

# **THE JUSTIFICATION AND RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

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## ***Abstract***

I am interested in discovering if the rationality of religious belief can be defended. I begin by elucidating the specific beliefs I wish to investigate and surveying the available standards for analyzing arguments for them. I go on to argue that any adequate conception of justification must include an access component, because without it a discussion of rational belief maintenance is impossible. I also suggest that an adequate theory be commensurable with both an ‘all-or-nothing’ and a degree-sensitive understanding of rationality. I evaluate the theoretical implications of different conceptions of justification and evidence, and conclude that a successful understanding will need to be compatible with a conception of rationality that allows for the justification of degrees of belief. Religious and epistemological constraints, that I argue ought to be granted, make the justification and thus the rationality of outright belief impossible to defend. I then survey the available theories of justification in order to determine within which of them religious beliefs attain the most favorable results, as well as which of the theories’ aspects account for these. I find that externalist theories of justification, slightly modified so as to fulfill the aforementioned desiderata, yield the most desirable evaluations.

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## ***Introduction***

The starting point for the present work is the realization that too little attention has been allocated to determining the best framework within which to evaluate religious beliefs and believers. A great deal of literature is available analyzing the evaluative criteria of beliefs and the constituent components of knowledge in general, but relatively few philosophers have adequately applied their theories to the body of religious beliefs. Yet, because these beliefs are generally recognized to be both widely held, and at least to some degree, epistemologically suspect, a thorough analysis of their statuses, as determined by the most plausible available epistemological theories, is warranted.

In order to reach significant conclusions about the rationality of religious belief, it will be necessary to explicate the type of beliefs that are of interest. Once the parameters are set, it will become possible to investigate the standards for evaluating the arguments for these beliefs. Also, a general analysis of competing conceptions of rationality and justification is required to determine which theoretical admissions and concessions make possible a favorable evaluation of religious beliefs. Finally, by applying these notions of justification and rationality to available epistemological theories, it will be possible to determine which of them offers the most favorable evaluation to religious beliefs, and why.

## Chapter 1 - The Beliefs in Question

I have referred to the types of beliefs I wish to investigate as 'religious'. This class is incredibly general and encompasses a wide array of beliefs in its ordinary, every-day use. In order to attain meaningful, concrete, and plausible conclusions it is necessary to identify the specific sub-set of religious beliefs in which I am interested and to which my terminology is intended to refer. By 'religious beliefs' I mean beliefs of the, 'God exists', 'God is all powerful', and 'God created the universe' type. These are meant to be distinguished from more mysterious beliefs such as: 'God became man' and 'God is both three and one', which are often called religious in the every-day sense. My reason for distinguishing between these is that the beliefs in the first set are more widely held, rigorously argued for, and lend themselves to a number of religious traditions. The evaluation of these beliefs and those who hold them is therefore likely to be both more achievable and more pressing.

My use of 'religious beliefs' will encompass a subset of metaphysical beliefs as well. The metaphysical beliefs to which my term 'religious' will apply are those of the, 'there must have been a first cause' or 'there exists a necessary being' type. I do not wish to investigate metaphysical beliefs such as, 'there are universals' or 'possible worlds have a real existence', and other beliefs that are usually covered to by the general use of the term 'metaphysical'. I include this restricted set of metaphysical beliefs in my use of the term 'religious beliefs' because of the similarities they share with the aforementioned set. The similarities can be exemplified by juxtaposing the beliefs 'God created the universe' and 'there must have been a first cause' or 'God exists' and 'there is at least one necessary being'. It is apparent that these propositions have similar referents and that belief in them entails similar commitments.

It might be objected that the set of metaphysical beliefs included in my investigation is relevantly different from the set of religious beliefs specified above. For example, it might be suggested that the two sets differ in scope, as religious beliefs seem to be more constraining on those individuals who accept them than their metaphysical counterparts. Religious beliefs, in so far as they differ from metaphysical ones, place restrictions on what the ‘being’ or ‘cause’ referred to is; namely, religious beliefs imply that the metaphysical entity, God, has certain properties. In contemporary philosophy of religion the term ‘God’ is taken to refer to the scripturally described being of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. Among the more universally accepted properties entailed by religious belief is that the necessary being or first cause, as it is conceived in metaphysics, is also tri-omni, the creator of the universe, transcendent, etc.

Of course, many historical theorists maintained that belief in a first cause or a necessary being committed one to certain beliefs about its nature. For example, Aquinas argued that if such a thing existed, it would necessarily be perfectly simple, perfectly good, and immutable, among other things.<sup>1</sup> Parmenides also believed that a number of properties were necessitated by the existence of such a metaphysical entity.<sup>2</sup> Were their arguments persuasive, the distinction in scope between the two sets of beliefs would disappear, as metaphysical beliefs would then be equally constraining on the individuals who accepted them. However, contemporary theorists have argued that a ‘first cause’ need not be *all*-powerful, only powerful enough to have created the universe, and similarly with other omni-properties. One can therefore assume, if only for the sake of argument, that a metaphysically conceived entity can differ in the degree of its entailments from its religious counterpart.

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<sup>1</sup> Aquinas, *Prima Pars*: Question 3, Article 7; Question 6, Articles 1 & 2; Question 9, Article 1

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, ‘Parmenides’

Another *prima facie* difference between the designated religious and metaphysical beliefs is the way in which we come to believe in them. Belief in a necessary being or a first cause is usually reached through rigorous philosophical argument. Belief in the existence of God, on the other hand, is usually reached through familial indoctrination or some similar, equally non-critical means. As such, it might seem as though religious beliefs are usually held on somewhat less-favorable epistemic grounds than their metaphysical counterparts.

This result, although I grant its legitimacy as an empirical fact, is not crucial to the evaluation of these beliefs. Upon further reflection the distinction between the methods of arriving at these beliefs appears to be a result of the rigor and explicitness of the terminology invoked, and not of the conceptual commitments involved. Take for example the question of whether or not there are tables and chairs. Most people come to the conclusion that there are such things, and do so through means that do not involve argument. However, there can be well-founded doubt that anyone reaches a position on the question of whether only elementary particles or both elementary particles and composite objects really exist (to borrow van Inwagen's terminology<sup>3</sup>) without going through a significant amount of critical reasoning. Yet, these two sets of beliefs are relevantly similar to those in question, namely, they concern the same issue. A similar point could be made concerning beliefs about the existence of an outside world and many other metaphysical questions.

Further, one could easily maintain that the universe had a beginning for reasons similar to those for which most people maintain that there is a God, namely being indoctrinated into the belief. Another could come to believe in God, solely on the basis of rigorous philosophical or theological argument; the same way that most people come to decide whether or not there must

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<sup>3</sup> Van Inwagen, *Material Beings*

have been an uncaused cause. Thus, although there is a difference between the way that most people come to believe in the religious and metaphysical propositions specified above, there is no theoretical basis for insisting that the paths to them are mutually exclusive; beliefs of either kind can be reached through both more-reason-based and less-reason-based means. Therefore I maintain that the terms ‘metaphysical’ and ‘religious’ as they refer to the two subsets of belief outlined above are loose synonyms; ‘loose’ because of the possible differences in their respective scopes. The types of beliefs may be unique, but remain intimately connected. As such, for the sake of simplicity I will refer to both the subsets of belief specified above as ‘religious’ for the remainder of the work.



