

ABSTRACT

Proportioning Theistic Belief: Approaches to Faith, Reason, and Evidence

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To what extent should belief that God exists be proportioned to the evidence for such a claim? Possible responses to this question range from positions in which theistic belief requires no evidence to be rational to positions in which it must meet the same evidential standards as a scientific theory. This thesis attempts to map the logical space of the proportionality question, offering an analysis of the main views one can take on the issue. After a discussion of the evidentialist objection to belief that God exists, recent treatments of fideism, evidentialism in several varieties, and pragmatism all receive consideration. I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these different positions, drawing out their motivating philosophical assumptions and theological implications.

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PROPORTIONING THEISTIC BELIEF:
APPROACHES TO FAITH, REASON, AND EVIDENCE

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The story of this thesis stretches back to the first week of my freshman year, when Dr. Trent Dougherty recommended to the students of his first-year seminar on the philosophy of C.S. Lewis that they read W.K. Clifford's essay "The Ethics of Belief." I read it, thought to myself, "Hmm, maybe I could use this for my thesis someday!" and forgot about it, until I found myself in Dr. Todd Buras's office in September of my senior year, contemplating switching my thesis project to a topic in philosophy. Clifford's essay came up in our discussion, and I remembered my fascination with his claims from those first few weeks of my freshman year. In a sense, then, this thesis is a work that has spanned all four years of my time at Baylor, and I am thankful beyond words for the people that have walked beside me during this time. Without them, this thesis could not have come to fruition.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Legend has it that Bertrand Russell once claimed that, if God does exist, and he upon his death should find himself standing before the judgment seat of God, and God should ask him why he did not believe, Russell's answer would be, "Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!"¹ Russell's quip reveals a resolute commitment to a version of what can be called evidentialism, a position that broadly claims that there must be some sort of standard of evidence in order for a belief to be justified. We ought not to give our assent to a proposition if we do not have sufficient evidence for that belief; in fact, perhaps we even have a duty to avoid any belief that does not meet a certain evidential standard. For an evidentialist, belief that God exists is no exception to the rule, and for an evidentialist objector, such as Russell, the evidence for the existence of God comes up short.

But is Russell's stance the correct one to take with respect to belief that God exists? What are the other alternatives a person has when it comes to proportioning theistic belief to the evidence? These questions lead to the issue that is at the heart of the discussion of this thesis: To what extent should belief that God exists be proportioned to the evidence we have for that claim? It is this main question that I seek to examine in this project. Many other questions follow from this one: Is the reasonableness of

¹ For the story see footnote 20 in Wesley C. Salmon, "Religion and Science: A New Look at Hume's 'Dialogues'," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 33, no. 2 (1978): 176.

religious faith truly to be evaluated like any other scientific hypothesis? Do the same standards for belief apply to faith in God as to scientific theories – that is, ought we to proportion our belief using the same standards we would for something that can be empirically tested? Or are there things about theism and faith in God that set it apart from ordinary scientific methods of inquiry? Could it be the case that belief that God exists does not require any evidence at all? Although these questions address different facets of the proportionality problem, they all are grounded in the fundamental question of the extent to which we ought to proportion our belief that God exists to the evidence we have for that claim.

At the very beginning I want to make explicit the argument of the evidentialist objector, which is the sort of argument someone such as Russell might use to support his conclusion that he is right to believe that God does not exist. The argument comes out of an evidentialist tradition that stretches back to John Locke and David Hume. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke writes that a person should not hold “any proposition with greater assurance than the Proofs it is built upon will warrant.”² Following Locke’s lead, David Hume asserts, “A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence,” arguing that the degree to which we believe one proposition more than another should be proportional to the different strength of evidence we have for each claim.³ The strongest statement of this evidentialist requirement, however, comes from W.K. Clifford, who in *The Ethics of Belief* makes the following claim: “It is wrong always,

² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Philadelphia: Hayes & Zell Publishers,), 452.

³ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 80.

everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”⁴ A person who is an evidentialist with respect to belief that God exists claims that in order for such belief to be justified – or perhaps even to be rational – it must meet a certain standard of sufficient evidence. If this belief meets evidentialist standards, that is good and well, but if it does not, the evidentialist objector claims that we should not accept belief that God exists. The basic argument of the evidentialist objector to belief that God exists is as follows:⁵

1. There are obligations or standards of excellence with respect to belief which, when followed, provide permissive justification for a belief.
2. It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.
3. Belief in God requires discursive justification.
4. So, it is irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.
5. We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.
6. So, it is intellectually wrong or defective to believe that God exists.

⁴ W.K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), 77.

⁵ I take this argument almost verbatim from Mark S. McLeod, *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 108-09. The one adjustment I make, in order to make my own argument more explicit, is to break up the parts of Premise 3 into two separate premises. The term “discursive justification” could be replaced with a variety of other phrases depending on the emphasis we wish the argument to have, but I will keep the phrase from McLeod. It means simply that the beliefs in question require a certain degree and/or sort of evidence.

The argument is valid. If we are to negate the conclusion successfully, we must show that one of the premises is false. This is, in fact, exactly what the positions I will examine in subsequent chapters attempt to do, either by seeking to demonstrate that belief that God exists can measure up to the standards of the evidentialist or by constructing alternative frameworks within which to examine the rationality of the claim that God exists.

Many different answers have been offered in response to this and similar arguments, but all these answers tend to fall into a small number of main camps that share certain defining characteristics. This thesis is an attempt to map the logical space of the possible answers to the proportionality question. To accomplish this, the structure of the thesis follows a “flowchart” of questions.⁶ By answering these questions with a “yes” or “no” I hope to provide a clear outline of the possible positions a person can take on the question of the correct way to view the relationship of theistic faith to standards of proportionality.

My approach will be as follows. The first question under consideration will be, “Should belief that God exists be proportional to the evidence for the claim that God exists to any extent?” Answering “no” to this question leads to a certain form of fideism, which will be the subject of Chapter 2. Answering “yes” points towards another question: Are the standards used to evaluate evidence and the evidence we should consider for the claim that God exists purely impersonal – that is, do the standards of evaluation and the type of evidence considered belong to the realm of normal science?

⁶ See the Appendix. The flowchart provides a visual aid to the structure of the thesis.

An answer of “yes” to this question yields a position I shall call “impersonal evidentialism” and will be the focus of Chapter 3. Those who reply “no” to the above question indicate that they think there are non-normal considerations at work when evaluating the rationality of theistic belief, and so I address the first of two non-normal considerations with the question, “Is an interpretational or paradigmatic shift needed to evaluate the evidence correctly?” Chapter 4 is devoted to an analysis of this question, dividing those who answer “yes” into those who think a paradigm shift leads to the realization of new evidence (what I will term “narrow personal evidentialism”) and those who think that such a shift causes a reevaluation of old evidence (“personal evidentialism”). For the person who accepts that non-normal considerations apply but denies the necessity of an interpretational or paradigm shift, Chapter 5 asks the question, “Should we take into account pragmatic reasons to believe that God exists?” Answering yes to this question leads to a sort of “pragmatic evidentialism.” After working through the logical map, in Chapter 6 I offer an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the various positions and draw out the theological implications of the views, suggesting that, in light of these theological concerns, certain meta-epistemological presuppositions that have shaped the direction of inquiry into the question merit reexamination.

Before embarking upon this project, however, it will prove helpful to state clearly the definitions I shall use for several key terms and ideas. Thus, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to defining and discussing the terms and ideas that form the subject of the examination. Words such as “belief,” “God,” and “faith” are loaded with layers upon layers of meaning and are used even in our daily conversation in many different ways. In

what follows I seek to provide a working definition of the key terms; in doing so, I hope to avoid a significant amount of confusion as my examination progresses.

Belief

I begin with belief, not because it is the simplest of the terms under discussion but because it will serve as a necessary foundation for analysis of the other terms.⁷ Note first that there is a difference between belief that p and belief in p .⁸ The former indicates an emphasis on the truth or falsity of a propositional statement while the latter seems to refer to something more akin to what we might call faith, a certain kind of trust or allegiance. For the purposes of this project I will use the phrase “belief that” to refer to belief of a purely propositional nature, while reserving “belief in” for the second kind of belief. For the most part I will treat belief as a primarily intellectual stance towards a proposition that can either be true or false. Belief is a sort of intellectual “nod of assent” to a proposition.

Thinking about belief as a “nod of assent” to a proposition, insofar as that assent is intentional and conscious, indicates that belief can be voluntary. But it also seems that in many instances belief is involuntary. People might form beliefs unconsciously or even

⁷ For detailed discussions of modern analyses of the concept of belief, see Radu J. Bogdan, ed., *Belief: Form, Content, and Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Hamid Vahid, *The Epistemology of Belief* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁸ Particularly when applied to belief in God this difference has the potential to be crucial. It is not obvious that belief that God exists is the same as belief in God. See Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983), 18.

in some sense against their wills, and belief is influenced by a multitude of factors that extend beyond cognitive reasons. It follows that there are two types of belief, and as a result two types of belief in God. It is the voluntary sort of belief that I am interested in here. We might be able to assent directly and voluntarily to the proposition that God exists, or we might be able to engage indirectly (yet still voluntarily) in a process that brings about such belief. Either method falls within the realm of voluntary belief. Arguments have been made against the possibility of truly voluntary belief, and everyday experience supports the claim that sometimes we cannot make ourselves believe something, even if we want to. For my purposes, then, I will assume that belief that God exists is voluntary – that is, a person can decide to believe or not to believe that God exists.

The last aspect of belief that needs to be addressed here is the problem of “degrees of belief.” We often treat belief as coming in different levels of strength – it does not sound strange to say that people believe one proposition more strongly than they believe another. The following question is a helpful way to think about degrees of belief: What would it take for a person to give up a belief, to deny the truth of the proposition that is the object of belief? If the answer is, “Give me a somewhat plausible argument and I will listen,” the person holds the belief less strongly than if the answer is, “Nothing you say can make me change my mind.” To some extent the concept of believing in degrees might seem counterintuitive, since people must sometimes give or withhold assent to a proposition regardless of their level of assurance. Some of this confusion, however, stems from differing understandings of what degrees of belief means; it does not refer primarily to acceptance or rejection of a proposition – this does not come in

degrees – but rather to the level of assurance (or doubt, depending on the spin we wish to take) with which a person accepts that proposition. People can believe a proposition more or less strongly depending on a variety of factors, including what they perceive to be the evidence for or against that proposition.

Evidence and Evidentialism

What counts as evidence for the truth of a proposition?⁹ I shall treat evidence for a proposition merely as information that either by itself or when combined with other information increases the probability that the given proposition is true. Evidence forms the propositional premises of inductive arguments. A distinction can be made between background evidence (knowledge that we are not directly concerned with as we make an argument for the truth of a proposition) and new evidence (the evidence we use to make the inductive argument).¹⁰ An inductive argument succeeds, then, if the probability that its conclusion is true is greater when both the background and new evidence are considered than if only the background evidence is considered.

Some attempts have been made to distinguish having evidence for a belief from having grounds for that belief.¹¹ On this view, although evidence constitutes a ground, a ground might not be able to be characterized as evidence of the sort that can be evaluated according to probabilistic calculations. A grounded belief, even if properly basic, is

⁹ For discussion of the concept of evidence, see Peter Achinstein, ed., *The Concept of Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Swinburne provides this distinction in *The Existence of God*, 16-17.

¹¹ Plantinga is one such philosopher. See “Reason and Belief in God,” 73-91.

rooted in the conditions that justify belief. I will not address this distinction further here, but it will be helpful to keep in mind particularly in the discussion of fideistic positions.

Another term important for this thesis and closely related to the concept of evidence is that of evidentialism. In their introduction to a recent collection of essays in evidentialism, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman define evidentialism at its most basic level as “a supervenience thesis according to which facts about whether or not a person is justified in believing a proposition supervene on facts describing the evidence that the person has.”¹² Evidentialism, then, claims that belief can be justified only by evidence. Note that this definition includes no moral pronouncements of the sort made by Clifford.

Evidentialism comes in two main types: threshold evidentialism and proportionality evidentialism.¹³ Threshold evidentialism maintains that in order for a belief to be justified, its support must reach a certain level or standard of evidence. Beliefs for which the evidence is above that threshold are justified; beliefs for which the evidence is below that threshold are not justified. Proportionality evidentialism, on the other hand, claims that people ought to believe a proposition only as strongly as is merited by the evidence they have for that proposition. Note also that these two types of evidentialism are not mutually exclusive. A person could maintain that there is a certain threshold of evidence that must be met in order for a belief to be held at all and also claim

¹² Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 2.

¹³ George Mavrodes draws this distinction in “Belief, Proportionality, and Probability,” *Reason and Decision* 3 (1981): 58-68. C. Stephen Evans comments on Mavrodes’s discussion in *Faith Beyond Reason* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 39-40.

that belief above that threshold should still be proportioned to the strength of the evidence.

God

For this thesis I adopt a fairly narrow sense of the word “God,” but I believe it is the sense that has proved to be the most important throughout Western history and still exercises the most influence today. This is the Judeo-Christian God, the God of the Bible.¹⁴ God is a spiritual being, and He is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and not bound by time. He is the source of everything in existence and the Creator of heaven and earth. Furthermore, He is perfectly good and desirous of good for His creatures. Despite His otherness, He is a personal being and enters into personal relationships with His creatures. In this project, I will use the term “theism” to refer to belief that such a God exists.¹⁵

One point merits brief attention before moving on. In the last century there has been a move to deny the reasonableness of theism not by arguing against it or denying its truth but by claiming that the phrase “God exists” can have no truth value at all – at worst

¹⁴ I follow the lead of many other scholars in choosing to limit my discussion to the Judeo-Christian understanding of God, an understanding to which Audi refers as “classical theism.” See Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment*, 91; Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 3-4; Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 22-27; Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 18; Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 7, for a sample.

¹⁵ For discussions of the attributes and nature of God, see Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, *The Divine Attributes* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002); and Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

it is mere nonsense, an internal contradiction, and at best a weak human construct.¹⁶ This position has fallen out of fashion in recent years, and I shall not review the arguments that attempt to refute it here.¹⁷ For the purposes of my own examination I shall assume that the statement “God exists” indeed has meaning and can be held to be either true or false.

Faith

The term “faith” is perhaps the most complicated of the ideas discussed so far, or at least the most debated with regard to its meaning. My discussion will focus on one specific component of belief, what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls its “belief-content,” but a broader examination of the term will help to clarify this aspect of faith and its relationship to its other facets.¹⁸ We use the word “faith” in many different ways in our daily life; a person can have faith that an event will occur, or have faith in a person or organization.¹⁹ Faith can highlight certainty or uncertainty depending on the context; to say, “I have faith that the economy will see an uptick after the election,” means

¹⁶ For an argument in favor of this position see R.B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist’s View of Religious Belief* (Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Library Editions, 1973).

¹⁷ Swinburne provides one of the most thorough responses to the denial that “God exists” has meaning. See Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also George Schlesinger, *Religion and Scientific Method* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977), 141-48 for a more concise defense of the claim that the phrase “God exists” has meaning.

¹⁸ For Nicholas Wolterstorff’s use of the term “belief-content,” see *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984).

