

# The Irrationality of Religious Beliefs

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Abstract:

Many highly educated people think religious belief is irrational and unscientific. If you ask a philosopher, however, you'll likely get two answers: most religious belief is rational in some respects and irrational in other respects. In my previous essay I explained why they think so many religious beliefs are rational. In this essay I explain why they think those same beliefs are irrational.

The charge of irrationality applied to religious belief could come from any of several distinct groups: philosophy professors who have studied rationality and religious belief for many years; intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Paul Zachary Myers, and Sam Harris who have serious intellectual training but virtually no serious study of rationality (which is a subset of epistemology); intelligent atheists with little intellectual training at all; or unintelligent atheists who foam at the mouth on blogs and in bars. Different groups bring significantly different charges under the heading 'irrational'. In this essay I will be articulating what professional philosophers think on the matter, just like how I described in the previous essay the primary factors that professional philosophers think make much religious belief rational. For the most part *I will not be commenting on the strength of the charges*—that is, I won't attempt to figure out whether the charges show that religious belief is irrational in any *worrisome* sense.

As I mentioned in the first essay, my methodology of listening to voices in my head is flawed. Even so, I think nine of the most common philosophical complaints about the epistemic status of most religious belief (which are not always the ones that get published in professional philosophy journals and books) begin as follows.

## *Charge C1: Irrational Sustaining Causes*

First, there is charge C1 that although a great many people *acquire* their religious beliefs in rational ways (almost always testimonial, when they are young children), they frequently *sustain* many of their important religious beliefs via irrational means. The irrational means include factors such as mental illness, wishful thinking, fear (e.g., of the unknown), groupthink, the strong tendency for obedience, and the often unconscious desire for comforting worldviews. So even if there is rock-solid argumentative proof of God's existence, or a way to vividly perceive him and his standard characteristics (e.g., that he is loving, or forgiving, or omniscient), or just epistemically very powerful testimony that comes from people

who have perceived God, an enormous percentage of people are theists in an irrational manner. These people do *not* hold their beliefs solely on the basis of testimony or arguments or personal experience—even if such bases are available to them; instead, the *main* factors that hold up their religious beliefs, the ones doing almost all the real causal work in making them stick with those beliefs, are the epistemically defective ones listed in the second sentence above (as well as other, similar, factors). There are millions of people with rational religious beliefs, as stated in my previous essay, but there are millions of *others* with straightforwardly irrational religious beliefs due to irrational sustaining factors. That’s what charge C1 says.

You could say the same thing about *many* beliefs that happen to be held by many millions of people, political and moral as well as religious. I think it would be quite odd for someone to deny C1! Again, agreeing with C1 does not, by any stretch of the imagination, mean that one thinks religious beliefs are never, or only rarely, rational in interesting senses of ‘rational’. For comparison, *whatever* your political views are you have to admit that a great many people who have some of your political beliefs have them via patently irrational means. Or set aside beliefs and just think of political *actions* such as voting: you’ve got to admit that many people who voted for the same candidate you voted for did so for really bad reasons (to verify this point just read some political blogs for a few hours).

I suppose there are people, philosophers included, who would deny C1. They would say that even when things look epistemically bad for religious believers—since it appears as though they are maintaining their religious beliefs via the irrational means listed above—what is really happening is that the clear majority of ordinary people are subtly perceiving or experiencing God and, what is crucial here, *that’s* the prime basis for their religious beliefs, so the charge C1 is mistaken. However, I know of no evidence whatsoever for this view. In fact, I think this attitude in a philosopher is due to excessive sentimentality, wishful thinking, or an amazing lack of observation. For what it’s worth, C1 is a litmus test for me: if a philosopher denies that C1 has significant application to religious believers, then I will simply not trust anything that philosopher says regarding the epistemology of religious belief (it would be like finding out that he or she is a young-earth creationist). It’s utterly clear that a great many *political* beliefs are held for epistemically poor reasons, and I think it’s comparably clear that the same holds for religious beliefs.

What is more interesting, at least by my lights, is that many of the rational religious beliefs discussed in my previous essay are often thought to have important irrational aspects *even when they aren’t sustained via wishful thinking, mental illness, groupthink, the desire for obedience, fear, or the desire for comfort*. That is, it’s thought that there are plenty of religious beliefs that (i) are rational in the respects described in the previous essay, (ii) avoid *all* the problems noted in C1, but (iii) are still irrational—or, better, “epistemically flawed” in a serious manner. Those are the beliefs I will discuss in the remainder of this essay.

