From Fundamental Faith to Classical Theism

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§1 Introduction

Suppose we agree with the account of faith I’ve defended elsewhere: that fundamental faith involves a disposition to respond in service of an ideal. Such a position on faith leaves quite a bit of variability to be expected concerning which combinations of cognitive, affective, and connative states result in or constitute any given instance of this disposition. In fact, there can be no proof that any particular such states are required for such faith, even when we restrict the kind of faith in question to religious faith or more specifically to the faith of a particular religion. The reason is simple: dispositions are functional creatures, understood in terms of characteristic outputs, and one well-known feature of functional items is that the input recipes are open-ended with respect to common outputs.

This fact raises an issue, the issue of how one gets from such fundamental faith to the classic doctrines of, e.g., the Christian faith, and whether doing so results in some failure or defect or flaw on the part of those who traverse this path. It is the purpose of this paper to address this issue, and the answer falls into two parts. One part is quite negative, involving the misuses of the institution of power that is organized religion, but another part is positive, locating the impulse for Classical Theism in appropriate responses to the source of religious affection in awe, wonder, adoration, and worship. I begin, however, with the negative.

§2 Coercive Routes from Faith to Classical Theism

2.1 Dewey’s Discontent

We can begin with John Dewey’s account of the kind of attitude that fundamental faith involves:

1See Kvanvig (2013, 2015b, 2016a,b).
Apart from any theological context, there is a difference between belief that is a conviction that some end should be supreme over conduct, and belief that some object or being exists as a truth for the intellect. Conviction in the moral sense signifies being conquered, vanquished, in our active nature by an ideal end; it signifies acknowledgment of its rightful claim over our desires and purposes. Such acknowledgment is practical, not primarily intellectual. It goes beyond evidence that can be presented to any possible observer. Reflection, often long and arduous, may be involved in arriving at the conviction, but the import of thought is not exhausted in discovery of evidence that can justify intellectual assent. The authority of an ideal over choice and conduct is the authority of an ideal, not of a fact, of a truth guaranteed to intellect, not of the status of the one who propounds the truth. (Dewey 1934, p. 19)

Dewey claims that the kind of conviction involved in faith is practical rather than intellectual. He uses the language of belief to describe this conviction, thus distinguishing between practical and theoretical doxastic attitudes, and one may be inclined to question the use of the language of belief for such practical attitudes. But I will pass over that issue here, for the more important question in our context is the chasm between practical and theoretical convictions, regardless of the language used to describe such convictions. For on Dewey’s approach to faith, the practical convictions can be as pure and pristine as one might wish, without any need for the theoretical elements organized religion provides:

Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality. Many a person, inquirer, artist, philanthropist, citizen, men and women in the humblest walks of life, have achieved, without presumption and without display, such unification of themselves and of their relations to the conditions of existence. …[T]he claim on the part of religions to possess a monopoly of ideas and of the supernatural means by which alone, it is alleged, they can be furthered, stands in the way of the realization of distinctively religious values inherent in natural experience. (Dewey 1934, p. 25)

Not only does Dewey maintain that one can display the virtue of faith without the theoretical accoutrements that organized religion provides, he characterizes
the relationship between the two as antagonistic—religion “stands in the way” of what is valuable here. His reasons appeal to a standard, dismissive attitude toward religious experience:

In reality, the only thing that can be said to be “proved” [by religious experience] is the existence of some complex of conditions that have operated to effect an adjustment in life, an orientation, that brings with it a sense of security and peace. The particular interpretation given to this complex of conditions is not inherent in the experience itself. It is derived from the culture with which a particular person as been imbued. . . . The determining factor in the interpretation of the experience is the particular doctrinal apparatus into which a person has been inducted. (Dewey 1934, p. 12)

Dewey’s view, then, is that if the theoretical commitments of organized religion are justified, it will have to be on the basis of religious experience, but religious experience isn’t up to the task, since it is a product of prior indoctrination that corrupts experience. He writes,

[The] positive lesson is that religious qualities and values if they are real at all are not bound up with any single item of intellectual assent, not even that of the existence of the God of theism; and that, under existing conditions, the religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature, together with the idea of peculiar avenues of access to such truths. (Dewey 2008, p. 23)

The conclusion, then, is that the kind of faith worth having can only exist where it is freed from the influence of religion. Why? Not only is religion not necessary for such faith, but rather inhibits it by substituting something cognitive for something affective and corrupting to the integrity of one’s approach to intellectual matters in the process. Dewey makes it clear that “the issue does not concern this and that piecemeal item of belief, but centres in the question of the method by which any and every item of intellectual belief is to be arrived at and justified.” (Dewey 2008, p. 23) What is the method? It is the method “conveyed by the word ”scientific”…” (Dewey 2008, p. 23).
2.2 A Contingent Version of the Discontent

There is certainly a contingent truth of the sort Dewey focuses on, a truth on display in much of the history of Christianity. Consider, for example, the claims of the Athanasian creed. The creed includes meticulous and detailed descriptions of doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, to delineate orthodoxy from its rivals, and concludes by saying, “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. . . . This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe truly and firmly, he cannot be saved.”

Such language is coercive, adopted to induce compliance in a way that bypasses the normal and respectable pathways from evidence to belief in favor of a pathway that runs through a desire or interest in being saved rather than damned. Attempts of this sort to achieve conformity of thought obviously threaten the intellectual integrity of those who hear the message, leading to efforts to sustain or create a belief through something other than a love of truth.

Not only is the language objectionably coercive, it is inconsistent with a defensible reading of the Christian message. In the context of the Deweyan account of faith worth having that I have articulated and defended—a generic account of which Biblical faith is a particular instance—such remarks are jarring. They beggar belief. The lack of fit between what is demanded here and the language of Scripture, which notes that Abraham placed faith in God and it was credited to him as righteousness, is manifest. The thought that Abraham’s faith was somehow infused with Trinitarian and Incarnational theology is baffling, mind-boggling in the extreme.

One could try to rescue the Athanasian claims by distinguishing what was once required for saving faith from what is no longer demanded, given our advanced understanding of such doctrines. Such a response will be easily recognized for the subterfuge it is once we are careful in thinking about what could possibly make faith such an important part of life, both religious and mundane. Faith matters because it involves the setting of one’s heart on things that matter; it involves a commitment to a way of life and an organizing and prioritizing of what one cares about and values so as to further the ideal in question, whether that ideal is an abstract entity such as democracy or equality of opportunity or something more concrete such as the kingdom of God and the reconciliation of all things to God through Christ. In the latter context, the value of faith is not fundamentally a matter of having true beliefs, but rather a matter of loyalty and commitment to a cause, and such loyalty and commitment can surely be present in people with
vastly different cognitive stances regarding the implications of the idea that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

Given this alternative perspective on faith worth having, the language of the Athanasian creed befuddles. One wonders, “Why such insistence on uniformity of thought and belief?” Consider a Johannine alternative, for example, one emphasizing uniformity of affection even in the face of intellectual disagreement. On such a conception, the guiding principle could be the Biblical injunction to always “greet each other with a holy kiss,” even when disagreements are deep and irresolvable. That is, whatever variation exists regarding thoughts and beliefs among Christians, the one abiding principle is that love must always abide. The uniformity demanded on this conception would be affective and connative rather than cognitive.

