

## Is Religion a Form of Epistemic Akrasia?

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**Abstract:** Despite the fact there is some debate on the subject, many philosophers recognize *epistemic akrasia* as a concomitant of practical akrasia—believing what one ought not to believe, just as one often does what one ought not to do. This essay will argue that epistemic akrasia is real and common, although not always best understood as lack of willpower or self-control. Then it will show that religious belief is a form of such akrasia—believing religious claims when one knows (or could and should know) that one ought not to believe them.

**Keywords:** akrasia, belief, epistemic virtue, religion, voluntarism

*Prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est ... certum est, quia impossibile*  
—Tertullian, *De Carne Christi* (c. 203–206 CE)

### 1. Introduction

Kurt Wise studied paleontology and earned a doctorate in geology from Harvard University, training under the august Stephen Jay Gould. He fully understood that the Christian account of creation and the scientific theory of evolution could not both be true and even attempted a project to excise all of the biblical passages that are incompatible with evolution. However, confessing a prior personal relationship with Jesus, he determined to believe the religious claim and disbelieve the scientific one, going so far as to testify that, “if all the evidence in the universe turned against creationism, I would be the first to admit it, but I would still be a creationist because that is what the Word of God seems to indicate” (Ashton 2000: 355). He now directs the Creation Research Center at Truett McConnell University in Georgia, where he promotes young-earth creationism.

Someone with advanced education in science, fluent in the evidence of the history of the planet and life on it, declares that despite his knowledge—indeed, despite all possible knowledge—that supports evolution and contradicts special creation, he would choose the latter. That stance contradicts everything that scientists and ordinary people value in critical thinking and rational discourse. We think, and philosophers stress, that belief should “aim at truth” and people will, or at least should, hold true beliefs and jettison false ones when evidence and experience make the case clear. Further, many philosophers have argued that such truth-aiming beliefs are not a matter of choice: evidence and experience ultimately dictate what is possible to believe. It would be an intellectual *if not a moral* failure to do otherwise, for who would knowingly want to hold a false belief?

In the realm of behavior, philosophers use the term akrasia to refer to situations in which people know or believe one thing and do another. Akrasia, from the Greek α-κράτος, *a-kratos* or “without strength/power” (*kratos* as in democracy, *demos-kratos*, “people power”), has been defined in various related but significantly different ways. Horowitz wrote of such practical akrasia or akrasia of action that “an akratic agent acts in a way she believes she ought not to act” (2014: 718). In the words of Vahid, “To act akratically is to act against one’s best judgment.... The problem of (practical) akrasia is the problem of making sense of how an agent can do x intentionally while judging that, all things considered it would be better to do y than do x” (2015: 296). However formulated, practical akrasia amounts to an actor knowing or believing that an action is bad, wrong, ill-advised, or otherwise blameworthy or self-destructive and proceeding to do it. Common examples are understanding that smoking is bad for your health but smoking nonetheless, realizing that another piece of cake will ruin your diet but eating it, or recognizing that robbery is a crime but committing robbery anyhow.

Akrasia is often categorized and condemned as “weakness of will” or “lack of self-control” (the *kratos* in akrasia construed as power over the self). This interpretation highlights our Western belief in and preoccupation with the will and supposed “free will,” by which we can and should control ourselves and do what is good and true.

There are many reasons, though, why we might act in ways that (appear to) contradict our “best judgment,” self-interest, or knowledge of the good. Smoking may be an actual addiction which willpower alone cannot resist. We may yield to the temptation of more cake because we figure one little piece does not harm us too much. And we may rob a victim in full awareness that robbery is wrong and illegal because we want the money or property—or we might not know or feel that it is wrong or illegal (potentially a smoker might not have heard of the perils of smoking or might accept the risks).

In whatever way we conceive it, akrasia connotes doing something when we know better or ought to know better than to do it. This is a subtle yet important distinction: knowing and ought-to-knowing are different, in the sense that we may judge that a person who does not know, for instance, that smoking is harmful or that robbery is illegal is responsible not only for the akratic act but for a secondary weakness or failure—the weakness/failure to learn about health or law. As they say, ignorance of the law (or of health) is no excuse.

