

Believing by faith

*An Essay in the Epistemology and
Ethics of Religious Belief*

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1

Introduction: towards an acceptable fideism

My aim in this book is to contribute to rehabilitating an unpopular position in the epistemology of religious belief: I seek to defend a version of *fideism*.

The core issue in the epistemology of religious belief is generally taken to be the question of whether religious beliefs are epistemically justified, with ‘religious beliefs’ typically specified as the beliefs of classical theism. This issue provides the familiar territory for perennial philosophical debate between theists and atheists—the contest between natural theology and natural atheology to determine whether our total available ‘natural’ evidence (i.e. evidence that stands independently of any presumed revealed truths) supports the existence or the non-existence of a classical theistic God.¹

Although this debate has often been assumed to be at the heart of Philosophy of Religion, there is also a long-standing view that it is a debate which neither side can win. This view may be expressed as *a thesis of evidential ambiguity* which accepts that the question of God’s existence is left open—perhaps even necessarily—because our overall evidence is equally viably interpreted either from a theistic or an atheistic perspective. The question thus arises whether traditional theistic belief can nevertheless in some sense still be justified even if it is indeed beset by evidential ambiguity. Obviously enough, philosophers committed to theism who are inclined to

¹ For a useful survey of the Philosophy of Religion since the mid-20th century, see ‘The Ethics of Religious Belief: a Recent History’, in Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell (eds), *God and the Ethics of Religious Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–27. Dole and Chignell give a helpful account of the return to centrality of issues concerning the rational justifiability of religious belief.

accept the thesis of evidential ambiguity have an interest in being able to answer this question in the affirmative.

To that end, considerable attention has been paid to the idea that theistic beliefs might be, so to speak, good epistemic currency even though their truth is not supported by independent evidence. This idea is well developed in Reformed epistemology, which maintains that foundational theistic beliefs may carry epistemic worth even though they are held ‘basically’ (i.e. other than by inference from other epistemically justified, more basic beliefs). Indeed, Reformed epistemology has become a significant rival to the more traditional natural theological approach to the epistemic defence of classical theism.²

There has been less discussion, however, of an obvious response to intimations of the evidential ambiguity of theism—namely the fideist response that affirms that people may be justified in holding and acting on religious beliefs even though those beliefs lack sufficient evidential support, whether direct or inferential. To the extent that this response is considered, it is usually swiftly dismissed. And that is natural enough: to an epistemologist, fideism will seem on the face of it not even to be an option when it comes to defending the justifiability of religious belief. If there is any sense in which believing without epistemic certification—‘believing by faith’—can be ‘justified’, it can hardly be an epistemic sense. Or so it seems.

Furthermore, there seem to be serious objections to the fideist proposal that believing by faith without sufficient evidential support might be justified in religious and similar contexts. In the first place, it is hard to see how believing by faith is possible psychologically or even conceptually—for surely belief is essentially a state of finding a proposition to be true through exposure to some form of evidence of its truth? In the second place, even if believing without evidential support is possible, it seems an epistemically—even morally—irresponsible thing to do. Believing by faith appears to be little more than wishful thinking, and to share the same loss of integrity. Once evidential guidance is left behind (if, indeed, it can

² The perspective of Reformed epistemology is set out in essays by William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). Its most thorough development to date is to be found in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

be), what limit is there to the beliefs that might be justified ‘by faith’? How could there be any principled distinction between good and bad, better or worse, ‘leaps of faith’? It seems that sheer subjectivity must reign: practising fideists will inevitably find themselves conjugating the following irregular verb: ‘*I* am a “knight of faith”’, ‘*You* are an ideologue’, ‘*They* are fanatics’.

These are weighty objections. And their weight may be acknowledged without any need to insist on an absolutist evidentialist position—that is, while admitting *some* restricted scope for acceptable believing by faith. (Everyday examples here might include taking a friend to be trustworthy beyond one’s evidence, or believing one *can* succeed in a daunting task when the evidence suggests this is unlikely. A more philosophical example is accepting foundational claims—such as the existence of an external world and other minds, or basic arithmetical truths—while acknowledging that there are no rational means of refuting scepticism about their truth.) Objections to fideism with respect to religious commitments need not, that is, apply to *all possible forms* of believing by faith: they may be understood as *specifically directed* against religious (and relevantly similar) cases of it.

I am convinced, nevertheless, that *a version of fideism* can be defended against objections to believing by faith in religious and similar contexts. Furthermore, I believe that the most philosophically satisfactory response to the evidential ambiguity of theism (or, for that matter, to the evidential ambiguity of any relevantly similar religious, quasi-religious, or even non-religious system of beliefs) is correctly described as a fideist one—although not in the popularly prevailing sense in which to be a fideist is to ignore or reject the deliverances of reason.³ In this book, I shall develop a modest, moral coherentist, ‘supra-evidential’ fideism (the meaning of these qualifying epithets will be explained in due course). This modest fideism is inspired by, though not confined to, William James’s ‘justification of faith’ in his famous 1896 lecture, ‘The Will to Believe’. I shall investigate the prospects for defending this modest fideism against its rival which I shall call (again, for reasons to be explained in due course) ‘hard-line’ evidentialism. My conclusion will be that there can be no decisive rejection of fideism

³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines fideism as ‘any doctrine according to which all (or some) knowledge depends upon faith or revelation, and reason or the intellect is to be disregarded.’ (my emphasis). The fideism I shall defend does not fit this definition.

as epistemically irresponsible. Furthermore, although some favourite fideist arguments are not as successful as often supposed, fideism is open to certain forms of direct moral advocacy. It is an important question whether the morally best kinds of life admit making religious (and similar) commitments insufficiently supported by evidence, or whether, to the contrary, the highest morality is achievable only by resisting the temptation to make such leaps of faith. My conclusion will support fideist commitment to the former view.

