

The Partiality of Faith

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For several years now, Katherine Dormandy has campaigned against intellectual bias, pride, and close-mindedness in religious epistemology. Here her crusade advances to the hallowed ground of faith. Virtuous faith is sometimes thought to entail partiality towards its object. This partiality can lead one to be satisfied with what Dormandy calls “partialist evidence” for the object’s trustworthiness—evidence that, unlike impartialist evidence, may not be appreciable by all competent and earnest observers. Dormandy rejects partiality in faith. Faith that is partial towards its object is biased and leads to noetic entrenchment. Such partialist faith is no true faith at all, says Dormandy. Rather, true faith is made excellent by adopting a policy that relies less on partialist evidence and more on impartialist evidence, weighing the two equally.

While I commend Dormandy’s stand against intellectual vice, I disagree with her position on faith. True and virtuous faith is indeed partial, though it is not biased. It does, however, involve heavy reliance on partialist evidence. There are, after all, situations in which impartialist evidence is apt to mislead or to fail to bring one to the truth. In such cases, faith can attune one to the subject’s true motivations and intentions. Here the partiality of faith constitutes a kind of social acuity or expertise, not a bias. Indeed, to *lack* faith in such situations—and to give impartialist evidence equal weight with the partial—might constitute a kind of bias *against* the subject, casting his or her actions in an overly negative light.

In the second section, we will see that this form of partialism has several advantages over Dormandy’s view. First, however, we must introduce Dormandy’s view and her criticisms of partialism. I will end with a brief application to faith in God.

1. Three Views of Faith

Dormandy presents us with three positions with respect to faith: anti-epistemological partialism, epistemological partialism, and evidentialism. The most important differences can be grouped into four main categories.

Bias and Partiality

Does excellent faith involve partiality towards the object of faith? According to Dormandy, both forms of partialism say yes, while evidentialism says no. Importantly, partiality is defined by Dormandy as a *positive bias* (2020, 1), where a bias is something that “works by filtering out nuance—seizing on superficial or salient aspects of a situation and disposing a person to judge quickly on their basis” (12). This bias, she asserts, motivates one to ignore potential counterevidence, or view it with disdain, or to warp it to fit with one’s prior views. According to Dormandy, this will not bother partialists of either stripe (12).

Norms of Belief

What norms of belief are operative when placing faith in an object? Both forms of partialism, *contra* evidentialism, contend that believing positive things about the object is an excellent-making feature of faith. Epistemological partialism, along with evidentialism, also contends that respecting the evidence is an excellent-making feature of faith. Thus, for anti-epistemological partialism, faith at its best involves believing positively about the object despite a lack of evidence. For epistemological partialism, faith at its best involves believing positively about the object while respecting one’s evidence, possibly because one’s bias has shifted the evidence in its favor. And for evidentialism, faith at its best involves believing whatever the evidence says about the object, even if those beliefs are negative.

Respect for the Evidence

Respect for the evidence requires that one acquire new evidence responsibly (the diachronic condition) and responsibly form beliefs given the evidence currently available (the synchronic condition). Epistemological partialism and evidentialism flesh out these conditions differently.

Synchronically, the difference consists in the weight given to partialist evidence versus impartialist evidence. Impartialist evidence “includes experiences that any cognitively competent person can have just by being in the right place at the right time” or justifiable beliefs that “do not beg the question against certain alternative views” (6). Partialist evidence is any evidence that is not impartialist, such as private experiences or intuitions that are not shareable by any competent person. On epistemological partialism, “you are permitted to give partialist evidence

predominant weight and impartialist evidence little if any weight” (7). Alternatively, evidentialism insists “you should give impartialist evidence and partialist evidence approximately equal weight” (15).

Diachronically, epistemological partialism allows you to avoid or ignore potential counterevidence. You must address those defeaters that slip through the net, but this can be done by distorting the counterevidence to look benign (11) or by trumping it with partialist evidence (7). In contrast, evidentialism demands a much more genuine and active engagement with defeaters, including actively seeking them out (15).

