

FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS AND PERSUADING WITH HUMOR: REFLECTIONS INSPIRED BY REID AND KIERKEGAARD

Daniel M. Johnson and Adam C. Pelser

The most important and common solution to the Pyrrhonian skeptic's regress problem is foundationalism. Reason-giving must stop somewhere, argues the foundationalist, and the fact that it does stop (at foundational, basic, non-inferentially justified beliefs) does not threaten knowledge or justification. The foundationalist has a problem, though; while foundationalism might adequately answer *skepticism*, it does not allow for a satisfying reply to the *skeptic*. The feature that makes a belief foundationally justified is not the sort of thing that can be given to another as a reason. Thus, if foundationalism is true, we can only fall silent in the face of a challenge to our epistemically basic beliefs. Call this the practical or existential problem of foundationalism. Thomas Reid offers a rather stunning solution to this problem. Humor ("ridicule"), he thinks, can be used to defend basic beliefs which cannot be defended by argument. We develop and defend an account on which Reid is correct and emotions such as rueful amusement can be invoked to rationally persuade the skeptic to accept foundationally justified beliefs. Then, inspired by Kierkegaard, we extend the account to foundational moral and religious beliefs.

[W]e may observe, that opinions which contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this, that they are not only false, but absurd; and, to discountenance absurdity, nature has given us a particular emotion—to wit, that of ridicule—which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, either in opinion or practice. This weapon, when properly applied, cuts with as keen an edge as argument. Nature has furnished us with the first to expose absurdity, as with the last to refute error. Both are well fitted for their several offices, and are equally friendly to truth, when properly used.

— Thomas Reid¹

¹*Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* [henceforth *EIP*], ed. Baruch Brody (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T Press, 1969), VI.iv: 606–607.



The most important and common solution to the Pyrrhonian skeptic's regress problem is foundationalism. Reason-giving must stop somewhere, argues the foundationalist, and the fact that it does stop (at foundational, basic, non-inferentially justified beliefs) does not threaten knowledge or justification. The foundationalist has a problem, though; while foundationalism might adequately answer *skepticism*, it does not allow for a satisfying reply to the *skeptic*. At some point, when faced with a challenge to an epistemically basic belief, one must simply fall silent, resigned to the fact that one's non-inferential justification for one's belief which is called into question by the skeptic is not communicable, not the sort of thing that can be given as a reason. Peter Klein takes this to be a theoretical problem for foundationalism; if one is to remain justified, he thinks, one must be able to cite one's reason for believing as one does.² We disagree that the foundationalist's inability to defend basic beliefs with arguments or reasons in the face of a skeptical challenge is a theoretical problem for foundationalism because we don't see any reason to think that epistemic justification requires the ability to justify oneself in conversation (even with oneself). The disparity between the two simply reflects the fact that pursuit of the goal of truth (epistemic justification) can come apart from the pursuit of social goals like agreement (rational discourse). However, we do think that this peculiar inability poses a very significant *practical* or *existential* problem for everyone, assuming that foundationalism is true. Sometimes we *want* to be able to reply to a skeptical challenge to our foundational beliefs, most likely because we want to persuade the other person and achieve agreement with him.

Thomas Reid offers a rather stunning solution to this existential problem: when the skeptic challenges a foundational belief, what Reid calls a deliverance of common sense, we can reply by *ridiculing* the skeptic. Ridicule, Reid thinks, may succeed where argument cannot. And Reid isn't alone in this surprising opinion. Søren Kierkegaard similarly thinks that humor can convince us of truths which argument is powerless to support. The truths Kierkegaard has in mind, though, are important ethical and religious truths that are not included in Reid's first principles.

We think Reid and Kierkegaard are on to something. We will argue that, given a controversial thesis about the epistemic power of emotions, Reid and Kierkegaard are correct in believing that ridicule, humor, and the emotions they evoke can be employed in an attempt to persuade the skeptic to accept properly basic or foundational beliefs. The persuasion effected by this humorous defense of basic beliefs, moreover, can be a rational persuasion, though it does not involve giving the skeptic new evidence or arguments for the beliefs in question. Humor, therefore, can serve as a solution to the existential problem of foundationalism. It can

²See, for example, Peter Klein, "Infinitism is the Solution to the Epistemic Regress Problem," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 131–140.

provide us with a way to reply to a skeptical challenge to our foundational beliefs that involves neither searching for arguments in vain nor merely falling silent.³

In the first section, we will sketch the presupposition of our account, the thesis that emotions can be a source of justification. In the second section, we will show how this thesis supports Reid's view and enables humor, ridicule, and related techniques to be used to defend foundational beliefs in the face of a skeptical challenge. In the third and final section, we will show how the account can be extended to make sense of Kierkegaard's use of humor to defend ethical and religious truths which can't be defended by argument.

A quick disclaimer: while we do think our account is for the most part consistent with the views of both Reid and Kierkegaard, we are far more interested in finding, stating, and supporting a plausible version of the view (that humor may reasonably be employed in defense of basic beliefs) than we are in stating the precise version of the view held by Reid and Kierkegaard themselves. For the most part, then, we will concern ourselves with developing the view directly rather than with historical exegesis.⁴

I. Presupposition: The Epistemic Power of Emotion

Our account depends on the controversial thesis that emotional experiences are capable of serving as justifying reasons for belief (henceforth, the justificatory thesis). Put a bit differently, emotion is a (potential) source of epistemic justification. Though it is far from being an accepted view among philosophers of emotions, the justificatory thesis, or variations thereof, has been suggested and supported by a growing number of philosophers in recent literature.⁵ In this section, we'll specify what is involved in this claim, briefly point out some reasons for thinking that it is

³Reid's "ridicule" strategy is very likely not the only solution for the existential problem of foundationalism. There might be other ways to persuade a skeptic of a disputed foundational belief without giving the skeptic new, non-circular arguments for that belief (which would result in the skeptic forming an inferentially justified belief rather than a foundational one). Reid lists a number of strategies which may complement the ridicule strategy; see Reid, *EIP*, VI.iv: 604–613. For a development of one such strategy, involving rationally persuasive circular arguments, see Daniel M. Johnson, "Skepticism and Circular Arguments," *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 3 (2013), 253–270, and Johnson, "The Sense of Deity and Begging the Question with Ontological and Cosmological Arguments," *Faith and Philosophy* 26 (2009), 87–94.

