

(Ad-)ventures in faith: a critique of Bishop's doxastic-venture model

AMBER L. GRIFFIOEN

Department of Philosophy, University of Konstanz, PO Box 22, 78457 Konstanz, Germany
e mail: amber.griffioen@uni konstanz.de

Abstract: While some philosophical models reduce religious faith to either mere belief or affect, more recent accounts have begun to look at the volitional component of faith. In this spirit, John Bishop has defended the notion of faith as a 'doxastic venture'. In this article, I consider Bishop's view in detail and attempt to show that his account proves on the one hand too permissive and on the other too restrictive. Thus, although the doxastic venture model offers certain advantages over other prominent views in the philosophy of religion, it still falls short of providing us with an ultimately satisfactory account of religious faith.

Introduction

The current literature in the philosophy of Religion contains no shortage of models of religious faith.¹ While some models attempt to reduce faith to mere belief or mere affect, more recent accounts have turned their attention to the volitional component of faith, maintaining that it also appears to involve a willing *risk* of some kind. In this spirit, John Bishop has defended the notion of theistic faith as a 'doxastic venture'. In what follows, I will consider Bishop's view in detail and show that it falls short on its own terms. I will argue that Bishop's account proves on the one hand too permissive and on the other too restrictive. Thus, although the doxastic-venture model of faith has certain advantages over other prominent views in the philosophy of religion, it still falls short of providing us with an ultimately satisfactory account of religious faith.

Faith as doxastic venture

Against accounts that reduce faith to something merely passive and receptive (e.g. faith as a matter solely of belief or of affect), John Bishop

(2002, 2005, 2007) has plausibly proposed that faith contains an essentially volitional component. For Bishop, this amounts to understanding faith as involving a practical commitment to certain religious beliefs which one recognizes as going beyond the evidence, an endeavour he calls *doxastic venture*. 'People make a doxastic venture', he writes, 'if and only if they take to be true in their practical reasoning a proposition, p, that they believe to be true, while recognizing that it is not the case that p's truth is adequately supported by their total available evidence'.² Here, it is important to note the distinction Bishop makes between *holding* and *taking* a proposition to be true. Holding p to be true denotes a person's being 'in a psychological state that counts as a belief that p'. Taking p to be true, on the other hand, refers to a person's wilfully employing p 'as a true premise in reasoning'.³ Over the former, Bishop claims, we have little to no direct control, though we may at times exercise indirect control over our belief-acquisition and maintenance. However, he argues that we do often have direct control over which propositions we choose to employ in our reasoning – especially in our practical reasoning. That is, we have direct control over those propositions we *take* to be true. Of course, it is natural and habitual that the propositions we take to be true in our reasoning are those we actually believe, but these may come apart, as when one resists the workings of a prejudice or bias of which one is aware, or when a person with deep underlying trust issues nevertheless decides to entrust a friend with a secret, despite being unable to shake off the feeling that no one can really be trusted. In such cases, Bishop maintains, the subject does not allow a particular belief she holds to do the work in her reasoning that it would normally do. The same may be said when we are required to bracket or downplay certain beliefs we may hold e.g. when serving on a jury or performing a scientific experiment or enjoying a science-fiction movie. Here, allowing our beliefs about reality to play their normal role in our reasoning might mean undermining the rules, objectivity, or even the very possibility of the activities in question.

Thus, there appears to be something voluntary about the taking-to-be-true relation that does not obtain of the holding-to-be-true relation. As Bishop puts it, 'our wider capacity to decide what propositions to take to be true in our reasoning (and what weight to give their truth) can be deployed as a capacity for control over our beliefs – a locus of direct voluntary control over how beliefs are used in practical reasoning'.⁴ However, faith as Bishop understands it differs from the examples cited above, since the latter represent cases in which the subject's voluntarily adopted reasoning process reflects something other than what she actually believes. To count as a fully doxastic venture,⁵ he claims, the faith-proposition the subject takes to be true in her practical reasoning must match up with the belief she actually holds – and it must do so *despite* the subject's awareness that this requires going beyond what is supported by the evidence. Further, Bishop maintains that the faith-proposition in question must be affirmed

‘with full weight’ in the subject’s practical reasoning, i.e. ‘with the kind of weight that naturally’ – though, as we shall see, not necessarily – ‘goes along with straightforwardly believing that it is true’.⁶ Thus, a proposition only affirmed tentatively, hypothetically, or presumptively in one’s practical reasoning will disqualify an exercise of the above capacity from counting as a fully doxastic venture, even if the proposition does correspond to a belief one actually holds.

According to Bishop, then, faith is doxastic in so far as it involves ‘a specific capacity for a [doxastic] control that . . . may be used to determine whether or not beliefs *qua* held attitudes get given their due weight in salient practical reasoning’.⁷ And it is a venture in so far as it involves taking the epistemic risk of knowingly going beyond the evidence. Likewise, faith remains receptive in so far as one does not generally have direct control over what one believes, but it is active in so far as it involves one’s wilfully allowing beliefs that go beyond the evidence to play a role in one’s practical reasoning.

