I can only accept it in restricted contexts. In other contexts, I can accept mutually exclusive theories in the same way. This is a weak, flimsy commitment (if it can even be rightfully called a commitment at all). I would like to think that I can stand up for my favorite theory in all contexts—in both what I believe and in how I act.

Second, and relatedly, the idea that it is *irrational* to believe philosophical theories seems implausibly strong. While there may simply be a clash of intuitions on this point, part of the problem lies in the fact that those defending the no-belief view have relied on conciliatory principles and paid

much less attention to the motivations for steadfastness. Can I really not have opinions on something simply because it is controversial? Consider the philosophers who believe their philosophical views after careful thought, coming up with new arguments for them, defending them again and again in print, and responding to all the major objections. It seems strong to claim that, by believing their views, they are doing something irrational.

It's much more plausible to say that they aren't irrational for believing their theories, but they're irrational if they are *overly confident* in them. This overconfidence is characterized by an excessively high credence, which leads to dogmatism and being closed off to new evidence. Due to the controversial nature of the views, they should be less confident—and the more controversial the view, the less confident they should be. This is exactly my view.

4. OBJECTIONS

4.1 *Objection 1: Belief and low credence?*

Perhaps the most important objection to my view is the question of whether it could ever be rational to believe p , and, at the same time, have a middling to low credence in p . Brennan (2010: 1-2) notes: “[The skeptic] notices that philosophers have extensive disagreement about the answers to [philosophical] questions and thus concludes that the probability of her getting the true answer by pursuing philosophy is low.” If Brennan is right, then our credence in any given philosophical theory should be low—say, below 0.5. However, it's *prima facie* plausible that we shouldn't believe something if our credence in it is below 0.5. Hence, we have a straightforward argument that we shouldn't believe our philosophical theories.

This argument has two premises. One, that usually, the credence one should have in their favorite philosophical theory is below 0.5. Two, that you ought not believe p if your credence in p is below 0.5. Both premises are resistible.

First, let's consider the question of what credence you should have in your favorite philosophical theory. Most would agree that it should normally not be extremely high, e.g. in the 0.8–1 range. However, it's also not immediately clear that it should always be *below* 0.5, either. Presumably, you have arguments that raise the probability of your favorite theory, you've thought of responses to the major objections to your theory, and you also have serious objections to rival theories (which you may not think there are satisfying answers to). These considerations, then, may warrant giving your favorite theory a bigger piece of the “credal pie” than rival theories. While you are probably unwarranted to give the theory a credence that is high in absolute terms—it will depend on the number and plausibility of the rival theories, and the strength of the arguments for your theory and the objections to it—it may, at least in some cases, warrant a credence slightly above 0.5 for your favorite theory, even with a fair amount of credal conciliating.

Let's consider a concrete example. Suppose you are a libertarian about free will. You think libertarianism is the best explanation for the fact that people are morally responsible for their actions, and you find the consequence argument for incompatibilism quite persuasive. You think the other two live options—compatibilism and hard determinism—also both have things going for them, and you know many smart people who defend both views. Nonetheless, you think the argumentative scales tip in favor of libertarianism. For that reason, you have a 0.55 credence in libertarianism, a 0.25 credence in compatibilism, and 0.2 credence in hard determinism. This is admittedly a less-conciliatory credence distribution, but is nonetheless consistent with a moderate

degree of credal conciliationism, especially if we reject rigid updating rules like the split-the-difference view (as many conciliationists do).

Note also that the theories in this example are relatively coarse-grained; this is intentional. The more specific a theory becomes—and the more mutually-exclusive competing theories there are—the lower one’s credence in it should be, and the harder it will be to rationally believe it. It’s one thing to believe libertarianism is true. It’s another to believe, say, a very specific version of agent-causal libertarianism defended by Clarke in a 1996 paper. My concern is to defend that it’s rational to believe general philosophical theories, such as the former.⁹

Those who are sympathetic to *the Lockean thesis* may prefer this first response. The Lockean thesis is the view that S rationally believes p iff S has a rational credence in p above some (probabilistic) threshold (see Locke 2014, Dorst 2019, Fitelson & Shear 2018, Lee and Silvia 2022). Once your credence drops below that threshold, it’s irrational for you to believe the view in question.

