

# LESSONS FROM COMMONSENSISM FOR RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

Michael Bergmann

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In this paper I argue that commonsense responses to radical skepticism can provide helpful lessons for religious epistemology—in particular, for thinking about how best to defend, and respond to, religious skepticism. Section 1 provides a brief summary of *some* of the main elements of the Reid-inspired epistemic-intuition-based commonsense response to radical skepticism developed in my 2021 book, *Radical Skepticism and Epistemic Intuition*. Section 2 highlights five important lessons that can be drawn from the position presented in that book and applies them to religious epistemology. Section 3 explains how these lessons can help us to account for our religious disagreements in more plausible ways (i.e., in ways that don't implausibly disparage the rationality of those with whom we disagree). Section 4 addresses some potential concerns about Sections 2 and 3.

## 1. Radical Skepticism, Commonsensism, and Epistemic Intuition

Chisholm taught us the difference between methodist and particularist approaches to skeptical worries.<sup>1</sup> Methodists start with epistemic principles articulating criteria for rationality and use them to determine which of our beliefs are rational. Particularists start with clear cases of beliefs that are rational (and clear cases of beliefs that are irrational) and use these as a basis for

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<sup>1</sup> See Chisholm (1982).

formulating epistemic principles stating correct criteria for rationality—i.e., criteria that correctly classify those clear cases.

Those who find arguments for radical skepticism compelling typically proceed as *methodists*. Their skeptical arguments rely on a premise that endorses an epistemic principle. And these arguments conclude that large swaths of our ordinary beliefs fail to satisfy the criteria for rationality mentioned in the principle and, hence, aren't rational. Commonsense responses to skepticism (responses of the sort given by Thomas Reid and G.E. Moore) proceed in a *particularist* way. Commonsensists endorse the following thesis:

*Commonsensism*: (a) We rationally believe the most obvious things that most humans take themselves to rationally believe (this includes the truth of simple perceptual, memory, introspective, mathematical, logical, and moral beliefs); and (b) we also rationally believe (if we consider the question) that we are not in some skeptical scenario in which we are radically deceived in these widely held obvious beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

And because commonsensists are particularists, they insist that if the epistemic principles used in skeptical arguments imply that certain clear cases of rational beliefs are irrational, the principles should be rejected or modified.<sup>3</sup>

My 2021 book fills out this account in terms of epistemic intuitions.<sup>4</sup> Epistemic intuitions are seemings about epistemic value just as moral intuitions are seemings about moral value. Seemings are the distinctive mental states we're in when things seem to us a certain way. Seemings have a presentational feel: they feel as if they're revealing to us what reality is like. We very often treat them as evidence for their propositional content; this is how we treat perceptual seemings, memory seemings, seemings about simple mathematical and logical truths, and moral seemings. Some epistemic intuitions (or seemings) are treated as evidence for the epistemic principles that are their contents. Other epistemic intuitions are treated as evidence

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<sup>2</sup> Commonsensism also endorses points (a) and (b) when 'rationally believe' is replaced with 'know'.

<sup>3</sup> See Bergmann (2021: 119 & 128-9) for a more nuanced discussion of particularism and methodism in connection with skepticism.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Bergmann (2021: chs. 6 & 7).

that a particular belief is rational or that another belief is irrational.<sup>5</sup> Sceptically-inclined methodists rely on epistemic intuitions as evidence in support of the epistemic principles they employ as premises in their skeptical arguments. And commonsense particularists rely on epistemic intuitions as evidence in support of their judgments that particular beliefs (targeted by skeptical arguments) are rational.

Further details about my 2021 book's account of the dispute between commonsensism and radical skepticism will be given in Section 2 as I present the lessons for religious epistemology. What I've said so far is intended merely to provide a rough initial account of the sort of commonsensism I'll be relying on in drawing those lessons.

Two caveats before considering the application to religious belief: First, in saying that there are lessons from commonsensism for religious epistemology, I am *not* saying that religious beliefs are commonsense beliefs. Nor am I saying that there are no differences between the dispute between radical skeptics and commonsensists, on the one hand, and the dispute between religious skeptics and religious believers, on the other hand. Instead, I'm contributing to the decades-long tradition in contemporary philosophy of religion of emphasizing significant similarities between these two disputes.<sup>6</sup> Second, I'm not claiming that the religious believer's response to religious skepticism—the one that is highlighted and recommended in this paper—is the only or best response to religious skepticism for *all* religious people. The claim is just that it is *a* rational response that *many* will find realistic and attractive. This can be so even if, given the intuitions and evidence that *some* religious people in fact have, they cannot honestly adopt the response to religious skepticism recommended in this paper.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For more on epistemic intuitions and seemings, see Bergmann (2021: 84-6, 122-6, & 131-45).

