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HOPING ON INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE: HOW EPISTEMICALLY RATIONAL CAN ACTION-CENTRED FAITH BE?

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Abstract: Daniel McKaughan has recently argued that conceiving faith as an 'action-centred' attitude whose cognitive component falls short of outright belief can play a central role in explaining how people who regard the truth of Christianity as significantly less probable than naturalism can respond with faith to the gospel proclamation without believing its core claims or presuppositions on insufficient evidence, and without violating the requirements of either pragmatic or epistemic rationality. In this paper I object to McKaughan that hope—the attitude to which he assigns the cognitive role of action-centred faith—is ill-suited for the intended purpose, and that having to the core claims and presuppositions of the gospel proclamation any attitude that *is* suited for the intended purpose is not going to leave a person who takes her overall evidence to run against some of those claims and presuppositions 'free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads'.

I. INTRODUCTION

Daniel McKaughan has recently added an interesting twist to the view that the cognitive aspect of Judeo-Christian faith need not involve outright *belief* in the propositions that articulate its core claims or presuppositions (*e.g.*, that God exists, or that a man can rise from the dead). The idea that varieties of nondoxastic faith may serve adequately as the positive cognitive attitude that is crucial for the religious form of life of many sincere, devout individuals in our time, has been explored by a number of philosophers including William Alston, Robert Audi, Daniel Howard-Snyder, John L. Schellenberg, Richard Swinburne, and McKaughan himself.[1] But in his contribution to the JPR collection of papers in honour of William Alston,[2] McKaughan goes one step

[1]See Robert Audi, 'Faith, Belief, and Rationality', *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 213–39, https://doi.org/10.2307/2214096; William P. Alston, 'Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith', in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*, ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 10–27; William P. Alston, 'Audi on Nondoxastic Faith', in *Rationality and the Good: Critical Essays on the Ethics and Epistemology of Robert Audi*, ed. Mark Timmons, John Greco, and Alfred R. Mele (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123–39; John L. Schellenberg, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); John L. Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'Propositional Faith: What It Is and What It Is Not', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 357–72; and Daniel McKaughan, 'Authentic Faith and Acknowledged Risk: Dissolving the Problem of Faith and Reason', *Religious Studies* 49, no. 1 (2013): 101–24, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412512000200.

[2]Daniel McKaughan, 'Action-Centered Faith, Doubt, and Rationality', *Journal of Philosophical Research* 41 (2016), Issue Supplement: *Selected Papers in Honor of William P. Alston*: 71–90, https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr20165364.

further by arguing in some detail that conceiving faith as an 'action-centred' attitude[3] that does not involve belief in its propositional content can play a central role in explaining how having that faith can be not only practically, but epistemically rational. His claim is indeed that, since having action-centred faith in a person does not require believing, but only taking some sort of 'positive cognitive stand' on the truth of those propositions the falsity of which would make that faith vain, having such a commitment not only need not be a form of believing on insufficient evidence, but can be epistemically rational *under a wide variety of subpar evidential circumstances*. By this, he means that having action-centred (as opposed to doxastic) faith leaves one 'free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads' not only when it leads to conclusions that are broadly consistent with the propositions in question, but 'even in situations in which one takes the truth of Judaism or Christianity to be significantly less probable than naturalism', provided one attributes to it 'any non-zero (or at least non-negligible) personal probability'.[4]

The main reason why McKaughan's argument deserves closer scrutiny is of course that, while the Jewish and early Christian communities of the first century typically took God's existence for granted and treated it as a widely shared presupposition, in our time many cultured and scientifically informed people find themselves in a situation that has been aptly described as the 'modern predicament':

> the question at the forefront of many people's minds is not 'Is God trustworthy?' but rather 'Does God exist?' or perhaps some epistemic sibling such as 'Is there any good reason to think that anyone anywhere ever encounters God?' Faith *in* God doesn't make sense apart from the assumption that *there is such a person as God*. Yet one cannot very well trust *God* that *God exists* when God's existence is precisely what is in question. What avenues for faith are available, then, to a person who is significantly attracted to a particular monotheistic religious tradition—such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—but who has profound intellectual doubts about core claims made by those traditions?[5]

McKaughan makes the modern predicament vivid by introducing an imaginary character, Femia, who 'falls deeply in love with Jesus as portrayed in the writings of the Greek New Testament and with God so described', but at the same time has significant doubts about the central gospel proclamation: 'What?! A dead man rising?! Is there really such a person as God?!'[6] She would like to have faith in Jesus, but she takes her overall evidence to run against some core claims and presuppositions of the gospel proclamation:

[3]Of course, any consistently Judeo-Christian faith should include an 'action-centred' attitude, but in McKaughan's terminology, 'action-centred faith' is not just an action-centred attitude, but an attitude whose cognitive component falls short of outright belief. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for pressing me to clarify this point.

