

# Disbelief at the Altar Rail: Atheism's Compatibility with Doxastic Faith in God

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I am interested in forming an account of how an atheist (which I define as someone who believes that God does not exist) might have faith in God. Assuming an involuntarist position regarding the nature of belief, I examine whether an atheist could have non-doxastic propositional faith in God, but conclude that this is not possible since it would force an individual to believe that  $p$  might exist and that  $p$  does not exist at (what I call) a first-order level, which is impossible. I then examine accounts of objectual faith (faith in  $S$ ) and suggest that they may offer hope for the faithful atheist. Specifically, it appears that, in certain limited cases that I refer to as *objectual roles*, the object of one's faith may shift (a phenomenon that I call a "transfer") depending on who or what brings a given state of affairs about (so long as the enactor of this state of affairs meets the requirement of the role). This strange feature of objectual faith allows one to have faith in someone or something even if one does not believe in its existence. I conclude by examining how the possible implications of this project may impact Christian theology in particular.

## 1. On Involuntary Belief: Those Who Have It and Those Who Want It<sup>1</sup>

In this project, I intend to address a version of the claim that faith entails belief. Specifically, I am interested in the question of whether an atheist can have faith in God, where an atheist is understood to be someone who assents to the claim that God does *not* exist.<sup>2</sup>

As such, in a way, this paper concerns as much unbelief as belief. Mind you, when I speak of unbelief, lacking belief, or disbelief, I do not mean doubt—or the (perhaps temporary) belief that  $x$  *might not* be true. Even the most ardent believers among us likely remain doubtful about the object of their faith some (if not most) of the time. Further, in this paper, I use these terms (unbelief, lacking belief, and disbelief) somewhat imprecisely, with all of them referring to a belief in opposition to a certain claim. Thus, the unbelief that God exists in this context should be understood as synonymous with the belief that God does not exist. Should one have this belief, there appear to be some practical hurdles to participation in any religious structure in which the belief that God exists plays a crucial role. Within the major monotheisms, for example, one of the biggest problems to crop up from this belief is the problem that *faith* in God is often considered a necessary virtue for religious participation. And yet, if one

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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was presented for the 2022 conference entitled "Knowledge, Belief and Faith" hosted by the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion (BSPR) at Oriel College, Oxford. I am thankful for the critiques that I received there, especially from Michael Scott, and I have integrated them throughout this project. Additionally, I am grateful for my students who provided feedback on a later version of this paper including Grace Anderson, Ella Dangelo, Addison Deskins, Audrey Richardson, Logan Stoll, Sophie Wayne, and Elia Yon.

<sup>2</sup> Notice that, according to this definition, an atheist is not someone who does not affirm the claim that God does exist. In §II, I explore why this will not be possible for the atheist to affirm at a first-order level, but it is still not built into the definition of "atheist" according to this paper.

disbelieves in God’s existence, faith in God (be it the same or different from belief in God) seems out of the question.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we can summarize the problem I wish to address with the following syllogism: Faith in God is necessary for genuine religious participation in (at least) some religions. Faith in God entails belief that God exists. Therefore, belief that God exists is a necessary consequent of genuine religious participation in (at least) some religions.

But if this argument works, we have a major pastoral concern on our hands. What about the person who wants to have faith in God but cannot muster belief in God’s existence? Is there any source of comfort to offer this person? Certainly, this type of person is not too difficult to imagine. We might take, for example, the reader whom Blaise Pascal has in mind in his posthumous publication entitled *Pensées*, wherein he presents his famous wager. Amateurishly summarized, this wager suggests that individuals engage in a bet concerning God’s existence. However, this bet holds disproportionate advantages and disadvantages, which should motivate an individual’s faith in God (a term that he appears to use synonymously with belief in God) (see table one). Pascal reckons that the rational person would conclude that it is better to have faith in God<sup>4</sup> than not, since no temporal gains could rival the possibility of eternal consequences.

	<i>God exists</i>	<i>God does not exist</i>
<i>Faith in God</i>	Eternal salvation	Status quo
<i>No Faith in God</i>	Eternal damnation	Status quo

Table One: Pascal’s Wager<sup>5</sup>

Of course, this argument yields a problem for Pascal. The person who agrees with him here is only left convinced that they *should* have faith in God. But how could they cause such faith to attain? Pascal’s answer is surprisingly pastoral. He writes,

You desire to attain faith, but do not know the way. You would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies. Learn of those who were bound and gagged like you, and who now stake all they possess. They are men who know the road you desire to follow, and who have been cured of a sickness of which you desire to be cured. Follow the way by which they set out, acting as if they already believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally cause you to believe and bunt your cleverness. (Pascal 1932, sec. 343)

In other words, Pascal’s response appears to be that, by engaging in the practices of the faithful, one may actually cause such faith to attain in his life.<sup>6</sup>

But what about those for whom this does not work? Certainly, the religious among us are all too aware of individuals who (try as they might) cannot seem to muster belief in the existence of a God they so desperately wish to be real. Perhaps such anecdotal evidence is not

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<sup>3</sup> Technically speaking, since the atheist in this paper is only someone who holds a strong belief *against* God’s existence, then someone who only thinks it unlikely that God exists would not be an atheist. They might, instead, fall into the category of “practical agnosticism.”

<sup>4</sup> It is unclear for Pascal what such faith is—whether in the mere existence of God or something more.

