



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago  
Loyola eCommons

---

Dissertations

Theses and Dissertations

---

2013

# Fideism, Evidentialism, and the Epistemology of Religious Belief

Matthew P. Butcher  
*Loyola University Chicago*

---

## Recommended Citation

Butcher, Matthew P., "Fideism, Evidentialism, and the Epistemology of Religious Belief" (2013). *Dissertations*. Paper 508.  
[http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_diss/508](http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/508)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).  
Copyright © 2013 Matthew P. Butcher

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FIDEISM, EVIDENTIALISM, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF  
RELIGIOUS BELIEF

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

MATTHEW P. BUTCHER

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2013

Copyright by Matthew P. Butcher, 2013  
All rights reserved.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was completed only because of the wealth of support (in both personal and academic ways) of those around me.

First I would like to thank Paul Moser, Thomas Carson, and Blake Dutton for their tireless work as members of my committee. They have provided invaluable corrections, advice, and guidance. Paul Moser has worked with me on every step of this dissertation, leading me back from many a rabbit trail or false start.

Thomas Carson has at many points sharpened my focus and raised my awareness of competing views. And Blake Dutton, perhaps more than anyone else, is responsible for awakening me to the challenge of skepticism—particularly in regards to religious belief.

This thanks should also be extended to David Yandell and James Murphy, both of whom directed me from the early proposal toward what is now the dissertation. David's long-time friendship and sincere mentorship turned me back toward evidentialism, and it was James Murphy who suggested that fideism is an important foil to evidentialism.

Additionally, I would like to thank J.D. Trout, whose guidance on my Master's thesis has displayed itself in surprising ways in this dissertation, and also to Andrew Cutrofello, who helped me clarify (via Kant) what it means to have evidence for a religious proposition.

I would like to thank Drs. Dina Berger and Jessica Horowitz, along with the respective participants, for their mentoring and coaching through the dissertation bootcamps in 2011 and 2012. Thanks to Kristina Grob for advising me on the technical aspects of dissertation formatting. Alfredo McLaughlin encouraged me through many a medium, including the most amusing series of SMS messages I have ever received.

Thanks to the amiable staff of Caribou Coffee in Glenview. The supply of caffeine and good humor daily fortified me for writing, and all that coffee still cost less than a good therapist. And thanks to Hewlett Packard and my colleagues there for the measure of flexibility given me in the name of this dissertation.

My family relinquished their claims to my time on too many occasions to count. That is a debt that I will never be able to repay, and it is a profound lesson in grace and in love. Thanks to Angie, Annabelle, Claire, and Katherine for loving me enough to love my work. Thanks to Jon and Jane Hodge, Paul and Paula Butcher, Wes Munsil and Janet Seibert, Joanna and Chris Jones, Ryan Butcher, Dorothy Lesiw, Kristy Potter, and to Amanda Grace, all of whom put up with more philosophy than any non-philosopher ever ought. Thanks to our Tuesday small group, the table group, and the Saturday men's Bible study. I am so blessed to be surrounded by such encouragement.

Dr. Walter Lesiw, my grandfather, inspired my love of knowledge. My uncle Cliff Potter instilled in me a love of wisdom. Both passed away during the writing of this dissertation, but the influence of each is apparent to me on every page. When I too have crossed the bar, we three shall have a laugh at what we here

thought were knowledge and wisdom.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
CHAPTER ONE: RATIONALITY, BELIEF, AND FAITH	1
Job	1
Introduction	4
Overview	8
Rationality	11
A Model of Rationality	13
Obligation	23
Belief	25
Doxastic Voluntarism and Fideism	32
Believing In and Believing That	46
Faith	49
Bishop's Seven Models of Faith	50
Entitlement	65
Fideism	70
Conclusion	75
CHAPTER TWO: RATIONAL FIDEISM	77
Introduction	77
Rationality	80
The Failure of Reason	86
The Limitations of Reason	87
The Effect of Sin on Reason	94
The Impact	99
Faith	102
Biblical Faith	103
Faith as a Capacity	106
Fideism and Responsible Fideism	110
Epistemic Justification and Knowledge	114
Warrant and Knowledge	121
Responsible Fideism	125
Three Questions	129
What is the Role of Defeaters?	130
Defeaters	131
What Defeats What?	134
If Knowledge is External, How Can It Depend on Faith?	140
Knowledge, Warrant, and Justification	140
Externalism	142
The Result	147
Should We Really Side with Faith Over Reason?	148
Conclusion	154

CHAPTER THREE: FAITH AS VENTURE	158
Introduction	158
Clarifications	161
Entitlement Refined	164
The Evidential Ambiguity Thesis	169
Does the Evidential Ambiguity Thesis Hold?	171
Epistemic and Moral Rationality	178
Privileging Moral Obligation	179
The Moral-Epistemic Link Principle	186
Supra-evidential Fideism	190
Faith	191
Doxastic and Sub-doxastic Ventures	194
Framing Principles	202
Theses (J) and (J+)	207
Thesis (J): Permissibility of Doxastic Ventures	209
Thesis (J+): Morally Moral Permissibility	212
Abraham's Doxastic Ventures	217
The Problem of the Problem of Evil	219
Is Faith a Bad Guide?	222
Is Fideism Preferable?	228
Conclusion	230
 CHAPTER FOUR: EVIDENTIALISM AND FAITH	 233
Introduction	233
Doubt and Skepticism	236
Entitlement and the Skeptic	238
Is Evidentialism Defeated?	245
Moderate Evidentialism	245
Evans's Claims Against Evidentialism	253
Cognitive Limitations and Inference	254
Cognitive Limitations and Sinfulness as Defeaters	258
Rational Conflict, Selfishness, and Cognitive Limitations	259
Bishop's Claims Against Evidentialism	261
The Fideist's God	271
A Robust Notion of Evidence	277
Private Evidence	281
Evidence and God	284
Disconfirming Evidence	292
A Further Challenge from Bishop	294
Conclusion	296
Future Directions	298
 REFERENCE LIST	 301
 VITA	 307



CHAPTER ONE  
RATIONALITY, BELIEF, AND FAITH

**Job**

The ancient Hebrew epic poem Job, written perhaps in the tenth century BCE, tells of Job's suffering and lamentations during the testing of his faith.<sup>1</sup> Early in the story, Job loses assets, family members, and his own health.<sup>2</sup> As the plot unfolds, Job exchanges several verbal volleys with three of his friends, each of whom attempts to explain why God would allow such devastation to befall Job.<sup>3</sup> Yet none gives an answer that Job finds satisfactory. Job expresses the locus of his frustration with the explanations of his friends.

Surely there is a mine for silver,  
and a place where gold is refined.  
Iron is taken from the ground,  
and rock is poured out as copper.  
Man puts an end to the darkness;  
he searches the farthest recesses  
for the ore in the deepest darkness.  
Far from where people live he sinks a shaft  
in places travelers have long forgotten,  
far from other people he dangles and sways....  
He has cut out channels through the rocks;

---

<sup>1</sup> For possible dates, and the myriad complications in accurately dating the book of Job, see Norman C. Habel's *The Book of Job*, 40-42.

<sup>2</sup> Job 1:13-2:10. All biblical quotations are from the New English Translation (NET) Bible, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Elihu, the fourth friend, has not yet appeared by chapter 28. Elihu's first speech is in chapter 32.

his eyes have spotted every precious thing.  
 He has searched the sources of the rivers  
 and what was hidden he has brought into the light.  
 But wisdom—where can it be found?  
 Where is the place of understanding?  
 Mankind does not know its place;  
 it cannot be found in the land of the living.<sup>4</sup>

Mining is Job's chosen image of seeking what is precious. In this poem he lists several techniques for locating and extracting precious gems and minerals. Look at the extent, says Job, to which humankind has developed a technology for finding hidden things of value. Yet wisdom and understanding, whose value is immeasurable, remain elusive. Job wants insight into his present circumstances. When God speaks to Job, enlightenment is not on the agenda.<sup>5</sup>

To the fideist, Job may be seen as a sort of epic hero.<sup>6</sup> Here is the fideist's take on the story: Job confronts the quandary of understanding the divine. Humankind, notes Job in his rumination on mining, has made laudable progress in the realms of science and industry. Much has been learned, much has been gained. But when confronting the problems of a divine nature, human capabilities have fallen short. There is a lacuna, a mandatory lacuna, that cannot be bridged

---

<sup>4</sup> Job 28:1-4, 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Steven M. Cahn points out that the odd thing about the story is that the reader *does* have insight into the reason for Job's suffering—the explanation is found in Job 1 (Cahn 2006, 31-33). The point of Job, argues Cahn, clearly is not that humans cannot understand God's motivations, for we are told his motivations.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Job as an epic hero in the tradition of Sumerian, Hebrew, and Babylonian folklore, see Habel 1985, 35-40.

by human understanding.<sup>7</sup> The fideist extracts the following moral from the story of Job: The solution is to overcome this limitation *with faith*. One has faith in God, or at least faith that certain propositions about God obtain. And this faith overcomes any shortage of evidence or reasons.

Viewed correctly, the Job poem is not exactly an endorsement of or an argument for fideism. Job and the fideist are after two very different things. Job is not interested in the justificatory status of propositions such as “there is a God.” He is not investigating whether non-propositional belief content is adequate to support religious beliefs. Neither is he questioning the existence of God or the soundness of certain religious doctrines. Rather, he is inquiring into the motivations behind God's actions.<sup>8</sup> The fideist, on the other hand, is interested in precisely those places where human reason runs up against religious beliefs and finds itself at an explanatory impasse. And the fideist's answer is that, in at least some cases, “having faith” can forge the link between our limited cognitive capacities and the truths we seek so desperately to grasp. But is the fideist correct in this assertion? Can one remain rational, yet hold a position “by faith”? And what exactly is meant by “having faith”?

---

<sup>7</sup> Lev Shestov argues this in his essay “The Theory of Knowledge,” in which he alludes numerous times to Job (Shestov 1966b). Job, for him, represents the man who has correctly forsaken the quest for knowledge, and has embraced incommunicable truth via faith (cf. Mai Neto 1995, 98, Evans 1998, 133-134, and Monas 1966, xiv).

<sup>8</sup> Even if the message here *is* that Job should have (more) faith in God, this does not immediately concede the point to the fideist. C. Stephen Evans suggests that the Biblical accounts of faith should be understood as something different than the fideist account suggests (Evans 1998, 4-7). Faith, in the present context, seems to be fiducial, not belief-oriented.

## Introduction

The focus of this dissertation is a theory, typically offered in a religious context, that certain propositions can be held (and in some cases ought or even must be held) by faith without regard for evidence.<sup>9</sup> Deriving its name from the Latin word for faith (*fides*), this theory is called *fideism*. Just as it is not possible to talk of metaphysical dualism, moral deontology, or epistemic externalism as unified theories, fideism is not so much a single theory as a family of related theories—related in the sense that all focus on the important role of faith, and the unimportance of evidence, in accepting a particular religious position.<sup>10</sup> Nowhere does this appear more clearly than by taking a glance at the variety of ways in which theorists have attempted to capture the essence of fideism in a sentence or two.

- Speaking of the possibility of religious knowledge, Pierre Bayle makes the famous remark that, “The powers of reason and philosophical examination go no further than to keep us in suspense and in fear of error, whether we

---

<sup>9</sup> Some fideists offer fideism as a solution to evidential ambiguity or insufficiency, while others take a stronger stance and suggest that evidence *ought* to be disregarded when it comes to faith propositions. Thus, “without regard” is not intended to suggest strictly that evidence is ignored, but only that evidence is not a determining factor for the fideist. I revisit this point at the end of the chapter, after sufficient groundwork has been provided.

<sup>10</sup> Here I use the term *acceptance* loosely. Clarifications of this and other related terms are made throughout this chapter.

affirm or whether we deny.”<sup>11</sup> Bayle suggests that the “grace of God or childhood education” must fill in where reason falls short.<sup>12</sup>

- Barbara Sher Tinsley attempts to capture Bayle's fideism with this quip: “[H]e insisted that, in the last analysis, faith had to be accepted by faith, and could not be proved by reason.”<sup>13</sup>
- Michel de Montaigne offers his own succinct statement of the fideist position, saying that “Christians wrong themselves in desiring to support their belief by human reasons, since it is conceived only by faith and by a special inspiration of divine favour.”<sup>14</sup>
- Richard H. Popkin offers this as an historical observation: “Fideism is the thesis that religious belief is based on faith and not either evidence or reasoning.”<sup>15</sup>
- Terence Penelhum defines fideism as the “insistence that faith needs no justification from reason, but is the judge of reason and its pretensions.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Bayle 1999, 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tinsley 2001, 21. Later in the chapter I examine various models of faith.

<sup>14</sup> Montaigne 1999, 162.

<sup>15</sup> Popkin 2000, 200.

<sup>16</sup> Penelhum 1983, 1.

- In a similar vein, C. Stephen Evans calls fideism the idea that “faith should not be governed or regulated by reason, where reason is understood to be an autonomous, relatively competent human faculty.”<sup>17</sup>
- Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli offer this definition in their *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*: “Fideism contends that the only knowledge, or at least the only certain knowledge, we can have is by faith.”<sup>18</sup>
- Drawing on Luther’s rally cry of “Faith alone,” John R. Shook characterizes fideism as the “contrary principle” that “where one cannot know, one should faithfully believe, at least where Christianity is concerned.”<sup>19</sup>
- John Bishop, defending a form of fideism markedly different from those above, provides his own generic characterization: “[P]eople may be justified in holding and acting on religious beliefs even though those beliefs lack sufficient evidential support, whether direct or inferential.”<sup>20</sup> Bishop explains his own fideism as the thesis that doxastic or sub-doxastic faith ventures are sometimes morally and epistemically permissible.<sup>21</sup>

Beginning from such characterizations, what conclusions can be drawn about “fideism in general”? All of these characterizations deal with doxastic or sub-

---

<sup>17</sup> Evans 1998, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Kreeft and Tacelli 1994, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Shook 2010, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Bishop 2007, 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. More will be said on doxastic and sub-doxastic faith ventures in the section on Faith in this chapter.

doxastic states—usually belief.<sup>22</sup> And they likewise rely on a notion of faith. As we shall see, though, these accounts have nuanced views of faith. Some of the characterizations above seem to focus broadly on reason and rationality in general, while others take an epistemic tenor. Some of these characterizations make surprisingly strong claims. The only certain knowledge we can have is by faith? Others are more tempered. Bishop, for example, offers fideism as a solution in cases where evidence is insufficient. The relative strength of these claims notwithstanding, all of these fideists (Bayle included, though the quote doesn't make this evident) offer faith as a remedy for a purported inadequacy in (epistemic) rationality.<sup>23</sup> Rationality (epistemic and otherwise), belief, and faith are all topics in need of some clarification before we can meaningfully and consistently discuss them, and this chapter deals with all three topics.

Just as dualism, deontology, and externalism have general tenets shared among adherents, so too does fideism. One such claim is that propositions that are important—propositions that serve as framing principles—can be held or taken fideistically.<sup>24</sup> The classic example of fideism illustrates this: By faith, one

---

<sup>22</sup> This assumes that faith has a doxastic component. This question is covered more in the section on Faith in this chapter.

<sup>23</sup> All seem to suggest problems with epistemic rationality. Not all suggest, though, broad issues with rationality in general. This point is discussed further in the section on rationality later in this chapter.

<sup>24</sup> A framing principle is a high-order principle providing support for a broad array of other beliefs. Bishop (2007, 2010) uses this term to describe foundational religious propositions. As the name implies, framing principles are propositional in nature. Both framing principles and non-propositional content will be discussed later in the chapter as well as in chapter 3.

may hold that God exists. Many prominent fideists, from Montaigne and Bayle to contemporary fideists such as Stephen Evans and John Bishop, have sought to defend variations of the claim that certain propositions can (and perhaps even ought to) be accepted by faith.<sup>25</sup> And in the theories elaborated by these and other fideists, the acceptance of such a proposition plays an important role in reasoning. Does fideism (in any of its forms) offer a compelling theory that a rational agent ought to, or even can, accept? Can one remain rational while also being a fideist? Is fideism, as its proponents suggest, the best contender for answering questions about religious propositions?

#### Overview

In this dissertation I argue that fideism is not the best theory for accepting a particular position (religious or otherwise). It does not offer the best explanation about how one ought to hold important propositions while maintaining a commitment to rationality. Thus, I argue, a person concerned with holding epistemically rational beliefs ought not accept fideism. Further, I argue that the Kantian move of accepting a proposition on moral (or prudential) grounds does not make fideism the best rational position, all things considered. Instead, I argue that propositions, including the sort of propositions touted by fideists as candidates for fideistic support, are best held by evidential support.

---

<sup>25</sup> Again, acceptance here is used loosely. The “ought” here implies an ethics of belief, but that subject will not be broached until the discussion of rationality later in this chapter.



The argument proceeds as follows. In what remains of this chapter, I examine several key notions relevant to our examination. I discuss a model of rationality, following the traditional distinction of moral, prudential, and epistemic rationality. I also discuss a strategy for addressing so-called “rational conflict” wherein different types of rationality seem to be in conflict. Given the centrality of belief to the topic, I suggest a particular notion of belief, and then address concerns about doxastic voluntarism. I also examine the common distinction between faith *in* and faith *that*. From there, I turn to faith, examining several models. The important concept of (epistemic) entitlement arises during the examination of models of faith, and I point out how that pertains to fideist theories. I conclude the chapter with a general account of fideism, in light of what has been said about rationality, belief, faith, and entitlement.

In the second chapter I examine C. Stephen Evans’s “responsible fideism,” which claims that individuals can claim to *know* certain propositions by faith. Evans provides an epistemological theory purporting to link a notion of defeasibly held faith propositions to Plantinga’s notion of “properly basic beliefs” and arrive at the claim that fideist believers attain knowledge. This, claims Evans, stands against evidentialist notions of justification, which, on his account, fail to provide grounds for believing certain faith-oriented propositions. Against this theory, I argue that the Evans has confused several epistemic notions, and that while he has done well in showing the limits of reason, he ultimately points the way toward evidentialism, not away from it. Several problems arise in Evans’s account,

largely stemming from Evans's treatment of epistemic reason as untrustworthy while faith remains a proper guide. In the second chapter, I explore some of the problems.

In the third chapter, I turn from epistemologically oriented theories to moral/prudential fideism. This fideism, finding its roots in Kant and James, suggests that it is rational for humans to hold certain beliefs on moral or prudential grounds (in absence of, or even contrary to evidence), and that such beliefs may also play the foundational role of "framing beliefs" in one's overall belief system. John Bishop has recently provided a sustained defense of this position, and it is on his work that I focus. I argue that Bishop's account relies upon a notion of evidential ambiguity that is flawed in crucial ways. Further, I suggest that the venture model of faith does not best address the concerns of the religious seeker committed to epistemic rationality. Finally, I examine to what extent Bishop's model addresses the rational goals of an agent, asking whether or not fideism is the most rational approach (all things considered).

I close the dissertation in the fourth chapter where I suggest that evidentialism remains a better candidate for supporting religious beliefs. I begin by returning to fideism's inability to address the concerns of the skeptic. From there, I sketch a theory of evidentialism that addresses the concerns raised by Evans and Bishop. I also return to the "evidential ambiguity" hypothesis of Bishop, suggesting that with a better notion of evidence, evidentialism does not suffer from the problems identified by Bishop. This leads to a notion of evidence

more robust than the ones offered by Evans and Bishop. Building a broadly abductive argument, I claim that fideism faces critical challenges when confronting the goals of a rational agent. Instead, evidentialism becomes the more compelling theory.

### **Rationality**

Why is there a theory of fideism? What problem does fideism purport to solve? Fideism is positioned as a solution to a problem of epistemic justification. Particular beliefs—notoriously, particular religious beliefs—seem to be resistant to traditional epistemic justification.<sup>26</sup> This resistance seems to be either a result of certain explanatory gaps or of evidential ambiguity or insufficiency. Either it is unclear how such beliefs could be justified or, given epistemic norms, it is unclear that the beliefs are (or can be) justified.

Does this lacuna suggest that one ought not believe, or ought to suspend judgment? In at least some cases, the fideist suggests otherwise: One can (ought to?) accept certain propositions, evidence (or lack thereof) notwithstanding.<sup>27</sup> One need not suspend judgment on important matters (e.g. the existence of God) merely because of an explanatory or evidential gap. Instead, the fideist proposes that we look elsewhere—somewhere other than

---

<sup>26</sup> Penelhum 1989, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Note that here we must transition from “believing” to “accepting propositions” because not all fideists suggest that *belief* is the correct response. Some, like Bishop (2007, 2010) and F.R. Tennant (1989), suggest taking a proposition to be true (without necessarily believing it). Later in the chapter, I replace “acceptance” with more suitable notions of belief, assent, holding, and taking (to be true).

traditional epistemic justification—for a reason to accept such propositions. As we shall see, the fideist contends that in at least some circumstances, one ought to (or at least may) hold a proposition by faith.<sup>28</sup>

(For the moment, I use the term *accept* to mean assenting to proposition P at time t. This does not necessarily entail a long-term disposition toward P, and consequently does not entail belief. These notions will be refined later in the chapter.)

It is sometimes held that fideism is a variety of irrationalism, but the existence of well-developed theories of fideism, often held by people claiming to *not* be irrationalists, suggests that merely dismissing fideism as such is unwarranted.<sup>29</sup> It seems that fideism's *raison d'être* is to show that one might accept certain unsupported propositions, yet do so in a generally rational way.<sup>30</sup> That is, most fideists do not seem to take an “anything goes” attitude when it comes to evaluating and accepting propositions.

But how could believing against evidence (or when acknowledging the insufficiency of evidence) ever be rational? One answer grants such beliefs a certain degree of irrationality while also suggesting that the position is, on the

---

<sup>28</sup> Some varieties of fideism emphasizes faith in something, while others emphasize faith *that*. I return to this distinction in the section on Faith below.

<sup>29</sup> cf. Evans 1998, chapters 1 and 2. Evans spends much time examining the claims about fideism and irrationalism.

<sup>30</sup> I use the term “unsupported propositions” to include both propositions that do not have sufficient (epistemic) support and propositions which are purported to not need or be capable of support. In this way, I intend to capture the claims of a wide variety of fideists. Also, a notion of rationality will be sketched later in this chapter.

whole, still rational. It might be *epistemically* irrational to believe an unsupported proposition—particularly one of importance, as religious propositions seem to be. But this does not rule out the possibility that, *all things considered*, accepting the proposition is generally rational.<sup>31</sup> In that sense, fideism may turn out to be a rational theory even while eschewing the application of traditional notions of epistemic justification to a certain class of propositions.

To suggest such a line of argument, though, one must also suggest an appropriate model of rationality.

#### A Model of Rationality

For our line of questioning, the rationality of (accepting) a belief is of deep concern. And the present focus on religious beliefs makes this point even more salient, as the rationality of religious belief is a popular topic in philosophy of religion.<sup>32</sup> The varieties of fideism considered in this work are those that maintain, either explicitly or implicitly, that fideism is a rational position.<sup>33</sup>

A common approach in contemporary philosophy is to recognize at least three distinct kinds of rationality: epistemic, prudential, and moral rationality.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> For a sustained discussion of rationality as a broad notion, and epistemic rationality as a more specific concept, see Foley 1993 or Foley 2002.

<sup>32</sup> For a broad example, Paul Helm's *Faith and Reason* (1999) is an anthology of both historical and contemporary perspectives on faith and reason.

<sup>33</sup> Evans's "supra-rational" fideism maintains a commitment to rationality. Evans, 1998.

<sup>34</sup> The model of rationality proposed here is derived largely from Moser 1985, particularly chapters I and VI, as well as from Foley 2002 and Foley 1993. Moser follows the tripartite division here (though he does so qualifying that there are or may be other types of rationality). Foley distinguishes primarily between epistemic and prudential, but also discusses moral and economical rationality.

Epistemic rationality has to do with truth. If S is epistemically rational, S has preferences best served by acquiring true beliefs while avoiding false beliefs.<sup>35</sup> Moral rationality is concerned with whether a belief is moral. S is morally rational only if S has preferences best served by acquiring morally advantageous beliefs. Prudential rationality is concerned with whether having a particular belief is in an individual's best interest. If S is prudentially rational, S has a preference best served by acquiring beliefs supporting S's well-being. Such beliefs would be prudentially advantageous beliefs. It is not necessary that a given belief be morally, prudentially, and epistemically rational at once for a given individual. P may be epistemically rational while being morally and prudentially neutral. Or on occasion, rational conflicts may arise. It may seem epistemically rational to hold B, while seeming morally rational to hold not-B. The account sketched below addresses this possibility.

Evaluating the rationality of belief requires a general notion of *justification*. A basic characterization of justification suggests that S is justified in holding a belief B when B correctly relates to a relevant end for S.<sup>36</sup> An account of justification, then, is an account of what it means for B to *correctly relate* to a given end. This characterization is worked out differently in each of the three domains introduced above.

---

<sup>35</sup> This is a rough sketch. A more complete statement would include preferences for important epistemic propositions over against less important propositions. See Moser 1985, 214.

<sup>36</sup> Moser 1985, 1. Foley's characterization of justification is different than this (Foley 2002, 196).

In epistemology, justification can be explained as S's having sufficient undefeated evidence in support of a proposition.<sup>37</sup> If S has sufficient evidence for P (in the absence of undefeated defeaters), then S is epistemically justified in believing that P.<sup>38</sup> Of critical importance, here, the evidence we speak of is evidence that indicates the truth of P.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, it is epistemically oriented. Phrased according to our previous characterization of justification, we can say that sufficient undefeated evidence in support of B correctly relates one's belief that B to the epistemic end of acquiring true beliefs while avoiding false beliefs.<sup>40</sup> This can be contrasted with moral justification.

S is morally justified in holding belief B when it is right or good for S to believe B. When S's belief B is morally advantageous—promoting S's moral goodness—then S is morally justified in holding B.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to epistemic justification, no truth requirement is immediately necessary when explaining

---

<sup>37</sup> This is in no way a full treatment of epistemic justification. It is just an introductory sketch. Likewise, my explanations of moral and prudential justification are merely sketches. In chapter 4 I offer a more detailed characterization of epistemic justification.

<sup>38</sup> This is by no means an analysis of justification. It is a rough sketch intending to capture the basic idea of evidentialism. For more complete formulations of evidential notions of justification, see Moser 1989 and Conee and Feldman 2004a. Again, justification is treated in more detail in the fourth chapter.

<sup>39</sup> As I have here defined justification, it is clearly an internalist, evidentialist approach. Many contemporary epistemologies would take issue with my characterization of justification as internal. However, as will become clear in the section on faith, the internalist construal of justification is clearly the most pertinent when it comes to fideism. In the next chapter I discuss an externalist theory of justification, showing how one theory of fideism attempts to leverage it. In the final chapter, I discuss internalist justification and evidence in more detail.

<sup>40</sup> Reasons, in this epistemic sense, are alethic, while this is not the case for moral or prudential reasons. cf. Moser 1989, 44.

<sup>41</sup> B may promote S's goodness by helping him act rightly or by developing S's (moral) character.

moral justification, as it is goodness (not truth) that is the relevant end for moral rationality.

Finally, S may be prudentially justified in holding a belief B. S is prudentially justified in believing B when S's belief promotes S's own well-being. In his discussion of prudential obligation, Paul K. Moser characterizes the scope of prudential interests as follows: "Among our most valued prudential interests are... the interests to have psychological, physiological, social, and financial well-being."<sup>42</sup> These are interests of the non-moral, non-epistemic variety. To say that S has adequate prudential reasons for believing B is to say that believing B is most conducive to S's well-being (compared to the options of not believing B and withholding judgment on B).

These are three forms of justification. Satisfaction of a justification condition indicates that it is rationally permissible for S to hold B. Notice, however, that there is nothing above that tells us whether one *ought* to hold justified beliefs. Questions about obligation are typically captured under the heading of the *ethics of belief*.

Just as we sketched three types of justification above, I will sketch three types of obligation here: Epistemic, moral, and prudential.<sup>43</sup> Epistemic concerns are concerns over the *truth* of a belief. Thus, when we talk of epistemic obligations, we are talking about one's obligation to both maximize one's true

---

<sup>42</sup> Moser 1985, 216.

<sup>43</sup> The following is derived from Moser 1985, pp. 214-217.



beliefs and minimize one's false beliefs.<sup>44</sup> One's moral obligation, in contrast, is to hold beliefs that, on balance, are morally advantageous to the denial (or suspension of judgment) of such beliefs. That is, one morally ought to hold the beliefs most likely to be morally conducive. And a similar description can be given of prudential obligation: S is prudentially obligated to believe P when S's belief that P is better suited to S's wellbeing than the denial of or suspension of judgment regarding P.

For each of our types of rationality, we now have a sense of being *justified* in a belief, and also a sense of being obligated to believe. Before looking at broader questions of rationality in general, it also makes sense to talk about what it means, for each of these three types of reasoning, to *rationally* seek to fulfill these obligations.

For S to be rational in fulfilling these obligations, S must have "a preference whose satisfaction is evidently best provided for by his fulfilling his relevant epistemic, moral, or prudential obligation. For it is a preference of this sort that typically makes such obligations *rational obligations* for S."<sup>45</sup> Rationality, in this case, is pragmatic in the sense that it reflects the agent's commitment to preference—an epistemic preference for accumulating true (and only true)

---

<sup>44</sup> Some beliefs are more important than others. Because of this, the simple dictum above would best be understood with the *sotto voce* "all beliefs being equal." Practically speaking, though, a more robust account would have to be given. Such an account would take into consideration the relative importance of beliefs. Similar points can be made for moral and prudential obligation. See Moser 1985, pp. 212-236.

<sup>45</sup> Moser 1985, 220.

beliefs, a moral preference toward beliefs conducive to goodness, and a prudential preference toward beliefs that foster one's well-being. Given this, one is acting irrationally only if one does not have a preference best satisfied by these obligations.<sup>46</sup>

In this sense, the radical fideist Lev Shestov is indeed (as he claims) an epistemic irrationalist, for he eschews the very foundations of epistemic obligation:

Then, then—and this is most important of all—you will at last be convinced that truth does not depend on logic, that there are no logical truths at all, that you therefore have the right to search for what you like, how you like, without argument, and that if something results from your search, it will not be a formula, not a law, not a principle, not even an idea!<sup>47</sup>

Shestov refuses, in this quote, to countenance any proffered normative epistemology.<sup>48</sup> Since Shestov is not interested in fulfilling any epistemic obligation, failing to see it as meeting his epistemic objectives, he seems clearly to be an irrationalist at least in the realm of epistemic reasoning. Shestov's epistemic irrationalist does not, by that fact, make him a moral or prudential irrationalist as well. From our definitions above, it would be possible for Shestov

---

<sup>46</sup> Foley suggests that if it is possible to hold contradicting preferences, that, too, may be construed as irrationality. Foley 1993, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Shestov 1966a, 141. It is unclear whether Shestov is employing gross hyperbole, or is just offering an incoherent argument.

<sup>48</sup> C. Stephen Evans offers a brief and decisive counterargument against Shestov's irrationalism. Evans 1998, 20-22. For our purposes, there is no reason to dwell on the flaws of Shestov's epistemic irrationalism.

to hold a belief on moral grounds, and do so rationally, for the requirement for moral rationality does not presuppose that an agent is epistemically rational.

So far I have sketched an account of rationality for each of the three kinds of rationality discussed: epistemic, moral, and prudential. The difficulty with such an account of rationality is that it does not, as it stands, provide a method for resolving problems where rational conclusions conflict. For example, it is perfectly conceivable that for some person S it is morally rational to hold that P, while it is prudentially rational to hold that not-P. And we need not restrict the possibilities to a dilemma, but a trilemma can also arise. It may be morally rational to believe P, prudentially rational to believe not-P, and epistemically rational to suspend judgment on P.

As we shall see over the course of the dissertation, this particular issue is pertinent to the question of fideism, where one may claim that whereas epistemic rationality suggests suspension of judgment regarding a faith-proposition, moral rationality suggests that one ought to accept that same faith-proposition.<sup>49</sup> How can such problems be addressed? One approach is to claim that one particular form of rationality (e.g. moral rationality) should always be considered most important.<sup>50</sup> Such an account of rationality puts external conditions on an agent's rationality. The account offered here, though, suggests a person-relative solution

---

<sup>49</sup> This is one example of a position I introduce later as one formulation of moral/prudential fideism.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Gewirth provides a substantial defense of the position that one is not rational unless one is morally rational. Gewirth, 1978.

to the problem: Instead of assigning (by fiat) a precedence to the different forms of rationality, we can instead suggest that the individual's preferences may determine the resolution of a rational conflict.<sup>51</sup>

Such a solution can be found in an account of a broader form of rationality. Moser provides such an account in *Empirical Justification*, and I offer here an abbreviated account of what he terms "All Things Considered" (ATC) rationality.<sup>52</sup> Moser suggests that when a rational conflict arises, one may ask what is best for one, all things considered. On this account, one ought to be able to decide (at that time, given the context) on a superior preference—a preference favoring one type of rationality over the others. Clarifying this, Moser says:

Let us understand a preference to be a desire related either to a goal or a means to a goal. Thus, let us say that S prefers, for instance, to resolve a rational conflict by fulfilling [epistemic obligation]  $O_e$  rather than [moral obligation]  $O_m$  if and only if S desires to fulfill  $O_e$  rather than  $O_m$ . S's desiring to fulfill  $O_e$  rather than  $O_m$ , as I understand it, is just S's desiring to make true the proposition that he will fulfill  $O_e$  rather than  $O_m$ .<sup>53</sup>

Essentially, ATC rationality requires that the agent have preferences in cases where rational conflict arises. As Moser develops his account of ATC rationality, he provides this concluding description of what it means for one to be ATC rational:

---

<sup>51</sup> A further examination of the merits of external constraints on rationality versus what I am here calling person-relative rationality is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I suggest, though, that external accounts tend to break down into either question begging or assertion.

<sup>52</sup> Moser 1985, 221-236.

<sup>53</sup> Moser 1985, 226.

In a case of rational conflict of any sort, S has an ATC rational obligation to fulfill a particular obligation,  $O_i$ , if and only if (i) the fulfillment of  $O_i$  is likely (i.e., more likely than not), on S's total evidence, to satisfy his superior evaluative preference, which does not depend on an epistemically unjustified belief of S's, and (ii) S is capable of coming to recognize the truth of (i) from reflection on his evidence.

There are a few notes to make on this account. First, a protective clause stipulates that S be epistemically justified in his or her belief that a particular obligation is indeed correctly related to his or her chosen superior preference. Second, a cognizability clause requires that the agent is actually capable of reflecting on evidence and thereby recognizing the truth. Third, this account suggests that immoral people—even, perhaps, moral monsters—may in fact be ATC rational even when engaging in morally irrational acts.<sup>54</sup>

Later in the dissertation (chapters 3 and 4), we shall see how Bishop attempts to solve rational conflict by situating one form of rationality (epistemic rationality) over others. And others have made similar attempts to resolve conflicts by appeal to one form of rationality as authoritative.<sup>55</sup> But what this ATC account acknowledges is the role of an agent, and that agent's preferences, in sorting out rational conflicts in a rational way. By this model, one may opt to act, say, epistemically rationally but not prudentially rationally at one time, yet at another opt for the reverse. And it is possible that in both cases the agent may be

---

<sup>54</sup> An evil agent may indeed have rational preferences that do not favor moral rationality. While the conclusion I've drawn here may be unpalatable, I believe it still best captures what we mean by rationality. cf. Baehr 2011, 214-220. I return to this issue in chapter 3.

<sup>55</sup> cf. Gewirth, 1978.

acting *generally* (ATC) rational. I find such an account to be compelling for this reason. It avoids a (question-begging) hierarchy of sorts of rationality, and it does this will granting (or acknowledging) agents a freedom to have and express preferences.

While my characterization has not been an attempt to provide any sort of analysis or even a thorough examination of the concept of rationality, I have provided a sketch that will provide an adequate foundation for the subsequent discussion of fideism. Pertinently, I have suggested that we observe a difference between moral, prudential, and epistemic rationality. Following Moser's discussion of rationality<sup>56</sup>, I have suggested notions of justification, obligation and of rational obligation that provide a model of rational obligation, as well as a basic distinction between an agent's acting rationally (in accordance with rational obligation) and irrationally (against one's rational obligation). Finally, I have introduced Moser's All Things Considered (ATC) approach to resolving rational conflicts—conflicts an individual faces when one rational obligation comes into conflict with another such obligation.

I have introduced all of this with a purpose, for fideism is a theory (or a family of theories) about rationality and belief. It cannot be confined to purely epistemic construals any more than it can be confined to purely moral or prudential domains. And for this reason, a theory of general rationality will assist us in untangling the complexities of various forms of fideism.

---

<sup>56</sup> Moser 1985.

Given an agent who is ATC-rational (that is, who is interested in fulfilling rational obligations in accordance, when necessary, with a superior rational preference), we can turn an evaluative lens toward various forms of fideism, asking which, if any, provide such an agent with the necessary equipment for judging the rationality of (primarily religious) beliefs. For at the core, what I take the fideist to be suggesting is that one can continue to hold an ethics of belief while at the same time having beliefs that are not based upon evidence.

### Obligation

The fideist is suggesting that sometimes a proposition P does not have adequate epistemic support (either because S does not possess sufficient evidence, or because such a proposition cannot be supported epistemically), yet in such cases, it is okay for S to believe P. The fideist wants to suggest that P is still in some way “certified.” Above, I characterized rationality as coming in different forms, including a general All Things Considered (ATC) rationality. In this account, I suggest an ethics of belief that requires that if S is interested in achieving certain goals (epistemic, moral, or prudential), S must abide by certain obligations.

Is the satisfaction of a rational goal or obligations (either in a specific sense, as in epistemic rationality, or in the general ATC sense) what the fideist is after? I think it is fair to answer this question in the affirmative. I think that what the fideist wants to claim is that S is justified (again, using the broad notion of the term) in holding B even if S is not epistemically justified in believing B. But it goes

beyond merely being *rational*. The fideist seems to also want to be able to use fideistically held propositions in epistemic context with what Bishop calls “full epistemic weight.”<sup>57</sup>

There seem to be several strategies for making such an argument. Some fideists approach the matter as skeptics about epistemology. They suggest that we cannot be epistemically justified in holding any beliefs, and suggest a Pyrrhonian route toward accepting or not accepting religious beliefs.<sup>58</sup> Also there is a group of fideists who claim that while certain faith propositions cannot be epistemically justified according to traditional means, there remains a sense in which one can be epistemically rational in holding such beliefs. These I cover in chapter 2. Finally, some have suggested, following Kant and William James, that at least in certain cases, when it is morally or prudentially rational to hold a belief, it may also be admissible in epistemic contexts. In other words, even without adequate evidence, one might be able to assert that God exists, and thereby treat this as a “framing principle” in one’s epistemic framework. This is the subject of chapter 3, where I focus on John Bishop’s account of fideism.

One might claim to be an irrationalist in all regards—opposed to moral rationality, prudential rationality, and epistemic rationality—yet still claim to hold certain beliefs fideistically. It is unclear to me what “fideism” would be in such a

---

<sup>57</sup> Bishop 2007.

<sup>58</sup> See Penelhum 1983 and Maia-Neto 1995 for sustained examinations of Pyrrhonism and fideism.



context, for if one's overarching strategy is "anything goes," one's beliefs need no methodological rigor at all. Neither justification nor obligation is necessary. Consequently, there seems to be no practical role for "fideism" to play. In contrast, there seems to be a place for non-global forms of irrationalism; for example, Lev Shestov's irrationalism seems to be limited to epistemic irrationalism. Shestov might be construed as interested in achieving moral and prudential rationalism, but not at all favoring epistemic rationality. Whenever there is an appearance of a conflict between epistemic and moral rationality, for example, moral rationality wins out. The details of Shestov's account may be bizarre and internally inconsistent, but we can still understand Shestov (at this high level) as having particular preferences in regards to moral, epistemic, and prudential questions.

At this point, we can revise the initial characterization of fideism to reflect two things: first, the fideist does seem to have a commitment to adhering to general rationality, and second, the fideist is not simply interested in *being (ATC) rational*, but also has an epistemic interest. Namely, the fideist wants to suggest that, S can hold or take some faith-propositions with full epistemic weight. Next we will look at a notion of belief.

### **Belief**

While it is not a *prima facie* logical necessity that fideism apply only to religious propositions, we have seen already that many avowed fideists are fideists concerning (primarily) religious propositions. Thus, there is much

discussion of religious *beliefs*. Faith, as we shall see shortly, is a notion often coupled with belief. And already, we have talked about belief in the context of rationality. In the familiar account of knowledge, one must not only be justified, but also *believe* a true proposition before one has knowledge. Thus, it is clear that *belief* will be an important notion for the present discussion.

In this section I first discuss belief itself, providing a definition along with a few crucial clarifications.<sup>59</sup> I focus first on belief in the sense of *believing that*. Then I turn toward a puzzle about belief that could be particularly vexing to many accounts of fideism. That is the problem of doxastic voluntarism. Finally, I turn to the differentiation commonly made between believing *that* and believing *in*.

Belief is a state. It is always dispositional, and also sometimes occurrent; that is, one may be in a long-term doxastic state regarding P, but needn't always be actively contemplating P to maintain this state. A belief has content (S believes (that) C). Of interest to us are propositional beliefs—beliefs whose content is a truth-bearing statement.<sup>60</sup> A belief may also have non-propositional content, such as the object of belief. Take my belief that there is a table before me: Obviously, this belief has propositional content (“There is a table before me”); but there is a second relationship—an aboutness relationship—between my belief and the table. It does not make sense to say of this latter content that it

---

<sup>59</sup> This account is largely derived from Moser 1989, 14-23.

<sup>60</sup> That is, a statement that can be either true or false. This is the *content* of the statement, not the act of making a statement. See Moser 1989, 14-15.

is true or false. Moser uses this detail to distinguish between *de dicto* and *de re* beliefs:

Believing, then, is a dispositional *state* of a person that is related to a propositional *object*. This in short is *the state-object view of belief*. On this view a belief has two essential components: a dispositional state and a propositional object. These two components exist not only in *de dicto* belief, where a belief is related only to a propositional object, but also in a *de re* belief, where a belief state is related to a nonpropositional object as well as a propositional object.<sup>61</sup>

While both *de dicto* and *de re* beliefs have propositional content, only the *de re* belief has non-propositional content.<sup>62</sup> There is a locutional difficulty: We often speak of “S’s belief.” Is this a reference to the belief itself, the propositional content, the non-propositional content, or some other variant? In most cases, when I use this locution I mean the propositional content of one’s belief; when further specificity is needed, I will make it explicit.

So far I have spoken only of “belief,” and spoken of it as a propositional attitude. There are three propositional attitudes considered under the heading of belief: there is belief (doxastic affirmation that P), there is disbelief (doxastic denial that P), and there is suspension of judgment (withholding doxastic affirmation regarding P).<sup>63</sup> Like belief, I here take disbelief and suspension of judgment as doxastic dispositions, not necessarily occurrent at any moment. For the sake of brevity, I use the term *belief*, but understand disbelief and withholding

---

<sup>61</sup> Moser 1989, 17.

<sup>62</sup> *De re* believing “involves an ‘aboutness relation’ to an object... that is not found in *de dicto* believing.” Moser 1989, 14. Non-propositional content is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

<sup>63</sup> For relevant discussion, see Alston 1989, 120, and Feldman 2003.

of judgment as having essentially the same characteristics.<sup>64</sup> Disbelief that P is disbelieving that P, while suspension of judgment that P is neither believing nor disbelieving P.

In *Knowledge and Evidence*, Paul K. Moser distinguishes between believing and merely being *disposed* to believe, and this distinction provides a few important details that will be helpful in examining fideism.<sup>65</sup> Roughly, to be *disposed* to believe is to be in such a state that *if given the opportunity to assent to P*, one would indeed assent. This differs from belief, which requires that one has (in the past or at present) assented to P.<sup>66</sup> Assent is the psychological affirmation of a proposition. As Moser describes it, assent is “one’s sincerely and understandingly affirming it [the content of the belief].”<sup>67</sup> There are a few details that need to be clarified. First, there are the dual criteria of sincerity and understanding. *Sincerity* captures the requirement that the affirmation must be unfeigned and honest. This is different than, say, affirming as a working hypothesis, affirming for the sake of argument, or lying. The criterion of understanding, which I shall not describe in great detail, requires that one’s

---

<sup>64</sup> Critically, all three states have a dispositional element and at least one occurrent moment of assent/dissent/abstinence. It may be possible to argue that suspension of judgment is different in critical ways from belief and disbelief, but any such argument is beyond the scope of the present work.

<sup>65</sup> Moser 1989, 14-23.

<sup>66</sup> To clarify, if S has assented in the past to P, and has not at any point withdrawn that assent, then P still believes. Sustaining of belief may raise interesting philosophical questions, but is beyond scope.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

affirmation be suitably cognitively grounded. If S does not *understand* P, one cannot assent to P. Affirmation that does not meet these two qualifications of sincerity and understanding does not qualify as assent.

Second, assent needn't be a conscious decision. One may psychologically affirm a belief—and thus assent to it—without necessarily being cognitively aware (that is, conscious) of doing so. But assent *is* occurrent. One assents, even unconsciously, at a particular time. Merely assenting to some proposition does not mean one *believes* that proposition. While assent is a necessary condition of belief, assent and belief are not the same. Belief requires a dispositional element, as well. Assent, being an action, is not dispositional.

Thus on the one hand we have assent; but on the other hand, we have the *disposition to believe*. This is not the same as belief; it is the fact about S that *if S was prompted to assent to P, S would assent*. One may be *disposed to believe* but not yet actually believe:

A person, S, is merely disposed to believe that P at a time, *t* = *df.* (i) S does not believe that P at *t*, but (ii) S is in a dispositional state at *t* whereby he will come to believe that P upon his sincerely and understandingly answering the question whether it is the case that P.<sup>68</sup>

Having not yet considered P, one may remain disposed to believe P. While this is not yet a proper belief, it reflects something about S than cannot otherwise be accounted for in a more basic belief model: namely, that S has developed doxastic dispositions to affirm certain propositions (such as, say, arithmetic

---

<sup>68</sup> Moser 1989, 19.

sums), but it need not be said that S has an infinite number of beliefs (one for each possible sum).

Belief, then, is the combination of a dispositional state and *assent* (either consciously or unconsciously). Thus it has both an occurrent (though not necessarily presently occurrent) component and a long-term dispositional component.

A person, S, believes a proposition, *P*, at a time, *t*, = *df.* (i) S has assented to *P* (consciously or unconsciously) either before *t* or at *t*, and (ii) as a nondeviant result of his assenting to *P*, S is in a dispositional state at *t* whereby he will assent to *P* in any circumstance where he sincerely and understandingly answers the question whether it is the case that *P*.<sup>69</sup>

Note again that assent to *P* can occur either presently or at a previous time (again, assuming that the belief has been sustained since the time of assent).

The distinction between belief and a disposition to believe sidesteps other epistemic concerns regarding “beliefs” that are not presently or have never been occurrent.<sup>70</sup> For example, consider the novel proposition *P*: “the next integer after 9,109,321 is 9,109,322.” Assuming S would understand and agree to the proposition if presented the proposition at time *t*, does S *believe* *P* at *t* - 1? A notion of belief that does not have, for example, the occurrent consent condition

---

<sup>69</sup> Moser 1989, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Roughly, without an account of belief that can adequately answer questions about occurrence and disposition, it seems that there is a justificational problem over whether beliefs must be occurrent (a) in order to count as beliefs, and (b) in order to serve as evidence. These problems are summarized in both Feldman 2004b, 236-237 and Conee & Feldman 2004, 67-69. The present account requires both assent and a long-term disposition, both of which fill the need Conee and Feldman mention. cf. Moser 1989, 14-24, 156.

may lead one to suggest that S holds a potentially infinite set of beliefs (since, given the example above, we could continue enumerating integers without end). But given our current model, we need only say one has a *disposition* to believe.<sup>71</sup>

While our present focus is not on epistemology or epistemic justification, there is one thing that should be said here on the matter: While the traditional account of knowledge focuses on justified true *belief*, it seems that in at least some cases, justified true *assent* (as we have defined assent above) ought also be considered knowledge.<sup>72</sup> This will differ from JTB-knowledge in that belief's dispositional nature makes such knowledge dispositional. That is, on our definition, S's knowledge that P persists even when S is not occurrently assenting to P. But in justified true assent (JTA), there is no underlying and dispositional belief to (speaking loosely) sustain S's initial assent; to that end, JTA knowledge is transitory, lasting only when S is occurrently assenting to P.<sup>73</sup>

In this section I have sketched a notion of belief that will be used throughout this dissertation. There remain a few clarifications to make regarding belief, the first of which is to what extent human agents can be said to control their beliefs.

---

<sup>71</sup> And in more complex justification examples, as raised by Conee & Feldman 2004, 67-69, we might suggest that, doxastically speaking, only propositions that we believe or assent to play a role as evidence. Dispositions to believe are not evidential.

<sup>72</sup> Moser 1989, 21-24 provides a more detailed case for considering justified true assent as knowledge.

<sup>73</sup> The notion of justified true assent is important in the fourth chapter, where the notion of epistemic venture is introduced. Assent (alone) is what Bishop calls *sub-doxastic*.

## Doxastic Voluntarism and Fideism

Fideism is concerned either directly or indirectly with belief. Many forms of fideism (Evans's included) make claims about S's believing that (or believing in) some faith proposition. Others, such as Bishop's version, distinguish between one's believing (holding) P and one's taking-that P (or *taking it to be true that P*), and continue on to claim that it is one's fideistically taking-that P that matters. Of course, to distinguish between taking-that and belief, one must have worked out a notion of belief. Thus regardless of the details, both of these positions are concerned with belief.

But can we choose what we believe?<sup>74</sup> Can one follow the advice of the radical fideist and believe against all evidence, or decide to ignore evidence? To what extent does it make sense to admonish one to *believe P*? One puzzle often discussed in contemporary epistemology is the problem of doxastic voluntarism. To what extent, if any, do we have control over our beliefs? Can one directly or indirectly determine to believe P? Can one even influence one's belief that P?

If it were to turn out that human agents have no significant doxastic control, the tenor of this examination of fideism would change markedly. For the questions would then turn to whether being a fideist is a logical possibility, and whether one's being a fideist has implications for an ethics of belief. Only if there is a meaningful sense in which one can influence one's own beliefs can we continue along the proposed line of inquiry. It is important to examine, even if in a

---

<sup>74</sup> Assent, introduced above, will play an important role in addressing this question.



cursory manner, the question of doxastic voluntarism. In an essay entitled “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification,” William P. Alston argues that we have no meaningful doxastic control.<sup>75</sup> At best we can indirectly influence (but not control) our beliefs.

Alston suggests four different modes of doxastic control: basic control, immediate nonbasic control, long-range nonbasic control, and indirect influence. The basic control thesis suggests that “one can take up at will whatever propositional attitude one chooses.”<sup>76</sup> That is, beliefs—any and all of them—are under direct volitional control. Alston offers a few thought experiments as counter-examples of the basic control thesis. For example, “Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the United States is still a colony of Great Britain...?”<sup>77</sup> Alston also suggests that in cases where there is no meaningful sense of an alternative to a belief it does not seem right to say that one can *choose* to believe, for there is no relevant alternative to be chosen. Thus, for beliefs that seem *prima facie* indubitable, it makes no sense to speak of voluntarism of any sort. Perceptual beliefs are, suggests Alston, one such example. “Thus, even if I willingly, or not unwillingly, form, for instance, perceptual beliefs in the way I do, it by no means follows that I form those beliefs at will, or that I have voluntary control over such belief formation, or that I can be

---

<sup>75</sup> Alston 1989a. While the focal point of this article is a non-deontologist approach to justification, the present concern is only with Alston’s analysis of doxastic voluntarism.

