

teorema

Vol. XLII/3, 2023, pp. 131-142

ISSN 0210-1602

[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2023) 42:3; pp. 131-142

The Duty to Believe: Accuracy, Sincerity, and Acceptance

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the duties we have as believers and communicators of beliefs. I maintain that we have a duty regarding to what Williams (2002) calls the two virtues of truth: accuracy and sincerity. We ought to be reliable in forming our beliefs, and we ought to transmit what we really believe. I defend two principles, one for each of these two virtues, that, in my opinion, are at the same time epistemic and moral. With regard to accuracy I propose a variant of Clifford's principle, and according to sincerity I propose that to assert that p , one has not only to believe that p but also accept that p .

KEYWORDS: *Belief, Testimony, Acceptance, Epistemic Duties.*

RESUMEN

En este artículo exploro las obligaciones que tenemos como formadores y comunicadores de creencias. Mantengo que tenemos deberes con respecto a las que Williams (2002) llama las dos virtudes de la verdad: precisión y sinceridad. Debemos ser fiables a la hora de formar nuestras creencias y debemos transmitir lo que creemos realmente. Defiendo dos principios, uno para cada una de estas virtudes que, en mi opinión, son a la vez epistémicos y morales. Respecto de la precisión, propongo una variante del principio de Clifford, y, respecto de la sinceridad, propongo que, para aseverar que p , uno no solo se tiene que creer que p sino también aceptar que p .

PALABRAS CLAVE: *creencia, testimonio, aceptación, deberes epistémicos.*

I am very happy and honoured to contribute to this issue. I have known Carlos Moya for many years, so many I dare not count them. During this time, we have shared many things, even an office for a while. We have exchanged, discussed and even written down many ideas, we have commented on each other's writings many times, and we have jointly produced a good number of them. But we have also shared many of those little or not so little things that end up shaping one's life: hopes, some achievements, and also pain and sadness at times. I have had that

privilege, the privilege of being friends with someone I have always admired. I have always had a high regard for Carlos's intellectual honesty, for his ability to understand philosophical problems and challenges and to tackle them soundly and tenaciously, with no concessions or easy ways out of impasses. Observing Carlos, I have always admired his autonomy in thinking, and his firmness in following the path along which the argumentation leads, without giving in to comfort and much less to self-deception, not even to the comfort of the most popular or most widely accepted position.

In Carlos I have always witnessed an epistemic responsibility which is, I believe, a form of moral responsibility, and that is why I have chosen this subject for my contribution to this issue in his honour.

I. BELIEFS AND ACTIONS

Beliefs have consequences for our actions. Actions manifest our beliefs. Our beliefs and actions influence other people's beliefs and actions. Because of all this, it is important to form and transmit true beliefs. We are epistemically responsible in doing so. And given the practical consequences, we are also morally responsible. These days, when respect for truth, to put it mildly, has been relaxed in too many areas and contexts of social life, it is important to say this (remembering what many authors have already said) and to argue for it. We must be careful in forming our beliefs, and maybe even more careful in transmitting them to others. Because, as Bernard Williams says:

Someone who asserts something to another standardly gives the hearer to understand that he can rely on the truth of what has been asserted, in particular that he can base his actions on that assumption. [Williams (2002). p 79].

There are two elements here that deserve further explanation. First, our audience can usually take our words to be true and base their actions on them because ordinary linguistic exchanges are governed, at least in part, by the following norm of assertion: say p only if you know that p [Williamson (1996), p. 494]. Second, to base one's actions on the assumption that p is true is a form of what Stalnaker (1984), Cohen (1989) and Bratman (1992), among others, have called *acceptance*, a way of accepting that p .¹ And acceptance is a concept that will play an important role in what follows. Again, if our words correspond to our beliefs and

can be the basis for our actions and the actions of others, then we have an important responsibility in how we form them and convey them to others.

In other words, we have a duty to respect what Williams (2002) calls the two virtues of truth: accuracy and sincerity. We ought to be reliable in forming our beliefs, and we ought to transmit what we really believe.

In this paper I will defend two principles, one for each of these two virtues, that are at the same time both epistemic and moral. Regarding accuracy, the principle I want to argue for, to a first approximation, is the following famous claim of William Clifford (1877)/(1901), p. 175:

(PA) It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.