### *Charge C2: Flawed Amateur Arguments*

Charge C2 says that most of the arguments for the existence of God *appealed to by non-experts*, such as the three given in the previous essay under factor F2 (viz., the Design Argument, the Cosmological Argument, and Social Argument), have fatal flaws that philosophers have uncovered. It doesn’t matter if

there are *other* religious arguments that are perfect and detailed in the reader's favorite professional philosophy essay: most of the common ones, the ones that considerable numbers of *ordinary* non-philosophers *partly base their beliefs on*, have fatal flaws that philosophers have long known about. For instance, even if the human eye and other impressive aspects of nature were directly designed by God, the simple design arguments that most non-philosophers offer for this conclusion fail because of the impressive epistemic status of evolutionary theory: in those bad design arguments evolutionary theory is either completely ignored or brutally misunderstood or evaluated in an exceedingly flawed manner. Again, maybe there is a *wholly successful* design argument! But the ones typical people rely on are well known, by philosophers, to have fatal flaws; to think otherwise is to be overly sentimental, unobservant, or engaged in wishful thinking. The same holds for the simple cosmological arguments summed up with slogans such as 'Well, something must have caused the universe to exist; that's gotta be God'.

By 'fatal flaw' I mean a flaw that is so bad that in order to repair the argument to get around the weakness it would have to change so much that we wouldn't say that it was the same argument just revised. For the sake of comparison, think of all at once replacing the engine, tires, doors, seats, wheels, and chassis of a car: now you have a *new* vehicle, not the old car just altered.

This charge C2 is consistent with the point made with factor F2 (from my previous essay) that those arguments are *good enough* to help make religious belief reasonable in the sense described in the previous essay, when the person in question has no inkling of the flaws in the arguments. There need be nothing *stupid* about the common philosophical or scientific argument for theism even when they have fatal flaws.

### *Charge C3: Flawed Professional Arguments*

Charge C3 says that the professional philosophical arguments for substantive religious claims (by, for instance, the contemporary philosophers Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne) have fatal flaws that as far as we know can't be repaired. Philosophers keep *trying* to find decent ontological, cosmological, and design arguments but they just keep failing—and this has been going on for centuries. By 'failing' I don't mean to imply that critics have shown that all the arguments have false premises! No: the best, most sophisticated theistic arguments are hardly silly. Instead, critics have revealed objections powerful enough that for each deductively valid argument for a substantive theistic belief there is at least one premise (e.g., the premise that every contingent thing that has a beginning has a cause) whose overall evidence isn't good (even if the overall evidence doesn't show that the premise is false).

Clearly, C3 is much more controversial than either C1 or C2, both of which I happen to think are true. I will not comment on the truth of C3.

### *Charge C4: Dueling Philosophical Arguments*

Charge C4 says that even setting aside the argumentative flaws just mentioned by charges C2 and C3, highly educated theists know, or at least *should* know, that philosophical reasoning for grand philosophical claims is untrustworthy in this sense: for almost any half-way decent looking philosophical

argument *for* a grand philosophical thesis, we have half-way decent looking philosophical arguments *against* that thesis and it's rarely plain which side is stronger.

C4 is advanced by a great many intelligent, even gifted, college students, but I think a significant portion of philosophy professors endorse it as well (even though the support amongst philosophers for C4 is less frequent than their support for the other charges, as C4 often casts doubt on the epistemic credentials of their own philosophizing).

C4 is like C3 in being controversial. I won't comment on whether it's really true.

Charges C2-C4 do not have a lot of application to real-world religious belief for the simple reason that most religious belief isn't based on anything like discursive argument—and even when a religious belief has such a basis, that argumentative basis is just a *small part* of the full basis of the belief. Most of the important religious beliefs that are rational are primarily based on testimony and/or experience and are based on discursive argument to a very small degree. I will examine challenges to those testimonial and experiential sources now.

#### *Charge C5: Poorly Grounded Testimony*

Suppose Sari bases her religious belief entirely on testimony, including perhaps some tacit and partial reliance on something akin to the Social Argument given earlier. So, it is not based on anything like wishful thinking, the desire for comfort, flawed philosophical or scientific arguments, etc. Hence, she is looking pretty good epistemically considered. Even so, charge C5 claims that a great deal of the testimony she bases her belief on *is* the result of wishful thinking, the desire for comfort, bad arguments, mental illness, experiential delusions, and the like. Sari isn't guilty of any of those things, or so we are assuming, but the odds are that *a great many* of the people in the testimonial chains leading to Sari are so guilty. In a large number of cases the believer will be completely and blamelessly unaware of this flawed basis, and this ignorance helps keep her belief reasonable. However, that doesn't change the fact *that many of the testimonial chains propping up her belief have these serious epistemic deficiencies*.

