

Article

God Unhinged? A Critique of Quasi-Fideism

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Abstract: Drawing on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, Duncan Pritchard argues for a position he calls quasi-fideism. Quasi-Fideism is the view that hinge commitments such as "God exists" are exempt from rational scrutiny within the language game of religion. However, other religious beliefs, which are not part of the framework of hinge commitments, can be rationally assessed and evaluated. This view is to be contrasted with pure fideism, in which all aspects of religion are exempt from rational scrutiny. The success of quasi-fideism depends on demonstrating that "God exists" is, indeed, a hinge commitment. In this paper, I will review and criticize some of Pritchard's reasons for arguing that God's existence should be considered a hinge commitment. Additionally, I will offer reasons why "God exists" cannot be a hinge commitment. Considering the rational problem of evil, single and multiple divine attributes, and the emotional problem of evil, I will show that the non-circular rational criticism of God's existence is possible. Following the distinction between subjective and objective certainty in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, I will suggest that a more fruitful line of inquiry for Wittgensteinians is to examine God as a subjective certainty.

Keywords: quasi-fideism; hinge commitment; religious belief; the problem of evil; the emotional problem of evil

1. Introduction

Duncan Pritchard (2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c), drawing from Wittgenstein's insights in *On Certainty*, has developed and defended a view he terms quasi-fideism. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein criticized G.E. Moore for claiming to have defeated the skeptic. Moore claimed he could establish the existence of the external world based on his knowledge of having two hands. However, Wittgenstein points out that propositions such as "I have two hands" are not the objects of knowledge but hinges. Unlike hinges, knowledge is truth-apt, and when dealing with knowledge claims, we can rationally assess or doubt them. Elaborating on the difference between hinges or Moorean certainties on the one hand and knowledge claims on the other hand, Pritchard states,

"...not only are Moorean certainties necessarily groundless, but that also rational doubt of a Moorean certainty is simply impossible (i.e., as opposed to being merely rationally unmandated). Wittgenstein claims that the very idea of a rational evaluation, whether positive or negative, presupposes a backdrop of Moorean certainties that are themselves exempt from rational evaluation. To attempt to rationally evaluate a Moorean certainty is thus an attempt to do something impossible".

(Pritchard 2016, pp. 65–66)

Different language games are grounded on hinges that are neither rational nor irrational, neither justified nor unjustified, and neither true nor false. These hinges cannot



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be doubted, nor can we offer any argument or evidence in their favor or against them. Pritchard (2000) argued that “God exists” is a hinge proposition. Later, Pritchard (2018) argued that “God exists” and “miracles would occur” differ from other religious beliefs because they are “fundamental to religious life” (p. 51) and suggests that we treat fundamental religious beliefs as hinge commitments in the language game of religion. Given that hinge commitments are arational and rational arguments do not apply, this means that “God exists” or any other religious hinge commitment is beyond rational scrutiny. Pritchard offers a parity argument that intends to show that religious central claims cannot be supported by rational arguments simply because religion, like any other language game, rests on arational hinge commitments. Given this parity, demanding religion to offer rational support for its hinges or major claims would be applying a different standard of rationality to religion and treating it unfairly.¹ Therefore, while the quasi-fideist would agree that she can rationally evaluate the historical accuracy of certain religious texts by examining the evidence, she would disagree that any such evaluation is possible regarding God’s existence. Pritchard’s quasi-fideism is supposed to be a middle ground between fideism and intellectualism; the former view, which has been attributed to some Wittgensteinians, holds that no rational evaluation is possible in the religious language game, whereas intellectualism holds the view that all religious beliefs and doctrines can be evaluated rationally. As Pritchard (2012) puts it,

We should think of religious belief as also involving a hinge commitment to the existence of God that is immune to rational evaluation. . . Religious belief involves a fundamental commitment to God’s existence which is both highly stable from a psychological point of view, but which is also part of the essential background to a wealth of furthermore specific religious beliefs that the subject holds.

