

How to Make Norms Clash

Eva Schmidt

1. Introduction

Katherine Dormandy reflects on norms of belief supplied by religious faith, norms governing how a religious believer should go about forming beliefs pertinent to her faith. Take the issue of whether God is perfectly good. It seems that the person of faith should take into account evidence bearing on this issue. But also, maybe she should follow her faith-based inclination to form *positive* beliefs like

(g) God is perfectly good.

Assume that Theodora is moved by her faith to believe *g*, even though her evidence pushes her towards suspension or even disbelief – it is *counterevidence*. This raises the worry that faith demands that she should have positive beliefs, even while epistemically, these are prohibited.

Dormandy puts this worry as an issue of how faith-based and epistemic norms of belief relate, particularly of whether they “clash” (p. 2).¹ She contrasts three views of the relation: (1) anti-epistemological partiality, (2) epistemological partiality, and (3) evidentialism about faith. The corresponding faith-based norms of belief give the conditions under which positive beliefs about the object of faith contribute to excellent faith. *Anti-epistemological partiality* is a Kierkegaard-inspired view, according to which positive belief contributes to the excellence of one’s faith even – or especially – if one disregards one’s counterevidence in forming it. *Epistemological partiality*, a view inspired by the likes of Plantinga and Alston, has it that positive belief about the object of faith is an excellent-making feature of faith, where this belief is evidence-responsive, albeit in a biased way. Partialist evidence supporting positive belief can be given more weight than impartialist counterevidence.² Finally, *evidentialism about faith* claims that belief about the object of faith that respects the believer’s evidence and counterevidence equally contributes to the excellence of one’s faith.

Dormandy’s way of dividing up the views is compelling. Positive beliefs about God, which are intuitively part and parcel of faith, do often come into conflict with counterevidence – a conflict I will call ‘the clash’. It is not uncommon for persons of faith to struggle to bring together their religious world-views with what science tells them about the world, with the suffering of innocent people, etc. Moreover, it seems that believers are certainly not crazy to feel torn about what to believe – rather, feeling conflicted is a rational or at least understandable response. Against this backdrop, it is an important question what faith *demand*s regarding belief about the object of faith or what it says would be *good* to believe. The three views characterized by Dormandy take different stances on the clash: (1) the stance that faith pushes the believer to accept the clash while remaining unmoved by

¹ I refer to Dormandy’s “True Faith” by giving the bare page numbers.

² Impartialist evidence functions just like scientific evidence. Partialist evidence encompasses, among other things, religious experiences and testimony (p. 6). Note that I ignore Dormandy’s diachronic condition on respect for evidence.

counterevidence; (2) a stance according to which there is no clash because evidence may be weighted in a way that is favorable to positive belief; and (3) the stance that it is best to square one's faith with an unbiased respect for the evidence, even if this is psychologically difficult.

However, as my discussion in the following will show, we still need a clearer understanding of the clash and of how it is generated, and thus a clear conception of the underlying norms of belief. I will argue that conceiving of them as *evaluative* fails to explain the clash, and that understanding them as *prescriptive* is no better. I suggest an understanding of these norms along the lines of Ross's (1930) *prima facie* duties, and show how this picture can make sense of the clash.

2. Norms of Belief

Epistemic norms of belief are often used to give the conditions under which a belief is epistemically permissible, e.g. prescribing that A believe that p only if she knows that p (e.g. Williamson 2000, 255/256). Stronger norms of belief add conditions under which one ought to believe that p . E.g. Simion et al. (2016, 386) provide a knowledge norm according to which "[o]ne must: believe that p iff one knows that p ."

I focus for current purposes on a *prescriptive evidentialist epistemic norm* of belief:

(P-Evi_{EPI}) Believe that p iff belief that p respects your evidence.³

Such *prescriptive* norms can guide our doxastic conduct. Distinct from this, there are *evaluative* norms of belief, which provide a standard for attributively good belief. Attributively, we can e.g. say that a sniper with perfect aim is a good sniper without saying that snipers are good *simpliciter* or good for anyone (cf. McHugh 2012, Simion et al. 2016). Here is an *evaluative evidentialist epistemic norm* of belief

(E-Evi_{EPI}) Belief that p is epistemically good iff it respects the believer's evidence.

