Evidence Thresholds and The Partiality of Relational Faith

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**Abstract:** This commentary shows how Dormandy’s ‘Partiality Norm of Belief for Faith’ can be made compatible with ‘Evidentialism about Faith’. Dormandy takes partiality to involve disrespect toward evidence – where evidence we are partial toward is given undue weight. I propose an alternative where partiality is to require more or less evidence for believing a proposition given the benefits or harms of holding the belief. Rather than disrespecting evidence, this partiality is simply to have variable ‘evidence thresholds’ that are partly set by pragmatic considerations. Evidence is not disrespected; an agent just requires more or less of it on pragmatic grounds.

**Keywords:** Evidence Thresholds; Epistemic Resilience; Belief; Faith; Pragmatic Reasoning.

1. **Introduction**

It has seemed plausible to many that holding positive beliefs about the object of one’s faith is good-making of that faith. Having salient positive beliefs about a friend you have faith in, e.g. that your friend is trustworthy, or about God whom you have faith toward, e.g. that God is merciful, makes that faith excellent. A common reason supporting this is that it instantiates the loyalty required by the relationship you have with these agents. As such, people seem warranted in factoring in these good-making properties of positive belief in their deliberation about what to believe. Dormandy calls this pragmatic reasoning *the Partiality Norm of Belief for Faith* (PNBF).

Despite the plausibility of PNFB, Dormandy rejects it, instead, favouring the evidentialist norm that it is ‘respect for evidence’, and not positive beliefs about the object of faith, that make it good-making. She calls this *Evidentialism About Faith* (EF). Respecting evidence, Dormandy says, requires one to exercise epistemic responsibility in, synchronically, forming and maintaining beliefs given the total evidence you have at a time; and diachronically, acquiring new evidence (3).

Why will someone following PNFB not be respectful towards evidence? One concern is partiality towards evidence involves giving some evidence undue weight in deliberation over what to believe. But that needn’t be the case. In this commentary, I consider a way of making PNFB compatible with EF, and I show how it evades some of the concerns that Dormandy has concerning PNFB. This proposal takes partiality to involve pragmatic factors changing the *amount* of evidence an agent requires before forming or relinquishing a belief, not giving evidence undue weight. I begin by setting out the theory and then apply it to relational faith.

1. **The Evidential Thresholds Theory**

To explain this alternative theory, it will help if we begin with one theory that Dormandy puts forward, which also attempts to make compatible PNFB and EF: *Epistemological Partiality* (EP). On the versions of EP that Dormandy considers, there are two kinds of evidence: *impartialist evidence*, which ‘includes experiences that any cognitively competent person can have’; and *partialist evidence*, such as ‘personal experiences of the object of faith (including religious experiences), testimonial experiences colored by emotions and background beliefs (where outsiders would have different experiences of the same testimonial acts), and community traditions that outsiders will tend to reject’ (6). Partialist evidence tends to ‘make available charitable explanations for apparently negative behavior, which community doctrine and practice may (for example to promote unity) encourage believing’, whereas impartialist evidence ‘tends to speak more ambiguously, sometimes confirming but other times disconfirming positive beliefs’.

EP has both a synchronic and a diachronic policy for treating evidence, but I will just focus on the synchronic condition. Synchronically, EP says that ‘When forming beliefs about an object of faith, you are permitted to give partialist evidence predominant weight and impartialist evidence little if any weight’ (ibid). So, when you have faith in God, then beliefs salient to this faith, such as the belief that God exists, or that God is merciful, may be held almost entirely on partialist evidence. And when you have faith in a spouse, then beliefs salient to this faith, such as the belief that your spouse is honest, may be held almost entirely on partialist evidence. On EP, different kinds of evidence are *treated* differently, but the supporter of EP will maintain that evidence is still treated respectfully, and hence PNFB and EF can be compatible. I don’t want to take issue with Dormandy’s formulation of EP or her interpretation of its supporters. I simply want to show, by contrast, an alternative way of making compatible PNFB with EF.

Recall that respecting evidence requires one to, synchronically, exercise epistemic responsibility in forming and maintaining beliefs given the total evidence that you have at a time. Let’s call this *the synchronic condition*. This condition will appeal to many who take it that the aim of belief is truth (Whiting 2013), and since it is evidence that counts in favour of a proposition’s truth (McMyler 2011, 133), then a belief should aim to be formed and maintained on the basis of one’s evidence. Moreover, many agree that the question of whether to believe *p* reduces to whether *p* is true (Shah 2006), and since it is only evidence that counts in favour of the truth of *p*, then it is only on the basis of evidence that we can even deliberate over what to believe. I will assume that these claims are correct, and that it follows that only evidential considerations can serve as the proper grounds for forming and maintaining beliefs, i.e. that the synchronic condition is correct.

