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AGAINST QUASI-FIDEISM

Jeroen de Ridder

Duncan Pritchard has recently ventured to carve out a novel position in the epistemology of religious belief called *quasi-fideism*. Its core is an application of ideas from Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology to religious belief. Among its many advertised benefits are that it can do justice to two seemingly conflicting ideas about religious belief, to wit: (a) that it is, at least at some level, a matter of ungrounded faith, but also (b) that it can be epistemically rationally grounded. In this paper, I argue that quasi-fideism fails. Its central tenets either have unattractive consequences or are implausible.

1. Introduction

In a number of recent papers, Duncan Pritchard ventures to carve out a novel position in the epistemology of religious belief called *quasi-fideism*.¹ It is inspired by Wittgenstein's 1969 *On Certainty* and, indirectly, by John Henry Newman's 1870 *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Quasi-fideism's advertised attractions are legion. It can do justice both to the idea that religious belief can be epistemically rational *and* also that it is at bottom held on arational faith. It instantiates a more general and independently plausible epistemological framework. As a result, it not only inherits the benefits of this framework, but it also allows for a parity argument which shows that many critics of religious belief are unfairly holding religious beliefs to higher epistemic standards than ordinary belief. The general framework of which quasi-fideism is an instance is anti-skeptical, preserves plausible epistemic transmission principles, and avoids epistemic relativism.

Reflecting on this list, you might well think that quasi-fideism is too good to be true. In this paper, I argue that you would be right. I will first present quasi-fideism and explain how it is supposed to have the benefits indicated above. I will then raise objections to all three of quasi-fideism's key tenets.

¹Pritchard, "Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism"; "Wittgenstein on Faith and Reason"; "Faith and Reason."



2. Quasi-Fideism

The rationality of theistic religious belief is precarious. It's not a given that belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good supernatural being can be rational for intellectually responsible modern people. In fact, many have argued that it cannot.² Typical responses to this charge come in two sorts. On the one hand, there is *fideism*, the claim that religious belief is not subject to the canons of rationality. It is a matter of blind faith and is, as such, beyond rational evaluation. Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and D. Z. Phillips are associated with this idea.³ On the other hand, some claim that there is rational backing for religious belief, either in the form of experience-like grounds⁴ or of publicly available reasons and arguments.⁵

Both options suffer from well-documented problems.⁶ The former puts religious beliefs outside the sphere of rational discourse and hence immunizes it from rational criticism. This does not only seem undesirable and implausible, it also makes it mysterious why anyone would have religious beliefs or faith, at least from a purely cognitive perspective. Moreover, it reeks of special pleading: what's so different about *religious* beliefs to render them exempt from rational evaluation? The problem for the second sort of response is that it is controversial whether the rational backing that religious belief is supposed to possess is strong enough to withstand criticisms that are leveled against it and whether it really outweighs anti-theistic evidence. The jury is still out on this, but both religious believers and atheists have had a hard time convincing each other that the support for their beliefs is strong enough to demand wide assent.

Quasi-fideism steers a middle course between these options. It attempts to appropriate the benefits of both, while avoiding their problems. Consider the following two seemingly conflicting observations. First, religious people's core beliefs—such as the belief that God exists—are very stable and don't respond to rational considerations in the way more mundane beliefs do. Belief in God is *psychologically stable*: people don't just suspend it when they encounter rational criticisms as they might with other beliefs. Belief in God is also *doxastically stable*: it acts as a fulcrum to evaluate which objections to it must be taken seriously and which can be rejected.⁷ Core religious beliefs constitute part of a person's worldview. Second, more specific religious beliefs often do appear to be held in a paradigmatically

²Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*; Sobel, *Logic and Theism*; Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*; Tooley's contributions to Plantinga and Tooley, *Knowledge of God*; Howson, *Objecting to God*; Philpse, *God in the Age of Science*. Several popular-scientific books also belabor this conclusion (Dawkins, *God Delusion*; Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*; Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*; Stenger, *God*), but their argumentative rigor is, to say the least, not always up to snuff.

³Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism"; Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry*.

⁴Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

⁵Copan and Moser, *Rationality of Theism*; Swinburne, *Existence of God*; Craig and Moreland, *Natural Theology*.

⁶See the references above.

⁷Pritchard, "Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism," 144–145.

epistemically rational manner. Many religious believers are intelligent, well-informed, and there is nothing wrong with their cognitive functioning. Reflective believers can cite reasons or other grounds for their beliefs and revise them in light of new things they learn. An acceptable epistemology of religious belief, then, should show how religious beliefs can be rationally evaluable.

Quasi-fideism takes its cue from Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology.⁸ Hinge epistemology holds that rational evaluation is necessarily *local* in the sense that it can only happen within a framework that holds fixed a number of so-called hinges: commitments that cannot be supported further and cannot coherently be doubted. Since these commitments constitute the framework for rational evaluation, they are not themselves rationally evaluable.⁹ Thus Wittgenstein:

The *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.¹⁰

Quasi-fideism's central proposal is that *we ought to think of the existence of God as a hinge commitment for religious believers*. Commitment to God's existence constitutes part of a religious believer's framework for rational evaluation. More specific religious beliefs, however, can be rationally evaluated inside this framework. Says Pritchard:

We should think of religious belief as also involving a hinge commitment to the existence of God that is immune to rational evaluation. . . . Religious belief involves a fundamental commitment to God's existence which is both highly stable from a psychological point of view, but which is also part of the essential background to a wealth of further more specific religious beliefs that the subject holds.¹¹

And more recently:

The crux of the matter is that the basic religious convictions of one who has faith will form part of that person's hinge commitments, and hence will be part of the bedrock against which rational evaluations are undertaken.¹²

Pritchard doesn't make it explicit whether he takes quasi-fideism to characterize the situation of all, many, or merely some religious believers. Since

⁸To be sure, Wittgenstein himself never applied the ideas in *On Certainty* to religious belief. The fideism that is associated with his views on religious epistemology is inspired by the posthumously published notes about Wittgenstein's lectures on religious belief (Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*).