Virtually all philosophers and other observers accept that practical akrasia can and does happen (although they may disagree on the nuances of the issue). But there is considerably more disagreement on whether we can *believe* when we think or know that we should not, or *epistemic akrasia*.

## 2. Is Epistemic Akrasia Real?

It is only fairly recently that the concept of akrasia has been extended to belief (and to knowledge). Like its pragmatic cousin, epistemic akrasia has also been defined in consequentially diverse ways. Coates suggested that it “arises when one holds a belief even though one judges it to be irrational or unjustified” (2012: 113). For Horowitz, epistemic akrasia appears when a person “believes something that she believes is unsupported by her evidence” (2014: 718). Ribeiro called it a subject *S*'s

*clear-headed* formation (or continuance) of a doxastic state which *S* *clear-headedly* judges to be other than the doxastic state best supported by the arguments and evidence (= the reasons) *S* is aware of.... In such a case *S* is believing (or disbelieving, or suspending judgment) against her own considered judgment of what her reasons indicate the appropriate doxastic state to be for her (19-20).

Finally, Vahid deploys the term for “the possibility of forming an attitude that fails to conform to one’s best judgment” or for holding a belief “even though he judges that his evidence rules it out”; such a position on any given belief/proposition *p* could take the form:

- “I believe *p*, but my evidence does not support *p*.”
- “I believe *p*, but I am not justified in believing that *p*.”
- “I believe *p*, but I ought not to believe that *p*” (2015: 296-7).

Several scholars, like Bernard Williams and William Alston, have disputed the very possibility of epistemic akrasia or akratic belief, usually on one or both of two premises. The first claim is that, as Engel put it, “belief is not under the control of the will, [so] we cannot be deemed responsible for it” (2009: 207). That is, many if not most opponents of epistemic akrasia reject *epistemic voluntarism*, the notion that we (can) choose or will our beliefs or knowledge. The facts and evidence being as they are, we are more or less obliged to believe or know particular things. The second claim, following closely on its predecessor, is that, whether there is any voluntarism in belief or not, “no one can freely and deliberately form the belief that *p* when they think the evidence sufficient to establish its falsehood, because no one can judge that there is *any* reason to believe *p* in such a situation” (Owens 2002: 390). In other words, even if we could will ourselves to believe something, we could not will ourselves to believe it if the evidence is roundly against it. No one would/could entertain that epistemic contradiction.

These objections can be and have been met in various ways by various respondents. First and foremost, it is not a settled conclusion that our beliefs are involuntary. There is actually a venerable philosophical tradition that holds that beliefs are substantially within our control. The ancient school of skepticism was premised on the capacity for choosing to suspend belief or judgment; for Sextus Empiricus, a skeptic was a person who “makes a way of life out of suspending judgment”—that is, neither believing nor disbelieving” in circumstances of *equipollence*, i.e. the cases for and against a claim are equally (un)convincing (Perin 2015: 108). Furthermore, this control over one’s belief-formation process was presumably not innate but required discipline or training of the will

and mind. Descartes has often been assessed as a voluntarist, at least in the sense that he maintained that it was not only possible but prudent if not urgent to withhold belief in anything that was not unquestionably certain (such as “Cartesian doubt” is obviously the first step of his philosophical method). In Clarke’s estimate, “The whole Cartesian project of suspending belief, of radical hyperbolic skepticism, depends on our being able to choose our beliefs. This Cartesian project, which includes the idea that to *know* one must be able to *provide* reasons for one’s belief, presupposes that we actively choose our beliefs” (1986: 44). Descartes’ contemporary, Blaise Pascal, famously made a wager out of belief (religious, specifically), cajoling us to voluntarily believe in view of the costs and benefits thereof. Kant too is considered by many a voluntarist of sorts, particularly when reason reaches its limits at the unknowable noumena.