## Chapter 2 - Evaluating Religious Beliefs and Arguments

Oppy is right to note that far too little attention has been afforded to discerning the relationship between argumentation and reasonable believing in the philosophy of religion.<sup>4</sup>

There are nearly as many theories concerning how to evaluate religious beliefs and the arguments for them as there are theorists debating these issues. Strength in logical structure, soundness, persuasiveness, and successfulness are some of the evaluative criteria that have been suggested. However, I believe that, at least as they currently stand, each of these is unsuccessful in informing one about the proper evaluation of religious beliefs.

Faust points out that on the naïve or standard view, arguments are evaluated according to soundness or the strength of their logical structure.<sup>5</sup> Consequentially, if an argument is sound, that is it has true premises and its premises entail its conclusion, it is an effective argument and rationally one ought to affirm its conclusion. I doubt if any theorists would disagree. However, because most arguments for religious belief contain premises that, due to humans' limited epistemic capabilities, one cannot definitively establish as true or false, the standard view is unhelpful in evaluating them. In regards to the structure of religious arguments, only their validity can be determined, and therefore soundness cannot be an illuminating criterion for evaluating them.

Faust advocates evaluating religious arguments and belief in their conclusions in terms of persuasiveness. She points out that although persuasiveness was historically equated with soundness, an adequate understanding of persuasiveness must take into consideration the antecedently held beliefs and propositional attitudes of the audience. The fact that what is essential for persuasion is the perceived, not the actual, truth or falsity of the premises is

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<sup>4</sup> Oppy, pg. 6-7

<sup>5</sup> Faust, pg. 74

illustrated by the empirical finding that a sound argument may fail to persuade an audience, while an unsound argument can sometimes succeed.

Faust offers a positive account of persuasion that consists of three necessary, although not necessarily jointly sufficient, conditions.<sup>6</sup> First, the given audience or subject must hold each premise to have a positive degree of plausibility. Next, a subject must *perceive* the given argument to be valid, or at least strong. Finally, each premise must be more acceptable to the given audience than the conclusion. This final requirement captures the intuition that if one holds the conclusion of an argument to be more probable than a given premise, that premise cannot be meaningfully said to support the conclusion. Her account, Faust points out, has an advantage over the naïve, soundness conception of persuasion in that it takes the subject's antecedently held beliefs into consideration through the assignment of subjective probabilities to an argument's constituent parts.

It is exactly for this reason, however, that Faust's criterion cannot be used to inform the present work. Although I find her account of persuasion intuitive and plausible, it is precisely the emphasis it places on the subjective probabilities of premises and conclusions that renders it uninformative here. This is because accounting for each individual's unique psychological make-up, and the subjective probabilities that each individual would assign an argument's premises as a result of it, would cripple any ability to reach the sort of global evaluative conclusions I am interested in.

I assume that it is for this reason that Oppy chooses to evaluate religious arguments in terms of their success. In his terminology, "the most successful argument would be one that

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<sup>6</sup> Faust, pg. 75-76

succeeds... in persuading any reasonable person to accept its conclusion”.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this could be a productive methodology of evaluation, as it no longer directly relies on an argument’s ability to persuade an individual, but rather makes the evaluation of arguments depend on a generalized notion of subjective probability; the probability that any reasonable person would assign the constituent components of an argument. However, the view’s fundamental weakness is its dependence on an under-developed notion of a ‘reasonable person’. A reasonable person, I assume, is one whose beliefs, and therefore one whose assignment of subjective probabilities, are rationally derived or maintained. Thus, until the constitutive features of rationality are precisely explicated, a framework that relies on the ‘successfulness’ of arguments to evaluate beliefs and belief-holders cannot be informative.

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<sup>7</sup> Oppy, pg. 10

## Chapter 3 - Rationality

The explication of the most appropriate or desirable way in which to understand the rationality and justification of beliefs has been an on-going project in epistemology. One will quickly notice that attempts to determine the best framework for understanding these features, even as they regard uncontroversial beliefs, have encountered a great deal of difficulty as there has been, and remains, a great deal of disagreement on the issue within the literature. Naturally then, one would expect to find that in cases of controversial beliefs, such as those concerning religious beliefs, even less consensus on the nature of rationality has been possible.

A further difficulty regards the historical duration of the debate. Accounts of rationality and justification go back as far as Plato<sup>8</sup>; and the more immediately relevant discussion is traceable to the scholastics. As such, a great deal of terminological and conceptual inconsistency exists in the literature. In the following, I will survey the most influential accounts of how to understand the rationality of belief. The main interest being whether the theoretical background of modern epistemological theory allows one to rationally and/or justifiably maintain religious beliefs. A more specific issue concerns which theoretical commitments one can allow or must concede to do so.

### 3.1 - Internalism and Externalism

One of the most fundamental issues to determine when discussing the rationality of belief is whether or not subjects have privileged access to the evaluative statuses of their beliefs. Internalists maintain that subjects have reflective access to their beliefs and the ways that their beliefs are supported by, and support, other beliefs. Because internalists believe that these factors are the ones that are important for justification, they also maintain that subjects can

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<sup>8</sup> Cooper, *Meno*

determine whether or not their beliefs are justified. To the contrary, externalists hold that knowledge of a belief's maintenance and its relationship to other beliefs is not necessary in order for a subject to have knowledge. As Langsam points out, reliabilists claim that only the outputs of one's mental processes matter. That is, whether the beliefs they create tend to be true or not, one's understanding of how or why that is the case can be irrelevant in determining whether a subject has knowledge.<sup>9</sup> For Nozick's tracking theory, similarly, only one's beliefs' ability to track the truth is important, not necessarily how or why they do so.<sup>10</sup>

It is usually assumed that the proper aim of belief is the truth; that is to say that one's goal in forming beliefs is to form them in such a way that as many of them as possible turn out to be true. Justification is usually understood as being the feature of belief that aids or assures this goal. That is, beliefs are justified to the extent that they are, or might be, related to a truth-entailing or truth-conducive system. It is therefore apparent that in order to believe rationally one must be justified in her beliefs. That is, rational belief requires that some relationship exist between one's belief and the truth. It is generally on the issue of what conditions need to be satisfied by a belief in order for it to be justified or on the question of which systems or relationships are truth-conducive or truth-entailing, that theorists disagree.

If one cannot discover whether their beliefs are justifiably held, one cannot evaluate the rationality of their beliefs. This supports the idea that it is one's ability to give reasons for thinking that one is justified in believing a proposition, and not merely one's blind justification in believing a proposition, which allows for the use of rationality as a productive evaluative criterion. Rationality concerns one's ability to offer reasons for their belief; that is, reasons to

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<sup>9</sup> Langsam, pg. 85-88

<sup>10</sup> Nozick, pg. 172-176

think that their belief is true. If the reasons for believing can be unavailable to the subject, she cannot argue for their rationality.

