

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reasonable faith and reasonable fideism

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Abstract

What is faith? And what makes faith reasonable, when it is so? I first defend approaching the question of faith and its reasonableness by starting from faith in the religious context. Next, I develop a ‘venture’ theory of a specific kind of faith of which religious – and specifically Christian – practical commitment to a whole worldview may be taken methodologically as a paradigm case. Then I consider the conditions under which faith-commitment of this general type may be reasonable. I suggest that faith-ventures of this kind are *morally* permissible only when they are made reasonably, with epistemic integrity. I consider the role an appeal to epistemic externalism may have in defending the epistemic integrity of venturing beyond (though not against) the available evidence. I advance a moderate fideist thesis (inspired by William James’s ‘justification of faith’), and consider the debate between Jamesian fideists and evidentialists for whom epistemic integrity requires commitment to be made to truth-claims only to the extent supported by evidence for their truth.

Keywords: Faith; fideism; epistemological externalism

In this article, I develop a ‘venture’ theory of a specific kind of faith of which religious – and specifically Christian – practical commitment to a whole worldview may be taken methodologically as a paradigm case. I seek to defend the claim that, under certain conditions, faith-commitment of this kind can be entirely reasonable.

Starting from ‘the religious case’

To understand how faith can be reasonable it seems we must first understand what faith is. Yet if we take as our basic data the ways ‘faith’ is used in ordinary language, it’s apparent that faith is not something single and unified. There are different kinds of faith, and different contexts in which ‘faith’ features: for a few examples, consider ‘having faith *that* you will succeed, despite setbacks’, ‘having faith *in* democracy’, ‘believing that God exists by faith’, ‘being a person of faith’, ‘professing and keeping *the* faith (or losing it)’, and ‘keeping (or failing to keep) faith *with* someone’. For a full understanding we’ll also need to grasp how faith relates to trust, to hope and to belief. Are having faith and trusting the same or distinct? Is faith a form of hope, or, rather, a ground for hope? Some may judge, then, that any ‘objective’ inquiry into faith must first give an account of faith *in general* by providing a taxonomy or conceptual map of the different ways in which we use the term ‘faith’. But there is, I think, an alternative approach.

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Understanding the reasonableness of faith does indeed presuppose a prior specification of faith. That specification may be provided, however, without first undertaking a comprehensive taxonomy – namely, by focusing on the kind of faith whose rationality is a key matter of concern and debate. That’s the approach I take here, by focusing on a specific kind of *religious* faith – or, rather, on faith of a specific kind *found in* religious contexts, where the point of that circumlocution is to leave it open that faith of that same specific kind may occur in non-religious contexts.

I will be considering faith of a certain specific *general kind*, then, though I won’t be offering a theory of faith *in general*. I’ll focus on this kind of faith specifically in the Christian context. Of course, as we’ve known since Socrates, a respectable account of (for example) courage, or piety, or justice ought to deal with a universal, rather than appealing purely to a presumed instance, as when Euthyphro says that piety is what’s exemplified by his prosecuting his father. So too with faith: it certainly won’t do to say ‘*this is what faith is, Christian faith like mine!*’ Still, Euthyphro can potentially make progress from his chosen paradigm case. He can do so by reflecting on what general features he thinks make pious his action in bringing his father to court. Similarly, then, one may try to develop a general account of a specific kind of faith taking its occurrence in a Christian context as a paradigm case.

Philosophers interested in defending the reasonableness of religious faith may nevertheless feel that an unbiased account should *not* begin from reflection on faith in a specifically religious context. The required generality, they may think, needs to arise from inquiring into faith across all contexts, both religious and secular, making a careful attempt to identify and analyse all the different ‘faith’-concepts that need to be distinguished. That, surely, is an entirely respectable approach – though the task it sets itself is a daunting one. There is no hidden bias, however, in the alternative, deliberately selective, approach I’m taking which zeroes in on a specific kind of faith found in religious contexts, though not exclusively there. I make no assumption (indeed, I would deny) that the general description ‘religious faith’ denotes a ‘proper kind’ (by contrast with ‘secular faith’). I’m starting from the religious case only in the sense that it’s there that I find the type of faith whose nature and reasonableness I’m investigating, and which has, I believe, been at the centre of historical debate about faith and reason.

Faith as ‘venturing’ commitment to the truth of an entire worldview

In this section, using Christian faith as my example, I will develop an account of faith as resting, at its core, on a ‘venture’ which commits in practice to the truth of an entire worldview.

To begin, I’ll start from what seems like the beginning, namely, with the question of the *category* to which faith of the kind exemplified by Christian faith belongs. ‘Faith’ itself is an abstract term, and theories of faith don’t usually take the form ‘Faith is such-and-such’; typically, they analyse something more concrete – namely, what it is for *some person, M, to have faith*. My inquiry’s target seems, then, to be *a certain type of property of individual persons*.¹

Faith as dispositional belief . . .

Evidently an individual’s having faith is not a physical property; presumably it’s a psychological one. But what kind of psychological property is it? It doesn’t seem *as such* to be an occurrent conscious, or qualia-bearing, state. Apparently, then, for M to have faith is for M to be in a certain *dispositional* psychological state – but of what kind?

One candidate is belief – that is, dispositional belief that some proposition (that *p*) is true. M's having the belief that *p* is M's having the disposition to 'feel' it true that *p* and to affirm that *p* (whether overtly or purely mentally). M's having the belief that *p* is also a broad *practical* disposition: when the question whether *p* seems to M relevant for M's settling how to act, M is disposed to take it to be true that *p*, employing 'that *p*' as a premise in practical reasoning (whether consciously and deliberately or otherwise). Faith understood as constituted just by dispositional belief could, however, only be 'propositional' faith 'that *p*', marked out from belief generally through its distinctive content – namely, given our paradigm, religious or relevantly similar content. (An account of faith as belief would therefore have its extension limited by what's taken to be admissible propositional content for a belief to count as a 'faith-belief'.)

... plus an affective or evaluating state: something still missing?

