

Agnosticism and the Ethics of Belief

Are there Moral Reasons to Suspend Judgement on God's Existence?

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ABSTRACT

This article will draw from two central notions of normative epistemic interest: 'It is wrong to maintain a belief despite the awareness that it is not supported by evidence,' and 'If the evidence is inconclusive or otherwise insufficient to support a decision, one should not make a judgement.' Both of these sentiments are captured in philosophical thought, the former in the ethics of belief, the latter in agnosticism. It will be examined how an overlap of these inclinations can be spelt out and whether it holds for the locus classicus of agnosticism: religious belief in the existence of God/gods. More specifically, whether a moderate and modern version of moral evidentialism can provide arguments for being agnostic or support existing agnostic theories. The core premise which will be defended here is that in certain cases there can be moral reasons for suspending judgement when the evidence is inconclusive. Where beliefs become morally relevant, i.e., through the actions we base on them, there are not only epistemic but also moral reasons to carefully stick to the evidence. It will then be argued that the belief in God's/gods' (non-)existence is such a case. Both religious and atheist convictions can be of great practical relevance on a personal and societal level. Through their impact and authority, they hold moral stakes and have to be founded on a solid evidential base. Finally, the article provides agnostic arguments to show that such an evidential base has not yet been met and ends with an appeal to reconsider the authority of atheist and theist convictions, especially in a secularizing and religiously pluralistic society.

KEYWORDS

Ethics of Belief, Agnosticism, Moral Evidentialism, Religious Belief.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a person trying to find information and form a belief about a particular fact (X). For example, Tim is trying to find out whether Mary is dating Joe. After conducting excessive research on the topic and gathering every information available, he finds the evidence inconclusive. However, he opts for believing that X, independent of its basis in evidence. Maybe an equal amount of Mary's and Joe's friends deny and confirm they are an item. Since Tim finds them equally credible and does not have access to other sources, his epistemic reasons for and against believing X cancel each other out. Nevertheless, he is a devoted advocate of true love and soon convinces himself that the romantic involvement of Mary and Joe is material for the latest talk of the town.

Beyond the notion that one should not stick their nose in other peoples' love affairs nor gossip and speculate about such delicate matters in public, I hold that this scenario appeals to two central notions of normative epistemic interest. First, it is wrong to maintain a belief despite the awareness that it is not sufficiently supported by evidence. Second, if the evidence is inconclusive or otherwise insufficient to support a decision, one should not make a judgement. Both of these sentiments are captured in philosophical thought: the former in the ethics of belief, as a way in which norms should guide epistemic practice; the latter, an appeal to suspension of judgement, is a form of agnosticism. The scenario presents a case of how a theory from the ethics of belief, namely evidentialism, can overlap with and support agnosticism. I want to investigate whether this overlap holds for the traditional case of agnosticism: the existence of God/gods. More specifically, in this paper, I will investigate whether moral evidentialism can provide arguments for being agnostic about God's/gods' existence.

Merging these lines of thought is not a new idea. In mid-nineteenth century England, Victorian secularism emerged as a movement against religious authority and for societal progress through science and rationality. A key idea of this movement is expressed by Victorian secularists like William Kingdon Clifford (1999 [1877]) and Thomas Henry Huxley (2011 [1889]). Their claim that norms should guide our belief-formation was strongly intertwined and discussed in debates about religious belief, God's existence, and the authority religion should have. However, their positions on agnosticism and evidentialism are not explicitly combined or used to support each other. Further, the immense clarification, deradicalization and modernization they call for would exceed the scope of this article. Nevertheless, I will briefly show how the moderate and modern version of moral evidentialism that I adopt stems from Clifford's idea and then identify the argumentative support it can offer for agnostic theories today.

