Group identity and the willful subversion of rationality: A reply to De Cruz and Levy

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Abstract

De Cruz and Levy, in their commentaries on *Religion as make-believe*, present distinct questions that can be addressed by clarifying one core idea. De Cruz asks whether one can rationally assess the mental state of religious credence that I theorize. Levy asks why we should not explain the data on religious "belief" merely by positing factual beliefs with religious contents, which happen to be rationally acquired through testimony. To both, I say that having religious credences is p-irrational: a purposeful departure from rational thought and behavior, where the purpose in question is maintaining a group identity.

KEYWORDS

belief, rationality, religion, make-believe, imagination, attitudes

1. INTRODUCTION: TWO QUESTIONS ON *RELIGION AS MAKE-BELIEVE*

I would like to answer the main questions posed by Helen De Cruz and Neil Levy, to whom I am grateful for their comments, by clarifying one core idea.

In distilled forms, I take their questions to be the following:

1. De Cruz asks (explicitly): Given that people's religious credences are not factual beliefs, can one reasonably assess religious credences as rational or irrational at all?

2. Levy asks (implicitly): Given that there are alternate strategies (namely, those he advocates) for explaining the data I cite surrounding religious "beliefs," isn't leaning heavily on the construct of religious credence under-motivated?

Let us rehearse the reasoning behind each of these questions in turn.

First, philosophers and lay people alike often assess beliefs (in some sense of that term) as rational or irrational. Rationality, in this train of thought, implies coherence with other beliefs, responsiveness to evidence, and so forth: If a belief is at odds with an agent's evidence, it is irrational; if it coheres with that evidence, it is rational.[1] With that in the background, De Cruz is right that my distinction between religious credence and factual belief complicates the idea of assessing "beliefs" as rational or irrational.[2] My view, of course, leaves rational appraisal firmly in place for factual belief. But religious credence is a secondary cognitive attitude. Basically, that means it is like imagining in its cognitive dynamics, though it goes beyond *mere* imagining in other ways, namely, in its constitution of people's group identities and in its links to sacred values. So it is not obvious what to say about the rationality of *it*.

Suppose, for example, my evidence would render a factual belief that *p* irrational. Would a religious credence that *p*, given that same evidence, also be irrational? If my distinction between the two is legitimate, the irrationality of the factual belief still leaves the rationality of the religious credence an open question. After all, it is not irrational for me to *imagine* that *p* when I am aware

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[1] This is to some extent setting aside pragmatists like Rinard (2017). But the present point could be reworked within her framework, given that she holds that the vast majority of the time forming beliefs on the basis of evidence is practically rational.

[2] As I point out in my Epilogue.

of evidence at odds with that proposition. So, since religious credence is cognitive kin to imagining, it is not clear that there is any irrationality in my *religious credence* that *p*, even given contrary evidence. But it is also not clear that there *isn't* any irrationality, especially when religious credence-based action spills further and further outside the sacred practical setting.

Hence De Cruz's question. As it happens, I do talk about the rationality of the religiously devout in my book. One of my arguments—which emerges in Chapter 8—for positing a distinct cognitive attitude of religious credence is that it allows us to explain how people who are in full possession of their rational faculties can "believe" absurd contents (concerning, e.g., six-day creations, flying snake gods with feathers, shape-changing supernatural beings, etc.): They are taking a different attitude from factual belief toward those contents, which leaves their general rational capacities uncompromised. So my book is clear about maintaining the global rationality of most religious *agents* (though there are of course exceptions).

But De Cruz is right that one can take all that in and still wonder: *Does Van Leeuwen's view imply that religious credences* as mental states *cannot be assessed as rational or irrational?* Otherwise put: Even if a religious person is *globally* rational, is there no respect in which they might be *locally* irrational in holding and/or acting on a particular religious credence? And here she gives appropriately provocative examples, including this:

> We tend to align our beliefs to those of group members, including coreligionists. In most cases, these beliefs are safely compartmentalized so they become only salient in the pews on Sunday or in the Mosque on Friday. But they often aren't. Religiously motivated beliefs in the US (and globally) often represent a substantial political force with serious real-world consequences … For example, Evangelical Christianity in the US is closely tied to climate change denial, and Evangelical Christians have become increasingly polarized around this issue, even stamping out green efforts among their own ranks such as solar panels on church buildings. Underlying this is a constellation of beliefs, including the association of nature awareness with non-Christian forms of religiosity such as neo-paganism, and beliefs about the rapture and Christ's second coming which make climate catastrophe not something to be avoided, but in fact welcomed as a sign of the end times. (De Cruz, 2024: **PN**)

Surely, one might think, there must be *something* irrational about a cluster of religious "beliefs" in anyone's mind—even if they are religious credences and not factual beliefs—if they would lead to people's welcoming a climate catastrophe-induced second coming.[3] What should we say here?

