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# Religious Disagreement and Rational Demotion

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There are many religious disagreements: between religious and nonreligious viewpoints, between one religion and another, among adherents of the same religion, and among non-religious people discussing religion. I'll focus on *one* disagreement (i.e. whether or not theism is true) and mainly on *one* perspective in that disagreement (i.e. the theist's). I will defend the view that, in certain actual circumstances that aren't uncommon for educated westerners, an awareness of the facts of religious disagreement doesn't make theistic belief irrational. In the first section I will make some general remarks about when discovering disagreement (on any topic) makes it rational to give up your beliefs. In the later sections, I will defend the rationality of theistic belief in the face of disagreement.

### 1. Some General Remarks about Disagreement

In section 1.1 I discuss the two main possible outcomes of disagreement: defeat of one's disputed belief and demotion of one's disputant. In section 1.2 I consider the three main kinds of evidence that are relevant to demoting one's disputant and consider whether all three of them are appropriate to use for this purpose. And in section 1.3 I consider four kinds of epistemic assessment, clarifying which are essentially involved in demoting a disputant and which are not.

### 1.1 *Two Ways of Handling Disagreement: Defeat and Demotion*

If you view someone as your *epistemic peer* with respect to *p*, then learning that this person disagrees with you about *p* (thinking it's false) can give you a *defeater* for your belief that *p*—a reason to cease holding it.<sup>1</sup> You and I are epistemic peers with respect to *p* if your evidence with respect to *p* is approximately as good, epistemically, as mine and—when it comes to belief-formation with respect to *p*—you are approximately as good, epistemically, as I am at responding to such evidence.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> But if I view you as an epistemic *inferior* with respect to *p*, then learning that you disagree with me about *p* needn't create much of a problem for my belief that *p*.

I define epistemic peerage in the next sentence in the text. We can think of epistemic inferiors and superiors along the same lines. Your epistemic inferiors with respect to *p* either have evidence for *p* that isn't as good, epistemically, as yours or—when it comes to belief-formation with respect to *p*—they're not as good, epistemically, as you are at responding to such evidence. Your epistemic superiors with respect to *p* either have evidence for *p* that is better, epistemically, than yours or—when it comes to belief-formation with respect to *p*—they're better, epistemically, than you are at responding to such evidence.

<sup>2</sup> What exactly makes one bit of evidence with respect to *p* epistemically better than another? And what makes one way of responding to such evidence (in terms of belief-formation with respect to *p*) epistemically better than another? These are difficult questions that I can't adequately address in this chapter. I'll make only a few brief remarks here. First, there are several factors involved in each case. For one bit of evidence with respect to *p* to be epistemically better than another, it matters how strongly and obviously it supports the truth, how it is acquired, and how misleading it is (e.g. how much it points away from the truth). And for one way of responding to evidence (in terms of belief-formation with respect to *p*) to be epistemically better than another, it matters how well that way of responding fits the evidence and how misleading that way of responding is (e.g. how much it involves being led astray by misleading aspects of the evidence). Second, a good rule of thumb to keep in mind in filling in the details further (in response to the questions at the beginning of this note) is this: the accounts given of *better evidence* and a *better way of responding to evidence* should be such that, in light of them, it's reasonable to think: "My recognition that *S* disagrees with me about *p* is less likely to count as a defeater for my belief that *p* if I also recognize that I have better evidence than *S* or a better way of responding to such evidence than *S* has".

I should note that my account of epistemic peerage differs in some ways from other accounts in the literature, in part because I focus on peerage *with respect to a proposition*. In addition, unlike some accounts of peerage, I don't require that peers have the same evidence (largely because I think people who disagree with each other almost never have the same evidence). And unlike other accounts that emphasize the importance for peerage of rough equality in intellectual virtue (i.e. intelligence, thoughtfulness, and sincerity in truth-seeking), I require for peerage rough equality in the epistemic quality of one's belief-responses to evidence, which neither guarantees nor is guaranteed by rough equality in intellectual virtue.

How does the discovery of disagreement with an assumed peer<sup>3</sup> give rise to skeptical concerns? Suppose that I have a justified belief that *p* and am disposed to believe, if I consider the question, that you are my epistemic peer with respect to *p*. I then get evidence that you believe  $\sim p$  (perhaps you report this to me), which inclines me to think that you believe  $\sim p$ . This leads to a tension among the following five things that I believe or am disposed to believe:

- B1. I believe *p* at *t*.<sup>4</sup>
- B2. You believe  $\sim p$  at *t*.
- B3. A belief that *p* at *t* and a belief that  $\sim p$  at *t* can't both be true.
- B4. My belief—at *t* about whether or not *p*—is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way.
- B5. Your belief—at *t* about whether or not *p*—is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way.<sup>5</sup>

Because I trust my own ways of forming beliefs and I view you as my epistemic peer, initially (i.e. just before you report to me what you believe about whether or not *p*) I'm disposed to believe both B4 and B5, which disposes me to believe that:

- B6. Each of our beliefs—at *t* about whether or not *p*—is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way.

But once I learn what you believe about whether or not *p*, I'm inclined to believe B1–B3, with the result that I'm also inclined to believe that:

- B7. Either your belief or my belief—at *t* about whether or not *p*—is formed in a *misleading* way.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> As I'll be using the term "assumed peer", it refers to a person one had viewed, or was disposed to view and treat, as an epistemic peer just before discovering the disagreement.

<sup>4</sup> Notice that to believe B1 isn't to have a belief with the content *p*. It's to have a belief with the content that *I have a belief with the content p*.

<sup>5</sup> The time *t* in B1–B7 is the time just before you report to me what you believe about whether or not *p*.

<sup>6</sup> See n. 2 for some discussion of what's involved in a belief's being formed in a misleading way. Although all false beliefs are formed in a misleading way, it's possible for a true belief to be formed in a misleading way. For example, consider the cases in Gettier's 1963 paper of justified true beliefs that are not knowledge. Those beliefs are true but they're formed in a misleading way because they're based on false beliefs that are based on misleading evidence.

The tension, then, is between B6 and B7. On the assumption that it's not a live option for me to think it's epistemically just fine to accept both B6 and B7, it follows that in order to resolve the tension, I must refrain from believing at least one of B1–B5.

I will assume that it's not a live option to resolve the tension in (B1–B5) by denying B1 or B2 or B3, given that each of those three claims is reasonably believed in the usual interesting cases of actual disagreement.<sup>7</sup> So, on the basis of B1–B3, I rationally believe that one of us has formed a belief—about whether or not *p*—in a misleading way. I thus face rational pressure not to believe the conjunction of B4 and B5. Here are the three main ways I can deal with this pressure:

- (i) disbelieve B4 or doubt B4 to the point of withholding judgment about it<sup>8</sup>
- (ii) refrain from option (i) even though I am rationally required to take option (i)<sup>9</sup>
- (iii) rationally believe B4 and rationally disbelieve B5.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> There are special circumstances where it may be reasonable to doubt B2 (these are cases where it's reasonable for me to think you are joking or engaged in some performance or, for some other reason, not speaking truthfully). But the most common cases aren't of this sort. (See Fumerton, 2010, 95–6 and Christensen, 2011, 9, for a discussion of such cases.) Also, there may be cases where people think they are disagreeing about a single proposition when in fact they have different propositions in mind and are merely talking past one another, in which case B2 may be false. I will be assuming that, in the cases of disagreement I have in mind, there has been enough conversation to make it clear that the two people really do disagree about a single proposition, even when the proposition is that God exists.

<sup>8</sup> To withhold judgment about *p* isn't just to *neither believe nor disbelieve p*. There are millions of propositions you've never considered that you neither believe nor disbelieve. But we wouldn't say you are withholding judgment about them. To withhold judgment about *p* involves considering the prospect of believing *p* and considering the prospect of disbelieving *p* (i.e. believing  $\sim p$ ) and resisting both (either voluntarily or involuntarily). See Bergmann, 2005, 420–2.

<sup>9</sup> Of course this wouldn't be an attractive option if viewed under this description. But it might be taken nonetheless, in part because it isn't viewed under this description.

<sup>10</sup> It seems that rationally believing B4 while rationally believing or withholding judgment about B5 isn't a live option (maybe it isn't even a possible option). This is because, given that you rationally think that at least one of B4 or B5 is mistaken, if you rationally believe B4, then rationality requires you to disbelieve B5 (thereby preventing you from rationally believing it or withholding judgment about it).

