What Is the Question?

Now many people concede that there is such a thing as Christian belief, but complain that there is something seriously wrong with it; Christian belief is irrational, or unjustified, or childish, or no more sensible than belief in Superman,[1] or in some other way cognitively not up to snuff, and therefore worthy of disdain and contempt. But what, more precisely, is the problem? Can we be a bit more specific?

De Facto vs. De Jure Objections

Beliefs can have at least two kinds of defect. On the one hand, a belief can be false. The de facto objection, with respect to a belief, is just that it is false, like the belief that there is such a person as Santa Claus. The de facto objector, therefore, argues that Christian belief is false, or at least very improbable. For example, there is the venerable "problem of evil": this is the claim that there is a contradiction between the facts of suffering and evil, on the one hand, and, on the other, the idea that there is such a person as God, who is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and perfectly good. God and evil are incompatible; but obviously there is evil; hence there is no such person as God. There are other versions of the de facto objection. For example, God is said to be an immaterial personal being — that is, a person without a body; but, so some followers of Wittgenstein think, it's not possible to be a person without a body.[2] Again, God is supposed to be both omnipotent and also omniscient but, so some people claim, it's not possible that there be a being who has both of these properties.

On the other hand, there is what I'll call the de jure objection, which also comes in several versions. Here the claim is not that a belief is false (although of course it might be); the claim, rather, is that it displays some other defect: it is immoral, or irrational, or foolish, or unjustified, or in some other way deficient. Consider the belief that there are an even number of stars; maybe that's true and maybe it's false, but it is not a belief a rational person will have (because it is the sort of belief for which evidence is required, and there is no evidence here either way). Similarly for the belief that the total snowfall at Mt. Rainier in the winter of AD 1895 was approximately 1205 inches. This belief is even less reasonable than the belief that the number of stars is uneven. With respect to what we know, it's as likely as not that the number of stars is even, but it is unlikely that the total snowfall at Mt. Rainier in 1895 was about 1205 inches: the highest total ever recorded there was about 1300 inches. Still another example: suppose I'm a baseball fan, and I firmly believe (perhaps by way of wishful thinking) that my team will win the World Series next year, even though they finished last this year and dealt away their best players. That too is irrational.

The de jure objection, therefore, is the claim that Christian belief is irrational or unjustified or perhaps immoral; more exactly, it is the person who embraces Christian belief who is alleged to be irrational or unjustified or in some other way deserving of disapprobation. This de jure claim is the chief focus of this book. It is also, I believe, far the more common of the two kinds of objections.

This objection is offered, first, by those who claim that Christian belief may have been sensible in the past, before the days of modern science, before we learned about evolution, relativity theory, quantum mechanics, and all the rest. But now, given contemporary science, it is no longer possible for a sensible and informed person to accept Christian belief. As I mentioned in the Preface (note 6), in the interests of brevity I'll simply refer the reader to my Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism,[3] where I argue that while there is indeed conflict between science and naturalism (the view that there is no such person as God or anything like God), there is no conflict between science and religion.

The de jure objection is offered, second, by those who emphasize the pluralism of religious belief. There are ever so many different and mutually inconsistent kinds of religious belief. There is Christianity, of course, but also Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, various African religions, Native American religions, and many others. Furthermore, some of these — Christianity, for example — split up into a multitude of warring factions. How, then, can it be sensible to embrace any particular one of these clamoring claimants? I'll respond to this objection in Chapter Nine.

Third, there are those who claim that it is intellectually arrogant to endorse a specific version of Christian belief, because then one is implicitly claiming that other people who don't endorse that version are inferior to you, or misled, or at any rate not as well placed as you are. Fourth, some claim that Christian and theistic belief, to be justified, requires evidence or argument; since there isn't sufficient evidence for it, so the objector goes on to say, such belief is unjustified. A fifth objection is that Christian or theistic belief is irrational. According to an important version of this objection such belief is a result of wish-fulfillment or wishful thinking. Thus according to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), we puny human beings find ourselves in this cold, cruel world, and we can make life endurable only by projecting into the heavens a father who really does care for us (and is a lot more powerful than our human father). But such belief is irrational.

Now it looks as if any of these objections could be offered by someone who held no view as to whether Christian belief is true. The objector could put it like this: "Well, I don't know whether Christian belief is true or false; but I do know that a person can't rationally accept it (because there is insufficient evidence, or there are so many alternatives, or such belief is a product of wish-fulfillment, or . . .)." What I want to do in this chapter is to try to identify a de jure objection more exactly. What we're looking for is an objection (1) that really does apply to Christian belief, and isn't trivially easy to answer, and (2) is independent of the de facto objection — that is, is such that one can sensibly offer the objection without presupposing or assuming that Christian belief is false.

Is There a Serious De Jure Objection?

