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Circular and Question-Begging Responses to Religious Disagreement and Debunking Arguments

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Abstract:

Disagreement and debunking arguments threaten religious belief. In this paper, I draw attention to two types of propositions and show how they reveal new ways to respond to debunking arguments and disagreement. The first type of proposition is the *epistemically self-promoting proposition*, which, when justifiedly believed, gives one a reason to think that one reliably believes it. Such a proposition plays a key role in my argument that some religious believers can permissibly wield an epistemically circular argument in response to certain debunking arguments. The second type of proposition is the *epistemically others-demoting proposition*, which, when justifiedly believed, gives one a reason to think that others are unreliable with respect to it. Such a proposition plays a key role in my argument that some religious believers can permissibly wield a question-begging argument to respond to certain types of disagreement. [Word Count: 139]

**Keywords**: religious epistemology; debunking arguments; disagreement; religious disagreement

**1. Introduction**

I will argue that some religious believers can permissibly wield circular or question-begging arguments in response to certain debunking arguments and religious disagreements. However, this paper is not just an exercise in religious epistemology; it has implications for epistemology more broadly. Crucial to the permissible circular argument is the notion of an *epistemically self-promoting proposition*, which, when justifiedly believed, gives one a reason to think that one reliably believes it. And crucial to the permissible question-begging argument is the notion of an *epistemically others-demoting proposition*, which, when justifiedly believed, gives one a reason to think that others are unreliable with respect to it. These two types of propositions have mostly gone unnoticed in the debunking and disagreement literature and should be of interest to epistemologists more generally.

§2 through §4 are about religious debunking, and §5 through §7 are about religious disagreement. In §2, I explain Alvin Plantinga’s influential response to debunking arguments to Christian belief. In §3, I show how one type of debunking argument evades Plantinga’s response. And in §4, I defend a new circular argument, which uses an epistemically self-promoting proposition, to respond to that debunking argument.

In §5, I explain the so-called *Independence* principle, its importance to the epistemology of disagreement, and a counterexample to it. In §6, I show how a lesson drawn from that counterexample allows some religious believers to use a “question-begging” argument in response to religious disagreement. This argument uses a proposition that is *both* epistemically self-promoting and epistemically others-demoting. My arguments will be called ‘circular’ or ‘question-begging’ and will strike many, at least initially, as counterintuitive. However, I will argue that they are none the worse for it.

I’ll make four clarifications or assumptions. First, I will use ‘warrant’ to denote whatever it is that turns true belief into knowledge; justification is typically taken to be necessary, but not sufficient, for warrant (because of Gettier cases). Second, I’ll assume that radical skepticism is false and that we have justified and warranted beliefs in commonsense propositions, e.g., that there are hands, that the sun will rise tomorrow, and that 1+1=2. Third, although I’ll use Christian belief as my main example of a religious belief, I will explain later how what I say might apply to other religious beliefs.

My fourth assumption is that Christian belief is *prima facie* justified and warranted (i.e., justified and warranted in the absence of defeat) and is not defeated by considerations *other than* debunking and disagreement (e.g., the problem of evil or arguments that Christian doctrines are incoherent). This is not a bad assumption. My project is about *rational belief change*; I am interested in whether disagreement or debunking gives someone who was *initially* justified (or warranted) in her belief a defeater or a *new* reason to give up her belief, not in whether her belief was already unjustified (or unwarranted) to begin with. The *prima facie* question, as well as discussion of other potential defeaters, are valuable, but they are not the focus of this paper and are explored elsewhere.[[1]](#footnote-1) Those who are unhappy with this assumption can just take me to be arguing for the conditional: “*If* Christian belief is *prima facie* justified and warranted and not defeated by other considerations, then debunking and disagreement do not constitute a defeater for it.” That’s interesting enough.

**2. Background**

*2.1 Plantinga Review*

In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga (2000) aims to defend the positive epistemic status (e.g. the justification and warrant) of Christian belief. He acknowledges that the term ‘Christian belief’ is vague[[2]](#footnote-2) but says that he will use it to denote belief in at least the following propositions:

that God created the heavens and the earth; that he created human beings in his own image; that human beings fell ruinously into sin, from which they require salvation; that in response, God graciously sent Jesus Christ, the divine son of God, who took on our flesh (became incarnate), suffered, and died as an atonement for our sins, and rose from the dead, thus enabling us fallen human beings to have eternal life with God (202–203).

I’ll use ‘Christian belief’ as Plantinga does, and I’ll use ‘Christianity’ to denote whatever propositions are the objects of Christian belief.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Plantinga is interested in the epistemic status of the Christian beliefs of a certain type of believer, one who does not believe on the basis of arguments. For example, his focus is not on people who first come to believe in God by way of the ontological argument, and then come to Christian belief by way of a historical argument for Jesus’ resurrection. Rather, his interest is in a believer who hears or reads central Christian teaching via scripture and finds herself with a felt conviction that it is true. There is some flexibility to how this might go:

So faith may have the phenomenology that goes with suddenly seeing something to be true: “Right! Now I see that this is indeed true and what the Lord is teaching!” Or perhaps the conviction arises slowly, and only after long and hard study, thought, discussion, prayer… This process can go on in a thousand ways; in each case there is presentation… of central Christian teaching and, by way of response, the phenomenon of being convinced, coming to see, forming of a conviction” (2000, 251).

Along with this conviction, the believer develops many affections, including a deep love for God (2000, 290–323). The question, for Plantinga, is what the epistemic status of such Christian beliefs are.

To address this, Plantinga distinguishes between *de facto* objections and *de jure* objections to Christian belief. A *de facto* objection to Christianity concludes that it is *false*. One could make such an objection without making any reference to a Christian believer or belief. *De facto* objections are not Plantinga’s focus. A *de jure* objection concludes that some Christian belief is not justified or warranted. Here, the belief or the believer *is* the target. Someone who wields a *de jure* objection but not a *de facto* objection might say, “Regardless of whether Christianity is true, my Christian friend is not justified in holding her belief!” *De jure* objections are Plantinga’s focus.

A specific *de jure* objection of interest to Plantinga was the *Freud-Marx objection*, which claims that religious belief is the result of mere wishful thinking or cognitive dysfunction; it is thereby unwarranted. In response, Plantinga (2000, 241–266, 285–286) argued that *if* Christian belief is true, then it is probably warranted. Here is the gist of his argument. Suppose Christianity is true. Then, according to Plantinga’s argument, the process behind Christian belief probably involves the activity of the Holy Spirit. *Given* Christianity’s truth, it is probable that there is a Holy Spirit who is both the testifier of Christian belief – by being its ultimate author – and also the agent who instigates the formation of true, Christian belief.[[4]](#footnote-4) Plantinga argues that this process involving the Holy Spirit furnishes the believer with everything required for warrant. So, if Christian belief is true, then it is probably warranted.[[5]](#footnote-5)

What about the Freud-Marx objection? Given Christianity’s truth, Christian belief is probably not *merely* the result of unreliable wishful thinking or dysfunction, as the Freud-Marx objection claims; it is more likely the result of a testimonial, belief-forming process that involves the Holy Spirit’s reliable guidance. For the Freud-Marx objection to get off the ground, therefore, one needs to arguethat Christianity is false. If it is false, then maybe the Freud-Marx objection is right and Christian belief is the result of unreliable wishful thinking or dysfunction. But if it is true, then the Freud-Marx objection is probably incorrect. Absent a good argument against the truth of Christianity, therefore, the Freud-Marx objection fails. Plantinga concluded that the *de facto* question about Christian belief (whether Christian belief is true) is relevant to the *de jure* question (whether Christian belief is warranted).

