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Editors

Ethics of Belief: Essays in Tribute to D.Z. Phillips

Foreword by Eugene Thomas Long

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Six of the articles published here were products of the 2007 Claremont Conference on the Philosophy of Religion organized by D. Z. Phillips and held in Claremont Graduate University in February 2007. Regrettably, Phillips' sudden death on July 25, 2006 prevented him from participating in the conference, adding his voice and publishing the proceedings as he had done in previous years.

This publication would not have been possible without the efforts of many persons, beginning with Patrick Horn, one of Phillips' doctoral students and now Associate Dean and Assistant Professor in the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. It is a privilege to welcome him as co-editor. I also wish to acknowledge the generous financial support given to the conference by Claremont Graduate University, Pomona College and Claremont McKenna College and the authors of the essays who contribute to the funding of future conferences by waiving their claims to royalties.

In Swansea, Helen Baldwin was instrumental in facilitating correspondence with the conference participants. In Claremont Jacquelyn Hunter managed most of the conference logistics and finances and Ray Bitar assisted with correspondence and the coordination of the work provided by graduate students during the conference. In South Carolina Margaret Weck facilitated correspondence and organized the papers for publication. Thanks to all of these persons whose expertise and cheerful assistance helped in significant ways to make the conference and this publication possible.

Eugene Thomas Long

Ethics of belief: introduction

Eugene Thomas Long

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This volume is presented as a tribute to the life and work of D.Z. Phillips. Six of the articles were originally presented at the annual conference on the philosophy of religion organized by Phillips and held at Claremont Graduate University, February 9–10, 2007. Unfortunately, Phillips did not live to participate in the conference itself. He died unexpectedly July 25, 2006 in the library of his beloved University of Wales, Swansea. Previously published volumes of essays, based on conferences organized by Phillips in Claremont, included a chapter entitled, “Voices in Discussion,” in which Phillips provided his own reactions to the discussions written almost immediately after the conference. Sadly, this volume appears without the addition of his voice.

Born in Morriston, near Swansea, Phillips was a Welsh speaker, a strong supporter of Welsh speaking schools and the author of many works in philosophy and literature in Welsh and English. Known widely as the leading representative of the movement in the philosophy of religion called Wittgensteinianism, Phillips spent much of his effort challenging the tendency of philosophers to elevate one kind of discourse to the point where it becomes the norm by which other forms of discourse are to be judged. He argues that many contemporary philosophers of religion are obsessed by what they call the reality of God or the so-called *real* existence of God where real existence means existing in the manner of humans and physical objects. On Phillips’ view, coming to see there is a God is not like coming to see that an additional being exists, not even an absolute being. On his account, both idealists and empirical realists miss the point. To speak of God as a religious reality is to speak not theoretically, but from the religious context of a life of struggle and hope, of life transformed and absolutely grounded by grace and redemption. This point can be briefly illustrated by reference to the religious understanding of God as eternal love as discussed by Phillips in the second chapter of *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry*. Coming to understand eternal love, Phillips argues, is not a matter of adding new information to one’s knowledge. It is rather to be given new meaning, new understanding. Unlike temporal love, eternal love does not depend on how things are in the world. Eternal love is neither tentative nor dependent upon

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certain states of affairs being realized. Eternal love can neither change nor suffer defeat. It is inescapable and will not let go. Coming to see that there is a God is to come up against or be given a new understanding of a love that will not let go whatever happens. Coming to see the possibility of such love is coming to see the possibility of God.

Phillips, who always maintained the neutrality of conceptual analysis, argued in his later work for what he called the contemplative conception of philosophy of religion and attention to the world in its differences. Philosophy in this sense, as he says in the last chapter of *Philosophy's Cool Place*, seeks to go nowhere, seeks only to show what it means to believe in God or to deny his existence. This brings him into conflict with philosophers of religion who argue for the rationality of religious belief in God as the best explanation of how things are. This does not, however, make him a postmodernist in the ordinary sense of that term. While he does share common ground with some of the postmodernists in their efforts to free us from the control of metanarratives, Phillips challenges the conclusion that we create our own narratives and decide between the real and the unreal. He may also be said to share common ground with many philosophical theologians who are engaged in revising religious beliefs under the challenges of modernism. But he argues that he himself is not reforming anything, and in his characteristic way, that he is only "contemplating an old, old story and seeing what gets in the way of telling it today."

Phillips was often frustrated by what he considered misunderstandings of his philosophical views, including in particular the charges of fideism and anti-realism. He defended his views with great energy, erudition and literary style, but also with a deep sense of humanity and appreciation of others. It was not unusual to see him, following a toe to toe argument with a colleague on the conference floor, entertaining that same colleague with his many stories at dinner. Indeed, it is difficult to recall Dewi, as his many friends called him, without at the same time recalling one of his stories and his hearty laughter.

Phillips began his academic career as an assistant lecturer in philosophy at Queens College, Dundee in 1961, returning home to the University of Wales, Swansea in 1965 becoming Professor and Head of Department in 1971. In 1992 he was appointed Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Claremont Graduate School, sharing his time with Swansea until 1966 when he retired as Rush Rhees Research Professor. For fourteen years Phillips spent every spring term at Claremont where among his many responsibilities he organized the annual philosophy of religion conference.

In organizing the conferences in Claremont it was never Phillips' intent to promote his own views. On the contrary he relished discussion with philosophers who held views different from his own. This is shown in the list of persons invited and his letter outlining the purposes of the conference. In his letter of invitation to speakers at the conference on the ethics of belief, Phillips asked how belief is to be understood and whether beliefs are of the same kind. He also suggested that one might distinguish broadly between three different views of belief, beliefs that are answerable to evidence or the criteria of rationality, beliefs that are held within contexts where the ways in which we think are not open to choice, and beliefs that are regulated by religious, ethical, psychoanalytic or political values. Although the papers need not center on religious belief, he said, he hoped that the implications for religious belief would be explored.

The first three essays in this volume focus on the question of the ethics of belief and the evidentialist principle most frequently associated with W.K. Clifford. In contrast to those contemporary philosophers who argue against the evidentialist principle, Allen Wood provides a strong defense of it. In his essay, "The duty to Believe According to the Evidence", Wood acknowledges that Clifford may have had in mind a too narrow definition of evidence, but Wood does not believe that an evidentialist has to follow Clifford in this regard. Given

the right epistemic standards, Wood argues, we still have to ask the question whether belief is morally permissible in cases where there is insufficient evidence. He defends evidentialism against several objections and argues for the duty to believe according to the evidence on self-regarding and other-regarding grounds.

In “The Virtues of Belief: Toward a Non-Evidentialist Ethics of Belief-Formation,” Richard Amesbury construes Clifford’s ethics of belief as entailing two independent substantive claims, an epistemological claim and a moral claim. He rejects the epistemological claim that entitlement is always a function of evidential support, but argues for preserving something of the moral claim that it is wrong to hold beliefs to which one is not entitled. The notion of a belief being wrong in this context has to do with the fact that belief is not a purely private matter and that it cannot be separated from other aspects of life. Building on this notion, Amesbury suggests an alternative way of conceiving the ethics of belief in which emphasis is placed more upon virtues than duties and more upon persons than just their beliefs.

In “The Ethics of Belief and Two Conceptions of Christian Faith”, Van Harvey distinguishes between what he calls the traditional conception of Christian faith in which faith is conceived as belief in a series of propositions and a conception of faith found in somewhat different forms in which belief has more to do with giving expression to religious affections (Schleiermacher), a gloss on religious experience (Wittgenstein) or “awe in the presence of the divine incognito” (Barth). Harvey argues that while the evidentialist principle does raise conflicts with the beliefs in the first conception of faith it does not do so in the second conception of faith. With regard to the second conception of faith, Harvey argues that Christian theologians, who believe they have the responsibility for grounding their interpretation of faith in the New Testament texts, are likely to find most sympathy with Barth’s conception of faith. This conception of faith neither requires believing a set of propositions that are defeasible by human inquiry nor a set of propositions about divine being.

Many contemporary philosophers have argued for the involuntariness of belief. In “Choosing to Believe”, Ronney Mourad challenges this widely held view. He argues that beliefs are sometimes voluntary and that these beliefs ought to be regulated by moral principles. Mourad develops a conception of belief in conversation with the work of J.L. Schellenberg, argues that some beliefs can be voluntary, and replies to William Alston’s objections to doxastic voluntariness. While agreeing that most of our beliefs seem to be involuntary, Mourad argues that some of our most important beliefs are voluntary and that these beliefs should be subject to moral regulation.

Jennifer Faust begins her essay, “Can Religious Arguments *Persuade*”, by acknowledging that arguments aimed at establishing or rejecting religious beliefs are seldom persuasive and offering an explanation for this. Rejecting the claim of some theists that non-believers are psychologically or cognitively defective, she argues that the persuasive power of an argument cannot be equated with the logical strength of the argument and may depend on features external to the argument itself. A person’s antecedent deep or fundamental commitments raise the bar for persuading a person to accept or reject a metaphysical or religious belief and may prevent an otherwise compelling argument from being persuasive. Taking religious belief to be a fundamental or framework belief of this kind, Faust argues that the expectation of the evidentialist that religious beliefs are or should be sensitive to evidential input is mistaken and that the prospect for an ethics of religious belief is bleak.

In “Belief, Faith and Acceptance”, Robert Audi argues that no one conception of belief is central in all discussions in religion and that ‘belief’ is sometimes used where ‘faith’ or ‘acceptance’ would better express what is intended. Audi engages in a detailed analysis of these terms arguing that there are many kinds of belief, faith and acceptance, that propositional faith need not be doxastic and that although attitudinal faith or belief-in is not a

doxastic attitude, it may embody beliefs. His purpose is to show that religious faith must be understood in its own terms and that these distinctions are important for understanding and appraising a person's religious position. The question of evidence and rationality continues to be relevant for religious faith, but the conditions for rationality are different from or less strong than is the case with doxastic belief.

In earlier publications of the Claremont conferences organized by Phillips, he would at this point add his own voice, often in the form of a dialogue with the speakers. In the absence of this, John Whittaker was invited to add his article, "D.Z. Phillips and Reasonable Belief". Whittaker, a sympathetic, but not uncritical reader of Phillips, would be the first to say that he does not and cannot speak for Phillips. However, he helps us better understand Phillips' efforts to make us aware of the plurality of forms of belief and judgment and the failure of philosophers to find universal and mutually agreed upon standards of rationality. Philosophers, Phillips argues, often fail to distinguish the logic of moral and religious commitments from the logic that governs abstract hypotheses and requires some kind of inferential justification. Good judgment in matters concerning religion and morality is important, but judgment in these cases differs from the more objective model of rational inference. Judgments of truth in morality and religion are more personal in nature. They depend more on self-honesty, self-transformation and persuasion.

Anselm Min was also invited to add an essay in the absence of Phillips' voice. In "D.Z. Phillips on the Grammar of 'God'", Min focuses on Phillips' concern with understanding religious belief and the theory of language upon which talk of God depends, a topic that is at the root of many of Phillips' discussions of the ethics and rationality of religious belief. Although an appreciative reader and sympathetic in many ways with the core of Phillips' argument, Min appeals to his own more Hegelian and Thomistic point of view to extend the discussion. Min argues in particular for the need of religious games to be held in dialectical tension with other language games, for the importance of a more systematic metaphysical analysis of the nature of God to spell out the absolute character of divine reality, and for the need to recognize the irreducibility of transcendent reality to any form of human subjectivity.

The concluding piece, "Tribute to Dewi Z. Phillips", is written by Patrick Horn. This is a slightly revised version of the tribute that Pat originally presented before family, colleagues and friends at the funeral service for Dewi in Swansea. Pat speaks for himself and largely from the Claremont context, but many will find in these words the Dewi they knew as colleague and friend.

The duty to believe according to the evidence

Allen Wood

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Abstract ‘Evidentialism’ is the conventional name (given mainly by its opponents) for the view that there is a moral duty to proportion one’s beliefs to evidence, proof or other epistemic justifications for belief. This essay defends evidentialism against objections based on the alleged involuntariness of belief, on the claim that evidentialism assumes a doubtful epistemology, that epistemically unsupported beliefs can be beneficial, that there are significant classes of exceptions to the evidentialist principle, and other shabby evasions and alibis (as I take them to be) for disregarding the duty to believe according to the evidence. Evidentialism is also supported by arguments based on both self-regarding and other-regarding considerations.

Keywords Evidentialism · Belief · Clifford · James

Is there an ethics of belief?

Are beliefs a matter for morality? Can we be blamed for what we believe, or have an obligation to believe one thing and not another? Some think that nothing of this kind makes sense, on the ground that our beliefs are not voluntary. I believe that G. W. Bush is President of the United States, that koalas are marsupials, that Charlotte Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre*, and that gold has atomic number 79. I cannot change any of these beliefs at will. Neither offering me money to change them, nor threatening me with blame or punishment if I do not, will have any effect. I may wish that Bush were not President, but that wish is powerless to affect my belief about who is President. My beliefs might change in response to new arguments or evidence, but it is also not in my power whether such evidence is put before me. In short, what I believe is not up to me. What I cannot help, what isn’t voluntary, can’t be a matter

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for morality. So belief can't be a matter for morality. That's one case that is sometimes made against the ethics of belief.

There are at least two ways, however, in which beliefs have been regarded as subject to morality. First, it is sometimes held that we have an obligation to believe certain things, and that it is wrong to believe others, simply on the ground of the content of what is believed or not believed. Some people have held that we ought to believe in God, or even that we will be damned to hell, and deservedly, unless we believe that Jesus Christ was crucified and then rose from the dead on the third day. Others find it blamable to believe that some races are naturally superior to others or blamable not to believe that the Holocaust occurred. I will call such supposed obligations regarding belief '*content* obligations.'

Second, some hold that some beliefs can be obligatory or blamable on account of something about the way in which they are formed and maintained. Some people think that we ought to believe what we are told by the Bible or by certain religious authorities simply because that is what they tell us. Others think it is wrong to hold beliefs on any basis except your own untrammelled thinking and experience. Some also think we have an obligation to believe only that for which we have good reasons or evidence. All these people think we have what I will call '*procedural* obligations' regarding belief.

Both content and procedural obligations to believe at least make sense, and easily survive the objection that belief isn't a matter for morality because it is involuntary. For one thing, although it may be true of *many* beliefs that it is not up to us whether to hold them, this is by no means true of all beliefs. I've heard people say, "I choose to believe that the President is telling us the truth." I once heard Stephen King, the author of horror stories, say in a radio interview: "I choose to believe there is a God." I see no reason to doubt that such people are accurately reporting what is going on in their minds.¹ They believe certain things because they choose to, and they would hold different beliefs if they had chosen differently. Those beliefs really are up to them. Such cases typically occur where the evidence is scanty or mixed, especially where the subject of the belief is important to the person, so that their emotions, or hopes, or moral commitments have the opportunity affect their beliefs at least as much as the evidence does. Even if they admit that the evidence against God's existence is stronger than the evidence for it, some people still try to believe in God, and some apparently succeed.

William James, using a metaphor derived from electric wires, distinguished between what he called 'live hypotheses' and 'dead' ones. For James, a 'hypothesis' is anything proposed to our belief. It is *live* if we are capable of believing it if we will to do so, while it is *dead* for us if (as James puts it) it "scintillates with no credibility at all" and so it is beyond our power to believe it.² Whether we actually have any content obligations to believe, such obligations at least pass the test of voluntariness when they have to do with live hypotheses. Perhaps, on grounds of involuntariness, you can have no obligation to believe a hypothesis that is dead for you, but as far as voluntariness is concerned, you might be blamed for believing or not believing any hypothesis that is live for you. In that case, the obligation to believe in God or

¹ I take belief to be fundamentally a dispositional state rather than a psychic occurrence, much less an act. So choosing to believe something cannot be like choosing to crook your finger or stick out your tongue. The choice to believe that p no doubt involves a complex set of choices—to affirm rather than deny p on various occasions, to attend to evidence favoring p and to avert attention from considerations that might lead to doubting p, and so on. But it would be impossible to specify all the chosen acts of this kind that have gone into the choice to believe that p, and even more impossible to specify in advance all the choices that will constitute in the future one's continuing to choose to believe that p. Therefore, "I choose to believe that p" is exactly the right locution to describe what Stephen King is doing. No philosophical quibbles should lead us to say that he misspoke, still less that what he said cannot be literally true.

² See John McDermott (1967), pp. 717–718.

in the Holocaust, might in principle apply to all those for whom the existence of God, and the occurrence of the Holocaust are live hypotheses.

As for procedural obligations to believe, they simply aren't the least bit dependent on the idea that it is voluntary what we believe. They depend instead the voluntariness of the actions of thought, attention and inquiry through which we form and maintain our beliefs. It is often up to us whether we defer to authorities or think for ourselves, whether we let ourselves consider arguments or evidence, or undertake further research before making up our minds. Wherever this is so, procedural obligations to believe or not believe pass the test of voluntariness.³ Some beliefs, of course, are formed through psychological mechanisms such as wishful thinking, self-deception, or accepting the beliefs of those around us. It may not always be easy to resist such mechanisms, or even to be aware of them, but it is up to us whether we try or not try to be aware of them, and whether we try or not try to resist them. Often such voluntary tryings, when they occur, meet with success. In fact, procedural obligations regarding belief are important precisely because our beliefs are *not* wholly up to us or under our voluntary control. For in general, when a state that affects our behavior (for instance, an emotional state, such as anger) is not under our voluntary control, it is all the more important to watch carefully over all the voluntary processes through which you might get yourself into such a state. In this respect, belief is like anger or other emotional states.

The obligation to believe on the basis of evidence or reasons

I won't be considering content obligations to believe any further here, simply because, on moral grounds, I deny that there are any content obligations to believe. If it is wrong not to believe in the Holocaust, for instance, that is due to procedural obligations to believe, such as that we have a duty to believe according to the evidence, together with the fact that evidence for the Holocaust is overwhelming. The main principle that I think governs the ethics of belief, in fact, is the procedural principle I have just invoked and also stated in the title of this talk: *Apportion the strength of your belief to the evidence; believe only what is justified by the evidence, and believe it to the full extent, but only to the extent, that it is justified by the evidence.*⁴

³ Of course there are some who think that nothing at all is voluntary or up to us, and that everything we say or think or do is involuntary and happens by a necessity that is beyond our power, determined by our genes or operant conditioning or the laws of physics. But unless you take that extreme position (which would do away not merely with obligations to believe, but with all obligations whatever), you should admit that it is up to us what we believe and how we form and maintain our beliefs often enough for an ethics of belief to pass the test of involuntariness.

⁴ Clifford writes as if belief is an all-or-nothing matter—either you believe something or you don't, and there are no degrees of belief. (He never directly asserts this, however, but merely omits to consider issues raised by strength of belief or degree of subjective certainty.) Since I think degree or strength of belief, and strength of evidence, are sometimes real factors in belief, I do not want to make a similar omission. But I do not think that the notions of strength of belief and strength of evidence are equally applicable to all cases. They seem most appropriate in cases where there is a careful, disciplined weighing of evidence that is hard to come by, or mixed—as it is for historians, for example, or in many branches of science. In many cases, however, it seems right to say that a person simply believes something or doesn't, and not to speak at all of degrees or strength of belief. Especially artificial is the practice of some epistemologists who think of all belief as the assignment of a precise probability—as though my saying that I believe fairly strongly that the outcome of the Iraq war will be unfavorable to the U.S. must consist in my assigning some precise probability (60%? 75%? 90%?) to the proposition "The outcome of the Iraq war will be unfavorable to the U.S." I do not think the assignment of such probabilities, even when it occurs, belongs to the same category as having a strong or weak belief. For instance, I might assign a probability of 80% to the proposition "The U.S. adventure in Iraq will be rightly judged in retrospect to have been a failure," while having either a strong or a weak belief that this is the correct

Using a term that is employed more often by opponents of this principle, I will call this the ‘evidentialist principle.’ The evidentialist principle is perhaps most often associated with the name of the 19th century British mathematician, scientist and philosopher William Kingdon Clifford. But other contemporaries of Clifford, such as Thomas Henry Huxley, were equally strong supporters of this principle, and its pedigree in modern philosophy goes back much farther. Among the important modern philosophers who explicitly endorse the evidentialist principle in one way or another are Descartes, Locke and Hume.

The evidentialist principle is a *moral* principle. It holds that beliefs not justified by the evidence are *immoral*. Yet if the term ‘justified’ that occurs in it referred to *moral* justification, then the principle would seem tautologous, or even vacuous. However, I do not intend the term ‘justified,’ as it occurs in the principle, to refer to moral justification. Rather, I mean employ a notion of justification that is wholly *epistemic* in character. The evidentialist principle, in other words, is to be understood against a background of a set of epistemic standards telling us, relative to a given context, what a certain set of considerations, regarded as rational arguments or evidence, justify a person in that context in believing. In the evidentialist principle, I therefore understand the term ‘evidence’ in a very broad way, encompassing not only empirical information but also a priori arguments and anything else that can authenticate itself as a genuine epistemic ground for assent, acceptance or belief. Clifford probably intended ‘evidence’ too narrowly (having in mind only empirical evidence, and a certain then fashionable interpretation of ‘the scientific method’), but there is no reason that an evidentialist has to follow him in this. To broaden the notion of evidence, however, by no means trivializes the evidentialist principle. For no matter how you think of evidence or epistemic justification, people do often hold beliefs that fail to meet the epistemic standards, and it is still highly significant to point out that this is morally wrong. The point is rather that the evidentialist principle itself does not take a position on what our epistemic standards should be. That is for epistemologists to decide. And it is also open to the evidentialist to insist that the proper standards for a given person on a given occasion are contextual, depending on that person’s epistemic position (the questions it is reasonable for them to ask, the information available to them, and so on). To say that epistemic justification is contextual in this way is not, however, to say that the standards of epistemically justified belief are “subjective” or “person-relative.” It is only to say that the objective standards (which, however, may be subject to controversy, even to endless controversy and endless correction) apply differently to different people because different people begin in different situations, are asking different questions and have different evidence available to them.

Alvin Plantinga and others have sometimes tried to attack evidentialism on the ground that it presupposes a mistaken epistemology. But in this they are clearly on the wrong track. The evidentialist principle is compatible with any epistemology that has any use at all for some notion of epistemic justification that can be employed in determining what to believe.⁵ It is suspicious, however, that those who wish to dispute the evidentialist principle fasten on epistemological issues (which are essentially irrelevant to it). For this suggests that they realize they cannot controvert the evidentialist principle directly, and must resort to obfuscating or diverting attention from the real question. The real question is simply this: Given

Footnote 4 continued

probability assignment. Theorists who think this last strong or weak belief must consist in my assigning yet another probability are merely being silly, and if they do not see this, that shows only that they are hopelessly committed to a wrong theory.

⁵ Even those, such as William Alston, who have questioned the common notions of epistemic justification, still endorse using a set of evidential criteria to assess beliefs. Whether we use the term ‘justification’ to sum up the results of using such criteria seems to me a verbal matter, not a substantive one.

the right epistemic standards—whatever we decide the right ones are—if it is decided that there is insufficient evidence to justify a belief epistemically, there is still the moral question whether holding the belief is morally permissible. Some people, such as James and Pascal (to name only two), think this is permissible. But the evidentialist principle says it is not morally permissible, that it is morally wrong and blameworthy.

Belief, as I have said, sometimes comes in degrees of strength. At the time he was first running for President, George W. Bush's belief that Clinton was President was clearly stronger than his belief that Atal Bihari Vajpayee was Prime Minister of India, since he could not name the then Prime Minister of India when asked, but he certainly could name the abominable adulterer who defeated his father for the Presidency in 1992. Evidence that justifies a weaker belief may not justify a stronger one. For instance, Bush thought he had some evidence at the beginning of 2003 that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but this evidence pretty obviously justified only a much weaker belief in the existence of these weapons than Bush held at the time. If so, then when he ordered the invasion of Iraq, offering the existence of weapons of mass destruction as his chief reason for doing so, Bush was violating the evidentialist principle. Long after it was determined that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Bush still avowed on national television the belief that in 2003 Iraq posed an immediate military danger to the security of the United States. Whatever may have been true before the invasion, *that* belief was clearly not justified by the evidence about Iraq's military capabilities that we all obtained quite soon after the invasion. The evidentialist principle thus clearly condemns that belief as immoral.

It will often be a non-trivial, or even a difficult and controversial matter to determine what standards of evidence apply to a given context or justify a certain person in holding a certain belief to a certain degree of strength or certainty. For instance, it may be a non-trivial question how strong a belief in the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was justified by the evidence U.S. intelligence services provided the Bush administration (or whether any belief at all in their existence, even a weak one, was justified then). But for almost every significant moral principle, such as the moral principle condemning all wars of aggression, there are non-trivial issues of fact, and sometimes even deep issues of theory, involved in applying the moral principle to particular cases. So the evidentialist principle is no different from many other moral principles in that respect.

Evasion and denial regarding the evidentialist principle

How often is the evidentialist principle violated? Pretty often, I think. A majority of those who voted for Bush in 2004 told pollsters they believe both that weapons of mass destruction had actually been found in Iraq, and that Saddam Hussain was behind the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. These beliefs were never at any time supported by any credible evidence whatever. The violation of the evidentialist principle not only occurs very frequently, it is also quite often not merely winked at but even approved, sometimes even provided with a philosophical defense, such as the one offered by William James in "The Will to Believe." A world in which people always abided by the evidentialist principle, like a world in which human rights were always respected, in which there were no wide gaps between rich and poor, and in which all nations and peoples were at peace with one another, would be a very different world from the one we live in, and like those other possible worlds, I think it would also be a much better world than the one we live in.

I think that many realize at some level how far most people are from complying with the evidentialist principle, but for various reasons they fear having to abide by the evidentialist

principle in their own lives, so the main effect of this awareness is to induce in them a state of denial regarding the evidentialist principle. By a 'state of denial' I mean that they find all sorts of indirect ways of evading the principle or putting it out of action. The idea we examined right at the start, that beliefs are not a matter for morality at all, is one of these ways. So is the idea that the evidentialist principle assumes a doubtful epistemology.

The context in which disputes about the evidentialist principle have most often taken place is the philosophy of religion. Some people seem to think that religion is a special area of human life where beliefs are simply exempt from the evidentialist principle. They often express this by saying things like: "Religious questions are matters of faith, not of evidence or proof." Sometimes they even infer that religion has to be exempt from the evidentialist principle merely from the premise (which they apparently take to be too obvious for meaningful dispute), that there could not possibly be adequate evidence for religious beliefs. Their inference is invalid to the point of downright impudence: You might as well argue that professional hit men should be exempt from the laws against premeditated murder just because it is obvious that killers for hire can't justify their actions under those laws. In any case, religious beliefs clearly differ in the degree to which they are justified by evidence. A belief in divine creation that is consistent with astronomical and biological science is clearly better supported than one that requires us to deny the facts of evolution or to claim that the universe only 4,000 years old. The Judaeo-Christian scriptures themselves frequently offer what they take to be evidence in favor of the true faith and against contrary religious beliefs, as when they report that Elijah's sacrifice was miraculously accepted while those of the prophets of Baal were not (1 Kings 18:30–40). An evidentialist need not agree with the scriptural conclusion that the people were justified, at Elijah's command, in killing the proponents of the evidentially unsupported religious belief. But evidentialism does agree with Scripture in maintaining that evidence is relevant to religious beliefs, as to beliefs of other kinds.⁶

James accuses Clifford of holding that we must abstain from every belief until it has been evidentially certified, and then points to the absurd practical consequences of such a policy. But this is a red herring, since Clifford accepts no such picture. When Clifford's famous ship owner is about to send out his emigrant ship, his belief that it is seaworthy is taken for granted until doubts about this are suggested to him. His wrongdoing consists in ridding himself of these doubts in the wrong way, not in failing to provide an evidential justification for each of his beliefs separately and singly before believing anything.⁷ James's criticism here seems to me typical of the dishonesty and evasion we find in all attempts to challenge or quibble with the evidentialist principle.

When people become truly desperate, the form taken by the state of denial is sometimes a sudden and extremely acute attack of epistemic scruples. The believer, for whom skepticism in any form is normally the most deadly enemy, all of a sudden falls into a state in which there seems to be no good evidence for believing anything—that the sun will rise tomorrow, that

⁶ I submit that whenever it is stated or implied that religious beliefs are all equally unsupported evidentially, this is either a simple case of anti-religious bigotry or else a patently dishonest attempt to exempt one's own religious beliefs, which one knows to be unreasonable, from all critical standards.

⁷ The obvious instance of a philosopher who does something like what James is attacking here is Descartes, in the practice of his method of first philosophy. But anyone who reads Descartes' *Discourse on Method* with any care will see clearly that requiring us to support our beliefs from scratch by intuitive certainty or demonstration applies only within the domain of philosophical method, which Descartes clearly partitions off from all the beliefs he holds for practical purposes. Further, even within the specialized method, Descartes does not require his beliefs to be separately authenticated until after they have been called into question by his special methodological doubt. Even there he does not begin by considering all his beliefs guilty until proven innocent, and then asking for a justification from scratch for each one. James's charge would therefore be a red herring even applied to Descartes, much less to Clifford, or any other evidentialist I know of.

fire will burn you, that drinking water is any better for you than drinking gasoline. From this the believer immediately draws the wildly invalid conclusion that we are at liberty to believe anything we like without ever attending to any evidence at all. The fallacious reasoning and even more desperate dishonesty represented by this form of denial are so disarmingly transparent that it is hard to keep a straight face in dealing with those who have subverted their intellects in this degrading manner.

I won't have time here to go through all the shameless evasions I've run into in the course of defending the evidentialist principle. The kinds of prevarication and sophistry people go through in the course of rationalizing their evasions of the evidentialist principle are virtually inexhaustible, so even an infinite time would not suffice to reply to all the possible quibbles, alibis and excuses that might be dredged up from the bottomless pit of human self-deception. What I do want to address here are some philosophical arguments, such as those of William James, for the thesis that the evidentialist principle is too restrictive. I should preface this discussion, however, by saying that I think those who, like James, directly dispute the evidentialist principle through such arguments are less in a state of denial about it than those who engage in the wide variety of more dishonest evasions. Worse even than they, however, are those who do not dispute the evidentialist principle at all, but merely interpret all evidence they get dishonestly, so as to confirm their pet faiths and prejudices, without even acknowledging that their conduct even raises a moral issue.

The basic idea behind the most thoughtful objections to the evidentialist principle is that there is a class of beliefs that are not justified by the evidence, but holding them either does no harm or even does some positive good. For instance, James and others argue that religious beliefs unsupported by evidence provide joy and consolation to those who hold them, enrich their lives, and encourage the believers to engage in actions that benefit others and the world at large. There is even a body of empirical evidence, summarized in a 2003 article in *American Psychologist* by Carl E. Thoresen and William R. Miller, that religious involvement leads to a longer life and greater contentment.⁸ James argues that sometimes people can succeed in doing something worthwhile only if they believe in advance that they will succeed, so that to forbid them the belief that they will succeed (when it is not supported by evidence prior to the attempt) is to condemn them to failure, which James argues would be harmful and even irrational.

There are several different worries that an evidentialist will have about these supposed cases and the arguments based on them. First, as regards the joy and consolation afforded by unsupported beliefs, the empirical studies do not deal directly with religious *belief* (as distinct from participation in religious activities), and do not distinguish among religious beliefs regarding their evidential support, or even between beliefs that the believers themselves do and do not take to be evidentially supported. So the studies do not directly address the question whether *evidentially unsupported beliefs* contribute to human well-being.

It cannot be denied that in exceptional cases, it can benefit someone to hold a belief that is false. For example, a cancer patient's morale, and hence his chances of beating the disease, might in some cases be improved by his not believing he has cancer at all. In that case, the

⁸ See Thoresen and Miller (2003). The American social psychologist Shelley Taylor regularly praises what she takes to be the biologically advantageous tendency of medical patients to hold illusions about their condition. See Taylor and Brown (1988). These claims raise somewhat different issues from those I am discussing, since Taylor and Brown are claiming that people are benefited by holding false beliefs as well as beliefs not supported by evidence. But it should be clear that in a case like this no one could stably hold both the belief that is supposed to benefit them and also know that it is false. So no one could know about themselves that they are being benefited by such a belief while continuing to hold the belief. Hence even if illusions do benefit people's health, it does not seem that this is a justification a person could stably or self-consistently apply to their own beliefs.

issue would arise for his physician and family whether to deceive him for his own good. This is not an easy issue to decide in general, however, since to deceive someone is to treat them paternalistically, so it needs to be carefully considered whether the benefit to them of holding a false belief outweighs the disrespect shown them by deceiving them. But the fact erroneous beliefs can sometimes benefit people does not show that it is ever permissible to seek such supposed benefits for yourself by manipulating yourself into believing something that the evidence shows is probably not true. For to do this would be to corrupt your procedures of belief formation and deliberation in a fundamental way. It is to show lack of respect for yourself that is so radical that it is hard to see how you could permit this and still retain intact even your capacity to deliberate rationally about what benefits you and what does not, in which case there would be no reason for you to trust your judgment that the evidentially unsupported belief really benefits you.

Even if we grant that evidentially unsupported beliefs do sometimes make people feel joy and consolation, it is still not clear that a person is really better off feeling joy and consolation in cases where those feelings are based on illusions.

Suppose I am elected “Most Popular Guy” in my high school graduating class, and feel joy and consolation in receiving this token of esteem and affection from all those cool jocks and groovy chicks who I never thought liked me at all; but in fact I was elected to this honor only because the election was a sham, a nasty conspiracy, a cruel joke played on me by my malicious classmates, who in fact without exception regard me as a contemptible dweeb, and now laugh at me behind my back for being such an easily deceived geek. In this case, it seems to me, my condition is pitiable rather than enviable, and my feelings of joy and consolation even constitute a significant part of why my state is so pitiable. (If I knew they were kidding, I might still be a revolting nerd, but at least I would not be such a ridiculous sucker.)

If this is right, then the joy and consolation afforded by beliefs unsupported by evidence normally count as something good for the person only if those beliefs are actually true. To think that a person’s real condition is so bad that they would truly be better off living an illusion surely is to rate the person’s state as wretched beyond any hope of improvement. To lie paternalistically to people may sometimes help them (for instance, to overcome a life-threatening illness), but like most forms of paternalism, it shows a lack of respect for the person, and seems justifiable only temporarily, under very special conditions. To regard it as an acceptable general policy in forming people’s basic beliefs about themselves and the world (for example, their religious beliefs) is incompatible with respecting people at all. And of course to adopt such a policy regarding yourself, when it is possible at all, is to engage in a systematic pattern of self-deception that is incompatible with self-respect. Hence even if we considered it possible that we might really be better off holding beliefs that are not only evidentially unsupported but also false, we should not consider the miserable and contemptible level of well-being we might achieve by this device to be any genuine good, certainly not a good sufficient to justify making exceptions to the evidentialist principle.

In general beliefs unsupported by evidence are false more often than true. (If you doubt this, then I think you would also have to doubt that there is anything deserving the name ‘evidence.’) So granted that we truly benefit from holding epistemically unjustified beliefs only if the beliefs are true, it could never be true in general, but only in exceptional cases (when, namely, contrary to the evidence, the beliefs are true), that the joy and consolation afforded people by such beliefs will turn out to be genuinely beneficial to the believers. It follows that the general *policy* of seeking joy and consolation in beliefs not supported by the evidence could never benefit people, even if in exceptional cases people do sometimes accidentally benefit from holding such beliefs. But then let’s ask this question: Could we ever *know* that a given case is exceptional in this way? Defenders of epistemically unjustified

belief often argue by simply stipulating, plausibly enough, that there are such cases, and then claiming that the evidentialist principle is mistaken in condemning those beliefs. If such cases are necessarily exceptional, and we can never know whether we are dealing with one of them, this objection to the evidentialist principle can never justify any particular belief that violates the principle, even granting for the moment that the benefits of believing would suffice to justify it. Yet it is not clear how we could obtain good evidence that we will succeed if we believe without also getting pretty good evidence that success is pretty well within our grasp anyway, which casts doubt on the supposition that our belief that we will succeed is evidentially unsupported.

These arguments also do not usually distinguish between the effects of *believing* we will succeed and the effects of *hoping* we will succeed. It probably also requires evidence to be justified in *hoping* something will be true, since (as I would argue) hope always requires at least a very weak or tentative belief. (It makes no sense to hope for what you are firmly convinced is not the case.) How, then, can we be sure we are not dealing with a case in which epistemically justified hope will do just as good a job of promoting success as epistemically unjustified belief? In the face of such subtle and difficult questions, I am tempted to offer the modest suggestion that we might try just being honest with ourselves, both hoping and believing what the evidence justifies hoping and believing, and see if we can't somehow muddle through without having to lie to ourselves.

We might also raise the question in these cases whether there really is good evidence that *evidentially unsupported beliefs* enrich people's lives, or promote success, more than possible alternative beliefs that are better supported by the evidence. (The empirical studies about religion, once again, never specifically address that question, since they do not even ask about the evidential support there might be for various religious beliefs.) It seems to me a telling point that James, in the course of his defense of evidentially unsupported religious beliefs, counts it as one of the affirmations of *religion*—hence one of the beliefs for which he claims *evidence is unnecessary*—that *we are better off believing that religion is true*.⁹ This might seem illegitimate and question-begging. Yet it is only consistent with the basic position for which James is arguing. For if the joys and consolations to be derived from a belief are truly beneficial to a person only if the belief is true, then in the case of evidentially unjustified beliefs, it is evidence for that which is lacking. And as we have already seen, someone who is prepared to subvert his belief-forming procedures by believing what is unsupported by the evidence can also not trust himself to deliberate reliably about what it might benefit himself (or other people) for him to believe. It follows that particular violations of the evidentialist principle simply cannot be honestly defended *to the believers themselves* by providing evidence that they are beneficial to the believer, even if we agree that such beliefs might occasionally exist. In order to accept such justifications, we must shift to a kind of third person perspective on beliefs, in effect treating ourselves with a disgusting attitude of condescending paternalism, and assert propositions about ourselves that we cannot consistently hold while also holding the beliefs that are to be justified.

Generally speaking it is obvious that true beliefs tend to lead to good consequences and false beliefs to bad ones. There may be ironic exceptions to this general truth, but it would be folly (or worse) to live your whole life as if just the opposite generalization were true. Further, if the word 'evidence' means anything at all, it means that beliefs supported by evidence are more likely to be true than those lacking evidential support. So if, as we have admitted, there are cases in which good consequences follow from holding unsupported beliefs, they

⁹ James, *Op. cit.*, p. 732.

are necessarily exceptional, and when these exceptional cases occur, we can never be in a position to know (or justifiably believe) this.

The mere existence of such cases would be far from constituting a moral justification for holding those beliefs. This is especially the case when the good consequences consist solely in some alleged benefit to the believer—such as pleasant feelings of joy, consolation and contentment. For it is often true of immoral actions (for instance, betraying the trust of a friend) that they benefit the person who performs them. (By betraying your friend, you can get his money away from him, or you can get away with some of your other bad actions by causing your innocent friend to take the blame for them.) These benefits to yourself obviously do not show that your act of betrayal is morally justified. Just as little would the fact that a believer benefits in some specific way from holding an unsupported belief (by feeling joy or consolation, or by succeeding in his projects) show that belief to be morally justified.¹⁰

Sometimes beliefs on insufficient evidence are defended on the grounds that they make the believer a morally better person. But what is the evidence for this? Does religious belief in general make people better? (Often enough, people who make such a claim simply take the question-begging and dishonest Jamesian line of treating it as one of the affirmations of religion, for which therefore no evidence is necessary.) But if we ask seriously and honestly whether religion makes people better, this turns out to be very hard to say, partly because there is considerable controversy about what counts as a good person, and partly for other reasons. There is empirical evidence, however, that criminal behavior is *not* negatively correlated with religious belief.¹¹

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that *some* religious people are, on the whole, very good people, and often these people themselves think that their religious faith contributes to whatever moral virtue they possess. But there is also massive anecdotal evidence that *other* religious people are not good people at all, yet they too usually believe they are good, and that their religious beliefs make them good. So the former group, who are good, might be mistaken in believing that religious belief makes them good, just as the latter group, who are not good, are mistaken in thinking both that they are good and that religious belief makes them good. In both cases, both the religious belief and the belief that religious belief makes

¹⁰ It is quite possible, of course, to imagine cases in which the benefit of violating the evidentialist principle is not supposed to go to the violator but to others. And it is equally possible to imagine cases where the motive for violating the principle is not self-interest but some generous or otherwise laudable motive. But people can have laudable motives for doing blamable actions, and the actions can be blamable nonetheless. And not just any means is permissible to reach a state of affairs, even if the state of affairs is good, and something a good person would want to bring about. If we have very general and very powerful moral reasons, of both a self-regarding and an other-regarding character, for adhering to the evidentialist principle—as I will argue later that we do—then it is merely a corrupt way of thinking that tries to tempt us to violate the principle by pointing to the good that can be obtained, or the evil averted, by violating it. This is a point that can be made equally well by a consequentialist and a non-consequentialist moral theorist, as long as the consequentialist understands the powerful reasons (which for him are consequentialist ones) for following the moral principle in question. It is a general human failing to rationalize the violation of important moral principles by magnifying the importance of some immediate good to be obtained or evil to be averted. And people make moral judgments all the time that are bad and corrupt when they think that the desirableness of some immediate end outweighs the importance of some principle of honesty or integrity. But as John Stuart Mill points out, a thinking utilitarian is no more susceptible to this failing than anyone else (see Mill (1979), pp. 22–23, 25). It should not be thought that consequentialist theories can be criticized by charging them with a tendency to reason in such corrupt ways, or, conversely, that such corrupt reasoning can be defended by subscribing to a consequentialist moral theory. But the basic point, which is valid generally of all moral principles, was stated quite precisely by St. Paul when he condemns “doing evil that good may come” (Romans 3:8).

¹¹ See Argyle (1958), pp. 90–99.

them good seem to belong to the class of evidentially unjustified religious beliefs, rather than counting as beliefs for which there is good evidence.

Some argue, however, that it is not a question of the actual effect of religious belief. The point, they say, is rather that without evidentially unsupported beliefs, you would not have any *reason* to be good, and it's to give yourself such a reason that you ought to hold those beliefs. For instance, they hold that the belief that there is a real difference between good and evil, or the belief that there is some powerful cosmic force co-operating with our efforts for good and opposing the forces of evil, is required to motivate us to do right and avoid doing wrong. Their claim is that if we did not hold these epistemically unjustified beliefs, we would have no reason to care about morality at all, but would be justified instead in taking the selfish and unprincipled course in everything we do. To put it bluntly, those who think this way have to believe that based on a rational assessment of the evidence, being honest and kind is only for fools and suckers and the only rational course of life is that of an unprincipled sociopath. But I submit that if that's how you see the world, then I you are already a person of very bad moral character, since this is not how a morally decent person could possibly see the world. Moreover, I don't think your attempts at dishonest self-manipulation, through professing beliefs you know lack evidential support, are likely to do much to improve your bad character.¹²

More often, I think people who argue this way are thinking of themselves (perhaps rightly, and with admirable candor) as susceptible at times to this corrupt view of the world, even though when things appear from the standpoint of the better side of their character, they do not truly think that dishonesty and selfishness are the only rational way to live. They think they need unjustified beliefs in order to have something to say to themselves when their bad side is in danger of gaining the upper hand over their good side. But I submit that their bad side is not likely to be fooled by such transparent attempts at self-deception, and their good side stands in no need of them. I suspect that what attaches them to the beliefs in question is not their moral effects at all, but various motives of wishful thinking, habit and self-complacency which, seen for what they are, belong to their bad side and not to their good side at all.

Obviously good consequences of any kind cannot provide a justification for violating a principle whose validity is not based on its conduciveness to good consequences. Even for a moral consequentialist, however, merely to pointing to some good consequences is not enough to justify anything. It would have to be shown that the consequences are on the whole better than those of any alternative. If we remain neutral for now between consequentialist and non-consequentialist moral theories, it still holds true in general that citing the good consequences of holding a belief on insufficient evidence could provide a moral justification for the belief only if these consequences constitute a moral reason that is not outweighed by moral reasons, whether based on consequences or on something else, that count against holding the belief. This point leads directly to the next topic I want to take up, namely, the grounds for the evidentialist principle.

Grounds for the evidentialist principle

The evidentialist principle seems morally compelling both on self-regarding and on other-regarding grounds. Each type of ground opens up a broad field in moral theory, and it will

¹² As David Hume put it: "The smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on men's conduct than the most pompous views suggested by theological theories and systems." See [Hume \(1970\)](#), p. 115.

be impossible to do justice to either in the short time remaining at my disposal here. But I'll do my best.

Self-regarding grounds

Under this heading, I start from the idea that each of us has good reason to regard ourselves as having a certain value, a value entitling us to self-respect. This is what Kant meant in saying that humanity in my own person is an end in itself; and what Mill meant in speaking of the sense of dignity that belongs to the good of every human being.¹³ Our own dignity makes moral demands on us of various kinds, requiring us to stand up for our rights, and not to adopt a servile stance in relation to others, even when we might be safer or more comfortable if we let them degrade us. Our dignity also makes demands on the way we think of and behave toward ourselves. We violate it when we are dishonest with ourselves, or let ourselves fall prey to patterns of thinking and habits of mind that express self-contempt.

One such pattern is letting others do our thinking for us. Of course it is quite all right and even required by the evidentialist principle, to listen to others, acquiring evidence and arguments from them and letting ourselves be rationally convinced by it. It is also sometimes reasonable to defer to others who know more than we do, letting their informed opinions count as evidence. Kant got it right when he said that the ideal is to think *for* ourselves, but *from the standpoint* of everyone else, and to think consistently.¹⁴ But it is something entirely different from this when we defer to authorities about certain matters simply as a way of finding some semblance of mental security in the face of the uncomfortable fact that here no one really has good evidence for what they believe. Then our conduct amounts to cowardly irresponsibility, servility and slavishness of mind. In effect, to do this is to lie to yourself, treating as evidence something you know is not evidence. Such faith in authority is therefore always bad faith.¹⁵

Beliefs held on insufficient evidence require one or another among certain kinds of psychic mechanisms to sustain them, and these mechanisms display patterns of dishonesty and self-contempt. One mechanism is wishful thinking—holding a belief because you wish it were true and because it therefore brings you pleasure or comfort to believe it is true. It is cowardly and contemptible not to face the facts, which also means facing up to what the evidence says the facts probably are. It is also cowardly and contemptible not to face up to one's own limitations regarding your ability to know what the facts are. Self-honesty and self-respect require that you be able to endure being uncertain where knowledge or justified belief is not possible. We naturally wish we knew many things we can't know—such as what (if anything) becomes of us after we die, or whether there is a benevolent power secretly watching over us, or perhaps the ultimate fate, after we are gone, of some great historical cause to which we have devoted ourselves. It is depressing and frightening to realize that you can never know these things; it is pleasant and consoling to have a belief about them (especially a belief whose content is pleasant and consoling, such as that there is a beneficent Providence and a reward in Heaven, and that good—as it pleases you to define it—will

¹³ See Mill (1979), p. 9.

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Ak 5:294–295; *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Standpoint*, Ak 7:200, 228–229; *Logic* Ak 9:57.

¹⁵ More generally, there is dishonesty wherever critical judgment is called for and we don't exercise it. 'Hypocrisy' means (etymologically), 'not enough judgment.' Not every failure to exercise critical judgment is literally hypocritical, but a dishonesty always attaches to it that puts it in the moral vicinity of hypocrisy.

ultimately triumph over evil). But to hoodwink yourself into such beliefs is to sell yourself short. You should be ashamed to deal with your human predicament in this cowardly way.

A different pattern of misconduct, though easily combinable with wishful thinking, involves social conformity, the imitation of those around you and the desire to gain, or keep, their approval, or at least to avoid their wrath and contempt. This leads people to defer to others when they should not, and it is often easy to do because self-deception can represent it as a case of listening respectfully to their thoughts or even as believing according to the best evidence. Honest and critical people, however, know the difference and attend carefully to it. Another powerful pattern of thinking that sustains evidentially unsupported beliefs is one that combines something like wishful thinking with something like social conformity. This is where you believe something because believing it constitutes conformity to some image of yourself that you want to have. A faithful Christian believes the Bible, a patriotic American believes America has never fought an unjust war, a good communist believes the victory of the proletariat is inevitable. If there is evidence that suggests otherwise, the faithful Christian, the patriot or the devoted revolutionary dismisses it—saying that it's only the propaganda of unbelievers, or traitors, or capitalist reptiles.¹⁶ Yet whatever lofty or advantageous image of myself (as Christian or patriot or communist) I may sustain or live up to by holding beliefs in this way, one image of myself I would not be entitled to sustain is that of a fundamentally honest and self-respecting human being.

Self-respect imposes on us the duty to direct our lives in accordance with our rational capacities. When it comes to belief, our chief capacity is the ability to weigh the evidence and apportion our belief to it. Letting wishes or social conformity or self-deceptive aspirations to self-approval interfere with the exercise of this capacity is an abdication of our responsibility to govern our own lives through our own reason, and displays a lack of the respect we owe ourselves as autonomous beings with human dignity.

