Augustine and William James on the Rationality of Faith[[1]](#endnote-1)

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Augustine and William James are among the greatest defenders of religious faith in the history of thought. Their arguments on behalf of faith mark important connections between theology and philosophy, with further links to psychology, history, and social and political thought. Augustine argues that religious faith is trust and that trust is a normal and necessary way of believing, foundational to family and social life. It is also the proper way for us to get to the truth when we lack knowledge. Beginning with faith, we then work towards knowledge by means of philosophical contemplation. James, in ‘The Will to Believe,’ makes two pragmatic arguments for the rationality of faith. We do not know (yet) whether God exists, but faith meets a well-established criterion for rational decision-making. It is, at least for many of us, a highly consequential choice we must make between multiple possibilities which are open to us; it is a choice between the risk of believing something false and the risk of not believing something true, and in the absence of very clear evidence we may decide for ourselves which risk we prefer. James further explains that we may be able to experience God in the future and thereby gain knowledge, yet even this may be contingent on our willingness to believe.

I am not aiming to break any new ground on Augustine or James or to directly confront any scholarly debates on their texts; rather, I aim to compare and contrast their religious epistemologies, with a brief look towards future possible synthesis. This will help us to understand both thinkers better, and promises to enrich contemporary discussions of faith and reason through a better awareness of the past dialogue on the subject.

In both thinkers, faith is understood to be rational, to be practical, and to precede knowledge. Yet there are key differences. The object of faith in Augustine is Christian testimony from Christ, Scripture, and the church. James, however, is defending the rationality of whatever religious commitment may be of interest to us. Moreover, the eventual acquisition of knowledge, according to Augustine, relies mainly on philosophical contemplation whereas, according to James, it relies on experience. In other words, Augustine’s analysis of faith and rationality is distinguished from James’ in that the former is a Christian somewhat under the influence of neo-Platonist rationalism. James, however, is an empiricist and a Pragmatist. These differences, however, may be less significant than they first appear, as I will show. After explaining Augustine and then James I will draw out the major points of comparison and contrast and suggest a few reasons their insights might be at least partially synthesized.

I. AUGUSTINE

Faith is trust—in one of Augustine’s customary Latin terms, *fides*. Augustine consistently defends *fides* in Christ, the Bible, and the church as rational. This faith is epistemically on a par with faith in other areas of human life such as family relations, geography, and history—where trust reveals itself as both rational and practically necessary. Although it falls short of knowledge, which requires a full understanding of the truth, it is an appropriate and necessary way of getting to religious truth for most of us, and indeed a propaedeutic for knowledge of that truth. This knowledge will come after faith and by means of contemplation of the sort modeled by the Platonist philosophers.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Let us consider some of the major texts.

In his earliest surviving writing, *Contra Academicos* or *Against the Academics*, Augustine offers an interesting analogy for faith (*c. Acad.* 3.15.34). Suppose two people are walking to Alexandria and come to a fork in the road. They do not know which way to go, but a local shepherd who happens to be present points down one way, saying that it is the way to Alexandria. The first traveler, ready to believe whatever he is told, immediately takes the road indicated. His companion, unwilling to assent without proof and doubting the reliability of this scruffy fellow’s testimony, waits at the fork for more evidence to come along. Later it does—in the testimony of a more sophisticated person who also happens to be a prankster who deceives him and sends him down the wrong path! Although he protests that he does not *believe* that this new testimony is true, only that it seems likely, he errs all the same. Sometime later, the first traveler is resting in Alexandria while the latter is lost in the wilderness.

The immediate epistemological point is that trust in testimony is a viable means of pursuing the truth, and sometimes a necessary one. When we know not the truth, we may trust those who do. Even if we are not sure a testimony is from one who knows, trust is a responsible course of action. It may be the best way for us to get to the truth. Moreover, we risk error by *dis*believing no less than by believing since we will *not* know the truth if we make no judgments.[[3]](#endnote-3) It is likely that the shepherd has a more specific meaning in theology and in specifically religious epistemology. Some suggest that the shepherd stands for Christ or the apostles, the church, or some combination of these.[[4]](#endnote-4) Thus the trust involved in becoming a Christian is justified by the possibility that trust is the way to find the truth about God.