<sup>6</sup> See work by William Alston (e.g., 1991), John Greco (e.g., 2000), and myself (e.g., Bergmann 2017b) in this vein.

<sup>7</sup> A similar point could be made about the commonsensist response to radical skepticism—i.e., not all inclined to resist radical skepticism will share the intuitions and evidence of the commonsensist.

## 2. Five Lessons

### 2.1 *Anti-Skepticism and Noninferentially Rational Belief*

Lesson 1: there is an anti-skeptical advantage for epistemologies that allow for beliefs targeted by skeptical objections to be properly basic (i.e., noninferentially rational) in the way that Reid, in opposition to Hume, allowed for perceptual and testimonial belief to be properly basic.

Rather than accept an epistemic principle saying that one's perceptual beliefs are rational only if one is able to infer their probable truth via a good argument from one's sensory experience, commonsensists endorse a less demanding and more plausible standard—one that accommodates the view that our perceptual beliefs can be noninferentially rational. Since the average person's perceptual beliefs are not based on arguments and since sufficiently good (noncircular) arguments in support of our perceptual beliefs haven't been discovered even by the best philosophers, there is an enormous anti-skeptical advantage for those holding the Reidian view that perceptual beliefs are properly basic. Of course, this is an advantage only if this view is plausibly true. But Reid, Moore, and many others think it *is* plausibly true.

It's common knowledge, to anyone familiar with developments in philosophy of religion over the past four decades, that a parallel point applies in religious epistemology: given the difficulty of identifying sufficiently good arguments in support of religious beliefs, there is an anti-skeptical advantage for epistemologies endorsing the view that religious belief can be noninferentially rational in the ways proposed by Plantinga (2000), Alston (1991), and others. Here too this is an advantage only if the view in question is plausibly true. But many philosophers (including me) think it *is* plausibly true. Thus, for the remainder of this paper, all

discussions of religious epistemologies will focus on religious epistemologies of this sort, calling them “noninferentialist” religious epistemologies.<sup>8</sup>

## **2.2 Autodidactic vs. Proselytizing Responses to Skepticism**

Lesson 2: anti-skeptics are wise to take an autodidactic rather than a proselytizing approach in responding to skepticism.

The gold standard in dealing with disagreement is to defend one’s own position via arguments from compelling premises in such a way that rational and well-informed people who previously disagreed with you will be forced, on pain of irrationality, to concede that your view is the correct one, and their opposing view is mistaken. Adopting this standard in dealing with skepticism is the *proselytizing* approach—i.e., showing skepticism-sympathizers, to their own satisfaction, that your nonskeptical view is the correct one. It has not met with success.<sup>9</sup>

Commonsensists don’t take this approach. Instead, their goal is to fully appreciate and appropriately respect the force of skeptical objections and to determine honestly—by their own lights, relying on their own epistemic intuitions—what rationality requires, belief-wise, in response to those objections. Commonsensists are aware that those inclined to skepticism (including many who are well-informed and philosophically competent) might not arrive at the same conclusions; that difference will have to be factored in when determining what rationality requires. But the question for the commonsensist is not “how can I convince the skeptically-inclined to give up their skepticism?”; that’s the question for those who take the proselytizing approach. Instead, it’s “what is the principled rational response for me, in light of all the

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<sup>8</sup> Reformed Epistemology—see Plantinga and Wolterstorff (1983)—is a noninferentialist religious epistemology in this sense.

