

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Why you should be a religious skeptic

Sebastian Gäb 

Faculty of Philosophy, LMU Munich,
Munich, Germany

Correspondence

Sebastian Gäb, Faculty of Philosophy,
LMU Munich, Munich, Germany.

Email: s.gueb@lmu.de

Abstract

Most philosophers of religion subscribe to some variety of religious realism: they believe that religious statements aim at capturing a mind-independent reality and are true precisely if they successfully do so. Curiously, most religious realists also believe that at least some of our religious beliefs are rationally justified. In this paper, I argue that these positions are actually at odds with each other. Religious realists should rather be religious skeptics. I first argue that realism always implies the possibility of our beliefs being false. Then, I develop a Copernican argument to show that we have no reason to believe that we are in an epistemically privileged position where we could be confident that our particular belief is justified while all competing beliefs are not. This seems impossible for two reasons: (a) From a probabilistic point of view (adopting a principle of mediocrity), it is highly unlikely that current humans have the maximum of epistemic capacities possible. Rather, our ability to understand reality is limited, so we should expect at least some parts of religious reality to remain unknown to us. (b) From a deep-time perspective, humanity has not pondered religious questions for long. We are probably still in the early stages of our cognitive evolution, and so we should treat our religious beliefs as provisional and open to revision.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Here are two facts about philosophers of religion, neither of which should be particularly surprising: First, most of them are *religious realists*. They believe that religious statements refer to a reality that exists independently of us and that it is not up to us whether these statements are true or not. For realists, religious language should be taken at face value: it is both factual and truth-apt. It is not just a way of expressing feelings or worldviews (though it can be that, too), but a way of stating what is the case and what is not.¹ Second, most philosophers of religion are *epistemic optimists*: they believe that it is rational for us to accept at least some of our religious beliefs as true.² Epistemic optimists agree with realists that our beliefs are factual and truth-apt, but in addition, they also believe that we are in an epistemically favorable situation and can have valid reasons to regard them as true (at least sometimes). The combination of these two views is so widespread among philosophers of religion (and among ordinary religious believers, too) that one might think of it as a kind of religious common-sense realism. But though it may be a widespread position, it is not a coherent one: its two elements, or so I will argue, are incompatible with each other. Instead of being an epistemic optimist, the religious realist's natural position should be *skepticism*: if you are a religious realist, then you should first and foremost *doubt* that you are *justified* in accepting your religious beliefs as true. I am using the term “justified” in a very broad sense here, meaning any factor (internalist or externalist) which would render a religious belief rationally acceptable; if your belief is justified in this sense, then you are epistemically blameless when you accept your beliefs as true.³ So, the religious skeptic is slightly different from her epistemic cousin. Epistemic skeptics argue that our beliefs (e.g., about the external world) lack justification, and therefore never qualify as knowledge. But most religious believers would happily admit that they do not *know* that, for example, God exists—they only believe he does. Still, they consider their beliefs rational or warranted or epistemically justified in some other way. Religious skeptics challenge this assumption and try to undermine the believers' confidence in the rationality of their beliefs. The aim of religious skepticism is not to show that religious believers cannot have any knowledge about religious facts (they will grant that), but that they are not in their epistemic right to accept their beliefs as true.⁴

To convince you of this skeptical claim, I will develop a Copernican argument. This argument asserts that the only acceptable position for a religious realist is a form of *epistemic Copernicanism*.⁵ As realists, we should not assume that we occupy a privileged position in the vast spectrum of epistemic abilities. An epistemically privileged position would be one in which the subject is in their epistemic right to accept their beliefs as true while other subjects are not. The epistemically privileged subject could rationally accept their beliefs as true (while rejecting all competing beliefs) without committing any epistemic errors. But given that religious facts (whatever they are) are supposed to exist independently of us and that we probably occupy a random position in a vast spectrum of cognitive abilities, there is no reason for any epistemic subject to assume that they have happened to hit the epistemic jackpot and managed to form the correct religious beliefs while other people (or beings) have not. But then, for any epistemic subject, there is no reason to accept your religious beliefs as true—because for all you know, you might not be in a position in which this assumption would be rational. So, you should doubt that your religious beliefs are justified.

