

This is the penultimate draft of an article which is published in its final and definitive form in Koczka Etelka Krisztina (eds.): *Faith, Science and Community* (Budapest, Szent István Társulat, 2021).

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Can Free Will be the Source of Rational Philosophical Beliefs?

Abstract

The paper investigates whether positing libertarian free will gives us the epistemic right to regard our philosophical beliefs as rational even in the light of permanent and pervasive disagreement between philosophers. I argue that if free will is one of the main sources of philosophical beliefs, then there is no reason to consider them as reliable. Therefore, it is hard to see how free will would make sustaining our philosophical beliefs rational in the face of disagreement between philosophers.

Introduction – An argument for the irrationality of philosophical beliefs

One of the main aims of philosophers has always been to get knowledge about the fundamental features of reality. However, we can say if we focus on the state of the discipline of philosophy as a whole that this epistemic enterprise did not succeed because there is no consensus between philosophers on what the fundamental features of reality are. Some of them believe that there are only physical facts and beings, other philosophers deny this; some philosophers claim that there are irreducible moral or other kinds of norms, many other do not accept this claim; many argue that the mind is a physical entity, and many disagree. One could continue this list endlessly. But the gist of all of this is the following. Since doing philosophy did not establish any kind of consensus on the fundamental fabric of reality, one may claim reasonably that philosophy as a common epistemic enterprise, in contrast with physics and mathematics, was unable to provide answers to those questions which philosophy attempted to answer (see Dietrich 2011).

At this point, the question arises as to how dare any philosopher, regardless of how excellent she is, form beliefs about what the fundamental features of reality are if philosophy as a common epistemic enterprise was unable to provide answers? Even more importantly, how dare any of us form beliefs about what the fundamental features of reality are? Concerning this issue, Immanuel Kant formulated a disturbing hypothesis. According to Kant, some kind of urge that directed toward

the absolute explains why we adopt views with regard to the most fundamental aspects of reality even if doing so goes beyond the boundaries of human knowledge (Kant 1787/1998, BXX). Together with János Tózsér (Bernáth & Tózsér manuscript), I work on elaborating an argument which leads to a similar – or may be even more depressing – conclusion according to which philosophical beliefs can be best explained by some kind of irrational causal influences.

The departure point of the argument which Tózsér and I call Irrationality Argument is that the most recognized philosophers, who debate about the truth-value of the non-trivial propositions about those objective features of reality that are independent of the epistemic agents' world view (in short: they debate about the truth-value of factual substantive philosophical propositions), seem to be epistemic peers to each other in every relevant regards. Their CVs show respectable carrier in the case of each of them, all of them are equally recognized and cited in the profession, they know the relevant literature and we have no reason to doubt in their intellectual honesty. The only relevant difference between them is that one of the camps of these most recognized philosophers correctly judge the truth-value of p (or, at least, whether anyone has epistemic right to judge the truth-value of the proposition) and all the other camps' judgement about p is wrong. For example, the theists (who claim that the proposition 'God exists' is true), the atheists (who deny the proposition 'God exists'), and the agnostics (who believe that everyone should suspend her belief about the truth-value of the proposition 'God exists') debate on whether we should regard the proposition 'God exists' as true or not. If we would like to rank the most recognized proponents of each position without any regard to which group has the same view as we have, then we will not find any relevant epistemic difference between the most recognized theist, agnostic, and atheist philosophers. Hence, the first premise of the Irrationality Argument is as follows.

- (1) Those most recognized philosophers who disagree with each other and have beliefs which are in conflict with each other's beliefs are epistemic peers.

Nevertheless, since one cannot explain their disagreement about the truth-value of any factual substantive philosophical proposition by the hypothesis according to which some of them are not so smart, informed, or epistemically virtuous, we have to arrive at the conclusion that the most recognized philosophers' factual substantial philosophical beliefs which are in conflict are produced by irrational causal mechanisms. This is because the cause of their disagreement can be only that their belief-formation processes are influenced by factors which are both beyond the competent assessment of the full body of evidence and have nothing to do with whether the factual substantive philo-

sophical proposition in question is true. In other words, the formation of the most recognized philosophers' philosophical beliefs has to be decisively influenced by the philosophers' desires, upbringing, characteristic traits, and other factors like these ones. Regardless of to what extent a philosopher is recognized, if her acceptance of proposition p can be explained by what kind of desires, upbringing, and characteristic traits she has, then her belief in p is based on wrong reasons; thus, it is irrational. Anyone who agrees with the reasoning of this paragraph accepts the second premise of the Irrationality Argument as well.