<sup>9</sup> See Alston (1993) and Bergmann (2021: ch. 3). For an impressive recent attempt to provide an anti-skeptical argument that can satisfy skeptics, see Rinard (2019). For objections to Rinard’s argument, see Bergmann (2021: 64-72).

evidence I have, to these skeptical objections?"; this is the *autodidactic* approach that is typical of commonsensism.<sup>10</sup>

The autodidactic approach has often been taken by those who endorse noninferentialist religious epistemologies. Alston (1991) and Plantinga (2000) explain in principled ways, *to their own satisfaction* (in light of the evidence they have), why it is that their religious beliefs are rational or warranted. They realize that what they're saying won't persuade non-religious people to convert to religious belief. In fact, it may not even convince non-religious people that the religious person's beliefs are rational (even if false). But since Alston and Plantinga are taking the autodidactic approach rather than the proselytizing approach, this doesn't count as a failure to achieve their goal.

Of course, nonskeptics have other-regarding hopes when they explain their autodidactic reflections in their published writings (this is why they publish them). One such hope is that they may help fellow nonskeptics to see how they too can rationally resist the force of skeptical objections. A second hope is that skeptics will come to see how it can rationally seem (from the perspective of nonskeptics) that their nonskeptical views are rational. A third, albeit dimmer, hope is that skeptics will become (i) more open to the kinds of evidence on which the nonskeptic relies and (ii) more skeptical of the relative strength of the evidence supporting skepticism, thereby becoming more open to a nonskeptical view.

Obviously, persuading skeptics would be nice. But since that isn't the goal, not achieving it isn't a failure to do what one was trying to do. Moreover, the skeptic is also failing to persuade the nonskeptic of the irrationality of her nonskeptical position (using evidence and

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<sup>10</sup> And it's the approach taken in Bergmann (2021).

premises that the nonskeptic views as rationally acceptable). So if this is a problem, it goes both ways.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3. *Epistemic Intuitions on All Sides*

Lesson 3: both skeptics and anti-skeptics rely heavily on epistemic intuitions, which contributes to leveling the playing field.

Epistemic intuitions—i.e., seemings about rationality, either about epistemic principles identifying criteria of rationality or about whether particular beliefs are rational—are often treated as evidence. Importantly, this is true even of the skeptically-inclined. In arguing for the irrationality of beliefs, they standardly rely on epistemic principles stating criteria for rationality that they think the targeted beliefs fail to satisfy. But their evidence in support of these principles is (plausibly) epistemic intuition. In fact, even those who think *it isn't rational to treat epistemic intuition as having evidential value* are, it seems, relying on epistemic intuition as evidence in their endorsement of that very thought.

There are multiple ways that epistemic intuitions factor into the exchange between commonsensists and skeptics. Both sides have epistemic intuitions in support of epistemic principles, though there are differences regarding exactly which principles their epistemic intuitions support and how strongly. Both sides have epistemic intuitions in support of the rationality of particular beliefs and the irrationality of others; here too, there are differences in *strength* of intuition and *degree* of epistemic value attributed (whether positive or negative). In addition, both sides have higher-level epistemic intuitions (also of differing strength and

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<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of how this problem goes both ways in the dispute between radical skeptics and commonsensists, see Bergmann (2021: 145-50).

attributing different degrees of epistemic value) about the epistemic quality and evidential value of the previous two kinds of epistemic intuitions just mentioned.

That the skeptically inclined, and not just commonsensists, rely on epistemic intuition is worth noting because acknowledging this contributes to leveling the playing field. It can be tempting for those impressed by skeptical arguments to view the commonsensists' reliance on particularist epistemic intuitions (exemplified famously by G.E. Moore holding up his hands and announcing his knowledge of their existence as external world objects) as stubbornly, dogmatically, flat-footedly, and simplistically holding their ground in the face of principled, reflective, more sophisticated, more philosophically serious objectors wielding impressively developed skeptical arguments. But when the dust settles, what we really have are the epistemic intuitions of the commonsensists in conflict with the epistemic intuitions of the skeptics. The appearance of an elite or privileged higher ground occupied by the more sober-minded skeptical objector evaporates when we see that she and the commonsensist are relying on the same kind of evidence.

Turning to religious epistemology,<sup>12</sup> we can make the very same sorts of points. First, it's important to highlight the fact that both religious skeptics and religious believers rely on epistemic intuitions. It's true that noninferentialist religious epistemologies often highlight religious experience (including various religious seemings<sup>13</sup>) as the evidence on which religious beliefs are based. And it's also true that nonreligious people seem to either lack this sort of evidence or lack any inclination to treat it as evidentially valuable. But that isn't the full story.

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<sup>12</sup> Recall that our focus is on noninferentialist religious epistemologies.