One indication of the truth of what I am saying is that exhortations to self-blame, self-contempt, and self-despair are prominent among the arguments given, especially in religious contexts, for holding beliefs on insufficient evidence. Basic to a certain kind of unhealthy religious temper is the insistence that doubting the dogmas of faith, or even inquiring critically into the evidence for them, constitutes sinful haughtiness against God, displaying the reprobate's proud closed-mindedness against the Truth. This last charge nicely turns things topsy-turvy, representing closed-minded dogmatism as open-mindedness, and openness to the evidence as turning your back on the truth. One could hardly ask for clearer testimony that self-respect demands free inquiry and the rational weighing of evidence and that the only way to sustain beliefs disproportionate to the evidence is to regard one's rational faculties with self-contempt.

Dishonesty with yourself about moral questions is perhaps the most fundamental possible violation of any duty of self-respect. It is not possible to violate the evidentialist principle, however, without falling into some form of self-deception. For there is a non-accidental, even a conceptual, connection between believing something and assessing the evidence for it, so that sustaining such a belief necessarily involves either a policy of misinterpreting or failing to attend to the evidence, or a policy of distracting oneself from the connection between belief and evidence. Even the conceptual connection between believing and assessing evidence can be a device for rationalizing the kinds of self-deceptions that make possible violations of the evidentialist principle. I have heard people argue, for instance, that it cannot be possible to

¹⁶ The openly vicious (but hardly uncommon) version of this pattern is believing something because it serves your own self-interest to believe it—as when the CEO of a logging or mining company believes that what is most profitable is also environmentally friendly, and dismisses contrary evidence as merely the misguided ravings of a few pointy-headed academics and wigged-out tree-huggers.

violate the evidentialist principle, or even possible to want to, since to violate it one must hold a belief one sees is unsupported by the evidence—which (so the argument goes) is a conceptual impossibility. When it is then pointed out that human self-deception makes this not only a conceptual possibility but even a quite common occurrence, the next move made by the self-deceiver is to say that self-deception necessarily operates unconsciously, hence involuntarily, so that even if violations of the evidentialist principle do occur, no one could possibly be blamed for them. On the one hand, philosophers argue that the evidentialist principle is impossible to violate, and then on the other, that its violation could not possibly be voluntary, or therefore anything for which people could be blamed.

Faced with arguments of this sort, I do not know whether to respond with outrage or laughter. Of course people have motives for self-deceptively exploiting what looseness there is in the conceptual connection between belief and assessment of evidence to violate the evidentialist principle. And they do it all the time. And although there may be some cases in which a person's mind is so profoundly disrupted that they are unable to rid themselves of their self-deceptions, there are also a great many cases where self-deception is blamable because it would be avoidable by anyone who had a little courage and undertook the simple resolve to be honest with himself. When a person is caught red-handed doing something wrong, two of the shabbiest and commonest alibis they offer are: (1) "I couldn't possibly have done it, because I couldn't even have had a motive for doing it" and (2) "I might have done it, but if so, I couldn't help it." Who can fail to see that the two sophistical arguments just rehearsed fit precisely these two patterns?

Other-regarding grounds

Perhaps even stronger grounds for duty to believe according to the evidence come from this source. As I mentioned earlier, Clifford tells the story of a ship owner who has grounds to question the seaworthiness of an old vessel he is about to send out with many emigrant families on board. Instead of putting himself to the expense of having the ship refitted or even inspected, he overcomes his melancholy doubts by reflecting on the many voyages the ship has returned from safely, and by trusting in Providence to protect all those poor people. He watches the ship's departure with a light heart and good wishes for all those on board. Then when, like himself, Providence apparently also looks the other way, he collects his insurance money when the ship goes down in mid-ocean with all hands and tells no tales.¹⁷

In his famous essay "The Will to Believe," William James defends the thesis that we have "a right to believe, at our own risk, any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will,"¹⁸ whether there is evidence for it or not. In this formulation, James tosses out the phrase "at our own risk" rather casually, as though it were obvious that the beliefs he has in mind concern only the believer's own interests and welfare, and could never put anyone else at risk of harm. But is that true?

Obviously not every belief on insufficient evidence does as much harm to others as the ship owner's self-serving belief in Clifford's example. But any belief that is important to us and likely to have a significant effect on our lives and actions is also likely to have an impact on the well-being of others. To adopt a set of religious beliefs, for instance, is often to adopt an entire way of life. Some possible ways for me to live are good for others, and some are bad for them. Many religions encourage attitudes that are backward, unenlightened, repressive,

¹⁷ See Clifford (1999), p. 70.

¹⁸ James, *op. cit.* p. 733.

authoritarian. The adherents of one religion frequently hate and persecute the adherents of others. Some religions believe in proselytizing and even in even forcibly converting others to their faith. Elijah's religious beliefs obviously put the Baal worshippers at risk, and we obviously put others at some risk by adopting any religious faith with a determinate content. So if James's principle is really that we are morally permitted to adopt a belief irrespective of the evidence only when we do so solely at our own risk, then it is not clear that the permission he is defending would apply to any significant beliefs at all.

James distracts us from all this in "The Will to Believe" by giving voice only to a set of religious convictions that are so empty and insipid that they could not possibly do much harm (or, for that matter, much good). No doubt, as we have already observed, most religious people feel that their beliefs are good for the world, but that feeling, as we have seen, is part of their religious belief itself, which, if that belief is not supported by evidence, renders it question-begging as a defense of the belief's supposed other-regarding virtues.

No doubt it is sometimes possible in retrospect to conclude that religious beliefs which we regard as unsupported or even irrational played an important role in achieving good results. For instance, it is true that John Brown and many other passionate abolitionists were partisans of certain Protestant sectarian views about the imminent second coming of Christ, which led them to regard purging the world of the sin of slavery as a divinely ordained preparation for the end-time. History, as we know, is full of such ironies. But it is an entirely different matter to suppose we ourselves could be justified in seeing some comforting or inspiring but evidentially unsupported belief of our own as necessarily leading to beneficial results for the world. That is simply a dangerous pattern of self-deception, all too common among misguided fanatics of both the religious and non-religious variety, whose evidentially unsupported beliefs usually include some historical narrative, flattering to themselves, their world-view and their aims, whose triumphant conclusion lies out there in a brightly glowing but still hazy future. Isn't it obvious that when we let ourselves believe something because it is pleasant to believe it, irrespective of the evidence, we will also find it easy to persuade ourselves that what is pleasant to believe is also beneficial to believe, irrespective of whether there is any evidence that our beliefs are beneficial? It obviously poses a danger to others all by itself that we let ourselves fall into a state in which we are subject to illusions about the goodness or badness of our conduct.

In general we owe it to others, simply as fellow human beings and partners in the collective rational search for truth, to offer them, in the give and take of communication, what is best of ourselves and our unique perspective. It is our duty not to let our self-interest and self-deception, or our personal wishes and psychological needs take precedence over the evidence in forming the beliefs that shape our communication toward others and our actions that bear on their well-being. It is not controversial that we have duties of this kind in special cases, where vital human interests are at stake and where we are specifically charged with some special responsibility for taking care of those interests. If physicians, or the food and drug administration, or building inspectors allowed their personal wishes, emotional needs or self-interest to take the place of hard evidence in determining the matters for which they have responsibility, such 'faith-based' judgments would constitute criminal conduct on their part. The general moral duty toward others to form one's beliefs according to the evidence, along with moral duties in general, has to be left to the conscience of individuals; it would be an infringement of individual freedom to subject it to coercion. But there is no reason to think that this duty is less real on that account.

We see clear evidence of the violation of the duty to believe according to the evidence, and of the harm it can do, in the conduct of the American and British governments right now. Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector in Iraq, has declared that the US-British decision

to go to war there was based on a clear failure to judge critically the state of the evidence for the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. He has compared their conduct to that of people in past centuries who engaged in witch hunts: because they wanted to believe the evil was there, they did believe it. Anything they could interpret as evidence for this belief, they did so interpret, while they ignored all the evidence against their belief.¹⁹ Richard A. Clarke, for years the chief anti-terrorism expert in the Clinton and then the Bush administrations, reported that the administration wanted so badly to believe there was a connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda that they repeatedly asked him to find evidence for this, and simply would not accept the fact that the evidence gathered over a period of years justified precisely the contrary belief, that there never was such a connection.²⁰ Even now these regimes still justify their actions by ignoring the chaos, the civil strife, the overwhelming sentiment of Iraqis that their occupation should end immediately, together with their own crimes and abuses that give rise to that sentiment, and then they mark every event they can—an election, however dubious the process or unhelpful the result, or the formation of even the weakest puppet government—as a “turning point” providing them with a new pretext to gesture hopefully toward an imagined future Iraq, a grateful and friendly ally of the West, a land of democracy (and of course, rapaciously free enterprise, prominently including US corporations) which their war will have ushered into existence. Most of the disasters perpetrated on the human race by failed rulers fanatical tyrants and misguided revolutionaries were, I suggest, motivated by such hopeful beliefs, contrary to the evidence, in propositions framed in the future perfect tense.²¹

It always helps us to appreciate the importance of a moral principle when its violation leads to bad or demented actions with disastrous consequences on the part of those who wield great power. But in fact I do not think that what is worst about violating the duty to believe according to the evidence, from an other-regarding point of view, is to be found in the spectacular misdeeds that may result from people's allowing their beliefs to be formed in disregard of the evidence. Still worse, in my opinion, is the way that the custom of condoning violations of the evidentialist principle subtly corrupts the process of social communication in general. When people associate on the basis of a common search for truth, grounded on objective evidence, they are free beings associating on terms presupposing mutual respect and reinforcing it. When it is assumed that what we believe is determined solely by prejudice or emotional need, the only true basis for mutual respect between people disappears: the human race is suddenly partitioned, by forces of unreason, into two opposed groups: those who happen to believe as I do, and those who happen not to, the elect and the reprobate, the slaves of God and the slaves of evil.

One prominent syndrome here is the constellation of religious views (in a variety of traditions, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu) commonly called ‘fundamentalism.’ Every

¹⁹ Blix said this in an interview with Jim Lehrer on the Newshour, March 17, 2004. See [Blix \(2004\)](#).

²⁰ Clarke made these assertions on *60 Minutes*, March 21, 2004. See [Clarke \(2004\)](#).

²¹ In his book, *The President of Good and Evil*, Peter Singer has brought a broader and deeper indictment of the same kind against G. W. Bush himself, arguing that the moral and religious commitments on which the President prides himself actually involve a habit, characteristic of some forms of religious belief, though obviously not all, of believing things not because there is evidence that they are true, but because you have decided independently of the evidence to believe what it seems to you would be believed by the kind of person you want to be, the kind of person you consider morally upright and religiously devout. See [Singer \(2004\)](#), see especially pp. 96–104. The current American regime's disastrous errors in foreign policy and its contemptuous treatment of science (on a wide variety of topics, from stem cell research to global warming to the scientific value of the Hubble telescope) are only some of the ways in which our nation and the world are paying a heavy price for the President's system of moral and religious values, which apparently countenance an irresponsible deficiency in critical thinking and an arrogant, willful neglect of the duty to believe according to the evidence.

fundamentalism is a superstition that has lost its innocence, turning dishonestly against critical reason while portraying itself as a only an innocent continuation religious devotion uncorrupted by critical reflection. But toothpaste can't be squeezed back into the tube, and pre-modern forms of life cannot be preserved by rejecting the critical thinking of modernity that has exposed and discredited them. The only result of trying to do this is to transform religion into a conspicuous form of that corrupt mendacity which has always been the darkest side of modernity. Another syndrome resulting from the pervasive and generally accepted violation of the evidentialist principle might be described as 'deconstructive' or 'post-modern': critical reflection comes to take only a single, cynical, universally corrosive form, in which all speech and communication come to be regarded as humbug, hype, spin, propaganda, rhetoric and bullshit. The belief that there might be such a thing as truth and honesty in human affairs, or even the mere desire or the taste for them, comes to be regarded as hopelessly naïve, if not downright pernicious. The result of these two syndromes taken together would be that the only options left are cynicism and fanaticism: the only people who have any convictions at all would be those whose convictions are irresponsible and dangerous. Isn't that nightmare scenario all too close to where we are right now?

The difficulty of the duty to believe according to the evidence

No doubt illusion, evasion, prevarication, self-deception are an ineradicable part of the mental life of human beings. In cultures based on unreflective consensus, authority and tradition, in which neither critical thinking nor corrosive cynicism have yet to take hold, they are so deeply woven into the way people think that they can even operate with a kind of charming innocence. But there's something funny about innocence: it is a beautiful thing, but its beauty can be appreciated only by those who have lost it. The attempt to revert to it, or even to preserve it, is therefore never innocent; it is always not merely futile, but also self-deceptive and positively corrupt. This is just what I mean in saying that every fundamentalism is a superstition that has lost its innocence. The only honest option for lovers of innocence is to accept that their love for it simply proves that they have lost it forever, and that their only task now is to face up to the uncanny and abysmal challenge of making some kind of new life for themselves in the bleak, comfortless territory east of Eden that we call the human condition.

As people become less innocent and more sophisticated, they acquire the capacity for critical thinking, but at the same time their loss of innocence means that their capacity to subvert their own intellectual integrity also increases. An increase in civilization, as Rousseau noted, goes hand in hand with an increase in the devices through which people evade the truth. For these reasons, no one should think that the duty to believe according to the evidence is easy to fulfill. It is probably a duty no one fulfills perfectly, and we may be at greatest danger of violating it when we become most confident that we are fulfilling it. This is perhaps why some philosophers who are clearly aware of the evidentialist principle, such as Hume and Freud, tend to moderate their condemnation of its violation by regarding it with a bemused or weary condescension. It might also tempt us to think that this duty is better conceived as what Kant would call a 'wide' or 'meritorious' duty than as a strict or owed duty: In other words, we should have an esteem for those whose beliefs adhere to the evidence which we do not have for those who give in to less admirable motives in believing, but not really blame those who allow wish-fulfillment or other irrational factors to influence their beliefs. But to me the violating of this duty is too much like culpable lying for that to be an acceptable option. That comparison, however, might suggest that this duty, like the duty not to lie, if it is considered a strict duty, is also one that admits of exceptions—perhaps that religious beliefs

are an exception to it, analogous to exceptions to the prohibition on lying in the case of the would-be murderer who asks you the whereabouts of his intended victim. The problem with this is that there simply are no analogous cases. There are no matters in which letting factors other than the evidence influence our beliefs do not violate both our self-respect and to the legitimate claims our fellow human beings make on us as rational beings.

It is an important truth in moral theory that human life is sufficiently complex that no moral principle formulated simply enough to be useful can be guaranteed free of exceptions. So I would not claim about the evidentialist principle that no conceivable exception to it could ever be found. But it is also true that people have a deplorable tendency to use the general truth that moral rules admit of exceptions as a pretext for making exceptions when they should not. It is highly suspicious, therefore, that as soon as one admits the bare possibility of exceptions to the evidentialist principle, people are eager to transform this admission into the suggestion that the evidentialist principle should not be considered binding on us at all. For this reason, it is important also to state that the duty to believe according to the evidence seems as close to an exceptionless duty one could imagine. No doubt we should take a tolerant rather than a harsh attitude toward the violation of the evidentialist principle by others, as we should of moral faults generally, at least in those cases where the fault is minor or involves no direct harm to anyone else. Nevertheless, it is not something we should ever approve or condone.

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The virtues of belief: toward a non-evidentialist ethics of belief-formation

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Abstract William Kingdon Clifford famously argued that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” His ethics of belief can be construed as involving two distinct theses—a moral claim (that *it is wrong to hold beliefs to which one is not entitled*) and an epistemological claim (that *entitlement is always a function of evidential support*). Although I reject the (universality of the) epistemological claim, I argue that something deserving of the name *ethics of belief* can nevertheless be preserved. However, in the second half of the paper I argue that Clifford’s response to the problem of unethical belief is insufficiently attentive to the role played by self-deception in the formation of unethical beliefs. By contrasting the first-person perspective of a doxastic agent with the third-person perspective of an outside observer, I argue that unethical belief is a symptom of deficiencies of character: fix these, and belief will fix itself. I suggest that the moral intuitions implicit in our response to examples of unethical belief (like Clifford’s famous example of the ship owner) can better be accounted for in terms of a non-evidentialist virtue ethics of belief-formation, and that such an account can survive the rejection of strong versions of doxastic voluntarism.

Keywords Ethics of belief · Clifford · Evidentialism · Virtue ethics · Belief-formation · Self-deception · Doxastic voluntarism

It is as easy to close the eyes of the mind as those of the body: and the former is more frequently done with willfulness, and yet not attended to, than the latter; the actions of the mind being more quick and transient, than those of the senses.

Joseph Butler, “Upon Self-Deceit” (1726)

On a warm evening in May 2003, approximately 100 undocumented immigrants were loaded into a refrigeration tractor-trailer in south Texas: the driver had been paid \$7,500 to

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smuggle his human cargo past a U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint. But temperatures began to rise inside the sealed trailer, and humidity quickly reached 100 percent — the point at which the human body can no longer cool itself by perspiring and begins to overheat. By the time the driver stopped and unlocked the trailer, 17 passengers were dead, and another two expired after being taken to a nearby hospital. Prosecutors argued that the driver “ignored screaming and banging from inside the trailer,” but his defense attorney “said his client did not know how many people were inside,” and that “the pleas for help were in Spanish,” which the driver did not understand (Rice and George 2006, p. 1). He simply did not believe that anything was wrong and so—it was claimed—bore no responsibility for the deaths of his passengers.

This tragic account is disturbingly similar to the story with which William K. Clifford began his famous 1876 essay, “The Ethics of Belief.” In Clifford’s example—based loosely, we may surmise, on the realities of his own time¹—the owner of a sailing ship is preparing to send it out with a cargo of emigrants bound for a new home across the sea. The ship is old, and its owner has doubts about its seaworthiness. “He thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him at great expense” (Clifford 1886, p. 339). However, he succeeds in suppressing these doubts, reasoning that all would be well, as it had, after all, in the past. Thus, Clifford tells us, “he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales” (p. 339).

In December 2006, the driver of the tractor-trailer was convicted on 58 federal smuggling counts, and in January 2007 he was sentenced to life in prison. The jury concluded that if he was in fact ignorant of the plight of his passengers, he was culpably so. Believing that everything was alright did not excuse him of responsibility for what happened, because the beliefs on which he acted (or which nourished his inaction)—even if sincere—were not ones to which he was rationally entitled. Clifford would have agreed. Referring to the ship owner, he wrote: “What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because *he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him*” (pp. 339–340). Not only do the beliefs of the driver and the ship owner not absolve them of responsibility, insofar as they were arrived at in the wrong way they constitute positive grounds for guilt.

Would the owner have been innocent if his ship had successfully made the crossing? Would the truck driver have been blameless if, by some fortunate turn of events, his passengers had survived their journey north? The answer, according to Clifford, is *no*: the rightness or wrongness of a belief is a function of how it was arrived at, not of whether or not it happens to be true. If it was arrived at dishonestly, it is wrong, even if it happens in the event to be true. The ship owner and the driver would still have been guilty even if their passengers had survived. “They would not be innocent, they would only be not found out” (p. 341). The reason for their guilt is that they did not form their beliefs in the appropriate way. Instead of dispassionately considering the evidence, they suppressed whatever doubts and reservations they might naturally have had and acted with reckless disregard for the consequences of being wrong. Their convictions, even if sincere, were come by carelessly and self-servingly.

According to Clifford, it is a “universal duty” to question “all that we believe.” To be sure, many of our beliefs are acquired by initiation into the culture, rather than through first-hand experience. However, “the main purpose of the tradition itself is to supply us with the means

¹ In the same year that Clifford penned his essay, the British Parliament passed the Merchant Shipping Act, which required load lines on ships. The law was the result of a vigorous campaign by M.P. Samuel Plimsoll, who called attention to the hazards of overloaded, unseaworthy, and heavily insured “coffin ships.”

of asking questions, of testing and inquiring into things” (p. 355). It is not by treating the received wisdom of earlier generations as sacrosanct, but by subjecting it to rigorous and patient examination that we pay appropriate respect to the past. To fail in this charge is to deplete the cultural resources on which posterity will in turn rely. For our culture is “an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handed on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork” (pp. 342–343).

Clifford was not the first philosopher to suggest that belief ought to be proportioned to the evidence, but he gave clear and forceful expression to that intuition when he famously concluded that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (p. 346). Notice that Clifford does not say that it is *irrational* to believe on insufficient evidence—that would be tautologous (assuming “insufficient” means “not sufficient to establish rational entitlement”)—but that it is *wrong*. Here “wrong” is meant in a moral sense—hence the essay’s title. This moral dimension is a result of the fact that belief is not a purely private matter, or one that can be partitioned off from other aspects of life: one’s beliefs have consequences for others, as well as for oneself. Those who know Clifford primarily as the foil (“that delicious *enfant terrible*” (James 1956 [1897], p. 8)²) in William James’s essay “The Will to Believe” may be surprised to find that his ethics of belief is in fact premised upon a claim which is consistent with (and indeed anticipates) James’s own pragmatic conception of belief—namely, that nothing is worthy of being called a *belief* “which has not some influence upon the actions of him who holds it” (Clifford 1886, p. 342). Clifford colorfully captures something of this internal relation between belief and practice when he observes that “[h]e who truly believes that which prompts him to an action has looked upon the action to lust after it, he has committed it already in his heart” (p. 342). Moreover, Clifford suggests that consistent neglect of one’s epistemic obligations corrupts a person’s own character, rendering one unfit to contribute positively to the creation of “the world in which posterity will live” (p. 343).

Clifford was nothing if not a vivid and dramatic writer, and his critics have often maintained that he overstates the case for an ethics of belief. In “The Will to Believe,” for example, James complained of the excessive “pathos” in Clifford’s voice (James 1956 [1897], p. 8), and more recently (and caustically) Richard Gale has suggested that “for maximum effect,” portions of Clifford’s essay “should be read aloud while ‘Pomp and Circumstance’ is played in the background” (Gale 1993, p. 355). But while it is true, as I will try to show, that Clifford overstates his case, I think it would also be a mistake—a worse one—to overstate the case *against* an ethics of belief.

Clifford’s ethics of belief can, I suggest, helpfully be construed as entailing two independent, substantive claims—a moral claim and an epistemological claim. The moral claim is that *it is wrong to hold beliefs to which one is not (epistemically) entitled*, and the epistemological claim is that *entitlement is a function of evidential support*. If one likes, these can be treated as premises to which Clifford’s principle that it is wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence—sometimes called the “evidentialist principle”—is the conclusion (though that is not how Clifford himself presents the case). So construed, it is clear that the evidentialist principle can be challenged in more than one way, along either of two distinct axes. Although most philosophical challenges to the evidentialist principle center on the epistemological claim, the moral claim is arguably the centerpiece of any ethics of belief and deserves to be evaluated on its own merits. In what follows, I will consider each of these

² James was in fact only three years older than Clifford. Note too that Clifford died in 1879, nearly two decades before the publication of “The Will to Believe.”

theses in turn, beginning with the epistemological claim. I will try to show that this claim is problematic—at least if conceived in the general way required by Clifford’s conclusion—but that something deserving of the name *ethics of belief* can nevertheless be preserved, even if its demands cannot properly be expressed in quite the way Clifford imagined. The paper concludes with some reflections on the application to belief-formation of virtue ethics.

Evidence and entitlement: the epistemological claim

Sometimes one says “I believe ...” in order to express uncertainty, as in, “I believe I love you”—an expression unlikely to elicit much (positive) passion. However, the beliefs with which Clifford is concerned are expressions of commitment rather than doubt. The epistemological claim from which the evidentialist principle derives its name is that in order to be entitled to such a belief, one must have evidence for it. In many cases, this is clearly true. However, the evidentialist principle (which purports to apply “always, everywhere, and [to] everyone”) requires that it be true universally, and it is this to which various objections can be raised. To be sure, the epistemological claim does not presume to tell us *how much* or *what kind* of evidence is needed in any given case, but it does seem to assume that it is necessarily on the question of evidential support that entitlement will turn.

Many of our beliefs are of course acquired through education and enculturation, rather than on the basis of an independent assessment of the evidence. I believe, for example, that the distance between the earth and the sun is roughly 92 million miles, in spite of the fact that I have not done the measurements and calculations for myself. If pressed for the grounds of my belief, I might defer to someone I have reason to regard as an authority on the subject. Such a person, I believe, has evidence for the belief in question, and insofar as I am entitled to rely on her expertise, I am entitled to my belief. In any case, it is obvious enough how I might go about examining the evidence for (or against) such a belief for myself, if I were so inclined. However, there are other beliefs for which this is not the case. In such contexts, it is not simply that we lack direct evidence—evidence that someone else might possess—but that we do not know what “evidence” could mean. Often, these beliefs are as certain as any we hold, and yet their certainty is due not to an overwhelming abundance of evidence, but to the fact that they frame the processes of inquiry within which the notion of “evidence” has its place.

G.E. Moore once gave a famous lecture at the Aristotelian Society in which he held his hands up in the air to show that there was something he knew with certainty—namely, that he had two hands. What might it be like to doubt that one has two hands? Perhaps I have recently regained consciousness in a hospital bed and am distressed to discover that my arms are wrapped in bandages. Those were not, of course, the circumstances in which Moore found himself, or the sort of doubt with which he was concerned: his hands were visible for all to see, and he intended his demonstration as a refutation of skepticism about the external world. But Moore’s claim to know that he had two hands is surely a curious one, even by the permissive standards of academic philosophy. Ordinarily, one who claims to know something can be asked *how* he or she knows it. But as Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out, “My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it” (Wittgenstein 1969, §250).

In *On Certainty*, his last work, Wittgenstein argues that there is a class of beliefs—or at any rate a loose agglomeration of belief-like commitments—to which one can be entitled without evidence or positive justification. To attribute such a belief is to attribute *prima facie*

entitlement to it. Of such a claim it may be said that “the grounds that [one] can give are no surer than [the] assertion” itself (§243). Consider the following examples, selected more or less at random from among the many he discusses: “The earth has existed for more than five minutes”; “Motor cars don’t grow out of the earth”; “ $12 \times 12 = 144$ ”; “My name is Ludwig Wittgenstein.” It seems clear that these propositions have little in common besides their being, in certain contexts, set apart from doubt. Some of them, such as “ $12 \times 12 = 144$,” are of the sort that no one who understood arithmetic could reasonably doubt. Others, such as “My name is Ludwig Wittgenstein,” seem to be certain only within much more limited contexts, such as the context constituted by *being Wittgenstein*.

Wittgenstein argues that what makes all of these propositions “certain” is not their incorrigibility or self-evidence when regarded in the abstract, or the sincerity of those who believe them, but the central role they play in particular contexts of life — contexts which one may or may not happen to occupy. “What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it” (§144). It functions like a hinge on which other things turn, an axis around which they revolve.

Wittgenstein’s conclusion—that there are certain things we *do* not doubt—may superficially resemble Moore’s conclusion—that there are certain things we *cannot* doubt—but in fact it represents a radical reversal of direction. In claiming to know that he had two hands, Moore was participating in a long-standing philosophical tradition—namely, the search for foundations for belief that are not susceptible to doubt. Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* is the locus classicus, but the genre contains multitudes. The engine that drives this dogged quest is the assumption that all of one’s beliefs are guilty until proven innocent—that we are obliged to refrain from holding these beliefs (or to give them up) unless we have adequate reasons for holding them. But since the demand for evidence, if relentlessly pursued downwards, threatens to give rise to a classic regress problem in which one’s entitlement to a belief is indefinitely deferred, it is thought that what we need are some foundational certainties on which to build.

In contrast to Moore, Wittgenstein does not offer such certainties; he denies that we need them. What he challenges is the assumption that all of our beliefs are guilty until proven innocent. His point is not that the beliefs he discusses are immune from doubt or that they cannot be challenged. Under appropriate circumstances (such as waking up in a hospital bed), they can. In such cases, however, it is our doubts, rather than our convictions, that stand in need of justification. Doubt is not the epistemological default position, in the face of which every positive belief requires evidence. Rather, without appropriate grounds doubt can itself be irrational, and until doubts arise, we are within our rights to believe. Robert Brandom calls this the “default-and-challenge” structure of entitlement.³

We do not as a matter of fact demand evidence for everything, but this is not because it would be overly tedious and time-consuming — a practical impossibility (though it is certainly that). Nor is it a result of intellectual complacency or an insufficiently critical acceptance of conventional patterns of thought. Rather, it is a condition of the possibility of attributing entitlement in the first place.⁴ Indeed, were it not for the fact that we regard many beliefs as innocent until proven guilty (as *prima facie* entitled commitments), rather than the other way around, the sort of critical questioning Clifford advocates could not so much as get off the ground. Wittgenstein writes, “All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation

³ See Brandom 1994, pp. 176ff.

⁴ Brandom writes, “Entitlement is, to begin with, a social status that a performance or commitment has within a community. Practices in which that status is attributed only upon actual vindication by appeal to inheritance from other commitments are simply unworkable; nothing recognizable as a game of giving and asking for reasons results if justifications are not permitted to come to an end” (Brandom 1994, p. 177).

of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument” (Wittgenstein 1969, §105).

Clifford’s evidentialist principle—that it is wrong to believe without evidence—is couched in terms of the guilty-until-proven-innocent paradigm of entitlement. The principle’s epistemological claim derives plausibility from the fact that there are indeed many cases in which the conferral of entitlement depends upon the possession of evidence. Wittgenstein — it is important to stress—does not deny this. However, he also helps us to see that the demand for evidence—indeed, the very notion of *evidence* itself—is intelligible only against a backdrop of much for which evidence is not required.⁵

Morality and entitlement: the moral claim

The epistemological points considered thus far constitute objections to the evidentialist principle that it is wrong to believe anything without sufficient evidence. However, they need not be viewed as objections to the ethics of belief per se. One way of preserving the ethics of belief would be to restate the evidentialist principle roughly as follows: it is wrong to believe anything without sufficient evidence, provided that it is the sort of belief for which evidence is required for entitlement. In other words, one could restrict the scope of the ethics. The drawback of this approach is that it suggests that beliefs for which the possession of evidence is not the appropriate criterion of entitlement fall outside the domain of ethical evaluation. Alternatively, we might want to think of the ethics of belief as primarily concerned with entitlement, rather than with any particular criterion of entitlement (like having evidence). One of the advantages of distinguishing between the epistemological and moral claims implicit in the evidentialist principle is that it allows us to strip away some of the epistemological assumptions in which the ethics of belief has historically been packaged without limiting the scope of the ethics itself.

Of course, whether the ethics of belief can be sustained without its evidentialist trappings will depend on the moral intuitions implicit in what I have called the moral claim. At this point, then, I would like to turn from a consideration of the epistemological claim that entitlement is always a function of evidential support to a consideration of the moral claim that it is wrong (always and everywhere) to believe anything to which one is not entitled.

Perhaps the objection with which the moral claim is most commonly met is that believing is not subject to the will and consequently cannot rightly be subjected to ethical evaluation. Now, I’m personally inclined to agree that our beliefs are not subject to direct voluntary control: we cannot simply choose, as if off a complete menu of options, any beliefs we like. (Let us call the view I reject *strong doxastic voluntarism*.) On the other hand, there are good reasons for thinking that believing is nevertheless subject to ethical evaluation—one of the best of these being the fact that we *do* hold one another accountable in this way. Even taking into account the epistemological points made earlier, it is, for instance, difficult to avoid the conclusion that the ship owner and the truck driver in our earlier examples acted immorally—that their beliefs in fact represented egregious violations of a critically important sort of obligation. So the question is: how do we make sense of this moral obligation, given that our beliefs are in large measure a function of our circumstances and not subject to our free choosing?

⁵ Raimond Gaita writes, “To oversimplify a little: the concept of sound judgment – as it is expressed in the ways things are ruled out of consideration – is partly constitutive of the boundaries within which concepts like evidence, common knowledge and authority mean what they do to us” (Gaita 2000, p. 161).

The answer, it seems to me, is that even if our beliefs are determined by our circumstances, we *can* exercise some control over—and so do bear some responsibility for—these circumstances. This is nicely illustrated in a sermon by Joseph Butler, the eighteenth-century Anglican bishop. Butler writes:

It is not uncommon for persons, who run out their fortunes, entirely to neglect looking into the state of their affairs, and this from a general knowledge that the condition of them is bad. These extravagant people are perpetually ruined before they themselves expected it: and they tell you for an excuse, and tell you truly, that they did not think they were so much in debt, or that their expenses so far exceeded their income. And yet no one will take this for an excuse, who is sensible that their ignorance of their particular circumstances was owing to their general knowledge of them; that is, their general knowledge that matters were not well with them, prevented their looking into particulars (Butler 1970 [1726], p. 96).

In other words, the beliefs on which these people acted were a function of their circumstances, and so they were genuinely surprised when they ran out of money, but we do not accept this as an excuse because they ought to have altered their circumstances. On this view, the ethical intuitions implicit in our moral response can survive the rejection of strong doxastic voluntarism. However, this way of locating the problem of unethical belief suggests that we might want to rethink traditional ways of addressing it.

Here I would like to introduce two more examples that are perhaps more ethically ambiguous, which I hope will spur us to think further about what it is that is so reprehensible about the belief-behavior of the driver and the ship owner. First, imagine the parents of a young soldier who has been posted to a dangerous, war-torn region. Their daughter writes them regularly, but one day the letters stop arriving, and soon the parents receive a visit from an officer who informs them that she has gone missing in action. More time passes, and everyone gives up hope—everyone, that is, except her parents, who believe that she is still alive. Friends try to reason with them, and professional counselors are brought in, but the parents cannot believe that she is dead. They do not hold a memorial service.

Here is the second example: a young man is arrested and accused of a crime, but his mother refuses to acknowledge that he is guilty. Evidence is brought forward, and he is convicted by a jury of his peers. However, his mother still believes that he is innocent. She says that she has known him much longer than anyone else has, and that he would never have committed such a terrible crime. He must have been framed, she concludes.

Both of these examples—like the ones we examined earlier—are presented in the third-person point of view. However much we might sympathize with the characters, we cannot place ourselves in their shoes, because the stories would then have to be told rather differently. It is essential to each story being what it is that we stand outside it, and it is from this external vantage point that we are invited to pass judgment. This is important, as I will try to show shortly. However, before we compare our vantage point as observers with that of the characters we are observing, I would like to compare these latter examples with the ones we examined earlier. The earlier examples—of the truck driver and the ship owner—seem fairly straightforward; but here, I suspect, our moral reactions are mixed.

Sometimes stories like these have unexpected, happy endings: soldiers return, and the falsely accused are exonerated. So hope isn't always unwarranted. But that isn't my point. Let us grant, for the sake of the argument, that the beliefs of the soldier's parents and the beliefs of the convict's mother are not beliefs to which they are entitled. The question I want to consider is whether, in holding them, these parents are behaving immorally. According

to the moral claim we are considering, the answer is *yes*. However, many people would, I suspect, want to disagree. They might point out that, unlike the ship owner and the truck driver, who were motivated (it might be concluded) by greed or self-interest, the parents in these examples are motivated by their love for their children, and that this is admirable. Even if I believe that their beliefs are just as irrational as those of the ship owner and the truck driver — indeed, even if I am certain that their beliefs are false—I might regard the parents as virtuous, or at least regard their irrationality as forgivable, because I admire their love and courage.

I don't claim that it is obvious that the parents in these examples are acting morally. It isn't. I do claim that it is not obvious that they are acting immorally, all things considered. What these examples go to show, I contend, is that, in the case of the sort of external evaluations we are presently considering, the situation is a good deal more complicated than we might otherwise imagine. As third-party observers in these cases we are obliged to weigh two rather different sorts of considerations against each other—two things that our earlier examples did not distinguish very clearly. Examples like these throw into relief the fact that our negative verdicts on the beliefs of the ship owner and the truck driver are based not simply on the fact that they were not entitled to their beliefs (that they did not apportion their belief to the evidence) but also on the fact that their beliefs appear to have been shaped by something like greed and self-interest. When such vices are replaced with virtues, as in these examples, we may be inclined to look with more leniency on the beliefs in question.⁶ Notice too that these dimensions of the ethics of belief are most clearly visible when a person's beliefs are situated within the context of his or her character as a whole—a theme to which I will return shortly.

When one's *own* beliefs are at issue, however, the situation is different. In one respect, it is simpler, because I am not faced with the kind of dilemma we have just described. From an internal (or first-person) perspective, one's epistemic obligations—whatever they may be—function not simply as *prima facie* obligations but as all-things-considered obligations, inasmuch as non-epistemic considerations like love and greed are simply rendered irrelevant. My aims, as a person who holds beliefs, are to form true beliefs and to avoid false ones: this is part of what it *means* to speak of my beliefs. So the considerations relevant *to me* (as far as the formation of beliefs is concerned) are epistemic considerations.⁷ Love for my child, however admirable from a third-person perspective, is simply not the sort of thing to which *I* could rationally appeal to justify *my own* beliefs about, e.g., his innocence—at least in the face of an epistemic obligation to the contrary. To put it another way, I cannot consistently believe *both* that my own beliefs are irrational—that they are not beliefs to which I am entitled—and that I can be excused for believing them for non-epistemic reasons.⁸

⁶ There are of course limits to what one is prepared to forgive. Here, unlike in the earlier examples, the consequences of false belief are not as catastrophic. We would no doubt feel differently about the present examples if, for example, the convicted man were a sexual predator and his mother were the governor, with the power to pardon him.

⁷ There are, however, cases in which I may be obliged, for non-epistemic reasons, to *act* on less than all the evidence available. Consider, for instance, the rules governing the admissibility of evidence in a courtroom. As John Rawls notes, "Not only is hearsay evidence excluded but also evidence gained by improper searches and seizures, or by the abuse of defendants upon arrest and failing to inform them of their rights. Nor can defendants be forced to testify in their own defense." What these examples show, Rawls argues, is that we sometimes "recognize a duty not to decide in view of the whole truth so as to honor a right or duty, or to advance an ideal good, or both" (Rawls 2005, pp. 218, 219). I am, of course, free to *believe* that a defendant is guilty, even if I am bound, for moral or legal reasons, to acquit him or her.

⁸ It is true that holding certain beliefs (e.g., that the plane in which I am flying is safe, or that other people like me) may produce psychological benefits (e.g., feelings of peace or wellbeing). In such cases, however, the benefits of believing *p* are the product of believing that it is *true* that *p*. Thus, the enjoyment of these

The virtues of belief-formation: a restatement

But these reflections raise an interesting question: if the only reasons relevant to belief-formation are *epistemic*, then what exactly is the point of an *ethics* of belief? Given the analysis in the preceding section, it would seem to add nothing *in the way of a reason for belief* to say that it would be wrong *morally* not to act on the basis of the relevant epistemic considerations. To the extent that this is *itself* an extra-epistemic consideration, it is irrelevant when I am deciding *what* (or *whether*) to believe. In this final section I want to suggest an alternative way of conceiving of the ethics of belief—one which places the emphasis on virtues rather than duties, and on persons rather than just their beliefs. Here it will be important to pay close attention to the problem of self-deception.

Let us recall the moral claim implicit in Clifford's ethics of belief: one ought not to hold beliefs to which one is not entitled. That this is a curious principle, as stated, should be clear from the fact that it is not the sort of rule one could knowingly violate. One can of course hold beliefs to which one is not entitled, but one cannot hold beliefs to which one *knows* one is not entitled. The impossibility here is logical, not simply psychological.⁹ Any doubts one might have about one's own entitlement to a belief are *ipso facto* doubts about the belief itself.¹⁰ Remember that belief is not simply a volitional "mental state" (the result of furrowing the brow while thinking of a sentence, say).¹¹ My believing *p* consists in my taking *p* to be true, with all that that entails in practice, and if I discover that *p* is false, or that I have no right to regard it as true, I cannot continue to (be said to) believe it. I can of course *claim* to believe it, but not truthfully.

Ordinarily, to tell someone that such-and-such an action is wrong is to present him or her with a reason for avoiding it—namely, the fact of its being immoral. Consider the statement, "It is wrong to take office supplies home from work." I can knowingly violate such a rule insofar as I deliberately do what I am told it would be wrong to do—in this case, purloining office supplies for personal use. But since I cannot hold beliefs to which I know I am not entitled, I cannot choose to violate the rule that says I ought not to believe such things. Interestingly, I can violate it only if I do not *know* that I am violating it.

I may, for instance, unknowingly hold beliefs to which I am not entitled simply because I have never reflected on them or examined the evidence (or arguments) for myself. Many people's political opinions undoubtedly fall into this category. Here, unlike in Wittgenstein's examples, my credulity is blameworthy. It is indicative not of my rational proficiency—my having mastered a practice—but of my naïveté. A second sort of case is more complicated. In such cases, I have examined the evidence (or otherwise reflected on my entitlement) and concluded that my beliefs are ones to which I am entitled; however, my reading of the

Footnote 8 continued

psychological benefits cannot function as an independent aim of believing *p*—an aim distinct from the epistemic goal of holding true beliefs. If I have good reason to doubt that *p*, then I cannot reap the benefits of believing *p*.

⁹ A Cliffordian might object that many people hold beliefs for which they know they lack evidence. Assuming, however, that these individuals are competent doxastic agents, it is likely that the Cliffordian has misidentified the relevant criterion of entitlement—the criterion actually operative in the practice in question. Such people might not be able to *articulate* the relevant non-evidential criterion but would nevertheless likely feel that what is unreasonable is not their belief, but the demand that it be supported by evidence.

¹⁰ Belief is, however, consistent with a certain degree of doubt. Moreover, there are cases in which a person may mistakenly *believe* that she is not entitled to a belief she cannot in fact give up—e.g., when confronted with skeptical arguments about other minds.

¹¹ Nor, in the sense that we are using the term here, is *believing* the same as accepting a policy, entertaining an hypothesis, or otherwise trying an idea on for size.

evidence (or arguments) is distorted by ulterior motives and ambitions. I am in the grip of self-deception.

In neither case does my ignorance of the fact that I am violating an ethical obligation excuse the violation. For (as we saw earlier, with Butler's example) even if I am unaware that my beliefs are not ones to which I am entitled, I can still be held morally responsible for my failure to critically examine them, or for having allowed my emotions to cloud my epistemic vision. Nevertheless, the manner in which the problem presents itself suggests that traditional formulations of the ethics of belief in terms of something like the moral claim we have been examining may not be the most appropriate or effective vehicle for addressing the problem of unethical belief.

It is true that reflection on such a rule might remind me of the need to make sure that my beliefs are ones to which I am entitled, prompting me to critically examine beliefs I might otherwise have held unthinkingly. I may then come to the conclusion that some of these are ones to which I am entitled and that others are not. The latter I can thus no longer believe—but *not* (notice) because I think it would be *immoral* to do so, but because once I discover that they are not beliefs to which I am entitled, I logically can no longer hold them; they are no longer *my* beliefs. My total epistemic situation has been altered, and with it my beliefs. Whatever objections can be made to specific beliefs can be made entirely in epistemic terms. The immorality, in other words, consists in not having taken the trouble to examine my beliefs in the first place, rather than in holding beliefs that I have examined and found wanting (which would require me to stand outside the story in which I am myself a character, assessing my own beliefs as if from a third-person perspective).

Or consider a case of self-deception, like the example of the ship owner. Here it is even less useful to be told to examine the evidence (or to be critical), since the ship owner would respond that he *has* examined the evidence.¹² What he doesn't know—and what we do—is that his reading of the evidence is skewed by his self-interest and greed. These blinders are, however, invisible to him, and so it is with a clear conscience and a "light heart" that he watches his dilapidated vessel disappear over the horizon.

The moral claim that we have been considering looks like a rule about which kinds of reasons for belief—epistemic or non-epistemic—are morally permissible. But nothing it rules out is in the right category to count as a "reason for belief," when looked at in the first-person. When, as third-party observers, we render a negative verdict on someone else's beliefs, we are in effect claiming to know something they do not. *We* know that the ship owner in Clifford's example was blinded by self-interest or greed, but the ship owner himself would never cite *greed* as his reason for belief, if only because it isn't any kind of reason, even a bad one. It is rather a constraint—invisible to the ship owner himself—on his assessment of the evidence and his entitlement. Our perspective is superior to that of the ship owner because his is corrupted and biased. His beliefs are thus ones to which (according to us) he is not entitled: we know this, but he does not, insofar as they continue to be his beliefs. Or consider the mother of the convicted man. She would never say, "My son is guilty, but I love him; therefore I will believe that he is innocent." Rather, she would say that she does not think the evidence against him is conclusive, and she would say this (according to us) *because* she loves him. Love is not for her a reason; it is a condition (visible to us, but not to her) within which epistemic considerations are evaluated. Since in the first-person we are never confronted with a choice between what *we* regard as rational and irrational grounds for

¹² Similarly, Holocaust deniers can usually produce what seems to them to be telling "evidence" for their views. Indeed, the "accoutrements of rationality" are accorded a central place in all conspiracy theorizing. Although I deny that Holocaust deniers are entitled to their beliefs, I grant that they can sincerely *believe* they are so entitled.

belief (even if that is how it may appear to others), Clifford's rule, however valid, does not address us at the level where it would be useful—the level at which delusion can distort our believing.

Here it may be helpful to distinguish between two senses in which we might speak of “reasons for belief”—reasons in the sense of (epistemic) *justifications* and reasons in the sense of *motives*. Reasons in the sense of justifications are what doxastic agents produce to demonstrate entitlement to their beliefs. But reasons in the sense of motives are what we third-party spectators can *attribute* to doxastic agents in order to explain the disparity between the beliefs these agents hold and what, from our perspective, is their lack of entitlement to these beliefs. What Clifford calls “evidence” falls into the first category, whereas greed and love fall into the second. In the contexts we are considering, the latter play an *explanatory* role, not a justificatory one.

Now, self-deception, as I am using the term, occurs whenever a doxastic agent is oblivious to the way in which her motives affect her assessment of her entitlement to a belief, such that her assessment would be altered if these motives could be brought to her attention in a meaningful way. For instance, Clifford's ship owner is in a state of self-deception because his self-interest blinds him to the otherwise obvious inadequacies of his vessel and the dangers of sending it out without first having made repairs, and the spendthrifts in Bishop Butler's example are in a state of self-deception because their fear of discovering that they are short of cash prevents them from looking into their financial affairs more carefully.

The problem is not that people choose to hold beliefs to which they know they are not entitled—choosing to believe *against* reason—but that they choose not to (or do not choose to) submit themselves to the conditions in which otherwise cherished beliefs might be challenged.¹³ They close the eyes of the mind (to use Butler's apt phrase) while keeping the eyes of the body wide open (Butler 1970 [1726], p. 96). The difficulty, therefore, with being told to look only at the evidence, or to avoid beliefs to which one is not entitled, is that one's reading of the evidence can be shaped by forces of which one is unaware. What the ship owner needs is not a rule about entitlement but a deeper, more perspicacious self-understanding, a clear-sighted view of his own motives and interests and how they cloud his judgment. This, I suggest, is the appropriate level at which to cast an ethics of belief. For although one who is in the grip of self-deception is necessarily unaware of it (and so is unlikely to think that she is violating her duties, however explicitly these are expressed), one can be held morally responsible for having allowed oneself to fall under its sway in the first place. The real ethical challenge is thus to address the conditions within which belief-formation gets its purchase, so that reason (in whatever form it takes) can proceed unimpeded.

If the failure in cases of this kind can be traced to deficiencies of character like laziness, greed, and self-love, then the remedy for self-deception and unethical belief-formation is to cultivate better epistemic habits. This way of looking at the problem—in terms of properties of doxastic agents rather than simply properties of their beliefs—suggests that the intuitions behind an ethics of belief might more effectively be expressed in the language of *virtues* (excellences of character). Just as virtue ethics focuses on persons rather than acts, its application to the ethics of belief would shift attention from beliefs to the believers who hold them.

One way of identifying some of the virtues of belief is to begin with a paradigm case of unethical belief—such as Clifford's example of the ship owner—and then ask what went wrong. Instead of attempting to catalogue here the many answers that might be given, let

¹³ I may, for instance, choose never to visit the doctor, to avoid the possibility of being told that I have health problems, in spite of knowing that my family has a history of heart disease.

me simply offer one observation, which is that the ship owner keeps his own counsel on a matter he might well have discussed with others. Curiously, this is rarely mentioned when the example is analyzed. Indeed, despite the recognition that one's beliefs have implications for others, ethical belief has largely been assumed to be something that can be achieved in isolation. The problem with this, as we have seen, is that one can be blind to the biases in one's own thinking. Thus, the injunction against beliefs to which one is not entitled often amounts to a command to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps—to examine oneself as if from the perspective of an outside observer. But while it is not possible to adopt a third-person perspective on one's own thinking, it is nevertheless possible to subject one's thinking to external critique. Others may be able to detect flaws in our thinking that we are unaware of, even though it is safe to assume that none of us is free from bias altogether.

As I see it, the language of virtues need not *replace* the language of duties that is more familiar to the ethics of belief, but it has certain advantages that the latter lacks. In conclusion, let me briefly outline four of these. First, by shifting the focus from beliefs to believers, it reminds us that unethical belief is itself a *symptom* of deficiencies of character like greed, self-love, fear, and intellectual laziness. Fix these, and belief will fix itself.