⁹What I present here is Pritchard's rendering of hinge epistemology. There is some controversy about how best to construe the position. See Ranalli, "Deep Disagreements" for discussion of its different guises.

¹⁰Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §§341–342.

¹¹Pritchard, "Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism," 149–150.

¹²Pritchard, "Faith and Reason," 117–118.

he writes without qualification about “religious believers,” “persons of faith,” and “theists,” however, I will assume that he has at least the second option in mind and perhaps even the first. Quasi-fideism is supposed to be a default option for religious believers; it describes the epistemological situation of a typical religious believer.

To unpack quasi-fideism further, I summarize it in three theses. First:

FRAMEWORK: The claim that God exists has framework status for religious believers.

FRAMEWORK captures the faith-character of religious belief. Commitment to God’s existence is part of a framework in which other beliefs are rationally evaluated. Specific religious beliefs thus presuppose it. This is not some special feature of *religious* belief—there is no special pleading on the part of the religious believer here. It is a general fact about our practices of rational evaluation, regardless of their domain. All our ordinary beliefs about the world likewise presuppose hinge commitments which cannot rationally be doubted, e.g., that there is an external world, that every individual has biological parents, that cats do not grow on trees, etc.

This short list of hinge propositions might look like a ragtag bunch. This raises the specter of epistemic relativism: the thesis that the positive epistemic status of beliefs (such as their rationality) depends on a framework of norms that vary with local conceptual or cultural conditions and lack universal validity and that there are no facts of the matter about which of these norms are correct.¹³ Because the quasi-fideist is explicit in seeking to avoid relativism,¹⁴ she ought to explain how it can be that the view does not entail the possibility of incommensurable but equally legitimate epistemic frameworks since it seems quite possible for people to have incompatible but equally legitimate sets of hinge commitments. Pritchard thinks the quasi-fideist can avoid this conclusion because, first appearances notwithstanding, hinge commitments do have something in common: “What all our hinge commitments express is our basic certainty that we are not radically and fundamentally in error. Call this our *über hinge commitment*.”¹⁵ For example, the fact that cats don’t grow on trees is

¹³Baghramian and Carter, “Relativism.”

¹⁴See Pritchard, “Epistemic Relativism,” “Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism,” 156, “Faith and Reason,” 112.

¹⁵Pritchard, “Faith and Reason,” 111; cf. also his “Epistemic Relativism.” The introduction of this *über hinge* creates a tension in Pritchard’s construal of hinge epistemology. On the one hand, the claim is that hinge commitments are partly constitutive of the framework for rational evaluation and are, as such, arational and incapable of being supported by rational reasons or grounds (see also below). On the other hand, they are supposed to follow from the *über hinge*. But presumably, if the *über hinge* logically entails specific hinge commitments, it provides a *reason* for them. After all, if recognized logical implication doesn’t provide reasons, nothing does. So either there really is only one hinge commitment—the *über hinge*—or there is some unaccounted-for relation between the *über hinge* and specific hinge commitments that makes it false that the former is a reason for the latter. In what follows, I will ignore this tension and continue to assume, like Pritchard, that both the *über hinge* and more specific commitments can be hinges. Thanks to Emanuel Rutten for raising this point.

fundamental to our grasp of biology and our basic understanding of what the world is like. If they were to grow on trees, we would be radically and fundamentally in error. Hence, it follows logically from the über hinge that cats don't grow on trees. Similarly for other outlandish possibilities that go against our basic grasp on the world. What ultimately remains fixed, then, is the über hinge, rather than various more specific hinge commitments which follow from the über hinge. The latter in fact do allow for variability over time and between cultures. If, say, sinister future biotechnology will allow us to grow cats on trees, it would no longer be a hinge commitment that they don't since this wouldn't violate our basic understanding of what the world is like anymore and, hence, it would no longer follow from the über hinge. The über hinge itself, however, would stay in place. Hence, epistemic relativism isn't a live threat.¹⁶

A second implication of the idea that something is a hinge commitment is that it is *arational*:

ARATIONAL: The claim that God exists is an arational commitment.

Arationality is not irrationality. Hinge commitments do not have bad credentials from the perspective of rationality; they "precede" or "stand outside" rationality. According to ARATIONAL, a believer's commitment to God's existence differs from her more specific religious beliefs. Beliefs like "God has helped me" or "God loves all people" can be supported, criticized, or otherwise rationally evaluated—someone might point to biblical passages or theological considerations—but belief in God itself is presupposed in all of this.