Let's start considering three of these candidates (those not dealt with in another book or a later chapter), beginning with

Christian Belief Is Arrogant

This is the claim that it is arrogant or egotistical to endorse or believe a proposition you know others do not believe. Thus William Cantwell Smith: "except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: '. . . we believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God and you are totally wrong.' "[4] Now strictly speaking, Smith seems to be talking about someone who doesn't merely believe what others don't, but who goes on to say out loud, so to speak, that what he thinks is right and what those others think is wrong. Gary Gutting goes a bit further; he argues that it is egotistical and arrogant to believe a proposition for which you don't have a good argument, and with which you know others disagree (whether or not you voice this belief):

> First, believing p [when I don't have an argument and know that others disagree] is arbitrary in the sense that there is no reason to think that my intuition (i.e., what seems obviously true to me) is more likely to be correct that that of those who disagree with me. Believing p because its truth is supported b y m y intuition is thus an epistemological egoism just as arbitrary and unjustifiable as ethical egoism is generally regarded to be.[5]

But is this really convincing? I believe it is dead wrong to lie about my colleagues in order to advance my career. I believe this very firmly. I know there are others who disagree: there are many people, people whom I respect, who doubt that there is anything that is really wrong (although some things may be inadvisable). I don't really have an argument for my belief here, or at any rate an argument that will convince those who disagree with me. But does it follow that I am arrogant or egotistical in holding this belief?

I don't think so. First, I don't really believe p on the grounds that it is supported by my intuition — that is, I don't reason as follows: p is supported by my intuition; therefore p . Instead, p just seems right. So suppose I think hard about this proposition that lying about my colleagues to advance my career is wrong; and the more I think about it, the more clearly it seems to me that it's wrong. I consider all the objections I know: for example, reasons for thinking nothing, really, is right or wrong (although some things might be more advantageous or useful than others), or reasons for thinking that what counts, as far as right and wrong go, is only what is best for me and best advances my self-interest. After serious and protracted thought, it still seems to me, maybe even more strongly, that lying about my colleagues to advance my career is wrong. In fact it isn't even within my power, after thinking the matter over, to give up the belief that behavior of that sort is wrong. So could I be properly accused of egoism or arbitrariness or some other kind of immorality for thus thinking? I certainly can't see how.

Christian Belief Is Unjustified

This egoism objection, I think, is a nonstarter. A more important kind of objection here has it that Christian belief is unjustified. But what is this justification? What is it for a belief to be unjustified, or for a person to be unjustified in holding a certain belief?

The Dual Nature of Justification

There seem to be two strands to this notion of justification. On the one hand, justification seems to have something to do with evidence: a belief (or the believer) is unjustified if there isn't any evidence, or enough evidence, for that belief. On the other hand, justification seems to have something to do with duty, or obligation, or moral rightness. "Sam was entirely justified in rejecting his boss's harsh criticism"; this means, perhaps among other things, that Sam was within his rights, was contravening no duty, in rejecting his boss's harsh criticism.

If we take a look back in history to see where justification talk about belief originates, this two-strand appearance of justification is confirmed; we find concern with duty or obligation, and also with evidence. According to the important British philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) we have duties and obligations when it comes to what beliefs we form and hold. He asks this question: what are the ways in which "a rational creature, put in that state in which man is in this world, may and ought to govern his opinions, and actions depending thereon?" In a classic text, he gives his answer: a rational creature in our circumstances ought to govern his opinions by reason:

> faith is nothing but a firm assent of the mind: which, if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything but upon good reason; and so cannot be opposite to it. He that believes without having any reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him, to keep him out of mistake and error. He that does not this to the best of his power, however he sometimes lights on truth, is in the right but by chance; and I know not whether the luckiness of the accident will excuse the irregularity of his proceeding. This at least is certain, that he must be

accountable for whatever mistakes he runs into: whereas he that makes use of the light and faculties God has given him, and seeks sincerely to discover truth by those helps and abilities he has, may have this satisfaction in doing his duty as a rational creature, that, though he should miss truth, he will not miss the reward of it. For he governs his assent right, and places it as he should, who, in any case or matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves according as reason directs him. He that doth otherwise, transgresses against his own light, and misuses those faculties which were given him to no other end, but to search and follow the clearer evidence and greater probability.[6]

Here Locke isn't speaking about specifically religious faith (faith as contrasted with reason, say), but about assent or opinion generally; and his central claim here is that there are duties and obligations with respect to its management or regulation. In particular, you are obliged to give assent only to that for which you have good reasons, good evidence. God commands us, says Locke, to seek truth in this way; he commands us to regulate our opinion in this way. If you don't follow this command, then you neither seek truth as you ought, nor pay due obedience to your maker. Someone who does seek truth in this way, even if he should happen to miss it, may still "have this satisfaction in doing his duty as a rational creature." You govern your assent "right," he says, you place it as you "should" if you believe or disbelieve as reason directs you. And if you don't do that, then you transgress against your own lights. One who governs his opinion thus is acting in accord with duty, is within his rights, is flouting no obligation, is not blameworthy, is, in a word, justified.[7]

So there are two strands to this notion of justification; on the one hand it has to do with duty and obligation; the idea is that there are duties and obligations with respect to what you believe and the way in which you believe. And this is the basic notion of justification: you are justified in believing something or other, in the basic sense, if you are fulfilling your obligations, not going contrary to duty in believing that thing. That's the first strand. According to the second strand, justification has to do with evidence: you are justified in believing some proposition just if you have sufficient evidence for that proposition. What is the connection between these two strands in Locke's thinking? Easy enough: Locke thinks the relevant duty is to believe only those propositions for which you have good evidence. We all have this duty: to believe a proposition only if we have sufficient evidence for it. So someone who believes that there is such a person as God but who doesn't know of evidence for that belief (arguments for the existence of God, for example) is going contrary to her duty and is therefore unjustified. The claim that Christian belief is unjustified (that the believer is unjustified) comes down to the claim that the believer doesn't have adequate evidence for this belief.

