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SCEPTICISM AND ATHEISM

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ABSTRACT. Our focus will be some prominent ways in which scholars have tried to motivate scepticism about the rationality of religious belief and in the process make a case for atheism. This will lead us in turn to consider how the putative flaws in these sceptical arguments might mitigate against the philosophical case for atheism. Finally, we will consider how *fideistic* and *quasi-fideistic* approaches to the epistemology of religious belief might be able to embody a certain kind of scepticism while nonetheless avoiding atheism.

0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In what follows, I will assume, for simplicity, a theistic conception of God. For now, at least, I will also take it for granted that religious conviction, on the theistic conception, essentially involves a belief that God exists (though we will be questioning this assumption later on). Relatedly, I will also take it as given that atheism is to be understood as the thesis that God, on the theistic conception, does not exist. Someone who endorses atheism thus believes that God, so understood, does not exist. With the debate characterised in this way, there is a very natural way of understanding the relationship, in its most general form, between scepticism and atheism, which is that sceptical arguments directed at religious belief—concerning, say, our putative lack of sufficient evidence for thinking that God exists—can be used to motivated an atheistic outlook. My aim here is to cast light on some of the more specific ways in which atheism and scepticism might be related to one another. My focus will be on some key sceptical arguments—and one *master argument* in particular—regarding the rationality of religious belief which, if successful, would

in turn provide support for atheism. But we will also be considering the claim that the putative flaws in these sceptical arguments can be used to defend the rationality of religious belief, and thereby undermine the case for atheism (at least insofar as the latter is dependent upon such sceptical arguments). Finally, we will also look at how *fideistic*, and *quasi-fideistic*, treatments of the epistemology of religious belief might well avoid atheism while also preserving a certain kind of general scepticism.¹

1. SCEPTICISM AND ATHEISM: THE MASTER ARGUMENT

Consider the following argument, which makes a case for atheism via a general scepticism about the rationality of religious belief (or *religious scepticism*, for short). For reasons that will become apparent, I will be calling this the *master argument*:

The Master Argument From Scepticism to Atheism

- (1) Theistic religious conviction requires one to believe in the existence of God.
- (2) Belief in the existence of God is rational only if there is sufficient evidence for the existence of God.
- (3) There is not sufficient evidence for the existence of God.
- (4) Therefore, belief in God's existence is not rational. (From (2), (3))
- (5) If a belief is not rational, then it should not be held.
- (6) Therefore, one should not have theistic religious conviction. (From (1), (5))
- (7) Therefore, one should be an atheist. (From (6))

Each of these claims seems highly plausible. Let's start with (1). What else could a theistic religious conviction be if it didn't involve belief in the existence of God? For example, how could one have theistic religious conviction if one is, say, *agnostic* about whether God exists? Likewise, (2) seems like a straightforward truism about rational belief. If one's belief lacks appropriate supporting evidence, then surely it can't be rationally held. (3) is more controversial, and so one might think that this is the weak link in the argument (though as we will see one can dispute most, if not all, of the claims in play here). We will consider some reasons to endorse (3) in a moment. (2) and (3) collectively capture one historically prominent motivation for scepticism about the rationality of religious belief, which is the broadly *evidentialist* line that sufficient evidence is required to rationally believe in God's existence but such evidence is lacking.²

(4) follows deductively from premises (2) and (3), and so ought to be uncontroversial. (5) just seems to be an obvious point about belief. Of course, such a belief might be hard, perhaps impossible, for the person with genuine religious conviction to ever give up. And yet, from the perspective of rationality, one ought not to have it, just as one ought not to have a belief that one's

child is innocent of that dreadful crime once it becomes clear that the evidence for his guilt is overwhelming. Finally, (6) follows deductively from premises (1) and (5), and so ought to be uncontroversial. Arguably, (7) is an obvious consequence of (6), though as we will see in due course, there are reasons to dispute this transition.

The reason why I refer to this line of reasoning as a ‘master argument’ is that we can capture several general types of religious scepticism via this template, and also in the process thereby capture several kinds of responses to such scepticism. We can most immediately see this point in action by considering the various ways in which one might try to motivate premise (3). The reasons here are numerous.

