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A Two-part Rebuttal of Probability-based Arguments Against Christian Theism

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By

David Wilson  
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## **Introduction**

This thesis will argue that *as long as religious belief enjoys some manner of warrant, it remains justified regardless of how improbable it may be shown to be*. Many atheists use probability-based arguments to show that theism is either untrue, absurd, or otherwise unjustified. Probability arguments of this kind are ultimately attacks on the epistemic grounds of theism. This thesis will propose a two-part rebuttal of probability arguments to show that, because religious belief is thoroughly warranted, it remains justified regardless of these kinds of atheistic arguments.

## **Chapter One: PA vs God**

### **Introduction**

Probability-based arguments (PA) represent a specific variety of atheistic arguments. Probability is used to adjust and influence beliefs in a plethora of contexts. It is a tool employed by mathematicians, scientists, and many others. For the purposes of this thesis, PA will refer only to instances where probability is used to undermine or debunk theistic belief or warrants for theistic belief. PA may be thought of in terms of categories. What one might intend, when referring to probability in a PA, may differ greatly from person to person. This chapter will consider four PA, used in three different ways, by three separate atheist thinkers. These will include Dylan Evans, Bart Ehrman, and William Rowe respectively. Usages of the term *probability* will be defined and categorized with each example.

### **PA Explained**

Dylan Evans elucidates his frustration with his fellow atheists in the fifth chapter of his book *Atheism: All That Matters*. He is specifically disconcerted by those of the so-called New

Atheist movement and by what he believes to be atheistic proselytism. For Evans, proselytization betrays the spirit of atheism. In an example of this atheistic evangelism at work, Evans points to a campaign organized by the British Humanist Association with the help of Richard Dawkins in 2009. To advertise the appeal of atheistic thinking, hundreds of public transit buses in the UK bore the phrase “*There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.*”<sup>1</sup> Evans found this public advertising campaign distasteful and likened the effort to “missionaries trying to convert others to their religion.”<sup>2</sup>

Evans’ frustrations with the evangelistic efforts of modern atheism are interesting to say the least. However, it is the reasoning of Dawkins and the British Humanist Association that is most interesting for the purpose of this thesis. There seems to be a curious basis for the evangelistic efforts put forth by Dawkins and his associates. The campaign appeals to probability as justification for leaving theism. What, though, is this probability grounded in? The advertisement claims that theism is improbable, but improbable based on what? Is one to infer that the advertisers have undisclosed information concerning the probability of theism? It does not seem so. It appears that the bus advertisements are appealing to a different kind of probability. This is not *probability* as it is used in the technical or epistemic sense, but rather in the popular, subjective, or common-use sense. That is to say, the reason one should stop worrying about God and enjoy their life is because one can know intuitively that there probably is no God. This subjective thinking is a strange warrant for atheism, but not an uncommon one.

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<sup>1</sup> Dylan Evans, *Atheism: All That Matters* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), chapter 5, accessed June 10, 2021, [http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/hoddervcwc/about\\_the\\_author/0?institutionId=5072](http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/hoddervcwc/about_the_author/0?institutionId=5072).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

The advertising campaign's reasoning is representative of what must surely be the most common objection to the existence of God. Suppose, for example, that there are two coworkers named Lisa and Thomas. Lisa wants Thomas to leave atheism and become a Christian. To win him over, she studies and memorizes a presentation of the *kalam cosmological argument*. When she makes her case for theism to Thomas, he simply laughs and mocks her. He does not even consider the argument's premises. He does not have to. For Thomas, it does not matter how much evidence there is or is not for theism, because his belief in atheism is not based on evidence. Thomas believes in atheism because, as he might put it, invisible wizards from space do not exist.

What, really, would Thomas be getting at with such a statement? In what does Thomas anchor his atheism? It is the same type of thinking that Dawkins and the British Humanist Association seem to be employing on their bus advertisements. Based on what else Thomas *feels* to be true about reality, he believes that theism is improbable. So improbable, in fact, as to render theism absurd. This type of belief is based on a kind of intuitive warrant. It may be that life experience has convinced Thomas that God probably does not exist. Thomas might say he has never had any of his prayers answered. Perhaps he has never experienced any interaction with angels or demons. He feels like he has only ever experienced the natural world. Because he has concluded that God probably does not exist, there is no reason for Thomas to worry about evidence. He has an intuitive justification that allows him to dismiss theism, stop worrying about it, and focus on enjoying his life.

Evans himself, a former Catholic and priest-in-training, cites this type of subjective intuitive belief as the basis for his own atheism. He explains that, after an enrapturing encounter with the serene natural beauty of the outdoors, he lost his Christian faith "as irrationally" as he

had first gained it, “in a strange but compelling personal experience.”<sup>3</sup> Something inexplicable about this experience with nature led him to abandon all his theistic convictions. This conversion experience was not brought on by evidential data or intellectual reasoning. It was brought by a feeling or intuition that God probably was not real. While atheists such as Dawkins would certainly allege that hard data is what motivates and vindicates their atheism, the reality is that many atheists such as Evans choose atheism for intuitive reasons rather than evidential reasons.

Individuals such as these are not atheists because they believe science and logic compel them to be so, even if they claimed that was the case. Evans shows that some atheists base their atheism in a subjective intuition. The argument made through the bus advertisements is appealing to this kind of subjective belief. These kinds of PA are not rooted in anything in particular. Just as in the example of Thomas, who dismisses God’s existence without considering any evidence to the contrary. These kinds of PA petition one to abandon the superstition of theism for the sensibility of atheism. These PA do not appeal to evidence, but to subjective feelings concerning the likelihood of God’s existence.

The reasoning of Dawkins represents the first category of PA, PA that are argued from a position of subjective intuition. This category will be referred to as subjective probability arguments (SPA). There are many atheists who reject theism simply because the supernatural seems to be, based on what they feel is true, an inherently childish thing to believe in. It may be possible for the supernatural realm of God and angels to exist, but for these, it is absurdly improbable. This is not improbability in the technical sense, to say that there is an X% chance

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<sup>3</sup> Evans, preface.

that atheism is true. Rather it is improbable in that, given what they feel to be true intuitively, theism seems to be a superstitious and irrational thing to hold to.

The second type of PA is represented by an argument put forth by Bart Ehrman. Ehrman's PA is a rejoinder for the belief that Jesus rose from the dead. Ehrman rebukes "some evangelical Christian scholars" who assert that there is strong historical evidence to support the belief that Jesus was resurrected.<sup>4</sup> It is not clear who Ehrman specifically has in mind when he says this, but it seems that he may be referring to what is known as the *minimal facts argument*. *The minimal facts argument* uses data that both Christians and non-Christians agree to be true to show that the resurrection of Christ was a real historical event. This argument from historical evidence is not convincing for Ehrman.

He does not believe that historians can demonstrate such things. For Ehrman, historians "can only establish what probably happened in the past."<sup>5</sup> He argues that miracles are "beyond historical demonstration."<sup>6</sup> He asserts that the matter of the resurrection is a matter of probability. On his view, it does not matter how much evidence there is for the resurrection, or what manner of historical validity it may have, it only matters how probable it is for someone to raise from the dead. To put it simply, in his own words, "people do not come back to life, never to die again, after they are well and truly dead."<sup>7</sup>

To drive the point home, Ehrman offers an intentionally bizarre and unlikely explanation for the resurrection account. He proposes that two of Jesus' disciples went by themselves to the

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<sup>4</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), chapter five, accessed May 15, 2021, [https://libertyonline.vitalsource.com/#/books/9780061863288/cfi/6/34\[;vnd.vst.idref=copyright\]!](https://libertyonline.vitalsource.com/#/books/9780061863288/cfi/6/34[;vnd.vst.idref=copyright]!).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

unguarded tomb of Jesus. While attempting to steal away the body of Jesus, the pair are caught in the act by two Roman soldiers and are killed. The Romans are then left with a trio of dead bodies, and haul them off to be dumped at Gehenna. Within a few days, Jesus's tomb is found empty by the twelve and the myth of the resurrection begins. While it is unlikely that this could happen, Ehrman reckons that is still more likely than a miraculous resurrection. "From a purely historical point of view," he concludes, "a highly unlikely event is far more probable than a virtually impossible one."<sup>8</sup>

Ehrman's thinking is reminiscent of David Hume, who says similar things concerning the probability of miracles in general. Hume, in his treatment of miracles, speaks to what he considers to be the inherent impossibility of miracles. A miracle by definition, according to Hume, is "a violation of the laws of nature" that is established by "firm and unalterable experience."<sup>9</sup> Miracles are therefore beyond reason, based on the fact that they are miracles. Because of this inherent nature of miracles then, it would be far more probable that the one testifying of the miracle was either a liar or mistaken than it would be that the miracle had truly happened. As with Ehrman's treatment of the resurrection, it would be far more likely that something other than a miracle had taken place.

Ehrman's PA is unique in that, while it is far from a mathematically precise equation, it is also quite distinct from subjective probability arguments. Unlike SPA, based on a feeling or intuitive sense of likelihood, Ehrman's PA contains certain data points one may infer a conclusion from. One can judge, in at least some quantifiable way, that the number of people who have risen from the dead is significantly less than the number of people who have not (D).

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<sup>8</sup> Ehrman, chapter five.

<sup>9</sup> David Hume, "Miracles" in *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (2017), 58, accessed March 3, 2022, [https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1748\\_3.pdf](https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1748_3.pdf).

This can be weighed against the evidence (E) for the resurrection (R). The conclusion follows that  $E+D = \sim R$ .

Ehrman insists that his intention here is not to argue that Christ did not rise, or that he did not really appear to the disciples. He states that his desire is only to demonstrate that “there can be no proof” of the resurrection.<sup>10</sup> Saying that of all possible occurrences, “miracles are the least probable.”<sup>11</sup> Ehrman’s PA then is aimed not necessarily at the resurrection of Christ directly, but at the idea that such an event could be proven historically. Of course, the inference of such a belief, regardless of Ehrman’s self-alleged intentions, is that belief in Christ’s resurrection is unjustifiable. At least unjustifiable by historical evidence.

Ehrman’s PA represents the second category of PA. These are PA that are based on evidence and reasoning. This category will be referred to as epistemic probability arguments (EPA). Epistemic probability is a term that is used often in the conversation of epistemology and warrant for religious belief. William Hasker helpfully defines epistemic probability as “an objective, logical relation, concerned with the degree to which a hypothesis is supported or made probable by other propositions which constitute evidence for it.”<sup>12</sup> These are beliefs formed and merited by tautological evidence. For the purpose of this thesis, EPA will be limited to those kinds of arguments such as the argument made by Ehrman.