¹⁹ Stephen Evans does an excellent job of highlighting the different ways we think about the word “faith” in Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 1-3.

something very different than to say, “I just have to have faith that my daughter will get better quickly.” Note that, in many of the contexts in which we use the term, faith has no religious connotations, and although “faith” is often equated with “religion,” this shifts the focus from the question of what faith actually is to something that can be criticized on grounds other than its rational defensibility (for example, religiously motivated oppression).

This plenitude of ways in which we use the term “faith” has led some scholars to question whether there is even one “concept” of faith that can apply to all uses of the word.²⁰ Although this claim is a strong one, it does highlight the difficulty of providing a concise definition of faith that will not pose problems of interpretation further down the road. Given this difficulty, in what follows I outline the features of “faith” in the sense I shall use the word.²¹ Faith, in the sense I will use the term in this project, has an essential propositional element to it, but that propositional dimension is broadened by personal relationship leading to a changed overall attitude towards the world. Aquinas calls these two aspects of faith cognition and affection.²²

²⁰ One such scholar is Sessions, who writes, “There is no category or categorical concept of faith. That is, there is no single substantive concept that applies univocally, in virtue of shared characteristics, to everything reasonably labeled ‘faith.’” See William Lad Sessions, *The Concept of Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 5.

²¹ My discussion of faith combines aspects of William Lad Sessions’s six models of faith that he believes cover all the ways in which we understand the term (the Personal Relationship Model, the Belief Model, the Attitude Model, the Confidence Model, the Devotion Model, and the Hope Model) as well as Robert Audi’s analysis in *Rationality and Religious Commitment*, 52-65. For an overview of the different features of each model, see Sessions, *Concept of Faith*, 19-22.

²² Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputae de veritate*, 14, ii.

First, theistic faith includes belief that certain propositions are true, belief that is an intellectual “nod of assent” as discussed earlier. This is the cognitive aspect of faith. I am concerned with only one proposition that characterizes religious faith, the proposition that makes up the heart of theism: the claim that God exists. To be a theist, a person must believe that God exists. As noted earlier, believing *that* God exists can be distinguished, at least in principle, from believing *in* God, and it is the former claim that will begin the discussion of whether or not theistic belief ought to be strictly proportioned to the evidence for such a belief.

Second, theistic faith, if we are operating with the definition of God as given above, demands a certain understanding of the possibility of a personal relationship with God. This faith is grounded in its propositional content, but it goes beyond that propositional content in that it is faith *in* a person, not merely faith *that* a proposition is true. A faith grounded in personal relationship, whether in another human person or in God, can perhaps best be summed up as a “trust” in that person, which often involves reliance on the authority of that person for other matters of belief. This aspect of faith is more difficult to define than the belief element of faith, but it will prove crucial as the discussion of the relationship of faith to evidence progresses.

Finally, faith that includes both belief and a personal relationship leads to a certain attitude about the world, an attitude including both devotion to the person in whom faith is placed as well as hope grounded in the trust of that person. When applied to theism, the resulting attitude is (or ought to be) dictated by the understanding of the character of God and humanity’s relationship to Him. Although attitudinal faith is based on propositional faith and personal faith, it carries the implications of these two through

to their logical conclusions in that it entails action. Note also that action in accordance with attitudinal faith requires an act of will, or a decision. This aspect of faith will play an important role in Chapter 6, but until then I will, for the most part, focus on the first two characteristics of theistic faith.

Conclusion

Clifford's claim (and other claims similar to it) that it is wrong to believe any proposition, including the proposition that God exists, on insufficient evidence has motivated many different responses and attempts to demonstrate that belief in God can indeed be rational, whether inside or outside the standards of Clifford's ethics of belief. With our terms now more clearly defined and with the evidentialist objector's argument established, we are ready to begin the main project of the thesis, which is to map out these various positions. Keeping the evidential objector's argument in mind will prove helpful as we move through the different positions under discussion, and I shall return to it briefly at the beginning of each chapter to point out the different premise each view focuses on denying. I start by attempting to separate out a view that denies the necessity of any evidence for rational theistic belief. The first question of the flowchart asks, "Must belief that God exists be proportional to the evidence for the claim that God exists to any extent?" An answer of "no" leads to a fideistic position, the first under consideration.

CHAPTER TWO

Fideism

Must belief that God exists be held to any standards of proportionality to the evidence at all? Some philosophers of religion answer “no” to this question, maintaining that faith that God exists requires no evidence to be a respectable belief. Such a position can be termed the “independence model” of faith and reason, but even within this model there is a wide range of options that can be explored. In this chapter, then, I consider the positions that are grouped under the label of “fideism,” mapping out the different options as well as offering some discussion of criticisms raised against them. I begin by examining why the independence model is appealing to some and acknowledge certain insights it has into the limitations of human reason, insights that shall prove useful in later chapters. Then I examine several more specific positions. First is the strict fideist, who denies completely the value of reason when it comes to matters of faith. For the strict fideist, belief that God exists has nothing to do with evidence. Second I consider the position of the Reformed epistemologists, most notably Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga and other proponents of Reformed epistemology have often been accused of accepting a fideistic framework, although Plantinga as well as others have disputed this label. Finally I discuss John Bishop’s suggestion that belief that God exists should be viewed as a sort of “doxastic venture.” Despite the differences between these positions, all adherents to an independence model of faith and reason have in common the claim that belief that

God exists is respectable even if the person who holds that belief has absolutely no evidence for it.

To situate ourselves in the project as a whole, let us consider again the argument of the evidentialist objector and point out the premise the fideist denies:

1. There are obligations or standards of excellence with respect to belief which, when followed, provide permissive justification for a belief.
2. It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.
- 3. Belief in God requires discursive justification.**
4. So, it is irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.
5. We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.
6. So, it is intellectually wrong or defective to believe that God exists.

The fideist denies Premise 3 of the evidentialist objector's argument, claiming that rational belief that God exists does not require proportionality to the evidence. This is the heart of the fideistic claim. Note that the fideist could also deny Premise 5, although to do so would be unnecessary once Premise 3 has been successfully refuted. The fideist could also expand his objection to Premise 2, but most of the discussion centers around Premise 3. The core of the fideistic position is to maintain that belief that God exists does not require discursive justification in order to be rational, whether or not that discursive justification is in fact available.

The Appeal of Fideism

Why is fideism appealing in the first place? To many people it might seem that rejecting the value of evidence is, simply put, a foolish move. Who will take you seriously if, when asked why you believe something, you say, “I don’t have any evidence for my belief that *p*. In fact, I don’t think I *should* have any evidence for my belief that *p*.” Although on the surface this position seems irrational, proponents of fideism or other views with similarities to fideism can produce some good reasons for doubting the capacity of reason to perform successfully in matters such as theism.

Increasing Reason Decreases Faith

I begin with one objection to the value of reason in matters of faith that sees faith and reason as diametrically opposed to each other. This is the claim that reason is simply bad, that the less evidence you have for believing that God exists the better your faith must be. The anti-intellectualism that characterizes some groups of fundamentalists epitomizes this position. The objection goes something like this: The more evidence a person has for believing that God exists, the less faith that person will have to have that God exists. Faith is valuable, and we want to maximize its value. So, we should spurn all attempts to inform faith by the use of reason. Such an objection displays not so much a grounded distrust of reason but an unfounded outright rejection of the power of reason to have any bearing at all on matters of faith.

An element of this objection is found in Søren Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Kierkegaard’s concern is that faith is stronger, more vital, more genuine, when it must confront uncertainty:

The all-but-probable, the probable, the extremely and exceedingly probable, this is something he can all but know, or as good as know, or know extremely and exceedingly, but to have faith in it, that he cannot do, for it is the absurd that is the object of faith and the only thing that permits of faith.¹

Knowledge of the increasing probability of an article of faith paradoxically begins to make genuine faith impossible. Thus, according to Kierkegaard's claim in this passage, even if reason is capable of investigating matters of faith, it ought not to do so, since by so doing it undermines the very faith it seeks to support. Although Kierkegaard's concern here is legitimate, it seems to be operating on a fairly narrow view of faith and the things in which the value of faith consists. It seems that robust faith is not necessarily weakened by consideration of its relationship to reason; rather, if rationality is a fundamental part of what it means to be created as a human being, people ought to see faith and reason as complementary rather than at odds with each other. To think that reason must be able to explain the absurd is different than to suppose that reason can have something to say about why the absurd exists or what our relationship to it is. It is this distinction that Kierkegaard's claim does not make clear, although his fundamental recognition of the importance of the absurd is an important aspect of faith.

Sinfulness of Human Reason

A second objection against attempts to use reason in matters of faith, an objection that I believe has more merit, is that reason is incapable of acting successfully when it comes to theistic belief. This objection can be based on one of two views of reason. The first consists in the doctrine that sin has corrupted human reason to such an extent that it

¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. by Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 177. For a discussion of this passage, see Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 109-110.

has no power to grasp, understand, or investigate the truth. Because reason has been so twisted by the effects of sin, it cannot serve as a guide at all in matters of theistic faith, since it is guaranteed to lead people astray.

The view that human reason in its corrupted form is incapable of evaluating theistic belief is a position that I will discuss further in Chapter 5. From a Christian perspective, if one is to accept the doctrine of original sin, it seems unavoidable to conclude that human reason is fallen along with the rest of human nature. But this conclusion does *not* entail that there are not ways that fallenness could be overcome or rectified in a way that would renew the prospect of using reason in matters of faith. It ignores the possibility that there is some sort of common grace, a grace given to both those still under the bondage of sin and those who have been released from that slavery, that allows reason to function at least to some extent as it was designed to do. The blanket objection to the use of reason discussed here does not consider such an option.

Finiteness of Human Reason

The second direction an objector can move is to deny that reason can reach into matters of faith. Such an objector is not obligated to claim that reason is completely corrupt, but merely that the finite nature of human reason puts inquiry into the existence of God beyond its limits. Reason has no tools to deal with things that are far removed from human experience.² Because of the extreme otherness of God, the question of His

² This objection applies to more than the existence of God. Hume points out the far-reaching consequences of the problem: “Let the errors and deceits of our very senses be set before us; the insuperable difficulties which attend first principles in all systems; the contradictions which adhere to the very ideas of matter, cause and effect, extension, space, time, motion; and in a word, quantity of all kinds, the object of the only science

existence is beyond the realm of human reason. If we rely on reason to reach a conclusion about whether or not God exists, we are faced with a stalemate, since human reason is not equipped with the tools necessary to deliver a verdict on something as far above itself as God.

One set of arguments that support such a position is found again in Soren Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Kierkegaard argues against the use of objective reasoning in matters of religion with a series of three arguments.³ Robert Adams discusses all three of these thoroughly, and the first two demonstrate the concern stated above. Adams terms these two arguments the "Approximation Argument" and the "Postponement Argument."⁴ The Approximation Argument points out that any evidence reliant on a historical event is merely an approximation, while the Postponement Argument claims that, because we can never be sure whether we have all the relevant evidence, we can never be free from the worry that a new piece of detrimental evidence will come to light. As a result, reason forces us to postpone judgment. Both of these

that can fairly pretend to any certainty or evidence. When these topics are displayed in their full light, as they are by some philosophers and almost all divines; who can retain such confidence in this frail faculty of reason as to pay any regard to its determinations in points so sublime, so abstruse, so remote from common life and experience?" See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. by Martin Bell (London: Penguin, 1990), 41-42.

³ In his discussion of Kierkegaard's arguments, Robert Adams helpfully defines "objective reasoning" in the following way: "Let us say that a piece of reasoning, *R*, is *objective reasoning* just in case every (or almost every) intelligent, fair-minded, and sufficiently informed person would regard *R* as showing or tending to show (in the circumstances in which *R* is used, and to the extent claimed in *R*) that *R*'s conclusion is true or probably true." See Robert Merrihew Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 25-26.

⁴ For his discussion of the Approximation Argument (for which he provides two separate although not mutually exclusive interpretations) see Adams, *Virtue of Faith*, 26-30 and 42-47; for his discussion of the Postponement Argument see 30-33.

arguments presuppose what Kierkegaard calls the “infinite interest” of religious faith – since religious faith is concerned at least in part with the eternal fate of individuals – and are ultimately based on the fact that the human capacity to reason is finite, and particularly when historical events are part of the discussion, as is the case for the claims of Christianity, uncertainty is unavoidable.

Note that all these objections are, at their roots, anthropomorphical objections in that they arise out of a certain view of human nature, man’s relationship to God, and the role of faith. These theological concerns lead to fideistic positions with respect to the proportionality of theistic belief. In what follows I examine two main camps that are generally considered to be fideistic: presuppositionalism and Reformed epistemology. I also discuss John Bishop’s concept of a doxastic venture; although this position falls within the fideistic category, it also bears a resemblance to positions that will be examined later on in the project.

Presuppositionalism

The basis of presuppositionalism is the claim that the gap that exists between those inside of Christian faith and those outside rules out any traditional arguments grounded in premises that any rational person would supposedly accept.⁵ The presuppositions of the two camps are so different that no meaningful, productive dialogue can occur. This statement is what is often referred to as the “no neutrality” thesis; there is

⁵ For a statement of this position see Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 160. A helpful collection essays offering an overview of the presuppositionalist framework is Jamin Hubner, *The Portable Presuppositionalist* (Charleston, SC: BookSurge Publishing, 2009).

no common ground on which the believer and unbeliever can confront one another and interact in a rational manner. As a result, before reason can begin to contribute to faith and theistic belief, a person must accept basic tenets of faith and operate under those tenets as his presuppositions. These tenets must be believed on faith alone and require no discursive justification to be rationally accepted. Thus, for the presuppositionalist, belief that God exists is held purely on faith with no reference to the evidence for that belief. No standards of evidential proportionality hold.

Presuppositionalists fall into two main camps. The first presuppositionalist position is influenced most heavily by Cornelius Van Til.⁶ Van Til's presuppositionalism is summed up by a reliance on the absolute authority of Scripture. Van Til himself states this clearly: "The general structure of my thought . . . is controlled by the idea of the Bible as the infallible Word of God and by the 'system of doctrine' contained in the Bible."⁷ Second are those who follow the lead of Gordon Clark, who argues that any attempt to gain knowledge through reason that does not rest on revelation, specifically Scriptural revelation, is doomed to failure.⁸ The statements of truth found in the Scriptures act as the axioms from which all other knowledge is derived. Although the two positions differ only slightly, Clark places a greater emphasis on the process of logical reasoning that takes place after the axioms of Scripture are accepted.

⁶ For an overview of Van Til's thought, see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955), 21-39. For further evaluation of Van Til's position see Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 16-24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ See Clark's definition of reason in Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1961), 108-110.

The essential point of any version of presuppositionalism, however, is that from outside of faith, people are incapable of using their reason correctly. As a result there is no common ground between believers and unbelievers when it comes to discussions about things such as the existence of God. The methods of secular inquiry, such as the sort of evidentialism discussed in the previous chapter, can have nothing to say about matters of faith. Thus, belief that God exists does not require justification and in fact *cannot* be justified according to the methods of scientific evidentialist inquiry. Proportionality of belief to the evidence is not only unnecessary but impossible.

The presuppositionalist position is weakened by some of the objections that came to light in our previous discussion of the motivations for fideism. Presuppositionalism ignores the possibility of a sort of common grace that might be able to create common ground between believers and non-believers; if, however, this common grace is real, the no-neutrality thesis that the presuppositionalist endorses loses its power. There might be good reason to suppose that there is in fact some shared rational ground between the believer and the unbeliever. To maintain his stance, the presuppositionalist must show either that this common grace does not exist or that it does not function in a way that allows a certain degree of redemption of reason for both believers and non-believers.