The stance of the Athanasian creed is, however, fundamentally cognitive rather than affective and connative, and it is perplexing because of this fact. It is perplexing because the value of faith isn’t fundamentally a matter of the cognitive elements present in a faith worth having. It is perplexing because it involves a great inferential leap from the idea that some beliefs are true while others are mistaken to the damnatory idea that those with false beliefs will be lost forever. When one recognizes the centrality of faith to the good life—faith in family, friends, self, and causes beyond one’s merely egoistic concerns—the cognitive demands of the Athanasian creed are alien enough from what makes faith central to the good life to demand an explanation of how such a cognitive distortion of what faith involves could become so commonplace.

2.3 Retrenchment in Service of Cognitive Distortion

It is worth noting here, however, that there are possible cognitive approaches here that refuse the exaggerations of the Athanasian Creed, and these approaches were hinted at earlier when I noted the possibility of a loyal and faithful band who have quite different cognitive stances toward the generic idea that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The idea is that there is an arena of agreement within a larger realm in which variety of stance is allowed. In this sense, there are some commitments that are non-negotiable, that are fundamental, and variability regarding the fundamentals calls for exile: you are simply not one of us.

This possibility of a carefully crafted and limited number of fundamentals for a given kind of faith is attractive, but it is most attractive when the issue is the sociological one of who counts as one of us and who doesn’t, as opposed to a soteriological one concerning who is headed for damnation and who isn’t (e.g., as
in the Athanasian Creed). Here, however, soteriology is the appropriate standard, for a given Christian group could adopt clear standards about who can stay and who must be exiled while yet acknowledging that their standards applied only to communal life and not to the question of eternal life itself.

Moreover, if the cognitivist approach is to be sustained in this way by appeal to fundamentals, there are two hurdles to clear: one about what the fundamentals are, and other about exactly which cognitive attitudes are being demanded with regard to the fundamentals.

The second can be dispensed with more quickly, since even though the standard cognitive attitude insisted on is doxastic, the reasons for this demand are not compelling and certainly don’t constrain cognitivist positions more generally. The reasons for doxastic approaches here arise because of a long-standing view that faith is, or requires, a kind of propositional belief (perhaps belief that the claims of the Gospel are true), and if that account of faith is rejected (as must be assumed to make sense of this project!), then the possibility of alternative cognitive attitudes toward the fundamentals has to be acknowledged. What other kinds of cognitive stances might there be? Here the list of such possibilities is fairly extensive: there are beliefs, degrees of belief, levels of confidence, assumptions, acceptances, presuppositions, expectations, guesses, hypotheses, suspicions, suppositions, conjectures, postulates, and even shots in the dark. There is a nice hope that all of these reduce to belief (or degree of belief), but optimism on this score is not supported by lots of success in the project. For our purposes, however, we need not take a position here, for the central issue is not which cognitive attitudes are acceptable, but rather whether there are any fundamentals toward which some cognitive attitude other can be demanded.

This point puts the weight of the above proposal on identifying the fundamentals. Here, we have to be careful to distinguish what is fundamental to the faith in question from what is fundamental for a given expression of that faith. In the discussion above, I revealed my own commitments: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. But I make no pretense of insisting that every instance of Christian faith requires endorsement of this claim. In fact, I doubt the early Christians endorsed this claim, at least not before they’d learned of and

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2 There is an anti-reductionist approach here that should be noted. Instead of trying to reduce everything to belief (or degrees of belief), one might engage in the project of finding the simplest theory to explain human behavior. Doing so might lead one to the postulates of standard decision theory: all we need are degrees of belief and preference orderings. One might then insist that since all we need in our theory are these things, to the extent that other notions listed in the text cannot be reduced, they are not needed.
heard the content of the last of the known letters from Paul to the Corinthians. Moreover, this point generalizes: when you defend a claim as being one of the fundamentals of the Christian faith, full stop, as opposed to something that is fundamental for your particular instance of Christian faith, you must be able to defend the claim that all of the redeemed, from the saints of the Old Testament onward, actually endorsed the claim in question. On this score, it is fairly clearly that none of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob endorsed the specific claim that God was in Christ.

Once this point is acknowledged, there is a fork in the road, and not one you can pick up. Taking one path leads to denying that there is any common core, fundamental claims that are soteriologically required. Taking the other path involves finding some generic content that all true believers endorse, perhaps something as generic as that God is for us, that God is redemptive, or something like that. I don’t want to take the time here to give an extended argument for preferring the first fork to the second, but will merely indicate briefly why I favor it. The problem with the second fork is that it demands representational content in the cognitive region of the mind, and it is more plausible to think of generic claims such as those above as being entailed by what is actually present in terms of representational content rather than what is actually present in terms of representational content. For example, I doubt that Abraham believed or otherwise endorsed the claim that God is redemptive or that God is for us. But I think it is obvious that, among his cognitive commitments can be found claims that entail that God is redemptive or that God is for us. In order to accommodate this point, I prefer rejecting the idea of fundamentals for the religion, in favor of the idea that is fundamentally non-cognitive, though involving cognitive elements in some way or other.

2.4 Qualifications

A couple of qualifications are worth mentioning here to avoid misunderstanding. My remarks are not meant to question the possibility of legitimate religious authority in theological matters. The point of this particular creed is to lay out an authoritative position on the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, and I’m not questioning the position taken about the doctrines in question nor the authority of its authors. If the document were a creed about soteriological matters, remarks about what is necessary for being saved would be appropriate, but this is not such a document and the intent behind the damnatory clauses is clear.

Note as well that I am not claiming that there are never cases where practical
rationality and theoretical rationality conflict in such a way that one must try one’s best to believe something for reasons unconnected with a love of truth. If one is unlucky enough to encounter such situations regularly and also successful in inducing belief in such cases, one will have done what one had to do. But one will have taken steps that weaken the love of truth, and the end of such a process is a loss of integrity in intellectual matters. When the forces behind such a loss are Darwinian and evolutionary, the loss is lamentable; when the forces behind such a loss involve organized religion, the loss is not merely lamentable. It is a loss to be laid at the door of organized religion in protest of an unjust use of power.

Even worse, the unjust use of coercive power found in the Athanasian creed pales in comparison to more brutal tactics used in an attempt to secure doctrinal conformity, tactics involving torture chambers and executions of those in disagreement. These facts are well-known enough that one might wonder why I bring them up. As we will see, they are not directly the target of Dewey’s concern, but any philosophical discussion of the concern over intellectual integrity that did not note and acknowledge the sordid behavior of Christian authorities, especially one such as this one that aims to identify a path that avoids Deweyan concerns, would run the risk of appearing pollyanna-ish, failing to take into account the horrific and despicable behavior in question.

2.5 A Necessary Version of the Discontent

Even so, the contingent facts in question are not Dewey’s target. Dewey’s concern would exist even in a world where every religious authority showed the greatest respect and tolerance for those who disagree, never resorting to any means or methods to induce agreement other than through quality of evidence and argument. Dewey’s claim is that the conflict is not a mere contingency of actual history but rather a conflict that is philosophical and (at least in the neighborhood of) necessary. I believe he thinks that, given our actual nature of religious experiences and the correct explanations of them, it is simply impossible for the laudable religious attitude to be anything but inhibited by the theoretical commitments of organized religion. I doubt he is claiming that the kind of faith he finds admirable can’t be displayed at all by those with such intellectual commitments, but rather only that such commitments are certain to affect the attitude in negative ways. He claims that “the religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths,” and this language of emancipation is instructive. The idea, I take it, can’t be one of a binary distinction between slave and free, but rather a degree’d distinction be-
tween an ideal of full freedom and a lesser state that involves some freedom but also some lack of it. The evidence for this understanding is Dewey’s wonderful passage about the capacity of ordinary, mundane lives to display the religious attitude in question: “Many a person, inquirer, artist, philanthropist, citizen, men and women in the humblest walks of life, have achieved, without presumption and without display, such unification of themselves and of their relations to the conditions of existence.” This passage is evidence that the emancipation Dewey seeks is something that comes in degrees, since it is nearly certain that many of the individuals lauded by Dewey will not only display the religious attitude he lauds but will also be part of organized religion. So, when Dewey finds such achievement in many who are doubtless religious in a way that is objectionable to Dewey, the most he can say is that the theoretical commitments were unnecessary and inhibitory, not that they made the non-cognitive religious attitude impossible.