Faith in our paradigm case seems to need description as faith *in* God, however, and someone's having faith *in* God involves more than dispositional beliefs with appropriate propositional content. So, if our target kind of faith does consist in some dispositional psychological state, that dispositional state looks not to be merely a propositional belief-disposition. One suggestion is that we need to add to propositional belief some kind of positive affective and/or evaluating state (for example, approving feelings and/or judgments of approval). It might be held, for instance, that for a person, M, to have faith in X (of a kind exemplified by Christian faith in God) is for M to believe that relevant propositions are true, and also to *welcome* their being true, approving their truth and having positive feelings towards the X (the object of faith) implicated in those propositions.

Understanding faith as 'welcoming' belief with suitable content may not, however, adequately account for the *active and practical aspect* of Christian faith. That faith essentially has such an active aspect seems implied in characterizing Christian faith as faith *in* God. It may not be adequate, then, to understand faith purely as a cognitive, or a cognitive plus affective, psychological state, because there is something in the category of *action* that is essential to this kind of faith.

Faith's essentially active component

Judaeo-Christian faith in God as characterized in scripture involves trusting in God and being faithful to God in a covenantal relationship. The kind of faith of which Christian faith is a paradigm case, then, may be understood as 'action-centred commitment to following a person or way' (McKaughan (2016), 78). That may seem, then, to be the additional 'active component' that would be missed by an account of (this kind of) faith purely as the state of 'welcoming' belief: indeed, the question can be raised whether actual belief is even necessary for faith if following 'the way' is possible without it (I'll return to that issue below).

Those who think that having faith is just a matter of certain psychological dispositions might reply that actively trusting in God is the practical *working out* of faith, rather than faith itself. And they might point out that an account of faith as 'welcoming' belief conceptually ties faith to action, since belief disposes the believer to deploy its content in practical reasoning. That conceptual tie, they may say, is all that's needed to take account of what's active in faith. Since it is clear, however, that Christian faith isn't worthwhile unless it leads to active trust in God, perhaps it's not important to settle whether active trust belongs to faith itself or just to what's needed for faith to show its worth in practice.

I'll proceed, then, on the basis that we are seeking a theory of faith *that is worth having*. In taking the Christian context as providing the paradigm of faith of my target kind, it is apt to focus, then, on worthwhile Christian faith – or, to be more accurate, Christian faith

as *held to be* worthwhile. Philosophers will, of course, have it in mind that a moral concern may always be raised as to whether any given particular case of faith in a religious context *really is* worthwhile. Indeed, within the Abrahamic traditions, this concern isn't merely philosophical: it's a vital religious imperative to avoid misplaced or idolatrous faith.

I'm accepting, then, that faith (of the kind Christianity holds worthwhile) essentially involves active commitment. I'll now consider further the character of that active commitment and what's needed to constitute it. In order to do so, I'll look more closely at the content of Christian faith and the question of how having a Christian faith-commitment comes about.

Faith as practical commitment to the truth of a worldview

Christian faith that is thought worthwhile is active faith in God. In understanding what this faith amounts to, however, I believe it's not enough to see it just as a relation to a supreme being or as commitment to a certain way of living. To trust in God, or in God's commands and promises, one must be practically committed to its being true that *there is* a God (*this* God), who is to be trusted. If that's correct, there is an active commitment *that underlies* actions of trusting in God and following 'the way', a commitment that needs to be in place for those actions to be reasonable. To trust in God requires practical commitment to God's existence – to the existence of the God who, in the Abrahamic traditions, is the Creator for whose good purposes all that is real exists as it does. This underlying practical commitment must, then, in fact be practical commitment *to the truth of an entire worldview* – an overall view of reality as being, so to say, 'the God-way', the way theism holds it to be.

I propose, then, that Christian faith in God should be taken to consist, at its basis, in a practical stance that accepts Christianity's view of ultimate reality, presupposing this view as framing all one's experience of, and interaction with, the world. I'm not denying that worthwhile Christian faith in God consists in actions of trusting God and following the way of the Christ; but I'm claiming that these actions make sense only given something logically more fundamental, which is not itself belief or any other dispositional cognitive state, but is rather *in the category of (mental) action*, namely *opting to take it to be true in practice* that reality is overall as Christianity says it is.²

Understanding the content of this presuppositional practical stance which is fundamental to Christian faith is a matter of understanding (to the extent that one may) what it is for reality to be 'the God-way' according to Christianity. Here's a sketch: according to the Christian worldview, the entirety of what exists ('the Universe', with a capital 'U') constitutes a divine creation existing to fulfil divine purposes which (so far as humans need to know them) are revealed in human history, culminating in the life and teaching of Jesus the Christ, and continuing in the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church (the 'Body of Christ'). For humanity to be fulfilled (according to this Christian worldview) human wills must be aligned with the will of God, which may be summed up in Christ's 'new commandment' that we should love one another as he has loved us. For this to happen, individuals must be transformed away from their natural self-centredness to become participants in the 'kingdom' of justice, peace and love that Jesus proclaimed as already at hand among us but which, ultimately, is a sharing in God's eternal life.

Much is contested, of course, in the work-in-progress which is Christian theology – the discipline that articulates the Christian worldview from the perspective of faith-commitment and deals with problems and disputes that arise as faith seeks understanding. My sketch above expresses Christian theological basics only (yet it will no doubt meet some disagreement, largely, I expect, from those who think crucial details need adding – pun intended!). My intention here, though, is not to debate the essentials of Christian theology

but just to emphasize that faith in God rests on practical commitment to an overall view of reality as purposive and meaningful, and of human beings as having a nature and destiny whose fulfilment is achievable through living in accordance with that view of reality.

To conclude this section, a note of caution. I am saying only that Christian faith is commitment to the truth of an overall worldview framing all one's experiences and interactions, not that every Christian actually does think of it thus, let alone is in possession of an articulation of an entire Christian worldview. Typically, I agree, Christians will simply think of themselves as trusting in God and following the way of the Christ. If I am right, though, it will be true that reflective Christians will recognize that their faith is founded on practical commitment to the truth of a whole Christian worldview whose content and implications for human existence they seek, open-endedly, to further understand.