Second, the language of virtues encourages—or at any rate *can* encourage—an appropriate moral humility. The reliance on third-person narration that is central to the traditional approach contributes to the misconception that unethical belief is largely a crime of which *other people* are guilty. Not only is this view not conducive to the sort of introspection necessary for avoiding self-deception, but it can itself serve as an impediment to genuine dialogue between individuals who hold contradictory beliefs, insofar as it contributes to a climate of mutual suspicion.

Third, as suggested above, a virtue-ethics approach might help to foster a dialogical dimension of ethical reflection. The justification for entering into dialogue about our beliefs is not that we have reason to doubt them, but rather that we can be confident that if our thinking is biased, it is likely that we do not know that it is. Moreover, our experience of others suggests that few human beings are immune from self-deception. While many beliefs are rightly treated as innocent until proven guilty, it is thus wise to take the opposite view with respect to one's own character. In "Upon Self-Deceit," Butler put it this way: "Every man may take for granted that he has a great deal of [self-partiality], till, from the strictest observation upon himself, he finds particular reason to think otherwise" (Butler 1970 [1726], p. 97). And fourth, notice that epistemic virtues (like openness to dialogue and receptivity to criticism) are transportable: they are no less relevant in contexts where evidential support is not the (sole) criterion of entitlement.

Finding one's way out of the dark wood of self-deception is difficult. It requires that we attend not only to "the evidence" but also to ourselves, looking inward as well as outward. I have suggested that the ethics of belief—though critically important—cannot easily be expressed, but if it needs a motto I might venture the following: Know thyself, and let belief take care of itself.

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The ethics of belief and two conceptions of christian faith

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Abstract This article deals with two types of Christian faith in the light of the challenges posed by the ethics of belief. It is proposed that the difficulties with Clifford's formulation of that ethic can best be handled if the ethic is interpreted in terms of role-specific intellectual integrity. But the ethic still poses issues for the traditional interpretation of Christian faith when it is conceived as a series of discrete but related propositions, especially historical propositions. For as so conceived, the believer makes claims that fall within the province of an intellectual discipline, history, that requires evidence and rules of procedure for the adjudication of such claims. It is noteworthy how few Christian theologians and philosophers of religion deal with the issue in these terms. Alvin Plantinga is a noteworthy exception and his views are examined and criticized because, among other things, his conclusion is that any believer without having any training in biblical languages or historical studies can know that the New Testament narratives are true. The article then considers a second conception of Christian faith in which this conflict does not arise. One finds it in the works of Schleiermacher, Wittgenstein, and, surprisingly, in the conception of faith found in the early writings of Karl Barth.

Keywords Ethics of belief · Christian faith and historical inquiry · Plantinga · Wittgenstein · Barth

For centuries, philosophical critics of Christianity have argued that its core belief in a transcendent deity was unjustified and incoherent. These criticisms have, in turn, been met with various kinds of counterarguments: attempts to show that the idea of God is not incoherent, or analyses of the limits of reason and, hence, the necessity of faith. But it is only since the Enlightenment that the critics of religion have argued that faith itself is immoral because it is not based on evidence. If, as John Locke once argued, the genuine lover of truth is a person who does not entertain any proposition with a greater degree of assurance than the proofs it

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is built upon will warrant,¹ then the Christian is, by definition, not a lover of truth. Moreover, if love of the truth is a virtue, then faith must be a vice.

John Locke, of course, thought that the Christian faith was rationally justified and so he did not conclude that the Christian believer was not a lover of truth. But when it later became widely assumed that the metaphysical arguments for the existence of God that Locke accepted were untenable, it became possible to turn Locke's definition of the lover of truth against the Christian. One of the most powerful expressions of this new complaint against Christian faith is to be found in Clifford's well-known essay "The Ethics of Belief." Clifford, generalizing from several cases in which beliefs had been carelessly arrived at and harmful, concluded, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence."² The issue is not that the content of the belief is erroneous but that it was not arrived at through patient investigation. One has to earn the right to believe.

Clifford's essay has prompted a number of lively responses both positive and negative. Some philosophers have argued that Clifford's Principle is misguided because beliefs are involuntary and not subject to moral imperatives. Some have argued that Clifford's project is based on Classical Foundationalism, and this theory has been shown to be incoherent. Others, like William James, have argued, "our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds. . . ."³ And still others have argued that Clifford's Principle completely misconstrues our cognitive situation. Most of our beliefs are groundless.

Two of the more recent positive endorsements of Clifford's Principle are by Susan Haack and Allen Wood. Haack argues that even though Clifford's ideal is over demanding and his argument has flaws, one cannot, nevertheless, reject the fundamental ideal of intellectual integrity underlying it. The search for truth does require avoiding self-deception and the modulation of one's judgments in accordance with the evidence.⁴ Wood's endorsement of Clifford's Principle is more unqualified. He argues that intellectual integrity is only achieved when we understand that we have a moral duty to become aware of the manner in which we form our beliefs. The issue has to do with the norms and procedures by means of which we acquire our beliefs. Clifford was not committed to any particular norm so that the claim he is a Foundationalist is mistaken. What he condemns is the holding of a belief without regard to whether it meets the appropriate standards, whatever those standards turn out to be.⁵

Clifford's argument as well as Wood's is based on the notion that persons are responsible for culture and society. No one's beliefs are merely private matters because our modes of thought and belief are common property, "an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred truth to be handed on to the next one. . . ."⁶ Our civilization, which has been built up over eons of time, depends upon the habit of forming only justified beliefs. Consequently, credulity, the readiness to hold unjustified beliefs, threatens the very foundation of society. And since every belief, no matter how trivial, is significant because it prepares the mind to receive more like it, it is the bounden duty of every person, no matter how humble their station in society, to guard the purity of their beliefs. Whoever suppresses doubt or allows the quest for certitude to overcome the critical spirit sins against humankind. Only when we arrive at our beliefs by patient investigation and testing are we

¹ Locke (1934) Bk 4, chap 29.

² Clifford (1999), p. 77.

³ James (1986), p. 61.

⁴ Haack (2001), pp. 21–33.

⁵ Wood (2002), p. 5.

⁶ Clifford (1999), pp. 73f.

entitled to the psychological pleasure that accompanies belief. If that pleasure attaches to unjustified belief, Clifford writes, it is a stolen pleasure and we “should guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town.”⁷ Consequently, Clifford concludes, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence.”⁸

Anyone who has dipped into the ethics of belief literature will recognize that there are a number of very technical philosophical issues involved. One of the more serious of these has to do with how human beings normally acquire beliefs and whether moral categories can appropriately be applied to this acquisition. Most human beings do not acquire their beliefs using the norms and procedures that Clifford’s Principle requires. We cannot carefully weigh the evidence of every proposition recommended to us. Rather our culture, our family, and our schools impart to us most of our beliefs in the process of educating us. They teach us to organize our experience in certain ways by giving us concepts and rules of use. They inform us about our history and what the sciences tell us about the world as well as an infinite number of commonplace beliefs. We acquire, so to speak, a picture of the world; that is, a loosely connected network of propositions in which the consequences and the premises are mutually supportive. It is against this background that doubts arise and we acquire, if we do, justifications for our beliefs. We doubt only when our expectations are contradicted in some way by our experience or when we are confronted with the challenge to believe some proposition the meaning or consequences of which are at odds with what we already believe. We begin by believing and we must have grounds for doubting.

In his little book *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein argues in this fashion and concludes that many of our fundamental beliefs are literally groundless but that this has nothing to do with credulity.⁹ We do not acquire these beliefs through testing or investigation but simply by belonging to a community bound together by science and education. One might even say that at the foundation of what we called well-founded belief is belief that is not well founded. “My life,” Wittgenstein writes, “consists in my being content to accept many things.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, he maintains that we can be legitimately certain of these beliefs. Indeed, he holds that the reasonable man simply does not have certain doubts at all.

I, L.W. believe, am sure, that my friend hasn’t sawdust in his body or in his head, even though I have no direct evidence of my senses to the contrary. I am sure, by reason of what has been said to me, of what I have read, and of my experience. To have doubts about it would seem to me madness—of course, this is also in agreement with other people; but I agree with them.”¹¹

One might even say that it is unreasonable to ask us to question and examine all of our beliefs.

Another problem that emerges when considering Clifford’s Principle has to do with the distinction we make in everyday life between “I believe” and “I know.” As Stephen Toulmin has pointed out, saying “I know” is something like a claim to a title and as such its merits depend on the merits of the arguments that can be produced in its support.¹² When one says “I know” one puts forward a claim to speak with some authority and backing. It implies that one stands ready to give compelling reasons for what one says. The words “I believe” or

⁷ Clifford (1999), p. 75f.

⁸ Clifford (1999), p. 77.

⁹ Wittgenstein (1972), p. 32.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein (1972), p. 44.

¹¹ Wittgenstein (1972), p. 36.

¹² Toulmin (1958), p.11.

“am sure”, on the other hand, are more ambiguous and are frequently used to simply report the state of one’s mind, to indicate that one is aware that she lacks the accepted grounds for saying “I know.” “I know”, in short, lays claim to an entitlement in a way that “I believe” does not. Indeed, “I believe” can sometimes mean that one lack justification for what one says. Wittgenstein makes this point also in *On Certainty* when he argues that if someone knows something, then, the question “how does she know?” must be capable of having an answer.¹³

Nevertheless, it is also the case that one of the ideals that our culture and the schools attempt to instill in us even as it imparts to us scores of unjustified beliefs is the ideal of a person who has disciplined herself to believe responsibly, who is not careless, slothful, or impatient in matters of the intellect and who prizes lucidity and whose degree of assent is commensurate with the grounds and evidence for it.¹⁴ Such a person cultivates entitlement to the beliefs she holds by appeals to evidence and reason. This character trait has been an ideal in Western culture since Plato. The problem is how we are to understand this ideal given the assumption that we arrive at most of our beliefs a-critically.

One of the ways I have suggested that we can make obvious sense out of Clifford’s Principle is when, like Clifford, we concentrate on the role-specific nature of much intellectual responsibility.¹⁵ In Clifford’s essay, it will be remembered, a ship owner who was leasing his ship out to immigrants to the New World certified that the ship was seaworthy even though he had not inspected it. He knew the ship had safely weathered many storms in the past and he put his trust in Providence, dismissed any suspicions about the honesty of the builders, and acquired the comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy. The ship went down with the immigrants and the shipbuilder collected his insurance. Clifford writes that the ship-owner was not only guilty of the death of the immigrants but was morally wrong in certifying that the ship was seaworthy. Indeed, he would have been morally wrong even if the ship had arrived safely at its destination. But surely he was morally wrong because it was his role-specific duty to acquire his beliefs about the ship only after an investigation. The immigrants, who also believed the ship to be seaworthy, were not morally wrong for so believing.

To generalize: We participate in a culture with role-specific responsibilities for belief and knowledge. We expect doctors who specialize in oncology to have grounds for their beliefs about how our cancer should be treated just as we expect journalists to have grounds and reasons for what they report as fact. We expect cognitive responsibility, so to speak, from druggists, schoolteachers, lawyers, policeman, and scientists. One might say then that this virtue of reasonableness is part of the form of life taught to us by our culture. But what we mean by reasonableness and hence justification is only intelligible against the background of many groundless beliefs. When we say “I know” the authority for this claim often lies in the background beliefs we have received in our schools, informed as it is by the various intellectual disciplines. When we ask for the grounding of the cancer surgeon’s judgments, we are really asking him to appeal to the background of what our culture determines is medical science. When we ask for the justification of the opinion of a journalist, we accept that this justification will be grounded in what we a-critically count as present knowledge.

¹³ Wittgenstein (1972), p. 72.

¹⁴ How vigorously our schools now impart this ideal is debatable. One can easily imagine the historian of Victorian England, G. M. Young, writing of our graduates what he wrote of the English. “. . . whether they believe or disbelieve, the grounds of their faith or skepticism are purely emotional, traditional, or it might seem accidental. What the schools have failed to teach is that a man [sic] has no more right to an opinion for which he cannot account than to a pint of beer for which he cannot pay.” See Young (1962), p. 7.

¹⁵ See Harvey (1986), pp. 189–203.

The ethics of belief literature raises issues for Christianity at two levels: first, at the level of the ordinary believer and second, at the level of the theologian who has the role responsibility for reflecting critically on the doctrines and beliefs of the Christian community. It seems obvious that Clifford thought that in so far as the religious believer or the theologian appealed to faith as the ground for their beliefs, they should be regarded as immoral. But this conclusion assumes too quickly that Christian faith is the believing of propositions that are defeasible by or justifiable by inquiry and thus begs the issue.

Just as one may argue that the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question, so it may be also claimed that the nature of theology is a theological question. And central to the question of the nature of Christian theology is the nature of faith which, in turn, requires some clarification of the relation of faith to belief. In what follows, I would like to explore two quite different conceptions of Christian faith and the implications of each of them for understanding the task of theology given the criticisms emanating from the Cliffordians.

Before addressing these issues directly, it is important as a first step to cease generalizing about religious beliefs and to avoid the tendency of philosophers to identify religion with theism. There are non-theistic religions as well as a variety of logical types of what we call theism. Moreover, in any given religion there are logically diverse types of belief that are interwoven in complex ways to constitute a web of belief characteristic of the religion in question. Sometimes the web is so tightly woven that one can unravel the whole by pulling out, so to speak, one of the central threads. But sometimes the weaving is less tight and one can pull out one of the strands composing the web and leave the web relatively intact. This has clearly been the case in the history of Christianity.

On the surface, at least, the Christian religion, particularly, seems to be made up of many diverse types of belief—metaphysical cosmological, anthropological, and historical. Concentrating on the implications of this diversity is one of the possible ways to approach the issue of religious doubt and the closely related issue raised by the ethics of belief literature; namely, the problem of doubt that arises when some of these beliefs seem at odds against the background of the beliefs that we have learned from our culture. As Alasdair MacIntyre once observed, earlier generations of theologians and philosophers debated the issues of faith and unfaith in rather wholesale and abstract terms; namely, the opposition of faith to reason, the nature of the proofs for the existence of god, and the problem of evil. The eighteenth-century philosopher, David Hume, could question the truth of theism for reasons that are similar in kind though original in detail to those used for millennia, just as John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century could without anachronism write a Christian apologetics using similar arguments. But the debates over theism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have to do not with these abstract arguments but with questions that arise out of some special intellectual discipline, like biology, geology, and history.¹⁶ The educated public is not so much disturbed by philosophical arguments concerning the existence of God as they are over the theory of evolution or the discovery of how little can be known about the historical Jesus or how many different forms of Christianity competed for dominance in the second and third centuries.

How are we to understand this situation in light of the demand for intellectual integrity in the Christian believer? The problem seems to be this. Most philosophical discussions in the West concentrate on belief in God. But since this belief, almost by definition, is not a belief based on evidence, the believer can argue, as did William James, that this belief is justified because our passionate nature has a right to decide when the truth of the matter cannot in

¹⁶ See MacIntyre and Ricouer (1969).

principle be decided on intellectual grounds. By saying “I believe” rather than “I know” the believer is registering the opinion that she cannot justify her belief by appeal to evidence. But traditionally regarded, the Christian faith not only consists of this theological or metaphysical claim but a series of related beliefs of many different sorts that shape how the core belief is to be appropriated in one’s life. One need only look at the traditional creeds to see this. The Christian believes in the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was dead and buried but resurrected from the dead on the third day and who will come again to judge the quick and the dead.

When the Christian faith is looked at in this traditional way, that is, as a fabric of discrete but interwoven propositional beliefs, the issue is that not only is the Christian making a series of claims without any evidence but, more blatantly, some of these claims fall within the province of intellectual disciplines in which there are accepted criteria of evidence and rules of procedure for the making and adjudication of such claims. In the case of belief in God, the Christian could argue that there is no field of knowledge with which this belief collides, unless, that is, one thinks that metaphysics is a sphere of knowledge. So the issue with respect to theism is largely philosophical and metaphysical: Does the Universe require a Creator? Does the order exemplified in the world suggest an intelligent author? Because these arguments were indecisive, as all metaphysical disputes are, the issue, as Kant saw, was basically whether the reason, lacking objective grounds, had a right to orient itself in existence by virtue of a subjective need of reason. Kant argued that one did have such a right in the special case of a “first original being as a supreme intelligence and at the same time as the highest good” because our reason needs the concept of the unlimited as the ground of all limited being and because no other satisfactory ground can be given for the contingency of the existence of things in the world.¹⁷

But it is otherwise with many of the discrete beliefs of the Christian. Here the Christian is not following a need of reason but making discrete claims about matters that are also the legitimate object of inquiry by certain scholarly disciplines in which there are rules and procedures and canons of evidence for the making and adjudicating of claims. The interjection of faith into these areas is not only regarded as irrelevant but an obfuscation. When Christians argued as late as the nineteenth century that the world was only a few thousand years old and appealed to faith in the authority of Scripture, the geologists and soon the educated public had to reject the claim not only as false but also as obscurantist because it violated the procedures that the geologists necessarily used to arrive at their own conclusion that the world is billions of years old.

The reason that this collision between Christian belief about the age of the earth and the intellectual discipline of geology takes on a moral quality is because the intellectual or scholarly disciplines themselves possess what I would call a “morality of knowledge.” The academic disciplines such as biology, chemistry, geology, physics and history, to name a few, are not only committed to certain norms and procedures for acquiring their scientific results but there is a commitment to honesty and intellectual integrity in following and observing these norms and procedures. Consequently, the appeal to faith in matters of empirical fact is an explicit rejection of the norms and procedures of the discipline because it short circuits when it does not violate the process of inquiry as defined by the discipline. Hence it violates the general ideal of believing responsibly as related to that specific mode of inquiry.

It is understandable then, as I have argued elsewhere, that when Christians interject faith into the historical debates regarding the life of Jesus, this poses the issue of intellectual

¹⁷ Kant (1996), pp.10f.

integrity for the historian because this interjection simply by-passes and may even be said to repudiate the rules of evidence and the procedures that are normative for the historian.¹⁸ If one claims to know “on faith” a past historical event rather than forming a probability judgment after looking at the evidence, then one simply sets aside the type of warrants and backings that enable the historian to exercise carefully qualified judgments. For the historian does not just flatly say “so and so happened” but “given what we know it is possible that x,” or “it is probable that x,” or “it is relatively certain that x.” The believer, on faith, simply flatly says “this is what happened.” The historian deals in carefully qualified judgments; the believer deals only in flatfooted claims. In short, the ethics of belief arises most acutely when on the basis of faith a believer makes an evidential claim that is in the province of a long standing intellectual discipline such as geology, biology, or history without regard to the procedures of those disciplines.

It is surprising how few Christian theologians and philosophers of religion who conceive of the Christian faith as including assent to a series of logically different propositions, some of which are defeasible in principle by scholarly inquiries of various sorts, have dealt with this way of framing the issue. A great many have tried to deal with Clifford’s challenge so far as belief in theism is concerned but very few have attempted to confront the problem of the impingement of Christian beliefs on the intellectual disciplines. One exception to this is Alvin Plantinga who has not only mounted a philosophical counter-attack against Clifford’s Principle but attempted to make the case that the discrete and specific propositions that constitute Christian belief can be known to be true.¹⁹ He argues not only that the Christian need not appeal to faith as the justification for her confession “I believe” but can utter the more confident “I know”.

Plantinga’s thought regarding the justification for belief in theism has gone through some very interesting developments but fundamental to all of them is the rejection of Clifford’s Principle on epistemological grounds. The difficulty, Plantinga claims, is that it is based on Classical Foundationalism; that is, it stipulates that unless a belief is incorrigible or self-evident (as in the case of modern Foundationalism) or evident to the senses, or based on evidence that is, it is not justified. But the restrictions that Foundationalists would impose on beliefs belonging to the foundations of a rational system cannot themselves be justified by Foundationalist criteria. The claim that only beliefs that are incorrigible or self-evident or evident to the senses belong to the foundations of a rational noetic structure is none of these things, nor is it based in belief that is. Any theory, therefore, that insists on such restrictions is “self-referentially incoherent.”²⁰ Consequently, Plantinga proposes a more positive and complex argument in which he claims that belief in God functions as properly basic in a mature theist’s system of belief when it arises as a result of the right use and proper function of our epistemic capacities.

The crucial term here, of course, is what Plantinga means by “proper function,” and the validity of his larger argument depends to a great deal on how convincing his criteria are for determining this proper function. In his later writings, the concept of proper function is developed in terms of the reliability of belief-producing mechanisms operating in an appropriate environment and in accordance with a “design plan” aimed at truth.²¹ But this development, it then turns out, relies heavily on what Plantinga calls the Aquinas/Calvin model; namely that

¹⁸ Harvey (1996).

¹⁹ See especially Plantinga (2000).

²⁰ See Plantinga (1979)

²¹ Plantinga (1993), pp. 46f.

God has implanted in human beings a *sensus divinitatis* such that in certain circumstances like “the perception of the night sky or the tiny flower” the apprehension of God is triggered directly and non-inferentially, much like the knowledge of natural objects is triggered by seeing them. “In this regard, the *sensus divinitatis* resembles perception, memory, and a priori belief.”²² In short, for a properly functioning noetic equipment, certain circumstances will immediately trigger the knowledge of God. This implies, of course, that those who do not have the awareness of God in these circumstances have had their noetic capacities impaired in some way.

I am less interested in Plantinga’s defense of the warrant for belief in God by virtue of the *sensus divinitatis* than I am in his attempt to justify the truth of those propositions that constitute specific Christian doctrines. For just as he appeals to an internal disposition given by the Almighty to account for human belief in God, he extends the Aquinas/Calvin modal and argues that those specifically Christian beliefs he claims are found in the Scriptures—the Trinity, sin, incarnation, atonement and resurrection—are seen to be true by the internal testimony or instigation of the Holy Spirit. Just as the *sensus divinitatis* provides an immediate and non-inferential awareness of the truth of theism, so the Holy Spirit provides a non-inferential awareness of the truth of the core beliefs of Christian faith found in Scriptures.²³

The logic of this argument is interesting. It is not that the Holy Spirit inspires these doctrines in us directly but that It testifies to us that the “great things of the gospel” found in the Scriptures are true. Just as God has responded to our fallen condition by giving us Scripture (the improper functioning of our noetic capacities having been impaired by sin), so the Holy Spirit enables us to see that the teachings of Scripture are true.²⁴ The use of “see” in the previous sentence is significant because the revelation of the truth of Scripture is analogous to our knowledge of objects; that is, without inference or reflection. But as one of his critics has pointed out, this means that

an ordinary Christian, one quite innocent of historical studies, the ancient languages, the intricacies of textual criticism, the depths of theology and all the rest, can nevertheless come to know that these things are indeed true; furthermore, his knowledge need not trace back (by way of testimony for example) to knowledge on the part of someone who does have this specialized training.²⁵

There could hardly be a more revealing example of how a certain conception of Christian beliefs has the force of setting aside the rules and procedures of the discipline of historical inquiry. More vigorously, it corrupts historical judgment. In this view, the ordinary, even uneducated Christian without any training in theology or reading the New Testament can claim to know the truth about the narratives therein and, therefore, is in the position to know that any scholarly historical judgments that differ from this known truth are false. He can know, for example, that even when a distinguished Christian biblical scholar like Willi Marxsen concludes that the earliest Christian confession was “Jesus lives” and made no reference to an empty tomb, this scholar is in error. The ordinary believer can know in advance and without any knowledge of the biblical languages that the titles “Son of Man” and “Son of God” were claims to divinity and not messianic titles. In short, the biblical historian can only confirm what the believer has already had confirmed as true by the witness of the Holy Spirit.

²² Plantinga (2000), p. 175.

²³ Plantinga (2000), p. 251.

²⁴ Plantinga (2000), p. 180.

²⁵ Roche (2002), p. 6.

It is not only that this conception of Christian faith makes biblical historical inquiry superfluous but it forces the believer qua believer to adjudicate issues in the biological sciences as well because Plantinga's basic account of warrants in terms of "proper function" in accordance with a design plan is inconsistent with neo-Darwinian biological theory. Plantinga argues that this evolutionary theory regards beliefs as epiphenomena of the causality that produces adaptive behavior. Therefore, it cannot account for a belief-producing mechanism that can produce a high proportion of true beliefs.

It is not surprising that many philosophers find Plantinga's argument that belief in God is properly basic unconvincing. Others may find it arrogant for the Christian philosopher to claim that his mind is led by the Holy Spirit while the mind of the critic must be deformed by sin. (How, incidentally, is one to account for all the various different doctrines that have been produced by those who have also appealed to the Holy Spirit? And how do we judge the legitimacy of these appeals?) There are even some philosophers of religion who argue that Plantinga has not only not provided a convincing apologetic for Christian belief but, ironically, that his position leads to relativism, and, ultimately, a radical subjectivism or skepticism. Although it is beyond my purpose to pursue their arguments here, they consist of the claims (a) that he has no defense against the argument that other religious and epistemological communities, like Hinduism, can also claim proper basicity for their beliefs,²⁶ (b) that he admits it is "beyond the competence of philosophy to show that the presupposition of the Aquinas/Calvin model are true" and, hence, has no criteria for adjudicating between alleged basic beliefs, (c) that lacking any attempt to establish this warrant we are let to either relativism or skepticism. Indeed, one might conclude that Plantinga's account of warrant undermines the soteriological exclusivism central to the traditional Christian belief he intends to defend.

If one has to appeal to the testimony of the Holy Spirit in order to justify holding certain specific beliefs to be true independent of the methods and procedures we normally appeal to in order to justify such beliefs, this naturally leads us to ask whether Christian faith need be interpreted in this way: namely, as a web of discrete beliefs of different sorts, some of which impinge on the subject matter of scholarly disciplines like history and biology. Certainly this is the fashion in which these propositions have long been taken both by ordinary believers and orthodox theologians. But anyone familiar with the history of Christian doctrine will acknowledge that this is not the only way Christian faith has been interpreted. Indeed, in the last two centuries, particularly, there have arisen movements in both theology and philosophy of religion that have rejected this traditional and orthodox conception of Christian faith. Some of these new movements, as in the case of the Liberalism inspired by Friedrich Schleiermacher, were driven by the apparent conflict between the claims of traditional Christianity and the sciences. But there were others, more recent, for which the conflicts with modernity were only the occasion for exploring more deeply and carefully just how faith was conceived in the important and, for the theologian, normative texts of the New Testament.

Schleiermacher is perhaps the most important and influential Protestant theologian to have reinterpreted how one should think of Christian faith and, hence, the function of theology. In his philosophical writings, he had already concluded that God could not be the object of knowledge because God could only be the name for the limit of thought to which the mind was driven and which was presupposed in all thinking: the "transcendental unity of thought and being". Since he believed that a concept could only be made determinate through the use of some system of judgments, and there could be no judgment about this absolute

²⁶ See Christian (1992) I am indebted to both Professors Christian and Roche for their critiques of Plantinga.

presupposition, consequently there could be no knowledge of it in the form of a judgment. The reality of this transcendental unity could only be sensed by means of a unique feeling, the feeling of being absolutely dependent. The religious sense of this reality arose when in our participation in the universal causal nexus, a nexus in which we both act and are acted upon, we rise to the realization that the whole is itself absolutely dependent. Religious feeling just is this consciousness of being absolutely dependent, and the name “God” is the name that Christians give to this “Woher” or “Whence” of this feeling.²⁷ Moreover, by equating the divine causality with the whole of the finite, there could be no isolated intuition of the divinity because the pious person is “drawn to the conscious apprehension of the power of the Highest directly near to him in all finite causality.”²⁸

Schleiermacher held that all religions presuppose this feeling of absolute dependence but each is shaped, colored, and formed by the determination of what he calls the “sensible self-consciousness”; that is, the way in which our self-consciousness is determined by the history and culture in which we participate. In the case of certain religions, this self-consciousness rooted in the sense of absolute dependence is decisively shaped by its Founder; for example, Mohammed or the Buddha. In the case of Christianity, however, the consciousness of the corporate community is decisively conditioned by Jesus of Nazareth and his distinctive God-consciousness. Jesus’ influence is, so to speak, interjected into the historical nexus and is now borne by an historical community that gradually widens in scope and permeates the world. To become a Christian is to step into this corporate community with its distinctive sense of sin and grace. It is to receive a new personal self-consciousness that is able to relate all things to the Infinite, which is to say, to intuit the Infinite in and behind the finite in a particular historically conditioned way.

The result of this conception of religious faith is that Christian theology is not conceived of as reflection on a revealed set of beliefs or, more precisely on beliefs said to be derived from revelation. Rather, theology is regarded as the description of the religious affections of the Christian community for the purpose of guiding that community. Indeed, the fundamental form of dogmatic theology is “the description of human states” and in so far as the theologian discusses divine attributes or the constitution of the world, these propositions “are permissible only in so far as they can be developed out of the [fundamental form]; for only on this condition can they be really authenticated as expressions of human emotions.”²⁹

It might be argued that Schleiermacher’s conception of Christian faith doesn’t escape the objection that it presupposes an historical belief and, hence, is vulnerable to the same criticism in this respect as Christian orthodoxy. For the God-consciousness of the Christian is said to be dependent on or influenced decisively by the perfect God-consciousness of Jesus.³⁰ Whether Schleiermacher’s position necessarily involves this historical claim is a matter of debate among historians of doctrine. But my point in giving this brief rehearsal is to point out that his theology involved a decisive shift in how Christian doctrine is interpreted. It is not an attempt to provide normative propositions to which the believer must give assent but an effort to set forward in doctrinal form the affections of the Christian religious consciousness.

Perhaps the most recent and most discussed re-interpretation of Christian belief has been proposed not by theologians but by philosophers of religion heavily influenced by the thought

²⁷ Schleiermacher (1948), S. 4. 3.

²⁸ Schleiermacher (1948), S. 53.1

²⁹ Schleiermacher (1948), S. 30.2.

³⁰ Albert Schweitzer was especially critical of Schleiermacher’s posthumously published *Life of Jesus*. It reveals that “the great dialectician” did not have a historical mind and that he was “not in search of a historical Jesus, but of the Jesus Christ of his own system of theology....” See Schweitzer (1952), p. 62.

of Ludwig Wittgenstein, especially D.Z. Phillips. It is not easy to generalize about Wittgenstein's influence on theology because of the non-systematic nature of his remarks on religion and theology and because the implications of what he has written are much debated. Some have argued that his slogan "theology as grammar" means that he regarded theology as a descriptive discipline, albeit descriptive in a different manner than Schleiermacher's theology. Others have been taken with his suggestions in his *Lectures on Religious Belief* that religious belief and practice are guided by pictures. But unlike the replaceable pictures often found in philosophy or mathematics, in religion "the whole weight is in the picture." "In religion," write I.U. Dalferth in his essay on the impact of Wittgenstein on theology, "pictures regulate not merely a particular activity but a whole life."³¹ One learns how to use the pictures and in the case of pictures of God these are among the earliest learnt.

If one asks how his view of religious beliefs as pictures relates particularly to the historical claims one finds in Christianity, Wittgenstein writes in his *Nachlass* the following:

Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. *Here you have a narrative, don't take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives! Make a quite different place in your life for it.*³²

This entry is followed by the observation that the historical accounts in the Gospels could even be demonstrably false and belief would lose nothing by virtue of it. The Gospel has to be appropriated lovingly and that is where the certainty lies.

However Wittgenstein's view of religion is interpreted it seems clear that he held that Christianity does not involve intellectual commitment to a series of beliefs considered as doctrines. He writes, again in the *Nachlass*,

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For 'consciousness of sin' is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things. . . are simply describing what has happened to them, whatever gloss anyone may want to put on it.³³

Any Christian theologian who believes that in the first instance she has the responsibility of grounding her interpretation of the faith in the New Testament texts cannot be completely happy with either Schleiermacher's or Wittgenstein's interpretation of faith and the subsequent view of theology, even though she might welcome the shift away from the traditional orthodox interpretation of it. Schleiermacher's view of Christian doctrine as a description of the religious affections of the Christian community influenced by the perduring influence of the perfect God-consciousness of Jesus has, for example, little continuity with the understanding of faith found in the New Testament, especially in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Nor is it a very convincing claim about the nature of doctrine itself; that is, as a description of the religious affections of the contemporary Christian community. And Wittgenstein's view that Christian doctrines are only a gloss on religious experience is not derived from any serious analysis of the history of doctrine and is even less convincing.

³¹ Dalferth (2005), p. 288.

³² Wittgenstein (1980), p. 32.

³³ Wittgenstein (1980) p. 28.

It is against this background that one can see why Karl Barth's early commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans is so interesting and radical.³⁴ For in this commentary on a text most Protestant theologians have in the past found authoritative, Barth professed to find a conception of faith that neither requires believing a set of propositions that are defeasible by human inquiry nor a set of propositions about the divine being. Faith, rather, "is awe in the presence of the divine incognito."³⁵

The commentary created a sensation when it was written in 1918 not only because of its content but because it eschewed the standard type of biblical commentary characteristic of liberalism in which the scholar uses the historical-critical method to recover and repeat what Paul had written.³⁶ Rather, Barth decided to engage in what he called an "uninterrupted conversation" with the wisdom of the past by which he meant that he wanted to confront the religious questions Paul had raised by systematically wrestling with each line of the text. The result is radical because the meanings that ordinary believers and traditional theologians have attributed to the familiar terms "God," "faith," "sin," "revelation," and "Jesus," are subverted. What most people mean by "God" is "in fact, 'No-God' . . . [and] . . . the cry of revolt against such a god is nearer the truth than is the sophistry with which men attempt to justify him."³⁷ And what most people believe to be faith is not faith at all, for "even faith, if it proceeds from anything but a void, is unbelief. . . ."³⁸ "Sin," it turns out, is not the opposite of virtue but the attempt to obscure the radical difference between the finite and the infinite that, paradoxically, finds its highest expression not in atheism but in religion.³⁹ "Revelation" is not the disclosure of the nature of the divine being but the disclosure that God is unknown and unknowable. And finally, "Jesus" is not a perfect human or the exemplar of the perfect God-consciousness but someone who "stands among sinners as a sinner" and "takes his place where God can be present only in questioning about him".⁴⁰

Those familiar with Luther's commentary on the Romans will recognize that Barth also viewed the aim of the Apostle Paul to break down all human righteousness and wisdom and to magnify and increase the sins and follies people do not recognize. And like Luther, Barth stressed the divine incognito, the hiddenness and otherness of God. But unlike Luther, Barth did not interpret revelation to be the disclosure of this otherwise inaccessible reality. On the contrary, what is revealed is that the Divine is unknown and unknowable and that all attempts to penetrate this incognito, to domesticate it with predications of any sort, is "sin." Indeed, faith is not the possession of certainty but knowing that you do not know.⁴¹ God reveals himself to "those who have abandoned direct communication".⁴² It even may be said to proceed from the void. This faith does not consist in some esoteric knowledge added to

³⁴ Barth (1953).

³⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

³⁶ It is one of the mysteries of modern theological scholarship that it has not been much remarked or reflected upon how much and how fundamentally this early view of Barth's differs from his later view that comes to expression in his *Church Dogmatics*. What one might call the religious agnosticism together with the religious existentialism found in the commentary on the Romans is completely lacking in his later writings. It is also ironically mysterious why Barth had such a difficult time in understanding the theology of Rudolf Bultmann because it was Bultmann who first came to the defense of Barth's commentary but, unlike Barth, continued to affirm and extend his fundamental insights.

³⁷ Barth (1953), p. 40.

³⁸ Barth (1953), p. 57.

³⁹ Barth (1953), p. 136.

⁴⁰ Barth (1953), p. 97.

⁴¹ Barth (1953), p. 45.

⁴² Barth (1953), p. 41.

what we can otherwise know. When Paul wrote that the “invisible things of God are clearly seen” Barth interpreted this to mean that “The insecurity of our whole existence, the vanity and utter questionableness of all that is and of what we are, lie as in a text-book open before us.”⁴³ The problem for the human is not believing what is strange but in actively embracing and living out her life amidst the incomprehensibility and triviality of human life without attempting to obscure it by elevating something human to the center of meaning. One of the starkest passages of the commentary reads:

Men love God, whatever their visible behaviour may be, when, veritably and existentially, quite clearly and once for all, without possibility of avoidance or escape, they encounter the question: “Who then am I?” For the contrasted and inevitable ‘Thou’ involved in this question is—God. In being thus compelled to face themselves, men do in fact manifest love towards God.⁴⁴

There are two related themes that are prominent in Barth’s commentary that are especially interesting in the light of the ethics of belief demand for the intellectual justification of religious belief. The first is Barth’s treatment of Paul’s familiar formula “justification by faith apart from the Law”; the second is his treatment of Jesus and revelation. So far as justification is concerned, Barth believed he is only making Paul’s formula understandable in contemporary terms by translating the word “law” by “religion.” In this context the word ‘law’ embraces all who set out to experience the infinite. . . . And just as the Jew believed that righteousness before God was found in obedience to the Law, so, too, the Gentiles believe they can achieve righteousness through religion, whether it be through Schleiermacher’s “God consciousness” or the modern Evangelical’s ‘personal relationship with God’. It is just the believer’s conviction that she is close to god in religion that sin abounds.⁴⁵ Sin just is this sense of bridging the abyss between man and God. Consequently, there is no more ambivalent and arrogant a human project than religion, and this includes Christianity.⁴⁶ Indeed, one may even say that Christianity is idolatry and especially the god of liberal Christianity. The God of most believers is just a superpower among other powers, a no-god. Consequently, the cry of revolt against such a god is nearer to the truth than is the sophistry with which persons attempt to justify Him.⁴⁷ It follows that just as righteousness of God is apart from the law so is it apart from religion. “Our religion consists in the dissolution of religion.”⁴⁸

This does not mean that anti-religion as such has any advantage any more than being anti-Law has an advantage. It is faith itself only which could justify anti-religion. But what, then, is faith?. What is justified human activity? For Paul it is when human beings are bereft of any ground of boasting, when they can see the utter ambiguity and incomprehensibility of human existence. Faith is knowing one does not know and the awareness of the arrogance in our attempts to penetrate that hiddenness.⁴⁹ It is a void, it has no content against the content of being helpless and shattered. It is not a belief about something out there that requires justification; rather, it is the adoption of a view of oneself and human beings.

How then are we to understand the Christian’s claim that God has been revealed in Christ? And how does this avoid the type of historical claims that we found so unacceptable in that

⁴³ Barth (1953), p. 46.

⁴⁴ Barth (1953), pp. 318f.

⁴⁵ Barth (1953), p. 136.

⁴⁶ Barth (1953), p. 136.

⁴⁷ Barth (1953), p. 40.

⁴⁸ Barth (1953), p. 110.

⁴⁹ Barth (1953), p.202.

mode of theology which sees Christianity as a web of referential beliefs? Barth, interpreting Paul, regarded Jesus as the righteousness of God revealed apart from the law. But this revelation of God's righteousness is not exclusively seen in Jesus because, "In Jesus we have discovered and recognized the truth that God is found everywhere and that, both before and after Jesus, men have been discovered by Him."⁵⁰ It is just in Jesus that the standard for all such discoveries is found. And what is the content of this discovery? It is the faithfulness of God to which the Law and the prophets bear witness. It is Jesus "entering within the deepest darkness of human ambiguity and abiding with it. . . ."⁵¹ In one of the most remarkable passages in the commentary Barth wrote:

Jesus stands among sinners as a sinner; He sets Himself wholly under the judgment under which the world is set; He takes His place where God can be present only in questioning about Him; . . . He moves to the cross and to death; His greatest achievement is a negative achievement. He is not a genius, endowed with manifest or even with occult powers; He is not a hero or leader of men. . . . My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Nevertheless, precisely in this negation, he is the fulfillment of every possibility of human progress, as the Prophets and the Law conceive of progress and evolution, because He sacrifices to the incomparably Greater and to the invisibly Other every claim to genius and every human heroic or aesthetic or psychic possibility, because there is no conceivable human possibility of which He did not rid Himself. Herein He is recognized as the Christ. . . . In Him we behold the faithfulness of God in the depths of Hell. The Messiah is the end of mankind, and here also God is found faithful.⁵²

The resurrection, then, is no supernatural miraculous event. It is not an event in history at all.⁵³ Rather, it is the disclosure of Jesus as the Christ; that is, it is the non-historical relating of the whole historical life of Jesus to its origin in God.⁵⁴ It is the Christian confession that his life and death are the paradigm for our understanding of existence.

This brief rehearsal of the main themes of Barth's commentary scarcely does justice to its richness and complexity but perhaps it is sufficient to make sense of the observation that Christian faith does not consist in the belief in a supernatural being alongside or including other beings nor does it require doctrinal beliefs about the creation of the world or the divinity of Jesus and the historicity of the resurrection. Christian apologetics, then, is completely meaningless.⁵⁵ Faith cannot claim to be knowledge but is awe in the presence of the divine incognito. What Jesus reveals is that God is unknown.

It is tempting to write that this view of Christian faith is analogous to Wittgenstein's view of the religious life as one dominated by a picture. Christian faith is not belief in a series of propositions of various types that are defeasible by various intellectual disciplines and to which the believer must cling despite the results of those disciplines. But Barth's view, unlike Wittgenstein's, follows not from a philosophical theory about the nature of religious language but from the nature of faith as he believes it was understood by the Apostle Paul.

It might be argued that this view of faith does involve some beliefs and these beliefs require some rational justification; for example, the belief that this picture is the most significant and truest one could and should adopt, a picture in which God is utterly distinct from man, a

⁵⁰ Barth (1953), p. 97.

⁵¹ Barth (1953), p. 97.

⁵² Barth (1953), p. 97.

⁵³ Barth (1953), p. 30.

⁵⁴ Barth (1953), p. 195.

⁵⁵ Barth (1953), p. 35.

primal origin that “sets a question-mark against all truths.”⁵⁶ One need not deny that there are implicit beliefs in this picture, but the picture is not a heteronomous one; that is, one that violates reason or for which no reasons can be given. Just as one might see in Camus’s novel *The Plague* or Phillip Roth’s *The Human Stain* or Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Kamarazov* a depiction of human existence that strikes one as true, one might see here also a picture that, so to speak, fits: a picture of human history and existence as utterly ambiguous and where human beings seek to overcome this ambiguity through religion and especially a religion in which the human figure who most Christian believers think resolves this ambiguity is himself a prime exemplar of it.

To understand the Christian faith in this fashion does not mean the picture cannot be criticized or even rejected. Indeed, for the most part our culture including believers and unbelievers alike, reject it. Secular humanists reject it and argue that it is demeaning to the goodness and dignity of human nature. And many who call themselves Christian reject it, especially those who think that Christianity involves a type of doctrinal certainty. But the point is, that for those who adopt the picture, the type of reasons they will give will not be the type of reasons one would need to give for embracing those various sorts of propositional beliefs associated with orthodox Christianity.

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⁵⁶ Barth (1953), p. 35.

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Choosing to believe

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Abstract This article defends a regulative ethics of voluntary belief. In order to determine the occasion and the scope of such an ethics, the article begins with an examination of the concept of belief in conversation with the view of J. L. Schellenberg. Next, against the dominant position in contemporary epistemology, it argues that some beliefs can be voluntary, in the sense that they are under the immediate control of the believer, and replies to William Alston's influential objections to doxastic voluntarism. If some beliefs are subject to the immediate control of the believer, then in these cases believers are ethically responsible not only for how they investigate those beliefs, but also for the choice of whether or not to believe them. The article concludes by formulating and defending two types of regulative ethical principles governing voluntary belief.

Keywords Belief · Ethics · William Alston · J. L. Schellenberg · Doxastic voluntarism · Evidentialism · Faith · Self-deception

People frequently make moral judgments about beliefs, either their own or those of others. We say things like, "I ought not to have believed him," or "there's no reason why anybody should believe such a thing," or "she has no right to think that." The problem for a philosophical ethics of belief is to make sense of such statements. Do those who assert such statements intend to make moral judgments, or are they using moral concepts in an imprecise way to make factual assertions? If they really intend to make moral judgments, are those judgments aimed at beliefs, or at the reflections that produced the beliefs, or perhaps at something else altogether?¹ On the view that such statements sometimes communicate moral judgments aimed at beliefs, questions remain about the nature of the beliefs that they target and the nature of the value that those beliefs purportedly fail to achieve. While the development of

¹ See Kim (1994) for the claim that deontological ethical judgments (especially Laurence Bonjour's) about belief apply in the first place to the process of critical reflection on beliefs (or the lack thereof), and only derivatively to the beliefs produced by this process.

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a full ethics of belief therefore presents a host of problems, in what follows I will focus on three specific issues in service of the thesis that beliefs are sometimes voluntary, and when they are, they ought to be regulated by moral principles. If true, this thesis would help to explain some moral judgments about beliefs in ordinary language, but it would not explain them exhaustively. Belief formation is a complex process, and there are good reasons to think that different parts of that process are subject to varying types of moral evaluation. I claim, therefore, a modest but nonetheless important explanatory role for my thesis.

The first issue relevant to my project is that the nature of belief itself is a disputed matter, making it difficult for discussion of the ethics of belief to advance on the basis of a shared conceptual vocabulary. Beliefs might be defined as thoughts of a certain kind, dispositions to have thoughts of a certain kind, or even dispositions to act in certain ways. The objects of beliefs might be conceived as states of affairs, propositions, or sentences. Beliefs might or might not be defined so as to require a feeling of confidence. It is possible that several significantly distinct phenomena are labeled by the term “belief” in ordinary language in a way that obscures ethically relevant differences between them.

The second issue relevant to a regulative ethics of belief is that some versions of the project are rendered impossible by the widely held position that all beliefs are involuntary, since “ought implies can.” The view that deontological ethical conceptions such as “requirement, prohibition, and permission” cannot apply to beliefs because they are almost entirely involuntary has many defenders, but perhaps its most influential recent advocate is William Alston.² Just as I cannot be obligated to choose to bring about world peace rather than have lunch this afternoon (since it is not possible for me to bring about world peace this afternoon, even though it would be a very good thing to do), I cannot be obligated to choose beliefs in accord with certain regulative principles if it is not possible for me to choose my beliefs in the first place. The conviction that all beliefs are involuntary is not incompatible with several alternative conceptions of the ethics of belief, however. A distinction between prescriptive and descriptive conceptions of belief formation might useful here.

The author of a prescriptive ethics of belief aims to affect the process of forming beliefs in the members of her or his audience. The task of a prescriptive ethics of belief is therefore to identify objective duties to be fulfilled concerning belief (or the processes leading to belief) or objective goods to be achieved by some types of believing. By identifying these objective ethical norms or goals, the philosopher hopes to affect belief formation in one of the following three ways. First, on the assumption that beliefs are sometimes voluntary, the philosopher might hope to identify these objective norms or goals so that members of her or his audience will use them to regulate their choices of beliefs. Second, on the assumption that beliefs are sometimes or always involuntary, the philosopher might hope to convince members of her or his audience of the ethical deficiency of some beliefs that they hold and thereby cause a change in those (involuntary) beliefs. Third, again assuming that beliefs are sometimes or always involuntary, the philosopher might hope to change ethically deficient (involuntary) beliefs indirectly, by changing a person’s (purportedly voluntary) “belief policies,” epistemic attitudes, or world views.³

Instead of defending ethical duties or goals concerning belief, a descriptive account seeks to identify general patterns in the processes by which subjects actually form beliefs. Such an approach (a “naturalized epistemology” in one sense of the phrase) is certainly compatible

² Alston (1988), p. 257. For Alston’s invocation of “ought implies can,” see p. 259.

³ Alston himself sketches a deontological conception of this kind as an alternative to the attempt to regulate beliefs themselves (Alston [1988], pp. 277–283). The idea that the ethics of belief concerns “belief policies,” rather than beliefs themselves comes from Helm (1994).

with the conviction that all beliefs are involuntary, though it may not require it.⁴ A descriptive account of belief formation still has a normative dimension despite its rejection of a regulative interpretation of that normativity. For example, Alvin Plantinga argues that in order to generate warranted beliefs, a belief forming process must be “functioning properly” according to its “design plan.”⁵ It may be good for subjects to hold warranted beliefs in Plantinga’s sense, but it is largely not in their power to bring about this state of affairs by regulating what they believe, since the proper functioning of a belief forming process depends on a number of objective factors (the absence of brain injury or mental illness, for example).

In my view many of these types of analysis can offer complementary insights into the ethics of belief, but here I will attempt to identify prescriptive, regulative principles of voluntary belief, to show the limits of such principles, and to relate them to some other conceptions of the ethics of belief. My project, therefore, has three parts. First, I will summarize J. L. Schellenberg’s definition of belief, which I find largely persuasive, in the first part of this essay in order to clarify the proper application of my ethical claims. Second, I will argue that beliefs can sometimes be voluntary. Third, I will argue that there are objective norms concerning belief, and I will describe two types.

