FAITH IN AN ATHEISTIC

WORLDVIEW

by

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ABSTRACT

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In the ongoing debate between reason and faith, it has always been problematic to reconcile the opposing forces of rationality and religion. Many philosophers have tried to tackle this debate from various angles. Some have taken faith and reason to be irreconcilable, while others have tried to bridge the gap between them. The research proposed would aim at elucidating certain aspects of atheism as it applies to the debate, and to hopefully create a new perspective from which this debate can be examined and tackled.

Atheism is usually placed on the rational side of the fence, but it is both theists and atheists who require a certain kind of "faith" in order to develop a religious worldview, a requirement that maybe only agnostics can be excluded from having. By

analyzing common themes in the philosophy of religion, like the ethics of belief and the suspension of judgment, it will be argued that an entirely rationalistic approach towards a religious worldview might be inadequate, and that a passional leap must be taken in order to evade a skeptical stance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned mainly with the role that faith plays in a religious worldview. For our purposes, a religious worldview can be defined simply as the set of beliefs held by an individual concerning a divine reality, i.e. the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, miracles, etc. According to an individual's response regarding the existence of a divine being, he or she can broadly be classified as a theist, an atheist, or an agnostic.

Rationality and logic are not necessarily amiable to religion, but philosophy has tried to make an effort towards understanding theistic beliefs in a rational manner, mostly by using logical argumentation. The concept of faith, when tied to religion, can be sometimes misunderstood. It can generally be attached to a certain sense of uncertainty or doubt, which is its essence to prevent or overcome by means that are in their majority neither logical nor rational. For this reason, it is difficult for many atheists to accept the notion of faith into their religious worldview, mainly because of their commitment to a rational understanding of the world. By examining William K. Clifford's essay "The Ethics of Belief" and William James's essay "The Will to Believe", a clearer understanding of the nature of religious belief will be achieved, which will help us in the end to draw our conclusion.

The paper will be divided into three sections. In the first section, the distinction between faith and reason will be analyzed, while examining the purpose of philosophy of religion and the characteristics of fideism. In the second, the ethical and epistemological traits of faith will be investigated, as they are famously discussed in the essays of Clifford and James. And in the third and final section, it will be argued that faith is an important ingredient in an atheistic worldview, by distinguishing atheism from agnosticism and using James's 'passional' argument.

CHAPTER 2

FAITH AND REASON

2.1 The Debate

One of the main problems encountered in the struggle between faith and reason is whether reason is intellectually all-sufficient. The role played by faith changes drastically depending on whether the question is answered in the negative or the positive. Interestingly, the answer to this question depends greatly on how we define our terms. Throughout this chapter we will establish a narrow definition for 'faith' that will help us evaluate our problem, while also comparing it to 'reason', as it relates to philosophy of religion, and examining fideism, a view that embraces faith as prior to reason.

The great contest between faith and reason can be sometimes simplified by connecting it to the religious question of the existence of a theistic God. William James, for example, described the problem of the existence of God as one of facts: "*that* there is a God, Reason can only infer from the facts of experience."[1] He understood reason as a faculty of inference that couldn't by itself distinguish which facts exist. It is faculty of principles and relations, not of facts. His answer to the question above was simple, if our concept of reason involved covering the faith-process, then reason would indeed be all-sufficient.[2]

He continues in his attempt to reconcile these apparently opposed notions, sometimes viewed as a form of religious rationalism, by arguing that religious experiences, by providing additional facts to analyze, could supply a valid platform for faith to jump in. He concludes that reason, without the inclusion of faith to aid in its inferring process, would "fail to reach completely adequate conclusions".[3] Although this is not necessarily a popular view nowadays, his conclusion about the nature of reason and its relationship to faith seems very interesting and worth looking into.[4]

Atheists have usually appealed to reason to defend their position, by arguing that there is insufficient evidence to support the claim that a divine being exists, or by appealing to arguments against the existence of God, such as the evidential argument from evil.[5] But many theists, usually aided by the work of philosophy of religion and theology, have also tried to rationally argue in favor of the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God. Nevertheless, neither group can argue that they have complete control over reason, and that the opposition is barely supported by blind faith. This paper will also try to reconcile faith and reason into a working relationship, one that will help individuals to better understand the world and to be better capacitated to adequately answer the fundamental religious question while coherently holding a religious worldview.