Faith as venturing beyond what's rationally required

Assuming it is granted, then, that Christian faith rests on commitment to a Christian overall view of reality, we may next consider how people may become committed in practice to the truth of that Christian worldview. It is of the first importance to recognize that they do not do so purely by engaging in some rational practice that delivers, from an initially neutral starting point, the endorsing judgment that one ought to make such a commitment. Our intersubjectively checkable empirical methods – of sensory perception and the scientific theorizing based upon it – cannot confirm the kinds of value-laden claims about ultimate reality, its purposiveness, and the place of human nature and its flourishing within those ultimate purposes, which belong to the Christian worldview. Christian faith-commitment is thus a venture beyond what all our shared available evidence (according to the applicable rational norms) requires us on pain of irrationality to accept as true, or, at least, as more probably true than not.³

The claim that Christian faith-commitment involves a venture in the sense described may seem an obvious, even an elementary, truth. It is, however, challenged by a tradition that takes the reasonableness of Christian faith to consist in its being a commitment which Reason (capital 'R') requires of us. It is widely agreed as implicit in the limitations of human cognition that the truth of the Christian revelation's full content could not be *directly* rationally established. It may yet be claimed, however, that we ought rationally to accept the Christian worldview because a rational assessment of the relevant evidence requires us to accept the authoritativeness of the Christian sources and, therefore, belief in what those sources convey. On this view – which I'll call 'Lockean' since it accords with John Locke's account of the relation between reason and faith – though faith *does* involve commitment to truth-claims beyond what our human unassisted reason can directly understand and verify, there is no venturing beyond what is required of the epistemically reasonable person.⁴ This Lockean view may be challenged, however – and many would say that it is rebutted – by limitations in the purported evidence for the sole authority of the Christian sources (traditionally involving appeal to authenticating miracles) and, more fundamentally, by the diversity of sources which yield contrary claims yet which, by different traditions, are held equally to be authentically revelatory.

The 'Reformed' epistemology prominent in recent philosophy of religion might be seen, though, as dodging these problems with the Lockean view by deploying insights from the philosophy of perception and epistemic externalism in an attempt to retain the view that Christian belief is the exclusively rational stance on matters religious. Alvin Plantinga argues that Christian belief is likely to enjoy high epistemic status (which he calls 'warrant') if Christian belief is true. According to Plantinga's 'extended A/C model', God, if God exists, would be likely to design human creatures with a quasi-

perceptual cognitive faculty that (under certain conditions) directly, non-inferentially, recognizes God's presence and the central truths of the Christian Gospel. Beliefs thus formed would then result from a properly functioning process designed to yield truths and avoid falsehoods, and would therefore have epistemic worth, that is, they would be beliefs worth having in fulfilling the epistemic goal.⁵ Even if this argument is granted, however, there is no denying that commitment to the truth of the Christian worldview goes beyond what widely shared rational empirical methods could show to be rationally required on all the available evidence. (Christians may, of course, have what they regard as compelling evidence supporting their beliefs, such as their own experiences of God's presence; but evidence of that subjective kind won't render their beliefs rationally required according to our shared rational empirical methods, even if it shows, at least *prima facie*, that they are epistemically blameless in holding those beliefs.)

Unless we seriously envisage a revival of the Lockean approach, then, I believe that we (Reformed epistemologists included) must rule out the idea that Christian faith-commitment can be shown to be reasonable by being shown to be required by our available evidence according to the norms of empirical epistemic rationality. Instead, we need an account of Christian faith-commitment as *venturing beyond* what can be shown to be true, or probably true, by rational empirical methods which don't already assume the truth of key elements in the Christian worldview. According to such a 'venture theory', then, a person, M, has Christian faith in God if and only if M takes the Christian worldview to be true in practice, where so doing does *in fact* involve acting and living from an overall stance that accepts the truth of that worldview in the absence of independent empirical rational endorsement of its truth. For M to satisfy these conditions, M will need to have some motivation for commitment 'beyond the evidence', and that motivation will include some positive, 'welcoming', affective/evaluative attitude towards the truth of the claims concerned. The general kind of faith that Christian faith-commitment exemplifies, then, is faith that ventures to commit to the truth of propositions that 'frame' one's experience in the manner of a religious or similar worldview. It is also – perhaps just because of this presuppositional, 'framing', function – faith-commitment whose propositional content cannot in principle be shown to be epistemically justified by appeal to the available evidence according to widely shared, publicly checkable, intersubjective rational norms. (I'll use the term 'faith-venture' for practical commitments with these features.)

To conclude with a similar note of caution as in the previous section, this venture theory claims only that faith-commitment is, in fact, commitment of the venturing kind just described, not that all those with Christian faith consciously recognize it as such. It's only *philosophically reflective* Christians who may see their faith this way, and then – of course – only if their reflections lead them to agree that the Lockean approach fails.

Faith as commitment in the face of (a certain kind of) doubt

Understanding Christian faith according to this venture theory is consistent with a tradition that regards Christian faith as compatible with doubt, and, indeed, as maintained in the face of doubt. One needs to be specific, however, about *the kind of doubt* with which faith is compatible. Since this kind of faith essentially involves taking relevant propositions *to be true* in practical reasoning, it *isn't* compatible with doubting in the sense of *disbelieving* ('God exists? I very much doubt it!'). Nor, for the same reason, is faith of this type compatible with suspending judgment *in practice*. To the contrary, practical commitment to reality's being the Christian way (when sufficiently sustained) *overcomes* that 'sitting on the fence' kind of doubt. But this kind of faith *is* compatible with finding that what one accepts in practice to be true isn't a rationally required belief given the publicly available evidence, and so may reasonably be doubted so far as that way of settling the truth is concerned. Indeed, on

this venture account, having faith *entails* accepting in practice truth-claims open to doubt because their public-evidence-based epistemic justifiability is not secured. Yet faith-commitment *resolves* practical doubts about where to stand and how to live, including the classic practical doubt that arises for reflective believers – namely, the concern that rational integrity might require holding back unless and until ‘the evidence decides’.