(pp. 149–50)

The success of Pritchard’s argument depends on establishing central religious claims as hinge commitments. The existence of God is the religious commitment to which Pritchard has dedicated much of his arguments. If one could successfully establish that “God exists” is a hinge commitment, then it would not be a shortcoming of the religious believer if she does not or cannot offer any rational evidence or arguments in favor of her position. The atheist would also not be rationally justified in offering arguments against the existence of God. On the other hand, if one successfully establishes that God’s existence cannot be considered a hinge commitment, all positions that rely on God’s existence as a hinge commitment would collapse; fideism and quasi-fideism will collapse since both views, despite their differences in scope, rely on God as a hinge commitment. However, most recently, Pritchard (forthcoming) has announced dissatisfaction with considering “God exists” as a hinge commitment and instead proposes “God loves me” as a better substitute. This, however, only appears in the footnote and there remains to be seen what Pritchard’s arguments are. This is Pritchard’s explanation why “God loves me” is a better candidate than “God exists” for a hinge commitment:

It is usually assumed that if there are religious hinge commitments, then one of them will be a commitment to the proposition ‘God exists’. I don’t think this is a plausible candidate to be a hinge commitment, however, as it is far too abstract and theoretical in nature. Accordingly, I doubt that the kind of visceral certainty that Wittgenstein is describing, and which on a quasi-fideistic view would be manifest as regards fundamental religious commitments, would attach itself to this claim. A more promising example would be something that captures the personal relationship one bears to God, such as that God loves me.

(Pritchard forthcoming, p. 20)

Pritchard is, in effect, arguing that he wants to abandon “God exists” because it lacks some of the features Wittgenstein had enumerated for hinge commitments, such as “visceral certainty”; additionally, it is abstract and cold. While these reasons, depending on how they will be argued for, could be valid reasons to question “God exists” as a hinge commitment, in this paper, it will be argued that “God exists” is open to rational scrutiny and, therefore, it cannot be a hinge commitment.

Pritchard’s presentation of quasi-fideism has gained some attention, and some reactions to his view are critical. Pritchard’s effort to present John Henry Newman as an ally or a precursor to his idea of quasi-fideism, and Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology has been criticized by [Aquino and Gage \(2023\)](#), who argue that Newman does not argue for the ungroundedness of religious and non-religious beliefs; instead, Newman emphasizes that the grounds are not explicit rational processes but rather implicit ones. Robert [Vinten \(2022\)](#) has criticized Pritchard for his propositional account of hinges and argues that “a nonpropositional hinge-epistemology is the best way of capturing the rationality of religious belief” (p. 977). Jeroen [de Ridder \(2019\)](#) argues that quasi-fideism leads to epistemic relativism. Anna [Boncompagni \(2022\)](#) argues that, unlike hinge commitments, belief in the existence of God requires a leap of faith, and one can imagine empirical tests for belief in God. Boncompagni emphasizes that those tests are not similar to scientific tests but have a personal dimension. Pritchard has responded to some of his critics (see [Pritchard forthcoming, 2022a](#)).

In this paper, I will offer arguments demonstrating that “God exists” cannot be a hinge commitment. If it can be shown that God’s existence can be rationally scrutinized in a non-circular way, then it can be shown that God’s existence should not be treated as a hinge commitment. In this paper, I show that such arguments are possible and taken seriously by most believers, especially when they take the form of problems of evil and the consistency of divine attributes. I will develop Boncompagni’s point and argue that the emotional problem of evil is a personal test for belief in God. In this section, I will also engage with Pritchard’s newest religious hinge commitment proposal, namely “God loves me”. Some exegetical evidence suggests Wittgenstein considered “God” to be like another hinge commitment, i.e., physical objects. However, this categorization partly depends on Wittgenstein’s controversial conception of God, and finding theists who have endorsed it is challenging. Finally, it will be suggested that Wittgensteinians can contribute to the philosophy of religion by considering belief in God as subjective rather than objective certainty.