Plausibly, epistemic evaluative norms capture what is good about belief *qua* belief (McHugh 2012, 22). But a belief may be a good instance of another kind under which it falls, similar to how a pocketknife is good as a pocketknife to the extent that it's sharp, but may be good as a paperweight to the extent that it's heavy. Connecting this to Dormandy's statements of faith-based norms for belief, she formulates evaluative norms of belief, which express what it is for a belief to be attributively good from the perspective of faith. The kind of goodness she has in mind is goodness of a belief *as a contributor to excellent faith*.

Turning to the partiality norm introduced by Dormandy, it can be read as an *evaluative partialist faith-based norm* of belief, which states that a belief contributes to excellent faith – and thus is a good instance of a contributor to faith's excellency, i.e. good from the perspective of faith – just in case it is a positive belief:

³ Weaker norms alone don't give rise to a clash, so I work with stronger norms throughout.

(E-Pa_{FB}) A belief about the object of faith is good from the perspective of faith iff it is a positive belief about the object of faith.⁴

But some of the things Dormandy says make it sound like she also endorses prescriptive faith-based norms. For one, her central worry is a *clash* due to norms; for another, she talks about what faith-based norms of belief “mandate” (p. 2) or what beliefs faith “demands” (p. 5.). This then suggests a *prescriptive partialist faith-based norm of belief*:

(P-Pa_{FB}) Believe that *p* about the object of faith iff it is a positive belief about the object of faith.

In addition to the partialist norms, Dormandy introduces an evidentialist faith-based norm of belief: “Respect for evidence about the object of faith is an excellent-making feature of faith ...” (p. 2). This norm coincides with the evidentialist epistemic norm when it comes to belief about the object of faith. As before, we can give the *evidentialist faith-based norm* an evaluative or a prescriptive reading:

(E-Evi_{FB}) A belief about the object of faith is good from the perspective of faith iff it respects the believer’s evidence

and

(P-Evi_{FB}) Believe that *p* about the object of faith iff belief that *p* about the object of faith respects your evidence.

Now that the relevant norms of belief are on the table, it is time ask how well they fare when it comes to explaining the clash.

3. Which Understanding of Norms of Belief?

How exactly should we conceive of the norms of belief introduced by Dormandy, as evaluative or as prescriptive? These conceptions are not mutually exclusive. For instance, one can maintain simultaneously that whether a belief about the object of faith is positive determines whether the belief counts as good from the perspective of faith, *and* that one ought to adopt a belief just in case it is positive. Yet on different conceptions, norms of belief may be better or worse at explaining the clash. Dormandy clearly endorses an evaluative conception of norms of belief – but does this suffice to explain the clash, or does she have to take prescriptive norms on board as well?

Further, epistemic and faith-based norms of belief need to do more than give rise to *some* kind of clash; they need to explain the specific features of the clash as characterized by the respective positions, anti-epistemological partiality, epistemological partiality, and evidentialism about faith. Finally, although these positions characterize the clash in different ways, the clash as characterized

⁴ Dormandy’s norm originally reads: “Positive beliefs about the object of faith are an excellent-making feature of faith.” (p. 1)

by them has to paint the believer's internal conflict as rational or at least understandable. As Dor-mandy describes the views, anti-epistemological partiality and evidentialism about faith achieve this by emphasizing the inescapability of the noetic struggle the believer undergoes in dealing with coun-terevidence. But even proponents of epistemological partiality, who will say that it is unnecessary, have to allow that it is understandable for the believer to feel conflicted when confronted with coun-terevidence. The reason for this claim is that it would be both uncharitable and implausible to paint the conflicted person of faith as crazy. That science, the state of the world, etc. clashes with positive belief is not some pipe dream, but an intelligible, if not rational worry, which may very well occupy a believer's mind.

My task here is thus to examine which conception of norms of belief best explains the specific clash as each of the three views describes it, in a way that preserves the rationality (or intelligibility) of the believer's internal struggle.