<sup>5</sup> This figure is admittedly contrived and simplified. Pascal ultimately comes to affirm that belief in a non-existent God should be prioritized over disbelief in a non-existent God, thus altering both “status quo” sections. I have opted for this simpler argument as it is less contested, albeit not without its own detractors (Hájek 2018; 2022).

<sup>6</sup> One might also think of the man in Mark 9:24 who says to Christ, “I believe; help my unbelief.”

as problematic as it seems; after all, we cannot know the sincerity of others. But I suspect that these instances still trouble us. In this article, I examine the topic of faith with such figures in mind. However, rather than asking how one might attain the belief required for faith, I question whether any belief needs to be present in the first place for all versions of faith. Specifically, I am interested in asking whether someone can succeed in having some type of faith in God while remaining an atheist. My motive for doing so is strictly practical. I am simply interested in asking what is *necessary* for faith to attain—keeping a careful eye on whether the atheist who lacks belief might still have faith.

Unlike Pascal's suggestions above, I distinguish faith from belief and try to argue that, though an atheist (by definition) believes that God does not exist, it is theoretically possible that she has faith in God—though I ultimately call into question whether such faith could be considered something like *saving* faith.

I begin by examining so-called “non-doxastic” views of propositional faith, which suggest that belief that  $p$  is not a necessary condition for one to have faith that  $p$  (§II). Faith, according to such views, involves that one “goes along with, acquiesces to, or places their trust in the proposition in question” (Scott, 2020). Rereading Pascal's advice from this vantage suggests that the very act of “taking holy water” and “having masses said” may count as acts of faith in their own respect, thereby eliminating the need for such practices to result in belief.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, I suggest that these accounts do not offer help for the strict atheist since they still require one to hold that God *might* exist. Further, I offer reason to be skeptical of non-doxastic propositional faith in credal religious communities.

In §III, I offer an alternative account of faith (objectual faith) wherein an individual has faith in a person for a specific state of affairs (rather than a proposition). Then, I explore situations where a person may have faith in an “objectual role”—or, faith in the enactor of a given role. In these situations, it appears that the object of one's faith may attach to whomever fulfills a given state of affairs (so long as they may fit within the constraints of this role)—a process which I dub to be a faith “transfer.” This process allows individuals to have potential faith in a series of referents and actual faith in an unknown referent. I note that this is particularly well-suited for doxastic views of objectual faith, though it may still be possible for non-doxastic accounts. Finally, in §IV, I explore the results of this project in the context of the Christian faith. Specifically, I apply the examples from the previous section to non-Christians, agnostics, and atheists, suggesting that an individual might attain objectual faith in God while being unaware of it.

## 2. Propositional Faith: Doxastic and Otherwise<sup>8</sup>

The most challenging hurdle for an account of how atheists might have faith in God concerns the traditionally held entailment of faith and belief. This entailment is generally referred to as the doxastic view of faith and is widely discussed in the context of propositional faith (faith

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<sup>7</sup> I find it interesting that Pascal does not mention partaking of the sacraments themselves since they are to confirm grace. Notice that he suggests “having masses said,” not partaking of the Eucharist. This lack (should it have been intentional) appears to only emphasize Pascal's point; the activities *inspire* belief—the purpose of participating is not to circumvent belief.

<sup>8</sup> I owe much of my account regarding the historical developments of non-doxastic propositional faith in this section to the work of Lara Buchak and Michael Scott, though I generally default to Scott's terminology where the two differ (Buchak 2017; Scott 2020).

that  $p$ ). According to it, faith that  $p$  cannot exist without belief that  $p$ . Here, belief that  $p$  may be restated as the assent that  $p$  is true. In this article, I treat belief claims as non-voluntary and certain, unlike *trusting*,<sup>9</sup> which is voluntary, and *thinking*, which is non-certain. As such, I use the term belief to mean a type of seeming that cannot be changed at will (Clarke 1986; Rosell 2009). Importantly, the certitude of belief does not mean that the believer understands the belief to be immune from error—on the contrary, most people would be willing to affirm that their beliefs are such because they might be wrong (as opposed to *knowing*). But, when I say, “I believe that  $p$ ,” I mean, “It seems to me that  $p$ ,” and this seeming cannot be changed at will.

We may formulate the doxastic view of faith as such:

(DOX)<sup>10</sup> Necessarily, faith that  $p$  is accompanied by belief that  $p$ .

Of course, if one affirms DOX, it will still be important to distinguish the difference between faith that  $p$  and belief that  $p$ . Perhaps the most commonly cited distinction here is that faith requires a positive disposition toward the proposition in which one has faith (Buchak 2014).<sup>11</sup> For example, I cannot have faith that

1. I have cancer

since my disposition towards (1) will (presumably) be negative.<sup>12</sup> Though I may *believe* that (1), so long as my attitude remains negative toward this proposition, it would be odd to suggest that it would count as faith. Such instances appear to go against the accepted use of the term “faith.” In contrast to (1), I may, however, have faith that

2. My cancer is cured

since I would (presumably) desire this outcome. As such, on one interpretation of the doxastic view, faith that  $p$  entails belief that  $p$  while adding the condition that I must have a positive disposition toward the proposition in question.

Take, for example, the following proposition:

3. My plane is flightworthy.

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<sup>9</sup> This distinction is similar to that used by Snježana Pijević-Samaržija, though she does so while assuming doxastic voluntarism—albeit a version of which is focused primarily on intellectual freedom. Pijević-Samaržija affirms that trust must be epistemically responsible, but this still appears to allow for a degree of volition (Pijević-Samaržija 2018). I would contrast this position with Zagzebski's account of trust, wherein trust plays a role in our acquisition of belief (Zagzebski 2012).