For example, one might think that the evidence for God’s existence is always *underdetermined*, such that there are always equally plausible alternative explanations for that evidence that don’t demand the existence of a God (e.g., that the burning bush that is apparently dripping in religious significance is nothing more than a coincidence that is causally due to lightening). In effect, the argument to (3) involves a sub-argument that appeals to a very plausible underdetermination principle:

The Underdetermination Principle for Rational Belief

If one’s evidential basis for believing that p does not prefer p over a known to be incompatible alternative, q , then one’s belief that p is not rational.³

This principle is very plausible, since it is hard to see how evidence that is indifferent to the truth of known to be incompatible alternatives (or, worse, actually favours the non-believed incompatible alternative) can be consistent with one having a rational belief in the target proposition. Wouldn’t it be more rational to (at least) suspend belief? But with this principle in play then one can appeal to a further sub-premise to generate one’s motivation for (3). That is, one can argue that one lacks an evidential basis that prefers belief in God over known to be incompatible alternatives, such as that one’s evidence in fact only demonstrates that one’s experience of, say, the burning bush is simply due to the coincident lightening strike on the bush, and nothing at all to do with God’s agency.

One might further supplement this kind of line with some claim to the effect that any explanation of the evidence that appeals to a mysterious entity like a God, rather than more mundane entities in the usual causal order (like lightening), is bound to be at an epistemic disadvantage. Or one might supplement it by claiming that the kind of evidence cited by religious believers is not of the right kind, on account of how it tends to presuppose religious commitment in the first place. (Think, for example, of religious experiences in this regard). Instead, what is required is evidence that meets some sort of objective standard, and hence can be appreciated as such even by those who lack such conviction. One might then argue that, with the evidence so

construed, evidence for God's existence is conspicuously lacking.⁴

Another sceptical line in defence of (3)—which is often taken to be roughly equivalent to underdetermination-based scepticism, but which I have argued elsewhere is in fact logically distinct—is to appeal to sceptical hypotheses and some form of closure-style principle.⁵ So, for example, one might argue that one's evidential basis for belief in the existence of God does not exclude the sceptical hypothesis that there is no God and one only thinks that there is due to some sort of deception that one cannot rationally exclude, such as a concerted attempt to trick one into believing that there is a God. For example, imagine that there is no God, but suppose further that there are scientists who have detailed knowledge of everyone's cognitive processes (such as their cognitive biases etc), to such an extent that they know what kinds of experiences would trigger someone to falsely believe that God exists and sustain that belief thereafter. Imagine further that they undetectably engineer this response as part of an elaborate experiment, and continue to undetectably prompt experiences that they know will sustain this belief. Given how this sceptical scenario is described one does not seem to be in a position to offer a rational basis for excluding it, as it is indistinguishable from one's current experience. As with the underdetermination-based sceptical argument against rational religious belief just noted, this argument also appeals to a sub-argument in support of its defence of premise (3). The first part of the sub-argument is the claim just noted—*viz.*, that one lacks a rational basis to dismiss a certain sceptical possibility. The second part of the sub-argument, again in keeping with underdetermination-based scepticism, is to appeal to an epistemic principle that effects the required epistemic damage:

The Closure Principle for Rational Belief

If one's evidential basis is sufficient for rational belief that p , and one knows that p entails q , then one's evidential basis is sufficient for rational belief that q .⁶

This principle seems eminently plausible, in that one's sufficient evidential basis for rational belief appears closed under known entailment, at least in usual cases. Suppose I rationally believe that I am sitting down in virtue of a particular evidential basis (my current experiences, say), and I know that if one is sitting down then one is not standing up. Isn't one then in an evidential position to know that one is not standing up? But if that's right, and if it's true that one is unable to eliminate sceptical alternatives to one's belief in the existence of God, such as the scenario described earlier, then it follows that one lacks a sufficient evidential basis for rational belief in the existence of God, in line with (3). That is, if I did have an evidential basis that was sufficient for rational belief that God exists, then I would have an evidential basis that was sufficient for rational belief that I am not subject to the sceptical scenario just outlined (i.e., where there is no God, but I have been 'primed' to believe otherwise by the scientists). Conversely, if the latter is not possible, then

neither is the former, and hence I lack an evidential basis that is sufficient for rational belief that God exists.