There have been many other attempts to reconcile the differences between faith and reason. There are those that reject faith, as irrational belief; those that embrace it, and reject reason as the only guide to truth; and even those that try to hold on to both as

evenly valid. In order to understand this debate and be able to responsibly hold a position, we must first elucidate what we mean by the term "faith."

<h2 style="text-align:center">2.2 Defining Faith</h2>

Faith can refer to the personal beliefs of individuals, based on hopes and fears; it can be interpreted as trust; it can be viewed as relating to voluntary commitments, such as obedience; or to a combination of all of these.[6] This notion of faith as belief, trust, and obedience is popular among the major theistic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, in which it is intimately tied to God. It might involve believing in God, trusting Him, and obeying His commands. But it is a broader meaning that is in play in our discussion, not restricted to any particular religion or doctrine. It might be called a philosophical 'faith', which, for the purpose of our discussion, will be focused more on beliefs rather than trust or obedience.

Faith appears to be opposed to what we properly regard as knowledge. It doesn't seem to fit into the description of justified true belief, but it does relate to our belief states. Perception seems also to be external to faith, because it is hard to understand how we can have faith on something we can touch or see. But, although it can be easily seen how it can relate to our emotions and passions, some argue that it must go beyond mere feeling.[7] In a certain sense, to have faith we must be able to doubt a certain idea. As expressed in the words of the British idealist F.H. Bradley: "The non-logical overcoming from within of doubt as to an idea, or the similar prevention of such doubt, appears, so far as we have seen, to be the general essence of faith." [8] If an idea or a

belief cannot be put to doubt, then faith cannot be adequately involved in the belief making process.

There have also been disputes about faith having propositional content. For example, some of the philosophers favoring this idea believed that faith consisted partly in accepting truths revealed by God, while the opposition rejected this by arguing that it was only when humans tried to interpret these truths that propositions came into play. [9] This dispute is important because, although there is no agreed definition, we commonly hold beliefs to be propositional attitudes that influence behavior. It is through this link between faith and beliefs that many of the moral and epistemological questions regarding the nature of faith come forth.

When tied to theism, faith can sometimes be viewed as simply believing things on God's say-so. But this view is problematic because in order for faith, in this sense, to be responsible, the believer must first establish that there exists a God that communicates, and then that there are good reasons to believe that the content of his belief is in accordance with what he claims God has communicated.[10]

The philosophical faith to which we refer to in this essay is one that is linked to belief, beliefs that have propositional content and from which we are motivated to act. This view also brings about profound issues related to responsibility, both moral and epistemic, which will be discussed in the following chapter. The main concern of this paper, regarding the nature of faith, is its relationship to reason in constructing a religious worldview. A relationship that can be easily gauged by first examining the

rationalistic standpoint, one that might sometimes be considered to suggest that to call something 'faith' might mean that it is "empty of objective rationality".[11]

2.3 Rationalism and the Philosophy of Religion

As explained by Alexander Campbell Fraser, in his article "Philosophical Faith", John Locke, the famous seventeenth-century Empiricist philosopher, was one of the first to reject the position that held faith "as non-rational, possibly fallacious", and as an "insufficiently thought-out sort of knowledge".[12] According to Stephen Evans, Locke held an evidentialist position, which states that the certainty of a belief depends primarily on the reliability and quality of the evidence supporting it. Evidentialist critics of religion would usually reject faith as inappropriate because of the insufficient evidence available for religious belief. But Locke, Evans argues, certainly thought "that human beings can by faith come to grasp truths they could not attain through natural human reason alone".[13]

Rationalism can be considered the view that reason is the most adequate way to acquire knowledge, relying on the power of the human intellect to grasp truth. But, as portrayed by the Locke example, although evidentialism generally puts reason in opposition to faith, it can be a view held by both critics and defenders of faith. Critics usually classify the notion of faith as the blind acceptance of doctrines and, therefore, mostly composed of a set of irrational beliefs. But some defenders also apply rationalist views to argue that reason has limits, human reason and intellect being finite, which would suggest that faith also has valid position in the search for truth, a view that could hardly be considered to be irrational.[14]