A CASE FOR CAUTION FROM MORAL EVIDENTIALISM

It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

– W. K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief'

In William Kingdon Clifford's infamous principle, formulated in 1877, we are confronted with a radical instance of moral evidentialism. He claims that it is morally wrong to believe without sufficient evidence in every possible case. However, his principle is not only radical but often considered too radical, for it seems to have too demanding evidential standards. If we have to acquire the same extensive evidence for all beliefs alike, we would need to be able to present thoroughly justifying evidence for every arbitrary belief we form in our everyday life. It suggests

that we need equally strong evidence for justifying our belief that there are three eggs in the fridge, as we do for believing that our neighbor is a criminal.¹ A further concern with Clifford's principle is that it does not distinguish between those cases and their moral relevance. So, not only do we need equally strong evidence for both of those beliefs, it is also equally wrong to form them without evidence. Both concerns can be evaded by introducing a scale or degrees to the principle. For example, one can open the principle up to allow different degrees of certainty that correspond with the evidence at hand. This would mean that not only full-blown beliefs based on absolute certainty would be allowed, but degrees of certainty that are appropriate to the strength of evidence (Chignell 2018). Further, one might accommodate the principle with a scale of moral relevance. There can be stronger moral reasons in some than in other cases to believe only as far as evidence can carry.

Finally, Clifford's principle, along with other principles of moral evidentialism, has to face two further challenges: counterexamples of cases in which it seems to be morally demanded to believe without sufficient evidence and the apparent involuntariness of belief formation. These objections would render the idea of moral evidentialism implausible and have to be answered if we want to employ moral evidentialism in support of agnosticism. In the following, I suggest a more agreeable and, in many ways, much more moderate moral evidentialist principle than Clifford's:

Moderate principle (MP): There are moral reasons to form beliefs following one's evidence.

I will defend the MP, show that it can withstand the objections mentioned above and can be applied to the case of God's/gods' (non-) existence in the following way:

- 1) If there are moral reasons to form beliefs in accordance with one's evidence, there are moral reasons to suspend judgement when the evidence is inconclusive.
 - 2) The evidence for God's/gods' (non-)existence is inconclusive.
 - 3) The moral reasons apply to forming a belief about God's/gods' (non-)existence.
- C) There are moral reasons to suspend judgement about God's/gods' (non-)existence.

1) If there are moral reasons to form beliefs in accordance with one's evidence, there are moral reasons to suspend judgement when the evidence is inconclusive.

To defend the first premise of my argument from moral evidentialism, two questions will have to be answered upfront: why should we adopt evidentialism in general, and why moral evidentialism

in particular? In the following, I will offer three brief accounts of general reasons why one ought to form beliefs in accordance with the evidence: an argument from folk intuition, a claim that evidentialism is internal to belief and an account of extrinsic reasons to base belief on evidence.² Then I will look at moral reasons specifically. Afterwards, I will defend moral evidentialism against the most common arguments and counterexamples.

Reasons for moral evidentialism

Firstly, the most substantial and apparent reason for assigning (moral or epistemic) normative rules to belief formation is based on intuition and common practice. The phrases ‘You should not believe what Mary says; she is a notorious liar,’ ‘You should believe it when the doctor tells you that the vaccination is safe,’ ‘It is wrong to believe that the Sun revolves around the Earth,’ or ‘They are guilty, the CCTV footage is unambiguous,’ express an unsurprising normative approach to beliefs. It is a crucial part of our everyday lives, for instance in expressing approval or disapproval about someone else’s beliefs, as well as in the standards of various of society’s institutions such as education, law enforcement, and the sciences. These intuitions display a generally normative approach to belief formation and emphasize the justification of beliefs through evidence. Suggestions like ‘They should be found guilty because I dislike them,’ which propose a belief independent from any evidence and based on personal preferences, seem ill-advised. Even if they align with common practices, such statements are usually condemned. It is yet unclear whether this is epistemic normativity or whether we also make moral judgments in cases like these. By the end of this section, I will conclude that both are the case. Either way, this shows that evidentialism is well equipped to fit with folk intuitions and practices fundamental to our society.