In the late nineteenth century, William James made the “will to believe” the topic and title of a classic essay, in which he insisted that we could—and often were compelled to—fall back on our will when matters were not decidable on the facts and evidence alone (if, in his terms, the matter at hand was momentous, forced, and living). As he explained, his was a kind of backhand voluntarism, one not entirely dependent on “will” in the normal sense but on “our passionate nature” including such influences as “fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set”—that is, many factors totally unrelated to the facts at hand (1897: 9). One could argue with some justification that these passionate forces, themselves not entirely under our control, constrain our believing as much as any body of evidence and perhaps more insistently. In his commentary on James, Johanson opined that James’ will to believe “is taken to cover beliefs based on these non-rational factors,” which he dubbed *overbeliefs*. A “state of *overbelief*” exists, he said, when one believes that *p* but this “belief that *p* is not based on evidence that is sufficient to warrant either (a) the conclusion that *p* is true or (b) the conclusion that *p* is probably true” (1975: 110-11).

James’ essay was ostensibly a response to Clifford’s even more adamant plea that belief is largely voluntary—and frequently a very bad decision. In his 1876 article “The Ethics of Belief,” Clifford declared unequivocally that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,” preempting James’ appeal to non-evidential grounds for believing (1876: 295). Clifford considered such unjustified believing to be both an effect and a cause of feebleness, adding, “Every time we let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons, we weaken our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judicially and fairly weighing evidence” (293-4). Either way, as he made explicit, believing is within “our powers of self-control,” powers that we should cultivate and practice.

Finally, the question of whether beliefs are subject to will is answered by the fact that people do subject their beliefs to will or at least think that they do. In a unique moment of experimental philosophy, Turri, Rose, and Buckwalter tested the folk psychology of belief and, across multiple studies, found “strong evidence that voluntary belief is conceptually possible and...that voluntary belief is psychologically possible” (2017: 2507). Participants in the studies indicated not only that belief can be voluntary but that belief is the most voluntary of ten mental states examined in the research and that belief can be chosen whether based on “inferential evidence” or “perceptual evidence” in a way that knowledge cannot.

This takes us to a second criticism of the anti-epistemic akrasia position, which is the uncaredful conflation of belief and knowledge. Notwithstanding that knowledge is commonly construed (erroneously, in the eyes of this author) as a subtype of belief (namely, the justified true type), it is plausible that believing may be more voluntary or freer than knowing. Certainly people do believe things for which the evidence is scant or absent, if not which the evidence bluntly contradicts. Indeed, unlike “to know,” the English verb “to believe” strongly implies uncertainty or doubt, presumably related to the grounds for such believing. Comparatively, knowledge seems more compulsory, closer to perception than credition (a technical term for believing). For example, if we study math, we cannot *not* know that two plus two equals four; if we study history, we cannot *not* know that the Holocaust happened; if we study ecology, we cannot *not* know that the climate is warming; and if we are crossing the street, we cannot *not* see a car approaching.

One problem with eliding belief and knowledge is that, as we observe in the world around us, there are individuals who *do not* know that the Holocaust occurred or that global warming is happening. They may look at the evidence and deny the very facticity of the Holocaust or global warming or the fairness and accuracy of the 2020 U.S. presidential election or something so seemingly incontrovertible as the roundness of the earth. (Not to mention that we really can cross the street and not see the car approaching, due to inattention, immaturity—children may not have learned to recognize or understand traffic—or lack of the concept of “car.”) As the proliferation of “fake news” has illustrated to our consternation, people do not even agree on what “knowledge” or

a “fact” is or on who is to be trusted as a source of knowledge/facts. And, for better or for worse (and often much worse), individuals are members of epistemic networks and communities, which circulate and certify some claims as knowledge/facts and other claims as non-knowledge, hoaxes, and “alternative facts.” In the end, knowledge too may be more voluntary, or at least fungible, than we like to admit.