*2.2 Debunking Arguments*

So far, I have merely summarized the dialectic from back in 2000. Few people these days, at least in analytic philosophy of religion, are moved by the Freud-Marx objection. More popular are so-called *debunking arguments*. Now, as I see things, a debunking argument against *p* is just whatever argument is used to support a *de jure* objection against *p*. So, debunking arguments are not some new type of objection; there’s still the aim to show that some belief or set of beliefs is epistemically defective. Philosophers of religion have been concerned with these objections for quite some time; indeed, we should think of the Freud-Marx objection as a type of debunking argument.

Two things are novel and of note. First, there has been increased interest among metaethicists in whether *moral* beliefs are subject to debunking arguments. Second, there has been increased use of evolutionary psychology and cognitive science to support debunking arguments. These two factors have drawn further interest in debunking arguments from the broader philosophical profession.[[6]](#footnote-6) For this paper, I’ll use both the terms ‘*de jure* objection’ and ‘debunking argument’; it is helpful to use the former for continuity with Plantinga’s work and the latter for continuity with other areas of philosophy.

Let us now consider how cognitive science of religion (or ‘CSR’) might support a *de jure* objection to Christian belief. CSR theories give various explanations for people’s religious beliefs. For example, according to one CSR theory, part of why people believe in Christianity is because they evolved a *hyperactive agency detection device*, which moves us to posit the existence of agents in response to certain events. This is why they are inclined to feel as if there is a God, an agent, who created the world and is active in it. Another theory might say that people are inclined to believe Christianity because they have *promiscuous teleology*; this mechanism inclines people to find purposes in life, which, perhaps, moves them to find the gospel story attractive and compelling. There are other interesting theories suggested by CSR for why people have religious beliefs, but I’ll stick with these two examples. Now, the point is that when Christian beliefs are formed under the influence of these cognitive processes, there is something epistemically defective about them.[[7]](#footnote-7) ‘Hyperactive’ and ‘promiscuous’ are not exactly epistemically flattering words; they are used to denote something about the unreliability of those processes.

Despite the novelty of these arguments, there is much less than meets the eye, since Plantinga’s response to the old Freud-Marx *de jure* objection applies equally here.[[8]](#footnote-8) *If* Christianity is true, then even if *hyperactive* agency detection or *promiscuous* teleology is involved in Christian belief formation, the whole process is also likely one that is reliably superintended by the Holy Spirit.[[9]](#footnote-9) And if *that* is so, then the belief does not have the aforementioned epistemic defects after all. For the debunking argument to get off the ground, therefore, one must arguethat Christianity is false. If it is false, then maybe the debunker is right and Christian belief is unreliably formed. But if Christianity is true, then the debunker’s claim is probably incorrect. We see once again a connection between *de jure* and *de facto* objections. So, we can see how Plantinga’s response to the Freud-Marx objection can also apply to a CSR debunking argument.

**3. An Undermining Debunking Argument**

*3.1 When Does One Have a Defeater?*

I’ll now develop a *de jure* objection to Christian belief that evades Plantinga’s response. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga divides up *de jure* objections into two types: those that aim to show that the believer has a *defeater*, a reason to give up the belief, and those that don’t. Following Roger White (2010, 575), I’ll call the former an ‘undermining debunker’ and the latter a ‘blocking debunker’. The objections in §2 are blocking debunkers; they are meant to impugn religious belief regardless of whether the believer herself has a defeater – from the debunking argument – as a reason to give up her belief. In this section, I’ll show that if we revise the *de jure* objections of the previous sections to be formulated as undermining debunkers, then Plantinga’s reply is ineffective against it.[[10]](#footnote-10)

To formulate the objection, I’ll make a substantive but plausible claim about defeaters. Suppose S believes p. Following Bergmann (2005, 422), let ‘p\*’ denote the proposition that *my belief that p was formed reliably*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Consider,

*Defeater Principle*: For any belief that p that S has, if S should either believe that it’s not probable that p\* or believe the probability of p\* is inscrutable, then S’s belief that p is defeated.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Suppose I look at what seems to be a green shirt and form the belief that the shirt is green. My extremely trustworthy scientist friend tells me that I just ingested a pill with my meal that has a 50% chance of rendering my color vision unreliable. I should now believe that it’s not probable that my belief that *the shirt is green* was formed reliably. Intuitively, my belief that the shirt is green has a defeater.

Or suppose, instead, that the scientist tells me that he mixed up the probabilities, and now he has no idea what the probability is; that’s all the information he gives me. Now, it seems that I should think that the probability that my belief that *the shirt is green* was formed reliably is inscrutable. Furthermore, it seems that I have a defeater for my belief that the *shirt is green*. Cases like these support the Defeater Principle, which I will use to formulate an undermining debunker for Christian belief.

*3.2 A Proposed Defeater for Christian Belief*

Plantinga often talks about Christian belief *generically*; he rarely, if ever, applies his arguments to specific Christian believers. For this undermining debunker, we will talk about a specific believer. Call her ‘Hannah’. Hannah forms her Christian belief in one of the ways described by Plantinga. She is at church and hears the preaching of the gospel; while praying, she comes to have a firm conviction that Christianity is true. Correspondingly, there is a growth in love and affection for God.

Let ‘Christian belief\*’ denote the proposition that *Hannah’s Christian belief was formed reliably*. Earlier, we considered a *de jure* objection that would show that Christian belief\* is false on the basis of the Freud-Marx objection or CSR. This was the sort of argument that Plantinga argued included the undefended assumption that Christian belief is false. It also criticizes Hannah’s Christian belief regardless of whether she herself knows any facts about the Freud-Marx objection or CSR. As mentioned before, this makes it a blocking debunker, not an undermining one.

Now consider the following undermining debunker. It claims that once Hannah *learns* of the CSR considerations, she will be jolted into considering whether her Christian belief was reliably formed (i.e., whether Christian belief\* is true); she will then gain a *defeater* for her Christian belief. We can imagine the debunker arguing as follows:

“I’ll grant that Plantinga is right that I must *argue* that Christian belief is *false* in order for the earlier argument against Christian belief\* to get off the ground. But just as I can’t *assume* that Christian belief is false and conclude that Christian belief\* is false, neither can Hannah just *assume* that Christian belief\* is true! *From Hannah’s perspective*, after considering the CSR debunking arguments, she should realize that she doesn’t have a good reason to believe Christian belief\*. So, she should think Christian belief\* either is not probable or that the probability is inscrutable. By the Defeater Principle, she gets a defeater for her Christian belief.”

I will take this speech to capture the argument I am interested in responding to in the next section. It’s a potential defeater for Christian belief that Plantinga does not address.

**4. Deflecting the Defeater with a Circular Argument**

* 1. *Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign*

What is an epistemically circular argument? Drawing again from Bergmann (2006, 180), let’s first say that S’s *belief* that <some belief source X is reliable> is *epistemically circular* if S used X to come to believe that <X is reliable>. For example, if I use my memory to come to believe that my memory is reliable (say, I try *remembering* all the times my memory got things right), then my belief that my memory is reliable is epistemically circular. Second, S’s *argument* for the conclusion that <X is reliable> is *epistemically circular* if S used X to come to believe in one of the premises of that argument. So, if I formulated an argument for the conclusion that <my memory is reliable>, and I used my memory to come to believe in one of the premises of this argument, then this argument would be epistemically circular. (Distinguish ‘epistemically circular argument’ from ‘logically circular argument’, which is when the conclusion of an argument is also a premise of that argument. For this paper, I will use ‘circularity’ to just mean *epistemic circularity*.)

