VARIETIES OF ASSENT:
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Nuno Venturinha
nventurinha.ifl@fcsh.unl.pt
(Universidade Nova de Lisboa – ifilnova)

Introduction

This article explores different faces of the concept of assent that can be found in the history of Western philosophy. The development of this concept coincides with the shaping of epistemology and its vocabulary, with assent, belief, faith and holding for true sometimes appearing as synonyms of one another. It is not my intention here to go into detail about the complex relationships between these concepts, which partake not only in general theory of knowledge but also in moral and religious epistemology. Instead, my aim is simply to briefly trace the outline of some significant contributions to this theme. My overall goal is to bring to light deep connections that are obscured by the use of different terminologies to depict essentially the same cognitive processes. I shall thus provide a mosaic of views put forward by various authors belonging to distinct periods and, in many cases, seemingly irreconcilable schools of European thought. These views, I argue, can be profitably exploited today if we identify their common features.

Let us start from the beginning. The roots of assent lie in the Greek idea of *synkatathesis*, which plays an important role in the Hellenistic period. According to the Stoics, in particular, to assent is to form a cognition that determines what is given in perception. This cognition, they believed, is somewhat constraining leading to the notion of "universal assent". What this means is that everyone in the same position as myself would have to assent to the same that I do, i.e. that their perceptual faculties would constrain them in the same way that my own perceptual faculties constrain me. The sceptical worry about whether we are actually capturing what we take to be real would in

this way vanish. But there is a caveat to this presumption. If there were a complete match between our sense impressions and reality, then there would be no freedom of judgment and consequently no freedom of belief, which seems intolerable. Hence there must be a capacity to assent or withhold assent according to the rational evaluation we can make in each situation – one that for the sceptics always remains inconclusive. Franz von Kutschera writes apropos of this problem:

> The Stoics said that the step from an impression, that something is the case, to the judgment, that it is indeed the case, is an act of assent which they termed synkatathesis (adsensio), a decision to accept the impression as correct. Now in judgments we express our beliefs. Therefore we cannot say that in our judgments we are free, but not in our beliefs. Beliefs, then, are neither impressions nor determined by them, but are also formed by an act of assent, of synkatathesis. (von Kutschera, 1994, 28)

Medieval philosophers such as Aquinas and Suárez extended this understanding to Christian theology, making use of the word *assensus* to characterize a voluntary act of the will that is mandatory for faith. Commenting on Aquinas, Jude Dougherty points out that "faith is then defined as a personal act of assent to propositions acknowledged to be true but for which there is not sufficient scientific or philosophical evidence" (2003, 40). That is the reason why Suárez associates faith with opinion given that there is no epistemic sufficiency for the claims made by the intellect in matters of religion. While these contributions are significant, epistemology is not so much their central focus. It is only with the advent of British empiricism that assent regains its epistemological significance.

This concept is central to the work of Locke, assuming a pivotal role in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1690. In this book, Locke explores the nature of assent focusing on various epistemic operators. This examination goes back to 1671 when we find two drafts for Locke's masterpiece. The first bears the Latin title *Intellectus humanus cum cognitionis certitudine, et assensus firmate* whereas the title of the second is already close to that of the final version: *An Essay Concerning the Understanding, Knowledge, Opinion and Assent*. Rejecting an innatist perspective, Locke's goal is to give an account of

the origins and limits of human cognition, analyzing what he calls "the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent" (2008, I.i.2). In his view, none of these possess the status of knowledge, with assent encompassing both belief and opinion. Knowledge as such is limited to judgments that are absolutely certain, with this resulting in what Peter Anstey aptly calls "a form of imposed epistemic boundedness" (2013, 33). Since the majority of our propositions about reality lack the firmness of indubitable knowledge, it is probability as the higher approximation to truth that rules our assent, one that articulates human praxis with its moral and religious dimensions. What is more interesting in Locke, following the lead of the Stoics, is in fact the way he looks at assent as possessing not merely a theoretical meaning but also a practical application. Hence the weight attributed by Locke to what he calls "wrong assent, or error" (2008, IV.xx.1-18) for this involves a misuse of our capacities to recognize what is probably true and act accordingly.