As mentioned above, for externalist theories of justification it is sometimes the case that an agent is blind to the justificatory status of their belief, especially on externalist theories that are more skeptical about the possibility of knowledge. This is not to claim that all externalists hold that one can never know if any of their beliefs are justified or rationally maintained; many hold that in some, or even most, situations, one can. However, to the extent that an externalist believes that the evaluation of beliefs in regards to their justification and rationality is possible, she is obligated to allow the agent a degree of access to some of the constitutive features of her beliefs. To discuss a belief's rationality the externalist must allow one to have some access to, the reliability of their belief forming processes within a reliabilist theory, the changes in conditions that would persuade one to accept or abandon some relevant beliefs on the 'tracking' theory, or the appropriate features of one's beliefs within other externalist frameworks. If one denies that agents have access to these features of their beliefs and circumstances, then evaluating the rationality of one's beliefs becomes impossible.

Chapter 2 determined that we are interested in understanding the rationality of belief, and therefore the framework that we are interested in cannot be a skeptical form of externalism; it will necessarily need to include an internalist access-component. That is, the theory will need to grant access to the features of beliefs necessary for an evaluation of their rationality or justification, whatever those features may be. An externalist account that lacks such a component, because of the impossibility of determining justification and within it, will be insufficient for the present goal of defending the rationality of belief.

### **3.2 - Degrees of Rationality**

Rationality is the most general evaluative feature of belief, usually understood as a function of the way in which a belief is maintained or brought about, and the conviction with which it is held. When a belief is maintained or brought about in an appropriate way and is held with a suitable amount of confidence, it is rationally held. However, disagreement exists concerning whether the evaluation of the rationality of beliefs is best understood as an all-or-nothing use of term, as a term of degree.

The main problem with a degree-sensitive rationality, Ganson claims, is that it is “too unfaithful to our ordinary practices of epistemic assent”.<sup>11</sup> Here, she is claiming that the way we normally speak about the rationality of belief does not lend itself to a degree-sensitive interpretation. Most often, rationality is used as a blanket label and every belief that is for some reason deficient is regarded as undeserving of the title ‘rational’. For this reason, throughout ‘Evidentialism and Pragmatic Constraints on Outright Belief’ she maintains that rationality is not a term of degree.

However, before settling on this conclusion she considers the suggestion that a sufficient epistemological framework ought to include a conception of degrees of belief.<sup>12</sup> It is nearly universally granted that justification comes in degrees. As rationality is at least partially constituted by justification, it seems that rationality too might come in degrees. If rationality failed to do so, then there would need to be a threshold of justification, perhaps in conjunction with some other factor, that, when passed, would qualify the given belief as rational. However, there does not seem to be a non-arbitrary way of setting such a threshold. Furthermore, such a threshold would be subject to problems of vagueness, as incredibly similar beliefs, on either side

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<sup>11</sup> Ganson, pg. 458

<sup>12</sup> Ganson, pg. 442-444

of the threshold, would be evaluated as rational and irrational respectively. Such a result would run counter to the deep-rooted intuition that similar beliefs ought to be evaluated similarly.

The dilemma between conforming to common language-use practices and avoiding problems of vagueness and arbitrariness appears to be authentic. As I do not propose to be able to solve the dilemma here, I suggest only that a further criterion for an adequate theory be put in place: the theory should either be commensurable with either an ‘all-or-nothing’ or a ‘degree-sensitive’ understanding of rationality, or it should give one adequate grounds for accepting one understanding over the other. As I have claimed, I am unaware of a sufficient response of the latter type. Therefore I will here be searching for a theory that satisfies the former conjunct of the criterion.



## Chapter 4 - Justification

I will refer to the feature that makes a belief, when held with the appropriate level of conviction, rational (be that way in which the belief is maintained, the way it is brought about, or whatever other feature) as ‘justification’. I realize that I break with some traditions by defining this constitutive feature of rationality in such a way. For example, although Nozick’s tracking theory concerns the manner in which beliefs are maintained, he claims that his theory does not rely on a notion of justification at all.<sup>13</sup> However, I find the difference merely terminological and believe that a sufficiently broad conception would include his ‘tracking’ as a form of justification as well.

### ***4.1 - Justification Inside or Outside a Theory***

When analyzing justification, it is important to determine whether or not it should be understood within a given theory, be it a theory of knowledge or of justification alone, or if it should be conceived of independently, beyond the constraints of a given theory. Forest claims that the problems that arise specifically in the epistemology of religion deal mostly with the relationship between evidence and justification and that therefore, defending a given theory of justification or knowledge is not necessary.<sup>14</sup> He claims that the issue at hand is to determine whether one can be justified in holding some religious belief, and not whether one can claim to know some religious proposition. As such, he maintains that the arguments for and against the justification of religious belief can be understood as applying to justification within coherentist, foundationalist, reliabilist, and other frameworks of knowledge.

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<sup>13</sup> Nozick, pg. 172-176

<sup>14</sup> Forest, ‘The Epistemology of Religion’

He is correct to separate the issue of whether religious beliefs are justified from the issue of whether justification entails the possibility of knowledge of religious propositions. However, isolating justification from the way in which it is conceived within specific theories would be inappropriate in the current context, as we are interested in justification as a constitutive feature of rationality and ultimately whether and how religious beliefs can be rationally maintained. Contra Forest, I believe that the only way to make significant developments in our understanding of the evaluative statuses that religious beliefs ought to receive is to survey epistemological theories and their respective evaluations of justification. As we are specifically interested in defending the rationality of religious belief, a theory from which to do so is required.

#### **4.2 - Justification, Evidence, and Access**

In ‘Justification in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’ Plantinga opens with the statement, “It would be a colossal understatement to say that Anglo-American epistemology of this century has made much of the notion of epistemic justification.”<sup>15</sup> He surveys a number of suggestions of what it is for a belief to be justified, which he takes from the most prominent available theories. Among these are: ‘the belief is rationally based on evidence’, ‘the subject has good reason to think it true’, ‘the belief fits the evidence available to a given subject’, ‘the subject has reflexive access to evidence that a belief is true’, ‘the belief comes from a reliable process’, and many others.<sup>16</sup> From the examples he surveys, Plantinga abstracts a number of common themes. Two of them are particularly illuminating to the current discussion: justification is a matter of epistemic responsibility and justification depends on evidence.

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<sup>15</sup> Plantinga, (1992), pg. 43

<sup>16</sup> Plantinga, (1992), pg. 45-49

The two themes just mentioned elucidate the motivation for ‘the evidentialist challenge’. Comesana defines evidentialism as the view that “the justificatory status of a belief is determined by the evidence that the subject has for the belief at a specific time in question”.<sup>17</sup> One frequently cited basis for the evidentialist challenge is Clifford.<sup>18</sup> He closes the first section of ‘The Ethics of Belief’ with the famous passage, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” The implicit idea is that one is justified in believing some proposition only insofar as one’s evidence supports the belief. Because of its normative as opposed to descriptive nature, evidentialism is not a standard theory of justification; its prescriptive feature and the fact that it is silent about what counts as evidence, makes it compatible with several other theories. For example, evidence could be construed so as to include reasons for thinking that one’s belief forming processes are reliable or that one’s beliefs are strongly supported by foundational beliefs. Nearly any theory of justification can be amended so as to incorporate an evidentialist component.