Telos of Faith

Finally, in a world like ours, what state will excellent faith in God bring one towards? Will it be a position of noetic ease where other beliefs about the world rest easily alongside belief in God’s trustworthiness? Or will it be a position of noetic dissonance where belief in God’s trustworthiness stands in tension with other beliefs (e.g. about suffering or religious diversity)? In answering this question, Dormandy assumes there is stubborn counterevidence to the trustworthiness of God that, unless perceived through positive bias, will leave one in a state of noetic dissonance (§4). Given this assumption, evidentialism and anti-epistemological partialism answer that excellent religious faith will lead one to noetic dissonance (the latter urging you to continue believing positively nonetheless). In contrast, epistemological partialism maintains that excellent faith, being biased, should lead one towards a state of noetic ease—the counterevidence being avoided, ignored, or distorted.

With the views so characterized, Dormandy argues that both forms of partialism lead to noetic entrenchment, “a mode of perception that favors stark, black-and-white, categories and overlooks nuance; beliefs that are similarly simplistic, as well as highly confident and indisposed to waver in the face of counterevidence” (10). This is surely correct, since partiality is defined as a bias that rids one of subtlety, encourages overconfidence, and distorts counterevidence. Dormandy maintains that such faith is not truth-conducive, or at least less truth-conducive than it could be. Even if the bias is a reliable one, the lack of nuance and insensitivity to counterevidence threatens one’s ability to track the truth (12). She also claims that it stands in tension with faithfulness and loyalty towards the object of faith. Both of these require that one

properly value and commit to relationship with the object, but doing so requires an accurate assessment of the object's condition (19-20). Dormandy concludes that, since excellent faith is truth-conducive and concordant with faithfulness, neither form of partialism can be true of faith.

Dormandy's evidentialism is supposed to fix these problems. It does not embrace bias, allowing nuance and measured confidence to come back into play. In fact, it discourages bias by requiring that impartialist evidence (considered less susceptible to bias) be given equal prominence in one's theorizing, and it demands regular engagement with potential counterevidence. Thus, Dormandy argues, evidentialism is the correct characterization of faith.

For Dormandy's argument to work, the positions she considers must represent the most plausible or prominent positions on faith. This is decidedly not the case. Indeed, I am skeptical that any major thinker endorses either form of partialism (not even Kierkegaard).¹ I would be especially surprised to find any of those who Dormandy cites as epistemological partialists (philosophers such as Alston, Gellman, Moser, Plantinga, and Tucker) encouraging us be unnuanced, overconfident, and to ignore or distort counterevidence. Surely, there is some middle ground between bias run rampant and Dormandy's specific form of evidentialism.

In the next section, I will articulate an alternative form of partialism that avoids the legitimate problems raised by Dormandy. It will also correct for some unacknowledged problems with Dormandy's own evidentialist position. We'll see that, by requiring impartialist evidence to be given equal prominence, Dormandy's evidentialism becomes susceptible to its own form of bias and is not as truth-conducive as it could be. Evidentialism also threatens to eliminate the distinctiveness of faith as an intellectual virtue, reducing its role to one that can easily be filled by other ordinary intellectual virtues.

2. Percipient Epistemological Partialism

Let us call this alternative view "percipient epistemological partialism," or just percipient partialism for short. It is "epistemological" in that beliefs based on faith are governed by the same epistemic norms that govern any other belief. Yet it is partialist in the sense that faith disposes one to perceive the object more positively than one might otherwise, and one's continued confidence in the trustworthiness of that object (if such confidence remains) is

¹ My understanding of Kierkegaard is largely drawn from Evans 1998.

sometimes permitted to rely predominantly on this partialist evidence. Unlike Dormandy's forms of partialism, however, percipient partialism rejects bias and does not mandate positive belief. Rather, percipient partialism says that faith at its best is about *accurately perceiving* the trustworthiness of the object in situations where the impartialist evidence would not substantiate the same level of confidence. Let us examine these features more closely in comparison to Dormandy's evidentialism.

Concerning norms of belief, it seems to me that faith doesn't issue any special norms of belief at all. The same epistemic norms governing any belief also govern beliefs based on faith—no more and no less. If those epistemic norms include an evidential norm (as I argue is the case (McAllister 2019)), then percipient partialism can be coupled with evidentialism about faith. Percipient faith does not mandate that one believe positive things about the object of faith. This is a mistake akin to saying that believing lowly of oneself is a norm of intellectual humility. For what if you are actually quite excellent? Intellectual virtues help one discern the truth of the situation. Thus, the virtue of humility does not mandate that one believe less positively about oneself than is accurate, and virtuous (or excellent) faith does not recommend positive beliefs about the object when it is in fact untrustworthy.