<sup>13</sup> See Bergmann (2017b: 35-7) for a summary description of this sort of evidence, which consists of theistic or religious seemings *triggered* by a wide variety of ordinary experiences, including experiences of nature or reading sacred texts (which is to say, it doesn't consist solely or even mainly of dramatic religious experience reported by religious mystics). See also Rea (2018: chs. 6 & 7) for some discussion of the way in which ordinary instances of perception can be rationally experienced as divine encounters. These too can be cases where ordinary experience triggers religious seemings.



In addition, both religious and nonreligious people often have (i) epistemic intuitions about the evidential value of the religious experience on which religious beliefs are based and (ii) higher-level epistemic intuitions about the evidential value of the epistemic intuitions mentioned in (i). To religious people, it often seems—because of (i)—that it is epistemically appropriate to rely on their religious seemings in forming their religious beliefs. And if they're reflective, it will also often seem—because of (ii)—that it is epistemically appropriate for them to have that positive view about the evidential value of their religious seemings. But for nonreligious people, it often seems—because of (i) in their own case—that the religious seemings of religious believers lack sufficient evidential value. And if these nonreligious people are reflective, they'll often think—because of (ii) in their own case—that this negative view of the evidential value of the religious seemings of religious believers is itself entirely reasonable.

Recognizing the relevance of epistemic intuitions of kind (i) and (ii) and the pervasive evidential role they play in the beliefs formed by those on both sides of a dispute between skeptics and anti-skeptics is crucial to understanding disagreements about skepticism, whether radical skepticism or religious skepticism. Both sides in these disputes are relying, often without realizing it, on evidence of the very same kind, namely, epistemic intuition. And this evidence often plays an unrecognized role in buttressing one's own position and in resisting opposing views. In the case of religious skepticism, this is important because it undermines the impression that the religious skeptic avoids relying on "questionable" evidence of the sort employed by the religious believer to whom she is objecting.

#### ***2.4 The Importance of Intuitions about Particular Cases***

Lesson 4: disagreements between skeptics and anti-skeptics in their epistemic intuitions about the rationality of particular beliefs play a significant and under-appreciated role in accounting for their overall disagreements.

In disputes about radical skepticism with respect to perception and memory, there are at least four kinds of evidence:

- (a) sensory experience and memory seemings,
- (b) epistemic intuitions about the evidential value of the evidence mentioned in (a),
- (c) higher-level epistemic intuitions about the evidential value of the epistemic intuitions mentioned in (b),
- (d) epistemic intuitions about epistemic principles stating what the criteria for rationality are.

The point I want to emphasize here is that the evidence mentioned in (b) plays a *very* significant role in determining whether one sides with anti-skepticism or skepticism in this disagreement.

And the evidence mentioned in (c) is nearly as important when people are more reflective. It's often the case that the epistemic principles to which skeptics appeal in their arguments—supported by the evidence mentioned in (d)—are viewed by all sides as being at least in the ballpark of some relevant truth. But the particularists in the dispute will tend to tweak and modify statements of these principles so that they accommodate the evidence mentioned in (b). And when challenges are raised against the legitimacy of using the evidence mentioned in (b), the evidence mentioned in (c) comes to the rescue.<sup>14</sup>

From the perspective of the commonsensist, the (b)- and (c)-evidence she highlights significantly outweighs the (b)- and (c)-evidence highlighted by the skeptically inclined and provides strong support for the rationality of our ordinary perceptual and memory beliefs.

Perhaps there are also differences in the strength of the (d)-evidence had by these two groups,

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<sup>14</sup> People can have (a)-, (b)-, and (c)-evidence without thinking of it as such. (For the following example, suppose that (a) speaks of "evidence we have for simple mathematical beliefs such as  $2 + 3 = 5$ " rather than sensory experience and memory seemings.) Suppose a skeptic suggests to an intelligent person, S (without familiarity with epistemology), that a demon could get a person to feel confident about a necessary falsehood (e.g.,  $2 + 3 = 6$ ). And suppose the skeptic says that, for all S knows, this might be happening with S's belief that  $2 + 3 = 5$  (which is in fact false). S might dismiss the suggestion that she could be making that sort of mistake as ridiculous and remain confident that her evidence in support of her belief that  $2 + 3 = 5$  is excellent. In doing this, she will be relying on (b)-evidence, even if she doesn't think of it as such. Next, suppose that the skeptic says that S's persistent confidence in the high quality of her evidence for thinking that  $2 + 3 = 5$  might itself be a demon-produced deception. In response, S might dismiss this further suggestion as ridiculous too. In doing so she is relying on (c)-evidence, without thinking of it as such.

but there needn't be, or at least such differences needn't be significant. Ultimately, the reason commonsensists aren't moved by skeptical arguments is that—in light of their (b)- and (c)-evidence—they can't take seriously the skeptical view that most of their ordinary perceptual and memory beliefs are irrational.