There are, of course, other ways of arguing for the truth of a claim like (3). One might appeal to the argument from evil, for example, and thereby claim that the fundamental tension between the essential properties of God (such as His goodness) and what we know about the world around us (such as that apparently pointless evil exists) entails that we lack sufficient evidence for rational belief in the existence of God.⁷ Or one might argue that whether one has a belief in God's existence is so completely contingent upon one's cultural upbringing that it follows that one doesn't really have an evidential basis sufficient for rational belief for this proposition at all.⁸ And so on.

2. RADICAL SCEPTICISM AND RELIGIOUS SCEPTICISM

How persuasive we find the master argument from scepticism to atheism will very much depend on the particular kind of sceptical argument that is plugged into it. Given their prevalence within mainstream discussions of radical scepticism, one might think that the strongest renderings of the master argument will be those that employ the underdetermination or closure principles.⁹ In fact, I think that the exact opposite is the case. The reason for this is that these principles are effective in radical sceptical arguments precisely because the sceptical alternatives in play are radical error-possibilities that call the rational standing of one's beliefs as a whole into question, as opposed to local error-possibilities that call into question the rational standing of a much more restricted set of beliefs. And yet the kinds of sceptical alternatives at issue when it comes to scepticism about the rationality of religious belief are by their nature local error-possibilities.

Let's start by examining that last point. Why is it important that if religious scepticism appeals to error-possibilities at all, then they should be local rather than radical error-possibilities? The reason for this is that religious scepticism isn't particularly interesting if it turns out to just be radical scepticism about the rationality of belief in general. Rather, the claim is meant to be that there is something specifically rationally amiss about religious belief, and not that there is something rationally amiss with *all* belief, and thus, *a fortiori*, religious belief also. In effect, the charge is that religious scepticism that proceeds in this way demonstrates too much, if it demonstrates anything. Moreover, notice that this point has an additional edge to it insofar as we are thinking of religious scepticism being geared towards motivating atheism. If the former entails that the rational status of all belief is now up for grabs, then it can hardly be employed in defence of the rationality of adopting the latter.

So the error-possibilities employed as part of an underdetermination or closure-based religious scepticism had better be local error-possibilities that merely call the rationality of a subset of one's beliefs into question (as was the case, in fact, with regard to the scenarios employed above), and not all of one's beliefs *en masse*. The problem, however, is that what makes radical sceptical error-possibilities so hard to exclude is precisely because they are radical. This is because they also call into question one's background beliefs as well, so that there is nothing the rational status of which is not being called into question by the scenario that one can appeal to. There would be no point, for example, arguing *contra* the brain-in-vat radical sceptical scenario (i.e., that one is currently envatted on Mars being 'fed' one's experiences by supercomputers), that the technology doesn't yet exist and hence the scenario is far-fetched. After all, one's beliefs about the current state of technology are also being produced via the supercomputers!¹⁰

This is not the case when it comes to local error-possibilities. Imagine that I think I see a zebra before me at the zoo, in conditions that appear absolutely normal. You now come along and ask me how I know that it's not a cleverly disguised mule, which is indistinguishable, to the untrained eye (and without conducting special checks, such as for paint), from a real live zebra. In this case, I am perfectly entitled to appeal to my background knowledge to form a view about the plausibility or otherwise of this error-possibility. (Why would the zoo do such a thing? How could they hope to get away with? Wouldn't such a deception be expensive? And so on). In the process I could certainly marshal sufficient evidence to make it rational for me to dismiss this error-possibility and maintain my belief that there is a zebra.¹¹

This is why it is very important to local error-possibilities how they are rationally motivated. In contrast, radical sceptical error-possibilities are not rationally motivated at all, since that would clearly be self-defeating. Instead, they are merely presented. The same strategy is not very effective with a localized error-possibility. Take the scenario we described above in support of religious scepticism, whereby there was no God but one believed that there was due to the interference of the scientists. If this is merely presented, then it ought to be easy for the defender of religious belief to rationally dismiss it. After all, their evidence in general is not being called into question, and no rational motivation has been presented for this error-possibility, so surely the rational thing to do is to appeal to one's background knowledge and argue that this error-possibility is simply far-fetched. As in the zebra case just described, it hardly matters that one cannot distinguish actual conditions from this sceptical scenario, since that in itself doesn't prevent one from being able to know that one is not the victim of such a scenario, and thus retain (for all has been shown to the contrary anyway) one's rational belief in God's existence.

