

On the Morality of Having Faith that God Exists

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Abstract Many theists who identify themselves with the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) maintain that it is perfectly acceptable to have faith that God exists. In this paper, I argue that, when believing that God exists will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to believe that God exists on the basis of sufficient evidence. Lest there be any confusion: I do not argue that it is always wrong to have faith that God exists, only that, under certain conditions, it can be.

Keywords Faith · Sufficient evidence · Doxastic practice · God · Properly basic belief

I've heard many people say quite sincerely, 'I believe that God exists, but by my own lights, I am not justified in believing that God exists.'¹ Hilary Kornblith
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.² Jesus of Nazareth

Introduction

Is it morally acceptable to have faith that God exists?³ In what follows, I argue that there are conditions under which it is not. But before doing so, I need to address what I mean by 'having faith that God exists.'

For present purposes, to have faith that God exists is to believe that God exists despite recognizing that one lacks sufficient evidence (or, if you prefer, adequate reason) for the truth of this belief. Allow me to explain exactly what I mean by this.

Let us begin with what I mean by 'sufficient evidence.' By 'evidence,' I include both private and public, inferential and non-inferential evidence. Working backwards, non-

¹Hilary Kornblith, 'Naturalizing Rationality,' in *Naturalism and Rationality*, edited by Newton Garver and Peter H. Hare (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books), 119.

²John 20:29.

³By 'God,' I mean the Abrahamic god, a being who is understood to be omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, perfectly good, eternal, self-existent, and personal, among other things.

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inferential evidence of God's existence is evidence that involves direct perception or awareness of God's existence. Inferential evidence of God's existence, on the other hand, is evidence that does not involve direct perception or awareness of God's existence but from which we may infer God's existence.

That said, *public* evidence is objective and, in the words of Stephen Davis, thereby 'open to the awareness and inspection to anyone who is interested enough to consider' it.⁴ In other words, public evidence is evidence that it is in principle possible for anyone to evaluate and find convincing or not convincing, while *private* evidence is subjective and thereby open 'only to the awareness and scrutiny of the given individual to whom [it is] private, and [is] not necessarily convincing to anyone else.'⁵ For example, one might believe that one's leg is injured on the basis of pain one feels in one's leg. In this case, the pain one experiences is not open to the awareness and inspection to anyone who is interested to consider it. Thus, one's pain serves as private evidence for the belief that one's leg is injured.

By 'sufficient' evidence, I mean evidence the strength of which is proportional to the strength of the belief derived from it. Simply put: the stronger one believes something, the stronger the evidence must be if it is to be sufficient. Consider two continuums. For the first continuum, let's say that '1' represents one extreme of belief involving complete certainty, while '0' represents the other extreme of belief involving complete uncertainty. For the second continuum, let's say that '1' represents one extreme of incontrovertible evidence, while '0' represents the other extreme of utterly controvertible evidence. If the strength of my belief that, say, I am typing right now is approximately 0.6, then the strength of evidence for this must be approximately 0.6 as well if it is to be sufficient.

Notice, also, that having such faith involves a phenomenological component: it involves *recognizing* that one lacks sufficient evidence for the belief that God exists. This phenomenological component is included for two reasons. First, and most importantly, cases involving this understanding of having faith that God exists are widespread. Like Kornblith (quoted above), I have encountered many theists—both personally and through various media—who have such faith that God exists. Indeed, of the theists I've encountered in my lifetime, the majority of them have professed to having such faith that God exists, either straightaway or after some dialogue. (In cases of the latter, things typically go as follows: the theist is asked on what grounds she believes that God exists, she proceeds to lay out an argument for God's existence, objections are raised, and this is repeated for some time until the theist proclaims, 'Well, all of this is beside the point anyway, since I have faith that God exists.')

Indeed, even the preeminent theistic philosopher Alvin Plantinga concedes, 'Belief in God is seldom accepted on the basis of the teleological argument, or indeed any argument or propositional evidence at all.'⁶

A second, more philosophical reason to include this phenomenological component may be motivated by way of illustration. Suppose Joe believes that God exists and does so on the basis of what he deems to be sufficient evidence, namely, a gut feeling. Suppose also that he is mistaken about having sufficient

⁴ Stephen T. Davis, *Faith, Skepticism, and Evidence* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1978), 26.

⁵ Davis, 28.

