PART 3: PERMISSIVISM IN RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

CHAPTER 7: PERMISSIVISM ABOUT RELIGIOUS BELIEF
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(note: this is a draft of a chapter of a book defending epistemic permissivism; comments welcome!)

ABSTRACT: In this chapter, I argue that theistic belief is permissive belief. This is not a universal claim about persons or normative domains, but the claim that, for many common bodies of evidence, epistemic rationality is permissive about whether God exists. Marks of a permissive belief are rational disagreement over time, rational disagreement over persons, and powerful evidence on both sides. I argue that theistic belief fits all these criteria. I also show how considerations from divine hiddenness support permissivism about theism. Then, I show how these considerations support intrapersonal permissivism about theistic belief, using Peter Van Inwagen's (1994) *Quam Dialecta* as a case study. Finally, I reply to objections.

KEYWORDS: Theism; Theistic Belief; Rationality; Evidence; Permissivism; Atheism; Agnosticism; Religious Conversion

1. INTRODUCTION

This part of the book applies epistemic options permissivism to religious epistemology. I'll argue that religious propositions—especially, the proposition that *God exists*—are often permissive cases, given the complex evidence for and against theism. Then, in the next three chapters, I'll apply permissivism to three areas in philosophy of religion: religious faith, the problem of evil, and Pascal's wager.

This part of the book will largely focus on monotheism in the Abrahamic traditions. In this, for example, I'll normally frame things monotheistically, i.e. in terms of whether God exists, and many of my examples will be drawn from the Abrahamic traditions. I am open to extending my arguments to other traditions, but I will save that project for others with expertise in those traditions. Most of my arguments, however, shouldn't require a specific conception of God. For example, the "omni" God is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), omnipresent (exists everywhere), and omnibenevolent (all-good). While popular among philosophers, this is a specific and controversial definition, and some even argue that this isn't the God described by the Bible/Torah/Qur'an.[1] I'll conceive of God as minimally something like a powerful, good, Creator, although most of what I say here should fit with "thicker" conceptions of God as well.

I'll primarily discuss belief that God exists. However, to some extent, my arguments may apply to religious beliefs more broadly, including beliefs about what religion is true and/or beliefs about particular religious doctrines. These latter beliefs, however, are less likely to be generally permissive than generic theistic beliefs. Note further that I am not assuming that *belief* that God exists is all that matters for a religious commitment, or that belief that God exists and faith that God exists are the same thing (they almost certainly are not). Nonetheless, I do think belief that God exists is a religiously significant attitude that deserves careful thought and attention.

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[1] On the difference (if any) between the omni-God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, see Heschel (1976: ch. 7), Morris (1984), Stump (2016), O'Conner (2008: ch. 6).

This chapter argues that theistic belief is permissive belief.[2] The idea that theistic belief is permissive belief finds its roots in historical thinkers, although it is cashed out in slightly different terms. Blaise Pascal (1670/2004) said that God's existence is a matter that "reason cannot decide", and William James (1896/1979) argues that theism "cannot be resolved on intellectual grounds."[3] This chapter argues for and explores implications of this general insight suggested by Pascal, James, and others, and brings this insight into conversation with the contemporary permissivism debate.

My claim is not merely interpersonal—i.e. given the complex and qualitatively diverse evidence regarding theism, theists, atheists, and agnostics can all be rational, even if they share evidence (but I take this to be one of the view's implications). My claim is stronger in that it is also intrapersonal—i.e. many of us have epistemic options regarding our theistic beliefs. For some, their evidence will be merely bi-optional: allowing only belief (or disbelief) and withholding, whereas for others, their evidence may be tri-optional. I'll provide an example of the latter from Peter Van Inwagen's (1994) *Quam Dialecta*, the story of his conversion to theism as an adult.

That said, I won't argue that theism is universally permissive: that all persons have epistemic options regarding God's existence, given their evidence. Perhaps religious mystics who take themselves to have had undeniable experiences of God or witnessed miracles ought to be theists, given their evidence. Others may have evidence that points so strongly toward atheism that they cannot be rational in taking a different attitude. Consider the last sentence of Paul Draper's book (202X): "I am and ought to be a[n]…atheist." It's hard to deny that some people find themselves in impermissive epistemic situations regarding theism.

