Does God Need Evidence?
A Debate between a Fideist and an Evidentialist

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Preface

John Bishop and Trent Dougherty

This book’s companion volume *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist* (Oxford 2004), addresses the question whether God exists. Its authors claim to cite evidence for and against the existence of God. This book asks a prior question (it is “logically prior” so it doesn’t matter in which order the questions are addressed or the books read). It addresses the question whether such debates are necessary or, indeed, whether they make any sense at all.

Just as there is a long tradition of treating the first-order question whether God exists, there is a long tradition of asking this second-order question whether that question can be answered by standard means or should be investigated in the same way as ordinary investigations. Evidentialists say that religious belief gets no special treatment. Fideists say that religious beliefs are special and so deserve special treatment.

This debate is in what is often called “Religious Epistemology.” Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which studies notions like knowledge, justification, and understanding. Religious epistemology is a form of applied epistemology, and the reader can learn much about epistemology in this book by following its application to the questions raised in a religious context.

The answer in this debate makes a big difference. What challenges and obligations believers and unbelievers have depends on the answer. If the evidentialist view is right, then believers not in a position supported by evidence are shirking an important duty. If the fideist view is right, then demands for evidence are often out of order.
Chapter 1

The Lockean Picture of Reason and Faith

Trent Dougherty

It has always bothered me that the venerable Principle of Parsimony—roughly, “Don’t multiply entities without necessity”—has come to be called “Ockham’s Razor.” After all, Aquinas mentions it in the Summa, and anyone of common sense will endorse it. Another equally common sense epistemic imperative has also been unduly connected to a latter-day name: “Hume’s Dictum” (or one of them, the Scot had many dicta) points out “A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence” (Inquiry, “Of Miracles”). For those who object that this is not grammatically in the imperative, consider that Hume further opines that people “are obliged, in every question, to consider each particular evidence apart, and proportion their assent to the precise degree of evidence which occurs” (Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion). John Locke, however, vigorously endorsed such a principle decades before David Hume was born.

Furthermore, the more traditionally Christian Locke has a divine source for this imperative, unlike the deist Hume¹: “For he governs his Assent right, and places it as he should, who in any Case or Matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves, according as Reason directs him. He that does otherwise, transgresses against his own Light, and misuses those Faculties, which were given him to no other end, but to search and follow the clearer Evidence, and greater Probability.” Since God gave us the faculty of Reason (with a capital “R” no less), it is an affront to God to misuse such a lofty gift. But Locke gives a very good reason as to why this imperative is no mere fetish of the Enlightenment: “He that believes without having any reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due his Maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him” (Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book IV, Chap 17, Section 24). We are expected by God, says Locke, to be discerning (the Judeo-Christian Scriptures speak much of the virtue of discernment). This virtue excludes being “in love with our own fancies.” However, such a love of fancy is an all-too-human tendency.

This tendency to get carried away by our beliefs, to accept positions as true not because of signs of truth but rather because of their “utility”—whether useful for personal gain or some community benefit—is one of the dangers of what Locke called “enthusiasm” (OED REF), which includes, but is not limited to, religious enthusiasms like fideism. Sometimes fideism is described as the will guiding the intellect (I wish to bracket discussion of this from the standpoint of Saint Thomas Aquinas, for his theory is quite sophisticated and raises many issues too.

¹ According to Wolterstorff it was Locke who “first articulately issued the evidentialist challenge to the religious believer, doing so as one who was himself a Christian who thought that he could meet the challenge” (John Locke and the Ethics of Belief, 1996)
complicated to address here). The fideistic believer’s intellect does not discern the marks of truth, but her will discerns, in a manner of speaking, signs of how good belief would be.

The problem with “enthusiasm” is that self-interest and self-deception can make the intellect the will’s slave. So the virtue of discernment is a safeguard against self-interest and self-deception. Moreover, a key part of this virtue is the habit of proportioning belief to evidence. This sub-virtue of proportioning is a technical description for the practice of not fabricating evidence. For Locke says “It is as impossible that the love of truth should carry my assent above the evidence there is to me that it is true, as that the love of truth should make me assent to any proposition for the sake of that evidence which it has not” (Essay, “Of Enthusiasm”). Love of truth seeks signs of truth. And, to go beyond those signs is no more justified by the love of truth than the fabrication of evidence. The one who does otherwise “does violence to his own faculties, tyrannizes over his own mind, and usurps the prerogative that belongs to truth alone, which is to command assent by only its own authority, i.e. by and in proportion to that evidence which it carries with it.” Locke is even moved to wax poetic on the subject: “Light, true light, in the mind is, or can be, nothing else but the evidence of the truth of any proposition.” The root of the Lockean picture is the love of truth, which seeks the true light of evidence. Surely this is a virtue God would respect. However, fideism calls into question God’s approval of this virtue of the love of truth.

Having laid the conceptual foundations of the Lockean picture—which I will specify as a position called “evidentialism”—I will proceed to add some detail before moving on to a notion of faith derived from Pascal which fits nicely into this Lockean picture.

**Some Specifics**

**Reasons: A Taxonomy**

If you have ever made a “pro and con” list, then you have engaged in reasoned deliberation. Do you buy the latest smart phone now or wait for the upgrade this summer? Well there are plusses and minuses about both options which need to be weighed against one another. That is, there are reasons to buy now and reasons to wait, and these competing reasons need to be compared. Moreover, as best as possible, they need to be weighed on the same scale.

This example is of a practical matter: it concerns deliberations about what to do. But we also sometimes deliberate about what to believe. In a moment, I will be attempting to clarify the distinction between the kind of reasons we weigh in deliberating about what to do and the kinds of reasons we weigh in deliberating about what to believe. Call the latter *epistemic* reasons. But first I want to do two things. First, I want to clarify the notion of a reason a bit more. Then I want briefly to distinguish between two kinds of reason to act.

**The Notion of a Reason**

Since reasons occur in the context of deliberating, perhaps the most general way to characterize a reason for something is as a *consideration that counts in favor of something*. Talk of favoring indicates a value according to which considerations are being weighed. Values concern various
desiderata in the world, whether states of affairs literally desired by us or ones which are simply “desirable” in and of themselves (this is a hard thing to comprehend, but most of us have some such notion). One kind of value concerns promoting our personal interests. Thus, when I ask if I ought to buy a certain model of smartphone now or wait until the upgrade comes out, the question is about which of these options best promotes my personal interests. I have an interest in having the most recent technology, but I also have an interest in not throwing my money away over minor improvements (I will usually speak of having an interest to indicate felt desires, usually ones I reflectively endorse to some degree. I will speak of its being in my interest to denote what really will tend to cause me to flourish whether I recognize this fact and have a felt desire for it or not, but this is to get a bit ahead of myself). I recently faced just such a scenario. It seemed clear to me after just a bit of investigation that the upgrades were not going to be crucial for my purposes, so I ought to just go with the current model.

This last statement, that I ought to buy the phone now rather than wait, raises important issues about the normativity of reasons. There are many issues here which I cannot get into, but I do wish to stake my claim and advocate what I think is a very commonsense perspective. First, there is the issue of going from value talk—“This is good/better/best”—to normative talk—“I/you ought/ought not do this.” Second, there is an issue concerning the subjective and objective aspects of the situation.

I assert that one ought to do what one has the best reason to do. I know of no way to support this thesis beyond its own intuitive obviousness and through illustration by example (can you really think of a counter-example: some time when you shouldn’t do what you have most reason to do?). If one doesn’t find this principle to be true, I will have very little to offer in its behalf, though I might be able to say a thing or two about purported reasons not to accept it. I’ll simply call it the “best reasons principle” (BRP). The BRP takes us from value language to normative language.

There is also an issue concerning subjectivity and objectivity. Sometimes we do not see what is truly best for us. So suppose it turns out I am wrong about the phone: the new one will have—and is currently known to have by insiders—upgrades which would greatly enhance my productivity. The way I will describe such situations is to say that there is reason for me to wait for the upgrade, but I do not have this reason, because I am unaware of this information (whether blamelessly or not). Some people think one of these ways of speaking is primary and the other derived, but I do not think we need to solve that problem here. More contentious is the question of which kind of reason determines what I ought to do. Again, I do not think there is much to gain from attempting to privilege one notion over the other. I will simply talk about what I ought-ideally to do—which in this scenario would be to wait for the upgrade—and what I ought-from-my-perspective to do—which in this scenario is to go with the current model. I admit that I am almost entirely inclined to go with the first-person perspective in these matters, but I need not defend that here. So I am going to focus on the first-person issues here, but I do not think anything I say depends ultimately on whether the first or third person is privileged in normativity. I only want to consider the kinds of reasons that feature in the explanations of people’s behavior and some consideration of which one is not aware cannot do that. (I cannot help, though, offering as evidence of the primacy of the first person perspective how annoying it is to hear people saying what a coach “should” have done after some sporting match!)
Practical vs. Moral Reasons

Now that I have provided some perspective on a few tricky and controversial matters in value theory and normativity, I want briefly to distinguish between practical and moral reasons as a preface for introducing epistemic reasons.

The distinction between practical and moral reasons is seen most clearly in that they can be opposed to one another. In fact, moral and practical considerations often do point in opposite directions. Though doing our duties to others often actually promotes our own interests (thus “enlightened self-interest”), it frequently does not. I have promised to help my neighbor load his moving van this evening. One thing led to another, and I am asleep on the couch. I hear him knocking. I have a duty to get up and help, but there is nothing that promotes my self-interest in helping (he’s moving away, so I am not going to miss out on any reciprocity, and (suppose) I do not care about the mild decrease in virtue that would result from remaining comfortably on the couch). Plus, we could make the duty smaller and the cost bigger if we needed an exaggerated case to make the point (and even then the most that could be said is that there is always some self-interest promotion in doing our duty: it would remain true that the cost of getting up is a purely practical reason against doing my duty).

The case of so-called “enlightened self-interest” just mentioned also shows their difference even when they point in the same direction, for we clearly recognize that the way the possibility of getting help in return is one kind of reason to help and doing our duty is another. This is the difference between a practical reason (to act) and a moral reason (to believe).

Epistemic Reasons distinguished from moral and practical reasons

It is perhaps easier to understand what practical and moral reasons are than to understand epistemic reasons, for it is easy to misunderstand epistemic reasons as practical reasons in the theoretical sphere (for some of our personal interests concern whether certain theories are true, one of our personal goals is to know the truth about some matter). But this would be to misunderstand the nature of an epistemic reason and its distinction from practical reasons. Again, we can see how the two are opposed with a couple of old examples.

