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Reasons, Emotions, and Evidentialism: Reflections on William Wainwright's Reason and the Heart

Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen*

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Research Article

Abstract

In *Reason and the Heart*, William Wainwright defends a kind of religious evidentialism, one that takes into consideration the promptings of the heart, provided the heart is a virtuous one; and he claims that this view is able to avoid relativism. Here, Wainwright's *evidentialism* is examined in relation to other views that have gone by that name. Wainwright's position is briefly stated together with an expression of doubt about its ability to fend off relativism. Following this, an outline of the history of evidentialism is presented. It is concluded that Wainwright's view is not really a form of evidentialism at all. Evidentialism may be weakened in two ways: (1) redefining "evidence" to include elements that are not recognized by objectifying inquiry; (2) allowing subjective factors, such as religious emotions, to govern the interpretation of the evidence. Wainwright describes his view as a form of evidentialism because it does not avail itself of (1); but it is only misleadingly called "evidentialism" because of (2). After making this case, several reasons are presented for rejecting evidentialism. It is argued that evidentialists focus attention of what the evidence is to determine whether beliefs are justified or rational, while how the evidence is treated is of no less importance when beliefs are supported by reasons. Furthermore, there are beliefs the justification of which is a practical matter of commitment to a more general framework rather than inference from some body of evidence. It is suggested that some religious beliefs may fall into this category.

Keywords

William Wainwright, evidentialism, hinge epistemology, justification, pragmatism, rationality, reasons, religious belief.

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* Professor of Philosophy, The Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, Qom, Iran. Legenhausen@gmail.com

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Wainwright's Argument

Since 1995, when William Wainwright's *Reason and the Heart* was published, many of the themes treated in this work have been subjects of extensive discussions, including evidentialism, relativism, reason and the emotions, and the relation of each of these to the philosophy of religion. The view Wainwright defends carefully[1] fits these themes together so that religious faith can be consistent with a certain kind of evidentialism that recognizes the need for the support of the emotions and that is capable of avoiding the pitfalls of relativism. Although I am sympathetic to the aims Wainwright sets for himself, I will argue, first, that the sort of evidentialism that should constrain religious epistemology is so attenuated as to make the appellation to Wainwright's view dubious. Second, the evidentialist projects in both epistemology philosophy of religion face serious objections.

I will not examine the final chapter of *Reason and the Heart*, "The Specter of Relativism", only because of considerations of length. Wainwright argues that while evidence independent of the stirrings of the heart is not sufficient to justify religious belief, the evaluation of evidence guided by a virtuous heart will be able to provide for the rationality of faith. To those who object that the reliance on emotions introduces a subjective factor that will lead to relativism, Wainwright replies that the evidence independent of the passions is incapable of evaluating the evidence; and the risk of relativism can be reduced by requiring the passions to be those of the virtuous. There are two undeniable difficulties here: first, there we have no objective standard by which to determine who has a virtuous heart; and, second, to the extent we may be able to identify the virtuous, there does not seem to be increasing agreement on religious matters proportionate to increased moral virtue. So, even if adding virtuous emotion to reason can help to whittle away some of the positions that arise with the threat of relativism, the specter continues to loom large.

Evidentialism

Evidentialism has been defined in a number of ways. Evidentialists agree that for a belief to be epistemically justified or rational, it has to have enough evidence. There are disputes about how much is enough. In *Reason and the Heart*, Wainwright defines evidentialism for religious beliefs in terms of rationality: "Religious beliefs are rationally held if and only if one has sufficient evidence for them" (Wainwright, 1995, p.2). In a footnote, he

1. Wainwright also defends and develops the position in subsequent works, such as (Wainwright, 2011).

notices that "sufficient evidence" might be merely subjective or objective. Sufficient evidence for subjective rationality requires a belief that one has good enough evidence and a fulfillment of epistemic duties. A more subjective form could be imagined by replacing the fulfillment of epistemic duties with the mere belief that one has fulfilled one's epistemic duties. Objective rationality requires belief on the basis of evidence where the evidence is objectively good enough. Although Wainwright contends that the difference between subjective and objective rationality is not important for the main argument he wants to make, opponents to his view might well argue that any position according to which virtuous emotions are required will fail to establish objective rationality.

Contemporary discussions of the ethics of belief usually contain references to the disagreement on the issue between the English mathematician, William K. Clifford (1845-1879),[1] and the American psychologist and pragmatist philosopher, William James (1842-1910), although discussions of the primacy of empirical evidence and the relation between theory and evidence are to be found throughout the empiricist tradition and the philosophy of science, respectively, notably in Locke (1632-1704), who upholds a form of evidentialism as required for a proper defense of religious belief;[2] and Wainwright cites Locke as the source of his own take on evidentialism.

Contrary to Locke, Kant (1724-1804) based his entire critical philosophy on the idea that the sort of evidence surveyed by theoretical reason was incapable of supporting beliefs in human freedom, the afterlife, and the existence of God, but that the actions of *believing* these things, could be justified with practical reasons (Kant, 1996). Justification of religious belief on the basis of practical reasoning is also the most famous idea in the legacy of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662); and discussions of the relevance of prudential reasons to epistemic justification are prominent in the literature on *Pascal's wager*.[3] Long before any of these discussions, however, an argument with similarities to Pascal's has been attributed to Imam Ṣādiq (*'a*).[4]

Clifford's article, "The Ethics of Belief", was published in 1877 as a vehement defense of evidentialism; and James' pragmatist response, "The Will to Believe", first appeared in 1896. Although Clifford did not live long enough to see James' essay, defenses of Clifford's position would soon be

1. For an overview of Clifford's views on religion, see (Peels, 2022).
2. See (Locke, 1999), which is largely devoted to this issue.
3. See (Jordan, 2006) and the bibliography provided there.
4. The argument is reported in several versions. An English translation of one of the longer narrations is given in (Momin, 1963).