Plantinga argues that evidentialism is implicitly born out of classical foundationalism.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, evidentialism is most frequently combined with internalist theories, as the evidence for one’s beliefs, the process of forming beliefs on the basis of that evidence, and the evaluation of the status of one’s beliefs after they are formed, appear to be the sort of things that a subject has access to. Although it may be possible to construct an externalist account of evidentialism, because of its prescriptive nature it would need to be one that allowed the subject some access to the statuses of their beliefs.

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<sup>17</sup> Comesana, pg. 2

<sup>18</sup> Clifford, ‘The Ethics of Belief’

<sup>19</sup> Plantinga, (1981), pg. 44

Illustratively, Haack argues that the main vice of externalist theories is that they fail to account for the evidentialist intuitions of justification.<sup>20</sup> There are those, like Comesana, who have attempted to combine evidentialism and externalism into a coherent theory.<sup>21</sup> But largely, even these theorists have recognized the need include an access component in their frameworks. This is because the ‘basing’ relationship’s merits lie in, and the normative aspect of evidentialism seems to presuppose, the subject’s ability to alter her beliefs according to the evidence available to her. Therefore, along with the clear intuitive link between evidentialism and rationality, specifically that to believe rationally one’s beliefs ought to be subject to their evidence, the theory gains further plausibility from requiring an access component identical to the one that section 3.1 determined an adequate theory from which to defend religious beliefs ought to have. Because of its commensurability with our earlier findings regarding access and the theory’s plausibility on its own grounds, I suggest a further criterion for a theory from which to defend religious beliefs: the theory should incorporate an evidentialist component.

#### ***4.3 – Justification, Evidence, and Degree***

The question then becomes how, exactly, this evidentialist component will function and what implications it will have. The evidentialist maxim supports, like most epistemological theories, the idea that justification is a matter of degree. In evidentialism the degree of justification is relative to the quantity and quality of evidence one has for a belief. The relevant result, for the current project is that while other theorists can maintain that factors other than evidence can bolster one’s conviction to outright, the evidentialist must cede that fully convinced religious belief is only justified if the evidence for it is conclusive. Few contemporary theists are

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<sup>20</sup> Haack, pg. 28

<sup>21</sup> Comesana, ‘Evidentialist Reliabilism’

bold enough to claim that to be the case; most admit that some degree of doubt is reasonably sustained on the basis of our available evidence. Thus, it appears that if the evidentialist claim is accepted, outright religious belief becomes unjustifiable and therefore irrational.

One reply would point out that there can be at least some evidence for the existence of God. Almost all theists, most agnostics, and even some atheists<sup>22</sup> would allow such a move. Then, even within an evidentialist framework, one can be justified in holding a partial degree of belief. Evidentialist theorists would be obligated to cede this point, assuming that some admissible evidence could be gathered.

However, most theists would not be satisfied with such a response for two reasons. First, most religions prescribe unconditional belief in their tenets and, as mentioned above, most theists admit that it does not appear as if conclusive evidence is, or even perhaps ever will ever be, available. Thus, within the evidentialist framework one can never satisfy the requirements of religion. As most theists have a desire to satisfy the requirements of religion beyond merely assenting to the proposition ‘God exists’, they would likely find this response insufficient. Further, many theists claim to feel as though their belief is, and/or ought to be, outright. Settling for some degree of justification proportioned to the available evidence would still render the conviction of belief that many theists hold and wish to defend unjustified.

From these considerations it follows, as Ganson points out, that to maintain the justification of outright religious belief one must reject pure, or what she calls ‘conventional’, evidentialism.<sup>23</sup> Sessions makes the same claim, and goes further to argue that although evidence may aid in justification, it is neither necessary, nor sufficient for justification on its

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<sup>22</sup> One example is William Rowe

<sup>23</sup> Ganson, pg. 450-455

own.<sup>24</sup> His counter-examples employ psychological self-fulfilling prophecies in order to argue that there are instances in which one has non-evidential justification for belief. In one example, he describes a politician in a close race who is behind in the polls. Sessions asks his readers to suppose that her charisma is necessary for her success, but further that belief in her success is necessary for her charisma.<sup>25</sup> Then, he argues, it would be irrational for her not to believe that she will win, since believing is a necessary condition for succeeding, and success is her aim. He believes that in a similar way, pragmatic constraints can be used to justify outright religious belief. Of course, for the analogy to be successful Sessions would need to claim that the politician's charisma requires that she is fully convinced that she will win; were a high degree of conviction adequate, the analogy would fail. Although I find this condition implausible, that is I see no reason why one should need to be fully convinced that they would win a race in order to charismatically carry on, it is not the most fundamental problem for his view.

The main problem is that if one were to grant Sessions' claim that pragmatic considerations can guide rational belief, one would implicitly be accepting a view according to which truth was no longer the sole proper aim of rational belief. This is illustrated by the fact that in the case of the politician, the proposition 'I will lose the race' is clearly much more likely to come out true than the proposition 'I will win the race'; this is shown by the politician's evidence, namely the preliminary poll results. As such, belief in the latter would be more rational, on the normal understanding of rational, because its aim is to end up with beliefs that are true. If one were to allow pragmatic considerations, specifically one's own interests, to guide her evaluations, one would be rejecting the widely agreed upon principle that the goal of rational belief is attaining the truth.

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<sup>24</sup> Sessions, pg. 146-151

<sup>25</sup> Sessions, pg. 148

Ganson, without explicating her divergence from the normal conception of rational belief, picks up the line of argument in favor of pragmatic constraints on justification. Her first point is that we normally make different evaluative judgments about the justificatory status of peoples' beliefs in different situations, even if they share the same evidence for the same belief. She claims that in cases where belief in a proposition has little significance, one is justified in believing on less evidence than in cases where it is important.<sup>26</sup> Her example concerns belief in the proposition 'this train to Geneva is express' on the basis of a Swiss commuter's casual testimony upon being prompted. Was one going on vacation for a long time and not overly concerned about the speed of the train, the man's claim that it was an express train would justify belief in the proposition. However, were one planning to address the United Nations about funding for an important cause and in a situation where only an express train would arrive in time to allow one the opportunity, she argues that one would need more evidence than the commuter's informal assurance to be justified in holding the same belief. In both cases the inquirer has the same evidence for the same belief; only pragmatic constraints differ. Yet, Ganson believes that only the former is justified in believing the proposition.

Ganson also points out that James prescribes two intellectual duties: believing truths and to avoiding believing falsehoods.<sup>27</sup> However, she reminds us that these two duties often conflict. Were one to believe everything, one would believe all the truths, while if one remained perfectly agnostic or did not believe anything, one would avoid believing any falsehoods. There is no basis for choosing how to weigh these duties when they conflict, she argues, if we do not take our practical needs and interests into account. Her argument amounts to the claim that in order

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<sup>26</sup> Ganson, pg. 445

<sup>27</sup> James, *The Will to Believe*

to determine how to use one's evidence in forming a belief, one needs to take the pragmatic features of one's situation into account.

Owens, too, argues for a similar conclusion.<sup>28</sup> He points out that even if evidentialism were correct and one ought to believe or disbelieve a proposition on the basis of their evidence alone when the time for drawing a definite conclusion arises, before one is required to draw a final conclusion, evidential considerations cannot help determine whether or not one should continue pursuing further evidence. He argues that only practical or pragmatic interests, such as perhaps how important it is for one to be correct in her belief and how costly a search for further evidence would be, can determine whether or not one is justified in believing a proposition on the basis of inconclusive, immediately available evidence.