⁶ Alvin Plantinga, 'Science and Religion,' in *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?*, Daniel Dennett and Alvin Plantinga (New York, NY: OUP, 2011), 9.

evidence for this belief—he believes that having a gut feeling constitutes sufficient evidence for this belief, to be sure, but he is mistaken (the strength of Joe’s belief that God exists is, say, 1, but the strength of his evidence for that belief—the gut feeling—is significantly less than 1). In this case, then, Joe believes that God exists but does so without having sufficient evidence for this belief.

Now, some would claim that Joe has *faith* that God exists. For such people, believing that God exists without sufficient evidence is one and the same as having faith that God exists—regardless of whether one recognizes that one lacks sufficient evidence. Richard Dawkins, for example, understands faith to be ‘belief that isn’t based on evidence.’⁷ And Richard Creel writes of ‘those who have faith that God exists, that is, those who have non-evidential confidence that God exists.’⁸ In neither of these understandings is the recognition that one lacks sufficient evidence stated to be a condition of having faith that God exists. But this strikes me as a misleading omission. To be sure, *ex hypothesi*, Joe erroneously believes that he has sufficient evidence for the truth of the belief that God exists. But it seems odd if not simply misguided to say that he has *faith* that God exists. Indeed, it’s telling that Joe himself would not profess to having faith that God exists; rather, he would profess to believing it on the basis of (what he deems to be) sufficient evidence—the gut feeling. There is reason to think, then, that having faith that God exists involves not only believing that God exists while lacking sufficient evidence but also recognizing that one lacks sufficient evidence. In any case, it is this sense of having faith that is to be addressed presently.

Granted, some philosophers may have misgivings about the understanding of having faith that God exists under consideration. The misgivings may be expressed in a number of different ways, ranging from claiming that such an understanding is not ‘mainstream’ to claiming that it does not accord with, say, the Jesuits’ understanding of faith or even the understanding of a particular philosopher or theologian. In some of these cases (such as the ‘mainstream’ case), the claims underpinning the misgivings would arguably be false.⁹ In other cases—particularly

⁷ Richard Dawkins, ‘Science Versus Religion,’ in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, edited by Louis Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), 451. Also, Sam Harris, citing Paul Tillich, writes of faith as ‘an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence.’ See Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004), 65.

⁸ Richard E. Creel, ‘Faith as Imperfect Knowledge,’ in *Faith in Theory and Practice*, 69.

⁹ It should be noted here that one reviewer of this paper expressed misgivings about this understanding of having faith that God exists, claiming that,

although many people understand ... faith in this way, it is scarcely the mainstream understanding of ... faith. I imagine that many Christians, for example, would say that they have faith that Christ died for our sins, and would say that an adequate reason for the truth of this proposition is that the Bible declares that it is true.

But, ironically, this case gives us reason to believe that the understanding of having faith employed is indeed mainstream. After all, what does it even mean to say that many Christians ‘have faith’ that Christ died for our sins *and* that they believe that they have an ‘adequate reason’ to believe this? If such Christians really believe they have adequate reason to believe that Christ died for our sins, what are they adding—if anything at all—when they say that they ‘have faith’ that Christ died for our sins? Faith has a non-trivial role to play in this claim, I submit, only if the reason they have for believing that Christ died for their sins is, by their own lights, somehow *inadequate*. So, if such Christians are representative of the mainstream view of having faith, as the reviewer seems to be suggesting, then my understanding of having faith is indeed mainstream.

those about how the understanding does not accord with a particular philosopher or theologian's understanding—they would not be false. In any case, however, such reactions would be unsurprising. For, as William Sessions writes, 'Adequately characterizing faith is a much larger task than is commonly realized. In part this is because *the* concept of faith encompasses a variety of conceptions that differ in many ways.'¹⁰ Moreover, such reactions would be neither here nor there, for, as stated previously, the understanding of having faith that God exists under consideration is widespread and thereby worthy of our attention.