⁴Showing that Kierkegaard held any view is a demanding exegetical task because of the literary complexity of his authorship, especially because of his use of pseudonyms, so space is more efficiently used if we neglect most of those exegetical concerns.

⁵See, e.g., Linda T. Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chap. 2, and *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 4; Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chap. 3; Sabine Döring, "Explaining Action by Emotion," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003), 229–230; Terrence Cuneo, "Signs of Value: Reid on the Evidential Role of Feelings in Moral Judgment," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14 (2006), 69–91; Ralph Wedgewood, *The Nature of Normativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 10.

true, and then discuss the consequences for the use of emotion in persuasion. We will be brief, though, because our ultimate aim is not to give a full defense of the epistemic power of emotions but to show how, if it is granted, it is possible to use humor to defend basic beliefs.⁶

On the justificatory thesis, emotions are, epistemically speaking, unjustified justifiers (though, as we will see below, it is nevertheless appropriate to speak of emotions as in some sense justified or unjustified, rational or irrational). The justificatory thesis is not the claim that an agent can form a justified belief on the basis of an inference from her awareness of her emotional states, but rather the claim that emotions themselves can confer justification on beliefs formed non-inferentially out of (or on the basis of) emotional experience, as, for example, sense perceptions can confer justification on sense perceptual beliefs. For example, my emotion of compassion felt at the situation of a homeless child may justify me in believing that it is important that this child flourish (that she has worth). My emotion of compassion can justify this belief even if I do not have any reason other than the emotion to believe this and even if I have never thought much about the reliability of my emotion of compassion and so have no independent reason to think my emotion reliable.

While it is arguably compatible with various theories of emotion, the justificatory thesis seems to fit most naturally with accounts of emotions according to which emotions are a kind of perceptual state, most often (perhaps always) of *evaluative* properties of situations. On such views, emotions have propositional content and are a kind of seeming state (i.e., the object of my fear really *seems dangerous* to me in my fear). The claim of the justificatory thesis is, therefore, that emotional experiences (seemings) can and sometimes do justify the beliefs to which emotions give rise and which, at least in the typical case, share the propositional content of the emotions.

Since this view of the epistemic power of emotion is a minority position in the history of philosophy, we'll briefly point to a few reasons to accept it. First, there are cases which seem to support the claim that emotion is a basic epistemic source—the compassion example a few paragraphs back is one such case.⁷ Second, it seems we need emotion to be a source of epistemic justification if we are to have all the justified beliefs we take ourselves to have. Were emotion not such a source, much of our aesthetic, moral, and other evaluative knowledge would be undermined. As Linda Zagzebski has compellingly argued, we have a tendency to trust our emotions by forming beliefs on the basis of them.⁸ While some such emotion-based beliefs are no doubt unjustified, others of our emotion-based

⁶The defense of the justificatory thesis we offer here is developed more fully in Adam C. Pelser, "Emotion, Evaluative Perception, and Epistemic Justification," in *Emotion and Value*, ed. Sabine Roeser and Cain Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁷For some other examples, see the opening paragraphs of Cuneo, "Signs of Value," 69.

⁸Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, chap. 4.

beliefs seem to be formed in much the same, epistemically legitimate, way as our sense perceptual beliefs—i.e., we have a conceptually-rich, propositionally-structured experience of the world and we affirm that experience in an act of judgment or belief. One way we come to believe justifiedly (and, indeed, to know) that sunsets are beautiful, or that generosity is admirable, or that friendship is valuable, or that slavery is unjust, is that we have particular emotions in response to situations involving sunsets, generosity, friendship, and slavery. Perhaps we could theoretically come to know these truths by testimony, but then there would have to be an original testifier and an account of that testifier's original perceptions of these truths, and in any case surely testimony is not the primary way most of us in fact come to know that sunsets are beautiful. While we do not have space to develop these arguments in any depth here, our aim is simply to show that the position is at least *prima facie* defensible; that is enough to license our use of it to give an account of the use of ridicule and humor in defense of basic beliefs.

Another kind of support for this thesis about the epistemic power of emotion is the absence of good reason to reject it. The major objection to the thesis is the simple observation that emotions are so often unreliable; surely many of our obviously inaccurate emotions do not do much of anything to justify beliefs. We grant this fact, but we don't think it threatens the justificatory thesis. The internalist about justification can simply point to defeaters to account for this. For many of our emotions, we have good reason to think that they are unreliable or mistaken and so have a defeater for the justification the emotion would otherwise provide. This doesn't threaten the justificatory thesis, though, since foundational justification is defeasible. The externalist about justification can appeal to defeaters as well, but may also account for the failure of many emotions to provide justification by noting that certain emotions are, for certain people, unreliable or that the emotional faculties in question are malfunctioning. This doesn't threaten the justificatory thesis either, because the externalist will make the very same point about other basic sources of justification like sense perception. Sources of justification provide only defeasible justification and, if externalists are right, they provide justification only when operating reliably (or functioning properly, and so on).⁹ The justification provided by emotions might be more fragile than that provided by other sources—that is, it might be defeated more often or emotions might be less reliable on the whole—but there is no reason to think that this fragility cancels out all the justification provided by emotions. There are at least some emotions, in some people, which are quite reliable and for which

⁹Incidentally, the fact that the internalist and externalist can make different replies to this objection shows that the justificatory thesis—the claim that emotion is a source of justification—is neutral between internalist and externalist accounts of justification. (Strongly classical foundationalist internalist views, though, such as Laurence Bonjour's and Richard Fumerton's, might rule out the thesis. More moderate kinds of internalism are able to accommodate it.)

we have no defeating evidence.¹⁰ As Robert Roberts and Jay Wood have argued, virtually the whole range of virtues, both intellectual and moral, are in part dispositions to have the right emotions toward the right objects at the right time and to the right degree.¹¹ Insofar as some people possess some virtues, therefore, the unreliability objection does not undermine the justificatory thesis of emotion.