Hume is another author for whom the idea of assent is central in his philosophy. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which appeared in 1739-40, Hume equates "assent" with "belief" and analyzes the way this natural operator lies at the bottom of our everyday practices (cf. 2007, 1.3.5 ff.). Assent presents itself with an irrecusable force which nonetheless shall not prevent us from questioning its solidity. Scepticism, in the eyes of Hume, is therefore unavoidable from a rational point of view. Yet this is not to say that experience is really doubtful. There is always uncertainty, but habit shows that any dubitative efforts collide with the strength of what is immediately perceived or assented. For Hume, assenting, or believing, is what governs the totality of our actions. The consequences of this doctrine are particularly threatening for morality. Thus Russell Hardin writes that "Hume has no moral theory, only a theory of the psychology of our moral views" and emphasizes that this "cannot be satisfactory for anyone who seeks 'true' moral positions" (2007, 28). However, can we actually talk about truth in Hume? His teaching is that truth is something we practically, albeit not rationally, cannot do without because it is crucial in our decision-making. This also holds for religious dogmas. Even if Hume considers that religion is incompatible with reason, it belongs to the natural history of man.

Hume is not the only author of his time concerned with these issues. Emphasis on religious assent can be found in the writings of "minor" authors such as George Stanhope and Samuel Johnson. The way Johnson employs the word "assent" in his 1754 *The Elements of Philosophy* deserves special attention. After presenting "knowledge", "certainty" and "evidence" as not depending on our assent, since what they involve are "those Truths which are necessary and immutable", Johnson distinguishes between opinion and faith, dividing the latter into human and divine (cf. 1754, 77). What defines opinion is our assenting to a mere possibility extracted from the nature of things. Human faith, in turn, is explained by Johnson in terms of testimonial belief, which carries more or less confidence according to the credibility of the testimony. What remains unquestioned throughout history is a matter of "moral certainty" (ibid., 78). Finally, divine faith is reserved for a moral assurance which is "grounded upon *Reason*" (ibid., 79) and does not leave room for doubt.

These are important approaches to the concept of assent, but we would have to wait a few more decades to find a detailed treatment of its intricate epistemological connections with other concepts, which are located at the crossroads between theoretical and practical reason. This was the work of Kant to whom I now turn.

Kant and His Critics

Having also received inspiration from Wolff, for whom *assensus* is equivalent to the free act of faith, Kant focuses on assent, or "holding for true" (*Fürwahrhalten*), in his three Critiques and in other texts, notably his 1800 *Lectures on Logic*. Kant's articulation of the matter will provide the framework for all subsequent inquiries about this theme in the German-speaking world. Kant opens the discussion about this topic in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781, by making reference to what he calls "objective grounds", on one hand, and "subjective causes", on the other (cf. 1998, A820/B848). His view is that we are at risk of mixing up what simply arises from human subjectivity with what is factually objective, something that results

in an illusory holding for true. However, to recognize this illusion is not an easy task because, Kant avers, we only have knowledge of phenomena, not of things in themselves. He affirms that there are three degrees of taking to be true, namely "having an opinion" (*Meinen*), "believing" (*Glauben*) and "knowing" (*Wissen*) (ibid., A822/B850). An opinion is considered by Kant to be insufficient both objectively and subjectively by virtue of lacking epistemic justification. Belief also possesses objective insufficiency but enjoys validity for the person who decidedly adheres to a certain proposition. In a different way, knowledge lies in an objectivity that is epistemically unshakable. Given that, for Kant, apodictic knowledge can only be achieved through theoretical self-evidence, belief acquires a privileged status within the practical sphere.

In the First *Critique*, Kant will conceive of belief in three different ways, which parallel the three modes of holding for true. A belief can be "pragmatic" if what is fuelling it is of a doxastic nature resulting in an instrumental decision; it can be "doctrinal" in cases of pure theoretical speculation; and it can be "moral" if it respects moral law as something the subject postulates in order to act in agreement with values that are taken to be universal (cf. ibid., A824/B852 ff.). In this sense, the idea of "moral belief" matches the very concept of *Fürwahrhalten*, in the midst of which free choice is its highest expression (cf. ibid., A828/B856). In Kant's view, there can be no moral knowledge for providing infallible rules of conduct. The only possibility of human action rests on a compromise the subject establishes with something that has but an assertoric strength.[5]

This conception will be reinforced in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which appeared in 1788, where, re-examining the notion of taking to be true, Kant stresses the role of duty in our praxis. His strategy is to contrast the mere subjective inclination to behave in a certain way with what he terms a "*need from an absolutely necessary point of view*" (1996, 5.143). In agreement with the definitions provided in the First *Critique*,

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[5] Only a judgment anchored to "objective grounds" can be considered apodictic and represent a source of knowledge. Guy Longworth explains this well by saying that "what we hold true for practical purposes is to be viewed, from a purely theoretical perspective, as a mere hypothesis" (2017, 265).

the idea is to explore a sphere of universality, which is recognized as a practical necessity. As Sorin Baiasu put it, "the bases of the assent that are valid for me can be tested on the understanding of the others to see whether they have the same effect on them" (2013, 31).