It is tempting to think that no circular belief can be justified.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, many epistemologists have argued that a belief’s being circular does not *alone* disqualify it from being justified; sometimes it does disqualify it, and sometimes it doesn’t.[[14]](#footnote-14) Following Bergmann, let circularity that disqualifies a belief from being justified be called ‘malignant circularity’; otherwise, call it ‘benign circularity’. Here are two reasons to think there is benign circularity. First, Bergmann (2006, 206) points out that, intuitively, we justifiedly believe that our cognitive faculties as a whole are generally reliable. Yet, we *used* our cognitive faculties to come to this belief. So, this would be a case of benign circularity. Second, consider Plantinga’s (2000, 125) point that not even *God* (if God existed) could know that his faculties are reliable without using his cognitive faculties. But it seems that God’s belief in the reliability of his own faculties would be justified. This would also be benign circularity.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Why, then, are we tempted to think that circularity is always malignant? Bergmann suggests that using a deliverance of X to support believing that *X is reliable* results in malignant circularity if S “*is or should* be seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X” (2006, 198). The reason is that if S is or should be seriously questioning the trustworthiness of X, then S is or should be seriously questioning any belief formed by X. (Example: Suppose you should seriously question whether Fred is a reliable testifier. Then you should seriously question any belief you might form on the basis of his testimony, including his testimony that he is reliable. Believing that his testimony is reliable on the basis of his testimony, in this case, would be malignantly circular.) Furthermore, we are tempted to think that circularity is *always* malignant because we are normally concerned with cases of circularity when a given source already is (or should be) in significant doubt.

Let’s connect Bergmann’s points with defeaters. Plausibly, S *should* seriously question whether X is reliable *if* S has a defeater for thinking that X is reliable. So, if S already has a defeater for thinking X is reliable, then using a deliverance of X to support believing that X is reliable will be an instance of malignant circularity. On the other hand, it is less clear whether S has a defeater for thinking X is reliable *if* S seriously does or should question whether X is reliable. Perhaps S can seriously question whether p without having a defeater (or reason to doubt) that p. And, given complexities of the epistemic *should*, perhaps there are cases in which one should seriously question p even if one does not have a defeater for p. So, defeat is not the only source of malignant circularity.[[16]](#footnote-16) These connections between defeat and malignant circularity will be important for our discussion below about whether Christian belief has an undermining debunker.

Notice that the above cases of benign circularity do not meet Bergmann’s condition on malignant circularity. Plausibly, since it’s not the case that I do, or should seriously question or doubt, whether *my cognitive faculties are reliable*, it is permissible to use my faculties to believe that *my faculties are reliable*. (This is also the case for God’s belief about the reliability of his own faculties.) So, Bergmann provides both plausible criteria for when circularity is malignant and also an error theory for why we’re tempted to think that circularity is always malignant even if it is not.[[17]](#footnote-17)

* 1. *Deflecting the Defeater*

I can now respond to the undermining debunker from §3.2. I’ll begin by distinguishing between two ways to block defeaters. A *defeater-defeater* nullifies the defeating power of something that is already a defeater. A *defeater-deflector* prevents something from being a defeater in the first place.[[18]](#footnote-18) I’ll argue that Hannah has a defeater-deflector for the undermining debunker.

Recall that the debunker claimed that Hannah cannot just assume that Christian belief\* is true. I agree. Fortunately, Hannah has an *argument* for Christian belief\*. She can use *modus ponens* and reason as follows:

1. Christian belief is true
2. If Christian belief is true, then Christian belief\* is probably true.
3. Christian belief\* is probably true.

And if Hannah can conclude (III), then she can deflect the potential defeater.

How can Hannah justifiedly believe premises (I) and (II)? An assumption I made at the beginning of this paper is that her Christian belief is *prima facie* justified and warranted and without defeaters (other than debunking and disagreement). At least initially, then, we can affirm that she justifiedly believes (I).[[19]](#footnote-19)

Hannah can also justifiedly believe (II). She can start by considering Plantinga’s argument. *Given* Christianity’s truth, there is a Holy Spirit who is involved in the salvation of human beings and their reconciliation with God, which will include their Christian belief formation by way of the Holy Spirit’s testimony and instigation.[[20]](#footnote-20) So, if Christianity is true, then Christian belief (say, the Christian beliefs of many people) are probably warranted (and thus, reliably formed).

But this argument alone won’t show that if Christianity is true, then *Hannah’s* Christian belief is reliably formed.[[21]](#footnote-21) (Recall that ‘Christian belief\*’ denotes the proposition that *Hannah’s* Christian belief was formed reliably, not just that some generic Christian’s belief was formed reliably.) Hannah will need more argument than what Plantinga offered if she is to justifiedly believe that if Christianity is true, then *her* Christian belief is probably reliably formed. I suggest the following. First, for contrast, note that Hannah didn’t form her Christian belief by shaking a Magic-8 ball, asking whether Christianity is true, and then the ball saying, “It sure is!” She might be skeptical that, even if Christianity is true, a Christian belief formed in *this* way is by the Holy Spirit’s instigation. Rather, Hannah formed her belief in a way not unusual for Christian believers, which included hearing the preaching of the gospel at church, prayer, a conviction in Christianity’s truth, and the formation of love toward God. Hannah can justifiedly think that, given Christianity’s truth, this *is* probably the sort of occasion that would involve the Holy Spirit’s activity and her Christian belief’s being reliably formed.

But what of the undermining debunker? Suppose Hannah agrees that, *in general*, religious beliefs are often partly caused by promiscuous teleology or some other generally unreliable mechanism. Still, *given* Christianity’s truth and the fact that she formed her Christian belief in her specific circumstances, she has reason to think that *her* Christian belief was still reliably formed, since the whole process behind her belief is one superintended by the Holy Spirit. So, Hannah can justifiedly believe that *if Christian belief is true, then Christian belief\* is probably true*. By *modus ponens*, she can conclude (III).[[22]](#footnote-22),[[23]](#footnote-23)

Hannah’s belief in (III) is epistemically circular. She formed Christian belief on the basis of some process: P. Then, using Christianity as a premise, she inferred claims about the Holy Spirit’s active role in the production of her belief, which led her to believe that P is probably reliable. So, a doxastic deliverance of P played a role in justifying her belief in the probable reliability of P. Hence, Hannah’s Christian belief\* is circular.

Fortunately, there is no reason to think this is malignant circularity. Recall Bergmann’s point that if S is or should be seriously questioning or doubting whether *X is reliable*, then using a deliverance of X to support believing that *X is reliable* results in malignant circularity.[[24]](#footnote-24) We can simply stipulate that Hannah *is* not seriously questioning or doubting Christian belief\*. *Should* she be seriously questioning or doubting it? The only plausible reason to think that is if she has some good reason to: a defeater. But in this case, Hannah can use her *modus ponens* argument to prevent herself from ever gaining a defeater in the first place. Hannah is wielding a defeater-*deflector* and not a defeater-defeater. If we took Hannah to be wielding a defeater-defeater, then her belief in (I) (or Christianity) would already be defeated (unjustified) by the *de jure* objection, and so she could not use it as a premise to defeat the defeater. Fortunately, she is wielding a defeater-deflector, and thus, preventing any defeat from happening in the first place.[[25]](#footnote-25)

*4.3 Epistemically Self-Promoting Propositions: Objections and Clarifications*

Once Hannah became a Christian believer – a believer whose Christian belief is *prima facie* warranted – she immediately gained justification for believing things about how God is working in the world, which includes the Holy Spirit’s reliably producing Christian belief in people such as herself. We can now see that Christianity is an *epistemically self-promoting proposition* for Hannah: if she justifiedly believes it, then she gains good evidence that her belief in it is reliably formed. In the clearest case of epistemic self-promotion,

1. p is an epistemically self-promoting proposition for S if S also justifiedly believes a conditional of the form: *if p, then my belief that p was (probably) formed reliably*.