published and vigorously debated.[1] James complained that some critics seemed to think he was licensing wishful thinking in defiance of the evidence. On the other hand, some complained that the allowances James made for pragmatic grounds in support of religious belief were subject to too many strictures to allow for the sort of defiant faith common in some Protestant circles.[2]

James himself is largely in agreement with Clifford's evidentialism, except that he allows for a very tightly circumscribed set of exceptions to Clifford's *evidentialist principle*: "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence"(Clifford, 1879, p. 183). Clifford himself, at the end of the very same essay in which he states the cited principle, also allows for some exceptions, such as the assumption of the uniformity of nature, for which he holds that we do not have sufficient evidence. So, the difference between Clifford and James is a matter of specification of the scope of the exceptions to the evidentialist principle. James does not categorically deny the principle, nor does Clifford assert it absolutely. The contemporary debate about evidentialism is thus rooted in a debate in which pragmatists object to a stricter form of empiricism that would limit reasons for belief to the evidence, and the main issue about which this debate centered was the justification of religious belief.

The debate over evidentialism was revived with the publication in 1983 of *Faith and Rationality*. Plantinga, together with Nicholas Wolterstorff, edited and contributed to this widely read collection of papers in which what they called *Reformed Epistemology* was presented. In his introduction to the collection, Wolterstorff introduces *the evidentialist challenge*, to which he, Plantinga, William P. Alston, and others, sought to respond.

> Now the form assumed by the vision of the Enlightenment when it came to matters of religion was what may be called the evidentialist challenge to religious belief. The challenge can be seen as consisting of two contentions. It was insisted, in the first place, that it would be

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1. Although (Lloyd, 1907) is aimed at rebutting James, he makes no mention of Clifford in his defense of agnosticism, and earlier rejection of James' position for seeking to justify believing on insufficient evidence is (Miller, 1899). Witnesses to the persistence of the debate along the same contours are the defense of James against Miller by another major American pragmatist in (Schiller, 1927) and the short sparring of (Moore, 1943).
2. (Perry, The Thought and Character of William James, 2 vols., 1935), 207-249. The material contained in Perry's biography provides valuable insight into the flavor of the controversy, and how James sought to clarify his position. Much of this is missing in the abridged version, (Perry, The Thought and Character of William James, 1996 (original copyright 1948)).

> wrong for a person to accept Christianity, or any other form of theism, unless it was rational for him to do so. And it was insisted, secondly, that it is not rational for a person to do so unless he holds his religious convictions on the basis of other beliefs of his which give to those convictions adequate evidential support. No religion is acceptable unless rational, and no religion is rational unless supported by evidence. That is the evidentialist challenge (Plantinga & Wolterstorff, 1983, p.6).

While James' objection to evidentialism was based on the pragmatist contention that practical considerations could justify belief under certain conditions when evidence was insufficient, Plantinga argued that some religious beliefs are justified without any propositional evidence because they are *basic beliefs* that arise in an individual whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly. Reformed Epistemology is not a form of pragmatism. Religious basic beliefs are the product of what Plantinga, citing Calvin, calls the *sensus divinitatis*, a cognitive faculty that enables one to experience the world religiously and to form basic religious beliefs as a result. Plantinga has developed his position in defense of basic religious beliefs through a long series of articles and books that carefully and insightfully review the epistemological challenges to religion and defend Reformed Epistemology.[1] All subsequent work in the epistemology of religious belief has had to position itself with respect to the lines of argument Plantinga has spelled out, whether or not it is in agreement with the conclusions he defends.[2]

In this tussle, Wainwright takes a nuanced approach. Against both Plantinga and James, Wainwright defends evidentialism. The disagreement with Plantinga, however, hides agreements that may turn out to have greater importance, for both Plantinga and Wainwright agree that the justification of religious beliefs requires divine assistance, or grace. For Plantinga, this grace takes the form of the *sensus divinitatis*, the ability to intuit manifestations of divine love, majesty, etc., in such a way that one can immediately infer the existence of God and His possession of at least some divine attributes. For Wainwright, God also provides epistemic aid to believers, but they have more work to do. Wainwright's divine aid comes in the form of the ability to weigh the evidence correctly, while Plantinga's allows for justification as long as sufficient counter-evidence is lacking or is defeated.

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1. Plantinga's masterpiece is the warrant trilogy: (Plantinga, 1993); (Plantinga, 1993); (Plantinga, 2000).
2. For a recent explication of how sin could harm the operation of the sensus divinitatis, see (Vahid, 2019).

With regard to James, Wainwright agrees that the passions can legitimately have epistemic weight. Our deep-seated intuitions are to be considered trustworthy because without them we have little chance of hitting upon the truth. Pragmatic reasons are not to be understood as factors to be added after our epistemic reasons prove inconclusive. The pragmatic reasons are themselves epistemic. In defense of James, Wainwright cautions that pragmatism must not be understood as a license that certifies beliefs as rational even when they have nothing going for them but wishful thinking. Wainwright's proposal is a critique of passional reasoning that will seek to establish the conditions under which pragmatic reasons highlighted by appropriate emotions may also be taken to be epistemic ones. Wainwright also credits James with the endorsement of a critical approach to our passional nature. Wainwright supports James' pragmatism and sees it as only superficially opposed to evidentialism. At this point, however, the ambiguities in the definition of "evidentialism" need more attention than Wainwright provides. Wainwright's position is so far from that of Locke and Clifford that calling it *evidentialism* is questionable.

Two years after the publication of *Faith and Rationality,* Earl Conee and Richard Feldman published a highly influential defense of evidentialism.[1] Conee and Feldman clearly distinguish the question of *epistemic* justification from that of *moral* justification:

> The evidentialism we defend makes no judgment about the morality of belief. Instead, it holds that the epistemic justification of belief is a function of evidence. It is possible that there are circumstances in which moral, or prudential, factors favor believing a proposition for which one has little or no evidence. In that case, the moral or prudential evaluation of believing might diverge from the epistemic evaluation indicated by evidentialism. It is consistent with our version of evidentialism that there are aspects of life in which one is better off not being guided by evidence (Conee & Feldman, 2004, p.2).