The Baseball Case You are up to bat and really want to hit a home run. You are well aware of your stats: .220 average and no home runs this season. Yet you have just been told by a top hitting coach that if you believed you would hit a homerun, then you would be more likely to do so. In this case, your evidence clearly suggests that even with a modest probability boost from a mental placebo effect, you will not hit the home run. You have an epistemic reason to believe you will likely not hit the ball and that you will not hit a homerun if you do. However, you do have a practical reason to trick yourself into believing. It would be a good thing—from the standpoint of your practical interests—to believe that you were going to hit a homerun, for it would increase the probability of success.
The Genie Case A genie tells you that if you believe that humans have never set foot on the moon, then ever thereafter he would give you the ability to know the truth about any matter you considered.

Now it seems clear that in both these cases the difference between epistemic and practical reasons is illustrated. In the baseball case, no matter how much benefit there would be in believing, there is no epistemic justification for doing so. The genie case also nicely illustrates why epistemic reasons are not just practical reasons which pertain to our goal of having true beliefs. From the standpoint of that goal, it makes good practical sense to believe one little falsehood for the sake of so many truths. Yet that belief itself is completely without epistemic justification. It is totally unjustified—from an epistemic perspective—to believe any of the crazy conspiracy theories that the moon landing was a hoax.

So I think we have on the table the basic notion of a reason and the distinctions between the main types of reasons. This will be helpful later as I discuss in exactly what sense it is “rational” to have faith.

Epistemic reasons briefly explicated

The simplest kind of epistemic reason consists in statistical evidence. That 990 out of 1000 observed swans have been white (and 10 black, there are some in Australia) counts in favor of the truth of the theory that about 99% of all swans are white. But there are less straightforward cases which are nevertheless epistemic reasons in the sense that they count in favor of the truth of a proposition regardless of our duties to others and our practical interests.

A standard example of basic empirical evidence is evocative of the old phrase “the testimony of the senses.” You look across the room and see a red mug on the table. At least, it seems like you do. It might, of course, be a white mug under (for some reason) a red light. But having that sort of experience provides a reason for you to believe that there is a red mug on that table regardless of whether the experience turns out to be misleading, since, at present, you have absolutely no reason to think it is misleading. Further investigation might overturn the belief, but that’s another matter.

We have not only sense perception as a native ability, but also things like introspection and rational insight. Via introspection, we can gain evidence that we think it is inevitable that the president be re-elected. You might even think we cannot be mistaken about such things, but a few pages of psychology would reveal that we can be. The point, though, is that we can gain evidence of what we think via “looking on the inside.” Rational insight is similar but different. Via rational insight we can “just see” that if one of two events each leads to a third and that it is inevitable that one of the first two must occur, so must the third. The world seems to force these things on us, we seem imposed upon, so we become convinced (which means essentially “conquered”).

So the basic notion of a reason to believe—on the view I am pressing—is of having an experience which seems to reveal reality, which seems to make clear or evident that the world is
as it says. This is a basic sense of “evidence”: that which makes evident. The “vid” in “evident” is the same “vid” in “video” which in Latin means “I see.” Seeming to see that something is the case is a reason to think it is the case. Appearances can be deceiving, but they are innocent until proven guilty.

Furthermore, as reasons stack up, more reason will be had to believe something. The more the evidence, the more the strength of belief called for. This fits nicely into the Locke/Hume picture stated above.

**The Luster of Truth: What Evidence Is**

Most of the time, the evidence we have to discern between true and false explanations (I will set aside here the idea that explanations can be more or less true, for which philosophers have coined the melodious term “verisimilitude”) is not statistical in nature (at least on the surface). Rather, like crime scene investigators, we gather information and try to piece the various items together into a narrative that “makes sense.” Three things are especially worth noting about this kind of evidential reasoning.

First, not every item of evidence will fit into a narrative equally well. Some facts will fit into the story more comfortably than others. Some might resist integration altogether and might remain anomalies which we do not yet know how to integrate into the story. Yet this does not mean that the theory is false, it just means that it is less clearly true than a story which fits all the facts together quite naturally. This brings us to the next point.

Second, “making sense” comes in degrees. Sometimes the light bulb just goes off in a “Eureka!” moment: we go from complete confusion to complete enlightenment seemingly bypassing any intermediate steps. Most of the time, though, we go through many more stages in which we gather evidence and explanations come and go, wax and wane in plausibility. One theory might get on the map with slight plausibility, become quite plausible, and finally convincing. As “convincingness,” if you will, varies so ought our **conviction**. Thus, this very natural picture of the rational formation of belief supports the notion that belief comes in degrees (or, what is functionally equivalent for my purposes, is necessarily attended by a property which comes in degrees).

The third point arises out of the first two. Competing narratives might be thought to arrive at a “tie” in the following manner. Consider a set **D** of data points \{D₁, ..., Dₙ\}. And consider two hypotheses, H₁ and H₂. It might be thought that **D** be partitioned in such a way that H₁ explains one portion well and another portion less well and H₂ explains precisely the opposite situation. Would this not constitute a tie between the two views? No, not unless the data points themselves were equally certain, which is highly unlikely. And, even if such an unlikely event occurred, surely suspension of judgment is the proper response. It is just not true that we **must** endorse one alternative. If action is called for then, like Buridan’s ass, we can choose at random. To act, though, simply does not require cognitively endorsing one of a competing set of hypotheses. It would be helpful to illustrate this with a simple, finite case.
Suppose our evidence regarding the stolen money consists of only two items: (E1) Smith’s fingerprints on the safe and (E2) Jones’s having made a deposit in the sum of the stolen amount the day after the burglary, despite having been unemployed for some time. Let H1 be that Smith stole the money from the safe and let H2 be that Jones stole the money from the safe. H1 explains E1 but not E2 and H2 explains E2 but not E1. Isn’t this a tie? No, not if E2 is more unlikely than E1. The ability to explain a more unlikely event witnesses greater explanatory power (in addition to being intuitively correct, this is also vouchsafed by Bayes’s Theorem).

But assume that it is exactly as likely that Smith’s fingerprints would be on the safe—he doesn’t work at the bank and has no licit access to it at all—as that Jones would make such a deposit. Now we have a tie, but the proper response seems equally obvious: suspend judgment pending further evidence. “But,” it is protested, “mustn’t something be done about the missing money?” Yes indeed, we must search for clues, we must gather evidence in the hope that we can come to a cogent conclusion. Such is the story that evidentialism tells about cases of equally adequate stories.

**Evidentialism Defined**

Hume says we must proportion our belief to the evidence “in every question.” Locke’s thesis is equally totalizing, saying that we must do so “in any Case or Matter whatsoever.” We may express these sentiments in a kind of formal philosophical statement called a supervenience thesis. Here’s an illustration of supervenience at work. It is plausible that the property *sharpness* of a knife supervenes on the knife’s micro-physical structure. So, if you have two knives and they are an atom-for-atom match, then one will be as sharp as the other. Arch-evidentialists Earl Conee and Richard Feldman have advocated the following evidential supervenience thesis about epistemic justification.

ES Any two people who are exactly alike where evidence is concerned, are exactly alike in what they are justified in believing.

We can clarify this a bit by noting that beliefs come in all kinds of strengths from very weak to very firm. Thus we can rewrite the same principle this way.

ES Any two people who are exactly alike where evidence is concerned, are exactly alike concerning how strongly they ought to believe or disbelieve any proposition.

Like Locke and Hume, Conee and Feldman see the scope of ES as universal. That is, it is not just propositions of a certain kind which require justification. ES is also universal in its application to all people. So, for example, if you have two people, each of whom have the same evidence concerning the existence of God, then they ought to have exactly the same strength of belief or disbelief in the proposition that God exists, regardless of what their actual beliefs, inclinations, or preferences are. So, if the two possess evidence that makes it very likely that there is no God, then the committed believer, no less than the confirmed atheist, ought to firmly believe there is no God. Not to do so is unjustified. By the same token, if the pair possesses evidence which makes it very likely that there is a God, then the atheist’s position is unjustified. One’s current beliefs, inclinations, or preferences never in and of themselves get to usurp the evidence.
**Fallibilism**

Sadly, sometimes our evidence can be misleading. This can occur for a variety of reasons. We might be irresponsible in gathering evidence, and in this way we see that moral and prudential considerations can affect our epistemic position. Still, the epistemic justification of our beliefs depends on what evidence we actually have, not on what evidence we should have had. To think otherwise is to confuse the evaluation of beliefs with the evaluation of character.

Still, we might be perfectly responsible in our evidence gathering and our belief might fit the evidence we have, and yet we might still be mistaken. Thus, we can be justified in believing a proposition—even to a very firm degree—even though it is false. We can think we know and be mistaken. This is just the human situation. On this view, knowledge does not require absolute certainty. How much evidence does it take to be in a position to know? Who knows? Modern epistemologists don’t rely on the concept of knowledge as much. We can get by just fine by talking about evidence and degree of certainty. This is well in keeping with that modern paradigm of rationality, science (as it is when it is practiced well).

**From Rational Degree Of Belief To Rational Action and Faith**

Thus far, we have considered only rational belief, not rational action, much less faith. But this is natural, for belief is the basis of action, and exercising faith is one special kind of action. There are two ways our actions can go wrong (in ways that need not concern immorality). One way is for our estimates of what will occur to be off. Another way is for us to combine our beliefs and desires incorrectly (I am not going to address the complicated fact that we can also be mistaken about what we really want). For example, if I desire an extended period of rest and relaxation more than another promotion, yet I accept the promotion rather than the buy-out, my action is “out of sorts” with my beliefs and desires. There are all kinds of explanations why this might be. One might be that I was lazy and failed to think it through, or perhaps I just acted from habit or pressure from others. Whatever the cause and whatever our evaluation of my character, our evaluation of the action itself will be negative. We will call it “irrational” in the sense that it does not effectively promote what I take to be my interests. Rational action, on the other hand, does effectively promote what I take to be my interests (and, again, I am simply shelving the issue that we can easily be mistaken about what is in our interests. If we have a justified false belief that doing some action is in our interest, then we can hardly be blamed for acting on it.)