With these preliminary remarks out of the way, we may now address the central question of this paper: Is it morally acceptable to have faith that God exists? In other words, is it morally acceptable to believe that God exists despite recognizing that one lacks sufficient evidence for this belief? In what follows, I will be defending the following claim: In cases where believing that God exists will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to proportion one's belief that God exists to the evidence. Lest there be any confusion: I will *not* be arguing that it is *always* wrong to have faith that God exists (à la W. K. Clifford and many of the so-called neo-atheists), or even that it often is; I will simply be arguing that, under certain conditions, it can be. And, though this may strike some philosophers as a rather conservative conclusion, I believe it reasonably splits the divide between what heretofore have been rather popular positions on having faith that God exists: that of Clifford and many of the so-called neo-atheists, on the one hand, who arguably overstate the moral obligation to believe that God exists on sufficient evidence, and that of those alluded to above, on the other, who find it perfectly acceptable to believe that God exists despite recognizing that they lack sufficient evidence for this belief.

But before presenting my argument, a brief word about methodology is in order.

Methodology: The Commonsense Approach

For present purposes, I have adopted what I will refer to as the *commonsense approach*. The commonsense approach involves examining and evaluating the aforementioned question of faith in light of concepts and views constitutive of commonsense morality and commonsense psychology.

Beginning with commonsense morality, there are numerous ways in which one might attempt to characterize it, such as by delineating what commonsense morality considers to be morally relevant factors—factors that make morally right acts morally right and morally wrong acts morally wrong—and by delineating the moral claims typically associated it.¹¹ For the purposes of this essay, the latter will suffice.

As for the moral claims typically associated with commonsense morality, the one most pertinent to our discussion is shared by seemingly every moral system, namely, that it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to refrain from wronging

¹⁰ William Lad Sessions, 'The Certainty of Faith,' in *Faith in Theory and Practice*, edited by Elizabeth S. Radcliffe and Carol J. White (Peru, Illinois: Open Court Publishing), 75.

¹¹ See Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 17ff.

others. Indeed, if there is a fundamental tenet of commonsense morality, it is this. Of course, commonsense morality may differ with other moral systems with respect to which acts involve wronging others. But, for present purposes, such is inconsequential, since the moral claim most pertinent to our discussion is simply that it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to refrain from wronging others.

It should be noted, moreover, that, according to commonsense morality as understood here, the moral claims it makes are understood to be claims about moral *facts*, not statements of mere attitude or emotion. Just as it is a fact that trees exist, cats have digestive systems, and rocks are solid, so, according to commonsense morality, it is a fact that it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to refrain from wronging others.

Regarding commonsense psychology, it may be characterized as ‘the set of background assumptions, socially-conditioned prejudices and convictions that are implicit in our everyday descriptions of others’ behavior and in our ascriptions of their mental states.’¹² Commonsense psychology, then, includes the concepts of belief, desire, fear, hope, and more—belief being the most important of the concepts for present purposes. By adopting commonsense psychology, then, I am thereby rejecting eliminative materialism, the view that commonsense mental states—including beliefs—do not exist.¹³

With this said, a potential problem with my position presents itself: it’s only as good as the commonsense approach itself. I’m happy to embrace this implication, if for no other reason than that many of the theists who think it’s morally acceptable to have faith that God exists also embrace what I’m referring to here as the commonsense approach. Accordingly, the following discussion plays by such theists’ own rules, as it were.

On the Morality of Having Faith that God Exists

So, is it morally acceptable to have faith that God exists? Clifford, for one, emphatically denies that it is. ‘It is wrong,’ Clifford writes, ‘always, everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.’¹⁴ But this is greatly overstated—surely it is not immoral for, say, an elderly woman on her deathbed privately to have faith that she is going to heaven. Of course, that Clifford has overstated the case does not entail that there are no conditions under which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that God exists. And, if my argument is sound—to be referred to here as the *Moral Argument against Faith* (or, MAF)—then there are indeed conditions under which having faith that God exists is *prima facie* wrong. The argument is as follows:

P1: When one’s doing something will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to refrain from wronging those who will be affected by one’s doing it.

¹² *The Language of Psychology: Dictionary and Research Guide*, <http://www.123exp-health.com/t/01084175594/>.

¹³ For more on eliminative materialism, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/materialism-eliminative/>.

¹⁴ W. K. Clifford, ‘The Ethics of Belief,’ in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 367.

P2: In some cases, believing that God exists will affect others.

C1: In cases where believing that God exists will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to refrain from wronging those who will be affected by one's so believing.

P3: Attempting to refrain from wronging those who will be affected by one's believing that God exists involves attempting to believe it on the basis of a doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable.

C2: In cases where believing that God exists will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to believe that God exists on the basis of a doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable.

P4: The practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence is the only doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable.