Reformed Epistemology

In his essay “Reason and Belief in God,” Alvin Plantinga argues that belief that God exists is properly basic; that is, we do not need any evidence or argument to believe that God exists in a completely rational matter. Belief in the existence of God is independent of rational enquiry; we can justifiably hold that God exists with absolutely

no arguments for that belief. Thus, Plantinga rejects the evidentialist standards for proportionality of belief when it comes to theism.

The evidentialist objection to theistic belief consists of the basic claim that we do not have evidence to merit belief in the existence of God. This means that the burden of proof is on the theist; a person must offer at least some convincing arguments before accepting the truth of the statement “God exists.” Yet, Plantinga points out that even for the most adamant evidentialist objectors, there are some statements that they must accept without evidence. Why, then, Plantinga asks, can belief in God not be appropriately considered to be part of the set of beliefs that are basic?⁹

Plantinga presents what he believes to be the evidentialist objector’s answer to the above question and argues that it fails miserably by falling into the trap of the vicious circle. Here Plantinga attacks classical foundationalism, an epistemological framework that originated in Aristotle’s theory of demonstrative knowledge in the *Posterior Analytics* and was subsequently developed by Aquinas and appropriated by the evidentialist objectors.¹⁰ To explain the idea of classical foundationalism, Plantinga helpfully introduces the idea of a noetic structure, defining it as “the set of propositions [a person] believes, together with certain epistemic relations that hold among him and these propositions.”¹¹ For a foundationalist, some of these propositions are basic; that is, they are held to be true in themselves, not on the basis of anything else. Other beliefs are built

⁹ Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 39.

¹⁰ Aristotle lays out his theory of demonstrative knowledge in Book 1 of the *Posterior Analytics*. See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 2nd ed., trans. by Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 1-89.

¹¹ Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 48.

up upon the foundation of these basic beliefs, following from principles of logic. As a more specific version of foundationalism, classical foundationalism demands that these basic beliefs be either incorrigible for the person holding them (it would not be possible for the person to hold the belief and for the belief at the same time to be false) or self-evident to the person holding the belief.¹²

But it is with this definition of properly basic belief that Plantinga uncovers the fatal flaw of classical foundationalism. For in what way can this very definition of a properly basic belief be considered properly basic? On what basis can an account of proper basicity be accepted? The classical foundationalist must hold his very definition of proper basicity as basic, since it does not seem that it can be logically proven and is certainly not incorrigible or self-evident. Thus, Plantinga concludes that classical foundationalism is bankrupt, and that therefore the evidentialist objection so far as it is rooted in the noetic structure of classical foundationalism is seriously flawed.¹³

Once the arena for proper basicity has been opened to a broader range of beliefs than those that are incorrigible or self-evident, it is possible to argue that belief in God is properly basic. In making this claim, however, Plantinga is careful to specify that not just any belief can be properly basic. To say that a belief does not require justification is not to say that the belief is groundless. To separate beliefs that are properly basic from those that are not, and to demonstrate that belief that God exists falls into the properly basic

¹² Ibid., 58.

¹³ Ibid., 63.

category, Plantinga introduces a well-developed theory of warrant.¹⁴ Although I will not go into the details of his theory here, Plantinga's theory revolves around the claim that beliefs are warranted insofar as they are produced by cognitive processes that are aimed at the truth, are functioning in an appropriate cognitive environment (either that for which they were created or in which they originated), and are generally successful in arriving at that truth in that environment. From this definition of warrant, Plantinga concludes that, if it is true that God exists, the human faculties that lead to belief that God exists are aimed at the truth (since they are created by God). We are warranted in believing that God exists without evidence, since that belief is produced by a process geared towards truth. Thus, Plantinga concludes that theists ought to endorse an independence model when it comes to the role of evidence/arguments in theistic belief – belief in God is entirely justified even if a person has no evidence whatsoever for it.

Before leaving the discussion of Plantinga, it should be noted that Plantinga himself denies charges of fideism and states explicitly that his position should not be considered fideistic.¹⁵ He defends Reformed epistemologists from the charge of fideism, pointing out that they do not think that there is a fundamental conflict between faith and reason. On the views of many opponents of Plantinga, however, he clearly represents a fideistic position. The confusion lies in differing definitions of fideism. Plantinga

¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Chapter 1 "Warrant: A First Approximation," 3-20, offers a helpful overview of Plantinga's theory of proper functionalism. For the application of this model to theistic belief, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially Chapter 6, "Warranted Belief in God," 167-198.

¹⁵ See the final section of "Reason and Belief in God," 87-91, for Plantinga's denial of the charges of fideism made against him.

operates under a definition that eliminates reason from matters of faith altogether.¹⁶ Given this definition, Plantinga is not a fideist. What Plantinga's critics seem to be concerned with, and what I am concerned with, however, is the role of reason in the initial step of believing that God exists. Plantinga clearly denies the claim that belief that God exists ought to be proportioned to the evidence we have for that claim, and in this respect it is hard to see how his position is not fideistic, regardless of his views on faith and reason once the proposition that God exists has been accepted.

Circularity in Warrant

The most worrisome difficulty for a fideistic model such as Plantinga's system of warrant arises out of a concern similar to the one discussed above: the problem of epistemic circularity. Plantinga's warrant for basic belief that God exists is predicated on the claim that God does, in fact, exist. If God must exist in order for the process by which we arrive at the belief that God exist to be truth-oriented and successful, than we must believe that God exists before we can claim that the process does indeed function that way. This concern is articulated by Herman Philipse, who claims that Plantinga's model only works for people who don't doubt the existence of God at all. To demonstrate this, he addresses the four criteria for warranted belief that Plantinga lays out in *Warranted Christian Belief*, arguing that a person, either one who accepts or one who rejects the proposition that God exists, can never know whether these four conditions are

¹⁶ Plantinga offers the following definition of fideism: Fideism is "exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth." See "Reason and Belief in God," 87.

fulfilled with respect to theistic belief.¹⁷ Believers assume they are fulfilled, but their assumption is already predicated on the belief that God exists. Thus, according to Philipse, Plantinga's argument is hopelessly circular; warranted basic belief that God exists is only possible if God does exist.¹⁸ But since we do not truly know that God exists and that the *sensus divinitatis* to which Plantinga appeals is in fact reliable, a person cannot in a rationally acceptable fashion endorse the claim that belief in God is properly basic.

Note that Plantinga himself anticipates this objection and tries to use it to his favor. He writes, "I don't know of an argument for Christian belief that seems very likely to convince one who doesn't already accept its conclusion."¹⁹ In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga draws a distinction between *de jure* objections to belief that God exists (objections that deal with whether it is rational or justified to believe that claim) and *de facto* objections (objections that deal with whether in fact God does exist). He suggests that the *de jure* question of whether belief in God is warranted cannot be settled independently of the *de facto* question.²⁰ As a result, we should not expect to be able to answer successfully the question of whether we should believe that God exists without first asking and answering the question of whether God does exist.

¹⁷ Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 200-201.

²⁰ For an introduction to this discussion, see Plantinga's preface to *Warranted Christian Belief*, viii-xiv.

A Doxastic Venture

A final version of fideism that merits attention is that proposed by John Bishop, who advocates for a modest fideism that is characterized by an argument for the moral permissibility of what Bishop calls a “doxastic venture.”²¹ Bishop claims that the overall force of the evidence for and against the existence of God is ambiguous, and as a result, accepting this form of fideism can be justified. Bishop defines a doxastic venture as follows: “To make a doxastic venture is to take a proposition to be true in one’s reasoning while recognizing that it is not the case that its truth is adequately supported by one’s total available evidence.”²² There is a certain sort of risk associated with doxastic venture, since the person engaging in it knows that the belief he takes on faith is not fully evidentially warranted. Note, however, that the doxastic venture approach leaves more room for appreciation of the value of evidence than does the presuppositionalist or the Reformed epistemologist view. Although the person engaging in a doxastic venture with respect to theistic belief need not demonstrate that his belief that God exists is supported by sufficient evidence, he also does not need to claim that evidence has no role in coming to that belief.

Bishop’s modest fideism bears a close resemblance to positions we will consider later in this project; in fact, he makes extensive use of William James and others who

²¹ John Bishop outlines this approach in *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

²² *Ibid.*, 9.

take into account pragmatic reasons for religious belief.²³ His position bears mentioning in this chapter since Bishop himself claims a form of fideism, but I will discuss many of the concerns he brings to light later on in the project. As a result some of the main ideas of doxastic venture, such as evidential ambiguity, will resurface in later discussions. Still, Bishop's fideism is distinguished from other non-fideistic views in that he does not require epistemic proportionality of belief to the evidence for the claim that God exists.

Conclusion

Before leaving the discussion of fideism, I should be careful to point out that the fideistic positions discussed in this chapter do not reject reason completely. Clearly, rationality, logic, and careful thought play essential roles in the philosophy of the presuppositionalist, the Reformed epistemologist, and the person who accepts belief in God as a doxastic venture. Yet, this reason is subordinate to faith and can only be employed after certain tenets of faith are accepted, tenets that then order the rational endeavors of a person. With respect to the proposition that God exists, the fideist holds that no evidence is necessary to believe it rationally. Proportionality of belief to the evidence that God exists is not a concern; to no extent does the fideist maintain that it is necessary to have arguments or evidence for theistic belief. What is the next step? The person who answers "yes" to the question of whether belief that God exists must be proportioned to the evidence to any extent must then confront the question of what sort of

²³ For Bishop's discussion of James, see *Believing by Faith*, 122-145. Although Bishop's reading of James as a modest fideist is not indisputable, his analysis brings out the similarities in the two positions.

evidence and standards for evaluating that evidence are required. It is this question to which I turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Impersonal Evidentialism

Fideists answer “no” to the question of whether belief that God exists should be proportioned to any extent to the evidence for such a claim. Answering “yes” to this question brings us into the territory of evidentialism, opening up a range of options for the relationship between belief and evidence. Concerns include the sort and degree of evidence necessary for theistic belief to be rational as well as the standards by which that evidence should be evaluated. The next step, then, is to ask, “Are the standards used to evaluate evidence and the evidence we should consider for the claim that God exists strictly impersonal?” An affirmative answer leads to a certain type of evidentialism that I shall call “impersonal evidentialism.” I will use this term to refer to a type of evidentialism that takes into consideration only normal sorts of evidence and normal methods of evaluating that evidence. I use “normal” here to describe evidence and methods that do not require a certain preexisting set of philosophical and theological attachments; two people who differ drastically in their assumptions still ought to be able to make similar use of normal evidence and methods. In this sense the impersonal evidentialist seeks to treat theistic belief almost like a scientific theory. A belief must be supported by evidence and methods for evaluating that evidence whose force everyone can agree on before it can be considered justified, or perhaps even rational. Theistic belief is no exception. This chapter examines this sort of impersonal evidentialism,

giving attention to both those who think theism can and does measure up to normal, “scientific” standards and those who think it fails to do so.

I first lay out basic characteristics and motivations of evidentialism and then state in more detail the evidentialist objection to theistic belief. Although many philosophers have made persuasive and refined evidentialist arguments, I consider that of Herman Philipse, whose recent book *God in the Age of Science?* carries on in the tradition of Clifford and Hume and serves as an excellent example of the position of the evidentialist objector.¹ I then turn to evidentialists who hold that theistic faith does in fact hold up under the scrutiny of scientific standards of inquiry, ending by seeking to gain an understanding of why the conclusions the impersonal evidentialists reach when confronted with exactly the same evidence vary so drastically.

Evidentialism and the Ethics of Belief

Evidentialism as an epistemological framework is widely accepted and has significant merits in the ways it addresses questions of knowledge and belief.² It has also been used a framework for thinking about faith and theistic belief for centuries – Thomas Aquinas devotes the second question of his *Summa Theologiae* to the asking whether the existence of God can be proved, and he cites five evidential arguments in support of the

¹ Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² For recent discussion of evidentialism, see Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, eds., *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) and Trent Dougherty, ed., *Evidentialism and its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Dougherty’s collection also offers a helpful summary of Conee and Feldman’s scholarship since the publication of their collection (see Appendix B).

claim that God exists.³ Thomas Aquinas's arguments set a precedent for examining theistic belief from the evidentialist perspective.

John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* made the claim that a person ought not to hold "any proposition with greater assurance than the Proofs it is built upon will warrant."⁴ This explicit statement that belief ought to be proportioned to the evidence for the truth of that belief set the tone for the epistemological investigations of many modern philosophers. Hume followed with his empirically-grounded arguments in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and his claim in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that "A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence."⁵ The discussion came to a head with the publication of W.K. Clifford's bold essay "The Ethics of Belief," in which Clifford famously (or infamously, as the case may be) claimed that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."⁶ Initially, perhaps, this statement strikes the reader as completely plausible; after all, to believe something without good reasons seems intellectually irresponsible. But Clifford's claim immediately raises several problematic issues. First, Clifford

³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 2, i-iii. Note that these "five ways" are *a posteriori* methods of proving God's existence, not deductive arguments such as Anselm's ontological argument. For secondary literature on the five ways, see Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways: St. Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Philadelphia: Hayes & Zell Publishers,), 452.

⁵ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. by Martin Bell (London: Penguin, 1990). For the quote from the *Enquiry*, see David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 80.

⁶ W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), 77.

extends his denouncement to the moral realm. It is not merely intellectually inferior to believe a proposition on insufficient evidence, but it is morally wrong. What basis does he have for such a strong claim? Second, what Clifford means by “insufficient evidence” is extremely murky. How can a person decide if the evidence they possess is sufficient to merit belief? Already it is clear that Clifford’s strong evidentialist position contains some difficulties. Still, for the time being I shall grant Clifford’s thesis for the sake of argument.

Clifford’s statement comes across as quite a bit stronger than Locke’s, but there is a more important difference between the claims of the two philosophers. George Mavrodes helpfully explains this difference in his distinction between what he terms “proportionality evidentialism” and “threshold evidentialism.”⁷ Locke’s claim about belief and evidence falls into the category of proportionality evidentialism; belief ought to be proportioned to the amount and strength of evidence of which a person is in possession. The question is not primarily whether a person should believe a proposition at all, but rather how strongly he should believe it. Proportionality evidentialism assumes that believing in degrees is possible, a phenomenon that, as discussed in the first chapter, requires some explanation. On the other hand, Clifford’s ethics of belief reveals a certain threshold evidentialism. For Clifford, the ambiguity surrounding the concept of degrees of belief is not a concern, since a person commits to belief either completely or not at all. A person should believe a given proposition only if the evidence for that proposition exceeds a certain “threshold” of sufficiency. This version of evidentialism, of course,

⁷ George Mavrodes, “Intellectual Morality in Clifford and James,” in *The Ethics of Belief Debate*, ed. by Gerald D. McCarthy (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 207-9. For further discussion of this distinction, see C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 39-41.

raises an obvious question: where is the threshold that constitutes a sufficient amount of evidence? Is the threshold the same for all beliefs? And how do we tell? With these questions, and with the framework of the evidentialist established, we can turn to the question of how the evidentialist view applies to theistic belief.