<sup>10</sup> This formulation is offered by Michael Scott. Scott suggests that individuals who held to the doxastic view historically include Aquinas, Augustine, Locke, Evans, and Plantinga (Scott 2020). Nonetheless, I am skeptical of analyses that take this issue back so far. I worry specifically of reading figures like Aquinas, Augustine, and (even) Locke anachronistically. Buchak offers a more nuanced approach for many of these same figures (Buchak 2017).

<sup>11</sup> This solution can be utilized both for doxastic and non-doxastic views of faith, though it is more helpful in the former, since, in this account, one must provide a distinction between faith and belief.

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm and Scott offer a rebuttal of this thesis. However, while I would suggest that their argument succeeds for objectual faith (faith in  $S$ , see §III), it does not obviously work for propositional faith (faith that  $p$ ) (Malcolm and Scott 2021). Buchak's view of positive attitudes, too, has evolved throughout the years (Howard-Snyder and Mckaughan 2022).

According to the doxastic view, faith that (3) entails (at least) the assent that (3) is true. Simply put, if I do not believe that my plane is capable of flying to its destination in one piece (barring some act of God), then I cannot have faith that (3). It should be clear that this view, as it concerns propositional faith, is antithetical to any account of an atheist's faith in God, as it would require one to simultaneously believe in God and not believe in God.

However, the doxastic view has been subjected to severe scrutiny since the end of the twentieth century. Perhaps most influentially, William Alston rejected the doxastic view (Cohen 1995; Alston 1996),<sup>13</sup> instead suggesting that faith that  $p$  only requires an individual to accept that  $p$ —that is, she is committed to using  $p$  as an assumption (whether for theoretical or practical reasoning; Cohen 1995; Scott 2020). Continuing with the above aviation example, we might suggest that (prior to boarding) I have doubts that my plane is capable of flying safely. Still, I decide to board despite these doubts under the assumption that it will.<sup>14</sup> Though I may worry that the plane might crash as a result of its current condition, my action demonstrates that I assume that (3), and thereby, I succeeded in having faith that (3).<sup>15</sup>

The non-doxastic view (sometimes referred to as the weakly doxastic view)<sup>16</sup> has become widely accepted since its initial proposal (Howard-Snyder 2016; 2019). Generally, however, it is suggested that this view requires adding an important constraint to our definition of faith. Specifically, it is commonly purported that faith that  $p$  does not attain if one actively disbelieves that  $p$  (Audi 2011, 73; Howard-Snyder 2013, 316). Thus, even according to the non-doxastic view, I *cannot* have faith that (3) if I am simultaneously convinced that

4. My plane is *not* flightworthy.

Instead, faith that  $p$  appears to require that the subject allows that  $p$  is at least a faint possibility and thereby cannot assent that  $\sim p$  is true.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Though Alston's work perhaps sparked the most interest, it was preceded by Audi (1991) and Pojman (1986).

<sup>14</sup> In this essay, I do not maintain a strong distinction between faith and *hope*. Pojman, for example, suggests that hope is our attitude toward faith propositions (Pojman 1986). For the purpose of this essay, however, I have left such claims unexamined.

<sup>15</sup> On the extremes of this view is that of John Schellenberg who suggests that faith is not even compatible with belief. One is also reminded of Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" (Cross 2003; Kierkegaard 1983, 17–21; Schellenberg 2012, 132).

<sup>16</sup> The terminology of "weakly doxastic" is used by Lara Buchak as distinct from non-doxastic. Buchak does this to allow for views of faith that require something completely different from a cognitive assent (even if this is only the assent that  $p$  is possible). Though Buchak's three-part taxonomy of doxastic, weakly doxastic, and non-doxastic views may be more accurate, I take it that those views that Buchak sees as non-doxastic fall into a different framework than do the other two. Further, I would suggest that it is difficult to make sense of a truly non-doxastic account that does not allow for the possibility that  $p$ —a point which I explore further in this section. It may be possible to deny that faith is composed of belief, but I am interested in entailments in this essay, not composition (Swinburne 2005). Thus, in line with Michael Scott, I use the terms doxastic and non-doxastic to cover the entire scope of views (Buchak 2017; Scott 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Swinburne's account may serve as an exception to this principle. He suggests that faith simply is the activity in which one engages, although he offers the caveat that one should have good purpose for this activity. It is unclear whether a motivation like Pascal's wager would be "good purpose," or if this purpose requires a reason for the assumptive act itself. In stark contrast to Swinburne, Cross (through his reading of Kierkegaard) suggests that faith requires one to act *in opposition* to an apparent good purpose (Swinburne 2005; Cross 2003; Buchak 2017). I do not entertain such "pure nondoxastic accounts" like Swinburne's might be since it still appears to necessitate some level of belief. After all, if I believe that my plane is in such a condition that, should it take to the skies it will (without shadow of a doubt) crash, and (even though I don't want it to crash) I get in it anyways, this appears to be insanity, not faith.