This degree’d notion of the tension is enough, however, to trigger Dewey’s concern that what makes faith valuable has now been undermined by the cognitive accoutrements Christians (and other types of faith communities) add to the kind of affective and dispositional elements that account for the value of faith. For, no matter what the precise cognitive commitments in any instance of faith, those commitments are going to entail metaphysical commitments that Dewey and his ilk view as in conflict with the value of the religious attitude itself and in conflict with any defensible scientific and experimental effort to make sense of things. What we need to consider, then, is whether Dewey is right. Is it possible to get from affective faith of the sort that characterizes what Dewey calls “the religious attitude” to doctrinal positions of any sort, including those of Classical Theism, without being condemned to an intellectual life that is not suitably scientific or experimental or empirically sensitive, in the way Dewey claims?

§3 A More Excellent Way

It will be useful to begin with a bit of historical fiction, aimed at characterizing the way in which Classical Theism might have arisen from an initial affective orientation toward an itinerant preacher from Nazareth. The story will be a fiction, since the cultural presuppositions of the time and place in question are ones that I want to abstract away from, for among these presuppositions are claims that Dewey claims to be in conflict with an appropriately affective faith.

My goal here is not to use the fiction to address or answer Dewey’s complaints, but rather to paint a realistic enough picture of how things might develop, with
enough detail to provide a setting for addressing directly the kinds of concerns that Dewey raises. It is unfortunate that too much discussion of the rational credentials of Classical Theism is devoid of context, except for the joyful celebration by critics of the embarrassing details of Christian Fundamentalism. What is needed is a minimal narrative about how Classical Theism could arise from affective faith and be sustained across generations, described in a way that will make some sense of what it would be like to move from the kind of faith worth having to the doctrinal commitments in question. Such a sense-making narrative will present the development as charitably as possible, aiming to describe a context and a kind of development that give some hope of answering Dewey’s concerns, but the narrative itself is not intended to be an answer to those concerns. Instead, as we will see, it will merely provide as neutral a context as possible for raising the concerns in question and seeing whether they have the strength some have thought them to have.

The aim, then, is to articulate a sensible path from fundamental faith to Classical Theism, one that arises in the process of sense-making that is at the heart of worthwhile theorizing about ourselves and our place in the universe. In this regard, a first step to notice is that out of the affective origins of Christian faith is the wonder, awe, adoration, and resultant worship central to such affections. Jesus is not only taken to be one-to-be-followed, but comes to have a place in the wonder, awe, and adoration that is central to religious expression of every sort. Such expressions are easy to anticipate to be verbal as well as emotional, and in giving verbal expression to the underlying emotions and affections, we should expect to find honorific expressions of adoration that a probably best viewed as hyperbolic, at least initially. We see the same phenomenon in loyalty to sports teams and kind of admiration, praise, and veneration of our athletic heroes: they are not only great athletes, we want them to be the greatest ever. It is also much like the kind of exalted characterizations we give of each other when first falling in love. What we find here is not to be thought of as pretense of any sort. Instead, what we find is a product of enthusiasm for a life to be pursued and the elements involved in it.

What begins as enthusiastic acclaim on behalf of an ideal, whether a person or something more abstract, moves from an entertained thought or idea, together with attendant affective engagement, toward something more cognitive and more committed. Moreover, whatever cognitive elements are present will be elements that go beyond experience, partaking of the more theoretical and metaphysical aspects that are involved in the normal human patterns aimed at understanding, explaining, and making sense of experience, both our own and that of those
around us. What gets posited at this stage is tentative and affectively infused, not even remotely like the kinds of cognitive attitudes we might expect of a person motivated solely by a disinterested concern for truth.

As a result, these first stages of cognitive formation along the path I’m envisioning are probably not best thought of in terms of belief or degrees of belief, at least not when these things are conceived of as purely cognitive. We don’t have a good vocabulary to talk about such states, so perhaps we can do no better than what Tamar Gendler does in inventing the term “alief”. Here is one of her examples:

Nor do we need anything so dramatic to make the point. The same phenomenon occurs when I set my watch five minutes fast. The effectiveness of the strategy does not depend on my forgetting that the watch is inaccurate, or on my doubting that it’s really 9:40 rather than 9:45, or my deceiving myself or others into thinking that it’s five minutes later than it is. Rather, as with the glass-bottomed Skywalk, when I look at my watch, input to my visual system suggests that I am in a world where the time is t+5. This visual input activates a set of affective response patterns (feelings of urgency) and motor routines (tensing of the muscles, an overcoming of certain sorts of inertia), leading to the activation of behavior patterns that would not be triggered by my explicit, conscious, vivid, occurrent belief that it is actually only 9:40.

The activation of these response patterns constitutes the rendering oc-
current of what I hereby dub a belief-discordant alief. (Gendler 2008a, pp. 640–641)

The point to note about Gendler’s discussion is the complex disposition which is the target of her term “alief”. The presence of alief explains various feelings and motor responses, triggering various behavior patterns, and doing so in a way that can bypass the doxastic realm entirely. In our context, we can employ such a possibility to help avoid the impression that the initial theorizing that moves from enthusiastic hyperbole to something more cognitive and theoretical can only be understood in terms of belief formation of an epistemically suspect form. Instead, we should expect that the stage of loyalty inculcation and initial sense-making doesn’t have well-defined doxastic elements, but also isn’t simply affective, conative, and behavioral. It is, instead, a way for initial hyperbolic expressions of enthusiasm and other underlying affective elements to filter into the way in which

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3 Gendler 2008a,b.
a person begins to see and experience the world, leading to further inclinations to adopt various theoretical postulates in the attempt to make sense of such an evolving experience. As noted already, these early speculations and postulations do not require actual belief, though of course they may, but are rather better understood as some combined state of the individual somewhere in the logical space of Gendler’s notion of alief.

A central objection to Gendler’s thesis from those wanting to preserve a more standard view of cognition and its relationship to behavior is that alief is not really a distinctive kind of mental state, but is rather a dynamic relationship between dispositions toward behavior and other, more standard mental states. In fact, Gendler describes alief in terms that suggest such: it is representational, affective, and behavioral, with causal relationships between the three. Since we already have an ontology populated by lots of representational states, including perceptual experience as well as beliefs and degrees of belief (on the cognitive side), it is natural to view alief as merely a name for a complex that is not really itself a mental state.

Note however that in our context it doesn’t much matter whether we side with Gendler or the critics, for the crucial thing to note is that if we acknowledge the dispositional and affective nature and origins of faith, there is no reason to treat the initial cognitive and theoretical stages of faith in terms of a model focused on belief. We might quite justifiably describe it instead in terms of alief, embracing the idea that there is no metaphysically determinate answer to the question of exactly what doxastic dimensions are involved in such early stages of faith. Of course, there will be some such dimensions, but the variety available, while still being the same state of alief, will have to be acknowledged.