<sup>76</sup> Alston 1989a, 122.

held responsible or blameworthy for doing so.... We have just as little voluntary control over ordinary beliefs formed by introspection, memory, and simple uncontroversial inferences.”<sup>78</sup>

Alston claims that since the vast majority of our beliefs fall into categories in which we are bereft of doxastic control (including perceptual beliefs, recollection, and any propositions that seem *prima facie* true or false), the only sorts of beliefs that might remain under our control are so-called controversial beliefs. “Hence if only the uncertain beliefs are under voluntary control, that will not enable us to form a generally applicable deontological concept of epistemic justification.”<sup>79</sup> Yet even with this category of controversial beliefs, Alston suggests that it is wrong to talk of doxastic control; for it is not the case, he says, that we choose to believe one proposition over another, but that once the evidence points a particular way, we simply *do* believe—belief naturally follows the direction of evidence. There is no decision, no action. And what of cases where evidence seems ambiguous? Can we choose in such cases? “To do so would be to choose a belief in the face of the lack of any significant inclination to suppose it to be true. It seems clear to me that this is not within our power.”<sup>80</sup> Alston’s argument seems unclear, though,

---

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 123. I take Alston to be suggesting here that the skeptic about such contents is not really (doxastically) doubting the content of the perceptual belief. This, of course, is different than calling into question the relation between that appearance and any underlying reality. Alston isn’t here committed to a realist metaphysics.

<sup>79</sup> Alston 1989a, 124-125.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

for it suggests that inclinations are limited only to epistemic reasons. That is, belief in P is dependent, wholly dependent, on whether or not S supposes P to be true (or at least supposes P).<sup>81</sup> But could one not have prudential or moral reasons to accept a proposition? This is, in fact, the contention of a number of fideists (though it is by no means limited to fideists).<sup>82</sup> Indeed, this argument can be extended against cases where evidential ambiguity is not an issue. There may be cases (as discussed earlier) where one has epistemic evidence in favor of P, but has moral or prudential reasons for believing not-P. Thus, to claim that a “decision to believe” cannot exist when the epistemic evidence for a proposition is decisive seems to me to be based on an exclusive emphasis on epistemic considerations. While this consideration is far from supporting unconditional doxastic voluntarism (such as basic volitional control), it does suggest that the link between epistemic reasons and doxastic states is not as strong as Alston assumes.

One might revise Alston’s argument and suggest (following our earlier discussion of rationality) that doxastic states are the result of generally rational (or ATC rational) automatic belief forming processes, and in so doing again re-assert the claim that a human agent has little or no doxastic control. But this assumption seems to me to be less readily acceptable, for it suggests an

---

<sup>81</sup> cf. Moser 1989, 14.

<sup>82</sup> cf. Bishop 2007. As we shall see later, Kant and William James both suggest this as well, and Pascal has often be interpreted in this way, too.

underlying process far more sophisticated than preponderance of evidence. Even if such a process *can* occur, and even if it can occur at an unconscious level, this does not necessarily conclusively show that one *cannot* exercise voluntary control.

In another attempt at salvaging Alston's argument, one might also be inclined to reject the influence of moral or prudential reasons on belief, suggesting that such reasons do not actually have any impact on beliefs—only on what one takes (hypothetically) to be true. It is not hard, however, to conjure examples of life-threatening situations averted by one's prudentially motivated (even if evidentially ambiguous) belief that one can perform a task or endure a challenge. Either response, therefore, faces additional challenges before it can be shown to be successful.

Alston anticipates another objection—the suggestion that we routinely decide to hold a position regarding propositions in political, social, or religious domains. Again referring to controversial beliefs, Alston suggests that perhaps one misleading factor is a misuse of the term *belief*. We say *believe* when we mean something else. Alston suggests that many times we *accept* a proposition, holding it as a working hypothesis.<sup>83</sup> The scientist, of course, relies upon working hypotheses when testing theories. But Alston by no means intends to restrict this

---

<sup>83</sup> Alston's notion of acceptance differs from the general notion I introduced early in the chapter. There, I suggested that *acceptance* is "taking a positive doxastic or subdoxastic attitude toward P." Alston's notion seems to require that the attitude be subdoxastic—that is, acceptance is not a broad enough notion to include belief. In this section, I am discussing only Alston's notion.

to the scientific realm. Rather, he suggests that acceptance (as opposed to belief) is a broad pattern, extending even to religion. “One may adopt belief in God, or some more robust set of religious doctrines, as a guide to life, setting out to try to live in accordance with them, seeking to act and feel one’s way into the religious community, in order to determine how the doctrines work out in the living of them, both in terms of how satisfactory and fulfilling a life they enable one to live and in terms of what evidence for or against them one acquires.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, even the decision to hold certain religious “beliefs” may just be the decision to accept those propositions as a working hypothesis.

Alston’s introduction of his notion of acceptance is evocative of a term introduced in the previous section on belief. There, I suggested that there are two components of belief: a dispositional element and an act of assent. As Alston introduces acceptance, it sheds some clarity on his notion of belief. Acceptance is capable of sometimes including assent,<sup>85</sup> yet belief is merely conceived as a disposition. Contrast the account of acceptance above with his characterization of belief:

Now a belief, in the psychological sense that is being used here (as contrasted with the abstract sense of that which is believed), is a more or less long-lived *state* of the psyche, a modification of the wiring that

---

<sup>84</sup> Alston 1989a, 127.

<sup>85</sup> Alston’s examples of acceptance range from one who is knowingly forwarding P as a hypothesis (and thus not sincerely assenting) and one who genuinely and understandingly assents to P.

can influence various actions and reactions of the subject so long as it persists.<sup>86</sup>

Clearly, this is a wholly dispositional notion of belief; in fact, it seems unclear that one could distinguish (on the account above) between a disposition to believe and belief itself. Furthermore, the passive language above raises an important question. Whence belief? Alston seems to accommodate no moment of assent in his account of belief. Beliefs just appear, perhaps upon reaching a preponderance of evidence, or when confidence reaches a certain level, or when probability weighs in on direction rather than another: “Thus when our philosopher or religious seeker ‘decides’ to embrace theism or the identity theory, what has happened is that at that moment this position seems more likely to be true, seems to have weightier[sic] considerations in its favor, than the envisaged alternative.”<sup>87</sup> In absence of a component of assent, belief is left as a result of some other non-volitional process. I think this is a crucial oversight on Alston’s part, one that plays a role in Alston’s other categories of doxastic control, too.<sup>88</sup>

Alston suggests a second category of voluntarism, which he calls *nonbasic immediate voluntary control*. This locus of control requires more than just an act of the will. It requires some other action, such as physical movement. Alston quickly dismisses “perceptual, introspective, and memory propositions” from

---

<sup>86</sup> Alston 1989a, 120.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>88</sup> Baehr (2011) suggests that an attempt to separate action and belief—a tempting route to defend Alston—is ultimately unsuccessful in capturing what we mean by rationality (206ff).

being under immediate voluntary control, suggesting that there are no auxiliary actions that accompany the belief, and that will thereby provide us with belief-accepting (or rejecting) powers.<sup>89</sup> He then turns to Chisholm's suggestion that one can put oneself in an epistemic position in which the evidence will influence one's beliefs in a particular way. For example, one might yield to the suggestion to collect more evidence, rather than to form a belief based on current evidence.<sup>90</sup> Alston's counter-argument runs as follows: "Consider propositions concerning what is visible. I have the power to open my eyes and look about me, thereby putting myself in a position, when conditions are favorable, to reliably form propositions about the visible environment.... No one, I suppose, would take this to show that I have immediate voluntary control over what I believe about the visible environment.... And yet this is essentially the same sort of thing as the search for additional evidence...."<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, when opposing Alston's account, Richard Feldman takes Alston's example as evidence that one can indeed have immediate voluntary control.<sup>92</sup>

There is a third category of voluntarism, suggests Alston: "People try to convince themselves that X loves them, that Y will turn out all right... or that God

---

<sup>89</sup> Alston 1989a, 129.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, 132.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-132.

<sup>92</sup> Feldman 2004a.

exists.”<sup>93</sup> But this is not a directly occurring sort of voluntarism (as both basic and nonbasic immediate voluntary control are), for it does not happen in one specific set of actions. Rather, it is a long-term (diachronic) process involving many actions over time. Alston calls this *long-range voluntary control*. By selectively gathering evidence, exposing oneself to influences, and keeping company with “believers,” one might attempt to influence one’s beliefs. But this method, points out Alston, is not necessarily successful. One may or may not be able to believe even when taking so many steps to influence one’s belief. Alston suggests that it takes too much vigilance to amass only confirming evidence while avoiding disconfirming evidence. Simply stated, because we are (as Alston puts it) at the mercy of “doxastic tendencies that are too deeply rooted to permit modification by deliberate effort,”<sup>94</sup> exercising long-term control, while possible, is not a reliable enough process to consider it to be really under our control.<sup>95</sup>

Alston concludes his examination of doxastic control with the suggestion that, at best, what we have is indirect influence over some of our beliefs.<sup>96</sup> We make non-doxastic choices that influence our beliefs. There are “(1) activities that bring influences to bear or withhold influences from, a particular situation involving a particular candidate, or a particular field of candidates, for belief, and

---

<sup>93</sup> Alston 1989a, 132.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>95</sup> The existence of ardent Republicans and devoted Democrats seems to me to be ample evidence of the human’s ability to selectively gather evidence in support of a belief.

<sup>96</sup> Alston 1989a, 137.



(2) activities that affect our general belief-forming habits or tendencies.”<sup>97</sup> I may choose, for example, to ruminate on my political views, and in so doing accept propositions that in turn result in a doxastic change. “Although the fact that it is within my power to either look for further evidence or not does not show that I have voluntary control over what attitude I take toward  $p$ , it does show that I have voluntary control over influences on that attitude.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, it seems to be that the fact that one’s decision to continue gathering evidence (or take similar epistemic measures) does not *necessarily* result in a change of beliefs is reason enough, on Alston’s account, to reject this is a form of doxastic voluntarism.

Alston’s account is not conclusive. Even reviewing just his argument against basic doxastic control we can see this. The argument first suggests that one cannot help but disbelieve clearly false beliefs. He then suggests that one also cannot disbelieve clearly true beliefs. Granting these, there is still the large matter of beliefs that are neither clearly true nor clearly false. Alston engages a handful of examples backed by intuitions about them—the philosopher considering epiphenomenalism, the gardener wondering whether to plant a garden today or tomorrow, and the religious seeker pondering God’s existence. Alston suggests that one’s final *decision* is not actually volitional at all. It is merely a toggling of belief state, and it is caused by some sort of tipping of the cognitive scales. But this conclusion itself raises a number of doubts: What is to

---

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

be said of this feeling of decision we believe we have made? Do we decide when a certain amount of evidence is garnered or do we decide when a certain threshold of confidence has been reached? Do we choose in which cases psychological certainty is the criterion and in in which evidential probability is the criterion? Alston's simple appeal to intuition seems to mask a tangled web of assumptions about underlying cognitive phenomenon that are supposedly non-volitional, yet which trigger belief.

Keeping that in mind, we can see how the situation is made more difficult by Alston's distinction between acceptance and belief. Acceptance seems to be, from Alston's account, the willful affirming of a proposition. It is not directly related, on Alston's account, to an enduring disposition toward P.<sup>99</sup> But how does it relate to assent as we have defined it? Alston doesn't indicate the relationship between acceptance and assent. More explicitly, Alston does not explain whether when S *accepts* P, S also may *sincerely* and *understandingly* affirm P. Clearly, there are some cases where accepting P as a hypothesis will not be done sincerely. But conversely, it seems equally as clear that in some circumstances one may accept P and do so sincerely and understandingly. Alston's example of accepting religious propositions seems to suggest sincerity. Already it has been suggested that one can assent to P without believing P, and Alston provides no

---

<sup>99</sup> Such a disposition may or may not be present. On Alston's account, acceptance does not seem to be directly related to any disposition.

reason to cause us to doubt this. Taking the rest of Alston's argument at face value, then, it seems that at least some cases of acceptance may involve assent.

It appears, given the above, that Alston is not denying the human capability to assent. Alston is concerned that when it comes to the other half of belief—the dispositional component—it is unclear that we have any doxastic control. For our present account of belief, this is not particularly concerning. Where Alston's account becomes troubling is where he treats all cases of doxastic assent as unconscious, while the subdoxastic assent in acceptance is conscious. Because of this distinction, it does appear that one may have no explicit doxastic control. But I see no reason to accept this. Alston gives examples of cases where assent is unconscious. That is not troubling. He has not, conversely, shown that *all* assent must be unconscious.

The result seems to be this: If there is a meaningful sense of assent, and there is no conclusive argument that beliefs do form automatically in all cases, it seems there is room for doxastic control. Returning to our original definition of belief, belief requires both assent and a disposition toward the belief. If assent is sometimes conscious and voluntary, and is so in some cases where a disposition to believe also exists, then there is a meaningful sense in which we can talk of doxastic voluntarism.<sup>100</sup> Clearly this is not a thesis of radical doxastic

---

<sup>100</sup> Moser (1985) distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary beliefs, calling voluntary beliefs beliefs that "have arisen from a noncompulsory, albeit perhaps habitual, belief forming process" (213).

voluntarism; it is a moderate view, for I am not suggesting that all beliefs are subject to volition.

With this characterization of moderate doxastic control, a question arises in the context of religious belief, and this is a question of particular importance to the fideist.

The radical fideist might be inclined to suggest that one believes *against* one's evidence. In its most simplistic form, the argument might go something like this: S has ample undefeated evidence that not-P; yet S ought to believe that P anyway. As we have seen already, Alston suggests that one cannot truly believe against one's epistemic and psychological proclivities.<sup>101</sup> But given the present notion of belief as assent coupled with a dispositional element, does the radical fideist have a foothold?

Religious belief seems to be among the clearer cases in which (at least for some people) belief includes an explicit conscious moment of assent. History is replete with conversion stories in which individuals recount their moment of belief. The biblical book of Acts tells many such stories, including Saul's conversion in chapter 9. Augustine's *Confessions* may very well mark the inception of a conversion narrative as a literary work.<sup>102</sup> And this phenomenon is not restricted to Christian belief, either. The *Chuang-Tzu*, for example, recounts Taoist conversion stories, and the *Huang-Po* provides examples from Zen

---

<sup>101</sup> cf. Alston 1989a, 138.

<sup>102</sup> Augustine 1961. cf. Brown 2000, especially chapter 16.

Buddhism.<sup>103</sup> In both of these works, the moment of assent is the focus of the account.

Yet the details of Alston's account once again raise a question about our doxastic limits. For while the present notion of belief requires an element of assent—which seems satisfiable in religious cases—it also requires a disposition to believe. Clearly (and Alston illustrates this well) dispositions easily arise when they accord with evidence. Can a disposition be formed against evidence, though?

It is far from clear that doxastic dispositions are necessarily epistemically warranted or even *rational*, regardless of whether they are voluntary. One need only reflect on the wide range of human psychoses and neuroses to see that people genuinely and sincerely believe obviously false things, and persist in doing so regardless of the evidence. Thus, it seems possible that one has a doxastic disposition toward P even in a case where evidence points to not-P.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, it seems possible that one can assent to P, and even sincerely believe P “against the evidence.” Whether or not this sort of fideism qualifies as a neurosis is a question for the psychologist.

---

<sup>103</sup> *Chuang Tzu*, 1996; P'ei Hsui, 1958.

<sup>104</sup> One might claim that this is a result of malfunctioning belief forming mechanisms, but that does not matter in the present context. The fact that it is possible to form a disposition to believe is adequate to carry the point.

## Believing In and Believing That

The account of belief so far has been focused on propositional belief—belief *that*. But does this exhaust what is normally meant by religious belief? It is commonly suggested that *believing in* can be contrasted with *believing that*. And since religious believers often talk about *believing in* God, or *believing in* a particular doctrine or set of doctrines, clearly this is a matter deserving investigation, even if only in a preliminary way.

Suppose some proposition *P*. To believe *that P* is to hold the epistemic position that *P* is true. Thus, when talking about *de dicto* beliefs, the statement *S believes that P* is equivalent to *S holds P*.<sup>105</sup> *Believing that* is a propositional attitude.

But the term *believing in* is not so clear, in part because it is used in multiple senses. First, there are cases where *believing in* expresses belief that some instance of a given description exists.<sup>106</sup> Creedal uses of belief-in may sometimes be taken as such. “I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth...” may be taken to be (merely) a statement that one believes that there is a being who is described by “God the Father, maker of heaven and earth.” Second, there is the sense in which *believing in* means having trust in someone,

---

<sup>105</sup> Whether or not the same point is true of *de re* beliefs is not of concern here. It seems that to say “I hold that there is a steaming mug of coffee before me” is awkward, but it may be correct. In chapter 3, I will follow John Bishop in distinguishing between *holding P* and *taking P to be true*. The second is weaker, not having a doxastic commitment, but only a practical commitment—a commitment to *act as if P*.

<sup>106</sup> That is, if *God* is a title, then to state that God exists is to state that there is a being who fulfills the requirements for having the title *God*.

or more specifically, having trust that that subject will do what is good, right, or prescribed. In this sense, people say things like “I believe in the Chicago Bears,” “I left my teenager at home alone, but I believe in her,” or “I believe in Senator Crookshanks.” Importantly, this sense seems to entail *belief that*, but is not reducible to *belief that*.<sup>107</sup> Third, *believing in* can function as a moral report of one's own viewpoint; it may mean believing that a particular effort or course of action is right or good. “I believe in democracy,” “I believe in charity,” and “I believe in practicing what I preach” are all examples of this. Perhaps in this sense *believing in P* can be reduced to *believing that P is good*. But it is less clear that these cases directly entail *believing that P exists*. Arguably, self-identification with an ideology or movement is also a different meaning of *believing in*. Thus “I believe in Christianity” is not just a claim that “I believe Christianity is good or right,” but is also an expression of acceptance of, membership in, or a doxastic disposition toward that movement.

If there is a second thing in common between various versions of *belief in*, it might be the fiducial component. Many of our uses of *belief in* seem to have something to do with trust. (And the term *faith*, which looms large in the present inquiry, suggests a similar dissection into doxastic and fiducial components.) “I believe in the President” seems to entail that “I trust the President” (while “I believe in the Easter Bunny” does not seem to entail “I trust the Easter Bunny”).

---

<sup>107</sup> This seems to be true even in the anti-realist case, though perhaps it is not clear *what* one believes to be the case.

“I believe in democracy” similarly seems to entail something like “I trust in the principles of democracy.” As we shall see in the next section on faith, this overlap in meaning complicates the distinction between belief and faith.

Given the discussion above, at least some senses of *belief in* are expressive of a propositional attitude, and have this in common with locutions of *belief that*. Restricting this discussion to the propositional attitude is convenient and straightforward, and a major hurdle of religious language is cleared simply by replacing *belief in* statements with their less expressive *belief that* counterparts. But is this an appropriate way to proceed? How important is this fiducial or devotional aspect to an examination of fideism? Trusting that an agent is authoritative, honest, and accurate is important when that authority is part of one's evidence base. But our principle line of inquiry isn't into the trustworthiness of a given authoritative source, but over whether holding a particular belief is rational.<sup>108</sup> This is not a fiducial question, but a question regarding the propositional attitude. This seems to capture the gist of what most fideists claim. Fideists – at least the ones we shall examine here – are more concerned with propositional attitudes toward religious propositions. They are interested in the *believing that P* component of *believing in P*.<sup>109</sup> Fideists are interested in

---

<sup>108</sup> In chapter 4 I discuss authoritativeness and trustworthiness, but even there I refrain from adopting the language of “belief in” to capture this.

<sup>109</sup> The opening example from Job might again serve as an illustration here. Job's inquiry is fiducial. He wants to know about the character of God. As I pointed out, though, fideists such as Shestov try to re-construe Job's inquiry as being an epistemic question about the rationality of belief that God exists (and belief that many other religious propositions hold). This exemplifies how the confusion of *belief in* and *belief that* (or between fiducial and doxastic construals of faith)



supporting their attitude toward a proposition. This is a matter of explaining first why S believes that P. This is not to say that the fideist never brings fiducial or devotional elements into the discussion, nor that a *de dicto* sense fully captures the meaning(s) of *belief in*. When such aspects play an important role in a fideist's theory, I draw explicit attention to them, and attempt to avoid the obfuscation that comes from the language of *believing in*. But unless otherwise noted, I use belief as defined early in this section—as a disposition toward a propositional object, and a disposition to which the belief holder has assented at some point.

Much time has been spent on clarifying a notion of belief. But the traditional focus of fideism isn't necessarily on *belief*, but on *faith*. How are these two terms related? As we shall see, there are several notions of faith, and different fideists will use different notions. The next section examines several construals of faith.

### **Faith**

The name *fideism* suggests that at its core, such a theory deals with faith. But *faith* is a nebulous term. This is evident in the awkwardness of Barbara Sher Tinsley's summary of Bayle: “[H]e insisted that, in the last analysis, faith had to be accepted by faith, and could not be proved by reason.”<sup>110</sup> Faith had to be accepted by faith? In this single sentence *faith* is used to mean “a set of religious

---

can lead one astray.

<sup>110</sup> Tinsley 2001, 21.

beliefs,” and also as a (presumably doxastic) disposition of an individual toward that set of propositions. And this sentence by no means exhausts the variety of meanings ascribed to the term *faith*.

Tinsley’s usage of *faith* as a set of religious beliefs (or as adherence to a particular religious tradition) is a common usage, but not one that will be dwelt upon here.<sup>111</sup> I will use other less ambiguous terms (such as “religious beliefs”) to avoid confusion. But Tinsley’s other usage—her speaking of *accepting by faith*—is of critical importance. What does it mean, in this sense, to *have faith*?

We shall see seven models of faith in the following section. While I point out problems along the way, the goal of this section isn’t to decide upon a single notion of faith, but to identify a range of notions so as to rightly identify, in later sections, which notion of faith is operative within a given theory.

#### Bishop’s Seven Models of Faith

In his article “Faith” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, John Bishop distinguishes seven models of faith.<sup>112</sup> He suggests models of faith as a purely affective state, as a special form of knowledge, as belief, as trust, as a doxastic venture, as a sub-doxastic venture, and as hope.

Bishop begins by suggesting that faith has affective, volitional, and cognitive aspects. It is affective in the sense that there is a psychological state of confidence or trustiness associated with faith. It is volitional in that one

---

<sup>111</sup> cf. F. R. Tennant (1989) for a discussion of this sense of faith.

<sup>112</sup> Bishop 2010.

chooses (to at least some extent) whether to have faith. Bishop suggests that concerns over doxastic voluntarism are not a problem most accounts of faith. I will discuss the particulars as necessary below. Finally, faith has a cognitive component, as most accounts of faith appeal to reason to some degree. With these characteristics in mind, Bishop offers seven different models of faith.

First, Bishop discusses faith as a purely affective state. In this account, faith is a default disposition of “feeling confident and trusting.”<sup>113</sup> Failure to maintain this disposition (“losing one’s faith”) jeopardizes one’s flourishing. On this account, faith has neither volitional nor cognitive components. Bishop finds this characterization of faith to fall short of adequately encompassing the domain of religious faith. This notion of faith, paying little regard to volitional and cognitive aspects, does not seem to capture what most people have in mind when making claims about faith.

Differences in the explanation of the cognitive aspect of faith play a role in distinguishing a few of Bishop’s seven models of faith. Bishop points out the presumed tension between faith and reason, a tension raised by Kant, James, Kierkegaard and others. “It is thus widely held that faith goes beyond what is ordinarily reasonable, in the sense that it involves accepting what cannot be established as true through the proper exercise of our naturally endowed human cognitive faculties—and this may be held to be an essential feature of faith.”<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

Given this assumption, some have suggested that faith is *superior to* reason.

One such claim is that faith is produced by a cognitive faculty higher than other knowledge.

The second model of faith takes faith to be a special form of knowledge. In this model (Bishop cites Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff and William Alston as proponents), faith is a variety of knowledge of specific truths. As Plantinga puts it: “Faith is not to be *contrasted* with knowledge: faith (at least in paradigmatic instances) *is* knowledge, knowledge of a certain special kind.”<sup>115</sup> Plantinga argues that theistic beliefs are what he calls “properly basic,” generated by the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>116</sup> Given Plantinga’s externalism, the fact that the *sensus divinitatis* is a properly functioning belief forming mechanism means that beliefs thus generated are warranted.<sup>117</sup> And knowledge, on Plantinga’s view, is warranted true belief. An individual can then be said to *know* one’s religious beliefs.<sup>118</sup> C. Stephen Evans, whose argument we will examine in the next chapter, discusses Plantinga’s account of faith and knowledge while elaborating his own theory of responsible fideism.<sup>119</sup> In at least some cases, says

---

<sup>115</sup> Plantinga 2000, 256.

<sup>116</sup> Plantinga & Tooley 2008, 7; Plantinga 2000.

<sup>117</sup> Plantinga 2000, 257-258.

<sup>118</sup> The notion of belief employed here is, it seems, close to Alston’s. Belief is primarily a doxastic disposition, produced by external mechanisms, and beyond doxastic control. cf. Alston 1989.

<sup>119</sup> Evans 1998, 41-47 & 110.

Bishop, faith in this model isn't merely warranted belief. It may also require assent. To that extent, one can choose or resist faith.

While this account might provide theistic beliefs with warrant, Bishop suggests that there is one thing it does not adequately provide to the reflective believer. The reflective theistic believer is aware of a plurality of religious traditions. Given that the religious tenets of all of these traditions are not mutually compatible, one must be concerned with holding the right beliefs, avoiding a fall into idolatry. The faith-seeker understands that there are competing interpretations of the belief,<sup>120</sup> and desires the correct interpretation. Thus, says Bishop, a reflective believer is not just after what Plantinga offers under the rubric of warrant. This is because the believer does not feel *entitled* to believe. The externalist account "is still, it may be argued, insufficient to secure entitlement to theistic faith—assuming that entitlement requires that one has evidence adequate to establish one's knowledge, or even just one's justified belief, that God exists."<sup>121</sup> Bishop suggests here that Plantinga's account fails to capture a requirement of foremost concern to a faith-seeker. Belief stemming from external mechanisms cannot succeed here, for entitlement requires at minimum that the supporting reasons be accessible (at least indirectly) to the believer. In consequence, an externalist notion of faith as special knowledge does not

---

<sup>120</sup> Here, *belief* is to be understood according to viewpoint just expressed—as a warranted doxastic disposition.

<sup>121</sup> Bishop 2010. Note also that Bishop seems here to be suggesting that it is not enough for S to be justified that P, but that S recognizes this to be the case.

succeed in capturing the needs expressed by the faith-seeker. Bishop's notion of entitlement is important, and I will return to it later in the section, but for the moment we will continue to review Bishop's models of faith.

Another possible model for faith is to treat faith as firmly held belief. Proponents of this model focus on the relationship between belief (or faith-as-belief) and rationality. Recalling the issue of the tension between faith and reason, Bishop suggests this as the challenge for the faith-seeker: "The rationality of faith on this model will rest on the rationality of the firmly held theological beliefs in which it consists." Bishop is almost exclusively concerned with epistemic rationality. This faith-as-belief model (with its epistemic underpinnings) is compatible with various forms of epistemic evidentialism, which seek to delineate rational beliefs from irrational beliefs based on evidence.<sup>122</sup> Swinburne's "evidential proportion" model is the first Bishop considers—and he does so primarily to raise his objection which serves as a foundational claim in his book *Faith and Evidence*: the so-called evidential ambiguity thesis.<sup>123</sup> Stated briefly, this is the claim that any purported evidence regarding God's existence (or other faith propositions) is unavoidably ambiguous, being subject to multiple interpretations. If this is true, then there seems to be no hope of amassing sufficient evidence for justifying a belief (or of satisfying the requirements of

---

<sup>122</sup> Elsewhere Bishop calls this kind of evidentialism "hard-line evidentialism" (Bishop 2007). I will discuss the position extensively in chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>123</sup> Bishop 2007. This thesis is discussed at length in chapter 3.

epistemic entitlement). Bishop summarizes thus: “If the ambiguity thesis is correct, then—assuming evidentialism—firmly held theistic belief will fail to be reasonable.” (I take Bishop to be using “reasonable” here to refer to epistemic rationality only.) It is important to notice that the critique here isn’t against the notion of faith-as-belief, but against a particular variety of evidentialism when coupled with the evidential ambiguity hypothesis. But Bishop does have concerns with faith-as-belief.

Bishop worries that treating faith as “belief that proposition P” invites danger, as it suggests that faith-beliefs are competing with scientific beliefs, subject to the same evidential criteria. This, thinks Bishop, will ultimately empower critics to easily dismiss religious beliefs on the grounds of evidential deficiency.<sup>124</sup> Again, the concern is over the entitlement to believe: If one claims faith is belief, the same sort of thing epistemologists worry about justifying, and if that belief lacks unambiguous evidential support, then one is not entitled to hold that belief.<sup>125</sup> Thus, to consider faith to be belief is to mistakenly expose it to evaluation against the wrong standard. While Plantinga, Evans, and others suggest that faith is stronger than mere belief, it seems that here Bishop is suggesting that faith is weaker than belief—perhaps weak enough to not even be considered a doxastic state.

---

<sup>124</sup> Bishop 2010.

<sup>125</sup> In chapters 3 and 4, we will see that Bishop’s concerns about ambiguity of evidence are not problematic to the extent Bishop here indicates.

The fourth model of faith is faith-as-trust. “It may thus be held that faith as accepting propositional truths as divinely revealed rests on believing in God—and it is this ‘believing in’ which is, fundamentally, the nature of faith.”<sup>126</sup> Bishop suggests that the trust model is best expressed as one’s having faith *in* God, where this does not merely entail belief that God exists, but also indicate one’s practical commitment to act with trust in God. In the previous section, we discussed how some notions of *belief in* entail a fiducial component. Likewise, a fiducial element plays an important role in the model of faith-as-trust. For the time being, I suggest that faith as yielding and faith as obedience may be justly subsumed under this model (though both are more robust notions of what is required as a result of one’s trust).

Bishop suggests that trust requires a venture: When S puts trust in another, S is acting as if the other has S’s interests in mind. This is a venture for S because S is giving up some measure of control and yielding to the other. But how do we determine in whom (or in what?) we should trust? Does it not seem that for one to reasonably trust another, one ought to have evidence that the other is trustworthy? Bishop offers two considerations here: First, we often trust a hitherto unknown individual on the basis of having formed general ideas about trusting others. Thus, if others are *generally worthy* of trust in a particular regard, then it may be rational to trust in an individual without having specific evidence of

---

<sup>126</sup> Bishop 2010.



that individual's trustworthiness. Second, there are cases where one must make an all-or-nothing decision to trust even when evidence is unavailable.

Such cases provide a particularly interesting class of exceptions to the general evidentialist requirement to take a proposition to be true only as justified by one's evidence. They are interesting because they do not involve non-epistemic considerations overriding epistemic ones, as is the case with some readily recognisable types of exception to trust-evidentialism—for example, cases where being in an established relationship with someone obliges one to trust contrary to the weight of one's evidence; or cases of 'educative' or 'therapeutic' trust, where others are trusted in order to develop or restore their trustworthiness. In the target cases, the epistemic concern to grasp truth and avoid falsehood is not overridden: they are cases where the truth that a person is trustworthy may be beneficially grasped only if one first takes it that the person is trustworthy beyond the possible support of evidence—though once the venture is made conclusive evidence of trustworthiness may happily soon accumulate.<sup>127</sup>

Trust, in a context such as this, is a prerequisite to having evidence of one's trustworthiness. What is unclear to me is how this second example can be considered a case of insufficient evidence in light of the previous suggestion that we have general ideas about trust. For if evidence of general trustworthiness is sufficient for application in a particular case, then even these cases of "extreme" trust seem to have the balance of evidence favoring trust. In consequence, Bishop has not given an example of a case of an exception to general evidentialism, though he may have suggested that supporting evidence, while inconclusive, may be adequate for an agent to venture to trust.

One might further wonder why, if faith is the conjunction of belief (that) and trust, the evidential insufficiency of the belief is not itself sufficient to defeat this

---

<sup>127</sup> Bishop 2010.

model of faith. For the account does not seem to suggest that “faith in” does not require “belief that,” but only that it is irreducible to “belief that.” And if that is so, then the evidential ambiguity thesis seems still to weigh heavily against this notion of faith. In the context of faith in God, the above account suggests that belief that God exists coupled with trust in God together composes faith. Yet if one is not entitled to believe that God exists, it is unclear how the fiducial component plays an important role. Clearly, it does not grant entitlement or justification.

Bishop moves swiftly from faith-as-trust to his fifth model: Faith as doxastic venture, a model that he defends at length elsewhere.<sup>128</sup> In faith-as-trust, the fiducial aspect is captured in one’s trust in God. That is, one believes that God exists *and* trusts that he will act with one’s best interests in mind. In contrast, faith as a doxastic venture is not fiducial. Rather, it deals with the belief condition; it is a venture *that God exists*. Against objections of the sort I identified above, Bishop suggests that the faith-as-trust model might entail the doxastic venture model: trusting in God may carry with it the doxastic venture that God exists.

F. R. Tennant develops a similar model, which he calls faith-as-venture or faith-venture.<sup>129</sup> “Faith,” says Tennant, “involves the determination to be guided by such experiences as we have, rather than none at all, and to experiment in

---

<sup>128</sup> Bishop 2007. I discuss this at length in chapter 3.

<sup>129</sup> Tennant 1989, 99-100.

the realm of the merely possible or ideal.”<sup>130</sup> Two things stand out about Tennant’s synopsis. First, faith is an alternative to suspension of judgment. Second, it is undergone (on Tennant’s account, at least) as a preliminary step; it may, in fact, lead to belief. But neither confirmation nor belief is guaranteed with faith. “Faith has always to take the risk of disappointment and defeat”—thus its venturesomeness.

Bishop’s account shares these features. As the name implies, a fixture of this model is its implications for one’s beliefs. The doxastic venture model suggests that one *believes* and *does so as a venture*. That is, one both believes that P, and acts in accordance with that belief. Bishop circumvents concern over doxastic voluntarism by pointing out that regardless of whether or not one has volitional control over belief, one’s acting in accordance with a proposition is indeed volitional, and it is thus that aspect of the model that counts as venturesome.<sup>131</sup> As Bishop puts it, “Doxastic venture is thus not a matter of willing oneself to believe without adequate evidential support; rather it is a matter of taking an already held belief to be true in one’s practical reasoning while recognising that its truth lacks such support.”<sup>132</sup> Bishop sees this as the re-unification of faith as a gift (that is, as a belief given by God and outside of direct

---

<sup>130</sup> Tennant 1989, 101. While Tennant is not always consistent in his explanation of faith as venture, this particular passage seems to indicate that Tennant is forwarding a model similar to Bishop’s.

<sup>131</sup> Elsewhere Bishop does defend a form of indirect doxastic control in his book *Believing by Faith* (Bishop 2007, 28-33).

<sup>132</sup> Bishop 2010.

doxastic control) and as one's actions in regard to that gift. The fact that one believes, in this model, without adequate evidence, and is cognizant of the insufficiency of evidence, does seem to come into conflict with Alston's argument against doxastic voluntarism in that Alston suggests that one cannot believe against evidence (willfully or otherwise).<sup>133</sup>

Unlike what Bishop calls elsewhere "hard-line evidentialism,"<sup>134</sup> the doxastic venture model does not attempt to base willingness to act on P upon one's evidence that P. One acts *on a venture*, aware that the evidence does not conclusively show that P, and (as Tennant put it) aware of a risk of disappointment and defeat.<sup>135</sup>

Bishop additionally points out that what he calls "highest-order framing principles," propositions that serve a crucial role in supporting large bodies of beliefs, might be of the sort that simply cannot be adequately supported merely by appeal to "a body of independent evidence."<sup>136</sup> Framing principles are, on this account, a special sort of thing. "The framing principles of a doxastic framework are those propositions whose truth must be presupposed if any of the beliefs

---

<sup>133</sup> Alston 1989a, 126.

<sup>134</sup> Bishop 2007.

<sup>135</sup> Noteworthy is the fact that for Tennant, scientific knowledge is *certain* (Tennant 1989, 100). This yields a strong requirement for conclusiveness. Bishop's account (covered in chapter 3 of this dissertation) relies upon a more probabilistic threshold model.

<sup>136</sup> Bishop 2007, 139-144.

belonging to the framework are to be evidentially justified.”<sup>137</sup> And because evidence is incapable (in his account) of conferring adequate support to such principles, accepting any framing principle carries with it an element of venture. (Bishop's notion of a framing principle is addressed in chapters 3 and 4.) And religious faith is the paramount example. It is only the venture model that pays due respect to the quandary of the religious seeker.

The doxastic venture model may thus be regarded as capturing the spiritual challenge of faith more satisfactorily than evidential proportion models do, since it involves a deeper surrender of self-reliant control, not only in trusting God, but in accepting that there is a God—indeed, this God—who is to be trusted.<sup>138</sup>

If all of this is the case, then how can the issue of epistemic entitlement be addressed for faith propositions—those that Bishop now suggests are amenable only to a venture model? The venture model's challenge at this point is to address the following concern (again, recalling our earlier discussion of rationality): How can a faith venture satisfy epistemic obligations for rationality? Bishop offers a couple of answers.

Bishop recounts one popular version of arational fideism, in which one believes *in spite of* the evidence. At minimum, this suggests that one forgoes, in this instance, one's epistemic obligation, ostensibly in order to believe the truth. We will deal with this confusing notion later. Bishop points out that the majority of the so-called proponents of this model (including Kierkegaard) are misinterpreted

---

<sup>137</sup> Bishop 2007, 22. Italics removed.

<sup>138</sup> Bishop 2010.

on the point.<sup>139</sup> However, there is a notable proponent among 20<sup>th</sup> century fideists, though. While Bishop does not cite Shestov, the Russian ex-patriot does indeed seem to be a candidate for classification here.

More often, proponents of the doxastic venture model rely on a notion of supra-rationalism: faith does not oppose reason, but instead extends beyond the limits of reason. C. Stephen Evans, whose version of fideism is the subject of the next chapter, expounds a theory of supra-rationalism based on the argument that reason, subject as it is to sin, is limited in crucial respects. Most crucially, it is limited in its ability to grasp divine truths, even those having to do with God's existence. That granted, one must move beyond reason's limits (to faith) regarding those truths. Bishop makes the observation that "Whether the desire to grasp more truth about the real than science can supply is a noble aspiration or a dangerous delusion is at the heart of the debate about entitlement to faith on this supra-rational fideist doxastic venture model."<sup>140</sup> Noteworthy is the fact that nowhere is the issue on entitlement addressed on this account. Merely suggesting that faculty A is deficient in some regards does not thereby grant one the right to trust faculty B. That is, the imperfection of "scientific" reason does not thereby show faith to be reliable, or even tenable. Furthermore, the faith model in this sort of doxastic venture does not give guidance on how to determine which faith propositions one ought to have faith in, and which ones she or he ought not.

---

<sup>139</sup> In the next chapter I discuss Kierkegaard as understood by Evans. There I return to this point.

<sup>140</sup> Bishop 2010.

The sixth model of faith departs on a crucial detail from the doxastic venture model. This sixth model is the sub-doxastic venture model, and as the name implies, the crucial difference is in regards to an agent's belief. Specifically, the sub-doxastic model does not require that one actually believes in order to have faith; instead, one need only *act as if* the proposition in question obtains. Faith, here, is a decisive commitment to P without an accompanying belief that P. This doesn't necessarily entail that one does not believe that P. But faith, in this model, is not contingent in any degree on one's beliefs. Bishop draws from both Tennant's notion of faith venture and Alston's "acceptance" in explaining this model. Earlier we saw how Alston's definition of acceptance was ambiguous with regards to assent.<sup>141</sup> Bishop's model as explained in this context suggests an ambiguity, though Bishop elsewhere eliminates the source of ambiguity:

People make a sub-doxastic venture with respect to the proposition p if and only if they take p to be true in their practical reasoning, while recognizing that it is not the case that p's truth is adequately supported by their total available evidence, yet without believing that p—i.e. without actually holding that p is true.<sup>142</sup>

Holding-to-be-true, on Bishop's account, strongly correlates with what we have called *belief*. Bishop contrasts it with *taking-to-be-true*, which is assenting to P, but while making certain acknowledgements about the evidence. Taking P to be true is not accompanied by a disposition toward P, while holding P, on Bishop's account, requires not only sincerely and understandingly affirming that P but also

---

<sup>141</sup> cf. Alston 1989a, 126-130.

<sup>142</sup> Bishop 2007, 25.

having a doxastic disposition toward P.<sup>143</sup> This, then, is the clear contrast between the doxastic and the sub-doxastic venture models: the doxastic model requires belief. The sub-doxastic model does not. Importantly, the sub-doxastic venture still requires sincerity in assent (a topic I discuss more in chapter 3). Theories of “faith without belief” that espouse a form of fictionalism or hypothetical (insincere) acceptance of a proposition are not, by this sincerity requirement, forms of sub-doxastic venture.<sup>144</sup>

The seventh and final model that Bishop offers is the model of faith as hope. In absence of conclusive evidence that P, one can adopt an attitude of wanting P to be true or desiring that P obtains.<sup>145</sup> But at the same time, one does not assume (to any degree) that P. Bishop suggests this as the distinguishing point between the hope model and the sub-doxastic model, for the sub-doxastic model recommends taking P to be true in practical reasoning, at least.<sup>146</sup> Yet one can still act *from the hope that P*. But like the sub-doxastic model, it seems to be primarily action-oriented, suggesting that one acts toward that which they hope for. Be that as it may, it is unclear how, exactly, this model fits into an account or

---

<sup>143</sup> Bishop 2007, 33-35. I cover the holding/taking distinction at length in chapter 3.

<sup>144</sup> Bishop would not understand Vaihinger as being an advocate of sub-doxastic venture. For an examination of how Vaihinger’s fictionalism lacks sincerity, see Fine 1993.

<sup>145</sup> Pojman (1986) advocates this perspective. It may be possible to read this into Vaihinger or other fictionalists, but it seems to me that Vaihinger does not even extend the possibility of truth (and thus there is no real grounds for hope).

<sup>146</sup> Tennant makes a similar distinction, finding it in the writings of the apostle Paul and in the letter to the Hebrews. Tennant 1989, 105-107, 112.



rationality. Under what conditions is one entitled to act in hope that P? To what extent can hope-that-P be used as evidence in support of other propositions?

Tennant suggests, further, that hope is a weaker notion than faith:

Hope is a species of expectation fraught with pleasant feeling and desire. It is relatively passive, whereas faith is a creative activity provocative of effort. The opposite of hope is fear or despair: the opposite of faith is mental inertia or indifference as to any spiritual Beyond. Hope involves a slight degree of assurance: faith is assurance sanguine enough to be called certitude.<sup>147</sup>

Hope is distinct from faith, says Tennant, and is by no means strong enough to capture the notion of faith frequently employed in a religious context.

Of the seven models just outlined, neither faith as hope nor faith as an affective state is important for our subsequent examinations. Neither adequately captures the usage of the fideists we shall examine, nor of the subsequent theory. Remaining are faith as a sort of knowledge, faith as belief, and the three venture-based models of faith: faith as trust, faith as doxastic venture, and faith as subdoxastic venture. In coming chapters we shall return to these notions within the context of various theories of fideism.

Before leaving Bishop's discussion of faith, though, one more thing deserves our attention, and this is Bishop's notion of *entitlement*.

#### Entitlement

The idea of entitlement figures prominently in Bishop's assessment of models of faith. Bishop introduces entitlement as a satisfaction of a need of the

---

<sup>147</sup> Tennant 1989, 112. Bishop references this passage in his discussion of faith as hope (2010).

reflective religious seeker or believer: “From the perspective of reflective persons of faith (or would-be faith), the question of entitlement arises: are they rationally, epistemically—even, morally—entitled to adopt or continue in their faith?”<sup>148</sup>

Entitlement serves multiple purposes for Bishop.

First, it exposes what Bishop believes is missing in the externalist’s account of faith. For the reflective believer is concerned with the right placement of his or her faith. And the reflective believer seeks commitment, not just belief.

Plantinga’s warrant (having one’s belief generated by a properly functioning facility) does not account for the reflective believer’s epistemic goals, for the reflective believer wants to avoid idolatry—misplaced worship—while also accepting one’s belief. This, suggests Bishop, requires what must be described as an internal condition: the believer must be satisfied that his or her belief is rightly placed. Rather than turn the argument toward the internalist/externalist debate in epistemology Bishop introduces the notion of *entitlement*. It is not enough that a belief be warranted; the believer must be entitled to believe it.

Second, entitlement serves as a differentiating point between a rationally held faith proposition and an irrationally held faith proposition. Bishop does not want to suggest that *any* proposition can rationally be held by a faith. Entitlement is the watermark or certification that some proposition is held (by faith) rationally.<sup>149</sup> One’s faith that (or in) P fails to be rational faith if one is not entitled

---

<sup>148</sup> Bishop 2010.

<sup>149</sup> What exactly it takes to reach this watermark is the central question for the fideist. Evidence,

to have faith that P. Bishop talks about faith as a *virtue* only when one's faith satisfies that relevant entitlement conditions.

Third, entitlement captures a sense of the permissibility of holding a belief. One way of viewing Bishop's entitlement thesis is to consider the difference between obligation and permissibility.<sup>150</sup> Under this lens, entitlement is about the permissibility of holding a belief, and not (directly) about epistemic obligation. In his essay "The Nature of Epistemic Justification," William P. Alston distinguishes between epistemic obligation and epistemic permissibility: Epistemic obligation is "doing what we can to achieve the aim of maximizing truth and minimizing falsity within a large body of beliefs."<sup>151</sup> While this is slightly different than the characterization made earlier in the chapter, the difference is not important in this context.<sup>152</sup> What is important, though, is how Alston moves from this characterization of obligation to epistemic permissibility. S's belief that P is *permissible* if and only if S's so believing does not violate any epistemic obligations.<sup>153</sup> The notion of epistemic justification introduced earlier in this

---

of course, can provide entitlement, but what else can? Bishop (2007) suggests certain moral considerations.

<sup>150</sup> Foley makes a similar distinction between "justifiable beliefs" (borne out of obligation) and "nonnegligent beliefs," which are permissible beliefs not (yet) justified (Foley 2002, 200).

<sup>151</sup> Alston 1989b, 86.

<sup>152</sup> Alston ultimately defines justification in terms of permissibility rather than obligation. Contrasting Alston's account in 1989b with the one offered in this chapter would be fruitful, but is outside of the present scope.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-88. Clearly, we could extrapolate from the realm of the epistemic to other realms. Thus we could readily talk about moral permissibility and prudential permissibility.

chapter suggests that justification requires having sufficient undefeated evidence in support of a belief. But perhaps the way to understand Bishop's notion of entitlement, and how it differs from justification, is best explained by drawing upon Alston's distinction above. Entitlement is a permissibility thesis stating that S is *permitted* to hold B because S's belief is not held in violation of S's epistemic obligations. Holding a justified belief is, of course, permissible (given that, by definition, it satisfies epistemic obligations); but beliefs that are not justified may be permissibly held, provided that they do not transgress one's obligation to maximize true beliefs while avoiding false beliefs.<sup>154</sup>

Finally, entitlement broadens the scope beyond *epistemic* support.<sup>155</sup> The sort of justification discussed by Swinburne, Plantinga, and Alston is epistemic. But one may be entitled to have faith in a proposition (or perhaps non-propositional content) without epistemic justification. Bishop suggests that one may be *morally* entitled to hold P, and we could readily imagine that one could claim to be *prudentially* entitled in holding P. While Bishop concedes that some may claim entitlement to be strictly epistemic, he suggests that such a restriction is not likely to be successful. Bishop's own account, which he offers at length in his book *Believing by Faith*, is that strictly epistemic notions of entitlement are

---

<sup>154</sup> There are two details to point out. First, Alston's account of justification (and of obligation) diverges from the one here. Alston's permissibility thesis is refined accordingly. Second, the exact mechanics of a permissibility thesis may in fact be quite sophisticated, as Alston's (1989b) account suggests. Neither is discussed in detail here.

<sup>155</sup> The exact mechanics of this is sophisticated in Bishop's account, for he discusses entitlement as epistemic, but then suggests that under certain conditions, moral considerations toward P make one epistemically entitled to hold P (Bishop 2007, specifically 22 and 176ff).

69  
unsuccessful; moral entitlement achieves what epistemic entitlement cannot.<sup>156</sup>

Given this description, Bishop's notion of entitlement, considered as a permissibility thesis, can be fitted into our existing model of rationality.

Bishop suggests that the reason why the notion of entitlement is necessary (or desirable) is that believers need "to satisfy themselves of their entitlement to their faith."<sup>157</sup> This, as Bishop notes, requires that the believer have at least some level of cognitive access to the entitlement status of his or her beliefs. And he goes on to suggest that the typical account of evidentialist justification is sufficient to satisfy the requirements of (presumably epistemic) entitlement.<sup>158</sup> But there are cases where an agent is not evidentially justified in holding a belief, yet may still be entitled (permitted) to hold that belief. Thus, in the end there seem to be two defining characteristics of Bishop's entitlement that distinguish it from justification: First, if entitlement is required so that believers may satisfy themselves that their faith is not misplaced, there is an cognitive access requirement. Second, if entitlement is a permissibility thesis, as I have suggested, then it does not require justification (as I have defined it).

A question arises at this point: Does the religious believer need to be justified, or only entitled to believe? As we shall see, various fideists answer this question differently. But it is fair to suggest that meeting one's rational

---

<sup>156</sup> This is illustrated by Bishop's so-called "moral-epistemic link principle" in Bishop 2007.

<sup>157</sup> Bishop 2010.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

obligations, when possible, is better than merely avoiding transgressing rational obligations. For rational obligations, per our model, are obligations that best meet the preferences of the agent. Meeting one's obligations is, then, the most expedient route to achieving one's goals.

In chapter 3, Bishop's notion of entitlement is fitted into his own argument for fideism. Entitlement and its implications will be examined more carefully there. But at this point, we will move from faith and entitlement back to a more general discussion of fideism as a theory.

### **Fideism**

With an account of rationality and belief, and an examination of several models of faith, we are now ready to return to fideism itself. Fideism is a theory designed to address a particular epistemic problem: the purported resistance of certain propositions to epistemic justification. (I will abbreviate this as *justification resistant*, though this term is specific to epistemic justification.) In the context of philosophy of religion, for example, thousands of years of philosophy have failed to produce a conclusive argument or conclusive evidence for (or against, for that matter) the existence of a divine being. Therefore, the story goes, holding such a proposition is unjustified. Thus, on some accounts, the proposition "There is a divine being" is an example of a justification-resistant proposition.<sup>159</sup> Yet such

---

<sup>159</sup> Clearly, this is a disputed point. The proponent of natural theology would balk at the suggestion that religious propositions are in any way resistant to justification. Contrast this, though, with Alasdair McIntyre's "great divide" between definite knowledge and religious dogma, separated by the great No Mans Land. See Taliaferro 2005, 377.

propositions are, first of all, believed by many. And they are deemed by many to be epistemically important. The result seems to be that for an important class of propositions, we cannot have knowledge. S may believe P, and P may be true, but if P cannot be justified, then how can S know P? Fideism purports to provide an answer to this quandary in at least some cases—the exemplar being religious propositions.<sup>160</sup>

The claim that certain propositions are resistant to justification is a crucial claim made by fideists. For fideism is a response to the problem—a claim that in such cases, one may (rationally) still hold (or take to be true) these justification-resistant propositions.<sup>161</sup> The fideist claims that certain propositions, which I will call *faith propositions*—are amenable to what I will for the time being call *fideistic support*. That is, one may hold or take to be true such propositions *by faith*. Note that this is not to claim that any proposition that is resistant to justification is amenable to fideistic support. As we shall see in the next chapter, some (perhaps most) fideists restrict which propositions may be held/taken by faith.