Notice that the status of a proposition as epistemically self-promoting is relative to a believer. Clarifications should be made. One might think that (IV) makes self-promotion too easy.[[26]](#footnote-26) Consider some belief that p of mine that I justifiedly think is reliably formed. Couldn’t I easily infer, via the truth-conditions for the *material conditional*, that *if p, then my belief that p is reliably formed*? And aren’t many, perhaps most, of my beliefs such that I justifiedly think they’re reliably formed? Then I could believe of them that if they are true, then they’re reliably formed. So, it seems that self-promotion is too easy. [[27]](#footnote-27)

It is not too easy. The conditional in (IV) should be understood as an ordinary English *indicative conditional*, not a *material conditional*. Just as I cannot justifiedly infer from my belief that *the moon is made of rock* to the proposition that *if the moon is made of cheese, then it is made of rock*, neither can I justifiedly make the sort of inference mentioned in the previous paragraph. (More generally: I cannot just infer from *my belief that p is formed reliably*, to the proposition that *if p, then my belief that p is formed reliably*.) There has to be some reason to think that the consequent actually *follows from* the antecedent, like in Hannah’s case.

Here’s a second reason to think (IV) makes self-promotion too easy. Consider some belief that p that I know I have. I can reason that if p is true, then my belief that p is true. I can then infer that a narrow process type – the process of believing p, in exactly this way, at this time, under these precise circumstances – is very reliable. After all, this narrow process has 100% reliability! It seems that, for *any* belief that p that I know I have, *if* p is true, then the narrowest process type producing my belief that p is reliable. And so, for any belief that p I have, if it’s true, then it’s formed reliably.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In response, I mean something more substantive by ‘formed reliably’ in (IV). Recall the overall dialectic. The debunker claims that Christians aren’t justified in thinking that it’s probable that their Christian belief is formed reliably. I claim, by appeal to (IV), that they *do* have reason to think their Christian belief is probably formed reliably. For my response to meet the objection, ‘formed reliably’ in (IV) must mean what the debunkers mean by it.

When the debunker claims that Hannah should think it’s not probable that her Christian belief was formed reliably, is he saying that she should think it’s not probable that it was formed by the aforementioned extremely narrow, reliable process type? This is unlikely, since this is tantamount to saying it’s not probable that the belief is *true*, and the debunker is supposed to be wielding a *de jure* objection, not a *de facto* objection. So, *being formed by an extremely narrow process type that is reliable* is not what ‘being formed reliably’ means in (IV). It must be at least about the reliability of a broader process type (or method or faculty). This blocks the above objection that epistemic self-promotion is too easy.[[29]](#footnote-29)

An example will illustrate why epistemic self-promotion (and deflection of potential defeaters in the way Hannah does) isn’t too easy. Suppose I came to believe that *platonism is true* by way of a standard philosophical methodology; I use intuitions and weigh the various arguments for and against it in the literature. Do I also justifiedly believe that *if platonism is true, then my belief in platonism is probably formed reliably*? Well, if platonism is true, then my philosophical methodology led to a true belief *in this case*. And so, the extremely narrow process type of *producing this belief, in this exact way, in these precise circumstances*, is reliable. But as we just saw, this is not the relevant sense of ‘formed reliably’. I cannot conclude that my philosophical methodology is probably *generally* reliable, or that my belief in platonism was reliably formed in some more substantive way. A positive answer to the *de facto* question about platonism does not imply a positive answer to an interesting *de jure* question.

This is not so for Christian belief. Hannah can justifiedly believe that *if Christianity is true, then (probably) my Christian belief is reliably formed*. Using the argument above, Hannah can justifiedly believe that if Christianity is true, then her Christian belief is probably *warranted*, which will include reliable belief formation.[[30]](#footnote-30) An interesting difference between Hannah’s Christian belief and my platonist belief is that the truth of Christianity has the implication that the Holy Spirit reliably guides some believers, including Hannah, to form their Christian beliefs. The truth of platonism has no plausible implications for how I came to believe it. Even if platonism is true, there is no Platonistic Spirit that guides platonists to form their beliefs; I will have used the same reliable (or unreliable) philosophical methods, regardless of platonism’s truth. So, we see again how the *de facto* question about Christian belief has interesting implications for its *de jure* question—a sort of implication not shared by platonistic belief. So, we need not worry that *just any old* belief will be epistemically self-promoting or that it will be *too easy* to deflect potential defeaters.

Here’s another objection to Hannah’s reasoning that is not about epistemic self-promotion generally. According to it, my strategy makes it impossible for Hannah’s Christian belief to ever get defeated since she can always flat-footedly appeal to the Holy Spirit any time a defeater looms.[[31]](#footnote-31) Hannah is thereby rationally sealed from open-mindedness about the possible falsity of her belief. This indicates that the strategy is problematic.

My first response is that a premise of the objection is false. Hannah *can* still gain defeaters by considering *de facto* objections to Christian belief, say, arguments from evil or arguments that Christianity is logically incoherent.[[32]](#footnote-32) One of the assumptions of this paper, which I made for the purpose of keeping its length and discussion manageable, is that Hannah *doesn’t* have such defeaters. But *contra* the objection, she still *could* gain such defeaters. So, open-mindedness is not ruled out.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Second, Hannah *could also* gain a defeater for believing premise (II): that if Christian belief is true, then Christian belief\* is probably true. Recall that part of the reason Hannah thought her Christian belief was reliably formed (given Christianity’s truth) was that she formed it in a way that is common among Christians, which involves hearing the gospel at church, prayer, forming love toward God, and so on. Hannah *could* gain compelling evidence that she had taken a drug that both made her hallucinate the whole thing and also erased her memory of taking the drug. Then it seems that her confidence that her Christian belief was reliably formed, *even given* the truth of Christianity, should be lower. *Maybe* the Holy Spirit works through such drugs (or, say, Magic-8 balls); maybe not. Who knows? Perhaps the probability will be inscrutable for her. Either way, she now has a defeater for (II), and therefore, (III). By the Defeater Principle, this gives her a defeater for (I).[[34]](#footnote-34) So, Hannah’s strategy allows for potential defeat.

To end this section, I’ll attempt to address an unease some readers might feel. Despite what I’ve said about the possibility of benign epistemic circularity, an objector might report still feeling uncomfortable about the fact that Hannah used her Christian belief in a premise to argue that her Christian belief was formed reliably. I will report that I too feel uncomfortable. But I also feel uncomfortable about the fact that I use my memory to believe that my memory is reliable and that I use my cognitive faculties to believe that my cognitive faculties are reliable. Suppose I cannot justifiedly believe that these faculties are reliable and must instead withhold belief that they are reliable. Then I have a defeater for any belief produced by these faculties, and so skepticism follows. But I am assuming in this paper that skepticism is false. So, I must live with the discomfort that accompanies the benign epistemic circularity that is required for rejecting skepticism. (Living with the discomfort that accompanies skepticism would probably be a whole lot worse for me.)