Here, it will be important to examine why this would be the case since there are two possible explanations. It could be a) that the belief that  $\sim p$  itself nullifies the possibility of faith that  $p$ . But, if faith does not entail belief, it is not clear why this must be. Instead, I would suggest that b) the problem comes from the impossibility of simultaneously believing both  $p$  and  $\sim p$ . But is this really impossible? After all, I can certainly imagine an instance where I hold two contradictory claims in the same instance. I may, for example, believe that

5. My trash is always collected on Tuesdays

while also believing that

6. My trash is not going to be collected today

even in the instance that

7. Today is Tuesday.

Certainly, given (7), we can know that (5) and (6) entail a contradiction.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, we could easily imagine that I am confused about what day it is and thus hold to (5) and (6) without realizing that they contradict each other. Perhaps I (wrongly) believe that

8. Today is *not* Tuesday.

In this circumstance, my acceptance of (8) allows me to remain unaware of the contradiction. Admittedly, one of these claims would be *wrong*—in this case, (8)—but so long as I am ignorant of this, it does not appear to be impossible for me to hold both.

But if I can believe in two claims that entail a contradiction here, could not I also believe that  $p$  is a faint possibility while also believing that  $\sim p$ ? And if this is true, might I have faith that  $p$  while also believing  $\sim p$ ? In short, no. The two instances are disanalogous in that believing that  $p$  and that  $\sim p$  occurs at the same cognitive level (which I will call the first-order level), whereas believing that (5) and that (6) is only possible should one fail to see their entailment created from an additional proposition. If I am oblivious to what day it is, it seems that I cannot hold firmly to (6). Meanwhile, if I believe that (7), I must reject (6). But, I could affirm (5) and (6) while affirming (8) (and not (7), thereby believing it to be any day but Tuesday); I would be unaware of the actual contradiction and could happily (albeit wrongly) believe both (5) and (6). In other words, I am able to believe positions that are actually contradictory by denying a premise that entails their contradiction (even if I am wrong about this denial). However, this does not appear to be the case when we hold to contradictory terms at a first-order level (such as directly affirming  $p$  and  $\sim p$ ). For example, it does not seem possible to simultaneously believe that (7) and that (8).

Since the non-doxastic position requires that I am willing to use  $p$  as an assumption, it appears to be the case that—while I do not have to assent that  $p$  is true—I do need to believe that  $p$  *might* be true. And yet, by assenting that  $\sim p$  is true, I would run into a first-order level contradiction. For example, it is hard to imagine how I could believe that

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<sup>18</sup> I am using the phrase “is [not] going to be collected” as a statement that holds for the whole day—not as a future claim. As such, even if the trash were already collected by the point of utterance, this would not impact the truth value of the proposition.

## 9. The earth might be round

while simultaneously believing

## 10. The earth is not round

since holding (9) requires the possibility of  $\sim(10)$ .<sup>19</sup> As such, believing both (9) and (10) would be akin to believing (10) and maybe  $\sim(10)$ . This provides a promising explanation for why, even in the non-doxastic view, one cannot have faith that  $p$  while also believing that  $\sim p$ .

When this constraint is allowed, a propositional non-doxastic account of faith suggests that—so long as one believes that  $p$  is possible while maintaining a positive disposition towards  $p$ —an individual may have faith in  $p$  without belief in  $p$ .

The upshot of the non-doxastic position regarding the philosophy of religion is difficult to exaggerate. If faith that  $p$  does not require belief that  $p$ , then it is not necessary to believe that

## 11. God exists

to have faith that (11). Specifically, it may be the case that by simply acting as if God exists, one may fulfill a religious requirement for faith in God so long as the actor maintains the possibility of God's existence and sees this existence in positive terms.

Nonetheless, this explanation of propositional faith does not leave a route forward for the faithful atheist since, by definition, an atheist believes that  $\sim(11)$  and thereby cannot have faith that (11) (since one cannot believe that  $p$  and that  $\sim p$  simultaneously). Additionally, the non-doxastic account appears to create its own problems for religious communities by binding credal statements to either hermeneutic fictionalism or bullshit accounts (Rausser 2009; Scott 2020). For these reasons, I see it to be worthwhile to explore other areas in which faith may attain where belief is absent.

### 3. Objectual Faith

In the last section, I examined propositional faith (faith that  $p$ ). In addition to being skeptical about the success of non-doxastic positions in religious contexts, I concluded that even if one affirms this view, it is not possible for an atheist to have faith that (11) since believing that  $\sim(11)$  (which is definitionally necessary to be an atheist) would entail a contradiction at a first-order level. In this section, I will focus my attention away from propositional faith and instead examine objectual faith (faith in  $S$ ).<sup>20</sup> Whereas propositional faith directs its attention to the

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<sup>19</sup> Using “possibility” language is somewhat misleading since the issue is not whether (10) on its own is possible, but whether (10) is possible simultaneously with  $\sim(10)$ .

<sup>20</sup> I am aware that there is some discrepancy as to how the term “objectual faith” is used. Audi uses it as the belief that something has a property, though he allows for the possibility that it is related to faith *in* (Audi 2008). As such, a better term might be preferred. Nonetheless, I have decided to continue using this term since it does a good job at suggesting a type of faith with an object. This version of objectual faith is similar to what Anscombe refers to as *believing x* (as opposed to believing *in x*). On this point, it is worth being clear: where Anscombe writes, “believing in  $x$ ,” this paper uses the formulation “faith that  $x$ ,” and where she writes, “believing  $x$ ” (or “believing  $x$  that  $p$ ”), the paper uses “faith *in x*.” Clearly, these terms are more slippery than many would have them out to be (Anscombe 2008, 2). Certainly, it is not necessary for my argument that my implementation of objectual faith

content of a claim, objectual faith (as its name suggests) is concerned primarily with a person or thing in which one may have faith. As such, I might have “faith in God” rather than “faith that God exists.” I suggest that, unlike propositional faith, objectual faith allows for the possibility of the faithful atheist.

