

FAITH AND RATIONAL DEFERENCE TO AUTHORITY

Lara Buchak¹

ABSTRACT: Many accounts of faith hold that faith is deference to an authority about what to believe or what to do. I show that this kind of faith fits into a more general account of faith, the risky-commitment account. I further argue that it can be rational to defer to an authority even when the authority's pronouncement goes against one's own reasoning. Indeed, such deference is rational in typical cases in which individuals treat others as authorities.

1. Introduction

Can it ever be rational to defer to someone else, against your own understanding? This question arises with respect to epistemic, practical, and moral matters. And it is a particularly important question in philosophy of religion, since many accounts of religious faith hold that faith is deference to an authority, and in many religious traditions it is a moral requirement to defer to religious authorities or to God.

I have elsewhere argued for the risky-commitment account of faith, which holds that to have faith in a claim is to commit to taking risks on that claim without looking for further evidence, and to remain committed to these risks even when one gets evidence against the claim. On the face of it, this seems quite different from the influential view that faith requires deference to testimony; however, I will show that testimonial deference turns out to be a special case of risky-commitment faith: the risky-commitment account encompasses deference to authority, but is also broader. By considering recent work on the rationality of risky-commitment faith, we can see when and why deference to someone else's testimony *against* one's own reasoning can be both *rational* and *morally good*.

The purpose of this paper, then, is two-fold. The first is to show that my account of faith subsumes the testimonial deference account of faith, thereby unifying some of the disparate literature on faith. The second is to illuminate when and why it can be rational to defer to an authority rather than one's own

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reasoning. Both the unification and the illumination contribute to the case in favor of the risky-commitment account of faith.

2. Faith as Risky Commitment

Here is the account of faith I have argued for:²

Risky Commitment Account: To have faith in a *claim* is to (be willing to) commit to take risks based on that claim without regard for additional evidence, and to (be willing to) follow through on taking these risks even if one gets evidence against the truth of the claim.³

For example, if you have faith that a friend will keep your secrets, you are willing to risk confiding in her without first asking a third party if they think your friend is trustworthy; furthermore, if someone tells you that they think your friend is a gossip, you are willing to continue to tell her your secrets anyway. If you have faith that a colleague would not try to embezzle given the opportunity, you are willing to risk leaving him alone with money unsupervised, and if money goes missing, you continue to believe that your colleague didn't take it or at least act under the supposition that he didn't. Since Moses has faith in God, he is willing to follow God's command to lead his people out of Egypt—a great risk—even when it appears that the pharaoh will not let them leave. If God's people have faith that there will be manna to gather each morning, they will refrain from storing it for the next day, and risk not having anything to eat tomorrow, even if it seems implausible that more will appear tomorrow.

Strictly speaking, having faith can be compatible with *looking* for further evidence, as long as one does not do so for purposes of deciding what to do; that is, as long as one is committed to taking risks on the claim regardless of what the evidence says. For example, a committed Christian might look for a satisfying response to the problem of evil in the hopes of convincing someone else to believe, and he will

² Buchak (2012, 2014, 2017a, 2021, 2022). See Buchak (2016, 2017b), and Rettler (2018) for a discussion of various other accounts of faith.

³ Some additional notes. First, not every claim will be a potential *object* of faith. I've argued that a claim is only an object of faith if the subject has a positive attitude towards the claim and is not certain whether the claim holds on the basis of his evidence alone. However, I don't need to take a stand here on what exactly makes a claim a potential object of faith. Second, faith comes in degrees, and as Pace (2017) argues, it comes in degrees along two dimensions: one may be willing to take *riskier* actions on the claim, and one may be willing to disregard or resist *stronger evidence*.

count as having faith as long as he doesn't base his commitment to Christianity on the results of his investigation.⁴ But in many cases, looking for evidence can often *indicate* that one is not committed to taking risks on the claim.

The risky-commitment account is an account of propositional faith (faith *that*); but we can use it to give an account of interpersonal faith (faith *in*): one has faith in a person if one has faith that the relevant claims concerning that person are true. For example, you have faith in a friend if you have faith that she will keep your secrets, and Moses has faith in God if he has faith that God is good, that God speaks truly, that he should be devoted to God. (One might only have faith in someone in a particular context, e.g., you might have faith in a friend in the context of secret-keeping but not in the context of being on time.)

I have shown, using decision theory, when and why risky-commitment faith is rational.⁵ Assume that an individual has *credences* in various claims, which represent how likely she thinks various claims are to be true, given the evidence she has, and assume that in choosing how to act, she *maximizes expected utility*.⁶ Next, assume that she faces a choice between two actions, one of which is a risk based on some claim *X*, in the sense that the action will turn out better than the alternative if *X* holds but worse than the alternative if *X* does not hold. For example, leaving my colleague alone with money is a risk based on the claim that he won't try to embezzle given the opportunity: if this claim is false, it would be better not to leave him alone. Moses leading his people out of Egypt is a risk based on the claim that they will succeed (or the claim that God's command is good or that God speaks truly): if this claim is false, it would be better to stay in Egypt.

⁴ Buchak (2011: 233-34). See also Adams (1977).

⁵ See Buchak (2010, 2012) for the argument that it is rational to commit to an action rather than looking for more evidence; see Buchak (2017a) for the argument that it is rational to maintain that commitment in the face of counterevidence; see Buchak (2014, 2021, 2022) for these arguments applied to belief.

⁶ We assume that credences obey the probability calculus and are updated by conditionalizing. Some hold that credences are rational as long as they are consistent. That view is compatible with my view about what faith is, but makes rational faith fairly easy to come by. I hold a stronger view, namely that credences must actually track the evidence (though I am not committed to thinking that a single body of evidence licenses a single rational credence). In any case, we can talk separately about whether faith is rational given one's credences, and whether faith is additionally based on credences that are rational. In section 6, I will argue that some ordinary cases of faith are both rational and based on rational credences. I here assume for simplicity that individuals maximize expected utility, but I actually think rationality is broader than that (Buchak 2013); and as it turns out, faith can be rational without commitment benefits (condition (iii)) for non-expected utility maximizers (see Buchak 2010, 2012, 2017a).

Faith requires taking a risk based on X . It also requires doing so without regard for further evidence, and sticking with the risk even if you receive evidence against X . When will doing so be decision-theoretically rational? That is, when will the expected utility of committing to the risky act and remaining committed be higher than the expected utility of first examining more evidence and then deciding what to do; and, if counterevidence does arise, when will the expected utility of remaining committed to the risky course of action be higher than the expected utility of switching to the safer course of action? Committing to and remaining committed to the risky act will have a higher expected utility if the following conditions jointly hold, where *neg-E* is the negative evidence against X :⁷

- (i) $p(X)$ is sufficiently high: one already has significant evidence for the claim in question.
- (ii) $p(X \mid \text{neg-E})$ is sufficiently high: evidence against the claim in question, if it appears, won't be very conclusive.
- (iii) There are benefits to be gained from *committing* to take a risk on X (or from taking the risk *now*), if X holds; these benefits couldn't be gained from merely taking the risk; and one must actually follow through on the commitment in order to get these benefits (or to avoid paying costs of backing out).

