Faith and Reason

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Abstract
A novel account of the rationality of religious belief is offered, called *quasi-fideism*. According to this proposal, we are neither to think of religious belief as completely immune to rational evaluation nor are we to deny that it involves fundamental commitments which are arational. Moreover, a parity argument is presented to the effect that religious belief is no different from ordinary rational belief in presupposing such fundamental arational commitments. This proposal is shown to be rooted in Wittgenstein's remarks on hinge commitments in *On Certainty*, remarks which it is claimed were in turn influenced by John Henry Newman's treatment of the rationality of religious belief in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*.

'*The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing.*'
Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* [*OC*], §166

'*None of us can think or act without the acceptance of truths, not intuitive, not demonstrated, yet sovereign.*'
John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [*EAGE*], 150

1. The Rationality of Religious Belief

To what extent can religious belief be rational? Answers to this question have tended to cluster around two extremes. On the one hand, there is *epistemic heroism*. This is the stance that a perfectly sound epistemic basis can be offered for religious belief - one that is epistemic through-and-through -and hence that there is no standing problem to the idea that such beliefs can be rationally held. In its most radical form, epistemic heroism involves arguing that there are *a priori* proofs of the existence of the God, or at least that there are *a priori* considerations which demonstrate that His existence is highly likely (or more likely than not at any rate).[1] But epistemic heroism doesn't need to be quite so extreme. A more modest line of

[1] See, for example, Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

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argument—found in important work by *reformed epistemologists* like Alvin Plantinga[2], for example—makes no appeal to *a priori* proofs, but merely skilfully demonstrates that a plausible general epistemology, at least if applied in a consistent way to religious belief (i.e., such that there are no 'double-standards' in play), can deliver the required positive epistemic result.

There are a number of difficulties that afflict epistemic heroism, but perhaps the most pressing is that it doesn't seem altogether true to the nature of religious conviction. Religious conviction, after all, is at its most fundamental level a matter of *faith* rather than reason. Indeed, there would something seriously amiss with someone who professed to a faith in God, but who was nonetheless willing to abandon this commitment once faced with counterevidence that she is unable to rationally dismiss (e.g., the problem of evil). If she did abandon her faith as soon as it is challenged in this way, we would rather say that she never had the faith that she professed to have in the first place. And yet giving up one's commitments in light of the presentation of counterevidence that one cannot rationally dismiss is one of the hallmarks of the rational person. It follows that if we take the nature of religious commitment seriously, then we should be suspicious of accounts of the rationality of religious belief that are epistemic through-and-through.

But if we don't head in the heroic direction, then what is the alternative? The standard line is that unless epistemic heroism can be made to work, then we will need to acquiesce with *epistemic capitulation*. Here I have primarily in mind the kind of *fideistic* accounts of the nature of religious belief which effectively remove such belief from being rationally assessable at all. The fideist will maintain that to rationally evaluate religious belief, as if it were akin to other kinds of belief (e.g., perceptual belief), is somehow to misunderstand its nature. Unlike epistemic heroism, views which espouse what I am calling epistemic capitulation, such as fideism, take the nature of religious commitment, and in particular the fact that faith rather than reason lies at the heart of that commitment, very seriously. Unfortunately, they also effectively epistemically 'ghettoize' religious belief. Not only is there no through-and-through epistemic basis offered for religious belief, there is no epistemic basis at all, in contrast to other forms of belief.

[2] Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', *Faith and Rationality*, (ed.) A. Plantinga & N. Wolterstorff, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16–93 and also Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Is there not a way to steer between these two extremes? I think so. I maintain that there is a way of thinking about the rationality of religious belief which simultaneously takes seriously the fact that such belief is, at root, a matter of faith rather than reason while also avoiding the trap of treating religious belief as being such that it should be epistemically evaluated completely differently from ordinary belief. I call such a view *quasi-fideism*.

Although the defensibility of such a proposal is obviously independent of whoever proposed it, such a position can be found in the work of John Henry Newman, particularly his master work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [EAGE]. Significantly, this proposal is also arguably found in the final notebooks of Wittgenstein (published as *On Certainty* [OC][3]), which I think were highly influenced by an engagement with Newman's work. Newman's writings on the epistemology of religious belief are these days largely ignored (by analytical philosophers at any rate), and his influence on Wittgenstein's final notebooks is barely registered in the literature. Worse, Wittgenstein's treatment of the epistemology of religious belief is standardly construed as a straightforward fideistic position, and hence the subtleties of his actual position in this regard are overlooked. A proper understanding of quasi-fideism, and its historical sources, thus goes some way towards rectifying these intellectual injustices.