Contrary to SPA, that are rooted in intuitive belief, EPA undermines how reasonable theistic belief is by weighing it against other things that are already believed to be true. Ehrman’s EPA is aimed at undermining evidence for theistic belief. In this case, the evidence for the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>William Hasker, “Is Christianity Probable? Swinburne’s Apologetic Programme,” *Religious Studies* 38. No. 3, (September 2002): 253-264, accessed February 19, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20008419>.

resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a consequential attack. Belief in the resurrection is the most foundational belief in Christian theism. If the resurrection of Christ can be discredited, all of Christian theism suffers. If there is a low probability that the resurrection is true, there is by extension a low probability that anything Christianity asserts is true.

The final atheist thinker who will be considered is William Rowe. Rowe offers two separate arguments using probability. First in his *The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism*, an argument against theism from gratuitous evil. Secondly, is his *The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look*. A developed and rethought version of his first argument. His first offering, *The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism*, is an EPA like what was put forth by Ehrman. Rowe, like Ehrman, uses what is known to be true and weighs it against theism to determine a sense of probability.

Rowe's argument against theism is reminiscent of the argument laid down by Epicurus. He challenges the idea that it is possible for a God to exist who is omnipotent as well as omnibenevolent, as purported by Christian theism. His argument states that:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>13</sup>

Most theists would agree that Rowe's premise [2] is perfectly reasonable, and Rowe's premise [3] seems to follow necessarily if [1] and [2] are true. So, the whole of the argument

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<sup>13</sup> William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 16, no. 4 (October 1979): 335-34, accessed May 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20009775>.

hinges on Rowe's premise [1] being true. Because [1] appears to be true prima facie, Rowe's premise [3] initially seems to be unavoidable. Rowe has a problem though. The theist is under no obligation to believe that [1] is true. Man, after all, is a finite being with limited understanding. As such, he is inherently incapable of being able to approach the understanding of an infinite being. Man is not in a position to make any sort of judgment on whether Rowe's premise [1] is true or not, as he does not have the understanding or information required to make such an inference.

Rowe attempts to answer this difficulty with a hypothetical tragedy. He proposes a bolt of lightning that strikes a tree, igniting a wildfire and entrapping a baby deer. The fawn is not killed, but terribly burned, lingering for several days in torturous anguish. Finally, the pitiful creature dies unbeknownst to the outside world. Is it possible for an omnipotent and omniscient being to rescue the creature from this fate? The answer is emphatically yes. The problem for the theist here is that it doesn't seem to be true that there is any rhyme or reason for the fawn's torment.

If there is no reason for the fawn's suffering, then Rowe's premise [1] is true. Of course, if [1] is true then the logical cascade begins. The formula flows from [1], to [2], to the inevitable [3]. Nevertheless, the fact remains that mankind is unqualified to make such inferences. The very definition of omniscience implies that there are things God knows that mankind is incapable of knowing. Therefore Rowe's premise [1], in the absolute sense, can never be known to be true. As long as man is a finite being it will never be possible to say definitively that God has no good reason for allowing the fawn's suffering. Unless mankind is able to achieve perfect understanding of all things, it will be impossible to determine whether there is good reason for the fawn's torment or not. Rowe himself acknowledges this point. This is where Rowe employs an EPA.

Rowe argues that, though it is impossible to *prove* [1], it is *reasonable* to believe [1]. Furthermore, one must recognize that the tormented fawn is not a singular or isolated event. There are many such cases involving animals as well as people, presumably happening every day. When one considers this, Rowe says, “it seems quite unlikely all the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are intimately related” to a greater plan of an omnibenevolent and omniscient deity.<sup>14</sup> This is so unlikely for Rowe, that “the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented” by God is “an extraordinary absurd idea, quite beyond our belief.”<sup>15</sup> The suffering of the fawn makes theism improbable, this in turn makes atheism the more reasonable thing to believe.

Though the development of Rowe’s argument is more thorough than Ehrman’s EPA, one can notice the similarities. Ehrman’s EPA asserts that, because it is more common for someone to remain deceased after they have truly died, it is more likely than not that a resurrection has not occurred. Because it is more likely than not that a resurrection has not occurred, one is compelled to believe that a resurrection has not occurred. For Ehrman, whether or not belief in the resurrection is viable depends on how probable it is relative to what else one understands to be true. In the same way, Rowe demands that the justification for belief in atheism can be found in how probable [3] is relative to what one understands to be true about gratuitous suffering.

An example of the final type of PA, and perhaps the rarest form of PA, comes in Rowe’s second offering titled *The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look*. This PA is a development of the previous argument. In this PA, Rowe uses *Bayes Theorem* to demonstrate that it is more probable than not, given the reality of evil, that God does not exist. To achieve

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<sup>14</sup> Rowe, *Some Varieties of Atheism*, 337.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

this, Rowe assigns a value to the various relevant beliefs. Rowe determines that, given one's background knowledge concerning evidence for and against theism,  $\Pr(G/K)$  is equal to  $\Pr(\sim G/k)$ , giving both a value of 0.5.<sup>16</sup> Rowe believes that by adding P and Q, it can ultimately be shown that  $\Pr(\sim G/K) > \Pr(G/K)$ .

Using the formula  $\Pr(Q/K) = [\Pr(G/K) \times \Pr(Q/G\&K)] + [\Pr(\sim G/K) \times \Pr(Q/\sim G\&K)]$ , Rowe establishes that  $\Pr(Q/K)$  is equal to 0.5.<sup>17</sup> This follows because  $\sim G$  gives Q a value of 1, just as G gives Q a value of 0. The formula then might be expressed numerically as  $0.5 \times 0 + 0.5 \times 1$ . As Rowe explains:

On the left side of the plus sign, we have  $0.5 \times 0$ , for the conjunction (G&k) entails that Q is false. On the right side of the plus sign we have  $0.5 \times 1$ , for Q is entailed by  $\sim G$ . So  $\Pr(Q/k) = 0.5$ . If we accept the earlier assignment of 0.5 to  $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ , then  $\Pr(P/k) = 0.75$ , with the result that  $\Pr(Q/P\&k) = 0.666$ . But aside from this argument, it is evident that  $\Pr(P/k) > \Pr(Q/k)$ .<sup>23</sup> So, given that  $\Pr(P/k) < 1$ , if  $\Pr(Q/k) = 0.5$ , it follows that  $\Pr(Q/P\&k) > 0.5$ . In fact, if our argument is correct,  $\Pr(Q/P\&k) = 1 - \Pr(G/P\&k)$ , and this will be true no matter what non-zero assignments less than 1 are made to  $\Pr(P/k)$ ,  $\Pr(G/k)$ , and  $\Pr(Q/k)$ .<sup>18</sup>

Rowe reasons that when P is added to  $\Pr(Q/K)$  it makes the probability of Q greater than 0.5. In this way, Rowe establishes that "P not only makes Q more likely than it otherwise would be but also makes it more likely than not."<sup>19</sup> From here Rowe abandons Q altogether, insisting that, given the formula, P tips the balance between G and  $\sim G$ , making it more probable than not that  $\sim G$  is true. If Q is greater than 0.5, then it stands to reason that G must be less than 0.5. The result being that it is improbable that God exists and Christian theism is true.

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<sup>16</sup> See appendix for explanation of terms.

<sup>17</sup> William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 269, Kindle.

<sup>18</sup> Rowe, Evidential, 269.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 269-270.

This is an example of the final category of PA that will be referred to as technical probability arguments (TPA). A TPA endeavors to demonstrate that theistic belief is improbable in the mathematical sense. Richard Swinburne calls this type of reasoning “statistical probability.”<sup>20</sup> Swinburne explains that statistical probability measures “the proportion of events of one kind in a collection of events of another kind.”<sup>21</sup> Simply put, a TPA discredits the warrant for epistemic integrity by weighing its likelihood in a technical sense. Such an argument might assert that there is only an X% chance that God exists where X is a significantly low percentage. By whatever means a TPA is implemented, it will undermine and discredit the theist’s position by utilizing mathematical probability.

### Conclusion

This chapter has shown four examples of PA with the intent of illustrating two specific points. First, it has illustrated how bromidic PA are. It is commonplace for the atheist thinker to seek to undermine rather than defeat theistic belief. Whether that effort consists of an attack on Christian theism itself, or an attack on a specific warrant for Christian theism, these atheists believe that the improbability of theism vindicates their atheism. Second, it has illustrated the ways that PA might be used. This chapter has shown there are no less than three separate categories of PA. These being SPA, EPA, and TPA.

Prima facie, one may already detect flaws in the use of PA to establish or discredit warrant for theism or atheism. Unless the probability of theism can be shown to be absolutely 0,

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism: Second Edition* (Oxford, United Kingdom Oxford University Press, 2016), 46, accessed September 11, 2021, [http://liberty.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?bookMark=eNrjYmDJy89LZWbgtTS3MDC0NLQwMrU0N2Jj4MIPzrM0NTG0NLE0MuBkEA\\_JSFVIs9ILUrNS05VyE9TKMIlzSzO5WFgTUvMKU7lhdLcDIZuriHOHrrF-Yk5mUmpRSWVBoZARml8cmJJYk5-erypoaGpkZmpkbGFgYGBiaWhmTE5egC1HTM9](http://liberty.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?bookMark=eNrjYmDJy89LZWbgtTS3MDC0NLQwMrU0N2Jj4MIPzrM0NTG0NLE0MuBkEA_JSFVIs9ILUrNS05VyE9TKMIlzSzO5WFgTUvMKU7lhdLcDIZuriHOHrrF-Yk5mUmpRSWVBoZARml8cmJJYk5-erypoaGpkZmpkbGFgYGBiaWhmTE5egC1HTM9).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

PA can not be used as a defeater for theism. Thus, before any thorough examination has taken place, one may observe that the atheist cannot achieve what he sets out to do. Even if there were a 99% chance that atheism was true, the possibility that theism could still be true would remain. Therefore, regardless of what manner of PA is used, the theist might remain warranted in holding to theistic belief. PA, regardless of which category of PA is employed, cannot strip theism of its warrant.

Further chapters will show that PA of any category cannot demonstrate anything of particular interest to the theist. Far from being a grand irrefutable defeater, PA is underwhelming at its very best. Warrant for Christian theism will be established, and a two-part rebuttal of PA against Christian theism will be provided. The thesis will show that the atheist is unable to reduce theistic belief to absurdity using SPA, EPA, or TPA. In fact, it will be established that it is the very attempt to do so that is absurd. The matter of atheism versus theism may only be settled in terms of warrants and defeaters, not in terms of probability.

## Chapter Two: PA and Epistemology

### Introduction

The question of PA is ultimately not a religious one, but an epistemic one. The field of epistemology uses probability, warrants, and defeaters to ascertain if a belief is held legitimately. By implementing a PA, the atheist is ultimately accusing the theist, in one manner or another, of not possessing sound epistemic justification for their theism. One must ask whether PA can sufficiently serve as a warrant for atheism or a defeater for theism. This chapter will explore the field of epistemology and consider whether PA from atheism can truly render theistic belief unwarranted. It will show that there are two ways one may think about knowledge and justification. These are the positions of internalism and externalism.