As that conclusion suggests, my case for a modest fideism will not confine itself to epistemology. Indeed, I shall construe the fideist claim that religious (and relevantly similar) believing by faith can sometimes be justifiable as ultimately a *moral* claim. To motivate that construal, I shall re-examine the usual assumption that philosophical concern about religious beliefs is directed solely at their *epistemic* justifiability.

The metaquestion: what is the issue about the ‘justifiability’ of religious belief?

My starting point, then, is the following metaquestion: what is it that concerns those who raise questions about the ‘justifiability’ of religious beliefs?⁴

To anchor that metaquestion, consider the following (quite varied) examples of situations in which people are aptly described as concerned about the justifiability, *in some important sense or other*, of their own or others’ religious beliefs.

- An undergraduate from a closely knit conservative Evangelical community is challenged by his new friends in Philosophy 101 to prove his Christian beliefs. He is dismayed to find he cannot: he is able to detect flaws in each of the famous ‘proofs’ of God’s existence he has studied, and can see no way to improve on them. He thus becomes concerned whether he could be justified in continuing to hold and act on his faith-beliefs in the absence of proof of their truth.

⁴ The term ‘metaquestion’ is Plantinga’s: see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 67. Although my own answer to it is quite different from his, I acknowledge the service Plantinga has done by drawing attention to the importance of this metaquestion.

- An eco feminist is convinced that people are morally in error in believing in God, since she thinks that such belief supports the evils of patriarchy and ‘man’s dominion over nature’.
- A scholar spends a lifetime considering all the available evidence for and against the existence of the Christian God and comes to the conclusion that the balance of probability supports such belief and so feels vindicated in his continuing orthodox Christian faith.
- A Christian woman has fallen in love with a Muslim man and wonders whether it would be right (or indeed, even psychologically possible) for her to convert to Islam out of a desire to share his faith just because it is *his* faith.
- A young man from a nation oppressed by an imperial power comes to think that God is calling him to be prepared to sacrifice his life to liberate his people, and takes that as overriding justification to join an armed struggle.
- A journalist interviews a pastor who is convinced that God is telling him to denounce homosexuality as perverted; she comes away stunned at the man’s arrogance, yet reflects that she recently completed an admiring article on a Central American Archbishop martyred for acting on his conviction that God was calling him to denounce the violence of a military junta.

And, for a final example:

- An Anglican priest finds she can no longer believe in the supernatural God of traditional philosophical theism because she thinks it unwarranted to believe in a morally perfect and all-powerful being given the horrendous evils that blight our world. She is troubled as to whether she could conscientiously continue her priestly ministry with suitably revisionist views about the nature of God, or whether she should come clean as a post-Christian atheist who retains from Christianity only certain core moral values.

These examples form a complex and varied set. What they have in common—and further examples with this same common feature could be multiplied many times over—is that in each case people are concerned with, or have views or puzzles about, the ‘justifiability’ in one sense or another of their own or other people’s religious beliefs. In some of these examples, the people involved simply have—perhaps quite dogmatic—opinions

about the justifiability or unjustifiability of certain religious beliefs (the eco feminist, the ‘freedom fighter’). In other examples, however, those involved are themselves concerned about the justifiability of beliefs they already hold, but might revise or abandon, or of beliefs they do not at present hold but which count as more or less live options for them (the undergraduate, the scholar, the Anglican priest). I shall refer to people in this latter category as *reflective* believers, taking that term to include reflective *would-be* believers also.

The justifiability issues with which reflective believers are concerned may, of course, be raised using many different normative expressions. For example, it may be asked whether religious beliefs are *rational* or *held reasonably*; or whether those who hold them are *warranted* in so doing, or *entitled* to take them to be true when they come to act. It may be asked whether people are *within their rights* in holding and acting on their religious beliefs; or whether, in so doing, they are *expressing* or *honouring salient virtues*; or whether holding religious beliefs is *intellectually* or *morally respectable*; or whether, in acting upon those beliefs believers are doing what they *ought* to do, or what it is *permissible* for them to do. Notice that sometimes the focus of these questions is on the status of people’s religious beliefs themselves, and sometimes on what people do with, or in virtue of, their religious beliefs. I shall make more of that difference later. But for now I will refer to all such questions simply as questions about the *justifiability* of religious beliefs, though I recognize that the different normative terms I here place under one grand umbrella have often been recruited to make important distinctions—though by no means in uniform ways.

Faith-beliefs

My inquiry concerns religious beliefs—but what do I take the scope of religious belief to be? I take as my paradigm religious beliefs in the theistic traditions—with the core belief of each such tradition being that God exists, and is revealed historically in certain specific ways that vary according to the tradition concerned.⁵ Classical philosophical theism specifies the nature of

⁵ Note that the term ‘belief’ is used here to refer to a certain kind of psychological state known as a *propositional attitude*. This usage is so familiar in the analytical tradition that the fact it is a technical

God as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, supernatural personal Creator *ex nihilo* of all else that exists.⁶ It is an interesting question—though a question I shall not here directly pursue—whether that classical theistic concept of God is in fact adequate to the God who is worshipped in theistic religious traditions.

