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## Religious Skepticism and Higher-Order Evidence

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The recent literature on the epistemology of disagreement grew out of the literature on religious disagreement from the 1980s and 90s. This sort of development differs from what one might have expected—namely, a body of literature on the epistemology of disagreement in general, followed by application to specific cases. In this instance, however, the discussion moved from specific to general. The religiously-oriented discussion started by (e.g.) William Alston, Gary Gutting, John Hick, Alvin Plantinga, and Peter van Inwagen gave rise to the general discussion taking place today between (e.g.) Michael Bergmann, David Christensen, Adam Elga, Richard Feldman, Thomas Kelly, and Jennifer Lackey.

In this paper, I tie together some threads common to these two discussions, and consider to what extent the recent literature should impact the ongoing discussion of religious disagreement. As a means to this, I'll examine two arguments for religious skepticism: (1) an argument from peer disagreement; and (2) a cumulative argument from higher-order evidence. I aim to show that the first argument is unsound, but that the second is more promising for the religious skeptic. I'll close by discussing some strategies for replying to the second argument. The best of these replies, I'll suggest, reveals ways in which discussions of disagreement and higher-order evidence point beyond themselves.

### II. THE ARGUMENT FROM PEER DISAGREEMENT

Much recent discussion of the epistemology of disagreement has focused on the special case of disagreement between epistemic peers. A brief foray

into the key terms and positions within this debate will set up the skeptical argument from peer disagreement, and will prepare us for the argument presented in section III.

The notion of *epistemic peers* has been understood in more than one way, but Thomas Kelly's definition is typical. On that definition,

... two individuals are epistemic peers with respect to some question if and only if they satisfy the following two conditions: (i) they are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on the question, and (ii) they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias. (2005, 174–5; cf. Kelly 2010, 112)

Suppose one believes that P. A question central to the recent discussion is, What is the rational response to learning that one's epistemic peer believes  $\neg$ P? Can one rationally retain the belief that P in such circumstances? Or, is one rationally required to reduce one's confidence in P—perhaps to the point of suspending judgment? We can distinguish between two broad views about disagreement by way of their proponents' answers to these questions. Philosophers who think that, at least sometimes, one can rationally retain belief in the face of peer disagreement defend what has been called the *steadfast view*. Those who think that awareness of peer disagreement mandates significant belief revision defend the so-called *conciliatory view*, or simply, *conciliationism*.

At its core, conciliationism requires the endorsement of certain epistemic principles—principles that mandate belief revision in the face of peer disagreement, or at least in the face of certain types of peer disagreement. Stated in all-or-nothing terms, on a simple version of conciliationism, awareness of peer disagreement rationally requires a movement from belief (or disbelief) to suspension of judgment. The conciliationist's immediate rivals are those who deny or doubt conciliationist principles. Chief among these are defenders of so-called justificationist views of disagreement, and defenders of total evidence views. According to *justificationist views*, the propositional attitude one is justified in taking in the face of peer disagreement depends in part on the strength of one's justification for believing the target proposition *in the absence of* disagreement. In other words, the attitude that is *ultima facie* justified in the face of disagreement depends in part on one's prima facie justification for (say) believing the target proposition. In cases where one's prima facie justification is very strong, learning of a peer's disagreement may not require suspending judgment; indeed it may sometimes require little attitude adjustment at all.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, according to *total evidence views*, the

<sup>1</sup> See Lackey (2010a) and (2010b) for a defense of this view.

attitude one is justified in taking in the face of disagreement depends on one's total evidence, where this includes both one's initial (first-order) evidence that is directly relevant to the target proposition and the higher-order evidence consisting in awareness of peer disagreement. In cases where one's first-order evidence is very weighty, it may enable one to rationally retain belief in the face of peer disagreement, even if some reduction in confidence is also mandatory.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of justificationist and total evidence views, then, seek to defend the steadfast view against conciliationist epistemic principles, and provide similar ways of doing so.

A certain kind of *disagreement-based skepticism* results from putting conciliatory principles to work in an argument concluding that, with respect to some topic or other, our beliefs are unjustified. Accordingly, we should abandon those beliefs and suspend judgment. As others have emphasized, not all conciliationists are disagreement-based skeptics. It is possible to endorse a conciliatory principle without thereby committing oneself to the claim that the antecedent of that principle is regularly satisfied.<sup>3</sup> This makes it possible to embrace one premise of a disagreement-based skeptical argument without thereby embracing skeptical conclusion.

But it's disagreement-based skepticism that interests us here. So let's set out the skeptical argument from peer disagreement, beginning with the most prominently defended conciliationist principle whose consequent is strong enough to do skeptical lifting. Stated in all-or-nothing terms:

C: If S believes that P and acknowledges that S's epistemic peer, T, believes  $\neg P$  and S has no reason (independent of the disagreement and the evidence that S shares with T) to think that S is more likely than T to be correct about P, *then* S is not justified in believing that P, and should suspend judgment about whether P.<sup>4</sup>

This principle is labeled "C" for "conciliationism." Note that, in addition to abstractly describing a peer disagreement, C's antecedent contains a clause that prohibits the following kind of reasoning:

I believe P, while my peer believes  $\neg P$ . My reasons for believing P, when conjoined with this disagreement, give me a reason to think that my peer has assessed our shared evidence incorrectly. So I should think she *has* assessed this evidence incorrectly. So it's reasonable for me to stick to my guns, and retain my belief that P.

<sup>2</sup> See Kelly (2010) for a detailed defense of this view.

<sup>3</sup> On this see Elga (2007) and the critical discussion in Kornblith (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Principles like C have been defended by, among others, Christensen (2007), (2009), and (2011), Elga (2007), and Feldman (2006) and (2007). For criticisms of such principles, see Kelly (2005), (2010), and (2013), King (2013), Lackey (2010a) and (2010b), and Thune (2010).

Conciliationists reject such reasoning as blatantly question-begging. In light of this—and to avoid apparent counterexamples to less nuanced conciliatory principles—they have equipped C with a no-independent-evidence clause. The idea is that in the presence of peer disagreement and the absence of independent evidence that one is more likely to be right than one's peer, one is rationally required to suspend judgment.

To see how C might be wielded in an argument for religious skepticism, we need only add:

*Lots of Peers:* With respect to many religious beliefs, many human thinkers are aware of epistemic peers who disagree with them, and these thinkers lack evidence (independent of the disagreement and the evidence they share with their peers) to think they are more likely to be correct than their peers.

When conjoined with C, *Lots of Peers* (LP) yields the conclusion that many of us are unjustified in our religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> In the face of apparently widespread peer disagreement, many of us should suspend judgment rather than retain these beliefs. (The same goes for those peers who believe the *denials* of the religious propositions we ourselves endorse.)

I have significant reservations about both C and LP. My worries about C, however, are largely dependent on the work of others.<sup>6</sup> Reaching the point in the dialectic where I have something new to add would occupy more space than I can afford here. So, for present purposes, I'll mostly discuss LP.<sup>7</sup> Note that several sub-claims must be true in order for LP to be true. It must be true that:

- i. Many human thinkers are aware that others disagree with their religious beliefs;
- ii. These others *are* their epistemic peers—that is, they have the same evidence and are equally well-disposed to respond rationally to that evidence;<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Feldman (2007) for a similar argument.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Kelly (2010) and Lackey (2010a) and (2010b). See also King (2013).

<sup>7</sup> See King (2012) for a more generalized version of the main argument developed in this section.

<sup>8</sup> I take it that the intellectually virtuous dispositions Kelly and others build into the concept of peerhood are among (but do not exhaust) the qualities relevant to agents being equally well-disposed to respond rationally to evidence. But because such virtues do their "work" in generating epistemic problems about disagreement precisely by being dispositions to respond rationally to evidence, the broader dispositional notion is appropriate. It has the added benefit of encompassing other "peer-relevant" qualities like intellectual skills and reliable faculties that often factor into the examples of peer disagreement discussed in the literature. In what remains, I will ignore this point, because it does not affect the arguments under consideration. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful discussion here.

