

Evidence is Required for Religious Beliefs

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I. Religious Evidentialism

Few would deny that religious belief *can* be held without evidence. What concerns us here is whether a religious belief held in the absence of evidence can be *rational*. I will approach this question from an intellectual, rather than a practical, point of view. That is, I will assess religious belief from a mindset concerned solely with believing truth and disbelieving falsehood—truth being a kind of correspondence or fit between the way things are represented and the way things actually are. The practical advantages or disadvantages of religious belief are, for our purposes, irrelevant. Beliefs that are judged positively from this truth-oriented mindset are known as “epistemically rational,” or just “rational” for short.

There is no doubt that some religious beliefs are irrational. There are people today who claim to believe in the gods of ancient Greece—Zeus, Athena, and the like. If we assume they are sincere, then such belief is almost certainly irrational. But *why* is it irrational? The traditional explanation (and the one most philosophers throughout history have accepted) is that the available evidence does not support the existence of the Greek pantheon. In contrast, other religious beliefs appear to be rational. The beliefs of mature and sophisticated Christians constitute as good an example as any. If we assume these beliefs are rational, then, the traditional story goes, that is because those beliefs are likely to be true given all of the evidence available to those believers.

Generalizing from these cases, the following picture arises: the doxastic stance one takes towards a religious doctrine should reflect the level of evidential support one has for that doctrine. Believe it only if your evidence supports its truth. Disbelieve it only if your evidence supports its falsity. Otherwise withhold assent.¹ And if you do believe or disbelieve the doctrine, you should do so *because* that attitude best reflects your level of evidential support for it. In sum, your stance towards the doctrine should both match and be based on your evidence concerning it. I will argue that this traditional picture is the right one: that a religious belief (like any other belief) is rational only if it is supported by sufficient evidence. I will call this position “religious evidentialism.”

II. Evidence for Religious Evidentialism

Religious evidentialism is a natural and intuitive position. To appreciate its appeal, we need to start with the nature of evidence. I will discuss the nature of evidence in more detail later, but in its broadest sense, evidence is just something that indicates the truth of a proposition. Usually,

¹ This picture is simplified for convenience. If we want to get more precise, we need to acknowledge that the level of epistemic support one has for a proposition and the level of confidence one places in a proposition both come in degrees. I have more support for thinking that circles are round than I do for thinking that dinosaurs went extinct from an asteroid impact. I also place a higher degree of confidence in the former than I do in the latter, though I rationally believe both. What I really maintain, then, is that the degree of confidence one places in a proposition should match the level of epistemic support one has for the proposition. The more support you have, the more rationally confident you can be in its truth.

when we ask whether a position is supported by the evidence, we are not asking whether one has *any* indication of that position's truth but whether, overall, there are stronger indications of its truth than its falsity. If so, then one's evidence *as a whole* indicates the truth of that position. I have already said that an epistemically rational belief is one that is assessed positively from an intellectual point of view—a point of view concerned only with believing what is true and disbelieving what is false. Putting all of this together, religious evidentialism simply maintains that, from an intellectual point of view, it really only makes sense to believe something when we have some overall indication of its truth. This is commonsensical. Think of the alternative. Imagine that all signs point to a proposition's falsity or, instead, that there are no indications of its truth at all. If your goal is to believe only what is true, how could it make sense to believe in such a situation? It doesn't. This is why believing in absence of evidence is irrational.

An example should drive the point home. Say you go to the races where two horses are about to square off: Proposition and Negation. You must decide whether to bet on Proposition, bet on Negation, or to simply keep your money and walk away. You have a family to feed at home, so you do not want to bet recklessly; neither do you want to walk away from easy money if it's there to be had. You get no thrill from gambling. If you bet, you're in it for the money and nothing else. How should you bet? Well, here's how you *shouldn't* bet. Say you learn that Negation is a champion thoroughbred that just won the Triple Crown whereas Proposition is an old plow horse with a broken leg. In this case, your evidence indicates that Proposition will lose. Accordingly, betting on Proposition is irrational. Similarly, say you learn that Negation and Proposition are evenly matched or, alternatively, say you have no information about Negation or Proposition at all other than that they are racing each other. In this case, your evidence is neutral with respect to who will win. You really don't have any on-balance indication one way or the other. If you are as wary of losing money as you are eager to gain it, and you don't want to gamble for gambling's sake, the only sensible thing to do in this situation is to walk away. Betting really only makes sense if you have some overall indication of who is going to win. In the same way, when operating from a purely intellectual point of view, taking a stance on the truth of a proposition only makes sense when you have some on-balance indication of its truth or falsity.