But there are, of course, *non-theistic* religious beliefs—and there may also be quasi-religious or non-religious beliefs about which analogous justifiability concerns arise. Indeed, my defence of a modest fideism will amount to a defence of believing by faith *any* propositional content that plays a relevantly similar cognitive role to that of theistic religious beliefs, and which exhibits the same evidential ambiguity as putatively affects theism. How that whole category of relevantly similar beliefs might be defined is an interesting question, to which I shall in due course return. Since theistic religious beliefs constitute the cognitive component of theistic faith, I shall sometimes describe them, and the general category to which they belong, as *faith-beliefs*, and their propositional contents as *faith-propositions*.⁷ Whether, as fideists maintain, faith-propositions are ever properly believed ‘by faith’ (in the sense that they are believed without sufficient evidential support) is, however, left entirely open under this description of them. For, there are, of course, important *non-fideist* models of theistic faith that take its cognitive component to consist wholly in faith-beliefs held *with* adequate evidential support.

one is often forgotten. (Also familiar is the use of ‘the belief that p’ to refer, by metonymy, to the proposition that is the intentional object of the attitude.) In the philosopher’s technical sense, then, to have the belief that p is simply to have the attitude towards the proposition p that it is true. In this sense, believing that p is consistent with—indeed necessary for—knowing that p. In ordinary usage, however, believing and knowing may be contrasted: to say that one believes that p is sometimes implicitly to deny that one knows that p. Some practising theists may thus deny that they merely ‘believe’ that God exists—they affirm that they ‘know’ it. Theistic religious belief, furthermore, is centrally a matter of believing *in* God (in the sense of placing one’s trust in God)—and, in this sense, to believe is obviously more than just to have a certain kind of attitude to a proposition.

⁶ There is room for variation, of course, in formulated definitions of the classical theist’s God. Compare, for example, Richard Swinburne’s definition of God as ‘[a] person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the Universe’ (*The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, rev. 1993): 1).

⁷ A belief will be a *faith-belief*, then, in this stipulated sense, just in case it is held in, and has the right kind of relation to, some particular context in the same way that beliefs that make up the cognitive component of (e.g.) Christian theistic faith are held in and related to the context of Christian faith.

Overview of the argument

So much by way of introduction. My attempt to defend fideism—or at least a certain modest version of it—begins at the start of the next chapter. I will supplement this introductory chapter with an overview of what is to come.

Chapters 2–4 deal with preliminaries needed to set the stage for my case for a modest fideism. In Chapter 2, I tackle the important metaquestion identified above. What notion or notions of justifiability are at issue in a reflective believer's concern? I shall outline a standard answer to this question: namely, that what is at issue is whether faith-beliefs are epistemically justifiable in the sense that it is reasonable to hold them on the basis of one's evidence of or for their truth. I shall argue that this standard answer fails to recognize that reflective believers' concern is ultimately for the *moral* justifiability of *taking faith-beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning*. Our control in relation to our beliefs—which seems presupposed if concern for their justifiability has any point—is exercised, I shall claim, at two 'loci': indirect control over what we *hold* to be true, and direct control over what we *take* to be true in our practical reasoning. Taking a belief to be true in practical reasoning is itself open to moral evaluation, I shall argue, whenever the actions to which such reasoning can lead are themselves morally significant—and this condition is clearly met in the case of theistic faith-beliefs, which pervasively influence how people live. I thus conclude Chapter 2 by noting the need for an *ethics of faith-commitment*—an account of the conditions under which it is morally permissible to commit oneself practically to the truth of a theistic (or any other) faith-belief.

The fact that it is the *moral* status of commitment to faith-beliefs that is ultimately at issue does not, of course, entail that epistemic evaluations are irrelevant. Indeed, in Chapter 3 I set out a plausible case for the *moral evidentialist* view that people are morally entitled to take faith-beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning only if they are *evidentially justified in holding* those beliefs (i.e. only if those beliefs are held on the basis of adequate evidential support for their truth). Moral evidentialism, I shall maintain, needs to be parsed into (1) the *moral-epistemic link principle* to the effect that people are *morally entitled* to take faith-beliefs to be true only if they are *epistemically entitled* to do so, in the sense they do so through the right exercise of their epistemic capacities, and (2) *epistemic evidentialism*,

which holds that practical commitment to a belief's truth carries epistemic entitlement only if the belief is held on the basis of adequate evidential support for its truth. Epistemic evidentialism may be defended, I shall argue, even though it is conceded to epistemological externalism that beliefs may indeed have epistemic worth quite independently of their truth being supported by evidence accessible to the believer. My argument for that conclusion relies on an important distinction, not usually noticed but apparent in the light of the two loci of doxastic control identified in Chapter 2, between *agency-focused* and *propositional-attitude-focused* epistemic evaluations.

If theistic faith-beliefs are evidentially ambiguous—that is, if our total available evidence is equally viably interpreted on the assumption either of their truth or of their falsehood—then, under moral evidentialism, it will *not* be morally permissible to commit oneself in practice to their truth. Yet, as I argue in the remainder of Chapter 3, it is plausible enough that theistic beliefs *are* evidentially ambiguous for it to be important to consider whether this moral evidentialist verdict on theistic faith-commitment under evidential ambiguity is correct. My argument from here on, then, will remain within the scope of the assumption that all forms of theistic religious belief are indeed evidentially ambiguous.

Reflective theists who accept the evidential ambiguity of theism will naturally hope that their faith-commitments may nevertheless be morally vindicated. There are two broad strategies by which this might be achieved: one aims to avoid fideism, while the other embraces it (or, at least, some version of it). The strategy that embraces fideism seeks to show that believing by faith *can* be morally justifiable—or, as I shall prefer to put it, that it can be morally permissible to make a *doxastic venture*. *To make a doxastic venture is to take a proposition to be true in one's reasoning while recognizing that it is not the case that its truth is adequately supported by one's total available evidence.* I shall outline a doxastic venture model of theistic religious belief in Chapter 5 so as to prepare the ground for considering whether an exception to moral evidentialism may properly be made for faith-commitments of the kind made by theistic religious believers. My prior task, however, will be to consider whether the moral probity of evidentially ambiguous theistic commitment might be upheld without the need to attempt a defence of fideism in any shape or form.

In Chapter 4, then, I consider responses to the evidential ambiguity of theism that (a) note its relativity to a prevailing set of norms for assessing evidential support for beliefs—the norms of what I shall call *our rational empiricist evidential practice*—and then (b) maintain that those are not the right norms by which to judge the evidential justifiability of theistic faith-beliefs. Theistic faith-believers might thus turn out to be evidentially justified after all, relative to the properly applicable evidential practice.