What counts as 'sufficiently high' credences for conditions (i) and (ii) depends on the stakes and on the size of the benefits of commitment.⁸

The basic idea behind the result is that there are benefits to committing to take a risk on X , and also benefits to letting one's act instead be based on additional evidence. These benefits weigh against each other to determine which course of action is better overall.

There are two cases. The first case is when *neg-E* would lower one's credence, but the risky act still has higher expected utility than the safe act on the new credence. In this case, the benefits of committing to take a risk on X are just the benefits one gets by committing to X or acting on X now rather than later.

The second, and more interesting, case is when *neg-E* would lower one's credence to the point that taking the risk would no longer maximize expected utility. Here, the benefits of committing to take a risk on X

⁷ Buchak (2022: 11).

⁸ See Buchak (2012, 2021, 2022) for general conditions and examples.

are (1) if X in fact holds but additional misleading evidence tells against X , one won't be swayed from what is in fact the better course of action by the negative evidence and (2) if X in fact holds, one gets the benefits of committing to X or acting on X now rather than later. The benefits of letting one's act be based on additional evidence are (1') if X in fact does not hold and additional correctly-leading evidence tells against X , one will be swayed from what is in fact the worse course of action by the negative evidence. The overall force of each of these benefits is a matter both of the probabilities of the scenarios in which the benefits are obtained and the utilities of the benefits. If (1) and (2) together outweigh (1'), then one should commit to taking a risk on X and not be swayed by counterevidence—in other words, one should have faith that X .

Thus, faith keeps one from being blown about by the changing winds of evidence, and also keeps one from dithering or being unsteady. Indeed, having faith that X is the only way to complete certain long-term projects based on X , if in fact X holds—in particular, long-term projects that require a series of actions and where evidence is apt to 'bounce around.' In the Exodus story, for example, leaving Egypt requires steadily carrying out the exit plan, and the pharaoh keeps changing his mind about whether the Israelites are allowed to leave. If Moses were to base his actions on pharaoh's current mood (and thus Moses's current evidence about whether the exodus would be successful), then he would never lead his people to leave.

This account of faith and its rationality concerns *action*. But we can also use this framework to evaluate *beliefs*. This is because believing X is itself a risk based on X : for someone who cares about the truth, believing X is better than agnosticism (and than believing *not-X*) if X holds, and worse than agnosticism (and than believing *not-X*) if X does not hold. The theist is better off than the atheist and agnostic, belief-wise, only if God exists. More specifically, on the *cognitive utility* account of belief, we can assign utilities to holding beliefs that are sensitive to whether the claim believed is true and to how specific the claim is (so that, for example, if X holds then it is better to believe X than to believe X or Y .)⁹ Under this model, committing to believe X without further evidence, and maintaining the belief even if one gets counterevidence, is rational under the conditions listed above (where 'take a risk on X ' is interpreted as 'believe X ' in condition (iii)).

So, again, for a committed belief to be rational, one must already have significant evidence for the claim in question, and one must also hold that evidence against the claim in question, if it appears, won't be

⁹ See Levi (1967a, 1967b), who formalizes an idea from James (1896).

very conclusive. Furthermore, there must be some benefit to *committing* to believe X (if X in fact holds) beyond simply believing X , benefits that will not obtain if one backs out of the commitment. This last condition is apt to hold for two kinds of claims. First, claims concerning matters in which it is better to have an unwavering belief in the truth. These might include claims about interpersonal matters, including those with religious or moral content. For example, it might be better to unwaveringly believe of my friend that she is trustworthy, and unwaveringly believe of God that God loves me. Second, claims upon which a great deal of reasoning is based, such as the core claims of a scientific, religious, or moral tradition.¹⁰ Committing to these claims facilitates our reasoning, by helping us figure out which sources to consult and cutting down on our cognitive load; and dropping this commitment is costly, since it often involves reasoning from an entirely new set of basic assumptions. For example, a committed Catholic will pay more attention to Catholic sources and will spend her time thinking about what follows from central Catholic assumptions; if she instead decides to become a Buddhist, she will have to consult entirely new sources and cease to pay as much attention to the Catholic ones.

Some might not like this account of belief, or think that faith is compatible with being agnostic, or even with disbelieving.¹¹ Those who take this route can simply adopt the practical account without the epistemic one, and the corresponding practical account of testimonial faith in the next section. For the rest of the paper, however, I will proceed as if this account of belief is correct.

One final note. While faith rationally keeps one committed even when evidence comes in that lowers one's credence—and lowers it to the point where one would not take the risk or hold the belief if one was not already committed to doing so—it will not be rational to remain committed no matter what. If the evidence against the claim is definitive, then it can be rational to drop the faith commitment. This will amount to *losing* faith—to repudiating the commitment—rather than the commitment itself being a limited one.

¹⁰ Buchak (2022).

¹¹ Whether faith requires belief has been a subject of debate in recent years; see, for example, Pojman (1986), Audi (1991), Alston (1996), Kvanvig (2013, 2016), Howard-Synder (2013), McKaughan (2013, 2016), Mugg (2016), and Malcolm and Scott (2016). On the present account of belief: faith, i.e. a committed belief, is compatible with it sometimes being the case that the evidence is insufficient for (rational) belief in the absence of the commitment, but one (rationally) believes anyway; indeed, this is precisely when the faith commitment is 'operative,' in keeping one believing when the evidence at a time is insufficient.

The typical way faith rationally progresses, in response to evidence, is as follows. One first gathers enough evidence to make faith rational. (You observe your new acquaintance being trustworthy; Moses has initial interactions with God.) If evidence raises one's credence sufficiently, one then has faith, i.e., commits to risky actions and develops committed beliefs. (You commit to confiding in this friend or commit to believing that she is trustworthy; Moses commits to doing whatever God commands or commits to believing that God is good.) Thereafter, one's evidence for the claim ebbs and flows: during periods when one's credence remains high or gets higher, one acts or believes confidently and the faith-commitment does little work; but during periods when one's credence drops, one acts or believes but only because of the faith-commitment, which does all the work in making one stay the course. (You confide in the friend easily and confidently, or you confide with doubt and only because you have faith in your friend; Moses follows God's commands which independently seem best, or Moses follows them despite misgivings.) Finally, though it may not always progress to this stage, either one has amassed such strong evidence that the claims do not need faith to prop them up, or one's evidence has grown so weak that one abandons the faith.