There are other possibilities as well, but I don't consider them to be live in this context. These other possibilities arise if we allow that it's possible to neither believe *p*, disbelieve *p*, nor withhold judgment about *p* (e.g. if you aren't considering *p* but instead ignoring it or just failing to have any of these attitudes about it). I'll call this 'ignoring *p*'. The possibilities I have in mind, in addition to (i)–(iii), are:

In possibility (i), I disbelieve or seriously doubt B<sub>4</sub>, the claim that my belief was formed in a nonmisleading way.<sup>11</sup> If I disbelieve B<sub>4</sub>, believing that my belief that p was formed in a misleading way, then I have a defeater for my belief that p. This is so whether or not my disbelief in B<sub>4</sub> is rational. Even if I *irrationally* think my belief that p was formed in a misleading way, it is still irrational for me to continue believing p.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, if (due to serious doubt) I withhold belief in B<sub>4</sub>, neither believing it nor disbelieving it, because I don't know whether or not my belief that p was formed in a nonmisleading way, then I have a defeater for my belief that p. And, once again, I have this defeater for my belief that p, even if I'm *irrational* in withholding judgment about whether B<sub>4</sub> is true.<sup>13</sup> In possibility (ii), although I neither disbelieve nor seriously doubt B<sub>4</sub>, rationality requires me to disbelieve or seriously doubt B<sub>4</sub>. Here too I have a defeater for my belief that p. If rationality requires me to be pessimistic about the reliability of my belief that p, I don't escape defeat merely by being stubbornly and irrationally optimistic. Similarly, if rationality requires me *not* to demote you, and yet I demote you anyway and, as a result, am enabled to be optimistic about the reliability of my belief that

- (iv) rationally believe B<sub>4</sub> and rationally believe or withhold judgment about B<sub>5</sub> (this option was discussed at the beginning of this note)
- (v) rationally believe B<sub>4</sub> and rationally ignore B<sub>5</sub>
- (vi) rationally believe B<sub>4</sub> and irrationally believe or disbelieve or withhold judgment about or ignore B<sub>5</sub>
- (vii) believe B<sub>4</sub> though rationality requires me to ignore B<sub>4</sub>
- (viii) rationally ignore B<sub>4</sub>
- (ix) ignore B<sub>4</sub> even though rationality requires me to believe B<sub>4</sub>.

As I said, none of these seem to be live options for those trying to resolve the tensions in B<sub>1</sub>–B<sub>5</sub> (in most cases, this is because they involve ignoring the problem rather than solving it). So I will set them aside. However, it is worth noting that in some of these cases I might not have a defeater for my belief that p, e.g. in possibilities (v) and (viii).

<sup>11</sup> To seriously doubt a claim is to doubt it to the point of withholding it.

<sup>12</sup> It's true that in such circumstances, the ideal would be for me to *stop* irrationally thinking that my belief that p was formed in a misleading way; but so long as I *don't stop* thinking that, it is irrational for me to believe p. See Bergmann, 2006b, 164–8, for some discussion of this point.

<sup>13</sup> Withholding belief in B<sub>4</sub> may not be as problematic as disbelieving it. But it's problematic enough to make it irrational for me to keep believing p. (If I conclude that I have no idea whether or not my belief B was reliably formed, I should stop holding B.) Regarding the claim that *withholding* belief in B<sub>4</sub> is a defeater for the belief that p even if the withholding is irrational, see the comments in the previous note about irrationally *disbelieving* B<sub>4</sub> (those apply in this case too, *mutatis mutandis*). For further discussion, see Bergmann, 2005, 426; 2006b, 164–8.

p, my irrational demotion doesn't enable my belief that p to escape defeat. Thus, if I either do or epistemically should disbelieve or significantly doubt B<sub>4</sub>, then I have a defeater for my belief that p.<sup>14</sup>

Possibility (iii) is the only one of these three ways of dealing with the tension in B<sub>1</sub>–B<sub>5</sub> that does not result in a defeater. It involves my rationally believing B<sub>4</sub> and disbelieving B<sub>5</sub>. In so doing, I rationally believe that my belief in the disputed claim is *not* formed in a misleading way and rationally believe that your contrary belief *is* formed in a misleading way. This will involve rationally demoting you in one of two ways. I might demote you from being an epistemic peer with respect to p to being an epistemic inferior with respect to p (thinking that you have worse evidence than I do or that you aren't as good as I am at responding to such evidence). Or I might demote you from "believing like an epistemic peer with respect to p on this occasion" to "believing like an epistemic inferior with respect to p on this occasion". (Just as someone can be as good as you are at shooting foul shots in basketball and yet behave on a particular occasion like someone who is worse than you at shooting foul shots, so also someone can be as good as you are at responding to evidence with respect to p and yet believe on a particular occasion like someone who is worse than you at responding to evidence with respect to p.) If I demote you in the first way, I'm demoting you from peer to inferior; if I demote you in the second way, I'm demoting your believing on a particular occasion from peer-like believing to inferior-like believing.<sup>15</sup> To simplify the discussion, I will refer to both as demotion from peer to inferior. By rationally demoting you in one of these ways, I resolve the tension I'm experiencing

<sup>14</sup> Compare this result with principle D in Bergmann, 2009a, 343.

<sup>15</sup> What really matters (in connection with demotion and defeat in cases of disagreement) is the second kind of demotion. If I disagree with some previously assumed epistemic peer whom I do *not* rationally demote in the second way, I have a defeater. Rationally demoting this person in the first way avoids defeat only if it leads to or includes rational demotion in the second way; and the absence of rational demotion in the first way results in a defeater only if it leads to the absence of rational demotion in the second way.

Typically, when we demote someone, we do so in both the first and second way. But it's possible to demote someone in the second way and not the first way—e.g. when you think a peer's current belief is unluckily epistemically problematic despite the fact that her peerage is not negatively affected. Likewise, it's possible to demote someone in the first way but not the second way—e.g. when you think the person is not a peer but her belief on this occasion was formed in an epistemically good way. It is rare for people to have the evidence required to reasonably demote someone in one of these ways but not the other. Thanks to Chris Tucker for pressing me to state this part of my view more clearly.

in B1–B5 *without getting a defeater*: I do so by rationally giving up on B5. There are, therefore, two main live options when we discover a disagreement with an epistemic peer: defeat and rational demotion.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.2 *Three Kinds of Evidence Relevant to Demotion*

An important division in the literature on disagreement has to do with whether one accepts or rejects the following controversial principle:

*Independence*: In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another's expressed belief about p, in order to determine how (or whether) to modify my own belief about p, I should do so in a way that doesn't rely on the reasoning behind my initial belief about p.<sup>17</sup>

According to this principle, you cannot rationally rely on evidence for the proposition under dispute to determine whether it is rational to demote your assumed peer with whom you disagree, although you can rationally rely on evidence pertaining to your own reliability and your assumed peer's reliability.

There is, I believe, good reason to think this principle is mistaken. Suppose you start by believing both of the following:

- (A) p
- (B) S's belief—about whether or not p—is formed in a trustworthy manner.

And then suppose that you come to believe:

- (C). believes ~p.

There are two ways things could go from here: the Independence-Compatible way (I-C) or the Independence-Incompatible way (I-I):

(I-C) Once you believe (C), the combination (B&C) gives you a defeater for (A), along with a reason to mistrust the method by which

<sup>16</sup> The defeat option is connected with possibilities (i) and (ii); rational demotion is connected with possibility (iii).

<sup>17</sup> Christensen, 2011, 1. As Christensen points out (2011, 2), the main reason for endorsing this principle is that it is thought to capture what is wrong with responding to *everyone* who disagrees with you by simply dismissing them in the following question-begging way: "Well, so-and-so disagrees with me about p. But since p is true, she's wrong about p. So however reliable she may generally be, I needn't take her disagreement about p as any reason at all to question my belief".

you arrived at (A). So you can't rationally rely on (A) or on the method or evidence used in arriving at (A). Because (A) has been defeated, it can't rationally be used as part of a defeater-*defeater* for (B&C).

(I-I) Once you believe (C), the combination (A&C) gives you a defeater for (B). But if you have a defeater for (B), then, if you're sensible, you won't believe it, in which case it won't be a belief of yours that can be combined with (C) to give you a defeater for (A), in the way noted in (I-C). Because (A) *hasn't* been defeated, it can rationally be used as part of a defeater-*deflector* for (B&C)—i.e. it can be conjoined with (C) to defeat (B), thereby preventing the potential defeater, (B&C), from becoming an actual defeater.

(I-C) helps to explain why someone might think Independence is true: the reason you can't rely on evidence for the disputed point as grounds for rationally demoting your friend is that it has been defeated by the discovery that a peer disagrees with you.

Unfortunately, this explanation for the truth of Independence takes for granted that (I-I) is never a sensible way for things to go. But that is implausible, as the following example shows:

*Math Conference Case:* Suppose you are a 50-year-old full professor of mathematics, well-informed in your field. You are at a mathematics conference and, in the conference hotel, you see a man your age dressed in the way a typical math professor attending such a conference would be dressed, reading a sign giving the conference schedule. You ask him if he's here for the conference and he says he is. At this point, you assume he's roughly your peer on mathematical questions up to at least the level of, say, first-year university calculus. However, a little later you are having a conversation with him in which he asserts things that demonstrate a level of mathematical incompetence you'd expect from someone whose SAT score in math was so low he couldn't get into a community college. (Suppose he asserts ten things, each of which is the denial of a mathematical claim so obviously true that any ordinary high school freshman earning a C or higher in math classes would easily see that it's true.) The man persists in his beliefs, even after you tell him you disagree and can see that his beliefs are obviously mistaken.



Let's consider the instances of (A) and (B) we get if S is the man you saw in the hotel and p is the disjunction of the ten claims he denies.<sup>18</sup> After your first brief conversation with the man you believe (A) and (B). But once you learn (C),<sup>19</sup> the reasonable thing for you to think is that (B) is false, that he is not trustworthy with respect to whether that disjunction is true.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, your belief in the falsity of (B) is inferred directly from the conjunction of (A) and (C). You don't for a moment pause to consider how reliable you are with respect to (A). Instead, you just see, plainly, that p is true and that the man believes  $\sim p$ ; and on this basis you immediately infer that the man is not trustworthy with respect to p. At the very least, you make no effort to refrain from relying on your belief that p and your evidence for that belief, in demoting the man. In short, you rationally demote this man in the (I-I) way, not the (I-C) way.<sup>21</sup> The defender of Independence seems forced, at this point, to say that it would be irrational for you to think this man is your epistemic inferior and not your peer, if you did so on the basis of your belief in (A&C). But that assessment seems quite implausible. Rationality does not require you, in this case, to turn your attention from the evidence for (A) to a consideration of the way in which your belief that (A) was formed.<sup>22</sup> It doesn't require you not to depend on (A) or your evidence for (A) in demoting this man. The defender of Independence seems to be taking for granted that your discovery that this man disagrees with you, together with your assumption that he was a peer, gives you a defeater for your belief that (A),

<sup>18</sup> You are actually utterly confident about the truth of the *conjunction* of these ten claims he denies, but this man denied the disjunction of these ten claims (in asserting the denial of each) and, of course, you also believe the disjunction of those ten claims.