Before proceeding to the main course, however, I would like to offer one more appetizer. Richard Feldman identifies two strategies open to those who reject Alston’s view that, in the traditional sense, deontological judgments cannot apply to beliefs because they are almost entirely involuntary. He writes, “(i) they can argue that we do have the requisite sort of control over our beliefs,” or “(ii) they can argue that deontological judgments do not have voluntarist implications.”⁶ Feldman pursues strategy two by arguing that epistemic duties are a type of role responsibility, and role responsibilities carry obligations even when the agents occupying those roles cannot fulfill them. While this is an interesting suggestion, I will pursue a different tactic. As I have already indicated, I intend to argue, along the lines of strategy one, that some of our beliefs are voluntary. However, as an advocate of a prescriptive ethics of belief, as characterized above, another reply to Alston is available to me along the lines of strategy two. Suppose that all beliefs are formed involuntarily, as a response to the total epistemic situation of the subjects who form those beliefs. As I already mentioned, the prescriptive ethicist might seek to cause a change in subjects’ involuntary beliefs by bringing their attention to an epistemic principle that they had never previously considered.

Suppose, for example, that Madame Zuleika (M. Z.) was home schooled in a remote location by parents who regularly consulted a crystal ball to form beliefs about future affairs in the outside world and taught M. Z. the same practice. She accordingly forms several beliefs about the future by employing this practice and holds them all involuntarily, as responses to the evidence available to her (what the crystal ball indicates to be the case). If I argue that M. Z. ought not to hold beliefs based on crystal ball gazing, because this method for forming beliefs about the future can be shown to be extremely unreliable, have I violated the principle that “ought implies can”? I think not, because M. Z.’s beliefs can change, just not by her choice (since for purposes of this argument we are assuming that all beliefs are involuntary). Upon hearing my argument M. Z.’s total epistemic situation could change in a way that would lead to the (involuntary) rejection of some of her previously held beliefs about the future. In other words, the “ought” of epistemic obligation only seems to require the “can” of causal possibility, not of voluntary believing. With respect to my thesis, these reflections have the following implication: although all three parts of my argument are necessary to

⁴ The phrase “naturalized epistemology” originates with Quine (1969).

⁵ See Plantinga (1993).

⁶ Feldman (2000), p. 669.

defend the thesis that subjects should seek to regulate their voluntary beliefs according to ethical principles, the third part of the argument (the defense of objective ethical principles concerning belief) would still have a prescriptive implication even if the first and second parts (the definition of belief and defense of voluntary belief) fail.

The nature of belief

Many of the defenders of doxastic voluntarism, the view that subjects have some degree of voluntary control over their beliefs, focus on the nature of voluntary control.⁷ Indeed, in so doing they are following Alston's lead, as he clarifies several types of control that subjects could possibly have over their beliefs but (he argues) actually lack. It seems to me, though, that the tension between Alston's conclusion and examples of ordinary language that imply the voluntariness of belief (examples I will discuss below) has more to do with Alston's conception of belief than his conception of voluntary control. My attempt to clarify a working conception of belief in this section is therefore integrally related to my defense of the voluntariness of belief in the "Voluntary beliefs" sect.

What is a belief? The well known distinction between belief and knowledge might be useful as a starting point. Epistemologists have long observed that truth is a necessary condition of knowledge, but not of belief. Ordinary language use seems to support this distinction. For example, if I claim to know that there is a television in my living room right now, but I later discover that I was robbed of my television earlier today, then I would be inclined to say that I did not in fact know what I claimed to know. Knowledge is therefore not constituted solely by mental states, but rather implies something about the world. Belief, in contrast, does seem to be constituted solely by mental states. If I merely believe that there is a television in my living room right now, then even if I was unknowingly robbed earlier today, I would still be inclined to say that my use of the term "belief" to describe my epistemic situation was correct.

But what type of mental state characterizes belief? J. L. Schellenberg proposes the plausible view that when a subject *S* believes a proposition *p*, "*S* is disposed to apprehend the state of affairs reported by *p*, when that state of affairs comes to mind, under the concept *reality*."⁸ This definition accounts for several important insights. First, it defines belief as the disposition to think in a particular way and does not require this disposition to be activated in a conscious way. Such a qualification is necessary to account for what we might call "unconscious beliefs" or "implied beliefs." These phrases refer to beliefs that are implied by other beliefs or world views that we may hold or actions we might perform. For example, my decision to eat lunch ordinarily implies my belief that the food in front of me has not been poisoned, even though I am unlikely to think consciously about the state of affairs described by the sentence "this food has not been poisoned." Nonetheless, my decision to eat does imply that I am disposed to think that my food is not poisonous under the right set of additional circumstances (say, someone asking me to consider the possibility). Second, although this definition takes states of affairs to be the objects of beliefs, it is also possible to speak derivatively of propositions or sentences as the objects of beliefs, since states of affairs can be reported by propositions, and propositions can be expressed by sentences.⁹

⁷ See Steup (2000) for an influential example of this approach.

⁸ Schellenberg (2005), p. 50 (italics in original). My treatment of belief relies heavily on Schellenberg's in this section, although I part ways with him in Section "Voluntary beliefs".

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 41–43, for further discussion of this point.

Third, the definition distinguishes the kinds of thoughts associated with belief from imaginative or speculative thoughts about states of affairs. Schellenberg writes, “the believer, when it comes right down to it, is simply *thinking of the world*. (Notice that the world is real by definition; thus if *the world* is thought of by someone, there is no way for the question to arise whether he is not after all thinking of things in a detached way, perhaps in an imaginative reverie, and thus in a manner implying or consistent with nonbelief.)”¹⁰ The propositional content of beliefs typically does not include the notion of “reality” or “belonging to the world” explicitly. For example, the believer would not typically think “in front of me there is a cup of coffee belonging to the world,” but simply “in front of me there is a cup of coffee.” It is not therefore the content of the proposition believed that distinguishes belief from other kinds of thought, but rather the “form” of the thought as a whole. A believing subject “apprehends” some state of affairs as real, in a way that is difficult to describe precisely, but is phenomenologically familiar.¹¹

One final observation about Schellenberg’s definition is relevant to the question of the voluntariness of belief. Since a conscious belief can be defined as a mental state possessing an objective property (the apprehension of some state of affairs under the concept of “reality”), there is no need to add additional conditions pertaining to the emotional state of the believing subject to the definition. In particular, Schellenberg rejects the idea that the distinction between beliefs and speculative or imaginative thoughts about states of affairs is best understood in terms of the feeling of confidence that purportedly accompanies beliefs but not other types of thoughts. This point is of particular significance to my argument, because, as Schellenberg points out, Alston is an advocate of this view.¹² Schellenberg argues that feelings of confidence are not necessary conditions of belief by noting that such feelings often do not accompany thoughts about real states of affairs at all, but rather accompany some thoughts about propositions describing states of affairs. He summarizes his position on this matter as follows: “Degrees of felt confidence should not be confused with degrees of belief (in general, feeling is not the important thing). The experience of activated belief is instead ‘all or nothing,’ for either... I apprehend some state of affairs under the concept *reality*, or I do not. The feeling of confidence comes into play only... when I think about the *epistemic status* of the proposition I believe... Belief and confidence, then, are different things, dispositionally and otherwise, though they may occur together and causally interact.”¹³

Voluntary beliefs

Despite the differences between Schellenberg and Alston concerning the nature of belief, they agree that beliefs are always involuntary, at least in the sense that they are never subject to our “basic voluntary control.” Alston associates this type of control with “the maximally direct control we have over the motions of our limbs and other parts of our body” and with “actions we perform ‘at will’, just by an intention, volition, choice, or decision to do so.”¹⁴ With respect to beliefs, therefore, Alston argues that “we are not so constituted as to be able

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 46–47 (italics in original).

¹¹ “What we are talking about here has only obliquely to do with the *content* of the thought, as internally experienced, and rather more with an objective quality of it, one that might be referred to in a correct external description of the thought while yet not registering with you at the time.” (*ibid.*, p. 49 [italics in original]).

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 52 (italics in original).

¹⁴ Alston (1988), p. 260.

to take up propositional attitudes at will.”¹⁵ The central argument here for both philosophers (Schellenberg cites Alston in support of his position on this point) is a phenomenological one. They invite their readers to try to change a belief they hold through an act of will and argue that if they fail to do so, they should conclude that such changes are (contingently) impossible for human beings. Alston, for example, asks, “Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the US is still a colony of Great Britain, just by deciding to do so[?] If you find it too incredible that you should be sufficiently motivated to try to believe this, suppose that someone offers you \$500,000,000 to believe it, and you are much more interested in the money than in believing the truth... It seems clear to me that I have no such power.”¹⁶ They also agree that, despite our lack of basic voluntary control over beliefs, human beings have a kind of long-term, indirect control available to them in some cases. They might be able to deceive themselves into believing in a way inconsistent with the evidence available to them by a persistent policy of imaginary mental representation or self-hypnosis.¹⁷ This position on the lack of basic voluntary control is widespread in contemporary epistemology, though not universal. Of the philosophers I have mentioned so far, Feldman, Helm, and Plantinga all defend it with minor variations.

I agree with Alston’s position on two points which are important to my argument. First, my claim is a phenomenological one, rather than a metaphysical one. I do not claim to show that the choice of a belief should be understood in “libertarian” terms, as the cause that actualizes one of two or more genuinely possible outcomes.¹⁸ It may be that a “compatibilist” interpretation of the choice of beliefs is superior, in which the subject voluntarily chooses in a sense, although the outcome is determined. My argument requires only that there is a set of beliefs that are “free” in the sense that subjects would find an ethical analysis useful in the experience of regulating them. If subjects sometimes experience a choice between belief and some other way of apprehending a state of affairs as a choice between competing purposes or goals that they could achieve by thinking in one way or another (as I will argue), then this is a sufficient condition for freedom in the relevant sense. If there are beliefs that are voluntary in this sense, then they would be analogous to the kinds of actions that Alston considers to be under voluntary control. Take the example of basic voluntary control over the fingers (assuming the absence of paralysis). Most of the time, subjects do not consciously experience the motions of their fingers as actions that result from a choice between competing purposes. However, when faced with a reason to attend consciously to these motions, they are able to experience them in this way. For example, a police officer holding a gun might consciously wonder if she should pull the trigger.¹⁹ She might entertain competing purposes to be achieved by performing this action or refraining from doing so, and she might also find it useful in this situation to reflect on ethical principles to regulate the choice.

Second, I can agree with Alston and others that most beliefs are involuntary. His phenomenological appeal to the reader is persuasive with respect to beliefs that subjects take to be settled conclusively by the evidence available to them. Thus, with respect to Alston’s example it does not seem that subjects experience a choice to believe or disbelieve that the US is still a colony of Great Britain as a choice between competing purposes or goals that they

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 263.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ For an early development of this idea, see Naylor (1985).

¹⁸ Alston (1988), p. 262.

¹⁹ Technically, if she is thinking about the trigger, then this case would be an example of “non-basic immediate voluntary control” for Alston, but let us imagine that the officer is actually thinking about the motion of her fingers—suppose she is thinking “just one little twitch and it’s all over. Should I or shouldn’t I?”

could achieve by acting in one way or another, even though Alston provides a hypothetical monetary incentive. The problem is the clause “that they could achieve.” When it comes to uncontroversial beliefs we simply lack direct voluntary control, because such beliefs are determined by the evidence we have for them.

The involuntary nature of beliefs such as these does not imply that all beliefs are involuntary, however. Control over most voluntary human behaviors comes and goes depending on a variety of circumstances. For example, wearing a full body cast prevents a person’s normal range of basic voluntary control over his arms. Alternatively, suppose that someone suffering from a serious mental delusion unshakably believes that he is a bird in flight and needs to flap his arms continuously in order to stay alive. In Alston’s sense, this subject lacks basic voluntary control over his arms because his reason for flapping them is completely determinative of his behavior. He would fail the “try it and see” test for voluntariness, since if he were asked if he could stop flapping his arms he would be unable to do so (unless plunging to his death was an option for him, which, let us suppose, it is not due to overwhelming fear). Whatever we would think about applying the term “voluntary” to the subjects’ control over their arms in these examples, it seems clear that regulative ethical principles concerning the use of their arms would not be useful to them. Perhaps, then, having what seems to be conclusive evidence for or against the truth of a proposition is analogous to the full body cast or the delusion in these examples – that is, perhaps it is a condition that prevents us from having immediate voluntary control over a type of behavior that we otherwise might.

Alston rejects this possibility by arguing that even in cases where the evidence concerning the truth of competing propositions is truly inconclusive, we lack immediate voluntary control over our beliefs concerning them. He asks, “How *could* I simply choose to believe one rather than the other when they seem exactly on a par with respect to the likelihood of truth, especially when that subjective probability is rather low? To do so would be to choose a belief in the face of the lack of any significant inclination to suppose it to be true. It seems clear to me that this is not within our power.”²⁰ The appeal here is, again, phenomenological, and it seems to get something right. Agnosticism may indeed involuntarily preclude belief in many cases like this one, but must it always?

Alston’s analysis here and elsewhere assumes an important difference between beliefs and the types of behavior he considers voluntary that helps to explain his phenomenological intuition. Voluntary action can be analyzed as a choice between competing purposes. Perhaps the subject of the choice would recognize some purposes he could pursue as good and some as bad, and perhaps the subject would recognize multiple ways in which the good could be realized in a choice. Therefore, the mere pursuit of the good does not determine voluntary actions in any straightforward way. In the passage just quoted, in contrast, Alston implies that the subject’s attitude toward a proposition is always directly determined by his pursuit of the truth. Therefore, if we intend to believe a proposition in pursuit of some goal (such as comfort or wish-fulfillment) other than believing important truths and avoiding important falsehoods, we must do so indirectly, by making it seem true to ourselves. As I mentioned above, Alston grants that we do sometimes succeed in controlling our beliefs in this indirect way, but he argues that the procedure is unreliable, difficult, and rare. He calls it “long range voluntary control.”²¹

If this is Alston’s view, then it seems possible to reply that just as with other types of actions, it seems possible to imagine cases where subjects immediately choose to believe for reasons that compete with the pursuit of truth. First, let me reiterate that I am not arguing that

²⁰ Alston (1988), p. 266–267.

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 273–274.

immediate voluntary control is typically possible when people have conclusive evidence for some belief or disbelief. Perhaps in these cases subjects must undertake a long range program of mental activity to alter their beliefs in pursuit of their goals. When the available evidence underdetermines someone's attitude toward a proposition, though, the situation seems different. Suppose that a widower who has no conclusive evidence either for or against the existence of the afterlife has just lost his spouse and resolves at her funeral to believe that she continues to live in Heaven, because he finds this belief comforting. He does so by thinking of her in a pleasant and peaceful environment, surrounded by friends and family. When he thinks of Heaven as a real place he feels comforted in his grief, but when he thinks of it as a merely possible or imaginary place or as a theoretical or practical hypothesis the comfort disappears. We might add that he finds himself unsure what to believe in this situation, genuinely conflicted about how to think about the afterlife. In the end, he chooses the belief recommended by the pursuit of comfort against the agnostic attitude recommended by his evidential situation. It seems to me perfectly plausible that this widower has temporally immediate voluntary control over his belief that his wife is really in Heaven.²² It also seems plausible to me that this case can be generalized to other situations where subjects have an evidentially underdetermined attitude toward some proposition, and they could achieve competing purposes by thinking of the state of affairs reported by that proposition in different ways.

I admit that this thought experiment lacks the punch of a direct appeal to the reader's experience. Perhaps for many people the question of the afterlife is a settled matter, one way or the other. Perhaps others, lacking the widower's grief, could not suppose the pursuit of comfort a real competitor to the desire for evidentially grounded beliefs. However, there is a good reason to present a third-person rather than a second-person argument for basic voluntary control of a belief. As a general rule, when people believe something in pursuit of a goal other than truth they tend to hide their motives from themselves.²³ Therefore, we might find it hard to imagine (with Alston) that we could choose to believe something in pursuit of a "disreputable" goal like wish fulfillment or comfort.²⁴ If the example of the widower is persuasive, though, we do not typically find it as hard to imagine that others sometimes make such choices, and if we can acknowledge the possibility in others, then perhaps careful introspection can also sometimes reveal it in ourselves.

Consider a different sort of example, again concerning a religious belief. Ms. Thinksalot has undertaken extensive, open-minded, critical reflection on the question of whether or not God exists. She has worked hard to gather evidence for and against the reality of this state of affairs by looking at classical and contemporary versions of theistic and atheistic proofs, experimenting with religious experiences and mysticism, acquiring relevant testimony from people and texts she has no reason to distrust, and examining the evidence for various purported miracles. Suppose that she finds some of the theistic proofs and testimony somewhat persuasive, some purported miracles explained well by a theistic supernatural cause, and some of her experiences consistent with what she would expect if she were perceiving God. But suppose she also finds the problem of evil troubling for theism, naturalistic explanations of purported miracles and religious experiences perfectly plausible, and some of the testimony decidedly atheistic. If the widower's attitude toward the existence of Heaven is underdetermined by his evidence, we might say that Ms. Thinksalot's attitude toward the existence of God is overdetermined by her evidence. She could offer reasons she finds

²² I will argue below that this immediate control is "non-basic."

²³ See Mele (2001) for a review of the evidence for this claim.

²⁴ Alston (1988), p. 273.

somewhat persuasive for theism, atheism, or agnosticism. Now add that when Ms. Thinksalot thinks about God as really existing (not, again, as a merely possible or imaginary being or as a theoretical or practical hypothesis) she feels peace and joy. In pursuit of these pleasant feelings, she chooses to believe that God exists by focusing attention exclusively on those evidential sources available to her that support theism. The focus of human consciousness is quite limited, after all, and for most people, short-term memory is only capable of holding onto a few items at once. I suggest that Ms. Thinksalot has a type of immediate control over her belief in this case that Alston calls “non-basic immediate voluntary control.”²⁵ She does not directly choose to believe that God exists, but her thinking of this state of affairs as real is an immediate consequence of voluntarily focusing her attention only on the supporting evidence. If they are voluntary in this sense, beliefs concerning overdetermined propositions could be regulated by ethical principles.

Someone might object that in both of these cases the subjects choose conscious thoughts, but according to the definition discussed above in “The Nature of belief”, a belief is a disposition to think in a certain way, not the one-time occurrence of a thought. Even if we can sometimes choose to think of propositions as true or states of affairs as real in order to achieve comfort, peace, or joy, can we immediately choose a disposition to think this way? I think the answer to this question is “yes” for two reasons. First, the reason for defining belief as a disposition rather than an active thought is to account for those cases where the belief never becomes conscious. If a belief is ever consciously activated, then the conscious thought reflects a disposition (even if the circumstances for the activation of the belief only happen to be realized a single time in someone’s life); therefore, individual conscious apprehensions of some state of affairs as real manifest beliefs in the full sense of the definition. Second, there are reasons to think that a single act of voluntary conscious thought can sometimes cause a long-term disposition to apprehend some state of affairs under the concept reality. Having gone through the mental process leading to the decision to think of his wife in Heaven, the widower may never revisit the issue, but simply may apprehend this state of affairs as real whenever his wife comes to mind in the future. Perhaps this varies from person to person, on the analogy of an addictive personality. Some people can spend a day gambling and form no disposition that makes gambling more likely for them in the future, while others become addicted to gambling after a single episode. If this is the right phenomenological description of the widower’s mental process, then, in Alston’s terms, he has non-basic immediate control over his belief. His having the relevant belief disposition is caused indirectly but immediately by his act of thought.

Alston might still reject the claim that my cases present instances of immediately voluntary belief, because his definition of belief requires the subjective component of confidence. Even if the widower and Ms. Thinksalot could choose to apprehend Heaven or God as real, could they choose to be confident when thinking of these states of affairs or when reflecting on the propositions that report them? I concede that directly choosing to be confident about one’s apprehensions of reality seems not to be in the power of most human beings. Feelings or emotions, including confidence, are typically (at least partly) passive responses to circumstances (hence the etymologies of terms like “passion” or “affect” used to label feelings in the philosophical tradition). We might be able to bring about some feelings in a non-basic, immediate way, by creating the circumstances that produce the feeling, such as producing the feeling of pleasure by eating some chocolate. It seems plausible to me, though, that the only circumstances that produce the feeling of confidence about one’s attitude toward a proposition

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 269. To illustrate non-basic immediate voluntary control, Alston gives the example of turning on a light. The subject causes the event as an immediate, short-term result of some basic action he or she performs (such as moving the necessary body parts).

are evidential circumstances, and in many cases (including my two imaginary ones) these are not within the subject's immediate voluntary control.²⁶ The inclusion of confidence in the definition of belief, then, helps to explain why Alston reaches the conclusions he does concerning doxastic voluntarism. However, as I clarified in "The nature of belief", I think that Schellenberg's definition of belief is superior to Alston's on this point. The feeling of confidence simply does not seem to be a necessary condition of belief in the ordinary sense of the word (even if it often accompanies belief).

A final important set of objections to my arguments might interpret the behavior I am calling voluntary belief as some admittedly voluntary mental phenomenon other than belief, such as acceptance, "acting as if", or faith. In L. Jonathan Cohen's sense, to accept some proposition *p* "is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that *p*—that is, of going along with that proposition (either for the long term or for immediate purposes only) as a premiss in some or all contexts for one's own and others' proofs, argumentations, inferences, deliberations, etc. Whether or not one assents and whether or not one feels it to be true that *p*."²⁷ As a conceptual shorthand, we might say that to accept a proposition is to treat it as a theoretical hypothesis without necessarily believing it. "Acting as if" is a phenomenon in which someone resolves to treat some proposition as a practical hypothesis, a basis for acting, without believing it. Someone might object that it is more plausible to imagine the widower in my example choosing to act as if his wife were in Heaven without believing it. Perhaps Ms. Thinksalot might "accept", in Cohen's sense, that God exists without believing it. The observant reader will notice, though, that I described my examples to exclude these possibilities, describing the cases in such a way that acceptance or "acting as if" would not yield the desired goals of comfort, peace, or joy. In any event, I agree that there is a set of significantly different phenomena here, but I see no reason that is not question-begging to prefer these interpretations to mine in cases such as I have described. If one simply presupposes the view that beliefs are always involuntary, then perhaps these alternative interpretations may seem plausible, but the voluntariness of belief is precisely the issue under discussion.

To interpret my examples as instances of faith rather than belief also seems to me to beg the question of the voluntariness of belief. Having argued, with Alston, that human beings lack immediate control over their beliefs, Schellenberg discusses a voluntary form of "propositional faith" distinct from belief, acceptance, or "acting as if". He names four conditions necessary and sufficient for a subject's (*S*'s) attitude toward some proposition (*p*) to count as propositional faith (and a fifth one necessary for it to count as religious that I will not discuss):

- (1) *S* lacks evidence causally sufficient for *S* to believe that *p*.
- (2) *S* considers the state of affairs reported by *p* to be good or desirable.
- (3) *S* tenaciously and persistently represents the world to herself as including that state of affairs.

²⁶ Ms. Thinksalot might have a kind of basic voluntary control over her evidential circumstances, at least insofar as she can immediately exclude some of the evidence available to her from her conscious focus. Perhaps she could thereby generate some degree of confidence about her belief that God exists. I will not develop this argument further, though, because I do not think the feeling of confidence is necessary for belief. Richard Feldman also points out that if we have immediate control over some state of affairs, then we also have immediate control over the evidential circumstances that determine some of the things we believe and are confident about regarding that state of affairs. For example, if we can turn on the light, then we can control our belief and confidence regarding the proposition that the light is on by doing so (Feldman [2000], pp. 671–672).

²⁷ Cohen (1989), p. 368.

- (4) *S* voluntarily and committedly adopts a policy of assent toward that representation—or, more broadly, toward *p*.
- (5) *S* recognizes the religious character of her attitude.²⁸

Schellenberg's "propositional faith" is somewhat similar to the notion of voluntary belief I have been developing in this section. Both phenomena are voluntary ways of thinking about a state of affairs or a proposition (conditions 3 and 4), and the choice of attitude in both phenomena is motivated by the pursuit of something other than holding true beliefs (condition 2). Both are also only possible when the total evidence for the proposition under consideration does not already determine belief (condition 1). There are also differences. Voluntary beliefs, as I have characterized them, do not require a long-term policy of tenacious, persistent, committed representation and assent. They are chosen immediately in pursuit of some non-truth-oriented goal. In this respect, instances of propositional faith seem a bit like the attempts to exert "long range voluntary control" over beliefs that Alston discusses. Furthermore, in the case of overdetermined propositional attitudes, the subject does have evidence causally sufficient for her to believe some proposition (contrary to Schellenberg's condition 1), but she also has evidence causally sufficient for her to disbelieve it or remain agnostic toward it, depending on how she chooses to focus her attention. Therefore, if my examples are persuasive, it would not be plausible to interpret them as propositional faith.

Schellenberg develops his concept of propositional faith as an alternative to propositional belief in response to two convictions: first, propositional belief is always involuntary, and second, ordinary religious language requires that "faith must be understood as voluntary."²⁹ Together, these two convictions lead to his view that propositional religious faith must not be a form of belief. On the face of it, though, instances of propositional faith meet his definition of belief, because, as condition three makes clear, they imply a disposition to think of some state of affairs under the concept reality, or as "belonging to the world." In the case of propositional faith this disposition is maintained willfully rather than involuntarily, but without the presupposition that beliefs are always involuntary, it seems to me that propositional faith could also be taken to describe another form of voluntary belief, according to Schellenberg's own definition.³⁰ I will admit that although involuntary beliefs, voluntary beliefs in my sense, and instances of propositional faith all involve thinking of states of affairs as real, there are phenomenological differences between them. In that case, does it obscure more than it illuminates to label all of these phenomena forms of "belief"?

This argument is partly a semantic one about the reference of the term "belief". With respect to this semantic question, it seems to me that ordinary language supports my suggestion that these phenomena are all forms of belief. Not only does the phrase "choosing to believe" make sense as it is deployed in my examples above, but there are other familiar examples that suggest the appropriateness of referring to voluntary phenomena with the term "belief". People sometimes say things like "he only believes what he wants to believe," "your belief is a little convenient, don't you think?" or "what's your *real* motive for believing that?" Moreover, there is another good reason to put voluntary beliefs and propositional faith in the category of belief. Precisely because both of these phenomena include voluntary thoughts of

²⁸ Schellenberg (2005), p. 139.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁰ Schellenberg could reply that his definition of belief requires the disposition to "apprehend" some state of affairs under the concept reality, rather than to "represent" it under that concept. If there is a difference between these two concepts, though, other than the question-begging suggestion that the former is involuntary and the latter voluntary, then it is not clear to me exactly what that difference is and why it matters.

states of affairs as real or of propositions as true, they raise a set of common ethical issues, which I will now discuss.

Ethical principles of voluntary belief

Can there be general moral principles or aims that regulate the choice of a belief? To avoid misunderstanding, let me begin by stating that there are good arguments against restrictive universal epistemic principles prescribing that all beliefs should be based only on some limited set of evidential criteria. First of all, if these principles are meant to regulate all of our beliefs, then they make the mistake of attempting to regulate involuntary behavior. Moreover, attempts to limit the criteria of ethical or justified belief to only certain types of evidence (for example sense experience and logical intuition) seem arbitrary, because no non-circular demonstrations of the reliability of beliefs formed on the basis of these criteria are possible.³¹ Some of these restrictive epistemic principles also imply, upon reflection, that most of the beliefs we ordinarily take to be justified are not, thereby prescribing obligations that are impossible to fulfill. Furthermore, such principles are often self-referentially problematic, because they prescribe universal criteria of ethical belief that they themselves cannot meet. For example, it is not clear what argument appealing only to sense experience and logical intuition could prove that these are the only criteria of ethical belief. Some forms of foundationalism as universal theories of the ethics of beliefs seem to founder on these types of objections.³²

I think that these arguments are persuasive, but that they do not suggest the impossibility of regulative principles of belief. Rather, they suggest that any such principles will be either general (applicable to all voluntary beliefs), but sufficiently abstract as not to prescribe particular criteria of ethical beliefs, or specific but still generalizable (and therefore applicable only to some type of voluntary beliefs), according to the meanings of the terms that constitute them. I will argue that both types of ethical principles of belief are defensible, and the second type results from the application of the first. The first type of principle I call the “general epistemic principle.” The second type of principle I call a “type-specific epistemic principle.” Although foundationalist universal epistemic principles are vulnerable to the serious objections mentioned above, many type-specific epistemic principles that avoid these objections have a foundationalist structure.

In its most basic form the general epistemic principle simply prescribes a *prima facie* obligation that people should choose to believe something only if it seems true to them. Notice that the principle is presented in a regulative way and therefore only applies in cases where subjects have voluntary control over their beliefs. Notice also that for advocates of the view that subjects’ beliefs are always determined by the evidence available to them, all of our beliefs would trivially fulfill the general epistemic principle, even if it were not restricted to voluntary beliefs. Plantinga makes this point explicitly.³³ This implication follows if *S*’s “evidence” for some proposition *p* is understood broadly, as referring to any other belief or experience of *S*’s that makes *p* seem true to *S*. With this definition in mind, we might restate the general epistemic principle as prescribing a *prima facie* obligation that people should choose to believe something only if they have sufficient evidence for it. So understood, the

³¹ See Alston (1991), Chap. 3.

³² For a thorough development of such objections to “modern classical foundationalism,” see Plantinga (2000), Chap. 3.

³³ See Plantinga (2000), pp. 108, 116.

general epistemic principle prohibits the kind of voluntary believing I have been discussing, in which subjects choose to believe propositions that are not supported by the total evidence available to them in pursuit of such goals as comfort, peace, or joy.

The argument for this principle appeals to the moral values of consistency and honesty. According to Schellenberg's definition of belief presented above, a belief is a disposition "to apprehend the state of affairs reported by *p*, when that state of affairs comes to mind, under the concept *reality*."³⁴ There is a phenomenological difference between the "kind of forgetfulness" involved in thinking about a state of affairs and the "self-consciousness" that accompanies reflection on a proposition for Schellenberg.³⁵ However, since a proposition "is true when the state of affairs it reports actually obtains," believing that a state of affairs obtains implies a disposition to think of the proposition reporting that state of affairs as true.³⁶ Given these reflections, the *prima facie* obligation presented in the general epistemic principle can also be expressed as follows: people should choose to think of a proposition as true only if that proposition seems true to them. Thus, the principle is prescribing consistency between the propositional attitude recommended by one's evidential situation and one's choice of belief.

Apart from the consistency to be achieved by adhering to the general epistemic principle, choosing to believe in accord with this principle also avoids deception, since beliefs are communicative. In the first place, the choice to believe something in pursuit of a goal other than truth communicates the thought that a state of affairs is real to one's future self, and this thought could affect one's beliefs in the long term. It is also possible that circumstances might arise for communicating one's voluntary beliefs to others. Communicating such beliefs is necessarily deceptive, if the truth of a proposition is independent of whether it is, for example, comforting (since we could imagine many apparently true and false propositions that might be comforting as objects of belief). The voluntary believer in pursuit of a goal other than truth therefore deceives himself, and possibly others, by communicating a proposition as if it seems true to him, while actually believing it out of a motive that has no bearing on its truth.

Type-specific epistemic principles aid subjects in applying the general epistemic principle, by clarifying the kinds of evidence that would be relevant truth criteria for various types of propositions. For example, someone might argue that there is a *prima facie* obligation for subjects to choose to believe something about geological history only if they think it is supported by best available peer-reviewed scientific conclusions of well-trained geologists. Such a principle is an application of the general epistemic principle, if those who seek to regulate their beliefs about geological history in this way aim thereby to choose beliefs that seem true to them. Someone might wonder why we need type-specific epistemic principles. Why not simply choose beliefs that seem true to us rather than formulating principles that prescribe restrictive truth criteria relative to the meanings of propositions? The need for type-specific epistemic principles emerges out of actual inquiry regarding propositions of various types. For example, in the course of inquiring about geological history, someone who was not applying the epistemic method stated above might rely on his own sense experience, the testimony of various people and texts (some of which state peer-reviewed scientific conclusions and some of which do not), and his own deduction, induction, and abduction. Such an inquiry might lead to belief, but it might also lead to doubt. When the result is doubt, subjects often seek to establish second-order beliefs about the truth-conduciveness of sources that support conflicting propositions and, therefore, about which sources to trust when choosing

³⁴ Schellenberg (2005), p. 50 (italics in original).

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 44.

³⁶ *ibid.* See also p. 44n.7.

specific kinds of beliefs.³⁷ Type-specific epistemic principles result from such reflections, and they state the resulting second-order beliefs.

Adherence to type-specific epistemic principles could preclude the choice of many different beliefs, but which principles to adopt in cases of disputed beliefs is itself a disputed matter. In general, one should adopt the type-specific epistemic principles that one takes to be most appropriate for establishing true beliefs of the type under consideration. These principles cannot be stated abstractly, because they will depend on the subject's interpretation of the meanings of the propositions under consideration, and in particular, her judgments about which criteria are the best available ones for assessing their truth. Once subjects have established beliefs concerning type-specific epistemic principles, though, they should regulate their choice of beliefs according to them. As with the general epistemic principle, subjects have a *prima facie* obligation to choose specific types of beliefs in accord with the evidential criteria they take to be appropriate for establishing their truth, rather than to choose in pursuit of goals other than truth. For example, if someone accepts the principle regarding beliefs about geological history stated above, then she should refrain from choosing beliefs about the age of the earth according to the book of Genesis, even if choosing them would produce a desirable feeling of her own importance in the unfolding drama of natural history.

I have argued that the general epistemic principle and its type-specific applications state *prima facie* moral obligations, but *prima facie* obligations can sometimes be overridden. In order to see this point, return to the example of the widower who chooses to believe in the afterlife, because it comforts him, and add now that he also believes it would comfort others in similar situations. Is his belief unethical? It is at least *prima facie* unethical for the reasons discussed above. By choosing his belief, he communicates to himself and perhaps to others that a proposition is true for a reason that he does not consider truth-conducive. Still, it seems possible that in some cases the deception (either self-deception or deception of others) involved could be outweighed by the good achieved (the comfort) by the choice. Since the widower in this revised case communicates his belief for his own comfort and in the hope of comforting others, his choice is not necessarily selfish.

It seems to me that my arguments regarding regulative epistemic principles do not obviously settle the moral issues raised by these sorts of choices. I have argued that voluntary beliefs can be understood as communicative acts. If communicative acts imply claims to truth and claims to ethical rightness, then perhaps the two types of claims can conflict in cases like this one.³⁸ Such cases of belief might be best understood as tragic choices, where either option (belief that there is an afterlife or agnosticism about the afterlife) involves a cost. I will not attempt to provide a method for adjudicating between competing options in such cases. My purpose here has only been to show that there is a *prima facie* duty to believe in accord with the general epistemic principle and its type-specific applications. Perhaps, though, if subjects recognize this *prima facie* duty, they will tend to adhere to it most of the time. The fact that we often hide our non-truth-oriented motives from ourselves suggests that we often do not experience beliefs with these motives as tragic choices, but rather as immoral choices. Perhaps fuller awareness of the inconsistency and deception involved would discourage the choice of such beliefs in these cases at least.

³⁷ By "second-order beliefs" I mean beliefs about other beliefs. "First-order beliefs" would then be beliefs about anything else.

³⁸ For a good discussion of the types of claims implicit in communicative acts, see Karl-Otto Apel (1998), pp. 173–74.

Conclusion

I have argued that some deontological moral judgments are aimed at voluntary beliefs. If a belief is a disposition to apprehend some state of affairs as real or to think of some proposition as true, then it is sometimes possible for us to choose to believe. Voluntary choices are possible only if our evidence underdetermines or overdetermines our beliefs, and by choosing them, we aim to achieve some purpose other than holding true propositions and avoiding false ones. Since voluntary beliefs are possible, it makes sense to talk about regulating them. We have a *prima facie* moral obligation to refrain from choosing beliefs in pursuit of goals other than truth, and this obligation is grounded in the values of consistency and honesty. This obligation manifests itself in a general epistemic principle and in type-specific applications of this principle.

My purpose in so arguing has been both explanatory and prescriptive. My thesis helps to interpret examples of ordinary language implying that belief is sometimes voluntary and sometimes subject to moral evaluation and regulation. I have also tried to defend the kinds of prescriptive principles that subjects ought to use when undertaking the regulation of their voluntary beliefs. Although most of our beliefs seem to be involuntary, when we do choose our beliefs, they may be among the most important ones we hold, as my examples suggest. Therefore, the obligation to regulate them responsibly deserves serious attention.³⁹

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³⁹ I wish to thank H. Eugene Cline, Joseph Olechnowicz, and the participants at Claremont Graduate University's 2007 "Ethics of Belief" conference for their thoughtful comments on this paper.

Can religious arguments *persuade*?

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Abstract In his famous essay “The Ethics of Belief,” William K. Clifford claimed “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” (Clifford’s essay was originally published in *Contemporary Review* in 1877; it is presently in print in Madigan (1999)). One might claim that a corollary to Clifford’s Law is that it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to withhold belief when faced with sufficient evidence. Seeming to operate on this principle, many religious philosophers—from St. Anselm to Alvin Plantinga—have claimed that non-believers are psychologically or cognitively deficient if they refuse to believe in the existence of God, when presented with evidence for His existence in the form of relevant experience or religious arguments that are *prima facie* unassailable. Similarly, many atheists fail to see how believers can confront the problem of evil and still assert their belief in a benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient Creator. In this paper, I propose to explain why religious arguments so often fail to persuade (I take the term ‘religious argument’ to include arguments whose conclusions are either assertions or denials of religious claims). In doing so, I first offer an account of persuasion and then apply it to religious arguments. I go on to argue that at least some religious arguments commit a form of question-begging, which I call “begging the doxastic question.” An argument begs the doxastic question, on my account, when a subject would find the argument persuasive only if she antecedently believes the argument’s conclusion. This form of question begging is not, strictly speaking, a case of circularity and thus, is not a fallacy; rather, it would explain why one coming to the argument would fail to be persuaded by it unless he already accepted its conclusion. This has the effect, when applied to religious argumentation, that religious arguments are rarely persuasive, which raises the further question: what good are religious arguments? I end by suggesting some non-persuasive functions of religious argument. Finally, I suggest that a full understanding of religious argumentation should give evidentialists pause, for religious beliefs look less like belief states that are sensitive to evidentiary states and more like framework principles or fundamental commitments.

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Introduction

It is a well-noted fact that religious arguments, whether aimed at establishing religious belief or undermining it, are rather doxastically inert; that is, few are talked into (or out of) religious belief on the basis of arguments.¹ This feature of religious argument seems to raise a dilemma for proponents of such arguments. On the one hand, few if any nonbelievers are convinced of the truth of religious doctrines (and thus converted) on the force of religious arguments. So it would seem that religious arguments are not sufficiently effective tools for persuading nonbelievers to believe. Indeed, I will argue below that at least for many nonbelievers, religious arguments often *cannot* be rationally persuasive, for such arguments will beg the question for that audience. On the other hand, religious arguments seem beside the point for those who already believe; that is, a religious believer is one who already assents to religious tenets and thus one who will not need to be persuaded of their truth. So it would seem that religious arguments are not necessary for persuading believers to believe. If this is so, then religious arguments are neither necessary nor sufficient for producing religious belief. And yet, the history of at least some (particularly monotheistic) religions is rife with examples of religious arguments that seem, on the face of them, to be aimed at persuading the argument's audience of the truth of their conclusions. Should we conclude that theologians have long wasted their time in formulating religious arguments? Or should we perhaps ask what purpose, other than persuasion, religious arguments might serve?

In this paper, I aim to address this quandary, both by explaining why religious arguments are so often doxastically inert and by arguing that nonetheless, religious arguments serve several useful functions other than persuasion. But before moving to my own arguments, I want to contrast my view with a view that is prevalent in both Christian theist and atheist circles. On this view, if a person is not persuaded by a religious argument—that is, if he does not give up his religious belief or come to have a religious belief that he did not have prior to hearing the argument—he is irrational. Theistic proponents of this view seem to think that nonbelievers who are not converted by religious arguments are somehow psychologically or cognitively defective.² St. Anselm famously took this line in the *Proslogion* when he declared “Truly there is a God, although the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.”³ As Richard Taylor illustrates in commentary, Anselm understands the ontological argument's force in terms which place the fault for any failure of persuasion squarely on the person whom the argument fails to persuade.

¹ Gilson(1969, p.174), for example, declared that “the prospect of looking for proofs of something I feel so sure of appears to me a waste of time.” Baillie(1959, p.132) noted even more strongly, “We are rejecting logical argument of any kind as the first chapter of our theology or as representing the process by which God comes to be known. We are holding that our knowledge of God rests rather on the revelation of His personal Presence Of such a presence it must be true that to those who have never been confronted with it argument is useless, while to those who have, it is superfluous.” Baillie is quoted in Holley (1983).

² I mean for this account to hold for the atheist who accuses theists of being irrational if the latter fail to be persuaded by atheistic arguments. For the sake of brevity, however, I will here focus on the theist tradition and hope that the reader will agree that the case can be made for the atheist tradition in similar fashion.

³ *Proslogium*, in Deane (1962, p. 53).

[God's] existence is perfectly evident to anyone who really understands what is being described, and only a fool, St. Anselm said, or one who has no clear understanding of what is meant by God (*sic*) can fail to believe in him.⁴

In other words, one's nonbelief in the face of the ontological argument entails one's lack of understanding (a cognitive defect).

Although our focus here is on argumentation, it is interesting to note that this view goes beyond those in the evidentialist tradition. Alvin Plantinga, the foremost defender of Reformed Epistemology, similarly holds that non-believers are cognitively or psychologically defective. In his defense of his claim that religious beliefs are properly basic (i.e., they are well-founded without the need for argument), Plantinga claims:

God has so created us that we have a tendency or disposition to see his hand in the world about us. More precisely, there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe.⁵

Plantinga takes religious beliefs to be epistemically analogous to ordinary perceptual beliefs. We have an innate tendency or disposition to believe propositions of the sort "there is a tree" or "I hear a dog barking" just in case we have normal (non-defective) sensory organs. And observational sentences such as these are *justified* whenever they strike a person as true, provided that the person's sensory organs are in working order and the conditions under which they are operating are normal (they are not hallucinating, the experience occurs under normal lighting conditions, etc.). Presumably on Plantinga's account, the innate tendency or disposition to believe propositions of the sort "this flower was created by God" involves whatever normal (non-defective) cognitive abilities are required to "read" the phenomenological evidence of God's presence. It follows from such a view that those who do not come to believe propositions of the sort described are either psychologically incapable of accepting such propositions, or cognitively defective.

But surely, the view held by both Plantinga and Anselm—roughly, that nonbelievers are psychologically or cognitively deficient—begs an important question. To see why this is so, let us first consider what is involved in religious experience of the sort Plantinga invokes (for an adequate account of religious belief will parallel an adequate account of religious experience). Suppose that two people, a Christian and an atheist, contemplate a beautiful flower. Both smell the flower's aroma, both are pleased by the flower's intense purple color, both marvel at the intricacy of the petals' arrangement. The Christian is moved by this experience to say something along the lines of "this flower was created by God." But of course, despite his pleasure in the flower, the atheist will not be moved to say or to believe any such thing. Why is this? Plantinga would say that the atheist is either resistant to the experience of God's presence in the universe (as evidenced by this flower, among many other things) or his natural disposition towards such beliefs is somehow defective. But, for the atheist, *no* proposition can be true that invokes the concept of 'God' (or even 'god') in such a way as to entail that God exists. It is fundamental to many atheists' belief sets that no god exists. Thus, not only is he *not disposed* to utter claims such as "this flower was created by God," he is disposed *not* to utter such claims.

The distinction between the believer's experience (as Plantinga describes it) and the atheist's experience turns on the *intentionality* of religious experience. A person's religious

⁴ Taylor (1965, pp. xvii–xviii).

⁵ Plantinga (1992).

experience cannot be adequately described without appeal to the concepts, beliefs, and judgments that enter into the subject's identification of his experience. As Wayne Proudfoot has noted, "In order to understand [a person's] experience of a miracle, I must ascribe to him the belief that the event cannot be exhaustively explained in naturalistic terms, but I need not endorse that belief."⁶ In other words, one can have experiences such as those described by Plantinga *only if* one has, within one's belief set (or within one's conceptual scheme, we might say) the relevant theistic beliefs (or concepts). So to describe the non-theist as somehow psychologically deficient or defective is to beg the epistemic question—the non-theist lacks theistic experiences *because* he does not accept theistic concepts and beliefs! To label the non-theist as psychologically resistant or defective here is to seriously underestimate the role of the non-theist's beliefs in his experience.

Similarly, I will argue that to accuse the subject who fails to be persuaded by religious arguments of irrationality or cognitive defect is to seriously underestimate the role of antecedent beliefs and commitments in the evaluation of arguments. An adequate account of persuasion must take these subjective factors (as well as other contextual factors) into account. As it turns out, the failure of even very good arguments to persuade need not entail any defect in the non-persuaded subject. In order to defend this claim, I first propose an account of persuasion.

The logic of persuasion

The primary purpose of an argument, understood in the philosophically orthodox sense, is to persuade someone of the truth of its conclusion. This aim of argumentation is so obviously and widely recognized that it is often written into the very definition of the term. A typical account of argument, found in a standard introductory logic textbook, defines one as "a group of statements, one or more of which (the premises) are claimed to provide support for, or reasons to believe, one of the others (the conclusion)."⁷ Now, typically we understand the arguer and his audience to be separate persons, such that the statements in an argument offered by person A aim to provide another person, B, with reasons for B to believe the conclusion of A's argument. On this view (hereafter called "the standard view"), an argument's primary purpose is to persuade an audience to accept its conclusion.⁸

Naïve versions of the standard view (i.e., those taught in introductory logic and critical thinking courses) equate the concept of being rationally persuasive with the concept of being a sound (or, more weakly, a logically strong) argument.⁹ On such naïve views, any rational person who is confronted with a sound argument will come to believe the argument's conclusion. Of course, the soundness of an argument depends only on two features—namely, the internal logical structure of the argument and the external relation between the premises and the world (i.e., the correspondence truth relation). While the relationship between soundness and persuasiveness is a close one (at least insofar as ideally rational agents are concerned), the two cannot be equated for the simple reason that the latter and not the former depends on

⁶ Proudfoot (1992, p. 341).

⁷ Hurley (2000, p. 1).

⁸ The 'accept' here is to be read as the particular epistemic attitude that one has towards a proposition when one is interested in seeking truth and avoiding error and when with these goals in mind one assents to the proposition in question. For a full account of acceptance (especially, as this attitude differs from mere belief), see Lehrer (1990).

⁹ Throughout this discussion, I use the term 'logically strong' to mean either a deductively valid argument or an inductively strong argument.

features of a person's antecedently held set of beliefs and other relevant propositional attitudes. On a psychologically and epistemologically more realistic account of persuasiveness, we must attend to the beliefs and other propositional attitudes that an audience brings to the table.

For starters, we must note that there are persuasive arguments that are not logically good arguments (simply because some people are persuaded by bad arguments). Further, there are logically good arguments that fail to persuade. Some logically strong arguments have false premises and the argument's audience may recognize the falsity of one or more premises and thus fail to be persuaded. This may sometimes be the case, but note that it is not the actual falsity of a premise that will determine the persuasive power of a strong argument; rather, it is the *perceived* truth value of the premises. That is, if a person is confronted with a strong argument whose premises he firmly believes to be true, he may accept the argument's conclusion even where he is mistaken and at least one premise is in fact false. Conversely, a person confronted with a strong argument one of whose premises he firmly believes to be false will not accept the argument's conclusion even where he is mistaken and the premise in question is in fact true. The upshot of all of this is that the concept of being rationally persuasive cannot be equated with (any of) the logical concepts of soundness, validity, or strong inductive probability.

Given that an argument's persuasive force is not solely a function of its logical properties and the truth values of its premises, what must be the case for an argument to be rationally persuasive? Clearly, the persuasiveness of an argument is subjective in the sense that it depends on a subject's judgment as to the truth of the premises and the logical strength of the argument. The foregoing discussion indicates at least two conditions that must be met for an argument to be persuasive. For the sake of brevity, let us adopt the following shorthand: S will represent any person (subject) who "receives" (i.e., hears or reads) an argument and understands it in its entirety, and $p_1, p_2, p_3 \dots p_n/C$ will represent the argument from premises $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$ to the conclusion, C . Then,

For any S and any argument $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n/C$, S will be persuaded to believe that C on the basis of $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n/C$ only if:¹⁰

- (i) Each of $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$ holds some positive degree of subjective probability for S .¹¹
- (ii) S recognizes that $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n/C$ is a logically strong argument in the sense that the probability of C given $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$ is greater than the initial probability of C .¹²

The first condition captures the subject's evaluation of the premises—that is, S must assign some positive probability to each premise or he will simply reject the argument as unsound and thus not in need of serious consideration. The second condition addresses S 's evaluation of the logic of the argument. In essence, condition (ii) captures the central feature of argument-as-persuasion embedded in the definition of 'argument' with which we began our discussion: to persuade S to believe that C is to provide S with reasons for believing that C ; thus, if $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n/C$ is persuasive for S he must recognize the epistemic force

¹⁰ Note that this is *not* "if and only if." The conditions spelled out here are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions on an argument's being persuasive for S . We shall see below why they fail to be sufficient.