This is the *risky-commitment* account of faith, of its rationality, and of its typical progression.

3. Faith as Deference to the Testimony of an Authority

Many hold that faith and trusting testimony are intimately related. Indeed, a historically popular account holds that faith *is* belief on the basis of testimony: one has faith in a person insofar as one relies on that person's testimony in forming beliefs, and one has faith in a proposition insofar as one believes that proposition on the basis of someone else's testimony. So, to have faith that X is to believe that X on the basis of testimony—as G.E.M. Anscombe puts it, to believe *someone* that X.¹² Furthermore, this reliance on testimony is supposed to supersede one's own reasoning, in the sense of filling in the gaps that one cannot reason to, or even going against what one would conclude on the basis of one's own reasoning.

This account has proponents across a variety of major religious and philosophical traditions.¹³ Augustine holds that we should defer to the authority of the (Catholic) Church, and believe its claims even if we

¹² Anscombe (1979, 2008).

¹³ Many of these sources do not explicitly *define* "faith," but either (1) make the most sense if we presuppose that this is their definition of faith; or (2) are arguing about what we should do epistemically and rationally in religious matters, and therefore explaining a religious virtue, that is best thought of as faith than a different virtue.

cannot ourselves reason to the truth of those claims.¹⁴ Maimonides holds that people should stop reasoning at their intellectual limits, and that many people should just accept Jewish tradition without understanding it; furthermore, if something in that tradition seems false to them, they should not reject it.¹⁵ Al-Ghazali argues that Muslims must believe in matters reported by revelation, and that there are many classes of people who should not engage in reasoning about whether religious claims are true.¹⁶ Aquinas discusses at least two senses of faith, one of which is deference to testimony.¹⁷ In the early modern period, the view that faith is belief on the basis of testimony was held by John Locke, and more recently, this view has received support from Anscombe, Linda Zagzebski, Trent Dougherty, and Mark Boefspflug.¹⁸ Thus, various philosophers in the three major monotheistic traditions have all argued for deferring to the authority of their revelation or of their tradition and its leaders, rather than relying on one's own reasoning.

Proponents of this view abound in Eastern traditions as well. In the Confucian tradition, Xunzi argues that *xin* (trust) is the proper attitude towards tradition: people should defer to the authority of tradition, particularly the practices and views of the ancient sages.¹⁹ According to Andy Rotman, the Sanskrit term *śraddhā*, which is translated as *faith* or *trust* and etymologically can be understood as “to place a wager” or “to put one's heart”, has an ambiguous meaning.²⁰ He argues that in Indian Buddhism, it is associated with the idea of trusting someone about the truth of something.²¹ He also quotes Rao on the term's use in Hinduism: an “aspiration of the heart for a transcendent goal ... a confidence in some appropriate ‘means’ (*sādhana*) to reach that goal ... [and] a reliance on the *śāstra* for the knowledge of both ... the goal and the means.”²²

¹⁴ Augustine (1892 [391]).

¹⁵ Maimonides (1974 [1190]: Chs. 32-34).

¹⁶ Al-Ghazali (2013 [12th cent]).

¹⁷ Aquinas (1946 [1265-74]).

¹⁸ Locke (1996 [1698]), Anscombe (1975, 1979), Zagzebski (2012), Dougherty (2014), Boefspflug (forthcoming). McKaughan (2016) uses trusting a testimonial source as a core example of faith, but his account is broader.

¹⁹ Hutton (forthcoming).

²⁰ Rotman (2008: 29).

²¹ Rotman (2008). The meaning of *śraddhā* is debated by Buddhist scholars, apparently with similar positions arising as in the contemporary debate about faith among Western scholars: for example, that *śraddhā* is a belief in a proposition that falls short of knowledge or that *śraddhā* is an affective confidence towards something or someone (see Rotman (2008: 29)).

²² Rotman (2008:29). Rotman cites Rao (1974: 178). The term “*śāstra*” can be translated as “scripture.”

Deference can come in two forms, epistemic and practical. While Anscombe discusses belief in particular, others hold that following commands or moral precepts plays a more central role. Thus, we can distinguish between *epistemic deference*—believing something on the basis of someone else’s testimony—and *practical deference*—acting on the basis of someone else’s commands or advice. If Moses epistemically defers to God, he will believe what God says (e.g., that God is God, that is, that the entity speaking is the one true god; or that Moses should lead his people out of Egypt); if he practically defers to God, then he will take the actions that God tells him to take (e.g., leading his people out of Egypt).

In the case of testimony about *what to do*, epistemic deference and practical deference typically overlap, and can be difficult to distinguish. Very often, if someone believes that he ought to do something, then he will do it. But epistemic deference and practical deference can also come apart even in this case: Moses can believe that he ought to lead his people out of Egypt, but not actually do it; and Moses can lead his people out of Egypt while not being sure whether he ought to. (Jonah appears to have believed that God ordered him to go to Nineveh, but nonetheless didn’t do it.)

Distinguishing between epistemic and practical deference will allow us to think of these two kinds of deference separately, again making room for several positions in the debate about what faith is: those who think that faith requires belief; those who think that faith requires action; and those who think that faith requires both.

Thus, the *testimonial deference* account of faith says that:

Testimonial Deference Account, Epistemic Version: To have faith *in an authority* is to (be willing to) believe claims on the basis of the authority’s testimony, even if one’s own reasoning about these claims is silent or suggests their falsity. To have faith *that a claim holds* is to believe this claim because one has faith in an authority.

Testimonial Deference Account, Practical Version: To have faith *in an authority* is to (be willing to) act on the basis of the authority’s claims, even if one’s own reasoning about these pronouncements is silent or suggests that one shouldn’t so act. To have faith *that a claim holds* is to act on this claim because one has faith in an entity.

I note that “one’s own reasoning” might include the fact that an authority testified to such-and-such; thus, having faith must go beyond treating the testifier’s pronouncement as just another piece of evidence, to be considered in the same manner as other evidence one has.²³

To take someone to be an authority is to have faith in them, in one or the other sense of the testimonial deference account. Entities that are sometimes taken to be authorities—entities about whom it may be claimed that one should have faith in them—include another person, a governing authority, a text, a tradition, or God.

4. Testimonial Deference is Risky Commitment

We are now in a position to see that *testimonial deference is a special case of risky commitment*. Practical deference to testimony is a special case of risky-commitment faith, and, if one accepts the cognitive utility account of belief, epistemic deference to testimony is also a special case of risky-commitment faith. (In this section, I will use faith_R to stand for faith in the sense articulated by the risky-commitment account, and faith_T to stand for faith in the sense articulated by the testimonial deference account.)