<sup>19</sup> i.e. that the man believes the denial of the disjunction of those ten claims (which is just to say he denies each of those ten claims).

<sup>20</sup> You might think a more natural hypothesis for you to accept is that the man was not speaking truthfully when he reported that he believed that each of those ten claims was false. Let's just stipulate that you have very strong evidence for thinking that he is sincerely and accurately reporting his beliefs.

<sup>21</sup> So in *this case* things don't go as Christensen suggests they go when he's trying to explain how one can demote in a way consistent with Independence. See Christensen, 2011, 9–10.

<sup>22</sup> Christensen (2011, 20) says: "Rationality requires that I take seriously evidence of my own possible cognitive malfunction in arriving at my beliefs". This may be true in cases where the evidence for this possibility is worth taking seriously. But discovering that this man at the conference, whom you assumed was your peer, disagrees with you about the disjunction of these ten utterly obvious math claims is not evidence for this possibility that is worth taking seriously.

thereby preventing you from relying on (A). But it's completely implausible to think that your belief in the disjunction of these ten utterly obvious math claims is defeated in this way.

In this example, your evidence for (A) is very strong and your evidence for (B) is rather weak. Thus, when you discover (C), it is more reasonable to combine it with (A) to get a defeater for (B) than to combine it with (B) to get a defeater for (A). Given how often we simply assume that those with whom we speak are our epistemic peers, it won't be unusual for us to believe (B) in cases where our evidence for it is much weaker than our evidence for (A). In such cases, if we discover (C), it won't be very surprising if events sometimes unfold in the (I-I) way rather than the (I-C) way, enabling us to rationally demote someone in a way that conflicts with Independence.

Thus, Independence is false and it's reasonable to think that the following three kinds of evidence (rather than merely the last two) are relevant when determining when it is rational to demote an assumed peer upon discovering that the two of you disagree:

p-evidence: evidence for p, the disputed claim

Rp-evidence: evidence that your belief that p is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way

R~p-evidence: evidence that your assumed peer's belief that ~p is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way.

When your p-evidence and Rp-evidence are strong and your R~p-evidence is weak (as in the Math Conference Case), it is rational to demote an assumed peer.<sup>23</sup>

### 1.3 *Four Kinds of Epistemic Assessment*

We epistemically assess other people or their beliefs when we view them as peers and when we demote them. It's important to be clear about what kinds of epistemic assessment are involved in these two activities and what kinds aren't (or needn't be).

<sup>23</sup> If you had strong p-evidence but even stronger ~p-evidence, then your all-things-considered (atc) p-evidence would not be strong, since it would be outweighed. Thus, the point in the text could be put more carefully by saying that when your atc p-evidence and atc Rp-evidence are strong and your atc R~p-evidence is weak (as in the Math Conference Case), it is rational to demote an assumed peer. Thanks to Nate King for getting me to clarify this.

One kind of epistemic assessment, *being well-formed*, applies to beliefs. A belief is well-formed when it is based on epistemically good evidence and it is an epistemically good response to such evidence. Another kind of epistemic assessment, *being intellectually virtuous*, applies to people. A person is intellectually virtuous if she is intelligent, thoughtful, and sincerely seeking the truth.

Two other kinds of epistemic assessment ascribe internal rationality and external rationality to beliefs.<sup>24</sup> To understand this distinction, consider a man who forms a noninferential belief that *p* in response to an experience *E*. Suppose that he has experience *E* only as a result of cognitive malfunction due to brain damage. But suppose that the epistemically appropriate way for people to respond to experience of the same phenomenal type as *E* is to believe *p*. Is this man's belief that *p* rational or not? The answer is that it is internally rational but not externally rational. Internal rationality has to do with what goes on in belief-formation "downstream from experience" whereas external rationality is broader in that it also depends on what goes on in belief-formation causally prior to or upstream from experience. Thus, a belief is *internally rational* if and only if it is an epistemically appropriate response to the subject's mental states.<sup>25</sup> And a belief is *externally rational* if and only if the believer's cognitive processing mechanisms are working as they epistemically should be in producing the belief (including where their working well is not in response to the subject's mental states).<sup>26</sup> So, returning to the example of the man who believes *p* in response to *E*—an experience he has only as a result of cognitive malfunction—we can say that his belief is internally rational (since it is epistemically appropriate for him to respond to *E* by believing *p* on the basis of it) but it isn't externally rational (since he has experience *E* as a result of cognitive malfunction).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Plantinga, 2000, 110–12.

<sup>25</sup> Note that those who think that the epistemic appropriateness of a subject's response to her mental states is determined by factors such as reliability or proper function are *externalists* about *internal* rationality.

<sup>26</sup> Thus, external rationality requires, at the very least, that in cases where a belief is based on experiential evidence, this experiential evidence is not itself due to cognitive malfunction or manipulations of the believer's cognitive processing mechanisms by a deceptive evil demon or a mad scientist's supercomputer. But this is something not required for internal rationality.

<sup>27</sup> Internal rationality, so understood, is pretty much the same thing as epistemic justification. I should note here that, in light of this connection between internal

How are these kinds of epistemic assessment related to viewing someone as an epistemic peer? To view someone as my epistemic peer with respect to *p* is to think that if that person were to form a belief with respect to *p* (believing it or disbelieving it), it would probably be as well-formed as my own belief with respect to *p*.<sup>28</sup> Thus, if I take for granted that my own belief with respect to *p* is well-formed, then, in viewing you as my epistemic peer with respect to *p*, I am taking your belief with respect to *p* to probably also be well-formed.

However, I can sensibly think you are about as intellectually virtuous as I am without thinking you are my epistemic peer with respect to *p*. I can sensibly think this because being intellectually virtuous involves only general traits (intelligence, thoughtfulness, sincerity in truth-seeking), which are compatible with having a belief on a particular topic that is not well-formed. It is important to recognize this because some people define “epistemic peerage” as rough equality in intellectual virtue.<sup>29</sup>

It is also important to be clear about how we were, in fact, thinking of those with whom we discover we disagree with respect to *p*. Prior to discovering the disagreement, did we really think of them as epistemic peers with respect to *p*? Or did we instead think of them merely as equals in intellectual virtue, without thinking of them as epistemic peers with

rationality and justification, I need to replace the following account of justification given in Bergmann, 2006b, 133:

JPF: *S*'s belief *B* is justified iff (i) *S* does not take *B* to be defeated and (ii) the cognitive faculties producing *B* are (a) functioning properly, (b) truth-aimed and (c) reliable in the environments for which they were “designed”.

In its place, I offer this slightly altered and, I hope, improved account (with the difference in italics):

JPF\*: *S*'s belief *B* is justified iff (i) *S* does not take *B* to be defeated and (ii) the cognitive faculties producing *B* are (a) functioning properly *in response to all of S's mental states*, (b) truth-aimed, and (c) reliable in the environments for which they were “designed”.

See Bergmann, 2013a, section 3.3, for further related discussion.

<sup>28</sup> And to think that if that person *has* formed a belief with respect to *p*, that belief probably *is* as well-formed as my own belief with respect to *p*.

<sup>29</sup> See Christensen, 2009, 1–2; Feldman, 2007, 201; Kelly, 2005, 175. They sometimes include other qualities, besides the ones I've mentioned, as components of intellectual virtue (e.g. freedom from bias). But the basic idea is that epistemic peers are roughly equals in intellectual virtue (where this has to do with general intellectual traits the person has) who have equally good evidence.

respect to *p*? The answers to these questions are important. If we didn't think of them as epistemic peers with respect to *p*, then it's not so clear that we have a good reason to think that discovering a disagreement with them provides us with a defeater.<sup>30</sup>

Let's turn next to demotion. To demote (from peer to inferior) someone who disagrees with you about *p* is to think her belief with respect to *p* is not well-formed and not to think this of your own belief with respect to *p*.<sup>31</sup> I've already pointed out that you can demote someone while rationally believing that that person is equal to you in intellectual virtue. You can also demote someone with respect to *p* while rationally believing that that person's belief that *p* is internally rational. For example, you might think that, for some reason, the person has, when she shouldn't, a strong seeming that *p* (thereby acquiring bad evidence with respect to *p*). However, you might also think that the epistemically appropriate response to such a seeming is to believe *p*. As a result, you might think that although her belief that *p* is externally irrational—due to the fact that there has been some cognitive processing problem causing her to have that seeming when she shouldn't—it is also internally rational given that all is going well downstream from that seeming.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> As noted earlier, whether it is rational to demote a person with respect to *p* will depend on how strong your *p*-evidence and your *R<sub>p</sub>*-vidence are—and on how much stronger they are than your *R~p*-vidence. One thing that can reveal the weakness of your *R~p*-vidence is to consider whether it can be better construed as evidence in support of the other person's intellectual virtue or her belief's being internally or externally rational even though it is not well-formed. If the *R~p*-vidence can be plausibly construed in these alternative ways, then it may be weaker than it initially appeared. The thought here is that when we think someone is an epistemic peer (before discovering that we disagree) we typically have some reason to give a positive epistemic assessment of that person or that person's beliefs. So there is some reason to resist a negative epistemic assessment of that person or her beliefs. But further reflection might reveal that what we have most reason to resist is a negative epistemic assessment with respect to intellectual virtue or internal rationality or external rationality and that we don't have much reason at all to resist a negative epistemic assessment with respect to whether her belief is well-formed. If that's so, then the evidence against demoting is weaker than it initially appeared. This will make it easier to rationally demote with respect to the disputed proposition and, thereby, to avoid having a defeater caused by discovering disagreement with an assumed peer.