I shall argue that this approach does not succeed in circumventing the need to defend a fideist position. It is true that theistic beliefs are subject to an at least partly distinct evidential practice (think, for example, of hermeneutic principles applied to sacred scriptures, which presuppose the existence of a God whose word is there revealed). So theistic faith-beliefs do form an identifiable *doxastic framework* within a person's overall network of beliefs. But this observation, I believe, cannot provide a satisfactory basis for defending the conformity of theistic faith-commitments to moral evidentialism.

I shall consider two proposed epistemologies of religious belief which might be thought to offer such a defence. The first is an *isolationist* epistemology, which takes theistic doxastic frameworks to be epistemically isolated in the sense that their 'framing principles' are *necessarily* not assessable in the light of evidence *from outside* the framework. (Isolationism, I shall observe, has a clearly principled basis for *non-realists*, who take theistic claims to have some non-assertoric function, such as expressing a community's core values and encouraging solidarity in respecting them.) It is true that, under isolationism, theistic faith-believers may be evidentially justified *from within* a theistic doxastic framework, but their commitment to its foundational principles will necessarily lack *external* evidential justification. Such commitment therefore requires doxastic venture, and can be morally justifiable only if doxastic venture is, in the relevant circumstances, itself morally justifiable.

The second attempt to uphold moral evidentialism appeals to *Reformed epistemology*, according to which holding certain theistic beliefs may be evidentially justified because their truth is *basically, non-inferentially*, evident in experience. Once within a theistic doxastic framework one may indeed treat the truth of some foundational theistic beliefs as non-inferentially evident; but that fact can provide reflective theists with no assurance that their commitment *to a framework of theistic beliefs as a whole* carries either

epistemic or moral entitlement. I shall examine and find wanting two Reformed epistemologist attempts to avoid this conclusion. I shall argue, first, that the so-called ‘parity’ argument fails: lack of external evidential justification does indeed also affect (e.g.) our basic sensory perceptual beliefs, yet our commitment to them carries epistemic entitlement by default, since we cannot generally do otherwise than take (unoverridden) sensory perceptual beliefs to be true in our practical reasoning. The same does not hold of our basic theistic beliefs, however. The second Reformed epistemologist argument rests on an appeal to externalist epistemology. It is indeed true, I shall concede, that theistic beliefs held without inferential evidential justification *may* have epistemic worth. Yet, I shall argue, reflective theists may not, without begging the question, infer from the *conditional* truth that, if God exists, their basic theistic beliefs are (most likely) caused in such a way as to guarantee their truth, to the conclusion that they are *in fact* epistemically entitled to take those beliefs to be true. Accordingly, commitment to the truth of foundational theistic faith-propositions ventures beyond evidential support. Such commitment can be morally justifiable, then, only if doxastic venture in favour of faith-propositions can be morally justifiable. Reformed epistemologists, I thus maintain, need to come out of the closet as fideists—at least, fideists of a modest kind.

Once I have thus (as I shall claim) established that morally acceptable commitment to evidentially ambiguous faith-propositions can be defended only *via* some version of fideism, the preliminaries will finally be over. I will then occupy the remaining chapters, first, by seeking to develop a fideist thesis that specifies conditions for morally permissible believing by faith; second, by showing how a version of fideism based on that thesis avoids widely held objections; and, finally, by considering the prospects for vindicating my favoured version of fideism against a ‘hard-line’ moral evidentialism which insists that commitment to religious (and similar) faith-propositions without evidential support can never be justified.

Believing by faith tends to suggest *acquiring* or *inducing* by an act of will a state of belief recognized as evidentially unsupported. The fideism I seek to defend, however, understands believing by faith as, rather, a matter of *taking a proposition to be true in one’s practical reasoning* while recognizing its lack of adequate evidential support. This latter notion is what I mean by *doxastic venture* (as already indicated)—and, in Chapter 5, I set out a doxastic venture model of faith, contrasting it with alternative models which locate

the venture of religious faith elsewhere. I then provide a Jamesian account of how doxastic venture may be conceptually and psychologically possible. On this account, beliefs can, and often do, have ‘passional’ causes—where a passional cause is broadly understood to mean a ‘non-evidential’ cause: i.e. any cause of belief *other than* something that provides the believer with evidence of or for its truth. So, for example, religious beliefs resulting from enculturation or from desires (perhaps deep-seated and unconscious) will count as passionately caused. Where such a passional cause sustains belief even though the believer recognizes a lack of evidence for its truth, there is the opportunity for doxastic venture: the person concerned may, *if he or she so chooses*, practically commit him or herself to its truth. If such a doxastic venture is made, it will not amount to inducing a state of belief (either directly or indirectly); rather it will be a direct act of *taking to be true* in one’s practical reasoning what one *already holds to be true* from passional, non-evidential, causes. (I shall concede, however, that commitment beyond one’s evidence by faith might sometimes involve only *sub-doxastic* venture—that is, taking a faith-proposition to be true in one’s practical reasoning with the weight that goes with believing it to be true, yet without *actually having* that belief.)

Whether commitment by faith is fully doxastic or not, however, it involves giving the truth of a religious (or similar) proposition full weight in one’s reasoning while recognizing that it lacks sufficient support from one’s total available evidence. The conditions under which such ventures may be permissible is the subject matter for Chapter 6. Using Jamesian resources (in particular, an interpretation of his notion of a ‘genuine option’), I shall propose that doxastic (and sub-doxastic) ventures are permissible provided that the issue is ‘forced’, of sufficient importance, and *essentially* unable to be decided on the evidence. I shall observe that this proposal rules out *counter-evidential* ventures—i.e. taking beliefs to be true *contrary to* one’s recognized evidence—and thus expresses a potentially more palatable *supra-evidential* version of fideism. This proposal faces a significant ‘degrees of belief’ challenge, however—to the effect that practical reasoning never forces us to choose starkly between taking a proposition to be true and not doing so; we may always give it *partial belief* according to the degree of probability the evidence affords its truth, so that there can be no cases where ‘the evidence does not decide’.