These arguments and counter-examples, however, only seem to apply to a non-degree-sensitive understanding of belief; allowing a degree-sensitive evaluation of belief lets one easily account for the intuitions raised in the arguments above, without being forced to admit that pragmatic features directly affect justification. For example, in the train case, both the UN speaker and the vacation-traveler could be thought of as having justification for a specific degree of belief in the proposition that they are on the express train to Geneva. At the same time, pragmatic features could account for the fact that the latter would be required to search out further evidence, while the former need not; the latter's situation requires a higher degree of belief than that which is attained by his evidence, while for the former, the degree of belief that he is justified in holding on the basis of the same evidence is sufficient. Similarly, for Owens' case, one could claim that one's evidence always justifies some degree of belief and what one ought to do in a given situation is believe to that degree. If the degree attained is found to be

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<sup>28</sup> Owens, pg. 23-36



insufficient for pragmatic reasons, one ought to search out further evidence in order to justify a higher degree of belief. Also, for James' epistemic duties, one need not determine whether to believe a proposition outright before all the evidence has been gathered, one need only believe to the degree that their evidence justifies the belief; in this way no conflict of interests due to inconclusive evidence would arise. Thus, employing a view in which one understands justification as applying to degrees of belief, allows one to preserve the evidentialist stance.

Degree-sensitive evidentialism then emerges a tenable theory of justification. However, it will not be very favorable for theists who wish maintain outright belief. A significant, positive degree of belief in God or an uncaused cause might be possible as the existence of the universe, our understanding of causation, the complexity of nature, and other factors can perhaps lend themselves as evidence to these beliefs. Yet, because most theists would prefer to justify outright belief in God for the reasons mentioned above, pure evidentialism, given that it requires degrees of belief, will ultimately not be the most favorable theory for them.

A pragmatic-evidentialist account of the nature of justification, like the one that Ganson and Sessions' arguments point towards would be more favorable for such believers. On such an account, evidence could justify some positive degree of belief, and pragmatic features, for example one's inability to attain more evidence or the threat of eternal damnation, could be used to justify outright belief.

However, it might be difficult to vindicate one's maintaining a pragmatic-evidentialism in the face of full out pragmatism of the Pascal's Wager type, where one's interest alone can guide one's beliefs regardless of the truth.<sup>29</sup> That is, once one accepts that outright belief can be justified, and therefore rational, on pragmatic grounds, why should one require that other beliefs

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<sup>29</sup> Pascal, note 233

be justified on grounds like evidence that aim at the truth? There does not appear to be a non-arbitrary reason for insisting this and thus it seems that evidentialist-pragmatism collapses into complete pragmatism.

Accepting pragmatism, though, forces one to renounce truth as the sole proper end of belief, as fulfilling one's interests becomes an acceptable reason to believe as well. Yet, a truth-based rationality is the sort that most theists would wish to attain. That is to say that most theists would not like their belief in God to be rational because it is in their interest to believe it. Rather they would prefer it to be rational because they have good reason for thinking that it is true. However, an interest-based rationality is all that is possible on a pragmatic account, because pragmatic-evidentialism seems to collapse into full-out pragmatism. Pragmatism abandons truth, in favor of personal interests, as the proper aim of belief and pure evidentialism makes outright belief irrational; neither of these consequences is likely to be deemed favorable to the majority of theists.

#### **4.4 - Voluntary Belief**

One issue, which has not yet been addressed, involves the amount of control one can exercise over one's beliefs. Namely it concerns the relationship between justification and rationality, and voluntary belief. The concern emerges from the normative nature of most evaluations of justification and rationality. Normativity suggests that if one's beliefs are not justified, they ought to be abandoned, and that if they are affirmed without adequate justification, they are done so irrationally. However, a number of theorists argue against doxastic voluntarism, or the claim that people can change their beliefs at will. This anti-voluntaristic sentiment is especially strong within debates in the philosophy of religion, as many hold their beliefs so strongly that even when convinced, by argument or experience, that they ought be

believe differently, either by holding different beliefs or holding their beliefs with a different level of conviction, they find themselves unable to do so. If persons cannot change their beliefs at will, then praise and blame cannot be assigned on the basis of an agent's judiciously holding only justified beliefs, and the evaluative nature of justificatory and rationality criteria will need to be amended. Plantinga suggests that, "perhaps the relevant obligation is not that of divesting myself of theistic belief if I have no evidence... but to try to cultivate the [right] sorts of intellectual habits..."<sup>30</sup>

The retreat from voluntarily changing one's beliefs to voluntarily amending one's intellectual habits is a frequent one in the face of anti-voluntarism, but even if it is successful a further issue remains. Mitchell expands upon it in 'The Justification of Religious Belief'. He writes that, "it is the essence of [religious belief] that it should be freely chosen and also that it should be fully committed".<sup>31</sup> Yet, for beliefs to be rational, the evidence upon which they are based should either be conclusive, in which case belief cannot be freely chosen, or it should be provisional, in which case belief cannot be fully committed. This objection could easily be altered to fit accounts with varying conceptions of what evidence is. For example in a reliabilist framework, if one's belief in God originates from a perfectly reliable process, one will have difficulty in holding that it is freely maintained, especially when the reliability of the process is available to the subject. Similarly for coherentists, if one's belief in God's existence coheres with one's other beliefs perfectly, it does not appear as if the belief can meaningfully be held to be free. However, if these conditions are not met in their respective theories, then outright belief cannot be justified. The dilemma appears legitimate: either belief is outright or it is free, not both.

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<sup>30</sup> Plantinga, (1981), pg. 43

<sup>31</sup> Mitchell, pg. 218

Freely chosen belief, or belief which stems from freely made decisions to appropriately cultivate one's intellectual habits, must be found to be more important to the religious than outright belief. It seems obvious that from an evaluative standpoint, strongly convinced, free belief would be deserving of praise, while outright belief that is not freely chosen would deserve none. Therefore, combining the findings of sections 4.3 and 4.4, either full-pragmatism must be found to be a favorable framework from which to defend religious beliefs, or given the plausibility of evidentialism and the need to understand it as degree-sensitive, outright religious belief will not be justifiable.

## Chapter 5 - Beliefs in Contemporary Theories

As I claimed in 4.1, I believe that the most productive way to determine the most favorable framework from which to defend religious beliefs is to analyze how the available, contemporary epistemological theories evaluate them. The theories in question vary according to their conceptions of justification. Justification is necessary for rational belief and therefore discovering the best way to understand the justification of religious beliefs will determine which theory affords the most favorable status to rational religious believers. Further, by surveying the evaluations that the available theories grant to these beliefs, one can discover which aspects of these theories are responsible for the agreeable evaluation. In this way one can hope to discover the most beneficial components of contemporary theories and find a cogent framework from which religious beliefs can be defended.