The Evidentialist Objection to Theistic Belief

The above discussion sheds light on the argument of the evidentialist objector that is serving as an aid to our analysis. Note that the second premise is essentially a statement of Clifford's ethics of belief. Proponents of the impersonal evidentialist view accept this argument; both those evidentialists who believe that God exists and those who do not differ in their evaluation of whether Premise 5 is true. It is this premise that will be under examination for the remainder of this chapter:

1. There are obligations or standards of excellence with respect to belief which, when followed, provide permissive justification for a belief.
2. It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.
3. Belief in God requires discursive justification.
4. So, it is irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.
- 5. We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.**
6. So, it is intellectually wrong or defective to believe that God exists.

Both the evidentialist objector and the evidentialist champion of theistic belief agree that belief in God is not acceptable without sufficient evidence (Premise 4), but they disagree about whether or not we have that sufficient evidence. With the basic argument established, I now turn to the heart of the evidentialist position and lay out both its goal and its method.

The Method of Evidentialism

The evidentialist approach to theistic belief seeks either to confirm or disconfirm Premise 5. If we do not have sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists, then belief that God exists is irrational, and we ought to withhold belief. If we do have sufficient evidence, belief that God exists is rational, and we ought to give our assent to the proposition and live accordingly. Underlying Premise 5, then, is a certain understanding of rationality whose standards mirror those of investigation in the empirical sciences. It is this sort of rationality that motivates the particular type of evidentialism, which I have been calling impersonal evidentialism, under discussion in this chapter. Another good term for this concept might be “narrow evidentialism,” which highlights the fact that its advocates will consider only epistemic reasons and diachronic considerations as opposed to a broader range of evidence or reasons. Other broader types of evidentialism exist, and I will examine some of these in subsequent chapters.

For now, however, two primary aspects of the sort of rationality upheld by impersonal evidentialists merit discussion. First, the rationality demanded by the

evidentialist is epistemic rationality.⁸ Epistemic rationality is concerned with whether or not a belief is true; a belief is epistemically rational if there are good reasons to think that belief is true (whether those reasons be that the belief is self-evident or supported by good evidence). Other sorts of rationality, such as those that deal with instrumental or practical considerations or those that are related to acting well, do not factor into rationality in the evidentialist's sense of the term. As a result, the sort of evidence that can contribute to the project of providing confirmation or disconfirmation for theistic belief must be related epistemically to that belief.

Second, within epistemic rationality, there are different standards of rigor for the sort and amount of evidence that is required for a belief to be rational.⁹ The evidentialist advocates an extremely demanding standard for rational belief: a belief is fully rational if and only if it is justified diachronically and objectively. Diachronic justification requires a review of evidence over time, and objective justification demands that there be certain outside standards for justification; a belief cannot just *seem* right subjectively. Theists ought to desire the claims they make about the existence of God to be objectively true according to the correct criteria of adequacy and to be supported by evidence throughout time.

What do these standards sound like? They sound remarkably like standards for normal scientific methodology. Science demands that its theories be confirmed and

⁸ For an overview of epistemic rationality, see Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65-67.

⁹ See Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 45-54 for definitions of his five types of rationality. Philipse reiterates these divisions; see Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?*, 67-75. I take my definition of rationality according to the evidentialist from Philipse's discussion of Swinburne.

justified in order to avoid rejection, and that justification takes place over a period of time as experiments are performed (diachronic) and produce results that provide a large degree of objectivity. The impersonal evidentialist, then, holds theistic belief to standards almost identical to those adhered to in normal scientific investigation. On the surface this approach seems extremely plausible – after all, if we treat theistic belief just like another scientific theory, are we not bound to arrive at a more precise understanding of its merits?

Although the evidentialist position seems attractive, it is not without its problems for the theist. Most troubling among these difficulties is the unavoidable possibility that, if we treat theism like any other scientific theory, it is at risk of being disproven just like any other scientific theory. It is endorsement of this diachronic objective rationality, then, that leads to what Herman Philipse calls “the Tension”:

On the one hand, natural theologians who aspire to [diachronic objective rationality] have to claim that their method is very much like scientific or scholarly methods, and that their theistic theory closely resembles large-scale scientific theories, or factual hypotheses in history. But on the other hand, it is clear that if their method and theory resemble scientific methods and scientific theories too closely, their chances of success are negligible, and they put religion at great risk.¹⁰

Most of Philipse’s analysis of the situation seems right. If impersonal evidentialist champions of theism want to maintain their credibility with nonbelievers, they run the risk of being disproved by scientific methods. No matter how good a person believes the evidence for theism to be, he must nevertheless admit that there will always be the possibility that he could be proven wrong. One aspect of Philipse’s claim, though, is less obviously true – can it really be the case that the “chances of success are negligible” for the evidentialist theist? This is the question on which evidentialists will disagree.

¹⁰ Philipse, *God in the Age of Science*, 89.

Before turning to this disagreement, however, it is necessary to gain a more thorough understanding of the methods endorsed by the evidentialist who aspires to diachronic objective rationality with respect to a given belief – in this case, the belief that God exists.¹¹ In the third chapter of *The Existence of God*, Richard Swinburne deals with the justification of explanation, or the question of what warrant is needed for believing that any given explanation is a true explanation of a certain phenomenon. He considers two types of inductive arguments, which he labels P-inductive and C-inductive. P-inductive arguments are those that make their conclusion probable, while C-inductive arguments are those in which the premises add to the probability of the conclusion being true. His analysis relies on Bayes's Theorem, which states that the probability of a given hypothesis being true is equal to its intrinsic probability times its explanatory power. Another statement of the theorem is that the probability of *h* being true, given background evidence (*k*), times the probability that observed phenomena (*e*) are likely on the proposed hypothesis, divided by the probability that the observed phenomena would occur without *h* being true, is equal to the probability of *h* being true. A symbolic representation of the theorem is as follows:

$$P(h | e \ \& \ k) = P(e | h \ \& \ k) P(h | k) / P(e | k)$$

The evidentialist approach to natural theology hinges on this theorem. If the product of the explanatory power provided by the hypothesis that God exists and the intrinsic probability that God exists comes out to a value of greater than one-half, then we are

¹¹ In the first four chapters of *The Existence of God*, Richard Swinburne offers a detailed analysis of the methods of evidentialist inquiry. See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 4-73. A similar discussion of method is found in J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 1-37.

justified in believing at least to some degree the proposition that God exists. The goal of the theorem is to demonstrate that the cumulative effect of several C-inductive arguments yield a P-inductive argument.

For Swinburne, the success of theism compared to other theories with regard to its explanatory power is an important factor as well. Given his evaluation of the prior probability that God exists and the explanatory power of the hypothesis, Swinburne sees theism as the logical result of inference to the best explanation. Thus, a proposition that is favored by the overall total evidence is rational to believe, but it also might be the case that a proposition that is favored *more* by the total evidence as compared to other theories might be rational to believe.

This evidentialist approach essentially involves filtering the pieces of evidence we have through a probability calculus and comparing the success of the results to other theories on the table. If, once we have accomplished this task, the resulting probability that the proposition is true is determined to be greater than whatever we think is the appropriate threshold of evidence (that is, it satisfies the criteria of threshold proportionality), we are justified in accepting the proposition to some degree as true. But, in accordance with Clifford's ethics of belief, we ought not to believe a proposition until it is so justified. Undoubtedly, this is a very high standard to which to hold any belief, not only theistic belief.

Does Theism Measure Up?

It is not my task in this thesis to argue whether or not the theistic hypothesis can in fact live up to the evidentialist standards. I am only concerned with whether such

standards are the appropriate ones to use when it comes to theistic belief. Nevertheless, a brief overview of the opposing answers to the question requires some attention. Is it the case that we have sufficient evidence to justify theistic belief according to the evidentialist framework?

The evidentialist objectors answer “no” to this question. Prominent among such recent philosophers are J.L. Mackie and Herman Philipse, both of whom have written thorough critiques of theistic belief.¹² Both conclude that when the evidence we possess for and against the existence of God is filtered through a probability calculus such as Bayes’s Theorem, the result reveals theism to be a weak hypothesis at best. Philipse states his conclusion particularly strongly, arguing that in light of the evidence, we ought to become strong disjunctive universal atheists, which he defines as follows: With respect to every god humanity has worshipped, “either religious believers have not succeeded in providing a meaningful characterization of their god(s), or the existence of this god or these gods is improbable given our scientific and scholarly background knowledge.”¹³ Probabilistic arguments in support of theism using Bayes’s Theorem fail, since we cannot accurately evaluate the prior probability of the existence of God. This is the case because, at least according to Philipse, we have no background knowledge about the existence of God with which to evaluate the prior probability (or even if we do, it is not objective enough to be of any use).¹⁴ In addition, Philipse claims that the hypothesis that

¹² See J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, and Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?*

¹³ Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?*, 343.

¹⁴ For Philipse’s discussion of the difficulty of evaluating the prior probability of the existence of God see *God in the Age of Science?*, 204-07.

God exists has little to no predictive or explanatory power; since without preexisting knowledge about the existence and nature of God, we cannot say anything in a non-arbitrary fashion about what God's intentions might be and what sort of thing we could predict Him to do.¹⁵ Thus, the two factors involved in Bayes's Theorem fail to increase the probability that God exists. As a result, Philipse's final conclusion is that we ought to become strong disjunctive universal atheists.

On the other hand, some philosophers of religion, most notably Richard Swinburne, have answered "yes" to the question of whether we have sufficient evidence of the sort under consideration to justify theistic belief by impersonal evidentialist standards.¹⁶ After setting forward the claim that the existence of God provides the best stopping point for explanation, since it is the simplest explanation we can conceive with the greatest increase in explanatory power, Swinburne addresses the intrinsic probability of theism, which, since Swinburne takes the background evidence to be only tautological evidence, is reduced to the question of the simplicity of the hypothesis.¹⁷ Note that the intrinsic probability is one of the main variables in Bayes's Theorem, and also the variable that Philipse thinks cannot be determined. Swinburne proceeds to filter eleven arguments of natural theology, including arguments such as the cosmological and teleological arguments, through Bayes's Theorem. He concludes at the end of the

¹⁵ See Philipse's analysis of the predictive power of theism in *God in the Age of Science?*, 145-50.

¹⁶ See Swinburne's arguments and conclusion in *The Existence of God*.

¹⁷ Swinburne argues for his claim that theism is actually a very simple hypothesis in Chapter 5 of *The Evidence for God*, "The Intrinsic Probability of Theism," 93-109. He suggests that this simplicity stems from the way in which the divine properties of God work together and lead to a simple understanding of His intentions and powers.

process that belief in God is indeed justified and rational, since the evidence we have results in a probability of greater than one-half, yielding a moderately strong P-inductive argument.¹⁸

Why Do Evidentialists Disagree about the Force of the Evidence?

Why do Swinburne and Philipse come to such radically different conclusions while using an essentially similar method? If impersonal scientific standards are the guidelines for evaluating the evidence for and against the claim that God exists, it seems that two people should come to the same conclusion regarding the force of the evidence. But the situation is not so simple. Science, at least when applied to a question such as the one under investigation here, is not as impersonal as it might appear to be. Although Philipse and Swinburne approach the evidence in much the same fashion with similar tools, they enter the inquiry with very different preexisting attachments and ideas about what constitutes a viable theory. Most significantly, Philipse begins his analysis of the

¹⁸ Note that some philosophers have argued that Swinburne's approach merits an even stronger conclusion than he puts forward at the end of *The Evidence for God*. Charles Gutenson argues that if, as Swinburne appears to claim, the intrinsic probability that God exists is very high, at least equal to $\frac{1}{2}$, each individual argument that Swinburne labels as C-inductive would in fact be P-inductive, since the increased probability obtained by each argument when added to the probability provided by the intrinsic probability of the existence of God would automatically be greater than one-half. Rather than concluding that his analysis makes the cumulative case for the existence of God a moderately strong P-inductive argument, Swinburne ought to be bolder in his claims, suggesting instead that the evidence supports the contention that the evidence for God contributes to a very strong P-inductive argument. See Charles E. Gutenson, "What Swinburne Should Have Concluded," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 243-47.

evidence already having ruled out the legitimacy of personal explanation.¹⁹ Personal explanation is explanation that is grounded in the intentions and actions of a personal being independently of physical causal analysis. Swinburne, on the other hand, keeps his options open and is willing to countenance the possibility that personal explanation is a viable way to talk about causation.²⁰ Swinburne notes that although a commitment to purely scientific explanation rules out the possibility of person explanation, acceptance of personal explanation does not compromise the validity of scientific explanation. While scientific explanations, because they are limited to a physical analysis of cause and effect relationships, have no room for talk about personal intentions or purposes, personal explanations can include physical descriptions of how those intentions lead to results in action.

What is the significance of this difference between the position of Swinburne and the position of Philipse and Mackie? Because Philipse starts his project already having eliminated an entire realm of possibility, he restricts the theories he will countenance to a much greater extent than Swinburne does. An insight offered by William James will make this difference between the two more clear. James writes, “a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.”²¹ Is it possible that far from being

¹⁹ Philipse offers his reasons for rejecting the validity of personal explanation in *God in the Age of Science?*, 146-48. Mackie discusses similar objections in *The Miracle of Theism*, 128-32.

²⁰ For Swinburne’s discussion of the distinction and relationship between what he calls scientific and personal explanation, see “The Nature of Explanation, Chapter 2 of *The Evidence for God*, 23-51.

²¹ William James, “The Will to Believe,” 28.

the responsible and sensible intellectual move he thinks it to be, Philipse's refusal to consider the possibility of personal explanation is an example of an irrational rule? If this is the case, Swinburne's position is actually more rational than that of Philipse, since Swinburne does not begin with a rule that keeps him from considering a certain kind of truth if that truth in fact exists.

Setting this question aside for now, what I hope has been made clear from this discussion is that the evidence of the sort considered relevant by evidentialist standards cannot definitely prove or disprove the claim that God exists, at least within the narrow evidentialist framework advocated by Philipse and Mackie.²² Such a framework restricts the concept of rationality so much that it borders on being irrational itself. It is not indisputable whether the claim that God exists or the denial of that claim is more probable on the given evidence – excellent philosophers have produced convincing arguments on both sides of the question.

