**Disagreement Skepticism and the Rationality of Religious Belief**

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**1. Introduction**

The Equal Weight View is a view about the epistemic significance of disagreement that is thought to have significant skeptical consequences. In this paper I do two things: (i) apply the Equal Weight View to cases of religious disagreement, and (ii) evaluate some consequences of that application for the rationality of religious beliefs. With regard to (i), I argue that the Equal Weight View implies that awareness of the current state of disagreement over religious propositions, such as *God exists* or *God doesn’t exist*, gives us a defeater for any non-skeptical attitude toward such propositions. With regard to (ii), I examine what this entails about the rationality of religious beliefs. In particular, I examine how troubling the theist should find these consequences, and argue that they are not as troubling as is typically thought.

**2. The Epistemology of Disagreement**

The epistemology of disagreement concerns how discovering that another person disagrees with you about some claim should affect what you believe about that claim. Discussion of the epistemic significance of disagreement typically takes place in two ways: examining peer disagreements and examining more general everyday disagreements. While there are a number of distinct conceptions of epistemic peers in the literature, the central feature of all of these accounts is that epistemic peers are a kind of epistemic equal. Epistemic peers about p are in an equally good epistemic position with respect to p – they are equally likely to be correct about p.

Three questions lie at the heart of the debate concerning the epistemic significance of peer disagreement, and the various views on the epistemic significance of disagreement can be distinguished in terms of how they answer each of these questions.[[1]](#footnote-2)

(Q1) Does evidence of a peer disagreement give me a defeater for my belief?

(Q2) If yes to (Q1), then how strong is this defeating reason?

(Q3) If yes to (Q1), then under what conditions is this defeating reason itself defeated?

**2.1 The Equal Weight View**

The Equal Weight View gives a ‘yes’ answer to (Q1). It claims that in gaining evidence that a peer disagrees with you, you gain evidence that you have made a mistake. Finding out that someone who is in an equally good epistemic position on the matter disagrees with you about that matter, gives you a reason to think that there is a deficiency in your evidence or your processing of it, or more generally, it gives you a reason to believe that you have made a mistake. While the fact that you disagree with your peer is also a reason for your peer to believe that he has made a mistake (and for you to believe that they have made a mistake), this does not prevent this information about your peer from being a defeater for your belief. One of you has made a mistake, and the explanation that it is *you* is no worse (or better) than that your peer has made the mistake.

With regards to (Q2), the Equal Weight View claims that this defeating reason is quite strong. Since peers are in an *equally good* epistemic position on the matter, the evidence that you have that you have made a mistake is *just as strong* as the evidence you have that you are correct. So, according to the Equal Weight View, the evidence that you have made a mistake and the evidence that your peer has made a mistake is equally strong, and this results in each of the peer opinions being given equal weight. While there are a number of ways that two opinions may be given ‘equal weight’, according to the Equal Weight View, the significance of giving both peer opinions equal weight is that each peer should ‘split the difference’ and adopt the mean doxastic attitude between the two originals. That is, if you believe p, and gain evidence that your peer disbelieves p, then this evidence calls for you to split the difference with your peer and suspend judgment about p. On a more fine-grained account of doxastic attitudes, if you have a 0.8 degree of belief that p, and gain evidence that your peer has a 0.4 degree of belief that p, then this evidence calls for you to adopt a 0.6 degree of belief that p.

What about (Q3)? According to the Equal Weight View, the call to split the difference coming from the discovery of a peer disagreement is only defeated by considerations *independent* from the disagreement itself. Along these lines, David Christensen has given the following principle:

*INDEPENDENCE*: In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another’s expressed belief about P, in order to determine how (or whether) to modify my own belief about P, I should do so in a way that doesn’t rely on the reasoning behind my initial belief that P.[[2]](#footnote-3) (2009, 758)

While INDEPENDENCE is focused on establishing the epistemic position of potential peers, the Equal Weight View extends this reasoning to apply to any potential defeater-defeaters. So, according to the Equal Weight View, while it is possible to possess a defeater that defeats the call to split the difference, such a defeater must come from considerations outside of the disagreement itself. As such, considerations such as that *I* disagree, that *I* had reasoned differently, that *my* intuitions were what they were, and the shared first-order evidence[[3]](#footnote-4) in fact supports my belief, all do not qualify as defeaters to the call to split the difference. On the other hand, considerations such as that my peer is drunk, my peer is biased on this topic, my peer has been taking medication, or that the majority of experts agree with me, all could qualify as defeaters to the call the split the difference (at least if I am justified in believing that they obtain with respect to the peer disagreement at hand).