(2) If conflicting beliefs of philosophers who are epistemic peers to each other have deterministic explanation, then their belief-formation is decisively influenced by factors which make these conflicting beliefs irrational.

The wording of the second premise indicates a loophole for anyone who does not like the direction in which the argument goes. One could object that the whole argumentation is based on the assumption according to which the conflicting philosophical beliefs of the most recognized philosophers can be causally explained by *something*. In other words, the argument assumes that if the beliefs in question cannot be explained merely by the relatively competent assessment of the evidence, then they have to be explained, at least in part, by irrational causal processes. Thus, if someone does not accept the following premise (which is the third premise of the Irrationality Argument):

(3) each belief (including each factual substantive philosophical belief) has deterministic explanation,

then she has no reason to conclude that the factual substantive philosophical beliefs of the most recognized philosophers formed as a result of irrational causal mechanisms. And there is a rather good reason for avoiding the conclusion according to which such philosophical beliefs of the most recognized philosophers are irrational because it is hard to deny the truth of the following claim:

(4) if the factual substantive philosophical beliefs of the most recognized philosophers are irrational, then my philosophical beliefs are irrational too.

Everyone has factual substantive philosophical beliefs, each of us has a view about the fabric of reality. All of us have opinion about whether the world is a purely physical one, God exists or not,

free will is real or an illusion, what moral obligations one has (if there are objective mind-independent moral obligations at all), and so on. Hence, if it were proven that the most recognized philosophers' factual substantive philosophical beliefs are irrational, we should arrive at the conclusion that our factual substantive philosophical beliefs are irrational too. However, this conclusion is not only epistemically inconvenient but it seems to be rationally unsustainable. How would we be able to sustain our factual substantive philosophical beliefs if we regarded them as irrational because they are based not only on evidence but irrational processes which are not rooted in philosophical truths? Thus, it is within our best epistemic interest to refute the following conclusion through denying one of the premises:

(C) Our factual substantive philosophical beliefs are irrational.

Although one may, in principle, deny the first or the second premise of the Irrationality Argument, both strategies have challenging difficulties. Denying epistemic peerhood of the most recognized philosophers merely on the basis of that I agree with some philosophers about a philosophical question and disagree with their rivals seems to be an indefensible epistemic maneuver. It would be completely arbitrary if a theist claimed that the most recognized theist philosophers know the evidence better or assess them more skillfully than atheist and agnostics *only because* she is a theist. Furthermore, it would be arbitrary to the same degree if an atheist claimed on the basis of an argument which is well-known by the theist that the theists have to be epistemically deprived. Since this kind of attitude is the devaluation of the epistemic status of the interlocutors merely on the basis of that the interlocutors disagree with the atheists about the strength of the argument. Denying the second premise is problematic too. This is because there is nothing else beyond the irrational causal influences that could plausibly explain the disagreement between the most recognized philosophers if it is accepted that there is no relevant difference between their well-informedness and competence due to their epistemic equality.

To be fair, it cannot be excluded that one can overcome the mentioned difficulties regarding rejecting premise (1) and (2). However, in this paper, I focus solely on the question whether the Irrationality Argument can be refuted through denying the third premise. In other words, I investigate whether and to what extent we can regard our factual substantive philosophical beliefs as rational if we assume that nothing – neither irrational causal influences nor anything else – determines these beliefs because they are the result of free decisions.

1. Why is it not an easy task to trace back the rationality of philosophical beliefs to freedom?

Peter van Inwagen argued in a manner somewhat similar to the Irrationality Argument that the pervasive and permanent disagreement between philosophers casts a shadow on the epistemic status of our philosophical beliefs. He briefly and critically mentions the idea according to which our philosophical beliefs depend on the exercise of our (free or unfree) will.