However, these cases are exceptions, rather than the rule. Most of us have not had undisputable mystical experiences of the divine, but also don't have evidence that decisively favors atheism. I'll argue that, in contemporary society, the average case and the standard body of evidence are permissive regarding theism, and many common bodies of evidence provide epistemic options concerning whether God exists.

In many ways, this is a happy result: interpersonally, theists, atheists, and agnostics can all be epistemically rational, even if they share evidence regarding theism. This also has the intrapersonal result that many people can change their minds rationally about theism without a change in their evidence, so rational religious conversion doesn't require a radical shift to one's body of evidence. One might wonder about tiebreakers: if our evidence doesn't settle the question of God's existence, how do we break this symmetry? In the subsequent chapters, I'll suggest ways that various non-epistemic factors might act as symmetry breakers, which in many ways mirrors what we saw in Chapter X regarding encroachment and purism.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I provide three motivations for the idea that theistic belief is permissive belief: disagreement over time and persons (**Section 2**), diverse and qualitatively distinct evidence (**Section 3**), and divine hiddenness (**Section 4**). **Section 5** discusses how these considerations motivate not just interpersonal rational disagreement about theism, but also intrapersonal epistemic options. **Section 6** addresses objections and **Section 7** concludes.

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[2] This chapter draws on the arguments from section 2 of my (2023) "A Permissivist Defense of Pascal's Wager."

[3] See also John Bishop (2002), who, following James, argues that theism and other fundamental "framework principles" are "evidentially undecidable." However, of course, the idea that theism is an epistemically permissive matter is controversial; it is the very thing Feldman (2007) argues against.

2. DISAGREEMENT OVER TIME AND PERSONS

Debates about God's existence have a long history, and there is widespread disagreement about God's existence. Historically, many people, and most philosophers, were theists. Felipe Miguel (2020) points out that, in a poll done by Brian Leiter (with 1160 participants, mostly professional philosophers), the top ten most important Western philosophers of all time were (in this order): Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Wittgenstein. 8/10 of these philosophers were theists of some stripe, with Hume and Wittgenstein being the (possible) exceptions. If we consider the top 32 most important philosophers from Leiter's poll, 18 are theists (~56%), 9 are atheists (~28%) and the theistic beliefs of 5 are unclear/ambiguous (~16%).[4] So, while theism does have a slight edge among these philosophers, there's significant disagreement and controversy over whether God exists—and keep in mind that these lists leave many important names off, and are restricted to Western philosophers.

Today, in the overall world's population, there are more theists than atheists. While numbers vary somewhat, and the number of non-theists is increasing (especially in the West), recent estimates suggest around 80% of people worldwide identify as religious, and most of those religious people are theists (see Keysar & Navarro-Rivera 2017). However, the 2020 PhilPapers survey, which surveyed around 2000 professional philosophers, found that 66.9% of philosophers are atheists and 18.9% are theists (Bourget & Chalmers 2023).[5] Though when we narrow our focus to philosophers of religion—those who specialize in questions about God's existence—the same survey found that around 78% are theists.

Overall, then, there is significant disagreement about God's existence, both over time and across persons. There are differing explanations for these facts, and here, I don't take a stand on which explanation is correct or which group (if any) is more likely to reliably form theistic beliefs. I mention these statistics to show (i) that there is widespread disagreement on the existence of God and (ii) that there are smart, informed people on both sides of the debate. The pervasive disagreement and lack of consensus make theism a good candidate for an issue that is likely to be permissive.

Further, many atheists, agnostics, and theists appear to be epistemically rational, even when they are aware of the same (or similar) evidence that bears on God's existence. The question of whether God exists is dissimilar to questions in which our evidence clearly supports a particular answer, e.g. the question of whether the earth is flat. When it comes to positions on God's existence, there is epistemic symmetry: no group has an obvious general epistemic advantage over the other. This isn't to assume that we all have the exact same evidence about whether God exists. It just is to say that, among the diversity of bodies of evidence, many rationalize distinct opinions on theism.

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[4] The other philosophers on Leiter's list are Hobbes, Marx, J. S. Mill, Spinoza, Augustine, Frege, Hegel, Nietzsche, B. Russell, Kierkegaard, Berkeley, Quine, Epicurus, Rousseau, Kripke, Rawls, Carnap, Bacon, Bentham, D. K. Lewis, Democritus, and Heraclitus.