Despite the conciliatory tone taken by Conee and Feldman so as to allow for non-epistemic forms of justification for religious faith, the brunt of their arguments was largely viewed as a more sophisticated version of the evidentialist challenge to religious belief. At roughly the same time, Louis P. Pojman took up a defense of both religious faith *and* a form of evidentialism (Pojman, 1986). But Pojman merely defends a form of *ethical* evidentialism according to which we have a duty to form our beliefs in accordance with the

1. (Conee & Feldman, 1985), included in (Conee & Feldman, 2004).

best available evidence; at the same time, he rejects the view of many evidentialists that any two persons confronted with the same evidence ought to come to the same conclusion, contrary to the *epistemological* evidentialism of Conee and Feldman. Although Pojman's book was subject to severe criticism for historical and logical infelicities, the work remains an important defense of a form of religious evidentialism that rejects the idea that evidence alone determines whether one's religious faith is justified. Both Pojman and Wainwright claim to support evidentialism, but they do so in very different ways. For Pojman, although *beliefs* must be based on the evidence and the passions must be disregarded, *faith* is much more than belief, and may be legitimately based on hope rather than evidence.[1] Wainwright rejects Pojman's exclusion of passional factors from evidence for belief, although he does not appeal to the passions to directly provide pieces of evidence. Instead, the passions of the virtuous can legitimately shape the ways in which the evidence is evaluated.

Largely in response to the efforts of Conee and Feldman, a significant literature developed on *epistemological* evidentialism. Plantinga responded directly to this form of evidentialism as formulated by Conee and Feldman;[2] and, like them, he was primarily focused on the question of the epistemological justification of beliefs rather than on Clifford's original *ethical* evidentialist allegation of the immorality of believing without sufficient evidence.

The bifurcation of evidentialisms may be multiplied beyond the epistemological versus the ethical, for there are different sets of norms that compete for recognition in epistemology no less than in ethics. Epistemological norms may be designed to maximize true beliefs, minimize false ones, promote understanding, achieve coherence, or for other epistemic goals. Likewise, the moral values to which appeal is made in the defense of ethical evidentialisms can vary among eudemonia or felicity, utility, autonomy, and others, including explicitly religious ultimate moral/spiritual values.

The religiously motivated defense of faith against the evidentialist challenge was also front and center in Kelly James Clark's *Return to Reason* of 1990 (Clark K. J., 1990), which was hailed by Wolterstorff as the first "comprehensive treatment" of Reformed Epistemology. Evidentialism was associated with a foundationalist epistemology, classical foundationalism, whose foundations were limited to the evidence of the senses, self-evident propositions, and incorrigible beliefs about one's own inner states. Reformed

1. A similar position is advocated in (Lebens, 2021).
2. See the references to Conee and Feldman in (Plantinga, 1993).

Epistemology accepted the general foundationalist picture,[1] but argued that the foundations had to include much more than just sense experience, for many common sense beliefs are obvious and obtained without any conscious inference from other beliefs, yet are not logically self-evident, are not incorrigible, and are not obtained directly through sense perception. Clark's examples of basic beliefs that fall outside those accepted by classical foundationalism include some beliefs about the past, belief in the external world, moral beliefs, belief in other minds, belief in the self, and others. Reformed epistemologists held that some basic religious beliefs could also be included among the properly basic beliefs without any need for weighing the evidence for them, contrary to evidentialism, which Clark defines as follows: "**Evidentialism** maintains that *a belief is rational for a person only if that person has sufficient evidence or arguments or reasons for that belief"* (Clark K. J. 1990, p.3). Clark notes: "by evidence is meant propositional evidence in the form of an argument; nonpropositional or experiential evidence of God is typically discounted by contemporary evidentialist objectors."[2] The necessary condition is strengthened to necessary and sufficient in 2015 with the definition offered by Dougherty and Tweedt:

> Epistemic evidentialism: Belief B is justified for S at t if and only if S's evidence sufficiently supports B at t (where the general criteria for what counts as evidence for religious beliefs are the same as the criteria for what counts as evidence for non-religious beliefs) (Clark K. J. 1990, p.3).

Note that both Clark and Dougherty and Tweedt add provisions designed to make evidentialism unfriendly toward religious belief.

In 2002, Jonathan Adler's *Belief's Own Ethics* appeared. Adler argued for a radical form of evidentialism and he specifically takes aim against Reformed Epistemology. Adler rejects basic beliefs and foundationalism altogether. All beliefs, he insists, must be *well-founded* by evidence. But instead of typical coherence theories of justification, he claims that there can be tacit justifications for background beliefs on the basis of overwhelming evidence provided by practices of acceptance and testing assertions. Some of the common sense beliefs considered by Clark and the Reformed Epistemologists to be basic were said by Adler to be justified by the overwhelming evidence of justified background beliefs. Religious beliefs, Adler claims, lack this sort of support.

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1. But see (Plantinga, 1986).
2. (Clark K. J. 1990), p.136, n. 5. The combination of foundationalism with the exclusion of theistic beliefs from the foundations is called *hyperevidentialism* in (Dougherty & Tweedt, 2015, p. 548).