Classical Foundationalism

Here there is a problem. The objector is evidently thinking of propositional evidence: evidence from other propositions one believes. The theistic arguments — cosmological, ontological, the argument from design, fine-tuning arguments — would be evidence of this sort for the existence of God, if indeed those arguments are good ones. And the objector is complaining that Christians don't have sufficient propositional evidence to support their beliefs.

But obviously you can't have propositional evidence for everything you believe. Every train of arguments will have to start somewhere, and the ultimate premises from which it starts will not themselves be believed on the evidential basis of other propositions; they will have to be accepted in the basic way, that is, not on the evidential basis of other beliefs. So presumably the objector is not holding that every belief, if it is to be justified, must be believed on the evidential basis of other beliefs; if that were true, no beliefs could be justified. (And if no beliefs could be justified, it is nothing in particular against religious beliefs if *they* can't be justified.) The objector must be supposing that some beliefs are properly basic: accepted in the basic way, not accepted on the evidential basis of other beliefs, and also such that one is justified in accepting them in that way.

John Locke was entirely aware of this. It was his idea that some beliefs are certain; and beliefs that are certain, he thought, can properly be accepted in the basic way. These certain beliefs fall into two kinds. First, some beliefs about my own mental life are certain. I believe I am in pain: that belief is certain for me. I believe, as I am looking out of the window, that there seem to be trees and grass and flowers there. I am certain of this: not that there really are trees and grass and flowers out there, but that it looks to me as if there are. We could call such beliefs "incorrigible": if you claim that you are in pain, or that it looks to you as if there is a tree there, I can't sensibly correct you and claim that you are mistaken. Incorrigible beliefs, according to Locke, are basic, and furthermore they are properly basic.

There is a second kind of belief that, according to Locke, is certain and therefore properly basic: self-evident beliefs. Examples would be beliefs like 2 + 2 = 4 or Nothing can be red and green all over at the same time or If all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal. I can simply see that these beliefs are true. Such beliefs, we might say, are such that you can't understand them without seeing that they are true. So beliefs of these two kinds are properly basic; you can be justified in accepting them even if you don't believe them on the evidential basis of other beliefs you hold.

Think about the whole set of beliefs you hold. Locke thought of such a set of beliefs as having a characteristic structure: there are basic beliefs, which form the foundation of the structure, and there are nonbasic beliefs, which are accepted on the evidential basis of the basic beliefs. According to Locke, in a well-run, properly regulated set of beliefs, the only beliefs to be found in the foundation would be beliefs that are either self-evident or incorrigible. Locke's views here are an example of classical foundationalism, as it is called. The classical foundationalist holds that the only sorts of beliefs that are properly basic are those of these two kinds: self-evident beliefs, and incorrigible beliefs. All other beliefs must be accepted on the basis of propositional evidence, that is, by way of arguments from other beliefs, arguments that trace back to those self-evident or incorrigible foundations.

Now Christian beliefs aren't just self-evident, like $2 + 1 = 3$, and neither, of course, are they just about one's own mental states. Therefore, according to the classical foundationalist, Christian beliefs must be accepted on the basis of arguments; they must be accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions. Thus one version of the claim that Christian belief is unjustified (that the believer is unjustified) arises out of classical foundationalism: it is really the claim that there is no good (or good enough) propositional evidence for Christian belief from propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible. Hence the Christian believer is unjustified; she is violating her epistemic duty.

But classical foundationalism itself has serious problems. First, it seems to shoot itself in the foot; it is hoist on its own petard; it is in self-referentially hot water. For according to classical foundationalism (hereafter, CF) you are within your epistemic rights in believing a proposition only if you believe it on the evidential basis of propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible.

If you believe a proposition for which there isn't any evidence from self-evident or incorrigible propositions, then you are unjustified and violating your epistemic duty. But here's the problem: there don't seem to be any incorrigible or self-evident propositions that support CF itself. It certainly isn't self-evident: it isn't such that anyone who understands it can just see it to be true. For example, I understand it, and I don't see it to be true. In fact I believe it is false. So it isn't itself self-evident; but it also looks as if there aren't any good arguments for CF from other propositions that are self-evident. Furthermore, CF isn't incorrigible; it isn't at all about how things appear or seem to anyone. Nor does it look as if there is a decent argument for CF from other propositions that are incorrigible. And still further, it certainly doesn't look as if there is a good argument for CF from propositions that are either self-evident or incorrigible. So, unless looks are deceiving here, even if CF is true, no one can properly believe CF; anyone who believes it is unjustified. Accordingly, CF seems to be self-referentially incoherent.