Rational beliefs can be considered to be those that can withstand scrutiny by other beliefs. Kai Nielsen describes them as those beliefs that "must be capable of being held in such a way, *ceteris paribus*, as not to block or resist reflective inspection, namely, attempts to consider their assumptions, implications, and relation to other beliefs."[15] He argues that, basically, a belief can be considered to be irrational if the person holding it knows that it is inconsistent, unintelligible, incoherent, or false.[16]

Following the rational and logical nature of philosophical inquiry, when religious issues began to be examined, they were put under the same rigorous eye as the rest. The philosophy of religion, as a rational study of fundamental religious claims, is mainly interested in uncovering truths about religion, while attaining a deeper understanding of its metaphysical and epistemological traits. It has been mainly restricted to broadly studying theism, while the study of particular religions and their doctrines has usually been taken to concern theology.[17]

There are four major kinds of arguments used by theologians and philosophers to rationally defend their belief in God: the teleological argument, or argument from design, which makes an analogy between created objects and the universe to argue for the existence of a divine creator; the cosmological argument, or first-cause argument, which argues for the existence of a first cause or mover which put the universe in motion; the ontological argument, which attempts to prove the existence of God by analyzing the concept of God; and the moral argument, which presupposes the existence of God for an objective morality. All of these have different varieties and also strong counterarguments that are also taken into account.

In discussing God's attributes, some logical problems arise, the problem of evil being one of the most prominent. In most theistic traditions, God is considered to have three basic properties: omniscience, omnipotence, and omni-benevolence. There are also believed to be two main classes of evil in the world: moral evil, usually considered to be inflicted by humans, like rape and genocide; and natural evil, like hurricanes and earthquakes. The problem of evil arises when the existence of a God with these divine attributes is taken in conjunction with the fact that there is an incredible amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world. In response, many theologians and philosophers have posited theodicies in order to reconcile God's existence with the fact that this is not the best of all possible worlds, the two most popular being the Free Will Defense and the Ultimate Harmony Defense.

A rational approach towards faith and religious belief can be appreciated in the work of philosophy of religion. But within this philosophic tradition there have been many that have also advocated a faith devoid of reason, a view that may appear to harshly contrast the main purpose of this branch of philosophy.

2.4 Fideism

The view that rational reflection could never bring about true religious beliefs is known as fideism. Faith, according to this view, is a requirement for any kind of religious thinking. C. S. Evans characterizes the fideist as someone who "typically rejects the rationalistic assumption that reason is our best or even our only guide to truth, at least with respect to religious truth."[18] The term, being derived from *fides*, the

Latin term for "faith", encompasses a disparagement of reason, which is replaced by an exclusive reliance on faith. [19]

This notion is commonly linked to the words of the church father Tertullian: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[20] Athens representing reason and Jerusalem representing faith, this view clearly expresses the rupture between the terms. Besides Tertullian, there have been many others that have been associated with this school of thought, most prominently Soren Kierkgaard, William James, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Kierkegaard, for example, believed that the disparity between the terms was embedded in nature of Christian faith and human reason. According to Evans, Kierkegaard believed that the explanation behind the impossibility of comparing the terms was rooted in the fact that human reason was corrupted by sinfulness: "from the point of view of the Christian faith, human reason is 'untruth', and the Truth, as well as the capacity to know the Truth must be given to human beings by God himself."[21]

William James is famous for defending the reasonableness of believing in absence of proof. But more than taking a fideist approach, James is actually trying to create an environment in which it is favorable for faith to work in a rationally responsible manner.[22]

Wittgenstein, regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of the past century, although not considered to be conventionally religious, held some views that are interpreted as being fideistic. These views related to his ideas of language games and the autonomous nature of religion. Religious beliefs are not necessarily exempt from

rational inspection, but are rather "autonomous in the sense that the rational standards that must be employed are themselves part of the religious outlook."[23] He saw religion more as a matter of practice than of theory, and faith as a passion, a view shared also by Kierkegaard and James.[24]

