Science and Stance Refinement From Within a Tradition:
Common Sense Realism, Empiricism, Physicalism, and Undogmatic Faith

I. INTRODUCTION: RELATING SCIENTIFIC AND MANIFEST IMAGES

Wilfrid Sellars famously characterized philosophy as an attempt “to understand how things in
the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the
term” (Sellars 1963, 1). At the forefront of Sellars’ own attempts to reach a coherent general
view of reality and our place in the cosmos was the question of the extent to which various
views of continually refined common sense (the Manifest Image) can survive integration with,
or even just continue to coexist alongside, a contemporary scientific picture (the Scientific
Image).

The importance of Sellars’ synoptic question is now widely recognized. Aren’t all of us,
nowadays, enthusiastic about science? The content of current science yields an abundance of
reliable information about what reality is like. We acknowledge that we should take its latest
and best results seriously, though perhaps not uncritically. Moreover, there is a great deal of
interest in big questions such as: Does science provide anything like a worldview – some sort
of single comprehensive perspective on reality – or does it leave room for reasonable
disagreement on a variety of outlooks? How does science relate to empiricism, physicalism,
naturalism, scientism or other philosophical perspectives often associated with science? To
what extent is science compatible with faith in God or divine action in the world? Does science
now set the terms for the only sorts of explanatory or causal accounts that are tenable today?
What sorts of pressures or constraints does science put on particular claims that we have come
to regard as common sense, cherished convictions, or even basic values? When our various
beliefs or intellectual commitments do come to stand in tension how can we bring them into
a comprehensible reflective equilibrium?

Science is also a spectacularly successful human activity and the claim that its methods of
empirical investigation are paradigms of rational inquiry is uncontroversial. One great
characteristic of this activity is that it is a collective endeavor of a diverse public. Science is a
cooperative social enterprise in which it has been possible for people to reach a wide level of
agreement in our understanding of nature, despite deep and persistent differences in
metaphysical or religious outlooks. This diversity should alert us not to let Sellars’ use of the
definite articles mislead us here, by incorrectly assuming either more widespread agreement
about what constitutes ‘the’ Manifest Image, or about the kinds of metaphysical claims that
science delivers, than we find. The diversity of views we encounter is not only synchronic but
diachronic. As Sellars recognized, both Manifest and Scientific Images are moving targets –
traditions that develop and evolve over time.

We can face the task of interpreting the significance of a contemporary scientific understanding
of the world for big questions as individuals or as participants in various communities. And
the task looks different depending on the traditions with which we identify. In this ongoing
endeavor to reexamine and improve our epistemological standing, Otto Neurath was correct
that we can do no better than to start from where we are. I have been asked, as a philosopher
of science and a committed Christian, to reflect on how the attempt to come to terms with
what science tells us about reality might look from within the Christian tradition. As a way
into this topic, I shall briefly consider how the notion of a stance, introduced by Bas van
Fraassen (2002), helps us to understand the interactions between science and three attractive
and influential philosophical traditions – physicalism, empiricism, and common sense realism.
I shall then go on to offer some all too incomplete remarks about how similar insights might open new possibilities of rapprochement for those thinking about science and religious commitment from within the Judeo-Christian tradition.

II. SCIENCE AND THREE PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS: PHYSICALISM, EMPIRICISM, AND COMMON SENSE

As Bas van Fraassen (2002) has argued, often continuity within a tradition comes not at the level of doctrinal agreement but in shared sensibilities, attitudes, and values that make up a stance. A stance is, roughly, a sort of posture or approach or policy one can adopt in doing philosophy – a position which, though it might be accompanied by beliefs or other contentful cognitive opinions, consists primarily in holding attitudes, commitments, values, or goals (van Fraassen 2002, 47-48). The notion of a stance can perhaps best be understood by examining several examples of the kinds of clusters of attitudes and evaluative judgments that might arguably characterize core features of various distinctive philosophical traditions.

1. Physicalism

As our first example of how a philosophical tradition might interact with and respond to developments in the sciences, consider materialism or physicalism. Physicalism is, on the face of it, a global ontological thesis (roughly, the claim that everything that exists is physical). What counts as ‘physical’? The physicalist might start by specifying what ‘physical’ excludes: there are no ghosts or fairies or gods (and perhaps no tables, mountains, minds, or persons) or anything at all spooky like that. Or we could point to examples – like sticks, stones, and bones – and argue that everything else is like that. But physicalists often seek to associate the content of their position more closely with science.

Suppose that we define ‘physical’ with respect to what is countenanced by science – perhaps by some such thesis as: reality includes nothing but the entities, properties, and events recognized in physics. Carl Hempel (1969) pointed out that, in attempting to specify the content of ‘physical’ in this way, the physicalist faces a choice between two alternatives, neither of which looks attractive. We could define the physicalists’ ontological commitments with respect to either (a) current science or (b) a future completed science. Defined with respect to future science, physicalism is either trivial or obscure (since we don’t yet know what the content of future science will include). Defined with respect to current science, physicalism is probably false (given the pessimistic induction from the history of science and the fact that current science is recognizably incomplete).