¹¹ By some "positive degree of subjective probability" I mean some probability equal to or greater than .5.

¹² Here, of course, we mean the subjective probability of C , as assigned by S . In the case of a deductively valid argument, S 's recognition amounts to his acknowledgement that the truth of the premises makes C certain. In the case of a strong inductive argument, it amounts to S 's assignment of a probability to C after considering the argument considerably higher than the probability he assigned to it before hearing the argument.

of $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$ vis-à-vis C . Condition (ii) simply encapsulates this notion of epistemic force in terms of subjective probability.

In addition to these two conditions, many commentators—from Aristotle forward—have added a third condition:¹³

- (iii) Each of the premises $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_n$ is more acceptable to S than is the argument's conclusion.

Condition (iii) is meant to call attention to a central feature of persuasion as a species of justification—that is, one is not apt to accept a proposition on the basis of evidence statements that one rates as less probable than the proposition in question. If S assigns a higher subjective probability to C than to a given premise, p_i , then S will not accept p_i as persuasive evidence for C (i.e., S will not accept C on the basis of p_i). Some commentators have argued that this “evidential priority” requirement is too strong a condition on argumentation.¹⁴ However, it seems reasonable to endorse the requirement in *dialectical contexts*, for it seems that where S_1 attempts to prove to S_2 that C , S_1 must argue from premises that S_2 accepts as more plausible than C (at least at the outset). Thus, insofar as we take argument to be aimed at convincing non-believing others of a claim that we endorse—i.e., insofar as *persuasion* is our concern—condition (iii) seems to be a valid requirement. To recap, then, it seems that for an argument to persuade a person S that C is true, S must find each of the premises plausible on its own; S must take each of the premises to be more plausible than C (at the outset of the argument); and S must recognize that C is more probably true, given the premises, than it would be otherwise. As it turns out, these conditions raise very serious problems for persuasive argumentation in some contexts. Before turning our attention to those problems (as we will do in subsequent sections), let us first see what advantages this account offers and refine it further.

This account of persuasive argument has an advantage over the standard view considered above. In analyzing the persuasiveness of an argument in terms of the recipient's subjective probability assignments to the premises (individually) and to the conclusion in relation to the premises (collectively), the account recognizes the role of S 's antecedently held beliefs in an argument's persuasiveness for S . Subjective probability assignments for a given subject S are a function of S 's antecedently held belief set precisely because all S has to go on in judging the truth of a proposition is his current belief set. As Brand Blanshard has put it, the *test* of truth is always a matter of coherence.¹⁵ Thus, the persuasive force of an argument is always dependent upon a given subject's antecedently held beliefs.

Failure to persuade

But while these three conditions on persuasion seem necessary, they are hardly jointly sufficient. To see why this is so, consider the following (rather typical) example of the failure of an argument to persuade, in spite of its being widely recognized as a *prima facie* strong

¹³ See *Prior Analytics* 64b 30 ff., where Aristotle seems to endorse this as a general requirement on argumentation.

¹⁴ For a thorough discussion of this requirement and its relation to the issue of circularity, see Walton (1985), especially p. 271 ff.

¹⁵ Blanshard (1939). Blanshard argues that even empirical “verification” is a matter of coherence; see especially 213 ff. Although this claim might be controversial, we need not go that far here—we need only admit that from one's own subjective viewpoint, the test of truth will always be a matter of coherence (with one's standing belief set).

argument. Suppose that a person *S* is confronted with Descartes' second skeptical argument of the *Meditations*, and she understands that the conclusion of the argument entails that she does not know that she has a body. Suppose further that *S* simply cannot bring herself to accept this conclusion, in spite of the fact that she believes the argument to be deductively valid and she cannot find fault with any one of the premises of the argument (i.e., both conditions (i) and (ii) on persuasion are met). Further, condition (iii) on persuasion is met, as *S* finds each of the premises of the argument to be more probable than the radical skeptical conclusion. What are we to make of this sort of failure to persuade?

One response that many will have to *S*'s predicament is that she *ought* to accept Descartes' conclusion, and that she fails to do so on pain of irrationality. The appropriateness of saying that a given person *S* *ought* to accept a claim on the basis of a logically strong argument depends in part on the source of *S*'s resistance to the conclusion. It seems that one of two things might be preventing *S*'s acceptance of the conclusion of an argument that even *she* admits is *prima facie* a sound one. On the one hand, the conclusion of the argument may conflict with one or more of *S*'s antecedently held beliefs; where this belief (or set of beliefs) is assigned a high degree of probability by *S*, the argument to the contrary may not convince *S* to change her belief. On the other hand, *S* may have some relevant non-epistemic attitude (e.g., fear) that prevents her from accepting the conclusion (or one or more premises). Let us consider the latter case first.

If *S* has some relevant non-epistemic attitude (e.g., fear) that prevents her from accepting the conclusion, the claim that *S* is not acting as a rational agent has some force. On this view, any rational person who is confronted with a sound argument *should* come to believe the argument's conclusion. Thus, the notion of 'rationally persuasive' is an intrinsically normative one—i.e., if an argument is logically strong and a person who hears and understands it fails to be persuaded of the conclusion in the absence of any epistemic reason for not accepting that conclusion, then the person is irrational. But this "fix" is also psychologically naïve. In epistemic contexts as in ethical contexts ought implies can, and whether a given person *can* come to believe a proposition will depend on features external to an argument.¹⁶

But perhaps even recognizing this psychologically contextual feature of real argumentation, we can formulate a general account of rational persuasion. Let us stipulate for the sake of this discussion that a person is a rational epistemic agent just in case (and to the degree that) he desires to have true beliefs and to avoid false beliefs. If this is so then whatever other psychological motives are in play, a rational epistemic agent when confronted with a sound argument will agree that in the interest of acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs she *ought* to come to believe the argument's conclusion.¹⁷ She may be unable to do so immediately (and perhaps even in the long run), given her antecedently held non-epistemic attitudes, but she should as a rational agent acknowledge that insofar as she strives to have true beliefs she ought to accept the argument's conclusion. This account sidesteps the "ought implies can" issue, as it requires of the rational agent not that she simply must acquire the belief, but that she recognize that she ought to strive to acquire the belief in question. The

¹⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for epistemic voluntarism, but on my view some version of indirect voluntarism is correct. Indirect voluntarism is the claim that while belief states themselves cannot be adopted or rejected directly simply by an act of the will, a person can voluntarily perform certain actions that might eventually lend themselves to the adoption or rejection of a given belief state. Different versions of epistemic voluntarism are defended by Matthias Steup, Carl Ginet, and Richard Feldman; each has a paper on the topic in Steup (2001).

¹⁷ A similar point is made in Dayton (1981, p. 742): "Thus to accept a proposition is to commit oneself to bringing it about that one believes the proposition. Of course to change one's beliefs may take time and effort; indeed one may fail. To be persuaded by an argument is thus to accept, though not necessarily ultimately come to believe, its conclusion."

latter requirement may be met, even if the agent is unable to simply accept the belief in question. For instance, she may seek to dismantle the psychological barriers to believing the argument's conclusion (e.g., her fear that she knows far less than she thought she knew) and thus clear the way for acquiring the belief that she recognizes as one she ought to accept.

But while this response seems plausible in the case of psychological resistance to otherwise compelling arguments, it fails as a response to the first kind of persuasive failure we encountered—namely, cases in which *S*'s antecedently held *beliefs* are what prevent her from accepting an argument's conclusion. To see why this is so, suppose that *S*'s inability to accept the conclusion 'I do not know that I have a body' is based on the fact that she believes that she does have a body and she takes this antecedent belief to be certain or very nearly certain. In this case, she is unable to believe the conclusion of an argument that she accepts as a *prima facie* good one because she is convinced on other grounds that the conclusion is false.

Here, we have a case in which a person fails to be persuaded by an argument with conclusion *C* because she already believes (and is convinced that) *not-C* is true. In such a case, a person is not likely to be persuaded that *C* is true, even where she finds the argument for *C* *prima facie* compelling. Of course, it is possible that one can be persuaded that she has been mistaken even about strongly held beliefs. But a person's serious consideration of an argument—even a compelling one—for conclusion *C* does not necessarily imply that she will change her mind about the truth of *C*. Much will depend on the strength of the person's antecedent belief that *not-C* (one might say, on the strength of one's prior subjective probability assignment to *not-C* and thus to *C*). Even in the face of a compelling argument for *C* one may continue to accept that *C* is false, especially in cases where one's antecedent belief in *not-C* is based on evidence or reasons to which one assigns a very high probability (or even considers to be certain). At best, a person in this situation may shift to a position of agnosticism with regards to the truth of *C*. But notice that even if one is moved to agnosticism, the argument in question has failed to convince the person that *C* is true—and it is always possible that at a later date the person will shift back into believing that *not-C* is true. Whether or not the person holds on to his belief that *not-C* will rely, in part, on the centrality of that belief in his belief set.¹⁸

Again, I do not want to overstate the power of antecedently held beliefs—we do, often enough, change our minds about the truth of one or more of our beliefs in the face of persuasive arguments to the contrary. But there will be some cases in which arguments will be nearly powerless to convince us that we are wrong. Such cases will be those that involve our most fundamental beliefs. By this, I do not mean to imply that epistemic foundationalism is true; on this issue, I will remain neutral. Rather, we need only note that on any theory of the "structure" of justification, some beliefs are more central, deep, fundamental, etc.—and thus more immune to challenge—than others. For a foundationalist, these beliefs will be those that are more certain and epistemically prior to others. For a coherentist, these will be the beliefs that are at the core of the belief system, and thus most immune to change brought on by the influence of new empirical evidence. For a contextualist (or a Wittgensteinian), they will be the beliefs that constitute the framework within which certain inquiries (or language games) may take place; on this sort of view, such beliefs will be unquestionable in principle—that is, by being in place they make certain questions possible but also entail that these

¹⁸ Perhaps the best known advocate of epistemic holism, W. V. O. Quine has consistently stressed this point—i.e., that where we face a "challenge" to our belief set it is a challenge to the whole, never to a single statement in isolation from the rest. Our response to such challenges is always to do the least damage to the standing set, which typically means revising only at the periphery rather than within core; thus, the more central a belief is (within one's belief set), the less likely it is to be given up or revised. For a straitforward defense of this view, See Quine and Ullian (1978).

framework beliefs themselves are immune to doubt.¹⁹ Note that a *prima facie* compelling argument whose conclusion is the denial of one of a person's fundamental beliefs in this sense is likely to fail to be persuasive for the simple reason that the epistemic cost of changing one's fundamental beliefs is always higher than the cost of changing a more peripheral belief.²⁰ It is reasonable to think that the more fundamental a belief and thus the higher the epistemic cost of changing that belief, the less likely an argument is to persuade one to give up the belief in question (all other things being equal). Conversely, the more peripheral a belief and thus the lower the epistemic cost of changing the belief, the more likely an argument is to persuade one to give up that belief.

Let us sum up the discussion thus far and prepare to apply our results to the issue of religious argument. We have noted that the persuasive power of an argument will depend on features external to the argument itself, and thus cannot be equated with the logical strength of the argument. A person's non-epistemic attitudes towards the (premises or) conclusion of the argument may prevent her from coming to believe the conclusion of an argument, even where she finds the argument otherwise compelling. Also, a person's antecedently held beliefs may conflict with the (premises or) conclusion of an argument in such a way as to prevent an otherwise compelling argument from convincing her of the truth of the conclusion. This failure of an argument to persuade will be especially acute where a conclusion is in conflict with one's most fundamental beliefs.

Now, whether a *prima facie* good or compelling religious argument will persuade an audience of the truth of its conclusion—i.e., whether a religious argument will compel belief—will depend on whether one of these “failure to persuade” conditions is in effect. So, for instance, if a person is psychologically predisposed against accepting the conclusion of a religious argument (for example, if he is a nonbeliever who is disgusted by religion and thus by religious propositions, or if he is a believer who refuses to accept any argument that challenges his religious beliefs), then he will be unlikely to accept the conclusion of a religious argument even where the argument is a good one. Likewise, if a person strongly believes that the conclusion of a religious argument is false and has good reasons for so believing, he will not be persuaded by a religious argument that fails to undermine his antecedently held reasons. Finally, if a religious argument challenges a person's most fundamentally held beliefs, the argument is not likely to persuade the person to change those beliefs, if the epistemic cost is too high (and the payoff too low).

Religious beliefs (and metaphysical beliefs that entail the truth or falsity of many religious beliefs) are precisely the kinds of beliefs that are fundamental in the sense just articulated. That is, they typically frame religious and metaphysical discussions and thus dictate the boundaries of what can be called into question as well as the evidentiary standards in play. Thus, the bar that one must reach to persuade someone to accept (or reject) a religious or metaphysical belief is raised higher than many other kinds of beliefs and may well be unreachable (especially where the “target” belief contradicts such framework beliefs). In this section, I have argued that there are both psychological and epistemological explanations for the failure of religious arguments to persuade opponents of the arguments' conclusions to accept those conclusions. In the next section, I argue that there are reasons to think that

¹⁹ There is also compelling evidence from neuroscience that some of our beliefs are regulated by (stored in, mediated through—the language is uncertain here) different parts of the brain than other beliefs. The indication, from several recent studies, that religious beliefs are located in different brain structures than other kinds of beliefs has led to a spate of articles and books on the topic. For example, see Ashbrook and Albright (1997) and Newberg et al. (2002). I thank Carl Kobelja for reminding me of this sort of research.

²⁰ This cost/benefit analysis is only one of several aspects of contextualism. For a more thorough account, see Williams (2001).

religious arguments are most likely to persuade those who already accept their conclusions. What to make of these features of religious argument will concern us in the final section of the paper.

Begging the doxastic question

In this section, I argue that many religious arguments are likely to commit what I call “begging the doxastic question.” An argument begs the doxastic question, on my account, when a subject would find the argument persuasive only if she antecedently believes the argument’s conclusion. This form of question begging is not, strictly speaking, a case of circularity and thus, is not a fallacy; rather, it would explain why certain arguments tend to persuade only those who already accept the argument’s conclusion. This issue will bring us back to the third condition on persuasion, the “evidential priority” condition. If an argument begs the doxastic question, then the assignment of some positive degree of probability to at least one premise relies on acceptance of the argument’s conclusion. But in so fulfilling condition (i) on persuasion, the argument violates condition (iii). That is, an argument that begs the doxastic question will be unable to persuade someone to believe its conclusion when the acceptance of that very conclusion is antecedently required. Similarly, given this close epistemic relationship between the conclusion and the premise(s) in cases of doxastic question-begging, one who antecedently rejects the argument’s conclusion will be unlikely to assign a positive probability to the argument’s premises, and thus the argument will not be likely to fulfill the persuasion conditions for that person.

Before we examine this issue further, it is imperative to contrast doxastic question begging with the well known fallacy of begging the question.²¹ *Petitio principii*, or the fallacy of “begging the question,” is committed when an argument (or, more appropriately, an arguer) assumes an answer to the very question that is at issue. Another way in which this fallacy is commonly characterized is to say that an argument begs the question when the conclusion of the argument is stated in one or more premises of the argument. Note that this fallacy is not a deductive fallacy: any argument of the form ‘p, therefore p’ is deductively valid, while such arguments clearly beg the question. Begging the question, then, is dialectically—not logically—illicit. Consider a gem of an example, attributed to President George W. Bush.

The reason I keep insisting that there was a relationship between Iraq ... and al-Qaida is because there was a relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida.²²

Now, this passage might be read in different ways. On the surface, it appears to simply be an argument of the form: $(P \ \& \ Q)/(P \ \& \ Q)$. This is a deductively valid argument, but reading it this way leaves us puzzled as to why President Bush might have uttered such a thing. We might invoke the principle of charity, and read it as an explanation, rather than as an argument; on this reading, President Bush is saying something of the form “I said that p because p is

²¹ The two issues are all too often run together. A casual search of websites purporting to instruct readers on the issue of begging the question turned up several instances of examples that do not in fact beg the question (if the question is understood as whether or not the argument’s conclusion is true). Instead, many of the examples cited should properly be interpreted as begging the doxastic question. Among the websites that cited non-question begging arguments as paradigmatically question-begging were Thompson (2006), Curtis (n.d.), and Cline (n.d.).

²² Bush’s statement (quoted in its entirety) is offered as an example of the fallacy of begging the question Thompson (2006). In its entirety, Bush’s assertion is actually an invalid argument: “The reason I keep insisting that there was a relationship between Iraq and Saddam and al-Qaida is because there was a relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida.” Nonetheless, in abbreviated form it serves as a good starting point for discussion.

true.” This is not only an explanation, it is often a good enough one,²³ and on this reading, President Bush hasn’t begged any question at all. However, if we read the passage as having occurred in a context in which the truth value of the conclusion is the very question at issue, Bush is expected to give a reason for his insistence that Iraq and al-Qaida are related, a reason that is independent of the very proposition at issue, and his stated reason merely repeats that he takes this proposition to be true. In this sort of context—namely, a dialectical context in which separate parties dispute the truth value of a proposition—one cannot simply assert the proposition in question, for to do so is to violate the evidential priority condition.

But there are arguments whose premises do not state their conclusions that nevertheless violate condition (iii) *because* the assignment of a high subjective probability to a premise requires an antecedently high subjective probability assignment to the conclusion; such arguments do not “beg the question” in the traditional sense, but are more properly labeled as doxastic question begging. Consider the following argument:

1. Republican lawmakers routinely devalue public welfare programs, education funding, same-sex marriage rights, and other socially progressive causes.
2. One ought to vote for candidates that value public welfare programs, education funding, same-sex marriage rights, and other socially progressive causes.

Therefore,

3. One ought to vote for a Democrat in the next legislative election.

This argument does not beg the question in the traditional sense—it does not assume what it sets out to establish. It does, however, make an assertion (premise 2) that those who are antecedently inclined to vote Democratic are likely to assign a high subjective probability. Further, in some contexts—indeed, in the dominant political climate in the U.S. today—those who reject Republican candidates are likely to vote Democratic, so those inclined to vote for Democratic candidates are also those who would find these premises to be compelling reasons to vote Democratic. For that audience, this argument begs the doxastic question.

The question before us now is whether religious arguments routinely or systematically beg the doxastic question. It is crucial to note that ‘begging the doxastic question’ involves both subjective and contextual factors, as it is determined by subjective probability assignments to premises and conclusions as well as evaluations of the evidentiary link between premises and conclusions, which will be contextually sensitive (as the “Vote Democratic” example shows). However, there will be notable patterns where arguments involve beliefs that are typical of certain groups, as defined by their belief sets. For instance, any religious argument that includes a premise that will be judged highly probably only if one is a theist will beg the doxastic question for any atheist. Similarly, any religious argument that includes a premise that would be assigned a very low probability by any theist will beg the doxastic question for theists. It is my contention that most (if not all) of the best known arguments for (and against) God’s existence beg the doxastic question; in other words, most of these arguments will be compelling only to those who already accept their conclusions.

In the Introduction, I argued that whether or not one has religious experiences (of the sort that Plantinga invokes) depends on whether or not one already subscribes to a theistic conceptual scheme. Similarly, here I will argue that the lack of persuasive force of religious

²³ Consider a context in which a woman keeps saying that one of her husband’s friends is a jerk. Exasperated, he asks “Why do you keep saying that?” and she replies, “Because it’s true!” Here, she has given him her reason for saying so, but as an argument, it is of the form “I said that p, because p [is true].” He might be satisfied with this response, or he might not, but if he isn’t, he’ll ask a different question, such as “Why do you think that?” So the wife has not begged the original question (which concerned her speech, not the truth value of her assertion).

arguments for many non-believers is best explained by their prior epistemic commitments rather than by psychological resistance or irrationality on their part. As we began our discussion with St. Anselm's accusation that those not persuaded by his ontological argument are fools, let us look at that argument's persuasive force for the non-believer. It is a common contention that Anselm's ontological argument (and perhaps all versions of the ontological argument) assumes no religious belief on the part of the argument's audience. Again, Richard Taylor's commentary captures this prevalent view:

[Anselm's] argument presupposes no belief in the existence of God. It presupposes only the concept of God, that is to say, the concept of an absolutely supreme being, and for this no religious faith at all is required.²⁴

This common interpretation of Anselm's argument rests on a distinction between religious *beliefs* and religious *concepts*, and further holds that anyone—regardless of his or her beliefs—can understand religious concepts (otherwise, of course, they are cognitively deficient). On this interpretation, understanding of the *concept* of a being “than which none greater can be conceived” (i.e., a greatest conceivable being) presupposes no religious commitment. But Anselm asks us to do more than understand this concept—his later premises rely on a move from “existence in the understanding” to “existence in reality” and in so doing, they rely on assent to the idea of a greatest being. But to assent to the notion of a greatest being is to assent to a Chain of Being, in which all existents are *ranked* or *valued* with respect to one another. And of course it is not a subjective sense of value that Anselm had in mind when he referred to the greatest conceivable being; he meant ‘greatest’ to be understood in some objective, universal, or cosmic sense. In this sense, there is *one* objectively and universally correct valuation of all beings relative to one another, and this valuation of every being is according to the natural or moral law of the universe. But upon what is the moral law of the universe based? The answer for the theist, of course, makes reference to God, the Supreme Being and the source of all ultimate value. So, theists are likely to assign high subjective probabilities to Anselm's premises. Many (though not all) atheists will reject the very notion of a “greatest being,” and thus assign low subjective probability to the premises of Anselm's argument. The standard interpretation of (and Anselm's own presentation of) the ontological argument asks us to separate religious concept from religious belief, when in fact one who rejects the religious belief in question will not likely accept the concept in question. And the subject who does not believe in God and rejects the very idea of an ultimate Chain of Being is not, contrary to Anselm's accusation, cognitively deficient in this regard. The mistake made by Anselm and his commentators is to fail to recognize the interdependency of one's beliefs and the concepts with which he will work.

This problem is not unique to the ontological argument. Another prevalent type of religious argument, the cosmological argument, runs into the same problem. Standard accounts of the cosmological argument move from the acknowledgement that the physical universe exists, through a demand for explanation of this fact, to the conclusion that (only) God's existence adequately explains this fact. The move from a demand for explanation to God's existence as the only adequate explanation rests on the dual claims that explanation in the scientific sense (of immediate physical cause that is itself an effect) is inadequate and that there is an alternative kind of explanation (the uncaused cause). But, of course, many non-theists will reject the second (and perhaps also the first) conjunct of that premise; for instance, a committed physicalist will reject out of hand the concept of a non-physical cause. The currently in vogue “design arguments” fit a similar pattern; that is, design arguments move from the

²⁴ Taylor (1965, p. ix).

claim that the universe exhibits order and the claim that the only adequate explanation of such observed patterns is an intelligent designer to the conclusion that God (the intelligent designer) exists. But those who reject theism are likely to assign low subjective probabilities to each of these premises; i.e., they will reject both the claim that observed regularities constitute order (and certainly “perfect order” as some versions of the argument have it) and the claim that such observed regularities require non-natural explanations. And again, we have fundamental metaphysical disagreements here, not cognitive or psychological deficiency on the part of the unpersuaded.

Finally, the ubiquitous “Problem of Evil” argument, whose conclusion is often stated as ‘God (defined as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent) does not exist,’ includes premises that are likely to be assigned high probability by atheists and low probability by theists. That is, every version of this argument relies on premises of the general form ‘God would not allow evil to occur’ and ‘Some aspects of the world in which we live are evil.’ Given that theists will assign one or both of these premises low subjective probability, the argument is unlikely to meet the conditions on persuasion for theists (because condition (i) will not be met). For many atheists, condition (i) will be met (that is, the premises will be assigned high subjective probability), but condition (iii) will then not be met (for the atheist antecedently believes the argument’s conclusion, and thus, the premises do not themselves provide the reasons for his atheism).

What good are religious arguments if they are not persuasive?

If the foregoing is correct, then religious arguments—whether “pro” or “con”—rather systematically beg the doxastic question, and thus will not be persuasive in the sorts of dialectical contexts in which the truth value of their conclusions is what is at issue. However, as I alluded to above, the use of religious argument is more widespread than the foregoing account of its persuasive function suggests. For example, arguments are often a part of doctrinal or theological training, they are often voiced during sermons, they serve as aids in exegetical work, and they are often aimed at increasing the understanding of those who already adhere to the beliefs stated in their conclusions. As we have noted above, none of these uses can be understood as aimed at *persuasion*, as these arguments all function within religious contexts and are aimed at those who already believe their conclusions. What purpose, we might ask, can arguments serve in these (believer-specific) contexts?

In addition to the aim of arguments embedded in the standard view, it is clear that arguments serve several other purposes. Among them are justification and elucidation. In the first kind of case, an argument might be aimed at convincing someone to believe its conclusion *for the reasons stated in the premises*. This is slightly different from our account of argument as persuasion, which holds that an argument is aimed at getting a person (who does not already believe the conclusion) to accept its conclusion. Thus, a religious argument aimed at one who already believes its conclusion might be an attempt to provide that person with strong evidence for something they already believe on faith (or perhaps on weak evidence). This interpretation of religious argument is compatible with the reports of Anselm and others, who already believed on faith what they set out to prove. *Because* their antecedent beliefs will increase the likelihood that they will assign high probability to the premises of such arguments, and thus find them compelling, such arguments will be successful in this sort of context.

In the second kind of case (elucidation), arguments may be used to indicate inferential connections among propositions that might otherwise be missed, to show interrelationships

among doctrinal claims, to draw out consequences of prior epistemic commitments, and so forth. Again, this use of arguments differs slightly from the standard view for both the proponent of the argument and its intended audience will most likely already believe the arguments' conclusions yet the argument may be useful in illustrating the logical relations among one's religious beliefs and between those beliefs and others. One prevalent concern among theologians is the coherence of a given system of religious beliefs. For example, many theologians and philosophers have been interested in showing that their beliefs about the nature of God are internally consistent, and that the system is consistent with other widely acknowledged facts (such as the existence of purported evil in the world). One cannot illustrate the coherence (or lack thereof) of a system of beliefs without the use of arguments. But it is important to note that arguments so functioning are not intended to persuade anyone to believe their conclusions (because they are typically being offered and received by those who already believe the conclusions).

Although the use of arguments for justification and elucidation differs from the standard view of argument as persuasion, each involves the use of argument in an evidentiary sense—that is, in each case argument is used to indicate the evidence for a given religious proposition or to illustrate inferential connections among religious propositions. These uses explain many (perhaps most) religious arguments in theistic contexts. But such evidentiary uses of argument need not exhaust the practice of argumentation in religious contexts.

In some cases, arguments may be part of an altogether different “language game.” When Wittgenstein argued that language has multiple functions, with the meaning, rules of usage, and grammar all determined by the linguistic context, he tended to focus on singular terms and statements. But the same may be true for larger units of language as well—thus, the meaning and usage of arguments may also vary with context. In certain religious contexts, such as the sermon in a church service, an argument may not be used in an evidentiary sense at all. Instead, it may be a performative speech act, an argument as confession of faith. In defending this understanding of religious argument, Maury Jackson compares the presentation of a religious argument to such performatives as “I love you”—in both cases, the utterances are also *acts* of the relevant sort.

Saying ‘I love you’ also acts out one’s love linguistically, for to say ‘I love you’ is considered in many cultures to be an act of love. ... The textual sermon serves just a similar kind of role. It is the acting out of one’s faith linguistically, by confessing one’s own faith in Christ.²⁵

Just as in the context of a sermon, so it may be in the wider context of theology that a religious argument may serve neither an evidentiary nor a persuasive purpose at all but rather a performative one. Together, these three distinct aims of argumentation—as justification, elucidation, or speech act—help to explain the ubiquitous use of religious arguments in the history of religion.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that as persuasive devices, religious arguments are more likely to fail than to succeed; that is, in certain dialectical contexts in which the audience is assumed to believe *not-C* prior to the reception of a religious argument concluding that *C*, such religious arguments are unlikely to provide such an audience with reasons to believe that *C*.

²⁵ Jackson (2002, p. 89).

I have attempted to explain this “inertness” feature of religious arguments by showing that religious beliefs, and thus arguments for those beliefs, are of the sort that involve our most fundamental commitments—metaphysical and epistemological—and therefore, are the least sensitive to the kinds of reasons or evidence provided in arguments. This is so because religious arguments are likely to beg the doxastic question, being judged compelling only by those who antecedently accept their conclusions. Rather than place blame for the failure of such arguments to persuade, we do better to understand the epistemology of persuasion and religious belief. It seems to me that my account both provides an explanation for such failures to persuade and raises a fundamental challenge to the evidentialist tradition in theology. For if I am right that one’s evaluation of premises and thus of arguments depends on one’s antecedent “deep” commitments, one of which is surely religious faith (or lack thereof), then the evidentialists’ expectations that religious beliefs are—or should be—sensitive to evidential input is mistaken. And, whatever the prospects for an “ethics of belief” in general, it would seem that the prospects for an ethics of religious belief are particularly bleak.

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Belief, faith, and acceptance

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Abstract Belief is a central focus of inquiry in the philosophy of religion and indeed in the field of religion itself. No one conception of belief is central in all these cases, and sometimes the term ‘belief’ is used where ‘faith’ or ‘acceptance’ would better express what is intended. This paper sketches the major concepts in the philosophy of religion that are expressed by these three terms. In doing so, it distinguishes propositional belief (belief *that*) from both objectual belief (believing something *to have a property*) and, more importantly, belief *in* (a trusting attitude that is illustrated by at least many paradigm cases of belief in God). Faith is shown to have a similar complexity, and even propositional faith divides into importantly different categories. Acceptance differs from both belief and faith in that at least one kind of acceptance is behavioral in a way neither of the other two elements is. Acceptance of a proposition, it is argued, does not entail believing it, nor does believing entail acceptance in any distinctive sense of the latter term. In characterizing these three notions (and related ones), the paper provides some basic materials important both for understanding a person’s religious position and for appraising its rationality. The nature of religious faith and some of the conditions for its rationality, including some deriving from elements of an ethics of belief, are explored in some detail.

Keywords Acceptance · Belief · Ethics of belief · Conviction · Defeasibility · Evidence · Faith · Hope · Justification · Probability · Rationality

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Belief and its objects

The concept of belief may well be basic in a sense implying that a standard philosophical analysis offering illuminating necessary and sufficient conditions is not possible.¹ I refer here to belief as instantiated by a *person's* believing a proposition. We should set aside immediately the use of 'belief' in which it designates a *proposition* believed or hypothetically believed, as in some cases in which a person asks whether (for instance) there is any evidence for the belief that the universe has always existed.

From a structural and ontological point of view, there are several basic cases of belief. One is *propositional*: this is believing that *p*, where *p* is a proposition. Another is *objectual*: this is either (1) believing a thing to have a property, say the sky to be threatening, or (2) believing, *of* a thing, such as the sky that it has a property.² Neither (1) nor (2) entails believing any particular proposition. An important locution explicable in terms of these two is 'believing a person'. This is roughly a matter of believing certain propositions the person affirms, on the basis of the person's affirming the proposition(s) in question (perhaps the notion also includes—less commonly, to be sure—having an objectual belief the person conveys).

An important locution not explicable simply in terms of the first two is *believing in*. Believing in God—which might be called *attitudinal belief*—is not in general explicable in terms of propositional and objectual believing. Attitudinal belief is a central concept in the philosophy of religion and should not be assimilated to either of the first two kinds. (I will return to it below.)

What of *belief about*, as where someone is said to have a false belief about God's forgiveness? *Belief-about* locutions can function either objectually, especially where the believer is in perceptual contact with the object, or *topically*, as where we speak of someone's beliefs about the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia or even about whether one round square can be larger than another. The locutions are useful because we need a way of indicating the subject matter of cognition without commitment to the existence of its topical objects. In this spirit, atheists doing philosophical theology may be said to know what they are talking about even if atheism should be true.

It is well known that instances of propositional belief, unlike instances of propositional knowledge, are not by their very nature true. To say however, that belief is never truth-entailing in any sense would be a mistake. It is obviously false for beliefs of necessary truths. But consider objectual beliefs. We cannot believe the sky to be threatening unless there really *is* a sky *of* which we believe this. This illustrates the kind of existential truth entailed by the existence of objectual belief. To be sure, what one believes *of* a thing that exists may be mistaken; my point is that there is an important notion of belief which connects the believer with reality in a way that facilitates (though it does not entail) forming true beliefs about the object.

From a phenomenological point of view, many writers have contrasted occurrent with dispositional beliefs.³ The former are roughly beliefs in consciousness, such as my belief that there is printing before me, as opposed to beliefs one *has* that are stored in memory but not, at the time in question, manifested in consciousness in the sense that they or their

¹ I have argued for this point about belief in (1972). Further discussion of belief in relation to the philosophy of religion and pertinent to this paper is provided by Alston (2007).

² The difference between propositional and objectual beliefs is discussed in detail in Audi (2007) and in McKinsey (1991).

³ For an early treatment of the distinction between dispositional and occurrent beliefs see Goldman (1970). A detailed analysis of the distinction is provided in Audi (1994).

contents are before mind.⁴ This distinction is important; but it can cause trouble if taken to indicate *kinds* of belief, as opposed to two ways beliefs may be held: roughly, actively in mind as opposed to being just in memory.

From a psychological point of view, beliefs of any kind have many dimensions. Three in particular should be mentioned in relation to understanding religious beliefs: entrenchment, centrality, and intensity.

Entrenchment is a matter of how 'rooted' the belief is, where rootedness is understood in terms of how much is required to eliminate it. One counterforce is hostile evidence, directly encountered or presented by others. Another is memorial fading (though this is normal for, e.g. beliefs we 'need' only briefly, as in driving). For almost anyone, a license number is easily forgotten; almost none of us can forget our names. And if a plausible skeptic can get undergraduates to doubt that there is an external world, it would be a rare success that results in their doubting that they are hearing someone make the case. The belief-forming power of perception is a central epistemic fact. Perceptual beliefs tend to be deeply entrenched, if only for the duration of the sensory stimulation that grounds them.

Centrality is a matter of how influential the belief is in the person's psychology, especially the belief system but also behavioral tendencies. What other beliefs rest on it? What pro or con attitudes does it underlie? What conduct does it tend to generate? Centrality so understood is often proportional to importance, in an intuitive sense involving relevance to guiding thought and action, and in a religious person some (but not all) religious beliefs will be both important and central.

Intensity is roughly a matter of the felt conviction—the sense of truth—that accompanies a belief when it is occurrent, say the degree of conviction that God has a plan for humanity, felt when this proposition is before the mind. Intensity is no doubt correlated with entrenchment, but they can vary independently. Both can be referred to under the common phrase 'strength of belief'. (So can subjective probability; but strength in these other senses is a distinct variable and need not be accompanied by a corresponding degree of probability, as where the person ascribes a high probability to a proposition firmly believed.)

Maps provide a useful metaphor for the belief system. Our belief systems serve as our maps of reality. *Given* motivation, and intentions in particular, they determine our itineraries. A map alone pictures destinations, but does not incline us to go to them. And if we had motivation without a cognitive map, we would be at a loss to find our way. If we have objectual beliefs, we are in contact with reality, but this alone may not help us. Consider again believing the sky to be threatening. Having this belief guarantees that there is a sky but not that it is threatening. Verisimilitude in the object slot, one might say, guarantees nothing about the truth or even justification of the attribution in the predicate slot.

Religious belief

Suppose we now consider religious belief in the light of the conception of belief now outlined. We can see immediately that 'religious belief' can apply to the content notion, roughly

⁴ It is an interesting (and neglected) question what it *is* for an objectual belief to be dispositional versus occurrent. If, as I drive along, I continue to believe the road to be slippery, must I be seeing the road or otherwise perceptually aware of it? This seems doubtful, and it may make room for such a belief to be dispositional; but here what is in my memory need not be a proposition, as opposed to a predication (say *being slippery*). What is required for such a belief to be occurrent? A consciousness of the road and a thought of the predication *being slippery* would seem sufficient (where one does in fact believe the road to be slippery), but this is probably not the only way such a belief may be occurrent.

to an “article of faith,” or to the psychological notion, the holding of a belief. It can also designate propositional beliefs or attitudinal beliefs. Both have what might be called fiducial applications: each kind of ‘belief’-locution may designate a kind of faith. Indeed, faith is perhaps the most common referent of ‘belief in’, though the faith designated is not necessarily religious. To be sure, belief in, say wood nymphs may simply come to believing that there *are* such beings; but more commonly ‘belief in’ implies a positive attitude and not just existential belief.

If religious belief can be equivalent to religious faith, we would expect faith to be similar in dividing into propositional and non-propositional cases. It does. There is faith that God has a plan for humanity as well as faith in God. But is the latter objectual? It is true that we cannot properly speak of faith, *of* God, that God has a plan; but we can speak of faith, concerning God, that God has a plan. But could ‘concerning’ be just topical? It can be when used in a certain tone of voice, say sarcastically. The same holds for ‘belief in God’. But the typical uses of ‘belief in God’ presuppose that God is the object in question. The question is important for understanding the notion of a *religious believer*, sometimes abbreviated to ‘believer’. Those phrases are used in political philosophy and indeed in politics and everyday life. Their use by theists tends to presuppose God’s existence (or that of some deity). We need a way to characterize religious believers that does not presuppose this, and this can be done by appeal to the notion of a person’s having religious faith, quite apart from using the locution ‘believes in God’. Let us turn to that.

Religious believers are commonly taken to be persons of (some) religious faith. Is religious faith, then, a kind of belief? One might think that propositional faith, say faith that God has a plan for humanity, is simply a matter of believing this proposition. But that is not so. For one thing, a person could believe this but be sorry that it is so and regard it as a bad thing. Faith that *p* (for some proposition *p*), by contrast, implies having a positive attitude toward *p*’s being the case. Belief by itself does not imply this (with the possible exception of a belief whose content, say that God has a plan *good* for humanity, implies a positive attitude of the same sort).

Given the positive attitudinal element of propositional faith, it may be that an adequately rich set of such fiducial attitudes (believing that God loves us, that God will resurrect us, and the like) would suffice for being a religious believer. There may, however, be an additional requirement: the presence of what the believer would express as attitudinal religious belief, say believing *in God*. If this is not required, we can at least see that sincere denial of such an attitude would be *inconsistent* with being a religious believer. There is no need to settle this here, however. My main point here is that faith does not reduce to belief conceived simply doxastically. This is important for many issues in the philosophy of religion, including the special question of whether a person may have direct voluntary control of belief-formation (may ‘believe at will,’ in one terminology). If more is required for propositional faith beyond what is needed for belief having the same propositional object, then more volitional power is needed for producing faith at will as opposed to just belief with the same content. Whether faith even entails belief and how its rationality conditions should be conceived are topics that remain.

Acceptance

Before we approach those questions, however, it is important to compare faith with acceptance. The reason is not only that religious believers are supposed to accept what they hold in faith; there is also a duality in the use of ‘accept’. On one use, acceptance entails belief;

on another, it does not. A recent paper by William P. Alston is a good focus for developing the contrast, particularly since he considers acceptance a good intuitive anchor for a kind of faith we both take to be important, a non-doxastic kind (to be characterized shortly) that does not entail believing the proposition that constitutes its content.

Alston says of this kind of acceptance,

I find the voluntary character of the act of acceptance to be the best way of giving an initial idea of it. The act of acceptance, unlike a state of belief, is the adoption, the taking on of a positive attitude toward a proposition. . . a mental act . . . But when we come to saying just what positive attitude to a proposition is adopted when one accepts it, we are back to the pervasive similarity of acceptance and belief. . . accepting that *p* is both a complex dispositional state markedly similar to believing that *p*, but distinguished from it by the fact that this state is voluntarily adopted by a mental act.⁵

One could, then, consider a theological proposition and then accept it and thereby pass into a state of acceptance of it that is an instance of non-doxastic faith. I propose to call the posited act *behavioral acceptance* and the resulting state *cognitive acceptance*. Alston gives a useful example:

Consider an army general . . . facing enemy forces . . . He needs to proceed on some assumption as to the disposition of those forces. His scouts give some information about this but not nearly enough to make any such assumption obviously true. . . He *accepts* the hypothesis that seems to him the most likely . . . He uses this as a basis for disposing his forces in the way that seems mostly likely to be effective, even though he is far from believing that this is the case. (*Ibid.*)

There are acts of acceptance, as the military example shows in noting the decision to use a hypothesis as a basis of action. But what is the 'voluntary act' whose result is entering a *cognitive* (truth-valued) state, such as belief that God has a plan for humanity? Granted that we can *cause* the formation of such states *indirectly*, say by exposing ourselves to certain external stimuli (or brain manipulation), can we do this directly, i.e., at will? I doubt it. Even if we can, is this what behavioral acceptance is?

If you tell me something controversial and I accept what you say, have I performed an act of forming a positive cognitive attitude, or does 'accept' here designate something like (1) my *not* resisting, say by asking for evidence, and (2) my cognitive system's responding in my forming the appropriate attitude—which, in this case, would normally be belief? 'He accepted what I said', for instance normally implies his believing it. By contrast, our commanding general need not pass into a state of cognitive acceptance of the proposition in question. He may simply accept it *as a working assumption*, which is mainly a matter of deciding to act in certain ways.⁶ In this case, it is not an instance of willing to believe.

I believe, then, that behavioral acceptance is not a good candidate to yield a cognitive state, and cognitive acceptance is not a good candidate for the kind of non-doxastic faith both Alston and I consider important and insufficiently emphasized in the literature. I grant that some cases of propositional faith may also be cases of cognitive acceptance; but the latter typically implies belief.

The term 'accept', moreover, has a liability from the point of view of the philosophy of religion. Suppose it is taken to designate a kind of faith. References to acceptance often imply a contrast with rejection and will then wrongly suggest that forming the faith attitude

⁵ Alston, op. cit., ms. p. 11.

⁶ This issue is considered in detail in Audi (1999).

in question *requires* some voluntary act. But a person can have faith that *p* without having definitely accepted *p*. This is not to deny that in having propositional faith one may cognitively accept *p*. Still, propositional faith does not entail cognitive acceptance, and that in turn does not require behavioral acceptance.

Granted, if I have faith that God loves us, it would be at best misleading to say that I do *not* accept that proposition. This may be mainly because 'do not accept' strongly suggests having *considered* and rejected, or at least having considered and not come to believe, a proposition. There is, to be sure, the locution 'accepts on faith'. But this does not imply behavioral acceptance; the beliefs or other cognitions in question may have arisen spontaneously in response to experiences, including prayers, in which their propositional objects simply appear as true.

We can also say, of things people accept, that they are *part* of their faith. In these cases 'accept' normally implies belief. It does not imply, however, that the cognitive attitudes in question have been voluntarily adopted or even adopted as a result of voluntary acts. Supposing, then, that there is a kind of cognitive acceptance that is equivalent to non-doxastic propositional faith, it may also be equivalent to what I call *fiducial faith*, a kind of trusting that I will shortly describe. But 'fiducial faith' and 'trusting' are in my judgment more appropriate, in part because (1) neither can be used to designate an act or even an event, (2) neither of the relevant fiducial attitudes must be formed as a *result* of a voluntary act (as at least typically holds in the scheme Alston is proposing), and (3) neither is as close to implying belief as is acceptance understood cognitively. Let us consider fiducial faith more closely.

Varieties of religious faith

Philosophers and many others addressing the relation of faith and reason have tended to think that although religious faith implies more than believing certain propositions—for instance, an attitude of trust—the notion of faith is nonetheless fundamentally *doxastic*, that is, belief-entailing. But consider faith that God loves humanity. Might this be a distinct kind of attitude? On my view, just as one can have faith that a friend will survive cancer, without either believing *or* disbelieving this, one can have such non-belief-entailing faith regarding religious propositions. Even when faith concerning divine action does not embody *belief* of the proposition in question, say that God has a plan for us—and hence is *non-doxastic*—it can play a central role in a person's religious life.⁷ I will return to this kind of faith; it is a special case of the first of a number of kinds of faith we must briefly sort out before explicating any one kind.

There are at least seven different faith-locutions in English alone. I shall begin with the corresponding basic fiduciary notions. These seven are *propositional faith*, faith *that* something is so; *attitudinal faith*, faith *in* some being (or other entity, such as an institution); *creedal faith*, i.e., a religious faith, the kind one belongs to by virtue of commitment to its central tenets; *global faith*, the kind whose possession makes one a *person of faith* and can qualify one as religious provided that the content of the faith is appropriate; *doxastic faith*, illustrated by believing something 'on faith' (or, perhaps not quite equivalently, 'in faith'); *acceptant faith*, referred to when someone is said to accept another person, or a claimed proposition or proposed action, 'in good faith' or, sometimes, 'on faith'; and lastly, what we might call

⁷ I have elsewhere argued that non-doxastic faith can play such a role, e.g. in Audi (1993).

allegiant faith (or *loyalty faith*), which is roughly fidelity, as exemplified by ‘keeping faith’ with someone. Let us take these in turn.⁸

If I have faith that God loves humanity, I have a certain positive disposition toward the proposition that this is so. This disposition is something beyond hope. But the cognitive component of propositional faith, though stronger than the minimal cognitive element required for hoping, does not entail belief. Propositional theistic faith is, to be sure, incompatible with believing that God does *not* exist; but that is a different point. Because of the positive way in which propositional faith is more than hope, it is also incompatible with a pervasive or *dominating* doubt that God exists, though it can coexist with some degree of doubt or even with a tendency to have *moments* of deeply unsettling doubt.⁹

If I believe *in* God, and so have attitudinal faith, I presuppose certain propositions about God, the kind one might affirm as expressing tenets of one’s religious faith. Religious faith, whether propositional or attitudinal, implies certain attitudes, such as reverence and trust. But those attitudes, while they do imply a measure of conceptual sophistication (at least enough sophistication for comprehension of their objects) and also imply certain cognitive attitudes stronger than hope, do not entail belief that God exists.

When we come to the third case, that of *a* religious faith, we are in the abstract domain, at least regarding the main sense of this phrase. To have, or ‘be of’ a creedal faith is chiefly to hold certain tenets and attitudes; and these may be specified in such a way that one could speak of a faith no longer held by anyone, or of a faith people ought to aspire to. *The* faith in question is, then, the appropriate set of propositions; *holding* it is constituted by having the appropriate attitudes toward (or connected with) them; and there are many *ways* to hold those attitudes and thereby to be *of* the faith in question.¹⁰

The fourth case, global faith, is the richest. The basic notion is that of being a person of faith—roughly (in the main use), of having *religious faith*—as opposed both to lacking faith and to having a *particular* religious faith, which implies holding certain doctrines (usually, institutionally embodied). People with their own views of God who do not fit any existing

⁸ I should note here that keeping faith with a person has both global and focal forms; if my relation with someone is dominated by a single obligation, keeping faith with that person may then be naturally considered just a matter of living up to that obligation (perhaps in a generous sense). For much valuable discussion of various kinds of faith see the special issue of *Faith and Philosophy* on the Nature of the Christian Faith, volume 7, no. 4 (1990). It is noteworthy that one author, Nicholas Wolterstorff, stresses not only the existence of different kinds of faith but also that “The question, ‘What is the nature of Christian faith?’ is . . . ill-formed. Both in the Scriptures and in the Christian tradition this single word ‘faith’ is used to pick out a number of somewhat different phenomena. Each of those has its own ‘nature’.” See Wolterstorff (1990), p. 397. For a different view see Adams (1989).

⁹ This is not to say, as Richard Creel does, following Tillich’s claim (which he quotes) that “Faith is the continuous tension between itself and the doubt within itself;” that a mature faith “grows out of [doubt] or over against it. Doubt is a *structural feature* of a healthy, mature religious faith, for we do not want to commit ourselves to that which is less than the absolute.” See Creel (1977) pp. 58–59; cf. pp. 80–81. I am not suggesting that *all* faith implies doubt, or even that non-doxastic faith has it as a ‘structural feature.’ One might claim that *whenever* we take (or are disposed to take) a proposition to have a probability lower than 1/2 we doubt it to some degree; but this seems too strong and misses some of the distinctive character of doubting. In any case, non-doxastic faith does not imply any disposition to attribute a probability or even a specific range of probabilities to its propositional object.

¹⁰ What I am calling a creedal faith is the sort of thing that Keith Yandell calls a religion: “a *conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, that rests on that interpretation an account of how life should be lived . . . and that expresses this interpretation in a set of . . . practices*” (1990). There is controversy over just what constitutes a religion, or a faith in the relevant sense; my concern is simply to note a use of ‘faith’ that covers the same, broadly doctrinal range. I have, however, added the words ‘or connected with’ to indicate that to be a person *of* a religious faith may require such non-cognitive attitudes as desires to do God’s will. These and other non-cognitive attitudes are implied by ‘faith in’, which some might argue is an essential attitude for being a person of religious faith.

religion can be persons of faith, though they do not belong to any faith in particular. (There is indeed a secular notion of a person of faith, but I will not explore that interesting possibility here.)