All the same, it is not difficult to see why one might mistakenly conclude that faith mandates positive beliefs. The comparison to humility is once again helpful. Intellectual humility plausibly has to do with accurately assessing one's epistemic position (Church 2017). Notice, however, that one could be excellent at picking out the ways in which one's epistemic position is good but terrible at assessing the ways in which one's epistemic position is less than ideal. We therefore find it useful to give a name to that specific excellence in assessing the less than ideal aspects of our epistemic position, which we call intellectual humility (Whitcomb, et. al. 2017). So understood, humility will only incline one towards "negative" beliefs about one's epistemic position (one's whose content is presented under the guise of *being-less-than-ideal*). Observing this, one might err in thinking that negative beliefs are normative for humility. Something similar is true of faith, except flipped around. Faith helps one discern the trustworthiness of a subject *when that subject is in fact trustworthy*, especially in situations where those without faith are not

in a good position to discern this fact.² Thus, faith will only incline one towards positive beliefs about the object of faith. But it would be a mistake to think that positive belief is always an excellent-making feature of faith—it's not when that faith is misplaced.

On the other hand, it would also be a mistake to say, as Dormandy does (14), that excellent faith can produce or mandate negative beliefs, since the virtue of faith is only operative in forming positive assessments of trustworthiness. Of course, faith can be misplaced in an untrustworthy object, but then it would only serve to form overly positive assessments and so would not be a virtuous instance of faith.³ Naturally, if one discovers that faith is misplaced, then one should form negative beliefs about the object; but it will not be one's *faith* that causes or mandates that those negative beliefs come about.⁴ If anything, it is the *cessation* of faith that leads to negative beliefs.

What is the place of bias and partiality in faith? Percipient partialism, unlike the partialisms critiqued by Dormandy, will have nothing to do with bias. Bias, as Dormandy defines it, lacks any nuance or subtlety. It is prone to overconfidence. It avoids, ignores, or skews counterevidence. This is not a recipe for intellectual excellence. Instead, percipient partialism characterizes virtuous faith as an intellectual excellence in perceiving and forming judgments about the trustworthiness of some object. To have virtuous faith is to be *more* subtle and nuanced in assessing the object of faith. It moves one towards *proper* confidence in the object (of a level befitting its actual trustworthiness). And it only leads one to dismiss *specious* counterevidence that might otherwise mislead. In these ways, virtuous faith is an antidote to bias.

Nevertheless, on percipient partialism, faith remains partial in the sense that placing faith in an object disposes you to perceive that object in a more positive light than you otherwise would (McAllister 2018). Actions that seem incriminating without faith may not seem so with

² We could coin a name for the mirror virtue that helps one to discern the untrustworthiness of a subject when that subject is in fact untrustworthy, especially in situations where those without this virtue are not in a good position to discern this fact. Call that virtue "suspicion." The suspicious person is good at picking out the wolf in sheep's clothing. The person of faith, on the other hand, is good at picking out the sheep in wolf's clothing. Both of these virtues constitute a part of the virtue of discernment, the general excellence at assessing the trustworthiness of an object.

³ Faith differs from other virtues here in that there are virtuous instances of it and non-virtuous instances of it. Perhaps it is better to say that faith is a habit of mind that *can* be a virtue, or function virtuously, when in the right conditions.

⁴ Just as when one discovers oneself to be in a better epistemic position than previously thought, we should not credit one's humility as leading to this positive evaluation.

faith. This will generate partialist evidence that, in some instances, can serve as the main evidential basis for continued confidence in the trustworthiness of that object. This partialist evidence can sometimes be strong enough that it reasonably sustains this belief even when the impartialist evidence does not point in the same direction.