[4]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 85, 72, 77. An anonymous referee for this journal remarked that McKaughan's talk of action-centred faith 'leaving [one] free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads' might suggest commitment to some controversial form of doxastic voluntarism. However, McKaughan emphasises that the 'decision to trust' and the 'commitment to following' involved in action-centred faith are *not* 'decisions to believe' precisely because he does not want to question the view that belief 'is a largely passive psychological state that one simply finds oneself in' (77). So I think that the voluntaristic-sounding statement quoted in the main text can be safely construed as saying that having action-centred faith is *consistent* with following the arguments and evidence where it leads, which involves no controversial form of doxastic voluntarism. This is how this and similar phrases should be construed in what follows.

[5]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 72.

[6]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 72.

> Femia wants, more than anything, to follow Jesus—he is her heart's treasure or 'pearl of great price' (Matthew 13:45-46). But she also wants to do so with intellectual integrity and she recognizes that following the Way does not make sense apart from particular claims about reality that are part of or presupposed by the core religious teachings […]. Femia has significant doubts about the reliability of the testimonial source with respect to central parts of the core teachings. She sees no convincing non-question begging reasons for the reliability or trustworthiness of the source, though this remains a live possibility.[7]

McKaughan's question is then whether there is any way for people trapped in the modern predicament to respond with faith to the gospel proclamation without compromising their intellectual integrity—that is to say, without (a) believing its core claims or presuppositions on insufficient evidence, and (b) without violating the requirements of either pragmatic or epistemic rationality. His answer is that there is indeed such a way, which is responding to the central gospel proclamation with *action-centred faith*, that is to say, with an action-centred attitude whose cognitive aspect consists in hope rather than belief.

The proposal has many merits, but in the end I think it does not deliver the goods. In this paper I argue that, while McKaughan does a good job in showing that having action-centred faith does not involve believing on insufficient evidence or violating the requirements of pragmatic rationality, he fails to show that it does not involve violating the requirements that epistemic rationality places on a person whose current evaluation of the evidence heavily counts against such propositions as that God exists or that a man can rise from the dead. In part II, I introduce McKaughan's proposal and describe in some detail his view of the attitude—hope—he takes to be best suited to play the cognitive role of action-centred faith. In part III, I discuss different criteria of cognitivity and argue that hope is not cognitive enough to play the intended role. In part IV, I argue that having an attitude that *is* cognitive enough to play the intended role will not leave an agent that is trapped in the modern predicament entirely free to proportion their epistemic opinions to the evidence, as it will prevent them from forming rationally appropriate beliefs on the basis of the relevant evidence. Finally, in part V, I recap my argument by putting it in the form of a dilemma.

II. ACTION-CENTRED FAITH

McKaughan devotes some pages to spelling out the requirements that 'a complex human attitude or posture' must meet to qualify as *faith* in Jesus or God in the Judeo-Christian sense. In short, his view is that having faith in Jesus or God involves: (1) a personal response that includes (1a) *trust in* or *reliance on* Jesus or God, and (1b) a *commitment to following* Jesus or to walking in God's ways; (2) a *positive evaluative response* to the relationship with Jesus or God; and (3) *a positive cognitive stand* on the truth of any claim that may be involved in or presupposed by having faith in Jesus or God.[8] McKaughan argues that these behavioural, affective, and cognitive roles can be filled in many different ways, not only by 'involuntary dispositions', but also by actions that are 'straightforwardly under one's direct voluntary control',[9] and describes a

[7]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 73.

[8]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 74-76.

[9]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 79.

view of faith as 'action-centred' just in case it locates what is most central to faith in the realm of action. His claim is that it is possible to come up with,

> some notion of reliance, trust, or risk taking behavior on behalf of the good such that it can both (1) plausibly play the role of trusting in or relying on a person in a sense relevant to faith […] and (2) that trust or reliance can be spelled out in such a way that one can adopt it by voluntary acts that are straightforwardly under one's direct control and do so in circumstances in which one lacks belief-level confidence [in some core claims or presuppositions of that faith].[10]

For present purposes, it is not necessary to discuss in detail the notion of reliance proposed by McKaughan. What must be emphasised is rather that, in his view, the *positive cognitive stand* that must accompany the decision to trust and the commitment to following need not be the sort of attitude envisaged by the '*belief-plus* conception of faith'—the view that faith involves *belief* as the agent's distinctive cognitive attitude towards its propositional content.[11] As a consequence, having action-centred faith does not involve *believing on insufficient evidence*—a point that I am happy to grant. Just as I am happy to grant that having action-centred faith can be *practically rational*:

> for Femia, someone to whom only one religious way is a live possibility (in contrast to naturalism) and who values that religious way as a 'pearl of great price' (Matthew 13:45–46) in the sense that she values it so highly that she is willing to forego many (perhaps any) other potential goods to pursue it, a decision to follow that religious way can be practically rational under a wide range of evidential circumstances (even situations in which she takes the truth of [the core claims and presuppositions of the gospel proclamation] to be significantly less probable than [their falsity]).[12]

What I am less happy with is McKaughan's claim that the cognitive role of faith can be filled by a nondoxastic attitude whose possession can be both 'constitutive of Judeo-Christian faith in God' *and* epistemically rational *even for someone whose current evaluation of the evidence favours naturalism over the truth of Judaism or Christianity*. This is taken to mean that its owner remains entirely free to do one's 'level best to have [one's] epistemic opinions (e.g., credences or subjective probability judgments) conform to the evidence […] and to properly investigate what evidence might be available in a manner appropriate to how much any given topic matters to [one] relative to [one's] other concerns'.[13]

Let me turn, then, to McKaughan's bid for the cognitive role of action-centred faith, that is to say, to the attitude he believes best qualifies for the role of the positive cognitive stand that having action-centred faith requires to take on the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith.