But a new question then arises: *how much* evidence must an agent acquire before she is justified in forming a belief? One recent theory, developed by Morton and Paul (2018; 2019) attempts to make space here for pragmatic reasoning, which takes different agents to require different amounts of evidence for believing a proposition in certain contexts. Morton and Paul focus on agents committed to meaningful long-term goals, such as training for a marathon or completing a PhD. They propose that, given the motivational effects of belief, agents who believe they can achieve these goals are more likely to succeed in them. Moreover, they might have higher thresholds for belief revision, such that they have a policy whereby they require more evidence before they will relinquish their belief that they will achieve their goal. For example, the person training for a marathon believes that she will complete the marathon, but may suffer an ankle sprain that counts as evidence against her belief. Nevertheless, if she continues to hold on to her belief, then she will be more motivated, and hence more likely, to achieve her goal.

On this basis, she may have a high evidential threshold for her belief, and not take the evidence of the ankle sprain to be sufficient to require her to relinquish her belief that she will complete the marathon.

We can identify three components to this account. First, the stakes in *believing correctly* may be lower or higher in different contexts. For the casual marathon runner, it will be fairly low stakes whether or not it is true that she will complete the marathon. She is not a professional athlete, and will lose very little if she doesn’t complete the run. But for the professional marathon runner, it is high stakes whether or not it is true that she will complete the marathon. She may lose sponsorship, professional standing, and the ability to compete again if she doesn’t complete the race. Consistently with recent literature (Kim and McGrath 2018), call this the *pragmatic encroachment* component.

Second, the stakes in *holding a belief* may be lower or higher in different contexts. If it is correct that if the runner continues to believe that she will complete the marathon then she is more motivated and hence more likely to complete it, then this raises the stakes for her continuing to believe she will complete it. But the same is not true for the impartial observer watching the race who has no vested interests in holding a belief about whether the runner will complete the marathon. Call this the *pragmatic reasons* component.

Third, the stakes in believing correctly, as with the pragmatic encroachment component, and with holding a belief, as with the pragmatic reasons component, are partly determined by pragmatic factors, including the positive or negative consequences of believing correctly, and the positive or negative consequences of simply holding a belief. However, on the account offered by Morton and Paul, these do not show up in one’s deliberation about what to believe. Rather, they partly determine how much evidence a person requires before she is to believe, or relinquish a belief toward, a proposition. Call this the *evidential thresholds* component.

Morton and Paul recommend a tiered structure for how agents ought to respond to new evidence. As a first-order principle, one’s policy for responding to evidence ‘ought to be shaped solely by epistemic concerns like accuracy or conduciveness to knowledge’ (2019, 193). This is consistent with the synchronic condition. But there are also second-order ‘pragmatic and ethical concerns’ that bear on the amount of evidence someone requires in a given context. In line with the pragmatic encroachment component, this will particularly be the case when someone requires ‘more evidence to form or update a belief concerning matters where it is very important to get it right, and less when it is less important’ (ibid, 194). The literature on pragmatic encroachment has provided many examples of such contexts, most famously, whether or not the bank is open (Stanley 2005). But also in line with the pragmatic reasons component, it may be beneficial for those with long-term goals to have ‘some degree of inertia in the agent’s belief about whether she will ultimately succeed’, since such inertia can help one’s chances of success. This inertia can be brought about by adjusting one’s evidential thresholds by having a policy of requiring more evidence to demonstrate that she cannot succeed ‘relative to the way in which an impartial observer would tend to update on new evidence’ (Morton and Paul 2019, 194).

So, we have a theory for responding to evidence that, in the first-order, treats only evidential reasons as reasons to form or update a belief, and in the second-order, determines where to set the threshold for how much evidence is required before forming or updating a belief, which is partly determined on pragmatic grounds. Let’s call this *the* *evidential thresholds theory*.

1. **Evidential Thresholds for Relational Faith**

The evidential thresholds theory can be applied to many contexts relevant to relational faith (Malcolm 2020, 124-5). Consider an example relevant to the pragmatic reasons component. Suppose Jane is David’s friend and Jane has been accused of a crime. David has faith in Jane’s innocence, and plausibly, in virtue of their friendship, David’s faith would be made better if it involved a belief that Jane was innocent because this would underlie his loyalty to Jane as a friend. That is, their friendship requires David’s loyalty, and to be loyal, David’s faith in Jane could involve believing that Jane is innocent. Now, David ought also to follow the evidence where it leads, but it seems permissible that David requires *more* evidence to believe that Jane is guilty than does an impartial observer, precisely because it makes his faith in Jane, and hence his loyalty towards her, better.