One might answer the question of justification resistance with another question: Why be concerned at all with finding an alternative to justification in a case when justification is not an option? Is it not the case that when P cannot be

---

<sup>160</sup> Fideism need not be *restricted* to religious propositions. One might be a fideist about other minds, the external world, or moral objectivity, for instance. In this dissertation I am primarily interested in fideism about religious propositions. However, the solution I ultimately offer in chapter 4 may apply in some regards to other cases.

<sup>161</sup> In distinguishing between holding and taking, I am attempting to preserve Bishop's distinction between doxastic (holding) and sub-doxastic (taking) faith.

epistemically justified, the rational response is to suspend judgment? There are a number of responses available to fideists. One is the Jamesian suggestion that certain propositions cannot or should not be met with suspension of judgment (they are, in William James' parlance, immediate, live, and forced options).<sup>162</sup>

Another response, this time from John Bishop, is that there are epistemically and rationally important "framing principles" that, while required for reasoning, are resistant to (non-circular) justification.<sup>163</sup> The suggestion common to these is that suspension of judgment is not always the right response to justificational deficiency. Indeed our general account of rationality makes this evident. Even if what is epistemically reasonable is suspension of judgment, it may be morally or prudentially rational to assent. It is sometimes rational to hold (or take) P even when one is not epistemically justified in holding (or taking) P. While fideism is sometimes taken to be irrationalism, the above shows that this is not necessarily the case, and the examples of fideism examined herein are all theories that claim to be rational.<sup>164</sup>

The fideist, then, claims that (a) there are certain propositions that resist epistemic justification, and (b) that one may still rationally hold (or take) P.<sup>165</sup>

---

<sup>162</sup> James, 1984.

<sup>163</sup> Bishop 2007, 189.

<sup>164</sup> There may indeed be forms of fideism that are committed to irrationalism, but those are out of scope for the present examination.

<sup>165</sup> This characterization would agree Bayle, Montaigne, Evans, Bishop, and many other "traditional" fideists. Kant also seems to fit this characterization, as may some of the Reformed epistemologists. With fictionalists like Vaihinger (and maybe Pojman), the story becomes more



With these two claims in view, we can then characterize fideism (generally) as *the theory that there are at least some propositions that a given subject is epistemically rational to hold or take to be true without regard for evidence*. Any specific theory of fideism must elaborate on the conditions under which a given faith proposition may be held or taken without violating epistemic rationality.

By using the phrase “without regard for evidence,” I do not intend to place a requirement that for a theory to be fideist, it must require ignoring available evidence. Rather, this phrase is intended to capture three possible cases: (1) the case where the available evidence is insufficient, (2) the case where the evidence is ambiguous, and (3) the case where the evidence is disconfirming or defeated. Debatably, one might also suggest a fourth case: (4) the evidence is conclusive, undefeated, and supportive, but is rightly ignored. This position suffers, though, from the problem that said belief is already justified, and it is unclear what it would mean to fideistically hold a justified proposition. (Arguably, the fact that one chooses to ignore evidence does not have bearing on whether that evidence actually justifies a proposition.)

Given the above, there are three obvious avenues by which one may attempt to defeat fideism: One may contend that there are actually no cases of propositions that are resistant to epistemic justification. By my lights, for such a claim to be satisfactorily defended, it would require showing that reason is in fact

---

complicated, for they clearly do not *hold* that P. The question then is whether their *acting as if* qualifies as assent. I do not think that it does, as the acknowledgement of the fictionality of P is contrary to the requirement that one *sincerely* take P.

unlimited. That is, one would have to show that there are no propositions beyond the ken of reason. Given that we are not concerned with a conception of fideism for an ideal reasoner, but for real human agents, examples of human cognitive deficiencies—including generally observable psychological dispositions such as the confirmation bias and cognitive difficulties of processing counterfactuals—suggest that attempting this line of argument against fideism is unlikely to be fruitful.<sup>166</sup>

A second avenue is to show that there are no cases in which one can rationally assent to a proposition that is resistant to epistemic justification. Yet I have already argued counterexamples to this in the general discussion of rationality. Clearly there are cases where one can be (all things considered) rational in believing a proposition even when that proposition is not epistemically justified.

The third route is to suggest that, given the proposed theory of rationality, fideism is not the best theory for meeting our rational obligations, all things considered. Phrased more specifically, when it comes to important propositions, such as religious beliefs, one does not best fulfill one's rational obligations through fideism. Developing this argument, though, is not a simple matter of a few paragraphs. It requires closer examination of various theories of fideism, for individual theories have crucial differences that must be addressed. This third route is the line of argument that I take in the following chapters.

---

<sup>166</sup> cf. Gilovich 1991 and Bishop & Trout 2005.

## Conclusion

The goal of this introductory chapter has been to set the stage for the examination of fideism that is to come in the following chapters. Fideism, as I have characterized it, is grounded in an epistemic problem: certain propositions are important, yet (at least in some accounts) seem to be resistant to epistemic justification. To many fideists (and many non-fideists), religious propositions seem to be members of this class. But if these important propositions cannot be justified (and hence cannot be known), then how can a religious believer be rational? Early in the chapter, I sketched a model of rationality that includes epistemic, moral, and prudential notions of rationality (and of justification). And I sketched a general All Things Considered (ATC) rationality, as well. This provides us with tools to assess the rationality of fideism, and we can see that at least *prima facie* fideism is not necessarily irrational. It may be possible to develop a theory of fideism that is rational.

Belief and faith are two other notions that figure largely in discussions of religious belief. Drawing from Moser, I have sketched a notion of belief that at once captures the dispositional aspects as well as the assent requirement. While doxastic voluntarism may yet have unclear elements, the account sketched here includes a moderate doxastic voluntarism. Finally, the section on belief closed with an examination of the difference between *believing in* and *believing that*. I have suggested that both *de re* and *de dicto* beliefs have propositional objects, and it is belief as belief that P that is of principle concern in our analysis of

fideism. That said, there are important senses in which *de re* beliefs differ, and those will be discussed, too, when necessary.

Fideism ascribes tremendous importance to the role of *faith* on the behalf of the reflective religious person. Yet, following John Bishop, we have seen seven models of faith. Fideists, it seems, have multiple candidates when considering the notion of faith. While I have hinted at a few of the weaknesses in some of these models, I have not limited the following examinations to a certain notion of faith. As we examine different fideist theories we will see different notions of faith.

Finally, I have offered a general theory of fideism, intending to capture the commonalities between versions of fideism that range from Bayle and Montaigne's Pyrrhonian fideism to Evans's supra-rational fideism and to Bishop's Kantian notion of fideism as a morally grounded doxastic venture. I summarized fideism as the theory as the claim that some propositions may be held without regard to evidence.

In the next chapter I turn to C. Stephen Evans's account of what he calls rational (or supra-rational) fideism. There, I examine Evans's use of externalist epistemology, coupled with a strong model of faith-as-belief, as groundwork for a theory of fideism.

CHAPTER TWO  
RATIONAL FIDEISM

**Introduction**

“Faith enables human beings to move beyond the limitations of finite, fallen human reason.”<sup>1</sup> With these words C. Stephen Evans concludes his defense of a version of fideism that he calls *responsible fideism*.<sup>2</sup> Evans’s theory, elaborated in his book *Faith Beyond Reason*, is the subject of the present chapter. In this chapter, I examine Evans’s account of responsible fideism, an example of epistemically focused fideism. Evans combines the fideism he locates in Kierkegaard with contemporary externalist epistemology, particularly so-called Reformed epistemology.<sup>3</sup> In doing this, Evans argues that religious knowledge is not an unattainable goal, and where certain beliefs cannot be justified, faith gives one the epistemic entitlement to rationally hold those beliefs. Ultimately, I argue that Evans’s account is flawed in important respects. For that reason, Evans’s responsible fideism does not best address the concerns of a rational agent. Evans’s argument illustrates the difficulties inherent in attempting to build an

---

<sup>1</sup> Evans 1998, 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Evans uses Kierkegaard’s Climacus pseudonym as the source for this fideism. Evans seems to think that Climacus is reflecting Kierkegaard’s own considered view.

account of fideism that remains committed to epistemic rationality.

In the previous chapter I provided a general model of rationality and reason, outlining three important forms of rationality: epistemic rationality, prudential rationality, and moral rationality.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I suggested an account of a general (all things considered) rationality by which it is possible to solve rational conflicts wherein two or more types of rationality came into conflict. Evans's account of fideism is focused almost exclusively on epistemic rationality. That is, the gist of his argument is that one can be an *epistemically* rational fideist. Moral and prudential rationality do not play substantial roles in Evans's account.

Evans employs a variety of technical terms in his argument, and in a few cases the technical terms are used in more than one way. Because Evans draws deeply on various historical texts and movements, and also works broadly within contemporary externalist epistemology, certain terms, such as *justification*, *faith*, and *reason* are used in various ways in various contexts. For these reasons, I spend time examining and explaining the key terms. The first two sections of this chapter are devoted to Evans's models of epistemic rationality and faith.

In the first section, I discuss Evans's model of rationality, and then move to one of Evans's key arguments. Evans sees reason as flawed in two important ways: First, reason has cognitive boundaries. These limitations mean that certain things cannot be understood or even reasoned about. Second, reason is tainted

---

<sup>4</sup> Again, this is not to suggest that these are the only possible types of rationality. They are, however, those that figure prominently in this discussion of faith and religious belief.

by sin—notably pride and selfishness. For these reasons, one cannot assume that reason is the best way to address all propositions or beliefs. Religious beliefs—and in particular beliefs about God—are in such a class. With this argument, Evans opens the door to fideism as an alternative to what he calls *rationalism*—a position he characterizes as wrongly dependent on epistemic reason.

The second section focuses on faith. As we saw in the previous chapter, there are a variety of models of faith. There we looked at several models identified by John Bishop. Evans suggests a model that he calls *Biblical faith*. Drawing from what Bishop called faith-as-belief and faith-as-trust models, Evans elaborates an account of faith that includes three components: belief, trust, and obedience.

The third section is devoted to Evans's responsible fideism, a variety of fideism that begins with a commitment to religious realism and also to epistemic rationality. In this section, I show how Evans integrates contemporary Reformed epistemology with several themes he finds in Kierkegaard's middle (pseudonymous) works in order to create an account of fideism that retains strong epistemic claims while also forwarding faith as an alternative to justification (in certain cases).

In the final section I critique Evans's responsible fideism by asking three questions. In addressing each question, certain issues with Evans's argument come to the fore. Ultimately, I argue that the issues are enough to suggest that

the needs of a rational seeker are not best met by Evans's fideism.

### **Rationality**

Before exploring Evans's fideism, it is necessary to understand Evans's notion(s) of rationality, and also to understand why Evans casts a jaundiced eye toward reason, particularly when it comes to religious beliefs. Evans's fideism is largely couched in a pair of notions familiar to the philosopher of religion: faith and reason. And there is no small amount of tension between the two in Evans's account. The interplay between faith and reason is an important theme throughout the book, with a core thesis being reason's inadequacy in certain domains. That is, reason is incapable of justifying, or even entitling, one's religious beliefs. Consequently, one must turn to faith. Before we can examine the second half of this claim, we must first assess what Evans means by *reason*, what reason's shortcomings are, and how those direct one toward fideism.

In the previous chapter I offered a model of rationality in which I described three different sorts of rationality (epistemic, moral, and prudential), as well as a general "all things considered" rationality. Further, I suggested that one seeks to fulfill rational obligations in order to satisfy certain goals. I will draw on this previously defined model in order to explain Evans.

In *Faith Beyond Reason*, Evans has a great deal to say about rationality, but what Evans means by rationality is sometimes unclear. This is partly due to the fact that Evans is often engaging with enlightenment period notions of knowledge, understanding, and reason. Kant, Locke, Hegel, and Kierkegaard



operate with notions not strongly in line with contemporary usage, and Evans attempts to engage these thinkers on their own ground. But this usage is the exception rather than the norm. Evans's work is not a history of philosophy. Rather, it is largely an engagement with contemporary philosophy of religion and epistemology. When stepping back from the historically oriented passages, a clearer picture of Evans's notion of rationality emerges. Here I attempt to capture Evans's own notion of rationalism, rationality, and reason.

First of all, Evans refers to a philosophical standpoint that he calls *rationalism*. His usage differs from what the historian of early modern philosophy might mean by this term. The salient claim of this form of rationalism is "that religious beliefs ought to be completely governed by reason."<sup>5</sup> Evans suggests Bertrand Russell and Richard Swinburne are contemporary proponents of such a standpoint, while John Locke and W. K. Clifford are historical proponents.<sup>6</sup> Evans links rationalism strongly to evidentialism, the epistemic theory that suggests that justification is best understood in terms of evidence: S is justified in believing B if and only if S has sufficient undefeated evidence in support of that belief.<sup>7</sup> "Theological rationalists," says Evans, "often seem to assume that religious

---

<sup>5</sup> Evans 1998, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8, 38ff.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. Indeed, Evans suggests that Russell, Swinburne, Locke, and Clifford are all evidentialists. Note that Locke is a "rationalist" because of his evidentialism; Evans is not confusing Locke's position in the historical rationalist/empiricist debate, but rather is applying his present definition of rationalism to Locke.

beliefs must be based on evidence.”<sup>8</sup> This linkage between rationalism and evidentialism is an important detail, as it accounts for Evans’s further linking between one’s having *reason* for belief B and *evidence* for belief B. Importantly, the “opposite of rationalism” (and thus the “the denial of evidentialism”) is fideism.<sup>9</sup> I suggest that we best understand (theological) rationalism as the doctrine that religious beliefs require sufficient undefeated evidential support.<sup>10</sup>

This leads to a second related term: *reason*. Evans uses *reason* in two ways: First, there is reason as “an autonomous, relatively competent human faculty.”<sup>11</sup> Reason, in this first sense, refers to our ability to critically evaluate evidence. Evans’s notion of an *autonomous faculty* seems to carry with it an almost personification of this faculty, as we shall see throughout. But what is most important about this formulation of reason as a faculty is that reason can come into conflict with other faculties, notably the faith-producing faculty. While Evans’s notion of reason has strong epistemic connotations, it is not fully clear that he has in mind *only* epistemic rationality. However, with only a few nods in the direction of other types of rationality (notably in the context of Kant’s moral argument for God’s existence), Evans restrains his own argument to epistemic

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Thus any theory of rationalism must offer acceptable guidelines for what “sufficient undefeated evidential support” involves. Also, there is the question of why beliefs require this. There are three likely answers to this question: entitlement, justification, and warrant (in Foley’s conception). To these I will return later in the chapter.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 152.

reason.

The related term *rationality* seems to be consistently used in this epistemically oriented sense as well. Instead of a notion of a general “all things considered” rationality that may be able to arbitrate between conflicting rational obligations, Evans draws a distinction only between (epistemic) rationality and faith. Reason, in the sense explained here, is on Evans’s account a deeply flawed faculty—flawed enough that in certain cases we ought not rely upon it. Later in this section we will explore the two ways in which Evans thinks reason is flawed. But there is a second way that Evans uses the term *reason*, and it, too, is crucial to understanding Evans’s argument.

Evans also talks about *reasons* as individual items. In this usage, a *reason* is (a piece of) evidence. When Evans talks of *reasons to believe* or a *reason to believe*, he is talking about evidence in support of a belief.<sup>12</sup> Evans discusses two types of belief. First, there are some beliefs that are supported by evidence. Such evidence is in turn supported by other evidence. He suggests that this form of evidence “is derived through some process of conscious inference....”<sup>13</sup> By *inference* what Evans wants to capture is not so much the reasoning process, but that such evidence is in some way reliant on other evidence. This dependence causes Evans to worry about an infinite regress argument. To avoid this, he suggests that not all beliefs are evidentially supported. Evans employs

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Plantinga's notion of *properly basic beliefs* to demarcate a class of beliefs that are in some way exempt from evidential support.<sup>14</sup> Evans suggests that certain beliefs are properly basic, such as beliefs about self-evident truths and phenomenological experiences.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, Evans, again following Plantinga, suggests that belief in God—and perhaps other religious beliefs—is properly basic.<sup>16</sup> While Evans does accept that there may be evidential support for God's existence, he states that such evidence on its own cannot be conclusive.<sup>17</sup> Basic beliefs can then serve as foundational evidence for other beliefs, and in this way Evans believes he has circumvented the infinite regress argument. There are problems with aspects of Evans's notion of evidence, and to those I will return later in the chapter. But when Evans talks about reasons, it is with this notion of evidence that he operates.

Finally, Evans uses the terms *reasonable* and *rationality* in a more general sense than the related terms *rationalism* and *reason* might otherwise suggest.

*Reasonable*, as Evans uses it, simply means *to accord with reason*. And

---

<sup>14</sup> Evans uses Plantinga's argument against restricting basic beliefs to a certain class, suggesting instead that denominating a belief as basic is primarily done "in a broadly inductive manner" (1998, 42).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. Again, this is strongly based on Plantinga (1983). This is a simplification, though, for Evans also follows Plantinga in suggesting that there aren't simple rules for identifying properly basic beliefs (42).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-43 and 149.

<sup>17</sup> He considers two measures of conclusiveness, which he calls threshold evidentialism and proportionality evidentialism (Evans 1998, 39). In neither case, he suggests, can one's evidence for God be conclusive. As we see later, this is due to reason's limitations.

rationality is “a commitment to practices that are aimed at truth.”<sup>18</sup> While being reasonable is not a commitment to rationalism, it is also a rejection of blanket irrationalism. Evans’s responsible fideism espouses this moderate rationality, which is evident in this turn of phrase: “[O]dd as it may sound, it may be ‘reasonable’ to hold a belief for which one has no reasons.”<sup>19</sup> One may be reasonable, as we shall see shortly, in assessing the faculty of reason and finding it limited and tainted by sin.

While Evans considers *rationalism* the wrong way to approach religious belief, he maintains that one should commit to *rationality*. While *reason* may be flawed, and while one may believe without *reasons*, one should be *reasonable* in one’s beliefs. As we shall see in the next section, these distinctions become important as Evans argues that while reason is limited, one ought to be reasonable in one’s beliefs.

Evans maintains that his version of fideism is *rational* fideism. What he means by this, given his epistemological notion of reason, is that one can remain epistemically rational even while holding certain unsupported religious beliefs. How can this be rightly construed as rational fideism? This is what Evans calls *responsible fideism*: The reason one can remain rational in this case isn’t because one ignores reason, but because one discovers reason’s flaws and boundaries, and thus (reasonably) moves beyond rationalism. Reason’s limits

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

then take center stage.

### The Failure of Reason

As we have seen, *reason* is principally an epistemic notion for Evans, and he ties it closely to evidentialism. As Evans sketches man's search for justification of religious beliefs—notably, beliefs about God's existence—he interprets this quest as one of finding sufficient evidence to justify such beliefs. But it is an endeavor that has largely been unsuccessful. Why is this so? Is it because there is not sufficient available evidence? Is it divine hiddenness? Perhaps in part. But Evans believes that the primary culprit is nothing other than reason itself. Reason (alone) cannot justify belief in God, and this is so for two reasons. First, reason is limited in crucial ways. Second, reason, like other aspects of humanity, is tainted by sin, and this stymies its ability to adequately address certain beliefs—beliefs about God being the foremost examples. Reason's limitations prevent it from functioning properly when it comes to gathering and evaluating evidence for this crucial class of religious beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

As we move into a discussion of Evans's fideism, there are certain limits that must be set. Evans draws heavily on Aquinas, Kant, William James, Calvin, and Kierkegaard (among others). In fact, he claims that his positive argument is inspired by his reading of Kierkegaard.<sup>21</sup> An examination of any of these thinkers is a tremendous undertaking. Kierkegaard, with his many pseudonymous

---

<sup>20</sup> Evans's claims about evidentialism are addressed in chapter 4.

<sup>21</sup> Evans 1998, vii.

writings, is notoriously difficult to interpret. My analysis does not focus on the works of these authors, but on Evans's interpretation. Furthermore, to maintain the course of the examination of contemporary fideism, I do not devote attention to comparing Evans's interpretation of Kierkegaard with any other interpretation. I simply take Evans's argument for what it is.<sup>22</sup> Because Evans is both advancing an argument and interpreting Kierkegaard, this leads to several situations where Evans's interpretive remarks become points in his own positive argument. Where I think it is correct to do so, I take Evans's interpretive remarks on Kierkegaard ("Kierkegaard believes that reason has what we might term a restless, domineering quality....")<sup>23</sup> as reflective of Evans's own thought; I restrict this only to cases where Evans seems to presuppose Kierkegaard's point of view in building Evans's own argument. With this clarification in mind, we can move on to Evans's historically grounded claims about the two ways in which reason fails.

With this boundary set we may look at what Evans thinks are the two problems with reason. The first claim we shall look at is Evans's claim that reason has certain cognitive limitations.

### **The Limitations of Reason**

First, there is the claim that reason is limited. In what ways? And is this an irremediable condition? Evans draws on Aquinas, pointing out beliefs that

---

<sup>22</sup> I happen to think that Evans relies too heavily on Kierkegaard's Climacus pseudonym, and often overlooks Kierkegaard's non-pseudonymous writings. Thus, one may say that this is fideism inspired by Climacus.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Aquinas says cannot be reached by reason, such as what the essence of God is and what it means for God to be triune.<sup>24</sup> Aquinas' notion of *scientia* (scientific knowledge) does not extend to such beliefs. Yet Aquinas suggests that we can have a kind of knowledge about such propositions. Evans interprets Aquinas as suggesting a knowledge-by-faith model, wherein one's faith provides entitlement to believe.<sup>25</sup> "It is not knowledge in the strict sense because it does not include a direct vision of the truth of what is believed. Nevertheless human beings can by faith apprehend 'intelligible truths about God' that they could not know if they relied solely on natural human reasoning."<sup>26</sup> Evans is not asserting that Aquinas is a fideist. Rather, he points out that he considers the limitation of human reason as a familiar claim in Christian theology and philosophy.

To Aquinas' arguments that reason is limited, Evans adds Kant's. Kant famously divides pure reason from practical reason. Knowledge of God is beyond the grasp of pure reason. Evans explains Kant's theory this way: "In a strong sense... an Idea of reason, such as the Idea of God, marks the boundary or limit of reason. The Idea of God is meaningful to reason; it is an Idea that reason must think. However, it [is] an Idea that can never become an object of knowledge."<sup>27</sup> While knowledge of God may be beyond the ken of pure reason, Kant suggests

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>25</sup> It is not clear whether the object of faith is God, or the proposition in question.

<sup>26</sup> Evans 1998, 58. Footnotes removed. Evans is here drawing on *Summa Theologiae* I 32 1 and I 12 13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



that the idea of God is necessary for morality. Kant identifies God with the highest good, and claims that in order for an agent to act morally, to act with good will, one *must* believe in God.<sup>28</sup> Again, Evans talks about this as a kind of knowledge of God: “The heart of Kant’s philosophy of religion is his insistence that the knowledge of God is *practical* in character. The discovery of God’s reality is not like the discovery of the neutrino or some other exotic sub-atomic particle.... Knowing God, however, is supposed to make a difference to how people view themselves and their task.”<sup>29</sup> One’s “knowledge” of God is not from pure reason; instead, any “knowledge” we have is from practical reason, where the concept of God is necessary for one to properly reason morally.

Critical to Evans’s analysis is the fact that neither Aquinas nor Kant are dealing with a notion of knowledge that matches the contemporary notion of defeasible justified (or warranted) true belief.<sup>30</sup> Regardless, points out Evans, these thinkers do show ways in which reason has its boundaries. It is in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous *Postscript*, though, that Evans finds his most important arguments. Kierkegaard suggests that reason is limited in two crucial ways.

First, reason is limited in its ability to grasp certain concepts. Kierkegaard moves a step beyond Kant and Aquinas, who suggest it is the essence of God

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. Again, this is Evans’s reading of Kant, not a commentary on Kant.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

that confounds us. For Kierkegaard, it is the incarnation that causes reason to founder. As Evans reads Kierkegaard, the incarnation doubly exposes reason's limits:

The point of the incarnation, according to Kierkegaard, is that it is a concept that reason cannot understand. This is so not because reason has a perfectly clear grasp of what it means to be God and what it means to be human and properly judges that the two concepts are logically contradictory. In fact, just the reverse is the case. Human reason is baffled both by human nature and by God.<sup>31</sup>

Evans is here seeking to explain Kierkegaard's talk of the paradox of the incarnation. It is not that the incarnation gives rise to a logical contradiction. Rather, it is that humans understand neither God's nature nor our own. Furthermore, we display what Evans calls a synthesis of the eternal and temporal. Evans describes this as our ability to consider, plan, and set goals. That is, we are forward-looking and take the future into account when we make decisions in the present. We are, in fact, so deeply entrenched in this way of thinking that it is easier for the individual to imagine his existence continuing on than to contemplate his or her own demise. But, points out Evans, even while we display such abilities and proclivities, we also often fail to match our current behaviors to our stated long-term goals. "In reality... all human beings experience life, at least at some points, as a process in which we diverge from our ideals."<sup>32</sup> In Christ, explains Evans, we discover the perfect synthesis of the

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

eternal (forward-thinking) and the temporal. Evans suggests that we find this, or at least Kierkegaard finds this, such a jarring revelation that we cannot properly comprehend it.<sup>33</sup>

But there is a second limitation of reason that Evans finds in Kierkegaard. Reason is limited “by the historical finite character of human reasoners.”<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard’s criticism here springs from the disparity between our high conception of reason and our everyday cognitive situation. For we have what Kierkegaard calls false but comic presupposition that reason is equipped to understand the world as a complete system, and in a detached way—a “view from nowhere.”<sup>35</sup> It is important to see that there are two prongs to this complaint. One is directed against the claim (particularly dominant in Kierkegaard’s milieu) that reason is capable of understanding the world. This is a limitation of reason. The second is that it can do so in a dispassionate way—a result of sin. We will thus shelve the second point for the moment and focus on the first prong.

Whereas Kierkegaard’s first limitation is based on the limits of understanding, the second focuses on the inability of human reason to generate sufficiently accurate theories about the world.

When reason attempts to know the world, it can produce wonderful theories, but when those theories are applied to the actual world, they can never be more than ‘approximations’, since both the world that is to

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

be known and the knower are in constant temporal flux. [footnote removed] My knowledge of the world is both approximative and tentative, always subject to revision. As a temporal being I can never see the world as Spinoza attempted to do, 'under the aspect of eternity', as God himself sees things.<sup>36</sup>

Again returning to Kierkegaard's paradox of the incarnation, Evans points out that historically, human thought has stumbled on the juxtaposition of the eternal and the historical. From Parmenides to the present, endeavors to provide systematic explanations of the world have failed, for they cannot explain both the unchanging, law-like features of the universe in conjunction with the serial change of temporal existence. Neither Kierkegaard nor Evans is suggesting that the world is not governed by laws, nor that it is possible for an ideal mind to grasp it. The point is merely that human reason is ill-equipped to do this, in spite of our nearly obsessive attempts to generate adequate theories. Reason, in other words, is hindered by its inability to handle complexity.

So two cognitive limitations hobble human reason: The first is that certain things seem to be beyond reason's ken, appearing to us as "paradoxes" (to use Kierkegaard's language). The second is that even within the realm of notions we ostensibly can grasp, human reason is still incapable of dealing with the complexity that must be accounted for in explanation.<sup>37</sup> As we shall see in a moment, Kierkegaard (along with Calvin and others) also suggests that reason is

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>37</sup> William J. Wainwright examines a variety of viewpoints regarding the limitations of reason and the understanding of God or the divine. He explores variations of the arguments Evans offers here, showing broad historical basis. (Wainwright 2009, 78ff).

tainted by sin. But before moving to that argument, a few remarks are in order.

First, the argument uses “reason” a little differently than the definitions offered earlier in the book. Here, *reason* has more to do with cognitive capabilities, and is less epistemically oriented. Called into question are matters of whether we can *understand*, whether our cognitive machinery can hold enough information, and whether we can process sufficient amounts of information. What is importantly not called into question is whether or not we can be justified in holding certain beliefs. In other words, nothing in this criticism defeats an account of justification—especially evidentialist justification. Justification does not require complete *understanding* of a belief, or of the object of the belief. One’s belief that electrons exist is not contingent on one’s understanding of the true nature of an electron. A similar point holds for beliefs about God, the incarnation, the trinity, and so on. Yet I think Evans is correct in pointing out that this broader notion of rationality (as cognitive capabilities) is indeed limited in crucial ways. While Evans may have run afoul of his own definitions, the general point is legitimate. It may not call into question our evidential practices specifically, but it does properly challenge any claims that reason is boundless, capable of solving any problem thrown its way.<sup>38</sup>

Second, there is little in the arguments of Aquinas, Kant, or Kierkegaard that would come as a shock to contemporary philosophers. The suggestion that

---

<sup>38</sup> Evans’s argument against epistemic reasoning could be strengthened considerably by raising issues such as forgotten evidence, cognitive biases, and other deficiencies that have a direct bearing on justification. cf. Bishop and Trout 2005 and Gilovich 1991.

reason is limited is now well accepted, and the close ties between knowledge and certainty in the Enlightenment conception of knowledge no longer holds sway. Knowledge is now widely regarded as defeasible. How does this impact the argument at hand? Jose R. Maia-Neto's take on Kierkegaard may be the most revelatory.<sup>39</sup> He suggests that Kierkegaard (in particular) utilizes skeptical arguments to show that *we cannot be certain*, which then makes it impossible to know. Consequently, faith is all that can keep us from despair. But if certainty is not a requirement for knowledge, one need not accept that the only alternative is faith.<sup>40</sup>

In light of these points, it does not at present seem that the limitations of reason, as elaborated here, force one into fideism. What about the effects of sin?

### **The Effect of Sin on Reason**

The second claim Evans makes about reason is that, because of sin, reason does not function as it ought.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, faith comes into opposition with reason, seeking to remedy reason's sin-based failure. "The claim that faith is not only above but against human reason is rooted, not merely in the recognition of

---

<sup>39</sup> Maia Neto 1995, 65-89. Crucially important here is that Maia Neto reads the pseudonym Climacus as Kierkegaard speaking for himself, basing this reading on very early manuscripts. Furthermore, he develops this as a reaction against Cartesianism and Hegelianism—two traditions privileging certainty.

<sup>40</sup> I revisit this argument in chapter 4.

<sup>41</sup> To put this in Plantinga's language, I believe the argument that Evans makes here is that because of sin, the faculty of epistemic reasoning is not properly functioning (at least in some cases).

human finitude, but in the charge that human reason is radically defective.”<sup>42</sup>

There are two ways that Evans thinks reason is tainted by sin. First, reason is hindered by its pride. Second, it is egoistic and selfish.<sup>43</sup> Again, Evans finds both of these reasons in Kierkegaard, and suggests that these are the grounds upon which Kierkegaard bases his argument that faith and reason are in conflict, and one must sometimes choose faith over reason. In Evans’s words, while the limitations of reason push us toward a model of “faith above reason,” the damage done to reason by sin pits “faith against reason.”<sup>44</sup> Whether or not faith is the appropriate response to reason’s limitations and failures is the topic of the next section. In this section, we will look at Evans’s Kierkegaardian argument that reason is tainted by sin.

Evans identifies pride as the first of two ways in which reason is impacted by sin. Again drawing from Kierkegaard, Evans states that “Kierkegaard believes that reason has what we might term a restless, domineering quality, in that it is always striving to master or appropriate whatever it encounters.”<sup>45</sup> When, for example, the scientist makes a startling discovery, her or his reaction isn’t merely to marvel, it is to master. And this, suggests Evans, is because reason is prideful. It tests its limits, constantly pushing for dominion over the world. But herein lies

---

<sup>42</sup> Evans 1998, 96. I take “radically defective” to be hyperbole here.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

the problem: “Insofar as reason is confident that it will always be victorious in its continued quest, it will necessarily reject any claim that there is an *ultimate* mystery, anything that is in principle resistant to reason’s domination and control.”<sup>46</sup> Previously we encountered Evans’s arguments that reason is limited—that there are in fact mysteries that human reason cannot unravel. Here, though, Evans takes the argument a step further, and suggests that reason pridefully refuses to accept this, and this *pride* is damaging. Pride becomes a barrier for reason. When reason approaches something mysterious, but is then incapable of understanding or mastering it, reason rejects the mystery: “The attitude is, ‘What (in principle) I cannot understand must be nonsense’.”<sup>47</sup> For Evans, one’s encounter with a mystery, and subsequently foiled attempts to understand it, becomes the separation point: Here, one must decide between faith and reason.

The second form of sin that taints reason is selfishness. The crucial point of contrast here is in reason’s assertion of neutrality: “Reason in fact prides itself on its disinterestedness and objectivity.”<sup>48</sup> Evans is building an ethical case on top of his previous case for reason’s limitations. Earlier, he argues that one of reason’s limitations is that it is incapable of taking the “view from nowhere.” Now he argues that sin compounded with this limitation results in blind selfishness. Reason maintains that it is capable of taking an objective, neutral view. The

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.



scholar works hard to achieve an objective stance on her or his topic, and views disinterestedness as a goal to be achieved. In contrast to disinterested reasoning, there is *interested* reasoning—reasoning that is done with the goal of attaining a specific result.<sup>49</sup> Evans, via Kierkegaard, argues that the existential aspects of our daily life necessitate interested reasoning. Ethical and religious thinking, with its profound influence on day-to-day life, is thus interested reasoning. Here is where the idea of disinterested reasoning begins to unravel for Evans, for in our practical reasoning, as a result of sin we are primarily concerned with ourselves. We are self-centered, says Evans. And this self-centeredness does in fact extend into areas in which we attempt to maintain disinterestedness. "Even the disinterested scholar looks first to the index of a new book to see how many times he or she may be cited."<sup>50</sup> Evans is not here calling into question the veracity of the scholar, but suggesting that even the application of disinterested analysis is in service to a goal that is self-interested. The scholar of history may well apply the proper apparatus of critical distance, but surely the scholar's own pursuits are motivated by a desire to be recognized, to be understood, and to contribute to her or his field. In the human proclivity of self-interestedness Evans finds a problem. Our own selfishness is what prevents us from faith in God, foremost because we cannot understand God's nature for

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. It is not entirely clear that these are contrary or contradictory in the description Evans gives.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.

our own weakness: "The problem is that God's nature is love and we are so self-centered that we cannot understand God's love, even when, especially when, it is expressed in human form."<sup>51</sup>

Much of Evans's characterization of selfishness suffers from the absence of a crucial distinction: There is a difference between acting *in self interest* and acting *selfishly*. Notably, acting selfishly is acting at the expense of others, while acting in self interest does not imply causing harm, and can be morally and prudentially justifiable.<sup>52</sup> One can act in a self interested way without acting selfishly. In not making this distinction, Evans seems to have opened up an interesting moral issue: One's faith is often (if not always) motivated by self interest as well. A desire for life after death, a fear of eternal condemnation, even an earnest longing to be in the presence of a benevolent God—all of these carry no small amount of self interest. Can one therefore condemn the faithful, claiming it is *sinful* to have faith because of self interest seems to suggest that one morally ought to suspend belief? I see no reason to claim that self interested, when it does not transgress into selfishness, is in any way morally reprehensible.

Interestingly, Evans does not explore what I think may be a more powerful argument about the effects of sinful selfishness (and one that might help distance the notion of selfishness from self-interest). It is not only, or not so much, an

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>52</sup> cf. Moser 2010, 111-119 for a description of selfishness, how it is distinguished from self-interest, and why it damages one's religious inquiries.

*understanding* of God that is put in jeopardy by selfishness. Selfishness stands in stark contrast to what a loving God asks of us, for God requires that we display the same selfless love toward others. Accepting God's gift is intertwined inextricably with becoming part of God's gift to the rest of the world by becoming an avenue through which God's love is expressed.<sup>53</sup> For a selfish agent, such an idea may well be repugnant—repugnant enough to make unbelief a more pragmatic route than belief. While Evans does not develop this line of argument, he does point out the result, citing both pride and selfishness as contributing:

There is of course a link between the two ways sin operates to damage our rational capacities. It is our self-centeredness that makes us prideful and self-sufficient. It is because we are so fundamentally concerned with self that we want to make ourselves the centre of the universe and become as gods. Or, looking at things from the other direction, it is our prideful self-sufficiency that makes it impossible for us to love, that blocks us from truly seeing and caring about the other for the other's sake.<sup>54</sup>

At the end of this quote, Evans identifies selfishness as a blocker to the expression of genuinely other-directed love. If reason is tainted by selfishness and God requires that one love in this sort of way, then it does seem that one may cling to selfishness and for that reason make certain decisions against belief in God.

### The Impact

To what extent is Evans successful in arguing for the failure of reason? On

---

<sup>53</sup> This topic is explored in the final chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

one hand, I find Evans's conflation of reason and the agent's psychological dispositions to be troublesome. *Reason* is not prideful. An agent is prideful in regards to her or his rationality. One can be just as prideful in one's faith. I develop this argument later in the chapter, because I think it reveals a crucial weakness in Evans's account.

Be that as it may, Evans has uncovered a troubling supposition that we often make: namely, we forget about the interestedness of our endeavors. Even in our scholarly detachment, we have intentions that motivate us. While Evans does not explicitly use the same model of rationality as the one introduced in chapter 1, the quandary he points out can be seen even more clearly in our model of rationality: an agent can have a rational preference in favor of, say, prudential rationality—to selfish extremes, even—over against other forms of rationality. In that way, we can certainly understand Evans's suggestion that reason is tainted by sin. I suggest that if Evans's main point is that rationality is not immune from the effects of sin, then he is correct. That said, I'm not quite sure what it would mean to say that *epistemic rationality* is tainted by sin, unless one is using the sin language here to identify cognitive limitations. For as we have sketched epistemic rationality, free of the personification of reason as a faculty, it does not have its own "agentness"—it is not the actor; the agent is the actor. I will return to this later in the chapter.

Then there is the question of whether or not reason is limited, and so limited in important ways. There are myriad documented ways in which humans have

cognitive limitations—occurrent capacity, memory, understanding complex counterfactuals, and so on.<sup>55</sup> Cognitive limitations impact reasoning in a very real way. For that reason, humans cannot act as the ideal reasoners in spite of the loftiest hopes of philosophers. Again, the point deserves re-iteration that there is nothing in this account that calls evidentialism directly into question. Evans's ambiguous use of "reason" and "rationalism" can sometimes lead to a conflation of reason—the faculty—and evidentialism or evidentially oriented accounts of justification. Showing that reason is flawed does not by that fact show that evidentialism is untenable, for contemporary evidentialism does not require an ideal faculty of reason. Most evidentialists accept that knowledge is defeasible, that one cannot occurrently (or even dispositionally) hold all evidence, and that evidence can be forgotten or otherwise lost. The correct conclusion to draw from Evans's argument is that, yes, reason is limited in critical ways. But these limitations do not show evidentialism untenable.<sup>56</sup>

Cognitive limitations and the effects of sin both contribute to reason's incompetence in matters of religious belief. This is the direction of Evans's argument. If this is so, if reason is really so incapacitated, then where ought the religious seeker look? Whence comes the believers entitlement to believe? Evans argues that the solution is faith.

---

<sup>55</sup> cf. Gilovich 1991, Bishop and Trout 2005 for numerous examples of cognitive limitations rooted in cognitive biases and dispositions.

<sup>56</sup> A more complete argument to this effect can be found in chapter 4.

## Faith

In the previous chapter we saw seven distinct models of faith. Early in his book, Evans highlights one of many difficulties in defining faith: “In both secular and religious contexts, we sometimes speak of faith to highlight *uncertainty*.... Paradoxically, we sometimes use the term in a way that connotes some kind of certitude, if not objective certainty....”<sup>57</sup> The term *faith* is used in many ways, and it can be far from clear what the operative notion behind the term is in any given context. To clarify what would otherwise be a highly problematic ambiguity, Evans devotes substantial time to characterizing faith. Yet he stops short of giving a single unified definition. For that reason, we will need to do some work to clear away a few difficulties. As with Evans’s description of reason, his description of faith is sometimes interleaved with analysis of late modern philosophers, the most notable being Kierkegaard. Evans’s frequent references to Kierkegaard introduce a difficulty, as it becomes difficult at times to separate Evans’s notion of faith from Kierkegaard’s (assuming that Evans wishes to distinguish his from Kierkegaard). For these reasons, understanding what Evans means by faith requires a bit of reconstruction from his descriptions.

In the previous chapter, I outlined John Bishop’s several models of faith.<sup>58</sup> As we begin to examine Evans’s conception of faith, we will see elements of three of Bishop’s models. Bishop suggests that some so-called Reformed

---

<sup>57</sup> Evans 1998, 2.

<sup>58</sup> cf. Bishop 2010.

epistemologists (such as Alvin Plantinga) treat faith as a special sort of knowledge. Evans's argument has strong Reformed elements, but what we will see is that his notion of faith diverges from other Reformed epistemologists.<sup>59</sup> Then there is the model of faith as a particular variety of belief—belief, we might say, with a high degree of certainty or conviction. And the third relevant model is Bishop's model of faith as trust. My reading of Evans is that he intends to be most closely related to the third model, but often falls back into the second model. And this, as we shall see, is no surprise given his characterization of faith as consisting of three elements.

#### Biblical Faith

Evans is interested exclusively in what it means to have *religious* faith. In fact, he is most interested in what it means to *have faith in God*. While he acknowledges a wide variety of conceptions of faith, Evans thoroughly introduces only one account of faith, and this he calls Biblical faith.<sup>60</sup> Yet he does not claim that this is his operative notion of faith. After examining this characterization we will need to determine whether this is in fact his operative notion as well.

Biblical faith, says Evans, has three components: belief, trust, and obedience. Belief, the first component, is propositional in nature. Biblical faith is faith *in* God, not necessarily faith *that* God exists. Evans treats *faith that* as

---

<sup>59</sup> To be clear, I am comparing Evans to *Bishop's reading* of Plantinga, Alston, and others. What Bishop points out in his characterization of Plantinga is critical, I think, for distinguishing Evans's fideism from Plantinga's own view.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

merely propositional, reducing in all important ways to belief (that).<sup>61</sup> Evans is skeptical, though, that faith and belief in these contexts are sufficient to capture religious faith—and Christian faith in particular. The belief component in his tripartite faith model is indeed belief *that* God exists.<sup>62</sup> In what remains, I treat this as the principle meaning of Evans’s belief condition. But Evans expands on his belief condition, claiming that it is also “believing what God has said.”<sup>63</sup> This suggests that Evans has a more robust model of belief than epistemologists tend to immediately attach to the term. Belief of the sort required by faith is belief that extends beyond its initial target (God) and well into doctrine. What did God say? There are two ways to interpret what Evans is suggesting here. On the one hand, one may read Evans as claiming that believing in God (in his sense) entails holding several related beliefs, such as that the Bible is God’s word. On the other hand, perhaps he is merely pointing out that Biblical characters believed what God told them. But this introduces an ambiguity that Evans does not unpack. For one may then ask what is the difference between belief in this later sense—belief that what God says is true—and trust. For we might just as readily say “I trust what S has said” in exchange for “I believe what S has said” and *prima facie* mean the same thing. But trust is a separate component in Evans’s

---

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



characterization of faith.<sup>64</sup>

To trust someone, says Evans, “is to say that one would be inclined to believe the person even when that person says something that one has some reason to doubt.”<sup>65</sup> It is tied closely to an epistemic notion of authority and credulity: Well-placed trust is trust in one recognized as an authoritative source. That is, to believe a source when one has reason to doubt, one ascribes greater authority to the trusted source over the other source or sources. “So trust in another person is linked to beliefs about that person in a double way; it seems not only to require that we believe what the person tells us, but to require that we do so partly because we have certain beliefs about the character of that person.”<sup>66</sup> On this account, both belief and trust involve the recognition of authority. Not only are we to take God as a moral authority; Evans suggests here that to have faith in God is to consider God an epistemic authority as well.

The third component of the so-called Biblical model of faith is obedience. This final element is linked primarily to our ethics and actions. Faith *in God* includes an action component. That is, a necessary condition of faith is that one acts in accordance with that faith. If God is to be viewed as an authority—moral, epistemic, and otherwise—then faith necessarily involves acting *as if that were*

---

<sup>64</sup> My reading of Evans on this point is that in his transition from belief to trust, he inadvertently introduces this ambiguity. For that reason, I think the best reading of his belief condition is the first, more propositionally oriented sense. This rendering best matches how Evans subsequently uses the term.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

so. Evans draws upon an historical rift between the Roman Catholic and protestant theologians over what Luther called “the straw epistle.” Evans suggests that the Epistle of James be understood as essentially focusing on the obedience aspect of faith.<sup>67</sup> The historical arguments, suggests Evans, were primarily rooted in a misunderstanding of terminology: The Catholic doctrines did not explicitly include obedience, while the protestant notion of faith did. Both understood the necessity of a “willingness to be obedient,” so the dispute was largely a failure to begin with the same notion of faith. Biblical faith, reiterates Evans, can only be understood as having three components: belief, trust, and obedience.

This three-part notion of faith serves as the basis for Evans’s argument that one ought to believe “by faith” beyond or even occasionally against reason. But while Evans does pose faith against reason on numerous occasions, it should be clear that there is nothing inherent in this notion of faith that necessitates the juxtaposition of faith and reason. That is, faith and reason are not contradictory, contrary, or “opposites.” But when it comes to further characterization of faith, there is one additional step Evans takes: He explains faith as a *capacity* or a *faculty*, using much the same language as he does when talking about reason as a faculty.

#### Faith as a Capacity

Again drawing on Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings, Evans explains

---

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

how faith is a capacity which one develops through certain actions and attitudes.

For Kierkegaard, faith in God in the general sense we are here discussing... is essentially a developed spiritual capacity. Cognitively this capacity expresses itself by giving a person an interpretive skill, an ability to see a pattern and discern its meaning, where those who lack the skill in question might see nothing.<sup>68</sup>

Faith is a capacity, says Evans, to trust God and see God's presence.<sup>69</sup> The trust aspect of the Biblical model is apparent in Evans's description here, and the belief aspect is also readily inferred (one must have a host of beliefs about God, says Evans earlier, before one can trust in God). Remarking on the effectiveness of natural theology, Evans states that the so-called proofs of natural theology are only effective for the believer: "In the beginning of the proof I presuppose that God exists and actually begin with trust in him."<sup>70</sup> Only with that presumption can one accept the conclusion.<sup>71</sup> It seems clear, then, that faith-as-a-capacity is only possible if one already has *faith in God* as explained by Evans's Biblical faith model.

What does Evans gain in construing faith as a capacity? Why make this addition to the model? The primary utility in explaining faith thus is in the juxtaposition one can then maintain. Recall that on Evans's account, reason is a

---

<sup>68</sup> Evans 1998, 120-121.

<sup>69</sup> Evans seems to treat the terms "capacity" and "faculty" as roughly the same. Seeing no distinction in his usage, I use the terms interchangeably.

<sup>70</sup> Evans 1998, 120. Footnote removed. Evans draws this point from Kierkegaard as well.

<sup>71</sup> cf. Evans 1996, 241-243.

faculty. Evans frequently personifies reason such that *reason* is making decisions, *reason* is prideful, and *reason* is acting in a certain way. By framing faith as a capacity or faculty, Evans can now talk about *faith* in similar terms. *Faith* can see the evidence, *faith* can approach God, and so on. If reason is an agent-within-an-agent (a homunculus), yet faith is but a disposition of an agent, the juxtaposition between faith and reason is in some sense strained. However if both are active within a human, each pushing the agent in a particular direction, then one can more readily sketch an account of faith versus reason.

I disagree with Evans's personification of faith just as I do with his personification of reason, and I will return to that point later in the chapter. But I think there is another answer to the question of why faith is construed as a capacity.

Faith, on Evans's middle-Kierkegaardian account, becomes a faculty of evidential evaluation. What do I mean by this? Consider Evans's Biblical model of faith: Faith is belief that God exists, trust in God (as an authority), and obedience to God. On this model, to say that one believes that God exists *by faith* implies that one has assented to the proposition that God exists and that one now has a disposition to believe thus. Now consider this modified conception of faith as a capacity. As a result of Biblical faith one now has a capacity to—what? To see evidence previously unavailable? Or to interpret certain evidence in different ways? What is Evans claiming?

Is faith the capacity to see evidence previously unavailable? Suggesting that

believing E1 may enable one access to evidence E2 is not, by my lights, problematic. One may look at mathematical beliefs as an example: believing (or assenting to) a particular theorem or proof may indeed become a foundation for discoveries that would have been otherwise inconceivable.<sup>72</sup> The subsequent discovery may then become further evidence for yet other mathematical beliefs (perhaps even beliefs already held). Or consider the case of a doctor evaluating a patient who may be suffering from one or more heretofore undiagnosed ailments. When assessing the sick patient who is displaying a litany of symptoms, the doctor may accept (or even believe) that symptom S is indicative of disease D. In so accepting this, the doctor may then begin to probe for other confirming evidence, prompting the patient to disclose more information or running tests designed to discover latent symptoms. While simply accepting S does not in itself lead to the immediate availability of other symptoms, it leads the doctor to direct her investigation in a particular way, thus uncovering previously hidden evidence. If Evans is suggesting that faith may open one to further evidence, I do not object. But it strikes me as a category mistake to suggest that by virtue of opening a route to other evidence, faith is now a *capacity*. To be a capacity, it seems to me that faith must also augment one's cognitive abilities such that one can now *do something* that one could not otherwise do.

There is a second way of interpreting Evans's faith-as-capacity model that is

---

<sup>72</sup> And there may be any number of steps between accepting, say, P1 and arriving at P2. This is not necessarily a direct relation.

not in danger of this category mistake. If faith is the ability to interpret evidence differently, to interpret evidence in a way fundamentally impossible in the absence of faith, then it does seem that faith is rightly called a capacity. But what is this new ability that is gained? Here I think Evans's account is problematic, for the few examples he gives—acceptance of proofs of God's existence or openness to seeing God's purpose revealed in nature—do not seem to require new cognitive capacities. By my lights, they seem to require only holding certain beliefs (namely, belief in God) as preconditions for holding other beliefs. And as previous examples show, this is by no means a capacity limited to the religious believer. It is, in fact, a cornerstone of internalist accounts of evidentialism: Two people may hold belief B, but while one is justified because she has evidence that B, the other is not justified because he does not hold evidence that B.<sup>73</sup> We do not say that our first believer has a *capacity* that the second does not merely because she has access to evidence that the second does not. Likewise, I think that ascribing to faith the status of capacity is ill-conceived.

Evans's operating notion of faith is the Biblical model discussed previously. Nevertheless, by calling faith a *capacity*, Evans now personifies faith in the same way as he personifies reason.

### **Fideism and Responsible Fideism**

Thus far we have examined Evans's models of rationality and faith. Reason,

---

<sup>73</sup> This account is, of course, greatly simplified, as it ignores discussion of adequacy of evidence, defeaters, Gettier conditions, and so on.

construed in largely epistemic terms, is a faculty devoted to evaluating beliefs on the basis of available evidence. But reason is not the pure, wholly objective faculty that some suggest that it is. It is both cognitively limited and tainted by sin. Evans defines faith according to what he calls the Biblical model. It is the conjunction of belief that God exists, trust that what God communicates is in fact the truth, and obedience to God. Evans treats both faith and reason as independent faculties, active parts of one's mental life capable of coming at odds with each other. Against this backdrop Evans proffers his theory of fideism. We have already, in the previous chapter, seen a generic account of fideism. Here we will look at Evans's own variety of fideism, *responsible fideism* in that it does not attempt to dispense with rationality altogether, but rather responds to reason's limitations.