According to the risky-commitment account, if an individual has faith_R that some testifier pronounces correctly in some matter, then she must be willing to commit to act on the basis of his testimony without regard for what further evidence might say; furthermore, she must remain committed to acting on the basis of his testimony even if she encounters counter-evidence.²⁴ Similarly, if we adopt the cognitive utility account of belief, then if an individual has faith_R that the testifier pronounces correctly, she must be willing to commit to a belief in the claim without further evidence, and must stick with this belief even if she gets evidence against the claim.

For example, if I have faith_R in my priest (in the context of pronouncing correctly in matters of Christian doctrine duty), then I have faith_R that he pronounces correctly in matters of Christian doctrine and duty.

²³ Note that “pronouncing”—speaking as an authority—might be different from merely speaking; for example, a speaker might invite others to take him as an authority on certain matters but not others.

²⁴ Several other accounts of faith see faith as involving a kind of practical commitment or practical resolve, which (presumably) must be maintained in the face of counter-evidence. These accounts can therefore also hold that practical testimonial deference is a special case of faith as they understand it. See, for example, Alston (1996), Swinburne’s (1981) “Lutheran” view, Howard-Snyder (2013), McKaughan (2016), and Jackson (2021).

Thus, I am committed to following his pronouncements. I am committed to taking a risk on each of his pronouncements, that is, I am willing to act on what he says about both doctrine and duty; and I am willing to believe what he says. If Moses has faith_R in God, then he has faith_R that God speaks truly, and that he ought to do what God tells him to do. Thus, he commits to take a risk on doing whatever God tells him to do, to act on what God says about Godself and about Moses's position in the world, and to believe whatever God says.

One kind of further evidence someone might seek, after hearing a testifier's pronouncement, is what conclusion they themselves would come to after thinking through the matter themselves. In the case in which the priest is the authority, I might study the Bible on my own and think about whether *I* think it really says what the priest claims it says. In the case of God and Moses, Moses might think about the pharaoh's mood, the strength of his army, and the Israelites' ability to handle a long journey, and decide whether this all adds up to it being a good idea to leave Egypt.

Faith_R requires not engaging in this reasoning for purposes of action based on the claim or belief in the claim. More precisely, it requires committing to act or to believe *regardless of the results* of this reasoning. In other words: if I have faith_R in my priest with respect to the tradition, but I reason to a conclusion contrary to his, I follow his anyway; if Moses has faith_R in God, but he reasons to the conclusion that leaving Egypt would be a bad idea, he leaves anyway. (Mutatis mutandis with believing these claims.)

Thus, faith_R in an authority (in the context in which they are authoritative)—or faith_R that an authority's pronouncements are correct—implies faith_T in that authority. To have faith_R in an authority requires committing to act on or believe the authority's pronouncements without regard for further evidence, and to continue to do so even if one gets evidence to the contrary. One particular kind of evidence is *evidence constituted by one's own reasoning*. Therefore, faith_R in an authority requires committing to act on or believe the authority's pronouncements without regard for your own conclusions when thinking through the matter yourself, and continuing to commit to do so even if you do think through the matter yourself and come to a conclusion that conflicts with that of the authority; and this is precisely faith_T . Faith_T is faith_R with respect to particular claims, namely the claims of an authority. In short: testimonial deference is a special case of risky commitment faith.

5. When and Why Testimonial Deference is Rational

We are now in a position to see when and why testimonial deference is rational, both practically and epistemically. Recalling the conditions for the rationality of faith_R , and noting that faith_T is a special case of faith_R , we can say that *acting on X* or *believing that X*, on the basis of testimony from an authority *A*, is rational just in case:

- (i) $p(X \mid A \text{ testifies that } X)$ is sufficiently high.
- (ii) $p(X \mid A \text{ testifies that } X \ \& \ \text{one's own reasoning points to not-}X)$ is sufficiently high.
- (iii) There are benefits to be gained from *committing* to take a risk on *X* (or from taking the risk *now*, before thinking through the matter oneself), if *X* holds; these benefits couldn't be gained from merely taking the risk; and one must actually follow through on the commitment in order to get these benefits (or to avoid paying the costs of backing out).

Again, what counts as “sufficiently” high for both conditions (i) and (ii) depends on the stakes; one will generally need higher credence the riskier the act is.

The first condition, which we will call the *reliability condition*, says roughly that the testimony provides significant evidence for the truth of the claim testified (where, again, how significant the evidence needs to be depends on the stakes), antecedent to the subject's own reasoning about the claim. This probability will typically be determined by whether the testifier is generally knowledgeable about the domain into which *X* falls and generally tells the truth. (Keep in mind that these conditions are about the subject's credences; thus the condition is about the individual's assessment of the evidence about the testifier's reliability, not the testifier's actual reliability.)

The second condition, which we will call the *inconclusiveness condition*, says that given the testimony, the subject's own reasoning against the claim won't be conclusive: there is still a significant possibility (according to her own assessment) that if she reasons to not-*X*, then she has reasoned incorrectly.²⁵ (How

²⁵ Compare to Zagzebski's (2012) defense of deference to authority rather than one's own understanding, which bears some similarities to the defense in this paper. Zagzebski says, roughly, that you should defer to an authority when deferring to the authority is more likely to result in true beliefs than reasoning on your own. On both of our accounts, one thinks that one will generally do better by following an authority than reasoning oneself; but whereas hers evaluates total true beliefs from following the authority versus total true beliefs from reasoning on my own, I evaluate the likelihood of a true belief (or correct action) on each particular matter, and, furthermore, on my account,

significant this possibility needs to be depends on the stakes.) The subject's own reasoning can include her background knowledge about X : for example, the fact that X has a low antecedent probability, or the fact that X is a matter about which someone is apt to give false testimony.²⁶ This probability can be very different for each claim X in domain, even claims about which one's reasoning points in the same direction.

As in the case of faith_R generally, there are two relevant cases here. One is the case in which you are sufficiently pessimistic about your own reasoning abilities, relative to those of the authority. In this case, if your reasoning points to *not- X* , this won't lower your credence in X very much; thus, it will still be rational for you to act on X or believe X on the basis of your credence. In this case, you will have testimonial deference faith, but it will be 'inert,' so to speak—you behave no differently than you would if you were to simply count the authority's testimony as a very strong piece of evidence. The second case is one in which, if your reasoning points to *not- X* , this will lower your credence in X enough that *in the absence of the commitment* you would neither act on X nor believe X . In this case, testimonial deference is doing the work: it is the reason that one acts on X or believes X . Thus, in this case, you must treat the authority's pronouncement in a special way, not just as evidence to be weighed up against other evidence and your own reasoning.