Faith, belief and acceptance

According to this venture theory of faith-commitment, M’s having faith essentially involves M’s *practical commitment* to the truth of relevant propositions, and not merely M’s *having beliefs* that those propositions are true. M’s making this faith-commitment thus involves *action*, the mental action of willingly taking certain propositions to be true in practical reasoning – something which is in a different category from M’s being in the *state* of having the belief that those propositions are true.

When M has faith of the target kind, M usually believes the propositions M takes in practice to be true. Indeed, M’s practical faith-commitment to its being true that *p* is typically *motivated* by M’s having such beliefs (after all, a state of belief is intrinsically a disposition to perform the mental action of taking what’s believed to be true in salient reasoning). When M believes the relevant proposition, we may say that M’s faith-commitment involves a *doxastic venture*. That is, M has a certain belief that *p*, and (as thereby motivated) ventures to actively deploy the proposition that *p* as true in practical reasoning even though (as M may recognize if M is reflective) taking it to be true that *p* is not rationally required by the available evidence in accordance with rational empirical methods. This venture is not – it is important to emphasize – any kind of direct willing oneself *into* a state of belief (arguably impossible anyway). Rather, this venture is an act of will that takes to be true in practical reasoning a proposition one *already* believes, yet where that belief is not held on the basis of its being rationally required given publicly available evidence.

There is clearly conceptual space, however, for a venture of faith-commitment to be made *without* accompanying belief that the relevant proposition is true, since the act of taking a proposition to be true in one’s practical reasoning can take place in the absence of the attitude that the proposition is true. One might, for example, act on a proposition’s truth by way of experiment, or pretence, or in playing a role in a play. Those motivations, however, don’t fit with authentic faith-commitment of the kind exemplified in Christian faith. That kind of faith-commitment is typically motivated by belief – albeit by belief that does not usually arise through intersubjectively rational assessment of relevant evidence. Most commonly, faith-commitments (of the kind exemplified in Christian faith) arise through acculturation within, or significant encounter with, an established religious, or relevantly similar, tradition. It is important to acknowledge, however, that people may be motivated to commit to the truth of the Christian worldview without actually believing that it is true, or, even, that it is more probably true than not. For example, they may judge that it would be practically rational to make such a commitment, or they may commit just because they hold that it would be very good for reality to be Christianity’s ‘God-way’. Such people might then commit in practice to reality’s being that way, but they would then not be making a *doxastic* venture, only a *sub-doxastic* one.⁶

Repeated practical commitment to Christian tenets, however, even if made initially without belief, may by habituation eventually produce belief in their truth.⁷ And, in any case, worthwhile Christian faith involves *persistence* in practical commitment to the Christian worldview; the challenge to trust the God ‘whose law is love’ is constantly repeated. Each new challenging occasion brings opportunity for renewed faith-commitment, and when lapses occur (as they always do), faith in God’s mercy and

forgiveness may restore and reinforce commitment. The psychological state of ‘having Christian faith’, then, seems to be a state that *results* from practical commitment to the truths of the Christian Gospel, becoming more stable the more that commitment is repeated.

If that account is correct, then it may seem unlikely for a person’s Christian faith to become well established without actual belief that the Christian worldview is correct. In recent discussions of faith, however, the idea that faith of the Christian sort needn’t involve belief, but only some other, ‘non-doxastic’ positive propositional attitude, has gained considerable support.⁸ Jonathan Cohen’s notion of ‘acceptance’ is one commonly offered example of such a non-doxastic attitude. ‘To accept that *p*’, Cohen says, ‘is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing or postulating that *p* – i.e., of including that proposition . . . among one’s premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not [as when one has belief] one feels it to be true that *p*’ (Cohen (1992), 4).

Now, if, as I’ve argued, having faith requires *making practical commitment* to the truth of relevant propositions, faith essentially involves something actional: a person’s making a faith-commitment is not even in the right psychological category to be identified as a *state* of propositional belief or knowledge. A venture theory of faith thus seems friendly to non-doxasticism, since a venture theory holds that what’s essential for a person to have faith is *the action* of taking relevant propositions to be true in practical reasoning (or, being disposed so to do). There may remain, however, questions about the place of belief in faith. Can there be a settled disposition to perform acts of faith-commitment in the absence of belief that the relevant propositions are true, or will such a settled disposition always involve (or amount to) belief? One may agree that what’s central to faith is an act of commitment to the truth of relevant propositions rather than a state of possessing some positive attitude to their truth, while still regarding belief as playing an essential role in a person’s having faith of the kind exemplified by faith-commitment to the Christian worldview. Faith-commitment requires motivation, and belief that the propositions concerned are true provides it. Faith-commitment may, as already acknowledged, initially be motivated otherwise, and it’s common enough for Christians to persist in commitment to ‘the way’ while being in doubt about particular aspects of traditional creeds and received theological theories. Reasonable practical commitment to ‘the way’, however, seems essentially linked to its evaluation as a *right and good way* for the person to follow, and so (on moral realist assumptions, anyway) to the person’s holding an evaluative belief of that kind.

The scope of ‘venturing’ faith

My target has been faith of a specific kind exemplified in Christian faith: where else may faith of this kind be found? Obviously, it is found in commitment to religious worldviews belonging to the same family as the Christian worldview, as in Jewish and Muslim faith. But ‘venturing’ faith’s scope is wider than faith in the Abrahamic traditions. Commitment to any worldview that takes a stance on ultimate reality and its significance for human existence and flourishing is commitment venturing beyond what is rationally required. All the great religious traditions require commitment of this sort – but, so too does commitment to ideologies not usually thought of as religious, such as to Marxist dialectical materialism. A faith-venture is needed, as well, for commitment to a ‘scientific naturalist’ worldview that holds that there is no more to ultimate reality than a notionally completed natural science could describe. That our lives are to be lived *in the absence* of divinities or universal teleology or any other transcendent religious ultimate is not a

claim that science itself could confirm, nor the indisputable *a priori* rational default, but itself a stance needing a faith-venture.

