



A Critical Review of the Theory of the Precedence of Action Over Belief with Emphasis on John Cottingham's View

Mahdi Khayatzaheh 

Ph.D. in Contemporary philosophy, Tehran University, College of Farabi, Qom, Iran.
mkhayat1365@ut.ac.ir

Abstract

Research Article



The relationship between reason and faith is one of the most important topics in the philosophy of religion. This issue has been investigated from several aspects. One of these aspects is the relationship between action and religious belief. John Cottingham, a contemporary analytical philosopher, emphasizes the primacy of religious practice over belief, as well as the involuntary nature of belief. In his opinion, the factor that causes people to become religious is not intellectual discussions about God but the internal aspects of religion itself and the transforming power of religious practices in human life and experiences. In the present work, a critique has been made of his point of view with an explanatory-critical method. Criticisms that his point of view includes: First, the belief resulting from the course of action is only psychological certainty and such certainty is beyond the logic of verification. Secondly, knowledge of God and the practical system is a condition for entering it and precedes it. The third criticism is the problem of the plurality of religions and practical systems which causes people to mistrust reasons of the heart. The fourth criticism is that entering into a practical system is a confirmation of its benefits and anyone who does not believe this would have no reason to enter such a system.

Keywords: John Cottingham, precedence of action over belief, involuntary belief, evidence of the heart, religious belief.

Received: 2023/03/17 ; Received in revised form: 2023/05/05 ; Accepted: 2023/05/25 ; Published online: 2023/05/26

▣ Khayatzaheh, M. (2023). A Critical Review of the Theory of the Precedence of Action Over Belief with Emphasis on John Cottingham's View. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, 25(2), 57-80. <https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2023.9254.2871>

▣ © The Author



Introduction

John Cottingham is a contemporary English philosopher, and one of the contemporary theorists in the field of the relationship between reason and faith. The relationship between reason and religious faith can be examined from four aspects: 1) The relationship between reason and the epistemological area of faith, 2) the relationship between reason and the practical area of faith, 3) the relationship between reason and the commitment area of faith, and 4) the relationship between reason and the area of faith.

Explanation of Cottingham's view

Cottingham's view can be presented in seven steps:

1. Criticism of the current situation in analytical philosophy;
2. Changing the topic of discussion from the religious field to the spiritual field in order to expand the topic of discussion to non-religious spiritual fields;
3. Comparison of spiritual practice with devotional orders in the past philosophical tradition;
4. Understanding religion is based on practical participation in it;

This introduction is expressed according to Pascal's point of view. According to Pascal, faith should be acquired in the atmosphere of a living tradition of practical religious worship, not through discussion and analysis in a seminar room. The basis of this view is that issues related to the nature and existence of God are beyond the reach of reason.

5. The role of emotions in human understanding;

Using Nussbaum's point of view, Cottingham says: There are types of truth that the intellectual effort to obtain is equivalent to not reaching them. Religious truth is also a part of these truths. Because religious truths are beyond the direct understanding of humans and trying to understand them through logical analysis is moving away from them.

6. Involuntary belief;

Human belief, whether religious or otherwise, is not optional and there is a kind of passivity in all human perceptions. According to Cottingham, this point is shared by philosophers such as Hume and Descartes. Cottingham is also influenced by Pascal in this introduction. According to Pascal, although belief in God is not optional, there are indirect ways such as participating in religious activities to realize it, which are available to humans. The role of these ways in the formation of belief is a preliminary role and creating the ability to accept.

7. The necessity of trusting the witnesses of the heart;

According to Cottingham, such a thing is necessary for the human condition, and this issue exists in all fields of human knowledge, as well as in human daily life. For example, to go to work, a person must believe that when he turns the switch on the car, the car will not explode, even if such a belief is not the result of checking the car's electrical system, you still have to trust this article or you will lose your job.

Cottingham's conclusion from the seven premises is that the factor that causes people to become religious is not intellectual discussions about God but the internal aspects of religion itself and the transformative power of religious practices in human life and experiences. Accordingly, faith in God is a product of trust and participation in a living community of faith.

When the truth of religion is obtained through faith, and faith depends on a practical religious tradition, then there will be no other choice but to enter into the practical system of religion.

Of course, he emphasizes that entering the life of faith does not mean abandoning the critical method in content analysis, and the previous reasons resulting from religious practice must be

supplemented or regularized by subsequent intellectual reflections. According to Cottingham, worship precedes rational theory in four ways: 1) temporally; 2) heuristically; 3) psychologically; 4) morally

Critical Review

In the following, I will do a critical review of Cottingham's view.

His view on the priority of action over religious belief and that the understanding of religion is based on practical participation faces criticisms: First, the belief resulting from participation in religious actions is only psychological certainty and such certainty is beyond the logic of confirmation. Secondly, knowing God and the practical system is a condition for entering this system and has precedence over it. The third criticism is the problem of the plurality of religions and practical systems which causes people to mistrust reasons of the heart. The fourth criticism is that entry into a practical system is a confirmation of its benefits and anyone who does not believe this would have no reason to enter such a system. Therefore, at this stage as well, it is necessary to have a rational way to confirm the usefulness of this path.

His view on Doxastic voluntarism is also under the involuntary approach of indirect belief, which is Pascal's view. This component is also present in the opinions of Allameh Tabatabai. The difference between Cottingham and Allameh's points of view is that Cottingham and Pascal consider rational arguments to be inefficient in the realization of belief and scientific verification, and they consider a practical commitment to be necessary for the realization of such verification, but Allameh Tabatabai considers scientific premises and rational proof to be the necessary conditions for faith.

Conclusion

Although the theory of the precedence of action over belief is faced with numerous criticisms, it is an undeniable matter. Paying attention to different levels of religious faith makes the value of theoretical discussions as well as paying attention to practical refinement and participation in spiritual actions be considered together.

References

- Cottingham, J. (2005). *The Spiritual Dimension - Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value*. Cambridge University Press
- Cottingham, J. (2009 a), *Why Believe*. Continuum
- Cottingham, J. (2009 b). What is Humane Philosophy and Why is it at Risk? *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*. 65, 233-255
- Cottingham, J. (2014). *philosophy of religion - Towards a More Humane Approach*. Cambridge University Press
- Javadi Amoli, A. (2013). *Theology*. Esra.
- Sabzevari, H. (1990-2000). *Šarḥ al-manẓuma*. Nāb.
- Shīrāzī, Š. (1981). *Asrār al-Ayāt*. Introduction and proofreading: Mohammad Khajawi. Islamic Society of Wisdom and Philosophy of Iran.
- Tabātabā'ī, M.H. (1992). *Al-Mizān fi Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān*. Ismailian Publishing House.