A second objection to the justificatory thesis is that emotion cannot be a source of justification since only *justified* emotions are capable of justifying the beliefs to which they give rise.¹² This objection fails to undermine the justificatory thesis because whatever kind of justification an emotion admits of—let's call it emotional justification—there is no reason to suppose that it is either epistemic justification for the emotion's propositional content (which is the proposition for which the emotion provides epistemic justification) or epistemic justification for the claim that the emotion is reliable. These are the only ways that the fact that emotions can be justified could undermine the justificatory thesis. So we need not think that the epistemic justification provided by the emotion reduces to the justification for the emotion itself.

What, then, *is* emotional justification? Here is one suggestion. It seems to have two components. First, if your beliefs about the situation which you then perceive emotionally are themselves (epistemically) unjustified, then your emotion is not justified. For example, if you irrationally believe that someone hit you, your angry response to the situation is not justified because your beliefs about the facts of the situation are not justified. Second, if your emotion is not an accurate perception of the situation as you justifiedly believe or perceive it to be, your emotion is not justified. For example, suppose you justifiedly believe someone to have hit you; your emotion of anger might still be unjustified in case it gets the evaluative properties of the situation wrong—if, for example, it was a four-year-old child who hit you and your anger is completely out of proportion to the offense.¹³ So, for your emotion to be justified (1) your beliefs about the situation which the emotion perceives must be (epistemically) justified, and (2) the emotion must be accurate to the view of the situation your evidence

¹⁰Conversely, there are plenty of sense perceptions which are not reliable and for which we have plenty of defeaters—good examples are perceptions of senses other than vision, which are often quite underdeveloped.

¹¹Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, "Proper Function, Emotion, and Virtues of the Intellect," *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004), 3–24.

¹²For perhaps the best statement of this objection in the recent literature, see Michael Brady, "Emotions, Perceptions and Reasons," in *Morality and the Emotions*, ed. Carla Bagnoli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Pelsner offers a detailed reply to Brady in "Emotion, Evaluative Perception, and Epistemic Justification."

¹³Notice that this is not to say that the emotion must be accurate to be justified. The emotion need merely be accurate to the situation as you justifiedly believe it to be; you could be justified and be wrong about the situation. Imagine the mother of a young soldier grieving over the reported death of her son, only to discover later that her son had been found alive. Her grief was clearly justified, even though it was inaccurate, because it was accurate to the situation that her evidence pointed to.

supports.¹⁴ What this analysis suggests is that while emotional justification might depend on prior epistemic justification for the beliefs on which the emotion is based (e.g., “he hit me”), when an emotion justifies a belief, that belief is a higher-order evaluation of the situation, which is not justified independently of the emotion (e.g., “he is morally culpable for hitting me and deserves to be punished for his offense”).¹⁵ So while the epistemic justification provided by the emotion may be dependent on the emotion’s being (emotionally) justified, it does not reduce to the emotion’s justification.¹⁶ However this suggestion fares, it is far from obvious that emotional justification is the sort of thing that would threaten the justificatory thesis.

So far we have presented a presupposition of our attempt to make sense out of Reid’s use of ridicule—the claim that emotion can be a basic source of justification—and merely sketched some of the reasons to accept the claim and replies to a couple of major objections to the claim. If we accept this thesis, it should be obvious that emotion can be of use in attempting to persuade others (though we haven’t shown that it is of use in defending basic beliefs, and we will not show how this is possible until the next section). Here we’d like to make two significant points about the use of emotion in argument. First, like a sense perception, you can’t simply use an emotion as a premise in an argument. You could use the fact that somebody has a particular emotion, but that (testimonial) belief doesn’t have the justifying power of the emotion itself. So, if you want to use emotion to persuade someone through emotion, you need to get them to have the emotion (just as if you wanted to persuade someone through a sense perception, you’d need to get them to have the sense perception)—we’ll call this, following Alan Brinton, *evoking* the emotion.¹⁷ There are many ways to evoke an emotion; one way is to describe the situation vividly that you want your interlocutors to emotionally perceive in a certain light and hope that they have the right emotion. This is analogous to *pointing* in order to draw your interlocutors’ attention in order to get them to have a certain sense perception. After you’ve evoked the right emotion, you can

¹⁴Emotions are sometimes assessed as unjustified according to a third criterion, i.e., when you have overriding reason to believe it is inaccurate. We do not think this is a condition on emotional justification. Instead this is a case where you have overriding *reason to believe* that your emotion is unjustified since you have reason to believe it is inaccurate (and accuracy to the situation as you believe it to be is a condition on emotional justification). You therefore judge it to be unjustified. Merely having reason to believe that an emotion is unjustified does not entail that it is in fact unjustified.

¹⁵Roberts provides a very helpful and thorough discussion of the propositional contents characteristic of a wide range of emotion types in his *Emotions*.

¹⁶Strictly speaking, the justification provided by the emotion might be dependent only on the beliefs about the situation being epistemically justified—dependent only on condition (1) for emotional justification being fulfilled, not condition (2). Emotion is therefore parallel to testimony: if they are both basic sources of justification, they are *dependent* basic sources, since the justification they create is dependent on other beliefs being justified though not reducible to the justification of those other beliefs.

¹⁷Alan Brinton, “Pathos and the ‘Appeal to Emotion’: An Aristotelian Analysis,” in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 5 (1988), 207–219.

then use the belief justified by the emotion as a premise in an argument—we'll call this, again following Brinton, *invoking* the emotion to establish a conclusion.