2. Wittgenstein on the Structure of Rational Evaluation

Reformed epistemologists standardly motivate their position by offering what is known as a *parity argument*.[4] This is the idea that when we consistently apply the epistemic standards in play as regards ordinary belief, we find that religious belief is no worse off. So, for example, one version of a parity argument states that when we epistemically evaluate religious belief in the same way that we epistemically evaluate perceptual belief, then the former turns out

[3] *On Certainty*, (eds.) G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright, (tr.) D. Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1969).

[4] See especially William Alston's 'Religious Experience and Religious Belief', *Noûs* **16** (1982), 3–12, 'Is Religious Belief Rational?', *The Life of Religion*, (ed.) S. M. Harrison & R. C. Taylor, (Lanham Maryland: University Press of America, 1986), 1–15, and *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, (Cornell, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

to be of just the same epistemic standing as the latter. Assuming this claim is correct, it is dialectically significant because, radical scepticism aside, there isn't thought to be a standing challenge to the epistemic standing of perceptual belief. Hence, given that scepticism about the rationality of religious belief is meant to be specific to religious belief (i.e., and not a trivial consequence of radical scepticism more generally), then it follows that there is not a serious epistemic challenge to religious belief.

As we will see, quasi-fideism also involves a kind of parity argument, albeit of a very different sort. Whereas standard parity arguments aim to show that religious belief can be just as rational as another kind of belief which is generally considered to be through-and-through rational, quasi-fideism takes a more radical line. According to the quasi-fideist, our everyday beliefs that we take to be through-and-through rational in fact presuppose fundamental arational commitments—i.e., commitments which are not rationally grounded. This is where the parity argument comes in, since the proponent of quasi-fideism claims that although it is true that religious belief presupposes fundamental arational commitments, this is not a basis for a specific scepticism about the rationality of religious belief since *all* belief, even beliefs which we generally hold to be paradigmatically rational, also presuppose fundamental arational commitments. Put another way, while the quasi-fideist grants that religious belief is, at root, a matter of faith rather than reason, she nonetheless holds that this doesn't disqualify religious belief from being rational since all belief is, at root, a matter of faith rather than reason.

One can find a development of this kind of position in Wittgenstein's last notebooks, subsequently published as *On Certainty*. In this work, Wittgenstein is grappling with the idea that our most basic commitments—i.e., commitments which express propositions about which we are optimally certain—are in their nature rationally groundless. Part of the stimulus for this investigation are the kinds of everyday certainties famously enumerated by G. E. Moore[5] (1925; 1939), which are these days known as *Moorean certainties*. These include propositions such as that one has two hands, that one has never been to the moon, that one is speaking English, and so on. Moore believed that the special certainty that

[5] G.E. Moore, (1925). 'A Defence of Common Sense', *Contemporary British Philosophy* (2nd series), (ed.) J. H. Muirhead, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1925) and 'Proof of an External World', *Proceedings of the British Academy* **25** (1939) 273–300.

we attach to these propositions provides them with a special epistemic status that enables them to play a kind of foundational role in our epistemic practices. Wittgenstein took a very different view. He argues instead that we can make no sense of the idea that we can rationally evaluate that which we are most certain of, where this includes both a *negative* rational evaluation (i.e., a rational doubt of these commitments) or a *positive* rational evaluation (i.e., offer rational support for these commitments).

Consider the Moorean certainty that (for most people, and in normal circumstances), one has two hands. Wittgenstein writes:

> My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.
>
> That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. (OC, §250)

Here Wittgenstein is suggesting that to conceive of this proposition as rationally grounded is to suppose that the rational grounds are more certain than the proposition itself, which of course is *ex hypothesi* impossible since it is held to be optimally certain. Wittgenstein brings this point into sharp relief by highlighting how odd it would be for one to treat one's conviction that one has two hands as being grounded in one's sight of one's hand. Consider this passage:

> If a blind man were to ask me 'Have you got two hands?' I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*? (OC, §125)

In normal circumstances, one doesn't need to check by looking that one has two hands—indeed, imagine how odd it would be if someone were to do this—and moreover to check by looking would make no sense anyway. If one doubts that one has two hands, then one ought not to believe what one's eyesight tells one, since this is no more certain than that one has two hands, which is in doubt.