Despite the former, more passive aspect of faith, over which we have little control, Bishop maintains that faith is (or ‘should be’) ‘broadly reasonable in the sense that exercising the capacity for faith should be in harmony with the exercise of our rational capacities’.⁸ (This rules out those fideist views on which it is a mark of faith that it be either irrational or arational.) Indeed, that religious faith may be both practically and epistemically rational turns out to be crucial for Bishop. He argues that since religious beliefs have a morally significant impact on our actions and ways of living, ‘the question of the justifiability of taking a religious belief to be true in one’s practical reasoning is ultimately a *moral* question’.⁹ But Bishop’s ethics of belief lead him to tie the morality of faith to its rationality via his endorsement of what he calls the *moral-epistemic link principle* – namely that ‘people are morally entitled to take their beliefs to be true only if they are *epistemically entitled* to do so’.¹⁰ So if the kind of venturing necessarily involved in faith turns out to be epistemically irrational,¹¹ it will also thereby lack moral standing. And any theory that is forced to characterize faith as necessarily immoral (or at least as never morally justified) would appear to have a *prima facie* strike against it from the very beginning. In short, although the notion of faith as doxastic venture highlights the importance of the volitional element of faith, it does so at the risk of losing the rational element. But if the rational element is lost, by Bishop’s standards so is the morality of faith. Thus, it will be important to look more closely at the way in which Bishop justifies the rationality of faith to see if the doxastic-venture model can be successful.

Is doxastic venture rational?

As we have just seen, since the account of faith Bishop proposes involves an ‘active venture in practical commitment’¹² to certain theistic faith-beliefs, and given that these theistic faith-beliefs ‘pervasively influence how people live’,¹³

such commitments are open to moral evaluation. Yet given the moral-epistemic link principle cited above, the burden is on Bishop to show that such doxastic ventures can be epistemically rational in a way that still allows them to be venturesome. To this end, Bishop makes two argumentative moves aimed at denying the central thesis of *epistemic evidentialism*, which claims that the rationality of a practical commitment to a belief (or, what is more or less the same: a person's entitlement in holding it and employing it in her practical reasoning) rests upon that belief's being evidentially justified. First, he argues that classical theism is 'evidentially ambiguous'. Second, he employs a strategy borrowed from William James to argue that where the evidence is ambiguous, it is rationally permissible to believe on a 'passional' basis. I shall discuss each of these moves in turn.

According to Bishop, subjects are *evidentially justified* in holding that p 'if and only if they hold p to be true on the basis of adequate evidential support for p's truth'.¹⁴ Further, Bishop maintains, epistemic evidentialism claims that evidential justification (and only evidential justification), understood in this way, can confer epistemic entitlement. Of course, what it means to 'hold p to be true on the basis of adequate evidential support for p's truth' is debatable, but Bishop focuses primarily on 'rational empiricist evidential practice',¹⁵ since this is the framework within which many philosophers have assumed the evidential support for the truth of faith-beliefs should be evaluated.¹⁶ There are many reasons to question the plausibility of the thesis regarding rational empiricist evidential justification and thus of any version of epistemic evidentialism that rests on it.¹⁷ However, Bishop departs from typical externalist and Reformed epistemological approaches to denying or modifying this kind of evidentialism, since he is largely concerned with the *rationality* of faithful believers, not of the *per se* worth of the beliefs held. Here, Bishop is concerned (I think, rightly) with the more 'agency-focused' notion of entitlement, as opposed to externalist, 'propositional-attitude-focused' theories about justification.¹⁸ Moreover, even in so far as evidentialist accounts themselves attach an 'evidentialist imperative' to justification, he notes that most discussions understand it as 'a principle about the proper use of our indirect control over the formation, retention, and revision of our beliefs' – that is, about the aetiology and maintenance of our beliefs.¹⁹ Bishop, however, claims that 'the evidentialist imperative should be construed as applying also – and, indeed, primarily – to our direct control . . . over what we take to be true (and with what weight) in our practical reasoning'.²⁰

For our concerns here, it is sufficient to note that Bishop maintains that there is good reason to suppose that classical theism is *evidentially ambiguous*, such that 'the question of God's existence is left open – perhaps even necessarily – because our overall evidence is equally viably interpreted either from a theistic or an atheistic perspective'.²¹ This is clearly not an uncontroversial claim, and there are parties of both theist and atheist persuasions that would vehemently

reject it. However, Bishop counters that ‘the fact that, after centuries of debate, equally intelligent and well-informed thinkers continue to disagree about how to assess the evidence for and against God’s existence does suggest . . . that the evidence on this question is indeed ambiguous’.²² If this is right (and it seems plausible to think it at least might be), then any account of faith resting on a version of ‘rational empiricist epistemic evidentialism’ as described above would represent a kind of irrationalist fideism, since no reflective faith-believer would be justified in holding a belief in the existence of the God of classical theism and thus would not be entitled to take the proposition ‘God exists’ to be true in her practical reasoning. Further, given the moral-epistemic link principle, such a taking-to-be-true would also represent a moral failure (or, at the very least, would lack moral justification). Thus, Bishop must show that there are rationally legitimate ways of believing (or practically committing oneself to beliefs) that go beyond what the evidence supports.

Bishop’s suggestion for saving the rationality of this ‘venture’-component of faith is to take a page from William James’s playbook. He suggests that, in forced situations of genuine import in which the evidence is recognized to be ambiguous, one may legitimately believe in non-evidentially caused ways – what Bishop, following James, calls *passionally caused believing*. Passional causes may include such phenomena as emotions, wishes, desires, evaluative beliefs, affections, affiliations, and so on.²³ This understanding of the doxastic venture, however, places two main constraints on the passionate believer. First, the situation must present the believer with a *genuine option*, understood here in the Jamesian sense. That is, it must represent a living, forced, and momentous option for belief.²⁴ If the relevant option is of no significant personal or existential import to the agent, or if there is a way to ‘slip between the horns’ of the dilemma non-passionally, there is no legitimate opportunity for doxastic venture. Second, Bishop notes that ‘doxastic venture can be defended . . . only against the background of a general acceptance of evidentialism’.²⁵ He maintains that ‘options that *can* be decided by rational assessment of one’s evidence fall under the moral evidentialist imperative’²⁶ and are thus not candidates for legitimate doxastic venture. Indeed, Bishop goes so far as to claim that – at least as far as faith-ventures are concerned – the Jamesian doxastic-venture model of faith requires that the faith-believer must *correctly recognize* that the proposition in question is evidentially ambiguous.²⁷