Secondly, the epistemic normativity of belief formation can be backed up by several means. Jonathan Adler, for example, adopts an internalist stance on evidentialism. This means he holds that it is in the very nature of belief to be based on evidence:

Since one’s beliefs are what one regards as true, when we attend to any of our beliefs, a claim is made on us for holding that the belief is true. So it is belief that requires proportional reasons or evidence, not any external source. (Adler 2002, 5)

On Adler’s account, no genuine beliefs can knowingly be held upon insufficient evidence since, according to him, what it means to be believing is thinking that a proposition is true, which in turn means thinking that the proposition is secured by evidence or reason (ibid., 29–31; Chignell

2018). Therefore, one ought to align belief a priori with appropriate evidence, in the same way one ought to put gin in a gin and tonic—it would otherwise not be a gin and tonic.³

Thirdly, one could add that there are also extrinsic reasons why we should align our beliefs with the available evidence. It satisfies the basic human need to hold correct beliefs and avoid error, which enables us to interact with our environment successfully and, among other things, secure survival and well-being. Avoiding error by seeking evidence that makes the truth of a belief more likely can be crucial for human flourishing and survival (Craig 1999, 11).

However, solely arguing from extrinsic reasons like these does not suffice to defend the evidentialist imperative. It is prone to refutation through counterexamples, according to which some errors might be beneficial and dependent on whether someone desires to have a likely-true belief or reliable ground for action and decision-making. However, this only means that extrinsic reasons might not always bear on forming beliefs, but it still seems safe to say that it will be often or maybe even most times beneficial to form well-founded beliefs. Nevertheless, as we have seen, evidentialism could be defended through a priori analyses and ultimately reflects folk intuitions and practices exceptionally well. Hence, I will take the extrinsic account to merely add to the reasons one ought to align belief with evidence, though it cannot account for the position on its own. Since the extrinsic reasons for adopting the evidentialist principle appeal to successful action and human wellbeing, they lead us to the second part of the question: why moral evidentialism in particular?

What are the moral reasons to motivate us to follow the evidentialist MP? To begin with, it might be overall morally desirable if, as a practice, it contributes to human flourishing. Arguing for epistemic norms in this way subordinates them to moral norms and constitutes what is called the ‘special-case theory’ (Haack 2001, 21). Terence Cuneo, for example, claims: ‘Both sorts of facts [moral and epistemic] are, as it were, grounded in features that comprise the human good. [...] Consequently, I think there is a sense in which one can say that epistemology is a branch of ethics’ (Cuneo 2007, 80). Nevertheless, we need not adopt such a vast approach. Instead, I will pursue what Susan Haack (2001) calls an *overlap thesis*.

When deciding to take action, we usually base these decisions on the relevant beliefs. For example: I believe the traffic light just switched to green. I start walking. However, actions of high moral relevance can hinge on the corresponding beliefs. A demolition expert’s belief, like ‘There are no people in the building when the explosives detonate,’ gains high moral relevance because people’s lives could be at stake. The expert has moral reasons to form this belief with the highest epistemic caution. Therefore, according to Sharon Ryan (2015, 405), adopting moral

evidentialism would, again, best explain and reflect folk habits, institutions and intuitions. It would explain the moral pressure on the demolition expert to believe beyond the slightest doubt that the building is empty. Nevertheless, there are cases where nothing hinges on a particular belief, where no action at all or no morally relevant action follows from the belief. Take, for example, my belief that there is a lot of dust on my laptop's screen and the act of cleaning it with my sleeve. Thus, I hold that while epistemic normativity may not be reduced to moral normativity, they often *overlap*, such as when beliefs themselves are morally relevant or when morally relevant consequences hinge on a specific belief. In these cases, as the following will show, there are moral reasons to form beliefs only according to one's evidence, and the MP applies.

Objections to moral evidentialism

For now, I have tried to give a positive account for the MP, presented reasons for evidentialism on its own, and further how evidentialism can be morally motivated. I will now turn to the objections against this principle and point out how the MP can meet these objections. A very popular type of argument against moral evidentialism involves counterexamples that allegedly show situations in which one ought to believe contrary to or without sufficient evidence. Sharon Ryan (2015, 408–11) gives a comprehensive list of such examples, which fall into three categories. Examples in the first category appeal to the personal relationship between one person and another (romantic partnerships, friendships, family, etc.). According to these examples, a close relationship can morally require you to believe against the evidence that, for example, a teenage daughter is not taking drugs or that your spouse is not cheating (Chignell 2018). This can be owed to the other as faithfulness or trust or as an act to save the relationship.