A similar point can be made about disputes between religious believers and religious skeptics. Here too there is (d)-evidence, but in place of (a) through (c) we have:

- (a\*) religious seemings and religious experience,
- (b\*) epistemic intuitions about the evidential value of the evidence mentioned in (a\*),
- (c\*) higher-level epistemic intuitions about the evidential value of the epistemic intuitions mentioned in (b\*).

And here too (b\*)-evidence and (c\*)-evidence play a very significant role. Many religious believers are intelligent, sincere truth-seekers who are very well-informed about skeptical objections to religious belief and who know of many other similarly qualified people who hold religious beliefs similar to their own. A deep and personal familiarity with these people, in which their intelligence, erudition, and intellectual honesty are evident in abundance, and completely intertwined with their religious beliefs and practices, makes it very difficult to take seriously the suggestion that their religious beliefs are manifestations of irrational belief-forming tendencies. In light of this knowledge of other people, these religious believers—who recognize that the religious beliefs of those in their community are based on (a\*)-evidence—have strong (b\*)-evidence supporting the epistemic appropriateness of these religious beliefs.<sup>15</sup> In addition, they have strong (c\*)-evidence supporting this evaluative judgment about the epistemic appropriateness of these religious beliefs. As a result, the religious believer's (d)-evidence in support of the epistemic principles used in skeptical objections to religious belief—including

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<sup>15</sup> One might have a high level of confidence in *some* beliefs based on (a\*)-evidence—or (a)-evidence—and not others.

principles focused on the non-universality of the religious believer's (a\*)-evidence—is outweighed by the religious believer's (b\*)-evidence and (c\*)-evidence, which can be accommodated by tweaking these epistemic principles.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, things are different for the religious skeptic. But this difference is not due solely to the fact that the religious skeptic doesn't have the (a\*)-evidence had by the religious believer (and, in fact, sometimes the religious skeptic has some evidence of this very same kind). Nor is it due to a significant difference in (d)-evidence between the religious believer and the religious skeptic (especially if they both endorse commonsensism in response to radical skepticism).<sup>17</sup> Instead, the religious skeptic differs in having quite different (b\*)-evidence—i.e., she does not have a positive view of the relevant (a\*)-evidence. Likewise, the religious *skeptic's* (c\*)-evidence does not reflect well on the religious *believer's* (b\*)-evidence, as described in the previous paragraph. As a result, the skeptical objections offered to religious belief seem much more compelling to the religious skeptic than they do to the savvy and well-informed religious believer. It's in large part the difference between the religious skeptic and the religious believer with respect to their (b\*)- and (c\*)-evidence that explains this.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It may be that some people have a kind of (a\*)-, (b\*)-, and (c\*)-evidence without thinking of it as such. In support of this claim, points similar to those made in footnote 14 about mathematical belief could be made in the religious case as well.

<sup>17</sup> At least this is the case if the religious skeptic endorses the same epistemic principles in dealing with religious skepticism as she endorses when dealing with radical skepticism (instead of holding religious beliefs to higher standards). Alston (1991: 199) and van Inwagen (1996) suggest that some religious skeptics *do* arbitrarily hold religious beliefs to higher standards.

