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Reason and Religion

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“I don’t believe in God, but I miss Him” are the first words of Julian Barnes’ book on death, *Nothing to be Frightened Of*. (Barnes 2008, 1) Nonbelievers (like Barnes) who are wistful and even nonbelievers (like Nietzscheans) who say, “good riddance” may be intrigued by the topic of reason and religion.

What is religion? Daniel Dennett’s definition is a good starting point: Religions are “social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.” (Dennett 2006, 9) Religions are complex social phenomena that encompass a congeries of institutions, hierarchies of human authorities, beliefs, doctrines superstitions, public rituals, private practices, prescribed and proscribed behavior. In the vast arrays of practices and doctrines that make up religions, reason has a sprawling role.

The three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—endorse a personal God. In these religions, God is conceived as the creator of the universe, who cares for his creatures. He is maximally excellent in power, knowledge and goodness. Philosophical questions about reason and the Abrahamic religions tend to arise with regard to beliefs about God—his existence, his nature, and his relation to us. To avoid getting lost in the ungainly array of activities and beliefs that mark religions generally, I’ll confine attention to arguments about a single question: Is it reasonable to believe in a personal God? I shall confine discussion to the epistemic reasonableness of personal theism.

State of the Art

The current state of the question of religion and reason has its recent roots in earlier centuries. Medieval theologians offered a variety of proofs of the existence of God based on premises that reasonable people would assent to.

If successful, a natural-theological argument (e.g., the ontological argument, the “First-Cause” argument, the design argument, etc.) would demonstrate the truth and rationality of theism. Today, however, most of these arguments are defunct—although I still harbor hopes for a sound version of the ontological argument (Matthews and Baker 2010). The 18th century saw religious authority challenged by Enlightenment thinkers; the 19th century saw Freud, Marx and Nietzsche deal religion a further blow by emphasizing nonrational aspects of human nature. Finally, the rise of Darwinism seemed to leave theistic religion in eclipse, especially in the eyes of intellectuals. It is hardly surprising that in the 20th century, the question of evidence for the existence of God came to the fore.

In epistemology generally, a view called ‘evidentialism’ rose to prominence. According to evidentialism, a person is epistemically justified in believing a proposition *p* if and only if the person has good epistemic reasons supporting *p*. Epistemic reasons are reasons to think that the proposition is true. Evidentialism is not concerned with any sort of practical value that a belief may have. Epistemic justification concerns only reasons relevant to the truth of a belief.

I shall organize the discussion of the “state of the art” discussion of reason and religion around a simple generic version of an evidentialist argument against theism, formulated in terms of epistemic entitlement. Say that a person is epistemically entitled to believe *p* if and only if the person’s believing that *p* violates no epistemic duty. Evidentialism applied to the question of the existence of God becomes the view that one is entitled to believe in God only if one has sufficient evidence for God’s existence. Call this ‘The Evidentialist Master Argument’ (EMA):

1. If anyone is entitled to believe that God exists, then there is sufficient evidence for God’s existence.
 2. There is not sufficient evidence for God’s existence.
- Therefore,
3. No one is entitled to believe that God exists.

Let me make a comment on each of the premises: (1) The sufficient evidence required by Premise 1 is epistemic. Pragmatic considerations—such as the moral value of believing something—are not evidence in the requisite sense. Similarly, being entitled to believe is interpreted as epistemic. (2) Sufficient evidence for God’s existence means ‘sufficient

evidence on balance.’ Evidence, otherwise sufficient, may be overridden by evidence against God’s existence—from science, the existence of evil, or from some other source.

The Evidentialist Master Argument (EMA) is obviously valid. The question is whether or not it is sound. Are its premises true? In this section, we’ll consider arguments for and against the premises of the EMA.

In favor of Premise 1 of the EMA:

Many philosophers simply assume that Premise 1 is true. At the beginning of the 20th century, for example, W.K. Clifford (Clifford 1999), proclaimed, “It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Clifford gave reasons to believe this dictum that many have found inconclusive, at best. It is noteworthy that the dictum is usually applied exclusively to religious belief—to the detriment of theism. Toward the end of the century, Peter van Inwagen (van Inwagen, 1999) spelled out the disastrous consequences of consistently applying the principle to *all* our beliefs. Nevertheless, many philosophers (e.g., Feldman 2007) embrace this dictum with moralistic fervor.