- iii. Many human thinkers are *aware* that these others who disagree with them are their epistemic peers (that is, many human thinkers have good reason to believe the higher-level claim that their dissenters are peers);
- iv. Many human thinkers lack independent evidence for favoring their own religious beliefs over those of their dissenting peers.

To be sure, condition (i) is true. I'll grant for the sake of argument that (iv) is true. However, I have doubts about (ii) and (iii). That is, I doubt that when it comes to religious beliefs, epistemic peerhood is very common. And I doubt that human thinkers often have reason to think that their religious disagreements are *peer* disagreements. To see why, consider the following case:

*The Divines:* James is a Catholic seminary student, studying for the priesthood. Ashoka is training at a Buddhist seminary to become a priest. The two are friends, and often engage each other in interreligious dialogue. In their respective seminaries, James and Ashoka have learned various arguments in favor of their religious beliefs. In particular, James has learned several arguments supporting the claim that God exists; Ashoka has learned several arguments for the negation of this proposition. James and Ashoka have spent a great deal of time articulating their arguments, checking for mutual understanding, and so on. (Indeed, let's stipulate that they have been very scrupulous about this.) However, in addition to their dialectical evidence, both James and Ashoka have robust spiritual lives, and both have a range of experiences that support their religious beliefs. Further, both glean from rich traditions involving expert testimony on religious matters. In part due to these differences, and in part due to disagreement about the force of the evidence they share, both James and Ashoka stand firm in their religious beliefs—even after all their discussion.

This seems like a pretty typical case of interreligious disagreement<sup>9</sup> (with one exception, to be noted below). But unless we insist that religious experience and testimony don't count as evidence, it seems clear that James and Ashoka don't have the same evidence. They have had different religious experiences—perhaps very different ones. And the testimonial traditions in which they stand are very different. Further, we may reasonably suppose, James and Ashoka have differing intuitions with respect to the premises of their shared arguments for and against theism. Given all this, they don't have the same evidence. And if not, they're not peers. Plausibly, what goes for James and Ashoka goes for most of us. If our case is like theirs, then it's

<sup>9</sup> Inasmuch as *intrareligious* disagreements often take place among those with similar experiences, training, and background beliefs, peer (or near peer) disagreement may be more common in such cases. But because most of the recent literature has focused on interreligious disagreements, I leave this point to the side.

unlikely that our dissenters have all and only the same evidence we do. So, it's unlikely that our dissenters are peers.

Let's move a level up. James and Ashoka seem not to know or have good reason to think that they're peers. Indeed, inasmuch as they are aware of their own experiences, received testimony, and so on, and inasmuch as they know their dissenter has had *different* experiences and received *different* testimony (and so on), they have good reason to *deny* that they have the same evidence. So, the two seminarians should not take themselves to be peers in the sense defined above. And if we reasonably think that *our* situation is similar to theirs, we shouldn't think our dissenters are our peers, either. (Of course, this doesn't imply that we should think these others are our *inferiors*—but that's a separate topic. Here we're simply examining the soundness of one argument for religious skepticism, the argument from peer disagreement. If we find it unsound, others may take its place. Stay tuned.)

The above line of thought relied on a fairly permissive notion of evidence. I counted religious experience and testimony and intuitions as evidence. Suppose we restrict ourselves to a narrower conception of evidence—one on which evidence consists only in *arguments* of a sort that can, in principle, give a thinker a dialectical advantage over a dissenter.<sup>10</sup> Are James and Ashoka peers on *this* conception of evidence? And do they have good reason to think that they're peers? Finally, how does their case compare to ours?

First, suppose we stipulate that James and Ashoka have taken such care in sharing their arguments that they are literally aware of all and only the same dialectical evidence. This is an impressive feat—one I doubt many of us accomplish in conversations with our dissenters. Even if we stipulate this achievement, it does not seem particularly likely that James and Ashoka will turn out to be peers. For if we don't count experience and testimony and intuitions as *evidence*, we must surely account for them as factors that affect James's and Ashoka's dispositions for responding to the arguments they discuss. And however these factors influence our thinkers' dispositions, there is no particular positive reason to assume they'll render the thinkers *equally well-disposed* to respond to the evidence rationally. So it seems dubious that the dispositional part of condition (ii) on acknowledged peer disagreement is satisfied.

Second, even if we stipulate that James and Ashoka *do* have the same dialectical evidence, and even if we stipulate that they only regard dialectical evidence *as* evidence, and even if we stipulate that they *are* somehow equally reliable, they may still lack reason to believe the higher-level claim that they're peers. This is because it may be difficult for them to gain good reason

<sup>10</sup> For criticism of a similar notion of evidence see Williamson (2004).

to think that they're equally well-disposed to respond to their shared evidence appropriately. After all, it can be very hard to gain insight into the reliability of *one's own* cognitive dispositions—let alone to gain enough insight into another's to make the needed comparisons. Of course, we could have built it into the case that James and Ashoka once took a logic class together, got the same grade on all their exams, and so on. But then we wouldn't have a typical case of religious disagreement anymore. As the case stands, it doesn't seem like a case of acknowledged peer disagreement.

If the Divines case is a typical case of religious disagreement, then typical religious disagreements probably aren't peer disagreements, much less acknowledged peer disagreements. This is true even if we adopt what many will take to be an overly-constrained notion of evidence. (And note that in one respect, the Divines case is likely atypical: I doubt that many of us take as much care in sharing our arguments as James and Ashoka do. This casts still further doubt on the idea that *our* religious disagreements are peer disagreements.) Now, on a broader notion of evidence—one that includes religious experience and testimony and intuition—it's even clearer that the Divines aren't peers. And it's even clearer that *we* aren't peers with our dissenters. Nor do we often have good reason to think that our dissenters are peers. In short, to accept the claim that many religious disagreements are acknowledged peer disagreements, we would need to ignore many epistemic dissimilarities between subjects, and to presuppose an unrealistic degree of access to the contents and workings of others' minds. If this is right, then the *Lots of Peers* premise is dubious, and the skeptical argument from peer disagreement is in trouble.<sup>11</sup>

This isn't the last word on the argument from peerhood, of course. But rather than spend all of our time in rounds of reply and rejoinder about *this* argument, I'd like to set it aside and develop another. I hope, at a minimum, to have provided reason to think that typical religious disagreements aren't helpfully modeled as peer disagreements. This might initially strike the

<sup>11</sup> *Objection*: "You're being pedantic in the way you think about peerhood. Of course few pairs of subjects will possess *exactly* the same evidence and have *equal* capacities for responding rationally to their evidence. But once we allow small differences between subjects to be consistent with peerhood, we'll find that peer disagreement is common after all." *Reply*: It's better to be pedantic than to reason from the false premise that genuine peer disagreement is common. And in any case, my pedantry aims at fairness toward the skeptic. Loosening the definition of peerhood so that it's consistent with small differences between subjects will not help the skeptic's argument. For by relaxing the definition of peerhood, we may create space for counterexamples to C, the skeptic's other key premise. So, at least if the objection is meant to help the skeptic, it is unsuccessful. King (2013) develops this kind of point in more detail. Thanks to Fritz Warfield for helpful discussion.

religious believer (and the disbeliever) as good news—if it's right, it provides a way to diffuse a common skeptical argument. But, I'll suggest below, a kind of bad news quickly follows the good. For the discussion of peer disagreement naturally gives rise to a different skeptical argument, one that is both more psychologically realistic and more difficult to answer than the argument from peer disagreement.

### III. A CUMULATIVE ARGUMENT FROM HIGHER-ORDER EVIDENCE

Whatever we think about who is right in the current peer disagreement debates—the conciliationists, the total evidence folks, the justificationist folks—we can agree that these debates have underscored the importance of *higher-order evidence* (that is, evidence about our grounds for belief, our dispositions for responding rationally to those grounds, and our performance in responding to those grounds). Such evidence can affect the epistemic status of our first-order beliefs, even if those beliefs are otherwise very well justified. The present argument exploits this point, and does so in such a way as to broaden the current discussion.