### 5.1 - Contextualism

The conclusion of section 4.4 was that either full-pragmatism is a viable theory for defending religious beliefs, or outright religious belief is unjustifiable due to evidentialist constraints. As such the first theory to discuss is contextualism, as it is the theory of justification that takes pragmatic constraints into account when determining whether an agent is justified. Contextualist theories claim that the truth-value of knowledge attributions depend on the context of the utterance, where the context includes the attributor's psychological make-up and situation.<sup>32</sup> On contextualist theories, the standards for justification vary with the degree of doubt or skepticism raised about the beliefs in question. For example, one's belief that the pitcher of lemonade is still on the counter where they left it ten minutes ago, is justified in normal circumstances. The belief loses its justificatory status however when one is directly

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<sup>32</sup> Rysiew, 'Epistemic Contextualism'

questioned about it or some relevant doubt is raised, such as a suggestion that some third party might have moved the pitcher to the refrigerator.

Contextualist theories are esteemed by some theorists for their alleged ability to deal with puzzles about knowledge and account for our every-day knowledge attributing practices.<sup>33</sup>

However, an approach that opts for adopting contextualism or implanting a contextualist feature into a framework in order to defend religious beliefs would definitely be unsuccessful. Its failure would result because the justificatory status of religious beliefs, both intuitively and according to most religions, does not and should not depend on the context. A contextualist could properly claim to have had knowledge of God's existence in a previous, less-stringent setting, although she might admit that she lacks knowledge of the same proposition now. Similarly then, for the contextualist, belief in God's existence would be justified in some circumstances, and not in others. However, because religious believers would prefer any theory in which the rationality of their beliefs does not falter or fade from one context to the next, and because most believers would find circumstantially justified religious belief to be little, if any, better than unjustified belief, contextualism will obviously be an inadequate theory for the defense of religious beliefs. Unfortunately then, given the conclusion of section 4.4 and the plausibility of evidentialism, outright religious belief does not appear to be rationally defensible. However, a theory from which to defend highly convinced religious beliefs is still a feasible and worthwhile goal.

## **5.2 - Coherentism**

Langsam defines coherentism as the view according to which only beliefs justify beliefs.<sup>34</sup> Haack writes, more specifically that, "coherentism requires justification to be

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<sup>33</sup> Rysiew, 'Epistemic Contextualism'

<sup>34</sup> Langsam, pg. 81

exclusively a matter of the relations among beliefs”.<sup>35</sup> The general framework that coherentists put forth is that one begins with an initial set of beliefs, which mutually support one another through inference relations. Additional beliefs are then justified to the extent that they are supported by, or offer support to, beliefs in this set. Coherentism is also an internalist theory of justification as the mutually supportive web of beliefs, and therefore the degree of justification afforded to a given belief, is accessible to the subject by reflection.

Coherentism appears to be a favorable framework from which to defend religious beliefs. If the justification of a novel belief is determined merely by its coherence with one’s preexisting set of beliefs, then regardless of the means by which one comes to believe in God or a first cause, be it philosophical argument or indoctrination, a high degree of belief can be justified. Further, given the internalist nature of coherentism, one can access the status of their belief and determine its degree of justification, and therefore rationally maintain it. That is, they can give acceptable reasons for their holding it to be true. These features make coherentism seem as though it might be a highly favorable framework for religious believers to endorse.

However, despite the positive evaluation it affords religious beliefs, coherentism, as a general theory of justification, is not without its critics. The main criticism raised stems from the regressive nature of justification. If a belief is justified, some (x) must be justifying it. In turn, that (x) too must be justified in order to be providing justification, and so on. Now few theorists would accept the suggestion that justification is infinitely regressive, as the finite nature of the human mind would then render rational belief impossible, because one could never sufficiently defend their beliefs. Coherentists, because of their position’s claim that only beliefs can justify, are forced to concede that justification is circular. That is, if belief (a) justifies belief (b) which

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<sup>35</sup> Haack, pg. 19

in turn justifies belief (c) and so on, eventually one of the beliefs in the chain of justification must justify belief (a). As such the chain of beliefs is not based on anything that ensures, or even reliably aims at, truth. Although, it might be the case that coherence is truth-conducive sometimes, it certainly does not need to be so. One could easily concoct a set of mutually supported beliefs that were coherent but that were all wildly fictitious. It is exactly because coherence does not entail truth and is not necessarily truth-conducive, that most theorists find it inadequate.

Even if one were to cede that belief need not aim at the truth, a different objection that applies specifically to religious beliefs remains. Bagger claims that within a coherentist framework a believer will be necessarily unable to justify his belief to the non-believer.<sup>36</sup> Because their sets of beliefs are different, the non-believer can never be brought to believe through reason. This objection is born out of the previously noted fact that different people can maintain mutually exclusive, opposing but coherent sets of beliefs. Therefore, Bagger believes, the best result in theistic debate will be a stalemate. Such a conclusion may not be ideal, but the theist could put it to use. The current situation in the philosophy of religion certainly seems to be a sort of gridlock and adopting a coherentist conception of justification could account for it.

Yet the objection can be responded to in a different way as well. The objection presupposes that the opposing sets of beliefs are equally coherent. This need not be immediately granted. If a case could be made that one set of beliefs is more coherent overall than another, then the epistemically appropriate move for the individual with the less-justified set of beliefs would be to accept his opponent's beliefs. Assuming coherentism, theistic debate could continue

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<sup>36</sup> Bagger, pg. 304



by attempting to establish either atheism or theism as being a more coherent, and therefore a more rational system or set of beliefs.

Religious beliefs and believers attain very favorable results within a coherentist framework. However, if rational belief is to aim at finding the truth, then some more plausible methodology than mere coherence will be necessary for justification.

### **5.3 - Foundationalism**

Foundationalism is a theory that attempts to solve the problem that coherentism faces in attempting to defend rational belief. Because rationally held beliefs ought to aim at the truth and cannot if an infinitely regressive or circular chain of justification justifies them, some truth-entailing basis is necessary for rational belief. Foundationalist theories maintain that there is some non-belief entity that ultimately justifies one's beliefs. Justification is then a function of how strong the chain of justification through beliefs to this non-belief entity is. Intuitively when foundational, or when directly supported by the foundation, a belief is highly justified. Also, when it is supported by multiple beliefs, which are in turn each strongly supported, it is highly justified, and so on. The general framework then consists of a foundation of beliefs that are justified by some non-belief entity or entities, which in turn justify a super-structure of connected chains or webs of belief.

The issue for plausibly defending foundationalism becomes elucidating the non-belief entity, which provides justification for one's foundational beliefs. Plantinga points out that ancient and medieval foundationalism required that the foundational beliefs one holds must be self-evident or evident to the senses, while modern foundationalism holds that they must be

incorrigible.<sup>37</sup> If belief in God fulfilled this requirement, or some beliefs that justified belief in God did, then theists could rationally justify their belief.