Further contexts for faith-venture will be found whenever settling some existentially significant factual question is beyond the reach of empirical, scientific, methods. Commitment to basic moral values and ideals may be such a context – at least on the moral realist assumption that there is a fact of the matter about what those values and ideals ‘really’ are. ‘Metaphysical’ commitment to moral realism itself seems to need a venture beyond what ‘reason’ can establish, and may thus count as a faith-stance of the target kind, assuming (as I think we should) that the question it settles is not of merely theoretical importance. Basic practical commitment to other minds and external world realism might also be construed as a faith-stance – but one naturally endowed and practically irrecusable, rather than a response to a real option, as with the other examples.

How faith-ventures can be reasonable

I have characterized faith of the target kind as involving practical commitment to the truth of factual propositions beyond what’s rationally required on the available evidence. This may seem to build irrationality, or at least arationality, into faith’s very essence. That won’t follow, however, if practical commitment beyond the evidence to the truth of certain sorts of factual propositions can (under certain conditions, anyway) be in accordance with the right use of the relevant rational capacities, and therefore reasonable in the sense of rationally permissible. This claim may itself be defended by showing that having their truth rationally supported by the available evidence is not *the only* way in which beliefs may be held, and acted upon, reasonably. That is what I shall now aim to show.

My characterization of reasonableness here is a broad one. Practical commitment to a truth-claim in accordance with the right exercise of the relevant rational capacities does not, on the face of it, seem *obviously* to consist in committing only as the weight of the available empirical evidence dictates according to widely shared, intersubjective, norms for assessing evidence. Yet faith-ventures to commit beyond what the evidence can settle won’t *always* be reasonable in this broad sense. Some faith-ventures are blind, misguided, fanatical, or idolatrous – and these defects may stem, at least in part, from their not being in accordance with the right use of the relevant rational capacities. To be reasonable, faith-venturing must meet certain constraints, which need articulating and defending in explaining how reasonable faith-ventures are possible.

Moral evaluation of faith-ventures, and a ‘moral-epistemic’ link

Faith of the kind I’m considering rests on *practical* commitment to the truth of relevant claims. It may therefore seem that the constraints on reasonable faith-ventures must be those of *practical* rationality. Commitment to the Christian worldview might be held reasonable, then, when and only when it serves the individual’s interests according to decision-theoretic norms. ‘Pascal’s Wager’ might then prevail. It might be argued that the ‘dominating expectation’ of the ‘infinite reward’, however finitely slight the probability of its eventuating, makes ‘betting on Christianity’ decision-theoretically rational.⁹

Yet, as William James remarks, in his famous, but misleadingly titled, lecture, ‘The Will to Believe’, we may feel that faith so arrived at ‘would lack the inner soul of faith’s reality’ (James (1956), 6). If that remark resonates, it is interesting to reflect on why it does. One reason why we may feel something lacking in a faith-commitment motivated just by calculating its expected utility is that it sets aside epistemic concern to align one’s practical commitments with the way reality actually is. Detachment from that concern for

truth may even strike us as a *moral* flaw when it comes to the existentially significant commitments made in religious faith.

That last observation brings to light an important point, since, in any case, the evaluation of faith-ventures clearly does have a moral as well as a rational dimension. Faith-ventures are open to moral assessment when (as in the religious case) they commit to a value-laden worldview with implications for morally significant actions and a whole way of life. If actions issuing from commitment to a certain worldview are morally evaluable, and, as I've claimed, that commitment rests on intentional action, then that commitment must itself be morally evaluable. Furthermore, faith-commitments to religious (and similar) worldviews may be understood as made for the sake of achieving human flourishing and fulfilment, both individual and collective – and, from that perspective, what a worldview says about what makes for human fulfilment and the path towards its achievement is evidently morally evaluable, and, therefore, so too is faith-commitment to such a worldview.

There is a question, then, about the conditions under which faith-ventures to the truth of religious (and similar) worldviews are *morally* permissible. One plausible (though not uncontested) condition is that morally permissible faith-ventures must also be *epistemically* rational ones – in the sense that they must be made in accordance with the right use of rational capacities that promote the epistemic goal of gaining truth while also avoiding error. I call this condition the 'moral-epistemic' link. Its acceptance, I think, underlies James' feeling that taking the 'Pascalian' wager lacks faith's 'inner soul'. And, in any case, there's a line of objection to the 'Wager' argument that supports the need to care about what's true, not just about what it will be advantageous to take to be true in practice. If human fulfilment is, in fact, achievable only within historical existence, then there's a perspective on what ultimate loss can mean in human terms from which commitment to a religious worldview promising fulfilment in an everlasting hereafter risks ultimate loss just as surely as would rejecting a 'hereafter-focused' worldview if that worldview turns out true. If there's no hereafter, focusing hope for ultimate fulfilment outside human historical existence risks failing to achieve the only kind of real human fulfilment that is possible. From that perspective, then, the message would be that there's no dodging epistemic concern for the truth, no short-circuit via purely practically rational, decision-theoretic, considerations. There's a case to be made, then, for the view that faith-commitment of religious and similar kinds is never morally permissible independently of the question of truth and the concern to align one's practical stance with how things really are.

A moderate, Jamesian, fideist thesis

Certainly, William James endorsed this 'moral-epistemic link' principle in his 'justification of faith' in 'The Will to Believe'. With that principle affirmed, it follows that to make a morally permissible faith-commitment to the truth of a worldview one must be motivated by a desire to 'have the truth', despite the truth of the worldview *not* being independently establishable by the publicly available evidence. That is, the assumption must be – a key theme in James's account – that there may be existentially vital truths about reality which, *of their very nature*, could not be ascertained by empirical scientific methods and could therefore be gained only by making a faith-venture. Belief in truths of this kind belongs in religious traditions which posit special revelation – and also seems preserved, albeit by appeal to 'intuition' or 'Reason' rather than revelation, in realist moral and intellectual traditions now often detached (rightly or wrongly) from their religious roots.

Faith-venturing commitment to existentially important truth-claims held to be true in religious (and similar) traditions is then arguably in accordance with the right exercise of

rationality seeking to meet the epistemic goal only if it coheres with the results of our scientific endeavours in service of that same goal. This Jamesian account of faith-venturing therefore imposes the constraint that, to be epistemically permissible, it may go *only beyond and not against* what we reasonably take ourselves to have confirmed through empirical investigation. For faith-ventures to be *morally* permissible they need, then, to be epistemically permissible ('the link principle'), but further conditions will also be needed, for example, to rule out ventures that have content inconsistent with (what we take to be) correct morality (for example, faith in the gods of Nazism).