Elsewhere Augustine addresses these matters a bit more systematically and without relying on illustration. Let us take a brief survey. Also in *c. Acad.*:

But there is no doubt that we are urged on to learn by a twin weight of authority (*auctoritas*) and reason (*ratio*). Therefore, I am certain not to depart ever, in any way, from the authority of Christ, for I find nothing more powerful. But what should be accomplished by a most subtle reason (*sublitissima ratio*)—for I have already been so affected that I impatiently long to learn what is true not only through believing (from *credo*) but also through understanding (from *intelligo*)—I trust in the meantime I shall find among the Platonists, insofar as it is not incompatible with our sacred [teachings].[[5]](#endnote-5)

Again, in *Ord.*, written at the same time, Augustine says:

Twofold is the path we follow when we are moved by the obscurity of things: either reason (*ratio*), or at least authority (*auctoritas*). Philosophy promises reason but it barely frees a very few. Nevertheless, it drives them not only *not* to disdain those mysteries, but to understand them alone, as they should be understood.[[6]](#endnote-6)

He further explains that philosophy teaches the existence of God, and authority the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The authority of Christ (conveyed via Scripture and church) is necessary for teaching some religious truths, yet others we may be able to understand by the power of the mind exercised in advanced reflection in imitation of the Platonists.

Later, in the *Confessions*, Augustine explains how, in Milan under the influence of Bishop Ambrose and with his mind beginning to clear, he had come to appreciate the position of orthodox Christianity. It commended faith in what was beyond understanding, whereas the Manichean heretics reviled faith and promised certainty, yet ended up asking for blind faith in silly doctrines.[[7]](#endnote-7) Augustine, meanwhile,

began to consider the countless things I believed which I had not seen, or which had happened with me not there—so many things in the history of nations, so many facts about places and cities which I had never seen, so many things told me by friends, by doctors, by this man, by that man: and unless we accepted (*credo*) these things, we should do nothing at all in this life. Most strongly of all it struck me how firmly and unshakeably I believed that I was born of a particular father and mother, which I could not possibly know (*scio*) unless I believed (*credo*) it upon the word of others.

Moreover, ‘since men had not the strength to discover the truth by pure reason (*ratio*),’ ‘we needed the authority of Holy Writ.’[[8]](#endnote-8) We needed ‘the medicine of faith (*fides*).’[[9]](#endnote-9) This faith or trust in the Bible is the same sort of trust as that which we exercise in many cases where we lack firsthand knowledge. Entire fields of study—history and geography—are mentioned, and especially the truths foundational to familial and social life—who our parents are. Augustine even goes so far as to suggest that some *knowledge* comes by this *faith* in reliable testimony.

In *The Advantage of Believing*, written to help his friend Honoratus escape the Manichean heresy, Augustine employs the same argument for the permissibility of trust based on its necessity for knowing who our parents are and elaborates eloquently on the immorality and the devastating social consequences that would follow if we should refuse to trust.[[10]](#endnote-10) He also applies the same argument to friendship, which requires belief in one’s friend’s good intentions.[[11]](#endnote-11) (In *Faith in the Unseen* there is an extended passage on this same theme and on the devastating social consequences that would follow from a refusal to trust in the minds of our friends.[[12]](#endnote-12)) Augustine includes in *Advantage of Believing* a neat little argument building on the importance of trust in a fellow human’s good will.[[13]](#endnote-13) If we are coming to someone who might have the truth and might be willing to share it with us, we expect that person to believe in our sincerity as truth-seekers. So we should return the favor and believe *their* sincerity in dispensing the truth. To believe by trust alone, even rational trust, is not the same thing as *intellegere*, to understand, or *discere*, to know.[[14]](#endnote-14) Yet further proofs of the truth, such that we could *know* it apart from faith, may be simply impossible at this stage, since we might not even be able to understand it.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Yet ‘faith (*fides*) prepares the ground for understanding (*ratio*).’[[16]](#endnote-16) Suppose we cannot understand the truth and its evidence (that sort of truth with which Platonic philosophy might be able to help). Here is Augustine’s advice:

when you do not have the ability to appreciate the arguments, it is very healthy to believe (*credo*) without knowing the reasons (*ratio*) and by that belief (*fides*) to cultivate the mind and allow the seeds of truth to be sown. Moreover, for minds that are ill this is absolutely essential, if they are to be restored to health.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In this way, we shall seek the truth, first by faith and later by reason, and in seeking we *shall* find.[[18]](#endnote-18)

And where shall we seek? In orthodox Christianity—in the institution of the orthodox church. Honoratus should ‘follow the path of the Catholic teaching, which has flowed down to us from Christ himself through his apostles and will continue to flow down to our descendants.’[[19]](#endnote-19)

Let’s review. We may summarize this survey of Augustine’s religious epistemology in seven points.