3.1 Evaluative Norms of Belief

Let's begin by investigating how well *evaluative* norms of belief fare in accounting for the clash. Start-ing with anti-epistemological partiality's picture of the clash, this position emphasizes that there is a "noetic struggle" (p. 8) that the person of faith has to stick out. Believing positively about the object of faith in the face of this clash, which – following Kierkegaard – requires "a doxastic leap into ab-surdity" (p. 7), makes one's faith excellent. However, if we understand the participating norms as evaluative norms (E-Evi_{EPI}) and (E-Pa_{FB}), no struggle arises. (E-Evi_{EPI}) and (E-Pa_{FB}) merely provide dif-ferent ways in which a belief can be good, as an instance of distinct kinds. And it seems unproblematic and conflict-free to acknowledge these different standards of attributive goodness. Return to The-odora, who believes *g* despite a preponderance of counterevidence. Given only evaluative norms of belief, this lets us say nothing more than that her belief is good as a contributor to excellent faith, as it's a positive belief about God, but not good as a belief, as it doesn't respect her evidence. Compare: No clash arises when I judge that the pocketknife is good as a paperweight (since it's heavy) but not good as a pocketknife (since it's dull).

In response, the proponent of (E-Pa_{FB}) might argue that the noetic struggle is a *psychological* conflict. That something is good as an X but bad as a Y doesn't lead to conflict by itself. But what if the subject *desires* a good X and a good Y, but cannot have them both because they are mutually exclusive? Maybe Theodora strongly desires to have a belief that is good both according to (E-Evi_{EPI}) and according to (E-Pa_{FB}) because she wants to be a good epistemic subject *and* a good person of faith. Since both desires cannot be fulfilled, she feels torn; fulfilling either desire leads to her feeling conflicted about frustrating the other.

However, then it is *irrational* for Theodora to feel conflicted. We often desire mutually exclusive things. For instance, Amy desires to apply herself fully to philosophy, *and* desires to apply herself fully to being a mother. She cannot do both and decides to immerse herself fully in philosophy, while her partner takes care of their children. It seems she can rationally feel sad about not fulfilling one of her desires. But – assuming that fully applying herself to being a philosopher is gratifying – after she has made up her mind, it would be irrational to feel conflicted still. For this would presuppose retaining both desires, and that would be irrational.

According to anti-epistemological partiality, (E-Pa_{FB}) “wins” against (E-Evi_{EPI}) (p. 5). This has to mean that it is best if Theodora fulfills her desire to meet the faith-based norm, at the expense of frustrating her desire to meet the epistemic norm. But this amounts to a recommendation to give up the latter desire so that she can pursue the former. If this is indeed the best course of action, feeling conflicted over giving up the desire is an irrational response. Assuming a deeply rooted desire to meet epistemic standards, it will be rational to feel *sad*, but that’s all.⁵ This, however, is not the conflict that anti-epistemological partiality is after; this is not loyally defying the standing demands of reason. So, an evaluative reading of norms of belief does a poor job of explaining the clash.

Are evaluative norms a better fit with epistemological partiality, then? This position denies that there is a noetic struggle and instead endorses “noetic ease” (p. 9): Faith is made excellent by one’s being in a state of internal harmony with respect to one’s attitudes about the object of faith. Such harmony is achieved by faith dictating a lenient evidence-weighting procedure to epistemology. Accordingly, believers are allowed to give predominant weight to partialist evidence, which is likely to support positive belief. Adopting belief that respects such unevenly weighted evidence suffices for meeting the epistemic norm of belief. Since (E-Evi_{EPI}), supplemented by this biased evidence-weighting procedure, tends to lead to positive belief of just the kind that (E-Pa_{FB}) calls good, there is no clash.

But why should epistemological partiality bother to force a novel, biased evidence-weighting clause on epistemology at all? If all the supposed clash amounts to is two evaluative norms setting incompatible standards of attributive goodness, this move is unmotivated. For on this picture, as argued above, there is no conflict in the first place. But maybe we get a *psychological* clash if we don’t supplement (E-Evi_{EPI}) with a biased evidence-weighting policy. In addition to my objections against a psychological account of the clash above, note that doing so *overshoots* epistemological partiality’s goal of easing the believer’s psychological struggle. If finding noetic harmony is as easy as realizing that one may give one’s partialist evidence predominant weight, why are there so many, even well-educated and smart people who are conflicted about how to square their faith with their

⁵ For some real-life support: One of my friends not only has severe difficulties making up her mind in high-stakes decision situations. She also keeps second-guessing her decisions, once made, for years after, and keeps on feeling conflicted about whether she made the right decision. I find this kind of behavior deeply irrational.

counterevidence? This makes them look irrational. My opponent might respond that their being conflicted is at any rate understandable, since these subjects are woefully misinformed about the proper evidence-weighting procedures. But this still leaves the surprising claim that many, even well-educated and smart people are so misinformed about something as basic as how to weight their evidence.