The idea of arationality can be further fleshed out by considering its technical sense in Wittgenstein's thought. For Wittgenstein, giving rational grounds requires that grounds are more certain than the belief they are supposed to support. This is why hinge commitments are groundless: nothing we might offer to support them will be as secure as those commitments themselves. In fact, anything we offer would already presuppose those very hinge commitments. This explains why Moore's response to the sceptic fails as a reply: *Seeing* that you have two hands isn't more secure than your belief that you do. To suggest that the former could rationally ground the latter manifests confusion about the nature of rational grounding.¹⁷

ARATIONAL has it that the existence of God is a hinge commitment for believers in this sense. ARATIONAL paves the way for a parity argument in defense of religious belief. As far as rational grounding is concerned, religious belief is in the same boat as ordinary belief, scientific belief,

¹⁶A general discussion of whether Pritchard's über hinge strategy can avoid epistemic relativism successfully would lead us too far afield for present purposes, but see Carter, "Epistemic Pluralism" for some worries.

¹⁷Pritchard, "Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism," 149, "Faith and Reason," 106. While hinge commitments are rationally groundless, they are not arbitrary or optional. They are given with our nature, "animal," "swallowed down" as part of our worldview, and involve a kind of primitive trust ("Faith and Reason," 107).

and other types of belief. They are all ultimately groundless in the sense explained above. The objection that belief in God is ultimately without grounds, then, is nothing against it because the same is true for our belief in an external world and other hinge commitments. Religious belief has no special problem.

Together with FRAMEWORK, ARATIONAL also accounts for the psychological and doxastic stability of belief in God alluded to above. Such stability makes perfect sense if God's existence is an arational hinge commitment that partly constitutes the framework for rational evaluation.

The third tenet of quasi-fideism is:

NON-BELIEF: Religious believers' attitude vis-à-vis the claim that God exists is not that of belief.

Hinge commitments aren't *beliefs*, at least not of the sort that mainstream epistemology is concerned with and that many take to be a component of knowledge. Hinge commitments are non-optional, "visceral," "animal." They involve "primitive trust," are unresponsive to rational considerations, and are 'swallowed down' rather than acquired via rational processes. All of this sets them apart from knowledge-apt (rational) belief. Belief is, by its nature, a truth-directed mental state and is, as such, responsive to rational considerations.¹⁸

NON-BELIEF is the key to solving what Pritchard calls the "containment problem."¹⁹ If a believer's commitment to God's existence is arational, this threatens to infect all her religious beliefs because they all presuppose the existence of God directly or indirectly. Or, in the other direction: if, as quasi-fideism maintains, a believer's specific religious beliefs can be rationally grounded, then so should her commitment to God's existence. After all, a straightforward inference could take you from a rationally grounded belief that, say, God loves you to the conclusion that God exists. Rational support for the former belief ought to carry over to the latter, or so it would seem. To put it in general terms: rational support for religious belief, or lack thereof, seems difficult to contain.

The epistemologically sophisticated reader will have noticed that the issue at stake here is the *transmission* of rational grounding.²⁰ While everyone agrees that rational support transmits when people competently reason their way from one belief to another, formulating a principle that spells out the conditions under which this happens is far from easy. Fortunately, however, NON-BELIEF allows you to circumvent this difficult

¹⁸Pritchard, "Faith and Reason," 108. Pritchard thus takes NON-BELIEF to follow from ARATIONAL. I think the two claims can nonetheless be considered separately. That hinge commitments are immune from rational evaluation might imply that they aren't beliefs, but the reverse doesn't hold: Attitudes that aren't beliefs might nonetheless be subject to rational evaluation.

¹⁹Pritchard, "Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism," 151–154.

²⁰Wright, "Warrant for Nothing"; Davies, "Epistemic Entitlement"; Moretti and Piazza, "Transmission."

task entirely. It doesn't matter what a correct transmission principle looks like, the point is that it applies to *beliefs*. So hinge commitments cannot be fed into it. Hence, the commitment that God exists cannot receive rational support from more specific religious beliefs, nor does its lack of grounds render other religious beliefs equally groundless. Not only is the containment problem pre-empted, everyone can also hold on to their favorite transmission principle.

Having presented quasi-fideism's key tenets and proclaimed attractions, I will now go on to criticize it.

3. FRAMEWORK and Epistemic Relativism

According to FRAMEWORK, the claim that God exists belongs to the framework within which rational evaluation can take place for the religious person, but isn't itself susceptible to such evaluation. I will argue that this commits the quasi-fideist to epistemic relativism, i.e., the existence of incompatible but equally acceptable frameworks for rational evaluation.²¹ On this understanding of epistemic relativism, it is possible for there to be two agents who hold conflicting beliefs but are equally rational by the standards of their respective epistemic frameworks, without there being any rational means by which one might persuade the other. Now, one might think that epistemic relativism is true, perhaps even an inevitable part of the human condition. The problem is, however, that Pritchard explicitly claims that the quasi-fideist can avoid it. This is not the case, as I will now show.

How does FRAMEWORK lead to epistemic relativism? For that, it suffices if there is a mirror image of FRAMEWORK for unbelievers:

ATHEISTIC FRAMEWORK: The claim that God does not exist has framework status for religious unbelievers.

Just as God's existence can function as a hinge commitment for typical believers, God's non-existence can fulfill this role for at least some unbelievers.²² Given ATHEISTIC FRAMEWORK, epistemic relativism follows quickly. Imagine two subjects, Theist and Atheist, for whom God's existence and non-existence respectively have framework status. They further have conflicting beliefs about the origin of the universe. Theist believes that God created the universe, Atheist doesn't—she believes there is a complete naturalistic explanation for its existence. It seems perfectly possible for their beliefs to be equally rational within their respective frameworks, assuming that both have competently evaluated the relevant arguments, objections, and rebuttals relative to their frameworks. Hence, we have epistemic relativism.