And regarding sincerity, the principle I want to argue for is this:

(PS) To assert that p , you must not only believe that p but also accept that p .

II. ACCURACY

Let's begin with the (PA), the principle about accuracy: William's Clifford famous dictum. Although it seems extremely demanding, it is not so demanding if we take into account that beliefs can be held with more or less intensity, and with greater or lesser confidence. Once this has been acknowledged, what matters is that the intensity of our belief should be proportional to the evidence at our disposal; as maintained by Locke, Hume and other evidentialists. With this in mind, we can see that the sufficiency of evidence is contextual and will also depend on the intensity of one's belief. Therefore, evidence does not have to be conclusive or even very strong to be sufficient. It all depends on the intensity of one's belief: whether it is proportional to the evidence. In my opinion, belief admits of different intensities, ranging from considering p to be more probable than not- p (as well as the propositions that one knows to imply not- p) to certainty (believing without doubt and discarding any possibility that not- p). Considering p to be more probable than not- p is not something as weak as it may seem. To believe that something is red is to think that it is more probable that it is red than it is not red (i.e. yellow or blue or green...). And to believe that Descartes was born in 1596

is to think that it is more probable that he was born in this year than in 1597, 1595, 1623... or any other year.

In my view, since I am an anti-voluntarist [see Williams's (1973) seminal paper or Scott-Kakures (1994)] – that is, I maintain that it is impossible to believe at will – the problem is not so much believing without sufficient (subjective) evidence, i.e. believing despite thinking that there is insufficient evidence. After all, our beliefs are slaves to the evidence we have or think we have. The evidence tips the scales of our beliefs without us having to decide or do anything else. The problems, in my opinion, lay elsewhere. It is indeed problematic (1) to take as evidence what is not evidence, (2) to ignore counterevidence, (3) not to adequately weight the evidence for and against a proposition, or (4) to undertake what Kunda (1990) has called *motivated reasoning*, that is, the reasoning that takes place “when a person has a desire or preference for a particular conclusion and that desire guides their reasoning in a way that facilitates their drawing that conclusion” [Ellis (2022), p. 2]. These problems arise because what we consider to be evidence, and what weight we give to it, may depend to a large extent on our reasoning.

Much has been written about the nature of evidence, and there are conceptions and theories of very different kinds. I will not enter into this discussion, however.² I will understand “evidence for a proposition p ” as including any fact that is cognitively accessible to a subject which (disregarding the possible existence of defeaters) makes p (objectively) more probable than not- p and any other proposition that implies not- p .

Evidence, like beliefs, can have different intensities. What is appropriate is that the intensities of one's evidence and beliefs are consonant, meaning that beliefs must be adapted to evidence and evidence to facts. But a major problem, as I said, is taking as evidence what is not evidence. As I said, I will consider to be evidence for p only what makes p objectively more probable than its negation (i.e. that which increases the probability of p in this way). That is, in the debate between evidence conceived as what makes it reasonable to believe p and what makes p objectively probable, I shall take the latter option. We live in an age in which bullshit, lies, hoaxes and fake news are not only abundant, but also have an enormous capacity for dissemination through social networks. We also know that an immense part of our knowledge has been generated through testimony, and that this medium elicits our sympathy, to the point that it is often difficult to escape its influence, and that we usually need powerful reasons in order that what is testified does not immediately become one's belief. This is perhaps why such forms of deceit are so

dangerous. But a lie (insofar as it is a falsehood) cannot constitute evidence, according to my characterization of evidence. George Bush's claim that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, insofar as it was a falsehood and did nothing to increase the likelihood that there were any, could not constitute evidence in favour of there being weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (although it could make it reasonable to believe this). Thus, fake news, hoaxes, etc. cannot constitute evidence in favour of what they claim. But they can seem to do so, and many people do not stop to assess their credibility; they accept them directly because of the power of the testimony, circulating them more and more and thus increasing, by the number of repetitions and the media in which they appear, their credibility in the eyes of others.

If we also take into account that such messages often have a strong emotional charge, we can understand their capacity for success even better. If what we are told matches what we desire, already believe or would like to believe, then we seem unlikely to question it. It is difficult in such circumstances to look for evidence and consider the issue carefully. And if we do so, it seems that our reasoning will frequently be motivated.