As a corollary of his system, Kant dedicates the final paragraphs of his 1790 *Critique of the Power of Judgment* again to the question of holding for true, namely to the kind of belief that is not anchored to any objective grounds but nevertheless can guide our actions on the basis of "trust" (2000, 5.471). Andrew Chignell demonstrates keen insight when he remarks that "Kant leaves room for another kind of firm assent that has *nonepistemic* grounds or merits that are sufficient to make it rational in particular contexts, even if it doesn't have sufficient objective grounds" (2007, 333). However, despite its novelties, Kant's project is marked by a teleological understanding of humanity, which raises a number of issues belonging not only to moral but also to religious epistemology. In particular, one may wonder whether people holding different reasonable beliefs should necessarily converge in the same direction, which poses the problem of value-disagreement. The "spectre of relativism", in Axel Hesper's phrase (2010, 318), is for Kant simply a symptom of blindness towards the universal good, which can be achieved if individual interests are put aside and truth acknowledged in the form of a practical postulate.

Contending against the Kantian perspective, Bolzano re-evaluates the notion of holding for true in his 1837 *Theory of Science*. This work aims to establish the logical pillars of science searching for objective laws, which, by definition, do not depend on our recognition of them to exist. One of the main contributions made by Bolzano is his theory of "propositions in themselves", which he associates to that of "truths in themselves" (2014, §§19 and 25). A proposition in itself is what underlies any possible proposition that can be expressed or merely thought by us. What matters to Bolzano is reality as such and not the way human beings subjectively represent it. As a consequence, truth does not result from our propositional acts but imposes itself upon the world, with error corresponding to our incapacity to identify what the case is. Whereas Kant, as Robert Theis notes, "insists on the *subjective*

character of *Fürwahrhalten*" (2010, 221) as encompassing opinion, belief and knowledge, Bolzano excludes the latter from it.

Bolzano's view is that only opinion and faith constitute expressions of our taking something to be true, the difference between them lying in a weaker or stronger adherence to the content at issue. He extends this view to the traditional laws of thought – excluded middle, identity and non-contradiction – as properties that belong to reality itself and not just to our mental capacities. For Bolzano, these laws, more than logical, are ontological, something that had also been flagged by Wolff. We are thus in the presence of a realist epistemology that sees the threat of scepticism in Kant's critical philosophy, which is especially manifest in the dichotomy phenomenon/thing in itself. To say that our phenomenal knowledge can never reach things in themselves is to open the door to sceptical claims that in the end lead to a solipsistic standpoint. According to Bolzano, it is clear that our knowledge attributions involve an acquaintance with the external world, albeit partial given the impossibility of each time taking all aspects into account, and are not the product of a phenomenalism.

This has important practical consequences, with Bolzano applying his realistic doctrine to the moral and religious spheres. His aim is to fight relativism in these domains by searching for principles that are independent from particular circumstances at both an individual and a collective level. Bolzano's writings explore new avenues for thinking about these questions using the notion of "natural morality", discussed in his *Treatise of the Science of Religion*, as a background (cf. 2007, 199 ff.).

Strongly influenced by Locke and, like Bolzano, regarding Kant as a subjectivist, Newman published *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* in 1870. Here he speaks of three possible ways to enunciate a proposition, an "interrogative", a "conditional" and a "categorical" one, which he associates with three "modes of holding propositions" (1985, I.i.1). These are the mental acts of doubt, inference and assent. Newman also makes a distinction between "notional" and "real" apprehensions, relating inferences, as "conditional acts", to the former and "assents", as "unconditional", to the latter (cf. ibid., I.i.2). This conceptual landscape plays a decisive role in Newman's understanding

of the praxis of religion. One can believe in a dogma, Newman avows, in two diametrically opposed ways: "To give a real assent to it is an act of religion; to give a notional, is a theological act." (1985, I.v) It is very interesting that for Newman the "real" assent operates on the basis of what he calls "religious imagination" while "notional" assent "is held as a truth, by the theological intellect" (ibid.). There is thus a primacy of religion over theology, a conception that is of the greatest importance if we look at the number of internal incompatibilities within some confessions, including Christianity.