My argument has two parts. The first is a negative argument drawing on the realist core assumption that reality exists independently of us. I will argue that realism implies a potentially unbridgeable gap between reality itself and our perception of it. Thus, it is always possible to doubt that this gap has been closed (i.e., that our beliefs are true and we are rational

in accepting them as such). The second part provides a positive argument as to why in the case of religious belief, we should indeed be in doubt whether we have arrived at the truth. For one, it is unreasonable for purely probabilistic reasons to expect that contemporary humans are in an epistemically privileged position and possess the epistemic abilities necessary to fully close the realist gap. But if we cannot assume that we can close the gap, we must be prepared to concede that some, if not all of our beliefs might be unjustified. Second, we need to take into account the fact that humans have a rather short evolutionary history of cognitive development. From a deep-time perspective, humans have not been thinking about religious questions for that long. Given this, we should conclude that we are probably still in the early stages of what could be a much longer process of cognitive evolution. So, we should expect at least some of our religious beliefs to be premature and most likely false, and thus treat them as merely provisional and open to revision. Recognizing our position in time makes it reasonable for us to be religious skeptics.

2 | REALISM AND SKEPTICISM

Let us begin with the first part: As religious realists, we should expect that at least some, if not all of our religious beliefs are unjustified. Not because we have specific reasons to doubt this or that belief in particular, but in general—we simply should not trust our religious beliefs. To see why, we first need to take a closer look at the epistemic implications of adopting a realist attitude. Realism and skepticism are closely connected: without a realist foundation, skepticism is practically inconceivable.⁶ More precisely, realism entails two skeptical consequences: First, for the realist, it is always possible that reality exceeds the limits of thought (there is always the possibility that some parts of reality remain epistemically inaccessible to us). Second, it is reasonable to assume that this is actually the case—it would be implausible to assume that this possibility is *de facto* never actualized.

Why? It all hinges on the definition of realism. In general, realism is the claim that reality exists independently of us. But clearly, this definition is not very helpful unless we explain what we mean by “independent”. One way to unpack the meaning of this obscure term is to treat realism as a semantic thesis that explains what it is for a statement about reality to be true,⁷ namely that they are true or false objectively. If reality exists independently of us, nothing but the facts themselves will make these statements true or false, regardless of whether we know them to be true. For example, on this interpretation, realism about the future means that the statement “Donald Trump is the US president in 2032” is now already true or false, even if no one knows that it is. The same holds for religious realism: for the religious realist, religious statements are true or false in virtue of the facts which make them true. It does not matter whether we can determine their truth-value (or will ever be able to). More succinctly, the core of realism is a realist conception of truth.⁸

And what is a realist conception of truth? Essentially, it requires two elements: evidence-transcendence and bivalence. Evidence-transcendence means that a statement’s being true or false transcends our available evidence. Having evidence for the truth of a statement (or belief) is neither necessary nor sufficient for it to be true.⁹ Realist truth is a strictly non-epistemic property, so it is always possible that a statement is true even though we will never be able to know its truth. Therefore, realism implies the possibility of mysteries—or, more profanely, undecidable truths. The principle of bivalence is the logical counterpart of evidence-transcendence. It states that every statement *p* has a definite truth-value: true or false. There are no truth-value gaps.

Even if there are statements that are undecidable for us due to lack of evidence, the principle of bivalence demands that these have definite truth-values, too.

So, in summary, realism means that statements...

1. *Have propositional content. They are truth-apt, and their meaning is not exhausted by their noncognitive functions or emotive potential.*
2. *Have definite truth-values, even if we do not know them. It may be an open question whether the claim “every human being has an immortal soul which will survive bodily death” is true, but from a realist point of view, there is a precise answer, even though we do not know it (yet).*
3. *May be irremediably undecidable. It is possible that for some statements, we will never know whether they are true or false. There either is a God or there is not, but nothing about this guarantees that we are able to decide which one it is.*