Are My Beliefs Within My Voluntary Control?

That's a serious problem, then, for the justificationist objection to Christian belief, at least if that objection is based on classical foundationalism. But the justificationist objector need not base her objection on classical foundationalism. Maybe she agrees with the classical foundationalist that Christian belief must be accepted on the basis of some evidence to be justified, but doesn't believe CF. Maybe she thinks that to be justified the Christian believer must have evidence from other things she believes, but doesn't necessarily need to have evidence from propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible. Then the above problem wouldn't affect her.

Still, there is another problem. According to the classical foundationalist, to be justified in believing, e.g., that there is a tree in my backyard, or that I see a tree in my backyard, I must believe that proposition on the evidence of propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible. Now maybe I can't find a decent argument of that sort for the proposition that there is a tree in my backyard. In fact maybe there isn't a decent argument of that sort for that proposition. I might try: "On most occasions in the past when it seemed to me that there was a tree in my backyard, there really was a tree there; on this occasion it seems to me that there is a tree there; so probably on this occasion there really is a tree there." But how do I know that on those past occasions when it seemed to me that there was a tree there, there really *was* a tree there? By appealing to *other* earlier past occasions? Clearly that's not going to work.

And what about the very idea of past occasions, or more generally what about the very idea of a past? I certainly believe that indeed there has been a past; but where can I find a good argument for the conclusion that there really has been a past? The whole development of modern philosophy from Descartes to Hume really shows that there is no good argument from what is self-evident or incorrigible to propositions of this sort.

Still, when I look out of my window, I do form the belief that there is a tree out there; and in fact it isn't within my power to withhold that belief. The fact is, beliefs of this sort are not under our voluntary control. We don't will to form them. It's not as if, when I look out into the backyard, I am appeared to in that familiar fashion, and then choose to believe that there is a tree there. I don't choose between believing this and not believing it: I just find myself believing. In the typical case, what I believe is not under my control; it really isn't up to me.

Perhaps in some special cases I decide what to believe — perhaps I look at the evidence for some proposition, and then decide to believe it — but even in these cases it's not clear that this is what happens. What really does happen, so it seems to me, is that I decide to look at all the evidence; and when I do, either I find the evidence convincing to one degree or another, whereupon I believe the proposition in question or think it likely, or I don't find the evidence convincing, and don't believe the proposition. But I really don't tot up the evidence and then just decide whether or not to believe.

If so, however, moral categories — duty and obligation, etc. — don't really apply to beliefs (believings). Go back to my belief that there is a tree there: under the circumstances in question it just isn't up to me whether or not I form that belief; I simply find myself with it. But then how could I be going contrary to duty in holding that belief? If I fell out of an airplane at 3,000 feet, I would fall down, not up; and it wouldn't be up to me which way I fell. But then I couldn't be going contrary to my duty in falling down; my falling down isn't something that can be morally evaluated; I can't sensibly be either praised or blamed for falling down. And isn't it the same with respect to belief? If it isn't within my power to withhold belief, in those circumstances, then in those circumstances I couldn't be going contrary to my duty; therefore in those circumstances I couldn't be unjustified. And isn't the same thing true for religious belief? I am a theist; I believe that there is such a person as God; but I have never decided to hold this belief. It has always just seemed to me to be true. And it isn't as if I could rid myself of this belief just by an act of will.

Justification without Evidence

In any event, it is perfectly plain that someone could be justified in accepting the whole Christian story; that is, it is plain that someone could accept that story without going contrary to duty. It isn't at all difficult for a Christian — even a sophisticated, and knowledgeable contemporary believer aware of all the criticisms and contrary currents of opinion — to be justified, in this sense, in her belief; and this whether or not she believes in God (or in more specific Christian doctrines) on the basis of propositional evidence. For consider such a believer. She is aware of the objections people have made to Christian belief; she has read and reflected on Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche (not to mention Flew, Mackie, and Nielsen) and the other critics of Christian or theistic belief; she knows that the world contains many who do not believe as she does. She doesn't believe on the basis of propositional evidence; she therefore believes in the basic way. Can she be justified in believing in God in this way?

The answer seems to be pretty easy. She reads Nietzsche, but remains unmoved by his complaint that Christianity fosters a weak, whining, whimpering, pusillanimous, duplicitous, and generally disgusting kind of person: most of the Christians she knows or knows of — Mother Teresa, for example — don't fit that mold. She finds Freud's contemptuous attitude towards Christianity and theistic belief backed by little more than implausible fantasies about the origin of belief in God (patricide in the primal horde?[8] Can he be serious?); and she finds little more of substance in Marx. She thinks as carefully as she can about these objections and others, but finds them wholly uncompelling.

On the other side, although she is aware of theistic arguments and thinks some of them not without value, she doesn't believe on the basis of them. Rather, she has a rich inner spiritual life, the sort described in the early pages of Jonathan Edwards's Religious Affections;[9] it seems to her that she is sometimes made aware, catches a glimpse, of something of the overwhelming beauty and loveliness of the Lord; she is often aware, as it strongly seems to her, of the work of the Holy Spirit in her heart, comforting, encouraging, teaching, leading her to accept the "great things of the gospel" (as Edwards calls them), helping her see that the magnificent scheme of salvation devised by the Lord himself is not only for others but for her as well.