The third condition, which we will call the *situation* condition,²⁷ says that there are benefits to *committing* to the action or the belief in question or to doing so *now*. We've already noted that there are apt to be benefits to committing when it comes to claims that are of interpersonal importance, that guide your life-projects, or that play a central role in your web of beliefs or your plans. Situations in which there are apt to be benefits to making a commitment now, or taking an action now (including the 'action' of believing) which will be costly to back out of, are similarly common. Many interpersonal situations have this feature: getting married, putting effort into a relationship or friendship. So too with any course of action

a commitment to following the authority can make it rational to defer to the authority's testimony rather than one's own understanding even when it would not be rational to do so in the absence of this commitment.

²⁶ See Hume's (1999 [1748]) famous discussion of miracles and Earman's (2000) Bayesian reconstruction for a detailed discussion of how testimony can raise and lower the probability of various hypotheses. A more general account will involve an individual testifying about her credence that X (see, e.g., Elga (2007)), but I won't address that complication here.

²⁷ In Buchak (2017), I called this the *value* condition, but I now prefer *situation* condition, since the condition concerns the practical (or epistemic) situation the subject finds herself in.

that (if the relevant claims are true) is better the sooner one starts: leading one's people out of Egypt or committing to a religious way of life, for example.

Putting this together, with respect to claims that are of interpersonal importance, claims that guide your life-projects, claims that play a central role in your web of beliefs, and claims that support plans that are better to get started on as soon as possible: *if* you know a testifier with an excellent track-record, and a good track record when compared with your own, then it will be rational to commit to treating this testifier as an authority: it will be rational to defer to this person with respect to X , without first thinking through the matter yourself, and to continue deferring even if you do think through the matter yourself and conclude that X is false. It will even be rational to continue deferring if your new credence in X —after taking both the testifier's pronouncement and your own reasoning into account—is low enough that you would not act on X or believe X in the absence of the commitment.

Again, as with faith_R generally, if one's credence drops very low, it may be rational to lose faith in the authority. So while one commits to acting on, and believing, an authority's pronouncements, this commitment is not irrevocable.

We have now vindicated the idea that faith sometimes involves deference to an authority, and that it can be rational to so defer: it can be rational to defer to an authority rather than rely on one's own reasoning. In short, rational agents may be required to believe others on faith.

6. Are Central Cases of Testimonial Deference Rational?

We've seen how to distinguish cases in which it is rational to defer to an authority rather than one's own reasoning from cases in which is irrational to do so. We will now look at four kinds of cases in which someone is typically treated as an authority: an expert in a domain, an interpersonal advisor, a tradition (particularly a religious tradition), and God. While the discussion of each of these can only scratch the surface, we will see that individuals in these cases can satisfy the conditions for the rationality of faith, and perhaps typically do. (By this I mean not just that individuals can have consistent credences that meet the relevant conditions—which is trivially true—but that credences that meet the relevant conditions typically constitute a good response to the evidence.) This will both vindicate our ordinary practices and show that our conditions are latching onto something that appears to guide the practice of deferring to an authority.

6.1 Domain Experts

It is common to treat experts as authorities within their domain of expertise. We treat scientists as authorities about scientific findings, professors and teachers as authorities about the subject they teach, doctors as authorities about their patients' health, woodworkers as authorities about how to make furniture, artists as authorities about how to make good art or (perhaps) what constitutes good art, and wine tasters as authorities about the flavor of particular wines. To treat these individuals as authorities in these domains is to defer to their pronouncements rather than to reason through the matter ourselves, and to continue to defer to them even if we do reason through the matter and reach a different conclusion.²⁸ I treat my physics professor as an authority when I accept her solution to a problem as correct, even if I've arrived at a different solution. I treat my doctor as an authority when I do what she prescribes as treatment for my illness, even if my own internet research suggests I should do otherwise. An apprentice woodworker treats a master woodworker as an authority when he defers to the master about the order in which he should assemble a cabinet, even if he thinks he's found a faster way.

We will now see that treating a domain expert as an authority is often or typically rational: one's situation with respect to the expert satisfies the reliability, inconclusiveness, and situation conditions.

For someone to be widely recognized as an expert is for a community to hold that the reliability condition is satisfied with respect to them and their domain of expertise.. An expert is someone who has deep knowledge on a subject—whether academic or practical knowledge—and thus is someone who is likely to be correct about facts in their domain of expertise. (Delimiting their domain of expertise might require some precision; for example, we might take philosophers to be experts about the arguments for various metaphysical claims without taking them to be experts about whether these claims are true.) What it is for someone to be recognized as an expert in their domain is for this fact to be acknowledged, often with some credential—a degree or a license—or some title—professor or doctor or master—that requires that the would-be expert has demonstrated a track-record of knowledge and is agreed to have done so by other experts. Thus, the reliability condition about the expert is satisfied for the typical novice.

²⁸ Boespflug (forthcoming) provides empirical evidence that this is how most people who believe in climate change behave with respect to scientific experts on climate change—they defer to these experts rather than thinking through the matter themselves—and argues that this deference to expertise constitutes a similarity between the epistemic practices of science and religion.

The inconclusiveness condition, too, will typically be satisfied in the case of a novice treating an expert as an authority. Recall that this condition states that there is still a fairly high chance of the expert being correct, even if the novice reasons through the matter herself and comes to a different conclusion from the expert. An undergraduate who reasons through a physics problem and arrives at a different solution than his physics professor should think his professor is very likely to be correct, even if he cannot locate her error. A novice woodworker who reasons about the order in which he should assemble a cabinet and arrives at a different answer from the expert should again think the expert is very likely to be correct, and should proceed according to the expert's plan rather than his own.

It is instructive to note that when one gains subject-matter expertise, one also gains an ability—which the novice does not possess—to reason about why various answers are wrong. Thus, one important difference between an expert and a novice is that the latter doesn't know enough to know when she is in error, making the inconclusiveness condition more apt to be satisfied. The novice who reasons to *not-X*, even if she takes into account that the expert thinks *X*, will typically not be good *at this process of reasoning*: she won't have a feel for the kinds of errors one could make in reasoning about the domain in question.

Finally, cases of treating a domain expert as an authority often meet the situation condition, which (recall) says that there are benefits to committing to the action or belief in question, or to doing so *now*. Projects like assembling a cabinet, taking a prescribed course of medical treatment, or completing an art project can typically only be completed, if the expert is correct, by following the expert's advice. For example, starting a medical treatment, then stopping in the middle if one's credence in its success drops, will often interfere with the treatment's effectiveness. Beginning to assemble a cabinet as directed by an expert woodworker, then proceeding to assemble it according to one's own reasoning and against the woodworker's directions, will often result in the failure of the project.