#### III.1. The Argument Sketched

By way of preview, the argument goes like this.<sup>12</sup> There is not just one sort of higher-order evidence that is relevant to the epistemic status of religious belief; there are *several*. It is plausible that, taken individually, each of these types of higher-order evidence requires *at least some* reduction of confidence on the believer's part. These bits of higher-order evidence may not mandate significant confidence reduction when considered individually. However, as they are accumulated, significant confidence reduction seems more and more appropriate—and even mandatory. Thus, if religious believers are aware of such evidence, they may be unjustified in their beliefs.

It is the attempt to accumulate higher-order evidence that makes the present argument different from other skeptical arguments on offer. Other arguments focus on one kind of higher-order evidence (e.g., evidence from disagreement) and aim to vindicate skepticism by appeal to this single

<sup>12</sup> Nathan Ballantyne's 2011 dissertation suggests this sort of argument independently. Ballantyne also provides detailed investigations of several varieties of higher-order evidence. See Ballantyne (2013), (2014), and (2015).



factor. By contrast, the argument developed below appeals to several types of higher-order evidence. Some of these varieties become salient as a result of disagreement, while others need not involve disagreement.

Importantly, the argument developed here is consistent with the most prominent views in the literature on the epistemology of disagreement: conciliationist views, total evidence views, and justificationist views. At least to date, these positions have been couched in terms of the epistemic significance of peer (or near peer) disagreement. But the argument to follow does not appeal to peer disagreement. It thus allows the skeptic to sidestep debates about that topic.

The argument is also consistent with epistemological externalism (roughly, the view that subjects needn't have reflective access to the epistemic grounds of their beliefs in order for those grounds to justify or warrant those beliefs). This is because the argument requires no specific view about the requirements for the *prima facie* justification or warrant of first-order beliefs. Instead, it considers whether certain sorts of higher-order evidence serve as defeating evidence for such beliefs. Further, the argument developed here is compatible with the Reformed epistemologist's claim that belief in God can be properly basic—that is, justified or warranted independently of positive arguments for religious belief.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, proponents of all the views mentioned above countenance the notion of epistemic defeat (including defeat via higher-order evidence).<sup>14</sup> And it is precisely as defeating evidence that the higher-order evidence discussed below becomes salient. Thus, the present argument steers clear of several ongoing debates in general epistemology.

The first stage of the argument requires explanation of the relevant bits of higher-order evidence (HE), and an initial assessment of their epistemic weight. Let's begin with what I'll call 'HE1':

HE1: *Something's Wrong with Most of Us*

There are billions of people in the world who hold religious beliefs. Very many of these beliefs (and thus their corresponding belief systems) are incompatible with many of the others. At most one of these belief systems is entirely correct. Most of them contain false beliefs—perhaps many or mostly false beliefs. It follows that most people who hold religious beliefs either (i) have misleading evidence, or (ii) have assessed non-misleading evidence inappropriately. Plausibly, many, many of these people are intelligent and well-meaning.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Plantinga (2000) for a magisterial development of Reformed Epistemology.

<sup>14</sup> See Bergmann (2005).

<sup>15</sup> See the cited works by Hick for reflection on this sort of higher-order evidence in religious contexts. See also Alston (1991).

When I realize that I'm among these billions of people, how should I react? Granted, it doesn't follow from the fact that *most* of these people have false religious beliefs that *my* religious beliefs are false. And granted, there are myriad ways of assessing evidence among these billions of people. So perhaps there's no single general process—say, *forming religious beliefs*—that I can identify as irrational or unreliable. But I needn't know exactly *what* is wrong with most of us in order to know that *something* is wrong. Something clearly *is* wrong. Whether due to dispositional unreliability or poor evidence assessment or misleading evidence (we needn't know which) many of us have false beliefs about the relevant subject matter. And this seems at least somewhat worrisome, even if we can't identify what the problem is.

Compare: I'm sitting at the doctor's office awaiting test results. There are five other patients next to me. They tell me that, like me, they feel fine today. The doctor then comes in and announces that five of the six of us will soon be dead of a terrible disease. He doesn't say which of us will die, and he doesn't tell us what the disease is. Clearly, I should be worried about my fate—at least a little. I should surely be more worried than I was the moment before the doctor delivered the news. But then the same verdict seems to be in order with respect to the higher-order evidence described in HE1. If I am going to completely dismiss it as epistemically irrelevant, it seems I must think my epistemic position is so good that I can completely dismiss the possibilities that *I* am unreliable, that *my* evidence is misleading, and that *I* have assessed my evidence incorrectly. And even in my most optimistic moments—say, when God seems present to me in prayer—I don't think I have grounds to completely dismiss those possibilities. Accordingly, it seems like reflection on this sort of higher-order evidence should lead me to draw down my confidence, at least a little.

One might think I'm already being overly-skeptical here, so I should provide a bit more motivation for my assessment. Suppose I shouldn't be worried *at all* about those billions of dissenters described above. I'm epistemically in the clear to dismiss them entirely. If that's right, then *my* epistemic position, as one aware of pervasive falsehood and disagreement in religious belief, is the same as that of a person who is *not* aware of such disagreement. But that seems wrong. Surely a person who had grounds *for* religious belief identical to mine, but no awareness of religious disagreement, would on balance have less reason to doubt her religious beliefs than I do. Likewise, I would be greatly relieved if one day—say, next April 1—the proponents of the world's great religions suddenly announced that they were “just kidding,” and had held beliefs identical to mine all along.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Fritz Warfield for helpful discussion here.

Awareness of the disagreement seems to count for *something*. And if it does, I should reduce my confidence—at least a bit.

Here's a second piece of higher-order evidence:

HE2: *Difficulty in Assessment*

Many of the relevant grounds for religious belief are difficult to assess. Some of these grounds are *arguments* for the relevant beliefs. And arguments can be hard to assess. As Pascal says, “The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.”<sup>17</sup>

Pascal's point is exacerbated when one moves from isolated arguments toward a cumulative case. As Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew note, “Cumulative case arguments are indeed particularly difficult to evaluate... In the nature of the case, such arguments draw on many details and often require, for their full appreciation, more than a passing acquaintance with multiple disciplines. Beyond this, there is the sheer cognitive difficulty of appreciating the evidential impact of multiple pieces of evidence on a single point; we are apt to focus on two or three considerations and discount the rest. Finally, the pieces of evidence must themselves be not only considered in isolation but coordinated, that is, considered in connection with each other.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, what goes for the arguments for God's existence goes for the arguments against, and for the arguments for various other religious belief systems. Such arguments always involve inferences—deductive inferences, probabilistic inferences, the weighting of explanatory criteria, and so on. Even *good* thinkers sometimes make mistakes in assessing complicated arguments. The more complicated the arguments, the more likely mistakes become.

How shall we assess this additional sort of higher-order evidence? I can already hear the Reformed epistemologists saying that reasonable belief in God needn't be based on an argument. So the difficulty of assessing theistic arguments (or historical apologetic arguments) needn't be reason for concern. After all, if one's religious beliefs aren't *based on* an argument, then one needn't worry about having made a mistake in reasoning when arriving at one's religious beliefs.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Pascal (2008), 63.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew (2009), 617.

<sup>19</sup> This view has been developed most fully in Plantinga (2000).

Right. But that one's belief isn't based on a positive argument does not imply that one can ignore the higher-order evidence just described. For, at least if one is a typical reflective religious person, one will have encountered arguments *against* one's religious views. These arguments *are* relevant to assessing the epistemic status of one's religious belief—and, more to the point, so is the fact that the arguments can be very hard to assess. Properly basic beliefs aren't ipso facto indefeasible; and our new kind of higher-order evidence enters the fray as a potential defeater. To speak again in the first person: I do take myself to have reasoned well in rejecting (e.g.) those versions of the atheistic argument from evil that I have come across. But some of these arguments are very subtle. They involve fine-grained distinctions and delicate inferences, some of which involve a fair bit of mathematics. Further, with respect to some of these arguments, my initial rejection involved the reasoning skills of a philosophical beginner (my past self). Even today, when I revisit the arguments, I still think there's at least some probability that I make a mistake in reasoning when I reject them. In light of this, it seems, I should downgrade my confidence in my religious beliefs—at least a bit. For, though I think I have adequate responses to the above-mentioned arguments, I'm not sure of this.