The second kind of counterexamples, the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' type, goes in a similar direction. These examples construe cases in which a belief only turns out to be true because we believed it in the first place. A person with a deadly disease, for example, might, against all odds and evidence, believe in their recovery and consequently gain so much strength that they actually survive. So, if believing is the way to survive, the patient is morally required to do so, even if it would be irrational (James 1897, 24; Jordan 2018). I hold against examples like these that they recommend self-deception instead of honesty or acceptance, and neither can clearly show that this is the morally right thing to do. If a teenager gets involved with drugs, it might be better for the parents to bite the bullet and address the issue, instead of closing their eyes to the uncomfortable facts—the same might go for the cheating spouse (Ryan 2015, 414). It is also not evident that it is better to irrationally believe that one surely will not die instead of preparing oneself and the loved ones for the possible event, or that it is impossible that one can be aware of the possibility and still remain optimistic (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, one might argue that it is important

to trust one's child or spouse not only for the sake of the relationship but also because being trusted is what can make a person become trustworthy after all (Alfano 2015; D'Cruz 2019). The troubled teenager might be 'motivated to prove [themselves] worthy of the trust and esteem that have been directed [their] way' (Alfano 2015, 202). Increasing the amount of trust and especially trustworthiness constitutes a strong moral as well as epistemic reason to follow this recommendation. However, I do not think it is necessary for the parents to actually come to some other belief than that their daughter is using drugs to engage in this kind of trust-building behavior. It might even be motivated by their acknowledgement of the fact that their daughter is currently lying to them, that they try to make her feel trusted, so she will eventually open up to them and become more trustworthy. These objections do not wholly undermine the counterexamples, but they show that they are more ambivalent and less striking than they claim or might seem. Examples of this type cannot cast satisfactory doubt on moral evidentialism.

Finally, a third type of counterexamples follows – the extortion argument. Imagine someone threatening to kill a room full of people unless a person forms this particular, yet unjustified, belief. The argument goes that even Clifford himself would have to permit believing against the evidence if many people would lose their lives otherwise. Thus, in this case, there would not be moral reasons to form the belief according to the evidence aside from coercion to the extortionists' will. However, these kinds of examples are not only very artificial, but they also miss the point. Saying that there can be conflicting moral obligations does not mean that they cancel each other out. It is not out of the ordinary that an action has conflicting moral implications. If someone threatens to kill many people unless Clifford robs a bank for them, moral obligations also pull in different directions. However, just because it might be better to rob the bank in this case, the moral reasons against robbery do not suddenly disappear. Similarly, it might be morally demanded to form an ill-informed belief in this case, but that does not mean that there are no moral reasons to form the belief according to the evidence. Therefore, this argument can only target types of moral evidentialism that make a categorical claim, not allowing exceptions to the evidentialist principle. Still, the MP only holds that there are moral reasons for aligning belief and evidence, not that they are overruling reasons in every case. Since the MP is less radical than Clifford's principle and does not pose a categorical imperative, it does not fall prey to the extortion type of counterexamples.

I will now look at a different objection to evidentialism—the involuntariness argument, which states that we do not have the kind of control over our beliefs required to be held responsible for them or for them to be a matter of normative evaluation. This type of argument usually presupposes the widely accepted 'ought implies can' platitude: one can only say that I ought to

believe something or ought not to believe it, if I am able to follow up on that—if I am able to believe or not believe it (Ryan 2015, 419). It makes no sense to have an obligation if it is impossible to put it into practice. This argument is usually made by doxastic involuntarists, who deny that we can follow up on an obligation like this, because forming a belief, unlike waving my arm or shaking my head, is not something I can do at will (see e.g.: Alston 1989; Nottelmann 2007). They argue that in a particular situation, given the evidence and sensory information, we cannot willingly change or form beliefs of any content. For example, when I look out the window and see the raindrops running down the glass and falling on the ground, I cannot just believe that it is not raining, even if I want to. The belief is forced upon me by my sensory information. They might add that our beliefs are further due to information that we have been exposed to in the past, including the way we were socialized, the assumptions we grew up with and that we are exposed to every day. According to this train of thought, beliefs are automatically formed in response to the information we have obtained. As Alston (1998, p. 129) puts it, there is ‘nothing any normal human being can do’ to interfere with this process and to control their beliefs on the spot.