What the *Grammar of Assent* investigates are the epistemic conditions for a "real" assent, in contrast with a mere "notional" form of apprehension. This has obvious implications for morality, with "conscience" appearing as the cornerstone of Newman's approach. He opposes "moral sense" to "sense of duty" (ibid., I.v.1). The first is what enables us to reflect on what is the best thing to do on a certain occasion, with our rationality acting in benefit of a practical orientation. But when it comes to duty, "a rule of right conduct" is not at issue any longer; what is essential is "a sanction of right conduct" (ibid.). This, Newman believes, is to be accessed in terms of good or bad conscience, to which he attributes an emotive character, anticipating current trends in the philosophy of emotion. If Bolzano talked about "natural morality" as the backbone of a sustainable society, Newman vindicates "natural religion" as a key to inform both ethics and theology (cf. ibid., II.x.1).

The Analytic and Continental Traditions

The theme of assent is no less prominent in the rise of "analytic" philosophy. Frege, whose views are in many ways reminiscent of Bolzano's, set forth his conception of logic in clear opposition to the psychologism defended by Erdmann in his 1892 *Logic (Elementary Doctrine)*. In the first volume of his *Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, published in 1893, Frege maintains that logical laws can only bear on "laws of truth" or "being true (*Wahrsein*)", whereas psychological laws have to do with "laws of takings-to-be-true (*Fürwahrhalten*)" (1964, 13). Frege forcefully rejects

the view that mental processes characteristic of psychology can inter-fere with the immutability of logic. He is convinced that "general valid-ity" should not play a role in logical matters for the simple reason that truth will remain untouched even if it is taken by everybody to be false. What is true, Frege insists, corresponds to something independent from our judgments and not to subjectivist expressions, as psychologists would have it.

Of course this is based on the assumption that *the logic* of thought is unchangeable, something that is by no means consensual in contem-porary science. Frege extends his view of logic to an objectivist theory of linguistic meaning, where the "sense" of our sentences is not the result of a compromise between subjective representations but is fixed by the objective nature of "thought" (cf. 1956). For Frege, as bearers of the capacity of thinking, we can apprehend thoughts and hold them for true or false, even though the content of these thoughts belongs to no one in particular and is true *per se*. Authors such as Charles Travis have highlighted in Frege "[t]hought's social nature" (2011, 304) as occurring within specific forms of life, a leitmotif of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.[6] However, the problems posed by intercultural communi-cation show that we need a much more powerful framework for the explanation of thought-expression.

Following in the footsteps of Frege, Husserl, the father of phenom-enology, will also severely criticize psychologism in the *Prolegomena to Pure Logic*, the first volume of his *Logical Investigations*, published in 1900. Husserl, who had himself endorsed a psychologist view in earlier writings, deepens the Fregean critique of Erdmann stressing the sceptical relativism that can arise from an anthropological approach to the laws of thought. Husserl's strategy is to demonstrate that even the hypothetical inversion of our operation of "holding for true" (*für wahr halten*) in a "holding for false" (*für falsch halten*) would have no

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[6] Tyler Burge goes as far as to argue that "[t]he later Wittgenstein took up Frege's remark that recognition of objectivity or shareability in linguistic expression centers 'in the deed'" (2005, 34). I concentrate on Wittgenstein below.

repercussion in the truths and falsehoods themselves (cf. 2001, 1, Prolegomena, §40).[7]

This, for Husserl, does not apply only to logic but also to epistemology. Hence, to conceive of a subjectivity of truth as applied not merely to individuals, with their mental processes, but to the species, which could suffer a *bio-logical* mutability, is vehemently discarded by Husserl. Timothy Mosteller recalls that "Husserl's main point is that any relativistic claim in which truth is relative to the constitution, or any other feature (including epistemic standards) of the human species, involves itself in a contradiction" (2006, 23). What Husserl tries to show is that there are evidences that cannot be recognized in psychological terms.

In the first part of the second volume of *Logical Investigations*, titled *Investigations towards a Phenomenology and Theory of Knowledge*, which appeared in 1901, Husserl studies exactly what remains objectively subjacent to our intentional acts, with his analyses vindicating a distinction between the sphere of truth and the psychic experience of the contents at stake. There we can see that his approach is not identical to the Fregean one. As Martin Kusch highlights, "whereas Frege reduces psychologism to idealism and solipsism, Husserl attacks psychologism as a radical form of empiricism" (1995, 62). The fifth investigation is especially relevant, with Husserl introducing a whole set of concepts, among them that of "positing acts", to characterize our taking to be true, or belief, in contrast with the "imaginative" ones we perform (cf. 2001, 2, V, §§34-40). The influence of phenomenology on Heidegger's philosophy put Husserl on the side of "Continental" thought and consequently as a foreigner to mainstream analytic scholars. However, we can see that there were central concerns shared by the founding fathers of the two main currents in contemporary philosophy, Frege and Husserl.