This line of reasoning is no less apparent when it comes to religious belief. Religious beliefs are just that, beliefs, and they can be assessed from an intellectual point of view like any other belief. Some religious adherents maintain that to evaluate religious beliefs in this way is to miss the point—that religion exists to provide meaning and inspiration, not truth—but even these adherents must admit that we *can* evaluate the epistemic rationality of religious beliefs, even if doing so mistakes their purpose (a position, for the record, that I do not endorse). And when we enter into the intellectual frame of mind, a belief is only rational to the degree that there is on-balance indication that the content of the belief is true.

The idea that we can rationally believe something without having evidence in its favor jars not only with our intuitions but with the ordinary practices of religious believers. For example, some atheists have argued that the scientific data behind the theory of evolution makes Christian belief irrational. There are three major responses among Christian believers. There are those who argue that evolution does not conflict with Christianity, but only with a specific version of creationism—one that is not essential to or even expected on Christianity. There are those who

admit that evolution does conflict with Christianity, but insist that the best scientific data does not support the theory of evolution. There are also some who admit that the scientific data runs contrary to Christianity, but maintain that there is even *more* reason to believe in the truth of Christianity—that the testimony of God in Scripture and its confirmation in lived experience is to be trusted over scientific theorizing. Personally, I think the first strategy is the right one; nevertheless, the other two strategies at least make sense in that they attempt to show that the evidence, on balance, does not tell against Christian belief. What you don't see is people admitting that a fair evaluation of the evidence disproves Christianity and yet insisting that it is still somehow epistemically rational to believe it.

What about a situation in which the evidence is completely neutral, neither supporting one's religious belief nor counting against it? Some people claim that you are free to choose what to believe (to the extent that choosing what to believe is possible). The people who say this, however, aren't usually interested in evaluating religious belief from a purely intellectual point of view. They are concerned with the practical advantages made possible by religious belief, insisting that if we do not "take the leap" or "make the wager" we may miss out on some of these advantages. Whatever the merits of their reasoning, few of these individuals would maintain it is *epistemically* rational to believe when the evidence is neutral. For as we saw above, believing something only makes sense from a purely truth-oriented mindset when there is some on-balance indication that the proposition is true.

To sum up, religious evidentialism is the most natural and intuitive way of approaching the rationality of religious belief. In my judgment, this is sufficient evidence is in its favor to make it the default-position. By this I mean that one ought to accept religious evidentialism unless other, stronger reasons arise which oppose it. (I am assuming, of course, that one's stance on religious evidentialism should be determined by whether there is greater evidence for or against it. This is, I submit, the common sense way to approach any issue, including religious ones.)

III. An Objection to Religious Evidentialism

Among Christians, at least, a common reason people resist religious evidentialism is that there are examples of religious belief—examples that are taken to be representative of a broad swath of religious believers—which appear to be rational and yet do not seem to be supported by any evidence. These examples are part of a more general concern that religious evidentialism makes rational belief too difficult for ordinary folk. Underlying this objection is the conviction that religious belief (of a certain sort) is generally-speaking rational. It is then asserted that, contrary to fact, religious evidentialism entails that such beliefs are not typically rational, since ordinary people do not usually have sufficient evidence in support of their beliefs. The aforementioned examples are supposed to be paradigmatic instances of this very situation.

Let's get some of these examples on the table. The following cases are commonly cited as instance of religious belief that are both rational and held in the absence of any evidence:

Cosmic Wonder. Al is camping near a lake in rural Michigan. It's a new moon and the firmament is brimming with stars. As Al sits on the bank, staring up at the night sky, he is filled with an overwhelming sense of the sheer enormity and grandeur of the cosmos laid out before him. *Something must have caused all of this*, he finds himself thinking. In this

moment, it seems clear in an especially vivid and powerful way that there is a being—call him “God” if you like—that created this orderly world set before him. Al is compelled by this experience to believe that there is a God. (We can add, if you like, that God does exist and has specifically designed Al to form a belief in him in circumstances just like these.)

