

7

The Apologist's Dilemma

C7

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C7.P1 Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, "This person began to build and wasn't able to finish."

(Luke 14: 28–30 NIV)

C7.P2 Consider the religious apologist. Such a person seeks to provide a rational defense of her religious beliefs. She tries to show that these beliefs are true, and that they are reasonable to hold. As she does this, she comes into contact with people who disagree with her views, and who reject her arguments. In these enlightened times, she must approach this situation with a keen awareness of religious diversity and disagreement—and thus with epistemic humility. But in an intellectual setting that calls for humility, the apologist faces a dilemma about the rational force she takes her arguments to have.

C7.P3 The problem arises in the following way. In the typical case, the apologist will take her arguments to rationally justify her own beliefs. She will think that these arguments suffice to render these beliefs rational, perhaps even in the face of disagreement. Here is a related question:

C7.P4 Should the apologist think that those who disagree with her—even after hearing her arguments—are rational in denying her beliefs, or in suspending judgment about them?

C7.P5 In this paper, I will suggest that both affirmative and negative answers to these questions come with potential costs—thus, the dilemma. After explaining this dilemma, I will count the costs of taking either path. The first path, what I'll call the *way of the sledgehammer*, subjects the apologist to the charge of arrogance, and suggests a commitment to the implausible claim that she has "knockdown arguments" for her views. The second path—what I'll call the

permissive path—threatens to make the apologist’s enterprise incoherent, and to undermine the very beliefs for which she argues. It also threatens to worsen the problem of divine hiddenness and, for some apologists, the problem of Hell. I will explore various ways in which the costs of traveling each path may be reduced. My main aim, however, is to show that the apologist cannot sensibly isolate her views about religious disagreement and apologetic strategy from her views about other issues in epistemology and the philosophy of religion.

1. The Dilemma Stated

C7.S1

C7.P6 The dilemma addressed in this paper is closely related to recent work the epistemology of disagreement. Such work has largely focused on questions like these:

- C7.P7 • Can it be rational for someone to retain her beliefs in the face of disagreement with someone whom she regards as at least roughly as reliable and well informed as she is?
- C7.P8 • When she acknowledges this qualified dissenter as such, can she rationally retain her own beliefs?

C7.P9 The answers to these questions remain under dispute, despite the scores of papers published on the epistemology disagreement over the past fifteen years.¹ For present purposes, we’ll embrace affirmative answers, at least for the sake of argument. We’ll do this in order to address the question posed in our introduction. For our question occurs downstream of affirmative answers to the questions about disagreement posed just above.² Granted that it’s rational to retain one’s own belief in the face of disagreement, is it also rational to think that an informed dissenter’s incompatible attitude is rational? More specifically, is this rational *for the religious apologist, after* she has shared her apologetic arguments with her dissenter?

¹ For important early contributions to this literature see Kelly 2005, Christensen 2007, and Feldman 2006 and 2007. See also the essays in Feldman and Warfield 2010, Machuca 2013, and Christensen and Lackey 2013. For an introduction to the epistemology of religious disagreement, see King and Kelly 2017. Note that I do not here assume that religious disagreements are commonly *peer* disagreements—disagreements between *equally* reliable persons who share the *same* body of evidence. I strongly suspect that they are not, because I suspect that genuine peerhood, and acknowledged peerhood, are quite rare (see King 2012 and 2016).

² Richard Feldman raised the question early in the epistemology of disagreement literature. See Feldman 2007. This question has not yet received the same degree of attention as questions about the rational status of retaining one’s own beliefs in the face of disagreement.

C7.P10 We'll focus on the latter, more specific version of the question, for two reasons. First, the theme of this volume is not just disagreement in general, but religious disagreement, in particular. Second, as we will see, by virtue of her religious commitments, the religious apologist faces theoretical costs that do not accrue to thinkers engaged in disagreements about other topics.

C7.P11 One last stipulation. In what follows, we will understand the *religious apologist* to be a proponent of a theistic religion. Such an apologist affirms the existence of a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good, and the Creator of the world. Apologists for (for instance) Christianity, Islam, and Judaism count as religious apologists in this sense. Buddhists and other non-theists do not count as religious apologists in this sense, even if they are devoutly religious and argue rigorously for their views. (Exclusion of this sort demands explanation. The reason for our restriction is that the costs of embracing the idea that one's dissenter is rational in this dissent are *different* for the theistic apologist than they are for the non-theistic apologist. The theist faces problems that non-theists, including religious non-theists, need not face.)

C7.P12 So then, can the religious apologist sensibly think that those who do not believe in God, despite being aware of her arguments, are rational in their non-belief? We can get a rough and ready grasp of the problem by imagining the following dialogue:

C7.P13 APOLOGIST: [Gives several arguments for her views] . . . So that's my case for my belief in God. I think it shows that my beliefs are both true and rational.

C7.P14 DISSENTER: OK, but what do you think about the beliefs of people—like me—who have heard your arguments and don't find ourselves moved by them to convert to your view? Are we rational in our non-belief or not?

C7.P15 APOLOGIST: Interesting question. Why does my answer matter? I've already shown that my beliefs are true and rational. What else is there for me to do?

C7.P16 DISSENTER: Well, on the one hand, if you say "no"—if you say your dissenters are irrational in their non-belief once they've heard your arguments—then you seem arrogant and overbearing. You must think that you have knock-down arguments for your views, arguments so good that anyone who rejects them must be a fool. On the other hand, if you say "yes"—if you say that non-believers can be rational in their unbelief even *after* hearing your arguments—then why do *you* hold your views on the basis of those arguments? After all, by your own admission, it can be rational not to do so. And if you think *that*, what, in your view, could be the point in giving the arguments? Worse, if you say "yes," you're admitting that rational non-belief occurs—and that admission raises the problem of divine hiddenness.

A wholly good and all-powerful God wouldn't allow non-culpable, much less *reasonable* non-belief. So, if you give the “permissive” answer to my question, you should end up an atheist. And even if you don't, you might end up believing in a God who is a real jerk—a God who punishes people for not believing in him when, by your own admission, they might be *rational* in not believing.

C7.P17 APOLOGIST: Um

C7.P18 Hereafter, we will assume that the apologist's dissenter has heard and understood the apologist's arguments. We can state the dilemma more precisely like this:

- C7.P19 1. Either the religious apologist thinks that her dissenter is rational in that dissent, or she thinks her dissenter is not rational in that dissent.
- C7.P20 2. If the religious apologist thinks her dissenter is not rational in that dissent, then she expresses arrogance, and reveals her commitment to the implausible belief that she has knockdown arguments for her views.
- C7.P21 3. If the religious apologist thinks that her dissenter is rational in that dissent, then she is hard-pressed to explain why her own religious beliefs are rational; in addition, she undermines the apologetic enterprise, she makes the problem of divine hiddenness worse, and she may reveal her commitment to unpalatable eschatological views.

C7.P22 Thus,

- C7.P23 4. The religious apologist either expresses arrogance and reveals her commitment to the implausible belief that she has knockdown arguments for her views *or* she is hard-pressed to explain why her own views are rational, she undermines the apologetic enterprise, she makes the problem of divine hiddenness worse, and she may reveal her commitment to unpalatable eschatological views.

C7.P24 In short, if she doesn't admit that her dissenter can be rational, the apologist ceases to be humble. But if she admits that her dissenters can be rational, she ceases to be a real apologist for *her* position. Her commitment seems wishy-washy, and may even be self-defeating. Either way, the dilemma suggests that the prospects for humble apologetics are not good.

C7.P25 The dilemma is validly formulated. If its premises are true, then the religious apologist has bills to pay, whatever she thinks about the rational status of her dissenter's attitude. Of course, someone might want to split the horns of the dilemma. That is, one might note that the religious apologist could suspend judgment about the rational status of her dissenter's attitude, thereby denying (1).

We will address to this possibility in section 4. There, we'll see that this position, too, comes with costs.

C7.P26 For now, let's consider the other two possibilities: thinking that the dissenter is irrational, and thinking that he is rational. That is, let's consider what can be said on behalf of (2) and (3). We'll consider objections to these premises and their supporting arguments in section 5.

C7.S2 **2. Potential Costs of the "Sledgehammer" Response**

C7.P27 Start with (2). In taking this path, the religious apologist thinks that, once her arguments have been heard and understood, anyone who dissents from her religious views (anyone who denies them or suspends judgment about them) is irrational. In this connection, Michael Murray describes a kind of apologetics that

C7.P28 aims to show the unbeliever that they are rationally compelled to believe in the central features of the Christian worldview and that the failure to do leaves them *irrational* in this respect This is what we might call "sledgehammer apologetics." The sledgehammer apologist thinks that apologetic arguments deliver the intellectual equivalent of knockout punches by making it impossible for unbelievers to rationally continue in their unbelief.³

C7.P29 The sledgehammer apologist, in short, thinks that the arguments for her views are not only good, but that they are *so good* that they can be rejected only at the cost of irrationality.

