

## **Phenomenal Conservatism and Religious Belief**

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Phenomenal conservatism is defined by Michael Huemer who has written much in its defence, as the view that:

[PC] 'If it seems to [a subject] S that P, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has some degree of justification for believing that P' (Huemer, 2007, 30)<sup>1</sup>.

Similar principles with different names have been advocated by others – 'epistemic conservatism' (e.g. Fumerton), 'dogmatism' (e.g. Pryor, 96-98, and Tucker, 2010, 96) and 'the principle of credulity' (e.g. Lycan, and Swinburne, 2001). Whether this doctrine is true depends on how we understand 'belief', 'seems', 'justification' and 'defeaters', and I will consider each of these in turn, to see whether there is an understanding of these concepts, under which we can get a plausible version of [PC]. I will then apply these results to issues of the justification of religious beliefs.

While most issues about the nature of belief are not relevant to its justification, there are two relevant issues. The first issue is whether belief is an attitude to a proposition or to a sentence. Although animals and sometimes humans may have beliefs which they do not or cannot put into words, I suggest that when we are concerned with beliefs which can be justified or not justified, a belief is best regarded as fundamentally an attitude to a sentence. (and so is the same attitude as the attitude to a synonymous sentence.) By a 'sentence' I mean a token sentence which has the meaning it has in the language in which it is uttered. The difference between believing a sentence (that is, believing a sentence to be true) and believing a proposition is then the following. In believing a sentence, you must of course believe that all its entailments are true. But to believe a sentence you do not and cannot know what they all are; you need to believe merely the most immediate entailments of the sentence – which I call the mini-entailments of the sentence, and it is these latter which alone (together in case of many sentences with some paradigm examples of recognizable circumstances in which the sentence would be true), which determine what the sentence means. It is they which make the sentence the sentence it is. What determines whether one sentence *q* entails another sentence *w* which it does not mini-entail, is whether there is a chain of mini-

entailments from  $q$  to  $w$ , that is  $q$  mini-entails  $r$ ,  $r$  mini-entails  $t$ , and so on until we reach  $w$ . Whether there is such a chain depends on facts about the rules of the language beyond the facts which determine what  $q$  means, which are facts external to  $q$ . By contrast, a proposition is the proposition it is in virtue of all its logical entailments. In believing a sentence, you believe that the sentence expresses a true proposition, but you may not know which proposition it is, in the sense of knowing which are all those entailed propositions which constitute it. But the logical modal properties of a sentence depend on what it or its negation entail, and so belong primarily to the proposition which it expresses, and only secondarily to the sentence which expresses it. (I shall call all sentences which are as strongly necessary as is a simple truth of logic such as the law of non-contradiction 'metaphysically necessary', and those among them whose necessity can be determined a priori 'logically' necessary.) So say that a sentence is logically necessary is just to say that it expresses a logically necessary proposition, and so it is normally logically contingent that some sentence is logically necessary. ('Normally' because there are some sentences which (if you have modal concepts) you could not believe without believing that they are logically necessary - for example, 'if he is under five foot tall, then he is under six foot tall'.) Two speakers who have beliefs in different but synonymous sentences (e.g. sentences of different languages) believe sentences which express the same proposition. 'Proposition' and 'sentence' are words which have somewhat imprecise criteria for their application, and so philosophers can tighten up those criteria in whatever ways they choose. But I find this a useful way of understanding these words; and we shall see in due course that there would be a considerable problem with [PC] if we supposed that it is concerned with a belief in a proposition rather than a sentence.

The second issue about belief is the issue of the relation between believing a sentence  $q$  and believing that  $q$  is probable. Clearly to believe that  $q$  is not compatible with believing that  $q$  is less probable than not  $-q$  (that is, has a probability less than  $\frac{1}{2}$ ). Also, I suggest, believing that  $q$  is very very probable entails believing that  $q$ . So it looks as if there must be some value of probability  $x$  between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and 1, such that  $S$  believes  $q$  iff (when  $S$  has a belief about  $q$ 's probability)  $S$  has the belief that  $q$  has a probability greater than  $x$ . But while our ordinary rules for the use of words are compatible with any such value, we need a sharp concept of belief for present purposes, and I suggest that we get the concept which fits ordinary usage the best if we suppose that  $S$  believes  $q$  iff  $S$  believes that  $q$  is more probable than not- $q$  (that is, has a probability greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$ ). I shall understand 'belief' in this way in future. If  $S$  believes that the probability of  $q$  is  $x$ , then I shall say that

she believes  $q$  with a strength  $x$ . The strength of a belief in some sentence may be less than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , but nevertheless play a role in contributing to our other beliefs. If the strength of  $S$ 's belief that  $q$  is  $\frac{1}{3}$ , the strength of her belief that  $r$  is  $\frac{1}{3}$ , and the strength of her belief that  $t$  is  $\frac{1}{3}$ , and  $q$ ,  $r$ , and  $t$  are - she believes strongly - probabilistically independent of each other, then - if she is guided by the probability calculus, she will have a belief with a strength degree of something like  $\frac{19}{27}$  in  $(q \vee r \vee t)$ .