As we did in the previous section, the first course of action will be to separate doxastic and non-doxastic views of objectual faith. Since DOX (as it is construed above) concerns propositional faith, it will be necessary to reformulate it here:

(DOX<sub>[obj]</sub>) Necessarily, faith in  $S$  is accompanied by belief that  $p$  where  $p$  is proposition  $\langle S$  will bring about state of affairs  $q \rangle$

or, we could put this formulation in a slightly more succinct way

(DOX<sub>[obj]</sub>) Necessarily, faith in  $S$  is accompanied by belief that  $S$  will bring about  $q$ .<sup>21</sup>

Notice that, while objectual faith does seem different from propositional faith in that it attaches itself to a person or thing, this formulation of DOX<sub>[obj]</sub> need not require a real distinction here since the important difference between these two can be construed as the type of proposition they hold.<sup>22</sup> The ability to “attach” to an object may successfully distinguish it from propositional faith, but it is not necessary to affirm this point here.<sup>23</sup> The important observation is that, for objectual faith, we have faith in  $S$  only insofar as  $S$  brings about a state of affairs ( $q$ ). For example, I might have faith in my landlord ( $S$ ) that he will collect my rent every month ( $q$ ), but this does not mean that I have faith in him to fix my shower. Further, on a colloquial level, we might simply say that one has faith in  $S$ , such as

12. Jeff has faith in Scott.

However, we should be careful to distinguish these “scopeless” (or “that-*q-less*”) instances from their “that-*q*-ed” counterparts since they, too, appear to rely on some completion of a state of affairs. In affirming (12), it is likely that I mean something like

13. Jeff has faith in Scott that Scott will bring about any  $q$  that is both appropriate and possible.

For example, a parent might leave a nanny with his kids by saying

14. I have faith in you

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be exhaustive for faith in accounts. Perhaps others exist beyond what I explore here. For a further treatment of objectual faith, see Malcolm and Scott (2023, 97–128)

<sup>21</sup> Malcolm and Scott (2023, 130) allow for the possibility of belief *or* acceptance here. In the version that I have put forward here, this difference does not appear to be significant.

<sup>22</sup> Though this is certainly not the case on all accounts. Anscombe suggests that, while faith in  $S$  (what she refers to as believing  $x$ ) requires one to assent that  $S$  exists, one does so in a way that is fundamentally different from the propositional belief they ascribe to on account of  $S$  (that  $p$ ). Faith concerns only the content *offered* by  $S$ —or, as Buchak frames it, believing *someone* that  $p$  (Anscombe 2008; Buchak 2017). This account bears a similarity to the (later) work of Zagzebski (2012).

<sup>23</sup> Though, to be clear, I would be inclined to affirm a real distinction here.

This claim could suggest faith in the nanny to keep the children safe or perhaps to take care of any other appropriate work. But (14) need not imply that this parent has faith that the nanny will do his taxes for him.<sup>24</sup>

Following the lead of propositional faith, we might assume that the more likely route here would be via non-doxastic views of objectual faith. Recall that non-doxastic propositional faith requires only that an individual be committed to using  $p$  as an assumption (whether for theoretical or practical reasoning). We might offer a similar thesis here. As such, a non-doxastic view of objectual faith requires only that one is committed to using the belief that  $S$  will bring about  $q$  as an assumption and that  $S$  might exist. For example, by going to sit on my chair, I appear to successfully have faith in my chair (that it will hold me up). This attains since, when I go to sit on a chair, I lean back in such a way that—should this chair not be strong enough or be improperly built—I will fall. Here, the faith I place in my chair is dependent not on whether I think my chair will support me but on my commitment to using this belief in the sitting act.

Now, someone might suggest that this example demonstrates that non-doxastic objectual faith is just propositional faith with an implicit proposition, such as

15. This chair can support my weight.

However, there are examples that demonstrate more clearly that this is not the case. We might imagine an action movie protagonist being chased by some villain through a construction site. Not having much time to consider his escape options, he jumps onto a somewhat precarious scaffolding unit. It is fully possible that he doubts the scaffolding will hold him up. He may even be skeptical that the scaffolding is there at all (perhaps it is extremely hard to see). However, in jumping onto it, he appears to have faith in the scaffolding—that it will hold him up.

In this example, it is clear that the protagonist is not beholden to the belief that the scaffolding will support his weight (or that it exists). However, it may be worth recognizing that, much like the problem we ran into with propositional faith, it does appear that the protagonist must maintain that the scaffolding *might* support his weight (and that it *might* exist). If he were to believe

16. The scaffolding will *not* support my weight

then it appears that using the belief that  $S$  will bring about  $q$  as an assumption would entail a first-order contradiction (that  $p$  is possible and that  $p$  is not possible). *Prima facie*, the route of objectual faith appears to have the same problems for the believing atheist as propositional faith. If one affirms the non-doxastic account here, the faithful must affirm the existence of the object of their faith.