But, as suggested by C. S. Evans, fideism as a complete rejection of rational reflection about religion is not a reasonable approach. Evans is known for trying to defend a fideistic view by distinguishing between responsible forms of fideism, in which faith jumps in where reason leaves off, from irrationalistic approaches that put reason and faith against each other.[25] Although fideists are normally considered to place faith above reason, it can be argued that when closely examining their work it becomes complicated to really peg them as defending an irrational approach towards faith.[26]

CHAPTER 3

THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

In the previous chapter, we linked the notion of faith to an individual's religious beliefs; beliefs that are not based on empirical evidence but that nevertheless motivate him to act. The complicated nature of faith has engendered various debates about the kind of justification required to hold these beliefs and the responsibility that an individual has when holding them. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in discussing the evidentialist position as it concerns faith, explains how "it is often the case that a person who believes some theistic proposition immediately (or basically – that is, not on the basis of propositional evidence) is entirely within their rights in so doing."[27] Although this view might be controversial in may philosophical circles, its subject matter is intimately linked to the ethical and epistemological characteristics of religious belief. In order to better understand this subject and adequately posit our conclusion, we must first examine one of these debates.

In 1877, William Kingdon Clifford, an English mathematician, wrote a controversial and much discussed essay on the immorality of holding beliefs without evidence called "The Ethics of Belief". In response to this essay, William James gave a famous lecture titled "The Will to Believe", in which he defends a pragmatic view that allows us to decide what beliefs to adopt based on our passional nature, in cases where the decision cannot be made on intellectual grounds. To elucidate the way in which

faith plays a role in an atheist's religious perspective of the world, both views will be examined and, while also considering some criticisms, the relationship among faith, evidence, justification, and responsibility will be studied.

3.1 Clifford's Principle

When discussing religious belief, it is of great importance to take into account the contributions of William Clifford, a staunch defender of the evidentialist position. His famous principle, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence"[28], is still a source of great controversy. Many argue whether he supposed these beliefs to be wrong morally, epistemically, or both. Some point out that he never made explicit how much evidence is to be considered "sufficient", while others complain that his requirement is unreasonably high. Nevertheless, his abstract essay on belief expounds on some interesting points that are worth looking into.

He begins by describing two scenarios in which he gives examples of people that irresponsibly hold beliefs without evidence that later bring disastrous consequences. He proposes that we shouldn't believe unless our evidence is sufficient, mainly by arguing that believing false things is much worse than not believing true things. He applies the notion of ethics to our beliefs because of their relationship with action, a notion he makes explicit through his examples: "It may be said, however, that in both of these supposed cases it is not the belief that is judged to be wrong, but the action following upon it."[29]

Then, by taking a slightly deontological approach, Clifford tries to argue that holding a belief with insufficient evidence is analogous to stealing, in that both can be reduced to a failure of carry out a duty towards man and society:

> "What hurts society is not that it should lose its property, but that it should become a den of thieves; for then it must cease to be a society. (…) In like manner, if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous."[30]

The problem of credulity being that it fosters false beliefs that can result detrimental to society, and which are morally and epistemologically irresponsible to hold. He also emphasized the weight of authority in regards to testimony in trying to explain the problems caused by credulity.

He argued for the constant questioning of our beliefs, urging us to never rest if doubt was among us. He warned against beliefs based on tradition or culture that were not based on sufficient proof, a view with which he tried to highlight what he believed to be the irresponsible nature of faith:

> "In regard then, to the sacred tradition of humanity, we learn that it consists, not in propositions or statements which are to be accepted and believed on the authority of the tradition, but in questions rightly asked, in conceptions that enable us to ask further questions, and in methods of answering questions."[31]

He concludes by arguing that we must limit our beliefs to what can be experienced or inferred through nature, that we should only believe the words of another person if there are good grounds for supposing that he or she speaks the truth, and that it is "wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence".[32]