C3: In cases where believing that God exists will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to proportion one's belief that God exists to the evidence.

In the following, I defend each premise in turn.

Defense of P1

As stated previously, P1 is a constitutive of commonsense morality as understood here. Rejecting P1, then, would amount to rejecting commonsense morality altogether. Given that commonsense morality is a component of the methodology adopted for purposes of this paper, I am assuming that P1 is true.

Defense of P2

It is clear that, in some cases, believing that God exists will affect others. For example, the (sincere) evangelist spreads the gospel as a result of believing that God exists and, in doing so, affects other. To be sure, his believing that God exists alone is not sufficient for affecting others—some would say that he needs to desire to spread the gospel as well, for example—but his believing that God exists plays *a* role in so affecting others. And this is all that is being claimed in P2.

Defense of P3

My defense of P3 consists of two steps.

The first step involves establishing how one comes to wrong another. There are, of course, numerous ways in which one may come to wrong another, but the two ways most pertinent to this discussion are as follows: (1) by making errors about moral facts and (2) by making errors about non-moral facts. And, if it's not already obvious, it should be noted that these are doxastic errors—errors of belief about what are and are not moral and non-moral facts.

Take, for example, murder. Insofar as there are moral facts—as commonsense morality says there are—surely one of them is that murder is morally wrong. And, when one wrongs another in this way, this may be the result of making one or more of the following doxastic errors. First, it may be the result

of erroneously believing that murder isn't morally wrong or that the victim isn't innocent. Either way, an error about a moral fact is made. Second, it may be the result of erroneously believing that, say, one's victim is not (fully) human or that one's victim has consented to be killed. Either way, an error about a non-moral fact is made.

Attempting to refrain from wronging those who will be affected by one's believing a proposition, then, involves attempting to refrain from making errors about moral and non-moral facts, among other things.

This brings us to the second step. Given that wronging others may be the result of making errors about moral and non-moral facts, attempting to refrain from wronging others involves attempting to refrain from making such errors. But what does attempting to refrain from making such errors involve? Well, if it's to be a good-faith attempt (pun, alas, intended), it involves attempting to believe propositions of (purported) moral or non-moral facts on the basis of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. Perhaps the clearest way to convey what I mean by a 'fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable' is to break this clause into its constitutive parts and analyze them in piecemeal fashion. Thus:

- By 'doxastic practice,' I mean a belief-generating practice.
- By 'fact-determining' doxastic practice, I mean a doxastic practice that pertains to facts as opposed to opinions or tastes—i.e., that pertains to objective truths as opposed to relative truths. The reason for this should be obvious: the immediate issue is what attempting to refrain from making errors of moral and non-moral *facts* involves. Thus, whatever doxastic practice is proposed as a solution, it should be one that pertains to facts, not mere opinions or tastes.

And,

- By a doxastic practice that has 'proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable,' I mean a doxastic practice that: (a) generally can be counted on to generate true or probably true beliefs and (b) can do so in a way that is not strictly coincidental, i.e., can do so such that there is an appropriate causal relation between the belief and the doxastic practice itself. It's important that the doxastic practice be reliable since one is attempting to acquire true—not merely rational—beliefs about moral and non-moral facts. And it's important that the doxastic practice be nonarbitrarily reliable so as to rule out doxastic practices that may be reliable but nevertheless should be rejected. Consider, for example, the doxastic practice of flipping a coin in order to decide whether or not to believe a given proposition.¹⁵ Such a practice may turn out to be reliable in that it generally can be counted on to generate true or probably true beliefs. But surely we ought to reject it and do so on the grounds that there is not an appropriate causal relation between the true or probably true beliefs

¹⁵ The possibility of such a doxastic practice is discussed in George Mavrodes's 'Jerusalem and Athens Revisited,' in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 209.

and the doxastic practice itself and, thus, that believing on the basis of such a practice is intellectually and/or morally irresponsible.