In a nutshell, my worry is that, given evaluative norms, epistemological partiality is forced to paint the many smart and well-informed people who have struggled with their faith as either irrational or, implausibly, as woefully misinformed. Together with the worry that introducing a biased evidence-weighting procedure is unmotivated from the start, this indicates that evaluative norms do not provide for an adequate epistemological-partialist account of the clash.

So finally, how well do evaluative norms of belief fit with evidentialism about faith? For this view, good beliefs from the perspective of faith just *are* good beliefs from the perspective of epistemology; both (E-Evi_{FB}) and (E-Evi_{EPI}) characterize beliefs as good that respect the evidence. So, there can be no conflict between a pursuit of the epistemic good and a pursuit of the good of faith. The subject's desires directed at these goods are satisfied in one fell swoop by evidence-respecting beliefs.

But then how can there be a rational clash? Dormandy claims that the conflict comes from further attitudes a person of faith may have (p. 19). For instance, Theodora's faith may be such a central part of who she is that losing it would cause a deep, existential crisis; giving up her faith might rob her of a sense of meaning; etc. So, despite being compelled by the evidence to abandon faith, the person may desperately *want* to remain faithful because it may be devastating for her to lose faith. This is plausible; think of it as a conflict between what is *prudent* for the person to believe and which belief is supported by evidence (i.e., by epistemology and faith).

My worry now is why norms of belief are needed at all to account for the conflict. The work of explaining the clash is done by tensions between prudential and epistemic/faith-based considerations, so an appeal to norms of belief seems unmotivated. Admittedly, the appeal to norms helps to distinguish the three views of the relation between faith and epistemology. So here is a more cautious point: Given evaluative norms, what accounts for the clash is apparently *disunified* across the three positions, in that it's not always factors of the same type – sometimes it is conflicting norms of belief, sometimes prudence versus epistemology/faith. In light of this, a better explanation of the conflict, providing a more unified account, may lie elsewhere, maybe with prescriptive norms of belief.

3.2 Prescriptive Norms of Belief

Spelling out the clash by appeal to conflicting prescriptive norms of belief appears nice and straightforward. Assume that (P-Pa_{FB}) prescribes that Theodora should believe *g*, whereas (P-Evi_{EPI}) prohibits this belief. To the extent that Theodora is responsive to these norms, she will feel compelled both to endorse *g* and to reject it. This is a psychological conflict; it is due directly to the demands of the norms; and it is rational – Theodora struggles because the norms she is sensitive to demand incompatible responses. This is simpler than the account based on evaluative norms, on which the norms don't directly conflict, and a clash is generated only given that the subject as a matter of fact desires to have good belief both on the standards of faith and on those of epistemology.

This account of the clash is, of course, the one given by anti-epistemological partiality. Despite initial appearances, however, this explanation of the clash fails. (P-Pa_{FB}) “defeats” (p. 2) or overrides (P-Evi_{EPI}), so overall, *it* is the one that is authoritative here. Theodora ought to adopt *g*. What causes trouble for anti-epistemological partiality is the claim that Theodora’s belief that *g* is absurd, from an epistemological perspective. For if the faith-based norm really overrides the epistemic norm, that norm generates *no* requirement for Theodora.⁶ Consider: We here have two general principles governing subjects’ doxastic responses across all cases. The interesting question is what to believe if the two principles ever (apparently) require incompatible doxastic attitudes. One option is that the subject is then faced with a genuine dilemma, such that she really ought to give two incompatible responses. (As in the movie *Sophie’s Choice*, where Sophie is forced to choose between her daughter’s and her son’s life – arguably, a genuine moral dilemma.) If so, there is genuine conflict, but neither norm – (P-Pa_{FB}) or (P-Evi_{EPI}) – dominates the other. The other option is that one norm overrides the other in such cases; then there is exactly one thing that the subject ought to believe, but that is just to say that the other norm is overridden and thus has no force in this case. (As when Amy skips breakfast to provide first aid to her neighbor. The norm that one should start the day with a good breakfast is overridden by the moral requirement to save lives; thus, Amy is in no sense required to have a good breakfast.) But then there is no conflict between the norms, as (P-Pa_{FB}) nullifies the force of (P-Evi_{EPI}) rather than clashing with it, and so – contra Kierkegaard – it is not absurd for Theodora to endorse *g*. There is no epistemic norm in force here that would throw a bad light on this belief, and if Theodora feels compelled by epistemic considerations in this case, this is irrational.