It is often said that we live in information (or disinformation) bubbles. We read the press that is most in tune with our ideology. On social networks, we connect almost exclusively with people who think similarly to us, and algorithms select messages, texts and news for us based on our preferences. Our conception of the world and of things can be increasingly biased, and overcoming this tendency requires an increasingly strong effort. This is an effort that many do not make and are not willing to make. We are situated in our epistemic comfort zone and have no desire to leave it. Add to this the fact that the online platforms of newspapers, etc. earn money according to the number of visits they receive. The consequence is often (in the best case) sensationalism or ideological overtones. In the worst case, truth loses its guiding role in our discourse and is replaced by the goal of achieving the desired perlocutionary effects in each case.

But maybe the major challenge is not just to believe the truth, but to act according to one's beliefs. Perhaps we should reformulate or complete our principle as something like this:

(PA') Don't act on the basis of p without sufficient evidence that p .

Since speech acts are actions, this principle applies directly to them. On the other hand, the sufficiency of evidence is relative not only to the

intensity of one's confidence, but also to the possible consequences of acting on the basis of what is believed. Depending on the desirability of the consequences, greater or lesser confidence (and evidence) will be necessary in order to behave in accordance with what is believed. The higher the desirability, the lower the subjective probability that is needed to act, and the lower the desirability, the higher the subjective probability that is needed to completely discard its truth and act according to what one believes. So sometimes we accept the opposite of what we believe, and sometimes one acts as if the truth was the opposite of one's belief. I do not believe that this lottery ticket is going to win the prize (I know it is very unlikely that it will) but I still buy it. I am almost certain that I will not have a car accident on my journey back home, which is very short and on a road with very little traffic, but I buckle my seatbelt anyway.

Recall the two cases presented by Keith DeRose in "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions" (1992), p. 913. In both cases, a subject and his wife plan to go to the bank on a Friday afternoon to deposit their pay cheques. In the first case, it is not particularly important for them to do so, and as they drive by and see that the lines inside are very long, the subject decides that he will come back on Saturday morning. When his wife questions this, he says that he knows the bank will be open the next day, Saturday. In the second case, they have just written a very large and very important cheque and if their "paychecks are not deposited into [their] checking account before Monday morning, the important check [they] wrote will bounce, leaving [them] in a *very* bad situation". This time, when asked by his wife if he knows if the bank will be open the next day, Saturday, he says he doesn't know.

Regardless of whether, as contextualists argue, it is true that in the first case the subject knows and in the second case he does not (his evidence and confidence being the same), the fact is that depending on the possible harm or benefits that would follow from being wrong or right, either we accept or do not accept (decide to act or not to act on the basis of) what we believe. This is what unscrupulous politicians exploit in their campaign speeches. They make promises and give us guarantees which we doubt very much they will keep or comply with, but we want so much for things to be as the politicians say that, despite our many doubts, we come to accept what they say.

Knowing all this, in this post-truth era we have to be especially careful about the virtue of accuracy. We have to be the masters of our beliefs, that is, we have to avoid incorporating into our body of beliefs

anything that has not passed through the filter of (PA), which sometimes requires us to rationally examine the content of testimony.

III. SINCERITY

As I said, our words often greatly influence the behaviour of others, for the reasons already mentioned. First, everyone's beliefs depend partly on the testimony of others, and we are all informants. Second, when we assert that p , we imply that we know that p and, consequently— in Williams's terms — that the listener “can rely on the truth of what has been asserted, in particular that he can base his actions on that assumption”. As Williams also says, “assertions play their role in the transmission of knowledge just because they are taken to be direct expressions of belief and the speakers are taken to be reliable” [Williams (2002), p. 79]. We largely take people to be sincere (and accurate), and so we take each other's assertions to be reliable.³

Since others usually trust our words and base their actions on them if they need to, we have a *prima facie* duty to be sincere. But what is sincerity? In the quotation from Williams above, he says that sincerity “consists in a disposition to make sure that one's assertion expresses what one actually believes” [Williams (2002), p. 96]. But what does “actually believes” mean here? To be sincere, is it enough to say something I believe to be true? I do not think so. Or, if we agree that it is enough, then something more than sincerity is needed to be a trustworthy speaker. Am I sincere if I say that the next Catalan Conference of Philosophy will take place either in Terrassa or in Manresa if I know that it will be in Manresa? After all, I do believe that it is true that the next Catalan Conference of Philosophy will take place either in Terrassa or in Manresa. Am I sincere if I assert that next Saturday it will rain if, although I believe this, I am not sure of it? Am I sincere when I assert something that is true (and which I believe to be true) if my assertion conveys a false implicature? In my view, to be sincere, in the sense required for being a trustworthy speaker, consists in not trying to deceive or mislead. But what does this imply for us as speakers?

