
Belief into Understanding

Augustine's
Anti-anti-intellectualism

Belief and Understanding

- ✦ First and most obvious point: belief (*fides / credere*) ≠ understanding (*intelligere*)
- ✦ Second and more difficult point: as Augustine presents them, they seem to differ in several different ways:
 - ✦ Belief seems, as belief, unmoored, at least in the sense that one can believe something with little or spurious or even no evidence at all. (See *Confessions* vii 6.9)
 - ✦ One can believe what is false; understanding seems to put us into contact with what is true.
- ✦ Still, beliefs can be justified in at least two ways:
 - ✦ Sense perception, *a posteriori*
 - ✦ Reason, *a priori*
 - ✦ The role of authority?
 - ✦ We do accept some things on the basis of authority.
 - ✦ There is a further question, though, concerning which authorities are genuine and which are poseurs (See *Confessions* vi 4.6)

Bidden to Believe

- ✦ *Confessions* 6.5.7: Bidden to believe
- ✦ Is this not a foolhardy, dangerous, and damnable way to proceed?

Believe so that you may understand

- ✦ Someone says to me, 'Let me understand, in order to believe (*Intellegam ut credam*).'
I answer, 'Believe in order to understand (*Crede ut intellegas*).'
- ✦ So when an argument of this sort somehow starts between us, so that he says to me, 'Let me understand in order to believe,' and I answer him, 'Rather: believe in order to understand,' let us go with this argument to a judge—don't let either of us presume to give judgment for his own side.
- ✦ What judge are we going to find? After considering all sorts of men, I don't know whether we can find a better judge than a man through whom God speaks. —*Sermon* 43.4

Clifford's Principle

- ❖ (CP): 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.'

How *Wrong*?

❖ This might mean:

- ❖ that it is *immoral* to do so.
- ❖ that it is *imprudent* to do so.

❖ that it is *epistemically irresponsible* to do so.

❖ Perhaps, though, these may be connected thus:

1. We have an epistemic duty to believe only that for which we have adequate evidence.
2. We have both a moral and a prudential duty to discharge our epistemic duties.
3. So, we have both a moral and a prudential duty to believe only that for which we have adequate evidence.

❖ This, at any rate, seems to be what is animating Clifford's story.

A Seeming Purport

- ❖ It is wrong everywhere and always to believe anything *solely* on the basis of faith.
- ❖ CP holds, then, of *any* religious belief which is not grounded in evidence.
- ❖ There is no evidence for religious belief; all religious belief is ultimately faith-based.
- ❖ So, it is wrong everywhere and always to have religious belief.

Against Faith-based Belief

❖ A little argument against faith:

1. (CP) It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.
2. We have insufficient evidence to believe in God (however construed, as the God of the Christians, the God of the Manichees, Zeus, Yaweh, Allah, what have you. . .).
3. So, it is wrong, everywhere and for anyone to believe in God (however construed, as the God of the Christians, the God of the Manichees, Zeus, Yaweh, Allah, what have you. . .).

Fideism

- ◊ Fideism: we can legitimately hold to/accept/believe certain propositions on the basis of faith, without having any evidence whatsoever in favour of them.
- ◊ Some (non-exhaustive) degrees of fideism:
 - ◊ Mad dog fideism: I can/should believe proposition p precisely because it seems absurd and incredible. (Tertullian? *Credo quia absurdum est.*)
 - ◊ Strong fideism: For any given proposition p , I can/should believe p , even though (i) I lack evidence for p and (ii) p seems incredible in its own terms.
 - ◊ Moderate fideism: For some proposition p , I can/should believe p , even though I lack evidence for p , so long as p : (i) seems credible in its own terms, and (ii) p coheres with other things I believe on the basis of adequate evidence.
 - ◊ Weak fideism: For some proposition p , I can/should believe p , though I lack evidence for p , as long as p : (i) seems credible in its own terms, and (ii) p derives from a reliable or trustworthy source.
 - ◊ N.b. Possibly 'weak fideism' is so weak that it is not appropriately called 'fideism'.

Against Strong Fideism (SF)

1. If SF, for any random p , possibly I can/should believe p .
2. It would be a grotesque abnegation of our rational faculties and also morally pernicious were we to believe certain propositions.
3. We should avoid being morally pernicious and should refrain from abnegating our rational faculties.
4. So, we must refrain from endorsing SF.
 - ◊ One might grant this conclusion and try to extend this argument thus:
 1. One has grounds for religious belief only if SF.
 2. Not-SF.
 3. So, one never has grounds for religious belief.

A Supporter and a Dissenter

- ❖ We must remain vigilant against 'a resurgence of fideism, which fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed for the very possibility of belief in God.' —John-Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998, §55)

The Real Problem?

- ◊ If we relinquish evidence-based groundings for our beliefs, then we relinquish rational control altogether.
 - ◊ If we give up rational control, all bets are off: one might come to believe *just anything*—no matter how foolish, outlandish, or pernicious.
 - ◊ Surely, it can be neither right, nor prudent, nor humanly responsible to believe *just anything*.
 - ◊ When, however, we put controls on the admissible range of our beliefs, we are back in the game of assessment—and assessment seems to bring evidential grounding squarely back into play.

Chains of Justification

- ✦ Suppose we justify p by appeal to q and r .
 - ✦ For instance, suppose we justify our belief (p) that the lights are on by appeal to our belief (q) that we see they are on, and then we justify our belief (q) by appealing to our belief (r) that sense perception is generally reliable.
- ✦ Then one might ask: on what basis do we believe r ? What is our justification for that belief?
 - ✦ Pretty plainly the sceptic can always pose the question, 'Yes, but why do you suppose you're justified in believing that?'
- ✦ So, a question: can chains of justification reach an end? Must they reach an end?
- ✦ Some possibilities:
 - ✦ Yes, they can: they eventually reach some foundation which is self-justifying, and so needs no further justification.
 - ✦ No, they cannot: they never reach a foundation, but are justified in some circular manner.
 - ✦ No, they cannot: eventually we reach some unjustified belief which is simply accepted as an article of faith.

Faith before Understanding

- ✦ Two ways of thinking of that motto:
 - ✦ Heuristically
 - ✦ Epistemically

Heuristically

- ✦ Faith is first in the order of discovery:
 - ✦ One will not, in fact, come to understand the claims of theism without first accepting them, at some level of commitment. —Perhaps, in fact, one *cannot* come to understand such claims without first having accepted them on faith.
 - ✦ Compare: One will not come to understand relativity theory until one believes that the teacher teaching physics is an authority, capable of leading one to understanding; this seems to involve believing, at least at some level of commitment, that what she is saying is true.
 - ✦ If one thought, e.g., 'Well, this woman, this so-called 'teacher', is a moron who doesn't even see that two things can happen at the same time,' then one would likely not learn relativity theory from that teacher.

Epistemically

- ✦ Faith is first from a *justificatory* standpoint.
 - ✦ One will not understand that a certain doctrine is true—that is to say, the sort of belief which is justified and acknowledged as being true because justified—unless one first accepts the claim as true *and as justified* on the basis of faith alone
 - ✦ This seems to be an untoward sort of fideism.

Compare Two Ascents towards Truth

- ❖ *Confessions* vii 17.23
- ❖ *Confessions* ix 10.24