In favor of Premise 2 of the EMA:

Premise 2 is supported by various arguments about the existence of evil. Whatever sufficient evidence there is for the existence of God is overridden, many hold, by the extent of undeserved suffering. Alvin Plantinga showed that the existence of God is not logically inconsistent with the existence of evil. (Plantinga 1978) However, the mere logical consistency of the existence of God and the presence of (some) evil does not dispel worries about the amount and distribution of evil in the world. Here is a simple example of what is called the ‘evidential’ argument from evil: (directly quoted from Rowe 2004, 5)

- a. There exist horrendous evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no justifying reason to permit.
 - b. An all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would not permit an evil unless he had a justifying reason to permit it.
- ∴ c. God does not exist.

Although presented as if it were a valid deductive argument, at the end of the article, Rowe claims only that “the facts about evil in our world provide good reason to think that God does not exist;” The argument is “only one of probability.” (Rowe 2004, 13) In response, Howard-Snyder and Bergmann criticize premise b (along with “Bayesian” probabilistic variants) as being arguments from ignorance (Howard-Snyder & Bergmann 2004). How can we know what reasons an omnipotent God has for allowing horrendous evils?

Neither arguments for or against Premise b are, I believe, logically compelling. Theodicies that attempt to “justify God’s ways to man” invariably fail.¹ Attempts to use a libertarian view of free will don’t touch the problem inasmuch as the real worry is the evil caused by God. (See Job, King Saul.) In my opinion, the best that the theist can do in the face of examples of horrific evils is to charge that we are in no position to judge what an all-good, omnipotent God would permit to happen. The atheist can always respond that, surely, an all-good, omnipotent God would not permit *this* atrocity to happen. And the theist can ask the atheist, How do you know? The result seems to be a logical impasse.

I’ll consider a different line of thought—one based on science—in support of Premise 2 of the EMA in the next section. First, let us turn to arguments that can be deployed to reject the EMA.

In opposition to Premise 1 of the EMA:

Alvin Plantinga’s view of warrant may be seen as rejection of premise 1. Plantinga exploded onto the scene with what he called Reformed Epistemology, which holds that evidence is not necessary for warranted belief in God. Plantinga has argued at length that Christian belief can have “warrant even if it doesn’t receive it by way of argument or propositional evidence.” (Plantinga 2000, 135) Although Plantinga does not reject natural theology, which aims to prove the existence of God on the basis of premises that are thought (or hoped) to be generally agreed on, his approach is rooted elsewhere. In the Reformed (or Calvinistic) tradition, Christians do not need such arguments, because belief in God is “properly basic.” A “person is

¹ “Malt does more that Milton can/ To justify God’s ways to man” (Housman 1954, 456-58).

entirely within his epistemic rights, entirely rational, in believing in God, even if he has no argument for this belief..." (Plantinga 1987, 265)

Plantinga proposes a model for how beliefs about God have warrant. He develops a suggestion of Calvin's, which can also be seen in Aquinas, that human beings have an instinctive tendency to develop beliefs about God in a variety of situations and circumstances. On this view, all people have a *sensus divinitatis* working in them. (Plantinga 2000, 170-2) Plantinga likens the *sensus divinitatis* to an input-output device: It takes as input various circumstances—the starry heavens, the beauty of a tiny flower—and issues as output beliefs about God. Such beliefs are as spontaneous as perceptual beliefs or memories. They are “occasioned by the circumstances; they are not conclusions from them.” (Plantinga 2000, 75) You look at the buds on the trees and spontaneously the belief arises in you that there are buds on the trees. What prompts your belief is not evidence for it. Such a belief is “basic, in the sense that it is not accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions.” Similarly, for memories. You ask me what I had for breakfast, and the answer just comes to my mind. Or a priori beliefs: I don't infer from other beliefs that modus ponens is a valid form of argument; I just see that it is.

