

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 25 | Issue 2

Article 2

4-1-2008

Faith and Merit

Hugh Rice

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Rice, Hugh (2008) "Faith and Merit," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol25/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

FAITH AND MERIT

Hugh Rice

Can belief in God can be meritorious if not epistemically rational in the ordinary way? I argue that the primary condition to be met if a belief is to be meritorious is that it is based on a good reason, and that to believe that something is so on the grounds that it would be good if it were can be to believe for a good reason. In particular I argue that to believe in God on the grounds that it would be good if He existed can be to believe for a good reason, and that such a belief can, therefore, be meritorious.

Let us suppose that John believes that God exists as matter of faith. Let us further suppose, if this is not already implied, that his belief is not properly basic, is not properly based on inductive or deductive reasoning, and is not properly based on testimony. That is to say, John's belief is not epistemically rational; at any rate, not in the ordinary way. Might his belief nonetheless be meritorious? That is, could the following all be true?

- (i) John believes that God exists as a matter of faith.
- (ii) John's belief is not epistemically rational in the ordinary way.
- (iii) John's belief is meritorious.

I

What is it for a belief to be meritorious? Let us consider first what it is for an action to be meritorious. First and foremost the action must have been done for a good reason. But, perhaps, that is not sufficient. If someone acts on the basis of what is in fact a good reason, but has not taken as much trouble as the decision called for in finding out about the facts or in weighing the considerations, that would be to the agent's discredit; and, perhaps, if the decision making were sufficiently inadequate, that would be enough to outweigh any merit that might be due to the goodness of the reason. Perhaps. But no amount about of care in finding out the facts and weighing the considerations would make the action meritorious if, in the end, the reasons were not good reasons. On the other hand, if an admirable degree of a care had been taken, that would, surely, enhance the merit of the action. The merit might also be enhanced in another way. The action might have been taken in the teeth of temptation to act otherwise. But, again, this resistance to temptation would not be enough in itself to make an action meritorious; if one did not have a good reason for acting in the way one did, one's resistance to temptation to refrain from acting that way would not make the action



meritorious. Would acting for a good reason after sufficient care in arriving at one's decision be enough to make the action meritorious? Perhaps not, if the decision were of no great moment; perhaps not, if there were no difficulty in arriving at one's decision and sticking to it. Or, perhaps, even then the action would be to some small degree meritorious, but less than it would have been if these features had been present. A decision on this issue will not turn out to be important. What seems certain is that, though there may be other necessary conditions, the primary condition that an action must fulfil, if it is to be meritorious, is that it should have been done for a good reason.

What, then, is it for a belief to be meritorious? Can we simply give the same answer? Can we say that first and foremost for a belief to be meritorious it must be held for a good reason?

As a preliminary we had better rebut a argument for saying that beliefs cannot be meritorious at all. The argument claims that for an action to be meritorious it must have been intentional; but beliefs are not intentional; the belief that *p* does not arise from the intention to form the belief that *p*. So beliefs cannot be meritorious. Now, I do not think that it is true that the belief that *p* can never arise from the intention to form the belief that *p*. But, whether it is true or not, this is a bad argument. Typically, no doubt, when an action is meritorious, it will have arisen from an intention. But in that case, if the action is meritorious, the intention will typically be meritorious; perhaps it always will be. But, of course, that does not mean that the intention must itself have arisen from an intention to form such an intention. So it cannot be a general truth that for something to be meritorious it must be intentional.¹

Let us return to our question, then. Can we say that first and foremost for a belief to be meritorious it must be held for a good reason? Almost, but not quite. Firstly we should notice that in the case of a belief it is possible to distinguish between the reason, if any, one had for forming the belief in the first place, and the reason one has later for continuing to believe. So, if the meritoriousness of a belief at a certain time depends on one's reason, the relevant reason will be one's reason for believing at that time, which may or may not be one's original reason. Secondly we should notice that it seems that a belief, unlike an action, might be meritorious in the absence of a good reason; not that one's belief can be meritorious even if one's reason is not a good reason, but that it can be meritorious without being based on a reason at all, if it is a properly basic belief. Perhaps a properly basic belief will not *ipso facto* be a meritorious belief, but, if it is held in the teeth of temptation not to believe, if one resists, and properly resists, the blandishments of considerations in favour of abandoning it, and (let us add) it is a belief on an issue of some importance, then surely it would be meritorious. Since, however, our primary concern is whether John's belief is meritorious, and since we are supposing that his belief is not properly basic, we can safely ignore this way in which a belief could be meritorious. Ignoring properly basic beliefs, then, it seems that it is at least a necessary condition for a belief to be meritorious that the reason (or reasons) on the basis of which it is held, should be good reasons. This is the primary condition that a belief (other than a basic belief) must fulfil, if it is to be meritorious. So, to decide whether John's belief could be meritorious we need first to