This is where realism and skepticism meet: for the realist, there is an objective truth “out there” that we try to grasp—but it is not certain whether we will ever reach this goal. A realist conception of truth severs all conceptual ties between something *being* true and *being known* to be true and thus opens the gates for skeptical doubts. In the realist picture, there is always a gap between reality as it is in itself and as we conceive it. When we attempt to gain knowledge, we try to bridge this gap. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not. But if reality is evidence-transcendent, then we can never be quite certain that this gap has been closed once and for all, and thus realism inevitably contains the seed of skepticism. Reality might always be different from what we think it is. Take, for example, a realist belief in God: a mind-independent entity called “God” with certain properties, like omnipotence, omniscience, etc. Neither God’s existence nor his properties depend on us. All truths about God are evidence-transcendent so that whatever is true about God is true regardless of our ability to ascertain it. Maybe we can discover some of these truths, but, as they do not depend on us, there is no guarantee that we will ever succeed. Thus, if you are a realist about God, you should be prepared to admit that it is at least *possible* that everything you believe about God might be false, even if you have no reason to think so in any case in particular.

Of course, most realists do not think that all of their beliefs actually are false—it is just a logical possibility, like the possibility that I am a brain in a vat. I might be, but I do not think that I actually am (at least on most days). Rather, they are epistemic optimists and believe that the realist gap can be closed. If a fact is real, then we should in principle be able to know this fact. The epistemic optimist is confident that some of her beliefs will not turn out to be false. If there is a God and there are certain facts about him, then it is—again: in principle—possible for the believer to grasp these facts. Maybe some of our beliefs happen to be false, but that does not prevent us from having at least some beliefs which we rightfully accept as true.

3 | A COPERNICAN ARGUMENT

But if realism and skepticism are intrinsically linked, then this leads to a surprising consequence: if you are a realist, you cannot be an epistemic optimist. The existence of the realist gap means that it is always possible that reality exceeds our epistemic capacities. In *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel presents a compelling argument for this. Metaphysical realism, he says, will inevitably lead to skepticism, or rather: every strategy to avoid skepticism will eventually force us to give up realism because the assumption that the opposite is true—that whatever is real is also

conceivable for us—is incoherent. Nagel notes that if we think it through, the realist concept of objectivity is self-defeating¹⁰: Realism assumes that there is an objective reality that contains us and that our subjective representations of this reality are the result of conscious interaction with it. But this picture is precisely what causes the notion of a realist gap: objective reality can only be conceived from a subjective point of view, which itself is not part of objective reality—objectivity is a “view from nowhere”, and by definition excludes all subjective points of view. The result is a gap between objective reality and its subjective representation, and thus, skepticism.

But why must we assume that there is a mismatch between the subjective and the objective? Could not it be that the seemingly insurmountable gap between objective reality and its subjective representation is actually just like the horizon—an apparent boundary that cannot be crossed simply because it is not really there? This is the core thesis of antirealism: the concepts of thought and reality are inseparably connected so that whatever is real must be conceivable, and whatever is true must be in principle knowable.¹¹ The realist idea of an objective reality beyond all subjective representations (aka the realist concept of truth), the antirealist contends, is fundamentally confused—no concept of truth is acceptable that would allow for non-epistemic truths. A classical defense of this kind of antirealism is given by Donald Davidson. Davidson claims that the concepts of truth and meaning have no application beyond the boundaries of our conceptual schemes.¹² For him, the idea that something might have meaning even though this meaning can never be expressed in our conceptual scheme is absurd. If there were such an intrinsically non-understandable and untranslatable language, how would it differ from no language at all? Is the murmuring of the creeks in the forest a language we will never be able to understand or is it just the meaningless noise of flowing water? For Davidson, this is not a meaningful question. If the concept of truth is inextricably tied to our conceptual scheme, then although there may at any moment be things we do not know, this is just bad luck—there is nothing that we could *never* know because this would amount to a non-understandable truth. If it is real, it is in principle knowable. And if it is not knowable, then it is not even real, it is just nonsense.