According to Plantinga, God designed our cognitive faculties, one of which is the *sensus divinitatis*. Under the right conditions, the *sensus divinitatis* produces true beliefs about God that are not evidentially based on other beliefs. The *sensus divinitatis* is a reliable belief-forming mechanism. Beliefs produced by the *sensus divinitatis* are typically not accepted on the basis of any argument at all. And like memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs, and a priori beliefs, beliefs about God can have warrant without being inferred from any other propositions.

On Plantinga's model, the *sensus divinitatis* works in a way analogous to the cognitive mechanisms for perceptual beliefs, memories, and a priori beliefs. Such beliefs are all starting points for thought. They are not inferred from other beliefs. They are thus basic. Moreover, when the cognitive systems function properly, such beliefs are *properly* basic in two ways. First, with respect to justification: If belief that p is produced in S by S's *sensus divinitatis*, S is within his epistemic rights to accept p independently of the evidential basis of other propositions. Second, with respect to warrant: If belief that p is produced in S by S's *sensus divinitatis* and S accepts p

independently of the evidential basis of other propositions, then p has warrant for S. (Plantinga 2000, 178)

Plantinga goes on to develop a positive account of knowledge as true, warranted belief, where a belief has warrant if the belief is produced by proper functioning of epistemic faculties, in an appropriate environment, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. (Plantinga 1993) Warrant is thus connected to proper function. A belief has warrant just in case “it is produced by cognitive processes or faculties that are functioning properly, in a cognitive environment that is propitious for that exercise of cognitive powers, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true belief.” (Plantinga, 2000, xi) Plantinga applies this general schema to theistic belief.

Plantinga notes that his account of warranted theistic belief presupposes that God exists: If God does not exist, the belief that he does exist is (probably) without warrant, and if God does exist, the belief that he does exist (probably) does have warrant. Thus, the de jure question of whether belief that God exists has warrant is not independent of the de facto question of whether God does exist.

Richard Feldman diagnoses Plantinga’s view as a species of what he calls ‘authoritarian epistemology,’ which fits the following general pattern: “If S has evidence E, then it is rational for S to believe P iff the inference from E to P is approved by ____.” (Feldman 2004, 123) But, Feldman asks, “Why think that good reasoning is reasoning that follows patterns prescribed by God?” He does not accept the answer that “God knows what good reasoning is and designed us to reason well.” On the contrary, Feldman holds that “there is an independently identifiable thing that counts as good reasoning or justified belief...” (Feldman 2004, 124)

Feldman’s criticism rests on a presupposition that Plantinga would deny—namely, that Plantinga’s condition for reasonable belief aims to explain or illuminate the basis of rationality “as an independently identifiable thing.” Since Plantinga would deny Feldman’s presupposition, the Feldman/Plantinga disagreement here seems to be a stand-off.

Whether belief in God is “properly basic” and thus reasonable depends in part on whether there are defeating conditions for the belief, especially from the existence of evil. Atheist Michael Tooley, along with others both theists

and atheists, has pushed this line of thought in a book he co-authored with Plantinga. (Plantinga and Tooley, 2008.) Tooley argues that in light of the Lisbon earthquake in which approximately 60,000 innocent people died, it is extremely unlikely that a powerful and beneficent God exists; i.e., the fact of such innocent suffering makes it highly improbable that God exists. Plantinga replies, among other things, that even if God's existence were improbable with respect to evil, or a certain kind of evil, it may not be improbable on our total evidence. There are back-and-forth responses and replies by Plantinga and Tooley. Again, there seems to be a stand-off.

Plantinga's view has also come under criticism from inside Christianity. A different kind of dissent from Plantinga comes from within the natural-theology tradition in Christianity. (Quinn 1985)² A number of philosophers, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have taken issue with Plantinga. (Pargetter 2007, Zagzebski 1993) Some of the most interesting material comes from a debate between Plantinga and Philip Quinn (Quinn 1985), who argued that intellectually sophisticated people in our society are unlikely to be in an epistemic situation in which belief in God is properly basic. (Hasker, 1998)

In opposition to Premise 2 of the EMA:

William Alston's view of religious experience as evidence for the existence of God may be seen as rejection of premise 2. Alston has argued that we do, in fact, have sufficient evidence for God's existence. (Alston 2004) Religious experience of the sort that is taken to be awareness of God provides prima facie rational grounds for believing. The rational support may be overridden if one also has reason to think that the experience is untrustworthy. Alston's strategy is to take religious experience to be like sensory experience in that in the absence of overrides or rebutters, beliefs formed on the basis of such experience are rationally acceptable. Then, he fends off objections about dissimilarities between perceptual experience and religious experience that is taken to be awareness of God.