<sup>18</sup> Keith DeRose (2018)—an epistemologically sophisticated theist—claims that neither he nor anyone else with whom he's acquainted *knows* that God exists. This suggests that, despite being a theist, DeRose doesn't have (b\*)-evidence indicating that his theistic beliefs count as knowledge; or if he does, he doesn't trust it, which suggests that his (c\*)-evidence does not support the rationality of any (b\*)-evidence he has in support of the claim that theistic beliefs count as knowledge. But the fact that a theist like DeRose doesn't fit the pattern I've sketched in this section doesn't count against the claim that many theists *do fit* that pattern. Moreover, it's not clear that DeRose doesn't fit the pattern, since he would fit the pattern if he had (b\*)-evidence supporting the claim that his (a\*)-evidence provided some positive epistemic status or other for his theistic beliefs or acceptances (e.g., that they are rational) and if, in addition, he had (c\*)-evidence supporting that evaluative claim just mentioned about his (b\*)-evidence. DeRose doesn't say whether he has such (b\*)- and (c\*)-evidence, though he accepts theism, which suggests that he does have such (b\*)- and (c\*)-evidence. (DeRose has said—personal correspondence—that he thinks his acceptance of theism is justified.)

Four decades ago, Plantinga made a point in the same neighborhood when he was discussing the relevance of particularism to the dispute between the religious believer and the religious skeptic:

... criteria for proper basicity must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented *ex cathedra* but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples. But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he does not accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree; but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.<sup>19</sup>

In this passage, Plantinga is taking for granted Lessons 1 and 2 (about religious belief being noninferential and about the wisdom of taking the autodidactic approach) and he is highlighting Lesson 4, under discussion here. Plantinga doesn't put it in precisely this way, but his point is essentially that religious believers have very different (b\*)-evidence and (c\*)-evidence than religious skeptics have, and this plays a significant role in their view on the rationality of their religious belief.

Why is this old news worth highlighting? Because those involved in disagreements about the rationality of religious belief often seem not to recognize the very significant role played by the differences in the (b\*)- and (c\*)-evidence possessed by those involved in the dispute. There is a tendency to emphasize the difference in (a\*)-evidence instead, as if this is the only relevant evidence at issue in the dispute. But this can distract us from the fact that disagreements about religious skepticism often pit one set of epistemic intuitions about cases against another set of epistemic intuitions about cases. And that distraction leads to misunderstandings about what's actually going on in these religious disagreements and can distort assessments of the rationality of those who hold an opposing viewpoint.

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<sup>19</sup> Plantinga (1983: 77).

## 2.5 *The Strength of the Anti-Skeptical Web*

Lesson 5: anti-skeptics disagree with skeptics in a complex and coherent set of ways composing a larger anti-skeptical web of positions that is impressively resistant to skeptical attack.

It's clear from the previous lesson that in disagreements between commonsensists and those inclined to radical skepticism, there are multiple kinds of evidence—i.e., (a)- through (d)-evidence—and that this evidence can be different for those on opposite sides of this dispute. And Section 1 made it clear that there is often a methodological disagreement between methodist-leaning skeptics and particularist-leaning anti-skeptics regarding how best to treat and weight that evidence. As a result, the full evidential picture from the commonsensist perspective will be quite different than it is from the skeptical perspective.

Importantly, there may well be *multiple* points of difference—e.g., differences in the content or strength of the epistemic intuitions making up one's (b)-evidence, (c)-evidence, or (d)-evidence, in addition to differences in the strength of one's leanings toward methodism or particularism (which will, perhaps, be intertwined with the differences in epistemic intuitions just mentioned). Objections targeting just one point of disagreement (e.g., disagreements about epistemic principles) will run into an interconnected web of positions on the other side, which hold together well and jointly stand in opposition to multiple different positions held by the objector. Because so many seemingly plausible views supported by different kinds of evidence will need to be overturned (for the objection to be successful), objections need to be stronger than they would need to be if they were targeting only an isolated position.

In the religious case, parallel remarks apply. There is different evidence on both sides of disputes about the rationality of religious belief, including a difference in (a\*)-evidence consisting of religious seemings and experience. But just as important is the difference in (b\*)- and (c\*)-evidence on both sides, which will interact differently with the (d)-evidence on both

sides, even if the latter is fairly similar. In addition, there may be differences in how much each side leans toward particularism or methodism. As a result, both sides can have a coherent set of positions supported by multiple kinds of evidence. Trying to object to the rationality of religious belief by hammering home an epistemic principle is unlikely to be effective against an anti-skeptical web of interconnected views, including views about the rationality of particular religious beliefs thought of as paradigm cases that must be accommodated by a revision of the epistemic principle being used against those beliefs.