There are two ways to refute the involuntariness argument. One could either put forth that we, in fact, do have the necessary control over our beliefs, or one could question whether this type of control is necessary (Ryan 2015, 419). I will go with the latter and explain how we can think of a norm for belief formation without needing direct voluntary control. Arguing that direct voluntary control over belief is unnecessary leads us to a common position within this debate and among many philosophers: indirect doxastic voluntarism. As Ryan (*ibid.*) points out, there are many things that we have responsibility for which we cannot directly control. People are responsible for the well-being of their children or the cleanliness of their flat. While one has direct control over moving one’s arm to wave at a friend, one cannot in the same way just have a clean house or healthy, happy children. These things can only be indirectly brought about by conducting a variety of other actions which result in cleanliness or wellbeing. Similarly, one can argue that we indirectly control our belief formation through the sources we consult, the criticism we ask for, the people we talk to, et cetera.

We can voluntarily bring about beliefs by engaging in a particular behavior that might induce them, even if we are not initially convinced. Note that my goal is not to advertise tricking oneself into believing something that one has trouble accepting or might even run contrary to the evidence. But if we accept indirect doxastic voluntarism, we can make sense of the evidentialist principle. Exercising this indirect control can be done by carefully considering evidence and likelihoods, choosing our informants and sources well, and reflecting on our level of certainty towards something. We can then hold someone responsible for having a specific belief, just like

we can hold them responsible for having a clean house. Thus, it is not necessary to be ‘highly trained “mental masters”’ (Nottelmann 2007, 123), able to directly believe something at will, to assign norms to belief formation and make sense of an ‘ought’ in that concern.

Summing up, as an initial step to defending a moral evidentialist argument for agnosticism, I have presented various reasons to accept the moderate moral evidentialist principle (MP) and thereby the first half of my first premise, which is that there are moral reasons to form beliefs in accordance with one’s evidence. I have shown that the counterexamples were insufficient to raise serious concerns about the MP and that the MP also evades some of these examples because it is less radical. Further, I have argued that direct voluntary control is not necessary to pose an epistemic norm.

... suspend judgement when the evidence is inconclusive.

The second part of premise 1 should not be puzzling: there are moral reasons to suspend judgement when the evidence is inconclusive. I hold that the evidence can be inconclusive in two ways, namely when the evidence for or against X is equally balanced, or when it is entirely absent:

[S]uspension of judgment is the fitting attitude for each of us toward the proposition that an even number of ducks exists, since our evidence makes it equally likely that the number is odd. Neither belief nor disbelief is epistemically justified when our evidence is equally balanced. (Conee and Feldman 2003, 83)

Similarly, Tim acquired inconclusive information about Mary and Joe’s relationship status. Hence, in accordance with premise 1, this would require him to refrain from forming a belief on the matter. But what exactly does it mean for Tim to suspend judgement? The way I just phrased it, ‘refrain from forming a belief,’ is only one interpretation—suspension of belief as the mere absence of belief. As Jane Friedman (2013) shows, this interpretation might be too simplistic. We have an absence of beliefs about many things, especially those that we have never considered, like the name of the only child of Jane Austen’s inspirational cousin.⁴ However, as Friedman (2013, 168) points out, we would not say that we have, until this point, been agnostic or suspended judgement about the child’s name.