²¹Baghramian and Carter, "Relativism"; cf. also Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge* and Carter, *Metapistemology and Relativism* for development and discussion of this version of epistemic relativism.

²²Note that ATHEISTIC FRAMEWORK doesn't need to hold for all unbelievers, or even for many unbelievers. It suffices for my argument if it has this status for some atheists.

ATHEISTIC FRAMEWORK is plausible for two reasons. First, it follows directly from parity considerations. If theists are granted the courtesy of getting God's existence as a hinge commitment, atheists should be treated likewise. There are no obvious differences between God's existence and his non-existence that would bar the latter but not the former from having framework status. Both are fundamental metaphysical claims about what exists. Moreover, both have formidable philosophical arguments for and against them and both have been held by many thoughtful, intelligent, and well-informed people throughout the ages. Given that we're thinking about these commitments as arational, these considerations cannot give us rational grounds for thinking that they can both be hinge commitments, but at least they show that there is practical or social parity between the two, which lends further support to ATHEISTIC FRAMEWORK.²³

Second, there is reason to think that God's non-existence in fact functions as a hinge commitment for some atheists. It seems pretty clear that belief in God's non-existence is highly psychologically and doxastically stable for convinced atheists, in the senses specified in the previous section for religious believers. They will not suspend it immediately when they encounter a theistic argument or reports of religious experiences. If someone were to do this, we would question whether she really was an atheist in the first place. Atheistic belief can also be doxastically stable: Commitment to atheism will function as a fulcrum by which other beliefs are evaluated. Upon hearing about a theistic argument or religious experience, a convinced atheist will think it rational to believe that there must be some problem with the argument or a fully naturalistic explanation of the experience. The phenomena parallel the ones Pritchard pointed to in support of the thought that God's existence is a hinge commitment for believers.

Some written avowals of atheistic commitments also fit the picture very well. Thomas Nagel, for instance, once wrote:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.²⁴

Presumably, someone who hopes God does not exist and does not want him to exist, will not easily give up his commitment to God's non-existence and will actively seek to conform his beliefs to this basic atheistic tenet.

²³My argument applies specifically to the case of God's existence and non-existence as hinge commitments. I don't rely on a *general* parity principle about hinge commitments to the effect that, for any H, if H is a hinge commitment for some people, not-H can be a hinge commitment for other people too. Such a general principle is implausible. For instance, "there is an external world" plausibly functions as a hinge commitment for lots of people, but there's no reason to think that, therefore, "there is no external world" can also be a hinge commitment. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

²⁴Nagel, *The Last Word*, 130.

How then, one might wonder, does Pritchard think quasi-fideism avoids epistemic relativism? In section 2, we noted that the general strategy of Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology for avoiding relativism is to maintain that, behind superficial temporal and contextual variation in specific hinge commitments, there is a deeper and fixed commitment to an *über* hinge, namely that we are not radically and fundamentally mistaken. Since the various more specific hinge commitments are supposed to follow from the *über* hinge, this preempts the possibility of different and incompatible sets of hinge commitments. It is far from clear, however, that this strategy wards off the more specific charge that *quasi-fideism* leads to relativism. God's existence (or non-existence) isn't at all something that plausibly follows from the *über* hinge. Rather, it would seem that both God's existence and his non-existence are compatible with our being not radically and fundamentally in error about the rest of the world.²⁵ The simple observation that numerous knowledgeable and intelligent people disagree about whether God exists, while there is not a hint of disagreement about other paradigmatic hinge commitments, provides strong evidence for this. And unless the quasi-fideist wants to defend the wildly implausible claim that all atheists are thoroughly confused or mistaken about the logical implications of the *über* hinge, it seems she, too, is forced to accept the compatibility of God's non-existence with the *über* hinge. But then my earlier argument stands: Both God's existence and his non-existence can be hinge commitments and epistemic relativism ensues.

But isn't there a sense in which religious believers are "radically and fundamentally in error" if God doesn't exist? After all, God's existence has fundamental metaphysical import, so to be mistaken about it is to be *fundamentally* mistaken. That may well be right, but such metaphysical fundamentality does not entail epistemological fundamentality of the sort relevant to our discussion. God's existence is not epistemologically fundamental to all of our other, more mundane non-theological beliefs about the world and ourselves in the way that claims like "there is an external world" or "I have two hands" are. If we are to imagine ourselves being mistaken about these latter claims, the basis of our epistemic self-trust would be overturned: we would have no grip anymore on which (if any) of our faculties to trust, what to take as evidence for what, and how to expand our rationally based beliefs. This is not what happens when we consider God's non-existence.

But, one might press further, perhaps I'm still being too cavalier about this. Religious believers could insist that God's existence really is *epistemologically* fundamental to their outlook, just like other hinge commitments and hence does follow from their understanding of the *über* hinge. In support of this line of thought, they could point out that, according to

²⁵My claim is that this is true in the actual world. Perhaps there are worlds in which God's existence is so fundamental to people's outlook that it does follow plausibly from the *über* hinge. An example might be a world in which Berkeley's idealism is true and generally known to be true. Thanks to Chris Ranalli for making me clarify this point.

their religious outlook, an external world wouldn't have existed if God hadn't created it nor would it continue to exist without his sustenance. Theists who accept Plantinga's proper functionalist epistemology²⁶ or his evolutionary argument against naturalism,²⁷ moreover, will add that if God didn't exist, we couldn't trust our cognitive faculties, so that, without God, we become epistemologically unhinged.²⁸ Hence, the commitment to God's existence really does infect most of what theists believe.

