

## A Critique of the Tu Quoque Defense of Faith

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### Abstract

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This paper is a critical examination of the classic Tu Quoqueor “You Also” Defense of faith in God that has played such a significant role in traditional Christian apologetics. Section 1 offers an initial, partial definition of ‘faith’ and distinguishes between fideist and evidentialist approaches to the rationality of faith. Section 2 explains the traditional Tu Quoque Defense of religious faith and supplies some historical background. The gist of this defense is that those who criticize religious faith themselves invariably rely on basic assumptions in science and common sense that go beyond the available evidence and so have a faith of their own. Section 3 considers several inadequate rebuttals and indicates their flaws. Section 4 presents a stronger rebuttal, inspired by David Hume and endorsed by some contemporary philosophers, and defends it against two criticisms. The key point of the Humean rebuttal is that basic assumptions in science and common sense, unlike religious faith, are not only natural but irresistible. Section 5 examines an ethical Tu Quoque based on William James’ famous essay “The Will to Believe”, and argues that like the traditional version it fails to withstand critical scrutiny. Finally, Section 6 includes a few brief concluding reflections. [200 words]

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This paper is a critical examination of the classic Tu Quoqueor “You Also” Defense of faith in God that has played such a significant role in traditional Christian apologetics. In Section 1 I give a partial definition of the relevant notion of faith and distinguish between fideist and evidentialist approaches to faith. In Section 2 I explain the traditional Tu Quoque Defense and briefly give some historical background. In Section 3 I consider several rebuttals I find inadequate and explain what I take their flaws to be. In Section 4 I present a stronger rebuttal, inspired by David Hume and endorsed by some contemporary philosophers, and defend it against two criticisms. In Section 5 I examine an ethical version of the You Also Defense based on William James’ famous essay “The Will to Believe”, and I argue that like the traditional version it fails to withstand critical scrutiny. Finally, in Section 6 I offer a few brief concluding reflections.

### Section 1: Preliminaries

For present purposes ‘faith’ may be defined (at least partially) as belief that willfully goes beyond or against the evidence available to the believer. ‘Willfully’ is included so as to leave out “honest mistakes” in which the believer is trying to proportion her beliefs to the evidence (i.e., trying not to go beyond or against it) but does not succeed. The corresponding conception of theistic faith is reflected in the fideistic view that such faith need not be based on good evidence in order to be epistemically rational or justified, that its rationality or justification is to that extent evidence transcendent.<sup>1</sup>

Evidentialism, of course, is the principle that good evidence is indeed required if a belief is to qualify as epistemically rational or justified. The standard evidentialist objection to fideism is that faith in God is irrational or unjustified precisely because it is not based on good evidence.

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The *locus classicus* of this criticism of faith is probably W.K. Clifford's famous essay "The Ethics of Belief", though his neglected essay "The Ethics of Religion" is also relevant (Clifford, 1999, Chs. 3-4; see Wood, 2002, Chs. 1-2 for a very thoughtful exposition and defense of Clifford's position).

## Section 2: The Tu Quoque Defense Of Theistic Faith

The traditional Tu Quoque Defense (also known as the parity argument [Penelhum, 1983a, esp. p. 30]) is a fideistic reply to evidentialist critics of theistic faith: "you also have faith," they are being told. According to this defense, theistic faith is on an epistemic par with basic assumptions in science and common sense; thus evidentialist critics who accept these assumptions are being inconsistent, and so are ill-placed to criticize faith in God for its evidence transcendence. Philip L. Quinn helpfully explains the relevant notion of epistemic parity in terms of epistemic permissibility: what proponents of the Tu Quoque Defense are asserting is that if basic scientific and commonsense assumptions are permissible despite the lack of good evidence for them, then so is theistic faith (Quinn, 1999, pp. 334-335).

Some recent proponents of the Tu Quoque Defense speak vaguely of foundational or ultimate commitments without identifying any in particular (Jensen, 2012; Jones, 2014). But most defenders are quite happy to give specific examples. Here's a fairly complete list, though induction probably comes up most often:

- (1) The intelligibility of nature (e.g., Einstein, 1954, p. 46; Davies, 2007).
- (2) The reliability of inductive inference (e.g., Demos, 1961, pp. 133-134).
- (3) The reliability of the scientific method (e.g., Tillich, 1957, pp. 8, 33; cf. 40, 93, 126-127).
- (4) The reliability of sense perception, or the existence of the external world.
- (5) The reliability of memory (e.g., Demos, 1961, pp. 132-133).
- (6) The existence of other minds (e.g., Demos, 1961, p. 132; Plantinga, 1967, Pt. III).
- (7) The trustworthiness of one's friends and personal relations (James, 1969, pp. 208-209).
- (8) The truth or reasonableness of one's worldview (e.g., Tillich, 1957, pp. 6263, 9093, 120, 124).
- (9) The validity of one's "ultimate concern" (Tillich, 1957, pp. 16, 106-107, 114, 126-127).