Second, Levy's question/critique should be read in the context of his broader project on beliefs that finds its fullest expression in his recent (2022) book *Bad beliefs: Why they happen to good people*. There he emphasizes the rationality of forming beliefs on the basis of testimony from others (by "beliefs", as in his present piece, he means *roughly* what I mean by "factual beliefs"). For Levy, testimony-based belief formation is rational even—or especially—when one does not have a clear understanding of the first-order evidence for the beliefs in question. The testimony *is* evidence—higher-order evidence, or evidence *that* first-order evidence exists. From that point of view, a religious believer who believes on the authority of her pastor *that there was a talking snake in the Garden of Eden* is engaged in the same kind of rational, testimony-based cognitive processing as a university student who believes on the authority of her astronomy professor *that $e=mc^2$*. Since acquiring beliefs (factual beliefs) on the basis of authorities who are perceived to be competent and benevolent is as rational in the one context as in the other, positing a distinct cognitive attitude in the religious case is not well motivated, on Levy's view. People with absurd religious or ideological "beliefs" are just epistemically unlucky in terms of the social-epistemological context in which they dwell—but they are *not* processing any differently from, or less rationally than, well-educated science-minded liberals. As his present piece makes clear, there are other interesting details to Levy's explanatory approach, but rational testimony-based belief acquisition is central.

2. THE CORE IDEA: P-IRRATIONALITY

So how do I answer De Cruz's and Levy's questions? Here is the core idea that constitutes the basis for my answer to both. This idea swims below the surface of much of what I say in my chapters on group identity and sacred values (6 and 7, respectively). It is time for it to rise clearly above the surface.

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[3] See my Chapter 6 for how I handle extremism and fanaticism, which I distinguish.

It is well understood in game theory that in some situations being irrational—unresponsive to evidence and changing incentives—can put one in a superior position with respect to obtaining some aim (as compared with remaining rational). There are various examples of this sort of thing, but one from Derek Parfit is as useful an illustration as any. Parfit discusses a fanciful case in which he has a safe in his house with gold in it, where one night a ruthless man breaks in and demands that he give him the gold—or else he will murder his children. He realizes that if he does not give the man the gold, his children will likely be killed; yet if he does give the gold, the thief might still kill all of them in order to leave no witnesses. As it happens, however, he is in possession of a drug in liquid form that, for a time, will render him utterly irrational. Should he drink it?

> Before the man can stop me, I reach for the bottle and drink. Within a few seconds, it becomes apparent that I am crazy. Reeling about the room, I say to the man: 'Go ahead. I love my children. So please kill them.' The man tries to get the gold by torturing me. I cry out: 'This is agony. So please go on.'
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> Given the state that I am in, the man is now powerless. He can do nothing that will induce me to open the safe. Threats and torture cannot force concessions from someone who is so irrational. The man can only flee, hoping to escape the police. (Parfit, 1984, p. 13)

In this case, getting the thief to go away was achieved by subverting his own rational control. Given the dynamics of the situation, remaining rational would have rendered it rational for the thief to torture him, and so forth. Irrationality was his only hope.

There are thus, in principle and often in fact, some things that can only be gotten by becoming irrational—at least for a certain time and space and in certain respects. My core idea then is this: *a group identity is one such thing*. I don't mean irrational here in the sense of being a failed, confused, or misfiring attempt at rational processing (like when one commits fallacies); I mean irrational in the sense of being *disconnected from* evidence-based reasoning and utility-maximizing action choice, like Parfit became in his fanciful case. Having religious credence, as De Cruz glimpses and Levy does not, is a way of taking one's cognition and behavior—at least for a time and place—*outside* the space of rational control such that one even *could* have a group identity. Symbolic behavior that expresses religious credences and hence signals one's identity,

often in costly ways, is (seemingly paradoxically) *irrational for a reason*: Its very unresponsiveness to utilities (as opposed to sacred values) and evidence-based factual beliefs both signals to others that that agent would not defect from the group and simultaneously destroys the agent's capacity *to* defect by burning bridges with other potential groups.[4] This is, as it were, a large part of the *purpose* of religious credence-guided symbolic action.

We can come at this from the other end. Rational thought and action—from the perspective of a staunch in-group—is suspiciously fickle. If one is merely cooperating with the group because one has certain utilities and because one has evidence-based factual beliefs that indicate that cooperating will help satisfy those utilities, one will both be and appear likely to defect. As the world changes, evidence-based factual beliefs do too (and the agent's utilities might as well), which might make it no longer rational to cooperate and hence rational to defect. A staunch in-group will notice such slippery rationality. A true loyalist, then, is one whose group allegiance thumbs its nose at rationality, at least when something sacred is at stake: *that* is who you want by your side. Thus, as in the Parfit case, becoming (at least in a certain respect) irrational can serve a conscious or subconscious aim. But in this case, the aim is not thwarting a thief; the aim is *belonging* (De Cruz, 2020; Van Leeuwen, forthcoming).