Nagel counters with an analogy¹³: A 9-year-old child will not understand what is meant by “the curvature of space-time” in Einstein’s theory of relativity, so it is impossible to translate statements about space and time into their language. Still, we do not think that these statements are meaningless (and neither should the child) as it is clear that from an intellectually competent adult’s perspective, they are understandable. The 9-year-old can, of course, learn to understand them while growing up, and at 30, they will know what they could not know at 9: that space-time can be curved. But now imagine a kind of being that exceeds our epistemic capabilities like an adult’s exceeds the 9-year-old’s. From this being’s perspective, it is perfectly clear that we are wrong when we believe that anything beyond the limits of our language must be meaningless. Antirealism, it seems, is naïve, even egocentric—not everything there is can be known or even conceived by us.¹⁴

But then, it cannot be rational for the realist to accept her beliefs as true: it is only rational to accept a belief as true if you can rule out relevant alternatives, that is, scenarios in which you would be confident that your belief is true when in fact it is not (for example, it is not rational for you to believe that the creature in front of you is a crocodile if you cannot tell a crocodile from an alligator). But if reality is evidence-transcendent, then it is always possible to imagine an epistemically indistinguishable situation in which your confidence in your beliefs is misguided. It is always possible that right now, you are the 9-year-old, and you cannot be certain that you are not. Being a realist is like being the person in Goldman’s famous barn-example¹⁵: if you are driving through a place full of fake barns and look out the window and see a barn, you cannot confidently assume that you have seen a barn—even if it is the only real barn around here and

your belief is actually true. You are surrounded by fake barns and you cannot tell whether you have seen a real barn or a fake one. Once you are aware that there is a scenario in which your belief turns out wrong—you think you saw a barn, but actually, it was not a real barn—you cannot accept your claim as true anymore.¹⁶ The presumed justification for your belief crumbles and you are forced to withdraw your claim because you cannot rule out a scenario in which it *seems* to you that your belief is true when it actually is not. But if Nagel is right, this is always the case for realists—unless they have reason to assume they are in a position where they can be confident that this barn is not fake, or that no defeating scenario is possible.

But do they have any such reason? Probably not—not only is it always *possible* that we are in an epistemically subprime situation and cannot rule out potential defeaters for our beliefs, but it is also *probable* that we are. This, too, follows from purely conceptual reflections on what the realist position entails. If Nagel is right and the antirealist identification of what is real and what is knowable is false, then it is always conceivable that reality exceeds our epistemic abilities.¹⁷ Of course, it might still be the case that the limits of thought and the limits of reality are the same, even though they are not conceptually linked. But if this really were true, then we are assuming that there is no higher position from which our beliefs could turn out to be unjustified. Our epistemic capacities would need to be maximally developed—no being could ever have greater epistemic capacities than we do (because if it had, there would be things that are real but which we cannot know). On the large spectrum of epistemic capacities, we would occupy a very extraordinary spot: the top. This, of course, is not impossible, but it is highly unlikely.

Why? Because it follows directly from a position we might call *epistemic Copernicanism*: the view that it is irrational to assume that you are in an epistemically privileged position unless you have reason to believe otherwise.¹⁸ Adopting epistemic Copernicanism is a natural consequence of accepting the principle of mediocrity: if an item is chosen at random from a large set, it will probably belong to the category that contains the most items in the set. If, for example, there are one thousand tickets in a lottery, and five of them are winning ones, then you will probably draw a blank when you randomly pick one—simply because there are a lot of tickets and only a few winning ones. So, if you have no reason to believe that your case is special and that you will definitely win, you should not expect to draw a winning ticket. In general, the principle states that it is *ceteris paribus* irrational to believe that you occupy a special position in any given system as special positions are, statistically speaking, very few in number (that is why we call them “special”). The overwhelming majority consists of other, non-special positions. Another example: if I meet a friend and do not know her birthday, it would be irrational to believe that today is her birthday (unless I have reason to believe otherwise, like her wearing a party hat and standing under a large banner that says: “Happy Birthday Susan!”) because there are 364 cases in which I will be wrong and only one case in which I will be right. Applied to our epistemic abilities, this means, if we assume that contemporary humans are just a random sample of cognitive capabilities, it is highly unlikely that they happen to be the winning ticket—the one species that exemplifies the absolute epistemic maximum possible. And if this is so, then it is highly probable that there are parts of religious reality that exceed our grasp. It would be simply irrational to assume that our epistemic apparatus is a reliable source of knowledge about all there is because, statistically speaking, most epistemic apparatuses are not.