I become even less sure in light of the following piece of higher-order evidence:

HE3: *Disagreement about Assessment*

With respect to some religiously relevant bits of publicly sharable first-order evidence (i.e., arguments), there is widespread disagreement about the force of that evidence. Among those who hold incompatible views about the force of that evidence, there seem to be many, many intelligent, well-meaning people. Further, among those who disagree with me are a few geniuses, people who, in the words of Bryan Frances, would “kick my philosophical ass.”<sup>20</sup>

This kind of evidence is similar to the higher-order evidence discussed in the peer disagreement literature. But there are important differences. Disagreement over assessment, as just described, concerns only discrete bits of evidence (individual arguments) that are much easier for subjects to share than large collective bodies of evidence. Further, having this sort of higher-order evidence does not require an implausible degree of access to the contents and workings of other minds. We need only know that there's some evidential overlap between us and our dissenters, and that many of these folks are smart

<sup>20</sup> Frances (2010), 419.

and earnest—some of them probably more so than we are. Finally, the higher-order evidence just sketched appeals to the fact that *many* people who hold views incompatible with one's own are aware of at least some of one's evidence. To suppose this is no less plausible than supposing that many of one's dissenters have read some of the same books that one has read.<sup>21</sup>

How much force does disagreement over assessment have? The answer depends on the details of a person's total epistemic situation. I can speak most knowledgeably of my own, so here goes. I don't take my primary positive grounds for belief to consist in arguments, so I'm not terribly worried that certain non-believers—say J. L. Mackie, and the Davids Hume and Lewis—think lowly of the arguments for theism. I'm somewhat more worried about the fact that Mackie and Hume and Lewis think that certain arguments (of which I'm aware) are strong evidence for atheism. I'm not *extremely* worried about this, as I often think I can see at least one flaw in the atheistic arguments I'm aware of. So I don't find myself tempted, in the face of disagreement over assessment, to move to atheism or even to agnosticism. Rather, I find myself compelled to be a bit more circumspect about my beliefs than I would otherwise be. In short, I'm inclined to think that, for someone in my epistemic situation, disagreement over assessment mandates at least a *small* reduction in confidence. And if your situation is like mine, perhaps you'll think similarly.

Next, consider:

HE4: *There's A Lot Out There*

With respect to our religious beliefs, few of us have more than a sliver of the total relevant epistemic grounds that are available to human subjects. Some of us have significant religious experiences, along with a smattering of relevant arguments, intuitions, testimonies, and so on. But in reflective moments, we realize that there's a mountain of epistemic grounds (arguments, experiences, and so on) that we don't have. Of course, we can't have others' religious experiences, so we don't have them. Perhaps we need to account for those grounds, but we don't feel guilty for not having them. By contrast, we may well feel sheepish when we consider the thousands of pages of relevant books and articles that sit unread on our shelves, or in the university library. "I should read that," we say; "I should already have read that"; "After I get tenure I'll read those books"; "I'd read more articles if I had a less demanding teaching load"; "I'd keep up with the literature if I didn't have to serve on these damn committees"; "I forgot the main argument

<sup>21</sup> For a line of thought that is similar in important respects, see Ballantyne (2014).

of that article.” And so forth. When we think about it, it seems likely that there are many potential epistemic grounds that are available and relevant to our beliefs, but are such that we don’t have them. Some of these grounds surely point away from the truth of our beliefs. When we realize all this, it might occur to us to ask whether we have good reason to think that our grounds are representative of the total available grounds.<sup>22</sup>

To the extent that we have reason to doubt that our grounds are representative, it seems, we have reason to downgrade our confidence in the target belief. Or, more modestly, if we accord some positive probability to the claim that our grounds for belief *aren’t* representative of the total grounds available, we should downgrade our confidence—at least somewhat. At any rate, *I’m* not comfortable in regarding all the grounds I *don’t* have (at least some of which surely support beliefs incompatible with mine) as carrying *no* epistemic weight. The higher-order evidence that there *are* such grounds seems to count for something. For the sake of concreteness: I’d be relieved if I visited the university library and discovered that all the books I thought were defending views incompatible with mine were instead filled with blank pages or Garfield comics. But because they’re probably not, it seems I should downgrade my confidence in my religious beliefs—at least a smidgen.

In addition to HE1–HE4, consider

HE5: *Elsewhere and Elsewhen*

It’s true that for many of us, if we’d been born elsewhere and elsewhen, we’d believe differently than we in fact do. If we’d been born in (say) Baghdad instead of Boston, we’d be (say) Muslim instead of Catholic. Our religious beliefs causally depend on all kinds of highly contingent factors related to our upbringing and social circumstances.<sup>23</sup> Reflection on the history of these beliefs reveals that if we’d been born elsewhere and elsewhen, we would likely believe differently precisely because we would have (a) a different set of relevant epistemic grounds than the set we in fact have; and (b) different dispositions for assessing such grounds. This much

<sup>22</sup> See Ballantyne (2014) for a detailed treatment of the epistemic significance of unpossessed evidence. The treatment briefly developed here—especially the library example—owes much to Ballantyne’s work. I differ from Ballantyne in focusing on *grounds* we don’t have, instead of on *evidence* we don’t have. This is, in part, because I am trying to engage Reformed epistemologists, who deny that religious beliefs must be based on evidence in order to be rational. No Reformed epistemologist denies that religious beliefs must be based on epistemic *grounds* (where these may include religious experience). The Reformed epistemologist’s claim that belief in God is properly basic should not be confused with the claim that such belief is *groundless*.

<sup>23</sup> For extensive discussion of this issue see White (2010), Ballantyne (2013), and Bogardus (2013); see also Plantinga (2000), 427–9.

is easy to see—for, many of those who disagree with us were born elsewhere and elsewhen, and their grounds and dispositions are different from ours, and they hold the beliefs they do largely because of these factors.

Once we're aware of HE5, we might well wonder whether we have reason to think that *our* combination of grounds and dispositions is likely to lead to the truth, and more likely to lead to the truth about the disputed proposition than our dissenters' grounds and dispositions. After all, it's not as though we carefully chose our grounds and dispositions because they seemed trustworthy guides to the target proposition. Rather, these came to us as a result of dozens of highly contingent factors, many of which were beyond our control. To the extent that these factors should lead us to doubt that our grounds are non-misleading and our dispositions reliable, they give us reason to doubt the beliefs to which those factors gave rise. Plausibly, the factors give us *at least some* reason to doubt these beliefs—certainly more reason than we had before learning of HE5.

There are other relevant kinds of higher-order evidence. For instance, it's at least a live possibility that many of us have formed our religious beliefs on the basis of wish-fulfillment (or, in the atheist's case, on the basis of some sort of divine authority problem). A complete rendering of the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence would account for these varieties of higher-order evidence. It would also detail the individual kinds of higher-order evidence more thoroughly. For present purposes, however, we'll stick to the ones briefly developed above.<sup>24</sup> It seems plausible that each of these provides at least *some* reason for us to reduce confidence in our religious beliefs. If this is right, then it's initially plausible that, when the relevant bits of higher-order evidence are combined, they together provide reason for significant belief revision.

### III.2. The Argument Stated Explicitly

Having sketched the main contours of the cumulative skeptical argument, we can now state it more explicitly. Here my main aim is to chisel the argument into evaluable shape.

Let  $HE^*$  be the sum of the higher-order evidence canvassed above in HE1–HE5.  $HE^*$  is higher-order evidence relevant to some religious belief that  $P$ , and  $S$  is the subject who believes  $P$ . We can now set out the argument:

<sup>24</sup> For detailed discussion of these varieties of higher-order evidence, see the works by Ballantyne, along with White (2010) and Bogardus (2013).