This ‘recognition-criterion’ is of no small import to Bishop’s account, as it rules out certain candidates for faith on the doxastic-venture model. First, it excludes ambivalent believers. Bishop maintains that he is only concerned with ‘reflective’ faith-believers,²⁸ so those subjects who simply do not care about the evidential status of the propositions in question, or those who have simply never asked such questions, are not candidates for doxastic venture in the context of faith: ‘the venturing involved in doxastic venture is *conscious* venturing’.²⁹ Yet not only

must such faith-believers reflectively judge the proposition in question to be evidentially ambiguous, they must do so *correctly*. 'So', Bishop writes,

reflective faith believers who *incorrectly* judge that their beliefs lack support and then commit themselves to their truth will not *in fact* be making doxastic ventures. And those who *incorrectly* judge the truth of their beliefs to be evidentially well supported, will in fact venture beyond their evidence in taking them to be true, contrary to their conscious understanding of their situation.³⁰

These caveats may appear surprising at first, and I do not think they are unproblematic, as I discuss below. But first we must understand just why Bishop thinks these qualifications are important for his account. Since, for Bishop, the moral justifiability of a faith-belief rests on the agency-focused notion of epistemic entitlement, agents who are not epistemically reflective and just 'happen' to believe passionately without any views on the nature of the evidence do not 'do' anything for which they could be considered rational or irrational, and thus epistemic entitlement does not obviously appear to apply. In other words, the unreflective believer doesn't venture anything, since there is no awareness on his part of the risk he might be taking.³¹ Interestingly, the same will be true of the reflective faith-believer who judges incorrectly that he has adequate evidential support for his faith-beliefs. He, too, fails to venture anything, since there is no perceived risk involved in his belief.³² Of course, his belief itself is in fact risky, since unbeknownst to him it goes beyond what the evidence actually supports, but his believing it (or practically committing himself to it) is not.

What about the (potentially hyper-reflective) faith-believer who incorrectly judges that her belief lacks evidential support and yet nevertheless practically commits herself to it? She does seem to take a conscious risk, just as the faith-believer who gets it right does. My suspicion here is that Bishop does not want to count such endeavours as doxastic ventures, since in reality nothing is risked. Although the believer sees herself as venturing doxastically, she doesn't *actually* venture anything – like a trapeze artist who doesn't realize there is a safety net below her. Such an individual might turn out to be a wishful believer or self-deceiver or other type of doxastic 'adventurer' (since she does, in fact believe passionately), but she does not engage in doxastic venture, in so far as there is nothing really at stake.

Finally, the restriction on faith-ventures that the believer correctly identify the proposition in question as evidentially ambiguous is supposed to rule out the possibility that counter-evidential ventures such as self-deception (which would certainly be doxastically venturesome!) count as instances of faith. For Bishop, faith is a *supra*-evidential enterprise (in going beyond the evidence) but not a *counter*-evidential one.³³ Thus, agents who correctly identify the evidence as indicating the falsity of a certain faith-proposition yet try to believe in the face of that evidence may venture doxastically, but not in the sense required for epistemically (and thus for morally) legitimate faith.

As we have seen, Bishop's claim is that practically committing oneself to certain faith-propositions that go beyond the evidence can be epistemically rational, provided they represent genuine options for the agent, who correctly assesses them as being evidentially undecidable. This, of course, opens the door for the possibility that supra-evidential faith ventures may also be morally justifiable. However, Bishop's account of faith is not without its problems. First, it is not so clear that doxastic venturers will always be as epistemically 'in the clear' as Bishop seems to think they are, for the threat of self-deception still looms large – and with it worries about the rationality (and thus, by Bishop's own account, the morality) of faith-believers. That is, Bishop's criteria for what counts as faith might allow for cases that might give us (or should at least give Bishop himself) pause. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Bishop's account appears to rule out certain candidates for religious faith that we might think quite naturally fall under this term. It is to these issues I now turn.

The doxastic venture model is too permissive: worries about self-deception

Before raising a few objections to Bishop's account, I think it important to note that the doxastic-venture model of faith has a distinct advantage over accounts that reduce religious faith to mere passive, affective responses to the divine, or to rational belief on religious matters in accordance with the evidence, since it observes that faith is also something active, something risky, something for which we are potentially *responsible*.³⁴ That is, it rightly moves faith towards the realm of the *practical*. Nevertheless, Bishop appears to want to have his cake and eat it too by entrenching that move firmly in the realm of the doxastic. Indeed, he ultimately still understands faith as resting on *epistemic* rationality. Yet it is not clear that this really reflects what we take to be special and significant about religious faith. Further, it is precisely this requirement that might get the account into trouble on its own terms.