§4 From Affection to Theory

The relevance of the notion of alief in our context is that there is something a bit off-target in describing the enthusiasm and fervor, the animation and intensity, of overt expressions of affective faith in terms of the language of belief. Especially, when one listens to the language voiced publicly declaring allegiance to causes, purposes, and persons, it is often hard to see doxastic commitments tracking with any precision the attitudes being expressed. If one shouts, “Democracy is utopia!” as a way of expressing one’s commitment to cause, there may be some

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doxastic commitments present that help explain the utterance, but it is implausible to think of those commitments as including the claim that, literally, democracy is utopia. Even if we think the remark is obviously figurative, it would be philosophically incautious to insist on the presence of such a figurative belief—for one thing, we should take seriously the possibility that there are no such things as figurative propositions, and hence no beliefs with figurative content. Moreover, it would be incautious as well to insist that such assertions involve some literal content that must be endorsed doxastically in order for sincerity to be present. Finally, even if there are beliefs with non-literal content, we should recognize that sincere avowals, prompted by affective faith, need not be underwritten by belief, even if we want to insist that there is some generic type of cognitive commitment to the content in question: a bit of self-awareness by we philosophers should make it clear to us that we often sincerely avow things that we don’t actually believe. We are, perhaps, inclined to be them, we think the claims make better sense than opposing claims, we may even be willing to take some substantial bets on whether the claim can survive scrutiny. But, if we grant that much of what we endorse isn’t something we know to be true, we should also grant that we can sincerely assert a claim that we don’t actually believe, since it is possible to behave as philosophers behave while regulating our mental lives by the idea that you shouldn’t believe what you don’t know to be true.

Some of the above is controversial, but here all I want to do is to refuse to make assumptions. I won’t here sign the pledge of allegiance to the claims needed to draw the conclusion that sincerity requires belief, and will present an account that doesn’t require them. Instead, I want to pursue the idea that the exclamatory nature of this and other expressions of fervor for a cause are not best understood as an expression of belief combined with some emotional element. They can be such, but need not. The enthusiasm and fervor may only be part of a process that leads to belief formation, of the sort we might find in Thomas’s response to encountering Jesus after having expressed some skepticism about the experience of the other apostles. He exclaims, “My lord and my God,” and even if the language is decidedly anti-Sabellian and anti-Arian in content, it would be an indefensible hermeneutic to think that Thomas was embracing this part of orthodoxy in order for his exclamation to lack pretense. Instead, it may describe an inclination of heart and mind toward a certain theological position, one that over time may blossom into one that embraces, both affectively and doxastically, the full divinity of Jesus. But an explanation of a surprise encounter that ignores the way in which surprising joy can be accompanied by disbelief and confusion is simply not adequate to the experience.
Consider, for example, an unexpected encounter with a cherished friend whom one hasn’t seen for decades. The rush of excitement and the hope involved are regularly accompanied by disbelief: “is that really you?” The process begins from emotional and affective elements and proceeds rather quickly to full belief, but it is simply a mistake to require the presence of full belief when the initial proclamations of identity are voiced: “Sam, Sam, is that you Sam!?” Instead, the language of alief is more fitting, as the process is one moving from affective patterns and associated behavior patterns—the kinds of items characteristic of Gendler’s notion of alief—to belief in relatively short order.

Such speed of identification is predictable in cases of perceptual identification, whether prompted by positive emotions such as joy or by negative affective states such as fear of predators. The affections are triggered by a perceptual input that presents an appearance of a certain sort, leading to behavioral responses and perhaps finally to belief formation. But belief formation follows rather than leads, or at least it can; it is just that in perceptual cases, the process is very quick. We should expect things to move more slowly when dealing with non-perceptual cases.

The process, when occurring rationally, does not show the signs of uniquely intellectual interests and motives central to typical theories concerning the epistemic rationality of doxastic formation and sustenance. Instead, we find significant degrees of cognitive penetration, of the sort generating much of the recent literature on perception. In cases of ordinary perception, a person’s strong desire for finding gold might penetrate the cognitive system so that a particular rock is perceptually taken to be a piece of gold when without that strong desire, that rock would be perceptually taken to be fool’s gold. In such cases, we have a legitimate question as to whether the perceptual seeming in question can play its usual role in supporting the epistemic rationality of belief formation. In our context, however, not much turns on the question of whether epistemic rationality can be sustained through processes involving cognitive penetration by affective and conative elements, for unlike the simple perceptual cases, the process of fixation of belief in cases of affective faith can be clearly rational in a broader, more pragmatic sense even if the beliefs that result are not, at least initially, epistemically rational according to theories that have stronger requirements concerning purely truth-related motivations.

Paradigm examples of such processes involve allegiance to political causes and movements. Attraction to the ideas of equality, fairness, and human dignity for all often results in joining particular organizations; and in the process of working to-

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ward an attractive ideal of this sort, one may easily come to have opinions about certain actual political structures in various parts of the world that are, from a more neutral affective standpoint, less than realistic. Supporters of the Russian revolution, for example, often allowed attraction for the ideals it embodied to color their opinion of the regime that resulted, and the opinions of that regime would likely count as epistemically irrational opinions even if the entire process from attraction to an ideal through the process of belief fixation counted as rational in an all-things-considered sense. Consider, for example, the experience of Jack Reed, as chronicled in the 1981 Warren Beatty movie *Reds*. Reed is inspired by the ideals of the Russian revolution, travels to Russia and participates in the events of 1917. The views and opinions he comes to hold initially are both laudable (concerning the ideals in question) and naive at the same time (thinking that the result of a revolution will bring in something resembling Utopia). There is, of course, a real question about when the voicing of such claims involves something closer to alief than belief, but it is clear that the process aims toward fixation of belief and finally results in it. And when such fixation is achieved, it is questionable the degree to which such beliefs will be epistemically rational. In spite of any such defect, however, it would be a mistake in judgment to view the entire process from commitment to an ideal to its outworking in both mind and behavior as one that is somehow irrational, all-things-considered. Fixation of belief is the normal, expected outcome of the bravado and enthusiasm present at the initial stages of commitment to a cause, and should be tolerated in our assessments of rationality much as we (should) tolerate youthful lack of caution more generally. Perhaps such tolerance should lead to fewer findings of epistemic irrationality in the process (as opposed to other intellectual vices or mistakes), but even if we retain such findings, we shouldn't display such epistemic fetishism that an overall evaluation is swamped by such defects.

Findings of epistemic irrationality as a result of the penetration of cognitive processes by various affective and connative elements, however, may overreach. Hardcore defenders of Phenomenal Conservativism will be unmoved by worries about the source of our seeming states, whether intellectual or perceptual, and they may be right. But we needn’t settle that dispute here to reject the idea that the process from affection to the adoption of a system of understanding that satisfies the sense-making urges that drive human cognition can be fully satisfactory, all-things-considered, even if subject to criticism from more particular points of view. The explanation of to get from fundamental faith of an affective sort to a

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6For an excellent collection on the prospects and difficulties for Phenomenal Conservativism, see [Tucker (2013)](#).
mature Christian faith that involves the metaphysical commitments of Classical Theism is thus not aimed at those who want to deny the possibility if such faith, motivated by a disinterested concern for truth, but rather is aimed at someone like John Dewey, who approves of the affective, fundamental faith in question but insists that it is inconsistent with such faith to develop into or be accompanied by the metaphysical commitments of Classical Theism. Instead, it is quite easy to see how a fully experimental approach to the universe and our place in it can take one from affective faith in a person such as Jesus to the kind of cognitive expression of such faith that is found in the Classical Theism of traditional Christianity, even for those who insist that the lack of purely intellectual motivations in the process somehow disturbs or prevents the possibility of epistemic rationality of the sort claimed to be required for knowledge.