Evans introduces fideism this way, contrasting fideism to evidentialism:

The fideist says rather that faith must be accepted as at least partly autonomous or independent of reason, or even that reason must in some ways be corrected by or be made subservient to faith... In other words, the fideist typically rejects the rationalist assumption that reason is our best or even our only guide to truth, at least with respect to religious truth. The fideist sees human reason as limited, flawed, or damaged in some way. Thus, humans who rely on it to obtain religious truth will not achieve their end. For Christians, the flaw is usually linked to the *sinfulness* of human beings.<sup>74</sup>

Fideism is a response to the recognition that reason is critically flawed. All varieties of fideism, suggests Evans, have this distrust of reason in common. But this does not mean that all varieties of fideism reject reason entirely or even

---

<sup>74</sup> Evans 1998, 9.

within the context of religious beliefs. In fact, Evans claims that reason is a necessary component in a successful theory of fideism.<sup>75</sup> Evans calls his version of fideism *responsible fideism* in order to distinguish it from the caricature of fideism as stubborn irrationalism. He also seeks to distance his version of fideism from varieties of fideism based on anti-realism or language-game approaches.<sup>76</sup> Though he does not make the overt statement of this as his goal, Evans provides an account of fideism that combines elements of contemporary analytic epistemology with a form of fideism he finds in Kierkegaard (mostly in the pseudonymous writings).

Evans distances his account from irrationalist and skeptical fideism. For Evans, the irrationalist is one who “rejects reason as a whole.”<sup>77</sup> That is, irrationalism is the rejection of the claim that reason (a faculty) can or ought to offer any guidance in matters of religious belief. Lev Shestov, whose anti-rational quips we saw in the previous chapter, is clearly an irrationalist in this way. Evans also seems to group the theologian Cornelius Van Til with irrationalists as well, citing Van Til’s claim that only the miracle, and nothing else, can bring one to faith.<sup>78</sup>

It is not only irrationalism, but also varieties of language-game and anti-

---

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-24.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>77</sup> Evans 1998, 23.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-23. While Shestov may be a global irrationalist, Van Til’s alleged irrationalism is limited only to religious knowledge.



realist theories of fideism that Evans wishes to distance from his responsible fideism. Evans dismisses the fideism he finds in Norman Malcom, D.Z. Philips, and the theologian Don Cupitt, suggesting that a critical characteristic of religious belief is lost in these models.<sup>79</sup> His argument against these can be summarized thus: The typical religious believer does not believe she or he is using language symbolically, or merely trying to express certain feelings or affective states through a certain use of words. Rather, he says, they are expressing their belief in certain facts. “[M]ost religious believers will continue to see their faith as linked to claims about the character of reality, and there is no reason why they should not do so.”<sup>80</sup> Because anti-realism and language game accounts cannot accommodate this, they are inadequate theories.

Against irrationalist and anti-realist forms of fideism, Evans positions his responsible fideism as one that recognizes the benefit and usefulness of rationality. But it suggests that the faculty of reason has certain deficiencies. As we saw earlier in the chapter, reason is both limited and tainted by sin. In certain circumstances, the appropriate response to this deficiency is faith. That is, some beliefs must be held by faith because reason cannot provide the necessary support.

This is the gist of Evans’s theory. As we unpack it, we first must look at how justification is related to knowledge, both explicitly and implicitly, in Evans’s

---

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

account. We must also examine how faith is supposed to fill the perceived gaps left by reason's inadequacy and sinfulness. Answering these questions should leave us with a succinct account of Evans's fideism, an account which we can then assess critically.

### Epistemic Justification and Knowledge

It is important to not get our epistemological wires crossed. Historically, at least some forms of fideism may have arisen as a reaction against the strong coupling of certainty and knowledge.<sup>81</sup> And even in contemporary epistemology, questions about epistemic justification become inextricably entangled with questions about knowledge. But a careful distinction between talk about epistemic justification (herein just *justification*) and the role (or potential role) of justification in knowledge will make understanding Evans's argument easier.<sup>82</sup>

Some philosophers make a useful distinction between epistemic justification and warrant. One such recent example is Richard Foley, who views the differentiation between the two as playing an important role in distinguishing questions about knowledge from questions about the rationality of belief.<sup>83</sup> Warrant, as Foley uses the term, is that which is added to true belief (perhaps

---

<sup>81</sup> Penelhum (1983) situates what he calls *evangelical fideism* in this way, though not his weaker *conformist fideism* (62ff). cf. Maia Neto 1995.

<sup>82</sup> Foley (2002) explains the rationale behind considering epistemic justification on its own. There, Foley uses the term warrant as what must be added to true belief (and maybe other conditions) to make knowledge. It behooves us to assume this differentiation when examining Evans, even if later it turns out that justification is warranting.

<sup>83</sup> Foley 2002, 180-182. See also Foley 1993.

with a Gettier-defeating clause) to make that belief *knowledge*. Any given theory may suggest that warrant is satisfied internally, externally, or by some combination of the two. Justification, on the other hand, is about rationality of belief, and as such is generally internal to an agent. One is justified in believing P when one's belief is correctly mentally supported.<sup>84</sup> When S is justified in believing P, S is epistemically rational to believe that P. It should be readily apparent that Foley's description of justification works in conjunction with the model of rationality provided in the last chapter. Evidentialism, on this reading, is an account of *justification*.<sup>85</sup>

With this division between warrant and justification in place, we can then leave it as an open question whether or not justification confers warrant (and whether justification is the only way to be warranted). Evans's own view is nuanced. While he does make a distinction between warrant and justification, he is not strict about the terminological distinction. He sometimes uses the term *justification* to mean only evidentialist justification, and other times uses the term to mean warrant.<sup>86</sup> I attempt to clarify any cases where *justification* seems to be

---

<sup>84</sup> This is intentionally vague, to be completed by evidentialist, coherentist, and other models of internal justification.

<sup>85</sup> Many evidentialists would also claim that evidentialism is about warrant, but that point is not of concern in the present context.

<sup>86</sup> This is compounded by Evans's reciprocating between Plantinga's terminology and Alston's terminology. One of Evans's previous books, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, does a better job of explicating each of these two terminologies, but there as here the term justification sometimes means just internalist justification and sometimes is synonymous with warrant. cf. Evans 1996b, 213-230.

used ambiguously.

Evans's defense of fideism is not principally about knowledge, but about epistemic justification. Above I characterized justification along an evidentialist vein. Evans has the same thing in mind when he talks about internalism and evidentialism. Insofar as Evans is critiquing "rationalism" and evidentialism, he conceives of epistemic justification primarily as an internal condition. It seems, though, that Evans himself espouses a form of externalism about knowledge.<sup>87</sup> He relies upon Plantinga's notion of a properly functioning belief forming process to account for how certain beliefs may arise and be warranted.<sup>88</sup> For Evans, (internal) justification is not a necessary condition of knowledge. Some beliefs may be properly held without evidence, and hence without justification. Warrant, in contrast, is necessary. "Having evidence for a belief is clearly one type of warrant," says Evans, but it is not the only source of warrant.<sup>89</sup> Later in the chapter, we will explore Evans's use of warrant and externalism, but for the time being the salient detail is that there is a clear distinction between (internal) justification and warrant, with warrant being a necessary component of knowledge.

Hidden in this brief characterization is a premise that ought to be brought to

---

<sup>87</sup> This comes across most clearly in Evans 1998, 149. cf. Evans 1996b, 203-230. Evans's externalism seems to be a combination of Alston's and Plantinga's respective versions of externalism.

<sup>88</sup> cf. Evans 1998, 41-45, 147-148.

<sup>89</sup> Evans 1998, 148.

the surface. If knowledge does not require (internal) justification, why is justification important? Evans does not explicitly give an answer, but I think the answer can be gleaned from the context.<sup>90</sup> What is important about Evans's distinction between justification and warrant is not so much what it says about a theory of knowledge, but of what it says about the importance of having internal truth-indicators about a belief. In the last chapter we saw how John Bishop captures the importance of this need in his account of faith. The religious faith-seeker, says Bishop, is wary of falling into idolatry.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the seeker wants not just true belief, or even (externally) warranted true belief, but a sense of *entitlement* to believe.<sup>92</sup> Evans, too, recognizes the same need to which Bishop has drawn attention: Evans recognizes that the faith seeker wants *reasons* to believe. And *reasons*, in Evans's lexicon, is *evidence*. Evans goes so far as to suggest that one's beliefs ought to be reasonable to the greatest possible extent. This comes through when Evans says, "For fideism, at least as I have interpreted it, does not wish faith to come into conflict with logical truths and cannot simply embrace genuine logical contradictions. Nor can the believer simply assume without argument that reason is completely powerless when it comes to looking at religious questions."<sup>93</sup> I find at least two reasons Evans thinks that justification

---

<sup>90</sup> cf. Evans's discussion of faith and "signs and pointers." Evans 1998, 122-123. Evans periodically makes remarks that faith ought not be free from scrutiny, too (37).

<sup>91</sup> Bishop 2010.

<sup>92</sup> In the next chapter we will see how critical this point is to Bishop's fideism.

<sup>93</sup> Evans 1998, 127. Footnote removed.

is important for an epistemic agent: First, the rational agent should genuinely seek to avoid cognitive dissonance—and especially contradictions—whenever possible.<sup>94</sup> As we shall see later, Evans maintains a role for defeaters that can (at least in theory) defeat even faith-beliefs.<sup>95</sup> Second, religious naiveté ought to be avoided. Even while Evans defends fideism, he seems to acknowledge the danger of what Bishop calls idolatry: misplacing one's faith, even if well-intentioned.<sup>96</sup> There is the third possibility, and Evans mentions this explicitly, that justification can be warranting.<sup>97</sup> However, in spite of the fact that Evans thinks justification may confer warrant, this particular reason cannot account on its own for Evans's emphasis on justification, especially in light of Evans's claim that religious beliefs are properly basic (and thus not in need of justification). Furthermore if warrant were the only reason justification is important, there would be no need for a substitutionary faith (as faith very clearly does *not* confer warrant). Within an externalist conception of knowledge, fideist faith only has a role if it can meaningfully supplant justification in the conference of warrant. Consequently, faith must be understood as having to do primarily with entitlement, and not as having a role in conferring warrant.

---

<sup>94</sup> As we have seen, and as we will continue to see, Evans makes exceptions for certain religious beliefs. But within what Evans considers reason's rightful domain, cognitive dissonance should be avoided.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-112.

<sup>96</sup> Evans does allude to fulfilling one's epistemic duty when holding beliefs (37), but without any further explanation of what this means, it is unclear what role this plays.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

Justification is a general tool for entitling one's belief.<sup>98</sup> But Evans is particularly concerned with religious beliefs. Are these in any way a special case when it comes to questions of entitlement? As Evans puts it, many see evidentialism as the way to meet the entitlement challenge even for religious beliefs.<sup>99</sup> Evans does not think this is a goal that can be attained. When he pits evidentialism against fideism what he is suggesting is that there are at least some cases where faith can replace evidence (and evidentialism) in the role of granting entitlement to believe. Instead of reasons for belief, Evans's responsible fideism proposes that one believe by faith. By *faith*, Evans is not suggesting that one has carte blanche to believe *anything*. As he develops his theory of fideism, he provides controls intended to combat both naive belief and irrational belief, though as we have seen, he intentionally leaves room for beliefs that are, as he puts it, above reason.

Another important issue must be raised here. In the previous chapter I suggested that John Bishop's entitlement thesis is based on *permissibility*. That is, one is entitled to believe if it is not the case that one ought not believe. Justification typically has a stronger sense of obligation: If one is justified in believing P it is the case that one ought to believe P. Justification satisfies the

---

<sup>98</sup> Entitlement, recall, says that S is (epistemically) *permitted* to believe B.

<sup>99</sup> Evans is not merely suggesting that philosopher or even academics use evidentialism thus. Rather, he suggests that religious seekers of all stripes tend to approach religion this way.

requirements of entitlement as understood above.<sup>100</sup> If one is justified in believing P, one is entitled to believe P. But as we shall see, Evans suggests an alternative to epistemic justification, an alternative rooted in faith. Is this alternative merely a claim that it is permissible to believe, or does (or can) Evans claim that this faith-based alternative leads to epistemic obligation? I will suggest here that Evans's notion of faith tends toward a permissibility thesis. That is, I think Evans is best understood as claiming that one is rationally *permitted* to hold beliefs in virtue of one's faith.<sup>101</sup> But I will add the caveat that Evans himself does not make this distinction between permission and obligation, and this occasionally seems to lead him to confuse permissibility with obligation, and thus directly compare fideist faith with epistemic justification. I return to this issue when I question Evans's strong ties between faith and knowledge.

Thus far we have distinguished between justification and warrant, where justification captures an internal state, and warrant is construed as that which, when added to true belief, makes knowledge. And we have suggested that justification may confer warrant in some cases, though we have not made it necessary that a justified belief is a warranted belief. This model seems to best fit

---

<sup>100</sup> Some epistemologists might argue this point, but for Evans's account (and for Bishop's as well) this seems to be the assumption.

<sup>101</sup> Since belief, though, is a condition of faith, it seems absurd to attempt to ask the question of obligation: is it rational for one to have faith and not believe. But to suspend the belief condition and ask if it is rational for one to trust and obey God, and yet not believe that P, requires us to make unfounded inferences into whether or not believing P in this case is in fact trusting and obedient to God, for one must additionally bridge one's holding P to a demand from God to believe that P. Thus, my hesitance to call faith an obligation stems from an inability to make sense of this claim.



Evans's argument. We have also looked at the role of justification in Evans's model, with an eye toward understanding why Evans thinks faith can, at least to some extent, stand as a substitute for justification. Bishop's notion of entitlement has helped capture this point.

But what we haven't seen yet is how Evans construes knowledge. Because Evans frequently talks about knowledge of God and religious knowledge, to understand Evans's fideism we must understand what Evans means by knowledge.

#### Warrant and Knowledge

I have suggested that to best understand Evans, we must distinguish between notions of justification and warrant, and I briefly suggested how justification may be important even in cases where it does not confer warrant. And I have stressed that on Evans's account, justification is not a necessary component of knowledge. However, Evans frequently talks about knowledge, particularly knowledge of God. How is this to be understood? Here I want to sketch what I take to be Evans's theory of knowledge, an account based substantially on Reformed epistemology.<sup>102</sup>

Early in *Faith Beyond Reason*, Evans introduces externalism, but does so primarily as a foil to a certain variety of evidentialism. Not until the last chapter

---

<sup>102</sup> Evans distinguishes between knowledge by acquaintance and propositional knowledge, and goes so far as to suggest that both he and Kierkegaard are really working with a knowledge-by-acquaintance model (Evans 1998, 115). But in spite of this claim, he is clearly working with a notion of propositional knowledge. Penelhum 1983 gives a similar reading of Kierkegaard's (Climacus') acquaintance model, but focuses on this as an alternative to belief, not propositional

does Evans “come out” as an externalist about knowledge.<sup>103</sup> For that reason he sometimes sounds as if he is explaining what others believe when he is in fact enunciating his own theory. Evans explicates his externalism piecemeal, beginning with the introduction of *properly basic beliefs*, then adding the notion of *grounded belief*, and finally suggesting that a belief may be warranted even if it is not internally justified.

Evans introduces the notion of a basic belief in the context of a traditional problem for foundationalism: the so-called regress problem. Evidentialist justification, suggests Evans, is based on the idea that a belief is justified by other beliefs, which in turn are justified by other beliefs. This chain of beliefs, though, cannot go on forever. Some set of beliefs, whether large or small, must (on Evans’s account) be held without justification.<sup>104</sup>

[I]f the chain of evidential reasons is not going to be infinitely long, it seems that I must believe some things without believing those things on the basis of any other beliefs... Presumably, then, some of our beliefs are not only basic, but properly so, in the sense that the person holding the belief not based on any other beliefs has not violated any epistemic duty and is not guilty of any intellectual failing.<sup>105</sup>

Evans suggests here that there is a class of beliefs that are basic—not requiring

---

knowledge (170).

<sup>103</sup> And even here, Evans comes across more as suggesting that his theory is compatible with externalism than that he is an externalist. However, elsewhere Evans actively advocates externalism over internalism. cf Evans 1996b, especially chapters 10-12.

<sup>104</sup> See Moser 1985 for a detailed counterargument. The mistake Evans makes is that he does not recognize the role of non-propositional belief content.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

any further justification—and that one may rightly hold these beliefs without justification. Such beliefs he calls *properly basic beliefs*. But what makes a belief properly basic? How is it distinguished from other non-basic beliefs? To answer these questions Evans draws on an argument that Plantinga offers in “Reason and Belief in God”: We need no criterion or criteria for determining which beliefs are properly basic. Rather, the question is inductive: we must discover such beliefs as we go. However, one feature of a basic belief is that it has a ground.<sup>106</sup>

Evans defines a ground thus:

The ground is not properly thought of as a belief at all, or even as an experience, but rather as a set of circumstances which includes an experience of a certain kind... The circumstances in these cases function as grounds by virtue of the fact that God is said to have created the mechanisms by which these beliefs are formed.<sup>107</sup>

A ground is not evidence, and Evans goes to pains to ensure that one does not misunderstand him thus.<sup>108</sup> Grounds have more to do with external circumstances and belief-producing mechanisms. As Evans explains it, grounded beliefs are formed immediately because of the circumstances, having no evidence, but arising spontaneously.<sup>109</sup>

When Evans considers the question of what knowledge is, and what makes warrant, Evans invokes the arguments offered by Plantinga, Alston, and others in

---

<sup>106</sup> It is unclear whether Evans thinks that only basic beliefs have grounds.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-149.

the tradition of Reformed epistemology. Knowledge, on Evans's account, is warranted true belief, where warrant is to be understood in an externalist way. He gives a rough characterization of externalism: "The externalist insists that whether a belief amounts to knowledge depends upon many factors that are external to my consciousness and not completely within my control."<sup>110</sup> However, when it comes to specifics, Evans is non-committal on which precise formulation of externalism he espouses. Yet while he sketches both Alston's version of reliabilism and Plantinga's earlier proper-function account, it is from Plantinga he most frequently draws.<sup>111</sup>

What is important about Evans's externalist theory of knowledge is what it confers on the fideistic believer: If S believes that P, and in fact (it is the case that) P, yet S cannot be justified in believing P, then on the internalist account of knowledge, S cannot know P. But Evans wants to make the stronger claim that we can have knowledge about God (and not strictly in the acquaintance sense that he sometimes uses, but in the propositional sense, too). However, if warrant can be had externally, then one may in fact be able to have knowledge of God without being justified. And to turn a Kantian phrase, this makes room for faith. Now we are ready to turn to Evans's responsible fideism, and see how Evans's accounts of knowledge and justification combine with his view of faith and reason

---

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-149. A similar case is made in Evans 1996b, wherein Evans also sketches Alston's and Plantinga's respective accounts, but does not champion a particular theory. cf. Alston 1989c, Plantinga 1983, and Plantinga 1993.

to produce what he calls *responsible fideism*.

### Responsible Fideism

Thus far I have sketched Evans's models of rationality and faith and I have outlined Evans's epistemology, with emphasis on his views on (internal) justification, warrant, and knowledge. Now we can formulate Evans fideism in its epistemic context.

Reason, we have seen, is deeply flawed in two ways. First, it is limited. Its capacities do not extend indefinitely, and clearly reason cannot comprehend all that it encounters in the world. Second, reason is tainted by sin. It is prone to selfishness and pride, refusing to acknowledge its limits, and subverting its own claims of objectivity by pursuing (subjective) interests and agendas. This, more than anything, becomes Evans's impetus for fideism. Reason is most critically flawed in its approach to religious matters, specifically in its approach to the question of whether there is a transcendent God who is an absolute authority. Reason cannot understand this, nor does it, in its pride and selfishness, wish it to be the case that it is accountable to a greater authority. Thus, reason cannot on its own be trusted to lead one to truth.<sup>112</sup>

This leads to the problem of justification of beliefs about God. Justification, understood along evidentialist lines, requires that one have sufficient undefeated evidence in support of a belief. But because of reason's limitations, we cannot rely upon it to produce such justification. Whether there is available evidence for

---

<sup>112</sup> The problems introduced by the personification of reason are examined later in this chapter.

God's existence is inconsequential, for a deeper problem exists. Reason may operate well enough for our run-of-the-mill beliefs, but when it comes to religious beliefs, when it comes to inquiry about God, reason's litany of shortcomings have the combined effect of rendering our everyday evidentialism useless or, at best, highly dubious.

But, says Evans, this should neither foreclose the possibility of being entitled to believe that God exists (and hold other religious beliefs), nor foreclose the possibility of having knowledge about religious things. On the one hand, faith can entitle belief, and on the other hand, the externalism of Reformed epistemology shows that knowledge does not require justification. Accepting these propositions is not wholesale acceptance of irrationalism, though it is fideism. Rather, it is accepting rationalism only to the point where one ought to accept rationalism—it is accepting that reason functions properly in certain domains, while in others its limitations prevent it from autonomously functioning correctly. In such circumstances, faith is the better alternative.

Divested of its Kierkegaardian, Thomistic, and Kantian trappings, this is the outline of the argument that Evans is making. All of this is what Evans has in mind when he offers this characterization of his own theory:

[F]aith is against reason only in the sense that it runs into conflict with a concrete form of reason that is damaged. Perhaps it is best to describe such a faith as beyond reason rather than against reason, since there is no necessary conflict with reason, but only a conflict with reason that has suffered damage but refuses to recognize this.<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> Evans 1998, 153.

Evans offers a partial taxonomy of fideism. First, there is fideism in general, characterized as it is by its distrust of reason, and its forwarding of faith as the remedy. Within fideism in general, Evans offers three strains he sees as untenable, or at least undesirable. These we have addressed before: irrationalism (including at least some types of skeptical fideism), anti-realism, and Wittgensteinian fideism (or language-game fideism). But there is also a type of fideism that maintains a commitment to religious realism and also rejects the blanket dismissal of rationality as espoused by irrationalists.<sup>114</sup> This is the sort of fideism Evans calls *responsible fideism*.

There are several reasons why Evans characterizes his fideism as responsible: First, he suggests that reason is the appropriate tool in most epistemic situations. Thus, reason cannot be discarded. Second, while reason may be critically limited, Evans thinks that one can become aware of this and adjust accordingly. While, on Evans's account, this requires humbling oneself and accepting both one's own limitations and God's authority even on epistemic matters, Evans seems to suggest that a sort of epistemic rehabilitation occurs thereafter.<sup>115</sup> While reason's deficiencies are not remedied, an agent's reliance on reason may continue because the agent is aware of those deficiencies and

---

<sup>114</sup> Here I use the phrase "religious realism" as a generic term indicating the commitment to interpreting religious claims and doctrines to be claims about how the world really is or really appears to be. A full examination of this idea is beyond the scope of this dissertation. For pertinent discussion, see Moser 1993.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106.

can work around them.<sup>116</sup> (Without the rehabilitation that comes from faith, one cannot work around the deficiencies.) Third, reason in responsible fideism plays the role of assessing defeaters to faith. That is, faith can be defeated rationally.<sup>117</sup>

But following his interpretation of Kierkegaard, Evans takes one further step to claim that faith is in some sense against reason. There are religious truths, says Evans, that stymie reason. They appear in the form of Kierkegaardian paradoxes.<sup>118</sup> The incarnation of the God-man is the foremost example. When one encounters these “absurdities,” these challenges to a faculty of reason that will not and cannot accept such propositions, one must make an informed choice between faith and the conclusions of reason. Such areas are precisely the ones in which, Evans points out, reason is at or beyond its limits. To assent, to believe, is to go against reason. But it is to go against reason where reason is not reliable anyway.

Where does this fideism leave the believer, epistemically speaking? Faith does not confer justification; rather it replaces it in its entitling role. That is, in these cases where reason has reached its limit, one is *entitled* to believe by faith.

---

<sup>116</sup> It never becomes clear what this rehabilitation is or entails, but it seems that the principle gain comes in the form of having a new evidence base of faith beliefs that can then support other beliefs.

<sup>117</sup> Evans 1998, 106-112.

<sup>118</sup> Evans devotes substantial space to explaining Kierkegaard’s usage of the terms *paradox*, *absurdity*, and *contradiction*. In all three cases, the salient point is that these are not indicators of logical contradiction, but of deep difficulties at the notional level. Evans likens them to Kant’s antinomies. Evans 1998, 80-86, 91, 93-94.



It is, epistemically speaking, permissible for one to believe. But without justification, can one have *knowledge* about these faith beliefs? Here, the externalism of Reformed epistemology provides a clear yes: knowledge does not require internal justification. So long as one's faith is formed by a reliable or properly functioning belief forming process, one's belief may be justified. John Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, or the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may play that role of a reliable process.<sup>119</sup> Thus it is reasonable to suggest that one may indeed have religious knowledge, even when one is not justified in one's belief.

This is Evans's account of responsible fideism. With an externalist epistemology that preserves knowledge in absence of justification, and a model of faith and reason that suggests that there are areas of belief that extend beyond the ken of reason, Evans argues that when it comes to religious beliefs—especially beliefs about an absolutely authoritative God—we would do best to shelve the arguments of natural theology and take the advice of Kierkegaard, having faith beyond reason, and perhaps even faith against reason.

### **Three Questions**

So far we have seen how Evans construes fideism. By examining what Evans means by faith, reason, and justification, we have seen how Evans's fideism suggests that human rationality is both limited and flawed. We have seen how Evans uses this argument to dismiss the efficacy of evidentialism in justifying belief in God and in other religious propositions. And we have seen how

---

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

Evans suggests that faith can bridge the gap purportedly impassable to reason.

Evans calls fideism that is committed to reason *responsible fideism*.

But there are questions that arise about Evans's theory. In this section I raise three that are particularly telling. In answering these questions, certain issues with Evans's theory come to the surface. I suggest that these issues indicate that Evans's fideism may not be the best grounds for believing in God, and may not even admit permissibility of such beliefs.

The first question is in regards to Evans's suggestion that reason plays an evaluative and corrective role in faith. Evans suggests that defeaters may rightly defeat faith. The second question has to do with the conflict between faith and reason. Evans suggests that in some circumstances we are confronted with faith on one hand, and reason on the other, and we ought to select faith. And the final question focuses on the relationship between knowledge and faith. Here I question Evans's use of externalism.

### **What is the Role of Defeaters?**

Defeaters play a curious role in Evans's overall scheme. Evans spends considerable time developing an account of the limitations of reason. As a remedy, he suggests faith. Given his externalist bent, justification is not a requirement on his account, as beliefs may be warranted even when unjustified. But just as it seems that Evans has departed wholesale from internalism, he suggests a new role that reason plays in relation to faith. Faith, he says, may be defeated by undefeated defeaters. This claim, which is the subject of the present

section, is then further complicated by Evans's other claim that in some cases, "paradoxes," "absurdities," and "contradictions" ought to be accepted *against reason*. But if this is so, what exactly are we to make of defeaters? How powerful are they, and under what circumstances are they a concern?

### **Defeaters**

From Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, Evans draws the conclusion that there is no role for evidence in supporting religious beliefs. But Kierkegaard, he thinks, has gone too far. Evans makes this remark: "Objective evidence may be neither necessary nor sufficient for faith. However, it does not follow from this that objective evidence is simply irrelevant for faith, or that the believer will have no concern for evidence. Even a belief that is properly basic is subject to being 'defeated' or overturned by evidence."<sup>120</sup> Evans thus suggests that for any given belief, evidence may arise that overturns or defeats the belief. And this is a proper role for reason.

Evans does not spend substantial time developing a notion of defeaters in *Faith Beyond Reason*. In an earlier book, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, he outlines a theory of defeaters in the context of basic and non-basic beliefs, though even this characterization is brief: There are defeaters that suggest belief B is false, and there are defeaters that suggest the process of arriving at B is not truth conducive.<sup>121</sup> Either type may possibly overturn one's

---

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 110. Paragraph break removed.

<sup>121</sup> Evans 1996b, 293-294, also 93, 314-315.

belief if left undefeated. Much has been written in contemporary epistemology about the nature of defeaters.<sup>122</sup> But rather than dwell on details and edge cases, Evans suggests that, “It is not always clear when it is reasonable to think a belief has been defeated,” and with this acknowledgement he moves on to cases that he thinks are clear cut.<sup>123</sup> The particular case he chooses reveals what I take to be the most perplexing aspect of his claim that reason can play a role in fideist faith.

[I]t seems wrong to say that the believer would always be right to ignore evidence that falsified the belief. Suppose, for example, that we found overwhelmingly powerful evidence that Jesus never existed, and that the whole of Christianity, along with its early history, had been invented in the fifth century. If the evidence were really powerful, would it still be possible to continue to believe that an historical figure from first-century Palestine, Jesus of Nazareth, was divine?<sup>124</sup>

What is the responsible fideist to do? Evans’s conclusion: In this case, the evidence is a defeater. Rationality wins out over faith. I find this perplexing for a few reasons, but before explaining those, there is the matter of defeating the defeater.

Evans claims that even while reason may alight upon evidence that is rightly a defeater for a belief held by faith, that defeater can be defeated. That may seem unsurprising, but there is a twist: In cases where the original (defeated)

---

<sup>122</sup> cf. Pollock and Cruz 1999, 196-197 for a concise definition of a defeater, as well as a characterization of the various forms of defeaters. See also Moser’s discussion of contraveners in Moser 1989, esp. 100-106, 113-115.

<sup>123</sup> Evans 1998, 111.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 111. Footnote removed.

belief is held by faith, “[t]he intellectual inquiry and amount of evidence that might be necessary in order to ‘defeat the defeater’ is quite different than what would be required if the belief itself were based simply in objective evidence.”<sup>125</sup> And it is not that a faith-defeater defeater needs more evidence—on the contrary, it needs less. Evans suggests that for a faith belief, the criterion for defeating a defeater is only that there “is no overwhelmingly powerful evidence,” while the requirement for the evidentialist is that the truth be “proved.”<sup>126</sup> That is, in the case of the alleged fifth century Christianity fraud, the faith-holder need only discover that there is no overwhelming evidence that the Jesus story was a myth, while presumably a believer who believed on the basis of evidence would require, it seems, conclusive evidence that the alleged first century fraud story is itself untrue.<sup>127</sup> The rationale for this perplexing dual standard is not explained.

Even granting Evans’s initial claims about fideism, I do not see any reason to accept the suggestion that defeaters are defeated differently for beliefs held by faith and beliefs supported by evidence. More detailed accounts of defeaters and defeating defeaters may better address what is required for defeating defeaters, but for the present, I suggest that Evans is mistaken in claiming that evidentially held beliefs have a higher onus when confronting defeaters. If anything, it seems that the opposite would be true: faith beliefs, absent sufficient evidence, ought to

---

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>127</sup> This claim does not appear in Evans 1996b. cf. 314-315 for relevant discussion.

be more readily jettisoned when confronted with an undefeated defeater.

Drawing on the earlier distinction between faith and justification, it seems clear that psychological conviction notwithstanding, faith is on weaker epistemic footing than a justified belief in virtue of the fact that it is not evidentially supported. Suggesting that an evidence-less belief is less susceptible to defeat than a justified belief borders on irrational, as it clearly does not align with the rational obligation to maximize true beliefs while minimizing false ones.

Defeating the defeater, as troublesome as it appears here, is the lesser problem. The greater problem is Evans's account of defeaters and one's response.

### **What Defeats What?**

The main point of Evans's introduction of defeaters is this: While one may hold a belief by faith, reason may reveal defeaters that can (and perhaps ought to) defeat faith. That is, when an undefeated defeater against a belief held by faith comes to one's attention, one must assess whether, as a result of the defeater, one ought not believe. While defeaters are traditionally posed against justification or warrant, Evans acknowledges that they may operate against faith as well. There are, however, two difficulties with such a use of defeaters.

First, it is not clear what part of faith the defeater defeats. All things considered, this may be a minor point, but I find it troublesome. Evans's account suggests that defeaters work against faith in the same way that they work against justification. The context of Evans's discussion, too, is on internalist notions of

justification—and more specifically, it is about evidentialism. A defeater works against evidence in that it can rebut or undercut that evidence. In the typical account of defeaters, when E is evidence in support of P, a rebutting defeater E\* indicates that not-P.<sup>128</sup> Evans's example above is an example of a rebutting defeater. A defeater is undercutting when it calls into question the connection between evidence E and P. Undercutting defeaters capture the case where E's relation to P is not such that P follows by virtue of E, or, as Pollock and Cruz put it, an undercutting defeater shows that *E does not guarantee P*.<sup>129</sup> In short, a defeater presents a challenge to the source of support for a proposition.<sup>130</sup>

But how do defeaters work against faith? Faith, in Evans's Biblical model, is a combination of belief (that), and trust and obedience to God. Even in the traditional account of defeaters, a defeater is not a defeater of belief, but of justification. Thus, there is no reason to suggest that a defeater in this context defeats belief. Indeed, it is not clear what that would even mean. So does a defeater defeat obedience, or defeat trust? Both trust and obedience seem to be about a relationship tangential to the actual belief. I may trust God and I may obey God, but what part of Evans's example of the alleged fifth century Christianity scandal undermines that specific trust? I may continue to trust and

---

<sup>128</sup> This is sometimes qualified by adding that E\* must also in some way be more probable than E.

<sup>129</sup> Pollock and Cruz 1999, 196-197.

<sup>130</sup> The notion of a defeater is also addressed in the fourth chapter, where it becomes important for a positive account of evidentialist justification.

obey God, but reject propositions about early Christianity, perhaps even about the incarnation. I think the actual role that the defeater is playing here is in regard to entitlement. This defeater theory suggests that in light of an undefeated defeater, it is simply no longer epistemically permissible to believe that which has been defeated. But entitlement is something I have added to Evans's account. Thus, it seems to me that importing the notion of a defeater and using it in relation to faith exposes a weakness of Evans's account—an overzealous attempt, perhaps, to make faith act like justification. Only when faith is properly understood as only entitlement, and not a direct analog or alternative to justification do we see how faith can be undermined by a defeater. Again, this is a minor problem, one that the present account has already corrected. The other looms large.

Secondly, there is the matter of *reason* defeating *faith*. How does this concept of a defeater coexist with Evans's claim that sometimes reason is incapable of addressing certain propositions simply because it is too limited? Evans cites Aquinas, Kant, and Kierkegaard all on this matter, concluding that reason sometimes falls short.<sup>131</sup> Evans believes reason is critically flawed. But in light of reason's incapacity to understand how God could become a person, reason's incapacity to understand triunity, reason's incapacity to understand God's authority or power, and so on how can reason suddenly be competent to

---

<sup>131</sup> Evans 1998, chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 each elaborate this point, first from Aquinas, then Kant, then twice from Kierkegaard.



*defeat faith?*

I find it odd that while evidence for or against a religious proposition does not count toward entitling a religious belief, evidence against an already held proposition does count. Evans reiterates throughout the book that when it comes to certain matters, and religious propositions are the foremost example, reason's limitations and sinfulness make it an ill candidate for supporting religious beliefs. Evans does *not* argue that there is no evidence for God's existence, nor does he argue even that the evidence is necessarily unavailable or underdetermining. He argues that *reason* is the problem. Regardless of whether there is evidence for God's existence or for the historical works of Jesus, reason is incapable of justifying such religious beliefs because of its own flaws. Broaching such religious topics is beyond reason's capabilities. This, of course, is what makes faith an indispensable component of rational religious belief. Why, then, is reason suddenly qualified to defeat faith? Are not those same limitations of reason—its pridefulness, its selfishness, its limitations in capacity and understanding—reasons that should also disqualify it from presenting defeaters?<sup>132</sup> One might attempt to circumvent this argument by claiming that, once aware of its limitations, reason can properly operate in cooperation with faith, and thus in this renewed capacity rightly present defeaters. But this borders on begging the question, for if reason presents defeaters that undermine faith in propositions

---

<sup>132</sup> cf. Evans 1998, 97. There Evans enumerates the flaws of reason he finds in Kierkegaard, and these reasons would seem to disqualify reason from raising defeaters.

about God's existence, one does not then say it is by God's rehabilitation of reason that reason properly undermines belief in God.<sup>133</sup>

It does seem, though, that Evans's intuition about defeaters is correct: When overwhelming evidence presents itself, one ought to follow the evidence. If Evans indeed wants to maintain an air of epistemic rationality, such a move is, it seems, necessary. To refuse a role for defeaters is to concede the point to the irrational fideist: reason plays no role in faith. To avoid this, acknowledging a role for defeaters seems to be a requirement. Yet it also does not work, for it must, to turn a phrase, place reason above faith.

Finally, Evans's introduction of defeaters brings into sharp relief a nagging issue with his characterization of reason in general: Repeatedly we see reason characterized as imperfect—"fatally flawed," says Evans. Yet he continually returns to the claim that fideism can be reasonable. Even with the hairline differentiation between rationalism, rationality, and reason, Evans still seems to have transgressed on an important detail: ultimately faith (on this account) has to be judged to be *reasonable*, and so judged by a faculty Evans says is decisively unreliable. This account of defeaters is but one example of how Evans smuggles reason back in as a counterbalance to faith while still maintaining that reason is not competent in such matters. Evans does argue that even a flawed reason

---

<sup>133</sup> This is not actually question begging, for one might suggest that it is God's will that one does not *believe* in God's existence. This would represent a tremendously strong form of divine hiddenness. Such a response would suffer from other difficulties, though, not the least of which is whether such a being could be rightly called God. And clearly this is not what Evans is suggesting.

would be capable of recognizing its own limits, but can it compensate for these limitations? The best answer Evans has to offer is that reason is in some way redeemed by faith.<sup>134</sup> However, it is unclear what this redemption looks like, and the context indicates that all Evans really means by *redemption* is that once one has faith that P, one can then proceed to use P as the basis for other beliefs.

In the end, the re-introduction of reason and evidence in relation to defeaters is problematic. We are left with three problems arising out of two questions: First, there is the ambiguity of what is defeated by a defeater. Second, there is the question of how reason can play a role regarding raising and defeating defeaters when it was deemed to be deficient to bring to bear on the proposition in question. Third, there is the fact that in the end, reason becomes the judge of faith, reversing the roles Evans has so assiduously asserted. What all of this illustrates is the tension that arises when epistemic goals of maximizing true beliefs and minimizing false ones come into conflict with the very notion that is central to fideism: that some beliefs can be held by faith, regardless of the evidence. Evans's attempt to introduce reason back into the picture as a check and balance to faith unveils the weakness in the theory. If reason is incapable of providing positive support for a belief, why is it capable of undermining faith? If evidence plays no role in supporting religious beliefs, why can it play a role in defeating religious beliefs? But if defeaters are not allowed, we end up in the position Evans thinks is so undesirable: faith is unchecked by reason.

---

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-106.

### If Knowledge is External, How Can It Depend on Faith?

In the previous section I suggested that Evans's attempt to incorporate a theory of defeaters into his model of faith-based epistemic entitlement suffers from several flaws. In this section, I change tack from talking about entitlement and justification to examining what Evans has to say about knowledge. Evans defends a form of externalism strongly influenced by Reformed epistemology. But he also integrates faith into this knowledge model. I argue that Evans's attempt to integrate faith into an account of knowledge causes problems for his overall theory of fideism.

#### **Knowledge, Warrant, and Justification**

While Evans discusses externalism at various points in *Faith Beyond Reason*, it is in chapter 10 that Evans incorporates externalist epistemology into his account of knowing God. What purpose does an external account of knowledge serve? Given that Evans is intent upon producing a strongly epistemic fideism, what I see Evans doing here is preserving the idea that there can be knowledge of God, while also attempting to preserve faith-based beliefs against the failed attempts at justification he broadly criticizes.<sup>135</sup> How does his externalism mesh with his concern for evidential (internal) justification and faith's substitutionally entitling role?

To begin answering this, we can inquire into the role of justification in

---

<sup>135</sup> While Evans explores a few uses of the term *knowledge*, he is importantly interested in propositional knowledge—knowledge that God exists. He devotes the entirety of chapter 8 to this question (*Ibid.*, 114-124).

Evans's epistemology. As we saw earlier in the chapter, Evans does maintain a deep concern for evidentialist justification of at least some propositions. Why is Evans so concerned with internal justification (and thus with providing an account of faith to "fill the gap")? Earlier I suggested two reasons: The first is that Evans is committed to epistemic rationality—applying reason in cases where reason is qualified for that application (i.e. where reason's deficiencies do not disqualify it). While Evans is an externalist, this notion of epistemic rationality always plays out in his works in a primarily internal fashion: We seek justification (or entitlement) in order to avoid conflict and eschew contradiction, and rightly so. The epistemic import of justification, then, is to meet in whole or in part this requirement.<sup>136</sup> The second reason that justification is important is that one of our rational goals is to maximize our true beliefs while minimizing false ones. Justification is a tool for, if nothing else, satisfying our own questions as to whether or not we have done this. John Bishop adds what I consider an appropriate religious spin on this when talking about religious beliefs: The religious seeker wants to avoid idolatry. That is, the religious seeker wants to avoid believing the wrong things about God or about ultimate reality, the religious seeker wants to avoid misdirecting her or his devotion. As we have seen, Evans suggests that faith may also meet this need.

The version of externalism Evans finds in Plantinga does not necessarily accommodate these needs. Thus it seems that justification, in its internalist

---

<sup>136</sup> While reason is considered grossly incompetent when it comes to religious matters, Evans certainly thinks it qualified for many other domains. And in regard to religious beliefs, Evans attempts, as we saw above, to incorporate reason in a theory of defeaters.

sense, retains an important role in describing a common epistemic goal. But Evans does not alter his externalist theory of knowledge. What we are left with is Evans's separate accounts of knowledge and of justification/entitlement. Knowledge is warranted true belief, where warrant may arise externally. Justification is a primarily internal matter of evaluating one's beliefs, as is entitlement. But Evans's view of justification differs in another way: He is not so much interested in being *obligated* to hold a faith belief, as traditional justification models might indicate. He is more interested in whether one is permitted to believe. While justification carries with it a sense of epistemic obligation, entitlement is about the permissibility of holding a belief. That is, if S is justified in believing P, one epistemically ought to believe P; if S is entitled to believe P, then it is not the case that S ought to believe not-P. Thus, for Evans, epistemic justification that P implies epistemic entitlement to believe P.

At first blush, it seems that we can then make a clear segmentation between justification and entitlement on the one hand, and warrant (and knowledge) on the other. However, the separation is not so clean as the picture above may indicate, for Evans describes *faith* as necessary for *knowledge*.

### **Externalism**

In the chapter entitled "A Fideistic Account of Knowing God," Evans makes a curious claim:

What I wish to argue is that a fideist does not have to deny that there is any such thing as a natural knowledge of God. What the fideist must deny is that there is any knowledge of God, or at least any worthwhile knowledge, that can be had independently of faith. Such a claim is

consistent, however, with affirming the possibility of real knowledge that is dependent on faith.<sup>137</sup>

How can knowledge be dependent upon faith? Evans is an externalist about knowledge, characterizing externalism as being free from dependence upon just this sort of internal state. The traditional externalist does not require justification, or even *entitlement* as a criterion for knowledge. So how can faith be required for *knowledge*?

There are a few ways to understand what Evans claims. The first is to suggest that Evans has not wholly jettisoned his notion of internal justification, even as he espouses a form of externalism. And this is born not so much from any attempt to build an integrated internalist/externalist epistemology, but out of a terminological misstep. It is a confusion introduced by ambiguous use of the term *justification* to sometimes mean warrant (as we have defined it) and to sometimes mean internalist justification.<sup>138</sup> This dual usage becomes more problematic when combined with Evans's negligence in distinguishing justification from entitlement, which sometimes leads to the posing of faith as a replacement for internal justification.<sup>139</sup> And what we are left with is the unqualified suggestion that faith is required for knowledge regarding religious propositions even while it is seemingly not necessary in "garden variety" cases of

---

<sup>137</sup> Evans 1998, 116.

<sup>138</sup> I have already noted this confusion when I introduced the term *warrant* early in the chapter.

<sup>139</sup> Recall again that *entitlement* is a notion I have injected to account for Evans's treatment of faith as satisfying an unstated permissibility thesis.

knowledge.

If we are to read Evans in this way, then it appears that he makes a critical mistake in his characterization of belief. Evans suggests that certain religious beliefs, such as the belief that God exists, are properly basic. On Evans's account, such a properly basic belief arises from an external ground, from a properly functioning belief forming process. (In this case the *sensus divinitatis* is the likely candidate.)<sup>140</sup> But here arises the confusion: Evans suggests that in regards to one's internal relation to certain religious beliefs, one *cannot have justification, and instead one has faith*. Note a crucial detail of this argument: faith does not produce the belief. It cannot, by definition, produce the belief, as belief is a component of faith. Perhaps it arises with the belief, and is as Evans remarks at one point, a gift. Or perhaps taking the belief by faith is the result of rational deliberation, as Evans argues in a sustained way.<sup>141</sup> But the belief itself is a result of the properly functioning process.

So we have two things. First there is the externalist explanation of a belief B arising from a properly functioning belief forming process. Also we have the internalist explanation that one is entitled to believe by faith. But Evans's claim is that faith plays a role in knowing. Where does faith come in to the question of knowledge? Here I think Evans's terminological overload causes a problem. He mistakenly takes the internalist sense of entitlement to be serving as warrant for

---

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-146.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, This is, as I understand it, the driving argument through chapter 7 and 8.



the belief. I think this arises from Evans's argument that faith can replace justification, conjoined with Evans's usage of the term *justification* to sometimes mean *internal justification* and sometimes mean *warrant*. But this claim clearly cannot hold. Faith does not justify a belief, and faith cannot warrant a belief. This is quite simply not the role that faith is deemed to play.

If this is the confusion that causes Evans to claim that religious knowledge is dependent on faith, then it appears that such a claim has been overturned. But perhaps there is another way to interpret this difficulty.

What if what Evans means when he claims that (natural) knowledge of God is based on faith is merely that for one to attain knowledge of God, one must first hold certain fideistically held beliefs?<sup>142</sup> This can roughly be abstracted into something like this: S believes B1, S has faith that B1, and S then uses B1 as evidence in support of some other belief, B2. Faith, in this account, is then necessary in that it is S's faith that brings B1 as evidence for B2. While Evans is an externalist, he does suggest that evidence sometimes plays a role in warranting some beliefs.<sup>143</sup> In this case, the claim might be better understood as *S knows B2 because S has faith that B1 and hence can use B1 as evidence for B2 (and B1 is sufficient evidence for B2)*. It seems that such an account does not

---

<sup>142</sup> Evans discusses *knowledge* in two senses. One is an acquaintance model, in which Evans treats knowledge of God in relational terms. But the bulk of Evans's discussion is about propositional knowledge about God—most specifically about knowledge that God exists. I deem this second sense to be the more important to Evans, and focus on it here (to wit, Evans treats "experiential awareness of God" as evidence for the proposition "God exists"). Evans 1998, 114-124.

<sup>143</sup> Evans 1996b, 264-265.

fall victim to the argument I raised above. However, it has its own problem.

The problem with this attempted escape is it is based upon a mis-construal of how warrant works, for if B1 is a basic belief, faith is altogether superfluous to the account. First, by definition, S already believes B1. So we do not need faith merely for the belief component. Second, neither obedience nor trust have any bearing on B1. Third, at no point has entitlement been a requirement for warrant, or for evidence. The opposite seems to be the case for externalism. S can have B1 as evidence without B1's being a faith belief (or without S's being entitled to believe B1).<sup>144</sup> In fact, to suggest otherwise defeats externalism's most trumpeted claim: that one can *know* P without needing to possess some internal state linking one's belief to P. Take, for example, the early version of Plantinga's externalism of which Evans makes use. Basic beliefs (on this account), in virtue of their basicity, obviate the need for S to produce support for one's belief. Their support is found in their arising from a properly functioning belief forming process. To make Evans's claim that basic beliefs (specifically, here, basic religious beliefs) cannot be justified—and thus faith is required—is to undercut the claim that external support is sufficient for warrant. If B1 is a basic belief, then B1 is warranted if and only if B1 arose from a properly functioning belief forming process. Neither internal justification nor entitlement have any bearing on B1's warrant. Nor do they have any bearing on belief, or the truth of B1. Thus, faith

---

<sup>144</sup> Again, here I am mixing, as Evans does, externalism about so-called basic beliefs with evidentialism about other beliefs.

has no bearing on B1's being known.

Even granting that B2 is warranted by evidentialist means, and that B1 is sufficient undefeated evidence for B2, faith does not play a role in either B1's being evidence or B1's warranting B2.<sup>145</sup>

In the end it does not seem that faith is necessary for *knowledge* of God, even of natural knowledge of God. We have already examined at length why entitlement is important for a reflective believer—for one inquiring into their beliefs. But to retain an externalist notion of knowledge, it seems best to not attempt to add an entitlement requirement.

### **The Result**

Evans wants to link faith to knowledge, yet retain an externalism about knowledge. As we have seen, this does not work without coining an epistemology with the strained requirement that religious knowledge is a special case of knowledge, requiring not just warranted true belief, but also an extra internalist condition of faith. This clearly is not what Evans intends. I suggest that the right response is to eliminate the faith-knowledge connection.

Thus what we are instead left with is another role for faith: Faith is an internalist entitlement condition, an "assurance," as it were, that one is not irrational in holding one's religious beliefs; that one is epistemically permitted to

---

<sup>145</sup> Perhaps Evans is suggesting that B1, while already known, still requires entitlement (or justification) before it can be used as evidence. But if this were the case, then the entire class of epistemological problems that externalists claim to be avoiding with notions such as basic beliefs are once again problematic. Once again, one must provide a non-circular account for how these beliefs are justified or entitled. Evans is back where he began. cf. Evans 1998, 146-150, 41-47.

hold such a belief. One might ask what value entitlement offers. And is this what we, as epistemic agents, really ought to seek? Evans says yes, we must, because *there is no better epistemic route* for us to take. We are epistemic irrationalists, naive believers, or responsible fideists. We can be nothing more, says Evans, because reason is fatally flawed. Thus of the three, Evans has argued, fideism is the most preferable. This raises our last question: Is faith really a better candidate than reason?

### Should We Really Side with Faith Over Reason?

The single most important conclusion Evans claims to have drawn is that responsible fideism is the best route to take for epistemic entitlement of faith beliefs. I have already raised questions about Evans's attempts to re-integrate "a role for reason" in the form of a theory of defeaters, and also about Evans's attempt to make faith a condition for religious knowledge. But Evans's critical point is his argument that due to reason's flaws, the move to faith is one's best option for entitling certain religious beliefs. Now I want to address the question of whether Evans has given sufficient reason for accepting this conclusion. Should we really side with faith over reason?

Earlier, I devoted a substantial part of this chapter to exploring what Evans has to say about reason. I noted that for Evans, reason is an epistemic faculty. Evans ties it to evidentialism as a faculty that evaluates evidence and produces justification. Most notably, Evans reiterates countless times that reason is flawed in such a way as to render it unreliable in certain important domains, most

importantly in regard to religious beliefs.

Evans personifies reason, and to an extent does the same with faith. Like dueling homunculi, Evans portrays reason and faith as battling capacities. He conjures images of inner turmoil in which a person's will is caught between warring forces within herself or himself. But ought reason and faith be construed in such terms? Or in doing so is Evans introducing a false metaphor? I suggest that his characterization is inaccurate and leads to a confused conclusion. Once we jettison the talk of "faith versus reason" we see the great problem in Evans's outcome: There is no reason to accept that faith is a better candidate than reason. A rational agent, even a limited one whose judgment may be clouded by sin, is not best served by abandoning reason and espousing a doctrine of "believing by faith." On such grounds, one may embrace all sorts of abhorrent beliefs.<sup>146</sup>

What does Evans mean when he says "reason attempts to know the world"?<sup>147</sup> What about suggesting that it "is possible, however, for reason itself to recognize its own 'neediness', if it is properly 'educated' by a transforming encounter with God's revelation."<sup>148</sup> What does it mean to suggest that reason is prideful or restless or domineering or confident? What does it mean to say that,

---

<sup>146</sup> I return to this point in chapter 3, where Bishop raises the specter of Nazi religions.