The nature and scope of self-deception is itself philosophically contested, but it is generally agreed that it represents a paradigm case of epistemic irrationality, in which subjects acquire or maintain a favoured belief in the face of strong evidence to the contrary.³⁵ There are a few ways in which self-deception might appear to threaten Bishop's account. First, one might worry that, in a Pascalian-type manoeuvre, one could undertake a self-deceptive project for prudential (i.e. passional) reasons aimed at putting oneself in an emotional (or other passional state) that is likely to induce religious belief in oneself.³⁶ However, Bishop explicitly claims that the doxastic venture he has in mind does not apply to cases in which subjects undertake self-deception as a means of passionately acquiring a belief:

Engaging in such self manipulation is not doxastic venturing . . . Intentionally inducing passional causes for a certain belief in order to satisfy an essentially non epistemic desire

to have that belief . . . does not amount to doxastic venture on my present account.
 On my present account . . . there can be occasion for doxastic venture only if there is
 already a passionately caused tendency to hold the proposition concerned to be true.³⁷

Thus, Bishop adds in a footnote, Pascalian endeavours 'are not *themselves* to be identified as doxastic ventures', though they may 'bring about *the occasion for* doxastic venture' if Pascal's strategy works and a theistic belief has thereby been passionately induced.³⁸

Of course, although Bishop may exclude Pascalian strategies aimed at acquiring passional beliefs from themselves counting as *fully* doxastic ventures, it is not so clear that he can rule them out as *sub*-doxastic ventures (which he also considers genuine faith-ventures), where subjects meet all the conditions required for fully doxastic venture, with the exception that they do not hold the relevant faith-proposition to be true.³⁹ Thus if the Pascalian strategist aims for the passional acquisition of a religious belief, e.g. in the existence of God, and does so while correctly judging that the evidence cannot provide an answer on this question, then she will be venturing sub-doxastically. Of course, if we think (as we said above) that self-deception is a form of believing (or attempting to believe) *in the face of evidence to the contrary*, then this kind of Pascalian case might not even count as self-deception, and may even be admitted by Bishop's account as an epistemically rational undertaking which aspires to bring about the occasion for a fully doxastic venture.⁴⁰

But the real problem for Bishop is not that some Pascalians may rationally come to hold passional beliefs which then become candidates for fully doxastic venture, but rather that some may *irrationally* do so. Indeed, given Bishop's epistemic criteria for fully doxastic faith-ventures, the aetiology of one's passional beliefs doesn't appear to matter at all to the determination of whether one's faith-venture is justified or not. All that matters is that I hold a particular faith-belief passionately, judge correctly that it is in principle evidentially undecidable, and then commit myself to its truth in my practical reasoning. If this were the whole view, then, it would seem that non-evidential beliefs, *however* they may be arrived at – e.g. via wishful thinking, self-deception, hypnosis, electroshock therapy, a bump on the head, and so on – may all be candidates for doxastic venturing, so long as they are held 'passionally' and paired with a correct judgement about their evidential ambiguity.

However, Bishop *is* concerned that the epistemic conditions he places on doxastic venturing do not, by themselves, go far enough to allow for *moral* justifiability. He thus adds two moral conditions, in order to rule out cases in which one practically commits oneself via doxastic venture to, e.g., the existence of Nazi gods. First, one's 'non-evidential motivation for taking p to be true [must be] of a morally acceptable type', and second, p itself must 'conform with correct morality'.⁴¹ Concerning the current worry regarding the aetiology of our passional beliefs, it will be the first of these two conditions that most explicitly interests

us here. Bishop does not give specific examples of what he takes to be ‘morally unacceptable’ motivations, claiming only that ‘we do clearly recognize that some non-evidential motivations are morally honourable, and others dishonourable’ and assuming that some general theory of virtuous non-evidential motivations is feasible.⁴² Nevertheless, perhaps we can venture an answer on Bishop’s behalf. It is unlikely that the general *class* to which a particular motivation belongs (e.g. wish, desire, evaluative belief, affection, affiliation, emotion, etc.) will determine a motivation’s virtuousness or lack thereof, rather this will more likely have to do with the content or object of the motivation. For example, religious beliefs passionately motivated by Nietzschean *ressentiment*, a desire to dull the pain of existence, or an instinct to exclude a certain class of people might be considered vicious, whereas those motivated by the evaluative belief that ‘it would be good – supremely good, perhaps the only way the supreme good could be realized – if that faith-proposition were true’,⁴³ or by a desire to open oneself up to experiences that contribute significantly to human flourishing, might be more virtuous. Yet these considerations do not directly respond to the aetiology worry above. It may rule out those passional beliefs acquired via wishful thinking or self-deception that are viciously motivated, but what about those that are virtuously (or at least non-viciously) motivated? Is the religious faith-believer entitled to practically committing herself to the truth of those beliefs?

Again, we might respond on Bishop’s behalf by claiming that the agent is epistemically entitled to such faith-beliefs, so long as she correctly judges the truth of those beliefs to be evidentially ambiguous – and not before. An agent who (via a non-vicious motivation) acquired the passional belief that God exists via a self-deceptive project, which involved her coming to believe *in the face of* what she took to be strong counter-evidence, is not epistemically entitled to her belief or to any ventures that she should undertake with it, since this would be a counter-evidential venture, and as we have seen Bishop excludes counter-evidential ventures from faith-ventures. If, on the other hand, the agent *changes her mind about the force of the evidence*, concluding now that it is ambiguous, it would seem that, on Bishop’s view, she is now (and only now) entitled to continue to take her passional beliefs to be true, since she is no longer believing counter to the evidence. Thus, what was once an irrationally (counter-evidentially) held passional belief might now be a rationally (supra-evidentially) held one.