**Pascal and the Port Royal Logic**

Around 1654, the Chevalier de Mere—a notable gambler—asked a very interesting question (which some 16th century Italians had previously pondered) of two of the time’s (indeed, all time’s) greatest mathematicians: Blaise Pascal and Pierre de Fermat (of the famous “last theorem”). How do you divide the pot if a game is interrupted in the middle, and one player is ahead? It seems unfair to just nullify the bets. But, if the pot is to be divided another way, how? Well, the answer is complicated, but the moral of the story is not. Through considering this and similar puzzles, Pascal founded both the modern science of probability theory and decision
theory. Decision theory—sometimes called “rational choice theory” is, along with game theory, the foundation of modern economics. Risk management is big business. In industry, risk is defined as the effect of uncertainty on objectives. Decision theory is the simplest method of combining facts about our uncertainty (the flip side of probability) with our objectives.

The basics of decision theory can be illustrated by an example adapted from the most famous logic textbook in history, the Port-Royal logic, published just after the death of Pascal. Suppose you have as your objective to climb to the summit of Mt. Lemmon, outside of Tucson, AZ. You’re half way up Lizard Marmalade Direct when you hear thunder. Climbing has inherent risk, but the risk just rose. What do you do? Well, it depends on how badly you want to get to the top and how badly you want to remain living. But it also depends on how likely it is that the good or bad outcomes should eventuate. To make things simple, suppose staying alive outweighs getting to the top by a thousand to one (the numbers are arbitrary). Does this mean you should definitely bale on the climb? Not at all, for it may be that the probability of getting struck by lightning is one in ten thousand. So even if the good of getting to the top is not nearly as good as the good of staying alive, it might still make sense to continue because of the improbability of the negative outcome. In this case, securing the objective would be worth the risk.

Faith and Reason

In a passage inspired by Pascal and probably written by him, the basic structure of decision theory is applied to the religious case.

It belongs to infinite things alone, as eternity and salvation, that they cannot be equaled by any temporal advantage, and thus we ought never to place them in the balance with any of the things of the world. This is why the smallest degree of facility for the attainment of salvation is of higher value than all the blessings of the world put together; and why the slightest peril of being lost is more serious than all temporal evils, considered simply as evils. (Closing lines of the Port-Royal logic)

This is not exactly the passage known as “Pascal’s Wager” (and indeed there are many wager arguments to be found in his writings), but it reveals the essential structure of Pascalian faith. The English speaking world is—or at least was—a primarily Protestant world where faith was—or became—essentially the acceptance of a body of teaching. But a more traditional view of faith is that of following a path. Indeed, one of the first names for Christianity mentioned in the Christian Scriptures is “The Way” and Jesus referred to himself by that phrase as well. To have faith in Christ was to obey his invitation to “follow me.”

There might be many doubts along the way, but because there could be no greater destination than that to which the way is said to lead, there’s really no degree of doubt that would make it unreasonable to follow the way (most probabilists rule out ever having absolute certainty). This might seem strange until you compare this to other cases of trust. So let’s return to Mt. Lemmon and suppose you have imprudently attempted the extremely difficult route Sentenced to Hang. And there you hang, unable to proceed up the route. So you attempt to rappel off the route but you are unable to recover your gear and have no choice but either to hang there exposed in the
sun—and we can throw in some mountain lions and scorpions if need be—or to attempt to
downclimb to a ledge. You might think it not at all likely that you can do this. Indeed, you
might think it quite unlikely. Nevertheless, the rational thing to do is to attempt it. You are
going to die anyway, so at least this way you have a chance.

Pascal thinks we are in very much the same situation with regards to faith. We may think it
unlikely that by going to Mass, praying, reading Scripture, and doing works of charity we can
attain Heaven. Yet Heaven (not the cartoon heaven, but the Empyrean Heaven) is a destination
worth attempting under any circumstances. Religious faith is religious commitment, trust in and
commitment to following a way, in the case of Christianity, the way is in a sense Jesus himself,
but by extension the sacraments of his Church.

So, religious faith is consistent with a great deal of doubt, even doubt for the most part, but in the
standard case conviction is the norm. That is, in the ordinary case, one has confidence that the
one being trusted is trustworthy. Locke lays all this out with considerable clarity. Consider the
following distinctions he makes in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding.

“1. According to reason there are such propositions whose truth we can discover by examining
and tracing those ideas we have from sensation and reflection; and by natural deduction find to
be true or probable. 2. Above reason are such propositions whose truth or probability we cannot
by reason derive from those principles. 3. Contrary to reason are such propositions as are
inconsistent with or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct ideas.” (Bk. IV, Ch. 17 para. 23,
emphasis added.)

People often confuse the latter two. Consider the proposition that there will be an end of history
and all the dead will rise from the grave, that is, the doctrine of the General Resurrection. This
certainly fits into class 2, it is not something that we can derive or even make probable from
observations of ideas or nature. However, it is clearly not in class 3, as it is not in any way
impossible or inconsistent. If there is a God, then it could happen. Now whether it will happen
is still something we can form a reasonable opinion about even though it is “above reason.” To
see how, consider Locke’s distinction between faith and reason found shortly after the above
passage.

“Reason, therefore, here, as contradistinguished to faith, I take to be the discovery of the
certainty or probability of such propositions or truths which the mind arrives at by deduction
made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties; viz. by sensation or
reflection. Faith, on the other side, is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the
deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some
extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men, we call revelation.”
(Bk. IV, Ch. 18, para. 2.)

So, religious beliefs are in a special category of beliefs, they are arrived at not through our own
investigation, but rather accepted on testimony. This is no disparagement of the reasons, the
same is true in a court of law or, for the most part, in a scientific laboratory (almost any
experiment you could go see would be one which assumed the results of many previous
experiments as reported in journals), and is certainly the lot of historians (and in an important
way archaeologists and paleontologists). In all these cases faith is put in some person or other’s authority. Of course, an act of trust is only as reasonable as the object of that faith is apparently trustworthy (or the stakes are high and there is no other choice). In his work *The Reasonableness of Christianity* Locke defends the reasonableness of trusting Jesus. Locke sees the central truths of Christianity as being made reasonable on the authority of Jesus, who demonstrated his trustworthiness both by his life and the miracles that attested it. But since Locke thinks “reason must be our last judge and guide in everything” (*Essay*, Book IV, Chapter 19) he does not just take this for granted. He thinks that the Class 2 beliefs are ultimately founded on the Class 1 beliefs in that whether someone is trustworthy—and whether a miracle occurred—are things we must investigate in the ordinary fashion. (Richard Swinburne has taken up the Lockean case in contemporary times; see the suggested readings at the end.) In summary, as Locke had forecasted in the previous section, “Reason and faith are not opposite, for faith must be regulated by reason. (Bk. IV, Ch. 17 para. 23, emphasis added.)

Some people seem to treat faith and reason like opposites, as if something accepted “by faith” was something which was by definition something with no connection to what we know by reason. Rejecting the Lockean synthesis (which is virtually indistinguishable from what Saint Thomas Aquinas said), they think that reason’s regulation—which Locke refers to simply as the authority of truth—has no hold on the claims of faith, or that religious beliefs get some kind of evidential exception or special status. Unfortunately, this view seems to be fairly widespread. I think no such exception or special status is warranted (or even in any way desirable, even from within a religious perspective). Thus, while in this chapter, I have laid out the basic Enlightenment picture, focusing particularly on John Locke’s expression of it, in the remainder of the book, I will defend this picture by showing how the facets I have described here provide the resources to handle any objection.
Chapter 2

A Jamesian Picture of Reason and Faith

Defending fideism seems a forlorn task for a philosopher. Fideism, as widely understood, is the claim that religious commitments are made ‘by faith’ and therefore quite independently of any rational evaluation of what is believed and acted upon. But a philosopher, surely, is one who is dedicated to ‘reason’, who ‘follows the argument and the evidence where it leads’, irrespective of inclination or preference. A philosopher-fideist, it would seem, is a dysfunctional philosopher. (One might compare the ethical egoist theory that what is morally right is whatever serves the agent’s own interests: an ethicist who defends egoism seems similarly to be a dysfunctional ethicist.)

Of course, faith does not at all obviously demand setting aside the love of truth and the exercise of reason. Religious philosophers typically hope for a harmony of faith and reason. They hope that commitments of the kind involved in religious faith will be consistent with adherence to the highest rational standards. Were that not so, what sort of a world would religion propose for our belief? It would be a world where religious commitment required psychic dissonance. It would be a world of alienation from rational capacities whose proper exercise we usually and naturally assign to human excellence. It would be the world that the anti-philosophical fideist actually inhabits, in which critical rationality, at least as applied to religious matters, may be denounced as corrupt and ‘fallen’ and religious commitment affirmed purely by zealous and authoritarian enthusiasm. A philosophical faith utterly rejects this kind of irrationalist fideism.

But is a philosophical faith genuinely possible? May we satisfy ourselves that a stark choice between religious faith and commitment to philosophical values will not need to be faced? If so, what are the conditions under which faith can be rational? And – a question not to be overlooked – what limitations on rationality may need acknowledgement in light of the possibility of reasonable faith-commitments?

I defend the view that there can be a rational, philosophical, faith. But I shall claim that rational faith essentially makes a commitment that ventures beyond (though not against) what can be rationally settled on the basis of evidence. I echo Kant’s famous remark that rational knowledge needs to ‘make room’ for faith.² My main influence in so doing is not Kant, but rather William James, and, in particular, his controversial lecture ‘The Will to Believe’, which he introduces as ‘an essay in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical [= rational] intellect may not have been coerced.’ (James 1956, 1). We may learn from James that defending a philosophical faith requires embracing a view aptly described as a modest or moderate (as opposed to an extreme or irrationalist) fideism. It is aptly so described because it rejects – for the special case of faith of a religious or similar kind – the general ‘evidentialist’ requirement (as exemplified in the Lockean picture of faith and reason) that cognitive commitments be in accordance with the rational weight

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² In the Preface to the Second Edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant reports: ‘I have … found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith’ (Kemp Smith 1933, 29).
of one’s total available evidence. This position is a fideism – a ‘faith-ism’ – because it honours
our capacity for faith-commitments as something beyond, though harmonious with, our rational
capacity for judging in accordance with our available evidence. Making a faith-commitment is –
I shall maintain – entirely consistent with the proper exercise of our rational capacities, but it
involves trusting in our wider nature and letting go of an ideal of rational self-control that is both
philosophically and religiously problematic.