C7.P30 Similarly, Kelly James Clark describes Aquinas's project in natural theology as follows:

C7.P31 Aquinas self-consciously tried to use premises that all rational beings are obliged to accept, taking logical steps that are obvious, thereby *demonstrating* or *proving* the existence of God to nearly any sane person. His proofs would demonstrate that the unbeliever is rationally obliged to believe in God.⁴

³ Murray 1999, 10–11. Murray does not himself endorse this variety of apologetics.

⁴ Clark 1990, 4.

C7.P32 Given Clark’s description, Aquinas qualifies as a sledgehammer apologist. Arguably, so do many other thinkers, including Anselm, Descartes, and Leibniz.⁵

C7.S3 2.1 Knockdown Arguments: An Implausible Commitment?

C7.P33 Why might someone find sledgehammer apologetics too costly? One reason is that sledgehammer apologetics apparently require the apologist to think she has “knockdown” arguments for her views—arguments that, once heard and understood, render dissent irrational. Sledgehammer apologetics and knockdown arguments walk hand-in-hand—or maybe fist-to-fist. But many philosophers have given up on the idea of “knockdown” arguments. For instance, in assessing his own work, David Lewis remarks,

C7.P34 The reader in search of knockdown arguments in favor of my theories will go away disappointed. Whether or not it would be nice to knock disagreeing philosophers down by sheer force of argument, it cannot be done. Philosophical theories are never refuted conclusively.⁶

C7.P35 Likewise, Peter van Inwagen:

C7.P36 There are . . . no knockdown arguments in philosophy. There are no philosophical arguments that all qualified philosophers regard as compelling.⁷

C7.P37 Knockdown arguments, if there are any, offer conclusive⁸ evidence for their conclusions—and every qualified philosopher discerns that the arguments do this. More precisely, knockdown arguments are such that every qualified person who hears and understands them, and has no reason to doubt that she understands them, *should* believe their conclusions on the basis of their premises, which are themselves supported by very strong reasons. Not to do so

⁵ Each of these thinkers argues for God’s existence by appeal to premises that are supposed to be self-evident, or obvious to all rational persons. And each seeks to lead the hearer toward the theistic conclusion by way of valid inference from these self-evident premises. By virtue of seeking to prove God’s existence in this way, these thinkers qualify as sledgehammer apologists. For discussion of their theistic arguments see Chignell and Pereboom 2015.

⁶ Lewis 1983, x. ⁷ Van Inwagen 2009, 105.

⁸ Some authors speak in terms of “conclusive” evidence or reasons, while others speak of “decisive” reasons. I treat these terms as synonyms, for the purposes of this paper.

would be irrational.⁹ But, Lewis and van Inwagen suggest, there are no such arguments. And if there aren't, then there can be no sledgehammer apologetic arguments, or at least no philosophical ones.

C7.P38 Suppose this is right. While it might make us wary of sledgehammer apologetics, it would not explain *why* there are no knockdown arguments. One possible explanation—and a second reason to be wary of sledgehammer apologetics—concerns the underdetermination of theory by data. Michael Murray explains the relevance of underdetermination in the present context:

C7.P39 [N]ew evidence which seems to count against a theory is instead *incorporated into* the theory . . . any given data set admits a large variety of explanations, and . . . no amount of data can decisively select for one theory or explanation over all of the competitors . . . One lesson to be learned from this is just that there is no sledgehammer apologetics. There are no arguments for the truth of Christianity that force the atheist or non-Christian to their intellectual knees. The unbeliever can always backtrack and give up some other belief instead.¹⁰

C7.P40 Similarly, Kelly James Clark affirms,

C7.P41 Of course, the argument from design does not *demonstrate* the existence of God. A whole host of hypotheses are equally compatible with the evidence, and the evidence does not rationally force one to accept one hypothesis over another. This is not to say that God did not create the world; it implies only that the propositional evidence for God's creating the world does not speak with one voice. The propositional evidence is ambiguous with respect to the competing hypotheses and should not be expected to persuade all rational creatures.¹¹

⁹ I owe this notion of a knockdown argument, as well as the quotations from Lewis and van Inwagen, to Nathan Ballantyne. See Ballantyne 2014; also Keller 2015. In the quotations from Lewis and van Inwagen, one can discern both descriptive and normative elements, corresponding to whether qualified hearers *would* or *should* be convinced by a given argument. The normative sense is the relevant one, for present purposes. Note also that those who take themselves to have knockdown arguments are not merely claiming that one should accept their conclusions on the basis of their premises *if* they accept those premises. (This would make any valid argument a knockdown argument, which is too strong.) They are saying that one should accept the premises as well, because these are supported by very strong reasons. Aquinas is a good example here.

¹⁰ Murray 1999, 13.

¹¹ Clark 1990, 35.

C7.P42 And elsewhere:

C7.P43 The thinking theist must recognize that a number of competing hypotheses are consistent with the evidence.¹²

C7.P44 There are two distinct points here. The first point is that that at most, the apologist’s argument will reveal that the non-believer must give up *some* belief—that the apologist’s premises are inconsistent with some claim the non-believer currently holds. However, this does not by itself show that the non-believer would be irrational if she did not become a theist. Granted she must give up something, it does not follow that atheism, or agnosticism, or some other attitude inconsistent with the apologist’s conclusion, is the thing to jettison. The second point is that the evidential data, on which the apologist and the non-believer are agreed, is consistent with more than one hypothesis. So, one might think, it does not uniquely favor the apologist’s conclusion. There are really two kinds of underdetermination here—what theorists call *holist* underdetermination and *contrastive* underdetermination, respectively.¹³ Taken together, one might think, these two underdetermination arguments provide a powerful one-two punch against knockdown arguments—and thereby, against sledgehammer apologetics.

C7.P45 Here is a third challenge, one that highlights just how ambitious the sledgehammer approach can appear. Consider this claim, which the sledgehammer apologist endorses:

C7.P46 a If the non-believer rejects my religious beliefs even after having heard my arguments for them, then he is irrational in so doing.

C7.P47 Notice that this claim is perfectly general. As stated, it applies to *anyone* who rejects the sledgehammer apologist’s argument, irrespective of the non-believer’s *reasons* for rejecting these arguments, and irrespective of the non-believer’s other relevant evidence. Thus, by endorsing (a), the sledgehammer apologist must apparently endorse the following:

C7.P48 b Irrespective of the content, quality, or extent of the non-believer’s evidence prior to encountering my apologetic arguments, the non-believer is irrational if he persists in non-belief after having heard my arguments.

¹² Clark 1990, 45.

¹³ I owe this distinction to Kyle Stanford. See Stanford 2017. For a detailed discussion of underdetermination and the related topic of holistic rationality, see Kvanvig 2014, chapters 4 and 5.

C7.P49 (b) is a strong claim. Many will find it implausibly strong. For it implies that, for all possible non-believers and their corresponding evidence bases, adding the apologist’s arguments to those evidence bases renders non-belief irrational. To put it colloquially, it amounts to the apologist saying, “I don’t care what your evidence is. Mine is better. It’s decisive. And once you’ve heard it, you’re irrational to disagree.” This claim is supposed to hold whether the apologist is a neophyte or a seasoned expert, and whether the non-believer is a neophyte or a seasoned expert. It is supposed to hold if the non-believer happens to have no evidence against theism or theistic arguments (so far, so good). But it is also supposed to hold if the non-believer is a philosophical expert who knows more about the relevant evidence than the apologist knows.¹⁴ Importantly, it is supposed to hold even if the non-believer has experienced a life of terrible tragedy and suffering—say, as a survivor of the Holocaust, or the Gulag—and thereby has what many will regard as *experiential* evidence against theism.¹⁵ It’s also supposed to hold even if the non-believer rationally thinks (prior to hearing apologetic arguments) that no such arguments can be successful. In short, the sledgehammer apologist thinks, her evidence overrides¹⁶ all. However, unless the apologist is familiar with *all* of the non-believer’s evidence prior to presenting her arguments, this seems like an implausible stance to take. Thus, one might think, it is unwise for the religious apologist to grasp the first horn of our dilemma.

C7.S4

2.2 A Failure of Humility?

C7.P50 An overarching concern is about sledgehammer apologetics is that the approach involves claiming more for one’s argument than it actually shows. It involves, for instance, claiming not only that one’s premises are good evidence for one’s conclusions, but that they *prove* one’s conclusions, or render alternative conclusions irrational. Moreover, it apparently involves accepting such claims in a way that floats free of any counterevidence or objection the non-believer may have—no matter how strong, and even if the apologist has not heard them.