<sup>31</sup> Which typically involves your thinking or taking for granted that your belief with respect to *p* is well-formed.

<sup>32</sup> Because you think her belief is based on bad evidence (i.e. a strong seeming that *p*, which she shouldn't have and which is due to external irrationality), you think it is not well-formed.

You can also demote someone with respect to  $p$  while rationally believing that that person's belief that  $p$  is externally rational. Consider Plantinga's Stolen Frisian Flag Case:

*Stolen Frisian Flag Case:* The police haul you in, accusing you of stealing my Frisian flag again. The evidence against you is strong. There are reliable witnesses claiming to have seen you at my house at the time the crime occurred. You are known to have a motive to do me harm. In addition, this sort of theft is in keeping with your past behavior. And the flag was found on your property, close to the place you had hidden it when you stole it before. The jury, upon hearing the evidence, is convinced and believes that you are guilty. But you have a clear memory of being on a solitary hike near Mount Baker at the time, although you have no witnesses who can confirm this. You report this clear memory to the jury, but they aren't impressed, especially because you also have a history of telling feeble lies in the past to cover up your crimes.<sup>33</sup>

In this case, you disagree with the jury members about your innocence. Moreover, you demote them because you think their beliefs aren't well-formed (in virtue of their evidence not being as good as yours, given how misleading it is). But you think that in forming their beliefs on this topic, the jury members' cognitive processing mechanisms are working well both upstream and downstream from the experience that constitutes their evidence. The only problem is that they are missing a crucial piece of evidence that you can't give them, even though you tell them you have it.

## 2. Steadfastness in Religious Disagreement

It's time to consider how these general remarks about disagreement and defeaters apply to actual religious beliefs of people around us. I've noted, at the end of section 1.2, that there are three kinds of evidence relevant to the question of whether it is rational, in a case of disagreement about  $p$ , to remain steadfast and demote someone previously assumed to be an epistemic peer:  $p$ -evidence,  $Rp$ -evidence, and  $R\sim p$ -evidence. In this section, I'll focus on whether the first two kinds of evidence can be strong enough to support an educated theist's steadfastness in the face of disagreement.

<sup>33</sup> This is a slightly altered version of an example Plantinga gives in his 2000, 450.

In section 3 I'll consider whether the third kind of evidence can be weak enough to allow an educated theist to rationally demote her atheist interlocutor.<sup>34</sup>

### 2.1 *p-evidence*

The *p*-evidence on which I will focus is the seeming that God exists.<sup>35</sup> Some people think all evidence consists of seemings. Others don't, but agree that sometimes evidence is in the form of seemings: e.g. the evidence for moral beliefs often consists of intuitive moral seemings, the evidence for simple mathematical and logical beliefs is often comprised of intuitive mathematical or logical seemings, and the evidence for a memory belief is typically a memory seeming. I'll assume only that some evidence consists of seemings. The theistic seemings I have in mind are to be distinguished from more dramatic religious experiences, where God reveals himself in some vivid or shocking or overwhelming way.<sup>36</sup>

Many things can trigger ordinary theistic seemings: feelings of guilt or being forgiven or desperate fear or gratitude can trigger them; so can admiration of the grandeur and majesty of oceans, waterfalls, mountains, deserts, and sky; and so can appreciation of smaller intricate parts of nature.<sup>37</sup> Another way theistic seemings can arise is in

<sup>34</sup> For the reasons mentioned in section 1.1, in cases of discovering disagreement with an assumed peer, rational steadfastness goes hand in hand with rational demotion. Nevertheless, I'm separating the discussion of evidence in support of one's own belief in section 2 from the discussion of evidence in support of one's peer's reliability in section 3. The former discussion is more directly relevant to steadfastness and the latter is more directly relevant to demotion.

<sup>35</sup> To believe that God exists is to think there is an invisible person who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good and loving. It's natural to think that if God is all-powerful and all-knowing, all contingent things depend on God for their continued existence, at least in the sense that he is able to and knows how to annihilate them if he so chooses. Likewise, it's natural to think that if God is perfectly good and loving, he cares about the fortunes of all living creatures.

The contents of theistic seemings include not only the proposition that God exists but also propositions obviously entailing that one, such as propositions ascribing a property to God (e.g. God is able to help me, God deserves my gratitude, God made this, and God forgives me).

<sup>36</sup> See Plantinga, 2000, 182–3, where he discusses the nature of the experiences involved in the operation of the *sensus divinitatus* (which produces belief in God), and notes that what they have in common is that they all include doxastic experience. Doxastic experience is the sort of thing that is involved in having a seeming (see Plantinga, 2000, 110–11; 1993, 190–3). For further discussions of what seemings are see Bergmann, 2013a, and 2013b; Cullison, 2010; Huemer, 2001, 99–100 and 2007; Tolhurst, 1998; Tucker, 2010 and 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Plantinga, 2000, 174.

response to the spoken or written testimony of others: we encounter the testimony and what is said simply seems right.<sup>38</sup> Theistic seemings can also result from ruminating upon what we have learned about the immensity, complexity, mysteriousness, and possible origins of nature and of the human mind.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, a consideration of the apparent design in nature (e.g. in the biological world and in Big Bang cosmology) can prompt a seeming that God designed these things, a seeming that isn't based on any argument from design and that is compatible with believing in evolution.<sup>40</sup> These theistic seemings aren't the results of simply considering the proposition *God exists* and finding that it seems true; nor are they conclusions of arguments. They are more like what Audi calls "conclusions of reflection", which are not based on inferences from premises but instead emerge noninferentially from an awareness of a variety of observations, experiences, and considerations.<sup>41</sup> Thus, in a certain sense, the p-evidence I'm thinking of doesn't consist solely of theistic seemings. It also includes the observations, experiences, testimony, and considerations out of which these theistic seemings emerge upon reflection. It is often the case that we are unable to trace the origins of such conclusions of reflection. But, as Sosa and Oppy point out in other contexts, the fact that we can't trace the origins of our seemings arising out of reflection, doesn't show that the beliefs based on those seemings aren't rational.<sup>42</sup>

Now as I've indicated, the rationality of remaining steadfast in believing that God exists, despite disagreement, depends in part on how strong one's p-evidence is, when p is theism.<sup>43</sup> How strong is the p-evidence just described? One might think that it is weak just in virtue of being an ordinary seeming rather than a more spectacular religious experience. But seemings of other kinds can be strong evidence

<sup>38</sup> As Plantinga writes:

We read Scripture, or something presenting scriptural teaching, or hear the gospel preached, or are told of it by parents, or encounter a scriptural teaching as the conclusion of an argument (or conceivably even as an object of ridicule), or in some other way encounter a proclamation of the Word. What is said simply seems right; it seems compelling; one finds oneself saying, "Yes, that's right, that's the truth of the matter; this is indeed the word of the Lord." (Plantinga, 2000, 250)

<sup>39</sup> See Peirce, 1965 [1908].

<sup>40</sup> Plantinga, 2011, 240–64.

<sup>41</sup> Audi, 2004, 45–6.

<sup>42</sup> See Oppy, 2010, 195; Sosa, 2010, 288–91.

<sup>43</sup> Or some other proposition about God that obviously entails that God exists.



despite the fact that they are mere seemings and not nearly as vivid and detailed as, say, a visual experience. Our simple mathematical and logical beliefs are based on seemings and are very convincing; likewise for many of our moral and memory beliefs. So it's not true in general that if a belief is based primarily on seemings it isn't based on strong evidence.

Still, some seemings are stronger than others, and the stronger ones are better evidence than the weaker ones.<sup>44</sup> The question, then, is how strong are these theistic seemings? Obviously, there will be different answers for different theists, and for an individual theist, there will be different answers at different times. But many educated theists persist in their theistic beliefs despite being aware of many challenges to those beliefs as well as social pressure (from other educated people) to give up those beliefs. There are various ways to explain this persistence, but it's worth keeping in mind that simplistic explanations that ignore the intelligence, maturity, kindness, and psychological health of such theists are not plausible. One explanation of this persistent theistic belief is that these theists have *strong* theistic seemings—strong in the sense that they continue to result in a strong inclination toward theistic belief even in the face of much opposition, opposition which these theists deem to be ultimately unconvincing. At the very least, I think we don't have good reason to *deny* that it is fairly common for educated theists to have strong theistic seemings. They may not be as strong as the strongest mathematical or logical seemings. But they may be as strong as they need to be to make steadfastness in the face of disagreement rational.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.2 *Rp-evidence*

What about *Rp*-evidence—evidence that your belief that *p* is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way? Do we have any evidence of that

<sup>44</sup> A weak seeming that performing some action *A* is morally wrong isn't strong evidence for the belief that performing *A* is wrong, though it is *some* evidence for that belief.