The point here is not that physicalism cannot be advanced as a clearly defined thesis. Nor is my aim to assess the arguments that might be mounted for physicalism or for affirmative answers to questions such as: Has science progressed to the point where, in broad outlines, it entails that the universe is a causally closed system or now not only discloses everything that exists but also that there is nothing else besides? Notice instead that materialists’ views about what counts as physical have been revised considerably over the centuries. Democritus’ ancient

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1 David Lewis defines it as follows:

Roughly speaking, Materialism is the thesis that physics – something not too different from present-day physics, though presumably somewhat improved – is a comprehensive theory of the world, complete as well as correct. The world is as physics says it is, and there’s no more to say (Lewis 1983, 361).
claim that reality consists in nothing but uncuttable atoms swirling in the void has given way to forces, energy, space-time points, quarks and electrons (or other varieties of fermions and bosons), superstrings, loops, and fluctuations in quantum fields. If we reject the ancient theses as scientifically outdated, revise our ontology to include items that are not clearly material objects in any traditional sense of the word, and recognize that even the existence of these might well be discredited by future developments in science, in what sense can we identify and characterize a continuous tradition that persists through such changes? Van Fraassen argues that the tenacity with which physicalism (and its precursor materialism) has been held through major transitions in ontology suggests that the position is better understood as a stance or a policy characterized by a central commitment to being guided by and limited to physics, or to natural science more broadly, in opinions about what there is. Today’s physicalists share with their materialist predecessors a satisfaction with science as complete – as the only tenable source for views on what there is.

Whether we construe physicalism as a stance, as a metaphysical claim tied to current theories, or as a prediction about what science will eventually countenance, these attitudes and claims are neither results of science nor assumptions that are required for scientific inquiry. As with any contemporary tradition, notice that physicalism faces outstanding puzzles. What sort of story can the physicalist tell about mathematics or the status of numbers, which play an indispensable role in scientific inquiry? How do consciousness, subjective experience, and intentionality fit into the picture? What shall physicalists make of the fact that recent cosmological theories concerning dark matter and dark energy suggest that ordinary baryonic matter may make up less than 5% of the mass-energy in our universe? Or why think that we are in a position to know that reality includes only physical entities, when some of our latest theories suggest that our universe may indeed be only one of many others which are beyond the reach of observation? Do we have good reason not to expect that, even in the limit of inquiry, there will not be a multiplicity of empirically adequate but mutually incompatible theories (or perhaps even rival empirical equivalent total theories of the world that differ in their core metaphysical claims)?

2. Empiricism

Other attitudes toward science are clearly available to us. One might be impressed with an abiding sense of awe, wonder, mystery, beauty, or elegance of the universe that is not diminished by scientific discovery (see van Fraassen 2002, 155). The value that we place on scientific inquiry might be accompanied by an openness to the full range of human experience – including, perhaps, the arts, literature, humanities, and religious experience. MIT physicist Alan Lightman, for example, describes being “haunted by the suspicion that what we see and understand of the world is only a tiny piece of the whole” (Lightman 2013, x). One might think that a proper understanding of science should include a critical awareness of its scope and limitations – perhaps a healthy suspicion of metaphysical claims or assumptions that might be masquerading as science.

Van Fraassen contrasts the physicalist’s stance of deference to the content of current science with the empiricist’s admiration for undogmatic empirical methodology (including a willingness to revise in light of experience) and characteristic rejection of certain types of metaphysics (including a skeptical attitude toward explanations that involve postulation of entities that are beyond the reach of experience and resistance to at least some kinds of overreaching factual and evaluative judgments that might underlie claims that the ontology countenanced by current science is more or less complete).
Like physicalism, empiricism faces its own challenges – both external and internal to the tradition. The first aspect of the empiricist’s stance is rather uncontroversial. Aren’t all of us, nowadays, enthusiastic about empirical inquiry? Not everyone, however, shares the empiricist’s distinctive distaste for metaphysics. Is the empiricist simply being overly skeptical? Scientific realists challenge that science delivers more information about unobservables than empiricists have tended to allow. Moreover, because the thesis that experience is the one and only source of information about the world has not been and perhaps cannot be established by empirical inquiry (and indeed risks being formulated as precisely the sort of metaphysical claim that empiricists have characteristically been at pains to avoid), van Fraassen argues that contemporary empiricism is also more defensibly formulated as a stance rather than a thesis (van Fraassen 2002, chapter 2). However, if the empiricist’s allegedly radical critique of metaphysics is at bottom rooted in an expression of values (such as disdain for ontological claims that empirical grounding), what bite can such a critique have against those who hold other values? Moreover, other empiricists might be reluctant to give up so quickly on the task of formulating their view in doctrinal terms and instead want to explore the prospects for offering a bold empirical defense of their thesis. We are biological organisms. Are not questions about the kinds of perceptual and cognitive access we have to the world empirical ones? Almost everyone agrees that experience is a source of information about the world. Why shouldn’t the empiricist couple this plausible thesis with a commitment to critically evaluating the grounds that anyone puts forward for alleged alternative sources?