[5] A similar study done by De Cruz (2017) surveyed 518 professional philosophers and found that 50% self-identify as atheists, 25% theists, 16% agnostics, and 8% "other."

3. Diverse and Qualitatively Distinct Evidence

Not only is there extensive and seemingly rational disagreement concerning God's existence; there's also diverse, qualitatively distinct, powerful evidence supporting both theism and atheism. It's unsurprising that these facts go hand in hand. Where there's parity of the widely available evidence supporting a proposition and its negation, there's likely to be rational disagreement regarding it (and, conversely, rational disagreement about p often suggests evidential parity regarding p).

There are many arguments for theism. These include classic philosophical arguments, such as the ontological argument (Anselm 1078/1965, Oppy et al 2024), the cosmological argument (Aquinas 1272/1920, Reichenbach 2022), the contingency argument (Aquinas 1272/1920, Rasmussen 2010), and the moral argument, including the argument from moral knowledge (Crummett & Swenson 2019). There is also a family of design arguments, which often combine philosophical and empirical considerations, including the fine-tuning argument (Collins 2012, Friederich 2023) and the evolutionary argument against naturalism (Plantinga 2011). There are some more recent arguments for theism from psychophysical and nomological harmony (e.g. Cutter & Crummett forthcoming).

Other arguments attempt to confer a positive epistemic status to theism, including arguments from religious experience or perception of God (Alston 1991), the argument from miracles (McGrew & Larmer 2024), and arguments from religious testimony (Greco 2017). These arguments are unique in that they don't necessarily attempt to raise the probability of theism for everyone, but for those who have the relevant experiences, perceptions, or testimony.

On the other hand, there are also powerful arguments for atheism. Perhaps the most notable is the argument from evil and suffering (McBrayer & Howard-Snyder 2013, Draper 202X), which is widely considered to be a significant, evidentially weighty challenge for theism. There's also the argument from divine hiddenness (Schellenberg 1993, Howard-Snyder & Moser 2001), which we'll explore more in the next section. Others have argued that the idea of God is incoherent (Mizrahi 2013) and that there's no need to posit divine being(s) if the universe has a perfectly good natural explanation (Wielenberg 2009).

Furthermore, to some degree, there are also atheistic parallels to the arguments from experience, perception, and testimony. Several have argued that in the same way perception of God could justify theistic belief, perception of evil can justify atheistic belief (for discussion, see, e.g., Draper 1991, Gellman 1992, Tweedt 2015).

I don't mean to suggest, however, that the arguments for theism and for atheism are perfectly parallel in every way. For one, perhaps there are a greater number of arguments for theism (depending on how they are individuated) but the arguments for atheism are often regarded as especially evidentially powerful. Furthermore, the types of evidence on each side are qualitatively diverse, including philosophical considerations, scientific considerations, statistical evidence, testimony, perception, experience, and the like. Given the extensive, qualitatively diverse evidence, the evidence for theism and the evidence for atheism is on a par, not tied, another mark of a permissive case (rather than a case where agnosticism is required, like a coin flip case).

There are also distinct versions of many of the above arguments, e.g. the logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil, Anselm's ontological argument and Plantinga's ontological argument, and the Kalam cosmological argument and Thomistic cosmological arguments. On both sides, the

arguments have been presented, objected to, reframed, objected to again, responses given… the process continues. And, for almost every version of each argument or point raised (pro or con), there are at least some considerations that undermine, defeat, or call the initial argument into question. But of course, some of these undermining considerations are more plausible than others, and defenders of these arguments have offered replies to such objections. The same debates have occurred with the various versions of each argument, each new argument succeeded by a long string of objections and replies. The conversation continues as I write this, with no end in sight.

4. DIVINE HIDDENNESS

The divine hiddenness literature also supports the thesis that our evidence is permissive about theism. Many philosophers in this literature argue that one important sense in which God is hidden is that our evidence for theism is ambiguous—i.e., many of us are in an evidentially indeterminate situation concerning God's existence. For example, Schellenberg (1993: 4) calls the evidence regarding God's existence "obscure," and Morris (1988: 6) notes that we live in a "religiously ambiguous environment." Here are some longer observations regarding the ambiguous evidence for theism:

> John Hick (1966: 281): "The kind of distance between God and man that would make room for a degree of human autonomy is *epistemic distance*. In other words, the reality and presence of God must not be bourne in upon men in the coercive way in which their natural environment forces itself upon their attention. The world must be to man, to some extent at least… 'as if there were no God.' God must be a hidden deity, veiled by His creation" (emphasis mine).