Conclusion

It is this ambiguity that motivates those who answer “no” to the question of whether the evidence we should consider for the claim that God exists and the standards used to evaluate that evidence are purely impersonal. With this negative reply we leave the realm of purely normal evaluative standards and must begin to ask if there are non-normal considerations that must be taken into account when considering the evidence for the existence of God. The non-normal reasons to believe that God exists fall generally

²² This is what John Bishop terms the “thesis of evidential ambiguity.” See John Bishop, *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 70-71.

into two categories: paradigmatic reasons and pragmatic reasons. The next question in the flowchart seeks to separate these two out from one another, addressing the paradigmatic reasons: Is an interpretational or paradigm shift needed to evaluate the evidence for the claim that God exists correctly? The following chapter will survey the affirmative answers to this question.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Reorientation of Reason

It seems indisputable that there is some evidence, whatever the nature of that evidence might be, for the claim that God exists. From the preceding chapter, however, it is unclear whether a framework such as that suggested by Philipse and Swinburne is appropriate when applied to theistic belief. There seems to be something that keeps the force of the evidence, whether it is for or against the existence of God, from being recognized by all those who confront it. Why is it the case that two intelligent, well-informed, and (at least apparently) well-intentioned philosophers such as Richard Swinburne and J.L. Mackie can come to such different conclusions regarding the existence of God with exactly the same access to the evidence? In this chapter I examine a position which suggests that in fact they do *not* have exactly the same access to the evidence. This position answers “yes” to the third question of the flowchart: Is an interpretational or paradigm shift needed to evaluate the evidence for the claim that God exists correctly? Attention to the importance of interpretation and paradigmatic assumptions brings us to the realm of non-normal considerations, considerations that would not come into play when evaluating hypotheses by normal scientific standards. Such a shift could require a conceptual reorientation, which might involve both a person’s reason and his passional nature, including his wants, desires, and attachments. In addition, these rational and passional concerns might be intimately connected – a person’s desires and preexisting attachments have the potential to affect the conceptual theories that this person will countenance (consider the differing stances on the

plausibility of personal explanation that Swinburne and Philipse take). There might be good evidence for the existence of God, but that evidence can be assessed correctly only if the person performing the assessment is in a correct cognitive mindset.¹

Note that this position is still one of evidentialism in that it maintains a requirement of proportionality of belief to the evidence. A person who affirms the claim that reason must undergo a reorientation in order to recognize the evidence is as much an evidentialist as Swinburne or Philipse. Returning to the argument of the evidentialist objector, an adherent to this position denies Premise 5:

1. There are obligations or standards of excellence with respect to belief which, when followed, provide permissive justification for a belief.
2. It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.
3. It is not the case that belief in God requires discursive justification.
4. So, it is not the case that it irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.
- 5. We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.**
6. So, it is not the case that it is intellectually wrong or defective to believe that God exists.

Like the view of Swinburne, the position under consideration now affirms that we have sufficient evidence to merit belief that God exists; it just denies Premise 5 for slightly different reasons than does Swinburne's view. Rather than claiming that just anyone can

¹ William J. Wainwright provides one of the best recent arguments for this thesis in *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). He states his claim in this way: "We will examine the thesis that mature religious belief can, and perhaps should, be based on evidence but that the evidence can be accurately assessed only by men and women who possess the proper moral and spiritual qualifications" (see p. 3).

filter the available evidence through a probability calculus and come out with the right answer (like Swinburne), this position suggests that although this approach has merit, a person cannot be successful in his attempts to evaluate the evidence for the existence of God without a cognitive shift in his view of the world, which might include moral and spiritual dimensions. Such a shift might make more clear the validity of the sort of evidence Philipse and Swinburne consider, but it also might open up a whole new range of possible evidence. Belief in God still requires discursive justification, but not just anyone can correctly go about the process of examining that justification.

In this chapter, then, I outline the position of the reorientation of reason, beginning with an explanation of considerations that lead to the need for such a shift. These concerns include both the limited nature of human reason and the possibility that both the rational and passional aspects of the self have been corrupted through sin. I move on to point out the implications of human finiteness and/or sinfulness for evaluating rationality and evidentialist arguments. I argue that, if this picture is true, a failure of what I shall call the egalitarian assumption between theistic and nontheistic beliefs is to be expected and that theistic rationality ought to be seen as the standard of true rationality rather than the other way around. Given this framework, I suggest two possible (but not mutually exclusive) approaches: first, that there is a *sensus divinitatis*, and second, that there is a range of evidence for the existence of God that neither Swinburne nor his evidentialist opponents consider. Finally, I confront the apparent problem of circularity this argument entails, arguing that the objection does not succeed in undermining the position, since the framework and the results we see in the world are

consistent and also because *no* model of rationality has answered the objection with any significantly larger degree of success.

The Problem of Sin

For the following discussion I will assume a substantive amount of Christian teaching. Although this step might make some hesitant to consider the argument presented here, it is necessary in order to explore what the implications of such teaching would be *if* it is true. Christian theology includes in its central statement of doctrine the belief that since the Fall, humankind has been corrupted by the power of sin. The concept of original sin is complicated and has sparked much debate over the centuries, and I do not propose to address any such debates here.² Rather, I assume that original sin is indeed a force that colors all of human existence, relying on the undeniable observation that people do indeed act in ways that few would be able to claim are morally beyond reproach. For those who are doubtful as to the extent of human corruption, this recognition of the everyday sort of sin will be sufficient for the argument at hand. What then are the implications of this sinfulness for the ability of human beings to reason well, particularly with respect to divine matters?

The hypothesis of sin offers one possible explanation of why two perfectly intelligent people who are both doing their best to find truth arrive at completely different conclusions when it comes to the existence of God. The objection that, if there truly were good evidence for the existence of God, people would not differ so drastically in their

² For a brief and straightforward overview of the historical and theological development of the doctrine of original sin, see John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013). For a more detailed explication, see Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002).

opinions of the force of that evidence, is a common one. Such objectors endorse what we might call an “egalitarian assumption,” the idea that, given the same evidence, with all other cognitive things held constant (such as background knowledge, intelligence, attentiveness, etc.), rational people ought to be able to form roughly the same beliefs.³ Although clearly this does not always occur in reality – beliefs are determined not merely by reason, but by factors such as upbringing, environment, preexisting attachments to ways of looking at the world, etc. – it does seem that there ought to be a certain sort of similarity between the conclusions one rational person reaches and the conclusions of another rational person. Why is this not the case for theistic belief?

The answer lies in the claim that, in a sense, sin has caused humanity to fall from true rationality. McLeod describes what it means to be rational in the following way: “To be rational is to belong to a community of believers who, given the full human capabilities, form similar beliefs given similar inputs.”⁴ Now, there is undoubtedly more to being rational than the above definition suggests, but it is certainly the case that we tend to judge rationality of thought or behavior compared to what we normally observe. The key phrase here is “given the full human capabilities.” From the theistic perspective, the full human capabilities are *not* given any longer – since the fall, human reason, as well as the human heart with its wants, desires, and attachments, has been corrupted by sin. Thus, the egalitarian assumption is false. Because of our sinful human nature, our

³ Mark S. McLeod terms this the “universality challenge” and discusses the egalitarian assumption as it applies to Plantinga’s theory of warranted belief. The discussion extends to the topic at hand. For McLeod’s explanation of the nature and significance of the egalitarian assumption, see *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 122-129.

⁴Ibid., 125.

rationality is less than it once was, less than it was created to be. Our misguided desires and self-interest creates a set of conditions in which our reason cannot function as it was intended.⁵ By grace that rationality can be restored, a restoration and rejuvenation that allows a person to overcome the corruption of his reason. The person who has experienced a renewal of his reason will finally be able to see reality as it truly is. But how does this restoration of reason come about? And what are its results? What implications does it have for the question of how we should approach evidence for the existence of God? The first step involves a change of the heart in a way that frees reason to see the evidence for the existence of God.

Changing the Heart

William Wainwright is perhaps the most articulate defender of the view that a return to true rationality requires a reorientation of reason, making excellent use of philosophers and theologians preceding him and focusing particularly on Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman, and William James.⁶ Wainwright is concerned with the claim that we cannot properly evaluate the evidence of natural theology without a reorientation of the heart and mind. He is dealing with the same sort of evidence Swinburne evaluates, but he thinks that there is a change that must take place before a person can weigh that evidence correctly. What is needed to counteract the effects of sin

⁵ John Calvin's view of the *sensus divinitatis* and the effects of sin upon our noetic abilities are helpful in understanding this idea. See Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the noetic effects of sin," in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 87-107.

⁶ William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

is a fundamental shift in the human disposition that will change the way a person evaluates evidence for the existence of God. The problem is not that reason is not capable of dealing successfully with the evidence but that humanity in its fallen state has lost the disposition to use that reason well and to recognize the force of the arguments. Jonathan Edwards in his *University Sermons* sums up the problem and introduces a solution:

Natural reason is thus capable of establishing the authority of scripture as well as the truths of natural religion. Why, then, does it so often find it difficult to do so? Not because the *evidence* is not obvious enough. Because these truths nearly concern us, God would not be good if He had not clearly declared them (*OS* 155-57). We have sufficient ‘means of knowledge,’ therefore, as well as ‘a sufficient capacity’ (*OS* 148). What is lacking is “a disposition to improve” the “light” God has given us (*OS* 149).⁷

We have sufficient and clear evidence, and we have the ability to evaluate that evidence. What then is this disposition that separates those who can in fact see the force of the evidence and those who only have the capacity to do so but do not act in a way that makes use of that capacity?

In *The Grammar of Assent*, the great Anglican-turned-Catholic philosopher and theologian John Henry Newman introduces the idea of an “illative sense.”⁸ The illative sense is that aspect of our rationality that acts before we even begin reasoning explicitly:

⁷ The passage is Wainwright’s paraphrase of several of Edwards’s sermons. See Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, 17.

⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I.T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 222-47. For a secondary discussion of Newman on the illative sense see Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, 58-62. Wainwright includes in his discussion a brief analysis of the origin of Newman’s term. “Illative” was used in contemporary dictionaries to talk about things related to inference and conclusion, and Wainwright also conjectures that Newman might have borrowed the term from Locke. Locke defines “illation” as an intellectual faculty which “consists in nothing but the perception of the connexion there is between the ideas, in each step of the deduction.”

it weighs prior probabilities and determines the sorts of evidence we consider to be legitimate. In addition, it can influence the way we respond to the overall force of an argument. From this description, it is clear that that illative sense will differ drastically among different people and will therefore lead to very different approaches to the same sets of evidence. Thus, Newman observes that the illative sense offers “no common measure between mind and mind.”⁹ Put within the context of the discussion of fallen human reason, the illative sense, if not redeemed and restored to its proper function, has the potential to mislead those seeking to evaluate the evidence for the existence of God. But what should a reoriented illative sense look like? Following the lead of Jonathan Edwards, Wainwright discusses this disposition as a certain “benevolence” that consists in “a sense of the heart that tastes, relishes, and perceives the beauty of holiness.”¹⁰ It is a softening, a sensitivity, that comes about through a response to the grace of God. Note that this dispositional shift involves passional concerns that lead to an adjustment in epistemic concerns – it is a change in our desires and our perception of what is good and worthwhile that motivates us to reason differently.¹¹ This shift has the potential to alter our evaluation of the evidence and arguments for the existence of God.

Once the reason and the heart are ordered correctly, a person is free to seek after evidence and is able to perceive that evidence correctly. When evaluating the sort of

⁹ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 233.

¹⁰ Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, 42.

¹¹ This is not the same claim as the one made by William James, a claim that will be discussed in the following chapter. James maintains that our desires and will can and should be a factor in the decision to believe, whereas Edwards’s claim is that correctly ordered desires change the way we reason but do not themselves function as grounds for belief. For further discussion of the distinction, see Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, 51.

arguments Swinburne or Philipse would take into account, a person who has undergone a reorientation of his reason will be able to see the force of those arguments in a way that truly reflects their reality. Consider again the stance on personal explanation Swinburne takes as opposed to Philipse and Mackie. From the beginning of their examination Philipse and Mackie rule out personal explanation as a legitimate option due to their preexisting attachments, whereas Swinburne gives both scientific and personal explanation attention and is willing to consider the relationship between the two and how they might be compatible. This sort of reevaluation is the first step to which a change of the mind and heart can lead. But it is also conceivable that a reorientation of reason opens up the possibility of a different kind of evidence than that considered so far. It is this possibility that I address in the following sections.

A New Kind of Evidence

Wainwright attempts to establish the claim that a reorientation is necessary to evaluate correctly the evidence of which we already have possession. He does not, however, consider the possibility that there are other kinds of evidence that are made available by such a process. This is the next question of the decision tree stemming from the acceptance of the need for an interpretation or paradigm shift: Does this shift lead to the recognition of new evidence or a broader range of evidence? To address the answer to this question I turn to Paul Moser, who argues for a new kind of evidence that God exists.

What Kind of Evidence Should We Expect?

One aspect of evidentialism that has been almost entirely overlooked deals with what type of evidence we ought to expect when we seek to construct rational arguments for God's existence. Given the fact that we are interested in the existence or non-existence of the Judeo-Christian God, the God of the Bible (or at least a God who has very similar attributes to the God of the Bible), what sort of evidence would such a God be interested in providing to people?¹² The answer to this question requires a two-fold discussion: consideration of the nature of God, and, stemming from that, a discussion of God's purposes in making Himself known to His people.

To summarize the discussion of what I mean by the term "God" provided in Chapter One, I understand "God" to refer to a spiritual being who is perfectly omnipotent, omniscient, loving, and good. Such a God, then, would desire the best for all the people He has created, which foremost includes relationship with Himself. As I established earlier, then, God must want His people to have knowledge of Him, at least insofar as it makes them able to enjoy His love and love Him in response to that love. Knowledge of a personal being is a complicated affair, and I will not discuss here the types of knowledge a person can have of God. I leave the issue with the idea that a person must have knowledge of God at the level that is required in order for that person to relate to God.

How could God achieve this state of affairs? The most obvious answer might be that He could provide indisputably clear evidence in favor of His existence. On the

¹² Stephen Evans addresses this question in *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). See especially Chapter 1, "The Problem of Natural Theology," and Chapter 2, "The Concept of Natural Sign," 1-46.

surface this looks like the best possible state of affairs, but after a bit of thought, it seems that evidence such that no one in his right mind could help but conclude that God exists would in fact be coercive. If God desires His creatures to love him truly, to love Him in a way that necessitates a choice made in free will, coercion has no place in His designs. What sort of evidence, then, should we expect from such a God?

Personifying Evidence of God

In his book *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined*, Paul Moser advocates for a type of evidence that he believes has been neglected by both philosophers and theologians alike.¹³ He calls this type of evidence “personifying evidence of God” and maintains that belief in the existence of God can be both rational and justified. In a sense, Moser takes a middle ground between Plantinga’s independence model and Swinburne’s harmony model with respect to faith and reason; although belief in God is not properly basic, we cannot argue for it using methods similar to those of the empirical sciences. Yet, there is still evidence for the existence of God, and this evidence is made available to humans first by a reorientation of reason through a healing of the heart, and second, by openness to the question discussed above – namely, the question of what the aims of a good, loving God would be in giving us evidence for his existence.

Moser answers that the evidence would most likely take the form of a sort of “moral challenge” in which God would seek to mold the hearts and minds of the people

¹³ Paul Moser, *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

whom He calls to enter into fellowship with Himself.¹⁴ Because of these aims of God, our demands for evidence cannot be “on *our* preferred cognitive terms, as if our own boldly appointed terms were cognitively above reproach.”¹⁵ Even for a seemingly well-intentioned, capable inquirer, God might remain hidden – God is cognitively elusive, at least within the framework of our finite or preferred terms.¹⁶ There is not a fool-proof method that can be pursued by everyone that will lead without fail to freely embraced belief that God exists. Natural theology as understood by Swinburne and Philipse ultimately has no power, because it seeks to fit God into a humanly-constructed box, refusing to admit of divine hiddenness that demands submission and a change of heart in order to be overcome.

Even if natural theology is bankrupt, Moser believes that there is nevertheless conclusive evidence for the existence of God. Moser calls this evidence “personifying evidence” – that is, evidence that stems from the transformative work of God in the lives of individuals. His basic argument is as follows:¹⁷

1. Necessarily, if a human person is offered and receives the transformative gift, then this is the result of the authoritative power of a divine X of thoroughgoing forgiveness, fellowship in perfect love, worthiness of worship, and triumphant hope (namely God).
2. I have been offered, and have willingly received, the transformative gift.

¹⁴ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁶ Moser offers an extensive discussion of the cognitive elusiveness of God and the implications thereof in Paul Moser, *The Elusive God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 200. The argument as stated is taken verbatim from Moser.