McKaughan lists several attitudes that might qualify as the required positive cognitive stand (besides, that is, believing that p), including believing that p is likely, believing that p is more likely than relevant alternatives, trusting that p, accepting that p, assuming that p, assenting to p, deciding to live by p, resolving to act as if p were true, believing that p is possible, taking p

[10]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 81–2.

[11]McKaughan, 'Authentic Faith', 103.

[12]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 87.

[13]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 84.

to be a live option, *etc*., but in the end he settles on *hoping that p*, which, he maintains, 'has both an evaluative and a cognitive component and can thus play both of the affective and cognitive roles needed for having faith',[14] while leaving the agent 'entirely free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads'.[15] He emphasises that the conditions of rationality for hope are different from those for belief:

> A hope that something is the case requires far less by way of evidence than belief with the same content. Suppose that you get a lottery ticket. Recognizing that your chances of winning are less than one in, say, 250 million, it would be irrational for you to believe that you are going to win. However, it is clearly not irrational to hope that you will win. Indeed, […] given certain combinations of affections and behavioral commitments, having propositional faith that *p* is compatible with having any non-zero (or at least non-negligible) personal probability for *p*.[16]

Quite so. However, this does not suffice to show that having action-centred faith that *p* will leave an agent entirely free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads *even if their current evaluation of the evidence favours naturalism over the truth of Judaism or Christianity*. In the next sections I will argue (i) that there is reason to doubt that hope is suited to fill the cognitive role of (action-centred) faith, and (ii) that having to the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith any attitude that *is* suited to fill that role does not leave one entirely free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads.

III. HOPE IS NOT COGNITIVE ENOUGH

Hope is *cognitive* in a variety of senses. It is cognitive in the sense that hoping that *p* is having an attitude whose content is truth-apt, *i.e*., a proposition. So it is cognitive also in the sense that hoping that *p* requires mastering the concepts involved in grasping the proposition that *p* (some qualification may be required if *de re* attributions are allowed to enter the picture, but such subtleties need not detain us here). Finally, hope is cognitive in the sense that an agent can hope that *p* only if they assign it a probability that is different from either zero or one. But it seems clear that being cognitive in all these senses is not sufficient for an attitude to fill the cognitive role of action-centred faith: desiring that *p* is cognitive in all these senses,[17] and yet desiring that the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith be true can hardly qualify as taking the required positive cognitive stand on them. This is implicitly acknowledged by McKaughan when he observes that hope might play both the affective and the cognitive role required for faith in virtue of its being constituted by a mix of 'strong desires and weak beliefs'.[18] And of course, desire is the prototype of an attitude having a world-to-mind direction of fit. Therefore, unless hope can be shown to be significantly

[14]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 77; see also McKaughan, 'Authentic Faith', 112–14.

[15]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 85.

[16]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 77.

[17]One might object that people sometimes describe themselves as *desiring* that some past event never happened or that they never performed this or that action. But this is just loose talk: in such cases it would be more appropriate to say that one *wishes* that some past event never happened, or that one never performed the relevant action.

[18]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 77; see also McKaughan, 'Authentic Faith', 112.

more cognitive than desire, there is little reason to regard it as a serious candidate for the cognitive role of action-centred faith.

It is worth noting that taking a positive cognitive stand on a proposition does not merely involve having to it a cognitive attitude that is in some sense *positive*: it requires having to it a cognitive attitude that is *positive in a specifically cognitive sense*. A number of remarks in McKaughan's paper point in that direction. For one thing, he views the 'positive evaluative response' involved in action-centred faith as itself unequivocally propositional,[19] which means that he does not regard having a propositional content and involving mastery of the relevant concepts as sufficient for an evaluatively positive attitude to be able to fill the cognitive role of action-centred faith (if he did, he would not need to invoke a distinct attitude for that role). Second, when he says that 'the conditions of rationality for hope differ from those for confident belief' because 'hope that something is the case requires far less by way of evidence than belief with the same content',[20] he seems to be implying that an attitude can qualify for the cognitive role of action-centred faith only if it is subject to conditions of epistemic rationality. Finally, his list of candidates for the cognitive role of action-centred faith includes only attitudes that involve some degree of *cognitive preference for, or endorsement of*, the relevant proposition on the part of the agent: it includes items like believing that *p* is likely, believing that *p* is more likely than relevant alternatives, trusting that *p*, accepting that *p etc*., rather than items like believing that *p* is *unlikely*, believing that *p* is *less likely* than relevant alternatives, doubting that *p*, rejecting that *p*, *etc*. All this strongly suggests that McKaughan subscribes to the view that taking a positive cognitive stand on the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith requires having towards them an attitude that is *positive in a specifically cognitive sense*—as opposed to a *positive* attitude that is *cognitive* in some of the above-mentioned senses. This is, I think, as it should be.