In the same year, 2002, Bas van Fraassen's *The Empirical Stance* was published. Van Fraassen does not use the term "evidentialism" but he opposes it under the heading "objectifying inquiry" and defends religious belief as beyond the scope of such inquiry. Even in the natural sciences, however, van Fraassen argues that the old evidentialist demand to proportion opinions to the evidence has little to contribute to understanding how science advances through revolutionary changes; and he compares religious conversion to this sort of change (Van Fraassen, 2002, p.66). Van Fraassen credits William James with the realization that value commitments must be taken into account when assessing information. We possess no methodological cookbook for an inductive logic that will dictate how we are to evaluate evidence. Our religious beliefs, like our scientific theories, are in some ways proportioned to the evidence, and in some ways not. Beliefs and theories inevitably go beyond the evidence; and because they do so, they can be subject to criticism when change is required. Exactly how we are to respond when facing epistemological crises is a matter of choice. Van Fraassen draws on Sartre, Buber, and Fackenheim to support the element of voluntarism in belief choice:

> …[R]ationality is but bridled irrationality. Throughout such changes we can continue to view ourselves as acting reasonably—I should say, as acting in a way we can endorse to ourselves as reasonable. Changes in View are not rational because they are rationally compelled; they are rational exactly if they are rationally permitted, if they do not transgress the bounds of reason (van Fraassen, 2002, p.92).

Van Fraassen's position is in several respects similar to Wainwright's. Although Wainwright calls himself an evidentialist, he allows for the employment of subjective factors that bring him closer to van Fraassen's point of view. However, Wainwright appeals to the emotions of the virtuous while van Fraassen rules out only those emotions that push us beyond the bounds of what is reasonable. Wainwright is optimistic about avoiding relativism; while van Fraassen tries to be satisfied with the admission that our choice of one from among competing alternatives that cohere with the evidence is inescapable (van Fraassen, 1992).

Much of the ensuing discussion continued to concern itself specifically with evidence and religious belief. Feldman, for example, has argued that in cases of religious disagreement, the fact of the irresolvability of the disagreement should be considered as *evidence* that would undermine the justification of the claims of the parties to the disagreement (Feldman, 2007). Despite the fact that the term *evidentialism* was embraced by thinkers with a diversity of religious opinions, such as found among defenders of natural theology, Pojman, and Wainwright, it continued to be associated with an epistemological stance

hostile to religion.

Natural theology is a term used for attempts to show that reason and sense perception provides us with good evidence for some religious beliefs through traditional proofs for the existence of God and the divine attributes. Other religious beliefs could then be backed up by revealed truth supported by the evidence of miracles. Natural theology never saw evidentialism as a threat. What was more novel was the idea that religious beliefs could be justified by the evidence even if the evidence provided by miracles and the traditional proofs was held to be insufficient. Even if the traditional proofs are taken to be inconclusive, Richard Swinburne had argued already in 1979 that probabilistic reasoning could support religious belief (Swinburne, 1979) and Basil Mitchell had presented his *cumulative case* in favor of the rationality of religious belief by 1973 (Mitchell, 1973). Mitchell seems to be endorsing a version of evidentialism in the following passage:

> What has been taken to be a series of failures when treated as attempts at purely deductive or inductive argument could well be better understood as contributions to a cumulative case. On this view, the theist is urging that traditional Christian theism makes better sense of all the evidence available than does any alternative on offer, and the atheist is contesting the claim (Mitchell, 1973, pp.39-40).

So, it was not inevitable that evidentialism would lead to the sort of critique of religious belief initiated by Clifford, or to the evidentialist challenge that had been the centerpiece of discussions in the heyday of Reformed Epistemology. Although much of the criticism of evidentialism has been religiously motivated, many have argued, completely irrespective of religious issues, that we are justified in holding some beliefs on matters about which the evidence is silent or about which evidential inquiry is inappropriate.[1]

In the twenty-first century, there was a tremendous increase in attention to evidentialism, both by supporters and detractors of religious belief. *Evidentialism* was given different explications, leading to critical as well as sympathetic examinations of different varieties of evidentialism. John Bishop took up the cause of what he calls *Jamesian fideism* in his much-discussed

1. McCormick cites Hume as an example, (McCormick, 2015), 6, because although Hume is often taken to be a hero of evidentialism, he admits that there are questions about which experience is "entirely silent", such as whether our perceptions correspond to things in the external world. Although evidentialist precepts would counsel suspension of belief where evidence cannot issue a verdict, Hume cautions against this and advises acquiescing to the instinctual belief that normally what we perceive is as it seems to be. (Hume, 2007), XII. P.12, ff.

Believing by Faith of 2007. The form of evidentialism against which Bishop argues, however, is defined in terms of *practical* rather than *theoretical* reasoning:

> Evidentialism is the thesis that people are entitled to take beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning[1] only if they are evidentially justified in holding those beliefs (Bishop, 2007, p.21).

Bishop argues that one may be justified when one decides to engage in a "doxastic venture" in circumstances in which evidence is ambiguous.

In 2005, Nishi Shah's "A New Argument for Evidentialism" (2006) won the *Philosophical Quarterly* essay prize. Shah claims that his argument ends the deadlock in the debate between evidentialists and pragmatists in favor of evidentialism. Shah's discussion invokes the concept of what he calls *transparency*, that is, that when we deliberate about what to believe, we justify our decision to ourselves only on the basis of evidence, so that when S is deciding whether to believe *p*, S considers only whether *p* is true, and other factors about believing disappear or become "transparent" to S. Thus, when one considers whether to believe that *p,* one ignores whether *p* or believing that *p* will have non-epistemic benefits. Shah claims that this is an intrinsic feature of belief, as such, independent of human psychology.

Shah's defense of evidentialism has been followed by lively debate and the emergence of a group of authors who have been called "the new evidentialists" by Susanna Rinard (2015). Characteristic of the debate is that evidentialism is understood as a thesis about reasons for belief and not, as in Conee and Feldman, the supervenience thesis that one's total evidence determines a unique set of justified beliefs.