2. Rational Arguments Against the Existence of God

A fact accepted by theists and atheists alike is that pain and suffering have been prevalent throughout history.² Suppose we also take the theist’s premises about God, namely that God is the creator and sustainer of the universe and that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. In that case, it seems that God with such attributes would be incompatible with the existence of the evils in our world. If God is all-powerful, he has the power to prevent or stop evil; if he is all-knowing, then he knows how to prevent or stop evil from occurring; and if he is omnibenevolent, he would want to prevent or stop evil. Yet, we have abundant instances of pain and suffering in our world. Some philosophers have argued that these two premises (i.e., the existence of God on the one hand and the existence of evil, or some specific kinds of evil on the other hand) form a logical contradiction, e.g., [Mackie \(1955\)](#), [Oppy \(2018\)](#)—the logical problem of evil—while some have argued that the existence of pain and suffering, or the amount or types of pain and suffering in the world, make it the case that the existence of God is less probable, e.g., [Rowe \(1979\)](#)—the evidential problem of evil. The logical and evidential problems of evil are categorized under the

heading “rational problem of evil” in contrast to the emotional problem of evil. The theist has different possibilities when faced with the rational problem of evil. One possibility is to abandon belief in the theistic premise altogether and become an atheist. Another option is to maintain the theistic premises, although with some modifications. For example, one may argue that God is powerful but not all-powerful, and, as a result, although he would want to eliminate pain and suffering, he cannot because he does not possess the required power. Another option is to stick to your guns and try to find justifications for the co-existence of God and evil in the world. While some theists have chosen the third option, some theists (e.g., proponents of open theism) have adopted the second option, and some theists would abandon their faith due to the force of the rational argument from evil. A theist who looks at all the pain and suffering in the world with the premise that God created and sustains it needs to find a solution to the problem of evil. The rational problem of evil puts the concept of God to the test. If one sees all the pain and suffering in the world and cannot square that with the existence of God with specific attributes, then it would be rational to either abandon that concept of God altogether or modify it. Given that “the existence of evil” and “the existence of God” are both assumed by theists—and these two assumptions are the main assumptions of arguments from evil—if an argument attempts to show the incoherence of theism based on the problem of evil, such an argument against theism would involve assumptions that theists would endorse. Therefore, the arguments based on evil are not dependent on assumptions exclusive to atheism. These shared assumptions in rational considerations of the problem of evil provide enough shared basis for theists and atheists to engage in rational arguments for and against the existence of God.

The argument from evil is not the only rational argument that attempts to show the incoherence of theism. Some arguments attempt to show that single and multiple divine attributes are incoherent. Such arguments take one divine attribute that theists hold God to essentially possess and then show that that attribute is incoherent or impossible.³ For example, Theists hold that God is essentially omniscient. In other words, for God to exist, he has to be omniscient. Omniscience is a single divine attribute. One way to offer a rational argument against the existence of God would be to show that this single divine attribute is either impossible or incoherent. Patrick Grim (1988) has argued that omniscience is impossible. Another rational argument against the existence of God is to take more than one divine attribute and show that they are incompatible with one another. For example, given that theists believe that omniscience and omnipotence are essential attributes of God, if one can show that these two are incompatible, then it follows that it is impossible to have a being who possesses these two divine attributes together. Norman Kretzmann (1966), among others, has argued that omniscience and immutability are incompatible. Whereas the argument from evil takes the empirical fact of the existence of evil in our world along with the existence of God as its premises, the arguments based on single and multiple divine attributes are purely conceptual and based on the claims that theism makes about God.⁴ Given that essential divine attributes are the assumptions of theists about God, if one were to argue for the incoherence of one or more divine attributes one would not be arguing against theism based on any assumption theists would not endorse. In other words, such rational criticisms are not based on any assumptions specific to atheism or non-theism.