§5 Reversing the Process: From Belief to Faith Worth Having

Even if this part of our story is adequate regarding how the cognitive dimensions of Classical Theism could arise in a non-coercive way in the early history of Christianity, it says nothing about how the actual or purported wisdom of one generation is passed on to the next. Successful living, for human beings, depends in large part on an understanding of the world and one’s place in it that is not a result of one’s own direct experience of the world, but is rather mediated learning through the phenomenon of testimony in its various forms, including the tropes of culture and the allusions that surround us in any human civilization, tropes and allusions that direct our minds and hearts toward that which is (taken to be) most important and central to our joint flourishing (from flags and mottos to aesthetic dimensions in public art and architecture which yield not only aesthetic pleasure but also a sense of gravitas for certain cultural institutions over others). The understanding, the picture of reality, derived in this way by human beings as they develop has a structure, with certain parts of it more central and fundamental than other parts of it, with other parts more peripheral and easier to abandon. Such a recognition is common to all the major players in the mature epistemologies of the twentieth century, including the coherence-infused foundationalism of Chisholm, the web of belief metaphor of a Quinean coherentism, or the bedrock

\[7\text{See, especially, Chapter One of Dewey (1934).}\]
metaphor of a Wittgensteinian assumptionalism. These elements of coherence that are both descriptively and normatively relevant to our understanding of the world, dependent as they are on the influence of individuals and institutions in which each of our individual developments occurs, are also inherently conservative, functioning in part to make vivid to all what is significant and what isn’t. So one needn’t be a foundationalist to grant the point that conservative principles form a large part of the story of human cognition, both from an explanatory and also a normative perspective.

Once we recognize this dimension of human life, and also recognize the way in which faith of whatever variety is a force for unification of the various competing dimensions of life, we have a sound basis for seeing a strong tendency for fundamental faith to receive expression in terms of some propositional content or other and for whatever propositional content results to come to be deeply entrenched in cognitive life. Perhaps it reaches the foundationalist’s nirvana of incorrigible belief, but even if it falls short of such, it will still be deeply resistant to revision, in the way that the central features of the web of belief are revised only rarely, and then only when less radical revision fails. We should expect, that is, that cognitive elements become deeply resistant to change, whether they are present in doxastic form or in the form of a cognitive stance that is something a bit different from belief. We can find evidence of such in philosophical stances, where philosophers tend toward ossification of stance and attitude, even if these stances and attitudes do not count as belief.

Nonetheless, the goal of inculcated belief is attractive, with the ideal of full certainty the gold standard, when it comes to the kind of influence that individuals and institutions wish to have over future generations. The reason is relatively simple: the influence of cognition on behavior is maximized when cognitive elements receive doxastic embodiment. It is not that it impossible to duplicate the...

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8In fairness to Quine and Chisholm (not to mention other luminaries of the epistemology of the last century, such as Wilfrid Sellars, Nelson Goodman, Keith Lehrer, and Laurence BonJour), one on the above list is not quite like the others: assumptionalism, like infinitism, has only the barest outline of a response to the regress argument, in comparison with the more developed responses by foundationalists and coherentists. There is, of course, the other of the twin towers of motivation for epistemological theorizing, the underdetermination argument aimed at showing that our opinions are generally fallible, but in our context, it is the regress argument that is most important, since it is that argument that forces one's hand to describe the structure of a system of understanding that might survive rational scrutiny. It is for that reason that my discussion in the text ignores recent versions of externalism, such as those of David Armstrong, Fred Dretske, Alvin Goldman, Alvin Plantinga, Ernest Sosa, Robert Nozick, and even Timothy Williamson, since those theories are better thought of in the context of underdetermination arguments, aimed at showing why skepticism isn’t the inevitable consequence of our fallibility.
effect of belief on behavior by cognitive stances that are not doxastic, but belief is always as useful and typically more effective than other cognitive stances. Moreover, it is, perhaps, the natural cognitive condition, whereas cognitive stances that are non-doxastic tend to require levels of reflective sophistication that may not be widespread and even if widespread, require levels of maturity that make belief a better target when it comes to intergenerational pedagogy.

The descriptive story of a focus on belief is thus fairly straightforward, but it leaves us with a serious question about the normative status of the cognitive dimensions of fundamental faith, whether they arise as the result of sense-making project prompted by the affections or whether they arise first, or in concert with, those affections. Here the questions are whether such dimensions can be rational, and whether the kind of rationality is the right sort to expect of cognitive commitments.

These issues are fundamentally epistemological, but it is worth remarking in passing on the political and social pressures that are sure to be exerted by individuals and institutions of power to generate intellectual conformity, in contrast to the less troubling educational possibilities indicated above, ones that rely primarily on the social role of testimony in the transmission of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding from one generation to the next. The educational efforts can be frustrating to those in control, since failure to honor the lessons (thought to be) already learned can seem so catastrophic. Resorting to coercive means to produce conformity is most tempting, and the history of Christianity is rife with examples of such. In this history, the damnatory clauses of the Athanasian Creed are mild examples, and no treatment of the issue of the rational status of transmission of intellectual content from one generation to another can ignore the abuses that furthered the spread of Christianity. The alternative process, where educators show enough respect for persons to allow the process of discovery to focus on the quality of arguments and explanations for positions taken rather than on preservation of doctrine, finds a rare home in the history of Christianity, though of course it is not the only major world religion with this blight on its soul.

The tendency toward impatience with the educational process is exacerbated by the paucity of clear thinking in the history of Christianity between alethically adequate cognitive commitments and salvifically necessary ones. Damnatory clauses such as those instanced in the Athanasian Creed litter the history of Christianity, but such clauses do not cohere well with standard assumptions about Old Testament saints, to mention just one problem. It would be anachronistic in the extreme to think that Abraham, for example, held the incarnational and trinitarian beliefs demanded by the Athanasian Creed. It is as if the working
assumption is that as soon as a theological discovery is made, no one can be saved without believing that claim; and in light of that working assumption, the motivation for coercive behavior, showing a lack of respect for persons, is immense.

My intent, however, is not to focus on the lamentable history of Christianity on these issues, but rather on a deeper problem, one that would make criticisms of actual historical practice of secondary importance, deriving from the fact that there simply is no possibility of the cognitive underpinnings of a given instance of affective faith surviving rational scrutiny. This question of whether such cognitive underpinnings can have the right kind of rational standing can be put in the form of a dilemma. If the kind of rationality found, assuming there is one to be found, is something other than epistemic rationality, there will be strong pressure against the maintenance of these commitments, and such strong pressure will be resistable only through mechanisms of belief fixation that exploit non-epistemic factors. In short, if the kind of rationality is non-epistemic, the cognitive elements in question will be paradigm examples of bad faith, rather than innocuous accompaniments of a kind of faith worth having.