3. Therefore, God exists.

The transformation that takes place is the sort of change of heart and the reorientation of reason discussed by Wainwright. Personifying evidence puts the ball in God's court, so to speak, looking to His transformative work instead of human efforts to find evidence that fits easily into our categories. This personifying evidence does not fall into the realm of natural theology, and as a result, Moser does not attempt to treat it in a probabilistic fashion in the style of Swinburne. Yet with this personifying evidence, the theist can with confidence claim his belief in God to be justified and rational.

A Rejection of Natural Theology

As discussed above, Moser argues against the value of natural theology, claiming that it does not fit with the character of God and that it does not allow for divine hiddenness. We cannot demand evidence from God that would not require us to submit to Him. This is the problem Moser sees with natural theology. He argues that traditional natural theology faces several fundamental flaws, which he outlines as follows:¹⁸

1. Natural theology is "independent of a divine call in its content but also insensitive to the direction of a human will relative to God's will."
2. Natural theology does not allow for divine hiddenness.

For Moser, then, traditional natural theology as endorsed by Swinburne is not an appropriate approach when considering whether or not the claim that God exists is true. This is the fundamental point that distinguishes the otherwise similar positions of Wainwright and Moser. Wainwright maintains that natural theology has value, although the arguments of natural theology can only be evaluated correctly after true rationality

¹⁸ Moser, *The Evidence for God*, 183.

has been restored. Moser, on the other hand, views the reorientation of reason in a more radical light, arguing that if we respond openly and truly to God's call and experience the personifying evidence of His existence, we will see that the project of natural theology is an entirely inappropriate approach. Despite the insights of Moser's objections, his eagerness to cast away natural theology could easily be viewed as a hasty conclusion, and it is possible that Wainwright could offer a reply in which the value of natural theology is shown to be entirely consistent with both the need of a sincere response to God's call as well as the recognition of divine hiddenness. I will return to the possibility of a synthesis of Moser and Wainwright's approaches in the final chapter.

The Objection of Circularity

We have, then, an explanation and defense of the claim that only a person who has experienced the renewal of his reason through the grace of God is capable of recognizing fully the evidence for the existence of God. One immediately obvious objection to this conclusion is the accusation of circularity. Is it not the case that this explanation for why some people assign more force than others to the evidence for God's existence is dependent on a theistic framework from the beginning? Is the argument not rife with theological assumptions? Both these questions must be answered with a "yes." But it does not follow that the conclusion itself is completely unmerited.

First, the predictive power of the theory of the influence of original sin on reason is significant. It explains the phenomena of different people's responses to the evidence for the existence of God in a consistent manner – in fact, such a state of affairs is to be expected on this model. What is the alternative? For a person who wants to uphold the

egalitarian assumption, the options are limited. He is forced to claim that the rationality of those who reach a different conclusion is somehow impaired, but he can offer no clear analysis of why this is the case.

Second, the circularity inherent in the argument is a characteristic of *every* description of human reason. People generally assume that reason is objective only when emotions and passions are not at work. This applies to the non-theist every bit as much as to the theist; thus, the objection turns against itself. Granted, there is circularity present in the theistic position, but there is also circularity present in every other point of view. Consider Philipse and Mackie's rejection of personal explanation that I discussed in Chapter 3. For these evidentialists, preexisting attachments to ideas about what sort of explanation is legitimate determine at least to some extent the sort of explanation they conclude makes up their final answer. The more we can make this sort of circularity explicit, the better and more clear our reasoning will be, but we must also acknowledge that it is unavoidable to a certain extent. It cannot be used as a defeater for the claim that reason requires a radical reorientation if it is to evaluate correctly the evidence for the existence of God.

Conclusion

The reorientation of reason examined in this chapter keeps the discussion of the correct approach to proportioning belief that God exists within the realm of evidentialism. The philosophers and theologians discussed here deny the fideistic claim that justification is not needed to believe respectably that God exists, but they expand the evidentialist framework advocated by Swinburne by arguing that there is a change that

must take place within a person before he can accurately evaluate the evidence at hand. This change can lead to one or both of two modifications of the impersonal evidentialist position: first, a person will now be able to evaluate the evidence he already has correctly, and second, a person will be able to access a whole new type of evidence that is not taken into consideration by the impersonal evidentialists. The position described here can still be held in accordance with Clifford's statement of the ethics of belief. If Wainwright and Moser are correct about the problem of sin, its influence on human reason, and the reorientation needed for humans to be restored to full rationality, the evidentialist objector must find a new way to defend his position.

But what if a person answers "no" to the question of whether an interpretational shift or a reorientation of reason and the heart is needed to evaluate the evidence correctly? What if the impersonal approach to evidence is in fact the proper view to take? We have already seen that impersonal evidentialism on its own presents some serious weaknesses. The next option, then, is to move beyond the realm of purely epistemic considerations and to take into account pragmatic reasons for belief. The final question of the flowchart asks, "Should we take into account pragmatic reasons to believe that God exists?"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Role of the Will

It is uncertain whether reason can solve the question of the existence of God on epistemic grounds alone. The evidence is not incontrovertible; divine hiddenness is undeniable. So where do we go now? Even if the arguments presented in the previous chapter are convincing, even if we reconsider the sort of evidence we ought to include in our analysis and take into account the cloudiness of reason resulting from human finiteness and sinfulness, can belief in God live up to sufficient standards of rationality? In this chapter I examine the positions of Blaise Pascal and William James, who suggest that theistic belief must be formed not only by reason but also by the passional aspects of the human person. Is theistic belief something that must be determined to some extent by our passional nature in addition to our ability to reason? Can pragmatic concerns influence the rationality of theistic faith and should they play a role in the decision of whether or not to believe that God exists?

Note that the role of the passional nature under consideration in this chapter is distinct from the passional considerations discussed in the previous chapter. In the discussion of rational and passional reorientation, passional aspects of human nature such as wants, desires, and attachments must undergo some sort of shift in order for a person to be able to evaluate the evidence for and against the existence of God correctly. The passional nature influences how a person sees the available evidence (or allows that person to recognize a new sort of evidence). In this discussion I consider the way in

which the passionate nature can make a difference for belief without reference to the effects it might have on a person's perception of the evidence. Passional considerations may affect the practical context in which evidence is considered and might themselves be reasons to believe.

It is at this point that we finally leave the standard of proportionality of belief behind. Although in a passionate model of faith, belief to some extent is motivated and supported by evidence, ultimately belief is a matter of the will. Thus, belief is no longer strictly proportional. Note that in the previous two chapters proportionality of belief was still maintained, even if the evidence to which that belief was proportioned was not of the sort typically considered to be legitimate. Once again, consider the following argument:

1. There are obligations or standards of excellence with respect to belief which, when followed, provide permissive justification for a belief.
- 2. It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.**
3. Belief in God requires discursive justification.
4. So, it is irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.
5. We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.
6. So, it is intellectually wrong or defective to believe that God exists.

The position considered here denies Premise 2 of the evidentialist objector's argument.

The denial of Premise 2, stated positively, claims that it can be intellectually right or intellectually respectable for a person to believe a proposition on insufficient evidence. Is this true? Are there propositions that do not require discursive justification in order to be

accepted in an appropriate manner?¹ If the answer to this question is affirmative, the argument of the evidentialist objector fails. But it fails not because the pragmatic considerations demonstrate that God exists (they are not epistemic reasons that make the proposition that God exists more likely to be true), but rather that it is rational, given the pragmatic considerations, to believe that God exists.

One position that merits brief attention but does not respond to the evidentialist objector's argument in the same way is that of Robert Audi, who presents an alternative way to bring pragmatic considerations into the conversation by couching his discussion not merely in terms of belief but also in the language of commitment. Audi's main task is to demonstrate that religious commitment can be rational in the sense that it is consonant with reason and also in the sense that it is reasonable. A belief or commitment is consonant with reason if it is in harmony, or not in conflict, with reason. Consonance with reason covers a broad range, from beliefs that are barely above the level of minimal rationality (in that they are not simply crazy) to beliefs that fall just below the mark of being required by reason.² But, for Audi, rationality is determined not only by intellectual or epistemic concerns but also involves a comprehensive view of life that takes into account experience and a person's interactions with reality. It is this broader

¹ John Bishop states the question in a way that brings out explicitly the issues of proportioning belief to the evidence: "May we be morally entitled to take faith-propositions to be true in our action while recognizing that their truth lacks evidential support? Can it sometimes be morally right to act on faith-beliefs with a confidence *not* proportioned to our total available evidence?" See John Bishop, *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 102.

² For Audi's discussion of rationality, see Robert Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 6-23.

view of rationality that allows Audi to take the step from discussing religious belief as rational to claiming that religious commitment can also be fully rational.

Audi's arguments for the rationality of religious commitment fall into the category of pragmatic considerations related to theistic belief.³ What is unique about his position, however, is his claim that even if people are not justified in believing disproportionately to the evidence, they might be justified in committing in a disproportionate fashion and allowing their actions and life to reflect that commitment. Like Pascal and James, he recognizes the evidential ambiguity of the theistic question and its overwhelming importance to the life of the individual; it is for these reasons that he claims that for religious beliefs it is "unreasonable to demand justification as a condition for respect."⁴ What distinguishes Audi's position from the two discussed above is that Audi treats commitment explicitly apart from belief. He is concerned not just with the rationality of intellectual belief with respect to the proposition that God exists but with the overall rationality of the choice to commit one's life to the truth of that proposition. Because Audi's position strays from the main topic of this thesis, which is the question of to what extent *belief* that God exists ought to be proportioned to the evidence we have for that claim, I will set aside his arguments and focus instead of those who maintain that pragmatic reasons ought to influence belief itself. The next step is to identify what sort of beliefs ought to be opened to pragmatic considerations.

³ Audi examines the concept and value of commitment in Chapters 4 and 6 of *Rationality and Religious Commitment*; see 89-99 and 137-160.

⁴ Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment*, 34.

Distinguishing Characteristics of Theistic Belief

Even if some statements can be believed respectably without sufficient evidence, it is not clear exactly what sort of proposition could be believed appropriately without discursive justification. It seems that not just any proposition falls into this category. This is one of the questions William James tackles in his essay *The Will to Believe*.⁵ Certain qualities of propositions indicate or perhaps even demand that their truth be accepted or rejected without sufficient evidence.

The proposition that God exists is one such statement that cannot be determined on purely intellectual grounds (or so we assume for the discussion at hand). But there are all sorts of propositions whose truth-values cannot be determined beyond a shadow of a doubt, or perhaps even to a reasonable level of probability. About many of these we can merely suspend judgment and go about our lives without giving them much further thought. Scientific theories, for the most part, fall into this category. It does not matter to us in our daily life whether the Rutherford-Bohr model of the atom is correct. Although exceptions might exist (for example, consider a theory about the efficacy of a given cancer treatment that if correct will allow a patient to live, but if wrong, will lead to immediate death), scientific theories in general do not have much bearing on our day-to-day lives. This, it seems clear, is not the case for theism. Whether or not a person believes that God exists has the potential to change radically the way they live on a daily basis. The importance of the concern is brought out even more by thinking of the vast numbers of people who have fought and died over their faith in God, while few have

⁵ William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy and Human Immortality* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 2-4.

been willing to do so in defense of a scientific theory. What, then, distinguishes theism from other sorts of propositions in this respect?

In his influential essay *The Will to Believe*, William James lays out three criteria in response to this question. James suggests that for a proposition that cannot be evaluated on purely intellectual grounds to be above suspension of judgment, it must be *living, forced, and momentous*.⁶ A living decision is one in which both options are legitimate epistemic options and hold some degree of appeal for the person considering them. A forced decision is a decision in which there are no other alternatives besides the ones presented – the two alternatives are logically exhaustive. Suspending judgment and simply not choosing between the alternatives is not an option, since the life of each person is shaped partly and unavoidably on the basis of the answer to the question. A momentous decision is one that carries a significant degree of involvement for the person making the decision, or what Kierkegaard calls an “infinite interest.”⁷ If an option is living, forced, and momentous, James calls it a “genuine” option.

Does theism meet these three criteria? For most people it will be a living option, and given the numerous books written on different sorts of evidence for the existence of God, it seems that people at least ought to treat it as a living option. Not to do so displays narrow-mindedness and prejudice. It is a forced option; a person must act on either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist. Agnosticism does not avoid this decision, since even if a person does not believe firmly one way or the other, that person must still make decisions in life as if he believed or disbelieved. The fact that

⁶ James, “The Will to Believe,” 4.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. by Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17.

theistic belief is also momentous makes suspension of judgment implausible and irresponsible. The question of theism is not one to be cast aside lightly.

The Role of the Will

How then should we treat decisions, such as the decision to accept the proposition that God exists, that are living, forced, and momentous? If our reason is incapable of determining the correct answer on purely epistemic grounds, and if the decision is truly forced, it is necessary that something else enter the scene in order to break the stalemate. It is here that the passional nature and the will come into play. Our passional nature must make the decision whether or not to believe. But what exactly is the “passional nature”? The passional aspects of the human person are those parts that touch on the emotions, desires, hopes, wishes, and fears. Rather than being motivated by strictly theoretical or epistemic concerns, the passional nature is driven by pragmatic concerns (although it is conceivable that theoretical concerns could function as pragmatic concerns, if, say, we claim that the obtainment of truth is a deep desire of the human heart). The will is what both guides the passional nature and is in turn guided by emotion and desire.

The approach advocated by James, then, can be seen as a refutation of proportionality evidentialism.⁸ A willingness to include non-epistemic concerns when it comes to matters of belief is incompatible with the claim that belief must be strictly proportioned to the epistemically-relevant evidence. Note that even James would not claim that no beliefs ought to be proportioned to the evidence; he merely maintains that not *all* beliefs must be strictly proportioned to the evidence. Some beliefs can be held

⁸ Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 47-52.

respectably even if the available evidence does not justify that belief. Note also that the Jamesian position is *not* explicitly in conflict with threshold evidentialism. James maintains that any belief, including the belief that God exists, must reach a certain level of justification before the passional nature can take over (in other words, it must be a living option). No doubt this threshold would be much lower than the “sufficient evidence” demanded by Clifford, but it is important to remember that James’s method does not throw evidentialism out the window completely.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the approach suggested here is not necessarily irrational. Granted, it is not rational in an epistemic or theoretical sense, but should theoretical rationality be the only kind of rationality with which we ought to be concerned? James as well as the other proponents of similar views do not advocate irrationality; rather, they suggest that a different sort of rationality – namely, pragmatic rationality – ought to play an important role when it comes to belief that God exists.⁹ The positions in the following examination simply demand a broader view of rationality than that which limits it to only epistemic concerns

Two Options

In what follows I consider two positions that support the engagement of the passional nature in the decision of whether or not to believe that God exists.¹⁰ These

⁹ For a discussion of the differences between theoretical and pragmatic rationality, see Richard Foley, “Pragmatic Reasons for Belief,” in *Gambling on God*, ed. by Jeff Jordan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 31-46.

¹⁰ For a skeptical overview of pragmatic arguments for belief in the existence of God, see Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 344-87. Note that I will not address explicitly the pragmatic

three differ slightly and state their cases more or less strongly. I hope to draw out these differences while at the same time maintaining focus on their similarities.