2.2 Moving Beyond Peer Disagreements

While much of the literature on the epistemic significance of disagreement focuses on disagreement between epistemic peers, a complete account of the epistemic significance of disagreement must move beyond this and say something about the everyday disagreements that we discover.[[4]](#footnote-5) Regarding everyday disagreements, the Equal Weight View claims that you should weigh each opinion on the matter in accordance with what your evidence supports about that subject’s epistemic position on the matter. The greater you are justified in believing one’s epistemic position on the matter, the more you are to weigh her opinion on the matter. Here, however, a caveat is needed. Two agreeing and *independent* opinions about *p* will carry more weight than two agreeing opinions about *p* that are not independent (all else being equal). For instance, evidence of two individuals who both believe incompatibilism but who went to the same school, took the same classes, had the same advisor, etc. will give less support for that metaphysical claim than evidence of two individuals who each believe without such a shared history. The less independent two individual’s opinions are, the more likely they are to be influenced by the same non-epistemic factors. So, the less independent any two opinions are, the greater the likelihood of an alternative, non-epistemic, explanation for their agreed opinion, and so the combined evidential weight of their opinions is less than it would otherwise be.

Regarding many controversial propositions in science, politics, and philosophy, we are not justified in believing of any non-skeptical doxastic attitude[[5]](#footnote-6) that our higher-order evidence best supports adopting it toward the disputed proposition.[[6]](#footnote-7) While it may be plausible that *some* non-skeptical attitude is often better supported by the evidence than the others, we are often in the dark regarding which attitude that is. It is very difficult to gauge the epistemic position of various people, it is difficult to find out what attitude a number of people have toward a given proposition, and it is difficult to assess the independence of various individual’s attitudes on a topic. The precise state of disagreement on such controversial issues is simply too difficult to determine. However, regarding propositions that we know enjoy an overwhelming consensus (i.e. that the Earth is not flat, that 2+2=4, that Obama was President in 2015) these difficulties can be overcome – a non-skeptical ‘winning’ attitude can reasonably be declared. Regarding such claims, the difficulty in determining the precise state of the disagreement does not prevent us from justifiably declaring a non-skeptical ‘winning’ attitude. It is clear that *belief* is the ‘winning’ attitude regarding whether Obama was the President in 2015 regardless of how the small details work out. However, regarding claims that we know to be more deeply contentious (i.e. that free will and determinism are compatible, that God exists, that property taxes should be raised) these difficulties prevent us from having an undefeated non-skeptical attitude toward them – here the race is too close to call. Regarding such deeply contentious claims, such details will decide the ‘winning’ attitude and thus cannot properly be ignored in assessing the ‘winning’ attitude.

There is an analogy here with political elections.[[7]](#footnote-8) While there are difficulties in calling an election winner, sometimes we have enough information to make such a call without having all the relevant information. Such cases parallel our ability to declare ‘winning’ non-skeptical attitudes regarding relatively uncontroversial propositions. In these cases even incomplete information is sufficient to declare victory. Other times, the races are tight and are too close to call given the information at the time. Such cases parallel our inability to declare a ‘winning‘ non-skeptical attitude regarding deeply contentious propositions. While we may know who the contenders are (what attitudes, what propositions), and we may be able to rule out some possibilities (like distant third-party candidates), we aren’t in an epistemic position to declare a ‘winning’ non-skeptical attitude at this time. When the controversy is deep, the details will matter and we simply lack the right kind of access to those details. Given our awareness of the extensive disagreement surrounding a claim, any justification that we had for a non-skeptical attitude toward such a proposition is thus fully defeated.

My task here is not to defend the Equal Weight View, such defenses can be found elsewhere.[[8]](#footnote-9) Rather, my task here is to examine the consequences of the Equal Weight View for the rationality of religious belief. With this understanding of the Equal Weight View in hand, we turn now to this task.

**3.. Disagreement & Religious Belief**

The Equal Weight View has it that any justification we have for a non-skeptical attitude toward a deeply contentious proposition is fully defeated by our awareness of the controversy surrounding it. The Equal Weight View thus has consequences for contentious claims in science, politics, philosophy, and religion, though my focus in what follows will be on religious disagreement. By ‘religious disagreement’ I mean simply disagreement concerning a religious claim. While there are a number of such disagreements, I will focus on the disagreement concerning God’s existence as a paradigm case of religious disagreement.

God’s existence is controversial. There are intelligent, informed, open-minded individuals (those in a good epistemic position on the matter, or at least as good as it gets for creatures like us) that believe that God exists and there are intelligent, informed, open-minded individuals that disbelieve that God exists. Regarding God’s existence, the disagreement is so extensive that the precise state of it cannot be determined; the higher-order evidence does not clearly favor *belief* or *disbelief*. So, we are not justified in believing of either *belief* or *disbelief* that it is best supported by our higher-order evidence. Like other deeply controversial claims it appears that the Equal Weight View has it that our awareness of the extensive disagreement surrounding God’s existence defeats any justification we have for a non-skeptical attitude (belief or disbelief) toward the claim that God exists.[[9]](#footnote-10)

3.1 Religious Disagreement: A Special Case?

Now it might be thought that religious disagreement is special – that religious disagreement is importantly unlike other disagreements in science, politics, and philosophy more generally, and that such a difference renders religious beliefs immune from the defeating effects of discovered disagreement. Some of the more plausible candidate differences are (i) that religious disagreement is in some sense fundamental, (ii) that religious experience is importantly unlike other kinds of evidence, and (iii) that there is an important asymmetry in epistemic position between believers and non-believers.