However, McKaughan does not provide a fuller characterisation of what is involved in having to a proposition an attitude that is positive in a specifically cognitive sense, and one is likely to feel that his candidate for the cognitive role of action-centred faith is significantly *less cognitive* than the other attitudes included in the list by which he attempts to throw light on the relevant psychological concept. Such a feeling naturally prompts the question whether hope is (positively) *cognitive enough* for the role that McKaughan proposes to assign it.

We have seen that his focus is squarely on Judeo-Christian faith: the thesis that hope can fill the cognitive role of action-centred faith is meant to vindicate the claim that hope can fill the cognitive role of a complex human attitude or posture that may constitute a genuine instance of the Judeo-Christian faith described in the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament.[21] So, what does the Judeo-Christian faith therein described require from an agent from a cognitive point of view? A recent insightful discussion of the question is provided by Howard-Snyder,[22] who attempts to clarify the nature of the positive cognitive attitude required by 'Markan propositional faith' by offering eight 'comments' on the issue.[23]

[19]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 76.

[20]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 77.

[21]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 74–7.

[22]Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'Can Fictionalists Have Faith? It All Depends', *Religious Studies* 55, no. 4 (2019): 447–68, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412518000161, esp. 450–1.

[23]Howard-Snyder's comments are not intended to constitute a *definition*, but only to 'shed enough light [on the attitude] to make it sufficiently understandable and theoretically useful' ('Can Fictionalists Have Faith?', 450).

First, Howard-Snyder claims that Markan propositional faith is incompatible with disbelief and requires some sort of belief-like attitude. Second, he claims that the positive cognitive attitude it involves falls on the cognitive side of the line that divides the cognitive from the conative and/or volitional. Third, he notes that it is possible to distinguish paradigm cases of positive and negative cognitive attitudes: believing a proposition is a paradigm case of a positive cognitive attitude, while disbelieving it is a paradigm case of a negative one. Fourth, he observes that some cognitive attitudes (*e.g.*, entertaining a proposition or wondering whether it is true) are neither positive nor negative. Fifth, he argues that both positive and negative cognitive attitudes have a mind-to-world direction of fit. Sixth, he suggests that a cognitive attitude towards a proposition is positive in that the agent who has it *takes a stand in favour of its truth* (and a cognitive attitude towards a proposition is negative in that the agent who has it *takes a stand against its truth*). Seventh, he argues that (positive and negative) cognitive attitudes are evidence-sensitive in the sense that no one can have a positive or negative attitude towards a proposition that does not reflect their (possibly wrong) estimation of the truth or falsehood of that proposition. Eighth, he emphasises that taking a stand in favour of the truth of a proposition need not involve having a tendency to affirming the proposition outwardly when asked whether it is true or to assenting to it inwardly when considering whether it is true: for example, 'someone who lacks those two tendencies but who has a tendency to outwardly affirm and inwardly assent to the proposition that *p* is likely, or the proposition that *p* is five times as likely as each of its five credible contraries, among other possibilities'[24] can be correctly described as taking a stand in favour of its truth.[25]

How does hope fare when assessed in the light of these 'comments'? We can set aside Howard-Snyder's third and fourth comments, as they fail to specify any necessary condition for an attitude to qualify as positively cognitive in the relevant sense. Turning to the second comment, Howard-Snyder offers no criterion or procedure for settling whether an attitude falls on the cognitive side of the line that divides the cognitive from the conative and/or volitional, so I will just voice my intuition that hope does not clearly fall on the cognitive side of that line and leave it at that. Moreover, I will grant that nothing in the first and sixth comments stands in the way of hope's qualifying as a positive cognitive attitude in the required sense. But it seems clear that hope performs rather poorly when it comes to the fifth, seventh, and eighth of Howard-Snyder's comments.

Let me start from the fifth comment: it seems obvious that hope does not have a mind-to-world direction of fit. The fact that an agent can hope that *p* only if they assign to the proposition that *p* a probability that is different from either zero or one is no objection: for as long as both extremes are avoided, no amount of evidence that not-*p* will be incompatible with an agent's hoping that *p*.[26] So it seems equally obvious that hope fails to be evidence-

[24]Howard-Snyder, 'Can Fictionalists Have Faith?', 451.

[25]Howard-Snyder, 'Can Fictionalists Have Faith?', 451–3 adds a further item to the list, but his ninth comment is more a series of corrections to the way Finlay Malcolm spells out the notion of 'a positive cognitive attitude toward p' in his 'Can Fictionalists Have Faith?', *Religious Studies* 54, no. 2 (2018): 215–32, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412517000063.