**5. Religious Disagreement: The Independence Principle**

*5.1 The Independence Principle*

There are many interesting suggestions for how to respond to religious disagreement.[[35]](#footnote-35) I offer a new approach. I argue that Hannah can use a permissible, question-begging argument to deflect potential defeaters from religious disagreement by using both an epistemically self-promoting proposition and an epistemically others-demoting proposition. However, I will not argue that my way is the only way to deflect defeat in the face of religious disagreement, and I am happy to let a thousand flowers bloom.

To see why disagreement *might* provide Hannah with a defeater, consider two influential cases in the literature. The first is David Christensen’s (2011, 2) Mental Math case, in which two dinner partners who consider each other to be arithmetic peers calculate the tip and disagree; one thinks it’s $43 and the other that it’s $45. At that moment, it seems that both gain defeaters for their beliefs. The second is Richard Feldman’s (2006, 424) Quad case, in which two people who consider each other to be perceptual peers look out the window and disagree about what is there: one thinks there is a person with a blue coat, and the other thinks that there is nobody. It seems that both gain defeaters for their beliefs. In both cases, the believers should significantly doubt that their own belief forming processes are reliable. If the situation of these believers is relevantly similar to Hannah’s situation when she meets someone who disagrees with her about Christianity, then she will also gain a defeater.

What information *could* allow these people to remain steadfast in the face of disagreement? If one of the arithmetic peers had evidence that the other was drunk, then she could consider the other to be arithmetically unreliable. Or if one of the perceivers knew that the other had an idiosyncratic penchant to hallucinate people with blue coats, then he could consider the other to be perceptually unreliable. In these cases, the disagreements clearly do not provide a defeater. So, if S has evidence *independent* of the disagreement to think that T’s belief was formed less reliably than S’s belief, then S avoids a defeater.

On the other hand, it seems impermissible for one of the arithmetic peers to reason that since the tip *is* $43, the other person is not her peer, and so she need not withhold belief that p. Or one of the perceivers should not reason that since it seemed that there was a person with a blue coat, the other perceiver must be visually inferior. It seems that the believers should only use *independent* evidence to evaluate the other. David Christensen formulates the following principle to exclude such “blatantly question-begging dismissals of evidence provided by the disagreement with others” (2011, 2):

*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 about P” (2011, 1-2).

Independence has been an important, disputed proposition in the epistemology of disagreement literature.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In Moon (2018b), I noted that Independence, as it is stated, is limited. In Feldman’s Quad case, the perceptual believers do not form their beliefs on the basis of *reasoning*. Probably, Christensen did not have noninferential beliefs in mind when formulating Independence. I suggested the following replacement:

Independence1: 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 neither relies on the reasoning for my initial belief about P nor relies on my belief about P itself (67).

Independence1 has wider applicability than Independence and can apply to Feldman’s Quad case. More importantly, it will also apply to Hannah, who holds her Christian belief noninferentially. Since Independence1 is so much in the spirit of Independence, anybody who accepts one will likely also accept the other.

Now, suppose Hannah meets Archie, who believes Christianity is false. There are three plausible strategies by which one could argue that Hannah could avoid defeat:

1. Hannah can employ evidence *independent* of her disagreement to justify thinking that Archie’s belief has significantly worse epistemic credentials than her own.
2. Hannah can employ evidence that is *dependent* on her disagreement to justify thinking that Archie’s belief has significantly worse epistemic credentials than her own.
3. Hannah doesn’t need any evidence to justify thinking that Archie’s belief has significantly worse epistemic credentials than her own.

Options (a) and (c) are intellectually promising, Independence1-respecting ways to argue that Hannah can remain steadfast in her belief.[[37]](#footnote-37) Option (b) is not sanctioned by Independence1; it is what Christensen calls the *question-begging* option since it assumes the correctness of one’s reasoning or position to evaluate the epistemic credentials of the other person.[[38]](#footnote-38) I will defend the reasonableness of (b) in this paper.

*5.2 A Counterexample to Independence*

Defending option (b) will require Independence1 to be false. In this section, I’ll explain one of my earlier counterexamples to it and then draw a lesson.

In Moon (2018b), I provide five counterexamples to Independence1. The fifth one, which builds upon the earlier four, is as follows.[[39]](#footnote-39)

*Counterexample 5*

Someone I know to be a reliable testifier tells me,

(P) Peggy is at the party.

(W) If Peggy is at the party, then *Quinn’s beliefs about Peggy’s location are unreliably formed*.

I have no other special information about Quinn. I come to justifiedly believe both P and W. Quinn then comes up to me and tells me that ~P. So, I believe P and Quinn believes ~P. I then use *modus ponens* to infer from P and W that Quinn’s beliefs about Peggy’s location are unreliably formed. I give a low evaluation of the epistemic credentials of Quinn’s belief that ~P.

It seems both that this reasoning is permissible and also that I may remain steadfast in my belief that Peggy is at the party on the basis of my low evaluation of the epistemic credentials of Quinn.

In this example, I justifiedly relied on the belief that P to evaluate the epistemic credentials of Quinn’s belief about P. It is therefore a counterexample to Independence1. We can generalize from this case and draw the following lesson:

LESSON: *If*, independent of the disagreement, S justifiedly believes both P and also <if P then T’s belief about P is unreliably formed>, *then* S may use the belief that P in support of her evaluation that T’s belief about P is unreliably formed.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Notice that LESSON describes what I earlier called an *epistemically others-demoting proposition*, which, when justifiedly believed, gives one a reason to think that others are unreliable with respect to it. Although the reasoner in Counterexample 5 is using what Christensen might call a ‘question-begging argument’, it is none the worse for it. This will be important for Hannah’s response to religious disagreement.[[41]](#footnote-41)

**6. Hannah’s Response to Religious Disagreement**

*6.1 Application to Hannah’s Christian Belief*

Hannah affirms Christianity, and Archie denies it. They meet and talk about their disagreement. Hannah can reason as follows:

1. If Christianity is true, then disbelief in Christianity that is formed while in the natural human sinful state and without the aid of the Holy Spirit is formed unreliably.
2. Archie disbelieves Christianity in his natural human sinful state and without the aid of the Holy Spirit.
3. If Christianity is true, then Archie’s disbelief in Christianity is formed unreliably.

What is Hannah’s justification for (1) and (2)? Regarding (1), on Plantinga’s model, it follows from Christian belief that all human beings are subject to noetic effects of sin; those who lack the Holy Spirit’s activity and testimony will be epistemically impoverished with regard to their disbelief in Christianity. (2) could be plausible for Hannah simply because Archie reports both denying Christianity and also having never experienced the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Notice that the dialectic does not require that (1) and (2) be *true*. Defending (1) and (2) would require more than my brief summary of Plantinga’s (2000, 241–268) lengthy defense. It only needs to be possible that Hannah could come to *justifiedly believe* (1) and (2), and thereby (3), along the lines I’ve mentioned. And it seems that Hannah *could* justifiedly believe these propositions on the basis of Plantinga’s argument in the same way that a person comes to justifiedly believe any proposition on the basis of an argument.

Two things will allow Hannah to deflect defeat from her religious disagreement. First, to review from §4, she has already justifiedly inferred that Christian belief\* is probably true by *modus ponens* from her Christian belief and her belief that *if Christian belief is true, then Christian belief\* is probably true*. By this reasoning, she came to justifiedly believe that *her own* Christian belief is probably reliably formed (despite the epistemic circularity). (So, her Christian belief is belief in an *epistemically self-promoting proposition*.)