<sup>45</sup> This isn't to say that a strong seeming is *sufficient* for rationality; the point is only that if this is a case in which a strong seeming is *required*, the theistic seeming may be strong enough. If *S*'s theistic seeming that *p* is strong enough, then the appropriate response to *S*'s mental states might be a theistic belief, in which case *S*'s theistic belief might thereby be rational. If that strong theistic seeming is a result of *S*'s cognitive processing mechanisms working well, then *S*'s theistic belief might be externally rational as well. But if that strong theistic seeming is a result of one's cognitive processing mechanism's malfunctioning, then *S*'s theistic belief might be internally rational and externally irrational.

sort in the case where *p* is theism? I think we do, though it is not easy to recognize. A good place to start in thinking about this question is the work of Thomas Reid, who says that it is a first principle that our faculties are reliable.<sup>46</sup> First principles, says Reid, are properly believed *noninferentially*.<sup>47</sup> Just as we have noninferential knowledge about our immediate physical environment by means of sense perception and about our past by means of memory, so also we have a faculty of common sense by means of which we have noninferential knowledge of first principles.<sup>48</sup> How exactly does this faculty of common sense produce beliefs in first principles? According to Reid:

We may observe, that opinions which contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this; that they are not only false, but absurd: and, to discountenance absurdity, nature has given us a particular emotion, to wit, that of ridicule, which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, either in opinion or practice.<sup>49</sup>

When you entertain the contrary of a first principle (e.g. the principle that your faculties are reliable) you experience the emotion of ridicule. On the basis of this experience you dismiss as absurd the contrary of the first principle and believe the first principle itself. Thus, noninferential common sense belief in the reliability of your faculties is like noninferential perceptual belief in that both are based on *experiential* evidence.<sup>50</sup>

Similar points have been developed in a different context by William Tolhurst who tries to capture the essence of seemings as follows:

The real difference between seemings and other states that can incline one to believe their content is that seemings have the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are. Their felt givenness typically leads one to experience believing that things are as they seem as an objectively fitting

<sup>46</sup> “Another first principle is, that the natural faculties [e.g. sense perception, memory, introspection, etc.], by which we distinguish truth from error are not fallacious” (Reid, 2002, 480).

<sup>47</sup> Reid, 2002, 452.

<sup>48</sup> “We ascribe to reason two offices, or two degrees. The first is to judge of things self-evident; the second to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are. The first of these is the province, and the sole province, of common sense . . . and is only another name for one branch or degree of reason” (Reid, 2002, 433).

<sup>49</sup> Reid, 2002, 462.

<sup>50</sup> For more on this view of Reid’s, see Bergmann, 2006b, 206–11. Baron Reed objects to this Reidian view in Reed, 2006, and I reply in Bergmann, 2006a.

or proper response to that seeming. When I merely think about a cat in my yard, imagine this to be the case, or desire that it be the case, my mental state does not have this feel.<sup>51</sup>

Tolhurst calls this feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are its 'felt veridicality'. It is the distinguishing feature of seemings. He goes on to speak of a higher-order awareness of this felt veridicality:

Felt veridicality can also ground a felt demand that one form a second order belief about the seeming. In calling the feeling of felt veridicality to mind one reflects on one's experiences and considers how they feel. This generates a second order seeming in which the seeming is itself the object of a seeming. When we become self-consciously aware of a seeming it seems to us that the seeming is veridical. This second order seeming is grounded in our awareness of the feel of veridicality.<sup>52</sup>

According to Reid, when a person considers the thought that her beliefs formed on the basis of seemings (e.g. her simple mathematical or logical or moral beliefs) are unreliably formed, she will find that thought absurd and believe instead that they are reliably formed; another way to put this is that it will *seem* absurd to her that they are unreliably formed and it will *seem* that they are reliably formed and she'll believe that. Tolhurst says something similar: when we consider a seeming that *p*, we become aware of its felt veridicality and this makes it seem to us that the seeming that *p* is veridical; on the basis of this higher-order seeming, we believe that the belief that *p*, based on that seeming that *p*, is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way.

The case we're considering is where *p* is *God exists* and the *p*-evidence, on which the belief that *p* is based, is a theistic seeming. The *R<sub>p</sub>*-evidence is the higher-order seeming that the theistic seeming, on the basis of which we believe that God exists, is veridical. It's not that the theist finds it absurd that any seeming on a religious topic could be nonveridical. Rather, when she ponders the particular theistic seemings on which her own theistic beliefs are based, she finds it absurd that *they* are nonveridical. Or, at the very least, it seems to her (because of an awareness of their felt veridicality) that these theistic seemings are veridical.

How strong is this *R<sub>p</sub>*-evidence? It might be tempting to think it is rather weak—how can a mere seeming that another mere seeming is

<sup>51</sup> Tolhurst, 1998, 298–9.

<sup>52</sup> Tolhurst, 1998, 299.

reliable be viewed as impressive evidence? But if we focus on other cases, I think we can see that Rp-evidence of this kind can be quite impressive indeed. Consider again simple logical and mathematical beliefs. These are based on strong intuitive seemings that their contents are true. Now suppose someone points out that intuitive seemings don't always logically guarantee the truth of the beliefs based on them. After all, it's possible for one to have a seeming that  $p$ , even a very strong seeming that  $p$ , when  $p$  is false. If, in light of this, you were asked to consider the suggestion that your seeming that  $1 + 2 \text{ must equal } 3$  is misleading, it would be natural to find that suggestion absurd. That mathematical seeming feels like it reveals what the mathematical facts really are—it has felt veridicality. As a result, you have a very strong higher-order seeming that your seeming that  $1 + 2 \text{ must equal } 3$  is veridical; and you, quite naturally, believe that it is veridical. Moreover, all of this seems rational—both the first-order simple mathematical belief and the higher-order belief that the first-order belief is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way. Thus, when we have strong seemings in support of simple mathematical or logical beliefs, the Rp-evidence we have in support of the reliability of these beliefs is just the higher-order seeming about the veridicality of the first-order seeming. And this Rp-evidence is not flimsy and unimpressive; it is strong and constitutes a rational basis for believing in the reliability of the first-order beliefs.

So Rp-evidence of this kind can be strong. But is it strong in the case where the first-order seemings are theistic seemings and the higher-order seemings (the Rp-evidence) are seemings that those theistic seemings are veridical? I see no good reason for thinking that it isn't fairly common for educated theists who reflect on their seeming-based theistic beliefs to find that it seems implausible that their theistic seemings are nonveridical. Perhaps these higher-order seemings of the veridicality of theistic seemings aren't as strong as the higher-order seemings we have about the veridicality of mathematical seemings. Nonetheless, the second-order seemings about the veridicality of theistic seemings could still be as strong as they would need to be to support steadfastness in the face of disagreement. If these second-order seemings were that strong, that would nicely explain why many educated theists remain confident in their theism, despite recognizing that others disagree and despite reflecting on the fact that it is *possible* for evidence for theism (consisting of first-order seemings) to be unreliable.

### 2.3 Agreement as *Rp*-evidence

One other kind of evidence that is relevant to the reliability of theistic belief is our awareness of large numbers of other people in the world, in many different cultures and societies, who also have theistic belief. It's not only that we know there are large *numbers* of such people. We also know that there are theists who are exceedingly intelligent, whose moral character is extremely admirable, who are very mature (i.e. emotionally secure, focused on others, and adept at respectfully and compassionately negotiating the complexities of human interactions and relationships), and who are also practically wise in ways that enable them to flourish in their environments. Their theism doesn't seem to be due to deficiencies in intelligence, moral virtue, maturity, or practical wisdom. Moreover, there are *many* theists like this—they aren't rare. The point isn't that the percentage of theists among those who are intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise is greater than the percentage of nontheists in that group. Rather, it is that there are *large numbers* of theists who are intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise. This shows that theism *can* be held by such people; it needn't be due to the absence of such traits.<sup>53</sup> Given that theism is one among several competing views of which this is true, this doesn't count strongly in favor of the claim that theistic belief is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way. But it prevents certain objections to that reliability claim that might arise if theism were *not* such a view—if, for example, it had no adherents who were intelligent, virtuous, mature, or wise.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that other people also rely on theistic seemings and independently arrive at the same belief you do (i.e. that God exists) lends *some* support to the view that both of you are discovering the same theological

<sup>53</sup> Of course this doesn't show that it is *never* due to the absence of such traits, but the same can be said for atheism and many other views. The point is that it's implausible to say "theistic belief is always due to such traits" or even "except for extremely rare cases, theistic belief is always due to such traits".

<sup>54</sup> Christianity sometimes emphasizes that grace and saving faith are common among the poor and lowly, including those who are not wise by the usual standards and those whose moral failures are obvious in the eyes of society (e.g. Matthew 21: 31–2; Luke 5: 31–2; Luke 6: 20; 1 Corinthians 1: 26–31). This isn't incompatible with the points I'm making about there being large numbers of theists who are intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise. For one thing, large numbers needn't indicate high percentages. For another, Christianity also teaches that growth in virtue and maturity (of a kind that involves emotional security and a caring focus on others) are part and parcel of advances in the Christian life, even if moral weakness and other kinds of failure, weakness, or need often motivate people to seek and be open to divine assistance.

reality. This support isn't very strong; a similar sort of support is available for atheistic belief as well. Nevertheless, by noticing that others using similar methods arrive at beliefs similar to theirs, both atheists and theists have more support for the view that their own beliefs are reliably formed than they would have had if they didn't have any evidence that others also held beliefs like theirs.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. Demoting in Religious Disagreement

Let's turn now to a consideration of demotion and R~p-evidence—i.e. evidence that the belief that *theism is false*, held by those who disagree with theists, is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way. In order for demotion to be rational for the theist, her evidence of this sort must be sufficiently weak. In this section I will consider the strength of our R~p-evidence as well as other factors relevant to the rationality of demotion in cases of religious disagreement.