In this Chapter, I aim to sketch this modest fideist understanding of the relationship between
faith and reason. My aim will be to make clear where it departs from the Lockean evidentialist
picture Dougherty has presented in Chapter 1. We may then, in subsequent Chapters, move on
to debate the question whether these departures are justified.

**Faith as practical commitment: its justifiability an ultimately moral question**

The place to start is with the question how to understand faith itself, as exemplified in the
religious case. (I think it important to leave open the possibility that the *same general kind* of
faith as exemplified in religion may be found in contexts not ordinarily classed as ‘religious’:
perhaps, for example, commitment to a scientific naturalist worldview, or commitment to one’s
basic ethical values, count as cases of faith-commitment.)

Some accounts of faith are purely cognitive: they identify faith wholly as a kind of knowledge or
belief. Dougherty and I agree, however, that there is an essentially active component to faith,
which I have here anticipated with my talk of faith-commitments. Faith-commitments are
practical commitments, affecting how one acts and lives one’s life. Indeed, if a practical
commitment is authentically religious, then its effect on one’s life will be a pervasive one. I am
fond of observing that etymology alerts us to an important feature of the religious: *religere*
means ‘to bind together’, so a religious life is one in which all aspects of one’s existence in the
world are supposed to be bound meaningfully together, framed, as it were, by the content of
one’s faith-commitment. So, though faith may not be purely cognitive, there does have to be
cognitive content to faith. Faith essentially involves taking the world to be a certain way – for
example, in the case of theist faith, it involves taking the world to be such that God exists and
is to be trusted. But theistic faith is not merely *having* the attitude that God exists and is to be
trusted; it is also *taking* that claim to be true (in the right sort of way) in one’s practical reasoning
towards decision-making and action (this is what is meant by ‘practical commitment’).

Faith’s involving active practical commitment entails that the justifiability of faith is not
exclusively a matter of the justifiability of believing its cognitive content to be true – although
that is indeed important. At root, the justifiability question is about whether or not one is
justified in making the practical commitment involved in faith. It is the question whether one is
justified in taking it to be true in one’s practical reasoning that (to continue with the case of
theistic faith) God exists and is to be trusted, and is revealed thus-and-so. (It is important to note
that religious theistic faith is always a matter of commitment to *this* God – in the Christian case,
for example, the One who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of Our Lord Jesus
Christ, etc.) The question of the justifiability of faith is thus a question about whether or not a
certain kind of (mental) *action* is justified. Given the pervasiveness and significance of the
consequences for one’s own life and the lives of others, the sort of justification at issue must
ultimately be moral justification. That this is a deep concern about the justifiability of faith is apparent from the critique of the ‘new atheists’, such as Christopher Hitchens (2007) and Richard Dawkins (2008): they maintain not just that theistic belief is a mistake, but that it is a dangerous mistake, and their message is that human existence would be much improved if we could only grow out of our religiousness. These ‘new’ atheists are not, in fact, so novel: they revive an an ancient lament: tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.3

But it is important to see that the moral justifiability of faith may become an issue for religious believers too. Believers may become concerned about their entitlement to their particular faith, especially when they consider the implications of religious diversity. Such reflective believers may ask themselves: am I entitled to continue my existing faith commitments? Do I have a duty to examine them critically? Is the ordering of my life that flows from my faith a ‘right’ ordering, a proper orientation to the world? Is there, perhaps, a superior alternative orientation to which I should convert? Or, less drastically, do I need at least to be open to developing my faith, through critical reflection and by engaging, perhaps, with other traditions? If I think I recognise in some other contemporary or historical faith-commitments the tragic errors of fanaticism and the pursuit of what Paul Tillich tellingly calls ‘false ultimacy’(2001, 21), how do I know that I am not falling into the same trap? Such reflections are, I think, especially proper for believers within the great monotheistic traditions, for whom the avoidance of idolatry is so strong an imperative. Could it be that the object of my present worship is something other than, and lesser than, the true Highest One?4

**How moral and epistemic evaluations of faith are related**

Faith may be, or involve, a morally assessable practical commitment. But, as a commitment to the world’s being a certain way, it must also be open to epistemic evaluation – that is, the kind of evaluation relevant to the epistemic goal of grasping truth and avoiding error. How does the moral assessment of commitment to God’s existing relate to the epistemic assessment of taking this proposition to be true? Well, surely, we will be morally justified in directing our lives on the basis of this God’s existence, only if we are epistemically justified in holding that this is indeed the God who is? Epistemic justification in believing, that is, seems a necessary condition for the related faith-commitment to be morally justified.

There is a way to avoid this claim, but it goes back on the realist assumption that faith is commitment to the world’s being a certain way quite independently of any mental construction of how it is. Theological non-realism treats the theist worldview essentially as a fiction, socially constructed to express and reinforce key values of the religious community. On that view the moral justifiability of theistic faith is free of any epistemic consideration, and will presumably be assessed according to whether the values expressed are sound, and commitment to acting in the light of the fiction conducive to promoting them. The fact that the theistic traditions have clearly not understood themselves in this non-realist way is not, perhaps, by itself sufficient argument against theological non-realism. Nevertheless, it will suffice for present purposes to emphasise that the modest Jamesian fideism I defend shares with Lockean evidentialism in firmly retaining

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3 Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, I, 101 (So potent is religion to persuade to evil deeds.)

4 Mark Johnston (2009) has recently argued that, on the standard philosophical conception, the God of theism must be rejected as an idol from the point of view of the theistic religions themselves.
the usual realist assumption about the cognitive content of faith. Our present interest is in a
debate within the broad church of those who accept realism about religious belief – debate
between realists and non-realists is another topic.⁵

On the realist view, the impulse to faith seeks an overall framework for living that latches on to
reality as it really is, and it proceeds with a constant horror of being fobbed off with a fantasy,
however grand and idealistic. Moral integrity in faith-commitment thus absolutely requires
epistemic integrity with respect to its cognitive content. In theistic terms, only a God who most
truly is could be worth our ultimate trust and commitment (a conclusion that may be, perhaps.
the useful residue of the fraught dialectic of the Ontological Argument).

Evidentialist versus fideist conceptions of epistemic integrity

But what does epistemic integrity require? This is the question that gives rise to our present
debate. To put it broadly, the evidentialist maintains that epistemic integrity always requires
‘proportioning one’s belief to one’s evidence’ – so that a person’s faith that \( p \) will have epistemic
integrity only if the evidence available to him or her adequately supports \( p \)’s truth. The modest
fideist, by contrast, allows that under certain conditions it is consistent with epistemic integrity
to commit to \( p \)’s truth even though the believer, him or herself, recognises that the available
evidence does not adequately support \( p \)’s truth. It is important to observe that the modest fideist
is not recommending ‘open slather’. Concern that beliefs should enjoy evidential support is not
simply set aside – rather, what the fideist claims is that the proper attempt to settle important
questions on the basis of evidence can come to a limiting point at which settling them without
adequate evidential support is permissible. This kind of fideist agrees that epistemic integrity
requires conscientious searching for evidence and respect for whatever evidence one finds, yet
nevertheless maintains that there can be good reasons, consistent with the epistemic goal of
grasping truth and avoiding error, for ‘believing beyond the evidence’.

One might perhaps assume (thinking of Hitchens and Dawkins, perhaps) that the debate between
evidentialists and fideists will be a debate between an epistemology adopted by and congenial to
atheists and agnostics and an epistemology adopted by and congenial to religious theists. But
that is emphatically not the case. For one thing, fideists might be atheists: indeed, I shall suggest
in a later Chapter that a defensible Jamesian fideism imposes criteria on acceptable faith-
commitments that may rule out theistic commitment relative to the standard philosophical
conception of God – that is, as a supernatural person, Creator and Sustainer \( \text{ex nihilo} \) of all else
that exists, who has the ‘omni’-properties of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.
(I like to call God under this conception, ‘the personal omniGod’: and it is notable that James’s
own personal religious beliefs did not focus on a God of this kind.) It is even more important,
however, to recognise that theists may weigh in on either side of the evidentialist/fideist debate.
Indeed, this debate is arguably at its most passionate when it occurs, as here, between two
religious theists, both of whom accept the moral importance of epistemic integrity, but where one
identifies maintaining this integrity with respecting an evidential requirement that applies as
much to religious belief as to any other kind of belief, while the other regards it as essential that
the person of religious faith makes a venture with respect to belief itself (a doxastic venture) yet
in accordance with epistemic integrity more widely understood.

⁵ For a useful discussion of theological non-realism, see Charles Taliaferro 1998, 40-5.
Doxastic venture, its possibility ...

It is now crucial to explain the conditions under which, according to the modest fideist, doxastic venture is permissible and consistent with the highest epistemic integrity. This explanation will require clarifying further just what doxastic venture is. Consider the following formulation James provides of his main thesis in ‘The Will to Believe’:

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 … (1956, 11)

This claim both characterises the act of faith and provides criteria for its being justified. I will focus first on the act of faith and what it means to understand it as a doxastic venture.

One might be forgiven for supposing that ‘deciding an option between propositions’ is a matter of *deciding to believe* the truth of the chosen proposition. But this cannot be what is meant, since (as James himself makes clear) beliefs – states of holding that a proposition is true – cannot be adopted simply at will. One may, perhaps, want to have a certain belief, but one cannot satisfy that want through direct voluntary control. Indirect control of beliefs is, of course, a possibility. It occurs all the time when we engage in inquiry: I want to have a true belief about the state of the weather, so I look out the window. What I then come to believe is partly the result of my own exercise of control. Sometimes we may deliberately acquire a particular desired belief (whether true or not) by manipulating our cognitive functioning – by having ourselves hypnotised for example. But beliefs can arise in me (or, for that matter, be sustained in me) only if something other than my own direct will causes me to come into (or remain in) the psychological state of holding the relevant proposition to be true.

What *is* meant, then, by ‘deciding an option between propositions’ in James’s thesis? Our earlier discussion of the active aspect of faith provides the clue: what is meant is *committing oneself in practice to the truth of a proposition* – or, in other words, taking that proposition to be true in practical reasoning. Clearly, that is something that *is* under the direct control of the will. The act of faith, then, is (or involves) an act of practical commitment to the faith-proposition’s truth.