ask whether a reason for holding a belief could be a good reason unless it was the sort of reason which would make the belief epistemically rational in the ordinary way.

II

Could someone have a good reason for believing something if the belief was not epistemically rational in the ordinary way, if the reason was not a good epistemic reason of the ordinary kind?

Consider James. James wants to believe something for a reason which has, in his estimation, no bearing on the truth of what he wants to believe. Because he wants to believe this, he takes steps to bring about the belief. And he succeeds. So he acquires a belief in somewhat the same way as Pascal envisages someone acquiring a belief in God who is impressed by the thought that to believe in God is a good bet. Now, there is no difficulty in supposing that his reasons for wanting to have this belief were good reasons. But was the belief which resulted meritorious? That surely depends on what in the end actually gave rise to the belief and why it continues, not on his reasons for bringing it about that he came to have the belief. His taking steps to acquire the belief may be meritorious, but this will not in itself make the belief meritorious; whether it is or not will depend on the reasons on which it is based when it is acquired. Indeed those reasons might be reasons which make the belief epistemically rational in the ordinary way; in which case James will be of no interest to us for the purposes of our present enquiry.

Consider Peter, then. Peter, like James, wants to believe something for a reason which has, in his estimation, no bearing on the truth of what he wants to believe. But, whereas James's desire to believe gave rise to his belief indirectly, let suppose that Peter's desire gives rise to his directly. Maybe this never happens; but surely it could. And if it did, might Peter's belief be meritorious? To answer that we need to know what sustains his belief after it has been acquired. If it is no longer his desire to believe, then however good his reason for wanting to believe, it will not make the belief once acquired meritorious, any more than Peter's desire in itself made his belief meritorious. So let us suppose that the belief is indeed sustained by his desire to believe. Then we need to consider whether he is aware of this. Again, if he is not, his reasons for wanting to believe, however good, will surely not make the belief meritorious. For surely his belief cannot be made meritorious for reasons of which he is unconscious. And, even if he is aware that he wants to believe, and is aware of why he wants to believe, that will not amount to his being aware of his reasons for believing unless he is aware that he believes what he does because of his desire to believe. So let us suppose that he is indeed aware of his reasons for believing. So his position would be this. He would believe that something was so, while at the same time being aware that his reasons for believing it had no bearing, in his estimation, on the truth of his belief. He would believe what he did in spite of being aware, if he was at all reflective, that it would be sheer luck if his belief happened to be true. Now, one might think that it was impossible to combine believing that something was so with the belief that it would be sheer luck if that belief were true.² But it would seem

that such a position is not so much impossible as precarious. The belief sustained by the desire would be constantly at risk of being undermined by the thought it would be unlikely to be true. Let us suppose, in any case, that the position would be precarious rather than impossible, and that Peter is in such a position. He continues to believe in spite of being aware that it would be sheer luck if his belief were true. Could this be a good thing? And, if so, could the belief be meritorious? Certainly to continue to believe would seem irrational—epistemically irrational, at any rate; but there is no reason to suppose that the value of such rationality is bound to trump all other values. So, perhaps it could be a good thing. But what if the belief in question is the belief that God exists? Surely, one might think, this is, or ought to be, a belief which is central to Peter's life. Could Peter be content with the idea that it is appropriate hold such a central belief in the teeth of the considerations of epistemic rationality? Perhaps he could. Perhaps he might even think that, valuable as epistemic rationality is in some respects, it can also be a temptation to deflect us from beliefs we ought to have. But even if Peter thinks this, and even if he is content with his state, could he be right? Maybe. But, rather than pursue this question, I want to consider a rather different sort of person.