Second, the goal of rational discourse restricts the class of emotions to which a responsible arguer can appeal and the strategies the arguer can use to evoke them. The goal of rational discourse is not persuasion at all costs, but *rational* persuasion. You do not just want your interlocutor to agree with you; you want your interlocutor to justifiably agree with you. This imposes limits on the emotions to which you should appeal, and there are norms which govern this sort of appeal. One such norm is that you should appeal only to emotions you justifiably believe to be accurate because you should not knowingly mislead your interlocutor. There are more norms governing this practice, but it would be a digression to attempt to identify all of the relevant norms here.¹⁸

We think that Reid and Kierkegaard both would be at least friendly to the notion that emotion can be a source of epistemic justification (or rational belief). Reid's position is hard to pin down for a number of reasons. For one thing, it is exegetically difficult to determine precisely his view of the relationship between emotions and feelings, affections, passions, and other such terms, and it is difficult to see how his use of these terms line up with our use of the term "emotion."¹⁹ For another thing, once the exegetical smoke clears, Reid may end up embracing a complex, limited version of the justificatory thesis, since he may think that only some of the things we call emotions are the sorts of things which can provide epistemic justification.²⁰ Nevertheless, the passage on ridicule itself (the epigraph above) is probably the clearest passage available and it supports the claim that emotion (at least the emotion of ridicule) is a source of justification.²¹ Kierkegaard, for his part, really never uses the language of contemporary epistemology and so never straightforwardly says that emotion is a basic epistemic source, but in light of his suspicion of reason and his appreciation of the ability of emotions, such as rueful amusement, to help us to the truth, it would be surprising if he were to denigrate the epistemic power

¹⁸A further investigation and rigorous statement of when emotions should and should not be used will yield an account of the distinction between fallacious and legitimate appeals to emotion in argument.

¹⁹Terence Cuneo's discussion ("Signs of Value") is hard to map onto our thesis precisely because we would need to specify the exact relations between these various terms (emotion, feeling, affection, passion, etc.). Nevertheless, much of what Cuneo says could be taken as support for the justificatory thesis.

²⁰For a discussion of some of the complexities that are relevant here, see Sabine Roeser, "Reid's Account of the Moral Emotions," *Reid Studies* 4 (2001), 19–32.

²¹There are other passages which suggest that Reid, at least in his better moments, sees emotion as a basic source of justification. For instance, he talks about certain emotions being perceptions of beauty—Reid, *EIP*, VIII.iv: 779–808. Reid also allows that emotion can be a source of belief (see Cuneo, "Signs of Value," 74) and that emotions can be reliable indicators or "signs" of the value of potential objects of thought—see Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* [henceforth *EAP*], ed. Baruch Brody (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1969), III.ii–vi: 183–185; cf. *EAP* II.iii: 76–80.

of emotion. So it is plausible to read both our authors as at least friendly to the presupposition of our account of their “humor” strategy for defending basic beliefs. In any case, though, we are more interested in giving a plausible version of the view than getting the views of Reid and Kierkegaard exactly right, and so we’ll leave off our exegesis.

II. *The (Reidian) Account: Defending Basic Beliefs with Humor*

Emotion, as we have seen, can be appealed to directly in an argument. You can evoke an emotion, and then invoke it (i.e., its propositional content) in support of other claims. Emotion can persuade more indirectly, though, and it is this indirect way of appealing to emotion in defense of a belief which makes humor suited for use in defense of properly basic beliefs. What follows is an account of this indirect persuasive use of emotion and an application to basic beliefs.

The first step in the account is to notice a subset of the facts we can come to know on the basis of emotions: evaluations of behaviors. We can perceive by way of emotions whether a behavior (ours or another’s) is shameful, or admirable, or silly, or ridiculous, or blameworthy, or embarrassing, or gracious, or dangerous, or excellent, or respectable, or surpassingly great.²² Some of these evaluative facts about behaviors can give us reason to change the behavior. So, for example, if I come to know that my behavior is shameful on the basis of my shame, I have reason to stop my behavior. Likewise, if I come to know that my behavior is silly or ridiculous on the basis of my rueful amusement or embarrassment, I have reason to change the behavior.

The second step in the account is to notice that there are distinctively *intellectual* behaviors, and that two of those intellectual behaviors are *believings* and *withholdings* of belief. So my emotions can justify me in believing evaluative facts about my believings and withholdings. And, again, some of those evaluative facts give me reason to change my (in this case intellectual) behavior. If I come to perceive emotionally that my believing or withholding is ridiculous or absurd or embarrassing, then I have reason to change my behavior (from believing to withholding or disbelief, or from withholding to belief). This reason for action is a defeasible reason, but it is a reason nonetheless.

The final step is to notice that all this applies to basic beliefs as well as to non-basic beliefs. Withholding or accepting a foundational belief can be evaluated in all the same ways other beliefs can, as admirable or ridiculous or embarrassing. Our emotions can give us reason to change even our intellectual behaviors which are epistemically basic—give us reason to abandon beliefs which are basic, or to stop withholding epistemically

²²Some of the emotions that perceive some of these properties are amusement, shame, admiration, embarrassment, guilt, gratitude, fear, and awe. Not all emotionally-perceived properties for which we have names correspond to emotions for which we have names.

basic belief. In fact, withholding assent to a properly basic belief is more likely than withholdings of other sorts to be ridiculous or silly.

The strategy for using humor to defend an epistemically basic belief, then, is this. When the skeptic challenges your epistemically basic belief, find a way to get the skeptic to emotionally perceive the fact that he is being ridiculous (or shameful, or guilty, or silly, and so on) in withholding his assent to the proposition. For example, if the basic belief in question is the existence of something in the external world, get the skeptic to realize he's being ridiculous in withholding his belief in the hand he sees in front of his face—ridiculous in refusing to believe his eyes. Then, once he's had the emotion and believed on the basis of the emotion that he is being ridiculous, show him that this implies that he should change his behavior. (In many cases, it is probably unnecessary to show that the evaluation gives a reason for a change in behavior; your interlocutor will probably realize that immediately.) It is possible, then, to get the skeptic to stop withholding assent to a basic belief by getting him to have the right sort of emotional perception of his intellectual behavior of withholding.