Before going further, I must make the obvious point that strengths of belief and probabilities of sentences cannot be given exact values (except under highly idealized conditions, and in some cases where the value is 1, 0, or  $\frac{1}{2}$ ). So I ask my readers to understand all subsequent talk about such strengths and probabilities as preceded by 'very roughly' or 'some value of the order of'. Often the most that we can say about the probability of sentences is that the probability of this sentence is greater than the probability of that sentence, and that the probability of this sentence is small and the probability of that one is large.

Next, what is it for it to 'seem' to a subject that  $q$ ? I assume that 'it seems' is equivalent to 'it appears'; and when we are concerned with the deliverances of particular senses, equivalent to 'it looks', 'it sounds', 'it feels' etc. There is a comparative sense of these expressions with which we are not concerned; this is the sense in which 'the tree looks green' means 'the tree looks the way green things normally look', without any implication that anyone is inclined to believe that the tree is green. Our concern is with the epistemic sense in which contingently or necessarily 'it seeming that  $q$ ' leads to a belief or inclination to believe, that  $q$ . My view is that, in the epistemic sense, seemings just are basic inclinations to believe of which the subject is aware, which have different strengths. It seems to  $S$  that  $q$  with strength  $x$  iff  $S$  believes that in the absence of other inclinations to believe sentences which make more or less probable  $S$  would believe  $q$  with that strength.

The majority view of those who write on this topic (see Moretti, 299) seems to be that seemings are *sui generis* experiences, unanalysable in terms of beliefs or inclinations to believe. One argument against seemings being beliefs is that it could seem to someone that  $q$  without their believing that  $q$  (Tucker, 2013, 4). But, given that 'seems' is being used in the epistemic sense, this is surely so only when it doesn't seem strongly enough that  $q$ . Other arguments include: (1) 'I can be so convinced that an appearance is illusory that I'm not even inclined to believe it' (as with the stick in water which seems bent), and (2) 'I might be inclined to believe  $p$ , because I really want it to be true' But if I don't have the slightest inclination to believe that the stick in water is bent, then in the epistemic sense of 'seems' it doesn't seem bent (although of course

it does seem bent in the comparative sense of 'seems'.) And if I have an inclination to believe  $q$  and am aware of my disposition to wishful thinking, that will be a defeater which may be strong enough to prevent the inclination acquiring the status of a belief; and if I am not aware of it, it's not an inclination in my sense<sup>2</sup>.

However, as I wrote, the majority view is that seemings are a *sui genesis* kind of experience. They are not sensations, Tucker (2011,58) claims, for one reason because someone with blindsight has such a 'seeming' about the location of a spot on a screen although he has no accompanying sensation. Rather, they are experiences with representational content which, according to Huemer is 'forceful' (2001, 77), according to Tucker (2010,530) is 'assertive', and according to Tolhurst, (1998, 298-99) has 'the feel of truth'. But these metaphors do not enable me to discover in my mental life any kind of experience which I have distinct from beliefs and inclinations to believe. So I conclude with Tooley (2013,318) that 'we do not presently have any satisfactory account of Huemer's concept of a seeming'. For this reason I suggest that we understand 'seems' in terms of an inclination to believe in the sense defined above. When [PC] is formulated in terms of such inclinations, it seems more natural to call that principle 'epistemic' rather than 'phenomenal' conservatism.

Next, 'justification', by which is meant 'epistemic justification'. The synchronic justification of a belief at a time  $T$  depends on how things are with the believer at  $T$  and the immediate causes of her belief. The diachronic justification of a belief depends on whether it has been reached as a result of actions which would (in some sense) probably lead to a synchronically justified belief; and in particular whether it has been adequately investigated. The concern of those who write about [PC] is with synchronic, and not diachronic justification, and that will be my concern too. Further, my concern, as is that of most of those who write about [PC] is with what is called 'propositional justification', not doxastic justification. A belief is epistemically 'propositionally' justified insofar as the believer has good reasons or adequate evidence for the content of that belief, that is - on my account - the sentence believed. A belief is doxastically justified insofar as it, that is the mental state of believing, is 'based on' those reasons or that evidence. Having some belief at a time  $T$  is an involuntary matter, not immediately subject to voluntary control. So a belief cannot be synchronically justified in any sense to which praise or blame are appropriate; a belief being synchronically 'justified' seems to mean no more and no less than that in some sense it is probably true; the sentence which is its content is made probable by some second sentence, for example one stating the evidence available to the believer or the reliability of the process which produced the belief. The differences between theories of

justification then lie in what constitutes the relevant second sentence and what are the criteria by which they make the first sentence (that is, the content of the belief) probable.

I cannot see that the innumerable different theories of 'propositional' synchronic epistemic 'justification' assume a univocal sense of 'epistemically justified', such that one can sensibly discuss which theory gives the correct account of the criteria for a belief being epistemically justified. Each theory seems to me to distinguish a different sense in which a belief is 'epistemically justified'. The interesting question is then – which kinds of epistemic justification are worth having<sup>3</sup>.