Less obviously, there are benefits to committing to *beliefs* that domain-experts profess, because doing so is often necessary to understanding the subject matter. For example, the physics student who commits to holding that his professor is correct, regardless of his own reasoning, will be more apt to try to figure out his own error, will use the professor's result rather than his own in other problems, and so forth. Indeed,

committing to deferring to an expert, independent of one's own reasoning, is often how one becomes an expert oneself.²⁹

Recall the typical progression of faith, whereby one first gathers enough evidence to make faith rational, then develops faith, then either amasses enough evidence in favor of the claim so that one no longer needs faith, or amasses enough evidence against the claim so that one loses faith. This, as it turns out, is also the typical progression of a novice with respect to an expert. The expert first establishes a reliable track record, such that the reliability condition holds, and the inconclusiveness condition holds for the novice. Even if all the novice knows is that the expert possesses a particular credential, this will be enough to give her high credence in the expert's pronouncements and at least middling credence when she disagrees with the expert. The novice then has faith in the expert, i.e., defers to the expert as an authority, even when she doesn't herself see the reasons for the expert's claims, or disagrees with them. Faith in the expert is useful because it keeps the novice from acting on her doubts or lack of understanding about what the expert claims.

If the novice is interested enough in the subject matter, she will continue to seek understanding, guided by the expert. If the expert is in fact reliable—if he is truly an expert—the novice will amass enough knowledge that she does not need faith to prop up the expert's claims: her judgments will agree with the expert's. Thus she will no longer rely on the expert, but not because she 'loses' faith in the typical sense. One must suspend disbelief to learn from an expert, but not indefinitely, if one becomes an expert oneself. Alternatively, if in gathering more evidence, the novice's credence drops below the threshold for meeting the inconclusiveness condition, then the novice will lose faith in the expert. Thus, if the purported expert is in fact a "quack," the novice won't be stuck following him indefinitely—taking someone to be an authority is a commitment that can be revised.³⁰

²⁹ Many proponents of deference to authority point out that in many domains one relies on an expert to learn how to reason about the domain: see, e.g., Augustine (1892 [391]), Maimonides (1974 [1190]), Al-Ghazali (2013 [12th century]).

³⁰ This fact suggests a response to Lackey's (2021) problem of the "predatory expert." Roughly, Lackey worries that on views like mine—views where authorities' reasons are taken to be pre-emptive—those who treat others as authorities will be open to exploitation. The response suggested here is that even though one should treat an authority as pre-emptive, one can revise one's commitment to count someone as an authority if one gets strong evidence against the authority's claims or against the claim that that person is an authority. While the authority's testimony pre-empts one's own beliefs or actions, one still keeps track of one's own assessment of the strength of the evidence.

6.2 Interpersonal Advisors

Another case in which we treat others as authorities is the case of interpersonal advisors. Many people have someone to whom they defer in matters of personal conduct and decision-making: a friend; a parent; a therapist; a sponsor in a 12-step program; a priest or rabbi or imam. To treat these individuals as authorities is to take their advice and directives even when one's own reasoning leads one to believe they are wrong.

We will see in this section that treating an advisor as an authority is often rational; indeed, that it very likely would be a mistake to treat no one as an interpersonal authority.

An individual can rationally satisfy the reliability condition with respect to an interpersonal advisor either if the advisor has a track record of wise advice (as in the case of a trusted friend or family member), or if the advisor possesses some credential that the individual takes to be indicative of or correlate with a tendency to give wise advice (as in the case of a religious figure or therapist).

The inconclusiveness condition is particularly apt to be satisfied with respect to certain matters. These include matters on which the individual is a "novice" and the advisor is an "expert." For example, a young married person might consider herself a novice about marriage relative to a couple who has been happily married for five decades. We can think of becoming a moral person, becoming a good spouse or a good friend, or developing virtue, along the lines of a novice trying to become an expert with the guidance of other experts.

Taking someone to be an interpersonal advisor is not limited to asymmetrical cases of novice and expert. Crucially, the inconclusiveness condition is also satisfied on matters on which one is apt to engage in motivated reasoning—to conclude that it is permissible to do *A* when in fact *A* is impermissible.

Temptation doesn't operate simply by making an immoral action difficult to resist; instead, it can operate by clouding one's judgment, by making certain lines of reasoning seem more compelling, by minimizing the harm of the action, or by making one's own conduct seem uniquely justified ("everyone else is cheating on the test, it's not really that bad; besides, I know the material, I'm just bad at test-taking; I'm really just checking my answers against my neighbor's anyway..."). One particular way in which one's judgment can be clouded is to see oneself as better positioned to understand the status of the act than

outsiders, and thus to see one's reasoning as superior ("you wouldn't understand, you've never been in my shoes...").

Thus, the inconclusiveness condition is particularly apt to hold with respect to an advisor on moral matters where the advised action is something difficult to do. For example, when discussing a falling-out I had with a friend, a mutual friend tells me I am in the wrong and need to apologize but I conclude the opposite; a trusted confidant tells me that I need to repent of certain conduct but I don't see anything wrong with it; a rabbi tells me that I need to place the needs of my children above my own needs; and so forth. Similarly, the inconclusiveness condition is apt to hold with respect to an advisor on practical matters in which performing the advised action is especially difficult, or requires perseverance, courage, or self-sacrifice: for example, a professor tells a student she needs to change her study habits or (less mundanely) a seasoned veteran tells a general he should lead his troops into battle.

It should be clear that the situation condition can hold in these cases of interpersonal authorities as well. Many of these cases are ones in which there are benefits to acting now rather than later. It is better to not cheat on the test than to have to admit your mistake later. It is better to apologize now, to repent now, to put the needs of my children first now. Many of these cases are also (or instead) ones in which committing to a course of action is better than merely doing the requisite actions when one's own reasoning justifies it. Interpersonal relationships are long-term projects, and the conditions for (e.g.) friendship or marriage over time are something over and above acting like a friend or spouse at particular times—they involve commitment to doing so.

That the three conditions for the rationality of treating someone as an authority are apt to be satisfied in the moral and practical sphere is an argument that one *should* have an authority to whom one defers, especially in moral or practical matters about which people are apt to engage in motivated reasoning—or matters in which oneself in particular is apt to engage in such reasoning. This doesn't, of course, mean ceding one's decision-making to another for all time, because one can still eschew faith if one comes to different judgments than the advisor over a long enough period of time, and thus lowers one's assessment of the advisor's reliability, or if one is nearly certain that the advisor is wrong.

6.3 Religious Traditions

Let us next consider the case of those who treat elements of traditions, particularly religious traditions, as authoritative. Different elements may be taken to be authoritative in matters of both belief and practice.