Dormandy or others might construe this kind of perspective shift as a distortion—as the object seeming to be more trustworthy than it really is—and that can happen in the case of misplaced faith. But when faith is virtuous, as we are talking about here, the perspective brought on by faith is not a distortion. It is in fact the opposite: a kind of bringing into focus the reality of the situation. This is why the analogy of “casting the object in a positive light” is imperfect, for it suggests that the true color of the object is more neutral and one has made it appear to be a color it is not. Consider instead the analogy of looking at a painting in dim lighting. The initial lighting conditions are limiting. You cannot fully appreciate the painting’s true colors (e.g. you think this part is red but you’re not very confident) and may even be misled about them (e.g. what looks brown now is actually green). Cast the painting in better lighting, however, and its true colors become plain. So it can be with people. In some cases, the initial way you perceive someone is akin to poor lighting—the way she seems to you is overly negative or insufficiently positive. Well-placed faith in this person casts her in a better light, allowing her to appear as trustworthy as she actually is. Other analogies work here as well: virtuous faith is like a pair of glasses that correct defective vision or like a telescope that sharpens vision beyond a level it could readily achieve unaided.

A crucial insight here is that the perspective we or most other earnest and competent humans bring into a situation is not always very good at getting at the truth of things. We may begin in dim lighting conditions—our default perspectives being prone to leave out important facts or even to mislead. It needn’t be the case that these default perspectives are defective (though they may be); it may just be that we are operating in conditions where getting at the truth requires a kind or level of competence than is not generally available to humans. Perhaps the required competence can only be gained through special training or by having experiences that are not readily available to all.⁵ Now impartialist evidence is the sort of thing that any earnest and generally competent person must be able to discern for themselves. It follows that there will

⁵ Or it may only be available by supernatural grace, as Christians believe of the theological virtue of faith.

be cases where the impartialist evidence is going to lead one to the wrong conclusion about a subject. Either it will point to the false conclusion that the subject is untrustworthy or else fail to point to the subject's actual trustworthiness. If one is to judge such cases accurately, one must possess the social expertise to correctly perceive the subject and her actions. Since this is not available to all competent persons, the astute intuitions and judgments one reaches on the basis of this expertise is partialist evidence.⁶ One must rely primarily on that partialist evidence, without the concurrence of impartialist evidence, to form a belief in the subject's continued trustworthiness. According to percipient partialism, the virtue that enables one to do this is faith.

Such cases reveal the inadequacies of Dormandy's evidentialist conception of faith. By Dormandy's lights, excellent faith in such cases leads one to *misinterpret* the subject's actions and take a *deficient* attitude towards her trustworthiness. Ironically, Dormandy's conception of faith leads us to construe the subject in an overly *negative* light. This is because the impartialist evidence must be weighted equally with the partialist, even when the partialist evidence is a much better guide to the truth of the matter. In general, any such one-size-fits-all evidential weighting policy is going to be problematic. Different situations and domains call for different kinds of evidence to take center stage. In mathematics, impartialist evidence should be given all or almost all of the weight. In science, impartialist evidence should plausibly be given most of the weight.⁷ In morality, partialist evidence may take on a larger role.

Consider the case of morality more closely. I intuit that it is wrong for the elite to "accept in good conscience the sacrifice of countless people who have to be pushed down and shrunk into incomplete human beings, into slaves, into tools," all to fulfill their own ambitions (Nietzsche 2002, 152). Nietzsche—a competent and earnest disputant—does not share that intuition, nor any of the surrounding intuitions about the dignity and value of humans that I could

⁶ Notice that we cannot include things like personal knowledge of the subject and her trustworthiness as a requirement for competence vis-à-vis impartialist evidence. This is because Dormandy requires that we define the level of competence relevant for impartialist evidence in a way that is neutral between parties in the dispute (2018, 63-67). If we said that only those who are personally acquainted with the trustworthiness of the subject are competent, we would be begging the question against those who doubt her trustworthiness. Alternatively, if we *can* define competence in a way that takes sides in the dispute, then impartialist evidence ceases to be the kind of "neutral arbiter" that Dormandy hopes it can be.