While there are diametrically opposed opinions on how religious belief might be justified, in order for theism to be considered knowledge it must enjoy at least *some* type of justifying warrant. For some, that warrant must come in the form of justifying evidence. For others, religious belief can be justified by direct warrant without additional justifying evidence or argumentation. In either case, it seems that probability can have only a limited impact on religious belief. Probability can only adjust one's perception of a belief, it cannot dictate whether a belief is justified. Unless one's belief is solely dependent on probability for its justification, a belief cannot be defeated by PA. Low probability cannot be used as a defeater for a belief which enjoys strong warrants, and theism is strongly warranted. Therefore, whether one holds to an internalist or externalist concept of knowledge, PA can only have a diminutive impact on religious beliefs.

## Challenges Facing Epistemology

The first thing that must be addressed in the issue of PA, is to what degree, if any, can PA influence the epistemic grounds for religious belief. To think of it another way, to what degree does probability influence epistemic justification in religious epistemology? After all, there are many grounds and warrants one might use to justify their assent to theism. If a PA is asserting that  $\sim G/X$ , or something similar, what effect might that have and the grounds and warrant a theist has for their belief? To answer this one must plumb the depths of religious epistemology and consider whether PA is even epistemically relevant.

William Alston defines epistemology as the discipline that “is concerned both with the justification of belief and with knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> Tyler McNabb adds that “epistemology is roughly the study of knowledge” and is “understood also as the study of justification, warrant, and rationality.”<sup>23</sup> Epistemology has become one of the most hotly debated subjects in the world of philosophy. It is disputed “whether justified belief is required for knowledge,” as well as whether or not “knowledge requires the impossibility of error,” or “requires only that one have sufficient indications of the truth of the belief.”<sup>24</sup> Not only that, there are even those that question whether or not belief “is even compatible with knowledge.”<sup>25</sup>

It is possible for one to hold to a belief that is unjustified, a belief one does not have good grounds or reasons for possessing. Such a belief, though unjustified, could happen to be true. On the other hand, one could be justified in believing something that happens to not be true. The

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<sup>22</sup> William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 70, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt5hh24c.1>.

<sup>23</sup> Tyler Dalton McNabb, *Religious Epistemology*, chapter 1 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2019) accessed February 4, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108558365>.

<sup>24</sup> Alston, 74.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

question is if either one of these things could be considered knowledge. Kevin Diller defines knowledge as “believing something about the way things really are.”<sup>26</sup> Diller’s definition of knowledge gives a two-part criterion for being able to know. One must believe that a thing is true, and that thing must be true in reality. By this definition, the unjustified person, who believes something which is true accidentally, does have knowledge. On the other hand, the one who is justified in their belief but believes something untrue, does not have knowledge.

There are many who would disagree with this type of simple definition of knowledge. It is hard to imagine that someone who is correct accidentally could be said to have knowledge. Accidentally believing the truth seems closer to doxastic luck than actual knowledge. Here one can already have a sense of the challenges faced by epistemology. On the definition provided by Diller, it is more important to believe something that happens to be true than it is to be justified in believing it. Perhaps a better definition would qualify knowledge further by adding justification. Perhaps knowledge is equal to *justified* belief that corresponds to reality. This is known as justified true belief (JTB), and it initially seems to answer the challenge of defining what knowledge should look like. On JTB, Schukraft explains: “I know that, for example, I am human because: (1) I believe I am human; (2) my belief is justified (people treat me like a human, not like a dog); and (3) it is true.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, JTB is not satisfactory.

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<sup>26</sup> Kevin Diller, *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 38, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=2036903>.

<sup>27</sup> Jason Schukraft, *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge* (London, England: Macary International, 2017), accessed February 19, 2020, [http://liberty.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?bookMark=eNqdUU1PAyEQxfgRrfbonZunKgMLhZPRpn4kTbzombC7YFAEBdam\\_95t6sWrySTz3mTeZN7MBB3EFC1C50AuG0abKzWXoIBSCVLQPTT9w\\_frBBgfo4E5P0InSrFmDoTyYzQt5Y0QQmEsKH6CFjcRm2jCpviCk8PL\\_mOIPb63tXqbLwp-LPhtKNU7b3tc82Bxa4O3Dr\\_HtA62f7XXZ-jQmVDs9Defope75fPiYbZ6un9c3KxmLROKzUzPBFOSMQWm4z2QVIAjCSXOUC46KaDjjhgxwrnkciSMtA1zTLbQ9YSyUwS7uSWZ4Fub64bACAbdmWpCetUcQDK-](http://liberty.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?bookMark=eNqdUU1PAyEQxfgRrfbonZunKgMLhZPRpn4kTbzombC7YFAEBdam_95t6sWrySTz3mTeZN7MBB3EFC1C50AuG0abKzWXoIBSCVLQPTT9w_frBBgfo4E5P0InSrFmDoTyYzQt5Y0QQmEsKH6CFjcRm2jCpviCk8PL_mOIPb63tXqbLwp-LPhtKNU7b3tc82Bxa4O3Dr_HtA62f7XXZ-jQmVDs9Defope75fPiYbZ6un9c3KxmLROKzUzPBFOSMQWm4z2QVIAjCSXOUC46KaDjjhgxwrnkciSMtA1zTLbQ9YSyUwS7uSWZ4Fub64bACAbdmWpCetUcQDK-)

JTB was the standard position in epistemology until the so-called Gettier Problem was introduced in 1963. In his *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge*, which “has been cited over 2,300 times since it first appeared,” Edmund Gettier challenged the traditional system by showing that one can have JTB and still not have knowledge.<sup>28</sup> He achieves this by showing the reasons behind a given belief could be false. There has been virtually no agreement as to what a proper epistemological system might look like ever since. This problem, inevitably, extends itself into the associated field of religious epistemology.

### Religious Epistemology

Religious epistemology, according to McNabb, is the study of the relation between “epistemic concepts” and “religious belief and practice.”<sup>29</sup> Agreeing upon a specific epistemological system for justifying religious belief is a difficult task to be sure. Albeit there is nothing particularly unique about these difficulties. As pointed out by Diller, “the epistemological difficulties facing theology are, to a great degree, no different from the epistemological difficulties that have always faced any pursuit of knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> It is not as though the atheist enjoys something in this area that the theist does not. Both are burdened with an unsettled, and seemingly irresolvable, debate about how one can go about discovering if they really know what they believe they know.

The task of epistemology, as defined by Alston and McNabb, is to settle what exactly qualifies as a justified belief or knowledge. However, before the task of agreeing on an

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<sup>28</sup> Schukraft, 12.

<sup>29</sup> McNabb, chapter 1.

<sup>30</sup> Diller, 29.

epistemological system can even begin, it must be assessed if it is even possible to know rightly if something is or can be true. It's argued by some that truth is unknown and unknowable, or even that there is no such thing as truth whatsoever. If something which can be called truth does exist, is it possible to *know* what that truth is? If that task is achievable, at what point can one say definitively that beliefs are equal to knowledge?

When the high skepticism of modernism gave way to the relativism of post-modernism, theories concerning reality and objective truth became confused. Fortunately, the question of truth is self-resolving. If it were true that there is no truth, then at least one thing would be true. There is no way for relativism to be true without contradiction. This is unacceptable for any kind of belief, as Swinburne explains, "a proposition is incoherent (that is, metaphysically impossible) if in some way it involves a contradiction."<sup>31</sup> Relativism simply does not and cannot hold itself together, it is metaphysically impossible. It is therefore undeniable that there is an objective truth and that, as worded by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, "if something is true, it's true for all people, at all times, in all times."<sup>32</sup>

Our beliefs then must attempt to grasp at the external objective reality. Diller explains that, if one prescribes to "an external reality" that is independent "of our thoughts, opinions and preferences," then it becomes nigh on impossible to possess "a standard view of knowledge" without adhering to a "correspondence view of true belief."<sup>33</sup> This correspondence view, or correspondence theory, is the position that our beliefs may only be considered correct or warranted if they correspond with objective reality. As Diller puts it, correspondence theory

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<sup>31</sup> Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2004.), 37.

<sup>33</sup> Diller, 37.

demands that “the truth or falsity of a belief depends in some fundamental way on what is true ontologically.”<sup>34</sup>

With only minimal reflection it becomes clear that there is an objective external reality, but how can one be sure that a belief corresponds with that reality? This is the role of warrant and justification. Justification, as explained by Eric Balmer, is “an indication of truth.”<sup>35</sup> Justification is that thing that “links truth and belief.”<sup>36</sup> One must not adhere to a belief without proper justification for that belief. Beliefs on their own are inherently subjective things. Justification allows one to weigh a particular proposition and judge its worth by determining how well it resembles objective reality.

Given that truth is something that is, as well as something that can be known, there also exists a certain ethical obligation to justify one’s beliefs. The ethics of belief, influenced by individuals such as William Clifford and John Locke, considers the moral implications of epistemology. Action is downstream of beliefs, so that unethical actions may be direct results of improper beliefs. Many who have written on this subject believe that “whether one has done one’s doxastic best is not only an epistemic but also a moral question.”<sup>37</sup> If one knew it was wrong to do something and did so anyway, or knew to do something and refrained, it is obvious they have done something unethical.

Clifford drives this point home with his famous illustration of the unethical shipowner. In Clifford’s illustration a shipowner has evidence to believe that his ship is not seaworthy.

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<sup>34</sup> Diller, 37.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Fielding Balmer, “Epistemic Justification with Respect to Theistic Belief: Two Rival Theories.” Master’s Thesis, California state university, 2007, accessed January 29th, 2021, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/304710019?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell, eds., *God and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 4, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511499166>.

However, he chooses to believe that the ship will make the voyage safely despite the evidence he is aware of. His decision to hold this unjustified belief ends in disaster when the ship sinks and the passengers are killed. For Clifford, the decision of the shipowner would be immoral even if the ship had made the voyage safely. The shipowner may have sincerely believed that the ship would make it safely, but “he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.”<sup>38</sup> This is far more serious a matter than merely being mistaken about one’s beliefs, as Clifford puts it, the shipowner is “very guilty of the death” of the passengers and crew.<sup>39</sup>

Few could disagree with Clifford’s conclusion concerning the shipowner. The example of the unethical shipowner illustrates the deontological nature of epistemology. One has an epistemic duty to believe rightly. This insight is especially important for the matter of religious epistemology. If having knowledge is important when someone’s life is at stake, how much more important is having knowledge when someone’s soul is at stake? Whichever side of the internalism/externalism debate one finds themselves on, it can be agreed that it is one’s moral duty to have sufficient grounds for their beliefs.

Clifford’s illustration is especially important when considering ideas like relativism. Regardless of what the relativist asserts, it is either true that the ship is seaworthy, or it is true that the ship is not. The shipowner is morally culpable regarding how seriously he takes his doxastic duty to discover which of those things is true, regardless of how he may feel or what else he may believe. Not only because of his responsibility to not endanger other people, but also because of his responsibility to his own conscience.