Christian Faith. Rich is in a local pub, sipping a pint and reading the Gospel of John. Rich had recently fallen in with a group of Christians who seem like fine and intelligent people. For the first time, Rich was earnestly considering the claims of Christianity. The more he read, the more unsettled Rich felt by the person of Jesus. He had an aura about him which attracted Rich, but Rich was repeatedly startled by Jesus’s claims to be something more than merely human. At first, Rich thought his resistance was intellectual—*It’s not even clear what Jesus is claiming to be, and why should I trust him anyway?*—but the more he read, the more half-hearted these protests became. Upon reaching St. Thomas’s climactic proclamation in John 20, “My Lord and my God!” Rich broke down in tears. He was utterly convinced that Jesus is God. The truth of this proposition seemed nearly as plain to him as the existence of the book which he held in his hands. (We can add, if you like, that Jesus is in fact God and sent his Spirit to plant faith in Rich, allowing him to accept the testimony of scripture in this moment.)

It is not immediately clear whether such beliefs are rational (that seems to depend on what other evidence is available to Al and Rich), but I am happy to grant that they are. The only question then becomes whether such beliefs are held in the absence of evidence. It certainly seems like Al and Rich don’t have any evidence for their beliefs, at least on some conceptions of evidence. And therein lies the key. These are not genuine examples of rational beliefs without *any* evidence. They are rational beliefs without a *certain kind* of evidence. Al and Rich may lack sophisticated arguments, they may lack the kind of evidence that a scientist searches for or that is admissible in a courtroom, but that does not entail that Al and Rich lack *any* kind of evidence. Indeed, I will maintain that Al and Rich do have evidence—the same sort of evidence on which all beliefs are ultimately based. Thus, the fact that these beliefs are rational (assuming they are) does not conflict with religious evidentialism.

The same response can be given to the more general concern. Religious evidentialism might make rational religious belief virtually unattainable *if* it required believers to wield sophisticated arguments or scientific data in support of their beliefs. But properly understood, religious evidentialism requires no such thing. There is a more basic kind of evidence that is widely available and capable of supporting the convictions of ordinary believers.

My response will begin with some general observations about the ultimate nature of evidence. After this more general discussion, I’ll apply these conclusions to the cases of Cosmic Wonder and Christian Faith, as well as to the situations of ordinary religious believers. I’ll end by drawing out some final implications for religious evidentialism.

IV. Different Kinds of Evidence

If you ask people on the street for paradigmatic examples of rational inquiry, they will probably point to mathematics or the natural sciences—biology, chemistry, and, especially, physics. A few

might mention medicine or even law. Notice that in each of these specialized disciplines, what is thought of and accepted as evidence differs. In a court room, evidence comes in the form of depositions, bullet casings, and crime scene photos. A doctor will rely on lab work, MRI scans, and expert opinions. Physicists draw conclusions from observations of cosmic background radiation, the data from particle colliders, and (interestingly) the elegance of a theory's mathematics. Mathematicians, on the other hand, use rigorous proofs, peer-review, and *a priori* reasoning. The various conceptions of evidence at play here are not entirely at odds with one another, still there is noticeable variation.

There is an even bigger difference when we compare evidence in these specialized disciplines to the sort of evidence we rely on in ordinary life. Most of our judgments in ordinary life are quite simple, such as *That's solid* or *He's upset*. Our evidence for these simple judgments is very different from the sort utilized in legal or scientific paradigms. There are no objects that can be stored in an evidence-locker, no expert reports, no data that can be charted on a graph. Typically, the belief *That's solid* is based on nothing more than a certain sort of perceptual experience which presents the world as containing some solid object. Such ordinary cases show us that an experience or mental state of the right sort can constitute one's evidence. Given that the simple judgments based on such experiential evidence are rational (at least some of them are), this sort of evidence must be capable of rationalizing belief.