§6 Fundamental Faith and Rational Commitments

This pressure toward holding the cognitive elements involved in any instance of faith worth having to the common standards of epistemic rationality that govern ordinary beliefs of common sense and science should be contrasted with a more extreme perspective on the role of epistemic rationality in human life. The contrast can be illustrated with reference to an interview of Bertrand Russell from 1959. The interviewer asks, “Do you think there is a practical reason for having a religious belief?”, to which Russell replies,

“Well, there can’t be a practical reason for believing what isn’t true . . . at least I rule it out as impossible. Either a thing is true or it isn’t. If it is true, you should believe it. If it isn’t true, you shouldn’t believe it. It seems to me a fundamental dishonesty and fundamental treachery to intellectual integrity to hold a belief because you think it is useful and not because you think it is true.”

There is much to question in Russell’s remarks. First, even for epistemic rationality, the connection between truth and what one should believe is more vexed than

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9There is a YouTube video of the interview here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Il7Kxw9TDBc
what Russell claims. It is simply false that one should believe the truth and disbelieve the false, at least if we restrict the kind of obligation in question to the epistemic one that governs the important notion of epistemic rationality—that kind of rationality that takes into account only what ought to be believed from a purely intellectual point of view, answering to the fundamental human predicament regarding what to do and think. There is some epistemic connection between truth and falsity and what sorts of beliefs are epistemically appropriate—there is something to the idea that the governing idea regarding epistemic rationality is the goal of getting to the truth and avoiding error—but the means-ends connection between the goal and the proper thing to believe in service of the goal is far from as simple as Russell suggests.

Second, Russell’s remarks elide an important distinction. One issue is whether there can be non-epistemic reasons for belief, another issue is whether one is permitted to believe on the basis of whatever non-epistemic reasons for belief there might be. Note that Russell first claims that it is impossible for there to be non-epistemic reasons for belief, but then backtracks to a weaker position, one according to which it is “dishonest” or “treacherous to intellectual integrity” to believe on the basis of non-epistemic reasons. Note, however, that the question of basing belief on non-epistemic reasons is a different question from the question of whether there are adequate practical reasons for belief: reasons are one thing, basing belief on reasons another.

It is a little unfair, however, to treat the casual setting of a conversation by the standards of rigor appropriate to an evaluation of published work in philosophy, so I don’t want to press any further these particular points against Russell. The relevance of the quote is, in our context, elsewhere, for Russell expresses quite clearly the position I have elsewhere labelled “Epistemic Fetishism.” It is the position that maintains that epistemic considerations swamp all other considerations when it comes to intellectual commitments, so that what is rational in this arena, all-things-considered, is always and everywhere what is epistemically rational.

Put in such terms, it is easy to conclude that the position is exaggerated, since it would be surprising to find one particular kind of reason to have such power over all other kinds of reasons, regardless of context. If Epistemic Fetishism were true, the charge of bad faith above could be bypassed, since there would be no need for any additional criticism of the cognitive commitments of affective faith

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10 This remark is a brief gloss of the approach to rationality that I develop and defend in Kvanvig (2014).

11 See Kvanvig (2016a).
beyond arguing that they don’t pass epistemic scrutiny.

Even so, the charge of bad faith is a close cousin of the more exaggerated fetishist position. If we think of good reasons are the kinds of things that motivate normal individuals toward what they are a reason for, it is easy to come to the conclusion that those lacking epistemic warrant for their cognitive commitments must be “true believers” who somehow manage to go to whatever length it takes to maintain a point of view, even in the face of objections and incoherencies that are obvious to us or to any good therapist.

The charge of bad faith, however, can be leveled without relying on Epistemic Fetishism. Once we see the truth in the idea that the natural or normal state for cognition is in terms of tracking (appreciated) evidence, when we find a person holding a belief but having no epistemic basis for such a belief, a realistic assessment of such a situation is that it will be quite unstable, requiring serious effort and expense to maintain. Given this tendency to instability, there will be reasons to try to find non-epistemic factors to contribute toward fixation of belief or other intellectual commitments, and then the charge of bad faith is quite natural. The argument here can thus be summarized as follows: even if the nature of reasons shows that Epistemic Fetishism is false, normalcy in cognitive function gives confounding evidence that nothing other than epistemic reasons can yield the kind stability of cognitive commitment that is efficient enough to make for all-things-considered rational allegiance to a cause or point of view. So, one doesn’t have to be an Epistemic Fetishist to make the charge of bad faith here. It is enough to have the simple decency and concern of a therapist.

§7 Sense-Making and Bad Faith

In order to assess this concern, we can begin by noting that the charge of bad faith here is an all-things-considered negative judgment. It would not be enough of a concern if it were merely *pro tanto*. Some people use inefficient rubrics for solving the math problems that arise in ordinary life, and their doing so is questionable, for if there is no consideration that outweighs this inefficiency, the practice will be all-things-considered irrational. The charge of bad faith, however, is not of this sort. One can’t say, as we can in the case of the math example, “Yes, but changing my ways at this point would be too time-consuming to be worth the effort.” Such a response would reveal a failure to appreciate the gravity of the charge being made. What is needed is not a response to counter a *pro tanto* consideration against the

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12 Hoffer [1951].
faith in question, but rather a response that shows that the critic’s perception is mistaken: that any *prima facie* badness disappears once we look more closely.\(^\text{13}\)

In some cases, the therapeutic concern is misplaced because of an unsound epistemology, and it is worth noting that it is much harder to sustain the charge of epistemic irrationality than is commonly thought. A common assumption in such arguments is that epistemic rationality is a function of bodies of information, so that if two people have exactly the same body of information, the same things will be epistemically rational for them. Once we note that it is rare for lives of faith to involve evidence or information to which the concerned therapist isn’t privy, it is easy to see how the argument will go. The mantra is that either private experience or public evidence is needed to generate epistemic rationality, and absence in both areas will strongly confirm the existence of bad faith even when bad faith is not entailed by a failure of epistemic rationality.

A more careful epistemology, however, reveals flaws in this line of thinking. I do not have the space in this essay to defend the picture I will paint of a more adequate epistemology,\(^\text{14}\) but the broad strokes painting will be useful nonetheless in rebutting the line of thought above. In short, what I will suggest is that the story of epistemic rationality is a story involving a myriad of complexities that the line of thought above ignores.

The complexities involve the following factors. First, order of inquiry matters. Second, there is both information possessed as well as the way in which a given piece of information is embedded in a given cognitive system, and all of these factors affect epistemic rationality. Third, the lesson of the Quine-Duhem problem is that there is significant optionality in epistemic rationality, both diachronically and synchronically, a point that is tied intimately to the first point that the order in which one acquires information cannot be ignored. Finally, the mantra that results from a proper appreciation of all of these features is this: when it comes to rational opinion, there is both the evidence and what we make of it. A corollary of the mantra is that we learn from experience, not only what the world is like, but also what confirms what. The epistemic connections that control rational opinion are *a posteriori*, even though the theory of epistemic rationality is a matter of epistemic principles that are necessarily true and probably *a priori* as well.

\(^{13}\)Here I echo Shelly Kagan in distinguishing *pro tanto* reasons from *prima facie* ones: “A pro tanto reason has genuine weight, but nonetheless may be outweighed by other considerations. Thus, calling a reason a *pro tanto* reason is to be distinguished from calling it a *prima facie* reason, which I take to involve an epistemological qualification: a *prima facie* reason appears to be a reason, but may actually not be a reason at all.” (Kagan 1989, p. 17n).

