How Low Can You Go? Belief, Credence, and Philosophical Views
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1. Introduction

What attitude should philosophers take toward their favorite philosophical views?
- Not a **descriptive** question about what attitudes philosophers actually take, but a **normative** one.

When it comes to the normative question…
- You might think, at first blush, that it is perfectly rational to believe your philosophical views.
- However, a number of authors have argued that it actually isn't rational to believe our philosophical views (Goldberg 2013, Barnett 2019, Fleisher 2018, forthcoming).

Today, I will to argue that philosophers *can* believe their philosophical views. More precisely:

> **Thesis:** It is epistemically permissible for philosophers to believe their favorite philosophical views; however, they should have middling or low credences in them.

2. The Challenge from Disagreement

One of the primary reasons people have thought that we shouldn't believe our philosophical theories is because of the problem of *disagreement* (Christensen 2007, 2009).
- Basic idea: how can you rationally believe something when so many smart people have different opinions about it? This captures what is intuitive behind **conciliationism**, the view that we should change our opinions in response to disagreement with smart people.

However, not all philosophers are conciliationists. Others defend **steadfastness**, the view that we can maintain our opinions in the face of disagreement (Kelly 2005).
- Can't we have opinions about controversial matters?
- Spinelessness (Fritz 2018); Epistemic benefits of disagreement (Lougheed 2020, Dormandy forthcoming, Buchak forthcoming).

My thesis carves **a middle way** between these two main positions in the epistemology of disagreement: we can acknowledge and give weight to smart people's opinions, but take a stand on controversial matters, avoid spinelessness, and glean disagreement's benefits (see Jackson forthcoming and Buchak forthcoming).

Why change credence rather than belief?
- Solves self-undermining problem for conciliationism.
- Answers the spinelessness worry.
- Credences are fine-grained enough that we can conciliate flexibly (belief-conciliationism doesn't allow us to capture much except the basic disagreement case of belief that p and belief that not-p).
- Credences allow us to conciliate in different ways depending on if the disagreement is with a peer, superior, inferior, expert, or novice (King 2012; Easwaran et al 2016).

3. Some Other Arguments

3.1 Roles for belief and credence

Role for belief: enables you to take a stand and have a view of the world. Because of the way that credences leave possibilities open, it's not clear that they can do either of these things (cf. Ross and Schroeder 2014).

Role for credence: tracking one's precise level of evidential support. Credences change (via conditionalization) as you encounter new evidence for or against p. Not all evidential changes need change your beliefs though (and almost everyone agrees with this).

3.2 Other cases of belief and middling/low credence

- Agnosticism consistent with most/all credences on the [0,1] interval (Friedman 2013; Buchak 2014)
- Preface cases (Smith 2016: 72ff; Cevolani 2017)
- Serious doubting (skepticism, faith) (Buchak forthcoming)
- Race horse case (Hawthorne et al 2016)
- Statistical evidence cases (Smith 2016: 86ff)

General idea: Belief and credence sensitive to different features of a body of evidence.

3.3 Belief vs. acceptance

Why not just accept our philosophical theories?
- S **accepts** p iff S acts as if p is true.
- Not clear this helps with the spinelessness worry. You can *act as if* it's true, but you can't honestly take a stand.
- The idea that is it *irrational* to believe philosophical theories seems very strong.

4. The Lockean Thesis

Lockean thesis: S rationally believes p iff S has a rational credence in p above some (probabilistic) threshold.
- My view isn't strictly inconsistent with the Lockean thesis. However, I will take a stand here: Lockeans should lower their threshold, A LOT. Like 0.6 *at the highest*.
- Permissibility threshold vs. requirement threshold.

Should we ever give up belief in our philosophical theories? Yes. When? Either…
- If the Lockean thesis is true, then when your credence falls below the permissibility threshold.
- If the Lockean thesis is false, then (maybe?) when you get the right *kind* of evidence against your philosophical views.
  - Disagreement doesn't seem to have the same epistemic force as a solid deductive argument against your view that you don't have an answer to.

Ways you can help me:
- Curious about people's intuitions about the cases of belief and middling/low credence.
- Literature recs? (I'm still reading about philosophical views.)
- Application to disciplines beyond philosophy?

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