Among synchronic theories, there are pure internalist theories, pure externalist theories, and mixed theories. For an internalist what makes a belief justified are 'internal' factors, that is, ones of which the believer can become aware by introspection. The relevant internal factors are the believer's inclinations of different strengths to believe different sentences, and the criteria by which some sentences make other sentences probable. By contrast, for an externalist a belief being justified depends on the process by which it is produced being of the right kind, quite independently of whether the believer is or can become aware of whether the belief has been produced by such a process. But as phenomenal conservatism is normally advocated within a pure internalist framework, I will consider its rationale solely within that framework.

While there can be pure internalist theories, that is senses of 'epistemically justified', differing in respect of what are the criteria for one sentence making another one probable, phenomenal conservatism, it seems to me, is normally advocated as a principle designed to assess the justification of a belief by objectively correct internally accessible criteria. By 'correct criteria' I mean those actual criteria which modern western humans consider to be the criteria by which some evidence does make some hypothesis probable to some specified degree. These criteria are a priori criteria, since we can derive them by introspection by reflecting on various examples where evidence obviously makes some hypothesis probable, and – when we do – it is quite irrelevant whether those examples are actually occurrent ones or mere thought experiments. That there are such a priori criteria seems clear, and I shall assume for the purposes of this paper that they are logically necessary truths. Since it is a good thing to have true beliefs and the nearest we can get to them is to have beliefs which are probably true on the evidence accessible to us, it is obviously a good thing to have beliefs which are justified in this internalist sense. That is the sense of 'justified' with which I shall be concerned.

On the pure internalist picture basic inclinations to believe interact, some (defeaters) making others less probable, some (which I will call 'strengtheners') making others more probable. 'Basic inclinations to believe' is a clumsy phrase, and I shall in

future abbreviate that to 'basic inclinations' or just 'inclinations', and assume that each such inclination to which I refer is indexed by its strength. Defeaters and strengtheners may or may not lower or raise the probability of a some sentence to such an extent that it becomes probable or improbable *simpliciter*. Basic inclinations which become beliefs are then basic beliefs. The set of his basic inclinations constitutes a subject's 'total available evidence'.

Given all this, it then follows from my analysis of 'seems' in terms of basic inclinations, that Huemer's [PC] takes the form of this principle of Epistemic Conservatism:

[EC 1] On *S*'s evidence that he has a basic inclination *q* with a strength greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$  and no defeater (and so believes *q*), then thereby *q* has 'some degree of' probability  $x$  greater than 0, and so *S* has some degree of justification for believing that *q*.

Note crucially that Epistemic Conservatism is concerned with the justification and so the probability of *S*'s belief that *q* on the evidence that 'he', that is 'he himself' believes *q*, not just on the evidence that *S* believes *q*. Someone else could have the latter evidence, but it wouldn't necessarily make *q* as probable as does the evidence that 'he himself' believes *q* makes *S*'s belief. Put in terms of 'seems', the way things seem to me should affect my beliefs in a different way from the way in which my beliefs about how things seem to you, affect my beliefs<sup>4</sup>.

One reason why [EC1] is unsatisfactory is that most sentences have 'some degree of probability' on any evidence, whether or not *S* believes them. What [PC] was getting at was surely that if *q* 'seems true', *q* has a significant degree of probability. We can deal with this by amending it to read:

[EC2] On *S*'s evidence that he has a basic inclination *q* of strength greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , and no defeater (and so believes *q*), then thereby *q* is probable (i.e. more probable than not), and so *S* is justified in believing *q*.

and more generally

[EC3] On *S*'s evidence that he has a basic inclination *q* of strength  $x$  and no defeater and no strengthener, then thereby *q* has a probability  $x$ , and so *S* is justified in believing *q* with that strength.

The 'thereby' claims that evidence that he believes *q* raises the probability on *S*'s evidence of *q* above its intrinsic probability. The 'intrinsic probability' of *q* is its probability on tautological evidence (and so without defeaters or strengtheners). But the 'thereby' in [EC2] cannot be generally correct. For any sentence *q* for which it holds, it will not hold for not-*q*. This is because -given the normal

probability axioms,  $P(q|k) + P(\text{not-}q|k) = 1$  on any evidence  $k$ . So (except when both  $q$  and  $\text{not-}q$  both have an intrinsic probability of  $1/2$ ) either  $q$  or  $\text{not-}q$  will already be probable in advance of  $S$  acquiring the evidence that he believes  $q$ , and so will not be made probable by that evidence. So we must omit the 'thereby' in [EC2].

Note now that if our inclinations to believe contents of a kind which if they are true are necessarily true and if they are false are necessarily false, were inclinations to believe propositions, it would not be possible for those inclinations to increase the probability of those contents. For given normal probability axioms, if such contents were necessarily true propositions, they would have an intrinsic probability of 1 - and so any inclination to believe them could not increase that probability. And if they were in fact impossible propositions and so had an intrinsic probability of 0, again since it is necessary that a proposition which is impossible is impossible, nothing could increase that probability. Yet it does look as if my inclination to believe some simple arithmetical formula (e.g. that  $7 \times 6 = 42$ ) does increase its probability. But there is no contradiction in supposing that an inclination to believe some sentence could increase the probability that that sentence expresses a necessary proposition. This is because it is normally a contingent matter whether some necessary or contingent sentence is true. In the case of most sentences expressing apparent necessary truths, whether they do express necessary truths depends on their remote entailments, which in turn depend on the rules of the language governing the meanings of other sentences. What these rules are is a contingent matter, but they determine which proposition a sentence expresses; and, to repeat the point made earlier, the probability of a proposition is what it is, independently of the rules of language. If we insist on claiming that evidence can increase the probability of a necessary proposition, we would have to invoke or construct a non-Bayesian probability calculus which allows us to claim this. But if inclinations to believe are inclinations to believe sentences, there is no need to do this. That is why I suggest that we regard inclinations as inclinations to believe sentences. There are however some sentences which express necessary truths in virtue of the rules governing their own meanings (not those of sentences which they remotely entail). These are sentences such as 'all squares have four sides' or ' $1+1=2$ '; and inclinations to believe these sentences cannot increase their probability, which is therefore 1. Hence in the case of these sentences the 'thereby' in [EC3] also does not apply.