While each of the alleged distinctions between religious disagreements and other disagreements deserve more attention than I can give here, there is reason to worry that these distinctions are up to the proposed task. In brief, the problem is this: the claim that any of these distinctions is both legitimate and epistemically relevant is itself deeply contentious. Further, the contentiousness of such claims prevents them from being used as reasons to treat religious disagreement as special. To see this, consider the following claim:

C: Religious disagreement is fundamental, and in virtue of that, our awareness of the disagreement does not give us a (undefeated) defeater for our justification for adopting a non-skeptical attitude about God’s existence.

The problem is that C is itself a deeply controversial claim; there is significant disagreement concerning C. One may worry that not many people have considered C. However, we have good reason to believe that were many to do so there would be significant disagreement. That is, we have good reason to think that were more people to consider C, they would be deeply divided over its truth. Mere novelty cannot save one from the defeat of disagreement.[[10]](#footnote-11) So, the Equal Weight View has it that our awareness of the controversy concerning C provides us with a defeater for any justification we have for believing C. Given the Equal Weight View and our awareness of the disagreement surrounding C, we are not justified in believing C. This is not to ‘beg the question’ against C, since C is consistent with such consequences in general. In fact, C is offered as a reason to think that religious beliefs do not suffer a similar fate, granting that other controversial beliefs do. Remember that here we are assuming that the Equal Weight View is correct, and simply examining the claim that religious beliefs are to be treated as a special case. So, the defeating effects of disagreement cannot themselves be defeated by an appeal to C, since any justification for believing C is defeated by the disagreement surrounding it (at least given the truth of the Equal Weight View).

Further, C does not have the resources to save itself from this fate. C is not able to defeat the defeating effects of disagreement concerning C. Even if C is true and enjoys prima facie justification, this is of no help to defending C from the threat of disagreement. After all, C is not *itself* a fundamental proposition (on any plausible account of what counts as a fundamental proposition). C certainly does not play a foundational role in one’s worldview. Disagreements about C are not fundamental disagreements (on any plausible account of what counts as a fundamental disagreement), so given the Equal Weight View, one’s awareness of the disagreements surrounding C provides a defeater for any justification one has for believing C. So, even if C is true and prima facie justified, the disagreements surrounding C prevent us from being able to use C to ward off the disagreement defeater for religious beliefs. If our justification for adopting a non-skeptical attitude toward C is itself defeated and we should suspend judgment about C, then we cannot then use C as a reason to believe that these same skeptical consequences apply to our religious beliefs. Put differently, our awareness of the controversy surrounding C has it that we are justified in suspending judgment about whether C is true (and not justified in adopting any competitor doxastic attitude toward that proposition). However, if we are justified in suspending judgment about C, then appealing to C cannot defeat the defeater for our justification for our religious beliefs. So, C cannot simply save the justification of our religious beliefs.

Further, similar considerations apply to the other plausible candidate distinctions between religious disagreement and more general disagreement. Whether religious experience is a special type of evidence, and whether there is an important asymmetry in epistemic position between believers and non-believers, are themselves deeply controversial claims.[[11]](#footnote-12) Further, those claims do not provide the resources to save themselves from the skeptical consequences of disagreement. We do not have religious experiences about the epistemic weight of religious experience, and there is not an asymmetry of epistemic position between believers and non-believers regarding assessments of epistemic position, even if there is such an asymmetry regarding God’s existence. So even if religious disagreements are importantly different from more ordinary disagreements, the extant controversy surrounding that issue, or better our awareness of it, prevents us from using such claims as reasons to believe that our awareness of religious disagreement does not give us a (undefeated) defeater for any non-skeptical attitude toward those claims. So, given the Equal Weight View, none of our initially plausible candidates give us a good reason to treat religious disagreement differently.

In addition, there is good reason to worry that some other candidate we have yet to examine is up to the task. The reason is that for any such candidate the same recipe of response will apply. Given the nature of such philosophical claims, any new candidate will likely itself be controversial, and thus given the Equal Weight View, those aware of such an impending controversy will not be justified in believing the relevant claim absent some reason to treat it as special, and it is implausible that the candidate claim will also have the resources to save itself from the defeating effects of disagreement. So, given that our three plausible candidate claims fail to give us a reason to treat religious disagreement differently, and there is good reason to be pessimistic about the existence of some other candidate claim being successful, we should think that the Equal Weight View applies to religious disagreements in the same way that it applies to disagreements more generally.

3.2 An Early Worry

Now it might be thought that the above argument is too quick. The above argument shows that given the Equal Weight View, aware individuals are not justified in believing the candidate claims, but it might be thought that there mere *truth* of any of these claims is sufficient to treat religious disagreement as special. After all, we needn’t be justified in believing a number of epistemic principles in order for their truth to have implications for the status of our beliefs.