That attempting to refrain from making errors about moral and non-moral facts involves attempting to believe statements of (purported) moral or non-moral facts on the basis of such a doxastic may be seen as follows. Consider cases of punishment, legal or other. Whether to punish someone or not for something he allegedly did—say, stealing a diamond bracelet—is a moral matter, at least in part. How, in good faith, would we attempt to refrain from wrongly punishing such an individual? We would attempt to refrain from making errors about moral and non-moral facts, among other things. And we would do this by believing the relevant moral facts [e.g., that something was done (or not done) that is deserving of punishment—whatever the moral facts may happen to be] and non-moral facts [e.g., that the accused did (or did not) steal the bracelet, that the diamond bracelet is in fact a diamond bracelet—whatever the non-moral facts may happen to be] on the basis of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. We would not, for example, attempt to refrain from making errors about moral and non-moral facts on the basis of a doxastic practice that has *not* proven itself to be reliable—such as, say, reading tea leaves—or on the basis of a doxastic practice that may be reliable but lacks the appropriate causal relation between the true or probably true beliefs and the doxastic practice itself—such as, say, flipping a coin. To do either of these things would be intellectually and/or morally irresponsible.

Or, to take a non-punishment-oriented case, suppose a new, seemingly sentient and sapient life form—one uncannily reminiscent of Spock from television's *Star Trek*—were discovered on earth and we were genuinely concerned about not wronging it by, say, killing it or inflicting pain and suffering upon it unnecessarily. How, in good faith, would we attempt to refrain from wronging it? Again, we would attempt to refrain from making errors about moral and non-moral facts. And we would do this by believing the relevant moral facts (e.g., that killing this life form is morally wrong, or morally acceptable, or morally required—whatever the moral facts may happen to be) and non-moral facts (e.g., that this new life form *is indeed* sentient and sapient, or not sentient, or not sapient—whatever the non-moral facts may happen to be) on the basis of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. We would not attempt to refrain from making errors about moral and non-moral facts by reading tea leaves or flipping a coin. To do either of these things would be intellectually and/or morally irresponsible.

Defense of P4

This brings us to the fourth and final step. The only fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable is proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. The evidence for this is overwhelming and can be stated quite succinctly.

Consider, for example, the history of intellectual progress. Specifically, consider how *far* we've come in the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology), the social sciences (psychology, anthropology), the humanities (philosophy,

history), etc., and consider the doxastic practice *through which* we've come so far. The progress in each of these fields is both undeniable and remarkable. And, the doxastic practice through which we've come this far—particularly in more recent history—is principally proportioning beliefs to the evidence. This is not to say that, as a species, we've *always* proportioned our beliefs to the evidence, or that all intellectual progress is rooted in doing so. It's simply to say that, when we reflect upon the history of intellectual progress, we see a stronger and stronger correlation between proportioning beliefs to the evidence and intellectual progress. And, as a result, we have come to deem this doxastic practice as one that has proven itself to be reliable in this domain. (There is no better place to witness that we deem this doxastic practice as one that has proven itself reliable in this domain than the place wherein intellectual development is expected to occur, namely, the classroom.) No other fact-determining doxastic practice can claim a comparable history of success. Indeed, it's difficult to think of a non-evidence-based, fact-determining doxastic practice that's even a potential contender. A thorough presentation of this fact would involve describing in great detail the history of each of these fields, but for the sake of space, I trust that the reader is sufficiently familiar with their histories to grant the point.¹⁶

Consider, also, the history of moral progress. There is no doubt that moral progress—particularly when understood in terms of commonsense morality—has occurred throughout the history of humanity. What was once considered morally acceptable in many societies—such as slavery, torture, the eye-for-an-eye principle of justice (at least, the literal implementation of it), the unequal treatment of women and non-whites, etc.—is now largely condemned as immoral. And, the doxastic practice through which we've progressed so—particularly in more recent history—is principally through proportioning beliefs to the evidence. Again, this is not to say that, as a species, we've always proportioned our beliefs to the evidence, or that all moral progress is rooted in doing so. It's simply to say that, when we reflect upon the history of moral progress, we see a stronger and stronger correlation between proportioning beliefs to the evidence and moral progress and, as a result, we have come to deem this doxastic practice as one that has proven itself to be reliable in this domain. (There is no better place to witness that we deem this doxastic practice as one that has proven itself reliable in this domain than in a college course on ethics.) As with the history of the progress of the fields above, a thorough presentation of the history of moral progress would require much more space than is permitted for present purposes. But, for the sake of space, I trust that the reader is sufficiently familiar with their histories to grant the point.¹⁷

All of this strongly supports the claim that proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence is the only fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to

¹⁶ If the reader is not sufficiently familiar with the history of these progresses, a perusal of the relevant entries in an encyclopedia is a good place to start.

