Credal Voluntarism and Christian Faith

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Abstract: While many Christian theologians have affirmed that faith involves voluntary belief, contemporary philosophers frequently contend that we cannot exercise voluntary control over our beliefs, and that even if we could, voluntary beliefs would not be epistemically justified. I argue that the doxastic attitudes that are part of Christian faith could be both voluntary and epistemically justified. The doxastic voluntarism that I defend is more radical than some contemporary defenses of voluntarism that build on recent arguments for “pragmatic encroachment” in epistemology. These accounts show how we could justifiably exercise voluntary control over belief, but they do not show how we could exercise similar control over credences. After arguing that mere belief voluntarism is too weak to vindicate voluntarist accounts of Christian faith, I defend “credal voluntarism,” the thesis that, at least in some situations, one may knowingly, and without damaging epistemic justification, exercise voluntary control over the credence value assigned to a proposition.

Introduction

Many of the most significant theologians from Christian history affirm both that faith is a voluntary act and that it essentially involves belief. And while faith certainly involves more than just a doxastic commitment (“even the demons believe—and shudder”), the believing involved in faith is typically held to be one of its voluntary aspects. Aquinas, for example, asserts that “the act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God.” And Barth, shortly after describing faith as “a knowledge” and “a cognitive event,” is quick to insist on the voluntary character of faith: “We are not dealing with an automatic reflection, with a stone lit up by the sun, or wood kindled by a fire, or a leaf blown by the wind. We are dealing with man. It is, therefore, a spontaneous, a free, an active event.” Contemporary philosophers who have tried to give sympathetic accounts of Christian faith have typically eschewed the doxastic voluntarism implied by these prominent

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1 James 2:19, NRSV.
2 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 2a2ae q2, a9.
3 Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation, 758. For another account of Christian faith that quite clearly insists on the voluntariness of a cognitive commitment, see Rahner, “Intellectual Honesty and Christian Faith.”
Theological accounts. Their departure on this point is understandable: believing at will is often claimed to be impossible; and even if believing at will were possible, many question whether voluntary beliefs could be justified. Despite these legitimate worries, my aim in this paper is to defend the thesis that doxastic attitudes that are part of Christian faith could be both voluntary and epistemically justified. The voluntarism that I defend is more radical in the significance it assigns to the will than some contemporary accounts of faith that build on recent arguments for “pragmatic encroachment” in epistemology. These accounts arguably show how Christian belief could be voluntary, but they supply no reason to think that the “credences” pertaining to matters of the faith could also be voluntary. I argue in section 1 that mere belief voluntarism is too weak to vindicate voluntarist accounts of Christian faith. Such accounts seem to demand not only belief voluntarism, but also what I call “credal voluntarism.” Credal voluntarism is the thesis that, in at least some situations, one may knowingly, and without damaging epistemic justification, exercise voluntary control over the credence value assigned to a proposition. I defend credal voluntarism in section 2. In section 3, I consider an objection that says that even if voluntarily-determined credences do not violate the norms of synchronic rationality, setting our credence values in response to practical reasons is not compatible with intellectual virtue. I argue in response that we can sometimes shape our credences in accordance with the desires of our heart without any loss of intellectual integrity.

1 The Limitations of Belief Voluntarism

The doxastic state of a typical human person cannot be adequately described if the only doxastic attitudes referenced are those of belief, disbelief, and withholding judgment. Among the propositions believed by an agent, some will be believed with greater confidence than others; likewise, an agent may assign various degrees of plausibility to propositions that are neither believed nor disbelieved. Adequately representing these variegated confidence levels requires that we invoke a much more fine-grained range of doxastic attitudes. This is provided by the credence framework of contemporary epistemology, which represents a subject’s confidence in the truth of some proposition with a credence value that may take on any value between zero (representing certainty of falsehood) and one (representing certainty of truth).