C7.P51 At least initially, such a position can seem arrogant, or at best to express a failure of intellectual humility. Such humility, on the account of the trait most

¹⁴ On the perils of reasoning about evidence one does not possess, see Ballantyne 2019, chapter 7.

¹⁵ For discussion of such experiential evidence against theism, see Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs 2016.

¹⁶ Given the current political climate, I cannot bring myself to write “trumps” here.

salient here, amounts to being aware of, and responding appropriately to, one's intellectual limitations. As Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder put it, "[Intellectual Humility] consists in proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one's intellectual limitations."¹⁷ This trait stands as Aristotelian mean between the vices of servility and arrogance. Arrogance can concern either the attentiveness condition or the owning condition (or both). One might express arrogance by being oblivious to one's intellectual limitations—say, by simply failing to register them. Or, one might express arrogance by *responding* inappropriately once one becomes aware of a limitation—as when one ignores the limitation, or denies having it, or doesn't care about it, or does nothing about it, or becomes angry when someone points it out.¹⁸ The latter reactions mark failures to *own* limitations, even if one is appropriately attentive to them.

C7.P52 If this account of humility is on the right track—indeed, if limitations-owning is even necessary for humility—then sledgehammer apologists can easily fail to express humility.¹⁹ For, in order rationally to make the comparative judgment implied in (b) above, one needs reason to think that one's apologetic arguments can beat all comers. This requires, at a minimum, having rational beliefs about the types and instances of counterevidence one's dissenters might have, and a rational trust in one's ability to judge that such counterevidence isn't good enough to override the evidence provided by one's own apologetic arguments. These conditions are not easily met. Meeting them requires a firm and thorough grasp of a broad array of evidence, along with good access to the potential contents and workings of a potential dissenter's mind. Perhaps some expert apologists meet these conditions. I don't dismiss that possibility, and we'll consider it in more detail below. It is nevertheless easy to see how, for many apologists, even attempting—much less claiming—to meet the conditions is beyond their intellectual limitations. For many theists, sledgehammer apologetics can't be humble apologetics.

¹⁷ Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder 2017, 520.

¹⁸ See Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder 2017 for detailed explorations of these dimensions.

¹⁹ Some Christians might object to the account of humility assumed in this section. Limitations-owning is not even necessary for humility, they might think. For, from a Christian perspective, Christ is the central exemplar of humility—and yet Christ does not have intrinsic limitations to own. Rather, at the Incarnation, Christ takes on limitations that are extrinsic to his nature. Thus, the limitations-owning account is too strong. For development of this objection, see Kvanvig 2018, section 9.4. For present purposes, it should help to note that, irrespective of what ends up being the true account of *humility*, the failure to own one's epistemic limitations is clearly a failure of intellectual virtue of *some sort* (perhaps a failure of modesty?). This is enough to ground an important concern about sledgehammer apologetics. Those who reject the limitations-owning account of humility are encouraged to recast the worry accordingly.

C7.S5

3. Potential Costs of the “Permissive” Response

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Is the other path of the dilemma easier to travel? By way of reminder, that option involves the apologist saying that at least some non-believers can encounter, seriously consider, and reject her arguments without thereby falling into irrationality. On the face of it, it is an attractive option. It allows the apologist to say that her dissenters are rational in their dissent—something that sounds enlightened and charitable. The option also allows the apologist to avoid claiming that her arguments are knockdown arguments, and to avoid perilous comparative judgments about the probative force of evidence she may not even possess.

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However, there appear to be costs for traveling the permissive path.

C7.S6

3.1 Up-Front Costs

C7.P55

Two kinds of costs are salient. The first kind concern the potential instability of the position that says, “given the evidence we share, my belief and your non-belief belief are both rational.” The apologist incurs these costs just by taking the permissive path. Call these “up-front costs.” The second kind concern ways in which the permissive path exacerbates theological problems the apologist already has—e.g., the problem of divine hiddenness or the problem of Hell. Such problems are not directly in view just by virtue of the apologist’s taking the permissive path. They come into view only when we consider the permissive path in connection with some other theological problem. Call them “hidden costs.” Let us explore these costs in turn.

C7.S7

3.1.1 Permissivism and Belief

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In a well-known paper, Richard Feldman argues that taking what we’ve called “the permissive path” is incoherent. To show this, he imagines a detective trying to determine which of two defendants, Lefty or Righty, is guilty of a crime. (It is given that one, and only one, defendant is guilty.) There is strong evidence that Lefty is guilty, but also strong evidence that Righty is guilty. Given this, one might think that the total relevant evidence licenses *both* the belief that Lefty is guilty and the belief that Righty is guilty, so that one can rationally hold either belief, given this evidence. Thus, if there were *two* detectives assigned to the case, it could turn out that one could reasonably hold that Lefty is guilty, the other could reasonably hold that Righty is guilty,

and that each could agree that the other detective is reasonable in holding the contrary attitude. Feldman argues that this assessment of the case is mistaken:

- C7.P57 It is clear that the detectives should suspend judgment in this sort of case The evidence for Lefty is evidence against Righty. Believing a particular suspect to be guilty on the basis of this combined evidence is simply not reasonable. Furthermore, it is hard to make clear sense of the thought that the other belief is reasonable. Suppose one of the detectives believes that Lefty is guilty. She can then infer that Righty is not guilty. But if she can draw this inference, she cannot also reasonably think that it is reasonable to think that Righty is guilty. This combination of beliefs simply does not make sense.²⁰
- C7.P58 Feldman thinks that these considerations lend support to the Uniqueness Thesis, which he construes as the claim that “a body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions (e.g., one theory out of a bunch of exclusive alternatives) and that it justifies at most one attitude [belief, disbelief, or suspending judgment] toward any particular proposition.”²¹ To deny the Uniqueness Thesis is to embrace *Epistemic Permissivism*, from which our “permissive path” derives its name.
- C7.P59 The debate over Uniqueness and Permissivism occupies a literature of its own.²² That debate concerns whether a given body of evidence can in fact justify or make rational more than one competing attitude toward some proposition. Note, though, that what’s at issue here—and what Feldman considers in the second half of the passage just quoted—is a question that occurs one level up. Namely:
- C7.P60 When one believes that P on the basis of evidence E, can it be rational to *acknowledge* or *believe* that E also makes it rational for someone else to believe not-P on the basis of E?
- C7.P61 On Feldman’s assessment, to think that it can, one would apparently have to deny that evidence for P is evidence against \sim P. But this line is hard to hold. To see why, we might expand a bit upon Feldman’s reasoning. By the rule of double-negation, P is equivalent to $\sim\sim$ P. Thus, one might think, if evidence

²⁰ Feldman 2007, 205.

²¹ Feldman 2007, 204. I have included the bracketed words for clarification.

²² For a helpful introduction see Kopec and Titelbaum 2016. For important primary works, see White 2005 and 2013, Kelly 2013, Ballantyne and Coffman 2011, and Matheson 2011.

E supports P, then it supports $\sim\sim P$. Hence, because $\sim\sim P$ is directly contradictory to $\sim P$, to whatever extent E supports P, it serves as evidence against $\sim P$. Or, to put the point in terms of probability, it is an axiom of the probability calculus that

C7.P62

$$\Pr(\sim P) = 1 - \Pr(P).$$

C7.P63

The debate between P and not-P is a zero-sum game, and the evidence can't back both sides. If you believe P but think your evidence makes $\sim P$ probable, you are in effect denying that it makes P probable. Alternatively, to whatever extent you think the evidence makes $\sim P$ probable, you are committed to thinking that it makes the belief that P that much less probable—that much less rational to believe, given your evidence.²³

C7.P64

Return to our main thread. We are considering the religious apologist who thinks that, while her arguments render her own belief rational, they also make (or at least *leave*) it rational to deny her beliefs. If the reasoning just rehearsed is sound, it suggests that this position is incoherent. In acknowledging her dissenter's disbelief as rational even given her apologetic arguments, the apologist appears thereby to admit that her own beliefs aren't rational, given those arguments. (Or alternatively, to whatever extent she affirms that her dissenter's beliefs are rational, given her apologetic arguments, she undermines the extent to which those arguments make rational her own beliefs.) But if she admits that her arguments can make (or leave) rational *both* belief and disbelief in her religious views, awkward questions arise. (Here I rehearse an argument inspired by Roger White.²⁴) Why does the apologist hold the views she does, rather than those of her dissenter, *given* that she acknowledges both beliefs as rational on the evidence she has shared? And, on the assumption that rationality is a guide to truth, why should she think her beliefs are true? For by her own lights, if she takes rationality as a guide to truth, she's just as likely to get the truth by holding the negation of her beliefs as by holding the beliefs themselves. As White asks, why should she then bother forming her beliefs on the basis of the evidence, rather than by, say, popping a belief-inducing pill?