Suppose that's all true; what does it mean for Sari's belief? First, C5 admits that no matter what happened in the testimonial chain leading to her belief, Sari's belief is the same in epistemic quality as far as Sari can determine from the "inside" so to speak: she need not be at all aware of the defects in the chains. It also admits that the defects don't make her belief blameworthy *as long as she is blamelessly unaware of those defects*, which will be quite often provided she lives a philosophically sheltered life. The real substance of charge C5 is this: (a) Sari's externalistic, God's-eye-view, overall epistemic status is significantly lowered by the defects in the testimonial chains (even if she's blamelessly unaware of those defects); (b) if Sari is aware of those defects, then she is much less justified in continuing to hold the beliefs propped up by those testimonial chains; and (c) if Sari has a little culture in her, then she *should* be aware of those defects.

#### *Charge C6: Doubts about Spiritual Experiences*

Charge C6 concerns alleged spiritual experiences of God. This charge is complex, as befits its subject matter, and is worth going over in detail. Again, let me emphasize that I am just articulating the doubts; I am not pausing to evaluate them.

To begin with, I'm guessing that the vast majority of what people call 'spiritual experiences' fall into four categories:

- Meditation: The experiences of those who have meditated for many years under the direction of a spiritual teacher and according to some well established tradition.
- Mind-Blowing: The "out of the blue" mind-blowing spiritual experiences which are quite rare, very unlike any normal experiences, and not brought about via disciplined meditation.
- Calm: The much more common and *comparatively* calm yet meaningful experiences that people have when seeing the ocean at sunset, the starry skies, the birth of a baby, etc.
- Overall: The "overall" sense one has that many of one's everyday experiences and circumstances in life have been designed in an intentional way by God (e.g., he is rescuing me at various points, challenging me at others, pointing me in the right direction in yet others).

With regard to any of the four categories of alleged spiritual experiences, I suspect that most philosophers are willing to admit that it's *possible* that such experiences really do give one knowledge of various substantive theistic claims such as 'God exists', 'God loves us', 'God knows me', and 'God has awesome power'. Mere possibility is cheap; just because something is possible gives one no reason to think it's true. Accordingly, when theistic philosophers argue for pages on end that there is no conclusive argument showing that perceptions of God, for instance, are *impossible*, they are addressing a pretty small percentage of their critics (maybe they are addressing some *vocal* ones, but that's a different matter). Despite that admission of possibility, philosophers also think *there is good evidence that the experiences in each category are not reliable indicators of the truth of important substantive religious beliefs; moreover, there is little good positive evidence that the experiences are reliable indicators*. Thus, with regard to 'The experiences are good indicators of the truth of important substantive religious beliefs', the two-part charge C6 says there is little good evidence *for* it and there is good evidence *against* it. Now I have to explain the reasoning behind both parts of C6.

### *Meditation Category*

With regard to the Meditation category, there are several factors that make philosophers not trust the theistic reports of meditators as being good indications of the truth of substantive theistic claims.

First, a significant percentage of people who have years-long meditation training are atheists (e.g., practitioners of Zen and other forms of Buddhism). Thus, although there are loads of meditation practitioners who are theists, there are loads who are not.

On this point, there is so much long-running and pervasive “expert” disagreement among meditators that we on the outside are in no position to adjudicate and discover the ones to trust. This is akin to a situation in which we are well aware that 1/3 of nutritionists say that food X is healthy, 1/3 say it’s not healthy, and 1/3 say they aren’t sure about X even after reviewing multiple studies of the matter. In such a scenario we non-nutritionists who know about the profound split among experts hardly know which group to trust. So the epistemic significance of the fact that some meditators say that they have perceived God is partially offset by the fact that a great many meditators say that what happens in meditation is not the perception of God: the testimony of the former is offset by that of the latter.

Second, some philosophers are aware that a good number of the meditators insist that there are many interesting *delusions* experienced in meditation, including convincing illusions of other non-physical persons (spirits) being present, that only more advanced meditation reveals to be illusory. So *even they* admit that some spiritual experiences that seem very impressive to the person having them are actually delusory. Thus, we have testimonial evidence that the testimony of other meditators is not reliable.