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See, for example, Alston, “Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith.” Of course some may resist accounts of faith (whether Christian faith or faith in general) that are committed to doxastic voluntarism not because they have a problem with doxastic voluntarism per se, but either because they deny that faith requires belief (e.g., Howard-Snyder, “Does Faith Entail Belief?”) or because they deny that faith must be voluntary. Note that the theological import of my piece does not depend on the claim that faith essentially requires belief, or that it must be voluntary. If ideal Christian faith involves voluntary belief, then this is sufficient to motivate a concern with the intelligibility of justified and voluntary believing.
Granting that we do have credences (or at least some set of fine-grained attitudes that the credence framework imperfectly models), this does not mean that the coarse-grained attitude of belief is a fiction. Nor does it mean that beliefs are in some sense “reducible” to credences, so that if you already knew some agent’s credence values, you would not gain further information about her doxastic state by being told what her beliefs are. Against such reductionism, many epistemologists hold that while credences are “pure” epistemic states that are sensitive only to evidential considerations, beliefs are sensitive to practical as well as evidential considerations.\(^5\) This “pragmatic encroachment” thesis can be used to motivate a modest sort of doxastic voluntarism.

Consider, for example, a proposal from Michael Pace that builds on William James’s famous essay “The Will to Believe.”\(^6\) James contends that in managing our beliefs, we are guided by not one but two distinct (and often conflicting) fundamental epistemic aims: the aim of avoiding error and the aim of believing the truth.\(^7\) We will succeed in avoiding erroneous belief on some question if we remain agnostic and withhold from belief altogether. But while agnosticism with respect to some question guarantees error avoidance, it also guarantees that we fail to believe the truth on the matter. Someone who is more concerned to believe the truth than to avoid error has reason to form beliefs even when the evidence is far from conclusive. Pace argues that these insights from James can illuminate the relationship between credence and belief. On his proposal, concern for believing the truth will tend to weaken the evidential requirements for belief. Since our credences express our subjective evaluation of evidential support, we can also say that the concern for believing the truth tends to lower the credence threshold for belief. Conversely, the concern for error avoidance will tend to strengthen the evidential requirements for belief and thus raise the credence threshold. Since there is no epistemically right or wrong way to weight these competing epistemic aims, there is nothing epistemically problematic if one’s weighting of these distinct epistemic aims is responsive to practical reasons. For example, if you think that correctly believing in God (should God exist) would lead one to reap great benefits, and that incorrectly believing in God (should God fail to exist) would result in comparatively minor costs, then you have a practical reason to take steps that would make more likely your believing that God exists. One such step would be to lower the credence threshold for theistic belief. Because this threshold is not settled by epistemic considerations, it is plausible that lowering the threshold is something that a fully rational and epistemically justified agent can do knowingly and voluntarily. If this is right, then at least in some contexts, we can exercise

\(^5\) For example, see Weatherson, “Can We Do Without Pragmatic Encroachment?”; Ganson, “Evidentialism and Pragmatic Constraints on Right Outright Belief”; and Ross and Schroeder, “Belief, Credence, and Pragmatic Encroachment.”

\(^6\) Pace, “The Epistemic Value of Moral Considerations.” Others have developed similar accounts in defense of belief’s sensitivity to practical concerns and/or doxastic voluntarism. For example, see McHugh, “The Illusion of Exclusivity.”

\(^7\) James, The Will to Believe, 17–18.
voluntary control over whether or not we believe in God without endangering our epistemic justification.

Pace’s “Neo-Jamesian” proposal allows us to see how the beliefs involved in faith could be voluntary and epistemically justified, but this brand of doxastic voluntarism is arguably not strong enough to satisfy the demands of traditional voluntarist accounts of Christian faith. To see why, note that while epistemic considerations do not determine an exact credence threshold, they do give us reason to set a credence threshold that is 0.5 or higher. If my credence for \( p \) is merely 0.4 (so that my credence for not-\( p \) is 0.6), then by my own lights, the belief that not-\( p \) would better serve *both* fundamental epistemic aims than the belief that \( p \). Since the belief that not-\( p \) outperforms the belief that \( p \) on *any* way of weighting the two epistemic aims, the belief that \( p \) would not be epistemically justified. Thus, Pace’s proposal allows us to explain epistemically justified voluntary theistic belief only in situations where purely epistemic factors lead the subject to have a credence for theism that is at least 0.5. In situations where one’s credence for theism is less than 0.5, theistic belief would not be epistemically rational. Moreover, given that it is constitutive of belief that it “aims” at truth, there is reason to think that it is not even possible to believe in God’s existence while knowingly assigning it a credence of less than 0.5.