What about epistemological partiality? It insists that ideally there is no clash between (P-Pa_{FB}) and (P-Evi_{EPI}) and the believer lives in noetic harmony. This sits well with the claim that (P-Pa_{FB}) overrides epistemic demands placed on the believer, which ensures harmony. However, that harmony is so easily achieved again raises the question why the epistemological partialist should go the extra length of dictating to epistemology a questionable evidence-weighting policy, giving predominant weight to partialist evidence. On the current picture, there isn’t even space for a rational or under-

⁶ Cf. Dancy (2004, ch. 1) for a related objection against generalism.

standable psychological clash of desires. For if the only norm in force is (P-Pa_{FB}), desiring to have a belief that conforms to the evidence is irrational (and actually unintelligible), as there is no rational basis left for such a desire. So a further problem is that epistemological partiality, combined with prescriptive norms, leaves it unexplained how the clash can be rational, or even understandable.

Finally, evidentialism about faith faces the same difficulties as before. (P-Evi_{EPI}) and (P-Evi_{FB}) harmonize. Both require respect for (evenly weighted) evidence in forming belief. The conflict arises elsewhere: between what it is prudent for Theodora to believe and what epistemic and faith-based norms of belief require of her. This is indeed a rational conflict. However, it leaves us with the theoretically dissatisfying situation of disparate accounts of the clash given by the different positions, viz. by a clash of norms of belief on the one hand, and by a conflict between what the subject is required to believe (by epistemology and faith) and what it is prudent for her to believe, on the other. Again, an account that traces the clash back to the same kinds of factors for the different positions is preferable.

In summary, although this second, prescriptive reading of norms has the potential to tell a more straight-forward story of the clash in terms of the subject's responsiveness to pertinent norms, it fails to give a fully satisfactory account of the clash for any of the three views in the end. I admit that I have not provided knock-down arguments against the evaluative and prescriptive interpretation, and that lots more could be said on their behalf. However, I hope that I have cast sufficient doubt on them to motivate a third reading of norms of belief as a basis for a better account of the clash in terms of *prima facie* norms along the lines of Ross (1930, ch. 2).

4. *A Clash of Prima Facie Norms*

A better account of faith-based and epistemic norms of belief and their clash understands them along the lines of Ross's *prima facie* duties. In a particular situation, start by looking at the believer's normative reasons, the facts or considerations she has available that speak for and against believing. For instance, assume that Theodora's counterevidence outweighs her evidence (provided by testimony or religious experiences) that God is perfectly good. Consequently, her epistemic reasons all things considered speak against believing *g*. In other words, *as far as epistemology is concerned*, she ought not to believe *g*.⁷ This is a *prima facie* norm, not an "absolute duty" (Ross 1930, 28); rather than outright telling Theodora what to believe, it summarizes what doxastic attitude her epistemic reasons support, namely that overall, they speak against believing *g*.

On the picture provided by the partiality views, Theodora further has faith-based normative reasons to believe *g*, such as the fact that believing that God is perfectly good is the faithful thing to

⁷ The story would of course run differently were we to assume the biased evidence-weighting policy of epistemological partiality.

do, or that the person of faith stands by the object of her faith through difficult times. Assume that all things considered, these reasons favor believing *g*. They thereby give rise to a *prima facie* faith-based norm: *As far as faith is concerned*, Theodora ought to believe *g*. Again, this not an absolute norm that tells her to believe *g*. It merely states what doxastic attitude is backed by her faith-based reasons altogether.