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein (1969) reminds us that in some cases in which we try to offer rational arguments against a position, we presuppose our own language game and neglect theirs.⁵ However, rational criticism is possible when faced with people with a different language game. One way to do so is to show that their language game lacks internal coherence. In this manner, we do not rely on our hinges to argue against them but use their hinges against them. Most theists endorse the hinge commitment that frameworks should have coherence and that the incoherence of any framework is a reason to abandon

one or some components of that framework. The rational argument from evil and single and multiple divine attribute arguments attempt to undermine the coherence of the theist's framework. So far as theists are committed to the coherence of their worldview, these arguments could jeopardize their framework as it stands. These rational arguments try to show incoherence in theism based on the hinges that the theist accepts within her framework. Therefore, when rationally criticizing God with these arguments, the atheist is not relying on an atheistic language game to undermine the theist's worldview. Theists have put forth different arguments to defend the coherence of theism, e.g., [Swinburne \(2016\)](#), in the face of such criticisms. Some theists have gone on the offensive and developed arguments to show that atheism is an incoherent view, e.g., [Alvin Plantinga \(1993\)](#) argues that an atheist cannot coherently believe both in evolution and the non-existence of God. Plantinga also uses two premises of naturalistic atheism to make his point, i.e., natural selection and the non-existence of God.

Rational arguments can, in principle, undermine the coherence of worldviews when the worldviews in question share a commitment to logic and coherence. If there are religious frameworks that do not commit to logic and coherence, their type of theism would not be aptly labeled as quasi-fideism. Such a theism would be irrational, and whatever is said within that religious framework, even if it is incoherent or logically problematic, should be accepted. Pritchard has set out his goal not to defend this irrational form of theism but rather quasi-fideism. Therefore, we do not need to engage with the irrational form of theism here. As the quasi-fideist has a hinge commitment to coherence, she should accept that any argument that could undermine the coherence of a theistic worldview is a rational argument against the existence of God. Given that hinges cannot be rationally assessed, and belief in God can be rationally assessed, belief in God cannot be a hinge commitment.

Our considerations in this section were not intended to establish the coherence or incoherence of theism, nor do they show that the rational problem of evil or single and divine attributes arguments are knock-down arguments and should convince every single theist. Instead, they were designed to show that in so far as theists and atheists have the hinge commitment that their frameworks should be coherent, we can pose non-circular arguments against theism. Given that hinge commitments are considered beyond rational scrutiny, yet the concept of God is prone to rational scrutiny, we have identified a major difference between "God exists" and hinge commitments. If one were to claim sufficient rational arguments to establish the falsehood of "God exists", one would be committed to a stronger version of the argument proposed in this section. If "God exists" is false, then it is obvious that it cannot be a hinge commitment. However, the argument proposed in this section is weaker and merely commits to the claim that God's existence is rationally scrutinizable and has been rationally scrutinized. This weaker argument undermines the hinge status of "God exists" without committing to either theism or atheism.

3. The Emotional Problem of Evil

Whereas we examined the rational problem of evil in the previous section, the problem of evil can also be considered an emotional problem. When the theist experiences pain and suffering, the emotional and existential angst that these experiences create might lead to the abandonment of faith or questioning God's existence or attributes. A famous example is C. S. [Lewis \(1966\)](#), who struggled with his belief in God after his wife passed away (p. 6). Although Lewis retained his faith in God, some may not maintain their belief. The emotional problem of evil has been largely ignored in the analytic tradition because it is believed that it is not the philosopher's task to counsel those who undergo such experiences. It is believed that the philosopher should restrict herself to weighing the evidence and determining the rationality of belief in God. Although Wittgenstein has not written on this

topic extensively, the following quote from *Culture and Value* (Wittgenstein 1998) is helpful for our discussion,

Life can educate you to “believing in God”. And *experiences* too are what do this but not visions, or other sense experiences, which show us the “existence of this being”, but e.g., sufferings of various sorts. And they do not show us God as a sense experience does an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts,—life can force this concept on us.