<sup>147</sup> Evans 1998, 97.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

“Reason... prides itself on its disinterestedness and objectivity”?<sup>149</sup> In these passages, showing samples of a literary device used throughout the book, reason is personified, treated as if it is in some way capable of making decisions, having feelings, and setting agendas independently of the agent. I call it a literary device because I do not think that Evans is really suggesting that reason is a homunculus-like independent agent operating within the human mind. But I think that this literary device introduces a flaw into the argument.

Evans talks about two deficiencies in reason. The first is its cognitive limitations. Reason is incapable of understanding everything, or of grasping everything, or of holding large amounts of data simultaneously, or even of intuiting the details of all arguments. As contemporary empirical psychology has shown with ample evidence, reason is not without its ticks and quirks. That reason is limited seems to be a broadly accepted thesis, and the fact that Evans personifies reason when talking about it does not seem to adversely impact the argument.

But then Evans talks about reason as being tainted by sin. Reason is prideful. Reason is selfish. Reason balks at being placed under the authority of God. This characterization is problematic. It indicates that reason has some degree of isolation from the human agent. It suggests that reason, not the agent, is the culprit. In and of itself this might not present a problem. But Evans chooses to frame the argument in terms of reason and faith, where faith takes on an

---

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

analogous personality. Thus Evans makes statements such as “faith does not even want objective certainty; it thrives on uncertainty....”<sup>150</sup>

With this personification of two faculties, it is no surprise that there is an intra-agent tone to Evans’s positioning of faith and reason. Here is an account of faith versus reason, a battle within an agent, with reason pushing one agenda and faith pushing another. And while reason comes across as the demon on the left shoulder, faith is the angel on the right shoulder, seemingly untainted by selfishness, pride, and the other sins and deficiencies.

With a setup like this, it is easy for Evans to argue that in light of reason’s obvious deficiencies, faith is the better candidate. With sinful reason bound to lead us astray, faith alone seems capable of leading us into the light. While pride prevents reason from correctly assessing, or even locating, evidence in support of a religious belief, faith dutifully bridges the gap. But is this not taking the metaphor too far? It no longer sounds like a literary device, but an attempt to describe mental faculties as actually agent-like, and this is a misstep.

To make this point, the relationship between an agent, sin, and reason can be altered slightly. Instead of ascribing sin to reason, let’s ascribe sin to the human agent—S is prideful, S is selfish—and then suggest that S’s sin can have a profound impact on S’s rationality. We can enumerate a few ways in which this is possible, drawing from our model of rationality offered in the first chapter. One’s overall rational goals may change as a result of sin. One might, for

---

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

example, selfishly favor prudential rationalism over moral and epistemic rationalism. Sin may lead one to ignore some evidence, discount legitimate defeaters, or simply fail to inquire. Sin may, in fact, lead one to intentionally seek disconfirming evidence while avoiding confirming evidence.<sup>151</sup> I see no reason to personify either reason or faith.

Sin is tied to the agent rather than to a faculty of reason. Where does this leave faith? It leaves faith equally susceptible to sin. One may misplace one's faith—we call this idolatry. One may exercise bad faith.<sup>152</sup> One may exercise blind faith. One may have faith for selfish reasons, hoping, for example, that faith in God results in health, wealth, and power—even at the expense of others. To me, this account seems far more plausible than the suggestion that reason alone is prone to sinfulness. But to what extent does this conflict with Evans's argument?

Evans gives no reason to accept that faith is immune to the effects of sin. Evans does, though, clearly acknowledge that faith propositions are defeasible. As the defeater account suggests, faith *could* lead one astray. Otherwise there would be no reason to attempt to introduce an account of defeaters. But the point remains understated. In assessing Evans, I think it *must* be concluded that faith is just as susceptible to cognitive limitations and sin as reason is. It certainly

---

<sup>151</sup> Assuming, of course, that a suitable model of doxastic voluntarism is assumed. Note, also, that cognitive limitations may cause this same phenomenon, as is described as the *confirmation bias*. See Gilovitch 1991, 30-36.

<sup>152</sup> Sartre (1984, 86-115) defines bad faith as attempting to deceive oneself. As Sartre spells it



seems broadly consistent with observable fact that at least some people at some times have had misplaced or mismotivated faith. But if we accept this, where does it leave Evans's argument?

If nothing else, this changed approach to reason and faith leads to an important question: Under what set of circumstances am I more epistemically rational in believing "by faith" instead of seeking justification for my beliefs? Even granting all of Evans's claims about the epistemic shortcomings of human beings, we are still left with the very real possibility that those shortcomings will have as much impact on faith as they will on epistemic reasoning. To the potential fallibility of faith, an additional point must be added: faith itself doesn't seem to come with any overt relationship to truth-indicators. Evidentialism is a theory based on the idea that one ought to follow one's evidence, one ought to follow the direction of truth indicators. But faith as Evans has presented it does not seem to have this same characteristic. Faith, as Evans has described it, is a move *without* evidence, and sometimes *against* evidence. Again, attention must be drawn to the fact that Evans does not deny the possibility of evidence, or even the real existence of evidence. His argument rests on reason's limitations. But if faith suffers those same limitations, yet has a weaker relationship to truth indicators, it seems to me that faith is a dubious guide.<sup>153</sup>

---

out, bad faith is believing P against evidence one recognizes as supporting not-P.

<sup>153</sup> In the next chapter we will see how Bishop attempts to escape this predicament. He does this not by attacking reason, but by suggesting problems with evidence.

If Evans is to maintain his position that reason is the culprit, that reason has transgressed to an extent that one must look to faith, then Evans must show that faith itself escapes the problems of reason. This he does not do, and I do not see any clear route to claiming that while reason suffers from the impact of cognitive limitations and sinful proclivities, faith remains unscathed. On the contrary, faith without the guidance of truth indicators is doubly dubious, claiming (as Evans states) a high degree of certainty, but without any support.<sup>154</sup>

Evans's central claim in *Faith Beyond Reason* is that because of reason's faults, we ought to believe *by faith*. But I suggest that this conclusion is not without its faults—faults severe enough that it seems better to accept our epistemic limitations, yet forge on ahead in our evidential quest rather than resort to Evans's faith. In the last chapter, I shall return to this point, asking whether evidentialism is still the best candidate for meeting rational obligations—specifically epistemic obligations.

### **Conclusion**

To what extent is Evans's responsible fideism a successful theory? Among its stronger traits, and what distinguishes Evans's fideism from other popular forms, is Evans's use of epistemic externalism. This enables Evans to make stronger epistemic claims than most fideists can muster. For example, Evans can

---

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 106ff. The suggestion that faith provides a high degree of certainty is one Evans draws from Kierkegaard/Climacus' idea of "infinite interest." While his response is nuanced, he does seem to maintain here and elsewhere that faith comes with some variety of certainty that is beyond what reason can produce (at least about *a posteriori* matters).

claim that one may have religious knowledge. But as we saw, there are several problems with Evans's fideism. His account of defeaters highlights a difficulty of fideism in general: faith seems to bring with it a sense of arbitrariness. Free from the restraints that rationality imposes, beliefs held by faith seem to be unchallengeable. This rightly leads to concerns about bad faith, misplaced faith, and idolatry. But as Evans's theory of defeaters shows, remedying this while still maintaining that reason is deeply flawed (to the point of requiring faith) is a difficult task. In my estimation, Evans is unsuccessful in his attempts. What this discussion brings to the surface is the seemingly unresolvable tension between the claim that reason is fatally flawed and the claim that fideism is reasonable.

A second difficulty for Evans arises from the externalism upon which Evans relies. Evans maintains strong contact with internalist notions of justification, and suggests that sometimes justification confers warrant. But he makes a further move, suggesting that *faith* is required for knowledge. I have argued that this cannot be the case. Faith does not and cannot play a warranting role (doing so undermines externalism). Nor can this suggestion be re-cast in terms of faith making available evidence otherwise unavailable, for to do so also undermines his externalism.

Finally, I have raised what I think is the most significant difficulty. I have argued that when the personification of reason and faith is stripped away, a substantial problem becomes visible: is faith more reliable than reason? In absence of an argument showing that faith is immune to the effects of sin and

cognitive limitations, there is no compelling reason to take faith to be more reliable. Even with its flaws, reason is grounded in truth indicators. Faith is not. This leads to a conclusion contrary to Evans's argument: even in matters of religious propositions, one is most likely to satisfy one's epistemic obligations by seeking to hold justified beliefs, not by accepting propositions by faith.

While Evans's argument may not be compelling, in the final analysis, it is nonetheless interesting in part because it is epistemological through and through. Evans constrains his discussion of rationality to just epistemic rationality, and he proposes a solution that, as he presents it, is epistemically oriented. Faith plays an epistemic role. Faith, he claims, is an adequate guide to truth. His introduction of epistemic externalism aids this argument, as it allows Evans to maintain focus on questions about justification, warrant, and knowledge. Yet the difficulties in Evans's theory are suggestive for any epistemically oriented fideism: an attempt to substitute (to any degree) a notion of justification with a notion of evidence-less faith must somehow produce a theory of belief-holding that does not admit of arbitrariness. I have argued that ultimately Evans's argument does not succeed in overcoming the difficulties inherent in any fideist theory.

Two major questions are left open at this point. The first is whether or not Evans's critique of evidentialism, and his suggestion that evidence is incapable of supporting certain religious beliefs, is conclusive. In the fourth chapter, in which evidentialism is contrasted with fideism, I will return to this argument. Secondly, there is a larger threat to the sort of fideism that Evans suggests than any I have

offered thus far. And this is skepticism. A mark of a good epistemic theory is its resilience to skepticism. As we shall see when I return to the point in chapter 4, responsible fideism does not address the skeptical challenge.

In the next chapter we will turn to John Bishop's articulation of fideism. While Evans has chosen to focus on the agent as he develops his account, Bishop focuses on the evidence.

CHAPTER THREE  
FAITH AS VENTURE

**Introduction**

Is there conclusive evidence for the existence of God? In the previous chapter we saw how Evans suggests that this is the wrong question to ask. He suggests that epistemic reason itself is too flawed to reliably approach such a question. As we saw, this led Evans to offer a theory of fideism. In this theory, in cases where justification is unavailable, one may hold a belief “by faith.”

John Bishop’s answer to the question of evidence is different, and it leads him to formulate a different kind of fideism. In his book *Believing by Faith*, Bishop suggests that the evidence for many religious propositions—with the question of God’s existence being one such example—is ambiguous.<sup>1</sup> This, suggests Bishop, accounts for the impasse between various philosophers of religion. Such evidential ambiguity poses a serious problem for epistemologists who urge that one must “follow the evidence.” Bishop offers a response to this ambiguity thesis, and this response is a new variety of fideism that he calls *supra-evidential fideism*. Inspired by William James, Bishop suggests a model of faith as a venture, and he suggests that in some cases, undertaking a faith venture is preferable to accepting the hard-line evidentialist’s conclusion that

---

<sup>1</sup> Bishop 2007, 6.

evidential ambiguity ought to be met with suspension of judgment.

Epistemically speaking, Bishop's theory is a refinement of evidentialism, but Bishop's fideism is not just epistemological. In the previous chapter, we examined C. Stephan Evans's responsible fideism, which I characterized there as epistemically oriented fideism because of its nearly exclusive focus on epistemology, epistemic justification, and epistemic rationality. But Bishop's fideism is oriented differently: Instead of approaching the question in a strictly epistemic fashion, Bishop inquires whether moral rationality might, in certain cases, trump epistemic rationality even in an area more frequently approached epistemically. In certain circumstances, suggests Bishop, one ought to take what he calls a *doxastic venture*, accepting an epistemically unjustified proposition on moral grounds, and thereafter giving it full weight in epistemic contexts. Bishop calls this a form of fideism.

Bishop's supra-evidential fideism is the subject of this chapter. I explain several key components of Bishop's theory, and then elaborate the core behind his supra-evidential fideism. Bishop's account has its difficulties. In the course of the chapter, I point out those that I find threaten the success of his theory of fideism. In the end, I ask whether Bishop's theory is ultimately the most compelling for the religious seeker.

This is how we shall proceed. The first section of this chapter covers Bishop's *evidential ambiguity thesis*, which states that the total available evidence for (or against) religious beliefs is ambiguous. This is a crucial part of

Bishop's argument, for if it is true, certain avenues of justification are closed to the religious seeker. Bishop argues that the evidential ambiguity thesis does not necessarily lead to Reformed epistemology (as some epistemologists have suggested), but to fideism. And his own variety of fideism is largely a response to the ambiguity thesis. In this first section, I explain the thesis along with the implications Bishop identifies.

Second, I discuss Bishop's emphasis on moral rationality, how it is positioned in regard to epistemic rationality, and what this relationship says about solving rational conflict. Bishop's rationality can be compared with the model of rationality offered in the first chapter, and in so doing we gain a level of clarity in assessing Bishop's central claim. This claim is that when it comes to religious beliefs that are evidentially ambiguous, one may rightly solve a rational conflict by setting moral rational preferences above epistemic rational preferences. This is a critical step in Bishop's development of a theory of fideism.

The third section introduces Bishop's venture model of fideism. Bishop's fideism is oriented around a notion of faith-as-venture. In important cases, where morality dictates and epistemic rationality does not contradict, it may be appropriate to act as if a belief is true, even while acknowledging that one is not justified in holding this belief. While this approach may stand in conflict with traditional "hard line" evidentialism, Bishop suggests that the approach best meets one's rational obligations, and is thus the preferable model. Bishop offers what he calls thesis (J+), which provides conditions under which a faith venture is



morally acceptable, and under which one may rightly hold certain faith propositions with full epistemic weight.

As I move through these sections, I point out a few issues with Bishop's account. At the conclusion of this chapter, I ask whether these issues, when taken in concert, recommend Bishop's fideism. Bishop offers a compelling theory for dealing with cases of evidential ambiguity. But in the end, I argue that his notion of evidential ambiguity is flawed. Furthermore, his model of rationality raises questions as to whether his argument is quite as conclusive as it may at first appear. I question whether Bishop's model best addresses the epistemic and rational (ATC) goals of an agent. Finally, I suggest that there are a few problems with his (J+) thesis that, when conjoined with the previous issues, indicate that fideism is not the best stance to take when one finds oneself in the evidential situation described by Bishop.

#### Clarifications

At the outset of *Believing by Faith*, Bishop develops several key terms along similar lines to how I developed them in chapter 1. In this first section, I gloss some of this terminology, pointing out any important differences, and also drawing attention to those facets that play a major role in Bishop's version of fideism.

First, Bishop defines belief as *holding* a proposition true, while he also identifies a second state of *taking* a proposition to be true.<sup>2</sup> Holding a proposition

---

<sup>2</sup> Bishop 2007, 33ff. Note that his distinction between holding and taking differs slightly from

to be true requires both *assent* to the proposition and an enduring *disposition* toward that belief. Thus, in the case of propositional beliefs (which are the primary sort of beliefs we are here interested in), to hold P is to assent to P and to have a disposition toward P. Thus Bishop's notion of holding P is not dissimilar from the notion of believing P I introduced in the first chapter. Bishop makes the further observation that one who believes P is also generally inclined to act as if P. In practical reasoning, one performs a mental act (consciously or perhaps unconsciously) in favor of P.<sup>3</sup> This act is what Bishop calls *taking a proposition to be true*. An individual, points out Bishop, can take P to be true without really believing P. In the language we have already employed in chapter 1, one can assent to P and act accordingly, but not develop any long term disposition toward P. Bishop's division into *holding* and *taking* is most pronounced when it comes to action. It is one's taking a proposition to be true (an event, says Bishop, that occurs in reasoning) that leads one to act as if P. There are some minor ways in which Bishop's definition of *taking-to-be-true* differs from assent as explained in chapter 1. Perhaps one noteworthy difference is that Bishop does not explicitly require that one *sincerely* take P to be true, while our characterization requires sincerity for assent.<sup>4</sup> Yet as this plays out in Bishop's discussion, the differences

---

Bishop 2007 to Bishop 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Bishop notes that here "taking to be true" is more like assent, not belief. Acceptance can be done insincerely, such as "for the sake of argument." However, Bishop reserves this sort of acceptance for special cases only, and where that is the case I will mention it explicitly.

between assent and taking-to-be-true are minor enough that I treat taking-to-be-true as assent.<sup>5</sup>

Second, a certain amount of doxastic voluntarism is required by Bishop's theory. Bishop offers an account of doxastic voluntarism in which he identifies what he calls the two loci of doxastic control.<sup>6</sup> He suggests there are both direct and indirect ways in which we can exercise doxastic control, though direct doxastic control is restricted in certain ways. In the first chapter I also dealt with doxastic voluntarism, suggesting a moderate form of doxastic voluntarism. My claim there was that there are clearly areas where assent is under doxastic control. While Bishop's account differs from mine on minor details (and may be more restrictive), the differences do not impact the present discussion. The most salient aspect of Bishop's account of doxastic voluntarism is found in his notion of the *second locus of doxastic control*. Bishop claims that when one is taking action, one has doxastic control over whether or not one assents to certain propositions<sup>7</sup>. The sketch of doxastic voluntarism I offered in chapter 1 also allows for doxastic control at this level.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, throughout this work I have used the terms *religious seekers* or *faith*

---

<sup>5</sup> Bishop makes this point on *Ibid.*, 41, fn. 18, where he compares assent, acceptance, and taking-to-be-true.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-41.

<sup>7</sup> In other words, Bishop suggests that even if one has a disposition toward P, one may still choose at time t to refuse to assent to P.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop notes that doxastic control does not entail conscious or deliberate assent (*Ibid.*, 37). This, too, is compatible with the account I have offered.

*seekers* as a label for those who are in some way engaged in reflective examination of religious beliefs. Bishop uses the term *reflective believers* to identify that same group. Bishop is quick to point out that a *reflective believer* may not necessarily be a believer in a particular faith, and I should also qualify my own usage to indicate that it is not the case that a seeker is one without religious beliefs.<sup>9</sup> A lifelong *believer* may, in virtue of her or his reflectiveness about those beliefs, be a *religious seeker*, just as an atheist reflectively examining the claims of Christianity may be rightly called a *reflective believer*. In short, both terms describe agents reflectively seeking to hold only rational religious beliefs (where religious beliefs may include atheism).

One more refinement is in order, and this is in regards to Bishop's notion of *entitlement*.

#### Entitlement Refined

In the previous two chapters, I have used Bishop's notion of epistemic entitlement as a point of contrast with the stronger notion of epistemic obligation. Epistemic entitlement is a permissibility thesis suggesting that *it is not the case that S should not hold/take P*. Bishop's use of the term *entitlement* in his book *Believing by Faith* has a few additional nuances beyond the characterization he offers in the *Faith* article used in the first chapter.

Bishop recognizes a distinction between different types of rationality—moral, epistemic, and otherwise. Entitlement, like justification, plays out differently in

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

each rational context. In a general sense, entitlement plays a normative role in one's reasoning. Following Plantinga's distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* objections to faith, Bishop suggests that entitlement is the indicator that one is within one's rights (*de jure*) in holding a belief.<sup>10</sup> Thus, moral entitlement is about whether one is within one's moral rights to believe. "[T]he *de jure* question about Christian belief is ultimately just the question of moral entitlement to take Christian beliefs to be true...."<sup>11</sup> One is morally entitled to hold P if holding P does not cause S to commit a moral transgression.

Bishop offers a more thorough characterization of *epistemic entitlement* in this book. And here the notion is more refined than the generic sense of entitlement that appears in his "Faith" article.<sup>12</sup> As Bishop characterizes epistemic entitlement here, S is epistemically entitled to hold belief B only if S's belief is "made through the right exercise of their epistemic capacities."<sup>13</sup> Bishop expands this characterization to impose three requirements on the believer:

[T]he right exercise of those capacities comes to this: reflective believers will need to have paid proper attention to the question of the truth of their faith-propositions, to have judged that issue properly (in accordance with the correct application of the objective norms applicable to such judgments), and to have taken proper account of that judgment in deciding to commit themselves practically to the truth of their faith-propositions.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 49 fn 25.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Bishop 2007, 57, italics removed.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

What Bishop has provided here are a list of criteria that must be met before S is epistemically entitled to hold P.<sup>15</sup> One must properly reflect on the epistemic status of one's faith beliefs, one must judge the issue properly, and one's practical commitments must "take proper account" of that judgment. How should we understand the second requirement—judging the issue properly? Bishop first explores the notion that epistemic entitlement requires epistemic justification in the form of adequate evidential support (a suggestion he rejects later).<sup>16</sup> He calls this first possibility *hard-line evidentialism*.<sup>17</sup>

This hard-line evidentialism has an interesting consequence: because entitlement requires justification, when the evidence is ambiguous one ought to suspend one's belief about P—one is not entitled to believe P.<sup>18</sup> Prima facie, Bishop thinks this requirement seems overly stringent, for it suggests that one is not epistemically entitled to hold any unjustified beliefs even if holding such beliefs does not conflict with available evidence.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly problematic for Bishop, for he wants to claim that entitlement allows for making what he calls

---

<sup>15</sup> Note that in no way can these requirements for entitlement be read back into the discussions in the last two chapters. The term as used here ought to be viewed as a different, more specific notion of entitlement than that offered in chapter 1, and applied to Evans's view in chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, the *actual* stringency of this requirement is largely determined by the requirements for epistemic justification. The question of the permissibility of holding beliefs that accord with available (though perhaps inconclusive) evidence is a topic worthy of examination. But in the present context I remain focused on Bishop's comparison between hard-line evidentialism and a more permissive model of entitlement.

a doxastic venture—taking a belief to be true (in practical reasoning at least) when the evidence is not (yet) conclusive.<sup>20</sup> *Faith-ventures* are doxastic ventures regarding religious belief. Such ventures become the basis for Bishop’s fideism. Consequently, a notion of entitlement that requires justification becomes an apparent road-block to Bishop’s supra-evidential fideism, denying as it does that one can be entitled to hold any unjustified belief.<sup>21</sup>

Against this strong, hard-line sense of entitlement, Bishop proposes a weaker requirement that one needn’t be *justified* in holding a belief, but only *permitted* to hold such a belief. “[E]pistemic entitlement in making such faith-commitments requires that their truth not be evidentially excluded under the applicable evidential practice.”<sup>22</sup> That is, provided that the available evidence does not foreclose P, one is entitled to hold P. This version shifts from epistemic obligation to epistemic permissibility—from requiring justification to merely requiring that one not be required not to believe. Distinguishing between entitlement and justification on this ground opens up “the possibility that taking a proposition to be true in reasoning may carry epistemic entitlement even though the person concerned is in no position to certify the epistemic worth of his or her

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23, 161-162.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 162. Here Evans has elaborated a shift from hard-line evidentialism to what he calls “realist integrationist doxastic values” (explained on 155-162). Evans sees the tempering of the justification condition to be a significant departure from hard-line evidentialism.

holding that proposition to be true.”<sup>23</sup> This last bit about an individual’s ability to *certify the epistemic worth* of holding a proposition is of crucial importance.

Warrant, or any externalist construal of “justification”, does not give an agent any sense of assurance that she or he meets the three requirements for entitlement that Bishop enumerates in the quote above.<sup>24</sup> Entitlement requires that the agent has *mentally judged the belief*, has found the belief not at odds with the evidence, and has also assented to this belief.<sup>25</sup> Using epistemic entitlement in this specific way, Bishop suggests that even if externalist epistemologies provide the best (or even a plausible) theory of knowledge, there remains an evidentialist requirement that plays an important role for a reflective inquirer (and this is not limited to strictly religious inquiries).

At this point, we have revisited a few terms introduced earlier in this dissertation, but have clarified them in the context of Bishop’s present argument. The notion of entitlement, as revised here, provides the foundation for Bishop’s subsequent argument that it is sometimes permissible to make doxastic ventures. What makes doxastic venture (and entitlement) such a crucial part of Bishop’s argument? The answer for this lies in Bishop’s thesis of evidential ambiguity.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>24</sup> Bishop makes this argument on *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> In this particular context Bishop is unclear as to whether or not this all must be conscious, though he implies elsewhere that it does not. cf. Bishop 2007, chapter 2. It is unclear why assent is required for entitlement.



### The Evidential Ambiguity Thesis

Religious belief has enjoyed widespread philosophical analysis since the birth of philosophy. Arguments for God's existence—the usual suspects, teleological, ontological, cosmological, and so on—prove a perennial interest for philosophers of religion. But in the thousands of years during which they have been debated, no single argument has been either conclusively demonstrated or conclusively shown to be false. Or consider claims about divine hiddenness—the idea (roughly) that if there is a God, evidence is not readily available. Atheists and agnostics claim that divine hiddenness supports their position while theists suggest that hiddenness is compatible with God's character, and is perhaps even a necessary aspect of it.<sup>26</sup> A litany of epistemological questions arises as well. Is there evidence for the existence of God? Is it sufficient (or conclusive) evidence? Is it publicly available evidence? Should we expect it to be public evidence?<sup>27</sup> While such questions have enjoyed broad debate, no answer has enjoyed broad agreement. It is thus no wonder that some philosophers have thrown in the proverbial towel and proclaimed that the search for evidence is a doomed endeavor. When considering this debate, Bishop remarks on the evidential problem, and then gives it a name.

Although this debate has often been assumed to be at the heart of

---

<sup>26</sup> An excellent example of this debate can be found in the Schellenberg/Moser debate in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Schellenberg 2004, Moser 2004).

<sup>27</sup> The proposition "God exists" is of course only one of a multitude of religious propositions that might also be substituted here.

Philosophy of Religion, there is also a long-standing view that it is a debate which neither side can win. This view may be expressed as *a thesis of evidential ambiguity* which accepts that the question of God's existence is left open—perhaps necessarily—because our overall evidence is equally viably interpreted either from a theistic or an atheistic perspective.<sup>28</sup>

Bishop suggests that it is now an attractive option to accept that the total available evidence for God's existence does not clearly indicate whether God does in fact exist: "the evidence is 'open' in the sense that it neither shows the truth of the claim that God exists nor the truth of its denial to be significantly more probably than not."<sup>29</sup> Bishop suggests that calling this conundrum *an ambiguity* most aptly describes how competing perspectives have interpreted the evidence differently. This is attested, at least to some degree, by the fact that after centuries of debate no single conclusion has been reached. "I myself incline to the view that the arguments of both natural theology and natural atheology typically exhibit epistemic circularity by resting on hidden presuppositions acceptable only to those already convinced of their conclusions—and, if that is correct, the case for the evidential ambiguity of theism is strengthened."<sup>30</sup> Evidential ambiguity is not merely inconclusiveness of evidence. Evidence may be inconclusive, but still have directionality—that is, one might not have conclusive evidence for the existence of Higgs Bosons, yet of the evidence that

---

<sup>28</sup> Bishop 2007, 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

one has, it may point toward the existence of these particles.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, for a body of evidence related to P to be ambiguous, that same body must be interpretable as supporting P, supporting not-P, and possibly even supporting the claim that one should withhold judgment regarding P. Ambiguity is a far more troubling situation than inconclusiveness.

As strong as Bishop believes the argument for evidential ambiguity is, he does not claim to have conclusively shown it to be the case. Instead, he claims only that it is “plausible enough” for it to be taken seriously when examining faith commitment.<sup>32</sup> The reflective believer, suggests Bishop, will recognize that the longstanding debates over natural theology may best be explained by the evidential ambiguity thesis.

#### Does the Evidential Ambiguity Thesis Hold?

The idea of the evidential ambiguity of theism is crucial for Bishop’s argument, and his argument in support of it is compelling. But there is one difficulty that Bishop mentions, yet does not develop. The evidential ambiguity of theism is based on the *total available evidence*. How do we characterize this notion of total available evidence?

As Bishop initially sketches his account of total available evidence, he introduces it as pertinent to what he thinks are widely held epistemic practices

---

<sup>31</sup> Conee and Feldman (2004b, 102) suggest that when the directionality of evidence supports P over not-P, that may in fact be sufficient for claiming S’s belief in P is justified.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

regarding religious propositions: “judgments of evidential support for theistic beliefs are to be made taking into account *all* the evidence that ‘we’ have available that could conceivably be relevant to their truth...”<sup>33</sup> Bishop is careful to clarify here that this includes not only public evidence, but evidence “private to them or to some local community to which they belong.”<sup>34</sup> He is equally careful to note that one cannot limit evidence to *only* private evidence; to remain intellectually honest, one is epistemically (and perhaps morally) obligated to include all available evidence.<sup>35</sup>

But a complication arises. Bishop suggests that total available evidence is all the evidence ‘we’ have. Who is ‘we’? Bishop claims it is “no less than the entire human race over its full history to date.”<sup>36</sup> Bishop tempers this grandiose claim by noting that any individual human agent is also fallibilist and limited when making judgments. But when attempting to build a coherent picture of total available evidence from these glimpses, certain difficulties threaten the coherence of a notion of total available evidence that at once admits public *and* private evidence, but also encapsulates the evidence of the “entire human race over its full history to date.” Here are four ways one may try to construct a theory of total available evidence.

---

<sup>33</sup> Bishop 2007, 67.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 67, fn 15.

<sup>35</sup> I will return to Bishop’s views on moral and epistemic obligation in the next section.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

First, we may say that total available evidence is *all publicly available evidence*, excluding private evidence by fiat. For the moment we will ignore Bishop's inclusion of private evidence, for by doing so, we can ask whether evidential ambiguity can be rendered consistent. As he considers evidential ambiguity, he limits his examination to natural theology and public evidence.<sup>37</sup> Therefore this characterization is intended to capture all of the evidence traditionally relied upon by natural theology. The intent of labeling evidence *public* is to suggest that this evidence has an air of neutrality, approachable "objectively" by believers and unbelievers alike.<sup>38</sup> By so categorizing it, we can see already why the evidential ambiguity thesis is a plausible outcome. For centuries, the same evidence has been at the center of debate. Thus, it is no surprise that the condition Bishop wishes to avoid—that of ceaseless back-and-forth arguing between theists and non-theists—is in fact the most likely state of debate around public evidence. This is the first way we may understand total available evidence, and with this understanding, Bishop's thesis of evidential ambiguity does make sense.

The problem with this account arises when examined in the context of using evidence. Bishop's reflective believer is one who evaluates her or his evidence, and makes a conscious decision thereupon. As Bishop explains this, such an

---

<sup>37</sup> cf. 69-74. This reading, then, assumes that Bishop's footnote inclusion of private evidence is an afterthought, and not a central claim of the argument.

<sup>38</sup> See Feldman, 2006 for an interesting take on public evidence and evidential ambiguity.

agent possibly has access to private evidence, not merely public evidence. And Bishop does claim that it is imperative (epistemically and morally) that evidence should not be ignored when available. While Bishop himself seems to limit his examinations to the arguments of natural theology, based as they are on public evidence, it seems clear that he does not intend to disqualify the individual's private evidence from the total available evidence. If, as Bishop suggests, one has an epistemic (and perhaps moral) obligation to include all evidence—public and private—to which one has access, the notion of total available evidence as described here does not adequately capture all of the evidence to which an individual may have access. To try to expand this notion of total available evidence to *include* private evidence leads us to the next few characterizations.

The second way to characterize total available evidence is as the *totality of all evidence, both public and private, of all agents at all times*. From the natural causal order of the world to St. Augustine's vision in the garden, from cosmology to answered (and unanswered) prayers, all actual evidence falls within the scope of total available evidence. Is this what Bishop is suggesting? Such a construal of total available evidence may superficially sound compelling to the proponent of evidential ambiguity. If we look at it *all* and still find it ambiguous, then it truly *is* ambiguous. But, of course, the problem is simply that no human agent has access to the totality of evidence. Private evidence, by definition, is inaccessible to all but those who experience it, and even public evidence is not therefore globally available to all reasoners.

It is important to note, in passing, that there is nothing necessarily mystical about private evidence.<sup>39</sup> Phenomenological evidence (beliefs whose non-propositional content is phenomenological) is private, and yet clearly admissible as evidence. The fact that it is private divests the evidence neither of its evidential import nor of its epistemic relevancy. Be that as it may, it remains private, and thus inaccessible to some people at some times.

With such a broad view of total available evidence as suggested here, to include all real private evidence is to eliminate the possibility that any one human agent could assess the evidence. And Bishop does not intend to build a theory of fideism based on a notion of the ideal reasoner. Evidential ambiguity is something Bishop believes many and perhaps all reflective believers encounter as a result of their own fallible, finite adventures in epistemology. In absence of a “view from nowhere,” a notion of total available evidence that includes evidence beyond the evidential purview of an individual renders the notion impractical. One cannot meaningfully draw conclusions from inaccessible evidence. Thus this characterization of total available evidence fails to fit Bishop’s theory.

The third way to characterize total available evidence is as the total evidence available to a particular subject S at a particular time t. Such a characterization would include both public and private evidence, but only the evidence to which S has access. This is the notion of total evidence often operating in internalist accounts of justification. But were Bishop to accept it, the

---

<sup>39</sup> cf. Bishop 2007, 199-201.

consequences would not be so good for his theory of fideism. Evidential ambiguity, on this understanding of total available evidence, is no longer the global problem it is purported to be. Theists don't appear to feel it—reflective believers claim to have evidence in favor of their religious propositions. Atheists don't appear to feel it, either—they claim to have evidence against those same religious propositions. Might it be the case that at least some of these are justified in their beliefs by the body of evidence available to them (including their private evidence)? Perhaps only some percentage of religious seekers suffer the tyranny of evidential ambiguity, and perhaps this is a consequence of the fact that such seeker's available evidence is ambiguous or incomplete. While accepting this conclusion does not defeat Bishop's fideism, it weakens the central claim that evidential ambiguity is the right, and perhaps the necessary, conclusion to draw in regard to evidence for religious propositions.

The fourth and final way to characterize total available evidence may also be the most difficult reading of Bishop. Bishop displays deep concern for recognizing and respecting the religious beliefs of others—a stance laudable in itself.<sup>40</sup> What if we suppose that this concern may be the undercurrent pushing a theory of evidence in which the evidence that counts in favor of P is that evidence which is *not currently disputed* by the community surrounding the examiner. Evidence admitted in support of P is not all available evidence, but all of the evidence that does not raise the hackles of one's peers in the epistemic

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 9.



community. Thus relevant evidence—whether public or private—is nothing but community-accepted evidence. In an epistemic community divided over an issue, the evidence base agreed upon by the community is far more likely to result in the sort of ambiguity Bishop describes. In a hotly disputed area, such as religious beliefs, ambiguity of religious evidence is an unsurprising conclusion. Evidential ambiguity may even be, as Bishop suggests, unavoidable in such circumstances.

The major problem for such a social epistemology has to do with the vagueness of the epistemic community: which epistemic community or communities determine which evidence is included in total available evidence? Are we to infer that a community of stout theists would come to the same conclusion about evidential ambiguity that a community of atheists would? Or are we to assume that “the relevant community” includes both of those communities? Is there a specific community that appropriately decides about evidence, or is Bishop suggesting that all communities would (necessarily?) arrive at the same conclusion? Or are we once again back at a “view from nowhere” in which “the community” is that grand community of all religious seekers, past and present? Without an answer to these questions, the claim of ambiguity of religious evidence seems itself terminally ambiguous.

Of the four ways of characterizing Bishop’s notion of total available evidence, none looks to be an unproblematic fit. All four theories fall short of supporting Bishop’s claim that the evidence for these important religious propositions is in fact ambiguous in a pervasive sort of way for every human

agent. At best, we must settle for a weakened notion of evidential ambiguity.

What is the consequence of this evaluation? We have seen that evidence may be ambiguous to some people at some times, and perhaps taking the “view from nowhere” may *in fact* be ambiguous, but it no longer seems to be the case that evidential ambiguity is a pervasive or systemic problem for all reflective believers. It seems that many believers may in fact have evidence for their religious beliefs, and unproblematically so. At least some religious disagreement, then, may not be so much a result of evidential ambiguity, but rather of the fact that different people possess different evidence at different times.

### **Epistemic and Moral Rationality**

The evidential ambiguity thesis, if taken in its strongest form, leads the so-called hard-line evidentialist to the epistemic conclusion that one ought to suspend judgment on each of those beliefs that fall under the canopy of evidential ambiguity. Thus, if many of the crucial tenets of religious faith, such as belief that God exists, are evidentially ambiguous, hard-line evidentialism claims that one ought not hold such tenets. On Bishop’s characterization, the hard-line evidentialist will then draw the conclusion that rationally, one ought to suspend judgment.<sup>41</sup>

But Bishop suggests that here the hard-line evidentialist may be incorrectly privileging epistemic rationality. Might one have moral grounds for accepting

---

<sup>41</sup> Bishop’s characterization of the hard-line evidentialist includes a strong preference for epistemic rationality.

such beliefs even if the evidence is ambiguous? Bishop thinks so. In this section I focus on Bishop's model of rationality. Bishop explains, in his account of fideism, under what circumstances one may choose to make what he calls a *faith venture* on moral grounds, even when epistemic rationality is stymied by evidential ambiguity.<sup>42</sup>

There are two aspects of Bishop's model of rationality that I will examine below. The first is Bishop's claims about how moral rationality sometimes must be privileged over epistemic rationality (a much stronger claim than what I sketched in the model of rationality offered in the first chapter). This is grounded in Bishop's underlying claim that epistemic obligations are in many or all cases reducible to moral obligations. The second is Bishop's so-called *moral-epistemic link principle*. This principle suggests that one can believe P morally only when one is epistemically entitled to believe P.<sup>43</sup>

#### Privileging Moral Obligation

In the first chapter I sketched a general account of rationality. Bishop's fideism is founded not just on epistemic rationality, or even on moral rationality, but on a general account of rationality that takes into considerations both moral and epistemic rationality.<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, Bishop is deeply concerned with

---

<sup>42</sup> Evidential ambiguity is not limited to religious propositions. However, religious belief is the focus of Bishop's argument.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>44</sup> Bishop has little to say about other forms of rationality, but as will become apparent, this is largely because he views moral and epistemic rationality to be the ones in contention for rational primacy.

moral obligation. Yet to be morally rational in holding (or taking) P, one must be morally *justified*. As we shall see shortly, Bishop regards moral justification as, at least in many cases, requiring epistemic justification.<sup>45</sup> Later I will contrast this with the model of rationality explored in the first chapter, but for the present the focus is on understanding Bishop's model and how it pertains to his argument for fideism.

Bishop introduces the relation between moral and epistemic rationality not by sketching a general account of rationality, but by suggesting that epistemic rationality has a goal: "Why... should we care in general about the epistemic justifiability of our beliefs? Because, the standard answer maintains, our beliefs influence how we act."<sup>46</sup> Bishop does not give what I would consider to be the standard answer: because we want to maximize our true beliefs and minimize our false ones. Instead, he gives an ethically oriented response: because our beliefs influence our actions. This leads Bishop to make the following claim: "While agreeing that practical, moral, and epistemic evaluation are indeed not to be confused, I nevertheless wish to argue that—at least when it comes to faith-beliefs—it is reasonable to hold that our doxastic responsibilities are ultimately *moral* responsibilities."<sup>47</sup> An ethics of belief, then, is a *morally charged* ethics of

---

<sup>45</sup> Bishop does not attempt to give a full characterization or definition of moral justification. He restricts his comments to the relation between moral justification and epistemic entitlement and justification.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, footnote removed.

belief. Bishop claims that because our epistemic goal is to act “rightly,” our epistemic obligations are subsumed under moral obligations.

The goal of Bishop’s discussion of rationality is to establish a connection between epistemic concerns and moral concerns, a crucial step in his development of an account of fideism. Bishop here refuses a role for an ethics of belief that has to do with purely epistemic goals. Instead of acknowledging epistemic goals as legitimate goals in themselves, Bishop claims that epistemic aims are ultimately moral aims—that one wants true beliefs only because they aid one in action, and if they are related to action, then they are within the domain of morality.<sup>48</sup> Thus, when Bishop talks of an ethics of belief, he has in mind a moral evaluation of the consequences of holding a belief. Bishop gives as an example the case of the Inquisitor who believes that by burning the heretic at the stake, he is saving the heretic’s soul from eternal fiery torment. The Inquisitor, we are to infer, has what he deems adequate evidence that burning a heretic saves the heretic’s soul. Yet, is not the Inquisitor’s assenting to this belief a morally wrong action? “[I]t seems clear that the Inquisitor’s taking it to be true in his practical reasoning that heretics will burn everlastingly if they are not burnt briefly here must *itself* be a morally wrong action.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps Bishop is right that one may be morally culpable for holding such a belief. But as I have argued, asking whether the Inquisitor *ought* to hold this belief is an ambiguous question.

---

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Is this a moral *ought*? Or is it epistemic? Or perhaps something else altogether?

If, as Bishop suggests, an epistemic goal is really bound to moral considerations, then an epistemic “ought” is reducible to a moral “ought.” There is, on this account, no way that an epistemic obligation can arise that is contrary to a moral obligation simply because epistemic obligations are rooted in moral rationality. We are morally obligated to hold beliefs conducive to morality, and our epistemic goal is to hold beliefs that conduce to moral rationality.<sup>50</sup> Can an epistemic *ought* be separated from moral considerations? Bishop does not think so. “One could, perhaps, reply that this ‘ought’ is an epistemic ‘ought’. But that reply is, in effect, a way of refusing the question—or it is tantamount to answering it with the implausible essentialist claim that it is just in our nature as believers that we accept these epistemic duties.”<sup>51</sup> Bishop finds it untenable to claim that an epistemic ought is something other than a moral ought. An epistemic ought is a practical ought, because it is focused on action, and a practical ought is a moral ought because the practical goal is to act in a morally right way.

In the model of rationality I offered in the first chapter, I suggested that rational obligations are directed by rational goals. Moral goals are one kind of rational goal. Prudential goals are another, and the epistemic goal of maximizing truth and avoiding falsehood is yet another. Here, the “ought” of rational

---

<sup>50</sup> Again, Bishop’s formulation of our epistemic goal is *not* maximizing true beliefs and minimizing false ones, but holding beliefs that produce (morally) right actions.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

obligation captures the stipulation to reason in a certain way in order to achieve a goal. Thus, to satisfy an epistemic goal, one's epistemically rational obligation is to hold epistemically justified beliefs. Similarly, to satisfy one's morally rational obligations, one *ought* to hold beliefs that are morally advantageous. It is, for example, morally advantageous to hold beliefs that lead one to act morally. As the Inquisitor example amply illustrates, assuming the Inquisitor is justified in his belief, the Inquisitor may find his moral obligations in conflict with his rational obligations. What Bishop is suggesting, though, is that the Inquisitor transgresses both epistemic and moral obligations in holding his belief that burning a heretic saves the heretic's soul from eternal damnation.<sup>52</sup>

Does Bishop's folding of epistemic obligations into moral obligations then lead to the undesirable conclusion that one cannot be epistemically rational in holding beliefs that conflict with moral rationality? It would seem that this is so, and with an odd consequence: it turns the immoral (or amoral) genius into an epistemic lunatic. To illustrate, consider the case of two individuals intent on acquiring a great deal of justified beliefs about weapons of mass destruction. The first individual (Agent A) acquires such beliefs in order to be able to dismantle such weapons should she ever find them, while the second person (Agent B) intends to build and use such weapons against an unsuspecting general populace. Both have the epistemic goal of acquiring true beliefs about said

---

<sup>52</sup> There is the question of whether the Inquisitor is in fact epistemically justified at all. For the sake of the example, we will assume that the Inquisitor is in fact epistemically justified.

weapons, while also minimizing false beliefs about them. Let's say that the two acquire an identical set of beliefs about these weapons, and hold them based on identical evidence bases. By my lights, it is undesirable to say that Agent A is epistemically rational in her beliefs, while Agent B is not epistemically rational. If Agent A has satisfied the epistemic requirements for belief, surely so has Agent B. Likewise, it seems that if we claim that Agent A's epistemic goal is best served by pursuing evidence (Agent A epistemically ought to...), we seem bound to extend the same epistemic obligation to Agent B. The question of moral rationality is separate. Agent B may be morally irrational in her beliefs about the destruction of human life and motives for acquiring knowledge, but this does not translate to the claim that one's epistemic "ethics of belief" have been violated as well.<sup>53</sup> It should be clear though that this is *not* to suggest that one is immune to moral considerations when engaged in epistemic evaluation.

In summary, there are two problems in Bishop's ethics of belief. The first is that it does not follow that just because holding or taking P is open to moral evaluation, one's epistemic obligation in regard to P is in any way contingent upon one's moral obligation in regard to P. Secondly, there appears to be a confusion about epistemic goals. Epistemic goals may indeed be distinct from moral goals. Even granting for a moment that one's epistemic goals are action-

---

<sup>53</sup> A similar argument may be applied to another argument that Bishop cites (disapprovingly) in which it is asserted that epistemic rationality trumps moral rationality. Precisely the same mistake is made there: there is no non-arbitrary "ought" operating at the ATC level. *Ibid.*, 52. See also Gewirth 1978.



oriented (which does not seem to me to be completely correct), it still does not follow that one's epistemic goals are *ipso facto* moral goals. One may act according to the truth of a proposition, but act immorally. We may be able to call such an individual immoral, but can we call such a person (all things considered) *irrational*?

In the end, I think Bishop's desire to privilege moral rationality is laudable, but not sufficiently defended. Furthermore, I think a simpler claim can be made. Bishop may well proceed under the assumption that the genuine religious seeker is nobly motivated by moral goals. In this case we can continue to understand Bishop's argument with the preface: *Assume one privileges moral obligation over epistemic obligation [when it comes to religious beliefs]*. I think this provision best represents what Bishop means when he says "reflective believers' concern for the justifiability of their faith-beliefs should be regarded primarily as a concern about whether it is *morally* justified to *take faith-beliefs to be true in one's practical reasoning*."<sup>54</sup> Epistemic obligation cannot be as conveniently collapsed into moral obligation as Bishop suggests. While this weakens Bishop's argument, it does not defeat it. Bishop is targeting the same audience: "This inquiry into the justifiability of faith-beliefs takes its origin, then, in the situation of *reflective faith-believers* (or would-be faith-believers) who are interested in the question whether they are morally justified in taking, or continuing to take, the relevant faith-beliefs

---

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

to be true in their practical reasoning.”<sup>55</sup> The religious seeker is, on this account, one who has a rational preference for morally rational religious beliefs.

Bishop has more to say on the relationship between moral rationality and epistemic rationality. As we shall see, he suggests that in some ways moral justification is contingent upon epistemic justification. This he calls the moral-epistemic link principle.

#### The Moral-Epistemic Link Principle

Already we have looked at how Bishop ties moral and epistemic obligation. Bishop raises another case where epistemic and moral rationality are intertwined: justification. He calls this second area the *moral-epistemic link*, and he initially characterizes it as the principle that “it is morally justifiable to take beliefs to be true in our reasoning only when it is epistemically justifiable to do so.”<sup>56</sup> Bishop sees this particular formulation of the link as the culprit of many misdeeds in epistemology, for by this principle one may rightly suspend judgment on morally important propositions by citing evidential ambiguity. By Bishop’s action-oriented perspective, the result of this is the rather troublesome possibility that one will fail to act upon certain moral beliefs because one has not achieved epistemic justification (and hence has not achieved moral justification) regarding those beliefs. Yet while he thinks this version of the principle has flaws, Bishop does not reject it wholesale. Instead, he seeks to revise it.

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Why does Bishop think the principle, as stated above, is problematic?

Bishop's concern is with the case made by the hard-line evidentialist. As he characterizes it, the hard-line evidentialist claims that it is morally justifiable to take/hold a belief only if one is epistemically justified to do so; by the evidential ambiguity thesis one does not have sufficient evidence to justify pertinent religious beliefs, and hence one cannot be epistemically justified. Consequently, by the link principle, one is not morally justified in holding/taking religious beliefs: "If epistemic entitlement as certified under this evidential practice is required for the moral probity of living by theistic beliefs, then the upshot is that it is *not* morally justifiable to make theistic faith-commitments."<sup>57</sup> Even if one has a disposition toward certain religious propositions, one ought not assent. In one's practical commitments, says Bishop, one must not take religious beliefs to be true.<sup>58</sup>

Must we accept the moral-epistemic link, asks Bishop, "Or do people have a perfect moral right to commit themselves beyond their evidence to the truth of faith-beliefs if they so choose—and have the necessary psychic resources?"<sup>59</sup> Bishop thinks the moral-epistemic link, in this initial form, is too strong. Perhaps by beginning with the intent, it can be reformulated to be more broadly

---

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75. This seems to include atheistic beliefs as well as theistic beliefs. Interestingly, Bishop claims that a further conclusion of the argument is that one ought to strive to "eradicate" one's doxastic dispositions as well.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

accommodating.<sup>60</sup> Upon examination, says Bishop:

The moral-epistemic link principle, at its most basic, may thus be interpreted as claiming that their moral conscience can be clear only if, so to speak, their epistemic conscience is clear also: people may be morally justified in practical commitment to the truth of their faith-beliefs only if, I shall say, that commitment carries epistemic entitlement.<sup>61</sup>

Bishop believes the hard-line evidentialist has made a mistake in requiring epistemic *justification* that P as a necessary condition for moral justification that P. Moral justification requires that one has done one's epistemic due diligence. But requiring epistemic justification is too strong. This requirement is better captured as a permissibility thesis. Thus, Bishop's final characterization of the moral-epistemic link principle is expressed as follows: "People are morally entitled to take their beliefs to be true only if they are *epistemically entitled* to do so."<sup>62</sup> Here and elsewhere, Bishop shifts between moral justification and moral entitlement, but he does not clarify the difference as carefully as he does with epistemic justification and epistemic entitlement. In regard to the moral-epistemic link principle, Bishop seems to suggest that epistemic *entitlement* (not epistemic justification) is the correct requirement for moral *justification*. But when he comes to formulating the principle, the term moral *entitlement* is used.

Given this revised version of the moral-epistemic link principle, moral justification (or at least moral entitlement) still requires an epistemic element. But

---

<sup>60</sup> Bishop explains his "parsing" of the original epistemic link principles on *Ibid.*, 62-65.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

does this rule out conflict between moral and epistemic rationality? Let's take one of the standard cases for rational conflict: Bob has some evidence that his wife Susan has been unfaithful. But Bob recognizes his faith in his marriage as a strong source of moral goodness in his life. Following the evidence leads to the epistemically rational conclusion that Bob's marriage is dissolving while the conclusion of moral rationality is that Bob's faith in his marriage promotes morality. The important question for Bishop is whether Bob remains epistemically entitled to believe that his marriage is not dissolving, in spite of the fact that the evidence points to the contrary. Assuming for a moment that we have a satisfactory definition of *sufficient evidence*, one might perhaps claim that until one has sufficient evidence for P, holding not-P is still epistemically *permissible* even if it is perhaps more epistemically responsible to hold P.<sup>63</sup> Under such circumstances, it appears that one could be morally entitled to hold not-P (in virtue of one's epistemic entitlement to hold not-P), while also being epistemically entitled to hold P. (Keep in mind that to be *entitled* is a state, and does not require assent or any other mental action on the part of the agent.) Thus, it seems possible to experience rational conflict while still satisfying the moral-epistemic link principle. As Bishop has characterized it, the hard-line evidentialist cannot admit rational conflict between moral and epistemic obligations because one cannot be morally justified in holding a belief that is not epistemically justified. And perhaps we might be able to define evidential requirements in such

---

<sup>63</sup> This is disputable, but it seems to be the claim Bishop is making.

a way as to rule it impermissible to hold not-P whenever evidence points to P.