3. Common Sense Realism

Another sort of tradition, perhaps more closely associated with the Manifest Image than either of the previous two traditions, is the sort of common sense realism championed by the likes of Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and Roderick Chisholm. We might take the core of this tradition to be something like the assertion that one is prima facie justified or rational in believing particular claims about how things seem. We are typically entitled to ordinary perceptual beliefs like: this is a desk, I have two hands, and I have a headache. Such beliefs can be accompanied by a healthy fallibilism rather than dogmatism, sensibly allowing that we can be mistaken and that such beliefs are defeasible and open to challenge. But, unless presented with some good reason to the contrary, we are ordinarily entirely reasonable and within our rights to continue to hold such spontaneously formed beliefs. Under favorable conditions, something similar arguably holds for many of our other properly basic beliefs, including that $2+2=4$ (which is self-evident to rational intuition), remembering that I had breakfast this morning, and propositions such as that the world has existed for more than five minutes and that there are other persons (which are clearly reasonable, but difficult to argue decisively for or against in the face of skeptical challenges).

The common sense tradition also faces challenges. Why has it been so difficult to understand how a scientific perspective fits with our ordinary understanding of ourselves as persons – as conscious, reasons-responsive beings who have beliefs, desires, feelings, and intentions, and as agents who are morally responsible at least for those behaviors that we assume to be free or under our voluntary control? The Scientific Image pruned back Aristotle’s once seemingly obvious doctrine of natural place. Einstein taught us to give up basic intuitions about space and time that may retain some of their grip on us outside the physics laboratory. What quantum theory might require us to relinquish is arguably even more dizzying. Nor do we expect this to be the last time that our intuitions must yield.

Each of these three philosophical stances has its attractions, yet none can simply be read off
of science. They all involve further interpretive judgments, attitudes, inferences, or arguments for views which neither the results of science nor successful engagement in scientific practice demand. For all science tells us about what the world is like, there is much that remains underdetermined – leaving room for legitimate disagreement on many philosophical and religious matters. Science, for its part, is an autonomous activity with its own criteria for success and so, as van Fraassen puts it, science has no need for loyalty oaths, secular or religious (van Fraassen 2002, 174).

III. SCIENCE AND THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Let us now turn to consider the bearing of contemporary science on the Judeo-Christian tradition. The characterizations of physicalism, empiricism, and common sense realism were intended to be recognizable as living traditions that are potentially attractive and reasonable whether one would locate oneself inside or outside the tradition in question. Can we similarly come to understand faith in a way that both religious and secular persons might recognize as intelligible and potentially rational? Science is often seen as a powerful secularizing influence on Western society. When people state reasons for not believing in God or for rejecting religion, quite often, these have something to do with science. What room is left for faith, once science has had its say? Are the attitudes involved in faith inescapably dogmatic in a way that sits uneasily with a properly scientific approach to inquiry? Can Christianity survive as an intellectually open option, given what we have learned about reality? Or has science closed off certain possibilities – such as the claim that there is such a person as God – that are indispensable to the tradition?

Our previous observations about stances also invite us to reflect on whether traditional Christianity has as much stake in the outcome of any particular scientific theory or philosophical disputes in metaphysics as is often assumed. Within the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions there is wide, though by no means boundless, latitude for doctrinal disagreement inside each of them. The attempt to find unity at the level of doctrine has often been a source of division and we are well aware that each of these traditions have factions. For better or for worse, Christians have been especially prone to seek unity in common creedal confessions. Within Christianity, not only are there Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions, but each of these groups houses a variety of further sub-communities. The official doctrines within many of these communities have continued to change and be refined over time and strikingly different theologies of God’s nature, the resurrection, atonement, or the authority of scripture that have been put forward. In large ways and small, even individual members of a local communion will differ at the level of doctrine and practice as well as in attitudes and values. Moreover, Christian intellectuals have held a variety of radically different philosophical outlooks ranging, for example, from idealism to physicalism with respect to God’s creation, from substance dualism to mind-brain identity with respect to human persons, and from libertarianism to determinism on matters of free will.

1. Beyond Shallow Characterizations of Religious Traditions

One of the goals of philosophy of religion should be to understand various religious and non-religious forms of life in a deep way. Yet, much contemporary work in the field continues to presuppose a relatively shallow characterization of the forms of religious response available to us. The standard view has it that responses to God as characterized in classical theism fall neatly into three categories: theism, atheism, and agnosticism. This view categorizes religious responses according to belief, often while assuming a particular set of views about flat-out belief. The idea, at least crudely and as a first gloss, is that there are just three epistemic attitudes
that one can take toward a proposition: One might believe that \( p \), disbelieve \( p \) (believe not-\( p \)), or withhold judgment. Even those who model partial belief in terms of subjective probability often think of theists as people for whom the probability of the proposition that \( God \ exists \) lies above some threshold, typically at least above 0.5. But whether we think about belief in flat-out or probabilistic terms, the prevailing tendency is for philosophers to locate the discussion of the kinds of religious forms of life available to us almost entirely within the realm of belief or epistemic opinion. I suggest that such treatments are leaving much of what is most important to understanding religious commitment out of the picture – with the unfortunate consequence that all too often what it is or can be to have faith is often mischaracterized and significant avenues for authentic religious response (e.g., of a sort that might be suggested in some of Mother Teresa’s writings) are overlooked or misunderstood.

When T. H. Huxley introduced the term “agnostic” in 1869, as a label for someone who neither believes nor disbelieves that \( God \ exists \), it was – for contingent historical reasons – primarily associated with religious dissent. For too long since it has simply been taken for granted that someone who finds themselves with a purely epistemic opinion along these lines will conduct themselves in a way that is, at the level of practical action, equivalent to atheism. Notice, however, just how flat-footed such categories for religious response can be.