But of all the forces in the human psyche that direct us toward and away from assent to propositions, only rational attention to relevant evidence tracks the truth. Both experience and reason confirm this. And if you assent to a proposition on the basis of some inner push, some ‘will to believe,’ if I may coin a phrase, that does not track the truth, then your propositional assent is not being guided by the nature of the things those propositions are about. If you could decide what to believe by tossing a coin, if that would actually be effective, then, in the matter of the likelihood of your beliefs being true, you might as well do it that way. (van Inwagen 2010, 27)

Van Inwagen clearly outlines the main challenge for those who claim that philosophical beliefs are not produced by irrational causal mechanisms because these beliefs are not predetermined by anything. If our philosophical beliefs come from what we would like to believe and how we exercise our (free) will, then our beliefs seem to be irrational since our choice concerning our beliefs has nothing to do with what the truth is. The best case scenario would be that if the *truth or at least our evidence determined* our philosophical beliefs. In contrast with the beliefs that are primarily determined by the evidence or the truth itself, those beliefs which are mainly produced by our choices seem to be a *matter of chance* and, ultimately, irrational.

Those philosophers who are called libertarians and believe in an indeterministic free will which cannot be identified with deterministic causal processes aim to clarify what the crucial difference is between free decisions and events which are a matter of chance (some attempts: Kane 1996, O’Connor 2000, Clarke 2003, Balaguer 2004, Mele 2006, Lowe 2008, Franklin 2011, 2018, Pink 2017, Lockie 2018, chapter 9). Let us suppose that one of those attempts is actually successful; that is, free will, free decisions, and free actions are not a matter of chance in any sense. Nevertheless, it does not solve van Inwagen’s problem. This is because van Inwagen’s problem is whether *the truth is found* is a matter of chance *if we freely choose our beliefs*. Therefore, the problem is not whether freely chosen beliefs are a matter of chance in themselves.

Let us take the following example. Theophilus investigates the pro and contra arguments with regard to the existence of God. He sees that both the pro and the contra arguments have some weight but it is hard to compare the strength of these arguments because their epistemic nature is so heterogenous and judging how strong they are depends on certain theoretical commitments. Theophilus has the intuition that he has to freely decide about whether he trusts the pieces of evidence which is for the existence of God or he trusts rather the pieces of evidence which are against the existence of God. Theophilus *decides* that, in spite of the counter-arguments, he regards the proposition ‘God exists’ as true.

There are two issues with Theophilus’ case. First, it seems to be unlikely that we adopt philosophical beliefs in the same way as Theophilus did. One can easily decide for that she is going to defend theism (or atheism) in a future debate but it sounds weird that someone decides for believing that theism is true. In other words, such a direct form of doxastic voluntarism seems to be implausible on the basis of everyday experience; that is, it is hard to believe that we can choose our beliefs as the same way as we can choose our actions (Alston 1989). Second, as van Inwagen points out, if I believed that not the accessible evidence has the decisive role with regard to which belief I form, then it would be irrational to trust in that my belief is true. Theophilus does not consider the full body of evidence as decisive; to put it differently, he believes that both theism and atheism can be true in the light of the evidence. Insofar as he regards atheism and theism as equally probable in the light of the evidence, he should admit that he has only 50% chance of being right if he adopts the belief in God. In this sense, van Inwagen is right, Theophilus could form his belief on the basis of a coin-tossing rather than a free decision since his chances for forming a true belief would not be worse.

As far as I can tell, there are only two libertarian theories of free will which attempt to solve the two problems above (in the recent literature, those arguments that attempt to show the incompatibility of determinism and rationality are discussed to a greater extent, see Jordan 1969, Popper 1972, Ripley 1972, Boyle & Grisez & Tollefsen 1976, Lockie 2018, Elzein & Pernu 2019, Zanetti 2019, Chevarie-Cossette 2019). In one way or another, both theories try to solve these problems by rejecting the standard version of doxastic voluntarism (according to which we choose our beliefs – at least on some occasions – in the same way as we choose our actions). In the next section, I give a brief summary of both approaches and argue that there is no reason to expect that such libertarian theories can provide a solid ground for the rationality of factual substantive philosophical beliefs.