\(^{14}\)I have done so elsewhere, especially in Kvanvig (2014).
Some clarificatory remarks about each of these points may help. We can begin with the last point. Any genuinely experimental attitude toward the world around us has to recognize that we are often in the dark, not only about what the truth is, but also about what significance to attach to our experience of the world. A simple example here involves the difference between second-person awareness by those suffering from autistic spectrum disorder and those without such a disorder. Those with autistic spectrum disorder have to learn what a given facial expression means, whereas those without the disorder can just see what it means. The difference, however, isn’t one impugning epistemic rationality in either group, but rather a difference affecting the ability to discern the truth easily. Moreover, in other cases, we learn not to trust our intuitive and non-inferential inclinations toward belief-formation. The lesson is clear: the significance of experience, what to make of it in terms of what to believe and how strongly, is something that we master if things go well for us, intellectually speaking, and something that hounds us for life when things do not go well for us. And whether we are related to experience as master or prey, the entire life can be one of full epistemic rationality.

Second, the lesson of the Quine-Duhem problem is that experience never requires any given change of opinion, nor is any given opinion typically required by a given body of information. Relative to any body of information, there will typically be a variety of intellectual responses all of which are rational. Does the vase on the table look red to you? Yes? So you believe that the vase on the table is red. I doubt it is red, wondering whether the lights are abnormal, or whether I’m subject to trickery. Or I don’t believe it is red at all, since I don’t think colors are real. The list goes on and on about the kinds of attitudes one can hold in light of experience, compatible with full epistemic rationality of opinion.

One corollary of this point is that commutativity of experience is indefensible. It is tempting to think that if two persons X and Y begin from the same intellectual starting point, and X has experiences E1 and E2 successively, and Y has the same experiences but in the opposite order, the changes in opinion that occur must be the same if they are to be epistemically rational. Once we grant the optionality point and the more general point that there is both the evidence of experience and what to make of it, we must deny commutativity. Cases of this sort will arise when one rational effect of E1 is both to change one’s picture of the world and one’s theory of evidence of what significance to attach to various future experiences, resulting in a different rational significance for E2 than one would have had if one had experienced E2 first. Careful attention to the phenomenon of transformative experiences, whether religious or otherwise, are precisely the kinds of experiences one should expect will have such features.
This point is worth discussing a bit further because of the literature in Bayesian epistemology that takes denials of commutativity to be problematic. The literature began with the recognition that Jeffrey conditionalization—the needed fallibilistic replacement for Strict Conditionalization—does not preserve commutativity on input distributions. The notion of an input distribution, however, is not the same as the notion of experience, and the question of the relationship between inputs and experiences allows a defender of Jeffrey conditionalization to preserve commutativity of experience even though commutativity of input distributions is abandoned. The basic point against commutativity, however, can be made in the context of Strict Conditionalization, which is well-known for preserving commutativity. It preserves commutativity, however, only when the relevant conditional probabilities on which updating occurs remain constant. In our context, the right way to think about these conditional probabilities is that they encode the theory of evidence for the person in question, and to the extent that the theory of evidence is something we learn about in the process of experience, to that extent the conditional probabilities should not be thought of as incorrigible. If there is both the evidence of experience and what we make of it, we should expect the updating to sometimes affect unconditional probabilities and sometimes to affect conditional ones, and if the relevant conditional probabilities change, commutativity on successive experiences is lost. The upshot, then, is that it matters at what point in life one has had a given experience; not simply that one has had it.

If we continue to think in Bayesian terms here, the lesson to learn is that we can't assess the epistemic rationality of a given life of faith with reference only to private experience and public evidence. We also must address the issue of how information is embedded in the relevant system of information, and such embedding is at least partially a matter of what conditional probabilities are present in the system: the more deeply embedded in the system, the less susceptibility to change of opinion by Strict Conditionalization as revealed in the conditional probabilities.

As a result, it is a significantly more difficult challenge for those wishing to defend the charge of bad faith against a given life of faith. The basic problem is that it is difficult to raise such an objection without also being guilty of substituting

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16 But embedding is not measured only by the conditional probabilities, for the conditional probabilities themselves can be more or less deeply embedded in a system, revealing how fixed the theory of evidence is for a given person.
the perspective of the critic for the relevant perspective and life experience of the person of faith. The point of this brief sketch of the relevant theory of epistemic rationality is to reveal how easy it is to fail on this score, much more easy than has been widely recognized.

Even so, if the only route toward answering the concern about bad faith was by showing the greater complexity of the story of epistemic rationality, we would have an answer that would mirror the standpoint of the Epistemic Fetishist: faith is fine as long as it is epistemically rational faith; otherwise it is bad faith. The rest of the story involves needed limitations on the reach of epistemic rationality into the kind of full and rich life we legitimately hope for. This part of the story involves the phenomenon of cognitive penetration and, for want of a better term, the partiality of much of our experience of the world.

Cognitive penetration involves a generalization of the old worry in the philosophy of science concerning the theory-ladenness of observation. Whereas the latter issue concerns the worry within cognition itself that what we see is a function of prior theoretical commitments, and thus not a suitably passive and given aspect upon which to build a foundational theory of knowledge, cognitive penetration generalizes to other mental states as well. For example, suppose I am more likely to visually experience a certain rock as a piece of gold if I really want it to be gold; suppose I seem to remember only disturbing things for people I dislike; etc. It is clear, and clearly good, that experts can see more in an X-ray than I can, but it is not good if one’s belief that someone is angry causes one to experience an ambiguous facial expression as hostile. My fear of snakes makes me more likely to detect them in certain contexts, and that is a good thing; your supreme self-confidence inclines you to experience love and affection from everyone you meet, and while that makes you happy and is good in virtue of that, it’s also a bit discouraging to see you so out of touch with reality.

The difficult questions here are two-fold. The first is a descriptive one, about the extent to which perception is cognitively penetrable and whether there is some early vision system in place that is encapsulated from penetration, that is modular in the sense of [Fodor](1983). Once the descriptive task is complete, however, there is still the normative task of saying what effect the penetrability in question has on the epistemic standing of the resultant beliefs. At one end of the spectrum are the hardcore Phenomenal Conservatives, who think that it doesn’t matter one whit where your seemings come from, all that matters is which seemings you in fact have. At some distance from this view, but maintaining some affinity with it, are those who discriminate among seemings in terms of the reliability of the mechanism involved, or the sensitivity of the system for getting to the truth and
avoiding error.

An alternative that I favor doesn’t treat all seemings the same but doesn’t sort them teleologically in terms of likelihood for getting to the truth. Instead, I favor an approach that adverts to a kind of Kantian autonomy when it comes to the epistemological story. What matters for epistemic rationality is the degree to which one is motivated by, to speak medievally, a love of truth. Such motivation comes in degrees, and the degree to which one’s cognitive attitudes are epistemically rational is at least partially a function of one’s motivation. Notice that the nature of one’s motivations partake of the kind and degree of accessibility to reflection that one’s mental states have, so internalists who value accessibility should have no problem with this element of the theory. Moreover, it is precisely the motivational issue that underlies the deep concern over cognitive penetration. It is for this reason that Jerry Fodor, in Fodor (1984), took it as great epistemological news that our perceptual mechanisms are modular in the sense specified in Fodor (1983): it’s operation is not sensitive to the beliefs, desires, and other mental features of the larger organism of which it is a part. Sadly, the perceptual system as a whole is simply not modular in that sense: that is what the facts about cognitive penetrability show. Of course, it may still be that there is some subpart that is modular in the required sense, but even if that is true, it won’t free us from the epistemological consequences of cognitive penetrability, since the fact of cognitive penetrability remains substantiated whether or not there is subsystem that is motivationally untouched by outside forces.