That, too, would make it impossible to gain moral justification for not-P, and thus would once again rule out moral-epistemic rational conflict. But as we have seen, there is at least one plausible way to interpret Bishop in such a way that leaves open the possibility of a rational conflict.

The consequence of this is that, based on this examination of Bishop's tying of moral and epistemic rationality, it still seems that it is most appropriate to acknowledge the possibility of rational conflict, which in turn leaves open the question of how one ought to solve such problems. Bishop's preference, as we saw in the previous section, is to countenance moral rationality over epistemic rationality. He believes this is most coherent with the goals of the true religious seeker. But perhaps that later claim is anything but sure. Religious seekers may well privilege epistemic, prudential or other rational goals above moral goals.

Thus far, we have examined Bishop's claim that the evidence for many religious beliefs is ambiguous. The religious seeker, says Bishop, is concerned with holding (or taking) morally rational beliefs. But to be morally justified in taking P one must be epistemically entitled to take P. In the face of evidential ambiguity, can the religious seeker satisfy epistemic entitlement in regards to religious propositions? Bishop answers this question by suggesting his own variety of fideism.

### **Supra-evidential Fideism**

Bishop's discussion of rationality identifies a general problem for rational

agents: When evidence about a practically important matter is ambiguous, how should a rational agent respond? Bishop frames the problem in terms of rational and moral obligations. The hard-line evidentialist, says Bishop, claims that because one is morally justified in taking P only when one is *epistemically* justified in taking P. In regard to religious belief, if the evidential ambiguity thesis holds, the hard-line evidentialist claims that (all things considered) an agent ought not assent to religious beliefs.<sup>64</sup> But Bishop claims that this conclusion is based on the too-stringent requirement that one must be epistemically justified before one can take P to be true. Might S rationally take P to be true if S is morally and epistemically *entitled* to take P? Answering this question in the affirmative opens the possibility for what Bishop develops as *supra-evidential fideism*. As we shall see in this section, Bishop develops an account of fideism that suggests that under certain circumstances one is rational in holding religious beliefs even in the case where the evidence is ambiguous.

Returning first to Bishop's models of faith, we will see in this section how Bishop develops a notion of doxastic venture, and from this Bishop introduces his fideist thesis, first as thesis (J), and then as the revised thesis (J+).

### Faith

As Bishop begins to unfurl his particular type of fideism he offers his own

---

<sup>64</sup> One might argue that the jump to ATC rationality is premature, as Bishop has not explained how prudential rationality and other forms of rationality ought to be weighed. This is true, but I believe that Bishop's intent is to make this claim at the most general level of rationality, not merely in the domain of moral and epistemic rationality.

characterization of faith. The model he offers ultimately emphasizes doxastic venture—a particularly important aspect of his fideism. But venture alone does not describe faith.

Bishop suggests that there are at least three components to faith. The first is the cognitive component, which involves propositional beliefs. One necessary condition for S to have faith in God is that S believes that God exists. And to talk more generally of a religion as a *faith*, Bishop suggests that for one to hold to the Christian faith, one must believe certain propositions about God, Jesus, and so on. The epistemic origin of these beliefs is not at issue here, says Bishop. Calvin's claim that these beliefs arise as revelations from God is not, says Bishop, incompatible with this characterization of faith.<sup>65</sup> In making such a claim, Bishop is sidestepping an early challenge from the externalist, and as we shall see later, this is important.

The second component of faith is what Bishop calls the *evaluative-affectional* component of faith. This is "the believer's *welcoming* the content of the cognitive component of his or her faith." This entails assent, as I characterized it in the first chapter. But is this evaluative-affectional component just assent?<sup>66</sup> Bishop indicates that there is more to it, that there is a certain affectional character to it that distinguishes this welcoming from mere assent.

---

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>66</sup> It seems more likely that Bishop intends for assent to be part of the first component. But one could read Bishop as suggesting that one have a disposition toward a belief (1), and an assent-like attitude toward a belief (2).



Citing James 2:19, Bishop points out that it is possible to believe, yet not be one of the faithful: “You believe that God is one; well and good. Even the demons believe that—and tremble with fear.” Bishop suggests that what differentiates between the demons—enemies of God—and the followers is beyond mere faith. One must also be *receptive* to these faith-beliefs. The evaluative-affectional component requires a degree of receptivity and affection that is beyond the doxastic stance of the demon in James’ epistle. Perhaps it is better to liken this component to trust, as in Evans’s model, if one understands trust as an affectional attitude.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to these, Bishop enunciates a third requirement: “Faith is not just a matter of holding faith-beliefs, and being glad of the truths so held. Faith involves commitment so *some* kind of *act* is thereby essential to faith.”<sup>68</sup> While Bishop suggests the term *commitment*, what he means, it seems, is closer to what Evans calls *obedience*: one seeks to do God’s will.<sup>69</sup> It is not just that one continues to hold faith propositions, but that one allows one’s faith to give direction in one’s practical life.

These last two elements, says Bishop, have an element of risk, of venturesomeness.

Christians rely on God for their ultimate welfare, and must therefore

---

<sup>67</sup> Evans 1998, 5-6.

<sup>68</sup> Bishop 2007, 105.

<sup>69</sup> Compare Evans 1998, 6 with Bishop 2007, 105-106.

relinquish the egotistic fantasy of trusting only themselves for directive control over their lives—and that involves genuine risk and real venture. That is common ground: what is contentions is *the nature* of the venture or ventures involved in authentic Christian faith.<sup>70</sup>

Thus faith involves a transition from determining one's own goals and motivations, determining one's own fate, to trusting another (namely, God) as an authority and seeking to conform one's will to the will of that authority. And it is at this point that Bishop makes an interesting move from what might initially seem like a trust-based model of faith to what he calls a doxastic venture model.

#### Doxastic and Sub-doxastic Ventures

In the first chapter we surveyed the seven models of faith that Bishop enumerates in his Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on "Faith."<sup>71</sup> That section introduced general notions of faith as doxastic and sub-doxastic ventures. As Bishop develops his account of supra-evidential fideism in *Believing by Faith*, he offers a more specific and detailed examination of these two models of faith. The main model of faith with which Bishop is concerned is the doxastic venture model.

Bishop transitions from his characterization of faith to his explanation of the doxastic venture model. His first characterization of faith involves a tripartite conjunction of (cognitive) belief, (evaluative-affectational) welcoming, and commitment or obedience. Bishop suggests that this model is venturesome, in

---

<sup>70</sup> Bishop 2007, 106.

<sup>71</sup> Bishop 2010.

that it involves a realignment of interests from the egotistical to the obedient. That notion of venturesomeness as obedience dissipates when he introduces the doxastic venture model. He introduces doxastic venture with no mention of welcoming or obedience: “The doxastic venture model of such faith-commitment maintains that it involves *an active venture in practical commitment to the truth of faith-propositions that the believer correctly recognizes not to be adequately supported by his or her evidence.*”<sup>72</sup> How does this relate to the characterization of faith Bishop has just offered?

Bishop’s characterization of faith involves belief, welcoming, and obedience, but it does not involve epistemic justification.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, given evidential ambiguity, evidential justification is not possible. It is the obedience or commitment condition that links his characterization of faith to this model of venture. Obedience (commitment) is action-oriented. It involves taking certain beliefs to be true even if these are as of yet unjustified, and this is particularly true in the context of action. That is, one must act as if such beliefs are true.

While this may seem redundant, given that belief entails assent (holding B entails taking B to be true), the real emphasis here is on the practical context: one’s actions proceed in accordance with one’s beliefs. Thus, Bishop isn’t simply suggesting that one must believe, and then assent again. What he is suggesting

---

<sup>72</sup> Bishop 2007, 106, footnote removed from original.

<sup>73</sup> Bishop here is interested in *justification* as that which is capable of granting entitlement. He is not here interested in warrant or knowledge-making. Thus he restricts his considerations to internalist forms of justification. cf. Foley 2002.

is that one must believe, and one must *act* according to one's assent.<sup>74</sup> *Practical commitment* is the point Bishop wishes to emphasize, and he explains practical commitment (in doxastic venture) as having three key aspects: (1) S must believe B, (2) S must "take it to be true (with full weight)" that B when practically reasoning, and (3) S must recognize that S is not evidentially justified in believing B.<sup>75</sup>

In regard to (1), belief in this case is the disposition toward P. Here it does not seem to include assent, which is instead captured in clause (2). As Bishop puts it, "there can be occasion for doxastic venture only if there is *already* a passionately caused tendency to hold the proposition concerned to be true."<sup>76</sup> Here Bishop suggests that the disposition toward P is "passionally caused." This phrase he borrows from William James, and he invokes the notion of passion here to explain how one would have the disposition, and yet have neither sufficient evidence nor assent. I return to this point later.

The idea of "taking B to be true (with full weight)" is crucial for Bishop. He is explicitly distancing himself from an evidential proportionality model.<sup>77</sup> He

---

<sup>74</sup> Why act on one's *assent* versus acting on one's belief as a whole? The answer is in the way Bishop treats assent as special within the context of action, while belief (holding-that) is generally treated as both propositionally oriented and dispositional. Bishop is deeply concerned that one recognizes the difference between the cognitive orientation of believing and the action-oriented nature of assent. I am not as convinced that this is necessary.

<sup>75</sup> Bishop 2007, 106-107.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, footnote removed from original.

<sup>77</sup> Bishop cites Paul Helm (2000) as a proponent of evidential proportionality. Bishop offers some additional analysis for how doxastic venture differs from what Helm calls "evidential deficiency" models. Bishop points out that the doxastic venture model is *not* a substitution for justification.

eschews the claim that one should proportion one's belief to one's evidence. Part of the venturesomeness of the doxastic venture is in holding this unjustified belief with the same degree of belief as one would hold a justified belief—and again note that the context here is practical reasoning.<sup>78</sup> Bishop understands practical reasoning as requiring a degree of responsibility beyond contemplation or consideration. In this way, taking P to be true in practical reasoning is more demanding than taking P to be true in theoretical reasoning. Acting (especially morally important acting) carries with it a higher onus than, say, thinking about an article one has read in the newspaper.<sup>79</sup> Thus, when Bishop says in the third claim that one must *recognize* one's epistemic state, he goes so far as to stipulate that this is deliberate (and occurrent) recognition because “the venturing involved in doxastic venture is *conscious* venturing.”<sup>80</sup> For one to be responsible in one's venture, one must be conscious of what one is venturing. Moreover, Bishop is concerned that faith be *genuine* or *authentic* faith. “Authentic faith requires *full* pragmatic commitment... theistic doxastic venture involves giving the

---

Bishop 2007, 108-109.

<sup>78</sup> Or, given the language of evidential proportionality, one is to hold an unjustified belief with the same weight as a strongly justified belief.

<sup>79</sup> This is why suspension of judgment is often not an option—a (morally) important practical situation may demand decisive action, while mere contemplation is more amenable to suspending judgment. More on this later in the chapter.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. Bishop leaves open the possibility of a subconscious doxastic venture. However, he brackets it as outside of the concern of the religious seeker.

truth that God exists *full weight* in one's practical reasoning."<sup>81</sup> To proportion a belief to the evidence seems, in Bishop's mind, to undermine the genuineness of belief. (This notion of authenticity is important, and I will return to it in the context of sub-doxastic faith ventures.)

One cannot make a doxastic venture that P, says Bishop, if one has epistemic justification that P. As far as I can tell, Bishop's reason for this is that he does not think of justified beliefs as ventures. But if justification is understood as defeasible, does that not make holding even justified beliefs venturesome? For S to hold P defeasibly, S acknowledges that even while S believes P and has evidence that P, S cannot be certain that P. It still may be the case that not-P. Is holding P thus not a venture? (Bishop's emphasis on justification is on P being justified *for S*, not just that S is justified in holding P.) Perhaps Bishop would suggest that with justification comes assurance or confidence, and that for such a reason, believing a justified proposition is no longer psychologically venturesome. But it is not clear where venture ends and confidence begins, nor is it clear that confidence precludes venture.<sup>82</sup> Another way to interpret doxastic venture is in relation to a notion of degrees of belief. Bishop, as we have seen, mentions proportioning belief to evidence, but suggests that a defining characteristic of doxastic venture is the "taking P with full epistemic weight." It

---

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>82</sup> We often talk of degrees of confidence. It seems to me that to claim that one has a low degree of confidence in P, yet still claim to believe P, that individual is expressing venture. I return to this in chapter 4, where I examine how venture is a useful notion when talking about justification.

seems that an argument could be made for the claim that S is taking a doxastic venture regarding P *even when possessing evidence* in cases where the evidence demands only a low degree of belief. Here, the doxastic venture may be grounds for taking P with full epistemic weight (as Bishop says) even when the evidence recommends a lesser degree of belief.<sup>83</sup> Does Bishop's neglecting this point hurt his overall argument? Perhaps not. Indeed, it may be a boon. No longer is the doxastic venture limited to only propositions with ambiguous evidence, but perhaps also beliefs with little evidence.

Doxastic venture describes a case where one *believes*, and one ventures to *act* in accordance with that belief even while recognizing that one is not justified in believing.<sup>84</sup> Bishop considers another case, though: the case where one does *not* believe—where the doxastic disposition is absent. And he describes a second form of venture model that he calls the *sub-doxastic venture*.

In a sub-doxastic venture, the first condition of the doxastic venture need not hold. It is not the case that S must believe (as a doxastic disposition toward) B. In the first chapter, I offered an account of belief that has both a dispositional element and a requirement that an agent (either consciously or unconsciously)

---

<sup>83</sup> This rough sketch suggests a “degrees of belief” model. I have made no effort here to defend such a model, and to do so is beyond the scope. For the present, I am simply suggesting that the notion of doxastic venture could be extended across such lines.

<sup>84</sup> Bishop gives an argument for the psychological possibility of doxastic venture, claiming that it is possible for one to have certain doxastic states *toward* a belief, even while recognizing that one does not have evidence confirming this. While this is not an important argument for the case at hand, he does seek to address some of the issues we saw Alston raise in regards to belief and doxastic voluntarism. *Ibid.*, 111-121.

assent. There I also suggested that one might *assent* to B but not (at that point or any other) develop a disposition toward B. I even suggested that justified true assent (at time t) may count (at t) as knowledge. Bishop's holding/taking distinction shares the traits described: one can *take* B to be true (at time t) without the dispositional component required in *holding* B. The sub-doxastic model makes much of this distinction, as it suggests that one can take B to be true (assent to B) at time t, while not believing B.

Assent, as I have construed it, must be sincere. Sincerity requires that one's assent is both unfeigned and honest. Does Bishop understand sincerity as a requirement even for sub-doxastic venture? Bishop's primary interest in his account of taking-to-be-true is that one's assent is lived out in one's action. But there remains the possibility that one may act on an insincerely held proposition. It seems that one can take P to be true without sincerity. Bishop does not think this counts as taking-to-be-true. "[F]ull commitment to a faith-proposition's truth will not suffice for authentic faith if it is undertaken in a purely experimental spirit, or as an exercise in pretending to believe."<sup>85</sup> This answer is inspired by Mark 9: 24: "I believe; help my unbelief!" This may be understood, says Bishop, as the statement that "I assent, Lord, help me to form the disposition!"<sup>86</sup> Bishop suggests that "if people *can* be so prepared without actually believing the truth of the faith-propositions on which they act, then it ought to be conceded that they

---

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>86</sup> Bishop 2007, 119, fn 32.



may indeed be making an authentic venture in faith.”<sup>87</sup> I suggest that what Bishop earmarks as authentic in this expression is sincerity.<sup>88</sup> One is committing to B because one desires to form belief that B. While it may not be possible or prudent to thereby infer from this that Bishop holds that *all* takings-to-be-true are *ipso facto* sincere, the specific faith ventures that are at issue in this context do seem to be characterized by sincerity.<sup>89</sup>

Authenticity plays a significant role in Bishop’s notion of venture. Both doxastic and sub-doxastic ventures require that the agent is *authentically* taking P to be true. Why does Bishop make this a requirement? Why not allow that a venture be hypothetical, an “acting-as-if”? Doing so would substantially simplify Bishop’s argument, perhaps eliminating “fideism” altogether. But Bishop insists on a higher degree of commitment, and this is a result of his definition of faith. Bishop understands genuine religious commitment to *require* faith. (This rightly raises significant questions about Bishop’s notion of God—a question I address in the next chapter. Genuine religious commitment is about a relationship with God, and a genuine relationship cannot be had by “acting-as-if.”) The cognitive and evaluative-affectual components of faith demand more than a hypothetical

---

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>88</sup> As a consequence, fictionalism is not fideism. Fictionalism lacks sincerity. Pojman’s notion of hope may or may not satisfy Bishop’s qualifications for sub-doxastic venture, since what it comes down to (it seems) is S’s willingness to assent at *t*. Pojman (1986) seems to suggest that one can assent without belief (and this is done with hope). cf. Bishop 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Bishop makes it clear that acting as if P “in a purely experimental spirit, or as an exercise in pretending to believe” clearly does not count as authentic faith, he does not explain whether or not this is a true sub-doxastic venture. *Ibid.*, 120.

venture. So the doxastic venture, and even the sub-doxastic venture, requires that one assent sincerely, making an (affectional) commitment beyond “acting as if.” This, I take it, is the meaning of authenticity for Bishop.

There is a second (related) question we might ask about Bishop’s doxastic venture model of fideism. Given both doxastic and sub-doxastic models, why does Bishop emphasize the doxastic venture model? Instead, he could discount doxastic dispositions and focus on sub-doxastic venture. The answer to this, I think, has more to do with descriptiveness than prescriptiveness. Bishop (again following James) is interested in giving an account of how those who believe may rationally do so. Recall that for Bishop, the disposition to believe is a precondition for a doxastic venture, not a result of it. The sub-doxastic venture model certainly admits those who are seeking and who are willing to assent before believing—and this captures a very real class of people. But Bishop is most concerned with those who find the disposition already there, yet have difficulty assenting in light of evidential ambiguity.

Bishop suggests that a doxastic venture may be the appropriate response to propositions plagued by evidential ambiguity. In the next section we will encounter a certain class of propositions that Bishop finds to be a particularly troublesome example of evidentially ambiguous, yet important, propositions. Some propositions play the role of framing principles.

### Framing Principles

We have explored Bishop’s notions of faith, doxastic venture, and sub-

doxastic venture. These are critical components of Bishop's fideism. Specifically, they explain the attitude of the believer (or assenter) in relation to beliefs. But there is an important aspect of Bishop's argument that has to do with types of belief. Bishop wants to identify certain classes of religious beliefs as particular candidates for faith ventures. One such class of beliefs is what he calls *framing principles*.

Bishop uses the term "doxastic framework" to describe a set of related beliefs: "For an identifiable doxastic framework to be a feature of a person's overall noetic structure is for the person to have a related set of beliefs that all presuppose the truth of a specific set of framing principles."<sup>90</sup> A doxastic framework is not (necessarily) isolationist—beliefs that are part of that framework may be related to beliefs not in that framework. As this integrationist attitude suggests, Bishop is not smuggling an anti-realist conception of belief into his account. But he is attempting to capture the fact that humans may have (and perhaps often have) clusters of closely related beliefs (political views, religious beliefs, and so on), and that often times those clusters have certain higher order "framing principles" that in some sense undergird them. Thus, Bishop describes framing principles as "those propositions whose truth must be presupposed if any of the beliefs belonging to the framework are to be *evidentially justified*."<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Bishop 2007, 139. Bishop defines *noetic structure* as "the whole structure of his or her beliefs, and the norms and associated practices associated with holding, retaining, revising, and acting on beliefs" (139).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Presumably, for example, a monotheistic doxastic framework (e.g. evangelical Christianity) will have the framing principle “God exists.” Some framing principles are what Bishop calls *highest-order framing principles*, not depending for support on any other propositions within the doxastic framework.<sup>92</sup>

Framing principles, thinks Bishop, have an interesting property: even if one were to adopt proportionality (“degrees of belief”) evidentialism as a general strategy, framing principles don’t seem to admit to degrees of belief. Bishop suggests that when it comes to a framing principle one either buys into it or one does not; one either takes them true (in practical reasoning) or one does not.<sup>93</sup> Bishop adopts James’ terminology, and describes framing principles as *forced*—one either accepts or does not accept. And again drawing from the so-called evidential ambiguity of theism, Bishop suggests that at least some framing principles are undecidable.<sup>94</sup> “[T]he choice whether or not to commit to the truth of the framing principles of a whole doxastic framework of faith-beliefs could

---

<sup>92</sup> Bishop is unclear as to whether or not they depend on other beliefs. He cites isolationist and Reformed epistemologies as cases where highest order framing principles seem “basic,” but he does not dwell on this. *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-140. I am not convinced that Bishop’s invoking “in practical reasoning” here is appropriate. This, in Bishop’s parlance, means one can assent without believing. If a framing principle is a critical piece of a doxastic framework, then assenting without belief seems to be in some ways a troublesome situation. If S assents to framing principle F, but has no disposition toward F, does this mean that S can only assent to all propositions in the doxastic framework?

<sup>94</sup> Bishop notes that there is the possibility—at least according to some—that “disambiguation” could occur, thus resolving evidential ambiguity. But Bishop suggests that the opposite may be true as well—evidential ambiguity may necessarily be true. *Ibid.*, 141. For an argument against treating framing principles as a special case that admits evidential ambiguity, see Feldman 2006.

present... a genuine and essentially evidentially undecidable option.”<sup>95</sup> In virtue of it being a framing principle, one must either buy in (all the way) or not. “Either one is practically committed to the framework’s principles or one is not. Either one takes them to be true with full weight or one does not.”<sup>96</sup>

Bishop’s notion of framing principles plays three roles in his fideism: First, they explain Bishop’s own notion of how we hold related beliefs. We can see from his description that Bishop’s noetic “web of belief” has clusters of associated beliefs, and at least some propositions in at least some such clusters are highest-order framing principles. Second, the notion of framing principles bolsters Bishop’s claim that some propositions are evidentially ambiguous. I read Bishop as here trying to make an architectural case for ambiguity. This is different from the empirical case we have already encountered. Bishop here claims that evidential ambiguity may be a necessary result of the architecture of belief. Finally, by positioning framing principles as crucial to entire groupings of beliefs, Bishop has elevated the urgency of his argument. Fideism is important, he claims, when it alone can provide rationale for holding (or taking) certain beliefs—beliefs that play a critical role in supporting broad clusters of beliefs.

The second claim, that framing principles are evidentially ambiguous, is troublesome. The implication is that some propositions cannot be evidentially

---

<sup>95</sup> Bishop 2007, 139.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 143. Again, here Bishop suggests that this may be a sub-doxastic sense of assent without belief. And again it seems to me that a proposition assented to, but not believed, seems to entail a highly volatile doxastic framework.

supported because of their *role in one's noetic framework*. I see no clear reason why the role of a proposition would prevent evidential support, and the very examples Bishop gives are those currently under dispute anyway: the existence of God, the idea that God acts in history. What Bishop seems to be doing here is forwarding propositions that he believes are evidentially ambiguous in the empirical sense discussed previously, then claiming that these are framing principles that play an architectural role, and thereby concluding that framing principles cannot be supported by evidence. Two things seem to surface when viewed in this light. First, if the empirical argument for evidential ambiguity thesis is weakened, so must the ambiguity of framing principles. We must shy away from Bishop's claim that framing principles may be *essentially evidentially undecidable*.<sup>97</sup> Secondly, with no further indications of what might constitute a unique class of framing principles, it seems there is no reason to treat framing principles as evidentially undecidable *in virtue of their role*.

Framing principles—especially those highest order framing principles—represent an important class of propositions for Bishop's theory of fideism. They play an important role in one's doxastic framework, yet on Bishop's account they are architecturally resistant to evidential support. These principles then seem to Bishop to be the ideal case for doxastic venture, and lead to supra-evidential fideism.

---

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

## Theses (J) and (J+)

Bishop's account of rationality combines with the moral-epistemic link principle and the evidential ambiguity thesis to pose a serious problem for the religious seeker who espouses hard-line evidentialism: Evidentially ambiguous religious propositions can be neither epistemically nor morally justified, and one therefore ought to suspend judgment on such propositions. From such a perspective, it appears that one cannot be both rational and a religious believer. But Bishop calls into question the assumption that he finds in hard-line evidentialism: is epistemic justification really necessary for moral justification? In answer, Bishop suggests that epistemic entitlement (which, as he explains it, does not require epistemic justification) meets the epistemic requirements for moral justification. Epistemic *justification* is not required. But what other conditions must be met before one may hold (or take to be true) religious propositions, even if on principally moral grounds?

Bishop's version of fideism, which he calls *supra-evidential fideism*, is based on the doxastic venture model introduced earlier. *Supra-evidential fideism* is the thesis that under some circumstances it is morally permissible to make a doxastic or sub-doxastic venture when the evidence is inconclusive. (Bishop does not delve into the question of how moral permissibility is tied to moral justification. It appears both here and elsewhere that moral permissibility may in fact require moral justification, making him "hard-line." But a weaker reading seems consistent with Bishop's claims as well. Moral permissibility requires

epistemic permissibility, but may not require satisfaction of other (unspecified) stipulations of moral justification.)

The crucial question is this: under what circumstances can one undertake such a venture? While Bishop is ultimately focused on only religious beliefs, he begins with a generic account of what circumstances may admit doxastic venture. He begins with William James' essay "The Will to Believe," and suggests *a la* James, that only *genuine options* be considered candidates for religious belief.<sup>98</sup> According to James, there are three qualifications for an option (candidate for assent or belief) to be *genuine*: it must be live, it must be forced, and it must be momentous.<sup>99</sup> An option is live only if that option is a real possibility for the inquirer. One must be able to assent sincerely to P in order for P to be live for that person. Momentous live options are those that, if held, will have a significant impact on a believer's overall actions or beliefs. It impacts, says Bishop "what kind of lives they lead or persons they become."<sup>100</sup> Momentousness also requires an element of immediacy or uniqueness: a momentous option is one about which a decision must be made right away. Finally, an option is forced if the possible responses are a bivalent *for* or *against*. (The notion of a forced option was introduced in the previous section.) In the

---

<sup>98</sup> cf. James 1948.

<sup>99</sup> This theory of options does not require complete doxastic control. It does require control over assent, but that much has been discussed already. It does not imply, though, that one be able to voluntarily form a long-term doxastic disposition.

<sup>100</sup> Bishop 2007, 126.



context of a particular religious belief (“Jesus is my personal savior”), says Bishop, the option is between accepting and not accepting because there is “no salient practical difference between not doing so while suspending judgment and not doing so while ‘positively’ disbelieving it.”<sup>101</sup>

### **Thesis (J): Permissibility of Doxastic Ventures**

With this, Bishop introduces thesis (J), a thesis about under what conditions one is morally permitted to make a doxastic or sub-doxastic venture regarding religious propositions.

(J) Where P is a faith-proposition of the kind exemplified in the context of theistic religious faith, it is morally permissible for people to take P to be true with full weight in their practical reasoning while correctly judging that it is not the case that P’s truth is adequately supported by their total available evidence (‘to make a faith-venture in favor of P’) if and only if:

- (i) the question whether P presents itself to them as a genuine option; and
- (ii) the question whether P is essentially evidentially undecidable.<sup>102</sup>

Evidential undecidability is related to the evidential ambiguity thesis Bishop offers. But there is more to it—especially when coupled with (i). Evidential undecidability would, under most circumstances, indicate that one ought to suspend judgment. But Bishop argues that this is not necessarily the case when P is a genuine option (live, forced, and momentous), for there are non-epistemic considerations that must be taken into account—not the least of which is this

---

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. I find this claim problematic, and return to it in the following chapter.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

decision's having to do with one's practical reasoning.<sup>103</sup> Because the option is forced, by definition one cannot invoke a proportional belief model. Thus, the "undecidability" in (ii) cannot be avoided by claiming that one may adjust one's degree of belief based on the evidence. But if suspending judgment in regards to P is not an option (or is performatively the same as disbelieving P), and the evidence is undecidable, isn't it simply the case that one should not assent to P? Not necessarily, says Bishop. If "the evidence neither supports P's truth nor P's falsity, then either taking P to be true or not doing so would be consistent with intellectual assessment of the evidence, and the decision must be determined by some further considerations about *what one ought to do* in such a situation of open evidence."<sup>104</sup> Bishop is suggesting that if a live option P cannot be epistemically justified, yet P has importance for practical reasoning, one may still be morally justified in holding/taking P. But moral justification has an epistemic requirement. And this is where thesis (J) comes in: It spells out the conditions under which S may satisfy the epistemic component of moral justification without having epistemic justification.

Clause (ii) has another important effect: it rules out what Bishop calls counter-evidential fideism. In the last chapter we saw Evans suggest that in some cases faith may be *against* reason. On Evans's account, reason's limitations and sinfulness will lead to the conclusion that not-P, when faith urges

---

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

toward P. Sometimes, says Evans, one must (in light of reason's deficiency) choose faith against reason. Bishop is opposed to any such claim, and clause (ii) rules out this possibility for supra-evidential fideism. *Only* in cases where evidence is undecidable is one morally permitted to make a doxastic venture.<sup>105</sup> When it comes to cases in which the evidence points in a particular direction, "it is indeed our ethical duty to take to be true only what the evidence shows to be true, irrespective of where our passional inclinations may lie."<sup>106</sup> By "passional inclinations," Bishop intends to identify emotive (often morally charged) inclinations that an agent may have. He suggests here that such feelings—even if morally motivated—must not trump the epistemic outcome. Yet when Bishop pays this point further attention later, he concludes that in *non-religious* contexts, counter-evidential doxastic venture may in fact be permitted "only on the grounds that the consequences of refraining from it might, in more or less contrived circumstances, be sufficiently serious."<sup>107</sup> Why the exception for non-religious contexts? Admitting one exception to the moral-epistemic link principle (and on such weak explanatory grounds) calls into question whether Bishop's method of solving rational conflict is insufficient. Be that as it may, Bishop's emphasis on following the evidence whenever possible (even if only in religious contexts) does avoid some of the issues we observed with Evans in the last chapter.

---

<sup>105</sup> Bishop 2007, 135-137.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

Bishop is also eager to point out that (J) is a permissibility thesis. One is *permitted* to make a doxastic venture if the conditions obtain, but one is not *obligated* (ever) to make a doxastic venture. Given the requirement that epistemic obligation proceeds from epistemic justification, one is not epistemically obligated. And given (J)'s moral emphasis, I interpret Bishop to be suggesting that one is not *morally* obligated to believe, either.<sup>108</sup> This, says Bishop, is a virtue of (J)—recognition of this fact (that doxastic venture is permitted, but not required) encourages one to accept religious pluralism.<sup>109</sup> One may act as if P is true with full weight, but one still ought not become dogmatic, for one must acknowledge the venturesomeness of taking P to be true.

#### **Thesis (J+): Morally Moral Permissibility**

There is something peculiar about thesis (J). Ostensibly, we have an account of moral permissibility, yet all of the conditions are epistemic. Nothing at all is said of morality. It seems, then, that under thesis (J), one may be morally entitled to make patently immoral doxastic ventures. Bishop gives the example of a Nazi religion: One may (by (J)) be morally entitled to make a faith venture in favor of a religion that extols the extermination of others, is committed to racism, and aspires to world military domination. Thesis (J) then, seems to be a rather amoral moral permissibility thesis.

---

<sup>108</sup> This is assuming that either moral entitlement does not require moral justification or that moral justification does not entail moral obligation. Perhaps this is the reason that Bishop shifts between talking of moral justification and moral entitlement.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

To rectify this, Bishop suggests two additional conditions. First, he suggests that the doxastic venture can only be considered moral “if it is motivated by a morally acceptable type of motivation.”<sup>110</sup> Bishop suggests, rightly I think, that any adequate moral theory should be able to answer the question of whether, for any doxastic venture V, S’s motivation in making V is morally acceptable.<sup>111</sup> Adding this condition should successfully rule out cases where one’s motivations are immoral. But what about the case where one earnestly ventures in favor of an immoral religion (again take Bishop’s Nazi religion as an example) for morally laudable reasons? Bishop is concerned about this case. “It seems... that it is possible to commit oneself to a morally objectionable faith-belief with a non-evidential motivation of a morally respectable kind.”<sup>112</sup> To eliminate this possibility, another condition is necessary.

This other condition, claims Bishop, must stipulate that the proposition about which one makes a doxastic venture must itself be morally good. Bishop spells out this revised version of (J) as thesis (J+):

(J+) Where P is a faith-proposition of the kind exemplified by the proposition taken to be true in the context of theistic faith, it is morally permissible for people to take P to be true with full weight in their practical reasoning while correctly judging that it is not the case that P’s truth is adequately supported by their total available evidence, if and only if:

(i) the question whether P presents itself to them as a genuine option;

---

<sup>110</sup> Bishop 2007, 164.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 165. Bishop himself seems to favor a variety of virtue ethics that he finds in James.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

and

(ii) the question whether P is essentially evidentially undecidable;

and

(iii) their non-evidential motivation for taking P to be true is of a morally acceptable type;

and

(iv) P's being true conforms with correct morality.<sup>113</sup>

Clauses (i) and (ii) remain unchanged, while (iii) and (iv) have been added.

Bishop is very clear in stating that (iv) is to be understood as an external requirement. It is not about what one takes to be correct morality. "Condition (iv) as stated requires faith-commitments to conform to what correct morality *actually* is."<sup>114</sup> Bishop suggests that one is only permitted to make a doxastic venture when that venture is moral. But Bishop's externalist construal of the fourth condition raises a significant problem. Ultimately, to require the satisfaction of an external condition is to undercut the entitlement thesis that is essential to Bishop's argument.

Reading (iv) as an external condition, the question of P's conformance to morality is not at all determined by P's internal relation of P to S's morality. Nor is the relation between P and "correct morality" necessarily accessible to S.

Condition (iv) can be satisfied regardless of S's knowledge of or awareness of correct morality. Similarly, (iv) can fail to obtain while S has no awareness of that

---

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

failure. And herein lies the problem, for S may *not be entitled* to venture P while having no capacity to discover that she or he is not so entitled.<sup>115</sup> Yet the entire rationale for introducing the notion of entitlement is that an agent must have internal access to her or his epistemic relation to a belief. Fideism—here spelled out in terms of a doxastic venture—is what gives the religious seeker peace of mind that she or he may indeed rationally take or hold P. Yet if S is only permitted to make doxastic ventures that satisfy the conditions of (J+), and such conformance to (J+) is external and possibly inaccessible to S, no peace of mind is gained here. One is left uneasy about whether or not (iv) obtains, and hence whether one indeed may make a doxastic venture. This is fundamentally destructive to Bishop’s fideism.

It is clear why Bishop wants (iv), and wants it to be externalist. He wants to prevent doxastic ventures that are immoral—and admitting the possibility that (J+) may lead one to embrace militant and extremist religious views is distasteful to say the least. While well-meaning, I think Bishop overreaches. To satisfy the goal of building a theory that indicates to an agent when that agent may correctly make a doxastic venture, any moral restriction must remain internal. In the first chapter, I discussed a model of rationality, and talked about moral justification. This may provide a foundation for an alternative to an externalist version of (iv). We might sketch a different restriction on doxastic venture that directs focus to

---

<sup>115</sup> Here, S is not *morally* entitled by (J+), and given Bishop’s view of rationality, that means S is not *generally* entitled to hold P. The fact that S may in fact be epistemically entitled would then be cold comfort. The goal of epistemic rationality is, after all, “right action.”

coherence with one's other moral beliefs: S determines P's moral goodness in respect to S's other beliefs relevant to S's moral evaluation of P. Perhaps this can be best filled out by requiring that S be morally justified in believing (or assenting to) P. This formulation I will call (iv'). Recall that S is morally justified in holding/taking P if doing so promotes S's goodness or morality. This is a rough sketch—one whose completion is beyond our scope. But it points to the pertinent issue: Just as epistemic justification leads one toward truth, so moral justification leads one toward goodness. But the move toward goodness is done based on one's internal evaluation. It is worth noting, though, that this requirement is essentially taking a *hard-line moralist* position by requiring moral justification as a prerequisite for morally permissible doxastic venture. (This is not to claim that nothing is morally permissible without moral justification, but that doxastic venture is not morally permissible unless it is morally justified.) This rebuilding of the fourth condition as (iv') seems the best way to save Bishop's notion of entitlement from encroaching externalism. This has the negative side effect that it might allow S to make a doxastic venture in favor of a proposition that is in fact immoral, but this is no more frightening for us than the fact that S may also be epistemically justified in holding a false belief.

We've seen that accepting (iv) undercuts Bishop's stated goals for entitlement. Holding (J+) results in one no longer finding peace of mind that one's doxastic venture is morally acceptable, and hence one must remain uncertain about whether one is entitled to make such a doxastic venture. The way to



escape this undercutting conclusion is to replace (iv) with (iv'), the requirement that P must be morally justified for S.

Why is it that Bishop does not seem to recognize this problem? In fact, there are indications in the text that Bishop does recognize it, and these surface in his discussion of the problem of evil.

*Abraham's doxastic ventures*

Once Bishop has offered J+ as the morally strong version of J, he considers a few examples of doxastic venture. We will look at Bishop's analysis of the story of Abraham and Isaac, and then see how Bishop addresses the problem of evil. I argue that in these accounts, the weaknesses of (J+) come to the forefront.

Inspired by Kierkegaard's famous opening discussion in *Fear and Trembling*, Bishop examines the Genesis story of God's calling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Was Abraham entitled to make the doxastic venture that it was indeed God's command to offer Isaac as a human sacrifice? Explaining, in terms of (J+), why Abraham is justified in making this particular faith venture leads Bishop into trouble. Initially, he suggests that Abraham is *reasonable in supposing* that he should sacrifice Isaac because *as far as Abraham was able to judge* in his ethno-sociological context, God's demand to sacrifice Isaac does conform to correct morality.<sup>116</sup> But Bishop must qualify this according to his externalist construal of (iv) by pointing out that we know now that this requirement of God's does not conform to correct morality.

---

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-173.

This raises a question at the very heart of the account: Was Abraham in fact morally permitted to make this particular faith venture? Let's grant Bishop the premise that a deity's requirement of human sacrifice is indeed non-conforming to correct morality. If we grant this, we must conclude that Abraham's faith venture was in fact morally *impermissible*. But according to Bishop, the best possible interpretation of Abraham's action is that indeed he thought this action morally permissible. We seem to have arrived at a case in which Abraham is not permitted to believe B, but where by his (Abraham's) lights he is permitted (even obligated) to believe B. As I understand (J+), Bishop's conclusion must be that Abraham was not entitled to make the doxastic venture that led him up the side of Mount Moriah.

This is a noteworthy problem for Bishop's account, and it illustrates the concern I expressed initially with condition (iv). Recall what the goal of Bishop's fideism is: It is to provide an indicator to a reflective believer as to whether she or he is morally permitted to make a faith venture. This goal cannot be satisfied if (iv) is externalist, for it leads to the Abraham problem: It can be morally impermissible for the reflective believer to hold P *even when* the reflective believer has adequately reflected on both the epistemic and moral conditions in such a way that the believer has satisfied all of the relevant internalist conditions. It seems that a reflective believer must then recognize that, in absence of an ability to determine the moral permissibility of a faith venture, the believer does not have grounds to make the venture.

Bishop desires to retain for moral permissibility the sort of indefeasibility epistemologist long sought. But just as epistemology has largely given up on an indefeasibility requirement for epistemic justification, in this case we should reconstrue (iv) of (J+) as internal, and recognize that the claim of moral permissibility is itself defeasible.

Interestingly, replacing (iv) with the internalist (iv') variant best accords with Bishop's Abraham example. On Bishop's telling, Abraham initially determines that God's demand for the sacrifice of Isaac is morally right.<sup>117</sup> Yet when Abraham reconsiders his moral position, he recognizes that sacrificing his son does not conduce to goodness (and furthermore, he recognizes that a benevolent deity would not require a human sacrifice). This causes Abraham to revise his beliefs. With (iv), there is no ground to accept Bishop's claim that Abraham's initial doxastic venture is morally permissible. But with (iv') Abraham meets the requirements of a doxastic venture *for both ventures*, yet we can see clearly that the grounds for making a doxastic venture are defeasible. As Abraham's moral reflections change, so too may his doxastic ventures.

*The problem of the problem of evil*

In the story of Abraham and Isaac, one difficulty for Bishop's theory arises. Bishop identifies another problem in regard to the problem of evil. As a thesis essentially about moral rationality, Bishop notes that (J+) is open to a common

---

<sup>117</sup> Bishop suggests that Abraham was concerned that he was committing idolatry by loving his son more than God.

objection against claims in favor of God's existence. For the reflective believer to rightly make a doxastic venture in regard to P, P must satisfy the two moral conditions, (iii) and (iv). If P is claims the existence of a moral God, then one must be able to offer an adequate explanation of God's actions and allowances in regard to evil in the world. The so-called problem of evil still presents a problem for traditional theists engaging in a doxastic venture according to (J+).<sup>118</sup> The answer Bishop gives to the problem of evil is interesting because he sidesteps the externalism issue of (iv) by quietly substituting a new requirement in place of (iv).

As Bishop formulates it, the problem of evil boils down to whether a reflective believer can "endorse a moral theory under which all historical evils could be such that God has a morally adequate reason for permitting and/or causing them."<sup>119</sup> Bishop claims that the problem of evil is not a problem of the epistemology of religious belief, but of the morality of belief. The question, as Bishop understands it, is whether one ought to make a *moral* doxastic venture in favor of some account of God's existence in conjunction with the existence of evil. But, suggests Bishop, the already offered doxastic venture model can be applied here. What are the demands of (J+) when evaluating whether a conception of God accords with the requirements in (iii) and (iv) of (J+)?

First, there is the motivational question in (iii), in which one must ask

---

<sup>118</sup> Bishop 2007, 167-170.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-169.

whether one's motives for accepting P are morally acceptable. This does not seem to pose a particularly troublesome blocker in the case of the problem of evil. It requires only that the *venturer's* motivations are correct; the morality of the actions of God (thus construed) is of no consequence in the context of (iii).

Condition (iv), though, poses a greater challenge. (iv) requires that one's taking to be true that P (with P in this case being an explanation of how a benevolent God can allow evil to occur) accords with *actual* correct morality. But Bishop seems to recognize that this is a stumbling block, for clearly the believer has no access to whether a given theory of theodicy is morally correct—it is, after all, the question at hand. This renders the permissibility of the faith venture indeterminate to the agent—the problem I have noted in the last two sections. But Bishop draws a startling conclusion about this: “condition (iv) in such cases will then reduce to the requirement that those beliefs [about God's character and the existence of evil] be mutually coherent.”<sup>120</sup> No explanation is given as to how this external requirement is suddenly “reduced” to internal coherence.

I find Bishop's move to coherence perplexing, as it seems so conceptually distant from Bishop's earlier characterization of (iv). Not only have we moved from an externalist condition to an internal one, we have also moved from a question of morality to a question of epistemology. There are the problems with this. First, the requirement that P *coheres* with one's other moral beliefs is extraneous to the morality question in the original (iv). Under Bishop's initial

---

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

characterization of (iv), there is no need for the agent to have any awareness of correct morality. The condition is merely whether taking/holding P does in fact accord with correct morality. There does not seem to be any sense in which the fact of P reduces to P's coherence with other propositions held by S. Second, coherence seems to have very little to do with the *morality* of holding a proposition. Bishop introduces (iv) as a way to stymie immoral doxastic ventures, yet epistemic coherence does nothing to fill the stated goal of (iv). Drawing from the original example, the Nazi religion may be both internally coherent and coherent with S's other beliefs. But this does not do anything to ensure morality. Consequently, I don't see how Bishop's sudden replacement of (iv) with a coherence requirement addresses what is of concern.

Yet I think Bishop is right to be concerned with the problem of evil, and I think he is right in construing it as a problem for an account of doxastic venture. What comes to light in this example is the inadequacy of (J+)'s condition (iv). Bishop's externalist move is a misstep. Moving to an internal account of moral justification, as formulated as (iv'), brings the problem of evil into the proper relation with the individual's doxastic venture. The believer must be morally justified in holding beliefs about the existence of God in a world in which evil occurs.

### **Is Faith a Bad Guide?**

In the last chapter I challenged C. Stephen Evans's claim that given reason's limitations, faith is a better guide. I challenged this on grounds that there

is no evidence that faith is a reliable method of attaining truth. Bishop shares this same worry in regard to his own doxastic venture model. Starting from the perspective of the hard-line evidentialist, Bishop frames the problem as follows:

Hard-line evidentialists may... seek to turn the tables by maintaining that *there is no real possibility* that passionate doxastic inclinations should function as guides to evidentially inaccessible truth. It is irrational, they will say, for supra-evidential fideists to accept the guidance of what they themselves agree not to be a generally apt indicator of truth just because there can be no other sort of guidance. A bad guide does not become a good guide through being the only one available.<sup>121</sup>

The criticism, as Bishop sees it, is that whatever “passional” elements lead one to take a faith venture, they possess no apparent qualifications as guides to truth. As Bishop sees it, practical reasoning—even in a strictly epistemic sense—brings to bear *all* of the relevant capacities.<sup>122</sup> But how does one determine which capacities are relevant? Bishop suggests that the hard-line evidentialist rules out any capacity that seems “passional.” Bishop calls these *passional doxastic inclinations*. Bishop, citing James, characterizes passional inclinations as “any cause of [a] belief other than a cause that provides the believer with evidence for its truth.”<sup>123</sup> This strikes me as an unsatisfactory explanation primarily because of its vagueness,<sup>124</sup> but at other points Bishop gives indications of what sorts of inclinations he views as passional when he suggests that fideists often try to

---

<sup>121</sup> Bishop 2007, 197-198.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>124</sup> It also seems somewhat question begging when Bishop evaluates whether passional inclinations count as evidence (*Ibid.*, 198-199).

transform “certain kinds of emotional states” into evidence.<sup>125</sup> I understand Bishop to be targeting that sort of oft-claimed “religious experience” captured with phrases like “an awakening of my soul” or “a stirring in my heart.”

The question that Bishop then asks is whether passional doxastic inclinations legitimately play *any* role in religious doxastic venture. Before examining how Bishop addresses the claim of the hard-line evidentialist, it is important to note two important differences between Bishop’s doxastic venture model and Evans’s responsible fideism. The first is that Bishop offers staunch and unwavering requirements about the preconditions for making a faith venture (viz. (J+)): ambiguous evidence, a genuine option, moral motivation, and moral conformance. As far as I can tell, none of these is required in Evans’s model. The second is that while Evans touts the occasional faith commitment “against reason,” Bishop rules out counter-evidential fideism. Bishop’s model is not based on a strong claim about the inadequacy of sin-entangled reason against a stronger (untainted?) divinely-given faith. Because of these, it seems to me that Bishop’s fideism is in a much stronger position to address the concerns of the “hard-line evidentialist.”

As Bishop sees it, the traditional arguments over passional doxastic inclinations have revolved around a supposed dilemma: “[E]ither treat religious doxastic inclinations as basic evidence, or else accept that they are indeed

---

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.



passional and thus never properly treated as guides to truth.”<sup>126</sup> As we’ve seen, Bishop is opposed to countenancing feelings (*qua* passional doxastic inclinations) as evidence.<sup>127</sup> He is opposed to the idea that one’s feelings about some proposition be treated as evidence in favor of that proposition. Furthermore, Bishop does not want to admit “experiential awareness” as legitimate evidence as Evans seeks to do.<sup>128</sup> Bishop seems to view such awareness as nothing other than a passional experience. Even while he maintains that passional doxastic inclinations are not evidential, he also does not want to rule them inapplicable to epistemic rationality. He rejects the apparent dilemma, suggesting that there is a middle way through.

The key to the answer, says Bishop, lies in the nature of a doxastic venture as a *venture* that is *amenable to later modification*. Consider the case where one makes a faith venture, and later happens upon conflicting evidence. “Under the supra-evidential fideism expressed in (J+), she is then morally obliged to withdraw or modify her initial faith-venture....”<sup>129</sup> How does this escape the dilemma? By the commitment to epistemic rationality expressed in (J+) and the understanding of a commitment as subject to revision, Bishop believes that the supra-evidential fideist is indeed not only acting (generally) rational, but

---

<sup>126</sup> Bishop 2007, 199.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 199. It also follows from the definition offered on p. 24.

<sup>128</sup> cf. Evans 1998, 123.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

remaining fully committed to epistemic rationality. And Bishop does not just restrict modification of one's faith-ventures on epistemic grounds, he identifies both prudential and moral reasons for modifying a faith-venture.<sup>130</sup>

Furthermore, he suggests that even these "passional intuitions" can have epistemic restrictions placed on them. He sketches three such conditions, though he does not dwell on them. "First, they are subject to the constraint of mutual logical coherence." I understand this to mean coherence between *intuitions*, as the next condition has to do with other beliefs. And this second condition is that intuitions must have "evidential fit" with existing "evidentially-based factual beliefs."<sup>131</sup> Bishop defers explaining evidential fit, choosing to characterize it only as making sure that intuitions are constrained by facts.<sup>132</sup> Finally, Bishop suggests that there is a sense in which these intuitions need to be checked by "critical pressures" from the community.<sup>133</sup> By exposing one's intuitions to others in a community (and I take Evans to be referring here to an *epistemic* community—a group of people who share common epistemic commitments), one's judgments about how these intuitions fit with available evidence are open to further perspectives and evaluations.

---

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 200. That said, it is clear that Bishop envisions evidential ambiguity as irremediable and doxastic venture as unavoidable. One's religious beliefs may change, but one will remain a fideist.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-201.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

With these constraints in place, Bishop suggests that while the intuitions or passions do not necessarily themselves gain evidential weight (which, again, is a position he seeks to avoid), they do function *rationally*—that is, they accord with an agent’s rational (all things considered) goals.<sup>134</sup> They can thus rightly influence one’s ventures, but for this to be rational, one must remember that one’s doxastic venture is essentially experimental.<sup>135</sup>

It is important to note that Bishop is not exactly accomplishing what he states. What Bishop is claiming is that *passional doxastic inclinations may indeed be valid truth indicators*. Essentially, Bishop claims that when no strong evidence is available, these inclinations may rightly serve an epistemic goal. Evidentialists have a name for this sort of indicator: evidence. Even if it is weak and defeasible, it remains evidence. What I see Bishop doing here is offering a defense that, when strong truth indicators are ambiguous, it is at least epistemically permissible to admit passional doxastic inclinations as weak evidence. I don’t see this as particularly problematic, subterfuge aside. This seems consistent with how humans actually do reason (even in non-religious contexts), and is also

---

<sup>134</sup> Bishop may wish to restrict this to epistemic rationality, but I think the context indicates that a more general rationality is indeed the goal.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-203. There is a confusion in the examples given by Bishop, though. Passions are here conflated with morally and prudentially rational beliefs. It is unclear, therefore, whether in these examples the reason for a redaction of one’s faith venture is *passional* or based on new moral/prudential beliefs. Perhaps this is intentional. Perhaps Bishop intends to label moral and prudential beliefs as essentially passional, but it seems that the cases he gives here are markedly different than the case of “having warm feelings” when hearing the gospel message—a case he dismisses earlier (178). cf. 14-115, where Bishop classifies various forms of passions.

consistent with at least some characterizations of evidentialism.<sup>136</sup>

### Is Fideism Preferable?

Bishop's model of doxastic venture suggests that when certain conditions are met, it is *morally* permissible to make a doxastic venture. But how does this tie back to Bishop's model of rationality? Is hard-line evidentialism defeated? More generally, has Bishop shown his variety of fideism to be rationally (all things considered) preferable?