Henry Wace, a famous 19th Century theologian, was quick in responding to Clifford's article. He aimed at criticizing his views by making an important distinction between "the spirit of Christian thought and the disposition of mind".[33] Wace argued that faith and belief were intimately connected to the credibility of testimony, to truths that are simply probable rather than evident in themselves or scientifically proven. He rejected Clifford's principle because when applied to our everyday lives it became "not only impracticable, but morally wrong."[34] Although he suggests that faith must be checked by reason, he argues that men must, nevertheless, act everyday on certain moral and religious assumptions. Life was made for men of action, and "no man of action is good for anything if he cannot sometimes form a belief on insufficient evidence, and take a leap in the dark."[35]

But Wace is not the only one to attack Clifford's principle. Arnold E. Johanson also argued that since Clifford presumably lacked sufficient evidence for his principle, those who hold it would be "guilty of violating their own principle and that the principle cannot be believed without being violated."[36] But to adequately tackle this debate, we must also look into the criticism offered by William James regarding the ethics of belief. He not only rejects Clifford's principle, but also aims at carving a realm of belief that is responsible without having to rely on evidential justification.

3.2 The Will to Believe

There are many philosophers who have tried to posit new ways to understand and justify human beliefs, without recurring to evidentialist justification. Alvin Plantinga, for example, rejects an evidentialist approach by using memory beliefs as an

illustration. He argues that we don't have propositional evidence for our memory beliefs, which would make them unjustified according to the basic assumption about justification of belief, "that such belief is justified only if there is a good argument for it from other propositions you believe", but they are "none worse for that." [37]

But it is William James who famously tackles this problem by taking a pragmatic approach towards morality and religion. In his lecture, "The Will to Believe", he shows an understanding of human psychology that "upends both rationalist and positivist notions of truth and provides a compelling reorientation that neutralizes evidentialist criticisms of religion."[38] He characterized his essay as a "justification of faith, a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced".[39] James believed that Clifford misunderstood human psychology because he argued that belief and action should follow from the notion of sufficient evidence, but for James, "passionally determined beliefs and actions are always already in play."[40]

He argues that most of the times we find ourselves believing without knowing how or why, and that our non-intellectual nature influences our convictions. The thesis he defends can be stated as follows:

> "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open,' is itself a passional decision, -just like deciding yes or no, -and is attended with the same risk of loosing the truth."[41]

In order to understand his point, James begins by providing some necessary definitions. He defines a 'hypothesis' as "anything that may be proposed to our belief"[42], and calls a decision between two hypotheses an 'option':

> "Options may be of several kinds. There may be – 1, *living* or *dead*; 2, *forced* or *avoidable*; 3, *momentous* or *trivial*; and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind."

Living options are those in which both hypotheses are live, i.e. they are real possibilities for whom they are proposed; forced options are those in which a choice is unavoidable; and momentous options are those in which the decision is unique, significant, and irreversible.

He argues that faith is "certainly lawful and possibly and indispensable thing", by characterizing the religious belief in the existence of God as a genuine option between theism and atheism. He also asserts the two essential affirmations of religion as the ideas that the best things are the more eternal things, and that we are better off if we believe this to be true.[43] When one commits oneself to a belief there are two main risks: gaining falsity and losing truth. James believes that Clifford's position amounts to the idea that it is better to risk losing truth than accepting the possibility of being duped, but he rejects this position by arguing that some questions cannot wait for sensible proof.

Some truths, he claims, are dependent on our personal action, and sometimes, then, "a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming."[44] To opt for skepticism is not to avoid an option but rather choose a side:

> "To preach skepticism to us as a duty until 'sufficient evidence' for religion to be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to

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yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law."[45]

James seems to neither accept the agnostic position in this debate, nor agree to keep his willing nature out of the picture. Everyone must chose a side and act accordingly.