Second, on the basis of (3) and her Christian belief, she can follow LESSON and reason by way of *modus ponens* to the conclusion that Archie’s disbelief in Christianity is formed unreliably. (So, Hannah’s Christian belief is belief in an *epistemically others-demoting proposition*.) We see now how Hannah can reasonably remain steadfast in the face of her religious disagreement. She can use *both* an epistemically circular argument *and also* a question-begging argument (i.e., question-begging by the lights of Independence1). Normally, one does not want to be saddled with the labels ‘circular’ and ‘question-begging’. However, I argued in §4 that there is nothing wrong with this type of circularity, and I argued in §5 that there’s nothing wrong with this type of question-beggingness.[[42]](#footnote-42),[[43]](#footnote-43)

*6.2 Generalizing the Strategy*

Once Hannah became a Christian believer – a believer whose Christian belief is *prima facie* warranted – she immediately gained justification for believing things about how humanity is fallen in sin and that some people’s disbelief in Christianity without the aid of the Holy Spirit is unreliably formed. Hence, Christianity is an *epistemically others-demoting proposition* for Hannah: if she justifiedly believes it, then she gains evidence that some other people’s belief in it is unreliably formed.

Just as I dealt with the concern that epistemic self-promotion is too easy in §4.3, I’ll now deal in this section with the concern that epistemic others-demotion is too easy. Let us look at the general structure of Hannah’s reasoning. Suppose S believes p and T believes ~p.

*Condition 1*: S has *prima facie* justification to believe *p* and has no defeaters (independent of the proposed defeater from disagreement).

*Condition 2*: S is justified in believing that *if p*, *S’s belief that p is probably reliably formed*.

*Condition 3*: S is justified in believing that *if p, then T’s belief that ~p is formed unreliably*.

In this paper, I’ve *assumed* that, with respect to her Christian belief, Hannah meets Condition 1, and I’ve *argued* that she meets Conditions 2 and 3.

A clarification should be made. In §4.3, I noted that ‘formed reliably’ does not merely mean the belief is true or that it is *formed by an extremely narrow process that is reliable.* Similarly, we should think that ‘T’s belief that ~p is unreliably formed’ in Condition 3 does not just mean that the belief is false or that the narrowest process type forming the belief that P – *forming the belief that P at that moment, in those exact circumstances* – is unreliable. This is not the sort of process relevant to epistemically demoting someone in cases of peer disagreement. If I find out my friend was drunk while doing math, I epistemically demote him and conclude that he formed his math belief unreliably. *Doing math while drunk* is the sort of process relevant to epistemically demoting someone here; it is also compatible with my friend getting the right answer. So, the relevant type of unreliably formed belief formation isn’t the belief’s being formed by an extremely narrow process type that is unreliable.

With that said, I’ll show how Conditions 1–3 are not met *that* easily and that Hannah’s strategy does not *easily* generalize. Condition 1 is often not met. For example, most flat-earthers won’t meet Condition 1 because they either won’t have *prima facie* justification for their belief or they’ll have plenty of defeaters for it independent of the disagreement. In §4.3, we saw that Condition 2 is often not met.

Condition 3 is often not met. Consider the Mental Math case. The person, call him ‘David’, will normally not have justification for thinking that *if the tip is $43, then my friend’s belief that it’s $45 was formed unreliably*. (Call the friend ‘Tom’.) David and Tom have both used the same process of thinking hard, putting pencil to paper, and carefully coming to an answer, and David’s overall evidence supports thinking that Tom is of equal reliability in using that process, even if the tip is $43. Now, David *can* think the narrower process type, the process of *forming the belief that the tip is $45, at this exact time, under these precise circumstances*, is extremely unreliable (*if* the tip is $43). It would have a 0% reliability! However, this is not the sense of ‘formed unreliably’ meant in Condition 3. So, David does not meet Condition 3.

Similarly, a platonist won’t be justified in believing that *if platonism is true, then my nominalist colleague’s belief that platonism is false was formed unreliably*. The platonist should think that her philosophically astute colleague’s belief was formed by the same sort of reliable (or unreliable) philosophically reflective process that she used, regardless of platonism’s truth. Unlike Hannah’s Christian belief, which has the implication that humans are, in some sense, spiritually dead in their natural, sinful human state, most platonists would not think that their platonism has analogous implications of fallenness for their nominalist colleagues! In these cases, the *de facto* question (truth question) is sufficiently unrelated to the *de paribus* question (the question of who is my peer). So, we need not worry about Hannah’s strategy *too easily* generalizing.[[44]](#footnote-44)

*6.3 How to Deal with a Standoff*

In this final section, I will respond to two questions:

Question 1: Are there other cases where Conditions 1–3 are met?

Question 2: What should two believers do if they both meet Conditions 1–3 and their views contradict each other?

My answer to Question 1 will simply be that I do not know. Not being a religious studies scholar, I’ll avoid making claims about whether other religious beliefs could plausibly be both epistemically self-promoting and others-demoting for someone. However, by laying out Conditions 1–3, I have laid out how other religious beliefs *could* be self-promoting and others-demoting, and I invite those who are familiar with other religions to consider whether Hannah’s strategy can work for them.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Let us move to Question 2.[[46]](#footnote-46) Suppose that Archie affirms some religion (call it ‘Religion X’), that Religion X is logically inconsistent with Christianity, and that Hannah disbelieves Religion X because it is inconsistent with Christianity. As we did with Hannah, let us assume that Archie’s belief in Religion X is *prima facie* justified and does not face defeaters apart from the disagreement. Let us also suppose that Religion X specifies that when people believe Religion X in condition C, the belief in Religion X is reliably formed. Archie notices that he believes Religion X in condition C and, using his belief in Religion X, comes to believe that his belief in Religion X was probably reliably formed. We’ve now just stipulated that Archie meets Conditions 1 and 2.

Archie then reasons as follows:

1. If Religion X is true, then those who form a belief about Religion X without the aid of the X-Spirit will form their belief unreliably.
2. Hannah disbelieves Religion X without the aid of the X-Spirit.
3. If Religion X is true, then Hannah’s disbelief in Religion X was unreliably formed.

Archie might justifiedly believe (4) because Religion X implies that humanity has been stricken with spiritual disease and so needs the X-Spirit to form accurate religious beliefs. Archie might believe (5) on the basis of Hannah’s testimony: she has reported never having an experience with the X-Spirit. Then, in accordance with LESSON, Archie can use his belief in Religion X and his belief in (6) to infer that Hannah’s disbelief in Religion X was unreliably formed. Having spelled out the case, we can now ask Question 2 with Hannah and Archie in mind.

They are at a standoff. One might wonder how Hannah and Archie should reasonably engage each other, once they realize that they are in this standoff. I think they can at least do two things. First, they can revisit arguments for the relevant *de facto* claims. Hannah might try to win Archie over with a historical argument for Jesus’ resurrection, or Archie might try to win Hannah over by showing that Christianity includes some logical inconsistency. The strategy would be to cause the other person to gain a defeater for their belief and not satisfy Condition 1.

But suppose they have had their discussions, they have not successfully provided the other with a defeater, and they still disagree. At this point, we might have reached the end of what rational persuasion can do. Then, and this is the second thing, we will have to appeal to means other than rational persuasion. For example, Hannah might pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth of Christianity to Archie. If Religion X is theistic, Archie might pray that Hannah can be freed from spiritual disease that afflicts her with Christian belief.