Consider Aniha and Femia. Let us suppose that Aniha, along the lines of James 2:19, fully believes that \( God \ exists \) and yet she is entirely indifferent (or even averse) to this state of affairs. Asked to consider the central content of the gospel, she responds coldly: “Yes, but what of it?”—she does “not love [God] at all, nor even try to, nor trust him at all, nor pray to him, nor adore him” (Price 1964, 9). “Such a person,” Price writes, “might as well be an atheist. Perhaps there is even a sense in which he is an atheist, despite the strength of his theistic convictions” (Price 1964, 9). Contrast Aniha with Femia (an imaginary figure drawn from McKaughan 2013 and further developed in McKaughan 2016), who is genuinely open to the possibility that \( God \ exists \). She seeks \( God \) out of noble motives, and strongly desires to come to a full belief that the Christian proclamation of good news is true. After an honest appraisal of the evidence so far, she finds herself, painfully, in a state that falls short of believing that \( God \ exists \). Nevertheless, recognizing that, if there is a God, living in relation to \( God \) is among the highest of goods she continues to entertain this possibility in all seriousness and with a sense of earnestness, urgency, and longing. Femia seeks not just to participate in public worship and prayer but as Price says, “inwardly,” in her own heart and – insofar as she can – she acts as she thinks a person would who strongly believed that \( God \ exists \). Femia has, let us suppose, all of the relevant emotional attitudes, affections, reverent devotion commended among “true believers” that can be had apart from a sense that the evidence renders it likely that there is a \( God \). To her sorrow, she finds herself thinking that naturalism is more likely than theism given her evidence. Can we conclude, ah well, Aniha is a theist and Femia is an agnostic (or even an atheist) and leave it at that?

If we do so, we are missing out on a lot that is important to understanding religious life. Moreover, I think that this way of seeing matters sets up both (a) perceived intellectual barriers to religious commitment that are worth tearing down and (b) tempts some religiously committed people into self-deception, into pretense that the evidence is better than it is, or into regulating their intellectual lives in ways that deliberately flout plausible evidentialist norms. As I shall argue, we better understand the role that faith plays in people’s lives by attending to what Femia has and Aniha lacks rather than the other way around.

People commonly lumped under the “agnostic” (or “atheist” or “theist”) heading can differ widely in their non-epistemic attitudes toward religion. Consider the following real world
examples. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously remarked: “I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view” (Drury 1981, 94). Speaking of the fear of religion, Thomas Nagel writes:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that (Nagel 1997, 130).

We can just as easily imagine people with precisely the opposite affective judgments. These differences in attitudes and values can make a significant difference both in the lives of the individuals who hold them and, as I shall argue in Section IV, in our assessment of the overall rationality of the various ways in which they might choose to live.

2. Can Science Disprove the Existence of God?

None of this is to deny that Christianity has a stake in some specific claims about reality, which either are or are not the case (including such content as God exists, Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus was raised from the dead, and so on). Obviously, many of these claims are controversial and are clearly not disclosed to us by science. For example, Christians have tended to see God’s creation as contingent, a free and generous act by God – an act that God could have brought about in many different ways. From this perspective, empirical inquiry can be valued as an exercise of our God-given capacities to go and look at how God seems to have done this. Science can be can be viewed as a human enterprise aimed at developing an empirically adequate understanding of nature (or perhaps at a representation of reality that is as true and as comprehensive as we can realistically attain apart from God’s special revelation). On this view, science investigates the relations between members of the created universe, not on their relations to God. At least as currently practiced, science makes no mention of God. It does not even attempt to address the possibility that the continued existence of the physical universe depends at every place and moment on the creating and sustaining activity of God or that God has a plan for the world’s redemption.

Views such as these and other content which they presuppose opens the potential for tension with science, either because of a direct conflict or because the commitments go well beyond anything that science itself can establish. But not all of the things that Christians have maintained are equally central and not all of them are equally vulnerable to empirical critique. In the seventeenth century, progressive though they were on the issue of heliocentrism, Johannes Kepler and Rene Descartes took it that the Earth was about 6,000 years old. That is not a reasonable belief for us today and few would see it as an essential part of Christian teaching. I will simply take it for granted that traditions which hope to remain living and plausible options and to continue to attract members in the years ahead have an interest in finding ways of adjusting their outlook and doctrines so as to remain consistent with well-established scientific theories. To those who stand within a religious tradition, a love for truth and commitment to embrace it wherever it can be found should motivate such accommodation.

However, we should not fail to notice several of the other important dimensions along which our attitudes can vary. Even when we restrict our gaze to epistemic opinions there are, at least arguably, interesting differences concerning how resistant beliefs are to changes in opinion in the face of counterevidence that are not captured merely by one’s level of credence or subjective probability. For example, while I might be fully confident that my mother has not
committed a murder and that there is still some milk in the refrigerator, overhearing an offhand comment might be sufficient to dislodge my belief about the milk whereas I might have good practical or moral reasons to require more evidence before changing my mind about my mother (McKaughan 2007). Similarly, we should be alert to ways in which the attitudes of those who stand in the Judeo-Christian tradition might take toward the content of his or her faith, the way that the content is handled, and the role that it plays in one’s life can vary in important ways.