In comparing both essays, Richard Feldman argues that genuine options and intellectual undecidability only make James's argument needlessly more complex, and that they really don't play any crucial role.[46] He points out that the religious option "illustrates the idea that having a belief can have practical benefits."[47] He argues that James puts more emphasis on believing truths than on shunning error, and when it comes to momentous options it is better to chose a path than just wait for more evidence, because at least when you act you have a chance at arriving at your destination.[48]

From a different perspective, Arnold E. Johanson, in discussing James's essay, argues that the notion of "the will to believe" is composed primarily of states of overbelief. He defines overbeliefs as beliefs that are not based on sufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion that they are either true or probably true. Therefore, the notion of overbelief can be considered to cover "all cases where belief is determined by something other than rational consideration of the evidence."[49] According to Johanson, James tries to counter Clifford's principle and show that religious belief is morally permissible, and one way to argue that overbelief cannot be always wrong is to show that it is unavoidable. By claiming that religious hypotheses are undecidable by their very nature, he claims the right to overbelieve without asserting it as a duty. In the end,

Johanson transforms James's principle into a new one: "Overbelief is justified when belief will produce a greater balance of good over evil than non-belief."[50]

James himself concludes that a passional decision is acceptable in the cases were the options are genuine and they cannot be decided on intellectual grounds, i.e. by rationally analyzing the objective evidence on each side, as is the case with religious beliefs. This relationship between passion and belief will result indispensable for us to reach our conclusion regarding faith in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

AN ATHEIST'S FAITH

How can the notion of religious faith play a role in an atheistic worldview? In the final section of this paper, it will be argued that the atheist's belief in the nonexistence of God is itself, in a way, a faith based belief, similar to those held by theists about the existence and nature of God.

4.1 Atheism vs. Agnosticism

To better state their positions and explain their arguments, many philosophers have made a great effort to clarify these terms. William L. Rowe, for example, distinguished between the narrow and broad definitions of the terms "theist" and "atheist". The broad definition of a "theist" being a person who believes in some kind of divine reality, while the narrow definition denoting someone who believes in the existence of a God with the classic divine attributes. In the same manner, an "atheist" defined broadly refers to someone who denies the existence of any kind of divine reality, while narrowly an "atheist" is defined as someone who denies the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God. [51] Rowe even went to great lengths to defend a position he called "friendly atheism", a view that accepts that both theists and atheists are rationally justified in their beliefs.[52]

A core belief shared by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the three major theistic religions, is "the affirmation of the reality of one and only one God."[53] While theists are

those who believe in God, atheists are those that positively disbelieve in God. Atheism can be considered to be a rejection of religious belief, as it concerns spiritual beings, which must not be confused with the denial of God, in which belief is not necessarily a factor.[54] Atheism can refer to a variety of different gods that are objects of belief, "one might be an atheist with respect to one god while believing in the existence of some other god."[55]

Atheism is commonly justified in two ways: by arguing that there is insufficient evidence to actually justify belief in God, and by trying to disprove the existence of God through arguments that claim to show (1) that the properties usually attributed to this divine being are incoherent and (2) that the amount of evil in the world puts serious doubts on its existence.[56]

Agnosticism, on the other hand, emphasizes the unknowable nature of God and promotes the suspension of belief regarding its existence. According to J. G. Schurman, it was Hume and Kant who, by concentrating their attention on the limits of knowledge, "gave a new shape to philosophy and laid the foundations of modern agnosticism".[57]

Piers Benn, in his article 'Some Uncertainties about Agnosticism", explains some interpretations that can be given to the term. According to Benn, some argue that agnosticism is the view that no one knows the truth about the existence of God, others hold a stronger view that claims that it is impossible to know whether or not God exists, and a third more confusing and less popular view is that used by some atheists to call their position when they claim to not be able to disprove the existence of God.[58] In the end, he provides us with his own view, by stipulating that an agnostic is someone who

"understanding or at least thinking he understands the question of whether a theistic God exists, neither believes, nor disbelieves, in God's existence."[59]

In distinguishing atheism from agnosticism, George Strem argued that the fundamental difference is that the agnostic "does not deny, does not doubt the existence of God, but declares him to be unknowable, or that which surpasses human intelligence."[60] This view of God as "unknowable" seems to be appropriate, given our epistemic relation to this supernatural being; a view which might suggest that the question of its existence cannot be appropriately decidable on completely rational grounds and, as suggested by James, might permit our passional nature to step into the process.