#### 3.1 *Demoting as Plausibly as Possible*

In considering whether demotion is rational, it will be helpful to focus on the most plausible sort of demotion. Demotion is more plausible if it doesn't involve taking for granted that those who disagree with you about *p* *must be* doing so because of certain kinds of problems—especially if it turns out that these problems are likely not to be had by *all* who disagree with you about *p*. Consider, for example, the features just discussed in section 2.3: intelligence, virtue, maturity, and wisdom. If a theist's demotion of atheists involves taking for granted that atheists *must not be* intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise, then, insofar as it is extremely plausible that there are atheists who *are* intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise, this sort of demotion of atheists is implausible and, hence, not likely to be rational. Consider also the epistemic virtues

<sup>55</sup> It might be objected that the confirmation provided by others who hold the same beliefs isn't independent, especially if there is a common source, such as a religious teaching that has come to be influential in a society. This is an important consideration (and it too applies to both atheism and theism). But even with that influence from a common source, which might keep the confirmation provided by other like-minded believers from being *completely* independent, we still have individuals with their *own* theistic seemings formed in response to various considerations, including that source of influence. So there is *some* independent confirmation, even if it isn't completely independent.

of internal and external rationality, discussed in section 1.3. If the theist's demotion of atheists doesn't assume that the atheist's belief *must be* internally irrational or externally irrational, then it is more likely that this demotion is both plausible and rational.<sup>56</sup> Of course, it's essential for this approach that demotion *is* consistent with thinking that the one demoted is intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise and that her beliefs are internally and externally rational. But, as I argued in section 1.3, demotion *is* consistent with thinking these things. When you demote someone with respect to *p*, you think that person is an epistemic inferior with respect to *p*, in the sense that you think that either that person's beliefs with respect to *p* are not based on evidence that is as good as your evidence or that person doesn't do as well as you in responding to such evidence. Where *p* is theism, one can think this of a person while at the same time thinking that person is intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise and that her beliefs with respect to theism are internally and externally rational. This can happen if that person lacks the relevant theistic seemings and this lack isn't due to that person's cognitive processing mechanisms failing to work as they epistemically should.<sup>57</sup>

Two things should be emphasized about the sort of demotion I have in mind. First, it involves an epistemic assessment that is likely to be viewed as somewhat offensive or at least unflattering. The theist's claim, in demoting an atheist to being viewed as an epistemic inferior with respect to theism, is that that atheist either has inferior evidence or does a worse job at responding to her evidence. That isn't praise, and it isn't likely to be accepted by the atheist as true. So even when the theist tries to make the demotion as plausible and inoffensive as possible, it will still involve thinking negatively of the atheist in ways the atheist doesn't think negatively of herself. However, the second thing to be emphasized

<sup>56</sup> It's not a problem to think that there are probably instances of atheistic belief that are due to some of these deficiencies, just as it's not a problem to think there are probably such instances of theistic belief. But one should be cautious in drawing conclusions about particular cases.

<sup>57</sup> If this lack isn't due to any such failure, then to what *is* it due? This isn't any easy question to answer. But the point is that it can happen, as in the case of the jury members in the Stolen Frisian Flag Case, who don't have the evidence you have of your innocence and this lack on their part isn't due to their cognitive processing mechanisms failing to work as they epistemically should. The explanation in the theistic case would likely be importantly different, but that doesn't show there couldn't be some such explanation. See section 3.4 where I discuss the problem of coming up with such an explanation.

is that this sort of demotion is consistent with the theist having a significant amount of respect for the atheist. If you sincerely think a person is intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise and that her beliefs are both internally and externally rational, you are thinking very highly indeed of that person. Of course, theists won't think these things are true to the same degree of all atheists, but the main point is that their demotion of atheists (with respect to their views on the truth of theism) won't force theists to refrain from making such positive assessments of the atheists they demote.

There is a sense in which a theist's demotion of an atheist can be affected by the way in which that atheist demotes theists. Suppose that an atheist demotes theists in a very implausible way, taking for granted that theism *must be* due to deficiencies in intelligence, virtue, maturity, and wisdom. If a theist notices an atheist demoting theists in this implausible way, this gives the theist a reason to have some doubts about the rationality of that particular atheist's beliefs on the topic of God's existence. For if the atheist demotes theists in such an implausible way (taking for granted what is, as I pointed out in section 2.3, quite evidently false), then there is reason to think that her demotion of theists is irrational. And if that atheist's demotion of theists is irrational, then her awareness of theists who disagree with her will give her a defeater of her atheistic belief (because, in order to avoid getting a defeater from the discovery of such disagreement, she must *rationaly* demote those who disagree with her).<sup>58</sup> But if we have good reason to think an atheist's atheism is irrational (because it is defeated), then we can more easily demote her when we discover she disagrees with us; her disagreement needn't be very worrisome for us.

However, it's important—for the theist's demotion of atheists to be as plausible as possible—that the theist doesn't assume that an atheist's demotion of theists *must* involve demoting the theist in the implausible way described in the previous paragraph. There certainly do seem to be atheists who demote theists in this implausible manner. They are often among the most outspoken atheistic critics of theism. But the theist shouldn't conclude from that that *all* atheists demote theists in that way or that an atheist *must* demote theists in that way. Just as the theist's demotion shouldn't take for granted that atheists who disagree with her

<sup>58</sup> See the discussion in section 1.1.



must be deficient in intelligence, virtue, maturity, and wisdom, so also it shouldn't take for granted that when atheists demote theists, they must do so by implausibly assuming that theists must be deficient in intelligence, virtue, maturity, and wisdom.

What we're left with, then, is a kind of demotion for the theist to engage in that has a much better chance of being rational, given that it's compatible with a significant amount of respect for the atheists so demoted. But the preceding discussion has another implication as well. Atheists can demote theists by assuming they must be deficient in intelligence, virtue, maturity, or wisdom; or they can demote them more respectfully, allowing that they may well be intelligent, virtuous, mature, and wise. If they demote them in the former way, their demotion of theists—and, therefore, their atheism, which depends on the success of this demotion as a means to avoiding defeaters from recognized disagreement with theists—seems to be *irrational*. As a result, an awareness of the disagreement theists have with *these* atheists isn't much of a threat to the rationality of theistic belief. But if atheists demote theists in the latter more respectful way, then they are allowing that theists and theistic belief might have significant virtues. An awareness of the disagreement *these* atheists have with theists isn't as threatening to theistic belief as it would be if the atheists in question were able to *rationally* demote theists in a much less respectful way (something atheists can't do, given the wide availability of evidence for the intelligence, virtue, maturity, and wisdom of many theists).<sup>59</sup>

### 3.2 *Is Assumed Peerage the Starting Point?*

To this point, I've been assuming that discovering disagreement is a potential defeater for your belief because you begin by thinking that the one disagreeing with you is your epistemic peer. In order to escape this defeater, you need to rationally demote this person from being viewed as an epistemic peer to being viewed as an epistemic inferior. But do theists typically think that the people around them (including those they discover are atheists) are their epistemic peers with respect

<sup>59</sup> Of course, a similar point applies to atheists who consider the way in which theists demote them. Theists who demote them implausibly don't pose much of a threat. And theists who demote them more rationally, in a much more respectful way, pose less of a threat to atheistic belief than would theists who *rationally* demoted them in a much less respectful way.

to theism? Probably not. Educated theists will realize that many people around them are perhaps their equals or better in terms of intelligence, virtue, maturity, and wisdom. But they also know that many of these whom they assume are at least their equals in these ways are atheists. And it's doubtful that educated theists will think that those who are atheists are epistemic peers with respect to theism. So if they have no idea whether a particular person is a theist or an atheist, they are likely to have no view about whether that person is an epistemic peer with respect to theism.

Nevertheless, theists will often discover that particular people around them are atheists, and the question remains: does this discovery provide a defeater for the theist's theism? Earlier in the chapter, the answer given to this question was that there is no defeater if the theist can rationally demote the person who disagrees with her. But if the theist never viewed the other person as an epistemic peer to begin with, no demotion will be required, since demotion implies changing one's assessment from epistemic peerage (or better) to something less than peerage. Still, what will be required, to avoid getting a defeater from this discovery of disagreement, is that the theist rationally believes that the other person is an epistemic inferior with respect to theism—or at least this will be required on the occasions when the theist is thinking about the disagreement and considering whether it gives her a defeater for her theistic beliefs. And in order for the theist to rationally believe that this other person is an epistemic inferior with respect to theism, most of the same things will be required that are required for rationally demoting that other person with respect to theism. In particular, it will be required that the R~p-evidence is sufficiently weak.

With this in mind, let's say that, although, *strictly speaking*, demoting someone to being viewed as an epistemic inferior requires that you previously viewed that person as an epistemic peer or better, there is also a *loose sense* of "demotion" where you can demote a person even if you didn't previously view that person as an epistemic peer or better. In this loose sense, you demote a person so long as you now view that person as an epistemic inferior.<sup>60</sup> Throughout the rest of this chapter, when I speak of demotion, I will be speaking of it in this loose sense.

<sup>60</sup> Or you now view her believing as being like an epistemic inferior's on the occasion in question. See the discussion of the two kinds of demoting discussed at the end of section 1.1.