The point is that these basic certainties, precisely in virtue of being basic certainties, are thereby immune to rational evaluation, whether positive or negative. Moreover, Wittgenstein is quite clear that this is not an incidental fact about our rational practices, but rather reflects an important truth about the very nature of rational evaluations. This is that it is a prerequisite of being a rational subject at all—i.e., one who can undertake rational evaluations and have rational beliefs—that one has such basic arational certainties. To attempt to rationally evaluate a Moorean certainty is thus an attempt to do something

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impossible. It constitutes a failure to appreciate an important fact about the very nature of rational evaluation, which is that all rational evaluation presupposed arational commitments.

Wittgenstein repeatedly urges that the very idea of rationally doubting a Moorean certainty is incoherent. Such a doubt, he writes, would 'drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.' (OC, §613) Doubt of a Moorean certainty is deemed akin to doubting everything, but Wittgenstein cautions that:

> If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty. (OC, §115)

And elsewhere, 'A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt' (OC, §450; cf. OC, §§370; 490; 613). What goes here for doubt also applies to rational belief, for Wittgenstein would equally argue that the game of rational believing also presupposes Moorean certainties. All rational evaluation, whether positive or negative, presupposes arational commitments.

Wittgenstein famously characterise these arational certainties in terms of the metaphor of a hinge. Consider this famous passage:

> […] the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.
>
> That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.
>
> But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC, §§341–3)[6]

Wittgenstein is thus offering a radical new conception of the structure of rational evaluation, one that has arational hinge commitments at its heart. In particular, he is arguing that both the sceptical project of offering a wholesale negative rational evaluation of our beliefs and the traditional anti-sceptical (e.g., Moorean) project of offering a

[6] Although the 'hinge' metaphor is the dominant symbolism in the book, it is accompanied by various other metaphors, such as the following: that these propositions constitute the 'scaffolding' of our thoughts (OC, §211); that they form the 'foundations of our language-games' (OC, §§401–3); and also that they represent the implicit 'world-picture' from within which we inquire, the 'inherited background against which [*we*] distinguish between true and false' (OC, §§94–5).

wholesale positive rational evaluation of our beliefs are simply incoherent. This is because the very idea of a wholesale rational evaluation is itself incoherent, for it is in the very nature of rational evaluations that they take place relative to hinge commitments which are both groundless and indubitable.[7]

A comment about Wittgenstein's use of the hinge metaphor will be helpful here. What Wittgenstein intended with this metaphor is the idea that these commitments need to stand fast in order for rational evaluations to be possible, just as hinges on a door need to stand fast in order for the door to turn. One aspect of the metaphor that has mislead some commentators, however, is the fact that hinges on a door are usually *moveable*—that is, one can shift them about the door and thereby enable the door to turn in different ways. This has led some commentators to treat one's hinge commitments as at least sometimes optional, in that one can acquire or lose them at will (e.g., by changing the nature of one's investigation).[8] I think it is reasonably clear from a close reading of Wittgenstein's remarks on hinge commitments, however, that he does not regard them as optional in this way. Instead, he regards such commitments as being of a visceral nature, as 'animal' (OC, §359), and as involving a kind of 'primitive' trust (OC, §475). Indeed, Wittgenstein is adamant that these commitments are not only completely unresponsive to rational

[7] Note that it is more common in the literature to refer to *hinge propositions* rather than *hinge commitments*. The reason why I have departed from standard practice in this regard is that what is important about these basic commitments is precisely the nature of the commitment itself (i.e., the outright certainty that one is expressing) rather than the proposition that is being committed to. Indeed, I think that a focus on the latter has tended to obscure the point that Wittgenstein was trying to make in this regard.

[8] See, for example, M. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) on 'methodological necessities' (which can be lost by simply changing one's disciplinary inquiry), and C. Wright, 'Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **78** (supp. vol.) (2004), 167–212 on 'entitlements of cognitive project' (which essentially involve opting to trust certain claims that are essential to a particular cognitive project). See Duncan Pritchard 'Unnatural Doubts', *Skeptical Solutions: Provocations of Philosophy*, (eds.) G. A. Bruno & A. Rutherford, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming) for detailed discussion of the former proposal, and also Pritchard, 'Entitlement and the Groundlessness of Our Believing', *Contemporary Perspectives on Scepticism and Perceptual Justification*, (eds.) D. Dodd & E. Zardini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 190–213 for detailed discussion of the latter proposal.

considerations, but are also not acquired via rational processes. They are instead 'swallowed down' (OC, §143) as part of a picture of the world that accompanies, and underpins, the specific things that one is taught (e.g., OC, §§152–53).