[26]It is worth noting that the conflict between hoping that *p* and assigning to the proposition that *p* a probability that is equal to either zero or one seems to arise as a matter of presupposition rather than of satisfaction conditions: hoping that *p* while assigning to the proposition that *p* a probability that is equal to either zero or one seems (pragmatically) infelicitous rather than (epistemically) mistaken.

sensitive in the sense of Howard-Snyder's seventh comment. How could an agent's hoping that p *reflect* their estimation of the truth or falsehood of the proposition that *p*? Should the strength of an agent's hope that *p* be proportional to their estimation of the probability that *p*? Should it be inversely proportional to it? How could Femia's hope that the core claims and presuppositions of the gospel proclamation are true *reflect* an attribution to them of a personal probability that is just slightly higher than zero? (Should she have just a *very* feeble hope that they are true?) Finally, hope fails to satisfy the condition suggested by Howard-Snyder's eighth comment. For not only hoping that *p* involves no tendency to affirm outwardly and assent inwardly to the proposition that (the proposition that) *p* is likely: it involves no tendency to affirm or assent to the proposition that (the proposition that) *p* is *x* times as likely as each of its *x* credible contraries, nor to any other proposition that may be plausibly taken to express a (cognitive) preference for (the proposition that) *p* over its rivals. (If it did, the suggestion that it is suited to fill the cognitive role of faith for an agent trapped in the modern predicament would obviously be a non-starter.)

Judged in the light of Howard-Snyder's criteria, hope is then not (positively) cognitive enough for the role that McKaughan proposes to assign it. However, Howard-Snyder's criteria might be too strong, so it is worth considering whether hope would fare better when assessed by more lenient standards, in particular, when the requirement of evidence-sensitivity is dropped (perhaps Markan propositional faith does NOT really involve it). McKaughan emphasises that action-centred faith 'is expressed behaviorally in actions and decisions',[27] which suggests a different way of approaching cognitivity, one that focuses more closely on its relationship with behaviour.

It is often maintained that outright believing that *p* requires *being prepared to rely on p, or to use p as a premise, in practical reasoning*.[28] This can be a useful starting point for articulating a different view of what makes an agent's attitude a *cognitive* one, insofar as it suggests that for an attitude to count as cognitive it must be the sort of thing that can be cited in a *rationalising* explanation of its owner's behaviour. I owe this idea to Crispin Wright,[29] who exploits it to characterise the mere *acceptance* of a proposition, which he construes as an evidence-insensitive attitude. Wright argues that the explanatory analogy between (mere) acceptance and belief should concern exclusively their role as *reasons for further thought and actions*.[30] While ordinary intentional psychological thought admits of a number of non-rationalising kinds of explanation (we explain people's behaviour by citing their feelings, emotions, desires, *etc*.), the constitutive requirement of an agent's *accepting* the proposition that *p* is that they,

[27]McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 75–6.

[28]See., *e.g*., Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99; and Brian Weatherson, 'Can We Do Without Pragmatic Encroachment?', *Philosophical Perspectives* 19, no. 1 (2005): 417–43, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2005.00068.x.

[29]Crispin Wright, 'Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 78, no. 1 (2004): 167–212, esp. 181–2, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0309-7013.2004.00121.x.

[30]Howard-Snyder, 'Can Fictionalists Have Faith?', 451, comes close to endorsing the idea in his eighth comment, where he suggests that a cognitive attitude may involve *taking a stand in favour of the truth* of the proposition that *p* in virtue of its owner's having (among other things) 'a tendency to use [the proposition that] *p* as a premise in practical and theoretical reasoning'.

> (be disposed to) accept the consequences of *p* and to behave, in so far as [they] behave rationally, just in ways that would be practical-syllogistically rationalised by [their] actual desires and other beliefs/acceptances if in addition [they] were also to believe that *p*.[31]

Here, then, is a first shot at a general principle underlying judgements to the effect that a given attitude is *positive in a specifically cognitive sense*:

> *Positive Cognitive*: φ-ing that *p* can qualify as taking a genuinely cognitive positive stand on the truth of the proposition that *p* only if φ-ing that *p* involves acting in all respects—insofar as one behaves rationally—as if one believed that *p*.

Positive Cognitive is of course too strong. Believing that *p* to degree 0.9 is no doubt taking a positive cognitive stand on the proposition that *p*, but does not involve acting in all respects—insofar as one behaves rationally—as if one had a full belief that *p*: if I believe the proposition that *p* to degree 0.9, in most circumstances it will not be rational for me to bet my own life, or the life of someone else, on its being true that *p*. So *Positive Cognitive* must be revised to accommodate (sufficiently high) degrees of belief. Here is one natural suggestion:

> *Positive Cognitive**: φ-ing that *p* can qualify as taking a genuinely cognitive positive stand on the truth of the proposition that *p* only if φ-ing that *p* involves acting in all respects—insofar as one behaves rationally—as if one believed that *p* to a degree higher than 0.5.

The thought behind *Positive Cognitive** is again that the way in which agents behave must be *rationalised* by their φ-ing that *p* for their φ-ing that *p* to qualify as genuinely (positively) cognitive, but the idea is now generalised to partial beliefs and other attitudes that can be plausibly taken to involve some degree of *cognitive endorsement* of the relevant proposition.