Let us look a little more closely at the belief *He's upset*. We form snap judgments about each other's feelings all of the time, and we are usually right. One notable feature of such judgments is that they are inferentially basic, meaning that they are not consciously inferred from other beliefs. We do not reach such beliefs by relying on conscious reasoning, much less on affidavits or MRI scans. Indeed, it is very hard to specify just what we are responding to when we form such judgments. We might realize that there is something about the person's facial expressions, posture, or bodily movements which tips us off to his or her emotional state, but it is beyond our ability to describe these signs in any detail. Thus, judgments of this type are *causally triggered* by the person's facial features or body language, but they are not *inferentially based* on those signs. For we do not consciously notice them when making the judgment, nor can we consistently point them out after the fact. What then are these snap judgments based on? On another kind of experience. When we observe the other person, it just seems to us that he is upset. This may not be a perceptual experience (like in the solid case), but something more like an intuition, a firm impression that something is true. This impression constitutes the evidence for our beliefs—evidence sufficient to make our beliefs rational.

If you think about it for a minute, you'll see that the sort of evidence relied on in the aforementioned specialized disciplines is actually secondary to the more basic kind of experiential evidence supporting our simple, everyday judgments. Take the chemist who determines that the solution in front of her is acidic. Her evidence, she would say, is the fact that blue litmus paper turned red when dipped into the solution. This is true as far as it goes, but how does she know that the paper turned from blue to red? The answer is that she had a perceptual experience of the paper, concluded *That's blue*, dipped the paper, had another perceptual experience, concluded *That's red*. We might also ask ourselves how she knew that the paper used was litmus paper. The answer is she perceived a box, concluded *That box says "Litmus Paper" on it*, inferred *The paper inside is litmus paper*, felt herself reach in and grab a piece,

concluded *This paper in my hand is litmus paper*. I could easily go on but the upshot should already be clear. The data that the scientist is relying on is ultimately derived from the same kind of experiential evidence we all rely on in making basic ordinary judgments. The scientist, perhaps for the sake of convenience, just doesn't feel the need mention this more fundamental kind of evidence (though she might mention it if you challenged her data—"Are you sure you used litmus paper? Yes, the box is right here" "Are you sure it turned red? Yes, I saw it with my own two eyes"). Indeed, you will find that experience underlies all of our higher-level conceptions of evidence. Ultimately, we only know about fingerprints, medical reports, and the significance of these findings because of how things appear to us in experience. This fact is fairly apparent upon reflection, though it is easy to ignore much of the time.

I have been calling this most basic kind of evidence "experiential evidence". Someone has experiential evidence whenever something seems true to them. Philosophers use the terms "seemings" or "appearances" to designate the sort of mental state one is in when something seems true.² There are perceptual seemings (it seems that it is mildly hot in here), introspective seemings (it seems that I have an itchy sensation), memorial seemings (it seems that my 2nd grade teacher was named Ms. Greene), rational seemings (it seems that no figure can be both a square and a circle), and perhaps others. All other kinds of evidence will eventually trace their way back to some kind of seeming or appearance. Accordingly, I would maintain that all of our beliefs (if they are rational) must ultimately be based on how the world appears to be. For when it comes down to it, we have nothing else to go on besides how things seem.

My position does not imply that you can rationally believe anything that seems true. If your experience represents something as being true, then that only entitles you to place some initial presumption in its favor. That presumption of innocence is defeated if there are stronger reasons for the opposing position or if you have reasons for questioning the reliability of your experience. Such reasons are called "defeaters." Any defeater will itself have to come from another experience (or set of experiences). Experience is the lens through which we view the world. We have no other way of getting at reality.

Some might worry that my position leads us to subjective truth or other problematic forms of subjectivity. This concern is misplaced. The fact that our *judgments* are ultimately based on subjective, first-person experiences does not imply that *reality itself* is subjective. Indeed, there is no way for creatures like us to pursue objective reality except by trusting what our subjective experiences tell us about that reality. Others might worry that if my view is right, then all inquiry is systematically biased or partial. This too is misguided. We have already seen that paradigmatically objective (here meaning "non-biased") disciplines like chemistry ultimately base their conclusions on the way things appear to us. Nevertheless, these disciplines remain as objective and impartial as they ever were. To drive the point home, consider mathematics, an objective discipline if there ever was one. Take any mathematical proof. In order to reach the conclusion, we must determine that the premises entail the conclusion. Consider, for example, the following proof:

- 1) 2 is larger than 1.

² For a more detailed account of seemings, see McAllister 2018.

- 2) 3 is larger than 2.
- 3) Thus, 3 is larger than 1.