I think that once we take this aspect of Wittgenstein's account of hinge commitments seriously, then it follows that we shouldn't think of these commitments as beliefs at all, at least where by 'belief' we have in mind the kind of propositional attitude that epistemologists are concerned with (i.e., the sort of propositional attitude which is a constituent of rationally grounded knowledge).[9] This is because belief in this sense does have a basic level of responsiveness to rational considerations, in that it is a propositional attitude which is by its nature truth-directed.[10] This doesn't mean that one can't have irrational beliefs, of course, since manifestly one can. But it does mean that there is a conceptual incoherence in the idea that one has a belief that is completely unresponsive to rational considerations.

Imagine, for example, a parent who regards their child as innocent of charges brought against her even though it becomes clear that there is absolutely no reason for thinking that this is the case (e.g., the evidence for her guilt is overwhelming, and she is unable to offer any evidence in her defence). At some point, as the weight of the evidence becomes apparent, we would no longer classify her propositional attitude of one of belief but rather as something else (e.g., a wishful thinking or a hope). The same applies to our hinge commitments. Once we recognise that they are completely unresponsive to rational considerations—to the extent that one would retain such commitments even while recognising that one had no rational basis for regarding them as true—then they cease to be plausible candidates for being beliefs.

I think that appreciating this point about hinge commitments helps us to evade a problem that has afflicted attempts to develop a fully-fledged hinge epistemology—i.e., an epistemology that takes seriously the idea that all rational evaluation presupposes arational

[9] There are, of course, many notions of belief operative in the philosophical literature. See L. Stevenson, 'Six Levels of Mentality', *Philosophical Explorations* **5**, (2002), 105–24 for a survey of some key kinds of belief.

[10] Just to be clear: henceforth I will be talking of belief in the specific sense of that propositional attitude which is a component part of rationally grounded knowledge.

hinge commitments. Nearly all epistemologists would endorse the following principle:

Closure Principle for Rationally Grounded Knowledge

If S has rationally grounded knowledge that p, and S competently deduces from p that q, thereby forming a belief that q on this basis while retaining her rationally grounded knowledge that p, then S has rationally grounded knowledge that q.

What is so compelling about this principle is that competent deduction is a paradigm instance of a rational process. Accordingly, if one acquires a belief from one's rationally grounded knowledge via competent deduction, then how could that belief fail to be itself an instance of rationally grounded knowledge?[11]

The problem, however, is that it can look like this principle is in conflict with the idea that we have hinge commitments, at least insofar as the groundless nature of these hinge commitments is meant to be compatible with one's other beliefs being in the market for rationally grounded knowledge (which they had better be, if the view is not to collapse into radical scepticism). This is because on the face of it one could employ this principle to competently deduce, and thereby come to have rationally grounded knowledge of, one of one's hinge commitments that is entailed by a proposition that one has rationally grounded knowledge of. Conversely, if this isn't possible, then it seems that one is committed to regarding the antecedent belief in this entailment as not being an instance of rationally grounded knowledge after all.

[11] Note that epistemologists have denied a closely related—but ultimately very different—principle, which is the general idea that knowledge is closed under known entailments. See, for example, F. Dretske, 'Epistemic Operators', *Journal of Philosophy* **67** (1970), 1007–23 and R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). Crucially, denying that knowledge is closed under known entailments is quite compatible with the endorsement of the closure-style principle just articulated. C. Wright (e.g., 'Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **78** (supp. vol.) (2004), 167–212) has also motivated, on Wittgensteinian grounds, the denial of a principle more in the vicinity of the principle under discussion, though I think this relates to a mistaken understanding of Wittgenstein's notion of hinge commitments, as I explain in my 'Entitlement and the Groundlessness of Our Believing', *Contemporary Perspectives on Scepticism and Perceptual Justification*, (eds.) D. Dodd & E. Zardini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 190–213.