There are four important points to note about this sort of persuasion. First, this persuasion is in an important sense *indirect*. The emotion doesn't give any reason to think that the proposition which you are persuaded to accept is true, but only gives you reason to stop withholding your assent to it. It gives you reason to think that it is true that your withholding assent to the proposition is ridiculous, not that the proposition itself is true. In other words, the emotion doesn't give you epistemic justification for believing the proposition, only practical reason to believe the proposition. If the proposition is *epistemically* justified for you, then it receives its epistemic justification from some other source than the emotion which persuaded you to stop withholding assent to it. It follows from this that when the skeptic is persuaded by your ridicule to stop withholding assent to the challenged foundational proposition, that proposition *remains basic* for him; it isn't epistemically justified by the emotion-based belief which persuaded him. For example, consider the skeptic who is persuaded by your ridicule to stop withholding belief in the hand in front of his face. His external-world belief is still basic and epistemically justified by the evidence of his senses. The emotion he has as the result of your ridicule (perhaps embarrassment, perhaps a rueful amusement) epistemically justifies only the judgment that he is being ridiculous in withholding his belief; it doesn't imply anything about whether there is a hand in the external world. So his external-world belief can't be epistemically justified by the emotion. The emotion only gets him to stop ignoring the evidence which *does* epistemically justify the belief (or, in more externalist terms, gets him to stop malfunctioning, or stop acting contrary to intellectual virtue, or so on).²³

²³Another way of putting this is to say that the emotion serves as a subjective defeater-defeater. The skeptic has a subjective defeater for his external-world belief—his groundless

Second, as should be clear already, there is a range of emotions which could serve this function of defending basic beliefs. Any emotion which gives a reason to change behavior will serve. Reid cites the emotion of ridicule, but we think it is more natural to treat ridicule as a strategy for evoking an emotion, an instance of a more general family of strategies that fall under the broad category of "humor," than as an emotion itself. We suspect that the emotion Reid had in mind is what we have been calling rueful amusement. When one is confronted with one's own foolishness or silliness through ridicule, especially when the ridicule is legitimately funny and when it is applied gently and from a friend, one sees oneself as amusingly in error. Amusement is generally a pleasant emotion that involves a perception of its object as being incongruous in some comical way.²⁴ Insofar as amusement is a pleasant affective state, mere amusement at oneself will not serve to motivate change in behavior. Indeed, recognizing that one has told a funny joke or done something legitimately funny, but not at all embarrassing or shameful, typically motivates more behavior of the same kind. If the rhetorical strategy outlined above is to work, therefore, the pleasant affective "feel" of amusement must be tinged by the negative evaluation of one's own fault or imperfection.

In fact, we think that it is precisely in this affective tension between the pleasantness of amusement and the pain of self-criticism that the rhetorical strength of ridicule and other types of critical humor lies. When a person is made to laugh at herself, she is invited, as it were, into the third-person perspective of the other and is encouraged, even if only momentarily, to let her self-protective guard down in order to see her silliness as comical. Yet, depending on the severity of the error and her degree of sensitivity to the importance of not committing errors of that kind, her amusement at herself will be tinged with a bit of sadness, guilt, regret, shame, embarrassment, or anger at herself—she will see her error not merely as comic, but, to use a phrase Kierkegaard was fond of, as "tragic-comic." It is these negative emotions which give her a reason to change her behavior. In fact, one could employ the rhetorical strategy outlined above by evoking these negative emotions alone through harsher appeals than humor (or through a kind of vitriolic ridicule).²⁵ While it might sometimes be appropriate to evoke such negative emotions through harsh means, however, gentler and truly amusing jokes made at another's expense, perhaps with a friendly nudge of the elbow, can soften the blow of the criticism and can help the

doubt of his senses. The emotion serves to defeat this subjective defeater, but doesn't replace the senses as the source of justification for the external-world belief. Consider the following analogy: a statue is standing on a pedestal; someone throws a rock at the statue to knock it down, and I throw a second rock which deflects the first rock. The emotion in this sort of persuasion is like the second rock: it serves to deflect the first rock (the skeptic's groundless doubt of his senses), not to replace the pedestal (the evidence of the senses) as the support for the statue (as the justifier of the belief).

²⁴Cf. Roberts's analysis of amusement in *Emotions*, 300–308.

²⁵We should note that not all negative evaluations of behavior give reason to change the behavior.

person being ridiculed to feel as though she need not fully identify with the silly or ridiculous behavior. By seeing her own behavior as a bit ridiculous, she is already distancing herself from that behavior. The tactful ridiculer thus non-threateningly invites the object of ridicule to see the folly of her ways while at the same time feeling respected as one who is capable of recognizing that folly and who need not be personally defined by it. So, while the range of emotions that can be employed in defense of basic beliefs is broader than those evoked through humor, the humor family of emotions makes up a large part of that range and has a persuasive strength that more purely negative emotions lack.

Third, just as there are multiple emotions that can be evoked to persuade a skeptic to give up resisting a foundational belief, so too there are multiple "humor" strategies which can be used to evoke those emotions. Satire with all its varied techniques (telling jokes, "making fun," telling stories, straightforward ridicule, and so on) is aimed at getting people to evaluate (emotionally) and change their behaviors, and so these techniques can be applied specifically to the intellectual behavior of skepticism about foundational beliefs. Reid himself uses sarcasm to good effect:

I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes my way; I step into a dirty kennel; and, after twenty such wise and rational actions, I am taken up and clapt into a mad-house. Now, I confess I would rather make one of the credulous fools whom Nature imposes upon, than of those wise and rational philosophers who resolve to with-hold assent at all this expence.²⁶

One particularly interesting strategy is the telling of a story designed to evoke an emotional response from someone and then get him to see himself in the story and transfer that emotional response to himself. The prophet Nathan's confrontation with David is an example of this strategy.²⁷ To apply this strategy to the defense of basic beliefs, think of the many funny stories one could tell about genuine external-world skeptics trying to get around in the world (Reid's quote above contains some examples). Of course, the effectiveness of the indirect method of persuasion by emotion will depend on the rhetorical skill of the anti-skeptic, i.e., his ability to evoke the right sort of emotions in the skeptic, which will involve insight into the emotional makeup of the skeptic and skill in the strategies for evoking emotions. As Reid says, "some have from nature a happier talent for ridicule than others."²⁸

²⁶Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, edited by Derek R. Brookes (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 170. This is an example of Reid's use of his own strategy of ridicule, but it is sandwiched between examples of other strategies he thinks can be employed in defense of basic beliefs—what he calls *ad hominem* and *reductio ad absurdum* arguments (see Reid, *EIP* VI.iv: 608).