A third and final criticism of anti-epistemic akrasia is that its proponents tend to operate with a normative rather than an empirical attitude toward belief and knowledge. That is to say, they might exclaim, “No one can look at the evidence for the Holocaust/global warming and say that it is not real.” But plainly some people *do* look at the evidence—or dispute the trustworthiness or veracity of the evidence—and say precisely that. Part of the matter is that opponents of epistemic akrasia overestimate human rationality: it would be nice if people always and only based their epistemic stances on facts and logic, but they do not, or even if they do, they are prone to all sorts of cognitive biases and logical fallacies. Moreover, as James usefully reminded us, other items factor into knowledge and belief positions besides evidentiary or epistemic ones. As we saw, Johanson called them overbeliefs, while more generally they are labeled *subdoxastic states*, which Stich decades ago characterized as “a heterogeneous collection of psychological states that play a role in the proximate causal history of beliefs, though they are not beliefs themselves” (1978: 499). Among these subdoxastic (below-belief) states or forces are what Gendler (2008) called *aliefs*, the often visceral (though still perhaps learned) reactions to propositions, objects, experiences, or persons like fear, desire, hatred, and so forth. Still more unsavory are attitudes like racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia, again often if not ordinarily acquired (Crane and Farkas 2022). Another subdoxastic influence is our goals, which may not be purely epistemic (i.e. aiming at truth) but may involve interests and power. Last but far from least, identities, commitments, and group memberships figure into our processing of beliefs and knowledge-claims. Some beliefs and claims are resisted because they threaten our individual or collective ego and pride or for no other reason than that they originate from an untrusted source outside our group. This is what James meant by “imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set.”

### 3. Is Religion a Case of Epistemic Akrasia?

There are many other sophisticated elaborations and permutations of the epistemic akrasia debate, such as whether it is always irrational, whether it presupposes epistemic agency, and whether there are multiple levels of belief, for instance a higher-order or second-level belief or meta-belief about our beliefs (e.g. Horowitz advocates “level-splitting” such that it is possible and reasonable “to have high confidence in both ‘P’ and ‘my evidence doesn’t support P’” [2014: 720]). Let us posit for now that we have demonstrated minimally that epistemic akrasia is conceivable and that it is indeed found in some situations of believing. The inevitable next question is whether religion is—occasionally or inherently—epistemically akratic.

We begin where the discussion of epistemic akrasia began, contemplating whether there is a voluntary component to religious belief. Many contemporary scholars and religionists maintain that there is not, but this opinion has not been shared universally throughout history, even in Christianity. (It is more than ironic that partisans tend to view the positions they approve of as involuntary and the positions they disapprove of as voluntary, to wit, for lots of Christians, religious faith is not chosen but homosexuality is.) In its early centuries, Christian faith was almost always and necessarily a choice, as there was no pre-existing Christian community to which to belong; “conversion” or deciding to become a Christian was the entry into the religion. Influential church figures like Tertullian, Augustine, and Aquinas conveyed the message that becoming a Christian entailed an act of will, and much early (and modern) Christian writing seeks to convince nonbelievers to see the truth of the faith, often through (allegedly) rational and even evidential arguments. In Chapter 32 of *The Enchiridion* Augustine instructed that, “if a man is of an age to use his reason, he cannot believe, hope, love, unless he will to do so, nor obtain the prize of the high calling of God unless he voluntarily run for it.” Still today, it is part of Christian doctrine that an individual is not born a Christian but becomes one through a personal decision for and commitment to Christ.

Examining Christian history, according to Clarke, the Inquisition was founded “on the supposition that doxastic voluntarism is true; if one failed to believe X, then one was ‘morally wicked,’ suffered from ‘badness of will’ and *ought* to be punished” (1986: 41-2). As the Inquisition was getting underway, Aquinas taught in his *Summa Theologiae* that, “The act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine Truth at the command of the will moved the grace of God,” or as Dawes rephrases it, “religious faith is a choice and one that (in Aquinas’ view) is

made freely...but it is not the kind of belief that is formed spontaneously and unavoidably as a result of evidence or argument" (2015: 63). This latter point will become significant below. We have already encountered Pascal's notorious belief-wager in which religious faith is a bet against the worst outcome. Fichte called faith "that voluntary acquiescence" not to established facts or knowledge "but a resolution of the will to admit the validity" of that which cannot be founded on knowledge; Fichte further declared that when it comes to belief-propositions, "I do not accept because I must; I believe...because I will" (1899: 169). Kierkegaard introduced the "leap of faith" which cannot be justified by facts alone, and of course James pressed the case for the right to will belief, of which religious belief was his primary concern.