The Tu Quoque Defense dates back to the period of the Patristic Church fathers; according to John Hick, the first Christian apologist to give it was Origen, and he was followed by Arnobius (Hick, 1974, pp. 54-55n.). In the early modern period, Christian apologists such as Pierre Bayle and Michel de Montaigne made a related use of skepticism in emphasizing the need for faith in order to overcome the severe limits of human reason (Penelhum 1983a and 1983b). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries notable Tu Quoque defenders have included William James, Arthur Balfour, G.M. Gwatkin, Alan Richardson, Karl Heim, David E. Roberts, Paul Tillich, Alisdair MacIntyre, Raphael Demos, Alvin Plantinga, Paul Davies, Karen Armstrong, Stanton L. Jones, and Robert Jensen, among many others. In recent decades it seems to have become a staple of non-academic Christian apologetics.

## Section 3: Some Unconvincing Rebuttals

The first flawed rebuttal comes from Brooke Noel Moore and Richard Parker, the authors of a very popular beginning logic text. They maintain that the Tu Quoque Defense commits a version of the *ad hominem* fallacy: it infers the correctness of belief in God from the inconsistency of evidentialist critics regarding the rationality of faith in God vs. the rationality of their own secular faith (Moore and Parker, 2012, pp. 211-213; faith in God is my example, not theirs). I agree with Moore and Parker that this inference is invalid, but I don't believe that You-Also-apologists need be guilty of committing it. The point of the defense is to offer a challenge to evidentialist critics of faith: either give up the basic assumptions they accept in science and common sense (which would be no mean feat) or admit that faith in God can be rational even in the absence of good evidence. This sort of challenge is a common dialectical strategy in philosophy and other forms of inquiry; as long as its limits are understood, there is nothing fallacious about it.

A very different and more sophisticated rebuttal emerges in W.W. Bartley's important book *The Retreat to Commitment*. If I understand Bartley correctly, he charges the You-Also-apologist with presupposing a questionable, conditional form of foundationalism according to which a belief is rational or justified only if it is either self-justifying or based on other beliefs that justify it. Bartley's worry is that there aren't any self-justifying beliefs, so that we're stuck with arbitrary or irrational commitments in science, religion, and elsewhere.

His solution is to dispense with justification altogether and to adopt a conception of rationality (influenced by Karl Popper) that identifies rational belief with belief that is held with a willingness to submit it to criticism and to revise or abandon it if it does not stand up to that criticism. (Bartley, 1962, Chs. 4-5; see also Kaufmann, 1978, pp. 318-322 on responsible ethical belief). I find this Popperian form of a responsibility- or virtue-oriented epistemology intriguing; but for all Bartley shows.

At least some religious believers can and do hold their *initially* evidence-transcendent faith in ways that make it responsive to *subsequent* criticism and counterevidence. Indeed Derek Stanesby argues quite plausibly that this is so (Stanesby, 1985, Chs. 2, 4).<sup>iii</sup> The third rebuttal is given by the eminent Victorian agnostic Thomas Henry Huxley. Huxley concedes that “the validity of all our [empirical] reasonings” depends on faith in induction, but claims that reason’s need for initial faith doesn’t establish faith’s entitlement to dispense with reason (Huxley, 1948, p. 90). He is clearly right if he means ‘dispense *altogether* with reason’; but as we have just seen, faith need not do any such thing. The fourth and final rebuttal, perhaps the most common one considered in this section, is that unlike theistic faith, the so-called faith embodied in scientific and commonsense assumptions is not genuine belief at all. Scientists use the intelligibility of nature as a provisional hypothesis or regulative principle useful for developing and testing other hypotheses (Mackie, 1982, p. 245; Hick, 1974, pp. 55-56). Somewhat similarly, we make and act on commonsense assumptions from practical necessity or usefulness, not because we believe them to be true (Huxley, 1948, p. 90; Clifford, 1999, p. 79; Wood, 2002, pp. 19-20). This practicality rebuttal seems to work well in some cases of personal trust (Wood, 2002, p. 22; see 20-23 for excellent discussion of diverse cases of such trust). But I have my doubts about its ability to cope with other basic assumptions, such as the reliability of sense perception and memory. Surely we are fooling ourselves (except in special circumstances) if we say that we don’t really *believe* that our senses and memory to function reliably much of the time. Indeed, this belief and comparable beliefs in the intelligibility of nature, the reliability of induction, and existence of other minds seem psychologically *irresistible*—a topic to which I shall return in the next section.

