

Three Possible Causes of Irrational Belief

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1 Rational belief — a brief review

Recall, our rational belief principle (*aka.*, evidentialist principle) is:

- (RB) If a person's total evidence supports some statement p , then the rational epistemic attitude (for that person) toward p is belief, if a person's total evidence goes against some statement p , then the rational epistemic attitude (for that person) toward p is disbelief, and if a person's total evidence is neutral regarding some statement p (or, if there is no relevant evidence at all), then the rational epistemic attitude (for that person) toward p is suspension of judgment (or, if you prefer, 'epistemic indifference').

2 How is irrational belief possible?

Presently, we are concerned with the following question:

How can a person come to have an irrational epistemic attitude toward some statement p ?

There are at least three factors which might cause a person to have an irrational epistemic attitude toward some statement p . These are as follows.¹

- (1) *Misidentification* of the total evidence: if a person is mistaken about what their total evidence regarding p is, then this can lead to their coming to have an irrational epistemic attitude toward p . For instance, a person may ignore (or, just forget) certain parts of their total evidence. If a person has been presented with a lot of complex information concerning p , then it is not unlikely that they will *misidentify* their total evidence. Can you think of an example that illustrates how people can misidentify their total evidence regarding p ?
- (2) *Misevaluation* of the total evidence: Even if you correctly identify your total evidence regarding p (*e.g.*, you know exactly what your total evidence regarding p is), you may incorrectly weigh its support for or against p . That is, you may be wrong about the degree to which your total evidence supports (or goes against) p . Can you think of examples? I will discuss the so-called 'gambler's fallacy,' and cases of *anecdotal evidence*.
- (3) *Motivational Errors*: Even if you are fortunate enough to avoid *both* errors of type (1), *and* errors of type (2), described above, you can *still* come to have an irrational epistemic attitude toward p . If your epistemic state is sensitive to other, *non-epistemic* (*e.g.*, pragmatic) forces. For instance, you may have very good *pragmatic* reasons to *hope* that it will not snow any more this winter, but this should not be confused with *evidence* to *believe* that it will not snow any more this winter. This goes back to our earlier distinction between pragmatic *versus* epistemic reasons. Evidence must provide *epistemic* reasons to *believe* that some statement is actually *true*. So, the epistemic state of a rational believer is *not* sensitive to *non-epistemic* influences (*e.g.*, hopes, fears, desires, *etc.*). There are lots of interesting examples of motivational errors.

3 Using our 'beam balance' analogy to understand (1)–(3)

In the case of (1), we can describe *misidentification* of your total evidence as "having the wrong stuff on your 'evidential scale.'" If, instead of your total evidence, you put *something else* on your 'evidential scale', then you may² get the wrong measurement of how strongly your total evidence supports (or goes against) p .

In the case of (2), we can describe *misevaluation* of your total evidence as "a malfunctioning of your 'evidential scale.'" If your 'evidential scale' is not properly calibrated (or, if there is some other factor or force hindering its proper function — see below), then it may not accurately measure the degree to which your total evidence supports (or goes against) p .

In the case of (3), we can describe *motivational errors* as another kind of "malfunctioning of your 'evidential scale.'" In this case, your scale is sensitive not (only) to the weight of the evidence, but (also) to some other, *non-epistemic* force(s) (*e.g.*, your hopes, fears, desires, *etc.*). This is analogous to a beam balance which is sensitive not only to the masses of the objects placed on it, but also to the *color* (or, some other feature of the objects that is independent of their masses) of the objects. Such a beam balance would probably not be a very reliable one for measuring mass. Analogously, if your 'evidential scale' is sensitive not (only) to the evidence regarding p , but (also) to what your hopes, desires, fears, *etc.* are concerning p , then your 'evidential scale' will probably not be a very reliable one for weighing evidence.

¹All three of these possible causes of irrational belief can operate *at the same time*, or *in any combination(s)*.

²Notice how I consistently say "may" in these spots, and *not* "will." This is because, *even if* you fall prey to one or more of the problems (1)–(3), you may still — *by sheer luck* — end up with a *rational* epistemic attitude toward p (prove this)! This is analogous to the fact that, even if your belief in p is irrational, it can still — once again, *by sheer luck* — turn out that p (and, therefore, *your belief in p*) is *true*.