First, there is the question of epistemic rationality. As we have seen already, Bishop believes fideism to be epistemically *rational*, yet he does not think that one can conclusively show that his version of fideism is epistemically *preferable* to hard-line evidentialism.<sup>137</sup> But Bishop is not particularly troubled by this conclusion. Recall that for Bishop, the epistemic goal is not *maximizing true beliefs while minimizing false ones*. Instead, it is to put one in the best position to act rightly—and as Bishop construes this, this is a moral goal. For that reason, Bishop believes he can make his case in terms of moral rationality. And he does think that it is morally rational and morally preferable to accept supra-evidential fideism. There seem to be two alternatives:

Does the highest morality liberate us from enthrallment to all forms of religion or quasi-religion that require cognitive commitments in principle beyond evidential support, as the hard-line evidentialist maintains? Or is the

---

<sup>136</sup> Conee and Feldman 2004b, 102. I return to this in the next chapter.

<sup>137</sup> See Bishop 2007, chapter 8. Note that the question itself is somewhat problematic, for what does it mean to claim that it is epistemically rational to be morally rational when not epistemically justified.

fideist correct in holding that the highest morality permits us—or perhaps even requires us—to trust certain of our passional doxastic inclinations in making such faith commitments?<sup>138</sup>

Clearly, Bishop enjoins the latter. (Note that here, late in his argument, he includes passional doxastic inclinations as a key component.) If moral obligations are the most important of all rational obligations—indeed, if all rational obligations are (as Bishop suggests) ultimately understood as moral obligations—then, he says, we may, and perhaps even *must* espouse a doxastic venture model.

He has more to say about why hard-line evidentialism is not the preferable model. Bishop offers three reasons why he believes hard-line evidentialism is not the most morally rational theory. The reasons are:

(1) The suggestion that fideism expresses a more balanced and authentic self-acceptance than evidentialism; (2) the claim that hard-line evidentialism arises from an unwarrantedly dogmatic attachment to a naturalist view of the world—and may even count as a failure in love; and (3) the claim that those who accept that basic moral values rest on passional commitment will end up with a doubtfully coherent overall position if they also (as hard-line evidentialists) reject religious-ventures in favour of the claim that the world is a moral as well as a natural order.<sup>139</sup>

From these objections, Bishop draws the conclusion that supra-evidential fideism is in fact morally preferable—and rationally preferable—over hard-line evidentialism as an agent's epistemological toward the world.

Thus far, I have raised some reservations about this argument. I have suggested that Bishop misconstrues epistemic rationality and epistemic goals.

---

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

Most crucially, I have argued that Bishop conflates moral and epistemic goals. I have also claimed that epistemic rationality is not dependent upon moral rationality (recall the example of the two nuclear scientists). To what extent do these issues impact Bishop's supra-evidential fideism? This is the topic of the final section of the chapter.

### Conclusion

I have outlined Bishop's theory of fideism. Along the way I have pointed out some of my concerns. In some cases, I have suggested ways to improve Bishop's theory (such as by revising (J+) to avoid moral externalism). In other cases, I have left problems unanswered. But I have not claimed to *defeat* Bishop's theory. The goal of the next chapter is to argue that evidentialism presents a better alternative to fideism. Making that argument will require clarification of what makes one theory better than another, but I will not claim to conclusively show either Bishop's or Evans's varieties of fideism to be false.

At a high level Bishop's fideism suggests that (a) what the religious seeker is (or ought to be) interested in is moral entitlement for holding religious beliefs,<sup>140</sup> (b) epistemically speaking, justification for important religious beliefs cannot be had because the evidence regarding religious propositions is ambiguous, and therefore (c) what the religious seeker is left with, as a best available course of action, is a doxastic venture model as exemplified in thesis (J+). Along the way, Bishop has made some claims that I have argued against.

---

<sup>140</sup> Recall that moral entitlement, for Bishop, requires epistemic entitlement.

First, there is Bishop's model of rationality, in which moral obligation is the only form of obligation, and thus meeting one's rational obligations (regardless of the domain) becomes a question of meeting one's moral obligations. Second, Bishop claims that considering the total available evidence for important religious propositions (such as "God exists"), the result is evidential ambiguity. Third, when certain conditions obtain (as enumerated in thesis (J+)), one may—or perhaps ought to—make a doxastic venture regarding faith propositions. Such doxastic ventures are, it seems, *permanent* in the sense that we cannot hope for more evidence that will lead from doxastic venture to justified belief. For this reason, Bishop calls his theory a type of fideism.

The positive impact of Bishop's argument should not be lost in the critique. Bishop provides a much-needed theory of doxastic venture. There are cases indeed where evidence is ambiguous, yet the situation presents what Bishop calls a *forced option*. Bishop provides a rational alternative to the traditional "hard-line evidentialist" answer that would require suspension of judgment. He offers an account of how agents can make responsible (rational, all things considered) doxastic ventures. And having approached the problem with both moral and epistemic rationality in mind, Bishop has kept an eye on the practical aspects. Even in religious contexts, there are situations that, for some S at time t, involve ambiguous evidence. While I do not think doxastic venture is a broad and enduring solution to the problems of religious beliefs and evidence, it seems clear to me that sometimes a doxastic venture is a responsible (and perhaps the

only responsible) course of action. Sometimes that initial doxastic venture opens up the possibility of identifying evidence that might otherwise remain inaccessible. And Bishop is right, I think, in criticizing the hard-line evidentialist for mis-handling the situations that arise from evidential ambiguity, taking false refuge in a demand for suspension of judgment.

My concern is with the extension of this theory of doxastic venture into a version of fideism that claims that *in general* the doxastic venture is the correct approach to addressing religious propositions. Is Bishop's model the best a religious seeker can or should hope for? Is doxastic venture the answer for the religious seeker? Or is there a better candidate?<sup>141</sup> Much of the question now seems to hinge upon whether it has really been shown that there is not sufficient unambiguous evidence (or that sufficient evidence cannot be had).

This evidential critique of Bishop's, and even the agent-centered critique by Evans, should raise another question for us. What do these questions about evidential availability and agent reliability say about the character of the God these arguments purport to defend? Might we turn the question a different direction and ask about what can or ought to be expected (epistemically) from such a God? This will be a guiding question in the last chapter.

---

<sup>141</sup> Again, the very notion of "better" needs clarification, and I will address that in the final chapter.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### EVIDENTIALISM AND FAITH

#### **Introduction**

In the last two chapters, I have explored Evans's and Bishop's theories of fideism. I have claimed that each has difficulties. In this chapter I offer an evidentialist alternative to fideism. Both versions of fideism position themselves as answers to evidentialism's insufficiencies. But neither has conclusively shown evidentialism incapable of addressing the supposed problems raised by the fideist. In this chapter I wish to make the following claim: Far from being defeated, evidentialism provides a better account of how one can hold epistemically rational religious beliefs.

To begin, I will look at fideism's most troubling aspect: its seeming inability to address the concerns of the skeptic. Evans builds a theory centered on agent-based limitations and flaws. While Evans invokes cognitive limitations as an argument against evidentialism, ultimately it does damage to the fideist. Bishop's theory is about the permissibility of belief, but it leaves no compelling reason to accept religious beliefs in the face of skeptical challenges. When accepting evidential ambiguity as a permanent state, one has little hope of answering skeptical challenges to religious beliefs.

If the goal of both forms of fideism is to assuage the critical doubts of the

religious seeker, the fact that neither theory can rebuff the skeptic is cause for concern. An individual with rational goals is interested in acquiring theories resistant to skepticism.<sup>1</sup> Evidentialism, I argue, remains a better epistemological approach than fideism. Against the formulations of evidentialism in Bishop and Evans, I suggest a formulation that is less “hard-line,” and I call this *moderate evidentialism*.

A theory of evidentialism alone is not enough to adequately answer the criticisms of these two fideists. Evans and Bishop raise significant concerns about the purported evidence. We must return to the question of whether there is non-ambiguous evidence for religious beliefs, and whether that evidence is such that an agent can grasp it—even an agent cognitively limited and prone to selfishness and pride. Bishop and Evans each claim that the evidence of natural theology is insufficient. I examine why, discussing this sort of evidence as *forensic* evidence. But perhaps seeking forensic evidence for God is a less fruitful approach than others. Might we look elsewhere for a source of evidence? I return to the distinction discussed in the last chapter between public and private evidence. I examine the notion of private evidence in its various forms, concluding that we often admit private evidence in well-accepted epistemic practices. Certain claims about the evidential role of religious experience, though, give reason to pause. Ought we really accept *these* as evidence? Are they the best available evidence? And are they sufficient evidence? I briefly address

---

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of rationality in the first chapter for more on this.

these questions before moving on to another potential source of evidence.

Both the fideists and the natural theologians may have erred in their approach to evidence, in that they have neglected a critical leading question: If there is a being worthy of the title God, how would this being be evident to humans? A being worthy of the title God would be, among other things, relational, perfectly loving, and altogether moral. Based on these characteristics we might be able to project how such a being would interact with us. I suggest that the answer to the question of evidence is that God's existence would be evident to us through God's interactions (at a moral level) in our lives. Rather than seeking forensic evidence, traces of God, residue of his actions in the world, we are better off seeking evidence of God's person-based interactions. If we are to look for evidence of God, we should look for evidence of God's efforts to non-coercively motivate moral improvement in individuals. I call this *volitional evidence*, and suggest that we look at moral promptings experienced in conscience as a starting point for evidence of God's acting in our lives.

Such promptings, should we find them, still may not be sufficient for justification. But our response to these promptings may become the basis for encountering additional evidence. Thus, I suggest that Bishop's notion of epistemic *venture* may yet play a substantial, but non-fideistic, role in the epistemic journey of the religious seeker. But this venture model is rightly sensitive to the skeptic. That is, the venture does not conclude with evidence-less belief, counter-evidential belief, or even mere acceptance in the face of

ambiguity. Rather, it is an epistemically rational strategy for diachronically acquiring evidence.

### **Doubt and Skepticism**

A mark of a good epistemic theory is its resilience to the skeptic. Theories resistant to skepticism lend a higher degree of doxastic (or at least epistemic) stability. If there is one problem that troubles fideism in general, it is skepticism. By focusing on epistemic entitlement instead of justification, the two varieties of fideism presented here have committed to a permissibility thesis. But epistemic permissibility, as I claim below, is ill-equipped to rebuff skeptical challenges.

This claim may strike some as surprising. After all, historically fideism arose as an *answer* to the skeptics. Bayle and Montaigne, both considered fathers of fideism, were deeply rooted in Pyrrhonian skepticism.<sup>2</sup> They believed, as do Evans and Bishop, that traditional epistemic theories failed to answer the questions of the skeptic. Yet these early fideists make the claim that one ought to have faith (construed primarily in doxastic terms) in the face of epistemic failure. Early fideism was situated in a milieu in which *certainty* was held to be a necessary characteristic of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> This commitment to certainty opened the possibility of seemingly devastating skeptical attacks exemplified by Descartes' evil deceiver. But devotion to the certainty criterion for knowledge did not

---

<sup>2</sup> cf. Penelhum 1983, Popkin 1979, and the first chapter of Maia Neto 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Popkin (1979) elaborates on the relationship between theology, fideism, skepticism, and certainty.

diminish, and the epistemic theories (again, best exemplified in Cartesian epistemology) seemed to limit what may be known to a small pool of beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Humans can hope to *know* only a little. And religious beliefs seemed (to many) to be outside the scope of what could be known. Early fideism may be understood as reactionary—perhaps to the extreme opposite. If certainty is a necessary condition for knowledge, then the skeptic is in a strong position to undermine many knowledge claims. The solution offered by early fideists is to allow religious believers to retain conviction in the face of this radical undercutting doubt. Yet fideism accomplishes this by ignoring the skeptic's concerns. To those historical fideists, the precariousness of fideism was no more or less troubling than the precariousness of certainty-based knowledge. But when we turn toward the contemporary theories of Evans and Bishop the picture is different.

Contemporary epistemology has changed in at least one notable way: certainty has given way to defeasibility and fallibility. It is now rare to find a theory of epistemology that insists upon certainty as a criterion for justification or knowledge. In so changing, contemporary epistemology displays a marked improvement in resilience to the skeptical challenge. No longer can the introduction of doubt, however minuscule that doubt may be, undermine a knowledge claim. Nor can the mere possibility that not-P undermine justification that P. Taken in this light, that classical notion of fideism (as espoused by Bayle,

---

<sup>4</sup> Popkin calls Descartes's evil demon the first example of *super-Pyrrhonism* (1979, 179).

Montaigne and others) seems to be a fringe epistemology.<sup>5</sup> Instead of being a theory in opposition to another equally strong (yet widely accepted) theory, it appears to be an outlier that has perhaps fallen into disrepute.

But might fideism enjoy a re-formulation in kind? Might certain aspects of fideism be recalibrated to better address problems faced in contemporary religious epistemology? Evans and Bishop find reason to again forward varieties of fideism. As we have seen, these two theories of fideism are moderate when compared to earlier theories.

Many (though not all) contemporary epistemic theories fare better against the skeptic than the certainty-based theories of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. While this is not to say that all succeed in all regards, global skepticism may not appear to contemporary eyes to raise quite the specter that it was to Descartes.<sup>6</sup> But this raises an interesting question: Do the new forms of fideism forwarded by Bishop and Evans also display better resilience to the skeptic?

### Entitlement and the Skeptic

Bishop and Evans both purport to develop fideism not as an alternative to epistemic justification, but as a form of *entitlement* for belief. As I have shown in the preceding chapters, both Evans and Bishop are developing an account of the

---

<sup>5</sup> It has been suggested by Evans (1998), Bishop (2007) and Moser (2010) that at least some versions of epistemic externalism are also forms of fideism. This may be true, but this variety of fideist refrains from the forthcoming form of fideism found in classical fideists.

<sup>6</sup> Notable exceptions include Peter Unger, who defends the notion that certainty is a component

*permissibility* of holding faith beliefs. To what degree is such a permissibility thesis resistant to skepticism? Bishop and Evans both state that their claims are modest: these two versions of fideism only show that an agent may remain (generally) rational in holding qualifying faith beliefs. But even while qualifying the argument thus, both acknowledge that religious beliefs are anything but trivial details of one's overall beliefs. The core of the Christian beliefs at issue in both accounts is not merely a set of historical propositions, but an entire moral and epistemic framework, an outlook on life (and death, and beyond), and even a personal relationship between a human agent and God. Bishop expresses the importance of some of these core religious beliefs by claiming that these beliefs are *framing principles*: They become the foundation of a framework upon which one's entire view of the world—and one's acting within the world—is based. There is a magnitude to these beliefs that extends far beyond a simple venture that some historical fact P obtains.

Yet even while acknowledging the magnitude of such beliefs, Bishop and Evans seem to feel that it is sufficient merely to be permitted to hold these beliefs. Justification is not necessary. Here it behooves us to draw attention to a detail: Both Evans and Bishop conclude (though for different reasons) that one *cannot* be epistemically justified in holding faith beliefs. Evans believes that our epistemic equipment is "fatally flawed." Bishop believes that the evidence is irremediably ambiguous. But both reject the claim that the correct response is

---

of knowledge (2000, 334) and Barry Stroud (2000).

suspension of judgment. Bishop goes so far as to claim that the reason suspension of judgment is not appropriate is precisely because of the magnitude of the beliefs in question.<sup>7</sup> Here the skeptic is likely to raise the objection that basing one's overall noetic structure on beliefs that are not only unjustified, but perhaps unjustifiable, is epistemically irrational.<sup>8</sup>

For Evans, what precludes justification is the chronic malfunction—due to sin and cognitive limitations—of one's epistemic capacities.<sup>9</sup> Once we recognize this, says Evans, we can overcome this limitation by taking religious propositions by faith. The skeptic is unlikely to be swayed by Evans's admonition to have faith. The objection is one I raised in chapter 2: What makes faith less prone to lead one into error than epistemic rationality? Faith is at least as likely (if not more likely) to mislead one than reasoned decision making.<sup>10</sup> When one does not have the necessary capacity to reason about P, concludes the skeptic, the appropriate

---

<sup>7</sup> It is not morally appropriate because of the practical implications of such beliefs. But Bishop also claims that it is not epistemically appropriate (Bishop 2007, 143-144). Framing principles play an important epistemic role for Bishop. Suspending judgment on framing principles may have broad epistemic implications for an individual. Further, Bishop argues that because evidential ambiguity is unavoidable for religious propositions, one is *never* entitled to suspend judgment based on absence of evidence (143).

<sup>8</sup> "Overall noetic structure" is Bishop's term (2007, 139). The skeptic may then challenge Bishop's epistemic claims about framing principles.

<sup>9</sup> How do we know that there is a malfunction? Evans offers a roundabout argument that boils down to the claims that (a) reason is not so damaged so as to fail to see its own problems, and (b) some areas (e.g. religious belief) are more prone to failure than others (e.g. beliefs about my current physical state) (Evans 1998, 103-106). In chapter 2, I point out several issues with Evans's formulation of knowledge's limits. The bottom line, I claim, is that reason may be limited and flawed, but not "fatally" so.

<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Evans is an externalist about knowledge (and thus warrant), but he sees a definite role for entitlement. The skeptic needn't attack Evans's externalism to raise doubts about his fideism.



response is not belief, nor disbelief, but suspension of judgment.

Bishop's rebuttal to the skeptic is to make the Jamesian claim that in cases of forced options, such as faith beliefs, suspension of judgment is (practically speaking) the same as disbelief.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, to claim that one ought to suspend judgment in the face of ambiguous evidence is equivalent to claiming that one disbelieve (because of suspension of judgment). Consequently, one is *actually entitled* to select between belief and disbelief. Such an argument has a peculiar quality. The claim seems to be that because the outcomes of disbelief and suspension of judgment are (in some way) equivalent, the criteria ought to be considered equivalent. The criterion for disbelief (stated roughly) is that one have sufficient undefeated evidence that not-P. That is, if S has sufficient undefeated evidence that not-P, one epistemically ought to hold not-P. On the other hand, if S lacks sufficient undefeated evidence either for P or for not-P, S epistemically ought to suspend judgment. Bishop's claim seems to be that suspension of judgment regarding ("forced") religious propositions results in *performatively* similar or identical consequences to holding that these religious propositions are false.<sup>12</sup> This is not problematic, but what Bishop claims based on this does seem problematic: He indicates that because there are really only two outcomes (acting as if P, and acting as if not-P), suspension of judgment is the same as

---

<sup>11</sup> Bishop 2003, 129-134.

<sup>12</sup> As I understand it, what Bishop is claiming is that the agnostic and the atheist may claim to have different doxastic states regarding religious propositions, but those doxastic states both lead to the same sort of actions.

disbelief: “not taking p to be true is *in practice* equivalent to taking p to be false.”<sup>13</sup> Hence one is *actually* faced with a bivalent choice (believe or disbelieve). There is no meaningful sense of “suspending judgment” for what James calls a forced option.

The skeptic will point out that this is a troublesome conflation. The requirements for suspension of belief were met; therefore one epistemically *ought to suspend judgment*. Even if suspending judgment is not performatively different from holding not-P (a claim which itself may be dubious) this does not in any way change the fact that the criteria for suspension were met, nor does this similarity of conclusions entitle one to re-jigger one’s epistemology to preclude suspension of judgment as an option. In a shell game, the token is under only one of the three shells. There may be only two possible outcomes to the game (find the token or don’t find the token), but this does not mean that there are only two choices.

For the skeptic, neither Evans nor Bishop can deliver a reason why inability to gain justification that P (or that not-P) ought to lead one to hold P, even if “by doxastic venture” or “by faith.” When it comes down to it, the skeptic holds the epistemic high ground: it is epistemically rational to suspend judgment. When faced with irremediable evidential ambiguity or with defeated evidence, one (epistemically) is not entitled to hold a belief.

There is a second aspect of Evans’s and Bishop’s entitlement thesis that

---

<sup>13</sup> Bishop 2003, 132.

encounters skeptical objections. One who adopts fideism will find oneself in a precarious doxastic (or at least epistemic) situation. Permissive beliefs are not resilient against skeptical attacks. Epistemic permissibility may accomplish a purpose. In being permitted to believe, one may claim to be, in some sense, *rational*. But by acquiescing to the claim that sufficient evidence cannot be had (either because of agent-based deficiencies, as in Evans, or because of evidential ambiguity, as in Bishop), one relinquishes the claim that religious beliefs can be justified. One acknowledges the insufficiency of evidence, and yet suggests that fideistically held beliefs may still play the part of framing principles. This leaves not just a belief, but an entire system of beliefs susceptible to each and every novel skeptical attack that an agent encounters. And the skeptic can make a simple claim: Without justification, the fideist—even the rational fideist—is relying on dogmatic assertion.

The skeptic can raise this simple objection against entitlement-based unjustified beliefs by pointing out a result of entitlement for a belief that is not epistemically justified. For some held belief B, for what epistemic reasons would one hold this belief rather than something other than B (including not-B)? (I call such epistemically oriented explanatory questions *why-questions*.) Why believe Christianity rather than Buddhism? Why believe in one God rather than a multitude? Why believe in a personal deity rather than a powerful but uninvolved one? The permissibility theses found in Evans and Bishop do nothing to show

that holding a belief is the best available option.<sup>14</sup> This is where skepticism outmatches fideism. A fideistically held belief may be *rational* to believe, but in absence of justification, the skeptic may challenge the fideist on the grounds that other similarly rational beliefs may be held. Is fideism then cognitively arbitrary? Does religious preference come down to non-rational (or at least non-epistemic) deciders? The fideist then appears to be the dogmatist—that favorite epithet of the skeptic—bluntly asserting P against the relative alternatives.

The upshot is that fideism does not seem to be an overwhelmingly compelling answer to the plight of the religious seeker. Against the claim that one ought to believe regardless of evidence, the skeptic will claim that suspension of judgment is the epistemically rational stance. And against the claim that permissiveness (epistemic entitlement without justification) is sufficient for epistemically rationally holding religious beliefs, the skeptic will contend that the fideist dogmatically asserting some P without showing it to be the best available explanation.

But Bishop and Evans suggest that entitlement (without justification) may just be the only game in town. Epistemic permissibility may not be ideal, but if epistemic justification is not possible, entitlement will have to do. Fideism, at least on the two accounts discussed here, is the best explanation only if evidentialism is defeated. Unsurprisingly, both Bishop and Evans claim that evidentialism is in

---

<sup>14</sup> In the next section I will discuss how a critical part of epistemic justification involves addressing the question of best available explanations.

fact defeated. But is it? Or might it yet show itself to be the better alternative?

### **Is Evidentialism Defeated?**

Both Evans and Bishop claim that evidentialism suffers from flaws so severe that the rational human agent cannot use evidentialism to answer important religious questions. In chapter 2, we encountered Evans's claims that evidentialism's flaw lies in its conception of the rational agent. In chapter 3, I explained Bishop's notion of evidential ambiguity, along with the strong but questionable claims he attributes to the so-called hard-line evidentialism. These claims and their bearing on evidentialism must be addressed if we are to resuscitate evidentialism. First, though, some characterization of evidentialism is in order. While a full defense of evidentialism is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the sketch I offer will indicate how evidentialism functions in the context of religious epistemology.<sup>15</sup> I will then address the problems raised by Evans and Bishop.

#### Moderate Evidentialism

Bishop has much to say about the "hard-line evidentialist." Among his concerns is the hard-line evidentialist's privileging of epistemic rationality above all other forms of rationality.<sup>16</sup> Evans, too, paints a picture of evidentialism that in many ways matches Bishop's portrait of the hard-liner. But hard-line

---

<sup>15</sup> The account I offer here is strongly influenced by Moser (1985, 1989), Feldman (2004a, 2004b, 2008), Conee and Feldman (2004a, 2004b), as well as by Foley (1993, 2002) and others.

<sup>16</sup> Bishop 2007, 62.

evidentialism is not the best form of evidentialism, and the characterizations found in both Bishop and Evans suffer from deficiencies that, when rectified, will show evidentialism more compelling. The theory of evidentialism I defend here does not fit the mold of hard-line evidentialism, thus I characterize it as *moderate evidentialism*. It is moderate in that it avoids certain strong claims about both evidential practice and an epistemic rationality.

A theory of rationality has loomed large in this dissertation, as I have claimed that questions about religious propositions have not only epistemic dimensions, but also (at least) moral and prudential dimensions. For that reason, I wish to be clear in framing this theory of moderate evidentialism within the larger context of this theory of rationality. Specifically, I claim that at no point does epistemic rationality automatically trump other forms of rationality. Human agents can and do have different rational goals, and satisfying goals (when rational conflict arises) may not necessarily entail accepting only the conclusions of epistemic rationality. Moderate evidentialism thus does not overreach epistemic authority and dictate moral or prudential (or other) rational obligations or goals.

Justification, as I have characterized it throughout this dissertation, is always internal.<sup>17</sup> Roughly speaking, epistemic justification serves the role of indicating that agent S is epistemically rational in holding belief B at time t. Importantly,

---

<sup>17</sup> In chapter 2 I use Foley's distinction between warrant and justification to address the claims of the externalist.

justification indicates that S is epistemically rational in holding belief in B *instead of any other contrary belief*. The focus of our discussion of evidentialism and the fideist critique, given the framing of both Evans and Bishop, is not on religious *knowledge*, but on justification of propositional religious beliefs. In passing, though, it may be noted that the evidentialist maintains that knowledge is justified true belief (perhaps with an additional Gettier-defeater).

What is evidentialist justification as it pertains to propositional beliefs?

Roughly speaking we might characterize it this way: S is justified in holding P just in case S has sufficient undefeated evidence supporting P. While a full discussion of justification is beyond scope, I will give a sketch of how we are to understand “sufficient undefeated evidence supporting P.” I will discuss the notion of evidence itself more in the coming pages, for it plays a crucial role in the present discussion. But evidence, at its simplest, functions as a truth indicator. That is, it *points (fallibly and defeasibly) toward the truth of P*.<sup>18</sup> Evidence may be propositional, but it need not be; non-propositional content may also function as evidence.<sup>19</sup>

Justification requires that one have *sufficient* evidence. At what point is the evidence S possesses *sufficient*? We can imagine that S may possess some piece of evidence E, and that E may indicate P. But at the same time, we may

---

<sup>18</sup> A truth indicator indicates that P (points toward P), but is not a guarantee that P. It is fallible and may be subject to defeat.

<sup>19</sup> I return to this in the section on private evidence.

grant that, all things considered, S may not be justified in believing P. Perhaps S has other evidence that indicates something other than (or broader than) P. Thus, for S to have sufficient evidence, S must have evidence that makes P decisively more epistemologically probable than any competing propositions, including not-P.<sup>20</sup> That is, for S to be justified in believing that there is an individual being worthy of the title *God*, one's evidence regarding that proposition must not only plausibly answer important questions, but must also render the proposition decisively more probable than not just the proposition that there is *not* one being worthy of the title God, but also more than the propositions that there is at least one being worthy of the title God, that there are several beings worthy of the title God, and so on. Here I am using the terms *probable* and *probability* not in the statistical (or strictly logical) sense, but in an epistemological sense as shorthand to capture the outcome of a comparison relationship between two or more alternatives: roughly, P is decisively more probable than P' (P'', P''', etc.) when (and only when) P provides the best explanation (plausibly answers the most why-questions)<sup>21</sup> with the least complications and side effects, while still exhibiting an adequate level of explanatory parsimony.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the evidence

---

<sup>20</sup> "Competing propositions" here should be understood as propositions that S considers to be possible alternatives. For more on epistemological probability, see Moser 1989, Kyberg 1971, and Pollock 1993. My usage follows Moser's.

<sup>21</sup> We may further adjust this to qualify the why-questions: some why-questions are more important (e.g. have more explanatory value) than others. So perhaps this would better be characterized as answering the greatest number of *important* why-questions.

<sup>22</sup> My characterization of decisive epistemic probability is roughly based on Moser 1989, 99ff. I have simplified (I hope not too detrimentally) for brevity. By explanatory parsimony, I am



must make  $P$  a plausible answer to the questions, but also do so better than the competing alternatives  $P'$ ,  $P''$ , and so on. Decisiveness is not the same as certainty. Evidence may be decisive, but a belief may still be defeasible, fallible, dubitable, and so on. Certainty carries with it a certain supposition about the future. Given that  $S$  has undefeated evidence for  $P$  at  $t$ , certainty is the claim that at time  $t + 1$  there cannot be a contravener for  $P$ .<sup>23</sup> In contrast, decisiveness does not necessarily carry with it a certification about the future. Decisiveness indicates that at  $t$ , the evidence renders  $P$  more probable than its competitors to the extent that there is no immediate threat to  $P$ 's probabilistic advantage.<sup>24</sup> I will return to the notion of decisiveness later in this chapter, for it plays an interesting role in addressing the challenges raised by the fideist.

Sufficiency, considered this way, is not necessarily a quantitative measure—it's not the case that the proposition with the most evidence wins—but a broader measure of the degree to which the evidence supports  $P$  over possible alternatives, while not also introducing undesirable consequences that might otherwise be avoided. When  $S$ 's total evidence makes  $P$  decisively probable for  $S$ ,  $S$  has sufficient evidence for holding  $P$ .

---

suggesting something in the spirit of Ockham's razor.

<sup>23</sup> Goodman's infamous grue hypothesis may come to mind here: the success of that argument hinges on the fact that induction cannot make such a guarantee that  $S$  will be blue at  $t+1$ , and not green (Goodman 1983, 72-76).

<sup>24</sup> That is, if evidence renders  $P$  more probable at  $t$ , but there is strong reason to suspect that the evidence is about to be overturned, that reason may qualify as a defeater and render holding  $P$  indecisive, even while more probable at  $t$ .

In chapter 2, I discussed different kinds of defeaters, and how each defeats evidential support. There I discussed both rebutting defeaters and undermining defeaters. This same notion of defeaters is what I have in mind in the sketch of justification I am offering. Justification requires that no relevant defeater remains undefeated.<sup>25</sup> When considering epistemic justification of religious beliefs, we may interpret both Evans and Bishop as raising defeaters. One may interpret Evans's claims about the sinfulness and corruptness of one's cognitive faculties as being a proposed undermining defeater for any evidence in support of faith beliefs (and, for that matter, any evidence supporting beliefs contrary to faith beliefs). For any given piece of evidence E, Evans could respond with the proposed defeater that the evidence is unreliable for reasons tied to one's cognition. In that way Evans is calling into question the support of E to P. Likewise, one may also be inclined to view Bishop's evidential ambiguity thesis as a general claim that there are rebutting defeaters against any piece of evidence one might forward in support of a religious belief. In this sense, the idea of "evidential ambiguity" is understood as the claim that for every piece of evidence E in support of P, there is another piece of evidence, E\* that supports not-P. As Pollock and Cruz put it: "If M is a defeasible reason for S to believe Q, M\* is a rebutting defeater for this reason if and only if M\* is a defeater (for M as a

---

<sup>25</sup> By qualifying defeaters as being *relevant* defeaters, I intend to leave open the possibility that some far-fetched counterexamples against P may not actually count as defeaters of P in virtue of their far-fetchedness. Such a discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation, though.

reason for S to believe Q) and  $M^*$  is a reason for S to believe  $\sim Q$ .”<sup>26</sup> Thus one (perhaps sloppy) interpretation of evidential ambiguity is to suggest that it is the claim that every piece of evidence for a religious belief has an undefeated rebutting  $E^*$ . Applying this characterization to Bishop’s notion of evidential ambiguity may be a stretch. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the evidential ambiguity thesis is surprisingly complex. The principal point, though, is that it is *prima facie* plausible to interpret some of Evans’s and Bishop’s arguments as proposed (undefeated) defeaters to all evidence regarding religious propositions. I will return to these in the following sections, but first I will finish this sketch of justification,

Next there is the matter of evidence being in a support relationship to P. Evidence, on my account, has directionality. That is, it functions as a truth indicator *about* some belief B. For some agent S, evidence is not neutral at time t. It is the directionality of evidence that qualifies it as evidence, and not merely data. So S may have evidence that P, and S may have evidence that not-P, but S cannot have a piece of evidence that supports *P or not-P*.<sup>27</sup> Again this brings Bishop’s evidential ambiguity thesis to the fore. The evidential ambiguity thesis is not necessarily at odds with this characterization of P, but it does draw out a

---

<sup>26</sup> Pollack and Cruz 1999, 196.

<sup>27</sup> More specifically, one cannot have evidence that supports  $P \vee \sim P$ , yet does not support P and does not support  $\sim P$ .

salient detail: there is a perspectival element to evidence.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that there are cases where some piece of evidence E will be held by S1 as support for P, while for S2 it may be held as support for not-P. In such cases, the difference in interpretation is likely to involve how E interacts with the other available evidence for each subject. For example, there is a single mostly-empty wineglass on the kitchen counter. S1 may conclude from this that the proprietor drank a glass of wine alone, and was thus by herself. But say that S2 has an additional piece of evidence available: the proprietor does not drink alcohol. S2 may conclude that, given that the proprietor does not drink alcohol, she must *not* have been alone. The evidence is directional for both S1 and S2, but the combination of the evidence with other evidence may change the interpretation of the evidence.<sup>29</sup> Thus there might be some sense in which we can interpret evidential ambiguity as the case when E supports P for S1 (when E is considered as part of a body of evidence), and E supports something other than P (perhaps not-P) for S2 (when E is considered to be part of a different body of evidence).

In this section I have given a rough characterization of a moderate theory of evidentialism. While this characterization is far from exhaustive, this sketch should serve our immediate purposes. I shall ask how this fares in the face of

---

<sup>28</sup> Accepting that evidence has certain subjective elements does *not* require that one embrace global subjectivism, alethic relativism, and so on. Both the fallibility and the defeasibility of justification accommodate stronger notions of truth. cf. Moser 1993.

<sup>29</sup> This raises a number of questions about evidence as singular or as aggregate. Addressing this in any detail is beyond the scope of the dissertation. At present I am suggesting that we can meaningfully talk of *an individual piece of evidence* (a datum with alethic directionality) as well as *evidence taken together* (data with alethic directionality).

Evans's and Bishop's critiques. In the next two parts I will return to Evans's and Bishop's (respective) criticisms of evidentialism.

### Evans's Claims Against Evidentialism

Evans's primary argument against the evidentialist isn't that there is little or no evidence, but that a human agent's capacity to reason is limited and tainted by sin. Even if there is evidence, human agents will display, says Evans, the capacity to ignore, misunderstand, or reject the evidence. This is partially a result of cognitive limitations: we may simply be incapable of mustering the intellectual wherewithal to appropriately analyze the data and draw the correct conclusions. But pride and selfishness may play the bigger role; because of them human agents refuse to look for evidence, and (we are to infer) would refuse to assent even if possessing evidence. Thus, Evans says that sinfulness corrupts one's epistemic capabilities.

As Evans frames the problem, epistemic limitations render evidentialism a dubious epistemic practice in regard to religious propositions. I understand Evans to be claiming that cognitive limitations and sinfulness *prevent justification*, particularly in regard to religious propositions (and therefore religious propositional beliefs). At this point, we must ask how epistemic justification is thus prevented.

There are at least three ways in which we can understand Evans's claim. We might understand the claim to be that cognitive limitations and sinfulness prevent us from justifiably inferring from evidence to a proposition. Or, as I

mentioned in the previous section, we might understand Evans as suggesting that cognitive limitations and sinfulness are *defeaters* to any justification of religious propositions. Or we might understand these deficiencies to be operating at a higher (meta-epistemic) level, thus preventing epistemic justification from functioning properly on the more broad plain of rationality. Ultimately, it seems that cognitive limitations may raise one set of problems while selfishness and pride raise another. But it is not clear that either renders evidentialism implausible or inoperative.

### **Cognitive Limitations and Inference**

First there is the matter of whether the deficiencies prevent us from drawing justified inferences from the evidence. The crux of the matter here has to do with the access conditions for S's doxastic justification that P. For P to be justified for S, S must have sufficient evidence, and correctly infer from this evidence to the belief. Do cognitive limitations and selfishness preclude proper inference? Evans does seem to answer this in the affirmative, though in a roundabout way.

Evans claims that one of the evidentialist's main limitations in regard to supporting religious propositions has to do with our inability to *understand*. By understanding P, Evans seems to have in mind the ability to give a thorough explanation of P.<sup>30</sup> Thus, for example, to be justified in believing that there is a God, one must have thorough understanding of what it means to be God

---

<sup>30</sup> Evans 1988, 83 and 87. Evans's notion of understanding is tremendously complex, borrowing at various times from Aquinas, Kant, Plantinga, and Kierkegaard. I draw this particular characterization from his remarks on cognitive limitations.

(including, it appears, a complete grasp of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.).

Understanding, on Evans's account, does not become a barrier in our day-to-day reasoning, largely because we understand the world of our day-to-day reasoning. But when it comes to God and other religious matters, we cannot even hope to understand such things.

Elsewhere, Evans acknowledges that the presumption of what we do and do not understand may be an oversimplification.<sup>31</sup> Problems of understanding are not at all unique to religious propositions. We have many other beliefs—scientific, relational, and otherwise—that involve matters that we do not understand. Yet humans seem to be able to assess what limited evidence they can understand in an epistemically rational way.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, if we were to require thorough understanding of the external world before being justified in believing in the existence of the external world, the sort of fideism proposed by Evans would be far too modest. But thorough understanding is *not* required for justification. More specifically, for some evidence E to function as evidence for some agent S in support of some proposition P, it is not a requirement that S understands (in the sense just explained) E in order for S to rely upon E as evidence for P. Thus, an absence of understanding does not pose a significant problem to evidentialism.

This opens a second challenge, though. Perhaps it is not *understanding*, in the strict sense, but *argument* that is missing. Perhaps it is better to take Evans

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

as suggesting that we must be able to give *argument* for our beliefs, and because of our cognitive limitations we cannot reliably and consistently produce arguments in support of our beliefs.<sup>33</sup>

To have evidence, and even to be *justified* in a belief because of that evidence, does not require that one be able to produce an argument.<sup>34</sup> The skeptic may demand that one produce an (irrefutable) argument for a belief, but this is not a reasonable demand, as many of our beliefs—especially empirical beliefs based on experiential evidence—are rightly held by the evidence alone.

As Paul Moser puts it:

[O]ur having evidence, even evidence that satisfies the justification-condition for knowledge, doesn't necessarily include our having a non-questionbegging argument, or any argument, against skeptics... Our *having* evidence doesn't entail our giving an answer or claim of any kind... One's supporting evidence could still be cognitively impeccable, despite one's lacking the kind of argument demanded by a skeptic.<sup>35</sup>

While much can be said about the relation between evidence, argument, and justification, I will only make three brief points here: First, an argument is not required for establishing a relationship between evidence and belief. Second, evidence is not made less significant solely because one cannot produce an argument; most importantly, evidence can justify a belief B (and S can be justified in believing B) without S producing an argument.<sup>36</sup> Third, one need not

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Neither does it require a causal explanation. cf. Moser 1989, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Moser 2008, 63.

<sup>36</sup> It may indeed be the case that not all evidence has propositional content. cf. Moser 1985,



be able to produce a genealogy of evidence. That is, one needn't provide an argument identifying the source and reliability of one's evidence. While this is not to say that argument is useless (there are indeed many cases where it is useful), the skeptic is making a misstep when claiming that one must be capable of producing arguments before one can believe in an epistemically rational way.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, Evans's claim that an agent's inability to understand or provide an argument for belief undermines one's justification is based on a misunderstanding of the roles of understanding and argument in justification.<sup>38</sup>

Cognitive limitations do have an impact on epistemic rationality. Because human agents sometimes forget evidence, or fail to acquire evidence, or misinterpret evidence, there are numerous occasions in which we hold beliefs that are not true. However, this does not mean that those beliefs are not justified. Empirical justification is defeasible and fallible: we can meaningfully talk of holding justified false beliefs.<sup>39</sup> Admitting as much is not tantamount to granting the defeat of internalist justification.

---

chapter 5.

<sup>37</sup> By not requiring an argument, I am not claiming that one can be (doxastically) justified without any awareness of the evidence. For more, see Moser 1989, esp. chapter 3.

<sup>38</sup> For propositional beliefs, one must still be able to infer from the evidence to the proposition. That is, there must be a connection *for S* between the evidence and the propositional belief. But this inference may not be accompanied by an argument.

<sup>39</sup> There is the question of whether or not *a priori* justification is defeasible and falsifiable. But this is beyond the present scope, since we are focused on empirical evidence.

## Cognitive Limitations and Sinfulness as Defeaters

A second way of understanding Evans's cognitive limitations/selfishness argument is as the claim that these deficiencies become defeaters for any evidence about religious propositions. Thus, one cannot hold justified beliefs about religious propositions because one's evidence is always defeated. I suggested earlier that Evans may be understood as offering an undermining defeater for religious beliefs. If evidence E supports P, E\* is the claim that cognitive limitations and selfishness have tainted E, and E is hence unreliable. It is possible, therefore, that E does not actually support P.

This concern does not necessarily defeat justification, for the claim it makes is too general. That is, for some specific evidence E, simply raising the doubt that E is tainted by selfishness or cognitive limitations does not raise a *specific* challenge to the relationship between E and P. Further, it is unclear how the evidence may be tainted in a way that disqualifies it from being a truth indicator. The moderate evidentialist would accept the possibility that an agent makes cognitive mistakes and does not have unblemished evidential capacities. For the evidentialist, the possibility that the evidence available to S at t is not the most accurate representation of reality (however such a claim might be spelled out) is not a defeater.<sup>40</sup> Nor is the claim that E may be tainted by selfishness. Evidence is fallible and may be wrong; it is defeasible too. But one would be remiss to

---

<sup>40</sup> My master's thesis explored the possibility that various psychological biases might undermine evidentialism. My analysis there suffered from the same oversight made here.

jettison evidence on the grounds that it *may* be tainted by sin or cognitive limitations.

This is not to discount the possibility that a *specific* defeater may arise whose origin is best explained by cognitive limitations or selfishness. Such a defeater (whether undercutting or rebutting) would need to be defeated. Given this, Evans may be right to raise the *concern* that such defeaters may arise. It just is not the case that the general claim (fact?) that we have cognitive limitations and act selfishly is itself a defeater of all evidence for religious belief.

### **Rational Conflict, Selfishness, and Cognitive Limitations**

A better explanatory model for selfishness operates not at the epistemic level, but at the level of rational conflict.

Instead of understanding selfishness as a factor in epistemic justification, it is better to understand them as leading one to adopt a (rationally) prudential goal of doing what is best for oneself. We may understand selfishness as the condition that occurs when one favors one's own wellbeing (prudential rational obligations) in violation of one's moral obligations.<sup>41</sup> That is, it is a state that comes about when one is prudentially justified that P, but morally (and perhaps epistemically) justified that not-P, and one opts to act on prudential goals to the detriment of moral goals. As I stated in the first chapter, one need not be *conscious* of one's opting to act selfishly. Given this characterization, we can see

---

<sup>41</sup> Note that this may include acting in violation of one's epistemic obligations as well, but this is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for selfishness.

how selfishly selecting P when it is epistemically rational to select not-P does not, per se, indicate that one has failed to reason epistemically, but rather that one has opted to act selfishly by privileging prudential goals over moral *and* epistemic goals.

If selfishness is a threat at the (all things considered) rational level, and not at the level of epistemic rationality, perhaps it does not threaten evidentialism in the way Evans suggests. That is, at this level, Evans's argument does not question the status of evidence as a truth indicator. But there is a seemingly plausible further argument that might be raised.

Humans make mistakes when setting rational preferences. On the present account of rationality, setting one's superior rational (all things considered) preference involves determining which rational preferences are most important, and this has epistemic aspects.<sup>42</sup> Might it be the case that it is here, at this stage of rationality, that selfishness produces faulty evidence about how best to satisfy a rational preference? There is something about this suggestion that makes it compelling. Perhaps we sometimes act selfishly not because we intentionally selected prudential obligations over moral ones, but because our epistemic faculties taint our epistemic judgment. Thus, one cries foul: "It tricked me! I didn't mean to act against my moral obligation." But the problem with this account is that, at this level, it runs into definitional problems. If selfishness is the selection of prudential goals against moral goals, then it is an agent-invoked behavior, not

---

<sup>42</sup> Moser 1985, 229-234.

a “faculty.” True, the decision to act selfishly may be unconscious—it may even be true that some or all people have a default disposition to act selfishly—but this does not entail that selfishness is an evidence-producing faculty run amok. Nor does it show that the evidence is not a truth indicator.

In the end, I do not see a successful argument that evidentialism fails because of the epistemic insufficiency on the part of the reasoner. Evidentialism is not fatally damaged by the fact that humans suffer from cognitive limitations, or even by the fact that humans do sometimes make wrong (and sinfully so) choices. It remains possible for S to be evidentially justified in holding P, provided S has sufficient undefeated evidence. S may occasionally be wrong. Or S may decide to act as if not-P to satisfy other goals. But deficiencies in S’s evidence or behavior do not indicate that evidentialism as a theory is a failure. Nor does it indicate a pervasive fault in evidential justification of propositional religious beliefs.

Ultimately, Evans’s agent-focused critique of evidentialism does not succeed. Bishop’s argument, in contrast to Evans’, suggests that it is the evidence, not the agent, that poses the problem. While Evans is focused on the defectiveness of the agent, Bishop focuses on the evidence itself, claiming that the evidence (not the evaluator) is defective.

#### Bishop's Claims Against Evidentialism

Bishop suggests that, when the total available evidence for religious

propositions is examined, what ‘we’ find is that the evidence is ambiguous.<sup>43</sup> The same evidence can be interpreted (presumably correctly) as confirming or as disconfirming. Its ambiguity means it cannot support belief, which means justification cannot be achieved. Furthermore, Bishop believes that the ambiguity of evidence may even be *necessarily* so: there may be no possibility for it to be otherwise.<sup>44</sup> If this is so, propositional religious beliefs are resistant to justification, and the hard-line evidentialist must suspend judgment.

Already in this chapter I have suggested that evidence has directionality. That is, evidence *qua* evidence points toward the truth of a proposition. Were it to have no such directionality, it would not, by definition, be evidence. But this directionality also has a subjective aspect. I have given the wine-glass example of how S1 may view E as supporting P, while S2 may view that same E as supporting not-P. This shift in the interpretation of E has to do with the larger body of evidence in which the particular evidence is evaluated (that is, the *total* evidence available to S1 at time t and the total evidence available to S2 at time t). This “ambiguity” is not a problem for the evidentialist, for it is the directionality of an agent’s *total* evidence that matters for justification of a propositional belief. And it is possible that the *total* evidence recommends suspension of judgment just as it is possible that summing a series of positive and negative numbers may equal zero. So for some agent S at time t, the total evidence available to S may

---

<sup>43</sup> Bishop 2007, 67. I discussed Bishop’s ‘we’ in the previous chapter.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-143.

support P, something other than P (say Q or  $\sim$ P), or may require suspension of judgment.

As I claimed in the previous chapter, Bishop's move from a notion of "total available evidence" to the evidential ambiguity thesis has a difficulty that can be located in a misconstrual of the individual's available evidence. Bishop seems to be suggesting that if we gathered the evidence available to all people, we would be able to infer nothing other than that the evidence is ambiguous, and thus we would suspend judgment. Therefore, we should suspend judgment. But this is not how (moderate) evidentialism works. Evidentialism asks whether the evidence possessed by some particular S (at some particular time t) is sufficient for S to be justified in believing P.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as our focus has been on whether P is justified for S, we are asking whether S evaluates the evidence available and is aware that it supports P. It is not a requirement that *all possible* evidence be brought to bear, but only the evidence S has.<sup>46</sup> To move from this understanding of evidence to the claim that evidential ambiguity is a universal (or nearly universal) experience is to make a tremendous leap—a leap made all the more tendentious by the fact that both ardent believers and ardent disbelievers alike will claim that they do indeed have evidence supporting their beliefs.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Conee 2004, 261.

<sup>46</sup> There is considerable debate about what it means to *have* evidence (cf. Feldman 2004b and also Moser 1989). Ironing out that technicalities of this is not critical for the argument here. In the present context, I gloss that debate by suggesting that for S to *have* evidence E, S must have cognitive access at time t to E.

<sup>47</sup> In the previous chapter I examined a few other possible interpretations of evidential ambiguity

Some people at some times may find themselves in the position where their total available evidence recommends suspension of judgment. In such cases, as I will discuss later, there may in fact be rationale for making certain epistemic ventures (on the grounds that a venture may turn up additional evidence). But I do not see grounds to move from this possibility to the broader claims that (a) evidential ambiguity is a universal phenomenon, and (b) it represents a flaw in evidentialism.

Evidential ambiguity is not the only reason Bishop gives for rejecting hard-line evidentialism. A second issue Bishop raises has to do with the model of rationality espoused by the hard-line evidentialist. The hard-line evidentialist claims that S is only morally justified in holding P if S is epistemically justified in holding P.<sup>48</sup> This, in effect, places epistemic rationality over moral rationality in the context of resolving rational conflict. I have already claimed that this is not the case for the moderate evidentialist. For the moderate evidentialist, it is *prima facie* desirable to hold beliefs that are both epistemically and morally justified (assuming that one desires fewer rational conflicts, and this is certainly not a dictate of the system, but only a hypothesis). But this need not lead the moderate evidentialist to claim that one *must* be epistemically justified in order to be morally justified. On the present account, the moderate evidentialist may find oneself confronted with a situation in which it is morally rational to hold P, and

---

and found them equally problematic.

<sup>48</sup> Bishop 2007, 62. This is what Bishop calls the *moral-epistemic link principle*.



epistemically rational to hold not-P. The resolution of this conflict does not automatically fall on the side of epistemic rationality, but is resolved according to one's rational (all things considered) preferences.

Finally, Bishop suggests a problem that must be addressed carefully, and this has to do with what counts as evidence. Bishop talks about *passional* attributes as pertaining to one's evidential base. To what extent are so-called *passional* attributes (emotions) admissible as evidence? Bishop is careful when making claims of how "passional" attributes can count as evidence.<sup>49</sup> He thinks they can be allowable only under certain circumstances.

Feelings that involve intuitions of the truth of propositions will count as *evidence... only when they can be brought within an applicable normative evidential practice*. That will require, at a minimum, that the veridicality and defeasibility conditions of such intuitions be open to wide intersubjective agreement within the relevant community. Where subsumption under and evidential practice is not possible, however, 'feelings' as to truths, however subjectively compelling, will not count as evidence, and will rightly be classified as *passional doxastic inclinations*.<sup>50</sup>

Bishop sees it as a requirement that evidence, even when non-public, be governed by public evidential practice, namely veridicality and defeasibility conditions. How are we to understand this? First, Bishop gives an example of an emotion that is properly considered evidence: One feels fearful and threatened in the presence of another person.<sup>51</sup> This feeling, says Bishop, is appropriately

---

<sup>49</sup> Bishop 2007, 198-199.

<sup>50</sup> Bishop 2007, 199. Italics in original.

<sup>51</sup> Note that Bishop does not distinguish between the feeling (passion), the intuition (see the quote), and the means of reception.

considered evidence that this other person is hostile. Why? Because this sort of emotional response is widely regarded as an “intuition of basically evident truths.”<sup>52</sup> But what about the feeling of the presence of God? Is this also evidence? Here Bishop’s story becomes complex. On the one hand, Bishop is reluctant to claim such feelings are evidence, yet we do make decisions on the basis of “passions.” Does that make us epistemically irrational (or worse, generally irrational)?

First, there is the question of whether the rationality of a passion can be determined. To this, Bishop requires that for passions to be rational, they must at least meet two conditions: they must *not* conflict with “evidence-based factual belief” and they must be logically coherent.<sup>53</sup> But Bishop further suggests that any beliefs we hold “based on passion” be “subject to critical pressures from others.”<sup>54</sup> As I understand these claims, Bishop is suggesting that passions may be treated as evidence that P only if they meet all three of the conditions above. Here, though, Evans is careful to never suggest that such evidence is *justifying*. Instead, he only claims that one may be *rational* when holding beliefs based on passions.<sup>55</sup> As Bishop continues to spell this out, passions become the basis for

---

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-202.

doxastic venture, rather than for justified beliefs.<sup>56</sup> When it comes down to it, for Bishop the passions become the guide to *if and when* one ought to make a doxastic (or sub-doxastic) venture in the face of evidential ambiguity.<sup>57</sup>

It is not clear to me what is gained by taking this route of argument instead of claiming that passions serve as truth indicators but only weak evidence—evidence whose explanatory value is limited and unlikely to (on its own) be sufficient.