When we practically commit to *p*’s truth, we usually already believe that *p* is true. That is the standard case, though it is not the only case, since one may *act on the assumption of a proposition’s truth* without at all believing it. The typical situation of the reflective religious believer *is* of the standard kind, however. She has religious beliefs. She is also practically committed to their truth and she acts upon it. But now let us suppose that when she considers whether she is justified in her religious beliefs, she comes to the conclusion that her evidence is not sufficient to support their truth. That realisation might undermine her beliefs. But it need not: she might find that what causes her to hold, *and to continue to hold*, her religious beliefs does not also count as providing adequate evidence for their truth, according to the applicable objective or intersubjective standards for adequate evidence. She might find, to put it in James’s terminology, that what is causing her to hold her religious beliefs is some aspect of her ‘passional nature’.
Here we encounter a crucial feature of James’s psychology of belief: the insistence that belief is in fact often caused in people passionally or ‘non-evidentially’, in the sense that the belief’s causes are not also adequate epistemic justifiers for the belief’s truth. This applies rather obviously, I suggest, to the religious beliefs of a vast number of people. They believe because they were brought up to believe. They believe because they stand in a specific historical cultural and religious tradition. But the fact that it is the belief of their progenitors and teachers that has caused their belief is not adequate evidence for its truth. One might perhaps wonder how there could be a sustained tradition that transmits beliefs not well evidentially justified, and suggest that the fact that so many have believed is itself significant evidence that the belief is true. But this line of thought founders on the realisation that there is a diversity of, in significant respects mutually incompatible, religious traditions. So the attachment of many people to the beliefs of their own religious traditions seems a clear case of what James calls ‘passionally caused’ belief.

Now we see, then, what doxastic venture is. It is not (and could not be) a directly willed acquiring of a desired belief. Rather it is a venturing to take true in practice what one already believes, but (as one becomes aware) through passional, non-evidential, causes. Doxastic venture is a taking of a believed proposition to be true in practical reasoning, while recognising lack of adequate evidential support for its truth. Doxastic venture is thus possible only for someone who has, and maintains, non-evidentially caused belief. (Someone who loses religious belief on recognising its lack of evidential support will be capable at most of making a sub-doxastic venture – that is, of practically committing to the truth of a faith-proposition without actually believing it. It is an interesting question whether sub-doxastic venture could count as authentic faith-commitment. It is also interesting to consider what might motivate such a commitment in the absence of actual belief: in some contexts, of course, there may be significant incentives for maintaining the practices of the religious life no matter what one’s actual state of belief.)

… and its permissibility

Having discovered (as we are supposing) that her religious beliefs are not adequately supported on the available evidence, our reflective believer is now concerned whether she is justified in continuing her practical commitment to their truth. She has religious belief, but from passional causes. The question is: now she recognises this, is it acceptable to maintain her practical religious commitment in a doxastic venture? Since (as already argued) this will be morally acceptable only if it may be done with epistemic integrity, what has to be settled is whether it can be done with epistemic integrity.

James claims that doxastic venture is justified ‘whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds’. He explains a genuine option as one which presents in its context as ‘live, forced and momentous’ (1956, 2–4). My gloss is that this condition restricts doxastic venture to commitments that are existentially vital, making a decisive difference to the kind of life one leads – where (this is the requirement that the option be ‘forced’) what is existentially vital is precisely whether or not one takes a given proposition to be true. The existential urgency of the Evangelical Christian call to ‘let Jesus into your life’ illustrates this well (whatever view one may have of this particular style of theology). What matters is whether or not, here and now, you accept Jesus as your personal Saviour. Remaining
agnostic – leaving it open, for the sake of further inquiry, whether Jesus is or is not your Saviour – is here in practical terms equivalent to rejecting the Evangelical claim: in either case you do not here and now practically commit to the truth of the claim. Only when a religious claim presents itself with this kind of forced urgency, James thinks, could it be justified to adopt it in practice without adequate evidence.

There is a further necessary condition: the decision to commit must be such that it cannot be settled on intellectual grounds (that is, by evaluating evidence in accordance with applicable norms). An existentially vital forced option that might be settled if only one waited for more evidence may therefore not be resolved through doxastic venture. A fortiori, an existentially vital forced option that is settled on the available evidence may not be resolved in a contrary way: counter-evidential doxastic venture, in other words, is entirely excluded (so the ghost of irrationalist fideism is firmly laid). Only supra-evidential doxastic venture can be permitted – indeed, only essentially supra-evidential doxastic venture can be permitted, if we take seriously James’s qualification about the option ‘of its nature’ not being open to intellectual resolution.

It might be objected that this requirement is too strong. Are there not cases where practical or moral considerations simply override epistemic ones, so that believing beyond, or even contrary, to one’s currently available evidence is quite justifiable? Consider a different Genie case: I find myself embarrassingly inclined to believe the conspiracy theory about the Moon landing, recognising that the evidence is lacking (that’s why I’m embarrassed); now the Genie appears and promises that, if only I commit to the falsity of the Moon landings (by joining the relevant groups, assisting their publications, giving public speeches, etc.) he will confer some great boon on the world (relief from a severe North African famine, say). Surely, I shouldn’t hesitate, thanking my lucky stars that, unlike very many people, I am actually able to make the required doxastic venture? So believing beyond, or even against, the evidence can be justifiable because epistemic values can be outweighed. It is worth observing, though, that apparently clear everyday cases of this – such as the classic one of continuing to believe in the innocence of one’s spouse despite mounting adverse evidence – do not entirely convince us that epistemic values are simply overridden (one’s long relationship with one’s spouse gives access to evidence as to his character that no one else may have, so one’s continued belief in his innocence when the more widely available evidence shows his guilt may be quite epistemically rational). Reassuringly, perhaps, paring the pursuit of the good away from the love of truth seems to demand contrivance that abstracts away from our actual experience of life in the world.

Now we may explain the strength of the requirement that permissible doxastic venture in the religious case proceed beyond the very possibility of settlement of the option concerned on an evidential basis. The Jamesian fideist is one for whom the passion for truth is intrinsic to authentic religion, so there can be no overriding of epistemic considerations in making acceptable religious commitments. Justifiable religious doxastic venture therefore does not involve epistemic concern getting trumped by some higher value; when it is justifiable, it is justifiable within the scope of epistemic concern. Accordingly, it is only when an option could not in principle be settled evidentially, that one could commit in practice to the truth of a belief beyond evidential support consistently with maintaining the highest epistemic concern.

How epistemic integrity may require going beyond one’s evidence
Still, evidentialists will insist that *epistemic* concern could never lead one to commit in practice to a truth-claim beyond one’s evidence – except, of course, when a hypothesis is experimentally assumed true in practice with a view to generating relevant evidence. But that exception does not apply to authentic religious faith-commitment, which surely is not merely experimental. Evidentialists will prohibit doxastic venture, then, *even in the case* where the Jamesian thinks it justified – namely, when the option to commit to an existentially vital claim is both forced and *in principle* undecidable on the evidence. The evidentialist advice to our reflective believer, then, will be that, if she does indeed find her religious belief to be passionately, not evidentially caused, she should *not* continue to act on it – and, to avoid any such temptation, take all possible steps to eradicate her inherited doxastic inclinations. With evidential resolution in principle unforthcoming for the religious claim that *p*, suspension of belief is required: neither believing that *p* nor believing that not-*p* is epistemically justified – at best one might attach a credence of 0.5 to *p*’s truth in decision theoretical reasoning.

The Jamesian fideist response is to observe that, if this evidentialist advice is taken, and if in fact there *are* existentially vital truths whose acceptance could not in principle be justified on the evidence, then such truths will remain forever outside our grasp along with whatever benefits may flow from acting on them. Evidentialism may thus block our access to truth, and so frustrate our epistemic goals. Openness to doxastic venture, then, may be entirely epistemically responsible with respect to ‘genuine’ essentially and persistently evidentially undecidable options.

This fideist response effectively adopts an *external perspective* on our cognitive situation. An internal perspective considers only factors accessible to us that affect the epistemic status of what we believe – factors which, in other words, count as our evidence for or against the truth of our belief. But an external perspective can envisage epistemically relevant factors that are not accessible to us, and so do not give rise to evidence. (‘Reliabilist’ epistemologies, for example, are externalist, holding that epistemic justification or worth can be conferred on a belief through its being caused by a mechanism that is reliable in yielding true beliefs.) What the fideist is supposing is that, for all we know, our actual situation as viewed externally is that we can come to believe certain vital truths only through ‘passional’ causes, and thus be able to act upon these truths only through doxastic venture. If that is so, then it will only be by trusting in our wider nature – wider, that is, than our rational nature in its epistemic operation – that important truths such as religious truths can be appropriated.

Evidentialists will no doubt reply, with some impatience, that we have abundant higher-order evidence in favour of the view that our actual situation as viewed externally is one where we are likely to grasp truth and avoid error only by sticking to what is internally epistemically justified on the basis of our evidence. So, although what the fideist supposes is a bare possibility, in fact we are never justified in taking that possibility seriously with respect to our religious and similar options. This ‘higher-order evidence’ is just that the evidentialist policy works – or, at least, works well enough, and quite decidedly better than any policy that accepts beliefs caused by ‘such factors as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set’ (James 1956, 9).
The evidential ambiguity of theism

Evidentialists who are religious theists will also have been impatient with the assumption, which is needed for Jamesian fideism to apply to theistic faith-commitment, that the question of belief in God’s existence (or, rather, this God’s existence) is incapable of being settled on the total available evidence, and, indeed, as a matter of principle. Committed religious theists who are also evidentialists must, of course, take this assumption to be mistaken. They might thus not worry too much that a case could be made in favour of Jamesian fideism, thinking that—so far as their own live religious options are concerned, anyway—there is simply no occasion to try to justify faith as a doxastic venture. Practical commitment to the claims of their religious theism, they will think, is practical commitment to beliefs in accordance with their degree of epistemic justification on the available evidence: the epistemic integrity of these faith-commitments, then, is thus straightforwardly secure.