Now the proponent of quasi-fideism faces a dilemma. For note that this objection builds a fair amount of sophisticated metaphysics and epistemology into the contents of the religious believer's hinge commitment. Notions like creation and sustenance may be part of an ordinary believer's understanding of God, but—taking it for granted that most people do not contemplate the finer points of modal metaphysics—necessary existence most likely isn't, let alone the tenets of Plantingian epistemology. So the dilemma is this: either the hinge commitment of God's existence is metaphysically and epistemologically flord, or it isn't.

Someone who takes the first horn faces two problems. First, hinge commitments are supposed to be basic and uncontroversial claims about the world and ourselves; things we cannot rationally doubt. Surely, this is not the case for the metaphysical and epistemological baggage that is now built into the claim that God exists. A cursory glance at the history of theological and philosophical thinking reveals that the topics of divine creation, sustenance, necessary existence, and proper functionalism are the subjects of vehement controversy. Second, it is empirically implausible that many religious believers really are fundamentally committed to all of *this*. Perhaps some philosophically sophisticated theists are, but certainly not ordinary religious believers. But then epistemic relativism again follows, for we now have different and incompatible versions of the same hinge commitment among religious believers, which boils down to having different and incompatible hinge commitments.

Someone who takes the second horn walks right back into the arms of my earlier argument. If the claim that God exist is construed more modestly, i.e., without an extensive array of metaphysical and epistemological implications, it just doesn't follow from the über hinge.

FRAMEWORK leads to epistemic relativism. Anyone who thinks epistemic relativism is implausible and who was attracted to quasi-fideism because it claims to avoid it, should thus reject quasi-fideism.

²⁶Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

²⁷Beilby, *Naturalism Defeated?*; Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 307–350.

²⁸I'm ignoring a philosophical complication here. According to classical theism, God exists necessarily. Imagining what would be true if he didn't exist involves evaluating counterpossibles, which is notoriously tricky. If we cannot say much about the truth-values of counterpossible claims, we cannot be very confident about what would be the case were God not to exist and so the champion of quasi-fideism may be on thin ice here. Nonetheless, I'll grant that the claims I'm putting in the quasi-fideist's mouth appear initially plausible.

4. ARATIONAL and the Epistemology of Theistic Belief

A second tenet of quasi-fideism is that the commitment to God's existence is not subject to rational evaluation but precedes rationality. I will now show that accepting ARATIONAL has highly counterintuitive consequences for how we ought to evaluate (a) the intellectual lives of religious believers and unbelievers and (b) a number of influential projects from the history of thinking about religious belief.

First, consider a moderately reflective ordinary believer, Sue. Suppose she grew up in a Christian family. In high school and college, she acquainted herself with some of the arguments for and against God's existence and came to doubt whether God exists. Through conversations with friends and mentors and by reading some philosophy of religion, she became convinced that there are good replies to atheistic arguments and that theistic arguments are in pretty decent shape, as far as philosophical arguments go. She regularly goes to church and experiences God's presence in the liturgy. Being the moderately reflective individual she is, she sometimes considers the epistemic status of some of her beliefs (although not necessarily under this very description). Upon doing so, she finds herself firmly believing both that God exists and that she is rational in believing so. She considers that she has grounds for belief in God—arguments, testimony, and experience—that she isn't flouting any intellectual duties, that many people she knows and trusts share her belief, and that, qua epistemic qualities, her belief resembles many of her other beliefs—for instance about the acceptability of various scientific theories or about what other people think—which she also considers wholly rational.

This is a perfectly normal and common case of religious belief: Lots of believers are like Sue. What's more, Sue's self-evaluation seems highly compelling. But the quasi-fideist who subscribes to ARATIONAL must reject Sue's self-assessment. For her to think that her belief in God is rational is an error, because it is an arational hinge commitment. It is a serious blow for a religious epistemology if it ascribes to most ordinary believers a deep-seated confusion or error about their epistemic self-appraisals.²⁹

Second, the same point holds *a fortiori* for all those intellectually sophisticated believers throughout the ages—theologians, philosophers, scientists—who have argued for God's existence or the rationality of belief in God. Luminaries like Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, William Paley, and many others, up to present-day figures such as Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig, and Alexander

²⁹A parallel argument can be run for moderately reflective ordinary atheists. They, too, would be making a category mistake in thinking that their commitment to God's non-existence is rational. See Ranalli, "Revisionism" for an analogous criticism of Pritchard's construal of Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology.

Pruss are all confused or mistaken in thinking that their belief that God exists is, or even could be, rational.³⁰

The proponent of quasi-fideism, however, has to maintain that their confusion runs even deeper, and extends to the meta-level of systematic thinking about belief and rationality—something which not many ordinary believers typically engage in. Someone who subscribes to ARATIONAL is committed to a radical assessment of influential projects in the history of religious epistemology. Traditional *natural theology*, i.e., “weighing arguments for and against God’s existence,”³¹ was a major intellectual endeavor, to which most of the great philosophers and theologians of the past and several renowned scientists from the early modern period until the nineteenth century devoted at least some of their time. The quasi-fideist must judge that all of this was deeply confused, for it is impossible to give rational arguments for or against hinge commitments. Natural theology is tilting at windmills. Pretty much the same holds for everyone who has contributed to the development of Reformed epistemology.³² The point of reformed epistemology is to show how belief in God can be warranted (and justified and rational) for a typical believer, without being based on arguments. The quasi-fideist must again hold that the basic thrust of this project embodies a category mistake: since God’s existence is a hinge commitment for the typical believer, rationality doesn’t apply to it.