Third, much of what meditators say seems nonsensical to non-meditators, including philosophers, even after centuries of investigation by a great many able people. This is a (fallible, not conclusive) sign that they don’t know what they’re talking about. For instance, when asked to articulate their spiritual insights these meditators often use nothing but vague metaphors that defy comprehension, thereby leaving us non-meditators in the dark as to what they mean. Even worse, they often passionately disagree with one another’s metaphors (‘Ultimate reality is X’; ‘No it’s not!’). As a consequence, we have more reason to distrust what they say when they say that they have experienced God.

Fourth, as far as philosophers have determined, theistic meditators don’t acquire any knowledge or interesting quality that non-meditators can use as indicators that the meditators can be trusted. For comparison, although we non-mathematicians can’t directly verify anything mathematicians say about their discoveries, we trust them to know what they’re talking about because they have skills that we can see are distinctive and significant (e.g., engineers use their ideas to help build things that work: if the math was false, it would be miraculous if the things based on those mathematical principles worked).

So for those of us on the outside, who haven’t done any meditation, *if we aren’t sheltered*, if we are aware of the factors mentioned in the previous paragraphs, then we have good reason to mistrust the theistic meditation practitioners (as well as the atheistic practitioners). On the other hand, if a person is sheltered from those considerations, then of course she could easily be in a position in which it would be highly reasonable for her to accept the testimony from the theistic meditators; we saw that point in the previous essay.

### *Mind-Blowing Category*

With regard to the Mind-Blowing category of spiritual experiences, there are two relevant points to make.

First, it’s clear that many of the experiences really are delusional, as the people who say they have had the experiences often insist that the experiences showed them that they should invade Iraq, that Satan is influencing them by telling them to do certain awful things, etc. Hence, we have excellent reason to not

trust the testimony of mind-blowing experiences—and we also have good reason to not trust our own mind-blowing experiences.

Second, and more important, these experiences are incredibly emotional, surprising, and even shocking; and we know full well from psychology that people have a *very* hard time holding on to their rationality in such extreme circumstances (even ones that have nothing to do with spirituality). Mere amateur psychological knowledge will do the trick here; e.g., that possessed by police detectives who know how unreliable people are when having extremely emotional or otherwise disorienting experiences. (If nothing like that has happened to you, then you just don't know how incredibly disorienting they are!)

If someone is aware of these two facts about mind-blowing experiences, then she should draw two conclusions: “I should not trust the people who have had such experiences”; and “If I have such an experience myself, then I should doubt that my experiences prove what they seem to prove”.

### *Calm Category*

With regard to the Calm category of spiritual experiences (the experiences had while sensing extreme beauty in nature or something appropriately similar), I think philosophers have several beliefs that make them skeptical that such experiences give any remotely impressive indication that God exists (or loves us, or forgives us, or whatever). First, they think that when an atheist or agnostic sees her baby born or the starry skies, she has pretty much the same experience as the theist. Theists are having the same meaningful experiences as the non-theists but then they are immediately *grafting a theistic interpretation on to the experiences without any objective basis to do so*, an interpretation that in virtually all cases they have been taught in some form or other, usually implicitly. The crucial point: there is nothing in the experience that is a reliable indicator of God. The experiences may strike the theists as genuine experiences or perceptions of God or God's presence, but we know that people are generally not trustworthy about psychology.

Why do philosophers think this? Other than the testimony of some theists that they are somehow witnessing the works of God, there is no evidence that their experiences are any different from those of atheists or agnostics. It's not as though we have evidence that the brains of non-theists are importantly different from those of theists when they witness babies born. Further, even if we had such evidence, what would that prove anyway? A mere difference could easily and plausibly be explained as resulting from different *prior* attitudes, not differences in perceptions. And when the atheists and agnostics consider their own experiences of babies being born, they see no good reason to think God exists: just because an experience is amazing and incredibly moving hardly suggests there are any supernatural entities.

### *Overall Experience Category*

The fourth and final category of spiritual experience is quite common: the person has the idea that some (often many) of the twists and turns in her life have been manipulated by God in various subtle ways in order to have her live a special kind of life. For each twist or turn, she will often admit that when taken in isolation there is no solid reason to think it shows God's hand in her life; but when you take them all

together—which is hard to do without living through them yourself—one can see God’s influence. A great many of the theists I know claim to have had such experiences.