So unlike the radical sceptic, then, the religious sceptic needs to be able to rationally motivate their local error-possibilities. This means that it is crucially important how they

supplement their underdetermination or closure-based religious scepticism with further claims that can play this role. For example, the idea that any explanation of one's evidence that appeals to God will always be rationally deficient when compared with one that appeals only to more mundane features of the causal order. But the worry then is that it is really these further claims that are carrying the dialectical load in the argument, in which case what is added by constructing a case for (3) that also goes via an underdetermination or closure-based argument?

3. OTHER PROBLEMS WITH THE MASTER ARGUMENT

One can also object to the master argument from scepticism to atheism by questioning premises in that argument other than (3). For example, *reformed epistemology* will object to (2), and claim that it can be rational to believe certain propositions even if one lacks sufficient evidence in this regard. More precisely, they will contend that there can be basic beliefs, including basic religious beliefs (such as a belief in God's existence) that can be rationally held even in the absence of supporting evidence (or, at least, supporting evidence of a certain kind anyway; the reason for this *caveat* will become apparent presently). In order to see why reformed epistemologists make this kind of move, we need to first notice that it is a common feature of basic belief across a range of non-religious domains that it lacks evidence of the kind that is being demanded of basic religious belief. The rationality of one's perceptual beliefs, for example, presupposes a general commitment to the reliability of perception, but one has no non-circular evidential basis for that commitment at all (in that we calibrate our perceptual beliefs by appeal to other perceptual beliefs). And yet no one but radical sceptics thinks that there is a standing challenge to the rationality of religious belief as a result of this fact. So unless religious scepticism is to collapse into an appeal to radical scepticism—which, as we noted above, would severely mitigate against its philosophical import—then we should be suspicious about this way of expressing religious scepticism.¹²

More positively, reformed epistemologists claim that just as basic perceptual belief can be rationally held even in the absence of supporting evidence—or, at least, *independent* (i.e., non-perceptual) supporting evidence anyway, such as an *a priori* defence of the reliability of perception—so basic religious belief, such as belief in the existence of God, can be rationally held even in the absence of independent (i.e., non-religious) supporting evidence. Indeed, they claim that one can account for the rationality of basic religious belief along the same lines as contemporary epistemologists offer for basic perceptual belief. In the latter case, the contemporary rationale is that so long as one's perceptual faculties are functioning appropriately

within conditions that are suitable for their application, then one's basic perceptual beliefs can be rational even if one lacks an independent evidential basis for them. Similarly, argue reformed epistemologists, so long as one's religious faculty—the *sensus divinitatis*—is functioning appropriately within conditions that are suitable for its application, then one's basic religious beliefs can be rational even if one lacks an independent evidential basis for them. Of course, the atheist won't accept that there is any faculty of this kind, and so will be sceptical of this argument. But the point is that their opponent has appealed to a style of epistemological reasoning that is usually held to be entirely appropriate with regard to certain kinds of non-religious belief, so what is to prevent them from employing this style of reasoning in defence of religious belief?¹³

Another potential weak spot in the master argument is the transition from (6) to (7). Even if it is granted that one ought not to have theistic religious conviction, why should this entail that one should be an atheist? In particular, rather than positively endorsing atheism, why not instead suspend belief about *both* the existence *and* the non-existence of God and hence opt for *agnosticism*?

Answering this question demands that we determine what the default position is in this regard—is it agnosticism or atheism? Proponents of the latter often take it as read that if one takes oneself to lack a sufficient rational basis for supposing that something exists, then then entails that one is committed to supposing that it doesn't exist. If that were true, then the transition from (6) to (7) would be straightforward. There are grounds to doubt this reasoning, however. One can imagine a conscientious scientist who recognizes that she lacks a sufficient rational basis for supposing that some theoretical entity exists—the Higgs boson, say—but who would not thereby hold that she is committed to it not existing. If the best supported scientific theory available suggests that this theoretical entity exists, then from a scientific point of view one is rational to accept its existence as a good working posit, even if one lacks a rational basis sufficient to support belief in its existence.¹⁴

Why couldn't the same be true of one's commitment in God, such that one could accept (6) while rejecting (7)? That is, one grants, in line with (6), that since one lacks an adequate rational basis for believing in God's existence it follows that one ought not to have religious conviction (i.e., one ought not to believe that God exists). But one does not thereby also endorse (7), since rather than embrace atheism, one instead maintains one's general acceptance of the claim that God exists, albeit while recognizing that it lacks the kind of epistemic pedigree that would be required of a rational belief.