Consider Thomas, a Christian who believes the proposition Jesus was raised from the dead but who struggles with doubt and whose level of confidence in this proposition wavers considerably. Being informed of modern historical-critical scholarship, Thomas also confidently believes that Paul was really the author of Galatians, given that this the predominant view among scholars. When asked to make comparative judgments about his confidence in these two propositions, Thomas unhesitatingly reports that he is more confident concerning the second. However, these beliefs can clearly differ considerably in the extent to which they pervade her life and connect with other attitudes that she has. Giving the former belief up might be far more disruptive in her life than the latter. Suppose that we now put a different set of questions to Thomas, which reveal different features of how he manages his attitudinal web. When asked about what sort of evidence, if any, Thomas would count as counter-evidence to these commitments, it becomes clear that while he is prepared to give up Paul’s authorship relatively easily if relevant information comes to light, whereas Thomas’ commitment to the resurrection, let us suppose, is much more tenacious or resistant to revision. This contrast is not a measure of confidence level but rather of what is more or less peripheral to Thomas’ faith.

The process of rendering unto science what belongs to science is a healthy one. Like anyone else, Christians should attempt to manage their cherished convictions responsibly and to avoid seeking to insulate them from challenges in a facile way. Notice that even with an expanded appreciation for nuances in our attitudinal structure and of the forms of response available in the face of challenges, a tradition in need of significant adjustments might run into problems. Bultmann’s attempt to demythologize the gospel (and a good deal of liberal theology in the twentieth century) sought to reconcile Christianity with science by draining it of much of its ontological content. Yet, a tradition that continues to surrender ever more ground to empirical science might well reach a point at which the wine of faith has been so watered down that even its own adherents can no longer recognize in good conscience what they are drinking as continuous with the tradition of Jesus’ first century followers. Alternatively, those who place their faith in adventurous claims that, however inviting, come to seem increasingly improbable given what science tells us, might eventually find even the flames of hope at last extinguished in the dark night.

There are, then, some legitimate questions about the content of the Christian proclamation that deserve to be addressed head on. For example, faith in God doesn’t make sense apart from the assumption that there is such a person as God and, ordinarily, to deny God’s existence is to step outside of the tradition. In order to have faith or even to hope that God exists, one at least needs to be able to see this as a genuine possibility. One such question, then, is: Can science disprove the existence of God?

Peter Van Inwagen offers an argument for the conclusion that science cannot by itself disprove the existence of God (Van Inwagen 2004). The reason is that any such argument must include at least one premise that science cannot itself establish.

Think about the logical structure that any argument from observable features of the world to the non-existence of God must take. The argument will draw on science to establish that the universe is some particular way (1).
The universe has such and such observable features. But in order get from such a premise to the conclusion that God does not exist, you must assume at least one additional premise of the form (2):

(2) If God exists, then we would not observe that feature of the world.

But that additional premise (2) is not a claim that science itself can establish. You might find the additional assumption plausible on independent grounds (or think that some particular religious tradition is committed to it). But Van Inwagen’s point is that it won’t be the sort of thing that you can read in a top peer reviewed physics journal. It will be a metaphysical claim or theological assumption that is bound to be far more controversial and more open to reasonable disagreement than well-established scientific findings typically are. The evidential problem of evil has that form. But that is why it is a philosophical argument rather than a purely scientific one.

Van Inwagen recognizes that careful systematic observation can disprove (or, if you worry that “disprove” is too high a standard, refute or undermine) certain types of claims about the existence of locally present entities (those which are alleged to occupy space) and some claims about causal processes. You can draw on science to argue, for example, that the crystalline spheres postulated in ancient astronomy do not exist as follows: If the crystalline spheres exist, comets can’t pass through them. But comets do pass through regions of space where the spheres were supposed to be. Therefore, the crystalline spheres do not exist. Similarly, in principle, empirical inquiry can decisively settle such claims as that there is no Bigfoot in any of the national parks, no Loch Ness monster in Loch Ness (we could dredge the lake!), no Luminous ether, no phlogiston, and (sorry kids!) no Santa Claus. In contrast, it is not part of traditional theological claims about God that God is observable or that we can predict the circumstances under which anyone might encounter God. Not only is God supposed to differ from the created universe, God also relates to creation in unique ways: as a transcendent creator who sustains all else in existence at every place and every moment.

Even if a ‘complete’ account of the causal relations between members of the universe were available to us, in the sense that there are no causal gaps and nothing more was required to understand nature on its own, how could science rule out the possibility that God creates and sustains the universe? Moreover, if some such candidate theory were available, how could we distinguish it from a rival version that was nearly empirically equivalent but which allowed for the possibility that God occasionally intervenes in irregular ways?

IV. CAN RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT CONSIST IN SOMETHING OTHER THAN BELIEF WITHOUT SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE?

1. Faith and the Modern Predicament

Now even if you agree that science cannot disprove the existence of God, you might nevertheless think that Christian faith is unreasonable or irrational or in some way intellectually defective. One of the most common reasons for thinking this is the idea that faith is belief without sufficient evidence. All too often faith is held dogmatically in just this problematic

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2 Much of Section IV presents a condensed version of the argument developed in McKaughan 2016.
way. But the objection rests on assumptions about the nature and value of faith that, I shall argue, Judeo-Christian faith does not require.