> John Hick (1989: 73): "By the religious ambiguity of the universe I do not mean that it has no definite character, but that it is capable from our present human vantage point of being thought and experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways."

> Robert McKim (2001: 22): "The world manifests ambiguity in that it is open both to secular and to religious readings, but also in that it is open to a number of religious readings."

> Murray (2002: 62): "It is no surprise to discover that few (if any) have found the existence of God to be an obvious fact about the world. At least this is so in the sense in which we normally use the word 'obvious,' as when we say that it is *obvious* that the World Trade Center weighs more than a deck of cards or that it is *obvious* that Van Gogh is a better painter than I. Despite St. Paul's claim that God's eternal power and divine nature 'have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made' (Romans 1:20), few (if any) think that such is as 'clearly seen' as the book you now hold in your hand" (emphasis his)/

> Swinburne (2004: 268), notably, in the middle of his book-length defense of the claim that theism is more probable than not, writes: "…clearly there is much honest [atheism and] agnosticism. Many people who have devoted much time to considering whether or not there is a God are unconvinced by any arguments known to them, and have themselves had no relevant religious experiences."

Cottingham (2005: 112–113): [T]he natural world itself necessarily remains, from a certain perspective, ambiguous, blank, poker-faced; however well scrutinized, the intimations of a reality beyond or behind it will never be experienced unless the heart is open and receptive.

Rea (2018: 19) discusses our inconclusive evidence for theism: "For some people, whatever evidence they possess in support of the existence of God is inconclusive in the following sense: even if they happen to see that this evidence at least weakly supports belief in God, it is not strong enough in relation to the rest of their evidence and background beliefs (however those might have been acquired) to produce in them rational belief in God."

Max Baker-Hytch (2023) discusses what he calls *the problem of evidential ambiguity*, which is related to the hiddenness problem. In particular, he argues that the public evidence doesn't make it obvious which worldview is true, where a worldview concerns the nature of ultimate reality, including centrally the question of whether God exists. He considers the idea that there are multiple, reasonable ways to interpret the evidence (28), that the body of evidence is large, complex, and mixed (30-33), and even that these considerations may support a version of interpersonal permissivism about theism (29–30).

Many writing on divine hiddenness take this observation about the ambiguity of our evidence and consider what conclusions about theism we might draw from it (and of course, many authors, including Schellenberg, have concluded that it is strong evidence against theism; however, like many of the arguments we've considered, there are ample theistic responses, see, e.g. Cullison 2010, McBrayer & Swenson 2012, Rea 2018, among others.) However, the basic observation that concerns us here—quoted above, regarding the state of our evidence for and against theism—is *not* the point that our evidence makes theism irrational. Rather, the thought is that some are completely rational in their agnosticism or atheism—to use Schellenberg's (1993) terminology, they are *non-resistant non-believers*. Part of what makes the divine hiddenness question so serious and important is that the evidence for theism indeed doesn't seem decisive.

Part of how the problem of hiddenness gets its grip, then, is because God's existence is evidentially dis-similar to cases like the flat earth case, where our evidential reasons clearly justify only one belief-attitude, so one group has a clear epistemic advantage. Rather, God's existence is unclear and ambiguous. Of course, some have argued that this ambiguity is merely a feature of people responding to the evidence inappropriately (in other words, that there are no non-resistant non-believers; see e.g. Henry 2001). However, many, myself included, find this response to hiddenness implausible, as it requires the claim that all non-theists are ignoring evidence or otherwise irrational, which simply seems empirically false. There are honest, non-resistant, non-theists—some of whom even want God to exist and/or wish they believed in God.

If our evidence clearly supported a single rational attitude regarding theism, it's hard to see how the problem of hiddenness would gain traction. This further supports the idea that many bodies of evidence possessed by actual humans are permissive regarding theism.[6]

To recap: for all these reasons—extensive disagreement, diverse and qualitatively distinct evidence, and God's hiddenness—given the standard body of evidence today, God exists is a permissive proposition, in either the bi- or tri-optional sense. This may be one reason that theism is frequently cited as a permissive case and is even used to motivate permissivism via example (see, e.g., Alston

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[6] Thanks to Dustin Crummett.