²⁷2 Samuel 12:1–9.

²⁸Reid, *EIP* VI.iv, 606.

Fourth, there are constraints on this sort of persuasion. This strategy can easily become a blameworthy sort of emotional manipulation if the anti-skeptic intentionally plays on emotional vulnerabilities of the skeptic. Recall that the goal of rational discourse is not simply persuasion but rational persuasion. This means that the anti-skeptic employing this humor strategy should probably seek to evoke in his interlocutor only those emotions which will actually result in justified beliefs (about the evaluative properties of his behavior) and so give him *good* reason to change his intellectual behavior. This rules out appeals to highly unreliable and out-of-control emotions because the skeptic will generally have good reason to distrust those emotions. Also, the anti-skeptic should want to evoke only emotions he has reason to believe are accurate; he shouldn't want the skeptic to be embarrassed about his skepticism unless that skepticism is genuinely ridiculous. In short, this sort of persuasion legitimately works only on someone whose emotions are sufficiently well-formed to be used to correct intellectual behavior.²⁹

We conclude that, given the thesis that emotions can be a source of epistemic justification, it is possible to employ ridicule and humor more broadly (as well as appeals to other emotions) in defense of epistemically basic beliefs in the face of a skeptical challenge. Humor, therefore, can provide a solution to the existential problem posed by the truth of foundationalism.

We certainly acknowledge that we have developed this account far beyond Reid's own account.³⁰ His treatment is remarkably brief; he begins by stating the problem of foundationalism, that "men who really love truth, and are open to conviction, may differ about first principles," and asks "has nature left him [the person involved in disagreement over first principles] destitute of any rational means by which he may be enabled, either to correct his judgment if it be wrong, or to confirm it if it be right? I hope not."³¹ He then gives a number of ways to resolve disagreement over first principles, the second of which is the "ridicule" strategy developed here.³² He acknowledges the fact that ridicule can sometimes be inaccurate or absent when absurdity is present, and concludes that this doesn't threaten ridicule's place.

We really disagree with Reid only in one respect: we think that more intellectual behaviors than just departures from first principles (withholdings of basic beliefs) are absurd and worthy of ridicule, and so ridicule

²⁹Some precision: the external-world skeptic persuaded to stop being a skeptic on the basis of an emotion he shouldn't have trusted may still end up with a justified external-world belief, but he will have gotten there because of an unjustified process of reasoning about his intellectual behaviors.

³⁰For a treatment of the relation of Reid's views on humor to the surrounding philosophical context, see Giovanni B. Grandi, "Reid on Ridicule and Common Sense," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 6 (2008), 71–90.

³¹Reid, *EIP* VI.iv: 603–604.

³²Concerning Reid's other strategies, see footnotes 3 and 26 above.

has a wider use than in defense of foundational beliefs. Other than that, though, our account is simply a development of Reid's view. Our account here comes into conflict with Michael Bergmann's reading of Reid's view of ridicule.³³ Bergmann thinks that, on Reid's view, the various faculties produce non-inferentially justified beliefs, and that the emotion of ridicule (which Bergmann identifies as "the faculty of common sense") is a distinct faculty which generates non-inferentially justified beliefs in the general reliability of the other faculties (he thinks the various first principles Reid lists just amount to these sorts of beliefs). Our view is somewhat different: the emotion of ridicule (or, rather, the emotions evoked by ridicule and humor) don't justify belief in the first principles or the reliability of our other faculties; instead, it justifies the belief that *departures* from the first principles (that is, *refusals* to trust our faculties and assent to the non-inferentially justified beliefs they generate) are absurd or ridiculous—this is an evaluation of an intellectual behavior which Reid explicitly distinguishes from the claim that the first principle is true. Once we realize (on the basis of emotion) that refusals to act intellectually in accordance with certain principles are absurd, we may infer from this that these principles have a kind of privileged status and maybe even that they are probably true, but then we are justified in believing them on the basis of inference, not emotion.

Here are a couple of reasons to accept our view over Bergmann's. First, it is clear from the context that Reid sees ridicule as being useful because of its persuasive ability—its ability to patch up disagreements over first principles. If Bergmann is right and ridicule only generates non-inferentially justified beliefs in the reliability of our faculties, it wouldn't be of much use in a dialogue because the people who need to be persuaded are people who are *resisting* the deliverances of common sense (resisting taking their faculties as reliable). The very faculty being resisted will not be of much use in breaking down that resistance; any appeal to it will be subject to the very problem of foundationalism Reid sets out to solve. Our view, however, accounts for the usefulness of ridicule in helping to break down resistance to any basic belief, whether the particular beliefs justified by the faculties or the general beliefs justified non-inferentially by the faculty of common sense.