#### Section 4: A Stronger, Humean Rebuttal

David Hume is well known for the view that belief in induction, though unjustifiable, is *irresistible or unavoidable* (at least outside the philosophical study) because “forced upon us by nature”.<sup>iv</sup> He seems to have held the parallel view about belief in the external world, based on the reliability of perception (Hume, 1977, Sec. 12). And the irresistibility of beliefs in the intelligibility of nature, the reliability of memory, and the existence of other minds seem to possess comparable plausibility (though the irresistibility of belief in other minds may need to be relativized to sane persons). Suppose these views are correct, as indeed Tu Quoque apologists seem not to dispute. Then we have at last an epistemically significant difference between basic assumptions in science and common sense, on the one hand, and theistic faith, on the other: faith in God, unlike these assumptions, is not irresistible but optional (Hook, 1963, p. 242; Penelhum, 1983b, p. 311; Rescher, 1992, p. 265).<sup>v</sup> In fact, this appears to be Hume’s position as well (Hume, 1963, pp. 31, 78, 79, 81).<sup>vi</sup>

But *why* is this difference epistemically significant? The answer lies in the relevance of something like an epistemic “ought implies can” principle. As John W. Lenz points out in connection with induction (Lenz, 1966, 183-184), if a person cannot help holding the natural beliefs that we have identified with basic assumptions in science and common sense, then she cannot be blamed for doing so, and these beliefs cannot be criticized as epistemically unjustified. Indeed it seems reasonable to infer that the beliefs are epistemically permissible for her to hold (Quinn, 1991, p. 334).<sup>vii</sup>

It might be objected that the claim that beliefs in induction, perception, etc. are naturally irresistible is itself an empirical claim that presupposes the correctness or reasonableness of these very beliefs, so that it depends on circular reasoning. (See Flew, 1965, pp. 164, 167 on Hume’s “skeptical solution” to the problem of induction.) But the irresistibility claim is not an attempt to refute skepticism about induction, the external world, etc.; it is a reply to You Also apologists for religious faith, who do not dispute this claim and who do share the natural beliefs in question. So in the relevant context there is no circularity problem.

A much stronger objection is that for many individuals faith in God is itself irresistible, at least once they have acquired it. The idea is not or at any rate need not be that they have a genetic predisposition to believe in God which compels them to do so once it is activated.<sup>viii</sup> It is rather that their individual psychology makes it impossible for them to give up that belief, perhaps because of its crucial role in enabling them to meet vital psychological needs.<sup>ix</sup> I confess I am not sure what the best response to this objection is; but here are three possibilities. In the first place, we might relativize the notion of psychological irresistibility to the human species rather than to each individual, on the assumption that for most human beings at least in the modern era belief in God is optional rather than irresistible. But then the “ought implies can” principle must be relativized in the same way, and this is not easy to accept.

If an individual cannot do something, then intuitively or as a matter of common sense it seems clear that she should not be blamed for failing to do it, no matter how many others do possess the relevant ability.<sup>x</sup> In the second place, given that hundreds of millions of human beings do apparently lack faith in God,<sup>xi</sup> the burden of proof would seem to be on the critic of the Humean rebuttal to show that such faith is commonly irresistible for believers and not merely psychologically powerful. Other surveys indicate that dozens of millions of American believers in God are *not absolutely certain* of God’s existence; their uncertainty suggests that faith in God is optional rather than irresistible for them.<sup>xii</sup> We might wonder how many other believers profess absolute certainty because this is what they think they are *supposed to say*, or because it is difficult for them to admit even to themselves that they have doubts.

In the third place, even if some believers in God do lack the ability to give up their faith, many do not. There is still a contrast, then, with universally irresistible belief (at least among sane people?) in the reliability of perception, memory, and induction. I favor a combination of the second and third responses to the irresistible religious faith objection to the Humean rebuttal to the Tu Quoque Defense of faith. But I hope the first response receives further consideration.