If they are to shake this complacency, fideists might begin by agreeing that theists may properly regard their religious beliefs as adequately justified on the evidence relative to some specifically religious evidential practice. But this leaves it open whether any specific faith-commitment—for example, to the Christian foundational belief that God exists and is revealed in Jesus the Christ—is evidentially justified relative to some more widely applicable evidential practice. Once committed to Christian belief, one is then subject to an evidential practice internal to that commitment—a practice which applies certain hermeneutic protocols to sacred scriptures, for example, and which may admit certain kinds of religious experience as confirming religious beliefs. But the foundational Christian claim may itself be open to assessment from a perspective that does not already assume its truth. Philosophers of religion assume a wider human evidential practice and raise the question whether any foundational religious belief may be shown to be epistemically justified according to the norms that belong to this wider practice. (I here take it for granted that assessment of the epistemic justifiability of a person’s belief in relation to evidence implicitly appeals to norms both about what it is for evidence to support a truth-claim and also about what is admissible as evidence and what counts as the total available evidence in the given context. Evidence is just the notion of that which makes some truth evident or apparent, and this notion needs regimentation if objective (or, anyway, intersubjective) judgments of evidential support are to be possible. Clearly, there is not just one set of evidential norms, and those there are will not be found, so to speak, on tablets of stone, but will rather need to be teased out as implicit in shared practices that succeed in sustaining agreed judgments about the evidential justifiability of whole classes of beliefs. These are what I refer to as ‘evidential practices’.)

The question whether it is possible to provide non-question-begging argument and evidence to establish, or at least render more probable than not, the foundational claim of theistic religious belief (that God exists) has been much considered—as too the question whether this is possible for the denial that God exists. The long history of this debate suggests that it is at an impasse. But it is not the kind of impasse where all agree that the evidence is counterbalanced. Rather, many think the debate definitely resolved. But some think it resolved in favour of theism, others—apparently equally well motivated and competent—in favour of atheism. This suggests that the impasse is one of evidential ambiguity: the very same overall body of evidence seems capable of coherent interpretation either from the Gestalt of the theist or from that of the atheist/naturalist.
Furthermore, this will be no merely contingent matter if it is correct to see both theism and atheism/naturalism as resting on highest-order framing principles – that is to say as involving commitment to stances on the nature of reality that ‘frame’ the whole experience of the world of the person (or community) who makes them. Taking it that God exists – or, better, that this God exists, and is revealed thus and so – is not a belief that could be epistemically secured by independent evidence because it is the kind of belief that is brought to experience as a principle for making overall sense of it. No wonder, if this is so, that any piece of evidence atheists cite as persuasive (the existence of apparently pointless suffering) can be interpreted by theists as consistent with their stance (it is suffering whose connexion to the good is apparent to God alone). No wonder, too, that ‘proofs’ of theism turn out always to rest on assumptions that can reasonably be rejected by the naturalist/atheist (for example, the ‘fine tuning’ of the fundamental physical constants can be interpreted as ‘brute fact’, or, even as itself naturally necessary).

This is all quite controversial, of course! But it does indicate what context it is for which the Jamesian justification of faith is fitted. Part of what is needed, then, to defend Jamesian fideism as what providing a proper understanding of the moral and epistemic justifiability of religious theistic commitment will be arguments for accepting that, indeed, the context of in principle evidential ambiguity is the context in which reflective theists find themselves. Here I have only hinted at what those arguments may be.

But what I have said is enough to show why doxastic venture in making a faith-commitment may be consistent with epistemic integrity. The fact that epistemic integrity requires applying the evidentialist policy in those many contexts where evidence can be expected to settle justified belief does not give sufficient reason to conclude that it must do so in contexts of in principle evidential ambiguity. So, if the context of theistic faith-commitment is the resolving of a forced choice in the face of in principle evidential ambiguity, then, from an external perspective, it may be that doxastic venture in favour of passionately motivated belief in God gains us the vital truth. Equally, of course, such a venture may result in a failure to align ourselves with the truth. But there is no way of eliminating that risk when the option is vital and forced. Forced either to commit in practice to (this) God’s existence or not, I run the risk of not aligning my will with the truth however I choose. Of course, by suspending belief I avoid all risk of error in my belief-states: but what good is that to me if I fail to live my life in the light of God’s existence when (as it turns out) God’s existence is the deepest truth about the real world in which I live and move and have my being?

The case for modest, Jamesian, fideism, then, assumes – controversially, but not without considerable plausibility – that theistic faith commits in practice to God’s trustworthiness on the basis of a belief that has a, passional, non-evidential, cause in a context where the option to make that commitment or not is existentially vital, and in principle unable to be settled through a rational assessment of the independently available evidence (i.e., evidence that does not already presuppose the existence of the trustworthy God). Where our capacity to assess an important truth-claim in relation to our evidence runs out, and yet it is vital that we decide whether or not to act upon it, how could accepting in practice what we are anyway passingly motivated to believe be contrary to the right exercise of our rational capacities?
Theists who are moderate Jamesian fideists may reinforce this point theologically. They may take a lead from Locke by considering how God may expect us to use his gifts as we consider the question of God’s existence. What may a trustworthy God – if indeed he exists – properly expect from us if, as the Jamesian assumes, our epistemic predicament is characterised by necessary evidential ambiguity? Dougherty quotes Locke as maintaining that anyone who ‘believes without having a reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him’. But will it not be arrogant, rather than obedient, for us to expect that our faculty of Reason will settle matters beyond the limits of its proper exercise? Perhaps God has excellent reason to desire us to have the courage to commit ourselves to him in the necessary absence of the kind of rational certification assessment of evidence could supply? Then the doxastic venturer will by no means ‘be in love with his own fancies’, but, rather, responding to the deepest promptings of his wider nature and situation. Locke’s account of the ‘discerning faculties’ God has given us may be too narrow: human nature may be endowed with vehicles of discernment different from the capacity to ‘proportion belief to evidence’, and sufficiently different to be unable to be organised into a rational system.

There is, then, a theological tradition that sees commitment in the face of rationally, evidentially, irresolvable doubt as intrinsic to the virtue of faith. This tradition need not descend into irrationalism: on the contrary, at its best it fully endorses Locke’s sentiments about our duty rightly to employ our God-given Reason. It maintains only that, for good reason, what God purposes for us requires that our faith-commitment not be evidentially secured. Here is a speculation about what that good reason could be. To realise the supreme good at which God aims, it is necessary that we be transformed, as John Hick puts it, ‘from self-centredness to reality-centredness’ (1989, page?). This transformation must characterise our deepest commitment, which is, of course, to God himself. That commitment, then, must be both authentically our own but also free of egotistic control. It must be both an act of the self, and an act that gives up holding on to self. But so long as we insist on committing ourselves to God only so far as this may be justified intellectually on the basis of independent, non-question-begging, evidence, we must fail in both respects. We are rationally managing our risk, so we remain in control: and yet at the same time we hide our own, centred, responsibility for commitment by seeing it as issuing from ‘our reason’ – not ourselves but only a ‘department’ of ourselves – which we merely follow.

**Conclusion**

There is an important alternative to the Lockean picture of reason and faith. It is a Jamesian picture of reason and faith. On this picture – aptly described as a moderate, or super-evidential, fideism – it may, under certain conditions, be permissible, both morally and epistemically, to commit in practice to the truth of a belief even though one recognises that this truth is not adequately supported by the available evidence. On this picture, evidentialism, understood as applying uniformly, is false. Not that there is any quarrel with the thesis that epistemic justification in believing supervenes on the believer’s evidential situation (ES): clearly, one may understand epistemic justification in just this ‘internalist’ way – though if that is what a belief’s

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6 Hick argues that the need for this transformation is central, not just for the theistic religious traditions, but for all the great religions of humanity.
epistemic justification is, externalists will want to point out that a belief can have epistemic worth (for example, by being produced by a causal mechanism that reliably yields truths) without, in this internalist sense, being epistemically justified. (One does not want to dispute too much about the merely terminological question of how to use the term ‘epistemic justification’.) No, rather, what Jamesian fideism rejects is evidentialism as the practical (or indeed the moral) principle that one may commit in practice to the truth of a belief only to the extent that it is evidentially justified (epistemically justified in the sense of principle ES). Evidentialists recognise that this principle cannot apply absolutely without exception – since, for example, it may be overridden when epistemic considerations are trumped by other values. But, given that religious belief and commitment is understood as remaining within the epistemic concern to grasp (the deepest) truth about reality, and that it regards with horror the thought of making an ultimate commitment to a falsity, evidentialists will be on firm ground in maintaining that religious commitment cannot be exempted as a whole category from the evidentialist principle. Evidentialists will be on firm ground, that is, provided they are right in taking the exercise of integrity in epistemic concern as equivalent to the respecting of the evidentialist principle. The moderate Jamesian fideist holds, however, that this is a mistake. It is a mistake of a kind that is common and understandable – potentially tragic in its effects, though at the same time highly forgivable once acknowledged. It is the kind of over-enthusiastic mistake that takes something good but limited and pursues it beyond its proper limits. The accusation of ‘enthusiasm’, it seems, may be bandied in both directions in the present debate!

References
Chapter 3

Evidentialist Answers and Alternatives

Trent Dougherty

John and I are in stark disagreement. He follows Kant in affirming that “knowledge needs to ‘make room’ for faith” because faith “ventures beyond…what can be rationally settled on the basis of evidence” leaving faith a “special case.” I follow Locke and Hume in allowing no room for such departures and granting no special cases whatsoever.

I applaud the fact that John rejects “anti-philosophical” fideism and any disdain for rationality or proclivity for “religious commitment affirmed purely by zealous and authoritarian enthusiasms. This rejection is of more than philosophical importance—especially today—and is to be commended. However, he rightly notes that even his “moderate fideism” requires a rejection of evidentialism. From the evidentialists standpoint even moderate fideism is anti-philosophical in a way, even if only moderately so.

The Necessary Doxastic Component of Faith

John notes that some views of faith are “purely cognitive.” There are also purely practical notions a well. A toy theory would be: faith that p is pretending that p or acting as if p. It seems that John and I are agreed that neither of these views is correct. Rather, what’s true is what I’ll call the Mixed Practical-Doxastic theory.

MPD Faith has both a practical and doxastic component.

That John accepts MPD is implied in a number of passages. He says that he and I agree that “there is an essentially active component to faith” that “faith is not merely having the attitude that God exists” “faith is not exclusively a matter of the justifiability of believing” and other such things that imply that there is at least the propositional attitude of belief involved. More explicitly, he says that the doxastic justification “is indeed important.” He also says that faith “must also be open to epistemic evaluation.” Most explicitly, he seems to affirm that “we will be morally justified in directing our lives on the basis of this God’s existence, only if we are epistemically justified in holding that this is indeed the God who is…” (There is a bit of doubt since it occurs in a rhetorical question, but then he mentions that the way to avoid that commitment is theological anti-realism, which he explicitly rejects.)