However, this leaves room for a kind of self-deceptive project that – while not itself presuming to be a faith-venture – could be employed *in the service of faith*. Consider the case of a hyper-reflective epistemologist, call her Hildy. Hyper-reflective Hildy was raised in a Mennonite community by Mennonite parents. She went to Mennonite schools, attended (and still attends) Mennonite churches, and so on. Thus, Hildy’s ‘default’ belief, so to speak, has always been a passional belief in the existence of God, one motivated by her upbringing in and her strong affiliation with the Mennonite culture. However, Hildy has always had an

inquisitive nature, and when she goes off to university she decides to study philosophy. Hildy studies the major arguments for the existence of God, and to her surprise finds them relatively unconvincing (especially once she hears the objections to them). She also studies several of the ‘great atheists’, and finds their arguments significantly more persuasive. After years of study and careful consideration, she comes to the considered conclusion that the evidence points markedly against the existence of God. Yet she cannot shake the feeling that God exists – and in her private life, she still attends church and takes this belief to be true in her practical reasoning. Further, she reflectively believes that certain human goods could only be attained if God were to exist (but also that this fact does not itself provide sufficient evidence for God’s existence). We can imagine Hildy running across Bishop’s *Believing by Faith* – or perhaps, as bright as she is, glean the point directly from James himself. She realizes that were she able to conclude sincerely that the evidence for God’s existence is essentially ambiguous, not only could she continue to commit herself to her passionate belief with good conscience, she could even be said to exercise the virtue of *faith*, a trait any theist would think it good to have.⁴⁴

Here, we can imagine Hyper-reflective Hildy embarking on a kind of self-deceptive Pascalian enterprise, aimed at getting herself to believe *that the evidence is ambiguous*. Yet to do so requires her to commit a kind of ‘epistemic sabotage’ in order to bring about a change in her evidential standards (or at least in what she takes the evidence to show). In the service of this ‘irrational project’, then, there are several strategies she may adopt. She may selectively attend to pro-Jamesian-flavoured texts and ignore those likely to raise objections. She may filter through the literature, taking extensive notes on those arguments more likely to confirm her desired belief that the evidence is ambiguous and neglecting to write down any other arguments. She may be careful to try to attend anti-evidentialist conferences and thereby avoid opponents of her favoured view. She may even take on as her thesis adviser a known non-evidentialist. Now although this might require Hildy to be a little less hyper-reflective than she was in her earlier academic days, she may see this sacrifice as being well worth the reward.⁴⁵ And by habituating herself to such unreflective ‘scholarly’ techniques, she may in fact successfully undermine her earlier epistemic standards, now characterizing the former as having been part of a ‘learning process’ and thereby coming to believe that God’s existence is by its very nature evidentially undecidable.⁴⁶

In such a case, Hildy will hold a passionate belief that God exists, motivated by a perfectly virtuous affiliation with the Mennonite tradition (together with an evaluative belief in the value of faith), and will (assuming Bishop is right) correctly judge that this belief is undecidable on the evidence. She is, then, perfectly epistemically entitled by Bishop’s standards to embark upon a doxastic venture and to count as believing by faith, despite her having arrived at her (correct) judgement about the status of the evidence in an epistemically irrational and

irresponsible manner. Yet, in this case, it would seem odd to say that Hildy is *entitled* to her passionate belief, since she arrived at this ‘entitlement’ via self-deceptive means.⁴⁷

Now, the case of Hildy may (as with many philosophical examples) appear contrived, but it shows that there might be something missing in Bishop’s account of faith. If the aetiology of one’s passionately held beliefs doesn’t matter, then it seems that self-deceived (or merely epistemically lucky) agents may be able to count as having faith, despite having arrived at their beliefs via epistemically suspect means. Thus, Bishop’s account may seem too permissive on this point. If having faith has something to do with epistemic virtue (as it appears to on Bishop’s account), then we should hope that it cannot be arrived at via epistemically vicious means.

The doxastic-venture model is too restrictive: unreflective and disagreeing believers

Whereas the above considerations point to the possibility that Bishop’s doxastic-venture model of faith fails to rule out cases he himself might want to dismiss, I now want to consider the possibility that the account ends up being too restrictive. As we saw above, believers who have not reflected on the status of the evidence for their faith-beliefs appear to be excluded from the doxastic-venture model as elucidated by Bishop. Now Bishop himself admits that he is intentionally restricting his discussion to the realm of ‘reflective faith-believers, who are interested in the question of whether they are morally justified in taking, or continuing to take, the relevant faith-beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning’.⁴⁸ He also notes that ‘[N]ot all faith-believers are “reflective”, of course’,⁴⁹ and he even concedes that perhaps not every faith-believer *ought* to be (or become) reflective: ‘a life of “simple faith” may (under some conditions, anyway) be at least blameless and even fully virtuous’.⁵⁰ Yet it is not clear here what ‘simple faith’ would look like on Bishop’s view. From the outset, he has assumed that faith must essentially involve more than mere belief, since otherwise it would be merely passive and receptive. However, if faith does involve more than just believing certain propositions – if it involves a *practical* commitment to those propositions – then questions of moral justifiability would appear to apply to reflective and unreflective faith-believers alike, and Bishop basically admits as much.⁵¹ But as we have seen above, given that Bishop endorses the moral-epistemic link principle, it is by no means clear that unreflective faith-believers believe with epistemic entitlement, even if it turns out their faith-beliefs themselves might be, e.g., the result of a reliable belief-forming process or otherwise have epistemic worth. So it is hard to see how such ‘simpletons’ could be said to have faith on Bishop’s view, unless the kind of faith he has in mind is either (a) of a completely different kind from that of reflective faith-believers, or (b) of the same

kind but somehow epistemically (and thus morally) less praiseworthy. If the former, then Bishop owes us an account of how 'simple faith' is also venture-some (and thus counts as genuine faith). If the latter, then it is unclear how the simpleton's faith exhibits true virtue.⁵²