For the most part, ancient Jewish and early Christian communities of the first century took the reality of God for granted, as a widely shared background presupposition. The pressing questions of faith focused on (a) whether God can be trusted or relied upon to remain faithful in covenantal relations and on (b) the covenantal fidelity, loyalty, and allegiance to God manifest, or lacking, in the lives of individuals and communities. In our time, the question at the forefront of many people’s minds is not “Is God trustworthy?” but rather “Does God exist?” or perhaps some epistemic sibling such as “Is there any good reason to think that anyone anywhere ever encounters God?” For many in today’s world, this is the modern predicament: one cannot very well trust God that God exists when God’s existence is precisely what is in question. Many find it difficult to live with this question while carrying on from within the tradition. Faith in God doesn’t make sense apart from the assumption that there is such a person as God and, ordinarily, to deny God’s existence is to step outside of the tradition.

As the Apostle Paul well knew (1 Corinthians 1:23), the central gospel proclamation poses serious intellectual obstacles for some people, even if they are otherwise deeply attracted to its message and values. News of a dead man rising and the accompanying claim that a God who created the universe, loves us, and is acting to reconcile the world through the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth strikes many as fantastic. In a world with so much suffering and in which God can seem so hidden, to some such a message seems no more plausible than claims about the Flying Spaghetti Monster and no more evidentially well-grounded than Russell’s teapot. Moreover, the prospect of orienting one’s life around such a message is as pathetic as Linus waiting for the Great Pumpkin in the Peanuts comic strip. But notice precisely here just how easy it is for further attitudes and values, beyond one’s sober assessments concerning the likely truth or falsity of such claims, to creep in and what a difference they can make in one’s response.

Consider Femia, who can entertain Christianity as a live possibility, but who finds a thoroughgoing physicalism or naturalism more likely – perhaps significantly more likely to be true – when considering their respective claims on strictly evidential grounds. To this, let us add a bit more to her profile, particularly to her values, attitudes, and affections. Rather than dismissing the possibility with disdain, let us imagine that Femia has fallen deeply in love with Jesus as portrayed in the writings of the Greek New Testament and with God so described. She wants, more than anything, to follow Jesus. This is her “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:45-46). It strikes her that, if the proclamation is true, following Jesus and living in an ongoing reconciled relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a good of nearly incomparable value. She would like to have faith but finds herself in the modern predicament. What avenues for faith, if any, are available to a person who is significantly attracted to a particular monotheistic religious tradition – such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam – but who has profound intellectual doubts about core claims made by those traditions? Is there a way for Femia to respond with faith that doesn’t require believing on insufficient evidence? I think that there is and I will close with some reflections on what faith is, or what it can be, as faith is understood in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

2. The Nature of Faith

Faith is a complex human attitude or posture involving cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects – what one thinks, what one cares about, and what one does. We can characterize three sorts of conditions that will typically be satisfied or roles that will be filled in order for
someone to fit the attitudinal profile of having faith in a person in paradigm instances.

First, having faith in a person characteristically involves some sort of personal response expressed behaviorally in actions and decisions. Faith in God, for example, often involves acts of trust in God, submitting to God’s will, making God’s purposes one’s own, pledging one’s loyalty or allegiance to God, committed to living in obedience to God, responding to God’s commands, and the like. I take Judeo-Christian faith typically to involve two forms of what I call a “reliant relational response”: (1) trusting in or relying on Jesus or God and/or (2) following Jesus or to walking in God’s ways (a commitment to engaging in a life-orienting relationship centered upon loving God and loving one’s neighbors around which one’s behavior, activities, and allegiance is structured).

Second, with respect to the affective dimension, faith in a person arguably requires some sort of positive valuation, “being for,” or endorsement of the relationship with the other person. In order for some subject, S, to have faith in a person, P, S must have some sort of positive evaluative response to P. Propositional faith – faith that something is the case – requires that one cares about whether the proposition in question, \( p \), is true – that S wants \( p \) to be the case or considers \( p \)’s truth to be good or desirable (thinking, for example, it would be a momentously good thing if God exists or if God does such and such). Notice that there are a variety of ways of filling these roles (e.g., S loves God, has relevant affections or attitudes appropriate to the relationship, S values P, cares about S’s relationship with P, S wants \( p \) to be the case, considers \( p \)’s truth to be good or desirable, and so on).

Third, where having faith in a person presupposes claims about reality, it also involves taking a positive cognitive stand on the content in question. Traditional Judeo-Christian faith presupposes some particular claims about reality (e.g., that God exists, that Jesus is the Messiah) and, where it does, faith will involve some sort of positive cognitive stance on the truth of the relevant propositions. Belief, of course, is one sort of attitude that satisfies this condition. But belief is not the only form of intellectual commitment that can fill this role. In addition to S’s believing that \( p \), there are also a number of other candidates that might also fill the role of “taking a positive cognitive stand” (e.g., S believes that \( p \) is likely, S believes that \( p \) is more likely than relevant alternatives, S trusts that \( p \), S accepts that \( p \), S assumes that \( p \), S assents to \( p \), S decides to live by \( p \), S resolves to act as if \( p \) were true, S believes that \( p \) is possible, \( p \) is a live option for S, and so on (D. Howard-Snyder 2013; McKaughan 2013). Indeed, in my view, given certain combinations of affections and behavioral commitments, having propositional faith that \( p \) is compatible with having any non-zero personal probability for \( p \). Hope, which has both an evaluative and a cognitive component, can play both of the needed affective and cognitive roles.