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<sup>38</sup> W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in *The Ethics of Belief and other Essays*, ed. Timothy J. Madigan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), 77.

<sup>39</sup> Clifford, 77.

This section has shown several basic concepts from epistemology that can be adopted without engaging in too much controversy. First, one can be certain that there is such a thing as truth, and it is found in the objective external reality. Secondly, if our beliefs are to have any meaning, they must correspond to that objective external reality. Thirdly, some of the challenges associated with defining knowledge were expressed. It was shown that, on some level or another, one has knowledge when they believe what is true. These points led to the conclusion of the section, that one has a moral obligation to pursue this type of knowledge. Understanding that there is a truth that can be known, and that one has the ability to know it, there is an ethical obligation to do one's doxastic best when forming beliefs.

#### Internalist and Externalist Accounts of Knowledge

With an understanding of the basic challenges facing epistemology, the focus will now turn to a more in-depth look at knowledge and justification. There are two basic ways of thinking about justification. These are the camps of internalism and externalism. These two modes of thinking account for much of the controversy within epistemology. This section will explain the contention between internalism and externalism and consider how a belief might be properly formed. This will be helpful in forming the two-part rebuttal of PA.

Internalism, as the name suggests, insists that one must have internal access to a belief's justifying factors for that belief to be viable. As Balmer explains, "for the internalist, a given belief is justified if and only if the justifying reasons are cognitively available to the believer."<sup>40</sup> This requirement of cognitive access means that the believer must know why they believe what they do. It would not be enough for one to happen to have good reasons for their belief if they

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<sup>40</sup> Balmer, 7.

were not aware of those reasons. Their belief must have justifying grounds, and the “believer must have internal access to the reasons or grounds” for the belief to be warranted.<sup>41</sup>

On internalism, knowledge is a matter of internal mental states. It is helpful to think about internalism in terms of belief and truth. A belief is something that is internal. It is a metaphysical impression of the external world. While a truth, as has already been pointed out, is something that exists in the objective external world. For an internalist, knowledge has more to do with belief than it does external truth. An externalist on the other hand believes that knowledge has more to do with external truth than internal mental states. For the internalist, one attains knowledge by reasoning through other justifying beliefs they have access to.

Clairvoyance is often used to illustrate how the internalist framework looks pragmatically. Consider, for example, a man named John who receives true information clairvoyantly. He does not know where the information comes from, or how it enters his mind, but the information is always true. Through this process, he forms the belief that if he plays the lottery he will win. John acts on his belief, and indeed wins the lottery. The question for the epistemologist is: did John *know* he was going to win the lottery? The internalist says no. John has a belief which is true, satisfying Diller’s definition of knowledge, but he does not have epistemic access to the justifying reasons for his belief. He is missing what is known as doxastic justification, the understanding of the good reasons for his belief.

The internalist says that one must understand the thing or things that validate their beliefs. One’s beliefs must be based on good reasons, not merely possessing good reasons, but also being aware of and understanding those reasons. One might think of doxastically justified

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<sup>41</sup> Balmer, 7.

internalism as having a reflective access to the grounds for a belief. Having reflective access means the believer is cognizant of the warrant conferring things which lie behind the belief itself. As Balmer puts it, the internalist requires that one have “introspectable mental states of a special kind” before a belief can be considered as justified.<sup>42</sup> John cannot claim that he knew he would win the lottery, because he does not have introspective or reflective access to the grounds of his belief.

Contrary to internalism, externalism says that one may be justified by the external source of the belief. As Balmer explains, “externalism argues that the accessibility requirement of internalism is not a necessary condition for having a justified belief.”<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that, on externalism, one does not need warrant to justify a belief. Merely, that the “justifying reasons or properties that contribute to the justification of a belief can be external to or outside the first-person cognitive perspective of a believer.”<sup>44</sup> The believer may turn to other sources for their belief. In short, a belief does not require “any awareness or access to the justifying reasons for a belief to be appropriately justified.”<sup>45</sup>

This type of warranting feature is sometimes called direct warrant. Again, the externalist says that internal justification is not a necessary part of forming warranted beliefs. Direct warrant “is warrant that a belief enjoys independently of the support it receives of one’s belief.”<sup>46</sup> The justifying properties come not from internal states but directly from the external source. These

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<sup>42</sup> Balmer, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Balmer, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Keith DeRose, *Direct Warrant Realism in God and the Ethics of Belief*, Dole, Andrew and Andrew Chignell, eds. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 151, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511499166>.

kinds of beliefs sometimes referred to as being “properly basic,” and “have sufficient direct warrant to render them rationally acceptable.”<sup>47</sup>

Evil demon scenarios or brain-in-the-jar scenarios are often used to show the viability of epistemic externalism. Consider again that John has played the lottery and won. He sees the winning ticket in his hand, those around him congratulate him, and he experiences the celebration of his victory. He is doxastically justified in believing he has won. Now suppose a woman named Sarah. Sarah also believes that she has won the lottery. Just like John, she sees the winning ticket in her hand, is congratulated by her friends, and experiences the celebration of her victory. What Sarah cannot know is that she is possessed by an evil demon that is deceiving her senses. She believes she has seen the ticket and experienced the celebration, but this is all a cruel trick. Nothing she has seen or experienced has happened in reality. Her senses are unreliable.

The externalist points out that, on internalism, John and Sarah are equally justified in their belief that they have won the lottery. They would both have knowledge by internalist standards. Obviously, this is an unsatisfactory conclusion. The externalist agrees that John is justified in his belief, but not because he had internal access. In fact, his justification has nothing to do with doxastic justification at all. Rather, John was justified because his senses were reliable. Similarly, Sarah is not justified, because her senses were not reliable. This feature is known as reliabilism. What separates Sarah and John are properly functioning cognitive faculties. Sarah and John both have doxastic justification for their belief that they have won the lottery, but only John has knowledge that he has won the lottery.

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<sup>47</sup>DeRose, 151.

To better understand the contention between internalism and externalism, one might consider what Alston defines as being mediately or immediately justified. Alston states that mediate justification is when a belief “is justified by reasons.”<sup>48</sup> As he puts it, this means one is justified “by other things one knows or justifiably believes.”<sup>49</sup> Consider the belief that the sky is blue. The internalist might claim to be mediately justified in believing the sky is blue by comparing the color of the sky to other things that he believes to be blue. It is a matter of mental states, evidence, and justifying beliefs. He is doxastically justified in his belief.

On the other hand, one is immediately justified when one “is justified by something other than reasons.”<sup>50</sup> Remember, the externalist believes that justification for belief is rooted more in external truth than internal mental states. On the belief that the sky is blue, the externalist would attempt to justify his belief in a direct way. The externalist might say he is justified in the belief that the sky is blue because, the sky is in fact blue, and he observes the sky with reliable perceptual faculties. It is not a matter of using reasoning or argumentation to prove that the sky is blue. He does not need to know that he knows the sky is blue. The sky *is* blue, and he is immediately justified in believing the sky is blue because he perceives it as such with proper functioning faculties.

### PA and Epistemology

It has been shown that there are two ways one can think about knowledge and justification. For the internalist, knowledge is achieved through internal reasoning. For externalists, knowledge is achieved by external sources. How does this contribute to religious

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<sup>48</sup> Alston, 71.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

epistemology and the justification of theistic belief? Remember, PA are attempts made by atheists to undermine belief in God. Four examples of this were demonstrated in *chapter one*. To get at whether PA are able to undermine religious belief, it first must be determined what warrants religious belief to begin with.

Kelly Clark and Raymond VanArragon, in their *Evidence and Religious Belief*, are helpful in showing how internalism and externalism contribute to religious epistemology. They explain how thinkers such as David Hume and Clifford would demand “that religious belief must only be held on the basis of evidence.”<sup>51</sup> Stating that “if it isn’t, then such belief is deficient and irrational.”<sup>52</sup> This is an example of an internalist account of justified religious belief. There are multiple justifying arguments for theism that satisfy this internalist standard for knowledge. Likewise, they go on to explain how thinkers such as John Calvin would insist that “religious belief need not be based on evidence and should instead be thought of as properly basic.”<sup>53</sup> On such a view, “belief in God can serve as evidence without needing any itself.”<sup>54</sup> This is an example of an externalist account of justified religious belief. There are multiple justifying arguments that satisfy this standard for knowledge as well.

The debate between internalism and externalism is rife with controversy, and neither camp appears to be close to relenting. Both continuously fine-tune their own positions, attempting to undermine their opposition, while others attempt to solve the controversy by marrying externalism and internalism together. Suffice to say, there is no clear answer in the

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<sup>51</sup> Kelly James Clark and Raymond J. VanArragon, *Evidence and Religious Belief* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2, accessed February 5, 2021, 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199603718.001.0001.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

internalism/externalism debate. Indeed, it may be that there is no possible way to reach a satisfactory consensus, but there is a sense in which that does not matter. This is because, as stated above, whether one is internalist or externalist, religious belief can be and has been warranted. By any account, one can be and is justified in the belief that God exists. How is this concept affected by PA? The simple answer is: it is not, nor can it be. At least, not to any meaningful degree.

Suppose that a theist has sufficient grounds on internalism to consider his belief that the Christian God exists as knowledge. One could reasonably assume that this theist has more than one of these justifying factors, as there are multiple theistic arguments that satisfy on internalist grounds. So, the theist has multiple good grounds for claiming that he knows that God exists. Now suppose that a PA of a particular kind was introduced using either a SPA, EPA, or TPA of the sort as shown in *chapter one*. Would one of these, or any combination of them, render the theist epistemically obligated to abandon their theism for atheism?

Even if SPA, EPA, or TPA could convince the theist that God's existence is improbable according to X, this would not undermine the other reasons that the theist has for believing theism. The grounds that convinced the theist of his theism to begin with would remain, so that what he would be left with are two sets of ideas. The first group of ideas would tell him the existence of his God was certain. The second set, introduced to him by the PA in question, would tell him that it is unlikely that his God exists given a particular data point. This cannot harm the first set of ideas. A specific instance of possible improbability cannot defeat many instances of near certainty.

On an internalist account of knowledge it seems impossible to imagine a PA obligating a theist to abandon his theism. The atheist may successfully demonstrate that God's existence is

improbable given a particular case or evidence. However, the internalist's theism is not based on the probability of a specific case. It is based on justifying evidence. Those justifying evidences, that convinced the theist of his theism to begin with, do not cease to be convincing because an atheist finds that a particular case infers that theism may be unlikely.

On the externalist account of knowledge, PA is even less compelling. The externalist grounds her theism through direct warrant. This type of warranting is well beyond being threatened by PA. It is difficult to imagine any sort of evidence that would compel the externalist to forsake their theism. The externalist who is so convinced by direct warrant that they justly consider their belief as knowledge, will not be swayed to abandon that belief by a single argument of any kind. For the externalist, their belief is not based on probability or evidence of any kind. In what way could PA hope to affect such a belief?