However, the plausibility of the 0.5 threshold can be questioned.[32] Consider an agent—call her Flora—whose attitude towards the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith displays a profile modelled on that suggested by Howard-Snyder's eighth comment. Flora displays a *comparative preference* for the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith in the sense that she believes that they are twice as likely as each of their only contraries that she believes to a degree higher than zero: she believes the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith to a degree of 0.5, the core claims and presuppositions of naturalism to a degree of 0.25, and the core claims and presuppositions of Tibetan Buddhism to a degree of 0.25. Let it be further assumed that Flora acts in keeping with her attitude: her practical and theoretical behaviour is consistently rationalised by her comparative preference for the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith over those of both naturalism and Tibetan Buddhism. Now, it seems clear that Flora's attitude is both *cognitive* and *positive* in a specifically cognitive sense. However, it does not meet the condition specified by *Positive Cognitive**, as it does not involve Flora's acting in all respects—insofar as she behaves rationally—as if she believed the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith to a degree *higher* than 0.5. If Flora's comparative preference is indeed a case of taking a genuinely cognitive positive stand on the truth of the relevant propositions, we have a counterexample to *Positive Cognitive**: the condition it specifies is too strong.

One might try to fix the problem by including the lower bound into the set:

[31]Wright, 'Warrant for Nothing', 182.

[32]I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this point.

> *Positive Cognitive***: φ-ing that *p* can qualify as taking a genuinely cognitive positive stand on the truth of the proposition that *p* only if φ-ing that *p* involves acting in all respects—insofar as one behaves rationally—as if one believed that *p* to a degree equal to or higher than 0.5.

However, the slightly weaker requirement specified by *Positive Cognitive*** seems rather arbitrary.[33] While taking a positive cognitive stand on a proposition can be reasonably taken to involve some degree of cognitive endorsement of the proposition in question, one may doubt that the difference between an attitude that involves acting in all respects as if one believed that *p* to degree 0.5, and one that involves acting in all respects as if one believed that *p* to a degree asymptotically close to 0.5 on its lower side, justifies the verdict that having the former attitude, as opposed to having the latter, amounts to taking a positive cognitive stand on the proposition that *p*. After all, the behavioural differences associated with the two attitudes will be negligible, so why let in the former but not the latter?

Doubt about the plausibility of the 0.5 threshold is reinforced if belief is understood contrastively as relative to alternatives.[34] If believing that *p* is believing that *p* as against another proposition or set of propositions, where the contrast proposition—or the disjunction of the members or the relevant contrast set—need not be logically equivalent to the proposition that not-*p*, then someone who believes that the proposition that *p* is more likely than any of the contextually salient alternatives will arguably qualify as *believing that p* even if they believe that *p* to a degree that is considerably lower than 0.5.[35] This again runs counter to the requirement that φ-ing that *p* involves acting in all respects—insofar as one behaves rationally—as if one believed that *p* to a degree equal to or higher than 0.5. As a possible replacement, contrastivism about belief suggests considering the following condition:

> *Positive Cognitive****: φ-ing that *p* can qualify as taking a genuinely cognitive positive stand on the truth of the proposition that *p* only if φ-ing that *p* involves acting in all respects—insofar as one behaves rationally—as if one believed that the proposition that *p* is more likely than any of the alternatives considered in the relevant context.

To my ear, this sounds plausible enough, and is in fact my best shot at a necessary condition for an attitude's being *positive in a specifically cognitive sense*. Note that *Positive Cognitive**** picks out in a principled way the cases in which taking a genuinely cognitive positive stand on the truth of a proposition is consistent with acting in all respects (insofar as one behaves rationally) as if one believed that proposition to a degree lower than 0.5. Those are the cases in which the agent's behaviour is best rationalised by regarding them as acting in all respects as if they assigned to the proposition in question a higher probability than to each contextually salient contrary proposition.

The condition specified by *Positive Cognitive**** can be satisfied by attitudes that are not responsive to evidence (an agent can *act in all respects* as if they believed that the proposition that *p* is more likely than any of the alternatives considered in the relevant context without their attitude's being sensitive to the evidence), including attitudes that are ruled out by

[33]I am grateful to the same anonymous referee mentioned in the previous footnote for drawing my attention to this point as well.

[34]See Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 4–6; also Martijn Blaauw, 'Contrastive Belief', in *Contrastivism in Philosophy*, ed. Martin Blaauw (New York-London: Routledge, 2013), 88–100.

[35]Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 6-7.

Howard-Snyder's criteria. However, it is easy to see that hoping that *p* (like desiring and wishing that *p*) fails to meet it. If your chances of winning the lottery are less than one in 250 million (and you know that this is the case), it will certainly not be irrational for you to hope (or desire, or wish) that you will win, whether you know that those are your chances or not. But if you just hope (or desire, or wish) that you will win, it would be clearly irrational for you to act, or to try to act, in all respects as if you believed that the proposition that you will win is more likely than any of the alternatives considered in the relevant context.[36]

Contrastivism about belief is controversial.[37] But note that *Positive Cognitive**** involves no commitment to the contrastivist view that believing that *p* is *always* believing that *p* as against another proposition or set of propositions—it only involves commitment to the claim that taking a genuinely cognitive positive stand on the truth of the proposition that *p* involves acting in all respects (insofar as one behaves rationally) *as if* one believed that the proposition that *p* is more likely than any of the alternatives considered in the relevant context. And this condition can be satisfied not only by agents that believe that *p* as against another proposition or set of propositions, but also by agents that have an outright belief that *p* or that believe that *p* to a sufficiently high degree.