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[7] It should come as no surprise that the notion of *Fürwahrhalten* also makes its appearance in Nietzsche's writings. As Peter Bornedal reminds us, truth is, for him, "that which we *call truth*, that which we *decide is* and *designate as* truth, that which we *hold-to-be-true*" (2010, 53). In the *Posthumous Fragments*, Nietzsche refers to degrees of holding for true in connection with degrees of doubt and mentions the notion of *Fürwahrhalten* alongside that of *für-Unwahrhalten*, "holding for untrue", within the context of a discussion about our faculty of judgment (cf. 1988, 103). His idea is that we should indeed take as *un*true all artificial constructions, doing away with the very concept of truth, and build a novel social organization based on a will to dominance.

Another important contribution along these lines to the understanding of our holding for true was made by Wittgenstein. In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein reconsiders the impact of Frege on his 1922 *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, which assumed a strong anti-psychologist stance in regard to logic. The concept of *Fürwahrhalten* is used in Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, written in the 1930s and 1940s, no longer with the negative charge that can be found in Frege (cf. 1978, I, §§131-54). The way Wittgenstein employs the term points to a novel understanding of logic, which is no longer limited to basic operators such as truth-functionality, quantification and identity, but is now seen as underlying all spheres of human reasoning. As an expression of our "language games", which take place within contextualized forms of life, the holding of something to be true becomes a focal point of interest on the way to an evolutionary conception of logic or "evolutionary normativity" (Venturinha, 2015, 165).

In connection with this view, Wittgenstein dedicates significant thought to the application of *Fürwahrhalten* within the religious domain. He emphasizes that what the believer primarily takes for true is something that exceeds the mere "historical" facts and is sharable with other individuals (cf. 1998, 37-38), in a view clearly reminiscent of Newman (cf. Venturinha, 2019, 107-10). Emphasis on *Fürwahrhalten* is also to be found in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, prepared between 1949 and 1951, where we witness the all-embracing character of logic in the midst of which "there is no sharp boundary between propositions of logic and empirical propositions" (1974, §319), with the former corresponding to rules that are embedded in our practices. There are clear affinities between the later Wittgenstein and Kant which are mirrored in the relativism that our holding for true, be it individual, collective or historical-cultural, brings with it. Maria Baghramian, who looks at Wittgenstein from the angle of pragmatism, insightfully remarks that

> Wittgenstein seems to be arguing that all judgments can meaningfully arise only from within the context of a form a life, and that there is no possibility of standing outside all forms of life in the hope of making objective, external comparisons or offering criticisms of the comparative merits of various belief systems. (2008, 95)

Wittgenstein's biggest achievement was definitely the laying down of what he called a grammatical method, based on an investigation of our use of words in a variety of contexts. But his later remarks on hinge beliefs make us think about what is plainly cultural or personal and what is natural or ontological in our commitments.[8]

Conclusion

We have travelled a long way in this article which has been aimed at understanding the development of the concept of assent. From the Stoics to Wittgenstein, there is a consistent attempt to shed light on our reasoning schemes through an examination of what it means to assent to something. Davidson's notion of "holding true" is just one contemporary example of this epistemological legacy. The myriad of relations between the theoretical and practical spheres that this landscape makes visible urges us to look at moral and religious forms of assent as eminently cognitive. In each situation, we give our assent to a multitude of elements and withhold other elements, sometimes based on solid criteria and other times simply lacking rational justification. But the main question is whether certain kinds of assent really leave us an alternative. One may be tempted to say that there must be such alternative. As Peter Klein explains:

> With regard to any proposition, say p, there are just three possible propositional attitudes one can have with regard to p's truth when considering whether p is true. One can either assent to p, or assent to ~p, or withhold assenting to both p and ~p. (2002, 336)

However, if the later Wittgenstein is right in claiming that "some propositions are exempt from doubt", that they "are as it were like hinges" upon which a series of other propositions turn (cf. 1969, §341), then the "pro-attitude" Klein sees in assent (cf. ibid.) appears as much less proactive. If p is a hinge proposition, one cannot help assenting to it. Assenting to ~p or simply withholding our assent are options that, for the hinge epistemologist, are not on the table, where a specific

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[8] Pritchard (2016) talks exactly about "arational hinge commitments", distinguishing between "über hinge commitments"/"über hinge propositions" and "personal hinge commitments"/"personal hinge propositions".

context is set.[9] What remains to investigate, after we tread this path, is to what extent the moral and religious beliefs we express in multifarious forms of assent have also this character of hinges. The present article was meant to clear the way for such an investigation.[10]

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