The fifth case, doxastic faith, is faith that something is so, where this faith entails believing that it is so. Doxastic faith is often thought to imply the absence of evidence, as where someone says, “Do you expect me just to believe that on faith?” or “I believe the tenets of my religion on faith; it isn’t a matter of arguments”. The existence of doxastic faith does not imply anything whatever about how much evidence the person has or about how much there *is* in some objective sense. What is crucial is that doxastic faith—like other kinds of faith—is conceived as an attitude that is not simply a *response to evidence*, where that is taken to be above all formation of a cognitive attitude having a content and strength appropriate to the nature and amount of the evidence in question (indeed, it is not strictly necessary that faith be a response to evidence, or what is taken to be evidence, at all).¹¹

A person who believes on faith need not have any view about relevant evidence. One need not think that there *is* no evidence and may even think that there is much evidence, or may perhaps even take certain propositions to *be* excellent evidence.¹² But it might be possible to have doxastic faith while believing there is evidence, whether one has it or not. In part, doxastic faith may be called *faith* because of the positive *attitude* of the person toward the truth of the proposition. As to negative conditions, lack of psychological certainty of the proposition is a necessary condition—as it plainly is for fiducial faith—but that point is widely accepted. From the lack of psychological certainty implied by faith, one might be tempted to infer that whatever normative standards are implied by the ethics of belief do not apply to at least doxastic faith. This is not so. It may be true that insofar as there is an ethical responsibility to have evidence for one’s beliefs, the responsibility is greater in proportion to (among other things) the degree of one’s conviction; but it does not follow (and does not seem to me true) that there is no such responsibility where the degree of conviction is weak. Any belief we hold puts a proposition on our map of reality; any belief may in some situation determine some action.¹³

Acceptant faith can be a case of attitudinal faith, as where one trusts a person on faith (and in that way *believes in* the person). But often it is constituted by propositional faith, whether doxastic or not. To accept someone’s excuse in good faith is (typically) to accept it with faith that it is genuine. There may also be cases in which the acceptance is behavioral rather than cognitive. Perhaps one could accept a plan on faith in virtue of deciding to try it out open-mindedly and without depending on prior evidence of success (one might also lack the special positive attitude appropriate to attitudinal and propositional faith). Here the notion of faith may come in more as an indication of keeping faith with someone else than of having it.¹⁴

¹¹ I am of course distinguishing a response from a mere effect; faith could arise as a result of (exposure) to evidence: its nature, not its genesis, is at issue here, and the kind of faith in question is not a causal notion in any sense precluding any particular kind of cause—or at any rate, not mere causation by evidence.

¹² Here I differ with Basil Mitchell, who says that “Raziel Abelson is correctly reflecting ordinary usage when he remarks that “the expression ‘faith that . . .’ functions as a disclaimer of plausible evidence for (and sometimes even as an admission of strong evidence against) the proposition whose truth it asserts” (1973), p. 137.

¹³ For discussion of related aspects of the ethics, see Audi (2006).

¹⁴ We must then, qualify James Muyskens’ claim that “It is fidelity rather than trust that makes faith a virtue” (1985), p. 44. But does faith entail fidelity? Couldn’t a person (unfairly) have faith in someone but not be faithful to her? Cf. faithfulness. Rev 2:10.

As to acceptance, there are several kinds, two of which have been described, and the term is used so variously and with such elusiveness that we do better to focus instead on the behavioral and cognitive notions, and on the related conduct, that surely constitute the main raw material for understanding acceptance in the first place.¹⁵ Indeed, I think it will turn out that insofar as acceptance as a candidate for a kind of faith is distinct from belief, it will be at least roughly equivalent to the kind of non-doxastic faith I shall shortly explore.

When we come to fidelity (allegiant faith), we encounter a kind of faith that differs markedly from the other cases. To keep faith with someone is mainly to do, for the right reasons, the things the other person would expect. (The expectation might or might not be owing to the person's faith in one). I say 'would expect' because we can keep faith with people who in fact do not expect us to. So it was with Desdemona and Othello. We can also keep faith with someone *in* whom we have little or no faith and who may or may not have faith in us. Many marriages have exhibited this asymmetry. The notion of keeping faith is important for understanding religious commitment. But conceptually, the notion seems at least largely reducible to some combination of the others, whereas that does not appear to hold of any of the first four—propositional, attitudinal, creedal, and global faiths. These are apparently the basic kinds of faith, at least among those figuring in non-technical English.

The relations among these kinds of faith are complex. On the assumption that faith *in* implies the existence of the entity in question, attitudinal faith is not implied by propositional faith, which lacks such existential import. Faith that the devil will be foiled does not imply his existence. But if—without inverted commas—we can truly say that someone has faith in the Savior, then the Savior exists.

It does seem, however, that attitudinal faith implies propositional faith concerning the object of the former. Could one have, for instance faith in God, but no faith that (say) God loves humanity? Faith in a person implies faith regarding a suitably wide and important range of actions and associated attitudes, emotions or other characteristics bearing on conduct. It might seem that *all* the propositional attitudes integral to attitudinal faith might be attitudes of (psychological) *certainty* towards the relevant propositions. A person's faith in God, for example might be surrounded by certainty that God will protect us, chasten us, and so on. Ordinarily, however, we do not speak of faith in a person, or even of belief in a person (which seems to allow for more in the way of certainty than attitudinal faith), on the part of someone who is certain of that person's every deed of the kind to be desired as part of the positive attitude that goes with faith. Perfect predictability, even in this specific realm, is an occasion for firm expectation, but not for faith.¹⁶

In the light of these points, it is plausible to hold, then, that every instance of attitudinal faith implies at least one instance of propositional faith regarding the same object. I also suggest that, as usually conceived, a person of faith will *have* faith of at least one of the two kinds relevant here: attitudinal and propositional faith. But even this weaker conception may be too strong, for special cases I will explore.

¹⁵ Difficulties surrounding the term 'acceptance' are detailed in my 'Doxastic Voluntarism and the Ethics of Belief,' cited above.

¹⁶ Robert Merrihew Adams has made a similar point in 'The Virtue of Faith,' in Adams, op. cit. Scott MacDonald takes exception to it, noting that certainty regarding the conduct of a spouse is compatible with faith in that person. If these are compatible, however, that does not entail perfect predictability. See MacDonald (1993). MacDonald's point is more plausible for believing in a person; as suggested in the text, this locution allows for more in the way of certainty than 'faith in'. Someone could, e.g. fanatically believe in a political leader. If genuine attitudinal faith can be fanatical, it would seem to be so in a different way, for instance in leading to fanatical devotion as opposed to certainty about what the being in question will do.

As to fidelity, in the sense of keeping faith with someone, people *of* faith in the main, religious sense of ‘faith’, must in certain ways *keep* faith: with God, or with others sharing their religion, or at least with some appropriate ideals. For those who hold that religious faith is a kind of relationship, this is a central requirement.¹⁷

I have already granted that in the literal sense, faith in a being entails its existence; but there is a psychological make-up that one could have even if the being one takes oneself to have faith in does not exist (and certainly propositional faith does not guarantee the truth of the proposition in question, nor the existence of any entity that proposition concerns¹⁸). Moreover, the rationality conditions for faith must be discussed independently of assuming the existence of the beings or entities in question, and I therefore set aside the relationship notion of faith as either aspirational—indicating how faith *should* occur in human life but not identifying a basic concept—or as conceptually stipulative. In any event, it is plain that even if being a person of faith entails having a kind of fidelity to one or more others, achieving this kind of fidelity is possible without having faith in its beneficiary. Many have *kept* faith with spouses *in* whom they themselves have *lost* faith.

Fiducial faith, trust, and belief

In arguing that there is a kind of faith that does not entail belief, I have not meant to deny important connections between the two. It is true, for instance that faith that God loves us implies a disposition to believe that God loves us, just as faith that a friend will recover from cancer implies a disposition to believe *that*. Moreover, these dispositions tend to be realized—i.e., manifested in the formation of the relevant belief—by perceptions of certain positive signs, such as a pervasive sense of God’s protecting one, or the discovery of the friend’s improvement. But even readily realized dispositions to believe are not, and do not entail, believing the propositions in question; and this is one among other reasons why propositional faith does not entail having the corresponding belief.

Indeed, at least in non-religious contexts the closer we come to having a belief that *p*, the less natural it is to speak of faith rather than simply of belief that *p*. If I *believe* a student will find a position, it would be misleading to say I have faith that this will occur, except perhaps as a way of indicating a lack of confidence. It is possible to have faith that something is so when we also believe it is, but propositional faith—faith that—is often non-doxastic. When it is, I call it *fiducial* faith.¹⁹

This term ‘fiducial’ goes with the notion of *trust*. Trust has been rightly considered an important element in faith. You cannot have faith in a person you do not trust. You could have a *relativized faith* here, say in the person *as* a money manager, but not faith simpliciter.

¹⁷ The relationship notion is explored in great detail by Sessions (1994).

¹⁸ This point ignores the content externalist view that the very cognition of a proposition might require the existence of certain entities it is about. I doubt that such a view can be shown to undermine the point made here; but even if it does, the needed qualification of my position does not affect anything major in this paper.

¹⁹ Cf. L. J. Cohen’s view that “Faith (in the everyday sense) that God exists is an example of belief, not acceptance,” where “to accept that *p* is to have or adopt a policy of claiming positing or postulating that *p* . . .” and “Belief that *p* on the other hand, is a disposition to feel it true that *p*, whether or not one goes along with the proposition as a premise.” See ‘Belief and Acceptance,’ (1989), p. 386. I reject the suggested assimilation of propositional faith to belief, but it seems to me that such faith *is* something like what Cohen (mistakenly, I think) says belief is. Joseph Runzo quite explicitly treats faith *that* as “basically equivalent to the cognitive state of belief” (1990, p. 44) though on other points his treatment of the distinction between propositional and attitudinal faith is consistent with my construal of it.

A close connection between faith and trust is also suggested by the locution ‘I trust that’; this implies faith, provided the subject matter and context are appropriate. Trusting that a colleague will be supportive in a major matter is not on a par with trusting that I have my car keys. The former is a candidate to be a kind of faith; the latter is unlikely to rise to that level of significance. Trusting that *p* does not, however, imply unqualifiedly believing *p*. The closer one comes to being altogether sure, or even to absence of any doubt, the less appropriate it is to say ‘I trust that’. Granted, it is also true of belief that it does not preclude *some* degree of doubt; but typically, if one believes a proposition, one does not doubt it.

What of Hebrews 11:1, however: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Does such ‘conviction’ entail belief, as opposed to a steadfast trusting that the thing in question is so? Must assurance wholly rule out doubt? The answer in both cases may be negative. Assurance is called for where doubt is to be overcome. Conviction is roughly *felt* cognition, but the cognition—especially if it is of what is ‘not seen’—may not have to be belief. There is little question, however, that doxastic faith is suggested by much of what follows in this chapter of Hebrews. Still, Paul’s overall emphasis in the context is on the power of global faith and on what is required to achieve that faith. Here a major role for fiducial faith as an element in global faith is not ruled out.

I do not mean to imply any account of Biblical faith. It is far too complex and varied to allow brief treatment. I am simply noting how what may appear incompatible with my view is in fact mainly consistent with at least one kind of Biblical faith.

One reason why (propositional) faith may seem to imply belief is that it is apparently incompatible with *disbelief*. If I believe that not-*p*, surely I cannot have faith that *p*, just as I cannot (at least normally) believe both that *p* and that not-*p*.²⁰ I *can* have such faith compatibly with an absence of any feeling of confidence regarding *p*, and even with a belief that *p* is not highly probable. But if I disbelieve *p*, I do not have faith that *p*. Moreover, although I need not (and probably cannot) have any sense of certitude regarding the proposition, there are limits to how much doubt I can feel toward it if I have faith that it is so. When the strength of doubt that *p* is true reaches a certain point, hope, but not faith, will likely be my attitude.

Hope that *p* may indeed be so desperate as to coexist with as much doubt as is possible consistently with not reaching unqualified belief that not-*p*. Faith may alternate with such doubt, but cannot coexist with any doubt sufficient to undermine a basically positive overall outlook, a kind of trusting that the desired state of affairs obtains. Hope also differs from faith in other ways. It does not imply a favorable attitude, as opposed to desire. I may find myself hoping that something will occur where I am ashamed of wanting it.²¹ The same holds for wishing, anticipating, wanting, yearning, and other attitudes. But if I do not have a favorable attitude toward something’s happening, I cannot have faith that it will. This is not to say that I cannot have any ambivalence whatever; but faith is, overall, a positive attitude.

To be sure, for some uses of ‘faith’ a contrast with belief or hope is inappropriate. Unqualified belief that God loves us may be an article of one’s *religious faith* in a common sense of that phrase—the creedal sense, in which one can lay out one’s religious faith by formulating its content. But if one’s cognitive attitude is unqualified belief that God loves us, it is (in everyday as opposed to theological and other special contexts) misleading to call it faith *that*

²⁰ I am distinguishing between separate beliefs of contradictories and beliefs of a contradiction. The case against the possibility of the former seems less strong than that against the possibility of the latter, but I leave its possibility open. Arguably we should, for similar reasons, leave open the possibility of having faith that *p* even while disbelieving it. It may be, however, that faith is *dominant* in a way belief is not, so that genuine faith that *p* rules out the kind of negative attitude toward *p* implicit in disbelieving it.

²¹ Religious hope might be said to be different; but imagine someone hoping that God will kill an enemy, though disapproving of the maliciously desired deed and aware that it would be most ungodly.

God does. The point is more easily grasped in a context in which no major philosophical issue is at stake. If, from previous experience (or indeed for whatever reason), I unqualifiedly believe that Frederica will meet a certain challenge, I will tend not to express my attitude by saying I have faith that she will.

The distinction between belief and propositional faith having the same content can be brought out further by noting two related contrasts. First, other things being equal, for believing that p as opposed to having faith that p , there is more tendency to be surprised upon discovering not- p to be the case. (Distress is another matter; and here the 'investment' often required for faith is highly pertinent.) Second, consider the relation between faith and the emotions. In Mark 4:40, Jesus says to those fearing a storm, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Even outside religious contexts, faith tends to eliminate or diminish fear and other negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, and anger. Like hope, belief, even if it has the same content as fiducial faith, need not have this kind of effect, nor is belief required in an attitude that can have it. Belief that I will go through surgery with minimal discomfort and ultimate success is entirely compatible with high anxiety about the envisaged events; faith that I will achieve this tends to reduce such emotions and does not allow as much residual anxiety.

Might the sort of propositional faith I am talking about be a kind of tentative belief? I think not. In one sense, 'tentative belief' designates (roughly) belief which, whether strong or weak, is held with a self-conscious openness to reviewing the relevant grounds or content. This is not what propositional faith is, though that faith is compatible with such an attitude. In the other relevant sense, 'tentative belief' designates belief that is simply tentatively *held*, quite apart from whether there is the kind of self-conscious (often second-order) attitude just described. But propositional faith need not be held in this way, even when it is non-doxastic. The steadfastness of the attitude is not proportional to its cognitive strength measured on a spectrum that ranges from inking at one end to absolute confidence at the other.

Fiducial faith can be utterly steadfast and, in part because it is attitudinally positive, is commonly an important element in a person's outlook (at least where it is to the effect, or presupposes, that God is sovereign in the universe). Weak belief—roughly the kind closer to inking than to certitude—though not steadfast, need not be tentative, but (even given the same content as fiducial faith) tends to play a less important part in the person's outlook. I suggest, then, that the similarities between non-doxastic propositional faith as I have portrayed it and the corresponding beliefs, though significant, are consistent with treating such faith as distinctive in the ways I have described. But suppose that the only major difference between propositional faith that does, and propositional faith that does not, embody belief, should be one of confidence. That would be a significant difference. It would *at least* affect the standards of rationality and justification appropriate to the faith. For, other things being equal, the greater the confidence embodied in a cognitive attitude toward a proposition, the more is required for the rationality or justification of a person's holding that attitude.

It is important to see that I am not suggesting that fiducial faith is in general preferable to doxastic faith or that the latter is not, for many cases, including many religious ones, preferable to the former. I consider the two kinds of faith complementary. Indeed, doxastic faith may be a natural aim of someone with fiducial faith. But if we do not countenance fiducial faith as sufficiently rich to constitute a kind of religious faith, our conception of religion and of the fulfillment of its ideals in human life is unduly narrow.

Moreover, fiducial faith may be what remains when certain people undergo intellectual change, as where they are distressed by the problem of evil and become less confident of some of the tenets of their religion. To say that if they lose confidence in certain propositions in a way that precludes unqualified belief of the tenets of their religion, then they cannot remain

religious is to exaggerate the importance of the doxastic side of religious commitment. For people in this plight, fiducial faith may be argued to be a position of some retreat; but it is not a position of surrender. Indeed, the position may be both steadfast and rational in the light of one's evidence. It may be in part because one's ethics of belief requires giving up unqualifiedly believing certain theistic propositions that fiducial faith emerges as a position in which one can maintain both intellectual confidence and religious commitment. And if fiducial faith does not represent an *ideal* for faith, it is nevertheless a position from which ideal faith can develop. This may be mainly a matter of increasing confidence in its propositional content.

The Bible and other major religious texts probably contain more passages in which faith is apparently conceived as doxastic than passages suggesting non-doxastic kinds. But I am not here doing theology or scriptural interpretation; I am suggesting that there are non-doxastic religiously significant attitudes deserving the name 'faith'. This should be obvious given how often (propositional) hope—which clearly does not entail belief (if it is even compatible with believing the proposition in question)—is taken to have religious significance.

The rationality of fiducial faith

Hope differs from belief in part because it can be rational to hope that something is so when it is not rational to believe it is. The contrast between hope and fiducial faith is less marked. It seems clear that one might have, and accept, such strong evidence of a disease's being fatal that although one could have faith that God has disposed things for the best in the end, one could not have faith, as distinct from desperate hope, that the patient will recover. Even fiducial faith cannot coexist with the strong doubt one would have.

To be sure, cases that tend to evoke serious doubt about an object of faith may constitute a 'trial of faith.'²² But the possibility that faith may survive the challenges posed by such doubts does not entail that it may amount to only a hope accompanied by the appropriate positive attitudes. One may pass the test by retaining the trusting attitude that goes with fiducial faith. This faith precludes having—as opposed to entertaining—extreme doubt regarding the desired outcome; but it does not require unqualifiedly believing that this outcome will occur. One may also pass a test of faith and emerge with greater confidence than one had before. This is one reason why the line between fiducial and doxastic faith is fluid. Indeed, one might pass from fiducial faith to acceptance combined with hope. One could resolve to act as if this is a world under God even if one only hopes this is so and regards the evidence as giving the proposition only very low probability. One's behavior would be largely like that of someone with fiducial faith, but it would not be true that one trusts that the world is under God; one's attitude would be only a hope.

If, as I have suggested, the rationality of faith that something will occur entails that of hoping for its occurrence, but not conversely, then it is natural to think that other things equal, the rationality of doxastic faith entails, but is not entailed by, that of fiducial faith with the same content. Why should this be? There is a sense in which belief is a commitment of the intellect, rather as intention is a commitment of the will. Hope entails no such commitment: it entails neither believing a proposition one hopes is true nor intending to do anything to bring about what is hoped for.²³ But, although, on the volitional side, fiducial faith may embody a will to act in a certain way and strong positive attitudes that allow passion and spiritual

²² Cf. Adams's discussion of a 'trial of faith' and related notions in Adams (1989).

²³ Hope may not entail intending to do anything to bring about the hoped for thing because one can think of nothing one can do that might help. But even if one can, one might think the chance of success is too slim, thus only hope, rather than intend, to do the things in question. A more interesting case is the one in which

commitment, it is, on the cognitive side, only a strong disposition of the intellect rather than an intellectual commitment to its propositional object.

To say that, other things being equal, less is required in the way of rational grounding for the propositional element in fiducial faith than for doxastic faith is not to say just what is required. One might be tempted to say that the grounds must make it more probable than not that the proposition is true (that is, there must be at least a better than fifty percent chance that it is true). But how would we determine the probability (or other epistemic status) of our basic grounds for the proposition in the first place? If some can do this, not everyone capable of rational faith has the intellectual sophistication to do it.²⁴ And can we really assign numbers in such a case with any reasonable confidence? I doubt that reasonable quantification of just this sort is possible for everyone capable of rational faith. Of course, if we may hold that we are, on balance, justified in believing that, for instance God is sovereign in the universe, *then* it is safe for us to say that the probability of this is better than even. If this were not so, we would not be warranted in holding that, for a given person and set of grounds, justification for *p* is superior to and precludes justification for *not-p*.

One way to consider the conditions for rational fiducial faith is to recall its close similarity to trusting that. How good ground does one need for rationally *trusting* that a friend will survive risky surgery? Must one's ground make this outcome more likely than not? I can see a case for that, but I leave the matter open. What of having rational *faith* that the friend will survive? Here it seems to me unclear that one needs grounds for believing survival more likely than not. The difference may be in part due to the sense in which faith is not mainly a response to evidence (and need not be so at all). Trust is not always so, but rational trust seems to be more closely tied to evidence than rational faith. In either case, it helps to keep in mind that rationality should be understood in contrast with irrationality. Whatever one might want to say about whether it is irrational to trust that the friend will survive without believing this more likely than not, it does not seem irrational to have the corresponding faith without that belief. Granted, it might be irrational to have that faith while (rationally) believing that survival is *less* likely than not, but that is a different point. Defeasibility of the rationality of attitudes by negative evidence does not entail that they must be positively grounded in a (rational) belief that such negative evidence is absent.²⁵

Conclusion

We have seen that there are importantly different kinds of belief, acceptance, and faith. Much discourse about religious belief and religious believers invites us to think that religious faith is simply a kind of belief, but it should now be clear why this is not so. Propositional faith need not be doxastic. Attitudinal faith—*belief in*—is also not a doxastic attitude, though it

Footnote 23 continued

one is ashamed of hoping for the outcome, hence does not intend to do things to bring it about. To be sure, if one hopes for something one is ashamed of, one might also form intentions against one's better judgment. This possibility is discussed in Audi (1990).

²⁴ Richard Swinburne's work illustrates at once the complexity of the task and its apparent achievability by people of normal intelligence who receive the requisite education in philosophical theology.

²⁵ The distinction in question here is between defeasibility and (positive) epistemic dependence or, in another terminology, between positive epistemic dependence—ground dependence, of a kind—and negative epistemic dependence, which is vulnerability to defeat given a certain kind of counter-evidence. This distinction is developed in Audi (2001), esp. pp. 25–26.

may embody beliefs. It is a complex attitude that has a substantival rather than a truth-valued object and has motivational as well as cognitive elements.

In understanding religious commitment in general and faith in particular, it is of great value to bring acceptance into the picture. A cognitive kind of acceptance is implied by propositional belief; a behavioral kind may be implicit in many sorts of full-blooded religious commitment. But cognitive acceptance, as implying belief of the accepted proposition, should not be taken to be necessary for propositional faith; and behavioral acceptance, as implying an act of accepting of the kind that contrasts with an act of rejecting, should not be considered an element in every kind of full-blooded religious commitment—some people of faith, unlike those who acquire faith by ‘rebirth’ with all its ardent affirmations, never perform such acts.

Positively, I have argued that faith must be understood in its own terms. It may, but need not, embody belief of the proposition in question or, where it is attitudinal, belief about its object. It may, but need not, be supported by or even arise as a result of, acts of acceptance. When propositional faith does not embody belief, but does embody a kind of trust, it is fiducial. When it has the right kind of content and a certain kind of place in the overall dispositions of its possessor, it is religious. When it is religious, as where its content is that this is a world under God, the conditions for its rationality are different from those for its doxastic counterpart. They are less strong, though not so weak as to fail to imply that meeting them is intellectually significant; nor is fiducial faith immune from the kinds of normative standards that are required for a sound ethics of belief. Evidence is relevant to fiducial faith and may be sought in support of it without doing any injustice to its fiduciary character; but the evidential support required for its rationality is less than that required for its doxastic counterpart. Whether the rationality conditions for theistic fiducial faith can be met, and how they bear on the problem of evil and on the challenge of contemporary philosophical naturalism are major questions that have not been answered here.²⁶ My aim here has been to clarify the problem of faith and reason in a way that facilitates dialogue and appraisal in the philosophy of religion.²⁷

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²⁶ The challenge posed by naturalism for the rationality of a theistic world view is examined at length in Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (in preparation), esp. ch. 8.

²⁷ For helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper I thank Kevin Hart and the participants in the Claremont Conference on the Ethics of Belief arranged by D. Z. Phillips and dedicated to his memory. The paper may owe more than is evident to his work and my conversations with him over several years beginning in the 1990s.

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D. Z. Phillips and reasonable belief

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Abstract As an illustration of what Phillips called the “heterogeneity of sense,” this essay concentrates on differences in what is meant by a “reason for belief.” Sometimes saying that a belief is reasonable simply commends the belief’s unquestioned acceptance as a part of what we understand as a sensible outlook. Here the standard picture of justifying truth claims on evidential grounds breaks down; and it also breaks down in cases of fundamental moral and religious disagreement, where the basic beliefs that we hold affect our conception of what counts as a reliable ground of judgment. Phillips accepts the resultant variations in our conceptions of rational judgment as a part of logic, just as Wittgenstein did. All *objective* means of determining the truth or falsity of an assertion presume some underlying conceptual agreement about what counts as good judgment. This means that the possibility of objective justification is limited. But no pernicious relativism results from this view, for as Wittgenstein said, “After reason comes persuasion.” There is, moreover, a non-objective criterion of sorts in the moral and religious requirement that one be able to live with one’s commitments. In such cases, good judgment is still possible, but it differs markedly from the standard model of making rational inferences.

Keywords D.Z. Phillips · Reasonable belief · Wittgenstein · Persuasion · Grammatical diversity · Rush Rhees · Moral and religious disagreements · Subjective judgment

Introduction

Like any thinker influenced by Wittgenstein, D. Z. Phillips tried to resist the assumption that an essential form lay behind important philosophical concepts, and this is especially true of epistemological concepts such as reasonable belief. What counts as a reason depends on the issues at stake, and the evidence that is needed in one case is not sufficient or relevant

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in dealing with another. Indeed the reasonableness belief—the nature of good judgment—is nearly as heterogeneous as language itself.

This at least was Wittgenstein's view, and Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy was Phillips' way. Most of Phillips' philosophical work is directed against over-generalizations, such as the claim that *every* reasonable belief can be evidentially supported, or that *all* knowledge is justified true belief, or that *all* truth claims are descriptive representations of external realities. Thus, it can be difficult to read him, especially if one assumes that there *must* be some theoretical generalizations about language and belief that guide his thinking. Instead, he offers exceptions to our common picture of reasonable belief, often appealing to literature to show the sense in odd examples and extreme cases. The point is not to offer *better* generalizations about what it means to be reasonable, so as to include these exceptional cases; it is to free us from the narrow picture of good judgment that we hold up to ourselves as we struggle to believe. Bringing out the heterogeneity of the logic imbedded in our language was perhaps his most significant contribution, just as it was of his teacher, Rush Rhees, and of Rhees' teacher, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

All three thinkers thought that we were misled in this regard by two things: by our preoccupation with the "narrow range of examples" that we take to be normative in constructing a general theory, and by the fact that our language hides conceptual distinctions beneath a superficial commonality in our forms of expression. We need to aware, that is, that we call all sorts of things "beliefs," "knowledge," "facts," "truths," "well-grounded judgments," etc. We need to be aware of the fact that there are conceptually different ways in which these concepts are to be understood, depending on the context at hand. What counts, as Wittgenstein said, is not these superficial similarities in our forms of expression, but their underlying grammar—the norms and limits that govern epistemological notions like these in their particular settings of our discourse.

I cannot cover all that Phillips and other Wittgensteinians have said on the topic of reasonable belief, of course; but I can offer a sampling of the heterogeneity that drew Phillips' attention and a few remarks on the value that these samples have in helping us to become more mindful of the complex logic of language. I readily confess that my way of presenting these examples is my own. Yet even where this is manifestly the case—as it is later on when I come to persuasion—I trust that Phillips would agree with what I have to say.

We might start with those beliefs that are obvious truisms, where accepting such beliefs is a *mark of rationality*. The reasonable man accepts such truths *without doubt*, and this acceptance itself is a requirement of what we consider good judgment to be. But then we must turn to those cases in which a belief seems indubitable for the members of one culture but not for the members of another. Wittgenstein is interesting to read on this score because he, and Phillips after him, both refuse to say that one side or the other in such disagreements is *objectively* mistaken. We regard so-called primitive peoples, for example, as wrong in their conceptions of the world; and neither Wittgenstein nor Phillips would say that there is anything logically out of order in this attitude. The philosophical issue concerns whether or not their mistakes can be shown by appealing to independently guaranteed standards of rational judgment. Our standards of judgment are not their standards, and there are no *further* standards by which our standards can be authenticated. This does not mean that we cannot disagree with primitive peoples; we simply cannot show objectively that primitives are making a *demonstrable mistake*. For there is a logical background required for such demonstrations, and this background does not exist for primitive peoples. We face similar difficulties within our own culture, where cases of fundamental moral and religious disagreements involve analogous differences in the background of assumptions with which good judgment begins. This is where Phillips felt that epistemological clarity is most needed, and where it is hardest to come by.

Certainties

Every philosopher who has been impressed by the later Wittgenstein recognizes his notes *On Certainty* as an extraordinarily rich source of epistemological insight. They represent his efforts to clarify the logical ground of those beliefs we regard as certain, and he ultimately finds this ground to lie in an ungrounded agreement in our manner of thinking and living (i.e., in the form of our lives). Thus, the effect of these notes is not to undermine the certainties that lie behind the logic of our reasoning, but to lay to rest the never-ending search for further grounds on which to justify our certainties. That search comes to an end by acknowledging, practically speaking, what we take reasonableness to be: “This is how we think. This is how the life of reasoning unfolds. This is what it amounts to in real life.”

In other words, these notes *On Certainty*—both Wittgenstein’s notes and the extended notes of Rush Rhees, Phillips’ teacher—dwell on the surprising fact that some of our beliefs, including our empirical beliefs, are accepted *without* any reasons serving us as *grounds for thinking that they are true*.¹ They come to be accepted simply by learning how to reason historically or scientifically or psychologically, etc. And thus these beliefs—certainties—provide a striking example of the logical heterogeneity of the concept of a reasonable belief. For by the usual standards of rationality, these beliefs appear to be affirmed irrationally, without the firm grounding that we expect for reasonable claims. Yet they are the most certain beliefs that we have. They cannot, at least in all ordinary circumstances, be sensibly doubted. Their truth seems ingredient in our very understanding of reasonableness itself. So if *their* truth is not acceptable, then all grounds of belief are vulnerable; and the discipline of basing our judgments on *reliable* grounds is left without any ground to stand on.

We rely so thoroughly on such assumptions that they are almost never examined or even formulated. For the process of learning to think critically incorporates them as its rudimentary background, and so for those of us who have learned to think critically, it is otiose to demand they be justified on still-more-certain grounds. They belong to a web of assurance that is the logical substratum for everything that we know as good judgment.

Here are some examples from Wittgenstein.

“The sun is not a whole in the vault of heaven.” (OC 104)

“The earth has existed during the last hundred years.” (OC 138)

“I am writing this sentence in English.” (OC 158)

“Every [living] human being has a brain.” (OC 159)

“My friend’s [living]body is not full of sawdust.” (OC 281)

“Cats do not grow on trees.” (OC 282).²

Some certainties like these have been explicitly taught to us, and we have accepted them on the authority of texts and teachers. But others have never been expressly formulated. Rather, we simply “swallow them down” with the rest of what we learn (OC 144). For example, I am looking at the spine of a book on my shelf right now. I have never thought about the matter before, but I see that it is red. I am certain that it is red. In fact, I would have to dream up a very unusual scenario, one that does not obtain, in order to imagine myself having any reasons to doubt that this fact. Apart from such scenarios, I don’t even know what it would

¹ Phillips has edited several volumes of Rhees’ own previously unpublished notes, not only *Wittgenstein’s On Certainty* but also his notes on *Moral Questions* (1999), and his notes on religious belief (*Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, 1997). He said to me several times, in fact, that he regarded Rhees as a great thinker who stood head and shoulders above him as a philosopher, largely because of his honesty and intensity.

² OC refers to Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, followed by the entry number of the notes.

mean to doubt that the book's spine is red, nor do I know what would follow from such groundless doubts. I simply cannot imagine being mistaken.

The unusual status of such certainties is but one example of the epistemological heterogeneity of the statements we make, and of the differences in what counts as a reason to believe in these statements. Certainties belong to the "substratum of all inquiry and asserting" (OC 162), to our "frame of reference" (OC 83), to our "world picture" (OC 93-5), to the "inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" (OC 94), or to the "element in which arguments have their life" (OC 105). They are the "foundation walls [of thinking] that are carried by the whole house" (OC 248, 253), and so they "lie apart from the route traveled by inquiry" (OC 88). They are the fixed axis of belief that remains still in our thinking, as hinges that do not move with the door (OC 141). By whatever analogy we describe this relationship between having the certainties that we do and having a framework of judgment, *we require this background in order to think as we do*. "Any reasonable person," Wittgenstein says, "learns to behave like this" (OC 254), for to doubt such certainties is to forfeit everything we know as critical thinking, accepting some things in order to doubt others. Once that capacity has developed and once we recognize other speakers as sharing this same capacity, there is no going back and confirming the myriad of truths one has learned to trust in learning how to make responsible judgments in the first place. At times, of course, we do just that, but *only when we have specific, contextually supplied, reasons for doubt*. The mere appearance of a belief as a synthetic judgment provides no reason to doubt it; and without specific reasons to doubt the "inherited background against we distinguish between the true and the false," skeptical doubts have no logical force.

Yet these statements are not analytic truths. Their "predicates are not contained in their subjects." Their truth is not recognizable apart from the place they have in our thinking, nor are they necessary or self-evident truths.³ For there *are* special circumstances in which these truths would not be self-evident, and in those circumstances, it would make perfectly good sense to doubt them. Were those circumstances to obtain, we would need reasons (evidence) to counter our doubts. Thus, if I awaken in the hospital after an automobile accident and find my legs entirely bandaged, I might wonder if I still have two feet. So I will need a doctor to answer my doubts; but while the doctor tells me whether I still possess two feet, I do not doubt that we are conversing in English, that I am lying on a bed, that I once had two feet, etc. These latter certainties belong to the background of beliefs that enable me to deal with claims in the foreground, claims that for one reason or another *need* scrutiny.

Part of what it means to understand the heterogeneity of good judgment, then, is to understand the epistemological place various beliefs have in the logic of sensible thinking. This role is not the same for everything that we call a "belief." If we lack an appreciation for the resulting differences of sense, we will fail to see the point at issue when a statement is put before us—and this in spite of that fact that we might know the general meaning of all the words that make up the judgment in question. We will be like young children and not know what kind of judgment an assertion calls for—immediate acceptance, the suspension of commitment, conditional disbelief, etc.—because we will lack the ability to connect the belief to the overall shape of reasonable thinking, which is the context that gives the belief its sense and its epistemological status. Because of the role that they play in getting higher orders of critical consideration off the ground, certainties are judgments that we expect to be accepted without being justified; and this is but one example of beliefs that might be

³ I.e., the logic that governs the judgment of such beliefs is a function of the role that they play in the activity of our thought, not simply a function of what they supposedly represent or describe as a fact.

differentiated *in logical kind* from other beliefs because of the peculiar role that they play in the actual working of reasoning.

Yet I never heard Phillips put this general point about different kinds of belief in quite this way—that is, by correlating kinds of beliefs with epistemological differences in the kind of judgment that they require. I think that he associated the word “epistemological” with the notion of rational justification in the narrow sense. Yet the word “epistemological” plainly has a larger sense that includes every kind of judgment appropriate to all kinds of knowledge (which is also a heterogeneous concept!). However the point is made, though, in fact there is an array of diversity in the sense and in the judgment of what we believe. That is a lesson that Phillips learned well from Wittgenstein and Rhees: there is no such thing as a monolithic concept of a belief, nor is there a standardized picture of what makes a belief rational.

Cultural divides

So far I have mentioned certainties in order to substantiate my claim that the epistemological “place” that different beliefs have in our thinking is complex. This complexity determines the normative considerations involved in calling some of these beliefs rational and others irrational. But when people do not share common training in the actual business of making reasonable judgments, in which they are subject to such conventional norms, we can no longer assume that our partners in dialog will recognize the same norms that we have learned to accept. And that means that they will take for granted some claims that we would regard as extremely dubious, and that they will find some of our certainties virtually senseless. Thus, we doubt that a person can leave her body, commune with a world of spirits, and return with an authentic knowledge—e.g., of medicine—beyond our scientific ken. We have a hard time, in fact, understanding just what out-of-body travel is supposed to be. Yet others seem to have no difficulty at all with this, and some of them (primitive peoples) find it incredible that we can turn falling water into invisible energy, and can use that energy to make lights shine in the dark.

Or consider some historical examples. Having no training in what we consider history to be, those who have not learned to think as we have will miss the point of laying out historical evidence. Their thinking about the past will rely on stories that seem wholly mythological, since the reliability of these stories will not be related to evidence but to tradition, or to the stature of those who tell these stories, or to the stature of those who supposedly passed them down. Many of these latter accounts will have a significance that reaches well beyond the factual record, making up for their lack of historical credibility by adding other dimensions of significance that cannot be found in what we call “strict history.” Such conceptual divides, in which human beings have quite different conceptions of what the past is and about what is worth preserving in public memory are quite common, as the contact between educated people and indigenous or native peoples amply illustrates.

When people know nothing of our ways of thinking, we have to be careful about what it means to say their views are wrong. They know little about how reasonable judgments are formed in our alien ways of thinking, and so we cannot say that they have misused the rational calculus that we have been taught to accept; they have not used it at all. They simply think differently; and though this recognition offers no reason whatever for leading us to accept their way of thinking, it does mean that we articulate the nature of our disagreement with their way of thinking by saying that they have made a “mistake.” For both Wittgenstein and Phillips, mistakes, generally speaking, could be found out by using a commonly accepted method of reasoning. Mistakes, in other words, can in principle be *told*. One can see where a

person went wrong in his thinking, and his error can be discovered internally in his manner of reasoning. For here the one who identifies the mistake and the one who makes the mistake share the same underlying conception of what reasoning is and what it requires. Yet when we realize that another's thinking develops under differing norms, saying that they are making an error in their judgment can be misleading. For we disagree with them because their whole manner of approaching a subject is logically different than our own, not because they do not think well according to our logical standards.

Phillips was well aware of the epistemological issues that surround the idea of justification in cases where common argumentative grounds are lacking. Wittgenstein, in his "Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*," had argued against the assumption of educated westerners that native people simply make crude *scientific* descriptions.⁴ Such people are doing something quite different from describing the world in a scientific spirit, and it is sometimes difficult for us to realize this. We have trouble grasping what is going on when native peoples think as they do. Sometimes the accounts they offer of the shape of the world seem more like normative judgments expressing the order and value that they find in their surroundings. Other times we are not sure just how to interpret the sense of their beliefs, yet clearly, assuming that they are doing primitive science in a very crude way is off the mark. They simply think differently about their lives than we do. A conceptual divide separates their conception of good judgment from the norms that we rely on in defining our conceptions of rational thinking.

Outside of these remarks on Frazer, Wittgenstein said relatively little on the subject of primitive peoples. Yet in *On Certainty*, he offered some advice of vital importance in understanding what it means to proceed appropriately in cases of such basic disagreement. Reason, as I said earlier, is a concept with different senses; and the sense in which reason comes into play in cases of conceptual or cultural differences in understanding is not the same as the sense in which reason is brought into play in grounding an argument or drawing inferences. In the latter case, being reasonable means making one's judgments in the light of what rational norms require. It means having sufficient evidence to back up one's beliefs, or it means excusing one's beliefs from this requirement by explaining the benefits follow acting on the assumption of their truth. In the case of cultural divides, being reasonable is a matter of acting appropriately *given the inability to justify these rational norms themselves on effective argumentative grounds*. This difference is important for understanding both Phillips' rejection of the ideal of unconditional objective argumentation and for his rejection of cultural relativism.

First, he points out that the arguments we are tempted to give have no *logical* power to convince those who do not think as we do. In such situations we may call those who do not reason as we do unreasonable, but this is simply a negative pronouncement, not a justifiable finding. It is an epithet that expresses the fact of our disagreement—almost, as Wittgenstein says, as if we were "combating" those who disagree with us in a war of accusations and slander.

Supposing we met people who did not regard [the evidence used in physics] as a telling reason [for how things work]. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) Is it *wrong* for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it?
 —If we call this 'wrong,' aren't we using our language—game as a base from which to *combat* theirs? (OC 609)

⁴ Rhee edited this text (Wittgenstein 1979); and Phillips' colleague at Swandea, Peter Winch, expanded on the logical problems involved in cultural divides in *Understanding a Primitive Society* (1964).

When two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic (OC 611).

The attitude implied in these remarks is that people who clash over irreconcilable principles are not engaged in an argument that admits the logical possibility of being independently settled. Instead, they are simply combating each other with verbal accusations, including the indemonstrable accusation, “you are being unreasonable.” Wittgenstein’s point is that such accusations have no logical force, since the force of an argument depends on shared background about what counts as reasonable thinking, and that kind of background is missing in cases of irreconcilable conflict over the way in which good judgment is to proceed.

Yet if there are no objective, rational, means of determining who is correct in such fundamental disputes over the nature of good judgment, are we not forced to accept a relativistic view? For on this view, does not the truth as well as the reasonableness of our most fundamental certainties depend on conceptions that one happens accidentally to share? And if there is no independent way of determining the adequacy of these accidental conceptions, does not the idea that truth is at stake in our different ways of thinking simply evaporate?

Phillips, emphatically, did not think so, nor did he think that Wittgenstein accepted this kind of arbitrary relativism. For one thing, both are trying to clarify what it means to affirm the truth of various beliefs; and it makes no sense to nullify the very notions—truth and reasonableness—that one wishes to clarify. For another thing, Wittgenstein does not say that it is wrong or senseless for us to be “guided. . . by the propositions of physics.” Being so guided is entirely proper for those who know something about physics. The point at issue is not to lodge a complaint here; it is to point out the limitations in the kind of defense available to anyone facing such a cultural or conceptual divide. Here no objective compulsion is possible. The shared understanding that enables an appeal to objective standards of judgment does not obtain. The slogans we brandish in calling our opponents irrational do not mean that there must be such standards, nor do these accusations of irrationality compel others to change their minds. They simply make us feel better about the way we think. We might assume that there must be objective standards that will be compelling, but no standards of judgment are independent of a conventional pattern of application and the usage that manifests their sense. This usage shows what following these standards comes to, or what grounds their sense in our lives and makes them teachable. This is what enables us illustrate their sense, in other words. We say: “this is what a reasonable person does in this case,” “this is how we proceed,” “this is what evidence is,” etc. Yet the same conventional usage that manifests a proper understanding of good reasoning does nothing to guarantee that everyone will master this usage. For people are not exposed to the same training, and so the problem of trying to show people that they should “follow the propositions of physics”—that is, that they should think as we do—is bound arise whenever we encounter people who lack the training needed to appreciate this way of thinking.

Still, it can be difficult to admit that our norms of good judgment are not objectively verifiable. Most of us, as I said earlier, assume that the only alternative to determining the truth or falsity of all our beliefs objectively, including our principles and standards of rational judgment, is not determining the truth of what we say at all. It is, in short, an arbitrary relativism in which all claims are ultimately unjustifiable. Yet at this point, almost parenthetically, Wittgenstein offers a helpful bit of common sense,

I said I would ‘combat’ the other man,—but wouldn’t I give him reasons?

Certainly, but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion.
(Think of what happens when missionaries convert natives (OC 612).

The reference to persuasion here is often passed over by Wittgenstein's readers, including Phillips. But the reference is significant, for it shows that our spades are not altogether turned when we run up against those who share a different understanding of good judgment. We cannot convince them to change their beliefs by an argument they will appreciate; but we can use other means—some of which are appropriate—to bring about the needed change in form and content of their reasoning.

The fact that we generally try to persuade people to come around to our way of thinking shows that we do not regard our ways of thinking as arbitrary. We think of these ways as being in some sense true, as reliable, and as capacitating. And when objectively telling grounds of argument are not available or have been exhausted, we often *do* resort to persuasion. This tactic, in other words, is symptomatic both of our inability to construct objective arguments for those who cannot appreciate them, and of our confidence in our ways of argument. We think of our particular forms of rationality as productive or reliable, as capacitating, and as full of insight, and that is why we teach them to our children, for example. We give them instruction in ways of thinking that we think are vitally important for them to master, and the methods we use are essentially persuasive; for not yet having mastered the reasoning process, they are obviously in no position to appreciate arguments.

The means of persuasion by which we try to convert others to our ways of thinking are nearly impossible to summarize. They include everything from brow-beating to patient instruction, from offering rewards to teaching by means of impressive stories, and from punishment to practical demonstration. Many of these persuasive techniques simply manipulate and demean the intelligence of those we try to persuade. But somewhere in this collage of persuasive methods are due forms of persuasion, forms that are vital to the process of instruction, genuine understanding, and conceptual enlightenment. Yet the reason we distinguish all sorts of persuasion from giving logical reasons for belief is that persuasive considerations do not have the same relation to a conclusion that evidence does. Evidential grounds justify the conclusions that we draw from them inferentially; but persuasive considerations generally provide reasons only in the sense that they supply motives for the act of believing, not inferential grounds for the beliefs in question *as propositions*.

Pragmatic justification, for example, is a good example of persuasion. It holds forth the usefulness of a belief as a reason for holding the belief. But here there is no logical relation between the utility of a belief and the truth of that belief. False beliefs, for example, can often be very useful to people who do understand or should not hear the actual truth. Thus, in some sense, they can occasionally profit from accepting false teachings. False beliefs can also be useful models in science, just as the Catholic Church said about the heliocentric hypothesis during the Galileo affair. The heliocentric hypothesis provided a useful model for purposes of celestial calculation and prediction, but it was literally false. So while habits of beliefs might be pragmatically "justified" in terms of the benefits that accrue from them, the beliefs themselves are not thereby justified *as truth claims*. Neither Wittgenstein nor Phillips ever denied the possibility of giving such pragmatic explanations for various acts of belief; but for the reason I just gave, both insisted that such forms of justification do not belong to *logic*. Going along with a belief in a purely practical sense might explain causally what people *do* in believing, but it does not provide a ground from which a belief logically follows as a truth claim. Neither pragmatic justification nor persuasion, therefore, properly belongs to logic.

Phillips remained relatively silent about persuasion, then, not because he denied that there are such things as persuasive reasons to believe but because he was more intent on making the point that such reasons do not constitute an objective form of justification. And his neglect of the subject of persuasion might make it appear that he has nothing to say against the relativistic implications that are often read into his viewpoint. But we need to be reminded

that evidential reasons belong to a much larger and heterogeneous class of reasons that include persuasive considerations. And we need to remember, moreover, that we do not surrender our ideals of good judgment simply because they are inseparable from a conventionally acquired background in which we learn to accept all sorts of claims in learning what good judgment is. In fact, the connection between principles of judgment and the corresponding behavior actually *suggests* a non-objective means of trying to change the behavior—the form of life—that underlies what we take to be an inferior manner of thinking. We might endeavor to change this manner of thinking just as we teach our children how to expand the life-world of their own limited cognitive abilities. If this is a relativistic view, it is not a pernicious one, since it preserves the ideal that reliable forms of understanding are available to us, even though we might not be able to objectively demonstrate their existence.

Fundamental moral judgments

The sharp recognition of the limits of objective argument that comes out in cultural divides also comes out in Phillips' treatment of moral questions. But the study of such certainties presses in upon us in a particularly personal way, and this only increases philosophers' attempts to help us determine the correct moral responses. Again, however, this is not what Phillips is up to in his work on ethics. In fact, he intervenes in philosophical attempts to render ethical questions decidable in a purely intellectual and impersonal way. Philosophy can only show us more clearly what ethical struggles involve; it cannot lead us to some sublime point of view from which these differences can be objectively overcome.⁵

Here it is Rhees, even more than Wittgenstein, who influences Phillips' attempts to show the profound differences between objectively resolvable disputes and fundamental moral disagreements. He quotes Rhees to this effect in the introduction to Rhees' *Moral Questions*, a volume which he himself edited (Rhees 1999). He points out that moral disputes have differing logical starting points, or value commitments, that determine large parts of a person's moral outlook. On this point, again, he quotes Rhees, who in turn quotes A. E. Murphy.

Modern man would claim some advance over ancient Assyria in respect to the treatment of prisoners of war [whom they tortured for their own pleasure]. . . Could he offer any relevant *arguments* to show that the Assyrian practice was Wrong? He would have no doubt that he could. He could say that to act in this way was to produce gratuitous pain. . . and that this was wrong; he could show that it was to indulge one's impulse to hatred. . . and that this too was wrong. If then he was asked why these should be called wrong, could he continue the argument? He could say that to produce intense pain was wrong because such pain was evil. If he were asked to give reasons for these judgments again, he would probably be nonplussed. He had arrived at judgments that he would be content to regard as self-evident. But at any rate, he had offered an ethical argument.