As attractive as Alston's case is for a believer, it remains the case that religious experiences, unlike perceptual experiences, are not subject to

² Also see Plantinga's reply in Plantinga 1986. For Roman Catholic responses to Reformed Epistemology, see *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, Linda Zagzebski, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1993).

“cross-checking” that would rule out unsuitable causes (e.g., subliminal factors). (Fales 2004) Many philosophers (e.g., Daniel Dennett) would dismiss Alston’s position out of hand. In order to be evidence of anything, such philosophers hold, a phenomenon must be publicly available. This seems to me too quick. (Baker, forthcoming) In the interest of space, let me just conclude that both sides are riddled with presuppositions not shared by the opponents.

My Point of View

Turning now to my own point of view, I find the “state of the art” to be deeply inconclusive with respect to the role of reason in providing entitlement for religious belief. Neither the arguments cavassed for or against Premises 1 and 2 of the EMA would be logically compelling to a neutral party (if there are any).

Although I believe that the EMA is unsound, my arguments will not show that belief in God is rational, but only that two important arguments for the EMA should be rejected. The first to be rejected is a new version of evidentialism that can be deployed in favor of Premise 2. The second to be rejected is a version of scientific naturalism that can be deployed in favor of both Premises 1 and 2.

Rebuttal of first argument for EMA: The No-Rational-Disagreement Argument

The argument that I want to refute is a (new, to me) version of evidentialism developed by Richard Feldman (Feldman 2007). This argument—call it the “No-Rational-Disagreement Argument” or ‘the (NRD) Argument’—is designed to show that if epistemic peers who fully discuss all their evidence cannot come to agreement on a proposition *p*, then neither is epistemically justified in believing that *p*.

Feldman’s argument concludes that there can be no rational disagreement among epistemic peers who share all their information. In that case, if epistemic peers who initially disagree about whether or not God exists share all their information, and neither is convinced by the other, the only rational position is for both of them to suspend judgment about the existence of God. In that case, neither has sufficient evidence for or against her belief about God.

In greater detail: Suppose that A asserts, “God exists,” and B asserts, “God does not exist.” Then, there is a single proposition about which A and B disagree. One of them is wrong; one of them believes something that is false. A and B may agree on politics and on how the curriculum should be structured and on much else; but there is at least one thing that they genuinely disagree about: whether or not God exists.

Say that A and B are epistemic peers if they are more or less equal in intelligence, reasoning ability and background information.³ When epistemic peers have fully discussed a topic and have not withheld any information about it, they know each other’s view on the topic and the evidence that the other has for her view on the topic. Say that such epistemic peers have *shared all their evidence*. People who are not epistemic peers, or who have not shared their evidence may rationally disagree. But, according to Feldman’s argument, epistemic peers who have shared their evidence cannot rationally disagree.

The argument is based on what Feldman calls ‘the Uniqueness Thesis’—the thesis that a “body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions (e.g., one theory out of a bunch of exclusive alternatives) and ...it justifies at most one attitude toward any particular proposition.” (Feldman 2007, 205)

The Uniqueness Thesis (UT): Given a body of evidence, there is only one rationally justified attitude toward a proposition: belief, disbelief, suspension of judgment.

If A and B are epistemic peers who have shared all their evidence, and still disagree on a topic, then, by (UT), the only rationally justified position is for each to suspend belief on the topic.

Let me formulate the argument from Feldman that is to show that belief in God is unreasonable. First, let me give conditions for being in circumstances C:

³ The terminology as well as the argument from the (im)possibility of rational disagreement come from Richard Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements” in Louise M. Antony, ed., *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life* (New York: Oxford, 2007): 194-214.

A and B are in circumstances C if and only if:

- (1) A and B are epistemic peers and
- (2) A and B have shared all their evidence.