First, *fides*, or trust, is the placing of epistemic credit in the testimony of a person, text, or institution. It is the acceptance of that testifier as reliable and of that testimony as true.

Second, this trust is justified and rational. It is justified by its practicality. Trust is the thread out of which social life is woven and, moreover, a normal and necessary practice for getting truth when we lack the knowledge borne of firsthand experience or understanding. It underlies geography and history no less than religion. Faith is also justified as a *reliable* way of getting to the truth—it is epistemically as well as practically justified, we might say[[20]](#endnote-20)—insofar as it commonly relies on *reliable* testimony.

Third, religious *fides* is best placed in orthodox Christianity. Christ, his Apostles, the Bible, and the institution of the orthodox church as conveyor of doctrine and interpreter of Scripture are all necessary objects of trust.

Fourth, in the case of Christian *fides*, when we believe (*credo*) we (most of us at least) do not *know* (*disco*, *intellego*); we do not believe by reason (*ratio*) as such, for this involves a full comprehension or some direct experience of a fact; it means belief borne of our own capacity for accessing the truth, not the capacities of others. (We should note that Augustine later reconsidered his language here, recognizing belief without complete understanding yet based on reliable authority as a loose but satisfactory everyday understanding of *knowing*.[[21]](#endnote-21)) While the Apostles witnessed the Resurrection of the Messiah, we did not; we trust their reliable testimony. While some philosophically trained theologians may have some contemplative wisdom concerning God and the soul, most of us do not.

Fifth, however, we aim for it. We must seek to add understanding to faith. And, sixth, faith prepares us for this understanding. Seventh, and finally, achieving this understanding relies largely on philosophically informed contemplation.

II. JAMES

For purposes of brevity we may focus on James’ most famous analysis of religious belief, ‘The Will to Believe,’ which is ‘an essay in justification *of* faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced.’[[22]](#endnote-22) James gives two arguments for this conclusion. The first is based on the propriety of religious belief *sans* proof in situations in which whether to believe is a decision between options which are *live*, *forced*, and *momentous*. In these situations life forces a decision on us, and it is permissible simply to decide. The second argument is based on the idea of a personal God. If God is like human persons, James explains, God cannot be expected to provide compelling proof before we are willing to believe. We may be required to meet him halfway by having at least some faith, hoping to verify his existence and good intentions later.[[23]](#endnote-23)

The first argument relies on the idea of a *live*, *forced*, and *momentous* decision between two choices. A decision is *live* if we could really go either way. I once had a live decision between pursuing a Ph. D. in philosophy from a research university or a theology degree from a seminary. I also might have chosen an alternative career course; I honestly think I could have been happy as a dentist. Philosophy, seminary, dentistry—these were live options for me. They were not *forced*, however, because I could have gone some other way—computer programming, perhaps. The decision whether to go to grad school or not *was* forced; it was either one or the other. In a forced decision between two options, I cannot avoid the decision; I must choose one. In a *momentous* decision, there are significant and irreversible consequences, such as the enormous (and happy) consequences of my decision in 2006 to ask Miss Richardson to marry me.

Now when a decision is live, forced, *and* momentous it is necessary to decide; life leaves us no alternative. Moreover, if it should happen that there is no convincing evidence which way to go, this does not negate the necessity of the decision. In such cases we ‘not only lawfully may, but must, decide’ not on purely rational, but on other, grounds—based, at least in part, on what we *want*.

And, as the circumstances of life would have it, some such decisions concern what we are going to believe—or not believe—about ‘life, the universe, and everything.’[[24]](#endnote-24) Religion, James grants, is not a live option for everyone; some of us, perhaps, would not be able to believe if we tried. Others, apparently, would have difficulty *not* believing. For *some* of us, however, there is a *live* decision between religion and no religion. That decision is *forced* for everyone. Whether to be a Reformation Christian or a Shiite Muslim is not forced; there are plenty of other options in Christianity, Islam, other religions, and irreligion. However, the decision whether to have at least one religious belief or precisely none at all is a forced decision; each of us will take one of these routes. Agnosticism, when it comes to this choice, is the same answer as atheism, no less a form of *un*belief than *dis*belief is. Finally, the religious question is *momentous* for all of us. It affects how we live, which is, perhaps, enough to establish its momentousness. There is also the possibility of the afterlife, which may also be enough. James, however, builds his case on the promised benefits of religion in *this* life. He explains that, while we use science to explain *what* things exist and morality to determine *how good* those things are, ‘religion says essentially two things’: that ‘the best things are the more eternal things,’ and that ‘we are better off even now’ if we believe this. It is here that James locates the potential benefits of religion, and for this reason religion is a momentous decision.