This is a significant cost for the quasi-fideist. She has to maintain that large swathes of otherwise impressive thinkers have been confused or mistaken. Perhaps committed Wittgensteinians won’t think much of this, as they already believe that the history of philosophy is littered with pseudo-problems that need to be dissolved rather than resolved. For them, it would not come as a surprise that the language of religious epistemology,

³⁰Again, a parallel point would hold (*mutatis mutandis*) for intellectually sophisticated atheists. Insofar as quasi-fideism allows for atypical believers for whom God’s existence doesn’t function as a hinge commitment (cf. section 2 above) but instead as a regular belief, it is open to its proponents to suggest that quasi-fideism doesn’t capture the situation of these intellectually sophisticated believers. In reply, this move appears ad hoc: What else besides the desire to escape this objection is supposed to motivate the idea that belief in God is not a hinge commitment for these theists? Moreover, the quasi-fideist must still ascribe confusion to intellectually sophisticated believers: In so far as they take theistic arguments to be of relevance to the epistemic situation of the typical believer, they are mistaken.

³¹Taliaferro, “The Project of Natural Theology,” 1. Likewise Alston, *Perceiving God*, 289: “Natural theology is the enterprise of providing support for religious belief by starting with premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious belief. We begin from the mere existence of the world, or the teleological order of the world, or the concept of God, and we try to show that when we think through the implications of our starting point we are led to recognize the existence of a being that possesses attributes sufficient to identify Him as God.” Cf. also Chignell and Pereboom, “Natural Theology.”

³²Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*; Alston, *Perceiving God*; and Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* are the seminal works, but they have spawned a vast secondary literature.

too, has “gone on holiday.”³³ But those of us who are trying to assess quasi-fideism without such prior commitments may well demur.

These costs might be worth it, though, if the benefits of ARATIONAL offset them. I don’t think this is the case. The most important payoff is that it allows you to make sense of the psychological and doxastic stability of belief in God as discussed above.³⁴ But while this is arguably a phenomenon that any religious epistemology should account for, there is no reason to think that quasi-fideism outperforms the competition. Let me hint at just two alternatives. The Reformed epistemologist proposes that belief in God can enjoy strong positive epistemic status if it has been powerfully produced by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*.³⁵ As a result, belief in God will be very stable, not because it is an arational commitment, but because it has a significantly stronger epistemic status than, say, atheistic arguments. Linda Zagzebski’s recent defense of rational religious belief presents another live option.³⁶ She provides an elaborate argument that not only epistemic self-trust, but also epistemic trust in others is a basic and inescapable requirement of rationality. She then employs this argument to show how and why trust in a religious community or in religious authorities can be intimately connected with epistemic self-trust and hence perfectly rational. If she’s right about this, we can explain the remarkable stability of belief in God by noting that it is tied up with self-trust and therefore rationally inescapable.

In addition, there is an important mirror phenomenon that religious epistemology should account for and that quasi-fideism does not handle so well. Arguments may not play a major role in why people adopt or abandon belief in God, but they are not irrelevant either. Atheists often appeal to evil, divine hiddenness, or absence of evidence in justifying their non-belief in God. Theists often mention the appearance of design, the fact that something rather than nothing exists, or religious experience to account for why they believe. Apart from inveterately dogmatic folks on both ends of the spectrum, many people testify to having at least questioned their convictions in the face of rational arguments for or against God’s existence. Neither side is insensitive to arguments. The point can be brought into even sharper focus by comparing it to other hinge commitments. Philosophical arguments have never brought anybody to seriously doubt the existence of an external world, save perhaps a few overly enthusiastic philosophers. Arguments for skepticism or metaphysical anti-realism hardly get any real-life traction in comparison to arguments for and against the existence of God. This is a problem for ARATIONAL: If hinge commitments are supposed to be impervious to rational arguments,

³³Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §38.

³⁴The arationality of hinge commitment perhaps also plays a role in deflecting undesirable applications of epistemic transmission principles. I’ll return to this in the next section.

³⁵Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

³⁶Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, ch. 9.

then it's hard to explain why people would be moved even a bit by theistic or atheistic arguments. Perhaps the quasi-fideist can come up with responses to this challenge, but on the face of it, quasi-fideism fails to save the phenomena here.

In sum, ARATIONAL leads to radically revisionary evaluations of the intellectual lives of believers and unbelievers and of some influential large-scale projects in the history of thought. It doesn't have exclusive benefits and cannot easily account for the actual influence of theistic and atheistic arguments. We should thus reject ARATIONAL and thereby quasi-fideism.

5. NON-BELIEF and Belief in God

The third tenet of quasi-fideism is that a religious believer's attitude vis-à-vis the claim that God exists is *not* belief in the typical epistemologist's sense, but something else.³⁷ I will argue that NON-BELIEF, too, fails.