Consider Mary. Mary forms the belief that something is so on the basis of the belief that *it would be good if it were so*. Unlike Peter she is influenced, not by the desirability of having the belief, but by the desirability of what she comes to believe. There is no doubt that *this* could happen. It is surely quite common. But could it be a good reason for believing something? Could a belief so based be meritorious? Hardly, one might think. Such beliefs are commonly condemned as arising from 'wishful thinking'. But before we subscribe to this condemnation it is worth noticing that there are voices on the other side.

First it is worth noticing that, even if it is common to dismiss some such beliefs as cases of wishful thinking, it is also quite common to regard optimism as an attractive disposition. Now, I don't mean the sort of disposition which means that one's emotions are more responsive to the positive features of a situation than to the negative features; I mean the sort of disposition which means that one's expectations are (sometimes) coloured by one's beliefs about what would be good. This attitude is, surely, regarded as admirable by some people, at any rate, even if is condemned by others. But it is also worth noticing something which is more directly relevant to our main concern, that there are those who have apparently approved of the basing of beliefs about God on the perceived goodness of what is believed. Here are three examples.

The first example is provided by Aquinas's account of faith, on Eleonore Stump's interpretation:

By themselves, the propositions of faith, together with whatever else is known or believed by the intellect, are not sufficient to move the intellect to assent to the propositions of faith. But the will is drawn to the great good presented in the propositions of faith, and it influences the intellect to assent.³

Another example is provided by Newman:

The Word of Life is offered to a man; and, on its being offered, he has faith in it. Why? On these two grounds—the word of its human messenger, and the likelihood of the message. And why does he feel the message to be probable? Because he has a love for it, his love being strong, though the testimony is weak. He has a keen sense of the intrinsic excellence of the message, of its desirableness, of its likeness to what it seems to him Divine Goodness would vouchsafe did He vouchsafe any, of the need of a Revelation, and its probability.⁴

A third example is provided by the guide to the Sung Eucharist which was in use in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford a few years ago. In the order of service to which it referred the creed immediately followed the gospel. After the gospel the guide says,

It is because we have heard the good news and because it is good news for us, that we can assent to the declaration of faith which follows.

But could these witnesses be right?.

Let us return to Mary. Before we can pass judgment on her, we need to know more about her practice.⁵ Let us suppose that the thought that it would be good if *p* were true sometimes operates for her as a reason for believing that *p*, in the absence of normal evidence which by itself would have been a sufficient reason for her to believe this. The thought that it would be good that *p* leads her sometimes to believe that *p*. So, she forms beliefs *as if* she thought that its being good if *p* was sometimes evidence in itself that *p*, as if it counted in favour of *p*'s being true, as if it supported the conclusion that *p*. I say 'as if' because she may not have any opinion on the question of whether its being good if *p* is evidence that *p*. I mean merely to indicate that she treats its being good if *p* as a reason in itself for believing that *p* in the same direct way as she treats the sort of thing she does regard as evidence that *p*. The very thought that it would be good if *p* weighs with her. Later we shall need to return to the question of whether she would, at least on reflection, say that its being good if *p* was evidence in favour of *p*'s being true, or was not. But meanwhile it is important to say a little about the circumstances in which the thought that it would be good would weigh with her enough to lead her to believe that *p*.

Now, there is no need to think that Mary must be so foolish as to treat its being good if *p* as being a sufficient reason for believing that *p*, in spite of any other considerations. So, let us suppose that she treats its being good if *p* merely as if it were *prima facie* evidence that *p*. In particular let us suppose that she would not, of course, treat its being good if *p* as a sufficient reason for believing that *p* if she also thought that it would be equally good (or better) if *q* instead. And let us suppose that she would not treat its being good as sufficient reason for believing that *p* if she thought that other considerations—evidence of the normal sort—provided strong reasons for not believing that *p*. How strong? Well, let us suppose that she would not believe that *p* if she thought that the other considerations taken on their own made it more likely than not that not-*p*. So, in so far as she believes that *p* on the basis that it would be good if *p*, she does not do so in outright defiance of evidence against *p*.⁶ We are supposing, of course, that

the thought that it would be good if p is enough in some circumstances to lead her to belief that p when the other considerations did not make it more likely than not that p , or, at any rate, do not make it likely enough to lead her to believe that p .