That said, even for Lockeans, there is a degree of flexibility here. First, there are different points at which we could set the threshold, and the lower we set it, the more steadfast we can be when it comes to believing our favorite philosophical theories. Furthermore, it is worth distinguishing two kinds of Lockean thresholds: the Lockean threshold at which belief is rationally *required*, and the Lockean threshold at which belief is rationally *permitted*.¹⁰ The threshold at which belief is required may be significantly above 0.5, but the permissibility threshold could be quite low, e.g. slightly above 0.5 (or even lower than 0.5). Thus, one can accept both my view and the Lockean thesis; depending on the version of the Lockean thesis we accept, our beliefs in our philosophical views can be more or less steadfast.

A second response denies that you ought not believe p if your credence in p is below 0.5. Some readers may balk at this suggestion. However, several cases of this are already present in the current literature. Hawthorne, Rothschild, & Spectre (2016) discuss the following case. Suppose there is a 3-horse race, and horse A is 48% likely to win, horse B is 28% likely to win, and horse C is 27% likely to win. Even though the probability that horse A wins is below 50%, it is rational to believe *horse A will win*, since A is the most likely of the live options.

I find this case helpful because it may be analogous to the credence distribution that many have regarding their philosophical theory and alternatives. We can tweak the numbers so one’s credence in one’s favorite theory is even closer to the alternative theories. Furthermore, this need not commit us to the general principle that it *always* rational to believe the most likely salient alternative—but merely that this is sometimes rational, even if your credence in that alternative is below 0.5.

Other cases of rational belief and low credence have been suggested. In a preface paradox scenario, you may rationally believe the conjunction of all the claims in your book, but your credence in the conjunction of all the claims in your book should be quite low (see Smith 2016: 72ff; Cevolani 2017). Martin Smith (2016: 86ff) discusses cases where we learn of a base rate or get statistical evidence *against* some proposition for which we previously had good evidence. For example, suppose a bus hits someone on a busy street, you have reliable testimonial evidence that the bus was owned by the Blue Bus Company. Then, you learn that, on the day of the incident, only 5% of the buses operating in that part of town were owned by the Blue Bus Company. That doesn’t seem like a good reason to give up your belief that the Blue Bus Company was responsible—after all, you have reliable testimonial evidence supporting this proposition. Nonetheless, learning this

⁹ Thanks to Michaela McSweeney and Sandy Goldberg for helpful discussion.

¹⁰ Thanks to Francesco Praolini for helpful discussion.

statistic affects the probability that the Blue Bus Company was responsible. Given the eyewitness is 85% reliable, you can use Bayesian likelihoods to calculate the probability the Blue Bus Company did it—and this turns out to be around 23%.¹¹

Buchak (2021) discusses related cases in which we receive counterevidence to propositions at the core of our web of belief—whether that be our religious views, moral commitments, beliefs about our close friends and family, etc. Buchak suggests that the counterevidence might make us doubt the claim in question, and thus lower our credence, but we can continue to believe the claim in question—in part, because of the goodness of continuing believing if the claim turns out to be true. Buchak suggests that A could rationally believe p and B could rationally believe $\sim p$, but A and B could both end up with the same rational credence in p . Buchak (2021) and Jackson (2019a) suggest this is a way to capture the idea that rational faith remains steadfast in light of counterevidence.

The general idea in these cases is that rational belief and rational credence are sensitive to different features of a body of evidence (Buchak 2014: 295). Some kinds of evidence, like statistical evidence, move around our credences, even drastically, but need not change our beliefs. This suggests that believing p could be rational even if one’s credence in p is lower than 0.5.¹²

4.2 Objection 2: Should we ever stop believing our philosophical theories?

One might worry that my view implies that we should never stop believing our philosophical theories. This seems like a bad result. Rational belief is sensitive to new evidence, and rational people do not disregard counterevidence. But if the correct attitude to take toward our philosophical theories is belief and middling to low credence, then it’s not clear when we should stop believing a philosophical theory.