According to evidentialism about faith, Theodora has no such faith-based reasons to believe that God is perfectly good, but different reasons of faith: Facts such as that true commitment to God presupposes knowledge of him, that having faith in someone requires “*doing what is right for her*” (p. 13), or that unquestioning loyalty is not faithful but dishonoring. These faith-based reasons all things considered favor following her evidence, and thus not believing *g* – this then is the evidentialist faith-based *prima facie* norm, summarizing which attitude is overall supported by faith.

But further, evidentialism’s claim that the faith-based norm conflicts with what it is prudent for Theodora to believe can be made concrete by introducing prudential reasons. That it might be psychologically unbearable for her to lose faith, or that she would lose her sense of existential safety and meaning, are prudential reasons to believe *g* which, let’s assume, all things considered speak in favor believing *g*. If so, *as far as prudence goes*, she ought to believe *g* – this is a *prima facie* norm which supports belief.

My proposal is that all the pertinent *prima facie* norms now have to be weighed together to determine what Theodora outright ought to believe, what her absolute duty is in this situation. For anti-epistemological partiality, the faith-based *prima facie* norm is “more incumbent” (Ross 1930, 19) on the believer than the epistemic *prima facie* norm, so that her absolute duty is to believe *g*. The position can thus secure the claim that the faith-based norm is dominant. However, despite Ross’s unfortunate term “*prima facie* norm”, the normative force of the epistemic norm does not dissolve when, in jointly determining what the subject ought to believe outright, the faith-based norm keeps the upper hand. Rather, just like the *pro tanto* reasons giving rise to it, the *prima facie* norm has a contributory weight which is rightfully acknowledged by the believer even when defeated by the faith-based norm. For instance, rational responses to a defeated *prima facie* norm may be regret (Dancy 2004, 6) or compunction (Ross 1930, 28) at being unable to comply with it. So, my proposal enables the anti-epistemological partialist to secure a sense in which Theodora, in believing *g*, has to overcome the normative pull of her contravening epistemic *prima facie* obligations, and thus a sense in which she can be rightfully conflicted.

My proposal can also make good sense of the epistemological partialist’s claims, whose concern is the normative pull that the believer’s *prima facie* epistemic duty exerts even when defeated by the faith-based norm. The view promotes a stable, harmonic relationship between believer and God, which presupposes not just silencing, but eliminating any contravening *prima facie* oughts. This

is why the view goes beyond pinning down the right doxastic conduct from the perspective of faith, and strives to dictate a biased evidence-weighting policy to epistemology.

Finally, on my proposal, the evidentialist about faith comes out as appealing to factors of the same kind as her competition in explaining the clash: According to her, while epistemic reasons and faith-based reasons supply *prima facie* norms opposing Theodora's belief that *g*, prudential reasons give rise to a *prima facie* norm backing the belief. As Dormandy acknowledges (p. 19), because of this, it may be that all things considered, Theodora ought to maintain her belief that *g*, e.g. if losing her faith would shatter her. Whether this is so has to be determined on a case to case basis, carefully taking into account how bad a loss of faith would be prudentially, how strong the believers counterevidence is, etc. And even if one side wins, the believer can be rationally conflicted in virtue of the contravening *prima facie* ought.

5. Results

My commentary raised the question of how to understand the faith-based and epistemic norms of belief that Dormandy uses to demarcate three different views of the relation between epistemology and faith. I have argued that we arrive at a satisfyingly unified picture of the differences and commonalities of these views, as well as an illuminating account of their claims and motivations, if we interpret the relevant norms as *prima facie* norms. In light of these advantages, I suggest that this is how Dormandy's norms of belief should be understood.

But further, I believe that my proposal has the potential to elucidate other conflicts between distinct normative domains, for instance between moral and prudential, moral and legal, or practical and epistemic domains. Take the classical scenario of a cancer patient whose chances of survival go up if, against the surmounting evidence, she believes that she will survive. If it can be argued that her practical reasons generate a practical *prima facie* requirement to believe, and her epistemic reasons an epistemic *prima facie* requirement against believing, this makes sense of what is intuitively a genuine conflict between practical and epistemic demands. Alas, these thoughts will have to be further developed on another occasion.

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