The crucial point to see is that there are many ways of filling these roles. Moreover, these roles, including the cognitive and behavioral components, can be filled by voluntary acts – by decisions, actions, and commitments. Suppose then that Femia decides to follow Jesus and to rely on or trust in his teachings (or in the testimony of the authors of the Greek New Testament). As part of her faith in Jesus, Femia relies on or trusts in Jesus (or the testimonial source) to testify accurately or reliably with respect to the gospel proclamation (which includes the presupposition that \( God \ exists \)). Given that this sort of interpersonal faith (reliance or trust) grounds the content of Femia’s propositional faith (her faith that \( God \ exists \)), Femia can then decide to trust in or rely on (have faith in) God as well.

3. Faith and Rationality
Femia’s faith does not require belief and is therefore not a form of believing on insufficient evidence. However, a more general objection may be lurking here: the charge that Femia’s faith is irrational. But what exactly is the objection here?

Rationality is a goal-oriented notion (Foley 1991, 366) and charges of irrationality most often take the form of criticism broadly concerning (1) what one thinks and (2) what one does. Epistemic opinion and action are subject to very different criteria of appraisal. The relevant goals for epistemic rationality are truth-oriented: the goal of balancing the joint aims of believing truths and avoiding errors, which stand in tension; the search for a well-balanced (van Fraassen 2002, 87) or accurate and comprehensive (Foley 1991, 376) set of opinions. Like van Fraassen, I will construe rationality in terms of permission, since in seeking opinions that are properly responsive to experience, we face choices about under what conditions and how far we will go beyond experience in our interpretive judgments (e.g., ampliative inferences; how much evidence we require of belief, etc.) (van Fraassen 2002, 97).

Typically, an evidentialist policy – roughly Hume’s advice that we proportion our epistemic opinions to the evidence (considerations that bear on likely truth or falsity of \( p \)) – will be the best way for an agent to achieve her epistemic goals. Femia can do no better than to conduct her intellectual life in such a way that she does her level best to have her sober epistemic opinions (e.g., credences or subjective probability judgments) conform to the evidence available to her and to properly investigate what evidence might be available in a manner appropriate to how much any given topic matters to her relative to her other concerns. There are a lot of nuances we could add here, but the point to see is that nothing in Femia’s faith, as I have characterized it above need inhibit this epistemic pursuit. Because Femia’s faith is located primarily in the domain of action and is compatible even with significant doubt, intellectually she is free to follow the arguments and evidence where it leads.

Although there are, of course, many ways in which Femia could fail to be epistemically rational there is nothing inherent in Femia’s faith that leads her into epistemic irrationality. Femia will count as epistemically rational in the main sense that matters provided that she does her level best to form epistemic opinions that track her evidence and to inquire responsibly on things she cares about.

Questions about the rationality of actions (practical rationality), in contrast, are questions about how effectively an agent is promoting her ends. Decisions about how to act are not subject to further epistemic appraisal but are instead proper targets for moral and practical evaluation. By the lights of decision theory, one of the most important ways of thinking about practical rationality currently on offer, practical rationality is a matter of evaluating whether our epistemic opinions (credences or personal probabilities) are combined with our utility assignments (values or what we care about) for a range of various possible outcomes in such a way that effectively promotes what one takes to be one’s interests (e.g., by maximizing expected utility).

The point to notice here, as Pascal realized, is that it just is a fact about standard decision theory that when you have a big discrepancy between the valuations of the outcomes then it can be rational to follow a Christian Way even if you think an alternative such as naturalism is more likely given the evidence available to you. Similarly, if you place a high value on starting and owning your own business or becoming a great author or great artist or having a career in baseball, it could be rational to pursue those goals even if you knew or believed that your own chances of success were very slim. Even if Femia has a low subjective probability for God’s existence and the gospel proclamation, because she places such value on (has such a large utility
assignment for) the truth of the proclamation, her action – following the Way – will come out as practically rational.

Indeed, if Femia values that religious way as a ‘pearl of great price’ (Matthew 13:45-46) in the sense that she values it so highly that she is willing to forego many (perhaps any) other potential goods to pursue it, deciding to follow (or rely on) Jesus can be practically rational for Femia even for very low but nonzero (maybe non-negligible) subjective probabilities for Christianity (see Swinburne 1969; Swinburne 2005; Poston & Dougherty 2007; see also Poston 2009; Buchak 2012; Dougherty 2014).

So, despite Femia’s deep doubts about the central Christian proclamation, there is a form of voluntary response available to her that can constitute a non-trivial form of Christian faith. Moreover, I have argued for several significant conclusions about the rationality of such action-centered faith. First, because nothing requires a person to do anything other than proportion one’s beliefs or opinions to the evidence in matters of epistemic evaluation, Femia’s faith can be epistemically rational even under a wide range of subpar evidential circumstances. Second, given the strong attraction to and value that she places on the message of good news, as long as she continues to regard Christianity as the only live possibility (in contrast to naturalism) – or more generally as the live possibility that she values far above all others – Femia’s action-centered faith can also be practically rational by the lights of one of the most influential contemporary approaches to evaluating practical decision making.