In response, it’s not rational to dogmatically believe your favorite philosophical views *no matter what*. While, for the sake of being ecumenical, I won’t take a precise stance here, there are two main views on when we should stop believing. First, if one combines my view with a version of the Lockean thesis, then one should stop believing a philosophical view when their credence falls below the permissibility threshold. However, recall that, as discussed above, Lockeans that accept my view will want to set the threshold quite low—i.e. in the 0.5 range.

If the Lockean thesis is false, then one will have an alternative, non-probabilistic account of rational belief—e.g. Buchak (2014)’s statistical evidence account, Jackson (2020)’s salience account, or Smith (2016)’s normic support account. What unifies most of these accounts is that rational belief isn’t determined by a probabilistic threshold, but on what *kind* of evidence you have for or against your philosophical views. For example, Buchak argues that some kinds of evidence, like statistical evidence, can move one’s credences all over the (0,1) interval, but ought not change one’s beliefs. However, if one receives reliable testimony, then that’s the kind of evidence that

¹¹ Call (A) the proposition that 85% reliable an eyewitness testified it was blue and (C) the proposition that 5% of the buses in town that day were operated by the Blue Bus Company, and (B) the proposition that the Blue Bus Company is guilty. Then:

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(B|C) &= 0.05; \Pr(\sim B|C) = 0.95 \\ \Pr(A|B\&C) &= 0.85; \Pr(A|\sim B\&C) = 0.15 \\ \Pr(B|A\&C) &= (\Pr(B|C)*\Pr(A|B\&C)) / ((\Pr(B|C)*\Pr(A|B\&C)) + \Pr(\sim B|C)*\Pr(A|\sim B\&C)) \\ \text{Therefore, } \Pr(B|A\&C) &= (0.05*0.85)/((0.05*0.85) + (0.95*0.15)) = \sim 0.23 \end{aligned}$$

So, given our evidence (i.e., A and C), the probability that the blue bus is guilty is $\sim 23\%$. See Smith (2016: ch. 4).

¹² For additional cases and further discussion of the independence of belief and credence, see Jackson (2022).

could change one's beliefs. In the case of philosophical views, one might think that disagreement doesn't have the same epistemic force as, for example, a solid deductive argument against your view that you have no response to. The latter may provide a reason to give up your beliefs, whereas the former should merely lower your credence.

4.3 *Objection 3: Relevant alternatives and rational belief*

Let's return to Hawthorne et al's race horse case. Suppose you have an analogous credal distribution when it comes to the free will debate: a 0.48 credence in libertarianism, a 0.28 credence in compatibilism, and a 0.27 credence in hard determinism. I've suggested that it may be rational to believe libertarianism; this is intuitive when compatibilism and hard determinism are the relevant alternatives. However, suppose instead, we merely consider two possibilities: libertarianism is true or libertarianism is false. If you have a 0.48 credence that libertarianism is true, then you should have a 0.52 credence that libertarianism is false. You believe p , even though $\neg p$ is more likely. This seems irrational.¹³

There is something odd going on here. There seems to be two symmetrical intuitions—that you can rationally believe libertarianism and that you cannot rationally believe libertarianism—that vary with the alternative possibilities you are considering. This kind of case inspires some to suggest that rational belief is context-sensitive (e.g. Leitgeb 2017; Clarke 2013).¹⁴

A response to this worry appeals to a privileged set of relevant alternatives, motivated by the goals of inquiry. The final goal of inquiry is to find the true theory—not merely to rule out false theories. For this reason, in inquiry, we have special reason to consider libertarianism relative to the other specific alternatives (i.e. compatibilism, hard determinism), rather than relative to the unspecific “not-libertarianism”. You wouldn't be content if your inquiry into free will concluded merely that not-libertarianism—all that tell you is that libertarianism is false, but doesn't tell you which alternative is true. It's unsatisfying to end inquiry in mere disbelief.

Then, especially in inquiry, we ought to consider our philosophical theories relative to specific alternative theories. And, in seeing our views relative to specific alternatives, we can believe them, even if we assign them a credence below 0.5.