In short, in disputes between skeptics and anti-skeptics (over radical or religious skepticism), the best proponents of each side have a web of views with evidential support from multiple sources that can make one's position remarkably and rationally resilient in the face of objections.<sup>20</sup> This fact is commonly acknowledged by anti-skeptics who are comfortable sticking with an autodidactic defense of their own perspectives. But it is less often appreciated by skeptics (about perception or religion) who sometimes seem to think that their skeptical arguments highlighting specific statements of epistemic principles as premises should make it obvious to all concerned that their skeptical conclusion wins the day.

An important caveat: although these anti-skeptical views (whether they're opposed to radical skepticism or religious skepticism) are impressively strong, they are not invincible. Many proponents of these anti-skeptical views acknowledge that there are possible circumstances in which their anti-skeptical responses would fail.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> My emphasis on this web of views is *not* intended to support coherentism over foundationalism (to say that coherence is relevant to rationality doesn't commit one to coherentism). See Bergmann (2017a) for a defense of foundationalism against coherentist objections.

<sup>21</sup> See Bergmann (2021: 129-30) for further discussion.

### 3. Plausibly Explaining Religious Disagreement

These five lessons and the approach they recommend for religious epistemology provide the basis for explaining religious disagreement without implausibly attributing irrationality to those with whom we disagree. It's a striking fact—evident to those who spend time conversing with enough people who disagree with them on religious topics—that some of those who disagree with you on religious matters are extremely impressive people, both morally and intellectually. For example, consider the *most morally virtuous, intellectually competent, and well-informed adherents and defenders* of the following views: atheism, agnosticism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is highly implausible that what you view as the errors of some or all of these people on religious matters are, in all cases, due to their *inferiority*—relative to the most impressive people who agree with you—in terms of rationality, moral decency, emotional maturity, practical wisdom, intelligence, or erudition. Christians can, of course, acknowledge that there are many adherents and defenders of Christianity (and other views) who are inferior in these ways. Likewise, atheists can admit the same about many adherents and defenders of atheism (and other views). But those acknowledgements aren't relevant when our question is whether a well-informed, intellectually competent, and morally decent person can rationally endorse atheism (or Christianity, etc.).

It's common to raise objections to atheism, agnosticism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—identifying reasons to think that they are false or that it isn't rational to believe them. Objections of this sort are helpful in our philosophical reflection on these views and on the fact that we disagree about them. But often those offering these objections think that, in light of such



objections, one cannot be rational while endorsing the views they target. This thought flies in the face of our experience of those who hold these views.

I'm not here *arguing* that there are well-informed, intellectually competent, and morally decent adherents of these various views on religious matters. Instead, I'm *taking it as an exceedingly plausible starting point* supported by the personal experience of many of us. The lessons discussed in Section 2 provide a way of accommodating this plausible starting point. They do so by supporting the following thought: the reason that the best of those who disagree with you on religious topics are mistaken is that—even if they are your equals or superiors in terms of moral decency, intelligence, etc.—they have *misleading evidence*. And it's a commonplace that highly intelligent well-informed people with different evidence can rationally disagree.

Thus, objectors to religious belief—who think that noninferential religious belief lacks sufficiently strong evidence to withstand the defeating effects of widespread disagreement on religious matters—often have *different evidence* than reflective adherents of a particular religion who think of their religious belief as, in some ways, noninferentially supported. The evidence of these religious believers and their detractors can differ in multiple ways:

- (a) they might not have the same first-order direct evidence (with the same strength) for or against religious claims (e.g., evidence consisting of religious seemings supporting religious claims or seemings connected with whether a perfect being could have a good reason for permitting the evils we know of);
- (b) they might not have the same epistemic intuitions (with the same strength) about the evidential value of the evidence mentioned in (a);
- (c) they might not have the same epistemic intuitions (with the same strength) about certain epistemic principles (e.g., principles about the rational way to respond to awareness of widespread disagreement);
- (d) they might not have the same higher-order epistemic intuitions (with the same strength) about the evidential value of the epistemic intuitions mentioned in (b) and (c).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Although religious believers and their detractors can get evidence (via testimony from each other) that their evidence differs in these ways, this is not the same thing as *having* the evidence that the other has. For example, consider the evidence you have consisting of (i) your strong epistemic intuition that p, (ii) your sense of the

It's an interesting question *why* there are these differences in the evidence of religious believers and their detractors. Is it because, in the religious case or in the case of disagreements about radical skepticism, either the skeptical objectors or those who resist them are in a misleading environment or subject to some sort of departure from proper cognitive function? I don't have the space here to address these questions. But because there often seem to be these differences in evidence in the case of religious disagreement—which in some ways mirror the differences in evidence in the dispute between commonsensists and their skeptical detractors—we can see how religious belief can be rational in the face of arguments for religious skepticism in something like the way that commonsensism can be rational in the face of arguments for radical skepticism.