One might think that Hannah and Archie should now withhold belief. They might see that they are in a standoff and wonder, *how do I know that I’m the one who’s in the right?* To answer that, they might think that they are just as likely to be reliable as the other and so be moved toward agnosticism.[[47]](#footnote-47)

I argue, however, that they need not do this. They can *easily* answer the question that *they* are in the right. They have a justified belief that *their* belief was formed reliably! And they have a justified belief that *the other* belief was formed unreliably. That’s how they can justifiedly believe that they are in the right and not the other. They might grant that, from the other person’s perspective, they can all make similar moves as them, but they have justification for thinking that the other person’s moves are unreliable. So, there really isn’t a good reason to think that either side should have to withhold their religious belief. I take this to be an instance of reasonable religious disagreement.

Suppose my claims in the previous paragraph are false and that I have answered Question 2 incorrectly. Suppose that, in the unique case where Conditions 1–3 are simultaneously met by two believers of contradictory views who find themselves demoting each other, they do gain a defeater for their religious beliefs. Suppose all that’s correct. (I grant that there is an intuitive pull to say this.) It does not follow that the main theses of my paper are false or unsupported. I will still have shown circular and question-begging ways by which one can deflect defeat from religious disagreement in the many cases in which Conditions 1–3 *are* met (and the person is not encountering someone for whom Conditions 1–3 are also met). I will have shown that there is nothing wrong with reasoning in these ways, despite their being circular and question-begging.[[48]](#footnote-48)