First, particular texts, such as the Bible, the Torah, or the Qur'an, can be taken to be authoritative: the words of the text are to be taken as true in some relevant sense (they are to be taken as “data” that must be accommodated), though this leaves open both the mode in which such words are intended (as literal or allegorical) and the particular hermeneutics by which they are to be interpreted. Second, the opinions or pronouncements of particular people, such as Moses, Muhammad, or the ancient sages, can be taken to be authoritative. Third, a particular religious body can be taken to be authoritative; for example, the magisterium in Catholic Christianity or the ecumenical councils in many branches of Christianity. Finally, one might take ‘tradition’ itself—thought of as a consensus with a particular history—as authoritative.³¹

In all of these cases, the relevant authority is supposed to supersede one’s own judgments: if the authority says *X*, then one should believe *X* even if *X* doesn’t seem true on the basis of one’s own reasoning; if the authority says to *A* and not to *B*, then one should *A* and one should not *B*, even if *A* seems wrong or *B* seems harmless when one reasons about it oneself.

It is notable that in cases of religion, there aren’t unanimously recognized religious experts, but rather competing entities with different and incompatible viewpoints. (Only Muslims take the Qur’an to be authoritative; only Christians take the ecumenical councils to be authoritative; etc.) Nor are there objective ‘track records’ by which we could judge putative religious authorities, since we do not universally agree on matters of metaphysics or morals. Nonetheless, there is a good case to be made that many individuals can be rational in taking one of these sources as authoritative, i.e., that the conditions for the rationality of faith in *some religious authority* are often met for particular individuals. What follows are only sketches of arguments; each of these would have to be developed in more detail.

First, we could argue that some individuals rationally have high credence in the truth, and therefore reliability, of some religious tradition or another on the basis of arguments and sources of evidence familiar from philosophy of religion: natural theology, religious experience, historical arguments, and so forth. Second, we could argue that an individual can rationally have high credence in the reliability of the authoritative entity in particular, on the basis of her assessment of its track record: upon investigating the Bible, the individual concludes that it has a good track-record of declaring important moral truths that were otherwise unknown at the time of its writing, or that in cases in which she has disagreed with the Bible’s moral instructions in the past, she has tended to get it wrong. We should keep in mind that having a rational credence is a lower standard than believing the truth or being correct—it requires only a correct

³¹ See Zagzebski (2012: 189-99) for various models of tradition.

response to evidence. So to say that individuals can be rational in believing on the basis of these considerations isn't to say that the religion in question is true or that everyone must treat these considerations as good evidence.

More interestingly, we could argue that an individual can rationally assign high credence to the authority of the tradition she grew up in, without having arrived at this credence from an argument 'from nowhere.'³² First, it is often the case that others in one's life who do have a good track record (such as one's parents, teachers, or community leaders) defer to one of these authorities, just as they defer to intellectual authorities. Thus, an individual embedded in a community should initially assign high credence to the pronouncements of those the community treats as authorities, just as one should initially assign high credence to scientific authorities on the grounds that they are taken to be authorities by one's community. Second, the individual's own history with that authority or tradition can provide a high credence: from the point of view of an individual embedded in a religious tradition, the authorities of that tradition typically in fact have a good track record of saying true things and recommending good courses of action. Finally, we could adopt a picture of prior probabilities on which one has no choice but to think *some* body is truth-tracking in a domain—that's how one learns anything about the domain in the first place—and therefore that one is rational to assign (initial) high credence to the 'expert' in one's own tradition.

Again, we can think of deference to a religious authority along the lines of deference by a novice to an expert: the novice initially defers to the expert, then continues both to defer to and to learn from the expert, unless she meets the conditions for rationally dropping her commitment to defer (e.g., sufficiently low credence in the expert's pronouncements). A difference in the religious case—in which there are neither uncontroversially recognized experts nor an uncontroversial way to judge someone's track record—is that one's own reasoning will end up being more highly dependent on who one takes to be an expert in the first place; furthermore, the standards against which the expert is measured will be internal to the religious tradition, and thus somewhat informed by the expert herself. However, this need not threaten the rationality of the relevant credences, since it is not a trivial matter for the expert to have a good track record or to measure up to the standards.³³

³² See also Buchak (2022).

³³ See Pittard (2014) for discussion of the idea that religious commitments are not independent of epistemic standards, and that therefore one will have fewer 'epistemic peers' who disagree with one in the case of religion.

If we accept any of the above arguments that an individual can rationally satisfy the reliability condition with respect to an element or entity of a tradition, then a similar argument will show that an individual can rationally satisfy the inconclusiveness condition with respect to this element or entity. For if an individual thinks that an element or entity of tradition is knowledgeable or apt to be correct, then she should also think (as long as she is still a ‘novice’) that where she disagrees with the element or entity, there is still a sufficient chance that it is correct. As in the case of the physics expert, the religious ‘novice’ should think that she probably does not understand the subject matter enough to locate her mistakes, if indeed she has made some. Similarly, as in the case of an interpersonal advisor, with respect to religious claims or commands that require self-sacrifice, discipline, or overcoming vices, one’s own judgment is apt to be clouded, and one is therefore apt to come to erroneous conclusions.

Finally, religious matters are matters about which it is typically better to act now rather than later,³⁴ and matters about which there are benefits to committing to act or to believe, over and above simply acting or believing at various times. This is because religious commitment is a combination of interpersonal commitment, moral commitment, and epistemic commitment to core claims; thus it shares the benefits of commitment that have been articulated for those domains.

One upshot of this discussion is that, in religious matters (and other matters of contested expertise), individuals can often satisfy the conditions for the rationality of faith with respect to a certain set of authorities, but that there isn’t a set of authorities with respect to which all individuals can satisfy these conditions. This may be worrying—of course it would be preferable if our commitments weren’t sensitive to the community in which we grew up—but keep in mind there are conditions for dropping a faith-commitment: when an individual’s credence in the pronouncements of an authority drops below a threshold, she will experience a de-conversion.³⁵ Thus, while one’s community makes a difference to one’s commitments, one is not stuck with them forever, if the evidence against them mounts.

6.4 God

A final—and central—case of faith in an authority is faith in God. (As I’ve said, faith in God extends beyond just taking God to be an authority, but it includes doing so.) There are two points to make about this case: one, that central stories of testimonial-deference faith in God—for example, those in the

³⁴ James (1896) also makes this point.

³⁵ See Buchak (2022) on religious conversion, as well as conversion in the case of scientific or moral commitments.

Bible—satisfy the conditions for the rationality of faith; and two, that the rationality conditions provide the beginnings of a response to a classic argument against God’s existence.