#### 4. Potential Concerns

I have space to deal only briefly with three potential concerns.<sup>23</sup>

The first is that many non-religious philosophers will be inclined to think it's *ridiculous* to hold and defend religious belief in the way I've been recommending in this paper. But notice: that very reaction has everything to do with epistemic intuitions about (i) the evidential value of religious seemings and of epistemic intuitions attributing positive evidential value to those

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evidential value of your intuition that p, (iii) the testimony you get from me that I have a strong epistemic intuition that q (which is incompatible with p), and (iv) your sense of the evidential value of my intuition that q. This is quite different (in terms of how strongly it supports p and how strongly it supports q) from my evidence consisting of (i\*) the testimony I get from you that you have a strong epistemic intuition that p, (ii\*) my sense of the evidential value of your intuition that p, (iii\*) my strong epistemic intuition that q, and (iv\*) my sense of the evidential value of my intuition that q. In particular, your evidence consisting of (i) and (ii) supports p *more* strongly than does my evidence consisting of (i\*) and (ii\*); and your evidence consisting of (iii) and (iv) supports q *less* strongly than does my evidence consisting of (iii\*) and (iv\*). In the end, your evidence may quite reasonably leave you more open than I am to the possibility that my evidence is misleading; and my evidence may quite reasonably leave me more open than you are to the possibility that your evidence is misleading.

<sup>23</sup> One concern not addressed here is whether externalists (and not just internalists) can accommodate an epistemic-intuition-based response to radical and religious skepticism. For some discussion of this point, see Bergmann (2021: 159-64).

religious seemings and about (ii) the truth of the particular epistemic principles used as premises in arguments for religious skepticism. This confirms the very points I've been making.

Another potential concern is that there is reason to doubt that those involved in religious disputes are being honest and reflective about what their evidence in fact is.<sup>24</sup> Do religious people and their opponents *really have* epistemic intuitions that would help their case? Can they, in all honesty, say that these epistemic intuitions of theirs are compelling and strong, even after considering carefully the perspective and objections of those who disagree? In response to arguments for radical skepticism about our perceptual and memory beliefs, perhaps our commonsense epistemic intuitions remain strong; perhaps something like this is also true in connection with our commonsense moral beliefs in the face of arguments for moral nihilism. But is it true for our religious or atheistic beliefs in the face of arguments against them? Maybe in some cases the answer is “no”. But in many other cases (including my own case), I think that the honest answer is “yes”. This can be so for a particular person, even if skeptical objections undermine that person's confidence in some of their religious beliefs but not others.

A third potential concern is that taking seriously what I've said in Sections 2 and 3 forces us to approve of people who use what I've said there to defend truly bizarre religious or political beliefs, such as that God has told them that Donald Trump won the 2020 US election.<sup>25</sup> This concern is not well-founded. In thinking about bizarre beliefs, on the one hand, and Christianity and atheism, on the other, we need to consider at least these three things in each case: (i) what the beliefs in question are based on, (ii) whether that basis seems to have positive evidential value, and (iii) what impressions we have concerning how virtuous, intelligent, wise, and informed those who hold these beliefs are. While I agree that it's important to be open to having

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<sup>24</sup> Keith DeRose (2018) raises concerns in this neighborhood.

<sup>25</sup> See Alberta (2022) for some discussion of these sorts of bizarre beliefs.

my horizons expanded by becoming more familiar with people who disagree with me, my current experience leads me to take very seriously that many atheists and Christians are virtuous, intelligent, wise, and well-informed whereas this isn't the case for those holding bizarre religious or political views such as the one just mentioned. Hence, it makes good sense to treat atheism and Christianity differently than bizarre religious or political views, despite the fact that defenders of each may appeal to seemings about religious matters and epistemic intuitions in favor of those religious seemings.<sup>26</sup>

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