### Section 5: Tu Quoque Redivivus: Theistic Faith And Moral Faith

In this section I want to reformulate the evidencetranscendent character of theistic faith in Tu Quoque apologetics in order to bring out a parallel with moral faith that was first suggested (to the best of my knowledge) by William James. Proponents of the Tu Quoque Defense grant that theistic faith is not foundationally justified: that is, it is neither selfjustifying nor immediately or noninferentially justified. They grant too that such faith by definition cannot be justified by deriving theistic conclusions from exclusively nontheistic premises. Now as James pointed out in effect, moral skeptics typically argue in his view correctly that moral beliefs are in the same boat: none are foundationally justified (*pace* ethical intuitionists) and in accordance with Is/Ought gap, a.k.a. Hume’s Law none can be derived from exclusively nonmoral premises (*pace* ethical rationalists). He added that when we face moral questions we can’t wait for justifications of our moral principles (James 1969, 207-208). So he has given us what amounts to an ethical version of the Tu Quoque Defense of faith in God (Mackie, 1982, pp. 206-208).<sup>xiii</sup>

This ethical version seems to me to be more powerful than the traditional version in two ways. First, moral beliefs do not appear to be irresistible or unavoidable, even outside the philosophical study: some people, such as (some) psychopaths and feral adults, seem to lack them.<sup>xiv</sup> So the Humean rebuttal of the traditional Tu Quoque Defense is no help now. Second, I tentatively agree with James that moral skepticism is irrefutable: in skeptical contexts in which all our moral beliefs are together in question, none of them are justified.<sup>xv</sup> Nevertheless I am not convinced by the ethical version of Tu Quoque.

The main reason is that although neither theistic faith nor moral faith is irresistible, they seem to differ in how close they come to irresistibility. As noted earlier, probably hundreds of millions of competent adults lack faith in God. But though there are many intelligent, competent ethical skeptics, they generally retain or endorse some moral beliefs even while denying the reasonableness and sometimes even the truth of those beliefs (e.g., Mackie, 1977, Part II; Mackie, 1982, pp. 206-207). It is apparently *only* (some?) psychopaths, feral adults, etc. who are devoid of conscience and so lack moral beliefs altogether. If moral faith—unlike faith in God—is resistible or avoidable only at the cost of serious psychological disorder or incomplete mental development, then surely the two kinds of faith are *not* on an epistemic par.

I would add that for other reasons I doubt moral and religious skepticism are parallel after all, despite my concession two paragraphs ago. Let’s distinguish two forms of moral skepticism, negative and positive. Negative skeptics say there is no good reason to assert that any moral belief is true; positive skeptics (such as Mackie, 1977, Ch. 1) say there is good reason to assert that all moral beliefs are false.

I have granted the correctness of negative skepticism in skeptical contexts; I reject positive skepticism—and in particular Mackie’s error theory—on grounds I cannot articulate here (Sullivan, 1990, Ch. 4). But I believe that there is significant though inconclusive evidence against supernaturalist religious belief, including faith in God—a topic, to be sure, for another occasion!

### Section 6: Concluding Reflections

I will close by making three points. The first is that Tu Quoque apologetics is a dubious venture. Any plausible looking version needs to appeal to secular forms of real or supposed faith that we find it very difficult to give up. But that very difficulty will then distinguish it from faith in God, which many people have succeeded in giving up or else have never possessed in the first place.

My second point is that there may nevertheless be good *practical* reasons for some people to adopt theistic faith. I do not have in mind Blaise Pascal’s attempt in his famous Wager (which I regard as something of an intellectual abomination) to show that nonbelievers in God suffer from severe practical irrationality. Instead, I am thinking mainly of cases in which some believers derive significant benefits (comfort, consolation, direction, etc.) from their faith, benefits they might well lack without that faith.

My last point is more complex, and I cannot begin to do it justice; so I offer it as a promissory note to a future paper. Some YouAlso apologists, such as Paul Tillich, speak of the *courage* supposedly involved in taking the leap of faith beyond the available evidence (Tillich, 1957, pp. 16-18, 101-103). But it seems to me that the kind of *moral* courage that manifests itself in intellectual integrity requires avoiding such leaps when it is psychologically and practically possible to do so. It is something like this on which evidentialists (especially W.K. Clifford and Allen W. Wood) have insisted in their longstanding debate with fideists about the rationality and morality of faith. We might call this *the courage to be without faith*.<sup>xvii</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup>I will put aside until Section 3 both the distinction between epistemic and practical rationality or justification. I will ignore altogether possible differences between rationality and justification (except for a passing reference in Section 3 to W.W. Bartley’s rejection of the concept of epistemic justification and his focus on epistemic rationality). Finally, I should note that the Calvinist epistemology of Alvin Plantinga (Plantinga, 2000) treats some theistic beliefs as foundational and thus presumably as providing their own evidence. That implausible view is not my concern in the present paper.