Now, since religion can be live, forced, and momentous, this decision—for those of us faced with it—need not rely on reason alone. If it should be the case that the evidence does *not* determine the question for us, we are forced by life itself to decide on other grounds. ‘The will to believe’ is thus, even without proof, an acceptable grounds for deciding to be religious.

James strengthens his case with an analysis of the risks we face when we decide whether to believe. His primary target is a sort of skeptic—those who tout the overriding importance of avoiding error. To be precise, these folks—exemplified by W. K. Clifford—refuse to believe unless the evidence should prove thoroughly decisive, and their refusal is on the grounds that belief might be an error. Fair enough, James grants—it might be an error, and believing in error would be bad, and they have the right to avoid this outcome by not believing.

But this is not the whole story. Unbelief will protect us from errant belief, but it also prevents us from believing the *truth*. Believing the truth is also important, and carries its own benefits. There is not *one* risk here, but *two*: the risk of believing what is false, and the risk of *not* believing what is true. James figures that, when the evidence is unclear, we have the right to decide for ourselves which risk we prefer to take—whether we are more afraid of believing an error and so never believe yet risk missing out on the truth, or whether we are just as afraid of *not* believing any religious truths there may be and so believe yet risk being in error. Our live, forced, and momentous decision is not only between two ways of life, but between two equally legitimate practical epistemologies. ‘No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse’ against those who prefer one risk to another.

Let us take a look at James’ second argument. He introduces it thus:

Now, to most of us religion comes in a still further way that makes a veto on our active faith even more illogical. The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here.

The argument that follows is both interesting and important, although it is often overlooked in favor of the first argument of ‘Will to Believe.’ It is particularly important for our purposes because it points to the possibility of knowing God in the future. James has not been convinced by conventional philosophical arguments for the existence of God (ontological, cosmological, teleological, and so on); if he were he would not so emphasize the permissibility of belief in the *absence* of convincing evidence. However, this does not mean that James thinks confirmation of the existence of God (if such a being exists) is forever impossible. He is, in fact, very optimistic about the possibility of evidence that confirms God’s existence, the only difference being that, as a good empiricist and Pragmatist might well do, he looks to experience for this knowledge, and primarily to future experience.[[25]](#endnote-25)

That is what this second argument is all about—that, and a likely restriction on the possibility of this evidence and the relevance of this restriction to what we do now. We may reconstruct the bulk of the argument as follows:

1. Experiencing a personal God by means of a relationship with God may be our best chance of confirming the existence of God.

2. God is personal.

3. Persons in our human experience tend not to take all of the initiative in relationships; instead, they contribute to the relationship on *their* end largely in response to the trust and initiative we put forward on *our* end.

4. So it is likely that God will not take all of the initiative in our relationship with him, but will contribute to the relationship largely in response to our willingness to trust him prior to proof (from 2 and 3).

5. So our best chance of confirming the existence of God may be that we show some willingness to trust him prior to proof (from 1 and 4).

The first premise here is James’ own Pragmatic application of empiricism to the idea of a personal God: Unconvinced by other purported proofs of God, he looks to future experience as a likelier way of knowing such a God. The second premise is taught by most of our major religions; for most of us who find ourselves able to believe in God, a personal God is the God we are able to believe in. The third premise is an observation from experience. James’ own presentation of the analogy from human to divine persons is very nice:

We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way. To take a trivial illustration: just as a man who in a company of gentlemen made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed no one's word without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn,—so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicality and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods’ acquaintance.