⁷ Though many argue that personal judgment, and therefore partialist evidence, has a significant role to play (e.g. Polyani 1974).

use to build an argument for my position.⁸ Accordingly, all of those intuitions and arguments count as partialist evidence, and on Dormandy's evidence-weighting policy, I cannot allow these partialist intuitions to be given predominant weight. Since the impartialist evidence seems to be, at best, indifferent between Nietzsche and myself, the result is either that I shouldn't believe such dehumanization is wrong or that I shouldn't believe it with any strong conviction.⁹ Clearly, there is something wrong with such an evidence-weighting policy.

The upshot is that there will be some situations where partialist evidence *should* be given more weight than impartialist evidence and, on percipient partialism, faith becomes most relevant in precisely those kinds of situations. When the impartialist evidence fails to support the subject or even counts against her, virtuous faith generates sufficient partialist evidence to keep one in line with the truth. Percipient partialism does not, however, say that partialist evidence should *always* be given priority over impartialist evidence in social situations. If you have no adequate grounds for faith—e.g. no personal knowledge of the subject—then you cannot rightly place your faith in her. Thus, percipient partialism says that partialist and impartialist evidence should each be allotted its *proper* weight given the specifics of the situation. This corrects the mistakes of Dormandy's one-size-fits-all policy.

Dormandy's evidence-acquisition policy faces similar problems. Much of what Dormandy recommends about actively monitoring one's beliefs and genuinely engaging with potential defeaters is unqualified good advice that percipient partialism is happy to embrace (suitably adjusted to its proper evidence-weighting policy). Sometimes, however, you can have such sure knowledge of a subject that it is permissible to become closed-off to alternative viewpoints. Don't refuse to listen to alternatives, but actively "putting oneself in situations where counterevidence will likely arise" is not always required (15).¹⁰ For instance, I have such sure knowledge of the roundness of the earth that I needn't regularly watch flat-earth YouTube videos. Furthermore, Dormandy requires "cultivating the cognitive and emotional suppleness to

⁸ You might question whether Nietzsche is really competent. The problem is not his intelligence, of course, but you may think that he lacks some important competence like moral conscience. As we have seen, however, Dormandy specifically requires that the standards of competence not "beg the question" against one's interlocutors (2018, 63-67).

⁹ The precise outcome will depend on what it means to give partialist and impartialist evidence "equal weight." Dormandy says more on this procedure (2018, 67-68), but it remains unclear to me how it would be applied to many cases.

¹⁰ Or possible! What if there aren't any situations where genuine counterevidence is likely to arise?

notice unexpected things and *perceive them* in ways that may be in tension with your prior noetic state,” where this involves “seeding your background evidence richly enough to imagine and perhaps conclude the unexpected” (15-16). Generally, this seems like a good idea, but there are exceptions. I’m not sure what it would take to get me to seriously consider denying that $1+1=2$, or the law of non-contradictions, or the existence of objective truth, but I’m pretty sure it would involve manipulating my mind ways that make me *less* attuned to reality. Consider also the dehumanizing Nietzschean position discussed earlier. Should I artificially seed my background evidence to make this a live possibility? I don’t believe this is required, nor in the interest of discovering truth.

Instead, percipient partialism recommends that one gives *proper* time and attention to potential defeaters and that one remains *appropriately* open to alternatives. This policy tailors your diachronic requirements to how strong your epistemic position is with respect to the matter at hand—the stronger your epistemic position, the easier it will be to dismiss defeaters (generally speaking) and the more closed-off you are entitled to become. Importantly, this allows for circumstances in which especially well-grounded faith allows one to responsibly forgo actively seeking evidence of the object’s betrayal or manipulating one’s noetic state to remain open to that possibility.

Some may complain about the practicality of percipient partialism. The proper evidential policy is not transparent, so it is not very helpful to say that virtuous faith involves properly weighing and acquiring evidence. This complaint is irrelevant for our purposes. We are discussing what virtuous faith is, not looking for a how-to guide. Compare: A virtuous archer releases the arrow with the proper direction and force needed to strike the bullseye. It’s no objection to point out that this description isn’t very helpful or that executing it is really difficult to do.

In a similar vein, some may wish to salvage Dormandy’s evidentialism as a useful heuristic. Perhaps *on the whole* we could minimize bias by adopting evidentialism as a policy for religious epistemology, though there will admittedly be instances where it misses the mark. Compare this to a law that moves us towards a more just state, despite specific cases in which it

renders an unjust verdict. I have serious doubts,¹¹ but it would be an interesting discussion. It is not, however, the one we are having here. Our goal is to characterize excellent faith and the norms that govern it; and these are simply more nuanced (and open to partiality) than Dormandy's evidentialism makes them out to be.