Wittgenstein seemed to be aware of this problem. Consider this passage:

> 'It is certain that after the battle of Austerlitz Napoleon … Well, in that case it's surely also certain that the earth existed then.' (OC, §183)

The point is that our commitment to the idea that the earth didn't just pop into existence in recent history (just after one was born, for example) looks like a hinge commitment that one holds. And yet what Napoleon did after the battle of Austerlitz looks like an ordinary historical claim that one can have rationally grounded knowledge of (e.g., by consulting historical documents). Hence with the closure principle articulated above in play, it seems that one could competently deduce the hinge claim from one's rationally grounded knowledge of the non-hinge claim, and thereby come to have rationally grounded knowledge of it. Conversely, if that isn't possible—as proponents of a hinge epistemology are compelled to maintain—then wouldn't that show that one doesn't have rationally grounded knowledge of the non-hinge claim after all? One can see how this line of argument can potentially threaten the idea that hinge commitments are consistent with rationally held belief.

Once we recognise that our hinge commitments are not beliefs, however—and, relatedly, not the kind of propositional attitudes that can be acquired via rational processes, like competent deduction—then we can resolve this problem. The nub of the matter is that what makes the closure principle so compelling is that it involves the acquisition of a *belief* via a paradigm case of a *rational process*. It is only with these claims in play that the principle seems unassailable. But if one's hinge commitments are by their nature never beliefs and never acquired via rational processes, then it follows that they simply cannot be plugged into closure-style inferences in the manner that we have been supposing. It follows that a proponent of a hinge epistemology can consistently endorse the closure principle set out above as there is no essential conflict between these two theses. In particular, it is entirely compatible with the closure principle that, in line with a hinge epistemology, one can simultaneously have rationally grounded knowledge of non-hinge beliefs while lacking rationally grounded knowledge of one's hinge commitments.

Some further remarks about the nature of Wittgenstein's account of hinge commitments are in order. On the face of it, it can look as if our hinge commitments form a heterogeneous class, since they don't obviously have much in common (aside from the fact that they are regarded as certainties). Moreover, they can also look very

relative to person, place, epoch and culture. That I've never been to the moon, for example, may be a hinge commitment for both Moore's generation and ours, but one can easily imagine a future generation which doesn't treat this as a hinge commitment. These features of our hinge commitments can make them look rather mysterious items in our epistemic architecture.

This variability in one's specific hinge commitments is, however, superficial, and masks the underlying core that is common to all of these commitments. For what all our hinge commitments express is our basic certainty that we are not radically and fundamentally in error. Call this our *über hinge commitment*. It is this commitment that Wittgenstein thinks needs to be in place in order for one to be a rational subject who undertakes rational evaluations. Our other, more specific, hinge commitments—that one has two hands, that one has never been to the moon, etc.,—are merely expressions of our basic über hinge commitment. That is, one expresses one's general über hinge commitment by manifesting one's commitment to specific propositions which, if one were wrong about, would call into question the über hinge commitment. By characterising our hinge commitments in this fashion, I think we end up with a way of making sense of a number of their features.

First, notice that the claim that one cannot rationally evaluate one's hinge commitments because much clearer once we reflect that to do such a thing is in effect to attempt a rational evaluation of one's über hinge commitment. For the idea that there is some deep incoherence in attempting the rationally evaluate one's über hinge commitment looks very plausible indeed. How could one possibly undertake a rational evaluation of whether one is radically and fundamentally mistaken? Relatedly, the idea that this commitment is non-optional for rational subjects is also compelling.

Second, thinking of our hinge commitments in this way can also explain how they might change over time, and how they can apparently be so variable from person to person. Which specific propositions will codify one's über hinge commitment will inevitably depend on one's beliefs as a whole, so as they change so might one's specific hinge commitments. For example, if one lives long enough to be alive during an age when space travel is so common that one could well have been to the moon without realising it, then inevitably it will now no longer be one of one's hinge commitments that one has never been to the moon. Viewed this way, there is nothing remotely mysterious about this shift in one's hinge commitments.

Third, one might be tempted to think that any proposition about which one is optimally certain thereby qualifies as a hinge commitment. But I think that this would be a mistake. It would obviously be undesirable to treat pathological cases of certainty as thereby hinge commitments, for example. On the account of hinge commitments under consideration, however, we have a principled basis for differentiating genuine hinge commitments from merely optimal certainties, since only the former codify one's über hinge commitment. Waking up one morning and finding oneself convinced that there are fairies at the end of one's garden will not cut the mustard on this score, as given one's wider set of beliefs this is clearly something that one could be wrong about without calling into question the über hinge commitment.