C7.S8

3.1.2 Permissivism and the Apologetic Enterprise

C7.P65

Consider next not the permissive apologist's attitudes toward her first-order religious beliefs (e.g., about the existence of God, or the truth of her particular

²³ The argument rehearsed in this paragraph is inspired by, and bears obvious similarities to, arguments developed in White 2005 and 2013.

²⁴ White 2005, 447ff.

religion); rather, consider the apologist’s attitude toward her task as an apologist. By virtue of taking herself to be an apologist, she takes herself to offer evidence and arguments for her religious beliefs. As a *permissive* apologist, she takes the view that, even after she has shared her arguments with the non-believer, the latter can still be rational in that non-belief. But if that’s right, what could be the point of sharing those arguments in the first place? For then it seems that, by the apologist’s own lights, the non-believer will be as likely to get the truth by denying the conclusions of the apologist’s arguments as by embracing them.

C7.S9

3.2 A Hidden Cost: Unpalatable Eschatology

C7.P66 If the Feldman–White sort of arguments just canvassed are correct, then the cost of grasping the “we’re both rational” horn of the dilemma is a certain kind of epistemic incoherence. This is an “up-front” cost of grasping that horn. Let us now explore some “hidden” costs. I say they are “hidden” because they aren’t directly in view when we are considering the permissive strategy. Rather, they come into view when we consider the combination of Permissivism and some other factor.

C7.P67 To begin to grasp the first hidden cost, note that many religious apologists engage in their enterprise because they believe that the eternal destiny of their audience depends upon it. Apologetics is for them a tool for *evangelism*—for sharing the good news about God—good news that allows people to avoid the horrors of eternal damnation. To get a sense of the urgency involved here, consider these lines from a popular Christian meme:

C7.P68 Evangelism is hard. Watching people you love go to Hell is harder.

C7.P69 Similarly, nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon pleads,

C7.P70 If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.²⁵

²⁵ Spurgeon 1861, v. 7, p. 15.

- C7.P71 Some thinkers draw close connections between the hope of drawing others into saving faith (on the one hand) and their apologetic efforts (on the other). Consider these remarks from actor turned Christian apologist Kirk Cameron. Christians should do apologetics, he says,
- C7.P72 Not just to score points, but to save sinners. And it's easy to get this out of perspective, because apologetics can be so powerful. Apologetics appeals to truth and argumentation, and it's hard, and it's unforgiving, and it's like a granite rock that can be wielded around, and people can get clobbered with it, and it can do lots of damage, if it's used carelessly. We know that without Christ people are going to Hell. We want to save them. We want them to come to Christ. And that brings honor and glory to Jesus, who sacrificed Himself for them.²⁶
- C7.P73 Any theist who aligns with Spurgeon and Cameron faces an important ethical-eschatological problem. For she thinks that God condemns some people to Hell, or some other such punishment, in part because these individuals have incorrect beliefs about God—say, they believe there is no such person. (Alternatively, on this line of thinking, if people don't receive negative eternal judgment *because* of incorrect beliefs, correct beliefs are at any rate an important—perhaps essential—means or constituent of their receiving salvation.)
- C7.P74 This problem is well known and is hard enough to resolve—if it can be resolved—in its own right.²⁷ But now suppose that the religious apologist *also* holds that those who reject her apologetic arguments can be rational in so doing. Such an apologist is then committed to the claim that those who reject her apologetic arguments are destined for divinely administered punishment *despite* the fact that their non-belief is rational. They must be willing to recite the following speech: “My dissenter rejects my religious beliefs, which are essential to his salvation. Even though he's rational in his non-belief and is thus making good use of the cognitive faculties God has given him, God is planning to go ahead and send him to Hell, anyway.” It is hard to see how God, so described, could be anything other than diabolically evil. (If there is such a way, I am constitutionally incapable of seeing it.) At any rate, it seems clear that for the apologist who already faces the problems that arise for a traditional view of Hell, taking the permissive path will make for more treacherous travels.

²⁶ Cameron 2019.

²⁷ See, e.g., Kvanvig 1993 and Walls 1992.

C7.S10

3.3 Another Hidden Cost: Divine Hiddenness

C7.P75

Many theists subscribe to the claim that God wishes to know and be known by human beings, and to enter into a loving relationship with them. However, it is widely acknowledged that God—if such a being exists—is sometimes *hidden*. That is, at least for some people, at some times, God’s existence is not apparent. Perhaps in part because of God’s hiddenness, some people do not form the belief that God exists.

C7.P76

But here the question arises: can such non-belief be rational? An affirmative answer gives rise to atheistic arguments from divine hiddenness. J.L. Schellenberg has developed the version most salient for our purposes:

C7.P77

1. If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
2. If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.
3. Reasonable non-belief occurs.

C7.P78

Thus,

C7.P79

4. No perfectly loving God exists. (from 2, 3)
5. There is no God. (from 1, 4)²⁸

C7.P80

This argument is importantly connected to the dilemma that concerns us in this paper.²⁹ For suppose the religious apologist takes the permissive path of our dilemma—the path on which the non-believer can rationally resist her apologetic arguments. In that case, she has in effect granted premise (3) of the argument from hiddenness. The theist is committed to (1) by virtue of being a theist, and steps (4) and (5) follow from previous steps. Thus, if she takes the permissive path, the apologist will be forced to deny or undermine Schellenberg’s second premise.

²⁸ This is the official version developed in Schellenberg 2006. In more recent work (Schellenberg 2015), he prefers to speak in terms of *non-resistant* non-belief instead of *reasonable* non-belief. I use the earlier—“reasonable non-belief” formulation here, because it is directly relevant to the permissive path of our dilemma. For the permissive apologist has granted that non-belief can be *reasonable* or *rational*. Plausibly, however, granting that non-belief can be reasonable also commits the permissive apologist to the corresponding claim that non-belief can be non-resistant—that is, formed in a way that does not involve resistance to a relationship with God, if God exists. It is at least very natural to think that a non-believer who is reasonable in her non-belief is thereby not *resisting* belief. If this is right, then by taking the permissive branch of our dilemma, the apologist reduces the resources by which she can resist both the 2006 and the 2015 versions of Schellenberg’s argument.

²⁹ For further work that connects the topic of religious disagreement to that of divine hiddenness, see Matheson 2018.

C7.P81 Can she do so successfully? There is a large and complex literature devoted to assessing that question—that is, to the assessment of (2) and various revisions of it. We won't enter that discussion here.³⁰ For now, note the close connection between the views one takes on Permissivism and the positions she one takes on hiddenness. The apologist who takes the permissive view can't deny step (3).

C7.P82 Indeed, such an apologist appears committed to something even stronger than (3). As it stands, (3) is consistent with any number of ways God might be hidden and make reasonable non-belief possible. One might never have heard of God, might never been exposed to evidence—propositional or not—for God's existence. Or one might be raised in a social setting in which one's best epistemic resources—including experts in one's community—pointed toward non-belief.³¹ The permissive apologist doesn't just grant these possibilities. She *also* grants:

C7.P83 3*: Reasonable non-belief occurs *even* among people who have been exposed to my best apologetic arguments.

C7.P84 If this is right, two consequences follow. First, as already noted, embracing (3*) commits the apologist to (3), and this narrows the range of her available responses to Schellenberg's argument. Second, embracing (3*) commits the apologist to the failure of the very apologetic means God designed to extract people from non-belief-inducing circumstances. On that way of thinking, God would remain hidden to non-believers, in the sense that non-belief is rational for them, even *after* the apologetic evidence for God's existence was made known. It might seem a very strange God who would set the world up in this way. Taking the permissive route, then, threatens to make the problem of divine hiddenness worse for the theist than it would be otherwise.

C7.S11

4. A Third Path?

C7.P85 There are prospective costs for traveling both the way of the sledgehammer and the permissive path. In light of this, the apologist might consider seeking a third way.

³⁰ For discussion of several possibilities (though related to *non-resistant* non-belief, rather than of *rational* non-belief) see Howard-Snyder and Green 2015, section 3. For fuller discussion of theistic responses to divine hiddenness, see Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002, Green and Stump 2015, and Rea 2018.

³¹ For a careful treatment of social epistemology in defense of faultless non-belief, see Greco 2015.