So perhaps it is similar to the concept ‘object’ (§ 97)

While what Wittgenstein had in mind was the kind of experiences that would convince us to believe in God, there are also specific experiences that could convince us to abandon belief in God. These experiences are not to be understood as sensory experiences but rather the existential experiences we have in life, for example, the loss of a loved one, surviving a genocide, and the like. Experiences of evil could force the concept of God on us, which Wittgenstein had in mind; likewise, these experiences can force us to abandon this concept. In the emotional problem of evil, there is a personal dimension involved in which the person tries to make sense of his or her own experience and come to terms with God or abandon him. In such cases, the person would examine various scenarios and explanations, weigh different explanations, and try to interpret the details of her suffering. In other words, in the emotional problem of evil, one considers whether one can justify God for not preventing the evils that emotionally damage us. As Boncompagni (2022) argues, when it comes to “religious hinges”, it is possible to carry out tests even though such tests are not scientific. Instead, these tests are personal and affect our lives. The concept of God and belief in God seem to have a peculiar character that does not allow them to fit nicely with hinge commitments. Boncompagni clarifies this distinct feature by referring to pragmatists such as William James and Pierce, who spoke about God and belief in God in a way that has some affinities with hinge epistemology. However, the pragmatists she considers emphasize that while there is a leap of faith concerning the existence of God, we do not have such leaps of faith with other certainties, such as the existence of the world, earth, and our hands. Pritchard’s quasi-fideism neglects this difference between hinge commitments and God. Boncompagni (2022) elaborates on this difference as follows:

“Religion requires believers to believe and to know that they believe by faith. On the other hand, nothing risky or hazardous is at play in hinge-certainty; in a sense, it is indeed the absence of a sense of risk that marks out a hinge as a hinge”.

(p. 963)

Given the risks involved in believing in God, one would face personal tests in her faith to see if the risk is compatible with the reward. Although Boncompagni does not specify the personal tests, the emotional problem of evil is a good candidate for such a test. This test involves much interpretation and is intensely personal. However, emphasizing the personal and emotional aspects of the emotional problem of evil may mislead us in categorizing it as an arational problem. If it is an arational problem, then it cannot be counted as a rational argument against the existence of God, and quasi-fideism would not be affected by it. To illustrate this, we can use examples that involve only human beings. If someone claims that they love us but when faced with problems, they abandon us; although this is emotionally damaging to us, it would be rational for us to stop believing that that person loves us and rely on that person in the future. Our rational decision to abandon such a person is a response to the emotions we went through. While humans have limited power and other shortcomings, God is considered all-powerful and omnibenevolent. Therefore, if one experiences an extreme case of suffering and cannot find a justification for it, although the emotional toll would be a motive to reassess one’s belief in God, this does not mean that

this is an arational process. The emotional problem of evil has an emotional aspect, and unlike the rational problem of evil, it is not purely argumentative. Nevertheless, suppose one acquires or abandons belief after living through the emotional problem of evil. In that case, one does so after many attempts at interpreting and reinterpreting the event for oneself, trying to make sense of it, and seeking and examining various justifications.

As mentioned earlier, Pritchard has suggested replacing “God exists” with ‘God loves me’ as a hinge commitment. The emotional problem of evil indicates how “God loves me” can also be scrutinized. Facing the evils in our lives and experiencing torment and suffering, one would ask, how can God love me? This is because we would not permit unjustified pain and suffering to loved ones in our understanding of love. In the face of personal pain and suffering and in a struggle to make sense of “God loves me”, the theist might just abandon this hinge commitment. As it were, the person may conclude that the evil she has experienced counts as evidence for the non-existence of a loving God. Among the reasons that one could abandon this hinge commitment is not being able to square the existence of a loving God with the pain and suffering she has gone through. However, the theist may not abandon her hinge commitment and instead try to find a rational justification. For example, one might try to justify it by connecting the pain and suffering one has experienced to wrongdoing and perceiving it as a form of punishment. Or one might resort to some form of skeptical theism and argue that although one does not know why God permits these evils in the world, he has reasons for it, yet this does not amount to the conclusion that God does not love us. Among other possibilities, one can mention that the believer may abandon belief in God’s love but retain his belief in an all-powerful creator. All the above examples, despite their differences, are rational considerations of the love of God in the face of what could count as counter-evidence against it. After all, there is a limit to the amount and kind of pain and suffering that can be deemed compatible with God’s love for humans. Cutting one’s hand while peeling an orange would presumably not require investigating God’s love. However, the pain and suffering that people experience in war, famine, and earthquake can press them to re-examine their belief in God and ask questions such as “How can God love me?” or “Why should I believe that God loves me?”