1988, Schoenfield 2014, Tielbaum & Kopec 2016). If permissivism is true, then whether God exists is a paradigm case of a proposition that would be permissive.

5. INTERPERSONAL TO INTRAPERSONAL

One might object that many of the above arguments seem to apply to the interpersonal case, but not the intrapersonal case. Perhaps atheists, theists, and agnostics can all be rational, even if they share evidence; this doesn't mean that a single person has epistemic options and could rationally adopt multiple of these attitudes at a time.

In reply, consider your own view on whether God exists; you may be a theist, an agnostic, or an atheist. Would you be epistemically irrational if you had a different view? Does your evidence force one perspective upon you? Most of us will likely answer no: holding my evidence fixed, I wouldn't be *epistemically* rational if I had a different opinion on God's existence.

If you aren't so sure, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, not all readers may be in a tri-optional case; some may merely be in a bi-optional case. Second, there may be other factors—practical, social, moral, or even prior commitments you've made—that would make changing attitudes abruptly difficult and perhaps irrational in a non-epistemic sense (more on this in 6.1). Third, whether there's a God is a fundamental and worldview-shaping matter. What you believe about God has implications for many of your other beliefs (and vice versa; many of your beliefs have implications for whether God exists). Because of this, if you change your view on God's existence, for coherence reasons, you'd likely change your attitude toward many propositions. John Pittard (2020) describes this phenomenon as one of being pulled between two *worldviews* (what he calls 'epistemic frames'), rather than just a single attitude toward a particular proposition. So we aren't asking whether it would be rational for you to change a single belief in isolation, but if you could rationally adopt a different *worldview* concerning the existence of God.

It's worth considering what an intrapersonally permissive case of theistic belief might look like more concretely. Peter van Inwagen describes a phenomenon very similar to this one in an autobiographical article about his religious conversion as an adult. His remarks are worth quoting at length (1994: 35):

> First, I can remember having a picture of the cosmos, the physical universe, as a self-subsistent thing, something that is just *there* and requires no explanation. When I say 'having a picture,' I am trying to describe a state of mind that could be called up whenever I desire and was centered on a certain mental image. This mental image—it somehow represented the whole world—was associated with a felt conviction that what the image represented was self-subsistent. I can still call the image to mind (I *think* it's the same image), and it still represents the whole world, but it is now associated with a felt conviction that what it represents is *not* self-subsistent, that it must depend on something else, something that is not represented by any feature of the image, and must be, in some way that the experience leaves indeterminate, radically different in kind from what the image represents. Interestingly enough, there was a period of transition, a period during which I could move back and forth at will, in the "duck-rabbit" fashion, between experiencing the image as representing the world as self-subsistent and experiencing the image as representing the world as dependent.

Later in the same article, he describes this duck-rabbit experience as both "recurrent" and a central part of his conversion experience. This is a good example of how you can (i) see that your evidence for theism is permissive (perhaps you wouldn't use these exact words) and (ii) rethink your theistic beliefs in light of (i). In (some) such cases, you can move between seeing the world in two ways; both are "live" possibilities. You have epistemic options. And again, this may not merely involve an attitude toward a single proposition, but between two coherent sets of propositions, both that purport to explain the evidence.

Many conversion experiences (regarding both theism and other worldview-shaping matters) aren't simply a matter of simply getting new evidence. Some might be, of course—e.g., St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus—but others are more like a choice, where one finds themselves with inconclusive evidence, at a fork in the road, wavering between two options. St. Augustine (397–400/1998) discusses a period in his conversion similar to van Inwagen's, in which he appreciated the strong evidence both for and against Christianity and felt torn about what to conclude. C.S. Lewis (1952: 123) similarly remarks, "Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable: but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable."[7] This further supports that this isn't merely a case of interpersonal permissivism, but many of us are in an intrapersonally permissive case regarding theism.

6. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

6.1 Difficult of Doxastic Change
You might worry that it seems very difficult to simply change your theistic beliefs. However, if I'm right that most of us are in an *intrapersonally* permissive case regarding whether God exists, it should be easier to simply change your attitude toward theism at will. Even considering the possibility that you're merely in a bi-optional case, it may strike you as quite difficult to simply change from (dis)belief to withholding (or vice versa). And a good explanation of this is that our evidential reasons are not permissive, but uniquely justify a single attitude to theism.

Note three things in response. First, there are often non-epistemic costs to conversion or mind change, especially about important, worldview-shaping matters such as whether God exists. There may be *practical* costs to changing your mind: conversion may entail different lifestyle choices, financial choices, choices about how you spend your time, etc. There are also likely *social* costs, whether that's joining or leaving a religious community, what your friends and family might think if you changed your mind, etc. And there are potential *moral* costs, at least insofar as one might view the demands of morality quite differently if one takes on (or gives up) a religious outlook—e.g. even if divine command theory is false, if theism is true, it at least seems like we have *prima facie* reason to take God's commands quite seriously. Because of all these non-epistemic costs, mind change regarding theism might not always be simple and easy, and it may not be all-things-considered rational.

Second, you might be unaware of, or wrong about, your epistemic situation. Higher-order questions regarding permissivism aren't ones that all of us consider; without reflecting on these questions, you may have no beliefs at all about whether you're in a permissive case regarding theism, and so the

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[7] For some contemporary examples, see Clark (1993), Ang (2019), Morris (1994), especially Jordan's essay, Vitz & Hatfield (2012), especially Cuneo's essay, and Besong and Fuqua (2019), especially Cutter's essay.

possibility of changing beliefs on this basis may never occur to you. Alternatively, you might consider whether your evidence is permissive but evaluate it improperly (there's some psychological evidence for things like confirmation bias which suggests we tend to weigh evidence that favors our current beliefs more heavily), and thus conclude you're in an impermissible case when you're not (see Smith 2020). Believing your case is impermissible would surely be a barrier to mind change, but you're simply wrong about your epistemic situation. Alternatively but relatedly, you might be aware your case is permissive but nonetheless believe that doxastic involutarism is true—as the large majority of philosophers do—and thus find it difficult to change your beliefs because you believe you cannot control them—in the same way that genuinely believing you cannot, say, make a shot in a basketball game, perform well in a Q&A, or complete a difficult task on time, makes it more likely you cannot do those things (if you believe you cannot, you may not even try).

Finally, you might be in one of those rare cases where your evidence regarding theism isn't permissive. I don't want to rely on this response too heavily, as I maintain that these cases are atypical and uncommon, but it's worth noting the possibility that a reader finds themselves in this unusual position.

6.2 Isn't Permissivism about Theism Surprising, Given Theism?
Borrowing from the divine hiddenness literature, one might argue that permissivism about theism is surprising, given theism. In other words, if God existed, God would not allow us to be in a permissive case regarding God's own existence; theism would be clearly true, given the available evidence.[8]

I have two things to note in response. First, my goal in this chapter, and book more generally, is not to argue for theism. So even if the considerations here, to a degree, are evidence against theism, that's neither a problem for this chapter nor this book as a whole. Further, as we saw in section 3 of this chapter, the facts about God's evidential ambiguity are one consideration among many in a diverse body of evidence regarding whether God exists, so even fully conceding the objection would far from settle the question of God's existence.

Second, many (in fact, most) responses to the hiddenness problem suggest that permissivism about theism (and/or divine hiddenness) is less surprising on theism that it might seem *prima facie* (this contrasts with responses that deny that God is hidden or that non-theists can be rational, which are much rarer in the literature). To summarize a few: as suggested by some of the quotes from section 4 (e.g. Hick), God might have intentionally made the universe religiously ambiguous to allow for a greater degree of human freedom or autonomy; divine hiddenness makes it easier for people to freely choose to believe in God, enter into relationship with God, and act morally (see also Cullison 2010). Furthermore, it seems possible to have a relationship with someone without a specific belief that they exist (religious and non-religious examples show this; see Cullison 2010, Benton 2018) and some might even believe in God *de re* but not *de dicto* (they might, say, believe in God under the guise of ultimate goodness, truth, or beauty; see Stump 2018). Generally, there are many reasons that belief in God might be permissive, given theism; I won't commit to any particular response here, but there are many in the large literature on divine hiddenness worth considering (see also Jackson 2016, Rea 2018, Anderson 2021, Baker-Hytch 2023).