- (1) If S is justified in believing P on grounds G and then becomes aware of HE\*, S is not justified in believing P.
- (2) Many religious believers are justified in their religious beliefs on the basis of certain grounds, and then become aware of HE\*.
- (C) Therefore, many religious believers are not justified in their religious beliefs.

The argument is valid. Further, (2) seems plausible, at least with respect to many reflective believers. This is clearly the case for many theistic philosophers. If one holds religious beliefs, but also attends meetings of the SCP and APA, and is familiar with the literature in the philosophy of religion, and teaches classes on the topic, then one knows that many religious beliefs must be false, and that evaluation of religious claims is difficult and fraught with disagreement, that we have only a slice of the available grounds, and so on. So (2) seems plausible. In light of this, let's move on to (1). I suspect that's where the action is.

(1) is an epistemic principle. It says in effect that HE\* removes the epistemic efficacy of the religious believer's grounds, whatever they are. Why think this is right? To start to see a first reason, note that for each of the sub-components of HE\*, formidable philosophers have argued that those sub-components *by themselves* remove the epistemic efficacy of a belief's grounds. Thus we have arguments from (i) apparent unreliability,<sup>25</sup> (ii) difficulty in assessment,<sup>26</sup> (iii) disagreement over assessment,<sup>27</sup> (iv) evidence we don't have,<sup>28</sup> (v) evidence of non-rational contingencies in belief formation,<sup>29</sup> and so on. Now note that premise (1) packs all of these considerations into its antecedent. Plausibly, this makes the principle less vulnerable to counterexamples than principles appealing only to the individual bits of higher-order evidence comprising HE\*.

Second, when one believes P on grounds G and acquires HE\*, one arguably acquires a defeater for the belief that P.<sup>30</sup> Why? Because in acquiring HE\*, one will question whether G is a reliable indicator of P; or if one does not actually question this, one will acquire *reason* to do so. In light of HE\*, one will either disbelieve or withhold belief with respect to whether G reliably

<sup>25</sup> Kornblith (2010). <sup>26</sup> Pascal (2008), section 190 seems to suggest this.

<sup>27</sup> Kornblith (2010). Kornblith argues that difficulty in assessment is part of the explanation for disagreement over assessment.

<sup>28</sup> Ballantyne (2014). <sup>29</sup> Hick (2004), chapter 1 and (2001) chapter 1.

<sup>30</sup> A *defeater*, as understood here, is a reason to give up a belief that one has, or to reduce confidence in that belief. More formally, when a subject S is justified in believing P on grounds G, a defeater D is a propositional attitude or experience of S's such that (G&D) does not support S's belief that P, or supports it to a lesser extent than G alone.



indicates P, or one will *have reason* to disbelieve or withhold with respect to this. (See below for further argumentation.) But if any of these conditions obtains, and if (G&HE\*) exhausts one's total epistemic grounds, one will have a defeater for P, and thus won't be justified in believing P.

Let's take the conditions one by one. Start with *disbelieving* that (G&HE\*) supports P. Suppose my belief that P is otherwise justified. But then suppose that in light of HE\* I come to disbelieve that my grounds for believing P reliably indicate its truth. In such circumstances, my belief that P is defeated. I'm like someone who forms justified beliefs about the outside temperature by looking at a thermometer, and who subsequently comes to believe that the thermometer is unreliable. I have a *believed defeater* for P, where a believed defeater is a doxastic attitude of mine (belief, disbelief, withholding) that removes the justification of the target belief—at least unless I have some other support for P aside from G.<sup>31</sup>

Next, suppose I *withhold* with respect to whether (G&HE\*) supports P. This also seems to give me a defeater for P. For if I withhold with respect to this, my position is like that of someone who forms some justified temperature beliefs by looking at a thermometer, and who subsequently *withholds* belief in the thermometer's reliability. Withholding at the higher-level defeats the lower-level temperature belief. And likewise for my belief that P, if I withhold on whether (G&HE\*) supports P. At least provided that (G&HE\*) are all I have to go on, I get a believed defeater for the belief that P.

If believed defeaters are actual defeaters,<sup>32</sup> then we have two ways for HE\* to defeat the belief that P. I suspect that many religious believers acquire such defeaters upon acquiring evidence like HE\*. They think to themselves, "Even given my grounds for belief in God, could that belief really be right in light of this huge, jumbled, ambiguous pile of evidence, much of which is in any case hidden from me? That would be too good to be true. Given all of the available evidence that HE\* points to, my belief may very well be wrong. At any rate, I have no idea whether it is right." A religious believer who sincerely performs this sort of speech has a defeater for his beliefs. (And note: this much could be right even if the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence is unsound. The prospect of receiving a believed defeater by way of HE\* highlights an important and perhaps common way that religious beliefs may be defeated by higher-order evidence. Those with diffident personalities, for instance, may be especially vulnerable to such defeat.)

<sup>31</sup> For more on believed defeaters, see Bergmann (2005) and (2006).

<sup>32</sup> Bergmann (2005) and (2006) argues that they are, and argues that it is widely accepted that they are.

Moving on: suppose I *don't* disbelieve or withhold with respect to whether (G&HE\*) supports P. Suppose instead that I *believe* this proposition. I think to myself, "I'm not sure about all the details in HE\*. But I *am* sure that at the end of the day, whatever HE\* reveals, (G&HE\*) still supports my religious belief." Does that line of thought save me from defeat? Not automatically. For even if I continue to believe that G supports P, HE\* may give me *justification* for disbelieving or withholding with respect to that proposition. And if I would be justified in disbelieving or withholding with respect to whether (G&HE\*) reliably indicates P, then I have a defeater for my belief that P even if I continue to think this belief is well supported.

The crucial question, then, is *does acquiring HE\* give one reason to disbelieve or withhold the claim that G reliably indicates P?* Start with disbelief. Suppose S is aware of HE\* and is considering whether G reliably indicates P. Given all the higher-order evidence packed into HE\*, one can begin to see the plausibility of the claim that P is not very likely on S's evidence. For S is aware that many, many human subjects are largely failing to get at the truth regarding P. And S is aware that in light of all the relevant arguments pro and con, claims like P are notoriously hard to assess. Further, perhaps because of this difficulty, there's pervasive disagreement about the force of the relevant arguments. Still worse, S is aware that many of the grounds relevant to assessing P are grounds that S doesn't have (G is just a fraction of what's available). And S is also aware that if she had been born elsewhere and elsewhen, she either wouldn't have G or would assess its bearing on P differently. In light of all this, S might understandably disbelieve that her total grounds (G&HE\*) support P. She might think to herself, quite sensibly, "Given mountainous heap of evidence involved in HE\*, G isn't very likely a reliable indicator of the truth about P." Perhaps there's something wrong with this way of thinking, but it seems at least intuitively plausible. However, pretty clearly, if S is justified in thinking this way, she has a defeater for P.

Consider next the possibility that S is justified in *withholding* with respect to whether (G&HE\*) supports P. Why take this possibility seriously? Well, given all the evidence that's packed into HE\*, S might seem entirely justified in thinking something like this, "Given that my fellow humans aren't very good on this topic (most of us are wrong, after all), and given that the evidence related to the topic is really hard to assess, and that smart people have disagreed over the assessment, and that I have only a slice of the available evidence, and so on, I haven't a *clue* what to think about what (G&HE\*) supports. The probability of P on (G&HE\*) is *inscrutable* to me. I'll therefore withhold on this matter." It's not at all clear what's wrong with S's thinking in this way; S's way of thinking has, at least

to my mind, a considerable degree of intuitive plausibility. But if that's how things stand for S, then her belief that P is defeated, just as it was in the case where she justifiedly thought that P is unlikely on (G&HE\*). For if she is justified in withholding as to whether her total grounds support P, then she's justified in withholding with respect to P, and is not justified in believing P.