To summarize, The realist gap between things being true and being known to be true means that it is possible that our epistemic abilities and objective reality do not match. And accepting epistemic Copernicanism means that it is probable they do not. So, if we embrace realism and epistemic Copernicanism, we must accept that there will always be reasons to question our religious beliefs: we might be unable to correctly perceive or understand some parts of religious

reality; our religious notions might be premature and incomplete; we might be completely oblivious to religiously relevant facts that lie outside of our cognitive capacities. This will be true simply in virtue of the realist claim that the reality we try to grasp is independent of us. The religious realist cannot have it both: objective religious truths made true by nothing but the religious reality “out there” and the confidence that their beliefs truly capture this reality as it is. Religious realists are forced (simply by being realists) to accept the fact that parts of the religious landscape might ultimately remain inaccessible to them, and if they do not know which, then everything becomes dubious.

4 | A DEEP-TIME ARGUMENT

The first part of my argument was meant to establish that for purely conceptual reasons, religious realists cannot escape the skeptic's doubts. Now it is time to get to the second part and add an empirical argument: There is also substantial reason for us to believe that we actually are 9-year-olds when it comes to religious beliefs. This argument draws on John Schellenberg's concept of *deep time*: awareness of the fact that time extends far more deeply into the past and future than we are used to thinking.¹⁹ We usually measure our thoughts and actions in medium-length timescales: it is easy for us to see the difference between a task that takes a minute and one that takes a day, and we have a good sense of how long a week or a year is. Roughly, we are fairly good at dealing with timescales between seconds and centuries, and we struggle to really understand anything shorter or longer. But for the last two centuries, science has made us more and more aware that our human timescales capture only a minuscule fraction of the past. Anatomically and cognitively modern humans did not enter the stage until about 50,000 years ago, which is next to nothing compared to the 3,500,000,000 years since the beginning of life on earth: we are only in the final 0.001% of life's history. But, Schellenberg reminds us, we should not look just at the deep *past*, but also at the potentially vast *future* still ahead of us (“us” being humanity per se, not you and me in particular—we will be done in a couple of decades). There is a real possibility, says Schellenberg, that intelligent life on earth will continue for at least a billion years, which means that from a deep-time perspective, we are still in the earliest stages of cognitive evolution. And this means that all religious ideas humanity has come up with so far were developed in a state of immaturity.

In a situation like this, it would be naïve to simply accept any of our religious beliefs as true. It is easy to imagine a future in which our current beliefs turn out (from a cognitively more advanced perspective) to be premature or even ridiculous. Just remember how we today think about ancient Roman medicine or ghosts—and this is just a couple of centuries of intellectual progress. As a general epistemic principle, we should not believe now what might turn out false in the deep future:

[I]f it is epistemically possible that a view I now hold will turn out to be false in the deep future, then (by the definition of epistemic possibility) I have no good reason to believe it will not turn out to be false – which is to say I have no good reason now to believe it true.²⁰

So, once we are aware that in the deep future, there is a very real possibility that our current beliefs will turn out to be false, we have good reason to be skeptical, especially if we are realists. The realist gap means that religious truths are “out there”, and we are approaching them in an open-ended

process over long periods of time. We ask ourselves: “Are we there yet? Have we already grasped the truth?”, and if Schellenberg is right, the answer is “probably not”. Realism plus deep time make it highly improbable that our current beliefs are actually true.

The deep-time argument employs the classical skeptical strategy of drawing our attention to relevant alternatives which we cannot rule out. Again, we are in a similar situation to Goldman's barn example. Why should not I believe that there is a barn next to me when I look out the window and see one? Because when I am in a place littered with fake barns, there is a relevant alternative to the scenario where my experience is veridical: I believe that there is a barn, but there is also the possibility that I seem to see a barn even if it is not there. And both these scenarios are epistemically *indistinguishable* for me: I cannot tell which of the relevant alternatives actually obtains. Likewise, we should not believe that there is a God (in the theist's sense) or that theism successfully describes ultimate reality, because it is epistemically possible (and probable) that some future alternative will turn out to be the better candidate. Knowing that we are in a state of epistemic immaturity means that we are in a cognitive territory full of false beliefs. And once we are aware that there are plenty of scenarios in which we are wrong and which we cannot tell from the scenario where we are actually right, we need to suspend our beliefs.