The thesis that faith-commitment to existentially vital claims may be morally and epistemically permissible when it meets these empirical and moral coherence constraints I have previously described as a 'supra-evidential fideism' (Bishop (2007), 156). That description was perhaps ill-advised, as it seems difficult to shake off from 'fideism' the connotation of a 'blind leap' of faith abandoning all reason. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'fideism' is 'any doctrine according to which all (or some) knowledge depends upon faith or revelation, and reason or the intellect is to be disregarded'. I had hoped to rehabilitate the term to have something like the sense only of the first conjunct in this dictionary definition, reserving 'irrationalist fideism' or 'counter-evidential fideism' for views that endorse its second conjunct. Jamesian fideism is a *moderate* fideism that rejects venturing contrary to what the evidence shows to be true, and allows faith-ventures only when it is *in principle* impossible 'for the evidence to decide'. It needs to be recognized, then, that faith-commitment can remain *within* the scope of concern to use rational capacities to meet the epistemic goal. Epistemology should therefore pay attention to the question of the conditions under which it may be epistemically permissible to make a faith-venture, rather than treating faith-venturing as a non-rational phenomenon outside its purview.¹⁰

Can a faith-venture beyond the evidence have epistemic integrity?

What reasons may be given for accepting this moderate fideist thesis (mismnamed or not)? It seems plausible (as James urges) that it could not be an improper use of our rational capacities to venture to commit to existentially vital truth-claims *if that's the only way we could act in accordance with their truth if indeed they are true*.¹¹ For all we can know by employing empirical methods for confirming matters of fact, however, those truth-claims *could be false*; hence, by venturing we risk error on an existentially vital matter. 'Evidentialist' caution against faith-venturing therefore *also* seems plausible – and *prima facie* epistemically preferable, since faith-venturing commits to propositions where the epistemic worth of holding them true is *not* rationally established by the available evidence. If the epistemic permissibility of faith-venturing is to be defended, then, it needs to be shown in response to this evidentialist caution that practical commitment to the truth of a proposition while lacking adequate evidence-based justification for its truth may nevertheless (at least under certain conditions) have epistemic integrity (in the sense that the commitment is made *in accordance with the right and proper use of the relevant rational capacities*).

Here is a first step towards that conclusion. If it is a real possibility that certain vital truths could come to be acted upon only through a faith-venture, it follows that a faith-venturing commitment to the truth of the relevant propositions beyond any possible evidence-based justification need not abandon the epistemic goal. To have epistemic integrity, then, one necessary condition is that a faith-venture should have a motivation consistent with the desire for one's thinking and acting on existentially vital questions to be aligned with the truth. (Faith-ventures would not be permissible, then, if, for example, they were motivated wholly by the desire to conform, or purely by 'wishful thinking'.)

A further condition is required, though, if it is to be shown that a faith-venture that commits to the proposition that *p* may have epistemic integrity. For such a faith-commitment to have epistemic integrity, it must be a *real possibility* that having and acting on the belief (or other positive propositional attitude)¹² that *p* is true has (positive) epistemic worth (in the sense that it is a worthwhile belief to have in pursuit of the epistemic goal of gaining truth while avoiding error). Now, some philosophers hold that *the only* way a person's belief that *p* is true can be epistemically worthwhile is for its truth to be adequately supported by the evidence accessible to that person. If that evidentialist (and epistemic internalist) view is correct, then the very fact that a faith-venture commits beyond the support of available evidence entails that it cannot have epistemic integrity. This evidentialist view must be contested, then, if faith-venturing with epistemic integrity is to be a possibility. That is, if any faith-venture is to be epistemically reasonable, there must be some *other way*, in addition to enjoying adequate evidential support, in which epistemic worth may be conferred on a person's holding a certain proposition to be true.

Appealing to epistemic externalism, and its limitations

The idea that there's another way apart from evidential support for cognitive states to have epistemic worth is, of course, the main idea of epistemic externalism; so, epistemic externalism may offer some support for the moderate fideist claim that faith-ventures may (under certain conditions) be made with epistemic integrity. Putting it generally, epistemic externalism holds that a person's holding a proposition to be true may have epistemic worth conferred by the right kind of causes without the person having any awareness of that fact, nor having adequate evidence for the truth of the proposition concerned. It may be envisaged, then, that a person might make a faith-venture beyond available evidence, acting on a true belief which in fact possesses high epistemic worth according to an applicable externalist account of what confers such worth. That's an important possibility, which shows that faith-venturing might indeed serve the epistemic goal. We need to do more than recognize this possibility, however, if we are to defend the claim that faith-ventures may, under the right conditions, be made with epistemic integrity – that is, in accordance with the correct and right use of our rational capacities.

Appealing to epistemic externalism is, of course, a key feature of Reformed epistemology. Yet, while Reformed epistemologists agree that faith typically commits to the truth of propositions not arrived at by inference from further evidence, they insist, as Plantinga puts it, that faith 'isn't remotely like a leap in the dark' (Plantinga (2000), 263). I sketched above Plantinga's theory of how Christian belief may have high epistemic worth (or, in his terms, warrant) under his extended A/C model. But this appeal to an externalist account of how basic Christian beliefs may have epistemic worth seems insufficient *by itself* to assure reflective Christians facing the evidentialist challenge that they are exercising their rational capacities correctly when they commit 'by faith' to the truth of propositions not adequately supported by the available evidence.

Epistemic internalism may be false – that is, it may be false that only conditions accessible to believers themselves could confer epistemic worth on their beliefs – yet an internalist perspective remains inescapable for Christians seeking to defend the epistemic integrity of their commitments beyond the evidence. If holding the relevant propositions to be true does in fact have externally conferred epistemic worth, this fact needs to be known to (or, at least, justifiably believed by) a person in order for it to provide assurance that her commitment beyond the evidence to the truth of those propositions has epistemic integrity. Thus, the fact (assuming it is a fact) that a person's belief actually does have high epistemic worth from an external perspective, does not *by itself* entail that the person is justified in believing that she acts with epistemic integrity if she

practically commits to its truth – no more, indeed, than would the fact that the person’s belief can be seen from an external point of view to be true.