Suppose, for example, one held the belief that their name was David. Perhaps this belief was formed by either an externalist or internalist process. Then suppose that a statistician presented hard data that showed there is a very low chance that the person's name was David. It was proven that only 2% of people were named David, therefore there was a 98% chance that their name was not David. Would this be grounds for this person to abandon the belief that their name was David? Of course not. The only way such a probability argument could have a meaningful impact on the belief that their name was David, would be if probability was the primary grounds for that belief to begin with.

### Conclusion

To determine what impact PA may have on religious belief, this chapter has considered epistemology in general and religious epistemology in particular. It has considered by what

measure one could be considered justified in their belief that God exists, and by what standard could one say that they have knowledge that God exists. Two rival theories concerning this were explained. These were the two rival camps of internalism and externalism. By the standards of either camp, it was demonstrated that the theist has sufficient grounds available to them to consider their belief in God as knowledge.

From here, PA was considered in light of this information. It was shown that, on an internalist view of knowledge, PA can have only a minimal effect on the justification of religious belief. Furthermore, it was shown that PA has virtually no impact on theistic belief on an externalist view of knowledge. PA could only be found convincing if probability were the primary grounds for theistic belief to begin with. The following chapter will take a more in-depth look at both internalist and externalist considerations of how theistic belief might be justified.

## Chapter Three: Cumulative Warrant

### Introduction

PA of various types attempt to undermine or defeat theistic belief by demonstrating that, based on a particular point, it is improbable that there is a God. To say that, for example, because God's existence is improbable, one is epistemically obligated to abandon their theism. This would seem viable, especially if one considered the assertion of Clifford concerning the ethics of belief. However, *chapter two* argued that PA may only have a minimal impact on theistic belief. Even if PA is successful in proving that theism is improbable given X, then the theist has only to justify their theism on grounds other than X. With the understanding that the theist might argue their knowledge of God's existence on either internalist or externalist grounds, what types of grounds the theist has at their disposal will be explored.

To be clear, there is no such thing as an internalist or externalist argument. Internalism and externalism are not methodologies of apologetics so to speak, but merely ways of thinking about knowledge and warrant. The internalist and externalist have different ways of thinking about what qualifies as good grounds for knowledge. It may be, for example, a particular apologetic that satisfies the externalist is wholly unconvincing and even unviable for the internalist. This chapter, therefore, will not be offering internalist or externalist arguments, as there truly is no such thing, but rather arguments that satisfy both internalist and externalist thinking.

This chapter will make the case for a cumulative warrant for Christian theism. There are many kinds of arguments that might be used by theists to justify their beliefs. On either an internalist or externalist perspective of knowledge, the existence of God can be known. A

cumulative apologetic takes several arguments and evidences for theism, and uses the fact of these evidences as evidence itself. The cumulative warrant offered here will consist of a mixture of arguments that satisfy either an internalist or externalist account of knowledge. This is to show that, regardless of what epistemological camp one belongs to, one will have satisfactory grounds to claim knowledge of God's existence.

### Theism on Internalism

When it comes to Christian apologetics, being marked by reasoning and argumentation, one can see how most apologetic arguments would fall into an internalist category. In the effort to demonstrate the truth of theism apologists have “traditionally” relied on “four basic arguments.”<sup>55</sup> These arguments are known as “the cosmological, teleological, moral, and ontological arguments.”<sup>56</sup> This chapter will consider these four major arguments, and several others besides these, in an attempt to lay down a strong cumulative argument for Christian theism.

David Baggett and Jerry Walls offer an axiological or moral argument for God's existence that “is (1) cumulative, (2) abductive, and (3) teleological,” in what they refer to as an abductive moral argument.<sup>57</sup> This argument is to be considered in contrast to the traditional way axiological arguments are framed in a deductive manner. Abduction is “an inference to the best explanation,” while deduction is thought of as moving from general information to a specific conclusion.<sup>58</sup> The pair list several reasons why they believe that abductive reasoning is superior to deductive reasoning in the case of axiological arguments. They say, for example, that unlike

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<sup>55</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *God and Cosmos* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 274.

<sup>58</sup> Baggett and Walls, 55.

deductive arguments, abductive arguments keep “the moral facts in question front and center as the starting data in need of explanation.”<sup>59</sup>

The abductive moral argument points out the many mysterious features of morality and infers God’s existence. One such feature being the relationship between self-interest and moral duty that plagued thinkers such as Immanuel Kant. One’s motivation for doing good might paradoxically destroy the moral value of the action itself. However, when one understands moral motivation in the context of Christian theism, there is no such difficulty. One may act out of the love for a being who deserves their love, not just because he is worthy, but also because, in his intense love for us, seeks our well-being. In this way, “the promotion of our own well-being and self-interest is integral to loving such a God,” and is “the inevitable result of our true love.”<sup>60</sup> This means that, on Christian theism, the “conflict that Kant feared between genuine moral principles and acting to promote our self-interest simply dissolves.”<sup>61</sup> Baggett and Walls conclude that this conflict “between self-interest and altruism,” a serious problem for the atheist, “has no traction for theism and Christianity.”<sup>62</sup>

First, Baggett and Walls essentially define morality as being a kind of road map for reality. Naturalism, while it cannot deny objective moral truth in any respectable way, also cannot provide any kind of meaningful explanation for the existence of an objective moral law. This moral law is more than just self-evident, “it provides evidence to believe in a reality deeper than the physical world alone.”<sup>63</sup> While the full force of their argument cannot be captured in a

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<sup>59</sup> Baggett and Walls., 54.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 275.

brief summary, Baggett and Walls convincingly express that the best possible explanation for the presence of morality and complex moral features is the God of Christianity.

Next, there is the teleological argument, or argument from design. The teleological argument might be thought of as a set of arguments that use different means to infer an intelligent designer behind the universe. It fits well into the internalist framework of knowledge. These kinds of arguments seek to prove design by pointing to instances of things that could not have come about by natural processes. Sometimes the example of stones in a riverbed are used. If one reached into a river and removed a perfectly round stone, they could reasonably conclude that the stones were made round by natural processes. However, were one to reach into the same riverbed and pull out a stone that had been cut into the shape of an arrowhead, axe head, or some other similar stone tool; one could never conclude that the stone had taken its shape by natural processes. At least, not reasonably. One would be forced to conclude in such cases that the stone had been cut into its shape by a designer, even if they could not identify the designer.

Thinking in these terms, apologists look for instances in the natural world that seems to bear the marks of design and offer them as proofs that an intelligent designer exists. Norman Geisler, William Lane Craig, and Richard Swinburne are all apologists who are known for this type of argument. DNA, the human mind, and the complexity of the solar system are all instances of things found in the natural universe that bear the unmistakable marks of design. To use the previous analogy, these are cut stones rather than round stones. In fact, these are far more complex than any cut stone, and demand the presence of a designer even more so than a cut stone does.

Swinburne explains that “the argument from design has the enormous merit of providing a possible explanation of the pervasiveness of scientific laws, the regular behavior over the

endless time and space of objects which constitute the universe.”<sup>64</sup> Design arguments serve as excellent justification for Christian theism because “it does rather look as if a theological system such as the Christian one gives an account of the ultimate cause of the universe, why it works the way it does, and what is going to happen to its human inhabitants.”<sup>65</sup>

In the same vein as the teleological argument there is the cosmological argument. The cosmological argument, as explained by Kenneth Boa and Brian Bowman Jr., “is based on the virtual consensus among cosmologists that” the universe had a beginning.<sup>66</sup> In its most basic form, this argument states that all things that begin to exist have a cause, and because the universe began to exist, the universe must also have a cause. A few different versions of the cosmological argument have been offered by various individuals, but the most renowned version has been the kalam argument as made popular by William Lane Craig.

Charles Ryrie, in his *Basic Theology*, provides a helpful sketch of how the cosmological argument is so effective as a justifying argument for belief in God. The cosmological argument is supported by the findings of Albert Einstein and Edwin Hubble who were able to demonstrate that the universe had a beginning. If the universe had a beginning, that means it’s beginning must have had a cause. As Ryrie states, “the universe around us is an effect that requires an adequate

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Swinburne, “The Argument from Design: A Defense,” *Religious Studies* Vol. 8, no. 3 (September 1972): 193-205, accessed December 18, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20004972>.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Swinburne, “Response to My Commentators,” *Religious Studies* 38, no. 3 (September 2002): 301-315, accessed February 19, 2021, [http://liberty.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?bookMark=eNp1kEtLAzEUhYNUsK3-ABGhuB-9ec0ky1J8QUHwAe5COrITpnQmNZku-u\\_NMEUEkSwC93znJPdMyKj1LRJySeGWAi3u3gC4EJRJYAA5BXVCxITkOtNAP0dk3MtZr5-RSYwbAMqpEGNy9Ypx59uIs87PmsOs9E2DbWc7H-15Oa3sNuLF8Z6Sj4f798VTtnx5fF7MlxnljPOMoysUMKesAhC21JqDLpiUrKhkZTUqqZ1aCQYIVa6kc21YCqk0Wgos51NyM-Tugv\\_aY-zMxu9Dm540NAUxnVZKUDZAa7tFU7eV74It03HY1GUqo6rTfJ5YwTjIxNOBL4OPMWBldqFubDgYCqavzPypLHmuB88mpv1\\_DEkGJRhLOj9m2mYVarfGXz\\_9N\\_UbbIV1Fw](http://liberty.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?bookMark=eNp1kEtLAzEUhYNUsK3-ABGhuB-9ec0ky1J8QUHwAe5COrITpnQmNZku-u_NMEUEkSwC93znJPdMyKj1LRJySeGWAi3u3gC4EJRJYAA5BXVCxITkOtNAP0dk3MtZr5-RSYwbAMqpEGNy9Ypx59uIs87PmsOs9E2DbWc7H-15Oa3sNuLF8Z6Sj4f798VTtnx5fF7MlxnljPOMoysUMKesAhC21JqDLpiUrKhkZTUqqZ1aCQYIVa6kc21YCqk0Wgos51NyM-Tugv_aY-zMxu9Dm540NAUxnVZKUDZAa7tFU7eV74It03HY1GUqo6rTfJ5YwTjIxNOBL4OPMWBldqFubDgYCqavzPypLHmuB88mpv1_DEkGJRhLOj9m2mYVarfGXz_9N_UbbIV1Fw).

<sup>66</sup> Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith has Its Reasons* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 100.

cause.”<sup>67</sup> There are only two possible options to answer the question of the universe’s origin. Either the universe was created by something outside itself, or “it was self-created.”<sup>68</sup>

Obviously, the concept of anything at all being self-created, much less the entire universe and all it contains, is more than a little ridiculous. In fact, Ryrie points out it is actually a “logical contradiction.”<sup>69</sup> In order for the universe to create itself, it would have to exist. Because the universe did not exist before it was created, it cannot have created itself. The only logical possibility is that something outside the universe created it. In fact, there could be no other solution to the origin of the universe. Something cannot come from nothing. Being cannot come from non-being. To believe otherwise is utterly absurd.