<sup>ii</sup>I owe some of these references to Hick, 1974, pp. 54-55n. and Bartley, 1962, pp. 89-90n.

<sup>iii</sup>Hick claims that religious believers hold their articles of faith not as provisional assumptions but as “unshakable dogma, able to absorb and reinterpret all adverse or seemingly contradicting circumstances” (Hick, 1974, pp. 55-56, quote at 56; cf. Flew, 1966, pp. 170-172 and Kaufmann, 1972, p. 115 on unfalsifiability). No doubt he is right about many believers, but surely he is wrong about others: some believers’ faith is quite shakable, in some instances even to the point of abandonment. (See, e.g., Brenner, 1997 on Holocaust survivors and Tillich, 1957, pp. 16-22.)

<sup>iv</sup>See, e.g. Hume, 1977, Sec. 5. The quote is actually from P.F. Strawson, who endorses this view (Strawson, 1958, p. 21). In the body of this paper I say ‘the view’ rather than ‘Hume’s view’ because Hume exegesis is a tricky business.

<sup>v</sup>Terence Penelhum adds a further contrast between faith in God and common-sense faith: “faith [in God] is a state which it requires persistent efforts of attention and will to sustain, whereas (by definition) the convictions of common sense [grounded in nature] require compatible efforts of skeptical reflection to resist” (Penelhum, 1983b, p. 311).

<sup>vi</sup>Suppose Tillich is right that faith in the sense of “ultimate concern” is an inescapable part of the human condition (Tillich, 1957, pp. 100-101, 106, 114). Then the same point applies to possessing faith in this sense, though which faith one possess may still be open for rational assessment.

<sup>vii</sup>This inference depends on a deontic conception of epistemic justification. For the distinction between deontological and evaluative conceptions of justification, see Alston, 1989, Chs. 4-5.

<sup>viii</sup>See Newburgh, D’Aquila, and Rause, 2002, for a defense of a biological approach to belief in God. Alvin Plantinga’s “Calvinist epistemology” endorses a related view, grounded however in Christian theology rather than neurobiology (Plantinga, 2000, Pt. III).

<sup>ix</sup>My former student Corbin S. Fowler has urged this point, and it is anticipated by H.L. Mencken in his essay “On Happiness” (Mencken, 2002).

<sup>x</sup>This claim may need to be qualified to take account of cases in which the individual’s inability is the foreseeable result of her own past actions.

- <sup>xi</sup>Sociologist Phil Zuckerman argues using surveys from across the world that nonbelief in God is the fourth largest belief system, after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, and that there are roughly 500 million to 750 million nontheists in the world (Zuckerman, 2007).
- <sup>xii</sup>According to the Pew Research Forum, in 2014 “63% of Americans [were] absolutely certain that God exists, down eight percentage points from 2007....”The figure was 66% for mainline Protestants (down seven points), 64% for Catholics (down eight points), 88% for evangelical Protestants, 89% for members of historically black Protestant denominations, and 84% for Muslims. Education seems to matter too:66% of Americans without a college degree were absolutely certain of God’s existence, while 55% of college graduates were not.So does age:the figures were 70% for Americans at least 65 years of age, 51% for those under 30.(Lipka, 2015). What to make of all this is an interesting question.
- <sup>xiii</sup>There are also traces of an ethical Tu Quoque in Tillich’s *Dynamics of Faith* (Tillich, 1957, pp. 40, 107-108).
- <sup>xiv</sup>Psychopathy in particular is a fascinating but difficult subject. For helpful discussion of this condition and its relevance to amorality, see Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008, Chs. 3-4.
- <sup>xv</sup>But I do not believe that in ordinary, nonskeptical contexts this is the case (see (Sullivan, 1990, Ch. 4).
- <sup>xvi</sup> I am, of course, playing on the title of Tillich, 1952.Let me add that if leaps of faith are truly unavoidable for us, as Tillich claims, then we don’t seem praiseworthy for making them.

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