The problem of underdetermination regarding the existence of God seems to lead to a dilemma that was recognized early by C. S. Peirce: "either we remain forever and inexorably agnostic about the underdetermined questions or we apportion our beliefs by fiat."[61] Although Peirce tries to evade the dilemma by suggesting that there could not be underdetermination of this kind, his view regarding faith remains of great interest. According to his concept of the dilemma, both theists and atheists would fall under the category of fideists.[62] Even though his concepts of fideism and agnosticism are a little different to the ones discussed previously[63], his view foreshadows our discussion.

4.2 Passion and Belief

Thomas V. Morris argued that it would be better to be an agnostic that an atheist if there were truly no good reasons to believe in God. According to P. J. McGrath,

Morris believed that only if we were in a good epistemic position to assess this existence claim, could the absence of appropriate proof warrant the claim's denial. But, "since the assertion that God exists is a metaphysical existence claim, it is unlikely that one could be in a good position with regard to it unless one could prove or disprove it. Atheism is neither justified nor required therefore by the fact that one has no good reason for thinking that God exists."[64] But, as McGrath suggests, this view is problematic because it would lead us towards adopting a skeptic's stance towards all human knowledge.

Nevertheless, it does seem plausible that we are not in a good epistemic position to judge whether or not God exists. The concept of the theist God discussed throughout the paper is almost by definition ungraspable through reason, as some fideists suggest, and the rational attempts towards proving the existence of this divine being are, in the least, questionable. There have even been attempts to create valid arguments for atheism that deny the existence of God.

When an atheist rejects theism and believes in the nonexistence of gods, he commits himself to a belief based on 'faith'. It is a passional leap of faith from agnosticism, which both the theist and the atheist make when trying to form a religious worldview that is both coherent and pragmatic. According to James's view, if the evidence is counterbalanced and there are insufficient grounds to decide either way, both believing and disbelieving in the hypothesis are acceptable passional beliefs.

Even some agnostics accept a notion of faith in their religious worldview. Strem, for example, argues "agnosticism is also faith - faith in the creative process, the constant renewal…faith in the all-pervading spirit, which the Greeks called Nous…faith also in Man, in his ability to make life on earth a continuous renewal, an ever varying harmony, his own creation and worthy of his genius."[65] It might be argued that the kind of faith advocated by professor Strem has more similarities to that interpreted as trust, but it is nevertheless intrinsically linked to his beliefs. Obviously, though, the faith of the atheist is not as far-reaching as either that of the theist or the agnostic.

<u>4.3 An Atheistic Worldview</u>

An atheist, when he commits to the belief that God does not exist, takes a stand in the debate by refusing to remain skeptical and deciding passionally, rather than intellectually. Many may argue that religious belief can be supported by empirical and objective evidence, and can therefore be decided rationally, as is sometimes thought to be the main purpose of philosophy of religion. But the nature of the metaphysical question about the existence of God seems to make this an undecidable option. McGrath, for example, argues that there are no good reasons for not using Ockham's razor[66] on pure existence claims, such as one regarding the existence of a supernatural being, and that "in the absence of positive evidence for God's existence, therefore, one should be an atheist rather than an agnostic".[67] But, as Magnum points out, many agnostics still insist that fideism in this respect could produce unintended harm.[68]

In his book, "Philosophy and Atheism", Kai Neilsen argues "religious belief – or at least belief in God – should be impossible for someone living in our century, who

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thinks carefully about these matters and who has a tolerable scientific education and a good philosophical training."[69] Although this view might not seem amiable to our conclusion, it is nevertheless compatible with our point of view when examined closely. The "scientific education and a good philosophical training" of which Nielsen speaks seems to suggest a counterbalance of evidence, or at least leads us towards a skeptical position. But this position does not seem appropriate, mainly because of the deep bonds between belief and action. As Franks suggests, we are already "'in the game', and cannot step back to some transcendental perspective from which to get a reflective handle on life."[70] The agnostic's position, although it appears to be rationally supported, is neither practical nor coherent with the rest of our beliefs. Questions about knowledge, perception, and other minds, for example, also seem to be undecidable on our empirical evidence, but we nevertheless believe in our own existence and that we have certain claims to knowledge. Schurman seems to reject the skeptical position as well: "agnosticism is only a transitional and temporary phase of thought. The human mind can no longer surrender its beliefs to God than its belief in a world or in a self."[71]