After long, hard, conscientious reflection, this all seems to her enormously more convincing than the complaints of the critics. Is she then going contrary to duty in believing as she does? Is she being irresponsible? Clearly not. There could be something defective about her, some malfunction not apparent on the surface. She could be mistaken, a victim of illusion or wishful thinking despite her best efforts. She could be wrong, desperately wrong, pitiably wrong, in thinking these things; nevertheless she isn't flouting any discernible duty. She is fulfilling her epistemic responsibilities; she is doing her level best; she is justified.

And this is not only true, but obviously true. We may feel in some subterranean way that without evidence she isn't justified; if so, this must be because we are importing some other conception of justification. But if it is justification in the deontological sense, the sense involving responsibility, being within one's intellectual rights, she is surely justified. For how could she possibly be blameworthy or irresponsible, if she thinks about the matter as hard as she can, in the most responsible way she can, and still comes to these conclusions?

Indeed, no matter what conclusions she arrived at, wouldn't she be justified if she arrived at them in this way? Even if they are wholly unreasonable? A patient at Pine Rest Christian Psychiatric Hospital in Cutlerville, Michigan, once complained that he wasn't getting the credit he deserved for inventing a new form of human reproduction, "rotational reproduction" as he called it. This kind of reproduction doesn't involve sex. Instead, you suspend a woman from the ceiling with a rope and get her rotating at a high rate of speed; the result is a large number of children, enough to populate a city the size of Chicago. As a matter of fact, he claimed, this is precisely how Chicago was populated. He realized, he said, that there is something churlish about insisting on getting all the credit due one, but he did think he really hadn't got enough recognition for this important discovery. After all, where would Chicago be without it?

Now there is no reason to think this unfortunate man was flouting epistemic duty, or derelict with respect to cognitive requirement, or careless about his epistemic obligations, or cognitively irresponsible. Perhaps he was doing his level best to satisfy these obligations. Indeed, we can imagine that his main goal, in life, is satisfying his intellectual obligations and carrying out his cognitive duties. Perhaps he was dutiful in excelsis. If so, he was justified in these insane beliefs, even if they are insane, and even if they result from cognitive dysfunction.

Christian Belief Is Irrational

Granted: this man need not be flouting duty; he is or may be justified. Still, there is obviously something seriously wrong with his whole belief structure. It isn't just that his beliefs are false; they are also in a clear sense irrational. In what sense? According to Aristotle, man is a rational animal. That is, human beings, unlike, say, bacteria, have reason; they can think, form beliefs, learn about their environments, use arguments of various sorts, and the like. Now suppose we think of reason as something like a faculty or power by virtue of which human beings are able to do these things. Like other faculties, reason can sometimes fail to function properly; it can malfunction. And one way in which it can malfunction is by way of producing bizarre beliefs, as with the above advocate of rotational reproduction.

Of course reason, this faculty, produces different beliefs in different circumstances. Upon looking out of the window, I form the belief that I see a bunch of blackbirds in the backyard; upon attending a concert, I may form the belief that the brass is too loud. These beliefs would be perfectly proper in those circumstances. But if at the concert I form the belief that I see a bunch of blackbirds in the backyard, or if when looking out of the window I form the belief that the brass is too loud, then something has gone wrong — my cognitive powers are misfiring or malfunctioning; my beliefs, in those circumstances, are irrational. More generally, we could say that a belief is irrational, in given circumstances, if in those circumstances someone whose cognitive powers were functioning properly, not subject to malfunction, would not form that belief. A belief is rational, in given circumstances, if someone whose cognitive powers are functioning properly, could form that belief in those circumstances. According to this definition, that belief in rotational reproduction is irrational.

But what about Christian belief? Can Christian belief be held by someone whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly? This question, I think, brings us closer to a viable de jure criticism of Christian belief. So far we've seen several failed candidates for a viable de jure criticism: that Christian belief is arbitrary or egotistical, that Christian belief can't be justified, that it is wanting because there aren't good arguments for it, and so on. And what we've seen, so far, is that these objections don't really hold water. But with this question about rationality, we get closer to a defensible de jure criticism of Christian belief. Here we can properly start, I think, by considering the sort of objection offered by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), those great "masters of suspicion" as they are sometimes called. These objections are crucially related to the question of warrant, that property or quality which distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief. We'll get to warrant in a bit: right now, we'll take a look at the objections offered by Marx and Freud.

Marx doesn't have a great deal to say about religion, but what he does say can hardly be considered complimentary:

> The basis of irreligious criticism is man makes religion, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and the self-feeling of the man who has either not yet found himself, or else (having found himself) has lost himself once more. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, a perverted world consciousness, because they are a perverted world. . . .
>
> Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the

> heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.
>
> The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is *the* demand to give up a condition which requires illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion.[10]

Marx's idea is that religion arises from a *perverted* world-consciousness. Religious belief is both a result and a manifestation of cognitive malfunction or dysfunction, a lack of mental and/or emotional health. This cognitive dysfunction is due to social dysfunction; because she is living in a dysfunctional, perverse social environment, the believer's cognitive powers aren't functioning properly; they aren't functioning in a healthy fashion. If her cognitive equipment *were* working properly — if, for example, it were working more like Marx's — she would not be under the spell of this illusion. She would instead face the world and our place in it with the clear-eyed apprehension that we are alone, and that any comfort and help we get will have to be of our own devising.