So what determines the intrinsic probability of sentences? As for all probabilities of sentences, so especially for intrinsic probabilities, often the most that we can say is that the probability of this sentence is greater than the probability of that sentence, and that the probability of this sentence is small and the probability of

that one is large. But with that enormous qualification, I suggest that there are certain criteria which restrict the values of intrinsic probabilities within limits and sometimes determine them. As I wrote above, sentences whose meaning is such that they are necessarily true, have intrinsic probabilities of 1. (No one who understood such sentences could fail to believe them.) Sentences like 'he is over 6 ft. tall and also under 5 ft. tall', whose meaning is such that they are necessarily false have intrinsic probabilities of 0. (No one who understood sentences of the latter kind could believe them.) The intrinsic probabilities of other sentences which express propositions which are either logically necessary or logically impossible propositions, must be less than 1 and greater than 0, if the [EC] theses are to apply to them. I suggest that the more difficult it would be to prove such a sentence necessary by showing that its negation entails a contradiction, the lower is its intrinsic probability; and the more difficult it would be to prove such a sentence impossible by showing that it entails a contradiction, the higher is its intrinsic probability. These difficulties are functions of the minimum number of mini-entailments necessary to prove the requisite modality. I suggest these criteria, because intuitions about logical modality are intuitions to the effect that there are such chains of mini-entailments, and so they make bigger claims, the more mini-entailments are required; and for that reason are more likely to be mistaken. Our knowledge of our language (which I shall assume to be a priori knowledge, although it is knowledge of contingent truths about what various sentences mean) gives some idea about what are the minimum number of mini-entailments needed to prove that some sentence or its negation entail a contradiction. For example we have good reason to believe that far more mini-entailments would be needed to prove or disprove Goldbach's conjecture (that 'every even number is the sum of two prime numbers') than are needed to prove 'there is no greatest prime number' - since the former is so far unproven and the latter is easy to prove. (It is however just (epistemically) possible but very unlikely that there is a short chain of mini-entailments from Goldbach's conjecture or from its negation to a contradiction, which no one has yet discovered.) So the intrinsic probability of Goldbach's conjecture is (almost certainly) lower than that of 'there is no greatest prime number'.

And here are some of the criteria which we use to determine the relative probability of logically contingent sentences, that is the probabilities of one sentence relative to another one. A sentence *q* which tells you more about the world than a sentence *r* must be less probable than *r* - again, the more you say, the more you are likely to make a mistake. Thus a conjunction of two logically independent conjuncts is less probable than either of the conjuncts. There are problems about how to measure which of two logically independent



sentences gives you more information about the world, but the basic intuition that the more a sentence claims, the less probable it is surely remains, and there are innumerable examples of pairs of sentences, such that it is fairly clear that each of them gives us the same amount of information about the world – e.g. two sentences, each of which ascribes the same property to an object of the same size. I will say that two sentences which provide the same amount of information have the same scope; and one which provides more information than another has greater scope. I suggest further that all logically contingent existential sentences have a lower intrinsic probability than their negations, and so have probabilities less than  $1/2$ . 'There is an elephant in my garden' has a lower intrinsic probability than 'it is not the case that there is an elephant in my garden', and so the latter cannot be made probable by any basic inclination, although its probability can be increased by one. So it must have an intrinsic probability greater than  $1/2$ . Then secondly the simpler a hypothesis (a hypothesis being a sentence which -if true - would explain much else), the greater its intrinsic probability<sup>5</sup>. Hence a conjunction of  $n$  sentences of the same scope, each of which could be explained by some simple hypothesis is more probable than a conjunction of  $n$  sentences, each of the same scope as the former ones, which could not be so explained. Thus it is intrinsically more probable that all the positions occupied by Mars lie on an ellipse than that they lie on a curve of enormous mathematical complexity. The criteria of their scope and simplicity, and the simplicity of any hypothesis which could explain them thus determine the intrinsic probability of logically contingent sentences. I have no general formula for how to determine the relative intrinsic probability of a sentence when different criteria have different influences on it; but it is often clear in particular cases which criterion is more important. One important rule however shown by the practice of science is that great simplicity outweighs great scope in determining intrinsic probability – we believe a (relatively) simple theory of physics even though it has consequences for all of (possibly) infinite space. These criteria of intrinsic probability apply not merely to logically contingent sentences, but also to any logically necessary sentences, if there are any such, which make existential claims; and so would interact with the ones described earlier which govern logically necessary or impossible sentences, to determine their overall intrinsic probability. But I have no general formula for how this is to be done.