The moral of this discussion is then that hope proves ill-suited to fill the cognitive role of action-centred faith both by the lights of Howard-Snyder's criteria and by those of a less demanding 'rationalising' view of what it takes for a propositional attitude to be positively cognitive.

IV. REASONS, REQUIREMENTS OF RATIONALITY, AND 'FOLLOWING THE EVIDENCE WHERE IT LEADS'

So much for the first point. The second is that having to the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith any attitude that *is* suited to fill the cognitive role of (action-centred) faith—by which I mean, for present purposes, an attitude that meets at least the requirements

[36]By contrast, notice that many of the attitudes listed by McKaughan as possible candidates for the cognitive role of action-centred faith apparently meet the requirement: if your chances of winning the lottery are less than one in 250 million, it will be irrational for you to trust that *p*, to accept that *p*, to assume that *p*, to assent to *p*, to decide to live by *p*, and to resolve to act as if *p* were true; but if you were to do any of these things, it would *not* be irrational for you to act in all respects just as if you believed that the proposition that you will win is more likely than any of the alternatives considered in the relevant context. The same is true of other two attitudes that McKaughan mentions elsewhere as possible candidates for the cognitive role of action-centred faith, namely, having high-enough credence that *p* and having confidence that *p* (Daniel Howard-Snyder and Daniel McKaughan, 'The Problem of Faith and Reason', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Religious Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Fuqua, John Greco, and Tyler McNabb [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023], 96–114, esp. 99). It is worth noting, though, that McKaughan's possible candidates for the cognitive role of action-centred faith include other attitudes, besides hope, that do not satisfy the requirement, namely, believing that *p is likely*, *possible*, or *a live option* (McKaughan, 'Action-Centered', 77), as well as *propositionally relying on* and *imaginatively assenting to p* (Howard-Snyder and McKaughan, 'The Problem of Faith and Reason', 99–100). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for drawing my attention to the fact that all these attitudes are offered by McKaughan as possible candidates for the cognitive role of action-centred faith, not just as examples of cognitive attitudes *simpliciter*.

[37]See Peter Baumann, 'Contrastivism rather than Something Else? On the Limits of Epistemic Contrastivism', *Erkenntnis* 69 (2008): 189–200, esp. 198–9, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110253597.395; and Mikkel Gerken, *On Folk Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 247–8.

articulated by *Positive Cognitive****—is not going to leave one 'entirely free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads'.

The objection I am raising stems from the fact that *being justified (to any degree) to believe a proposition* and *being able to form a rationally based belief in that proposition* are different and potentially diverging conditions: there are circumstances in which an agent may have evidence that would justify them in believing a proposition and yet be unable to believe it rationally. This is because rationality involves two kinds of relations—the relation of *being a reason for* and the relation of *rationally requiring*. The idea is not new, but has become prominent in recent debates on rationality thanks to the work of John Broome.[38] Here is a simple presentation of the distinction by a well-known participant in such debates:

> On the one hand, there is the relation of being a reason for. This is a relation between a fact and an attitude. On the other hand, there are relations specified by requirements of rationality. These are relations among a person's attitudes, viewed in abstraction from the reasons for them.[39]

In the domain of theoretical rationality, the relation of *being a reason for* has to do with the degree of justification that an agent's evidence[40] provides them for believing a proposition. On the other hand, the relations specified by the *requirements of rationality* concern the logical and probabilistic consistency of an agent's doxastic attitudes. The existence of both kinds of relations opens up the possibility that an agent that is justified by the evidence to believe a certain proposition may be unable to avail themselves of that justification to form a rationally based belief in that proposition. For an agent's doxastic profile may generate normative requirements that clash with the agent's reasons: believing (or disbelieving) a proposition can make it epistemically irrational for an agent to believe certain related propositions even when the agent's belief (or disbelief) is not itself justified to any degree by the evidence. As a result, being justified (to any degree) to believe a proposition does not necessarily mean being able to believe it rationally.

A couple of examples due to James Pryor[41] will bring home the point. The first is as follows. Suppose that you happen to believe that Johnny can fly. If you happen to believe that Johnny can fly, this belief will *rationally require* you to believe that *someone* can fly even if you have no evidence for believing that Johnny can fly and plenty of evidence for believing that no one can fly. But then, even if you have plenty of evidence that no one can fly, you will be unable rationally to avail yourself of the justification that that evidence gives you for believing that no one can fly for the purpose of forming a rationally based belief in that proposition: a normative requirement generated by your doxastic profile will prevent you from doing so. Let us turn to the second example. Suppose that you happen to believe, without any evidence, that your colour vision is defective. If you happen to believe that your colour vision is defective, this belief will *rationally require* you to abstain from believing that the wall before you is red on the basis of

[38]See John Broome, 'Normative Requirements', *Ratio* 12, no. 4 (1999): 398–419, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9329.00101.

[39]Niko Kolodny, 'Why Be Rational?', *Mind* 114, no. 455 (2005): 509-563, at 509, https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzi509.

[40]For present purposes, we need not take on board Kolodny's assumption that it consists of *facts*.