Note that the proposal just sketched would be a very weak form of agnosticism. What makes it a form of agnosticism at all is that it doesn't involve either the belief that God exists or the belief that God doesn't exist. Nonetheless, it does involve a general acceptance of the claim

that God exists, and hence this is a very minimal form of agnosticism. The point is that if we can make sense of such a minimal form of agnosticism getting in the way of the transition from (6) to (7), then it may be even easier to imagine a more standard form of agnosticism—i.e., one which doesn't even involve an acceptance of God's existence—and blocking this transition. In particular, if one holds that suspension of belief is the default position to take on the existence of something when evidence is lacking—as opposed to belief that it doesn't exist—then it will be very natural to suppose that the right conclusion to derive from (6) is not atheism but rather agnosticism.

One way of approaching this last issue is by considering whether a lack of evidence that something exists is evidence that it doesn't exist (as the matter is sometimes put: is absence of evidence, evidence of absence?). If I am looking for something—empirical data suggesting the existence of phlogiston, say—and find that, time and again, it cannot be found, then over time we will take that as evidence that it simply doesn't exist. That is, the best explanation of why evidence of existence cannot be found starts to be that there is nothing to find in the first place.

Crucially, however, the evidential debate about the existence of God is not really analogous to the kind of scenario just described. After all, there are many parties to the debate who claim to have overwhelming evidence that the item in question—God—exists. Of course, it is evidence that won't be accepted by all parties, and so may be thought epistemically deficient in at least some respects, but that's not yet to say that it isn't *bona fide* evidence regardless. It is, at the very least, evidence that many other people—people who otherwise seem entirely reasonable in their beliefs—hold that God exists and that they have evidence in support of this claim. With that in mind, wouldn't the rational thing to do to suspend belief in the existence of God, rather than form the belief that God doesn't exist?

What about premises (1) and (5)? Can they be objected to? In the next section, we will be exploring this question as a way of introducing fideistic responses to religious scepticism. As we will see, this discussion will also expose a further reason to query the transition from (6) to (7).

4. FIDEISM AND QUASI-FIDEISM

One might be wary of (5) on the grounds that there are other ways of evaluating the propriety of a belief than via exclusively rational means. Perhaps some beliefs have a prudential value, for example. Indeed, even an atheist might be willing to grant that there might be some comfort in believing in God's existence, even if this belief is false. I don't think this line of argument is very compelling, however, since the 'should' in play in (5) is clearly one that specifically concerns

rationality. That is, even if one's belief has prudential value, if it is not rationally held then, from a rational point of view, it should not be held at all.¹⁵

Still, one might respond by arguing that once the 'should' is understood in this restrictive fashion, then it now follows that employing (5), in conjunction with (1), to motivate (6) leads to a very specific rendering of (6). Indeed, what we in fact get is this more specific claim:

(6*) Therefore, one should not, from a purely rational point of view, have theistic religious conviction. (From (1), (5))

The problem with (6*), however, is that it doesn't seem to obviously entail (7). In particular, there is a certain way of thinking about theistic religious conviction—*fideism*—which contends that we should not evaluate such conviction in rational terms at all, since it is rather a matter of faith.¹⁶ Such a proposal can entirely accept (6*), but will argue that (7) doesn't follow from it.

Interestingly, one might also appeal to fideism to motivate a rejection of premise (1). The notion of 'belief' is used by philosophers in a wide range of ways. Sometimes it can just mean a general endorsement of a proposition, but other times it can mean something much more specific, such as that particular propositional attitude which is a constituent part of rationally grounded knowledge.¹⁷ The latter is arguably what epistemologists have in mind when they talk about belief, and it is also plausibly that sense of belief that is in play when we are discussing the rationality of belief. On this construal of the notion, however, it is far from clear that religious conviction is best thought of as a belief. After all, beliefs in this sense have some basic connections to reasons and truth. For example, if one recognizes that one has little or no rational basis for thinking that *p* is true, and yet one is wholeheartedly committed to its truth nonetheless, then one's propositional attitude to *p* it is not a believing in this sense. It may be a wishful thinking, for example, or—and I think this is the propositional attitude that is more salient for our purposes—an article of faith, but it is not a belief.