But, one might object, is not there a critical difference to other skeptical arguments, like for example, Descartes' evil demon or Putnam's brain in a vat? In contrast to those, Schellenberg has not offered us an actual alternative scenario which, if it were true, would undermine the rationality of our beliefs. He does not even mention any conceivable alternative! Well, of course he does not as this would *ex hypothesi* be impossible: we are too immature epistemically to even grasp these alternatives. All we have is an argument to convince us that it is possible that there could be such a scenario in the future. But, one might reply, this is not enough to justify any skeptical doubts—if the mere epistemic possibility that my belief will turn out to be false in the future should be sufficient to suspend belief, we could not believe a lot of things anymore. For example, no one should believe that their partner is faithful as it is epistemically possible that this belief might be falsified in the future. Also, no bank should give loans anymore, as it is epistemically possible that the borrower will fail to repay them.

To counter this objection, we need to take into account the *probability* of error. Schellenberg does so by offering another probabilistic argument.²¹ First, he notes the obvious fact that any statement is equivalent to the disjunction of its negations: p is true if either q or r is false. For example, the statement that Manchester defeated Liverpool (p) is true if it is false that Liverpool defeated Manchester (q) and that the game was a draw (r). Analogously, every religious hypothesis is equivalent to the disjunction of its religious and nonreligious alternatives (i.e., all hypotheses which imply its falsity). For example, affirming the hypothesis that God created the heavens and earth is equivalent to negating the set of all alternatives, like the Aristotelian hypothesis that the universe exists eternally without a beginning; the naturalist hypothesis that the universe has a beginning in time, but no creator; or the Hesiodian hypothesis that the universe sprang from Chaos. The hypothesis that the theistic God is the creator of the universe is equivalent to the disjunction of all possibilities of how the world could *not* have been created by God. Now, the combined probability of any hypothesis plus its alternatives will necessarily be 1. Thus, if you affirm a religious hypothesis, you must assume that its probability is higher than that of any of its alternatives—because if you did not, why would you affirm this hypothesis and not the more probable one? But if all probabilities are more or less evenly distributed, the combined probability of all alternatives will simply swamp your religious hypothesis. The only way out would be to show that the probability of your religious hypothesis is far higher than its alternatives—but to do this, you need to thoroughly assess

all the available alternatives,²² and as we have seen when we became aware of the problem of deep time, this kind of thorough assessment is impossible: if our epistemic evolution is still stuck in its early stages, then it is very likely that we do not even know all possible alternatives yet. We cannot rule out the possibility that there are numerous alternatives to our current religious beliefs which are right now not only unknown but unconceivable. So, you cannot know whether your religious hypothesis is more probable than its alternatives—simply because you do not know all the alternatives.²³

5 | AN OBJECTION: GENERAL SKEPTICISM?

At this point, one might object that my argument is too strong: if it is successful, will not it achieve more than one should hope for and lead directly into a kind of *general* skepticism?²⁴ Nothing I have said about the realist gap, epistemic Copernicanism, and cognitive immaturity applies solely to religious realism. So, if my argument is valid, should not we become skeptics about everything?

The short answer is yes. Realism has an ineradicable tendency toward skepticism, and if you are a general realist, you will have to accept general skepticism, too. The realist gap between what is true and what we perceive as true means that it is always possible to imagine a scenario where what we believe to be true may actually be false. So ultimately, realists will have to admit that it is epistemically possible that their beliefs will turn out to be utterly false and thus that it can never be rational for them to accept them as true. Admittedly, skepticism is not a popular position, and some may consider the implication of general skepticism in an argument as a sign of its weakness—but this cannot be a sufficient reason to dismiss it! Even if the argument implies general skepticism, this only counts against it if you can offer compelling reasons to reject general skepticism, and as long as no such refutation of skepticism is presented, the skeptical argument remains valid—even if it may leave you feeling uneasy. So, the objection is partially justified: the realist argument promotes not just religious, but also general skepticism. What is not justified is the conclusion that it should therefore be rejected.