Philosophers don’t write much about this category, as far as I know. So I don’t have anything to summarize. But my sense (a voice in my head) is that they are not impressed with this alleged source of evidence for theism. For my own part, when I talk to people who say they have had this overall sense of divine guidance, they end up saying things that hardly call out for the existence of any “higher power”.

For instance, I had a student relate the following story, which I think is pretty typical of this category. He walks his dog nearly every evening on the same route for many years. One day, right before a storm was going to hit, he decided to not cross the street (like he always, *always*, does) and instead continue on the sidewalk for another block to cross the street. Well, a few seconds later a lightning bolt hit a tree which he would have been walking next to if he had crossed the street! And that strongly suggests that God exists and was looking out for him!

Sorry, but that has always struck me as just about the lamest idea I’ve ever heard. I suspect most philosophers would agree. There are several reasons for this attitude, but here’s just one: if he had crossed the street and a tree limb had fallen on him or his dog, then he probably would have come to the conclusion that God was putting an obstacle in his path of life for some good purpose. If you’re paying attention and you have some creativity, you can invent stories all day.

Finally, there is a consideration that goes against all four categories of alleged spiritual experiences: even if one thought that a person could perceive God as a certain kind of presence, and thereby know that he exists and is very powerful and loving, it’s hard to see how any of the vast majority of spiritual experiences could justify more specific religious claims such as ‘Jesus will come again’, ‘Jesus rose from the dead’, ‘Heaven really exists’, ‘Such-and-such miracle occurred’, ‘God is not merely supremely powerful and knowledgeable but perfect in power and knowledge’, ‘Salvation occurs only via X’, ‘The Bible is true when properly interpreted’, etc. Theists believe these things not *primarily* on the basis of experiences. For instance, an experience of tremendous love in the absence of a human, animal, or memory might (just *might*) tell me that some spirit is currently present, but it won’t tell me that the Bible is true when interpreted accurately, or that there is an afterlife, or that Jesus performed miracles, or that God is omnipotent. Of course, it’s *possible* that the source of the overwhelming love might say to the one living through the experience ‘Hey! I’m omnipotent and the Bible is true’, but nothing like that happens in real life.

### *Charge C7: Suffering*

Charge C7 says that a great many theistic responses to the existence of gratuitous suffering are epistemically flawed in significant ways.

Roughly put, an instance of suffering is gratuitous when it isn’t coupled with an outweighing good that would make the suffering worth it. The primary ideas behind this charge C7 are two.



**Premise 1:** If the universe has been created by a supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful being, then that being arranged things so that there is no gratuitous suffering.

**Premise 2:** But there is gratuitous suffering.

Clearly, if you're a theist then you have to choose among exactly two options when responding to this charge: hold that the two premises are true, or hold that at least one of them is false. If you take the first option, then you're saying God exists but doesn't fit the "supreme" characterization in the "if" part of Premise 1. But if you take that route, then you are faced with a different challenge: if God is not supremely knowledgeable, or powerful, or morally good—and he allows us to suffer when he knows full well that it isn't worth it, as there is no compensating good—then why trust, love, or worship him?

Most theists, at least in philosophy, take the second option: they hold that at least one of the two premises is false. So they have taken a definite and controversial position: *either Premise 1 is false or Premise 2 is false*. If they aim to have an *informative* view—which of course is a big 'if'—then they need to have some kind of defense of that either-or assertion. That is, they have to be able to say something in support of it.

There are multiple ways a theist might try to respond to the two premises in a manner that's both reasonable and informative. But this is a complicated issue that will take us too far afield, so I will skip it.

What is relevant to our limited concerns here is this: (i) a great many ordinary people have significant awareness of the serious nature of the challenge of suffering, but (ii) when they try to respond to it, philosophers find all sorts of glaring inadequacies in their responses. This is not to say that the suffering challenge refutes theism! What I'm saying here is intended to be analogous to what I said about philosophical and scientific arguments for God's existence. What I said there was this: even if there are *completely* successful theistic arguments—ones sufficient to generate high-grade knowledge of various important theistic claims—the ones ordinary people actually rely on are different and have fatal flaws. What I'm saying here is similar: even if there are completely successful ways of dealing with the challenge of suffering, the ways ordinary people respond are different and frequently epistemically highly defective. Therefore, people often defend their religious beliefs in epistemically highly flawed ways: they are aware of the seriousness of the challenge of suffering but they have no good response to it.

