

Pragmatic Reasons for Conversion

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EPS, 19 November, 2014



Christian in *A Pilgrim's Progress*

- He read the book.
- ‘What shall I do?’
- ‘Keep that [yonder] light in your eye, and go up directly thereto, so shalt thou see the gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.’
- ‘Life! life! Eternal life!’

Belief and religion

- It is possible to believe in the doctrine of a religion without becoming a member of that religion.
- If, for example, one has a belief in Christian doctrine of strength 0.6, how much reason is there then for this person to become a Christian?
- Reasons constituted by the expected benefits and disbenefits of the action.
- Unlike Pascal's wager: not belief but action; no infinite values.

Faith: belief + action

- What is required for being a Christian besides beliefs?
- Conversion: a man obtains forgiveness of sin and eternal life if he repents, asks God in prayer for forgiveness through Jesus' Christ's death on the cross, and commits his life to God.

Belief required for conversion

- Central Christian Doctrine CCD: If one asks God for forgiveness through Jesus Christ's death on the cross and commits one's life to him, then one will receive everlasting life; those who do not do this will generally not receive this but will receive some punishment after their death.
- How strong? *Belief* in CCD. >0.5 .

Decision theory

- The reasons for the action depend on the value of the consequences of the action multiplied by the probability of their occurrence.
- $u(F)$: the utility of faith and conversion;
- $B(Ft)_i$: the benefits and, if the value is negative, disbenefits of conversion and faith if CCD is true.
- $u(F) = \sum_{i=1}^n P(\text{CCD})B(Ft)_i + \sum_{i=1}^n P(1 - \text{CCD})B(Ff)_i$

When are the benefits a reason for conversion if $P(\text{CCD})=0.5$?

- $\sum_{i=1}^n B(Ft)_i + \sum_{i=1}^n B(Ff)_i > \sum_{i=1}^n B(\neg Ft)_i + \sum_{i=1}^n B(\neg Ff)_i$
- So there is a reason for converting if the expected benefits of converting outweigh the expected benefits of not converting.
- It may be rational to be more risk-averse than a utility maximiser; that would increase the reason for conversion.

Varieties of utility

- Utility as the strength of the desire multiplied by the believed probability? Then for addicts smoking has the highest utility.
- Normative: the believed goodness for him multiplied by the believed probability. (Objective list account of well-being.)
- There is not only the objective goodness of a state of affairs but also the goodness for a person.
- Also the satisfaction of a desire is good for the person.
- The argument is successful with desires too, as long as time preference is irrational.

The benefits of faith if CCD is true

- + ‘Heaven’ and ‘eternal life’: enjoying God’s presence and vision; being a very valuable being; producing goods?
- + Receiving forgiveness and a restored relationship.
- + Living on a true belief about one’s origin and the ultimate cause of everything.

The benefits of faith if CCD is false

- – Living on a false belief about the ultimate cause of everything.
- – Wasting time in church and for evangelism.

The benefits of non-faith if CCD is false

- + Living on a true belief about the ultimate cause of everything

The benefits of non-faith if CCD is true

- – Living on a false belief about the ultimate cause of everything
- – Punishment and hell after death
- – Unforgiven sin

Negligible, truth-independent benefits

- Faith + : Extra motivation for a virtuous life. Living with purpose and meaning, increased happiness, increased mental health.
- Faith - : Some additional duties, e.g. evangelism. Some desires not satisfied, e.g. staying in bed on Sunday. Persecution.
- Non-faith - : Living without meaning in the narrow sense.
- Non-faith + : Some desires satisfied.

Summing up the benefits

- The utility of faith then is: [CCD true:] 100 (eternal life) + 50 (forgiveness) + 50 (true belief) [CCD false:] - 50 (false belief) - 10 (time wasted) = 140.
- The utility of not converting and not having faith is: [CCD false:] + 50 (true belief) [CCD true:] - 50 (false belief) - 80 (punishment and hell) - 50 (unforgiven sin) = -130.
- Conclusion: $u(F) \gg u(\neg F)$. The expected benefits and disbenefits make conversion rational even if someone's belief in CCD is just stronger than 0.5.

What should one do if one does not believe CCD?

Then the benefits are a reason for:

- Looking for further evidence
- Trying to pray
- Counteract irrational factors (Claims one likes; resistance to change)

Conclusion

- Even a person who only just believes in CCD has massive reasons for converting.
- A person who does not believe in CCD has strong reasons for looking for further evidence and for counteracting irrational factors.
- Referring to heaven and hell in evangelism is adequate and rational. But the truth of CCD remains essential.