Second, and most importantly, is it really plausible to think that the emotions generated by ridicule can justify someone in believing that his senses are reliable? Surely it justifies him in thinking only that some intellectual behavior—the refusal to trust one's senses or perhaps the refusal to accept the general principle that one's senses are reliable—is absurd or ridiculous. In fact, Reid explicitly says that ridicule is fitted for discerning absurdity; he does not say or imply that it is fitted for discerning reliability of faculties. The evaluative proposition belief in which this emotion justi-

³³Michael Bergmann, "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2004), 722–723.

fies simply does not include the content of the first principles. He may infer from this absurdity that he should trust his senses, and may even infer from this that his senses are reliable. (Though we doubt this—we think he only gets practical reason to trust his senses, not epistemic justification for thinking his senses are actually reliable. If he is epistemically justified in believing that claim, it must come from another source.) Bergmann may be right that there is a faculty which generates non-inferentially justified beliefs in the general reliability of our other faculties, but ridicule is not that faculty.³⁴

III. The (Kierkegaardian) Extension of the Account: Religious and Ethical Truths

Reid isn't the only prominent philosopher to endorse the use of humor to defend beliefs which can't be supported by argument. Søren Kierkegaard extensively uses humor to persuade people to embrace beliefs he adamantly refuses to support with argument. He thinks that humor is tremendously important for facilitating transitions into new patterns of existence, the inhabitation of which includes embracing beliefs which cannot be supported by arguments. The foundational beliefs Kierkegaard uses humor to support, though, are somewhat different than Reid's. Kierkegaard is most interested in important ethical and religious beliefs. Kierkegaard therefore represents an extension of Reid's use of humor into the realm of ethical and religious truths.³⁵ In this section, we'll show how the account developed in the last section can be extended in the way Kierkegaard wants.

All that is needed to license this extension is the claim that certain ethical and religious truths are foundational in much the way that external-world beliefs are foundational. The most sophisticated and popular contemporary expression of this sort of claim is Reformed epistemology, inspired originally by John Calvin.³⁶ Calvin thinks that foundational religious beliefs come from two sources: the sense of deity, which all people

³⁴Reid calls both the particular deliverances of the faculties (like my belief that there is a cup in front of me) and the general beliefs in the reliability of those faculties (like my belief that I should trust my senses) first principles. It is difficult to understand Reid here; what is he up to? One way is to go with Bergmann and claim that there is another faculty which generates non-inferentially justified beliefs in the general reliability of one's faculties, but if this is so, ridicule is not that faculty, and ridicule can be employed to defend both the particular deliverances and the general beliefs. Another way would be to claim that Reid shouldn't have identified the general truths about reliability as beliefs which are justified foundationally, but instead as (non-basic) descriptions of the operations of the various basic sources of justified beliefs—any departures from which are ridiculous. However Reid is interpreted or his position modified, though, ridicule is not the faculty of common sense, and that is what is important for our purposes.

³⁵Reid also thinks some ethical truths are basic and so thinks that the ridicule strategy can be employed to defend them; see Reid's discussion of the "first principles of morals" in *EAP* V.i: 360–370. Kierkegaard goes beyond him, though, as to the religious content of those ethical beliefs and as to the basicity of specifically religious beliefs.

³⁶For a prominent contemporary example, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

have and which grants general knowledge of God as creator and the law of God, and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, which is had only by believers and which grants knowledge of specifically Christian doctrines. There is reason to believe that Kierkegaard held a very similar view. He certainly endorses both generically theistic and specifically Christian beliefs, but is vociferous in his attacks on any apologetic attempt to defend them with argument.³⁷ He writes,

So rather let us mock God, out and out, as has been done before in the world—this is always preferable to the disparaging air of importance with which one would prove God's existence. For to prove the existence of one who is present is the most shameless affront, since it is an attempt to make him ridiculous. . . . How could it occur to anybody to prove that he exists, unless one had permitted oneself to ignore him, and now makes the thing all the worse by proving his existence before his nose?³⁸

Kierkegaard here is treating the presence of God to us as analogous to the physical presence of others—we are acquainted with his presence in a way not able to be communicated in an argument. And Kierkegaard agrees with Reid in thinking that arguing directly for this sort of foundational belief is foolish and can only obscure the truth of the belief.³⁹

If certain ethical and religious beliefs are foundational in the way that external-world beliefs are—if God is *present* to all, as Kierkegaard and the Reformed tradition have claimed—then refusal to acknowledge God's presence (and the eternal ethical demands it places on us) is subject to many of the same evaluations as the external world skeptic's refusal to believe his senses.⁴⁰ In both cases, the skeptic's withholding may be ridiculous, embarrassing, silly, foolish, sad, and even blameworthy. The same fact that (according to Kierkegaard) makes *arguing* for God ridiculous and shameful even more obviously makes refusing to acknowledge God ridiculous and shameful. Since the intellectual behavior of withholding belief in each case is subject to similar evaluations, many of the same emotional responses are appropriate and able to show the skeptic the "tragic-comic" error of his ways. It follows that a quite similar strategy to Reid's can be followed to persuade the ethical and religious skeptic to stop withholding his assent to those religious and ethical truths: we can try to evoke in the

³⁷See, for example, Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 192–193.

³⁸*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Walter Lowrie and David F. Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 485. Here we quote the older Lowrie/Swenson translation because the key word ("present") is mistranslated in the Hongs' edition. The page number for the Hongs' edition is 545.

³⁹Reid explains: "When we attempt to prove by direct argument, what is really self-evident [i.e., foundational], the reasoning will always be inconclusive; for it will either take for granted the thing to be proved, or something not more evident; and so, instead of giving strength to the conclusion, will rather tempt those to doubt of it, who never did so before" (*EAP* V.i: 361).

⁴⁰Recall that non-basic beliefs and withholdings of non-basic beliefs can be ridiculous as well.

skeptic the right sort of emotional perception of his skepticism, on the basis of which we can persuade him to abandon that skepticism.