According to Friedman (2013, 179; 2017, 304), suspension of judgment involves an attitude towards the question asked. This attitude could, in a ‘metacognitive account of suspended judgement’ (Friedman 2013, 180), be the second-order belief that one is not justified in making a claim about, for example, the number of ducks or Mary and Joe’s relationship status. Friedman does not pursue this account further; however, I find it intuitive and well-fitting with moral

evidentialism. Moral evidentialism presents an appeal for epistemic caution and deploys moral and epistemic reasons for a doxastic behavior that asks for evidence in order to avoid error. With this aim in mind and the understanding that believing without evidence might bear epistemic and moral risk, ‘suspending judgement’ becomes intelligible as the conclusion or belief that one is not in a position to answer the question. This is compatible with the connection Friedman (ibid., 2017) makes between suspending judgement and inquiry. Being unable to form a belief or to answer the question calls for further inquiry, and inquiry happens especially when we do not have the answer yet. Thus, I suggest the state of suspended judgment involves an attitude of reflection on one’s current inability to answer the question and, at the same time, is a forward-looking position that opens towards inquiry.

In the first paragraphs of this section, I argued that there are moral reasons for aligning our beliefs with evidence, namely that one should be cautious when something morally relevant hinges on a given belief. I met the involuntarism objection by saying that this caution can be exercised as an indirect way of controlling one’s beliefs. Finally, this council of caution can demand to accept when one is not in a position to answer the question and has to keep inquiring—thus to suspend judgement for now. Thereby we obtain premise 1: If there are moral reasons to form beliefs in accordance with one’s evidence, there are moral reasons to suspend judgement when the evidence is inconclusive.

2) The evidence for God’s/gods’ (non-)existence is inconclusive.

Premise 2 is itself a significant part of the agnosticism debate. My aim here is not to provide a foundational but a supporting argument for agnosticism. Nevertheless, I will give a brief overview of arguments on the inconclusiveness of evidence for or against God’s/gods’ existence.

As seen in the former section, evidence might leave the options equally likely or unlikely, or it might be entirely absent. Additionally, the inconclusiveness can be either permanent or temporary and might stem either from our current epistemic position or from the nature of the God/gods it concerns, in which case we are, in principle, unable to know whether they exist or not. Most commonly, two different kinds of agnosticism stem from these different takes on the state of the evidence. Weak agnosticism, on the one hand, usually comes as a temporary position, and the main claim is that one does not currently know, or is not in a position to decide whether or not God/gods exist, due to the inconclusiveness of the evidence. On the other hand, strong agnosticism claims that we cannot know about God’s/gods’ existence. This might be because we have not discovered the relevant sources yet, because we do not know which source we would have to consult, or, more commonly: because a god is not the kind of thing that we can have

evidence for (Wilczewska 2019, 3), because God/gods are unknowable and incompatible with our concepts of thought (Detel 2018), or because they are incompatible with our ways of gaining knowledge (Mizrahi 2017). This sort of claim suggests a permanent and principled suspension of judgement. In this case, our evidence would not just be absent, but the entire search for it would be obsolete, and evidentialism would, in fact, not apply anymore. Further, making a principled claim like this itself needs strong evidential support. Even though judgement is suspended, it is not done out of epistemic caution in the face of inconclusive evidence, but out of principles which are not self-evident. Thus, the council of caution and call to remain open to inquiry, which my argument is meant to provide, cannot be used in support of strong agnosticism and is incompatible with it. Therefore, the support offered in this article can only be called on by weak agnosticism.

Weak agnosticism rests on the assumption that neither side of the debate has yet been able to settle the matter without doubt and satisfactorily in their favor. One reason for this assumption is the argumentative ping-pong that has been going on between theists and atheists (see also Le Poidevin 2010, 54–76). There might continuously be arguments and counterarguments on either side, making the evidence too ambiguous to make a judgment (Wilczewska 2019, 3). Arguments of these kinds are, for example, the argument from design and the unlikeliness of life occurring unintentionally (e.g., Ratzsch and Koperski 2020), the argument from morality (e.g., Kant 1878, V–VIII), or arguments from private spiritual experience (e.g., Swinburn 2004) on the theists' side. On the atheists' side: arguments from evolution (e.g., Draper 2008), genealogical arguments about the emergence of religious belief (e.g., Manson 2010), or the problem of evil (e.g., Hume 2007, D 10). I cannot provide an exhaustive discussion of these arguments here, or measure their evidential weight in a way that will show a symmetry in evidential force. I do not even want to claim that such a symmetry obtains. Even if there is a stronger amount of evidential force on one side, the matter is not settled quite as it is regarding other questions like 'Is it raining outside?', 'Can smoking cause cancer?' and 'Did Mary and Joe get married?' Epistemic and academic peers who have access to the same amount of information and a more comprehensive list of arguments still disagree about what the evidence suggests. A possible explanation for why this question seems to be different and is yet so controversial, is, I suggest, because of the moral, political, and societal impact that it has. This is also the reason why I think that it should be treated with as much epistemic caution as to suspend belief on it.