A final advantage of percipient partialism is that it preserves a traditional and distinctive role for faith where Dormandy's evidentialism does not. Faith has traditionally been thought to come into play in matters that are, in some sense, "unseen" (Hebrews 11:1). Percipient partialism accounts for this since faith becomes most relevant precisely when the impartialist evidence—the evidence available to everyone—does not verify the trustworthiness of the object, or even tells against it. On evidentialism, however, excellent faith only believes in the trustworthiness of its object (with any confidence) when the impartialist evidence is also there to recommend it. Furthermore, percipient partialism gives faith a distinct role to play as an intellectual virtue—it sustains true belief in the trustworthiness of the object when the use of other intellectual virtues alone would not lead you to the same conclusion. On Dormandy's evidentialism, however, there is no special role for faith to play. The ordinary exercise of ordinary intellectual virtues—the careful gathering and weighing of evidence about the object—meets all the intellectual requirements of excellent faith. In fact, whether or not I place faith in a person should not, on Dormandy's conception, make any difference to what I conclude about her, so long as I am intellectually virtuous in other respect. Dormandy has reframed the intellectual role of faith in such a way that she has eliminated the need for it altogether.

3. Religious Faith in a World Like Ours

What noetic state does excellent faith in God lead us towards in a world like ours? On percipient partialism, it depends on whether faith in God is virtuous. If it *is* virtuous, then excellent faith in God will tend towards noetic ease. This would not involve ignoring or distorting genuine counterevidence, but rather seeing through specious counterevidence that

¹¹ Notice that arguments from natural theology seemingly must be considered partialist evidence on Dormandy's framework. For instance, not all competent persons share the intuitions for the explanatory or causal principles underlying cosmological arguments. Indeed, is there *any* significant evidence for or against God's existence that relies only on intuitions and experiences sharable by all competent parties (where "competence" cannot be characterized in a way that privileges one side or the other)?

might mislead those without faith. If faith in God is not virtuous, then it will be skewing the perspective of those who have it. Noetic dissonance culminating in the loss of such faith is the best thing for it.

For faith to be virtuous, at least two things must be true: (i) the faith must be located in an object that is actually trustworthy in the way that one perceives it as trustworthy, and (ii) you must have adequate grounds for perceiving it as such. The first condition can only be met if God exists and is trustworthy as theists claim. The second condition requires that God has revealed himself to people in a way that provides them with adequate grounds for faith. Christians maintain that this is done through the working of the Holy Spirit, usually upon reception of scripture, the testimony of the Church, or a personal religious experience. These provide personal knowledge of God who, by becoming a man and dying for our sins, has given adequate grounds for faith in his goodness and trustworthiness towards us.¹² The upshot is that faith in God is virtuous if and only if theists (or Christians) are right.

Accordingly, Dormandy's assumption that there is stubborn counterevidence acknowledged by all but the biased begs the question against the person of faith—it assumes that God does not exist or has not made himself adequately known. Consider our perceptions of suffering. A person without faith may perceive an instance of suffering as gratuitous whereas a person of faith does not. Is the person of faith skewing things in too positive of a light and ignoring genuine counterevidence to God's goodness? Or is the person without faith skewing things in too negative of a light and accepting specious counterevidence to God's goodness? It depends on whether God exists and deserves our faith.

This conclusion leaves people with and without faith in God in a difficult predicament. In attempting to discern whether faith in God is appropriate, they must form a judgment as to whether God exists. But that judgment will surely itself be affected by the presence or absence of faith. Circularity threatens both the theist and non-theist alike. There is nothing for theist or non-theist to do but to muster all of her epistemic resources and humbly embrace the position that, all things considered, makes the most sense to her. For many, that process ends in the conviction that God exists and that the faith placed in him helps them to perceive the divine dimensions of reality with greater accuracy. If such faith is not virtuous, it is at least reasonable for them to conclude it is.

¹² See Stump 2010, Ch. 4, on personal knowledge.

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