While there is some pull to this worry, it ultimately fails. For even if the candidate claims are true, the problem noted above wasn’t simply that aware individuals are not justified in believing those claims (given the Equal Weight View), but that aware individuals are justified in suspending judgment about the truth of those candidate claims. This is an important difference. Let’s consider why in more detail by considering an analogy. Suppose that Smith now believes that he is sitting at a computer on the basis of his perceptual faculties. Smith then hears about the skeptical brain-in-vat scenario and learns that it is possible that he is being deceived right now. Suppose further that it is an epistemic truth that the mere possibility that one is being deceived is *not* a defeater for one’s justification for their perceptual beliefs. So, what Smith has learned is not in fact a defeater for his perceptual belief. However, suppose that Smith hears from two (and only two) equally reliable epistemologists, known by Smith to be such. One epistemologist tells Smith that the mere possibility of deception is not a defeater, but the other epistemologist tells Smith that even such mere possibilities are defeaters. Perhaps other details are needed, but fill them in as necessary to make it the case that Smith is justified in suspending judgment about whether mere possibilities are defeaters (even though they in fact are not). In such a situation where Smith is justified in suspending judgment about whether he has a defeater for his perceptual beliefs he is also justified in suspending judgment about whether there is a computer in front of him. Since Smith is justified in suspending about whether his computer belief is defeated, Smith is not justified in either believing or disbelieving the target proposition about there being a computer in front of me (only suspension is justified for him). Such a justified suspension of judgment effectively undermines the justification Smith’s perceptual evidence gives to his perceptual belief. So, a justified suspension of judgment about whether a belief is defeated amounts to a full defeater for that belief (whether or not the candidate defeater is true). Applied to the case of religious disagreement, if we are justified in suspending judgment about whether our religious beliefs are defeated (in virtue of being justified in suspending judgment about whether the candidate claims are true), then we are not justified in believing our religious beliefs (and this is true whether or not the candidate claims are true).[[12]](#footnote-13)

3.3 A Second Worry

Another worry at this point may be that the same considerations that doomed C apply equally well to the Equal Weight View. After all, like C, the Equal Weight View is also a deeply contentious view. So, according to the Equal Weight View, our awareness of this controversy constitutes a defeater for any justification we have for believing the Equal Weight View. For these reasons, many have charged that the Equal Weight View is self-defeating.[[13]](#footnote-14) While the principle aim of this paper is not to evaluate the Equal Weight View, one might think that the above concern must be addressed given that similar reasoning is being given to dismiss the effectiveness of C.

The first thing to note is that the disagreement defeater does apply to both the Equal Weight View and C. Both the Equal Weight View and C are significantly controversial, so given the truth of the Equal Weight View, those aware of this fact have acquired a full defeater for their justification for these propositions. So, the philosophically aware individual is not on balance justified in believing either the Equal Weight View or C.

The second thing to note is that this fact does not show that the Equal Weight View or C is false. Just as above we needed to consider whether C was true independently of whether we are justified in believing it, similarly, the fact that one is not on balance justified in believing the Equal Weight View does not show that the Equal Weight View is false. So, since we are supposing that the Equal Weight View is true, and examining what follows, such self-defeating concerns do no inhibit this project. Even if we are not on balance justified in believing the Equal Weight View, we can still examine what consequences such a view would have.

3.4 A Third Worry

At this point, one may worry that the project of this paper is a mere philosophical exercise with no real import. After all, if we are not on balance justified in believing the Equal Weight View, can’t we simply ignore it and all of it’s alleged consequences? In short, no we cannot. As we have seen above, if we are justified in suspending judgment as to whether we have a full defeater for the justification of one of our beliefs, then we thereby have a full defeater for the justification for that belief. Recall the case of Smith and the computer. So, if the end result of the self-defeating concern for the Equal Weight View is that we are on balance justified in suspending judgment about its truth, the Equal Weight View would nevertheless retain, rather than lose, its defeating consequences. So, like with C, a justified suspension of judgment regarding the Equal Weight View itself will only have us remain in its defeating grasp. This discussion reveals what is necessary to escape from the defeating effects of the Equal Weight View – one must be on balance justified in believing that the Equal Weight View is false or one must be on balance justified in believing that we have a defeater-defeater to neutralize the effects of the Equal Weight View. However, given the supposed truth of the Equal Weight View both such routes of escape are blocked since they require appealing to claims that are themselves recognized by us to be suitably controversial, and thus according to the Equal Weight View we are not on balance justified in believing them. As such, we are left with the defeating effects of the Equal Weight View. We turn now to getting clear on what those effects are and what to make of them.

**4. Some Consequences**

Having clarified the Equal Weight View and its application to religious beliefs, my primary task here is to identify and evaluate the consequences of the view for religious belief. This is an important task since too often the Equal Weight View has been thought to have consequences for religious belief that it simply does not have. One thing we care about is what we should believe. We particularly care about this question with regard to matters that are of deep importance to us – like religion. It has been claimed that the Equal Weight View has it that we should not have religious beliefs; that according to such views religious beliefs are irrational.