3) The moral reasons apply to forming a belief about God's/gods' (non-)existence.

The claim that belief in God's/gods' (non-)existence is morally relevant is primarily based on the intense personal significance and impact on the lives of a significant number of people. However,

it is essential to note that theistic or atheistic belief does not always impact the believer's life or actions. People can hold these beliefs without changing their behavior and without engaging in religious practices. Additionally, considering the plurality of religions around the globe, it would be a Eurocentric generalization to equate theistic and religious beliefs or frame religion as generally connected to morally relevant beliefs or behavior. Neither theistic nor atheistic beliefs necessarily have the moral implications that I will bring up now.

Nevertheless, atheist and theist beliefs—the latter being likely, but not necessarily, embedded in a religious framework—indeed can and often do impact the decisions people make. Recall the belief that the building is empty from the example given earlier: it is only morally relevant in a specific framework, namely when it is held by the demolition expert who is about to detonate the explosives in the house. It is not relevant when held by any random bystander who thinks, 'Ah, this looks empty.' I hold that the same goes for believing in God's/gods' (non-)existence. Although it does not necessarily have moral features, it certainly has done throughout history and still does in many cases, as examples will show.

The fact that theistic belief is so monumental for so many people, and the fact that it has been used to justify all sorts of morally significant behavior and policy, makes it all the more important to be extremely careful when forming one's beliefs. Moreover, it is not at all clear that believing in god delivers practical, intellectual, and moral payoffs that outweigh the practical, intellectual, and moral costs. (Ryan 2015, 411)

Ryan stresses two things here: people's emotional involvement with theistic beliefs and the high level of agency through which they are put into practice. I believe this does not only go for theists but can also apply to atheist belief. Theist beliefs often function as an indicator of group membership, which might in itself be a morally relevant factor. Further, some of these groups, such as the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church or evangelical megachurches in the United States, have a high level of direct political and social agency. Consider, for example, the recent setbacks on women's reproductive rights by criminalizing abortion in many American states. On the other hand, anti-religious and secularist efforts produce policies which lead to religious discrimination, such as the hijab ban for public officials, such as teachers in France. In past and present cases, the belief in God's/gods' (non-)existence even plays a foundational role for states with a distinctly religious or atheist denomination. For example, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Catholic theocratic Vatican City State on the one hand, and countries such as Vietnam, China and Albania, which adopted official state atheism under communist governments

on the other hand. If state policies and jurisdictions are based on a belief in God's/gods' (non-)existence, this belief indeed becomes morally charged.

However, atheist and theist beliefs also motivate morally relevant decisions on an individual level. Some theists and atheists alike go so far as to kill and die for their beliefs. Traditions of martyrdom show how solely the belief that a god exists can bring people to commit extreme acts, even accepting to be killed for maintaining and standing up for this belief. And not rarely have people died for denying the existence of a god in religious regimes. Additionally, on a less dramatic level, both beliefs can extensively impact people's life choices. Religious theism is often connected to specific practices and religious norms. As a result, it can have a wide-reaching effect on a person's way of living. Morally relevant actions such as which food to consume, which traditions to follow, whether to have an abortion or not, how to raise children and whether to pass the belief on to them, whether to join a missionary project and how to treat those who have different opinions, all the way to considerations of joining terrorist organizations, can hinge on this belief. On the other side, the belief that a god does not exist can affect similar choices. For example, formerly religious people often break with their families and friends and estrange themselves from their religious community once they become atheists. They can even obtain a hostile stance towards religious groups or individuals and engage in direct or indirect discrimination, influencing everyday behaviour like whom to sit next to on a bus, where to do the shopping and how to face people who wear religious symbols.