But, if both atheists and theists base their beliefs on faith, can it be argued that one position is more adequate and responsible than the other? Without going into much detail, it can be said that the atheist doesn't use faith as extensively as the theist. The atheist can agree that reason plays an invaluable role in our everyday lives, but nevertheless require a certain degree of faith to aid him with those unavoidable but intellectually undecidable questions, as is the question of the existence of a supernatural being. The theist, on the other hand, sometimes holds on to faith to justify beliefs that

are not necessarily undecidable, or that at least seem to have more empirical evidence going against them. Another option remaining for atheists, although not very popular, would be to take Rowe's lead and accept the friendly atheist's claim that both atheists and theists are rationally justified in their beliefs.

NOTES

[1] James (1927), p. 197.
[2] Ibid., p. 199.
[3] Ibid., p. 201.
[4] See Chapter 3, Section 3.2 "The Will to Believe"
[5] See William Rowe's "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" (1979)
[6] Cf. Evans, p. 2.
[7] Cf. Bradley, p. 165.
[8] Ibid., p. 166.
[9] Cf. Wolterstorff, p. 2.
[10] Ibid., p. 5.
[11] Fraser, p. 573.
[12] Ibid., p. 563.
[13] Evans, p.9.
[14] Ibid., p. 14.
[15] Nielsen, p. 192.
[16] Ibid., p. 203.
[17] Cf. Alston, p. 1.
[18] Evans, p.9.
[19] Cf. Amesbury (2005)
[20] Ibid.
[21] Evans, p.13.
[22] See Chapter 3, Section 3.2 "The Will to Believe" for a deeper discussion of James work.
[23] Evans, p. 24.
[24] Cf. Amesbury (2005)
[25] See C. S. Evans's *Faith Beyond Reason*
[26] Cf. Wolterstorff, p. 5.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Clifford, p. 295.
[29] Ibid., p. 291.
[30] Ibid., p. 294.
[31] Ibid., p. 305.
[32] Ibid., p. 309.
[33] Wace, p. 42.
[34] Ibid., p. 45.
[35] Ibid., p. 49.
[36] Johanson, p. 113.
[37] Plantinga, p. 3.
[38] Franks, p. 432.
[39] James (1917), p. 2.
[40] Franks, p. 437.
[41] James (1917), p. 11.

[42] James (1917), p. 2.
[43] Cf. James (1917), p. 25.
[44] James (1917), p. 25.
[45] Ibid., p. 27.
[46] Cf. Feldman, p. 19.
[47] Feldman, p. 29.
[48] Ibid., p. 28.
[49] Johanson, p. 111.
[50] Ibid., p. 125.
[51] Cf. Rowe (1998), p. 1.
[52] Cf. Rowe (2006), and Rowe (1998)
[53] Nielsen, p. 11.
[54] Ibid., p. 12.
[55] Rowe (1998), p. 1.
[56] Cf. Rowe (1998), p. 3-4.
[57] Schurman, p. 242-243.
[58] Cf. Benn, p. 172.
[59] Benn, p. 173.
[60] Strem, p. 160.
[61] Magnus, p. 26.
[62] Cf. Magnus, p. 29.
[63] According to P. D. Magnus, agnosticism and fideism are two conflicting intuitions. "The *agnostic* intuition is that, since the choice is forever beyond determination, one ought to forever suspend judgment about which of the rivals is true. The *fideist* intuition is that one might freely believe one of the rivals even now, since further enquiry will have no bearing on the question either way." (Magnus, p. 29)
[64] McGrath, p. 54.
[65] Strem, p. 155.
[66] Attributed to William of Ockham, it is the principle that favors the simplest explanation for any phenomenon, while making the least amount of assumptions.
[67] McGrath, p. 57.
[68] Cf. Magnus, p. 31.
[69] Nielsen, p. 41.
[70] Franks, p. 432.
[71] Schurman, p. 258.

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