An initial problem, specific to religious beliefs, arises for a foundationalist enterprise. It results from God's hidden-ness. Few people claim to be able to see, hear, or touch God directly and therefore belief in God cannot be justified because it is evident to the senses. People do frequently, however, claim to 'see' God's work in nature or 'feel' his presence in a cathedral. Perhaps then encountering an expanse of untouched wilderness or the atmosphere of a cathedral can justify one's belief that the universe is complex and awe-inspiring and that cathedrals instill a feeling of humility. These beliefs might in turn justify the beliefs that God created the universe and that God is omni-potent, which both entail that God exists. The degree of this justification would of course be subject to the plausibility and number of alternative beliefs that the initial beliefs could support. For instance, the impression made by an expanse of nature could also be used to justify the belief that evolution's complexity is incredible, while the feeling experienced upon entering a cathedral might justify the belief that certain types of architecture and decoration, due to the psychological makeup of human beings, tend to make one feel small and amazed. However, the religious beliefs would still be justified to some degree (or some degree of religious belief would be justified) because of one's seeing and feeling what they do.

Also, perhaps, instead of or in addition to one's senses, experiences could justify our foundational beliefs. Although not a foundationalist, Plantinga maintains the view that religious beliefs can be justified on experiential grounds. He claims that experiences within specific circumstances can justify certain circumstance-related beliefs. He asserts that persons are so created as to have a disposition or tendency to recognize God's work through their experiences.

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<sup>37</sup> Plantinga, (1981), pg. 44

Specifically, he believes that, guilt, gratitude, danger, and the experience of other emotions, in the right set of circumstances, can justify religious beliefs for a person.<sup>38</sup> Modifying his framework to accommodate foundationalism, one could argue that experiences of the relevant sort could justify their foundational beliefs.

Some problems, however, would arise for such a view in general, even before one begins to apply it to epistemically suspect, religious beliefs. The first is to non-arbitrarily determine which are the 'right' beliefs and the 'right' circumstances. Normally perceptual appearance experiences are taken to be a paradigm of the 'right' sort of justifying conditions. But, one could ask whether experiences such as a meditative trance, a drug induced euphoria, or reached through some other mystical means could satisfactorily justify the beliefs formed while in them; if not, one would need to be able to give a non-arbitrary reason why and doing so would be incredibly difficult.

Further, Plantinga points out an even more general, devastating problem for any foundationalist theory of justification. That is, any criteria for foundationality, namely incorrigibility, being evident to the senses, or self-evident-ness, will necessarily be self-referentially inconsistent.<sup>39</sup> Take for example the principle that only those beliefs, which are formed on the basis of one's senses, are foundationally justified. The principle itself is not evident to the senses, nor does it appear to be justified by any beliefs, which are evident to the senses. Similarly with other criteria, principles in terms of incorrigibility or self-evident-ness are not incorrigible or self-evident, nor are they justified by other incorrigible or self-evident beliefs. As such, assent to any foundationalist principle will be unjustified, even for the foundationalist, and adhering to it will be at best arbitrary. Thus, although religious beliefs and believers might,

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<sup>38</sup> Plantinga, (1981), pg. 46

<sup>39</sup> Plantinga, (1979)

granting certain justificatory relationships are in place, be evaluated favorably in a foundationalist framework, until the many problems the theory faces in general are resolved, the best defense should most likely be waged by using some alternative conception of justification.

#### **5.4 - Reliabilism**

Classical reliabilism is an externalist view of justification. It claims that a subject is justified in believing a proposition if and only if a reliable belief-forming process brings about her belief in that proposition. As Langsam points out, reliabilism, like other externalist theories of justification, presupposes that some of our belief-forming processes form true beliefs.<sup>40</sup> When these processes, whichever ones they may be, function correctly, the beliefs they form are justified.

Religious beliefs attain mixed results on such a theory. They can easily be justified, so long as a reliable belief-forming process brings them about. Familial indoctrination, authoritative testimony, and philosophical-argument all seem like perfectly good candidates for reliable processes. That is, *prima facie*, there seems to be no reason for assuming that the beliefs these processes give rise to are unjustified. If they are in fact reliable, assent to the beliefs they give rise to is justified, and when held with an appropriate degree of conviction religious beliefs are rationally maintained.

However, a number of general problems exist for reliabilism as a theory of justification. The first is born out of the fact that on externalist theories, if they lack a reflexive access component, which belief forming processes are in fact reliable and which are not, cannot be determined. A related problem in the literature is referred to as the ‘new evil demon problem’,

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<sup>40</sup> Langsam, pg. 88-93

and can be traced back to Cohen.<sup>41</sup> It tugs at the intuition that we know what sorts of processes are reliable. Specific, well thought out, carefully controlled inquiry, most assume, is a more reliable belief-forming process, than impulsively accepting a proposition as true on the basis of a stranger's unquestioned testimony. However, in a world where all people are constantly deceived by an evil demon, both these processes give rise to equally unreliable, and hence equally unjustified, beliefs. If one is persuaded by the idea that, even in this world, the former's beliefs are justified and the latter's are not, then reliability is not necessary for justification. Further, BonJour argues that reliability is not sufficient for justification.<sup>42</sup> Suppose one finds oneself with a religious belief not based on any evidence, which without her knowledge, is brought about through a perfectly reliable process. Intuitively, BonJour believes, one would not want to evaluate this belief as justified, although given reliabilism it would be. Because this reliable belief is not justified, he believes that reliability is not sufficient for justification.

Comesana's theory looks, at first glance, like it might fulfill the desiderata of an adequate theory of the justification of religious beliefs. He attempts to reply to the arguments raised above by incorporating an evidentialist element into his reliabilism. In his theory, to be justified is to believe in accordance with one's evidence, and one's beliefs accord with one's evidence if and only if one's evidence is reliably connected to the truth of one's beliefs.<sup>43</sup> As such, his theory is essentially a form of evidentialism where a belief 'fitting the evidence' is understood in terms of reliability.

Comesana makes use of an indexical understanding of reliable, where 'actually reliable' is taken to have a two-dimensional semantics. In his terminology, there are two propositions

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<sup>41</sup> Cohen, 'Justification and Truth'

<sup>42</sup> BonJour 'Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge'

<sup>43</sup> Comesana, pg. 27

associated with any attribution of justification, a diagonal and a horizontal one. The justification of a belief of the former type of proposition depends on the process's reliability in the world where it is exercised, while the latter depends on the process's reliability in the world where it is considered. This feature allows him to account for the intuitions raised by the new evil demon problem, as epistemically judicious victims of the evil demon will be horizontally justified, although it is impossible for them to be diagonally justified. Embracing indexicality about justification, he believes, adequately accounts for this problem. To respond to Bonjour-type criticisms of reliabilism, Comesana makes use of the evidentialist features of his framework. If one's beliefs are not based on any evidence, on his theory they are not justified.

The rationality of religious beliefs, however, does not attain favorable results within Comesana's theory. Although so long as one allows that there is at least some evidence for the existence of God and at least one reliable belief-forming process, then as long as the former is entered into the latter the resulting output will be justified belief. Yet, as this theory, at least explicitly, lacks an internalist access component, one cannot defend the rationality of their belief. This is because, like other forms of reliabilism, for Comesana, determining the 'actual reliability' of a process is not necessarily possible.