Having thus suggested what is the most plausible version of epistemic conservatism, why should we believe the [EC] theses, qualified by omitting 'thereby' from them? Most of our inclinations to believe sentences come with a mark of their source. Inclinations are either experiential inclinations and non-experiential inclinations;

and the latter divide into intuitions, and mixed inclinations, that is ones which come to us as logically or probabilistically dependent on both experiential inclinations and intuitions. By 'experiential inclinations' I mean inclinations to believe sentences because we are inclined to believe that we are in contact with the state of affairs described in the sentence. I don't just believe that there is a tree outside the window; I believe that I see it, or remember having seen it. Experiential inclinations include apparent introspections, apparent perceptions, and apparent memories. Our apparent memories include apparent memories of the testimony of others, and apparent memories that we have learnt some item of information from testimony, even if we cannot remember whose testimony it was. And since the testimony of others from whom we have learnt these things normally (we believe) depends on their memories of the testimony of yet others, and since we depend for our justification of almost all our beliefs deriving from introspection and perception on our memory of them, almost all our justified beliefs derive their justification from memories, and often from memories of memories of memories.

By 'intuitions' I mean those inclinations to believe sentences, not because we are in contact with the state of affairs described, but because the sentences seem to wear their truth on their face. They come to us as apparent necessary 'truths of reason'. They include all the relatively simple logical and conceptual truths which we believe (such as 'if A is greater than B, and B is greater than C, then A is greater than C'), and the inductive principles which we believe (such as that any hypothesis about some subject matter is more probable insofar as it yields more true and no false predictions). And finally there are inclinations to believe sentences which arise from both of the former kinds of inclination operating together. They include apparent memories of having inferred (by apparently correct criteria) some sentence from our own experiential inclinations, and also crucially most of our beliefs about historical and scientific matters. We hold these beliefs because we believe that we have learnt them from the testimony of others (although we cannot remember whose testimony it was) that they have derived their conclusions by inference from apparent memories of their perceptual inclinations by apparently correct criteria. It is -for almost all of us - because we have such inclinations of considerable strength that we believe such general truths about geography, history and science, as that the Earth is spherical, or that there have been humans on earth for several thousand years. If I am justified in believing all these things today, despite any defeaters which I may remember, then that justification is provided by the simple fact that I apparently remember them today.

Now if in the absence of defeaters my apparent memory of

having seen or learnt or calculated these things did not give a significant probability greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$  to that present memory and most of the memories of others, most of the contents of our experiential inclinations, and especially those very general ones, would be improbable on our evidence. That is implausible. And if that present apparent memory of all those past acquisitions of knowledge does give a significant probability to what we apparently remember, the same should apply to all our apparent memories of similar strength. And if most of our apparent memories must have probabilities greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , surely our beliefs apparently reached by introspection or perception must be yet more probable. So I suggest that [EC3] and so [EC2] (duly qualified) are 'in general' plausible for experiential inclinations, in the respects that S's evidence that she believes  $q$  with a strength  $x$  raises the probability of  $q$  above what it would be without it and gives  $q$  a probability of  $x$ . Similar considerations apply to our intuitions of apparent necessary truths. If it was not probable that these apparent necessary truths are necessary, then most of our beliefs about contingent matters which we believe because we believe that they are made probable by the contents of the experiential inclinations of ourselves and others would not be probable - which again is highly implausible. So it is very plausible that [EP3] and [EP2] apply to our intuitions, as well as our experiential inclinations, and so to inclinations which depend on inclinations of both these kinds.

[EP3] and [EP2] might initially seem too generous. It might seem more plausible, for example, for [EC3] to take the form of claiming that on S's evidence that he has a basic inclination  $q$  of strength  $x$  and no defeater and no strengthener, then  $q$  has a probability of  $0.9x$ , and so S would be justified in believing it only to that degree; and then [EC2] would take the form that on S's evidence that he has an inclination to believe a sentence  $q$  of strength at least  $10/9x$ , and no defeater,  $q$  is probable, and so S is justified in believing it. Yet any choice of the proportion by which the probability of sentences should be reduced would be totally arbitrary - unless of course it was based on evidence of the kind produced by social psychologists that people are generally over-confident to a particular degree. But that evidence would be a defeater, and so not the kind of evidence within the scope of the above principles. What these principles are concerned with is what is probable in the absence of such evidence. But nothing important for my purposes turns on whether (it is a priori that) a healthy scepticism would require a slight reduction in the probability. What is not plausible is a significant reduction, for that would make most of our obviously probable beliefs improbable.