Giving a philosophical account of Christian faith that comports well with the voluntarist accounts of Aquinas, Barth, Rahner, and others would require a version of doxastic voluntarism that is stronger than this modest belief voluntarism. If the only way we can voluntarily form doxastic attitudes is by determining whether some credence above 0.5 suffices for belief, then the intellectual process of assigning a credence in the first place must be entirely involuntary. On such an account, one can freely decide to move from merely having high credences for the articles of faith to outright belief in those articles, but the high credences

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9 Some readers may question whether I am entitled to the implicit assumption here that rational agents must choose between the belief that \( p \) and the belief that not-\( p \) rather than simultaneously believing both propositions. While this is of course a standard assumption, believing \( p \) while simultaneously believing not-\( p \) would be sure to satisfy the epistemic aim of believing the truth. And for an agent who gives trumping priority to the aim of believing the truth over the aim of error avoidance, it might seem that believing both of these incompatible propositions would be the surest way of achieving her epistemic aims. So simultaneously believing \( p \) and not-\( p \) should be a rationally viable option, as far as William James’s epistemic aims are concerned. My response to this objection is simply to deny that simultaneous possession of these beliefs is a genuine possibility. Just as I cannot see everything as red and green at the same time, I cannot simultaneously believe both \( p \) and not-\( p \). Perhaps I can exhibit some of the characteristics typical of someone who believes \( p \) while also exhibiting some of the characteristics typical of someone who believes not-\( p \) (for example, I might be disposed to employ \( p \) as a premise in my reasoning while simultaneously being disposed to be surprised upon learning not-\( p \)), but this is not the same as actually holding both beliefs. If it is impossible to hold both beliefs, then we can take this off of the menu of options available to rational agents even if *per impossibile*, having both beliefs would best serve the epistemic aims of some particular rational agent.
10 For a helpful development of this claim, see Hieronymi, “Controlling Attitudes.”
themselves “just happen” to a person and are not freely arrived at.\textsuperscript{11} This view, according to which one’s assessment of the probability of Christian teaching is “purely intellectual,” seems to be at odds with the view, so prominent among major theologians, that the intellectual activity of assessing Christian teaching is thoroughly influenced by the desires of the heart. Consider, for instance, the following words from 20\textsuperscript{th}-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner: “It is true of believers and unbelievers alike that there are no ultimate basic attitudes, no absolute standards of value or systems of co-ordinates for determining the meaning of existence such as might enable them to evade the struggles and hazards entailed in the responsible exercise of freedom. This is not because it is sheer blind caprice that rules at this level, but because at this level it is no longer possible to separate one’s basic views from the exercise of one’s freedom.”\textsuperscript{12} If doxastic voluntarism is limited to belief voluntarism, then we would have to reject Rahner’s view that, when it comes to our assessment of life’s meaning, our basic views are an expression of free agency: while we might have limited agency with respect to our beliefs, our plausibility assessments—assessments that significantly constrain what beliefs we can hold—would be entirely unfree. It seems likely to me that Rahner and other voluntarist theologians would judge this latter conclusion to be unacceptable.

A version of doxastic voluntarism that is adequate for the voluntarist theologians would need to affirm not just belief voluntarism but also credal voluntarism, which (you will recall) is the thesis that, in at least some situations, one may knowingly, and without damaging epistemic justification, exercise voluntary control over the credence value assigned to a proposition. I defend this thesis in the next section.