The issue of what counts as a reason is perhaps the most contentious topic in epistemology today. There are disagreements about what reasons are, that is, their metaphysical status; disagreements about the types of reasons, although it is common to distinguish *explanatory, motivating,* and *normative* reasons;[2] disagreement about whether reasons for action and reasons for belief are different enough to require their own theories; disagreements about what it means to *have* a reason; and disagreements about the conditions under which reasons are good.[3] The new evidentialists define evidentialism as the thesis that only evidence (and not practical considerations) can be a reason for

1. my underlining.
2. See the first chapter of (Vahid, 2021) and the appendix to chapter 3.
3. A good way to begin sorting through the views is by considering those collected in the two volumes: (Sobel & Wall, 2009) and (Reisner & Steglich-Petersen, 2011).

belief (Shah, 2006, p.482). Shah argues that evidentialism follows from the transparency of belief and the following constraint on what can count as a reason:

> R is a reason for S to φ only if R is capable of disposing S to φ in the way characteristic of R's functioning as a premise in deliberation whether to φ (Shah, 2006, p. 485).[1]

Shah continues that if we take φ to be *believing that p*, then transparency implies that the only things that can be reasons for S to believe that *p* are things S takes to count as evidence for *p*. So, transparency plus the deliberative constraint on reasons yields evidentialism.

This argument leaves several lines open for pragmatist rebuttal. One could argue about the nature of transparency and whether it might have exceptions. Richard Amesbury (2008) responds that the phenomenon of transparency only occurs in the first-person perspective. A third party might well take emotional or prudential factors into consideration when evaluating whether belief that *p* is justified for someone else. When considering whether or not *p,* deliberations have the characteristics of transparency only when the evidence is sufficient to force the issue one way or another. In other cases, such as aesthetic and moral disputes, disputes about philosophical positions, and disputes about which candidate would serve better in some elected office, the force of evidence is more ambiguous and the relevance of pragmatic considerations is more difficult to deny. The pragmatist could also charge that the deliberative constraint is flawed. This is the strategy employed by Susanna Rinard in her attack on the new evidentialism.

Rinard argues that practical considerations indeed do function as premises of deliberation about what to believe in some cases, like the cases deliberated upon in Pascal's wager. A number of other cases are also given: one might believe one will recover if one learns that so believing increases the odds of recovery; one might believe one will perform some task well after considering that this will increase the odds that the belief will be true; one may believe that one will perform a given deed in part because one has promised to, so that the practical reasons for promising may also be reasons for believing; moral beliefs and beliefs in the truth of certain axiom systems are also sometimes justified with practical reasons in a manner that seems to violate the evidentialist intent behind the deliberative constraint or transparency. Evidentialists respond that in such cases, practical considerations are not really

1. with a change in the symbols for the sake of consistency.

playing the role of premises in the way that evidence does. Evidence immediately guides belief, while such cases of practical influences always require some indirection. Rinard counters that the demand for direct guidance or determination of belief undermines the deliberative constraint altogether because it would make it impossible ever to have practical reasons for doing things in cases in which practical considerations are most pertinent, as in her case of deciding to wear wool socks, because the reasons for wearing the socks only indirectly lead to the action (first, one has to find the socks, or buy them, then put them on).

After demolishing the main argument of the new evidentialists, Rinard goes on to present her own form of "Robust Pragmatism, according to which (1) a pragmatic consideration in favor of believing some proposition always counts as a genuine reason to believe it; and, (2) the only genuine reasons for believing a proposition are pragmatic considerations in favor of so believing"(Rinard, 2015, p.217). Whether or not one is persuaded by Rinard or by Shah, a fascinating literature has grown in which there are careful discussions of pragmatic reasons, the transparency of belief, the manner in which evidence guides action and belief, and other related topics.

Evidentialism also split into discussions among those who were primarily interested in epistemological justification and those who were focused on the ethics of belief, or between theoretical and practical questions about evidential support. Others have questioned whether the latter division was justified.[1] Questions were also raised about what norms require that one *ought* not to believe what is not sufficiently supported by one's evidence. These norms might be prudential as well as moral. In the prudential sense, when we say that you ought not believe on the basis of weak evidence, we mean that believing on the basis of weak evidence will likely have consequences that we would rather avoid, the consequences that can be expected from believing things that are false. In the moral sense, believing on weak evidence is taken as a violation of one's moral duty, a shirking of one's responsibilities as a member of the community of inquirers.

A major contribution to the development of evidentialism has been made in the works of Kevin McCain. His *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* (McCain, 2014) advances an elaborate theory of the nature of evidence, according to which mental states and their contents count as evidence, including the state one is in when some proposition just seems true to one, and a theory of epistemic justification, which very roughly sanctions beliefs that

1. This is the principle thesis of (McCormick, 2015).

function appropriately in the explanation for the evidence one has. McCain's work has given rise to considerable criticism, some of which has been collected in a volume together with McCain's responses (McCain, 2018).

Much of the literature reviewed above has been focused on general epistemology. A return to the topic of *religious* epistemology may be found in a recent (and ongoing) defense of evidentialism with regard to religious belief in the work of Katherine Dormandy.[1] Dormandy and Wainwright are in agreement that although partiality and passion, if not checked, can make belief formation practices unreliable, "passional factors *should* affect reasoning" (Wainwright, 1995, p.109). They differ on how to keep the subjective elements from undermining reliability and on how the effect of passional factors occurs. According to Wainwright, the subjective factors only lead to unreliable beliefs when these factors are not elements of a virtuous life. The passions of the virtuous do not provide the subject with any new evidence not available to the dispassionate observer; rather, the passions help the virtuous subject to sort through the evidence and to assign appropriate weights to different pieces of evidence. Dormandy, on the other hand, allows for two kinds of evidence: partialist and impartialist, with the latter modelled on scientific evidence and the former including any other sort of evidence. To keep the partialist evidence from making belief formation unreliable, she proposes a multifaceted solution. The first facet is straightforward enough: it is the requirement to "give impartialist evidence and partialist evidence approximately equal weight" (Dormandy, 2021, p. 18) If the passions distort, even if only by bringing misleading evidence to bear on belief formation in some percentage of cases, and if in some percentage of other cases the passions provide even more reliable evidence than would be obtained by impartialist evidence alone, it will remain difficult to justify giving equal weighting to partialist evidence across the board. So, Dormandy proposes an additional requirement for her version of evidentialism:

> **Evidentialist Evidence-Acquisition**: To acquire evidence responsibly, you must defeat counterevidence and actively monitor your beliefs, including by putting yourself in situations where counterevidence is likely to arise (Dormandy, 2021, p.19).