On Plantinga’s account the reflective Christian believer has good reason to hold that her beliefs have warrant *if* the Christian worldview is true. But this *conditional* claim obviously falls short of the *categorical* claim that her beliefs *actually do* have warrant. It may seem, then, that the reflective Christian believer cannot, without circularity, assure herself that her commitment to Christian truth-claims has epistemic integrity by satisfying herself that her believing or accepting those truth-claims has epistemic worth. The evidence available to her doesn’t establish this, while the appeal to Plantinga’s externalist theory of warrant seems only to get as far as affirming the conditional *possibility* that her commitment to Christian truth-claims beyond what the evidence establishes has high epistemic worth.

We may, of course, observe that a person’s belief that Christianity is true, her belief that if Christianity is true Christian belief has high epistemic worth, and her inferred belief that her Christian belief *does* have epistemic worth and she is therefore acting with epistemic integrity in her continuing practical commitment to its truth (‘not remotely leaping in the dark’) exhibit a nice coherence. But that coherence could show the epistemic integrity of Christian commitment only with the aid of a coherentist (and internalist) theory of epistemic integrity. Coherentist theories, however, notoriously face the objection that they fail to ensure ‘connection with reality’: distinct and mutually incompatible ‘webs’ of belief may be equally internally coherent. That possibility is eminently apparent when it comes to commitments to overall worldviews such as religious ones. Reflective Muslim believers, for example, might parallel Plantinga’s account of ‘warranted’ Christian belief for the Islamic version of the theist worldview and, on that basis, make the same claim for the epistemic integrity of their Muslim faith-commitment.¹³

The upshot is that practical commitment to a whole religious (or similar) worldview unavoidably involves, from a reflective person’s ‘internal’ point of view, a venture beyond anything that could be established as the exclusively epistemically rational view. In that sense it involves a ‘leap’, though not necessarily an arbitrary and irresponsible leap ‘in the dark’. Moderate Jamesian fideism distinguishes epistemically permissible ‘leaps’ from those that lack epistemic integrity. According to this fideist thesis, a faith-venture has epistemic integrity only if it concerns an existentially vital question that cannot in principle be resolved by intellectual weighing of evidence, where its motivation (though, obviously, not a matter of belief evinced by evidence) is not independent of the concern to act and live in alignment with the truth, and where its content is consistent, not only with the known facts, but also with correct moral values. (Of course, a reflective person may judge this last condition only with respect to what he or she *takes to be* the known facts and the correct moral values.)

Fideism versus evidentialism

The Jamesian thesis just stated is a ‘permissibility’ thesis that may allow a plurality of different, and mutually incompatible, faith-ventures to be equally epistemically permissible for those who make them – though it imposes real constraints and is far from endorsing a faith-venturing free-for-all. Jamesian fideism will be rejected, of course, by evidentialists who maintain that commitment to truth-claims is epistemically permissible only to the extent that their truth is adequately supported by the available evidence. I’ll conclude in this final section, then, by briefly considering how moderate fideism may be defended against the evidentialist challenge.

Evidentialists may grant that it may sometimes be *morally* permissible to commit beyond the evidence – after all, epistemic values are not the only values, so they may

sometimes be overridden. As I've emphasized, however, moderate Jamesian fideists affirm the 'moral-epistemic' link principle for faith-commitment to the truth of worldviews (as in the religious and similar cases). Jamesian fideists are adamant that this kind of faith-commitment can be morally permissible only if it is epistemically permissible – and many evidentialists (including W. K. Clifford, whom James treats as a key opponent) would say 'amen' to that.¹⁴ There's an unavoidable debate to be had, then, between Jamesian fideists and evidentialists over whether commitment outside what the evidence can decide may be epistemically permissible (under the specified Jamesian conditions).

In 'The Will to Believe', James makes some interesting moves on the fideist side of this debate. For example, he serves the evidentialist with a *tu quoque*, arguing that, though the fideist risks falling into error, the evidentialist risks loss of truth, and suggesting that the question of fideism versus evidentialism is *itself* one that cannot be settled by a dispassionate consideration of the evidence, but requires a 'passional' choice beyond evidence – that is, a faith-venture. May one argue, then, that evidentialism is self-undermining because commitment to it requires a faith-venture? Or may the evidentialist admit that point, and persevere, as James himself envisages, accepting that only an initial faith-venture is needed to accept basic epistemic values which entail that thereafter no further faith-ventures are epistemically permitted?¹⁵

A second move James makes is to appeal to interpersonal contexts. Whether you like me or not, James says, 'depends, in countless instances on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation' (James (1956), 23); and he concludes that 'where faith in a fact can help create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say [as Clifford does] that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is "the lowest kind of immorality" into which a thinking being can fall' (*ibid.*, 25). The kind of faith that commits to a worldview, however, is not readily assimilated to such cases: evidently, trusting that reality is (for example) as Christianity claims it to be is not a step that can contribute to creating the fact that the Christian worldview is true. Furthermore, unlike in the interpersonal case, a venturing faith-commitment that the Christian worldview is true may not be merely a preliminary stage, later confirmed by emerging new evidence: Christians may need constantly to renew their commitment beyond any evidence that could assure them that they are doing what's rationally required.¹⁶

James's most passionate advocacy for his position rests, I think, on a point already mentioned above. If we take the evidentialist line, and refuse to commit ourselves until we have evidence which adequately confirms the truth concerned, then we are assuming that all the truth we really need can be obtained by this evidence-driven rational method. But that assumption may be mistaken; it may be unbalanced to place all our trust for the chance of gaining truth and avoiding error on our intellectual powers for arriving at beliefs rationally on the basis of objective (that is, intersubjectively checkable) evidence. To become more balanced, we need to trust other aspects of our nature that prompt us to hold beliefs at the level of a whole worldview – and those 'other aspects' importantly include our having been formed in a particular historical and cultural context which includes our inherited religious traditions.