Now let us first ask if Mary, in following this practice, is liable, like Peter, to find herself in a position where her beliefs are precarious; where it is difficult, if not impossible, for her to be content with her believing what she does—at least if she is reflective and clearheaded. She forms, let us say, some particular belief that q , on the basis of her belief that it would be good if q were true. So, let us suppose, she does not think that the other considerations make it more likely than not that not- q ; and let us also suppose that she does not have independent reasons for believing in a strong enough correlation in cases such as this between what would be good and the way things are to justify an *inductive* inference that q on the grounds that it would be good if q . Then, is it to be expected that, if she reflects on her belief, she will think that it would be sheer luck if it were true? Surely not immediately. She is not in the same position as Peter, who formed his belief for reasons which he took to have no bearing on the truth. Nonetheless, she might wonder about the reliability of her practice. Has she reasons for thinking that this way of forming beliefs is at least moderately reliable? Or has she, on the contrary, reasons for thinking that it is quite unreliable? Well, she might have reasons of an inductive sort for thinking that it was unreliable, at least in cases like *this*. And in that case she might well abandon her belief that q ; somewhat as one might abandon a belief based on inductive reasoning if one had good reasons (inductive reasons, no doubt) for thinking that *that* way of arriving at beliefs was unreliable in *that* sort of case; and somewhat as one might abandon a basic belief if one had good reasons for thinking that *that* way of arriving at a belief was unreliable in *that* sort of case. But what if, as far as she *knows*, beliefs formed in this way in this sort of case were right more often than not, at least when the other beliefs involved were correct—the belief that this would be good, the beliefs about other relevant evidence, and so on? Can she be content? Well, if she is sufficiently reflective, this may not be quite enough. She may have no evidence that her practice is unreliable, but has she any reason to think that it is reliable? Could she have such a reason? There are two possibilities: the first is that she has a reason for believing this which itself relies on the practice whose reliability is in question: the basing of the belief that p on the belief that it would be good that p ; the second is that she has an independent reason for believing this, a reason which does not rely on this practice. Now, it may be doubted whether a reason of the second sort would be available. For we are supposing that she does not have an independent reason for believing in a strong correlation in cases of this sort between what would be good and the way things are; so, to have a reason of the second sort would mean having an independent reason for believing in a strong correlation between *her believing that p on the grounds that it would be good if p* and p 's being the case, without having such a reason for believing in a strong correlation between *its being good if p* and p 's being the case. Maybe this would not be impossible, but we need not pursue this, if a reason of the first sort is available. And such a reason may indeed be available.

Let us suppose that Mary believes in the existence of a benevolent creator God. Let us further suppose that she believes this because she believes that it would be good if there were such a God, and does not think that it would be equally good (or better) if there were no such God, and does not think that other considerations make it more likely than not that there is no such God. Now, if we suppose for the moment that Mary is not worried about *this* belief, it is easy to see that she could have reasons to believe in the reliability of her practice of believing that things are so on the basis that it would be good if they were so. In the first place she may reasonably think that, if the world owes its existence to a benevolent creator God, then, at least in many important respects, the world is as it is because it is good that it should be so, because of God's creative action; other things being equal, there is likely to be a strong correlation between its being good if p and p 's being the case. Of course, it is important that other things should be equal. She may well suppose that there will be no such correlation in some cases—if malevolent or incompetent human beings have had a hand, for instance. And she will, no doubt, bear in mind that there are many ways in which a world created by a benevolent God might be, many different ways in which it might be good. But she will bear that sort of thing in mind when she comes to believe that p on the basis that it would be good that p . So she will not believe that p on the basis that it would be good if p , if she thinks, for instance, that malevolent or incompetent human beings may affect the issue; and (as we are supposing) she will not believe that p on the basis that it would be good that p if she thinks that there are equally good or better alternatives. And given that she has this reason for thinking that there is a strong correlation between its being good if p and p 's being the case, she will have a reason to believe in the reliability of her practice of believing things on the basis that it would be good if they were so.