Sosa responds to the general criticisms raised against reliabilism by adding such an internalist access component. Sosa's theory maintains that beyond being brought about by a reliable belief forming process, a subject needs to have access to how the process works, namely why it is reliable, in order to be fully justified in accepting the beliefs it produces.<sup>44</sup> His theory appears to be quite favorable for religious believers. So long as one can identify the process or processes that gave rise to their belief, and understand how and why they are reliable, one can be

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<sup>44</sup> Sosa, pg. 225-256

justified in maintaining their belief. For example, if one determines that the sole basis for their belief was the testimony of their parents, and their parents' word has thus far been proven quite reliable, then some degree of belief is justified. Similarly if they come to hold their belief on the basis of rigorous philosophical argument and most of the beliefs they reach in that way are reliable, and they know why, they can be justified in maintaining their belief. Although determining the precise reliability of the processes will likely prove quite difficult, this difficulty is not as great as those that other theories of justification have faced. Then, so long as their belief is held with an appropriate degree of conviction, subject to the reliability of the process that gave rise to it, the belief will be rationally maintained.

### **5.5 - Tracking**

Nozick puts forth an alternative externalist account of justification. According to his theory a belief is justified (in my terminology not his) when assent to it tracks the truth.<sup>45</sup> That is, were the proposition in question true, one believe it, while were it false, one would not believe it. His theory, Goldman writes, was motivated by the prospect of meeting the threat of skepticism.<sup>46</sup> Yet, it is now among the leading contenders for a plausible general theory of justification.

On Nozick's theory, religious beliefs can be justifiably held so long as assent to them tracks the truth. That is, were the beliefs 'there must have been an uncaused cause' or 'God created the world' actually true one would believe them, while were they actually false, one would not. As it explicitly stands, the plausibility of this approach for present purposes is rather low, as it does not lend itself easily to theistic debate; although theorists might feel some degree

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<sup>45</sup> Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*

<sup>46</sup> Goldman, 'Reliabilism'

of comfort believing themselves to be justified in their beliefs, neither side will be able to gain any footing over the other.

However, were one to add an evidentialist component and an access component to the theory, it could become a more feasible framework for the goal at hand. Claiming that one can know what degree of change, in which conditions, would lead one to change her mind about the proposition in question, would fulfill the access requirement. Claiming that the changes in one's position, as well as the degree of conviction with which it is maintained, would be relative to the changes in their evidence would fulfill the evidentialist requirement. Then one could maintain that the degree of their conviction is appropriate for her amount of evidence that her religious belief tracks the truth and therefore her religious belief is rationally justified. With some modification, then, Nozick's theory can be made to fulfill all of the criteria of an adequate theory from which to defend the rationality of religious belief.

## **5.6 - Findings**

The foregoing has surveyed the most relevant epistemological theories and the statuses they respectively bestow upon religious beliefs and believers. Straightforwardly internalist theories have been found largely insufficient for the task of defending rational religious belief. Contextualism makes rational belief subject to circumstance. Further, as defending the rationality of religious belief against objections from non-believers is essential to productive theistic debate and within a contextualist framework the context of such debate is a paradigm of a circumstance in which one's beliefs are not justified, the theory cannot be successful. Finally, accounting for pragmatic considerations makes rational belief a matter of personal interest as opposed to a genuine search for the truth. Coherentism lacks a truth-conductive or truth-entailing feature and as such leaves the title 'rational', which it can bestow upon religious



believers, empty; rational beliefs, intuitively, should be somehow tied to the truth. Attempts to connect rationality intimately to the truth by positing a secure foundation fail because no adequate and self-referentially consistent truth-entailing foundation is available. As such, foundationalism, too, is an unsuccessful framework for the present task.

However, coherence remains an important part of our intuitive conception of rational belief. It seems likely that even if coherence is not the constitutive feature of justification, one's set of rationally held beliefs ought to be coherent. This might be achieved by understanding the other condition of rationality, namely one's conviction in their belief, in terms of coherence. So long as the conviction with which one holds a belief is subject to its degree of coherence with one's other beliefs, the intuitive requirement of coherence can remain an important factor in one's evaluation of the rationality of belief.

As establishing a truth-entailing system of justification faces a number of serious difficulties, externalist theories could be more successful at defending rational religious belief. These theories begin from the assumption that some of our beliefs are, or could be, true. Their requirements for justification are laid out in terms of how beliefs are connected to the truth. Reliabilism and the tracking theory maintain that the processes that give rise to our beliefs and the way in which we maintain them are what matter for justification, respectively. Although these theories will be insufficient for our purposes as they stand, explicitly adding access and evidentialist components to them makes either theory a plausible and cogent framework for defending rational religious belief. Both these theories can also understand rationality as a degree sensitive or as a blanket evaluation, and can be amended to fulfill all of the criteria that are required for an adequate framework. Either a reliabilism with the evidentialism of Comesaña's theory and the access of Sosa's, or the tracking theory with the added evidentialist

and access components, holds the most promise for a successful defense of the rationality of religious belief.

## ***Summary and Concluding Remarks***

It was the aim of this work to determine the most adequate epistemological framework from which to defend a specific set of beliefs. In Chapter 1 I explicated the beliefs I wished to investigate. Therein I argued that a subset of the beliefs, which are generally called ‘religious’ and a subset of those commonly called ‘metaphysical’ are relevantly similar and that these specific subsets of belief warrant investigation due to the fact that their constituent beliefs are widely held, philosophically significant, and epistemically suspect. In Chapter 2 I surveyed the historical evaluative criteria for arguments and claimed that with respect to arguments for religious claims none of them was sufficient; an explicit definition of what a ‘reasonable person’ was, would be required to evaluate these arguments. Such a definition presupposes a detailed understanding of rationality. An attempt to reach such an understanding was made in Chapter 3. There I argued that to meaningfully defend the rationality of religious belief a theory must include an internalist-access component, and also that an adequate theory should be compatible with both an all-or-nothing and a degree-sensitive conception of rationality.

In Chapter 4 I defined justification as the feature of a belief that makes holding it rational. I argued that justification is almost always conceived of as a matter of degree and that the appropriate degree is most plausibly understood as being in relation to one’s evidence. Further, I argued that given this feature, rationally defending outright religious belief would require either accepting that belief is not freely chosen, because the evidence for it is conclusive, or that it is rational to believe something for pragmatic reasons alone. Neither of these options, I showed, were ultimately favorable, and therefore outright religious belief cannot be rationally justified.

In Chapter 5 I surveyed the most influential epistemological theories of justification while keeping in mind the desiderata for an adequate theory from which to defend the rationality

of religious belief. These were: (i) being compatible with both an outright or a degree-sensitive conception of rationality, or giving good reason for choosing one conception over the other, (ii) including a component whereby agents have access to the relevant features of their beliefs, and (iii) requiring that one's degree of justification and conviction be relative to her evidence.

During the investigation, internalist theories were found wanting because of their lack of connection between rational belief and the truth or because of inherent internal inconsistencies. Externalist theories were found to be inadequate in their basic forms, but amendable to the required criteria.

In closing I would like to draw attention to the fact that although the requirements listed throughout the work were established because of their utility and plausibility for a defense of religious beliefs, they appear to be necessary conditions, even if not jointly sufficient ones, for a theory that attempts to defend of the rationality of any beliefs. The link between evidence and justification, a subject having access to some features of their belief, a connection to a truth-entailing or truth-conductive mechanism, etc., are all important to maintaining the rationality of belief in general. Religious beliefs end up being no different from other beliefs; a theory from which to defend the rationality of either will require the same conditions be met.

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