Freud's criticism is different in an interesting way. There are several sides to Freud's critique of religion; for one thing he was fascinated by what he saw as the Darwinian picture of early human beings living in packs or herds, all the females belonging to one powerful, dominant jealous male; one day his sons, smarting under the condition that all the women belonged to their father, "came together and united to overwhelm, kill and devour their father, who had been their enemy, but also their ideal."[11] Their remorse and guilt, Freud thinks, are one source of religion.

Well, perhaps this grisly little tale doesn't come to much as a serious contribution to the history of religion. Freud's most characteristic criticism looks in a different direction. We noted above the insane beliefs of the advocate of rotational reproduction (above, p. 19); these beliefs, of course, were due to cognitive malfunction. There are more subtle ways, however, in which non-rational or irrational beliefs can be formed in us. Note first that there are belief-forming processes or mechanisms that are aimed, not at the formation of true belief, but at the formation of belief with some other property — the property of contributing to survival, perhaps, or to peace of mind, or psychological well-being.[12] Someone with a lethal disease may believe his chances for recovery much higher than the statistics in his possession would warrant; the processes that produce such belief are not aimed at furnishing true beliefs, but at furnishing beliefs that make it more likely that the believer will recover. A mountaineer whose survival depends on his ability to leap a crevasse (it's getting dark and cold and he doesn't have survival gear with him) may form an extremely optimistic estimate of his powers as a long-jumper; it is more likely that he will be able to leap the crevasse (or at least give it a try) if he thinks he can, than if he thinks he can't. Most of us form estimates of our intelligence, wisdom, and moral fiber that are considerably higher than an objective estimate would warrant; no doubt nine out of ten of us think ourselves well above average along these lines.

Furthermore a person may be blinded (as we say) by ambition, failing to see that a certain course of action is wrong or stupid, even though it is obvious to everyone else. Our idea, here, is that the inordinately ambitious man fails to recognize something he would otherwise recognize; the normal functioning of some aspect of his cognitive powers is inhibited or overridden or impeded by that excessive ambition. You may be blinded also by loyalty, continuing to believe in the honesty of your friend long after an objective look at the evidence would have dictated a reluctant change of mind. You can also be blinded by covetousness, love, fear, lust, anger, pride, grief, social pressure, and a thousand other things. In polemic, it is common to attack someone's views by claiming that the denial of what they think is patently obvious (i.e., such that any right thinking, properly functioning person can immediately see that it is so); we then attribute their opposing this obvious truth either to dishonesty (they don't really believe what they say [after all, who could?]) or to their being blinded by something or other — maybe a reluctance to change, an aversion to new ideas, personal ambition, sexism, racism, homophobia, and so on.

In a similar vein, Richard Dawkins insists that "It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet someone who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I'd rather not consider that)."[13] Dawkins apparently thinks the truth of evolution is utterly clear and obvious to anyone who is not unduly ignorant, is not too stupid to follow the arguments, and is sane, i.e., such that her rational faculties are functioning properly; it is therefore so obvious that any person who wasn't just (wickedly) lying through her teeth would have to admit that she believes in evolution. What are appealed to in all these cases are mechanisms that can override or cancel what our rational faculties would ordinarily deliver.

What we see, therefore, is that there are at least two ways in which a belief can be irrational: it may be produced by malfunctioning faculties, or by cognitive processes aimed at something other than the truth. This brings us to Freud's best-known account of the psychological origins of belief in God:

> These [religious beliefs], which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impressions of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection — for protection through love — which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the

establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place.[14]

Freud's idea is that belief in God arises from a psychological mechanism he calls 'wish-fulfillment' or wishful thinking; nature rises up against us, cold, pitiless, implacable, blind to our needs and desires. She delivers hurt, fear, and pain; and in the end she demands our death. Paralyzed and appalled, we invent (unconsciously, of course) a Father in Heaven who exceeds our earthly fathers as much in power and knowledge as in goodness and benevolence; the alternative would be to sink into depression, stupor, paralysis, and finally death. So according to Freud, belief in God is an illusion: a belief that arises from the mechanism of wish-fulfillment.[15] An illusion isn't necessarily false; but Freud thinks this illusion is one we can resist, and that it is intellectually irresponsible not to resist it:

> If there was ever a case of a lame excuse we have it here. Ignorance is ignorance: no right to believe anything can be derived from it. In other matters no sensible person will behave so irresponsibly or rest content with such feeble grounds for his opinions and for the lines he takes. . . . Where questions of religion are concerned, people are guilty of every possible sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanor.[16]

Once we see that religious belief takes its origin in wishful thinking, we will presumably no longer find it attractive; perhaps this will also, as in his case, induce in us a certain pity for those benighted souls who will never rise to our enlightened heights:

> The whole thing is so patently infantile, so incongruous with reality, that to one whose attitude to humanity is friendly, it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life.[17]

Freud and Marx both criticize religion, but in interestingly different ways. Marx's claim is that religious belief arises from cognitive dysfunction; as a result of living in a dysfunctional society the believer's cognitive faculties are not working properly. Freud, on the other hand, doesn't claim that the believer is suffering from cognitive malfunction. Belief in God is an illusion, he says, but illusion has its uses, in particular in enabling us to live in this cold, bleak, miserable world in which we find ourselves. Someone with properly functioning cognitive faculties might very well form religious belief. Still, there is a problem with such belief: it isn't produced by cognitive faculties whose purpose is to furnish us with true beliefs about our world. Perception is a faculty whose purpose it is to give us true belief. The same is not true for wish-fulfillment, however; the purpose of wish-fulfillment is instead to enable us to get along in a hostile or indifferent world. And it does so by projecting an unseen father into the heavens, a father who really does care for us and has our best interests at heart.

Warrant and the F&M Complaint

Freud and Marx (F&M) lead us to a more promising version of the de jure criticism: it is that religious belief — belief in God, for example — lacks warrant. I'll use the term 'warrant' as a name of the property that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief. And since that property comes in degrees, we'll have to put it like this: warrant is the property enough of which is what distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief. It's pretty obvious that you can have a true belief that isn't a case of knowledge. You have travelled 2,000 miles to the North Cascades for a climbing trip; you are desperately eager to climb. Being an incurable optimist, you believe it will be bright, sunny, and warm tomorrow, despite the forecast, which calls for high winds and a nasty mixture of rain, sleet, and snow. As it turns out, the forecasters were wrong and tomorrow turns out sunny and beautiful: your belief was true, but didn't constitute knowledge. What is needed, in addition to truth, for a belief to be knowledge? I'll use the term 'warrant' to name that property, whatever it is.

1. Proper Function

My suggestion begins with the idea that a belief has warrant only if it is produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly, subject to no disorder or dysfunction. The notion of proper function is fundamental to our central ways of thinking about knowledge.

But that notion is inextricably bound with another: that of a design plan. Human beings and their organs are so constructed that there is a way they should work, a way they are supposed to work, a way they work when they work right; this is the way they work when there is no malfunction. There is a way in which your heart is supposed to work: for example, your pulse rate should be about 50-80 beats per minute when you are at rest, and (if you are under 40) achieve a maximum rate of some 180-200 beats per minute when you are exercising really hard. If your resting pulse is 160, or if you can't get your pulse above 60 beats per minute no matter how hard you work, then your heart isn't functioning properly. (On the other hand, a mallard whose resting heart rate is 160 might be perfectly healthy.)

We needn't initially take the notions of design plan and the way in which a thing is supposed to work to entail conscious design or purpose. I don't here mean to claim that organisms are created by a conscious agent (God) according to a design plan, in something like the way in which human artifacts are constructed and designed. I am not supposing, initially at least, that having a design plan implies having been created by God or some other conscious agent.[18] I mean instead to point to something nearly all of us, theists or not, in fact believe: there is a way in which a human organ or system works when it works properly, works as it is supposed to work; and this way of working is given by its design or design plan.

Proper function and design go hand in hand with the notion of purpose. The various organs and systems of the body (and the ways in which they work) have their purposes: the function or purpose of the heart is to pump the blood; of the immune system, to fight off disease; of the lungs, to provide oxygen; and so on. If the design is a good design, then when the organ or system functions properly, i.e., according to its design plan, that purpose will be achieved. Of course the design plan for human beings will include specifications for our cognitive system or faculties, as well as for noncognitive systems and organs. Like the rest of our organs and systems, our cognitive faculties can work well or ill; they can malfunction or function properly. They too work in a certain way when they are functioning properly — and work in a certain way to accomplish their purpose. Accordingly, the first element in our conception of warrant (so I say) is that a belief has warrant for someone only if her faculties are functioning properly, are subject to no relevant dysfunction, in producing that belief.

2. Correct Environment

Many systems of your body, obviously, are designed to work in a certain kind of environment. You can't breathe under water; your muscles atrophy in zero gravity; you can't get enough oxygen at the top of Mt. Everest. Clearly the same goes for your cognitive faculties; they too will achieve their purpose only if functioning in an environment much like the one for which they were designed (by God or evolution). Thus they won't work well in an environment (on some other planet, for example) in which a certain subtle radiation impedes the function of memory.

3. Aimed at True Belief

But this is not enough. It is clearly possible that a belief be produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly in an environment for which they were designed, but nonetheless lack warrant; the above two conditions are not sufficient. We think that the purpose or function of our belief-producing faculties is that of furnishing us with true (or verisimilitudinous) belief. As we saw above in connection with the Freud and Marx complaint, however, it is clearly possible that the purpose or function of some belief-producing faculties or mechanisms is the production of beliefs with some other virtue — perhaps that of enabling us to get along in this cold, cruel, threatening world, or of enabling us to survive a dangerous situation or a life-threatening disease. So we must add that the belief in question is produced by cognitive faculties whose purpose is that of producing true belief.