With the understanding that time, matter, and space all came into existence at about the same time, one can form some reasonable beliefs about the cause of the universe. Firstly, whatever caused the universe to exist must be atemporal. Secondly, this unknown cause must be immaterial. Third, the cause must also be nonspatial. These points are obvious, as the cause cannot consist of things that did not yet exist. Fourthly, we might also add that the cause is omnipotent. As whatever could cause hundreds of billions of galaxies to burst into existence must be capable of doing so. Finally, and most importantly, the cause must have a personal will. As it would need to *want* to cause the universe to exist before causing it to exist. Whatever then is atemporal, immaterial, nonspatial, omnipotent, and personal could only be God. Furthermore, this is precisely the type of God who is revealed from the Scriptures. Thus, the cosmological argument serves as an outstanding justifying warrant for Christian theism.

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<sup>67</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1999), 32.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

The ontological argument, the last of the four major arguments for God's existence, is the most difficult. Not just because of its own inherent difficulty, but because it has been interpreted and reinterpreted in many different ways by many different thinkers. The argument was first developed by Anselm, the revered eleventh-century monk and philosopher. It is built around the concept that "the notion of a being of unsurpassable greatness is logically inescapable."<sup>70</sup> Many different versions of this argument have been offered, many are plagued by controversy, and some have even been flatly debunked. One of the great challenges of the ontological argument is that its complexity makes it difficult to fully grasp. Many are unconvinced of its merit by virtue of the fact that they simply do not understand it.

To understand the argument as it is often offered today, one must understand what it means to be necessary and what it means to be contingent. Something that is necessary must exist in all possible worlds. In contrast to this, something that is contingent may exist, but not necessarily. The ontological argument asks if it is possible for a maximally great being to exist. A maximally great being would have all the attributes of greatness. Therefore, a maximally great being would be necessary. This is because something that is necessary is greater than something that is contingent. Of course, if there is a maximally great being, he most certainly would be God. After all, Christian theism conceives God as being maximally great.

If it is possible for a maximally great being to exist, then he must exist in all possible worlds. Again, this is because to be maximally great he must also be necessary. Thus, the ontological argument asks if it is possible for a maximally great being to exist in some possible world. It follows naturally that the answer would be yes. It seems obvious that one could

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<sup>70</sup> Boa and Bowman, 17.

conceive of some possible world where a maximally great being existed. This is where the real power of the argument lies. Because, if a maximally great being exists in some possible world, then he must exist in all possible worlds. For that is what it means to be necessary. If such a being exists in all possible worlds, then he exists in this world. The world of reality. Therefore, one can conclude that if it is possible for God to exist in any possible world, then God exists. Because it is obviously possible for such a thing to be true, one must conclude that it is true that God exists.

Finally, there is what is sometimes called the minimal facts argument. This is another excellent example of internalist-type evidence for theism. The minimal facts argument employs the common practice of using “a list of historical facts that are admitted to by virtually all researchers.”<sup>71</sup> This method is typical of virtually all handling of Jesus’s resurrection and is not exclusive to the minimal facts argument. On any subject as contentious as the existence of God, the presence of bias is inescapable. By focusing on only those points that most scholars agree on, the argument brings one to a common ground of what should be believed concerning the resurrection. This is not an appeal to consensus, nor should it be, as a consensus can still lead to error. That several agree does not mean they are correct. Nevertheless, that there is agreement between atheists and theists on evidence that points to the resurrection is a significant point. When not even the atheist is willing to dismiss the evidence, one can know that it is credible.

Gary Habermas favors using twelve key data points in his argument for the resurrection. Other types of minimal facts arguments may use a different number of these points, but the

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<sup>71</sup> Gary Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 9, accessed October 19, 2021, [https://liberty.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/openurl?institution=01LIBU\\_INST&rft\\_id=info:sid%2Fsummon&rft\\_dat=ie%3D51114832570004916,language%3DEN&svc\\_dat=CTO&u.ignore\\_date\\_coverage=true&vid=01LIBU\\_INST:Services](https://liberty.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/openurl?institution=01LIBU_INST&rft_id=info:sid%2Fsummon&rft_dat=ie%3D51114832570004916,language%3DEN&svc_dat=CTO&u.ignore_date_coverage=true&vid=01LIBU_INST:Services).

results are the same. A few of these points are that “Jesus’s tomb was found empty” soon after he was buried, that the disciples “had experiences” that caused them to believe Jesus had risen from the dead, and that the declaration of the resurrection started “very early” in Christian history.<sup>72</sup> Virtually all scholars would agree with these points. The critical point here is that early eyewitnesses believed Jesus had been raised.

The idea that “the disciples had actual experiences” that caused them to believe Jesus was resurrected is considered by atheists and theists alike to be a historical fact.<sup>73</sup> This point is by Habermas’s estimation “the single most crucial development in recent resurrection studies.”<sup>74</sup> Virtually all scholars, including those who are most critical of the evidence, agree that the eyewitnesses truly believed they had seen Jesus risen. The question is: why? What could have caused so many individuals, some of who were even opponents of Jesus, to believe that he had been resurrected? This is the key question in the minimal facts argument.

Various naturalistic theories have been offered, including the EPA offered by Ehrman and referenced in *chapter one*. Nearly all these theories have been debunked. For any theory to be considered viable, they “must account for the disciples’ claims.”<sup>75</sup> The theory that is posed most often here, is that the witnesses experienced hallucinations of the risen Christ. Habermas successfully deconstructs this theory, pointing out several errors. He explains, for example, that such hallucinations “are not collective or contagious.”<sup>76</sup> It simply is not possible for so many

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<sup>72</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Gary Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 2 (2005): 135-153, accessed February 17, 2021,

<https://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAI8N200817000498&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 11.

different eyewitnesses to have experienced the same hallucinations. For this reason, and many others, the favored hallucination theory simply cannot explain the belief of the eyewitnesses that they had seen a resurrected Christ.

Because there are no viable naturalistic explanations for the belief that Jesus had risen, it seems that the only possible explanation is that Jesus really did rise from the dead. This is, after all, what the evidence suggests as well as what the eyewitnesses claimed had happened. The only obstacle to this conclusion is the presupposition that supernatural occurrences are impossible. However, if it is even possible that God exists, then it is most decidedly possible for such a miracle to take place. If this is true, as it seems to be, then every other objection to Christian theism is satisfied. Claims concerning the trustworthiness of Scripture, the existence of God, the presence of miracles, and the viability of Christianity are all confirmed beyond a reasonable doubt by the resurrection of Christ. This makes the minimal facts argument one of the best, if not the very best, arguments for Christian theism.

#### Theism on Externalism

Externalists believe that, contrary to internalism, it is not necessary to ground a belief in argument or evidence. On this view, as long as one has proper function, a belief can be warranted directly in the absence of a defeater. For religious epistemology, this means finding warrant for belief in God wholly apart from evidence and reasoning. Typically, Plantinga's properly basic belief is used to achieve this. Nevertheless, there might be other examples of warrants for theism that satisfy on externalist terms.

One such warrant is what Joe Puckett calls “*the argument from desire*.”<sup>77</sup> As the name implies, Puckett believes this type of thinking to be an argument, and therefore it satisfies on an internalist account of knowledge. However, this type of thinking, as will be argued here, may be thought of as direct warrant as well. Therefore, it may also satisfy an externalist account of knowledge. Puckett hints at this point when he explains that the argument “does not prove that God exists, let alone does it prove that the God of Christian theism exists.”<sup>78</sup> Instead the argument shows “it is rational to believe something must exist that is beyond this world” given the fact of transcendent longing.<sup>79</sup> This is precisely the type of direct warrant that externalism looks to. What Puckett calls rational belief the externalist would call a direct warrant for God’s existence.

Though he never used the phrase *argument from desire*, this type of thinking was made most popular by C.S. Lewis. In his *Mere Christianity*, Lewis points to the longing all are aware of that is never satisfied by the world. As he puts it, “there are all sorts of things in this world” that promise to satisfy the inward longing, “but they never quite keep their promise.”<sup>80</sup> Lewis explains that there is a longing that we seek to satisfy in “some subject that excites,” but we find that “no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy.”<sup>81</sup> Puckett adds to this that “all other innate desires have something that satisfies those desires.”<sup>82</sup> Hunger has food, thirst has water, so must the desire for some greater transcendent thing have correlating satisfaction.

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<sup>77</sup> Joe Puckett, *The Apologetics of Joy* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2012) 141, accessed February 19, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1cgdz7r.1>.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1980), 135.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Puckett, 141.

The seeming lack of this correlating satisfaction is sometimes referred to as the absurdity of life. Nontheists and theists alike have affirmed this frustrating aspect of the human experience. However, it may be that the reason there is no satisfactory naturalistic explanation for this longing is because it can only be satisfied by the divine. Perhaps God has instilled in mankind a desire that can only be satisfied in Him, to motivate mankind to search for Him. The presence of this longing may serve as a viable direct warrant for belief in God. Without evidence and without understanding what causes this longing, the theist can be justified in their belief that God exists by their perception of this transcendent desire.

Another justifying case for theism can be found in Thomas Aquinas' *five ways*. Aquinas believed, based on his understanding of Scripture, that mankind was capable of a natural knowledge of God. The *five ways* makes the case that God can be known directly from motion, efficient cause, possibility and necessity, gradation, and governance. *The five ways* may be considered externalist in nature in that they are five direct warrants. They are five individual external and direct grounds for theistic belief. An argument could be made that the five ways are to some extent internalist in nature, however, whether they are purely internalist or externalist is of no import.

The first way is an inference from motion. Seeing that there are things in motion, one can know that there must be something that set those things in motion. There must be a first mover that is unmoved. As Aquinas puts it, things are set in motion by a first mover in the same way that "the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand."<sup>83</sup> In the second way, the way of efficient cause, Aquinas points to the process of cause and effect. Because the cause-and-

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<sup>83</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Coyote Canyon Press, Kindle Edition), 40.

effect cycle cannot regress infinitely, “it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.”<sup>84</sup>

The third way considers the issue of contingent beings. Because we know that contingent beings, being what they are, do not need to exist, one must ponder why they exist. It must be that they exist because a necessary being has willed it to be so. As Aquinas puts it “we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity.”<sup>85</sup> The fourth way God can be known naturally, according to Aquinas, considers the existence of gradation. Simply stated, one can know that there are varying ascending and descending grades of perfection. This means there must be someone who is most perfect, and that person must be God. Finally, is the way of governance. Creatures without intelligence can be observed acting toward various ends. This is not possible, of course, unless there is some higher intelligence guiding and directing them.

Next, personal experience as a justifying warrant will be considered. Specifically, the belief that one has personally experienced a miracle. The idea of experiencing a miracle seems flatly impossible to most nontheists, and so is often regarded as an unconvincing argument. This is due to the bias of anti-supernaturalism. However, personal experience can be used as a warrant regardless of whether it is a convincing argument or not. The question here, after all, is to ask if it is possible for Christian theism to be warranted outside of the realm of argumentation. Can a Christian be justified without supporting evidence? In response, one might ask what could be more justifying than a supernatural miraculous experience?