But she will also have a reason of a rather different sort for believing in the reliability of her practice; and, as well shall see, it is important that this should be so. Her first reason for thinking that her beliefs that p , q , r , etc are likely to be true is that she thinks that it is likely that p , q , r , etc. But she also has another reason for thinking that these beliefs are likely to true, that this way of arriving at them is reliable. The reason is that, if there is a benevolent creator God, her natural ways of forming beliefs can be explained in part in terms of the action of such a God; so it is likely that they are at least somewhat reliable; and, given that she has no reason to suppose that the practice is question is not a natural one, it is likely that it too would be somewhat reliable. It might have been a different matter if this way of forming beliefs clashed with other apparently natural ways of reasoning; but it does not; she does not believe things on the basis that it would be good if things were so, if other reasons make it more likely than not that things are otherwise. In short Mary, like Descartes, can appeal to the idea that God is not a deceiver. So here is a second reason for believing in the reliability of her practice. But her having these reasons depends, of course, on her belief in the existence of a benevolent creator God. So, can Mary be content with *this* belief?

Can Mary be content with believing in the existence of a benevolent creator God because she believes that it would be good if there were such

a God? What if she asks herself whether *this* belief has been reliably arrived at? Then her answer, if she has one, will surely have to appeal to this very belief. Now this belief provided her with two reasons for believing in the reliability of her practice in the case of other beliefs. The first was that, if there is such a God, things may be expected to be so *because* it is good that they should be so, because of God's creative action. But she can hardly think that God exists *because* of His creative action. However her belief in God's existence can still provide her with a reason of the second sort. Her belief has been arrived at by a natural way of forming beliefs, and, given her belief in the existence of a benevolent creator God, she has a reason to believe that this way of forming beliefs is somewhat reliable in general, and no reason to think that in *this* case it is unreliable. So she can be content.

I said that it was important that Mary's belief in God provided her with the second sort of reason for believing in the reliability of this way of forming beliefs. One reason why this is so is that, in the absence of it, it seems that she would not have a reason for thinking that her belief in God has been reliably arrived at. But that is not the whole story. For let us suppose that Mary *does* think that it is *because* it is good that there should be a benevolent creator God that such a God exists.⁷ And let us suppose that she thinks that *this* is true because she thinks that it is good that it should be so. But let us suppose that she does *not* think that the existence of such a God provides her with the second sort of reason for believing in the reliability of her practice. Then, if she reflects on it, her confidence in her practice is in danger of evaporating. As long as she appealed to the goodness of God to explain, in part, her possession of this way of forming beliefs, she was able to provide some explanation of how it should have come about that she possessed in this a reliable way of forming beliefs. But, if she does not appeal to this explanation, she must wonder what explanation there might be. Was it just by *chance* that she came to have this way of forming beliefs? Was it as a result of processes which operated quite independently of the truth of beliefs so formed? If it was, then, even if the beliefs so formed constitute a coherent set, and even if one of them in particular testifies to the likely truth of the others, it will still be a matter of chance if this set of beliefs corresponds to reality. If there is nothing in the aetiology of her possession of this practice which could explain how it came to be aligned with the truth, it must be sheer luck if it is so aligned. If that is what she thinks then her beliefs will indeed be precarious. So, that her belief in God provides her with a reason of the second sort for believing in the reliability of her practice is important, not only in providing her with a reason for thinking that her belief in God has been reliably arrived at, but in underpinning her confidence in the reliability of the practice in general.

In Mary, then, we have someone who believes some things on the basis that it would be good if they were so; and yet, I have suggested, she may be reflective and clearheaded without its seeming to her that it would be sheer luck if such beliefs of hers happened to be true, without such beliefs being precarious.

But, even if Mary's beliefs need not be precarious, are her reasons *good* reasons? I shall consider two reasons for saying that they are not, but I shall argue that they are not compelling reasons.

The first reason claims that Mary's reasons are not good reasons because its being good if *p* does not in itself *support* the conclusion that *p*, is not in itself *evidence* for it.