¹⁷ Again, if the reader is not sufficiently familiar with the history of these progresses, a perusal of the relevant entries in an encyclopedia is a good place to start. See also Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker, eds., *A History of Western Ethics*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003); Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998).

be nonarbitrarily reliable. This is not to say, of course, that proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence *always* generates true or probably true beliefs, only that it's likely to, as the trajectories of intellectual and moral development reveal. And, of course, it remains possible that there is another fact-determining doxastic practice that may be capable of proving itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable but, if there is, it is one of which we are currently unaware. At least for now, then, a good-faith attempt to refrain from making errors about moral and non-moral fact and, in turn, wronging others involves attempting to proportion one's belief to the evidence.

To be sure, other doxastic practices have been defended by philosophers. For example, Reformed Epistemologists are famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) for arguing that it is not irrational for certain people to believe certain propositions—specifically, those that are properly basic—independent of evidence.¹⁸ But even if this is true, a doxastic practice in terms of which it's *not irrational* to believe certain propositions is not one and the same as a fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. After all, from the mere fact that it is not irrational for one to believe that *p*, it doesn't follow that *p* is true or even probably true; *a fortiori*, it does not follow that, in general, such a doxastic practice generally can be counted on to generate true or probably true beliefs. And, when it comes to avoiding making mistakes about moral and non-moral facts, a good-faith effort involves attempting to arrive at beliefs that are true or probably true, not simply beliefs that it is not irrational for one to adopt. Imagine in the punishment or Spock-like life form scenarios someone proposing that, to avoid making mistakes about moral and non-moral facts, we should simply adopt beliefs that it is not irrational for one to adopt. Surely this is far too low a standard when so much is at stake.

Summary

My moral argument against having faith that God exists (MAF) may be summarized as follows. When one's doing something that will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to refrain from wronging those who will be affected by one's doing it. In some cases, believing that God exists will affect others. In such cases, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to refrain from wronging those whom one will affect by so believing. Attempting to refrain from wronging those who will be affected by one's believing that God exists involves attempting to refrain from making errors about moral and non-moral facts. And this involves attempting to believe propositions of (purported) moral or non-moral facts—including the non-moral statement 'God exists'—on the basis of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. The only fact-determining doxastic practice that has proven itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable is proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. Thus, attempting to refrain from wronging those who will be affected by one's believing that God exists involves attempting to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence. In cases where believing that

¹⁸ See Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God,' in *Faith and Rationality*, 16–94.

God exists will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to proportion one's belief that God exists to the evidence.

A Qualification

Before moving on, a final comment is required. The extent to which believing a proposition will affect others is, in some measure, a function of the content of the proposition itself since, content-wise, some propositions are more others-regarding than others. For example, the proposition that people are never to be trusted is more others-regarding than the proposition that unicorns have four legs, since the former makes a claim about how one is to behave with respect to others while the latter does not. Given this, one might maintain that the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence is proportional to the extent to which the proposition is others-regarding: the more others-regarding the proposition, the worse it is to forgo attempting to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence, all else being equal. Though Clifford, for one, would likely reject this, I will grant that this is the case.¹⁹

That said, the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to proportion one's belief that God exists to the evidence depends on the extent to which that belief is others-regarding. The question, then, is: to what extent is the belief that God exists others-regarding? Some might think that it is not others-regarding at all, while others might think that it is others-regarding to one extent or another. Rather than settling this dispute, I'll simply submit the following.

First, if the proposition that God exists (by itself) is not others-regarding at all, then the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to proportion one's belief that God exists to the evidence will be nil. Even if this is the case, however, it doesn't follow that having faith that God exists is never *prima facie* wrong. This would be true only if having faith that God exists were done in a vacuum, independent of other beliefs, but such is generally not the case. Specifically, theists tend to believe not simply that God exists but that God would have us behave in various ways, ways that in many cases are others-regarding. So, even if the proposition that God exists by itself is not directly others-regarding, it tends to be conjoined with others-regarding beliefs in such a way that it becomes indirectly others-regarding. This brings us to the second possibility.

If the proposition that God exists is not others-regarding by itself but is others-regarding when combined with other beliefs, such as the belief that God wants wives to submit to their husbands, then the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to proportion these beliefs—that God exists and that God wants wives to submit to their husbands—to the evidence will be proportional to the extent to which the conjunction of these beliefs is others-regarding.