Finally, fourth, this way of thinking about the nature of hinge commitments also lessens the concern that such a view might lead to epistemic relativism. One can see the general shape of the worry, in that if our hinge commitments really are such an heterogeneous and highly variable class, then what is to stop the development of bodies of people with radically different hinge commitments? The problem is that these people would embrace epistemic systems which were epistemically incommensurable with one another, in that there would be no rational way of resolving disagreements. But is it possible for there to be such divergence in one's basic hinge commitments?

For one thing, notice that the über hinge commitment will be a constant in this regard. Remember too that these basic certainties are often about relatively mundane propositions, and hence typically concern essentially shared subject matters. For example, someone growing up China may well have the hinge commitment that they live in China, while someone growing up in England might have the hinge commitment that they live in England. But is this really a divergence in their hinge commitments? In effect, don't they both share a common hinge commitment regarding the country where they live? My point is that when hinge commitments are properly understood, the scope for radical divergence in one's hinge commitments starts to look implausible. Indeed, if anything, I think we should expect there to be large overlaps in hinge commitments, of a kind that should militate against the possibility of a widespread epistemic incommensurability. As Wittgenstein puts the issue at one point, in order to be a rational

subject at all, one 'must already judge in conformity with mankind.' (OC, §156)[12,13]

3. Faith and Reason

We are now in a position to see how a hinge epistemology might lead to a quasi-fideistic view about the rationality of religious belief. What is particularly interesting in this context is that there is quite a lot of evidence that Wittgenstein's remarks on hinge commitments were heavily influenced by the work of John Henry Newman, and in particular his defence of the rationality of religious belief in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. In this work Newman opposes a Lockean conception of our basis for religious belief. Locke famously argued in

[12] I explore the topic of epistemic relativism in more detail in Pritchard 'Epistemic Relativism, Epistemic Incommensurability and Wittgensteinian Epistemology', *Blackwell Companion to Relativism*, (ed.) S. Hales, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010) 266–85. See also Pritchard, 'Defusing Epistemic Relativism', *Synthese* **169** (2009) 397–412. For more on this topic as it arises in *On Certainty*, see M. Williams, 'Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism', *Episteme* 4 (2007), 93–114 and A. Coliva *Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty, and Common Sense* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[13] It should be stressed that the account offered here of hinge commitments is not universally shared; indeed, there are several competing accounts of this notion available in the literature, though it would obviously take me too far afield to describe them in detail here. For some of the key defences of competing proposals, see M. McGinn, M. *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), M. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), D. Moyal-Sharrock, D., *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). A. Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty, and Common Sense* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), A. Coliva, *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and G. Schönbaumsfeld, *The Illusion of Doubt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). For two surveys of this literature, see D. Pritchard 'Wittgenstein on Scepticism', *Oxford Handbook on Wittgenstein*, (eds.) O. Kuusela & M. McGinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 521–47. I further develop my own reading of Wittgenstein's epistemology in Pritchard 'Wittgenstein and the Groundlessness of Our Believing', *Synthese* 189 (2012) 255–72 and *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that reason must be our last judge and guide in everything.'[14] Accordingly, he maintained that religious beliefs should be put before the tribunal of reason just like any other. In particular, he argued that strength of belief should be a function of the strength of epistemic support such a belief enjoys, such that beyond a high enough level of strength this support can license certainty. In this Locke was opposing those religious believers he called the 'enthusiasts', who believe what they do 'because it is a revelation, and have no other reason for its being a revelation but because they are fully persuaded, without any other reason, that it is true, they believe it to be a revelation only because they strongly believe it to be a revelation; which is a very unsafe ground to proceed on, either in our tenets or actions.'[15]

While Locke is concerned only to demarcate rational religious belief from irrational religious belief, the standards he applies are apt to result in a general scepticism about the rationality of religious belief, particularly once one notes that (absent an *a priori* basis for religious belief anyway), religious belief is often grounded in reasons which can at least on the face of it appear little better than that offered in support of the enthusiasts' religious belief. Does the religious believer possess any solid independent basis for holding her beliefs (i.e., a basis which doesn't already presuppose the general truth of her religious worldview)? If not, then it is hard to see how it would pass the Lockean test.