Now I left it open whether Mary thinks that the fact that it would be good if *p* is evidence in itself that *p*. But let us concede that *if* Mary thinks this, and it is only because she thinks this that she believes that *p*, and if the fact that it would be good if *p* is not evidence that *p*, then Mary's reasons are not good reasons. So *is* it evidence? Now, I find this a difficult question to answer, but fortunately I do not think that it is essential to know what the answer is. The reason I find it difficult to answer is that it seems to me that one might think that for it to be the case that *q* is in itself evidence for *p* *just is* for it to be the case that believing that *q* would constitute in itself a good reason for believing that *p*. On the other hand one might think that, though *q*'s being evidence in itself that *p* entails that believing that *q* would constitute in itself a good reason for believing that *p*, it is not one and the same thing; in which case it would be possible in principle for believing that *q* to constitute a good reason in itself for believing that *p* without its being the case that *q* was evidence in itself that *p*. Now, it is agreed by all parties, including Mary, that the fact that it would be good if *p* does not provide evidence of the normal sort for *p*. What Mary presumably will hold, at least on reflection, is that the fact that it would be good if *p* constitutes a good reason in itself for believing that *p*. But she, at any rate, has no need to take a view on the difficult question of whether that is enough to make the fact that it would be good if *p* evidence that *p*; and, even if she does take the view that it is, there is no need to suppose that her believing that *p* on the basis that it would be good that *p* is dependent on her believing that the fact that it would be good if *p* constitutes evidence. But, even if Mary does not need to take a view, must we? I think not. No doubt, if we do think that the fact that it would be good if *p* constitutes evidence in itself that *p*, we will have no difficulty accepting that Mary has good reasons for her beliefs (in so far, at any rate, as she has good reasons for the beliefs on which they are based). But, even if we do not, we may still think that Mary's reasons are good, because we may think that for believing that *q* to constitute a good reason for believing that *p* it is not necessary for *q* to be evidence that *p*. The first reason may, then, be assessed like this. If for it to be the case that *q* is in itself evidence for *p* *just is* for it to be the case that believing that *q* would constitute in itself a good reason for believing that *p*, the first reason simply doesn't provide a *reason* for denying that Mary's reasons are good reasons; it amounts to no more than the claim that they aren't because they aren't. If, on the other hand, though *q*'s being evidence in itself that *p* entails that believing that *q* would constitute in itself a good reason for believing that *p*, it is not one and the same thing, the reason is not a sufficient reason for denying that Mary's reasons are good reasons, because it remains open that they are good reasons even though they do not in themselves constitute evidence for what she believes. That is my response to the first reason.

The second reason claims that, even if Mary's beliefs are not in fact precarious, they *should* be. And they should be because her confidence in the reliability of her practice is worthless, because it depends on her belief in a benevolent creator God, and that belief itself relies on the practice whose

reliability is in question. For this reason, it is claimed, Mary's reasons are not good reasons.

Now it is clear enough what the initial answer to this objection might be. It might go as follows. Of course one cannot in general expect to have reasons for supposing that one's ways of arriving at beliefs are reliable if one is not permitted to rely on the very ways of arriving at beliefs in question. One must distinguish between trying to establish the right to occupy a position not yet held, and defending, as Mary is, the right to continue to occupy a position already held. In the former case, to make use of the position would indeed be objectionable; but in the latter it is perfectly permissible, and, in general, inevitable.⁸

But is this initial answer enough to answer the objection to what Mary is doing? Perhaps it is not. In the case of *a posteriori* basic beliefs it seems right to treat beliefs as innocent until proved guilty. More specifically, it seems right to regard such a belief as reasonable unless the believer has a good reason to think that it has been unreliably arrived at. One must, of course, have *some* such beliefs before having any reason to suppose that any of them have been reliably arrived at. And, that being the case, it seems right to suppose that the reasonableness of these first beliefs does not need to wait for the belief that they have been reliably arrived at. But, even if it did, the reasonableness would depend on the existence of beliefs with no better claim to reasonableness. Either way such beliefs do not require support from other beliefs from outside the circle in order to be reasonable. And, because that is so, it is perfectly proper to rely on such beliefs as providing reasons for thinking that beliefs arrived at in this way are reliably arrived at. However, the beliefs of Mary's whose reasonableness is in question are not basic beliefs. They arise from other beliefs. Now, if it were merely a matter of Mary's beliefs being *caused* by other beliefs, it is not obvious why they should differ from basic beliefs as far as a reasonableness goes. Basic beliefs too have causes, and in many cases the believer may be aware of their causes. But, if Mary's belief that *p* on the basis of her belief that it would be good if *p* is to count as meritorious for that reason, it is not enough that her believing that it would be good if *p* is merely the reason she believes that *p*, is the *cause* of her believing that *p*; it is necessary that its being good if *p* is *her* reason for believing that *p*. So we need to need to compare what Mary does in order to be confident that her practice is reliable with what would be permissible in ordinary cases of inference.