Let us use the term *p-irrationality* ("p" for purposeful) for the general phenomenon of becoming irrational (in some respect) in order to achieve an aim, though of course the purposes needn't be consciously embraced (and may be more effective if they're not). The "p" is a variable for whatever purpose the irrationality serves, be it deterring a thief (as in Parfit's case) or attaining and maintaining a group identity (as in the current discussion). Kierkegaard was aware of the p-irrationality of "faith," which is why he wrote that universal reasoning must be set aside in the "leap of faith" in order to enter into an "absolute relation to the absolute".[5] My Durkheimian variation on this is that universal rationality—which implies changing course in light of changing evidence and utilities—is what must be set aside, at least in sacred contexts and sometimes beyond, in order to truly belong to a group: both to appear loyal and to *be* loyal.

There are many details to be filled in here (many of which can be found in Chapters 6 and 7 of *Religion as make-believe*). But the general idea, to put it in the terms presently developed, is

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[4] See Whitehouse (2018) on identity fusion, and Williams (2021) on bridge burning.

[5] Kierkegaard (1843/2013).

that adopting and maintaining religious credences, which are not vulnerable to evidence and which mark various entities as sacred and hence inviolable, is a way of furthering a course of p-irrationality that secures one's religious group identity. This is not to say that that is the *only* thing religious credences might do, since there might be more personal (Jamesian) aims as well[6], but group belonging is a central and widespread aim in having and maintaining religious credences. And since religious credences take one outside the space of rational control—usually in a compartmentalized way but often less so, as De Cruz points out—the need to express them symbolically often generates actions that appear self-destructive and irrational.[7] These apparently irrational phenomena, along with their underlying religious credences, are thus p-irrational in the defined sense: outside the sphere of rational control for a purpose, where the purpose here is group identity.

3. CONCLUSION: THE TWO QUESTIONS ANSWERED

My answer to De Cruz is thus as follows. The adoption and maintenance of religious credences is, characteristically, a form of local p-irrationality on the part of a globally rational agent. The widespread departures from straightforwardly rational thought and behavior are the outcroppings of the p-irrational processing that the religious agent has deliberately embraced, without which she would not *be* a member of the group—would not be a … "believer".[8] This is largely the point I am getting at in Chapter 6, which is on the relation between group identity and "belief" and contains the following passage in its opening pages:

> as Anthony Appiah argues in *The Lies that Bind*, the "beliefs" and narratives that define group identities are mostly myths, largely false, that crumble under rational scrutiny. Tales of national origins, theories of racial essence, talk of this or that being "in my blood," legends of great ancestors, and (yes) religious supernatural mythologies—poke any of these sacks of identity-defining ideas and a spate of

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[6] See James (1902) on "personal religion.

[7] See Bulbulia (2004, 2012) and Henrich (2009) on costly signaling.

[8] See my Chapter 5 for discussion of how "believe" and cognates is used differently by philosophers and lay people, such that being a "believer" (an emotion-laden word) in lay speech does not imply having straightforward factual beliefs.

falsehoods gushes out. The point I add to Appiah is that—for the purpose of defining an in-group—lack of truth is often a feature, not a bug. That is not to say that *all* identity-constituting "beliefs" are false or incoherent, only that, given their role, they often are and not by accident. (Van Leeuwen, 2023, pp. 147-148)

My emphasis in this passage is more on truth/falsity than on rationality, but the point applies equally: Departures from rationality on the part of religious credences make them both distinctive (a fully rational belief is not distinctive, since any rational agent is likely to hold it) and show just how far one will go in one's dedication to the group—what costs one will incur, even without any specific expectation of reward. In effect, as suggested, if you blend Kierkegaard with Durkheim, you get my answer to De Cruz's question: Religious credences are characteristically p-irrational, where the purpose is to belong.[9]

I discuss Levy's position and what I take to be some of its shortcomings in relation to religious "belief" in Chapter 8 of my book. But in light of the foregoing discussion, my answer to Levy here can be much shorter: His approach misses the p-irrationality of religious "belief" entirely.

Note that I *agree* with him that religious agents are generally (globally) rational. But his attempt to explain religious "belief" as much as possible in terms of straightforward rational reliance on competent and benevolent testimony is unable to capture a phenomenon that, from what I can tell, is central to religion: *the forming and cementing of group allegiance through deliberate departures from rational processing.*

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to Doubting Thomas: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed".[10] Here Jesus was not just telling Thomas to rely on higher-order evidence rather than first-order evidence, as Levy's approach would suggest. He was telling Thomas to "believe" in a different way altogether, a way that sidesteps the evidential vulnerability typical of factual belief. If Thomas had succeeded doing what he was encouraged to do, he would have been in a state of religious credence.

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[9] See Durkheim (1912/2008) for background.
[10] John 20:29, New International Version.

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