Examples like this are familiar in the epistemology of friendship (Stroud 2006), but are usually interpreted as taking pragmatic factors to warrant giving evidence undue weight. This is how the cases that Dormandy considers for EP work: because one has some form of special relationship, one is warranted in *treating evidence differently* than one would if one did not have the relationship, namely, by *prioritising* *partial* evidence and *deflating* the value of impartialist evidence. Hence, this approach fails the synchronic condition by disrespecting evidence. But the David-Jane example does not work like this. In that example, evidence is *not* treated differently: David does not ignore some evidence and give greater credibility to others. Rather, he just requires *more* *of it* than he would do if he did not have the special relationship with Jane. For instance, suppose an eyewitness said that she saw Jane commit the crime but Jane denies committing it. For the impartial observer, this may be sufficient to permit believing that Jane is guilty. But it may not be sufficient to permit David to believe that she is guilty: he requires something further because him believing that Jane is innocent makes his faith in her innocence greater. But David doesn’t deflate the value of the eyewitness testimony, or increase the value of Jane’s claim to be innocent. He treats these pieces of evidence with the due credibility they deserve. Rather, he has a higher evidential threshold before he will believe that Jane is guilty – high enough that the evidence he has is not sufficient to require believing in Jane’s guilt. Now, it needn’t be so high that David won’t ever come to believe that Jane is guilty – loyalty does not require indomitable epistemic resistance – but where the evidence is still reasonably indeterminate, then David may continue to believe in Jane’s innocence.

It’s important to note that one’s threshold for evidence for relinquishing a belief is not always heightened by pragmatic reasoning, but is sometimes lowered, particularly when we factor in pragmatic encroachment considerations. Suppose the marathon runner is a professional athlete, who has been told that if she competes and fails to complete the race then she will lose her sponsorship, but if she doesn’t compete but takes time to recover from her ankle sprain then she will keep her sponsorship. Her evidential threshold for her belief that she will complete the race is lowered by the stakes involved in getting her belief right. She needs to evaluate more evidence that indicates she can complete the race given her recent injury, and only requires minimal evidence indicating she cannot complete it, before she ought believe she cannot complete it.

The evidential thresholds theory is resistant to two objections that Dormandy proposes against EP. First, she says that treating evidence partially, in the way that EP promotes, leads to ‘noetic entrenchment’, which causes one to (a) form false beliefs, and (b) cause attendant moral harms. The troubling example of the latter is the abuse in the church being ignored because evidence of this is dismissed ‘out of hand’ (12). I have no doubt that treating evidence partially in the way Dormandy explains for extant theories of EP could well lead to these attendant moral and epistemic harms. However, on the evidential thresholds account, noetic entrenchment should be avoidable. Recall that the agent follows the evidence where it leads, even though for cases where the evidence is indeterminate, she may be permitted to require different levels of evidence on pragmatic grounds. This agent may well resist *some* counter-evidence, and is hence somewhat epistemically resilient. But she is not entirely resistant, and nor does she ignore or deflate the relevance of any counter-evidence to her belief. No evidence is rejected out of hand, and she will not be disposed to ignore the possibility that groups she is partial toward, including religious organisations, are incapable of committing significant moral harms. Moreover, when the stakes are raised for getting her belief correct, as with the church abuse example, she will likely have lower thresholds for the amount of evidence it takes to show that someone is guilty of the abuse.

Dormandy’s second objection to EP is that, rather than being loyal, it is disloyal for someone to be epistemically partial because ‘playing fast and loose with the truth about someone is no way to show her loyalty’, and instead ‘loyalty involves *doing what is right for her*’ (13). To return to our previous example, loyalty to the church ‘surely commits you to holding religious-community leaders accountable’, and not to turning a blind eye to evidence that might incriminate them. But since the evidential thresholds theory is more modest with its epistemic resistance, still following the evidence where it leads, it will not suggest treating partial evidence favourably and hence only ever believing positively of the object of faith. Whilst it takes positive beliefs about the object of one’s faith to be good-making, and hence to provide pragmatic reasons to have, under some circumstances, a different threshold for evidence from an impartial observer, it does not require evidence to be treated any differently from the impartial observer. It simply holds that, if it is the right thing to do to continue holding positive beliefs about someone we are loyal towards, then one has a pro-tanto reason to require more evidence before relinquishing these positive beliefs.

1. **Conclusion**

I have proposed a different model of evidential partiality, consistent with PNBF, and fully compatible with showing respect for evidence, as favoured by subscribers to EF. This account also avoids promoting noetic entrenchment with its attendant harms, and satisfies requirements for loyalty.

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