4.4 *Objection 4: Intuitive cases of conciliationism*

One might wonder what my view says about cases of mundane disagreements, such as Christensen's restaurant case. Should I really *continue to believe* everyone's share is \$43, even though you've calculated \$45?

In response, recall that my thesis only applies to philosophical views. Cases of mundane disagreement don't involve philosophical views. Maybe belief-conciliationism is appropriate in some cases of mundane disagreement, but not in cases of deep disagreement that involves propositions at the core of one's web of belief (see Pittard 2019.) Buchak (2021: sec. 7) argues that many of the epistemic benefits of steadfastness don't apply in cases of mundane disagreement: “you don't care that much about maintaining a correct belief on this topic over time, you don't have a lot of other beliefs that depend on presupposing this calculation in your reasoning, you are

¹³ Thanks to Sandy Goldberg and Uriah Kriegel for raising this worry.

¹⁴ Drawing on this suggestion, one might also defend a view on which most of the philosophical beliefs we're epistemically permitted to have are *contrastive* beliefs, e.g. I can believe <libertarianism, rather than compatibilism> (see Blauw 2012). While this is an interesting suggestion, I want to defend the view that I can believe my philosophical views full-stop. Thanks to Uriah Kriegel for helpful discussion.

not already involved in a long-term course of action on its basis, and so forth.” Thus, while my view does not take a stand on what to do in cases of mundane disagreement, a more rigorous conciliation may sometimes be appropriate.

4.5 *Objection 5: Belief, credence, action?*

Suppose a rational person believes p with a middling or low credence in p . This raises questions about how they ought to act. Suppose that the truth of p is relevant to some decision they are making. In deciding how to act, should they rely on their belief that p or their credence in p ?¹⁵

This is a difficult question, and I am not fully satisfied with my current thoughts on the matter. However, here are a few preliminary responses.

First, a version of this question is a problem for a most of the plausible views about what attitude we should take to our favorite philosophical theories. Most proponents of the no-belief view nonetheless think we can *accept* our favorite philosophical views, champion them, and act as if they are true. The question arises: should we always accept them? And if not, when should we accept them, and we should we act on our low credence that they are true?

That said, I do think that we can err on the side of acting on our beliefs (perhaps with certain exceptions, e.g. cases where doing so would involve a serious risk). One reason to think this is because of the epistemic benefits of disagreement—these benefits are better gleaned if people are asserting their favorite theories, arguing for them, publishing in their favor, etc. In many cases, there’s much to be gained if one acts on their believed theory, and it turns out to be true.

Some of the trickier cases involve philosophical matters that have practical implications outside of research contexts, and especially ones that are associated with a serious moral risk if one is in error. For example, suppose you have the philosophical view that it is permissible to eat factory farmed meat, but due to philosophical disagreement, your credence in this is middling or low. Instead of relying on your belief when deciding what to buy at the grocery store, wouldn’t it nonetheless be appropriate for you to err on the side of caution, because of the moral risk if your belief is false? These kinds of cases suggest that, even if we can rationally believe our philosophical views, it may not be appropriate to rely on them in all contexts.¹⁶

6. CONCLUSION

I’ve argued that it is epistemically permissible for philosophers to believe their favorite philosophical theories; however, they should have middling or even low credences in them. First, I raised some problems for the way that the no-belief view relies on conciliatory principles. I explained why my approach can solve problems that conciliationism creates for my opponents, while doing justice to many of the intuitions that underlie conciliationism. I then provided two additional arguments for my view: the first regarding the roles of belief and credence, and the second regarding why believing philosophical theories is preferable to accepting them. Finally, I addressed four objections, including the worry that it seems irrational to believe something if one has a middling or low credence in it. I conclude that philosophers should not shy away from believing their philosophical views, but also should be careful not to be overconfident in them.

¹⁵ Thanks to Alexandra Lloyd and Sarah Moss for raising this worry.

¹⁶ However, simply because we cannot rely on a belief in a context doesn’t mean we have to give it up. See Alonso (2014) and Jackson (2019b) for more on the distinction between having a belief and relying on a belief.

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