### *Charge C8: Awareness of Defects*

When a person is aware of some challenges to her view *and* realizes that they are serious *and* realizes that her responses to those challenges are significantly weak and defective, that takes away from the epistemic status of her overall position vis-à-vis that belief even if it doesn't affect the epistemic status of the belief itself. Charge C8 says that that statement is true—and the sentence's three-part conjunction is true for enough people to make the charge have some bite (even if it's true of a small percentage of theists, ones that are highly reflective, honest, and modest).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A more ambitious version of charge C8 claims that in many cases even if the three-part conjunction isn't quite true of someone, the person in question is sophisticated enough that it *should* be true of her, and

For instance, it is often true of some highly reflective theists that (a) they are aware that there are enormous numbers of religious people who disagree with their specific religious beliefs; (b) they know, at least a bit, that they really don't have anything like a decent argument that their belief is right and the contrary ones are wrong; (c) they know, at least a bit, that the other people claim to have had spiritual experiences and sacred texts every bit as legitimate as their own; and (d) they know, at least a bit, that they have nothing to point to in a non-question begging way that indicates that their belief is right and the contrary ones are wrong or are based on flawed texts or experiences or arguments. These are some seriously educated or highly reflective people. They know that when it comes right down to it, 'I don't have shit to point to that shows I'm right and they're wrong'. And yet, they stick to their guns anyway. Charge C8 says that this response is epistemically seriously flawed and takes away from the overall epistemic status of the retained theistic beliefs.

### *Charge C9: Lack of Preferred Evidence*

One often encounters objections to theistic belief that run 'there is no good evidence for it' and 'those beliefs are unscientific'.

On the face of it the first objection is poor. Clearly, centuries of testimony by an enormous number of outright geniuses has got to be counted as good evidence. Anyone who has thought much about religious belief knows that there is plenty of very impressive testimony for it. So we should not take the first charge literally.

Instead of literal interpretation, the accusation 'there is no good evidence for it' could mean this: the *overall* evidence we have—and by 'we' it is meant philosophers and other suitably informed people—doesn't support theistic beliefs. That statement might be a mere summary of points already made in this essay: although there are significant considerations that seem to support theistic beliefs, that positive support for theism is completely washed away: (a) many of those considerations aren't even true (e.g., no, the face of Jesus did not appear in the peanut butter jar), (b) many others are true but don't actually do any work in supporting theistic beliefs (e.g., yes, you survived the plane crash, but that's hardly any reason to think God saved you; yes, nature looks carefully designed, but we now have strong evidence that that came about in a natural way; yes, your mother's cancer mysteriously went away even though the doctors insisted it wouldn't, but there's no reason to think that that indicates any supernatural forces at work), and (c) there is evidence against the beliefs (and there is evidence against the reasons those beliefs are based on) that is very strong (e.g., gratuitous suffering).

However, there is an interpretation of the first accusation 'there is no good evidence for it' that I think better captures what the objection is intended to say: the 'there is no good evidence for it' objection is a

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that's enough for an epistemic defect in the retained theistic belief. Think of an athlete who misses something she should not have missed: she is blameworthy for failing to do X even though she didn't detect anything that called out for doing X. The idea here is that we have epistemic responsibilities and failure to meet them in some circumstances is a serious epistemic defect.

claim about the lack of a certain *type* of evidence: one given the title ‘scientific’. That’s why the two phrases in the first paragraph of this subsection go together. What is often meant by ‘there is no good evidence for it’ is this: whereas *commonly accepted* substantive scientific belief is almost always backed up by evidence that is (i) strong, (ii) non-testimonial, (iii) possessed and shared among many people, and (iv) not shown to be seriously flawed, *commonly accepted* substantive religious belief never satisfies all of (i)-(iv). Roughly put, our good “scientific evidence” satisfies (i)-(iv)—that’s a stipulation of how we are using ‘scientific’ here—and religious belief doesn’t measure up. It’s also thought that if a claim fails to be scientific in the sense of (i)-(iv), it’s highly likely that it is epistemically second-rate. The conclusion of the two thoughts, of course, is that religious belief is epistemically second-rate.

### *Conclusion*

None of these charges should be too unfamiliar: undergraduate students voice versions of most of the charges almost every time I teach a section on the epistemology of religious belief. Just to be clear: *I’m not suggesting that any of the charges consists of all true claims or that they show that suitably informed people should not be theists or anything else of the sort.* For what it’s worth, my own view is that C1, C2, C5, most of C6, and C7 are true or awfully close to being true; I’m less certain of the others even though I respect them. But in this essay I was just trying to articulate the doubts philosophers tend to have about the epistemic credentials of religious belief.