If that's right, then the fideist—who holds that religious conviction is a matter of faith as opposed to (epistemic) rationality—will be well-placed to reject (1) (perhaps in addition to holding that (6*) doesn't entail (7)). Moreover, notice that fideism is in effect a kind of sceptical solution to our sceptical challenge. Whereas other responses try to block the puzzle on epistemic grounds, and thereby demonstrate that religious belief is entirely in order as it is, fideism instead effectively concedes that an epistemic basis for religious conviction is lacking, but nonetheless presses the thought that such conviction is not thereby illegitimate.

Fideism of this general kind is often attributed to the later Wittgenstein,¹⁸ but I want to close by considering a different way of reading Wittgenstein's remarks on faith and reason, since

this suggests an even more radical—and arguably even more scepticism-friendly—way of thinking about fideism. This reading specifically concerns Wittgenstein’s (1969) remarks on the structure of rational evaluation in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*, remarks that were arguably inspired to a large extent by the writings of John Henry Newman.¹⁹

In this work, Wittgenstein argues for a radical new conception of the structure of rational evaluation. According to Wittgenstein, all rational evaluation takes place relative to background hinge commitments. These hinge commitments cannot themselves be subject to rational evaluation, since they are what enables rational evaluation to take place. As such, they are completely arationally held. Indeed, Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes the ‘visceral’ and ‘animal’ nature of these commitments, which are not to be thought of as subject to the realm of reason. One upshot of the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of rational evaluation is that all rational evaluations are essentially local, in that the attempt to rationally evaluate all of one’s commitments (i.e., including one’s hinge commitments) is simply incoherent. It thus follows that traditional attempts at universal rational evaluations, whether negative (i.e., radically sceptical) or positive (i.e., traditional anti-sceptical proposals), are to be rejected out of hand.²⁰

Wittgenstein is thus offering a conception of the structure of rational evaluation such that at the heart of all rational evaluation are basic arational commitments our conviction in which is more a matter of faith than belief (at least on the restricted conception of belief described above, which is the one that interests us). The relevance of this idea to our current concerns becomes apparent once we note the application to religious belief. This is where the parallels with Newman (1979 [1870]) become apparent. Newman famously argued in defence of the rationality of religious belief by appeal to an ingenious kind of epistemic parity argument. Unlike the epistemic parity arguments that we saw being offered by reformed epistemologists above, however, which purport to show that our religious beliefs are epistemically on a par with an everyday class of belief (such as perceptual belief) that enjoys a privileged epistemic status, Newman took a very different approach. He conceded that the religious believer has, at root, a set of basic arational religious commitments. But he claimed that this does not expose religious belief to any particular epistemic censure since *all* belief—even the kind of everyday beliefs that we take to be properly held, if any beliefs are—presuppose basic arational commitments. Here is a famous passage:

“None of us can think or act without the acceptance of truths, not intuitive, not demonstrated, yet sovereign.” Newman (1979 [1870]), 150

Newman’s epistemic parity argument thus doesn’t proceed by arguing that religious belief is analogous to everyday belief in being fully rationally grounded, but rather contends that religious belief is analogous to everyday belief in having arational commitments at its core. Still, the

conclusion of the epistemic parity argument goes through—*viz.*, that religious belief is immune to epistemic censure in at least this regard, since it is no less rationally grounded than everyday belief that is regarded as properly held.

The key difference between Newman and Wittgenstein is one of emphasis, in that whereas the latter is primarily interested in the role that our arational hinge commitments play in our system of belief more generally, Newman is primarily interested to draw out the implications of this thought for the rationality of religious belief in particular. Still, it is clear that Wittgenstein is concerned with the implications of the conception of the structure of rational evaluation that he offers for religious belief, since throughout *On Certainty* he returns to consider the ramifications of this account for this specific domain.