But one could object to this point, suggesting that the individual does not have faith but instead is just in a state of desperation (and is thereby willing to act even if it is likely that this action will have catastrophic consequences). After all, not jumping would certainly have a negative result. I would suggest another close example. Suppose a carnival worker is being chased through a funhouse. This funhouse is composed of a series of mirrors that form a

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<sup>24</sup> The major exception here is the specific instance of “faith in God,” which can sometimes imply simple belief that God exists. I take this instance to be a rather crass use of the term, and one that should be viewed as non-technical and perhaps intentionally polyvalent.

maze. To make matters complicated, the route of the maze is periodically changed to one of two plans: plan A and plan B. Suppose that the carnival worker believes that the person chasing him knows the route of Plan A but not Plan B; meanwhile, the worker himself knows his way through Plan B but not Plan A. Now, the carnival worker knows that his colleague was supposed to change the route to plan B last night—though he has not confirmed whether this happened. If he were to run into the maze, hoping to lose his pursuer, he would place his faith in his coworker to have completed his job (by changing the plan of the maze) since, should the colleague not have done so, entering the funhouse will almost certainly mean he will be caught. Ultimately, the carnival worker might have reason to doubt the reliability of his coworker, but it still seems like he can have faith in his coworker, and this faith can still be a voluntary act on the faithful's end. In this example, there may be advantages to having faith (since the carnival worker will have a better chance of losing the person chasing him). But there is no guarantee of a bad result if the worker should choose to avoid the funhouse. Yet, even this example will not offer hope for the faithful atheist for the reasons explored above.

However, this still leaves the (seemingly less promising) doxastic account as a possibility.

Upon initial inspection, this account offers even less hope. Since we know the object of one's faith is God, this appears to rule out any account that requires a propositional affirmation of  $\text{DOX}_{[\text{obj}]}$  (even a weak one) since it will not be possible for the atheist to have faith in God, considering she must believe that God will bring about  $q$ , and thereby she must (so it seems) believe that God exists. However, it may be possible to utilize an unclear sense of  $S$  such that the atheist does not realize that  $S$  and God share the same referent. To see if this works, we will need to explore the object variable ( $S$ ) more closely.

Certainly,  $S$  may be used specifically, as in (12). However, it is also possible to use  $S$  more generally in a way that still applies only to a distinct referent. Specifically, we can think of the instance of objectual *roles* wherein I have faith in one individual from a limited set. The clearest example may be an occupational role. In such cases, I can use a sense of the referent  $S$  where the sense is the role itself (even if this role applies to many referents in the moment of my faith), and, should my faith attain, I would be able to apply my faith to the referent. For example, we may say that

17. I have faith in [my milkman] ( $S$ ) that [he will take the empty milk bottles off my porch] ( $q$ ).

According to the doxastic view of objectual faith, my faith would attain if I believe that  $S$  exists and will bring about  $q$ . But this does not mean that I need to know any further specifics about my milkman. If Bob is my milkman, then it appears that, should (17) attain, I will successfully have faith in Bob. We might say that my faith “transfers” to Bob since he fills the role required by  $S$ . As such, so long as Bob fulfills the role of my milkman, then, if (17) attains, then I will also have faith in Bob. Further, we can imagine that, in another possible world, Bob is sick, and Gerald takes his place. So long as I am generally ignorant of my milkman's identity and (17) attains, then it appears that my faith (in this other world) “transfers” to Gerald instead of Bob. Though my internal state is the same in both possible worlds, in the first example I have faith in Bob, whereas in the second example, I have faith in Gerald.

But, this does not mean that anyone who fulfills  $q$  can act as the object of my faith. Because my faith is in my “milkman,” it will only successfully transfer to someone who could fulfill the role of “being a milkman.”<sup>25</sup> We also might suggest a related case in which my neighbor, Mr.

<sup>25</sup> Or, perhaps, “milklady.”

Smith, snatches the bottles from my porch. Here, it does not appear to be the case that I would have faith in Mr. Smith since he is not qualified to function as my official milkman. So long as my faith is in my milkman, and Mr. Smith does not have the necessary sanctioning to occupy this role (whatever this may be), his bringing about the anticipated state of affairs does not transfer my faith to him. If (17) attains, and Mr. Smith takes my milk bottles off my porch, it does not appear to be the case that I had faith in Mr. Smith all along. Though he brings about the necessary state of affairs, since my belief is in a role that he cannot occupy (since he is not a proper milkman), he cannot become the object of my faith. This allows us to avoid a possible objection where one might suggest that the format of this faith is not objectual but instead propositional, where  $p$  is

18. My bottles will be taken off my porch.

These examples appear to demonstrate that faith in  $p$  could be applied generally so as to allow for several different possible referents.

Nonetheless, it does not seem like the “transfer” account works for all manners of referring to a general referent. If I express faith in a member of a class or body of people, my faith does not “transfer” to the one that happens to bring a state of affairs about. Perhaps, one of the reasons for this is that such instances seem to revert to a strict propositional faith. For example, I may have faith that one of my children will take out the trash (though I know not which one). Nonetheless, it seems wrong to suggest that this faith could transfer to the child who happens to do this action so that we can say after the act that *I had faith in that child*. Suppose I express faith in my children at T1, and my eldest child takes out the trash at T2. It seems wrong to suggest that I have faith in my eldest child at T1 even though she happened to justify my faith at T2.

Notice that this type of faith—that which selects a member of a class—is hard to frame as faith *in*. Instead, I would say that I have faith *that* one child will bring about  $q$ . Perhaps I could frame this in terms of objectual faith by saying that I have faith *in* my children that they will take out the trash, but now I seem to collectively have faith in all of my children (or, my children as a unit), not just the one who brings the state of affairs about. This, too, would prohibit my faith from transferring to any individual.