Thus, Richard Feldman in “Reasonable Religious Disagreements” claims,

[The Equal Weight View] is also a skeptical view, in the limited sense that it denies the existence of reasonable beliefs in a significant range of cases. This may seem to be a distressing conclusion. (213)

In “Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement” Feldman reinforces this idea:

[O]n many [issues in philosophy, religion, science, and public policy] about which you have a belief, informed and intelligent people disagree with you. The question I will raise concerns the reasonableness of maintaining your point of view in the light of such disagreements. My conclusion will be that, more often than we might have thought, suspension of judgment is the epistemically proper attitude. It follows that in such cases we lack reasonable belief and so, at least on standard conceptions, knowledge. This is a kind of contingent real-world skepticism that has not received the attention it deserves. (217)

David Christensen in “Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy” echoes this sentiment:

The most obvious motivation for [opposing] views on disagreement flows from the degree of skepticism that [the Equal Weight View] would seem to entail. There must be something wrong, the thought goes, with a view that would counsel such widespread withholding of belief. If you have an opinion on, for example, compatibilism about free will, scientific realism, or contextualism about knowledge, you must be aware that there are very intelligent and well-informed people on the other side. Yet many are quite averse to thinking that they should be agnostic about all such matters. The aversion may be even stronger when we focus on our opinions about politics, economics, or religion.(757-758)

4.1 Broad Notions of Rationality

To evaluate such a charge we must distinguish various senses in which a belief may or may not be rational. Here is one:

 **R1**: S’s belief B is rational iff B is not ridiculous.

The sense of rationality in R1 is familiar in everyday speech. To say that a belief is rational in this sense is to say that a generally reasonable and informed individual could have such a belief; that the belief in question isn’t outside the realm of plausibility. For instance, when thinking about who will win an upcoming sporting event, many competitor claims will be seen as rational in this sense. When thinking about next year’s Super Bowl it is rational (in this sense) to think that the Patriots will win, and it is rational (in this sense) to think that the Seahawks will win. In this sense of rationality, it is clear that reasonable people can disagree. On many questions there are numerous competitor answers that all enjoy some plausibility. Further, this sense of rationality is not vacuous since it still leaves room for some beliefs to be irrational. For instance, sticking with the Super Bowl example, it is nevertheless irrational (even in this sense) to believe that both the Patriots and Seahawks will win, or even irrational (even in this sense) to believe that the Jaguars will have an undefeated season leading up to a Super Bowl win.

It should also be clear that religious belief can be rational in this sense. In fact, the particular kind of controversy that surrounds God’s existence *entails* that religious belief is rational in this sense. There is significant controversy surrounding God’s existence. The extensive controversy requires that there are numerous individuals who are intelligent, open-minded, and informed on either side of the issue. So, regarding the claim that God exists, both *belief* and *disbelief* are real contenders; each of these doxastic attitudes has a significant number of intelligent, informed, open-minded individuals who have adopted it toward the claim that God exists, and this enough to satisfy R1 – belief (and disbelief) isn’t a ridiculous response to the evidence.

However, other senses of rationality go well beyond R1. Consider the following:

 **R2**: S’s belief that p is rational iff p is what S should believe.

R2 is much stronger than R1 in that many non-ridiculous beliefs are still not ones that we should believe. Even if it is not ridiculous to believe that the Patriots will win next year’s Super Bowl, it does not seem that this is a proposition that we *should* believe. There is nothing wrong with people who fail to have this belief (even once they have considered the proposition). If anything, there is something wrong with people who *do* have this belief. Similarly, believing that there is an even number of geese in Canada, while not ridiculous, is not a belief that you *should* have. So, it takes more to satisfy R2 than it does to satisfy R1.

What does the Equal Weight View tell us about religious beliefs with respect to this sense of rationality? Does the Equal Weight View claim that we should not have religious beliefs? No. The Equal Weight View simply does not concern what we *all-things-considered* should believe. The Equal Weight View simply does not address any moral, prudential, or even religious reasons that there may be to believe anything, nor does it tell us how, if at all, reasons of all these varieties are to be weighed and sorted out to give a final verdict about what one all-things-considered should believe. The Equal Weight View is silent on all these matters. So the inference from *the Equal Weight View is true and applies to religious beliefs* to *we should not have religious beliefs* is too hasty.

The Equal Weight View is concerned with but one kind of reason that we may have for religious belief – *epistemic reaso*ns – reason that we have to believe something from the perspective dedicated to believing truths and not believing falsehoods. This matters since we can have reasons to believe something that are not epistemic reasons. To make this clear, consider Pascal’s Wager.[[14]](#footnote-15) Pascal has famously argued that belief that God exists is rational since believing that God exists is a good bet to make. Betting (with belief) on God’s existence has the potential for an infinite payoff with only negligible negative consequences in the event that you are mistaken. In contrast, not making that bet leaves little room for reward and has the potential for vast negative consequences. While an evaluation of Pascal’s argument is outside the scope of this paper, it should be clear that the Equal Weight View does not provide an indictment of this argument – the Equal Weight View does not show that we lack such reasons for believing that God exists. Pascal’s argument for believing that God exists concerns a kind of reasons for belief that the Equal Weight View simply does not address – pragmatic reasons (reasons concerning what is good and beneficial).