The Wager

Pascal approaches the rationality of belief in God with the language of wagers and bets.¹¹ Pascal begins by claiming that God is so other, so beyond the human capacity to reason, that we can never expect to find proofs of His existence. Yet, we cannot leave the question there. Pascal introduces the problem as follows:

Let us then examine this point, and say, “God is, or He is not.” But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.¹²

God is, or He is not. These are the only two options, and both are living in James’s sense of the term. Reason is incapable of saying which is more probable given the epistemically-relevant evidence. To suspend judgment is not a viable option. The decision (in Jamesian terms) is forced, and it is much too momentous to ignore. But what exactly is at stake? Let us consider the options according to Pascal:¹³

arguments from morality in this project, but for one such argument, see Linda Zagzebski, “Does Ethics Need God?” *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (1987): 294-303.

¹¹ For an overview of the logic of Pascal’s Wager, see Nicholas Rescher, *Pascal’s Wager* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1985), 1-38.

¹² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. by W. F. Trotter (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1931), 66.

¹³ Pascal’s evaluation of the finite good obtained by living a life of virtue rather than vice is not indisputable. For the purposes of this project, however, I will grant Pascal’s analysis and refrain from addressing arguments that claim that there is good lost

1. If you bet on the claim that God exists, and God does exist, you gain infinite happiness and lose nothing.
2. If you bet on the claim that God exists, and God does not exist, you gain a finite good as a result of living a life of virtue rather than vice.
3. If you bet on the claim that God does not exist, and God exists, you lose some good, whether finite or infinite.
4. If you bet on the claim that God does not exist, and God does not exist, then you lose a finite good as a result of living a life of vice rather than virtue.

The goal of the wager is to maximize utility, or the potential for happiness. Whether or not this indeed ought to be the goal is a question I will set aside for the purposes of this discussion; it is enough to recognize that most people do indeed want to maximize happiness for themselves. For both the proposition “God exists” and the proposition “God does not exist” there is a non-zero probability, even if we have no idea what exactly this probability is. All that is needed for the wager to succeed, however, is that the probability of “God exists” is a positive value, making both living options.¹⁴ If we grant this, and we accept that the happiness obtained if option 1 is true is indeed infinite, then we should choose option 1.¹⁵ If the probability that God exists is non-zero and finite, the wager holds.

if a person believes that God exists and He does not or that there is good gained if a person does not believe that God exists and He does not.

¹⁴ George Schlesinger notes that, apart from assigning a probability of zero to the proposition “God exists” there is another way to kill the argument before it even gets off the ground, which is to deny that the phrase “God exists” has any meaning at all. This view was discussed briefly in Chapter 1, and since I do not think it has much merit, I do not take the time to confront it here. See George Schlesinger, *Religion and Scientific Method* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977), 135-40.

¹⁵ Not all scholars have agreed that Pascal’s conclusion follows from his premises; some maintain that the wager is invalid. For a defense of the validity of the wager, see Ian Hacking, “The Logic of Pascal’s Wager,” *American Philosophical*

Pascal's Wager is fundamentally a probability calculation combined with a supposition that the goal of the wager is maximizing utility. The desire for happiness motivates the choice made in the wager; thus, the wager is guided by pragmatic rationality of the sort that will also motivate the two other approaches to passionate reason discussed in the next few pages. Note that Pascal's notion that a person can choose to believe includes an assumption that it is possible to will oneself to believe or disbelieve a proposition such as "God exists." I will address the difficulty associated with this assumption at the end of the next section, since it is also a problem for William James's position.

The Will

Like Pascal, William James suggests that pragmatic concerns ought to play a role in our decision whether or not to believe that God exists. In fact, James himself cites Pascal's argument, calling it a "regular clincher" – because our beliefs, at least those that involve deciding between two or more genuine options, are not determined solely on intellectual grounds, James sees Pascal's Wager as being an entirely legitimate approach to the theistic question.¹⁶ But James modifies Pascal's position, offering a broader, more balanced approach that can be applied to issues beyond that of theism.

James argues that the appropriate response to situations where we must decide between two or more genuine options is to engage our passionate nature in addition to our

Quarterly 9, no. 2 (1972): 186–92. For arguments that the wager is invalid, see Antony Duff, "Pascal's Wager and Infinite Utilities," *Analysis* 46 (1986): 107–9; and Alan Hájek, "Waging War on Pascal's Wager," *Philosophical Review* 112, no. 1 (2003): 27–56.

¹⁶ James, "The Will to Believe," 11.

intellectual reason, turning to our will rather than limiting our evaluation to just our reason. For James, such an approach is not merely advisable, but necessary:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision, - just like deciding yes or no, - and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.¹⁷

When we are faced with a decision whether or not to believe, and we know that we cannot come to a conclusion using only our reason, James claims that it is perfectly appropriate to take pragmatic considerations into account as well. If it seems, on the whole, that it would be better to believe than not to believe (or vice versa), we ought to use our wills to take the risk of belief.

How does this argument apply to theistic belief? Unlike Pascal's Wager, it does not require careful consideration of probabilities, and it does not even demand the recognition that the good to be gained as a result of believing that God exists if in fact He does exist is infinite. Rather, all that is needed is to determine that pragmatic considerations lead us to want to believe, or at least to want the results that would come from believing. Belief in God, then, can be justified by the practical goods to which it leads. Given the evidential ambiguity of the theistic question, and given the important practical considerations related to the theistic question, James holds that it can be rational to choose to believe in God by means of the will.

Before leaving James, it is worth noting that James's work has lent itself to a wide variety of interpretations, ranging from fideistic to evidentialist. For instance, John

¹⁷ Ibid, 11.

Bishop argues that James advocates a version of fideism.¹⁸ Although James is similar to a fideist insofar as his view of belief does not demand strict proportionality to the evidence, he differs in that he takes into consideration a broader view of rationality than does the fideist. Fideism, even if it does not claim that stringent epistemic demands be met in order for the belief that God exists to be justified, nevertheless it is still concerned primarily with theoretical rationality. The motivating factors behind the fideist position are epistemic; the motivating factors for James (and Pascal and Audi) are pragmatic considerations. For this reason it is not appropriate to treat James and the positions of other similar thinkers as fideistic. On the other hand, William Wainwright interprets James as laying claim to epistemic rationality, not just practical rationality, which places him closer to the evidentialist category.¹⁹ Wainwright suggests that perhaps James is arguing that theories such as the hypothesis that God exists are epistemically rational in that they satisfy the deepest intuitions of human nature and therefore are directed towards truth. Even if this is the case, interpreting James as primarily pragmatic in his views seems to be a consistent take on his position.

The Problem of Doxastic Voluntarism

One concern with the position advocated by both Pascal and James is that as much as a person might like to believe that God exists after realizing the possible pragmatic benefits, he cannot simply decide to believe that God exists. This is the

¹⁸ Bishop, *Believing by Faith*, 122-51.

¹⁹ William Wainwright makes this argument in *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 94-107.

problem of doxastic voluntarism.²⁰ In principle the will ought to help settle the question, but in reality it cannot. Pascal offers the following suggestion:

Endeavor, then, to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness. “But this is what I am afraid of.” And why? What have you to lose?²¹

Pascal’s remedy for unbelief is to act as if one believes. If a person lives like those who have belief, belief will follow the actions. In a sense Audi’s emphasis on commitment addresses this problem of voluntarism. It is possible to commit oneself to living in a certain way without believing the propositions that might lead another person to live in that same manner. Whether or not a person can come to belief by following Pascal’s suggestions, however, remains unclear. Pascal’s approach also has implications for the sort of interpretational or paradigm shift discussed in the previous chapter. Perhaps living as if one believes brings about the sort of reorientation necessary to see old evidence in a new way or recognize a different kind of evidence. Pascal’s suggestion extends beyond the application he intends it to have.

²⁰ William Alston addresses this problem of doxastic voluntarism in “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 257-99. Richard Feldman, in response to Alston’s arguments, defends doxastic voluntarism and a deontological conception of epistemic justification in “The Ethics of Belief,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60, no. 3 (2000): 667-95.

²¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, 68.

Conclusion

A final point ought to be made before bringing this chapter to a close. We have seen that Pascal, James, and Audi all adopt an attitude of “betting,” taking into account the pragmatic results of holding a certain belief and treating commitment and action as a primary focus. What has not been yet made explicit is that every position considered in this project has been guilty of this sort of betting to some extent. Whether we consider Philipse’s atheism or Plantinga’s fideism, whether the betting is made obvious or not, every one of these thinkers participates in a wager to some degree. James points out at the beginning of *The Will to Believe* that his students who reject faith are still full of faith in something, a faith that is determined at least in part by their passional nature.²² As James says, “Pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds.”²³ Perhaps engaging pragmatic rationality is not only helpful, not only necessary, but completely unavoidable. The better question is how to engage that rationality in the correct manner. In the last chapter we surveyed the possibilities that deal with the interpretational or paradigm shift brought about by a reorientation of human passion and reason; in this chapter we considered pragmatic and passional reasons to believe that God exists. We also briefly confronted Audi’s suggestion that we ought to believe proportionately but use our passional nature to commit disproportionately. In the final chapter of this project I look more closely at the relationships between these options.

²² James, *The Will to Believe*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

CHAPTER SIX

A Synthesis

We have surveyed the main options available to a person considering the relationship between standards of proportionality of belief to the evidence and belief that God exists. Each position has its strengths; each has its weaknesses. Some hold persuasive power for those who do not accept theistic faith already; others provide assurance for the one who already believes. In addition, these positions are not all mutually exclusive. To end this project I want to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the various positions as well as draw out some of their fundamental philosophical and theological assumptions, providing criticism of the different views while at the same time preserving their valuable insights. I argue that although Plantinga's claim that belief that God exists is properly basic is ultimately correct in an unfallen world, we have a responsibility now to use our reason to examine the evidence for the existence of God, taking into account both the traditional arguments of natural theology and the broader range of evidence that comes into play as a result of an interpretational or paradigm shift. I also support the claim that pragmatic reasons may and sometimes must play a role in the formation of belief.

My emphasis in this final chapter shifts slightly in that I will explicitly assume that God does in fact exist in my discussion. Given the consideration of the different answers to the question of the extent to which belief that God exists ought to be proportioned to the evidence we have for that claim, I turn to this question: what should a Christian think about this proportionality requirement? From the discussions of Chapters

4 and 5 in particular it should be clear that preexisting attachments have tremendous influence on the sort of theories a person is willing to countenance, and as a result, looking at the proportionality question from within Christian faith, not just from without, is essential.

I begin with fideism and Plantinga's insights from the Reformed tradition. I want to point out first that Plantinga's Reformed epistemology and the claim that belief in God is properly basic cannot be definitively refuted. No one can prove that belief in God is *not* properly basic. Perhaps it is, and if God does in fact exist, it seems entirely plausible to think that He would have made belief in Himself something that His creatures could hold without evidential support, or at least without the sort of evidential support advocated by any of the evidentialists. This idea is related to the concept of the *sensus divinitatis* that has played such an important role in the Reformed tradition.¹ The *sensus* is a certain awareness of God that is imbedded in the hearts and minds of all men, and it is immediate and direct, left over from the sort of direct knowledge of God mankind had before the fall. This common grace is present in all men, but it is able to be suppressed.

¹ The *sensus divinitatis* was an important theological idea for John Calvin. He describes the character and function of the *sensus*: "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty . . . Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men's minds. Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow." See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 43-55. Paul Helm discusses the concept of the *sensus divinitatis* within the context of the effects of sin on human abilities to reason in, "John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the Noetic Effects of Sin," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 87-107.

Before the fall, however, the question of whether or not God exists would never have occurred to Adam and Eve; for them, in the perfect world of the Garden of Eden, knowledge of God was immediate, part of every aspect of their experience of existence. To ask for evidence would have made no sense. Reliance on the *sensus divinitatis* as the first source of knowledge of God indicates that in an unfallen world, belief in God would be properly basic.

But the fact remains that we do not live in the Garden of Eden and that we must grapple with the problems of divine hiddenness and our own uncertainty. Even, then, if belief in God truly is properly basic, in our world today it is not enough to stop with this claim. There are good arguments for the claim that God does not exist; how should we respond to these? It seems irresponsible simply to ignore them. Can we make a case for the use of our reason to support our belief that God exists while at the same time recognizing the merit Plantinga's position might have? We require an approach that utilizes human reason as a God-given gift while at the same time refusing to succumb to narrow evidentialist standards.

Let us make explicit the rationale behind the first of these requirements. If God exists, He created humans with the capacity to reason. We are rational creatures, and this rationality is not merely a secondary part of our being. In the greatest commandment Jesus says, "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment."² The mind is as essential to loving God fully as are the heart, soul, and strength. To say, then, that to use our reason in the project of thinking about the question of God's

² Mark 12:30, KJV.

existence is unnecessary or even inappropriate seems to be a conclusion inconsistent with the way God created humanity. Even if belief in God is properly basic, why would God frown upon our attempts to use our reason to understand Him better? Even Plantinga finds it useful, although he thinks it is not necessary, to use reason to argue for the existence of God.³ It is plausible to claim that human reason is not what it was before it became tainted by sin, but this position is still far off from the view that human reason has been so corrupted that it can have nothing to say about matters of faith until that faith has already been accepted. It seems possible that God's grace could touch the minds of men and lay open the way to truth even before that truth is known. If this is the case, wholesale rejection of reason as incapable of interacting constructively with faith at all is unmerited.

A second important reason to employ our reason and examine the evidence in favor of God's existence is this: claiming as Plantinga does that belief in God is properly basic is ineffective for those who do not already accept belief in God. As I observed in Chapter 3 (following Philipse's lead), Plantinga's view only works for those who already accept that God exists. But our world is filled with people who do not believe. For some (and no doubt to some extent for all) this unbelief is primarily a matter of a hardened heart, but for others intellectual concerns keep them from treating belief that God exists as a living option (in the Jamesian sense of the term). As Christians we are called to go into the world, proclaim the good news of the Gospel, and make disciples of all nations, and one effective way to go about this task is the project of apologetics. I do not suggest

³ For example, see Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. by Deane-Peter Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 203-227.

that apologetics ought to be the primary method here, and I do not think ultimately it is the most effective, but I do think that arguments and examination of the evidence can be a powerful tool. Willingness to consider evidence and arguments can counter the accusations of circularity that are often made against fideistic positions.

We have, then, both theological and practical grounds for wanting to include reason, argument, and evidence in the project as we think about how to approach the theistic question. But we do not want to err too far on this side of the spectrum either. We do not want our faith to hang on the strength or weakness of the most novel argument or the newest rephrasing of an old argument. Our belief that God exists should not rely solely on probability calculations. If we embrace a system characterized solely by standards of evaluation such as a Bayesian probability calculus, we run the risk of not only miscalculating the evidence but also of ignoring evidence that might not fit nicely into such categories. We ought not to make our examination too narrow. This is one of the significant weaknesses of the impersonal evidentialist position. How then can we maintain our integrity as faithful Christians while still recognizing the need to think in an intellectually respectable fashion?

Questioning Doubt

I suggest that we can move towards finding this balance by giving consideration to a reversal of the mindset that has dominated Western modes of thinking since Descartes. In the *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, Descartes, troubled by his realization that many things he had spent his whole life thinking were true were actually

false, embarks on a quest to find the things of which he can be entirely certain.⁴ In order to begin this task, he states that he will doubt everything he thinks he knows to be true.