### 3.3 *R~p-evidence and Rational Demotion*

So how strong is the theist's R~p-evidence—i.e. her evidence that the belief that theism is false, held by those who disagree with her, is formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way? I don't think the theist has very strong evidence that the atheist's belief on this matter is reliable.

Of course, educated theists are aware that both atheists and theists have developed arguments *for* their positions and responded to the arguments *against* their positions. They are also aware that, just as with other topics in philosophy, there is a lot of variation in the assessments of these arguments and responses. If one considered only the philosophical literature on theistic and atheistic arguments, it would be very controversial indeed to say that it gives us strong evidence that the atheist's beliefs on this matter are reliable (it would be about as controversial as saying that the philosophical literature on incompatibilism about free will gives us strong evidence that the incompatibilist's beliefs about incompatibilism are reliable). Focusing only on atheistic arguments, the strongest seem to be arguments from evil and, although some of those arguments are more plausible than others, it seems fair to say that none of them are knockdown arguments and none of them are strong enough to rationally require consent from all informed intelligent readers.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, even if a theist thinks that theistic arguments aren't sufficiently strong to justify theistic belief and that atheistic arguments have some force, that isn't sufficiently strong evidence for thinking that the atheist's beliefs on this matter are reliable. Consider again the case of the Stolen Frisian Flag from the end of section 1. In that example, you've been accused of a crime and you agree that the jury has very strong evidence for thinking you are guilty. Nevertheless, you don't have strong evidence overall for thinking that the jurors' beliefs about your guilt are reliable. This is because you think their evidence is deficient in an important way in which your own evidence (which includes your vivid memories) is not. Something similar might be true of the theist who is thinking about the atheist who relies on atheistic arguments that have some force.<sup>62</sup> Although

<sup>61</sup> For some assessments of arguments from evil that lend support to this claim, see Alston, 1991; Bergmann, 2009b, 2012a; Plantinga, 1988, 2000, 458–99; van Inwagen, 1991.

<sup>62</sup> However, the theist will not be likely to think as highly of the atheist's arguments against theism as you think (in the Frisian Flag example) of the arguments for your guilt.

the theist might have good reason to think that the most sophisticated atheists are as good as anyone else at formulating valid arguments with somewhat appealing premises on the topic of God's existence, the theist doesn't have good reason to be equally impressed with the atheist's capacity or tendency to have appropriate theistic seemings and to respond properly to them. The theist has her theistic seemings and her higher-order seemings about these theistic seemings, which assure her of their veridicality. But when she considers the atheist, what she notices is that the atheist apparently lacks these seemings, or at least that she has them only weakly and doesn't have or trust any higher-order seemings about the veridicality of her theistic seemings. In noticing these things about the atheist, the theist isn't thereby getting strong evidence that these atheistic beliefs are being formed in reliable and nonmisleading ways. If anything, she's getting evidence to the contrary, given her own theistic seemings and their felt veridicality.<sup>63</sup> The theist's assessment of the atheist who has somewhat forceful atheistic arguments but who lacks or doesn't trust theistic seemings is like your assessment (in the Frisian Flag example) of the jurors who have strong evidence for your guilt but who lack memories of your innocence: you don't have strong evidence for the reliability of the jurors about your guilt and the theist doesn't have strong evidence for the

In the Stolen Frisian Flag Case, you might agree that the jurors could be sensible in thinking it is beyond reasonable doubt that you stole the flag (supposing you were framed well enough and other circumstances and history pointed to your guilt). But even if the theist thinks the atheistic arguments have some force, she won't think that the atheistic arguments are so strong that they make atheism beyond reasonable doubt. If the case in court for your guilt were as strong as the case in the philosophical literature in support of atheism, it would *not* be sensible for the jury to think your guilt is beyond reasonable doubt.

<sup>63</sup> Bryan Frances claims (2008, 62) that some atheist Zen masters are "spiritual experts" in virtue of having had "lots of spiritual experience" including "advanced spiritual experiences, and lots of competent reflection on spiritual experience, usually via helping others develop their spiritual experiences". Frances goes on to claim that these experts believe that the spiritual experiences had by ordinary religious believers who aren't involved in some advanced meditative discipline—and presumably this includes the theistic seemings had by ordinary theists—are not of God. Instead, according to these spiritual experts: "the correct explanation of [these] religious experiences or states of consciousness is non-theistic, and people who form theistic beliefs upon having such experiences are victims of a particularly interesting and pervasive illusion typical for beginners of spiritual experience" (2008, 62). Frances also claims (2008, 65) that some *theistic* spiritual experts (who "agree that God exists") will make the same assessment of ordinary religious experiences. His point is that, because these are spiritual experts, they can't rationally be demoted in the way I'm saying theists can rationally demote atheists.

But I don't see any good reason for theists to defer to atheistic Zen masters on the topic of whether the theist's theistic seemings are veridical. Having some expertise in generating

reliability of the atheist about whether God exists. Importantly, evidence for the atheist's overall intelligence, virtue, etc. doesn't count as strong evidence for her reliability on the topic of theism, since such intelligence and virtue are compatible with being not very good at all at forming accurate beliefs about theism.<sup>64</sup>

In short, educated theists don't have strong R~p-evidence for the reliability of the atheist's beliefs on the topic of theism. As a result, they often don't start off assuming that those who disagree with them are their epistemic peers with respect to theism. And even if theists do assume this, they won't think this assumption is based on *strong* evidence that these atheists are reliable about theism. So there won't be much of an obstacle to rationally demoting them with respect to theism. If we combine these considerations with the earlier points (from section 2) about how educated theists can have strong evidence for theism as well as sufficiently strong evidence for the reliability of their theistic beliefs, then we can see how educated theists can remain steadfast in their theism, rationally demoting those who disagree with them about whether God exists, with the result that their theistic beliefs aren't defeated by the discovery of disagreement.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.4 *The Difficulty of Demotion*

The last paragraph might seem to paint too rosy a picture. After all, it is no easy matter for thoughtful theists to demote atheists in the way just summarized. There are two main reasons why it is so difficult for

meditative experiences and coaching others in having them is compatible with not having theistic seemings; and it's compatible with having them but responding to them in an improper way. It's also compatible with a lack of expertise in assessing the evidential value of ordinary theistic seemings. As for *theistic* spiritual experts who allegedly criticize ordinary religious experience in this same way, Frances claims that there are such experts, but he gives no actual examples. What would be most impressive, in support of Frances's objection, is to have a significant tradition of theistic spiritual experts who dismiss the epistemic value of ordinary theistic seemings in this way. But I'm not aware of a single example of even one such expert. As for what I'd say about such a tradition of theistic spiritual experts if I were made aware of it, I'll postpone that discussion until I learn of such experts and can examine their actual views.

<sup>64</sup> It's true that, in light of these virtues had by many atheists, things look better for atheism than they otherwise would (see section 2.3). But of course theists have these same considerations in support of their own position and they have (in addition) their theistic seemings.

<sup>65</sup> Although I won't go into the matter here, one could argue in a similar way that educated atheists can rationally demote those who disagree with them about whether God exists.

them to do so. One is that it seems so offensive and arrogant to conclude that people who are ethical and bright are mistaken on such an important topic, especially when there is no apparent way to resolve the difficulty through rational discussion.<sup>66</sup> (It's not as if the theist can just pass on to the atheist the needed theistic seemings and the inclination to respond to them the way the theist does.) The second reason it is so difficult for theists to demote atheists in this way is that the problem cries out for explanation. But what story does the theist have to tell about why she, the theist, is able to have the right evidence and respond to it correctly whereas the atheist either lacks such evidence or fails to respond to it correctly? Some stories that are suggested (those denying that any atheists are intelligent, good, mature, and wise) seem rather implausible. It's tempting to think that the theist owes the atheist some kind of plausible explanation of the atheist's problem if she's going to demote the atheist in the way described at the end of section 3.3; if she can't produce one, then you might think that she shouldn't demote.

The first thing to see is that the atheist has exactly parallel problems. If she is going to hold on to her atheism and demote the theist, then she too will have to do what seems offensive and arrogant, concluding that people who are ethical and bright are mistaken on an important topic, when there is no apparent way to resolve the difficulty through rational discussion. Likewise, the atheist's demotion cries out for explanation: why is it that she, the atheist, is able to have better evidence and to respond to it correctly when the theist fails in this regard? Here too, the stories

<sup>66</sup> In this spirit, Bryan Frances complains (2008, 60) as follows about a position like the one I've just described at the end of section 3.3:

It seems as though we have arrived at the most absurd defense possible: I have a special way of knowing things that you don't have, and the only evidence you have is my word for it coupled with my good epistemic reputation. How is this different from just saying "Nyah, nyah"? Imagine trotting out the same defence when challenged on some belief that you can't defend. "Well, you see, I have this special cognitive access to a realm of facts that you just don't have, and you'll just have to take my word on it." Think of all the nonsense that would be generated if we took this route generally. Indeed, think of the patent nonsense that *really is* generated by some of the people who take routes similar to this one.