One might worry that an agnostic stance might not diverge very far from atheism in practice, since it would usually also include refraining from religious practices. Nevertheless, the position I am trying to put forward differs from both active atheism and theism, in the sense that it does not think itself justified to engage in a morally relevant way with either of them, and it recommends reflecting on the justification one has for a belief, when one bases morally relevant behaviour on it. This can affect personal choices, but also the way one interacts with people from either side. Especially on the collective level, and in political decision-making, I believe a humble stance that leaves room for inquiry into religious and non-religious positions can be helpful to maneuver the ongoing development of secularization and the religious diversity of a globalized society.

C) There are moral reasons to suspend judgement about God's/gods' (non-)existence.

In this paper, I have defended the three premises of the following argument:

- 1) If there are moral reasons to form beliefs in accordance with one's evidence, then there are moral reasons to suspend judgement when the evidence is inconclusive.
- 2) The evidence for God's/gods' (non-)existence is inconclusive.
- 3) The moral reasons apply to forming a belief about God's/gods' (non-)existence.

I have presented two different arguments for evidentialism and suggested a moderate moral evidentialism by showing how moral norms apply to doxastic behavior in addition to epistemic norms. This way, the epistemic counsel of caution also becomes a matter of moral caution. Sometimes, being morally and epistemically cautious means accepting the inability to justify a belief while remaining open to further inquiry. This position can be applied to various cases where our evidential base is not sufficient to justify morally relevant beliefs and actions. It can help us understand the full scope of someone's failing when they did not meet their epistemic duty and thereby imposed a risk on other people. Finally, I have applied this principle to both theism and atheism, thereby reconnecting agnosticism and the ethics of belief. I argued that the evidence for a belief in God's/gods' (non-)existence is a case in which suspension of judgement is in order because, in many cases, it falls into the scope of beliefs that bear moral relevance. Therefore, I conclude from 1), 2) and 3):

- C) There are moral reasons to suspend judgement about God's/gods' (non-)existence.

This, however, is not only meant to be a supporting tool for agnostics or a nostalgic reappraisal of Victorian theories. The Victorian secularists mainly challenged the predominant religious claim to authority in societal and governmental matters with the idea that progress based on responsible belief formation will ultimately help to build a better society. This way, belief formation became a matter of moral normativity to them. Since then, the process of secularization has changed the situation in most western countries, but that does not mean that there are no moral stakes attached to the matter anymore. We live in secularizing yet religiously pluralistic societies, that often struggle to equally accommodate both of these qualities. It is important to remember that neither theist nor atheist beliefs are without moral implications or have an exceptionally superior evidential base. Whenever decisions are made on an individual or societal level, when we pass laws and claim rights, in the way we meet and treat other people, we should check in with the support we have for our convictions, and with the justification it can lend to our behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Robin Le Poidevin and the participants of the Utrecht Philosophy Graduate Conference 2022 for many insightful comments and discussions.

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¹ Even though Clifford does not explicitly say what sufficient evidence involves, he sets the standards for inquiry very high. On the one hand, through the investigation his famous shipowner should have done, but also through the limited cases in which we are allowed to rely on testimony et cetera (Clifford 1999, 78, 86–96).

² The question of whether one ought to align belief with the evidence is part of the broader question of whether and why one should aim to form true beliefs in general and how this epistemic normativity can be justified. Thereby, complex metaepistemological questions stand behind this matter, and of course, they cannot be resolved in the scope of this article. My three accounts are solely meant to offer a selection of reasons that could make the idea of evidentialism intelligible. For more thorough discussion see e.g.: Adler 2002; Kornblith 1993; Carter and Sosa 2022.

³ Note that this does not mean that one cannot have false beliefs or base them on poor evidence. It only means that whenever we believe something, we do so because, as far as we know, we have appropriate evidence and that we would not believe something despite thinking that the evidence points against it.

⁴ Jane Austen's Cousin Eliza de Feuillide outlived her only son who was called Hastings.