Now this does mean that our beliefs create the God we believe in, that belief can create reality out of nothing, or any such fiddle-faddle. What it means is that divine reality might possibly be in that special category of things where our beliefs have some effect either on the reality itself or at least on our knowledge of it. One of the great contributions of the Pragmatist tradition in philosophy is the insight that some things can be affected by our beliefs concerning them, and that some truths cannot be confirmed apart from our belief in them. We are not spectators on reality, watching it from elevated seating; we are active players on the field of reality, and our beliefs about it make a difference. Our beliefs effect our behavior, which effects the world; in some cases, this effect may be on the same region of reality with which our beliefs are concerned. (This is particularly true with social realities, those from which James’ analogy is drawn.[[26]](#endnote-26))

Could God be such a reality? Certainly not, unless some very strong version of process theology is true.[[27]](#endnote-27) But our *relationship* with God might easily be such. If that relationship is sufficiently like the personal relationships we know from experience—the human-to-human ones—then truths about it may be, in part, the result of our beliefs about God. More importantly, our *knowledge* of God will likely depend on our relationship with God, which is shaped in no small part by our beliefs about God. Using my favorite example, we will learn that God exists and is favorably disposed towards us much like Benedick and Beatrice in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* learned of their mutual love—by *believing* in its existence.

We have not yet looked directly at the *final* conclusion of James’ second argument. Some truths can only be known after a certain degree of trust has already been placed in them. The likelihood that belief in God will help to verify the truth about God—if there be any such truth—shows that a rule against believing in the absence of prior compelling proof is ‘a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there . . . .’ Such a rule, James says, ‘would be an irrational rule.’ Thus the final conclusion of James’ second argument is the same as that of his first: Religious belief without prior proof can be rational.

In short, James with his two arguments is telling us that religious belief must be judged on practical grounds, not merely on the grounds of whether it is a conclusion deriving good logical support from its premises.[[28]](#endnote-28) And, on these practical grounds, there is no convincing case against religion. Religion is epistemically permissible. And belief in God may well lead to knowledge of God—as a result of that very belief.

It might be helpful to overview some of the main points of James before relating him to Augustine. First, epistemic rules are partly a function of the practical requirements of belief for life.

Second, belief in God without proof can be rational, and rationality is in no small part a function of practicality. Proof is not a requirement for rationality. We can believe what we do not yet know without violating the requirements of reason.

Third, the widespread theological claim that the ultimate and divine reality is personal has its own special relevance for the rationality of religion; specifically, it counts in favor of it.

Fourth, knowledge of religious truth (if there is any) is a real possibility. However, and fifth, the truth about God might be such that we will not be able to learn it without first believing it. Knowledge comes after belief, not vice versa. Belief may lead to knowledge by the natural processes of personal relationship between the human and the divine.

III. FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE

There is between Augustine and James a significant general agreement on the rationality of faith without knowledge. They converge on a number of points including the danger of unbelief, the practicality of faith, its non-identity (at least as things currently stand for most of us) with knowledge, and its role in leading us toward knowledge. No less significant, however, are the differences. One is that Augustine is devoted to Christian orthodoxy while James defends our right to believe what we want. Another is that Augustine’s efforts to add knowledge to faith are largely rationalistic whereas James’ are largely empirical. Yet these differences should not lead us to think that James and Augustine represent fundamentally inconsistent epistemological perspectives, for there are several clues pointing to the possibility of a degree of synthesis of their insights.

Let us consider first the major points of comparison, then those of contrast, and finally the possibility of synthesis.

A. MAJOR POINTS OF COMPARISON

We must understand the close connection between Augustine’s illustration for faith at *c. Acad.* 3.15.34 and James’ first argument. Let us modify Augustine’s illustration in a Jamesian direction. Say *three* friends are going to Alexandria: one who believes everything she’s told, a hard skeptic who *dis*believes everything he’s told, and a soft skeptic who withholds belief whenever proof is lacking. The shepherd testifies concerning the right way to Alexandria, which represents the (allegedly) true religion leading to its promises (whether these involve a happy afterlife, a good *next* life following reincarnation, a bodily resurrection when Christ returns, or merely earthly blessings). The credulous friend, representing the religious believer, believes and follows that way. The second friend, representing the disbeliever, thinks the shepherd is wrong and follows the other way. The soft skeptic, representing the doubter who opines only when he has proof, simply sits down at the fork to wait for more evidence. Sticking to James’ perspective, we don’t know what happens to any of them. Perhaps there is no Alexandria—no real God, no true religion. Perhaps the believer is in Alexandria and the disbeliever is eaten by wolves—perhaps one goes to heaven and one to hell. Perhaps they all make it to Alexandria—perhaps an all-forgiving God welcomes all into heaven in the end. The first two friends have made their choice what to believe, taking the risk of being wrong. There are only two things of which we can be sure: that at least one of the first two is wrong about *something*, and that the *third* one will never be *right* as long as he persists in his unbelief.