(UT) and the idea of circumstances C then lead to a new argument form—the No-Rational-Disagreement Argument:

- (1) If disputants in circumstances C disagree about the truth of a proposition p, the only rational position for each is to suspend judgment about p. (from UT)
- (2) q is a proposition, and the disputants who are in circumstances C and disagree about the truth of q. (empirical truth)
- ∴(3) The only rational position for the disputants is to suspend judgment about q.
- (4) If (3), then a disputant's belief that q is unreasonable. (conceptual truth)
- ∴(5) A disputant's belief that q is unreasonable.

If we substitute the proposition that God exists for 'q', we get the conclusion that a disputant's belief that God exists is unreasonable.

If the NRD Argument is sound, then whatever reason that a person has to believe in God is compromised by the existence of unbelieving epistemic peers: "Even if our individual reflections on these hard questions [about the existence of God] provides some justification for the beliefs that may seem correct to us, that evidence is counterbalanced when we learn that our peers disagree." (Feldman 2007, 212) "[I]t cannot be that epistemic peers who have shared their evidence can reasonably come to different conclusions." (Feldman 2007, 213)

However, the NRD Argument is unsound. Here is a straightforward counterexample to it.

- (1") If the Supreme Court Justices are in circumstances C and disagree about the truth of a proposition p, the only rational position for each is to suspend judgment about p. (UT)
- (2") That the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act is compatible with the US Constitution is a proposition, and the Supreme

Court Justices are in circumstances C, and disagree about the truth of the proposition.

- ∴ (3'') The only rational position for the disputants is to suspend judgment about the proposition.
- (4'') If (3''), then the only rational position for the disputants is to suspend judgment about the proposition that reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act is compatible with the U.S. Constitution
- ∴ (5'') Belief that the proposition that reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act is compatible with the U.S. Constitution is unreasonable.

The argument is valid. Is the conclusion (5'') true? It seems not. If (5'') were true, then *all* nonunanimous Supreme Court decisions based on the Justices' beliefs would be unreasonable, because each member of the Court would be unreasonable to have the belief, no matter how carefully considered, on the basis of which he or she voted. Many of the most important U.S. Supreme Court decisions—including the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act—are arrived at by a 5 to 4 majority.

Any standard of epistemic reasonableness that has the consequence that it is epistemically unreasonable for Justices to have beliefs on which they vote is a nonstarter. Nor is it any good to note that the Justices have a legal obligation to decide: A legal obligation may give them a legal or moral reason to come to a decision, but not an epistemic reason to have the divergent beliefs that led to the decision.

A defender of the NRD Argument may respond that the NRD Argument has to do only with belief, not action. However, this response will not do: belief is inextricably bound to action. To suppose that action is independent of belief would make action (and Supreme Court decisions) incoherent. You do not have to confuse epistemic and practical rationality to think that (epistemically) rational belief should not lead away from (practically) rational action. Principles that put epistemic and practical rationality in conflict are unacceptable.

Since the NRD Argument is valid and the conclusion is false, one of the premises is false. Someone may suggest that the Supreme Court Justices are not in circumstances C. But the Justices are a paradigm case of epistemic peers who have shared the same evidence, and who have discussed the evidence with one another. So, (2''), the empirical claim, is true.

The likely culprit to be the false premise is (1'')—based on (UT). Feldman gives no direct arguments for UT. He supports UT with a number of examples. Here are two:

(a) A detective, who knows that there is only one culprit guilty of a certain crime, gathers evidence against Lefty and Righty and comes to the conclusion that Lefty is guilty. The detective infers, then, that Righty is not guilty. Feldman says that such a detective “cannot also reasonably think that it is reasonable to conclude that Righty is guilty. This combination of beliefs simply does not make sense.” (205) Feldman is mistaken. If you think that p is true and thus that $\text{not-}p$ is false, it does not follow that you think that $\text{not-}p$ is unreasonable.

(b) Feldman argues that difference in worldviews does not generate rational disagreement. But his argument conflates reasonably rejecting a starting point (because it's incompatible with your own starting point) and finding the other's starting point unreasonable. Surely, you can reasonably reject a starting point without finding it unreasonable.