Bishop sees his advancement of the argument in favor of passions as a counter to the hard-line evidentialist. Bishop's hard-line evidentialist accepts only "incorrigible and self-evident truths and truths evident in sensory perceptual experience under 'normal' conditions."<sup>58</sup> This, thinks Bishop, forecloses on passional truth-indicators that suggest anything about the supernatural.<sup>59</sup> That is, as Bishop understands it, by admitting passions in even this minor capacity, Bishop's fideism is open to truth-indicators that hard-line evidentialism is not. To what extent does this view conflict with the moderate evidentialism proposed thus far?

---

<sup>56</sup> It is unclear to me how evidence could be evidence, yet not have any potential to be part of a justifying body of evidence.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. cf. 65-76.

<sup>59</sup> It is unclear how this link is forged, but I believe that Bishop assumes a presumption in favor of philosophical naturalism among hard-line evidentialists (*Ibid.*, 65-76). Another possible explanation may be found in Bishop's requirement that evidence must pass evaluation of a relevant epistemic community, where such a community may rule out supernatural experience (199-200).

The heart of the matter seems to be whether or not passions—emotions—qualify as evidence. Bishop has pointed to cases where an emotional response may rightly be considered evidential. One may feel fearful in the presence of another person, and this emotion may well be evidence that the person is hostile. Bishop continues from there to suggest that many other emotions may not be evidence, but may yet be indicators suggestive of a particular doxastic venture. But if some emotion E is an indicator that P, what more must E have before it can be considered evidence? Bishop suggests three additional criteria: consistency with other evidence, logical coherence, and the nebulous criterion of being acceptable to the greater epistemic community.<sup>60</sup>

The first two are, I suggest, not qualifiers for evidence at all. Evidence, in the atomic sense, need not meet criteria of coherence with other evidence before it can be evidence. Such a requirement would have the stilted effect of exacerbating a confirmation bias. The first piece of evidence would in many cases become the deciding piece of evidence. Contrary evidence would be discarded for failing the coherence test. Furthermore, in the atomic sense it is difficult to see what logical coherence affords. It may indeed be the case that two individual pieces of evidence display a superficial logical incoherence. This does not serve as grounds for rejecting one or the other *ipso facto*. Rather, the resolution of such evidential difficulties is part of an agent's resolution process in meeting the sufficiency and support conditions for justification.

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-200.

However, admitting evidence without these qualifiers does not automatically endow such evidence with justifying power. It must still be shown, along with other available evidence, to be sufficient. And evidence must weather defeaters as well. Consequently, admitting emotional evidence does not, by that fact alone, transform evidentialism into a soft emotivist theory of knowledge.

But there is Bishop's third qualification: that for any emotion to qualify as evidence, it must accord with existing epistemic practices of the community. By this rule, Bishop suggests that we may accept the evidence of fear in the case just cited (because "we all" agree that that emotion is evidential) while still resisting the claim that one's *feeling* that God exists be taken as *evidence* that God exists. In the previous chapter I objected to the vagueness of such "community scoped" conditions. And this remains a problem in the present context. Such an emotion, considered in the epistemic context of a charismatic Christian church on Pentecost may be perfectly acceptable, while invoking this same claim at the anthropology department's holiday party may be met with derision. That said, again I would step back to the claim that while acceptance by the relevant epistemic community might not be a *criterion for an emotion's status as evidence*, it may play another role in justification—be it as evidence or as perhaps as part of a potential defeater. That is, if S becomes aware that such an emotion is widely considered to be unreliable, S has just obtained a potential defeater for evidence that has as its content that emotion.

In the end, it seems to me that Bishop simply mischaracterizes the problem:

emotions are not to be tested as to whether or not they qualify as evidence.

Instead, we can accept them as evidential (assuming they act as truth-indicators) and subject to the same sorts of evaluation that all other evidence is subjected.<sup>61</sup>

Emotional evidence may be defeated—and perhaps it is more susceptible to defeat than other evidence. Perhaps logical incoherence, consistency, and accepted epistemic norms may play a role in the defeat of some piece of emotional evidence, but that does not entail that the emotion is non-evidential in the first place.

Bishop's criticisms of hard-line evidentialism are less problematic for the moderate evidentialism I am defending here. And Bishop's observations about emotions, ambiguity, and moral and epistemic rationality are well accommodated within moderate evidentialism without requiring a wholesale rejection of the possibility of justification of religious beliefs.

Bishop has suggested that against the hard-line evidentialist, the most plausible theory is a doxastic venture-based fideism. In contrast, I am suggesting that moderate evidentialism does not suffer from the problems of hard-line evidentialism, yet has attributes that make it more compelling than fideism. The first step in consideration of this claim is to begin with a fundamental (yet underdeveloped) notion central to the debate: What do we mean by *God*?

---

<sup>61</sup> A fruitful epistemological exploration of emotions might separate between the emotion itself that the accompanying intuition. E.g. the fear response may be parsed into the emotion (fear) and the intuition that the fear is a response to a threatening individual. Such a discussion is beyond the present scope, though.

## The Fideist's God

Fideism, in the forms we have examined, is largely a theory about the rational status of religious beliefs. Both Evans and Bishop are focused on religious epistemology. Both also have constrained their discussion to Christianity. But neither spends much time developing a notion of God. In some regards, this might strike one as almost superfluous or unquestionably unnecessary. After all, if we are talking about the God of the Christian Bible, do we not already have suitable background knowledge to answer even non-trivial questions? Perhaps we do. But answering one specific question may cast fideism in a new light, and may redirect the inquiry along a fruitful path. Here is the question: If there is a God, how might we expect to encounter evidence of his existence?

At first blush, it may seem that this question is irrelevant for some forms of fideism, with Evans's being an example. Evans may re-iterate that the presence of evidence is not an issue if indeed our faculty of epistemic reasoning cannot or will not accept the evidence. But in fact the question does remain relevant. Here is why.

Natural theology is rooted in the idea that we, as philosophers, ought to look for evidence of God in the natural world. But the kind of evidence the natural theologian has in mind is what we might call forensic evidence: traces left as a side effect or consequence of some attribute, manifestation, or action of God. Intricately functioning systems are a result of God's design. Our moral rationality

is a result of God's imbuing creation with a sense of morality. Even the ontological argument locates the proof in notions of perfection or necessity, tracing from the concept back to the being. Thus the natural theologian plays Sherlock Homes, weaving evidence that might otherwise seem circumstantial into a compelling and (hopefully) cohesive body of evidence in support of belief in God's existence.

If we were to stop here, then perhaps Evans would be able to rightly claim that the limits of our cognitive abilities do indeed become an intractable hindrance. It may indeed be the case that we are not Sherlock Homes, but Inspector Clouseau, and our perpetual bumbling and ineptitude prevents us from seeing and properly assessing the evidence. But the very characterization of evidence offered by the natural theologian neglects a crucial aspect to the question at hand: namely, the character and personality of the very being for whom we seek evidence. Here we must step back and ask that important question: What do we mean by *God*.

I use the term *God* as a maximally honorific title, not a name.<sup>62</sup> The term means one who is worthy of worship. *Worship* is not the cowering in fear or the heaping of empty praise, but the earnest reverence and adoration that expresses one's genuine feelings of devotion and love toward a deserving authority. Only a being who is worthy of that sort of adoration and reverence is deserving of the

---

<sup>62</sup> cf. Moser 2008, summarized in 2012, 264-266. Given that a title does not imply a title holder, no question-begging is going on here.



title *God*. Moral perfection, self-sufficiency, and perfect lovingness is what warrants this adoration and reverence, and thus a being deserving of the title must also be morally perfect, self sufficient, and entirely benevolent. “Since God must be inherently worthy of worship and full trust, God must be altogether morally good, a God of unflinching righteousness and perfect love.”<sup>63</sup> Such a God would desire that we, too, strive toward moral perfection. And to this end, God would actively and lovingly promote our own moral development.<sup>64</sup> Thus we can expect two things of such a God: this God would act personally, and this God would act with the intent of provoking moral growth. To this list we can add a third: a morally perfect God would act *non-coercively*.<sup>65</sup>

Considering natural theology in light of this rough sketch of God, a curious detail emerges: The natural theologian expects and looks for forensic evidence—residue or traces of God. A footprint on the beach. But this is done with the assumption that God does not necessarily intentionally leave this evidence. The natural theologian does not ask the question *if there were a being worthy of the title God where might he choose to leave me evidence?* The personality of the God they seek is not taken into account.

---

<sup>63</sup> Moser 2008, 86.

<sup>64</sup> That is, if God is omni-benevolent and morally perfect, God would seek to instill in us moral perfection. By my lights, love is quintessentially relational, and for that reason, it follows from the definition of God that God would want a relationship with us.

<sup>65</sup> A being worthy of the title God desires to be worshiped out of love. Love cannot be coerced out of one, though. An objection grounded in paternalism does not necessarily apply here: Some S may act coercively out of love (and thus be paternalistic). But to attempt to coerce another into loving one is neither paternalistic, nor (by my lights) morally laudable.

It is not just the natural theologians who make this mistake, but the fideists we have looked at do as well. Bishop claims that the evidence for God is ambiguous. In the last section I treated this as an epistemic question—a question about how evidence is and what evidence does. But there is another way of looking at evidential ambiguity. We can ask what Bishop is saying about a God who would offer (only) ambiguous evidence. While Bishop frequently talks about the possibility of the existence of God, he says very little about the character of God. His conception comes largely from traditional Christianity. But what scant characterization he does give of God—the view he finds in natural theology—he questions as perhaps failing to capture the notion of God with which he is concerned:

Classical philosophical theism specifies the nature of God as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, supernatural personal Creator *ex nihilo* of all that exists. It is an interesting question—though a question I shall not here directly pursue—whether that classical theistic conception of God is in fact adequate to the God who is worshipped in theistic religious tradition.<sup>66</sup>

It is unclear whether Bishop is claiming here that the natural theologian has overreached, or underdeveloped, or perhaps both. But there is the suggestion that answering the question has no relevance to the task at hand—the task of finding God. Still, Bishop may be suggesting the same thing I did above: that if we are to start with a description of God, listing the omnis might not be the best starting point. Throughout his book, Bishop implicitly treats God as I have

---

<sup>66</sup> Bishop 2007, 7.

suggested above: as a title fit only for one deserving of sincere praise, where such deserving entails absolute moral perfection. But even while this is implied, he does not make the epistemic connection. The lacuna he leaves may have a surprising consequence.

On the face of it, Bishop provides a compelling case for fideism without addressing his notion of God. I suggested in the last chapter that there are a few problems that arise when there is no clear characterization of God. The first has to do with faith (and doxastic venture). The second has to do with evidential ambiguity. We can treat both generically here by asking this question: What sort of God does Bishop expect to find? If the God Bishop seeks is indeed characterized in line with what I have already said, then it seems Bishop may have made a misstep. Evidential ambiguity as construed under natural theology is a red herring. What we ought to ask is where we might expect to find evidence for a being worthy of the title God. In what way might a divine moral being present himself to us? This question is applicable to both Evans's fideism and Bishop's, for the answer addresses the worries of each.

If God is *intentionally* acting, an assumption that seems well grounded in our notion of God, then to what extent ought we worry about Evans's cognitive limitations argument? In the characterization of God that I gave above, I claimed that God desires that we progress toward moral excellence. With this reason, God would work actively (but non-coercively) to bring this about in our lives.<sup>67</sup> So

---

<sup>67</sup> Coercion is incompatible with love. Forcing us, tricking us, or even revealing himself directly

we can expect God, should God exist, to act in subtle ways to promote our moral growth. There is a second trivial point to be made. God has knowledge about our cognitive limitations and selfish proclivities. This sort of knowledge does not even require omnipotence—it is a readily observable trait of humanity. Combining this trivial point with the claim about God’s acts of moral promotion, we can ask a simple question of Evans: Would a God who is well aware of our cognitive limitations rightly set the evidence so far beyond our abilities as to obscure himself, only to demand thereafter a (cognitively negligent) leap of faith? More specifically, if God were to work toward our moral good, would he do so in a way so obscure that we were unable to detect it? For the sake of argument, let’s answer this with a tentative *yes*. Let’s say that God acted in such a way that his actions were undetectable to us. This would raise two concerns. First, one may assert that for an agent to act in undetectable ways to us is coercive. As enticing as this option is, it does not hold water. Only if one acted in undetectable ways *against which we could not resist* would this be coercion. But the second concern in answering this question in the affirmative is that it seems to go against both the characterization of God as one who seeks a relationship with us, and also against Evans’s own characterization of the Christian God as one who demands overt faith as a prerequisite for salvation.<sup>68</sup> If God deliberately obscures the

---

and then commanding us would all be coercive, and thus contrary to the character of God. This is not to claim that all revealing is coercive—revelations may be non-coercive. Doing so in a way that demanded worship, though, is coercive.

<sup>68</sup> Evans 1996a.

evidence to extent to which he gives no indications at all of his presence, it seems that God's method is at odds with God's own goals. To obscure in this way—and then to demand (on Evans's account) evidence-less faith—does not seem to be consistent with God's character. I think this disqualifies such a being as worthy of worship. Note that this is not to say that *at some times, and for some people* God may not provide evidence. It may be the case that it is sometimes in line with God's own goals for God to not provide evidence. However, if divine hiding were a global permanent state, one might question the morality of such a God for thus also demanding evidence-less faith on the part of humans.

What about Bishop's evidential ambiguity? Would a God who desires a relationship with us, a God who acts personally, somehow be either incapable or unwilling to provide evidence that does not suffer from the sort of fatal ambiguity Bishop posits? Bishop's evidential ambiguity is based largely on the evidence of natural theology. To answer the question as presented here, we could make a simple concession: the evidence of natural theology is ambiguous. This leaves us on level ground when asking whether evidence in the form of a volitional challenge is in fact also ambiguous.

### **A Robust Notion of Evidence**

In the previous section, I claim that Bishop and Evans have neglected a question that, when answered, would change the discussion. What kind of evidence would we expect from a God who is worthy of worship? The common

approach of the natural theologian is to take a forensic view of evidence gathering, looking for trace evidence—footprints—of God in the world. But this approach does not take into account the purported personhood of God. If God is a personal being, we should expect evidence of a personal nature—evidence of communication. And since a God who is worthy of worship would also desire our moral improvement, we can expect this communication to promote morality, yet be without coerciveness. Thus we might expect God to challenge an individual volitionally, challenging the individual to make the decision to act morally. If this is the case, then we ought to seek evidence of God’s volitional challenges.

If a God worthy of worship exists, we would expect such morally challenging but non-coercive communications to have some of the following characteristics. First, the message would be specific to an individual. Second, to be non-coercive, the message must be such that an individual can choose to ignore it. Third, the message would (try to) promote our moral goodness. We should not expect such evidence to necessarily be public, for public evidence (and forensic evidence in particular) may not be aligned with God’s moral and redemptive purposes. Some sorts of public evidence may in fact be coercive.<sup>69</sup> Here I agree with Evans’s suggestion that some types of public evidence (historical evidence, for example) are irrelevant to the relational aspect of God’s character while other types of public evidence—“Miracles or other evidence”—may in fact *alienate*

---

<sup>69</sup> For elaboration on both of these arguments, see Moser 2008, chapters 2 and 3.

people from God.<sup>70</sup>

Public evidence is the type of evidence that is available intersubjectively. That is, for evidence E to be public, it must be the case that if S1 has access to E, it is possible (in principle) for S2 to also have the same evidence. Often, public evidence can be intentionally transferred from one agent to another.

Transferring evidence—revealing it—can be done either directly or indirectly. By suggesting direct and indirect forms of revealing, I intend to capture the cases where (a) S1 can give S2 evidence, and (b) S1 can direct S2's attention to evidence. For example, directly revealing evidence may entail physically or verbally transferring something, while to direct one's attention may be the suggestion that one *look over there* or *listen to that*. Notice that there is no requirement that S1 *does* transfer evidence, but only that it is possible that S1 transfer evidence. If I find an object and proceed to hide the object, not showing it to anyone, this does not (by that fact) make the object my private evidence. Likewise, if Fermat did indeed prove his last theorem, yet failed to transfer it, this does not mean that the proof is private evidence. It is only public evidence that has not been transferred.<sup>71</sup>

Above I suggested that indirect sharing of evidence may come in the form of a directive to adjust one's attention (*look over there!*). But this is a more

---

<sup>70</sup> Evans 1998, 140-142.

<sup>71</sup> Note also that this definition of public evidence allows that an *incorrect* proof is also public, as the derivability of the proof does not influence the proof's publicness or privateness.

complicated matter than it initially appears, for what evidence is shared? There is a sense in which two individuals in the same place at the same time with their attentions directed in the same way experience the same thing.<sup>72</sup> When the whistle in the distances draws attention to the oncoming train, in a very real way the train (and the whistling noise) are public evidence. This is largely because the individuals share common notions (though perhaps not identical notions) of “train,” “whistle,” and so on.

But included in the experience is, for each person, the phenomenological content of the experience to which attention is attracted.<sup>73</sup> I feel the ground vibrate. I hear whistle in the distance. I see a puff of smoke. (Or, following the adverbial form, I am being appeared to thusly.) In the first chapter I mentioned beliefs whose content is non-propositional, and the question arises here whether the contents of these beliefs are public or private. In each experience, the phenomenological content is, so to speak, *dependent* on the agent. That is, the experience does not appear independently of the agent.<sup>74</sup> While I may be able to direct others toward the smoke, or to listen to the whistle, I cannot share the phenomenological content of my experience. I can anticipate (based on other

---

<sup>72</sup> Maybe we need to add “with the same socio-ethnographic backgrounds” to eliminate cases of Quinean radical notional differences. Also note that I am not claiming that the fact that two people share this public evidence has anything to do with answering metaphysical questions about reality and the world.

<sup>73</sup> One might suggest a token/type distinction here. The train-whistle-blowing type may be had by many individuals. But the individual token is private to an individual.

<sup>74</sup> cf. Moser 1989, 89-90.



evidence I possess) that others may have similar experiences with similar phenomenological content. But my evidence for the proposition “there is a puff of smoke” depends on many individual pieces of evidence. And some of that evidence (foremost the phenomenological content) cannot be transferred. Thus, a common type of private evidence is phenomenological evidence.

Evidence is private just in case when S1 has access to E, it is not possible for some other agent (S2) to also have that same piece of evidence. This suggests that evidence such as memories, dreams, pain, and emotive states (elation, depression, sadness, etc.) are among those pieces of evidence that are rightly classified as private evidence. In these cases, at least some non-propositional content of the evidence is available only to the given individual.<sup>75</sup> To share this evidence, we may offer a propositional formulation of the experience in hopes that the listener may also have similar enough experiences to fill in the gaps incommunicable propositionally. (Consider the doctor’s frustration with the patient attempting to describe “where and how it hurts.”)<sup>76</sup>

### Private Evidence

It should be clear from the characterization above that private evidence plays an important role for evidentialism. If nothing else, it prevents the sort of

---

<sup>75</sup> It is not clear to me that there could ever be a case in which propositional content could not, in principle, be shared.

<sup>76</sup> Thus, one’s given experience of pain is an individual token, and the phenomenological aspects of that token are private. But the *type* of pain—while also non-propositional—is in a sense shared. That is, others may experience (tokens of) the same type of pain.

infinite regress argument that Evans worries over.<sup>77</sup> Beliefs with non-propositional content do not rely upon other propositional beliefs, and contain as their content something that does not necessarily need the support of other evidence or argument.<sup>78</sup>

The characterization I have given has steered well clear of the traditional conflation in religious epistemology of private evidence and religious experience. But religious experience is a question that must be addressed in the context of evidence generally, and private evidence specifically.

Given my sketch of the distinction between public and private evidence, it seems evident that most experiences that fall under the rubric of religious experience are indeed private. The non-propositional content of such experiences remain solely in possession of the one who experiences them. In fact, this is often the complaint lodged against such experiences. When such experience cannot be examined by others, and when such experience seems so intensely personal, we raise an eyebrow about whether it is legitimate evidence. By addressing headlong the questions about religious experience and evidence, we may better understand Bishop's complaint about evidential ambiguity. And we may gain new clarity on how to judge evidence.

There are two questions we may ask about religious experience and evidence. The first is whether or not religious experience is evidence at all. The

---

<sup>77</sup> See Moser 1989, chapter 4. Evans (1998) raises his infinite regress problem in chapter 3.

<sup>78</sup> cf. Moser 1985, chapter 5.

second question is whether this evidence (if it is evidence) is sufficient evidence for justification.

Given what has been said above, I characterize religious experience as the broad category of private evidence in which a human agent experiences God or has an inner state or event that, to the agent, indicates the presence (or, perhaps, the absence) of divineness. I have intentionally kept the notion broad. Mystical experience, in which one experiences a vivid mental event (perhaps coinciding with a physical event) that is inexplicable yet suggestive of divinity, may indeed be a kind of religious experience. But so also may be deeply moving feelings. Are religious experiences truth indicators? Religious experiences may have directionality just as do many of the previous examples of evidence.

But in regard to the second question I raised above, we must ask whether religious experience is good evidence. Is it easy to defeat? Does it answer why-questions? This is where many forms of religious experience show weakness. Take the inexplicable mystical experience. An earmark of the mystical experience is its singularity and non-repeatability. There is generally no way to authenticate such an experience, nor is there a substantial body of additional evidence that bolsters the trustworthiness of a mystical experiences. Mystical experience is not particularly resistant to defeaters. For any given experience, it seems that one may raise defeaters as to the cause of the experience: was it God's voice, or just bad sushi? Because of the aforementioned problem of authentication, there seems to be no general response to such defeaters.

Mystical experience may be evidential, but it is also of dubious value.

On the other end of the spectrum are the more innocuous religious experiences—those explained as (sometimes strong) emotional responses, or feelings of conviction. Where the mystical experience presents a difficulty in its uniqueness, the emotional response presents difficulty in its ubiquity. Emotional experiences, even strong ones, are by no means unique to religious experience. We experience these in many areas of our lives. Conversations trigger them. Life experiences trigger them. And common wisdom dictates that we ought not immediately take such feelings as *reliable* truth indicators. In fact, we attempt to safeguard ourselves from emotional decision making by invoking mediating strategies. Take a deep breath. Wait a day. Have a cup of tea. Sleep on it. In short, we often mistrust our own emotions. As Bishop points out in his fear example discussed previously, sometimes our emotions *are* trustworthy. Yet it seems that we are incapable of offering a simple rule to distinguish the trustworthy from the spurious or overwrought. The consequence seems to be that religious experiences of a wide variety are evidential, but we treat them as easily defeasible and on their own they are not likely to be sufficient evidence to justify belief.

Religious experience may be of value, then. But perhaps there is yet a better sort of evidence that we might look to.

#### Evidence and God

If there is a God, where “God” is a title indicating a being who is absolutely

worthy of worship, then how might such a God reveal himself? I have suggested that we should expect such a God to reveal himself in a way that would promote moral improvement. That is, such a God would be interested in changing the motivational core of the believer, giving that believer a disposition toward the good. Because this evidence is directed toward an individual's will, challenging the receiver to willfully choose to act, this evidence may be called *volitional evidence*.<sup>79</sup>

If this is the sort of evidence we are to expect, then one ought to look for such evidence by looking for instances where one's will has been challenged to act, and act for good. Where might one look for such challenges? We often talk about conscience as a locus of moral promptings. So might we look to conscience as a source of divine moral promptings? First we can talk briefly about what is meant by promptings of conscience. Initially we may interpret the notion of "promptings of conscious" as being a reflective and conscious rumination on what action is morally best in a given situation. This is not what I have in mind—indeed, that would not be a prompting at all. It is better to understand conscience as working analogously to our senses. When I hear the whistle of the train or feel the ground shake with the incoming engine, at the phenomenological level *something attracts my attention*. The whistle sound. The quaking sensation. Conscience, too, works by attention attraction. To phrase it

---

<sup>79</sup> Paul K. Moser provides a richer development of this idea in *The Elusive God* (2008), especially in chapter 3. The description of evidence that follows here is largely my take on Moser's claims.

adverbially, I am appealed to conscientiously. My attention is attracted to a moral prompting.

There are many cases of simple moral promptings—help the poor, do not steal that book, take care of your family, do not strike that person. There are also extraordinary moral promptings. We are familiar with stories of individuals who have given up comfort, wealth, and even a livelihood to become agents of positive moral change. Cases are not limited to the likes of Mother Theresa, but to those who make short term commitments (to become a temporary aid worker) or even momentary commitments (to take a single decisive and morally outstanding action). The promptings that lead individuals to act in such moral ways are the sort of prompting that we would expect from God. As Paul Moser explains this sort of evidence:

It would include the perfectly authoritative divine call, via human conscience, to relinquish our own selfish willfulness for the sake of living for the unselfish perfectly loving will of God. This elusive wake-up call would aim to work, if painfully, through human conscience in order to reach us at our internal moral center, where one could 'know reality together' with God, as the etymology of 'conscience' suggests. It wouldn't be reducible to spectator evidence, but would come instead with a moral challenge to us to be awakened from our selfishness to the moral primacy of divine love, even if we dislike and dismiss the challenge.<sup>80</sup>

What Moser points out is that one avenue by which God may provide evidence is through moral promptings, which we receive via conscience.<sup>81</sup> Given an

---

<sup>80</sup> Moser 2008, 50.

<sup>81</sup> This is not to claim that all promptings of conscience are morally good. This may or may not be the case. But (a) moral promptings are received via conscience, and (b) agents can test the morality of these promptings. The operative claim here is that conscience is the avenue by which we might expect God to prompt us morally.

understanding of these moral challenges as degrees of the same sort of prompting, from mundane to extraordinary, to what extent might we consider such promptings *evidential*?

Consider the following case: S identifies a prompting of conscience E. A characteristic of this prompting is its *attention attraction*. That is, an agent's attention is drawn to the event. For the sake of argument, E has neither any mystical attributes, nor is E an extraordinary demand (e.g. "fix world poverty"). E, for S, indicates the existence of a morally perfect being—a being worthy of the title God.<sup>82</sup> Ought S immediately believe in God on the basis of E? Most evidentialists would express restraint. While E may be evidence, it is unclear that E would (or could) be sufficient evidence on its own. Many evidentialists would advocate *seeking more evidence*. But this particular example presents a unique characteristic in regard to obtaining more confirming evidence: The best way to gather additional evidence (either for or against) is to *submit to the prompting*. That is, if one is interested in gathering more supporting evidence that a prompting of conscience is indeed an indication of the existence of God, one ought to follow the prompting, for doing so is the most likely route to encountering additional evidence.<sup>83</sup> So S may then follow the prompting (E) in S's actions. We might say that in doing so, S has *conformed S's will to the prompting* (and thus, if

---

<sup>82</sup> cf. Moser 2012, in which this encounter with a volitional prompting becomes a "Gethsemane moment."

<sup>83</sup> This is, I think, roughly the idea of *diachronic* evidence Moser (2008, 69) suggests.

God exists, to God's will). Our characterization of God as a being worthy of worship suggests that God is interested in the continual moral development of each individual. S might then expect to encounter additional evidence in the following forms: (1) experiencing other similar promptings of conscience, and (2) experiencing a genuine change in S's motivational core, gaining a stronger disposition toward acting unselfishly moral and following moral promptings.<sup>84</sup>

Regarding (1), I am suggesting that if there is a God (as defined above), a being whose interests include the moral betterment of any willing individual, then God would (joyfully) meet one's obedience in regard to E1 with another challenge E2, and so on. Regarding (2), again our definition of God suggests that it is in God's interest to transform individuals morally. "[A] perfectly loving God would noncoercively seek perfectly loving human submission to the degree that God's moral character is perfectly represented in willing humans."<sup>85</sup> And thus such a God would well be likely to invest in the individual with a transformation of the individual's motivational core—but only in a way that leaves the receiver free to reject the offer of transformation.<sup>86</sup> When one becomes willing to be transformed morally, one may expect to encounter God's offer of transformation. This is the idea Christians sometimes try to express with the phrase "having Jesus in one's

---

<sup>84</sup> This is developed substantially in Moser 2008 and 2010. Moser suggests that a "call to repent and to obey faithfully and wholeheartedly (2008, 53) can, if the agent is receptive, lead to a moral transformation. This is what Moser calls *the transformative gift* (2008, 134-135; 2010, 200).

<sup>85</sup> Moser 2008, 57.

<sup>86</sup> Moser 2010, 200ff, Moser 2008, 134-135.



heart” (though sometimes this notion is confused with other notions). A substantial body of this evidence from conscience may indeed be sufficient for justifying one’s belief in God, given that the inference made is that God’s moral actions via consciousness is indeed the best available explanation.

But lest we get ahead of ourselves, there remains the initial problem: That second level of evidence is *not* accessible based solely on an initial prompting of conscience. While I have suggested that more evidence *might* be had, that second level requires that S act on E. But is it not the case that for S to (epistemically) rationally act, S must already believe (or at least assent to) the claim that E is a prompting? Such belief/assent would not be justified—it has already been stated that the evidence is insufficient. On what grounds, then, might one act on this belief (or instance of assent)?

The skeptic might here recommend suspension of judgment. But this may not be the appropriate course of action, for there is *some evidence*, and the outlook for garnering additional evidence is promising. In this situation, one may rationally assent to E (even in one’s practical commitment) in hopes of obtaining further evidence. We already have a term for this sort of following of evidence: an epistemic venture. But the notion of venture that I employ differs from Bishop’s. Bishop distinguishes between doxastic and sub-doxastic ventures. Either will do for us—one’s disposition is not at issue. There is indeed a place for venture in epistemically rational reasoning, but this venture does not lead to fideism of any sort. Further, we do not need a thesis of evidential ambiguity as an initial prompt

for the making of this venture. Evidential ambiguity suggests (at least on some interpretations) that the evidence lacks directionality for us, and because of this we may need to venture. Yet the evidence in question does have directionality. Finally, contrary to Bishop's account, venture and justification do not stand as mutual exclusives.

Earlier I pointed out that most contemporary epistemologists, including most evidentialists, no longer require certainty as a condition for knowledge. In absence of certainty, believing (or merely assenting) based on evidence is venturesome. Even a justified belief may then be venturesome. That is, one may acknowledge that one has conclusive evidence for P at t, while still acknowledging that disconfirming evidence or defeaters may arise at t + 1; yet one may *venture* (for the future) that P.

Given this notion of venture, one might venture that some volitional prompting E is indeed a divine prompting—evidence of God's interaction in the agent's life. One may act in accordance with E, with hopes that doing so will lead to the availability of more evidence (in the form of promptings or transformation of one's motivational core).<sup>87</sup>

This notion of venture is compatible with the characterization of sufficiency and decisiveness introduced earlier in the chapter. If decisiveness does not require an assurance about the future (as certainty does) then justified but uncertain beliefs carry with them an element of venture. In accepting an

---

<sup>87</sup> The notion of venture explained here does not necessarily entail that S is justified that P.

uncertain belief P, S ventures that at time  $t + 1$ , S's total available evidence will continue to suggest P. S's holding P (and acting on P) is not because S is acting out a hypothesis for the sake of experiment, but because the evidence is sufficient for S to *decide* that P. Venture, as I am describing it, does not carry with it an additional caveat about how one assents or believes. Rather, it describes one's epistemic disposition toward P in light of an absence of certainty.<sup>88</sup>

Is this sort of venture a type of fideism? I do not think it can be so called. Fideism suggests a long-term commitment to faith without regard for an evidential base. Evans, for example, treats faith as dispositional: One believes by faith and no longer relies upon epistemic rationality. Bishop invokes permanent evidential ambiguity, claiming that there is no reason to hope that one's evidential base will ever disambiguate. Both treat this step of venture as replacing justification. In contrast, I am claiming that venture is appropriate solely on the epistemic grounds that it is the most likely course of fulfilling one's epistemically rational goals. The epistemic goal of holding a maximal number of (important) true beliefs while minimizing false beliefs is still the goal, and epistemic justification remains the best way of attaining that goal.<sup>89</sup> But even in absence of justification, epistemic venture can (at time  $t$ ), play a role (assuming S has

---

<sup>88</sup> One might draw parallels between the dispositional component of belief and the dispositional nature of epistemic venture. Venture, though, is related to justification. Not belief.

<sup>89</sup> As I pointed out in the first chapter, not all beliefs are equally important. There are many possible beliefs that are for most people at most times unimportant. Determining, for example,

evidence, though inconclusive, for P). The strategy for epistemic venture here is diachronic: venture today in order to be justified tomorrow.

### **Disconfirming Evidence**

One may read the argument thus far as suggesting that if S follows prompting E, S *will obtain* evidence. That is, one may see, or hope for, a necessary connection between accepting and acting upon E, and immediately gaining further evidence. (Or one may hope that if acting is not immediately met with further evidence, one is now justified in disbelief.) I am not claiming this, though. I am suggesting that if S is interested in gaining more evidence, the *most likely route* to obtaining evidence is to follow E. Given a God who is a person, not a mechanism, one must keep in mind that providing volitional evidence (that is, promptings) may well be a volitional act on God's part. That is, God would decide when to prompt us. To expect that immediately upon completion of acting upon E1, I ought to be prompted with E2 is to neglect the point that another willful being may choose *not* to communicate at time t.

Initially this may smack of a falsifiability violation, but what I am claiming is that the model to be applied to moral promptings must be the same model we apply to our interactions with human agents: we must assume that each party has a will, and that because of this the communication will be asynchronous.<sup>90</sup> In

---

how many blades of grass are in the front lawn, is not likely to best fit one's epistemic goals.

<sup>90</sup> I am borrowing this terminology from computer science, in which network communications are described as synchronous or asynchronous. A synchronous communication channel is one in which communication is expected to occur with immediacy. The sender thus expects the receiver

fact, it is the asynchronous nature of the communication that most aptly indicates the existence of a being who meets our definition of God. Consider the case of an email exchange with an unknown sender. I may receive an initial email from an unknown sender. The email may have been intentionally sent by an individual. Or it could have been sent by an automaton—perhaps it is a built-in feature of the email server. Indeed, the message may just be a cosmic fluke caused by wayward electrons. My initial reception of the email message is not sufficient to indicate which of these is the case. I have the option of ignoring the email; I also have the option of responding. The later option may provide me the best route for learning more about the sender. If I send a reply and hope for an immediate returned response, my hopes are more likely to be fulfilled if the sender is an automaton than if the sender is a willful agent. (Email auto-responders are synchronous and automatic: They re-act immediately to a prompting.) An agent responds willfully—when the time is right for the agent. A response *may* be immediate; or it may be delayed, unsent until the agent deems it appropriate. The relationship with an agent is asynchronous and not automatic.

But does failure to receive additional evidence constitute disconfirming evidence? If the process of receiving a prompting and then acting on the prompting does not result in additional promptings and changes (in a reasonable

---

to act upon message reception with an immediate response. An asynchronous communication channel is one in which the sender is not entitled to expect that the response will follow immediately. A synchronous process sends a message and waits (blocks) for a response. An asynchronous process sends a message and then continues work, checking back periodically for a response.

amount of time), then the initial evidence is not strengthened. It is not defeated, perhaps, but it is not strengthened. What I mean by “strengthened” is nothing mysterious. We talk about our total evidence in support of some belief, B. According to the venture model I have suggested, accepting and obeying E is a venture intended to unearth additional evidence, which would in turn lead to greater total evidence. But if additional evidence is not encountered, the total evidence remains unaltered. Again drawing from the email analogy, if I send a reply and hear nothing, I gain no further evidence about the nature of the sender (other than that the sender has not yet replied). But this does not constitute disconfirming evidence of the agent-ness of the sender, either.

### **A Further Challenge from Bishop**

Does this theory adequately address Bishop’s concerns over evidential ambiguity? Evidential ambiguity no longer looks like the global and pervasive problem Bishop claims. Yet Bishop may here borrow from Evan’s playbook and suggest that evidential ambiguity is not a result of the *actual* evidence, but of our unwillingness to take the evidence as it is. That is, Bishop may argue that evidential ambiguity may turn out (at least in this case) to be a result of selfishness and pride on the part of the human agent. And such a point is well-made. Receiving, recognizing, and acting upon a volitional challenge is subject to the will of the individual. Pride and selfishness could indeed interfere when one refuses to submit.

Volitional evidence is to be found, I have suggested, in conscience.

Promptings for non-selfish moral actions, promptings to conform to the will of a morally perfect God—these are non-coercive. They can be rejected, and they can be ignored. Thus, the willingness of the agent to receive (and consequently act upon) volitional evidence is, in a very real way, a determinant for the evidence.<sup>91</sup> One who ignores or rejects simply *will not have the evidence*. For this reason, if we are to fall back on a notion of evidence as forensic in nature—if we are determined to look only for traces of God without becoming engaged at a relational level—the evidence may well appear “ambiguous”—or, more accurately, vague and unreliable.<sup>92</sup>

But such an objection illuminates a crucial facet of this sort of evidential approach: The religious seeker must be genuinely receptive and willing to act. A relationship is not built by abstaining from commitments. And when searching for a being who is by definition both morally perfect and totally loving, it would be foolish to expect that we might keep aloof while still knowing God.

Moderate evidentialism remains a plausible—*the* most plausible, I argue—epistemological approach for addressing religious belief. But the success of the method is contingent to a large degree on our ability to look for the appropriate kind of evidence. Natural theology—as both Evans and Bishop argue—has not provided compelling evidence. But that may well be because we have asked the

---

<sup>91</sup> Moser 2008, 77.

<sup>92</sup> Moser 2008, 57.

wrong questions and looked in the wrong places.<sup>93</sup> By first asking how a being worthy of the title God might reveal evidence, we may recognize a better approach to gaining evidence. Though this approach requires a degree of venture by the religious seeker (an issue unremarkable given that much truth-seeking involves venture), it is the best method for acquiring sufficient evidence to justify religious belief.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that a variety of moderate evidentialism is preferable to fideism. I began by pointing out that ultimately fideism cannot help the religious seeker ward off skepticism. From there, I moved on to an examination of Evans's and Bishop's critiques of evidentialism. Through that discussion, I developed what I have called "moderate evidentialism"—an alternative to Bishop's hard-line evidentialism. This moderate evidentialism comes with a robust notion of evidence that includes both public and private evidence. Focusing on varieties of private evidence, I have suggested that there are in fact forms of evidence that may rightly indicate religious truths. In particular I have focused on volitional evidence. Two important lessons emerge from fideism: First, Bishop points out the value of epistemic venture, which I have

---

<sup>93</sup> Note that I am not claiming that God *cannot* provide forensic evidence, but that it is not aligned (it appears) with God's goals. "Thus, we should not expect it. For redemptive purposes, God wants people to know God directly, in an I-Thou acquaintance-relationship, without the dilution or the distraction of philosophical arguments. Accordingly, God wants the self-commitment of a human agent to God, not (in this context) to an inference or a conclusion of an argument. God wants to be one's sole evidential foundation for believing in God and for believing that God exists, and hence does not want an argument to assume this role" (Moser 2013, 11).



developed (in a non-fideistic way) as part of moderate evidentialism. In absence of certainty, one may *venture* upon one's evidence, and in so doing may obtain additional confirming evidence. Such a venture, when made without justification, is not the *basis* of continued faith, nor a staple condition for faith, but a temporary epistemic move designed to pragmatically address our cognitive and situational limitations and open the possibility of diachronically receiving additional evidence. Secondly, from fideism we have seen how the challenge of cognitive limitations identifies the role of the receiving agent in regard to volitional evidence. One must be willing to receive evidence. One must be willing to forgo selfish motivations to act upon volitional moral promptings. And in this willingness, one may open oneself to gaining evidence otherwise blockaded by selfishness and cognitive limitations. This is where evidence disambiguates.

In the first chapter of the dissertation I developed an account of rationality, focusing on epistemic rationality. I began with this because doing so grants a higher degree of clarity to the sometimes murky relationship between epistemic reasoning and rationality in general. In particular, it provides a framework for asking meaningful questions about what the fideist means when claiming that fideism is *rational*. Bishop and Evans each claim to provide rational accounts of fideism, and as we have seen, these two theories can be understood as such. But for each theory I have pointed out what I take to be substantial flaws—flaws that indicate that fideism is an impoverished epistemic standpoint. Most troubling, as I have indicated in this chapter, is that fideism does not resist skepticism.

There is a detail common to both Evans's and Bishop's fideism: the success of each theory is contingent upon the failure of evidentialism. Fideism only gains traction if epistemic justification is out of reach. I have shown in the present chapter that evidentialism can indeed address the epistemic questions of the religious seeker. And if this is so, then evidentialism is the best available explanation for how one can hold epistemically rational religious beliefs.

#### Future Directions

The original topic for this dissertation was volitional evidence. I had intended on examining what volitional evidence is, and how diachronic evidentialism might function in light of this. Yet my initial encounters with fideism suggested that before I could embark on that topic, I must first ensure that such a theory does not devolve into fideism. (I am indebted to Fr. James Murphy for raising this objection to my dissertation proposal.) Thus, my original starting point—a rough sketch of how initial volitional evidence might open one to additional evidence—has become the conclusion for this dissertation. I fear that once again where I hoped to plumb the depths of this topic, I have given an unsatisfactorily cursory treatment.

In other places I have had to bracket important topics. First, in appropriately scoping this dissertation, I found it necessary to eliminate an historical examination of fideism. Bayle, Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Kant have all been grouped into the fideist camp (for better or worse). Pascal in particular is interesting because he may better be understood as suggesting short-term

epistemic ventures rather than the full-fledged fideism sometimes attributed to him because of his wager argument. With its close associations with skepticism of both Academic and Pyrrhonian varieties, fideism has a rich heritage.<sup>94</sup> Yet in this dissertation I have made scant reference to the historical heritage of contemporary fideists such as Evans and Bishop.

Second, there are three classes of fideism that have received only faint attention. Irrationalism, the first of the three, is one I find less interesting. But Wittgensteinian fideism (sometimes called language-game fideism) and religious anti-realism present problems of interest for future investigation.

As a work of religious epistemology, I have opened many epistemological topics again addressing them only briefly. One is the epistemological perspectives relied upon by various forms of natural theology. Also, I have offered a rough characterization of evidentialism, one that I consider to be a more moderate form than the characterizations offered by Bishop and Evans. My own characterization is in need of careful elaboration, especially in regard to sufficiency and the notion of best explanation.

Finally, there is the issue of rationality and resolving rational conflicts. Any moral philosopher will rightly recognize that my sketches of rationality were somewhat lopsided, as I have given more detailed descriptions of epistemic rationality than of moral or prudential rationality (and I have not even considered other forms of rationality). This is largely due to the fact that I feel better equipped

---

<sup>94</sup> cf. Popkin 1979, Penelhum 1985, and Maia Neto 1995.

to offer an explanation of epistemic rationality than to offer one for, say, moral rationality. This is an oversight that I would like to rectify in future work.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Alston, William P. 1989a. "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification." In *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.
- . 1989b. "The Nature of Epistemic Justification." In *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.
- . 1989c. "An Internalist Externalism." In *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.
- . 1995. "Realism and the Christian Faith." In *God, Reason and Religions: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Eugene Thomas Long. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Augustine of Hippo. 1961. *Confessions*. Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin. NY: Penguin.
- Bayle, Pierre. 1999. "Simonides." In *Faith & Reason*, edited by Paul Helm. NY: OUP.
- Bishop, John. 2007. *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief*. New York: OUP.
- . 2010. "Faith." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Fall 2010 ed.). Accessed Aug 8, 2010. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/faith/>.
- Bishop, Michael and J. D. Trout. 2005. *Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgement*. NY: OUP.
- Brown, Peter. 2000. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. New Edition. Berkeley: U. of California Press.
- Cahn, Steven M. 2006. *God Reason and Religion*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*. 1996. Translated by Burton Watson. NY: Columbia UP.

- Clark, David K. 2003. "Faith and Foundationalism." In *The Rationality of Theism*, edited by Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser. NY: Routledge.
- Conee, Earl. 2004. "Heeding Misleading Evidence." In *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*. NY: OUP. 259-276.
- Conee, Earl and Richard Feldman. 2004a. "Internalism Defended." In *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*. NY: OUP. 53-82.
- . 2004b. "Evidentialism." In *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*. NY: OUP. 83-107.
- Davis, Stephen T. 1978. *Faith, Skepticism, and Evidence: An Essay in Religious Epistemology*. New Jersey: Associated UP.
- Evans, C. Stephen. 1996a. *Why Believe?: Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- . 1996b. *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*. NY: OUP.
- . 1998. *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Feldman, Richard. 2004a. "The Ethics of Belief" in *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*. NY: OUP. 166-195.
- . 2004b. "Having Evidence" in *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*. NY: OUP. 219-241.
- . 2006. "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement." Accessed Sept. 22, 2012. <http://www.philosophy-dev.stir.ac.uk/postgraduate/documents/FeldmanPaper.pdf>.
- Fine, Arthur. 1993. "Fictionalism." *Midwest Studies of Philosophy*. XVII. Accessed Feb 19, 2013. <http://faculty.washington.edu/afine/Fictionalism.pdf>.
- Foley, Richard. 1993. *Working Without a Net: A Study of Egocentric Epistemology*. NY: OUP.
- . 2002. "Conceptual Diversity in Epistemology." In *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, edited by Paul K. Moser. NY: OUP. 177-203.
- Gewirth, Alan. 1978. *Reason and Morality*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press.

- Gilovich, Thomas. 1991. *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life*. NY: Free Press.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1983. *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Habel, Norman C. 1985. *The Book of Job*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Helm, Paul. 1999. *Faith & Reason*. NY: OUP.
- . 2000. *Faith with Reason*. NY: OUP.
- James, William. 1948. "The Will to Believe." In *Essays in Pragmatism*. NY: Hafner Press.
- Jaspers, Karl. 1959. *Truth and Symbol*, translated by Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel. New Haven, CT: College and University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthew. Cambridge: CUP.
- Klein, Peter. 2002. "Skepticism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, edited by Paul K. Moser. NY: OUP. 336-361.
- Kreeft, Peter & Ronald K. Tacelli. 1994. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP.
- Kyberg, Henry E. "Epistemological probability." *Synthese* 23(2-3). 309-326.
- Maia Neto, José R. 1995. *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism: Skepticism and Faith in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Shestov*. Boston: Kluwer.
- . 1996. "Kierkegaard's Distinction Between Modern and Ancient Scepticism." In *Scepticism in the History of Philosophy*, edited by Richard Popkin. Boston: Kluwer. 135-158.
- Monas, Sidney. 1966. "New Introduction" in *Checkhov and Other Essays*. Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperback.
- Montaigne, Michel. 1999. "An Apology for Raymond Sebond." In *Faith & Reason*, edited by Paul Helm. NY: OUP.
- Moser, Paul K. 1985. *Empirical Justification*. Boston: Reidel.

- . 1989. *Knowledge and Evidence*. NY: CUP.
  - . 1993. *Philosophy After Objectivity: Making Sense in Perspective*. NY: OUP.
  - . 2004. "Divine Hiddenness Does Not Justify Atheism." In *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. Vanarragon. Maldon, MA: Blackwell. 42-54, 56-58.
  - . 2008. *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*. NY: CUP.
  - . 2012. "Gethsemane Epistemology: Volitional and Evidential." *Philosophia Christi*, 14(2): 263-274.
  - . 2013. "Doing and Teaching Christian Philosophy: Reply to McFall." *Evangelical Philosophy Society*. Accessed Feb 21, 2013. [http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20\(Reply%20to%20McFall\).pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20(Reply%20to%20McFall).pdf).
- Nagarjuna. 1995. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way : Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, translated by Jay L. Garfield. NY: OUP.
- Penelhum, Terence. 1983. *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism*. Boston: Reidel.
- . 1989. Introduction to *Faith*, edited by Terence Penelhum. NY: McMillan.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1983. "Reason and Belief in God." In *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame Press. 16-92.
- . 2000. *Warranted Christian Belief*. NY: Oxford.
- Plantinga, Alvin and Michael Tooley. 2008. *Knowledge of God*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Pollock, John. 1993. "Epistemology and Probability." *Synthese* 55 (2): 231-252.
- . 2001. "Defeasible Reasoning with the Variable Degrees of Justification II." In *Artificial Intelligence* 133(Revised June 20, 2002): 233-282.
- Pollock, John and Joseph Cruz. 1999. *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield.
- Pojman, Lious. 1986. "Faith without Belief." *Faith and Philosophy* 3(2): 157-176.



- Popkin, Richard H. 1965. "The High Road to Pyrrhonism." *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Pittsburg: U of Pittsburg Press. 18-32.
- . 1979. *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. LA: University of California Press.
- . 2002. "Fideism." In *Dictionary of Philosophy*. Thomas Mautner, ed. NY: Penguin.
- P'ei Hsiu. 1958. *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po: On the Transmission of Mind*, translated by John Blofeld. NY: Grove Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1984. *Being and Nothingness*. NY: Washington Square Press.
- Schellenberg, J. L. 2004. "Divine Hiddenness Justifies Atheism." In *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* edited by Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. Vanarragon. Maldon, MA: Blackwell. 30-41, 54-56.
- Shestov, Leon. 1966a. "Penultimate Words." In *Checkhov and Other Essays*. Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperback.
- . 1966b. "The Theory of Knowledge." In *Checkhov and Other Essays*. Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperback.
- Soskice, Janet Martin. 1987. "Theological Realism." In *The Rationality of Religious Beliefs: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell*, edited by William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Strout, Barry. 2000. "Understanding Human Knowledge in General." In *Knowledge: Contemporary Readings in Epistemology*, edited by Sven Bernecker and Fred I. Dretske. NY: OUP. 307-323.
- Sullivan, F. Russel Jr. 1978. *Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard*. Washington, DC: University of America Press.
- Shook, John R. 2010 *The God Debates: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Guide for Atheists and Believers*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Taliaferro, Charles. 2005. *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion since the Seventeenth Century*. NY: CUP.
- Tennant, F.R. 1989. "Faith." In *Faith* edited by Terence Penelhum. NY: McMillan.

- Tillich, Paul. 1955. *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press.
- Tinsley, Barbara Sher. 2001. *Pierre Bayle's Reformation*. London: Associated UP.
- Unger, Peter. 2000. "A Defense of Skepticism." In *Knowledge: Contemporary Readings in Epistemology*, edited by Sven Bernecker and Fred I. Dretske. NY: OUP. 324-338.
- Wainwright, William J. 2009. "Theology and Mystery" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, edited by Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea. NY: OUP. 79-102.
- Whelan, Ruth. 1993. "The Wisdom of Simonides: Bayle and Le Mothe Le Vayer." In *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, edited by Richard Popkin and Arjo Vanderjagt. New York: E. J. Brill. pp. 230-253.

## VITA

Matthew Butcher was born and raised in Colorado Springs, Colorado. After attending Colorado State University and the University of Wales, Swansea (UK), Matthew earned his BA in philosophy from the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs in 2004. In 2008, Matthew received his MA in philosophy from Loyola University Chicago.

While at Loyola, Matthew has served as the president of the Graduate Student Association for Philosophy and as the student representative to the Graduate School Council. Since attaining his MA, Matthew has taught as an adjunct at Loyola.

In addition to philosophy, Matthew is an accomplished software engineer. He is currently employed as a Master Engineer at Hewlett Packard.

Matthew has written seven books on software development. His articles have appeared in academic journals, trade magazines, and websites. He regularly speaks at conferences here and abroad. Most recently, he has combined his interests in philosophy and computer science, speaking on how modern software design is profoundly influenced by ancient Greek philosophy.

Matthew lives in Glenview, IL with his wife Angie and their three daughters.