Pritchard (2012) contends that one reason he can establish “God exists” as a hinge commitment is related to the acquisition and abandonment of hinge commitments. He argues that Wittgenstein’s insights in *On Certainty* are helpful for his quasi-fideism because, in addition to the claim that hinge commitments are immune from rational scrutiny, Wittgenstein also argues that the acquisition and abandonment of hinge commitments do not happen because of rational processes such as weighing evidence but rather arational ones (p. 150). In other words, Pritchard’s reading of Wittgenstein implies a strict distinction between hinge commitments and our normal beliefs, and rationality cannot play a role in acquiring or abandoning hinge commitments. Our considerations on the rational problem of evil indicate that God’s existence nor God’s love are not immune from rational scrutiny, and our considerations in the emotional problem of evil indicate that belief in God could be put to a specific type of test that, following Boncampagni, we can call personal tests. These tests are not “arational” but involve both rational and emotional elements.

Before moving on to the next section, It may be objected that according to Wittgenstein in *Lectures on Religious Belief*, whether one can offer reasons for or against religious belief is secondary and has no bearing on the certainty of the religious believer. This point was made in Wittgenstein’s criticism of Father O’Hara (Wittgenstein 1970, p. 59). Incorporating this point into our discussion, one could say that religious hinge commitments are irrelevant to rational arguments for or against them. As Wittgenstein sees it, Father O’Hara argues that his religious beliefs are based on evidence. Wittgenstein finds this superstitious and argues that religious belief is a passionate commitment; grounding it on reason would

weaken it. Whether people become religious or lose faith based on exposure to rational arguments is not a philosophical question. To determine how different people become religious or lose their faith, we need to conduct psychological and sociological research to determine when and how people convert, abandon, or acquire religious beliefs. However, I have not engaged with this specific question in this paper. There are many ways in which people become religious, including being brought up religious, becoming acquainted with religion in adult life through reading about it, having special experiences, and so on, and not all of them are a result of rational consideration nor based on rational considerations. This paper has, instead, argued that rational arguments can have a bearing on “God exists” or “God loves me” and could lead to doubting, scrutinizing, abandoning, or reinterpreting them. At least regarding such religious “hinge commitments” one cannot argue that they are irrelevant to rational considerations, especially since these rational considerations can be the basis for the individual’s new hinge commitments after experiencing evil.

4. “God” and “Physical Objects”

Another way to defend the idea that belief in God is a hinge commitment, but not considered by Pritchard nor endorsed by him (Pritchard 2015, 2022b), is to refer to the last sentence of the quote from *Culture and Value* mentioned in the discussion on the emotional problem of evil. Wittgenstein contemplates the similarity between “God” and “Object”. This analogy could be another way to defend the idea that God is a hinge commitment. According to Schönbaumsfeld (2010), unlike G.E. Moore, Wittgenstein held that propositions such as “there are physical objects” are not hypotheses nor empirical propositions for which one can offer any evidence; instead, they are philosophical nonsense. Consequently, given the similarity between God and the concept of object, it also makes no sense to say that God does or does not exist. Schönbaumsfeld (2010) argues that no experience and no argument or evidence can help us determine whether God exists or does not exist. By drawing a parallel between the atheist and the skeptic, she argues:

“For just as I cannot demonstrate to the sceptic that physical objects exist, neither can I demonstrate to the atheist that God exists—and the important thing here is to realize that this is not a shortcoming, but rather that it could not be otherwise. This is the whole point of Wittgenstein’s analogy between the concept ‘object’ and the concept ‘God’: both concepts function as principles of judgment within the relevant form of life and, therefore, can’t be ‘demonstrated’ since they must already be presupposed (or denied) in the demonstration itself. Hence, if I am not religious already, nothing will count as ‘evidence for the existence of God’ for me. Given that there is no such thing as a self-validating experience or a self-interpreting rule, the way I perceive certain events will itself already be shaped by my world-picture”.