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1. For example, see Alston (1991), Plantinga (2000), Tucker (2011), Moon (2016, 2017b) and McNabb (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Plantinga (2000, 202). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. However, see footnote 4 for an important, explicit addition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here, I see a gap in Plantinga’s argument. Nothing in Plantinga’s above characterization of ‘Christian belief’ included anything about the Holy Spirit or his role. So, Plantinga’s claim here about what is probably true, given Christian belief, is unsupported. To close the gap, then, we should stipulate as a part of ‘Christianity’ the proposition that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, guides the process by which sinful humans gain salvation, regeneration, and eternal life with God. And if the Holy Spirit is playing this role, then the Holy Spirit *is* probably instigating Christian belief formation. Thanks to Eugene Mills and a referee of this journal for encouraging me to address this. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. But doesn’t the Christian need to *know* that her belief is formed by this reliable process, or have evidence that her belief is produced reliably? No. See Moon (2018a) for exploration of this question and related questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Korman (2019) for an impressive summary and bibliography of debunking arguments across a wide array of areas in philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more discussions of how CSR might be relevant to religious belief, see Clark and Barrett (2011), Dawes and Jong (2012), Murray and Schloss (2013), Thurow (2013), Braddock (2016), Law (2018), and McNabb (2019, 25–33). The literature is large, and this is just a small sample. Also worth mentioning is the so-called ‘problem of contingency’ or ‘problem of irrelevant influences’ for religious belief (see Hick (1997), Plantinga (2000), White (2010), Bogardus (2013), Vavova (2018) and the references therein), according to which one’s religious belief is due merely to factors such as one’s schooling, culture, or upbringing; one’s belief, therefore, is epistemically defective. (See the footnote after the next one for more on this problem.) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Indeed, people began to realize that one could easily apply both Plantinga’s old religious epistemology and his response to the Freud-Marx objection to the newer and shinier debunking arguments. For examples, see White (2010, 583), Clark and Barrett (2011, 21–22), Murray and Schloss (2013, 251–252), Moon (2016, 881–882; 2017b), Braddock (2016, 280–282), Wielenberg (2016, 89–90), and McNabb (2019, 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This response applies to the problems of contingency and irrelevant influences (see footnote 7): if Christianity is true, then one doesn’t believe *merely* because of one’s schooling, culture, or parental upbringing; one believes due to a reliable testimonial process guided by the Holy Spirit. See also footnote 23 of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The strategy of using an undermining debunker is not original. The argument I formulate resembles ones by Dawes and Jong (2012), and especially Braddock (2016) and Law (2018), by aiming to show that CSR considerations give someone an undermining debunker rather than a blocking debunker. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Proposition p\* will be relativized to an individual believer, and this is present in Bergmann’s notation. I will leave it out for simplicity’s sake. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For similar defeat principles, see Bergmann (2005) and Moon (2018a). As I show in (2018a, 257), principles like the Defeater Principle are widely endorsed in contemporary epistemology. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For example, from Fumerton: “You cannot *use* perception to justify the reliability of perception! You cannot *use* memory to justify the reliability of memory!” (1995, 177). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For example, see van Cleve (1984), Alston (1989, 319–349), Plantinga (2000, 125; 2002, 241–242), Pryor (2004), Markie (2005), Bergmann (2002, 76–82; 2006, 179–211), Sosa (2009), and Weisberg (2012). The literature is large, and this is just a small sample. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This paragraph contained a cursory presentation of an argument for the possibility of benign epistemic circularity by Bergmann, which is developed in more detail in his (2006, 206–211). For more defenses of benign epistemic circularity, see the references in the previous footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As a referee points out, perhaps one should seriously question or doubt p because one lacks *prima facie* justification. Or perhaps one might lack a defeater, but certain externalist conditions – say, one’s cognitive design plan – makes it so a person should seriously question or doubt p. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Are there other reasons to think a circular belief is malignant? Yes. See footnote 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The distinction was first introduced in Plantinga (2002, 224). For more on the distinction and its importance to debunking arguments, see Moon (2017a) and Barker (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Disagreement will be dealt with in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See footnote 4. Note that I explicitly include the Holy Spirit’s role as part of Christian belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Thanks to Michelle Panchuk and Laura Callahan for helping me see the need to address this. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. We see here how Hannah *might* come to know that she knows that Christianity is true. Hannah would have what Sosa (2009) calls ‘reflective knowledge’. Hannah’s competently reflecting on the specific circumstances of her Christian belief formation allows her to meet a condition for reflective knowledge that VanArragon (2012, 126) worries Christian believers might not have. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Hannah can give a similar response to the problem of contingency or irrelevant influences (see footnotes 7 and 9). She can conclude that she doesn’t believe merely because of her upbringing or her schooling, but also by the Holy Spirit’s influence. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. There are other conditions for circular beliefs being malignant (in the literature on *bootstrapping*), but they have either compelling objections (see Weisberg (2012)) or are not relevant to Hannah’s reasoning. For example, Weisberg argues that certain inductive, bootstrapping, track record arguments result in unjustified, circular beliefs because of illicit adding of evidence to an inductive base. But Hannah’s not doing that. So, we can put Weisberg’s criterion aside. Bergmann’s condition is both plausible and also most likely to apply to our case, so I focus on it. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For a similar reason, Tucker (2010, 509) argues that the inability to resolve doubt (defeat a defeater) does not prevent justification from being transmitted from belief in the premises of an argument to belief in its conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Dawes and Jong (2012, 138–139) and Braddock (2016, 280) have noted that certain ways of responding to defeaters from CSR are *too easy* (even making defeat impossible!) and so should be rejected. The rest of this section will show that this concern does not afflict my suggestion for Hannah’s defeater-deflection. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thanks to a referee for helping me see this concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Thanks to Philip Swenson and a referee for helping me see this concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Stating precisely what this reliable belief formation amounts to is a hard task for both the debunker and the debunkee. Still, we have clear cases of defeat (when one should think one’s belief is probably not reliably formed) and clear cases of lack of defeat, and that is enough for our discussion to advance. For reasons to think that this reliable belief formation is necessary for warrant, see the next footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Suppose someone claims that warrant *doesn’t* entail this reliable belief formation. Then the Defeater Principle, used by the debunker, is false. For Hannah could respond, “Well, I *am* justified in thinking my belief (probably) has warrant – what turns true belief into knowledge – which is a superb epistemic good, so I shouldn’t be concerned that I should think it’s not probable that my belief is reliably formed.” Put another way, if you are justified in thinking your belief is warranted, then even if you should think your belief is probably not reliably formed (in the sense currently under discussion), that is not sufficient to give you a defeater. So, we have a counterexample to the Defeater Principle. For the debunker to avoid this counterexample, he should take ‘reliably formed’, in the Defeater Principle, to indicate a necessary condition for warrant. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Thanks to Donald Smith, Philip Swenson, Greta Turnbull, Daniel Rubio, Cameron Kirk-Giannini, Jeff Tolly, and Laura Callahan for helpful conversation about content in the following three paragraphs. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. A successful *de facto* objection alone will show that a proposition is false but not show that any specific believer has an unjustified belief. We could convert a *de facto* objection into a *de jure* objection by noting that some specific believer, who has considered and appreciated a successful *de facto* objection, has gained a defeater for her belief, and so her belief is unjustified. This could be the case for Hannah. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Defeaters are normally independent of each other. For example, whether an argument from evil is a successful defeater is independent of whether an argument that the trinity is incoherent is a successful defeater. This independence does not hold here. If an argument from evil is a successful defeater for Hannah’s Christian belief, then our debunking argument also becomes a successful defeater because she can no longer use her Christian belief as a deflector. More generally, if Christian belief has any other defeater, then our debunking argument *can* serve as a successful defeater for Christian belief. Thanks to Luis Oliveira for helpful conversation and this interesting point. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Suppose Hannah justifiedly believes a version of Christianity, call it ‘Christianity1’, which implies that one can form belief in Christianity1 *only if* the Holy Spirit is involved. She might then think that, *even in this drug case*, if Christianity1 is true, the Holy Spirit was probably at work in her Christian belief formation. Then, couldn’t she still use a version of (I)–(III) to deflect defeat? In theory, yes. But note that in such a case, Hannah could still gain a defeater by way of a *de facto* objection. It is at least doubtful that the Holy Spirit was at work in the pill, which should make it doubtful that Christianity1 is true. So, she would still gain a defeater for her belief in Christianity1. Thanks to Philip Swenson for helpful discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For example, see Alston (1991), Plantinga (2000), Feldman (2007), Frances (2008), King (2008), Lackey (2014), Bergmann (2015), Baldwin & McNabb (2019), De Cruz (2019), and Pittard (2016, 2019). King (2008) and Pittard (2016) are helpful, clear surveys of the issues. The literature is large, and this is just a small sample. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Against Independence has been Kelly (2005, 2010, 2013), Sosa (2010), Lackey (2010), Frances (2010), Bergmann (2015), and Moon (2018b). In its defense has been Christensen (2011, 2018, forthcoming) and Matheson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Alston (1991, 270–275) for a way of defending option (c). Plantinga (2000, 452–457) can be taken to be defending either option (a) or (c). See footnote 43 for more discussion of Plantinga’s response. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. It is only in the sense of ‘question-begging’ just explained – the Independence1-conflicting one – that I am defending a question-begging response to religious disagreement. I don’t have a complete definition of ‘question-begging’, but for this paper, the following is a sufficient condition: “S’s beliefs about another person’s epistemic credentials about whether p, in order to determine how or whether to modify S’s own belief about p, is question-begging *if* S relies on S’s own reasoning about p or S’s initial belief about p.” Thanks to a referee for encouraging me to clarify. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This is from p. 71. Since each counterexample builds upon the previous one, those who are unconvinced by Counterexample 5 alone might benefit from examining the previous four counterexamples. Note that the sort of reasoning used here falls under what Begby (forthcoming) calls ‘evidential preemption’, which he defends as legitimate reasoning. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. LESSON is similar to, and consistent with, Moon’s (2018, 73) Lessons 4 and 4a. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Christensen (forthcoming) has responded to Moon (2018b) not by disputing that this is a real counterexample to Independence, but by apparently conceding it and revising Independence. But then there is nothing in the way of inferring LESSON and applying it to Hannah’s case. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Note that Hannah’s epistemically demoting Archie with respect to his belief about Christianity does not entail that Hannah does not think of Archie as wise and intelligent more generally. It also does not entail that Hannah is arrogant or has a haughty attitude about this. For a related concern, see Frances (2008, 60) and Bergmann’s (2015, 42–45, 50n66) reply to Frances. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Compare my response with Plantinga’s (2000, 452–457; 2015, 252–254). The believer in Plantinga’s example makes similar judgments (about her own reliability and others’ reliability) as Hannah, but Plantinga never says *on what basis* the believer can make those judgments. I took this to be Anita Renusch’s (2015) main criticism of Plantinga’s position. I lay out the basis for Hannah’s judgments in this paper, and so deflect Renusch’s criticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. For more discussion of the connection between some *de facto* and *de paribus* questions, see Moon (2018b). Interestingly, I do not think that theism alone is an epistemically self-promoting and others-demoting proposition for most theists. First, in Moon (2017b, 455–461), I argue that, given skeptical theism, theism alone does not have implications for the formation of a theist’s own belief forming mechanism. And I argued in Moon (2018b, 75–76) that theism alone does not have implications for atheistic belief formation. I also argued in Moon (2018b, 73–75) that the atheist *can* use her belief in atheism as an others-demoting proposition (although it is difficult to see how it could be self-promoting). So, in previous papers, the atheist had the upper hand to the bare theist. In this paper, I argue that the Christian theist has epistemic resources that neither the bare theist nor the atheist have. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Baldwin and McNabb (2019) explore whether Plantinga’s religious epistemology can be applied to other religions. Perhaps the Zen masters described by Frances (2008, 62) are in this position. For a reply to Frances, see Bergmann (2015, 48n63). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Question 2 is motivated by Pittard’s (2019, 147–157) planets case. People of Planet A are told important truths by Kind Deity (by way of prophets), including the truth that people of Planet B are deceived by an evil angel. People of Planet B are similarly told corresponding claims by Evil Angel (who mimics the actions of Kind Deity), including the claim that people of Planet A are deceived by an evil angel. They are also told about what the other “angel” is claiming. Pittard claims that, after being told all these things, people of both planets should withhold belief about their own deity’s trustworthiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Cf. Pittard (2019, 152). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Thanks to Philip Swenson for many helpful conversations about this paper over many years, as well as helpful comments from a work-in-progress workshop during summer of 2019 at Virginia Commonwealth University (including Cathy Sutton, Donald Smith, Eugene Mills, Jamie Fritz, Miles Tucker, and Tony Ellis), the 2019 Brazilian Summer Seminar in Epistemology of Religion, the audience at the 2018 College of William and Mary undergraduate conference, a 2018 reading group session with the Rutgers Center for Philosophy of Religion (including Laura Callahan, Daniel Rubio, Cameron Kirk-Giannini, Chris Hauser, Howard Robinson, Pamela Robinson, Marilie Coetsee, Jim Jones, and Christina van Arlig), the 2018 Society of Christian Philosopher’s group meeting at the Eastern APA, and a 2018 Philosophy of Religion Works in Progress session at Ryerson University (including Rich Davis, Josh Brecka, Zach Reimer, Kirk Lougheed, David Hunter, and Klaas Kraay). Thanks also to Max Baker-Hytch, Joseph Blado, Helen De Cruz, Liz Jackson, Tyler McNabb, Jeff Tolly, Chris Tucker, and Greta Turnbull for helpful comments and discussion. I’m sad to say that I am probably missing many people who helped me with this paper. Lastly, I am indebted to the many people acknowledged in the final footnotes of Moon (2017b, 2018b), which were originally a part of earlier drafts of this paper and have now become prequels to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)