2. How can free will be the source of rational philosophical beliefs? Two approaches.

According to Joseph M. Boyle, Germain Grisez, and Olaf Tollefsen (1972, 1976), free decisions may be the sources of rational philosophical beliefs because epistemically relevant free decisions are not about which belief one adopts but ranking epistemic principles. The free epistemic agents, as their philosophical horizons widen, have to deal with more and more perplexing theoretical problems. Hence, they are forced to rank epistemic principles which are in conflict – and sometimes this process is not even perfectly conscious. For example, the epistemic principle of simplicity which demands the acceptance of the most simple theory often is in conflict with the principle of epistemic conservatism which demands the acceptance of explanations which take pieces of evidence from reliable sources at face-value as many as possible. The problem of determinism is one of those problems which make ranking of these principles necessary. The idea that each event can be in principle deduced from the conjunction of laws of nature and earlier events is a relatively simple theory. However, its cost is that we have to deny the reliability of the everyday experience of free will despite the fact that our knowledge is often based on everyday experience. Insofar as one successfully ranks the epistemic principle of simplicity and conservatism, then it decides whether she finds the theory of determinism plausible or not. Those who rank the principle of simplicity higher than the principle of conservatism can rationally accept the theory of determinism. In contrast, those who rank the principle of conservatism at the top can be rational only if they regard determinism as implausible. However, as Boyle et al. argues, if all of this is correct, then ranking epistemic principles by exercising libertarian free will that is incompatible with determinism is necessary condition for having rational philosophical beliefs of which truth can be proven on neither mathematical, logical, nor empirical basis. Thus, if we are aware of that, we cannot rationally believe in determinism anymore and have to accept the existence of free will.

Recently, Robert Lockie (2018) argued that any belief can be rational in a robust sense only if epistemic agents have free will. According to Lockie, only those beliefs are rational which fulfill epistemic obligations. However, one may have epistemic duties only if she is able to exercise control over her epistemically relevant cognitive functions (for instance the ability to control our attention, the ability to control in which way we try to get new information, and the ability to resist epistemic temptations and accept inconvenient conclusions, and so forth). So, according to Lockie, our philosophical beliefs will be rational in the relevant sense if we control our cognitive abilities in a way that fulfills our epistemic duties. Insofar as our beliefs are the result of such investigations, then our beliefs (philosophical or not) can be considered as rational since we fulfilled our epistemic obligations and adopted those beliefs which we had to adopt in our epistemic situation.

3. Why cannot the rationality of factual substantive philosophical beliefs be based on freedom?

The main problem with Boyle et al.'s and Lockie's approaches that they can secure the rationality of philosophical beliefs only in the sense that they show why an epistemic agent who had done the best what she could do cannot be blamed for philosophical beliefs. Indeed, if (i) our philosophical beliefs are appropriately rooted in the arbitrary ranking of the fundamental epistemic principles and/or (ii) we had done what we could do in order to find the truth, then we cannot be blamed for forming certain philosophical beliefs (provided that one can rank the most fundamental epistemic principles only arbitrarily). However, it does not follow from being blameless regarding a philosophical belief that the belief in question is reliable. For example, if a four year old kid forms an otherwise creative and intelligent idea of how rain is formed, she can be even praiseworthy for her belief. Still, we would not consider her belief as reliable. And since there is no guarantee for that the arbitrary ranking of epistemic principles or doing our best by fulfilling our epistemic obligations lead us to philosophical truths, we have a good reason to think that philosophical beliefs which are indirectly produced by free choices are based on shaky grounds; thus, we cannot trust them.

At this point, it is worthwhile to return to the disagreement between philosophers who seem to be epistemic peers. We are probably right if we suppose that the most recognized philosophers ranked the relevant epistemic principles and all of them made serious effort to exercise their epistemic abilities appropriately. Still, two out of three camps in each debate about the truth-value of substantive philosophical propositions are wrong. If the agnostics are right and everyone should suspend their judgment on p , then those who accept p or deny p are wrong because both camps believe that it is not needed to suspend their judgment on p . In contrast, if those are right who claim that it is within our epistemic right to accept p on the basis of the available evidence, then the agnostics (due to the fact that one could figure out the truth-value of p on the basis of the available evidence) and those who reject p are wrong. It follows from this that even if we do our best and rank our epistemic principles in a justified and blameless way, we still have a good chance for accepting a wrong approach (since there is only one approach out of three which is right). However, if we should believe about our factual substantive philosophical beliefs that there is a good chance they are wrong, we cannot rationally sustain these beliefs anymore; that is, these beliefs are irrational.