But even if we assume that there are decisive reasons to reject general skepticism, accept common-sense realism, and believe in a real, external world that is epistemically accessible to us, the argument remains relevant in regards to religious skepticism. This is because the situation is far worse for religious realism than for common-sense realism. Defenders of common-sense realism might for example point to the relative convergence of experiences of the external world and thus to the fact that we seem to live in a common, shared reality. While this in itself is not a sufficient reason to reject skepticism, it is something in which experiences of religious reality differ markedly from everyday experiences. The sheer number of available religious hypotheses (even if we discount all the alternatives we cannot even conceive) is much higher. While defenders of common-sense realism might contend that we do not have a vast amount of plausible, alternative scenarios in which our beliefs would turn out to be false, but which are indistinguishable from them being true, religious realists will have to admit that the religious landscape is littered with *prima facie* equally plausible scenarios. This is precisely the point where skepticism arises, though, we believe something, but it is epistemically indistinguishable for us whether our belief is actually true or whether some other scenario obtains in which it would appear as if our belief were true when in fact it is not. So, even if there are reasons to reject general skepticism, the same argument will not apply to religious skepticism. Again, we find ourselves in an epistemically uncomfortable situation: the cognitive immaturity of our species and the plurality of religious

and nonreligious alternatives make it impossible for realists to be certain about the truth of their religious beliefs. And the only rational reaction to this situation is, of course, to remain skeptical.

6 | TWO LESSONS

What lessons are there to be learned from this skeptical argument? I believe there are two points worth noting:

First, our religious beliefs are *probably incomplete*. We are trying to bridge the realist gap between objective reality and subjective representation, but as finite beings, our epistemic abilities have their limits. So, we should not expect to be able to bridge the gap completely. Even if some of our religious beliefs turn out to be true, it would be prudent to assume that there are some religiously relevant aspects of reality that we have no idea of. In some cases, we may be aware of the blind spots in our intellectual field of vision (maybe we even know where they are), in others, we may be completely helpless and are not even aware of the fact that there is something we do not know. Nothing justifies the presumption that it should be us of all beings who have completely grasped religious reality.

Second, our religious beliefs are *provisional*. Given the rather short amount of time that we as a species have spent pondering religious questions, it would be naïve to assume that we have already found the ultimate answers. For all we know, a lot of our religious beliefs might be false. This does not mean that religion itself is just an error, though. Even if most of our beliefs are false, some of these falsehoods might still allow us to grasp religious reality better than others: A 3-year-old cannot understand what it is philosophers do when they work. If you tell him that you are building things, they will probably think of Lego stones or building blocks. But even if you tell them that the things you build are different (because they are arguments and theories) and not really like Lego stones, their idea of what it is you are doing will allow them to develop an understanding of what it is you are doing that is better than nothing (even though it is far from adequate). The 3-year-old may have some curious notions about philosophical work, but they are still on the right track.²⁵ Similarly, we should accept that most of our religious beliefs in their current shape are probably false—but some could still help us to improve our grasp of what religious reality might be. For those who want to defend traditional religious ideas, this will be bad news, as it means that all teachings and dogmas that have been thought of as sacrosanct are now open to revision. But on the other hand, it also means that it would be premature to proclaim the end of religion, as old and new atheists loved to do during the last 200 or so years. In a very important sense, the history of religious thought is still just beginning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Sebastian Gäb  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2075-5684>

ENDNOTES

¹ For a thorough analysis of the concept of religious realism see Scott (2015).