In contrast to this Lockean view about rational belief, Newman argues that many of the propositions about which we are most certain do not enjoy anything like the kind of epistemic support that Locke imagines. The list of propositions he cites in this regard is very interesting:

> We are sure beyond all hazard of a mistake that our own self is not the only being existing; that there is an external world; that it is a system with parts and a whole, a universe carried on by laws; and that the future is affected by the past. We accept and hold with an unqualified assent, that the earth, considered as a phenomenon, is a globe; that all its regions see the sun by turns; that there are vast tracts on it of land and water; that there are really existing cities on definite sites, which go by the names of London, Paris, Florence, and Madrid. We are sure that Paris or London, unless suddenly swallowed by an earthquake or burned to the ground, is today just what it was yesterday, when we left it. We laugh to scorn the idea that we had no parents though we have

[14] See Locke (1979 [1689], IV, xix, p. 14).
[15] See Locke (1979 [1689], IV, xix, p. 11).

> no memory of our birth; that we shall never depart this life, though we can have no experience of the future. (EAGE, 149)[16]

Note that the propositions are all empirical certainties of the general Moorean kind that we saw that Wittgenstein was concerned with above. Indeed, the example that everyone has parents is explicitly considered by Wittgenstein in this regard on several occasions in *On Certainty* (OC, §§211, 239, 282, 335). Newman's point is that for all these cases we lack any epistemic basis which is commensurate with the level of certainty involved; *a fortiori*, we lack the kind of epistemic basis that Locke would demand for reasonable belief in this regard. Indeed, suppose we applied the test that we applied to religious belief above and asked whether one has an independent basis for beliefs such as this—i.e., a basis which does not already presuppose that one's general conception of the world is correct. Would these beliefs pass this test? Surely not. And yet all these beliefs seem eminently reasonable. In fact, they seem to be paradigm cases of what counts as ordinary reasonable belief.

Newman is thus offering the kind of parity argument in defence of the rationality of religious belief that we noted above. Lockean epistemology effectively raises the bar for rational religious belief by requiring a rational basis which is commensurate with the level of conviction involved. This is presented as part of a general view about rational belief and conviction, and hence on the face of it does not fall foul of a parity argument. But if we grant that Newman is right that normal rational belief can involve complete conviction even while lacking a corresponding rational status, then it follows that a double-standard is being applied to religious belief in this regard after all. For why should religious belief be subject to epistemic censure when cases of rational non-religious conviction which exhibit the very same epistemic properties are treated as paradigmatically rational? Put another way, if the Lockean line were consistently applied, then it would be in danger of undermining the epistemic legitimacy of everyday beliefs as well as religious beliefs. There is thus no principled route from the Lockean conception of reasonable belief to a scepticism which is specifically focussed on religious belief.

Newman's way of defending religious belief is thus by showing how the epistemic standing of ordinary belief is very different from how we might suppose it to be, such that it is ultimately not fundamentally different from religious belief. On the Lockean picture of

[16] A further example which Newman discusses at length is our conviction that Great Britain is an island (EAGE, 234ff).

rational belief, one's conviction in a particular proposition could be no stronger than the rational support one has in favour of it, and yet this picture of rational belief is manifestly (argues Newman) in conflict with our ordinary conception of rational belief, on which paradigmatically rational beliefs which are regarded as optimally certain possess very little rational support (and certainly nothing by way of independent rational support).[17]

In terms of Newman's own terminology, it is what he calls 'simple assent', which is the kind of conviction we have in these everyday truths, that lies at the heart of our system of rational beliefs, in contrast to the reason-based certainty that Locke thought should be playing this role. Moreover, like Wittgenstein, Newman held that such simple assent is already presupposed in our practices of offering reasons for and against particular propositions. As Wolfgang Kienzler puts the point, according to Newman:

> [*B*]efore we acquire the capacity to doubt, we already have a set of very firm beliefs that we did not gain by way of reflection but through our upbringing or just through everyday life.[18]

This should remind us of Wittgenstein's claim that one's hinge commitments are not explicitly taught to us, but rather comprise that

[17] Newman offers an intriguing take on Hume's treatment of belief in miracles which is salient here. Very roughly, Hume claimed that given the nature of miracles *qua* extraordinary events (and given also some further claims, such as certain facts about human psychology), it follows that it would be more rational to doubt the testimonial evidence offered for miracles than it would be to accept that a miracle had occurred on this testimonial basis. While accepting the general principles in play in Hume's argument, Newman nonetheless contends that in a particular case it can be rational to accept the existence of a miracle on a testimonial basis. For what matters is the specific way in which this commitment to the occurrence of a miracle fits within the religious worldview of the agent, with its attendant hinge commitments. Indeed, Newman goes so far as to suggest that one's commitment to the occurrence of the miracle could be a matter of simple assent, in which case one is not to think of the testimony as providing a rational basis for the belief in a miracle at all. To this extent Newman's stance is potentially logically compatible with Hume's, in that Hume was targeting beliefs in miracles which are epistemically grounded in testimony—i.e., and not simply the causal product of testimony—whereas for Newman it seems the beliefs in question need not be grounded in this way at all. See EAGE (243 & ff.). For a recent overview of the literature regarding Hume's stance on miracles, see Pritchard & Richmond (2012).