Now there is significant disagreement over the merits of Pascal’s Wager, and thus the Equal Weight View plausibly has it that we are not epistemically justified in believing that Pascal’s Wager is a good argument. Nevertheless, the existence of pragmatic reasons (such as the reasons Pascal maintains there are for believing that God exists) does not depend upon our being epistemically justified in their existence – pragmatic reasons are what we might call ‘objective reasons’. They exist, when they do, independent of our awareness of them and they are not prone to defeat like epistemic reasons. So, if Pascal’s reasoning is correct (whether we are epistemically justified in believing it is correct or not), there would be good reason to believe that God exists – reasons untouched by the epistemic significance of disagreement. Whether believing is a good bet is independent of whether we are justified in believing it is a good bet. So, the skeptical consequences of the Equal Weight View fail to defeat or even address any such pragmatic reasons to believe that God exists.

4.3 Purely Epistemic Notions of Rationality

These considerations lead us to a third conception of rationality:

**R3**: S’s belief that p is rational iff from the epistemic perspective, p is what S should believe.

As we have seen, the Equal Weight View does not concern just *any* type of reason to believe a proposition. The relevant sorts of reasons are *epistemic reasons* – reasons to believe that the proposition is true (and not merely beneficial to believe). Put differently, at issue are the reasons one has from the epistemic perspective. The epistemic perspective is the perspective one occupies with the twin goals of believing truths and not believing falsehoods.[[15]](#footnote-16),[[16]](#footnote-17) These twin goals each keep the other in check, preventing the unhealthy epistemic lives of both the overly cautious believer and the indiscriminate believer. The Equal Weight View concerns only epistemic reasons, and as we have seen, these are but one kind of reasons for belief.

Nevertheless, lacking sufficient *epistemic* reasons for religious belief may still seem like a significant negative consequence. After all, we care a lot about epistemic reasons. They are nice things to have, and the Equal Weight View may seem to imply that our epistemic reasons are not good enough to support a non-skeptical attitude toward religious propositions. However, there is good reason to believe that we still have not honed in on the particular kind of reasons targeted by the Equal Weight View.

The idea that we should abandon controversial beliefs is challenged by psychological evidence about group inquiry.[[17]](#footnote-18) In brief, there is evidence that groups with members who genuinely disagree about a proposition do better with respect to determining whether that proposition is true. This evidence gives us a reason to *not* abandon our beliefs in the face of disagreement, and it is a reason coming from the epistemic perspective. In contrast to Pascal-type reasons, the reasons here are entirely about getting true beliefs and avoiding false ones. The psychological data indicates that both:

1. Groups are better at discovering the truth when there is dissent and debate within the group.
2. Groups are better at discovering the truth when dissenting parties genuinely hold their dissenting beliefs in the debate.

The evidence suggests that groups with genuine dissent do better at avoiding both belief bias and confirmation bias.[[18]](#footnote-19) Genuine diversity of opinion amongst members of a group has been found to help in both uncovering a more balanced body of evidence as well as in properly evaluating that body of evidence.[[19]](#footnote-20) There being individuals who genuinely believe these competing views provides better checks and balances and improves our epistemic situation on the matter. That is, it is plausible that there are even reasons pertaining to *epistemic* goods to maintain a belief in the face of controversy.[[20]](#footnote-21)

For instance, there is good *epistemic* reason for physicists to believe their competing views of the quantum world. In disparate views having genuine defenders the resulting inquiry is mostly likely to lead us to the truth of the matter. When competitor views each have genuine defenders, we gain a better body of evidence and are more likely to evaluate that body of evidence correctly (we are less prone to blindspots and biases). These epistemic payoffs are not just for the group as a whole, but also for the individual members of the group. The disagreement need not last forever. In fact, in the studies the disagreements within groups vanished fairly quickly. There are difficult questions concerning when the benefits of continued disagreement wear off, and I won’t address those here. The purpose here is simply to show that there is another kind of epistemic reason out there, one that is often ignored.[[21]](#footnote-22),[[22]](#footnote-23)

While such reasons are properly considered epistemic, since they are reasons that one has simply from occupying the epistemic perspective, they are not kind of epistemic reasons addressed by the Equal Weight View. The reasons to maintain one’s beliefs in the face of disagreement are concerned with fulfilling your epistemic goals (believing truths and not believing falsehoods) *in the long run* – we might call them *diachronic epistemic reasons*. They are distinct from reasons concerned with fulfilling your epistemic goals (believing truths and not believing falsehoods) *right now* – what we might call *synchronic epistemic reasons*. Diachronic epistemic reasons do not provide the kind of epistemic justification required for knowledge (at least not knowledge right now), whereas synchronic reasons do. While they differ in this respect, we have seen reason to view both types of reasons as epistemic reasons.