Given then that it is in general plausible to suppose that [EC3] and [EC2] (qualified as above) hold for both kinds of basic

inclinations, there may nevertheless be reasons why they may hold more strongly or weakly for sentences of particular kinds (that is make sentences of particular kinds believed more or less probable than the norm), not contingent reasons -which would constitute defeaters or strengtheners - but necessary reasons arising from the kinds of beliefs which they are. To bring out what these reasons are I invoke Bayes's theorem:

$$P(q|e\&k) = \frac{P(e|q\&k)}{P(e|k)} \times P(q|k)$$

I assume that where  $q$  is some hypothesis, and  $e$  is some piece of evidence and  $k$  is our

background evidence (all in the form of sentences) Bayes's theorem states correctly the posterior probability ( $P(q|e\&k)$ ) as a

function of the likelihood' of  $q$  ( $P(e|q \& k)$ ) and the prior probability of  $q$  ( $P(q|k)$ ).

$$P(e|k)$$

Being completely general, Bayes's theorem must hold, however we divide the evidence between  $e$  and  $k$ . If we put all the relevant evidence into ' $e$ ', and leave ' $k$ ' as an obvious tautology, then  $P(q|k)$  measures the 'intrinsic probability' of  $q$ .

Now let  $e$  be the evidence that  $S$  has an experiential inclination to believe that  $q$  is true. It follows from Bayes' s theorem that, for any given likelihood, the greater the intrinsic probability, the greater the posterior probability - that is the probability which  $e$  gives to  $q$ . The likelihood of  $q$  will exceed 1 iff it is more probable that  $S$  will believe  $q$  if  $q$  is true than if  $q$  is false. It is probable that someone's belief  $E^*$ (reported by  $e$ ) will be sensitive to the state of affairs believed,  $Q^*$  (reported by  $q$ ) iff it is probable that  $Q^*$  causes (totally or partly)  $E^*$ , or  $E^*$  causes  $Q^*$ , or they have a common cause. The experiential inclinations are all ones where  $S$  is inclined to believe that  $Q^*$  causes  $E^*$ , that is that the event of  $q$  being true causes him to believe that  $q$  is true. My inclination to believe that there is a tree outside the window, when I apparently perceive it, is - I believe - caused by the tree being outside the window.

Given that believers get the resultant posterior probability largely correct, we must suppose that they make more - or - less correct judgments about both the intrinsic probability of  $q$  and its likelihood. We can to some extent discover the intrinsic probability of  $q$  by the criteria which I have described. There are also sometimes a priori reasons for believing that  $Q^*$  does or does not have much causal influence on  $E^*$ . For example, the fewer, the shorter, and the more direct are the causal chains required for  $S$  to acquire the belief that  $q$  when  $q$  is true, and the more, the longer, and the less direct

are the causal chains required for *S* to believe *q* when it is false, the more probable it is a priori that any causal influence of *Q\** will be transmitted to *S*. This is because in these cases there will be less scope for any rival causal influence to interfere with the influence of *Q\** on *E\**. And that is why we are right to trust apparent perceptions of near objects much more than apparent memories of having perceived such objects. There is also one case where we can know a priori that the state of affairs believed cannot cause the belief that it occurred. That – given the logical impossibility of backward causation – is when the state of affairs believed is a future uncaused state. So for some experiential beliefs we may know enough about the intrinsic probability of the sentence believed and its likelihood to conclude that a subject believing it to some degree *x* in fact makes it less probable than *x* or more probable than *x*. But since our criteria for determining intrinsic probability and likelihood are derived on the assumption that most ordinary beliefs are as probable as we believe them to be, we can only reach such conclusions for some experiential beliefs of less usual kinds.

The a priori reasons for believing that an intuition that *q* is true makes it more probable that *S* will believe it are not reasons about the extent of causal influence, because sentences don't have causal influence. But the harder it would be to prove *q* or its negation, which depends on the length of any proof thereof, the lower the likelihood; and these are the same considerations as those which determine the intrinsic probability of *q*. So if one is high, so is the other. So again in some cases we may know enough about the intrinsic probability of a sentence and its likelihood to conclude that a subject believing it to some degree *x* makes it less or more probable than *x*. But again since our criteria for determining intrinsic probability and the likelihood are derived on the assumption that most ordinary beliefs are as probable as we believe them to be, we can only reach such conclusions for some intuitions of less usual kinds. But given that most of our intuitions are correct, it follows that in general their intrinsic probability and their likelihood are fairly high. Clearly contingent evidence such as how familiar the believer is with operating with deductive arguments (and especially, if relevant, mathematical arguments), can increase or decrease that likelihood. But that evidence constitutes a defeater or strengthener to the evidence that I have a certain belief, and so again is not within the scope of the [EC] principles.

Now to apply all this to religious beliefs, and for reasons of space I can consider only the belief that there is a God, and the belief that there is no God. Suppose someone finds themselves holding the belief that there is a God, not on the basis of an argument, but because they have an experiential inclination to believe that it is true. That belief needs to be spelled out more fully before we can

assess it, for example in such terms as 'there is an essentially omnipotent person who sustains the universe in existence'. It being an experiential intuition means that believers believe it because they believe that they are caused to hold it as a result of some sensitivity to the presence of God. It may be either a direct experiential inclination (it seems to them that they are aware of God, but not by being aware of something else) or an indirect experiential inclination ( it seems to them that they are aware of God by being aware of something else, e.g. by seeing the beautiful natural world as created by God.) In either case in a very wide sense of 'perceive' they believe that they perceive God – albeit very dimly. This experiential belief is obviously the result of a different kind of apparent perception from the normal kind; and for that reason perhaps it cannot be taken for granted that [EC3] applies to the same degree as it does to most of our ordinary perceptual beliefs. But it is not the result of a very different kind of apparent perception; it is an apparent perception of a kind similar to that by which blind people sometimes seem to be aware of the presence of another person in the room. And so the fact that [EC3] governs experiential inclinations of all familiar kinds must make to the inclination to believe that there is a God, although perhaps to a reduced degree, e.g. that if 'there is a God' is a basic inclination with a strength of  $\frac{2}{3}$  then it gives a probability of  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 'there is a God'. Or rather this will hold in the absence of any a priori reason to suppose that (relative to other basic propositions) its intrinsic probability or its likelihood are very high or very low.