If the intuitions expressed in either of the last two paragraphs are on target, then religious believers who acquire HE\* have a defeater for their religious beliefs, despite these beliefs' enjoying prima facie justification via G. This is so even if these subjects continue to believe that (G&HE\*) supports their religious beliefs. Subjects in that position aren't justified in believing that (G&HE\*) supports P, and so aren't justified in believing P—just as (1) says.

We have now set out a valid argument, grounded in higher-order evidence, for the conclusion that the religious beliefs of many real-live subjects are unjustified. The antecedent of the argument's epistemic principle packs in a variegated mass of higher-order evidence. Plausibly, this makes the principle less vulnerable to counterexamples than principles that involve just one sort of higher-order evidence. Further, the empirical premise of the argument appeals not to some idealized notion of epistemic peerhood (or the like), but to mundane facts of intellectual life of which many reflective believers are aware.

#### IV. EVALUATING THE ARGUMENT

Let's consider some ways a religious believer might try to resist the above argument.<sup>33</sup> Four of these, though perhaps of some value, are insufficient to show how the believer can rationally retain belief in the face of HE\*. A fifth consideration—itself a combination of considerations—is more promising.

##### IV.1. Inadequate Replies

A first objection capitalizes on a limiting feature of the cumulative skeptical argument: even if it justifies significant belief revision, it only does so for fairly reflective religious people. Perhaps only philosophy nerds and theology geeks even stop to consider the sort of evidence discussed above. And if

<sup>33</sup> Though I'll be evaluating the *believer's* case, it bears repeating that those who believe the denials of religious propositions (e.g., atheists) also need a reply to the cumulative argument.

that's right, then premise (2) is questionable. I won't pursue this line of thought further, because it's of no use to anyone who is still reading. All of *those* folks are aware of HE\*, so it's too late for them to avoid coming to terms with it. And in this respect, they're like many other reflective people who hold beliefs about religious propositions.

A second objection: Perhaps some people who hold religious beliefs have religious experiences so powerful that they render the resulting beliefs *indefeasible*. The experiences are "self-authenticating"; they involve God's "zapping" the relevant individual so that the target belief is both psychologically and epistemically certain for her. Such experiences seem epistemically possible, and some believers claim that they are actual. Thus, possibly, someone forms a religious belief on the basis of some grounds (experiences of the sort just mentioned), and subsequently becomes aware of HE\*, and yet is completely justified in retaining the target belief. Such cases are counterexamples to (1).

This objection shows that (1) needs amendment—its antecedent needs a codicil to rule out the relevant kind of religious experience. In what follows, we can take the codicil as read. Given this, the objection doesn't cripple the cumulative argument. For once the skeptic adds the codicil to (1), and makes the corresponding change to (2), the argument remains a threat to believers who haven't had "zappy" religious experiences.<sup>34</sup> Such believers haven't had the relevant experiences, and so their beliefs can't be rendered indefeasible by them. Plausibly, this includes a great number of religious believers.

A third objection: wouldn't a parallel argument from higher-order evidence undermine not just religious beliefs, but also beliefs about ethics, politics, science, and most philosophical topics? And isn't the conclusion that our beliefs in these fields are irrational a *reductio* on the premises of the cumulative argument? This sort of response seeks to lump religious beliefs together with other types of beliefs in an effort to vindicate the former. It doesn't say, "We're all going down together." Rather, it says that there's something absurd about claiming irrationality for our beliefs about most everything controversial.

This objection rightly points out that, with respect to the prospect of defeat via higher-order evidence, religious beliefs fare no worse than beliefs about other controversial topics. But is it *absurd* to think—as the objector does—that all our beliefs about these topics are irrational? It can appear so if we consider the relevant beliefs at a glance, without examining the details. "*Of course*," we might say, "it's silly to think that hardly any of us are rational

<sup>34</sup> I owe the term to Frances (2008).

in believing anything controversial. We *clearly* have rational beliefs about many of those topics; and even if we don't, we have friends who do. So something has gone wrong with the skeptical argument."<sup>35</sup> This sort of reply is very tempting. But I suggest that its appeal comes from running together two claims that ought to be kept separate:

- Hardly any of us are rational in believing anything controversial; and
- Hardly any of us *who are aware of HE\** are rational in believing anything controversial to which HE\* is relevant.

The first claim is absurd—surely some people are at least *prima facie* rational in believing propositions that are in fact controversial. And surely some individuals whose beliefs are *prima facie* rational aren't aware of HE\*. The first claim, stated baldly as it is, doesn't account for this. Unfortunately, this is irrelevant to the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence. The second claim is the relevant one. It says that hardly anyone who is aware of widespread error, opacity in assessment, disagreement on assessment, historical contingency (and so on) relevant to his beliefs is rational in holding those beliefs. And this claim, though perhaps false, is not absurd. Further, claiming that it is absurd is not likely to advance the dialectic; nor does it explain *how* religious beliefs can remain rational in the face of HE\*.

A fourth objection charges the skeptic with self-defeat: If the cumulative skeptical argument highlights a reason to doubt that one's first-order grounds support religious belief, it also provides reason to doubt that *withholding* is the correct response to one's first-order grounds. It is therefore a challenge to skeptic and believer alike. Suppose I'm a religious skeptic. I'll likely know that many people hold religious beliefs (and disbeliefs). Granted, many of them have formed a false belief or an irrational attitude—they have misleading evidence, or are making mistakes in assessing their evidence, or... But then why not think that in my skepticism I've fallen into one of these malign circumstances? Likewise, if I'm a skeptic, it seems I should think that perhaps I've failed to appreciate the force of theistic (and atheological) arguments. For example, with respect to the dialectical evidence I share with the theist, there's at least some probability that I've failed to appreciate genuine grounds for belief. Finally, reflection on grounds I don't have shows me that my epistemic base is really pretty paltry. In light of all this, how can I be reasonably sure that suspension of judgment is the correct attitude for me to take?

<sup>35</sup> van Inwagen (1996) and (2010) considers this sort of reply.

This line of thought appears to show that if the cumulative argument makes trouble for religious belief, it also makes trouble for skepticism. Whether this appearance matches reality is another matter—one I won't pretend to settle here.<sup>36</sup> Instead, note that even if this reply successfully defeats the cumulative argument, it doesn't thereby deliver all the believer might want. Specifically, even if the reply is dialectically satisfying, it does nothing to explain *how* her religious beliefs might remain rational in the face of HE\*. It leaves unanswered the question, How, if at all, can a subject's religious beliefs remain rational, given that she's aware of HE\*?

To answer that question, we need a better handle on the extent to which awareness of HE\* defeats or disconfirms the beliefs of those aware of it. As we'll see, getting a handle on this will require us to consider a number of details. These details, I suggest, point toward more explanatorily satisfying replies to the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence.<sup>37</sup>

#### IV.2. Toward a More Adequate Reply

We have thus far treated the grounds for religious beliefs, as well as the content of those beliefs, in the abstract. We've been considering, in effect, whether HE\* is a solvent that eats away at most anything it encounters. But if we're to determine rigorously the defeating force (if any) of HE\*, we'll need to consider several more concrete details. For as the discussion below

<sup>36</sup> For discussion of this sort of reply to skeptical arguments from disagreement or their key epistemic principles, see Plantinga (2000), Elga (2010), and Weatherson (2013). Perhaps the strategies these authors employ could be directed at the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence.

<sup>37</sup> Here is one more kind of reply. I place it in the section on "inadequate replies" mainly because I don't know how to develop it adequately. The reply is that HE1–HE5 may not be wholly independent of each other. But the cumulative argument treats them as independent, thus overestimating their defeating force.