Finally, if the proposition that God exists (again, by itself) is others-regarding to one extent or another, then the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to

¹⁹ Clifford held that even believing propositions that are not others-regarding has deleterious effects, such as making the individual who does so (repeatedly anyway) more gullible and, in turn, more susceptible to believing on the basis of insufficient evidence propositions that *are* others-regarding.

proportion the belief that God exists to the evidence will be proportional to the extent to which the proposition that God exists is others-regarding.

An Objection

There are, of course, numerous objections that may be raised against the preceding argument, indeed, far too many to be addressed presently.²⁰ For the sake of space, I have to limit myself to the following.

Some might contend that MAF proves too much in that it entails that it is *prima facie* wrong to believe certain propositions that—on the contrary—it is perfectly morally acceptable to believe. Consider, for example, the following propositions:

- Ducks exist independently of us.
- Other humans are not robots.
- One's memories tend to be reliable.

At this moment, many of us believe these propositions. However, some philosophers—such as Reformed Epistemologists—argue that we do so while recognizing that we do not have sufficient evidence for their truth. Specifically, they contend that, given philosophical skepticism, no one has sufficient evidence for such propositions. Thus, insofar as we believe these propositions, we have faith (as understood here) that they are true. Nevertheless, they submit, it is neither irrational nor *prima facie* wrong for us to believe these things.

This objection to MAF is defective in numerous ways.

First, it is not necessarily the case that we have faith that these propositions are true. This is the case only if philosophical skepticism is counted as a given, and it's not at all clear that philosophical skepticism *should* be counted as a given. For counting philosophical skepticism as a given involves granting the philosophical

²⁰ For example, one might wonder whether we can control what we believe and, in turn, be morally accountable for what we believe. There is much to say about this. But, briefly, even we do not have direct control over what we believe—though we may not be able to, say, *will* ourselves to adopt any given belief—we nevertheless seem to have indirect control over what we believe. Indeed, two philosophers who couldn't disagree more on the issue of having faith—Jonathan Adler and William Alston—nevertheless agree that we have indirect control over what we believe. The ardent evidentialist Adler writes,

for many of our beliefs we do have the ability to influence and shape the dispositions underlying their acceptance. If you are quick to ascribe ill motives to others, you have probably had many occasions to discern and evaluate this pattern of your attributions and you can undertake to control them accordingly. The modification does not require direct control over your believing. (Jonathan Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2006), 66)

While the equally ardent *anti*-evidentialist Alston writes:

... I do have voluntary control over moves that can influence a particular belief formation—for example, looking for more evidence or selectively exposing myself to evidence—and moves that can affect my general belief-forming habits or tendencies—for example, training myself to be more critical of testimony. (William P. Alston, 'Christian Experience and Christian Belief,' in *Faith and Rationality*, 114)

If Adler and Alston are correct about this—and it seems to me that that they are—then we can indeed control what we believe, at least indirectly.

skeptic's epistemic principles—e.g., Hume's principle that all knowledge is derived from sensation or reflection—and one may have (very) good reason for rejecting these principles. Indeed, one might employ a 'G.E. Moore Shift' and contend that propositions such as the above are (much) more epistemically warranted than the philosophical skeptic's principles.²¹

But even if we do have faith that these propositions are true and it is morally acceptable for us to do so, it does not follow that MAF is thereby undermined. For, first, MAF dictates simply that it is *prima facie* wrong to *forgo attempting* to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence, not that it is *wrong full stop* to do so. Thus, so long as we have attempted to proportion our beliefs to the evidence—and, when confronted with new evidence, we continue to do so—we fulfill that which is dictated by MAF.

And, again, even if we do have faith that these propositions are true and it is morally acceptable for us to do so, it does not follow that it is always morally acceptable to have faith *that God exists*. Indeed, there is a significant and relevant difference between such propositions and the proposition that God exists. Regarding the former, we cannot help but believe such things—try as we might, we cannot genuinely sustain rejection of these beliefs (at least, we cannot genuinely sustain such rejection while remaining sane). Given this, and that 'ought' implies 'can' (as Kant argues), if we cannot reject such beliefs, then it is not the case that it is wrong, all things considered, to fail to do so.²²

The belief that God exists, on the other hand, is not so forced upon us by our experience—we can genuinely sustain rejection of this belief. Indeed, if religious affiliation is any indication, nearly half the world's population does just this.²³ So,

²¹ William Rowe introduced the concept of a 'G.E. Moore Shift.' See Rowe, 128–29.