With this distinction in hand, we can see that the Equal Weight View concerns only the synchronic epistemic reasons that you may have for your religious beliefs. The Equal Weight View does not address your long term epistemic goals and how the doxastic attitudes you have now may affect your ability to fulfill those goals. Since the Equal Weight View concerns only your synchronic epistemic reasons, and those reasons do not exhaust your epistemic reasons, such views do not make pronouncements about what you should and should not believe from the epistemic perspective as a whole. Rather, the Equal Weight View is concerned with one type of epistemic reasons that you may have for your beliefs, so the Equal Weight View simply fails to make pronouncements about what you should believe from the epistemic perspective. This is not an argument that there are good diachronic epistemic reasons for religious belief (nor is it a denial), but this shows that there are more epistemic reasons out there then what the Equal Weight View considers.[[23]](#footnote-24)

So, the sense in which the Equal Weight View has it that religious belief is irrational is only this fourth sense of rationality:

**R4**: S’s belief that p is rational iff from the synchronic epistemic perspective, p is what S should believe.

The Equal Weight View concerns only epistemic reasons for belief, and of those, only one particular type – synchronic epistemic reasons. Regarding these reasons, the Equal Weight View has it that they are fully defeated by our awareness of a significant controversy over the relevant proposition.

**5. Evaluating the Epistemic Consequences**

So, at last we have seen the epistemic consequences of the Equal Weight View for religious beliefs. Given awareness of the extensive disagreement concerning religious propositions, the Equal Weight View has it that we lack (undefeated) synchronic epistemic reasons that support a non-skeptical attitude toward those propositions. As such, the Equal Weight View has the consequence that such individuals currently lack knowledge of religious propositions as well. However, we have seen that this does not entail that religious belief is ridiculous, that we (all-things-considered) should not have such beliefs, or even that we should not believe such things from the epistemic perspective (with the sole goals of believing truths and not believing falsehoods). Given all of this, the epistemic consequences of the Equal Weight View for religious belief are much more minimal than they have been thought to be.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Having finally narrowed in on the epistemic consequences (or lack thereof) of the Equal Weight View for religious belief, we turn now to evaluating how significant or worrisome these consequences are. The first thing to note is that these epistemic consequences are *contingent*, they are not inevitable. Any state of controversy is a contingent matter, and while it may be reasonable to believe that religious controversies will stick around for the foreseeable future, the Equal Weight View does not mandate that they do. The kind of defeater for religious beliefs that comes by way of disagreement is not inevitable. The second thing to note is that these epistemic consequences are *contained*, they do not affect everyone. The disagreement defeater only comes by way of our awareness of the extensive controversy surrounding religious propositions. The mere existence of religious disagreement has no defeating effects. So, those who are unaware of the controversy surrounding their religious beliefs will not be susceptible to the disagreement defeater.

In addition, there is *no special problem* here for religious beliefs.[[25]](#footnote-26) The Equal Weight View does not single out religious beliefs in particular. While there is a great deal of controversy about religious beliefs, religious beliefs are by no means the only type of beliefs that are significantly controversial. The consequences of the Equal Weight View apply equally to controversial scientific claims, controversial political claims, and controversial philosophical claims in general. So, in this way, the Equal Weight View does not have it that religious beliefs are any worse off, rationally speaking, than one’s favored controversial scientific, political, or general philosophical beliefs. In fact, it is plausible that the Equal Weight View has it that religious beliefs are *much better off*, in terms of our synchronic epistemic reasons, than many controversial claims in science, politics, or philosophy in general. For instance, the higher-order evidence for theism appears to be much greater than the higher-order evidence for the truth of string theory, that a flat tax should be implemented, or for an agent-causation view of free will. While, like theism, none of these views have enough higher-order evidence in their favor to support a judgment that ‘belief’ would win the relevant epistemic election, the higher-order evidence in favor of theism appears to be much more impressive than the higher-order evidence in favor of these other views.[[26]](#footnote-27) Returning to the political analogy, we can compare the results of the relevant epistemic elections. While ‘belief’ fails to win in the epistemic election regarding each of the following:

1. God exists.
2. String theory is correct.
3. A flat tax should be implemented.
4. An agent-causation account of free will is correct.

it is quite plausible that ‘belief’ does better in the epistemic election regarding A than it does in the epistemic elections regarding B-D. Theism is rather impressive in terms of the number and quality of its defenders. While there are a number of complications that must be considered in determining the exact state of the relevant controversies[[27]](#footnote-28), theism appears to perform relatively well amongst the significantly controversial claims in science, politics, and philosophy in general. Given that, the Equal Weight View would have it that we have better synchronic epistemic reason to endorse A than we do to endorse B-D. While given the Equal Weight View, these reasons fail to make us on balance synchronically epistemically justified in believing A (and thus fail to allow us to know A), belief that God exists would have more synchronic epistemic reasons going for it than either of B-D, even if we still lack on balance positive synchronic epistemic reasons to so believe. So, not only is there no special problem here for religious belief, given the Equal Weight View, religious belief actually appears to fare better than many other controversial propositions in science, politics, and in philosophy in general. Those who believe B, C, or D do so on the basis of less synchronic epistemic reasons than those who believe A. This grounds an important comparative claim, that religious believers are no less rational (in the given sense) than believers of B, C, or D. In fact, it looks like religious believers actually have more synchronic epistemic reasons for their belief (even if those reasons do not suffice to make them on balance synchronically epistemically justified to believe A). Given all of this, the epistemic consequences of the Equal Weight View for religious beliefs are much less severe than they have been made out to be, and they may not even seem to be all that bad.