I have argued elsewhere (Swinburne, 2004,93-109; and 2011,3-24)at considerable length that although all logically contingent existential sentences may have very low intrinsic probabilities, 'there is a God' has a higher intrinsic probability than that of any other contingent existential hypothesis, because it makes a very simple claim, postulating the existence of just one substance definable by two or three properties to which there are zero limits. Although it is such that - if it exists - it would have great scope - that would not greatly decrease its intrinsic probability for the reason given above that simplicity is a more important criterion than scope in determining intrinsic probability. Is it probable that if there is a God we would be likely to believe it? God is by definition perfectly good, and just as a good father has considerable reason to interact with his children, so God has considerable reason to interact with the rational beings whom he has created, and so choose to make his presence known to them, not merely by inference from the world but by an (direct or indirect) experiential inclination. Of course there are also powerful reasons why he might choose not make his presence known by an experiential inclination to all rational beings (at least during their earthly life) – e.g. so as to allow them to make serious moral

choices for the right reasons, and also to allow other rational beings to tell them about him, and so to depend on them for information about his existence<sup>6</sup>. But nevertheless reflection on what a good omnipotent creator would do suggests a significant probability that he would choose make his presence known to some rational beings in this way. And since God is omnipotent, what he chooses to bring about will happen. It is surely much more probable a priori that God would make his presence known to some rational beings than that any other object such as a planet or a tortoise would make their presence known. We would have to be rightly positioned, our faculties would have to be working properly, etc. for a tortoise or a planet to make their presence known; God making his presence known would not be dependent on such contingent circumstances. If there is no God, is it probable that we would believe that there is a God? I can't see that there is any significant a priori probability of this – though of course on any psychological evidence that humans want to believe that there is a God, the probability might be much higher. But again I am assuming the absence of defeaters. So if I am right in my bold claim about its intrinsic probability, both the intrinsic probability and the likelihood of an experiential inclination to believe that 'there is a God' are significantly higher than those of other existential sentences. These considerations mean that this particular religious sentence 'there is a God', even though reached by a somewhat unusual kind of experiential inclination, is such that – for any *S*, on *S*'s evidence that he has a basic experiential inclination to believe it of strength *x* and no defeater, it has a significant probability of at least *x*.

I suggest that while there can be a direct experiential inclination to believe that there is a God which raises the probability that there is a God, a direct experiential inclination that there is no God cannot raise that probability-because an absence of something cannot cause any effect - by itself. Causing, in my view, is exerting influence, and only substances can do that. But even if you think that events (rather than substances) are what cause effects, the mere non-occurrence of an event cannot by itself have an effect; while maybe something can occur without being caused, something cannot occur caused by 'nothing'. When we say that the absence of something had some effect, this can always be paraphrased in a way which gives a more plausible account of the causal chain<sup>7</sup>. An absence can allow something else to cause some effect when it would not otherwise do so. When 'the absence of oxygen causes death', to speak strictly, it is certain neural events, themselves caused by certain bodily events, which cause death; if there had been oxygen, those bodily events would not have caused the neural events. And while we may say that someone's absence can cause

others to believe that they are absent, what is doing the causing is others failing to find that person where and when they would expect to find them. But if there is a God, people can only 'perceive' him if he chooses to allow them to perceive him, and there is no 'where' and 'when' they might reasonably expect to perceive them. Indeed -see above- he would have reasons for not making his presence known (during their earthly life) to all rational beings. So failure to find him is not in itself much evidence of his absence. So there can be much stronger evidence of the presence of God, of a kind (a direct experiential inclination) which cannot be had for the absence of God. But people can and do have indirect experiential inclinations to believe that there is no God; seeing the world full of suffering they see it as a world without God.

For more detailed religious claims such as 'God commanded me to preach to Nineveh', or 'God wants me to kill all non-Muslims', the intrinsic probability must be much lower. And the likelihood may also be different - for example 'God commanded me to preach to Nineveh' couldn't be true unless he ensured that I heard the command, and so the probability that I would believe it is 1 (though of course I might try to hide this belief from myself). [EC3] requires further qualification to take account of such factors.