[18] W. Kienzler, 'Wittgenstein and John Henry Newman On Certainty', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* **71** (2006), 117–138.

which we 'swallow down' along with everything we are explicitly taught.

The commonalities between Newman's approach to rational belief and Wittgenstein's approach to this subject in *On Certainty* are no accident. There is a lot of historical evidence to suggest that Wittgenstein read Newman's work very carefully and was inspired by it.[19] With this evidence in mind, it ought to be clear that the basic idea behind the localised conception of rational support put forward by Wittgenstein, such that our practices of giving reasons always presuppose arational hinge commitments which are not themselves subject to rational evaluation, is already present in Newman's work. Where Moore's work connects with Newman's ideas is in his focus on everyday certainties. Wittgenstein's critique of Moore is, however, a Newman-inspired critique: while these Moorean certainties do play a foundational role in our rational practices, this is precisely not because they have a special positive rational status. Indeed, the point is rather that their foundational role entails that they cannot be the kind of commitment which is rationally grounded.

Seeing Wittgenstein's treatment of hinge commitments through the lens of Newman's account of the rationality of religious belief *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* helps us to understand why a Wittgensteinian treatment of the rationality of religious belief should be cast along quasi-fideistic lines (rather than fideistic lines, which is how it is ordinarily understood).[20] The crux of the

[19] Although a number of commentators note Newman's influence on Wittgenstein in his later work - such as A. Kenny, (1990). 'Newman as a Philosopher of Religion', *Newman: A Man For Our Time*, (ed.) D. Brown (London: Morehouse Press, 1990) 98–122, A. Kenny 'John Henry Newman on the Justification of Faith', in his *What is Faith? Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), and C. Barrett, 'Newman and Wittgenstein on the Rationality of Religious Belief', *Newman and Conversion*, (ed.) I. Ker, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1997) 89–99 - for a thorough account of how their thinking is related, along with a comprehensive discussion of the historical evidence to back up this claim, see Kienzler op. cit. In particular, Kienzler offers a compelling case for treating Wittgenstein's reference to 'Newman' in *On Certainty* (OC, §1) as referring to John Henry Newman (and not to a different 'Newman' entirely, such as the scholar Max Newman, a contemporary of Wittgenstein's at Cambridge).

[20] For some key discussions of Wittgensteinian fideism, see K. Nielsen, K. 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy* **42** (1967) 237–54 and D.Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). To be fair, it should be emphasised that those authors which attribute

matter is that the basic religious convictions of one who has faith will form part of that person's hinge commitments, and hence will be part of the bedrock against which rational evaluations are undertaken. In this way, some of the person's religious beliefs will be rationally held, and hence in the market for being rationally grounded knowledge, even though such beliefs presuppose essentially arational hinge commitments. In this respect, however, religious belief is not fundamentally different from ordinary rational belief, since the latter also presupposes essentially arational hinge commitments. The religious believer's overall set of commitments thus includes fundamental commitments which are more a matter of faith than of reason, but this fact alone doesn't mark any epistemically significant difference between the life of faith and a life lived without it. With the relationship between faith and reason and its role in the production of rational belief understood along quasi-fideistic lines, religious commitment can be at its most fundamental level a matter of faith and yet there nonetheless be rational religious beliefs.[21,22]

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a straightforward fideism to Wittgenstein often don't have his remarks on hinge commitments in *On Certainty* in mind, but rather comments he makes about the rationality of religious belief elsewhere, particularly L. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, (ed.) C. Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966).

[21] For further discussion of quasi-fideism, and of the relationship between Wittgenstein's remarks on hinge commitments and Newman's religious epistemology, see D. Pritchard, 'Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism', *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2011), 145–59 and 'Wittgenstein on Faith and Reason: The Influence of Newman', *God, Truth and Other Enigmas*, (ed.) M. Szatkowski, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 141–64.

[22] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Religious Epistemology' conference held at Heythrop College, London, in July 2015. I am grateful to the audience for their feedback, and especially to the organiser of this event, Stephen Law.