Interestingly but not incomprehensibly, there is another spot where will enters into Christian belief, and that is the will *not to know* particular things. Manson called it *epistemic restraint* or, from the Christian perspective, the vice of curiosity. Initially seen in the Garden of Eden where certain knowledge was forbidden and then continuing in scripture which condemns knowledge as vain and the wise man as the fool, we see this attitude in Tertullian who castigated not only worldly knowledge (what, after all, has Athens to do with Jerusalem?) but also knowledge of God other than what the Bible and the Church teach. Augustine despaired of "the malady of curiosity" that inquires into the world, into falsehoods like magic and other gods, and even interrogates God himself. Aquinas (de)valued *curiositas* as a sin alongside pride and lust, which could lead believers astray and undermine their faith. As Protestantism emerged, Luther and Calvin both denigrated curiosity and knowledge, the latter writing, "Eve erred in not regulating the measure of her knowledge by the will of God.... We all daily suffer under the same disease, because we desire to know more than is right, and more than God allows" (quoted in Manson 2012: 241-2).

So Christian thinkers appreciated the will as operative and essential in the faith in two senses—choosing to believe/know what we should and choosing not to believe/know what we should not. We do not witness the same spirit of voluntarism in all religions (after all, Christianity is merely one of humankind's myriad religions and far from the typical one); in many places and times, there were no alternatives to the reigning religious concepts and practices. However, new religions necessarily prioritize freedom of choice and the decision to join, and even in religions where faith is more or less assumed, like Islam which teaches that all humans are born with the knowledge of Allah but that some humans shirk the duty to honor and obey him, there is still a voluntary element to religious observance. In particular, in Islam as well as other religions including Christianity, individuals may voluntarily commit to cultivating religious beliefs, sentiments, and habits. Saba Mahmood described this in the case of Muslim women, who employed their will and agency to ingrain and deepen Muslim virtues. Contrary to the conventional Western conception of will as independence if not resistance, Mahmood documented women who willed themselves to greater submission by making themselves "docile," not in the sense of weak or passive but in the original sense of teachable or prepared to receive and accept instruction. She contended that the women opened themselves up to gendered Muslim values like *al-haya'* (modesty or shyness) and *sabr* (quiet endurance of hardship) as well as standards of dress such as *hijab*, which they aspired to perform and perfect. She argued such docility was an intentional choice to develop Muslim piety, "the means both of *being* and *becoming* a certain kind of person"—to use one's agency to alter one's agency into what looks like non-agency (2001: 215).

If there is a degree of choice in any religious belief, practice, and identity, then the next question is whether one can know better than to make that choice. As we have noted, multiple figures over the centuries have opined that our "best judgment" as informed by the evidence does not support religious belief. In fact, at the extreme, the lack of empirical support for religious belief has frequently been taken as an argument *in favor of religious belief*. We can now turn to Tertullian and the epigraph at the top of the present essay. His pronouncement *Prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est ... certum est, quia impossibile* (referring to the death and resurrection of Jesus) has been popularly translated as, "It is entirely credible, because it is absurd ... it is certain, because it is impossible." More circumspect translators render the key word *ineptum* not as "absurd" but as "unfitting," but if the former goes too far, the latter does not go far enough. Various equivalents of *ineptum* include "improper," "silly," "senseless," "foolish," and yes, "absurd," with "foolish" perhaps being the most common and likely meaning; indeed, Tertullian may have selected the word for its resonance with biblical admonitions to make oneself a fool for Christ or to see the wise as foolish and the foolish as wise. Either way, Tertullian defended the position that the senselessness, impropriety, or foolishness of religious belief was not a reason to disbelieve it but actually to believe it.