Feldman repeatedly conflates holding a belief to be false with holding it to be unreasonable. Of course, if I think p and you disagree, I think that you are wrong and that your belief is false. But I need not think that it is unreasonable for you to have your belief—even if I think that you are my epistemic peer and that we have combined all our evidence. I do not think that you would assess Feldman's examples the way that Feldman does unless you were already committed to (UT). So, rather than supporting (UT), Feldman's examples depend on (UT).

There are further reasons to reject (UT). In general, honest acceptance of (UT), i.e., willingness to act on it, would be epistemically crippling. Here are some examples.

1. Two epistemic peers, A and B, with shared evidence may disagree in how to weigh the evidence for p , without there being a “right” way to weigh the evidence: Suppose that A and B disagree about a proposal to tax petroleum-based packaging products. In sharing their evidence, they find that they agree that if the new policy comes into law, there will be a significant decrease in the amount of waste that goes into landfills. But they

still disagree on how much weight to give this proposition, especially when weighed against the cost to the less affluent. Neither convinces the other. According to (UT), they cannot both be rational. Rationality is preserved only if they both suspend belief. If there is a vote on the proposal to tax petroleum-based packaging products, both A and B should stay home. Indeed, so should everyone who was discussed the proposal with someone she disagrees with. This consequence would devastate our common life.

2. Applying (UT) to itself, we should suspend judgment on it. I, for one, think that (UT) is false, and my evidence consists in the counterexamples I gave. If you are my epistemic peer and you think that (UT) is true, then I'll combine your evidence with mine as far as I can. If we each want to maintain our beliefs about (UT), then (according to UT) we should suspend judgment on it. But if we suspend judgment on it, we should not regard as true. And without (UT), the tolerant view of reasonable disagreement remains intact.

In short, (UT), and the NRD Argument in general, would have us suspend beliefs about politics, values, family life, equality of the sexes, discrimination against homosexuals, along with philosophical beliefs (about universals, mereology, modality, and so on) and scientific theories underdetermined by the evidence. (E.g., Copernicanism in 1543)

This concludes my counterargument to the NRD Argument for premise 2 of The Evidentialist Master Argument. To refute the NRD Argument for Premise 2, of course does not show that Premise 2 is false; but it does show that a seemingly strong argument in favor of Premise 2—Feldmans' NRD Argument—fails.

Rebuttal of second argument for EMA: An Argument from Science

There are numerous arguments based on science that could be used to support the premises of the EMA. Here is a simple argument for Premise 2 of the EMA.

- i. If there is sufficient evidence for belief that God exists, then science provides it.
- ii. Science does not provide sufficient evidence for the belief that God exists.

∴ iii. There is not sufficient evidence for belief that God exists.
(Premise 2 of the EMA)

Again, the argument is valid. Premise ii is true, but its truth is not a matter of what science turns up; its truth follows from the nature of science. Science is constrained by methodological naturalism, the view that scientific explanations make no reference to any supernatural forces. Methodological naturalism is not an ad hoc assumption, or a bias in science; it is constitutive of science and partly responsible for the success of science.

The sciences are in the business of discovering natural causes, and only natural causes. They do not and cannot appeal to immaterial entities or to supernatural agents. As long as an explanation seems to require a supernatural agent, it is not yet a scientific explanation. So, even if God exists, science—by its nature—will provide no evidence for his existence. Hence, although Premise ii is true, Premise i is false. Hence, the scientific-naturalism version of the EMA is unsound.

The Upshot

The conclusion is not that God exists or even that the belief that God exists is epistemically justified. Rather, evidentialism—construed as the EMA, the NRD Argument, or the argument from science—provides no reason to deny or to suspend belief in the existence of God.

However, we can reach a more constructive conclusion. Premise 1 of the EMA is just an instance of evidentialism. So, if Premise 1 of the EMA is false, then so is evidentialism. However, to give up evidentialism does not imply that evidence is irrelevant to whether one should believe *p*, much less that we should abandon reasonableness. Rather, it means that we should conceive of reasonableness in a more reasonable way.