First of all, Pritchard suggests that NON-BELIEF follows from ARATIONAL: Because hinge commitments aren't susceptible to rational evaluation, they aren't proper beliefs.³⁸ This means that the arguments against ARATIONAL from the previous section also undermine NON-BELIEF. If I'm right that the claim that God exists is rationally evaluable, then the support ARATIONAL might have lent to NON-BELIEF crumbles and we have not yet been given a reason to think that a believer's attitude regarding God's existence is not belief.

A second problem with NON-BELIEF is that religious language is littered with belief-talk. The expression "belief in God" and its cognates are ubiquitous both in ordinary religious discourse and in official statements of faith. Many ordinary theists will not hesitate for a moment to affirm that they *believe* in God. "Religious *believer*" is the default way to describe someone with religious commitments. Both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, accepted by all major Western Christian denominations, open by explicitly proclaiming *belief* in God.³⁹ The first of the six articles

³⁷A quick caveat: as Pritchard rightly notes ("Faith and Reason," 108n9), the notion of belief itself might not pick out any one clearly delineated thing. Eliminativists (e.g., Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism") and interpretationists (Davidson, *Inquiries*; Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, "Real Patterns") argue that "belief" doesn't refer to anything at all but is merely useful parlance. Others claim it is multiply ambiguous (Stevenson, "Six Levels") or vague (Schwitzgebel, "A Phenomenal, Dispositional Account," "A Dispositional Approach"). Digging into these concerns would lead us too far astray. For present purposes, I assume that that there is at least one fairly sharp concept of belief, which many of our run-of-the-mill beliefs fall under and which epistemologists like to think about. NON-BELIEF then claims that a religious believer's attitude towards God's existence does not fall under *that* concept of belief, even though it might fall under one or more other concepts that also have some plausible claim to the title of belief.

³⁸The assumption that rational evaluability is an essential feature of beliefs might be disputable, but since I suggested we bracket questions about the exact nature of (different kinds of) beliefs, I'll grant it here and assume that this is indeed a feature of the kind of belief under discussion.

³⁹The Apostles' Creed reads: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." The Nicene Creed states: "We believe in one God, the Father almighty, Maker heaven

of Islamic faith also is belief in God. And indeed surah 4:136 of the Quran reads: "Whoever disbelieveth in God . . . , he verily wandered far stray."

You might protest that belief *in* God should not be equated with believing *that* God exists. That is correct as far as it goes, but it doesn't help the defender of quasi-fideism. Although belief in X indeed involves more than mere belief that X exists, the former does entail the latter. You cannot believe in X unless you also believe (perhaps dispositionally) that X exists.⁴⁰ To believe in something or someone is to have faith or trust that it (s/he) is up to some task. But of course, no non-existing thing is up to any task! This explains why we can believe in Roger Federer and trust that he will win another grand slam title but cannot believe in Frodo and have faith that he will get the ring of power to Mount Doom (except in his fictional world). When theists avow their belief in God, then, they also believe that God exists. The *prima facie* evidence of informal and formal religious language speaks against NON-BELIEF.

The quasi-fideist could try to deflect this evidence by pointing out that religious language was never meant to express anything in philosophically rigorous terms and that, therefore, it glosses over the philosophically important distinction between a believer's attitude *vis-à-vis* God's existence (a hinge commitment) and that *vis-à-vis* more specific religious propositions (ordinary belief). This response strikes me as question begging. Believers use the word "belief" freely and indiscriminately to express both their attitude towards God's existence as well as various more specific religious propositions. Nothing in religious language or practice suggests that the meaning of "belief" shifts from one case to the other. In the absence of independent reasons to adopt NON-BELIEF, we shouldn't endorse the revisionary interpretation of the evidence that it necessitates.

A third strike against NON-BELIEF is the fact that believers' commitment to God's existence looks an awful lot like belief. On all accounts of belief, having a belief involves having certain characteristic dispositions to act and reason.⁴¹ On the traditional representational account, it furthermore requires having a mental representation of what you believe. For instance, if I believe that there is an open bottle of wine in my kitchen, I will be inclined to silently assert this to myself or out loud to others on suitable occasions, I will be disposed to walk to the kitchen if I long for a glass of wine, I will reason that I don't need to open a new bottle, and I might have an internal representation of the bottle in my mind. Exactly parallel things hold for the average believer. She will assert to herself or in public that God exists, she might act or refrain from acting in certain ways, she might use the existence of God as a premise in her reasoning, and she might have some sort of mental representation of God existing. We have

and earth, and of all things visible and invisible."

⁴⁰Cf. De Ridder and Van Woudenberg, "Worshipping, Believing" for further discussion of the relation between belief-in and belief-that.

⁴¹See Schwitzgebel, "Belief" for an overview of different accounts of belief.

good reason, then, to conclude that the typical religious person indeed *believes* that God exists.

The quasi-fideist might retort by suggesting that these considerations do not tell against her proposal because she already admitted that hinge commitments are similar to ordinary beliefs in many respects. However, they are crucially different in others. This was the point of ARATIONAL. Because commitment to God's existence lacks the feature of being rationally evaluable, it cannot be a belief. That proposal failed, however, and so we don't know in what way a believer's attitude vis-à-vis God's existence is supposed to be different from that of belief. Until this has been explained, we should take appearances at face value.⁴²

Fourth and finally, let's consider whether the work that NON-BELIEF was supposed to do might offer independent reason to accept it after all. If NON-BELIEF solves a pressing problem for the rationality of religious belief, this could compensate for its revisionary interpretation of religious language. Its theoretical fertility could offer strong circumstantial evidence of its correctness, even if—as we just saw—the direct evidence speaks against it. Recall that NON-BELIEF was the key to solving the “containment problem.” If commitment to God's existence isn't rationally based, don't all specific religious beliefs become arational, since they presuppose God's existence? NON-BELIEF solved this problem by denying that commitment to God's existence is a proper belief. Hence it cannot be fed into the epistemic transmission principles that generate the containment problem.