C7.P86 The only option I can see here is to suspend judgment about whether, having heard one’s apologetic arguments, one’s dissenter can remain rational in his non-belief. Such a position is possible—when faced with a “yes” or “no” question, one *can* sometimes say, “I don’t know.” And in some cases, this is what one should say. Is the apologist’s dilemma such a case?

C7.P87 One benefit of going agnostic about the epistemic status of her dissenter’s belief is that the apologist off-loads an important cost of the first path—namely, the belief that she has knockdown arguments for her views. For as we saw above, an apparent cost of taking the sledgehammer way is that, in order to do so, the apologist must embrace the notion that her arguments are knock-down arguments. Suspending judgment about the rationality of her dissenter’s beliefs leaves it open for the apologist to disavow this commitment, which—as far as our dilemma is concerned—should also forestall the charge of arrogance. So, there seems to be a benefit to going the agnostic, path-splitting route.

C7.P88 What about costs?

C7.P89 First, consider an extension of the Feldman–White argument discussed above. There, the thought was that if the apologist positively believes that her dissenter’s belief is rational, given evidence, E, she must, on pain of incoherence, think that E does not make rational her own belief. Now suppose that, instead of *believing* that her dissenter’s belief is rational, given the evidence, the apologist instead suspends judgment about this. She then holds the following combination of attitudes:

- C7.P90 • My belief that P is rational, given evidence, E.
- C7.P91 • I suspend judgment about whether my dissenter’s belief that $\sim P$ is rational, given E.

C7.P92 Is this combination of views coherent? One might think not. For again, it seems that evidence for P is evidence against $\sim P$, and vice versa. So, if our apologist thinks her belief is rational given her evidence, she should be able to deduce that the contradictory belief is not rational, given that same evidence. That is, she should think that her dissenter’s belief is not rational, given the same evidence, instead of suspending judgment about this proposition. To suspend judgment here would be a failure to respond properly to her evidence concerning the higher-level claim about whether her dissenter’s belief is rational. Worse yet, by suspending judgment about the rational status of her dissenter’s belief, the apologist seems to threaten the status of her own first-order belief about P. For it seems that if she suspends judgment about whether

E makes $\sim P$ rational to believe, she should also suspend judgment about whether E makes P itself rational to believe.³²

C7.P93 Given the reasoning just rehearsed, there is an additional cost of seeking a third path. Namely, doing so can make it difficult for the apologist to make sense of her enterprise. By virtue of being an apologist, she thinks that an important part of her calling is to provide evidence for her religious beliefs, thereby helping those currently outside her faith to enter into it. A third-path-seeking apologist suspends judgment about the following claim:

C7.P94 If I share my apologetic arguments with the non-believer, this will make it *irrational* for her *not* to adopt my beliefs and, insofar as belief is concerned, to adopt my faith.

C7.P95 Provided the reasoning in the above paragraph is sound, if the apologist suspends judgment about this claim, she should also suspend judgment about:

C7.P96 If I share my apologetic arguments with the non-believer, this will make it rational for her to adopt my beliefs and, insofar as belief is concerned, to adopt my faith.

C7.P97 But if she suspends judgment about *this* claim, it becomes unclear what she could take to be the point of sharing her arguments with the non-believer. For the very point of sharing those arguments is to enable the non-believer *rationally* to adopt the apologist's faith. Suspending judgment about the claim just above seems to leave the apologist in the position of thinking her efforts may very well be pointless. She'll be saying to herself, "I'm giving these arguments in order to bring the other to rational belief in my faith. But for all I know, he'll be rational even if he rejects my view after hearing these arguments." As far as the coherence of apologetic activity is concerned, the costs of splitting our dilemma seem similar to those of taking the permissive path.

C7.P98 Next, consider eschatological costs. (These costs will accrue only to certain theistic apologists.) Recall the difficulty of taking the permissive path while embracing the idea that God visits eternal punishment on non-believers. The idea, again, is that the permissive apologist embraces both of the following propositions:

³² For a similar point, see Feldman 2006, 234. Though I am inclined to endorse this argument, I do not claim it is decisive. Those who believe in epistemic *akrasia* or epistemic level-splitting will be inclined to reject it. I cannot address their arguments here. For relevant discussion, see Roush 2017.

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- C7.P99 • Non-belief is rational, even for those who have heard my apologetic arguments; and
- C7.P100 • God punishes non-believers eternally in Hell.

C7.P101 Given the argument developed in section 3, this combination of views makes God out to be a moral monster, who permanently punishes those who *literally* don't know better than to refrain from belief in God. Someone who holds the conjunction of these claims should, I think, conclude that God is evil. Now consider someone who believes the second claim, but suspends judgment about the first. Such a person believes that God punishes non-believers, but confesses ignorance about whether the non-belief that issues in that punishment is rational. Though perhaps not as bad as *believing* that God punishes rational non-belief, such a stance seems problematic. If thinking that God punishes rational non-belief commits the apologist to the claim that God is evil, then suspending judgment about this claim should at least prompt doubts about God's goodness.

C7.S12

5. Cost-Cutting Measures

C7.P102 The arguments sketched in section 4 are not decisive. They may be resisted in various ways, some of which we'll explore below. The point for now is that arguably, the apologist who splits the horns of our dilemma faces costs that mirror those of taking the permissive path. Some philosophical dilemmas may be dismissed simply by splitting their horns. Not so the Apologist's Dilemma. Here, carving out a third path requires substantive philosophical work, work that parallels that needed to reduce the costs of traveling one of the other paths. Deciding which path to take is no simple matter; it requires careful accounting. In light of this, it will be worthwhile to consider how to reduce trail fees for the other two paths.

C7.S13

5.1 A Cheaper Sledgehammer?

C7.P103 In section 2, we considered two prospective charges that the apologist incurs by taking the way of the sledgehammer: the charge of arrogance, and the implausible belief that she has knockdown arguments for her religious doctrines. Let's take these charges in turn.

C7.S14 5.1.1 Reducing the Arrogance Charge

C7.P104 Above, we explored the idea that the apologist expresses arrogance, or at best a failure of humility, if she thinks it would be irrational for the non-believer to remain steadfast in the face of apologetic arguments. There, the idea was that in thinking that her apologetic arguments will *always* render non-belief irrational for those who hear them, the apologist must think she has knock-down arguments for her beliefs. Recall that there is a plausible connection between the belief that one has knockdown arguments, on the one hand, and a failure of humility, on the other. For in thinking that her arguments will always render non-belief irrational, the apologist is apparently committed to:

C7.P105 b. Irrespective of the content, quality, or extent of the non-believer's evidence prior to encountering my apologetic arguments, the non-believer is irrational if he persists in non-belief after having heard my arguments.

C7.P106 But to embrace (b), the apologist seems to presuppose a vast amount of knowledge about the content, quality, and extent of *any possible* dissenter's evidence base. It is easy to see how the apologist who thinks this might be failing to acknowledge her cognitive limitations, and thus given the notion of humility as limitations-owning, is failing to express humility.

C7.P107 As far as humility goes, two separate charges might appear on the apologist's bill. The first is that by embracing (b), she shows that she lacks intellectual humility as a character trait. She shows that she is not a humble *person*. The second charge is that the apologist fails to express humility in the intellectual act of embracing (b); embracing this claim is not an intellectually virtuous *act*.

C7.P108 The apologist need not pay the first (character-based) charge just on account of thinking that (b) is true. That is, just thinking that one has knock-down arguments for one's views, even if this is not rational, does not mean that one fails to be a humble person. Singular actions are not normally regarded as sufficient evidence that a person has or lacks a given character trait. This is in part because people can act uncharacteristically. Someone who is usually honest might lie in rare or extreme circumstances. Someone with a reputation for lying might tell the truth when it suits him to do so. Someone who is normally courageous might commit an occasional act of cowardice. A cowardly person might perform an act of bravery. And so on. Likewise, it is possible that, even if embracing (b) is not a characteristically humble intellectual act, an otherwise humble apologist might do so. Alternatively—for those who don't construe beliefs as intellectual acts—even if a characteristically humble person

will not normally believe (b), such a person might hold this belief in a way that is out of character, but that need not keep her from having the trait itself.

C7.P109 So much for the first charge. The second is milder. It says only that in embracing (b), the apologist fails to express humility in that very act. It says that humble thinkers won't typically believe that they have knockdown arguments, when they are thinking in a way characteristic of their humility. The apologist could be guilty of this charge while nevertheless remaining a humble person in general.

