

# Interpersonal Faith and Self-Fulfilling Beliefs



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# Background: faith vs. belief

Belief: taking something to be the case; regarding it as true.

How is faith different than belief?

1. Faith has a desire component.
2. Faith “goes beyond the evidence.”

# Outline of Talk

1. Clarify what kind of faith we are discussing
2. The problem of faith and evidence
3. Self-justifying beliefs
4. Faith as self-justifying
5. An Objection
6. Application to faith in God

# What kind of faith?

Today, we'll focus on two kinds of faith:

- Intrapersonal faith: faith in yourself
- Interpersonal faith: faith in others

While faith in God / religious faith won't be our focus, I'll mention that near the end of the talk.

Another distinction:

- Faith **\*in\*** a person or ideal (e.g. faith in your spouse, faith in Democracy).
- Faith **\*that\*** something is true (e.g. faith that this chair will hold you, faith that God exists).

Finally, we'll be focusing on **\*epistemic\*** rationality (as opposed to practical rationality).

# Faith and evidence: a potential problem

On one hand, faith seems like an important part of a flourishing life.

- We don't want to simply say that faith is always irrational.

On the other hand, it's natural to think faith has a unique relationship to evidence.

- Recall: many say that faith “goes beyond the evidence” in some way (Buchak 2014).

How can we make sense of the idea that faith isn't just irrational, but also goes beyond the evidence? I'll argue that we can do so by appealing to *self-justifying beliefs*.

# Self-Justifying Beliefs

Self-justifying beliefs: beliefs that, when held, create evidence for themselves (James 1986).

Three categories:

- 1) Involving a powerful being/machine:
  - Rain: God makes the following proposal: If you believe that it will rain in LA tomorrow, then God will make sure it rains in LA tomorrow. But if you believe it won't rain tomorrow, then God will make sure it doesn't (Kopec and Titelbaum 2016).
  - Millionaire: An Eccentric Billionaire comes to the door with the following credible offer: she will give you one million dollars if you believe that you will be a millionaire (Antill 2019).
  - Mind-reading machine: Alice's brain attached to a mind-reading machine, which is in turn attached to a large visual display that is within Alice's view. When the machine is turned on, Alice will be asked to predict what number will appear on the display in 20 seconds. That number will be determined by what Alice believes the number will be (Reisner 2013).

# Self-Justifying Beliefs, cont.

## 2) Beliefs about yourself:

- Hiker: if you believe you can make the jump, this gives you energy and zeal making it much more likely that you'll make it (James 1898).
- Illness: believing you'll survive a life-threatening illness makes it more likely you'll survive.
- Public speaking: believing you'll give a great talk today makes it more likely you'll give a great talk.

## 3) Beliefs about others:

- Basketball game: Telling your friend that you believe they will win their basketball game gives them confidence and motivation to make them play harder (importance of fans in sports!)
- Surgery: Telling your grandmother that you believe she'll survive an upcoming serious surgery can make it more likely she will survive (changes her outlook, makes her more optimistic, etc).
- Marriage: Making vows with your spouse demonstrates a belief that your spouse will remain faithful, which can motivate them to remain faithful.

# The Rationality of Self-Justifying Beliefs

Many philosophers think that holding a self-justifying belief is often rational.

- Less controversially, these beliefs are rational when the initial probability (before you adopt the belief) is middling (around 50%) or unspecified/unclear.
  - Dahlback (forthcoming), Drake (2017), Kopec (2015), Peels (2015), Reisner (2007), (2013), (2015), and Velleman (1989).
- Even others argue that it's rational to adopt a self-justifying belief when the initial probability is low (a good bit less than 50%).
  - Raleigh (2015), (2017), Joyce (2007).
- Why is this rational? It's because IF you believe it, it becomes quite likely to be true. And if you know something is quite likely to be true, you have good evidence for it, so it's rational to believe it.

# Faith as Self-Justifying

Interpersonal faith:

- Faith that your friend will make her time goal in her upcoming marathon
- Faith that your friend will do great on his job interview

Intrapersonal faith:

- Alone (show)
- Faith you will follow through on an important commitment: e.g. finishing grad school, learning a new instrument, a new workout routine

Some cases of faith involve both:

- A marriage commitment

# Reasons to think that faith is self-justifying

- 1) Explains how faith can be rational but nonetheless have a unique relationship to evidence.
- 2) Explains why communicating faith to others (in the interpersonal case) is so crucial—which is one reason relationship and community is so important to faith (Preston-Roedder 2018).
- 3) Explains why we might treat those close to us—friends and family—epistemically differently than neutral third-parties (Stroud 2006; Morton and Paul 2018).
- 4) Gives us genuine *choices* about where to place our faith—and interestingly, often either choice ends up being rational.
- 5) Faith need not violate *evidentialism*: the idea that we should proportion our faith to the evidence.

# An Objection

Why think that this kind of self-fulfillment raises the probability of the target proposition (the proposition of faith) enough for faith to be rational?

Response 1: Not all faith is rational on this account. Faith's rationality depends on two factors:

- The initial probability of the proposition
- How much having faith raises the probability

Response 2: Remember the distinction between faith and belief. If faith goes beyond the evidence \*more\* than belief, then one could rationally have faith that X even if the probability of X is too low to justify *believing* X. In other words: self-justifying faith doesn't need to raise the probability as drastically.

# Application to faith in God?

This view doesn't apply directly to faith in God—having faith that God exists doesn't make it more likely that God exists.

However, having faith that God exists may \*reveal\* evidence that wasn't otherwise accessible. But you can't access this evidence until you take the leap of faith.

This is different than what I proposed above—since it is revealing, rather than creating evidence—but something I'd like to explore more in future work.

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