If it could be shown that there's a great deal of overlap between HE1–HE5, this might in turn show that the cumulative force of this higher-order evidence is not as great as it initially appears. However, it's worth noting that the relevant dependency relations must be demonstrated if this reply is to succeed. It won't do for the non-skeptic merely to *question* whether HE1–HE5 are independent. If it is just *unclear* whether they are dependent, the skeptic will be in position to pose an argument from one level up. Here's a sketch of such an argument. It's unclear whether HE1–HE5 are independent. So, the epistemic import of HE1–HE5 is unclear. If the epistemic import of HE1–HE5 is unclear, then those aware of HE1–HE5 are in a poor position to assess any body of evidence that includes it. And subjects who are in a poor position to assess their evidence should doubt the beliefs they form on the basis of that evidence. So, anyone aware of HE1–HE5 should doubt beliefs formed (partly) on the basis of HE1–HE5.

illustrates, these details can make large differences in how HE\* affects a belief's epistemic status.<sup>38</sup>

First, on more than one plausible account, what attitude it is reasonable to take in light of newly-acquired higher-order evidence will depend on the strength of one's initial grounds for one's religious beliefs. If one's initial, first-order grounds provide only moderate support (say, they make belief barely more reasonable than withholding), then evidence like HE\* may well force one to agnosticism. If one's grounds are very strong, it may not have such an effect. If higher-order evidence like HE\* is to be a defeater for even well-justified religious beliefs, it will need to mandate a very significant reduction in confidence even in well-justified beliefs.

Second, in considering to what extent a religious belief is disconfirmed by HE\*, we're in effect asking, "How likely is it that P is true, given HE\*?" That is, we're asking for the conditional probability of P on HE\*. To determine that, we'll need to determine the likelihood of the subject's having HE\* if her religious belief is true. We'll also need to determine the likelihood of our subject's having HE\* if her religious belief is false. In other words: We need to consider the relative explanatory power of P and its negation with respect to HE\*.

The remaining discussion will be set out in a Bayesian framework, because that framework will facilitate a clear expression of the substantive points to be made. It will also make clear how several relevant evidential factors bear on each other. Nevertheless, those averse to the Bayesian framework should be able to appreciate the substance of the discussion.

Let G, the religious believer's initial grounds, set the prior probability of her belief. These grounds may be arguments, religious experiences, or something else—it doesn't matter for our purposes. For the sake of concreteness, let the target belief be *theism* (T):

T: There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God who created the world.

In keeping with what skeptics are typically willing to grant, let's set T's prior probability high—say, at 0.9. (To be explicit: we're supposing that some subject, S, has a rational credence in T of 0.9, and that this credence is based on G.) To be sure, some religious believers will think this value too low, while some skeptics will think it is too high. Believers who think the

<sup>38</sup> Thanks to Tom Kelly, Richard Otte, and an anonymous referee for helpful discussion of this section.

probability assignment is too low are invited to substitute their own.<sup>39</sup> They may see the following exercise and its corresponding assignment as presenting a kind of “worst case scenario” for theistic belief. Skeptics who are dissatisfied with the probability assignment, but who want to advance the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence, can also see what follows as an exercise. If HE\* is to have the “trumping” power that the argument claims for it, then it ought to mandate significant confidence reduction (and thus a low posterior probability for T) even if the prior probability of T is set high.

If we want to find out how much (if at all) S should reduce her confidence in T in light of HE\*, then we need to know Pr(T/HE\*). When we put the relevant propositions into Bayes’ Theorem, we get:

$$\Pr(T/HE^*) = \frac{\Pr(T) \times \Pr(HE^*/T)}{\Pr(T) \times \Pr(HE^*/T) + \Pr(\sim T) \times \Pr(HE^*/\sim T)}$$

We’ve set the value of Pr(T) at 0.9, which leaves us with Pr(¬T) of 0.1. To determine Pr(T/HE\*), we require Pr(HE\*/T) and Pr(HE\*/¬T). If Pr(HE\*/T) < Pr(HE\*/¬T), then the higher-order evidence in HE\* will tend to confirm ¬T and disconfirm T. The extent of disconfirmation will depend on the values themselves. But determining these values is a substantive matter, not a mere formality. So there’s already reason to be suspicious of a universal answer to the question of what attitude one should take toward T in light of HE\*. And if things are already somewhat up in the air with respect to this, then more generally, we should be suspicious of the idea that higher-order evidence like HE\* dissolves the justification of all beliefs it comes in contact with.

Perhaps the best way to proceed is to plug in what seem like sensible values and see what we can learn from this. Again, those who don’t like the values are free to substitute their own. (Grumbling about the values will, in a way, support one of the main points I wish to make.) Let us begin with Pr(HE\*/¬T)—that is, the probability that we’d find all the higher-order evidence in HE\* if theism were false. It wouldn’t be all that surprising to find evidence like HE\* if theism were false. For given the falsehood of T, we might still expect people to ponder the possibility of God’s existence, to form beliefs about the matter, and to disagree with each other. And we

<sup>39</sup> As mentioned above, some believers may take their religious experiences to be “self-authenticating.” If they take these experiences to be their grounds for belief, they may set Pr(T) at 1. Such believers may then see the discussion that follows as relevant not to *them*, but to their less privileged brethren, who haven’t had such experiences.



might expect, once reflection got going, for evidence like HE\* to accumulate. At any rate, this isn't particularly improbable on  $\sim T$ . But perhaps it's not highly probable, either. It isn't as though the bare denial of theism leads us positively to expect HE\*. Accordingly—and provisionally—let's assign  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/\sim T)$  a value of 0.5.

Next consider  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/T)$ . In determining this value, we're in effect asking, "How likely is it on theism that there would be all manner of doubt and confusion about whether God exists? How likely is it that many apparently good-willed, intelligent people would have such difficulty figuring out whether there's a God? How likely is it that there would be widespread disagreement over God's existence, and that both beliefs and evidence related to the matter would be distributed by highly contingent factors?"

Some philosophers—those who advocate atheistic arguments from divine hiddenness—will argue that this probability is very low. According to such philosophers, if theism were true, its truth would likely be clear to all intelligent, good-willed parties. A good God would want all people to enter into loving relationships with him, and so would not leave his existence in doubt among reasonable people, inasmuch as to do so would undermine the possibility of such relationships. (Thus, so the argument goes, because no such God has made his existence obvious, no such God exists.) Focus for now on the probability that a good God *would* make his existence apparent to all. The case just sketched may provide a *prima facie* reason to think that probability is high—and thus, that  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/T)$  is low. But perhaps, as some theists have argued, God has good reasons for allowing his existence to remain hidden. Perhaps he knows that by making himself apparent, he would thereby coerce us into a relationship with him. Not desiring this, God chooses to hide himself. Or perhaps in some mysterious way, God's hiding actually *fosters* divine-human relationships because it reveals our need for God. On either of these hypotheses, the probability of divine hiddenness on theism may be fairly high, and the corresponding probability of  $(\text{HE}^*/T)$  may be high as well.

This is no place to enter into such debates.<sup>40</sup> Instead note that the resolution of these debates is a substantive philosophical matter deserving of great care. Thus, no party to our present discussion—theist, atheist, or skeptic—should blithely assign a probability to  $(\text{HE}^*/T)$ , as if a given assignment were clearly the correct one. Rather, such assignments, if they are to be responsible, will have to engage the ongoing discussion of divine hiddenness. As we'll see, this point makes a significant difference to our evaluation of the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence.

<sup>40</sup> But see Schellenberg (1993) and Howard-Snyder and Moser (2002).

For illustrative purposes, suppose  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/T)$  is low—something like 0.05. Suppose S agrees with this and all the above-discussed credences. In that case,  $\Pr(T/\text{HE}^*)$  for S can be calculated as follows:

$$\frac{0.9 \times 0.05}{(0.9 \times 0.05) + (0.1 \times .5)} \approx 0.47$$

Given these values, learning of  $\text{HE}^*$  mandates significant confidence reduction in T for S. Likewise, if we keep the other values constant but assign to  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/T)$  a value of 0.01, then the final value for  $\Pr(T/\text{HE}^*)$  will be  $\approx 0.15$ , again resulting in a significantly reduced rational credence in T for S.