I shall respond to this challenge by taking advantage of the appeal to doxastic frameworks already discussed in Chapter 4 in the context of isolationist and Reformed epistemology. Religious beliefs form a doxastic framework resting on distinctive framing principles. The foundational principles of theistic doxastic frameworks may well be highest-order (that would certainly explain the evidential ambiguity of theism and show it to be no mere contingency). Highest-order framing principles, however, present options for commitment that are both forced and persistently and necessarily unable to be settled by rational assessment of external evidence. One either does or does not ‘buy into’ a whole doxastic framework of theistic beliefs; and the notion of committing to the truth of the relevant framing principles with some intermediate degree of partial belief determined by their probability on the evidence can make no sense given that evidence is in principle persistently unavailable. Propositions that express highest-order framing principles function differently, of course, from ordinarily factual propositions: but it is, I shall claim, mere logical positivist dogma to insist that that function cannot have any assertoric aspect.

Having thus met the challenge that there can never be occasion for passional resolution of essentially evidentially undecidable options, I will next take up the task of defending my James-inspired supra-evidential fideist thesis. In the final stages of Chapter 6, I state this thesis—thesis (J)—as a claim about the permissibility of *faith-ventures*—that is, commitments under evidential ambiguity to *faith-propositions of the kind involved in theistic religion and relevantly similar contexts*. It will thus be clear that thesis (J) does not purport to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for permissible doxastic (and sub-doxastic) ventures *in general*.

Chapter 7 deals with a serious general objection to thesis (J), namely that it is too liberal, admitting faith-ventures that ought intuitively to be rejected as ethically dubious. One version of this objection alleges that it must be arbitrary to permit supra-evidential yet reject counter-evidential faith-ventures. But that objection, I shall maintain, wrongly assumes that supra-evidential fideism advocates ‘the ethical suspension of the epistemic’. To the contrary, proponents of thesis (J) need to insist that the faith-ventures it counts as carrying moral entitlement *carry epistemic entitlement as well*. Supra-evidential fideists need to hold, that is, that permissible faith-ventures are made through the right exercise of epistemic rationality—a

condition not met by counter-evidential faith-ventures, which necessarily fail to respect the coherence requirements of what I shall refer to as ‘integrationist doxastic values’.

Commitment to the overall integration of one’s network of beliefs—evaluative as well as factual—is also crucial in responding to a second, straightforward, version of the ‘too liberal’ objection. As (J) stands, it seems quite possible that an obviously morally objectionable faith-venture—say to the existence of the gods of Nazi religion—might fit its conditions. Such cases may be excluded, however, by augmenting (J) (now (J+)) with the requirement that both the content and the motivational character of a permissible faith-venture should cohere with correct morality. To assure themselves as best they can of the moral probity of their ventures in faith, reflective believers will therefore need to integrate those commitments with their best theories of how the world both is and morally ought to be—and I will follow Kierkegaard’s example in using a reflection on Abraham, as forebear in faith, to illustrate how theistic faith-ventures develop in tandem with evolving moral commitments.

Finally, I will turn to consider what arguments may be advanced in favour of the modest, moral coherentist, supra-evidential version of fideism developed in Chapters 5 to 7. Some standard objections to fideism will, I hope, have been successfully set aside in the process of arriving at thesis (J+). But can this version of fideism be vindicated against a moral evidentialism which, though not absolutist, does take a hard line in its determination to exclude religious faith-ventures? In Chapter 8, I shall try to answer this question. As already noted, a full vindication of supra-evidential fideism would require showing that faith-ventures conforming to (J+)’s conditions carry *epistemic* as well as moral entitlement. That does not follow, however, *merely* from the special features incorporated in (J+): the importance, unavoidability, and essential evidential undecidability of an option presented to a person by a faith-proposition *does not simply entail* the epistemic permissibility of resolving it through passional motivation. But that conclusion might be thought to follow with further argument—and I shall consider three broad strategies for producing such further argument.

The first is an ‘assimilation to personal relations cases’ strategy. A widely acknowledged counter-example to absolutist moral evidentialism is the obvious moral permissibility of taking another person to be trustworthy

beyond one's initial evidence: perhaps the permissibility of religious faith-ventures can be defended by assimilation to such cases? The analogy seems not to be close enough, however: evidence may subsequently emerge in the interpersonal case, whereas (on our assumption) it is persistently unavailable in the religious case. I shall note, however, that commitment to some forms of revisionary theism might be assimilable to cases where (as James puts it) 'faith in a fact can help create a fact', and (as James says) it would indeed be 'an insane logic' that refused to permit doxastic venture in such a case.⁸

A second strategy is to offer consequentialist justifications for faith-ventures. Apart from the usual general objections to moral consequentialism, this strategy faces the problem that it is ill-fitted to the defence of *supra-evidential* fideism, which resists the very overriding of epistemic considerations that will be involved in a consequentialist justification. Besides, any actual consequentialist defence of a particular faith-venture is likely to be question-begging—and I shall add a note to the effect that Pascal's Wager offers no real hope of overcoming this difficulty.

I shall pay most attention to a third, *tu quoque*, strategy, which seeks to defend fideism by showing that *everyone* unavoidably makes faith-ventures, *including evidentialists themselves*. This strategy looks promising, but it is difficult to make it work, since sensible evidentialists may concede fideist insights while maintaining a hard line specifically against religious and similar faith-ventures. Every sane person is committed beyond any *external* evidential support to the truth of the existence of an external world, other minds, and basic arithmetical propositions, for example; but such commitment is not optional in the way that religious and similar commitments are. Commitment to *evidentialism itself*, however, obviously is optional, and it is easy to suspect that it is passionately, rather than evidentially, motivated. Are there prospects, then, for decisively vindicating fideism on the grounds that hard-line evidentialism is self-undermining because its proponents must be making just the sort of faith-venture hard-line evidentialism prohibits?