Indeed, epistemic evidence does not seem to be the only ingredient in epistemic entitlement. We are certainly entitled to our everyday beliefs (e.g., that my book review is due next week, that I'll go to the grocery store tomorrow, that many Americans lack health insurance). But for most everyday beliefs, we have nothing worthy of being called 'bodies of evidence'. To hold that "rationally, you should suspend all those beliefs" would make it impossible to live. Evidentialism leaves out nonepistemic reasons—moral, social, psychological—for accepting or rejecting a belief.

Evidentialism view is not suitable for human beings, who must act under uncertainty. It cripples rational action. It divorces rational belief from what it is rational to do.

Interestingly, the so-called New Atheists—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and with more restraint, Daniel Dennett⁴—also go beyond evidentialism in their critiques of religion. They also use social and moral arguments, not just epistemic arguments, against religion. They are concerned, not only with the falsity of religion, but also with its impact: Is it oppressive or liberating? Is it toxic or beneficial? Richard Dawkins takes religion of all kinds to be dangerous to society; he claims that religion promotes fanaticism and subverts science. (Dawkins 2006) Sam Harris links religion to terrorism (Harris 2004), and Christopher Hitchens holds that religion “poisons everything.” (Hitchens 2007) Such claims against religion do not concern the epistemic credentials of any particular kind of religion, but rather concern reason in a broader sense.

I heartily agree that reason in a broader sense is more appropriate than the epistemic reason allowed by evidentialism that sever belief from action and, if adhered to, paralyze action or result in hypocrisy (as we saw in the case of the Supreme Court). However, the way that some of the the New Atheists use nonepistemic reasons leaves something to be desired. Here is an argument that can be elicited from Dawkins 2006:

- i. All manner of atrocities are committed in the name of religion.
- ∴ ii. Therefore, religion is pernicious.

This argument is a nonsequitur (or it is unsound if we charitably add the premise that would make it valid: If all manner of atrocities are committed in the name of religions, then religion is pernicious.) In the first place, religion is far from monolithic. Even within one religion, there are bitter disagreements. Some Christians kill Christian abortion doctors. Atrocious, I agree. But in light of all the Christians condemning the murder, it hardly seems fair to blame Christianity as a whole. To every case that Dawkins mentions, there is a similar response.

⁴ Daniel Dennett, who tends toward religious skepticism, makes only one prescription “categorically and without reservation: Do more research.” (Dennett, 2006, 311) Dennett takes the stance of a sociologist of religion. See his *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

Dawkins also argues that religious people inculcate unquestioned faith into their young, with the result that their ability to reason well and appreciate science is impeded. (Dawkins 2006). Some religious parents no doubt do indoctrinate their children, as do some nonreligious parents; but not all of either sort do. Moreover, fundamentalists may be excellent at reasoning. Ideology does not seem to hamper the ability to reason well.

The New Atheists all consider religions to be social institutions, and only to be social institutions. To understand religion better, Dennett advocates more research on the evolutionary history of religion, as well as “what religion does.” (Dennett 2006, 31) Theists can agree; they too want to understand religious social institutions better, and research would help us understand the sociological dimension of religion better. But that’s all. Because of the methodological naturalism of science, we know in advance that any scientific explanation of the origin and development of religious belief ipso facto will include no reference to any supernatural forces. If any religion is true, its truth will not be uncovered by a scientific account of its origins.

Perhaps if we had a scientific account of the origins and development of a religion, people would no longer seek anything transcendent. My guess is that some would and some would not. The religious need felt by some believers is not a gap that science can fill. Of course, there could be a scientific psychological account of religious longing, but that would imply nothing about whether such a need was satisfied by something transcendent. There is no way for science to rule out the existence of God, except to declare that there is nothing more than what science has access to. But how would a scientist be justified in claiming that?

In sum, scientific reason is constitutionally unable to render a verdict on the existence of God. In any case, we need to construe reason more broadly than evidentialists allow. It seems to me no violation of any epistemic duty to reject the Taliban’s version of Islam on account of their treatment of women. I would not be irrational to persist in my unbelief in the face of Taliban leaders who are both my epistemic peers and who disagree with me.

Without taking a stand on the effects of various kinds of religion—and it is important to remember that religion is not monolithic—let me conclude with a thought from William James (James 1956/1896) “A rule of thinking that would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if

those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.” So, I conclude that reason, rightly understood, does not preclude religion, rightly understood.

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