So, when James says, 'I, therefore, for one, cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic [evidentialist] rules for truth-seeking' (James (1956), 28), I interpret him as reporting his own subjective commitment to a moderate fideism. His view is, in effect, that the debate between moderate fideism and evidentialism has to be settled by a faith-venture, and it will end in impasse if it is treated as a debate about which thesis is *the* rational, epistemically justifiable, position to adopt.¹⁷ In sharing his own 'passional' decision, though, James effectively makes a recommendation for his audience, his readers, to do the same. And this recommendation is essentially a *moral* recommendation. It is, I suggest, a recommendation to *trust our wider nature* – not only our intellectual powers but also inclinations to believe

which have sources other than a judgement of what the intersubjectively available evidence shows to be, or probably to be, the case. He is not recommending, though, that we trust any part of our nature absolutely, but, rather, critically and discerningly; as I have emphasized, James places significant constraints on permissible, ‘passionally’ based, faith-ventures.

I conclude, then, by making the same recommendation. The choice between the moderate fideist and the evidentialist stance is itself a morally evaluable one, since it affects judgements about the epistemic permissibility of commitment to beliefs which influence our morally significant actions and ways of life. It’s a choice about what it is to make practical commitments with epistemic integrity; yet it is properly made, I maintain, by considering what stance on this epistemic question fits best with our considered moral judgements about how we ought to live.¹⁸

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Notes

1. Faith in the Abrahamic traditions is regarded as belonging not only to individuals but also to *groups* of people – ‘the people of God’, ‘the Church’. I’ll treat such talk in the standard methodological individualist way, albeit with misgivings. I believe it’s mistaken to understand Abrahamic faith as solely or principally a matter of an individual’s personal relationship with God; the relationship of ‘God’s people’ to God and the individual’s relation with God’s people are equally vital.
2. In Bishop (2007) I characterize the kind of faith-commitment I am here describing as practical commitment to the truth of propositions that present what William James calls a ‘genuine option’ (‘living, forced and momentous’) and which function as ‘highest-order framing principles’: for an extended discussion, see *ibid.*, 122–150.
3. This ‘venture’ account of Christian faith need not be at odds with the natural theological tradition. Those who hold, for example, that ‘natural’ evidence justifies belief that there exists a First Cause, Intelligent Designer and Necessary Being, still need to concede that a venture is required to commit to the full Christian world-view whose content expands well beyond this belief.
4. For a useful summary of Locke’s views on ‘reason, faith and enthusiasm’ see Uzgalis (2020), section 2.6. Locke defines faith as ‘the assent to any proposition, not . . . made out of the deductions of reason; but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication’, and he adds, ‘[t]his way of discovering truths to men we call revelation’ (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, 18, 2). As Uzgalis remarks, however, Locke thinks that ‘reason does have a crucial role to play in respect to revelation’, not in directly confirming the truth of what is claimed to be revealed, but rather in confirming that ‘the extraordinary communication’ is testimony that ‘comes from one who cannot err, and will not deceive’ (*Essay*, IV, 18, 8).
5. Plantinga names his model ‘A/C’ because he finds in both Aquinas and Calvin the idea that some form of direct, non-inferential, awareness of God’s existence is natural to human beings; he deploys Calvin’s term *sensus divinitatis* to name the quasi-perceptual cognitive faculty his model posits. For Plantinga’s exposition of his model, see Plantinga (2000), ch. 6, and, for its extension to cover direct awareness of specific Christian teachings through ‘the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit’, *ibid.*, ch. 8.
6. I follow Buckareff (2005) in using the term ‘sub-doxastic’, rather than saying that the venture is ‘non-doxastic’. This is because, though in this kind of case the propositions to whose truth practical commitment is made are not *themselves* believed to be true, *some* relevant belief nevertheless seems essential to the motivation for the commitment.
7. Recall Pascal’s advice to those who respond to his ‘Wager’ argument by pleading ‘I am forced to wager . . . and am so made that I cannot believe. What, then, would you have me do?’ Pascal replies that they should act as if they believe; this, Pascal says, ‘will naturally make you believe’ (Pascal (2016), section III, §233).
8. Supporters of ‘non-doxasticism’ include Alston (1996), Schellenberg (2005), Audi (2011), Howard-Snyder (2013), and McKaughan (2013), *Idem* (2016).
9. This description of Pascal’s Wager as ‘an argument from dominating expectation’ is due to Hacking (1972), 187. For objections to the Wager argument, see Hájek (2018), section 5.3.
10. For a full discussion of the considerations that lead to a moderate Jamesian fideist account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for morally and epistemically permissible faith-ventures, see Bishop (2007), 122–165. My final formulation of this Jamesian thesis is ‘(J+)’ (*ibid.*, 165).

11. Compare James:

I cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth seeking . . . I cannot do so for this plain reason, that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there would be an irrational rule. (James (1956), 28; emphasis his)

12. This qualification is needed to cover the case where a faith-venture is sub-doxastic. In what follows, I won't keep repeating this qualification.

13. Aijaz (unpublished) has recently argued that the possibility of a Muslim parallel is an undercutting defeater for Plantinga's theory of warranted Christian belief. For further discussion of the general line of objection outlined here to Plantinga's defence of warranted Christian belief see Bishop and Aijaz (2004).

14. James quotes at some length from Clifford's essay 'The Ethics of Belief' at the end of section II of 'The Will to Believe': see James (1956), 8.

15. I here have in mind this passage from 'The Will to Believe':

Two first steps of passion you have indeed had to admit as necessary, – we must think so as to avoid dupery, and we must think so as to gain truth; but the surest path to these ideal consummations, you will probably consider, is from now onwards to take no passional step. (James (1956), 19)

By 'a passional step' James means, of course, a commitment to a truth-claim not rationally required by the evidence.

16. For more discussion of the analogies and disanalogies between Christian faith and faith in the interpersonal context, see Bishop (2014).

17. For my own fuller discussion of this conclusion about the fideist versus evidentialist debate – that it ends in impasse, and can be settled itself only by a faith-venture – see Bishop (2007), ch. 8.

18. In Bishop (2007), ch. 9, I offer three types of moral consideration for preferring moderate fideism over evidentialism.

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