Not obviously so. Even if commitment to hard-line evidentialism is passionately motivated, there is nothing *inconsistent*, I shall point out, in

⁸ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, and Human Immortality* (New York: Dover, 1956), 25.

holding that the only faith-venture permissible is the one which hard-line evidentialists themselves might need to make. That view may nevertheless seem unreasonable: surely our capacity for uncompelled doxastic venture could not be so singularly restricted in its proper exercise? Evidentialists might protest in reply, however, that they *do* recognize a wide enough scope for permissible doxastic venture. They concede its propriety in the interpersonal cases already discussed, for instance. They may concede also (if disinclined to be Kantians) that commitment to basic moral and other evaluative claims requires a venture beyond any possible evidential support. What they reject, they may argue, is venture beyond one's evidence in favour of religious and similar faith-propositions *that have factual content*.

This would be all very well if the venture that undergirds evidentialism did indeed consist in commitment to a purely evaluative claim—as it would if evidentialism did indeed rest on giving higher priority to the avoidance of irremediably erroneous commitments than to the chance of gaining commitment to evidentially inaccessible vital truths, as James himself in effect suggests. I shall argue, however, that such a preference cannot favour evidentialism over fideism *with respect to forced and in principle evidentially undecidable options*, since the risk of irremediable misalignment of one's commitments with the truth attaches to *both* ways of resolving such options.

I shall then suggest that evidentialism is in fact grounded in commitment to a key *factual* claim—namely, the claim that *passional doxastic inclinations cannot function as guides to truth even when the truth is essentially beyond evidential determination*. The truth of this key claim might seem self-evident (given that a 'passional' doxastic inclination is, by definition, not motivated by anything that could count as evidence for the truth of the belief concerned). I will argue, however, that its self-evidence may be parried by appeal to epistemological externalism; and its truth challenged by showing how, paradoxical though it may seem, aspects of epistemic rationality are involved in the making of passionately motivated faith-ventures in accordance with thesis (J+)'s constraints. I will also argue that any attempt to establish the truth of the evidentialist's key claim by appeal to scientific explanations of how religious passional doxastic inclinations can arise even though they are systematically false will beg the question; and I shall conclude that evidentialists' confidence in their key claim ultimately rests

on a passionately motivated doxastic venture in favour of a purely naturalist view of the world.

On the other hand, however, once evidentialists admit that their prohibition of faith-ventures on foundational matters of fact must allow as a sole exception the doxastic venture they themselves need to make, fideists will hardly be able to accuse them of epistemic irresponsibility. For, the evidentialist's sole faith-venture would seem to meet (J+)'s first two conditions and thus, by fideists' own lights, carry epistemic entitlement. I will therefore conclude that the debate arrives at the following impasse: neither the evidentialist nor the fideist can decisively and non-question-beggingly establish the epistemic irresponsibility of commitment to the opposing position.

It may thus seem that the whole evidentialist/fideist debate must end in impasse, and, in Chapter 9—my final chapter—I shall begin by arguing that, even if this is the case, significant support has nevertheless been provided for the supra-evidential, moral coherentist, version of fideism expressed in thesis (J+). In the first place, fideism of this stripe has been defended successfully against objections: it gives no licence to self-induced direct or indirect 'willing to believe', making it clear that the venture of faith consists in choosing to take to be true in practical reasoning what one is *already* passionately inclined to hold to be true. Furthermore, (J+) places tight constraints on allowable faith-ventures: in particular, it permits no 'ethical suspension of the epistemic', excluding believing by faith *contrary to* one's evidence. It also requires permissible faith-ventures to be, both in content and motivational character, integrated with moral commitments. So this version of fideism can respond to the 'irregularly conjugated verb' problem posed at the outset, since it recognizes objective differences between good and bad faith-ventures. And it is—more than incidentally—an interesting question what verdict (J+) must pass, in particular, on classical theistic faith-commitments under evidential ambiguity. Arguably, taking the problem of evil into account, the version of fideism here defended *excludes* faith in the classical theist's omniGod, but leaves open the possibility of morally justifiable theistic faith-ventures under some alternative conception of the divine. It would be a further project to support that conclusion, however.

My rehabilitation of fideism amounts to more, however, than the articulation of a version of it that escapes the usual objections. For, as I shall argue next, if the debate does end in impasse, that suffices to secure the right to believe for those who make faith-ventures in accordance

with (J+)—on the assumption, anyway, that either side of an essentially irresolvable moral disagreement ought to tolerate the opposing position. Such a broadly political solution will not be fully satisfying, however, for reflective faith-believers who seek reassurance that their commitments are morally right, not simply deserving of toleration.

I shall therefore conclude by indicating the only path available for moving beyond the impasse. Neither side of the fideist/evidentialist debate can show that the opposing side has an epistemically irresponsible position (i.e. one that issues from the improper exercise of epistemic capacities, or from an abandonment of proper epistemic concern). Perhaps, however, one of the opposed positions can be shown to be preferable directly *on moral grounds*. In considering this possibility, I shall do no more than canvas some moral considerations that appear to favour the fideist side—including the suggestion that evidentialists lack self-acceptance and that they are too dogmatically attached to a naturalist world-view (even to the extent of failing thereby in love towards others). I will also suggest that an evidentialist prohibition on those religious faith-ventures whose content affirms that the world is a moral order in which the pursuit of the good is not ultimately pointless will sit uncomfortably with any acknowledgment that basic moral truth-claims can themselves be accepted only through passionately motivated doxastic venture. Though these considerations do not give decisive independent moral grounds for preferring fideism to evidentialism, they do show that preference to be, not merely undefeated by evidentialist argument, but deserving of positive endorsement.