6.3 St. Paul Says You're Wrong
In Romans 1:20, St. Paul writes, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—God's eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,

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[8] Thanks to Dominic XX for raising this worry.

so that people are without excuse." Given passages like this one, those in the Christian tradition might argue that theism is not a permissive case. Paul seems to be arguing God is clearly seen from creation (and in a later passage, the moral law). From this, some conclude that theistic belief is rationally required of most or all of us, given the evidence.

In reply, my arguments in this chapter are consistent with a relatively straightforward reading of Paul in this passage (and similar passages). In Paul's time, people had drastically different evidence that more clearly pointed toward theism. When Paul was writing, belief in God and/or the supernatural was extremely common and widespread (perhaps the divine hiddenness problem wouldn't have gained much traction in the first century!) People spent much more time in nature, staring at starry skies and breathtaking sunsets; today, much more time is spent walking around concrete jungles and staring at computer screens. Furthermore, as Charles Taylor (2017) argues, the Reformation, Enlightenment, and Romanticism involved deep cultural and intellectual transformations that gave rise to a much more secular society. My arguments in this chapter regard our current evidential situation, and while I maintain that permissivism about theism is supported by the widespread historical disagreement about God's existence, I don't claim that permissivism about theistic belief extends to all historical periods, places, and times.[9]

6.4 Religious Experience and Impermissivism
One might argue that, for those who have religious experiences, theism is not a permissive case. If you perceive God in a clear and obvious way that's on a par with your other sensory perceptions (see Alston 1991), this seems to not merely permit but to *require* theistic belief. Assuming religious experiences are quite common (although of course not universal), this implies that many people are not in permissive cases regarding the existence of God.

There are three things to note in response. First, there's evidence (from self-reported surveys) that the religious or spiritual experiences that are widespread would not require belief in God. These experiences include "a deep sense and wonder about the universe", "a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being", and "a deep sense of connection with humanity" which, according to a 2023 Pew survey, 71%, 66%, and 53% of US adults (respectively) say they feel at least several times a year (Alper et al 2023). Interestingly, more atheists and agnostics reported experiencing a deep sense of wonder about the universe than theists did. Furthermore, the more explicitly the religious experience refers to God or a being like God, the less common the religious experience is, e.g., 37% of US adults said they felt "a presence of something beyond this world" (ibid). Then, it's far from obvious that the kind of religious experiences that would rationally *require* theistic belief are widespread enough for this objection to succeed.

Second, it's questionable whether even clear perceptions of God would rationally *require* theistic belief. For one, such perceptions would have a defeater that normally isn't present with normal sense perception: the widespread disagreement about theism. Furthermore, as Fales (2003) argues, religious experiences cannot be cross-checked in the way other sensory perceptions can, and there are a variety of natural explanations for religious experiences. While not everyone who has religious experiences will be aware of these defeaters to the same degree, many of these defeaters (especially disagreement) are widespread enough that could call into doubt the veridicality of a religious experience.

Third and finally, those who have especially powerful religious experiences may not be able to rationally disbelieve that God exists (so their case isn't tri-optional) but they may nonetheless still be rational to be agnostic and withhold belief (and so their case is bi-optional). Why can they withhold? For one, they will likely encounter (or be aware of) the extensive disagreement regarding God's existence. And two, even if Alston is right about the epistemic parallels between divine perception and sensory perception, there are still powerful skeptical arguments that many think justify withholding belief regarding our sense perceptions (even if we shouldn't disbelieve our sense perceptions); so, at least in some cases, withholding belief regarding one's divine perceptions may be similarly permitted. I conclude that, given all the above responses, it's unlikely that widespread theistic belief is rationally required, given religious experiences.

7. CONCLUSION

I've argued that theistic belief is permissive belief, and not just interpersonally, but that many of us have epistemic options regarding belief in God. This conclusion is supported by the extensive disagreement over time and persons, diverse and qualitatively distinct evidence, and by considerations from the literature on divine hiddenness.

In the next three chapters, I'll apply this conclusion to three topics: how faith can be rational yet go beyond the evidence, the problem of evil, and Pascal's wager. I'll also suggest how non-epistemic factors might guide what we believe about God in the face of ambiguous evidence.

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