1. Here I will focus on (Dormandy, True Faith: Against Doxastic Partiality about Faith (in God and Religious Communities) and in Defence of Evidentialism, 2021) to which a special issue of the *Australasian Philosophical Review* is devoted, with comments from eleven authors and replies from Dormandy. For a bibliography of her work, which includes several articles related to evidentialism, plus the outline of a forthcoming book on the topic, see (Dormandy, 2022).

There is as much reason to question Dormandy's credentials as an evidentialist as there is to suspect Wainwright's. Wainwright is vague about what evidence is supposed to be, although he admits to understanding it "very broadly" (1995, p.3, fn, 4). Dormandy also takes a very broad view of what evidence is:

> I construe evidence broadly, as anything that counts as an epistemic reason. I mean this to encompass a person's (justified) beliefs, as well as her representational experiences, including intellectual and other seemings and personal experiences, not least of the object of faith (Dormandy, 2021, p.6).

She goes on to admit that her version of evidentialism differs in important respects from those attributed to Locke, criticized by Reformed epistemology, and endorsed by Conee and Feldman; and, as we have seen, she appears to broaden the notion of *evidence* beyond what Wainwright seems to have in mind by including *partialist evidence*. The inclusion of *partialist* evidence as a factor in deciding what to believe, whether given equal weight as impartialist evidence or any other positive weighting, is what would disqualify her account as a form of *evidentialism* as understood by the evidentialist critics of religious belief.

With respect to matters of religious faith, Dormandy adds the caution that one should respect one's evidence even when one struggles with doing so because it points in a negative direction about the object of faith. Here we find what is perhaps the most important difference between the approaches of Dormandy and Wainwright. While Wainwright and Dormandy both develop positions designed to show how religious beliefs can be rational, Wainwright, like most others who address the topic of evidentialism from a religious perspective, is concerned to show how positive evaluations of the justification of religious beliefs are compatible with a reasonable assessment of the available evidence. The main strength of Dormandy's work is that she argues that when the evidence points against religious beliefs, believers should admit it and engage in the difficulties of "noetic struggle". Instead of spending all their time trying to justify their beliefs, the faithful need to face the facts when the evidence is not favorable. The noetic struggle to respect one's evidence, even when it casts a dim light on the objects of faith, is "an excellent-making feature of faith". If we understand the term *evidentialism* to be justified by an insistence that we not turn a blind eye to the evidence when it offends our religious sentiments but plunge into noetic struggle, Dormandy's view will have more of a claim to the term than Wainwright's. The point is not the applicability of a label, but whether our philosophies of religion should

be in the business of taking our religious sentiments to permit us to dismiss evidence against our religious belief while maintaining epistemic responsibility. If Dormandy's evidentialism were just the requirement that no evidence relative to our religious beliefs is to be ignored, even when it counts against what we believe in, then we certainly should accept this requirement as a necessary condition for rational religious belief; but this is not what Wainwright or most other authors have meant by *evidentialism*.

The sketch of the course of evidentialism provided here is woefully incomplete. I have not even surveyed the views of all the big names in the philosophy of religion that have taken positions on these issues. Hopefully, however, it may serve as a rough guide, one in view of which various forms of evidentialism may be criticized.

Against Evidentialism

The critics of evidentialism in its various guises are also numerous. I will not attempt a parallel sketch to the one given above for the course of anti-evidentialism, which could include rationalists, Kantians, Hegelians, pragmatists, and Wittgensteinians. Instead, I will just mention a few arguments that pose difficulties for some versions of evidentialism. Evidentialists might have ways to handle these difficulties, but they are serious.

The first problem with evidentialism in all its guises is that it misleadingly gives the impression that having justified or rational beliefs is simply a matter of having the right evidence. Of course, evidentialists will deny that mere knowledge of the right sort of evidence for a belief suffices for the justification or rationality of the belief, since they insist that the evidence known must be taken into account; but evidentialists tend to overemphasize the possession of evidence as the key factor, or they define possession in such a manner as to exceed knowledge and imply proper treatment. This second strategy has the awkward consequence that some evidence might be possessed with respect to one proposition but not with respect to another.

Another problem with the impression given by the term *evidentialism* is its association with empiricism. The empiricists took evidence to be given by the senses; and in the writings of many authors, *evidence* abbreviates *evidence of the senses*. When *evidentialism* is used as the name for a position about the rationality of religious belief, it would seem to imply that the rationality of religious beliefs turns upon empirical evidence, or an extension of empirical evidence that includes religious experience. Indeed, Locke's appeal to the evidence of miracles and scriptural testimony indicates that he, at least, thought that it was empirical evidence that made religious belief rationally acceptable.

A standard criticism of empiricism is that it extends standards of rationality that apply to the natural sciences to questions that cannot be adequately treated experientially, such as philosophy, mathematics, and literary interpretation. A deeper criticism is that the empiricists misunderstood the role of experience even in the natural sciences. If evidence is experiential, it becomes difficult to apply evidentialism to areas that are too abstract for particular experiences to be particularly relevant, such as pure mathematics. A kind of evidentialism was defended even for basic arithmetic by Mill and others with the claim that even basic arithmetic is supported by generalizations from sense experience,[1] but this position has been met with severe criticism (Shapiro, 1997, p.115), although it and other forms of empiricism in mathematics continue to have supporters.[2]

Evidentialists, like Wainwright, may respond to the second problem with a simple denial that evidentialism is meant to be an endorsement of empiricism or naturalism. As for the first problem, Wainwright would also argue that it is based on an overly simplistic conception of evidentialism. Evidentialism has two components: beliefs must have sufficient evidence to be rational, and the evidence for a given belief must be treated in a manner that appropriately supports the belief. Wainwright misleadingly smuggles the second component into his elaboration of what is meant by "sufficient evidence" in the first component. This is not difficult to remedy, and it should not be considered a serious objection to his view. Nevertheless, it implies that if some body of evidence, *E*, objectively supports propositions *p* and *q*, but if an agent, *S*, fails to see how this evidence supports *q*, while *S* agrees that it supports *p*, it will follow that *E* provides *S* with sufficient evidence for *p* but not for *q*, so that *S* will both possess *E* as evidence and fail to possess *E* as evidence. The root of the problem is that evidentialism is an attempt at an objective theory of justification, while it concedes that subjective elements must be recognized for information to be treated as evidence relative to a given belief content.