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<sup>84</sup> Aquinas, 40.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 41.

Some of the most interesting claims concerning miracles come from the medical field. Reports of supernatural experiences from medical professionals are quite common. This is illustrated by the fact that, “three-quarters” of doctors in the medical field say that they “are convinced that miracles” occur regularly.<sup>86</sup> What makes these kinds of miracle claims interesting is that learned medical professionals are less likely than others to be mistaken concerning medical miracles. One could use this kind of testimony as evidence to support the claim that supernatural miracles take place on a surprisingly regular basis. However, these experiences do not need to be proven or supported by evidence to be considered as warrant for theism. With proper function, and without any defeaters, the belief that one has experienced a miracle may serve as direct warrant for theistic belief.

Such evidence may or may not be convincing to an atheist as positive evidence that God exists. After all, it may be these kinds of medical miracles have unknown naturalistic explanations. The point, nevertheless, is not to prove the existence of God, but to justify one’s belief in God. An apparent supernatural experience is a perfectly justifiable reason to believe that God exists. This does not mean that every miracle claim is equally viable. However, unless there are good reasons to believe that a miracle has not occurred, a miracle is an acceptable justification for belief in God.

Christopher Jay offers another way to go about justifying one’s belief in God. He points to something he calls *nondoxastic religious fictionalism*. This is a faith, not based in belief, but is in fact a faith held in spite of belief. That is, a faith despite reasons to believe theism is not true, or at least, a faith held without reason to believe that theism is true. For Jay, “it does not follow

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<sup>86</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Miracles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018), 31.

from our lacking the sort of epistemic warrant which would put our religious beliefs in good standing that we have no reason to have some sort of faith."<sup>87</sup> This is another prime example of externalist thinking.

Jay illustrates this proposition with an intriguing example. Jay proposes an individual who receives a letter in the mail claiming to be from their mother. They have good evidence to believe that their mother is dead, however, they decide to write back in the hope that their mother might still be alive. Through this exchange of letters, the individual has been “writing to their mother, and receiving news, reminiscences, and words of kindness from her, and what they write back is just what one would write to one's mother.”<sup>88</sup> These letters are intimate exchanges, containing words of affection, concern, and encouragement.

Despite this interaction “they are never confident enough that the letters are genuine.”<sup>89</sup> In fact, the individual is “not entirely confident that they are corresponding with a particular person at all, and not a criminal organization, various members of which at different times write a letter as part of an elaborate long-term con trick.”<sup>90</sup> Still, they retain hope that the one they have been writing is their mother. It is, after all, not unwarranted to believe that this really was their mother regardless of how unlikely that might be. Nevertheless, Jay explains “that the situation is not one in which they go as far as to believe that the letters are not from their mother.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Christopher Jay, “Testimony, Belief, and Non-doxastic Faith: The Humean Argument for Religious Fictionalism,” *Religious Studies* 52, no. 2 (June, 2016): 247-261, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412515000177>.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

Suppose at last that it turns out that the person this individual has been writing really is their mother. Could this exchange of letters be described as “a meaningful personal relationship?”<sup>92</sup> It seems so. Jay is able to show, in this way, that someone could have a personal relationship with God (of the sort that is promoted by evangelical Christianity,) without having knowledge of God’s existence. This kind of nondoxastic faith is a hopeful belief that can be held in spite of evidence to the contrary. This kind of faith is justified by direct warrant, i.e. the letter the individual received claiming to be from their mother. With a direct warrant, one can have a hopeful faith in God’s existence without the benefit of an undergirding belief.

The final example of religious justification that can satisfy an externalist account of knowledge is what is known as properly basic belief. Plantinga references kinds of beliefs that we would consider to be basic. For example, Bob’s belief that he drank coffee this morning, or the belief that there are other people that exist. Plantinga explains that although these kinds of beliefs are “properly taken as basic, it would be a mistake to describe them as groundless.”<sup>93</sup> Bob can be justified in his belief that he drank coffee this morning without having any supporting evidence or argumentation. This belief is justified in that it is properly basic. This is not to say that a belief is warranted merely because one believes it. Rather, it is that certain kinds of beliefs can be warranted with evidential justification.

For Plantinga, belief in God is a kind of belief that can be properly basic. He argues that “God has implanted in us a natural tendency to see his hand in the world around us.”<sup>94</sup> An awareness of this tendency serves as grounds for the properly basic belief that God exists.

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<sup>92</sup> Jay.

<sup>93</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” *Nous* vol. 15, no. 1 (March 1981): 41-51, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2215239>.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

Plantinga is not saying that groundless belief in God is properly basic. Belief in God is grounded in the same way that Bob's belief that he is not the person that exists is grounded. Plantinga argues that certain circumstances, such as someone reading Scripture and being "impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him," is sufficient grounds to justify one in the properly basic belief that God exists.<sup>95</sup> This kind of belief does not need to be proven or based on evidence to be considered as a justified or warranted belief.

### Cumulative Warrant

This chapter has been building a case for a cumulative warrant for Christian theism. This case is not in argument, but a warrant. It is not purposed to convince an atheist to convert to theism, though it might be used in such a way. It is instead purposed to show that Christians are justified or warranted in their belief that God exists. Further, this warrant does not depend on any single warrant presented. It may be that one or many of these warrants are flawed or unconvincing. The point is not to demonstrate the viability or success of any of them. Rather the cumulative warrant stakes its claim on the reality of these warrants. The fact that there are many good reasons to believe in God is, in itself, a good reason to believe in God.

Suppose, for example, that some evidence was brought forward to show that the cosmological argument is not a good reason to believe that God exists. The cumulative warrant still stands, because there are still many other reasons for believing theism. Instead, suppose that there was no such defeating evidence for the cosmological argument, but instead one simply found the argument unconvincing. The cumulative warrant still works, because it is not attempting to show that the cosmological argument is convincing. The cumulative warrant

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<sup>95</sup> Plantinga, Properly Basic.

justifies theism by showing that there are many different good reasons to believe in God. That fact by itself warrants Christian belief.

### Conclusion

*Chapter two* showed two ways of approaching knowledge and warrant. Internalist demand that knowledge must be based on evidence and argumentation. Externalists say this is not the case, and knowledge can be instead based on direct warrant. *Chapter three* has offered a cumulative warrant for belief in God. It provided five arguments that satisfy the internalist account of knowledge, and five ways theism can be warranted on an externalist account of knowledge. In light of this, it can be said that the Christian has every right to claim that they know God exists. The cumulative warrant has shown that by either standard of knowledge, Christian theism enjoys sufficient justifying grounds. By any standard, the Christian is justified in their belief that they know God exists.

## Chapter Four: A Two-part Rebuttal

### Introduction

This thesis has questioned PA's ability to impact or undermine theistic belief. First, it was shown that in order for a belief to be justified it must enjoy some manner of warrant. There are two views on what it takes to achieve this kind of justification, internalism and externalism. It was demonstrated through a cumulative warrant that, by either account, belief in God is justified. Now it will be argued that an established and justified belief cannot be undermined by PA. Using an argument that was developed by Plantinga, a two-part rebuttal will be used to show that PA are wholly unsuccessful at undermining or defeating theism.

In his *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga presents a brief yet insightful defense of theistic belief against PA. Dealing specifically with the issue of human suffering, Plantinga constructs what will be referred to here as *the inside straight defense*. Using the inside straight defense, Plantinga shows how a belief can be justified regardless of how likely it is. The thesis pairs Plantinga's inside straight with the cumulative warrant to create a two-part rebuttal of PA. It will be demonstrated that, *as long as religious belief enjoys some manner of warrant, it is justified no matter how improbable it may be*. Because religious belief is thoroughly warranted, PA cannot render it unjustified.

### Plantinga's Inside Straight

Plantinga makes his case through an illustration about a game of poker. He states that "it is improbable on the rest of what I know or believe that I have just drawn to an inside straight."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 464, accessed December 18, 2020, <https://ccel.org/ccel/plantinga/warrant3/warrant3.vii.iv.html>.

In the game of poker, an inside straight is a hand that is one card short of becoming a straight. The likelihood of drawing an inside straight is quite poor. In theory, one would not be epistemically justified in believing that they had drawn an inside straight, at least not according to the reasoning of PA. The chances of such a thing being true is simply too unlikely to be believed. However, Plantinga contends that, despite this low probability, “it doesn’t follow that there is even the slightest irrationality in my belief that I have just drawn an inside straight.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, it is perfectly justifiable to believe you have drawn an inside straight regardless of how probable it is. This is because, if one is actually holding an inside straight, the probability of such a thing happening is meaningless information.

Plantinga’s illustration demonstrates how fundamentally flawed it is to lord probability over belief and knowledge. The belief that one has drawn an inside straight is not dependent “for its warrant, on being appropriately probable on the rest” of what they believe to be true.<sup>98</sup> In this case, the belief that an inside straight has been drawn depends strictly upon perception. It will either be true that the poker player has drawn an inside straight, or it will be true that he has not. The player will be able to determine this truth based on their perception, and form their belief accordingly. When the player looks at their hand, their belief about what they have drawn will be determined by what they see, not by what is probable.

It is the same with religious belief. The question is, as Plantinga explains, whether theism can be justified “distinct from its probability on other propositions I believe.”<sup>99</sup> That is, if one’s belief in God depends on probability for its warrant, then and only then would PA be effective as an underminer or defeater of theism. However, theism does not now, nor has it ever, been

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<sup>97</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted*, 464.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

dependent upon probability. It may be that a particular defense of God's existence is supported in part by probability, but that is not what makes theism warranted. On the cumulative case argued in *chapter three*, Christian theism is warranted because there are many justifying arguments and warrants supporting it. One can claim they know God exists, because they have many good reasons for believing this to be the case. It would take a dramatically significant defeater to override this kind of warrant. This is not something that PA can hope to achieve.

To truly drive home the weakness of PA suppose for the sake of the argument, as Plantinga does, that "theism were improbable with respect to the rest of what I believe," and "the rest of what I believe offered evidence against theism and none for it."<sup>100</sup> In this case, the theist has no evidence of any kind to support their belief that God exists while the atheist offers good reasons to believe that atheism is true. Even in this case, PA may not necessarily compel one to leave theism for atheism. Unless a PA could show a 100% probability that atheism was true, there would still be reason to believe that Christian theism were true. There are multiple lines of thinking that show that this is the case.

First, consider the reasoning from Blaise Pascal's wager argument. Pascal challenges that one ought to "weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is."<sup>101</sup> Even if one found it was more likely than not, say a 60% chance, that atheism is true, should that compel one to leave theism for atheism? That seems unwise. As Pascal puts it, "if you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing."<sup>102</sup> If it were true that God exists, and one lived a life of unbelief, on Christian theism that

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<sup>100</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted*, 464.