Glossary of special terms

It will be clear from the preceding overview that I have found it necessary in the course of my argument to introduce some special terminology, and to use some existing terms in my own technical senses. So I will complete this introductory chapter by providing a short alphabetical glossary of terms. This glossary is not intended as a comprehensive guide to all philosophical terms used: rather, it picks out just those used in a special, or, it might be said, idiosyncratic, way. The glossary is given here mainly for reference, though it might also serve an introductory purpose in forewarning readers as to terminology that could otherwise be confusing. The reader may,

however, pass over it without loss, since I do endeavour to explicate as fully as I can each item of specialist terminology in its proper context. My definitions are, of course, intended only as *locally* canonical: whether any of them might be more broadly useful is something readers may judge for themselves.

absolutist moral evidentialism

Absolutist moral evidentialism is the thesis that, without exception, people are morally entitled to take beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning only if they are *evidentially justified* in holding those beliefs.

agency-focused epistemic evaluations/propositional-attitude-focused epistemic evaluations

Agency-focused epistemic evaluations are epistemic evaluations of agents' (mental) actions in taking propositions to be true (with some given weight) in their reasoning; propositional-attitude-focused epistemic evaluations are epistemic evaluations of psychological states that consist in attitudes towards propositions (principally, states of belief).

basically evident

See inferentially evident/non-inferentially (basically) evident.

counter-evidential venture

A counter-evidential venture is a venture in practical commitment to a proposition's truth contrary to one's evidence. That is, people make a counter-evidential venture with respect to proposition *p* if and only if they make a *doxastic* or *sub-doxastic venture* with respect to *p*, while recognizing that *p*'s falsehood is adequately supported by their total available evidence.

counter-evidential fideism

Counter-evidential fideism is the thesis that *counter-evidential ventures* are sometimes morally permissible.

doxastic framework

A doxastic framework is a framework of beliefs dependent on the acceptance of certain *framing principles*, in the sense that the evidential justifiability of any belief in the framework depends on accepting the truth of those principles. (For example, no specifically Christian theological belief could be regarded as evidentially justified except within the scope of the framing principle that God exists and is revealed in Jesus the Christ.) A doxastic framework has associated with it a specific *doxastic practice*.

doxastic practice

A doxastic practice is a complex of both habituated and voluntary behaviour relating to the formation, revision, and evaluation of beliefs within a given *doxastic framework*, including the assessment of the epistemic merit of beliefs in the light of evidence in accordance with an associated *evidential practice*.

doxastic venture

People make a doxastic venture if and only if they take to be true in their practical reasoning a proposition, *p*, that they believe to be true, while recognizing that it is not the case that *p*'s truth is adequately supported by their total available evidence.

See also *sub-doxastic venture*.

epistemic entitlement

People take proposition *p* to be true in their practical reasoning with epistemic entitlement if and only if they take *p* to be true through the right exercise of their epistemic capacities. (People take propositions to be true in their practical reasoning through the right exercise of their epistemic capacities if and only if they do so (i) having paid proper attention to the question of the truth of those propositions, (ii) having judged that issue properly (in accordance with the correct application of the objective norms applicable to such judgements), and (iii) having taken proper account of that judgement in committing themselves practically to the truth of those propositions.)

epistemic evidentialism

Epistemic evidentialism is the thesis that people take *p* to be true in their practical reasoning with *epistemic entitlement* if and only if they are *evidentially justified* in holding *p* to be true.

ethics of faith-commitment

An ethics of faith-commitment is an account of the conditions under which it is morally permissible to make a *faith-commitment*.

evidential ambiguity

The truth of a proposition, *p*, is evidentially ambiguous if and only if the total relevant evidence neither shows *p*'s truth nor *p*'s falsehood to be significantly more probable than not, where the total evidence is, furthermore, systematically open to viable overall interpretation, both on the assumption that *p* is true and on the assumption that *p* is false.

evidential justification

People hold the belief that *p* with evidential justification (= are evidentially justified in holding that *p*) if and only if they hold *p* to be true on the basis of adequate evidential support for *p*'s truth.

evidential practice

An evidential practice is a practice that accepts certain norms for judging the degree of evidential support enjoyed by a given proposition.

A given evidential practice will (implicitly) specify *inter alia* logical norms governing the inferential transfer of evidential support, and norms specifying categories of propositions whose truth may be taken (under canonical conditions) to be non-inferentially or basically evident.

evidential undecidability

The question of the truth of a proposition *p* is *evidentially undecidable* if and only if that question cannot be settled *purely* by judging correctly either that *p*'s truth or that *p*'s falsity is significantly more probable than not given the total available evidence. (This is a way of making more precise the vague notion of a question whose truth 'cannot be decided on the evidence'.)

evidentialism

Evidentialism is the thesis that people are entitled to take beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning only if they are *evidentially justified* in holding those beliefs. (See also *epistemic evidentialism*, *moral evidentialism*, *hard-line evidentialism*.)

faith-belief

A belief is a faith-belief just in case it is held in, and has the right kind of relation to, some particular context, in the same way that beliefs that make up the cognitive component of Christian theistic faith are held in and related to the context of Christian faith.