C7.P110 Even so, failures of humility should be taken seriously. Does the apologist fail to act humbly just by virtue of thinking she has knockdown arguments for her religious views? I doubt it. The correct answer to the question is, "it depends." Depends on what? On the content, quality, and extent of the apologist's evidence concerning her beliefs and their logical and doxastic contraries.³³ To think that *any* apologist who thinks she has knockdown arguments for her beliefs *ipso facto* fails to be humble, is to ignore the possibility that the apologist is rational in thinking her arguments are knockdown-quality. In a way, this is to skirt the same mistake one is attributing to the apologist herself. The apologist's critic claims that by embracing (b), the apologist exceeds her intellectual limitations. She presumes to grasp a vast body of evidence for and against her views, and to be the cognitive superior of dissenters whose judgments about the force of that evidence are incompatible with her own. But the apologist's critic seems to be doing something similar here. Namely, he presumes to have extremely good access to the content, quality, and extent of the apologist's evidence base, and to the apologist's capacities for assessing her evidence. For without a great deal of evidence relevant to these matters, he would not be in position to judge that the apologist is exceeding her limitations in embracing (b). In claiming that any apologist who embraces (b) thereby fails to be humble, the critic runs the risk of exceeding his own intellectual limitations.³⁴

C7.P111 Of course, even if embracing (b) doesn't *automatically* bespeak arrogance, it could turn out that many, most, or all of the apologists who actually embrace (b) do fail to express humility. The question whether *a given* apologist exhibits a failure of humility in believing (b) is closely tied to the following questions:

C7.P112 Can it be reasonable for the apologist to think she has knockdown arguments for her views—arguments that, once heard and understood, make it irrational for anyone to persist in non-belief? If so, *how*, and under what conditions?

³³ E.g., disbelief and suspending judgment.

³⁴ See Plantinga 1995 for a parallel discussion.

C7.P113 As a means of further exploring the arrogance charge, let us turn to these questions.

C7.S15 5.1.2 More Modest Knockdown Arguments

C7.P114 The apologist we are considering believes that irrespective of the non-believer's evidence prior to encountering her apologetic arguments, this non-believer is irrational if he persists in his non-belief after having heard those arguments. This is just to say that the apologist believes she has knockdown arguments for her views. Can thinking this ever be reasonable?

C7.P115 I'm not sure that it ever actually is. But to see how it *could* be, we can start with a more modest claim the apologist might believe instead:

C7.P116 There is at least one non-believer such that, given his evidence against my religious beliefs, if I were to share my apologetic arguments with him, it would be irrational for him to persist in non-belief.

C7.P117 Imagine a non-believer who suspends judgment about God's existence, not because he has considered the evidence and judged it inconclusive, but because he hasn't considered the evidence at all. Suppose that our apologist knows this, and that she also reasonably thinks her arguments provide significant, but not decisive evidence for her religious beliefs. Couldn't she sensibly think that if she were to share her arguments with her friend, the apologist would thereby render belief in her religious doctrines more rational than disbelief, and more rational than suspending judgment, for her friend? It is hard to see why not. In fact, it is easy to imagine that such a thing actually happens once in a while. But if this is right, then it is at least *sometimes* reasonable for an apologist to think that a dissenter's evidence base is such that, if apologetic arguments were added to it, non-belief would cease to be a rational option. Our question concerns whether and how the apologist could reasonably think that, given the apologetic arguments at her disposal, *every* case—and thus every evidence base—has this feature.

C7.P118 There are at least two ways in which the apologist might wish to reduce the cost of taking such a position. First, she might construe the claim that she has knockdown arguments *cumulatively*, so that it applies not to her arguments taken individually, but rather to the arguments taken together. She need not take, say, some version of the cosmological or design argument to be a knockdown argument in itself. Rather, we can envision her putting forth a large number and range of arguments, dubbing its inclusive disjunction her "argument" for her religious beliefs, and claiming that *that* argument always

suffices to make non-belief irrational. Her “argument” might consist in, say, Plantinga’s famous “two dozen (or so) theistic arguments,” all suitably developed, or in those arguments conjoined with additional arguments developed by (say) Richard Swinburne or St. Thomas Aquinas or others.³⁵ Such a move will make the apologist’s claim about the epistemic efficacy of her arguments more plausible than it would be, taken to apply to a single argument. When her “argument” is really a cumulative case, her claim to dialectical superiority rests on a much larger proportion of the total relevant evidence than it would if she were relying on a single argument to deliver the “knockout blow.”³⁶

C7.P119 Here’s a second cost-cutting strategy. Recall Clark’s description of Aquinas’s project in natural theology:

C7.P120 Aquinas self-consciously tried to use premises that all rational beings are obliged to accept, taking logical steps that are obvious, thereby *demonstrating* or *proving* the existence of God to nearly any sane person. His proofs would demonstrate that the unbeliever is rationally obliged to believe in God.³⁷

C7.P121 Notice—there are really two aims here. The first is to prove or demonstrate God’s existence, presumably with something approaching certainty. The second is to show that the non-believer is obligated to believe in God. Accomplishing the first task would be sufficient for accomplishing the second. But the tasks are separable. Success in the second task does not require success in the first. The apologist can note that in thinking that her arguments always render non-belief irrational, she need not think that these arguments render her religious beliefs *demonstrated* or *certain* or *proven*. She need only think that they make belief more reasonable than disbelief, and more reasonable than suspending judgment.

C7.P122 To see this, recall the definition of *knockdown argument* with which we are working. On that definition, such an argument has this essential feature: every qualified person who hears and understands it, and has no reason to doubt that she understands it, *should* believe its conclusion on the basis of its premises, which are themselves strongly supported. Nothing in this definition suggests that having such an argument renders one’s beliefs certain, nor that taking oneself to have such an argument implies taking one’s evidence to render one’s belief certain. Indeed, in taking oneself to have a knockdown

³⁵ See Swinburne 2004, and the essays in Dougherty and Walls 2018.

³⁶ On the logic of cumulative case arguments, and combined “weak” arguments, see Swinburne 2004 and DePoe and McGrew 2013.

³⁷ Clark 1990, 4.

argument, one need only take the argument to render belief more rational than both disbelief and suspending judgment.

C7.P123 Taken together, these cost-cutting strategies reduce the apologist's claim to possess knockdown arguments to this:

C7.P124 a. If any non-believer were exposed to the very wide range of well-developed arguments for my religious beliefs that I am prepared to present, and if he understood these arguments and lacked reason to doubt that he understood them, then these arguments would render it more rational for him to adopt my beliefs than to disbelieve them or suspend judgment with respect to them.

C7.P125 This claim is weaker than some other nearby claims that the apologist need not embrace. It doesn't require dismissing counterevidence for one's views as completely lacking in epistemic efficacy. It doesn't require thinking that some single argument should knock the unbeliever to the canvas. And as we've seen, it doesn't require thinking that even one's cumulative argument demands or licenses certainty about the content of one's conclusions, whether for oneself or for the non-believer. Employing our two strategies in tandem, then, reduces the bill the apologist must pay for thinking that she has knock-down arguments for her views.

C7.P126 Even so, the nuanced and diminished claim, (c), is very strong. The apologist should accept it only with caution, and only after ardent and extended study. It should only be embraced by apologists who have good reason to think that:

- C7.P127 • their mental powers allow them to develop and present a cumulative case for their religious beliefs;
- C7.P128 • they are thoroughly familiar with the arguments and experiential evidence supporting beliefs contrary to their own;
- C7.P129 • they have strong reason to trust in their capacities to make rational judgments about the probative force of large, cumulative bodies of evidence; and
- C7.P130 • they have more reason to trust the reliability of their own capacities to make such judgments than they do to trust the capacities of those familiar with the same evidence but who come to contrary judgments about its probative force.

C7.P131 Perhaps there are apologists who meet these conditions. I doubt that there are many. (As a religious believer who sometimes argues for his views, I am

confident that *I* don't meet them, and indeed could not meet them without the help of several consecutive sabbaticals.) To see why, consider just the first three bullet points, which concern assembling and making rational judgments about the probative force of cumulative bodies of evidence. As is widely recognized, even the evaluation of single arguments can be mentally taxing. Thus, Pascal:

- C7.P132 The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.³⁸
- C7.P133 And when we consider a *cumulative* apologetic case—the collection of Plantinga's two dozen arguments, say—the difficulty increases dramatically. As Timothy and Lydia McGrew note,
- C7.P134 Cumulative case arguments are indeed particularly difficult to evaluate In the nature of the case, such arguments draw on many details and often require, for their full appreciation, more than a passing acquaintance with multiple disciplines. Beyond this, there is the sheer cognitive difficulty of appreciating the evidential impact of multiple pieces of evidence on a single point; we are apt to focus on two or three considerations and discount the rest. Finally, the pieces of evidence must themselves be not only considered in isolation but coordinated, that is, considered in connection with each other.³⁹
- C7.P135 Moreover, to meet the conditions above, the apologist will not only need to assemble and evaluate a cumulative case *for* her own beliefs, but also to do the same with respect to the arguments and evidence *against* her beliefs. Otherwise, she won't be in position to make the comparative judgment that (c) requires. This is a formidable intellectual task. Apologists who lack good reason to think they can perform it should not embrace (c). To do so would be to fail to attend to and own their intellectual limitations. It would thus be a failure of humility.