This argument is valid—the premises entail the conclusion. But how do we know this? Because when we consider whether the conclusion follows from the premises, it seems obvious that it does. There's no argument here, just the irresistibly strong intuition that if 1) and 2) are true, then 3) must be true as well. Hence, even our conclusions in mathematics are based on the way things seem. This should not, however, make us doubt the objectivity of mathematics.

Still, there is a lesson here for those who would listen. Some of the ways we experience the world are undoubtedly influenced by our personal history, character, and perspective, leading us to conclusions which are different from those reached by others. Becoming aware of this fact should instil in us a kind of humility, an acknowledgment that we might be wrong about some of the things we hold dear, and an openness to considering the alternatives. It should also give us greater respect for those who believe differently than ourselves. The fact that they reached different conclusions can be explained by the fact that they see the world differently, not because they are stupid or irrational.

In wrapping things up, I want to emphasize that if experiential evidence were not sufficient to rationalize belief (in the absence of defeaters), then no belief could ever be rational. For all of our beliefs are ultimately based on experience. Consider someone who refused to trust experience until it was first proven to be reliable. Such a task could never be accomplished. There is no evidence for the reliability of experience that does not itself come from experience (nor is there any evidence *against* the reliability of experience that does not itself come from experience). Our only option is to trust in the way things appear to be, at least until we have reason to doubt it.

V. The Objection Defeated

We can now return to the cases of Cosmic Wonder and Christian Faith. I have granted that Al and Rich's beliefs are rational, but are they also devoid of evidential support as the objectors to religious evidentialism maintain?

It is apparent that Al and Rich do not base their beliefs on any legal, medical, or scientific evidence. No affidavits were submitted, no experts consulted, no experiments conducted. The Gospel of John is a form of testimony and so might be considered legal evidence in an extended sense, but it is unlikely that such testimony would be sufficient to establish the divinity of Jesus in any reputable court of law. Do they possess any other kinds of evidence?

Some have argued that there is a convincing historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus and, hence, the truth of his teachings. Even so, Rich does not rely on this sort of historical argument. He does not, for instance, reason to the general reliability of the gospels, establish certain historical facts surrounding the resurrection, infer the resurrection as the best explanation of the historical data, then affirm Jesus's self-professed divinity because of this divine seal of approval. Thus, while the words of Scripture occasion Rich's belief, his conviction does not seem to be based on any historical or philosophical argument. It is immediate and non-inferential.

Al's case is similar but more complicated. It is similar in that, while staring at the starry sky, Al clearly doesn't run through the Leibnizian Argument from Contingency or any other argument from natural theology—at least not on any conscious level. On the other hand, I think it likely that Al is tacitly perceiving a logical connection between his experience of the cosmos and the existence of God. In this respect, Al's belief is similar to the snap judgments we make about our friends' emotional states (discussed in the previous section). You come to believe that your friend is upset because, on some level, you are picking up on subtle facial features and postural cues that typically accompany irritation and distress; however, you are not consciously basing your belief on these physical signs. In the same way, I propose that Al is registering various features of the cosmos which bear witness to a divine creator, although he is not consciously basing his belief on any philosophical argument.³

To illustrate this, imagine we were to ask Al about why he came to believe in God. We would expect Al to appeal to the cosmos, saying something like, "Look at all of this! This couldn't just be an accident. I mean, something can't come from nothing!" This suggests that Al's judgment is not a blind hunch—something about the cosmos is indicating to Al that God exists. That being said, Al will probably not be able to articulate the apparent connection in any sophisticated way. Perhaps with further reflection or training, he would be able to formulate the connection into a series of logical steps, at which point Al would come to have inferential evidence for his belief. Until he walks through this process, however, Al is not basing his belief on any inferential evidence. Much like Rich, Al's belief is immediate and non-inferential.

Nevertheless, Al and Rich do base their beliefs on evidence—namely, *experiential evidence*. In each case, the subject has an experience in which the content of his belief is presented as true in an especially compelling way, and it is this experience that serves as the basis for his religious belief. The seeming is also evidence for the truth of that religious belief. I suspect the reason people think of Al and Rich as lacking any evidence is because they are thinking about higher-order forms of evidence, such as those featured in law, medicine, science, and (especially) history and natural theology. In popular discourse, talk of "evidence" typically comes up only in the context of those specialized disciplines, so it is understandable why people's minds would tend in this direction. But with Al and Rich, we need to be thinking in more fundamental terms.