Biblical stories of testimonial-deference faith—or lack thereof—involve God telling a person something or telling a person to do something.³⁶ God tells Noah to build an ark. God tells Abraham that he will make him the father of many nations and that his wife Sarah will bear a son. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. God tells Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. God tells Moses’s people that there will be manna to eat every day, and not to try to store any for the next day. God tells Jonah to journey to Nineveh and tell the people that it will be destroyed for its wickedness. God gives Samuel a vision about Eli’s family. God speaks through the prophets and tells his people that bad things will happen if they do not repent. God tells Hosea to marry Gomer. An angel of God tells Mary she will bear a child. God says that Jesus is God’s beloved son. And so forth.³⁷

The reliability condition is satisfied in these stories, if we evaluate them on their own terms. The recipient of the testimony sometimes has a track record of interacting with God *before* taking (or rejecting) God’s pronouncements on faith, and this track record reveals that God is a reliable source of truth and that following God’s commands has proven better than not doing so. Other times, these occurrences are accompanied by miraculous occurrences that ought to raise the recipient’s credence that they are speaking with God: for example, a burning bush or a voice from nowhere. (One might think that one should always have credence 1 in God’s pronouncements, on the grounds that it is analytic that God speaks truly. But we could think of the situations of the individuals in two ways: either they need evidence that God speaks truly; or it is analytic that God speaks truly, but they need evidence that this particular being is God or that this is the mechanism through which God is speaking.)

Similarly for the inconclusiveness condition. In each story, the recipient has some reason to think that God’s pronouncement is wrong. The claims are often laughable or surprising: that an old couple or a virgin will have a child, or that food will appear in the desert every day. And the tasks ordered often seem

³⁶ These are all examples from the Bible, according to a Christian understanding. I would expect that stories of faith in God from other religious traditions follow this same pattern, but I don’t have the expertise to comment on them.

³⁷ These stories appear in the following Biblical texts: Noah in Genesis 6-7; Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17; Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22; Moses and Egypt in Exodus 3-14; Moses and manna in Exodus 16; Jonah in Jonah; Samuel in 1 Samuel 3; Hosea and Gomer in Hosea 1; Mary in Luke 1; Jesus’s baptism in Matthew 3, Mark 1, and Luke 3.

difficult, impossible, or even immoral: liberate unarmed people from a nation with an army, take steps to sacrifice one's son. But, nonetheless, God's track-record—or an accompanying 'miraculous' sign—should weigh against the seeming falsity of the pronouncement or seeming impossibility or immorality of the task.³⁸

The situation condition holds in these cases as well. Some of these cases require unwavering belief, because wavering could lead to people acting wrongly; for example, if the people of Nineveh were not serious about repentance, it would have been destroyed. Many of these cases concern a belief about who God is, which is presumably central to the individuals' web of religious beliefs. Some of these cases require unwavering action over a long time: for example, journeying in the desert or preparing to give birth to a child.

Therefore, central stories of faith in God satisfy the rationality conditions. Having seen why, we can now respond to a challenge to theism due to James Rachels.³⁹ Rachels argues for atheism on the grounds that any being who is God appropriately requires *worship*; worshipping God entails following God's commands even if you disagree with them; but one should never do so, since it is wrong to cede one's moral autonomy to someone else. Thus, since no being could be a fitting object of worship, God does not exist.

We can now see when and why it can be not only morally permissible, but laudable, to do something commanded by someone else even when one's own reasoning indicates that doing it would be wrong, or to refrain from doing something prohibited by someone else even when one's own reasoning indicates that doing it would not be wrong. When one takes a potential authority to have a good track record of commanding things, and when one is in a case in which one is likely enough to be wrong about what one should do—either because of motivated reasoning or because one is a 'novice' compared to the potential authority—and when there are benefits to committing to doing or refraining from the action or to acting or refraining now—either because the action is part of a longer plan or because of the inherent benefits of committing—then one *does better*, in terms of performing right actions, by deferring to the authority

³⁸ I am somewhat sympathetic to Kierkegaard's (1941 [1846]) idea that Abraham was doing something genuinely irrational; nevertheless, it is notable that Abraham listened to God rather than other entities, and that needs to be explained through some feature of rational action (e.g., that Abraham's prior interactions with God led him to treat God as an authority).

³⁹ Rachels (1971).

rather than to one's own reasoning. If we keep in mind that maintaining such deference is not absolute—that one could cease to treat the entity as an authority if enough evidence comes in—then we might say that an individual does not problematically cede her autonomy, but instead defers to an authority because in her (autonomous) judgment, doing so is apt to conduce to her being a good moral agent.⁴⁰

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I unified the risky-commitment account of faith and the testimonial-deference account of faith by showing that the latter is a special case of the former. I then used the conditions for the rationality of risky-commitment faith to show when and why testimonial deference to an authority can be rational. In many matters, it is rational to commit to following an authority without first reasoning through the matter oneself, and to maintain that commitment even if one reasons through the matter oneself and arrives at a different answer. And this is true particularly in matters in which people in fact defer to authorities. Thus, in addition to providing criteria that distinguish between cases of rational deference to authority and irrational deference to authority, we have shown that many cases in which people in fact defer to authorities fall on the good side.

Faith can be rational in the case of deference to an authority: it can be rational to commit to acting on or believing the pronouncements of an authority, and to continue to do so even if one thinks through the matter oneself and comes to a different conclusion.

In other work, I have written about the rationality of maintaining one's commitments to central religious, moral, political, or scientific claims in the face of anomalies or peer disagreement.⁴¹ I want briefly to say something about the relationship of those arguments to this one. In those papers, I showed that if one rationally has high credence in certain claims, one can remain steadfast in one's beliefs or actions even in the face of genuine counterevidence (evidence that lowers one's credence). In this paper, I explored one way in which one might arrive at high credence in certain claims in the first place: one might rationally treat someone as an authority who tells one to believe those claims. Thus we arrive at a picture of rational epistemic life: one takes certain people to be authorities, on the basis of their track-records, credentials, or community's endorsement; one commits to believing or acting on their claims, particularly claims that are central to one's doxastic or practical life; and one maintains these commitments even in the face of

⁴⁰ See also Zagzebski (2012), who makes the point that “epistemic self-reliance” isn't needed for an individual to count as autonomous.

⁴¹ Buchak (2021, 2022).

challenges from one's own reasoning or one's peers. Although one relies on authorities for what to believe, one's own reasoning plays a distinctive role, since it is one's own assessment of the evidence that will lead one to treat someone as an authority, and eventually to reject certain authorities. Not only does this picture illuminate a rational way to govern one's epistemic life, it also bears strong resemblance to how people actually conduct themselves: to the interplay between relying on authorities, relying on oneself, and taking dissenting opinions into account.

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