4. Successfully Aimed at True Belief

Even this isn't sufficient. We can see why by reflecting on a fantasy of David Hume's:

> This world, for aught he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior Deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated Deity; and ever since his death, has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force, which it received from him.[19]

So imagine that a young and untutored apprentice deity sets out to build cognitive beings, beings capable of belief and knowledge. Immaturity and incompetence triumph; the design contains serious glitches. In fact, in some area of the design, when the faculties work just as they were designed to, the result is ludicrously false belief: thus when the cognitive faculties of these beings are working according to their design plan, they constantly confuse horses and hearses, forming the odd beliefs that cowboys in the old west rode hearses and that corpses are usually transported in horses. These beliefs are then produced by cognitive faculties working properly in the right sort of environment according to a design plan aimed at truth, but they still lack warrant. What is missing? Clearly enough, what must be added is that the design plan in question is a good one, one that is successfully aimed at truth, one such that there is a high probability that a belief produced according to that plan will be true (or nearly true).

Put in a nutshell, then, a belief has warrant for a person S only if that belief is produced in S by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S's kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.

Back to the F&M Complaint

Now we are ready to return to the F&M complaint: this complaint is really the claim that theistic belief lacks warrant. According to Freud, theistic belief is produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly, but the process that produces it — wishful thinking — does not have the production of true belief as its purpose; it is aimed instead at something like enabling us to carry on in the grim and threatening world in which we find ourselves. Therefore theistic belief does not meet the third condition of warrant. Theistic belief is no more respectable, epistemically speaking, than propositions selected entirely at random. It is baseless superstition.

Marx's views are similar. He thinks first that theistic and religious belief is produced by cognitive faculties that are not functioning properly. Those faculties are dysfunctional; and the dysfunction is due to a sort of perversion in social structure, a sort of social malfunction. Therefore religious belief doesn't meet the first condition of warrant; therefore it is without warrant, and an intellectually healthy person will reject it. Further, Marx also thinks that a person whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly and who knows what was known by the middle of the nineteenth century will see that materialism is very probably true, in which case Christian and theistic belief is very likely false. So he would join Freud in the contention that Christian and theistic belief is without warrant, a baseless superstition, and very probably false.

Marx and Freud, therefore, complain that religious belief is irrational; their complaint is best construed as the claim that religious belief lacks warrant. In the next chapter we'll look into this claim.

1. See Daniel Dennett in Daniel Dennett and Alvin Plantinga, Science and Religion: Are They Compatible? (New York Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 41ff.

2. See, e.g., Anthony Kenny, The God of the Philosophers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

3. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

4. Religious Diversity (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 14.

5. Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 86.

6. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. A. D. Woozley (New York: World Publishing, 1963), IV.xvii.11.

7. The English terms 'justified', 'justification', and the like, go back at least to the King James translation of the Bible. We are justified, in this use, if Christ's atoning sacrifice for sin has applied to us, so that we are now no longer blameworthy and our sin has been covered, removed, obliterated, taken away; we are no longer guilty; it is as if (so far as guilt is concerned) our sin had never existed. This is close to the sense of 'justification' that Locke seems to have in mind.

8. See below, p. 21, and see Freud's "An Autobiographical Study," in Volume 20 of the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis 1953-74), p. 68.

9. A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959 [1746]), p. 271.

10. "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, On Religion, ed Reinhold Niebuhr (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1964), pp. 41-42. Emphasis is in the original. Engels substantially echoes Marx's remarks.

11. See above, note 8.

12. This from John Locke:

> Would it not be an insufferable thing for a learned professor, and that which his scarlet would blush at, to have his authority of forty years standing wrought out of hard rock Greek and Latin, with no small expence of time and candle, and confirmed by general tradition, and a reverent beard, in an instant overturned by an upstart novelist? Can any one expect that he should be made to confess, that what he taught his scholars thirty years ago, was all errour and mistake; and that he sold them hard words and ignorance at a very dear rate? (Essay Concerning Human Understanding, IV.xx.11)

13. New York Times (April 9, 1989), sec. 7, p. 34. Daniel Dennett goes Dawkins one (or two) better, claiming that one who so much as harbors doubts about evolution is "inexcusably ignorant" (Darwin's Dangerous Idea [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995], p. 46) — thus displaying both ignorance and wrong-doing. You wake up in the middle of the night; you think about that whole vast and sweeping evolutionary account; you ask yourself: "Can it really be true?" Bam! You are inexcusably ignorant!

14. The Future of an Illusion, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York and London: Norton, 1961), p. 30. This work was originally published as Die Zukunft einer Illusion (Leipzig and Zurich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1927).

15. And in such a way that it (or its deliverances) rather resembles Calvin's sensus divinitatis (Chapter Three below) see also Freud's Moses and Monotheism (New York: Vintage, 1939), pp. 167ff.

16. Future of an Illusion, p. 32.

17. Civilization and Its Discontents, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1949), p. 23.

18. Although in Warrant and Proper Function (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 11, I argue that there is no viable naturalistic account of proper function.

19. Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), p. 53.