Take an example that Bishop himself discusses: the case of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham was surely not an analytic philosopher, let alone an epistemologist. It is doubtful whether he had any sophisticated philosophical views on the nature of the evidence.⁵³ But perhaps this is not necessary for reflective doxastic venture. Perhaps all that is required is an 'inkling' or a 'dim awareness' that one is believing beyond (but, importantly, not counter to) one's evidence when one commits oneself practically to the truth of certain faith-propositions. Or perhaps it is enough that the evidence actually *be* essentially ambiguous, regardless of what Abraham believes about it, so long as he himself refrains from making a judgement one way or another regarding the evidence.⁵⁴ But in either case, it is difficult to see how Abraham makes a willing, epistemically entitled venture on Bishop's model. If he is only 'dimly aware' that his commitment outstrips his evidence, it is not clear he is epistemically entitled to make this 'leap'. If he makes no judgement regarding the evidence whatsoever, he is unreflective, and it is unclear how he ventures anything willingly.

Interestingly, it is not just unreflective believers who run into problems. Reflective believers who do not arrive at the same conclusions as Bishop about the essential evidential ambiguity regarding, e.g., the existence of God (or other 'fundamental principles' of religious doxastic frameworks) do not appear capable of faith either. Of course, if Bishop's view regarding the ambiguity of the evidence for religious belief is incorrect, then it appears that no one ever justifiably makes a supra-evidential doxastic venture in the realm of religious belief, and that we must be error theorists about faith. On the other hand, if Bishop's view is *correct*, and such fundamental framing principles are 'essentially evidentially undecidable',⁵⁵ then a theist of the Reformed-epistemology persuasion who thinks (*pace* Bishop) that these fundamental theistic beliefs are properly basic, or a struggling intellectual theist like Hyper-reflective Hildy who concludes that the evidence against the existence of God outweighs the evidence for it, are incapable of having faith, since they have incorrect beliefs about the nature of the evidence. The former ventures without knowing it, and the latter ventures in the face of the supposed evidence – neither of which constitutes epistemically entitled belief for Bishop. Indeed, it would seem that many figures in the history of philosophy⁵⁶ are excluded from counting amongst the faithful in this respect, including all those philosophers and natural theologians who have at some point claimed that there are persuasive demonstrative arguments for the existence of God, since they would be likely to deny that God's existence is evidentially ambiguous. The doxastic-venture model appears to rule out those figures like Abelard or Meister Eckhart, who thought that the teachings of Scripture and Christian doctrine were

compatible with (or even, in the case of Meister Eckhart, equivalent to) the doctrines of the ancient philosophers, which can be arrived at through the exercise of reason and are thus rationally defensible.⁵⁷ It would appear to exclude all those strands of Islam, which claims that the Signs of Allah are found everywhere in Creation,⁵⁸ where failure to acknowledge these Signs as evidence of God's existence is understood as precisely what it is to *reject faith*.⁵⁹ At any rate, to say that none of these individuals are persons of faith seems woefully unfair.⁶⁰ Thus we might be inclined to think that Bishop's theory of reflective faith is not inclusive enough. To be sure, no one said faith should be easy, but neither should it be so restrictive as to make it more difficult for a reflective evidentialist to pass through the eye of a needle than to be counted amongst the faithful.

Conclusion

Given what we have said above, Bishop's account of faith, while promising, ultimately appears lacking in two respects. On the one hand, it is too weak: it allows that believers who have arrived at their passional beliefs via epistemically irresponsible and even irrational means can still be said to have faith. On the other hand, it is too strong: it rules out certain individuals whom we might be inclined to include among the faithful. For these reasons, although I think Bishop's doxastic-venture model represents a superior account of faith to purely doxastic models, it cannot do everything that we require of a theory of faith. My own view is that Bishop does not go far enough in distancing himself from doxastic accounts. I submit that a model which attempts more completely to dislodge the role of belief as a necessary component of religious faith may better correspond both to what we actually mean by the term 'faith' in many religious contexts and to something that we may strive for in our religious lives. While we might agree with Bishop that faith is importantly volitional, we might do better to deny that the venturing involved in faith is purely doxastic. Indeed, perhaps faith is not so much a doxastic venture, but rather a kind of *imaginative adventure*, one which aims at sincere, practical engagement with a religious tradition, even if that engagement lacks full-blown belief, passional or otherwise. But that is a story for another day. For now, we must perhaps agree with pop star George Michael that we ought to 'reconsider our foolish notion' that faith has centrally to do with belief and 'wait for something more'.⁶¹

References

- BISHOP, JOHN (2002) 'Belief as a doxastic venture', *Religious Studies*, 38, 471–487.
 (2005) 'On the possibility of doxastic venture: a reply to Buckareff', *Religious Studies*, 41, 447–451.
 (2007) *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
 (2010) 'Faith', in E. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition). URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/faith/>.