\section*{2 Credal Voluntarism}

My argument for credal voluntarism makes use of the notion of an “epistemic frame.” As I’ll use the term, an epistemic frame is a set of norms, principles, and/or apparent insights that shape the plausibility judgments of those who “inhabit” that frame, i.e., those who rely on the norms, principles, and putative insights that constitute the frame when assessing evidence and forming credences for various propositions. In a Bayesian framework, a subject’s credences are (ideally) a product of her empirical evidence and her ur-priors, where an ur-prior for $p$ measures the plausibility assigned to $p$ antecedent to empirical evidence. A Bayesian can think of

\textsuperscript{11} Of course one might make free choices that indirectly influence one’s credences by making it more or less likely that one will (involuntarily) find oneself with a high credence for Christian teachings. (For example, one could voluntarily commit to praying, which will perhaps put one in a better position to receive evidence of God’s existence that would boost one’s credence.) But the influence of the will over credences would at best be indirect in such a scenario: credences would directly answer to epistemic considerations alone; practical considerations, including the desires of one’s heart, would have no influence (at least not without damaging one’s epistemic justification).

\textsuperscript{12} Rahner, “Intellectual Honesty and Christian Faith,” 49.
an “epistemic frame” as a collection of norms, principles, and apparent insights that help to shape a subject’s ur-priors.

To illustrate the notion of an epistemic frame, consider the following example. Sam and Terry both occasionally find themselves struck by a feeling of amazement at the fact that the cosmos is ordered in a way that allows for the emergence of conscious life. Both of them can imagine universes that are too chaotic for life, or universes that have order but lack the complexity requisite for life, or a universe that is physically just like ours but that is utterly devoid of conscious experience. Included within their sense of amazement is the intuition that the conduciveness of the universe to life is something that could not plausibly have happened “by chance,” and that it cries out for a “deeper explanation.” Sam takes this intuition that an explanation is needed to be the product of genuine rational insight. He thinks that this intuition is borne of an understanding that it would be irrational to posit these features of the universe as unexplainable brute fact. Terry, on the other hand, thinks that there is no genuine insight behind her “feeling” that the conduciveness to life requires explanation. She considers it a bit of foolishness to trust as reliable our evolved sense of what requires explanation when this sense is applied to questions of ultimate explanation and to other questions that are far removed from the mundane matters most relevant to our evolutionary fitness. Sam and Terry are also occasionally struck by the sense that belief in God is naïve and unscientific, an unjustified product of wish fulfillment. Terry takes this sense to be genuinely insightful, thinking it a rational response to her attempt to assimilate her entire evidential picture. Sam, on the other hand, rejects the notion that this sense is borne of a clearheaded assessment. On Sam’s view, the sense that theism is naïve merely reflects his internalization of a cultural ethos that does not take religious perspectives seriously.

Because Sam and Terry take opposing views on which intuitions are accepted as genuine insights and which are not, they occupy different epistemic frames. This difference in epistemic frames is likely to lead Sam to have a higher credence for theism than Terry, even if Sam and Terry have the same empirical information.

Having introduced the notion of an epistemic frame, I can now put forward the key thesis of this section:

FRAME CHOICE: In some cases where two opposing epistemic frames are live for S, S can knowingly choose on the basis of practical reasons how much weight to assign to each frame without damaging the epistemic justification of the credences that result from this choice.

Appropriating a label from William James, when two opposing epistemic frames are both “live” for a subject, she is able to “feel the force” of two competing ways of thinking and the outlooks that follow from them. Moreover, she knows of no objection to either frame that is (by her own lights) decisive. Both frames appear to her as ways of thinking that could possibly be endorsed as her own. As I will
now argue, when we find ourselves in this position, we may be able to freely adopt
one or the other frame on the basis of practical considerations.