²² An anonymous reviewer of this paper took issue with my previous claim that we cannot help believing these things, noting: 'For one thing, Pyrrhonist skeptics have claimed to have a fair degree of success in carrying out a policy of withholding belief while, with respect to their attitudes and actions, being guided by appearances.' Now, I am no expert on Pyrrhonist skepticism, and I have no doubt that the reviewer is correct in saying that they *claimed* to have such success. But I find it nearly impossible to believe that being guided by beliefs regarding appearances rather than being guided by beliefs regarding the real existence of, say, physical objects—including not only ducks but stampeding horses, swinging swords, incoming spears, falling rocks, food, doors, etc.—is conducive for successfully navigating through life. After all, mere appearances are just that, *mere* appearances. So, unless one *also* thinks that appearances give us good reason to believe that physical objects really exist, I fail to see how appearances could serve one in successfully navigating through life. 'I am being appeared to sword-swingingly; thus, I ought to move out of the way' makes sense if the *appearance* of a swinging sword gives one good reason to believe that the swinging sword *really exists*. And if it does give one good reason to think that the swinging sword really exists, then it's doubtful that Pyrrhonist skeptics *really* withheld belief about the real existence of physical objects. On the other hand, if being appeared to sword-swingingly does *not* give one good reason to believe that a swinging sword really exists, then what possible role could such appearances play in one's successful navigation of life? In other words, if appearances do not give one good reason to believe that a physical object really exists, how are they any better at helping us successfully navigate through life than mere fictions or fantasies? All this is to say I rather doubt Pyrrhonist skeptics *really* suspended judgments about physical objects. Moreover, Pyrrhonist skepticism notwithstanding, the claim that such beliefs are forced upon us remains true for the vast majority of us—i.e., those of us who are not Pyrrhonist skeptics.

²³ According to adherents.com, 3.6 billion out of the world's 6.7 billion are adherents of religions that include belief in God as understood here. Moreover, since being an 'adherent' does not entail that one *really believes* that God exists, the number of believers in God's existence may be a lot smaller. See http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html.

even if it is morally acceptable to have faith that ducks exist independently of us, that other humans are not robots, and that our memories tend to be reliable, it doesn't follow that it is always morally acceptable to have faith that God exists.

Beyond properly basic propositions, however, there may still be propositions that MAF entails that it is *prima facie* wrong to believe but that—again, on the contrary—it is nevertheless perfectly morally acceptable to believe. Consider the following propositions:

- I have faith that my son will beat cancer.
- I have faith that my daughter will grow up to be a doctor.
- I have faith that the future will be better than the past.

As with the allegedly properly basic propositions above, some might argue that MAF renders it *prima facie* wrong for people to have such faith and, thus, proves too much. But there are at least two reasons to think this objection is misguided.

First, in many cases, propositions such as these are best understood to be statements of hope or desire rather than statements of *belief*. That is, they are not properly understood to be instances of having faith as understood here.

Second, even in cases where propositions such as these are not statements of hope or desire but instead statements of belief, such propositions fail to serve as counterexamples to MAF. To see this, consider the case of Madeline Neumann, an 11-year-old girl who died after her parents prayed for healing rather than seek medical help for a treatable form of diabetes. According to the local police chief, the girl's parents attributed the death to not having 'enough faith.'²⁴

Now, whether the Neumanns understand 'having faith' as understood here is unclear, but it need not be clear to make my point, which is: *if* the Neumanns believed that their daughter would survive without medical treatment while recognizing that they lacked sufficient evidence for this belief, and *if* they did not attempt to proportion their belief to the evidence, then their having such faith was *prima facie* wrong. And it's important to note that this is the case not simply because of the outcome of such faith—the death of their daughter—but because it is *prima facie* wrong to forgo attempting to proportion the belief that their daughter would survive without medical treatment to the evidence.²⁵

²⁴ <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,341574,00.html>

²⁵ Incidentally, this seems to be reflected in the legal outcome of this case. Though there is not a one-to-one correspondence between moral status of acts and the legal status of acts, of course, it is worth noting that the mother was subsequently convicted of second-degree *reckless* homicide. See http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2009/05/guilty_guilty_guilty_the_mother_who_reli.php