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1. This follows Matheson (2015a) and (2015d) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Principles similar to Independence can be found in Elga (2007) and at least implicitly in Frances (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. First-order evidence for p is evidence that directly pertains to p. It is to be contrasted with higher-order evidence regarding p which is evidence directly pertaining to the first-order evidence for p. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For more on such a move, see Matheson (2015b), Matheson (2014), Frances (2010), and King (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. By ‘any non-skeptical doxastic attitude’ I mean any doxastic attitude other than withholding judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. This is argued at length in Carey and Matheson (2013) and Matheson (2015a).. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See Carey and Matheson (2013) and Matheson (2015) for more on this analogy. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Elga (2007), Christensen (2007), Feldman (2006), and Matheson (2015a). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Some may maintain the epistemic election regarding God’s existence is not so close. After all, billions of people alive today believe that God exists, and historically, theism has been quite dominant at least in the west. If someone is justified in believing that *belief*, say, is the winning attitude, then the Equal Weight View will not have any skeptical consequences for that person. However, others see atheism as trending, with theism on the decline, and point to the large proportion of academics who are atheists. They also stress the lack of independence of may of those who have come to theistic conclusions. I take it that the outcome of such an epistemic election is itself significantly controversial. So, given the Equal Weight View, those aware of the controversy are not justified in believing that *belief* wins the epistemic election. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. For instance, suppose that I construct a novel argument for incompatibilism. While in my office, I know of no one who rejects this argument. That said, I know how these things typically go, so I know that were people to think about the argument, many will disagree. Such evidence of ‘nearby’ disagreement has a defeating effect. For more on this point, see Carey and Matheson (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Recall that even if many people have not actually considered these claims, it is reasonable to believe that were they to do so, we would find their opinions greatly divided on the matter. Such ‘nearby’ disagreement can take the place of actual disagreement if needed. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. One might wonder how many people this skeptical argument applies to. After all, since it is not the truth of the relevant claim, the effect of the defeater will not be universal. The question of how many people are aware of the relevant controversies is an empirical question, and I won’t suggest an answer here. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Elga (2011), O’Connor (1999), Plantinga (1999), Taliaferro  (2009), and Weatherson (2014). For responses, see Bogardus (2009), Christensen (2009), Elga (2011), Frances (2010), Graves (2013), Kornblith (2013), Littlejohn (2013), and Matheson (2015a and 2015c).   [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See Pascal (1670) for a more detailed explanation and defense of Pascal’s Wager. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. The representativeness of this view of the epistemological perspective can be seen in David (2001). David provides an extensive list of quotations to this end including epistemologists such as Alston, BonJour, Chisholm, Descartes, Foley, Goldman, Lehrer, Moser, Plantinga, and Sosa. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. This is not to say that truth is the *only* thing of value from the epistemic perspective, only that everything that has value from the epistemic perspective has it due to its relation to truth. For a nice discussion of this and related issues, see Pritchard (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See Moshman and Geil (1998), Sunstein (2002), Mercier (2012), Dawson et al. (2002), and Schulz-Hardt et al. (2002). See Dunn (forthcoming) for bringing these considerations to bear on the disagreement debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See Moshman and Geil (1998), and Sunstein (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. See Mercier (2012), and Dawson et al. (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. For more on this argument see Matheson (2015b). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. The relationship between epistemic reasons possessed by a group and epistemic reasons possessed by an individual is interesting, deserving of more attention, and bound to be contentious. The core of my argument here is that the Equal Weight View doesn’t say anything about whether an individual has any such epistemic reasons. I am not arguing that we have such reasons for religious belief, just that the Equal Weight View does not deny that we do. Additional premises may be added to the Equal Weight View to get that more skeptical conclusion, but my focus here is simply on what consequences the Equal Weight View itself has for the rationality of religious belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. An additional kind of epistemic reasons to believe that God exists that parallel the reasons offered Pascal. Believing that God exists could be a great means to arriving at a number of true beliefs in the future (and avoiding false ones), true beliefs that would perhaps be unavailable to those without such a belief. Such reasons are epistemic reasons, since they are reasons that one has from the epistemic perspective – they are reasons that one has in virtue of having the twin goals of believing truths and not believing falsehoods. That said, such reasons are importantly different from other kinds of epistemic reasons that we have – the kind of epistemic reasons epistemologists have typically been concerned with. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. It might be thought that I have mischaracterized the epistemic perspective, even if I have done so in good company. For instance, it might be thought that the epistemic perspective ought to be characterized in terms of ascertaining knowledge. An evaluation of this alternative conception of the epistemic perspective goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be noted that even on such a conception the distinction between one’s synchronic and diachronic epistemic goals applies. For the reasons considered above, some beliefs do better at getting at knowledge now, and other beliefs can do better at getting at knowledge in the long run. So, even on such a conception of the epistemic perspective, it makes sense to distinguish these two epistemic projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Note that this is a comparative claim. Many will likely find these consequences of the Equal Weight View to still be quite substantial. My goal is merely to show that the consequences of the Equal Weight View are much less strong than typically thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. For more on this point, see van Inwagen (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. For a related discussion, see Kelly (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. For more on this point, see Carey and Matheson (2013) and Matheson (2015a).. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)