Evidentialism can be weakened by expanding the range of evidence or by expanding what is considered a reasonable treatment of the evidence. If either or both of these expansions go too far, however, evidentialism will be trivialized. Evidentialism best describes views according to which the cases of contention are to be judged by giving due attention to the evidence. When Wainwright claims that his position is a form of evidentialism, the claim is undermined by his explanation that the rationality of a belief turns not on what evidence is available, but on subjectively variable aspects of how the evidence

1. See the discussion in (Kline, 1980), p. 328ff.
2. See (Bostock, 2009); (Linnebo, 2017).

is treated. An epistemological theory of religious belief should not march under the banner of evidentialism when the justification of belief turns on contentious interpretations of evidence rather than on the evidence itself, such as emotional factors that influence how the evidence is treated rather than on what the evidence is.

Against evidentialism, pragmatists like James argued that in *some* cases, not only evidence but also practical considerations are relevant to whether a proposition is worthy of belief, and these considerations can be reasons for belief that make one's belief epistemically justified or rational. One way for an evidentialist to respond to this sort of objection is to simply allow practical considerations to be counted as evidence. A number of philosophers have objected to this sort of move on the grounds that practical considerations generally do not provide *epistemic*, that is, truth-conducive, reasons for belief. Practical reasons are said to be *the wrong kind of reasons*.[1] This issue remains one of controversy and industrious publication. If, however, the pragmatists turn out to be right, and practical considerations can legitimately be epistemic reasons in at least some cases of belief, this would be sufficient for a rejection of those forms of evidentialism that exclude practical reasons from what is considered evidence. Evidentialism will also be challenged if the proper treatment of the evidence is governed by practical norms and aims that require attention to concerns that go beyond simple rules to be logical and to believe only what is true.

One of the benefits of Wainwright's discussion of evidentialism is that he highlights the problem of how the evidence is to be evaluated and what conclusions are to be drawn from it. Thus, we can distinguish (at least) two ways for supporting religious forms of evidentialism. First, there are those, like Locke, who would count religious experiences and miracles as evidence. To these we may add those who expand the range of propositional evidence by recognizing propositions formulated in irreducibly religious language.[2] Second, there are those, like Wainwright, who allow that the evaluation of the evidence may be carried out in a manner steered by religious emotions. At a more explicitly cognitive level, irreducibly religious language may be used in the construction of the theologies used to explain the evidence, and what is understood through the employment of theological concepts may also be described through the use of irreducibly religious language. Secular evidentialists would prohibit both approaches to religious evidentialism: those

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1. For a sample of recent discussions of this problem, see (Vahid, 2022); (Parfit, 2001); (Heuer, 2018); (Gertken & Kiesewetter, 2017); (Reisner, 2009).
2. As suggested in (Plantinga, 1996).

that broaden the range of evidence and those that allow religious approaches to the evaluation of the evidence.

As we have seen, sufficient evidential support for a belief is taken by some evidentialists to be both necessary and sufficient for justification, while others consider it merely necessary. One might question the sufficiency by considering cases in which someone has sufficient evidential support for a belief but believes on other dubious grounds. Vahid's work (2021) shows in detail that all the evidence one might require to support a belief will not be *sufficient* for justification if one does not *treat* the evidence as reason for holding the belief.

The *necessity* of evidential support for justified belief is questioned by those who claim that some beliefs, e.g., *a priori* beliefs, do not need evidential support to be justified. Reformed epistemologists claim that basic beliefs are not in need of any evidence. C. S. Peirce (1839-1914) held that one could justifiably believe that there is no Cartesian evil daemon because the Cartesian skeptical doubt could not be sustained in one's practical life. Then there was the pragmatist objection to evidentialism brought by William James: in some cases in which evidence is insufficient to support a belief, the belief may still be epistemically justified because of non-evidential factors, e.g., cases in which believing increases the likelihood of the truth of the belief, as when a patient believes she will recover because this increases the odds for recovery.

Richard Amesbury (2008) argues that we have some justified beliefs that are not justified on the basis of inferences we make from the evidence we have for them with reference to the "hinge propositions" that have been discussed extensively with regard to remarks made by Wittgenstein.[1]

Notice however that there are two different but related claims made by Wittgenstein. First, he takes the relation of evidential support to require that among the elements that give the support, some must be considered exempt from doubt, these are the "hinges", propositions, or the activity of assuming certain propositions. There are ambiguities here, and commentators have explained that Wittgenstein passed away before he could polish the text that became *On Certainty*. Second, there is the *system* in which argumentation has its life, and that cannot be disputed, because dispute requires the system. For example, Wittgenstein writes: "What I hold fast to is not *one* proposition but a nest of propositions" (Wittgenstein, 1972, § 225) So, we have two sorts of elements for Wittgenstein that evade the need for evidential support: hinge

1. (Wittgenstein, 1972), §§ 341-343. For recent related scholarship, see **Invalid source specified,** and (Pritchard, 2018).

propositions, or believings, and the system of argumentation. Both the conclusions to which we come and our methods of coming to them may be subject to criticism and demands for evidence. Some methodological principles and propositions may be so essential to reasoning that to question them may threaten our ability to reason and come to any conclusions at all. So, there is a sense in which such principles and propositions do not require evidence in order for us to be justified in relying on them and believing them to be correct. As Deborah Orr puts it:

> Throughout the course of his later philosophy, Wittgenstein was continually reminding the rationalist philosopher of the wide variety of occasions in which the ordinary use of language is not based on some underlying process of reasoned justification but rather is woven into the fabric of non-linguistic human life and behavior (Orr, 1989, p.141).