[41]James Pryor, 'What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?', *Philosophical Issues* 14, no. 1 (2004): 349–78, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-6077.2004.00034.x.

your colour experience, even if it appears red to you (and you are entitled to assume, or even know, that the light is normal). But then, even if you have empirical evidence that the wall is red, you will be unable rationally to avail yourself of the justification that that evidence gives you for believing that the wall is red for the purpose of forming a rationally based belief in that proposition: again, a normative requirement generated by your doxastic profile will prevent you from doing so.

These examples involve *beliefs*—the belief that Johnny can fly and the belief that your colour vision is defective. But the distinction between reasons and requirements of rationality has been put to work in epistemological discussions of scepticism and Moore's proof of an external world, and such discussions feature examples that involve the cognitive attitude of *doubt*.[42] To keep things simple, assume that doubt involves some degree of disbelief (the possibility of construing doubt in terms of agnosticism or suspended judgement may be ignored for present purposes). Now, it seems plausible to say that, just as an agent's unjustified belief that their colour vision is defective can make it irrational for them to believe that a wall is red even if their colour experience gives them some *prima facie* reason to believe it, so an agent's unjustified sceptical doubts about the existence of an external world can make it irrational for them to believe that there is a hand in front of them even if their perceptual experience gives them some *prima facie* reason to believe it. The possibility that an agent that has some justification to believe a proposition may be prevented by certain unjustified beliefs or doubts they happen to have from rationally believing that proposition on the basis of that justification can thus be invoked to show that sceptical doubts need not be justified to be rationally effective—even *unjustified* sceptical doubts can prevent an agent from using the evidence they possess as a basis for rationally believing many of the ordinary propositions they would otherwise be inclined to accept.

The point illustrated by these examples is that an agent can be justified to a certain degree to believe a proposition and yet be unable to form a rationally appropriate belief in that proposition on the basis of the relevant evidence as a result of other beliefs and doubts—even unjustified ones—that they also have.[43] But the point can be generalised to all sorts of belief-like cognitive attitudes, in particular to those that meet the condition articulated by *Positive Cognitive**** (which requires that the owner of the attitude *act in all respects—insofar as they behave rationally—as if they believed that the proposition in question is more likely than any of the alternatives considered in the relevant context*). So it seems clear that the situation of those agents who, like McKaughan's Femia, find themselves in the modern predicament because their current evaluation of the evidence favours naturalism over the truth of Judaism or Christianity, cannot be relevantly different from the situation of the protagonists of the examples discussed in the previous two paragraphs. For if it is true that a genuinely cognitive positive stand on the truth of (say) the proposition that the God of Judeo-Christian faith exists involves *acting in all respects*—insofar as one behaves rationally—as if one believed that that proposition is more likely than any of the alternatives considered in the relevant context, then having such a stance will inevitably prevent an agent whose current evaluation of the evidence heavily counts against that proposition from following 'the arguments and evidence where it leads' by (rationally) disbelieving that the God of Judeo-Christian faith exists. Arguing that having action-centred faith need not involve

[42]Pryor, 'What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?', 365–6.

[43]Pryor, 'What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?', 365; and Martin Davies, 'Two Purposes of Arguing and Two Epistemic Projects', in *Mind, Ethics, and Conditionals: Themes from the Philosophy of Frank Jackson*, ed. Ian Ravenscroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 337–383, esp. 367.

believing on insufficient evidence is thus not enough to show that having such a faith can be consistent with epistemic rationality *even in situations in which one takes one's evidence strongly to favour naturalism over the truth of Judaism or Christianity*. If the cognitive component of action-centred faith is governed by principles like *Positive Cognitive****, abstaining from believing on insufficient evidence the core claims or presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith will not leave an agent 'entirely free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads', as it will not exempt them from the requirements of rationality generated by their positive cognitive stand on those claims and presuppositions.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have discussed McKaughan's suggestion that locating the cognitive component of faith in the realm of action may facilitate explaining how people who regard the truth of Christianity as significantly less probable than that of naturalism can respond with genuine faith to the gospel proclamation without violating the requirements of either pragmatic or epistemic rationality. While I have been willing to grant his point about pragmatic rationality, I have taken issue with his claim concerning epistemic rationality. The problem with McKaughan's claim can be summed up as a dilemma. If the cognitive component of action-centred faith does not involve acting in all respects (insofar as one behaves rationally) as if one believed that the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith are more likely than any of the alternatives considered in the relevant context, then it will not be (positively) cognitive enough to fill the cognitive role of that faith; while if it does, it will not leave one entirely free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads—unless, that is, it already leads to conclusions that are broadly consistent with those claims and presuppositions.

Admittedly, my argument hinges on some (plausible) assumptions about the sort of cognitivity that an attitude must exhibit to qualify as the positively cognitive component of genuine faith in Jesus (or God) in the Judeo-Christian sense. My conclusion would be undermined if those assumptions were shown to be defective in the light of a more satisfactory account of the relevant sort of cognitivity. I suspect that any such account will leave those assumptions substantially unaffected, but that's just a hunch. In any case, it seems fair to conclude that, unless those assumptions can be shown to be significantly misguided, responding to the central gospel proclamation with action-centred faith cannot be a fully adequate way for people trapped in the modern predicament to take a proper cognitive stand on the core claims and presuppositions of Judeo-Christian faith without compromising their intellectual integrity.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares none.

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