So one who rationally believes theism (or places a high rational credence in theism) can find herself in a bad epistemic position upon learning of  $\text{HE}^*$ . But crucially, the probability assignments needed to generate that result are themselves controversial. They require taking up positions with respect to such matters as how likely  $\text{HE}^*$  would be on theism. And if this is right, we can draw an important lesson: what judgments we are rational in making about the epistemic significance of  $\text{HE}^*$  with respect to theism does not float free of our judgments about other topics (e.g., divine hiddenness). Rather, the skeptical threat from  $\text{HE}^*$  for theism depends on the grounds for thinking that  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/T)$  is low. And if so, then the skeptic who wishes to defend the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence will need to descend into the fray and argue that divine hiddenness (and the like) is *unlikely* on theism. For notice, if  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/T)$  is 0.5, then given a value of 0.5 for  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/\sim T)$ ,  $\text{HE}^*$  will neither confirm nor disconfirm T. And it's hard to imagine the theist agreeing to a very low value for  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/T)$  without a fight.

So our first lesson is that  $\text{HE}^*$ 's epistemic effect on theistic belief depends on other substantive matters. In particular, it depends on the comparative probability of our higher-order evidence on T and  $\sim T$ , respectively. And of course, similar remarks apply to other religious beliefs, and to other beliefs, generally speaking. (An aside: In this connection, it's plausible that much of the appeal of conciliationist views of peer disagreement stems from the fact that we do not *expect* our peers to disagree with us. That is, the conditional probability of a peer's disagreement given the target belief is low—at least *prima facie*. We do not expect such higher-order evidence, says the conciliationist, and that's why finding it disconfirms our view.)

A second lesson is this: The *content* of a religious belief is relevant to its ability to withstand  $\text{HE}^*$ .<sup>41</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, some specific versions of

<sup>41</sup> The strategy developed here is structurally similar Richard Otte's treatment of evidential arguments from evil. See Otte (2000).

theism fare better here than *bare* theism. Consider, for instance, Christianity. This view includes theism, but adds that we humans are mired in sin, and that this sin has impaired not only our moral standing before God, but also our cognitive capacities for knowing God. Thus, in speaking of mankind, St. Paul says, “[A]lthough they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Romans 1:21). Apart from God, according to the Christian story, we are lost both morally and noetically—especially when it comes to God. Fortunately, in his grace and through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ, God has arranged for both our moral and cognitive redemption. But—back to the bad news—even the believer should expect unclarity about God’s nature and purposes. To quote Paul again, we see these things “as through a glass, darkly”—at least in the present life.

Let ‘C’ designate Christianity so-described. As it turns out, HE\* has less disconfirming power with respect to C than with respect to T. This is because  $\text{Pr}(\text{HE}^*/\text{C}) > \text{Pr}(\text{HE}^*/\text{T})$ —in other words, Christianity gives us more reason to expect HE\* than does bare theism. Further, it seems that HE\* is about what we’d expect, given C. For as noted above, C gives us strong reason to think that when it comes to reasoning about God, humans will make all kinds of mistakes, will manufacture all kinds of misleading evidence, and so on. That is, *if* C were true, it would lead us to expect HE\*.

Consider another subject, S2, whose rational credence in C is 0.9, based on some grounds, G2.<sup>42</sup> And suppose that in light of considerations like those just posed, S2 assigns  $\text{Pr}(\text{HE}^*/\text{C})$  a value of 0.75. Given these assump-

<sup>42</sup> The wakeful reader will note that S2’s rational credence in C is the same as S’s rational credence in T: .9. These values have been set the same in order to isolate the effect of HE\*. Now, C entails T, but not vice versa. So, to avoid incoherence, a *single* subject’s credence in C must be lower than her credence in T. But because we’re comparing *two* subjects here, each of whom has different grounds for their corresponding prior credence, the worry about probabilistic incoherence does not arise.

Note in addition that the main point illustrated here is that not all versions of theism fare equally well in light of HE\*. Those with lingering worries about the probabilistic coherence of our example may consider another. Compare Christian theism (which includes theism and adds theses about humanity’s need for moral and cognitive redemption, along with specific “interventionist” doctrines like the Incarnation and Atonement) with *Enlightenment deism* (which includes theism, but also the *denials* of the specifically Christian doctrines just mentioned). In this case, we have two views that include theism but diverge about other details. Plausibly, Christianity has more explanatory power with respect to HE\* than does Enlightenment deism. That is,  $\text{Pr}(\text{HE}^*/\text{Christianity}) > \text{Pr}(\text{HE}^*/\text{Enlightenment deism})$ . Christian theism includes an account of the noetic effects of sin that leads us to expect something like HE\*. By contrast, Enlightenment deism, with its faith in the power of human reason, would seem to predict that all rational people will come to believe in more or less the same sort of God. If this is right, then the Christian who learns of HE\* will, other things being equal, find her beliefs disconfirmed

tions, it won't much matter what value we plug in for  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/\neg C)$ . Indeed, even if we plug in an exceedingly high value of 0.9999, the effect of  $\text{HE}^*$  is fairly negligible:

$$\Pr(C/\text{HE}^*) = \frac{0.9 \times 0.75}{(0.9 \times 0.75) + (0.1 \times 0.9999)} \approx 0.87$$

Further, if  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/\neg C)$  is less than the 0.75 assigned for  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/C)$ , then discovering  $\text{HE}^*$  will actually *confirm* S2's Christian belief. To put it mildly, that would be a surprising feature for a body of evidence touted as providing universal disconfirmation for religious beliefs.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It bears repeating that the values assigned in the above equations are assigned for purposes of illustration. If we change them, we'll get different results. For instance, if we set the priors for theism or Christianity lower, this will make those beliefs easier to defeat than they'd otherwise be. And if we set those priors higher, the beliefs will be harder to defeat or disconfirm. Likewise, the defeating effects of  $\text{HE}^*$  depend in part on the extent to which one's religious beliefs lead one to expect such higher-order evidence. And as we've seen, Christians have better reason to expect such evidence than proponents of bare theism. One should think that this comparative claim is right even if one balks at the value assigned to  $\Pr(\text{HE}^*/C)$  above.

Where does all this leave us? First, given the sheer number of factors involved, I think it should leave us in doubt about the key premise in the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence.<sup>43</sup> Again, the premise is this:

(1)\* If S is justified in believing P on grounds G (where G is not a "zappy" religious experience) and then becomes aware of  $\text{HE}^*$ , then S is not justified in believing P.

We've now seen that discovering  $\text{HE}^*$  does not *automatically* result in an epistemically mandatory and significant reduction in confidence—much depends on whether one would expect  $\text{HE}^*$  on the target belief, and whether one would otherwise expect  $\text{HE}^*$ .

to a lesser extent than the deist who learns of the same, assuming that these subjects have the same, but differently grounded, rational priors.

<sup>43</sup> See Koehl (2005) for an extended discussion of the ways in which these and other factors militate against "blanket statements" about the epistemic significance of religious diversity.

Second, in several ways, our discussion of the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence points away from itself. It encourages skeptics to reconsider granting that religious beliefs enjoy strong prima facie support. Further, it forces religious skeptics who wish to argue from higher-order evidence to enter the debate about the related issue of divine hiddenness. The argument also encourages believers to consider employing conceptual resources—including Christian resources—that extend beyond bare theism. Such strategies may reveal that their *actual* beliefs are disconfirmed by HE\* to a lesser extent than some proper subsets of their beliefs would be. Finally, the argument forces religious believers to consider whether their beliefs really *do* enjoy strong prima facie support.

In this connection, note one final problem. There is at least a certain tension between (i) warding off the negative effects of higher-order evidence by appeal to the Christian story about humanity's noetic foibles, and (ii) insisting that there are excellent epistemic grounds for believing that story in the first place. If Christianity leads us to expect all kinds of cognitive frailty and failing, why think that the prima facie grounds for belief are strong? The Christian philosopher must work to resolve this tension. More generally, it appears that if any of us wants a definitive evaluation of the cumulative argument from higher-order evidence, we'll need to get back to work on other topics.<sup>44</sup>

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