- CLARK, KELLY JAMES & VANARRAGON, RAYMOND J. (eds) (2011) *Evidence and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- JAMES, WILLIAM (1956) *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, and Human Immortality* (New York: Dover).
- MICHEL, CHRISTOPH & NEWEN, ALBERT (2010) 'Self-deception as pseudo-rational defense of belief', *Consciousness and Cognition*, **19**, 731–744.
- SCHÄLIKE, JULIUS (2004) 'Willensschwäche und Selbsttäuschung', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, **52**, 361–379.
- WOOD, WILLIAM (2013) *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin, and the Fall: The Secret Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Notes

1. John Bishop's article on 'Faith' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* lists at least seven broad categories, each of which has its own subcategories and variations. See Bishop (2010) for his complete list.
2. *Idem* (2007), 20.
3. *Ibid.*, 23.
4. *Ibid.*, 41.
5. Bishop allows that some faith ventures may be *sub doxastic*, in the sense that he thinks it possible to give a potential belief full weight in one's practical reasoning without actually holding the belief to be true. However, his real interest lies in demonstrating the possibility of '*fully doxastic venture*', where 'the venture not only takes a faith proposition to be true beyond the evidence with full weight in practical reasoning, but also actually holds it to be true' (*ibid.*, 119). Indeed, he seems to think that fully doxastic venture has certain advantages over merely sub doxastic venture. I return to a discussion of the relationship between sub and fully doxastic ventures below.
6. *Ibid.*, 25.
7. *Ibid.*, 41, emphasis removed. Bishop notes that the wider capacity 'to decide what propositions to take to be true in our reasoning' is not, properly speaking, doxastic. Nevertheless, this capacity as exercised in the narrower sense cited here, he thinks, 'is properly described as doxastic'.
8. *Idem* (2002), 472.
9. *Idem* (2007), x.
10. *Ibid.*, 24.
11. I am using the term 'irrational' here as Bishop does, namely as an 'agency focused notion', not a 'propositional attitude focused notion' (cf. *ibid.*, 56–57). Charges of irrationality attach to agents for believing or acting in certain *ways*, not to the attitudes or actions they adopt. There are no 'intrinsically irrational' propositions or acts – only irrationally believed propositions and irrationally performed actions. I will return to this point later.
12. *Ibid.*, 106.
13. *Ibid.*, 8.
14. *Ibid.*, 21.
15. *Rational empiricist evidential practice* is defined here as 'the evidential practice that assumes deductive and inductive standards for inferential evidential support, and allows as basically evident only incorrigible and self evident truths ... and truths evident in sensory perceptual experience under "normal" conditions' (*ibid.*, 24, 67).
16. See *ibid.*, 68.
17. See, e.g., Clark & VanArragon (2011) for a recent collection of essays on the relationship between evidence and religious belief.
18. Bishop (2007), 60.
19. *Ibid.*, 63.
20. *Ibid.*, 64.
21. *Ibid.*, 1.
22. *Ibid.*, 71.
23. See *ibid.*, 114. Bishop wants to keep this category reasonably broad, so as to include most if not all non evidentially motivated beliefs, such that passionate causes need not always be non epistemic causes (at least from an externalist point of view).
24. See James (1956), 3.

25. Bishop (2007), 123.
26. *Ibid.*, 129.
27. See *ibid.*, 107.
28. See *ibid.*, 108.
29. *Ibid.*, 107.
30. *Ibid.*, 108.
31. One might claim here that such agents could be labelled as 'irrational' or at least 'untitled' to their beliefs, in so far as they are perhaps epistemically *negligent*. That is, as potentially rational believers they 'ought' to be sensitive to questions regarding the evidence, and their lack of concern reflects a shortcoming or deficiency not found in rational believers. However, this would only strengthen Bishop's point that such believers should not be considered candidates for doxastic faith ventures.
32. It is not clear here whether Bishop intends each of the cases mentioned above to involve passional belief. If he does, then the belief of the subject who takes himself (incorrectly) to be evidentially justified might simply be overdetermined. In any case, there is still no venturesome risk involved.
33. See Bishop (2007), 135.
34. For those '*sola gratia*' fideists who worry about the potentially Pelagian implications of such a view, it is important to note that to maintain that faith is something one does and is accountable for can easily be paired with an account of grace, e.g., as that which enables (or endows one with the capacity for) the exercise of that faith.
35. Much of the debate in the self deception literature revolves around the question whether 'garden variety' self deception may be said to be intentional or not. This is not necessarily germane to our discussion here, though if it turns out (as I maintain elsewhere) that self deceivers may be said to deceive themselves intentionally, then the self deceiver will end up being even more strongly responsible for her irrationality than on a non intentionalist understanding of self deception. For a plausible argument that self deception requires believing in the face of the evidence, see Michel & Newen (2010).
36. Of course, Pascalian cases are not generally like this. Rather, one aims at inducing a change in one's *epistemic standards*, which would allow one to attain the necessary evidence for religious belief, thereby inducing a theistic belief for what the agent now takes to be good reasons. (I discuss a related Pascalian move in the case of 'Hyper Reflective Hildy'.) However, I do think some self deceivers may go in for wishful thinking or passional belief, as described above, and it is only this kind of case that Bishop explicitly addresses.
 One might further claim that Pascalian cases do not represent instances of 'garden variety' self deception if they represent self deception at all. I am inclined to think that at least some such cases fall under the concept of self deception, but if the reader prefers to substitute another term (like 'self induced deception') for 'self deception', he or she may do so. For a lengthier discussion of Pascal and self deception, see Wood (2013).
37. Bishop (2007), 119.
38. *Ibid.*, n. 31.
39. See *ibid.*, 22, 24.
40. This case should not strike one as all that far fetched especially among hyper reflective subjects like analytic philosophers since it may be more difficult for such subjects to continue to believe a proposition passionately once they have admitted the evidence for it to be essentially ambiguous. As Bishop notes, the passional causes for faith propositions must be able '*to sustain belief even though the believer recognizes that the truth of the proposition believed lacks adequate evidential support*' (*ibid.*, 115). But for someone who once believed non passionately on what she thought was good evidence, or someone who believed passionately but recently became reflective, this may simply be too psychologically taxing. Thus, such an individual may have to engage in sub doxastic venturing in order to get themselves into a position to engage in a fully doxastic venture.
41. *Ibid.*, 165.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, 120. Bishop uses this as a possible motivation for sub doxastic venture, but we can imagine it also motivating fully doxastic venture.
44. This might be what tips the subject's scales in favour of deceiving herself along the lines of the James Bishop route, as opposed to that of evidentialism. It might also simply be less psychologically

taxing to come to believe that the evidence is ambiguous, given her current belief that the evidence supports atheism, than to believe that the evidence supports theism.