Consider the following situation involving subject S, a situation that I contend
is not uncommon for actual persons. Frames F1 and F2 are both live for S, and F1
supports assigning p an initial credence of c1 while F2 supports assigning p some
different credence value c2. When S puts herself into an F1 “frame of mind” (by
sympathetically dwelling on the principles and putative insights that constitute
F1), F2 appears to be not just mistaken but rationally deficient. Similarly, when S
puts herself into an F2 frame of mind, F1 appears to her to be rationally deficient.
These appearances do not compel S to fully endorse either frame, since even if S is
inhabiting (in some tentative way) one of these two frames, S knows that there is
an alternative frame that is accessible to her and that leads to opposing
appearances. And when S limits herself to considerations that are independent of
the “dispute” between F1 and F2, she lacks dispute-neutral epistemic reasons for
any particular way of weighting F1 and F2. Nonetheless, S has practical reasons that
favor giving more weight to F1. (Perhaps S has a practical reason to have
confidence in God’s existence, and because F1 favors a high credence for theism
while F2 does not, S thereby has a practical reason to adopt F1.)

My contention is that this situation is realistic and that in this situation, it may
be possible for S to voluntarily and without damaging her epistemic standing settle
on F1 for practical reasons (or perhaps to settle on a determinate weighting that
favors F1 over F2), and that in doing so S thereby exercises a degree of voluntary
control over her credence for p. What does “settling” on an epistemic frame
involve? Presumably, the mental actions involved are similar to the mental actions
involved in “putting oneself in a frame of mind” (a frame that one may not fully
endorse), except that one is more fully engaged in the exercise. If one is tentatively
inhabiting a frame only in order to more deeply understand it, or in order to
experimentally test its power, then one attempts to see things from a certain
perspective while nonetheless maintaining a critical distance from that
perspective. This involves a degree of mental fragmentation: part of one’s thinking
is “given over” to the frame’s perspective while another part of oneself remains
detached from the frame in order to evaluate it from a disengaged vantage point.
In settling on an epistemic frame, one abandons the element of critical distance in
order to fully inhabit the frame and make it one’s own.

Some words from Aquinas may be helpful here. In attempting to explain how
faith can be responsive reasoning without diminishing the will’s role, Aquinas
writes that when a person’s “will is ready to believe, he loves the truth he believes,
he thinks out and takes to heart whatever reasons he can find in support thereof.”13
This language of “taking to heart” an argument comports well with my attempt in
the last paragraph to describe what is involved in endorsing an epistemic frame.
Taking an argument to heart arguably involves more than a disinterested
appreciation of the argument’s internal merits. It involves giving up or lessening

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13 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 2a2ae q2, a10.
whatever skeptical reserve one might have towards the argument (skepticism that is perhaps motivated by awareness of an alternative and live epistemic frame), so that one’s plausibility judgments are more fully shaped by the argument’s way of thinking.

To make the case for why S could voluntarily and justifiably choose a frame on practical grounds, I will describe the main reason for thinking that a rational agent cannot normally choose credences on practical grounds, and then I will explain why this reason does not apply in S’s situation. Suppose I have a strong practical reason for having a high credence for the proposition that the number of stars in the galaxy is even rather than odd, a proposition that I’ll label $EVEN$. I grant that I am unable to voluntarily adopt a high credence for $EVEN$. The reason for this inability is, I suggest (following Alex Worsnip), that such a credence would result in obvious incoherence since I endorse epistemic norms that prescribe a credence of 0.5 to $EVEN$.$^{14}$ And rational agents cannot adopt doxastic states that are transparently incoherent. Thus, in order for me to exercise voluntary control over my credence for $EVEN$, I would need to voluntarily adopt some epistemic frame that supports (or at least permits) having some credence other than 0.5 for $EVEN$ in my present evidential situation. Not surprisingly, no such epistemic frame is a live option for me: I am unable to “feel the force” of any perspective that permits assigning $EVEN$ some determinate credence other than 0.5. I therefore have no voluntarily control over my credence for $EVEN$.$^{15}$ But S’s choosing to adopt frame $F_1$ would not similarly result in incoherence. Because S’s choice is between fundamental epistemic frames (and the outlooks they support) that are both live for S, rather than a simple choice between two credences for a non-fundamental proposition, S’s choice is between entire outlooks that appear (to S) to be internally coherent. S’s options are therefore not restricted by her inability to avoid transparent incoherence.