Of course, the possibility for arguing that only those most recognized philosophers who agree with me upon the truth-value of p have exercised their epistemic abilities appropriately and have

ranked their epistemic principles properly is open to anyone. But, in fact, this reply attempts to answer the challenge of the Irrationality Argument through denying premise 1) instead of denying premise 3). However, it is not the real problem. The real problem is that it is difficult to deny the epistemic equality of the most recognized philosophers since it is hard to find any evidence for their (supposed) epistemic inequality.

Another possible answer to the objection which points out that we should recognize the relatively high probability of being wrong concerning factual substantive philosophical matters is to argue that those who do not know about this relatively high probability of being wrong can rationally sustain their philosophical beliefs if these beliefs are rooted in free decisions. If the epistemic agent does not know that she has a relatively small chance to be right, she can rationally believe that she is right. Note, this answer claims that some kind of ignorance or incompetence is the basis for having rational philosophical beliefs. Thus, this answer does not provide a real solution because the epistemic status of philosophical beliefs are not much better if they are rooted in ignorance or incompetence rather than irrationality.

Let us return to the issue of how one may meet the challenge of the Irrationality Argument by denying its third premise. In the light of the above, the main problem with denying the third premise is that free choice can provide justification for our philosophical beliefs only in the sense of blamelessness but it does not give any good reason to regard our philosophical beliefs as true. And how can we sustain our philosophical beliefs rationally if we do not have any good reason to regard them as true? Well, one may argue that she can sustain her philosophical beliefs rationally because the aim of philosophical beliefs is not truth but something else. For example, the aim of philosophical beliefs can be one of the following: i) providing an appropriate interpretation of reality¹ ii) improving the agent's psychological well-being iii) improving the agent's and others' well-being in general (iv) resulting in morally better actions, and so on.

This solution is not unproblematic. Even in itself, it is implausible to claim that the aim of philosophical beliefs (or any other beliefs) is not the truth but something else. Even the meaning of belief is most often defined by identifying believing in p with the propositional attitude of considering p as true. And it is hard to explain how considering p as true could have any other aim than the truth. Besides that, it is difficult to come up with a plausible interpretation of what the *aim* of the belief in the proposition according to which 'the aim of philosophical beliefs is not the truth'. This

¹ It seems to me that Jean-Paul Sartre denies the existence of God on such a basis. He denies the existence of God not because the evidence is against God but because he arrives at the conclusion that one can consider herself as a free agent if she denies God. Sartre 1946/1991.

proposition is a philosophical one; thus, the belief in this proposition is a philosophical one too. If this proposition and the belief in it do not aim at the truth, then how could we take them seriously? It is hard to dismiss the suspicion that such an approach defeats itself.

One may put this kind of solution in a more modest way. Rather than denying altogether that philosophical beliefs aim at the truth, one version of the approach can claim only that the truth is not a primary aim of philosophical beliefs. That is, philosophical beliefs aim at the truth but we may have a good reason to sustain them even if we think that there is only a small chance for that they are true because they serve a higher purpose.

On the one hand, this version of the approach does not defeat itself in the same way as the previous one does. On the other hand, it does not provide a full solution to the original problem. Insofar as beliefs secondarily aim at the truth, it is still irrational to sustain a philosophical belief if we regard our philosophical beliefs as probably wrong in the face of the disagreement between epistemic peers. Considering the truth as the secondary aim of beliefs provides, in fact, not the refutation of the conclusion of the Irrationality Argument. Rather, it provides an *excuse* for why we sustain our irrational philosophical beliefs. Because they have a more important purpose than the truth.

However, at the end of the day, it means that denying the third premise and positing free will do not refute Irrationality Argument. If, because of the lack of decisive evidence, we have to decide about which philosophical belief we adopt, we have little to none reason to believe that our philosophical beliefs are true in the same way as if our philosophical beliefs were formed by irrational mechanisms. Hence, the conclusion of this paper is pessimistic. Free will does not provide a ground for the rationality of our factual substantive philosophical beliefs.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Tamás Hankovszky and János Tózsér for their suggestions and the stimulating exchanges we had on many occasions. I was supported by János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (code: BO/00432/18/2) and the ÚNKP-19-4 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology (code: ÚNKP-19-4-ELTE-1202). The research leading to this paper was supported by OTKA (Hungarian Scientific Research Fund by the National Research Development and Innovation Office), grant no. K132911, PD131998, and Higher Education Institutional Excellence Grant (Autonomous Vehicles, Automation, Normativity: Logical and Ethical Issues).

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