There are many ways in which our words can lead the listener to form a false belief. Lying is the most direct one. And when one lies, one is clearly not being sincere. But there are other ways in which, as I see it, one can say what one believes to be true without being sincere. One of these ways, perhaps the one that has attracted most attention, is to be

misleading or merely misleading (Saul 2012). This consists in saying something true that will lead the hearer to form a false belief. A classic and nice example of this is St. Athanasius's words "He is not far from here", given as a response to his persecutors' question "Is Athanasius close at hand?" Perhaps the most usual way of being misleading is to assert something that is true (and believed true) but which conveys a false implicature. In a way, this is the case in each of the examples we have considered above.

As is well known, implicatures are produced by violating some Gricean maxims [Grice (1975)]. We can thus say that it is the violation of some Gricean maxim that produces the deceit. If, knowing that the next Catalan Conference of Philosophy will take place in Manresa, I tell you that it will take place either in Terrassa or in Manresa, I am violating the maxim of quantity of information, because I am giving you less information than necessary. You will think that I am violating this maxim in order not to violate the second maxim of quality: do not say that for which you lack evidence. So, you will conclude that I do not know in which of these two places the conference will take place (maybe because this has still not been decided by the organization). In the other cases, some maxim or another is also violated. St. Athanasius was violating a maxim of manner. By using "he" to refer to himself, he was not clear enough; he was incurring ambiguity.

What about saying that next Saturday it will rain, or that the bank will be open? Why am I being misleading if I assert this when I am not sure of it? Notice that the object of deception can vary: we can deceive others about the content of our assertion that p , but we can also deceive others about our epistemic (or mental) state: that we believe or know that p . In fact, when we deceive others about the content of our assertion, we also deceive them about our epistemic state. When I lie by saying that p , I not only try to deceive others about the asserted content, but also about the fact that I believe it. If you do not believe that I believe that p , you will not believe that p yourself (at least if the only reason you have is my saying that p). But I can (try to) deceive others only about my epistemic or mental state without trying to deceive anyone about p . I can do this, for instance, if I give them less information than necessary when I do possess the necessary information (as in the case of the Catalan Conference), or if I assert what I do not accept in spite of believing it. In these cases, I am being misleading about my epistemic or mental state.

I think that this kind of case is more problematic, in particular the case of the bank. Is a Gricean maxim violated in such cases? This is not

clearly the case. Am I violating the second maxim of quality? Consider the details of DeRose's example: if we agree that the subject has exactly the same evidence in both cases and we concede that in the first case he knows, then it is hard to say that in the second case he lacks (enough) evidence. Maybe, as I said, the amount of evidence necessary for accepting that p will depend on the benefits or risks that would follow from acting on the basis of p . In that case, the amount of evidence necessary for asserting that p will also vary in relation to them. As an invariantist (someone who thinks that "know" does not change its meaning across contexts and that contextual factors – such as risk and sceptical doubts – do not affect the standards that a true "knowledge" attribution must meet [Rysiew, (2021)], I tend to think that if the subject in DeRose's example knows in the first case, then he knows in the second case too. Or, conversely, that if he doesn't know in one case, then he doesn't know in the other case either.