Consider inductive reasoning. It seems that it is reasonable to rely on inductive reasoning in order to convince oneself that inductive reasoning is reliable. It may be less easy than one might suppose to come up with such reasons, but, if there are any, they would not be made worthless simply because they were inductive reasons. Indeed, the very fact that one is not guaranteed to be successful in looking for reasons for supposing that a mode of reasoning is reliable, even if one does rely on that mode of reasoning in one's search, strongly suggests that, if one *is* successful, the success is not worthless. But, arguably, what is permissible in the case of inductive reasoning would not be permissible in the case of any old mode of reasoning someone might employ. For modes of reasoning, one might think, unlike ways of arriving at basic beliefs, are not innocent until

proved guilty. If one were prone to conclude that the next A will be B on the grounds that most A's in the past have not been B, that would be a poor mode of reasoning. And it would not cease to be a poor mode of reasoning even if one were to convince oneself that it was a reliable way of reasoning on the grounds of its poor track record to date. So, what makes reliance on inductive reasoning permissible in concluding that inductive reasoning is reliable? One answer might be that it is the fact that inductive reasoning is *actually* reliable. But this is surely wrong. Even if, unbeknownst to us, inductive reasoning were extremely unreliable, because we were subject to the machinations of Descartes's *malin genie*, that would surely not mean that our inductive reasons are bad reasons, that our inductively based beliefs are unjustified or irrational. A more plausible answer, surely, is that it is an *a priori* matter that inductive reasons for believing are good reasons, whereas counterinductive reasons are bad reasons. But, if that is the case, if Mary's reasons are good reasons, her reliance on them in concluding that her practice is reliable is perfectly proper. If they are bad reasons, her reliance on them is not proper, any more than it would be proper to reason counterinductively.

The position then is this. *If* modes of inference are not, like basic beliefs, innocent till proved guilty, whether Mary's reliance on her reasons in this way is proper or not depends on whether her reasons are good reasons or not. But, in that case the second reason for saying that Mary's reasons are not good reasons fails. It is no good trying to argue that her reasons are not good reasons *because* it is not proper for her to rely on them in concluding that her practice is reliable. Whether this reliance is proper depends on whether her reasons are good reasons, and not *vice versa*.

But it is worth returning to the question of whether modes of inference should be treated differently from basic beliefs. If Richard Foley is right, one is entitled quite generally to trust one's beliefs and one's ways of arriving at them in so far as they are immune to reflective self-criticism in terms of the goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs.⁹ Indeed, he argues that, to the extent that one is entitled to trust them on these grounds, they can be considered epistemically rational. In which case the counterinductive reasoner's reliance on counterinduction in reflecting on its reliability would not in itself be improper. Though, of course, one might wonder whether counterinductive reasoning would really be immune to reflective self-criticism; not least if the reasoner was also inclined to reason inductively in some cases. Now, evidently, if Foley is right, Mary's reliance on her reasons in concluding that her practice is reliable is perfectly proper. So the second reason for saying that her reasons are not good reasons fails. What is more, it seems that Mary's practice is in fact epistemically rational—though not, of course, in the ordinary way. But even so, we cannot immediately conclude that her reasons are good reasons. Even if we concede that the counterinductive reasoner's reliance on counterinduction in assessing its reliability is perfectly proper, and even we concede that the reasoner is epistemically rational, if this practice turns out to be immune to self-criticism, we are not obliged to concede that such reasons are *good* reasons. Such a reasoner will be analogous to someone who chooses what to do conscientiously. And it is one thing for one to make one's decisions conscientiously, and another for one's reasons to be good. We do not, then,

need to decide whether Foley is right. Whether he is or not, we still we still need to ask whether Mary's reasons are in fact good reasons.