³⁸ Pascal 2008, 63.

³⁹ McGrew and McGrew 2009, 617.

C7.S16

5.2 The Permissive Path: Cost-Cutting Measures

C7.P136 If few apologists can afford to travel the way of the sledgehammer, the ones remaining may wish to consider how to reduce the costs of taking the permissive path.

C7.S17 5.2.1 Eschatological Price Slashing

C7.P137 As we saw above, for some religious apologists, there is an eschatological cost of taking the permissive path. Some religious apologists embrace the idea that God will visit eternal punishment on those who do not believe in God during their earthly existence. And if the apologist also holds—per the permissive horn—that some of these people are *rational* in their non-belief, then it is difficult to see how she can continue to hold that the God she worships is morally good. For in that case, she holds that some people are subject to eternal punishment for their non-belief, despite this non-belief being rational and thus a good use of God-given rational faculties.

C7.P138 Many religious apologists will want to reject the combination of views just described. They will find it unpalatable to think that God could punish people who are rational in their non-belief. Accordingly, they might abandon not their Permissivism, but rather, the idea that God punishes people for non-belief—at least when such non-belief is rational. One way to do this is to embrace universalism—the doctrine that all people are eventually “saved” by God.⁴⁰ Another way, one that falls short of universalism, is to embrace the idea of eschatological “second chances.”⁴¹ Perhaps, the apologist might think, even the best apologetic arguments fail to render non-belief irrational for individuals during their earthly existence. But for all this, at some point in the afterlife, all individuals will come face to face with God, and *this* encounter will make non-belief irrational. It is only after such an encounter, and presumably after a chance to relent, that non-believers will be punished for their non-belief. A third possibility is that God judges people only according to what they have reason to believe, so that, while irrational non-believers may be punished for their non-belief, rational non-believers are not. All of these possibilities deserve further exploration. The point for now is just this: for apologists concerned about the eschatological costs of the permissive path, there are several ways to lower the price.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Adams 1993 and Talbott 2014.

⁴¹ See Buckareff and Plug 2005.

C7.S18 5.2.2 Dealing with Divine Hiddenness

C7.P139 Recall this key claim in Schellenberg’s atheistic argument from divine hiddenness:

C7.P140 (3). Reasonable nonbelief occurs.

C7.P141 The apologist who takes the permissive path is logically committed to this premise. When conjoined with the claim that a perfectly loving God would not permit reasonable non-belief, (3) entails that no perfectly loving God exists. Inasmuch as theists are committed to the claim that if God exists, God is perfectly loving, it then follows that there is no God.

C7.P142 As we have seen, a cost of the permissive path is that it deprives the apologist of a strategy for responding to the hiddenness argument—namely denying (3). When it comes to that argument, the permissive apologist must resist

C7.P143 2. If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.

C7.P144 If she cannot do so, her permissive strategy will have led the religious apologist into atheism. From the perspective of a theistic apologist, this would be a maximally poor outcome.

C7.P145 Can the permissive apologist find a sensible way to resist (2)? We cannot answer that question here.⁴² In order to answer the question properly, we would need to engage a large and substantive body of literature on the hiddenness problem. But reflection on this fact reveals an important point: the cost of the permissive path cannot ultimately be tallied independently of ongoing debates about divine hiddenness. That is, we cannot ultimately tell how much the permissive path will cost the apologist without first discerning whether or not there is a plausible way to resist (2) that is consistent with the permissive strategy. An important lesson to draw is that it is a mistake to treat the topic of religious disagreement in the abstract, as though it swings free from other topics in the philosophy of religion.

C7.S19 5.3 Making Sense of the Permissive Apologetic Enterprise

C7.P146 In section 3, we saw that taking the permissive path of the Apologist’s Dilemma threatens to make the apologetic enterprise incoherent. The point

⁴² But see Howard-Snyder and Green 2015, section 3, for discussion of several attempts. See also Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002, Green and Stump 2015, and Rea 2018.

of giving apologetic arguments, one might think, is to give one’s interlocutor reasons to convert to one’s own position. But the permissive apologist apparently believes that even if she provides the non-believer with such reasons, non-belief may *still* be rational. What, then, could be the point of giving the arguments? For, by the apologist’s own lights, they fail to provide compelling reasons for conversion.

C7.P147 Faced with this question, the apologist should distinguish between different aims of her enterprise. Here are a few:

- C7.P148 • To show that non-belief in the doctrines of her religion is irrational;
- C7.P149 • To show that her religious beliefs are rational;
- C7.P150 • To show that there is enough evidence for her religious doctrines to put them “on the table” for rational discussion;⁴³
- C7.P151 • To show that non-doxastic attitudes like *hope*, *acceptance* and certain varieties of *faith* in religious doctrines can be rational.⁴⁴

C7.P152 The permissive apologist judges that her arguments fail in the first aim. She must therefore make sense of the other aims in a way that is independent of that aim. She must find ways to show that the latter aims are valuable—epistemically or religiously—even if the first aim is not tenable.

C7.P153 Some apologists who adopt the first (sledgehammer) aim also accept the legitimacy of more modest permissive aims. Here, for instance, is J.P. Moreland:

C7.P154 Two senses of rationality are relevant to the question [of what it means to say a belief is rational]. A belief P can be rational in the sense that it is a rationally *permissible* belief. A belief P is permissible in case believing P is just as warranted as believing not-P or suspending judgment regarding P in light of the evidence. A belief P can also be rational in the sense that it is a rationally *obligatory* belief. A belief P is obligatory if believing P has greater warrant than believing not-P or suspending judgment regarding P in light of the evidence. In my view, the evidence in this book contributes to making the belief that the Christian God exists at least permissible and, I would argue, obligatory.⁴⁵

⁴³ For discussion of this aim, see Matheson 2019.

⁴⁴ On the importance of such states in the religious life, see Audi 2011, Howard-Snyder 2013, and McKaughan 2013.

⁴⁵ Moreland 1987, 13. Bracketed words added for clarity.

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C7.P155 Likewise, William Lane Craig, himself no friend of permissive apologetics, affirms:

C7.P156 Apologetics is . . . vital in fostering a cultural milieu in which the gospel can be heard as a viable option for thinking people. In most cases, it will not be arguments or evidence that bring a seeker to faith in Christ—that is the half-truth seen by detractors of apologetics—but nonetheless it will be apologetics which, by making the gospel a credible option for seeking people, gives them, as it were, the intellectual permission to believe.⁴⁶

C7.P157 If apologetic arguments suffice to show that the apologist’s belief is rationally permissible, this is epistemically significant. For one of the most prominent critiques of religious belief over the past century or so has been that belief in God is *not* rationally permissible. If apologetic arguments are capable of establishing the rational permissibility of belief in God, then, they thereby undermine a very prominent critique of such belief. Accomplishing this—though it falls short of the grand aim espoused by sledgehammer apologists—would thus provide a way for the apologist to make coherent sense of her enterprise.

C7.P158 What about the aim of merely putting her religious beliefs “on the table” for discussion? Can the permissive apologist sensibly regard this as epistemically worthwhile, even if she thinks that her arguments don’t make non-belief irrational, and may not even suffice to make belief rational? Let’s explore two reasons to think she might.

C7.P159 First, some critics of belief in God make extremely strong claims about the state of the evidence concerning God’s existence. Here, for instance, is Sam Harris:

C7.P160 What I’m advocating . . . is a kind of conversational intolerance . . . All we need is a standard of intellectual honesty where people who pretend to be certain about things they’re clearly not certain about, receive some conversational pressure. This would all be accomplished if we treated everyone who spoke about God on the floor of the Senate as though they had just spoke [sic] about Poseidon Clearly that would be the end of that person’s political career. And yet *it’s not like someone discovered in the third century that the biblical God exists and Poseidon doesn’t. These claims have exactly the same status.*⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Craig 1999.

⁴⁷ Harris 2005. Emphasis added.