The difficulty that Murphy wrestles with here is a good example of a conceptual divide where different concepts of what is valuable or obligatory come into conflict. Murphy sees

⁵ Phillips explains what he means by subliming the logic of our language in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (1993, chapt. 2). It is to suppose that normative and conceptual conflicts about what is reasonable, real, and proper to believe can be settled by being sublimely removed from all of our normal but conflicting methods of judgment. As Alvin Plantinga put this sublime ideal, "sober questions of truth" await an objective resolution independently of any of the conceptual strictures that define what it means to speak of truth. See p. 15. See also Wittgenstein (1953, paras 38, 89, 94).

this clearly, but he is not sanguine about the possibility of finding a satisfactory argument to convince the Assyrian that his actions are immoral.

Suppose [he and his friends] had really been concerned to reach an understanding with the Assyrian on the wrong of torturing prisoners, and not simply to argue with complete rational cogency from premises which were *to them* self-evident: is it thus that they would proceed? Of course not. A 'common' argument requires common grounds or reasons, and so far none have been supplied. . .the Assyrian's notion of what is proper to do with prisoners is bound up, as it is bound to be, with the form of life of which the glorification of war and warriors and 'the fundamental right way' of treating enemies are part.⁶

Part of the problem with seeking out common grounds here is that truly functional moral grounds are embedded in a person's way of life, just as the conception of good reasons is embedded in a person's thought-life. Murphy refers to "forms of life" in this connection, now a familiar Wittgensteinian notion. But he might just as well have said that what seems fitting for the Assyrian to say about his treatment of prisoners is bound up with a different practice, or traditions, or pattern of living. Admittedly, all of these notions—"practices," "traditions," "ways of living," "forms of life"—are somewhat nebulous; but the point of invoking them in the case of moral judgment is not. For moral decision making, just like any other kind of decision making, does not take place in an abstract world of thought, disconnected with the actual business of living. And the Assyrian's confidence in the way he treats prisoners is of a piece with his confidence in his way of life. Ultimately, this means that to change the Assyrian's mind one will need to re-establish him in another way of life. And that will take something more than an abstract argument.

Thus, if one accepts this indissoluble connection between moral ways of thinking and moral ways of living, one ultimately needs to rethink what moral philosophy is. For if moral values are ultimately tied to differing forms of practice in which one realizes their power and appeal, then there can be no *higher* values that are divorced from any essential tie to practice and thus capable of adjudicating the differences between morally embedded lives. There are no transcendent standards of moral judgment, in other words, standing above moral living, as if these values might be recognized beyond the fray of all practical dispute. The values that philosophers and theologians often envision as having this higher status, turn out to be reflections of a particular evaluative tradition (practice, form of life, etc.). To see this point is to realize that these supposedly higher values are *not* above the fray of moral lives, but reflect moral practices that are urged upon us under the deceptive guise of giving us an objectively certain moral outlook.

Here as before, relinquishing the myth of an objective resolution to all evaluative disputes does not mean ceasing to oppose those whose values are morally unacceptable. Certainly there is nothing new about such conflicts. One person thinks that the other is wrong. But this does not mean, and need not mean, that one person can show objectively that the other is wrong. Objective issues, after all, can be settled by external criteria, which determine what it is reasonable to believe and what reasonable people *should* believe. But there is something irreducibly personal about moral commitment, something that comes to us from within rather than from without, from conscience rather than from externally imposed values, even from those that seem *intellectually* commendable. Thus, even though we can show to our own satisfaction that the moral position we hold is reasonable and that other moral positions are mistaken, we cannot show this to the satisfaction of those who weigh their values differently.

⁶ See Phillips' introduction to Rhees' *Moral Questions* (1999, pp. 2–3).

Trying to show them that they are making moral mistakes short-cuts the process of inner consideration essential to forming a personal moral outlook. Indeed, if we are to respect those with whom we disagree as persons, we must leave them room to decide fundamental value questions for themselves by weighing the best arguments that we can make. This essentially personal dimension of judgment is one of the things that distinguishes moral questions from purely factual questions, in which inward consideration plays little or no role in determining descriptive truths about the world.

What shall we say, though, about those who come to feel that they have made a mistake in their moral outlook? If mistakes are objectively identifiable, then those who recognize mistakes in their fundamental moral outlook must have an objective means of assessing their moral views. But on closer examination, this turns out not to be the case. Those who confess mistakes in their moral outlook generally arrive at this view by coming to weigh some values more heavily than others. The judgment that they have made mistakes in what they value, that is, is inwardly determined in the same way that their original commitments were determined. So in this case, talking about mistakes does not mean what it usually does. Mistakes are still found, yes, but the process by which they are identified is not an impersonal one in which arguments alone settles the issue. The significance of our value commitments is inwardly determined both in coming to a moral judgment and in withdrawing from one.

Phillips stresses the difference between the way we recognize moral mistakes and the way we recognize objective mistakes in our cognitive views because the epistemological differences show the limitations of strictly objective arguments in ethics. But he still believes that it makes perfect sense to object to moral views that one does not share, and at times to take steps to influence another person's thinking. Were he were a blatant relativist, he would not have such attitudes. But he is not. His point is simply to call attention to limitations of mounting objective arguments, particularly "sublime metaphysical arguments," in ethics.

Still, what is wrong with making a rational argument that satisfies us, even it does not carry any weight with our moral opponents? Ironically, the idea that we need to satisfy *only ourselves* argumentatively presumes the very kind of relativism that objective arguments are supposed to eliminate. For if only some people recognize the force of such arguments, then the conclusion of those arguments will hold only for those people. And a good argument will then be relative only to those who find it to be a good argument. This way of relativizing the power of arguments is no better than relativizing values. A good moral argument is relative to those who are in a position to appreciate it. A good value is relative only to those who inhabit a tradition in which it is part of the fabric of their lives. One way out of these relativist binds is to remind ourselves, first of all, that we take our moral view seriously even in the face of those whom we cannot convince by argument and, secondly, that our efforts to convince others do not end with formal argumentation. Persuasion, once again, is the oft-forgotten recourse that shows us that conviction is compatible with the logical impossibility of proof.

Criticism of particular moral theories

Philosophers, however, prefer to talk about epistemological justification, even in moral matters. Thus, for example, utilitarians try to make ethical judgments objectively determinable by tying the rightness of a moral action to its effect on people's general welfare. That is how the utilitarians achieve a standard of judgment *independent* of ordinary moral disputes. They simply portray moral issues as questions about what is conducive to the general welfare, which they take to be a more or less objective question about what constitutes human well-being. That makes issues of right and wrong resolvable according to non-moral judgments about what people want or about what is good for their interests. But Phillips will have none

of this, as this sort of utilitarianism simply reduces the distinctively *moral* character of our disputes to prudential issues by gathering moral questions up under non-moral standards. Yet moral individuals sometimes sacrifice their own welfare and the welfare of their society for the sake of ideals that override prudential considerations. Certain pacifists, for example, are willing to let their countrymen be over-run by despots rather than take up arms to protect the people's welfare. Here they need not think that they are somehow protecting the general welfare in the long run; they need give only an absolute moral weight to the moral significance of non-violence.

Similarly, Phillips criticizes Kantian ethics for proposing a formal standard (the categorical imperative) for resolving the question of what is and is not ethical. Supposedly, people need only be capable of universalizing the "maxims" of the acts they are considering to recognize their obligatory nature. If they cannot universalize these maxims without envisaging possible conflicts with what they feel entitled to themselves, the moral person will sense a conflict between what she desires to do and what she desires others to do. This conflict characterizes all immoral actions and serves as a purely rational means of determining what we should and should not do. Yet we typically act in concrete situations, under complex circumstances, and with some sense of our own moral limitations. And we bring these various qualifications with us when we consider what we ought to do. Thus, we can often say "anyone in my particular situation should do as I do" because we can wave the thought that we might be affected if everyone were to follow our example. If *everyone* were to do as we do—telling lies, for example—that would amount to the contradictory policy of willing that others lie to us. But then *everyone* is not involved; only those with my complex circumstances and difficulties need act as I do, and so I need have little fear that I would be lied to. My circumstances make me exceptional and allow me to do things that would otherwise be difficult to take as a universal model for moral behavior. The point is that actual moral decisions are usually made in circumstances to which the categorical imperative can be made to conform, so that it offers little guidance in determining what we ought to do.

The formal inadequacy of Kantian ethics becomes even more apparent when people face moral dilemmas. In moral dilemmas, both horns of the dilemma are ruled out by the Kantian principle, and yet one of them must be chosen. So in such cases one can either say that in choosing for oneself one cannot universalize and choose for others, or one can say, "if you were *I*, then yes, you and anyone else who lived *my very life* should do as I do." In the latter case, of course, universalizing the maxim of the act would not extend to *anyone* else and thus would provide no real guidance. Any choice in moral dilemmas is a moral choice and could be "universalized" in this way. Yet the categorical imperative, because it provides no criterion of when an agent's circumstances are relevant and when they are not, does not resolve actual moral issues, much less moral dilemmas, under a morally telling directive.

Similar criticisms apply to prescriptivist theories. It sounds plausible to say that a moral judgment is rational if a moral agent can cite reasons for making that judgment, where reasons consist of descriptive properties that a certain class of valuable things possesses. Thus, a moral judgment made about the permissibility of eating animals but not human beings is a rational judgment if we can identify a relevant property or set of properties that human beings have and animals lack. Supposedly, such properties would then justify not using people as food and using animals instead. The rationality here, however, does consist of choosing these properties *because* of their moral worth; it consists of the rule-like procedure of evaluating categories of things in the same way by connecting one's evaluative judgments with certain common properties of these objects. But there are no moral reasons for selecting such properties. The choice of properties becomes a "moral" choice only when people choose to regard that set of properties as the basis for a consistent attitude toward the objects in question.

Here Phillips was undoubtedly influenced by not only Rhees but also by his colleague R. W. Beardsmore. All three were philosophers at Swansea, and all three called attention to the unsystematic diversity that characterizes our treatment of various kinds of things, sometimes valuing them and sometimes not. Let's stick with the example of animals. We generally don't hold wild animals in the same moral regard as we do our pets, for example. Thus we would not think of eating our pets, but we might very well try a Chinese dish containing dog meat. The only relevant differentiating feature here is the fact that a particular dog is or is not my pet. No generalizations about what is moral or immoral follow from that since our moral regard for animals does not depend on any of their intrinsic features but only on their relationship to us, and this relationship is private. Hence, we cannot expect others to have the same relationship to our pets that we have, and so we cannot expect others to hold them in the same moral regard that we do.

We might wonder, moreover, what it is about human beings in distinction to animals that renders human beings worthy of greater moral respect. Supposedly we must be able to isolate a feature or set of features that human beings have but animals don't have so that we might explain why we evaluate humans as highly than animals. Perhaps they can return love in a fuller sense than animals can, perhaps they can deliberately plan their behavior in a way that animals cannot, perhaps they can consciously reflect about themselves, etc. Yet we regard some human beings with moral respect (the comatose, the mentally deranged, infants, etc.), even though they *lack* these characteristics. We respect people as people, that is, *despite* the fact that we cannot point to some additional feature—other than their humanity. Here we need to give up the effort to rationalize our moral judgments by looking for such features. We should say what we should have said to begin with—that we respect people *as human beings* and not because they have some special characteristic that can be singled out as the basis for moral regard.

If, after all, the moral treatment of people is based on their having certain properties (other than the fact that they are human beings), then we might ask why we should treat *that* property as the reason for the discriminations that we make in our behavior toward them. Must there be some *other* property that the first property must have for us to identify the first property as value-conferring property. Just where in fact does evaluation enter into the picture here? Beardsmore put the issue in this way:

...it is quite obvious that if sometimes we respond to x but not to y because of some property z which x though not y possesses, then it must respond [evaluatively] to z, but not the absence of z, without necessarily being able to identify any further characteristic to justify our responses. Otherwise we are led into an infinite regress of justifications for justifications, with the result that nothing is ever justified.⁷

Beardsmore's argument here captures Phillips' thinking as well, as both reject the prescriptivist claims that reasonable moral judgment is made in virtue of a specific property or set of properties possessed by the things we value. For both the whole effort to provide reasons to explain our moral evaluations is misguided.

Take another example. Consider those racists who think that what makes people worthy of moral respect is the color of their skin, and further imagine that they consistently hold to this view. Here one cannot resort simply to the principle as a means of explaining what is wrong with this notion, as this principle simply says that a rational person must have some answer

⁷ This quote is from a private copy of Beardsmore's paper, "People." I suspect this paper was presented at the Swansea Philosophical Society.

or another to the question, “why do you value one race above another?” Having an answer to this question, for the prescriptivist, means having a reason for one’s evaluative attitude. But this formal, non-moral requirement to have a reason is satisfied by the response, “because they (the favored races) have white skin.” Yet most of us, as Phillips would point out, cannot find any moral *relevance* in this property. One could just as well say that they have heavy beards. Morally speaking, the selection of such properties is arbitrary, and yet as long as there is *some* property to which to link one’s moral attitudes, one is said to be thinking rationally. The net effect of this view, therefore, simply reduces the evaluative quality of moral regard to a matter of formal consistency. If the racists are consistent, then they are moral.

But do we really want to say that racists are being *morally* rational if they consistently use skin color as the basis for their moral attitudes? Far better to expose the rawness of moral disagreement between racists and non-racists by saying that most people who are not racists would dismiss a “rational” racists’ consistency as something that is morally reprehensible. At least this would imply that there are specifically moral reasons involved in disputes over racism, and it would not promote the false ideal of manufacturing objective—i.e., non-moral—reasons to explain our moral attitudes.

This last case illustrates one of the confusions that attend the use of the word “reason” in the context of moral disagreements. In the case of prescriptivism, having a reason for one’s moral attitudes is a matter of having some way—any way—to explain these attitudes by giving a reason for them. Here having a reason for belief is not a matter of having evidence for a proposition but of being able to justify one’s behavior. Phillips thought the character of moral behavior was distorted if it explained on the basis of non-moral considerations. Moral positions, to the extent that they can be explained at all, rest on more deeply held moral views. This is not the use of the word “reasonable” that I mentioned earlier when I suggested that the morally enlightened might simply accuse racists of being morally unreasonable. In this latter context, the accusation that someone is being unreasonable means that someone (e.g., racists) cannot be *reasoned with* because of what they value and wish to defend. Their thinking is morally incommensurate with humanitarian views, and thus we lack a common basis for moral discussion. The problem in other words, is not that they do not know how to explain themselves by giving a reason for what they believe, but that their way of following this formal rule of reason begins with what we regard as the wrong values. When that happens, the disputing parties cannot find their way to a resolution of moral issues on the basis of shared values.

In sum, Phillips objects to various moral theories because they propose grounds on which to resolve moral disputes; and yet the grounds they offer either do not offer the guidance that they advertise—as in the case of Kant—or the grounds that they offer obscure the inherently moral nature of moral disputes. Thus, if one expects Phillips to offer a better theory, a theory anchored in some more telling conception of objective reason, one will find his work disappointing. For in his ethical work he is not trying to discover the objective ground of ethics. Instead, he wants us to see ethical and evaluative deliberations for what they are, even if this means seeing ethical reasoning as something that is too messy to be covered by theoretical generalizations.

Other observations on moral reasoning

If many moral disputes are objectively irresolvable, as Phillips says, it seems odd to many philosophers that we should speak of moral struggles as the search for moral truth. And yet people commonly do speak in this way, finding nothing amiss about the Declaration of Inde-

pendence, for example, and laying out human equality and human rights as obvious truths. So perhaps I should say more about this idea of moral truth.

Phillips has no objection to using this term, but he would insist that the word truth, like the word “reason,” requires grammatical clarification. The sense of the word that applies to moral discernment is different than the sense of truth that we invoke in describing the world of fact. When we distinguish between such differing kinds of truth, that is, we do so out of the recognition of the different forms of judgment involved in discerning these different kinds of truths. Such in-kind distinctions in what truth amounts to in various contexts reflects our epistemological sensitivity to the differences in the way that such truths are judged. Thus, not only are there differences in what it means to speak of truth in connection with our various judgments, there are also differences of kind to be realized in what it means to speak of “knowledge.” Moral knowledge is not the same thing as the knowledge of descriptive facts, and neither is the discernment moral truths the same as the ascertainment of information. Phillips never explained the heterogeneity in the concepts of reason, truth, knowledge, discernment, and the like in quite this way, but I think that he would have little objection to it.

I’ve already mentioned the fact that the moral judgment of truth has an essentially personal aspect to it, whereas purely factual or descriptive judgments do not. But this is not the only logical difference between moral judgments and objective descriptions. For one thing, when an objective hypothesis is disconfirmed, it is simply discarded from the collection of our beliefs. But when one moral stance is chosen over another, the unchosen belief often retains a liveliness that is missing in a disconfirmed hypothesis. In moral dilemmas, for example, one chooses to do one thing but remains absolutely opposed to the alternative that one allows. Out of concern for the national welfare, for example, a leader might refuse the demands of a ransom note from those who have kidnapped his child. Thus, he might choose to do one thing—save the nation from harm—and allow the kidnappers to do what they will with his child. But choosing to act in a national rather than a personal interest does not mean that he dismisses the importance of caring for his child, far from it. He has chooses to sacrifice his child rather than to sacrifice the nation, but his action does not mean that he feels any less of an obligation to his child. This is the nature of moral judgment: sometimes one must act against what one believes is a morally binding obligation (caring for one’s children) in order to act in accord with another morally binding obligation. The extent of one’s obligation is felt in the bottomless depth of one’s regret.

Such regret does not attend the rejection of an objectively disconfirmed hypothesis. The grounds we need to confirm a purely descriptive or empirical hypothesis might be unclear; and as long as they are, we might entertain sympathy for several alternative hypotheses. But this is unlike the moral uncertainty that we feel in recognizing several moral values that in various circumstances come into conflict. In the case of the hypotheses, we simply need more evidence to determine whether the hypothesis is correct or incorrect. Once this evidence is in, however, we can affirm one hypothesis and reject the others—without regret. Yet with moral issues, we must weigh the values that we choose; and even those that we choose not to act on in particular circumstances continue to have some weight in our thinking.

The fact that weighing values is part of moral judgment reiterates an earlier point—that there is an irreducibly personal element in the determination of moral truths. For moral truths are not determined in an entirely objective manner, as cognitive propositions are. Moral arguments are possible, of course; but after the arguments have been made, it remains for people to consider their force, and to judge this force in relation to their other values. That is why we call moral decisions “judgments” in the first place. In making these judgments, we weigh commitments according to our interior sense of what is appropriate. After all, a change in a

person's moral outlook changes one's personal life; and thus in deciding moral questions we are deciding questions about how we understand our selves and our lives.

To put this point differently, to affirm basic value commitments is to stand personally behind them, endorsing them, as it were, with one's life. It is to vouch for these beliefs by investing *oneself* in them. Trying to eliminate this feature of moral judgment by trying to justify moral ideas in an impersonal, objective, and detached manner is, in the end, senseless. For even if it should be possible to show moral truths objectively, it would still remain for people to weigh these truths against others in the depths of conscience.

Phillips implies as much about our moral affirmations when he says our moral beliefs must be commitments that we can live with, and that the commitments we cannot live cannot be maintained for long. Thus, we invest our sense of who we are in our moral lives, and this is what accounts for the personal dimension of seeking moral truths by which to live. Initially in our moral development, of course, we do not have our identities wrapped up in learning moral rules. Instead, our moral beliefs are maintained under parental and social pressures that have little to do with the internalizing of moral principles. But such internalization belongs to the nature of genuine moral commitment, and those who have yet to invest themselves in any moral values have yet to know the full force of moral belief. Morally speaking, they have yet to mature.

In view of the importance of this self-involving element in basic moral judgment, surprisingly, Phillips does not provide more details about what it means to find oneself in one's moral outlook. The point often comes up in writings of Rhes, who stresses the fact that deciding what one can and cannot live with is a matter of self-honesty.⁸ If Phillips had spent more time on this point, I think that he might have shed some light on the *appropriateness* of asking those we are trying to persuade, "Are you being honest with yourself in this decision?"—e.g., to have an abortion. "Are you really satisfied with your way of life?" Whatever the answer to such rhetorical questions might be, they point to the opening up of inward considerations of self-examination that are essential to the moral life. These questions carry weight because they connect the determination of values not only with the determination of what one wants, but also with the more important matter of how one understands one's own worth. These inward considerations are subjective, and they cannot be turned into objective reasons for belief. But then again, they do not have to be turned into evidence to play a proper role to play in moral judgment. For they reveal the crucial importance of avoiding self-deception in the evaluative judgments by which we live, which, once again, must bring with them a way of thinking and being that one can live with in inwardly transparency.

I will say a little more about the role self-honesty plays in our moral and religious judgments in the next section, but for now I want to stress that moral judgments derive their seriousness and to some extent their logic from their essential relation to selfhood. On the deepest level, those who are serious about clarifying their most basic values and moral principles are looking for a moral outlook that they can claim as their own, an outlook in which they can reside in inward satisfaction and integrity. That is what the subjectivity of moral judgments is all about, and one cannot eliminate the aspect of moral reasoning without reducing the moral life to a caricature of what it really is.

From the point of view of objective judgment, such subjective considerations as the weighing of values or their role in helping people find themselves surround the ideal of achieving objective judgment in moral matters with impossible complications. But that is what the moral life is for Phillips, not only an inwardly serious life but a messy one as well. His thinking is not designed to simplify it, nor to provide transcendent criteria by means of which we might

⁸ See Rhes (1999, chapt. 23).

impersonally discover moral truths in higher form of objectivity. As a philosopher, he does not object to the kind of arguments that people with strong values make in order to change minds. At most, he simply shows how far short of the logic of purely objective judgment moral commitment falls. This modesty in his intent is perhaps the most Wittgensteinian aspect of his work as a philosopher. He brings nothing new to the ins and outs of our moral deliberations. He simply tries to remove some of the layers of confusion that portray moral believing as an objectively adjudicable intellectual matter so that we might recognize the ways in which we are personally touched by moral questions. Such clarification reminds us about the complexity and heterogeneity of our judgments; and this is needed, as Rhees said, “not in order to fix your gaze on [a supposed] unadulterated form [of moral reasoning], but to keep you from looking for it. . . For reason doesn’t always mean the same thing; and in ethics we have to keep from assuming that reasons must really be of a different sort from what they seem to be.”⁹

Religious beliefs

Religious beliefs, as Phillips shows, share their objectively indemonstrable feature with fundamental evaluative commitments and with moral principles. In fact, they share so many logical features with moral claims; that Søren Kierkegaard—a writer whom both Phillips and Wittgenstein respected—put both sorts of claim explicitly into the logical category of “subjective truths.” Yet none of these writers thought that religious claims are subjective in the sense of being arbitrary matters in which personal desires somehow determine truths. These are beliefs which, because they play a formative role in opening up new ways of looking at the world, simply develop under different strictures than do cognitive claims and speculative hypotheses.

Another way of coming at Phillips’ view is to say that the world of a religious person is not the world simply as it is given to us and available for description. It is a world in which the ordinary world that we describe cognitively is regarded with altered conceptions of its worth, which necessarily extend to altered conceptions of our own worth. Seeing the world religiously is therefore an existential question, and good judgment in affirming a religious outlook can be said to be sober judgment if it is made in connection with a full and honest awareness of the inward struggles of selfhood and meaning. For to believe is to change the way in which we take life in under the guidance of religious ideas. We adjust our thinking to a new form of conceptual understanding that believers say brings them a peace that is unknown apart from a religious outlook. We do something more than saying “yes” to a thought, therefore. We transform ourselves. This self-transformation belongs to the very nature of what religious believing—faith—is, which involve changes not only in the way one thinks—the species of one’s judgments—but also in the manner of life that is involved in living out a new vision of the world.¹⁰ So it should not be surprising that faith claims, being essentially self-transforming, involve a different kind of judgment than that which is required by other, more objective, claims.

Phillips talked mainly about the belief in God because it is the pivotal religious belief for most westerners, who, like him, were best acquainted with Christianity. But his point was not to *defend* Christian belief. It was only to understand the difference in judgment involved in becoming a believer. He thought that the issue of faith had been obscured by a simple but

⁹ Rhees (1999, pp. 40–41).

¹⁰ This is why Kierkegaard said that subjective claims, such as religious beliefs, involve us in a *metabasis in allo genos*—the transition into another way of thinking. See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1941, p. 90).

firmly entrenched set of assumptions. We think that the belief in God must be reasonable in order to be credible, that being reasonable is a matter of having independent evidence for what one believes, and therefore that belief in God must have independent and objective grounds that determine its truth. Yet because this belief entails a change in the way one thinks and lives, these assumptions obscure rather than illuminate what faith is and what good judgment in matters of faith actually requires.

In trying to get other philosophers to see this point, Phillips became discouraged. Convincing most philosophers of the inappropriateness of objective forms of deliberation in relation to faith claims turns out to be a very hard sell. For them, the philosophical debates over the existence of God do not obscure the sense of theistic claims at all. Quite the opposite; these philosophers think of themselves as taking faith claims seriously *precisely by looking for objective grounds on which to believe or to disbelieve*. Many of them think that they are enhancing the credibility of certain faith claims by suggesting such grounds. Why would anyone want to deny the relevance of this? Are not believers committed to the existence of an objectively real God? How could giving objective, person-independent reasons for believing or disbelieving not be crucial to credibility of faith?

One way to explain Phillips' perspective here is to compare his treatment of God's existence to the stance one takes on fundamental issues of value. When it comes to our most basic value commitments, objectively telling grounds are not available; and trying to certify them on objective grounds simply robs moral conclusions of their moral point. Utilitarian reasons for being moral, for example, wind up portraying moral concern as the same thing as prudential concern. But a more careful consideration of moral disputes indicates that moral truths are justifiable on distinctively moral grounds. And thus the arguments over what is right begin and end with fundamental notions of what is obligatory or valuable, not with prudential concerns. But what then do we say of the evaluative grounds that we use in these arguments? Are *they* justifiable? That is the problem that we are up against both in morality and in religion.

If we like, we can say that the belief in God and the belief in certain values are self-evidently true, or that these fundamental convictions have been implanted in us by a benevolent god, or that the belief in God is a revealed truth. But if one attends carefully to what is going on when such things are said, it amounts to telling others that they should not expect justifiable grounds for these convictions—that they should believe *without proof*. That is the point behind such expressions, as those who insist on these views of faith know very well. They know that objectively compelling demonstrations for the existence of God are for one reason or another not as convincing as their proponents often imagine, and they believe that faith has its source in some other source of conviction. That is the thematic idea of Phillips' work on religion: the belief in God is not *logically* subject to being defended as a rational hypothesis. To believe is *eo ipso* to effect a transformation in the way that one lives. And if one tries to justify this belief as an objective hypothesis, the result will be a conclusion that has lost its power to change us. For a rational hypothesis belongs to one order of judgment, and its affirmation expresses confidence in that order of judgment. It does not signal a shift out of that entire way of thinking into another order of judgment. Yet the belief in God signals just this kind of shift, and not just in our thinking but in the personal changes that accompany it. If such personal changes are not essentially involved in the manner in which this belief is commended, then whatever affirmations come out of such impersonal reasoning will degenerate into a religiously empty form of mere assent.¹¹

¹¹ Perhaps additional premises can be added to the beliefs that a "believer" assents to, thus producing some practical implications for him to follow. But forcing yourself to live up to these practical implications is ego-managed "works righteousness," not the humble acceptance of grace that comes with genuine faith.

I once compared the belief in God to the belief in a rational principle itself, whose credibility depends on the power of that way of thinking that depends on it.¹² Phillips, however, prefers to speak in another way about the distinctive character of religious claims. Taking a suggestion from Wittgenstein, he treats most religious claims about God as grammatical claims.¹³ Grammar, as Wittgenstein used the term, is a normative concept that refers to the common usage that governs the sense of our words. Just as grammar in the usual sense gives parts of speech their correct role in speech, grammar in this normative sense gives words their meaning as concepts. Everyone who tells us how certain concepts are to be understood, as long as they are not stipulating personal definitions, appeals to what amounts to the same thing as grammar. Perhaps they do not use this term. Perhaps they appeal to traditional understanding, or to received interpretation, or perhaps they simply pronounce something a senseless way of understanding a concept. But they do so in accordance with what they take to be the proper, meaningful, usage of a term; and this amounts to grammar. The striking thing about Wittgenstein is not this notion of grammar and its usefulness in clarifying some religious concepts, but the suggestion that philosophical theology consists (or should consist) *entirely* of grammatical or conceptual elucidations.

If one objects to this view and denies that a certain statement about God has the logical status of a grammatical or conceptual truth, he need only deny the statement in question and see what happens. If, for example, one denies that God cares about us, suggesting that God is sometimes not even aware of what happens to us, the response that you will get is, “Nonsense. It makes no sense to think of God as an absent minded and uncaring being. Such a God is not the God that I believe in.” This denial comes straight out of a grammatical understanding of the concept, as does everything that we say about God. So if one denies the normal understanding of God as an absolute source of loving care, it becomes apparent to believers that the person who thinks that God can be ignorant and uncaring stands outside the circle of understanding that fixes the normal meaning of the word. Perhaps such a person belongs to some other circle of understanding in which the god-idea is not at all what we take it to be. In any case, the important point here is that grammatical knowledge, and not the knowledge that comes from factual investigations of an external object, explains how the concept of God is to be understood.

To take another example, the claim that God is not an object is also a grammatical claim. For God is obviously not a normal object. He cannot be touched, for example. But what kind of object is he, then? We don’t have any understanding of this outside our familiarity with the way people commonly speak of God. We might think that God must be a name for something that we can point to simply because it is a noun, and many nouns can be ostensively defined. But this assumption is over-generalized and completely gratuitous. What it means to speak of God as an object is given by a religious grammar that one has to learn in order to command any clear view of the concept. Before we can acquire this sort of understanding, we have to displace our assumptions about other kinds of objects. Confusions enter from every side because differing grammars govern the way objects are to be understood, just as confusions creep into our superficial understanding of what mathematical objects, such as numbers, are. Only grammar, the norms of common usage, gives us the means of understanding the nature of various kinds of object.

In any case, Phillips accepts Wittgenstein’s suggestion that theology might be understood as grammar, and he looks for the differences that attend the sense of what we say and think about God, as opposed to what we say and think about other things. If this is so, then the

¹² See Whittaker (1981).

¹³ Wittgenstein (1953, para 373).

knowledge of God's existence is not the result of an objective, speculative inquiry, or of anything like that. It is something that believers affirm by coming to share a new order of conceptual understanding, in which God's existence is distinguished from the existence of other objects, and the question of God's existence is distinguished from questions of investigation. One could make this same point by saying that the conception of knowledge is not the same in religion as it is in cognitive fields of study. It is a different concept altogether because the means of acquiring religious knowledge (wisdom) are utterly unlike the means of building up objective information. That is why believers give a different name to their understanding, calling it the "knowledge of faith" and distinguishing that sort of knowledge from the sort that depends on evidential confirmation.

The notion that we might affirm God's existence simply by conforming our own outlook to the transforming grammar of faith proves immensely illuminating in unraveling the paradoxical fact that believers say so much about the mysteriousness of God. It is hard to know what to make of this peculiarity in their "knowledge" of God. They say that God cannot be described—and then they turn around and say *all sort of descriptive things about the deity*. They tell us that a true knowledge of God is impossible because God transcends all reliable knowing. Yet these are not the self-contradictions that they appear to be. They say that God is mysterious largely to *block* the idea that one might find out things about God *by way of investigation*. God cannot be known in the way properties can be read off the given objects of natural experience, nor can his existence be inferred from properties that can be read off the face of experience, as if God were simply a more remote and less available object of experience. That is not a possible way of understanding God. That is what it means to say that God is a mystery. Purely cognitive means of approaching God are not possible because God is not an object of cognition to begin with. He is a mystery. Familiar descriptions of God, therefore, are not pieces of information about a cognitively remote God; they are conceptual remarks about the way the concept is to be understood. Believers do not derive their knowledge of God from anything like a direct encounter or a perceptual intuition or a cognitive inference; they get their understanding from their familiarity with the use of these terms. That and that alone is why they can identify some of the things said about God as nonsense. Their knowledge of God is purely conceptual.¹⁴

Right away, then, we can see why Phillips stressed the fact that beliefs about God are not hypotheses. For we do not know things about God from having conducted an investigation in his nature, as if we had made empirical or philosophical discoveries of what God is like. We only know God in the same way that we understand familiar concepts. And if we do not know God in this latter way, then we are simply in no position to speak with any confidence about the God-idea. We know mathematical "objects" in exactly the same conceptual way. We do not conduct empirical investigations into the nature of numbers, for example. We learn what numbers are in learning the proper use of mathematical symbols and concepts. And this is the only way we learn about numbers, since an independent investigation into the reality of numerical objects makes no sense. They have no reality outside that disclosed in mathematics, and neither does God have a reality outside that felt in belief. This certainly does not mean that numbers are unreal, or that God is, but their reality is understood only from within the relevant grammars that illuminate what the reality of numbers or the reality of God amounts to. Indeed, knowing nothing of mathematics, one might very well say that numbers are mysterious and indescribable. For they are unlike anything that one knows how to investigate cognitively.

¹⁴ Whittaker (2004).

Religion, then, no more needs an external justification of God's reality than mathematics needs an external justification of the reality of numbers or of probabilities or any other kind of mathematical conception. In both cases, what the real existence of the relevant objects means is internal to logical limitations of sense that govern the discourse. Philosophy simply goes on holiday, as Wittgenstein once said, when it goes looking for sublime guarantees of God's existence, as if such a thing could be sought independently of knowing what exactly it is that one is looking for.

Believing in and believing that

Earlier I suggested that the logic of justifying religious beliefs might be compared to the logic of justifying moral beliefs. In cases of two parties with a fundamental difference of values, the reasons that one offers for her side generally reflects the very values in dispute, and so these reasons are question-begging rather than convincing. Insofar as giving religious reasons for one's religious belief reflects the very orientation in dispute, giving religious reasons for one's religious beliefs suffers from the same circularity. But there are additional problems here as well. An effective argument for one's religious beliefs—for example, for the belief in God—must be transforming. This is particularly important to note in the case of religion because the point is so often overlooked. Belief alone, belief that has no personally transforming entailments, is not enough to effect a faith change. Faith logically entails internal changes in what one trusts and what one hopes for; and so if coming to believe does not *eo ipso* involve such changes, then the claims at issue are not fully understood. For they remain religiously pointless.

Antony Flew overlooked this aspect of religious belief when he demanded that those who believe in God explain what evidence might falsify the belief that God loves us.¹⁵ Plainly, then, he was treating the belief in an all-loving God as a purportedly credible hypothesis, not a grammatical belief that belonged to a new way of envisioning oneself and the world. But hypotheses are *objective* beliefs because precisely because their credibility does not depend on the personal changes involved in adopting a new outlook on life. Because the affirmation of a descriptive hypothesis depends on evidence, it is not, to that extent, self-involving in the way that religious belief is. The point of believing in God—and here we could just as well say that the meaning of believing in God—is to displace impersonal judgments that depend objectively on evidence with self-involving judgments that incorporate personal repercussions. Thus, judgment that there is a God entails the surrender of the ordinary prudential conception of happiness and the substitution of another conception, in which our true well-being depends not on ourselves but on a trustworthy but indescribable source of unfailing love. Hence, it is a cornerstone of this changed conception of happiness that this divine source is eternally, changelessly, and perfectly loving, despite all that we do or fail to do. God, so to speak, never gives up on us; and this eternal reliability is grammatically inscribed in the way in which is to be understood. Flew, however, asked believers to treat this grammatical truth, anchored in a new outlook on life, as if it were a hypothesis. And far from being a sensible demand, this request was in fact an unfitting expectation based on a complete misunderstanding of what is at stake in the issue of God's existence. The issue is not one of believing that there is an external object, God; the issue of faith is the issue of transforming one's life by trusting in a new conception of happiness that cannot be attained by willful self-exertion. God is the source of this trust.

¹⁵ Flew and MacIntyre (1964, pp. 96–98).

To believe in God, in other words, is not to satisfy oneself that there is a God in the ordinary sense of justifying an existential claim about the presence of an external object. To believe in God entails reordering one's basic longing for inward peace, and the concept of God is understood *in the light of this changed perspective*. God cannot be descriptively known, then, yet he can be understood as the descriptively unknowable source of an all-sustaining love. He is not an object in any ordinary sense, despite the fact that we refer to him with nominative expressions and personal pronouns. He is the source of a peace that passes all understanding and that can only be "known" through trust. We picture this source of love in a variety of ways, primarily as an infinitely loving being; but the descriptive adequacy of all such depictions is said to be inadequate. God can no more be described as an external object having a hypothetical existence than numbers can be understood as quasi-physical objects needing empirical confirmation.

There is nothing strange or necessarily irrational about people becoming captivated by God and conception of happiness without being able to supply a convincing justification to skeptics. One might attempt to give a pragmatic justification to skeptics by saying that believing in God is conducive to happiness in the ordinary, prudential sense—i.e., that it reduces stress, that it helps people to get along interpersonally, etc. But as I said earlier, such an argument does not touch the truth or falsity of God's existence. And neither do objective attempts to prove the existence of God. The starting point of both sorts of argument is logically inappropriate when the belief at issue is one where the affirmation of its truth brings with the entry into it altogether new way of thinking, much as affirming the reality of numbers entails a newfound ability to count. Thus, a child who knows something about how to describe things but nothing about how to count them need not be supplied with an empirical description of numbers in order to learn about their reality. He learns of their reality in learning how to count, and there is nothing illogical about the necessity or teaching him how to count rather than objectively trying to argue him into seeing the reality of numbers *independently of learning to count*. Here the child's acquisition of a new ways of thinking about things (counting them) is fitting without being rationally justifiable in the strict sense, and the same is true in trying to teach people to accept God's reality in teaching them a new way of seeing themselves and their happiness. There is another *kind* of reasonableness involved in the expansion of a child's thinking into new dimensions, and there is another kind of reasonableness involved in the effort to induct people into religious ways of construing their happiness. From a Christian point of view, God is necessarily involved in this effort to change people's ways of thinking about their happiness, just as numbers are necessarily involved in learning how to count. But this hardly means that either is irrational.

Recognizing these last points goes a long way toward disarming complaints about Phillips as an irrationalist. The fact that religious beliefs are not subject to hypothetical justification on independent, non-religious, grounds does not mean that believing in religious claims is unreasonable. It is unreasonable, in fact, to demand, as Flew did, independent evidence for the God-hypothesis because it mistakes the issue of faith as a hypothetical issue instead of an issue of conceptual transformation. Every such transformation involves developing appreciation for new grammatical claims, which can never be antecedently justified according to the canons of a prevenient way of thinking and living.

The logical oddity of trying to prove the existence of God sublimely—that is, without paying any attention to the grammatical role of the God-concept—can be illustrated by considering Norman Malcolm's well known discussion of Anselm's ontological argument. Malcolm points out that Anselm's argument, if we read it as involving *necessary existence* as a divine perfection, escapes the Kantian criticism of treating existence as a predicate. For even if existence is not a predicate, and therefore not a property possessed by a perfect object,

necessary existence is such a property. Anselm's argument, therefore, escapes the Kantian objection and shows non-believers that they cannot speak of God as being by definition a being greater than which none can be conceived *without also speaking of God as a necessarily existent being*. Since we know that something that exists necessarily must also exist actually, we are logically forced by Anselm's argument to say that a supremely perfect being *actually* exists. Malcolm makes this point, but then he wonders what the argument actually accomplishes.¹⁶

I don't think that the argument is as good as Malcolm seems to have thought it was, but let us suppose that it is.¹⁷ The significant point is that he does not deny that the argument will be powerless to convince people to change their lives. At most it will convince them that they cannot speak of a being greater than which none can be conceived as lacking the property of necessary existence. But what does that mean? It will leave most non-believers feeling non-plussed when it comes to adopting a religious life. It will not lead them to believing in God in the sense of changing their strategy of managing their happiness, for example. Affirming the unintelligibility of speaking of God as a merely possible and not as a necessary being will remain religiously pointless because this affirmation has been removed from the implications that it has according to its grammatical role. For all that remains of the issue of belief in the abstracted context of the argument is the question of whether or not one will allow oneself to speak of a necessary being as non-existent. Given only the argument, in other words, the consequences of accepting or denying the conclusion remain little more vital than this. The issue has been abstracted from the life of faith—i.e., the grammatical context—that supplies its meaning; and so to return this meaning to it, the issue of faith would have to be raised in connection, not with the concerns of modal logic, but with the existential of life. Once the idea of God's existence has been removed from its life-transforming role as a religious belief, we should not be surprised, then, that its affirmation does not awaken faith.

For Anselm, on the other hand, the proof was never a vital test of his faith. He already accepted the grammatical truth that God exists, and he already conformed his life to the religious entailments of this belief. He saw himself as divinely loved, and his notion of who he was, what was required of him, and where his happiness lay was changed as a result. Thus, he never thought of himself as questioning the existence of God, as if that were a prior question that had to be decided for the conceptual outlook of his faith to make any sense. The question of God's existence was not an issue that was separable from all of these changes and did not need an independent confirmation. His faith in God other words was already secure, and his argument provided only a conceptual embellishment to a religious form of understanding that he had already internalized.

In his discussion of Anselm, Phillips takes issue with the assumption that the question of God's existence is a meaningful question *prior to* the concept's acquisition of its religious role. Contrary to many philosophers, he does not think that the actual existence of God is an antecedent condition for the possibility of religious grammar. Instead, grammar explains what it means to believe in God. As I said, the grammatical role of the God-concept connects faith with the way in which one understands happiness, the way one deals with oneself, the way one recognizes the value of others, and so on. And if one abides by all of these entailments of belief, using them as templates for one's thinking about oneself, then one accepts the existence of God. The question of God's existence, in other words, is internal to the grammar

¹⁶ Phillips discusses Malcolm and Anselm in chapt. 1 of *Wittgenstein and Religion* (1993).

¹⁷ All that it shows, I think, is this: that if the concept of a being greater than which none can be conceived refers to anything, and it is not clear that it does, then it refers to an actual reality and not simply to a possible one. Here in effect, I have simply translated the argument into the *de dicto* mode and then restated Kant's objection in the *de re* mode.

of faith; and it is settled by choosing to abide personally in the guidance that conceptual truths about God bring into one's life. In this respect, the life of faith no more depends on logically prior proofs of the existence of God than arithmetic depends on independent proof of the actual existence of numbers. The actual existence of God, like the actual existence of numbers, is found in the *actual* practice of the activity that goes with believing in God or in believing in numbers.

Are all beliefs about God grammatical remarks, then, as Wittgenstein suggested? Yes, I think that Phillips would say they are, at least *when we are talking about God's nature*. But when believers are applying this understanding of God to themselves, what they say about God's activity in their own lives is not conceptually guaranteed. These opinions are surmised, and they can be mistaken. For example, believers often change their minds about what they consider to be God's will for their lives. I once knew someone who became a Wycliffe bible translator; and before he was to go into the mission field, he told me that God had appointed a wife for him (none of these translators could work in the mission field unless they were married). It was wonderful, he said, to be directed in this way to the woman he was to marry. Yet the next week I got another letter telling me that it was *not* God's will that he marry this young woman after all. He had met someone else that God had appointed for him, and he would marry her instead.

How did he come to such judgments? His view was that he had made a mistake in understanding God's will in relation to his own life. But this mistake was not like other, objectively demonstrable, mistakes. This one obviously had to be identified only through a kind of inner discernment. To really know what God wanted him to do, he had to be sure within himself that this or that woman was right for him. And what he said about God's will presumed this background of self-searching. Was this or that woman someone he could marry in utter sincerity and inward peace? He had to put these questions to himself and answer them before he could say what God's will for him was. He did not doubt that God willed something for his life—i. e., that someone was right for him. But he regarded his thinking about what that was to be correctible.¹⁸ Again, however, the fact that his thoughts on this matter proved to be correctible does not mean that he must have discovered his mistakes through objective evidence. His mistakes were inwardly discerned and self-determined. No one could tell him what results would turn up from his self-examination. Not even God, as it were, could do that.

The importance of self-understanding in relation to religious belief cannot be over-emphasized. It is perhaps the crucial factor in leading people toward faith or away from it. This is no small point. It means that knowing how to abide in faith requires knowing how to put religious ideas to work in one's life, and this bringing these ideas into touch with one's search for oneself.

A scene from a movie that I recently saw illustrates the point, and I sure Phillips would have appreciated it. The scene comes from an otherwise forgettable movie entitled *From Dawn til Dusk*, in which an aging preacher tries to explain to his daughter why he has left the church. He feels that he has come to a point where he just can't go on.

¹⁸ I think that God wills only that we find ourselves, not that we live in a particular way. It is a grammatical truth, that is, that God calls us, but not that he calls us to specific roles. Thus, believers heed God's call when they find themselves in particular roles that seem inwardly right to them; yet they express this sense of rightness as if God called them to this particular way of finding themselves instead of calling them to the general task of finding themselves.

My congregation needs spiritual leadership. Well, they can't get that from me anymore. My faith is gone. To answer your question, yes, I do believe in Jesus. But do I love them? No. After Jenny died, I just thought, what's the point?

When his daughter asks him how he can just pick up and leave, he looks her in the eye and says:

Every person who chooses the service of God as their [his] life's work has something in common. I don't care if you're a preacher, a priest, a nun, a rabbi or a Buddhist monk. Many, many times during your life you'll look at your reflection in the mirror and ask yourself, am I a fool? We've all done it. I'm not going through a lapse. What I've experienced is closer to awakening. I'm not trying to shake your faith. I've just decided not to devote my life to God anymore.¹⁹

Looking at himself in the mirror, of course, is an idiom for inwardly taking stock of himself. Intuitively, the preacher knows that feeling assured in the life of faith depends on feeling at one with oneself, and he asks himself if he is satisfied with the identity that he has tried to live up to. For his life in Christ was intimately connected with the need for inner wholeness and a settled sense of selfhood.

When the former preacher in this passage tells his daughter says he no longer wants to devote his life to God, he means that the life of faith has left him inwardly unsatisfied in trying to live according to what he once regarded as his calling. He has not lived his life for himself but for God—which would be fine if he could say that such a life had stilled his inner restlessness. But it has not. He tried to bring his life under a higher calling, and he found Jesus in this sense; but he did not find *himself* in the process. By finally freeing himself from his one-time religious identity, then, he feels released from the effort of pretending that he had found something that he had not.

Phillips often said that the acid test of faith is not so much intellectual as it is an inward trial. People lose their faith by confessing that they remain as inwardly lost as believers as they were before they believed; and it is difficult to see how an intellectual solution might solve this personal problem. Surely those arguments mounted in a cognitive attempt at having objective reasons for belief would not matter much to a believer whose religious doubts stem from such inner doubts about himself. At most, he might try to believe by forcing himself to do what he thinks that faith requires. But trying to believe is one thing, and genuine belief is another. And it is difficult to see how such efforts at self-manipulation could give one the freedom that comes from genuine faith.

Admittedly, it is somewhat surprising that Phillips, though he often refers to one's failure to find oneself *as a reason for losing one's faith*, does not treat the opposite as a reason for being confident in one's faith. Christianity, after all, promises a life of true abundance (John 10:10; I Tim 6: 19), and it is perfectly reasonable to treat that promise like any other. Whether this promise is borne out or not must be determined by those who are interested in it, but this determination is a not an objective matter but a subjective one.

That was perhaps Phillips' main point, and I think that Phillips did not say more about the subjective side of believing because he feared that it might obscure his primary objective. Like Wittgenstein, he objected to the overestimation of scientific reasoning; and he was intent on distinguishing the logic of religious and moral commitments from the logic that governs abstract hypotheses and requires some kind of inferential justification. The standards

¹⁹ The text of the screenplay can be found at <http://www.godamongdirectors.com/scripts/dusk.shtml>

of objective rationality have little to do with individuals struggling to find themselves in faith, nor should they. Indeed it is a logical mistake to put speculative considerations before the inward trials of our lives, as if the business of how we live might be settled by purely abstract arguments, sublime arguments, grammar-less arguments, and so on.

Had Phillips gone on and one about the inward satisfaction that might attend belief, moreover, he would have invited a misunderstanding of his philosophical purpose. He would have made it sound as if he, having exposed the limitations of objective arguments about god's existence, now occupied the position of trying to persuade other philosophers that faith is a good thing. But he was not trying to do that, any more than his teachers, Wittgenstein and Rhees, were engaged in that kind of effort. For them the importance of understanding, not believing, was the only call that philosophers should respond to. For once people clearly understand the nature of their moral and religious problems, the work of the philosopher is done and the real work of finding ourselves in the moral and religious sense we make of our lives has just begun.

Still, it is not easy to gain that sort of clarity, especially when we feel bound to be reasonable in the sense we make of our lives. But here is where Wittgensteinian philosophers can help. Not every judgment, again, is reasonable because it is rationally justifiable. Our thinking is reasonable when it is appropriate to the issues that confront us; and in addition to descriptive hypotheses that require evident grounds to be accepted as truths, there is an enormous variety of other beliefs that require other kinds of reasonable consideration. The affirmation of some beliefs requires a change in what we take good judgment to be, and those beliefs generally require due forms of persuasion designed to help others understand and appreciate the change in thinking that accompanies belief. Such is the case, for example, where our reasons are the values, rules, or principles to which we subscribe. But in addition to evidential grounds for beliefs as propositions, there are reasons that function as motivations for *acts* of belief, and there are causes for belief in this sense as well. Then there are the factors responsible for the expectation that reasonable people will accept some truths directly, without the need for further explanation. And there is also the use of the opposite term, "unreasonable," to indicate that a rational discussion is not possible with some people, including those who do not share the training we have in learning to think critically.