So, *are* Mary's reasons good reasons? Are Mary's beliefs meritorious? No doubt opinions will differ. If one thinks her reasons are not in themselves good reasons for believing what she does, and that it is not a good thing for any other reason that she should believe what she does on the basis of such reasons, one will, of course, think that they are not. If one thinks that they are not in themselves good reasons for believing what she does, but that it is, nonetheless, good that she should believe what she does on the basis of such reasons because, given the way the world is, such beliefs are, as a matter of fact, reliable, or because it makes her happy, or because it makes her a better person, or for some such reason, then, although one might think that there is a good reason for her to believe what she does, one would not think that her beliefs were *meritorious*, because one would not think that what made it good that she believed what she did constituted *her* reasons for believing what she did. Just as one would not think a person's reasons for acting made the action meritorious unless they provided good reasons in themselves for the action. If, on the other hand, one thinks that the beliefs that constitute her reasons are correct, and that to believe what she does for the reasons she has is in itself good, then one will think her reasons are in themselves good reasons; that her beliefs, in so far as they are based on such reasons, have fulfilled the primary condition for being meritorious. That is what I am inclined to think. Of course, that does not mean that I would think these beliefs of Mary's were true. It may be that I would turn out to possess evidence to the contrary which she does not possess; but it may also be that the thought that it would be good if *p* does not weigh with *me*, does not lead me to believe what I would otherwise not believe. To the extent that I think that such a thought can in itself provide a good reason for believing that *p*, I ought, no doubt, to regret the fact that such thoughts do not weigh with me, if indeed they do not. But it is possible to admire this sort of optimism in others without being an optimist oneself.

I am inclined, then, to believe that Mary's reasons are good reasons in themselves. I do not, of course, pretend to have shown that this is true. But then one can hardly be expected to prove that something is good in itself. What I have tried to do is to counter reasons for thinking that to believe something on the grounds that it would be good if it were so simply *cannot* be to believe it for a good reason.

If Mary's reasons are good reasons in themselves, then her belief that God exists fulfils the primary condition for being meritorious. And if we add that the question of whether God exists is an important question, that Mary has thought carefully about it, and, what is more, that her belief is based not only on good reasoning, but on a proper appreciation of the good, then surely that is now enough to make her belief meritorious. Furthermore, even if her belief might be regarded as epistemically rational, it is evidently not epistemically rational in the ordinary way. So she believes that God exists as a matter of faith. And evidently what goes for Mary may be true of John too. Let us suppose so. Then John's faith is meritorious.¹⁰

NOTES

1. It is not necessary to argue that beliefs are *voluntary*, any more than it is necessary to argue that intentions are voluntary in order to support the view that they can be meritorious. But for a persuasive defence of the idea that beliefs are often voluntary see James Montmarquet, 'The voluntariness of belief,' *Analysis* 46 (1986): pp. 51–52.

2. See, for instance, Bernard Williams, 'Deciding to Believe,' in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 148; Louis Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 170–77; Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 25.

3. Eleonore Stump, 'Aquinas on Faith and Goodness,' in *Being and Goodness*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 188.

4. John Henry Newman, *University Sermons*, ed. D. M. MacKinnon and J. D. Holmes (London: S.P.C.K., 1970). I owe this reference to Terence Penelhum, *Reason and Religious Faith* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), p. 53.

5. I take this use of "practice" from William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), chap. 4.

6. We might, perhaps, allow Mary to be less conservative. That is, we might suppose that she sometimes believed that p on the basis that it would be good that p although other considerations made it more likely that not-p, but not where they made it sufficiently likely taken on their own to justify the belief that not-p.

7. For such a view see A. C. Ewing, 'Two "Proofs" of God's Existence,' *Religious Studies* 1 (1966).

8. On this issue see, for instance, William P. Alston, *op. cit.*, chaps. 3 and 4; William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 115–23; Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Part One.

9. Richard Foley, *op. cit.*, chap. 2.

10. I am grateful to two anonymous referees for *Faith and Philosophy* for their helpful comments on an earlier draft, and to the editor for saving me from at least one mistake.