(p. 168)

Given that I have already argued that there are rational arguments against the existence of God in the previous section, I will not repeat them here again. Instead, I will address a specific concept of God that would allow us to consider God as a hinge commitment.⁶ It should be noted that using Wittgenstein’s insights on hinges for the religious language game is one thing, and his views about God are another. One can use the insights in *On Certainty* to talk about the language game of religion without committing oneself to what Wittgenstein said about God. Wittgenstein did not consider God an omnipotent, omniscient, all-loving creator of the universe; rather, he thought of God as a concept or a grammatical remark that is supposed to guide our use of religious language. As Norman Malcolm (1993) remarks,

Wittgenstein did once say that he could understand the conception of God, in so far as it is involved in one's awareness of one's own sin and guilt. He added that he could not understand the conception of a Creator. I think that the ideas of Divine judgment, forgiveness, and redemption had some intelligibility for him, as being related in his mind to feelings of disgust with himself, an intense desire for purity, and a sense of the helplessness of human beings to make themselves better. But the notion of a being making the world had no intelligibility for him at all.

(pp. 70–71)

Wittgenstein's conception of God, which his followers, e.g., D.Z. Phillips, later developed, has been widely criticized for distorting the religious language game.⁷ In theism, it is commonly believed that God is a conscious person or a person-like being with specific attributes, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, who created and ruled the world. To suggest that God is a "philosophical nonsense" like an "object" would be to distort the theistic language game altogether. John Hick, among other critiques, argued that Wittgensteinian accounts of the religious language offer a radical reinterpretation of religion in a way that this language is stripped of its traditional cosmic and metaphysical components. In such interpretations, [Hick \(1990\)](#) argues:

Not only is human immortality reinterpreted as a quality of this present mortal life, but, more fundamentally, God is no longer thought of as a reality existing independently of human belief and disbelief". (p. 78)

If we accept Wittgenstein's idea that God, like an object, is a concept, or, as Schönbaumsfeld puts it, a piece of philosophical nonsense, then God could be a hinge commitment since rational arguments against it would not be possible. The problem, however, is that theists perceive God as an agent with power, knowledge, and moral status who intervenes in the world. Atheists who argue against the existence of God also operate with this widely accepted concept of God. Given that the analogy between "God" and "object" relies on distorting the theistic definition of God and inventing a new one, it does not seem capable of defending the idea that God in the theistic tradition is a hinge commitment.

5. God: Subjective or Objective Certainty?

Finally, [Pritchard \(2012\)](#) contends that another reason that could convince us to take "God exists" as a hinge commitment is the psychological role of "God" within the language game of religion. Pritchard argues that belief in God differs from normal beliefs in that belief in God has a psychological stability that our normal beliefs lack; this is why when faced with counterevidence, the theist will not give up on belief in God and will try to find ways to justify his belief. (p. 145) Could this characteristic convince us that belief in God is, in fact, a hinge commitment? To clarify this point, we can direct our attention to the distinction Wittgenstein makes between objective and subjective certainty in *On Certainty*,

194. With the word "certain", we express complete conviction, the total absence of doubt, and thereby we seek to convince other people. That is subjective certainty. But when is something objectively certain? When a mistake is not possible. But what kind of possibility is that? Mustn't mistake be logically excluded?

Norman [Malcolm \(1986\)](#) elaborated on the difference between subjective and objective certainty based on this passage in *On Certainty* with an example. In this example, Malcolm differentiates two senses of saying with certainty that the door is locked. When one says that "it is certain that the door is locked", it is not the same as "He is certain that the door is locked". As Malcolm explains it, "in the first case we are saying that *the truth of a proposition is certain*; in the second case that *a person is certain*" (p. 207).

However, as I have tried to show in this paper, there are good reasons not to think of God as an objective certainty. While there seem to be good reasons to abandon the idea that God exists as an objective certainty, there is a place for considering God as a subjective certainty. Although Wittgenstein was mostly interested in exploring objective certainty throughout *On Certainty*, Wittgensteinians who wish to use his insights to explore religion can explore the religious belief in God as a subjective, or rather intersubjective, certainty and see how it differs from other types of subjective and intersubjective certainty.