Throughout this essay we have met thinkers who championed religious belief in full view of the lack of any factual basis for it. So said Aquinas, who wrote in *De Veritate* (14.1) that we believe "because of something that is

sufficient to move the will but not sufficient to move the intellect.” As Dawes commented, Aquinas maintained that “we must choose to believe because we lack the kind of evidence that would compel the intellect to give its assent” (2015: 64). Both Pascal and Kierkegaard offered no evidential case for belief: for the former, it was a gamble, for the latter a hopeful but ultimately blind leap. For Kant, sense experience could not provide the basis for deciding between religious belief and nonbelief; the existence of god(s) was one of the antinomies that could not be settled with evidence, since any god(s) existed beyond the wall that separated phenomena from noumena. Fichte too granted that to apprehend religious reality was not within the capacity of empirical knowledge; it was faith that made religious beliefs seem true, for it “raises to certainty and conviction that which without it might be mere delusion.”

All of these characters appeared to understand that, on the evidence alone, they held unjustified beliefs. To put it in Vahid’s terms from earlier in the essay, they confess, “I believe  $p$ , but my evidence does not support  $p$ ” or “I believe  $p$ , but I am not justified in believing that  $p$ .” From an epistemological stand, they should accept, “I believe  $p$ , but I ought not to believe that  $p$ ”: in the worst case, Fichte’s case, believing anything else in the same way they believed religion would be delusional.

Still more, though, a religious believer may recognize not only that the facts are not with him but that they are positively against him. Here, Dr. Wise is the prototype: he freely confessed that the evidence is against creationism, but all the evidence in the world would not convince him to relinquish his theistic belief. He was absolutely and adamantly declaring, “I believe  $p$  where  $p$  is young-earth special creationism, and on the evidence I ought not to believe that  $p$ , but I utterly refuse to stop believing that  $p$ , and nothing could shake me from my belief.”

There are other examples across the world’s religions of people (sometimes vaguely) grasping that their beliefs are suspect but clinging to them anyhow. Among the Iban or Dayak of Kalimantan, Indonesia, people expressed skepticism about their shamans, whose “performance may involve deceit,” and rival shamans accused each other of fraud and trickery (Wadley, Pashia, and Palmer 2006: 44). Likewise in Nepal, more modern folks disparaged or laughed at shamans and accused credulous believers of *andhabiswas* (blind belief) (Pigg 1996). Yet, perversely, this same skepticism and doubt might drive people to more intense acts of religion, as they flitted from one specialist (shaman, priest, diviner, oracle, *ad infinitum*) in hope of finding an authentic or competent one.

#### 4. Conclusion: Epistemic Akrasia or Doxastic Irresponsibility?

There are clearly, then, people who announce, sometimes timidly but sometimes proudly and defiantly, that their religious beliefs are akratic by any reasonable standard of the term. An argument can certainly be made that epistemic akrasia exists and that some or all religious belief qualifies as epistemic akrasia. But our work is not quite finished. First, there is more than one way to parse this matter of epistemic akrasia. One issue is the perspective from which the judgment of akrasia is applied. Another is, if you will, the stage in the believing process at which the judgment applies or is most applicable.

To tackle the issue of perspective, ascriptions of epistemic akrasia are ordinarily made from the first-person point of view. That is, akrasia exists where the believer says or would say, “I believe  $p$  but I should not (because the evidence is not on the side of  $p$ ).” This is problematic in one regard, which is that *the believer may and usually does have other reasons for believing  $p$  besides “the evidence.”* Again, Kurt Wise is paradigmatic: he rejected *not- $p$*  (i.e., not-creationism, that is, evolution) not on the basis of evidence—he was completely informed and completely indifferent to the evidence—but rather on the basis of biblical dogma and his ostensible personal relationship and friendship with Jesus. Similarly for Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Fichte, and a vast number of others, evidence is simply not the court to which they appeal. They are more driven by, and confident in, non-epistemic factors—Gendler’s aliefs, Johanson’s overbeliefs, James’ passionate nature, etc. As we mentioned before, these subdoxastic states or commitments, including what are often called “hinge beliefs” or “hinge commitments” on which other particular beliefs turn, provide the solid ground on which believers build their houses of belief.