On this much Augustine and James agree: Withholding judgment on religion carries with it the certain consequence of not believing any religious truths which might be there to believe, and of missing out on any good consequences of believing these truths. Stubborn agnosticism avoids the risk of error in belief, but has a risk of its own. As James puts it:

Believe truth! Shun error!—these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance.

There are at least four additional major points of comparison.

First, faith in the absence of knowledge can be rational. Second, faith is practical, and this is no small part of what justifies its rationality. In ‘Will to Believe,’ faith (for those for whom it is live, forced, and momentous) is a practical decision made along life’s course—less an academic epistemological situation and more like figuring out whether to marry, whom to marry, and whether to become a philosopher or a dentist. In Augustine, faith in religious testimony is, epistemically speaking, on a par with faith in historians, geographers, and parents. Not only is this sort of trust useful as a way of getting to know the truth when we lack knowledge, but it is also the foundation of familial and social life.

Third, religious faith is *not* knowledge. Yet, fourth, it *precedes* knowledge. This is true in a literal and temporal sense: Faith comes first, knowledge later. It is also true in causal terms: Faith *leads* to knowledge. Faith is a propaedeutic for knowledge. In Augustine, those who would eventually understand God by reason must begin by believing his message and, by thus believing, learn to *understand*. In James’ second argument God, as a personal being, may well reward faith with experiential knowledge of himself, knowledge that would not be given to one churlish in her use of her capacity to trust.

B. MAJOR POINTS OF CONTRAST

There remain notable differences in what we have considered here. There is one notable difference in method and another in goals.

Let us consider first the very important difference in goals. Augustine is aiming at orthodox Christianity, and he will not have our faith go any other way. The object of this faith, if we *had* to choose just one, would be Jesus Christ. It is better, however, to list at least four related objects of faith. Christ is foremost. However, he established the apostles as authoritative teachers of his way. The apostles both wrote the New Testament as an authoritative repository of Christian doctrine and established the orthodox church. This church now teaches this doctrine and stands as our interpreter of the Bible.

James is different. He is defending the right of our ‘passional nature’ to decide when convincing evidence is lacking; in other words, we may opt to believe without following any organized religion. We may ‘pray for the victory of the religious cause’[[29]](#endnote-29) without praying ‘Our Father in Heaven.’ To be sure, there appear to be some empirical and pragmatic restrictions on religious belief. I think James would not approve of a faith inconsistent with the findings of science, for example. Religion must also help us make life better in the future; religious beliefs are tested by their fruits,[[30]](#endnote-30) and religious belief ought to unleash the ‘strenuous mood,’[[31]](#endnote-31) the vigorous struggle to make a better world. Still, this is nothing like Augustine’s rigorous commitment to Christian orthodoxy; James is happy to be a heretic.[[32]](#endnote-32)

As to the difference in method, Augustine aims to add knowledge to faith by means of contemplation which intentionally draws from the Platonic philosophers. That Augustine admired much in this tradition is well known, and this is hardly the place to overview, much less settle, any debates about the nature and extent of these borrowings. It suffices for our purpose to observe that, as he said in some of the texts we examined, Augustine hopes that Platonic reflection will give him some knowledge of God. The heart of Platonism is its insight into non-physical reality. God and the soul are not physical things, and the Platonic methods for reflecting on such realities, Augustine thinks, will prove useful in gaining an understanding of God. Platonism, of course, tends more toward rationalism than towards empiricism; in other words, its epistemology considers knowledge to be found in the mind rather than in worldly experience. In both Plato’s *Meno* and Augustine’s *De Magistro*, we find interesting accounts of the origins of knowledge in the mind rather than experience accumulated in this life.

Not so James, a devoted empiricist. Knowledge comes from experience and is tested in future experience. Knowledge comes ‘by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think,’ and for it we look always to the end rather than to the beginning.[[33]](#endnote-33) When, in James’ second argument, he suggests that we might in the future be able to gain knowledge of God, he expects us to gain it in a different way than Augustine had aimed for it—in experience. (Not, by the way, in sensory experience as such, but in *experience*, which in James’ thinking is a broader category than mere sensory experience. This is what distinguishes an American Pragmatist’s empiricism from the earlier British Empiricists in the Enlightenment era.)

C. SYNTHESIS

Are these difference irreconcilable? Do Augustine and James represent the incompatible religious epistemologies of a medieval Christian neo-Platonist and a modern empiricist? Things are not quite that simple. There are at least three reasons their epistemologies might be at least partially synthesized, although working out a detailed synthesis is outside the scope of this project.