In spite of its cleverness, I think that this is a solution not worth wanting. Far from being a genuine problem, the containment problem correctly highlights that belief in God and more specific religious beliefs are in the same boat as far as rational basing is concerned. If belief in God can be rational, so can more specific religious beliefs. If it cannot, neither can more specific religious beliefs. Let's ask ourselves whether someone could really believe rationally that, say, God loves her while lacking any rational basis for her commitment to God's existence. Consider how a self-professed quasi-fideist should describe her own situation: “I have good reasons to believe that God loves me but I don't have any reasons to think that he exists.”⁴³ At the very least, this sounds paradoxical.⁴⁴ The fact

⁴²As Chris Ranalli pointed out to me, the quasi-fideist could reply to this argument by proposing that hinge commitments should be likened to *faith*. Perhaps having faith in God's existence entails a willingness to use God's existence in one's practical reasoning but not in one's theoretical reasoning. This an intriguing suggestion, but evaluating it would require more extensive discussion of the attitude of faith and its relation to that of belief, for which space is lacking here. See Howard-Snyder, “Does Faith Entail Belief?” “Three Arguments”; Rettler, “Analysis of Faith”; Ichikawa, “Faith and Epistemology” for recent discussion.

⁴³Reformulations that stay closer to the quasi-fideist's preferred terminology don't remove the sense of paradox either. Cf: “My belief that God loves me is rational, but my commitment to his existence is arational.” Or: “I have good reasons to think God loves me but cannot provide any reasons / grounds / rational support for my commitment to his existence.”

⁴⁴For further support, note that quasi-fideism licenses (a) utterances that seem Moore-paradoxical: “God loves me, but I don't have any reason to believe God exists” and (b) utterances that look like abominable conjunctions in Keith DeRose's sense (DeRose, “Solving the Skep-

that NON-BELIEF allows for this possibility, then, actually counts against it. Instead of accepting NON-BELIEF, we should say belief in God is what it appears to be, i.e. *belief*, hang on to whatever epistemic transmission principle we find plausible, and thereby accept that the presence (or absence) of rational support for general theistic belief transmits to specific religious beliefs and vice versa.

You might object that this criticism is too general and too quick. It affects all forms of Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology and thus rashly rules out a potentially promising solution to general skepticism. Consider that a parallel utterance concerned with external world skepticism sounds equally problematic: "I have good reasons to believe that there is a tree in front of me, but I don't have any reasons to think that there is an external world." The hinge epistemologist may grant that this sounds paradoxical but will add that this is because language can be deceptive. Besides, having a feasible solution to skepticism is no small feat, so we should just learn to live with it.

This companions in guilt defense won't work, however, for anti-skeptical belief and religious belief are crucially different, as we have noted repeatedly above. We're much more confident that it is rational to believe that there is a tree in front of us when we see one than we are that it is, or can be, rational to believe that God exists. This is evidenced by the fact that there is virtually no serious debate about the former but plenty about the latter. It is also witnessed by the fact that most epistemologists consider it a desideratum for an acceptable theory of knowledge or rational belief that it renders radical skepticism false,⁴⁵ whereas few, if any, would maintain that a theory of knowledge or rationality automatically fails if it cannot account for rational belief in God. So the idea that you have no reasons for your commitment that there is an external world—understood in the Wittgensteinian sense as meaning that nothing we might offer in support is as certain as that commitment itself—certainly has some initial plausibility. Not so for commitment to God's existence: it's not as if nothing a believer might offer in support of the claim that God exists will be as certain as that claim itself. Someone might be much more confident that she experienced, say, a deep sense of being loved by something transcendent, than she is that God exists. Or a natural theologian might be more confident of the premises of a cosmological argument than of its conclusion.⁴⁶ So my criticism of quasi-fideism doesn't overgeneralize: Someone could accept a Wittgensteinian response to general skepticism but refuse to take onboard its quasi-fideistic extension.

tical Problem"): "I have good reasons to believe that God loves me, but I don't have any reasons to deny God's non-existence." Thanks to Chris Ranalli for pointing this out.

⁴⁵Cf. Bonjour, *Epistemology*; Lemos, *An Introduction*; Pritchard, *What Is This Thing*.

⁴⁶And note that something similar would be true for atheists for whom God's non-existence would be a hinge commitment. They, too, might be much more confident that they have never experienced God, or that religious experience can be explained naturalistically, than that God doesn't exist. The hinge model thus doesn't quite fit the atheistic case, either.

Summing up: we should not believe NON-BELIEF. ARATIONAL offers no support for it, it flies in the face of the direct evidence against it from religious language and practice, and it is of no good theoretical use.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that all three of quasi-fideism's key tenets are untenable. FRAMEWORK leads directly to epistemic relativism. ARATIONAL violates the phenomenology of religious life and systematic reflection on it and doesn't have any significant theoretical benefits. NON-BELIEF fails to do justice to the evidence of religious language and practice, and the solution it offers to the containment problem is unattractive. My conclusion will be obvious: quasi-fideism offers quasi-solutions to real problems in religious epistemology.⁴⁷

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