While the account of the rationality of religious belief that results shares some features with standard forms of fideism, it also diverges from it in fundamental ways too, which is why the Wittgenstein-Newman position has been referred to in the literature as *quasi-fideism*.²¹ In particular, while both standard fideism and quasi-fideism hold that religious conviction is at root a matter of faith rather than (epistemically assessable) belief, quasi-fideism departs from fideism in hold that religious belief in general can be as rationally held as everyday (non-hinge) belief in general might be. There is thus no need, on this proposal, to treat religious belief as being of a different epistemic kind to belief in general. The thought is that just as everyday beliefs concerning specific matters—e.g., where one's car is currently parked—can be rationally held in the normal way, even though such a system of rationality presupposes arational hinge commitments (e.g., that there is even an external world at all), so one can rationally hold specific religious beliefs—e.g., about the religious import of a certain piece of scripture—even though such a system of religious rationality presupposes specifically arational religious hinge commitments (e.g., that there is a God, that there can be miracles, and so on).

Notice too how quasi-fideism—perhaps even more so than standard fideism—incorporates sceptical trains of thought. After all, on this view there are clear limitations to rationality, in that the aspiration for a fully general rational vindication of one's beliefs, including one's religious beliefs, is simply unavailable. It is crucial to emphasize, however, that this limitation—if Wittgenstein is correct anyway—is necessary rather than contingent. That is, it is not as if had we been cleverer, more imaginative, more thorough in our inquiries and so on, that we would have been able to undertake such fully general rational evaluations. Rather, they are as incoherent as circle-squares. We are thus led, via a kind of scepticism about the universality of rational evaluation, to a way of thinking about rational belief that lends itself to the general rationality of religious conviction.²² Surprisingly, we thus find scepticism, of a sort anyway,

motivating not atheism, but rather theism.

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NOTES

¹ Note that what we will not be examining here is the rich history of philosophical engagement between scepticism, atheism, and religious belief, since that would take us too far afield.

² Though note that this formulation of an evidentialist basis for scepticism about the rationality of religious belief lacks one key ingredient found in classical—i.e., Lockean—formulations of evidentialism, which is the extent to which the evidence one has must be proportionate to one's level of conviction (and hence very high in the case of religious belief). For a discussion of Lockean evidentialism and its potential to motivate scepticism about the rationality of religious belief, see Pritchard (2003). (Note also that generally I am disinclined to express sceptical arguments in terms of evidence, but rather prefer the more specific category of *reasons*, which I think is a better way of getting a handle on our intuitions in this regard. But since most epistemology of religious belief tends to focus on evidence, I will follow suit)

³ One finds underdetermination principles of this general kind regularly presented as part of sceptical arguments. For some examples, see Yalçın (1992), Brueckner (1994), Cohen (1998), Vogel (2004), and Pritchard (2005*b*).

⁴ Such a restriction on the nature of religious evidence would be, of course, highly controversial. For example, Plantinga (2000, 450-51) offers an interesting example where a subject can both recognise that the evidence, objectively speaking, suggests that not-*p*, and yet has an adequate subjective evidential basis for believing that *p* regardless. The example concerns something that has been stolen, and an agent who is widely known to be a thief. Moreover, all the evidence suggests that he took the item in question (he was in the right place at the right time, had a motive, etc). The accused agent might recognise that the evidence, objectively understood, is massively against him and yet nonetheless know full well, on the basis of his own subjective evidence (i.e., his personal experience), that he did not, on this occasion anyway, steal anything. In such a scenario, the rational thing to do is to believe in accordance with one's subjective evidence rather than the evidence objectively conceived. The parallel with the 'evidence' of religious experience in this scenario should be obvious.

⁵ For more on the logical relationship between underdetermination-based and closure-based sceptical arguments, see Brueckner (1994), Cohen (1998), and Pritchard (2005*a*, part 1; 2005*b*; 2015*a*, part 1).

⁶ Actually, this formulation is not quite right as it stands. I might have overwhelming evidence that suggests that the playing card before me is either a King or a Queen of Hearts, and on that basis arguably have evidence that suffices to make it rational to believe that it is a Queen of Hearts (i.e., given that this evidence excludes so many other alternatives). But clearly I do not have an evidential basis that makes it rational to believe that the card before me is not a King of Hearts, even know I know that if the card before me is a Queen of Hearts then that entails that it is not a King of Hearts. Even so, this formulation should suffice for our modest purposes here. For a discussion of closure-style epistemic principles, and how best to formulate them to serve sceptical purposes, see Pritchard (2015*a*, part one).