Instead of lamenting cognitive penetrability and seeking ways to diminish or eliminate it, however, a better approach is to embrace it for what it is: an essential component of a full and rich human life, the kind of life the ancients sought as philosophy is born of a desire for the good life. The fact of cognitive penetrability is found not only in purely theoretical areas, but in the elements central to any kind of good life. For a full realization of the good life is to a great degree a matter of having the right cares and concerns, friends and loved ones, and there is simply no escape from the fact that what one loves and adores, who one cares about and who one despises, colors one’s experience of the world in ways that are fairly easy to detect in others by careful observation and in ourselves by simple reflection. In the first-person case, it is not difficult to find that one’s interpretation of experience is not driven solely by a disinterested concern for the truth, and this point is easily appreciated by attending to the way in which the allegiance that is central to friendship plays a role in our intellectual lives. Such allegiance, such standing by, is voiced nicely by Ryan Preston-Roedder:

Standing by people in the sense I described is morally admirable given
the following view, which is both plausible and familiar, about the role
that morality plays in human life: conforming to moral ideals enables
a person to live in a kind of community with others, even though their
interests and aims may differ considerably from her own. In other
words, the world is teeming with people, and their various interests
and aims can come into sharp conflict. On the one hand, each of these
people devotes special attention to her own private aims, and accord-
ing to this view, it is appropriate for her to do so. But on the other hand,
there is a sense in which each person is just one among others, and no
one is any more or less significant than anyone else. These two judg-
ments are deeply plausible and central to the living of our lives, and
conforming to moral requirements enables a person to live in a way
that gives expression to each. Roughly, a virtuous person may pursue
her own private aims in some cases, but she limits her pursuit of these
aims, adopts new aims, and adopts attitudes in ways that bring her
into a kind of community, or harmony, with everyone else. Standing
by people, as when one has faith in them; adopting othersâ€™ interests
as one’s own, as when one has the virtue of benevolence; and limiting
one’s pursuit of one’s own aims so that others can pursue their aims
as well, as when one has the virtue of justice, are all ways in which a
morally virtuous person escapes her solitude and enters into this form
of community. (Preston-Roedder 2013, p. 684)

The central point to note here is the kind of partiality that faith in humanity
and friends involves, a kind of partiality toward attitudes that reflect our loyalty
toward them and our continued desire for and commitment to community with
them. This kind of partiality conflicts directly with the kind of disinterestedness
that a purely intellectual motivation for getting to the truth and avoiding error
involves, and often results in attitudes and opinions that would not be present
apart from the faith in question. What is most important in our context is to
note how impoverished a life it would be to think of such faith as bad faith and
such partiality and loyalty as an all-things-considered defect in a person. Preston-
Roedder gives voice to this partiality and its value:

A third consideration that makes faith in humanity morally admirable
is the fact that having faith in peopleâ€™s decency, despite reasons for
doubt, is a way of standing by them, in roughly the sense in which
one might stand by a decision, an ideal, or a friend to whom one is
committed, despite reasons to abandon or denigrate her. The cognitive
element of faith works together with the volitional to account for this link between having faith and standing by. Someone who has such faith is not just disposed to view people in a favorable light, but also invested in their confirming her favorable expectations. She roots for people to lead morally decent lives, even in the face of reasons to doubt that they can, or will, do so. (Preston-Roedder 2013, p. 683)

The point to note here is the way in which purely mundane relationships, such as friendship, can both cause and rely on epistemic biases that are part and parcel of the phenomenon of cognitive penetration. Our interpretation of the behavior of our friends often treats that behavior as innocuous, when other, less partial interpretation takes a more negative tone. One can try to explain away such partiality by appeal to better background information about the individual in question, but such an explanation is easily recognized to get things backwards: our greater familiarity is a function of the way in which friendship works, not the other way around.

Another way to appreciate this point is to think of what it would be like to be motivated only by a disinterested concern for truth in dealing with those around one. Such motivation rules out the kind of loyalty to friends and family involved in standing by them when questions arise, for one rational option in the face of such evidence is to walk away, and one motivated only by a disinterested concern for truth can just as easily walk away as not.

Once this point about the epistemic scandal of particularity is appreciated, it is easy to see why the portrayal of epistemic inadequacy in matters of faith does not invariably lead to bad faith. What needs to be shown, to sustain the charge of bad faith, is not just that epistemic rationality is absent from some lives of faith, but that the faith in question inhibits the good life rather than making it possible. Recognizing the great variability of the good life should lead us to conclude that there simply will be no general line of argument from epistemically deficient intellectual commitments to bad faith, but should acknowledge instead that the biases involved in the epistemic scandal of particularity are often central to the good life, even if that good life is not as epistemically good as we epistemologists would like to see.

17 For defense and discussion, see Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006).
§8 Loose Ends

Where does all of the above leave us? For some, what will stand out is the variety of criticisms that are not addressed, even when the kinds of criticisms allowed are restricted to those of a purely theoretical or intellectual nature (as opposed to political, aesthetic, moral, and practical types). We can point out that nothing in the above discussion tends to show that traditional Christian beliefs are sensitive to the truth in the way competent perception is (we hope and assume), or alethically safe in the sophisticated statistical inferences are. We can note that believing things that you don’t know to be true is as pro tanto objectionable as confidently asserting claims that you don’t know to be true, so in the absence of a defense of that claim that traditional Christian belief counts as knowledge, a problem remains.

My response to all of these complaints begins by acknowledging that the above account is guilty as charged, but it does not end there. I believe it is important to resist the idea that the goal of normative theorizing is to show what it takes to be immune to criticism that has, let us say, some probative value. I suspect, instead, that the varieties of intellectual value we find when we engage in epistemology from the kind of value-driven perspective I have argued for will result in competition among values rather than a utopian vision that makes cooperation among the values possible in the way that would be required to give a theory about full immunity from intellectual criticism. In the face of such a pessimistic induction about epistemic value, the strategy I counsel is to begin theorizing about a particular kind of intellectual value only after explaining the importance of that value, relative to other kinds of intellectual value. I have argued elsewhere that the kind of intellectual value addressed by the theory of rationality involved in the discussion above is perhaps the most important intellectual value, addressed as it is to the fundamental and inescapable egocentric predicament of what to do and think, what to be and become. I would thus ask those who wish to remind us of the remaining criticisms to engage in the metaepistemological value theory needed for explaining why the criticisms that remain are so worthy of consideration, rather than being akin to criticizing the President of the United States, not for his foreign policy or for a flagging economy, but rather for his boring wardrobe.

If we focus on the particular kind of criticism addressed here, however, the conclusion should be that cognitive penetration can’t by itself sustain the charge of bad faith. More work still needs to be done to show that cognitive penetration

\[18\text{See, especially, Kvanvig (2003) and Kvanvig (2014).} \]
undermines epistemic rationality, at least sometimes, and also can undermine all-things-considered rationality as well, though of course not always. The hard work is to figure out the relevant contexts, but even in the absence of a fully general understanding of these issues, it is not difficult to appreciate that there will be no blanket condemnation of the belief systems of those whose fundamentally affective faith develops to a full system of understanding of the sort involved in Classical Theism and traditional Christianity.[19]
References