Another feature of Wittgenstein's discussion of which we should take note is that he is often concerned with confirmation and disconfirmation, which he seems to understand as a kind of inferential relation. A belief is supported by the evidence when the evidence confirms the belief, when the truth of the belief is inferred from the evidence. Wittgenstein is concerned to show that not all "justified" cases of believing are inferential in this way.

Amesbury's argument against epistemic evidentialism is that there are "hinge" propositions that we believe without inferring them from any evidence. Likewise, Alvin Plantinga's *Reformed Epistemology* is founded on the claim that there are warranted basic beliefs that are justified without basing them on any particular body of evidence.[1] Both Amesbury's Wittgensteinian approach and Plantinga's are aimed only at refuting inferential evidentialism in which the evidence itself is assumed to have a propositional form, and no beliefs are considered justified without evidence. As mentioned earlier, however, a number of evidentialists, including Clifford, agreed that there were some justified beliefs that are not supported by evidence, such as the belief in the constancy of nature and the existence of the external world. Other evidentialists, such as Adler and McCain, have taken the more radical position that *all* beliefs must fit with or be supported by evidence if they are justified.

Evidentialists may specify their theories, as McCain does, in such a manner that *a priori* beliefs are justified because they are *implied* by the best explanation of one's evidence and are in some manner relevant or available to one, but regardless of what the most effective strategy here might be,

1. For a recent statement of his position, see (Plantinga, 2015).

Amesbury's and Wittgenstein's remarks suggest that by taking the evidentialist course, we may be losing track of what really accounts for justification. If justification is considered as an epistemic norm of belief according to which one is free from epistemic blame for holding a belief when the belief is justified, then justification may be accorded to a person's belief in obvious propositions not because of the relation of the proposition to some body of evidence and what that entails, but in a more basic or direct manner. Those are not the sorts of beliefs with which people will ordinarily find fault (unless they are doing philosophy, of course). What justifies hinge propositions is not evidence, but the norms governing competent language use.

> Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; —but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game (Wittgenstein, 1972, § 204).

If Wittgenstein is right about this, and if evidence does not include "our acting" or "forms of life" or the way in which we go about inquiry, then, contrary to evidentialism, believing in accord with epistemic norms is not judged solely on the basis of relations between beliefs and evidence. Some beliefs are considered to be justified because of their relation to the evidence available to the believer; but in other cases, a belief is awarded the status of being justified *without any regard to the evidence at all*, as in beliefs that are axiomatic for the framework within which evidence is examined.

Evidentialism becomes even more dubious when formulated as the requirement that justified beliefs supervene on the evidence. A clear statement of the supervenience thesis is given by Conee and Feldman:

> Our bedrock epistemic view is a supervenience thesis. Justification strongly supervenes on evidence. More precisely, a whole body of evidence entirely settles which doxastic attitudes toward which propositions are epistemically justified in any possible circumstance. That is, ES The epistemic justification of anyone's doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that the person has at the time (Conee & Feldman, 2004, p. 101).

A historically significant thesis that arguably refutes this kind of evidentialism is to be found in what Quine called *the underdetermination of theory by evidence*. Underdetermination arguments were formulated by Pierre Duhem (1861–1916) and in several forms by Willard Van Orman Quine (1908-2000). They reasoned that different overall theories can always be formulated that are equally consistent with the available evidence, which leads

to the hypothesis that the observational evidence is never sufficient to determine a uniquely true theory, or *the underdetermination of theory by evidence*.[1] Although the discussion takes place in the philosophy of science, it is a short step to the observation that for many beliefs formed in response to evidence, there will be alternatives that cannot be eliminated. Gordon Belot observes that it has not been demonstrated that evidence plus rational considerations will always lead to uniquely superior theories (2015). Although questions of underdetermination and possible alternative theories remain controversial in the philosophy of science, it is not unreasonable to surmise that these issues continue to pose a significant challenge to the idea that the norms of evidential rationality will exhaust those governing many, if not all, cases of contentious belief formation.

Conclusion

With particular regard to religious evidentialism, much turns on what we view God to be and how we are to assess other religious beliefs. If God is not something that can be discovered on the basis of evidence at all, questions of evidence would be largely irrelevant to belief in the existence of God. Plantinga and Wainwright are in agreement that it is some sort of experience interpreted in the right way that yields justified belief in the existence of God. For Kant and Hegel, on the other hand, God is not that sort of thing. The belief in God is axiomatic, and the question of the epistemic rationality of accepting such axioms is one of whether they provide a framework within which practical commitments are best fulfilled, where these practical commitments are inextricably interwoven with the more properly epistemic goals of achieving true beliefs and understanding.

We can take a religious view of things, either by decision or upbringing, but evidence is not what does the work of making the attitude reasonable. What makes it reasonable is how we are religious. Religion can be reasonable when it enhances our lives; where the enhancement may be epistemic, moral, aesthetic, and more. This enhancement is not something that we first discover through evidence and then, following some course of practical reasoning, leads us to religious belief. It is a commitment. We might discover evidence that the commitment is wrong and that we would be better off abandoning it. But in the absence of sufficient evidence of that kind, the justification of

1. For a monograph on the issue, I recommend (Stanford P. K., 2006). For a shorter introduction by the same author, see (Stanford K., 2021). For a review of the development of Quine’s thinking on the issue and a rebuttal to an objection posed by Scott Soames, see (Adeel, 2015).

religious belief follows from the reasonability of religious commitment, from religious commitment that expresses good judgment and wisdom, moral conviction, and devotion to what we take to have greater value than the life of this world.

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