Wittgenstein was of the idea that religious beliefs “could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of reference” (CV 73). Wittgenstein’s emphasis on passionate commitment is best understood with his emphasis on another characteristic of religious belief, i.e., it seizes you and changes your life, and once you make that decision to commit yourself, you should stay committed, “Here you have to be seized and turned around by something. –Once turned round, you must stay turned round” (CV, 61). Andrejč (2015) takes these remarks to illuminate differences between religious beliefs and hinge certainties. Andrejč (2015) further elaborates that Wittgenstein thought it was likely that a believer would stop being a believer, and “according to Wittgenstein, there are stages of religious life in which conscious determination is necessary to continue to be guided by religious belief” (p. 73), and components such as “persistence, commitment, and will” are involved in religious beliefs (p. 72). These are characteristics of psychological certainties. Traveling between doubt, disbelief, despair, hope, and passionate faith is common among religious believers and non-believers, and considering religious hinges as psychological certainty would allow us to explain them. In contrast, Pritchard’s account of hinge commitments does not seem well equipped to deal with the journeys between doubt and faith, which many believers and non-believers experience.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I examined the components of Duncan Pritchard’s argument in defense of quasi-fideism. The general aim of this paper was to argue that “God exists” and “God loves me” do not qualify as a hinge commitment. Unlike other hinge commitments, belief in God can be tested through rational arguments and the emotional problem of evil. Another possible way to establish God as a hinge commitment is to draw on Wittgenstein’s analogy between “God” and “object”, however, such attempts would distort the core tenets of theism. These considerations indicate the challenges that Pritchard’s idea of quasi-fideism faces. If God’s existence cannot be a hinge commitment, then quasi-fideism is not a tenable position, and the distinction between “religious hinge commitments” and “religious beliefs” should be abandoned. In that case, it would not be unfair to demand evidence and rational support for the major claims made in religion. That is to say, philosophers of religion can stay in the business of offering arguments and weighing evidence for and against God.

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Notes

- ¹ In an earlier paper, Pritchard (2000) draws the parallel between God and the external world’s existence as two hinge commitments and, based on the insight in *On Certainty*, argues that, in both cases, it is impossible to offer a non-circular empirical warrant for one’s belief. Just as showing two hands to the external world skeptic would not convince him that the external world exists, referring to divine revelation and religious experience would not convince a person who is a skeptic concerning God’s existence.

- ² A minority of theists have argued that the evils in our world are not real and are illusions (see [Davies 1992](#)). However, this view has not been taken seriously by most theists and atheists. This is to be contrasted to the privation theories of evil. The privation theory of evil does not argue that evils are illusions, rather, it argues that evil is the absence of good. This view has largely fallen out of favor. Two of the criticisms leveled against this view are as follows: (i) some instances of pain (such as physical pains that result from stimulations in our neurological system) are such that they cannot be categorized as a privation of good, (ii) if it is possible to formulate evil as a privation of good, it is also possible to formulate good as a privation of evil. This creates a symmetric view against the privation of evil with equal explanatory power ([Calder 2007](#)).
- ³ Although there are some disagreements as to which divine attributes are essential, it is widely agreed that omniscience and omnipotence are essential divine attributes.
- ⁴ For an overview of incompatible attributes, see [Drange \(1998\)](#).
- ⁵ 609. Supposing we met people who did not regard that as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle (and for that we consider them primitive). Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it? If we call this “wrong” are we not using our language-game as a base from which to combat theirs?
- ⁶ I do not intend to imply that [Schönbaumsfeld \(2010\)](#) endorses the specific reading of hinges, i.e., hinge commitments, proposed by Pritchard.
- ⁷ D.Z. Phillips was a prominent Wittgensteinian who mainly focused on religion. By using and developing Wittgenstein’s philosophy and views on God, he concludes that “Human consciousness is embedded in a context of a natural and social environment and bodily action, and our talk about human consciousness presupposes this context. *Therefore*, the notion of an unembodied divine consciousness is incoherent. . . Now, we have already excluded the idea of God’s having a physical body. It thus becomes evident that whatever else he (or she, or it) may be, God is not any sort of conscious entity at all” ([Hasker 2007](#), p. 157).

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