Perhaps contextualists – those who think that "knowledge" has different meanings or different standards of attribution in different contexts – confuse the semantic level and the pragmatic level. That is, they may confuse what is right or proper to say with what is true. The subject in DeRose's case, we are told, believes the same in both cases with the same intensity. After all, from the fact that it is not appropriate or correct to attribute knowledge to me if I do not accept that p , it does not follow that it is false that I know that p . One is not always the best judge of whether one knows or not. We all know extremely cautious people (to the point of neurosis) who deny knowing, even when the rest of us see no problem in attributing knowledge to them. Epistemologists have long accepted that it is possible to (truthfully) attribute knowledge to people who do not attribute it to themselves. There seems to be a standard of justification that determines whether or not there is knowledge, no matter how strict the presumed possessor is and no matter how demanding the particular circumstances are. After all, the degree of stringency imposed by circumstances, because of the sensitivity of the issue and the serious consequences that may follow, is not entirely different from the degree of stringency that different individuals impose on themselves according to their character. In DeRose's case, it may be that the difference is not that the subject possesses knowledge in one case and not in the other, but rather that in the first case he *accepts* that the bank opens on Saturday whereas he does not accept this in the second case. Acceptance, unlike belief, is not a matter of intensity. You can believe that p more or less strongly, but either you accept that p or you do not. If "know" does

not change its meaning across contexts, then why is it right or convenient to say “I know” in the first context and not in the second one? Remember that if you assert that p , then you convey (implicitly say) that you know that p , that you grant that p , and that you are sure that p , so that the hearer can act on the assumption that p . If I were to say something which I myself do not accept, something on the basis of which I am not prepared to act while taking it for granted, then I would thus be dishonest with my interlocutors. I would make them base their conduct on the assumption that p , when I am unwilling to do so myself.⁴ Therefore I must not attribute knowledge to myself of that which I do not accept, for I cannot guarantee it. (And notice that asserting that p without any precautionary qualification is a way of self-attributing knowledge that p).

Perhaps knowing something is different from being able to guarantee it. But to say that one knows that p is to say that one can guarantee that p .

IV. NOT SO RIGOROUS

We may conclude from the foregoing discussion that in order to assert something, we must not only (justifiably) believe it, but also accept it. And if I am being right in my interpretation of DeRose’s cases, then we should amend Williamson’s rule of assertion accordingly. However, just like the rule governing accuracy, this new rule of assertion is not as strict as it may seem. It is true that to say that p is, *prima facie*, to assert that p , to warrant that p . But there are many frequently employed ways to discharge this commitment. We can qualify our utterances using what we may call “expressions of caution”, such as “I think”, “it seems”, etc. With these expressions we imply that we are not in a position to guarantee the truth of what we say, so that the hearer would need to investigate more if they want to be sure. However, the appropriateness of acceptance will depend on what the consequences of being wrong are.

For sure, one must be much more justified in asserting that John has committed embezzlement (or in self-attributing knowledge thereof) than is required for asserting or saying that one *knows* that John smokes on the sly, regardless of whether we do this in a relaxed conversation with friends in a bar, or in a formal deposition to a judge. But from the fact that it is (or is not) appropriate to assert that one knows that p , it does not follow that it is (or is not) true that one knows that p . My knowledge (or lack thereof) that John smokes on the sly is the same whether I am among friends or before a judge. For such facts, of course, do not in themselves add any new evidence, nor do they take it away.

The risks that follow from acting in accordance with the truth of p are relevant and determine the correctness of asserting that p or self-attributing knowledge that p . But just as the circumstances in which it is asserted that John has committed embezzlement may affect the appropriateness of this assertion without affecting its truth, so I say, such circumstances will affect the appropriateness of an attribution of knowledge, but not its truth. However, they also affect the appropriateness of the assertion, and here again (PS) comes into play.

In short, this is the main moral of our discussion: do not believe that p without sufficient evidence, and do not assert that p if you do not accept that p , with the understanding that the sufficiency of evidence and the correctness of acceptance are contextual.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for comments from an anonymous referee that have helped me to improve this paper. The title itself is their suggestion.

NOTES

¹ Although there are some differences among these authors' conceptions of acceptance, Cohen defines it thus:

To accept that p is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that p – that is, of going along with that proposition (either for the long term or for the immediate purposes only) as a premise in some or all contexts for one's own and others' proofs, argumentations, inferences, deliberations, etc. Whether or not one assents and whether or not one feels it to be true that p [Cohen (1992, p. 368)].

And I will understand acceptance in a similar vein: To accept that p is to be disposed to act (at least for the moment) on the basis of p , to act as if p were true, whether one believes it or not.

² I have addressed some of the relevant issues in Grimaltos and Iranzo (2009b).

³ Nevertheless, we also know that many assertions are false, since people sometimes lie and have epistemic vices that make them unreliable.

⁴ See Grimaltos (2009a).

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