The first law of the method he develops highlights this privileging of doubt:

The first [law] was never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to comprise nothing more in my judgment than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt.⁵

For Descartes, fear of error trumps desire for truth. Nothing short of absolute certainty is good enough, and as a result, Descartes adopts methodological doubt as his *modus operandi*.

Descartes's privileging of methodological doubt has been the underlying assumption for much of our thought. But why should we accept this method? Why should skepticism and fear of error rule our intellectual life? William James recognizes the urgency of this question and the implications its answer can have for our entire way of thinking about the world:

There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion, - ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must know the truth; and we must avoid error*, - these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. ... Believe truth! Shun error! - these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life.⁶

⁴ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on the First Philosophy*, 4th ed., trans. by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 59-63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy and Human Immortality* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 17-18.

James sets up a stark contrast between two ways of approaching belief. Either we can pledge allegiance, as does Descartes, to the project of avoiding error, or we can accept the risk that we might at times form mistaken beliefs and make our first goal to seek after truth. The former path privileges doubt; the latter privileges trust and faith. Which of the two is better is not a question that can be answered easily or argued about in a straightforward manner. The answer each person will give to the question will depend on his or her own priorities and personal inclinations. Since Descartes, the path of doubt has proved to be the one many people, even people of faith, have chosen to follow. This privileging of doubt is closely related to the proportionality requirement between belief and evidence – in the fourth *Meditation* Descartes suggests that error consists in disproportioning assent to evidence, which comes about by not doubting what one should doubt.⁷ I suggest that the assumptions lurking behind the privileging of doubt ought to be questioned and reevaluated.

The implications this reevaluation has for a proper approach to theistic belief are far-reaching. What would it mean for the question of how to proportion belief that God exists to the evidence for his existence if we were to make seeking truth rather than avoiding error our primary goal in the project? If faith and trust are privileged rather than doubt, it seems that, like Plantinga, it is entirely appropriate to begin with belief that God exists. The question is turned on its head. This does not mean that we turn a deaf ear to the importance of evidence and the need to confront the doubt about whether or not God exists, for that doubt is unavoidable. Few people are strong enough in their faith never to have moments when they question whether they are mistaken about the existence of God,

⁷ Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on the First Philosophy*, 81-87.

but many live in a state of constant wrestling with the apparent absence of God from the world, the hiddenness of the divine, and the pain and suffering brought about by evil. These difficulties must be confronted. But to confront them with an attitude of trust and faith, not shying away from their significance but still making the primary goal to find truth, is much different than to begin the inquiry in a state of fear and doubt.

With this attitude of trust, a person opens himself to the reorientation of reason and passion discussed by Moser and Wainwright. If a person begins the project of trying to decide whether or not he believes God exists with openness to the possibility that there might indeed be a divine call and a willingness to respond to that call if it in fact exists, his approach to the evidence will be radically different from a person who enters the project with certain answers already closed off by his hardened heart and refusal to admit of certain possibilities. Reason and passion are still flawed, but is the grace of God not sufficient to work in the hearts of those who are open and willing and searching after truth? With this reorientation, a person is able both to evaluate the evidence he already has in a clearer light as well as to experience the sort of “personifying evidence” of God to which Moser gives such focused attention. He is able to ask the question of what sort of evidence he should be looking for given the hypothesis that the Christian God exists.

Consider the position of the evidentialist objector in light of this reorientation. His argument seems fearful and weak, motivated not by a courageous search for truth but by cowardice. From the very beginning, spurred on by his doubt, he cuts off a whole range of possible explanations for the phenomena we observe happening in the world and the very existence of the world itself, denying the possibility of personal agency. Clifford’s injunction that a person must believe only if he has sufficient evidence no

longer holds the appeal it did at first glance. Rather, it becomes clear that such a rule of belief restricts the possibilities of finding truth, even if it might lead to a greater avoidance of error than an approach that privileges trust over doubt.

Lest this evaluation sound accusatory and demeaning, I want to qualify these claims and acknowledge that the evidentialist position has tremendous merit, merit that is not excluded by a shift of focus from doubt and the avoidance of error to trust and the pursuit of truth. Weighing of the evidence still has a place in this framework. But rather than seeing evidence as something that we have to build up in order to believe appropriately or as something to which our beliefs must always be proportioned, we can view evidence instead as something that can combat the doubts brought to light by contradictory evidence. The Christian can freely admit that some intellectual questions are unanswered and not fear the doubt that comes with that acceptance. Nothing in this discussion is meant to question the value of natural theology; rather, natural theology is an essential tool in this project, useful for both the believer and the unbeliever alike.

Moser's apparent eagerness to cast away natural theology is not merited; his conclusion is hasty. Even if natural theology does not have the power that someone like Swinburne attributes to it, it ought not to be discarded and viewed as useless, or worse, wrong. Moser's objections to natural theology demonstrate an extremely narrow view of natural theology and fail to consider ways in which the arguments of natural theology could fit into the framework of reoriented reason and personifying evidence. Given that people come to different conclusions regarding the evidence provided by natural theology, it is clearly not coercive (in that it forces belief), so even a correct approach to natural theology demands a shift of the mind and heart. Thinking of the arguments of

natural theology as “natural signs” that point non-coercively to God is helpful.⁸ Even if our belief that God exists need not be dependent on natural theology, these natural signs can still play an essential role of our understanding of God.

But even given the acceptance of the reorientation of reason and the heart advocated by Wainwright and Moser, it seems that many people will still not be able to come to belief. Perhaps a person might even want to believe, but producing belief in one’s own mind is easier said than done. This is the problem of doxastic voluntarism, and the discussion in this chapter so far does not yet have the tools to address the difficulty. I suggest that the insights of Pascal, James, and Audi prove useful here. Although I am not convinced that it is possible to will oneself to believe something as James suggests it is, I think there is merit in Pascal’s recommendation that for a person who wants to believe but cannot, living as if he believed has the potential to draw him closer to faith. In essence this is one of Audi’s points as well. There is a difference between belief and commitment. Even if we are plagued by doubt as result of evidence against the claim that God exists or simply cannot bring ourselves to believe for other reasons, it is rational to commit to theistic faith and live in a way that reflects that commitment.

This, then, is the approach I propose for thinking about the relationship of theistic faith to standards of proportionality. First, we must recognize that in the unfallen world, knowledge of God would have been immediate and experiential, and therefore belief that

⁸ This approach is advocated by Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Evans evaluates many of the classical arguments of natural theology in light of a natural signs interpretation. For an overview of his approach, see the first chapter of the book, “The Problem of Natural Theology,” 1-25.

God exists would have been properly basic. But we must also recognize that we do not live in such a world any longer – sin has clouded our ability to see and believe, and evil has led to events that can be used in arguments against the claim that God exists. Therefore we cannot responsibly *treat* belief in God as properly basic, ignoring the realm of evidence and argument, but we also cannot accept without reservation the prevailing standards of evidentialism that are removed entirely from faith. To preserve the truth in both these positions, we ought to question our tendency to accept a Cartesian privileging of doubt and instead privilege trust and faith, following James’s suggestion to make seeking truth a priority over avoiding error. This shift and the openness to the possibility of a divine call that accompanies it makes us receptive to a reorientation of reason and passion, a reorientation that can clarify our vision, which has been marred by the effects of sin. We are free to respond to the personifying evidence of God, but we are also free to evaluate the evidence of natural theology in a correct fashion, perhaps even making use of something as formal as Swinburne’s probability calculus. Once we have considered the evidence, if doubt still lingers, we can give attention to our passionate nature and commit to faith, imitating those who believe and praying that God will help our unbelief.

A Final Objection

The most significant objection that remains is one that has been recurrent throughout the discussions in this thesis. It is the problem of circularity, the accusation that the view espoused here presupposes a theistic framework before showing that such a framework is valid. I offer two responses to this objection. First, I think the case can be

made that no view is completely free of circularity. Every position begins with some foundational assumptions. Even a philosopher such as Philipse eliminates from the beginning an entire realm of explanation, namely, personal causation. This is just the point Moser and Wainwright are trying to make: the state of a person's mind and heart will determine the way he evaluates the evidence. Why should a person inclined to accept the truth of theism be in a position of less worth than the person who is not inclined to such a belief?

Plantinga's refutation of classical foundationalism makes this problem especially explicit. Every view must accept certain standards for counting beliefs as basic. In fact, the belief that those standards are the correct ones for counting beliefs as basic must itself be basic, and Plantinga draws out this unavoidable circularity in the classical foundationalist position. Even an apparently objective, scientific approach to belief that God exists falls into the trap of the vicious circle.⁹ Classical foundationalism demands that basic beliefs must be either incorrigible for the person holding them (it would not be possible for the person to hold the belief and for the belief at the same time to be false) or self-evident to the person holding the belief.¹⁰ But in what way can this very definition of a properly basic belief be considered properly basic? The classical foundationalist must hold this definition of properly basicity as basic, since it is does not seem that it can be proved and is certainly not incorrigible or self-evident.

⁹ Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 59-63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

Second, in response to the accusation of circularity, I suggest that the move made in privileging trust over doubt that serves as the basis for the synthesis suggested in this chapter makes the most sense when built upon a theistic framework. There are numerous reasons and numerous worldviews that could incline us to see this approach as valuable, but choosing trust over doubt makes good sense if there is a theistic system of belief in place. Everyone must trust to some extent; it is unavoidable. But within a theistic framework, there is a reason to think that trust is merited. If a person is convinced that there is value in privileging trust over doubt, accepting the existence of God is perhaps the most stable system in which to engage in the pursuit of truth. Given these two responses, I do not think the objection of circularity proves fatal.

Conclusion

I close this project with a return to the text that motivates examination into the existence of God in the first place – Holy Scripture. From a Christian perspective, I believe the approach to the relationship between belief that God exists and the evidence we have for such belief suggested here is consistent with the teachings of Scripture.

Consider the following passage from First Corinthians:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing . . . Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in

part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.¹¹

What does this passage have to say with respect to the proportionality question and the suggestion that we should prioritize seeking truth over avoiding error? First, it tells us that some error is unavoidable. We see only dimly now; our reason is clouded and our vision is blurry. Our knowledge of God is as a reflection in a mirror, and as a result, we cannot expect complete clarity regarding the evidence for His existence. We will make mistakes, we will have unanswered questions, and we will doubt. The evidence for our faith will not be incontrovertible, and our belief will always be incomplete.

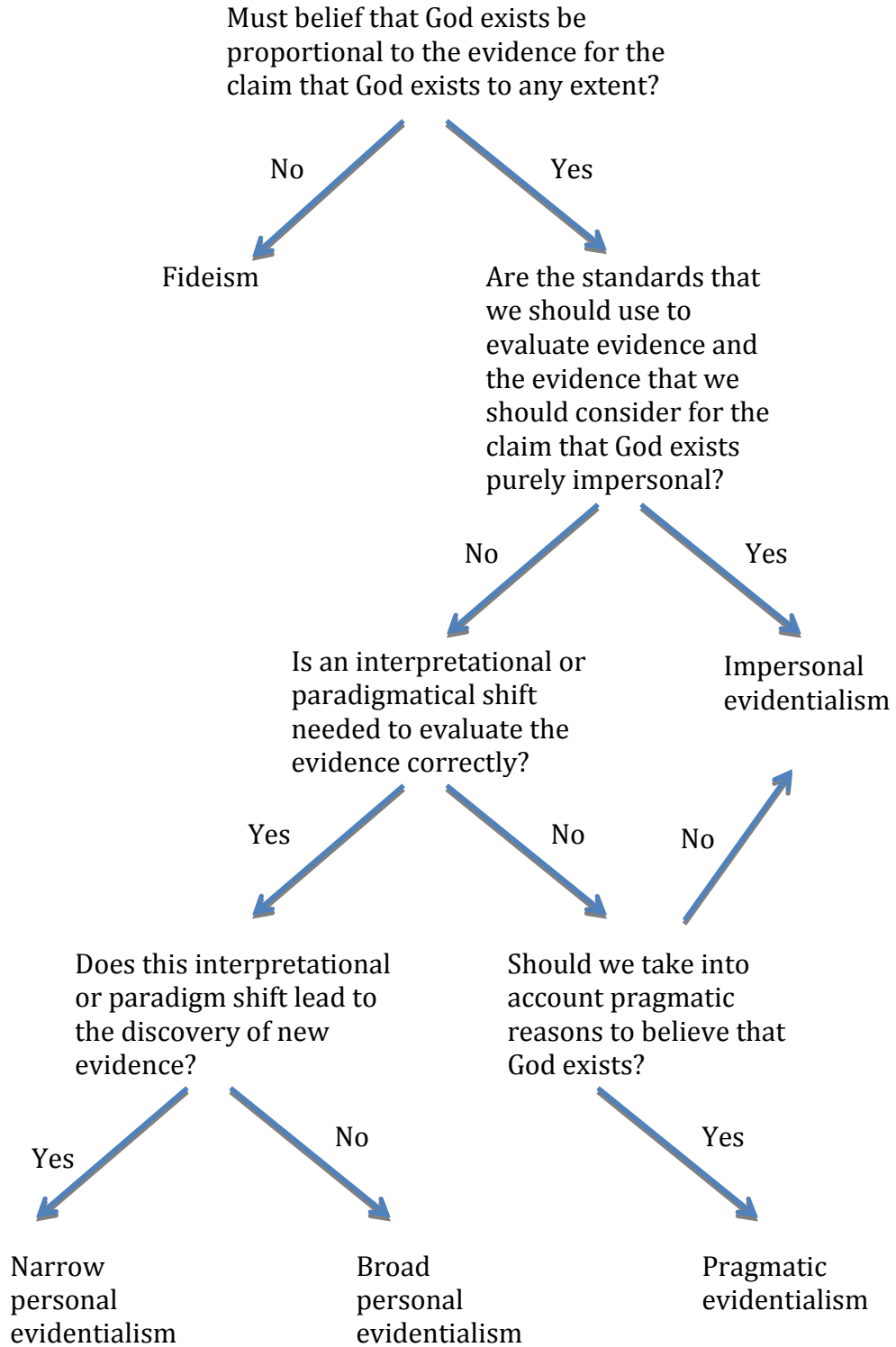
But what answer does this passage suggest to combat this lack of clarity? Not rigorous arguments, not a probability calculus, not a strict evidentialist system, and not a requirement that our belief in God should be proportioned to our evidence. Even if we could attain perfection in these areas, our belief would still be empty, nothing more than a clanging cymbal. Rather, we must give up our emphasis on doubt and instead trust God, seeking after faith and hope, and most importantly love, the love of God that calls us into a new state of reason and passion. We must recognize that our attempts to examine the evidence for the existence of God will always be flawed but nevertheless valuable while at the same time accepting that response to God's call and commitment to love for Him and others is what makes our faith and belief alive. One day, the question of proportionality will no longer even be necessary, a day when our partial knowledge of God will become full understanding, a day when we will regain the sort of immediate knowledge of God humankind had when it was first created. But until that day, perhaps we should be concerned not so much with whether or not our belief that God exists is

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1-2, 8-13, NIV.

proportioned correctly to the objective evidence for that claim but rather with whether or not our faith is proportioned appropriately to the love of God. And if that love is infinite, our proper response should be to believe in a way that motivates our commitments and actions, trusting in the perfect love of God and seeking to make that love the guiding principle of all aspects of our lives.

APPENDIX

CHAPTER FLOWCHART



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