<sup>101</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, W.F. Trotter, trans. (Infomotions, Inc., 2000), 46, accessed October 21, 21, [https://liberty.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/openurl?institution=01LIBU\\_INST&rft\\_id=info:sid%2Fsummon&rft\\_dat=ie%3D51171055650004916,language%3DEN&svc\\_dat=CTO&u.ignore\\_date\\_coverage=true&vid=01LIBU\\_INST:Services](https://liberty.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/openurl?institution=01LIBU_INST&rft_id=info:sid%2Fsummon&rft_dat=ie%3D51171055650004916,language%3DEN&svc_dat=CTO&u.ignore_date_coverage=true&vid=01LIBU_INST:Services).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

person would be faced with an eternity in Hell. However, if atheism were true and that person lived a life of belief, that person would by comparison lose very little. Perhaps they sacrificed certain passions for the sake of their belief, but this would be no great or meaningful loss to their life experience. On the other hand, if one chose to believe and it turned out that God did exist, they would gain eternal life. It seems quite foolish to risk one's soul, even if it were proven more likely than not that atheism was true.

Secondly, even if one did not consider the gain or loss of such a choice as suggested by Pascal, PA still would not necessarily compel one to leave theism. There are, after all, many things that are unlikely and also true. For example, it is quite unlikely in the grand scheme of things for life to exist in our universe. It would be quite unlikely, given all the time that has passed since the universe came into being, that one would end up being alive during this particular time period. It is improbable, given all of the names that you could have been named, that you would end up with the name you have. There are many other examples of such things that one could think of, this is the point of Plantinga's inside straight. The probability of a belief being true ultimately has no bearing on whether that thing is true in reality. It is either true or it is not. For this reason, PA can never be used as a defeater.

Nevertheless, it is *not* true that theism is unlikely with respect to what else we know to be true. In fact, the cumulative warrant argued in *chapter three* shows that there are many good reasons for believing that theism is true. More than mere belief, the cumulative warrant shows that by both internalist and externalist positions of knowledge, the theist can say they *know* that God exists. If one knows they are holding an inside straight in their hands, the probability that they would draw an inside straight is effectively meaningless information. By pairing the cumulative

warrant with Plantinga's *inside straight*, the theist has an insurmountable defense against PA. The defense this thesis is offering might, therefore, be presented in this way:

- A. Warranted religious belief may only be rendered unjustified by a definitive defeater.
- B. Probability-based attacks are not definitive defeaters unless they have 100% surety.
- C. Probability-based attacks cannot produce 100% surety as long as religious belief is warranted.
- D. Religious belief is warranted, therefore probability-based attacks cannot produce 100% surety.
- E. Therefore, warranted religious belief remains justified in spite of probability-based attacks.

This two-part rebuttal marries Plantinga's inside straight defense with the cumulative warrant from *chapter three* to effectively refute PA arguments against theism.

#### The Two-part Rebuttal Applied

The first example of PA that was given in *chapter one* was of SPA. SPA is an argument posed by Dawkins and his associates that appears to be motivated by the intuitive sense that God's existence is unlikely. The SPA dismissively states, without any particular argumentation, that one should give up theism and enjoy the alleged freedom of atheism on the basis that God probably does not exist. The rebuttal offered by this thesis is aptly applied to SPA of this nature. The theist need only respond that, regardless of the atheist's subjective feeling on the matter, that theism enjoys multiple justifying warrants. Not only that, but just because something seems to be

improbable, it does not mean that it is untrue. In this way, the two-part rebuttal may effectively refute SPA.

The second type of PA shown in *chapter one* is EPA. The arguments of Ehrman and Rowe were shown to be good examples of EPA. Ehrman employed an EPA to undermine the belief that Jesus rose from the dead. Rowe used a similar, albeit better developed, EPA to argue that the problem of evil and suffering undermines theism. Both of these arguments will be briefly revisited and answered respectively. Ehrman argues that the concept of a resurrection is near impossible because, on a naturalistic worldview, people simply cannot return from death. He contrives an intentionally improbable naturalistic explanation for the resurrection account, concluding that “a highly unlikely event is far more probable than a virtually impossible one.”<sup>103</sup> Such an argument has far-reaching implications. If the resurrection is untrue, then so is all of Christian theism.

Firstly, it must be pointed out that Ehrman’s EPA is less than compelling. The only reason the evidence for the resurrection does not seem compelling to Ehrman is based on his belief that it is virtually impossible for the dead to rise. However, if one presumes that God exists then one can also presume that miracles are real. With such assumptions as a foundation, a resurrection event not only becomes believable, but also quite plausible. Nevertheless, Ehrman’s position might be granted for the sake of the argument without doing any violence to one’s belief in the resurrection. The first part of the rebuttal is that Christianity enjoys significant warrant. Supposing that Ehrman is successful in his argument that the resurrection is virtually impossible, the theist still has exceptional reasons to believe that Christian theism is true. This is

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<sup>103</sup> Ehrman, chapter five.

demonstrated by the cumulative warrant. The second part of the rebuttal states that we know of many things that are unlikely and are still true. Something being virtually impossible does not make it actually impossible. This is demonstrated by Plantinga's inside straight. Thus, despite Ehrman's efforts, the Christian remains perfectly justified in believing that Christ is risen.

Next is Rowe's EPA. Rowe argued that, while suffering does not make theism impossible, it does render theism absurdly improbable. First, as with Ehrman's argument, Rowe's argument is not particularly compelling. The God of Christianity is not only omnipotent and omnibenevolent, but also wholly just. On Christian theism, the human race is guilty of a collective crime against God. Because of this, the world has been cursed by God as an act of God's justice. Were instances of suffering absent, one would have grounds to believe Christian theism is guilty of a contradiction. However, the presence of great suffering appears to confirm what Christian theism claims to be true about sin and the corresponding curse. Suffering then is a confirmation of, rather than a contradiction of, the existence of the Christian God.

Nevertheless, it may be presumed that Rowe is successful in showing that the reality of suffering makes Christianity, and theism in general, absurdly improbable. Again, the theist may apply the two-step rebuttal. Firstly, Christianity is warranted and justified. This is not impacted by how probable it may seem. Secondly, one can think of many things that are both improbable and true. Thus, one may rightfully assume that Christianity is like one of these things. Therefore, Rowe's EPA also fails to be convincing, even if his argument is granted.

Last is Rowe's TPA. Rowe uses Bayes Theorem to assert that it is more probable than not, in the technical sense, that God does not exist. Once again, Rowe's argument can be granted without much consequence. Again, the two-part rebuttal may be applied. Once again, it remains

that Christian belief is warranted and justified. Once again, there remains many instances where a thing that is improbable happens to be true. For these reasons, Rowes TPA is not compelling.

### Possible Objections

There are two possible ways one may object to the two-step rebuttal. First, one might argue, as Swinburne does, that the epistemic justification of Christian theism very much depends on theism being more probable than not. Swinburne posits that “the less probable” theism seems to be “the less rational it will be to lead the Christian life.”<sup>104</sup> So it follows, one might say, that an argument showing that theism is highly improbable would effectively obligate one to give up their theism.

There might be two responses to this objection. First, it may be argued that the cumulative warrant offered in *chapter three* does show that it is more probable than not that God does exist. Therefore, there is no reason for one to believe that any PA could be genuinely effective at rendering Christian theism improbable. Secondly, and more to the point, Plantinga’s *inside straight* clearly demonstrates that a belief can be improbable and still be true. So that, if theism really was improbable, there would not necessarily be any epistemic obligation to abandon theism. As Plantinga argues, theism can be warranted entirely “distinct from its probability.”<sup>105</sup>

Secondly, one might object to the notion that the Christian is in a position to say they *know* that God exists, thereby weakening this first part of the two-part rebuttal. To this objection one may respond that there is no need to be overly strict in a definition of knowledge. By the

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<sup>104</sup> Swinburne, Response.

<sup>105</sup> Plantinga, Warranted, 464.

strictest terms, no one would be in a position to know anything at all. One could not know that they know, well and truly, that this thesis exists, or that there really is such a school as Liberty University. Some degree of faith must be allowed when considering whether a belief qualifies as knowledge. As Clark and VanArragon point out, "...all human belief systems are fundamentally faith-based."<sup>106</sup> In the strictest sense, one could not truly know anything at all. The best one can do is to form their beliefs around sufficient warrant and have faith that their belief corresponds to the objective external reality. *Chapter two* showed that, on either internalist or externalist standards of knowledge, the Christian may know that God exists. To know that they know God exists is neither necessary nor reasonable, and frankly, not even possible. No belief could withstand such a standard.

### Conclusion

This chapter has argued for a two-part rebuttal of PA. The first part states that Christian theism is warranted and justified given the cumulative warrant argued in *chapter three*. The second part states that, based on Plantinga's inside straight, there is no reason to conclude the improbability of religious belief means it is unjustified. Even if it could be proven with certainty that God's existence was highly unlikely, this would not amount to anything consequential or particularly interesting for the theist.

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<sup>106</sup> Clark and VanArragon, 4.

## Summary and Conclusion

This thesis argues that *as long as religious belief enjoys some manner of warrant, it remains justified regardless of how improbable it may be shown to be*. To demonstrate this, a two-part rebuttal of PA was argued. This two-part rebuttal argues first of all that Christian theism is a justified belief that corresponds with reality. Secondly, it argues that the probability of a belief does not necessarily represent the truthfulness of that belief. As there are many things one could think of that are both improbable as well as true.

*Chapter one* showed different categories of PA and how they are used by atheist thinkers against theism. In *chapter two*, the subject of epistemology was surveyed. It was shown that there are two rival ways one might think about knowledge and justification. *Chapter three* demonstrated that by either internalist or externalist accounts of knowledge, Christian theism can be justified. A cumulative argument was built using five types of warrants that satisfy internalist standards of knowledge, and five types of warrant that satisfy externalist accounts of knowledge. *Chapter four* argued for a two-part rebuttal of PA based on cumulative warrant and Plantinga's inside straight. It was shown how this rebuttal is successful against every category of PA.

It has been shown that *as long as religious belief enjoys some manner of warrant, it remains justified regardless of how improbable it may be shown to be*. If the atheist wishes to be successful against theism, he must do so through the use of warrants and defeaters. Simply put, PA is not and cannot be an effective tool against religious belief. Theism does not depend upon its probability for its warrant. Therefore, theism cannot be rendered unjustified by PA.

## Appendix

### Key Terms Explained

- Q: “No good at all justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2.”<sup>107</sup>
- P: “No good we know of justifies God in permitting E1 and E2.” E1 and E2 are examples of evil given by Rowe. This might be simplified by saying that we know of no good that justifies God in allowing evil.<sup>108</sup>
- G: God exists.
- -G: God does not exist.
- K: Our noetic structure, all background knowledge we have available to us.
- Pr: Shorthand for probability.
- X: A placeholder with specific meaning.

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<sup>107</sup> Rowe, Evidential, 264.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

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