Getting this assumption in place allows me to make my argument rather explicit in the following form.

The Inconsistency Argument
1. Faith can be justified without the support of adequate evidence. Moderate Fideism
2. Faith entails epistemic justification. MPD and the above statements.
3. Epistemic justification entails the presence of adequate evidence. Evidentialism.
4. Faith entails the presence of adequate evidence. From 2 and 3.
5. Faith both does and does not entail adequate evidence. From 1 and 4.

This is another way to see the formal conflict between Evidentialism and Moderate Fideism. MPD is also a very important commitment to emphasize, for evidentialism is at its core only an epistemic doctrine, one aimed only at the evaluation of epistemic justification. As I mentioned toward the end of Chapter 1, the evaluation of commitments and practical reasons is covered by that other Early Modern thinker Pascal. It is the essence of my objection to the Jamesian picture that it runs together—con-fusing—these two distinct categories: the theoretical and the practical. My thesis does not entail anything so radical as “Theory and practice have nothing to do with one another,” for that is clearly false. I think they have much to do with one another both in faith and decision making generally. My thesis is simply that they are separate dimensions of evaluation. Something can be morally and practically justified without being epistemically justified and vice versa. Furthermore, no amount of moral justification entails any bit of epistemic justification and vice versa. Confirmation theory evaluates the rectitude of doxastic attitudes. Decision theory evaluates the rationality of decisions. Epistemic rationality and practical rationality and morality are all bound up in decision making, but they have their own standards to live up to.

Thus it is not quite on point, as John states in his conclusion to Chapter 2, that “what Jamesian fideism rejects is evidentialism as the practical (or indeed the moral) principle that one may commit in practice to the truth of a belief only to the extent that it is evidentially justified.” For evidentialism issues no such verdict. Indeed, any commitment is consistent with evidentialism, just as any commitment is consistent with geometry. Commitments don’t fall under the purview of epistemic rationality. Epistemic rationality evaluates doxastic attitudes, however we choose to think of belief states (i.e. whether as all-or-nothing or as coming in degrees). Commitments are evaluated by the canons of practical rationality which are explicated in Pascalian decision theory. But because of the moderate fideist’s commitment to MPD, the conflict between the evidentialist and the fideist arises in the way illustrated by the Inconsistency Argument.

Before moving on to a detailed critique of some of the details of the Jamesian picture, I want to make a few big picture remarks.

**Jamesian Fideism and Intellectual Integrity**

Like me, John has a fondness for etymology. My years of teaching Greek and Latin fostered this love and now I foist it upon my students. He notes that “religious” is related to religere, one of the usages of which is equivalent to “to bind together.” He glosses, “a religious life is one in which all aspects of one’s existence in the world are supposed to be bound meaningfully together.” But it seems to me to make an exception in the rules of epistemic rationality for faith “de-bundles” it from the rest of one’s life. A life where exceptions are made to principles does not strike me as one completely integrated. Rather, it seems dissonant to make such an exception, almost jarring.

And this leads to a very important question: Why is this exception granted? What is it about faith that warrants such an exception? What are the properties of faith which this exception is
founded upon? Let us simply denote the answer to this last version of the question as X. Unless we are to have exceptions upon exceptions, any form of commitment with the X factor must also be exempt from the normal rules of rationality. Or to work with John’s Kantian metaphor, knowledge must make room for anything with the X factor. The only features of religious belief to which John appeals on which to base this exception are practical importance. He says “Faith-commitments are practical commitments, affecting how one acts and lives one’s life” and in several places reiterates the fact of the fundamental action-guiding nature of faith. But at the same time he notes this is true of ethical beliefs and even scientific naturalism. The same could be said for political commitments and deep metaphysical doctrines. So it seems to me that a consistent application of the exemption thesis for faith would eviscerate the intellectual life. I can formalize that argument for convenience like this.

The Evisceration Argument
1. Religious commitment has factor X.
2. Commitments with factor X are exempt from ordinary canons of rational evaluation.
3. So religious commitments are granted an exception. From 1 and 2.
4. Political commitments have factor X.
5. So political commitments are granted an exception. From 2 and 4.
6. Deep metaphysical commitments have factor X.
7. So deep metaphysical commitments are granted an exception. From 2 and 6.
8. Etc. etc.

What this illustrates is that one can’t just stop the argument where one wishes. One can’t just jump off the train at proposition 3, for the argument chugs on. My fear is that it is a runaway train headed straight for the center of our intellectual town. Or to change the metaphor, our intellectual bus is stuck on the tracks. Our only hope is to pull the lever on proposition 2 and derail the train well before it smashes our intellectual lives to bits.

On Doxastic Ventures: Worries about the Formulation

John displays a crucial passage from James to explicate the nature of a doxastic venture.

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…

From this and John’s glosses we glean the following definition.

S doxastically ventures that p exactly when
(i) p is a genuine option for S, and
(ii) S believes p, and
(iii) S commits herself in practice to the truth of p, and
(iv) the evidence for p and against p are counterbalanced.
I find this definition odd for a number of reasons which I’ll explore through the remainder of this chapter. My puzzlement begins with the presence of both (i) and (ii). It would be a bit odd if (ii) didn’t entail (i). Can one believe what is not a genuine option for one?

(i) is later broken down into the following sub components:

(ia) p is live, and
(ib) p is momentous/urgent, and
(ic) p is forced.

Let’s examine these in turn. “Live” is glossed as “existentially vital” and I don’t know what that means. Returning to our penchant for etymology, “vital” comes from the Latin *vitalis* which just means “of or relating to life.” And I’m not sure what adding “existential” adds. (I find that it usually adds very little.) I’m not sure momentousness and urgency are the same thing at all. At least most of my emails marked “urgent” are far from momentous. But both come in degrees. Is there really some magic threshold below which I can’t doxastically venture that p because p isn’t just quite momentous enough. If only p had been more momentous I could have doxastically ventured on it? John seems to gloss this trait when he says “making a decisive difference to the kind of life one leads.” But this is clearly person-relative. Some people’s Christian faith seems to make little difference to the way they live. (One could say that only shows they don’t really have Christian faith, but I refuse do judge such matters.)

The Curious Case of Ted and Todd This leaves us with the following odd possibility. Ted is such that his belief that p makes a momentous difference to his life. Todd is such that his belief that p does not make a momentous difference to his life. Ted and Todd have exactly the same evidence for p, and that evidence is exactly counter-balanced. I.e. PrTed(p) = PrTodd(p) = .50. Now according to the present definition of a doxastic venture and the criteria for exemption from proportioning belief to evidence, Ted’s faith is acceptable and Todd’s is not. If only Todd cared more whether p, he’d be allowed to have faith that p. That seems very strange. And it seems to play right into Locke’s worries about fideism giving too much room to “enthusiasm.”

Similar puzzles apply to the third condition, (ic). John says very little about what it is to be forced to choose that p, and his examples don’t seem to involve any force at all. But whatever it means, could it really be that conditions could be such that the only thing making my venturing that p unacceptable is that I’m not forced to choose? So that if the only thing that changed was that someone else came up and made it a coercive situation, all of a sudden my venture would become acceptable. I just don’t understand the “genuine option” condition at all.

The essence of the doxastic venture really seems to be (iii) and (iv). I’ll briefly consider (iii) here and (iv) in the next section.

Consider John’s more informal characterization which focuses on (iii): “Doxastic venture is a taking of a believed proposition to be true in practical reasoning, while recognising lack of adequate evidential support for its truth.” Something is clearly missing from this formulation or else licensing doxastic ventures would create chaos. There’s nothing in this formulation to
separate doxastic ventures from pretending or assuming. The difference has something to do with our “passional nature.” One way of reading this is that when the evidence is a draw, we go with what we most want. I take it that’s not what John is suggesting. It’s not just desire which makes the difference. Rather, it seems that the passional bit is driven by the momentous bit. That is, one is passionate (if one is of sound mind anyway) because of the importance of the outcomes. He points to this when he says

if this evidentialist advice is taken, and if in fact there are existentially vital truths whose acceptance could not in principle be justified on the evidence, then such truths will remain forever outside our grasp along with whatever benefits may flow from acting on them. Evidentialism may thus block our access to truth, and so frustrate our epistemic goals.

As the song says, “That’s just the way it is.” Any evidence could be misleading. Suppose young-Earth creationists are right and not only is the Earth less than 8,000 years old, the correct understanding of salvation depends on this fact. Well, a considerable balance of the evidence points in the opposite direction. That would be sad, but we have no other guide to belief than our evidence. Part of the human condition is that our evidence could always be misleading.

There follows the above passage a non sequitur.

What the fideist is supposing is that, for all we know, our actual situation as viewed externally is that we can come to believe certain vital truths only through ‘passional’ causes, and thus be able to act upon these truths only through doxastic venture.

It is false that we can act upon these truths only through doxastic venture. For doxastic venture requires belief and action does not. Simple Pascalian decision theory can make rational actions based on propositions which are—from the external perspective we lack—true—but which—from the internal perspective, the only one we have—false, for all we know. Take the proposition that car pollution is causing global warming. Suppose you think the evidence for his is greatly overblown and that it is at best 50% likely. Well, you might reason, if we act on the proposition that it is and it’s false, we’ve lost very little. If it’s true, then we’ve gained much. If I don’t act on it and it’s true, then we face a catastrophe. The final option being neutral, decision theory seems to show that it is rational to act as if p, even though there is no belief that p. Thus the need for an exemption from epistemic rationality never occurs.

**On Epistemic Settlement**

There are two epistemological notions involved in the notion of a doxastic venture that I have grave concerns about. One is the idea of epistemic settlement. John appeals to this notion in a number of cases.

S1. I shall claim that rational faith essentially makes a commitment that ventures beyond (though not against) what can be rationally settled on the basis of evidence.
S2. the proper attempt to settle important questions on the basis of evidence can come to a limiting point at which settling them without adequate evidential support is permissible.

S3. An existentially vital forced option that might be settled if only one waited for more evidence may therefore not be resolved through doxastic venture.

S4. the requirement that permissible doxastic venture in the religious case proceed beyond the very possibility of settlement of the option concerned on an evidential basis.

S5. it is only when an option could not in principle be settled evidentially, that one could commit in practice to the truth of a belief beyond evidential support consistently with maintaining the highest epistemic concern.