I don't have the space to respond to this at length here, but it's worth noting that there need be no scorn or suggestion that the other will have to believe on the basis of your say-so (the theist might instead respectfully recognize that atheists might not be able rationally to believe in God on their available evidence, including the theist's say-so). Moreover, it

that might naturally come to mind (according to which there are no theists who are intelligent, good, mature, and wise) seem rather implausible. Without a plausible story, it might be tempting to think that the atheist shouldn't demote the theist.<sup>67</sup>

A similar problem afflicts the principled agnostic—the one who says that, in light of the fact that rational discussion doesn't enable us to settle the issue of whether theism is true, we should withhold judgment, believing neither theism nor atheism. In effect, this sort of agnostic is saying that theists and atheists should each demote themselves (as well as each other) on the topic of theism. This agnostic demotes them both, as well as herself, on that topic.<sup>68</sup> But notice that the principled agnostic demotes theists and atheists on the topic of *when it is rational to demote*, but doesn't demote herself on that topic. Thus, she too will be faced with problems similar to those faced by the atheist and the theist. The agnostic will have to do what seems offensive and arrogant, concluding that people who are intelligent and virtuous are mistaken on the important topic of whether their beliefs with respect to theism are rational. This alleged problem the agnostic notices on the part of intelligent atheists and theists cries out for explanation. But it will be difficult for the principled agnostic to produce a plausible explanation of this alleged problem. Here too, it's tempting to think that if the agnostic doesn't have a plausible explanation available, she shouldn't be demoting them in this way.<sup>69</sup>

So theists, atheists, and principled agnostics all face difficulties in demoting those who disagree with them. But they also face difficulties if they don't demote. It's difficult for the theist to give up her theism when it seems strongly to her that it's true and that her theistic beliefs

seems as though we're in pretty much the same position as the theist described above when it comes to realism about moral beliefs in a case where we're trying to convince moral nihilists of our views. Also, as I go on to point out in the text, atheists and agnostics have a similar problem. As for the charge, that *if we allow this sort of move in one case, we're forced to allow it in all sorts of other cases in defense of crazy beliefs*, see Bergmann, 2006b, 229–33, and 2008, 522–3, for some discussion.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Feldman seems to have these difficulties in mind when he concludes (2007, 213) that he shouldn't be so confident in his atheism.

<sup>68</sup> Obviously, she doesn't demote them and herself from peer to inferior *relative to herself* (you can't be your own inferior). Instead, she demotes herself and them to the level of epistemic inferiors (with respect to theism) of anyone who (a) has sufficiently good evidence for judging whether theism is true and (b) is sufficiently good at responding in an epistemically appropriate way to that evidence.

<sup>69</sup> Plantinga makes these sorts of points in his 1995 and his 2000, 444–7.

are reliably formed. Doing this doesn't seem like a rational thing to do. (Similar difficulties will be faced by the atheist in giving up her atheism and by the principled agnostic in giving up her belief that it isn't rational to be a theist or an atheist.) Thus, not only do theists, atheists, and principled agnostics all face the difficulties of demotion, in addition, each of them runs into other problems if they try to avoid the difficulties of demotion.

Keeping all this in mind, let's think about how theists might overcome the two difficulties of demotion, mentioned at the beginning of section 3.4. Consider the first difficulty—that of doing what seems offensive and arrogant. Here the theist can emphasize to herself and the atheist the ways in which she respects the intellect and moral character of many atheists, despite the fact that she is demoting them on this topic. She can be careful to demote as plausibly as possible.<sup>70</sup> She can also point out that she realizes that the atheist will be inclined to demote theists in the same way and that she can understand why that seems sensible to the atheist, given the atheist's evidence. If the theist does these things in a respectful way, I think the temptation to view her demotion of the atheist as offensive and arrogant is significantly diminished.

As for the second difficulty—the fact that the atheist's alleged epistemic inferiority with respect to theism cries out for an explanation that the theist doesn't have—the theist can simply say that, although she wishes she had an explanation to offer, sometimes you can't have what you want. Very often we know that something is the case even though we can't explain why it is the case. Of course this is disappointing. But the mere fact that we can't explain why things are a certain way doesn't force us to conclude that they aren't that way. In this case, the theist thinks that her own theistic belief is rational and that the atheist's belief that there is no God is not formed in a good way in response to good evidence. When asked to explain why the atheist lacks good evidence or the ability to respond to it properly, the theist may not feel confident that she has a good explanation that will cover all such cases. It would be nice to have such an explanation, but the only explanations she can think of seem doubtful (when considered as proposals that are supposed to cover *all* instances of atheistic belief). So she has to put this belief of hers (about the accuracy of her belief and the incorrectness of the atheist's belief)

<sup>70</sup> See section 3.1.



into the category of things she thinks are true, even though she can't explain why they are so.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, although it is difficult for a thoughtful theist to demote an atheist, it isn't as if there are any easy alternatives, either for the theist or the atheist or the principled agnostic. Moreover, the difficulties, while significant, aren't insurmountable. In my view, therefore, the educated theist can be rational in demoting the atheist, she can rationally overcome the difficulties in doing so, and she can thereby avoid having her theistic belief be defeated by the knowledge that intelligent atheists disagree with her.

#### 4. Do Doubts Defeat?

I've argued that, even if the theist's evidence for belief in God consists largely of theistic seemings and her evidence for the reliability of her theistic belief consists largely of higher-order seemings about the veridicality of her theistic seemings, there is no compelling reason forcing us to conclude that this evidence is flimsy or inconsequential. Likewise, I've argued that, although demoting atheists can be difficult for thoughtful theists (because it seems offensive and arrogant and it's hard to think of

<sup>71</sup> There are additional problems that some theists face if they think that being an atheist prevents you from ever experiencing union with God (even in an afterlife, in heaven). It seems that if there is a terrible everlasting consequence that results from being an atheist, it must be the case that the atheist is in some sense culpable for her atheism (otherwise it seems unjust for God to allow the atheist to suffer that terrible unending consequence of it). In light of this, it might be more difficult for the theist who holds such a view to show proper respect for the demoted atheist (because the theist will have to think the atheist is culpable for her atheism) and it will also make it more difficult for this sort of theist to come up with an explanation for the atheist's problems (because an explanation will be needed not only for why the atheist is lacking the right evidence or the right response to it but also for why the atheist is in some sense culpable for lacking the right evidence or the right response to it).

These are indeed difficult additional problems. But they don't seem insurmountable. For one thing, what needs explaining is why an atheist *ultimately* persists in her atheism (in a way that is culpable), and we simply haven't got any experience of this happening (or at least we don't if it can only happen to people after they die). So we can't look at actual cases and conclude that this or that explanation of such an event is a poor explanation or a good one. For another thing, the fact that there is some additional thing that needs explaining (i.e. why the atheist is in some sense culpable for her ultimately persisting in her atheism) could be handled in the same way I handled the problem addressed in the paragraph to which this note is attached: one could point out that, although it would be nice to have such an explanation, the fact that we don't have one, while disappointing, needn't force us to think there is no such explanation. For some further discussion related to this topic, see Bergmann, 2012b, 542–4; Rea, 2012, 269–70.

a plausible explanation for the mistakes of those demoted), theists don't have good evidence for the reliability of atheistic belief and there are good reasons for thinking that the difficulties of demoting can be overcome, in part because the alternatives to demoting aren't any better.

Nevertheless, many theists might remain unconvinced. They might find themselves with serious doubts about the strength of their evidence for theism and about the strength of their evidence for the reliability of their theistic belief-formation. Likewise, they might find the difficulties of demoting not to be as easily surmountable as I've indicated. As a result, they may have doubts about theism, about the reliability of their theistic beliefs, and about the unreliability of atheistic belief. What then? Do they have defeaters for their theistic belief?

I think they do, or at least they do if their doubts are strong enough. At the end of section 1.1 I pointed out that, if I either do or epistemically should disbelieve or significantly doubt that my belief that *p* was formed in a reliable and nonmisleading way, then I have a defeater for my belief that *p*. Thus, even if I'm right that rationality doesn't *require* theists to have doubts about theism or about their beliefs being more reliably formed than atheist's beliefs (with respect to theism), the fact that a theist *has* such doubts is problematic. In fact, even if the theist *irrationally* has doubts about these things, her theistic belief might be defeated by her awareness of atheists who disagree with her.<sup>72</sup>

Some religions (e.g. Christianity) speak of the "gift" of faith, which is what a person has when God enables that person to hold religious beliefs that the person would otherwise not hold and may even be inclined to doubt. Suppose a person's natural inclination is to let the difficulties of demoting (mentioned in section 3.4) overwhelm her so that she has doubts even though rationality doesn't require her to have those doubts. In such cases, special divine assistance might help a person overcome her natural tendency to doubt. But this gift of faith needn't be viewed as a threat to the rationality of the religious beliefs so produced. It may be better viewed as special divine assistance enabling one to overcome irrational (but quite tempting and natural) doubt and, thereby, to avoid defeat of one's theistic beliefs.

I've argued, in sections 2 and 3, that an educated theist can be rational in the face of disagreement with intelligent atheists, even though that

<sup>72</sup> Again, see section 1.1.

involves the difficulties of demoting people one respects. I've also noted in section 4 that, despite this, theists who have serious doubts in the face of such disagreement might have the rationality of their theistic beliefs defeated. What I haven't highlighted so far is that in addition to these two kinds of response (i.e. strong seeming-based theistic belief undefeated by disagreement and weak seeming-based theistic belief defeated by serious disagreement-based doubts) there are "in between" cases. In these cases, the theistic seemings (and the higher-order seemings about them) are in between weak and strong and the disagreement-based doubts are moderate rather than strong or weak. In such cases, a person's theistic beliefs may be subject to partial defeat without being completely defeated. In other words, the effect of recognized disagreement with atheists one respects may be that one's theistic beliefs are less rational and should be held less confidently than they otherwise would be, even though they still count as rational theistic beliefs. There are many ways this could go and many questions about exactly how it should go. But, despite their importance, those are questions for another occasion.<sup>73</sup>

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