I submit that what makes Al and Rich's beliefs rational (if they are rational) is that they are supported by experiential evidence.⁴ If one can rationally believe in the existence of other human persons simply because it seems obvious that there are such persons, then we cannot rule out someone rationally believing in God's existence, at least initially, simply because his existence

³ For a detailed account of this process see McAllister and Dougherty 2018. Evans 2010 also gives a plausible alternative model of such experiences.

⁴ I should note that the stories of Al and Rich are simplified for convenience. It seems to them that some religious doctrine is true. They believe it on the basis of this experiential evidence. Their belief is rational. End of story. Most real-world situations don't work like that. Arguments will almost inevitably arise which threaten to reverse one's evidential situation. They might, for instance, begin to doubt whether their experiences are reliable or discover evidence opposing their religious beliefs. Al and Rich would need to address these potential defeaters in order for their beliefs to remain rational. This is a feature of all views, not just religious evidentialism.

seems obvious. In fact, I do not think we can exclude any sort of content as, in principle, incapable of being rationally supported through experience. For I know of no metaphysical constraints on which propositional content can be presented to the subject as true, and if we lend this trust to *some* experiences because they feel revelatory (something we must do if anything is to be rational at all), then consistency demands that we extend this same trust to *all* experiences that feel the same way.

Our discussion thus far should make it apparent that religious evidentialism does not, in and of itself, threaten the rationality of ordinary religious beliefs. The concern that ordinary people would be largely incapable of meeting the standards of religious evidentialism seems, once again, to be based on an overly-narrow and demanding conception of evidence. What ordinary people don't have are sophisticated philosophical arguments or scientific evidence or evidence that could prove God's existence in a court of law. But this does not mean that they lack any evidence. Most believers have experiential evidence. I would add to this that ordinary believers have more inferential support for their religious beliefs than is typically acknowledged. For example, when the typical theist surveys the world, it will often seem to him that God's existence *just makes sense*—that God explains a world filled with such order, purpose, goodness, and beauty better than any of the atheistic alternatives. Believers who have such overall impressions thereby receive evidential support for their religious beliefs.⁵ Again, the answer is not to reject religious evidentialism but to adopt a more humane (and accurate) understanding of evidence and evidential support.

Thus, the faults exposed in these sorts of objections lie not with religious evidentialism *per se*, but only with a specific form of it—one that requires religious belief to be based on a specific kind of evidence. For instance, I could specify a form of evidentialism called “empirical evidentialism,” which requires all rational beliefs to be supported exclusively by evidence from introspective experiences and *a priori* logical reasoning. (This is the sort of evidentialism that John Locke or David Hume might endorse.) The cases of Cosmic Wonder and Christian Faith could serve as counterexamples to that more restrictive kind of evidentialism. But they do not bring into question the kind of experiential evidentialism that I have put forward. (My form of evidentialism is much closer to that of Thomas Reid than Locke or Hume.)

Indeed, the most prominent objector to religious evidentialism, Alvin Plantinga, who is to be credited more than anyone else for reinvigorating these sorts of debates, has the following to say about my form of evidentialism:

And if we do take [seeming-to-be-true] to be evidence, then no doubt it will be true that in a well-formed noetic structure, belief is always on the basis of evidence. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? Could it really be that you should believe a proposition, even though it had none of this phenomenal attractiveness, this seeming-to-be-true...?
(Plantinga 1993, 192)

⁵ See Gage and McAllister forthcoming for a more fleshed-out account of the evidential situations of ordinary believers in light of my approach to evidence.

In summary, the above examples pose no threat to religious evidentialism, properly understood. Indeed, if we consider experiences to be evidence, then the most prominent “objector” to religious evidentialism seems to agree that religious evidentialism is the most natural and intuitive position to take on these matters.⁶

VI. Conclusion

I have argued that religious evidentialism embodies the most natural and enticing approach to religious epistemology. A final advantage to this approach is that there is no special pleading for religious beliefs. The same standards apply to all. A religious belief, like any other, requires sufficient evidence to be rational.

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⁶ For a fuller consideration of Plantinga’s relation to evidentialism, see Dougherty and Tweedt 2015.