First, we may opt not to commit ourselves to an absolute dichotomy of empiricism and rationalism. Perhaps knowledge can come by philosophical reflection. Perhaps it can also come by experience. We do not have to say that *all* knowledge comes by *only* one of those routes. There may be different kinds of knowledge and, perhaps, sometimes different ways of gaining knowledge might converge on the same truth. As we will see below, Augustine’s own epistemology suggests as much, and so does that of another more recent Christian thinker whose epistemology has notable points in common with James.

Second, other connections between Augustine and James present themselves when we look at a slightly bigger picture. Although we cannot look at them in detail in this close-up study, they suggest that the methodologies of Augustine and James are not so far apart as they might appear.

Note, for one thing, that James elsewhere makes a defense of the necessity of faith in everyday life and knowledge much like Augustine’s.[[34]](#endnote-34) We find this in his *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, in which he describes knowledge using an economic metaphor. Knowledge involves ‘a credit system’ in which we accept the testimonies of others; nearly all knowledge comes by this trust, and the whole system relies on being able to cash in our notes of credit from time to time by confirming some bit of knowledge in experience.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Note, also, that there is an empirical streak in Augustine’s religious epistemology. Most importantly, there are the historical miracles that confirm the Messiahship of Jesus.[[36]](#endnote-36) This is religious knowledge from experience. There is also the contemporary fulfillment of prophecies concerning the church.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Third, there is one thinker in particular whose thought suggests the possibility of a significant degree of integration of the epistemologies of James and Augustine. C. S. Lewis, perhaps the most influential Augustinian in his century, is also an orthodox Christian, yet comes rather close to James on at least one occasion. He makes the same discovery concerning the verification of truth about God—that, since God is a person, we will not be able to test our beliefs about him through controlled testing as a geologist will test a theory about rocks. Lewis develops this insight at length and then does something James does not: He offers a specific account of how the verification of Christian theology comes about. Not only is belief needed; we must also be *good*. The right way of knowing God in experience, in Lewis’ eventual conclusion, is also corporate; if we are to know God in experience, we must enter into the loving orthopraxy of the church.[[38]](#endnote-38) Lewis thus comes alongside James in rejecting a spectator theory of knowledge, developing his own views in a more classical direction informed by his study of Christianity. We interact with the object of knowledge; we must be changed by what we know; we must become more like God in order to know him well.

We have seen that two of the greatest defenders of religion, one ancient and one modern, agree that faith can be rational in the absence of knowledge and yet itself may lead towards knowledge. One is a Christian with a neo-Platonic bent, and the other is an empiricist defending the religion of your choice. These differences notwithstanding, there is a possibility of a greater integration not necessarily of Augustine’s and James’ own views, but at least of the ideas they touted. This is a promising theme for future research. ‘Of making many books there is no end’—nor of considering the rationality of faith. However, progress towards understanding of faith and rationality has been made in the past, and future progress will be spurred on by better understanding these two participants in the past conversation.

1. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Heythrop Journal* whose insightful commentary has enriched this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Much has been written on faith and reason in Augustine. The interested reader might consult John M. Rist, ‘Faith and Reason;’ *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Krutzman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26-39; Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), Part One, Chapter 1; Frederick E. Van Fleteren, ‘Authority and Reason, Faith and Understanding in the Thought of St. Augustine;’ *Augustinian Studies* 4 (1973), 33–71; Scott MacDonald, ‘The Epistemology of Faith in Augustine and Aquinas;’ *Augustine and Philosophy*, eds. Phillip Cary, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 167-196; Gareth B. Matthews, *Augustine* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), chapter 10; Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), chapter 2; and Peter King and Nathan Ballantyne, ‘Augustine on Testimony;’ *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39.2 (June 2009), 195-214. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For additional commentary on this passage, see Erik Kenyon, *Augustine and the Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 51-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Augustine J. Curley, *Augustine’s Critique of Skepticism: A Study of* Contra Acadmicos (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 122. Joanne McWilliam, ‘The Cassiciacum Autobiography;’ *Studia Patristica* 18.4, edited by Elizabeth A. Livingston (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 1990), 28. Mark J. Boone, *The Conversion and Therapy of Desire: Augustine’s Theology of Desire in the Cassiciacum Dialogues* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Against the Academics*, in *The Cassiciacum Dialogues of St. Augustine*, trans. Foley (New Haven: Yale University Press, Forthcoming), 3.20.43. Foley notes here Augustine later ‘expresses regret for exaggerating the compatibility of Christianity and Platonic philosophy, filled as it is with “grievous errors.”’ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *On Order*, in *The Cassiciacum Dialogues of St. Augustine*, trans. Foley (New Haven: Yale University Press, Forthcoming), 2.5.16. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed, Introduction by Peter Brown; 2d ed. edited and notes by Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 6.5.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 6.5.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 6.4.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Augustine, *The Advantage of Believing*, trans. Ray Kearney, notes by Michael Fiedrowicz; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Part I-Books, Vol. 8: *On Christian Belief*, edited. Boniface Ramsey, Introductions by Michael Fiedrowicz (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2005), 12.26. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 10.23. Helpful commentary on the importance of faith in friends may be found in King and Ballantyne, 208-211. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Augustine, *Faith in the Unseen*, trans. Michael G. Campbell; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Part I-Books, Vol. 8: *On Christian Belief*, edited. Boniface Ramsey, Introductions by Michael Fiedrowicz (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2005), 1.2-3.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *The Advantage of Believing*, 10.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 11.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 10.24 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 17.35. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 14.31. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 14.30. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 8.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. In other words, there is some logical support of premises for their conclusion. We should beware of positing a *dichotomy*, however, between epistemic and practical justifications of belief; the relevance of practical concerns to those concerns we think of as epistemic is an aspect of Augustine’s analysis, as well as James’. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Augustine, *Retractions*, I.xiv, 285. Noted by Fiedrowicz in note 48 to *Advantage of Believing.* 11.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. William James, ‘The Will to Believe.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Much has been written on ‘The Will to Believe,’ and a few sources would provide ample opportunities for the interested reader to analyze the arguments in the text and begin to explore the scholarly debates on its interpretation. An honorable mention must go to O’Connell as a scholar of both Augustine *and* James; Robert J. O’Connell, *William James on the Courage to Believe* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 1997); chapter 1 is an admirable commentary on the text. For a reconsideration of James’ *vis-a-vis* his nemesis here, W. K. Clifford, see David A. Hollinger, ‘James, Clifford, and the Scientific Conscience;’ *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 69-83. Southworth is insightful on James’ first argument (neglecting the second if I understand him rightly), and uncovers an interesting aspect of it—that it is not supporting wishful thinking, nor merely the *right* to believe, but also the *courage* to believe when belief is necessary for acting on our moral commitments; James Southworth, ‘The Passional Nature and the Will to Believe;’ *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society* 52.1 (2016), 62-78. Fuller explains that James’ view that belief is rooted in passion rather than pure objective reason is rooted in his idea that the function of belief is practical; this, moreover, is a life-affirming view rooted in science rather than a nihilistic view rooted in relativism; Robert C. Fuller, ‘“The Will to Believe”: A Centennial Reflection,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64.3 (Autumn 1996), 633-650. Another helpful source is Michael R. Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, chapters 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Douglas Adams’ fine phrase. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. James’ long and careful look at *past* experience is *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. On James’ strategy of thinking about cosmic or divine reality by analogy from social relationships, see David C. Lamberth, ‘Interpreting the Universe after a Social Analogy: Intimacy, Panpsychism, and a Finite God in a Pluralistic Universe’ in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 237--259. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. And, in fact, James may subscribe to a process theology. But this is outside the scope of this text and not, so far as I can tell, what he is talking about in this particular argument. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Slater: In general, ‘for James, while the content of religious beliefs and experiences does not reduce to their practical value—for truth-value is not the same sort of value as utility, even if the latter serves as our best *indicator* of the former—we nonetheless have a practical reason to be persons of faith if, and only if, such beliefs and experiences prove to be valuable for how we live;’ Slater, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. William James, ‘The Moral Philosophers and the Moral Life.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture I. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. James, ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Stuart Rosenbaum, Introduction to *Pragmatism and Religion: Classical Sources and Original Essays*, ed. Stuart Rosenbaum (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. James, ‘Will to Believe.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. And also applied to *truth*, although this suggests some further difference between Augustine and James—perhaps a difference in metaphysics, or perhaps just a difference concerning philosophy of language and meaning. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Lecture VI. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. For example, Augustine, *The Advantage of Believing*, 14.32-15.33. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. A major emphasis in the later chapters of *Faith in the Unseen*. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952; new ed. 2001), 163-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)