Note: this specifies the intended sense of 'faith-belief', but—evidently—does not provide a real definition of it. In the course of my argument three further features of faith-beliefs emerge, each of which would need to be included in a real definition. (I do not, however, purport to provide a full real definition.) First, a belief will count as a faith-belief only if that belief is existentially significant, in the sense that practical commitment to its truth has an important pervasive influence on the way people who make that commitment live their lives. Second, a belief will count as a faith-belief

only if practical commitment to it is genuinely a matter of choice. Third, a belief that *p* will count as a faith-belief only if the *faith-proposition* that *p* is either a *highest-order framing principle* of a *doxastic framework* of faith-beliefs (in which case we may call it a foundational faith-proposition), or a proposition whose truth presupposes the truth of some relevant highest-order framing principle (in which case we may call it a derivative faith-proposition).

faith-commitment

For a person to make a faith-commitment is for that person to take a *faith-proposition* to be true in his or her practical reasoning.

faith-proposition

A faith-proposition is any proposition that is the content (or, intentional object) of a *faith-belief*.

faith-venture

A faith-venture is a *doxastic* or *sub-doxastic venture* with respect to a *faith-proposition*.

fideism

Fideism is the thesis that *faith-ventures* are sometimes morally permissible.

framing principles

The framing principles of a *doxastic framework* are those propositions whose truth must be presupposed if any of the beliefs belonging to the framework are to be *evidentially justified*. (For example, the proposition that God exists and is revealed in Jesus the Christ is a framing principle of any specifically Christian theological doxastic framework, since no belief belonging to that framework could be evidentially justified unless that proposition is true.)

full weight

See *taking a proposition to be true in one's practical reasoning with full weight*.

hard-line evidentialism

Hard-line evidentialism is the thesis that people are morally entitled to take *faith-propositions* to be true in their practical reasoning only if they are *evidentially justified* in holding those beliefs.

Note: Hard-line evidentialism is not as hard line as *moral evidentialism* could be, for it recognizes that it may sometimes be morally permissible (even obligatory) to make *supra-evidential* (or even *counter-evidential*) ventures. It is not, in other words, *absolutist moral evidentialism*. But it is 'hard line' because

it does altogether reject all *faith-ventures* as morally impermissible—i.e. all ventures in favour of religious (or quasi-religious) *faith-propositions*.

highest-order framing principle

A highest-order framing principle is a *framing principle* whose truth cannot be *evidentially justified* within any wider *doxastic framework* (on the basis of any higher-order framing principle).

holding/taking a proposition to be true

For a person to **hold** a proposition, *p*, to be true is for that person to be in a psychological state that counts as a belief that *p*—i.e. a psychological state that consists in having the propositional attitude towards *p* that it is true; for a person to **take** a proposition to be true is for that person to take it to be true in his or her reasoning—i.e. to employ it as a true premise in reasoning.

inferentially evident/non-inferentially (basically) evident

A proposition's truth is inferentially evident when its truth is correctly inferable (in accordance with the norms of the applicable *evidential practice*) from other propositions whose truth is accepted; a proposition's truth is non-inferentially (basically) evident, when its truth is acceptable (under the norms of the applicable evidential practice) without being derived by inference from other evidentially established truths.

integrationist

Integrationists generally value connecting things so that they can influence each other rather than separating them into isolated spheres or compartments. Those who accept integrationist doxastic values accept the ideal of overall coherence amongst their beliefs, and will therefore reject the view that *doxastic frameworks* can be epistemically insulated from a person's overall network of beliefs.

isolationist epistemology of religious beliefs

An isolationist epistemology of religious beliefs takes religious *doxastic frameworks* to be epistemically isolated in the sense that belief in the truth of their *framing principles* is necessarily not epistemically assessable in the light of evidence from outside the relevant framework.

moral coherentist fideism

Moral coherentist fideism is the thesis that *faith-ventures* are morally permissible only if they are properly integrated with (correct) moral commitments.

moral evidentialism

Moral evidentialism is the thesis that people are morally entitled to take beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning only if they are *evidentially justified* in holding those beliefs.

Note: Moral evidentialism may be factored into the *moral-epistemic link principle* and *epistemic evidentialism*.

moral-epistemic link principle

People are morally entitled to take their beliefs to be true only if they are *epistemically entitled* to do so.

naturalism

The metaphysical thesis that the world is just as depicted according to our best—or, perhaps rather, our ideally completed—scientific theories.

non-evidential causes of beliefs

See *passional causes of beliefs*.

non-inferentially evident

See *basically evident*.

passional causes of beliefs

A passional cause of a belief is any cause of that belief other than a cause that provides the believer with evidence for its truth.

Note: This usage is derived from William James. To avoid confusion, I often describe passional causes of beliefs as ‘non-evidential’ causes. I also sometimes refer to potential passional causes of beliefs as ‘passional doxastic inclinations’.

rational empiricist evidential practice

Rational empiricist evidential practice is the evidential practice that assumes deductive and inductive standards for inferential evidential support, and allows as basically evident only incorrigible and self-evident truths (including fundamental logical and mathematical truths) and truths evident in sensory perceptual experience under ‘normal’ conditions (i.e. in the absence of recognized overrides such as conditions known to create sensory illusions, etc.).

sub-doxastic venture

People make a sub-doxastic venture with respect to the proposition *p* if and only if they take *p* to be true in their practical reasoning, while recognizing that it is not the case that *p*’s truth is adequately supported by their total

available evidence, yet without believing that p —i.e. without actually holding that p is true.

supra-evidential venture

A supra-evidential venture is a venture in practical commitment to a proposition's truth beyond, but not contrary to, one's evidence. That is, people make a supra-evidential venture with respect to proposition p if and only they make a *doxastic* or *sub-doxastic venture* with respect to p , while recognizing that neither p 's truth nor p 's falsehood is adequately supported by their total available evidence. (One may also say that a supra-evidential venture is a doxastic or sub-doxastic venture that is not a counter-evidential venture.)

supra-evidential fideism

Supra-evidential fideism is the thesis that *supra-evidential ventures* are sometimes morally permissible.

taking a proposition to be true in one's practical reasoning with full weight

People take the proposition p to be true in their practical reasoning with full weight if and only if they take p to be true, not with some intermediate degree of partial belief, but with the kind of weight that naturally goes along with straightforwardly believing that it is true that p .