Suppose now that someone believes that 'there is a God' (spelled out as before) as a result of an intuition, and so believes that it expresses a logically necessary proposition. There is no reason for treating a belief about this purported logically necessary truth any differently from other beliefs about purported logically necessary truths; having an intuition is the same kind of experience in both cases. I have claimed that 'there is a God' has a higher intrinsic probability than other hypotheses. It would only be logically necessary if there is a chain of mini-entailments from 'there is no God' to a contradiction. It seems clear that if words are used in the same sense by all speakers of the language and so they know the mini-entailments of all sentences which they consider, and they are honest in their assessment of what is mini-entailed by some sentence, then if there is such a chain of mini-entailments from 'there is no God' to a contradiction, these must be very long chains. For the absence of agreement about the soundness of any such proof shows that at some stage the proof relies on some intuition of an entailment which is not spelled out in terms of mini-entailments, these being entailments which any competent speaker must recognize. That in turn indicates that the intrinsic probability of 'there is a God' is (very probably) less than that of the most difficult mathematical theorem so far proved. And since for reasons given earlier, in the case of intuitions a lower intrinsic probability goes



with a lower likelihood, it follows that the probability given to 'there is a God' by an intuition of its truth must be something like the probability given to some much contested mathematical conjecture by an intuition of its truth.

The same considerations apply to intuitions that '"there is no God" entails a contradiction', itself entails a contradiction, that is that it can be proved that it cannot be proved that it is logically necessary that there is a God. Like many other philosophers since Kant, I believe that there are powerful arguments to show that there could be no chain of mini-entailments from 'there is no God' to a contradiction. But all these arguments rely on contestable intuitions about what entails what. For the absence of agreement about the soundness of any such proof shows that at some stage the proof relies on some intuition of an entailment which is not spelled out in terms of mini-entailments, these being entailments which any competent speaker must recognize. Hence this claim also has a relatively low intrinsic probability. (Like the conclusion of the previous paragraph about 'there is a God', the contestable nature of these intuitions is an a priori truth, although brought to our attention by the fact of disagreement about them. )And the same goes for intuitions that 'there is a God' entails a contradiction. The intrinsic probability of each of these sentences must be something like the intrinsic probability of some mathematical conjecture; and so neither the intrinsic probability nor the likelihood of the disputed sentence can be very high. From this it follows that intuitions of the truth of these sentences will give to the intuited sentence a probability lower rather than higher than the strength of the intuition. And similar considerations apply to all more detailed theistic beliefs, such as 'God is three persons of one substance' ,which insofar as they presuppose the existence of God but tell us more about him, must have a correspondingly lower intrinsic probability and likelihood.

In short I suggest that while in general the [EC] theses must apply to the intuition that there is a God, as such they do not make that sentence more or less probable than do intuitions of similar strength about many other disputed matters, whereas experiential inclinations to believe that there is a God give that sentence a higher probability than do experiential inclinations of similar strength to believe most other sentences. I must point out in conclusion that the [EC] theses are concerned with what one is justified in believing in the absence of other relevant inclinations; and that most of us have lots of defeaters and strengtheners to our inclinations to believe that there is a God, and to all other religious beliefs. And while the probability resulting from any experiential inclinations and intuitions will make some difference to the probability that there is a God, in my view for many of us these days our assessment of the force of

arguments for and against the existence of God has and rightly has a much greater influence on the probability which we ascribe to the existence of God.

## NOTES

1. Huemer (2001,99) defended a stronger version of [PC] that 'if it seems to S as if P, then thereby S has at least prima facie justification for believing that P'. My arguments below suggest that something like this earlier version is more nearly correct.
2. Critics of the view that seemings are inclinations tend to equate 'inclinations' with 'dispositions' . (See Moretti, 198-199.)When I wrote in defence of seemings being 'inclinations' to believe, I explicitly distinguished inclinations from dispositions, inclinations being states which 'would lead to beliefs but for other beliefs which suggest that the inclinations mislead' (Swinburne, 2001,140), and dispositions being states which dispose someone to believe some 'proposition' (I should have written 'sentence') if it is put to them. Inclinations to believe are states accessible to introspection; dispositions need not be accessible.
3. I argued this point in Swinburne (2001), and - though unwilling to admit as many senses as the large number of senses which I distinguished - Alston (2005) accepted the main point that there are different senses of 'epistemically justified'.
4. Huemer (2011) calls the view that one's own evidence about how things seem has greater evidential force than does evidence about how things seem to someone else, 'agent centredness', and describes it as the view that the same evidence provides different justification for different people. There is no need to describe agent centredness in this paradoxical way. I suggest that the right way to describe agent centredness is as the view that there is a difference between evidence that 'oneself' believes *q*, which is evidence that 'it seems that *q*' and evidence that 'it seems to S (picked out in a way that does not presuppose that S is oneself) that *q*'. The difference arises because only I have the former evidence. 'I believe that *q*' is not synonymous with 'S believes that *q*.' (whether or not S is oneself).
5. I have argued elsewhere (Swinburne, 2001, 83-102), that a hypothesis is simple insofar as it postulates few substances, few kinds of substance, few properties, few kinds of property, and mathematically simple relations between events (that is, the instantiation of properties in substances.)
6. For further development of these points about the reasons why God might not make himself known to many rational beings, see my response to the 'argument from hiddenness' in Swinburne (2004, 267-272).
7. This is well argued by Beebe (2004). But she does not consider the kind of case where someone's absence causes a belief in that absence. I argue that it is always to be construed as some positive state from which that person is absent (e.g. a room in which she is not present) causing the effect.

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