Even if it is possible for S to voluntarily endorse $F_1$ for practical reasons, could the resultant outlook be epistemically justified? Well, if the $F_1$ way of thinking really is rationally superior to the $F_2$ way of thinking, then we have reason to think that in adopting a high credence for the correctness of $F_1$, and by moving her other credences closer to the values supported by $F_1$, S’s epistemic standing would improve, even if this change was motivated by practical reasons. Against this, however, one might contend that S’s high credence for $F_1$’s correctness could not

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$^{14}$ See ch. 4 of Alex Worsnip’s excellent dissertation, “Rationality’s Demands on Belief,” for an extended argument that an inability to be transparently incoherent can explain why doxastic voluntarism is normally impossible.

$^{15}$ I do not want to altogether rule out the possibility that we can exercise voluntary control over credences for propositions without also shifting our rationally fundamental perspective. Perhaps some of us endorse epistemic norms that issue in vague credence prescriptions, and we can exercise voluntary control within the vague region that our norms prescribe. Or perhaps the correct epistemic norms are in some situations permissive with respect to credence assignments, allowing more than one credence assignment in response to a given body of evidence; and maybe we can in some circumstances choose among the permissive options.
be justified since if S knew that she adopted it for practical reasons, then S would know that her credence is epistemically arbitrary and this would give her a defeater for her credence. The force of this worry dissipates when we distinguish between two ways a credence could be epistemically arbitrary. First, S’s credence for F1 could be arbitrary because it was adopted for epistemically irrelevant reasons. Second, S’s high credence for F1 could be epistemically arbitrary because that credence is not presently based on epistemically relevant reasons. Suppose S adopted F1 for practical reasons. In this case, her high credence for the correctness of F1 would be arbitrary in the first sense, but it need not be arbitrary in the second sense. While S adopted this credence for reasons that were not epistemically relevant, upon adopting a high credence for F1, S thereby gained epistemic reasons in favor of that credence. Recall that from an F1 frame of mind, F2 appears to be rationally deficient. So once S endorsed F1, she understood herself to have insight into the rational superiority of F1 over F2. This newly acquired epistemic reason could then become the basis for S’s continued endorsement of F1. Since S takes herself to have solid epistemic grounds for preferring F1, S can rationally stand by her high credence even if she acknowledges that her reason for adopting this credence was epistemically arbitrary (and even if she is presently striving to increase her confidence in F1 for reasons that she acknowledges to be epistemically arbitrary). Granted, S’s newly acquired reasons for endorsing F1 are not frame-neutral reasons. Because one must inhabit F1 in order to appreciate the (putative) rational superiority of F1, S’s epistemic reasons for accepting F1 exhibit what Alston and others call “epistemic circularity.” But insisting that fundamental rational frameworks be supported by framework-neutral considerations is a sure path to skepticism and is therefore not a very plausible requirement.

3 The charge of intellectual dishonesty

As I just explained in the previous section, when S endorses F1, S thereby gains epistemic reasons (albeit epistemically circular ones) for endorsing F1 and rejecting F2. From the F1 perspective, F2 appears rationally deficient in comparison to F1. The fact that an endorsement of F1 is self-justifying in this way differentiates frame choice from changes in credences for non-fundamental propositions like even.

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16 In an early argument against doxastic voluntarism Bernard Williams argued that one could not knowingly adopt a belief voluntarily, since the knowledge that one has done this would give one an irresistible reason for doubting that the belief accurately represents reality. (Williams, “Deciding to Believe.”) While few think that Williams argument for the conceptual impossibility of doxastic voluntarism succeeds, a more promising argument (the one I am considering here) uses the considerations he raises in order to argue against against the justification of credences that are known to have been acquired voluntarily.

17 For a defense of the reasonability of relying on certain belief-forming mechanisms even when we have only epistemically circular support for the reliability of those mechanisms, see Alston, “Epistemic Circularity”; Bergmann, “Epistemic Circularity.”
Raising my credence for **EVEN** does not result in my having reasons for thinking that this high credence is epistemically appropriate.