Therefore, if the relevant religious and ethical truths are indeed foundational, then an extension of Reid's persuasive strategy in defense of those truths is possible. There are four points to make about this sort of persuasive strategy, each of them an application of the four points made in the last section. First, the sort of persuasion effected by this strategy is still indirect. Belief in God or in certain ethical truths is not justified by the appeal to emotion which gets the skeptic to stop withholding belief; what epistemic justification those beliefs have comes from their normal source (if the Reformed tradition is to be believed, the sense of deity). The humor does not support the claim that God exists; instead, it convinces the skeptic to repent of the intellectual behavior of refusing to acknowledge that God exists. This fits nicely with Kierkegaard's critique of traditional Christian apologetics. He says,

People try to persuade us that the objections against Christianity spring from doubt. That is a complete misunderstanding. The objections against Christianity spring from insubordination, the dislike of obedience, rebellion against all authority. As a result people have hitherto been beating the air in their struggle against objections, because they have fought intellectually with doubt instead of fighting morally with rebellion.⁴¹

The humor strategy doesn't fight intellectually with doubt because it doesn't give any more justification for thinking that God exists. Instead, it fights morally with rebellion because it shows the skeptic the moral and evaluative qualities of his skepticism, qualities which give him reason to repent of that skepticism. This humor strategy, then, might be thought of as forming a large part of Kierkegaard's own persuasive method, his answer to traditional Christian apologetics.

Second, as we noted in connection with the application of this persuasive strategy to external world skepticism, a variety of emotions can be evoked to motivate abandonment of skepticism toward foundational moral and religious truths. The range of emotions involved here may be somewhat different from those discussed in the last section, however, due to the greater moral import of rejecting fundamental ethical and religious truths. Whereas the effectively persuaded external world skeptic is likely to perceive the ridiculous nature of his skepticism with emotions such as rueful amusement and embarrassment (and thereby justifiedly believe his skepticism is ridiculous), the effectively persuaded moral or religious skeptic may also perceive his foolish rejection of important moral and religious truths with more morally-charged emotions such as guilt, shame, and contrition (which likewise provide justification for the belief that his

⁴¹Soren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), entry 629. Quoted in the editors' introduction to *Works of Love*, 11.

intellectual/moral behavior is foolish, wrong, blameworthy, etc.).⁴² Yet, as explained above, the partially pleasant affective feel of amusement at oneself, due to the psychological distancing from one's faults that such amusement involves, makes rueful amusement perhaps more effective, at least initially, in helping the skeptic to see the folly of her ways than more purely negative emotions, which the skeptic may be more likely to resist, ignore, or suppress.

Third, there is a similar variety of strategies for the employment of this persuasion. Kierkegaard famously uses stories or sketches in which he sketches personalities that exemplify various worldviews and lifestyles in order to evoke amusement and pity for the characters and to guide the sufficiently self-reflective reader to see himself in those characters and thus to recognize the need for a change in behavior. Much of *Either/Or*, especially the first volume, which includes a number of sketches of kinds of people who do not acknowledge eternal ethical demands on their lives, is designed to accomplish precisely this.⁴³

Fourth and finally, the application of this method of rational emotional persuasion to moral and religious truths can be abused by evoking emotions that are unreliable for one's interlocutor. We should want the skeptic to have and to act only on accurate emotions, which means we should want them to be ruefully amused only when they are in fact acting ridiculously. What is more, we should want them to be ruefully amused (or embarrassed, or ashamed, and so on) about the right thing. When persuading an individual to stop rejecting basic moral and religious truths, we do not want them to be ashamed or embarrassed that someone more intelligent than them thinks them ridiculous for their beliefs (or withholdings) or because they are the only person in the room who doesn't accept these truths. Neither of these states of affairs is actually ridiculous. Rather we want them to be ashamed or embarrassed on account of their (accurate) perception of their folly. This is one of the reasons for Kierkegaard's frequent employment of pseudonyms—he did not want his own personality or his readers' concern to meet social expectations to distract from or be obstacles to his readers' (emotional) perception of their own relationship with God.

So far in this section, we've shown how the Reidian strategy of defending basic beliefs with humor can be extended to basic ethical and religious beliefs. We've only given hints as to why we identify Kierkegaard as our inspiration for this extension. Our major reason for thinking that Kierkegaard advocates this use of humor to defend epistemically

⁴²In accepting the general outlines of Kierkegaard's strategy of indirect persuasion by humor, we are not committed to every detail of Kierkegaard's distinctive analysis of humor. See C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard's View of Humor: Must Christians Always Be Solemn?" *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987), 176–186; reprinted in C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 81–92.

⁴³Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I and II*, ed. trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

basic ethical and religious beliefs is his theory of the stages of existence. Famously, Kierkegaard thinks that human beings live according to identifiable patterns, patterns he calls “stages” or “spheres” of existence—the aesthetic sphere, the ethical sphere, and the religious sphere (further divided into non-Christian and Christian religiousness). There are patterns of life (spheres) which serve as transitions between the more significant spheres; these transitional spheres Kierkegaard identifies as irony and humor. So Kierkegaard thinks that a pattern of life which involves recognition of irony and humor (i.e., the emotional/moral/spiritual maturity to laugh at oneself) is important for the transitions into the ethical and religious spheres of life—and central to these spheres is the acceptance of certain truths which cannot be supported by argument (eternal ethical demands, the existence of God, and the truths of the Christian faith, to name a few). Now, the use of humor which we’ve sketched certainly isn’t all Kierkegaard has in mind when he identifies irony and humor as transition stages,⁴⁴ but we think that it is at least part of what he has in mind, especially considering his own use of humor to persuade his readers of ethical and religious truths and his severe strictures on the use of arguments to persuade of such truths.

In any case, we have sketched an account which makes sense of the use of humor, ridicule, and the emotions they evoke to defend foundational beliefs in the face of a skeptical challenge. If emotions can directly provide epistemic justification, then they can indirectly be used to solve the existential problem of foundationalism, whether it crops up with respect to foundational beliefs in an external world or with respect to foundational ethical and religious beliefs.⁴⁵

*Shawnee State University
United States Air Force Academy*

⁴⁴See Evans, “Kierkegaard’s View of Humor,” for a more detailed account.

⁴⁵We are grateful to the editor of this journal and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. We are also grateful for the insightful questions and comments we received on early drafts of this paper from audiences at the Baylor University Graduate Student Philosophy Colloquium, the 2010 Annual Conference of the British Society for the History of Philosophy, and the 2010 National Meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Air Force, the US Department of Defense, or the US government.