The same problem seems to fall upon claims that might be somehow too general, such as

19. I have faith that someone will take out the trash.

Once again, it would be odd to suggest that, should Jenny take out the trash, my faith would “transfer” to Jenny as it did in the milkman examples. Also, notice that, similar to before, such claims (in English at least) must be stated as faith *that*.

Thus, in doxastic models of objectual faith, it is possible that the object of my faith may be a general placeholder that can take on several different referents so long as these referents fall under a set of constraints—specifically, these placeholders must refer to individuals in a role (not individuals in a class or individuals in a general sense).

Perhaps this will also work for non-doxastic models, although, on this point, it is less obvious. According to the non-doxastic view, I will only need to believe that  $S$  might exist and *might* bring about  $q$  so long as I commit myself to this assumption. For the instance of (17), I could leave my milk bottles on the porch. Certainly, this would count as an act of non-doxastic faith, but it would be hard to say that the activity itself commits me to having faith in someone or something that brings about  $q$ . I suspect this problem happens because when we refer to

faith non-doxastically, it takes on a limited temporal feature such that it seems odd to talk about the object of our faith changing after the matter or even being assigned to a general role. In the instance of the scaffolding or the chair (where the object of faith is not a role), the object of my faith is necessary because the activity only can apply to this object (by jumping on the scaffolding or sitting on the chair). However, it is not altogether obvious whether the non-doxastic model offers the opportunity for one's faith to transfer in the same way that the doxastic model does.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless, this yields a surprising result: it appears that, at least in the doxastic account, there may be an extra-mental feature that contributes to locating the object of my faith.<sup>27</sup> Again, this *might* apply to non-doxastic accounts. In the milkman instance, it appears that I have faith in whomever happens to be my milkman on a given day (so long as I do not know who my milkman actually is). We could imagine a world where Bob is my milkman and another world where Gerald is my milkman, and in both worlds, I am completely ignorant about who gives and takes my milk bottles. In either case, my own mental state does not change. Nonetheless, the object of my faith is different in each example.

At this point, it may finally be clear how the atheist can have objectual faith in God. Already, I have shown that it is possible to have two contradictory beliefs so long as they are not at a first-order level and an individual is not aware that they entail a contradiction. Since the object of one's faith may act as a placeholder, then so long as God fulfills an eligible objectual role of one's faith and brings about  $q$ , then an individual may have faith in God. Further, since it is not necessary for an individual to assent that God is the object of their faith, they need not believe two first-order contradictions.

And yet, when this is at such a theoretical level, it may be challenging to understand how it would actually play out. As a way of addressing this critique, take the following example:

Imagine a woman—let's call her Susan—whose older brother was put up for adoption before she was born. Wanting to keep this fact from her, Susan's parents lied to her so that she thought she was an only child. As such, Susan believes

20. She does not have a brother.

Unlike his sister, however, Susan's brother (let's call him Thomas) is aware that he was adopted and that he has a sister, but he is too afraid to contact her. Feeling guilty for his cowardice, when Susan turns a certain age, Thomas begins anonymously sending her \$50 most Mondays. Several years pass by, and Susan continues to receive these funds without knowing their source.

Now, suppose that Susan's rent is due on a Tuesday, and she has only exactly enough money to pay it. However, two days prior to the rent's due date (Sunday), she runs out of food to make dinner. Despite only having enough money for rent, she decides to buy \$50 worth of groceries rather than go hungry. Susan believes that her *benefactor* ( $S$ ) will send her money ( $q$ ). Thus, according to the doxastic view of objectual faith, Susan has successfully had faith in her brother.

There is a point that is worth examining more closely: although Susan would assent that her brother does not exist, it seems like she must assent that her benefactor—whoever was

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, I am inclined to suggest that the non-doxastic account of objectual faith where  $S$  is a role is actually not objectual faith at all, but veiled propositional faith.

<sup>27</sup> For additional accounts in support of this conclusion, see Malcolm and Scott (2023, 144–47).

sending her the cash—*does* exist to provide some justification for her act. Thus, she believes that

21. Her benefactor exists

and that

22. Her benefactor might send her money.

Further, it is actually the case that

23. Her benefactor is her brother.

Nonetheless, it appears to be entirely possible that Susan can maintain (20), (21), and (22) so long as she is unaware of (23). The reason Susan is able to believe these competing claims, much like examples (5)–(7), is that she lacks the awareness that they entail a contradiction. Though they do contradict, she is unaware of it.

This example works since the object of one's faith is able to act as a variable of whose identity the person having faith may be ignorant.

But what does this mean for the atheist and belief in God? Let us continue to operate under the framework that an atheist is (by definition) someone who believes

24. God does not exist.

We can adopt Susan's example to work here. Suppose that Susan is an atheist and that, rather than her brother sending her the money, God is her benefactor. Now, when she buys the groceries on Sunday, the non-doxastic view would suggest that she successfully has faith in God since God is the object of her faith (*S*). So long as God is the one who has been sending her money (and thus can be the referent with the sense "benefactor"), and Susan is unaware that this is the case, then she can maintain two claims that contradict one another (namely, (21) and (24)). As long as she is not aware of this contradiction, there is no problem with her believing both. Since God acts as her benefactor (*S*), we can affirm that her faith "transfers" to God. As such, it does appear that Susan has faith in God (that God will send her the money).