C7.P161 In like manner, Richard Dawkins opines:

C7.P162 The universe does not owe you a sense of hope. It could be that the world, the universe, is a totally hopeless place. I don't as a matter of fact think it is, but even if it were, that would not be a good reason for believing in God. You cannot say 'I believe in X,' whatever X is—God or anything else—'because that gives me hope.' You have to say 'I believe in X because there is some evidence for X.' In the case of God, there is not a tiny shred of evidence for the existence of any kind of god.⁴⁸

C7.P163 These claims are extremely strong. The apologist who claims merely to provide enough evidence to put God's existence on the table for discussion, makes a comparatively modest claim. That modest claim, however, is strong enough to make logical contact with the evidential claims of thinkers like Harris and Dawkins. And inasmuch as these thinkers are—for better or worse—quite prominent, it is easy to see how the apologist might think it worthwhile to rebut their claims by providing evidence, however modest, for her views.

C7.P164 Here is a second reason the apologist might think it worthwhile to provide evidence for her beliefs, even if, by her own lights, that evidence does not suffice to justify those beliefs. Consider the enterprise of scientific research. When scientists are careful about their work, they make sure not to draw grand conclusions from single studies. Careful researchers shy away from language like "this study *shows* that X and Y are highly correlated" or "our experiment *proves* that P causes Q." Instead, when researchers' individual studies are suggestive, the lesson to draw is that *further inquiry is merited*. A single study can provide some evidence for the hypothesis in question, while also providing evidence that the hypothesis is worthy of further research—perhaps in the form of replication attempts, or in the form of differently designed studies of the same phenomenon. Importantly, to make sense of this enterprise, the researchers need not think that their studies show that the negation of their hypothesis is irrational to believe, given the evidence that they supply. They need not think it is irrational to suspend judgment about their hypothesis. From an epistemic point of view, their study puts their hypothesis on the table for discussion, and justifies further inquiry—that's all, and that's significant. Likewise, the permissive apologist might think, her apologetic arguments don't always suffice to justify intellectual conversion.

⁴⁸ Dawkins 2008.

But perhaps, despite this, they provide rational encouragement for the non-believer to continue her inquiry—to run his own study, as it were. This might involve seeking further dialectical evidence in the form of additional arguments for or against religious beliefs. But crucially, it might also involve seeking direct evidence relevant to the beliefs, in the form of religious experience. For if God is real, one might think, among the most important evidence to be had is evidence gathered by seeking God directly by way of prayer, religious services, or a kind of devotional experiment.⁴⁹ Of course, there's no telling how such evidence-seeking will go. It is possible that the non-believing seeker will uncover no new evidence during the inquiry. The point for now is just this: if apologetic arguments suffice to put the given religious beliefs on the table for discussion, they encourage the further inquiry. In cases where this occurs, the apologist's arguments will have played an important epistemic role. That is perhaps enough for the apologist to make sense of her enterprise, even if she judges her arguments to fall short of justifying the beliefs in question.

C7.P165 There are still further possibilities. Perhaps, short of making religious *belief* rational, apologetic evidence can justify states like *hope*, (non-doxastic) *affirmation*, or (non-doxastic) *faith*. We cannot explore these possibilities in detail here. But arguably, such states can foster one's commitment to religious practices (e.g., prayer, reading Scripture) in the absence of belief, and in the presence of doubt. Many apologists will take such practices to be conducive to encounters with God—the supreme religious good. It therefore seems that the permissive apologist can appeal to a number of epistemic and religious goods in order to make sense of the apologetic enterprise, even if she thinks her arguments fail to render non-belief irrational. To think otherwise is to take a truncated view of the relevant epistemic and religious goods.

C7.S20

5.4 Permissivism Without Pill-Popping

C7.P166 Recall the Feldman–White argument discussed above. There, the idea was that by taking the permissive path, the religious apologist undermines the rationality of her own beliefs. If the apologist thinks that those who hear and understand her arguments can remain rational in non-belief, then why should she adopt those beliefs instead of denying them or suspending judgment about them? After all, by her own lights, given the evidence she has shared, all of these attitudes are rational. Moreover, given the view that both her belief and

⁴⁹ See Franks Davis 1986.

its negation can be rational, why should she think that her belief is *true*? For if she thinks that both her belief and its negation can be rational given the evidence she has shared with her dissenter, it seems arbitrary for her to think that *her* belief is the more likely to be true. Why, then, should she hold her belief on the basis of that evidence, rather than by popping a belief-inducing pill?

C7.P167 This sort of argument targets directly the extreme Permissivism (and the denial of the Uniqueness Thesis) characteristic of permissive apologetics. We won't address it with anything approaching the attention it deserves.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, to see how the apologist might respond, note that proponents of Permissivism's rival—the Uniqueness Thesis—grant that different portions of a body of evidence can support different attitudes toward the same proposition. What they deny is that a *total* body of evidence can do so. Thus, White's official formulation of Uniqueness:

C7.P168 Uniqueness: If an agent whose total evidence is E is fully rational in taking doxastic attitude D to P, then necessarily, any subject with total evidence E who takes a different attitude to P is less than fully rational.⁵¹

C7.P169 This is crucial in the present context because, first, even if Uniqueness is true, it is far from obvious that it applies to the case of the permissive apologist. For many such individuals, the apologetic arguments they share in the midst of discussion are only part of their total relevant evidence. More to the point, many such individuals *take* their arguments only to comprise only part of their total evidence. The latter might well include religious experience, testimony from experts in the apologist's religious community, and the like. If she takes E to be her total evidence, she will take the evidence consisting in their arguments, call it "E-," to be a proper subset of E. But crucially, in taking E- to support either their religious beliefs or the denial of those beliefs, she need not think that E itself does. Indeed, she might very well think that holding her religious beliefs is the only rational way to respond to E. So, even if the White–Feldman argument is sound, it is not clear that it reduces the permissive apologist to theological pill-popping, because it does not apply to her case.⁵²

C7.P170 Now, one might worry that this tack is purely evasive—that it ignores the epistemic anarchy that ensues unless one embraces Uniqueness. But as

⁵⁰ But see White 2005 and 2013, and Kelly 2013.

⁵¹ White 2013, 312.

⁵² A further salient possibility: perhaps in *giving* the arguments comprising E-, the apologist does not thereby succeed in ensuring that her dissenter *possesses* E-. For more on this possibility, see Anderson 2018.

Thomas Kelly has observed, to deny Permissivism, one need only think that there are *some* permissive cases—cases in which a body of evidence makes rational more than one doxastic attitude.⁵³ One can deny Uniqueness, Kelly notes, even if one thinks that many or most cases are *not* permissive. Now consider E- (the apologist's arguments). In taking the permissive path, our apologist must deny

- C7.P171 c. If any non-believer were exposed to the very wide range of well-developed arguments for my religious beliefs that I am prepared to present (E-), and if she understood these arguments and lacked reason to doubt that she understood them, then these arguments would render it more rational for her to adopt my beliefs than to disbelieve them or suspend judgment with respect to them.
- C7.P172 To deny (c) is to think that there are may be *some* non-believers whose evidence (and perhaps their background beliefs) is such that when E- is added to them, their new total evidence, which includes E-, renders non-belief rational. But crucially, to deny (c) is not to say that all non-believers and their corresponding evidence bases and background beliefs are like this. Indeed, the apologist might deny (c) while also claiming that with for many non-believers and their corresponding evidence bases and background beliefs, the addition of E- would render non-belief irrational. She might even take this stance when it comes to the non-believers with whom she is most familiar. So, a certain way of traveling the permissive path might accord with the spirit of sledgehammer apologetics, albeit without some of the costs that accrue to the latter, and without the costs that attend the most extreme versions of Permissivism. Of course, that this position is *possible* does not entail that it is *viable*. That matter depends crucially on whether the apologist's arguments *would* render (or leave) non-belief rational, once added to the non-believer's evidence. But this can only be determined by taking a close look at the arguments themselves.

6. Conclusion

- C7.S21
- C7.P173 The main purpose of this paper has been to explore the Apologist's Dilemma—the dilemma that arises when the apologist considers the rational

⁵³ See Kelly 2013, especially section 1.

status of her dissenter's belief. Having shared her evidence with her dissenter, should the apologist take her dissenter's beliefs to be rational, or not? I have suggested that both answers come with costs. And while there are ways to cut the costs of traveling both paths, it is not wholly clear which path is the least costly, on the whole. In this respect, our treatment of the Dilemma is analogous to two competing housing contractors who are willing to provide only rough estimates concerning the cost of their labor, but who can't provide a guaranteed and accurate estimate until the work is done. The apologist who wants to discern whether she should travel the way of the sledgehammer or the permissive path is, I think, in a similar situation. And so are we. Determining which path is most cost effective requires careful consideration of several thorny issues in the philosophy of religion and epistemology, including the possibility of knockdown arguments, the problem of divine hiddenness, and the quality of the relevant apologetic arguments themselves. The safest conclusion to draw is that for many apologists, the cost-counting should continue for some time.⁵⁴

C7.S22

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