- ² This includes *negative* religious beliefs—an atheist who believes that there is no God is also a realist and an optimist as she thinks that her belief is true and that she is justified in thinking so. Moreover, the term “religious” in this context is to be taken in its everyday sense: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism are religions, and beliefs that followers of these religions accept insofar as they are followers of these religions, are religious beliefs. Defining religion is a notoriously hopeless task (Harrison, 2006; Oman, 2013), but then again, nothing in my argument really hinges on a particular definition of religion.
- ³ Understood this way, even the reformed epistemologist could say that he considers his beliefs justified (although not in the narrower sense standardly used in epistemology).
- ⁴ This is also a crucial difference between the skeptic and the mere fallibilist: the fallibilist will grant that subjects are in their epistemic right to accept something as true even if it could be false (as long as they fulfill the sufficient requirements for rational beliefs); the skeptic denies that because he denies that the fallibilist can meet these requirements.
- ⁵ The term as well as the concept is borrowed from Rescher (1980, p. 335).
- ⁶ “Skepticism is realism reflected in the mirror of epistemology” (Heil, 1998, p. 69). Nagel (1986, p. 70f.) or McGinn (1979) defend a similar point.
- ⁷ Dummett (1993). For a defense of semantic realism (and a critique of Dummett), see Miller (2003).
- ⁸ Of course, realism (or *metaphysical* realism, if we want to make the distinction clearer) is not *identical* with a realist conception of truth. Nevertheless, it seems impossible to define realism without reference to a realist conception of truth. Not everyone agrees (e.g., Alston, 1996, p. 77f. or Devitt, 1983, p. 77), but mostly because they rely on questionable ideas about what positions should be counted as *antirealist*.
- ⁹ A borderline case are necessary truths—in this case, being proven would be sufficient for the statement’s truth if we are willing to include proofs into the concept of evidence.
- ¹⁰ Nagel (1986, p. 68).
- ¹¹ Sometimes, the term “antirealism” is used in a different sense, closer to “immaterialism” or “idealism”, but this is not what I have in mind here. Understood semantically, antirealism is just the opposite of realism, that is, a non-realist concept of truth.
- ¹² Davidson (1974).
- ¹³ Nagel (1986, p. 95).
- ¹⁴ The “us” is crucial here. Davidson might reply that it is not about us but about the conceptual link between reality and thought, and that nothing hinges on whether we can ever know that something is real. And yes, for an infinite, omniscient mind like the mind of God, Davidson’s argument will be true: all that is real is known by God and all that God knows is real, too. Thus, from God’s point of view, neither skepticism nor the realism–antirealism–distinction make any sense. Nevertheless, the point still holds for *finite* minds—and this is a paper about why *you* should be religious skeptic, after all.
- ¹⁵ Goldman (1976).
- ¹⁶ Of course, it is not the fact that now you are aware of the relevant alternatives that makes your belief irrational. Your belief was irrational all along, but once you are aware of the relevant alternatives, you will *realize* that it is irrational.
- ¹⁷ Again, emphasis on “*our*”. Realism needs only accept that reality may exceed *our* cognitive capacities—whether it might also exceed the cognitive capacities of any mind, even a Berkeleyan infinite mind of God, is a wholly different question. See Plantinga (1982) for an argument in this direction.
- ¹⁸ Rescher (1980, p. 338).
- ¹⁹ For a comprehensive account, see Schellenberg (2013).
- ²⁰ Schellenberg (2013, p. 68). By “epistemic possibility”, Schellenberg means “claims we don’t have any good reason to believe false, given our present evidence” (Schellenberg, 2013, p. 42f.) So, *p* is epistemically possible if we cannot be sufficiently certain that *not-p*.
- ²¹ Schellenberg (2023).

- ²² Here, Schellenberg's argument resembles a position he and (to some extent) Phillip Quinn have maintained in the debate on religious disagreement. If we find ourselves in an epistemic tie between two mutually inconsistent beliefs, we should suspend them. If others do not agree with me and if I have no reason to doubt the epistemic quality of their beliefs (which contradict mine), I should stop believing what I believe (but not start believing the opposite; cf. Quinn, 2008; Schellenberg, 2000).
- ²³ This does not necessarily mean that religious hypotheses are per se improbable—the plurality of religious and nonreligious beliefs supports religious *skepticism*, but not *irreligion*.
- ²⁴ I am grateful to two anonymous referees for having raised this objection.
- ²⁵ This example is borrowed from Alston (2005, p. 109).

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How to cite this article: Gäb, S. (2023). Why you should be a religious skeptic. *The Philosophical Forum*, 00, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12346>