But even if all will appear epistemically in order after S endorses \( F_1 \), one might object that before this endorsement takes place, S should reject as intellectually dishonest any actions aimed at bringing about this endorsement. Here is an analogy to motivate the objection. Vinod has just received evidence that shows that his friend Jane is a notorious con-artist who is eluding law enforcement. Vinod strongly wants to believe that Jane is an upstanding person. Fortunately, Vinod has in his possession a harmless pill that, if taken, will erase the last few minutes of Vinod’s memories, including his memories of the evidence and of taking the pill. Upon taking the pill, Vinod will simply think that he is waking from a brief snooze on the couch. We can suppose that after taking the pill, Vinod’s belief in Jane’s high moral character would be fully rational given the evidence available to him. Moreover, Vinod’s credences would be fully rational up to and including the moment he takes the pill. Nonetheless, I suspect that most would judge that Vinod’s taking the pill would amount to form of intellectual dishonesty that is not compatible with intellectual virtue. And according to the objection under consideration, S’s undertaking to endorse \( F_1 \) would involve a comparable sort of intellectual dishonesty, even if S is epistemically coherent after endorsing \( F_1 \), and even \( F_1 \) is in fact objectively correct.

This objection is importantly different than the “defeater” objection considered in the previous section. That objection questioned the **rationality** of S’s doxastic state after endorsing \( F_1 \), saying that the knowledge that S adopted this state for epistemically irrelevant reasons would give S a defeater for her new beliefs. The present objection questions the **integrity** of S before she has endorsed \( F_1 \), but after she has determined to acquire a confident belief in its correctness. The claim is that intellectual virtue should prevent S from attempting to acquire this belief.

To respond, I believe that there is a crucial disanalogy between S’s frame choice and the case of Vinod and the pill. For Vinod to succeed in bringing about the desired belief in Jane’s goodness, it is necessary that his future self not be aware of information possessed by Vinod’s past self. Arguably, what is most troubling about Vinod’s taking the pill is that Vinod’s subsequent epistemic justification is predicated on a lack of transparency between Vinod’s future and past selves. Any attempt to bring about such non-transparency in order to manage our future doxastic states amounts to a kind of self-deception that undermines one’s diachronic intellectual integrity.

In contrast, endorsing a frame for practical reasons does not require this sort of non-transparency. When a subject inhabits a new frame, his outlook changes not because evidence is gained or lost, or because he becomes aware of new arguments (or forgets old ones), but because the same evidence and arguments are assessed according to different standards. Changing one’s views by means of frame choice therefore does not require that one manipulate one’s evidence base or hide any considerations from one’s future self, at least not if the chosen frame was a live option. One can, as it were, work in the open. Arguably, then, choosing a frame on
practical grounds is compatible both with synchronic rationality and with diachronic intellectual integrity.

4 Conclusion

In this short paper I have attempted to defend the credal voluntarism that is implicit in many prominent theological accounts of Christian faith. Philosophers are rightly skeptical of the idea that we can adjust any arbitrary credence on the basis of practical reasons. Credences are a subject’s take on plausibility in light of one’s evidence, which means that we cannot set our credence for \( p \) at a value that we know is at odds with our evidence and the standards for evidential assessment that we genuinely endorse. But when we turn our attention away from isolated propositions and consider instead entire outlooks and the epistemic frames that give rise to them, the claim that we can voluntarily shape our credal state in response to practical reasons becomes much more plausible. Increasing my credence that some frame is correct will result in my having a more favorable evaluation of that frame’s epistemic standing, at least in cases where the frame has a favorable estimation of itself and is in this way self-justifying. Credence changes at this level bring with them a favorable higher-order epistemic evaluation of those changes, eliminating the incoherence that would typically result from epistemically arbitrary credence adjustments. Focusing at this level of fundamental epistemic frames allows us to take seriously the claim that the beliefs involved in faith can be freely chosen and fully justified.

References


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