These passages make it clear, that the notion of epistemic settlement is crucial to the notion of a legitimate doxastic venture, the idea at the core of moderate Jamesian fideism. But what is this notion?

Here are two notions of (affirmative) epistemic settlement.

**Strong Epistemic Settlement (SES)** The question whether p is strongly epistemically settled when no possible rational agent could rationally disagree with another. I.e. when a community of ideally rational agents would unanimously agree concerning p.

**Weak Epistemic Settlement (WES)** The question whether p is weakly epistemically settled (in the affirmative) when an agent’s evidence rationally convinces them that p. I.e. when S’s evidence induces assent that p.

It is easy to see the appeal of having strong epistemic settlement on an issue. When an issue is settled that strongly, many benefits accrue. However, we do just fine in ordinary life, even in very import matters, without it. We convict criminals in capital cases, we send people into orbit, we make strategic national defense initiatives, we perform surgeries, etc. without anything approaching SES. The reason seems clear: we know fairly well now to deal with decisions under uncertainty. We perform a risk analysis and a cost-benefits analysis and act accordingly. We’re not always equally adept at this, but the principles are pretty straightforward as explicated by standard decision theory. These principles are taught in business schools, economics departments, and military academies. The form the basis of the insurance industry as well. And, famously, Pascal applied them in the case of belief in God in a way quite different than James in a number of ways, but especially in that it required no violation of the standard account of epistemic rationality.

WES will play an important role in rebutting an objection to my brief sketch of a proposal for a better way to apply considerations of passional belief in the next section.

In addition to S4 and S5 above, John says “only essentially supra-evidential doxastic venture can be permitted, if we take seriously James’s qualification about the option ‘of its nature’ not being open to intellectual resolution.” This is a very strong condition on doxastic ventures. If there is
any possible situation in which God’s existence could be confirmed, then it would be wrong to
doxastically venture that p according to John’s Jamesian picture. That picture depends totally on
the thesis that that question is “essentially supra-evidential.” But why think that?

Firstly let’s get clear on the thesis. Given the textual citations above, the thesis seems to be this:

The Essentially Undecidable Thesis (EUT) Necessarily, it is not the case that there
exists any situation in which theism could be confirmed.

And confirmation here needn’t be taken in the absolute sense. For EUT to be true, there would
only have to be a conceivable situation in which the balance of evidence shifted significantly.
That’s the thesis. John gives two arguments for it. The first has to do with persistent
disagreement. I’ve addressed this somewhat above, so I’ll only add here that there’s persistent
disagreement about the epistemological significance of disagreement—John ironically admits
“This is all quite controversial, of course!—so there are self-defeat worries about this line of
argument.

The second argument he gives is this:

Taking it that God exists…is not a belief that could be epistemically secured by
independent evidence because it is the kind of belief that is brought to experience as a
principle for making overall sense of it.

This is what Wittgenstein called a “hinge proposition.” The idea that religious belief can be
defended as a hinge proposition has been severely criticized by Duncan Pritchard (“Is ‘God
exists’ a ‘hinge proposition’ of religious belief? International Journal for Philosophy of
Religion 47: 129-140, 2000), so I will not attach the methodology directly here. Rather, I will
offer a reason for thinking the premise false and an example illustrating the implausibility of the
thesis. First the example to raise doubts and drive a wedge.

It would not surprise me that the enterprising reader did not think of the following sort of case
after reading the EUT. Suppose flaming letters appear in the sky over every major city in the
world spelling, in their language, “I exist, signed, God.” Now you might at first think you were
going crazy. But after enough corroboration from other people and perhaps even some scientific
studies, surely you’d become convinced that God existed. Or if, strange as it seems to me, this
would not be enough, just add to the story. Jesus appears and does interviews on all major news
outlets working miracles, healing people, and generally putting on a pretty impressive show of
super-natural powers, all while being studied by a team of top scientists. He also dictates to
them a theory which unifies quantum theory and gravity, tells them the location of the Noah’s
Ark and the Ark of the Covenant (both of which are found precisely where he says and
authenticated by the top secular scholars). More? Moses and Elijah appear. Moses parts the
Red Sea for 24 hours during which Elijah orders the sun to stand still. These are all conceivable
scenarios. There is no reason to think they are metaphysically impossible. And if they all
occurred, there would be conclusive, public evidence that God existed. Only ostrich atheists
would remain. But if this is so, then EUT is false.
Here’s another reason to doubt the argument. It’s simply not the case that we bring “God exists” much less “This God exists” to experience to make sense of it as such. In commonsense epistemology, this is the job of such commonsense principles as “If it seems to you that something is the case, then go with that unless there’s reason to think otherwise.” This dictum is distilled from another early modern Scottish thinker Thomas Reid, the most famous member of the Scottish commonsense tradition in epistemology. ([Note that Chisholm traces this line from Carneades in the ancient world up to Reid and develops his own system. Also cite Swinburne’s credulism and Huemer’s phenomenal conservatism]

So it seems to me that the argument has a false premise and an implausible conclusion. In the next brief section, I will propose a more plausible path for those inspired by James to take.

**An Evidential Analog/Substitute for Doxastic Ventures**

I honestly believe that some of the good insights John is attributing to James, rather than pointing away from evidentialism, point to a new line of evidence. John highlights at one point the importance of “James’s psychology of belief: the insistence that belief is in fact often caused in people passionately or ‘non-evidentially’, in the sense that the belief’s causes are not also adequate epistemic justifiers for the belief’s truth.”

This is illustrated by his case of the critical believer:

[L]et us suppose that when she considers whether she is justified in her religious beliefs, she comes to the conclusion that her evidence is not sufficient to support their truth. That realisation might undermine her beliefs. But it need not: she might find that what causes her to hold, *and to continue to hold*, her religious beliefs does not also count as providing adequate evidence for their truth.

While it is true that “that the belief’s causes are not also adequate epistemic justifiers for the belief’s truth” it is also true that they might provide the materials for epistemic justifiers. For one needs an explanation of why it is that our natures seem to be bent on believing in God. Belief in God seems natural and spontaneous. A case for theism has been made along these lines by C. Stephen Evans in his *Natural Signs for God*.

John touches on a similar theme when he says

One might perhaps wonder how there could be a sustained tradition that transmits beliefs not well evidentially justified, and suggest that the fact that so many have believed is itself significant evidence that the belief is true.

This comes just after admitting, rightly, that “the fact that it is the belief of their progenitors and teachers that has caused their belief is not adequate evidence for its truth.” But note that though the fact that her belief was *caused* in that way might not be evidence, the fact that *they did* believe it might count as evidence. After all, almost everything we learn we learn from our progenitors and teachers: Math, History, Science, and much more. If we didn’t assume they were right about most things, then we’d be in the self-defeating position of affirming that most of
what we think we know came from unreliable sources. So one might reasonably think that there’s a benefit of the doubt on the side of tradition (cite Foley and Zagzebksi). My point here is not to argue for the truth of theism (that is the subject of this book’s companion volume *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist*) but rather to point out that fideists are missing the true force of their insights, and that what they ought to do is jump into the fray and defend the content of their commitments.

John’s own rejection of this line of argument is based on the epistemological significance of disagreement. “[T]his line of thought founders on the realization that there is a diversity of, in significant respects mutually incompatible, religious traditions.” This goes too quick. In the Epistemology of disagreement, there are models that call for suspension of judgment (cite Feldman), some that call for sticking to one’s guns (cite Kelly), and some that call for a more moderate position of believing but just less strongly (cite Christensen, Dougherty). And Plantinga has addressed the argument from diversity in some detail (Cite Al, WCB).

**Conclusion**

In the end, I do think there are important insights to be gleaned from James. However, I think they point back to Pascal. In fact, I think Jamesian fideism simply breaks down into Pascal’s Wager (and the latter, unlike the former, is perfectly consistent with evidentialism). Here is one place where I think that shows through pretty clearly.

from an external perspective, it may be that doxastic venture in favour of passionately motivated belief in God gains us the vital truth. Equally, of course, such a venture may result in a failure to align ourselves with the truth. But there is no way of eliminating that risk when the option is vital and forced. Forced either to commit in practice to (this) God’s existence or not, I run the risk of not aligning my will with the truth however I choose. Of course, by suspending belief I avoid all risk of error in my belief-states: but what good is that to me if I fail to live my life in the light of God’s existence when (as it turns out) God’s existence is the deepest truth about the real world in which I live and move and have my being?

This seems to me a fine expression of Pascal’s wager (which John criticizes in his book *Believing by Faith*). It has all the essential elements: it begins from epistemic neutrality, does a cost-benefit analysis, and concludes that committing (and act) is the best decision under uncertainty (there might be a bit of slippage here between the doxastic and the practical). My intention here is not to endorse Pascal’s Wager (there are many versions), but rather to point out that what good insights there are in moderate fideism are best captured in a Pascalian wager, which neither requires making any special exceptions to our practices of epistemic rationality nor confuses it with practical rationality. Everything is in its place.
4. Morally justified doxastic ventures, John Bishop

This Chapter will start by considering what reasons there are for regarding someone who accepts Pascal’s Wager as falling short of authentic faith-commitment (responding to Dougherty’s discussion in the latter part of Chapter 3). It will build on this an account of faith as doxastic venture – viz., as practical commitment to the truth of a proposition while consciously recognising that one’s total evidence does not adequately support its truth. The psychological possibility of doxastic venture will be defended against the objection that, without awareness of adequately supporting evidence, there could be no motivation to believe. An account will be given of the conditions under which doxastic venture is permissible, so that acceptable ‘leaps of faith’ may be distinguished from merely ideological, irrational, or fanatical commitments. The importance of a permissible faith-commitment’s coherence with wider beliefs, both factual and moral, will be emphasised, as well the need for faith-commitment to be morally well motivated. (This Chapter will draw on Bishop’s defence of a Jamesian account of justifiable faith in Chapters 5 & 6 of his Believing by Faith.)

5. The separateness of moral and epistemic oughts, Trent Dougherty

This chapter is loosely based on an expansion of Dougherty's "Reducing Responsibility: An Evidentialist Account of Epistemic Blame," European Journal of Philosophy, 2011. The chapter argues that there is no bridge from practical or moral normativity to epistemic normativity. In particular, though one might be in a position where one's moral obligations or self-interest "trump" one's epistemic obligations, this does not convert to epistemic entitlement. One is simply in a position where they have to choose which kind of impermissible thing to do.

6. Back to James, John Bishop