

Commitment without belief

The Cranky Professor

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What must a scientist believe in order to pursue science? What must a revolutionary believe in order to pursue the revolution? What must a lover believe in order to pursue her love?

Nothing in particular, or so it seems to me. My answer is not, though, the usual one.

The usual answer is that the scientist must believe a lot of particular things. She must believe, for instance, that the universe is lawful, that is, that prior events entirely or almost entirely determine the character of present events. She must believe that she can understand the laws of nature—that her methods can uncover them and that they can be represented in statements and theories. Perhaps as an implication of these beliefs, she must believe that supernatural forces do not affect the course of events. Perhaps she must believe that inductive reasoning, that is, reasoning that takes her from a claim about a sample to a claim about the whole, is justificatory reasoning, that is, reasoning that warrants her believing that claim about the whole.

The revolutionary must believe that his cause is just. He must believe that forces in history have fated that justice will prevail. He must believe that now is the time to act, that even if he fails in the short run, his actions will not ultimately be in vain.

The lover must believe that her beloved is worthy of her love. She must believe that her beloved will reciprocate her love. She must believe that should she win her beloved, both she and her beloved will be fulfilled.

The scientist, the revolutionary, the lover are agents in the world committed both to a set of ends and to a set of procedures for attaining those ends. The scientist is committed to understanding events and processes, and she is committed to understanding them through constructing double-blind trials and formulating generalizations and theories. The revolutionary is committed to justice, and to bringing justice about through overthrowing the current, corrupt order and installing a new, better one. The lover is committed to her beloved's flourishing, and to promoting this flourishing by honouring her beloved.

The argument that an agent needs to believe a host of things about the world and its ways in order to act is that without belief, there is no commitment. Unless she believes that the world has an underlying regularity and that humans can discover that underlying regularity, the scientist might as well read tea leaves or settle into the couch. It is her beliefs that ground her commitments, that give them their point. Since an ungrounded commitment, a pointless one, at least one that appears pointless, couldn't be a commitment at all, commitment needs belief.

We find the usual view in the common thought that each of us needs something to believe in if we are to live well. Without something to believe in, we have no impetus to act.

What, though, about the beliefs that sustain commitment? The scientist's belief that the world is structured and orderly would seem to be beyond the scientist's capacity to verify. Moreover, her belief that inductive reasoning is justificatory reasoning must certainly escape justification by reason, for any argument in favour of that belief will employ inductive reasoning; thus, her argument will presuppose, not show, that inductive reasoning is justificatory reasoning.

The scientist cannot believe what she needs to believe if she is to be committed to science except by violating her standards of warranted belief. The same result holds of the revolutionary and the lover.

Religious people would say that the scientist, the revolutionary, and the lover are, perhaps despite themselves, people of faith. In this, they are no different than the religious people themselves. The scientist, the revolutionary, and the lover all believe without evidence or reason. They put their faith in the order of the universe and the methods of science, or in historical processes and the virtue of their cause, or in their love or their beloved, just as the religious put their faith in God.

The upshot is that if one cannot live without commitment, or, at least, if one cannot live well without commitment, then one cannot live, or live well, without faith.

No doubt it is true of many committed people that they are, indeed, people of faith. Many among the committed see their commitments as supported by beliefs, beliefs for which, they may well understand, they have little evidence or warrant. Nonetheless, the argument that commitment requires belief is unsound.

Notice, first, that if there's nothing difficult about faith itself, that is, about believing without evidence, then there needn't be anything difficult about commitment without belief. If groundlessness is not a barrier to belief, then it needn't be a barrier to commitment. If understanding that one's belief is held on faith doesn't destroy it as a belief, then understanding that one's commitment is merely a commitment needn't destroy it as a commitment.

Notice, second, that commitment, as a psychological entity, is on the team that includes desire, affection, and emotion, not on the team that includes belief, hypothesis, and thinking. The two teams have to work together, of course, if there is going to be action. Desires motivate and beliefs guide, such that without desire there's no impetus and without belief there's no direction. But because the teams are separate, the only beliefs that one's commitment needs for it to produce action are beliefs about how to serve it.

We can escape faith, then, simply by engaging in the world for the sake of our commitments alone. We can investigate the world scientifically simply for the sake of investigating it scientifically, and not as an expression of a non-scientific faith that the universe is orderly and understandable. We can pursue our social and political goals for the sake of either those goals or the pursuit of them, and not as an expression of our subservience to the essence of history or the nature of the good. We can love for the sake of love or for the sake of our beloved, and for the sake of them alone.