In bringing such heterogeneity to light, Phillips enlivened his discussion with illuminating anecdotes and illustrative examples from life and literature; and that gave his work a genius that I cannot duplicate here. Instead, I have tried to find simplified ways of getting into some of his thoughts on the subject of reasonable belief; and I have risked my own way of making his points in the process. But Phillips was also a kind if insistent philosopher, and I trust that he would not have objected too much to this handling of his ideas.

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D. Z. Phillips on the grammar of “God”

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Abstract In this essay dedicated to the memory of D. Z. Phillips, I propose to do two things. In the first part I present his position on the grammar of God and the language game in some detail, discussing the confusion of “subliming” the logic of our language, the contextual genesis of sense and meaning, the idea of a world view, language game, logic, and grammar internal to each context, the constitution of the religious context, and the grammar of God proper to that context. In the second part I present my appreciative critical reflection by arguing that the conception of context and language game must be made more dialectical, that the grammar of God needs more systematic metaphysical analysis, and that a greater sense of the radical transcendence of God over a language game is necessary in order to avoid reductionism always inherent in any contextual approach.

Keywords Anthropocentrism · Anthropomorphism · Contextualism · Form of life · Foundationalism · Grammar of God · Language game · Meaning · Metaphysics · Naming God · Realism · D.Z. Phillips · Philosophy of religion · Wittgenstein

D. Z. Phillips has made many important contributions to philosophy of religion, such as defending the integrity of religious experience in its irreducible uniqueness, critiquing the untheological consequences of anthropomorphism in much of analytic philosophy of religion, and discrediting the instrumentalist and consequentialist versions of theodicy. It seems safe to say that central to these contributions is his insistent demand that we observe “the grammar of God” in all our talk of God. His work of over 40 years, however, has also been controversial, generating both loyal defenses and vigorous challenges. His theory of language games and the grammar of God in particular have produced a variety of charges and counter-charges, contributing to the further development of his own theories and insights.

In this essay I focus on his concept of the grammar of God or religious belief and his theory of language games on which that grammar depends. I will first present a discussion of

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his position on these two on his own terms, and then follow up with my largely Hegelian and Thomistic reflections on some of the more controversial aspects of his position. My basic argument is that Phillips's concepts of the language game and the grammar of God are sound at their core but that they demand extension and development in three directions: (1) introducing more complexity into the concept of the language game in terms of more movement, heterogeneity, and dialectical tension with other games, without which a language game tends to be reified into a game fixed and isolated from all other games; (2) providing more systematic metaphysical analysis of the nature of God to spell out precisely the "absolute" character of the divine reality that Phillips so insists on without which the grammar of God tends to be something simply given in a religious form of life with far less intellectual self-reflection than actually has been the case; and (3) recognizing the radical irreducibility of objective and transcendent reality to any form of human subjectivity, individual or collective, including forms of life and their language games. Human language games are much more dynamic and dialectical than Phillips tends to believe; the intelligibility of the grammar of God requires much more "metaphysical" analysis than Phillips seems ready to allow; and objective reality, especially God's transcendent reality, remains the irreducible test of the adequacy of any language game as of the adequacy of any human concept, ideology, or products, to which both Western modernism and postmodernism tend to reduce reality in their anthropocentric preoccupations. In order to escape the imperialism of rationalism and positivism one need not fall into the anti-intellectualist, potentially anthropocentric empiricism of a fixed language game without metaphysics.

At the root of so many problems in philosophy of religion Phillips finds our inveterate tendency, in Wittgenstein's expression, to "sublime the logic of our language," that is, to take language out of their normal contexts of application and treat it as an abstraction in a contextual vacuum. The meaning of words and concepts is not autonomous but always mediated by their context. They make sense only in the context in which they originate and which does justice to their proper nature or character. There is nothing that is free of all contexts and makes sense for all contexts. To take things out of their appropriate contexts is to distort and denature their character in their specificity. The first order of philosophical business, therefore, is to specify and locate the proper context of application in which alone it makes sense to speak of a particular concept or problem at all, that is, to attend to the *a priori* conditions of its sense and meaning. It is no wonder, therefore, that so much of Phillips's books and essays begins with or at least is devoted to unmasking instances of subliming the logic of our language and specifying the condition or context in which a concept or a problem makes sense. For Phillips this confusion of subliming or decontextualizing can occur in a number of ways, by ignoring the proper context of a concept, regarding proof as an independent, external, and prior condition for the context of believing, or abstracting from all contexts.

We ignore the proper context whenever we speak of God as though God were simply one object among others and try to apply the same logic to God that we apply to ordinary empirical things. We forget that the proper context of the speech about God is the religious context of worship, and God is experienced in this context as an absolute reality with necessary and eternal existence, as the graceful and loving creator of all things. The confusion of subliming or decontextualizing occurs when Gaunilo objects to Anselm's so-called ontological argument by appealing to the example of the "perfect" island. Such an island may be "perfect" but clearly lacks the necessity of existence. Gaunilo assumes that God is just another object like the perfect island whose existence has to be proved, without realizing that the very concept of God is that of an absolute reality with necessary existence. For Phillips, Anselm's point is not to prove but to clarify or elucidate the kind of concept we are dealing with when we speak of God's existence: God is a radically different kind of reality to which the logic of

ordinary empirical things does not apply. We cannot determine in the abstract whether it is fitting to speak of God's existence, any more than we can determine the fitting role of the king apart from the context of the chess game in which his role is played. Denying "existence" to God as atheism does because existence is always contingent is to apply the context of finite beings that come to be and pass away and ignore the specific religious context in which alone we can speak of the divine being with sense. In the eyes of faith God's existence is eternal, necessary existence; it is not necessity added on to an otherwise contingent existence simply externally and factually, as though God, without ceasing to be God, could just possibly be contingent although, as a matter of fact, he is not. Likewise, God is love, not contingently but necessarily so that "God is love" constitutes a rule for the use of the word "God." It makes no sense to say that God can be malicious although, as a matter of fact, he is loving. Separation from God is not a contingent consequence of sin; sin is—necessarily—separation from God.

We also commit the confusion of subliming when we regard proof as a prior, independent, and external condition for the practice and context of believing. This is the confusion committed by epistemological foundationalism that regards the belief in the existence of God as something to be proven in order to serve as the foundation of religious life (1988, p. 12).¹ John Searle, too—and many like him—are guilty of this when they present the prior belief in the existence of God as an explanation—not elucidation—for engaging in religious language games. For Phillips, this is like trying to first prove the existence of the physical world before we actually use it for our many practical purposes. For him, we do not presuppose the existence of physical objects before we sit on chairs, set tables, and climb stairs, but rather show the reality of physical objects *in* such activities, which is the very context in which alone it makes sense to speak of the reality of chairs and tables and outside of which it does not. There cannot be a purely logical demonstration of the existence of chairs and tables, which then can also serve as the external foundation or basis for the context of sitting on chairs, setting tables, and climbing stairs. It is this context itself that gives concrete sense to the reality of chairs and tables and in which alone, therefore, it makes sense, not to "prove" in the sense of providing logical, external evidence, but to "elucidate" their reality. In the same way, we do not first "presuppose" God's necessary existence, as though it were in need of demonstration—in order to talk of his love and judgement. We show the meaning or sense of the talk about God's necessary existence precisely *in* the talk about God's love and judgment.

Finally, we commit the confusion of decontextualizing when we abstract from all particular contexts and discuss issues and concepts in a complete vacuum of a concrete context and entertain the illusion of philosophizing for and above all contexts. This is true especially of metaphysical realism, which therefore can be regarded as underlying all other instances of subliming. Metaphysical realism asks the question of whether something is really the case, apart from all contexts and therefore apart from the logically prior question of what it "means" to offer a description of reality or to make an existential claim in a particular context, forgetting that what is so only makes sense in a particular context. Metaphysical realism tries to raise questions outside all language games. However, we cannot speak, for example, of "necessity" and "necessary" propositions apart from all contexts. It is not "necessity" that explains the various ways we speak of necessity but the various ways in which we speak that elucidate the status of necessary propositions. Even Norman Malcolm is guilty of this decontextualization when he summarizes Anselm's conclusion by saying that "God necessarily exists." He puts the conclusion almost like a religious declaration or confession. He should have said, if he meant to be grammatical, that "in this concept of God, he is said to necessarily exist." The moral of all these examples is that "as long as we sublime the logic

¹ References without names are to the works of D. Z. Phillips.

of 'existence', we shall never appreciate what it means, in religion, to speak of the existence of the sublime"(1993, pp. 19–20).²

For Phillips, then, considering the context of application is essential for determining the sense or meaning of a belief. The meaning of "context," however, needs further elucidation. Phillips provides this by discussing the grammatical issues involved in the relation between belief and its object. The relation between belief and its object is not as straightforward as realists tend to make it when they say that "we cannot believe in God unless we believe there is a God to believe in," or that "we do not worship God unless we believe that God exists." The relation depends on the character of the object, which requires considering the context in which belief has its sense but which realism refuses to take into account. For Phillips, the context of application for belief is the context of actions and practices entailed in the belief. For realism, on the other hand, action is not internal to belief but only an external consequence of belief. To believe in a "true God" is to worship God, whereas to believe in a theory does not entail such commitment. By divorcing belief and practice realism makes any kind of believing unintelligible. Whether we believe in something is concretely shown *in* our practices and actions. What a belief amounts to is shown in how it regulates and illuminates one's life. This is not to reduce the reality of the object to our actions and practices but to locate the sense of our object of belief in its proper context. By emphasizing the *internal* relation between religious belief and the actions it informs such as forgiveness, thankfulness, and love, we are not reducing God to such actions of ours but rather locating *our* actions in the religious context of God's forgiveness, God's love, and gratitude to God. The relation between belief and its practical consequences or fruits is internal, not external as realism would have it. It is precisely in and through these fruits that God is operative in us. To believe in God is to love God because God is love. The fruits of belief are not secondary but essential to belief (1993, pp. 33–55).

It is this context of practices that forms religious concepts and provides the appropriate condition for the sense and meaning of religious beliefs. For example, the whole discussion of the relation between grace and works and predestination makes sense only within the religious context where believers have a sense of sin, their inability to overcome their sins for themselves, and a holy and just God. Taken out of this context, and made a subject of abstract metaphysical speculation, the doctrine of predestination turns into the frightening doctrine of an arbitrary God decreeing an arbitrary destiny for human beings in ways wholly unmerited by what they do. Unmediated by a sense of sin and moral responsibility the doctrine of grace becomes a magical conception. On the other hand, within a concept of God as the creator of all things and of human beings as creatures who do not possess conditions of their own existence in themselves, grace means acknowledging the giftedness of all existence, rejecting self-absolutization as idolatry, and the moral obligation to care for others as fellow creatures in God. In this religious context there is an internal relation between grace and works. Grace does not "cause" good works in the way one object causes another, but acknowledgement of grace internally demands the good works of caring for fellow creatures as expression of gratitude for one's own existence. It is indeed the fruit of grace itself to be able to look upon all things as grace. Outside this context, grace becomes magical, and the nature of good works is distorted into an extrinsic means of attaining salvation. The perspective of grace changes our attitude to life as a whole, to works, successes and failures, praises and blames, loves and hates (1988, pp. 291–302).

Constituted by a set of practices or form of life, every context also generates, for Phillips, a distinctive language game with its own world view, grammar, and logic. Every language game

² For the preceding discussion of "subliming the logic of our language," see 1993, pp. 10–20; 1995.

contains a world view or picture of the world, an informal system of basic propositions each of which depends on the other in ways that are more practical than logical, whose function is not so much to provide “evidence” and proof as to provide “elucidation” by “underlying” and shedding light on others that “surround” them. This means that the world picture with its basic propositions is not a theoretical foundation of what we think and do in the sense of providing the logical starting point from which everything else must be demonstrated as in evidentialist foundationalism. Rather, they are foundational in the practical sense that they are not themselves in need of demonstration but simply taken for granted *in* what we think and do while shedding light on other propositions that surround them. The meaning of belief in God, a basic proposition, for example, is shown in “the light it casts on all that surrounds it” (1988, p. 43).

Just as we show our belief in the existence of other human beings by actually talking to them and dealing with them in many practical ways, so basic propositions and their totality called the world picture show their reality *in* the many particular ways of our thinking and acting. They provide the very context that makes our statements and actions meaningful, where we can make meaningful arguments and predicate truth and falsity, correctness and incorrectness of statements and claims. It makes no sense, therefore, to say that the world view as such or the basic propositions themselves are true or false, correct or incorrect, which would be to reduce the context itself to the level of a proposition and confuse the validity of a statement with the validity of the conditions of its meaningfulness. Our world views themselves are neither right nor wrong, any more than our languages, which make particular statements possible, are either right or wrong. “The grammar of a language, the concept of reality in terms of which denials and affirmations may be made, is not itself a belief or a theory about the nature of reality” (1988, p. 61). The criteria for judgment of particular statements are internal to this world picture, which in turn requires no external justification other than those practices that generate it. Whether something agrees with reality is itself a question that arises and makes sense only within a certain world picture. As for the practices themselves, they are “simply there as part of our lives” (1988, p. 33) or “simply there, like our life” (p. 25).

Does the distinctiveness of a language game mean that it is so isolated from other areas of human life as to be sufficient unto itself? Phillips is aware of these and many other criticisms, and adds “misgivings” of his own about the recourse to the idea of language games. He wants to clarify, however, what these misgivings “amount to,” to use his favorite expression.

One misgiving people have is that treating religion as a distinctive language game might trivialize religion as something purely esoteric; religion should be regarded as something important and valuable. It depends, however, on what people do to make religion important. If belief in God is important only as a means relative to some human ends in the fashion of instrumentalism and consequentialism, this will be to treat God as a relative, not an absolute, value, and this will falsify the nature of religious belief. Belief in God is a matter of an absolute, intrinsic, not a relative, extrinsic judgment of value.

Another misgiving people have about treating religious belief as a distinctive language game is that it makes impossible any justification of religious belief to non-believers on the basis of common criteria of rationality. To respond, Phillips appeals to Wittgenstein. Disputes are possible only on the basis of some common understanding. If someone argues that the sun is 90 million miles away from the earth, while another argues that it is only 20 million miles away, they are disputing about the facts, but they can meaningfully dispute because they agree on methods of calculation in astronomy. On the other hand, whether handling a ball is a foul or not depends on whether they are playing the same game with the same rules. Lack of a common understanding makes even disputes impossible. With regard to the

belief in God, this raises an anomaly: Do believers who affirm God's existence contradict non-believers who do not? Do they have the same concept of God? Believing in God is not like believing in the existence of unicorns, where those who believe unicorns exist contradict those who do not. God is not an object among other objects, the name of a thing to which we can point. The reality of God cannot be measured by a common measure that also applies to things other than God. Of other things it makes sense to ask when they came into existence and when they will cease to be, questions it does not make sense to ask of God. To ask such questions of God would be to treat God as a hypothesis, a probability, a relative reality. This does not mean that worshipers "just" believe that God exists. To worship God is to take God as an absolute reality whereby we are judged, not something we judge. The believer and the non-believer, therefore, do not mean the same thing when they talk about God, which means they are not disputing about the same thing; that is, they are not disputing at all.

How do we know, though, that such beliefs are not forms of disguised nonsense which believers themselves simply fail to recognize? For Phillips, this is a serious misgiving. To respond to this question, it is not enough to say that every language game has criteria of meaning and intelligibility internal to itself, according to which we can distinguish between what can and what cannot be said, between blunders and non-blunders. A language game may be internally consistent and still be pointless nonsense as a whole. This points to a strain in the analogy between religious beliefs and games. Games may be distinguished and separated from other sorts of games, but religion separated from other spheres of human activity and confined to its own purely religious formalities of worship will not have the absolute importance it claims to have and will cease even to be true worship. The very absolute nature of religion requires that it have something to say about all sorts of our worldly experiences such as birth, death, joy, misery, despair, hope, fortune and misfortune. Any sharp separation between religion and other areas of human activity falsifies the absolute character of religion. The force of religious belief depends, in part, on understanding the sense things have outside the sphere of religion. To understand Jesus' saying that "not as the world gives I give unto you," we must also know the sense in which the world gives. Religion isolated into the formalities of ritual will be empty estheticism, literally a game one plays, but no more.

While Phillips continues to claim that we cannot assess religious reactions to worldly situations according to criteria extrinsic to religion, he also insists that such reactions should not be "fantastic" in the sense of contradicting, distorting, or ignoring "what we already know" (1993, p. 70). For example, if some religious persons say that all suffering has some purpose, it is legitimate to accuse them of not taking suffering seriously. Furthermore, it is the connection between religious belief and our worldly situations which makes religious belief a matter of "striving" to believe. The tension between our beliefs and our desires such as pride, envy, and lust makes believing a matter of genuine struggle. Similarly, the existence of evil and tragedy in the world puts our faith in God on trial, not because it tests what is essentially a theory or a hypothesis but because it renders useless a certain picture of the situation and makes it impossible to react in a certain way. The meaning and force of religious beliefs, then, do depend, in part, on their relation to worldly situations.

For Phillips, however, these objections to the idea of religious belief as a distinctive language game still remain "confused." They are drawing false conclusions from important truths. The fact of partial dependence of the meaning and force of religious beliefs on non-religious situations does not deny that religious beliefs are distinctive language games. Religious beliefs still have their own intrinsic criteria; they do not derive their justification or conclusion from the non-religious facts they depend on. For example, if a boxer crosses himself before a match in the thought that it will protect him from harm, this contradicts what we already know about causality, and his crossing himself will be a blunder based on

ignorance of causal relations. He will also be treating his religious belief as a testable hypothesis. On the other hand, he may be dedicating his performance in the hope that it will be worthy of what he believes in, in which case his crossing himself has the different significance of expressing his faith and trust. It is in ignoring this religious character of the performance that the attempt to dismiss it as superstition remains confused. The faith and trust expressed in the crossing of oneself is something absolute and cannot be justified in any external way (1993, pp. 56–77).

What, then, is the grammar of God, the concept of God operative in its proper context of faith practices? What does the religious context say about what is appropriate and what is not about God? Does “God” refer to anything beyond this world? Again, Phillips’s answer is that what is important is not whether God does or does not refer to a transcendent reality but what it *means* to say such a thing or what such a statement “amounts to.” For this, we have to look to religious language. Here, depending on Rush Rhees’s example, Phillips argues that we have to pay attention to the basic difference in grammar when we are referring to God and other objects in the world. We can know, for example, who Winston Churchill is without knowing that he was prime minister, but not also without knowing that he had a face, hands, voice, etc. Being a prime minister is not essential to being Churchill, but having the characteristics of a body is. On the other hand, we cannot know who God is unless we also know God as the loving creator of all things and the source of grace. These attributes are essential to God in the sense of defining the very concept of God or the kind of reality that God is, and constitute “grammatical” attributes, as bodily characteristics constitute grammatical attributes for human beings. Any notion of God as essentially an object of fear and hope from whom one expects reward and punishment as from another human being is a purely instrumentalist and consequentialist notion that reduces God to an object of my fear and hope, and violates the grammar of God, who is God only as an absolute reality to be worshiped for her own sake (2007). Any notion of divine omnipotence conceived as another moral agent like us or conceived as simply the power to do whatever is not logically contradictory violates the grammar of God. To use Phillips’s favorite examples, God cannot ride a bicycle, lick a Haagen-Dazs ice cream (his favorite!), bump his head, have sexual intercourse, or learn a language, all of which are appropriate to bodily beings but hardly appropriate to the spiritual creator of all things (2005, p. 12).

It is precisely in this religious context that we can also meaningfully talk about the transcendent, objective reality of God. Against the many charges brought against his views, especially that of linguistic idealism that seems to reduce the objective reality of things to the reality of words, Phillips insists that it is the practice of faith and worship that itself stresses the irreducible reality of God by distinguishing between the objective reality of God and our own mental act of faith and denounces the vice of idolatry by distinguishing the nothingness of the creature and the transcendence of the creator. Believers are answerable to God, not to their words about God. It is true that it takes participation in the religious form of life to appreciate the meaning of God as creator, for God can be confessed and worshiped only as the creator of all things. Confession, however, is not about our language about God but about God herself. We do refer to God indeed, but we can do so without violating the grammar of God only in the context of faith and confession. God is indeed independent and transcendent but can be truly so acknowledged only on condition of faith. The existence of a thing is not reducible to the mental activity of speaking about it, but what that existence means or amounts to can be understood only in the way we talk about that (2005, pp. 168–191).

Finally, then, does Phillips allow for the inexpressibility of God in religious language? For him, this too is an example of confusion. Religious language is precisely that proper medium in which alone it makes sense to speak of the mystery of God. To argue that the

mystery of God cannot be expressed in religious language is in effect to place the mystery of God outside its only proper context and thereby make divine mystery as divine mystery impossible. Furthermore, it is absurd to speak of God's unknowability; in the religious context God is *known* as mysterious. When we say that "words cannot tell you how grateful I am," says Phillips, we are not expressing our failure to thank due to the limitations of our language; it is precisely the form and way we express our gratitude. When we confess to God that "you are beyond mortal telling," we are not expressing our failure to worship but precisely the way we worship. Just as it is within the religious language that we can refer to God's objective and transcendent reality, so it is within that same language that we witness to God's inexpressible reality. The religious language, for Phillips, is itself only a medium of expression, and it is confusion to blame language itself for its failure or success to do any particular thing (2007).

There is a large core of truth and plausibility about Phillips's contextualist understanding of religious language. The sense or meaning of a word or concept is not autonomous but contextual. This context is constituted by our practices and forms of life, each of which in turn generates a world view, language game, grammar, and logic internal to itself. The religious concepts of God, grace, omnipotence, and others are not exceptions to this contextual condition for all meaning and sense. It is, therefore, absurd to think that Phillips's contextualism is motivated by a desire to so isolate religion as to make it immune to all criticism. He is only applying to religion what are the a priori conditions for the possibility of any genuine sense and meaning.

Moreover, ever since Hegel, Marx, Durkheim, phenomenology, and structuralism, some sort of contextualism has been generally accepted by most Western intellectuals. The meaning or sense of a thing depends on its place in the whole to which it belongs, whether this whole is political, economic, or cultural. This contextualism, one can say, is the completion of the logic of Western modernity. Ever since Descartes, modernity has put the issue of meaning in terms of subjectivity and objectivity, always subordinating the objectivity of things to some form or other of human subjectivity, to the thinking subjectivity of the isolated ego, or his sensing subjectivity, or the formal a priori structure of the collective subject, or the idealist dialectic of the human spirit, or the materialist praxis of collective subjectivity, or our social construction of reality. In an important sense, the Wittgensteinian subjection of meaning and sense to human forms of life and practice is one of the latest forms of the typically modern Western subordination of objectivity to the human subject.

In reflecting on Phillips's position let me begin by pointing out certain inherent ambiguities. The basic outlines of his theory of language games and forms of life are reasonably clear, and it is easy enough to follow what he is saying. What is not clear, largely because he does not really provide an extended analysis of his theory anywhere, contenting himself with giving ad hoc examples and appealing to certain intuitive plausibilities, is the scope of the practices and forms of life which are meant to provide the conditions of meaning for religious beliefs such as the concept of God and various divine attributes. Can we say, for example, that Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, and the present Archbishop of Canterbury share the same form of life since they all seem to share a certain conception of God as an absolute reality, eternal, omnipotent, and loving? Should we say that Lutherans share the same form of life because they share the same understanding of justification by faith? Are we going to say that wherever we find a shared conception of some basic propositions and world views, there is a shared form of life? Where does a form of life begin and end? Do all Christians share the same form of life regardless of their historical, denominational, and dogmatic differences? Or, shall we say that forms of life overlap with one another in the most complicating ways that it is not really possible to separate one form of life from others? For example, shall we

say that a Christian today shares one form of life with all other Christians, another form of life with all members of her denomination, a third form of life with all members of her generation, a fourth form of life with her fellow citizens, Christian or otherwise, and so on, so that in one and the same person many forms of life are interacting?

This ambiguity leads to my first important point. Even though the idea of forms of life and practices is reasonably clear in Phillips's works, and even though he is fully aware that they are interacting and changing, he does give the impression on the whole that these forms of life and practices are relatively fixed and isolated. I think it is imperative to develop his ideas further by introducing movement, heterogeneity, and interaction into his forms of life and practices so as to bring his ideas closer to the objective reality of such forms and practices. Forms of life and practices vary in scope from the relatively simple cases of playing chess and adding numbers to academic practices of taking courses, grading, degree requirements, and importance of degrees to business practices in the many areas of banking, heavy industry, electronics, and investing to cultural practices of going to movies, concerts, and museums to religious practices of worship, prayer, meditation, and religious education. What complicates the picture is that all these practices can be further divided under different cultural settings (Confucian, Islamic, Hindu, Christian, African, etc.). Forms of life and practices not only vary in scope; they are also products of historical changes. The "Davos culture," the culture of the international business elite, and the "Faculty Club International," the internationalization of Western intelligentsia, are obviously products of contemporary globalization (Berger 1997). Not only are forms of life variant in scope or products of history; these variations in scope and historical genesis are themselves results of complex interactions with other forms of life and practices, interactions which increasingly become internal to the affected forms, promoting, eroding, and in any case significantly changing their identity, which is no longer identical but internally heterogeneous.

The point of this dialectical reflection on forms of life and practices is that the grammar or concept of God that Phillips so insists on is itself a product of a long history of human consciousness and subject to all the dialectic of interaction with competing forms of life and their world views in the contemporary world. The idea of God as an absolute, eternal, and infinite reality radically different from things in this world is an idea that has taken thousands of years to mature and take root in a particular group of people, and is now being exposed to the totalizing, often trivializing, and always commercializing impact of the internet with all its conflicting ideologies, values, and conceptions of the good life. The forms of life that promote the absolute understanding and grammar of God are being changed, eroded, and in any case severely challenged by the forces of globalization that leave no form of life and practice untouched and therefore no grammar unaffected. It is not only that, as Phillips knew, the "world" puts our faith on trial or partially determines the meaning and sense of religious belief; the world can put faith to a more radical challenge, trivializing it into non-existence by making absolute commitments increasingly impossible, or relativizing it into non-significance by exposing it to the competition among rival forms of ultimate belief systems, or confusing it in any case by compelling it to make sense of the trivializing, relativizing, and pluralizing tendencies of globalization. Forms of life and their world views are far more dialectically complicated than Phillips seems to realize.

There is another point to this dialectical reflection. I think it is important to see a matching relation between the scope of the form of life and the scope of the belief in question. If, for example, the belief whose meaning is at issue is a belief about where to park your car on campus, the appropriate context or form of life to look for as the condition of its meaning will be the common practical life of the particular school. If the belief at issue is about where to go to graduate school in America, the appropriate context will be the set of academic

practices governing graduate education in contemporary America. If the belief at issue is a belief about the stock market, the appropriate context or form of life will be the business practices of the Wall Street. These examples should make it clear that it is necessary to look for a form and context of life appropriate to the kind and scope of the belief in question.

This, however, also raises a complicating question with regard to religious beliefs. The more external and practical a belief is, the easier it becomes to identify its appropriate context of meaning, a certain historically determinate form of life and practices. Where to move a king or a queen in a chess game, for example, simply depends on the rules of the game. When the question at issue touches the existential and religious domain, however, it is not so easy to locate and point to the appropriate context. The question of the meaning of death, for example, is not only a historical question concerning its meaning for a particular society and religion but also an existential question concerning its meaning for all human beings regardless of their particular historical setting. Guilt about one's moral failure, love as a permanent human need, hope for something enduring, death as a definitive end of human life: these are not only historically specific in the responses elicited but also humanly universal in the challenges they provoke. It is quite reasonable to look for historically specific responses in their institutionalized form as the context of the meaning of these beliefs; it is equally reasonable to also look for certain universal or common patterns among the historically variant contexts of responses insofar as those phenomena are universally human. Human beings are indeed historically different, but they are not so different as to be only different with nothing in common.

Regarding the grammar of God this raises the important question: Does Phillips's view allow for both historical specificity and existential universality? He insists that the grammar of God is that of an absolute eternal being and creator of all things. How does he know this? Because the form of life that makes "God" meaningful is the life of faith and worship, and this life says that God is such an absolute reality. It is clear that this concept of God is derivative from the Judeo-Christian tradition. This concept does not mean that it is relevant only to the situation of worship separated from all other spheres of life. In fact, we saw Phillips insisting that the grammar of God makes God relevant to all fields of human concern and activity because we are asked to practice God's creative love in all human situations. What about God's relevance to all human beings, not just to all human situations? If the grammar of God is that of the loving creator of all things including *all* humanity, does Phillips ever argue for this universal human relevance? Should we not look by the very logic or grammar of God as the loving creator of all human beings for some traces of faith and yearning for God in all humanity and in the various religions in which human beings concretizes their relationship to God? It would seem that the grammar of God requires not only that God is not a means relative to some particular human purpose, like greed and ambition, not only that God is relevant to all human situations, but also that God loves all human beings as her creatures, and that if so, all human groups must also show some religious expressions of faith and worship appropriate to the meaning of God. The idea of a God relevant only to some nations and cultures will be just as ungrammatical as is the idea of a God who doles out arbitrary destinies for different human beings. Will Phillips allow this, which means that the context of the grammar of God is constituted not by a single form of life of a particular religious tradition but in some way by a plurality of often conflicting forms of life belonging to many different religious traditions?

The logic or grammar of God raises another issue. It raises not only the question of God's relevance to all human situations in the consciousness of the religious believer, not only the question of God's relevance to all human beings in their religious consciousness, but also the question of God's relevance to all human beings in all their mundane situations regardless of

how explicitly conscious of God they may be in such situations. That is to say, is it possible to regard all human situations of all human beings as the form of life or practical context for the belief in God? If the grammar of God requires making the belief in God relevant to all situations, and if the same grammar requires making the same belief relevant to all human beings, can't we go one step further and say that we have to regard all forms of life and practices as the appropriate context for the belief in God?

Doesn't the idea of God as creator of all things entail God's lordship over all things and therefore over all situations? Can there be any realm of human groups and activities to which God may be irrelevant? Some human beings like Italian spaghetti, others like Chinese noodles. One can say that these are simply matters of contingent tastes. Will the grammar of God allow us to say that God is relevant only to those who like to believe in God, in much the same way that Chinese noodles and Italian spaghetti are only relevant to those who happen to like it? Different things become relevant to different people according to their specific context of existence according to nationality, gender, profession, status, ethnicity, etc. The Stars and Stripes are relevant to American people and those who study national flags. Techniques of car repair are relevant to car drivers and car mechanics. Is God, then, one of the things which people may or may not find relevant according to their varying, contingent contextual needs? If the grammar of God does not allow limiting the relevance of God to a contingent situation, isn't there a sense, a very important sense indeed, in which we can say that the grammar of God as an "absolute" reality makes God relevant to *all* contexts and all forms of life? It seems that we should not only allow a particular context—faith and worship of a particular community—to provide the proper concept or meaning or grammar of God; we should also follow the logic of this grammar in its absoluteness and universality and allow that logic to determine the kind of contexts to which it should be relevant, that is, to be relevant to all contexts and all forms of life insofar as these are creatures internally related to their creator. In an important sense we can say that just as God is not one object among other objects, God's relevance is not limited to one context among other contexts either; the one is as much confused as the other. The true grammar of God seems to demand nothing less.

This raises another important issue. Most people including most Christians are not always conscious of the presence of God in their worldly situations, which remains "secular" as opposed to their "sacred" moments in specifically religious situations where they are conscious of the presence of God. It is precisely to meet this situation where we are not always conscious of the divine, although perhaps we should be, given the omnipresence of God in all created things, that Tillich and Rahner came up respectively with the notion of the "depth" dimension of the human spirit and the "horizon" of all human existence and knowledge. For Tillich, religion is not one special function among others of the human spirit but "the dimension of depth in all of them, ... [that] points to that which is ultimate, infinite, unconditional in man's spiritual life" (1964, p. 7). For Rahner, God is present in all things we do as the ultimate "horizon" whose reality we implicitly affirm in every act of judging and doing as its *a priori* condition by virtue of an anticipatory grasp or *Vorgriff* (1969, pp. 53–68). For both Tillich and Rahner, God is not a being whom we can meet only in a particular form of life or language game, although we do become "explicitly" conscious of God in specifically religious activities. We meet God in every situation and every context as the absolute inescapable horizon of our existence in its totality, although only "implicitly" or "latently." This is only possible because God is not an object among objects but the ground and horizon of all being and knowledge. For both this is a conclusion of a long but insightful metaphysical analysis of the structure and dynamics of human existence. But perhaps this is precisely what Phillips does not like, metaphysics.

My second point of reflection, then, has to do with the role of intellectual, metaphysical reflection in the settling of the meaning of religious beliefs. In Phillips I detect an empiricist tendency to directly attribute our beliefs to our practices as given in the life of a community, an existentialist tendency to equate the objective meaning of a belief with its actualization in the qualitative transformation of a person's existence à la Kierkegaard, and an anti-intellectual tendency to dismiss metaphysical analyses as useless abstractions. All these tendencies excessively belittle the role and power of the human intellect in human life.

It is true that we acquire our religious beliefs by participating in the practices of a believing community, but this does not mean that there is no room for our own intellectual judgments in the process of appropriation. No matter how long and how intensely we may participate, there comes a moment when our own intellect has to give its own assent to the truth and reasonableness of the practices and articles of faith we participate in. Our appropriation is never totally blind but requires varying degrees of participation on the part of our own intellect. Phillips's empiricism seems to deny this. What is most important to note, however, is that the Christian Church itself from its earliest beginnings has always incorporated metaphysical analysis into its noetic structure, as witness all the great theologians. Metaphysics was an intrinsic part of theology as such. Phillips might say that this is acceptable as long as theologians do this in the context and light of their faith seeking understanding, as Anselm did. Phillips, therefore, might accept metaphysical analysis within the context of faith, just as Barth exempts Anselm from the strictures against natural theology on the ground that Anselm was carrying on his reflection within faith. This is all very well.

Furthermore, Phillips himself engages in metaphysical analysis, as witness his appeal to the ideas of creator, creation, creatureliness, contingency, giftedness of existence, the radical difference of reality between God and creatures, and other theological concepts that are also thoroughly metaphysical. Grammatical differences are in fact differences in the kind of reality things have and therefore metaphysical differences. Granted, for the sake of argument, that we cannot do metaphysics outside all contexts. Why not then do more metaphysics and do it more systematically and thoroughly within the context of Christian faith?

Phillips argues like a good metaphysician that God is a different kind of reality than an object among other objects, but then refuses to engage in a further, systematic analysis of the being of created and uncreated entities precisely to show the metaphysical basis for the difference in reality and therefore also in grammar between God and creatures. Likewise, he argues that the point of the doctrine of grace and predestination is to show the basic creatureliness of all human beings and the need to care for fellow creatures as an expression of gratitude to God, but then refuses to go further by providing a metaphysical analysis of what it means to create, what the creator must be in order to be able to create, how this creating is not comparable to the making of things at the level of created things of our experience, and how human freedom and divine grace are not mutually exclusive in the way that two human freedoms might be. I do not know of any place where Phillips provides a lengthy systematic analysis of these profoundly metaphysical issues. He usually contents himself with an appeal to some telling examples and intuitive plausibilities followed by some general remarks based on such intuitions. He leaves so many issues simply dangling, issues a traditional metaphysician would grab and explore with enthusiasm and gusto.

My third and final point of reflection has to do with the irreducible difference between human subjectivity in all its forms and the objectivity of reality whether created or divine. I earlier noted certain modern and postmodern Western desire to measure and evaluate reality by the criteria of human subjectivity in its many forms, individual and collective, theoretical and practical, saying that the Wittgensteinian appeal to language games and forms of life as the context of meaning and evaluation is only one of the most recent attempts in the same

anthropocentric direction. My assertion of the irreducible difference between subjectivity and objectivity or between human thought and objective reality should be taken in a postcritical sense. No modern intellectual today would be a naïve realist. Reality is indeed mediated, theoretically interpreted and practically transformed, by human beings in light of their world views and horizons. This fact, however, should not lead us to the anthropocentric illusion that there is nothing outside the text, or language games, or stories, or horizons, or ideologies.

Being creatures means that we have not created the conditions of our own existence; these conditions are given there prior to our initiative, and all our initiatives, theoretical or practical, must conform to these conditions. It means that we should not absolutize ourselves, individually or collectively, not only in the sense that we should care for others as fellow creatures, as Phillips rightly remarked, but also that we should not try to dominate reality by subordinating it to the criteria and perspectives of our own horizons and language games. Despite all the inevitable mediation by our own subjectivity, reality remains both *other* and *more* than what it means to the human subject(s).

We can begin with something elementary. There is a world of difference between the idea of a thing and the reality of the thing of which the idea is an idea. Without in any way denying the isomorphism of being and thought so foundational to the classical tradition, it is also clear that the subjective idea is not identical with the objective thing. My idea of war is not the same as the reality of war. It is not only that my idea of war does not bleed, but that the reality of war is bloody. It is also that my idea of war does not reflect the reality of war in all its complexity and dialectic. This is something we can easily generalize to the level of our collective ideas, ideologies, language games, perspectives, and horizons. Without denying that some ideas might be more adequate than others, our collective ideas are not identical with the objective reality of the things and situations of which we have ideas. We like to assume a simple identity between our ideas and the objective reality of the world. We think and claim that the world is what we think it is. We entertain the illusion that our ideas are themselves the realities of the world, reducing the world to our subjectivity. Through various experiences, empirical researches, but most dramatically disasters natural or social, we learn that our ideas were wrong, often shocked and disillusioned into the recognition of the persisting difference and contradiction between our thoughts and the world we think about. It took the shock of World War I for Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy to shake off the illusions of liberal Protestant theology. It took the shock of the Depression to shake both capitalists and socialists from their social complacency and illusions. It took the shock of Hurricane Hugo of 1990 to shake me from all my anthropocentric illusions about the world. Changes in the real world have a way of replacing and displacing philosophical systems. Things are not what we think they are. Kierkegaard spoke the truth: the identity of thought and being applies only to divine creative thought, not to the human created thought, which does remain ever vulnerable to the shock of reality (Min 2004, pp. 79–82).

We try to hang on to the modern Western myth of constitutive subjectivity through pure formalism. The Enlightenment rationalists used to claim that the world is what reason thinks it is; to say that it is not is itself a judgment of reason and therefore valid only for reason, thought, or concept. It seems we cannot escape the reign of reason. Contemporary contextualism comes along and repeats the claims of modern constitutive consciousness: the negation of context, the distinction between context and reality, and the transcendence of context are themselves possible only within a context. Even in its self-negation and self-transcendence context remains constitutive: we cannot stand outside of all contexts or language games. This, however, is an empty claim, purely formal without content. When the complacent middle class American boys came home from Vietnam in plastic bags and on crutches, with their world view shattered and their illusions exposed, what comfort would it be to say that the

experience of the shattering is still possible only for their constitutive subjective consciousness, that it makes sense only in a worldview and a language game, when the constitutive role of such collective subjectivity is precisely to be shattered and to negate and transcend itself, like the last hurrah of a defeated general about to surrender himself? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to recognize up front that we can "constitute" the world only because we are, as creatures, first constituted to do so and learn to relativize ourselves?

This has more than a little bearing on our present problematic. Phillips tries to place God in the religious context where God can be recognized as an absolute reality. This is done in two different ways which can perhaps be misinterpreted. In one way he does this by saying that to know God is to worship God, that to worship God is to change our ways in light of God. To know that God is love is to practice love for one another. This is an existentialist, Kierkegaardian approach. The claim is that there is an internal relation between belief and practice: belief by its nature is meant to lead to the transformation of our existence. We have to be careful here, however. We should not equate the perfectly necessary ethical exhortation to subjective transformation with a statement of the objective reality of the object of belief. To say that there is an internal relation between belief and practice is still to maintain a distinction between the two; if not distinct, how can they be related, even internally? By the nature of the content, however, the belief demands to be actualized by each subject who believes. However, we should not forget that there is also the objective side of that reality, which should not be equated with and reduced to its role in the transformation of subjective existence. To say God is love indeed demands that we practice that love, but the reason why it does is precisely because it is God, not another human being, who is love, that is, because God is a certain reality even apart from her role in transforming our human existence. The internal demand to actualize love in our human life is itself parasitic on the antecedent objective reality of God as creator, infinite, eternal, etc.

It is important, then, to realize that in our haste to emphasize the ethical imperative of transforming our subjectivity, we do not forget the transcendent reality of God over us, beyond us, and apart from us, and do not reduce the meaning of "God is love" to what it entails by way of our subjective transformation. Even if we are not transformed, it does remain true that God is love. Even if we are sinners indifferent to divine grace, God remains a graceful God. Even if Christians are all hypocrites, Christianity can remain true. We should not confuse the objective sovereign reality of God with the ethical imperative of subjective transformation. The difference between objectivity and subjectivity, especially between divine objectivity and human subjectivity, remains implicit precisely in the ethical imperative of subjective transformation which is imperative only because it comes from a sovereign God who is more, far more, infinitely more, *semper magis*, than what we are or what God means to our subjectivity. The classical distinction between immanent Trinity and economic Trinity, between what God is in herself and what God is for us, is a distinction that must be maintained for the sake of both the infinity of God and the finitude of humanity.

The other way of recognizing the absolute reality of God in the context of religious faith is to show that it is the believing consciousness itself that makes a distinction between God and idol, between the irreducible sovereignty of God and human lowliness. As I already mentioned earlier, however, this is still to maintain the priority of constitutive human consciousness in relation to the sovereignty of God: God is sovereign because believers can themselves humble and negate themselves. This is not dissimilar to the postmodern phenomenological approach of Levinas, Derrida, and Marion, all of whom treat the transcendence of God as a function of human subjectivity in its self-negation and ironically reduces and relativizes God to human subjectivity (Min 2006).

The question of whether Phillips's Wittgensteinian approach is reductionist or not comes to the fore once again in the treatment of religious language in its ability to express the inexpressible God. Phillips is quite content with the statement that God is known in religious language as mystery, and that the confession to God that "you are beyond mortal telling" is itself the way, not a failure, to worship God, as the statement that "words are not adequate to express my gratitude to you" is itself the way, not a failure, to express gratitude. There are three points to be made here. One is that Phillips only says that the proper context of mystery is precisely the religious context of faith and worship, which is an important insight, but he fails to go on, for fear of metaphysics, to provide an analysis of what mystery might be as divine mystery. A distinction like the distinction St. Thomas makes between our ability to know God through her created effects and our inability to know God in her own essence would have been very helpful in the further analysis and development of the concept, as would have been Rahner's profound essay on the Catholic concept of mystery (McCool pp. 108–119).

Secondly, it is worth noting the paradox in Phillips's remark on the two statements that the self-negation of language is itself a positive way of worshipping God, not an expression of failure to do so. I am afraid here that he is not sensitive enough to the tension involved in that self-negation. We cannot avoid using human language to worship God, but human language can do its worshipping function only by negating itself. There is no avoiding a tension between the form of language and the content that negates and transcends and breaks through that form. It would be a travesty of true worship if the worshipper was quite content and happy because she just did the best she could with the human language, the only language at her disposal, without any sense of regret and sorrow that her language is not even remotely adequate to express God in her splendor and glory. Between her regret and her performance there is an ongoing tension between the form she cannot avoid using in order to worship God and the divine content that overflows and breaks through the form. Here is the tension and paradox. Religious language does its job only by acknowledging a sovereign reality that transcends it, only by negating and transcending itself in the direction of something indeed totally other.

Finally, why is human language radically inadequate? Phillips seems to deny that human language can be inadequate. In fact, he would consider it a matter of confusion to predicate adequacy or inadequacy of human language. Language as such is neither adequate nor inadequate. Here he seems to ignore the many philosophical reflections on the nature of human language, on how human language is suited to express the subject/object relations in the material world (Aquinas), "representational" thinking (Heidegger), and "predicative language" (Marion), which, left to itself, would necessarily lead to ontotheology that reduces God to an object among objects, an idol, unless one consciously uses language in an analogical way (Min 2005, pp. 168–174; 2006, 2007). It is unfortunate that someone like Phillips, who spends so much time talking about language, spends so little reflection on the structural inadequacies of language as such when it refers to transmundane realities.³

Acknowledgements I came to Claremont in the same year (1992) that D. Z. Phillips did and had the pleasure and honor of being his colleague for 14 years. He was one of the most truly remarkable philosophers, colleagues, and above all human beings I had ever known, and for all my serious philosophical differences with him I will always count his friendship as one of God's greatest gifts. I thank Eugene Long for his invitation to contribute to this commemorative volume. I dedicate this essay to the memory of D. Z. Phillips, a truly great human being. Requiescat in pace.

³ One of the most sensible critics of Phillips's philosophy of religion, I think, is Patrick Sherry (1972), who pointed out the need to "locate," "relate," and "justify" language games. For other criticisms, see Hoyt (2007) and Richards (1978).

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Tribute to Dewi Z. Phillips

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Dewi Z. Phillips held the Danforth Chair in Philosophy of Religion at the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. He lived and worked in Claremont, California, every spring from 1992 through 2006. For 15 consecutive years, he traveled to California in January and returned to Wales in May. Just before returning to Wales he would often say, “When I step off the plane *my whole world changes*.” Dewi thus lived the last years of his life in two different worlds: Swansea and Claremont. Those of us in Claremont know that he treasured his Swansea world and that the world of Claremont would never replace it. We saw this in the way he lovingly spoke of how his wife Monica looked after him. We saw it in the pride he displayed when telling stories about his three sons and their families. We saw it in his undying devotion to the Department of Philosophy in Swansea. I want to say a bit about his life in Claremont, and his lasting influence on those of us who lived and worked with him there.

The world of Claremont for Dewi was filled with graduate students who adored him or vehemently argued against him or sought his advice or admired him from another field outside of philosophy or avoided him altogether because of his reputation as a tough professor. He once overheard a student say to another student, “You can go out for a drink with Phillips and still get a B- in his class.” He liked that. People energized Dewi and nothing energized him quite like students. I think it is fair to say that for him a student’s genuine questions are the philosopher’s most precious commodity. He once said in a class to a student who openly complained about “juvenile questions” being asked by other students, “There are no juvenile questions in my class; there are only questions.” Dewi was deeply admired and respected by hundreds of students and former students because he attended to their questions with the same serious attention that he gave to the most prominent philosophers in the field.

Claremont also included his colleagues and co-workers. His fellow faculty members admired him for his extraordinary work ethic but were always a bit worried that the university administration would expect all of us to work as hard as he did. Claremont invigorated him

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to prodigious levels of publication because he encountered a diversity of perspectives among his colleagues. It reminded him of what Wittgenstein said of Shakespeare. "He shows you a city with no main road." Similarly, the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University is not a single way of looking at religion. It is many perspectives all arguing, discussing, and vying for position. He loved that about Claremont and his colleagues there, and believed that it is the best environment a university can offer.

Claremont was also a place of friendship for Dewi. His friends included students, former students, colleagues, retired colleagues, staff members, and others in the community, who took him to concerts, plays, ball games, and other social events. He enjoyed good food, good wine, and a good single malt, but only in the company of friends. In these groups, he was invariably the center of attention, telling stories and jokes until the wee hours of the morning. He was the best storyteller that most of us had ever heard. His friends also witnessed the quiet side of Dewi, a surprisingly sensitive man who often complained about himself that he was hopelessly sentimental. We loved that about him. We shall terribly miss his extraordinary capacity for friendship that included both an ability to entertain a large party for hours and to offer a sympathetic voice of encouragement to a troubled friend.

I am not certain that Dewi fully appreciated that for those of us who studied, worked and/or socialized with him, our world changed too, every time he stepped off that plane. His influence and charisma were such that we seem also to have lived in two different worlds: Claremont with D.Z. Phillips and Claremont without D.Z. Phillips. He brought such an enormous amount of energy to the place that it will be extremely difficult for us to go on without him. And this is our plight: What does it mean for students, colleagues, and friends to live in a world without Dewi Phillips? My worst fear is that Claremont will seem boring and uninteresting without Dewi there every spring. Life in Claremont will surely lose much if its charm. But I have a hope also that rests in Dewi's own Christian beliefs about the Eternal. The will of the deceased one becomes absolute and unchanging. If this is true, then Dewi's influence will rise to a spiritual level such that for students, colleagues, and friends in Claremont, the world will be a place that demands that we take seriously the questions of our students, that we encourage and facilitate a diversity of perspectives within the university, and that we enjoy the full breadth and depth of our friendships. For those of us who knew Dewi in the Claremont context, these values now have an eternal significance to which we must each respond.

It is no small matter that Dewi Zephaniah Phillips was one of the leading philosophers of religion of the twentieth century. And yet, that is not what passes into eternity with Dewi's passing. It is, rather, those eternal values that his life showed to us as a teacher, a colleague, and a friend.