45. Actually, in some sense she must be somewhat more careful concerning what she regards as evidence and what not. But regarding her own motivations, she must obviously pay less attention if her self-deceptive enterprise is to succeed.
46. Success in such self-deceptive projects often hinges on purely contingent psychological and environmental factors. Assuming Hildy is not so hyper-reflective as to be unable to habituate herself to untoward scientific practices, and assuming no catastrophically damaging counter-evidence is able to make its way in from outside, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Hildy's self-deceptive project might be successful. For a more detailed account of self-deception as a project of epistemic sabotage, see Schälike (2004).
47. Of course, Bishop could perhaps remedy his account by adding an additional requirement regarding the aetiology of either the faith-belief in question or the belief regarding the nature of the evidence (or both), but it is easy to see that things appear to be getting very complicated for the reflective faith-believer.
48. Bishop (2007), 49.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, 50.
51. See *ibid.*, 49–50.
52. Bishop might respond here that the moral-epistemic link-principle only applies to those who reflect on their beliefs and that simple faith gets its moral justification from other sources. But this double standard might make it appear that it is *not* better to be 'Socrates-dissatisfied' than an ignorant or otherwise unreflective believer satisfied. Indeed, if unreflective faith turns out to be easier, then it might provide me with a motivation to keep myself epistemically in the dark regarding religious propositions.
53. If anything, Sarah seems more a proponent of strict evidentialist standards than Abraham, as indicated by her laughter when told she would bear a son in her advanced age.
54. Interestingly, what Bishop himself says regarding the Abraham case makes no reference to what Abraham himself actually judges regarding the evidence: 'What requires venture essentially beyond his evidence', he writes,

is Abraham's taking it to be true that the living God has his will revealed in an inner voice that commands the sacrifice of Isaac . . . Abraham could not have had evidence that would have enabled him to make this decision purely rationally. . . . In fact, interpreting any experience as conveying divine messages requires going beyond what could non-question-beggingly be settled on the basis of evidence. (*ibid.*, 172)

55. *Ibid.*, 134.
56. Interestingly, Bishop (2010) claims that Aquinas might be best interpreted as holding a version of the doxastic-venture model because of the latter's insistence that faith involves not mere conviction but rather 'inner assent', which is 'under the control of the will' (*ibid.*, 12). Still, even if Aquinas endorses a form of doxastic-venture model, it may be quite different from Bishop's own model, since although assent may be needed for faith, the volitional act of assent does not appear to be posterior to (or have as its object) a *passional belief*, as on Bishop's account. Further, Aquinas appears to think there is sufficient evidence for the truth of at least some faith-propositions, whether this takes the form of demonstrative proof or divine revelation. Indeed, Bishop himself admits that interpreting Aquinas as a proponent of an evidential-proportion model may also be 'viable' (*ibid.*, 24). In any case, it is not at all clear that Aquinas is not excluded by Bishop's model.
57. Even if we restrict claims about evidential decidability to abductive, *a posteriori* arguments (e.g. the argument from design), it is not clear how those who think it is possible to argue *a priori* for the existence of God would (knowingly) risk anything doxastically, at least on Bishop's understanding of what it is to venture.
58. See, e.g., Qur'an 2:164:

Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and earth, and the alternation of the night and the day, and the [great] ships which sail through the sea with that which benefits people, and what Allah has sent down from the heavens of rain, giving life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness and

dispersing therein every [kind of] moving creature, and [His] directing of the winds and the clouds controlled between the heaven and the earth are signs for a people who use reason. (Saheeh International Translation (latest version, 1997))

59. However, here Bishop might admit that these individuals do not have faith that God exists but maintain that they exhibit faith regarding other framing propositions (e.g. regarding specific divine attributes or commands).
60. I should note here, however, that for Bishop faith seems much less like a general character trait or virtue than a capacity exercised in a particular circumstance or with regard to a specific proposition. Thus, it seems almost inappropriate on his account to talk about a 'person of faith' or a 'faithful theist', unless this merely refers to a person whose religious commitments are undergirded or otherwise framed by cases of genuine doxastic venture. Bishop himself notes in a footnote that 'the doxastic venture model is a model of what is involved in "believing by faith" that is, of what is involved in *a certain kind of cognitive commitment essential to faith*', and that it is thus consistent with models that view faith as a virtue or disposition of character (Bishop (2010), 106, n. 9, my emphasis). But if 'believing by faith' is, as Bishop suggests, necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) for faith understood as a virtue, then the figures mentioned here still will not count as persons of faith, given that they do not reflectively believe by faith.

Still, this is not to maintain that Bishop cannot respond to such worries or that I have not misunderstood the restrictions on his view. It is only to ask for more clarification on whether or not (and, if so, how) these types of believers can count amongst the faithful.

61. The reference is to Michael's 1987 song, 'Faith'. Michael himself appears to endorse a view of faith as something like hope, but I shall save my critique of such a view for a later date. I would further like to thank Jochen Briesen, Dina Emundts, Jeanine Diller, Russell Re Manning, Ursula Renz, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on earlier drafts of this article, and to express my gratitude to the 'Barmherzige Schwestern vom Heiligen Kreuz' at Kloster Hegne for providing the tranquil surroundings that offered me the requisite peace of mind to get these ideas down on paper.