Several features of the argument as I have presented it are worth noting. First, Pascal’s wager is often presented as a choice between courses of action that one might undertake in the hopes of coming to believe the proclamation (e.g., going to mass, taking holy water, seeking fellowship with other ‘believers’). Pascal did not claim that we were so made that believing is ordinarily under our direct voluntary control. But the steps he recommends that you take in order to “stupefy yourself” are clearly aimed at exerting indirect control over belief formation. On the view of faith I am proposing, the acts of trusting and following are constitutive of Femia’s faith and decision theory comes in as a response to the accusation that Femia’s action-centered faith is irrational.

Second, what has been shown is not that her faith is rationally required, for Femia or anyone else. My claim is only the more modest one that according to standard decision theory, in following the Way Femia’s actions are rationally permissible by her own lights. In particular, Femia’s decision to follow Jesus can be practically rational by her own lights despite her having significant doubts about central ontological presuppositions or claims of the gospel (e.g., that God exists, that Jesus rose from the dead).

Third, nothing about evaluating Femia’s actions in this way requires that her values stem crassly from self-interest. Indeed, Femia need not have used decision theory in her own deliberation at all. Again, decision theory comes into the discussion as part of an assessment of the charge that Femia’s action-centered faith is practically irrational. Decision theory is a widely used and influential approach to practical rationality and what has been shown is that action-centered faith can qualify as practically rational by that standard.

Fourth, others can use the same reasoning in application to other religious traditions. In attempting to think through these issues from within the tradition(s) with which I am most familiar (the Judeo-Christian tradition), I wish to leave serious and respectful conversation about the significance of religious diversity for another occasion. I nevertheless welcome the observation that (with perhaps only minor adjustments) the arguments here applied to Femia
could be run, for example, by a Jewish Ayala or an Islamic Aladdin and wish to leave serious and respectful discussion about the significance of religious diversity for another occasion. For better or for worse, similar arguments might also be extended to readers for whom the Great Pumpkin or Flying Spaghetti Monster are living and valued possibilities.

It is thus a mistake to think that faith must be solely or even primarily a response to one’s assessment of the evidential situation. Even for a substantive factual question such as whether or not God exists, disagreement about how likely it is in light of the available evidence may almost entirely fail to locate the salient differences between many of those who choose to follow a religious way and those who do not.

V. EVOLVING STANCES AND THEIR RELATIONS TO EACH OTHER

At a fine-enough grain, our manifest images can be every bit as fragmented and manifold as the individuals and communities who endorse them. Some questions about their relationship with science are thus best addressed in their full particularity on a case-by-case basis. There are, however, also interesting ways in which the various stances considered about might relate to each other. Though each is distinctive enough to be characterizable in separate terms, there seems to be enough flexibility within each tradition so that their core attitudes and commitments are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Empiricists and physicalists alike have often happily combined their outlooks with common sense realism. No one would claim that the untameably wild claims in which Christianity has a stake are simply the deliverances of common sense. However, many of the basic attitudes to be found in the common sense tradition fit well with forms of Christianity which value truth and interpret its core theological claims realistically. Although the robustly anti-metaphysical attitude characteristic of some forms of empiricism might stand in tension with ontological claims of any kind that go beyond experience – whether distinctively religious claims or the physicalist’s insistence that “nothing but” what science tells us about exists – it is certainly possible to combine the empiricist’s characteristic emphasis on experience as a source of information about reality (and rejection of allegedly a priori sources) in epistemology with physicalism in matters of ontology. For much of the twentieth century, empiricism’s principled resistance to metaphysics in science was associated with dismissive attitudes toward religion, especially in the expression given to it by leading logical empiricists. However, it is also possible for anti-metaphysical empiricism to take on a much different significance for religion. An aversion to certain sorts of metaphysics might just as well serve as a basis for resisting various ways of regarding science as complete (maintained either as theses or attitudes). Indeed, if this kind of skepticism is combined with a posture that remains open to religious experience, a fairly permissive view of rationality, and a tolerance of the diversity of opinions in such domains, the empiricist tradition can be quite hospitable to world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While a global and all-encompassing physicalism rules out forms of religion which conceive of God as a spirit or non-physical person, physicalism with respect to human persons or even all of nature (seen as God’s creation) is compatible with monotheism, even if it sits uneasily with some specific doctrines that have been put forward within these traditions.

Like Sellars, I see the ongoing attempt to reflect on how historical manifestations of the

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3 Acknowledgements: This project was made possible through the support of a grant from Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton Religion Trust.
traditions that we care about in any given era relate to the latest and best science as raising
some of the most important and perennial philosophical questions. Contemporary science
presents us with a far reaching and empirically well-grounded, if fallible, perspective on nature
with which all viable philosophical stances and religious traditions must come to terms.
Questions about the epistemic status of this picture, about the extent to which it is ambiguous
with respect to further philosophical and religious positions, and about what sort of constraints
it places on the range of religious interpretations of experience are clearly of broad public
interest. Indeed, in my view, there is a case to be made that scientific activity will itself be best
served if we can develop an understanding of science that is recognizable to a diverse public,
both secular and religious, on which science is clearly characterizable as independent of, yet
potentially compatible with, a wide array of various orientations.

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