#### **4. The Upshot: Quasi-Religious Pluralism and Faithful Agnostics/Atheists**

At this point, I suspect that the reader may hold some level of indifference to this conclusion. After all, even if this argument succeeds, it has only demonstrated that Susan, the atheist, may have faith in God for a very specific state of affairs. But is this actually helpful for the philosophy of religion?

Certainly, this type of faith may be interesting, but it is somewhat limited in its current state. But, we could expand this point out rather quickly. First, though the argument thus far has been interested in atheists in particular, I will examine the compatibility of Christianity with non-Christian religions here. For the sake of argument, let us assume the following

doctrine: only those who have saving faith in Christ will be saved. Here, “saving faith” is not a quality of faith but instead faith directed at a specific state of affairs (i.e., faith that I will be saved). As such, it is necessary for a subject to have faith in Christ (*S*) that she will be saved (*q*). Generally, if one affirms this doctrine, it is difficult to provide an optimistic account for practitioners of non-Christian religions.

However, if we utilize the conclusion of this project, one need not take a pessimistic account here. For example, one might succeed in having

25. Faith in one's Creator that she will be saved.

So long as Christ fulfills the role of (*S*) (*Creator*), then it appears that this individual has saving faith in Christ. Additionally, so long as one is not aware that (25) entails a contradiction in their belief system, then it may still be operative.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly, theologians may suggest that, in this instance, such saving faith may not be *sufficient* for salvation. Or, perhaps one might object that receiving the benefits of faith in Christ (or faith in God) would be negated if someone held (24), though we may say that on a technicality, their faith still attained.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, I am aware that there may be reasons to reject the implications of this article especially since I see the confession to credal statements to play an essential role at least in Christianity.<sup>30</sup> I myself would look quite suspiciously at any attempt to use this experiment to justify a flat-footed compatibility between Christian soteriology and a soft universalism. Nonetheless, this reading does seem to affirm that, *from a purely epistemological perspective*, it may be possible to have (a version of) faith in Christ in a rather surprising form.<sup>31</sup> How helpful this faith is will depend on a more strictly theological examination.

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<sup>28</sup> I am inclined to think that this suggestion is not too dissimilar from Lewis's famous treatment of Emeth, the Tash-worshipping Calormene at the end of *The Last Battle*. In a dialogue between Emeth and Aslan, Lewis writes, “But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, ‘Son, thou art welcome.’ But I said, ‘Alas Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash.’ He answered, ‘Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me.’ Then by reasons of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, ‘Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one?’ The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, ‘It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, *though he know it not*, and it is I who reward him.” (Lewis 2004, 757).

<sup>29</sup> I would also suggest that Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* (from my amateurish reading) seems to suggest something like an explicit rejection of Christ's Lordship would count as a damnable offence—though it is not clear if this rejection would attain if it was done via belief alone—with faith in Christ technically present. Nonetheless, it is for reasons like this, I wish to be very clear here: I am hesitant about the conclusion I am offering in this article because I see it to be quite dangerous if wielded carelessly. This point notwithstanding, if considered carefully and with wisdom, I would suggest that there is potential for this view to offer aid to current theological challenges.

<sup>30</sup> If, as part of my act of faith, I am tasked with professing *Credo in Deum*, and I might do so without *Assentio in Deo esse*, then I do not understand how to make sense of this activity apart from it being a profound participation in corporate bullshitting.

<sup>31</sup> This conclusion would be limited by the fact that one's faith in the role that Christ fulfills would need to be quite general. If one adds too much specificity to this role (such as pointing to a single referent), then the “transfer” could not occur. For example, if I know who my milkman is (let's say its Gerald), and I attach my faith to Gerald specifically, then there does not appear to be the possibility of my faith transferring to any other milkman for this objectual faith. We might say the same problem occurs if one has faith in the *referent* whom he believes created and not the *sense* “Creator.” It is, however, hard to argue whether such specificity usurps all “less

So, too, we might suggest that the agnostic can have something like saving faith when it is understood as a non-doxastic objectual faith. For example, we might suggest that a given agnostic get baptized “just in case.” So long as the agnostic remains open to the possibility of their salvation, this, too, might act as saving faith.

But what about atheists? After all, I have engaged this argument while continuously keeping in mind those who believe (24). Certainly, such instances present a harder example. In a weak sense, I have already fulfilled the goal of this project by demonstrating that atheists may have faith in God under certain, limited conditions. But, it would be odd for them to affirm something like *saving* faith since this would require them to have faith *that they will be saved*. And yet, it is hard to imagine what such instances of faith would even look like. We could equivocate on what *saving* means here. Perhaps an atheist is in need of a life-saving organ transplant. Nonetheless, she has faith that her life will be saved because she believes someone will bring her the necessary organ. If Christ directly supplied this organ, she might have “life-saving faith” in Christ (faith in Christ that her life will be saved). But this appears to differ from what is generally meant by *saving faith*.

Still, the point remains that such faith is, in theory, possible even though the atheist believes that (24). As such, I will consider this experiment to be at least a moderate success.

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specific” objectual faiths. Perhaps I have faith in Gerald *and* faith in my milkman generally such that, though both normally attain simultaneously, one might attain where the other does not. Thus, on the occasion of Gerald’s sickness, I have still attained faith in whomever my milkman happens to be. During Gerald’s sickness, this more generalized faith would prove to be founded, while the specific faith (though it still attains), would be unfounded.

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