⁷ See Tooley (2015) for an excellent survey of the literature on the problem of evil.

⁸ See, for example, Schellenberg (2013). See also the growing literature on evolutionary debunking arguments against religious belief which appeals to a broadly similar kind of argument. This literature is nicely surveyed in Wielenberg (2016).

⁹ In the contemporary literature on radical scepticism, the sceptical problem is almost exclusively formulated in terms of one or both of these principles. For discussion, see Pritchard (2015*a*, part one).

¹⁰ That's not to say that one can never have evidence against a radical sceptical scenario. For example, some have argued that we can have abductive grounds to dismiss them (e.g., Vogel 1990), while others have suggested that we might have a factive rational basis to dismiss them (e.g., Pritchard 2008; 2012). The point is just that it is far more problematic to suppose that this is possible with regard to radical sceptical scenarios than with local sceptical scenarios.

¹¹ Interestingly, this point is often missed, since commentators focus on the fact that one cannot *perceptually* distinguish between the zebra and the cleverly disguised mule (unlike, say, a zoologist). But as our discussion indicates, one can, by appeal to one's background knowledge, rationally form a view as to why an error-possibility should be dismissed even if one lacks this discriminative capacity. For more on this point—and the distinction between what I call *favouring* as opposed to *discriminating* evidence that underlies it—see Pritchard (2010).

¹² This is what is known as a 'parity argument'. One argues that the form of reasoning behind religious scepticism would be just as applicable to other forms of belief that, radical scepticism aside, are thought to be entirely in order, from a rational point of view. Given that religious scepticism is meant to be specific to the domain of religious belief, and so ought not to collapse into a general radical scepticism, so this significantly undermines its philosophical import. For more discussion of parity arguments in the context of reformed epistemology, see Plantinga (1983; 2000) and Alston (1991).

¹³ Another route to denying (2) is offered by Zagzebski (2010, 396). She makes the interesting point that treating belief in God's existence as somehow epistemically foundational to religious belief—in the sense that one needs to establish the rationality of this belief before one can defend the rationality of religious belief in general (such that if one fails in this task then a general religious scepticism follows)—is in fact to get things entirely the wrong way around. She claims, in contrast, that the more specific religious beliefs that one holds—e.g., regarding certain religious

experiences—can in fact be rationally held independently of the rational basis of one’s belief in God’s existence, such that these more specific religious beliefs can ultimately form the rational basis for one’s belief in God’s existence.

¹⁴ See van Fraassen’s (1980) for an influential defence, as part of his wider defence of constructive empiricism in the philosophy of science, of an account of scientific acceptance in theoretical claims, as opposed to scientific belief, that is along these lines.

¹⁵ For similar reasons, I don’t think it is relevant to our assessment of (5) that it may in practice be impossible for those with religious conviction to shake their belief in God’s existence.

¹⁶ For an excellent recent survey of philosophical work on fideism, see Amesbury (2016).

¹⁷ See Stevenson (2002) for a useful taxonomy of different uses of the notion of belief in the philosophical literature.

¹⁸ See especially Wittgenstein (1966). For two key discussions of a straightforward Wittgensteinian fideism, see Nielsen (1967) and Philips (1976).

¹⁹ See especially Newman (1979 [1870]). For defences of the parallels between Wittgenstein’s account of the structure of rational evaluation in *On Certainty* and the views defended by Newman, see Keinzler (2006) and Pritchard (2015*b*).

²⁰ For some key contemporary interpretations of a Wittgenstein hinge epistemology, see Williams (1991), Wright (2004), Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Pritchard (2012*b*; 2015*a*; *forthcominga*), Coliva (2015), and Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For two surveys of contemporary work on hinge epistemology, see Pritchard (2011*b*; 2017).

²¹ I introduced this nomenclature in Pritchard (2011*a*). For further discussion of quasi-fideism, so conceived, see Pritchard (2015*b*; *forthcomingb*; *forthcomingc*).

²² Thanks to Graham Oppy.