Instead of expecting the believer to admit her unfounded belief, we could also take a second- or third-person point of view, to the effect of, “You/she believe(s)  $p$  but you/she should not.” That is to say, epistemic akrasia does not necessarily demand that *the believer* understands that the belief is unfounded and out of control but can amount to an objective observer evaluating the believer’s belief as so unfounded and uncontrolled. This introduces the concept of *epistemic virtue* and the virtuous epistemic practices and standards that a rational person could be expected to adopt and for which she can be held responsible. The outsider (the philosopher, the

scholar, the skeptic) may warn the believer, “You have not exercised the epistemic virtue that a mature, rational person can and should exercise.” Epistemic virtue refers to the norms and standards to which a thinker should aspire, and to which he can and should be held accountable, in arriving at beliefs and knowledge-claims; call them the “best practices” of thinking, if you will. According to professional skeptic Massimo Pigliucci (2017), the epistemic virtues include attentiveness, conscientiousness, curiosity, honesty, objectivity, parsimony, warranty, and wisdom, among others; epistemic vices, on the other hand, include closed-mindedness, dishonesty, dogmatism, gullibility, naïveté, self-deception, and wishful thinking.

The first order of business in any epistemic situation is full and honest consideration of the evidence, and scholars from Clifford to Nikolaj Nottelman hold a person blameworthy if they do not demonstrate a certain effort to sincerely grapple with the facts. Recall that Clifford deemed all beliefs held for insufficient reasons to be “unworthy,” and Nottelman brands as “blameworthy belief” any belief

that is undesirable from an epistemic perspective and for who epistemic undesirability the believer has not adequate excuse. I shall maintain that a believer lacks an adequate excuse of the relevant kind, if, and only if, the epistemic undesirability of her belief is a result of an exercise of doxastic control constituting an inexcusable violation of an intellectual obligation performed with a relevant type of foresight.... (2007: 2).

With its reference to doxastic control, blameworthy belief seems an adequate synonym for epistemic akrasia, and a more inclusive one at that. The believer does not have to blame herself for the belief; others who understand, and accept the burden of, epistemic virtue can assess the belief and believer as such if it/they have violated the basic rules of belief-formation and belief-maintenance.

Another expectation in mature, reasonable thinking is *epistemic vigilance*, particularly because, as Sperber et al. emphasized, much of our belief and knowledge is received through communication by others. In their analysis, epistemic vigilance entails attention to and evaluation of the reliability of such communication, which involves many variables including the expertise, reputation, trustworthiness, and benevolence of the source and, more problematically, the compatibility of new information with “background beliefs” held by the receiver (2010: 374)—not to mention subdoxastic and passional factors like interests, goals, identities, and commitments. Talmont-Kaminski cautioned, though, that epistemic vigilance tends to work differently for religion than for science and factual/empirical matters in general. Science, he posited, operates on the principle of *content vigilance* or attention to the quality of the claim and its supporting argument and evidence; religion, by contrast, functions on the principle of *source vigilance*, where the “source” is typically a religious authority, institution, or scripture. The danger in source vigilance according to Talmont-Kaminski is that it “has the capacity to maintain belief traditions on the grounds that their representatives are deemed to be authoritative and appear to be honest in their beliefs—without any connection to the truth of those claims” (2020: 91). Yet more seriously, focus on the source can (and may be intended to) derail content vigilance, leading believers to undervalue or overlook flaws and contradictions in the beliefs or even to regard inspecting those beliefs too closely “as dangerous, arduous, or expensive” (another form of epistemic restraint against curiosity) which “will lead to a decreased likelihood that the content of the claims is investigated” (95).

In all, the process of religious believing often does, and seems ideally designed to, abdicate what Gideon Rosen called “procedural epistemic obligations.” He developed the concept in the context of moral conduct, but we can safely extend it to believing as a sort of intellectually- and morally-assessable conduct, since the obligations he has in mind include “to ask certain questions, to take careful notes, to stop and think, to focus one’s attention in a certain direction, etc.” Ultimately, procedural epistemic obligation does not tell us *what* to think or believe; rather, “It is an obligation to *take steps* to ensure that when the time comes to act [and we add, to believe], one will know what one ought to know” (2004: 301).

The question remains, then, whether we can reasonably expect that people will respect and practice epistemic virtue, epistemic vigilance, and procedural epistemic obligations in their belief-conduct. Granted, many, perhaps even most, beliefs are not filtered through these norms and standards. This is because many, perhaps even most, beliefs are acquired in childhood, before our critical faculties are completely developed. Indeed, it is the nature of culture in general, and religion in particular as merely a domain of culture, to instill and enculturate beliefs, values, and habits *before* individuals are mature and *as part of* their maturation. And in societies where religion is thoroughly dispersed throughout and integrated into the culture, and especially where it is thoroughly institutionalized (e.g. the Catholic Church), great energy may be exerted to inculcate if not indoctrinate people in

their youth—not only internalizing explicit discursive beliefs but, equally if not more importantly, the aliefs, overbeliefs, and passionate sentiments that underlie them and make them unusually real and vital for believers.

Arguably, we cannot hold believers accountable for how they *acquire* religious beliefs; in that sense, religious beliefs may be relatively involuntary and not freely chosen. Arguably too, so equipped with aliefs, overbeliefs, and passions, given the opportunity to judge and choose their beliefs, they are overdetermined to choose the very beliefs that they have received. (One thinks of the Amish tradition of *rumspringa*, when control of adolescents is intentionally weakened and some youths may even taste the fruits of non-Amish life, but—because to do otherwise would be incompatible with their internalized beliefs and values as well as a betrayal and loss of their community—the vast majority return “voluntarily” to Amish society and religion.)

Nevertheless, the fact that people received, usually uncritically, some religious beliefs in their childhood does not exonerate them from the obligation to inspect those beliefs when they reach a stage of mental adulthood that makes such inspection possible. Hence, while the *acquisition* of dubious beliefs may not be entirely voluntary or subject to epistemic akrasia, the *maintenance* or *persistence* of such beliefs, and the *change* of such beliefs, is. Granted too, changing or shedding beliefs is not easy. All experience indicates that it is much easier to acquire a belief than to relinquish one; dropping a belief not only demands cognitive and emotional effort and willpower but potentially implies a change or loss of community or identity. This is why religious apostasy is often reported as painful and traumatic. But that does not excuse people from the duty to reflect on their received beliefs. Nor can they reasonably claim ignorance (which, either way, is not an excuse in belief any more than it is in law). There is no educated citizen of modern society who is not aware that (1) there are errors and contradictions in their own religion and its putatively authoritative sources; (2) there are other religions in the world which (a) diverge from and controvert her own and (b) she herself would probably avow if she had been raised in another society (i.e., her religious beliefs are largely a matter of *epistemic contingency* or the accident of birth and upbringing); (3) the classic arguments for religion (cosmological, ontological, etc.) are inadequate if not refuted; (4) science has rendered much of religious belief unnecessary if not debunked; and (5) there are non-religious people in the world, including former devotees of her own sect or denomination, who illustrate the possibility of happy and fulfilling lives without religious belief.

In view of this undeniable knowledge, the religious believer cannot justifiably escape the responsibility to examine and question his received beliefs and *make the decision to retain them or reject them*. We concede that the original acquisition of religious belief may be involuntary, thrust upon children without the capacity to judge, but as Engel reminded us, the ability and opportunity to *attend to* “my belief that *P* gives me a kind of control over my beliefs” (Engel 2009: 212). So religious believing is never, under any circumstances, completely outside of our control. Of course, many people do reject or change religious beliefs, some migrating to other religions and some putting aside religion altogether (although occasionally in favor of equally suspect “spirituality”). Then there are those, like Kurt Wise, who consciously make the choice to recommit to their religious beliefs in the glaring light of the factual, evidential disconfirmation of those beliefs. They are guilty of epistemic akrasia. Or, since “epistemic” properly refers to knowledge while “doxastic” refers to belief, I would suggest that we conclude that holding religious beliefs in this day and age, with all that humans have learned about and are obliged to know about comparative religions, scriptural criticism, science, and secularism, is a form of not so much epistemic akrasia as of *doxastic irresponsibility*, which is more blameworthy since it is more voluntary—not a weakness of will but a failure or refusal of the duty to scrutinize one’s beliefs and one’s reasons for holding onto them, if not for having them in the first place.

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